If I Could Tell

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

In alternating first-person accounts, two primary and two secondary characters 'speak' the fictional narrative of *If I Could Tell*.

As the title suggests, doubt is implicit in the narrative; there is no impediment, necessarily, to the story being told – 'I could tell it, if …' – but, rather, doubt about telling (from the characters' perspective) where the truth lies.

An accumulation of first-person revelations forms, in four parts, an altogether more contestable version of the lives, thoughts and impulses of two 'siblings' Jessica (Jess) Morell and William (Willow) Morell/Osborne, a 'hitchhiker', Luna Fortune, and a nurse, Clare. In authoring themselves, each revealing a telling truth but misperceiving what is wholly true, they simultaneously create the narrative that, beyond their power, draws them together, then alienates them.

As Luna says – essentially of the difficulty of deciding whether or not Willow is 'a nice guy' – 'My point being, you can't always tell how a story turns out for the person who's listening, because you can't tell what they're hearing, what the story means, because of stuff that's happened to them or stuff they know.'

And the crisis of the novel lies at this nexus, the convergence of 'stuff that's happened' and 'stuff (the characters think) they know'. Plot and structure function together in exploring the limits and consequences of this intractability.

Willow and Jess are the son and daughter of Frances and Alfred Morell, an airman reported missing in action in a distant conflict when they are infants, but a presence in their lives and their imaginations. After an obscure political upheaval compels them to move from the river settlement of their early years to the city to live with Alfred's unmarried brother, Geoffrey, the promise of a wholesome upbringing fades with a despairing Frances succumbing to drink.

Through an accident of circumstance, her decline is associated with a serious injury Jess suffers in falling from a tree and, in the course of her recovery, the budding of an unnaturally intimate relationship with Willow. This intimacy comes to an incestuous climax on the night of their mother's burial, all but destroying their bond. They are estranged for some two decades.

By the time they meet again as adults at Geoffrey's funeral, all the most important details of their relationship and their life story are found to be false or flawed – though neither of them knows the full extent. Only Jess knows that Willow is not in fact her brother, his own father having died at the time of her conception, and Willow is alone in knowing that Alfred Morell's fate is critically at odds with the lore they grew up with. As they begin their long journey home in Willow's car, each

of them is privately transfixed by the risks and challenges of sorting truth from falsehood, and sealing the rapprochement they long for. Neither foresees the deranging impact of their glancing contact with Luna.

The narrative is deliberately placed in an unnamed setting in the hope of freeing it from the burdens of a given history and the reflex associations that inevitably arise from assumptions of prior knowledge. The work is not entirely free, however, from a late-20th century backdrop of ideological contest and transition in which the tropes of personal and public accountability are discernible in the tension between the characters' private and social worlds.

Their apparent willingness to discount the wider setting in favour of a more intimate order of interests seems often delusional, and is arguably akin to the author's evasive intentions. The three most prominent characters all have torments to reckon with, each of them in its way originating in the churn of History, though seeming capable of being weighed on a subjective scale. Yet it is probably the social context that is, if murkily, the agency of dissonance in the characters' relations.

It falls to Willow to discover – or to show, without necessarily being conscious of the demonstration - that personal and public pasts converge ineluctably, with unpredictable consequences.

If I Could Tell is the distillation of a long process of reading and thinking, and four years of writing and extensive revision. The fifth and final draft reveals significant departures from the structure and character development of the first.

Influences vary widely, but in thinking through the themes of engaging or evading the historical process, of placing the individual in the muddle if not always the middle, certain texts stand out for their imaginative reach and technical achievements, among them W G Sebald's *Austerlitz*, Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, J M Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*, Tolstoy's novella-length short story *Haji Murat,* Graham Greene's *The Quiet American,* Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers,* Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* and, more recently, Martin Amis's *House of Meetings*.

Throughout, I found myself returning to the notion expressed by the writer in André Gide's *The Counterfeiters*, who says of his book, emerging *'quite different from what I had been trying to invent'*, that *'I wish it now to run freely, according to its bent, sometimes swift, sometimes slow; I choose not to foresee its windings'*.

Its appeal as a writerly credo comes, eventually, with the necessarily humble acknowledgement that doubt stimulated by perceptive supervision is an indispensable accompaniment.

If I Could Tell

For my mother and father

We start transparent, and then the cloud thickens. All history backs our pane of glass.

Virginia Woolf. From *Jacob's Room*.

Are you still with me? In this dog-eared field, collapsing from one attitude to another, dragging your ghosts through the dirty air, your train of cast-off selves, constantly discovering yourself at the centre, in the present.

Ivan Vladislavić. From *Portrait with Keys, Joburg & what-what.*

ONE

CLARE / 1

When I looked up, I thought for a second his sight had returned, I really did. Stranger things have happened. I thought so in that instant because he was staring straight at me, and there was wonder on his face as if he was seeing mine for the first time, and hadn't heard a word of what I'd just read to him, as if that didn't matter nearly as much as seeing me. That's what I thought. I smiled, the way you smile automatically when someone looks you in the face like that. But William couldn't see. The wonder on his face, that look of wonder, just vanished. All he did was nod. Not a pronounced a nod, just a slight tip of the head, three or four times.

I said nothing, and I should have. If he'd spoken, it would have been easy, I'd have known what to say. But he didn't. He just nodded. And then I was called away.

I struggle to remember his silence just then. It's as if he became a different person, because I think of him as a talker, a story-teller, really. And I love his stories. I tell them all the time, I tell the other nurses. Sandra mainly. And Georgie. I said, Georgie, he thinks that dinner gong of yours is the loveliest thing he's ever heard. I can see it tickles him, though I have to keep reminding him who William is. Osborne, Ward A. Sometimes I think Sandra gets a bit tired of it, William this, William that.

She said, 'I wouldn't tell your hubby too much of this. He'll get ideas about you two.' And she looks at me meaningfully just to check in case there might be something in it. I said, 'Johnny knows. I tell him about all the goings on, the things patients say.'

'It's the way you brighten up, Clare.'

Well, I don't know if Johnny notices that. It was on the tip of my tongue to say, How, Sandra? How do I brighten up? But I stopped myself. Maybe I didn't want to know how true it was. It wouldn't do me any good. I don't think she'd understand if I told her I listen to the tape every day now, driving to work, driving home. If I didn't have an old car, I wouldn't be able to, but it has a tape deck. I said to Johnny, 'Where can I listen to a tape?'

'A cassette tape?'

He couldn't believe anyone used them anymore.

'Your car's got one hasn't it?'

I'd forgotten. So that's how it started. I've never told him what it is, not that I'm hiding anything. He's just never asked. He probably thinks it's music, and it is, in a way, that lovely voice.

William talks about our walks. That I like. There's something there about how he leans against me. It's not, well, not sexy or anything like that. Although it is a bit, the fancy language, the way he makes it sound, the two of us, close like that, him holding me as we make our way slowly down the path.

Some of the convalescents don't like to go out at all, and there are some I don't like to take, either, or when I do, I do the short route, especially if they start on their list of complaints, all the things they think they're not being treated properly for. But it's usually a relief to get out into the garden. From the bench I like to head for, you can hardly see anything of the building, just the bricked arch where some of the nurses go for a smoke. If you listen for it, you can hear the traffic down at the end of the drive, but that's all. It's like being in a park. Our wing is quite quiet, but you're always aware of the bustle in the other wards, which is nice to get away from, the intercom sometimes and the quick, squeaky footsteps of the staff.

You can hear it on William's tape, actually. He pauses for a good while sometimes, when he's thinking what to say next.

The parts that are hardest to hear are about Jess. In both senses, really. He mumbles, and I want to say, speak up, William, I can't make out what you're saying. But it's hard to listen to in the

other sense, too. I don't like it, I don't like her at all. I think if I ever met her I'd say, what you did is just unbelievable.

Sometimes it's better not to know where you stand. That's what I'm beginning to think. That's what I'd tell her. If there's something to discover, well, it depends what it is, but maybe it's better not to know.

It breaks my heart when he talks about his Dad. I feel I know a little about him, too. Though, of course, William doesn't. I keep wanting to say, you're coming along so well, William, but you've go to focus. I knew that, better than most. What you can tell is, he just doesn't know what's coming.

WILLOW / 2

The nurse keeps wanting to read the letter to me. She says it is unopened, but I don't believe that for a minute. They have been anxious for days now to get in touch with what they like to call 'your family'. It's obvious they've opened it, but I resist the urge to ask for it, to feel for the evidence.

Sometimes she holds my hand, so quietly I fancy I can hear her thinking, I can gauge her dammed thoughts in the healthy pulse where my finger touches her wrist. That little thumping triggers an impulse in me to comfort her. Her name is Clare. In a brave voice, a motherly way, she says that when the reality hits home I should expect bouts of depression and anger. I have no reason to doubt her, but how much more real does it get?

I picture myself with milky eyes, blotched a little with bloody clots, like polished agates. I ask them to tell me, but they are only ever willing to offer what are clearly meant as encouraging generalities – 'You're coming along fine' or 'Don't worry yourself now, it's looking so much better.' I wouldn't really want to see for myself, to be perfectly honest. There's a perverse comfort in not being able to.

It's when they remove the dressings that I feel especially prone, when the purer darkness gives way to a fog which is too demanding, as if all that's required is an extra effort on my part, a genuine attempt to try to see through it, pick out some verifiable detail and name it. There are no details. Not of that order, anyway. Only sounds, surfaces, gradations of warmth. Weight. I am discovering new worlds.

There was some smart alec in here this morning doling out homilies. I detected what I could have sworn was the shuffling of tracts. An unctuous palm settled on my forearm as he said quietly: 'There are worse ways of going blind than losing your eyesight.' What crap. Never trust an aphorism. I stopped myself from being quizzy. 'Such as?' came to mind. What other ways? I have a feeling he'd have settled in for the morning, and I'd have been done for, but I made myself seem suitably struck, I nodded. I imagined the bandaged wad of my forehead dipping wisely, and he left me soon enough. Although the funny thing is, I've been thinking about it all day. I still think it's a crappy stab at consolation, and I don't think it's true. I don't think there are worse ways. But there are other ways of being blind, I'll give him that.

It would never have occurred to me if I wasn't spending so much time going back over things, piecing it all together bit by bit. I don't mean the event itself. You've got to discount the accidental, running out of cigarettes in the middle of the night and disturbing a pair of thieves tampering with your car. That's not worth piecing together. I don't give a shit about them. But the other stuff, the long story, things you remember so well they're as good as forgotten. And you can say this about optical trauma, it sharpens the mind's eye. It's like a light, a storm lamp, inextinguishable, a perpetual flare in the brain. You can touch every damn thing within reach, but all you're conscious of is the hot blaze in the skull. The only relief is speech. It's the voice that does it, telling.

Ideally, you want a listener. If you're not being heard, there's only so much talking you can do, but a near genius impulse prompted me to ask for my tape recorder. I wasn't sure they'd bother getting it, but the very next day it was brought to me along with the spare batteries I'd forgotten I had. I haven't asked who fetched it or what he or she made of my flat, such as it is.

Nobody's ventured a thing, though I suppose they had a good look round. They checked the letterbox, and that tells you something. They do seem very interested in reaching beyond the limited things I've told them. I have my reasons for that. They'll just have to make do.

I was disappointed to start with that they'd not managed to find the other cassettes. I know there are others, but they say they couldn't find them. Soon enough I found it didn't matter - there's some virtue in having just the one, working with limited resources and recording over material before I get tired of listening to it.

Sometimes I press the record button and leave it running at my bedside until I'm disturbed, then play it back when I'm having my next meal. It's extraordinary what it picks up, even the hissing ether, which always seems mysterious.

I achieved a comical result the other afternoon. I'd dozed with the thing in my hand and when I listened to it later it was a performance of wheezing and snuffling, and what I can only call unearthly shudders, intermittent and ominously terminal, that it took me a while to recognise as my own. I called Clare to listen with me. She must have thought I'd lost my mind.

'When does it start?' she said.

'What?'

'The recording you want me to listen to.'

'This is it. A smoker's chest. At rest.'

She's getting used to me. I'm getting used to me.

Something I'd not realised is that there's a difference between hearing and listening. I'm learning to listen, which takes time and practice. The recorder merely hears, it's an unprejudiced collector. But as it plays back, I listen. I'm learning to.

Mainly, I like to hear myself speak. If I had more cassettes I'd be tempted to keep it all, but hearing it twice is enough, while I'm recording, then the playback. It's usually more than enough.

Yesterday afternoon I tried out my old name, the short form: 'Call me Willow, not William' and 'My name is Willow Morell.' For the next half hour I tried to describe the circumstances in which

Oddly enough, the one thing I can't remember, I just cannot bring it to mind, is the name of that girl we picked up. The whole thing was ridiculous. I feel irritated recalling it. I'd really wanted a calm moment to talk Jess through all that I had found out. And then I had to deal with the hitchhiker interlude, which should have been comic, but wasn't. She was beautiful, though. Her name will come to me, I'm sure. Her skin was pale, she had dark eyes. And she'd seemed asleep, dead to the world. She was quite lovely as I lay her down. A part of me, a not unkind part of me, wanted her to stay that way. I don't think she'd understand that. And I wouldn't expect her to, either.

JESS / 3

December 3

I think of her often, her damned prying. And the way she bent forward, eyes to the ground, and gravely spoke those words: you said he was your brother. Everything changed, then. I know I drew her to us. Not that I meant to, but that never makes a difference in the long run, the absence of intention. And she thought I was lying. 'It's just notes, Luna,' is what I remember saying. They add up to something, but they don't tell a story, there's not a beginning and an end. I wasted my breath. She made up her own mind about that the moment I was out of her sight. It just fell open, my 'diary' just fell open, she couldn't help it. 'You wrote stuff there.' I don't deny that, I wrote stuff. I still hear that voice of hers.

And before I knew it, we were on the road, Luna asleep on the back seat, a near stranger, and Willow driving again.

I'm discovering the importance of setting things down, to know that I have thought them, and that they're true. It's never enough to remember a thought. And that's the trouble, Genevieve would say. Sometimes, when she'd look up from her notes, I'd see the courtyard garden reflected in her specs, the slash of sunlight, the geraniums, the spindled hose. 'You must say it. *You* must say it.'

As we left the plateau, the road ahead was visible for miles still, hammered silver in patches by the heat. I wanted to ask how long we still had to go, but the question petered out before it reached the surface. I was numbed by the thrum of the engine, the batting wind. The worry. Luna still slept, but she was bound to wake. It was a different journey by then.

When we'd set out from the motel that morning, just Willow and me, I knew we could make a fresh start, I knew this was the beginning of it. I could have reached out and put my hand on his knee. It was the closest we'd been for years, though it's not what you think. We chatted, but appraisingly, we appraised as we neared each other. That's what I was thinking when I saw the wandering boy, his downcast eyes. If I could recall the name of the town I'd write it down. It was hours later, but before the breakdown, before Luna came into our lives.

We were on our way out, on the main street, one silent house after the next, gum trees, windmill, a potted palm stilled in the heat, when I caught sight of him going at a trot in the full sun behind his scraggly wire contraption. It was quite springy, ingenious. He was so intent he didn't look up, though I willed him to and thought he would. As we cruised by I saw not his eyes but his dusky eyelids. He was so absorbed in steering it just right. But whether I said as much, out loud, I can't say for sure. Later, I thought to ask Willow if I'd mentioned the boy. I thought of it because I saw they were so alike, that gaze fixed on the road, such unflinching boyness in them both. I spied on Willow, is what I'm saying, or I sneaked glances to make out the man he had become. And he did, too – sized me up slyly - as if there was something we missed in the ordinary course of things. And we did, we did. Except, the thing was, he didn't know. I thought I'd tell him when the time was right, tell him that none of it was as we thought it was. It would change everything. The question was, would I tell him in the dark, near the end, or once we were beyond the mountains? Or perhaps at the first sighting of the sea? I needed to have this goal, this point to prepare myself for, and these were the options. But there was no hurry. I had him all to myself then.

'Do you remember that?' I'd wanted to ask. And I was thinking of the very few times that we travelled down without Geoffrey, Mum driving, the very slight swaying. She was not very good on the

road, talkative, the constant effort of cheering. And a cigarette always - well, she couldn't always have had it between her lips, but that's what I remember seeing in the rearview mirror - a cigarette always dangling down. And what was true was that I was always in the back. I preferred the back, and Willow liked the front. Or it was where he was expected to be, in the absence of a man. When there isn't a father. Although we did all defer to Geoffrey. But the thing was, there'd always be a rise, the last rise, and the tedium of the journey would lift and Willow and I would sit forward a bit. I'd wedge myself in the gap between the two front seats, elbows out, longing for the far edge of the sky to give way to the darker, steadier line of blue, seldom as distinct as you'd want it to be. And one of us would blurt out: 'There's the sea!' But Mum would have to confirm it. You could be reckless in your hope, and what good is that? 'No,' she once said, when I thought I'd seen it, 'it's a trick of light. It's a good while yet.' And then Willow got it right that time. And not long after, really. A few minutes, I think. I remember it so well, the disappointment. I felt it without really knowing why. It was not not seeing the sea, not being right, that let the gloom in, but feeling I'd need to prove everything else. Everything else was a trick of light, too.

I didn't ask Willow if he remembered. I had my reasons. But what an intriguing man he was, behind the wheel, in Mum's place, Geoffrey's, more self-assured than I'd ever given him credit for.

I have to make an effort to recall everything in its place, because it all turned sour. Feelings always overtake facts if you aren't careful. I keep reminding myself, it's the story of what happened. It's all we've got in the end. It's the last thing that's left us. Get it right.

Despite myself, I was impressed by his black suit, black suit and tie. Walking across the lawn under the palms, all I could think of was the day we buried Mum, or the night, really, under cover of grief, the event that crippled me for years. But just then, seeing him standing there, I knew I'd be okay, I had a good feeling. It had been years since I'd seen him, and there he was, under the trees, darkly elegant, smoking a cigarette, looking at his watch.

It almost seemed a too sunny day for death, although not for dear Uncle Geoffrey's. And such cheerful washlines strung across the balconies of the flats over the way. I noticed that. And then I

saw Willow. I wasn't surprised he didn't recognise me. I walked straight on to the arch, and into the gloom and the fidgety stillness, that cool air of reverence. But he said afterwards that he had, he had recognised me, at the last minute, too late. I'd gone in, and he was still smoking and couldn't follow. At the wake, I kept thinking we shouldn't be smiling like this.

When we got to his car, I'd said, 'Is this it?'

'Did you want to linger?'

'Willow. No. I don't want to linger. But aren't you going to change?'

He grinned. 'I don't have anything to change into.' Did he say he'd mislaid his luggage? I can't remember. I almost said, well, you look like my chauffeur. Take your tie off, for God's sake. But I stopped myself. It was fine. I said it was fine, and we drove slowly down Corinth Road as if we needed to tiptoe away, taking our leave like this, too soon, in a packed car, in the early evening.

We were having a good time, thrilled by the recklessness of upping and going, just like that, and leaving Warren to see to the rest of the wake. He was almost part of the family anyway, more Geoffrey's friend than his lawyer. I meant to ask Willow what he'd made of Warren's eulogy – I was wondering if he'd noticed the near-slip - but it's one of the questions I never got to ask on the journey home, the 'trip', as Willow kept calling it. I was too interested in other things. More than anything else, I wanted to rediscover him. I wanted to know for sure that I'd found him again before breaking the news that we weren't brother and sister after all.

LUNA / 4

If anyone asked, I'd say I never knew them. It's not a lie really. I only remember his name, the guy, Willow. Her name I forget. She was a piece of work. But I never knew them.

I'm thinking, it's funny how things work out. Because you can never tell. When Dougs was looking for a name and everything, and talking big about making loads of money, back then you'd never have guessed a thing.

He said, 'Luna, you got the body for it, the moves. Give it a shot.' I thought, Jeez, he's a crazy guy. But I made him some coffee anyway. I said, 'Okay Dougs, I'll think about it.' Cool Dougs. That's what Dad called him. Although I can't picture the two of them together. On the job, the things they did. Dad would say, we had to do it. If we didn't, someone else would've. But that's another story, that was a while back.

I said, 'You're not going to put me in the paper, Dougs.'

He was checking out the smalls, the pussy ads, he calls them. I put his mug on the table. He spooned the sugar. I could see he was thinking.

'You got to have a name.' He found two he liked, Cupid and another one, Miss Mystique. I didn't think much of them.

'I'm getting ideas here, Luna. There's loads of them.'

'Well you not going to put me in there, that's for sure.'

'Don't need to, Luna.'

Cool as a cucumber, Dad said. That's Dougs for you.

'What are those things? Flyers? We'll do some flyers.'

'How's it going to work, Dougs?'

He doesn't like questions, I know that.

'Nice coffee, Luna.'

He was stuck on finding a name, he was going down the column with his unlit cigarette, like a pencil, tapping it. I never knew how it was going to work, but when I did eventually, I saw it wasn't what Dougs had in mind. He was counting on it, and it just didn't turn out that way. He should have kept Levitt out of it if you ask me. There's a guy for you, Levitt. A straight boozer. Dougs is

too, but he can handle it. They haven't been cops for a couple of years now, and you can see it. They're like flat batteries.

'So how'll they know?'

'It's sorted, Luna. They'll know. I got my people sorted.'

'So I just got to dance?'

'You getting ahead, Luna, just relax.' He stirred his coffee. 'I keep telling you, we got to start with a name. You got to plan stuff. Just relax.'

Maybe it wasn't a bad plan. But Levitt screwed up. He was late. He was boozing. As usual. But Dougs, Jeez it kills me, Dougs always sticks with him. I told him, I said, Dougs, you got to lose Levitt. He hates it when I tell him what to do. He was shaking his head. When there's nothing to discuss, Dougs just stops talking. Or he changes the subject. But I pestered him. I thought, what the hell, if he wants me to do stuff.

'Christ, Luna, I'm doing a diploma or what?'

You got to know when he's being funny. Dad said, he's okay. Just don't push him. I never pushed him. But he told me eventually.

'There's people sitting on a haul out there, Luna, and they're stretched, they angling for a return.'

'You know them?'

'There's one or two we worked with.'

He called them rats.

'They cut the deal both ways. We'd shovel the cash, they'd give us the information. Names and other stuff. You lay out good cheese, you get the rat.'

He lit a cigarette. I knew if I just sat still he'd go on.

'Me and Levitt, we figured diamonds paid for all the shit, detonators, hot plastic, you name it. And he was in the game, Levitt. Trapper Levitt. So we got in there, too. We'd do a trip, take a ride in the country. Hotels and stuff. English breakfast. You take your time, you keep it cool. You get

the low down, you pay. Jesus, we made guys so rich they couldn't even feel how rich they were. It numbed them, it fucked them over. Because they couldn't be rich, they couldn't live rich. And once they were in, we had them, tight and close. You whisper *sell-out* and the guy's a stiff. It was murky shit. Neutralise the threat, that was the lingo.'

I thought that was it. I said, 'So what have I go to do?' But he was still talking.

'And then, fucking hell, before you know it it's all over. And it's who knows what and who knows who? Jesus, everybody's jumping like a lot of mullet, covering their backsides like nobody's business. It's the last shot, is what I'm saying. The whole deal's closing down. We got to get in there.'

Half the time it sounded like he was in a movie, like he was just talking big. He had his dreams, Dougs, but mostly in his head. I like a dreamer. I thought he wouldn't be a bad guy to stick with, but you can't always tell. This dancing thing, it fitted in somewhere, in his plan, his scheming. He said, leave it to me.

'So stop bitching about Levitt. And don't ask me this stuff again. You got to dance, that's all. Just like you said. Or maybe there's no dancing involved, okay? But it's the plan. And we got to find a name, for Christ sake. You got any brandy, Luna?'

Once Ma said, 'Do you love him?'

'Dougs?'

She nodded.

'I don't know. Why d'you ask?'

'I see you always with him.'

'He's a pal, Ma.'

I know she was thinking about her stuff, her and Dad. Sometimes at the drive-in, me in the back, I'd see he wasn't even watching the movie, he was staring out the side. Once, he just started the car and we rolled into the dip and cruised away under the noses of all those parked

cars. I swung round and watched the screen, it just flickered without a sound. Ma didn't say a word.

I knew he reminded her of Dad.

'Stop worrying, Ma,' I said.

WILLOW / 5

In that instant, when I realised who she was, and how fragile she seemed, I knew that Jess would take it badly. I'd mistaken her for a latecomer, a stranger, as she came across the lawn under the old palms. It was her gaunt look, hair drawn back, the dark glasses, that misled me. She nodded as she passed, and I nodded back. I thought I must know her, or at least try to seem to, but my mind was wandering. I lit a cigarette and glanced over at Warren. He was looking at his watch. He could be counted on to make sure it all went like clockwork. He'd told me earlier, unnecessarily I couldn't help thinking, that he'd thought to order in more ice, which the bottlestore would deliver to Corinth Road while the funeral was 'in progress'. I'd almost expected him to say it's what Uncle Geoffrey would have wanted, but he didn't. His 'in progress' seemed to me a poor match for the event. I might have said 'pause'. The ice will be delivered in the course of the sad and mysterious pause. Something goes on, something outlasts the flesh. It's more, surely, than consequences. Although that's often plenty.

And then I realised who she was. Until then, I'd not given much thought to how I'd break the news. I turned, thinking I'd try to catch her before she reached the steps, but she was already under the arch and I could just make her out, with that half-stooping walk to not have your soles clacking on the stone flags, disappearing into the gloom.

It was only when I reached the steps that I found there was nowhere to ditch my cigarette. The verger, stepping from the shadow, came to the same conclusion, and I could tell from his look there'd be no concessions to grief. I lingered provocatively, and so did he. I avoided looking him in

the eye, but leaned in to see if I could spot her again. She was out of sight. In my limited view, I saw a man who from the tilt of his head I mistakenly thought I knew. While I watched he flipped through his hymnal as if on the off chance of finding something slipped between the pages. Then he bent forward and tipped it into the slot in the back of the next pew, the woody clonk triggering a small cough from the woman next to him. I didn't know them from a bar of soap. I hardly knew anybody I'd watched streaming in over the past half hour. It was only knowing that Jess was there now that made me feel a little less like a spectator. It was a sad thought, standing there, where the thin notes of the organ seeped out to meet the drone of the city, the precise locus of grief, I realised, the mismatch of sounds, the bad fit. Last rites at lunchtime.

Only as I moved away from the west door did I spot a large pot with a haggard geranium in it that would hide an unfinished smoke if the need arose. Warren, swivelling like a constable, blazor buttoned, noted my movements, but then looked the other way. He'd give a signal when it was time.

I was always closer to Mom than Jess was, I think, and not just because I was headed for much the same oblivion. And Jess, back then anyway, was the one who was obsessed about Dad, 'your father' as everyone used to say. We always lived with a man who was never there. But what I knew was that it was more than that, or worse than that; even his absence was falsely grounded. Jess didn't know a thing about it. It was up to me to tell her. It still is.

I kept thinking that if he'd stayed his hand - if he'd faltered, you could say - this could well have been his funeral, not his brother Geoffrey's. And the ache was having virtually nothing to recall of his life. I stood there with Warren, thinking of all the things I might have asked Geoffrey, the smallest things - his brother's favourite meal, what he kept at his bedside, what he was really like, the young father-to-be. And why flying? But I hadn't asked. I hadn't thought to ask. The missing pilot wasn't just an absent father, but an imagined one, a version of Geoffrey, gentle and absorbed, tolerantly willing, and tall, shy, stooping a little, with piercing grey eyes. And perpetually young, I suppose. But from the moment I found Dad's photograph, I knew that none of that had ever been true enough. It

brought home to me how much I didn't know, and how much I wanted to. Alfred Morell was the man I longed to remember being formed by, grasped at the shoulder by. But I never knew him.

I couldn't bear to think of Mom, the young wife, silenced for all those years, charading her rummaging, woven into herself. 'I was very young, Willow,' she'd say. 'And so happy. That was more than enough, I didn't need keepsakes.' Or, 'This much I know, Willow. He'd have put up a good fight before going down.' The dashing fighter pilot, missing in action. The funny thing is, it still has a ring of truth.

I was barely conscious of Warren's nearness when he asked quietly, 'Are you ready?' I nodded, grinding my cigarette into the lawn. We seemed, I think, the pair of us, oddly contrite, heads sunk, as we made for the hearse.

And what I was thinking was that whatever she remembered of me she'd have to revise. Jess would remember another me. I still hadn't figured out where she'd chosen to sit, and it was only once the service was under way, and we'd shuffled to our feet for a hymn that I looked back, but in the sea of faces it was impossible to pick her out.

My truer self took me by surprise, but you're always glad for these small things. When I saw out of the corner of my eye Warren unfolding his notes, getting ready to go up and deliver his tribute, I imagined that if this had been Dad's funeral, I'd have been the one to go, I'd have spoken and fleshed out the impressions people had of him with the intimacies, the unique affection, of the son. We'd have sat together, Jess and I, as grieving siblings brimming unsteadily with too much memory.

Hauling myself off my knees at the end of the prayer, I knew I'd have had a different life. The thought, alone, was like – or felt like - making a promise, not altogether too late. And then, without warning, I felt my mouth crumple with a rubbery spasm, and the Book of Common Prayer, the candles, Warren's faintly reverent departure for the lectern, slid away in a blur.

JESS / 6

December 4

The light was fading as we reached the edge of the city, the puckered bulk of the mine dumps looming off to our left where the street-lighted suburban avenues gave way to smallholdings and fenced stands of bluegum trees.

It was all so sudden, the way we'd left, that I'd not given any thought to the journey itself. I didn't want to drive through the night, but I thought, let's see how it goes. Then Willow said, 'It's a long haul. It would be unwise to do it in one go.' He'd already worked it out. 'I saw a place on the way up,' he said. 'A motel, or something like it. Roadside accommodation. Would that be okay?' I was in his hands. It felt lovely, easy.

The thing about feelings is that you can't think about them. Sometimes you can hardly tell whether they are there or not. I'm sure it's not just me. And you can't think them through. They're not a puzzle, as their consequences are. But at that moment, what I could feel was that I wasn't anxious. That was enough.

We saw the neon from a long way off. It's a pretty sight when you're in need of stopping. There was just one other car, and we pulled in alongside it. I like the sound of tyres on gravel, the gritty sound of arrival. As we sat there in the car, in that pause, I knew the difficulty was deciding where to begin. That was the trouble. I should have told him right there, I really should. The words were trying to order themselves in my throat, but too many of them. There wasn't enough space. And then Willow said, 'Well. Let's go and see.'

We followed the woman's smacking sandals along a porch still wet from the lawn sprinklers and came to a short wing of rooms. She switched the lights on, fiddled with the curtains. I put my case in my room and came back out again. Willow was rubbing his eyes. 'I think I'll just pack in,' he said. I thought he'd say, it's been quite a day, but he didn't. 'Me too,' I said. 'Sleep well.'

I lingered there for a bit. From the step, I could see across the plain to the low hills of the horizon, dim shapes in the starlight. I thought I'd kept more notes from the motel, but I realise now I was thinking things rather than writing them down. It was a mistake, although getting things down fixes the moment, but not always the truth.

I waited a long while in the morning for sounds of life next door, the muffled thumps of a waking room, the gargling basin. I was back on the step when Willow appeared. 'Hi,' he said. 'Bliss?' Almost, I said. 'It's a bit windy.' Against the slanting sun you could see shimmery flecks of dried grass in the agitated air. The world as we find it, I thought, is always slightly inconvenient. Which is what I imagined Willow must have felt having no change of clothes. He'd shaved, and still wore his tie. I didn't comment on it, but I liked him more for it.

The morning shadows were cool, but the sun was pleasant to be in. It was the best of both. I could have sworn Willow whistled as he took my case from me. Even the car seemed refreshed, eager to go. I was thinking that the last time I'd travelled on this road was so many years back I could barely remember anything of it, and it was something to look forward to. Except that was wrong – Paolo and I came up on it two days earlier. It was mostly in the dark, and I slept for hours, but you do see things differently, and it's not just that you're going in the other direction, but your frame of mind. At any rate, it's a very different road from the one we travelled as kids. Once, below the verge, I saw a vestige of the old one, crumbly at the edges, a bleached grey and so narrow you could hardly imagine two-way traffic on it. Mum and Geoffrey used to take turns driving. She liked to stop any old where on the roadside for the changeover, but Geoffrey always pressed on to the next town. He liked to mark out a journey in increments that had something to do with nameable events or notable personalities. 'A little more than a century ago, this is where …' and some or other marvel or lapse would be revealed. 'The town is named after …', or 'Now, if you can imagine …', and what you had to imagine was a different world in which one thing or another - drought, a lost campaign, the drifting of a restless populace – left its mark.

At the crest of a rise, a silver pulse of light caught my eye.

'Willow, look.'

I didn't point, but he saw it immediately. The falcon wavered, wing tips splayed, trying the impossible at a tenuous limit, but lost the thermal, swivelled tightly and fell away. There was a second metallic flash as the sun caught its wing on the descent, silent as film. Birds, more than planes, bring my father to mind. That's what I was thinking. They are so untouchable, and almost weightless, flimsy. My long lost father came and went as if he were immune to gravity, to the earth.

Recklessly, I asked, 'Willow, have you ever seen the photographs of Mum at the river house? There's one of her on the porch, and another of her standing next to a plane, in a field.'

'A plane?'

I could feel the pull of his curiosity. I thought; that's the boy in him. I remember that, the gliders. Model kits.

'An aeroplane, at the river. Years ago.'

I had to pause. 'I'm not sure that it's dated.' That was accurate enough. 'It was a war plane.'

'No, I've never seen them.' It was almost as if he didn't want to sound too interested. But I think he was. He said: 'A fighter, or what?'

'There was just the pilot. Does that make it a fighter?' Would he remember? Would he ask, would I begin to tell?

'Probably. Or a trainer. Or a spotter plane.'

I'd never considered the alternatives, spotter plane especially. The stricken spotter plane. And would he remember I'd so wanted to be a pilot?

'What was it doing at the river?'

For a moment I thought he was teasing.

'It was in difficulty of some sort.' Before he asked, I said, 'Geoffrey mentioned it once.'

'Do you know where it was flying to? It's not a, it's not a route to anywhere. It's not a …'

I was off the hook.

'Does it matter, when you're in the air? It's not as if you have to stick to the highway.'

'No, I know,' he chuckled, and looked over at me. I felt like patting his arm. 'But something about it doesn't make sense,' he went on. 'Not that it has to. Unless he was lost.'

Oh, he was lost, I thought to myself, far gone.

'I suppose he was.'

Willow was after something, I thought. Or was it just a male thing, wanting some sort of factual veracity, a literal truth?

'It must have caused a stir,' he said. 'Coming down there.'

It was going to be too hard. Or I thought so. So I said, 'Yes, it must have.'

And then we overtook a laden car, and a truck, and Willow didn't like to talk when he was concentrating on overtaking. His face became very set. But he was still with me. On the open again, he asked: 'And the other one? You said there was another photograph. Of Mom.'

Yes, of my mother, I was tempted to say. It's what I said in my head. It didn't seem brutal, because it was the truth. I thought to myself, I have quite a story to tell. Some of it you will find hard to believe.

'There's nothing to it, really. She's just standing on the porch, in the sun. I'll show them to you sometime.'

It seemed so natural say it; I'll show you sometime, because we'd see each other now, we'd have meals together, or go for walks. Or take trips. I was careful not to go too far, not to imagine too much, but we were heading that way.

Sometimes I pictured monitoring our progress from a great height; in the glare of the sun, I saw the car as no more than a frictionless glint skimming in silence like a satellite across the baking plain, ducking through the plum shadows of the hills. The aspect must be pitiless from up there, a landscape of ancient lesions blotched by irreversible ageing, and the distances we cover measurable by a scale of indifference that can only amount to godly fatalism. Yet the flinty gleam goes on unchecked, game as ever.

On the ground, we only look for what we expect to find. Most of the time anyway. I kept wanting to tell Willow about what I saw, or what I saw *in* what I saw. Every so often a tree slid by, silent and oddly frozen, willing itself to be noted, I fancy, above the tremulous grasses and the cloyingly metronomic telephone poles sidling up stiffly. Although I do like the woozy cresting and dipping of the lines, the languid catenaries snaking along like wavelengths beside the car.

In an hour, I'd seen only two people. In the landscape, I mean. I had spotted countless faces on the road, in on-coming cars, but always smudged with speed or somehow tampered with by the shiver of slipstream, and only ever a face, gestureless, and blanked out by sunglasses.

But the two men I could take in more of. I had mixed feelings about the first man. I had the impression there was something suspicious about him. It seems ridiculous. But what was he up to, was the thought, hurrying like that? I'd not have seen him at all but for an accident of topography. Just as we passed he crossed from the ferrous sepias of a stony slope to a band of shrill ochre where the grass began. He was quite far off, but suddenly uncamouflaged and stepping out briskly, head down, his trousers flapping. He was purposive, absorbed, hurrying along. Seeing him made me want to walk, too, and hear the wind in the grass and my own crunching footfall and be just as sure of an objective, chaining a gate maybe. But just then, without slowing, he looked back, a quick, intense glance at the way he had come, and I felt a chill, I grasped the economy of flight, his haste to be away. Or was I making too much of it, was it really just too much?

Later, the other man welled from the verge, a dark miniature clarifying in seconds into human form. He was old, and just standing there, clinging to a lumpy sack that seemed inseparable from his make-shift tunic. He seemed, all of him, stitched together with grubby string. In the half second of our visual intimacy, his eyes glittered with a baffled weariness. And then he was gone. I wanted to watch him in the side mirror, getting smaller and smaller, but Willow's car doesn't have one on the passenger side.

It brought back a vivid memory from when we were very young, nosing through the crowd in Geoffrey's car, and getting through eventually and seeing that tramping mass diminishing as the distance grew.

I wonder if it's possible to steer a car without watching the road ahead, just by tracking the leaping dashes of the meridian in the side mirror, holding to the navigational persuasion of the spent road? You'd have to have someone keeping tabs on trucks ahead. We came on them very quickly sometimes. I wished I could have experimented. It would probably have been narcotic.

From the back, surreptitiously, I used to watch Geoffrey's gaze in the dashboard mirror. Sometimes he'd notice, and wink. But the thing about his gaze was its almost amused intensity. His eyes played constantly. And perhaps innocently at times, which is underrated. It made the world fresh and foreign. The smallest thing merited attention. And he'd always have scoured honey jars with him, to collect things in. I have one still, containing the three pairs of long white thorns, very like the horns of an ox, that we collected on a roadside a long time ago. Of this artefact, I recollect only associated impressions; the soughing of the single tree, mangled tins, russet in the sun, and masses of fragments of shell from countless boiled eggs picked clean near the cement picnic furniture, petrified toadstools unshakeably disposed to the nuclear family. Geoffrey's bottles of collected things were always annotated, small slips of paper stuffed in with the contents, with date and provenance and, quite often, unlikely details: 'Half dozen circa late 19th c. copper brads retrieved from rotting timbers, 19--. Wreck? The point, - Bay. Jess upset at Willow dropping her half freshly peeled orange in sand.' In the accretion of material objects there was a curiously volatile cargo of sentiment and emotion, deftly catalogued, but apportioned and discrete, uncatalytic.

And I suppose the same could be said of his 'papers' – could have been said, while he was alive. Not anymore. He was always working away at them, this lifetime's accumulation of letters, jottings, sketches, brittle journals, photographs, most of them kept in the kind of boxes you don't get anymore, made of a yellowy cardboard as breakable as biscuit. And all invariably labelled 'Unsorted'.

I think he knew what was there. He must have. Rather like his book collection, stacked all over, two deep often. But there was something mute about his 'papers', which I was convinced, if they were ordered right, could frame a coherent question - how did we get here, what have we done? - and perhaps deliver an answer. But I was never sure that Geoffrey actually wanted to go that far, or could risk it. That's the feeling I had. As if there was too much riding on it. It's hard to say. Growing up with him, he just seemed delightfully muddled. Or tolerantly ill at ease in his present. He'd scoff at things like instant coffee, or 'convenience goods' with complicated instructions comically translated in Kyoto. I don't know what I'm trying to say about him except that, even when we laughed – at him sometimes, but mostly with him - I listened and watched more closely than he ever realised. He was the best clue – I counted on it – to my father, to what he was like, or would have been. How he would have been with us.

Once, in my teens, I bumped into Geoffrey at the supermarket – a novel kind of shop to him, or to all of us, really – and there he was, over-exposed in the fluorescent glare, trailing his near-empty trolley as if he needed it to steady himself. 'What are you going to do with the candles, Uncle Geoffrey?' He liked candles, he said. You never knew when you'd need them. But I think when he saw them on the shelf it was something else that made the choice for him, some kind of longing almost. His bluff cheer, his uncle-ness, obscured something that he kept to himself.
Willow's got it, too, the bluff arts. But not from the same source, the same blood.

WILLOW / 7

Of all the things I recall about growing up at Corinth Road, the shed is the one thing that's indispensable to making sense of that time. It started out as one thing and became something else entirely, leaky, eventually, when it rained, and cool and mouldy-smelling. None of that mattered. It still offered all I had come to expect. Sometimes I was less sure what that was, and nor was it a fixed

quality. But in its essentials the shed was unaltered by the weather, time, the seasons. Whatever was going on in the sky, it was the same refuge, the dark space that became my realm of charms. There's a certain resonance now, the dark space. I'm not so sure about the charms.

It actually came quite late in the day, the shed. It was built after the old corrugated iron fence was taken down and Geoffrey had been reluctant to dump the salvageable sheets, which he had piled in the yard along with most of the wooden beams until he could decide what to do with them.

For a few weeks, after the old fence had been dismantled and the new brick one was low enough to step over, the garden gaped open, embarrassed I always thought, to the street. You could see passing school children from the kitchen window, looking in. I found it off-putting, I lingered indoors. At supper one evening, Geoffrey said in his jolly way: 'It'll be up soon enough and we can all go back to normal.' But it was actually the 'normal' that preoccupied me, that I dreaded, because I alone knew of Mom's secret drinking, and of Madison's complicity, his clandestine deliveries to her bedroom window. He could pull it off. He was the gardener. That was the 'normal'. The abnormal was possibly worse. It was one thing believing that Mom's brittleness could be put down to the disruption of her narcotic routine, but the worst thing was having no clues to what alternatives she and Madison may have come up with. Only much later did I see that understanding the mechanics of her decline offered no relief at all, yet, at the time, an appreciation of impotence, a vague sense of my inability to intervene – so long as I knew that's what it was - was unaccountably appeasing. As always, it was deceiving, though.

While the bricklayers gradually raised a fresh boundary, I whiled away the hours in my room. I liked to lie on my bed and lose myself in the static combat of model aircraft that swirled above me, hung at aggressive angles from an arrangement of thin fishing gut attached to eyes in the ceiling. In a certain light that revealed the gleam of the stays, the planes seemed snared in a web.

