

Author of Man Booker Prize-shortlisted novel *Hot Milk*

DEBORAH LEVY

THE EARLY
NOVELS

BLOOMSBURY

Beautiful Mutants,
Swallowing Geography,
The Unloved

More Praise for Deborah Levy's Early Novels

"It throbs its way into the imagination like the unguided missile it decries."

—*The Observer* on *Beautiful Mutants*

"A bold debut; the arrival of a fractured fictional world in which characters spoke in riddles, dissolved and remade themselves, attracted and repelled one another and us, against a highly textured backdrop of images and objects. It was antagonistic, provocative fiction, made to describe and to flourish in Europe's geopolitical cracks."

—*The Guardian* on *Beautiful Mutants*

"Audacious."

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Beautiful Mutants*

"[Levy's] prose veers from dreamlike reverie to bald aggression in the turn of a sentence, never resting ... The macabre and the lyrical pile up and cry out with urgency ... Allows for a deeper appreciation of Levy's distinctive sensibility."

—*KGB Bar Lit Magazine* on *Beautiful Mutants* and
Swallowing Geography

"The two picaresque novels ... glimmer with dazzling flashes of fantasy and surreality ... These exercises in the literary avant-garde resonate with moving reflections on exile and alienation."

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Beautiful Mutants* and *Swallowing Geography*

"Surrealistic ... Luminously precise ... A vortex of shifting subjectivity ... Accomplished ... The prose is lean, unencumbered, and at its best in moments of pure lyricism ... You can respond to Deborah Levy's vision either intellectually or sensually."

—*The Independent* on *Swallowing Geography*

“Cerebral and literary ... Very smart ... and unfailingly unsentimental.”

—*New York Journal of Books* on *The Unloved*

“Brave and brilliant.”

—*The Independent* on *The Unloved*

“A startling work ... Levy’s world is horrifyingly violent, but she describes this dead European culture with a compelling, cool precision, always paring her language, never judging.”

—*The Times* on *The Unloved*

“Impressively ambitious ... Unusual and memorable.”

—*The Times Literary Supplement* on *The Unloved*

“Levy’s approach is cerebral and unsentimental, exploring, in prose both sensuous and supple, the sadness and perplexity of children, the unsatisfied desires of adults, and, above all, the power and role of love. Graphic, claustrophobic and fractured, this is emotionally violent and challenging work from a bold modern writer.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* on *The Unloved*

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By the Same Author

Ophelia and the Great Idea

Diary of a Steak

Billy and Girl

Pillow Talk in Europe and Other Places

Swimming Home

Black Vodka

Things I Don't Want to Know

Hot Milk

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THE EARLY NOVELS

Beautiful Mutants, Swallowing Geography,
The Unloved

Deborah Levy

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Beautiful Mutants

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My mother was the ice-skating champion of Moscow. She danced, glided, whirled on blades of steel, pregnant with me, warm in her womb even though I was on ice. She said I was conceived on the marble slab of a war memorial, both she and my father in their Sunday best; I came into being on a pile of corpses in the bitter snows of mid-winter. Afterwards they bought themselves a cone full of *ponchiki*, doughnuts dripping with fat and sprinkled with powdered sugar, and ate them outside the Kursk railway station, suddenly shy of the passion that had made them search for each other so urgently under all those clothes. On my fifth birthday, my father stole a goose. He stuffed it into the pocket of his heavy overcoat and whizzed off on his motorbike, trying to stop it from flying away with his knees. We ate it that evening, and as I put the first forkful into my mouth he tickled me under the chin and said, 'This does not exist, understand?' I did not understand at the time, especially as my mother stuffed a pillow full of the feathers for me, and soaked the few left over in red vegetable dye to sew on to the skirt of her skating costume.

When my parents died, I was sent to the West at the age of twelve by my grandmother, survivor of many a pogrom and collector of coffee lace handkerchiefs. She said it was for the best, but I think she just wanted to enjoy her old age without the burden of yet another child to look after. I was to stay with a distant uncle in London. When I asked my grandmother why he had left Russia she whispered, 'Because he is faithless' and busied herself wrapping little parcels of spiced meat from Georgia for me to take on the ship. Her letters were written on torn sheets of brown paper, three lines long and usually the same three lines in a different order; short of breath as always.

In London, where women were rumoured to swim in fountains dressed in leopard-skin bikinis, I unpacked my few clothes, books, photographs, parcels of meat, and wept into the handkerchief my grandmother had pressed into my hand,

embroidered in one scarlet thread with my name ...
L.A.P.I.N.S.K.I.

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The Poet smells of cashew nuts and cologne. She drinks tea from a transparent cup of cheap rose-coloured glass and says, 'This is the age of the migrant and the missile, Lapinski. In some ways you could say our time has come.' She laughs and her gold teeth rattle. Her hands are raw from making frozen hamburgers which is her job. Every morning a coach takes The Poet and other workers to an industrial estate on the outskirts of the city, clutching bags full of shoes to change into, hand-creams and hairnets. 'Exile is a state of mind.' She taps her wide forehead.

Tonight I will cook for The Poet a bitter, aromatic stew my grandmother taught me to make when I was a child, a dish for hunters with guns and moustaches who like to track small animals across the snow. She watches me put cabbage, rabbit, funghi, lilac, mushrooms, prunes, honey, red wine, salt and peppercorns into a pot.

'We on the meatbelt, Lapinski, blood under our fingernails, are not in a factory on the edge of the motorway, we are somewhere quite different. We are decorating our bedrooms, cleaning the house, making up conversations that will probably never be spoken, on a mountain, writing a book, trying out a new mascara, making plans for children, or for the future which is one day, at most one week, ahead. I myself am alone on the shores of the Black Sea coast or sitting under a fig tree in the paradise of Adam and Eve. If you were to count the thousands of miles between us as machines hum and our fingers linger on control buttons, you could cover the universe. We take ourselves through borders of every kind and carry no passport.

'I know women who work in their sleep and wake when the bell goes, women who sing lullabies, laments and pop songs in time with the machine, women who unknown to themselves make sculptures from meat, the burgers take on the shape of

their thoughts; I have seen great pyramids of thought sail across stainless steel into another life.

‘I have a good friend on the meatbelt, Lapinski, her name is Martha and she has soft white hands. In the tea-break she can hear the sea because she wears earrings made from shells and she swallows two spoonfuls of a thick expectorant for her cough every day – her lungs growl and she is often breathless. Sometimes she says she can see an image of her own face in the meatmound and who am I, Lapinski, to disagree? You will remember that when Saint Veronica met Jesus, she paused to wipe the sweat off his face and discovered that his image was for ever after imprinted on the cloth? I think of Martha as a modern saint because her visions have helped her not be defeated by her circumstances. Saint Martha paints her fingernails the colour of Portuguese oranges, defying the cardboard pallor of meatbelt life. We have displaced our selves, banished our selves. We are in exile.’

The sulphurous light of the city glows on The Poet’s fingertips. She has carried sacks of tea on her head through plantations of hazelnut and tobacco in the burning late morning sun. At five she sold gum and matches in Eastern villages. At seventeen she cut off her beautiful hair and unlike Samson found strength in the birth of her strong neck. In the slum cities of Northern Europe she lost her health. Coffee cups in greasy cafés offered her dark and difficult visions. And then she lost her mind. She lost her self in the architectural, rational, cultural, political, anatomical structures of Northern European cities and began to vibrate with confusion and pain. She turned inwards and lay in the damp crease of her pillow for twenty-eight days and nights. The sound of police sirens replaced the song of lottery callers, chestnut sellers, canaries and laughter. In her dreams she became a stone, eroded and reshaped by the tides, on the telephone she tried to talk to her mother but found she no longer had a language they both understood.

She held on to the bloody threads of each day, invisible with hundreds of other foreign workers, the brown underbelly of the city, some broken, some brave, but always dreaming, writing letters home, thinking of loved ones, hoping for better times. She survived on odd jobs, cleaning, sewing in sweat shops, looking after other women's children. It was at this time that The Poet mistressed the skill of metamorphosis. She learnt she had to become many selves in order to survive. Through observation, study and meditation she taught herself to change from one self to another, from one state to another. If she had no identity she would have many identities; she learnt she was engaged in a war and saw how those who are confused and in pain, or have some secret sorrow of their own, bring out an instinct in others who refuse to acknowledge the possibility of this pain in themselves, to crush, humiliate and hurt. The Poet refused to be crushed.

She waited for the storm inside her to be over. And when it was, in the parts that were torn, she planted sunflowers. She finished her cleaning, bought bread and dates, sat on benches in city parks looking at children scuff their knees in cement.

Chewing the white unbleached flour of the bread she liked best, she decided that the word justice did not mean law and order, and the word opportunity did not mean organized human misery. And as she swallowed the bread she also swallowed the humility of being a confused human being; devoted herself obsessively to understanding her condition and thus the condition of others. 'Lapinski,' she croaks, eating an iced bun, for she is no exotic, 'I have been a foolish casualty, a bitten fruit.'

Tears trickle down the veins of her brown arm.

In her eyes, whole continents seem to flicker.

It is true she turns her male lovers into swine.

It is true she rides over corn and heads of grasses.

These are merely images.

She is a poet.

‘Y’know I love you Y’know I love you Y’know I love you.’ It is a woman’s voice, breathless and monotonous, and cutting through her, an angry man shouting ‘I don’t know, I don’t know.’ I run upstairs and bang on the door with both fists, ‘Y’know I love you’ getting louder as I bang again. The man who lives there opens the door, first a little and then wider, a little pot of pink yoghurt clasped to his chest. ‘Hello, Lapinski,’ he says. We stare at each other and all the time, she, the woman is saying ‘Y’know I love you Y’know I love you Y’know I love you.’ He smiles, ‘She comes in three sizes,’ and points to a doll, five foot long, lying on the floor in front of the flickering television, yellow plastic skin, black hair and slanting eyes. ‘Just taming the savage,’ he says.

As I turn to go he shouts, ‘Lapinski, don’t thump on my door again you cunt ... I’m relaxing with a strawberry yoghurt. Do you know my dolly can talk? She’s moved in with me and she only says nice things.’ He points with his teaspoon to the O of her dead talking mouth.

The sound of a piano playing in some hidden part of the city drifts ghost-like through the walls. A strange, ecstatic sound; fragile and triumphant and full of bones. When The Poet throws back her head and roars with laughter, my cat stares into her mouth with wonder. ‘Today I saw a band of clowns in the street, banging drums, dancing, red noses and baggy checked trousers. They were shouting “Join the community church ... join today ... Jesus enjoyed a good joke ... Jesus liked to laugh too,” and they gave out free balloons to passers-by who were desperate to laugh and so they did because if you see a red nose you must laugh and be happy. I don’t think Jesus was so begging that he wore a red nose in the desert in case a passing nomad needed cheering up?’

We have finished our stew and I am polishing The Poet’s boots. She has only one pair and they have to last. My cat loves The Poet. They watch fat moths circle the lamp and

when I hear bird noises I don't know which of the two is making them. They have long conversations I don't understand. I pass her the gleaming boots – my father taught me to polish my school shoes every morning in the special way an icon maker from Yalta taught him. The Poet grudgingly admires her boots (the icon maker was a vain man and made sure the tricks he passed on would be admired), wraps a shawl around her shoulders, pins it with a glistening brooch. 'I'll be off, Lapinski, I can see from that glint in your bleary eyes you want to light your second cigar of the evening and summon a few demons. Oh don't deny it ... don't deny it ... like all people who feel uncomfortable in an uncomfortable world you want to make a map. Well let me tell you it is difficult to make a map in splintered times when whole worlds and histories collide.' She kisses me on the cheek and says goodbye to my cat with her eyes, which are turquoise tonight. 'When I first met you, Lapinski, you were attempting to brew vodka from peach stones ...' Small and bright and certain against the night sky, she walks in the direction of the zoo. As she turns the corner, she looks like a beast of burden. A llama. An animal that survives in harsh climates. Hunted for meat, milk, wool, dung.

Rain falls from a luminous sky on the broken wing of a Chinese umbrella, and under it a woman walks through the heart of London, with fast little steps in the direction of the hospital. She can hear voices, maybe from the cocktail bar where a young entrepreneur in sunglasses talks feverishly, breath quickening like an eroticized mercenary planning a raid, pointing to his 'joybox', a Ferrari parked outside. She says to the boy leaning against the wall, little ivory skull glued to the toe of his shoe, 'It's happy hour and my friend is dying. I have to find the hospital.' He gives her a cigarette which she lights, balancing her broken umbrella

On your old breast, dear

My permed head I'll rest, dear

wipes the rain out of her eyes and stares into his with an expression he cannot meet. 'We must treat the dying like kings you know.' She looks into the window of the bar where two waiters, blond hair gelled and parted immaculately in the middle, serve pink champagne and langoustines. They glide from table to table carrying pecan pie and crème caramel on the dip of their wrists, the backs of their long necks shaved in symmetrical sculptures. The blonder waiter gives a customer a small pair of metal pliers to crack the claws of his lobster. The woman looks at the boy again, smiles a ravishing smile, adjusts the lemon silk of her best suit and says, 'I've always been partial to lobster myself.' She crosses the road and, blinded by the rain, trips over a pigeon-coloured blanket that turns out to be a man sleeping rough on the pavement.

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Lapinski is a shameless cunt. I don't know what accent she's wearing today because it changes like the English weather, but I do know she hates my plastic love dolly and can't stand me either. She makes me feel weird under my suit but when I told her she made me feel weird she said I probably feel weird anyway. Her eyes gore into my ribs and crack them just when I think I've impressed her.

When she comes upstairs to whine at me about my lifestyle I have to spray my flat with a floral aerosol because she stinks. I think it's because she seals the soles of her flat brown shoes with donkey dung – or so she says – but then she told me she washes her hair in it too because it's a natural conditioner and brings out her chestnut highlights. I put newspaper down when she walks in just in case there's some truth in it. Sometimes she brings me frozen hamburgers some mate gives to her; I think she rubs garlic under her fingernails – I have to rush to the fridge, grab a beer and gargle with it to get a hold on things. Don't ever expect a simple answer to a simple question from Lapinski. She doesn't know how to talk straight. If you ask her if she likes dogs (I have a terrier called Duke) she says 'only curried' and then she pats Duke and strokes his ears and he falls in love with the cunt and whimpers when she leaves. She's got a job cooking in a café for foreign people and she's always broke. I tell her to write down everything she spends in a little book so she'll know where she is. She says she does write everything down but she still doesn't know where she is and where do I think I am?

My dad was the last blacksmith in our town and he was a socialist; he worked eleven hours a day, as a welder. When I was young my mother could never make ends meet and had to ask the butcher for bones for the dog – and then make us broth with them. My father wrote a song called 'Bones for the Dog', it came to him while he was sweating in the dark with fire and metal. He sang it in the pub dressed in a suit the colour of

granite. Well I don't want to be a stone – there's too much blood in it, too many late night tearful conversations about how to get by in it – too many fucking dog bones in it. Singing in the pub won't buy me a future. I prefer the wine bar. Working in the city, so long as your head looks like an arse (all us guys went bald this year), so long as you're delivering to target, the only thing that will get you sacked is being too honest – or possibly a full head of hair. When I go back to see my mum I sometimes catch her looking at me as if I am a complete stranger; her eyes settle on my suit like a half-starved fly – I feel stripped in front of her large stupid body, shuffle about the house trying to find words that will make her like me. She gave me some runner-beans from the garden and I threw them out of the window on the motorway.

I have bought myself a new toy. It's called The Revenger – a compact disc that I slip into the dashboard of my Nissan whenever I feel like relaxing. When you press the button you hear the sound of machine-gun fire as you crawl from red light to red light in the rush hour. Yesterday I had the gun belting out and saw a tart waiting on the kerb. Red fishnet tights and blonde ponytail; she made me tremble so I wound down the window. She looked beautifully shocked, it wiped the snarl off her slutty lips. I wanted her lips. She ran away – did she really think I'd fill her lovely soft belly with bullets? I followed her for half a mile down the road and when I caught up with her fishy legs said, 'What's your name?'

'Tremor.'

'Well Tremor, you make me tremble, how about a massage?'

The thought of a massage while listening to The Revenger sort of appealed. Like perfume in the trenches, or clean white satin under the rags of a whore in Tokyo where I sometimes do business. We had good sex on the back seat, with the engine running so I could keep the machine-gun firing. Her red tights lay like a puddle of blood on the floor.

She said I hurt her, I said I pay to hurt her. I don't like them with stretch marks on their stomachs – it's a turn-off to think of tarts as mothers. When she put the money in her handbag I saw she had a little plastic duck in it, the sort babies float in their bath. The next morning her hair was all over the seat cover.

Lapinski's cat is almost as vile as she is. She calls it, how do you say it, K.R.U.P.S.K.A.Y.A. No wonder he's nearly as far gone as his mistress. I think Bill is a reasonable name for a tom. The other day that cunt of a cat bit my ear. I kicked it down the stairs and bathed my lughole with Dettol but I think it's got infected. Lapinski says it was infected anyway – what? She talks rubbish all night with her friends and smokes little Cuban cigars – they arrive for her every month in the post in a little wooden box. Her breath made me cry when she peered into my ear and of course she told me I was crying anyway. Why isn't she crying? Her cardigan's got holes in the elbow and she has to walk home because she often doesn't have the bus-fare. Yesterday I saw her skipping over the lines of the pavement.

Maybe it's the Muzak coming in through the window, someone playing the piano: tonight I feel a bit down. The doctor has given me some pale pink pills, which was thoughtful of him because they match my tie.

I'll tell you something about Lapinski. When she gets a gas bill, she writes all over it with a thick black felt-tip, THIS DOES NOT EXIST, and sends it to the gas board. Her eyebrows meet in the middle.

Dear Lapinski,

In the mellow autumnal breeze I had a farcical chase after your lipstuck Rizla which got blown about and nearly lost. But I'm going to save it until we are next alone when I shall offer it to you wrapped around something appropriately aphrodisiacal.

Freddie

I have summoned my first love demon and he has answered my call. This is no act of the supernatural, more to do with the art of suggestion. I kissed the transparent skin of a Rizla, thinking of the cold wars we raged on each other's skin, tucked it behind Krupskaya's ear and watched her disappear into the night. She is the Messenger of Broken Dreams. These errands keep her fit and sleek. I journeyed from the Iron Curtain to the black Venetian blinds of a Western man's bedroom, and learnt love alone will not smash the atom.

We are walking on damp cement. Hand in hand. I wear a dazzling emerald dress. He tells me every time he makes an inspired brushstroke on canvas he hears the voice of Salvador Dalì whisper 'Olé!' and last night, which he spent without me, he was upset not to find three snails on his hot-water bottle. At his studio we eat rice with red hot pepper. 'I am hopeful for that painting there ...' He points to a large canvas propped up against the wall '... because everyone loves a butterfly and it is full of butterflies.' His long lidded eyes settle on my body like the Inquisition. Light shines on his short corn-stubble hair, his apricot body and thick lips. 'You are my butterfly,' he says, stroking the thin emerald cloth on my breast. His fingers slip under under my dress and all the time the sun is shining on him. I begin to sting and smart. The red hot pepper on his fingers and the possibility of love, yearned and dreamt for, the possibility of great love for ever and ever two inches away from my roaring heart.

In a caravan surrounded by geese and nettles, we eat a selection of cheeses. Goat, cow, sheep. We drink red wine. I am thinking this is the Last Supper because Freddie has been sleeping with another woman and I am upset. He bought her a bottle of lime pickle which seems to me a very intimate thing to do; he knows what she likes to taste. Just as my mother and father slipped away from me in a tram crash on a bridge where, months after their death, I'd stand looking down at the water below and imagine I could see them floating – a shoe, my mother's green skirt, my father's heavy overcoat – floating down and away from me, so I feel his love slipping away from me, and into her. I want him to declare his love so I can give him mine; instead he looks out hungrily, loots other sexual scenarios, comes to me changed, and fumbling and shy we have to find where we last left off, who we were before. Now he strokes my neck while geese run about the field and wind rocks the caravan. It is late autumn and loss is in the air; I am too familiar with its sensation; it haunts me in dreams and at unexpected moments, brushing my hair or waiting for a bus. He says, 'Where'd ya lose your heart?' I look down and see the gold heart I wear on a chain round my neck has fallen off. I search the floor of the caravan, hand clutching the place my heart once was, my very very precious heart, given to me by my grandmother that day she pressed the handkerchief into my hand. He comments on the blue black colours in my hair, yawns, smiles, stretches, says, 'You know, a lot of fashionable and influential image-makers would say that gold heart is naff. You have nothing to lose but your chain.'

On the beach we look at each other through a hole in a stone. He sucks all the green from my eye. He is a reader of colour, texture, signs, of the space between things, of light and dark and gesture. He stands outside himself and observes. He is interested in sensation. He is sensual. He admires me. I say, 'When I was twelve and arrived in the West, I drank Coke through a blue straw and thought it would make me free and if everyone in East Germany could drink it too the wall would

come down, so someone said, Why not chip off a bit of the wall, drop it into a glass of Coke and see if it dissolves overnight?’ He likes bizarre juxtapositions and contrives them in his paintings, his love play, his clothes, his conversation. I love him but try not to. He makes me cry. He is bewildered. He stands outside my tears, and watches them in relation to the window frame and straw chair.

On the beach we stare at each other through a hole in a stone. We are in love but we are scared and when we look away, he sings

*In a fishing boat
when the light turned blue
you burgled me
and I burgled you*

We are East and West looting each other.

We hang a washing-line across the room. It is draped with feathers and flowers and sheep bones found on walks, the insides of clocks and TV sets. It is the Berlin Wall. We declare an uneasy peace. War is more sexy. We are afraid to make peace. We sharpen our weapons. We pride ourselves on our weapons. If we were to make a peace treaty, to disarm, we would have to come to the conference table naked and we are afraid of our nakedness. He falls in love with someone else to punish me.

I am thinking of his mother. How she once told me she was merely alone and not abandoned. He says, ‘You are my butterfly.’ I am thinking of his father. How in the war he brought his girlfriend home to live in his wife’s house and how she, who is merely alone and not abandoned, washed her husband’s girlfriend’s clothes in the bath. Peering at the labels. Good clothes. And how his father (after he had abandoned his wife) got a disease that made him shake so severely he could no longer play cricket in his immaculate whites on England’s green killing fields. He says, ‘I have the body of Jesus Christ

and the soul of Lenin. Are you going to crucify me then with the curl of your lips?' No I am not. I am going to abandon you. He cleans his paintbrush with a rag, feeling abandoned and exhilarated.

'In fact, Lapinski,' says Freddie, in his mellow autumnal backyard, waving the lipstuck Rizla, 'dressed as you are in creams and blues you look like a gentle bruise.

'Forgive me I am shaking. there are roots poking through the walls of my flat, through the floor and through the ceiling, and I thought of you because you always said you had no roots. Perhaps you dropped a few seeds all those years ago. Yesterday, Lapinski, I stole a statue of Freud from a London park and carried him home. And I danced for him, swinging my hips, until I became paralysed. First my neck, but that was okay, it was interesting, I could still move the rest of my body. Then my arms froze in a great O shape above my head, wrists turned in on themselves, but my legs still danced on. I explored the family trees in my joints, muscles, bones, and then I became totally paralysed ... statue-like in front of the statue Freud. He watched me and then he spoke, asked for cocaine, books, a cigar, a florentine from a Viennese pâtisserie. I asked him whether my paralysis was real or a state of mind, but he was silent and staring. Staring at my penis, so I got an erection, and that became frozen too, which is to say, Lapinski, what am I to do with this lipstuck Rizla? Am I to attempt trans-meditational coitus with you – Lapinski who dropped her seed somewhere in me, like the male fish who carries eggs in his mouth?

'Lapinski, I have desires I don't understand. I dreamt I made women do things they didn't want to do, made them squeal with pain and ecstasy, tied them up and beat them and fucked them in their most secret places. I woke up sweating, it was terrible and wonderful, and as women walked the streets on the way to buy milk or cigarettes I thought ... it could be her, she's the one. I will take her back to my chamber of ferocious fumbling, my chamber of a hundred hidden orifices

and she will enjoy it. I will make her queen and I will be king. Lapinski, I am not a brute ... I do not have steel tips on my boots ... I want you to be strong and brave and beautiful but I also want to crush you ... want you to have your own will and desires but I also want to tame and domesticate you. I want you to want me but I don't want you. Lapinski, I have had many lovers but as soon as they want me I don't want them either. Remember when I deserted you and went off with the woman who grew lilies on her balcony, and the woman with the fake cherries pinned to the ribbon of her straw hat, and the woman with the yellow kid gloves, and the woman with the ideas, and the woman whose nipples I sucked till the sun disappeared for ever, and the woman who kept Valium in her sugar tin, and the woman reading alone in the apple orchard, and the woman who varnished boats in Marseille, and the woman who ate and ate and then sicked up in washing-up bowls, and the woman who taught her children how to make necklaces from pistachio nuts, and the woman who collected lizards, and the woman who cooked curries that made me hallucinate. Well, Lapinski, they were ponds, ponds to drown everything I do not want to feel. As soon as I start to feel something I find another pond. I am trying to confess, Lapinski, you have flown away from me but I have pinned you on to my canvas and everyone loves butterflies so you might have brought me luck in the marketplace. My woman from somewhere else. Open your wings and kiss me here ... here ... here ... land on me there, I can't sleep without you fluttering by my side and, anyway, one day I will be famous and I will buy you three villas in three different countries and you will have a cook and a driver and someone to iron your emerald dress but for now I want to fill myself up with your lips, with moments that give me reason to continue ... but I don't know where to find them.'

He is shaking. Shaking. Freddie is breaking down. He weeps and laughs at the same time. He carries the scent of a thousand women in his armpits, his tears are the jewels they

took off, or put on, for him, he is shaking just like his father shook before him, shaking into the moon, lipstuck Rizla spiked on his forefinger. Who will put him together again?

‘Lapinski.’

‘Yes?’

‘I am going to break into the zoo.’

He disappears in the direction of the zoo, where sometimes, at night, wolves can be heard howling through the bars of their cage. I once heard a man howl just like a wolf except he was standing in a phone box in Streatham.

It is the age of the Great Howl.

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No woman has ever fallen in love with me.

Last year I fell for a policewoman called Chloe but in the end she married her personal trainer, a man called Rod (born in Brazil) who always carried boxing gloves and pads in his holdall so his clients could have a go at him any time they had a spare hour. I liked Chloe's uniform and the streaks in her hair and the way she rode her horse. And she was bloody brave. She restrained (at her leisure) some fucker who sold her a dodgy endowment policy – by the time her leisure was over his teeth were no longer in his mouth. Last time I saw her, before she got engaged to Rod, she told me they were training her up to drive a tank. I said, 'Is there going to be a coup then?' but the tank thing was about her being posted to Wales where the miners were on strike and she was going to sort them out – that was what they were all going to do at her station, sort out the miners. She said she liked sorting things out if it paid her mortgage – and then she winked at me. I reckoned I had met the woman of my dreams. I could hear myself saying, do this and this and this and do it harder and she replying yes yes yes oh yes oh yes yes yes – but that will never happen because I don't need sorting out.

Last Sunday I went to a pub on the borders of West Sussex with two guys from the office. We had roast chicken with all the trimmings that made this country great and we warmed our selves by the coal fire. I gave my apple crumble to Duke who was causing trouble because I'd tied him up outside and he doesn't like the wind. And then I had this dream that I was dead and someone had put a lump of coal in my mouth, like a pig with an apple in its gob. For the last three nights I've heard Lapinski crying through the early hours. I don't know what's happened and I don't like to ask because she might tell me. Her cat *Krupskaya* made a jump for Duke yesterday. Duke gets annoyed and tries to bite her head off. So what does *Krup* do? Run away? Not on your life. She jumps on top of his back

and sticks there like a pot of glue. Duke begins to run about in circles and whine so I have to call Lapinski up. She stomps in, leaving mud, or donkey dung, all over my carpet so I have to go despite the fact her eyes are red and swollen. She told me I should take Duke out for a walk more often – and then she starts to unstick Krup by offering her the slab of pâté I had just bought from the deli. Duke licked her horrible hands and wanted to go home with her but I gave him the look Chloe taught me and he fell into line. Another thing. My mother's father was a miner.

OceanofPDF.com

It is by the mirror, where I practise narcissism, that I summon my second demon. For it is she who wrote me letters of love, written backwards so I had to read them through the looking glass. 'Backwards letters are my escape,' she said.

She is fifteen years old, voluptuous, ribbons and flowers and bits of old lace tangled in her mane of blonde hair; she wears Mexican smocks embroidered with silken greens on crisp white cotton, lips shining, a pot of gloss always at hand so that crumbs stick to her lips. She is full of fury and smells of roses.

'This, Lapinski, is my family.' She points to each of them: '... This is my father who has forgotten how to love; this is my mother who has forgotten how to think; these are my sisters who will all go into the wine trade ... and this ...' she bursts into tears '... is my life.' The aroma of freshly ground coffee lingers about the house.

She is on holiday with her business tycoon daddy and her sisters. An oily pensive anchovy on the beach, ashamed of her large breasts and little broken fingernails, surrounded by her father's girlfriends, film cronies, American and English exiles, models, villa owners, local boutique owners and hangers-on, she feels flawed. They swim, eat, arrange barbecues, play backgammon, strip poker, have massages, manicures, sunbathe, swap gossip. She watches them, her mouth tingling with ulcers.

Her fists beat the burning sand.

'I will escape,' she writes.

A glamorous model drapes her long tanned legs over the business tycoon's lap. Gemma stares sulkily at her daddy, who playfully slaps the bottom of the model. The model turns to Gemma. 'We're being nice to each other because I'm filming in the Caribbean soon and we won't see other for too long.' She kisses the tycoon's ears. 'I am a very busy woman, Gemma,' she smiles. Gemma snaps her book shut, and stands

up, scattering sand and suntan lotions. *'Your very busy life and very empty mind are what I want to escape from.'* The truth is she doesn't really know what it is she wants to escape from.

Gemma, who will later become The Banker, is seventeen years old; she gives me her cast-offs and I go home to my uncle's with carrier bags stuffed full of shoes and dresses, and Charles of the Ritz lipsticks. Years later, Freddie, who has a liking for silks and cashmeres, will run his hands slowly down my body, in Gemma's clothes, exploring buttonholes and pleats and the cut of a sleeve. And years later I will look into the mirror and see his tongue inside Gemma's mouth as they writhe about in a bed of flames.

Gemma stamps the floor with her high heels. We fight about money and class and privilege. She cries prettily, passionately, stops, reads me my horoscope, squeals and squeaks 'Eeeeeeeek,' calls me a 'meanie', flicks through magazines, works for hours in the school library. She is brilliant and sharp, asks teachers a hundred questions they cannot answer, shouts in exasperation. She loves me, she says, and asks me to trim her hair with a little pair of blunt scissors. She doesn't like pubs because they are full of 'sad people'. She is afraid of poor people.

After school she buys me a hot chocolate at the bus station. I sip it very slowly and then she finishes it off for me, a chocolate moustache on her immaculate face, waving goodbye and blowing kisses.

The morning after she has finished her Oxbridge entry exams, we sit on a bench eating monkey nuts, feeding pigeons with the shells. Her fingers are covered in ink and all the flowers have fallen out of her hair.

At Oxford, Gemma fluffs her hair, glosses her lips and tells a swarthy Italian economist at a cheese and wine party that she despises her hall full of simpering ninnies running baths of Avon bubbles and cooking little pans of sensible soup. 'They're so prim.' He smiles, offering her sausage on a stick.

She eats it fast, and guiltily. ‘Even a sedate patch of *blue* on the eyelids is considered fast.’ He doesn’t know what she’s talking about, but her cleavage is exciting and she displays it with pride. His suit is dull but well cut, his white shirt starched. She says, closing her eyes and giggling inside, ‘I like men in suits.’

Gemma invites him back to her room for water. She drinks pints and pints of it a day because she read in one of her glossy magazines it will make her thin. She shows him a picture of me, in a polka-dot dress. ‘This is my friend Lapinski. Don’t you think she looks like Sofia Loren?’ The economist nods (liar), fiddling with his cufflinks. ‘When I was fifteen I escaped into Lapinski’s arms. I love her passionately.’ The Italian economist leaves immediately. Tomorrow she will dine with a Panamanian economist she met in a Marx lecture. Apparently he is very rich and owns a plantation.

The Panamanian economist and Gemma fondle each other in her single bed. He cups her face in his hands, stares into her eyes, asks her to put some ice on his penis.

‘Ice?’

‘Yes pleeeeeeeeeeease.’

But the future Banker is intrepid and creeps to the communal kitchens where she finds one of the simpering ninnies brewing cocoa in her nightdress.

‘Hello Gemma,’ she blinks dozily.

‘I’m looking for ice.’

‘Ice?’

‘I’m very hot.’

They yank out a large jagged slab of ice from the freezer and Gemma trots back to her economist trailing her kimono on the corridor floor.

‘Tra la la tra la la la la.’

She throws it on to his penis and, still singing, climbs on top of him.

‘Aaaaaaaah.’ He comes immediately. The smell of fish fills the room. Wafts between them. It reminds the Panamanian economist of the fish markets in his home town, flies swarming around piles of roe and guts, and the jokes told by men about the whores they’d had the night before. Both attribute the smell to themselves and feel humiliated. Gemma sings ‘tra la la tra la la’ and sighs. The truth is one of the simpering ninnies put her little slice of cod on to the slab of ice that afternoon, and its juices became one with the ice, and now with the Panamanian economist’s juices too. Gemma, wet, fishy, blushing and unsatisfied, sprays the room with Chanel No. 5.

She wears her Cardin suit for her first terrifying tutorial with three boys from Balliol College. The tutor, little black hairs on his knuckles, clenches his knees and taps a fountain pen on the mahogany desk. One of the boys presents a paper called ‘Notes towards the development of a theory on the relationship between Marxism and feminism’. The tutor and the boys scribble fast little notes on the back of their folders, sometimes nodding, other times frowning, eyebrows raised. Gemma understands nothing, and when the tutor asks her to comment on the paper, bursts into tears. The men do not know what to do with this elegant glossed woman who has a reputation for scorn, strength, savoir faire, intellect, and is now squealing and squeaking like a plucked chicken behind her jasmine-yellow note pad. ‘Seems like *Kapital* has been your bedtime reading these last ten years,’ she weeps into her cuff. The boy who gave the talk passes her his handkerchief, shuffling his feet in irritation. He has spent long nights working on his paper and wants to discuss it; now this fat, stupid female is blubbering away all his tutorial time. Gemma cries some more and runs out of the room on her pointy heels, clattering down the corridor while the boys discuss alienation.

In the corridor she bumps into Eduardo the Italian economist, who cheers her up by taking her up to his room where he whips up a steamy dish of pasta with clam sauce. While he cooks he tells her he hopes Oxford won't be swamped by 'aliens' like the redbrick universities. They snuggle up together and Gemma falls asleep, waking up with pain that surprises her. She stares at Eduardo and wills him to take it away.

Dear Gemma,

Thank you for the invitation to the ball. I have a lovely dress with scarlet netting at the bottom like a mermaid's tail. If my grandmother could see me in it she would demand I dive for beluga caviar. The only trouble is my arms and legs are covered in flea bites. Yesterday, I shampooed Krupskaya, my cat, and hope that has put an end to the central committee that debate in her fur. Is it possible for you to meet me at the station? Perhaps we can go for a drink first, I will buy you a pint of water and we can talk.

Love Lapinski.

Dearest Lapinski,

It is not a good idea to come up for the ball after all. I have promised Eduardo (my Italian economist) that I'll spend the weekend with him, and the thought of you two meeting is not calculated to send warm feelings down my spine. Perhaps you could delay the trip until I find an ideologically correct young man. Eduardo's consciousness is somewhat intractable and I have no hope of bringing him into the bright light of socialist truth. Oh well. So long as we keeeeeep kisssssing we don't have to talk much.

Love love love to you sugar plum

Gemma xxxxxxxx

(from a putative member of the ruling class)

While my children play in the park, I am paid by men to let them put a part of their body into a part of my body. What they don't know is they are fucking a ghost. They are fucking a ghost because my spirit and soul are somewhere else but they don't care because my spirit and soul are not the most expensive parts of me. Most of my customers are businessmen with wives in the counties and shires; they spill a day's worth of wheeling and dealing into me and I receive it like sewage dumped at the bottom of the sea. Some want to beat me, some want me to pretend to love them or to pretend to be someone I am not. But that's OK, most people spend the whole of their lives pretending to be someone they are not. My names are Tremor, Gina, Ninette, Sam, Tina, Cleopatra, Iris, Suzie, Malibu, Alex, Blondie, Maggie and Stardust.

One customer wanted me to pretend to be his wife in real life – he was part of something called a REGENERATION CONSORTIUM and his firm had an open day 'party' where the local people could meet the developers in the flesh – something I do not recommend. He bought me a chiffon dress with a daisy print on it and white gloves – and I took the kids, which made him bite his lip with that sharp tooth of his. The whole event smelt of melted cheese. They'd hired eight out of work actors who went around banging people on the head with foam rubber hammers and then gave out funny hats with red, white and blue stripes on them – they looked like whip marks on pale English skin. Then the magicians started to take fake rabbits out of hats while a bored jazz band played 'Summertime' in the corner. A woman with a broken Chinese umbrella was the only one dancing, twisting her wrists to some music inside herself, while the waiters went around with sausage rolls and bowls of orange jelly on silver trays and this bloke whose wife I was shook the local community by the hand, saying, 'You're in an enterprise zone now,' to which the woman dancing replied, 'I've got my spoon stuck in the jelly.'

The highlight of the event was the free bus-tour around the area they were developing. We all trooped on to the coach and our guide was a woman in a navy blue suit called Belinda. She talked through a microphone in a robotic voice, telling us what we were passing, ‘This is a waterfront conversion,’ then she’d look at her clipboard and lose her place and not know where we were. The driver was ignoring her anyway (I think he’d got stoned to survive the day), so she would say, ‘In the 1920s produce used to be freighted here all the way from Yorkshire,’ and where she said you were, you were not – she’d point at the waterfront and it would be the railway station. Or she would say, ‘On the left you will see um, what will you see, you will see something but it’s not clear yet what it is that will be there for you to see.’ The driver would be cruising down some high street where the police were patrolling estate agents’ shop fronts because of stones being thrown at the windows, and she would tell you it was a multi-storey hotel when everyone could see it was the high street. We lost all sense of time and place and the old lady sitting behind me said she’d need a guide book to find her way home, all the while my husband muttering, ‘We’re restoring the city and giving it back to you.’ At the end of the day he kissed me on the cheek and said loudly, ‘Hope you had a pleasant day out dear – thought it would do you good to see for yourself why I am away from home so often,’ and told me he was just off for a jog on the new track they had built where the share index flashes up on a screen as you run. ‘We all have so much to look forward to,’ he said to the woman with the Chinese umbrella who was busy stuffing six sausage rolls into her handbag. ‘Pardon?’ she asked politely. ‘We all have so much to look forward to’ he repeated. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I think it goes like this but I’ve forgotten most of the words.

‘sa ra bo ra

ra bo ra sa

sa bo bo sasa’

My most recent customer brought his terrier dog with him – it whimpered under the bed for the ten minutes it took. He has a tattoo on his upper arm, an anchor with roses, and underneath, the word MOTHER. A lot of men have tattoos with MOTHER written on parts of their body. After he had finished he said, ‘I can taste coal in my mouth’ and then he confessed that something had gone wrong between him and his mother. ‘It’s civil war, Tremor, it’s civil war between me and her,’ which might be why he likes to have sex in his car to the sound of war guns – it’s a game he likes to relax to.

My own son has discovered he is good at making things grow. He’s got green green fingers and he’s hit on the idea of growing roses in the window-box to sell at the tube station. Despite the lead from the traffic they are blooming blooming blooming. We bought everything together, the soil and seeds, read how to plant them, the light and position and how much water; I watch his seven-year-old body bent over them every morning and hope he will never have to fight a war, certainly not a civil war. I hope he will never want to beat a woman because something went wrong between me and him and he wants to take it out on her. Yesterday, when we were having supper together, my youngest daughter started to sing

‘Lavender’s blue, dilly dilly

Lavender’s green

When I be king

You shall be queen’

and we all joined in because we know the song has a special meaning for her. She had two budgies, one called Lavender Blue and the other Lavender Green and they died seven months ago. She told me she’d buried them in the park. But yesterday she said, ‘Mum, you know how I buried Lavender Blue and Lavender Green that day ...’ and I said, ‘Yeah,’ and she said, ‘Well I didn’t.’ She stood up, perfectly serious, took her pencil box – one of those wooden ones with a sliding top –

off the sideboard and, in front of us all, opened it up. There was Lavender Blue. Just lying there like he's having a blissful night's sleep, except his eyes have rotted. She said, 'I put your scent on him.' I said to her, 'Where's Lavender Green then?' She shook her head and said she couldn't remember where she had put him. Her brother and sister began to sing

'Call up your men, dilly dilly

Set them to work

Some shall make velvet

And some shall make shirts'

giggling and nudging her until she gave up and told us to be quiet while she led the way to my bedroom, smiling at me to see if I was cross. She crawled under my bed, her little feet sticking out, and reached for an old shoe. Nestled in there, wrapped in tissue, was Lavender Green. She said, 'I put your scent on him too.'

So this little corpse has been lying on its back, scented, under my customers for seven months now. Just like me. I would hate my daughters to know anything about how I put a roof over their heads. My daughter has grieved in her own way for the birds she loved and lost. I don't know where I have buried all I have loved and lost but it's not in an enterprise zone. Why did they pay actors to hit us over the head with foam rubber hammers? Was it to show us they were only pretending?

Tonight, Jupiter, the god of animal metamorphoses, rules the stinking animal pits in the zoo. Urine and shit trickle into a ring of rage, a ring of starless moonless night.

The rage of animals imprisoned by a clumsy culture.

The smell of garlic oozes into the air, wafts over from the gorilla cages; the sweat of images behind the eyes, under the skin and in the cracks of lips. In the reptile house a python feeds on twelve dead rats. A mongoose eats a scorpion without removing its sting. The elephants lift up their trunks and bellow out, over London, and the refuse trucks collect the shedded skin of the day gone by to take to incinerators and burn.

Freddie lies on his belly outside the llama cage. He is covered in mud and worms, and the llama, all soft curves and very golden, bids him to speak. 'Where are your words?'

'I am unemployed,' says Freddie. 'That is to say I have no place in the scheme of things. No role to put on in the mornings and take off in the evenings. I am of the hungry species and I am alone. A stranger in a familiar land. I have no place to put my head, no thighs even in which to bury my head, no shoulder or lap or concept or cup of happiness or red rose in which to bury my head. No employment of any kind.'

'Unemployed?' says the llama. 'Oh come on. There are zillions of jobs for a slut. Why not accccccelerate, put your foot down on that steely pedal, how about a career in the citeeee? Penetrate the city like a hungry blue worm, find the worm in your self and become it. Innovation breeds success and success breeds delicious hungers of all kinds. How you do enjoy your pain, Freddie!

'Go into international finance, become a dynamic sales manufacturer in a high-growth computer company, become a senior sales consultant, a marketing manager, a business analyst for a billion-dollar corporation, become a technical

support analyst with BUPA membership and relocation expenses, relocate your ambitions, relocate yourself from here to there and beyond. Relocate your head and you will find a zillion homes for it.'

'But ...' and Freddie weeps, 'I don't know *how* to become those things. I don't know what will become of me at all. I am lost, llama, lost and lost and lost. How do I begin to become a corpuscle in a corporation?'

'OH SLUTTY SON be result-motivated! Think of those mortgage subsidies and executive benefits. Be a self-starter, be profit-motivated. Learn to Be. You need enthusiasm, no one invests in depression. Try harder and you will get the right package because you are the right person. But first you might emigrate. Pack up your head and heart and will and move to a different landscape. It is called let these words shimmer above your poor ruined head ... The Real World.' The llama giggles.

'Oh ... llama ... I defend The Naked Truth of Dreams.'

'The Naked Truth of Dreams? Oh Freddie. You are indeed a funny little thing. A funny little flower.'

Freddie buries his toes in the mud and watches two apes groom each other. The giant panda stares out into nothing, melancholy as she chews a strip of sugar cane; mosquitoes wail above her head.

'What dreams are you talking about, poor Freddie?' llama's eyes widen.

'I used to have dreams, llama. But I've lost them. I search in gardens for them. It would seem it is a family I want. Do you know male seahorses give birth? They have labour pains, curl their tails around a plant stem, bend backwards and forwards with the pain, with severe cramps, until they empty their pouches. I have severe cramps and no baby. I want a baby.'

'You digress,' says llama, digging the earth with her hooves. Digging the British soil up. 'We are talking of

Enterprise. Why not have a baby syndicate? If you want a family there are

*hardware families
and software families.'*

'What is there left for me to become if not a father? I will take my children to swing in parks, to swimming pools, rock them to sleep, mash them bananas ...'

'Freddie, I fear you are talking about a Family in the bigger sense of the word. You are perhaps talking of sisterhood? Brotherhood?' Llama sticks out her tongue to catch an invisible fly.

Freddie's tears fall like pebbles on to the mud. 'I don't know what I want, llama. I would like to be happy.'

'Poor Freddie. You have lost your way. Lost your silky slutty senses. I confess I am rather fond of people who have lost their way.'

'Aw, fuck off, llama,' weeps Freddie. 'I just want to be loved.'

Llama scratches her ear.

'You want to be loved? Ah. Aaaaaaaaaah. But can you love, Freddie? Remember the woman with the lilies, how she sang for you, how you became a flower in her bouquet, and how you ruined her? Not because she was stupid but because she was brave. I see her now with your daughter, her little love child. It is she who fries her potatoes, pushes her on swings, buys her crayons and paper and plasticine. Your daughter makes green and blue daddies in front of the television. And the woman with the violin who mothered your son, bought him plimsolls, introduced him to The Story, took him to libraries and cinemas, played tunes for him on her fiddle to send him to sleep. And where were you, Freddie? Here with me searching for your head? Wanting children you already have? Excuse me, Freddie, I have a stone in my paw.'

‘If you cannot love, Freddie, do something radical with your condition, service systems that manufacture sorrow instead. In this way you will hate well rather than love badly.’

A baby chimpanzee pulls at the long black nipples of its mother, who has her arm crooked to hold its head; her mouth opens and closes in time with the suckling.

‘Llama,’ whispers Freddie, ‘I have tried to change. I know indeed that human nature is an invented thing. I have tried to reinvent myself but confess I am reluctant to give up the little power I have on this earth. Yes, I am weeping again, I don’t know when I’ll ever stop or why. It seems there is no longer any grass to dream on. I hurt, llama, and I want someone to make me better. Have I really missed out on my children? I try to dream about women who have loved me but they refuse to appear. I want peace of mind. I want some peace but I don’t know what it is. Anything to get rid of this ... stuff ... inside me, this fear, these tears, this shaking. I would shoot guns and thrust bayonets through flesh to distract me from myself; I would whip, torture, wrestle, drive racing-cars over cliffs to distract me from myself; jump from helicopters, throw hand grenades to distract me from myself; I would march right left right screaming orders in my throat, obeying orders in my throat, to distract me from myself. I would build muscles I never knew I had, to distract me from myself.’

Llama shuts her honey eyes. Her belly rises and falls. It is as if her breath is a gentle wind; it makes the salt on Freddie’s cheeks smart and sting. He notices three cards pinned to her cage. The blue card says History, the white card says Behaviour and the pink card says Medical Record.

- 10.15 Specimen sounds as if she is coughing slightly.
- 10.40 Specimen vomited a little fluid.
- 1.10 Specimen restless.

- 1.40 Specimen has stomach contractions.
- 2.00 Specimen lying on back with periodic grunts.
- 2.30 No change in position.
- 4.10 Specimen throwing her weight against cage bars. Seems agitated.
- 5.10 Specimen shows evidence of some nasal discharge.
- 5.30 Specimen shows no reaction to noise.
- 5.45 Specimen refusing food. Eyes shut.
- 6.00 Specimen runs and falls over on occasions.
- 7.00 Specimen co-ordination much improved.
Saliva around mouth.

If no change tomorrow take swab.

‘Are you ill, llama?’ whispers Freddie

‘Are you ill, Freddie?’ whispers llama.

‘I think I might be very sick, yes, llama. And I cannot afford health.’

Llama smiles patronizingly. ‘The only freedom you have, Freddie, is the freedom to want more sugar. I am no barbarian. I do not come from your country. By a strange set of circumstances I find myself locked up here. How strange it is I find myself teaching you the hieroglyphics of your culture.’

‘Oh God,’ Freddie howls. ‘Oh God.’ He scoops up mud and begins to eat it. ‘Llama ... perhaps ... you could ... could just bite my artery here. Put me out of my misery.’

‘My teeth are blunt,’ says llama. ‘The zoo keeper filed them down.’

Freddie lies on his back and listens to the owls hoot into the night.

The lion shuts his eyes. He dreams he is lying in the shade of the acacia trees. The sound of that strange piano from an invisible part of the city dips in and out of the pictures behind his eyes. To the lion it is the wind. In his dream he prowls over to a nearby waterhole only to find it on fire. Fire over water. The smell of burning flesh wafts over the long bleached grasses. He opens his eyes. The grass has turned to cement.

Outside the zoo, a young boy and girl in their early twenties sit against a wall. A tattoo on their upper arms says THE INNOCENTS. Their eyes are closed as they sing in harmony

‘And then the knave begins to snarl

And the hypocrite to howl;

And all his good friends show their private ends

And the eagle is known from the owl’

They both think about hitching to a forest where they spent two summers and remember one particular tree. A pine tree. But the forests have been blown down in a small hurricane, the night the Stock Exchange crashed, and no one is planting things any more. They remember the evergreen of this tree and how it collected water on the tips of its needles; they would take it in turns to rip off their clothes and one of them stand under the tree while the other shook it by the trunk as it bowed this way and that way and little drops of water sprinkled the head of whoever stood under it.

The Innocents open their eyes. They feel the wall behind their backs and take deep breaths of the city’s air.

Dear Lapinski,

It is so HOT here in New York. I'm sitting naked at the table writing this. Sweat keeps dripping on to the page. Eduardo and I are now married. He works in Rome and flies over to see me at weekends. Instead of diamonds he brings me sachets of sugar and salad cream from the aeroplane – I have a whole closet full of them.

As words have never been our strong point we sit in front of the television flicking the remote control and eating our way through cartons of popcorn. The wedding was wonderful. When I cut the cake I cut my finger too and blood dripped all over the icing the Italian baker had taken three months to make into the columns of the opera-house. It was OK. Eduardo has always found blood sexy and sucked my finger for the photographer. My lips are covered in blisters. It always happens before I have an appraisal of my performance by the company. This is difficult to write. I feel very far away from you, both in experience and distance. Last time we met you looked at me as if all the worst predictions you made for me at fifteen had come true. More sweat. Blanche would have worn a floral wrapper but otherwise it's very Tennessee Williams.

Love Gemma

Gemma has become The Banker; a super-rich money marketer whose qualities of commercial acumen, aggression, energy, contact ability (most of her colleagues at Oxford), motivation, ego drive and adaptability earn her a salary she will not disclose. She has closed up like a seaflower, her voice on the phone is expressionless and brief; at the hairdresser, under the bright lights, she catches up on sleep. Nights alone are very still and black, she prefers to sleep with people around her. She pays a special consultant to buy and choose

furniture for her New York apartment, a mixture of old and new: a telephone from a 1930s Hollywood movie, two chaise-longues from an auction, a Perspex table, a bunch of glass poppies that light up at night, two Magrittes for the white walls, theatre posters from sell-out Broadway musicals, a sculpture made from nails. Her wardrobe is full of navy suits and leather pumps to match, she long ago threw out the Mexican smocks, orchids, glittering shoes of her school days and camouflaged herself in the discreet colour and cloth of a feminized male uniform. Her towelling robe is yellow and so is the bathroom soap; such attention to detail is what the consultant is paid for.

She jokes that she is not complimented on her bone structure any more, but on her bonus structure. Yesterday the blisters on her lips popped. On summer evenings, The Banker sits on her tiny balcony chewing Swiss chocolate and aspirins, watching the Empire State Building twinkle in the distance.

From dawn to dusk she is surrounded by computer screens and telephones. The day starts with a pep talk from the company analyst and then she begins selling. In her lunch hour she either has a pregnancy test (she does not want to be pregnant) or eats bagels on the edge of the desk watching the screens. Instant reactions to information is her skill. The slightest flicker and her jaws stop chewing on turkey mayonnaise. Her ruby nails dig into the black silk of her stockinged thighs, every rip equals a decision, and she has to buy them in bulk each week. Torn, laddered, full of tiny holes, they are her calendar to judge the stress of each day.

On Saturday mornings she works out in the bank's gymnasium and then meets a colleague for a Mexican meal. She has got short of breath but her lips still shine. Sometimes when Eduardo is asleep by her side she sobs like a wolf cub. The strange thing is there are no tears, she is dry-eyed even after hours of sobbing. Once when Eduardo woke up to find her body shaking and heaving he put his arms around her and asked what was wrong. She just buried her head under the

pillow, lying on her stomach, and continued to sob, sometimes surfacing to look at the clock.

Eduardo thinks about the week ahead and the small sleek whores in Bangkok, always smiling and ready to please. They know grief is not good for business.

