

PEDALLING BACKWARDS

**BY
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Pedalling Backwards

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CHAPTER ONE

The house is low-ceilinged and damp. When I ran my fingers over the walls they felt sticky with salt, the sheets will never feel dry. Two double bedrooms, a pokey little kitchen put together in the seventies before cooking became something glamorous, a largish main room with a wood-framed brown sofa, a couple of matching armchairs, grass rugs and an arrangement or two of local shells and pebbles on pine tables, cheap and shinily varnished. Not an exotic holiday house, no trimmings, but about right for our little group – a couple no longer young, not yet old, accompanied by her parents, grey-haired and shrunken-fleshed, but not infirm. So we have come here for our holiday, an island in the Blackwater Estuary. Except that it is not really a proper island. It is connected to the mainland by a causeway, which is tidally covered by brackish water. An island with an escape route, water that is neither salt nor sweet. Our sort of place, Stephen's and mine.

I like the name though. I like the name of this place, Storsea. And it is otherworldly. I opened the window as we were driving over the muddy causeway and heard the cries of the gulls, and smelled the rich, fertile stink of the salty mud, the rotting iodine of the kelp. It's scruffy and bleak this island and I can tell I will spend this summer feeling too hot or too cold and always a little dirty, but I like its smell.

Stephen's been here before. When he was a boy. This is not the same cottage as he stayed in. There are about four or five of them dotted about the island, he says. He spent a whole summer here when he was about eleven, a magical summer he said. They were as free as birds, he and his brother, he said. His mother sent them off in the morning with a makeshift picnic and didn't expect them back till dark. His father only came on the odd weekend. "It was like *Lord of the Flies*," he told me, all starry-eyed. But I don't think he's read the book, and I can't imagine his silent, moonfaced brother whooping and skipping through the undergrowth. More likely Stephen tied him to a scrabby tree as part of a game and ate the entire picnic on his own and then forced Matthew to eat that salty samphire he got so excited about. "Delicious with melted butter," he told me and my parents as we drove here. I'm sure it is, but raw and cold, it's probably sickening although I'm sure Matthew did as he was told and said nothing. He never says much of anything, Matthew even now he's a grown man, with a flat of his own and a job and a car, all the things that mark you as an adult.

Stephen was ebullient on the journey here. He filled the car with words all the way. Without him, we would have settled into our usual silence. My parents and I are very used to silence. We grew up with it. I'm sure Stephen did too, when I see his tight-lipped mother I can't imagine anything else. But then I never met his father. He was dead by that time, and I don't know at what time in her life Dora Wright's lips tightened. Stephen is good with

words, you can leave it up to him. I think it's part of the reason my parents like him, he lets them off the hook. He kept up the flow even after we got here, herding us along like a collie dog, chatting so perfectly to the woman who let us in and gave us the key. Her name is Frances, she and her husband have owned the island for about ten years. They live in a solid house on one side of the island with a small private beach and a jetty from which they moor their boats. I liked the look of her, something solid as if she has lived her life well. I don't think she would spend too much time thinking about us – not her most interesting visitors. I'm sure she's got stories to tell, this sort of place would attract artists, lovers, people on the verge and then there'd be people like us, with no extremes and no edge. I can imagine her saying to her husband over a glass of wine before supper, "well as long as they're not too demanding, blocking loos and needing light bulbs at odd hours, I don't mind light bulbs for the good looking ones, no I have to be honest, but with them, you'll see there's something a little sad."

Stephen won't let us be sad. He's valiantly fending off sadness. This is what he spent all of our first evening here doing. All through supper, until I couldn't listen anymore and so I spoilt it, which is why I'm sitting in the second double bedroom, the one with the candy floss pink blanket, slowly unpacking a few things from my bags and placing them half-heartedly in the flimsy pine wardrobe, hanging one or two hopeful summer dresses on wire coat hangers. They're too bright these dresses, too girlish, they look like sad little ghosts. I can hear their voices in the main room struggling on, but they'll have to give up soon, even Stephen can't keep it up. He'll give a theatrical yawn. "Well, I think I'll turn in for the night, long drive and all," he'll say heartily, a little too loudly so that I'll be sure to hear and be warned. Then they'll all be let off the hook. There'll be noises in the bathroom, running water, bumps and shifts and then silence from my parents' bedroom, the one with the baby blue blanket on the bed. And Stephen, Stephen will come through the door and close it carefully behind him. If I raised my head to look at him, I know his brow would be furrowed with concern, flesh rolled like a spaniel's. There he is now, I won't look to see if I'm right about his expression, I'll wait until I feel his hand on my neck, on my back. He kneads the skin a little, hesitantly, the way an amateur would handle an invalid or a difficult child. Then with a sigh he climbs into bed. We read for a while, silently. Stephen has run out of energy for today. We mutter agreement about turning off the light. Soon he will begin to snore, not too loudly I hope, but he does sleep, Stephen does sleep. And I lie, my body feeling soft and heavy as dough, the flicker of fight all gone from me, wondering, if this is the first night, how to bear it all.