By the time the wall was up, I had begun dabbling seriously with gliders, paper ones to start with, including some elaborate versions after a visit to the library had turned up a book on *'Simple Gliders to Make and Fly'.* As Jess practised her scales or hard-to-perfect fingerwork at the piano, I

pored over the rudiments of lift and thrust. I promised to make one for Jess once I'd perfected the larger prototype I had turned my mind to, a sleek model that incorporated a variety of materials and tricky techniques and a dazzling wingspan that gave the craft a spirit of independence as if, under the right conditions, it could find thermals and updrafts on its own and stay indefinitely aloft, like a hawk.

'Will it really fly?' Jess asked.

'If I get it right it will,' I said.

Once Geoffrey popped his head round the door and was clearly delighted by the enterprise, the evidence of my absorption. Desk and floor were littered with snowy crumbs of polystyrene and slim, curled lances of discarded cardboard and paper offcuts.

'Try and keep the glue off the counterpane, will you,' he grinned, noticing an incriminating smear. 'Your mother will have a fit.'

And that's when the shed came into being. It was simple enough; a sturdy cube of beams which the old corrugated iron sheets were nailed and bolted to, still in their original dull chalky red, scarred with dents and holes here and there that didn't match the new structure. The holes in the roof were plugged and patched. There was no window, but a bare bulb hung from a cable Geoffrey led to the shed from the kitchen window. Once an old table had been installed, and a stool, it more than matched my needs. In a matter of weeks, it became a homely mess of gums and glues, cutting tools, pegs and string, paints, fabric. I kept a pile of old newspapers, and a box for choice cardboard, balsa wood, polystyrene packaging. I sketched and shaped and measured.

In the early days, I'd inveigle Mom into spending the odd afternoon with me scouting out-of-the-way shops for materials and always ending up at the general dealers, *Morton & Haig*, Geoffrey's favourite, where you could spend hours finding things you didn't know you needed. If I could just keep her going, was the thought.

To fling a glider into the wind is to be at once delighted and bereft. As it swoops up and finds its plane, scooping light and air from the sky, it embodies all you had intended for it, but it leaves you

behind, indifferent to your helplessness yet also incapable of overcoming the deficiencies its abandoned maker is powerless to correct.

More often than not, I perfected the slight off-set in the tailplane – and the choice of launch pad up at the school fields – to be sure the glider would swing loyally home eventually, more or less anyway, a homing curve rather than a direct trajectory that would lose it to the roofs and trees of the houses beyond.

I went up there as often as I could. As you stroll out into the middle of an empty field there's a distinct sense of performance, as if the setting, the arena, the stands, require a feat.

I was telling Clare about it this morning. She gets funny ideas into head sometimes. 'You make it sound like the Coliseum,' she said. Her innocence is charming. I probably confused her when I said, 'No, I preferred being alone.'

On a few occasions I was watched for a while by other boys kicking a ball further down the field, but I'd usually wait until I was alone. The most interested spectators were plovers that strutted defiantly close, though with very quick, alert steps and an almost spectral skill at lifting off weightlessly.

Jess joined me sometimes.

'I wish it would go on forever,' she mused, 'higher and higher, until you can't see it anymore.'

'They always come down, Jess.'

'I know. I know that.'

Without thinking through the logic of what I meant, I remember saying: 'You can only fly it if you can see it.'

I made kites for her, too, and sometimes, watching her, I almost regretted being stuck with my gliders. She had much more of a sense of agency, I think, holding the weaving line with the recalcitrant kite at the end of it. For me, every time I let a glider go was like losing it.

During a late summer thunderstorm that hammered deafeningly against the corrugated iron shell, the bulb flickered, then went out. It was pitch dark. I felt for the door, but decided against

making a dash for the house until the downpour eased off. Standing there in the inky blackness, I noticed for the first time that if you came up close, three holes punched through the metal to match the old fence structure, each at a different height, offered a kind of periscope view of the back steps of the house and the back door. I could make out the bubbly torrent from a downpipe just out of range. A light draft cooled my eye as I came up close and took stock of the concentrated view.

Soon enough, the rain eased off a little and I sprinted across. I'd just got into the house when the power came on again. I found Jess and Mom and Sarah wandering around with candles, unwilling to blow them out.

'Why have you got candles? It's not that dark,' I said.

'It's just fun. Isn't it Mum?'

Mom glittered, too. Sarah seemed suddenly shy, sidling off to the kitchen, but cupping the flame as she went.

'It might go off again,' Jess said hopefully.

The brief power failure was not entirely a minor forgettable event. Months later, when the bulb blew, I was in the middle of something, and leaned back, pulled the door open and stopped it with a box. There was enough light to see what I was doing, which, if anyone had asked, I'd probably have found difficult to explain. I had around me all the same materials, the paper and glue and wedges of balsa and plastic foam, but almost without realising it I'd begun to make forms of no particular function, and certainly not capable of flight. I'd been working for some minutes, attaching one form to another and having some trouble deciding how they ought to be aligned and even to what effect, when a gust of wind dislodged the box and the door swung closed.

As I turned, I heard the back door open, followed by another sound I soon realised was Sarah's moving the old wicker chair she liked to sit in into the sun. Then there were voices, but indecipherable. Madison had appeared.

I must have been tempted to eavesdrop, but at that instant, I became aware for the first time of something else entirely; the shed was not entirely unlit because several of the plugs in the roof had

perished and five or six clean pencils of sunlight probed the gloom. I'd not have paid much attention to them were it not for the fact that one beam cast a near perfect dot of light on the very edge of a piece of paper lying on the floor. It was an obvious focal point, all the more so over the next few minutes as it crept off the edge. This miniature event, an eclipse of sorts, absorbed me for some reason. In the days that followed I created a series of charts – large sheets of paper pinned to the floor – on which I plotted the sun's passage over Corinth Road, a succession of parallel lines that hinted at the astral curvature far overhead. I stuck several of them up on my bedroom wall. In some of them, I drew the lines in different colours, though my favourite, the most deliberate, was all in red. It was absorbing, but boredom always hovered at the edge of these things, the sun's raking progress, the hours it took to chart it.

On one of the brightest days, I was impressed – I suppose the word is - by the flicker effect of stepping through the beams, which suggested a test: would it be possible to step through this portcullis of light without interrupting a beam before it reached the floor? I suppose I was intent on finding any distraction, then. And the charts proved their worth because I could plot various options, each requiring a degree of contortion, and fine balance. I practised stubbornly, convinced that with discipline and a good plan I could get through and avoid stopping a beam with back, eyelid, hand, scuffed school shoe. How strange that the picture of a scuffed school shoe is one of the clearest details to have lasted all this time.

I'd end up streaked with sweat as the iron sides of the shed ticked in the heat.

JESS / 8

December 5

I told him that I helped to trace things, the provenance. Photographs, rare books, drawings, porcelain. I worked with Maurice, I said, though it was only part of what he did. He'd been at

Laforgue's forever, I told Willow. There was no other auction house that could boast know-how like Maurice's. I suppose my pride, just then, was perverse. I'd mentioned him earlier, his illness and death, and I'd mentioned his son, too, Paolo, who'd driven me up from the coast for the funeral. But I didn't want to think about M.

'Tell me about your Mr Marvel, Willow.'

We had discovered that we lived on opposite sides of the bay, the harbour more or less equidistant between my apartment and the block where he stayed. He told me he could see the sea, a band of open sea, and he had a view of part of the harbour. And then he'd mentioned his neighbour, somebody Marvel. I forget his first name.

'And is he?' I'd asked.

'Marvellous?' Willow smiled.

'A marvel, I was thinking.'

And he sounded like it, in his way. He had a thing about planets, or was it only Venus? It comes back to me now; he had a dog called Jupiter. He reminded me of Geoffrey.

'Like Geoffrey?'

Willow seemed puzzled, or distracted.

'You know? Sirius?'

Geoffrey had his favourites. I recall lying on a blanket near the river, the summer night screeching in the dim trees, the water gulping now and then at the bank, slopping under a beached boat, and Geoffrey's raised arm, pointing out some chilly sparkle in the black, and the roughness of his cheek as he leaned in to aim for me.

'No,' he said, 'Marvel's a bit different.'

It was an event, the Transit of Venus, that interested his neighbour.

'Astronomers set up their telescopes to look at,' he said, 'the planet crossing the sun. There's not much to it. It's just a kind of notable phenomenon. It doesn't change the world or anything. Just knowing it's happening is the event. It's the knowledge.'

'What did you call it?'

'Transit. The Transit of Venus.'

'And your Marvel has seen it?'

'No, he hasn't. And it's not really the phenomenon that interests him. It's a particular one. It happened a long time ago.' It was a story, he said.

'You mean a fiction?'

He hesitated. At first I thought he was put off by the sudden appearance of a truck on the next rise, a lumbering cube inching into the skyline. Looking at him, though, I could tell he was thinking about it.

'It depends how you look at it, I suppose. It's a drawing. He has a drawing. It's real. But there's a story behind it, and I'm not sure it can be vouched for. Nor am I sure that vouching for it is necessary.'

'Do you think it doesn't matter?'

'I'm not saying that.'

'Willow, I'm just interested. I'm not accusing you of lying.' I said it grinningly, and I do wonder where that grinning comes from, the will to placate, that's lodged in our truest, deceiving selves, when placating's not called for.

He scratched lightly at his temple with the tips of his fingers.

Marvel knew Geoffrey apparently, though not very well. They never met, but Geoffrey evidently played some part in Willow meeting him and moving in next door. And I could picture the bookstore, Marvel's, I do remember it, though I'd always thought of it as a comics shop. I lost track of the story, to be honest. I can't remember the details and there seemed a lot of them, but I had a distinct impression that Willow stopped short of telling it all. There was something he held back. I could tell from the way his chin jutted too firmly from his neck.

As we drove on in silence, breaking through the first hills of the long approach to the escarpment, I thought we'd have more of a sense of making headway, the new distance dancing in

that jittery fashion across the windscreen, east to west. But the next vertebral ridge of hills seemed further off, not nearer. It's funny how these things stick. If we'd had a child with us, she'd have asked, 'How much longer is it?' And someone would have lied: 'It's not far. Not that much further.' But it always is, there's always further to go.

When I reached forward for my pen I knew Willow was watching me out of the corner of his eye. I knew he wanted to ask what I was feeling for along the dashboard. He was curious about everything I did. The smallest gesture he would want to get to the bottom of. Sometimes I tried to see myself as he saw me and I'd become obsessed with figuring it out, too. How do you choose? What do these gestures mean? And when he saw it was the pen, I knew he wanted to know what I was going to write down. It was hot from being in the sun, the ink, I thought, warm as blood. I'd wanted to tell him, then, just blurt it out, but I couldn't, not with her still in the car.

At last, Willow loosened his tie, tugged on it, pressed the button through its slit with thumb and forefinger. I noticed the twist of his mouth, the little grimace, that went with the effort. It compensated for the question he couldn't bring himself to ask. I reached for my notebook - I was writing in the margins now - and put the words down: 'The mountain horizon a cardiograph.' It seemed cleverly true, though I was doubtful the moment I looked up. It took a few seconds to see the error. Crossing out 'a cardiograph' I wrote: 'like torn paper'. It's not the fountain leaps of a heart that match the edge of the world.

There is always something you have never told before, the one thing nobody knows, the knowledge that's dreaded because it erases choice.

'It's like a movie,' I said.

'What is?'

'What you see through the windscreen. How it changes all the time.'

Willow took some time to answer.

'I suppose it is,' he said.

I was looking out so avidly, so mistakenly, for something to share, but I felt all my talk turning inward, in long silences.

'Is something the matter?' His question was murmured, just for my ears, in case she, in the back, was listening. He'd have thought she was just a hitchhiker. There wasn't time to talk about it, the two of us, alone, once the car was fixed and we were ready to go. He'd leaned over to unlock the back door and she got in.

I pulled down the visor and adjusted it so that I could see into the back, in the little mirror. She was still asleep.

Willow glanced at me.

'She's still asleep.'

Something was amiss, and he knew it, but I couldn't tell him.

'Where does she come from?'

'Does it matter?'

I tried to sound indifferent, but it took none of the anxiety away, it didn't put him off. Her name is Luna, I said to myself, and she's on the run. And she's a snooping bitch. And she knows more than is any good for either of us. And you just opened the door and let her in. I did think that. It was unfair.

'Did she tell you? Where she's from, I mean.'

I said, not murmuring: 'She did say, Willow. The name of some town. I forget.'

He snapped a look at me. Don't, it said. She'll know we've been talking about her.

But in the mirror, she slept.

'She needed a lift. I thought that would be fine.'

'It is fine,' Willow said.

And let's leave it at that, I thought.

'There's just something about her ...' This was not much more than a whisper. A little louder, he asked: 'Where did she want a lift to?'

I didn't know either. I hadn't asked. It wouldn't be the city, because I'd told her she'd be out of the car by the then, come hell or high water.

'To the coast.'

'Just "the coast"?'

We were both murmuring again.

'She may have said.'

Christ, I thought, let's just leave it now. I felt so unsafe, with her knowing my secret.

There were occasions, I recall, when Geoffrey seemed on the point of telling us, seemed to want to tell us. We'd have been teenagers. And I remember Mum frowning so furiously. I'd want to say, 'What? What?', but I knew not to. I could tell.

Willow's chin jutted again. He was craning his neck as if peeping over a wall. But you can't ever see enough of the back seat in a rearview mirror, not if you're driving. He must have been tempted to adjust it. I could just swing round and look, but he couldn't, not properly, not safely. The frustration must have made him want to go a little faster. And he did, now and then, speed up. The tone of an engine is always a give-away.

'She might just sleep for the whole trip, Willow.'

He said nothing.

I met Luna at the garage, after the car started playing up and Willow decided we'd have to stop. He was just beginning to tell me how he'd been trying to track someone down, someone he once knew a long while back, when the engine fault made itself felt. The intermittent jerks, as if the engine were stumbling, kept interrupting us. His search, Willow said, had 'got a bit unwieldy', but he'd decided to keep at it. I could have told him about 'keeping at it', I thought. That's me and Genevieve.

'Something comes,' I said, 'doesn't it?'

He nodded. He wasn't convinced. I wasn't either, not entirely. Although, what I do know is that if you're alert enough there's always something in the passing moment that reveals what you'd never

have imagined was there. I count on it, this 'something comes'. It's not a waiting game, which it sounds like. It's not patience. You've got to work at it.

Every so often, Willow would mutter 'wretched car!'. I wasn't sure which was worse, the jerking or, when it seemed to have sorted itself out, the irritation of expecting it start again any second.

When the spire of the next small town needled the skyline, Willow said: 'We'll have to stop. I'm out of airtime.'

'It's like being without oxygen,' I said.

'Sort of. It's the carburettor.'

'No,' I said, 'being out of airtime.'

He didn't find it funny.

I saw Luna soon after we stopped at the garage. Something about her caught my eye, and I think it was her shoes. Funny how a detail like that can make an impression. Her neat black pumps with a little-girl strap buckled at the side had something to say about her as she stood there peering into her purse.

Looking away I had to hold a hand against the glare to watch Willow cross the forecourt to the workshop and disappear into the shadow. I wondered if it was foolish leaving it to him to make it clear we didn't want to hang around and could they please sort out this problem now-ish. Then the hammer blows I'd barely been conscious of stopped. Willow was confering.

As I turned back to the forecourt thinking that if the map book was all there was to read, I'd get it from the car and find a cool spot to settle down and see what I could find in it, I saw Luna for the second time, coming out of the garage shop with a cooldrink in one hand and her small pink pillow bag in the other, stooping slightly with the effort of reaching the wandering straw with her lips.
I guessed she was on her own. You can always tell. I got into the car and closed the door. All the detail comes back to me; the ticking engine, the petrol attendants drifting back and forth in their tinkering way, the intestinal groans of the pumps as other cars came and went. And the buzzing sighs of passing traffic on the highway. That I remember. Luna was watching the junction, closely I

thought, where cars and trucks shuttled by at a near blur. I could see them, too, through Willow's window. Straight ahead, though, keeping an eye on Luna, I was aware of the intermittent flashes darting across a gap between a wall and some trees beyond the workshop.

She was waiting for someone, I decided, though not a family car, not a car everyone would pile out of, stretching, a bidden youngster scuttling to the bin with the balled foil and chip packets. Why I felt impatient I couldn't say, but when I saw Willow ambling back to the car, I was tempted to put him off, send him to the shop, just to have a little more time to watch Luna.

'He wants to look at it,' Willow said. He bobbed down at his window to get my attention. 'He says if it's what he thinks it is, it'll take a couple of hours to fix. But he's got to get another car on the road before he can start on ours.'

'What do we do now?'

Willow gave me a helpless look.

'We wait. There's nothing else we can do.'

Clutching the map book and my notebook and pen I stood by while Willow and a man in overalls wheeled the car away. To the side of the forecourt was a low parapet, some of it in shade. It would do. By the time I'd settled myself, I was strangely alarmed to find that Luna was looking straight at me.

WILLOW / 9

The shed assumed another function quite unexpectedly.

I was in the bath one evening when the door opened quietly and Sarah slipped in. She seemed to be looking for something, pretending I wasn't there while she busied herself at the linen cupboard. But when she closed it again, she turned to the bath.

I could see her face reflected on the wet steel of the large silver tap, but burnished into a small, dark apparition. When Jess and I were much younger, it fell to Sarah to get us bathed and ready for bed. She was familiar, then, in that sisterly way. But when the time came for us to look after ourselves, those uncomplicated intimacies were replaced by a new mix of things, coyness and embarrassment, discretion, all that sort of thing. Manners. And a different kind of affection.

Now, as she leaned on the rim of the bath, dangling her pink and fawn fingers over the side, I knew she had not seen me naked for years. She seemed suddenly amused, pleased with herself.

'Do you remember when I used to put you in the bath?' She grinned as I looked up at her. She was very close.

'You were small then,' she said, lifting her hand not much above the edge of the bath. 'And you were so naughty.'

I had to clear my throat to ask, to ask what I'd done. Shyly, I suppose, looking away, I kept my eye on the tap, and watched for the twist of her mouth, for the answer. I couldn't remember it at all, but if it was a fiction, how thrilling that she'd thought of it, telling me that as a little boy I'd once lifted her skirt to her waist.

'You just looked and looked, with eyes like this!' And she ringed fingers and thumbs into Os over her eyes, which were wide and mischievous.

She reached for the soap and began lathering my chest in a slow, circling motion. Neither of us spoke for a while. 'What made you think of that?' I murmured without looking up. She didn't answer and didn't seem to have an answer. 'Must I stop?' she asked. 'No,' I said quietly. I was very tense. The circling hand, sometimes splayed, sometimes kneading, was mesmerising. 'Is it nice?' I nodded. I must have nodded. A spasm shook my left knee, and I watched the ripples fan out, lapping soon enough the impudent tip of my prick, rigid, surprised. Suddenly she stopped and swept a wave of bathwater over my chest, clearing the soap she'd churned into a creamy skim. I lay there, not daring to move, or catch her eye. 'Your mommy's in the kitchen, Will,' she said, turning away to twist her hands into a towel. 'I must go.'

I thought to myself, she'll come back, if not now, another day, tomorrow even. Often. All through autumn I hankered for the next step, and there were other occasions for suggestive gestures – aping her wide-eyed thumb-to-finger rings over my eyes, which seemed to charm her, or doing a sly curtsy-bob to remind her of my lifting her skirt, if that's what I ever did. That didn't matter. And her winks. She winked. But there was that larger obstacle in my way, patterns of living, I suppose, risks I'd barely thought of, or didn't know of. All I knew was the throb of urges. Everything else was beyond me.

From inside the shed, I learned to tell more and more just from the sounds that reached me. It was another world outside, the sounds of it unmistakable, the bauhinia pods tearing themselves open in the summer heat, the seeds spattering percussively across the roof, birds swarming at the fruit, and the chip-chipping of the lawn sprinkler. Everything became less obvious as winter approached, or, come to think of it, clarified. Indoor sounds. I knew what to listen for, and swelled as I sensed my appointment approaching: the pendulous clink of the dresser keys as they swung in the door, the clunk of the breadboard sliding home, a teaspoon stirred against enamel.

Too soon, invariably, I'd bring my eye to the peephole only to be unrewarded, the listing wicker chair still unoccupied, this embarrassed survivor of the set we once used for tea on the front veranda on sunny winter mornings, or evening drinks in the stale after-burn of summer days. The others had collapsed and been thrown out. This remaining one was Sarah's.

I liked to wait, I liked the promise. Tapping a cigarette from the packet I kept lodged under the slouching pile of old magazines, I'd hold it squintingly in my lips as I jabbed the match – that furtive gesture – and drew inexpertly on it. The beams flickered bluely as I blew that first fresh lungful at them. Then I'd hear her.

From time to time I thought of the slim rays of sun tooling into the shed as probes that fell piercingly on me, like a conscience, but the effect was negligible, I was never put off. I had, for instance, installed a latch on the inside of the shed door, which, for a good while, Jess

misunderstood. She'd think it was locked, and that no one was inside. Wil-li-am, she would call over and over, and I'd hear her voice going round the garden, and never answer.

Balancing the cigarette on the brick I used on rare occasions to keep the door open, I'd crouch again, spreading my fingers like an athlete and bringing my eye up to the peephole. The glare off the back wall of the house always blackened my vision briefly, but I was used to it, this switch from dark to light. It hardly registered. I also knew not to change to the other eye too soon, but just blink the blackness away. There is something intensive about the view through one eye, the perspective of the shottist, which I understood – too well, Geoffrey would have thought, because it saddened him even as he tolerated it – from my bird-shooting days. But it was tiring, in the shed, the aiming view. And I had to keep it up, my gaze was roving.

My recollections are distilled into a single occasion. Sarah had barely settled, yet seemed already languid in the warm sun. I whispered her name, my lips almost touching the hot corrugated iron. I could feel its oven warmth against my skin. I always began with her face, the most familiar part of her, pretty, and usually alert, though slackened by the warmth and with some of the shine of her knees, her eyes seized in a doze. Her shoulders were still, her wrists hung off the armrests inanimately. Her body did not move, not even her toes. I took my eye off her and drew on the cigarette again, fanning the smoke unnecessarily, then squinted to the peephole again. Sometimes I'd have to wait for ages, sometimes I was denied the pleasure of it, but it was as if she was languorous by nature, helplessly revealing. And there it would be, down between her brown, unsuspecting thighs, where they narrowed in the shadow of her dress, the plump pouch of white cotton.

With aching knees, I eased back against the pile of magazines, stretched my legs out, and smoked carelessly, drawing hard on the cigarette so that the tip glowed fiercely, and blew extravagant plumes, smoke rings that rolled and crumpled smoothly towards the roof, taking forever in the still air, but rising steadily, reaching the unplugged nail holes eventually, which seemed to suck them out.

JESS / 10

December 6

Everyone kept asking, what was he doing in there? He was the absent look-out.

'So did you ask him?' Luna said.

I laughed. How bizarre, I thought, telling a stranger all this. I looked back across the forecourt, the fierce square of sunlight. I could just make Willow out in the café doorway. He was leaning against the icecream freezer, with his back to us, arms folded, talking to someone.

'Why was he in there?' Luna asked, turning to me again.

'The shed?'

Luna nodded.

'He had his hobbies in there. And I think he used to smoke, too.'

And then Luna seemed to lose interest.

'There wasn't a tree to climb where I stayed. When I was small.'

The hedge bushes at Corinth Road, I remember, were very dense because instead of being uprooted when they'd got really old they were just vigorously cut back year after year and been allowed to dig in for good. So if I'd fallen the other way it would have been like landing on a haystack. If that's what landing on a haystack is like. Willow would crouch there, when he still shot birds, when they'd stream into the mulberry tree in the fruit season. 'I'd be conscious of greyish blurs scattering away,' he'd once murmured as we lay together, 'and the one I hit would drop, just plop down.' The worst was finding one that was still alive, with a slow winking eye and a red leak from somewhere in the down, 'droplets bright as paint'. It was hard shooting it again, up close.

'What's his name again?'

'Willow. Well, it's William, but he's always been called Willow.'

'There's a tree called a willow,' Luna said.

'Yes, there is.'

'You get them at the river. And places like that.'

Her skin seemed almost translucent to me, paler where it tightened over her chin and high cheeks, which the light caught when she drew her hair back from her face. And how intense and dark her eyes were when she turned to me, which certain questions prompted her to.

'So does it still hurt?'

'What?'

'Your leg. Where you fell. It still looks sore.'

I was tempted to write that down.

'No, it doesn't. Although when I think about it, I can feel it, I can feel something's not quite right, I'm aware of the scar. Without looking at it, I mean.'

The scar was the first thing Luna noticed.

I'd caught her eye and smiled, and Luna smiled back, then looked away. Almost immediately, she turned and looked again, the breeze lifting her dark hair from a face I could tell was calculating something, an off chance. She needed something. Like someone about to ask directions, she shouldered her pillow bag and started across the forecourt. Just before she reached me, she glanced up at the main road, where cars flashed by every few seconds. She seemed smaller, close up, but unabashed. The buckles spoiled her shoes, I thought. 'Are you also hitching?' she asked. No, I said, our car's being fixed. It's my brother's, I said, and pointed Willow out to her, the back of him, visible in the doorway. I suppose that was the gesture, slight as it was, that made Luna a familiar of sorts. And the rest followed; if the car was fixed in time, I was sure she could get a lift, it would be fine. But it could be a while. 'Thanks a million', she said, but she couldn't wait too long. She'd see. Lighting a cigarette, she looked around as if there must be somewhere better to wait. We may as well sit here, I said. At least it's in the shade. As she sat down, Luna spotted the scar.

'So you didn't ask him?'

'You mean Willow?'

'About the shed. What he was doing in there when you fell and you bled there, on your leg.'

Madison, I remember, came running, stricken, as if he may have caused it by some domestic oversight, some undone chore, which was ironic, now that I think of it.

'Everybody else did, they kept asking him. But what difference does it make, after the fact.' Enough of this sneaking into the shed, and what were you doing there anyway? Mischief, unnatural. Sneaking away like that. And not hearing a thing. How could you? And he had a point: it was true that in summer the bauhinia pods burst every so often with a sharp crack, spattering the seeds across the roof, and how could you tell that from a mulberry branch snapping under the weight of an unreasonably curious girl?

'Is Willow older?'

'Not by much. A year. We're about the same.'

Luna was appraising me. I knew it. Or the circumstances into which she may or may not entrust herself.

'Did your dad wallop him?'

In a way, I thought. In a way, he did.

'Well, we lived with my uncle, with my Mum and my uncle.'

'My dad buggered off, too,' Luna said. 'I saw him when I was eighteen. He said, you're looking good. He was like a stranger.'

I was bundled into the car, Madison hauling the old garage door back until it held in the gravel, like a boat pulled on to the sand, and the engine starting up, seeming too loud in the cramped space, and Geoffrey leaning round to back the car out, and catching my eye. He had wanted at that moment to seem unshaken, but didn't succeed. The car bumped out a little too quickly, and then trees and lamp poles swirled by the window.

'Listen, can we sit somewhere else?'

Luna stood up before I could say anything.

'It's a bit barren here, isn't it,' I said, following suit, dusting my skirt impulsively with my free hand.

'No, it's not that.'

I'd already spotted the bench under a tree, near a tap I suppose was useful to people travelling with dogs. Only as we were walking over to it did I realise I'd not picked up the cue.

'Why did you say you wanted to move?'

'I didn't say.'

No you didn't, I thought. But the new place was better, so I left it. We could keep an eye out for Willow, so we'd know when the car was ready.

Luna sat beside me, her pillow bag between us.

'Can I tell you something?'

'This is also a crappy spot?'

'No. I mean, something personal.'

I guessed it. Just looking at her.

'About your dad?'

'No, about me.'

You never can tell. I recall how often I was tempted, sitting opposite Genevieve in that still pool of inquisitiveness and patience, to turn the tables and ask her about all the secret things she'd been told over the years. Especially the real puzzles, that for weeks on end didn't quite match and warranted a wearying quest, tears, gentle pressure. The wounded party, I knew, would always want to tell in the end. But she'd never be drawn. '*You* know how it feels …' I said once, and Genevieve, without a ripple, replied quietly: 'No. You tell *me*.'

But Luna, God, once she got going she prattled. Some people get personal too quickly, and then it doesn't seem particularly personal after all. You make mistakes, you misjudge people. I regretted being so lightly welcoming, never mind offering her a lift. It was better just watching her.

'So are you going to write it down?'

'Write what down?'

'The things I'm saying, what I'm telling you.'

No, I said, my notebook is for 'things I think about'. Or see, I wanted to add, though I realised it was unnecessary information. Or too little data, really, and I'd have to explain; not everything I saw, only things that had meaning. And how do you explain that? And just then, all I could think about was how to lose this talkative girl and her tacky career. Although she had said she couldn't wait for long. That's what I was thinking. With a bit of luck, Luna would run out of patience and wander off. Up to the main road. I could watch her at leisure then, at an undemanding distance.

'Well you can write it if you want. I don't care.'

And so I might, I thought. Some of it was memorable, the talcing of thighs and belly to bring out the 'centre of attraction', for instance, and the tassled nipple caps that she'd daub with a bit of honey to make sure they stuck firmly, especially when she lit them. Wasn't the paraffin off-putting, the smell of it? That was for her 'hot number', her 'exotic flame dance'. But stripping was all it was, getting naked for strangers. And not just men, she said. Women came too. It must have been a highlight at those country hotels, a sign of the old going by the board, a not unpleasant tremble at the fringe that had something to do with the blur of events in the cities. And would anyone have cared about that extra l in *Fortune's Frollics*? 'She goes all the way', her flyers said. That counted for something. Rummaging for one in her bag, she told me, 'The money's not bad, not bad at all. But sometimes you really got to lean on people to get paid.' That's how it is. The way of the world. Willingness can come at a cost.

Early one morning on his way in to the office, Maurice once turned up at my apartment with a package that he carried with what I think was an expression of surprised excitement. I was astonished to find him at my door. It was early days. I'd not even taken to calling him M yet. 'I should have called, I'm sorry,' he'd said, but there was something he wanted to show me. He seemed tense, standing there with his mysterious envelope, but relieved to have arrived all the same. He had a look that suggested he was quietly congratulating himself on getting to the top of the stairs and actually knocking on my door. Still in my gown, I went off to put on the kettle, calling from the kitchen that he was to make himself at home. And what could it be? So, he really was an interesting man,

after all. That's what I thought. I pinched my cheeks and fixed my fringe in the dresser glass, and headed back with - what was it? - measured aplomb, tray out front, only to find the lounge empty. I didn't pause long. There was only one other room. And there he was, propping them up on my dressing table, a sequence of antique erotic photographs that, to begin with, he discussed chattily, as a collector would, as if the content was unaffecting, and the technique, or the provenance, was the only possible source of delight. He'd found them in a lot delivered to Laforgue's by an elderly man who had said dismissively it was 'mostly worthless pictures' which he was anxious to get rid of. 'Clutter'. That was the first of Maurice's visits. Every time I expected him, I'd set out the tableau of pale, rapt figures, seized in their pleasures.

'Shall I go and see how they're getting on with the car?' I said, shifting forward to the edge of the bench. Luna was the one who'd spotted Willow hunched over the arcade game.

'Does he always play those games?'

'Who?'

'Your brother.'

'He's talking to the mechanic, I think.'

'I can see him in there, he's playing the ninja machine.'

I leaned across, and now I saw him too, bent into the console with a kind of aggressive preoccupation. I'd just decided that it couldn't be ninjas when I thought I'd go and see how the car was getting on.

'Yes, you better,' Luna said, 'otherwise we'll be here tomorrow still.'

WILLOW / 11

There'd always come the moment when I'd look again and she'd be gone. As I listened, I was conscious of a quickened pulse lightly rocking my frame. Sometimes she'd come back, but I learned

to decipher the signs. If she returned to the kitchen, it was over. Hearing the measured clatter of cutlery and what I imagined were fistfuls of knives and forks being fed back into familiar drawers I'd feel a chronic disappointment.

I never did replace the bulb. But there came a day when it all ended. Dimly aware of a commotion, I was about to rouse myself and go and see what the fuss was about when the door was shoved open, jamming half ajar against the collapsed magazines. It was Geoffrey, but he couldn't make me out in the gloom. He hesitated for a second, muttered, 'Damn!', and tramped off hurriedly. Soon after, I heard the garage door scraping open, the car starting up and pulling out a little quicker than usual. And then silence.

I kicked at the door, and it slammed shut. Some minutes later, there was a light, knowing knock.

'What is it, Madison?'

The silence, I knew, was a request. I'd have to open the door. Madison had something to say. And I had something to say, too, though as I girded himself, I wasn't sure that I would say it, or what purpose it might serve. You fuck-head, I'd think. Feeble fucking hiding places. If there was an obvious place to conceal a nip of gin, only Madison would choose it. Though of course it was a default sin. Delivering the liquor was not his choice, his doing. How could he refuse? Who could he tell? And why would he?

I think back to the oddest things: Madison's slyly concealed disbelief when told that men had landed on the moon; or my stealing cigarettes from the corner shop and giving one to Madison, making him an accomplice. It was a great favour, a fraternal act with risks all its own. Madison smoked his avidly, great blueish snorts streaming from his blameless nostrils.

He could stand at the tap and whip the hose from one bed to another with a deft flick, and it would snake over perfectly, just like that. I tried it once, one Sunday, though it was harder than I'd thought. I came close after several attempts, but my performance lacked something. Jess had been monitoring my efforts. She called out, 'You don't have the leering gallantry, Willow.'

You had to admire the patrician quality, though grudgingly at times. He once found it necessary to teach me about women. He made it sound easy, yet it remained improbable. Sinking his middle finger into his mouth, then withdrawing it wetly like a gnarled, varnished stump, he'd say; now she's ready.

He once persuaded me to follow him on his bicycle across what seemed a national boundary, beyond the railway lines and marshalling yards of the industrial zone to the mine dumps that slumped gravely in the perpetual distance of the unknown. We followed a smooth track that sparkled with tiny chips of mica and glittery fragments of glass, the irretrievable dispersals of forgotten liquors, into a wilderness of palaeolithic aridity. Leaving our bicycles, we trudged up a desert slope to a ridge from which he pointed to a cluster of peppercorn trees. When we reached them, I saw that the ground fell away to a pool, a sludge dam, toxic emerald in the sunlight, in which a number of young girls swam naked, the light catching their tennis-ball breasts and white enamel smiles. Madison and I watched in silence.

And there was a reason; he knew about Sarah. Well, not entirely. But he knew enough, I realised, to protect himself, he'd figured out my prurient gazes and clumsy attempts at suggestive hints. And he might even have known of the shed, what it was for, or even have tried it out while I was at school. It crossed my mind that Sarah might have said something, too.

I opened the door, and there he was, cloyingly knowledgeable.

He was sorry, but Uncle Geoffrey had said to tell me that Jess had fallen and hurt herself and they'd gone to the hospital.

'The tree broke down,' he said. 'And she fell.' There was bleeding, but he didn't think it was so bad.

I tried unsuccessfully to recall the expression on Geoffrey's face as he'd hovered fleetingly at the door. He must have thought, 'The light's off. Willow's not here.' Damn.

As Madison wandered off burrowing clumsily in his pockets for his tobacco, a slip of paper fell out and sailed to the ground. When he'd disappeared behind the hedge, I followed and picked it up. I

knew what it was, of course, recognising it almost as soon as it fell from his pocket. There was just one word on it, a name, Ndamiso, in my handwriting. And although there was no such name - as far as I could tell from an exhaustive search of Geoffrey's bookshelves – it still counted for something. It was the last anagram of an inventive series, little gifts for Sarah, each written out on its own square of paper, which I was certain would turn her head.

JESS / 12

December 7

So it was fixed. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad after all. Having Luna in the car would take my mind off how to tell Willow, and what to say, how much exactly. No, that wasn't true. But there would now be a legitimate delay. I wouldn't have to say a word until at least the late evening. And it would be easier in the dark, wouldn't it?

As I sauntered over to the dim workshop I was thinking where I'd prefer Luna to sit, front or back?

And come to think of it, I'd always had a measure of seniority on my side, driving with Mum, and always had the front seat. But the fall changed that. My braced and bandaged leg needed the space of the back seat, and I took to it eventually, the slight distance from the conversation going on in the front, which I'd dip into from time to time, or opt out of, especially when I tired of always having to ask Mum and Willow to repeat themselves. I could keep an eye on them. And they were so alike, in a way. Sometimes it was like watching strangers. And wasn't that the thing about the mulberry tree, too. There weren't always planes to watch, though I'd scan the sky constantly. But the view below could be just as yielding.

I described it for Genevieve with such dispassionate accuracy it almost seemed I was talking about someone else. Even then I held something back. It was still an accident, however you looked

at it. What difference would it make? 'I'd always climbed that way,' I told her. 'For years I'd taken that route to the top.' It must have bored Genevieve a little, the tedious detail, the familiar architecture of the tree. But I crafted an insight to make it seem thoughtful and important. It was true, but it was deliberately true. 'I was older, then, and the older you get, I think, the more likely it is that something will give.' The burden of self, I'd meant, registers as an increasing risk. Genevieve nodded at that moment with a small comradely smile. It was a mental tick, a full marks. But I kept Madison out of the picture, his watchful traverse below, his unctuous hesitation at Mum's window, the speak-only-when-spoken-to uncertainty of his hovering presence. When he'd appeared from his 'place' behind the garage, I vaguely recalled having heard just a minute earlier the clink of the front gate as it opened, and the rattle of it closing again. He didn't think to look up. He occupied, I realise, a different plane, he operated within a separate order of essentials; the upturned paint tin that was his stool, the wooden tomato box he kept his things in - razor, stiff cap, a small scratched mirror with orange stuff on the back. There was a tin of cream, smoothed down to a thin skimming when I went through his things one Sunday. And an empty jam tin, so clean it glimmered. On that mysterious occasion, I sniffed his overall, and smelled polish and earth and tobacco. And a kind of longing. This was the world he'd left not very many paces away, and now he hovered in mine. He didn't hover long. It all happened so quickly, so unexpectedly. At the moment I heard the window, the sash weight jostling unwillingly in its constricted descent, Madison took a step forward, a jump almost, a pronto gesture. And then I couldn't quite see, and moved a foot and leaned out. Mum's hand appeared, palm up, fingers pumping … come, come, come! Just as Madison produced the bottle, just as I verified its syrupy sheen, the sky jerked away.

The man leaning over the engine almost bumped his head as he straightened. Out of the corner of my eye I was aware of one or two others at other yawning bonnets stopping to observe, as if there was something to be learned from how the mechanic would deal with my questions. Somewhere in the gloom, a hammer stopped its jarring blows. The man didn't have much to say beyond generalities. 'It's coming along,' he may have said. After casting an eye over the dingy, oily

parts balanced on the bodywork, I mumbled my 'Thanks', and left. I was already in the sunlight before the hammer banged away again.

'It will be a while yet, I gather,' I said breezily. I hoped she'd get the message. 'They're busy with it, and not very forthcoming.'

As I sat down again, I noticed that Luna's pillow bag was too full for its zip. She had it between her feet now, and it was obvious it couldn't quite close.

'Don't you have any luggage?'

'Hey?'

'A suitcase or anything?'

Luna spread her legs as she leaned forward against her knees, like a child. 'I got everything in here,' she said. 'It's not much, I don't need much.' And then she cackled. 'I don't need much for my job.' I grinned. 'That's meant to be funny,' Luna said, sitting up again. 'You got to laugh sometimes.'

'You do. I know.'

And then she looked away.

Over at the café we could hear the muted clamour of the console game starting up again. Willow must have got some more change from the woman at the counter.

'You're close, the two of you, aren't you?'

'Me and Willow?'

Luna had leaned forward again, cupping her chin in her right hand. She was staring at the ground, at her feet.

'We're quite close. But we haven't seen each other in a while. I'm still getting used to seeing him again.'

Luna continued staring hard at the ground when she said, 'I thought you said he was your brother.'

'What's that?'

'That guy in there. You said he was your brother.'

'Willow? He is my brother.'

I felt cheerier after my short stroll. I wasn't prepared for the knowing snicker, just short of a scoffing plosive, that Luna appeared to aim at the gravel, but which, looking up levelly, she deftly redirected.

'What?'

'You could say it's none of my business,' she said evenly. 'But then again, maybe not.'

'What is it? What are you talking about?'

'I'm talking about all that stuff you write.'

The snicker again. You couldn't blame her, she said. She'd wanted to get something out of her bag and 'your diary' fell on the floor. 'I saw what you wrote there, about you and him, nude in bed. And the other stuff.'

A second passed before it hit me.

'Christ. This is none of your business. Who do you think you are!'

'You said he was your brother - "It's my brother's car … sure, we can give you a lift, my brother this, my brother that". Why shouldn't I know what kind of weird shit this is.'

I felt a throb against my ribs, like a weight dislodging itself.

'Listen, you're way out of line, here. And it's not what you think anyway.'

She flung her chin defiantly into the light.

'Jesus, I can't believe this, Luna. You were prying into my personal things. And you seriously think you can come over all moralistic with me when you do that smutty stuff. Exotic dancing my foot. You're a stripper. Why don't you just bugger off. This is private. It's my business, not yours.'

But Luna didn't budge.

'At least I don't lie.'

'I'm not a liar, damn you.'

'Yes, you are. You wrote stuff there. And about me. Some crap about my shoes. That I'm a nothing. Watching me like that. I read that as well. What's that got to do with you! And what about everything I've told you. I knew you were going to write it down. I said! So why should I bugger off?'

I was about to tell her just exactly how worthless I thought she was, I could feel those words lining up in the barrel of my throat, when I froze. Luna, I realised, knew everything, everything that Willow didn't. I had to stop her, and there wasn't much time.

'It's not what you think, Luna,' I said, too quickly probably and barely capable as the words left me of piecing together a coherently persuasive shift, 'and I don't feel obliged to tell you a thing about it.' Would it be the tone of my voice, or the words themselves, that would succeed here? 'And just in case the thought crosses your mind, don't you dare say a word to him.' I hoped it was part threat, part appeal. In a quieter voice, I said, 'Please.' Luna was motionless and silent.

All I could think was, Go! Just go! But Luna wasn't going anywhere. We'd achieved a ragged truce.

A large truck and its trailer swung slowly into the forecourt and came to a stop with a pronounced pneumatic sigh. I looked up to see the driver wiping sweat from his face with a hand towel. A second later, Willow appeared, skirting the back of the trailer, his face crimsoned briefly by the brake lights. He hesitated, puzzled for a moment because I wasn't sitting where he'd left me, then spotted us, and walked over, hands in his pockets.

'Here he comes.'

Luna sounded apprehensive, and stood up suddenly. Before I could think of a final plea, she stepped out of the shade.

'Hi,' she said as Willow came up, and stuck out her hand.

'Willow, this is Luna …' I said, and was about to say, she was wondering if she could - when Luna said: 'Your sister said maybe I could get a lift?'

Willow shook her hand.

'Sure, no problem.'

Looking away from Luna, I could see he made a fleeting effort to read my features, which I knew were too deliberately composed. He sensed something and I knew I had to put him off.

'What do they say about the car?'

'It's just about ready, apparently,' Willow said. 'It'll be another five minutes and we'll be on our way.'

Turning back to Luna, he said, 'Is this all you've got?'