In the morning he takes her shopping. He buys her spiky shoes, suspenders, petticoats, wigs she will never wear, a briefcase with a combination lock and a small revolver. She buys him the best cigarettes, starched white shirts, a cap with checks the shop assistant said was his tartan and twelve pairs of socks. Afterwards they eat ice-cream in parlours all over the city and then she takes him to the Waldorf where there is a little red bus in the window with HOVIS AND BUTTER FOR TEA written across its side. 'Makes me think of home,' she tells him as the Barts Bells chime twelve. Her sobbing fits stop and she knows they will never, never happen again. She is shaking hands with a fat man in grey flannels and a bow tie who thanks her for her help and promotes her to their branch in London. He says, 'You are a star, climb to the top and don't look down.' She says, 'I guess I'll miss the pace here Joe,' and jumps into the scarlet company car. As she looks in the mirror we catch each other's eye. We are startled voyeurs. The last time we were this close was when she took the glass of hot chocolate from my hand and put it to her lips.

Her eye is as blue as meat,

We stare into each other and then she cuts me out.

She shuts her eye.

The Banker taps her silicone fingernail on the window of her Cadillac. It is as if she wants to tap the irritation out of her self. She turns up the air conditioning, stops at the traffic lights, brushes her hair, glosses her lips, swallows vitamins, eats chocolate, checks her watch. The back seat is piled high with Gucci bags. As she boards the aeroplane to Heathrow, gold wedding ring glistening in the sun, she turns to me and

says in transatlantic English, ‘Don’t pride your self on being a small bird perched on my shoulder, Lapinski. I am just about to enter a huge bird, to be carried through the clouds and home again. You are a still-born bird somewhere at the back of my head, a cold-war baby who wants to make peace when there is no peace to be had. Life *is* a nightmare, it’s more interesting like that. You are no great shakes. It’s my job to invent reality, not fiction. I invent the world. You just figure out ways of surviving in it. You are the dispossessed cringing somewhere on the corner of this earth. I am in its centre, a bright burning light, and you in the corner will be dazzled.’

The air hostess offers her mineral water and prawn mousse. Down below, people get smaller and smaller as the engines roar and The Banker melts little dabs of orange shellfish on her tongue.

While the hares at John F. Kennedy Airport race the plane on the runway, an old man in Piccadilly, London, screams in the middle of the road, hands stretched above his silver hair. A line of cars comes to a standstill; the people in them are secretly afraid to get out and move him on. They laugh nervously behind the wheel; his screams pulse through their hearts. The Innocents watch him. They know his name is Mac and that he is homeless too. When he has finished screaming they saunter into the road and help him to the pavement. Mac says, ‘Okay you bandits give the old shaman a smoke. See this white skin over my left eye? I’m screaming so as to break it ... to get to the green underneath.’

On the edge of the motorway, a woman who wears earrings made from seashells sits on a high stool by the stainless steel meatbelt. She remembers a dream in which great clumps of small eggs, like spawn, leak from her and are put on a slide in a laboratory. Her mother, sister and a nurse are present. The nurse tells her that the red eggs are normal, but there is a chance that the white eggs contain ‘abnormalities.’ The name on her medical file is Saint Martha.

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An aeroplane has just flown over. It even drowned the sound of the machines on the meatbelt, which is quite something because they hum within as well as outside me; we have become one body. I am doing the night shift and miss my friend The Poet who calls me Saint Martha (she says it's a promotion) – she not been to work for three days now. I don't know where she is but I suspect she is trying to do something impossible. The lights from the factory guide planes that fly over us. The Alsatians outside bark at them. Sometimes I wish they'd just crash into us and we'd all die very quickly in a pool of duty-free gin. When for that one moment I could no longer hear the sound of the machines I thought I had died, that my heart had stopped and I had become meat too, splattered over the walls and floor.

I ached to be different from the women in my home town. But it's hard to be enchanting and carefree and spiritual when you're dead broke. I wanted either to take part in the world, to taste it, to dare search out joy and claim it, or not be here at all. I wanted there to be more to life than just surviving it. I wanted and I wanted. When I went to university, someone said, 'Are you going to piss in the outside loo in silk knickers then?'

I laughed when I was a student and first fell in love because I realized to be in love is to dream the other person instead of seeing them as they actually are – he was thrilling because he was a big bad boy from Barcelona and wore blood-red espadrilles even in the English rain. Some afternoons we would skip lectures and climb up on to the roof garden a friend had lent us with a bottle of wine, and fuck for hours; we talked about books, our lips wet with Rioja and each other. He said, 'In Spain every man is the toreador/Christ: we like to conquer death and pierce our flesh.' If I was brought up on chips and the Easter fair, he was brought up on paella and Mass. We made no plans for the future – we assumed our lives would be

rich in ideas and events, that we would always be curious, searching, full of questions and sensations. We assumed this because we made each other feel beautiful and interesting; I never thought it possible, then, that ideas could be bashed into stupid blue meat, and people encouraged to eat them like fast-food burgers. I often wonder where he is now, what he is doing, and whether he still feels able to conquer death.

When I visit my home town it's like going back to the scene of some silent, unrecorded massacre. Newspapers full of obsolete tragedies flap around the gasworks like dying birds. Condoms cringe in gutters. Pregnant prostitutes stand on street corners. There are regular floods of cancers for the undertaker to get rich on; cancer is gold to him. Young unemployed men and women suicide themselves all the time; leave ragged notes hidden in secret places for someone who might have cared for them to find, testimonies to their punctured spirit and shame and sorrow. If all their testimonies were put together they would make a new Bible, its prophets dead in battered cars, garages, and the bottoms of cliffs. There is a war on. Everyone is separated and afraid. It is as if we have been robbed of a language to describe the bewildered brokenness we inhabit. Best to leave and learn another language.

Last year I took my first ever holiday in Europe. I did not find myself in some golden paradise – but on an industrial beach, blue and pink corrugated iron shacks on the shore. Little fires and local people frying sardines. Dogs asleep on the sand. Football posts. Gulls with filthy wings swooping down for sewage and bread. High-rise flats. Patches of grass. A goat. The sad thing is I felt perfectly at home. I bought some candles from a holy shop with handmade roses climbing down the sides. A woman was begging as if her hand was made that way. On the last day, I took a bus to the nearest big city. Ate pork and cockles in cafés that smelt of drains. Drank lots of little cups of coffee with sweet almond cake, smoked strange cigarettes in red packets. Next to the big international shops, traders had set up barrows heaped with nuts, cheap glass,

earrings made from shells (I'm wearing them now) and flowers, so many flowers, sold by gypsies from the country. Organ grinders, church bells, chestnut sellers, chocolates filled with liqueurs distilled in Gothic monasteries, taxis, trams, piazzas, boulevards, tables and chairs out on the pavements in the sun and tourists taking photographs of everything. Men kissing each other, twice on the cheek, holding each other as they talked. Mothers and daughters with blossom in their buttonholes. They reminded me of a woman at home, with blue lips because she had a bad heart, who pinned a flower from her garden on to my heart. Once I went to a café with a huge clock on the wall; its hands kept swinging out of time with real time, so the waiters had to climb up the ladder to put it right. I went to art galleries full of the work of modernists and I went to bookshops to look for native poets in translation. My hair started to curl when it had always been straight. I read newspapers in the marble foyers of grand hotels and when I got bored, slipped into churches to see the frescos, listen to the service, watch people cross themselves in a trance. Among the elaborate gold leaf on the walls, one painting shocked – a priest standing against a cold snow sky and, stretched across the sky, a thin icy spiked line of barbed wire, the expression in his eyes chilled, as if at the moment the artist caught him he had lost his faith and was filled with unspeakable fear. I gazed at statues, touched them, sat under them reading maps, my fingers sticky with watermelon, legs tanned. I met a scientist and she took me home to meet her family, as if she regarded me as an important person who was worth getting to know. I played with her children, drank her wine, talked for hours about where I was from – she was trying to put me together, understand what sort of world I came from, but I didn't want her to understand because then I'd have to live in the world she was trying to put together. I wanted to live somewhere else.

That aeroplane has frayed my nerves. And they are not too good at the moment. I wake up coughing and my bronchitis

seems to be eternal. These days the most innocent of things can have a myriad fearful associations for me. Perhaps it was not a good idea to be promoted from Martha to Saint Martha, even though I know The Poet was joking. Did the saints feel psychically assaulted and scared, like I do? I feel there is something leaking from me, I think it is hope, that I need to save myself but I don't know how to. The lights are beginning to dim which means the night shift is nearly over. It is as if we women working on the meatbelt are returning to each other after a long separation and are startled by the distance we have travelled. Once, when I was watching The Poet work opposite me, for one mad and possibly saintly moment I thought she looked like a Messiah with no cross to hang on. The job of The Poet, like the Messiah, is essentially to prepare the imagination of the people to receive metaphors of all kinds. I have a feeling that right now she is trying to turn herself into a fish. She loves a good joke.

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- 7.15 Swab taken from specimen.
- 7.30 Specimen runs and falls over on occasions.
- 8.30 Specimen stands and falls over on occasions.
- 8.40 Specimen shows evidence of distress.

The llama's breath rises and falls. Like the dollar thinks Freddie. He wants to hold her. Bury his face in her fur. He sticks his hand through the cage bars but he cannot reach her. She seems to be sleeping and shivering at the same time. An aeroplane flies over the zoo and the animals become restless. The sky is scarred with a thick white line. The chief gorilla smooths the scar on his own chest with hands that are not so different from the hands of the old zoo keeper who rolls oranges into his cage every evening. The animals call to each other, ears alert, they murmur, scratch themselves, bellow out into the thick night of the city. It is as if the passing of this winged beast is an omen for some terrible happening in the future. The bird cages are full of fallen feathers; in a corner the Marabou stork hides her head under her wing. The white-tailed mongoose eats without tasting what it is he's eating. Toads croak. The cats lick invisible wounds with long sideways sweeping movements of their tongues. The elephants plaster mud on their skin, roll about in the dust and rub themselves against the wall of their compound. Their ears flap and spread, grey circles of time imprinted on their mud-soaked flesh, just as the hearts of trees have circles of time marked within themselves. The elephants dimly remember moonlit nights drifting through the bush stripping bark; tonight time seems to have stopped and the wind is hot.

In the city, three Cabinet ministers in navy serge suits, cufflinks and well-polished brogues dump their briefcases on a

hotel bed and pour themselves large gin and tonics. They raise their glasses and sing

'England here

England there

England every fucking where.'

Outside, on the high street, people put bits of plastic into a brick wall and in return get money. They carry their personal number around with them, in their sleep, during meals, love play, in swimming baths and offices. The computer in the wall is hot, like the forehead of a person with a fever, burning into the bricks and mortar of Europe.

09.00 Specimen shows evidence of discharge from eyes.

09.30 Specimen refuses to stand up.

10.30 Specimen still shows evidence of distress.

The llama's eyes have turned into a lake. She rolls on to her belly. Freddie thinks he can see her tail flicker, as if she is diving into her self. He touches his forehead for no reason at all. She looks like a fish with fur. Her belly is silvery grey. Freddie realizes he has been looking up into the sky which seems to be a great fathomless pool of inky water, and on the rippleless surface he can see the reflection of the llama's thoughts. At this moment she is a salmon, still and silent as the beginning of the world.

A woman with green wispy hair bends and bows over the black keys of her piano like a small tender willow. It is she who plays only those notes forbidden by the Catholic Church in the days of the Inquisition, who scents herself with Chinese cedar and twenty-five oils that are not for the timid, whose ribs stick out like needles, whose music spreads itself over all bedsit London, music that is full of questions, discord and joyful contradictions. The Anorexic Anarchist.

She says, ‘No no no, Lapinski ... I will not let you be an autocrat. I will break the pattern of your summoning which I hear through my little diseased cherry tree that refuses to blossom in this time of the accountant, prison warder, soldier, in this time when our common land is used to store nuclear icons, and battery chickens become golden nuggets in boxes that destroy the air we breathe. In this time when pigs become lumps of sorrow soaked in preservatives and people register their personal decay in solitary massacres ... yes I will break the pattern of your summoning. I will sow the seeds of chaos and disorder about your shoes, both left and right. I have a cake baking in the oven, can you smell the vanilla? Come here. Closer than that. I am going to transform *you*, but not before I have had a bath to cleanse me from all the television screens that go on at night.’ Her bones crack against the white porcelain of the bath. ‘I am an antibody fighting fighting fighting ... Come closer, Lapinski, you will be Marie Antoinette.’

I am Marie Antoinette. My bouffant of white cottonwool hair is tangled with barbed wire and birds; soldiers shoot out of my curls. I am standing outside a blue bank in the high street, a great hooped dress swirling about my hips. My lips red as glacé cherries. Two men who call themselves aides stand on either side of me. They wear mirrored sunglasses and one of them looks a little like Freddie; a white worm wriggles on his shoulderpad. Who’s your worm dancing for?’ a woman

carrying a violin asks him, and then takes a bite of her apple where she hopes no worms lurk. A huge cake stands on a silver trolley in front of me, iced with a map of the world. I have a metre ruler in my hand and as people go by I ask them if they would like a piece of cake. If they say yes, I put their portion of the world on to a banking slip one of the aides passes to me, with EAT CAKE in the little boxes where it says ACCOUNT NUMBER. The Anorexic Anarchist plays the trombone behind me, sometimes stopping to wheeze the concertina hung on leather straps around her neck, or to nibble sunflower seeds which are the only thing that keep her alive.

When the world is eaten, we take the soldiers out of my hair and bury them under a spindly sapling trying to grow in a crack in the pavement. A little boy makes a wreath out of his milkshake carton. Two lovers kiss on the grave, a small city-dance of leather and suede. I think of my father and mother and how they made love on the marble slab of a war memorial – perhaps it is the shame of the same species murdering each other so often that demands an affirmation of life, murdering each other in the heart, lung, arm, head, thigh, groin.

We are in a rowing boat. I am rowing. The Anorexic Anarchist rubs Nivea into her sparrow arms. The sun is warm and gentle. She closes her eyes, lids delicate, transparent, slivers of tiny veins. With her eyes shut she looks like a leaf. She trails her fingers in the lake. ‘Contentment, Lapinski, is going to meet someone you love on a full stomach. Happiness is going to meet someone you love on an empty stomach.’

She invites me to her home. On the floor is a clay bowl and inside it her lunch – two glistening spinach leaves. Her room smells of the wax candles she burns by the dozen while playing the piano. And of bread. It is in her bread that she creates the most beautiful anarchy. She puts everything into it, beer, rice, lentils, cumin, rye, yoghurt, depending on what she wants the bread to do to whoever eats it. It is the coming together, the convergence of everything she yearns for in the world. She makes bread that is full of ingredients she is

attracted to but she wants to be empty. She is trying to make the world less of something by making herself less of something as she oils her emaciated legs and arms, and she is teaching herself how to walk a tightrope. The rope is just six inches above the floor and her feet grip it as she shuffles across, arms flapping on either side. On the fifth step she stops, straightens up and points to the two spinach leaves. 'Eat your spinach, Lapinski.' She walks another step, it seems to take a hundred years. 'I have this little thing I do, Lapinski, when I put food on a fork, it can never touch my lips.' She smiles. 'I have walked the tightrope all my life. Now I'm trying to learn how to get to the other side.'

On the meatbelt blood is being spilled. Someone has been injured. The blades of the machines are still whirring. Seashells scatter across the floor. Someone's left hand is no longer attached to their wrist. The light is very bright. Women pick up the shells and put them in the pockets of their overalls. They do not know whether they are awake or asleep. Monster burgers slide down the belt, unattended as makeshift bandages are stripped from clothing and women haul themselves back from places of their own making – back to this scene, this room where the very real smell of blood is soaking into the paisley print of someone's headscarf, wrapped around the wrist of the injured woman known as Saint Martha, but mostly called Marth. The meat creates its own dimensions, patterns, becomes itself – a herd of beasts. The smell of blood mingling with perfumes dabbed on the temple and pulse points, and the ghostly fragrance of scents that have been imagined only five minutes before, the skin of a lover, the creases of a child, cardamon in a curry. Two bewildered women hold the shells to their ears – the sea sounds poisoned, slow and heavy as if she pulls towards the moon but cannot get back again. The women feel dizzy with the light, time has stopped, so much human blood trickling into the meat that was once four legs, a head, two eyes, a tail. They wander about pressing emergency

buttons that do not work because they make no sound and the floor manager is out to lunch.

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What a cunt. Lapinski told me I have no imagination. What do I need that for when my life could not be better than it is? On a good day, I've got quite a lot of things to look forward to. When they privatize prisons and water, I'll be there for a slice of the cake. Yesterday I went to a pleasure dome with a colleague. We had T-Bone, as a matter of fact. I could have ordered three T-Bones but my stomach won't take the stretch which pisses me off because I could have more of anything I want. Then we came back here and got rat-arsed on a bottle of Scotch. And another one. I didn't feel a hundred per cent this morning. The boss crept up to me in his famous posh boy brogues and said something like 'We don't carry any fat, you know.' Well I suppose fear is an executive tool, but fat? My mother went without so I could sleep at night without eating my fists. No one is going to make me feel bad about ordering Three T-Bones and giving two of them to my mother, but she doesn't want my money. I visited her last weekend, she was playing chess with her neighbour and when I walked in (dressed specially in a new shirt) she said, 'Son, you're a prat. Look after your queen, Mrs R.' One day I'll shoot her and it'll break my heart. I could buy her a car but she doesn't respect me enough to say yes, yes son, thank you. Dunno how she wanted her son to grow up. Dunno what she wants of me. Tonight I'm going to a charity ball to help raise money for a children's hospital – they're raffling off a helicopter. I'll get wrecked on champagne and help save babies with bone disease at the same time.

You have to take and then give a little bit back. You take a load and give back a slice. If I were to become strawberry jam under a tube train, the computers would carry on dealing without me; there are plenty more like me to feed the canon, to bribe and bully, to fill the bars and toy-town houses, to talk the talk and wear the uniform, to sell on dodgy everything and collect the annual bonus. People in my home town still talk

about my father. He is a well-missed man. They don't miss me and I don't miss them.

Hopefully the firm will relocate me soon. To the South-East or around. No Lapinski there. No glue sniffers there. No Greek sausages, salt fish or funny bananas in the shops there. The flower beds have no weeds in them and no one stands out in a crowd. The publicans serve who they want to serve because they own the place and they like serving me.

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A whole fresh salmon wrapped in foil with butter and herbs bakes in the oven. The napkins on the table are pale pink French linen, the cutlery silver, the glasses the thinnest, most fragile crystal. Marlene Dietrich croons from the compact disc player.

I, Lapinski, am in front of the mirror again. It seems The Banker and I are destined to meet backwards through the reflective surface of this glass. It was by the mirror my grandmother used to watch herself cry, first as a child and later as an adult. She was too proud to show her tears; instead when she felt the need to weep she would take from the drawer one of her many handkerchiefs, fold it on her lap, take off her eyeglasses and ritually begin. When she married and her husband caught her weeping one day by the glass he shook her by the shoulders so hard her hair, which she always scraped into a bun, fell loose and her combs scattered on the floor. 'Why are you so cross?' she had asked him. He replied tenderly putting the combs back in her hair, 'I often want to cry because I hoped I would marry a beautiful woman – and what did I fall in love with? A woman with a wart under her arm and a mouth like a crack in a pie. But do I cry? No. I do not cry because she is everything to me and if she is sad I want to know why.'

They opened a bottle of vodka kept for special occasions, talking about their good days and less good days and the neighbour who kept carp in the bath; it was only when they had finished half the bottle they remembered their daughter (my mother) was skating that afternoon to an audience of hundreds of school children. They arrived drunk, dishevelled and flushed, and embarrassed my mother by cheering loudly throughout her dance; afterwards she said their breath melted the ice and made her fall.

Through the looking glass I can see The Banker. She is slipping into a charcoal silk dress, goose pimples on her arms.

Eduardo is shaving in the bathroom and shouts at her for leaving water on the floor after her bath. She flosses her teeth and says the maid will clean it up in the morning. Eduardo calls her 'cats-breath' and playfully holds the razor up to her throat making slicing gestures. 'This is how you slice Parma ham,' he says, and then tells her she's lost her sense of humour.

Outside, the Innocents sit by the river drinking a bottle of sweet sherry. The girl has a violin bow in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She bows the boy's ear and he makes the noise of a violin in his throat. Fifty yards away a policeman watches over them; the boy now takes the bow and runs it over the girl's ear. She makes the noise of a violin in her throat. When they have finished the sherry they throw the bottle in the river. A helicopter hovers above them.

Jerry puts the last touches to his dinner table. With his golden ringlets curling under his earlobes, pale blue eyes and dimples he looks like a baby angel. At twenty-nine he has developed a slight lisp and when he smiles his tongue sticks out between his Cupid lips. A pianist/composer, quite famous in particular circles, his forte is to enchant his audience and introduce them to art and culture. He gives concerts for minor aristocrats in their rural homes, also at stately houses rented for the evening by various corporations and at numerous glitzy dinner parties. His experimental lisp and genuine love of shortbread baked by his adoring grandmother, who he lives with and who is also getting dressed for supper, all make him a delicious slightly wayward treat. He is much sought after and well-fucked by the sons of lords and dukes before they marry the women they will breed with and despise.

At this moment Grannie Bird, as she is called, is clipping a pair of ancient jet earrings on to her ears. She powders her soft smooth cheeks and remembers that she left her pot of rouge in the box at the Opera House in Milan.

The boy and girl watch the bottle of sherry bob up and down on the water. After a while the girl takes out a little box and shows it to the boy. Inside the box is a perfect set of long white false fingernails. She begins to put them on and the boy pushes back her cuticles with his own bitten fingernails. The policeman is baffled.

Eduardo, The Banker, Jerry and Grannie Bird sit at the candle-lit table drinking a light white wine with their fennel and Parmesan salad. Marlene sings 'Fall in love again' and Eduardo, who has taken off his shoes, searches for his wife's thighs under the table. Jerry is telling everyone about his last concert and how the host has promised to take him skiing in Europe for a weekend. Grannie Bird smiles; her teeth are like porcelain, and her blue eyes small and bright. 'You will look like a little angel flying over the snow. Be sure to keep your fingers warm.' The smell of salmon cooking wafts through the kitchen. Suddenly she says, 'My dear, you smell of roses.' She moves nearer The Banker and breathes deeply. 'Roses and roses and roses.' She gazes up into the chandelier. The Banker tells her there must be rose in her perfume. 'Ah that is what it must be,' sighs Grannie Bird, putting her knife and fork together. Eduardo tells them he has commissioned an artist to make prints of Warhol into tiles for their bathroom. The Banker tells Jerry she lost a hundred thousand pounds in the computer that morning and how it took her an hour to find it again. Eduardo nudges his toe under her knicker elastic. Jerry wraps one of his ringlets round and round his plump finger. Marlene sings 'I can't help it'; Grannie Bird wipes each corner of her lips with a napkin. Suddenly she moves back her chair and begins to tell a story.

'On the tube this morning three Irish children, they must have been five, seven and nine years old, got into my carriage, and in their hands, my dear,' she smiles at The Banker, 'were the most beautiful pink and red roses. Long-stemmed and alert as a rose should be, they smelt like you, Gemma, it is your fragrance that reminds me. And these children started begging

from passengers. First the little girl came up to me, held the rose under my nose and said, "Give us some money for food then." I shook my head and she went away. Then the little boy came up to me, his eyes as green as green, his hair shaved off, face heart-shaped and ...' Grannie Bird puts her fingertips together '... tragic. He also pinned the rose right under my nose and said, "Give us some money for food then." I shook my head. He said, "Please please please please please please please," pushing the rose into my face until I found myself blushing and delved into my pocket for some loose change. He said, "Give us a pound, I don't want less than a pound." I gave him substantially less than a pound, just the few coins I had. Perhaps twenty pence. All the time he pressed the rose into my face. "Please please please please I grew these flowers with Mama." '

Grannie Bird makes the sound of a little dog whining please please please. Jerry giggles and makes a rose from his pink napkin, which he presents to her with a little bow of his golden head.

'Thank you, Sir.'

She smiles at Eduardo.

'That rose smelt like the roses of my childhood. Of the world I grew up in. The woods a haze of bluebells, oh they looked like a Monet, and the light ... if you appreciate light ... early-morning mists, cuckoos in spring, the woodpecker, pheasants, wild rabbits. That rose made me think of my own mother in her gardening gloves, pruning her rose bushes; she planned her roses every year and people who visited from the city always took one or two back with them. English roses. When they were full-blown, petals would fall on the walnut sideboard, there were vases of them all over the house, and I would save them to press in heavy old books.'

Eduardo shuts his eyes. He is bored. His toe wriggles from side to side, Gemma silently mouths 'EEEEEEK'; Marlene sings 'What am I to do?' and Jerry fills everyone's glass.

‘My world was a peaceful thoughtful world. We basked in gardens we ourselves had created. Gentle sunlight, straw hats, white gloves, scones, homemade jams, lazy days picking blackberries in September, happy happy days. We knew the names of the children of all our servants and never forgot their birthdays. Bees hovered about the lavender bushes, our cook gave us muslin from the kitchen to make sachets of the stuff for our top drawers. My parents honeymooned in Europe for two years in a horse-drawn caravan. The house was always full of artists and actors. I spent my childhood on horses and my adolescence posing under the apple tree for young men in silk scarves. My father was a wonderful host and my mother, although she never made much fuss about it, painted little watercolours, with brushes especially imported from China. Dragonflies we thought of as fairies, yes those were happy day. My uncle tickling trout, rugs and hampers and lemonade. A hundred strokes to the hair last thing at night. We appreciated life. Lived it to the full, wanted it to last for ever and ever. Do you know, my dears, I have seven generations of earls in my larynx ...’

Jerry nudges her arm. ‘Grannie, tell us about the little boy.’

‘Oh yes. I gave him the money and he went away. I shouted “GIVE ME THE ROSE THEN” ... he looked as if he was going to kill me. You see, although other passengers had given money, they had not asked for the rose. They were just glad to be left alone. I am made of sterner stuff, and shouted again, “I gave you the money now you can give me the rose.” So he gave it to me. And then he started to cry. His sister rummaged in her pockets and found a pencil which she gave to him and he went round with that instead, holding it under people’s noses as if it was a rose. And when someone gave him money and demanded the pencil his sister gave him her hair slide ... she just took it out of her hair there and then ... he went around with that saying, “Give us some money for food then?” And when someone took the hair slide his younger sister turned out her pockets and found a half-eaten sandwich. So he

put that under some gent's nose and the man said, "You've got food," pointing to the sandwich. "What do you want money for?"

The Banker claps her hands. 'Play for us, Jerry.' Eduardo joins in, 'Play play play play.' Grannie Bird leaves the table, her long black velvet dress whispering along the carpet as she walks to the kitchen and opens the oven. The candles flicker as Jerry sings

*'Oh, Susannah won't you answer
with her hand her face she's hiding
some adventure, some adventure I shall see.'*

Eduardo is telling his wife about his meeting with a Japanese financier at an oyster and champagne bar in Soho. How they both agreed when the deal had been made that business was not too difficult and totally immoral which is why they both liked it. Jerry tosses his ringlets

'With her hand her face is hiding.'

Grannie Bird carries in the salmon. It is so big it flops over the sides of the baking tray. She puts it down on the table. It is steaming. She unwraps the foil and is just about to poke a long thin knife into its belly, when the salmon seems to take its last breath. It rises from the dish and gasps. Melted butter runs over its eyes. The Banker, who has been embarrassed by fish before, looks at it with interest. She bites her lip. Grannie Bird says to Jerry, 'Cut the fish will you darling.' Jerry takes the knife from her, his little plump hands shaking slightly. Eduardo moves his toe inside his wife's knickers. The Banker says, 'Eeeeeeeek.' Grannie Bird fiddles with the cutlery. Jerry cuts into the fish and Eduardo's plate is held out for the first sliver of pale orange pink flesh.

The terrible strange sight of ten minutes ago is uncommented on, as if saying something will confirm it actually happened. No one touches their salmon. They eat the petits pois, potatoes, broccoli, break bread rolls and dip them

into the mayonnaise and parsley sauce, pushing the fish to the side of their plates, talking of summer holidays, the exchange rate, property, obituary columns, and magazines they subscribe to.

Grannie Bird puts a bottle of port, five jade glasses and a whole Stilton on the table. She tells them the way to eat it is to scoop out the middle with a little silver spoon. Jerry hands round a bowl of walnuts, singing

'This is shameless

what presumption!

I forbid you to come near.'

Grannie Bird pops chocolates on her grandson's tongue and peals with laughter as he pretends to pant for more. Eduardo puts his shoes back on and sits on the cream leather settee with a glass of port. A block of passion-fruit sorbet melts unnoticed on the trolley. The Banker looks at the salmon. She is curious and takes a flat silver knife to cut a tiny piece of flesh off its belly, puts it on her tongue and chews it very slowly as if assessing its flavour. I catch her eye as she spits it out into her napkin and re-glosses her lips. She gargles with rosé and spits that out into the napkin too. As she breaks a match in half and picks her teeth with it, she turns to me, cheeks flushed.

'I think, Lapinski, this is the terrible trick of one of your friends. This fish has the possessed eye of a poet and tastes just as useless. In fact it tastes like a melancholy misfit. I have always hated poetry, I prefer hard mathematics or even hard drugs. Do you really think that in consuming this pescado I would consume its ideas? I have spat them out again and again. And what is The Idea? That there are thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird? Give it to me, I'll take it to the market and show you sixty ways of looking at it. Poets are fuckwits. They try and legislate with language but they don't have the roubles to bribe. On my aunt's salmon farm they stroke the

belly of hen salmon to squeeze out their eggs for breeding.
Well, I have squeezed you out too.'

This is shameless

what presumption

I forbid you to come near.

Jerry sticks his tongue into the middle of the Stilton, eases it in a little further and looks at Eduardo.

'Do you think I am a cannibal, Lapinski? That I eat consciousness? You fucking piss-artist. That you should try and infiltrate me so deviously. You have delusions of grandeur.'

so coy then

just to tease me ... la la la

I know why you're waitin' here

Jerry's tongue is covered in Stilton. Eduardo has fallen asleep.

'You fucking village idiot. You've spent too long in steamy kitchens making dumplings and *kasha* for broken people in broken shoes.'

She looks for her car keys.

I do like to be beside the seaside

I do like to be beside the sea

Grannie Bird sings in a quivering high voice, swaying her velvet hips in time with the piano.

The Banker slams her foot down on the accelerator of her Mercedes; smoke steams out of the exhaust and her hands, on the wheel, are white with fury. It is as if years of anger and fatigue are burning through her charcoal silk body. This time when she looks into the mirror she does not cut me out. Her eye is blue as petrol.

‘You, Lapinski, are the dinosaur trapped in ice from the age of slow-moving beings. I sit on trains rolling through the remains of the Industrial Revolution in a first class carriage reserved for me, briefcase by my side, computer on my lap, telephone under my chin, groomed, prepared to lead and steer and direct and instruct, all the while eating warm baked cheesecake prepared for me by my house-keeper. These are the crumbs offered to me, along with tickets for musicals, dinners at Maxim’s, trips in hot-air balloons, cruises on the Thames, for the stress, for the erosion of my sleep, for the thumping of my blood-pressure, for my loss of connection with losers like you. I understand myself perfectly. I do not have to search for reason or meaning or why or what or how. I know who I am and what I do.

‘I own a prestige apartment facing the sparkle of the river, with south-facing views, a private car park, porter, video security, entry phone, swimming pool and a sauna to nurture my health, which is after all my wealth. I am given all this for good reason. I am valued; I am an irresistible proposition to men in parliaments and tycoons on committees and entrepreneurs of all kinds; my condom case bulges with the promise of liaison and adventure. I am the new pioneer; the great adventure of my generation is to destabilize everything and everyone.

‘In my prestige apartment I am Madame de Sade. My phone never stops ringing; it is my Beethoven, speaking into it is oral sex, my shining black cock, I press buttons, phone up New York every evening, find out how the markets close, and sometimes, when Eduardo goes down on me, I wrap the cord around his neck until he begs me for mercy. If he survives, we go out to eat, or see another musical, or go to the first night of a movie, or the opening of an exhibition. I have a very special kind of love play, my instruments are straps and straddles and bulls and bears and stranglers and strategies and bells and bonds and whistles. I play my own and other people’s

destruction silkily and easily. I calculate crashes; I am a whore in the marketplace, I do a lotta rough trade.

‘I don’t dream. I fuck and hit the pillow and sleep as if I’ve died. Under my bathrobe I am covered in bruises. My lovers and I trace each other’s scars with fingers that touch the keyboard and make a volcano anywhere in the world we want to destroy, we like to abuse and use each other, it keeps us on our toes. I hate them and they hate me, this is our liberation. Yesterday I dug my nails into the flesh of a young dealer from Berlin, he came in the back seat of his Golf GTI, sperm and cocaine all over his seat covers, testimony to our wild afternoon in the maze of an underground car park, impaled on each other in fumes and brief ecstasy – yes, we have planes to catch and our pilots are waiting for us. Last week I fucked a computer millionaire, a high-flying technical whizzo; he programmed me and I flew until we both crashed into the leather of his swivel chair, screaming. We are exhausted, wide awake, berserk, invincible. And we, Lapinski, have won the moral freedom to wound. We dabble our bodies and minds and energy and money in the soils and lakes and seas and mountains of the world. We own the world.’

The bottle of sweet sherry bobs up and down on the water near where The Innocents are sharing a packet of crisps. She spreads her long white fingernails, fingers taut so they look like claws. They watch a Mercedes speed past them, and at that moment the girl thinks she can see twenty red parrots, wings on fire, fly into the sun, and the boy thinks he can see a rhino poke its horn through the moon.

The Banker pulls into a petrol station. She is electric, possessed. The taste of the salmon is still in her mouth; she spits, opens a Diet Pepsi, eats chocolate, smokes a cigarette, gargles with the Pepsi. She says, ‘Fuckwit fuckwit fuckwit ...’ Her dress sticks to her body; she seems to be sweating and shivering at the same time. The garage attendant rubs his eyes. With her American Express card she buys a hundred gallons of petrol, which she demands be loaded into her car, the boot, the

back and front seat, and on the roof. He does this for her in a daze. She crashes the car into a wall, buckling the front of the Mercedes, starts it again, her hands covered in blood and glass from the shattered windscreen. This time she crashes past the barrier in the zoo car park.

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When my hand got mashed in the meat machine, all I remember is the panic in the women's eyes as they bent over me. And then the Alsatians began to bark. Dizzy and dripping I thought perhaps I am a late-twentieth-century saint after all? Saint Martha of the Frozen Hamburger. What is described as an Industrial Accident is my left hand guillotined somewhere below the wrist and minced with British beef. This means a whole batch of hamburgers will consist of me. Customers will buy my flesh in a sesame bun with pickle. They will sit in buses and not even know that we have all started to eat each other.

I am not in pain. My arm is in plaster. My friends take it in turn to brush my hair. Every time my father sees me his eyes fill and he has to leave the room. I used to paint my fingernails orange – they looked like a shoal of tropical fish. I am losing parts of my self. Literally. If you have hands you might as well do something intelligent or gentle with them. When I was a girl I liked to hold the baby frogs that jumped from the pond on to my wrist, but I never kissed one to turn it into a prince and I never made a wish in case my wish did not come true. I wish I had made a wish. That is my wish.

The jagged lifeline I stared at so often in the palm of my hand is gone, so I will have to invent a tale without it. I predict a wonderful future for us all. You will meet the love of your life on a bridge in July, your children will be healthy and happy and never have to beg on trains in January, there will always be enough rain to water the crops in August, bees will never become extinct in April, libraries will be open twenty-four hours in May, no one will drill for oil under your house in November and everyone will be educated in February. That leaves March, June, September, October, December for other stuff to happen.

A rope is being strung from two telegraph poles above the zoo. First it is slack and then it gets tighter. Two ladders sway against the hour before dawn. The Anorexic Anarchist looks down. She is starving and her lips are parched. She tests the rope with her toe. The Banker opens the boot of her car. She carries two of the petrol cans into the zoo, runs back to the car, takes out another two, does this again and again until they are spread out like metal corpses on the turf; the spikes of her heels sink into the mud but she does not take them off, she just keeps running to the car and back again, the beating of her heart a small earthquake that shakes early-morning London. The llama and Freddie sleep on. When Freddie wakes up he sees The Banker in her charcoal silk and stilettos carrying petrol cans and piercing them with a car aerial. Her hands are bleeding. He rubs his eyes.

The monkeys begin to shriek, gathering their children, calling out to other animals, burying their heads under their arms, nuzzling and nudging against each other; the gibbons make loud whooping calls that echo through the city, into nightclubs and cinemas and traffic jams; the call is 65 million years old, it slithers under the foundations of buildings and rests there, it is answered in the dense forests of the gibbons' origin, it breaks the windows of the local police station.

Twenty policemen put on their boots, jump into a van, and head for a well-known pub where they think 'the trouble' comes from; they want to smash the sound with truncheons. The van smells of frightened animals, fists, rubber, uniforms and peppermints. The Banker disappears into the aquarium trailing blood from her cut hands, into the aviary and reptile house. Freddie discovers he has an erection as he watches her pour petrol through the bars of cages, splash it through every gap she can find, he watches her run for what seems like miles, in circles and zigzags, a silver streak of fury and sweat and ... roses ... and a will whose pulse beats harder than the

elephants' stamping feet as they lift up their trunks (at the same time the policemen lift up their truncheons) and bellow (just as three young boys hit in the stomach bellow), ears spread out to the sky. The panda who has fathered twins in Madrid and Washington spits out bamboo, thumps his own belly and tries to die. He watches the giraffe become a tower of flames and collapse into itself, ankles broken, tongue hanging out, the seven bones of its neck bowing down, one by one, curving into the earth. The folds of the elephants' skin crumple as the rings of time within it burn; some roll on their backs in the mud to put out the flames; one sits in a pool of water. The lion sees the strange sight of fire over water and roars into the dream he once had, under the acacia tree. As the flames grow and animals butt their heads against walls and bars and each other, the zoo becomes a museum of murmuring lit up by a thousand eyes, and in them Freddie can see himself; he is so aroused he can hardly stand up. Birds spread their wings of fire and try to fly but there is nowhere to fly to; they die in a ball of flames in mid-air, colliding into each other, scattering feathers and seeds. The rhinoceros from Java also attempts to fly; he digs his horn into the earth so that his body is in the air for one miraculous second until the horn breaks and he becomes a putrid hulk, a smouldering monster pointing its broken ivory stub at an invisible moon. The Banker's fingers are hot and articulate, her eyes water but she does not fumble or flinch or lose her balance; she sets fire to the litter bins as if she has been rehearsing for this all her life. She looks around her. There is nothing left of the chief gorilla except his liver which lies burning on the floor of the cage like some joke sacrifice to a wayward god. The one kangaroo that manages to jump out of her allotment runs straight into the litter bin where she falls, whimpering amongst soft drink cans and chocolate wrappers. Many of the animals are unconscious from the smell of petrol and burning flesh alone. In the aquarium the tanks shatter and fish who took so many years to fly (unlike the heavy ostrich who tried to take off in one moment of panic and broke its wings) by developing the habit of jumping to enlarge

their fins, now jump straight into the flames. The eels, which when old and sexually mature grow darker, the small fish hibernating at the bottom of the tanks, all fall into the fire, a cluster of tiny scaly stars; the sting-rays spew out poison and writhe in flames that burn purple and black, the silvery-brown spotted piranha sizzles in its own oil, the fish with eggs in their mouths drop them into the flames. Outside, the last of the elephants rolls on his back, legs in the air.

The llama desperately tries to turn herself into water. She becomes earth, sawdust, stones, but this is not enough to put out the fire inside The Banker; her desire is to destroy and it is hard to break desire. No matter how hard she tries, the llama cannot do it.

She becomes The Poet. Her black boots are covered in ash, her hair singed. She watches the leopards standing on their hind legs clawing at the sky, absorbs the image and tries to reshape it. She changes herself into contempt, remorse, love – and finally salt.

Freddie stares at The Banker. She is vomiting over her stilettos. He stands up and walks through the flames towards her. As the smell of burning flesh fills his lungs and makes him retch, he spits on his little finger, moistens the blisters on The Banker's lips, and presses his tongue into the burning furnace of her mouth.

I can smell burning. I'm glad my flat is insured. The sky is on fire. I dreamt I was on fire and fell from the sky into the sea. As the water filled my ears, a voice said 'You are the Dirty Young Man of Europe,' and then I realized I was shitting in the sea, it was pouring out of me, gallons of it, and I was screaming 'SAVE ME,' the sea turning brown and I was drowning in my own shit. And then a blue marbled whale swam towards me, came to save me, but as it came closer it began to flounder in the stuff coming out of me. I prefer swimming pools. At least you know what's on the bottom.

Duke is cringing under the chair, whimpering. He did this once before under the bed of a lady I was having my way with and it turned out he could smell a dead budgie – I saw it tucked into a shoe when I dragged him out. I like it better in the car – we've fucked through three massacres together, rain, the wipers going backwards, doner kebab and a thousand cigarettes afterwards to set me up for the day to come and the days after that. The sky is thick with smoke. Hitler didn't get us out – Duke and I are staying put.

Tomorrow is always another day because you can always buy something. To date I own a car phone, microwave, video, calculator that is also a diary/radio, tea maker that is also a radio, bicycle machine, vacuum to get rid of the hairs in my car, shower radio, cassette player that is also a clock/television/radio, compact disc player and recently I bought myself another Ansaphone which is also a clock and a photocopier. When I made the message to leave to callers I got Duke to bark three times by standing on his tail. Days, weeks go by and there are often no messages on the machine – I thought it would change my life, that it would be full of people trying to contact me. Wanting things is like being tortured. You're open to suggestion and your resistance is low. So the torturer beats you senseless and says, 'You need gold taps on your bath don't you?' and you say *yes*. And then he says,

‘What you really need is a Cornish pasty up your arse, isn’t that right?’ and you say *yes yes I need a Cornish pastry up my arse*. I am more needy than I’ve ever been. Am I the torturer or the tortured?

In sleep I find myself in the belly of that blue marbled whale frolicking in the sea ... and then the whale heaves, begins to vomit me up ... thrashes about until I am thrown out of the centre of its belly. For ever.

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The anorexic anarchist walks above the flames of The Banker's boredom on her tightrope. A black cat with a pearl collar sits on her shoulder staring at her sister lioness burn below. She takes three steps, her bare feet as slow and as sure as a tortoise; she pauses and breathes deeply; the heat is almost unbearable. Thick coils of smoke circle her head like a halo. On the seventh step she balances herself with her arms, fingers outstretched, dripping with sweat, and says

derangement is the subversion of order

i am deranged

i am starving

i have taken the pain of the world into my self

i have not walked on water but i have walked above fire

She loses her balance, stumbles, adjusts herself with flailing smoke-blackened arms. Her palms are blistered. She takes another three steps, her green hair blowing in the putrid wind.

The Poet stands in her black boots on a mound of ash. Her belly heaves. She staggers out on to the city streets, blinking away the fur in her eyes, itching from the ash that has fallen on discarded washing machines and broken chairs in the gutter, walks for hours in zigzags through the middle of roads and down alleys, she walks and walks, comes to what looks like a bridge of black bone, trips over the sprawled legs of a boy and a girl. The Innocents are sleeping under a blanket that has absorbed the smell of dying animals, their heads resting on a white DIAL A PIZZA BOX. The girl clutches a smaller white box to her breast and in it, neatly arranged, are the ten white fake fingernails, the boy nuzzling into her neck, spiked hair sticky with tea leaves: he is dreaming of Jerusalem, which he pronounces Jar-oos'a-lam, where he finds wild sage growing in the cracks of the wailing wall; he wants to find water to boil and brew the sage to give to the girl who is murmuring softly,

sometimes drowned by the trains, 'No babies ... I don't want babies ... no babies.'

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Freddie withdraws his tongue from The Banker's mouth. He says, 'I find your fire sexy, Miss.' Their shoes are sticky with vomit. 'Why do you find me sexy, son of a bitch?' She slaps his face and neck and ears. 'Why Why Why?' Freddie catches her hands – which are tearing the skin on his face – with his own hands, and squeezes them until the knuckles go white.

'Because I too want to act on my worst desires, to love my wickedness. I have fought this tendency in myself but now I want to give up the good fight. I want to glory in the truth of my worst nightmares. I want to live on adrenalin and deceit, to pluck the feathers off niceness, to drip scalding wax on my old utopian visions, to stick my fingers up at newly-weds ... at rosy optimism ... I want to fuck you in the flames. If the world is your playground I want to play with you; teach me to play. I will be your disciple. I want you to be my teacher, to scold and whip and kiss and suckle me. I want you to offer me a dangerous future. You are the woman I have yearned for all my life. I have found you and do not fear our difference. I have found the hidden jagged edges of myself in you, found forbidden desire in you, found my meanest self in you, in your womanly form ... and I want you.'

The Banker screws up her eyes, watches the flames throw shadows over the golden contours of his body. 'Come here then. Fuck this top goddess in the flames and I will be your chairwoman.' She lifts up her torn silk dress and tells him how she wants him to move.

'I am the first transsexual who's performed her own operation. I am a man-woman, and you, Freddie ... I see you have been feminized ... learnt the language of women I despise. I killed that woman in myself long ago. Drowned it in my husband's semen, drowned my disgusting neediness in the silicone heart of a machine better than my body. I pay no attention to the moon of blood and backache. I stopped all that long ago. I am totally in control. I have no appetite for love.'

None at all. I am love's arsonist, burnt it out of myself, where it was is now a smouldering field full of stubble. I am beautiful and brutal, soft and hard; a myth in a technological age. I have mistressed that age and become its master with my womanly contours, hairless skin, perfect breasts and tears. I woo seduce confuse and legislate ... SUSTAIN IT BADBOY OR I'LL BREAK YOUR LEGS WITH MY WILL ... HARDER HARDER HARDER ... Inside my womanly structure I can achieve what no man can even hope for. I am witch, mother, sister, mistress, maiden, whore, nun, princess. I am raping you with archetypes you yourself invented ... listen to the peacocks howl like hyenas, who would have thought it of such a pretty bird ... COME COME YOU BASTARD COME!'

She pulls down her dress and asks Freddie to brush her hair. He walks behind her, tenderly untangling knots, smoothing, caressing, stroking. She smiles. He puts on his trousers, limp and breathless and happy. Her breath, which smells of petroleum, is his wind of liberation. He feels abused, soiled, burnt, ecstatic.

She says, 'Breakfast. Croissants, coffee, orange juice, newspapers. I'll pay.' He takes her arm and they walk through the flames to the car park. She drives him to her favourite café where a waiter guides them to The Banker's private table, under an arch of stone. They can hear fire engines, police sirens, the babble of journalists, the flashlights of photographers.

'So you see,' says The Banker, dipping her croissant into her cappuccino, crumbs on her glossed lips, she pauses while nostalgic Muzak from a war-time movie washes gently over the walls and little baskets of warm bread rolls. 'We will inherit the earth.' She watches the waiter slice oranges and put them in the juice extractor. 'How many pigs have you got in your mouth then?' She smiles at Freddie who blinks and bites into his bacon sandwich.

‘Yes, Lapinski,’ says The Poet, waving her hand in the direction of the café with arches and domes and a striped canopy, ‘they will die stuffed and empty and we will die half full.’ Tonight, the moths that circle the light of my lamp like a wreath have wings that are singed at the tips. My cat Krupskaya seems to be dizzy. The pearls on her collar have melted and every time she tries to walk she falls down. When I tickle her under the chin she begins to wash her ears and prance about like a tsarina with a hangover. The Poet requests another cup of tea and a Jammie Dodger, a biscuit she is partial to way before and after the acceptable age to like Jammie Dodgers, those ages being seven and seventy. She is not particularly grateful which is a relief because being grateful can be quite tiring.

She says, ‘A friend of mine recently lost her hand on the meatbelt, you know ... better to lose your marbles than your hand, don’t you think? In my next metamorphosis I’m going to be a Professor of Madness and I’ll say to my students, If you want to know what health is, first you must know what sickness is: go and look at the way desks are arranged in offices and ask every Senior Manager and CEO what kinds of strategies they have in place to make their employees feel uneasy and ask career politicians what it is they do not believe in and ask the pornography industry what it is they are selling and ask farmers if there’s any reason why hens should be able to move freely and ask the pharmaceutical industry if it’s ever thought of bribing doctors to use its products and ask the floggers and hangers if their parents were kind to them and ask the present what’s it got to do with the past – and if it’s true that hope does not die last, it dies first, does anybody know where the bodies are buried?’

She stands up and thanks me for the Jammie Dodger.

In another part of London, Jerry sings

for-give ... me

for-give ... me

for-give ... me'

And Eduardo joins in

'per-do-no

per-do-no

per-do-no.'

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In the little restaurant which pays my rent and where people eat lamb stew and read newspapers in a variety of languages, the woman with the broken Chinese umbrella sits opposite me and says, ‘Lapinski, my friend is dying.’ I pour salt on to the aubergines I have just sliced and she watches it turn the flesh of the vegetable brown. ‘At the hospital, by his bed, we no longer talk about what is right or wrong. We talk about parks and we talk about bread.’ Her eyelashes are silver, her cheekbones sharp. ‘He loves a particular park in Paris and how the hedges are sculpted and we pretend we will go back to visit it with two baguettes in our rucksack.’ She smiles and the sun shines on her see-through hands, the veins a nest of blue snakes. ‘I am clearing out his room for him. It is not his personal correspondence that makes me feel strange – it is his objects. A little horse made from lead. A duck’s egg. A candle in the shape of a cactus. They seem suspended in time, like a miracle.’ She take the aubergines and squeezes them in her hands until their juice trickles into a saucer. Her left palm is covered in little white seeds. After a while she says, ‘Why the silence?’

I tell her how my father, a docker, always found time to take me to the public baths where he held my wrists and floated me out into the middle of the pool. So I would not be frightened of the deep, he made little boats out of paper and sailed them a short distance away from me. In this way he taught me how to swim. And how my mother changed from the clothes she wore to make engines for tractors, into the sparkling taffeta skirt with spangles and sequins, glittering as she danced for the sheer fun of getting dizzy; and how she would eat beetroot which she loved more than chocolate, and leave little red kiss marks on my cheeks and hands. She nods and smiles. ‘No one can read our thoughts even if they think they can.’

For some reason her words make me remember the helicopter I saw in the sky the night before. From the thirteenth floor of The Poet’s high-rise flat. How it had a yellow beam shooting down, searching for someone. In gardens, down roads, through the windows of houses. Although it was unlikely, I had felt scared in case they were searching for me and I did not know what I had done. But the most frightening thing of all was I felt they did not know what I had done either.

Swallowing Geography

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And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and composed
before a million universes.

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

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The Tadpole Fields

‘When you feel fear, does it have detail or is it just a force?’
The gold filling in Gregory’s front tooth shines into J.K.’s eye.
‘I can’t hear you.’

They are sitting in a bar surrounded by mirrors etched with the Eiffel Tower at Roissy airport, Paris. Brand names like Segafredo, Perrier, Dior, Kronenbourg 1664, Chanel spin like planets above them. The large blonde Californian waitress slams two cocktails down on the table.

‘They’re killers,’ she says.

‘It is as if Paris is muffled. I hear it at low volume.’

J.K. says nothing because these days Gregory’s voice is very quiet, as if frightened to let it out of his big body. She catches odd words like nausea, chestpain, The Baltic States, mother, father, aspirin, and sometimes she catches his eye.

‘Look at the inscription in this book.’

She moves closer to the secret in his body that tames his voice. It is an old volume of short stories printed in 1941 on thin transparent paper.

‘Leave this book at the Post Office when you have read it, so that men and women in the services may enjoy it too.’

The day before, they walked to Pigalle in silence, arm in arm, stopping to watch transvestite whores lean against cars and walls, put on lipstick, smoke cigarettes, call out to men passing by, their steamy drugged gaze settling on this man and that man and then somewhere else.

‘What kind of cultural virus taught those boys to stick their hips out like that, and pout and press their breasts across the

other side of the road?’ Gregory says.

‘Do you fancy them?’

‘They’re gorgeous. I like that one over there with the long black plait ... it comes down to his knees, can you see ... in the hat with the red feather.’

COME AND TALK TO ME! It is an eerie staccato voice. The voice of cigarette advertisements, fierce sun, a two-bit bar with dead flies on the floor. They turn round to see they are standing outside a pinball arcade, CASINO spelt in coloured lightbulbs above the door. COME AND TALK TO ME! The yankee growling voice comes from a silver and chrome machine. On its screen a square muscled man jumps up and down in a computerized urban landscape of skyscrapers and highways. Hands in raincoat pocket, jaw jerking to one side, he drawls again, COME AND TALK TO ME!

Gregory nudges J.K.’s arm. ‘Well, listen to the man, let’s take up his invitation.’ He puts ten francs in the slot.

HOW YA DOING? says the man. TYPE SOMETHING INTO THE KEYBOARD AND I WILL RESPOND. The screen whirs as the urban cowboy crosses his arms and leans towards them.

‘It’s in English.’

‘Well, tell him how you are.’

Gregory turns to face the man. He puts another ten francs into the machine and spreads out his fingers. Pink and blue bulbs flash above him.

Do your lips burn up when kissed right? Let me kiss ’em baby. Let me let me let me. I would like to fuck you. I would like to make you happy. How do you like to be touched? On the aeroplane over here, the air hostess demonstrated various ways of surviving an air crash. She said we must blow on a whistle to draw attention to ourselves. Don’t you think that is a little narcissistic? If

everyone in the everyday of their lives who wanted to draw attention to themselves blew a whistle where would we be? What do you do to make people love you? I do cheap things to make people like me. I make them feel more important than they are and flatter them and when someone makes me a great cocktail I take a sip and shout DRAGONFLIES! In England I light my cigarettes with matches made in Yugoslavia. The picture on the box is of 'Scenic Cornwall' and shows a number of signposts on the edge of a cliff. One of them says THE FALKLANDS 8109 and the other says AUSTRALIA 170001. I tell you this because when I was a boy I collected stamps. It was my way of naming places and conquering the world. A stamp is a small picture. So I had lots of small pictures of the world. Madagascar, China, Mexico, Argentina, Egypt. A kind of virtual reality.

What's your name, my sweet? Is it Johnny or Sam or Brett? I'd like to go down on you and for you to talk to me about football and religion and hamburgers and beauty and death and what it feels like to come. Were you bullied at school? When you were a teenager did you spend hours in your bedroom changing your clothes? Did you save up to buy the boots and shirts other kids had? What kind of Darwinian programmed you? Do you want to change yourself in any way? Like speak in a deeper voice or have a different nose? Do you feel safe in this world? Or do you feel alone and scared? What kind of gadgets do you have in your home? Do they comfort you? Baby do you sometimes feel glum? Baby take care of yourself. Oh baby I'd like to stroke you and whisper things to you and make you not have fear.

Honey, I want to tell you about a train I took to Kiev with my bit of squeeze. We made love just as we got near Chernobyl and the loudspeakers in our carriage played a kind of lament to mark the tragedy of the nuclear accident. In some way it seemed to mark all tragedy ever. The cries

of our lovemaking as we passed infected cattle, children with shaved heads playing by the railway tracks and the eerie stillness of deformed trees were the only sound, snow falling, he and I sweating in each other's arms and honey we were, at that moment, without fear. The high-rise blocks of flats we stayed in were called The Sleeping Region. I was brought up in a block like that in London. As a kid we lived on tins of beans and meatballs and hated to sleep because we were frightened. Darling, do you sleep sweet and easy and deep? Does someone sleep beside you? Breathing into the pillow next to you and you wake up first and feel them there and it's just so great that they're there and you know very soon they will wake too and you will move closer and kind of pull in the beginning of a new day together? In Kiev I opened tins of crab meat and caviar bought with hard currency and we slept easy. We slept easy and there was a famine outside. The circus played every night in Kiev – an old man sitting next to me made a joke about eating the cats and horses after the show. Are you happy with your life, my sweet? The man said, 'You can always tell a tourist, their eyes don't know where they're going. Here everyone knows where they're going.' Do you know where you're going baby? Is it a good place? Something to write home about? Is home a good place? Or just somewhere to return to?

Are you pleased to open your eyes in the morning? What do you see? Do you like what you see? If you hate it do you feel you have any power to change it for something else? Oh my love, let me call you that – My Love – let us imagine what that means, you and I liplocked some place in the American South, perhaps where the Klan lynched our brothers? You and I in a motor on the highway making plans for the future. The radio is on and we hear the Soviet Union has come apart and then there are some ads for Pepsi and bagel chips, and back to a war in Yugoslavia, nationalisms and internationalisms, an election in Great

Britain, refugees crossing mountains looking for a country to feed them, a jingle for vitamin capsules, and all the time we are hot for each other, through all this world news we just want to be in each other's pants, and we pull in for gas and I'm saying, No baby don't light a cigarette right now, wait till we pull out and anyhow we'll check into a motel soon. Hey Brett, I'm Imagining America! It's all from movies and magazines, I'm fumbling to make you America. I'm fumbling to make you and unmake you. Abe Lincoln on your dollar bills – IN GOD WE TRUST – pastrami and gas and tacos and beer bought with his image, he's the guy that keeps the wheels turning. I'm stuffing chocolate into your mouth and baby ... you're so hard, so hard honey ... you're all fired up and I'm talkin' dirty, I'm talking physical, I'm talking politics and dontcha just love it, got my fingers in your armpit and you're sweating bad. I want you too baby I want you too. Y'know that Springsteen song ... oh baby I'd drive all night again jus' to buy you a pair of shoes? Well I would. I'd drive to hell and back jus' to make you love me. How do you love? Do you keep it quiet and put it all in your fingertips or do you say words? What are your lovewords baby? What if the United States came apart? Would God come apart too and the stone pillars of the Abe Lincoln memorial crumble and statues of George Washington be torn up from squares of green, watered by sprinklers? Torn up by crane and bulldozer?

Now I am imagining Switzerland, Brett. I can see snow and stripped pine floors and coffee shops and cream cakes and blond people tinkling little silver spoons against their cups. I see children in nursery schools that are heated, very warm and very clean and their little snow boots lined up against the wall and gloves sewn into their coat pockets. I can't imagine you there, Brett. I'm trying to see a teacher bent over your shoulder while you draw your mother and father and the house you live in and giant flowers – but I

just can't vision you in Switzerland skiing and eating chocolate. You'd probably shoot up in your chalet, lie down in your shorts under the skylight, arms folded behind your neck looking up at the stars dreaming of home and bourbon and cookies and having a haircut. You see how I'm making you up, same as Switzerland and America? Does it feel like it fits you? Have you made me up too? Am I some kind of English faggot crazy for boys, cruising into my adult life in black leather under strobe and sonic boom of city discos? There's such a lot to talk about baby, just you and me, man to man. Did you hear about the man who went to a psychologist and said, Doctor I think I'm a dog, and the doctor said, we'll soon sort that out, now get on the couch. And the man said, but I'm not allowed. Well I'm inviting you to be whatever you like sweetheart, I'm listening to you, I'm listening to everything you want to be and were not allowed. Brett, I'm saying make yourself up for me baby, have as many goes as you like, be the man you always wanted to be, and I'll be the man that lets you. Brett, life is long dontcha think? When you tot up the hours and days and months it's a lot of time. How much of that time have you felt precious? I want to make you feel precious, my treasure, my lovestuff. Have you ever driven across a city you don't know very well and you're alone? It's night and you're lost. Had too many beers in some bar where they look at you as if you're an extraterrestrial immigrant and somewhere else, in another city, there's someone who loves you and you imagine them looking at you in this bar now, checking you out, what shoes you've put on today and what you're drinking and what kind of mood you're in? And you want to say to the people in this bar who think you're some kind of weirdo blown in to undo them – I am connected to the same things as you y'know – I have people who love me and I watch TV and I have a birthday and I brush my teeth and I'm not always like this, eating crap pizza alone and lost with this look in my eyes. And then you get into the car and

none of the street signs makes sense, and you just cry. Brett, have you done this? And you think of all the people you've jilted meanly and all the people who dumped you, and your pockets are full of old bills and tickets and you turn over all the secrets you carry inside you?

SOUNDS LIKE YA NEED SOME HELP! The handsome urban cowboy uncrosses his thick arms and takes out a gun. Suddenly he jumps on to a moving car, shoots, jumps off the car and thrashes a man across the head with his gun, runs, leaps over a motorcycle, crouches, shoots, climbs up a skyscraper, hangs on with one hand, shoots with the other, kicks a man chasing him off the building, shoots him in mid-air, dives through a pane of glass, shoots two three four five six other men, runs on to the roof of the skyscraper, flags down a helicopter, gets into it and pours bullets into the heart of the city – a loop of shooting and dying and dying and shooting and shooting and dying and then the voice says ... COME AND TALK TO ME ...

'I can't hear you, Greg,' J.K. says in the airport lounge.

'I know.'

'Have you seen a doctor?'

'Yeah.'

They finish their cocktails in silence.

'Look.'

J.K. opens her mouth and shows him the bloody gap where a tooth should be.

Gregory stares at her. Black flecks float in his green eyes.

'What happened?'

'I got slugged.'

'By who?'

'My mother. Knocked a tooth out.'

‘Lillian?’

Their flight number comes up on the screen and they walk to the gate for take-off.

‘Tell me about getting slugged.’

The aeroplane shudders and they put on their seat belts.

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The Terrible Rages of Lillian Strauss

Her mother comes towards her carrying a black suitcase. J.K. walks three paces, takes the bag from her mother's hands and says, when I walked towards you, something inside me walked too. Some beast that has taken up residence inside me, that inhabits the colony of my interior, that has decided to inhabit me against my will, walked with me towards you. It lifted up each of its four legs and walked the three paces with me. The petrol winds from the Texaco petrol station wake her up blowing through the open window, and instead of birds, the panicky whir of the carwash. Later, on her balcony, J.K. sees the camellia she planted last year has blossomed. One pink bud, opening and opening, just as she in sleep is opening and her mother sliding in behind her eyes.

Lillian Strauss is J.K.'s mother.

Her mother says, in Singapore every evening at six o'clock, a tray of drinks would be brought in by a servant. Gin and tonic, an ice bucket, lemon and bitters. We would drink until we went to bed, dropped on cotton pillows. Your uncle had a grog's blossom for a nose, purple-veined, a great bloom. J.K. thinks of her camellia blossoming on a concrete balcony in a poor part of London, opening and opening.

Her mother, in another poor part of London, walks the streets in one of her rages. She is mouthing words to lamp-posts and parked cars; she is weeping and she is drunk. Her husbands have left her, her children have left her, her beauty has left her, she is filling the holes of absence with gin-scented tears and,

like the suitcase, she wants to be carried, lifted into a sweeter present.

The wind hurls plastic bags up from the gutter and into the air. They fly like strange torn birds battered in a gale. Sheets of metal and bits of scaffolding fall from buildings on to the pavement. Mothers clutch their children and hurry home. The sky is the colour of dead fish. A man shuffles towards J.K., losing one of his slippers on the way. Beery breath, face much too close to hers, he whispers, 'Little woman, you have blood under your crotch,' and limps off into the swirling litter, a deranged prophet on the edge of the desert, walking into a swarm of locusts.

Lillian Strauss is planting red pokers in her garden. She digs and digs. Sometimes she buries bottles in her garden, binliners full of bottles; vodka, whisky, gin, wine, and once as a joke, an SOS, tucked into a very special bottle of malt whisky, a secret note for someone to find in the future. 'My red-hot pokers will bloom,' says Lillian Strauss, 'even in this bloody English soil.' And then she says to J.K., who hands her airmail letters so she can write to her sister in Singapore, 'You are a fool even though you are cunning and let me tell you this dear, you're hardly a matinee idol.'

'We're going to celebrate us in style J.K.'

Ebele orders two glasses of champagne and a plate of chips. Seven foot tall, in a suit and little red fez, he shows her his shoes. They are full of holes which he's stuffed with newspaper so he creaks every time he walks. His wrists jingle with bracelets and they are in a bar in Oxford, surrounded by pale young couples eating salmon cakes; somewhere, bells are ringing, ringing through the Muzak and neat pastel blouses.

J.K. dips a chip into a puddle of ketchup, circling it round and round, smiling and looking away, and then looking straight into his black eyes – just as the Muzak draws, 'Looovin' you whah whah ooooooooooh.'

Ebele so big, the glass of champagne small in his hand, in his beautiful wide-palmed hand, bells ringing through his fingers, as he creaks and jingles, rocks backwards and forwards on his chair. He tells her he is a twin and how his twin brother died at birth, weighing two pounds. He, Ebele, weighed eleven pounds, and when the cord was cut, his brother died next to him, thin and sickly, and he a giant baby freak screaming on a slab in Sierre Leone, nose to nose with his starved dead brother.

‘I felt a murderer y’know ... for years after, so when I come to the West, first thing I do is look up a book to see how twins lie in the womb.’ Ebele scoops up a handful of chips into his mouth and sips his champagne as if it were Guinness. ‘I learn it was my mouth that was wrapped round the food supply innit.’ His mouth is full of potato. ‘Yeh. But the spirit of my twin brother is always with me. My baby brother. He is my lucky charm. When things go wrong in life I feel him with me. He is the boy who stops the planes I fly in from crashing.’

He claps his hands and the tassels on his fez shiver under the air conditioner.

‘My hands feel so weak today. Look at my fingers. They’re like spaghetti.’

Lillian Strauss has very thin earlobes and very thin lips. She has a Biro in her hand and while she talks she doodles. The word Aristotle appears twice, and underneath it, a tortoise carrying a little red flower in its mouth. That’s my insignia, she says. Like people have tartans, I have tortoises. Her daughter laughs. In response to the laughter Lillian Strauss sketches a young girl holding a long-eyelashed cat by the lead. Good night angel, she says, I can’t drive you home because of my night blindness, and while she describes what it’s like not to be able to see in the dark, J.K. looks at her mother’s collection of tigers. They are arranged in little groups all over the house, striped heads and glassy eyes. Good night angel, she says, and her voice is panicked, breathless, just as it

always is when she expresses affection. And then when everything seems okay, the words Good night angel, the puckering of lips to kiss, there is a sea change. Lillian Strauss says, you hate all my family, you don't want to know about my childhood in Singapore, you think I am a w.a.s.p., you ignore half your blood, and she begins to write in the same biro, a 'hymn of hate' to her daughter. The tigers look on. They look straight into J.K., yowling great cries into her heart.

There is a beast inside J.K. It is a mammoth, frozen in ice. It inhabits the colony of her interior and sometimes it stirs. While her mother writes the hymn of hate, she can feel it nudge its big ugly head against the ice. When her mother says, 'I love you so much,' it lies down again, and rests. 'You are going away again,' says Lillian Strauss. 'Good riddance.'

Starlings fill the sky. They circle a large whitewashed mansion with green shutters raised above the bay. Scarlet blooms grow in turquoise pots and trees bend in the breeze inside the walls of the garden. There is shade in that garden. And a hammock strung between lemon trees. There is health in that garden. Cool walls and birdsong. I'd get to look young in that place. I'd come home to rest in that place. I'd stop running, running through airports and railway stations, running through European cities looking for rooms and coffee and company and comfort. I would stop running away from this beast inside me. We would rest here and stop being frightened of each other.

Lillian Strauss has sold her house, sold her car ('four hundred pounds and it's yours'), sold a carpet, sold some silver cutlery, sold a bronze buddha, and moved to another suburb in London. She drinks a bottle of dry white wine at 11 a.m. and says to her daughter, I want a sea funeral, I want to be buried at sea. J.K. says, 'You've always liked the sea,' and gives her a clay tiger she has brought back from Spain. By 1 p.m. her mother has finished the wine and is making scones. She is not a scone-making mother, but her mother made scones and she is trying to remember the recipe. She breaks lumps of butter

into the flour and says, this is to let them breathe. The smell of scones cooking fills the kitchen and Lillian Strauss folds her arms over her soiled cardigan. She stares at her new tiger with dull eyes.

‘I saw a park full of picnicking women yesterday afternoon. Young mothers and their children. They were picnicking on rugs and they were happy. I wanted to buy cherries and for us, you and me, to sit in the park and soak up the sun. I wanted to be as easy, as free and easy as those young mothers when I was a young mother.’ She stops and her cheeks are burning. ‘You have that horrible look on your face. You’re always plotting.’ Lillian Strauss is in one of her rages. She opens the oven and with her bare hands takes out the baking tin. Half the scones are sweet and half sizzle with melted cheese. She plunges her hands into them, tears them apart and throws them against the walls of the kitchen, her burnt hands writhing like snakes through the bone-white grass of her discontent.

Ebele brings J.K. one of his paintings for her birthday: an orange hand, its palm laced with henna, similar to Indian brides at weddings.

‘Count the fingers,’ he says.

‘Six.’ She smiles. ‘Six orange fingers.’

‘From your alien friend. They tell me I’m an alien at the airport.’ He holds up his own fingers and tells J.K. to count them. One, two, three, four, five. She kisses his hand and then bursts into tears. Afterwards, as they walk in the park hand in hand, kicking piles of new mown grass into smaller piles, she tells him about her mother’s blistered hands laced with sizzling cheese.

Lillian Strauss arrives at her daughter’s house with a large tin of tomato soup and a black pudding sausage. The hem of her dress is held together with safety pins and her calves are scratched and bloody. Ha ha laughs Lillian Strauss. ‘Just from the pins dear. They come undone. What did you think they

were?’ Her cheeks are covered in a nerve rash. She thumps the black pudding on the table.

‘Guess where I got the money to buy that.’

‘Where?’

‘I finished the *Times* crossword and won twenty quid.’

As they eat, Lillian Strauss points to the sausage pronged on her fork.

‘What’s this?’

‘Meat.’

‘No my dear. This is congealed blood.’

She puts it in her mouth and chomps with relish.

J.K. thinks about how much she loves her mother.

The panic of the raging beast. J.K. wears a summer dress the colour of the lemons she glimpsed in the walled garden. The colour she saw standing on the wrong side of paradise. Ebele stands behind her, plaiting her hair, brushing it, smoothing it down, weaving lemon ribbons into the braids.

Lillian Strauss takes a hammer and thrashes the ice tray. It is six o’clock, time for gin and tonic, a little bowl of peanuts, intimacies and brittle jokes. As the gin bottle empties, her hand tightens around her glass and laughter changes to melancholy. She begins to name all the cats she has owned and how each one of them died. ‘I would have liked grandchildren to get sober for,’ she weeps. One day J.K. gives her a present. Five papier mâché Chinese children. Round faces and black hair. There are blossoms painted on their clothes. Lillian Strauss arranges and rearranges them on a little straw mat, and J.K. observes that her mother has no half moons on her fingernails. Just as she is thinking this, Lillian Strauss flings one of the Chinese children to the floor and stamps on it with her square brown heels. ‘What you need is a good kick up the arse. It’s big enough.’ The papier mâché baby lies crumpled on

its stomach, cheek pressed into the carpet, and on the sole of Lillian Strauss's shoe, a little hand with three broken fingers.

Her mother points to the red hot pokers thrusting out of the stony soil of her garden. 'What do you think of my red garden, J.K.?' She leans over and strokes the stem. 'Your pink camellia, my dear, is for the cowardly.' The noise of the day fades.

When Lillian Strauss turns round to face the heat and silence behind her neck, she thinks her garden is on fire. And then she sees a mouth, a massive mouth, opening, opening, until it fills the whole of her eye, a quivering thing, standing in the blaze of her red-hot pokers. She clenches her fist and thumps it into the mouth of the beast, alone with the child she created.

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Re-imagining the Stranger

He walks in although she has no memory of leaving the door open. When she turns round to face him, he says, ‘You are barefoot, you have one tooth missing, and you are wearing a blue dress.’

‘Why do you always describe me?’

Silence.

‘Your lips are cracked,’ she says.

They are sitting together on the sofa. It is a warm night, the heat of the day pouring in through the windows. He takes out a wad of papers from his brown leather bag, the bag travellers strap across their chests, a few essentials packed with care. A book, a pen, a bottle of orange flower water, a passport, a photo, a slab of chocolate, a wallet heavy with foreign coins.

‘Currency,’ he says.

‘I have been thinking about strangers,’ she says.

He smiles and looks out of the window.

‘How a stranger never belongs to a person or to a place. He can be an insider and an outsider at the same time.’

At that moment he puts his arms around her and her eyelash touches his cracked lips.

In bed they laze about for a while and then she climbs on top of him and says, ‘Tell me about zones and frontiers.’ He is kissing her shoulders, his lips are cool and he is saying, ‘Um ... ooh ... there are um naked frontiers, take off your blue dress, and there are ... um zones you can go into and zones

you can't. Do you like being touched here or here?' She considers telling him where she was born, how old she is and what she does for a living.

'What's your name?' He puts his hand on her breast.

J.K.

She notices that this time (they have only been naked once together before) he shuts his eyes when last time he kept them open. She thinks he has his eyes shut because he is feeling something he did not feel before.

'You are naked apart from three silver bracelets,' he says.

'You're describing me again.'

'That's what strangers do. When they are in an unfamiliar place they describe it.'

'We are intimate strangers,' she says.

'Yes.'

They lie side by side, heads touching as the sky deepens and shops pull down their shutters.

'Do you want a glass of German champagne?'

'Was it a present?'

'Yes.'

'Why German?'

She shrugs.

'There's a story you're not telling me. That's how you keep someone a stranger.' And then, 'HEY you've got your shoes on. How can that be? You didn't have shoes on when I arrived. When did you put them on? We've been screwing and you've kept your shoes on!'

J.K. ties up the laces.

'These aren't just any shoes. They are made for walking long distances.'

She goes to fetch the champagne and, just as they open it, she lying across his back, there is a knock on the door. She says, 'That will be Zoya. A friend of mine.'

He is shy and surprised and puts his hand into the silver curls of his hair.

'But it's late ... it's ...'

'She has driven one hundred and ninety miles to see me.' J.K. pulls on her blue dress and leaves him naked in her bedroom.

Zoya wears little horn-rimmed spectacles (even though her eyes have perfect vision), a mantilla comb in her hair, and carries a small spherical black suitcase.

'It's the doctor,' she guffaws. 'Where does it hurt?' Despite the humidity of this unnaturally warm night she also carries an overcoat. 'Got no love to keep me warm,' she says, and takes a pineapple out of her spherical black bag. She saws through the thick skin with a bread knife and sucks a ring of pulpy flesh. 'Those are the green plates you bought in Brixton market.' She points to a shelf above the fridge, catching the juice running down her chin with a cupped hand. The stranger walks in and strokes J.K.'s hair.

'You are wearing a blue dress, three silver bracelets, walking shoes, and you bought six green plates in Brixton market.'

Zoya adjusts her spectacles and lights a cigarette.

'Are you going to introduce us?'

Silence.

'This is J.K.,' he says.

The migrant stranger and the migrant Zoya sit together in another room while J.K. cooks. They begin to find oceans, motorways, railway lines, bus routes, facial characteristics, languages, bread, fruit, fish, jokes and musical instruments in

common. When J.K. returns with plates of food and sits on a chair opposite them, she feels like a stranger.

The next evening, London is divided into two zones – by telephone. Inner and Outer, Central and Suburban. 071 and 081. The Post Office Tower celebrates by spinning laser beams into the sky. Zoya and J.K. are walking down Charlotte Street, West London, looking for a place to eat lamb kebabs.

‘How can I wo-rk when the sky’s so blu-e. How can I wo-rk like other wo-men do,’ Zoya croons.

‘I miss my family,’ she says.

‘You’ve never said that before.’

They sit down at a little café with tables and chairs sprawled on the pavement.

‘It’s the smell of lamb and heat.’

The waiter takes their order.

‘I used to be able to speak Urdu as a child. Then this country beat it out of me. One night I got drunk in Berlin and remembered everything. I even remembered languages I didn’t know I spoke! I remembered the house I grew up in, what part of the garden had shade and how I used to swill out the yard with buckets of cold water while my brothers played football. I was beside myself, babbling in tongues.’ She takes off her fake spectacles, puts them into a red fake leather case and snaps it shut. ‘And then I looked up into the cold grey eyes of the man sitting opposite me.’

‘What man?’

‘He told me he sold early Max Ernst etchings for millions of marks, all the time chasing a ribbon cut from the cheese he was eating across his plate. And then he talked about how he wanted to breed heavy horses ...’

J.K. laughs.

‘This was balm, J.K. I wanted to escape from the bloody pain sticking through my ribs, and heavy horses were just the thing. It could have been tortoises, stars, a list of rare ivy, buttonholes. He wore a crisp white shirt and citron cologne, and it was perfect, our difference was perfect. Like the Irish poet Patricia Scanlan who pushed all the grief of Belfast out of her head by writing lists of every sweet she bought as a kid at the local shop, I asked him the names and types of all the horses he wanted to breed.’ She giggles. ‘He told me he liked the idea of rubbing them down at 5 p.m., when they were hot and panting! And I said things like hmmm in-neresting, like I was a B-movie cop. I think he thought I was a headcase but he couldn’t resist a rapt audience. We went our separate ways and I bought you a bottle of champagne to celebrate.’

‘I drank it with the stranger.’

The waiter pours wine into Zoya’s glass.

‘This wine is the colour of health. It’s not like other wines. This is medicine.’ The waiter who is still standing by Zoya’s side smiles and says something to her in a language J.K. doesn’t understand.

‘He says he will read our coffee cups.’

‘You are flowers,’ he says, and disappears into the heat and bustle of the restaurant.

‘I miss my family too.’ J.K. sucks a long green chilli.

‘But they only live a tube ride away.’

‘I know.’

Someone has taken a photograph of them. A sweet peppery perfume and a blinding flash. They look up into the golden teeth of a middle-aged man, trousers belted high over his paunch, carnation in his buttonhole.

‘For you, girls. Only five pounds.’

He waves the Polaroid through the air so that Zoya and J.K. can see bits of themselves developing second by second.

‘Are we here yet?’

Two women sit at a small slanting table covered with a plastic cloth. One has a glass of wine between her finger and thumb, hands resting on a red spectacle case. Her shoulders are turned in towards her friend and her lips make the shape of the word ‘medicine’. The other has her legs crossed, bread in hand, chilli in the other. Her cheekbones are burnt from a day in the sun and her lips have just finished making the shape of the word ‘family’.

‘You are here.’ The photographer points to each of them on the Polaroid.

‘We know we are here,’ Zoya says.

He leans over and takes a toothpick from their table, tilts his head and works it into his golden teeth.

‘Sometimes it’s good to know where you are.’

The waiter lifts J.K.’s cup from the saucer.

‘Why are you laughing?’ she asks him.

‘What’s your name?’

‘J.K.’

‘I’ll tell you one thing, J.K.’

‘Okay.’

‘You must give yourself a name.’

071 and 081 for London. The Post Office Tower lights up and J.K. stares into her cup.

He walks in although she has no memory of leaving the door open. When she turns round to face him, he says, ‘You are wearing jeans and a silk halterneck.’

‘You have an airmail letter in your top pocket,’ she says.

It is a cold night and it is beginning to rain. J.K. is thinking, I have just left the 071 zone to come back here, to these rooms, the books on my shelves, to the fruit in my bowl, and to this man. Is that what a home is? A place to invite strangers to? He is staring at the snakeskin buckles on her shoes.

‘Y’know,’ she says, and he turns his body towards her. ‘My name is ...’

His gaze shifts from her eyes to the radio behind her head. ‘I like it that you’re just called J.K.’ When he lets his eyes meet hers she sees they are frightened.

‘Bye,’ she says.

He tangles his fingers with her fingers.

‘What are you still doing here?’

He says, ‘Start again. Why don’t you take off your shoes and tell me who you are.’

‘You like it that I’m just called J.K.’

‘Tell me who you are so I can love you properly.’

She considers these words. There are eleven walnuts in a bowl by her feet and there are eleven words for her to consider. Tell-me-who-you-are-so-I-can-love-you-properly.

‘You want me to be a stranger,’ he says and, for the first time ever, takes out a cigarette that smells of cloves, lights it and leans against the sofa.

‘You even wear shoes in bed so you can walk away from me.’

She stands up, switches on the radio, and looks at him sitting there, in her home, too close, a coil of smoke above his silver head, airmail letter shivering in his top pocket. At that moment, the radio announces that war has broken out, and tanks are sliding through the ripples of the desert.

Riding the Tiger

An English rose. The national emblem of England. The pink glow of the cheeks in health. Blooming Blushing Bright. But there are other roses. The rose of Jericho, of North Africa and Syria that curls into a ball in drought, the rose of Sharon that was probably a narcissus. The rose that covers the eyes of a corpse and the rosewater that scents lovers and sweetmeats.

Today Gregory told me on the telephone that he had Aids. We could both hear each other's TV, 60 miles between us, words like 'Saudi Arabia' and 'The Allied Forces', and someone was knocking on Greg's door. 'Anyway,' he says, 'have a good holiday. Where are you going?'

J.K. walks through a 'BeachPark' built on volcanic rubble; swimming pool and pizza malls and discos by the pool and there's nothing else but creaking palms planted alongside white holiday bunkers, curve of beach and desperate sunset. Somewhere else, charismatic missiles glide above skyscrapers. The dark incense of burning date palms and eucalyptus trees fills the desert. Young boys in the uniforms of North America and Europe sleepwalk through the bones of abandoned cattle, unsettling stars, scorpions and a sun that makes them shiver and burn at the same time. Sand in their eyes, they circle oil wells, delirious under that enormous sky, while men older than themselves, also in uniform, murmur strategies, statistics, geographies, parables into their sleepy heads, make jokes, hand out sachets of ketchup and arrange funerals.

'It's all complex on this island,' says the supermarket senora as J.K., shipwrecked and solo, pays 340 pesetas for chorizo and bus timetables.

'What kind of place do you want?'

The words make her sad and nervous. She walks back to the English boys eating pizza at the complex. They stare at her, call out to her, throw rings of pepperoni and black olives at her as she ties the red ribbons of her espadrilles, maps and timetables open on her lap, and she, thinking about what kind of place she wants to be in, puts on her spectacles and stares back. She stares into their pale blue eyes, growing blonder and blonder in the sun (Malcolm X called them devils) and what she sees is struggling mothers, absent fathers, broken park benches under sagging grey skies, poor food eaten in small rooms, places she doesn't want to be in, places she has run away from in search of an imagined place, a place that is not this place, a place that is not that place, a place that is – a place that, like the words War and Peace, is perhaps just an idea. This is a very blue sky. Thin cats hiss into it. Cacti lament under it. Their golden spines shiver in the wind, and from the largest, most formidable of all, another scenario of struggle emerges.

From its prickly heart, to the soft waves not of the ocean, but of Muzak piped from the local boutique, Leon Trotsky emerges, shirt sleeves rolled up, tattered straw hat askew on his thinning hair. He says, 'Yes, I was indeed architect of an alternative world. But I was banished before I could make it. On the run. Carrying it with me. Heavy luggage, my dear, for a man who had to be nimble on his feet.' He considers the cactus next to him, prods it, takes out a small sharp blade and cuts a piece of its flesh. 'I grew very fond of cacti when I was in exile in Mexico. However, I missed the inspiration of heavy overcoats and I have always thought better in a fur hat.' He digs his hands into the black rubble. 'No good for potatoes. Yes I am the same Leon Trotsky who once wrote impromptu speeches on napkins in Moscow restaurants. In exile I felt the loss of newspapers very badly. But cacti suit my choleric temperament and, like me, they survive in harsh climates.' He smiles at a pale woman with straw-coloured hair and a T-shirt with ZAP POW MY WAY sprawled over her pastel breasts.

She appears not to see him but her lips mouth the words CAR HIRE to some imaginary companion. ‘Her nose is too short,’ Trotsky observes. ‘I like women with large noses who nonchalantly cross their legs.’

He stares at J.K., whose fingers are tangled in the red ribbons of her shoes. She sits on her unpacked bags, passport in her back pocket, counting pesetas. Trotsky screws up his eyes. ‘Let us place you,’ he says. ‘You who are discontented, I can tell from the curl of your lips.’ He looks around him, up at the sky, and then at his blackened fingernails. ‘Why do you think you feel discontent more than those English boys eating Pizza Americano who will later get drunk and vomit in the swimming pool? Do you think they don’t know they are poor, miserable and needy? I was once an electrifier of weakening armies made up of just such boys.’ He stops. Wheezes. Kicks the cat under his old brown leather boots.

‘In the Middle Ages, these islands were visited only in the imagination. It took the map-maker Angelino Dulcert to record the actual sighting of the island and the humanist Boccaccio to describe his voyage of discovery in whatever ink and metaphor was available in 1341. Gold hunters and imperialists followed, and of course with all imperialists, slaves. You see,’ says Trotsky, ‘the island proved to be the most significant of the Atlantic archipelagos because the wind system linked them to the new world.’

He gestures towards the BeachPark Development where young couples carry plastic bags full of lager to their bunkers. ‘I’d like a beer myself. A beer and my arms round my babe.’ After a long silence he continues. ‘We will jump six centuries or so ... where were we, 1341, let us consider 1936. Let us make it summer. Dust winds blow from the Sahara. Hungry goats scavenge for food. There is a drought and the wells have dried. A paunchy little man called Franco, once commander-in-chief of the Spanish army, meets up in the woods of La Esperanza in Tenerife with a few discontented officers. They promise to give him command of Spain’s best troops, tough

lean Moroccan mercenaries. They walk to a hotel – the patron is a sympathetic English man – and by the time they have finished their omelette and sherry, they have given him the Foreign Legion as well. By 20 July the islands are in Franco's hands and he thus begins to conduct his ideological orchestra with machine-guns. Within hours, in the terrible heat of that summer, trade unionists, teachers, left-wing politicians, writers and artists are imprisoned or murdered.' He stops. 'I'd like to shag that girl over there, blonde with muscles in her thighs.' He watches an English boy stick his tongue into her ear. 'Amorous vertigo in one of these BeachPark bunkers would really cheer me up.' He scratches his balls. 'I am undone. My hopes have beggared me.' Head bowed, he examines a small hole in his cuff. 'Just thought I'd give you some information,' Trotsky wheezes, 'it probably wasn't in the brochure, and by the way, I recommend the local banana.'

The virus is making sorties into my body. Today I coughed up green mucus into a bucket on my lap. My masseur, an East End boy called Spud, says when he massages me he can see another body floating above me, and that's the body he works on. He calls us Gregory One and Gregory Two.

And from the shivering centre of another volcanic cactus, transplanted from some other place, perhaps a happier place, into sunshine and shadow, into the gentle Muzak of the BeachPark, someone else emerges. Vladimir Ilych Lenin. Ripped down from the bloodstained boulevards of Eastern Europe by his discontented children, Vladimir Ilych, great orator with gimlet eyes, now a little shaky, blinks. He is not used to sunlight. He prefers burying his hands in his wife's mother's fur muff. Wiping the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief he says, 'The great sculptor Aronson was enraptured with my skull. He told me I resembled Socrates.' He smiles, bends down and cradles a small striped cat to his breast. 'Aronson told me, hands deep in the clay, that light emanated from my forehead, but my eyes glittering with irony and intelligence were not as protuberant as Socrates' eyes.'

The cat purrs in his arms, its small paw catching his beard, and Vladimir, laughing, nudges it under the chin.

‘My political wife, Nadia, she loved my brain, but my lovers liked my lips. Thick lips that give me a Tartar look. While I listened to Beethoven’s *Appassionata*, played with kittens, read novels on couches, Turgenev my favourite but sometimes a little Hegel and Kant to keep me on my toes, nibbled cucumbers and made plans to hunt wild duck in autumn, I knew I could play my life in this way: admired for my lips, eat excellent goulash cooked by my faithful wife, enjoy lazy long games of chess, liaisons with admiring and full-breasted comrades, and write the odd book. I spent childhood summers in Kokushinkon reading Pushkin while my brother Sasha read *Das Kapital* – bought under the counter from a small second-hand book dealer. But I knew my destiny lay elsewhere! I would have to fight the seduction of Ludwig’s *Appassionata* and ride the Russian Tiger.’

The cat, entranced by Vladimir Ilych, falls into warm contented sleep.

‘The day I sat my examination papers on Pushkin, the tsar sent my brother to the gallows. My mother’s hair turned completely white and my sister Olga took to fainting at school ... but I passed my exams brilliantly!’ He stops, eyes settling on her chorizo, and asks how much it cost. ‘And how many choices of sausage? Five? Yes, the people, they like to have a choice of sausage. The sum of my life’s work undone by sausage. Remove it immediately, it offends me. To be deposed by a pig is not good for the morale.’

Vladimir continues. ‘My brother, Sasha, argued that any philistine can theorize, but the revolutionary has to fight. The trouble with intellectuals is they are physically weak. They finish a debate, not because they have resolved something, but because they are tired. Stamina Stamina Stamina. Just raising his hand in a meeting is enough to make an intellectual die of exhaustion.’ Stamina Stamina Stamina, the black volcanic

rocks echo. 'Very big practical demands were made of the workers, but the intellectuals, they just want to screw each other and eat long lunches in cafés. It's the same the world over.' He stops again. 'There is something a little frivolous about the way you do your hair,' he says in a steely voice. 'I think you are under the influence of red wine when you should be under the influence of the workers' movement.' His mouth suddenly crumples and his small black eyes go moist. 'I HAD A DOG CALLED ZHENKA!' he screams to the sky. Zhenka Zhenka Zhenka, the black rocks wail. 'At twenty my brother Sasha pawned his gold medal to obtain nitric acid from Vilna, second-hand revolvers that did not fire, and explosives that were too weak. He died on the gallows because he engaged in political activity before he had clarified the principles on which it should be based. It is I who created the framework for well-elaborated principles. I had to put away my Pushkin and learn statistics. To cut the flesh and find the bone, lay in bare detail the economic connection between towns and villages, light and heavy industry, the working class and peasantry. What is that smell?' His nose twitches. 'Aaaah. It is your suntan oil.' He writes something down in a little notebook: 'What is the brand? Coconut with Vitamin F? Tested under Dermatological Control? Getest onder dermatologisch TOEZICHT!' Zicht Zicht Zicht. Seagulls cry above his furious head. Vladimir wipes his brow again and stuffs the handkerchief back into his breast pocket. 'I, Vladimir Ilych, wrote "The Development of Capitalism" in prison ... FACTOR FIFTEEN WATERPROOF ...' the words seem to send him into despair. This time he howls. Proof Proof Proof, the black rocks howl back, and someone dives into the swimming pool. 'I wrote it for you ... for them.' His hands gesture towards the pool which is now full of vomit and lager cans. He sighs, tickles the kitten's ears with his thumb, silent as he watches the English boys try to drown each other. He points his forefinger at J.K. 'Take your bags and leave at once. Tolstoy said when one travels, the first part of the journey is

spent thinking about what one has left behind. The second half is spent anticipating what lies ahead.’

On a bus at the volcanic crossroads, away from the BeachPark, the bored driver plays with the buttons of his starched blue shirt. He says, you must go to Morro J, lays out his hand to conjure something beautiful for her there, and J.K. gives him her tortoiseshell fountain pen which he turns over in his hand, writes slowly in elaborate italics two words, *Pensione Omray*, and starts the empty bus. They’re driving through desert dune to Puerto Rio for her bus connection, one hour to wait, three bags, two of books, one of clothes, Smith Corona 1936 typewriter in a pillowcase. He drops her at a small industrial port at the bottom of the hill, the sea whirling gases, a church, a cigarette kiosk, a local newspaper which has oil-drenched Gulf birds on its cover: *Catastrofe ecologica en El Golfo, contaminada por el crudo bombeado al mar*; and somewhere a ship’s hooter shrieks while men gamble on the pavement. What is it, this blood that leaks from her mouth every day? Dark and morbid in the basin? Two red stars burn in J.K.’s cheeks. At the café by the bus station, small yellow butterflies knock against her bare arms.

‘Spit it out.’

J.K. looks up into the eyes of a young black woman who takes out a tissue and says again, ‘Spit it out.’ The woman’s daughter kicks her chair with her sandals and stares curiously at her. ‘It’s all right,’ her mother says. ‘It’s all right to spit.’ She calls out for some beers and an ice-cream for her daughter. A parrot cracking seeds on a perch nearby lifts its head and makes the sound ‘Hoo Hoooo’. The daughter, shy, whispers ‘Hoo’ back and then looks away. ‘Hoo,’ the parrot calls to her, and despite herself, a little louder this time, her lips return, ‘Hooo,’ and then she hides her face in her arms.

‘It’s all right,’ the woman says again.

‘What’s all right?’ J.K. also hides her eyes.

‘Nothing’s all right,’ the woman says, and they all watch the parrot.

‘Last year I woke up feeling weird. I could hear birds singing, my body was warm, my fingers tingling and I was in the Promised Land! So I took a chair outside, outside my estate that is, and fell into the garbage. Yes, you might laugh now, but I could taste milk and honey in my mouth! The allotment was rustling with sugar cane! I reached out towards the cane and cut my hands on glass, my head was spinning and I walked the streets until I came to this synagogue and I ran inside it. There’s a service going on and I shout UNITE! Everything stops and I shout again UNITE UNITE, so they called the police. Bloody Jews. I didn’t say Fuck you, I said Unite.’ She gives J.K. a tissue. ‘That’s better,’ she says. ‘Spit some more.’

‘Hooo.’

‘Hoooo,’ her daughter begins, and then stops herself.

She sticks her tongue into the ice-cream and looks up at her mother.

‘So the police put me in a cell, and in the cell are a lot of blue blankets and blue was the colour of peace to me. So I thought, if I put these blankets up on the wall and over the door it’s all going to be OK. But then they open the door and say they’re taking me to the hospital. So I say, “You’ll have to drag me there. I’m not finished with these blankets yet.” And I sit on the blue blanket like it’s a magic carpet and the police are pulling it, two on each end and me in the middle shouting UNITE UNITE, and they lash my arms behind my back and I end up in the hospital.’

‘Hooo.’

‘So nothing’s all right is it?’ Her finger prods J.K.’s hot arm.

A fat man sleeping on his guitar wakes up. He orders a plate of potatoes and chilli sauce, twisting the heavy ring on his fat

finger round and round. He smiles at the child, teeth small brown stumps, and points to the parrot. 'Lauro,' he says and throws her one of his potatoes.

'A doctor in a white coat comes up to me and I knew I'd met him before somewhere. In a concentration camp, or he sold me as a slave, or he massacred my mother or deported my father or lynched my brother. I knew that man. I knew he was evil and could hurt me. So I screamed. That scream frightened me more than it frightened the doctor ... I didn't know I had so much fear in me ... and then I saw this woman, this black woman wheeling a trolley of tea, and she says, "You're frettin' darling." So I threw myself on her and stuck there like a leech and wouldn't let go and she walked around giving patients tea with me stuck to her, telling the doctors it was ALL RIGHT I was stuck to her.'

'And I was lost,' her daughter suddenly says.

'She bloody well was. But not as lost as her mother. They put this needle in my arse like I'm some kind of rhino ... there was so much sleeping sickness in that injection I slept for three days. And then early one morning there's someone tapping my cheeks and I try to wake up ... it's the tea trolley woman. She's got my clothes in a plastic bag and she's saying, "Get out of here. Get dressed and run for your life out of this hospital." And I see her eyes, they wake me up, I see too much in her bloody eyes, I see my own mother in her eyes and I get dressed and run for my life.'

'And I was lost,' her daughter says again.

'But I found you, didn't I?'

'Yes.' She hides her eyes again.

'So nothing's all right. Except I'm telling you this tale in the sunshine drinking a beer, and not in a nightie in Ward Two.' She points to a bus revving its engine. 'That's yours.'

Now she is rolling through mountains and red dust oases, beer and blood in her mouth, waving to the woman and her

daughter. The fat man stretches out his arms and shouts, 'If you want my body you can have it!' The shape of the letters L and M cut into the sky, as if on a convict's cheek. L for lire, loony, Levi's, love. M for massacre, mint, molotov. J.K. spreads her hands over her lungs, palms warm and still, as if one part of the body can be sick and another heal it. She looks again at the scrap of paper. *Pensione Omray*. The bus shudders and stops. People get on carrying parcels wrapped in newspaper and string. Across the road an old woman thins out her tomato plants. On and on, from the North of the island to the South, herds of white goats and urban bunker developments, on past beaches of black sand, allotments growing tomatoes, solitary cafés, abandoned petrol stations and beat-up cars on the edge of crumbling cliffs.

Canaries twitter in small iron cages. Their master and tormentor, Omray, sweeps the floors of his *pensione*. Cigarette in his mouth, plastic sandals on his feet, he hums an old Elvis tune, soiled newspaper tucked into the pocket of his grey trousers. The jacket hangs over a chair at reception. He stands his broom against the wall and J.K. follows him to the chair, which he formally sits on, stares at her, lights another cigarette, asks for her passport which he flicks through, yellow fingernails tracing the outline of visas and the outline of her chin in the small photograph. His fingers move from Warsaw to her cheekbones, across Washington to her lips, eyes travelling over her luggage, especially the 1936 Corona in the pillowcase. Tired from his interrogation, he leans back in his chair and says, 'E-d-m-o-n-t-o-n.' The canaries beat their wings against the bars of their cages. 'When I am in England, I live on the edge of London. Dog's arse E-d-m-o-n-t-o-n. I prefer to live on the edge of life.'

He asks for some cash, counts it, locks it in a little steel box which he puts into a drawer, locks the drawer, and slowly, slowly, a smile parts his lips. 'Love me Tender, Love me True.' His keys jangle as he shows her a room with a little desk, an iron bed with a picture of a white horse above it.

‘Chinese,’ he says, and points to the shower which he walks lazily towards, swishing a plastic curtain around it with a magnificent gesture: proud host, Orray, penned by a bus driver in italic ink, brought into being one Sunday morning at the crossroads. She has journeyed to him and his canaries who scream through the walls, and he, one hand tucked into the top of his trousers, screams back until they fall silent, sighs, smiles, reaches deep into his pocket and gives her a small yellow feather. ‘Souvenir,’ he says and closes the door very quietly, as if nervous he will awake the distressed birds.

J.K. wades into the thrash of the waves, deeper and deeper until she is floating with the gulls, looking out at the European couples walking the coastline. A sudden gust of wind blows white sand into their faces. For a moment, disorientated, the Europeans walk in zigzags across the dunes, displaced and dizzy, fists in their eyes.

A group of elderly Germans sits at a café, chairs arranged in a circle around the table, laughing and slapping their thighs. The oldest man of all, huge paunch hanging over his trousers, suddenly begins to choke, coughing and spluttering until water streams from his pale blue eyes and his steely spectacles fall to the ground. The more he chokes the more his friends laugh, clinking brandies and pointing to him, until, just as it seems he is going to breathe his last, he spits out, inch by inch, a long silver chain, pulling it from his throat with fat hands, mouth opening wider and wider as he pulls out a round silver watch. His wife claps her hands and roars, ‘That was a good one! Better than the one you did in Munich,’ and orders more brandies from the bewildered waiter. One of the men turns to J.K. and shouts, ‘Why are you here?’ The man who has just choked up the watch says, ‘She’s here to make her dreams come true.’

J.K. turns away from their pink smiling faces, her own face suddenly damp with tears. Why am I here? An Englishman sitting opposite her peels a boiled egg. He slams his eyelids

down, blond lashes fluttering in some private excitement of his own.

As my body gets weaker, the things I most think about are pain and money. Perhaps my other body thinks about beauty and grace and how to measure value, but this one, my sweet, still has the same sort of fears people had in the Iron Age. Fear of the dark and certain kinds of animals. Things lurking under the sea, under my bed, inside my skin.

‘In Beijing,’ says the Englishman, ‘the government had all the dogs shot.’ He chews his egg slowly. ‘I once shot my dog. She was called Ogre and I hated the way she looked at me. Too much. It was too much.’ His teeth are flecked with egg yolk and he wipes his mouth on an old copy of the *Daily Mail*.

The sun is gentle, the ocean emerald, and somewhere windmills, a reddening creeper, a small garden with table and chair outside overlooking the sea. J.K. wants to sit there. Very badly. But she is not invited. She wants her own table and chair and garden and she hasn’t got one. Insurmountable obstacles seem to deny her the possibility of ever claiming them. What does she have to do to get them? Why have some people got them and not her? To have a home is to have a biography. A narrative to refer to in years to come. There is a house in the garden. Turquoise paint peels off the front door which is half open. Sunlight pours through. It is self-possessed, inhabits itself to the stranger’s eye with a particular kind of grace, has its own logic and order. Maps of the mind sprawl out and beyond the table and chairs standing in the small garden, spill into imagined scenarios of all kinds, but at this moment J.K. wants them to be part of her map. She wants to be able to point and say: these are the stones I dragged up and planted things between, these are the feathers and shells and cooking pots I collected, this is where I have placed them, this is the room I like most to sleep in, these are the paintings Ebele made for me.

How can she make the things she most wants happen? Not in dreams or sculpture or literature, but in bricks and mortar, with soil and seeds and water, in parliament, in the minds and hearts of other people? Who is the citizen sitting with her on those chairs in that garden? What does it mean to be named a citizen? This citizen is prone to violence and that citizen is prone to barbecues in Hertfordshire. This citizen has spent all her historical time surviving, getting wrecked in clubs, murder in her heart, cocaine up her nose, she rises from the eternal, dreary, fetishized flames of her own anger and says to that citizen, SO COME ON then, tell me about tolerance, moderation, your neighbourhood, your schools, tact, good manners, tell me about your Gods AND all the wars you fought in. I'll tell you about my neighbourhood, schools, taxis, clothes, ecstasy, drag queens, any number of sad corrugated sunsets AND all the wars I fought in. Tell me about this world and how to be well inside it?

Today Gregory says there are worlds floating in his bloodstream. Sometimes they make him feel beautiful and delirious.

The arrogance of metaphor when facts save people's lives. The succour of metaphor when facts inadequately describe people's lives. The bravado of T, who wore crazy jewels and made sweet wine from berries growing on the banks of railway lines. Abandoned with her small daughter in a high-rise in Bethnal Green, but growing her up good with fruit and books. And C whose twin sister suicided herself whilst swimming in a river one tearful summer. How she decided not to come up again, to put her head under and disappear, and C forever hallucinating her sister in a yellow dress, drinking coffee, eating bread, saying stupid things like Continental Blend and Yardley – as if the century had taken away her language and all she had left were brand names to describe herself. Her breasts dark circles under the yellow dress as they hoiked her out of the river, eternally hoiking women out of ponds and lakes and oceans. She just wades in and goes under,

all furtive and furious in useless protest, hoiked up by some geezer in wellies, leaving her sister to mourn and hate her.

And M who never travelled anywhere, except to the liquor store and back and back again and back and back again, who wrote poems and sent them to her, terse with the fear of humiliation, literary references and cryptic asides. How is it that M, alone and broke, drinking away her intelligence in front of the television, imagines her constituency to be professorial gents in corduroy with Anglo-Saxon beards and wives who sacrificed their lives to nurture the sensitive interpretive twitches of their literary husbands – and she, M, describing her life in language that doesn't fit her, that is to say, adopting the puns, tone and form of those whose lives are cosier than her own: a regular salary, children grown up by someone else – never read the world but a dab hand at sonnets, sonatas, Elizabethan musical instruments and logical reasoned argument.

Mega-star! Mega-star! The Englishman who shot his dog shuffles through the market, chanting, a small jar of Nescafé under his arm. A turkey escapes from its cage and runs towards him, gobbling leaves and flapping its wings against his flip-flops. He kicks it away, making turkey noises in his throat, grabbing feathers and sticking them into his hair. COME ON COME ON COME ON. It runs back to him. YALALALALAYALALALALAYALALA. The only sound that can be heard above his wacry and the writhing turkey are the words THE ALLIED FORCES.

Hurrah! I've got pneumonia. I've been blitzed! I'm a goner! I'm all technology and biology! Half alive, half dead. I'm God. A machine measures my heartbeats. Five drips poke into my body. My mother sent me some tartan socks and a peculiar card saying that when I was born she couldn't decide whether to call me Klaus or Gregory. This coincided with an old friend changing his name from Eric to Gus. When people suddenly out of the blue change their name, I always think they've been

visited by strange men in space ships. Out of the blue. Where is the blue? The blue is somewhere. Where are you?

What cultural violence made M's poems so boring? Why did she need the approval of a canon that would never invite her bad-tempered brilliance, politics, poverty and ungainly female form to their dinner table?

Does M exist?

What proof does she have?

When did she become a person?

When did she cease to become a person?

What kind of language is going to (re)create her?

In troubled dreams the white 'Chinese' horse on her hotel wall gallops across J.K.'s stomach and tells her in strange whispers that he will return. His breath is warm and wet, sometimes he speaks in Mandarin, sometimes in Spanish, and he does return, this time to say in strange hieroglyphics made from ice: we return to homelands and find they are a hallucination. We return to our mothers and fathers and find they are not the people we thought they were. We return to our street and find it has been re-named. We return to our cities and find they have been rebuilt. We return to our lovers and find they are elsewhere even when they lie in our bed. We return to our people and find they have been massacred and we were not there to defend them. The redemptive homeland, she is a joker, she runs away bells ringing on her toes, you chase her at your peril because she will appear disguised as something else and you will be chasing her all your life, watching her fickle back turn corners. What are you returning to, J.K.? What is your name, what are your voices, and most importantly, what are your actions? What use is the heart turned inwards? That is a lonely home, it knows each crack in the ceiling and every stain on the carpet. It must gallop outwards into the wilderness and perhaps even die there. Come out to play J.K.

She wakes to find Omray standing above her bed, cigarette glowing in the dark and canaries screaming in the corridor. 'I've bought you some more souvenirs,' he says, and drops a handful of yellow feathers on to her belly. She packs her bags, slams a roll of pesetas into his sleepy grabbing hands and walks out to the bus drivers' bar for churro and cortado, three bags, one Smith Corona 1936 typewriter in a pillowcase, and the breathy syllables of the horse tattooed on her face.

A prostitute with bruised elbows sits on a high stool drinking warm milk, a yellow plastic flower about to fall from her thin black hair. She has let her shoes drop to the floor and her ankles nudge each other as she avoids the eye of one particular bus driver who drinks half a pint of lager nearby. J.K. sits next to her, bags by her feet. The prostitute glances at the pillowcase and then at J.K., who smiles as the patron brings her a plate heaped with churro and a small coffee. She likes mornings. The beaches are empty, streets are being cleaned, and people have not yet summoned their meanest selves to pull them through the day. She last ate churro with a lover two years ago in Southern Spain. He dipped the sausage-like thing into hot chocolate and said, 'I love the blue rhinestones in your ears, by the way.' Usually a man of few words, an occasional joke and wry smile, observing her laughter but keeping his own inside him, that morning he talked and talked. Had she seen this and had she read that and what about hiring bicycles and heading off to a village famous for its honey and how brown her legs were getting and how much he liked the cool of marble floors and why did she cry that day in Lisbon and how he painted with coffee as a child in Argentina because his family were poor and could not afford to buy him paint and how his first wife died in a car crash leaving their ten-year-old daughter unable to sleep at night for fear of waking up and no one being alive and how she speaks French, German and Spanish and says she wants justice in three languages, how he planted English yellow flowers, what are they called, daffodils, in two old kettles and, eventually – I love you J.K. –

the words spoken for the first time, up to now always avoided, loud and brave over a plate of churro, and J.K., blue rhinestones in her ears, silent, receiving the words and not returning them. She bends down and picks up the yellow plastic flower that has fallen from the prostitute's hair that reminds her of those yellow flowers planted with love so long ago in two old kettles. *Gracias*, the prostitute says, and the pinball machine in the corner whirs in the black pools of her eyes.