She looked down at her pillow bag. 'Yip. This is it.'

'There's something to be said for travelling light.'

'Sorry?'

'I'm glad that's all you've got. There's not much space in the boot.'

As Luna nodded, Willow looked over at the garage.

'You may as well wait here. It shouldn't be long.'

He asked if we wanted anything from the shop. 'Juice, newspaper, chips?'

'No it's fine,' Luna said, as if the question had been for her.

'Okey dokes,' Willow said, turning to go. He swivelled with a playfully apologetic smile. 'And you, Jess?'

'We've still got water, haven't we?' I said as casually as I could manage. 'Although it will be warm. Maybe get some water, the coldest you can find.'

He whistled as he walked away. I think he did. I kept an eye on him in case he looked back, but he didn't.

What was her plan? We sat again, and remained silent for a while. We had come, in these two minutes, an indeterminate distance together.

'Listen. I'm sorry. I don't care what he is to you, but …'

'He's my fucking brother, ok!'

'Ok,' Luna said softly. 'I won't say anything, I promise.' She paused. 'I wanted to say, I need the lift. I need to get out of here. Someone may be looking for me.'

'What do you mean? Who is it?'

I had to concentrate hard. It seemed there was either a new risk, or a new opportunity. Everything was brittle.

'The last place I worked at, which you must have passed on the way here, they didn't pay me.'

'And?'

'The guy there, he ran the bar, he said he didn't earn enough, my shows didn't earn enough for him to pay me. He said I'd have to work a few days more for free. I said ok. But then he made more excuses. So after a week, I said, is it something else you want? So on the Sunday he said, you can come to my room. Come in the evening. I know his type.'

'Get to the point, Luna. The car will be ready any minute now.'

'He's got this stuffy little room at the back of the hotel. There wasn't even a window, can you believe it. He had a mattress on the floor, and there was a grimy gas cooker there. He poured me a drink in a mug, sweet sherry. I knew what he was trying. I know men like that. He wanted to feel me up. I said let's drink first. I pretended. You have to. He'd already had half the bottle, so I hoped, you know, he wouldn't last.

'Luna.'

'Ok. He made me do stuff, take off my dress. He made me stand there and pull my panty to the side. And stand over him and stuff. He pulled me around. I could see he was pissed. He took my nipples with his thumbs. It was sore. I think he wanted me to cry, or something like that, beg him. So I said, I'll blow you. I had to, to keep him away. So he lay down and I started blowing him. He smelled bad like that, with his carrot in my mouth. But he was so pissed he passed out before I could finish even.'

Luna looked down at her bag. 'I stole the money. I took the key and I went to the cash box and took it, all of it.'

'How much was it?'

'A couple of thousand.'

'You just stole it?'

'I was angry. I wasn't thinking. He hurt me …'

'And he's the one who's coming after you? When did you leave there? Who saw you?'

But Luna wasn't listening, she was talking, she was saying 'I thought of just putting on the gas, because he hurt me like that. I thought of doing that. Before I left and closed the door on him. And got away from there.'

'What gas? The gas in his room, the cooker?'

Luna said nothing.

'Luna. Did you put the gas on?'

She shook her head slowly.

'Don't think I'm so low down when you're also.'

'Jesus Luna.'

But she was finally spent. Luna Fortune. What a name.

'That's enough for today,' Genevieve would say, and I would sigh heavily almost as if I'd been holding my breath for a signal to come up for air. And, always, with a suddenness that was unexpected, we'd find ourselves among commonplaces; 'I've been meaning to say,' I might remark, 'I really like this carpet.' Or Genevieve would ask, 'Do you have anything planned for the weekend?' And so, as she walked me to the door with that ambling familiarity, we'd natter disregardingly. It was the homely departure, I later realised, that was therapeutic, the permissible flight.

Still seated on the bench, we looked into each other's eyes for the first time in twenty minutes, without a word welling up in either of us. It was little more than an unflinching gaze of exhaustion. That was true of me, maybe it was true of Luna, too. But there was something more, a reluctant equivalence, I found myself thinking.

From across the forecourt, an engine revved excessively, rising through a succession of grating peaks, then fell to idling. Not long after, the car appeared, Willow leaning cheerily from the window.

'Come on guys,' he called. 'The show's on the road.'

'Ok,' I hissed. 'Let's just get in the car. And don't open your mouth. I know nothing about you and you know nothing about me. It's quits. And when we get to wherever you want to go – and it's not going to be the city - that's it, I don't want to see you again.'

Without a word, Luna slung her pillow bag over her shoulder and went ahead. Willow leaned across to the stub of the rear-door lock and eased it up.

And I remember how Luna had asked: 'Was it his secret place?'

And I'd replied: 'No. I knew. It wasn't secret. We were very close. He told me everything.'

LUNA / 13

Sometimes I got to laugh.

He's got a carrot on him, that's for sure. We like to fool around. I dance. I dance over him, I do a slow jive. He says, you got the moves Luna. You do it for me, big time.

And that's how he got the idea.

'We going to make some serious dough, Luna, me and you.'

'And Levitt.'

'Stop worrying about Levitt.'

I never did. I was right.

I said, Dougs, you and Levitt, it's bad news. That was another time.

'He's my mate,' he said. 'We been through stuff.'

And Dougs was my pal. But the thing is, he didn't tell me everything, and what does that make me? He thought it was best. I know that. But when I found out I wasn't so sure. I thought, Jeez, Dougs, you could've told me. That's why I did what I did, and didn't tell him a thing.

He saw me off. I took a bus, it was a day's drive just about. I slept most of the way. I didn't want to think too much about what I had to do, not that it was much, but if I thought about it for too

long maybe I'd get it wrong, maybe I'd worry. In my heart I knew I didn't know the full story. That was the trouble, too much wait and see.

The hotel was crummy, which didn't matter because I didn't hang around. Dougs said, you arrive, you check in, you go straight to Bender. I got to laugh. Not in his face, but inside. The way Dougs is. It sounded like a movie. Like a mission or something. Agents and stuff. So I went. It wasn't hard to find, the shoe repairer, but I didn't like the look of him, the Bender guy. What kind of name is that? It was hot in there, it smelled of glue. And there wasn't enough light to see properly, I couldn't see in properly. He had a radio playing, that I noticed. Playing softly. I wouldn't say Bender was old, but his hair was grey, thin, like him, he was thin, just like Dougs said. I gave him the slip, he looked at me over the tops of his specs. He looked me in the eye, then he looked at my chest. I saw that. You always know. Then he studied the slip. Jeez, I was nervous. Dougs said, you don't need to say a thing, just hand him the slip. Somewhere in the back I heard another man whistling and tapping, and Bender turned to go. I thought, shit, what if he's a cop. That was funny. But he came back, and I took them. I thought, is this it? They were ordinary shoes, though with a silver buckle. And I couldn't remember if I was supposed to wear them or what. I did eventually, and there's a story there. But now I had them, now what? I just walked out the shop and headed back to the hotel. That's what Dougs said. I remembered everything, I did it all right. But where's Levitt? Funny how things work out. I always think that. Afterwards, I mean. I used to say, Dougs, Levitt's all over the place, but he never wanted to hear any of it.

So I waited. I had a drink in the bar, I read a magazine. But after a while, a long while, just waiting, I thought bugger this, I can't sit around. And just as well I had a small bag only. I said to the guy in the hotel, I'm just going to the shop. It must have looked like a handbag. Sort of. It was a bit stuffed, with the shoes in. He nodded. He didn't think there was anything wrong with that, and it's not that I owed him or anything. I wasn't really doing something wrong, though it felt like it, just walking out. Especially when I got outside and it was so damn hot.

By the time I got to the garage I thought, Levitt's got to be here. I'd have crapped on him if he was. He was way overdue. But he never even pitched. Every car, I'd think, okay, maybe this is him. Or I'd think, the third car to turn in will be him. You play tricks with yourself to pass the time. I shouldn't have kept my hopes up.

Then it turns out I'm not the only one watching the traffic. That's what I thought. I didn't know the set-up, then, I didn't know about the guy. He was in the shop, I suppose, or with the mechanic, I don't know. Him, the guy, I remember he was Willow, because I still said about the willow trees that you get at the river. She wasn't interested in that, I could tell. Her name was Jenna or Jemma, something like that, but shorter, like Jen. It was a J sound, definitely. I couldn't care if I never remember it.

She was dark, like me, but not as dark, with her hair pulled back out of her face, quite prim. She talked fancy, but I think she was just big for her boots. I wouldn't count on anything she said, that's for sure. Like the scar on her leg. That sounded like a tall story to me. Well, anyway, I got one on her. I told that girl so much crap you won't believe. And how right was I? Christ, it was a relief to be out of that car, thinking about it afterwards. I had a feeling about them. At first I thought he was okay. But not her. The way she wrote stuff, that was unnatural. Who writes stuff? I thought, Luna, just watch it. And, Jeez, I pressed her buttons. It was something else.

Sometimes I agree with Dougs. There's a lot of people around you can't trust. Not when it matters.

JESS / 14

December 8

The trouble started with the arcade games. We were back on the road. Luna was asleep.

'You must have spent a fortune on those games,' I said.

'What?'

'In the café. You played non-stop.'

'No I didn't.'

'We saw you.'

I could see his expression was saying, what's this all about?

Luna was the one who saw him first, hunched at the console.

'It's not that fascinating, Jess. If I played twice it was a lot.'

After watching some kids playing, he'd tried his hand at it, out of curiosity. He was waiting for the mechanic. It wasn't a big deal.

'I've never played them,' I said.

'There's not much to it.'

'Are they ninja games?'

'What do you mean?'

'Isn't that what they are? War games.'

'Haven't you ever seen an arcade game? It's not war games.'

'Well I don't know, Willow. I haven't played them. They sound like there's a war going on.'

He said nothing. I didn't really want to know, or I didn't want an explanation. I just wanted to hear Willow talk. I wanted to forget Luna was behind my back. And then I thought it would be all right. Willow said, 'I watched this young guy slamming the knobs. If you're really good you kind of slam them, and the console trembles. It's like an apocalyptic clamour. And the kid was hunched over it. He was expert. You could see that. But then he made a mistake and the game fucked out – sorry, that's crude, but it's fairly accurate, the screen dazzles for a second and then just as it goes blank, there's a terrible sound, like a, I don't know, like an airliner wiping out into a cathedral. Glass and steel. And the youngster stepped back with a look of surly disgust. He'd already turned away when he swung back and made to fist the screen, he came back like that, the gesture, you know, the threat of, whatever, revenge.'

Willow looked over at me. He seemed younger, then. I caught just the ivory crescent of his left eye. Did I get it?

'I couldn't take my eyes off him. It was like a performance. He put everything into it, from start to finish.' He paused. 'That's when I started playing.'

I knew he was going to say that. I suddenly recognised the truest part of him, the man who would fill a space as it opened before him, requiring so little of it. Unlike the youngster he'd been watching, who'd fascinated him, who had what he so wanted to have, though I doubt he knew it, or even knew what it was.

'Would you have fisted it? The machine? Kicked it or something?'

I thought he might flinch. I regretted asking. He shook his head. 'Probably not.'

Luna had asked if Willow would mind her getting a lift. I'd said, if you don't mind waiting, you can get a lift with us. And she'd said, 'Shouldn't you ask him?' She was twisting round, shielding her face from the sun, trying to see into the café. 'He won't mind,' I told her. 'He'll go along with it.'

I started saying, 'I remember when I came to the station …', and I stopped. He didn't know I'd come, when he and all the other conscripts were going off, the platforms packed. That was a lifetime away. And what was I getting myself into? It just came into my head. It was talking about 'war games' that must have triggered it.

'What station?'

I explained. Partly, anyway. I'd needed him more than ever, then. To share what I'd been through, which nobody knew, which nobody would know for years, until I started seeing Genevieve. Although, sitting there in the car, I didn't tell him that. I didn't tell him there was someone else in this world who knew all our secrets, and things even he didn't know. Who knew how I'd stood there in that crowd, willing my brother not to go and not finding the courage to push myself forward and get to the edge, the platform, and reach up to him. And how, with a wheezing jolt, the train slid slowly away.

'I came to beg you not to go,' I said. 'You shouldn't have gone, Willow.'

He misunderstood, but it was too late. No, it wasn't too late, it was Luna, it was Luna in the back. I couldn't talk freely. So he misunderstood and I couldn't say.

'So, it was simple as that?'

I blushed.

'And just as a matter of interest, what were you doing back then? Apart from hanging around railway stations willing the trains to stop.'

'Willow, I came to see you, I came because …'

'And someone would have said, fine. "Morell, go home. Your sister doesn't want you to go." What planet are you on, for Christ sake?'

'That's not what I'm talking about.'

'What was I supposed to do?'

'There was something … '

'Jess, you haven't a clue.'

'I don't want to argue about it, Willow.'

'But you are, Jess. You are arguing.'

I wasn't looking at him, but I could see his head jerking with the accents of his agitated mind.

'Willow, I know what you're trying to say,' I said, searching desperately for a new track. 'I'm talking about other things. It's not what you think.'

He wasn't listening anymore. 'I'm not fucking trying,' he said. 'I'm saying it.'

It came back to me, then, that at the funeral, as we left the church, there was a beggar near the west door, mumbling and wheedling. But the moment the coffin appeared, I could have sworn he brightened. I don't know what it was in Willow's anger, but I thought of the beggar just then, the way he'd blurted: 'Here come the boogie man!'

There are times I admire the witless potence of illiteracy; the ghost is everywhere all at once, unknowably plural.

WILLOW / 15

For a long time, the doomed man kept coming back to me, but he keeps his distance now. Even so, I'm as familiar as ever with that day. I've relived it, over and over. All my life, just about.

I was up at dawn, alone as usual, studying Geoffrey's letter, stuck on the detail of where Dad went down.

It was not so quiet that there was nothing at all to be heard, but as I pored over the word – which seemed to be *Kushk* but might have been *Kushr* or even *Kasht* for that matter – I felt entirely absorbed in it, sunk in a stupor, a stillness of preoccupation in which little else registered but the scrawl of this one unyielding noun. Everything else in the letter was perfectly decipherable, even if "a"s and "u"s appeared interchangeable, and "k" and "r" especially, but "t" as well – it came back to me, looking at it again not that long ago - seemed indiscriminately unfussy about where they stood. Without having to puzzle over it, the rest of it was comprehensible, all but that one word. And I'd no sooner settle for *Kushk* than *Kushr* would sneak in a claim of probabilistic authority. I remember that, with dread, not awful dread, but sad dread, it reminded me of Mom. She would have known whether it was *Kushk* or *Kushr*, the far, fatal place that claimed her airman.

As a child, I'd thought it was a different place entirely. I'd been convinced it was Khut. I suppose I'd in effect played the location into being, tilting into all those imagined dogfights one or another Airfix box, with its canyons of cloud and the menacing slant of the rival plane's banking turn. Or, leaning over the splayed atlas, with its spidery routes and points of no return, advancing a young moist finger, jerking with the weight of concentration, towards the dot that seemed to match the talk, the stories, the sound of them, the Khut, the false coordinate.

I'm reminded of how Mom would search stubbornly for lost things, and often turn up forgotten treasures instead – an old brooch rather than the photograph that would show how it was, who was present. It always cheered her, the substitute, the better-something-than-nothing, and she'd come to, tucking her straying hair bravely back behind her ear.

In all the months I'd had Geoffrey's letter I'd not paid much attention to the portion of it that had seemed old hat, the familiar lore. And there I was, so far from home, abandoning so unexpectedly a long-held untruth. It was quite a concession, or I imagine it must have been, though it was overshadowed by the events of that day.

I raised my eyes from the letter without lifting my chin from my clamped knuckles. My elbows were numb where they rested on the grey-green metal. I was conscious of being almost fatally inert. The clearing, broad, yellowed in the early light, was soundless. The trees on the far side wavered faintly in the heat. There was not a breath of wind. A small sound in my neck, a click I didn't quite catch, and couldn't verify, claimed my attention. I listened for it to repeat itself, but caught instead the slow airing of my lungs, life involuntary, and a moment later, at the base of my ears, the whispered chant of the heart. I forgot myself, the clearing, the trees, in its throb. I shut my eyes, but then opened them abruptly, astonished at the competing strike of my wristwatch, so insistent it was puzzling that I'd not been aware of it all along. As I listened, it seemed to grow louder, losing its sync, a panicked mechanism starting to run, an anomaly which, the instant I raised my head, clarified itself as a tell-tale clatter, half clatter, half thud, a helicopter beating the distant air. Then, closer in, a rustle of sleeping bag behind me in the shadowed bunker. We were so at home in our silence, Bosh and I, that the smallest disturbance was startling. I turned back from the sandbagged overhang and tried to make out his restful form in the gloom.

'Bosh!'

Silence again.

'Bosh!'

'Fuck off, Willow.' His mumbling head glistened slightly with an early sweat.

'We've got visitors, Buddenbrook.'

'Don't fucking call me that.' I liked him, fair, wispy haired Bosh, who didn't bother opening his eyes. I must have chuckled.

We didn't really expect visitors. What reason could there be?

I'd have folded Geoffrey's letter, which I was using as a bookmark, and stuck it back between the pages. If there was a gesture that went with that moment, perhaps it was a sniff, or a kind of sigh, a birthday-candle breath blown into the clearing. Perhaps there was no such thing.

It was the present, then, that required my attention. Reaching for the binoculars, I levelled them and panned the trees, a slow sweep starting at the far end, working middle finger and thumb to sustain the vivid obscurity of particulars that slid almost guiltily across my sight. There was something unavoidably ridiculous about my solitariness just then, the magnified limbs of trees, the ropey vines and breezy shadows, the utter indifference. But as my gaze slid over the disassembled geography of the too-near landscape, I became afraid that I was almost certainly about to make a mistake, that if I wasn't careful and completely present and watchful, I'd narrow the chances and after some kind of flurry the bunker would register on a distant, coolly judged chart as a red pin, a contact.

But what was it, what movement was it, or shape, that I knew to dread detecting in this absurd, jerky hunt? There were no insurgents, there hadn't been for months. Not in this sector. But you wouldn't know until it was too late. The risk lay in the dynamics; alertness, always waning, is never a match for stealth. And there had to be a mismatch in the numbers, too. There was never a measurable rival, a straggler. The figure was always numerous, marauders rising darkly as one from the wooded edge, embittered by the long homelessness of raids and terror.

I shifted in my chair to relieve the prickling in my legs and a kind of lower-back discomfort, a displaced annoyance at a line of thinking I wasn't up to. For all the implausibility, the crappy drama of readiness, why shouldn't I expect an event? And the more I thought about it, the more obvious it seemed that there was no delaying what was fated, the listless setting itself, my own posture of alarm, inviting the action. It was madness, ill-equipped as I was, not under-armed, but unwilling. And here it was, as if I'd not thought of it before, not pieced together the dawn flights and baking truck journeys, the oiling of working parts and practised handling of clips and catches, as if, had I been concentrating, I'd have known it would lead to this. But the clearing yielded nothing.

I panned again slowly, willing myself to detect something definite, an unhidden shoulder, a keen metal angle. Not the phantoms that flitted between the patches of light, and froze just as I caught up with them, dissembling ferns that shivered on their stalks. I was drenched with sweat. Months back, moving up, we'd been mustered one evening to study weekly reports plotting the scope of 'insurgency', poxed charts the combat officer had handed to us without a word. I'd thought his silence a big-deal thing, and I remember muttering an inward 'fuck you'. Still, you could recognise the truer spirit of the enterprise, the bewildering uncertainty, as if the notations were essentially figurative, losses and gains that no one could actually vouch for, but which, in the gathering sum, the episodic quality of the contest, indicated that the end drew steadily nearer, becoming more likely by the hour, the rushed movement and crackling gunfire and, by some accident of circumstance, the abrupt fade-out.

As Bosh said, 'What a cock-suck to die here. Jesus, it doesn't even have a name, for fuck's sake.' I did think it would be unreasonable. Too crap for words. Although words would be found. That the post fell under circumstances it was not possible to determine, the defenders having lost their lives in the action. For instance. Blah, blah, blah. How could it be any other way? Headquarters would be unflustered in producing a larger if delusional comfort: *the status of the sector remains unchanged, territorial superiority having been regained by nightfall.* There was always the select phrasing, the nightfall, to be counted on. But not out there, not when you're in it.

Keeping the binoculars pressed into my forehead with my left hand, I felt for the tripod with my right, finding the breech, then the palmed curve of the butt, and drew it almost secretively towards me. The blurred barrel of the heavy weapon swivelled darkly across my line of sight. I thought afterwards that I'd felt emotionless at that moment.

But I wasn't present in the defensive strata for long because without realising it as I pulled the cool steel into my side, I nudged my book to the table edge where it lost its balance and tipped off, hitting the tarpaulin floor with a sharp clap. I jerked back as if someone had hit me square in the face.

Behind me, the sleeping bag jostled with itself, but almost immediately fell silent. All was quiet again but for the unseen air patrol. There was no obvious reason for it, but the panic lifted immediately. I leaned back, picked up my book, stuck the letter in again. If it had been required of me, I could have reported that all was quiet. The helicopters seemed only slightly nearer and in a while I'd open the logbook and record the flight with just two words, *Dawn air*, the whittled down essentials – which I liked for the Vietnam-ish, rock bandy quality they had, a vaguely up-yours unmilitariness - that stood for the earlier form, *Airborne patrol sighted/dawn*, often the only entry in as many as three days.

In the beginning, it had been possible to note the time, and it had seemed essential, then, to record events with the temporal precision – 06h17 – without which the vicissitudes of combat readiness and torpor risked being mistaken.

Now that time was an arbitrary measure there was no point. My watch was buggered for a while after we were flooded out in a downpour. The place was a mess. For an hour, with ragged effort, we'd sloshed back and forth over the mound, staunching the fissure eventually with sodden cardboard, buckled tins, strips of tent fabric and mud. Afterwards, slumped like survivors, enjoying freshly lit cigarettes, I discovered my watch had stopped. Bosh insisted on tinkering with it. We only had the one, Bosh having posted his home from the transit camp. He was so earnest; he'd told me the glint of a watch could be detected from miles away. Now he got going on mine. It was like dealing with an oyster without the proper tool, though he went at it with a number of sharp objects.

'It's a piece of shit, Willow,' he said finally, having got the silvery backplate off, brutally, leaving a number of nasty nicks gouged shinily in the metal. There was mud inside. 'It's fucked,' he said. I was still trying to figure him out. He liked to swear a lot. A lot. I thought it hid something. But he could be funny, too. Before he'd dug it open, we were almost drunk with laughter when he wiped the back of the watch against his sleeve and read the spec, 'Waterproof to 150m'. Although I was quite pissed off. It was a good watch and I'd had it for years. Geoffrey gave it to me. Out of a kind of loyalty, I suppose, I picked at it with a match, and left it open in the sun all of the next day with a drop of

cooking oil seeping into its stiffness. By nightfall, I had it ticking, though the actual hour was lost. From then on, in the absence of time, I was content with judging the hour by the light.

Looking back at the lumpy camp bed again, I recognised how perfectly matched we were, chalk and cheese. It's better that way. I knew I'd have to get Bosh up soon, but I thought I'd leave it a while. By a fairly casual arrangement, I had the morning to myself. Once it was light enough, I could read. Bosh would wake me in the dark – soon after midnight or nearer dawn, we didn't ever know – and we'd change places, often without much more than a murmur. As a courtesy, though it had another unspoken function, Bosh would routinely make his way to the parapet and lean over the edge to reach the tap of the water tanker and swill out the cup for me. The piddling trickle would go on a little longer than necessary, and I knew that even though Bosh never looked back, he was giving me time to wake fully. In the moment, it was a bit irritating, but I always thought back on the wasteful trickle with some affection.

There was an extravagance to our first days in the bunker, which had now long gone. The gas light would hiss merrily for hours as we chatted into the night. It was like camping. Yawning, but still talking, though talking softer, our conversations settled like embers, the silences of nostalgia or reckoning lengthening in the warm steady glow. By the end of the second week we'd become aware of the gradual dimming of the filament. Even when there was still gas in the cylinder – and both of us swilled it to verify the faint metallic wash of its dwindling contents – we'd chosen to go without light. Thereafter, Bosh, who was convinced our vulnerability was greater in the dark, insisted on keeping the first watch. He said he thought his eyes were better. Actually, Bosh thought he was keener all round.

He woke me once with a shove to the shoulder and as I turned, his face was very close, eyes wide, a finger pressed urgently to his lips. 'Don't make a sound,' he whispered, leading me to the parapet. The mouth of the bunker, the night, was impenetrable. Blinking wildly, slightly breathless, I eased myself into the still-warm chair and leaned forward until the rubber casing of the eyepiece fitted snugly over the bridge of my nose. I often wondered how I'd react in an unexpected crisis, and

I wasn't certain that this was one, but I felt doomed, fatalistic. I think what panic I felt was the panic of lethargy, knowing in my core that I'd surrender to events with relief, a relief that's like sleep. In the nightsight, the landscape was a murky, luminous green, startlingly revealed, as if a light were being shone across it, but lacking the definition, the authenticity of the real thing. Also, the slightest movement of the scope had the effect of rendering everything in swimming swerves of neon before the image settled, and the minute it settled I felt compelled to move once more, to look for what I imagined must be there. Bosh interrupted this senselessly unsteadying procedure.

'D'you see him?' he whispered.

'What? What is it?'

'Out there … just in front of us somewhere.'

'Fuck, Bosh. What am I looking for!'

Suddenly I caught sight of something, the slight bulging glow of movement, and shifted the scope.

'You see him?' Bosh could tell.

I paused, letting out the breath I realised I'd been holding in for some seconds.

The wild dog bobbed along at a stealthy trot, head down, mysteriously afoot. It looked deeply preoccupied, but unthinkingly, impelled to move without having to consider why. The animal's scrawny flanks and limbs worked by such delicate mechanics, such lightness, it seemed on the brink of the imaginary, and might at any moment vanish. All this registered in my quietening mind as an unexpected redemption. Here was an ageless world, impervious to flags, armament, the moral infancy of conviction, this wild world of unseen life, beyond reason.

When the dog halted suddenly, raising its head with almost unbearable tenseness, crisp ears cupping the night air, I felt briefly the freeze of uncertainty, all the doubt of the night hours. But within seconds it dipped to its trot once more, veering daintily to choose its way, and gradually faded.

It stayed with me for a long time. I fancied we'd spot others in due course, though we never did.

'He got the fuck out, Willow,' Bosh said. He wasn't going to hang around.

I'd thought it basically superfluous to keep track of the days. Twelve weeks was not a long time, and if a Sunday and a Thursday were indistinguishable in their essentials, where was the need to mark them off? The logbook we had inherited, velvety at the corners, the slack binding over-willing to splay, was faithful to the languor of the outpost, its contemptible inactivity. The fastidious roster of the earliest pages, precise and inconsequent, gave way gradually, over many months, to page after page that contained nothing more than a terse daily entry – *airborne patrol, 07h10* or, more often, *nothing to report, 18h00* – until, after a single blank page, quite unexpectedly, there was a portrait, a wire-haired girl with pointy breasts in blue ballpoint, fixed in the cheery inexpertness of amateur draughtsmanship, her cartoon grin marred by a coiled scribble indented in the paper by a guard who must have tried impatiently to get his pen to work. Several marginal sums – supplies, days or debts – might have been the work of the same hand. The final entry, overleaf, seemed at once rhapsodic and plaintive: '*Fuck all ever happens.*'

'Look at this.'

Bosh came over.

'What is it?'

'The logbook.'

Bosh read it out aloud, without expression, then turned to the clearing and stared into its bleak silence for a while. He seemed disappointed, and I almost wanted to ask if he was, but didn't. There was something exultant in what promised to be a purposeless abandonment and I was unwilling just then to have it tempered by Bosh's stunted enthusiasm. I suspected he depended on having a purpose imposed on him, or even that he might unravel if the purpose were withdrawn.

I met him for the first time at the transit base. Bosh sought me out, going from tent to tent. 'I've been all over this fucking camp looking for you,' he said. 'HQ sent me down there …' and he flung his arm back contemptuously to indicate the far side of the vast canvas settlement. 'So, we're going up tomorrow.'

I stuck out my hand. 'It's William, by the way, but you can call me Willow. No one ever calls me William.'

He smiled as we shook hands. 'Same as me. Bosh. My name's Martin Schenk. No one calls me that either. Except the little runts at HQ.' He looked away. 'You ready? Your kit and stuff?' He seemed quite boyish to me, eager, his rifle slung on his shoulder, barrel down, as he'd seen the timers do, the stubbled returnees passing this way, to the south, more of them, I couldn't help noticing, than the fresh men moving up.

One of those veterans, in quiet absorption, had drawn the girl, tried hard to get her eyes right, rouged them heavily with the effort.

Partly in a spirit of consolation, then, I decided to restore the logbook, and tore out the last two pages, made a ball of them and tossed it at Bosh. With a flashy header, he sent it sailing over the parapet where it rolled into the grass. There it stayed.

In the first few days, I was keenly aware of the significance of accurate observation in somehow affirming our existence in the alien geography of the nameless clearing and the tatty bunker that looked as if it had been vacated carelessly, at the last minute, in a hurry.

For the first hour, Bosh did little but fiddle obsessively with the Browning. As I got on with making the place habitable, reassembling the camp beds, clearing the litter, checking the trunks – ammo, flares, medical - and sussing out the canisters of food, and the tinned milk, sugar and powdery coffee, I was conscious of the clicks and snaps of the weapon's moving parts as Bosh willed familiarity into his handling of it.

'Have you seen any goddamned oil anywhere?'

'Yeah, there are a couple of bottles. Sunflower. It's okay.'

'Christ Willow. Gun oil. Have you seen any gun oil?'

It was quite funny, I thought, but I decided against making a joke of it. As it happens, Bosh had a small supply of his own, and set to work immediately, stripping the machine gun and arranging the gleaming components in an order of assembly that expressed something of its lethal anatomy.

The bunker was dug into a slope overlooking a clearing that had been cut from the bush as a rudimentary landing strip. It had been burned a good while back. Closer in, the crisp stubble seemed to be made of shrunken hedgehogs uniformly petrified. Across the clearing, we looked out on a dark line of trees and, when the day was done, blinding sunsets.

I crossed alone to the other side once, leaving a testy Bosh in the bunker, resenting being left alone.

We'd been there for some weeks when the idea came to me to cross to the far side, to the dense trees and vines darkly defined as an impenetrable no-go zone beyond the lumpy runway. There was no need to know anything more about it, and no reason to go there. Bosh kept saying so. It could be left unexplored, it didn't warrant knowing. It was known for what it was. I imagined that other forms of surveillance, other bunkers and look-outs further up, as far as the horizon or even beyond it, accounted for the lasting stillness, the uneventful hours of watching, although I had no knowledge of this at all.

Bosh once described visiting one of the camps to the north, but in the dark, in a long, strung-out convoy. And being in one of the transports to the rear, they'd not had the chance to stop, the forward vehicles having already stopped and moved on again. There was an uncanny blaze of light, he said, fogged by the dust, and men moving about throwing long shadows. It seemed very busy, he remembered, though there were some silent figures beside the road, who stood and watched them pass.

'You couldn't tell much,' Bosh said. 'You couldn't see their faces.'

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December 9

Willow craned again to consult the mirror, twice, the first glimpse impressionistic, the next a second later to verify that Luna still slept. I thought so, anyway. And then he was quiet. And what point is

there in being angry at the way things are? If that's just how it is, I wanted to say. Which was against everything that Genevieve taught me. And everything I felt. 'Use your anger. Come on.'

There were times I hated her for making me dwell in my unspeakable self. But there could be no unspoken things. That was the point. 'Write it,' she'd say. 'Write it out. You've got a way with words.' Although the funny thing was, I fleetingly thought she'd said, or meant, 'You've got away with words'. And how untrue was that?

And the words were there. But they were my words. What about the others, the voices I could not hear, which I couldn't find?

Still, I had a way with words, so I wrote.

She was very pleased when I did, I think, although not with the result, necessarily. 'I'm a bit concerned,' she said, 'that you're obscuring things again, in a different way.' She was gentle with me.

I seemed, she said, to be skirting the edge. It's not a bad place to be, I wanted to say. And I do so clearly recall the morning after Mum's funeral, when I went down to the river alone. From the road, a sandy path dropped suddenly into the gloom of the waterside trees and vines and just as suddenly, from the dim stillness, I re-emerged into the light where the shallows of the lagoon, yellow as ale, lined the sand with leaves and twigs and a faint tidal spittle. It's an elemental contour. Far off, on the sand bar that separated the lagoon from the sea, I saw a boy, fixed like a peg in the sand, sparring with a weaving kite. I could hear the grating fabric of it, buzzing like a tireless moth. There were small fish darting ahead of me as I splashed along, but I kept losing the glints in the ripples of light and current and the quivering bruises where the rock shelf broke the sandy floor. In the deeper water, a submerged something caught my eye, a lump of opaque plastic that turned out to be a jellyfish drifting in the tide like a waterlogged lampshade so long in the river it had lost its colour. How strange to be like that, to never choose and never know where you're going to end up.

The edge, I dissembled, is a kind of preliminary position, or 'a median space'. The lingo is stupefyingly valid. I could see that she warmed to it immediately. I had succeeded in conveying the

potential of a purposeful transit, the longed-for journey away, not the stasis I'd really had in mind, the stubborn fact of occupying the slimmest possible space, at the margin.

Willow didn't know any of it. He'd just upped and left. That morning. I was eventually able to say it, outright: I slept with my brother. Genevieve made me. You must say it, she kept saying. Although she was very kind. If there was to be any outcome, she'd said quietly, the miscarriage was probably the best you could have hoped for.

We'd been so very close, Willow and I. And when it happened, it was an accident of closeness, of grief and consolation and warmth. Ordinary things, I think. Aren't they? But Willow, choked with rage, clutching that sheet, backed up against the door. 'What have you done!' he screamed. He blamed me, just like that.

It was Genevieve's suggestion that I make a study of the etymology. She'd meant it as a way in, a kind of gradual immersion by way of the steps rather than the diving board. It didn't work very well. I got stuck on 'unchaste', the 'not *castus*' root of 'incest'. That ransacking slayed me.

I've always thought that some part of me must have known the truth, or how else could it have happened? But discovering the facts was a second blow as hard as the first. It's a bitter lesson that truth doesn't make appointments, or keep them.

I wondered, sitting beside him in the car, how we could get back on to safe ground. I could see he was seething still. And if only I'd been able to say that I imagined him as a reluctant soldier, that I was certain his instincts were unshaken by it, that I knew he was a good person. I so wanted to say sorry, but I was stuck. And he was, too.

Luna stirred.

'Christ,' Willow hissed. 'Fuck!' When you're driving, there's nowhere to go with your fury.

But she'd only turned, turned her spine to us.

WILLOW / 17

In the evening the clearing looked as neat as a lawn.

What I'd really wanted was not a closer view of the trees on the other side, but to see what the bunker looked like from there. Crunching over the brittle tussocks, I kept my eyes down, focused on the ground just a few paces ahead, knowing that if I looked up I'd lose heart, and if I looked back I'd be drawn home. I imagined Bosh watching me and seeing a sauntering figure lost in thought.

Once, as a child, standing next to Mom at the seaside, on the crest of the dunes, I said: 'I think it's going to rain,' and I could see out of the corner of my eye that she wasn't listening, she was somewhere else, though she was looking just as I was at the greying sea far out in the bay and must have come to the same conclusion. Without a word, she turned and walked back up the path that led to the road and the cottage beyond.

When Bosh asked 'Why? Why do you want to go?', I just shrugged. It wasn't enough to say it was merely to look back from a distance.

'Why don't you come?'

But Bosh wouldn't.

'Well I'm going.'

'Go then.'

I felt suddenly doubtful as if I was about to leap into a dark pool from a high ledge, neither ledge nor pool offering a solution to my quandary. After a moment's hesitation, I swung over the parapet and began my slow walk into the sunlight.

Right at the end of the line of trees, a long way off, the dauntingly buckled form of the abandoned plane that, on our arrival, just the two of us and a driver, had reminded the driver that we were almost there - 'This is it, guys. Your bunker's up ahead.' – was, I figured, the forbidding punctuation of the bunker's visual vocabulary. But it read differently as the light changed. In the evening, when you imagined it would be at its worst, it was a mildly questioning form, backlit by the

mellow glow. In the flat light of noon, it was indistinct, or matter-of-fact, spent junk. In the early morning, though, despite the softer light, it had the angular alarm of an exclamation mark, the leading edge of the mostly intact tailplane in its unnerving nosedive-ish posture cutting a crisp line into the trees where the fuselage lay like a toppled column.

I guessed that for an incoming flight, the wreck was both disquieting and useful, a pointer however you looked at it.

Towards the end of our twelve-week stint, or what we thought was the end, we'd find ourselves gazing at different times of the day at the jutting tailplane. Neither of us spoke about it, but we both did it. You'd hear the heavy truck first, then eventually it would appear. There'd be three men in it, the driver and the two new guards, and lashed down on the back the mound of supplies. But it never came.

We'd each of us felt the deadline come and go. The subject was bound to surface.

Seeing me paging back and forth through the logbook as if I was looking for some vital but elusive detail, Bosh said: 'They're overdue, aren't they.'

'Yes. I think they are. But I'm not sure. The dates are out. And there are a lot of pages missing.'

'You've been fucking tearing them out, Willow, you fuckhead,' Bosh smirked. I was always scribbling things down, but I'd not touched the logbook as it happens.

'No, I've accounted for those. The picture, remember.' I bobbed up and there it still was, the balled paper snagged in the hedgehogs not far from the bunker, but looking more like disintegrating tissue.

'So where've they gone?'

I showed him, swinging the logbook round. 'You see here … our first entry? That wasn't the actual date. It kind of made sense. I mean, I know it doesn't, but the logbook was already so buggered, and it was really just a daily record, if you know what I mean. For a year or more it was just a record of stuff that happened in the day or every couple of days, but the pages were filled consecutively, not by date. We just followed the pattern.'

'That's fucking smart.'

I had to explain that it wouldn't have made any difference.

Having not quite abandoned the logbook, though given up on its capacity to place us accurately in the day or the month, there was a temptation, then, to begin a record, a sort of reverse countdown, a gradation of the extent of our non-relief, as it grew.

But Bosh agreed. 'Fuck that.'

It's amazing that neither of us said anything about being forgotten. I mean forgotten entirely. Mainly because of the dodgy logbook situation, I suspect, we were content to see the non-arrival of a relief crew as the result of a mundane logistical fuck-up, the sort of oversight that felt truer than if everything went like clockwork.

Even so, after another few days, I thought it would be wise to check on our supplies.

'We'll be okay,' I told Bosh. 'I've counted the rat-packs.' Or words to that effect. I hadn't actually counted them. I reckoned they were pretty much numberless. The surplus of the boxed one-man-per-one-day rations, some admittedly missing their condensed milk, had been abandoned at the tail end of some earlier push to the north. Or filched from a passing transport.

Water was fine, too. I made a rough calculation of the capacity of the water tanker, which was drawn in snug against the bunker. Pulling the perished camouflage netting aside, I set to work with a spoon, tapping the bellied steel to find by the acoustic differential the actual level of water. Working to a deliberately conservative estimate, I was certain it was plenty. But I also rigged a makeshift catchment out of a strip of tarpaulin so that if it rained we could refill the tanker.

Bosh was sleeping, but the succession of declining notes – *tang, tang, tong, toying, tung, tung* – woke him eventually, and he put in a quizzy appearance, eyes narrowed against the sun.

'What about smokes?'

I'd wondered about that too.

'We could always halve them,' he said. 'I mean, cut them in half. Double the stash.' And that's what we did, with a razor blade.

There came a time when we no longer exchanged theories about the non-arrival of relieving guards, and as day followed night I actually felt quite content at the plain fact of being left alone.

It was increasingly clear that the offensive of the past rainy season, eight months back, which I guessed had claimed the plane wrecked at the end of the clearing, had shifted the theatre of conflict to the west, and the military compass and all that followed it had swung away. I was convinced that in due course a distant clerk's zeal would draw attention to the bunker, or, more likely, its unaccounted for inhabitants. Until then, we'd sit out the days.

Sometimes, it was an idyll, serene. But every so often, without warning, there was menace in the air. It came, for instance, with an apparent change in the light as if an unexplained cloud had suddenly appeared, shading the sun, or in a wind that blew up from nowhere, which we'd detect well before it reached us in the shifty movements of the trees, tossing in eery silence across the clearing. Sometimes, at night, the cicadas and crickets raised for whatever reason an especially shrill clamour that swelled in the brain, leaving no room for anything but dread. But it always passed. Soon enough, the sun would rise behind us, a long tongue of shadow drawing slowly back as the day lightened, and boredom would settle in again. There wasn't much to do. Sometimes hours would go by without either of us saying a word.

Once, I was sunning myself above the bunker, with my book, several pages into the second reading, when in a fraction of a second I found himself flat on my stomach, wincing at a sharp pain in my side. In the pause before the second long burst of gunfire just below me, I realised I'd rasped my ribs over an exposed concrete buttress. Bleeding and enraged I scrambled down to find Bosh at the Browning, a cigarette sloping casually from an almost drowsy smile. 'I just wanted to smash your face in,' I told him later.

Belt after belt of ammunition was fired off in the direction of the tailplane over the next few days, a light-headed fest of pointlessness that eventually dislodged a peppered aileron. That day, or the next, in the silence of the early afternoon, we could distinctly hear the creek of the suspended metal as it swung in the breeze.

'I bet you a smoke I'll hit it,' Bosh said.

'Hit what?'

'The cable. It's hanging by a cable. I bet you I'll hit it. Two smokes if I hit it with the first burst. Two for you if I don't.'

I was just so damned bored.

'Come on, two smokes.'

The currency, with the prospect of Bosh's failing, was attractive. In a fit of playfulness that welled up before I could check it, I drawled something like, 'Blow it away, baby.' Vaguely, I guess, I had some filmic moment in mind, a kind of laconic bravado, a big screen gesture. Blow it away, baby. But I think I missed the essential roguish carelessness. I sounded too coquettish, too teasing.

Bosh started.

'What the fuck, Willow?'

'What?'

'What's with the "baby" thing?'

'What about it?'

'You sound like a fucking queer.' I did, actually. And something about his stricken look provoked me. 'I am a queer,' I said.

'Fuck off, Willow. Go and fuck yourself. Jesus. You're not a queer, just tell me you're not a bummy boy, for Christ sake.'

'Bummy boy?' I had to laugh.

'It's fucking not funny.'

'Fucking's not funny? Damn right, baby.' And now I was queening. And Bosh was suddenly infuriated. As he swung at me, I spun on my heel and with a kind of theatrical flare, flounced on to the parapet and crooned: 'Ooh my, have I got me a bummy boy!' And then I ran, I sped down into the sun, Bosh's yelling, his 'fucks' and 'cunts' and finally - worse, I knew - 'arsehole' following me ineffectually from the bunker. For an hour at least I wandered about the clearing pretending to be

genuinely interested in small things on the ground, as if I might find something. I made myself not look back. I was embarrassed, I suppose, although I also saw that I was in a fix of sorts, caught between needing to convince Bosh that I wasn't 'queer' after all and wanting at the same time for whatever complicated reason to persuade him that being gay was quite ordinary. I didn't think he'd buy that, and it was with a vague sense of shame that I settled on just convincing him that I wasn't.