Stretched out on a sand dune high above the sea, cheek pressed into the sand, J.K. watches the sun slip bloodily into the purple ocean, radio tuned for news and the sky darkening as hours slip by. Strange voices leak through as she stares out across the horizon, shivering in a thin dress under the stars:

ISRAEL, THE ALLIANCE, SAUDI ARABIA, 2,000
SORTIES, 5,000 CIVILIAN DEATHS, DENYING THE
ENEMY AN INFRASTRUCTURE, LIMBS OF WOUNDED
CHILDREN AMPUTATED IN CANDLELIGHT, ROCKEYE
CLUSTER BOMBS, NEEDLE-SHARP FRAGMENTS

Here, it is night. Cafés by the sea are busy. Hostile fatigued waiters carry trays laden with ice creams and beer and escalopes to bronzed men and women. Local fishermen, shoulders tense, stand against walls flicking worry beads, shuffling sandalled feet, smoking cigarettes, eyes on the ground, listening to the radio. Still and bowed. There are not enough fish in the ocean for that gut appetite. Tonight the Europeans are hungry, they want to be filled up. Fists bigger than local chickens, they complain about hire car firms in between mouthfuls ... ALLIED FORCES, WE ARE THE ONLY NATION ON THIS EARTH ... and J.K., lonesome cheek pressed in the dark, watches their shadowy arms lift glasses and forks like giant ghosts from a world that is too familiar. It is possible, though, that it is she who is the ghost, invisible, disenfranchised, the fragile daughter of colonial wars, one brown hand poking through the belly of Western Europe, the other wrapped around a bottle of malt whisky.

J.K. on a sand dune lit by stars and light from fishing boats on the tremendous ocean.

One winter she ran away to the flat marshland of South East England and lay on the pebble beach in the rain, sea lashing, just lying there for two whole days and nights. Three months later, feeling better, she unpacked her bag full of maps, any maps, ancient maps of China, maps drawn in 1310 by the Byzantine monk Maximos Planudes in response to the writings of astronomer Ptolemy, ink etchings of maps impressed on small clay tablets from Babylonia in 500BC where the universe floats on the sea in the form of a disc. Manuscripts which divided the earth into seven parts of the body: backbone, diaphragm, legs, feet, throat, rectum, head and face. She studied how the vocabulary of form changed with conquest, how the geography of speech and desire have all known invasions, plunderings, struggles and disguises. There in that marshland so bleak she could only look at it in parts, the horizon a long white scar, she thought about the instruments of early science used for surveying, measuring and mapping the world. The lenses, microscopes and telescopes that helped the subject get nearer or further away from her object of study, that led her through unknown worlds to the theatre of the galaxies. The further her mind wandered, the more curious she became about inscribing experience and information: if maps correspond to reality as seen at a particular time, what happens if she observes a number of realities at the same time? The word 'perhaps', which could be a route to possible worlds, but used in a certain way becomes the route to a single conclusion. Unlike the word 'if', which implies the discovery of possible universes, by making them.

Her brother sent her a book. The postwoman asked her to sign for it but she had forgotten her name and didn't know how to tell her. And then she saw J.K. written by her brother's hand on the parcel and copied it letter by letter as if she had just learnt her ABC, and the postwoman was gentle, helping her out, laughing in the right way, so she offered her coffee and for

six weeks took sea walks with her, made pancakes with her, let her brush the knots out of her hair, just glad she was there, finding ways to keep her warm, stopping draughts that raged through doors and windows. A loner with intelligent fingers.

Loners are the opposition. Pensive, thoughtful and furious, marooned with stories that need to be spoken out loud and no one to listen, curries to be cooked and no one to taste, days and days of traffic signals to be manoeuvred and no one to congratulate, except other loners: they find each other because like all good maps there are familiar signs that lead the way. The loner who both observes and creates worlds necessarily speaks with many tongues. It is with these tongues that she explores the contours of the centre and the margins, the signs for somewhere and elsewhere and here and now.

J.K. stranded on a sand dune between a war, three bags and one pillowcase.

Rockahulla! Blind. Almost blind. My head is full of dizzy blond Muzak. The kind you get while waiting to be connected on telephones. Oh yes! No Bach chorale for me. My head is full of form. Donald Duck! Mickey Mouse! I've been invaded by an army of Disney pets when I should be at my most profound. Are these my inheritance? Fear of death comes and goes. It's life's the edgy thing. You always wanted a garden, J.K. That's easy. Happy composting. Glorious growth. Glorious everything. What can you see?

J.K. sees the owner of the small sea shack on the cliff; table and chair outside, the table and chair she longs for, cacti and bush of herbs, boat on its side and tottering TV aerial on the tin and tile roof, palms rattling in the cold wind. A woman in a turmeric dress, bare legs and strong shoes waters her plants, looking out to sea while water spills on cacti. Someone comes out of the doorway carrying two bottles of beer, perhaps her mother, silver plait coiled around her brown head, pointing to a thirsty shrub. The turmeric woman is lost in some reverie of her own, ignoring commands to water this and water that,

stopping now and again to sip beer or examine the broad leaf of a succulent. How did she come to be there? Who is she? J.K. sees her own mother as observed by herself at five years old, pins in her mouth, French pleating her hair – it must have been early 1960s – watching her dress in the mornings, catching the thrill of her presence in gardens or leaning against a car. When she was J.K.'s age she had three children, had been married twice and was now alone, struggling with debtors demanding money she hadn't got. They would eat bread and apricot jam one two three days, and then on payday, steak, a new sack of oranges to suck in the shade. J.K. barefoot, lying on her stomach peeling oranges. Reading in the long grass. She is frightened and she is ashamed. Sometimes she cries and no one knows. Where is her father? She is nine years old and she knows that sometimes people are tortured. Are grown-ups cruel, then? She looks at them in a new sort of way and when they catch her eye she immediately smiles in case they know she knows they are capable of doing cruel things.

Who is going to love her enough to make her brave?

Her mother wore false eyelashes sometimes and lipstick and listened to classical music, but also blues, drank brandy, smoked cigarettes in a holder which she lost often and they had to search the house top to bottom while she went mad until, victory between their teeth, one of the children would find it and she would kiss them all over, laughing again. J.K. remembers thinking her mother was lovely and beautiful. She was allured to her, pulled to her, zipped the back of dresses for her, wanted her, tried on shoes at the bottom of her wardrobe clandestinely, especially in love with a purple patent pair with straps which seemed to promise a glamorous future, unknown worlds that J.K., five years old, glimpsed as she did up the buckles. Every kiss was a treat, Sundays a treat, tickling the soles of her mother's feet while she read newspapers in the sun, coffee and slacks with zips at the side. Love is no maiden

in silk. She is a monster who bellows, ugly and wounded. And her children are ugly and wounded too.

J.K. picks up her bags and resolves to find a place to stay.

In the chapel of the local monastery three monks gather around a painting of the Madonna, one perfect incandescent breast exposed to feed the child in her arms, nipple erect and moist. J.K. sits outside the chapel in the shade of an ancient tree, its trunk marked with three white circles of paint. She closes her eyes.

‘Just ships passing in the night.’

The green glassy eyes of the Englishman settle on her breasts. He moves nearer, immaculately manicured fingernails flickering across his trousers. J.K. thinks, yes, I am sitting under a tree marked for death. I must ask the monks something. What is it? Oh yes, when they think about women what do they feel?

‘I’m a mega-star,’ the Englishman says, puts two fingers to his forehead, shouts ‘bang bang’ and collapses at her feet.

Today Gregory died. Slipped out of this century. A few days earlier he said, here’s a picture of us, J.K.: we’re talking about places we feel happy in and people we feel happy with, about our ordinary everyday lives and the planning of things to look forward to. God is dead. Long live lager!

‘Bang bang.’ The Englishman falls on to the crackling leaves by the bench. Every time he makes the sound ‘bang bang’ in his throat, he dies again, in slow motion, mouth open, miming some terrible agony of his own.

J.K. is looking for a piece of string to tie up her suitcase which has split. Gulls cry above the glittering ocean. Grief is an inflammation. She spits it up bloodily, unhealthily, stupidly. She wants it to go away, but it won’t let go. She can taste it and see it and she has to spit it out. Here, the fishermen’s nails are crammed with fishguts, tourists translate menus, and dogs

sleep under cars. There, a friend has died, it is a cold winter and trains have stopped running.

Somewhere else, strewn across the desert, corpses, charred limbs, the odd shaving brush, a microwave, a mirror and one broken bottle of rose-scented cologne soaking into ripples of sand.

In Washington the currency is dollars, the bread yeasted, breakfast waffles and maple syrup, coffee filtered and decaffeinated, golf is being played on slopes of green grass and yellow ribbons hung on taxis. In Baghdad, the currency is dinars, the bread unleavened, breakfast goat's cheese, coffee flavoured with cardamom, foreheads scented. Mustansiriyah College in the centre is the oldest university in the world, crops are rice, vegetables, maize, millet, sugarcane, pulses and dates.

Do we exist?

What proof do we have?

When did we become a people?

When did we stop becoming a people?

What kind of language will (re)create us?

It is possible that classic rules of form and structure do not fit this experience of existing and not existing at the same time.

J.K. watches a storm rage into the crimson afternoon. The sky is electric. Rain whips her bare arms and legs. Dustbins are hauled into the air, caught on the wind's curve. Bags and pillowcase unpacked for a while, toothbrush, perfume, books, a little pile of yellow feathers, J.K. knows she too is caught in the wind. She is Europe's eerie child, and she is part of the storm.

Book of the Open Mouth

Rain lashes against car windows. Her favourite dress lies in a heap on the floor covered in candlewax. The white wax against black velvet looks like a fierce livid scar. The scar above her eyebrow makes the shape of a K which is the second letter of her name. J.K. shuts her eyes.

H arrives. They have met once before, briefly, in a train where she felt the brooding and bemused attention of someone staring at the wet black fur of her Russian hat (it had been raining), which she placed on her lap, lightly caressing its fur as the train rattled through the smoke of belching industrial chimneys. When at last he spoke, it was to conjure a picture for her. ‘Your hat makes me think of the time I thought I was going to die. I was standing on a jetty. There was a raging wind and a huge wave of white froth seemed to curve above my head. I thought I was drowning. At that moment I looked down and saw a black kitten sleeping on the wooden boards.’ He waited for her to say something or ask him something and when she did not he said, ‘The white smoke from the chimney reminded me.’ J.K. guessed from his voice that he was German, and another image of smoke raging from chimneys presented itself to her.

Now, as he walks through her front door, gift in his hand, he comments on the pleat in the sleeve of her black velvet dress, the books on her shelves and the thick ivory candles flickering in two heavy Ukrainian candleholders. J.K. pours rum into two long-stemmed glasses. She is ill. Flu is streaming through her, a virus, it is the decade of virus, and H, who offers her his handkerchief, is in a maverick mood.

Three days earlier, as she shut her front door, unlit cigarette in one hand, box of matches in the other, and started to walk down the stairs, a short man in his thirties walked up the stairs. They collided and he quickly shoved his hand inside her skirt. In the fight that followed with this stranger on the stone stairway, he somehow manoeuvred her on to his shoulders so that she, still with the matches in her hand, was on top of him, looking down at the frizzy blond curls of his hair. He was struggling with her weight and at the same time running his hand up her thighs. Suddenly she knew what to do. She lit a match and set fire to his hair.

After they have eaten, H turns his chair towards her and says, 'You look like a matador. You would fight small bulls, though. The sort you see running wild in the Camargue.' She lights his cigarette and asks him what his accent is. 'German,' he says. 'I like cold winters.' They drink more rum and she unwraps the gift he has brought her. It is a small packet of wild rice.

'Wars were fought over that rice.' H strokes the grey suede of her shoe. 'In fact it is not rice at all. It is a black seed that grows into aquatic grass in certain parts of North America.' As they dance across the curved room, tasting the rum on each other's lips, her hand pressed into the back of his neck, his hand pressed over her heart, which is beating fast, something salty mingles with the taste of rum. It is her tears, streaming again, and he moves his hand from her heart to her cheek. After a while she says, 'What kind of places would the trains journey through in a united Germany?' His fingers, now wet from her tears, draw a map across her cheek: 'Erfurt–Leipzig–Potsdam–Berlin.'

She lit a match and set fire to his hair. The blond stranger on the stone stairway began to burn, his frizzy hair in flames, the palms of his hands slapping upwards, anywhere, her calves, her knees, still holding on to her, until he got desperate and began to dig his sharp nails into her stomach and finally into her forehead, making the shape of a letter K.

‘What shall we do about your flu?’ H whispers as they dance into the flickering light of the candles. ‘Tell me about Erfurt,’ she says. His pale eyes settle on a painting behind her. Two vultures hover over a cream satin slipper, a languid red rose on its buckle. Next to it, a thin bamboo stick pokes out of a pot filled with soil, thin strips of shiny paper, gold, purple, green, glued to it so that if whirled it creates an arc of light and colour. ‘In this room you have made yourself a world that pleases you,’ he says. ‘In Erfurt there is a cathedral. The houses are covered in soot and the air smells of coal smoke. There is also a theatre and ...’ he smiles ... ‘good ice-cream.’ She follows his gaze as they dance, reading book titles as if they were new to her, and when they kiss under a small book called *Undocumented Lives: Britain’s Unauthorized Migrant Workers* she says, ‘Well, I think we should go to bed and drink more rum.’ He smiles, sticks his finger into her mouth and says, ‘Um ... you see ... you are quite lovely, but the thing is I have another involvement and I don’t want to lie to her.’ They dance in silence, this time his hands in her hair, and she says, ‘So tell me about Berlin.’

‘Berlin,’ he begins, and then stops. ‘Berlin is where I was born. Erfurt is where my ... my ... companion was born. She comes to Berlin to buy lipstick.’

‘And to see you,’ J.K. interrupts.

‘Yes.’ The vultures and satin slipper seem to fascinate his eye. He dances her closer to the image and studies it.

‘The bird has a snake in its mouth,’ he says.

‘Were you standing with her on the jetty when you thought you were drowning?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why did you say I and not We?’ she asks as they dance on and she untangles his hands from her hair, holding on to his hand though, both warm from the rum and he pressing against

her velvet hips, ambivalent and desiring, his pale eyes somewhere else.

‘Because it was my thought,’ he says. ‘The white smoke and your black fur hat. The white wave and the black kitten.’ He takes his finger out of her mouth and presses it against the scar on her forehead. ‘K,’ he murmurs. At that moment his elbow nudges the Ukrainian candleholder.

She lit a match and set fire to his hair. At last she managed to jump off his shoulders, calves and forehead bleeding, and ran down the stairs leaving him folded over himself, slapping at his blond head with blistered hands. And then, he spoke.

‘And because,’ he looks away, ‘I want to beam love into you.’

As hot white wax trickles down her black velvet breasts, J.K. sees the packet of wild rice lying on the table, a delicacy, a frivolous gift, and pulls in the following memory:

A woman holds up a queue of impatient (West) Berlin office workers one lunchtime in a supermarket while her groceries are cashed up at the till. At the other end of the supermarket (East) Germans queue for shopping trolleys because a sign tells them to. The shop is crowded with people pushing empty trolleys, a can of beer in one, a box of washing powder in another, two bananas and a can of Pepsi in another. No one can move. There are skid-marks on the lino from the wheels. An old man reads the label of a small carton of cream, broken shoes tapping against the beat of Muzak spilling through the speakers. He puts the cream very carefully into his trolley, walks to the cashpoint, stops, bends down to pick it up and read it again. Eventually the woman turns round to face the office workers who are having to dodge the trolleys squeaking past them. They do not have trolleys. They carry their groceries in their hands and have currency ready to pay and leave.

‘I queued for food for twenty years, you can queue for twenty minutes. Look! My mouth is open.’

They shout back at her, call her a White Turk, and she becomes quiet as she takes them in, their perfumes, shoes, briefcases, watches, cufflinks, haircuts, jewellery. ‘Are you the new world I’ve been promised?’

J.K. stares into H’s pale eyes.

‘It’s not a good idea to stick your finger into the mouth of a hungry woman.’

‘Who is more predatory ... the satin slipper with rosebuds on its buckle ... or the bird above it?’ he says pointing to the painting.

And then:

‘Tell me how you hurt your forehead?’

His hair was on fire and then his mouth opened and words poured out. ‘I gotta plate inside my head. Some cocksucker cracked my head. Only wanted an aspirin. Looking for an aspirin. Need an aspirin. I buried the dead in Bucharest, miss. Threw apples on the graves, six foot under the snow. A HAPPY NEW YEAR IN LIBERTY! If you’ve not got an aspirin, can you spare a piece of cheese?’

‘My companion and I are together because we are frightened to be alone.’ His fingers search for the zip of her black velvet dress. ‘But we are alone. I live half my life pretending I am full up.’ Outside, bins topple as drenched city cats search for food.

‘I am touched,’ J.K. says to her mother, Lillian Strauss. ‘I am touched by H in every way.’

‘Give some more form to the object of your affection,’ Lillian Strauss says softly, trying not to smile.

‘How do you mean?’

‘What’s his name?’

‘I’ll tell you when you’re sober.’

Lillian Strauss's hands tighten around her glass of scotch. 'You self-righteous pious little shit.' Her eyes go dim. 'Why do you have to ruin everything?' They sit in silence. Lillian Strauss takes a small sip from her glass and purses her lips. J.K. looks out of the window.

'I enjoyed Gregory's funeral.' Her mother takes another sip.

'Thank you for inviting me. I liked his mother. She said if she'd called him Klaus and not Gregory he might not have got Aids. She's a bit weird isn't she? We're having supper together on Tuesday.' She looks at her daughter, whose eyes are glued to the window.

'If I'd known I was going to blubber, I would have taken a tissue.' Lillian Strauss stands up. Walks to the sink and pours her drink into it.

'Bloody good stuff to waste,' she says, slamming down the empty glass.

'Mom,' J.K. says.

'Don't call me Mom. And don't ever have children. They'll just end up hating you. That's what happens to parents. Their children hate them.'

'Let's have a baby,' H says to J.K. His hand rests on her belly. It is summer. A small aeroplane hums above them. Her camellia has flowered again, another pink bud opening in the petrol winds of the city. She looks around her room; a little saucer full of yellow canary feathers, pebbles, postcards, a bag full of coins, an address book, a white bowl on a stand, a photograph of Gregory, a cashew nut in its shell – not unlike a foetus – a poster of a man with a dragonfly taped to his forehead, a green ribbon, the letters XYZ scrawled on the back of an envelope in felt pen, a picture of an orange hand with six fingers, ALIEN written underneath it, and a 1936 Smith Corona typewriter. J.K. feels panic rise in her chest. The same panic she always feels when arriving at a new place. She is in a new place. She is in H's arms and the aeroplane nearly

drowned out his words, but she heard them and he is waiting for her reply.

This is a frightening place. His hand on her belly. More frightening than walking the city late at night, alone, in clothes that make running away difficult. Than the crazy gaze of bureaucrats in uniform, thin youths with knives, the violent hands of a commuter in pinstripes.

‘I hope,’ H says, ‘that when I touch you, you can feel everything I feel for you.’

Mother. The word is full of pain and rage and love. Her children play in small city parks. Cut their feet on glass. Howl into pillows. That’s what children do. They howl into pillows. Howl for justice, for beans, for God, for love.

‘I’ll think about it.’

After a while he says:

‘I’ll drive you to the airport.’

She is walking past a cement factory, straw hat on her head, books under her arm. J.K. knows she will have to collect ten 100-peseta coins to phone H from a call box. She knows she will have to find out what the international dialling code is and she will have to find a voice to talk to him with. She could say, why are you there and I’m here? She could say, I’m learning the language, I’m brown and strong, the scar on my forehead is completely gone, every day I dive into the sea and every day is full of you. And then she remembers the eyes of a woman in her early fifties irrigating her garden in Southern Europe, drinking a glass of home-made lemonade at the end of the day after she had scrubbed the soil from her fingernails. What was that look in her eyes? Betrayal. J.K. knew she had been betrayed. Utterly. And the woman knew J.K. knew so she felt humiliated and when their eyes met J.K. had to pretend not to know. She had to find a way of meeting her eye dispossessed of knowledge. What does J.K. know? She knows that no one is

innocent. Only the privileged and sentimental can afford to be unknowing.

J.K. is guilty. She buys the black-haired waitress at the local bar a beer and asks her to describe her room and all the things in it. And who do you love? And how do you survive on your wages? And how is your life different from your mother's life? And then, much later, she asks her for some 100-peseta coins for the telephone box.

Telefonica-dialling codes:

COLUMBIA 07-57

BRASIL 07-55

EMIRATOS ARABES-UNIDOS 07-971

CHILE 07-38

YUGOSLAVIA 07-38

INDONESIA 07-62

J.K. studies codes. A code is a collection of laws. A system of rules and regulations, of signals and symbols. So now, as she drops the coins into the steel slot of the telephone, she is thinking about rules, signals and symbols. H says, 'Is that you J.K?'

My precious.

My sweet.

My darling.

My lovely.

What is German for 'the twentieth century'?

Das zwanzigste Jahrhundert.

And how do you say 'enigma'?

Enigma.

J.K. has two coins left. She rolls them into the slot.

And how do you say, 'the open mouth'?

Der offene Mund.

OceanofPDF.com

Swallowing Geography

She is the wanderer, bum, émigré, refugee, deportee, rambler, strolling player. Sometimes she would like to be a settler, but curiosity, grief and disaffection forbid it. She is however in love with the settler X, he being all that she is not.

Today she found two birds' eggs, pale blue, one in a field and one on the pavement of a city. She buys an envelope in a post office so she can send them to a friend who will appreciate them. The clerk is intrigued that she is wrapping two small cracked bloody eggs in a sheet of white tissue paper and putting them into an envelope. This same envelope will be stamped, inscribed with the name of the place she has posted it from. The receiver will now be able to imagine the sender in that place and make a picture of it in her mind's eye.

The wanderer Y is not without purpose, but the purpose is not wholly revealed. Sometimes she imagines the layout of land before she has actually seen it. Instead of following a map, she has made a map. Sometimes she is visible and sometimes she is invisible. This is not because she is a ghost or a mystic, but because some people want to see her and some people do not. The word absence suggests non-presence, loss, being nowhere, non-appearance, lacking. That's what the Turkish worker on a German tram told her, fanning out his hands for her so she could see the offal under his fingernails. 'This is the liver of a cow,' he said. 'We at the slaughterhouse carry the inner organs of beasts, carry their bodies on bits of our bodies.'

When she meets a stranger and they tell each other stories, she notes that it is always the people she leaves out of the stories that interest the stranger most. If she talks about her brother, sister and father, the stranger wants to know all about her mother. Therefore she learns that absence is often more interesting than presence.

Although she is walking forwards, one foot in front of the other, she is also walking backwards. This is because she is thinking of her past. Beginnings and endings curl into each other like a snake with its tail in its mouth. There was a man who wept and said, 'I can't remember myself. I see and recognize myself in the bodies and voices of other people. I know that we once worshipped in the same temple. I know that the same priests blessed us with basil leaves and water. I know we fought the same revolutions, told the same jokes and went to the same schools. I have been described somewhere but I don't know where to find myself.'

The settler X kisses the wanderer Y on lips that are cracked from wind, and says, this is the statue of my local poet, engineer, architect, painter, banker, philanthropist, scientist, mayor, and here, a statue of the local martyr. He takes her by the arm and points; this is my park, my shop, my dentist, doctor and baker. She is eating a burger and chips. Always be ready to eat a burger and chips, a Czech refugee said once, in a television studio. All the while he had a kitten on his lap and he stroked it. He said the cat wandered into the studio and he wanted to be filmed stroking it whilst talking about exile, so it would not seem as if he was in pain.

X and Y make love in her hotel room, the shutter open, a breeze on her left thigh. Someone is jangling keys in the corridor outside, and upstairs someone is singing a pop song. X says, I have to go now. His head is resting on a pillow inscribed with the name of the hotel; blue thread sewn into white cotton.

Is the settler X privileged and the wanderer Y deprived? For X and his partner Z, settled in the country of each other, there is something called a future.

For the deprived there is no word called future.

For the privileged there is only the future.

For the deprived the present is full of the absence of privilege.

For the privileged the present is full of the absence of deprivation.

Or is the wanderer Y privileged? Both intimate and alien, she can touch the world with a phantom hand.

X returns home to a chicken cooked by Z. Y eats takeaway pizza on her balcony and washes her hands with a tiny square of perfumed soap inscribed with the hotel's name.

She packs her bag.

Each new journey is a mourning for what has been left behind. The wanderer sometimes tries to recreate what has been left behind, in a new place. This always fails. To muster courage and endurance for a journey, it has to be embarked on with something like ambivalence. To retreat is to wane, fade, shrink, get less. This suggests that the privileged, who are not used to retreating, swell, expand and get more.

X rings through to the hotel and asks Y to stay one more night.

She, the wanderer, bum, refugee and rambler, drinks scotch on the rocks in a long glass, sitting in the corner of a bar. She smokes a cigarette bought in a small kiosk whilst changing trains at the last border she crossed. A border is an undefined margin between two things, sanity and insanity, for example. It is an edge. To be marginal is to be not fully defined. This thought excites her.

Although she is drinking whisky and smoking tobacco in a crowded bar in a strange city, and although she spends most of her time in cities, she often wants to be near water, to be under

the stars, to feel the wind on her cheeks and wrists, to collect cones and kernels, shells, fossils, pebbles. She returns to the city with a bag full of these things. When she empties them out on to a carpet or floorboards or the wooden surface of a table, she puts her hand over them and they pulse into her palm. It is then she wonders if these are the things that give her health and special endurance. Some become mementos, some gifts, and the most special become talismans.

So now in the palm of her hand is a small brown feather.

X walks towards her. They drink more whisky. He tells her how glad he is she's stayed on an extra night. He talks and she listens. He says, 'I feel very sad tonight.' In fact she too is feeling sad, but he has not considered that this might be so and tells her a tale. While she is hearing why he is sad, she is also hearing voices from the radio blaring behind the bar. There has been an earthquake somewhere. A man is weeping. He is saying through an interpreter, 'I lost my wife's mother, my four children and my house. They are all gone.' The interpreter describes objects buried in the rubble. X does not hear these voices and he does not hear the unspoken sad voice of Y.

'Let's go for a swim.'

'It's dark,' he says.

'I know.'

He, the settler, present, visible and somewhere, is reluctant to swim with the wanderer at a strange hour. He has a home and he has Z to return to. He will return wet and Z will ask him why. How is he to relate the small intimate moments of his day to his co-settler? 'I drank whisky in a bar with my lover, and then we went for a swim.'

After a while he says, 'I'll watch you.'

While she swims and he watches her, she, like the privileged, will be perceptible, observed, present to the eye, witnessed. What she does not know is that he will watch her swim, and he

will make her up. To him at that moment her eyelashes are blue, her wrists jangle with silver bands of alchemy and her hair is oiled with jasmine. In this way he will have stripped her of the possibility of being sad, needing things, having a past, present and future.

The sound of men and women wailing, and interpreters murmuring above them, leaks out of the radio.

They leave the bar. Sweepers in orange jackets clean the gutters. He puts his arm through hers and she strokes it with the small brown feather she has been holding all night. They walk out of town, across a road and then under a small bridge. Swans sleep on the river, necks tucked under their wings, floating silently under the moon.

She takes off her clothes. He watches her some of the time and he watches the swans. She is standing on the muddy bank. She is naked. He is clothed. X the settler has chosen not to swim. Y the wanderer is going to dive into the water and she is going to swim.

‘Take off your earrings.’

She gives them to him.

‘Don’t swallow the water,’ he shouts.

She swallows and swallows the water. And as she swallows she swallows the possibility she will always be alone. Swallows the river that will flow into the sea that is made from other waters that have flowed from mountains and hills, that will leak into oceans. She swallows geography, learns to swim in changing tides and temperatures, learns different strokes of the arms and legs, learns to speak in many tongues. She does this because she has no choice but to do so, and she comes out of the river to find him there, holding her earrings in his hand, and he says, ‘But they don’t fit. Who are you?’

‘Who are you?’ he said, backing away from the creature that emerged, streaked in mud, speaking a language he did not understand. ‘Lie with me a while,’ she murmured, and he,

entranced by her golden fur drying under the moon, understood the request and consented. They lay together on the river bank while the swans, curved into themselves, slept on, both thinking how odd the fragrance of the other was, the texture of their skin and hair, the way their lips and tongues met, the way their bodies joined together. Both kept trying to find something recognizable, familiar in the other, but they could not. This was frightening but it was also arousing, and they experimented shyly with ways of pleasing each other. All the while he held a pair of earrings in his hand and would not let go. 'Take me to meet your family,' she said, lying on top of him, her golden belly rising and falling. At that moment he lost his desire and tried to separate himself from her, and at that moment the swans swam to the bank of the river to watch them.

'Why do you hate me?' she said, staring into his very blue eyes.

'I don't.'

'You do.'

'I want you to be someone else.'

After a pause, he said again, 'Who are you?'

'I am the stranger who desires you and I have come to convince you it is truly you, in all your particularity, whom I desire.'

This made him sob, great gulping tears that made him ugly, mouth open, face crumpled until he found that he was howling and had to press his face into the mud to stifle his cries.

She said again, 'It is truly you, in all your particularity, whom I desire,' and he looked up into the black snout of her nose, at her golden paws and pink eyes, and vomited, spewed out the contents of his stomach, mostly chicken, into a little pool by his feet.

X wakes up from this short dream to see Y come out of the water, naked, and he says, 'Hi. I've been waiting for you. Here are your earrings.' He gives them to her. The wind blows and her breath tastes of whisky and mud.

As she dries herself Y asks X what he did while she was swimming.

'I watched you swim and then I fell asleep,' he says. And then he tells her he must go because Z will be waiting up for him.

'Stay,' she says.

He is silent.

She knows that by asking him to stay, she has invited him to tell her about his politics, ceremonies, poetry and food. She has broken a rule. She knows that though she has wandered through the country of his person, Z has permanent residence there. She knows this because she, the wanderer, has to know her heart and she has to know his heart. She has broken a rule and she runs the risk of being deported.

'Why do you hate me?' she asks.

'I don't.'

'You do.'

After a while he says, 'I want you to be someone else.'

'Who do you want me to be?'

An hour later, X will sit in front of a log fire with Z.

'Tell me about your day,' he says.

Z runs her fingers through her short-cropped hair and stares into the fire. With her other hand she strokes the cat on her lap. 'Today we got a postcard from B. Look.' She shows him the card, an image of a date palm on the edge of a desert, and in the distance, white thorns.

‘It is as if the desert has been posted through our front door,’ she says. ‘All day I have been tasting and smelling the desert, imagining its light and scale. And when I did my shopping, I imagined B there, sitting on ripples of sand.’ She looks at X, her co-settler. ‘What did you do today?’

‘I went to the office early and left late. Then I came home and ate chicken with you. Then I had a whisky in a bar and went for a walk by the river.’ Her hand moves slowly across the cat on her lap. The half moons of her fingernails glisten in its fur. ‘Come here,’ he says and pulls her towards him. He kisses her eyelids and tickles her neck with a small brown feather.

‘You’re wearing your hair down,’ she says, winding a silver strand round and round her finger. ‘I’ve never seen it loose before. You look like a stranger.’ And then she says, ‘Why do you hate me?’

‘I don’t.’

‘You do.’

After a while he says, ‘I want you to be someone else.’

Z takes the feather from his hand and strokes her wrist. She is feeling homesick, here in her own country, in her own home, in the bosom of her family, with her co-settler X.

Y is wringing water from her hair.

‘Who do you want me to be?’ she asks.

He shrugs and unwinds the green ribbon from his pony-tail. His hair falls down past his shoulders to his waist. He plaits her wet hair and ties it with the ribbon.

‘I’m missing someone I’ve never met.’ He smiles. And then he looks away.

Y puts on her thick wool jacket.

‘Who are you anyway?’ he asks, watching her put heavy gold hoops into her ears.

‘I am a country disguised and made up, offering itself to tourists.’

She gives him her small brown feather.

‘Here. A souvenir to take home with you.’

She is the wanderer, bum, émigré, refugee, deportee, rambler. But most of all she is the strolling player.

XYZ.

To name someone is to give them a country.

To give them a country is to give them an address.

To give them an address is to give them a home.

To give them a home is to give them a wardrobe.

To give them a wardrobe is to give them a mirror.

What does Y see in her mirror?

Her hair is wet and it is tied with a green ribbon. She wears golden hoops in her ears. If she is a character, is she dressed for the part? What part is she going to play? Or perhaps she is dressed out of character? Dressed in a way one would not expect her to be. What is going to happen to Y?

The wardrobe with the mirror inside it belongs to the EUROPA HOTEL. Y can see she is shivering in a woollen jacket. If she is a persona, has she adopted a system, constructed a voice to speak through? Is Y a first, second or third person? A first person does the speaking. A second person is spoken to. A third person is spoken about.

What are Y’s voices? The telephone rings and the receptionist puts through the call.

At this moment Z is re-arranging the furniture in her front room. Her co-settler X is at work. He is in a public place and she is in a private place. So now she is re-arranging the unspoken patterns of their privacy. First she moves the sofa away from the wall and places it by the window. Now she

picks up objects that have fallen under the sofa over the years. Coins, a cigarette lighter, a Biro, receipts, buttons, an elastic band, two magazines, bus tickets, keys, shopping lists, and lastly, a piece of paper folded into a neat square. She unfolds it and sees her co-settler's handwriting. He has written down the name of a hotel, the name of a bar, and a time. Z puts this into her pocket. Now she moves the rug from the centre of the room and places it at a diagonal somewhere else. She moves a table, chairs, three pictures, objects that have become so familiar she and her co-settler X have ceased to notice them, and places them somewhere unfamiliar. All the time she finds small things, long-lost and forgotten, out-of-date postage stamps, X's cufflinks, an old lipstick. They have lived a life together and Z collects it like evidence. Her short-cropped black hair is covered in dust. The cat, upset by the rearranging, runs across the room and back again, looking for places to hide. Z calls out to it. And then B walks in.

X is about to go into a meeting. He is collecting the paperwork he needs with one hand, and speaking on the telephone with the other. A colleague mimes something and points to his watch. X nods. A secretary brings him a cup of coffee. He mimes thank you. Through the glass windows of the open-plan office he can see bodies at work. Sitting, standing, leaning. Another colleague hands him a wad of papers which he flicks through whilst speaking on the telephone, considers this new information, stands up and reaches for his jacket, all the time still speaking on the telephone. Someone knocks on the glass window and tells him to hurry up. This is also mimed.

Mim-e-sis: Imitation. Representation. An ancient farcical play of real life with mimicry. A person's supposed or imagined words.

The person X is speaking to is Y.

Y is in her hotel room, bags packed, speaking on the telephone to X.

X: I've called to say goodbye.

Y: Goodbye.

X: I can't speak here. I'm about to go to a meeting.

Y: Bye then.

X: Don't go without saying goodbye properly.

Y: What does saying goodbye properly mean?

X: Can I call you later?

Y: I won't be here.

X: Where will you be? Give me a telephone number.

Y: Why haven't you asked me that before?

X: Look, I have to go.

Y: Bye then.

Z is carrying an armful of books when she sees B.

‘You're moving things,’ B says. ‘Why?’

Z drops the books on the newly positioned sofa and walks over to her. ‘I got a postcard from you yesterday. I can't believe you're here. I thought you were there. I've been imagining you there.’

B is tanned. Her shoulders are smooth and brown. ‘I got back three days ago.’ She looks around at the front room. ‘I've been imagining this room,’ she says. ‘I knew exactly where the table is, or was. You sat there,’ she points, ‘and I sat here. But you've changed it.’ She smiles. ‘It's like waking up on the wrong side of the bed.’ She runs her fingers through Z's short hair. ‘Oh honey,’ she says. They kiss in the disordered room. This is the first time they have kissed. Like that. Slow and long. Z strokes B's bare shoulder and then moves her hand to her breasts.

X is having a drink after work with a male colleague. ‘I think I am in love,’ he says. ‘But I don't want to hurt my wife.’

Y is about to get on a train. She is returning to the city she knows better than other cities. She knows how its transport works, where its most obscure coffee bars are hidden, opening and closing times, its swimming pools, banks, nightclubs, cheap restaurants, theatres and cinemas.

‘Oh honey.’

‘You’re lovely.’

‘Oh.’

‘There.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘Like that?’

‘Hmm.’

‘Oh.’

‘Sweetheart.’

‘Hmm.’

‘There.’

‘Is that nice?’

‘Harder.’

‘Oh.’

‘Oh baby.’

‘Oh.’

‘Aren’t you beautiful?’

X walks in to find his co-settler Z naked in the arms of their co-friend B who at this moment has her head buried between the thighs of Z. In addition this is happening in his front room which has been re-arranged and he does not know where anything is. Nor, it occurs to him, does he know who his co-settler is, how she might want to be touched, or where she wants to live, because he hears these words fall from her lips into the crease of B’s brown neck.

‘Take me somewhere else.’

Y is lying in a bath in the place she calls her home in the city she knows best. She is listening to music and the kettle is boiling. On the small desk next to her computer, she has placed five white goose feathers in a tin can. Her clothes hang on a rail. Her bed-linen is familiar and cool. Her cupboard is full of spices in labelled glass jars. She knows every book on her shelf. She knows what the view out of her window will be. So now she is lying in her bath looking out of the window and she knows that at about nine o’clock she will meet a friend and they will eat out somewhere in the centre of the city. They will link arms and walk through the traffic as if they have nine lives.

Z looks up into the eyes of her co-settler X.

His hands are in his pockets.

B puts on her T-shirt and smiles at X.

‘Hello,’ she says. And then she zips up her jeans and asks Z if she has any wine in the house.

‘No,’ X says.

‘Yes,’ Z says. She slips her hands into the pocket of her silk blouse, bought with X’s money, and gives him the piece of paper folded into a small square she found that morning. X unfolds it. It says HOTEL EUROPA, BAR LEONARDO, 6 P.M.

‘Go and find her,’ Z says.

B calls out to the cat who is hiding under the table.

After a while, X says, ‘I don’t know where she is.’

Y is eating pasta in a café in the centre of the city with her friend. It is busy and hot and the tables are full of pimps, lovers, prostitutes, friends, students, tourists and loners reading journals. They stare, talk, fight, shout out for ashtrays, ask for advice, borrow money, joke, cry, tell lies, describe their

families, romances, children, and some even tell their companion that they love them.

What does Y possess? She who owns no property, has no inheritance, husband, children, savings or pension plan? Y is a first, second and third person. These are all her voices. XYZ. Z and X will reconcile their differences, buy things for their home and grow old together. Will Y grow old? Have we met her elderly and survived and occupying public space, not with melancholy or eccentricity, but as a matter of fact?

Y dips her bread in her wine.

‘Fear is an invented thing,’ she says.

‘How do you uninvent it then?’ J.K. asks in Spanish.

‘You ask too many questions,’ Y replies in English.

At that moment B walks in and they invite her to sit at their table.

The Unloved

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PART ONE

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I know who killed her, says Tatiana the unloved child.

Detective Inspector Blanc stares dreamily into the pink folds of the child's taffeta dress. A gold paper crown sits askew on her unwashed hair. 'Who was it, Princess?' He tries to make his voice careless.

Tatiana smiles flirtatiously and taps his shoulder with her silver wand. Glitter falls from her stick and stains the navy serge of his jacket. 'Biddy Ba Ba,' she screams, pointing to the cat asleep on the chair. When she runs into the reluctant arms of her mother the Detective Inspector wants to murder her.

Be calm. Be patient, he tells himself, drinking the last dregs of the bitter coffee the bohemian tourists in the château have made for him. He gathers his papers and stands up. Tatiana's mother looks bored. Inspector Blanc stares hard at the small black pearls, the caviar that circles her milky neck. The exquisite sculpture of her shoulders. The snail of gold hair that has slithered out of her chignon and rests on the slope of her neck. How did this jewel, this perfection, this poised and perfumed woman spawn such an ugly child? When she looks down at her daughter's feet, he could swear her eyelids are powdered with silver dust. She is a mask, he muses, all artifice – as if somehow keeping mortality at bay. She is eternity, she is Chanel, she is Dior, she is Guerlain. She is quite simply perfect. A synthetic illusion painted with her own brush. Her narrow silhouette and the nuggets of antique silver on her wrists fascinate and perturb him. But the little girl? He'd show the princess the back of his hand and make her yelp.

The Inspector's shoes press angrily into the gravel path as he walks to his car.

'Don't tell lies.' Luciana stares impassively at the wall as the eleven-year-old girl struggles out of the froth of pink lace and

chiffon which is too small for her. The zip does not quite do up and she has to squeeze the princess dress over her plump hips. Dropping it at her mother's feet she thuds upstairs to her bedroom and bursts into tears.

Luciana fastens the small tortoiseshell button on her linen cuff. Serene and symmetrical down to the two detailed pleats in her faded tea rose linen skirt. How is it, she muses, staring at the ripped froth of pink taffeta the princess shed by her black Italian riding boots with their gleaming silver buckles, that only two weeks ago, she and her husband, and Tatiana of course, had driven from Frankfurt to Normandy on terrifying motorways to spend Christmas in this château, and in that time the English woman was murdered? Now, it seems, everyday routines have become suspect. Even someone running a bath seems full of hidden meaning and malevolent intention.

The sky is a grey block, low on the flat land. A long drive leads up to the entrance of the château, and on the left, a small farm. The farmer's wife had laid a fire for the tourists before they arrived. In return they bought her a tin of shortbread from the ferry, taking it in turns to speak to her in a hybrid mash of languages, anxious to present themselves as amiable, likeable people. Somehow they understood each other. Who are they? her husband had asked her that evening. Friends of Pinar, she replied. How many of them are there this year? She had to think hard. Polish, Italian, German, North African, American, French. The farmer fondly watched his wife open the tin of shortbread with her neat small hands.

So the Inspector's wife is staying with us again?

His wife pretends to read the ingredients on the back of the tin.

I saw you washing the bed sheets. Enough blood to make people think we slaughter pigs.

Poor woman.

Her mouth is full of shortbread made with one hundred per cent butter. Yes, the château is busting with tourists this year. And their children.

The two young girls, Tatiana and Claudine, will dance with long ribbons, pink and blue, whirling them into dragons and silken flames while the adults look on. One of the girls will ask her father to hold her teddy bear in his arms and squeeze it so that Muzak oozes from the red plastic heart hidden in its paw. The Englishman raises his glass. 'To simple things,' he says and they all lift their glasses, smiling as the heart in the bear's nylon paw lights up from the pulse of sound. Sprawled on a cushion next to the bear is a cat, a tiger cat from Paris, Bidy Ba Ba, who will stretch out in front of the fire and never go outside. He is agoraphobic and has to be picked up and put on the grass. Now Claudine puts down her ribbon, picks up the cat and runs outside in her ballet shoes to put him on the damp fern where he sits stricken and shivering in the rain. When she returns she starts to unpack her vanity case. Tatiana watches her friend carefully line six pairs of tiny ballet shoes on the window shelf. In the half-light of the fire they look like giant moths. Another toast. The American woman raises her glass. 'To new friends,' she suggests and everyone admires her daughter Claudine, who, red in the face, is doing the splits on the Persian rug.

'Between us all,' says Luciana's fat German husband, 'we are just about the entire European community.'

The oldest woman in the room interrupts him. 'Since when was I a European?'

'But you live in Europe, Yasmina?' Wilhelm rubs his paunch, one eye on the English woman as she stretches her pale, freckled legs by the fire.

'So what?'

Claudine's mother laughs infectiously, all dimples and lustrous blue eyes. 'Nor me,' she declares. 'Je suis

américaine.’ They all look at the photographs on the wall, three of them, carefully placed underneath each other. The first is of the Spanish poet and playwright Lorca, in dinner jacket and tie, his face a perfect heart shape. The second, a black and white photograph entitled ‘Happy Memories of Avignon.’ Three peasants, two men and a woman, sit around a wooden table eating bread and cheese under the heavy blossom of a chestnut tree. The third is a black and white photo of a rowing boat turned upside down on the River Lee in Hackney, London. ‘I live near there.’ The English woman points to the upturned boat. ‘Hope they kept their mouths closed when the boat turned over.’

Luciana, her face covered in a mud pack which she will soon wash off with icy water, sings upstairs, odd lines like ‘Sometimes it’s hard to get my eyes to close.’ She watches the mud mask crack with pleasure. Her husband, who sells real-estate in Frankfurt, does most of the cooking. ‘There is nothing that makes him happier,’ Luciana tells them all when she comes downstairs dressed for supper, ‘than cooking for other people,’ and they all peer at him through the glass doors of the kitchen as he rubs garlic into small squares of toast.

‘Topless girls and cold beer, that’s what makes me happy.’ Philippe the French man smiles at his American wife. She can sip wine all night long without ever getting drunk. She smiles back at her dark Parisian husband of seven years, the father of her daughter. Her clothes are demure, but underneath her beige woollen skirt she wears stockings and black boned corsets that pull in her waist and make her hold her breath. Such a fair woman with such a dark man, and such an enchanted child, Claudine, who laughs deeply from the pit of her small stomach, dancing on her toes. Much-loved Claudine. Her heels never touch the floor.

The couple from England collect wood for the fire. Sometimes when they are alone in the damp forest he says to her, ‘I love you, Mary,’ and she replies, ‘No, you don’t. You just want something to love.’ They throw the logs on to the

fire and watch the flames hiss in silence. The two single women observe the couples with stony fascination. Yasmina, who keeps the greying curls off her face with two hairslides, is short and chainsmokes hand-rolled tobacco from a canary-yellow leather pouch. She was born in Sétif, Algiers. Clouds of tobacco smoke hide her face, as do the books she always carries with her, holding them close to her shortsighted eyes. Polish Monika, in her early thirties, glances clandestinely at the fifty-five-year-old Yasmina and wonders if she too will grow old alone, self-possessed and deceptively serene. Once the lover of a famous man who had a woman in every port, Monika has grown fat. Every night she sews by the fire, a brooding presence who for now has removed herself from all possible pain. The English man is drawn to her. When they all eat around the long table, his thin body leans in her direction, making sure she has enough of everything.

Tonight Philippe immaculately spoons fennel sauce on to everyone's fish, watched by Wilhelm who, licking the garlic butter off his lips, wonders why he loathes the dark French man. A lamp in the shape of a globe of the world turns in the breeze from the window. At ten o'clock it moves from Arabia, the Arabian Sea, Sri Lanka and Colombo to Dondra Head.

The unloved watch the loved perform the small rituals of their loving.

At night they hear the cries of the loved from their solitary beds.

In the morning they watch the loved curiously.

They want rooms far away from their cries.

They want to be far away from the loved.

It hauls in their lovelessness too close.

But they also want to be near the loved.

Because the loved are blessed.

They want to be far away from the heat of the night, come together in the daytime for meals and light-hearted conversations because then they are more equal.

There are days when they do nothing but play music. The English man has an old 1930s accordion, the Algerian an oboe. Wilhelm the German real-estate agent strums his guitar; the Parisian, light on his toes, plays the saxophone very badly, and his American wife sings – a glass of rosé in her hand. Luciana sings too, shrill operatic versions of whatever the American is singing, her voice strangely detached and harsh. The English woman looks into the fire, playing with her hair or the buckles on her shoes, listening and fidgeting. Sometimes she gets up and collects more wood, even though there is plenty. Monika, in her shapeless cardigans, peels an orange for Tatiana, bouncing her on her knee. She likes the girl and sometimes plays card games with her, talking in a mixture of German and English. Tatiana helps her repeat unfamiliar words, corrects her pronunciation and laughs when the Polish woman shouts ‘Schnapps!’ every time she wins a game.

There are baths and the cleaning of the bath. Shopping and the carrying of shopping back home. Meals and the preparation of meals, washing up and putting away. The keeping of the fire going, the sweeping of the floor, the washing down of the plastic tablecloth, the pouring of oil into the central-heating system, the rinsing of clothes, the reading of books, the changing into walking boots. The quiet times of people alone, thinking, sleeping, peeling apples, gutting fish. There is the watching of children’s games and there is the playing of adult games. It is as if they have been marooned on an island, surrounded by the melancholy of frozen flat fields. Thin silver trees shiver in the wind. The postbox rusting next to the gate is always empty and the blue-green cedars that line the drive have no smell. This is the tamed wilderness that surrounds them, unlike the sea where all that is unknown lurks beneath the calm surface. There is, however, an escape route. A small road joins a bigger road that leads to the port. But no

one wants to escape. The tourists play ping-pong in the attic upstairs, tournaments in combinations that are slightly flirtatious. Wilhelm says to Mary every time she loses a game, 'Danke, danke schön.' The Algerian and the Parisian, swift, quick on their toes, score tricky points, watched by the American, whose perfume smells of milk and musk, the top of her stockings just visible as she lazily bends down to pick up an errant ball.

In this house, a tragedy occurred. The owners, a Spanish couple, sad at being childless for too long, adopted a baby girl from Mexico. They went to collect her when she was three weeks old and brought her back to Northern France. For six months the baby just lay on her back, black eyes staring at the ceiling. They thought it strange she was so still and silent but reckoned the long days of leaden sky and sleet in the winter months were a shock after the warmth of Mexico. When they discovered the baby girl they had searched so hard to find was brain-damaged, they hid all her picture books and tried to forget the plans they had made for her future. The baby seemed to watch them, never shutting her eyes, kicking her brown legs. One month later they paid for her to spend the rest of her life in a children's hospital in Paris, and then fled, distraught and guilty, back to Spain. So in the attic on the other side of the ping-pong table, something is covered in a brown blanket. A rocking horse with a real horse-hair mane, polished leather saddle and gleaming silver stirrups. In the small bedroom downstairs, white carved doves hang from nylon threads tied to the ceiling. A small wooden cot, like an empty coffin, stands beneath the birds. And now Pinar, the owner of the house, is pregnant – a miracle, she says to her husband, a miracle after being barren for so long, placing his hands on her huge belly so he can feel the child turn over. Sometimes she telephones the château, lying on her king-sized bed with its mosquito nets and pile of lavender pillows, concerned that everything is in order for her guests. Mary answers the phone and confesses shyly that she has forgotten her hostess's name.

‘Pinar,’ the English man whispers to her, and Mary says,
‘It’s Pinar, isn’t it? Everything is fine here.’

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Mary wades into the sea in her red woollen tights, hitching up her dress. She walks up to her ankles and then continues until the icy water laps around her waist and she can feel the weight of her clothes pulling her down. The English man, kneeling on the beach, shells in his lap, shouts out to her. She can feel the salt water touch her breasts through her thick cardigan. He shouts out to her again and the shells fall on to the sand. She has her back to him and hears his voice cracking against the wind. When the water touches her chin, she swims back to him fully clothed. A wave rushes over her head and he grabs at her wrists as she struggles to free herself, gasping from the many waves now pulling her back to sea. When he has dragged her twenty yards away from the white froth on the shore, she dips her hands into a puddle of water and wipes the salt off her face.

‘That is a sewage pump.’ They look at each other in silence and then he says, ‘God placed two doors to hell by the gateway of a sewer. I don’t know where I remember that from.’ He picks up the shells that fell from his lap when he dragged her out of the sea.

‘That’s a fossil,’ she says, disturbed to find she is weeping and cannot stop. They walk to a café. Every now and again she wrings out her clothes. He looks at her with fear in his eyes. ‘I love you,’ he says. ‘No you don’t,’ she replies. ‘You just wish you did.’

There are two questions he has not asked me, the weeping English woman thinks as she walks by his side. The first is, ‘Why did you swim in the icy winter sea with all your clothes on?’ He, the English man, is godfather to one of the little girls, Claudine. Every morning he makes her mushrooms on toast. She loves him. The morning he arrived, Claudine walked out into the grounds of the château and brought him one single

mushroom she had picked, wrapped in a green leaf. She held it out to him while he laughed and kissed her and started to cook for her the many mushrooms he had bought at the market earlier on.

A little patch of eczema streaks across his left eyebrow. The second question he has not asked her is, 'Do you love me?' Perhaps he does not want to know. He never asks and she never explains.

They drink coffee in the deserted seaside café and she is shivering, watched curiously by the woman behind the counter. Mary shuts her eyes and the sound of the sea pounds through her head.

and the moon is green cheese

and the moon

and the moon

and the moon is green cheese

An eerie tin-man voice from inside a computer game breaks the silence. When they look up they see an acned heavy-metal fan playing with his toy, laughing at them from the next table.

'We are very English, aren't we? We love apples and roses from the garden. And muffins and honey. We like the rain. We like green pea soup and sofas and cardigans.' She shrugs, shivering and sad. 'I love you to my detriment.' His voice is suddenly throaty and harsh. 'You want to hurt everything that loves you. It's sick. It's boring. Go away. Don't come back.' He pays and they leave the café, running in the rain to the car. He drives and she shivers, all the time looking at the emerald eyes of the snake key-ring in the ignition.

'Do I know Pinar?' she asks him.

'Yes. She came to the house a couple of times.'

'Which house?'

'My house in London.'

‘Did I meet her?’

‘I think you did.’

‘Why don’t I remember her?’

‘You forget things,’ he says, putting his foot down. She finds herself thinking about the thirteen eggs the American woman bought in the market two weeks ago. They are beginning to smell.

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The Inspector's cheeks are a little too flushed as he sips his fifth glass of burgundy. Luciana lethargically peels the shell off a pale prawn, one of many heaped on her plate.

'I am a meat man,' he says, patting his thickening stomach. Blanc has just eaten a large, bloody steak and is waiting for the waiter to bring the cheese.

'This is the land of seafood, cider, cheese and Calvados.' He waves his hand as if to capture the whole of Normandy. 'You have seen our orchards?' She nods and once again, as ever in her company, he can almost swear the strange blue of her eyes is unreal. Her gaze comes to him coloured by contact lenses, perhaps black, pressed over her pupils like small flying saucers.

'Yes, I have all this,' he says again as the cheese arrives and he cuts her a slice of creamy Camembert.

'But you speak as if you lack something, Inspector?' She leans forward to play with the cheese, chasing it across the plate before putting it into her mouth. He shrugs.

'The only thing I lack, Madame, is a solution to this case. I want to close my files and take my vacation.' She nods, brushing the crumbs off her white shirt, which seems to be made from a web of fragile and revealing straps. A strange garment to wear in winter, he muses as he lights a cigar and changes the subject.

'The English man. Did he love her?'

'Oh yes. If anything it was she who was indifferent.'

He thinks this over, rolling the cigar between his finger and thumb, knowing that the Italian woman is watching his hands.

'Indifferent? Is that right? Was he angry with her, then?'

‘Angry?’

‘Of course. Wouldn’t you be if your love was not reciprocated?’

‘I am not interested.’ She looks down at her plate and plays with the Camembert again.

‘Angry,’ he persists. ‘Like your daughter.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘I have not asked you,’ he risks, ‘whether you work?’

‘I am too rich to work.’ She relaxes now. ‘My husband is a good bank. He does not charge me interest.’

‘He just gives you children.’ The Inspector smiles at her.

‘Yes.’ She strokes her taut, flat stomach and seems to enjoy his curiosity. ‘My husband and I like to holiday in Vienna. Wilhelm enjoys the small pancakes and chocolate torte. There are no children to be seen in Vienna. That is what I enjoy.’

Blanc thinks about this for a while. ‘But Goethe, Schumann and Kafka – they were children once?’ She nods, and he notes that her face is devoid of expression marks. No wrinkles, no circles under her eyes, no furrows on her forehead.

‘I look forward to the next generation,’ she holds a prawn delicately between her fingers, ‘because they will be robots.’

The burgundy has made him braver. ‘You are a housewife?’

‘There are days,’ she says, ‘when I stare into the carpet. We have a lot of carpet in our house in Frankfurt because it is very big. I imported it from Rome. It is blue, the blue of the Mediterranean.’ She stops, as if to measure the effect of her words on the provincial Detective Inspector. ‘There are days,’ she repeats, ‘when I do nothing but stare into the carpet. There are places, near the television set for example, where the blue deepens and I am sucked, abducted, into its dark centre. I am an alien in my own home, floating through the hyperspace of one hundred per cent wool.’

‘You are daydreaming?’

‘Of course.’ She sips her Perrier. ‘Unless you think I am mad?’

Blanc feels he has made a fool of himself. Who is she, this mocking Madame Bovary, staring all day at her carpets? This Italian suburban supermodel, catwalking the white surgical aisles of hypermarkets in Frankfurt. Claspings soap powder and pâté to her beautiful breasts as if they were Oscars.

‘We were talking about the English man and his girlfriend. What makes you think he loved her?’

‘He was attentive.’

Blanc smiles bitterly.

‘All of us can imitate love, don’t you agree?’

She runs her fingers through her hair and leans back in her chair, looking up at the crowded lunchtime restaurant.

‘Love seems to be your speciality, Inspector?’

‘Not at all,’ he sighs.

‘Are you married?’

The Inspector changes the subject. ‘It is motive that I am after. It is not enough to feel love. More important is how we express love.’

He follows her gaze. It takes him to the first table by the door where a young, good-looking man with glossed slicked-back hair sits alone reading a newspaper. He has not taken off his heavy black and white checked winter overcoat despite the freakish heat of the wintry midday sun, and his bowl of soup is untouched.

‘Can I give you a lift home, Madame?’ He gestures to the waiter for the bill.

‘No thank you. My husband will pick me up later.’

Blanc nods, takes a thick wad of bank notes out of his pocket and, without counting, throws the lot carelessly on to the white tablecloth.

‘You are a generous man.’ She smiles at him as he helps her put on her jacket, standing behind the divine woman as she slides her slender arms into the silk-lined sleeves. He notes that the man has put down his newspaper, lunch still untouched, and pays the bewildered waiter who is asking him if there is anything wrong with the food.

‘Thank you for lunch, Inspector.’ Luciana walks a little too fast for him. ‘I hope I have been of some use to you.’ He takes her hand and kisses her wrist. ‘It was my pleasure,’ he replies and, with a military nod of his head, walks painfully to his car.

‘Were you ever in the army, Inspector?’ she shouts after him.

‘An officer in Algiers, Madame.’ Fumbling for his indigestion pills, one hand on the wheel, the other searching in his jacket pocket, he thinks about the man she is waiting for. He is not going to sell the superfrau a carpet, that’s for sure. Inspector Blanc radios a message to his colleague and leans his head against the window. An image of the lovely woman listening to Judy Garland in the splendour of her Frankfurt home, a circle of cucumber over each eye, presents itself to him. The brisk voice snarling from his radio startles him.

‘Yes, we can see her, Inspector. She is talking to Professor Horse.’

‘Is she now?’ The Inspector feigns surprise. It is not like Horse to leave his food untouched. Nor is it characteristic of him to wear a heavy overcoat inside a restaurant. It looked more like a black and white checked blanket anyway. Perhaps the stallion is losing his highly tuned sense of style? Blanc always enjoys a canter with Horse. The next time they meet he resolves to fill his pockets with plenty of sugar lumps.

Tatiana brings her father five large cabbages from the garden.

‘Look!’ she shrieks, and father and daughter part the leaves to discover they are crawling with maggots. ‘Never mind.’ Wilhelm squelches one of the slimy creatures between his fingers. ‘No one will know. Get me the tomatoes from the fridge.’ She does what she is told, holding her nose as she opens the fridge door. ‘It stinks!’ she shouts, just as the French man walks into the kitchen with a basketful of oysters. He looks at Tatiana with disgust as she pretends to vomit over her shiny new patent leather shoes. Wilhelm glances at the thirteen eggs as yet untouched by anyone in the house and tells her to shut the fridge door. ‘These are good.’ Philippe expertly examines the oyster shells. ‘I bought them in Dieppe this morning.’ He watches Wilhelm boil the leaves and the maggots alive, salvaging what is least bitten. ‘The Germans like to turn the kitchen into a laboratory,’ he says. Wilhelm detects a small sneer on the French man’s face. ‘I suppose you are going to tell me I am a Nazi next?’ He holds up a dead boiled maggot between his fingers. ‘You see how small my hands are? My mother wanted me to be a surgeon.’

The oysters lie heaped on two silver platters, one at each end of the table. Nancy, her mousy blonde hair arranged in a neat plait, sits next to the English woman. She pours lemon juice on to her oyster and prods it with a little fork. ‘Why don’t you eat any?’ she asks Mary.

‘Because I don’t like them.’

‘Ah.’ The American slides it down her throat. ‘Try one. Look, you prod here, and if they are fresh they move.’

‘No thanks.’

The American eats another and her eyes shine. ‘You know, eating oysters is like oral sex.’ Lemon juice runs down her

chin.

‘Oh,’ the English woman replies, watching the oyster shrink from the steel prong of the fork. Everyone applauds when Wilhelm brings the stuffed cabbage to the table.

In the next room Claudine and Tatiana are dissecting a plastic monster in the dark. They split the middle of its belly and slide their hands inside. Green slime glows on their fingers as they remove the organs from the centre of the beast. Tatiana whispers and points, ‘That is the brain, that is the heart, that is the liver and those are the ovaries so it must be a woman.’

Monika pokes her finger through one of the holes in the cabbage leaf. ‘To be in love is to be bitten,’ she suggests in her hard, sarcastic voice. By candlelight the amber heart she wears on a chain around her neck looks like a cancerous birth mark. Jilted lover. Betrayed, grown fat, she sleeps in the coldest room in the house under a pile of heavy blankets. ‘Claudine, come and eat!’ the American shouts to her daughter. Tonight she wears a blue velvet dress making her blue eyes more lustrous than ever. ‘Non. Non. Non,’ Claudine shouts and her father shrugs. ‘Leave her.’ Luciana wipes her lips with a napkin. She wears a tiger’s eye ring on her long finger and pours more rosé into Monika’s glass. ‘That rosé is industrial,’ Philippe says, looking at the label on the bottle. ‘Never mind.’ Luciana smiles at him. ‘Monika likes it.’ Monika tucks a greasy curl behind her ear. ‘You have a child in Poland?’ The Polish woman nods, devouring her cabbage.

The American raises her finely plucked eyebrows.

‘Really? Is that so?’

‘Perhaps,’ the English woman suggests to the American, who has just lit a Camel Light and stares curiously at the Polish woman. ‘Perhaps she does not want to talk about it.’ Something glitters in Luciana’s golden hair. An invisible silken web, a kind of hairnet studded with small rhinestones. Now she spoons some cream on to the Polish woman’s lemon

tart. 'I don't mind talking,' Monika shrugs as Tatiana runs into the room, her hands covered in green slime.

'If you have just finished heart surgery,' Luciana reprimands her daughter, 'you should wash your hands before you eat.'

Wilhelm ruffles the girl's hair. 'It is not normal for children to be clean all the time.' Tatiana climbs into Monika's lap and bursts into tears. 'Don't cry, we're having a party.' Monika wipes the slime off the girl's hands with her napkin and feeds her spoonfuls of lemon tart. Luciana brushes imaginary crumbs off her black linen lap.

'In Gdansk,' Monika begins, 'I worked in the shipyard. Every day I had to climb into a huge cylinder, very dark and deep, and clean it. There were steel stairs to climb down and up again, but it was still very dark and sometimes my lamp would go out. I was not happy but this is normal. It is normal to be unhappy.'

Wilhelm pours the coffee while Luciana spoons sugar into Monika's cup. 'Three, four?' She smiles at the Polish woman who, charmed, nods even when Luciana opens her weird eyes wide and whispers, 'Six, seven, perhaps eight sugars, Monika?' The English woman interrupts. 'It is not normal to be unhappy,' she insists, watching Ben disappear into the kitchen. 'Chocolate biscuits,' he says cheerily when he returns, holding up the packet. Only Tatiana takes one.

'Stick your biscuits up your arse.' The English woman throws her napkin down and leaves the table.

'She's gone to look at the rocking horse.' Tatiana gleefully sucks the chocolate off her biscuit.

'Exciting.' Monika is a little drunk.

'I told you I cleaned the cylinders in the shipyard?' Everyone nods, including Claudine who has now crept into the room, the ribbons of her ballet shoes trailing on the floor. 'One morning I put on my overalls and climbed down there with my

bucket and brush. I cleaned for about ten minutes and then my lamp went out. It was pitch black and I could not see anything. Someone grabbed hold of me. I screamed but of course no one can hear, it is very deep there, maybe thirty foot. This person held my arms behind my back. When he pulled up my dress and overalls I knew it was a man. He raped me.'

Tatiana reaches for another biscuit. 'So I became pregnant,' Monika says in a matter-of-fact voice. 'My grandmother said I must go and tell the manager of the shipyard what had happened. She came with me and there was a big meeting. It was decided that because none of the workers would own up, the whole shipyard was to be the child's father. Every man who worked there had to pay out of his wages towards clothes and food for the rest of its life. My child is called the Gdansk Baby because she has thousands of fathers.'

Luciana yawns, adjusting her invisible hairnet. A galaxy of turquoise rhinestones shimmers above her golden head.

'Goodnight!' She waves her hand vaguely in the direction of the dinner table and walks out of the room. Tatiana plays with the amber heart that rests malevolently between the Polish woman's large breasts.

'Do you like your baby?' she whispers.

'No. I do not like her. I did not choose to have a child.'

The American, who smells of velvet and vanilla candy, turns to Yasmina, suddenly morose. 'You must tell me more about my mother.' Her blue eyes fill with drunken tears that trickle prettily down her cheek.

'Do you know Nancy's mother?' The English man scratches his elbow and then immediately takes his hands away from the rash creeping into his arm. Philippe feels sorry for him. What is wrong with the maudlin English woman? Scorning his oysters and then humiliating her boyfriend in front of them all.

‘Chérie, don’t cry.’ He puts an arm protectively around his wife. The Algerian woman points to the globe. ‘When it turns to North Africa I will tell you about your mother,’ she promises, thinking that it is not his wife the French man needs to protect from his own anger but the sullen English woman.

Everyone goes to bed except Wilhelm. He takes his brandy and sits near the fire thinking about the three large condominiums that are to be built next year in California. He has to arrange for twelve Elite models to be flown to L.A. so he can be photographed with them. They will wear the briefest of bikinis and he will wear a suit. The eternal fat old kraut, he muses, perspiring and bald, grinning pathetically in the middle of this bouquet of whore princess flesh. Despising him and not one of them over twenty.

When Mary comes downstairs to get a glass of water, his slate-grey eyes take in her shabby blue dressing-gown and mousy hair flattened from sleep. ‘I am restructuring my debts,’ he says. She looks pale and vacant. He pours her a brandy, gesturing for her to sit with him by the fire. She is thin, he thinks, and probably bruises easily, that bony English type with freckles on her back. She drinks her brandy in one go, hunched into herself. He fills her glass again and lets his thoughts wander to the bar he could buy in a mall near the condominium. He would theme it, glamorise it, name it after those old Hollywood movies where men wore hats and women wore gloves and both of them wanted each other, dancing cheek to cheek in rooms full of potted palms. The globe moves across Hubli, Madras and Patna.

‘You were right, what you said at dinner,’ he says. ‘It is not normal to be unhappy.’ She looks bemused but when she speaks her voice is calm and detached.

‘What do you think the East and West Germans can teach each other?’

He laughs at her question, strangely aroused.

‘They can’t teach me anything. I don’t want to learn how to be a soldier or how to drive a Trabant. They have to learn our ways. They think they are always right. It’s not going to be easy for them.’ The well-fed German watches her scratch her mosquito bites. ‘You are an interesting woman,’ he says. ‘You are very private and very open at the same time.’ Unsettled by her silence, he continues.

‘The angrier you are the more the mosquitoes move in. That is because when you are angry your blood boils.’ Her distracted eyes settle on his fat tan face and then she stares at a calendar on the wall instead. Wilhelm is curious. She knows I am staring at her but she doesn’t care. This interests him. Eventually he says, ‘One morning I was walking in the mountains and a woman naked from the waist rode towards me on a horse. She stopped and said hello, her voice very deep. And then she rode away again. As I walked on, I saw a pair of women’s pants, hanging from a bush of thorns. It was erotic because it frightened me.’

The English woman nods.

‘Luciana,’ he says, ‘should make an exercise video. It would give her something to do and give her a private income. But she does not like exercise so that is no good.’ He wonders if she is naked under her dressing-gown.

‘What do you want to do with your life, Mary?’

‘I want to die.’

‘What for?’

‘My country.’ To his surprise, she guffaws.

‘Perhaps you think life is not interesting?’ He pours himself more brandy. ‘It is only electricity that is interesting.’ The ring on his finger, a thick band of gold, glitters by the light of the fire. ‘Ideas, money, the promise of sex, expression, taste, opinion,’ he spits the words out. ‘That is interesting.’

She shrugs.

‘The English are accomplished degenerates.’ Wilhelm runs his fat finger over his teeth.

‘Only aristocrats,’ she says, and seems startled to hear her own voice.

The fat man sighs. ‘Love is not interesting. It is hard work. Love is anguish.’

‘I’d like a kebab right now,’ she interrupts in her flat, guileless voice.

‘If I were to dress you,’ he brings his chair closer to hers, ‘you would be barefoot and I would shave off your hair.’

‘Why?’

‘So you would look like the victim you feel.’ He takes a sip of his brandy.

When Wilhelm sticks his tongue into Mary’s mouth she digs her nails into the back of his hands. And when he strokes her breasts under her dressing-gown with his swollen fingers, she pinches the folds of pink flesh at the back of his neck. Encouraged, he unbuttons her shabby dressing-gown and licks her stomach. She bites his shoulder through the navy cotton of his shirt. Real bites. Like he is meat. She wants him to hurt and bleed. She is repulsed by him and she wants him, electrifying her.

‘You are married,’ she whispers stupidly and the German pulls away from her, tugging at the band of gold on his finger.

‘Marriage?’ He points to the red welt where the ring was, running the cold metal down her stomach towards her thin pale thighs.

‘Papa.’

Tatiana peers at her father through the half-open door, trailing a blanket in her unwashed hand. She slowly walks to him, taking agonising fairy steps, journeying to her father across an infinity of carpet. He waits for her patiently and she

lets him wait, taking her time until at last she asks him to kiss her goodnight, which he does, his lips wet from the kiss before.

‘Take me to bed,’ she commands in a mock-sleepy voice. Her father strokes her tangled hair, whispering comforting things to her as he picks her up in his arms, engrossed with her, adoring her, and carries her out of the room, a proud groom and his yawning girl bride.

Mary, abandoned, does up the buttons of her childish blue dressing-gown and stares at the pile of white ashes where the fire once was.

There is an unspoken conspiracy of silence about the thirteen rotting eggs in the fridge. Even the children no longer joke about the smell in the kitchen. Everyone opens the fridge to get cheese or ham or milk and holds their breath. Outside, Biddy Ba Ba's stomach drags against the gravel on the drive as he cries out in terrible secret pain at the odourless cedars and mud fields beyond.

When the telephone rings and Philippe runs towards it, the English man stops him. 'I'll take this call.' The French man notices the authority in his voice and, in contrast, the violent skin disease on the back of his hands. 'Marat,' he jokes, but Ben has already turned his back on him.

'Pinar?'

'The baby is growing too quickly,' Pinar moans. 'My belly is huge, I can hardly walk. I'm listening to Mozart. What sort of person will my child turn out to be? I can hear Tatiana and Claudine playing near you ... let me listen ... where are they?'

'In the TV room.'

have you seen the red girl – clap clap

in her red skirt – clap clap

tomorrow she will go to the priest – clap clap

wakes up with a baby – clap clap

he doesn't want to eat – clap clap clap clap

'How is everything? My breasts hurt. I sleep on my side now. We are so happy. This is what I have prayed for. Lit candles in church for. Do you mind me talking all the time?'

'No.'

‘I eat ice-cream every day for the calcium. It’s due any day now. I’m tired all the time. My skin is good but I’m afraid of my hair falling out. What if there’s something wrong with the child? But they’ve done all the scans and it all seems okay. Is the central heating working?’

‘Everything is perfect.’

‘Do you play music, all of you?’

‘Yes, we play every day.’

‘I wish I could be with you. I eat too much meat and can’t have enough avocados. Do you think it will harm the child to drink a little red wine?’

‘No.’

‘Are you using the dishwasher?’

The English man suddenly drops the telephone and cries out. A large white rat scuttles over his shoes and runs across the room.

‘Ben, where are you? What’s happening?’

The rat’s thick tail thuds against the floor in a panic. The English man picks up an empty wine bottle and tiptoes towards it.

‘Where are you? What’s happening, Ben? Is something wrong?’

Biddy Ba Ba sits tangled in the satin ribbons of Claudine’s ballet shoes, growling as the English man moves a chair and takes a swipe at the rat. When he knocks it against the wall, a yellow frothy liquid spills from its mouth and the English man smashes the bottle over its head. The glass breaks. Ben and Philippe, shocked, watch the white beast throw its bloody body at the wall, refusing to die. Ben picks up another bottle and hits out with all his strength one last time. It shudders and yelps, a high-pitched desperate cry. This time the English man cracks its skull beneath his boot.

‘Pinar? It’s okay. It was just a rat. I’ll call you later.’

He puts the telephone down and he is shaking. They stare at the blood and fur. ‘I had a dream of death.’ The English man is short of breath. ‘I saw a blue tunnel of light, very dark blue in the centre. It was not frightening. It came towards me but it was not frightening.’

Philippe starts to clear up the rat.

‘I dreamt she was tearing my hair out like leaves,’ Ben says.

The French man is crouched down by the rat, trying to wrap it in newspaper. ‘Who was tearing out your hair?’

‘Mary.’

‘It is so big.’ Philippe shakes his head. The corpse’s feet hang over the sides of the newspaper.

‘I want to make love to her but she won’t let me.’ The English man scratches his cheek.

‘Is she a cold woman?’ Philippe puts the bloody bundle into the dustbin, but it won’t quite fit. Its tail sticks macabrely out of the garbage and the two men have to push it down, groaning and shaking their heads.

‘When I touch her she stiffens until I let go.’

They prepare a bowl of soapy water to clean up the blood on the skirting-board.

‘Why don’t you kill her?’ Philippe leans against the wall and lights a cigarette.

‘I would like to sometimes.’ Ben stares at the pool of vomit the rat threw out of its mouth.

‘But who knows? We might grow old together and drink Darjeeling in the garden.’

what’s the meaning of life – clap clap

asked the butcher’s big fat wife – clap

a round of white and a fat pork slice – clap clap
chops and steak and roast lamb twice – clap clap
clap

Claudine and Tatiana lie on their stomachs in the TV room. Tatiana is reading to Claudine from the faded yellow pages of an old exercise book, all the while keeping a nervous eye on the door.

‘It’s all right,’ the younger girl whispers. ‘They’re killing the rat.’

Tatiana squints at the page. ‘Who is she?’

‘My grandmother.’ Claudine reaches for the book.

Tatiana possessively moves the battered diary away from the grasping fingers of the princess girl. Today it is her turn to wear the paper crown and she wears it with pride on her gleaming yellow hair. Tatiana wants to keep the diary for ever and read it at her own leisure and in absolute privacy. Like Claudine, she knows this book is forbidden to her. The thought sends small electric shocks through her fingers as she turns the pages.

‘Tangier 1956. I say: Hey Jim, just want to connect you up to a few things. I don’t trust you. I don’t respect you. I guess we should split. He says, Jane, you’ve been so moody these past six weeks, I don’t think I want to live with you. Right now, Jim, I feel like I can’t sit in the same room as you, never mind share a pillow. When you don’t feel it in your body, well, you don’t feel it.’

Claudine also wants the diary for her own. Despite her fear at being caught stealing her mother’s possessions, she plays greedily with the letters and labels that fall from between the pages: an old postcard of a group of women in red headdresses adorned with silver and amber jewels, men in blue robes sitting on white mehari camels, advertisements for Texaco gasoline, faded cards with the telephone numbers of embassies, airports, hospitals and *gendarmeries* printed in bold

colours. Claudine holds on tight to her stolen booty; while Tatiana reads in a low whisper, she moves closer so their heads touch.

‘Tangier 1956. Jim says: Nothing in the world can hurt me as much as you. Suicide is rage, Jane.

‘Thing is, if you want to die you want to die. I don’t see the point of being brave and pretending to look forward to the future. Not all of us want to work at not being sad. Not all of us want to wring life for every experience it will give us. Some of us don’t want to be conscious anymore. Consciousness is a curse. Listen, some of us are too clever to pretend to raise our pathetic glasses of champagne to a long life and universal joy and all that shit. Some of us don’t want to accumulate knowledge and understanding in the hope that what is called the human spirit will make it all worthwhile. Some of us are just not up to all the things that being alive brings to your doorstep. Why should I pretend that they are part of complexity and make life interesting? No. I don’t want another long sad day.’

Tatiana cups her hand over Claudine’s ear. ‘She shot herself.’

‘I knew she was going to.’

The older girl makes her voice sound blasé and bored. ‘This next bit is only about a cat.’

‘Read it to me,’ Claudine commands. ‘She’s my grandmother.’

‘Oh boy! We got a new kitten. But Jim gives her chicken bones and I get scared for it. We had a kitten that once choked to death on chicken bones. Jim works all day but he can’t pay the rent with physics. Every equation he works on ends in zero anyhow. He doesn’t care. Sometimes I think I should work out who owes me what for the odd article and story and move out with the kids. But hell’s bells. What a waste of the little we’ve made together and all we’ve been through. A waste of all the fights and tears and making up. Sometimes I just can’t believe

I'm a mother. I feel more like Marilyn – y'know, all tits and lips – biting her diamond earrings. Eating diamonds for the camera! It is not that thought that makes me think I'm her. It's her lonesome eyes. Yeah. I'm always on painkillers like her, eating happy pills and smiling sweet. One day a sheriff and his dep will have to search the outback for me.'

'If your father comes in pretend to be asleep,' Tatiana whispers, strangely excited by the violent way her friend chews her lips as she listens to her grandmother's morbid words.

'Tangier 1957. I got a new nail varnish: tremendous pearl lustre to lift the heart. Also a new yellow silk blouse, the colour of lemons. Guess I want someone to squeeze me hard! Husband Jim and Wife Jane, that's me, talked last night about the possibility of separation. This has resulted in some queasiness on both our parts. We look at each other in a new cruel way; cool and judgmental when we used to have a warm eye. Leonora is staying with us for a while. I washed her long red hair for her this morning and we talked – the hours flew by and I was happy. I'd forgotten what that feels like. As ever, I'm always mighty cheered by thinking people – whatever meaning they've made for themselves.

'What a catalogue of snot, tears and misery. Let me change the tone and lighten things up. I like the small wooden desk I write on. I like my blue sleeveless summer dress and silver pots of mint tea. I like hammering the keys of the typewriter and then stopping for a long time, running my hands over the soft blonde hair on my shins, listening out for Nancy and Sam, little sweethearts, all cosied up in their bunkbeds for a siesta. I like Jim kissing me at the end of the day and us drinking beer and cooking supper together, and I like walking hand in hand through the souks. And I like the unfiltered cigarettes I smoke too many of. Yesterday I cut up a cigarette pack into ten little squares, and I wrote my name and address on every one of them, and I couldn't figure out why. Now I know. Should something happen to me, I want people to know where my

kids are. I want them to look after Sam and Nancy while the cleaning-woman mops up my guts from the blue and white tiles in the kitchen.'

'Give me the book.' Claudine nudges Tatiana's arm in a panic as she hears her father making his way to the TV room. When Philippe opens the door, he finds the two girls in a deep sleep, curled on their sides, the TV flickering over their bare arms and shins. He walks over to his daughter and kisses her forehead, comforted by her presence after the bloody spectacle of the rat. When he strokes her hair, careful not to knock off the paper princess crown, the girl holds her breath, counting to twenty until her father, at last, tiptoes out of the room. 'I just want codeine and a margarita,' Tatiana drawls in a ruined broken whisper, stabbing a biro into her heart as she watches Claudine creep out of the room with the diary tucked under the white cotton of her dress. She knows exactly what the princess with her tiny feet is going to do. She is going to run up the stairs and slide the diary under her mother's underwear at the bottom of the black suitcase.

'Did you ever read my mother's stories?' Nancy asks the Algerian as they watch the women of Rouen, in their high heels and golden crucifixes, trail little dogs on leads around the square. 'She wrote one where a woman cooks her husband's dog after an argument.' The American throws back her head and laughs. 'I'm glad Claudine has boring parents like me and Philippe.' Both women are shopping for sea perch because guests of Monika's are coming to supper. When Philippe asked the Polish woman if she wanted him to make a lemon sauce for the fish, she said, 'They can eat shit.'

A potbellied performer in purple shorts, his long black hair tied back in a pony-tail, lies on a bed of nails, watched by a circle of children. He drinks a gallon of paraffin, torches his lips and blows out flames into the crowd. The American woman shouts out to him to light her cigarette and everyone laughs. They are sitting on a bench with bags of shopping on their laps. When Nancy smokes, she looks like an old-style

hostess at a dinner party, lively and alert, effortless easy company. She could be wearing a thin-strapped cocktail dress, glass of champagne held laconically in one hand, cigarette in the other, a Mississippi belle who made it to the metropolis to browse in bookshops and sip lazy coffees in cafés. She flicks through the copy of *Le Monde* on her lap, smoking and looking down the columns for gossip. ‘When I met Philippe he said come and live with me and I will build you a bathroom. It was a clever thing to say because as a child in Tangier we had no bathroom. After Mom died, Dad just got on with his science research while we took showers in the shed outside. Our fridge was run from a gas bottle and if we had to go in the night we’d all pee into a red bucket we kept in the bedroom.’

A huddle of children run into the circle to put money into the performer’s basket. When the little girls kiss his cheek he roars, ‘Merci, merci, chérie,’ and they run away as fast as they can, scared and giggling.

‘The first time Philippe and I slept together I was wearing a very smart suit, you know, a short skirt and jacket a friend had lent to me. It was black, kind of like a sexy widow, and I wore it with a pair of red high-heeled shoes. As we were going up the stairs to his apartment, Philippe said, “You are the wife I have dreamt about. She wears a suit like the one you are wearing.” I thought, Gee, but this isn’t even mine. Perhaps I should give him my friend’s telephone number! He had an order for things. First we had to drink pastis. Then we had to eat the chicken he had cooked and finish a bottle of wine. And then after he had blown out the candles on the table and cleared the plates we had to make love. “You are too structured for me,” I said. “You would want me to put spoons in the drawer in a certain way.” “That is what you must bring to me,” he insisted. “You must bring to me your way of doing things.” ’

The man stands up from his bed of nails and roars again. Waving a caveman club he walks out into the crowd, bashing them over the heads until they reach into their pockets and

give him more money. He prises a woman away from her partner and orders her to oil his pregnant tattooed stomach. When he gives her a dart and tells her to aim just above his belly button, she refuses, shaking her head with horror. 'Please, please,' he cajoles her. She shakes her head and grimaces. The caveman roars and threatens to cull her with the club until she reluctantly takes aim and the dart falls off his great greased belly. 'Kisses hurt more!' he shouts to the crowd.

'My father didn't care if we lived on sour milk for a week before the next cheque came in. His work was everything. An interesting life was everything. But Philippe does not just care about himself. First thing for him is to feed his wife and child. You know what I love most about Philippe? He's never worn a denim jacket covered in funky patches from San Francisco. He always looks smart. After Dad and what happened to Mom in Tangier, all that dope and expatriate life, it's kind of cool to have a guy who looks like any other when you walk down the road.'

Nancy opens a bag of nuts coated in sugar. After a while she says, 'Tell me about my mother, Yasmina.' The Algerian woman shakes her head. 'It will take too long.' Nancy's lustrous blue eyes fill instantly. 'When you are five years old it is very difficult to believe your mother is dead. She made me little mice out of radishes, you know, when she wasn't writing.'

Yasmina says, 'My mother died when I was five too.'

Nancy's mouth is full of sugared nuts. 'I'm sorry.'

Yasmina stares at the American.

'How is it,' she asks, 'that you never ask me about myself?'

The American blushes. 'I want to,' she replies quickly.

'How do you think I live?'

'Huh?'

‘Some of us don’t have husbands and children.’

‘Yeah, well, you teach. Don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘See, I do know. You teach history at a university in London.’

‘So,’ Yasmina assumes a tone of voice that is familiar to them both. ‘What do we already know about you?’

‘My mother’s name was Jane, my father’s name was Jim.’

‘Yes.’

‘Like a lot of beatnik Americans, they lived for a while in Tangier.’

‘Yes.’

‘My mother shot herself.’

‘Yes.’

Nancy never asks, ‘Why did my mother shoot herself?’ Instead, the American changes the mood. ‘Let’s go and have a beer.’

‘I don’t drink.’ Yasmina smiles. ‘You see, you know nothing about me.’

When Nancy does not reply, she says, ‘Who are these friends of Monika’s, then?’

‘The man she loved and his girlfriend.’ Nancy watches Yasmina walk towards the tattooed man, jingling coins in her hand. She drops them into the hat near his bed of nails.

They pick up their shopping and walk to the Hôtel-Dieu hospital where the eleven-year-old Flaubert, son of the chief surgeon, ran with his sister through the hospital wards.

Peering through the windows of the autopsy laboratory, the two women stare at a child-birth demonstrator, a giant female rag doll that lies in a heap on the marble slab. The American

woman does not want the Algerian to spill out the entire contents of her foreign head. She wants to fast-forward the narrative from her point of view and stop at a few selected scenes. But she is at the mercy of the stubborn story-teller, who seems to have declared a secret ‘all or nothing’ ultimatum. Nancy secretly knows and dreads that Yasmina will ruin her version of history for ever. Story-tellers, she muses, are just evangelists with dandruff on their shoulders. They should get drunk, tell a few anecdotes and then fall over.

‘This is Gustav.’ Monika’s Polish face is powdered into a paler version of herself. She looks like a Noh mask: black kohl eyes and lips the colour of a recent massacre. She has painted an expression that will hide her own, and presents herself to the assembled company as the star player in a drama they have been invited to participate in – though they do not know the story. These unwitting players will have to make up their lines as they go along.

Monika looks happy. Gustav holds her in his arms for slightly too long and then shakes hands with Philippe, Ben and Wilhelm. For the women, the bit parts in this scenario, he smiles and nods in a warm and chivalrous manner. He rolls their names across his tongue, ‘Luciana, Yasmina, Nancy, Mary,’ giving each a smoky inflection. ‘And this is Sylvia,’ Gustav gestures to the awkward bleached-blond eighteen-year-old standing at his side, a ruched leather jacket draped over her shoulder. ‘Sylvia,’ Monika announces, ‘is an astrologer.’ Everyone understands the plot. Sylvia will play the girlfriend, Monika will play the wronged lover, and Gustav the guilty philanderer. Nancy says, ‘I don’t want to know about the future. If I thought about my life everything would close down.’

MONIKA: This is Gustav. [*They embrace.*]

GUSTAV: And this is Sylvia.

MONIKA: Sylvia is an astrologer.

NANCY: I don't want to know about the future. If I thought about my life everything would close down.

'We've bought two apple tarts.' Sylvia points to the white box on the table tied with yellow ribbon. Monika's powdered face leans to the left in a thank-you gesture as she glides across the room towards a tray of wine glasses. 'The future is always melancholy because it is there our dreams are supposed to become reality,' Sylvia suggests to Nancy.

Monika interrupts.

'The porcelain teapot just near your elbow, Gustav.' Gustav removes his elbow, which is precariously near the sixteenth-century teapot, just in time. 'Look.' He waves his cigarette in the direction of the barn. Everyone murmurs at the sight of a hawk, hovering above the roof.

MONIKA: This is Gustav. [*They embrace.*]

GUSTAV: And this is Sylvia.

MONIKA: Sylvia is an astrologer.

NANCY: I don't want to know about the future. If I thought about my life everything would close down.

SYLVIA: We've bought two apple tarts. [*Monika distributes wine.*]

SYLVIA: [*To Nancy*] The future is always melancholy because it is there our dreams are supposed to become reality.

MONIKA: The porcelain teapot! Just by your elbow, Gustav.

GUSTAV: Look! [*They all look at a hawk circling the barn outside.*]

Monika needs another language. She is badly, fatally hurt. The apocalyptic, the inflammatory, the controversial and contradictory – Monika cannot afford them this evening. There is no love without rage, that is why the script is ridiculous. Love and Rage, the four-letter furnace that will torch the stage sofa and consume them all. Monika wants to destroy Gustav.

Gustav, to survive Monika's rage, has to have not nine but infinite lives. In the room next door, Tatiana and Claudine watch Terminator on the TV reassemble himself after multiple woundings.

'I so much want,' Gustav slides a forkful of sea perch into his mouth, 'for the young people of Poland to try out something of their own.' He looks across the table and finds Monika's eyes. 'Some things are worth suffering for.'

'Like what?' Monika watches Gustav smear a thick layer of butter on to his bread roll.

'Freedom.'

'Oh,' she says.

'I am sad particularly for the dead of Romania who did not live to see the future they shed blood for.'

Wilhelm looks across the table and finds Mary's eyes. He says, 'Now that socialism is dead, we have to live more experimentally.'

'Socialism is not dead,' Mary replies. 'As long as people are not equal, socialism is not dead.'

'We are all unequal all of the time,' Monika interrupts. 'Isn't that right, Sylvia?'

Sylvia tucks her blonde hair behind her ears. 'Enjoy the present and let the future take care of itself!'

'Sylvia's surname is Starr,' Monika explains to Luciana.

Gustav puts his hand protectively on Sylvia's thigh.

Monika wants to suck this sad night out of herself for ever.

Gustav and Monika walk in the dark towards the barn. 'I would really like to know.' He pauses, and she holds her breath. What is it the man she loves, but who no longer loves her, wants to know? That she wants to stab a screwdriver into his eyes? 'I would like to know what the recent events in Eastern Europe mean to you.' She is ashamed of how much

pain she is in at this moment. The amber heart she wears around her neck feels like a teenager's trinket. 'They mean we must seriously listen to people who are unhappy,' she says. When they come to the end of the path they stand uncomfortably by the barn door, looking out at the cedars. 'Communism was the last dream.' His voice is sad and flirtatious. 'Monika, do you think there is no past and no future, just capitalism?' She bends down in the dark, and gathers something up into her arms. Bidy Ba Ba cries into her breast.

'There is only revenge.'

The English man looks at his watch, puzzled. 'It's almost stopped.' Mary peers at his wrist. When she sees the violent red streaks of his rash, she takes some ice from her water and gently rubs it on the back of his hand. 'It's slowed right down,' she says. 'The hands are flickering.' Philippe looks over Ben's shoulder. 'Like that rat,' he jokes. 'Your watch is in its last death throes, like the feet of the rat.'

'What rat?' Nancy looks at the other women, confused.

'You were out enjoying yourself.' Philippe refills their glasses. 'Apart from Mary. She never enjoys herself.' Everyone smiles at Mary. She shrugs, wringing her hands as she continues her conversation with Monika who has just returned from her walk. Everyone wants to know about the rat, but Gustav stops them in a mock-commanding voice. 'Line up for a photo before I go. I bought a new camera today.' Luciana runs upstairs to get the lipstick all the women admire and demand they wear for the photo call. 'It is called Indian Mysore,' the Italian says wryly when she returns. 'It looks different on everyone.'

'I am partial to lipstick.' Gustav points his lens at her and clicks.

'I was not ready.' Luciana's voice is steely as she pulls her cashmere cardigan from the back of a chair and puts it on.

The image is instant. It whirs out of the camera and they all watch it develop in silence.

‘Here.’ He gives the photograph to the perfect flawless woman without looking at it, by way of apology. When everyone gathers around Luciana to admire it, Gustav clicks again.

The unloved look brave.

The unloved look heavier than the loved. Their eyes are sadder but their thoughts are clearer. They are not concerned with pleasing or affirming their loved one’s point of view.

The unloved look preoccupied.

The unloved look impatient.

Gustav and Sylvia walk to the car hand in hand, man and girl, he beeping his horn, she waving, waving and blowing kisses to Bidy Ba Ba who makes little noises in his throat as he watches them from the window.

6

‘Chéri chéri chéri chéri chéri chéri chéri chéri,’ the American woman moans from the room next door.

‘Say you respect me,’ she cries out. ‘Say it say it say it say it!’

They scream and then they murmur, the springs of the bed wheezing and she crying out long and loud while he whispers something and her voice, angry and desperate, replies, ‘Say you goddamn respect me.’

Monika lies alone under her pile of heavy blankets, naming every cake she wants to eat. Gugelhopf, Käsekuchen, Sachertorte, Apfelstrudel. She is thinking about the conversation she could have had with Gustav. When she was visiting friends in Moscow, she, like everyone else, waited in a queue that snaked around three blocks to taste a delicious piece of the West in the new McDonald’s. A double cheeseburger cost the equivalent of two hours’ pay: McDonald, the benovolent father feeding hamburgers to fifteen thousand people a day. Around the corner, embalmed in his tomb, Lenin the father who put black bread on the table – but not every day. Actors dressed as cartoon characters amused the people waiting in line, watched by a statue of Alexander Pushkin. An eighty-year-old disabled war veteran limped to the front of the line and showed his ID card which gave him priority in queues. When he was served his Big Mac he sat down, stared at it for half an hour, and then eventually ate it with a spoon. He told Monika how he had come from Sverdlovsk to Moscow for medical treatment, but at Pushkin Square saw the crowd and joined in. It was longer than the queue for Lenin’s tomb of course. In between mouthfuls he told her that in his view the communists in his country had been very cruel to their people. This did not mean that communism was bad, only that some people were cruel. She

could not tell this to Gustav because he had been very cruel to her. She would not be interested in what he had to say because she would identify him with cruel régimes. He had offered her a future and betrayed her.

How is it she can name cakes but not bridges built over great dams and estuaries? Why is it she is not thinking about the future of Poland but she is thinking about a Polish man who said, ‘A man does not love a woman if he cannot beat her’? Why is it she does not spend her days reading great works of art, but instead idles away the hours thinking about a new perfume she feels will change her life? There are fictions, technologies, geographies, and there is poetry. There is coherence, incoherence and exhilaration. There is attraction and playing it cool and there is attraction and abandon. There is love and there is ambivalence, but there is mostly ambivalence. And there is freedom. What do you do with freedom? This is a conversation she could have had with Gustav. There are so many conversations she could have had with Gustav. Instead she has them with herself. There is her grandmother in Warsaw, too shy to ask overseas visitors to bring toilet paper, and there is her uncle in America who calls the toilet the bathroom. And there is her child. Monika begins naming cakes again.

Mary tiptoes into the bedroom, her bare feet cold on the floorboards. She takes off her clothes.

‘Look,’ she says, and naked, turns a cartwheel.

‘That’s very good.’ The English man peers over the blankets. ‘Do it again.’

She lifts her hands above her head and turns two more perfect cartwheels.

‘Very good,’ he says again. ‘Do something else.’

She does a handstand.

‘Hmmm,’ he says.

She gets into bed. 'You are a very lucky man.'

'Why?'

'Only Swedish au pairs are supposed to do things like that.'

'Oh,' he says, smiling.

'Stroke me,' she whispers, breathless from the cartwheels.

Ben's raw red hands press into her stomach, and then slide down her thighs.

'I love you,' she says.

The English man reaches over and switches off the light.

Sleepless and lustless in her electronic nightworld, Luciana stares into the infinity of her computer screen. One hand on her sharp hip, the other on the keyboard, she disrobes an image of herself: a virgin Luciana whose innocence waits for a conqueror. She strokes her techno breasts and watches her virtual ribcage expand as her breathing heightens. Luciana reinvents herself over and over again on a piece of software. Now she wears a choker made from crab claws; a chain of red glass pierces the skin of her slender waist and tattoos her stomach with tiny glistening rosebuds of blood. Now she is half-beast, half-woman, eyes of aquamarine flicker in her crocodile head: she is beauty and the beast, the beast is beautiful and it is she. She is female president in the couture house of her dreams, a cyborg goddess dressed in zips that go nowhere, a bloodless Cleopatra swathed in mists of a marshmallow-pink chiffon. She owns the audio and visual interactive rights of her body: sex and love simulations will be sold only to the highest bidder. Already she can give herself to her husband, and not be there at all. 'I will be your playtoy and nothing else.' When he weeps she says, 'Do you want more players to interact with you? Do you want another environment?' She presses D for Dominatrix. E for Erotic simulation. F for Fellatio. N for Nurse (stockings and suspenders under her uniform), S for Spank me and W for Wonderland.

‘What new sexual adventure do you want me to design for you, Wilhelm?’

‘Put your arms around me and kiss me here.’ He points to his lips.

Luciana stifles a yawn. ‘What text do you want?’ Her voice is matter-of-fact like the voice on an ansamachine. ‘I want you to say,’ he bangs his fist into a pillow, ‘say I like you. Say I respect you. Say you enjoy my company.’ She smiles. ‘I can be more exciting than that.’ Her husband throws himself on to the bed and buries his face in a pillow so that when he speaks his voice is muffled. ‘Okay, Luciana. I hate you. I despise you.’ She nods. ‘What’s my text, Wilhelm?’ Her husband thumps the pillow into his face.

‘You moan, you enjoy it, your eyes are closed, your wrists are tied with red cord, you cry out for me, you cannot have enough of me, you come, I come, I untie you, we lie in each other’s arms and you admire my body.’ Luciana caresses the keyboard with her long fingers. ‘Sometimes it’s hard to get my eyes to close,’ she says. ‘I’m doing something wrong because technically it’s easy.’ And then she laughs and sings in mock-country and western Tammy Wynette-style, ‘Sometimes it’s hard to get my eyes to close.’ She does not lift her eyes from the screen.

‘I am a voyeur in my own marriage,’ Wilhelm says.

‘But I give my virtual flesh to your fat fingers,’ she replies, motionless in her charcoal silk lingerie, bought with his money. ‘It is four in the morning,’ she says after a while, closing one file and opening another. ‘Where have you been?’

‘Talking to the English woman,’ he says. ‘And then Tatiana woke up.’

‘I know.’

‘If you heard her wake, why didn’t you go to her?’

‘She wanted you,’ his wife replies in her cool no-nonsense voice.

‘I am designing a new interaction for you, Wilhelm. You can have multiple sex partners, how about that? You can fuck ten woman a night without destroying your mind and soul or taking off your trousers.’

‘I want you.’

‘You can have me.’

‘I want you for real.’

‘You can have close-up action and you can have passion,’ she mocks and he can hear the Italian in her accent. ‘It will be better for you when my technology improves. Soon you will wear gloves that allow you to experience the brush of fingertips and the sting of the whip. You will wear a membrane that simulates human skin over your genitals, and you can joyride to your heart’s content.’ When he does not reply she says, ‘Your fingers smell of sex.’

Her husband bows his head and walks to the bathroom, throwing his tie on the floor. Now she clicks into the nervous system of a zebra and becomes him, stamping her hooves in the dust, slapping flies off her steaming male flanks, looking out at the colourless world with her zebra eyes. She shakes her mane of black hair and walks to the pool of water nearby, lapping it up with her rough tongue. She is a divine thing. She is woman, man and beast, and she is insatiably thirsty.

‘Why are you crying?’

When Ben does not reply, Mary lies on her back in the dark and listens to Nancy and Philippe making love next door.

‘I thought you were crying for me,’ she says finally. ‘Why do you pretend to love me when you don’t?’ She can feel her voice gentle itself and she knows it is because she is asking him to tell her the truth. ‘You can keep secrets from me, but

you shouldn't keep them from yourself.' The English man inches his body away from hers and she pretends not to notice.

'Stop telling me what I feel.' He hides his hands under the lavender-scented pillow case.

'Chéri chéri chéri chéri chéri!' the American screams and the door of a wardrobe slams.

When Wilhelm climbs into bed, Luciana wakes up from her electronic dream, sweating. 'I need water,' she pleads, 'get me some water,' and he does, returning three, four, five times to refill the glass as she shivers and sweats. He feels her pulse and then, satisfied, tries to read the book wedged between the pink folds of his paunch.

It is always at this time of night he hears the Algerian woman shout out what sounds like RabRabRab in her sleep. The German sticks his fingers in his ears. He wants chocolate gâteaux. Girls in bikinis. Male companions to play golf with. He wants to drink beer in friendly taverns and he wants to crack jokes with friends after a good meal. RabRabRab. Wilhelm knows that she with the scars on her stomach and golden coins in her ears is in hell and curses her for not suffering quietly.

Rabah Rabah Rabah.

A gendarme pokes his baton into Yasmina's stomach, pushing her backwards. I saw you running, that's what you get for being so pretty. Why are you running so fast, little one? In the distance she can hear sirens and the shattering of glass. I saw you, the gendarme says again. He is a small man. Yes, he is a small man.

What is it that he saw? His breath smells of garlic and wine and he is alone, unsteady on his feet. She leans towards him. Yes. She takes the knife from his back pocket and clasps his hair in her hand. Her fists hit out at his baby face as she slides the knife across his throat. Rabah Rabah Rabah. She kicks the gendarme to the ground and she hears her mother's voice, hard

and wounded: You will pick up nail parings with your eyelids in the afterlife. Her brother Omar limps towards her, pointing to the medals he won fighting the Second World War for Europe. Nancy's mother, Jane, says, s'long as you got eyes, a tongue and a throat they'll have you in uniform – hey why do I get stuck inside myself and can't get out again? Just go under? Stuck there, stuck there, it's so goddamn humiliating.

Tatiana sighs and puts the pillow over her head. She is preparing a court case in which she fights for her rights in three languages. In the room next door Claudine sleeps a long untroubled sleep, clutching her teddy bear, the heart in its nylon paw tucked under her chin. Her golden eyelashes flutter against her cheek, which is still warm from the goodnight kisses of eight hours ago. Claudine is kissed into sleep every night. In the morning she wakes up happy and beautiful. Tonight, Bidy Ba Ba lies at the foot of her bed, growling at the blue mist outside.

When the Inspector puts the key into his front door he is annoyed to find himself feeling shy. The feeling persists as he watches Luciana's black-blue eyes drag around the floors and walls of his apartment. He hopes he has left no evidence of his private life for her to decipher – his slippers or digestive powders, for example. She sits down on the only armchair and snaps open her snakeskin handbag.

‘You smell like the sea, Madame.’

‘A woman in Frankfurt makes my perfume, Inspector.’ She allows him to light her cigarette and then pushes her wrist under his nose.

‘Sea Spray.’

‘She is God?’ the Inspector jokes, pulling the small wooden chair up next to her and loosening his top button.

‘She can make the ocean in seven days.’ The Italian woman traces the curve of her eyebrow with her long fingers and he watches her, preoccupied and admiring.

‘She makes my sea in a bottle and then I take her to drink apple wine.’

The Inspector watches her rummage in her bag and take out three polaroids.

‘But you do not like to eat?’ he says.

‘I have no appetite.’ She smiles, handing him the photographs.

‘You have only seen Mary as a corpse. I thought you might like to see her alive?’

Blanc peers at the photographs. Perhaps this flippant, morbid creature is mad, or just bored, with her laboratory

ocean scents and crystal pendant reflecting his face back to him every time she changes position on the chair.

‘You women are all wearing the same lipstick.’ He peers at the first photograph.

She says nothing, flicking the ash from her cigarette into the antique saucer his mother gave him as a wedding present.

‘Mary is stroking the English man’s hand,’ he observes with interest.

‘She loathed him,’ Luciana replies.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘I know so.’

‘I think they will go upstairs and make love.’ Blanc looks at the next photograph.

‘She didn’t like him to touch her.’

‘Yes. They will make love. The body does not lie,’ he asserts and then stares hard at the polaroid of the unsmiling Italian beauty.

‘Oh yes, it does!’ She laughs.

He stands up and offers her an aperitif.

‘If you mean, Madame, that you have designed your ears, nose, thighs and breasts with the assistance of the excellent Herr Baeur, that is a different thing altogether.’ Blanc does not raise his eyes.

‘You have done your homework, Inspector,’ she eventually says, and her voice is darker, softer.

‘Do you often travel in aeroplanes?’

She nods.

‘I have heard,’ the Inspector lowers his voice confidentially, ‘that silicone breasts explode in aeroplanes.’

‘But not mine.’ She uncrosses her black leather boots, searching for the buttons of her gossamer blouse. The Inspector sighs as she reveals her firm, gently tanned breasts.

‘Touch them,’ she says in her cool voice, with its strange Italian inflection.

Blanc leans towards her and strokes the dark erect nipple of her left breast.

‘Do you know that huge swarms of locusts are devouring crops in North Africa at this moment?’ She slips out of the crêpe folds of her skirt. His eyes take in the length of her thighs; she is a sleek unblemished superbreed, svelte, matte, a silvery statue standing on his well-hoovered brown carpet.

‘They are having to invent a new pesticide.’ She takes his hand and places it on her thigh and he, despite his better judgment, finds it moving over her perfection, exploring contour and form. She bends over and unbuttons his starched white shirt, her fingers searching under his spotless white vest for his armpits, which are sweating.

‘Why don’t we move into the next room?’ she suggests, and he stands up, dizzy with sea spray and the erotic radiance of this robot with breasts, this sculpture with a triangle of golden fur, this vision in unbuttoned silver gossamer, and leads her to his lonely bed, too curious to mind her seeing the glass of water, the small plate with its crust of Brie, the knife and fork neatly placed together, and his alarm clock, all of them arranged on the table next to the bed. He has no time to feel shamed by this evidence of his late-night lonesome snacks because she has pushed him lightly on to the bed and, straddled across his thickening stomach, presses her sex against his.

‘Take off your shirt,’ he whispers, but she shakes her head.

‘I never take off my shirt.’ Instead she takes off her pants, and unsmiling says, ‘Fuck me,’ searching for his penis which

is flaccid in her hand. 'Fuck me,' she says again and he turns away, muttering something into the nylon quilt of his bed.

'What did you say?' she asks bewildered. He mutters again.

'I can't hear you.'

'I said, can I put the knife inside you?'

She pauses, bewildered.

'What knife?'

He half-heartedly points to the plate on the side-table by the bed. Luciana picks up the knife, running her hands down the sharp jig-jags of the blade.

'Put the knife where?'

'Let me,' he begs.

The sight of the knife in her hand has excited him. The Inspector pushes against her, moaning and ashamed.

'Let me,' he murmurs again.

'No.'

'Let me.'

He is hard now, struggling with her as he reaches between her legs, one hand pressing against her throat. When the telephone rings she considers picking it up and asking for help.

'I'm sorry.' He eventually picks up the telephone and puts it straight down again, rubbing his chest, not catching her eye.

'I will have that aperitif.' She sleeks down her hair, and then searches for her packet of menthol cigarettes. The room smells of stormy ocean, of rock pools, gulls and salt-encrusted rocks.

'So, Inspector. Tell me what it was like being a young French officer in Algeria.'

'La torture?'

Blanc pours himself a whisky. This time it is he who sits in the armchair while she stands facing him, half-leaning against the door.

‘The French sent their sons to keep the tricolour flying in Algeria. In France we said “La guerre d’Algérie”. In Algeria they said “the revolution”. This grand-style colonial war, Madame, paid my wages, which I sent home to my mother. She understandably hoped for a long war.’

‘La torture,’ Luciana reminds him.

‘I am not frightened of the word. Sometimes there is no choice. Only people with something to hide are secretive, is that not so, Madame?’ When he sips his whisky she notices that his hands are shaking. ‘The application of psychological and physical pain makes people less secretive. It is however philosophically abhorrent. I’m sure you agree with me.’

‘But then, philosophers do not fight wars,’ Luciana replies. ‘They write about them.’

‘Quite so.’ Blanc refills his glass. ‘I strung up naked Algerians by their feet and plunged their heads into a bucket of water. Later on I improvised a little and placed a spiked steel trestle table underneath the suspect. A little push in the right direction and he would swing past the table, grazing his genitals on the spikes.’