'So? Have you ever fucked a girl?'

'Fuck it, Bosh. What kind of question is that?'

'Well how do you know you're not a queer? If you've never fucked a girl?'

'You should hear yourself, Bosh.'

'Tell me how you do it, then.'

I saw that Bosh instantly regretted the subtly telling formulation of what was clearly meant to be his interrogative clincher. The innocence was unmistakable; I knew instinctively that he was a virgin.

'You've never fucked a girl have you, Bosh.'

'Fuck you, man.'

'No. Come on. You started this.'

'Just fuck off.'

'There's nothing wrong with it, Bosh.'

'Shut up.'

'Hey, cool it. It's not a big deal.'

'Just shut the fuck up.'

'Fine.'

The 'fine' did it, silencing him, but it bottled – or barely bottled - his frustration, his genuine, demanding curiosity and ignorance, the mounting rage of his innocence. He couldn't afford to open his big mouth now. Yet, as the hours passed it was as if he didn't need to. By the evening, what I can only think of as a forgiving gentleness had settled between us, a truce of unanswered questions, and with it a beguiling sort of yearning, a risky curiosity. There was a youthful sadness, almost, in the

bend of his pale back as he sat on his camp bed, facing away, leaning down to unlace his boots. Soon, it was dark, and we lay back, chatting.

'The thing is, I've just never … you know, the opportunity was never …'

'I know what you mean, Bosh. It's luck. Circumstances. You always think you can kind of make things happen.'

'Yeah,' Bosh agreed.

We were talking softly.

'First, you picture it, some detail. The hem of a skirt riding a little higher than you've ever seen it go before.'

'I know.' Bosh's voice had dropped to an attentive whisper.

'The skin, that skin, has a, a scent of its own.'

Through the opening, I made out the dull gleam of moonlight on the curve of the water tanker. I remembered a lot of things, then, that Bosh wouldn't have dreamed of. The single faint tremor of her thighs, and the sunlight catching the fine down on the backs of her legs.

'And a colour, a blush, of its own. Which she's proud of and wants you to see.'

There were long pauses in my meandering tale of dimples and creases and tremors, and the 'softening eyes' and the closed eyelids eventually, or the chin turned shyly away.

In the stillness, I could hear Bosh's breathing, the expirations of a fever, or of submission to a burden that is unavoidably imminent.

I felt my throat thicken. 'And then she lets you see her panties, pale and taut. Beautiful.'

'You want some of this?' I asked softly.

'What is it?'

'Oil. Sunflower oil.'

Bosh's silence was hesitant or unconvinced, as if his courage flagged.

'It's not bad,' I murmured. 'It's close to the real thing. You want some?'

After a moment, his hand rustled free and reached into the dark. I passed the bottle into the close void between us. Each of us flinched at the brief, awkward contact, the accidental touch of fingers hastily displaced by a practical question of collegial welfare; 'Careful,' I said, 'it pours suddenly.'

'Got it.'

I heard the cap snap back, another rustle of sleeping bag, and the bottle clinking into place, upright, beside his boots.

It was a while before either of us regained the delicate sanctuary we'd occupied with, I suppose, such impermissible ease only a minute earlier. A further intent silence passed before Bosh asked hoarsely, 'What did she do?' He had to clear his throat. 'What sounds, or words, or…?'

I had to think for a while, I had to struggle to separate thought from memory. What did she do?

'She sighed,' I said. 'And parted her legs a little.'

I sensed Bosh absorbing the image and reforming it, but too anxiously, too hungrily.

'And then?'

I guess I wanted silence then, I wanted Bosh to cut himself adrift, but I'd made him an acolyte and acolytes know nothing of the path to be followed.

'She pulled her skirt up, over her tummy. Up to her breasts. And then she hooked her thumbs in her panties and slowly pushed them down.'

Some of it was accurate.

'Tell me her name, Willow.'

That was the worst. I had to clench my eyes. There was a brief whited nullness.

'What's her name, Willow. I just …'

'Jessica.'

Not long after, I detected Bosh's helpless seizure, the faint stuttery succession of sounds in the dome of the lungs, aural jerks I imagine accompanying the onset of electrocution.

And me? Did I reach the peak? Was I thinking of her, back then? It doesn't bear thinking about, does it. At any rate, without another word, in our separate worlds, we drifted away.

For the first time, neither of us kept a look-out under the sandbagged overhang. I woke well past my watch at the gravelly sweep of the canvas flap lifting and falling in shifty breezes, the sunlight winking in reproachfully. The subject was never raised again, we never went back there. But as we ambled through the days to come, it never left us either, what each of us made of it, privately.

With my naked eye, I caught sight of the lead helicopter, in snatches, a large insect flitting behind the dark line of trees. As it reached the end, the tone of the rotors altered from clatter to steadier throb, the sound pummelling the air. There was urgency in it, I felt oddly thrilled. There was no doubt we had visitors, whom I imagined approaching in a cautious arc.

'Get the fuck up, Bosh!'

As I turned, I saw he was already propped up on his elbows, his face slow with sleep, soured as if he'd just bitten into a lime.

'Give us a smoke, then,' he murmured unhurriedly.

'Christ, Bosh. We don't even know who these fuckers are? You'd better move your ass.'

He groped into the mound of blankets, flak jackets and discarded clothes, his hand emerging soon enough with a bent half-cigarette. 'What the fuck, Willow.' He sounded dishevelled. Impulsively, I reached for my helmet and strapped it on, then did up the top button of my jacket.

'You ever wondered what the fuck we're doing here, Bosh?' The cocky, pretended jadedness, I knew, sprang from the almost guilty excitement I felt at that moment.

Behind me, Bosh stood up finally, his trousers comically tented by the early riser prodding from his groin.

'Willow, you know what?' he muttered in mid-yawn, 'I don't give a shit.' He came up to the parapet, grimacing at the glare, kneading his cheeks. 'Who are these cunts anyway?'

'Fuck knows.'

All three helicopters had now cleared the trees at the furthest end, though they appeared oddly hesitant, reluctant to commit. I wondered if it was a trick of light or geometry.

I held the leader in the binoculars, the dull gleam of the perspex obscuring the human forms it contained, though I imagined at least two figures in the machine, peering hard, forming some judgement or other, attempting to reach the determination required, to resolve the odds. I kept thinking they were holding back.

And then I realised. 'Christ, Bosh, the flare … they're waiting for the flare!'

He stumbled back and yanked up the lid of the trunk.

'Blue-white!'

He already had the canister. He ran at the parapet, leapt over the sandbags and down the slope into the sun, barefoot, his unbelted fatigues slipping on his hips. In the tautness of his back, the pronounced tendon that shadowed his neck, I glimpsed something desirably purposeful in the figure bounding away from me. After ten or fifteen loping paces, Bosh's right arm windmilled once and the pale-blue canister left him in a slow smoky arc. He stopped abruptly and watched it fall, bounce once and sizzle furiously in the grass, the smoke tumbling greedily into the morning air.

'Fucking A, Buddenbrook!' I shouted down to him.

'Morell, you cunt. You call me that again and I'll shove a flare up your fucking arse.'

But Bosh was grinning. He knew it was a good lob. It would bring the flight in.

JESS / 18

December 10

Geoffrey told me everything in a letter he'd posted just a few months before he died. I don't mean this to be in any way a burden, he wrote, and you are not to assume it is, for there is no shame in truth. That was the drift of his letter. It was your mother's express wish that nothing should be

revealed in my lifetime that would spoil your brotherly bond with William. And, as far as I can see, there is no reason why any of it needs to be revealed anyway, now or ever. But the time has come for you to decide. Words to that effect.

I have only vague recollections. I do remember dialling Geoffrey's number, and putting the phone down even before the first ring. I felt I'd lost everything, for a loving lie. I didn't wash, I didn't eat. I shovelled a mess of leftovers on to the window sill and watched the pigeons flick it off bit by bit. I tossed the spoon out, too. I ignored the phone. Hours passed like days. Days went by. I dialled Maurice's number at Laforgue's, just to hear his voice, '... please leave a message and I'll return your call'. His phone was all I had of him, then, and the fragment of his speech I'd not erased, even though he'd been dead for weeks. Even though I'd turned my back on him at the end. Love and deceit and longing. And now this lunacy, Geoffrey's staggering letter. I was crazed. I called in sick. I sounded sick. I was sick.

But it ends eventually. It always does. And you almost resent it, really, the dissipation of feeling. I have the clearest memory of the moment, that instance of the everyday that rescued me. It was a neighbour, hearing a neighbour – a cupboard door, then a whistled tune that he kept coming back to, the chorus he couldn't get out of his head – that drew me away. I walked straight to the window and pulled on the curtains, and all the city was there, the prickling lights, the speckled crimson of the traffic heading home on the freeway. I smelled cooking, a meal. I'd have a meal. I switched on the lights and ran a bath. I was dislodging the rigid contents of the freezer, clunky as blocks of ice and just as skittish, when I suddenly began to think of Willow again, but the new Willow, William, and I felt I could approach him at last, with something definite. And be myself.

I intended beginning gingerly, at the beginning, but the more I thought about it – the bald facts – the more doubtful I became. Telling the truth is reckless, but tell it as a story and it seems at least less ruthless. What I eventually wrote captured all the essentials. It would be enough to explain where we stood, just half a page that would not take him long to read but with plenty to mull over in. And then we could talk. I called it *Storm*, and I gave myself exactly 250 words. It went like this:

The storm brought the airman down near the bridge, at dusk.

The first to know was Jim Osborne, the resident water engineer, who'd been watching the rising flood. Hastening back, all he could think of was phoning Frances Morell, the friend, and likeness, of his late wife. But Frances couldn't hear him above the wind and the clamour of the labourers whose ramshackle homes were coming apart. Jim gave up, and said he'd come over.

As Jim set out, the dazed airman was sloshing towards the lights at the bend of the swelling river.

A third man was afoot: the artisan Peters, having secured his family, set out, too. He was fond of 'Miss Morell'. All three, none knowing of the others, converged on the lone woman's ill-lit porch.

Having left his infant boy with the nurse, and ducking along the hedges, Jim had just broken into a run when a sheet of roofing sailed at him unseen through the dark.

In this way, the storm delivered a brother to the girl who'd be the airman's daughter a full day before she was conceived. William Osborne became a Morell without knowing any other name.

At Jim's sudden death, none of this was known.

Only Peters, making his find, sensed upheaval. Knowing of the infant, the circumstances of Frances Morell, and the small, essential earnings made on all fronts, Peters advanced through the rain on Jim Osborne's vivid torso. He would say later that the eyes were shut, as in sleep.

But I never did give it to Willow. I lost the courage. For the second time. For the second time, at least. Or I thought I'd do better face to face, when the time was right. In the urgency of the moment I'd tell him the rest of it as well.

Then Geoffrey died.

The wake was still in progress and there we were, in the car, taking the long road home. I can hardly believe how well it began.

But by the time we left the plateau on a long declining arc, it was a different journey. There were three of us then. Below us the grassland heaved like an ocean towards the distant mountains,

mauve and stolid and fickle. There was an obviousness to the road ahead, but I was watching keenly. I was sure I could find something we could share. Willow would recognise that I was reaching for him again, that I was willing to overlook everything to find a new way. I was thinking of how it had been when it was just the two of us, early in the day, in the cool light, the slight chill in the air, the pleasant warmth of the sun. In a cross wind that swayed the car as we careened into the open from a cutting, a swirl of dust spun itself into a column that teetered for a moment before devilishly backing away from the road. Then it vanished, suddenly spent. All that energy. I had a hunch I'd see another like it, and I'd point it out to Willow. That's what I thought, I really did.

WILLOW / 19

As Bosh came up to the parapet, still out of breath, he was already lighting another cigarette.

'You'd better get some kit on,' I said.

He didn't look as if he intended doing any such thing, but he pulled on his boots and shoved his arms into a flak jacket.

'Give us a turn.'

I handed him the binoculars.

Our radio had been out of action for a good while. There was no fault with the radio, but the batteries, green, slabby bricks that looked like explosive devices, were dead. Bosh had managed to run them down by hitching them up to his portable. Not that it ever helped much. There was no reception to speak of, except occasional crackly bursts of incomprehensible haranguing and a music station that came and went, swelling for a few bars, then fading, music we weren't familiar with. It was demanding listening, but Bosh persisted, once even constructing a ramshackle web of cords and wires that swung from the overhang and reached back into the bunker like an elaborate snare, requiring us to duck between beds and table. It didn't work well as an aerial. In the cramped space I

found it difficult to read with the radio always promising clarity but never overcoming the spitting rustle of static.

'We could have done with batteries that actually fucking worked.'

Bosh ignored the remark.

'We could have radioed HQ.'

'What do they know? Dick heads.'

Dust and grass began to swirl under the hammering blades of the helicopters as they wallowed, one beside the other, in the churning air. Finally, the leader squatted down and the others followed, though they still seemed airborne. Helicopters always do that. For a while, nothing happens, the rotors still whipping round as if reluctant to give up the effort of suppressing the air, deafening and strangely defiant, the machine itself grounded, but unpredictable, not lightly approached.

'Are they going to switch off the fucking engines, or what?'

I was briefly deceived into thinking the crews had made a mistake and were about to leave, pausing here to confer, verify new coordinates. There was no let up in the engines, the dust and grit reaching into the bunker now.

'What are we supposed to do?' Bosh said.

I wasn't sure, but I said: 'Sit tight.'

I tried to picture the two of us as the helicopter crews saw us, though perhaps they couldn't see into the shadow. A gawping bunker, the open-mouthed vacuity of an imbecile.

'Isn't there a goddamn protocol?'

'Fuck knows.'

'What do you mean, "Fuck knows"!'

'Just cool it, Bosh. For Christ sake. I don't know if there's a fucking protocol, okay. This is the bunker and we sit tight.'

He swiped my book out of his way and planted his elbows squarely on the metal table-top, locking his forehead against the binoculars again. Almost immediately he bobbed up, as if he couldn't decide what to focus on, his eyes filled suddenly with too much to see.

'You should have said about the fucking batteries.'

I didn't like his panicky side, his bleating against fate.

'Fuck the batteries.'

'What's that?'

'I said fuck the batteries. And get a grip, Bosh.'

He said nothing. He was hunched into the binoculars again, staring hard into the dust. The machines swam in their own heat and clamour. Any moment now, something would change and we'd be required to act, though there was no telling what would be left to us to do.

We both saw – Bosh, I imagine, in the blur of his magnified sight - the whited stump the second it appeared, gingerly fingering the space, or so it seemed, between jump plate and ground, an image of unexpected tenderness, as if it were a child about to climb down, but unsure of how to. A second later, a booted foot swung down, followed too soon, too quickly, by the man's whole form, falling to the ground. He didn't get up, but turned awkwardly on elbow and hip.

Bosh jolted at my side, thrusting out a blind hand as if to stop himself from falling hard.

'Jesus! What the fuck!'

Almost immediately, the helicopters were wallowing again. It took me a second to realise they were lifting, getting airborne.

'Give me the binocs.'

I twiddled the focal ring to keep the glint of the lead helicopter's bubble as sharply defined as I could manage. Without thinking about what I was doing or why, I clung to the moving image as it lifted and swung away from the sun. And then I caught it, the fragment of human form, doubly encased, the flight helmet glittery as a bauble, too new, as dissembling as the perspex, and beneath

it, for a fraction of a second, lips that moved, a young chin, evidence of a voice that spoke words I knew in my heart were at that instant ordinary and calmly delivered.

I followed that face, even when it was no longer visible, twisting to track the receding clatter, the three hasty shadows flitting over the trees at the far end. Only when Bosh blurted with a tone of panic, 'What's that on his head, for Christ sake?' did I swing back, the quick, fawn blur resolving itself into intimate clarity the moment I found the hobbled figure.

I made out what it was. 'It's a hood.' All my mental effort went into tracing the hard-to-make-out cord that pulled it into the neck like a drawstring. 'They put a hood on him, so he can't see.'

'Fuck!'

I lowered the binoculars.

'Do you want to look?'

But I could tell Bosh's thoughts were racing.

'What the fuck are we supposed to do now? They didn't even fucking … Jesus. Did they have markings? Willow! Who were they?'

Conceptually, I suppose, Bosh and I parted company at this point. I was thinking of other stuff. I told him I hadn't looked for markings, and he dropped his head with a breathy snort. It was not so much exasperation, or ridicule, but uncertainty, or an unwillingness to admit it.

'Hey, I've just thought of something, Willow. Maybe he's on our side. What d'you think? Rescued. It could be, hey?'

'Sure, Bosh. They brought him here and threw him out of the fucking chopper. Saved at last.'

'Okay, okay, Willow. I was just trying to, you know, figure this out.' He was quiet for a few seconds, and then, as if they'd only just dawned on him, recapped the bare facts: 'They just threw him out. On that, fuck, that stump! He's fucking dead meat, man. Jesus, what the fuck's going on here.'

'We can't leave him there.'

'What's that?'

'Bosh. Listen to me. We can't leave him there. Okay?

'Christ!'

The day before had been a beautiful day. I'd woken Bosh in high spirits. 'It's a beautiful morning, Bosh. You should see it. It's out of this world.' I'd had a feeling we'd be going home soon. He said, 'Shut the fuck up, Willow,' or something like it. 'It's too fucking early for your shit.'

But that was a world away as we hunched there at the parapet wondering what to do next.

'Maybe we shouldn't get involved, Willow.'

'What are you talking about?'

'This is serious shit.'

'He's just a man, Bosh. A man without a foot. What do you think he's going to do – storm the bunker?'

'He might have a weapon, Willow.'

'In his pocket, or what?'

'Fuck you.'

But even I was hesitant. I already saw the improbability of bringing the man to the bunker and not taking off that hood.

'I'll man the Browning.'

That was Bosh for you.

'That's fine, Bosh, you man the Browning.'

I straddled the parapet, swung a leg over and walked down the slope. 'Just don't fucking shoot me,' I called over my shoulder. I felt glaringly dissonant, a preposterous saunterer wandering off distractedly, as if I hadn't – yet, and time was dwindling – prepared for the next minute. I always associate this moment, this sauntering into the sunlight, with the ill-fitting way I'd approached Jess all those years ago as she sat on the beach, clutching her knees, staring out at the ocean. I think I put a hand on her shoulder and said, 'I'm sorry.' It was too little, way too little. Maybe I was even thinking of it as I crossed the clearing.

The hood swivelled at my crunching approach. He would have thought the worst, I suppose. I could tell where his nose was by the pyramidal stretch of the dark cloth, and sense his listening mind from the systaltic pulse of the fabric below it, uncannily identical to the panicked flank of a trapped animal.

There were two things I had to remind myself not to do: no sudden movement or Bosh would blast away without even thinking about it, and no looking back at him. The result would probably have been much the same. For my own good – although it was something else, really – I knew I didn't dare hesitate, either.

This is what I clearly remember: in a soft, distinctly caring voice, I said, 'It's okay'. The phrase, the moment, has echoed in my head a thousand times since. It was as if I was talking to a wounded creature, a distant mammalian cousin in whom I trusted, or at the very least hoped, that not the words so much as the sound would signify in advance a charitable intention that, on its own, would have seemed threatening or even harmful and would almost certainly have been misunderstood. It crossed my mind that the hooded man might lash out suddenly, put in a last dreadful effort of blind resistance, a last shot at living. But he was inert. 'It's okay,' I said again. I don't think I could have been more truthful or more deceiving.

The bandaged stump, white as a hospital sheet, was the freshest sight I'd seen for months, though the artistry of overlapping chevrons was almost heartbreakingly spoiled at the tip by a dusting of dirt and flecks of grass. A small prickly twig that had snagged in the fine cotton plagued me as I tried to figure out what to do or say next.

The man was dressed in one of our uniforms, though stripped of all insignia. The fatigues were brand new, pleated still in all the wrong places by the folds of its packaging, the kind of novice outfit that attracted instant abuse at a training base because it meant you were naïve, un-broken in, undirtied by the business. It spelled weeks or months of trouble.

But there was additional apparel - and it is the archaic word that comes to mind. The hood arrangement was medieval in every way. It was not simply tied at the neck with a homely drawstring,

but sewn into a suit of sorts that looped between his legs, forming a tight, effacing apron. It was only then that I understood the man's posture, the awkward propping up on his elbow and bending into himself, chin down, as if to relieve an abdominal pain. Between a neat arrangement of eyelets, I could pick out the dull shimmer of a finely woven stainless steel cable that vectored at what might have been a pendant, but was actually a combination lock.

His hands were free to roam, which was the special perversion of his condition; it only heightened his captivity because he was at liberty to feel the stays, to have the deepest possible understanding of his hopelessness.

I stepped closer and gently touched the prisoner's raised shoulder. It was terrible, really. It stays with me, that shy, embarrassed pat of unmistakable condolence.

Thereafter, things fell apart a bit. It wasn't easy, and the sun was blazing hot. From where he would have been watching with mounting disquiet, Bosh must have puzzled over our awkward progress. At times I was afraid that, from the bunker, it would have looked as if we were grappling, one or the other struggling to assert some kind of mastery or overthrow.

On the other hand, if Bosh had had the mind for it, it must have been obvious I was always almost ingratiating in trying to find the right grip or the right pace, the effective means of the semi-rescue now under way. We stopped to rest often. I recall muttering 'Sorry,' a lot, but that was about the sum of what passed for speech. Every so often, the man grunted, or flinched audibly when his stump jabbed the ground, but no language came from the hood. There was just the awful sound of a beachball being inflated.

I was streaked with sweat when we finally reached the parapet. The hood betrayed no evidence of the captive's state. Bosh was fussing, and cursing in a stream of panicky invective, anxious to be visibly present, but, I could tell, uncertain of his footing, of the consequences that seemed to multiply dramatically into the immediate as much as the distant future.

We got him into the shade, at least.

'What fucking language does he speak?' It was not an entirely ridiculous question, but I flung my hands out in a kind of what-are-you-thinking! gesture, as if to say, Christ, Bosh, just because he's smothered in a goddamned hood doesn't mean he can't hear. It stung him, but he was unwilling to be chastened, and he aped me, wordlessly, with a kind of non-verbal, So?, or, more probably, What the fuck? Bosh laboured under the difficulty of strangeness, I saw. He was not intimate with the prisoner as I was now. I at least had a feel for him, his bulk, the distribution of his mass, the ordinariness of his musculature and his curiously endearing one-footed frailty. But Bosh had none of this benefit. Untouched, he was, to Bosh, untouchable, and ill-fated. I suppose I only saw this much later.

At the time, I had to keep chivvying him.

'I need your help, Bosh.'

'Willow, we're messing with stuff that's ...'

'Fucking come here! Just hold this.'

And, ultimately, with Bosh's help and various rudimentary tools, I managed to cut the stainless steel cable and hack through the apron. We stood back, as if the prisoner himself, naturally, casually, even thankfully, would take off his undone hood on his own. He felt freer, that much was obvious; he straightened in the chair. But that was as much as he was going to risk doing. He waited.

JESS / 20

December 11

I've avoided reading over my notes, the recent ones, of the past ten days. And the reason is, there's more to come, more to get down before I can take stock. Not that there's sense in the sequence. It's just notes, I tell myself. Although I do keep thinking about how that wretched

woman called it a diary. And I keep thinking of her, too, which is draining. Luna saps me. She gets in the way. I let her get in the way. At the beginning, I mean. Just when there was so much to think about, so much to sort out.

I must have fallen in love with Willow without knowing it, or at least without being able to admit it. I think both propositions are true. They must be. You could say, who falls in love with her brother, for God's sake? But he wasn't, was he. If I'd known as much back then it wouldn't have been anything more than a passing tremor, a lurch of emotion.

Knowledge, Maurice liked to say, is about questions, not answers. I didn't always follow his meaning. Not then. I should have told Genevieve more about him, but I liked to keep something back, to keep it whole, unpicked-over. Had I still been seeing her after he died, I might well have spilled the beans. But I wasn't.

I marvel at her letter. I'm proud, even. But also troubled. I sense a risk, and what troubles me is that I don't quite know where it lies.

I have seen you come a great distance, I have been with you on your journey and it has been difficult, but also rewarding.

It wasn't as if you were ill in the conventional sense and that you can now think of yourself as cured or healed or well enough to get on with the day-to-day. As far as I can judge, you get on without difficulty anyway. My point is, there is not a moment when you can say, 'I am better', since there was never a point when it would have been true to say, 'I am ill'. What I am trying to say is that if there is no such destination, it follows that the journey does not end. Am I making sense? Which brings me to the other matter I wanted to raise. I feel you have not said enough about your friend Maurice. And nor, in fact, have you delved particularly into the real circumstances of your father's life. I realise there is little to know. But there is always something more. Have you ever thought about trying to find out what that might be?

And as for confronting Willow – and I use your word here; you kept asking: 'Should I confront Willow?' – it's not at all for me to judge.

Objectively, however, I feel certain you will always be distracted by your childhood, your teens, unless you come clean with your brother. But I would sound a note of caution here. The consequences could well be unpredictable. You must remain aware of that. 'Confront' is, after all, how you conceive of it, and it might well be expecting too much to believe that you will always retain control over whatever encounter ensues.

I know it's hard, and I'll always be here for you should you feel the need. As it happens, I doubt you will. You have been flying solo now for some time. I suspect you've hardly been aware of it.

I woke up this morning in the usual state of alertness again, fully prepared to recollect, to reveal. It's Tuesday. I saw her on Tuesdays, and I've kept Tuesdays for the job of writing things down – or out, as she suggested. Sometimes I'm tempted to call her up. She'd amazed to know that Willow wasn't my brother after all. At any rate, I try to imagine that I am still talking to her. It makes it easier, or truer. She is a more reliably demanding audience that I am. It's not easy finding someone you can confess to. Strangers are ideal, though the more you tell, the more like intimates they become.

It was different with Maurice. Our intimacy depended on our strangeness. I barely told him a thing – and he could have said the same, it turned out. It made us very close, closer than I knew.

The trouble with Willow is that we're strangers and intimates at the same time, the strangeness and the familiarity so tightly knotted it's hard to see where you could begin unravelling them.

Did I really say 'confront'? I don't remember, but I can't doubt her. She'd have written it down. She wrote everything down. I imagine it's how I felt, then. In a way, it's how I feel now, too.

It's often just a word that changes everything. We don't see the power of them until so much later when we can barely account for the consequences. What I know too well is that you've got to hold out for the moment when it's possible and necessary to act, and then find the words, and the

courage. Although, I'm not convinced there's much in it, really, the difference between mastery and fate, between taking a hand in things or just going along with them. Maurice would say, people choose; that's what history is. It seems ironic that I was never really convinced. I'd say, but, M, I can see why. That's not the puzzle. The puzzle is, how? How do they choose? I suppose he knew I had more of a stake in the mechanics of this conundrum that I realised. I suppose we all do. Willow does, too, though he doesn't know half of it yet. And where will it lead? If there are any clues, they must lie far back, like buried seeds that want a wildfire to germinate. Nothing is altogether accidental. Some day I will find a way to explain to Willow why I think like this.

WILLOW / 21

I was suddenly conscious of not having thought through what now seemed an extraordinarily rash sequence of actions. I'd felt impelled, in the first instance, by what is probably called outrage. It hadn't required thinking about. The dumping of the live man triggered it, and what it triggered, or stimulated, was partly an instinctive disbelief in the contest itself, the them-and-us distinction that by the attrition of idleness and inaction had become friable.

Then, approaching the injured unknown in the clearing, what amounted to a vaguely but insistently compassionate plan of action seemed for all intents and purposes unavoidable. I mean, could I have turned back? And there were two thoughts; could I just have left him? – the question of actual integrity, if that was what it was – and, admittedly the lesser, could I have faced Bosh, could I have returned empty-handed and continued to be who I thought I was, or hoped I was, hoped I was seen to be?

Having cleared these hoops, the decision to get the hood off was a non-decision, it was a given.

But now what?

Bosh, sitting on a trunk, had pulled his rifle almost slyly across his knees. It looked casual enough, but I knew better. I was also strangely comforted.

'I'm going to take it off.'

Bosh said nothing, but parted his boots slightly in an unconscious gesture of preparedness, as if he anticipated being handed something heavy or bulky.

And were we ready for it?

The enemy soldier's face was stiff, as if it were cold, so icy it was incapable of expression. It was blue and dark and pale. And was it fear or pain, or the draining of all certainty, all knowledge really? All knowledge must fall away when reason itself is found to be a sham, when it is only utter impossibilities, the cannot-happens – the branding of an eye, say, or the severing of a hand - that is all that's left, that must be the next thing. Not dying.

And then his eyes shifted suddenly. Or that's what I remember. Perhaps it was a particular he detected, or simply the return, the resumption, of sight after the hours or - who knows? - days in the insensible dark of the hood. The point is, what I mistook for placid, almost heroic fatalism, which I'd fleetingly admired and took unconsciously as a vindication of my own impulsively charitable efforts, was gone. In its place was hatred. His eyes were cruel. It's what I saw, it's what I thought.

It wasn't as if I regretted in any way the rigmarole of my soft-heartedness, or that I actually reflected on its worth, a bit part, almost comic for offering the man nothing – and certainly not a reprieve – so as much as a deeper consciousness of his dead-end. If pressed, I might even have suggested I'd have acted just the same, irrespective. But at that moment, I found it easier to think of the stranger being taken off our hands. And not because I cared any less, but because I recognised our mutual powerlessness against something far greater, the terrible accumulation of ordinariness that welled, that must have welled, from some vast tide of fate. And this is what it came to, this unalterable prospect.

'Jesus fucking Christ! Why's he looking at me like that? Willow! Give him a smoke, for Christ sake. Just give him …'

'Bosh, shut up! Listen.'

'This whole thing's fucking crazy.' Even as he jabbered on, wavering within, Bosh trained his rifle on the prisoner's left-hand breast pocket.

'Bosh!'

'What!'

'If you'd shut the fuck up …'

And then Bosh heard it, too. I'm reminded, now, of the wild dog, its keen detective mien. All three of us were breathing heavily, as if we'd been wrestling.

What I – we - heard was a drone, very faint, jerky. Bosh snapped his head back and forth between the opening of the bunker and the shiny button on the pocket.

I was thinking of the image of the pilot's moving lips and the bauble helmet when I looked back at the remains of the hood apparatus. 'Stuff it in the trunk,' I told Bosh. 'Just get rid of it.'

It was not the lumbering truck of our earliest memory that cleared the trees at the end, and which, for weeks now, we'd given up anticipating, but a jeep. It lacked the heavier vehicle's barging progress, but instead made its way with almost picky twists and turns to avoid the ditches and stumps that were invisible from this distance. As I trained the binoculars on it, I warned Bosh to keep his finger off the trigger. He was jumpy. 'Who are they?' he said, his words fused with urgency.

'Take it easy, Bosh. And I said get your finger off that fucking trigger!'

'But who are they?'

'They're our guys.'

'Our guys? Are you sure?'

They look mean, I mumbled, to myself.

'What's that?'

'There are three of them,' I said.

Before lowering the binoculars, I caught the out-of-focus flicker of a bird, nearer in, taking to the air ahead of the jeep. It was a few seconds before I found it again and impulsively brought its

leisurely passage against the morning sky into focus, its memorably independent plane. There are always these moments of wishing it was the one thing and not the other; the bird rather than the jeep. When I left Jess at the beach, still clutching her knees, consoled or unconsoled, I didn't know – 'Just leave me alone,' I think she'd said, 'I just want to be alone' - and took the path that meandered across the marshy depression behind the dunes, thick with reeds, I remember how hot it was and so still I heard the plick of a beetle flying into the undergrowth. Suddenly, with an urgent crackle of snapping twigs and heedless movement, a heron leapt cumbersomely clear, prone for a moment as it clawed the air before bobbing gracefully away on a dipping curve, a smugly composed departee.

The prisoner seemed ruthlessly indifferent, but even as I restrained myself I was fidgety – much like Bosh – with anxious excitement. I put my book away, aligned the night-sight case with the table edge, assumed an air of purpose, of absorption in necessary functions, behaving as if I hadn't even seen the jeep until it was right alongside. And both of us, in these untypical minutes, ignored the stranger, as if we'd been relieved of all responsibility for him the moment the jeep cleared the trees.

They sported dark glasses, the three men, and each had shaved that very morning. The two of us, feeling ruefully unkempt, saluted them sheepishly. I think of errant campers greeting the owner of property on which they've pitched their tent without prior say-so.

There was no conversation. 'Snatch' was the word they used, or was it just the taller man who said it, the gaunt one? 'Where's the snatch?' And he didn't wait for a reply. 'Get him,' he told the other two.

Bosh, hovering next to the jeep now, eyeing the radio that hissed and spat unceasingly, started to ask if someone could contact the sector about our relief, the replacement guards. I can't remember how much of the sentence Bosh managed to get out before the gaunt one turned on him: 'Just get back to your post.'

But still Bosh wheedled: 'Can't you radio HQ? Fuck, man, we've been waiting for weeks.'

'Don't "fuck man" me, soldier. Get back to your post.' The 'post' he seemed to take in for the first time. 'And get this place cleaned up. It's a fucking pigsty.'

And in the course of this disappointing interlude, the virulent stranger left us. I know that I turned away as the two hefted the prisoner over the parapet. The distinct impression of their handling something inanimate filled me with shame. It was a complicated shame because there was a grim honesty in it, the untroubled swing they achieved as if the man with his whited stump was an object of brutish, and limited, utility.

Bosh stood there with his hands on his hips watching the departing jeep, prudently bottling his indignation. When it was a good distance away, he raised a rigid finger: 'Fuck you, fuck you! Cunts!'

But it was an oddly elated atmosphere we found ourselves left with.

'Morell!' Bosh called in mock sergeantly fashion. 'Get this place cleaned up. It's a fucking pigsty!'. Then, more emphatically: 'And don't "fuck man" me, soldier! Christ, Willow, what the fuck was that all about? Is this a movie, or what? He was a real cock-suck, the tall guy. The big fella. The big fuck.' He was silent for a moment. 'And what was that he said? Back to your post! Who was he kidding? Fuck head. It's all shit, Willow. Plain fucking, goddamn shit.' He looked out across the clearing again. 'Fuck you!' he yelled again. The second his voice died away, he seemed to realise, as if he hadn't noticed it before, that it was utterly still.

I was looking for the spade and I had my back to Bosh for much of the pantomime. It was a good while into the silence before it registered, before I knew Bosh was in trouble, his moony unfocused face swaying at the sun, mouth slack with sobs that wouldn't come.

And what had actually happened? It was difficult, even only hours after, to reconstruct the sequence, or preserve it all, visually. I knew that if I wasn't careful, every time I returned to it, it would be a different version, the narrative itself gaining false courage as it struck out from the straight and narrow. The actual events, the true things, were almost crassly unallowable. I'd crutched a stranger a little closer to his doom.

'It's okay,' I kept saying, patting him, making it worse, Bosh throbbing into my armpit. And every time he tried to speak it was a hurt boy's moan, incoherent and slobbery and vaguely ashamed. Mothers have the grit for it, I was thinking, but I could do it.

'Take the smoke, Bosh. Take it. Come on.'

And does talking it through help at all? I can't say. It all depends. I wanted to say to Bosh, this is what we're born to; looking on.

'He's fucked, Willow. Jesus. He's going to die. Someone's going to kill him.' Bosh would start off firmly, then slither into the wet, his voice rising to a jerky squeak: 'He's dead meat, man.'

'It's okay, Bosh.'

'It's not fucking okay.'

He was right about that. What could I say?

'Well, what I'm going to do now is bury that fucking hood. Alright? You just take it easy, you stay right here. Okay, Bosh?'

He nodded.

And, of course, it was a grave. The lock went in last, with a light, chesty thud.

What Geoffrey had written to say was that Sarah had died, and knew I'd want to know because I'd always 'been fond' of her. He knew, he wrote, that to receive sad news from afar was no easy thing, for one did hanker for the comfort of 'being there', of being near. He had felt his own heart would crack when the task fell to him to tell Mom all those years ago that Alfred was missing. These things were never very pleasant. Sarah had been a good woman, and a companion, too, a 'great help'. And thrilling thighs, I remember. Geoffrey would have been mortified if he'd known. She always sat there on the old wicker chair after lunch, after she'd 'cleared the things'. That was a lost world I liked to reach back to, the sounds of it, the wrenching open of the kitchen drawer, the clatter of knives and forks, fistfuls, fists full. You could hear all that from the shed, you could divine the elements of the early afternoon at Corinth Road, the movements, the routine, the pattern of life. Geoffrey padding off for his snooze. The drone of the warm afternoon, Madison elsewhere, indeterminately engaged with hose or clippers. What was maddening all those years ago, for all those weeks and weeks, was not knowing how she'd died. His letter shed no light on it at all.

After burying the hood, I paid special attention to recrafting the surface, smothering my footprints, reinstituting the hedgehogs.

You'd have thought Bosh was grieving, but not in the common sense. These things are complex. He was overcome by the reduction, the brute reduction of outcomes. It made me suddenly aware of my own slight footing. But it was worse for Bosh. He was overcome because he'd tried choosing to avoid being drawn into it. He'd even believed it was possible to avoid it. And then, unexpectedly, something was taken away from him; every other option, choice itself, became starkly irretrievable. Even then he couldn't help himself. He continued to think he'd missed his turn, as if his turn had come around and he'd missed it.

'There was nothing we could do.'

'Why do you keep fucking saying that, for Christ sake.'

'Because it's true.'

'It can't be.'

'Okay, Bosh, tell me. What could we have done?'

He actually seemed to contemplate the question, mentally enumerate the better ways.

'Packed him a food parcel,' I went on, 'and sent him off into the bush? Hobbling? Fuck, he couldn't even hobble. Crawling. Or we could have hidden him away. Until such time as … what? Or we could just have left him out there in the sun, hood and all.'

But these were not the questions. The question was, what could we have done to pretend he didn't exist? I had a suspicion you could pull it off, with some loss, admittedly. When I left the cottage, when I left Jess, I'd wanted to take the toy horse, but at the last minute decided against it. I sensed it meant so much more to Jess. The minute I got back from the beach, by the shortcut, the path behind the dunes, I decided I'd go. It was for the best, I thought. I got dressed, took some apples and made for the door. At the table in the passage, I stopped. On the blank reverse of the instructions for the gas geyser, I wrote: 'I'll be in touch, Jess. I think this is for the best.' And then the years went by.

The canvas flap swung lazily, the sun slid down to its putrid, valedictory blaze. The stillness was unforgiving, if you saw it that way, if you gave it half a chance. I lit the gas light.

'We'll be out of here soon, Bosh. You'll forget about it.'

'He fucking hated me, man. He hated me.' He was shaking again.

'If he really hated you, Bosh, it was only because you were here, because when I took off his hood, you were the first thing he saw. You and your rifle. And your fear, I guess. It will go away. Once we're gone, it will go away.'

Much later, in the dark, he sat up. 'Willow? You awake?'

'What is it, Bosh? You want a smoke?'

'Can I ..?' He'd already swung himself round, I could tell, though it was too dark to see. Then his head was right there, barging into my chest, like a child's, burrowing at my heart, but meeting the ribs. It was, I almost regretted, an impenetrable limit. Although that suggests something else. And it wasn't that. I had a vague sense that I was wounded, had a wound I couldn't vouch for, an unbandageable condition that was already, just these few hours later, an implacable obsession.

LUNA / 22

I'd say, just cool it, Dougs, it's okay. But it never was. He'd shiver or he'd laugh or he'd drink. Jeez, it's enough to make a person scream. I hate his stories, but I make him tell them. He's my pal, I know him, I know him well. I said, Dougs, you got to see someone. Maybe you got to go on medication. There's stuff you can take. And he says, Luna, you know what? I got my medication right here. It's brandy or rum or whatever. He loves a party, Dougs. I never seen a guy party like Dougs parties.

'We did stuff you'd never believe. Somebody had to.'

I'm thinking, why? But I never said.

'Sometimes, Luna, I stop at the robot, I check the guys in the other cars. This one's in a suit. That one's headed for the beach. Music coming out the window. There's a chic checking herself in the mirror, fiddling with her fringe, dabbing her lips. I check them out, all these people. And you know what I think? I think, they're all okay. These people, they're cool. Kids, jobs, nice houses. Got the pool, the patio. Friends come round for drinks. You know the story. You seen it on TV. And they're thinking, shit, it's a beautiful day. There's not a cloud in their fucking sky, Luna. I mean, where's the headache? There's no regrets. They never did a thing, never had to. I'm sitting there with this brick in my gut and they're just singing along with the radio. That's your little runt, for you, Luna, your weed.

'Willow, Dougs.'

'Whatever. Doesn't matter.'

'You didn't have to do it, Dougs.'

'Have to?'

He was pissed, as usual. And I'm thinking, here we go, same old crap. Why's it I'm hearing this again?

But I make him tell it. I always do. I know when he's got to. He goes quiet, he goes quiet and smiley, he pours himself a glass. It's like there's some joke he's remembering and wants to tell if he can just work out how the punchline goes but eventually the only funny part is he can't. I hate it, but I make him tell.

And I know what it is. I know exactly what it is. He knows there was no reason for it, except at the time it was what they had to do. Like Dad said, somebody had to. Somebody else would've, maybe. I don't know if that's what he meant.

'They used a different kind of language, Luna,' Dougs said. 'Like "objective". What the fuck. Objective? Hey? They'd dream up this stuff, the Bureau guys. And it wasn't like, okay, take out this one, he's trouble. Waste him. You can do that, in and out. That's easy. But this "objective"

thing was something else. Like, "You got to put a lot of fear in people's hearts". Crap like that. It's like Levitt says.'

'What d'you mean?'

'That thing he always says.'

'What thing?'

'Like a saying. He's always saying it'

'Like 'Where's the brandy?"'

'Fuck, Luna.'

'Well it's true. It's the first thing he says. He says it a lot.'

'That's not what I mean.'

'Why do you always cover for him?'

'I don't.'

'You never want to talk about it.'

'Satanic … "It's satanic, man"'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It's Levitt's saying, that's the thing he always says.'

'You aren't even listening, Dougs.'

'I'm telling you stuff, Luna, and you're going off in all directions.'

'I don't want to know.'

But I did want to know. He knew it, too. Or he didn't care either way.

I couldn't always make it out, follow the story. I think there were a lot of them all mixed up, the stuff they did. I said, 'It sounds like a war.'

'Should have been. But it wasn't. It was just bad shit.'

I thought, isn't war? Guys are different, I know that. Sometimes you can't figure them out. There's always a weak place, though. You hit them there, they're finished.

Sometimes he liked to talk about when he was a kid, he and his dad, and they'd go camping at a dam somewhere. It was in the hills, not any place I knew, but I could picture it, the winter morning and the mist on the water, like it was a warm bath and the steam is coming off it and so quiet you can hear the kettle begin to sing when you put it on the fire.

But I always knew; he's going to talk about that kid. I never tried to stop him. It was like I had to hear it too, once he started. The kid, and the guy they called Nine, like a cat, although they lost count of how many lives he had left.