The Italian finds herself staring at a portrait of a middle-aged woman hanging on the wall. Why is it interesting, this amateur attempt in oil paint? The woman looks mild enough in her blue cardigan and pearls. Her features are composed but her eyes are distracted as they stare out at the brown velveteen sofa. Even her hand, which lightly touches the pearl necklace, looks as if it has suddenly been flung up in alarm.

Luciana walks to the table and puts down her glass.

‘It is not good for a young man to hear the screams of the tortured,’ Blanc continues, casually picking up the polaroids on the table and holding them close to his eyes. ‘We would

shout “Vive la France! Vive la France!” over their cries until it was over.’ He bows his head. ‘In some ways you could say it is my wife who has suffered the most for France.’

The Inspector wipes his eyes on the sleeve of his towelling robe and stares morosely at the portrait on his wall. He stares at his bare feet.

‘If you find her, tell her I don’t like to sleep alone.’

The Italian woman nods, pushing open the door with her thin shoulders.

‘Two things,’ he calls out to her. ‘The photographs. Can I keep them?’

‘If they help your enquiry.’

‘Oh, they do.’ The whisky has deepened his voice. ‘You see, although I have seen most of your body, I have not seen you here.’ He holds up one of the polaroids.

‘There appear to be ants crawling up your arms, Madame. In fact they are track marks.’ He smiles. ‘I have met a few junkies in my time but none as beautiful as you.’

My father's a policeman – clap clap

my brother's a cowboy – clap clap

my uncle's a judge – clap clap

Claudine and Tatiana pretend to stab each other with a pair of scissors.

The Algerian says to the Polish woman, 'Think of an emotion and then hide it. I must see all this in your face and try to guess what it is you are hiding.' The children watch her. Tatiana's lips set into an exact copy of the expression on Monika's face.

'Is it anger?' Yasmina asks.

'No. I am feeling love. I am feeling love and I am hiding it.'

'So.' Yasmina looks down at the cloth Monika is embroidering. 'You look like you are angry with someone when you really love them?'

I'm a pig with a tail like a corkscrew – clap clap.

'Luciana!' Wilhelm yells from the kitchen, where he is pricking coils of bulging beef sausage for the evening meal. 'Telephone.'

The pleats of Luciana's black crêpe skirt dip and swirl as she makes her way to the corridor.

'It must be her perfumier. Urgent business,' Wilhelm pants, stabbing the meat with relish.

'We should all play Murder in the Dark one night,' the English man suggests, unpacking his accordion. Monika, who has been murdering in the dark all night, changes the subject. 'You must think of an object and I will try and guess what it is just from

the expression on your face.’ The Algerian chooses a walnut, the English woman a snowstorm in a bottle and the American a tiara. Monika studies Nancy’s face. ‘It is something hard,’ she says. ‘Something that shines, like stainless steel.’ Philippe cracks a real walnut, cupping it in his hand and squeezing hard. He gives the nut to Yasmina, the imaginary walnut still in her head for Monika to receive. To confuse her she dips the real one into her glass of milk.

The English man plays his accordion and sings, ‘I got a brand neeeew pair of shoes.’ Nancy sings in harmony with him. She stops. ‘I got a new line.’ She takes a breath and hums, ‘I capture your curls on my pillow.’

‘It’s a terrible line.’ The English woman laughs.

Nancy closes her eyes and bites into a macaroon.

‘No. It is warm and timeless.’

The English man sings experimentally, ‘I capture your curls on my pillow.’

‘That line makes me want to throw up.’

‘She’s a fucking bitch, your girlfriend,’ Nancy whispers to the English man when he leans into her breasts to light her cigarette.

‘Why don’t we all go for a walk by the sea?’ He wonders why the American is clutching her stomach, smoking and coughing at the same time.

Luciana can hear the sizzle of burning fat from Wilhelm’s sausages as he pours beer over their bursting guts. Beef, spice and beer – the fat man’s speciality. She can see her husband in the kitchen, grease on his chin, handkerchief on his knees, chewing on a piece of dark pungent meat while adding up figures on his calculator. For the first time this holiday she suddenly feels homesick for the spacious blue-carpeted rooms of her Frankfurt mansion. ‘We are going to the beach,’ Wilhelm shouts to his wife, licking beer and salt off his

fingers. The real-estate businessman who is her husband walks into the corridor, his face flushed from the heat of the oven, and kisses the cold sculpture of her cheek. He is so anxious to show her the sausages he has lovingly prepared that he does not notice her strange eyes are dark with fear as she stares at the telephone.

Claudine climbs on to a boulder covered in seaweed and slides down again on her stomach. Tatiana throws pebbles into the sea. The lovers and loveless walk on the cliffs, wrapped up against the wind. Sea, stone, air. Large empty houses shut up for the winter. Parisians will arrive in the summer, cars laden with food and wine. The loved and loveless with their cats and dogs, towels and magazines and suntan creams filling the empty houses. Opening the shutters and sweeping the floors. Making every day a day to remember, making it safe, making it familiar, not wanting anything too strange to intrude. The making of each day, hauling the hours in, finding a shape for time.

‘My stomach hurts,’ Nancy confides to Monika.

‘Everything hurts,’ is the Polish woman’s unsympathetic and enigmatic reply. ‘At least you have a body to keep you warm at night.’

The tourists eat crêpes and drink cider in a café by the harbour. The children sip hot chocolate and the men play the pinball machines while the women laugh at smutty postcards on a rack in the café. Nancy translates; if a man has a zizi like a frite he will make love like a potato; if you are an amateur fisherman and your wife is sitting naked on a rock, don’t mistake her zizi for a sea urchin. The American woman, postcard in her hand, suddenly doubles over and screams in pain. She is helped to a chair by the women, the loved and unloved women who stroke her forehead and massage her shoulders while she clutches her stomach, trembling and pale. The few locals drinking in the café look bewildered and

embarrassed. The women walk her to the toilet and take it in turns to make her wads of toilet paper to put between her legs.

‘I’m having a miscarriage,’ she weeps, ‘damn damn damn,’ doubling over, squatting on the toilet floor while the women hurry to get more paper, stroking her hair, rubbing the small of her back as she moans and cries out, ‘He doesn’t respect me, that’s why I keep losing them.’

‘Nonsense,’ the Polish woman says. ‘Love and respect have nothing to do with conception.’

‘It’s true,’ Nancy weeps.

‘Bollocks.’ Mary strokes her hair.

‘You know why my eyes shone so?’

Mary shakes her head.

‘Because there were two souls shining through them.’

Nancy looks up through her tears and it is true. Her eyes shine with half the lustre of before.

Biddy Ba Ba stays awake all night hissing at stray moths. Claudine has left the window open for him in case he wants to roam in the garden. Before she went to bed she held him in her arms and made him look at the stars, willing him to be brave and explore the frozen land beyond the château. The beast crouches under the table, contemplating the great outdoors with horror. Staring at the stars from his position under the table, the beast does not like the window open. And there is too much space between each star. Absolutely nothing, not love nor nature, reassures Biddy Ba Ba that outside is a good place to be. He pulls off the coffee-coloured wing of the largest moth and then steps back to watch it suffer.

When the early morning breeze spins the globe into Acapulco, Honduras and Managua, and the grandfather clock in the marble tiled hall chimes seven times, Nancy throws out the thirteen eggs. The secret voodoo she put in the fridge when she first arrived. She drops them into a black bin-liner one by

one, listening to them splash, ties up the bag and carries it to the bins at the end of the drive where Bidy Ba Ba cringes near the empty letter box. She puts her hand through the rusting flap just to see if there might be a message, a postcard from 'outside.' When there is not, she hugs the cat to her chest, lips pressed against the tiger fur of his head. Someone taps her on the shoulder and the American woman knows exactly who it is. Without turning round she says, 'Tell me about my mother.'

'Yes,' Yasmina replies. 'I came to find you.'

They walk back to the house, Nancy sobbing and clutching the cat. Yasmina points to the trees.

'Lovers like to carve their initials into the bark of the cedar because it is soft.' Nancy looks at the blur of trees through her tears and hallucinates her maverick father, penknife in his big hands, cutting the words 'Jane and Jim 4ever' into the soft bark. Sap runs, insects hum, birds sing. His wife carries four-year-old Nancy in her arms, smiling, shy when she sees the love words. He says something corny like 'If I had an aeroplane I'd skywrite us, honey, but I only have a knife.' The sun is shining and their arms are brown. Nature, Culture, Love, Children. Nancy weeps and weeps.

Princess Tatiana sits alone in the kitchen, reading her book in the early morning light. A silver crown sits askew on her head and she has half-heartedly pulled the taffeta dress over her pyjamas. When Bidy Ba Ba jumps on to her lap she beats him with her cardboard wand until he wails. She drinks a glass of milk and ignores Yasmina and Nancy when they sit at the large table, five places away from her.

'Okay,' Yasmina begins, as she has done so many times before.

'What do we already know?'

'My mother's name was Jane. My father's name was Jim. She was a writer, he was a scientist.'

‘They lived in Tangier where you were born,’ Yasmina continues.

‘Yes.’

‘Jane shot herself.’

‘Yes.’

‘What else do we know?’

‘You knew my father’s friend?’

‘Jack.’

‘How did you know him?’

‘I will have to go back to eighteen thirty, the year France colonised Algiers, to tell you.’

Nancy sighs. ‘I just want to know about her.’

Yasmina smiles. ‘What are you reading, Tatiana?’

The child holds up her book, an Italian, French and English dictionary.

‘Why are you learning these languages?’

‘Why do you think?’ Tatiana takes a long considered sip of her milk. ‘I want to be understood in all of them.’

‘So there’s Jim and Jane and Jack and you,’ Nancy persists.

‘That’s half the story.’

‘Who else?’

‘Safia, Rabah, Omar, my mother, Ahmed, Doctor Paranoid.’

‘And you?’ The princess interrogates the citizens who have invaded her early morning domain.

‘Yes.’

The American holds up her hand. ‘Just make me happy and connect me up to my folk,’ she sighs.

‘Sure.’ Yasmina fiddles with her golden earrings. ‘We’ll start in Tangier when Jim your father and Jack his friend walked to the taxi rank looking for a couple of whores.’

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PART TWO

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Tangier 1957. Two men lean against a taxi, taking us in with their blue eyes. All muscle and white teeth. The taller one slips his hand under his belt and whispers something to his friend in the white T-shirt. They jingle coins in their sunburnt fists. Yes. We walk towards them.

Ahmed is trying to sell the Americans hardboiled eggs. Earlier this morning Safia saw him peeling the skin off little fish that had fallen on to the pavement by the docks. Stuffing them into his big hungry mouth. So where did he get the eggs from? Right now the men have turned their backs on us and are choosing an egg. The one in the white T-shirt cracks the shell on Ahmed's shaved head and shouts, 'Tune in!' His friend laughs, all the time shaking his head. He lights up a cigarette and blows out the smoke, excited.

It is not a good idea to crack an egg on a head full of ringworm. In fact, it is not a good idea to crack an egg on this boy's head at all. Ahmed knows how to make bombs. The men chew their eggs slowly, eyes squinting in the sun.

'Hi. What's your name?'

'Linda.' Safia's voice is like her face. Melancholy and deadpan. 'My name's Jim.' He opens the door of the taxi and gets in first, followed by Safia and then myself. The man in the white T-shirt jumps into the front and slams the door.

'Yahoo!' He fiddles with the gears and grins at the driver who winds down the window. The cab fills with the sound of birds screeching in the trees.

Safia looks out of the window at men from the country being shaved on the street. Flies settle on her long hands. She has roamed through forests and caves dressed as a man, her pockets full of white feathers the doves of Kabylia leave on rocks, but now she sits dead still, as she always does after

she's smoked kif. She keeps it in a linen pillowcase a French woman gave to her mother. Jim stares at the plastic sandals poking through the cloth of her peppermint-coloured kaftan.

'Think she's alive?'

His friend turns round and steals a glance over his shoulder.

'Pinch her.'

Jim pinches Safia's arm. 'Hey Linda? Lin-da? Li-nnnn-da! What were you two girls talking about when you were walking to the taxi stand?'

Safia doesn't flinch. She's longing for a smoke and a can of milk.

Jack takes out a small brown notebook and writes something down. He turns his head sideways to me.

'Got a name, sweetheart?'

'Jane.'

He grins at the driver who is fiddling with the radio tuner, two damp circles under his arms.

'Got any jazz for Jane-y?' He offers him a cigarette.

'Americano. Very good.'

News from Algiers. *The French paras broke up the general strike at the end of January. Shops closed and shuttered. No post or telegraph. Jeeps prowl streets, urging strikers back to work through loud speakers. The driver turns up the volume, smoking his American cigarette. Army helicopters drop leaflets on the casbah. Children watch the French drive tanks into shopfronts. Food spills on to the streets.*

'The sky's weird here, man, it's green at night. Why've you got green skies eh, Linda?' Jim prods her knee. Safia's bloodshot eyes fix on the cracks in pavements. *Oranges, bananas, honey cakes*, the words crackle through the radio just as the taxi swerves to avoid a dog that suddenly runs into the road. Not fast enough.

The driver slams his brakes down and blood sprays the windscreen. Shocked, he curses the yowling dog running in demented circles under the car.

‘Do you believe in portents?’ Jim says.

‘Huh?’

‘Well.’ Jim cradles his forehead in his big hands. ‘You know, that dog’s out of control. Chasing its tail.’ He looks at me and lowers his voice. ‘It freaks me out that she’s called Jane.’

‘Why?’

‘Cause my Janey, she’s going crazy back home. She’s out of control, Jack.’

‘Shit.’ The American thinks for a while. ‘Jane will be okay.’

‘No man. She’s weird. I mean, I’m a science man, right?’

‘Right.’

‘What I was going to say is, I have to go into black holes and get myself back to earth again. But Jane! She’s floating somewhere inside those holes and she can’t get back.’

‘Doesn’t sound like the sweet Jane I know.’

‘And I can’t find the formulae to bring her back.’ Jim thumps his chest. ‘To me, Jack. To bring her back to me.’

The driver is wiping the windscreen with his handkerchief.

‘Know what she did the other day?’

‘What?’

‘She was putting some lotion on her hands. And she’s reading what’s in this damn lotion, you know, written on the back of the bottle, and she says in this scary voice, “Why Jim. Did you know Allantoin is good for cell renewal?”’

The driver climbs back into his seat and starts the car.

The room is small and cool with a little bed in the corner neatly made up. A wooden table stands next to it, bare, just a candle and ashtray. The American opens the glass doors and walks out on to a balcony overlooking the sea. He puts his hands on his hips, staring at the ocean, and breathes out, very soft. ‘Wow.’ A beacon flashes on and off, splashing red light on to his face. We can hear the American expats talking downstairs, their voices thick with opium and whisky. He walks back into the room and I follow him, waiting while he unties the laces of his boots and then throws them on to the floor. ‘Oh boy.’ He collapses on to the bed, arms behind his neck.

‘Y’know, the girls I usually date ... they’re called things like Ellen and Sarah-Lou. They wear ribbons in their hair, toast marshmallows by the fire and read the funnies on Sunday.’ He reaches over and lights the candle on the desk. ‘Sarah-Lou,’ he says again, dragging his lips across the words. He blows out the match and looks at me sideways.

‘Know what I want right now? A bowl of cereal! Say ... um ... little darlin’, why don’t you take the weight off your feet?’ He pats the bed with his big hands.

‘Want a cigarette?’

‘No.’ I lie.

‘Hey – you spoke!’

The smell of opium drifts in through the gap under the door. The American breathes deeply and pats his stomach. ‘My mother’s name is Marie. My folk go back to Breton, see.’ His finger, yellow from nicotine, traces my lips.

‘Whooooo.’ He whistles through his teeth. ‘You’re only a baby!’ His blue eyes flicker across my stomach and breasts. Weighing up the sum of what he has seen. The American has bought damaged goods.

‘When I was sixteen I was soccer crazy. Do Arab boys play?’ His lips stretch into a smile, or it could be disgust,

because his mouth freezes for a while, teeth bared, slits of blue where his eyes are crinkled, as if he is looking up into a blinding sun. 'Marie. That's my blessed mom's name. You like that name? French, see.' He stubs out his cigarette and lights another.

'Marie. Pretty, huh? That's a virgin name.'

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Sétif 1945. Daughters are meant to love their mothers but I hate mine. I am five years old and she is ill, as she always is, lying in bed suffering. There's dust in my eyes. I'm sitting on a chair by her bed and she is pinching me. It helps the pain, she says, but she is smiling. So I smile back and she pinches me harder, finger and thumb tightening on the skin of my arm. I am crying and smiling at the same time, and she is in pain and smiling at the same time. I don't know what part of the pinch is love, what part of the pinch is pain, and I can't tell anyone she's hurting me because then I would betray the part that is love.

When my uncle tried to get her into the European hospital, she refused, preferring the amulets, resins and potions women make in the villages nearby to the foreigners' penicillin. 'I know how to get into the hospital but I don't know how to get out – the Europeans will keep me there and kill me.' When they gave her pills she swallowed the lot in one dose. 'If it doesn't cure me in one gulp it's no good.' More intimate with pain than love, she understood its strokes, knew how to hurt without appearing to do so. 'The white doctors in their hospitals in the cities – why should they be tender with my body? Why would they want to relieve me of stomach rot?' Sometimes when the pain left her body she would curse my father, her voice hard, wounded. 'A man is like the hands of a clock. His penis points in all directions.' Now she is pinching me again. 'The butcher was good to pregnant women. He gave me anything I wanted. Liver and all the internal organs of a freshly slaughtered sheep. So you were born with a piece of liver between your teeth.' Yesterday, when she cut my fingernails she told me that if I was bad I would have to pick up the nail parings with my eyelids in the afterlife.

The colonial doctor, a fat breathless man with very clean hands, came to the house to give her vitamin injections once a month. He sold them in three sizes, small for one hundred francs, medium for five hundred, and large cost fifteen hundred. My mother paid him with money she stole from my father's pocket.

Rabah, my uncle, great lover of metropolitan cities, arrived one day while he was injecting her. If my mother troubled me, my uncle, who lived half the year in Algiers and the other half in Europe, thrilled me. Dressed in a linen suit bought in Rome and a heavy gold watch bought in Egypt, he watched the doctor curiously, arms folded over his sharp lapels, fingers stained with a mixture of his two trades: ink and flour. Rabah is a baker and a journalist. His most famous article for the newspapers was the one about words: how the Vichy régime replaced the slogan of the French revolution, Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, with the words Family, Homeland and Work. His most famous cake was the one he iced in the style of the American artist Jackson Pollock, whom Rabah met when he was working in New York. He told me about the giant seventeen-foot canvases, how the artist standing above them in his studio on Long Island, legs akimbo, used a stick to paint with, waiting for the right moment to make a move. My uncle's voice, lazy, gentle and amorous.

If he loved the cities, it was the countryside that gave him health and made him handsome. The orange blossom in May, the wild absinthe that scents the air near the coast, and the winds that blow from the Sahara. But now Rabah has his arms folded, watching the liquid inside the syringe disappear into my mother's arm. 'Monsieur Docteur' ... There is menace in his voice as he suddenly pulls the syringe out of the doctor's hands, takes off his sunshades and examines it. 'Salt!' he shouts. 'What are you doing injecting her with salt serum?' The doctor, caught out, denies it, saying he packed his bag with the wrong medicines that day, but it turns out he has been filling her body with salt all the time and not vitamins. A

landowner from Liège, he has become very rich out of the likes of my mother. Rabah says to the French man, ‘There’s a party in Paris right now. Why aren’t you there? Drinking champagne now we have helped you kick the Germans out.’ The doctor just stares. Rabah, who smells of roses, takes out a green handkerchief, sprinkles a few drops of cologne on to it and wipes his forehead. ‘Y’know what’s happening in San Francisco?’ He drags out the words, San Fran-cis-co. The doctor taps the toe of his little black polished boot, impatient, edgy. He has come to the house of a poor illiterate woman, not expecting the intervention of a maverick educated uncle in a suit smarter than his own. ‘The *colons* have got pens in their hands, Monsieur Docteur. What for? Eh? Any idea, Monsieur? They are signing the United Nations Charter declaring the rights of subject peoples to self-determination.’ My mother is pinching me again, not knowing what’s happening – just seeing her brother talking quietly to the doctor who is packing up his bag. ‘If the French are celebrating getting rid of the jackboots in their country, what the hell are you doing in ours?’

Mr Clean Hands took a long look at my handsome uncle – his suit, his shades, his shoes – and then he said something strange. Pointing his plump forefinger at Rabah, jabbing out each word, he said, ‘You’re mine,’ snapped his bag shut and left the house.

When I went to the beach on holidays with my uncle, I would watch the French settlers, the *colons*, splash in the water all day. They are Mediterraneans and love the sea. My uncle liked to look inland towards the heart of Africa, preferring the mountains and desert oases. The old women *colons* sat on park benches in the shade, knitting and gossiping while their men took a siesta, but the younger ones danced under the stars at night in summer dresses. Jiving and flirting in bright clothes, flicking their pony-tails and swinging their hips on the warm night-time sand. What were they going to be when they grew up? What was I going to be when I grew up?

If Monsieur Docteur injected my mother with salt, my uncle injected me with modernity. That is how he corrupted me. It was he who injected Europe into my life, passed on to me the hybrid virus of the English language, atheism, American slang, Mickey Mouse, and once he bought me a glass jar of marmalade. He taught me odd Russian phrases picked up on his travels, curious words like cannibal, traitor, cholera, purge. He also bought me biros and exercise books, taught me the names of painters, movie stars and pop singers.

No wonder women told him their thoughts like they told no other man. Rabah admired their bodies and laughed at their jokes. He looked like what he was, a desired and much loved man with light in his eyes and money in the bank. But he also hurt women. I have seen them weep over Rabah because he removed his affection and attention and the light in his eyes shone on someone else. How was it that he could love me one day and not love me the next? What do you do with the love you feel if it is not returned?

‘What’s wrong, Uncle?’

‘Politics.’

I did not understand, but his perfume made me daydream long after my mother finished pinching me. The morning he caught out Clean Hands and his salt serum injections was Victory Day. VE Day. The day my brother O limped home to drought and famine and dust, French medals pinned on his chest.

O lost his leg for Europe. Fighting with the French. He says in France the *épiceries* are empty – everything has been plundered by the Germans and everyone wants to sleep. He has heard that the yankee airmen, returning home, knelt down and kissed the US soil. Please don’t talk to him, he never wants to talk again. Rabah helps him out of his uniform, massaging his shoulders, squeezing his hand, and O’s eyes are closing. My mother gets out of bed, boils him bread with lemon and oil, climbs back into bed. He eats and gets some

strength, so we all sit with him, waiting for him to come back to himself. He gives me a colouring-in book, pictures of Red Sea fishes, but it is my uncle who reads me their names: the masked butterflyfish, the reef stingray and the scalefin that feeds on small shrimps, porcupine and parrot fish. I have to colour them in with crayons, O says. But I haven't got any crayons. Rabah takes something out of his jacket pocket. A lipstick. Pink. My mother wants it, she is holding out her thin hands, crying, 'Give it to me, give it to me!' I start to colour the Hawkfish pink.

'You-you-you, give it to me!' but I will not. I hold on to the pink colour, watching her pale lips bleat you-you-you – her pained eyes fixed on my hands. She is so thin I can feel her hips through the bedcovers. Something is happening outside.

you-you-you

The roads are filling with bicycles, taxis, even horses. We can hear the women ululating – you-you-you. Where are they? There has been no rain for months. People are edgy. Shadowy figures move through clouds of dust, handkerchiefs over their mouths. Children fight with dogs for garbage. Men are pouring into the streets from the outskirts. We hear the chanting – LONG LIVE A FREE AND INDEPENDENT ALGERIA. O limps into the crowd with his crutch. Uncle takes my hand, he holds on tight to me as we follow my brother. The gendarmes point their guns at the men who are holding banners and green and white flags. They shoot into the sky but no one takes any notice. There are so many of us. A French commissaire marches comically into the crowd and tries to take down a banner. The people start to stone him and he beats them off with his walking stick, swearing in French. More police. Men are still pouring into the square, holding banners, shouting, fists raised in the dust swirling above their heads. A man in uniform comes out of a café wiping his mouth. Long Live a Free and Independent Algeria. The chanting is swelling under the yellow sky. He reaches for his gun and shoots. I've still got the lipstick in my hand, and then, bang, the guns are firing,

people falling, screaming. Banners and flags are splashed with blood as the guns fire, on and on. We wait for them to stop but they do not stop. My uncle pulls at me, trying to get me home, but a man in uniform jumps on him and drags him to the ground. I see a stick come down on Rabah's head. When he covers it with his hands they beat his hands. My brother finds me. I hold on to him as we limp through bodies on the ground.

O pulls me into an alleyway. More dust. Chicken bones. Two gendarmes come towards us swinging batons. They beckon to him to hurry up. He cannot walk faster so he shouts that he has just come back from France, fighting for France. One of the gendarmes chucks me under the chin. 'Ma chouchou.' The other pulls my brother's trousers down. I can see the half-stump of his leg. Then they pull his underpants down and bend over him with the knife, my brother on the ground screaming, 'I have medals, you gave me medals, let the girl go.' The gendarmes look strange, their eyes bright, a flush in their cheeks. He looks up at me. 'Is this your brother?' I nod. Why is the dust wet? O's mouth is open. Wide open.

Jack unzips his jeans. 'I'm just a country boy without a dollar and I'm pleased to see you.' Five cigarette butts burn in the ashtray.

The small candle spits yellow wax. 'Whoooo baby let's go!'

He walks over in his shorts and presses against me.

Someone is knocking on the door but he ignores them, eyes half-shut.

Bang Bang Bang.

'Who's there?'

'Me.' It's a woman's voice. American.

'Who's me?'

'Me!'

'Shit.' The American thumps his fist into his thigh.

The door opens and he pulls away from me as a tall slender woman in slacks and sandals walks into the room, a large brown book tucked under her arm.

'Well. He-llo.'

'Hi, Jane ... look ...'

'No. I'm not gonna come back later.' She sits down on the small wooden chair and lights a cigarette, one long leg crossed over her knee. 'Damn you, Jack.' She blows out smoke, eyes flickering towards me.

'I want some fun, Janey. I was on that ship for a long time.' He sits on the edge of the bed and searches for a cigarette.

'Damn you, Jack.'

'What do you mean damn you?'

The woman takes out a bottle of pills, drops two into her mouth and chews.

‘Codeine.’ She smiles.

‘Get out of here, Jane.’

For a moment she looks startled. We can hear the drugged voices of the men downstairs. They are singing and banging on tables.

‘Thought I heard Jim’s voice,’ she says softly. Jack looks uncomfortable. He points to his tanned legs and pale ankles.

‘See how white my feet are? Gotta put ’em in the sun so they match.’

‘Just wanted to say hi, Jack. Heard you were in town.’

‘Yeah, well, we can say hi some other time, okay?’

‘Is that right?’ She taps the brown leather book resting in her lap.

‘I brought my photo album, Jacky.’ She is smiling again but her eyes are sad. ‘Thought we could look over ol’ America.’ Her voice is hard. ‘Memories, Jack. Y’know, when we were teenagers?’

‘Jeez, Jane, don’t you have eyes in your head?’ He rolls his eyes towards me.

‘Sure. Think I’ve done a reading of the general situation.’

‘But you aren’t hip to the situation, Jane. How many codeine you had today?’

She opens the book. ‘Just need to get a grip on things. Like who the hell I am.’ She looks at me, suddenly shy. ‘And who the hell is she, Jacky?’ Her fingernail, painted with pearl varnish, points at me and then runs down a photograph, teasing. ‘See this picture, here ... at the Cherokee Indian reservation? Me and my little brother standing beside this guy in his feather headdress? There’s the stall with the postcards ... and here,’ her blonde head bends over the book,

‘summertime in Long Island. The sprinklers are out in the garden and we’re running about in our little bathing suits. Man, here’s that picnic on the beach at Sarasota!’

‘Look, Jane, I don’t want to see this. I want you to go.’ He slides his big hands under her arms, trying to lift her up from the chair.

‘Give me three minutes, Jack, okay?’

‘And then you’ll go?’

‘Sure.’

‘Okay.’

He stands next to her chair, leaning against the wall in his shorts, arms folded, looking down at the photo album.

‘Jacky? What about this one? I’m lining up at the movie theater to see *Gone with the Wind*. Here’s little old me feeding nickels into the jukebox to hear Bonnie Baker’s “Oh, Johnny, Oh!” Look, I’m wearing bobbysocks, man! That’s my date in the sodashop! Remember Teddy? He’s the guy that wore the zoot suit. Remember the roller rink, Jacky?’

‘Okay, Jane. I’m looking at my watch now and you’ve got another two minutes.’

‘I want to talk about my mom.’

Jack whistles. ‘Fine. Talk about your mom for two minutes.’

‘Here she is. Remember her? Making damn sure every hour of her life is filled in case she ever has to think? Eating cake. No, not *eating* cake. Devouring cake. Fighting communism from the suburbs. She joined all those clubs. Look at her, atoms for peace and all that shit. I never wanna be like her ... never never never.’

‘No, Janey. You’re nothing like her.’

‘Cupcakes and teaparties, then there’s the shopping, the hairdresser, and bridge. Want to see her?’

She's talking to me. I don't answer, I don't even look at her. I keep my eyes down, staring at the stone floor. But something makes me look. I have to look. Straight into the miserable eyes of a portly woman in a hat and white gloves. She stands by an American soldier, a young boy, both of them smiling out of the photograph at me.

'She wears gloves in the broiling daytime and she's always at some committee meeting.'

'Time to go, Jane.'

'Yeah. That's my brother after he got called up, there he is! Mister Brawny. As long as you've got eyes, a tongue and a throat they'll have you in uniform. But see, Jack, you do get perks ... y'know, government toiletries. You get a slab of Lux, you get towels and a handkerchief and a winter uniform, 'cause the American GI, he is the best equipped soldier in the whole wide world. He gets a tent, a bayonet, a raincoat, a first-aid pouch and he dies! Yep, my brother died a well-dressed man. Hey, you remember how Superman pushed the Red Cross and V Bonds in the comics? I don't know who took this one. Who's that?' She points and looks up at the American.

'Frank Albert Sinatra.' Jack yawns.

'Don't know how this got here. Yeah I do. He was playing at the Paramount Theater ... on Columbus Day? Blue eyes like your blue eyes.'

'He's a square.' Jack fiddles with a strand of her blonde hair.

'Yeah. Know what Robert Sylvester said about squares?'

'Who?'

'He's a writer. Like me ... and he said the square always carries a hanky with his initials embroidered on it. He puts vermouth in his martini, he doesn't rip the bands off his cigars when he has a smoke, he doesn't tip in restaurants and he takes his portable radio to the ball game so he can follow the score.'

‘Who gives a fuck what Sinatra puts in his martini. Bye, Jane.’

‘And all the high school kids swooning for Frank, carried away on stretchers.’

‘Why are you telling me this shit?’

‘Because, well, I’d quite like to be carried away on a stretcher just like them, Jacky.’

‘What’s happening to you, Jane?’

She ignores him.

‘Yeah, it’s coming back – that TV psychiatrist said it was Frankie’s weedy build that brought out the maternal instinct of the female population. Like the women wanted to feed the hungry, and Frank was hungry!’

‘One minute left.’

‘Oh boy, Jack, here we are, you and me, eating ice-cream! You got melba peach and I got tutti frutti and I want to be Rita Hayworth. Do you remember Ava Gardner in *The Hucksters*? Jack, I’ve got so much of America in this book! So much, man – I could’ve been Miss Grill. Miss Grill of Maryland. With a crown of frankfurters and a little pink apron. Thank God I got out, thank God I met Jim, even though it’s hard here but I guess it’s kind of hard everywhere.’

‘Yeah. It’s kind of hard everywhere. See ya later.’

‘Like, everyone’s wrecked in this town. Jim thinks he’s an agent sent from another planet.’

‘UP UP UP.’ He’s tipping up her chair and she’s hanging on, talking while he tries to slide her off.

‘There’s no one to talk to here. Y’know, just sweet ordinary talk. Like what are you thinking about these days? Been on any good walks? What pizza do you like to eat, had any good visions? Are you in love like you want to be – that’s what you said? What did you get for your birthday, where do you buy

your socks, do you like the new way I do my hair? Do you think I look OKAY?’

‘Yeah, you look OKAY, Jane. Get out of here!’

‘But I don’t FEEL okay.’ She is shouting at him now. He looks away. Her voice comes back, soft and cajoling, her eyes fixed on the small candle spluttering from the breeze coming through the door.

‘Get out of here, Jane!’

‘Like you could ask me what I am doing for money, where do the kids go to school, do I still love Jim and how do I most want to live my life and how do you most want to live your life? Why do I sometimes just feel bleak, so bleak I can’t look after the kids or talk to Jim? Humiliating. It’s so GODDAMN humiliating. There’s no such thing as paradise, Jack, there just isn’t. It’s so damn sad to lose your dream. Don’t know what mine is any more.’ She turns to me.

‘You got a dream?’

‘She doesn’t speak English, Jane.’ The American pulls up his shorts.

‘Jack, why do I go into myself and can’t get out again? Just go under, stuck there, stuck there, stuck there, stuck there, goddamn you, Jack! I wanted to talk to you about getting older, I wanted to talk to you about dignity.’

She stands up and turns away from us now, crying, but trying not to. Hand in her blonde hair, she looks through the glass doors on to the sea.

‘Look, Jane, we’ll talk this evening, okay?’

‘Yeah.’ She brushes a fly off her cheek. She is slender in her sandals, lightly tanned. Her eyes meet his blue gaze and then quickly look away.

‘Hey, you?’ She is talking to me again. Her voice dark, gentle.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Jane.’

‘Is that so?’ She half-smiles. ‘Isn’t that a coincidence? Well, goodbye Jane.’

She turns to Jack. ‘I didn’t just bring my photo album.’ Her hands slide inside the lemon silk of her blouse. ‘I’ve got a present for you.’

Her fingers tug at something. The beacon flashes a strip of green light over the American’s thick neck.

She takes out a small revolver, stroking its tortoise-shell handle with her pearly fingers.

‘For you, bad boy.’ She presses it into his hands.

‘God, Jane.’

‘I’m scared I might use it on the kids,’ she says in her velvety American voice.

She begins to walk quietly out of the room, and stops.

‘Did you pack a medical kit? You do when you’ve got kids. Band-aids. Antiseptic cream. Thermometer. Insect repellent, anti-malarial tablets.’

She walks out and shuts the door.

‘Jesus.’ He stares at the gun, mouth screwed up, shaking his head.

‘I used to carry my kitten like this,’ he says, walking with it to the table by the bed, putting it down very gently by the flickering candle.

The French entered Algeria in 1830. They claim they made a country out of nothing. What is nothing? That is what I ask Rabah. My father disappeared. One night he did not come home. Is he nothing? I was born under a vast sky in a land of blistering rocks. Was I born into nothingness? When the French military look at me, what do they see? I am here but I am not here at the same time. Like my mother. When she died I moved to Algiers to live with my uncle. She was buried in Sétif and mint grows over her grave. Perhaps one day I will go back to Sétif and talk to her nothingness. But now I am fourteen and have no words for her.

I do have words for her.

I love you. I hate you.

Rabah says there is a word that describes my feelings. He says he would like me to at least try to speak. When the chergui blows from the Sahara it stings the eyes and chokes the breath. That is the feeling in my body when I think about my brother and mother. Last night I dreamt I was trying to pick up nail parings with my eyelids. I lay on my side, cheek close to the floor, eyelashes fluttering across the tiny sliver of nail, my fist bunched into my heart.

This morning I eat Rabah's delicately flavoured dates and ask him questions. Rabah watches me grow into my fourteen years with pleasure and curiosity because he has no daughter of his own. But I think he just likes me anyway.

It is with his dark eyes, irreverent and troubled, that I look at the world I find myself in. With his gaze and not that of the French administrators, governors, judges, technical advisers and tax inspectors. No. I lie. I do look with their eyes. I have had to learn to look with their eyes, in particular the eyes of the young gendarmes who cut into the body of my brother. I

watch them watching me. I translate myself to myself via them. That is how the French Presence is inside my body. Two days before the Catholic *pieds-noirs* were preparing their celebrations for All Saints' Day, my brother Omar, who is dead, walked into Rabah's apartment.

Rabah is baking. His apartment warm with the heat and smell of bread. It is built in the French style with large windows and a balcony. There are no courtyards. The courtyard is female space, space that is directed inwards, space that is within. Masculine space is directed outwards, towards the streets. So when I go on to the balcony I am violating a code of movement. I am trespassing male space. But then I am a trespasser. I have been corrupted.

So, what is Nothingness? Rabah only says, 'Yasmina, why are you hungry all the time?' I shrug. He is baking something special today. 'Let me tell you what is happening in France,' he says.

'The French people, in France that is, imagine they can see flying saucers in the sky.' He moves the bowl of dates away from my fingers. 'They go out for their early evening walk, and there one is! Glowing in the French sky is a sphere of strangeness! They eat at cafés in small provincial towns and everything seems normal enough. The steak. The vegetables. Good wine. By the time they order their Calvados and coffee, the unspeakable has happened. A flying saucer is spinning above their heads! They are being invaded by extraterrestrials, Yasmina. Aliens are interrupting the meals they worked hard to buy. Aliens are landing in their corn fields and making strange codes with the crops. The farmers do not understand their language. There are plans to bribe some alien collaborators who will translate these codes and inform French Intelligence of extraterrestrial strategy. Office workers maybe get a little bored at work and look out of the window. What do they see? Strangers dancing on the edge of a spinning sphere! They call the boss. The boss shakes his head and says something must be done about it. And let us not forget the

lovers. Lovers walk hand in hand down the boulevards of Paris. They feel uneasy. When they kiss, alien eyes watch their bodies. They are an occupied people. A strange and alien presence has settled in the very centre of the French people. Every small thing the French do is observed. They find themselves getting secretive and sly. It is an invasion of the street, the bathroom and the psyche.'

The telephone is ringing. Rabah, carried away, ignores it.

'Already existentialists are writing articles about this alien presence over a glass of red wine in cafés. Finally a hero, a chef at one of the leading restaurants in Paris, flings up his arms ...'

'The telephone, Rabah.'

'I know, I know, so the chef puts the last spoonful of mustard into the pepper sauce, flings up his arms and shouts, "Call in the Secretary of State for Air." ' Rabah runs to the telephone.

'No no chérie.

'Yes okay. Everything fine.

'Hmmm.

'I will be in New York on the Seventh.'

My uncle is murmuring lovethings in English.

I have long known that Rabah slips from one world to another, small suitcase in his hand, Egyptian watch on his wrist. Zones and borders are atmospheres, he says, and insists that sometimes he is invisible. An invisible man inside an atmosphere. Because he is not mystical or religious in any way, I do not understand. Perhaps he means that for some reason he is unseen, unperceived, because he is too vain to be invisible. Why else would he have aromatic perfumes specially made for him?

Everything is fine, sweetheart.

Why does Rabah lie to his women? I know, and he knows, there is going to be trouble on All Saints' Day. Recently, in the Constantine region, when the European mine masters came home at noon to have lunch with their wives, the mine workers attacked the village. European women had their bellies slashed with sticks and knives.

Algiers has been divided into six zones. All six zones on November the First will attack French police stations and military bases.

Yes, I'll try and bring you a carpet.

In Aurès, where people live on stones and air and rain turns the soil to yellow mud, they are going to attack the French garrison town at Batna.

I try to imagine America. Who is she? Will she kick off her shoes and curl up on the carpet Rabah brings for her, watching the advertisements on television with her pale eyes? I finish Rabah's dates, all the time listening to his conversation, and then I see something that startles me. It belongs to my mother. A box pushed under a chair is covered with the cloth of her wedding dress. It is as if my mother is in the room. Rabah is still on the telephone so I move towards the box.

I am walking towards my mother.

But she is dead.

I love you, Rabah murmurs into the telephone.

I love you. I hate you. Perhaps Rabah cut off her long black hair after she died and keeps it coiled in the box? My heart beats hard at the thought of such a spectacle. What about my father? He disappeared. Perhaps there are papers in the box that will tell me where he is? Do I want to find him? Yes. No. That is ambivalence. I lift up the wedding cloth my mother married him in.

We'll have to get you a winter coat, Rabah whispers.

No. There is not a ghostly coil of black hair in the box. Nor are there documents that will lead me to my absent troubled father. There are guns in the box.

‘Yasmina? Where were we?’ Rabah finds me bent over the silk sleeves of the wedding dress, counting his weapons. He has a strange light in his eyes.

‘Thirteen,’ I say.

‘Those are good pistols. German mausers abandoned by the Vichy French.’ He acts as if it is the most normal thing in the world to have weapons in a box under the chair.

‘Can you smell my bread? Where were we?’ He lights a cigarette. I know that he is wondering how I feel about the dress, because he only smokes when he is uncomfortable.

‘Flying saucers in Provence, Paris and Orléans. In other words, Yasmina, the French are edgy. The psychic state of the French is troubled.’

‘Who is she?’ I ask.

He gestures to the telephone.

‘Oh, a friend. We need all the friends we can get.’

Rabah presses his fingers into the bread and slams the oven doors. ‘Okay. Yasmina, because I am your uncle and in charge of your education, I must tell you what is happening in Algeria. Boys like your brother are making bombs in tins of jam.’

And that is when my brother walked into Rabah’s apartment. Omar. No, Rabah says gently. He is not Omar.

Rabah brings in the bread. He places it on a cloth. The boy, my uncle and myself stare at the three letters he has made from dough.

F.L.N. Front de Libération Nationale.

I eat the L, Rabah eats the F and the boy eats the N. Rabah points to the thirteen pistols. ‘In England,’ he says, chewing

the bread slowly, 'they call that a baker's dozen.' So, in 1954, when the French went flying-saucer mad, we celebrated the birth of our liberation movement in Rabah's apartment. And my mother was in the room with us, too. The guns wrapped in her wedding cloth, as if inside her belly.

'By the way,' Rabah says to the boy, 'if you blow up the telephone exchange, I won't be able to call my girlfriend.' And then he leaves the room.

The boy says, my name is Ahmed. But that is not my only name. He points to his chest. Listen to the jackal.

What is the jackal?

Ahmed says, these are its words:

I am a genius. So why do I sell cabbage heads at the market? Why do I polish shoes on the street? My mother twisted the neck of my newborn sister because she was crying for food. My sister was a genius. She knew how to yell for what she needed. My mother was a genius. She knew how to make carpets. Her feet were mashed in the factory because they did not give her boots. She limped in the hot mash of soap and sodium and her toes became pulp. When I was young I saw French officers slap the cheeks of my grandmother. My grandmother was a genius. She understood that herbs could calm the pain in her cheek. My father was gassed on the Western Front. He was a genius. He knew how to make clay stoves and trays for breadmaking. He knew how to make things grow from stones.

Ahmed chews his bread slowly.

I know every inch of the alleys of the casbah. My casbah is a labyrinth of secret passages leading from one house to another. My casbah has false walls. Inside the walls are bomb factories, caches and hiding-places.

My name is Avenger. Ahmed smiles at me.

After a while I say, my name is Avenger too.

‘This is Doctor P,’ Rabah interrupts us, his arm around the shoulders of a young man carrying a briefcase in one hand and a hatbox in the other.

‘My throat hurts,’ Ahmed says.

‘Give the doctor a break, Ahmed,’ Rabah chides.

‘What if I die, eh, Rabah?’ Ahmed makes a fist with his hand.

‘Then you will smell even worse than you do now.’

The man’s small hands feel Ahmed’s throat. I look away.

‘Nothing wrong with you,’ he says, and starts to say something to them both about anti-tetanus vaccines, all the time looking at me. Rabah brings in sugar for the doctor’s tea.

‘Yasmina’s mother died at the hands of colonial doctors,’ he says, pointing at me. ‘He gave my sister salt serum instead of vitamins and probably took X-rays with the help of a vacuum cleaner. Then he went home to his vineyards and orange groves to drink brandy and listen to Beethoven.’

‘My mother was scared to go to the modern hospital.’ My voice is too soft.

Doctor P eats the breadcrumbs in his hand. ‘She was right. Why should the colonial doctor be any better than the colonial policeman?’

I wind my hair round my finger and Rabah watches me curiously. ‘The body must feel it has something worthwhile to get well for,’ the doctor says, smiling at me. ‘Would you be so kind as to take this hatbox to number six for me?’

Yes.

When I return Ahmed says, ‘Congratulations, Yasmina the Avenger. You have carried pamphlets in that hatbox to our headquarters.’

The doctor smiles at me again. ‘So you are an Avenger?’

‘Yes,’ I whisper.

He thinks for a while. ‘Those pamphlets you carried in the hatbox are not to be worn on the head, but in the head. So it is true to say you have been carrying headware.’ He turns to Ahmed.

‘What is the name of the woman who printed them on my duplicator?’

‘Safia.’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Because the room smells of absinthe when she leaves.’ The doctor turns his attention to Ahmed. ‘Your throat is sore because you smoke cigarette butts. You’d be better off smoking your shoes.’

Ahmed the jackal, with his hard face and fists, shrugs.

‘I’m okay.’

‘Our *pied-noir* comrade,’ Rabah says to me, ‘has just finished operating on one of our leaders shot in the abdomen.’ The doctor says nothing.

‘Where do you live in France?’ I do not want to talk about death. He shuts his eyes and says in a bored voice, ‘Marseille, Lyon. Lille. My hair used to be straight when I lived in France. Since I’ve been here it’s gone curly.’ He glances at me and then says to Rabah, ‘I miss good cheese.’

‘Does Brie make your hair curly?’

‘I am telling you now, Rabah,’ the doctor smothers his smile, ‘the French authorities are going to put an embargo on anti-tetanus vaccine. No Algerian will be able to get hold of the stuff. You must think about this now.’ The smile suddenly appears again. ‘You know what? I am tired already. And the war has only just started.’

‘The war has not just started.’ Ahmed takes a butt out of his pocket, rolls it between his fingers and lights up. ‘Where there

are *colons* there is always war.’

‘Rabah,’ Doctor P’s voice is without emotion, ‘your comrade died before I operated. He had a hole in his intestine from gunshot. One of his colleagues must have given him water when he asked for it. If someone has a wound in the stomach they must not on any account be given water.’ Rabah nods, his shoulders shrunk with pain. He leaves the room.

‘Yasmina,’ the doctor is talking to me again.

‘Yes.’

‘I would like you to tell me one day about your brother.’

‘Why?’

‘You’ll sleep better after.’

Rabah must have told him how I am afraid to sleep. If I shut my eyes everyone will be dead when I wake up.

‘Why are you called Doctor P?’

‘Because I am paranoid,’ he says.

I can feel love, like a force, pushing itself into my body.

OceanofPDF.com

The American is pushing himself into my body and he is saying, Oh baby. Leaning on his elbows, blue eyes half-closed. Baby baby baby. He turns his head towards the doorway and groans.

I shut my eyes so that I need not see the blue eye of Jane who is peering round the corner of the door, waiting for the man who has bought me to notice her.

Ahmed does not want to be noticed. He lurks around corners, unseen, plotting. Sometimes I go out with him on to the streets where he cleans shoes. His fingers are always black from the polish and he sucks them all day long. ‘Stops my hunger pains,’ he scowls at the sun. Sometimes he tells me about his love affairs. They are always short because he has to change address so often. Ahmed is a fugitive in his own city, moving from one hideout to another, just as he moves from one shoe to another, spitting and polishing, holding out his hand for coins, a brown cap pushed over his eyes.

‘The F.L.N. is like the small pox.’ He unwraps a bar of chocolate stolen from a vendor and stuffs it into his mouth. ‘It will spread across the body of Algiers.’

Every morning Safia, who is Ahmed’s best friend, teaches him how to read and write in Rabah’s apartment. His first words are a note to her. ‘QUIT SMOKING.’ She punches him in the stomach.

‘I do what I like.’

‘I learn to write and get punched,’ he says.

Safia distracts him by writing him a note. ‘WHAT ARE YOUR PRINCIPAL TARGETS?’ He reads the words, sucking his fingers, and slowly begins to write, changing letters, crossing words out.

‘My principal targets are: 1. Radio stations. 2. The telephone exchange. 3. The gasworks.’

Rabah interrupts us. He carries a small leather suitcase and he is in his best suit.

‘Goodbye.’

Rabah always has a suitcase in his hand. I want to go with him when he leaves, but he just shakes his head and says, 'Tough.'

'Where are you going?'

'Tunisia.' Ahmed and Safia seem to already know this. I am always the last to know everything.

'Who is she?'

Rabah laughs. 'It's like living with a jealous wife.' He kisses my head. 'She is politics,' he says, taking money from his wallet and giving it to me. I am scared he will not come back. Everyone we know is in gaol. The French regularly round up innocent suspects and send them to prison.

Safia says she knows of mild family men who want an easy life. They want to eat their food and play with their children. Instead they are turned into ardent militants in prison. Marx and Lenin are smuggled into the gaols.

Doctor P breaks a loaf of bread into three pieces and puts it on the table with a plate of cheeses. 'Help yourself.'

I try the cheese but it is not to my taste. He smiles at me and clasps his small hands behind his head.

'I don't know what else to give you. Perhaps some soup?'

I shake my head.

'You will like the soup,' he encourages me. 'I made it last night. Beans and tomato.'

I break a piece of bread and chew it slowly.

'What are you thinking about, Yasmina?'

'I love you,' I say.

Doctor P pours himself a small glass of red wine.

'Talk to me about Omar.'

'Omar was my brother. The gendarmes cut him. Here.' I point to my crotch.

He nods.

‘They cut him and he bled.’

He nods again.

‘And then I ran away.’

‘That must have made you frightened for a long time,’ he says.

‘I love you,’ I say again.

He thinks for a while, and then lifts up his head and smiles at me. ‘Thank you.’ His voice is quiet.

‘When you can’t sleep what do you think about?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What does nothing look like?’

I get up from the table and walk to him. He sits very still, playing with the cheese on his plate. When I put my arms around his neck and press my lips to his cheek, he pulls me off him.

‘Tell me about Omar.’

Now I am weeping, and he is sitting opposite me, drinking wine.

‘There’s a lot to cry about,’ he says. I cry more because that morning I had coiled up my hair in a new style, two hours in front of the mirror sculpting and fiddling with pins and water. For him, who does not love me. I watched my new face, turning my head this way and that way, and I put kohl on my eyes, and looked again and looked again and then turned away in shame and excitement at the spectre of my small beauty staring back at me.

‘You fucking bastard.’ Jane stands over the bed, hands in her trouser pockets, tapping her sandalled feet.

‘Where is Jim right now, Jack?’

The American has put the sheet over his head.

‘I’ll tell you where he is. I go buy bread and vegetables for the kids. Pick them up from the minder. Cook for them. See this stuff on my shirt? Where it’s wet around my breasts? That’s milk. That’s the stuff I feed Jim’s baby with. I put them down to sleep. Tell them stories. Swipe at the flies that settle on them like shit. Tell them they’re going to be okay when they cry, persuade them not to be scared, get into bed with them and hold them and try and answer their fucking questions. Is there a God? Will He make us die? You’re going to be fine, Nancy, you’re not going to die. Where’s Dad? Dad’s coming back soon. I get them listening to the birds in the trees. I get them to sleep. And then I go find their father. Someone gives me this rat-dive address. I walk there in a daze. I walk there worried my kids are gonna wake up. I walk there in a damp shirt. I get lost and have to ask directions. Turn right here, you’ll come to a blue wall, take a left, no not at the blue wall, at the fountain. Do I need this kind of grief? And then when I find him, where is he?’

She kicks the bed.

‘He’s fucking a whore.’

Silence.

‘I’m at home putting band-aids on his daughter’s knee where she fell over and grazed herself and I’m going crazy because I can’t read or write or think or put cream on my face because everywhere I look there’s a kid bawlin’ for me.

She folds her arms across her shirt and circles the room.

‘In my twenties, y’ know, there is no way I’m gonna die in some suburb eating cocktail sausages on sticks. Drinking dry martinis and showing folks my new floorpolisher and power mower. I’m not going to host Sunday barbecues on the lawn and clean the station wagon while my kids are at cub scouts.’ She opens the glass doors, walks outside and stares at the sea.

When she comes back in again, the room fills with her perfume.

The American is still hiding under the white sheet pretending to be dead.

‘The grown men I drank beer with all wanted girl wives to make them omelettes in their underwear and take phone messages and give them babies. Even though they said stuff like “pad” and “bread” and they “dug” shit, they still wanted women to look after them, just like their mothers looked after their fathers, and to always be sexy and admiring and to never give him a hard time EVER with her own fucking nightmares and whateverthefuck she needed to convince herself to hang in there. You’ve gotta make yourself stupid for love, isn’t that right, sweet heart?’

Silence.

‘And then I’m thinking, well Janey, how’s the time for big love. Get it together. I am a beautiful woman in a man’s world. And as it happens, its not that much fun. I mean what must it be like to be a beautiful man in a man’s world?’

Silence.

‘So I meet Jim. Bring me home, Jim Boy. We go travelling and it’s wild. Y’know, Jacko, in Mexico there was this armadillo that would only sleep in my hair! If the armadillo wasn’t awake Jim knew I was still asleep. We spent our time reading and talking and riding horses. Jim, who I love above all others, respect and want for all time as you know, Time is Jim’s science thing. He’s making mathematics out of the future and the past. He’s happy in the present, taking the armadillo out of

my hair, squeezing oranges and sewing the loose buckle of his sandals back on with a needle and thread.'

'Trouble is, back home, we can't make a home. This is New York. Jim says, give up your room, Janey, come and live with me. I live with him for a year with my life packed in boxes, stacked in his cellar. I write on a rickety table he bought for five dollars some place – total junk – and he's writing on a desk with anglepoise lamps and filing cabinets, with his life all organized – but it doesn't matter. Why? 'Cause, well, we meet at six o'clock for cocktails. He made great margaritas in those days, Jack. Remember? He taught me how to make them too, a mean ol' mother with lots of lime. We were a citrus family. Sometimes there wasn't anything in the house except bowls of lemons and limes. We cooked cheap good food. Saw movies, browsed bookshops. Until, Jacko, it dawns on this mad broad ...'

She shakes him.

'That I am being ripped off! So this was the man I was going to spend my life with? We talked about it. How we would have a quality life and not reduce each other, not become one of those couples you see who sit in restaurants not talking to each other except to review the food: you like the trout, Eddie? Yeah it's okay, how's your steak? In our lovetalk we made gardens and studies and chutneys and marvelled at all the books we had not read. We would have a garden full of cacti. Like we saw in Mexico. And wild roses with those big muckerfucking thorns. What did we want? I wanted to write novels and Jim, being the humble man he is, wanted to rewrite the laws of the universe. We wanted to make babies and laze around in this garden we sketched out for each other. Cats and salads and glasses of wine, playing with our beautiful kids, watering our rose bushes, reading newspapers and smiling at the wonder of it all. Thing is Jacko – you with me?'

'I'm with you, Jane.'

‘Thing is, we would talk about this stuff but he was happy with me living half a life, despite all the fancy talk about a whole life. It was just talk. My belongings in his cellar and all. It suited him well. His head was in space most of the time. The joke is, his kind of science, it’s all about interconnectedness. A unified way of thinking about nature, how human beings behave, co-evolution and structure. He’s fine with galaxies and planets, he’s fine checking out artificial life, but when it comes to our life, he says, slow down, don’t get real, babe, just relax.’

She stops because the door opens and Jim walks in with Safia following behind him.

‘I love you, Janey,’ Jim says.

‘Cocksucker.’

Backlit like a vengeful angel, the beacon flashing across her blonde rage, she stares at Safia’s short black hair. Jim’s eyes have become empty. He fixes vacantly on the door. Safia leans against the wall in her cream kaftan and smokes a cigarette.

Jack peers over the sheet, and grins.

‘Hi,’ he says to Jim and then cocks his head at Safia. ‘Hey, have you got a cigarette?’

‘Pay me for it,’ she replies.

‘Shit!’ He shakes his head, searching on the floor for his cigarette packet. ‘I don’t pay for a drag on some butt.’

‘Yeah, shit.’ Safia draws heavily on her cigarette.

Jane walks over to the table by the bed, picks up the pistol and points it at her husband’s head.

‘Hi, Jim,’ she says.

‘What do you want, Jane?’

‘I want you to sing for your supper, Jim. Startin’ now.’

Safia's belly is swollen. There is a hectic flush to her cheeks. 'I feel sick,' she whimpers. 'My breasts have turned blue. I rub salt on the nipples in seven circles so as to protect my milk. My back hurts. I get cravings for kif and honey and coral and silver. My stomach is so mighty, I think it's twins. But my black hair shines, yes?'

'Yes,' I reply. Her hair is sleek and lustrous. 'Why do you keep it short, Safia?'

'So I can see,' she says in a matter-of-fact voice.

'Yasmina, I can feel her move. She's hard, my daughter. Got no curves. All sharp edges and cold skin. I'm eating for millions, you know. My appetite is rampant. Know what she likes? Not prunes. Not stew. Not couscous with salted butter. Want to feel her?'

I put my hands on her belly. It is bulky and sharp, like she says it is.

She opens her haik to reveal a web of string and straps tied to her body. Tucked under them are a mass of automatic pistols, gun clips and grenades.

'Now I have to travel all the way to Kabylia,' she sighs.

'Why don't you put them in a suitcase?'

'What do you think? The patrols will open and examine its contents,' she snaps, irritated, rearranging the folds of her haik.

'My niece. She is seven years old. A French soldier burnt her arm. Just for the hell of it.' Safia walks like a beast of burden around Rabah's apartment.

'Oh the weight of it. It's very heavy this stuff, you know.' She rubs her back. 'The most important thing is to give the

impression that my hands are free, then I will not be stopped. This look okay?' She holds up her hands.

I nod.

'Do these hands look humble and servile enough for you?'

'No.'

She makes the wrists go limp. 'Better?'

'Much better.' I put some of Rabah's dates in her hand. 'Is Ahmed waiting for you?'

'You look. He should be outside.' She devours the dates hungrily. 'Rabah has fine tastes. Perhaps you have some almonds for me to eat on the bus?'

I do not answer her because I am looking out of the window. Ahmed is polishing the grocer's shoes on the pavement outside the apartment, but something else is happening. An old woman is pressed against the wall, her hands above her head, while a patrol runs something over her body. It looks like a frying pan.

She is frozen, a black rock, while the young man examines her. Now he waves her on, but her arms are still stuck above her head. He shouts something at her and she slowly comes to life and begins to walk, but her arms have not come down yet, as if it is painful for her to move her bones. When I tell Safia she just shrugs. 'That's normal. The frying pan is a magnetic detector for weapons.'

'You can't go out there.' These days I am frightened all the time. My guts ache with fear and there is no one to tell.

'If he puts that thing over your body you're finished.'

She finishes chewing her dates. 'Is Ahmed there?'

'Yes.'

'It's okay.' She smiles, showing her two rotten front teeth. 'I will walk ahead of Ahmed. He'll follow me. If anything happens to me he will intervene.'

‘Take the dates with you.’ I give her the lot. Never one to be polite, she does not refuse and she does not thank me.

Goodbye. Rabah is always saying goodbye. He can say goodbye in twelve languages. I am sixteen years of age.

Goodbye.

This morning he carries the same old suitcase, coat slung over his arm, dabbing perfume on his brow and the back of his neck with a yellow silk handkerchief.

‘A little orange in this rose,’ he says, taking off his Egyptian watch.

‘For you.’ He hands it to me.

‘Thanks.’ I am always gloomy when Rabah says goodbye.

‘Yasmina, you are an angry girl. Why is that, huh?’ He straps the watch on to my wrist and, when it doesn’t fit, he makes a new hole for the buckle.

‘There. Perfect.’

‘What are you doing in Paris?’

‘Ah.’ His voice is stern. ‘That is why I never had children. Because I would have had to leave too often. It is politics that separate us.’

‘You do what you want to do. That’s all.’ I turn my back on him. He sighs.

‘Goodbye.’

We are both silent. ‘Goodbye,’ he says again.

‘Goodbye.’

He picks up his suitcase and slams the door.

‘I love you darkly.’

That is what my mother said to me in a dream. She runs towards me, excited, shouting, ‘I want to die.’ Knowing she wants me to say, please don’t die I want you to live, I reply

‘Die then, that’s a good idea. I won’t be sorry.’ Whereupon she falls on the floor and rolls her eyes towards me and fakes her own death. ‘You are the most important thing in the whole wide world,’ she cries to me, but her voice is mocking. ‘You are the centre of my universe. I love you darkly.’ I want to kiss her but feel queasy. ‘Of course everything I’ve just said is rubbish!’ she howls with laughter, clutching her sides and rolling on the floor.

I tell this to Doctor P. When I say the words I love you darkly I feel like a fool. So I laugh. What’s so funny, he asks me? I don’t want to cry. Ever again. I want to laugh and smoke kif with Safia and eat ice-cream. ‘I am no good for you,’ Doctor P says lightly. ‘I am not a curer of souls. I might as well be called Doctor Paralysis or Doctor Paradox. A doctor is just a dictionary. He gives a name to symptoms the patient does not know the meaning of. You ask me to explain feelings you do not know the meaning of. But who am I? All I can say is yes that is yellow fever. That is malaria. Sometimes I go to the campsite and sleep under the stars in the Sahara. I send home a carpet from Ghardaïa or buy souvenirs for my family from Touareg or el Oued. When I go to Tunis I look at mosaics. Sometimes I buy halva and pretzel sticks and watch the ferries from Europe arrive at the port. There is little to do except try to give to each other maximum dignity. But I am a fool. It is you who will have to give me back my dignity. Where Safia is now will be decimated by French napalm bombs. It’s a shame, I like the forests there. Does she look after you while Rabah is away?’

‘Yes.’

‘If you told your uncle you are frightened, he wouldn’t go away so much,’ he says, standing up.

When Safia arrives from Kabylia, one week later, she is no longer a mother-to-be. ‘I’ve dropped my babies,’ she says. ‘They’ve been adopted. Don’t think I’m heartless, I made sure they went to good homes.’ She yawns, drinking a can of milk,

her long legs stretched out on the floor. 'In Kabylia the cedars are blue. White doves slept on my face.' She tells me this while we laze on cushions in the heat of the afternoon. 'Kabylia is paradise. It has many caves and that is good.'

'Why?'

'Caves are good for guerillas,' she says. 'They can disappear.'

'I am frightened,' I say.

'In Kabylia,' she continues, ignoring me, 'there are caves and there are fig trees. I know five families who own one fig tree between them. I like to spend whole days lazing under that tree. Yes, I like to stretch my mind under its leaves and think about melting into holes in the hills.'

'I spent a lot of time under that fig tree. I reckon we stole nine hundred farms and four hundred agricultural machines back from the French in all that lazing I do.' She lights another cigarette. 'Our leaders have banned cigarettes,' she says in a mock-complaining voice. 'If they catch me smoking they will cut off my nose.'

'Why?'

'We don't want to put money in the pockets of *pied-noir* vine and tobacco growers, do we? I used to have to smoke at the back of the pastry shop when I was at the university.' She stands up and walks in circles around the carpets.

'What's this, Yasmina?'

'What?'

'The French making a study of guerilla techniques. They think we walk in circles to pass time.'

'Rabah should have been home three days ago.'

'So what?' Safia says scornfully. 'What's your problem? This is not a party, you know. This is a war.'

'Three days is a long time.'

I don't know where Safia comes from or where she sleeps at night. Sometimes I see her with another woman at the market selling grain and she pretends not to have seen me. Safia is clever, but she also frightens me. She sleeps with doves while organising country folk in total warfare against the French. Her kaftan is stained with saffron. I do not know her age. Her green eyes sometimes turn to glass and she falls asleep on her feet.

'Tell me where Rabah is.'

'I don't know!' she shouts back.

'You're no good, Safia.'

'Is that so?'

'Have you got a mother?'

'What do you think, Yasmina? I hatched out of a snake-egg?'

'Rabah should have been home by now,' I say again.

'Rabah takes his own time.'

'He's got responsibilities.'

'Like what, Yasmina?'

'Me!' I bang my fist into my chest.

Safia strokes my bare feet lazily with her long brown fingers, the gold and turquoise rings she wears cold on my flesh. I often sleep with my head in the lap of her peppermint kaftan, and she half sleeps too, sucking the sugar cubes I put in my tea. When the door bangs twice, she says, 'It is Ahmed. Open the door.'

'He's got a key, you know he has.'

Safia's fingers stroke my hair and cheek, her rough voice cursing flies that come too near.

My mother rolls on the floor, clutching her sides and howling with laughter. 'Here's your breakfast,' she screams. 'Now

grow! Here's your lunch. Grow! Here's an orange. Grow!

'Where's my father?' I wail at her. 'Every daughter always wants to know where her father is.' She slaps her thighs. 'But I don't know. I don't know. He's gone. Lost. Slipped away. Not here. Gone. Gone. Gone.'

'Yasmina, hey Yasmina, wake up.'

'Rabah?'

Ahmed is whispering to Safia like he always does, telling her not to drink and smoke, or she telling him where she has been, how many leaflets she has printed and how many weapons she has hauled in. Ahmed has his mouth close to her ear, while Safia listens, deadpan, shaking her sleek black head. She stands up and walks to the sink where she soaks a cloth of cold water and runs it over her hair.

'Give me a cigarette.' Ahmed points to her tobacco.

'You don't smoke.'

'That's right,' he says. 'I don't.' And lights up.

'You've got a new tattoo.' I point to the three black dots on his wrist.

'Know what it means?'

'What?'

'It means, My Crazy Life.'

'Get on with it, Ahmed.' Safia is smoking kif.

'Get on with what?' I ask, straight into Ahmed's tense face.

'Rabah is dead,' he says, looking ahead of him at the wall.

'Yes,' I reply. And watch the tips of their cigarettes glow.

Yes.

There are tears in Ahmed's eyes, but not in mine. They spill down his face while he smokes. Safia puts the cloth over her head again. Someone else is knocking on the door. Safia lets in

Doctor P. He carries Rabah's suitcase in his hand, drops it on the carpet and sits down.

'Yasmina?'

What does he want me to say, this stupid French man? Hello, I am very well, thank you? Ahmed is weeping with his back to me and I am coldly, mathematically, counting my losses. It is simple addition. My father, my brother, my mother, my uncle. Wiped out. Nothing there. Lost. Slipped away. Gone. Gone. Gone. Yet the room is full. Two street hoods and a doctor called Paranoid.

'Go away,' I say to them all. 'I live here, not you.'

'She's in shock.' Doctor P frowns.

'We don't need a doctor to tell us what we feel,' Safia snarls at him. 'We know what we feel.'

They are like statues, all of them, sitting, standing, leaning. Ahmed is a fountain. Water keeps spurting from him. The smoke from Safia's kif wafts through the room. The doctor loosens his white collar. Ahmed turns towards us.

'I'm going to tell you how he died,' he says to me.

Safia flexes her ankle, turning it in circles, round and round. Ahmed speaks with no emotion, softly and very fast.

'Rabah was arrested on his way back from Paris. Someone had information about him and gave it to the police. He carried money collected for the revolution from France in his suitcase. He also had notebooks for two articles he was writing about how whites in Toulouse are gunning us down on the street. When he would not talk, they stripped him naked. They pumped his stomach full of water and put electric shocks through his body. First in his mouth. The spasms made his heart race and he had a heart attack. So they left him and then they came back. On the third day when he would not speak, they thought it was because his tongue had swollen from the electrodes. So they gave him another break. In the break

young French officers and soldiers talked to him and he spoke. Rabah said to them, you must stop this, you are injuring yourselves. It is one of the officers who gave me this information. They said to Rabah, we know that the man who places the bomb is just an arm. Tomorrow it will be replaced by another arm. But tell us the names of the men the arms belong to. We must understand their brain. You can help us understand. When Rabah would not speak they hung him from his thumbs. That was the end of Rabah.'

Yes.

I walk over to the suitcase. 'I told you to leave my house.'

'They called me in to examine his body,' Doctor P says, standing up.

'I thought you might want the suitcase. Now I must get back to work. Coughs, colds, headaches, stomach aches.' He pauses.

'You know where I live.'

'I hate you,' I say.

Safia looks at Ahmed, who makes a gesture like swatting a fly with his hand, and then gently touches the doctor's shoulder.

'All the same, you know where I live.' His face is pale.

'I hate you,' I say again. He puts his hands in his pockets and leaves. Ahmed plays with his tattoo. My Crazy Life. Algiers. 1957.

'On Sunday,' Ahmed says softly, 'you will carry a bomb into the heart of European Algiers.'

Ahmed looks younger. He looks like a young boy. Perhaps that is why he takes sunglasses out of his pocket and puts them over his eyes.

'At home, I have two loaves of bread, seven oranges, a small piece of lamb, one jar of honey, seventy kilos of

explosive, two thousand mercury detonators, three hundred electric detonators, five beds for my chemistry students to sleep in and a pair of pyjamas for myself.’

‘See you on Sunday,’ I say.

Safia sleeps with me that night. At dawn I walk out of bed and open Rabah’s suitcase in the half-light. There are only two objects in the case. The police must have removed everything else. The silk handkerchief. And a book. It is not philosophy. It is not poetry. It is a tourist guide to Paris. Something is stuck between the pages. Two tickets, in the section titled Dance Halls – *bals musettes*. *Afternoon tangos to fill the afternoon hours. Come and tango at Balajo on the rue de Lappe. Métro Bastille. Waltz, tango, java, cha-cha.*

The roads are beginning to fill with early morning traffic. Car horns and birds. Often at this time Rabah would be typing in his room. I would hear the tap of the keys and make him coffee, or he would make me coffee. That is how he knew I could not sleep because I myself am tortured every night. I am tortured in my sleep. Nightmares that wake me, shivering, scared of the pictures I have seen and the dream information received. My uncle, unshaven in his slippers, half-parent, half-companion. My most loved man. My most loved everything. When he shouted at me I shouted back, and when he said goodbye, I said, goodbye.

‘I said sing for your supper.’

Jane takes a step backwards, lifts up the pistol and shoots at the ceiling. Plaster falls on to the concrete floor.

Safia takes out a piece of chewing gum and lazily puts it into her mouth.

‘Janey,’ Jack pleads with her. ‘Put that damn weapon down.’

‘Is that what you want?’ She shoots at his boot lying by the bed. It jumps into the air and breaks into three pieces. Safia, still chewing, says, ‘If you’re going to use that gun, aim right.’ She points to me, ‘You touch her and I’ll cut your throat.’

Jane smiles. ‘Yeah? Is that a promise? Should have come looking for you earlier. I need someone to finish me off.’ She slides her hand into the pocket of her slacks and takes out three white chalky pills. ‘Codeine.’ She throws them into her mouth and chews slowly. ‘It’s a good anaesthetic but I figure I’d still feel the knife. Better to blow me away with this.’ She waves the pistol at Safia. ‘Put me out of my misery then, lady.’

Safia starts to walk towards the gun, but Jim stops her. It takes a lot to stop Safia once she has set her mind on something. Safia is indestructible.

‘These are my love words, Janey.’

Jane is looking straight at him, but she is somewhere else too, chewing the codeine. Safia walks back to the wall, blinking the sun away from her long green eyes.

‘Nothing in the world can hurt me as much as you can, Jane. Honey. I’m stone in love with you. My happiest thing, Jane, is you. My precious. My true love. You are everything. You and

me and our kids and all we have made together is everything. There isn't anything more important to me than that.'

Jane holds the pistol firm in her fingers.

'I want to make myself plain to you,' she says. 'We must say the things we want. I want to give you all that I am. I may look like a princess but there's a toad inside me. I'll tell you what everything is. That's me holding this pistol right here. I want to murder you. That's everything.'

Jane smiles at Safia, who looks down at her plastic sandals, arms folded across her chest.

'What do you think I should cook the kids for supper tonight?'

She sighs, her hands tense on the gun. 'What are you here for, Jack 'n' Jim? The carpets? The climate? The magic? The souks? The sleepy camels way down on the beach? You here for the drugs? Cat got your tongue, Jim?'

'I'm a stranger everywhere, Janey. But I don't want to be a stranger to you. I don't want us to fall apart. I can't talk to you with a goddamn gun in your hand. Let's leave this place and sort ourselves out.'

'Stay right where you are.' She clicks the gun and aims it at his crotch, all the time speaking over her shoulder to Jack.

'How about you, Jack, what you here for? To broaden your mind or something? Is that it? What words do you speak in cafés? Do you say *adios* or *au revoir*? I kinda feel better with *adios*. What words do you know in Spanish? *Pasteleria*. *Perfumeria*. *Banco*. *Menu del dia*. It makes me sick. I want to chuck my life up into some piss bucket. Myself, I like the palms and the sad creaking they do at night when I lie awake.'

Her blue eyes burn black, hair the colour of ash. Jim looks at Jack and runs his fingers across his forehead. She continues.

'Last night, someone took me out to eat this thing, um, a little pigeon in puff pastry. I puked in the toilet. Not because it

wasn't good because it was ...' She stops. This time she looks Jim in the eye. 'Because I am so damn sad I won't be happy till I've blown you to bits.'

'Janey.' Jack climbs out of bed and starts to put his jeans on.

'Let's go have a coffee and talk.'

'Get the fuck out of my way.'

'I want to talk to you, Janey.'

'Which Janey do you want to talk to, Jack?'

'You.'

She shakes her head. 'Take those jeans off and get back into that bed with your little Janey over there ...' Her eyes are hard, pearly fingernail pointing at me. Hair falling over her face, she slips off her sandals so she can grip the floor better.

'I said, take those jeans off!'

Jack is nervous. 'Okay, okay.' He slides the jeans down his hips.

'Go on, Jack. I want you to talk to Jane.'

'I'm ready for you, babe.' He grins at her.

'Talk to her.' She waves her hand towards me.

His big body freezes under the sheet. Two red patches creep into his cheeks.

'She doesn't speak English,' he mumbles, running his nicotine-yellow fingers over the stubble on his jaw.

'Yes, she does,' Safia says.

'You heard the lady,' Jane shouts. 'C'mon.'

The American lies on his back staring at the plaster falling off the ceiling. Every time a new piece falls he shudders.

'How did you get those scars on your body, darlin'?' he whispers, still staring at the ceiling.

‘Can’t hear you!’ Safia shouts.

‘How did you get those marks on your body?’

‘A French soldier put wires around my stomach and cut me.’ When I find my voice it is matter-of-fact. I also stare at the ceiling.

Jack blows through his teeth.

‘Um, why did he do that to you?’

‘I bombed a café in Algiers.’

Jack clears his throat. ‘Enough conversation for you, Janey?’

‘You only just started, Jacko.’

He tries to laugh, looking at Jim, who shakes his head and then cradles his forehead with its stripe of sunburn in his big hands.

‘What? You just felt like um ... it’s Monday, bombing day today?’

‘They killed my uncle.’

‘Right.’ The American looks at the ceiling again. ‘How’d he catch you, this French soldier?’

‘A doctor working for the police knew where I was staying. They came to get me.’

‘I don’t suppose they gave you milk and cookies.’

‘They put wires around my stomach and cut me.’

‘Yeah.’ He presses his cheek into the starched white pillow and closes his eyes.

‘What about your mom and pop? Did they come and get you?’

‘They are dead.’

‘It’s just been one big car crash for you, hasn’t it, darlin’?’

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‘Look.’ Ahmed takes off his socks.

The words Shut Up are tattooed in black dye on the sole of his right foot. ‘Anyone shouts at me, I show them my foot.’ He walks to a small box piled with stolen chocolate and breaks a bar into three pieces. ‘My Crazy Life. Shut Up. That is me me me, Ahmed the jackal,’ he hisses at Safia when she refuses her share of chocolate.

‘Not strong enough to get you high, eh?’

Safia is nervous today. But not Ahmed. ‘I got the chocolate for you,’ he turns on her, hurt.

The casbah is his city. He walks us through walls. Behind each wall is another wall. I am lost in his labyrinth, eating chocolate in one of the rooms of the hideout. He has been preparing for this day, Sunday, and I am waiting for his orders. When the French blew up a house full of women and children thinking it was a bomb factory, Ahmed’s people waited for his signal and then shot down fifty civilians. Everywhere we go we are under curfew and we are searched.

My Crazy Life. Shut Up.

Ahmed tells us for the fifth time that this afternoon we will give European Algiers a heart attack. He calls it the Heart Quake.

‘I am going to wash your hair.’

Safia heats up water and stands behind me, mixing a paste that makes my eyes water.

‘What is it?’

‘Ammonia.’

She combs it through my hair. ‘Now we must wait an hour. You are going to be a superblonde.’ I laugh. Perhaps I will

look like Rabah's American. I imagine her to be like Marilyn Monroe, curled up on a rug in a polka dot dress, laughing at Rabah's jokes.

'I don't like blondes,' Safia murmurs.

'You are nervous,' I reply.

Ahmed comes back into the room, carrying something under his arm. It is a bright summer dress, sleeveless, with big white cotton daisies embroidered on to the cotton.

'Where did you get it?'

'Safia stole it from the daughter of the woman she cleans for.'

'Why do you clean houses when you went to the university?' I do not understand Safia.

She feels my wet sticky hair with her fingers.

'That's how it is at the moment.'

'She teaches us how to read and write,' Ahmed says, and I can see he is proud of her, despite their fights.

'And what does he write?' Safia shakes her head at me, pointing at Ahmed.

'My Crazy Life. Shut Up!' he shouts.

She smiles.

'You will look like a *pied-noir* girl going to the beach.' Ahmed turns away while I put the dress on. Safia zips me up, smoothing the cotton over my hips.

'Your name is Denise,' she says, her deadpan face pale in the dark room.

'Denise,' I repeat.

I remember the girls I saw dancing on the beaches when I was five years old on Rabah's lap. I know them better than they know themselves. Safia is anxious that I will not be able to

move freely in the dress, so I swing my hips for her. Ahmed laughs at me, biting his black nails, encouraging me, yelping, 'Eh, Yasmina!' his face serious, thinking something through. He asks me to practise walking and running. My eyes are watering from the ammonia in my hair as I run down the corridors, tears spilling out of me. The more they come the more I skip and run and jump and swirl my hips, but they keep on coming and I keep on moving until my head feels strange. I am falling. Safia puts her hand on my arm and I bite her hand to stop the pain in my head. She stays right there with me, my teeth marks in her hand, she doesn't move it from my mouth, she stands still and waits.

Rabah Rabah Rabah.

'Come on then.' Safia pulls me to her, and starts to wash the paste off my hair.

Who am I now?

I am ginger. Black eyebrows and ginger hair. It is not Marilyn Monroe who stares back at me in the mirror, but a hybrid woman, not this and not that. Similar to the *pieds-noirs* who are neither French nor Algerian. Zohra, Ahmed's girlfriend, walks in and laughs when she sees me. She sweeps my bleached hair into a pony-tail while Safia paints my lips and fingernails red. Safia's black hair is hidden underneath a straw hat. Today she wears a white kaftan and white sandals.

'You can't wear this,' she says pointing to Rabah's Egyptian watch on my wrist. A man's watch, heavy gold and thick black strap. 'Take it off.'

'I want to wear it.' My voice sounds strange and she remains quiet.

Ahmed shakes his head. 'Take it off.'

Safia sips her absinthe.

'No.' I shake my bleached mad head.

Ahmed has stopped smiling. He is quiet and he is solemn. His voice makes us calm. He has prepared a beach bag for me. Inside it is a bikini, a towel and suntan lotion. 'Feel the weight,' he says to Safia. She takes it from him and nods. 'The bomb weighs little more than a kilogramme.' Ahmed is pleased.

'Where is it?'

'Wrapped inside the towel.' He gives me a forged identity card.

'Denise,' I say.

'If you are stopped by a Zouave, you say you are going to the beach.'

My target is a café popular with *pieds-noirs* and European students on their way home from the beach.

'Remember,' Ahmed says, 'if you lose your nerve, there is no difference between the girl who places a bomb in the European café, and the man who strapped electrodes on to the body of Rabah.' He shakes my hand and I am surprised it is damp. He is more nervous than I am. I look at Safia and Zohra. They smile at me. Zohra at the last minute ties a white ribbon round my pony-tail. Ahmed carefully puts the bag over my shoulder.

'Walk for us.'

I walk for them, light-hearted and brisk. They clap and cheer.

'A little more lip-paint,' Zohra whispers.

Safia puts more colour on my lips and, as an after-thought, takes a black pencil and makes a beauty spot under my eye.

'Yasmina,' she says softly, 'when you go into the café order a cola first. Drink it and then leave your bag under the table, okay?'

'Okay.'

‘Don’t talk to anyone in the café.’ Ahmed’s eyes are too bright. I can smell sweat and cigarette smoke.

‘Make yourself calm here.’ Zohra touches a place on my stomach.

I nod at them all, their faces pulled with nerves into stupid smiles. Zohra clears up the ammonia paste.

The sun is shining. It is a lazy Sunday afternoon and I walk cheerfully, the bag swinging on my shoulder. When an old woman smiles at my youth and vigour, I smile back. A man sitting on the bench under a tree also looks up at me. Who cares? I am a made-up person. I can do what I like. Bleached hair, beauty spot and painted fingernails. I am three hours old. How to speak? How to walk? How to think? Where to look with my three-hour eyes? In my three-hour life the sun is shining, it is Sunday, no one has died, no one has disappeared, no one has been tortured, an old woman has smiled at me, a man has admired me, I am more than ready for my glorious new life.

‘Hey!’

Almost immediately I am stopped by a Zouave. I smile him a three-hour smile and he smiles back. He is apologetic when he asks for my identity card. I search for it in my bag but he hardly looks at it when I give it to him.

‘Where are you going?’

To Saint-Eugène beach. ‘Perhaps I can come with you?’

‘Sure,’ I reply and flick my ginger pony-tail.

‘Another time, hey? I’m on duty now.’ Okay. He gives me back the card, holding my three-hour hand for too long.

I walk away. But he stands there watching me. Why doesn’t he go away?’

‘Hey!’ he calls again.

‘Oui?’ I glance over my shoulder.

‘What’s your name?’ Denise. I shout my three-hour name and wave. I know I must keep walking but he won’t let me go.

‘Denise.’ He runs back to me. ‘I forgot to search your bag.’ Now I am sweating. ‘Look,’ I say, ‘I told you I’m going to the beach.’ I hold the bag open. My bikini. My towel, some magazines. ‘Show me your bikini,’ he leers at me. ‘Haven’t you seen a bikini before?’ I put my hands on my hips. ‘But I want to see yours.’

‘Since when do I have to show my bikini to the police?’

‘Okay,’ he shrugs. ‘Have a good swim. Shame I can’t come with you.’

I walk away too fast.

Outside the café I can hear the jukebox. Couples inside are dancing to the mambo. I watch them for a while through the glass panes and then walk in. The white cotton daisies tremble across my stomach. Mothers and their children sip milkshakes. I order a cola and pay, find a seat by the window and look out. The women are making their way to the cinema and the men to their yacht club. Someone turns up the volume of the mambo and more people get up to dance. I get up too. But not to dance. I leave my bag under the table, my mouth still full of cola, and try to weave my way through the dancing bodies. A young man calls out to me. Do I want to dance? No. I must swallow the cola in my mouth but I don’t know how to. I’m caught between their tanned legs and arms as the mambo changes and the girls scream ‘Elvis!’ A wopbopaloobop – alopbamboom! Their pony-tails like mine, flicking up and down, hand-jiving, shaking their hips and flirting with boys. ‘Kiss me, baby!’ a boy shouts to me. ‘Tomorrow!’ I shout back, cola spilling down my dress.

Tutti-frutti! All rootie!

When I turn up an alleyway I hear the explosion. Glass shattering. My eyes shut, and still the glass is falling.

Shut Up, My Crazy Life. 1957.

I open my eyes because there is a stabbing pain in my stomach. Something is pressing into the cotton of my daisy dress and someone has locked my shoulders because I cannot move, their hot breath too near my face. A gendarme is poking his baton into my stomach, pushing me backwards towards the wall, all the time saying, I saw you running, that's what you get for being so pretty. Why are you running so fast? There is no one in this side street. It is deserted because it is Sunday and everyone has run away from the chaos of the explosion. In the distance we can hear the sirens and then the shattering of more glass. I saw you, he says again. He is a small man. Yes. He is a small man. What did he see? His breath smells of garlic and wine and he is alone, unsteady on his feet. I know what I see. I take the knife from his back pocket while he waves his baton drunkenly. I am four hours old. In my four-hour life I have bombed a café and now I fight with a policeman. The daisy dress is busting at the seams as my arms and fists hit out at his baby face and I slide the knife across his throat. It is so easy, like drawing with chalk across a blackboard.

Rabah Rabah Rabah

'Yasmina!' I look straight up into the distressed eyes of Doctor Paranoid.

He is whispering now, holding my waist with one arm, looking for something in his trouser pocket with the other, wiping my shins.

'Listen to me.'

No No No.

'Keep your voice down.' He spits on the handkerchief and wipes my face. 'I am going to carry you. Pretend you are one of the wounded from the explosion.'

But I am wounded. Why must I pretend?

'If we are stopped that is what happened. You were wounded in the café and I am taking you to my surgery.' He

lifts me, cradles me like a child and carries me to his car, an old yellow Citroën that smells of antiseptic. Stern-faced, he drives in silence through the streets, towards his house.

Streets have been cordoned off. Crowds gather and are dispersed by the army. Firemen are hosing blood stains off the pavement. Bodies with their faces covered in newspaper lie in the gutter. Fragments of glass are being swept into piles as stretchers are carried to ambulances parked nearby. A gendarme waves his arms at the car. The doctor curses, slowing down as the gendarme taps with his knuckles on the window. Doctor P is speaking to him, and I lie in the back, bloody and silent, looking out of the window. Who is that man in the dark suit bending on one knee at the feet of a young woman? He is a doctor. A stethoscope on her heart. He stands up and shakes his head. Someone covers her face in newspaper. And then he stares straight through me, the stethoscope still hanging from his neck. His eyes move over to Doctor P. They nod to each other as he walks over to the window where Doctor P is talking to the gendarme. He explains that he is treating some of the wounded in his surgery. The gendarme nods and waves him on.

‘Wait a minute.’ Clean Hands puts his head through the window.

‘Let me examine her, Pierre. She looks bad.’

‘Minor cuts from the glass,’ Doctor P replies. ‘She just needs tetanus and bandaging.’

Clean Hands points to the ambulances waiting. ‘I don’t want her to lose more blood,’ he says. ‘The ambulance will be quicker than your car.’

‘I know her parents,’ Doctor P tries again. ‘It is better that they know she is safe. Nothing serious.’ He revs the engine.

‘It is my informed opinion,’ Clean Hands will not let go, he is a dog with stolen meat, ‘that the patient is losing blood. Let me examine her.’

He opens the door and holds out his plump hand to help me. I get out and he looks at me, taking his time, from my sandals up to my bloody shins, lingering for a while on the watch on my wrist and then forcing himself into my eyes. His face is full of thought when he eventually puts the stethoscope over the blood-stained daisy nearest my breast. ‘So,’ his mouth is close to my ear, ‘sorry to hear about your uncle.’ The metal of his stethoscope pressing into my chest and he enjoying the fear he can hear in my body. The gendarme comes up to him.

‘Take the number of the Citroën and wave him off!’ Clean Hands shouts to him. The young policeman looks bewildered, but he notes the number plate all the same and walks over to the car. They are arguing. Doctor P is refusing to move off. The young boy lifts his hands in resignation and walks over to help the men carrying stretchers.

Clean Hands shines a small torch into my right eye.

‘Just checking to see if there’s any glass,’ he says, ‘not good if splinters get into the retina.’ His plump fingers move on to my left eye.

‘You know how you find a rat?’ he whispers.

The French word for an Arab hunt or killing is *ratonnade*.

‘How?’

‘You smell him,’ he says, exaggerating the word ‘smell,’ tapping his nose, as he makes me open my eye, close my eye, open, close.

‘Better get back to your friend Pierre Paranoid.’ He smiles.

‘See you both later.’

I love you.

That is what I said to Doctor P. When Clean Hands sent the officers to get me we had just heard that the library had been set on fire. I love you, I said for the second time in our short encounter and my eyes ran from the black smoke of burning books. He was packing medicines into a box to give to the son of a doctor from the countryside. Pharmacists would not sell them to Algerians so they had to be smuggled into people's homes and clinics to treat the wounded. Anti-tetanus vaccine, antibiotics, sterile cotton and penicillin. Packed and ready to go. We were just about to eat chicken and he had bought us two cakes wrapped in a sheet of *Le Monde*.

'You don't want me,' Doctor P replied. 'You want a parent.'

They took him away. And they took me away.

PART THREE

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The sky is a grey block, low on the flat land. A long drive leads up to the entrance of the château and, on the left, a small farm. After she had laid the first fire for the tourists' arrival, the farmer's wife never returned to the château. They can make their own fires. Her husband chops wood and delivers it to the house once a week, refusing invitations to eat and drink with the tourists. Remind me how many of them there are this year, his wife asks him for the fifth time. He massages salt into the cut in his hand to disinfect it and his eyes water as he speaks. Polish, Italian, German, North African, American, French and English.

Ah, Italian, his wife replies and smiles at the Inspector's wife who sits in the kitchen, stirring lumps of sugar into her coffee.

Poor woman, the farmer thinks, and quickly walks out of the kitchen because he does not like to see her bruised eyes.

The frozen flat fields and thin silver trees are harsh on the eye. There is nothing fecund, luscious, plentiful to relieve the bleak winter scene. The postbox rusting next to the gate is always empty. The blue-green cedars that line the drive have no smell. The foxes that dart across the mud fields are lean and hungry. No one has taken away the black bin-liner full of rotten eggs at the end of the drive, nor the dead rat crawling with maggots in the bin; not even the foxes have gnawed the bare bones of the turkey carcass left over from the Christmas feast. During the day a few lone cars pass the château on their way to Paris, but mostly the roads are empty. This particular morning, even the birds are silent.

The American woman stands in her white nightdress, a glass of milk in her hand, staring out at a field full of black crows. She looks like a child housewife, except the Algerian

knows she is bleeding underneath all that virginal cotton. Tatiana, the child who is half-German, half-Italian, takes off her paper crown and examines the patch of dried glue where the glitter has fallen off. She does not look directly at the American woman, but secretly counts the buttons on her white nightdress instead. Tatiana makes one of her pacts with God. If there are twelve buttons on the American woman's nightdress, she, Tatiana, will live a long and happy life. If there are only seven buttons she will die next year, alone in her bedroom in Frankfurt, her mouth full of worms.

The American turns away from the crows towards the Algerian woman, tapping her fingernail against her glass of milk.

'I know Mom shot herself while Sammy and I were asleep. And I know that you found us and stayed with us until the cops found Dad. But how did you know where we lived?'

'She gave me her address. Scribbled on a cigarette pack.'

'Well, thanks a lot, Mom,' the American sneers.

'She wanted me to know where to find her children.'

Tatiana smiles nastily, affecting a mock-American accent, 'I might look the princess, but there's a toad inside me.' She jumps off the chair and runs to the door. 'I want to give you everything I am,' she drawls, and then disappears, shouting something in German to her father upstairs.

'That child's going to end up in a loony bin,' Nancy says distastefully as she pours herself another glass of milk.

'Wilhelm wants to know where his wife is.' Yasmina rubs her eyes with the palms of her hands, until she sees a block of deep red in her mind's eye.

Luciana waits patiently for the telephone to ring in the freezing corridor, just as she has done every morning for the past week. Rubbing her bare feet, she sips sparkling mineral water and invents a new fragrance to pass time. Crushed

orchids and vanilla. If she was ever to die, she would like to smash her head on the marble curves of a grand sweeping staircase. A cascading fountain nearby. Marble. Orchids. Blood. She suddenly remembers the woman who laid the fire when they first arrived at the château. The farmer's wife lisping on account of her broken front teeth when she came to thank them for the shortbread. She remembers driving Tatiana to the farm because the child wanted to see the goats. Yes. That was the day she saw the sheets drying in the wind outside. Some of them were blood-stained. Great swirls of blood that neither soap nor hot water, nor the will of the farmer's wife could erase from the cotton. The Italian invents a location for another of her fabulous deaths. A hotel overlooking a swollen muddy river. A woman in red satin platform shoes drinks Pepsi-cola. A man appears from the shadows. He wears a straw hat and his pockets are full of rice. He takes out a revolver and places it against her forehead. She presses her lips to his, and it is while they kiss, lip to lip, that he pulls the trigger. When the telephone rings, the Italian realises she is freezing cold and she cannot stop shaking.

‘Si?’ Luciana drags the telephone cord into the far end of the corridor with dread, staring out at the blue cedars. A shaky woman's voice says, ‘This is Louise Blanc returning your call.’ The Italian takes in the low grey sky and thinks how small the cedars look against it. She lets in the field to the right of the cedars where an old stallion grazes by the electric fence.

‘Are you the woman who sees Horse?’ Luciana can hear her stirring sugar into her coffee.

‘Yes.’

‘Where do you meet?’

‘By the port. Where the ferries come in.’

‘My husband knows him well. If you can't kick Horse, Horse will kick you.’

Luciana buries her face in her sleeve and takes a deep breath.

‘Madame, if you have not found a good surgeon, perhaps I can help you?’ Louise Blanc does not reply, but Luciana can hear her conferring with someone else. For a moment she thinks she recognises the voice. What are the right words to describe the kind of torture she knows the ex-military man practises on his wife?

‘Madame,’ she starts again, ‘understand that I will pay your fare to Frankfurt and all other medical expenses.’ Another whispering voice intervenes. The Italian knows she has heard it before. Where? She can sense the woman, the Inspector’s wife, preoccupied on the other end of the telephone.

‘Luciana?’

‘Yes.’

‘I am interested in your doctor.’

The Italian is surprised to feel how hard her heart is beating against her towelling bath robe.

‘When we meet, Louise, how will I recognise you?’

‘I have twelve stitches above my left eyebrow and I always wear blue.’ The woman’s voice, although tired, is humorous and sardonic. ‘You have not answered my question.’

‘Ask me again.’

‘Why do you want to help me?’

Luciana can feel the pain of blood rushing back into her numb feet. ‘I need to talk to you, Madame Blanc, because I am going to have to barter with your husband for my freedom.’

‘Did you ever get married, Yasmina?’

Nancy blinks childishly at the older woman, who wants more than anything to go back to bed and sleep.

‘My true companion is Safia. We eat together. We teach at the same university. We seek each other’s advice and opinion. It is Safia who I describe my life to.’

‘I don’t have any women friends.’ The American plaits and unplaits her mousy hair nervously.

‘When we came to England, I put Safia in a clinic. She was badly addicted to certain drugs.’ Yasmina puts out her cigarette and stands up. ‘She tried to charm her way out, first with the doctors and then with the menial staff, but she came out okay.’

‘You know, Yasmina,’ the American fiddles with the white lace on her nightdress, ‘I’d do anything for love. I’d eat flies.’ She sips her milk.

‘I kind of hate stories. I feel like you found me and for your own reasons kept in touch and that I have to give you something in return. Like save your life or look after you when you’re old. That I have to make some exchange with you and I’m frightened of that.’

‘You are quite right. There is something I want you to do.’

Nancy’s blue eyes flicker with dread and fear. The clock strikes eleven and they can hear the rest of the house stirring, baths running, shutters opening, the beginning of a new day.

‘I want you to kill Mary,’ Yasmina says.

‘What?’ The American frowns in disbelief.

‘She is the sacrifice on our island.’ The Algerian takes a small penknife out of her pocket. A sharp curved silver blade springs out of the leather sheath. ‘We must cleanse the ugly poor English girl with her unsightly white skin from our small community.’

Nancy knows now that this is what she has most secretly feared all along. The blistering rocks and arid desert lands, the squatting robed people with their brutal laws and

unfathomable codes, all of this lurking inside the mysteriously self-possessed woman with scars on her stomach.

‘Hey, I don’t do that stuff.’ Nancy shuffles her slippers feet uncomfortably.

Yasmina stares at the American woman for a while and then gathers the silver curls of her head in her hands. After a while she says, ‘Only joking.’ She wipes her eyes, recovering from some deep hilarity that Nancy, bewildered, does not understand.

‘I don’t want anything from you.’

The American suddenly feels ashamed and foolish. She glances furtively at the middle-aged academic sitting next to her, spectacles on a cord around her neck. Yasmina has students to teach. Essays to mark. Lectures to prepare. Books to write. This is after all a comfortable château with a well-stocked fridge and cosy log fires, it is not frontline or an underground carpark or city beach or deserted park or mall in the suburbs where someone’s psychotic son sprays shoppers with bullets. This is not a place where life is cheap. Her hands are icy cold as she realises Yasmina is saying something to her. She can’t hear it all because there is a noise in her head, but she does hear the Algerian say, ‘It is not me who is dangerous. It is you who are murderous, cunning and brutal.’ She takes out her penknife and starts to peel an orange.

The American watches the coil of peel fall to the floor until the noise inside her fades into a hum. She runs through the hit list in her mousy blonde head. 1. Her mother. 2. Her father. 3. Her husband. 4. Her daughter. Yeah. A bloody early morning massacre. Lucky her ma left her a gun. Her inheritance. Nancy smiles so that the dimples show in her pale peachy cheeks.

‘I’m going to make us an omelette with Gruyère.’

‘We are all Europeans now.’ Everyone is eating a late breakfast, and no one wants to talk. Wilhelm doesn’t care. He nudges his wife’s arm. ‘Eat for a change, Luciana.’

‘I have no appetite.’

The fat man reaches for another piece of toast and grins at Philippe with his mouth full.

‘You know that phrase “give bombing a chance?”’ He starts again, provocatively. ‘Some nations are just psychopathically violent.’ When the telephone rings, the English man jumps up so hastily he drags his chair across the floor. He drops the phone and picks it up again, kicking the chair away.

‘Civil wars are the most painful kind of wars,’ Wilhelm says darkly to Mary, spooning raspberry jam into his mouth straight from the jar.

Pinar?

It’s a boy. Seven and a quarter pounds. One hour of labour for each pound of flesh. I’m sitting in the hospital with a bag full of pesetas for the telepone.

Is he okay?

He will drive a Yamaha and smoke too much, I know it already. He’s beautiful. Can you hear him sucking?

No. Yes. Yes! And you?

Not even one stitch. We cried. The doctors and the midwife cried. He cried. He bawled.

What have you called him?

Robert. My father’s name.

And mine!

No? Ben, you're joking. Your father's name is Robert?

Yes. Except in English you pronounce the t.

That's good then, isn't it?

I feel like phoning him.

Don't be ridiculous.

I know.

Don't even think about it.

I can't help it.

What did I say to you that time?

You said how very kind of you to let a stranger stay the night.

Mary cannot take her eyes off Wilhelm. She does not want to see him in detail, she just wants a surface to think on. Something she has known secretly for a long time has suddenly made itself overtly known to her at this moment, and she is not quite sure what to do with the knowledge. Without taking her eyes off the blur of Wilhelm's face, his jaws moving, the flash of blue where his eyes are, she goes over the conversation she has just heard – from Ben's point of view. Pinar? Is he okay? No. Yes. Yes! And you? What have you called him? And mine! Yes. Except in English you pronounce the t. I feel like phoning him. I know. I can't help it. What did I say to you that time?

'How very kind of you to let a stranger stay the night,' Pinar Lopez casually remarks to Ben as he carries her small red suitcase up the stairs of his London home. 'Yes, it is,' he replies, opening the window, smiling at her. He finds a bottle of wine while she washes her hands over the sink. 'I could stay in a hotel,' she says. The cork sounds energetic and ripe, too noisy as he whisks it out of the bottle. 'But you don't need to. I have a spare room.' They drink the wine and she takes out a packet of pistachio nuts from her suitcase. When they crack the shells between their teeth, the sound is amplified; he thinks

of cicadas chirping in a bush, or of a branch cracking in the countryside at night. He is completely at ease with this Spanish woman he does not know. When she asked him for directions, a map in her gloved hand, and said, 'I am in London for five days and I don't like my hotel,' it was the gloves that struck him as endearing. He said, 'I don't want to sleep with you and I have a partner, but if you want to stay in my house you can.'

She replied, 'Do you have clean towels?'

Now he finishes his wine and picks up his car keys. 'I'm going to the cinema with Mary, have a bath and there are towels in the cupboard.'

When he returns, she is asleep, and he feels comforted by her presence in his house. The bottle of herb shampoo, the electric toothbrush and spearmint paste she has put in his bathroom comfort him. Her hairbrush and the thought of her breathing between the sheets he had washed the day before, and ironed, with her in mind, please him. When Mary asked him if he wanted to stay at hers after the cinema he replied, too quickly – I have a guest, it would be rude – and drove home, happy and excited.

The next day he is still happy and excited, frying bacon and eggs and whistling a new tune. When Pinar Lopez sees him frying eggs for her, she puts her arms around his waist and they can't help themselves. She is dark. He is fair. She comes from there. He comes from here. They like each other. It is an easy and lovely lust, they know how to touch each other and when he the English man cries out with pleasure, lying on the stranger's olive belly, playing with her long black hair, he feels like he is in his favourite place, the salt marshlands on the edge of the Camargue where gulls drop crab claws from the sky and silver fish leap from the shallow waters on to the salt flats. While they fuck the telephone rings and Mary leaves messages on the ansaphone: 'Ben, this is Mary. I've run out of money. Can you lend me ten pounds until Friday? Please call

me back.’ And they hear the sound of the kisses she blows down the machine, while their kisses, Ben’s and Pinar Lopez’s, are extravagant, his fingers in her mouth as the machine clicks and whirs and stores messages that he is not going to listen to. Afterwards they drink coffee and eat cakes and she says, ‘I have a château in Normandy. You can stay there any time.’

‘With you?’ He smiles.

‘No. I live in Spain with my husband.’

Congratulations, Pinar, the English man exclaims stiffly, and suddenly everyone at the table shouts out their good wishes.

‘It’s a boy,’ he tells them, and then,

Phone soon. We all wish you well here. Bye.

Ben walks back to the table. He lingers behind Mary for a moment and then puts his arms around her shoulders. When he kisses her cheek, lightly massaging her neck, she pushes him away. Philippe breaks his croissant and dips it into his coffee. ‘It’s nice, a bit of affection, no?’ he says harshly to the English woman.

In the next room, the princess stands on a chair in her torn froth of multicoloured taffeta waving her wand. Claudine bows at her feet while Tatiana speaks to her subjects:

‘Angels hold up the columns of my parliament. A brass giraffe stands in my garden. Ghosts dance inside the walls of my palace. The black dog dribbles. A castrato sings “When the swallows return from Capistrano” by the grand piano. A blue cat licks its paws. I feed peacocks to the white winged horses in my stables. I go to the cinema to have conversations with my prince. He is called Michael. We hose down the kitchens after we kiss. I wear knitted stockings. He shows me pictures of himself. He was a policeman in Mussolini’s army. I trample the roses and violets and wasps with the heels of my silver sandals. I sleep like a bone. The sky is full of constellations

I've never seen before. Down, Claudine. The earth is turning and we should be on our heads.'

Claudine bends over and shows her bottom to Tatiana. 'This is my cuckoo,' she giggles. She rubs her eyes twenty-one times and chants 'witch, skeleton, morte.' When she opens her eyes she screams and shakes her ankle bracelet made from sea-shells. 'What shall I paint?'

'A hornet,' Princess Tatiana commands.

Claudine draws an onion. Boats with balloons. Ten blue chairs. A giant sunflower bursting into spiders. When the doorbell rings the girls race into the tiled hallway and tug at the lock of the heavy oak door.

'Who is it?'

A fifteen-year-old boy, wearing an old man's suit, stares at the girls. He shuffles his scuffed shoes and eventually says falteringly, 'Pinar Lopez?'

'She lives in Spain.' Tatiana watches his brown hands dig into his jacket pockets.

'Pinar Lopez. You call her.'

'She's had a baby.' Claudine hides behind the princess.

The boy nods. 'I come for my sister.'

Tatiana thinks about the rocking horse in the attic covered with a blanket. She has galloped across her kingdom on that mare many a morning. Just as she has watched the white carved birds hanging on nylon thread fly across the skies of her domain, wondering if they will ever land on earth to feed from the bread she saves for them.

'The name of my sister is Maria. I am her brother.' He fumbles for English words and when Tatiana speaks in German to him he shakes his head nervously.

'Come in,' Tatiana says in French, opening the door wider, and he follows her into the large front room with its fire, its

black and white photographs on the wall, and the twelve small ballet shoes arranged on the window-sill.

‘He’s come for the baby,’ Tatiana announces to the bewildered adults.

‘What baby?’ Nancy gestures to Claudine to come to her, which she does, running across the kelim rugs into her mother’s arms. The boy stammers, ‘I am looking for Pinar Lopez.’

Ben says, ‘She is in Spain. Can I help you?’

‘I come to fetch my sister.’ He takes out a photograph and passes it to the English man. Ben stares at it and nods, passing the photograph to Philippe who in turn passes it down the table. A brown baby wrapped in a white blanket lies in the arms of a young peasant woman. She is barefoot and leans against the side of a crowded bus, watched by two elderly women from the window as she gazes tenderly into the black eyes of the little girl.

‘I come from Mexico. Take Maria home.’

Ben clears his throat. ‘I understand,’ he says and gestures to the boy to sit down. When the boy does not move the English man says, ‘Your sister is sick. She is in a special hospital.’

‘Yes. I take her home.’

Ben taps his head. ‘Your sister is brain-damaged. Do you understand? Sick here.’ He taps his head again.

‘I know,’ the boy says again. ‘I know she is sick.’

‘The baby is not here.’

‘Pinar Lopez. She pay my mother for baby. I give money back.’

‘The girl is not here.’

‘Where is she?’

‘In a hospital in Paris,’ Ben says. ‘But I do not have the address.’

‘You ask Pinar Lopez?’

Ben looks uncomfortable. Today of all days, he cannot phone Pinar.

Tatiana says, ‘Why do you want her?’

‘My mother want her.’ The boy has lost his stammer.

‘But she can’t talk or walk or anything.’ Tatiana circles him. Wilhelm stands up and puts a warning hand on his daughter’s shoulder.

The boy says, ‘You give me address of hospital in Paris?’

Ben hunches his thin shoulders. ‘You give me your telephone number and I will find out for you.’

‘No telephone.’ He shakes his head.

‘Anyway,’ Luciana stares vacantly at the boy, ‘you can’t just walk into the hospital and take her away.’

Monika takes the boy’s hand. ‘Sit down here,’ she says gently, and makes a space for him on the sofa. ‘Would you like coffee?’ He nods. Wilhelm stands up. ‘I’ll make it.’ Luciana’s lazy distracted gaze shifts to her husband as the fat man walks to the kitchen, all the while playing with the nugget of silver on her wrist.

Monika talks softly to the boy and he listens, bewildered and uneasy but holding his own all the same, because he interrupts her three times and says the name ‘Maria.’ Eventually she pauses, and this time she wants to be heard. ‘You can have the Gdansk baby. I do not unconditionally love her like your mother loves her vegetable child. So you must have her.’ When Wilhelm carries the small cup of coffee to the boy, he thanks the German in Spanish. His hand is shaking when he brings the cup to his lips.

‘You can have my baby,’ Monika says again.

‘Polish?’

‘I guess so.’ She looks bored and malevolent. ‘I don’t know what her father was.’