'There was houses at end of the road, in among the trees. We knew the guy was in there. They were meeting there, Nine and the others. We weren't interested in the others. Or the idea was, we'd show them. We'd take him out and they'd know, shit, this is what's coming, it's fucking over.'

How they made a mistake I don't know, except they couldn't see probably.

'It was so fucking cold my feet were dead. Couldn't move. You sit tight. You wait. One hour, two hours, nothing. There's smoke coming from a chimney, not much, thin, like there's not even much of a fire, it's cold in there too. Nothing moves, not a sound. Everyone's watching, waiting.'

It was a trap, or was meant to be.

'You just want to sleep. You'd do anything just to put your head down and sleep. You're dreaming of warmth. You can't even have a fucking cigarette. You're thinking all this stuff. And just as I look up at Levitt, he's nearer the trees, crouching there, he raises his hand, then drops it.'

Levitt. Levitt was there.

'I hit the switch and it blows. It's like a shotgun blast, in the trees there, loud, but you think, hey, it could have been louder, a charge like that. And for a second there's nothing. You think, shit, missed. But it was this fucking kid, man. Nine or ten. A kid for Christ sake. He bursts out the bush, like he's got a fright, but he's wet, shining. He's red all over. And something's not right, something's fucked. You only see it when he stops, he freezes there.'

Dougs frowns, like he's concentrating really hard, like he's stood on a nail that's gone deep in his heel.

'What is it?'

'There's no fucking arm. It's torn off. It's gone at the shoulder.'

It's not a shock anymore. Not like the first time. I hit him. I said it was enough, I heard enough, and he went on. He said, you need to hear this, Luna. About the woman, she was screaming and begging. That's when I hit him. He said it was like her voice came out the sky.

TWO

WILLOW / 1

Clare says none of it makes sense, I had the world at my feet, what was I doing? She stops short of saying I was lucky, or luckier than she was. And I know I make it worse by using bad language – it must seem that I'm making light of something, or making light of her – but it's the fitting language, I explained, the only language that works for this sort of stuff. I fucked out, it's as plain as that. Actually, I think she was annoyed that I seemed to make more of it than she believes it warrants. She wasn't taken with my saying it's hard work. I'd said you'd think it would be easy, the slide, ceding areas of the day to oblivion, but it isn't. It's not that a decade or two slip by in a fog of narcosis. Every minute is a job of work to be dealt with. It requires effort and foresight to fuck out, good sums, duplicity, a kind of wisdom. God, I could go on. Imagination, stamina. You've got to see what's coming, figure out how to make the next minute count. This is all that's valid, this is the value system. And that's how two decades slip by. Twenty years of slog, facing the front, pressing on. If you leave any sort of track, a groove in the grass, you're not aware of it, it doesn't matter. It's only the next three paces that count.

Except that's never altogether true. You'd think the demands of the present - cash, bodily needs, sticking with the one friend you can't do without until you're ditched, moving on, finding another, concocting fealty where there was never any hope of it, sustaining the delusion of some greater purpose in it all, some grand scheme – you'd think all these things would be consuming enough and they usually are. They create their own expectation of fastidiousness, and I was fastidious.

But I was never capable of a pause, a breather, that was entirely without a deeper consciousness that somewhere in the shabby bundle of half truths and hopes I clung to, fiddled with compulsively, there was some irresolvable detail always calling for the definition I just couldn't provide. I make it sound innocent, and sometimes it was. Sometimes it was just a face, or a name, but the familiar face had no name, or the name, even a chummy diminutive, came without its face.

It's not that you're lost, but that you're being found, constantly found. It's always all there, snatches of things that want accounting for, that never let up.

There came a time when it spun down to a single elusive fact: Was it the left foot or the right foot? Which was the bandaged stump? You'd think it wouldn't matter, but it did. It's all that mattered. It was a kind of madness. Left or right? This or that? Da da da, hammer hammer hammer. That's what it was.

I came to with a soothing voice saying things that made no sense and a scintillant jug of water at my bedside, a silvery glint so pristine I could barely keep my eyes on it. They had to put me on something. I raved for days, apparently. I smashed things. That jug flew.

'You should try it, swearing,' I tell Clare. She laughs. I do love that laugh of hers. Her off-duty weekends are a bit grim. But I like to imagine that she thinks of me. As I think of her.

'Is it a book, or what?' she asks.

'What is?'

'The things you're saying. On the tape.'

'No, it's nothing like that. It's not to keep. I've only got the one tape, I tape over it, again and again.'

'Therapy.'

'Is it? I'm not sure. I'm just trying to get things down. Get them straight.'

I longed to see her face just then, to judge her expression, her tolerance. I can't be certain I made it sound that fascinating. And I wanted her to be fascinated. I think that's why I decided to tell her about Alex Marvel, my neighbour, and his friend, Palmer. Some of it, anyway. There's always

this difficulty of having to keep some things back. And without seeing her face I couldn't tell how interested she was. I'm getting better at reading her silences, reading the air between us, but I wasn't as sure then, those weeks ago. Like when I'd say, 'No, I don't want you to read the letter', and she'd pause. It would frustrate her, I think. That's why she kept coming back to it.

Still, it's been thrilling, really, the gradual revelation. I keep wanting to tell her, 'You'll be amazed, Clare.'

Of course, there's always the risk – or I think there is – that I'm kidding myself, that I am, actually, making too much of events, of conduct that I can barely recall with any coherence. Except I've got some things straight, important stuff. For years, for instance, it was never enough to think of the hooded man as having been completely beyond aid. My conscience never let up putting in its bid for the bolder action I never took.

On that score, there's at least one thing I've abandoned. Habitually, I'd return to a consoling recollection of leaning in and slipping him not one, but two cigarettes and catching just then a movement, a subtle salute of gratitude, a hand lifted off the knee, or a sound, the beginning of a murmur, or some detectable sign in the eye. And for a moment it would be true and meaningful, brotherly, to have parted with two cigarettes impulsively like that. But always, not long after the image had formed itself in my mind - this generous confirmation of who I was - I'd remember it was not true, there had been no gift, no fraternalism to speak of.

Perverse, this, the lie, then the truth. It was the clearest hint some moral error in removing the hood and not making any attempt to be honest about the limits of what was possible. We didn't talk, we didn't even try. And it was never enough, ultimately, to persuade myself that he'd have spoken a foreign language, that it would have been impossible to ask: what happened to your foot?
The rest of it followed – the excursion into possible, then barely thinkable, explanations for the amputation, gross data that couldn't but exemplify, and thus somehow excuse, my own helplessness. I managed, even, to make the torment ineradicable by giving him a name, though God knows on what basis.

The booted foot was, for instance, shot clean away at a distance as *Carlos* bounded for the cover of trees; he was found in the grass, face down, silent, bleeding heavily. Clouds, like driven steam, sped across a bright blue sky.

It was shot away, not so cleanly, as he stood, arms clasped behind his head, sneering at his captors; he fell awkwardly, unable to bring his cuffed hands into play; dirt and saliva and blood from a cut lip smeared his cheek.

His cuffed hands were pale and trembling against the steel hoops; even as the machete glinted in its abrupt descent, every nerve of his body held out for an irrational reprieve; his sweat-streaked head shot up the moment his foot thumped absurdly to the floor, boot and all.

His nostrils hissed and snorted in rapid bursts, trying to express for the taped-up mouth the few urgent commands that had become its sole suffocating vocabulary: Stop! Wait! Stop! No! But the sawing began. Two or three ashen figures were in attendance. It was dawn. The air was cool. A rooster crowed recklessly in the east or the west.

It became spectacular. That's the word for it. One irresistibly inventive spectacle after the next. I could count on it, no matter what I did, how far I went.

But then, almost as if by some accidental misstep, we parted. It was not as if the ghost flitted away, but that in the course of not many weeks I saw for the first time how many there were, too many to pick from or claim a special intimacy with.

This is at least partly true. For a time, I was sure I could establish exactly what had happened back there at the bunker, that what I'd taken as unanswerable self-reproach could actually be picked apart and reconstituted in a less damning form. You start with facts, anyway. I don't think it was altogether fantastic. And I've got to concede there's something to be said for knowing.

JESS / 2

June 6

I couldn't begin to count how many times Willow heard how his father died – we both did – how the 'water engineer' or, on rare occasions, 'Mr Osborne' became a victim of the storm. But he was always only incidental to the real story. Jim was not the real story. I can't decide if that makes it easier or harder, now. But if I learned anything from Maurice, it's surely that the cost of lies is always greater than the cost of truths. Geoffrey couldn't have been thinking straight when he suggested I just leave things as they are. Willow also deserves to know we did nothing wrong. I hate the word *incest* but that's the word for it, and it's a terrible thing to live with. That's what it was. That's what it's been all these years. And the consequence, for me, which of course Geoffrey knew nothing about.

He'd be a young man now, my son, in his early twenties. He'd have my eyes, Willow's build, Willow's quietness, my feeling for things. And his grandfather's adventurous spirit. I can't help wondering how things would have turned out if I'd not miscarried. I'd have been a mother – which is a mad thought – always wary of giving something away. Like Mum. Just like Mum.

Perhaps there's a lot he's forgotten, Willow. He wasn't nearly as interested as I was. I'd want to hear it, again and again, the drama of the storm and my father's plane coming down, and the part about Jim Osborne. It's hard to imagine such a practical-sounding man, the resident water engineer, who knew about practical hazards, setting out and not making it in the end.

She remembered the phone ringing. It was Jim, who was alone by then, because his wife had died giving birth to Willow. He wasn't much more than a few months' old on the night of the storm. I do wonder if Mum reminded Jim of his dead wife. Perhaps he was already thinking a time would come when he could ask Mum to marry him. She was single, pretty. Perhaps this was on his mind when he phoned her that night.

'There's a downed airman.'

We can hear Jim, Mum couldn't.

'I can't hear.'

'An airman. He's come down in his plane. Near the bridge.'

'An airman?'

'A pilot. His engine failed.'

'I can't hear!'

'Wait ... I'll come over.'

'Now?'

'I'll come over. Wait.'

She listened to the steady drone of the dead phone for a while. He's on his way over, she must have thought, and hung up.

Just when you thought the wind couldn't blow any harder, it began to roar in the trees, she said. The poor-town people out there were shouting and yelling. I imagined the roofing coming adrift. It must have been dangerous, the sheets flying off in the wind, cartwheeling and buckling. They could slice a man in half.

I'd ask to hear it over and over, secretly wishing it would change, that at the last minute some small detail would alter and Jim would be spared. And then she'd say, Jessie, I've had enough of it now. And she was so tired, just so exhausted by it. It must have been the strain of keeping the lie and the loss distinct. The true story stopped with Jim. She'd tell it until the moment he was brought.

For a lifetime, she and Geoffrey connived. It's forgiveable, sometimes, the harm of love.

June 13

Two men chose Mum that evening, but fate made the choice for her.

From all the times Mum told it I feel I know it well enough to see how it all happened. Jim Osborne had been up at the bridge in the twilight keeping an eye on the rising flood when he heard the drone of a circling plane. He was willing the plane to move on because it was distracting him from his mental calculations when suddenly it appeared above the trees, streaking towards the

bridge. It passed in a second, so close Jim was able to make out the tread of its wheels, and in what seemed an unexpected silence came down in the field over the rise beyond the road.

He got to a phone, but Mum couldn't make out what he was saying. He said he'd come over. As Jim ducked along the hedges by the quickest route he knew, my pilot father, Alfred Morell, a stranger who dropped out of the sky, was making his way towards the houses. Jim had just reached the open ground that separated the poor section from the rest of the settlement when a gust of wind tore a sheet of roofing from one of the nearest cottages and flung it at him. It struck him like a razor. Heavy as a melon, he fell. I embellished it, compulsively, from an early age.

Not far off, now, Old Peters, the artisan, gingerly picked his way to the house of 'Miss Frances'. He was fond of Mum, and probably indebted in some way, too. And fatherly, I suppose, by nature. He knew she was alone. He must have thought, I'll see if she's alright.

Making his way in the wind and rain, he stumbled on Jim's body. It fell to Old Peters to complete Jim's short journey; he hauled his body along on the bloodied sheet of metal.

Mum didn't see at first what it was, a lump, not very bloody, and they couldn't make themselves heard above the storm. There was Old Peters hovering uncertainly, soaked through, his hat still on but drooping gloomily, not explaining himself, and Mum saying, 'What is it Peters? What have you got there? You shouldn't be wandering about in this storm, for God's sake.' Then he stepped nearer. The storm had darkened the sky. She switched on the porch light. She thought, Jim's mad, coming over in this weather.

And then my father could be seen tramping across the mud, his goggles glimmering wetly across his forehead like huge, happy eyes, his flying suit heavy and thick with water. He thought she'd waved. He came over when he saw her wave. And thank God someone's got a phone around here.

But she'd raised her hand, that's all. It was instinctive, to shield her face. 'God, Peters, no! Take that away, get it out of my sight.' But I don't think Jim ever left her. It never seemed odd that he was

the man whose name she sometimes pretended to forget, or just liked better to call 'the water engineer who died in the storm'. I should have known there was more to it.

I imagine Peters backing away into the rain with his heavy load as the baffled airman squelched up behind, not knowing what he was stumbling into, his slight grin reaching in under the porch.

I can't really remember how much Mum told – whether she followed the trail of drips down the passage, fading a bit where the wooden floor had soaked them up, into the spare room, whether she stood and noted the spots trailing under the bathroom door, where he was at that moment, the bathing aviator. I made up a lot of it. He'd called through the door that, yes, he was fine, she was not to trouble herself, the tea was more than enough. This is conceivably all of my making.

And I knew she didn't know what she'd do with him, or how it would take just four days, his coming and going. And in the course of the next day, all anyone could think of was the boy William, orphaned by the storm. At that age, whoever's caring it is is caring enough, but still the women worried. And the young airman slept late.

The water had risen overnight, and with the phone lines still down and the wash-away on the main road, it was clear he'd be stranded for a while.

I picture her turning at the sibilant click of his cigarette lighter. Whether I made up too much of it, well, I can't say. I always felt I had no choice. He'd have been standing there, freshly shaved, but feet bare, dressed in his dried fatigues and a white vest, hair uncombed. And why should she not have chosen him? Perhaps it was the brace of his shoulders, or something about the way he smoked that cigarette. How they must have sized things up, alone there in the dim house, isolated in the aftermath.

Near evening, one of the men from the launches came up to the house. They were patrolling the river to see if they could find anyone to rescue. I can't say where the airman was, whether he answered the door or slunk into his room at the knock. But there the man stood with apology written all over him, for disturbing Mum. He'd brought a gift. I suppose it was really for William Osborne.

Everybody knew. With Jim gone and the nurse to be paid, there was nothing else to be done. It was a little horse, the gift. I got it in the end.

There must have something almost festive about those few days, what with the strange man, the infant, all the excitement.

But in four days, Alfred Morell was gone. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday. It's not much. It's not enough. That must have been how she always remembered it. Four days of love, then all the loss.

On the last day, I imagine her begging him to stay, but he'd have said, 'The storm's over, Frances.'

He left in one of the launches. I see it clearly, the brown river and the wake peeling open, the leaving boat tilting away in a creamy arc to the bend, the windless trees, the sun silver on the water. I keep thinking the brooch we knew as kids was from him. He'd have given it to her on the Sunday morning, I think, when they were at their tenderest, cocooned by the storm, languid and warm. She was always losing it, the brooch, and finding it again – with a famous rapture, but often when she was looking for something else entirely. She could be very forgetful at times. Although sometimes she was just drunk.

WILLOW / 3

I like Alex Marvel. He used to own the bookshop, *Marvel's*, which he sold a few years ago. I got the impression he was a little screwed himself when I met him for the first time, but he turned out to be good company. We'd hover on the landing most mornings, Jupiter hopping at our feet. At the brassy rattle of the leash, I'd open my door, and there they'd be. The landing at the *Playa* is quite pleasant, airy and sunny for a bit in the morning, and we'd often while away half an hour without realising it.

I'm indebted to Marvel, or to his *Umber Venus.* Or does the thread begin with the sketcher, Manning? It's a puzzle to me how far back you need to go. At any rate, I'd not be the lucky man I am without them.

Jess, I remember, was intrigued by him, too. I mentioned Marvel, at the funeral I think, and it stuck with her, she came back to it later in the car before that interlude with the hitchhiker that irritates the hell out of me.

She said the way I described him Marvel reminded her of Geoffrey, although I misled her, I think, without meaning to. Marvel's not interested in the stars as Geoffrey used to be. He's not even interested in Venus, really, not as a planet. I didn't make that very clear, I didn't want her to start connecting any dots before I'd figured out what to say, exactly. I thought she'd quiz me when I let slip that Marvel knew Geoffrey. In fact, they hadn't known each other well at all, and had never met, but I suppose in the trade everybody knows everybody else. Which accounts, I imagine, for Geoffrey knowing that Marvel's next-door flat was up for grabs. I'd always tried to make a point of keeping in touch with Geoffrey. I was somewhat erratic about it admittedly, but it was a happy accident when he mentioned Marvel and the vacant flat. It came at the right moment.

I've enjoyed telling Clare about the *Umber Venus,* the drawing Marvel got for a song at an art auction. He'd been trying to track it down for years and ended up being completely obsessed. She listens intently as far as I can judge, though she was a bit fidgety to start with. Everyone thought *Marvel's* was the comics shop, I began, which was compounded by his carrying a small line and, being Marvel, managing to assemble some of the more collectable numbers as far as I could judge. I know nothing about this stuff. And Marvel's interest was just about nil, too - except for Venus. He called her the 'busty divine', and swept his hands up, vase-like.

'So is the drawing from a comic?'

I half wished it was. At that moment I wished I could have said, for simplicity's sake, yes, Clare, it's just a page from a comic. But I piqued her interest: 'The reason I'm telling you all this is because

it led to the most important discovery of my life!' God, I sounded just like Marvel. But it was true in its way. I said, bear with me. And she did, to her credit.

The comic character, the busty divine, was neither here nor there. The real figure of his fascination was a long-dead adventurer, Manning, who sounded like a bit of a schemer to me. But he was a good drawer, and that's the nub of it.

'I can't vouch for any of this, Clare. It was Marvel's story.' And I told it pretty much as he had told it to me; Manning falling in with a scientific expedition that had come out by ship to record the Transit of Venus, and trundling off into the mountains with their wagons or whatever it was. And the story was, he became entranced by the charms of a woman he took to calling Venus and made her the subject of one drawing after the next.

'We don't know much, but the fable at least is that when she saw the result, or perhaps it was one sketch in particular, she was seized by terror and promptly killed him for his trouble.'

'She killed him?'

'Well, we've got to assume she'd never set eyes on such a thing before. Perhaps seeing her likeness did it. Superstition.'

'Okay.'

'The whole point about Marvel's story is that nothing of Manning's work survived – except a single drawing of this woman. And he has it.'

'Marvel?'

I gave her the short version. Marvel's account was rambling and complicated. The drawing, which became known as the *Umber Venus*, kept popping up in the records. It attracted scholarly interest now and then, and was once even considered politically significant, as a symbol of conquest, I think it was, or submission. I forget. The point is, Marvel was hooked. He spent hours at the Archives researching it, and longed to establish its whereabouts. What he didn't know until stumbling on a newspaper report about the murder of a sugar tycoon is that he had been the drawing's owner for years. According to this tantalising reference, though, the drawing was now missing. That

seemed to be that. After a couple months, however, he got a tip off from a friend of his, Palmer, who worked at the Archives, that some shady character had been touting what he believed was a 'lost treasure'. The Archives dithered. Could they touch it? It was soiled goods after all. In the end the man never returned, but Marvel suspected he'd go to a commercial auction house. He kept a close eye on the catalogues and sure enough, after a couple of months, it turned up. Lot 23, *pencil sketch of woman, provenance uncertain*.

'He got it for a song.'

'What's it look like?'

I told her. When Marvel showed it to me I saw that what gave it its charge was the slight salacious tilt of the reclining woman's hips, and the unflinching gaze of the only visible eye.

It's only just struck me, it's exactly what I saw of her, the hitchhiker, in the rearview mirror, her eye. Just the once, I looked up and that dark unblinking eye was on me. Jess had just hissed at me for the umpteenth time that she was asleep. I don't know what she was all tensed up about, Jess. But I kept checking. And she did sleep much of the time. I'd see a shoulder or a cheek or an eyelid. But the once, that lovely eye was right on me. It was utterly impassive for a moment, then softened suddenly. I couldn't see her mouth, but I was sure she smiled just then. It was almost sly, just between us. I wish I could remember her name. If I could think of a way to get in touch with her, I'd be tempted to. I don't suppose we'd have much in common, but I had a feeling there was something interesting about her, some mystery I'll never fathom. I remember wishing I was alone with her in the car. I don't know why, I just did. It's odd thinking this stuff. But she made an impression, that I can't deny.

Clare liked my description of Marvel's drawing, I think, the darkly fetching Venus, though she seemed a bit startled in that slightly pleased way. 'William! You make it sound like porn, you naughty man!'

I must think of something to give her, when I leave. A token. Not just flowers. Something lasting.

'But what was the most important discovery of your life? Isn't that the point of your story?'

'I'm coming to that,' I said.

LUNA / 4

Ma and me, we managed just fine.

One night, she's doing my hair. I'm in my pink dressing gown, soft and warm after a bath. I got my doll, I'm doing my doll's hair while she does mine. And she says, 'Dad's gone away.'

You don't know stuff, not as a kid. I thought, it sounds like a holiday. But I never saw him for years.

I did all the usual. Pop star posters, yo-yos. Collected bottle tops and stuff. We had a doggie, Pom-Pom. He was cute, I loved him. He never yapped too much, except when someone came to the door and he could smell he was a stranger. Like Vernon. He was always a stranger to Pom-Pom. And he didn't stay either. He was around for while, maybe a year. He sold insurance, life cover and things like that. His favourite thing to say was 'You can't go wrong …'. It was this or that kind of cover, so much a month, and you get a nest egg when you're old, lump sum, or savings or whatever. 'You can't go wrong.' But you look at a guy like that and you think, so how come it went so wrong with you.

Ma liked him, except when he said to me once, so, your Dad's got a crumpet or what? Later, when he'd gone, I said, Ma, what's a crumpet? I was too young for all that. I didn't understand. Later I did, and by then it didn't really matter.

I never saw him, but he never missed a birthday, my Dad. Sometimes it was a present, it would be there when I got home from school, maybe on the doorstep, wrapped nice. I'd always wait for Ma to get home. She was a typist, she worked nine to five, and I'd wait, I'd have it on the kitchen table and I'd make her coffee and then I'd open it. He always remembered. He must have

had the date written down somewhere. Sometimes it was a postcard or a short letter, always on pink paper, seeing I was a girl.

I was twelve or thirteen when I found his cap in the back of the cupboard. It had a fur of dust on it, and the peak was skew from being squashed in there for so long. It was a bit big to wear, but I put it on, I played I was a cop all afternoon. It had a shiny badge on the front. When I heard the gate, I shoved it back in there, down behind the shoe boxes. I'd come back to it. I imagined a lot of things, solving stuff, or being kind to people. Pom-Pom would follow me round. Every room was a different place where I'd stop and check papers or salute and stuff and talk to people I made up in my head.

We didn't know. Everyone says now that we all knew, but that isn't true, it wasn't like that. You didn't know things were wrong, you lived normal. Everything was normal.

The reason I thought of the willow tree, talking to that girl, was because of the river, going there with my aunt, on holiday. Except she always called it a 'vacation'. A week felt like a long time. We'd share a rondavel, it was like camping. The willow trees hung in the water like hair and you could swim under them and pretend you were in a cave or something, me and my cousin Ollie, although he wasn't really my cousin, he was my aunt's stepson.

I was thinking of Ollie because I showed him the cap once. It was a mistake. I said, put it on, but he wouldn't. I told him it was a game I played, but he was put off. I think it was something about my Dad buggering off when I was little. He frowned when I put it on. He said, 'It's too big for you, Luna. You shouldn't wear it.'

JESS / 5

July 18

You can't tell much from the photographs. The first is of the plane, which seems intact on the whole, though you can tell it's grounded – a warplane stuck in a maize field and the tongue of metal in the

left-hand corner, that improbable curve of the snubbed propeller. He must have circled in the dusk over the fat silver S of the river, river and compass turning as one, a fixed spiral. With the light fading, there was little choice. It was now or never, in Geoffrey's phrase. Although how would he have known? They must have been my father's words - it's the idea of the man in the moment. I've always clung to the smallest things.

What's almost disappointing is the absence of any sense of emergency. You'd expect some lasting sign of panic, of running out of options. If you put your thumb over that tongue of metal in the left-hand corner, it's as if the one element that would explain everything is missing. There is no evidence of the storm, or what followed. There they are, posing like sightseers beneath the vacant cockpit, Mum and some of the local children, wary of the lens, thrilled but too anxious to show it. A faint blur, a smudge of movement, robs the clarity, the detectable emotion, from Mum's face. An untimely distraction must have made her look away.

Nor is there much to be said of the other one. It's the sunlight, I think, that leaches the spirit from Mum, standing there in the doorway squinting against the glare. Only if you look closely can you see that she's holding the screen door back with the heel of her right foot. That screen door I remember, the clatter as it smacked back into the frame. It grated Mum's nerves, waiting for the clatter. My father would have gone that way, the squeal as he pushed it open in his stride, and the smacking as it slammed shut behind him.

What I know about Geoffrey is that he was never much good at straightening-things-out moments. He preferred a limited revelation, something intense and particular, but without reach, without impact. He'd avoid hurt like the plague. Which is why I vaguely mistrust his account of Alfred's coming and going. There's none of his conditional, uncommitted tone. It's all deadpan, contrived. 'He lost his way, and found a field to come down. It was as simple as that. It was now or never.' It was accidental. Alfred said so himself, he writes. And then he was posted off, and that was that.

Geoffrey must have hoarded these photographs for years and then slipped them into the envelope with his letter as if it were some kind of unquestionable evidence. By implication, there were no others, and none of my father, his lost brother, or no trace of them. Or of him.

July 25

I can't look at a photograph casually, not after my years with Maurice, the lessons I learned. Within weeks of joining Laforgue's I was under his spell. He was older, so we started out as teacher and acolyte.

Maurice used to insist on taking a magnifying glass to every picture we got, and I learned why in time. You've only got to look hard, he always said. But there were such stacks of them that eventually I'd say, 'We haven't got time, M. We haven't got time to go through them all like this.' He wasn't just tolerant of my naivety, he counted on it.

I've taken the magnifying glass to this one, the one of Mum in the doorway, but in some pictures all you get is the grain, a blizzard of dots. I was looking for the shadow, of him, the airman. I thought about it this morning seeing the boy at the pool languidly surveying the elderly swimmers. Standing there in the sunlit arch, his shadow fell clear as a bracket across the paving and up the poolside wall. And there is a shadow in the picture of Mum. It falls across the porch, and it seems so manly, steady, as if everything's thrown into the calculated moment of exposure. The trouble is, I will myself to see his outline when it could just as easily be a tree. A million things get in the way of the light.

Maurice used to say shadow was often the most telling thing in a photograph. He got teacherly at times, which I remember thinking he did to obscure something else. Little did I know. He was astonished, I think, when I began calling him M. He'd complain that I never quite said his name right, so I said, does M sound better? And I didn't give him much of a choice. He liked that, he began to trust me.

August 8

The stories about the river began when we moved to the city. I don't think Mum missed it much, the old house and the big trees, but it makes sense that she wanted to keep going back in her mind once we'd gone. We left quite suddenly, though I don't remember much. I was about six. I remember being bundled into the packed car and then being stuck in a crowd as we nosed our way out on to the main road. I didn't even have a last look at the river. It was the early evening, the trees were dim. 'Children, don't look out!' Mum ordered. 'Just keep looking straight ahead …' But I sneaked glances. It must have been puzzling to me, as a child, where they all came from, looking thinned and exhausted, and even as they trudged along it seemed to me they were hardly moving at all, but immobilised in a quiet, imploring pause. A child slightly younger than me stumbled, crying, near the car, and nobody paid the slightest attention to her, but trudged on mechanically.

'Where are they going, Uncle Geoffrey?' I knew even then he would provide not so much the shocking truth – as I instinctively felt Mum would – but a palatable explanation, euphemistic if need be, that would leave our world adequately informed, but safely unchanged.

'It's the Upheaval, Jessie.'

I knew in my childish way something awful had happened behind us, out of sight, but that in the cocoon of our moving car, the powerlessness of our flight was a saving grace. Survival is a blessed condition. Geoffrey had come to rescue us.

As we nosed away, trying to look straight ahead as Mum instructed us to, I focused on the back of Geoffrey's head, stiff with a kind of shocked solemnity. Leaning over, I watched in the side mirror, as the trudgers eventually got smaller and smaller.

Geoffrey used to insist, 'There was no fugitive. That was a red herring. It was an appalling ruse.' After the searches all the rest of it followed, the public safety regulations, the relocations. He always called it the Upheaval. Only the old people remember it now, and the most they say of that time is that life went on somehow.

There were hundreds of cars on the road, but our pace was steady. It got dark. As the hours passed, the vehicles spread out, though there were always lots of red dots ahead, fuzzy in the windscreen. Mum handed us a blanket from the front, but we didn't sleep, we were too keen to see where our future lay. From a long way off, we could see the dome of light in the sky, bulging into the dark as we sailed on, an unexplained phenomenon, until finally we came over a rise and there the city was, a vast crater of embers. I'd never seen so many lights.

WILLOW / 6

Palmer was the key, the passing mention of Palmer, who worked at the Archives, and one thing led to another. It didn't occur to me at the time, standing on the landing there listening to the story of Manning, but I have a distinct recollection of the moment when the idea came to me. Marvel and Jupiter had just returned from their morning walk some days later. Glancing up at the muted punch of his front door, I was suddenly conscious of the morning glare and yanked on the blind. As it slithered down, I glimpsed a passenger jet in the sliver of sky that's one of the limited views from my flat, a tiny shimmer rocketing ahead of its vapour trail, slim and icy to begin with, but swelling eventually into a languid worm that hung there, reluctant to fade out altogether.

It was that track left in the air that was memorably suggestive; in the instant that the blind fell, I had the idea that there must be a way back, there must be traceable data.

You begin these things without having the faintest idea, and with wholly inflated notions of what's possible. I met Palmer for the first time a few days later. He was expecting me, though it was never clear what exactly Marvel had told him.

'I don't have much to go on,' I said.

'You don't have a name?'

He'd whipped his glasses on to his forehead, feathering the form I'd filled in to catch the late afternoon light.

I didn't.

'Or date? Dates?'

I had a region of time in mind, a year.

'It's not much to go on, as you say. It's probably not enough. But let's see.'

I came away thinking that if I could dig out more detail there was a chance, at least, of placing my impulsive actions on the scale of reason, and it gave me a sense of purpose I don't recall ever having felt before. Between my shifts at the Aschenbach, I spent every spare minute trying to reconstruct events, our routine, our chit-chat, the sunrises, the stillness, the nervy watchfulness, the look and feel of the bunker.

I'd got a job waiting on tables at the Aschenbach. It was novel, and undemanding, but not a bad way to get back into making ends meet in the regular way. It was popular, always busy. I've asked Clare if she knew the place.

'It's in town, isn't it? No, not really. I haven't been to town for years. And I'm not mad about coffee either.'

'Well, that's where I work. Or worked. I got a job waiting on tables.'

'You were a waiter?'

I almost regretted that I wasn't able to come up with anything better. The good thing about having Clare around is that I tend to tell her things that I wouldn't bother committing to the tape. The worst thing is that she's always got to go, there's always someone else to see to. I forget, sometimes. You forget the world a little, other people, patients.

Marvel, I remember, didn't bat an eyelid when I told him I was a waiter.

'I knew the Aschenbachs quite well,' he said once. 'Immigrants, hard-working.' For years, it was evidently the only place in the city where you could get decent coffee. Although there was a time when people didn't like hanging around there, with the Bureau in the next block, the gaunt, small-

windowed building people avoided talking about. It's gone now. He said it made the Aschenbach an obvious haunt. They were called 'vests', Marvel explained, the deceptively weedy characters, short for investigators. Anyone seen in their company was assumed to be a 'teller', an informer. I always felt I had to concentrate when Marvel told me things like this because he might have been describing a foreign city. I'd listen, like a visitor.

I always had my favourite spots, my routines. There was a time, for instance, when I could describe in detail the suggestive shapes in the bark of trees, or name every shade of colour in the fading graffiti. I knew the mystery of the one or two cars in the city precinct that never moved, that whatever the time of day or night, were always there, aslant at the kerb, abandoned I was certain, but unnoticed. I liked finding them there, old friends. So it was strange learning that I barely knew what I'd lived through.

But I didn't dwell on it, there was no need. After seeing Palmer, I spent all my free time going after data I was in no sense strange to, but which had become worn, had lost its definition to over-exposure. I suspect I probably tried too hard in those first few days. One Sunday I slept until dusk and woke to find the flat gloomy. I was groggily uncertain for a moment whether it was Sunday evening or Monday morning, or whether I'd missed the start of my shift. But as soon as the doze lifted, I got up, padded to the kitchenette, put on the kettle. Through the small window at the sink I could see the mist thickening across the harbour, broken only by the heads of cranes and derricks all lit up like electric giraffes nodding north to a great fuzzy plain.

It was already so much clearer in my mind, a lot of stuff, detail, snatches of conversation, sensations even. But some things just didn't come, or not easily. My mate, for instance, whose face was as plain as if he stood right there. I could see him, but I couldn't remember his name. I went at it with a notepad and pencil. It began with a B, that much I was sure of, but the minute I began ticking them off it felt like there were a million names that began with B.

You try for some unconscious agency, I suppose, some deep-down trigger. I could see his boyish posture as he tinkered with the small brass terminals of the battery, or painstakingly rigged

his web of wires, jamming the shiny end into the aerial socket of his portable with an old grenade pin. He was always irritatingly satisfied for a while with the newer whine that undulated through the spectrum of detectable frequencies.

'Buddenbrook' came to me in a flash. 'Don't fucking call me that, Morell!' It was astonishing. 'Call me that again, Morell and I'll …' whatever it was. You cunt. Then I got it, it was Bosh. It was almost miraculous. But these things are fickle. Bosh, I remembered, was just his nickname.

I don't think I knew it then, but I was losing heart. And it was not that my efforts yielded too litte. I'd put in weeks of visits to the Archives, and Palmer had done what he could as far as I could judge. He had masses of stuff brought up for me, but the more I scanned the documents, and often I only got to half the cloth-bound boxes on the trolley next to my chair, the more I realised I was always having to confront something larger. The sum of particulars was almost endearingly meaningless, names, dates, episodes that could well have been fiction for the little I recognised in them. But what you begin to see is the vastness of the thing, that the most mundane, blameless activities are always inseparable from what you started out thinking were exceptional, the isolated events, atrocities. Once, as Palmer wandered over, I sensed that my slump, or the dangle of my pen, gave me away.

And perhaps it was Palmer, after all, who unconsciously alerted me to the difficulty. I suppose he was trying to be helpful, and he was, though not in the way I think he'd intended, when he asked me once: 'So it's justice you're after, is it?' And I was thinking, how can it be? It's a bit late, isn't it?

But I said, no, it wasn't that. 'I'd just like to know what happened to the guy, who he was.' I wanted to know, if it were at all possible, how soon the man had died, under what circumstances. I didn't say as much, though. What I needed – what I thought I needed – was to establish what atrocity I'd been party to. But in a few short weeks my certainty was eroded. It ceased to matter whether I'd acted with calculation or not, or generosity. My hour of comic tragedy was merely ridiculously significant for being unexceptional.

Clare, I suspect, no-nonsense Clare, would clear it all up for me, strip away the nonsense. And I've thought of trying to explain it all to her. The trouble is, on the only occasion I brought it up I pared it down to a very basic untruth; 'I wanted to get in touch with an old mate.'

'That's nice,' she said. 'It's good to keep in touch with old friends.'

I hadn't seen Palmer for a week or two when he paid me a visit at the Aschenbach. It was a Friday, a typically busy one, when I spotted him ducking under an umbrella at an empty table and twisting round to look in under the awning at an interior he may or may not have recognised. He caught my eye and I went over. As far as Palmer was concerned, I wasn't directly involved. Out of habit, I'd stuck to a strictly third-person account of events at the bunker from the start. I didn't want him to be any more interested in me than was necessary, for whatever obscure reason, but I suspect he may have guessed the truth. It didn't matter, really, but I was unnerved that he'd gone to the trouble of seeking me out. I brought him his coffee, saw to a bill, then returned.

'I've thought of something,' he said.

I nodded. Did I want to know this?

'Look for yourself. Look for "Morell".'

I was non-plussed. 'In the Archives?'

'You'd be amazed,' he said.

JESS / 7

August 22

Overnight, Corinth Road was filled with a family, noisy, boisterous. It must have been a bit of a shock for Geoffrey, but he assumed control after a fashion. I liked the old house. Large trees hid it from the street, and even from the front gate you could only ever see a portion of the veranda and a single

window behind which the curtains were almost always drawn. Much more than the river house, it was my childhood home, the geography that made me, and undid me.

Every conceivable space was crammed with books and papers and what I can only think of as meaningful objects – or what Geoffrey thought of as meaningful objects - odd tokens of events, of an era, a skill, a briefly encountered stranger, a vaguely redeemed loss.

On a hook behind his study door there was a slightly battered straw hat which he'd got by comic error from a pony rider in the mountains. The wind had whipped the hat off the man's head just as they'd greeted with a wave, and Geoffrey had scrambled after it, down the slope. When he eventually returned, breathless, the man had gone.

Jars bristled with pencils. There were paintings and framed photographs on every wall. For children, it was a labyrinth of treasures, musty with secrets and wholesome surprises. And a refuge that seemed virtually impenetrable. Which it wasn't.

One of the clearest memories I have of Willow was his poring over cryptic riddles. I associate his quiet absorption with afternoon silences I sometimes found hard to bear. I was always the noisy one, bashing away at the piano until I'd be shushed because 'your mother needs to rest'. And you didn't have to listen hard for the mid-afternoon trickle and that darling tinkle of ice. In one of my old notebooks I came across a typical Willow anagram: *silent* = *listen*.

Later, years later probably, he found others we liked. Of all of them, the one I found most lyrical was, *astronomers* = *no more stars.*

I suppose I was so easily impressed, so struck by the curiously visionary quality of it all. *Snags hold parents oddly in snares (7).* *E n t r a p s.*

But he had to explain them to me, which is why I wrote them down, I suppose. The Madison ones I'd almost forgotten. Willow, for some reason, played endlessly with his name. There were the opposites: *Domains* and *Is nomad* or *I mad son* and *Is no mad.* There was one that was more like an encounter: *No, I'm sad* and the brisk rejoinder, *So damn I.* And, finally, a faintly deathly *O, I'm sand.* I almost think he may have loathed Madison.

And then there was Sarah, Geoffrey's housekeeper, though she was much more. Geoffrey would lean over her at the typewriter, saying, 'Go on, you can do it. It's just practice.'

I'd listen as he'd dictate oh so slowly to Sarah, the clacks and thwocks of her too-methodical progress barely keeping up with his flighty, almost amused summaries of marginal events.

He came into our lives before I was born. It was always understood – the fable was - that he and Mum had known each other for at least as long as long as she had known his younger brother. But now it's clear he and Mum met only after my father went missing, that Geoffrey in fact brought the news, and whatever comfort he could. He'd have been surprised to find the infant boy, and hear of the other on the way, his brother's. Had my father asked him to go and seek out this woman, this stranger he barely knew? It must have been love. He really did love her, that's what I think. But I'd like to know how it came about, what he'd asked Geoffrey to say, and if there was a promise. I wish I could trouble Geoffrey, but he's too ill and I only ever speak to the nurse. There's never a great deal to say.

'When all is said and done, my girl,' Geoffrey told me once, surrounded by his letters and journals and teetering references, 'even though people leave heaps behind, there's still such uncertainty about what drove them and how they filled their days.'

And I think he preferred it that way.

The more he let me see of his papers, the documents and letters of great cousins and grand uncles, the more I wanted to turn them into something whole, make the connections, link all those lives into intimate episodes, a history I could claim.

'Tell me about my father,' I used to ask.

'I've told you all, my dear. Many times.' And he never strayed far.

Alfred flew up to engage an enemy over a mountain pass – it followed the conditions were perilous for a dog fight - and did not return.

I remember asking once if he'd been decorated. After a pause, Geoffrey said: 'He did his duty, Jessica.'

It was at least partly a loving impulse that whenever I pestered him he'd haul out his books and we'd study the aeroplanes instead. He was good at finding redolent images, like that crisp shot of a plane banking with its unseen consort high over the desert. He'd say, 'Jessie girl, here's something.' And there was something in the swooping glimmer of the fuselage, the nose cone tearing into the morning air. It changed my life.

September 19

I was fond of climbing the mulberry tree in the corner of the garden to watch the jets streak across the sky and become small black splinters that you could catch, if you squinted, between your finger and your thumb.

I'll never forget the last time I climbed that tree. It was thought for a while that I might lose my leg. For weeks, I would not forgive Geoffrey for saying I'd never be able to fly. I think it was his way of expressing a terrible shock on my behalf. He'd wanted the world for me. We'd find out-of-the-way places to fly to in the atlas. But when I fell, I think it was his own dreams, whatever they might have been, that Geoffrey thought would be dashed.

I got through it, and it wasn't much in the greater scheme, but something was lost. Everybody felt it. What I can only think of as a reckless optimism that made our lives slightly unreal, our prospects limitless, was suddenly shadowed by caution and uncertainty. I suppose the cost of my treatment must have been a sobering though never-mentioned factor. But I think it was more than that. It was the proof of risks that until then had been too lightly discounted or rashly overlooked. Nobody ever talked about it, but it was there.

And when, in the next few years, Mum's condition worsened, an atmosphere of defeat seeped into Corinth Road. She was in and out of the clinic for months. Sometimes she went on her own, but not always. We all kept our doubts to ourselves about whether it would help or not. Nobody dared ask why it was happening at all. Life went on after a fashion, one school term after the next.

But there came a day when I was summoned to Miss Williams' office. She was stern as a headmistress, but kindly enough. I remember delivering a note to Mum, once. *'Your daughter, Mrs Morell, has a wandering imagination, which is something we like to encourage, but within limits. In Jessica's case, it is my - and her teacher's – feeling that we need to provide boundaries to ensure a healthier environment for her intellectual development.'* And so on. *'And perhaps it is the absence of a father, which cannot, of course, be helped. But it is incumbent on those of us who are charged with her well-being to make up for that deficiency.'* I burned with a sense of loss, but I took up hockey or whatever it was that was suggested, I concealed my 'deficiency'.

When I was summoned, and stood there with the autumn light gleaming off the floor, I knew Miss Williams had had to rehearse what she was about to say. 'I'm afraid I have bad news. I am very sorry, Jessica, to tell you that your mother ….' But I knew she was dead.