The boy stands up, ready to leave, arms folded across the faded grey cloth of his jacket while she writes down her grandmother’s address.

She gives it to him and says something in broken Spanish about paying his fare to Gdansk.

‘Poland?’ He says the word as if she has suggested Mars.

‘You must telephone!’ she shouts, watching him walk down the drive towards the cedars.

‘How’s he going to get home?’ Luciana’s eyes wander across the walls of the room and fix on one place, her body limp and golden.

Monika smiles at the Italian woman. An angry sad twisting of her thin lips. ‘He came from nowhere. He came from the dark. Like my baby.’ She turns to Ben. ‘The Mexican child is dead. My daughter is alive.’

‘Brain-dead,’ Ben snaps back, irritated. The rash on his cheek glows, an electric stripe of distress.

‘Kaput. Finished,’ Monika insists.

Luciana makes her eyes disappear into the wall, her fingers rhythmically and relentlessly stroking her bracelet.

Tatiana stiffens her jaw, assuming the blank face and neutral voice of a news reader. ‘The little girl is holding her own. The worst is nearly over. She is in all our prayers.’

Claudine starts to cry and Nancy carries her out of the room, scowling at Tatiana.

‘She can’t help being clever,’ Wilhelm apologises.

‘Don’t be absurd, Monika,’ Mary shouts at the Polish woman. ‘The boy wants his sister.’

‘The Mexican woman can have my Sophia with pleasure.’
Monika walks towards the door in her low-heeled shoes.

‘Her condition is getting worse,’ Tatiana formally announces to the room. ‘She is in the intensive care unit and her parents are unavailable for comment.’ The eleven-year-old girl lifts up her princess dress and dabs her eyes in a parody of grand tragedy. ‘She is in a critical and unstable condition. The doctors have done all they can. Goodnight.’

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‘Look.’ Inspector Blanc bangs his fist on the Formica desk in his office. ‘We now have the results of the autopsy. The English woman died of an overdose of heroin.’ He runs his fingers through his new haircut. ‘You foolish woman. I know who your contact is. I know Professor Horse better than you do.’ When the Italian woman shrugs nonchalantly, Blanc lets his mind wander for a couple of seconds. He suspects one of his sideburns has been shaved a little shorter than the other and worries it will reveal the red mole on his left temple.

Lowering his voice, he leans back in his chair, annoyed. ‘We drink with him. We eat crêpes with him. Horse works with us.’

‘So what?’ Luciana says again.

‘Where did Mary get the drug from?’

‘I gave it to her.’

‘Of course. Why?’

‘She wanted it.’

Blanc shuffles the papers in front of him. He is sweating, even though it has begun to snow and the grass outside is covered in fine grey ice. The Italian woman plays with the silver rings on her long fingers.

‘Are you going to pump my stomach full of water and string me up naked, Inspector?’

‘I’m going to do a lot worse than that.’

‘I want to make a statement.’ He notes that her voice trembles slightly. Her black feathered gloves have fallen under a chair, and although this worries her, she does not seem to have the stamina to pick them up. Instead, she languidly

strokes the cluster of milky gemstones on the most elaborate of her rings. Blanc presses a button on his tape recorder.

‘Go ahead,’ he encourages her.

‘We all decided to play Murder in the Dark.’

‘Whose suggestion was it?’

‘The English man’s.’

‘Thank you. Continue.’

‘I asked everyone to wait for me before we started. I badly needed to shoot up, as we say in hausfrau circles.’

‘Hausfrau circles?’

‘We like to get right out of it, Inspector. Right out of Frankfurt, you know?’

He nods.

‘Our husbands play golf and our children get chicken pox and the supermarkets order a new brand of something and the stores struggle to meet their sales targets. The jewellers and delicatessens and meat boutiques.’ The Italian stops for a moment. It is the first time Blanc has seen her look remotely troubled.

‘And the porcelain shepherdesses and Alsatian specialities.’ He notices that she is wearing one of her glittering hairnets: a superstar without a camera, a president without a parliament, she is rock ’n’ roll without a microphone.

‘So you went upstairs to inject the drugs you bought from Horse.’ Blanc glances at the tape recorder.

‘Yes. Mary followed me.’

‘Why?’

‘She wanted to die.’

The Inspector leans back and sighs. He hates the bourgeois with their melodramas and long baths. His mother had to heat

up the water and wash in front of the fire, always guilty at wasting money on small pleasures.

‘The English woman watched me heat up the spoon and take out the needle. She said, can I try it, and I said, yes.’

‘I believe you.’ Blanc nods in disgust.

‘Thing is, Inspector.’ She rubs her eyelids delicately. ‘Professor Horse let me down. I’m used to cut junk. Salt, milk powder, toilet cleaner, sugar, denture powder, anything that dissolves. Horse was too pure for me. His stuff takes you to the other side. Your world, Inspector. The dead world, the gégène world, the No No No world, and some of us don’t come back.’ Her mutant German-Italian intonation is dark, harsh under the solo strip of fluorescent light that sometimes flickers above her rhinestone hairnet. ‘Like you, Inspector. You’re way down there with us.’

Blanc concentrates on tensing the knuckles on both his hands, deep in thought.

‘So the English woman wanted heroin?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘When you supplied the woman with the drug, was there anyone else present?’ Blanc stares out of the window through the slats of his grey plastic blinds.

‘No.’

‘Thank you.’ He gestures for her to continue. She moves the tape recorder closer to her glossed red lips.

‘I told her not to shoot it. I begged her – eat it, smoke it, snort it. But she wanted to do it my way. She wanted the works. The next thing I know she dies in the dark.’

Luciana and Blanc sit in silence watching the falling snow.

‘I think you understand how serious your involvement in her death is – despite the fact you have refused your right to a

lawyer?’ Blanc gives his voice a kindly timbre for the benefit of the tape recorder.

‘I think you understand, Inspector, that Madame Blanc called me from her hideout. She was very happy to talk to me. I said, Louise, never go back to him. Get well. Your husband lives in hell. He should wear pyjamas, not a uniform.’

‘Your coffee, Inspector.’ A young policewoman puts her head around the door. When her boss, irritated, shouts something very fast in French, she apologises, spilling the scalding coffee over her wrists in her haste to get away. Luciana lights one of her menthol cigarettes.

‘Horse is my sickness, Inspector. We know about yours.’

She flicks her ash on to the acrylic cord of his liver-coloured carpet. Blanc does not reply. Yes. He can feel the red mole under his fingertip. The old barber is losing his touch after all these years. If there is one thing certain to make him crazy, it is an unsatisfactory haircut. He walks over to the filing cabinet and takes a magazine out of the steel drawer. When the Italian woman starts to speak again, he sits down and, frowning, flicks through it.

‘We know you prefer playing murder with the lights on, Inspector. So why don’t you switch off your tape and tell me what you are going to do?’

The Inspector does just that. He stops the tape and stands up, clicking his thick fingers while he paces the length of his small grey office.

‘I think it’s Portugal again this year,’ he says after a while, turning to the travel brochure he removed from the filing cabinet. He holds it up, pointing to a picture of a rowing-boat piled with fishing nets on the golden sands of a beach.

‘I like the sardines. The sea might even be warm enough for a swim. The oranges are the best in the world. They’ve had their revolution. I’ll be too early for the almond blossom but you can’t have it all.’

He rubs the two-day-old stubble on his jaw and wearily sits down again.

‘Look.’ This time he does not bang his fists. ‘Is anyone going to cause me problems? The English man? Did he care for her? Will he be difficult and delay my vacation?’

The Italian stares at the first winter snow outside, stroking the brooch she wears pinned to her breast, tiny rubies sculpted into a pair of lips.

‘The English man currently shares a bed with Monika.’

Blanc smiles nastily. ‘It’s the grief, I suppose?’ He squeezes the red mole between his finger and thumb.

‘I don’t care about who loves who.’ Luciana’s head seems to be shrinking. ‘I can’t feel anything, Inspector. Junkies don’t. Anyhow, Pinar Lopez has just given birth to his baby.’

‘Good.’ He will never go back to that barber again. The man was clumsy. Had the blade pierced his mole there would have been enough blood for the old man to practise his back stroke in. ‘I’d take you out for a pastis but I just don’t feel like it.’ His smile fades into his jowls. ‘What does your husband think of your habit? Presumably he must know?’

‘Sure.’ She looks so small. Disappearing into the chair. Only her eyes are large in her tiny pin head. It is as if she is being buried alive under the snow.

‘He likes it. It suits him. I never raise my voice. I never get annoyed with him. I always look good.’

‘Most of his wealth goes into a hole in your arm?’

She yawns, almost invisible. ‘For your information.’

‘Yes?’ He watches the gaze of her turquoise eyes get lost and then settle on the branch of the tree outside.

‘She encouraged us to kill her.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘I told you she wanted to die. She was depressed. She didn’t care.’

‘I see.’ He sighs, thinking about the words ‘she was depressed,’ ‘she didn’t care.’ The police doctor insisted there was evidence that the victim had struggled and been forcefully held down. Blanc knows a thing or two about depression. When the black dog visits him, it does not just bark at his ankles, it rips them to bone and sinew. The Inspector needs a holiday. When he loosens his tie and stares at the wall, Luciana pretends not to see that something has short-circuited in his dead brown eyes.

‘I am going to close the files. But first you must give me the address of my wife’s hiding-place.’

The Italian takes a breath. Snow has almost covered the windscreen of her car parked outside.

‘To make myself clear to you.’ Blanc moves his fingers down to his temple where purple veins pulse angrily beneath his fingertips and Luciana thinks of how the actors who play assassins in the movies always shoot their victims in that place, the side of the head. The man in front of her has become someone else, someone she does not recognise. All the niceties of before, the Madame and Inspector, the cheese and burgundy, the lighting of cigarettes, the flirtatious talk, all that was over. The man rubbing his temples was stronger than her.

‘I can either close the file or I can put you away for years.’

She thinks of him now as The Man. He is big. Heavily built. A policeman and soldier. Brawn and muscle packed into the white cotton of his shirt. The Man with the broken head. Luciana almost forgets to breathe out.

‘Your wife has moved on of course.’ She eventually finds her voice. ‘She knew you would trace her.’ She watches The Man attempt to interrupt her by once again thrashing his big fists on the desk. She is surprised to be feeling something intensely after all, guessing that it is fear but riding the wave

and hearing herself recall some vaguely remembered dreamscape when she says, ‘But I will design you a virtual wife. You tell me how you want her to be. You can give her actions and you can give her text. She will say anything you like.’

To her surprise The Man nods. He seems to understand the dreamscape she is trawling through to save her life.

‘What would you like her to say?’

‘The first thing Louise says is, “I forgive you.”’ The Man weeps into his hands. ‘My wife was fond of brioche,’ he tells her in a voice that has scrambled into a mess of fragments.

Luciana buttons up her fake fur chestnut coat. As she shuts the heavy door of his office, she sees him floundering in his head, motionless. A fly caught in honey, she thinks, smiling at the attractive young policewoman who walks briskly past her carrying a pot of coffee, two aspirins and a croissant on a grey plastic tray.

‘The Detective Inspector is in urgent need of his mid-morning snack.’ The Italian twirls her car keys. ‘I don’t think he’s happy with his new haircut.’

The tourists are unsettled after the visit from the Mexican boy.

It is as if his search for the lost child has made each of them more childish. Anxious and vulnerable, they indulge each other's stories. Childhood memories are related with fake bravado as they describe the first time they learnt to swim or bought a liquorice pipe after school. Philippe jokes one night about how he got his first beating from his enraged father. What for? The French man savours the melon-coloured wine in his glass. 'I never used to write on the first line of my school exercise books. I would always start on the second line. My father told me – begin on the first line, that is where the page begins.' He raises his eyebrows and chucks his giggling daughter under the chin. 'But for some reason I could not. I had a horror of the top of the page, it seemed to me right to begin a sentence on the second line. So one afternoon he stripped my school uniform off me, pinned me against the wallpaper of my bedroom – I remember the pattern – little steam trains running through the countryside – and beat my naked butt with the toilet brush.' The French man dissolves into a fit of laughter and then chokes on the exquisite golden wine.

'But Philippe is very close to his father,' Nancy reassures the silent grinning tourists. When Yasmina tells them how she was brought up by her uncle from the age of five, Mary raises her eyes to the ceiling. 'Do you all want the OBE for surviving childhood or something?' Only Luciana remains silent. When probed she says she has no memory of being a child. She thinks she was born a teenager somewhere on the outskirts of Rome, ready to flirt and sweat at her first disco. Monika mutters something about liking the circus and then stops, as if the memory is intolerable.

To break the mood they arrange a concert. Their instruments will be the bird-whistles Philippe gave Nancy for Christmas. The Algerian plays the nightingale-whistle which she fills with water. It warbles like a miracle through the rooms and corridors of the house. Wilhelm plays the duck-whistle, harsh little quacking noises. Philippe, dark and small, plays the quail and his American lover plays the sparrow, twittering against the throaty cries of the nightingale. Luciana stoically blows the woodpecker, which needs a lot of breath, the English woman plays the cuckoo, and Polish Monika seems to have chosen a peacock that howls long and hard as if its pride has been wounded. The English man conducts them, hands delicate in the half-light. He brings in one bird after another so that the house becomes an aviary of the loved and loveless, twittering and cooing, screeching and honking, all the while the globe moving across oceans and mountains and eventually into the black ice of a Canadian lake.

‘Listen to the duck,’ Claudine giggles from the TV room. The girls cross their eyes and poke each other as Wilhelm gives the whistle his all – it quacks dementedly through the house, drowning out all the other birds.

‘He’s pathetic.’ Tatiana holds the battered old diary from Tangier closer to her face.

‘He lets my mother take drugs so she won’t ever leave him.’

‘If you don’t read out loud I’m taking the book back upstairs. It’s mine,’ Claudine interrupts.

‘She’s got scabs on her arms.’

‘Read it to me.’

‘She’s going to die and my father is going to let her.’

‘Why don’t you tell her?’

‘My mother doesn’t care what I think.’

Tatiana resolves to steal the Tangier diary before she returns to Frankfurt. She will translate it into German and live in a castle in the Black Forest with a white Alsatian dog. She will drink wild strawberry schnapps and eat the best imported peaches from Valencia and she will never wear shoes, not even when it snows. She will collect pine cones barefoot from the forest, and feed them to the fire in her private chamber.

‘Read to me,’ Claudine insists.

Tangier 1957. So Jim has sex with whores. Tonight he crept into the apartment like he was going to rob the house and I was waiting up for him and I said – I’m going to pieces, Jim.

‘The whole universe is in pieces, Janey.’

See, I married a creep.

‘Janey, you want equilibrium but it just isn’t there. It doesn’t exist. There’s no such thing. There *is* only disorder, instability, disequilibrium. I mean that’s your experience, right?’

I walk towards my husband and I know everything is over. Love is over. Respect is over. Companionship is over. He looks frightened and the words just spill out of me. See here, you dumb fuck, pack your bags and get out of here.

‘You’re just crazy, Jane,’ he says in this sad voice.

So pack your bags, you lying, cheating chicken-brained creep. Pack your bags and go back to America. Play golf and grow a paunch and find yourself some obedient wife with Jesus in her heart and cookies in a tin – get out of here.

‘Nothing in the world can hurt me as much as you can, Jane. Honey. I’m stone in love with you. You’ve blown me away. Since our eyes first met you blew me away. My happiest thing, Jane, is you. My precious. My true love. You are everything. You and me and our kids and all we have made together is everything. There’s nothing more important to me than that.’

I play his love words over and over again. Why? 'Cause I guess they're the words I have always wanted a man to say to me. He looks weird, this redhead who was my husband. Like he has this Boy expression on his face while he rolls himself a joint, leaning against the wall, not knowing what to do. The fright in his eyes makes me want to hurt him more, but all of a sudden he's wised up, he's quick on his feet stuffing shirts and books into a bag. Then he's gone.

Gone. All the compromising, kissing, fighting – five minutes and they're gone. I thought of the first time I ever saw a 3-D movie – wearing those polaroid shades and screaming. I thought of the first time I ever hitched a ride with a truck driver in Memphis, the first time I ever tasted a mango and the first time I gave birth. How my water broke and I did everything wrong and held my breath when the contractions started and cried because this was what I was supposed to do better than anything else, push out babies. It seemed like a cruel gift to woman – pain, blood, milk – and the angry tears of new life in her arms.

'They've stopped playing.'

Claudine, her cheeks flushed with the horror of being caught with her grandmother's words, runs with the diary up the stairs. When she sees her father through the crack in the door arranging eight little cognac glasses on the table, she slows down, and even pretends to read more of the book on the top step, just to torture Tatiana who is watching her in disgust. The loved child nonchalantly puts the stolen book back in its hiding-place and then slides down the bannister to count her ballet shoes for the third time that day.

Philippe fills each of the eight small glasses to the brim with Calvados and declares himself wine waiter for the night. The tourists toast each other, clinking glass against glass. The Algerian remarks on the cedars, how they only leak their scent at night and she can smell them now, for the first time.

‘That is because you Arabs have long noses.’ Philippe smiles.

‘That’s the kind of thing a jerk like you would say,’ Mary turns on him.

Yasmina just shrugs, a faraway look in her eyes.

‘Let’s play Murder in the Dark,’ the English man suggests.

‘It’s frightening.’ Nancy hunches her pink mohair shoulders, all dimples and drunken blue eyes.

‘She is a frightened woman.’ Philippe puts his arms around his wife and squeezes her hard.

‘How do you kill?’ Monika inquires in an Ingrid Bergman voice. The English man notices her nipples poking through the black silk of her blouse and finds himself moving closer to her.

‘You stroke the victim three times under the chin.’

Monika nods, screwing up her mouth, her pale Polish flesh luminescent every time the flames flicker and climb in the fireplace.

‘Under the chin? That’s kind of scary,’ Nancy complains in a childish voice, nuzzling against Philippe’s white polo shirt. ‘I don’t like the dark.’ Mary groans. ‘I hate grown-up women who speak in little girls’ voices.’ Philippe bangs his glass on the table. ‘Kill the pig, cut its throat, kill the pig,’ he chants and suddenly, Tatiana and Claudine appear, drawn by the French man’s chant. They too bang the table and shout in unison, ‘Kill the pig, cut its throat, kill the pig, poke its eyes.’

‘Are we ready?’ the English man shouts above the noise, pouring himself another Calvados.

‘Just one minute!’ Luciana holds up her hand. ‘Wait for me while I go to the toilet.’ She runs up the stairs in her red suede shoes with the curved heels and spaghetti-thin ankle straps, untying the silk scarf from her hair. Mary puts down her glass

and follows her as the girls shout, 'Kill the pig, cut its throat, kill the pig.'

The front door is open and the full moon a fat blue globe in the winter sky. Bidy Ba Ba, who has three small stones tangled in the fur of his belly, decides to purr. He does not stop even when Nancy tries to remove the stones. Claudine holds his back legs and Tatiana his front legs. All three of them lovingly tend to the beast, admiring his long whiskers and the little beard under his tiger chin, the American saying over and over, 'Sorry, Bidy, am I hurting you?'

'Why does Luciana always leave the room like that?' Monika whispers to Yasmina.

'Because she's a junkie.'

'Impossible.'

Yasmina shrugs.

Wilhelm puts more wood on the fire. He wants to touch the English woman again. There is something about her unpleasantness that he finds sexy. He wants to excite her body. Knowing that she finds him repulsive excites him even more. He wants to part her thighs and lick her with his tongue until she cries out despite herself, hating him who is so fat and hideous for pleasuring her.

Luciana walks slowly down the stairs. 'Do we all know who the detective is?'

'Yes.'

'So if we are murdered we are stroked three times under the chin?'

'Yes.'

'Ready?' Ben has his hand on the light-switch.

'No.' Mary peers over their heads. She is standing on the third step from the bottom of the stairwell, clutching one of the dark wooden banisters. Wilhelm says, 'What is it, Mary?'

Everyone is surprised by the tenderness, the familiarity in his voice.

‘It is Sunday,’ she replies, deadpan.

Ben slides his livid hands deep into his pockets and looks at the floor while his girlfriend mutters something from her place on the stairs, oddly beautiful with her white skin and purple lips. He blocks out her voice, but he knows she is speaking because he can see her lips moving and he can feel the heat of everyone else listening to her. Gradually, he lets in some of her words.

‘I was so hungover I drank the holy water from a bowl in the church.’ She looks like she’s got ice in her veins, Ben observes, and suddenly feels frightened.

‘I was thinking about him all the time, like you do. Cherry Shiver they called me on account of my goosepimples. It was exciting. He gave me a golden-winged female lion and we ate Italian cake.’ Mary fixes her eyes on the wall, her voice expressionless. ‘Eventually I say I’m going to bed. I am in my nightshirt and I am in the kitchen squeezing grapefruits. He comes out of the bathroom and hovers. I say, why don’t we listen to music in bed and drink grapefruit rum? He moves towards me and we kiss and nothing is as important as this.’

Ben crosses his fingers inside his pockets to comfort himself. Don’t let her frighten you, he cautions himself. I don’t know her. Mary is a complete stranger to me and I don’t think I like her. He remembers her anger that day when she said, ‘We do not come from the same England, you and I.’ How he had wanted them to grow old in a garden full of roses, drinking tea sweetened with honey.

‘Beautiful kissing. I have been abducted, yeah, I’m so scared.’ Mary sighs, stroking her upper lip. ‘We’re okay. All shook up. It is everything, his hand pressing into my back, see.’

‘Gee Mary,’ Nancy laughs huskily to herself. ‘Who you got in mind for this major experience?’

‘Kill the pig. Cut its throat!’ the girls scream in unison. Claudine makes her hands into little wiggling pigs’ ears and runs away squealing. Ben’s cheeks flush as his girlfriend rhapsodises on the stairs. How come this love diva can barely bring herself to kiss him in the morning, pursing her lips shut and staring over his shoulder at the bare branches of winter trees. ‘Cut its throat, cut its throat,’ Tatiana snorts. Ben grabs a weapon, a cooking pot, and gives it to her to hunt the small piglet running through the echoing corridors of the château.

Monika puts her hand on her ample hip. ‘So tell us, Mary, who is your sweetheart?’ Luciana taps her curved red heels on the floor.

‘That is Mary’s secret,’ she says harshly in Italian.

Wilheim whispers something to his wife but she just shrugs, pale and golden, shivering in the corridor. When he persists she shouts in Italian, ‘If you’re so worried, call a doctor!’

The loved and the unloved glance slyly at Luciana. So perfect. So charming. So ‘above them all,’ Monika thinks once again from the centre of her secret lonely self. The fat German glances up at Mary and then wipes his sweating brow with a dainty plum-coloured hanky. An odd dandyish gesture from the ungainly man with three rolls of fat curving into the back of his neck. ‘Mary,’ he whispers, and no one knows what to do with the name that echoes through the corridor, so inappropriately mouthed by the fat man.

Luciana gracefully addresses her fellow holiday makers. ‘My husband,’ she says, ‘has an avant-garde way of expressing his cynical view of marriage. He likes to take off his wedding ring and part the thighs of young women. Then he pushes the ring into her sex.’

Philippe laughs. ‘Sounds interesting, Wilhelm.’ He looks around him, quickly noting that his American wife is not amused, but the dark French man is too drunk to censor the guffaws exploding in his throat.

‘You might lose the ring, no?’ Philippe splutters.

‘He always finds it again,’ Mary says blankly, and once again, Ben stares at his partner confused. ‘Although he is repulsive,’ Mary lingers on the word ‘re-pul-sive’ and the German bows his bald head.

She smiles. ‘Why don’t we play murder now?’

Everyone is relieved when the English man switches off the light and they can hide in the dark. Biddy Ba Ba sits on the stone doorstep staring through the half-open door into the house. Every now and again he bites the stones still tangled in his belly. Scarcely a minute passes before a loud agonised scream sends the cat scampering into a bush. ‘AAAAH Murder!’ Silence. ‘Who is the detective?’ someone shouts in the dark over a chaos of footsteps. When the lights are turned on, everyone makes their way towards Yasmina, who is slumped, corpse-like against the wall, clutching her heart.

‘I am the detective,’ Philippe announces, taking out pen and paper and staring hard at the expressionless faces huddled around the body. He bends down and examines the corpse.

‘Yes,’ he nods. ‘Algerians always die like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘With a sly smile on their faces.’ The French man holds one of Yasmina’s ankles in his hands. ‘My father said Algerians were easier to kill than rats.’

Yasmina opens her eyes and nods at Monika. ‘I told you what people think always finds its way into the world.’

The Polish woman counts the cedars reflected in Yasmina’s eyes.

‘We’ve got to find out who did it.’ Nancy lights up one of her cigarettes, smoothing her childish plait.

‘You did it,’ her husband points to her, spilling some more Calvados into his glass and gulping it down thirstily.

‘It’s not milk, Philippe,’ Monika chides.

‘Me?’ Nancy opens her blue eyes wide. ‘No sir. I could not kill a fly.’

The globe moves into Mato Grosso, Chicago, Dallas.

Tatiana crashes into the room and stops abruptly by the body.

‘I accuse you, Madame,’ the French man once again points to his wife.

‘Yes. She did it.’ Tatiana agrees.

Nancy throws her cigarette to the floor and stamps on it.

‘You are a horrible little girl!’ she screams into Tatiana’s flushed face.

‘Jane-y, Jane-y, can I have some money? What for, Jim? Um. Um. Um. For some candy, Jane-y.’ Tatiana looks up at her father just as Nancy swipes her hard across her legs. ‘You evil child,’ the American chants. ‘You evil evil little girl.’

‘Gotta codeine, Mama?’ Tatiana mocks in a highpitched American accent and then mimes a gun with her two fingers, shooting at the ceiling and making TV bang bang noises in her throat. ‘Why don’t you just take this gun and put me out of my misery?’

Luciana stares coolly at her daughter. ‘Tatiana is a very good actress,’ she explains to Nancy. ‘I don’t know where she gets her lines from.’

‘Evil!’ the American shouts again, cradling her pastel mohair shoulders with her hands.

‘Who is Jane-y?’ Monika moves closer to Tatiana.

‘She told me.’ Tatiana points to Yasmina and glares at Nancy. ‘Jane-y, Jim, Safia, Jack, Yasmina, Rabah and Ahmed.’

‘What is she talking about?’ Wilhelm glances at his wife, puzzled. Tatiana shouts at him in German and he suddenly understands.

‘You have been telling the child stories?’ He smiles conciliatorily at Nancy. Tatiana suddenly bursts into tears. ‘Rabah Rabah Rabah,’ she wails. When Yasmina rises from the dead and holds Tatiana close in her arms, the assembled tourists witness the strange sight of the eleven-year-old girl weeping as if her world, whatever it is, has truly ended. The middle-aged woman, the North African with scars on her stomach, wraps her arms around the girl, and talks to her in a mixture of Italian, German, English and French. Worst of all, she sobs with her, for a long time, imbued with a grief so private, so utterly removed from them, a grief so big, it is as if the whole château cannot contain its force. Eventually, Yasmina takes a strip of silk out of her pocket and wipes the child’s eyes. When Nancy tries to break the charged and terrible silence, the Algerian interrupts her and very seriously thanks the little girl. Thanks her in three languages for her tears, for her curiosity and for her trouble-making spirit. All these things, Yasmina tells the child, are good things, stroking her hair as she buries her face in Rabah’s silk handkerchief with its faint lingering scent of roses. Bewildered and embarrassed, everyone begins to look for their glass of Calvados and make small-talk about the tang of apple brandy on the tongue, how it warms the chest and whether it is best to buy it duty-free on the ferry home, or at a local shop.

Philippe puts his hand over the light-switch, shouting out in a bluff, laboured tone, ‘Murderers and victims will sort themselves out in the dark,’ and turns off the light.

Mary walks barefoot into the living-room with its twelve tiny ballet shoes lined up on the window-sill. She leans her head against the cool stone wall, staring at the black and white

photo of the upturned boat on the River Lee, Hackney, vaguely aware of muffled footsteps as people make their way to different parts of the house. She thinks of the taste of the water as the boat turned over and spilled all her passengers into the water. Birds from the local sanctuary circle the floating boat. Mary feels it is her own death, that she is sinking into the weeds of the River Lee, dying among the rusty saucepans and old shoes tangled in the weeds. Drowning under the concrete dust scum that blows from the estates nearby. When something touches her leg she is about to shout out 'Murder' but remembers just in time that the murderer is supposed to stroke the victim under the chin three times. She looks down and sees Bidy Ba Ba rubbing his fur against her bare shins. But there is someone else there, too. Worse, she can see their shadow on the wooden floorboards in the moonlight and she knows she is in danger.

A gentle fluttering of warm breath shivers across the back of her neck. She moves away from it but a hand grips her shoulder and then her breast. It fumbles to feel her bare skin and gives up, moving down to her crotch. Just as the English woman remembers to scream 'Murder' the same hand claps itself over her mouth.

'Bitch,' Philippe drunkenly murmurs into her neck. 'Cold bitch.' The English woman struggles in the dark while he presses her against the wall, opposite the photo of the upturned boat. Claudine, hunched under the window-sill, holds on to the ribbon of one of her twelve ballet shoes. When her father pulls his trousers up and leaves the room she stays where she is, the much-loved child, paralysed under the twelve giant moths that are her dancing shoes. She watches the English woman fall to the floor. Bidy Ba Ba walks in a circle around her. Finally he sits on her stomach, paws tucked under his tiger fur belly, and drifts into sleep. Both cat and English woman look like a perfect picture of repose. They could be lazing by a river-bank on a sunny day, or leaning against a tree, perhaps the tree in

one of the photographs on the wall, heavy with blossom and the promise of plenty.

Claudine decides never to dance again. The little girl watches Ben, her godfather, tiptoe into the room. She wants to cry out to him, he who cooks her mushrooms and makes up little tunes for her on his accordion, but for the first time in her life she feels too afraid. When the English man sees Mary he whispers, 'Found you,' bends down and strokes her gently three times under the chin before creeping away to hide in the shadows with Monika. She watches Wilhelm, who is out of breath, make his way towards the English sleeping beauty and feel her pulse. He too disappears into the shadows but returns with Luciana, who nods, indifferent to what the fat man is saying to her. The last thing Claudine hears is her mother shouting from some other part of the house, a loud indignant cry, 'Murder, murder!' Claudine tries to get up. She wants to save her mother's life but her small body refuses to move.

Monika likes the way the English man kisses her in the shadows. The thin man who holds her tight removes with his kisses the nails from the palms of her hand. Yes. It is time she stopped suffering. It is as if she has been roused from a deathly sleep during which her heart and her country have been turned inside out. Indifferent to her body, grieving for lost love, Monika has slept through centuries. An old peasant woman with a goose under her arm beckons to her in the dark and then fades, like a special effect in a film. The images crowd in as she warms her cold hands under his armpits, totally involved with this theatre of flesh and memory: the two boys in the flat next door who played Jimi Hendrix all day in their bedroom; the four sisters who all slept in the same bed – the very fat one had to sleep at particular fixed times because she did not fit in; the nightwatchman who ran an illegal vodka distillery; the woman downstairs who made sausages and whose sister-in-law was a hairdresser nicknamed the Golden Hand; the trout in the bath fattened up for Christmas. The years of curfew. Of saving dollars. Her five years travelling in Europe with Gustav after he finished studying philosophy at the university in Warsaw. Returning home, loving each other, they visited Auschwitz-Birkenau and bought juice from a vendor in the carpark. When she dug her heel into the earth nearby she retched. The juice was sweet like the smell of death. In the mountains they ate whale blubber ice-cream and swam in the cool mineral waters of the spas. She did not know then, shivering and naked, waiting for him to pass her the towel, that love passes quickly. To be loved and to be abandoned, is that not the way life is? Her daughter would have to agree. Enough snot and tears, Monika thinks. It is time for pleasure. Forget love. Live and yearn. Enjoy good cheese and bread. Choose your friends with care. Stroke small animals that become your companions. Grow old disappointed but laughing.

When they kiss again, it is with all the heat of the uncommitted. Only the cry ‘Murder murder’ pulls them apart.

‘That will be Mary.’ The English man grins, and Monika smiles savagely to herself, glad Ben cannot see her for the barbarian she really is.

‘Murder’ is what she cried into her lonely pillow when she first saw Gustav kissing his young blonde. I have been executed, she thought at the time. For him I no longer exist.

As they make their way to the kitchen, now flooded with light, they can see Nancy lying akimbo on the table, the knitted green tops of her stockings visible under her skirt. ‘I’m dead,’ she giggles, taking a sip of Calvados, liking the way it burns her lips.

Philippe refills all their glasses, drunk and unsteady on his feet.

‘Where is the detective?’ His eyes have blurred.

‘Here I am.’ Wilhelm steps forward looking uncharacteristically pale. Tatiana trails behind him, chewing the cuffs of her sleeve.

‘So.’ Wilhelm speaks in a faint distracted voice. ‘You, Monika, I think you do not like Americans?’

‘You’re wrong.’ Monika smiles, and everyone thinks for the first time how attractive she is. ‘America has long been the yellow brick road to the land of plenty. We have always yearned for America’s glistening automobiles to speed us down the highway to somewhere better. No, Sir. We Poles are crazy for Americans.’

‘I see.’ Wilhelm ponders. Nancy lights a Camel Light.

‘I hope the corpse is allowed to smoke?’ she drawls, leaning on her elbow, and flexing her toes.

‘Where is Claudine?’

‘Hiding,’ Tatiana says. ‘Anyway,’ she continues, ‘I know who did it.’

‘Who, mein Liebling?’ The detective bends over his daughter and tickles her ear.

‘She did it.’ Tatiana points to Yasmina.

‘Me?’ The Algerian makes a puzzled face. ‘Why should I want to kill an American?’

‘Because she killed you,’ Tatiana replies darkly, still sucking the dye out of her cotton cuffs.

‘Excuse me, Sir.’ The English man steps forward.

‘Yes. You have some evidence?’

‘I have a query.’

‘Speak now or never,’ the German insists.

‘I believe there are two murderers in this room.’

‘On what do you base this assumption?’

‘I am one of them.’ Ben sticks up his hands in mock surrender. ‘But it is not Nancy I murdered.’

Philippe refills everyone’s glass. ‘Once a wine waiter always a wine waiter,’ he sighs. ‘Is it time to eat yet?’

‘Then who killed Nancy? Because it wasn’t me,’ Yasmina interrupts.

‘I know.’ Tatiana walks towards the American.

‘Who?’ The detective questions her with an extra firm note in his voice.

‘She did it herself,’ Tatiana says. ‘It’s suicide. She wants to be like her mother.’

Nancy tenses her mohair shoulders and jumps off the table.

‘Where’s my daughter?’

‘And who did you kill?’ Wilhelm puts a hand on the English man’s shoulder.

‘His girlfriend,’ Monika volunteers, and stops. The sound of a child crying echoes through the house.

‘Maria?’ Tatiana makes her eyes wide and rolls them from side to side as the crying gets louder. ‘No, it is not Maria. Maria is in hospital in Paris. But she left her white birds and her black horse here.’ She turns angrily on Ben. ‘You must tell her brother the address so he can take them back to her.’ Before he can answer, Tatiana puts her hands together in prayer position and farts. ‘Maria kills cats and throws bricks at birds when she goes for walks in the gardens of the hospital. She should be locked up in a cell with criminals. No one has punished her enough. Hurt her. Then she will know the difference between right and wrong. She’s sick. Out of control. Don’t let her watch television. Make her cry and then she’ll say sorry.’ The girl smiles horribly at the bemused adult faces that stare at her. ‘No. It is not Maria crying.’ She pokes her fingers into her eyes and dribbles. ‘It is Sophia. Polish Sophia from Gdansk. She is here. In this house. I can hear her. I hear her every night. She’s slicing someone at school with her ruler. She’s a liar and a bully and she crawls under the desks and bites the children’s ankles. She cuts herself with scissors and pulls out her hair.’

The girl stands on the toes of her patent leather shoes. ‘Lock her up. For ever. Don’t give her any food. She should be hit until she says sorry. They should take away all her toys until she says sorry. They should set the dogs on her until she says she will be a good girl. She’s a liar. Lock her up and throw away the key.’ Tatiana runs to the bannisters and turns upside down like a bat. ‘Find her. We must find her.’

‘Claudine Claudine!’ Nancy runs to the living-room where the cries get louder. Philippe follows her. When the American sees Mary sprawled on the ground she is irritated. ‘Mary, where’s Claudine?’ she snaps, distractedly picking up cushions and

throwing them on to the floor as if her daughter might be under one of them. The crying gets louder and Mary does not answer. Philippe has just spotted his daughter. 'She's there.' He points under the window-sill, but he does not move. Monika, Ben, Wilhelm, Yasmina, Luciana and Tatiana crowd around the English woman while Philippe watches his wife drag Claudine from out of her hiding-place. The golden girl hides her face, sobbing into the soft folds of her mother's pastel mohair jumper.

'What's wrong, sweetheart?' Nancy rocks her daughter, stroking her flushed cheeks. 'Why are you crying?' Philippe watches in terrible sober silence.

'Mary Mary, I've already owned up.' Ben leans over his girlfriend and playfully tickles her ribs. When she does not respond, Monika bends down too and walks her fingers over the English woman's warm blue lips.

'Why has she got bruises on her shins?' Luciana asks in a strained voice. She also looks ill, her immaculate blonde hair damp, darkened with sweat.

'And where's the detective?' Monika is still in a light-hearted mood. She wants to play all night. Wilhelm steps forward, his pink face grave and unsmiling. Philippe watches the German lift up the English woman's thin slightly freckled wrist and feel her pulse. Yasmina shakes her grey head. 'It is not possible.' No one knows what she is talking about. 'She is dead,' Yasmina whispers, shocked when Monika laughs. Claudine lifts up her head and peers over her mother's shoulder. 'Biddy Ba Ba killed her,' she informs them all in her sweet girl's voice. Philippe walks towards his daughter and tentatively strokes her nose with his little finger.

'Chérie, I am going to make you supper.' Her father's voice is soft and cajoling. 'What would you like?' When she buries her head in her mother's shoulder, Nancy hugs her daughter and says, 'It's frightening, all these games, isn't it, honey?' Philippe takes his wife's hand and presses his lips to it.

Monika is just about to say, 'What a perfect family you are,' but stops because she has just heard Wilhelm, who has the telephone clenched under his many chins, ask the operator in broken French to put him through to the nearest police station.

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Tatiana turns towards Inspector Blanc. 'I know who killed her.'

'Who was it, Princess?' He tries to make his voice careless.

She takes a deep breath. 'You are a man who respects the law, Inspector?'

'Oui, Princess?' Blanc demurs. He feels it is he who is being interrogated and resolves to bring this conversation to an end as soon as he can. He has booked himself on to a flight to Faro in exactly four hours' time and is worried he has overpacked. Are three pairs of shoes excessive for a short winter vacation?

'I want to sue my parents for being born.' The girl has dressed up for the occasion, brushed her hair and scrubbed her hands for an hour with a nailbrush over the bath.

'I know who did it. I want to sue the unloving and make them pay.'

'Tell me, Princess.' Blanc stifles a yawn.

'It is she,' Tatiana points to her mother, 'who murdered me.'

'But you are alive, Mademoiselle.'

'That does not mean I enjoy my life, Sir.' The child rests her chin on her knee.

'Quite so.' The Inspector takes out a cigar. 'But nevertheless you are breathing, little one. You are not on my homicide file and this is not a trial.'

'I pursue my case, Monsieur. I speak English, Italian and German, and I want justice in all three languages. I have been damaged by unlove. It makes me weep at inappropriate moments when I should be dignified. It makes my voice

strange and narrows my eyes. My loud laugh has become sly. If I had been loved, I might have had more charm. I might not have been ugly and apologetic. As it is I have only guile.'

The girl gulps for air, clutching her chest. 'She called me evil.' Tatiana spits out the word and cries inconsolably. 'Evil.'

Nancy thinks for the hundredth time that holiday how much she detests, abhors, hates this plump-faced child. How did nature spurt out such a monster?

'I have always cared for you, my daughter.' Wilhelm bows his fat head, two tears oozing out of his pale blue pig eyes.

The girl nods at him.

'But all routes lead to Notre-Dame. That means Our Lady The Mother,' she explains to Claudine who stands half-heartedly on the points of her stained ballet shoes. 'I have visited the city of the mother many times. The city of Notre-Dame. It is an old city, paved with cobblestones. It is half-comforting but mostly terrible. The women wear hoods and clogs and watch me from the shadows. I do not want to go there for I am not welcome in that city. I get on a bus and ask for the nearest airport but the driver takes me to Notre-Dame instead. He always does. That is because all routes lead to the mother.'

'You are so dramatic,' Luciana sighs. 'Everything for Tatiana is a melodrama.'

'So you have always said.' Tatiana looks coolly at her mother, whose long legs are crossed on the most comfortable armchair in the room.

'My daughter wants revenge for some crime she feels I have committed. But love is not compulsory. Nor is beauty, of which she has very little. You are wasting your time with me.' Luciana's eyes seem to suck in the colours of the room, now slate grey, now burgundy, her voice matter-of-fact and low, a cool *nouvelle vague* heroine in black petticoat, describing the

meaning of life as if reading the instructions on the back of a coffee jar.

‘It is a disappointment to me to spawn a child who feels so deeply. I would like to refute the idea that to feel somehow makes you a better person. Who cares? I hope, Tatiana, that in the future you will rip out your womb and pack it with technology. I hope you will completely rewrite the text of your body and that birth will never be your biological destiny as it was mine. I hope you will make your children from a menu that pleases you. Run away now. Take your dirty pointing fingers elsewhere. Go to the TV room and relocate yourself to a simulated city in 3-D. Take control of the water pipes and subways. Placate angry tax payers, disappear into cool grey screens and interact with on-screen actors, interact with concrete, target your enemies with a virus. When you become a politician no one will know you trained on a personal computer. I’m going to cancel all appointments and have a long sleep. I repeat, I have not broken the law.’

‘It depends on which law we are talking about.’ Tatiana continues to jab her finger at her mother. ‘Love is the first and last law. It is the only law worth not breaking. There is nothing else.’

‘What we want and what we get are different things.’ Luciana is smiling now.

‘Yes.’ Tatiana turns once again to Inspector Blanc. ‘My mother did it. Take her away.’

Blanc looks sideways at Luciana, who gazes into her sheer grey stockings, as if watching TV.

‘But it is not you we are talking about, little one.’

The Inspector stubs out his cigar and addresses the English man.

‘Monsieur. Is there any detail you would like me to consider before I close my file?’

Ben's fingers tear at the flesh on his elbow.

'I can't remember anything. It's gone. Nothing there.' His voice is anguished and sincere. The Inspector nods sympathetically.

'What is that?'

'Rat blood.' Philippe ambles over to the skirting-board. 'We killed a rat.'

'That is a lot of blood.' Blanc is surprised to find a new note of interest in his voice. Perhaps he should miss his flight after all?

'It was big.' Philippe holds out his hands, describing how large it was for the Inspector. 'It might still be in the bins outside if you want to see.'

'Which one of you killed it?'

'We finished it off.' Philippe smiles, pointing to Ben and himself.

Blanc glances at his watch.

'I think she found me interesting company,' Luciana interrupts in Italian.

'I don't want an interesting mother,' Tatiana replies in German and, despite herself, smiles when she catches Luciana laughing into her gossamer eggshell-blue sleeve.

Nancy strokes her daughter's hair, wondering why it has lost its shine. 'Just before she died, when she talked on the stairs about love and um ... stuff ... she kinda looked like she was on the edge of paradise.'

Philippe throws up his hands. 'C'est folie!' he shouts hoarsely, and the Inspector nods in agreement. Encouraged, the French man makes a joke about Detective Inspector Blanc smelling a rat, all the while opening a bottle of champagne with a flourish of the wrist. When he leaves the room, everyone wants him to come back as quickly as possible,

missing his panache and good cheer and declaring him champion of the day when he returns with a silver tray laden with iced pale green glasses carved into the shape of lilies.

Biddy Ba Ba sits on the roof of the barn, hypnotised by the snow falling in slow-motion on to the cedars. Where once the agonising vista of open space made his fur rise as he hid behind chairs and under beds, now he wants to be outside for ever. If anything, the frightening place is inside. The danger zones are interiors. Inside is where fearful things happen. Not even snow will force the beast to risk shelter there.

Warmed by the fragrant logs crackling in the stone fireplace, the tourists and the Detective Inspector raise their glasses and toast the New Year, making lists of all the good things they want to happen to them. They joke about losing weight and giving up smoking, careful with each other as they make light-hearted polite conversation, smiling at anecdotes and confessions of weakness.

‘I know who killed her,’ Tatiana declares once again.

‘Who was it, Princess?’

‘You did it.’ She points to the Inspector.

‘You killed her,’ she repeats, loudly, in German.

‘What does she say?’ Blanc looks bemused.

‘She says you are the killer,’ Yasmina translates in French, and when she does not take her eyes off his puffed face colonised by a network of angry blue veins, the Inspector, who was in the middle of congratulating the French man on his choice of excellent champagne, spills the entire contents of his glass on to his immaculately ironed navy serge trousers.

‘Blanc has gone pale,’ Luciana whispers deadpan in Italian. When she knows she has her daughter’s attention she says, ‘I can’t remember a thing. It’s all gone Blanc.’ Despite herself, Tatiana guffaws reluctantly into her hand at her mother’s bad joke. Even Claudine, who has decided to be mute for at least

three years to make her parents suffer, manages to smile at her friend's infectious laugh. The globe moves into Omsk, Stalino Bay, Baku and finally, when the two girls can no longer conceal their hilarity at the sight of their fathers offering the Detective Inspector an assortment of handkerchiefs to mop himself up, the world stops at Alaska.

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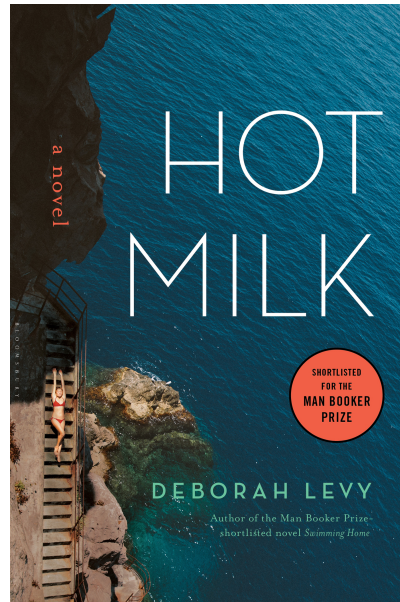
A Note on the Author

Deborah Levy writes fiction, plays, and poetry. Her work has been staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company, widely broadcast on the BBC, and translated into fourteen languages. She is the author of highly praised novels, including *Hot Milk* and *Swimming Home*, both finalists for the Man Booker Prize, the story collection *Black Vodka*, and the essay *Things I Don't Want to Know*. She lives in London.

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Also Available from Deborah Levy

Hot Milk



Man Booker Prize Finalist

Sofia, a young anthropologist, has spent much of her life trying to solve the mystery of her mother's unexplainable illness. She is frustrated with Rose and her constant complaints, but utterly relieved to be called to abandon her own disappointing fledgling adult life. She and her mother travel to the searing coast of southern Spain to see a famous consultant in the hope that he might cure her unpredictable limb paralysis. But Dr. Gómez has strange methods that seem to have little to do with physical medicine, and as Rose's illness becomes increasingly baffling, Sofia discovers her own desires in this transient desert community.

Hot Milk is a profound exploration of the sting of sexuality, of unspoken female rage, of myth and modernity, the lure of hypochondria and big pharma, and, above all, the value of experimenting with life; of being curious, bewildered, and vitally alive to the world.

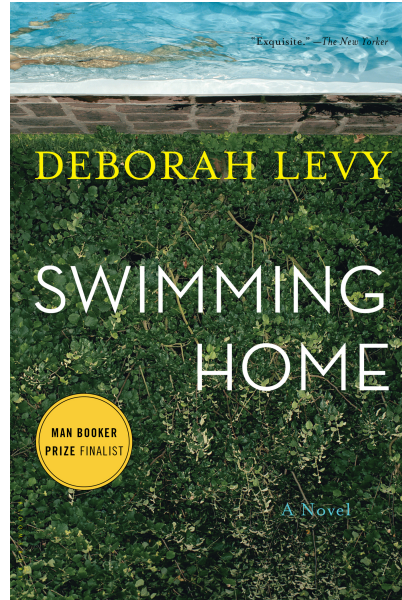
“Gorgeous ... What makes the book so good is Ms. Levy’s great imagination, the poetry of her language, her way of finding the wonder in the everyday, of saying a lot with a little, of moving gracefully among pathos, danger and humor and of providing a character as interesting and surprising as Sofia. It’s a pleasure to be inside Sofia’s insightful, questioning mind.” —Sarah Lyall, *The New York Times*

Book Review

“Against fertile seaside backdrops, Sofia, seeking a robust, global meaning for femininity and motherhood, becomes increasingly bold.” —*The New Yorker*

Also Available from Deborah Levy

Swimming Home



Man Booker Prize Finalist

As he arrives with his family at the villa in the hills above Nice, Joe sees a body in the swimming pool. But the girl is very much alive. She is Kitty Finch: a self-proclaimed botanist with green-painted fingernails, walking naked out of the water and into the heart of their holiday. Why is she there? What does she want from them all? And why does Joe's enigmatic wife allow her to remain?

A subversively brilliant study of love, *Swimming Home* reveals how the most devastating secrets are the ones we keep from ourselves.

“Exquisite.” —*The New Yorker*

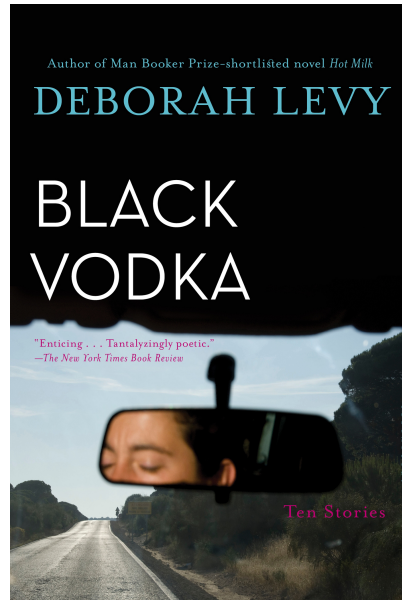
“Readers will have to resist the temptation to hurry up in order to find out what happens ... Our reward is the enjoyable, if unsettling, experience of being pitched into the deep waters of Levy's wry, accomplished novel.” —Francine Prose, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Here is an excellent story, told with the subtlety and menacing tension of a veteran playwright.” —Sam Sacks, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Elegant ... subtle ... uncanny ... The seductive pleasure of Levy's prose stems from its layered brilliance ... [*Swimming Home* is] witty right up until it's unbearably sad.” —Ron Charles, *The Washington Post*

Also Available from Deborah Levy

Black Vodka



The stories in *Black Vodka*, by acclaimed author Deborah Levy, are perfectly formed worlds unto themselves, written in elegant yet economical prose. She is a master of the short story, exploring loneliness and belonging; violence and tenderness; the ephemeral and the solid; the grotesque and the beautiful; love and infidelity; and fluid identities national, cultural, and personal. In “Shining a Light,” a woman’s lost luggage is juxtaposed with far more serious losses; a man’s empathy threatens to destroy him in “Stardust Nation”; “Cave Girl” features a girl who wants to be a different kind of woman and succeeds in a shocking way; and a deformed man seeks beauty amid his angst in the title story.

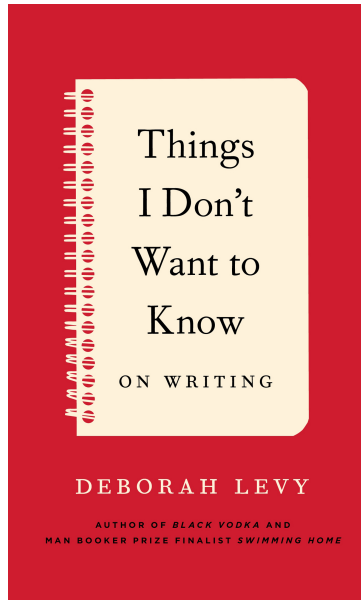
These are twenty-first-century lives dissected with razor-sharp humor and curiosity. Levy’s stories will send you tumbling into a rabbit hole, and you won’t be able to scramble out until long after you’ve turned the last page.

“These ominous, odd, erotic stories burrow deep into your brain.” —*Financial Times*

“One of the most exciting voices in contemporary British fiction . . . Sophisticated and astringent.” —*The Times Literary Supplement*

Also Available from Deborah Levy

Things I Don't Want to Know



Blending personal history, gender politics, philosophy, and literary theory into a luminescent treatise on writing, love, and loss, *Things I Don't Want to Know* is Deborah Levy's witty response to George Orwell's influential essay "Why I Write." Orwell identified four reasons he was driven to hammer at his typewriter—political purpose, historical impulse, sheer egoism, and aesthetic enthusiasm—and Levy's newest work riffs on these same commitments from a female writer's perspective.

As she struggles to balance womanhood, motherhood, and her writing career, Levy identifies some of the real-life experiences that have shaped her novels, including her family's emigration from South Africa in the era of apartheid; her teenage years in the UK where she played at being a writer in the company of builders and bus drivers in cheap diners; and her theater-writing days touring Poland in the midst of Eastern Europe's economic crisis, where she observed how a soldier tenderly kissed the women in his life good-bye.

Spanning continents (Africa and Europe) and decades (we meet the author at seven, fifteen, and fifty), *Things I Don't Want to Know* brings the reader into a writer's heart.

"A profound and vivid little volume that is less about the craft than the necessity of making literature." —*Los Angeles Times*

"A lively, vivid account of how the most innocent details of a writer's personal story can gain power in fiction." —*The New York Times Book Review*

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“The Innocents” song lines from William Blake

“Falling in Love Again” by Hollander and Connelly

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