September 26

It began with my injury. Willow said he didn't hear a thing when I fell from the tree and lay there bleeding. And everybody made such a fuss about that. But what difference would it have made? For a while I was unable to walk, and when I did get upright eventually, I limped for months.

'Is it hurting?' Willow'd ask. 'A little,' I'd say.

And I did feel relief when he smoothed the crease with his palm.

It was the summer after, or the summer after that, one quiet Sunday afternoon, the curtains drawn, when I'd seemed out of sorts to Willow. 'Is it hurting?' he asked quietly. That's how it began.

I lay my cheek on my crossed arms. A slim band of sunlight caught the fine hairs on my forearm, so close I could almost count them. I closed my eyes as his hand settled on my calf. I was all feeling. I could feel the hem of my dress where it lay across my legs, dipping lightly into the parting.

Genevieve made me tell it, inch by inch. And I did, though I suppose I muddled the occasions. I felt drugged as he stroked the one leg and the other, his hand creeping just a little higher at every

turn. The more he stroked, the more naked I felt, spellbound. Gorgeous tremors flitted through me, I was mad with the feeling of wanting to be prised gently apart.

We left for the coast immediately after Mum's funeral. Geoffrey, bewildered by our grief, couldn't think of anything else to do but flee. I sat in the back for the long drive down, Willow in Mum's seat. We barely spoke. I don't think we'd ever set off with as little preparation, as little foresight.

The cottage, set back from the dunes on the slope of the hill, had been in Geoffrey's family for decades. We knew it well, its musty cupboards and tatty curtains, and the big old tree out in the front. To start with, the 'girls' would sleep in the one bedroom, the front one, and Geoffrey and Willow would have the other. As teenagers, though, on the two occasions we'd had friends with us, we all bedded down in the living room, with sleeping bags and mattresses, and Geoffrey and Mum had the bedrooms.

It's quite something how fate finds circumstance willing. It was dark when we arrived, and chilly. We had some tea and then made to pack in. Geoffrey mumbled something about 'you two' taking the front room. 'You'll be more comfortable.' He was leaving early the next morning, to 'attend to things'. He'd be back by the end of the week.

Over the years, we must have been an unanticipated burden to him, Mum's difficulties, the demands of two growing children. I am sure he was rewarded in many ways. The delight took him by surprise, often. But I couldn't be certain that, at that moment, he was grieving. Or if he was, he was grieving for our grief. Getting us off to bed must have been an essential – and an essentially loving – objective.

The paraffin lamp glowed waveringly for a long while. Willow kept asking if I was okay. We spoke almost in whispers.

'Yes. And you?'

'I'm okay.'

We stared silently into the flame. Eventually he said, 'Shall I put it out?'

In the dark, I whispered again. 'Willow?' I knew he was awake, too. 'Willow, I can't sleep.'

The sea rumbled unceasingly, but I heard him peel his blankets away.

'And then?' Genevieve would ask in that quietly insistent way. It's brazen, I'd think to myself.

Why should I go there, I wanted to say.

'It was grief,' I said. It was comfort, an intensity of comfort. You can barely tell, in the dark.

'No. You must say it,' she said.

It was always a halting episode.

'But did you feel pleasure,' she'd want to know. And I always lied. I can't recall, I'd say.

It was only when Willow woke, naked, with me, that he knew or he remembered or he felt, what had happened, he felt emptied. That's how it seemed. He wrenched the sheet away and backed up against the door. His eyes gleamed darkly, he spat his incredulity at me.

He came looking for me eventually, and found me at the beach. There were a thousand things I wanted to say. I wanted to say, Willow, I feel so very alone. But I didn't, I didn't say a word. And all he managed to do was pat my shoulder. It was hesitant, embarrassed. That was it, he had nothing to say. And I didn't see him again for a long, long time.

I made up stories, of course, I put on a brave face. When Geoffrey returned at the end of the week, I'd scoured the cottage. I'd even washed the curtains. I said Willow had met some friends and would spend a few days with them. He'd be in touch. There was nothing to worry about, Willow was independent. 'Oh, I know,' Geoffrey said. 'He'll be fine.'

When we got home, Sarah knew something was amiss. She asked, Where's Willow? I said, it's fine, Sarah, he's with friends. We'd been gone a week, and I'd come back alone. It must have been a shock to her, her housekeeping reduced by half, Mum buried, Willow absent.

As the years passed, Geoffrey never asked what happened. He knew we were living in the same city and I pretended I was in touch. 'I see him now and then,' I'd say. 'We've both been so busy.'

I had my send-off a little more than a year after Mum died. Geoffrey made a thing of my last meal at home, at Corinth Road. It was just the two of us, and Sarah was hovering, making a fuss of me, though I think she was trying to remind Geoffrey that he'd not be on his own. Quite nonsensically, he'd rigged up some balloons as a farewell gesture.

'It's your last supper, Jessica.'

He kept filling my glass, as if I had an hour to become an adult. Little did he know.

It was months later that I saw Willow again, though he didn't see me. I stood there, watching the leaving train, the white streamers floating lazily from the windows as it wheezed away from the platform. They must have used every toilet roll on the train. I was certain I'd never see him again. Not that the conscripts looked in the least doomed, most of them. Willow, I remember, was very stiff in the face, unready, afraid perhaps. I had a letter for him, but I lost the courage to force my way through the teary mothers and vaguely remorseful fathers to blurt my 'Please don't go!', because I couldn't see how any sense could be made of it. I didn't have enough to say, or I had too much. We were still brother and sister then. I could never decide whether it would be better or worse, a burden or a relief, to say I had miscarried.

By the time he returned, I was working at Laforgue's, I'd met Maurice, I had no past.

I did see Willow – I hardly ever saw him, but I did see him – in the years that followed. Mostly he'd leave messages, and I'd have to hear how sozzled and dirty he was. The only way to discourage him from coming to find me was by giving him whatever he wanted – the money he needed. I paid to keep him away.

LUNA / 8

On my eighteenth birthday Dad paid a visit. I could hardly remember him, I mean what he looked like, because he wasn't like the photo I had where he's standing next to a truck in the sun with his hair swept back in the wind and the brightest smile you could imagine.

I'd show my friends, I'd say, 'That's my dad, it was a holiday, before I was born.' He's standing there and he's got one hand up on the side of the truck, and you think, there's a guy who'll take on anything. That's how he was.

But he wasn't like that anymore. He said, you're looking good. He sounded different, too, shy. Not like a Dad anymore.

We stood at the gate. I wasn't sure if he wanted to come in or if I could ask him to, what Ma would say, so we stood there.

He asked about school and I said, I'm finished school.

'Did you learn typing?' he asked.

I said, 'Dad, why did you leave Ma?'

He looks away, just across the street, but it's like he's seeing a long way, so far you can't imagine it. He wanted me to say something else, but when he looked back, I was looking straight at him, his grey eyes asking quietly for something, something else.

'Sometimes you can't tell what's right, Luna.'

'Or wrong, Dad.'

I did think what he did was wrong, although I never talked bad about him, in all those years, I mean. I kept that to myself. Some kids, they say bad things about their parents all the time but that's only because they've got them, it means nothing, but I'd always think, Jeez, you taking a chance, talking like that. I knew what it was like. So when he visited that day, I thought I'm not going to push him, just remind him what's what.

I thought he was going to say sorry. And I didn't want to hear that. I did, but not if I made him. It's easy to say. It's too easy.

'Are you going to wait for Ma? Are you going to see her?'

He didn't expect me to talk about her, I could tell. It was like it wasn't really my business, because I was a kid. But I wasn't anymore.

'I'll come back later,' he said.

I'm thinking, don't duck out, Dad. I looked at his car. He parked one house down.

'Who's that in the car?'

The guy had his head back against the seat like he was dozing, but his lips were moving. Maybe he was singing a song on the radio.

'He's my partner. You want to meet him?'

I knew I was giving in. You can't make a person do anything he doesn't really want to. That I know.

I said, 'Okay.'

He walked towards the car and I followed. I was curious. He was in his own world, the guy in the car, Dad's partner. He looked like he was dreaming up stuff.

It was Dougs.

JESS / 9

October 3

I can't remember how it started, how photographs of the poor, their own ones, all those marred little snaps, became iconic. But they did. It amazed me. There was an exhibition, once, that travelled, became a rallying point. Or maybe that was later. It was a lot of different things, I suppose, but the fact is, people began buying the snaps as a way of sympathising. Better ones, I remember, were often framed, but mostly they were just kept as they were, and stuck on the inside of windscreens or pinned to noticeboards in offices. It was solidarity, an outlet for a sort of moral repudiation. It just took off, and Laforgue's soon got a reputation for offering the best deals.

Often, we'd sell the photographs in batches without the buyers even bothering to look. Maurice was the only one who never failed to inspect the lot. For a long time I wondered what it was he was looking for, why he bothered, because the trade was brisk. We sold them on so quickly.

Even now - and he's been dead for what seems like a year, but isn't - I think, before doing certain things, of how Maurice would do them. Looking at photographs, for instance, always from the outside in, resisting the focal point until the last moment. But there was more to it. There was more to Maurice, too.

He'd say, 'For the little money they get, it's a wonder people give up their treasures so lightly.' I didn't understand, then, the risks they ran, and neither did they.

'Are these your marks?' I asked him once, 'or is it the men who come who made them?' They were pencilled dots in the margin alongside selected entries in the register. It eventually became my job to justify these entries against sales and draw up a weekly list. I knew, then, that I'd gained his trust, though I didn't really know why. It was not a difficult job. But he had stricken look when I noticed them for the first time. As he leaned over the magnifying glass again he said, 'They come to see what we've got. They're looking for pictures that could be helpful.'

'But these are just family snaps, M.'

He looked up.

'Every image reveals in the most unexpected ways, Jessica.'

He could see I was doubting. It was 'unintended revelation' that you had to find. 'You've got to look for it.' I still couldn't see what he was driving at.

'Let me show you.'

He picked a slightly curling print and handed it to me.

'What can you see? What can you tell about the subject?'

It was unremarkable, a little blurry where two children in the centre of the family group had jostled inopportunely. Sold on its own, I couldn't see it fetching much. What could I see?

'They're poor.'

'Yes. They're poor. What else?'

'They have no shoes.'

'They're shoeless. That follows. And?'

'They're shy?'

'They're shy and poor and shoeless and almost without hope, though not quite, for the camera holds out the transfigurative prospect of a future in which the image will attest to that longed-for redemption. And so on. What else?'

'Is it something in the background I'm meant to be looking at?'

'I'm asking you to study the photograph.'

I looked again. I fancied I understood – that you could tell the season from the pumpkins on the roof of the house behind, that you could see this family had a stake of sorts, a crop at least, that there was young and old in the picture, a familial unit that cohered despite everything. 'It's amazing, really.'

His gaze was impassive and unimpressed.

'Amazing it may be, but no, Jessica, that's not it. What you have failed to see is that the person behind the camera is a wanted man and unless we do something about that, this photograph will end up in a dossier. And these people, shy, shoeless and poor, cohering remarkably, young and old, will learn something of the bludgeon bolt from the sky that ends reveries for all time.'

He could craft his words, Maurice, and his lessons. I was stupefied until his finger hovered pedagogically over the obscure-seeming shadow that crept towards those unshod feet, casting an unmistakable betrayal on the dust. It was the outline of a beret with a cockerel feather jutting from it, the symbol of resistance. He'd told me once how shadow was often the most telling element of a photograph, and here was the evidence. The man behind the camera would have known to keep himself out of the picture without realising he was in it, anyway.

'Somewhere, perhaps, is a picture they did not bring to Laforgue's. They're not stupid. But, like you, Jessica, their alertness fails them from time to time.'

He was so very alert, M was. He was alert in love, too. And had to be. I adored him at that moment, adored his courage and foresight. I sometimes long to regain that sensation.

October 10

The weekly visitors, usually the two of them, were ordinary looking men who'd sit with Maurice for as much as an hour. Before I knew what it was about, he'd urge me by hints more than anything else to leave them. Once, sitting on the couch outside his door, the one highly polished shoe I could see was so static for all of ten minutes I had to lean forward eventually to be sure it was attached to the seated visitor. The other one always stood.

There was that severity everywhere, then. 'Best not show too much interest,' one of the clerks said to me once, 'it attracts attention.'

Even the bravest defiance seemed doomed, though I remember Maurice telling me, 'A moment will be reached when it becomes unsustainable.'

I wanted him to explain it to me. I couldn't ever see beyond the obscurity of willing the caution, the anxiety, to end. And that was never enough. I'm not part of this, I'd think. Why am I immersed in it? I'd sit in the square and imagine I was elsewhere, just for the relief. I liked to watch the scarf seller outside Laforgue's because I guessed he was sly and resourceful, and I could learn something from that. He got by. He made himself innocuous by his visibility, his vivid presence. It was the cleverest thing I ever saw.

But of course it all changed. The visitations stopped eventually, and nobody bothered with cockerel feathers or snapshots of the poor. I bought them for a while, once I could afford them, when they were going for next-to-nothing. I always thought Maurice lost interest because he was ill, though I was wrong. But I couldn't bare trying to explain to the many who still came that there was not much value in them anymore. They kept coming to town with their grubby shoeboxes.

Later on, some of the images were turned into posters that you'd see in the marches, the shy faces all the more abashed for being enlarged, and aloft, over-exposed. But for the rest, those ordinary little snaps, you just stopped seeing them. You never can tell what people will value in the end, or what meaning they attach to objects which may remind them of things they'd prefer to forget.

October 28

Just as the phone went last evening, the panning camera jolted, the picture freezing for a second, before steadying on the front rank of the parade where a high-kicking man leapt ahead with a flag. The commentator hesitated. I reached for the remote to turn the volume up. We're all reading events as basically unpredictable. The phone rang and rang as I watched, and I couldn't tear myself away. As it stopped, it seemed clear the flag-man was just dancing, streaked with sweat. He was just exuberant. The commentator thought so, too. You could hear his relief. And then the phone rang again. I felt a chill the second I recognised Warren's voice. I imagined he was standing as he spoke to me. From the hallway, I could see through to the lounge, lit bluely by the television. Beyond it, the evening city glittered in the window. I listened tensely as Warren began, 'Just as he would have wanted …' Geoffrey died in his sleep.

Without thinking, I said, 'What about Willow? What will you tell him?'

'Geoffrey has left that to you,' Warren said. 'It's up to you.'

I was surprised that Willow was already in town, that he'd 'fixed himself up'. He'll be at the funeral. I'll see him in less than a week.

I never wished Geoffrey dead, but I can see suddenly how promising everything is. It's more than twenty years now that we've all been living with pretences and shame and all because of a fiction, wrong facts.

October 31

The old familiar streets again, unchanged. I couldn't wait to see Willow, and there he was, elegant, smoking. Looking at his watch. He didn't recognise me.

We just upped and left, it was wonderful. I keep telling myself he'll be relieved when he knows. And I think I'll know when the time's right to tell all.

He drives intently. I like him, I like him like this. And we travel well together, not always talking. When I point things out he takes such an interest. In the cool wind, dust and flecks of grass catch the early light. And he's still in that tie of his.

The girl at the garage; black pumps, silvery buckle; can't reach the straw with her seeking lips. A pink bag, the pathos of it. She waits, eyeing the road. Gum trees, traffic flits by; flashes of light. She is intriguing, her simplicity, the scant impression she makes, the unwashed hair, skew teeth. I'd guess she asks for little, too little. Looking at her, you can tell she has little to offer, though lissome enough.

The road hammered silver in patches by the heat. Dread, again. The mountain horizon ~~a cardiograph.~~ like torn paper. We rush at the edge of the world.

WILLOW / 10

When I said it, it was as if she froze. I felt it. It was extraordinary the impact it had.

'I found my father, Clare. That's the discovery I meant. One thing led to another – Marvel, the *Umber Venus*, Palmer. And Manning, of course, if you take it all in.' I left the hooded man out of it.

'Do you know for sure?'

I still can't understand why she was so uncertain, and I've asked her about it, but she makes light of it now. Don't-kid-me Clare. She's a breath of fresh air. But I did, I did find him.

There's evidence of a smile. That's the first thing that struck me. The play of muscle and skin around the eyes and the misaligned curvature of lip and left cheek are unmistakable. What isn't clear is whether what the camera caught was the beginning of the smile or its fading remains. Not that that mattered. I was more interested in why, why he was about to smile, or had just smiled. I couldn't

imagine him being amused just then. Or was it simply resignation, wry fatalism, the quality you don't know is there until it's too late to be worth much.

What's plain from the photograph, though, is that for a fraction of time at the moment of his downfall, Alfred Morell was an outwardly contented, slightly amused young man. It was the first photograph I'd ever seen of my Dad. It had its own little sleeve. As I sat there, conscious of a strange tremor in my chest, I remembered Mom's rummaging, tucking her hair behind her ear in the determined effort of hiding, concealing the truth, the sadness, or the absence of the photograph she knew didn't exist. And the brooches and trinkets that came to light and the stories that went with them, distractions and diversions that led us away from the danger zone. And here he was. He'd been here all along, unforgotten for years and years in the oblivion of memory.

Innocently enough, I'd turned, as Palmer suggested, to 'Morell'. Frankly, I wasn't expecting much and as I stood there at the counter I thought, what the hell, let's have all the Morells, give me the works. I went to my table and waited. And, of course, the question was, why hadn't I looked before. The thought hadn't ever crossed my mind. I grew up, I realised, thinking I knew all there was to know about Dad. Geoffrey's version was always one of uncomplicated ambiguity. He'd gone missing. There wasn't much to know beyond that, the anecdotal embellishments serving merely to confirm the absence of hard data.

Some of the stuff I found was typed, some written in an old ink, a leaning cursive hand that I began to hope would ennoble the contents. But the documents on the court martial of Flight Lieutenant Alfred Morell lacked even the slightest trace of sentiment. I searched for it, for feeling, for hostility even, but there was none. In this measured, regulatory process – blandly referenced AMOR.iv - feeling was precisely the difficulty. Sitting there in what I remember as the serene temple light of the Archives I could see immediately how serious the charge was, how foolhardy and wonderful my father had been. His crisis of conscience, I saw, might have been forgiveable in the moment, might even have been punishable by other means, had he not elevated it to a stubborn resistance, and defended it.

I felt deprived that Dad's words were transcribed, typed up by someone else. I'd so wanted to see his hand, to sense his impression on the nib, the weight of his mind. But the words themselves were transcendent: 'If we are fighting for a just cause, we cannot mean what we claim if we conduct strafing missions on roads our intelligence has clearly identified as the only routes available to fleeing civilians.'

I could see him peeling out of the formation, a livid sun pouring into the cockpit, all that renegade doubt burning him up. He must have been wild with conviction. But measured against the disciplinary code, the King's ordinance, Ko541, his wilful disobedience amounted to treason, the treachery of emotion.

A smaller, crisper mind dictated the appraisal of Dad's solitary rebellion, just four words that seemed to fall gravely short: 'Prisoner's claim rejected. Proceed.' A too willing underling, I sensed, brought a dutiful vigour to the keys, his typing so deliberate it drove a lasting braille of indentations into the paper. Yet his hand was not so sure in the stamp, the ageing maroon impression clean in its upper features, but smudged along the lower curve, a little like a smear of blood from a careless nick.

None of the detail had the power of the photograph, which I kept going back to, flipping the documents aside to gaze at it, to trace the hairline, the apple curves, the soft bruises of shadow and muscle, the cool reservoir of heroic reason in the forehead. The lips, I thought, were feminine in their boyish assuredness, and slightly, amusedly pursed.

If I'd stopped there, it might have been one thing, the face of my father. But there was more. Halfway down a handwritten page of ancillary material on the military code that didn't seem of much interest at first glance, my eye fell on what I thought afterwards had seemed really just a shape, an outline, but one that I recognised instantly, that I knew I'd seen somewhere before. Studying it out of curiosity I found it was merely a reference to the King's ordinance, the 'Ko541'. But with a jolt, in that second, I realised it wasn't that at all. Well it was, it was Ko541. That's all it was. But in the handwritten scrawl, the imperfection of its haste, its impatience, I saw it was something else entirely.

What my optical nerve detected just then it had searched for since my childhood. And there it was, a cartographic find. It was, unmistakably, "Kushr".

I have a distinct recollection of raising my eyes to the ceiling at that moment and being struck momentarily blind by a stray shaft of sunlight that had crept up behind my chair.

The missing are only missing when someone begins to look for them. Out of that touching shyness of love, Geoffrey had 'found' Alfred Morell for his lost children, then abandoned him in an accidental riddle of two letters and three numerals which, if you wrote them quickly, disregardingly, had the potential to achieve a nominal, relieving, deception. Missing without trace in the skies above Kushr.

On my long walk home, an extravagant exercise in not arriving at the *Playa* just yet, I remembered the umpteen occasions in the bunker when I'd pored over Geoffrey's letter - the only time he actually committed the facts to paper - and the obsessive energy I used up trying to pin it down, the patterns, the shapes of vowels and consonants that would give some sort of exactitude to Dad's fate.

I'd often sensed Geoffrey was concealing something - out of compassion, I suppose - and now that I knew what it was, I felt complete. That's what it was, complete.

The flat was quite dark by the time I got home, but I didn't have to switch on the desk lamp to make out the slight disturbance of the geometry midway along the bookshelf where the envelope jutted from the ridge of spines like a bookmark, the bookmark it once was.

I could barely remember how in all my wandering I'd clung to the dwindling assembly of books, the dozen odd titles, I emerged with from the mess of years, the boarding houses, friends' flats, cheap rooms. Somewhere I'd have had a box, I suppose, or a carrier bag, for these few volumes that made it through the gauntlet of deals, of women and rows, of shortcuts and arrangements to get through the week, through the weekend, through the month-end. Laughter and fury and let-downs. And part of it, part of this choice freight, was the abiding notion that something visionary must come of it, that to shake loose and be light, nimble in the world, was an essential preparation to rising

above whatever it was had to be risen above, even if, whenever I thought of it, the means and the result were obscure. And this was the residue. In all this time, these few books kept up with me, and this one in particular.

I switched on the lamp and took it down. I hadn't looked at *Death in Venice* for years, decades. Two, about. Or Geoffrey's letter, the envelope tawny with handling, with age and travel. It seemed almost prurient, uncreasing it again, pinpointing the faultless lie, Kushr. Better than Kasht, truer than Khut.

I meant to tell Marvel about it. I thought it was quite a story, I thought he'd appreciate it. And I will, I think, once I'm on the mend, back at the *Playa*. Presumably. I wonder actually if Marvel's been told I'm here. For all he knows I'm still visiting Geoffrey. I doubt he even knows that Geoffrey died. Or perhaps he does, come to think of it. The police have probably been banging on his door. I should ask Clare to go and see him, put him in the picture.

I realised just how close we'd become, Clare and I, when I found myself telling her about Sarah. Not everything, but quite a lot of it. It was innocent enough, my telling her. I'd been thinking about Geoffrey's letter and that the detail of Dad's fate was secondary. He'd written to tell me that Sarah had died. I remember how crazed I was that he didn't say how she'd died, and it was a while before I found out because I only visited Corinth Road months after being discharged. I found the house unchanged, but very quiet. In the kitchen, there was a single plate and a single teaspoon on the draining board. Geoffrey put a brave face on it.

Sarah was too young to have died, is what I felt. Or I was too young to have been cheated out of a repeat encounter that I knew didn't amount to much but had been promising nevertheless. I still think about her, the stranger I peeped at and turned into an intimate I never knew. And what made it worse was hearing that she'd drowned in that sludge dam up in the mine dumps. I guessed it was the same place, the green pool I'd once seen under Madison's doubtful tutelage. It was implausible, I couldn't imagine why she'd have gone there, but what did I know? I knew nothing about her, she knew nothing about me. I didn't know, for instance, that she was the granddaughter of the old man

everybody used to call Old Peters. Geoffrey said his only relief when she died was that he wasn't around anymore.

It all seems so distant. I have only the vaguest recollection of Peters, and only really because Mom spoke about him. He was the one who found the body in the storm at the river, the water engineer's body. I don't remember his name. And I was never altogether certain of the details for that matter. I couldn't help feeling Mom made it more dramatic than it really was. I suspect she made up some of that story.

JESS / 11

November 28

If I was ever going to tell Genevieve about Maurice, I'd have left out the love, or the betrayal, one or the other. The last time I saw him was the day I took him the letter. I liked to take things on my hospital visits, knowing there'd always be that trying moment when the mundane chat would run out of steam, and the only thing left to think about was his dying. That's when I liked to have something to show him. Sometimes it would see us through to the end of visiting time, the morning session, which I knew I always had to myself, and I could leave in an atmosphere of pretending that his life wasn't over. But I made a mistake with the letter.

'What is it?' I said. I had no idea. I just thought he'd be pleased to get some mail. But looking at him, and he was pale as it was, I saw he was shaken.

Weakly, he held it up for me to read – and I've often wondered what he was thinking at that instant, what made him confess. I read it through and it made no sense at all. It was a letter of gratitude, thanking him for passing on names.

All I could think was, but how silly, because the other purpose of the register was to keep track – just for ourselves – of all the muddled names. It was an elaborate scheme he devised to protect

the less alert who sold us their treasures too lightly, not seeing what they revealed. Maurice muddled them as a ruse, pre-emptively. It was cunning, I admired it.

So the letter was just nonsensical. It was completely false. 'But this is nonsense,' I said, taking his hand, willing some fighting spirit into him, realising too late that I'd played into some underhand thing that I couldn't altogether grasp. I felt guilty. It was blackmail, I thought, or someone's attempt to avoid being fingered. Times had changed and many people knew they were at risk of being found out. It was less the formal part, the '*without your cooperation'* etc etc, than the personal touch, a simple *'Thanks, Maurice'* scrawled across the bottom, that seemed cleverly sincere and unavoidably brutal.

I was about to say, 'What rubbish!' or 'The bastards!' or, God knows what, when he said quietly: 'It's true, Jessica.' He was smiling thinly.

'Yes, it's rubbish. And it's mean. They know you're ill …'

'No, you don't understand.'

He always had to teach me, M did. Teach me to see things. He'd let the letter sail off the edge of the bed. I don't know if he ceased to care at that moment, one way or the other, about truth or lies or about dying. Or about me. It was the first time I realised how very ill he was, in that still aseptic air. As I leaned forward to pick it up, he stopped me, his hand firmer than I'd thought it capable of being.

'I did give them names.'

'But the muddled ones …'

'No.'

And, of course, it was quite rational, cold, but rational. Every choice, he insisted, must come at a cost. He'd had to give up some to avoid giving up the lot. How else would you do it?

'What else could I have done?'

I didn't answer him. I was thinking about how he did it, precisely, how he chose.

'How did you choose them, how did you choose which ones to give?'

'I didn't. You did.'

It came back to me how we – how I - would separate the marked entries, and keep a list of the unsold ones. He trusted me with that. I'd taken it as a sign, I was proud of his approval. There weren't ever that many in any given month, but there must have dozens over time. As he explained my hapless guilt to me, a bit of colour came back into his face. It was best, he said. It meant I was guiltless, my part was entirely unwitting. Wasn't I relieved about that?

'Why, M?'

'I've already explained.'

I wanted to say, you haven't, damn you!

'Did you tell them? Did they know I was involved?'

He shook his head feebly, remorsefully almost, as if I was destined to go unacknowledged.

'What happened to them?'

'The names?'

'The people, Maurice. The people we betrayed.'

'You're being naïve Jessica …'

I stood up. I was going to go, I couldn't stand it anymore.

'Please don't go. I need you to understand.'

'How much more do I need to know?'

'Can't you see? It would have been inconceivable to say we had nothing to give them. But to give them a few, Jessica, meant we could save many.'

I put on my coat as he spoke.

'Please don't go.'

'I have to, Maurice. I have to go. Visiting time is over.'

He turned his head to the window.

'You could have told me,' I said.

'Could I?'

'You were going to die without telling me, weren't you.'

I'd had enough. It was too late. I didn't wait to hear another word more, I just walked right out. We'd been lovely as strangers, and now we weren't any longer, not strangers, and not lovely. I didn't see Maurice ever again.

Only much later, long after he'd died, did I remember him telling me once, 'We're all bound up in events we think are not of our making,' or something like it, something clever like that, that was obviously meant to explain why I was foolish to think I could be detached and untainted. If I'd known, I'd have said, Maurice, you don't know a thing about me. And that was the point - I could just be myself with Maurice, which is a breathtaking contradiction; I could just be, without actually being myself. That's over now. It was a hard lesson, a mistake I'm determined not to repeat.

The truth is the only firm footing there is, and now that I have Geoffrey's papers, the umpteen packages Warren has sent on as promised, I've got to make sure I don't miss a thing. It's not as if Geoffrey's going to pull the wool over my eyes, but before I clear things up with Willow, I want to be completely sure of myself. I've got to be alert as I never was with Maurice. Or with that ridiculous girl, Luna, who keeps butting into my thoughts, the way she spoke those words: 'You said he was your brother.' I stumbled into that one without even seeing it coming. And I do keep thinking back to the journey home, the funeral, leaving with Willow like that in such high spirits. Could I have missed anything else? We were on the verge of resolving everything, Willow and I, and then it went bad. Was it just the girl? If I keep my wits about me – if I find what I'm looking for in Geoffrey's papers and figure out a way to make sense of it for Willow - we'll get over it.

I know from experience that arriving is not an event, it takes a while to arrive, and it's never as you think, the journey always lingering, unwilling to give up the ghost. When we'd spot the sea, as kids, it was not five minutes and it would be a let-down. You'd drop into a valley, come up a rise, and there it would be again. And then another, and still the same dim mass of blue far off, until, quite suddenly, you'd be there. But the air would be chilled, a disappointingly fresh wind making the warm car seem preferable. And there was still the unpacking to be done, the boot agape, expecting too much, somehow.

LUNA / 12

'Okay, here's how it works.'

Dougs had it sorted. I had a name, I had flyers.

'There's a shoe repairer, okay? Bender. Bender's Repairs. It's easy to find. I'll explain all that, how to get there. You go there, you hand him the slip. I'll give it to you. You just hand it over, okay? He'll give you a pair of shoes, old shoes, like you've had them repaired and you're picking them up. You take them, you leave. You go back to your hotel. It's as simple as that. You're just showing your face, you don't need to say anything, you do nothing. Just behave normal. You the signal, that's all. We're here, we're ready for business. You're cool. Okay? Then Levitt comes. You wait for Levitt. He'll take it from there. Your job's done.'

'Is that all?'

He nodded.

'What about the dancing?'

'They do stuff like that, shows. You got the flyers, you go to the manager, you say, look, this is who I am, it's a travelling show, I'm here for a few days. You're interested, I'm in. By then, Levitt's there. Dancing's off. You come home.'

'What if he says he's not interested, the manager? Before Levitt gets there. Or he is interested, and I've got to dance?'

'Luna, it doesn't matter. It's a cover. You look like a dancer, okay. I keep telling you. He says, no, we don't do that anymore? No problem. That's fine by you. You give him a flyer, you say, well, future reference. You give him one. Simple. He wants you to dance? You say, okay, I can start tomorrow. Tomorrow you gone.'

'And Levitt's there …'

'Levitt's there.'

It sounded okay. He thinks a thing through, Dougs. Except for Levitt.

I had to hitch a few rides to get back. After the weirdos it was fine, the weather was nice, and a family car stopped. I did a sing-a-long with the kids in the back. They didn't ask too many questions. I said I was from a farm and I was going to see my sister in the city, a surprise visit, give her a treat. They thought that was nice. Their little girl Annie couldn't get enough of the songs Ma and me used to sing. They came back to me just like that, I remembered every word. The chorus everyone sang, and Annie clapped. It was noisy, but, you know what? it was fun. I got their number, they said I must visit, and I'm tempted. Maybe I will sometime. You never know.

Dougs was already at my place. I knew he'd be. Sleeping off a party.

I said, Dougs, Levitt didn't show.

'He was late, that's all.'

'Is that what he tells you? He was late?'

'It doesn't matter, Luna. Just leave it. It worked out okay.'

The heels were hollow and Bender put the stones in there. We got twelve. Dougs took them out carefully and studied them. But I could see he was brooding.

'I had to get out of there. I had to think of something.'

'You got scared.'

'So maybe I did. I had no choice. If Levitt came. But he didn't. He was boozing probably.

Hey? I could've told you.'

'So you hitch a ride.'

'They offered me a lift. It just happened like that. What was I supposed to do? You said Levitt would be there, and he wasn't.'

'Fuck, just leave Levitt, Luna. I'm not his nanny, for Christ sake.'

'I'm just saying, Dougs.'

Whenever I'm away he drinks. I don't mind, it's okay. I thought, well, he's mellow, we can laugh about what happened. And there is a funny side.

He kept saying, 'Wait, I got to picture this.'

Sometimes we both laughed.

Or he'd get sidetracked when I was trying to tell everything.

'What are we dealing with here, sedan or what? Little, what, little blue car, two door?'

'Shit, Dougs, it was just a car with four doors and seats inside. You interrupting me all the time. It was just some old car. It broke down, I told you. I can't remember what car it was.'

'Okay, go on.'

Half the time he wasn't listening. Or he was, but he was thinking stuff, other things. But I told him all the drama.

'So eventually I'm at the side of the road and they driving off. I watched them until they were gone. It took a long time. You know what was funny? What was funny was the number on the car. It said Before You Go. The letters and numbers, I mean. It was B-E-4 U-G-0 or maybe B-4 and U-G-0. I can't remember. But either way, it said before you go. Dougs you not listening.'

'Hey?'

'You're pissed.'

He cackled.

'Luna. Damn. I'm pleased as hell, man. Where you been all these days?'

'It's a weekend Dougs. It's just a weekend.'

'And we got our haul.'

'We got our haul.'

He pushed them around on the table.

'Only thing is, it could have been better, Luna. It could have been more. It should've been double this.'

'Jeez, Dougs, it's enough. You said so.'

'It just kills me to leave a job half done, Luna. That's all I'm saying.'

'So what you got in mind?'

'Shit. Mind's empty.'

'Just leave it, Dougs. We got enough.'

We had twelve stones. He said it was worth thousands. You sell them into the trade is how you get the money. But they can trace a stone, he said, you got to be careful. I didn't know anything about this stuff, but I thought, Luna, you got to concentrate here girl.

JESS [SARAH/GEOFFREY] / 13

November 29

I've been listening to Sarah and Geoffrey. It put me so on edge I just had to get up and go out. I walked for two hours, I didn't stop. I even wondered if I could face coming back to it. But I did, I turned for home. And I've listened to it again. It's quite wonderful, really.

I'd not realised how clumsy Geoffrey was with this sort of thing. I imagine him regarding the tape recorder with a vague but unshakeable suspicion, as if he had to keep a grasp on it or it would do something unpredictable, irreversible. It's quite obvious that he's holding the microphone instead of resting it on the table between them. At first I thought it was my old hifi, dust in the tape deck. But you can tell from the fidgety rustle and the almost constant clicks and pops, like a boiling pot spitting on to a hot plate, that he's determined to hang on to that microphone. And he sounds apprehensive too, uncertain of his audience, a future listener he may not until that moment have given any thought to.

I can't make out the date. He begins, and it's all far too formal, with the date. He'd have wanted to strike a dispassionate note. It's a day in April, but which year it was I can't make out. He also mentions Corinth Road. He liked to pin things down, date and place, for what it was worth. They'd have been in his study, he and Sarah. The first time round I wasn't aware of it, but there's no mistaking the way she clears her throat three or four times during his rather self-conscious preamble. *'I am making this recording, well, we are … with the idea … the idea of … finding out a*

little about Sarah … Sarah's life … which has been varied … and certain things I have an interest in … involving Frances and her meeting … her first and, in fact, her only meeting, with my brother Alfred. Who was a pilot, a young airman.'

I was riveted. The pauses, and the wasted time on humdrum things, put me so on edge. It's plain Sarah doesn't have a great deal to say, unbidden, and she's hesitant. In the first minute or two she stops several times to ask if she's *'saying it right'*, and he doesn't answer but you can guess from the squall of rustles and clicks that he's gesticulating, probably mouthing at her, Go on, go on.

She goes on inconsequentially for a few seconds before Geoffrey prompts her. *'Tell us about the storm, Sarah, the night of the storm.'*

She seems suddenly to get the hang of it, and she's away, abandoning her tenses in a sometimes wondering account even of her own stake in events, her own feelings.

'All night I hear the pump. I knew the storm is getting stronger and the wind is beating on the roof in the dark. I kept the light on in the passage, even though I worried the baby will wake, but the baby sleeps.'

She dwells at length on the infant, the raging storm. 'Mr Jim' returns at some point, uses the telephone and then is off again. But we know all this. Eventually, much later, her grandfather, Old Peters, comes to the house and tells her what has happened. It's her slim grasp of grammar, I suppose, that denies her account much in the way of emotion. The next day, she takes Willow to Mum.

'And Miss Frances, she said I must never say. He's my boy now. It must be like that. There was nobody else. I knew that. I was happy for him, he have a home. Mr Jim is gone. And that's how I came to live with Mr Geoffrey.'

There's a bloom of rustling.

'Now. I want to ask about the airman.'

'Mr Geoffrey, I saw that man.'

There's another pause. My heart stopped. I was almost afraid to go on. I can sense Geoffrey's anxious silence, too. They'd reached this moment by an accident of curiosity and everything now hung by the slimmest thread of comprehension and memory, grammar, honesty. Geoffrey's silence weighs on us, on Sarah and me; come on, it says, more. Don't stop.

'He was there, with Miss Frances. He sat on the step drinking tea. I was too shy then, a girl. I nodded, and he smiled. That was the first time. I was carrying the blankets and the baby clothes, up to my chin. It's a lot of things. I didn't see him much. Once, he smoke a cigarette down at the water, looking at the river. I saw from the window. He just stand there and smoke. I suppose he is thinking of where he is and when he'll get home. I think maybe it's the day he left. I cannot remember. Or that was the day he held the baby. Wills. He held him. I see Miss Frances is smiling at him. He could be a daddy. I think he wants to. I can see in his eyes he wants to, for Miss Frances. He is very young, maybe too young. But he could be that daddy. I thought so.'

And he was. I don't begrudge Willow. I don't think so. It's not as if it matters to him, it's not as if he can help it. He was just sitting on a stranger's knee. And the truth is, as he was lolling there, I was on my way, I'd begun. He'd left his mark, my father, a part of himself. Although it's hard, it's been hard, not knowing what that part is. All my life I've wanted to know. I have a feeling at least for his solitary observation of the water, which was less calculation than submission, I suspect. There ought to have been more. She must have witnessed his departure, for instance. She must have brimmed with memories, and feelings about her new life. And Geoffrey wanted to know, too. But a moment after her *'I thought so'*, and it's as clear as anything on the tape, the doorbell sounds shrilly in the background, not once, but twice. It's as if they hesitate, the two of them, sitting there across from one another. I willed them to ignore the bell. But it's over, and Geoffrey has the last word; *'Oh dear.'* His regret is obvious, as if he's made a mistake, done something he could have avoided. I let the tape run on to the end but there's nothing more. It was more than an interruption, the doorbell going at that moment.

THREE

WILLOW / 1

I barely recognised the place. I'd been to Laforgue's many times before, but always under very different circumstances. I remember waiting for Jess in the entrance hall, unshaven and willing myself to seem contrite, and needy, which wasn't hard to do. She didn't always come. Sometimes, most times, she'd just leave an envelope and I'd duck out under the two huge portraits at the door, dim and velvetine except for their pink and effeminate faces, those magnates or mayors or whatever they were, gazing out of all that crackly lacquer like a pair of guileless cons.

But I barely recognised the place when I returned. I was hoping to see Jess, establish contact again. I let myself in and crossed from the polished terracotta to the soft tread of a Turkoman. The receptionist, young, quite pretty, had to rise a little to lean across the table and take my hand. Self-consciously, I suppose, I'd gone to the trouble of introducing myself. 'I'm Clio Shramer,' she said. 'How can I help you?' I was relieved. Her predecessor knew me too well.

But Jess wasn't in. As far as I remember she was with that man, Maurice, the one she mentioned in the car or wherever it was, who was ill, or who died, whose son she got a lift with to the funeral.

I'd wanted to meet Jess at work. There'd be less time to talk, and I'd imagined her forming a quick, approving impression. It would be obvious, without there being the scope for too many questions. And the masterstroke, I was certain, would be a casual reference to my buying a car. Well, I didn't have it yet. But I was going to get one. There were a couple of options.

The Shramer woman offered to take a number, but I blithely said Jess knew how to reach me. On reflection, I wasn't sure how true that was. It was true enough in the plain sense. I knew that

Geoffrey had told her where I was living. But in just about every other sense I was as good as a stranger to her. Perhaps it's the closeness that does it. Once, we were close, too close for a brother and sister. Although I'm convinced it's never as uncomplicated as people think, it's never strictly 'normal'. I wouldn't be surprised if Jess still dwells on it, our mistaken encounter, and the rest of it. The truth is, it never plagued me. I worried about it, I did worry about her, but I could place it in the moment, I could see how it happened, and leave it there. That's what it was. If anything, the error, my error, was just going off like that, but it seemed for the best. I don't really know what she expected me to do.

I'll have to tell Clare about Jess at some point, an edited version. I mull over it now and then, mainly because I know I'll have to deal with that wretched letter.

Some time after leaving Laforgue's that day I saw it was just as well I'd missed her because I hadn't given enough thought to what I was going to say. The import was big but the detail was lacking, the vital data, what became of him. I'd have got so far and she'd have said, 'So what happened to him? What happened in the end?' And Geoffrey was ill. What was the point of dragging him into it? She'd have grilled him, I think.

But she didn't get in touch after all. I wasn't altogether surprised, though for the first couple of days, whenever the phone went I felt a prickle of excitement, I'd hear myself breaking the news. It always turned out to be someone else, Geoffrey's nurse on a few occasions, or someone from the Aschenbach.

Eventually, I was relieved not to have heard from her. It was simpler. For a while it was simpler. I needed to find out more. I needed the time.

I had the photograph copied and slightly enlarged. Palmer helped me there. It was a good print, and I put it in a plain black frame I bought at the supermarket and propped it up on my desk. We'd keep an eye on each other, is what I thought, Dad and I. And I still do. Clare knows what I mean.

You wonder what it is that lasts, in the sap, one generation to the next, and I'm thinking less eye colour or weight of bone than tendencies, urges that jig the heart. Or how you fail, as you're bound to from time to time. Whether, or how, you pick yourself up, go on. Something outlasts the flesh.

It was some days before leaving to visit Geoffrey and, while there, see if I could get anywhere with my search for Bosh, that the letter I'd been counting on arrived. The two-page reply to my enquiry of some weeks earlier looked promising. It was encouraging to learn that, regarding my first query, there were *'virtually no limitations of access',* and deployment records were substantial. It went on about how to use the system, the basics of framing a search, what to ask for, where to look. There was *'no reason to anticipate any particular difficulty'*, and I was free to *'call in person'*. And that's what I intended doing. I'd got the hang of this. I was determined to find him. It couldn't be that hard. And I'd look him up. I'd tell him what it was we did back then. Not remind him, tell him, because he didn't know. He didn't really know. He was there, he watched, he saw it all, but he didn't really know a damn thing about it. I kept thinking of that instant when he'd said, 'I'll man the Browning.' He'd have thought all these years that he was excepted, that he'd made the better choice, that he'd stayed out of it. But he hadn't, and once I'd found him and told him, that would be the end of it, quits. It does all seem pathetic now. But at that moment that's what I felt, that was the plan. And I was getting somewhere with it.

But there was more to the letter, and I turned to the second page, the affront, without a clue, without considering for a second what I was in for. This clerk, what could he know? And how could I have foreseen it? The least you expect to find in death is rational clarity, something orderly, redeeming, a state of things that's finite. But *'your second query regarding reference AMOR.iv'* - crafted, I remember, with such believing optimism – yielded a vacuum I was ill-prepared for, the grammar itself seeming so willing to oblige. '*As to your second query regarding reference AMOR.iv, it appears the protocol at the time was much the same as the civilian code for capital crimes, that is, no record was kept.'* I read it with poorly judged urgency, skittering over the next line – *'Military*

suicides were disposed of in unmarked graves.' - as if the line after that had to contain the appeasement. But that was it. A military suicide, an unmarked grave. How else might this clerk have dealt with it? There is no other way. This is how the path narrows. And what else but to sign off cheerily, *'I trust the aforegoing is helpful'.*

It's this starkness that's hard to get around. I remember tensing up in the car when Jess started talking about the photographs she'd found, God knows where, of Mom and the plane. I wasn't ready to be pushed into explaining what I knew. It's almost as if she guessed I had something to tell. She was so cryptic and cautious, she didn't even mention his name. He'd dropped in to visit Mom and couldn't find the landing strip, as I recall. It was on the tip of my tongue to say, well, that was Dad's plane, remember? But I played along.

Having that hitchhiker in the car had the strangest effect on her. She kept bobbing up to pull down the visor and check in that little mirror to see if she was asleep. She was always saying, 'She's asleep, Willow', even when I knew she wasn't.

LUNA / 2

Once I sneaked a look and he, Willow, was staring right at me, in the mirror. I thought, you look like a nice guy, what are you doing with her? And then I remembered, he screwed his sister. How weird is that? All I know is, if I had a brother and he tried anything funny I'd just tell him to bugger off, that's for sure. So it tells you something about her, doesn't it. And the thing is, you wouldn't have said. Sometimes I think if that book hadn't fallen there, her diary, if I hadn't been so curious and I never knew, what would have happened then? It's creepy almost. I'd have been on this car journey without knowing how creepy it was.

Maybe I'd never think about it, even after what happened, if she hadn't written that stuff about me. Because she wrote there that I wasn't worth much, I didn't look as if I was worth much. And what

I wonder is, what makes a person cruel in that way? To watch a stranger and think something like that? I can just imagine what else she's written. She would have, she had a whole diary there.
I never told Dougs. He'd say, so, what's the big deal? Maybe he thinks the same. That's why I never said. I always go with my instinct, I know who to trust. I got it from Ma. She's also that way, she'd say, Luna, listen to your heart. Except sometimes you can't tell, you can't really say for sure. The guy was harder to figure out, Willow, because he didn't seem so bad. That's what I mean. He even offered to get me chips, chocolate, whatever. That's something, when a guy does that. It tells you something. If I didn't read that stuff he'd seem a nice guy.

After Vernon, I remember, Ma had a friend called Tommy. I always wished he'd just call himself Tom, because you only call a child Tommy. But he was like that. He called me Loony. He was a hairdresser, he liked the ladies.

We were in the kitchen one night and he says, 'I've got a joke. You want to hear it?' And Ma says, 'What sort of joke?' Tommy's grinning. He says, 'It's a hair joke.' I could see Ma wasn't sure, with me sitting there.

He said, 'No, it's clean. She'll laugh, it's funny.'

It's this joke about a guy and he's with his girlfriend and they're parked on the side of the road one night, they're on the backseat.

And Tommy says, 'So he kisses her and undoes her jeans and he's just got his hand in her pants when he sees a policeman at the window, and he's oh my god, it's a fuzz ...' And Ma says, 'Tommy! Not in front of her!' But he says, 'Just let me finish the joke, it's funny, you'll see – and so the guy in the car, he says, it's a fuzz, and the girl says, what did you expect, a pony tail?'
I didn't get it, not to start with, and he had to try to explain and it got embarrassing because he kept laughing in between explaining and Ma was saying, 'Tommy, stop it!' and the more it went round and round the more confused I got because I was thinking it was the cop who was in the car, which made sense, I could see the sense of that, because who else could it be but Dad, him being with a woman who wasn't Ma.

My point being, you can't always tell how a story turns out for the person who's listening, because you can't tell what they're hearing, what the story means because of stuff that's happened to them or stuff they know.

And the main point I'm thinking of is, Ma was right, her instinct. Because Tommy tried to fool around with me one afternoon while she was at work. 'So, Loony,' he said, 'you got a pony tail down there?' He was lying on the couch. He said, 'Maybe you want a treatment? A little shampoo?'

He was such a prick. I said, 'I'll tell my dad, Tommy. And he's a cop, so you better stop.' He laughed, but I could see he wasn't sure. So I said, 'And I'll tell Ma.' And I did, and there was no more 'Loony' after that. So Ma was right, there. She knew.

Except the thing about that guy Willow is that I felt he was a nice guy, and how could he be? Or maybe it was his sister, maybe she was just a liar.

JESS / 3

December 12

Maurice signalled to his son to close the gate – a kind of fatherly wave, I remember - and pulled slowly away. Fleetingly, at the bend, I had an impression of Paolo's loose, dark fringe, and beneath it the teenager's gaze fixed on our leaving car. That was the first time we'd met, Paolo and me. I knew it nagged Maurice that he felt he'd never be able to explain us to his son, or that's what I thought then. I thought he was struggling with summoning some kind of courage, and I was thinking, far too generously, what worth would that courage be? He wouldn't be the man I loved if he had it. But I know better now. It was explaining himself that he struggled with. And not just to Paolo.

I didn't know anything that Sunday, I was ignorant of the most important thing to know about Maurice as he drove me home that day.

The route to the city through the low, treeless hills of the coastal watershed drew us away, the long curves of tarmac, the white-fenced bridges where the fields sank to thickly reeded marshes. I reached for his hand in silence. I sensed there was no future in it. I knew he had not realised when he'd asked me to lunch with his family, with Manica and Paolo, that it would ultimately be a demonstration of his fidelity, his love's instincts. I persuaded myself that that was a kind of courage, too.

'Maurice often talks about you,' Manica told me in the kitchen, though when I looked up from the sink, she looked away, saying without meaning to be meaningful: 'He lives for Laforgue's.'
I saw then there was not enough of me for him, beyond the odd afternoon, the bearable lonelinesses of occasional deceit. And it was perfectly right that I was the last to know that he was dying.
I remembered my conversation with Manica when she phoned some weeks after Maurice died to ask if there was anything of his to be collected from Laforgue's.

'He has so much here at home I can't imagine there could be anything more,' she said. 'But I thought I'd check anyway.'

She sounded exhausted, incapable of taking on any more of a burden he might have left for her, especially one she didn't know about. She knew, I sensed, not to turn up unannounced. I made an effort to be consoling. It wasn't easy. I was bursting to betray him.

I'd already searched, in vain, for the registers. I think I'd wanted to count the names, foolishly enough, see how bad it really was, how bad I was. It took a while to realise I should be thankful they were gone, because if I'd found my lists I'd have tormented myself into trying to find out what had happened to those people. I looked for other things, for other letters. And bank statements. It's difficult to believe he'd have accepted payment, but then again, why not? I console myself that at least I didn't, not in cash anyway. Perhaps the difference is negligible. The one thing I regret is not keeping the letter I took to Maurice's deathbed. Not that it was mine to keep, but I could have taken it, I could have made life hell for the man who wrote it. But I didn't, I just left it there on the floor. I

glanced down at it from the doorway as I left him and thought, someone deserves to pay for that – but who?

Manica never came, but I was quite pleased when Paolo did, a few days later, driving his dad's car. I had prepared a box, I had erased all traces.

I took him for a drink afterwards. There was an awful moment back at the office while we chatted about his plans when he'd casually pulled the chair out from the desk and slumped down before realising it had been his father's. I'd wanted to reach out to him then, yet the ache of it was wanting him to reach out to me. It does catch me unawares at times, the feelings that go with the Maurice I didn't know, and loved, rather than the Maurice I found out.

Loss can be a reward in unexpected ways, though. It's the reward, perhaps, of vacancy, of having something to fill at last.

An hour after Warren phoned with the news of Geoffrey's death, I was halfway through booking a flight, the cursor blinking expectantly in the 'Return on' box, when I remembered Paolo's call. He'd phoned out of the blue a few days earlier to ask if I knew of anyone wanting a lift upcountry, to share the driving, or the petrol, or even just the ride.

'My mother says I can't go alone.'

Manica was right, I thought. I said I'd ask around, though who was I to ask? I said it anyway, it was the least I could do. As I dialled his number, I was thinking, of course, of Willow.

WILLOW / 4

As I waited for the keeper to make his way to the gate, head down, swinging his keys, I glanced back along the road I'd come. Part of the fence on the far side was flattened and beyond it, a path ran through the shaggy grass like a furrow. The open ground, gravelly in patches, was squared off

at one end by the freeway. Under its lip a ribbon of shacks clung to the margin between the crash barrier and the level ground below.

A football field away was another fence beyond which stood the hulks of a dozen or more railway carriages abandoned at the edge of the old marshalling yards. Most were streaked with rust, their shutters missing or broken. On the nearest carriage, though, taggers had been busy, the zany menace of graffiti zig-zagging left and right of a supersize Bugs Bunny, goofy and glib as ever. It was a picture of tireless irony.

I pulled forward as the gate squealed open, though the keeper made it obvious entry was not unconditional.

'Can I help you, sir?'

I wanted to say, can I take her away? Can I make arrangements to take Mom away from this place, this neglect?

I was reminded of my last visit to the clinic, though my teenage ardour for her well-being was misconceived. She smiled and mewled all at once. I was too young to understand, too keen to please her. And what an appalling intimacy it was, thrusting it in under her blankets until she felt the cool glass against her side, heard the muffled gulp as the air bobbled along the neck. I'd meant it as a kindness, the risk all mine. I didn't see that bringing her booze was a penalty. There are limited ways in which it's possible to help the truly stricken.

I gave the man my name, and her name. He made a note of my registration number and went back to his hut, returning shortly with the lot number. I could drive in, he said, and park at the end of the avenue; the grave I was looking for was to the right of the crescent.

The shale paths, hemmed by conifers, were deserted. A lawnmower droned unseen in a further quadrant, the freeway traffic a superficial disturbance that barely stirred the memorial air. I found her without difficulty, her name unweathered, the marble seeming somehow too new. I could make out my squatting reflection on the mottled sheen as I got down to keep the sun out of my eyes.

The only sign of age was a slight subsidence, a rightward tilt that set Mom's headstone askance from the row as if it wanted something to lean on. Irresistibly, I put my weight to it, but it was rock solid, cool and immovable against my side. It had settled that way, she was comfortable. I brimmed sadly, feeling oddly rewarded at the leak on my cheeks. I'd never seen her grave before. And part of it, I suppose, was finding there was too little there; *Frances Morell*, and the dates.

That's when I decided to take a photograph. Returning to fetch my camera from the car, I'd just rounded the conifers when I saw him, a scruffy youngster, leaning forward on crutches, facing me with a hint of familiarity that suggested he'd been expecting me, and was waiting as arranged. He was so close to the car, I said the first thing that came into my head.

'What are you doing?'

'I got the stuff. The best.'

'But what are you doing at my car?'

'Nothing, mister. I watch it for you. There's no-good people here.' He swung round, lightly hoisting a crutch to extend his pointing finger in the general direction of the freeway. I remembered the shacks. I felt vaguely uneasy, partly because I knew I was willing to find something likeable in the youngster.

'What's your name?'

'Bugsy,' he said, tugging his baseball cap to the side. Perhaps he sensed the diminutive underrated his truer, less cuddly self. 'I live there in the train, Bugs Bunny Express. Everybody knew me. Bugsy. I got the best stuff, mister.'

'I don't want it,' I said. 'I've come to see my mother.' Which must have sounded ridiculous, though he understood quickly enough, even said he was sorry. He was determined to hang in there.

'I watch your car.'

'I'm sure there's no need.' I looked back to see if I could see the keeper's hut. It was obscured by trees.

'You fine, mister. I can't run.' He rattled his crutches. 'No ways.'

I nodded.

'I won't be long,' I said, and went back down the gritty shale.

Seeing it again through the eyepiece, the mostly blank slab gave me the idea that I've put down in a letter to Jess. It's unfinished, admittedly, the letter. I haven't yet found a way round the starkness. But the idea I had then was so obvious that I couldn't believe it had not occurred to me before. Even if he was not laid to rest here, the least we could do, now that the truth was known, was remember him, and remember them, together. I'd thought to ask the keeper how we might go about it, but I was pressed for time. It couldn't be that difficult. It surely wouldn't take a stone mason long to add a name in matched lettering beneath Mom's - *Alfred Morell*, and his dates. There was more than enough space for the two of them.

I took at least a dozen pictures before I left, of the headstone and the better views, the last a wide shot. I'd warmed to the setting by then.

It was no surprise that Bugsy had gone by the time I returned to the car and I was relieved. It never occurred to me that I might be compelled to think back to my brief encounter with him, but at the time, all I thought was, it's just as well. I had no small change, and I needed to get moving. Geoffrey's funeral was only a few hours away. Weighing the options, I was confident of getting out to the suburbs and making it back to Corinth Road well ahead of meeting Warren at the church as arranged.

With the mapbook open on the passenger seat, I drove out through the gate, returning the keeper's leisurely farewell. See you again, it seemed to say. As I curved back on to the freeway, gaining speed, Bugs Bunny slid away under the crash barrier, flickering with a curious malevolence through the railings.

JESS / 5

December 14

I was the last to arrive and there Willow was, standing in the middle of the lawn smoking a cigarette.

We were late because I'd asked Paolo to take me to Corinth Road first. I said, Paolo, I won't be a sec, and let myself into the garden. He came looking for me eventually.

At every turn, I half expected to bump into Madison, though he must have retired ages ago. He may even have died. I detected another hand in the look of things, the swept look, the shorn hedges. And behind the garage, nothing. Not a trace.

I was quite thrilled, in a way, to find the mulberry tree, tall and tempting as ever, towering over its shade. I stood under it for a while. I had an urge to say something, though what it might have been I couldn't tell you. I might have waited until the words reached my throat, had I the stomach for it.

The front door was locked, and of course it would be. It was odd that I even tried it, twisting the old brass knob as if force would do the trick. Or a familiar touch.

All the windows facing on to the front veranda had their curtains drawn. It made me feel a bit like an intruder. But the exception was the window at the corner, Geoffrey's study, where there was just enough of a gap to see in, where the curtain had lost some of its rings and hung short a little sadly. A bright band of sunlight fell across his cluttered desk. As my eyes grew accustomed to the entombed glow, I could pick out one familiar object after another, a whole intimate museum. The brass figurine, his 'fakir', as he called it, glimmered willingly. There was the Maltese jar bristling with pencils, a few freshly sharpened. Beside it, the old enamelled penknife he once ticked me off for fiddling with when I was too young to manage the sprung blade. And a pipe he hadn't smoked for decades, the walnut greyed. So many things. Papers, boxes. A note of some sort thrust into a commemorative mug, curled like a scroll, brittle-looking. I made out the small black plastic wheel from a model aeroplane of Willow's, unmended over the years, a token of Geoffrey's long and

vaguely entrancing twilight. On the shelves, all the spines of books I'd often promised myself to look at, the gilt titles keen as ever.

I wanted to pull the curtain aside, see more, take it all in. But the window was bolted, it was impossible, it was beyond me. Motes drifted across the beam of light as if it were a sliver of outer space, a remote suspension of distant and forbidden mysteries. I was quite mesmerised.

I tapped on the glass, on my mooning face reflected on it, and was astonished a moment later when the door to Geoffrey's study swung slowly open. A young man appeared, ghostly almost in some or other white robe, some odd get-up, and came over hesitantly.

He battled a bit with the catch, but got it free eventually and lifted the window, the counterweights trundling down in the casement.

'Can I help you?' he asked at last. It had seemed an eternity.

I said, who are you?

'I'm from the caterers,' he said. 'We're doing the wake.'

'Hi,' I said. 'I'm the niece.'

He mumbled some too-formal words of sympathy. 'I heard the tapping,' he explained, straightening his starched apron. 'I wasn't sure …'

That was when Paolo came looking for me. I was about to offer him a tour, show him my universe – not seeing it was his father I was thinking of - when I realised that he was bridling, anxious to get on with his plans, which he'd not shared with me.

'Shall I bring your suitcase?' he suggested. I'd not thought of that. It was a very sensible idea.

As I waited for him in the hallway – it was odd being a guest of the waiter, who'd obliged by unlocking the front door but stood there as if he had to keep an eye on me - I saw that Warren had already made a start on packaging Geoffrey's papers. There were several boxes in the passage, one already taped up. It was exciting knowing it was all coming to me. I've waited long enough, I thought. I could have reached into the nearest box, which was almost filled, and taken anything I'd wanted, but that would have been cheating. I wanted them delivered sealed, complete. I did decide to take

Geoffrey's binoculars, though. I knew they were coming to me, there was no harm in it. He used to fetch the old scuffed case, take them out gingerly and hand them to me; 'Here,' he'd say, 'you'll see better.'

So I left my suitcase in the hallway, the binoculars next to it, and we got back into the car. 'Sorry about the hold-up,' I said to Paolo. We were very late now. 'Go as fast as you like.'

WILLOW / 6

I'd have liked to see him in action, grasping at a giggling boy and swinging him sky high. I was wondering what sort of father he made, what his kids looked like. There was a wife and there were children. And they lived on Tulip Drive. That's about all I knew as I drove out there. On the map, if I remember it right, it's an arc that knits all of Summer Ridge into a vast crescent of suburban streets where smallholdings used to be when I was young. None of it existed then. Once I got on to the freeway it felt as if I was leaving the city altogether, but over every rise the sprawl continued.

Tracking Bosh down, or Martin Schenk rather, turned out to be more difficult than I'd expected. I spent days poring over lists of names - companies, battalions, units, evidence of the bewildering scale of the enterprise - but doggedly. I knew there was no other way, and I also knew that the second I saw it, I'd remember it. And I did. *Schenk, Martin* leapt at me. It was relatively plain sailing after that. His father gave him the nickname, that much I remember. Why, he may not have said. I must have asked, though perhaps not.

There weren't many Schenks in the book, and it's just as well his wasn't the first number I dialled. But the Schenks are kin, it seems. This man put me on to an accounting firm in the city where I got through to a secretary eventually. Bosh was on leave, and she was hestitant to start with but gave me the address once I'd assured her he was an old friend. I made the mistake – not that it really mattered - of saying that I knew his nickname was Bosh. It didn't help me much. She'd never

heard of it. She repeated it a few times, trying it out, trying to match it with the man she knew, though I could tell it didn't work for her. Perhaps that was the origin of my misgiving.

Few of the houses on Tulip Drive had front walls; neat gardens with bricked or paved driveways lay open to the street and whitewashed stones marked off the edge where the lawns sloped to the tarmac. Young trees, still with their sapling scaffolding and ties that held them at the neck, lined the road on each side. In another twenty years, I thought, it would be shady, the houses a little obscured, the kids grown up.

I stopped two houses short of number 176, opened a new packet of cigarettes and lit one. I wasn't unreservedly willing to just get out of the car and ring the buzzer I could make out clearly to the left of the Schenks' front door.

I sat there thinking how we had not parted all those years ago, Bosh and I, in what you'd call the usual way, the way you'd expect after all that had happened. We'd found ourselves back at the transit camp with thousands of others milling around waiting for postings or flights, or trying to wangle jobs at the base. A day or two later, he came into the tent to say he was going up to the parade ground to watch a football game. I could hear its ragged progress as I lay there reading, but I dropped off, drained by the heat and boredom. Much later I was woken by a clamour of metal, forks and mess plates, and the evening banter as the queues formed between the canteen tents, and knew that Bosh had gone. He'd have woken me otherwise. He always did, well before the queues formed, berating me for being too slack for my own good. Something had come up and he'd gone.

It was only much later that I realised, could actually think through, what he'd left me with, but as I sat up blearily, saw his kit gone, just a sweet wrapper on the floor there and nothing else, I felt it, the extra weight. I'm hesitant to think of it as a selfless instinct, my thinking in those anxious weeks, Bosh is battling here, let's not talk about it, we'll talk about it when the time's right, I'll convince him there was nothing we could do, that whatever happened there, he wasn't to blame for anything. Maybe it wasn't selfless. But what did he think? Did he think I was okay, that I'd just get over it? Maybe he was right – he manned the Browning and I lost my fucking head and went out there and

fetched that ghost out of the sun. But whether he was right or not, it was just the two of us now, me and the stranger. Bosh got the fuck out.

As I sat there in the car – and it was a moment of truth, in a way, or I'd meant it to be – I found myself trying to find a generous register, a way to reach him, my old buddy, before getting to the hard stuff. And I was thinking, well, whatever happened back then, and we didn't talk about it, we didn't even say goodbye or whatever, the point is, it's all worked out, it's good to see you're okay, and I'm okay, I'm pretty okay. Hey Bosh? Does anyone call you Bosh …?

But could I find the voice, the register he would place, with none of the alarm of the worst moments or the intentness of all that whispering? Was he still a swearer of note? Morell, you cunt. Stuff like that. Hey, Morell! Jesus, man, what the fuck … come and have a beer, come meet the family.

What would I say, what would I really say?

In the mirror I spotted a uniformed security guard weaving along on a bicycle. He was a long way off still, and I was halfway through my second cigarette. When he reaches me, I thought, or when I finish my smoke, whichever comes first, I'll get out of the car and I'll go and ring that buzzer.

There was never a question about leaving that man out there in the clearing. Not for me. Whatever the consequences. To keep the stump up, keep it off the ground, that was my sole obsession. It was not easy, he was a big man. And he couldn't see, he couldn't see where we were headed. I felt his uncertainty, a willing enough grip, but not a sure grasp. There was too much to hope for and not enough to believe in. It was as if he was constantly on the brink of letting go. He wanted too much, too soon.

It took me a long time to place the sound exactly, the sound of that toiling maleness that leaned on me as we struggled to the uncertain refuge of the bunker, the sound inside the hood, not just of a man who was still alive, but a man who wanted to live. It was the sound of a beachball being inflated. He could not have had more than a few thousand breaths left in him.

The guard sailed by. He glanced at me briefly. Perhaps he made a mental note: man in car on Tulip Drive. My smoke was done, too, but I didn't move. I wasn't sure anymore what business I had there, but there was something to be done, the street, the house, the neat driveway anticipating a decision.

I had just wound up the window, I was about to get out of the car, when the garage door swung up. A moment later a young woman in jeans and white blouse bobbed into the light at the front door ahead of two children. There was a sway of blonde hair as she chivvied the younger one with a playful whack on his backside, and pulled the door closed. They laughed as they made for the backed-out car, the second child tugging on his mom's willing arm and squealing 'Swing me! Swing me!', and each of them had a turn, swooping low over the lawn.

It would have been terribly mistaken. I knew it at that moment. I had no business at this poignantly vulnerable address.

As the station wagon cruised towards me, Bosh turned a smiley face first at his pretty wife, then right round into the back of the car, to the children. I looked in as they came by, I saw their little strapped-in bodies craning forward with a kind of glee.

There's nothing but harm in thinking there's any virtue in exploding the illusions of others. Who was I to say he'd got clear of it all? He looked unburdened enough, but you never can tell.

They got to the stop street, the indicator blinked cheerfully, and they were gone. I was glad it was over, really.

I could not have left him out there in the sun. That's all I needed to know.

I started the car, figured out an exit from the maze of drives and dog-leg avenues and made for the freeway. It felt a bit like an escape, as if I'd hovered too long where I was forbidden to go, and got away without being found out.

Turning eventually into Corinth Road, I felt comforted by the familiarity of the older houses and ageing trees, the hint of tolerable decline. I breathed easier, I could be myself.

The carer was still there, Gillian her name was, gathering up the last of her things, and the off-putting apparatus. She was casually looping the black rubber tube around the oxygen canister, the hard plastic mouthpiece setting off a tinny chime each time it knocked the peeling cylinder. She seemed apologetic when she saw I was watching. 'He was a dear man,' she said with genuine feeling, I thought, for him, though it was obvious the remark was for me.

I felt myself perform a don't-mind-me thing, a sort of half hands-up, as if I'd intruded. It was as if he was still there, with her.

'I've just come to pick up something.'

She straightened at last.

'You know your way around.' She smiled. You don't need my permission, she implied.

The passage floor outside my old room still creaked as it always had. I knew it would, as I approached, heading for my room, first port of call, out of habit. I was fairly sure there was nothing left to retrieve and, anyway, I knew it had been Gillian's for months, and her predecessors in the past few years had slept there. I couldn't claim it as mine in quite the same way. I took a quick look nevertheless, surprising myself with a reflexive upward glance the moment I opened the door. The planes were long gone, of course, though the crooks of three eyes still beckoned serviceably from the ceiling. I wondered fleetingly what it would be like just to plop down on the bed, but its faintly sunken look put me off. It had had enough to bear. I remember thinking of Mom's gravestone. I gave her old room a miss. It had become Sarah's eventually. It was easier for Geoffrey. But even that was ages ago, a whole lifetime just about.

Between my room and Geoffrey's study was the lilac door to Jess's old room. Still lilac. Jess. I wondered how she'd aged, and what she'd remember, in what spirit. I hovered at her door, felt the bevel of the panelling, the cool, still surface. There's always an impulse to knock on a closed door even when you know there's no one there. I couldn't remember what had become of her room, and I was tempted, but I stopped myself. If I'd gone in, I'd have wanted to stay a while, I think. I did like her room.

I couldn't linger though. The whole day came down to timing. I'd gone to the trouble of dressing for the funeral first thing so that I wouldn't have to worry about it later on. Part of it, I remember now, was thinking I'd make a good impression with Bosh, I'd look like a fixed-up guy, not that he'd have known any different. That security guard, come to think of it, would have registered the oddity, unconsciously perhaps; man in black suit in car on Tulip Drive. It had a meaning. He'd have mistaken it.

But time was running out. Warren had prepared two boxes, taped and labelled, as we'd arranged. I'd said I'd take the books Geoffrey had singled out for me in his will. The rest I'd worry about later. But it wasn't only the boxes I was after. From what Warren told me, I gathered Jess would go straight to the funeral, so there was no risk of her finding anything just yet. She wouldn't have time. Still, I didn't want to take any chances.

I'd never foreseen having to navigate Geoffrey's disarray in this urgent fashion, knowing he'd have kept such a vivid truth too faithfully concealed in his accumulated obscurities. But I had to assume it was there, and I had to find it. There were signs of excavation – it's the best word for it. Warren, I suppose, had made a start and with the strata disturbed I was astonished how soon it came to light. The file was marked simply enough with a telltale 'A'. It even contained a copy of the photograph. I felt that jolt of discovery again, as if I was finding it for the first time. I couldn't help wondering if Geoffrey had ever succumbed, in the dead of night, while we all slept, and opened the file under his desk lamp to take stock of his forbidden knowledge. I did feel for him, Geoffrey, the surviving brother whose advice was, perhaps, overlooked, whose stamina as a faultless deceiver went unacknowledged in the end.

JESS / 7

December 15

It crossed my mind that he was avoiding me until I realised that, of course, he'd be a pallbearer. When the reedy introit began I turned to see them enter. I thought Willow was dashing, solemn but

dashing. You feel a little guilty thinking things like, under those circumstances. Although I think Geoffrey would have approved. He hated put-on formality, even though he was pretty good at it himself.

My mind was in a whirl. I barely remember a thing from the service, and about the only part of Warren's rather formal tribute I paid any attention to was the mistake he almost made when he looked up from his notes to say 'our hearts go out to his only surviving family, his niece', the falling inflection indicating what his panicked mind lurched to correct, because he had to add with too-hasty conviction, 'and his nephew'. I have a recollection of Willow turning to look back at that moment, but I didn't dare meet his eye.

I lingered nervously at the west door after everyone had shuffled out. I'd just stepped into the sun to try to make him out when he bounded up the steps towards me, grinning, looking almost too cheerful.

'You're looking well, Willow,' I said. He smiled his old smile, though with creases that were new to me.

'It was the dark glasses, I think, when you came across the lawn … I didn't realise, or not immediately. And then I dashed after you, but you'd already gone in by the time I got to the steps.'
I must have looked puzzled.

'Well, I was smoking. I'd have ditched it, but,' he jerked his head at a man to our left, 'he had his beady eye on me. The verger.' He grinned. 'I was tempted to flick it, I must admit.'
I liked this Willow, coolly decorous, though with a streak of mischief. I saw now how disappointed he must have been that I'd not got in touch when he called at Laforgue's.

'Willow, I'm sorry I didn't get back to you. It was a bad time.'

'It's fine. Really.'

A colleague of mine was very ill, I explained. I must have said more about Maurice, I don't remember now. What I do remember is that I was trying to take stock of him as we chatted there without it being too obvious. I noticed that even his shoes were polished. He'd had a touch of sun,

too. He looked really well, slim still, and he had an assurance about him that was attractive, that made me want to find out what he'd done with himself, how he'd pulled through. There was something about him that I didn't recognise at all, that was excitingly strange. He was already a different Willow, not the brother I'd known for years, not a brother at all, but a different man. It was foolish caution that made me put off telling him. I could just have sat him down and spelled it out. All the shame and anger, the regret, it would all just have gone. We'd have come through together. How hard could that have been? Not anywhere near as hard as what we've got to deal with now.

Willow said, 'How are you getting back?'

I wasn't sure. I'd probably fly, I said. And I was about to ask what his plans were when he said:

'You can come back with me if you like. I've got a car here.'

'You've got a car?' It would never have crossed my mind.

'It's nothing fancy, but it works.'

'And you've got space?'

'Do you have a family I don't know about?'

I laughed. He did too. It was just lovely.

We left the church together in Willow's car. I noticed everything in our old familiar streets. We pointed things out to each other, like tourists. I was happier than I'd been for a long time. It was such a relief after all those years.

Not even the prospect of having to spend the next few hours hanging around at Corinth Road dampened my spirits. There was quite a crowd, in the garden mostly, and not many people we knew well. But we mingled. I kept looking out for Willow. He seemed so at home, coming and going, chatting, fixing drinks. I liked to watch him, the man who was once a boy I knew. What was really nice was knowing that the resurgent something -- not a stirring, really, but a feeling nevertheless - was permissible after all. It wasn't strong or anything, but it was there.

Much sooner than I expected, he came to look for me.

'Shall we go?'

'Right now?'

He looked away. People stood about on the lawn, deep in conversation, drinks in hand. The young man in his long white apron meandered among them with one tray after another of cocktail eats, Warren managing it all with quiet efficiency.

'Yes. I think so. Right now.'

That was the loveliest moment. I had the highest hopes just then. I can't describe how glad I felt, free, girlish almost. He laughed, too. It was so delightful, cheeky. I got my suitcase from the hall, and the binocs, and we slipped out.

From the pavement, you could hear the gathering behind the hedge, murmured conversations, glasses clinking. It sounded quite pleasant. I said, 'I feel a bit bad, Willow, just going off like this. Without saying goodbye to Warren.'

And he surprised me. 'No, it's fine,' he said. 'I told him you were feeling poorly.' He grinned. 'I know I shouldn't have, but it was kinder than being honest.' Warren was none the wiser. 'I said we'd be in touch. He seemed quite happy to me.'

And that was that. The journey began right there.

Twenty-four hours later we were a world away. My only relief was that Luna slept, or pretended to. I felt the heat and the thrumming engine numb me, I tried to imagine we were alone. Idly, I began to unclothe Willow, starting with his sleeve, rucked just below his elbow. Mentally, I peeled it away from his forearm. I toyed with the rest, though I didn't get very far. It was too soon even for the slightest intimacies. There's more to hesitation than decency. I read that somewhere. I think it's true.

From the plain, the mountains seemed not nearer but further off. I'd wanted a better sense of the geography, I was hankering for a measure of time left to travel.

I stole another glance at Willow. I saw then how much older we were. I could learn to like him this way, I thought, though I also knew that I had forgotten who he was. No, not that. He had become someone I didn't know. I remember who he was, who he used to be.

I could have kicked myself for allowing Luna to come anywhere near us. It's ridiculous, when I think of it, having that complete stranger an arm's length away. But I'd been thinking hard, sitting there in the car, and I really believed I could find a way, that we'd get over it.

'Do you think we'll reach the pass before dark?' I asked.

'We should do.'

He took it as an idle question. I would have, too. And that was when I saw the second dust devil.

WILLOW / 8

I called to Gillian that I was on my way.

'Okay then,' she called back. It's a good term, 'carer'. Clare reminds me of her. She was still in his bedroom as I lugged the second box through the kitchen and out into the garden. I'd parked beside the garage, in the shade.

It was only when I got round to the back of the car that I realised the lock had been forced. The mechanism still worked after a fashion and with a bit of extra pressure the boot popped up. My case, of course, was gone. It was annoying, but no great loss. I was actually thinking it was just as well since the boxes were obviously going to take up more space than I'd bargained for when I saw the dope, the small plastic bank bag, like a stuffed miniature pillow of dried mint or tea.

I panicked, out of habit, shot a look at the house, the quiet windows, the garden shimmering in the glass, almost as if I was seriously toying with doing something I could get away with, even as I knew I couldn't. A part of me wanted to rush back inside, call Gillian, implore her to warn me, but it wasn't a second or two and I knew I was over it, it was obsolete alarm. I just picked it up, felt the crunch of it. It could have been oreganum for all I cared. And then I remembered Bugsy, that shifty

kid. What a strange thing for him to have done. And he'd never have dreamed how much more of a reward he'd given me.

What intrigued me, I remember, in my state of calm indifference was the wording printed on that plastic bag, the details of some or other safe custody service. I can't recall it exactly, but the gist of it was 'Keep your valuables away from the home or office'. The meaning's plain enough, but I was struck by the hint of something else entirely, some secure dimension that exists beyond the day-to-day, impervious to the choices, even the requirements, of living a life.

There's something appealing about it, but it's at odds with what I know to be true, that everything is inescapably indivisible, that in complex ways beyond seeing everything is looped back, knotted into the whole. How could it be otherwise?

When I began my letter to Jess after my discovery at the Archives, or began thinking about it, I had a vivid recollection of the morning I left her all those years ago, of wandering down to the river, thinking I'd find her there, and taking a swim before circling round to the beach.

Hard against the north bank you could make out the slim, flurrying pipette where the out-going tide ruffled the surface. Where I went in, though, it was still, chilled and dark as molasses. Only when I was up to my waist did I lean forward and sink in. The water was so calm the reflection of the low hill opposite and the few houses on it lurched ahead of me on the unsteadied sheen. I might have continued, but at the back of my mind I kept thinking of the drag of the tide in the deeper channel further over. I knew it was further over, but I eased up anyway, rolling and coming up to face the wide sky. As my legs sank, I felt for the bottom and came to rest, the water at my neck. I looked back to see how far I'd come, and saw a mother and her two children drop their towels and approach the water, mom cajoling the toddler into the shallows. The second child, a little girl, frowned at the water, belly out. She was clutching a yellow plastic boat and seemed sceptical about committing it to its voyage. I couldn't help thinking, you're right, little girl, the tide's going out, if you put your boat in the water, the tide will take it, it will be swept away, everything will change.

Yet the tide comes back, the irresistible cycle starts again – and wouldn't that be consoling to Jess, if I crafted it right, the metaphor, wouldn't she have some sense that for all our ignorance of our missing Dad, the crucial facts I'd found would be a new beginning? That's what I was thinking when I started on her letter.

But, of course, I was floundering, and perhaps because I was still trying to justify why I'd abandoned the hooded man, succumbed to the impact of the bigger picture, as if it really was worth more. What I wrote in the end, though, wasn't at all what I'd set out to get down. I pared the text down to a single page, and what I remember of it is its spirit of submission. Maybe there's virtue in that, but it created its own alarming dynamic, rather like one of those upward-tumbling Escher prints that maddens the eye with a restless search for some assurance of logic. It came down to a man – I called him Manning, I borrowed that from Marvel's story - on a bridge pitching his life's work page by page into an outflowing river, the last page being an account of his standing on a bridge pitching his life's work into the water below. I've got to admit it's hard to see it being of much use. I can't say it would mean anything to Jess - if I found it again, because I think I may have mislaid it somewhere along the line. I don't recall seeing it after getting back from the funeral, and I'm sure I'd had it with me. If it's gone, well, that's that. But even if I found it again I might not give it to her after all.

The point is, what I felt – part of what I felt - standing there at the car, taking my leave of Corinth Road, was that I'd know to pause at that bridge if ever I reached it, I'd know the tide for what it was. It never comes back the same.

Gillian came out. She was on her way, too, a little sadly I thought. We shook hands. 'I've been meaning to ask, how's your research getting on?' she asked. I'd forgotten I'd mentioned it. We'd chatted about other things on the few occasions I'd called in the fortnight I spent in the city. 'Quite well,' I said. 'I'm just about done, I think.' It was dissembling, I know, but I didn't want her to ask what I'd found partly because I wasn't a hundred percent certain myself.

'Good for you,' she said. I nodded.

'Well, I need to get moving. Look after yourself.'

She smiled bravely, glancing back at the house.

'You too,' I said.

I'd just taken a last walk round the garden – I wasn't surprised to see the shed was gone – when a man in a white apron appeared. In that instant, it made absurd sense; I thought 'undertaker'. He sort of looked the part. I was about to say, 'I'm afraid the body's gone …' – it's just as well I didn't - when he asked chattily: 'Where should we put the platters?'

Geoffrey would have liked that. Although he'd probably have blurted out, 'Ah, the man from the undertaker's …'

FOUR

JESS / 1

December 16

It was foolish. When I thought about it afterwards, it seemed extraordinary that it was just two words. But it became something else entirely. For several seconds I wasn't sure what had happened. I was clutching on to him, I think, as if I was about to fall off an edge, as if, had I let go, it would have been the end. Then, out of the corner of my eye, Luna's slack forearm, the pale, smooth, unsunned side, so still it could not have had any other meaning.

Only then did I remember the skid and what seemed like some sort of impact, a jolt, followed by a woozy return to the meridian, as if the car had tripped and taken a second to regain its footing. Had we rolled? Had we hit something?

'Jesus, Jess!'

Willow was pale. There was a fury of shock in the car as it slithered to a stop on the gravel shoulder.

'Christ,' he said, 'you could have killed us.'

I meant to speak, but my throat had dried, it was stiff, barren. I was looking into the back. I remembered, then, grasping his arm as I'd blurted the words, and with a tone he'd have mistaken. He thought it was a, I don't know, something to swerve from. But it was just, 'Look, Willow!' And I'd have pointed. After the first one, seeing the first one and not mentioning it, and wanting so badly for him to have seen it, my eye and mind were attuned to an urgency: the instant I spotted the second dust devil it just burst out of me.

We'd stopped, but the engine was still running, panting breathlessly.

'I think she's dead.'

Willow froze. For a second or two we sat rigid, staring blankly ahead. If I think about it now, it wasn't an answer we wanted, but a question. It was as if he couldn't bring himself to look. And without looking, he opened his door and got out of the car.

It is true; the anxiety vanished. I did think it; she won't talk, she won't tell. Unformed thoughts like a class of little children jabbing their hands in the air and saying 'Miss! Miss! Miss! agitated me as I got out, too. I was shivering. The metal was rasped clean in places along the glancing smudge. Back along the road I saw now the concrete cowling of a small bridge, low and unnoteworthy, that had bumped us back on to the tar.

'She's on the run.'

'What's that?'

My mind flew back and forth. I could hear Willow's breathing. He sounded short of air.

'The police are after her.'

'Jess, what the hell are you talking about?'

'She stole money. She told me at the garage, just as we were ...'

Willow turned to the hills as if there was something to find there, then to the road, a slim taper receding to nothingness. Just as I spotted the tiny glint, Willow said: 'We'll have to wait for it to pass.' I thought, yes, we will. We were complicit at that moment, so intimate in the logic of our deception, the panic of guilt.

We waited for the other car. At times I thought it had stopped, so slow was its approach. But the sound reached us soon enough, the comforting unconcern of its steady drone, the emerging form, a family car, the dark nubs of heads visible through the windscreen. Then the falling whine as it sped on. I turned away as it passed. I'd wanted to wave, I really did. I pictured the cheery faces. We seemed, I knew, like two people stopped at the side of the road for some ordinary reason, an unremarkable couple, stretching their legs, soon to get on with their journey.

Luna was heavy, heavier than you'd have thought, awkward to handle, slumped, unwilling as an old mattress. As Willow tugged at her armpits, backing out, her head fell back against his crotch and I saw the pink palate of her gaping mouth, the wet and veined interior of her soundless throat. I imagined the snapped neck. Then her back drooped and there was space enough for me to squeeze in and help.

We did it all wordlessly. I have wondered if that is intuition. I didn't look at her face again, but swaddled her knees in my arms to take her weight. I was on the verge of saying, 'I can't go any further, it's too heavy', when Willow lowered her shoulders.

'Get her bag.'

As I turned back to the car, I saw he was taking in the evidence on the bodywork.

In the moment, I wasn't sure what I made of his gestures, whether it was a kind of love or lovelessness, whether it was regard or a practised act of abandon. But it was so particular, it was a particular something, the way he arranged her shoulders and legs, slightly crooked, and worked her bag under her cheek, so that she lay on her side as if she were having a nap.

And then the hesitation. Let's go, let's go, I was thinking, and he sighed, hand on the ignition. I felt I dared not say a thing, that if I did, he might have second thoughts. It was so quiet we could hear the wind. And it was cold. I hadn't realised until then that the air had cooled. Then he started the engine and the car eased forward on the gravel. Just as he raised his head to look in the rearview mirror, just as I anticipated the acceleration, he braked sharply.

'Jesus!' he said, snapping his head back.

I swung in my seat. I thought, what is it?

It's quite funny when I think back to it, that particular part. And also quite a relief, really. I never wished her ill, not that much. And how comical that we'd thought the worst without even the most elementary check.

She staggered up to the car, limping, on Willow's side. I think he wound down the window, though he was cowering in a way.

'What the fuck? You just leaving me?'

For a second, I thought it would be okay, salvageable, but it turned bad. In the wind, Luna's hair was all over her face. I think her mouth dribbled, like a sleeper's mouth. She was already hoarse with rage.

'You nearly kill me and then you dump me and drive off? What the fuck kind of man are you?'

He started to say something. There might even have been the beginnings of a shy grin, a boyish apology, a complicated excuse. But she wasn't done.

'What the fuck! You fucking pervert.'

And then she said it.

'Sister fucker.' Like a depth charge, it took a moment to detonate, deep down.

'You fucking pervert sister fucker!'

I felt brutal just then. And brutalised, bitter. Whatever sympathy I was beginning to feel just flew out the window.

'Drive, Willow. Drive!'

'What is she saying!

'Drive the damn car!'

'I want to …'

'Go! Just go!'

If Willow's car had had a side mirror, I'd have monitored our progress, the exponential oblivion of Luna Fortune. The smaller I imagined her getting, the less I cared, or tried to. But she was still with us, sister fucker, sister fucker.

How many hours was it? I can't remember. At times the car seemed lighter, unencumbered. But I could hardly bare it, I could hardly bare sitting there. There was nothing I could say that he'd listen to. I screamed, 'Stop the car!', but he kept on, he wouldn't. He was fixed. We sped on, his words burning into me, 'Damn you!' he kept saying. 'A diary? A fucking diary?'

I said, 'Slow down, Willow, for God's sake.'

'I'll go as fast as I damn well like.'

He threw everything at me: that was another life, can't you move on? What's wrong with you? You're sick, it's pathetic. Grow up. Everything revolves around you. Always has. Me, me, me. I'm sick of it.

And so am I, I thought. So am I.

We hurtled on, the sun sank. I doubted, then, that I'd ever tell him, that he'd ever know the journey I'd made, that for a while at least I'd carried our child. And carried the shame, the mistaken, costly shame, for years.

I'd hardly been aware of the casually snaking ascent, but I came to my senses as the engine slowed.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm stopping.'

Our voices were crisp and fragile after the miles of silence.

'Right here?'

'Does it matter where?'

'I don't want to stop. Not here. Not on the pass.'

'Christ, Jess, there was no fucking crime. Get a grip, for God's sake.'

He switched off the headlights and got out, slamming the car door. I heard the trickle, splashy, because of the wind, but I couldn't make him out until he tried to light a cigarette, the lighter sparking twice before it flickered long enough. For a second the glow brightened his face. He smoked three cigarettes in all, one almost immediately after the other.

The longer he stayed out there, the better I felt. After a while, I began to take stock. It might have been worse, I realised. It was bad enough, but it would have been much worse.

For a while I thought I'd lost my notebook, but it was there, at my feet. There was a lot of stuff on the floor at my feet. I couldn't figure out where it had all come from, but it was the jolt, I suppose. Then I turned to look into the back. It was a mess, too, Willow's things, and chips that had spilled

from a half-eaten packet. How strange that not many hours earlier I'd watched Luna as she'd emerged from the shop, a total stranger. I wondered if she'd got a lift by now, whether she was catching up. I almost called to Willow to hurry up, but we'd travelled a good while, and at speed. I left it.

Half a dozen pages had slithered out of one of the folders Willow had shoved on the ledge behind the back seat to make space for Luna, and I reached back impulsively for the nearest one. As I switched on the cabin light I thought that if Willow objected I'd know soon enough, but he didn't budge. He smoked on.

It was absorbing, this page of text, mysterious almost, a passage of self-erasure that was fatuous and elegant all at once. That's not how I thought of it at the time, or I didn't think beyond just being drawn into something else, drawn away. I was still jittery and cold, I could feel the car rocking now and then in the wind. We hadn't seen another vehicle for ages, and I didn't feel safe sitting there at the roadside. The sky and the mountains merged into a single blackness. I could barely read in the dim light, but I was absorbed. I looked to see if I could find another part of it, another page, but the rest was just forms and jotted notes I couldn't make out.

As I twisted round to reach behind the seat in case there was something more on the floor, I came up with Luna's shoe. It would have been a different shoe if she had actually died, but it was still forlorn, as an empty shoe always is, estranged, but this one more so, the stripper's shoe, doubly abandoned, without its mate, without its foot. And the heel peeling away. It didn't feel good holding it. I was about to wind down the window and throw it out when I decided to tuck it back under Willow's seat again. Let him find it, I thought. He can do some remembering for a change.

I had just read the page through for a second time and folded it into my notebook when Willow got back into the car. He didn't say a word, he didn't even look at me. He started the engine and we pulled back onto the road.

I lost all sense of direction to the bends of the pass, the way ahead fleetingly lit by our roving lights, beside us the grey flurry of shrubs and stone, the white dashes of the road pulsing under the car.

I remember thinking, Luna has given up looking for her shoe.

LUNA / 2

Levitt told me.

'Levitt told me, Dougs.'

'So you and Levitt've got a thing now or what?'

'Dougs.'

'So what's he say?'

'He said you went after that guy.'

'So?'

'You said you were done with that. You promised.'

'He's a little runt, Luna. He's a little fuck. What you worried about? I gave him a wake-up that's all. People like that, Luna, they need a wake-up. They don't give a shit about anyone. They live the good life and fuck everyone else. Little runts like that.'

'Is it?'

'Shit, Luna. The little fuck dumps you and you let him walk over you?'

'Why did you do it, Dougs?'

'There wasn't a lot of options, Luna. Believe me.'

I should've known. Dougs couldn't help himself. Levitt said they forced the boot and Dougs is bent over there when this guy comes out the flats. It's that guy Willow. He shouts at them, like 'What you doing!' And Levitt says Dougs straightens up, but he doesn't say anything. For a

moment he just stands there. But he's got his truncheon with him, he took it with him, it's lying there in the boot, and as Willow comes closer, he grabs it and goes for the guy, swings at him. He didn't have a chance. He's out like a light, Levitt says. And I'm thinking, can I trust Levitt? Dougs or Levitt for that matter. He swung at him just once? Well, Levitt says that's the story, and they put the guy in the car, but they got to push the seat back to get him in because he's passed out. He's slumped at the wheel, like in a movie or something. And Dougs puts some coke there, a couple of packets, to make it look like it's a deal that went wrong. It's like a set up. I thought, okay, I'll wait for Dougs to tell me, because now I'm in it too. But he doesn't. He doesn't say a damn word.

'Jesus Dougs, they know me. You don't think about that, you just walk right in there. You going to get me in trouble and you don't think about that, you don't think about me. What kind of guy does a thing like that? Hey?'

'Don't make out you innocent, Luna.'

'What's it got to do with me?'

'How d'you think we traced the car? I had a dream or what?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You gave me the goddamn registration, for Christ sake.'

'That's crap, Dougs.'

'Crap? Jesus, it was a whole fucking amusing story, Luna. You forget or what? Before-u-go? Oh, but hang on. I was pissed. Yes, I remember now. You crapped me out for not listening. That ring a bell? You think I'm dumb, Luna, but I never miss a trick.'

'It's not a trick, Dougs. I was telling you stuff. It's just something I noticed. You didn't have to drag me into it. You didn't have to store it away in your sick effing mind so you could go beat up the guy.'

He still thinks he's got buddies in the Bureau, who'll fix stuff, pull strings, make the crap go away.

'Your buddies, Dougs, are just a load of boozers, they burned their bridges. And another thing, you can stop looking in my cupboards, because there's no booze here. You want to drink, you go. You cleaned me out already. You cleaned me out, Dougs.'

'Okay, okay. I've heard enough now. And so have the neighbours, for Christ sake. Jesus you've got a voice on you, Luna.'

'I won't shut up, okay.'

'Go ahead, then. Shout your head off. But you know what your trouble is, Luna? You don't stop to think. That's your trouble. You stumble into shit and you don't even know it. You and Levitt. Fucking hell, Luna. What do you take me for. You want to fuck him, fuck him. See if I care. But just remember what's what. Your trouble is you don't fucking think.'

'Me? You accusing me? Jeez, Dougs, who's talking?'

'Yes, you. Because you forgot something.'

'What's left once *you* done with it?'

'I went to get the shoe, Luna. You're forgetting that.'

I should've known. It was eating him up. He sighs, like he's exhausted.

'This guy, what did you call him? Weed?

'Willow, Dougs.'

'Well he was a weed. And you figured he was a dopehead? No, I guess not. Nice little stash right there in the car. You miss stuff, Luna. Detail.'

'So what about the shoe?'

'I'm getting to that, Luna. I'm wondering, what's the deal here? We talking magic or what? Hey?'

'What you talking about?'

'What's the data here? I find all kinds of shit. I find all these documents, military stuff. I find dope. And I find a shoe, just like you said.'

'So?'

'There's something about this shoe, Luna.'

'What?'

'You heard of tampering?'

I don't know why, I really don't know why, but right then I thought of Dad's cap in the back of the cupboard there, all those years ago, and the games I played, the dust on it and the skew peak. And how Ollie made me stop. It made him feel bad, that cap, me wearing it.

'So what you accusing me of? Fuck you, Dougs. You could've told me. All you said was, "you just showing your face". Hey? That's what you said. Jeez, you push me out there to do the dirty work. Like I'm the carrier or whatever. And now you accuse me?'

'I'm not accusing you, I'm asking. I'm just asking.'

'So you asked Levitt? You asked Bender? Maybe Bender screwed you, Dougs. Why shouldn't he? You going to run to the cops or what?'

I'm thinking, Luna, you've come this far, stick with it girl.

I remember they were arguing in the car, some crap about photographs maybe. She kept saying 'She's asleep, Willow.' That woman, she got everything wrong. I turned my back to them, so I could work at the heel. I saw it was loose, like the glue wasn't sticking so well. I'd figured it out by then. When I went to the toilet at the garage, I thought, what the hell, I'm going to wear these shoes. They had a buckle, I like the buckle. But I'm looking at them there sitting in the cubicle and I hear this rattle, I think, hang on, what's this?

'Well somebody has, Luna. Somebody's screwed me, because the heel's off and there's fuck all there. It's just pretty damn strange the shoe's still lying in the car.'

'So I'm dumped and you blaming me?'

The thing about Dougs, I can tell when's run out of steam, he's run out of stuff to think of. It's like he reaches a gate and he can't get through, he can't even see through. That's when he drinks. I went to fetch a glass. I know he wants to forget it all, he wants to just drop it, he maybe wants to say sorry and he can't.

'I haven't got ice.'

'Doesn't matter.'

Through the door I can see my tooth fairy box on my dressing table. There's a little dancer on top. She's got fairy wings, and golden hair that curls round her neck. If she could talk she'd tell me stuff I've forgotten. I put them in there, the other twelve. They don't sparkle. It's not like you think. They're just like a few little river stones there. The thing is, maybe I had a hunch. About a lot of stuff, Dougs even. I thought of Ma, her question. I wanted to say, what do you know about love, Ma? What's love got to do with it? I used to think Dougs and me, we'd be okay. But I'm not so sure anymore, after what he did. And maybe they looking for him. Maybe they looking for me, too. They looking for a stripper. But I never danced. That girl, she'll write stuff, she'll fill her smutty diary with me. But none of it's true. If I ever saw her, I'd say, you know what? You got it all wrong. Whatever you wrote there? None of it's true. I never danced, sweetie. I never danced for a second.

JESS / 3

December 17

I'm staying in again today in case Willow calls. There's a good chance he will because he'll have got it by now, and he'll want to know more. He'll probably have been puzzled to begin with, but I thought sending him *Storm* was a good start. I mustered the courage, finally. And there's enough to mull over in it. It's not as cryptic as it may seem. I did think it would be unfair to keep the truth all to myself because Willow deserves to know, and I suspect it will be liberating in ways he'd never have imagined.

I'm half hoping I'll have more to tell when he eventually gets in touch. When I look at it all, the heaps of stuff in the boxes Warren has sent down, I think of Genevieve's phrase, *there is always something more*. And I'm convinced it's only a matter of time before I find the clues. I'll buy an air

ticket to wherever I need to go if it comes to that, and I have the means now. It would be quite something to jettison the fabled father I never had, and find him, actually find him, as he really is. I wonder if Willow would come with me? He might just. It would be like him to go along with it. He's a bit like Geoffrey that way, ironically enough.

I must admit I'd feel a lot better if I knew there was a grave, a place I could point to and say, that's your father, Willow, Jim Osborne. That's where he lies. He and your mother, both. There must be a cemetery, surely. Somebody would know about the grave of Jim Osborne. I could write and find out if that's what I have to do. The thing is, I was very little, I don't remember much. There was the house, and beyond the house, the river. That was our world.

Some of it has already come to light. Odd bits and pieces, a photograph of the old boat, for instance, that we'd go on early morning expeditions in, with rusks and a thermos of tea. And the tape, the Geoffrey and Sarah tape.

I must be about a quarter of the way through sorting it all. There's masses of historical stuff, fascinating, but not urgently so. Sometimes I feel an urge to scrabble, but I'm taking my time. There's no rush.

One box appears to be devoted to photographs, which I've only peeked at, the neat little sheaths still pungent with the whiff of ageing chemicals. The few I've looked at – shy grins and old cars, faces shaded by hats – seem to be mostly neither dated nor captioned. It's a pity, although data isn't always rewarding. I promised myself I'd do the photographs last, but I can't resist dipping in now and then, seeing what there is.

I just wish Willow would phone, though.

At the end of our journey, I had him drop me off in the main street, two blocks from my apartment. I couldn't wait to get out of that car. After reaching the outskirts I pointed the way. We weren't speaking, we hadn't uttered a word for hours. The exhausting silence finally ended when I said, 'Stop here.' It had been raining, the streets shone. It was such a relief to feel that fresh air as I walked away. I heard the engine idling, it idled for a minute at least, a long minute, but I didn't look

back. Then he pulled away. I wanted to shout something into the night. I might have if it weren't for the couple a little ahead of me, so close I could smell her perfume, but I was already crying, the streetlights swimming in the air.

I recovered soon enough. I'm much better, and quite positive. It's been three weeks at least, so it's bound to be anytime now. I try to stay in as much as I can, keep busy. There's plenty to do, I'm not idle. And I've replaced my walking and swimming outings with a little routine of watching the trawlers. That's become my new thing. Deliberateness is the antidote on every front, that I know. It's one of the reasons why I keep an eye out for the ragged fleet, barging into the swells. With Geoffrey's binoculars I can watch the crews at work, stooping mostly, or doing that chimp-walk when the deck lurches. If I could see their faces more clearly I'd be tempted to give them names, and I fancy there'd soon be a host of unalterable associations that would be hard to shake.

Which reminds me, when Willow's done with asking me about all he needs to know, I'd like to ask him about that page I took from his car. It's so intriguing, promising and forbidding all at once. It begins: *Manning, having stopped on the verge before the last bridge, cuts the engine and is abruptly seized in the silence of the hills.*

I can't say what draws me to it, but it's fascinating, clever, and relieving, too, the way it folds in on itself. I read it again today, first thing. It was a lovely morning. I made tea and settled myself by the window. It's where I like to sit with the binoculars and keep an eye on the trawlers, though I usually have to wait a while before they appear.

There's a sense in which this Manning character is done for. He is, but he's chosen to be as far as I can make out. That makes a difference, I think. He's stopped on the bridge, the 'last bridge' and in that silence he turns to what I imagine is his life's work. Today, for the first time, it put me in mind of Geoffrey. Even the fatalism of it.

On the seat next to him, in a large cardboard box, is page after page of text, some pristine, others darkly revised, print-outs, hand-written pages, scraps from notebooks, diagrams, lists, even

drawings, several in pencil and black crayon, one in blue ballpoint. There are hundreds of pages. After consulting the tidetable he has brought with him, he gets out of the car at noon, opens the passenger door and lifts the box out. Carting it to the centre of the bridge, he puts the box at his feet, and steps up to the railing. He knows from the strings of tiny bubbles and convoys of leaves and flecks of foam passing slowly beneath him that the tide has turned.

Reaching into the box he begins to feed page after page into the stream, dropping them singly, watching each page sail down like a winged seed, trying this way and that to prolong the fall, resist the pull of the patient water. The floating sheets resemble, eventually, a footpath of white tiles all the way to the bend, and there they drift out of sight.

Finally, he reaches the last page. Forgetting himself, he begins to read the text, and it strikes him at that moment as both forbidding and familiar. As if by some accident that he senses he ought to have avoided, he is present at the beginning and the end, not by a trick of time or fate, but as a result merely of willingness, the slack give of his being. He reads it to hear again – before abandoning it – the patience of the day, a faithful indifference, it strikes him just then, that rings true: 'Manning, having stopped on the verge before the last bridge, cuts the engine and is abruptly seized in the silence of the hills.' There follows half a page of text. It blurs as it slips from his fingers and falls, light and careless to the cool, dark water flowing a little quicker now, the emptying tide, to the distant sea, the canon song, futile and wondrous, beginning and ending again and again.

Part of me hankers to see the rest of it, though I'm beginning to think that it stands on its own. It's odd to think that Willow might have written this, though I can't imagine why. Today for the first time it struck me that it could just as easily have been a piece of scrap paper because there's something written on the reverse in ballpoint. It's his handwriting. It was only when I noticed an embossed impression on the paper that I flipped it over and saw it was some or other reference - *AMOR.iv* - that Willow must have scribbled down, something to look up or remember. He'd pressed

hard, because as I turned back to the text, I could feel the weal on the paper. There wasn't much to it, but I ironed out with my thumbnail anyway.

I looked up just then to see the trawlers starting out, three in all cresting the rollers with their soapy grins, heading for the deep water, the shoals of the new day. I enjoy unstrapping the old case, the lenses glimmering inexhaustibly, and feeling for the cool metal. And then a fourth boat came into view. They'd never guess that I watch them so closely.

Although, how true it is, appearances can be deceiving. How much could I really know about those men out there? Just the other day at the pool, I watched an old man with saggy breasts and creaking knees step up to the edge. I'd have sworn he was just getting the measure of the water when he plunged, suicidally almost, tucking his white-capped head down as best he could. The splash was calamitous, but as the bubbles streamed clear, there he was, deep down, paddling polar bear-fashion, unhurried as he rose, unquestionably refreshed. That's what I mean. I'd doubted he could manage in the water on his own.

There are so many impressions I feel the need to audit. I redden with a sort of shame, for instance, whenever I think of how deftly Willow fussed over Luna's posture, at the roadside. It was to craft an appearance of innocuous misadventure, I thought, and I still can't be sure if that was loveable or cruel. I try to persuade myself that it doesn't matter, but I have a suspicion that it does. I have to laugh, though. We thought she was dead. How ridiculous. And then there she was at the window, like a drunk, hair over her face, teeth skew, shivery with astonished rage. She was one foot bare – which of course I didn't know, then – and cursing, 'What the fuck!' and the rest of it. Sister fucker. She was just so crude.

I should have kept the shoe. I'm alone in remembering that all there was to know, to find out at last, could be explained by that single, absurd artefact. But let Willow find it. Let's see what he makes of it. Although what could it possibly mean to Willow, a lost shoe? What comes back to me is how gamely the buckle shimmered, beaten metal, hammered silver.

I'm quite wrong, I see now. Manning has not chosen his doom. He discovers it when it's too late. And he doesn't have the option of holding back the last page. What I'd been wondering was, what if he holds it back? What happens then? What changes? And the answer, the only possible answer is, nothing changes. You can't help feeling that's a relief, really.

WILLOW / 4

'So is this William Osborne?'

Christ, it drives me mad. There's no accounting for the fuck ups in a place like this. The care is excellent, as far as I can tell. I've no complaints about that. And then, of course, there's Clare. I don't think of her as a nurse anymore. I can hear her coming a mile away. She's light on her feet, I can hear the cheerful squeak of her shoes on the linoleum. I've come a long way with her.

But there's this constant muddle of other stuff; how long I'm meant to be here, who's to fetch me – I keep telling them, there isn't anyone. And what my name is, for God's sake. Can't they read? It's almost as if they're tip-toeing around me trying to fathom some mystery.

And there is one, of course, but nobody has come close to shedding any light on it; who the hell were those guys?

The detective keeps willing me to offer some telling detail. Like hair colour. I've already explained it was the middle of the night. It's a wonder he doesn't ask for their height in millimetres. My favourite is: 'Language preference?' I wasn't sure for a second if he meant mine. And what was it? Violently demotic? Grimly ungrammatical? Although, now that I think about it, I do remember the other one's look of surprise, the one who stood by, the empty-handed one. For a second it looked as if he might intervene. On my behalf, I think. Or his friend's. But then the blow put me out like a light.

'They spoke in English,' I said flatly. Of a kind, I didn't add. I feel him sitting near the bed, the detective, staring at some part of me, the blanketed contour, trying his best to suppress his suspicion.

There was a shoe, a woman's shoe. And there's something about this shoe that seems significant. I can tell that he gets all meaningful whenever he raises it, which he does on every visit. God knows where it came from. Was it Jess's? Or that hitchhiker's? I've left Jess out of it. The two of them, actually, for good reason. They've got nothing to do with it anyway. They were both long gone by then. The story I'm sticking to is that the shoe must have been there when I bought the car. And how important can it be? They're supposed to be looking for a couple of thugs. What's this shoe thing all about?

And there's other things he wants me to try harder to remember, 'items' in the car. I recalled Jess using a pen. I offered that; 'A pen on the dashboard?' He was clearly disappointed.

'I just want you to think about it,' he says quietly. 'I'll be back later. Maybe you'll remember.' He's after something, but he needs me to bring it up. I'm stuffed if I can think what it could possibly be. Between the two of us, we seem to be drifting off the trail. Not that I care much. I'm tempted to persuade him to drop it altogether. It's how I feel. I could just as well leave it as it is, unexplained, a mishap, unalterable. It's better to resent an unnameable circumstance, better to harbour an unfocused grudge and pass it off as irritability than hanker for a specific redress that's unlikely to be forthcoming. Surely. I keep telling myself I have other things to think about. The gravestone, the unfinished letter to Jess. The documents. I can picture exactly where they are, but I'll have to hide them once I'm home in case Jess visits before I've had a chance to fill her in. Under the mattress. I could feel my way easily enough. Stuff them in there. No one's to fetch me, that's critical. Not Jess. And who else is there? I've been careful not to utter a word about her. Not to them. For the rest, I barely murmur. They can't have picked up anything. Sometimes, playing it back, it's a strain to hear it all, a drowsy voice that's hard to credit as my own, often a near whisper, pleasantly sibilant, like a prayer.

I did wonder if I might have dropped my guard under sedation, if I'd babbled. And there was the other worry, not in the beginning – I was barely conscious of it – but later on, when they reduced the dose. I became aware of it, then. It turns out I needn't have worried. They knew my history, they have a way of finding these things out. And the upshot is it's benign, non-habit forming, a mere pain-killer. For all I know, I'm still on it, though the ache is lifting, that much I'm sure of. The unobscured pain. You can always tell.

Dr Faber seems marginally confident that I'll see again, though he keeps saying it's too soon to say for sure. I try not to dwell on it. When I think of not being able to see, my head fills with pictures, I think only of what's visible, what there is to see. And the thing is, I don't believe him. I can feel it in my bones. It's the attention Clare pays to tutoring me. She's fond of the phrase 'the trick is'. The trick is, for instance, to touch lightly, not grasp, to feel for, not fondle. It fosters a sense of spatial proportion, of remembering the distance between one thing and another. It's a vocabulary of the subtlest sensations that stands for the hard reality of things. I practise with the pill bottle. It's almost full but still light, so light that even the merest miscalculation knocks it over. I keep it at my bedside, but every day in a slightly different position, and every day I reach for it, reach for the spot where I remember leaving it last. I say, Clare, look at this. And then I demonstrate my prowess. I'm getting better at it. She always laughs when I miss, but good-naturedly. She knows I'll crack it. She knows I'll have to. She's ahead of Faber, I think, Clare. She knows better than he does.

LUNA / 5

Levitt told me.

It's called the *Playa*. He wrote it down because he never said it right. He kept saying 'Plier'. What kind of name is that? I said, for Christ sake, Levitt, just write it down.

'Why do you want to know?'

I said, I just do. In case there's trouble.

He said there wasn't anything he could do, it happened too fast. I said, I know, I don't blame you or anything. That's just how Dougs is. And I was sick of it. Although I didn't tell Levitt that.

'This is between me and you.'

'What do you mean?' Levitt said.

'Don't tell Dougs you told me where it is, the guy's flat.'

I said, do you want a drink? I won't say a word, I won't tell him you were here or anything. He's such a sucker, Levitt.

These guys, they all say they got hurts they got to tell me about. And what am I supposed to do about it? What about me? I got hurts too and nobody's interested in that. Except Ollie. Not that he's really interested, not that he knows much. But he listens, I know he does. I didn't mean it to happen to him, what happened at the weir, and he knows he shouldn't have said what he said. I'm sure he knows. The way he taunted me, about my Dad, that was wrong. That's why I pushed him. I thought, bugger you. I told him to stop and he didn't. It was always fun on the weir. We'd sit out in the middle and feel the water pour round our legs, heavy and cool. We'd talk about stuff, school, friends. He said, have you got a boyfriend? I said no. He said, why not? I said, what kind of question is that, what about you, have you got a girlfriend?

'Why should I?'

'Why shouldn't you?'

'Is that what your Dad thinks?'

'What's he got to do with it?'

'Because he's got one.'

'Bugger you, Ollie.'

'Well he does. Everyone knows. Even your ..' That's when I pushed him. I pushed him and I got up and started back along the weir. It was slippery, you had to be careful, you had to keep your eyes on where you put your feet. And I didn't know, I didn't know the current was like that at the weir.

They call it the washing machine. Somebody told me that. Because it's like you in a washing machine, tumbling round and you can't get out. It's only when I reached the bank that I started running, but nobody knew what for, they thought I was running to fetch help, and they were shouting, Luna! What's happened! Where's Ollie! But I was breathless, I couldn't say a word, I just looked back. Someone had already gone down there, I saw him leaning in and struggling, slipping on the weir. He was shouting something. He couldn't reach. It seemed to go on forever.

But Ollie didn't drown. They pulled him out in the end. He was in there a long time. It was that, or maybe the gash on his head that did something to his brain. He was in hospital for weeks. My aunt said, he's coming round. You're not to worry. Ollie's alright, it was an accident. They never knew, I never said what happened. It wouldn't have changed anything.

I still visit him, a few times a year. He's calm now. And he knows it's me. I once said, Ollie, you shouldn't have said that, that's why I walked away. I never knew you were drowning. He just looks out the window, he's calm. And that's a nice place they got, gardens, pretty curtains. Music and stuff. And he doesn't know anything. He doesn't even know his step mom died. But I still talk to him, I tell him everything. And he listens. He'll listen to anything I say.

I was going to tell her. I almost did. And I've never told anyone. Why should I? Not even Dougs. And I'll never tell him now. He'll do something weird, he'll do something weird to me or to him or someone. Because he's screwed, he can't handle it anymore. I said Dougs, what goes around comes around. You do stuff, stuff will happen to you. You got to watch out. I told him that.

But her, I thought I could tell her, sitting there at the garage. I almost did. It was thinking of the willow tree, because of his name, that made me think of Ollie. You can talk to a stranger and it's like talking to a wall. But I didn't in the end, I didn't tell her.

I checked it out, the *Playa*. It's got a fancy name, but it's a dump, there by the harbour road. You can already smell the tar and oil, and the fish factory.

I went two days in a row and watched. I never saw him, so I suppose he went away. Although on the second day, I saw a woman go in and she was there for a bit, and then she came out with a

packet of stuff. Maybe she was the cleaning service. She was in a uniform, blue. Or maybe she's just a friend. Maybe he's staying with her. In the next-door flat was some old guy with a dog. Both days, they went for an hour, about an hour, for the dog to have his walk I suppose. So I thought when I come again I'll post it when those two have gone. On the porch there, there are letter boxes, a row of them. I saw his name on one. I put three in the envelope, folded in a piece of paper in case it felt like there was nothing in it, because the stones aren't that big. I typed *The Tenant* on the front. I've seen how they do that, in flats and stuff. And then I put in the card I thought I'd lost. It says *Douglas Monroe, Personnel Security.* It's got all his details. I know what PS stands for. It's like when you say something at the end which you almost forgot. Dougs said that had nothing to do with it. But I told Ollie, I said, you know what? It's got everything to do with it.

WILLOW / 6

Every edge, every surface has its distinctness, its telltale paradigm, heat and cold, texture, physiognomy, mass. You start with that, and in time the physical world assumes a measurable identity. You can picture it. Clare doesn't have the mind for my abstractions. 'Para-what?' she says, laughing. 'Don't confuse yourself. It's a chair, and you're about to trip over it.' But it's true. And for every plane, an arris. There's an edge to everything, a limit, and a new plane.

When I asked for the photograph of Dad to be brought to me, to my bedside, I was, I suppose, uncharitably disbelieving. Would they really have gone to all that trouble? Any framed glass would do, the feel of it. But I quizzed Clare.

'He's like a boy,' she said. 'He's almost smiling for the camera.'

I wondered if I'd be able to tell from her description, her innocent account of its contents. I was virtually certain when she said 'almost smiling', but it was her afterthought that settled it: 'It's like he knows something we'll never find out.'

'Yes, it's him,' I said.

'Excuse me?'

'My Dad. It's my Dad. Thanks Clare.'

I know she blushed. The air was charged just then. That's what I mean about listening rather than hearing. I could tell. I could tell from the quality of her silence. And I suppose I'd given myself away, too, my residual disbelief.

I've been trying it out, the slight pursing, the lightly puckered cheek, though I suspect it looks smug on me, Dad's almost-smile. It feels smug. It's a lot of under-the-skin activity that's required to render the essential fatalism, and I don't have it yet.

'Can we go to the garden?' I said. 'I'd like a cigarette.'

She knows, I think, that it's the walk I like, my leaning on her, feeling her undulate against me, her light bonework labouring beneath the warm puffy substance of her closeness, the little scented breaths that express the effort she makes.

We negotiate the corridor, two doors, a right turn, linoleum on to tiles, stairs, the main entrance, six broad steps and then, if you listen carefully, the traffic noise, and breezes. Off to the left is the gritty garden path. The shadows are cool, I can sense the density of the greenery.

From here, there are two possible destinations, a bench in each case. Whichever we reach first I always say, 'Can we go to the other one?' It makes the walk last longer. Whenever it ends, it's always too soon.

Clare said, 'Can I ask you something?'

Sure, I said.

'How would you feel if you learned that wasn't your father?'

I was non-plussed, though I knew what she meant. Some people don't have the grammar for saying precisely what they mean. And she's a lovely person, I don't hold it against her.
I'd be vaguely annoyed, I told her. But not very. I'd simply insist on the actual picture being brought to me. How difficult could that be? Feelings wouldn't come into it.

She was silent again. This time I found her silence harder to read. It was a lesson, really. There's more to knowing, much more, than you think. I felt something come between us just then, which plagued me a little as we wound our way back to the steps.

We'd no sooner got inside again than I surprised myself. 'Clare,' I said, calling a halt, 'if you like, you can read that letter to me now, when we get back to my room. Would you like to?'
She didn't seem as pleased as I thought she'd be, though it's easy to misjudge the signs. I'm certain there was a kind of excitement, something almost childlike in her, as we reached the linoleum, her shoes squeaking again, though less cheerily, given our quite ponderous tread. She's been teaching me to feel my own way, and you can't help it, being cautious, enclosed in the unsteadiness of a more or less imagined world. It fills very quickly. Too much stuff to keep track of. I always try to remember the visitors' chairs lined up against the wall at the end of the corridor, but I forget sometimes. You're oblivious to obstacles you've forgotten, never mind those you don't know are there. Still, we made it to my bed without mishap. It's accurate enough to say I led the way, I was eager. She squeaked off quite briskly. The letter's from Jess, of course, I'm convinced of that. It's bound to be a roasting.

It's sad, really, that she's got it so wrong. I'm just not the person she thinks I am. Perhaps we'll sort it out in due course. It's not too much of a worry. But I'll have to prepare Clare when she comes back, to save her the embarrassment, at least. I'll tell her all she needs to know. I've been thinking about it, and I know it'll be fine. She'll be fine.

I was just beginning to wonder what the hold-up might be when I heard the gong man start his rounds. He's adept at a rapid, well, what I thought was a tripling sequence, three notes, one-two-three, back and forth. But I was wrong. I've listened carefully. It's four notes in all. A small thing, but there you are, a mistaken impression. It's uncanny what one misses in the ordinary course of things, a detail like that, a missed note. But it's a quarter, a full quarter of the whole music, the fuller song, the mealtime jingle.

If she doesn't reach out and take my hand, I think I might ask her to. And she will, when she returns with the letter, that much I'm sure of. It's been worth it, I think, putting it off for so long. She'll

appreciate my conceding. It doesn't amount to much, but it's still a concession. And after all this time, I do anticipate some reward. I just have that feeling.

The longer it takes her to return, the sweeter that music becomes, and now that he's turned into our corridor, the gong man whose step I can hear is brisk, the clearer it is, the full four-note air. The loveliest thing I've ever heard. In its way, the loveliest thing.

JESS / 7

December 21

There's much less of a view from Willow's block than I'd thought. The way he described it, I imagined a sea view. From his landing, only if I leaned out, could I see across the harbour and even then neighbouring buildings got in the way. And it was quite chilly, being in the shade of the taller blocks. Perhaps it gets sun later, but I didn't stay long enough to find out. Judging by its thick-set frontage and the narrow steps going up to the porch, I guessed it was once one of the old boarding houses in the street. There's something about them you can't easily erase. You can turn them into flats, but they always bear a trace of the forlorn.

I didn't expect him to be there, and I was pleased that he wasn't, because I want it to be a surprise. I still knocked, twice. You always wait a while, don't you, thinking you've not been heard the first time. Well, he wasn't there. Between knocks I tried to see if I could pick out my apartment across the bay, but I couldn't.

I'd forgotten it was called the *Playa*. Willow must have told me that, though I didn't ever have the address. I got it from Warren. He seemed to think it was very important, legally, that I clear up the muddle about who we were. I fudged things. I said we were discussing it.

'What do you mean "discussing it"?'

I had to admit we weren't quite there yet, but that I'd put it in writing, I was going to send him a letter. We didn't have a chance to talk on the journey down, I said. The circumstances weren't ideal. I haven't been in touch since, I haven't told him I've not heard a word from Willow, about the letter or anything else.

When I drove over yesterday morning, I thought I'd wait and see how things turned out before getting back to Warren.

It was no surprise that his letterbox wasn't locked. That's Willow for you. There was other stuff in there, junk mail, which I threw in the bin for him. I can't abide getting letters that aren't addressed by name, when we've all be christened one way or another. I half thought I might find my letter in there, too, but he's got it, obviously, and for some reason doesn't want to get in touch. Well, I can't force him to.

But I think he'll be amazed at what I've come up with. And very touched. It's a lovely picture. He was a handsome man, as Willow is, actually. And he's like a man who's just got a prize for a race he never imagined he could win. It's that sort of smile, shyly proud, but unmistakably frank, naturally happy. It's a sunny day, and James Osborne's not wearing a shirt. Maybe he's been swimming, though there's nothing to bear that out. No slicked hair or anything like that, just the hint of a bare shoulder and the wholly unguarded gaze of a completely relaxed, athletic young man. On the back, in what I could swear is Mum's handwriting, it says, *James Osborne, 'Lucky Jim', Easter.*

Every time I look at a photograph I think of Maurice, or I think; what's the give-away here? In this one, at any rate, there's nothing obvious in the line of secrets. Or shadows. No betrayal.
I was a little jealous of Willow, to be honest. I know how I'd feel if I came across my father's picture. I tingle just thinking about it. If there's one thing I'd truly treasure, that would be it. So Willow's lucky really. I just hope he knows it.

I put a note in the envelope: *Dear Willow, This is a picture of your father, which I found in Geoffrey's things. It's a lovely picture, I thought you should have it. Please get in touch. Love, Jess.*

I was tempted to knock on his neighbour's door, Marvel's. I remembered him, the Venus man. Although I think I'd have pretended to be someone else. I might have knocked, just out of curiosity, and he was so intriguing, but I didn't in the end. I was done with the *Playa*, I'd no reason to linger. It's up to Willow now, is what I thought. No good hanging around. And if he's still stuck on that Luna episode, well that would be foolish. It's surely self-evident now that it was meaningless.

CLARE / 8

I was about to leave the nurses' station when the phone went. It was Sandra, to say she was running late.

'Tom's not home yet and Nic has come down with something. I don't want to leave him, Clare, but I'll be on my way any minute.'

'Not to worry,' I said. 'It's quiet. Come in when you can.' I remember that conversation as if it were yesterday. I took full responsibility. And it was a lapse of judgement. I can't fault the administration.

She said thanks, and I put the phone down. Then I headed back to William's room. As I passed George, I poked him in the ribs. I always do. He takes his dinner gong so seriously I like to tease him. *Pling, plang, plung, plong*. I suppose he's got to concentrate. He ducked aside with a frown, but I know he likes the tease. And even when I do it, he never misses a note. He's proud of that, and he's proud of the wink I give him. He takes it away with him, I think, Georgie. I almost stopped him, actually. I thought he'd give me good advice. Maybe I should have. I'd have said, George, should I make something up? But he was gonging away cheerily, and he's got a snappy pace. He's got to get through the whole place in a minute or two or the kitchen staff complain. He was round the corner almost before I'd thought of it. And, anyway, how could I? What could I have made up?

William was about to say something when I came in. He said, 'Clare, there's something ...'

'I've got it,' I said. 'Let me read it. I'll just read it, okay. Then we can chat.' It was my nursy voice. You get used to telling people what to do. But all I could think of was getting it over with. He said, 'Okay.'

I knew that he was listening carefully. I knew he would. I mean, before I started reading, he'd listen for the envelope being opened, and he didn't know it was already open. So I tore the end. I dug my nail in and ripped the crease. I could see from the tilt of his head how he calculated the size of the tear.

I didn't mean to make him wait, but I had to pluck up the courage. I realised afterwards that he must have thought I was having a quick read of it to myself. Which is what you do, really, isn't it, without thinking. But I'd read it many times.

Then I said: 'It's signed "Jess".' She used to be his sister. It's awful really.

He said, 'That's what I thought.' But, God, it wasn't at all. I don't really know what kind of person does a thing like that, to take away the one thing that means most to someone. A man of his age, and in his condition. And to call it *Storm*. Isn't that something. I hope I never meet her, I hope I never have to. I think of the picture of that pilot, how he'd hold it, how he'd ask me about it, over and over. The slight smile, the boyish face. His arrangement was always a combination of the pill bottle, 'Dad' in his frame, the tape recorder and a glass of water. That was his bedside, his daily puzzle. Every night he'd change it, and every morning he liked to show me how good he was getting. First thing, pointing carefully without touching, he'd say: 'Look at this, Clare. Pills. Recorder. Glass of water. And Dad.' I'd clap, and he'd say, very pleased with himself, 'I'm getting there, aren't I.'

Part of me wanted to race through it as if there was a chance he'd miss the point entirely and I could just put it back in the envelope and we could move on. But I also knew the only possible way he could move on was to absorb it and know what it meant. So I read it quite slowly, trying to convince myself that I didn't know what it would mean for him, and to keep any hint of pity out of my voice, or any emotion. I kept my head down. I didn't dare look at him. That cruel last line I almost left out: *'He would say later that the eyes were shut, as in sleep.'*

I don't suppose he knew I'd stopped, that I'd reached the end. I had to say, 'That's it.' Hardly a second passed before he said, quite softly: 'Read it again, please, Clare.' Those were the only words he spoke. I took his hand, and I read it again.

At the end, when I looked up, I thought for a second his sight had returned. It was the way he looked at me, with wonder on his face, as if he was seeing me for the first time. But he couldn't see. The wonder on his face, that look of wonder, just vanished. All he did was nod, a slight tip of the head, three or four times.

I wanted to say something, and I should just have said whatever came into my mind, but there was too much. I know that if he'd said just a single word I'd have known what to say. But he didn't. He just nodded.

To be honest, when I heard the crash down the corridor I was relieved. It sounded like a plate smashing on the floor. It gave me something to do, it broke the tension. Sandra wasn't in yet, so I had to see to it. I said, 'I'll be back in a minute,' and squeezed his hand. 'Somebody's had a calamity. I'd better go and sort it out, hadn't I?' I kept it light, and off I went. Sometimes I hate the way my shoes squeak on the linoleum. It's the polish, they use too much polish, I think. And just at that moment, it was way too jaunty. But I was in a hurry. I wanted to sort out the mess and get back. And then Faber wanted me, and I was itching to get away. I knew William needed help, he'd need a hand. He didn't, though, in the end. He could do it all on his own.

I can't say I resented being suspended. The hearing was fair, and I was cleared in the end, thanks mainly to Sandra and the others. Nobody let on that we knew what was in the letter, that we'd worked out what it meant. Even then, I never imagined he'd do it.

It was panic stations by the time Sandra arrived. I took her aside quickly and told her that in case I wasn't around, she was to make sure the undertakers didn't remove the photograph. She was to tell them, that goes too. They go together. Whatever happens. I'd taken it out of the frame and slid it under his shirt. I'd had to wait for the intern to finish. I was glad it wasn't Faber, although even he wouldn't have known to look. But the minute I walked in I knew. The photograph wasn't at his

bedside anymore. The pill bottle was still upright, but empty. And there was just the drained glass and that tape recorder. You imagine he might have swiped it away in a rage, the picture, flung it right across the room. But I knew William better. Without even thinking about it, I lifted the bedclothes and there it was, resting on his chest.

What was touching was that when I took the picture out of the frame I saw he'd written something on the back. It's the sort of thing a son writes to please his Dad. I wonder if he remembered it was there, or even writing it. It was something like *'You'll always be my example',* but not that, it was a bit fancier than that. And I did feel certain that he'd tried, even if in the end he lost the courage to see it through. Even if he wasn't the son he thought he was.

I've still got the cassette. I'm not sure how much is on it. I haven't listened to it yet, but I will. I'll listen when I have a quiet moment, when I'm feeling okay about it all. I liked his stories, and his voice, and I'm glad I still have it to listen to, at least once more, when I'm ready. If there was any family, I'd have given it to them, but there isn't.

William was one of the nicest patients, and I'll remember him at his best, calmer than you'd think for someone in his shoes, and always so charming, talking in a fancy way sometimes, things I didn't understand. Or I think I would have if he'd said them in a simpler way. I didn't mind. He was trying to get at something, something out of reach, I think, and I admired him for it. I should have told him that. I know he was fond of me, I could tell. Once, when I was teaching him to remember where everything was, bed, chair and all the rest of it, and he was standing in the doorway, pointing, he turned to me with such a pleased grin and said: 'And there's my Clare!' That was true in a way. It was true enough. I didn't have to tell him I was happily married, with three lovely children and a nice house that I drove home to every day. I didn't have to tell him that he was just another patient who I'd eventually only remember vaguely once he was discharged. Or who'd never think to pay us a visit. That's just how it is. They go away and we never see them again. There'll be others like him. George will do his rounds. We'll dim the lights, we'll watch over our charges. There must be so many still to come. And every spring and summer we'll always want to tell the day nurses coming in at

seven; you should have seen the sunrise today, it was quite something. It's a night-shift thing. And we've got the best view from the nurses' station. For a long while, the palms are black and jagged against the lightening sky, that ballgown blue that promises so much, that makes you think anything is possible, anything at all, even when you know it's just another day, the start of another day. Before you know it, it's over, the moment has passed. There's not much to it, really, only a change in the light.

I do sometimes wonder to myself in that quiet time, if I could tell how the day was going to turn out, would I still see the beauty of it? Although, when all's said and done, we need every bit of enchantment we can find. And what harm can there be in that?

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