I behaved badly at that first supper. That's what my parents thought. They didn't say, they wouldn't, but I could see it in their faces, which stiffened in preparation to ignore such behaviour. It was supposed to be a picnic. We didn't want to cook, not that first night when the kitchen was unfamiliar to us. Stephen had shopped that morning. "Leave it to me," he'd

told my mother when she asked what she could bring. "Leave it to me Hilda" and she had. My mother didn't understand food, she'd started to say this quite often, and I noticed a little hint of pride behind her voice, a little girlish lift in tone in the same way as another woman might say, "I just don't understand cars." So Stephen produced the food and I helped him lay it out. There was too much of it. My parents, watching us, started making little mutters and exclamations of protest, my mother's hands fluttered awkwardly now and then near her stomach as if to protect her narrow body from such abundance. He was Father Christmas, Stephen, pulling treats from Waitrose bags. Remembering the meagre, plain meals of my childhood, I expected their disapproval, but despite the "oh, no's", the "couldn't possibly's", the "what on earth is that's", they were delighted. They were distracted, entertained. They were courted.

Stephen had always courted my parents. The first time I brought him home for a Sunday lunch of overdone beef and uninspiring vegetables, he had found just the right things to say. I was so proud I felt my cheeks burning. I had, this one time, exceeded expectations. He was just right, dressed right, right tone, right actions. "Look," I wanted to say, "look what I've brought home." I didn't speak much, but I smiled a lot and I'm sure I even giggled once or twice. Stephen filled our quiet house with his presence just as I needed him to and made it a different place. We would laugh about it afterwards, I thought, about this horrid food and the colourless house with its furniture so awkwardly placed, and my mother's shift dress, olive green which made her look ill. But we didn't. Sitting in the passenger seat on the way back, I watched him. He kept his eyes on the road, he was a very careful driver.

"I think that went very well," he said. "Don't you?" Nothing in his tone, no special expression to show that he was drawing me in; us, a couple separate and distinct from them. And I was watching him.

"Yes," I answered and there was nothing in my tone either. But the heat and lightness I had felt at lunch, left me. Anxiety crawled back in. In profile, Stephen's snub nose is more marked. He has an open face, the skin textured with faint sandy freckles and a few pockmarks, bad skin as an adolescent. His light brown hair is thick with a stiff wave that rises above his forehead. As a small boy he would have looked old fashioned, a forties boy in an advertisement for sweets or soap powder. Now, as a man, the boyish look is tempered by rather heavy framed glasses, a thickening of flesh at his neck. Not a good looking man, but pleasant and substantial. Stephen's voice is strong, his eyes are pale blue, but they are steady and direct as if they have nothing to hide, nothing they cannot meet face on. That was what it seemed all those weeks after we met, before that first lunch with my parents. As we drove, I examined him and felt sick with wondering if it would be alright, would it be enough, would it do the trick. And when a week or so later we drove, ever so carefully

again, to the London suburb, a tree-lined street of quiet houses, to meet his mother with her stiff mouth, and his moon-faced, blank-eyed brother, the sickness of anxiety rushed in again. I saw at once why he had found nothing remarkable about my family home, his was almost interchangeable. The same deathly quiet, and chill in the air, the same collection of bland furnishings. The food was equally bad, although we did not eat at the house, but at the nearby golf club filled with overweight men in ill-fitting blazers, women in shapeless florals. Over grey lamb in gravy, I struggled to exchange words with the brother, Matthew, but kept an ear and eye on Stephen and his mother. She was a woman who had become an expert at playing the stoic while never for a moment letting either son forget her sufferings and regret. The meal out was Stephen's idea, to save her the trouble, he said. But she ate little and seemed to be putting up with it all.

"Are you alright Mother, enjoying yourself, food okay?"

"Oh yes, of course, only you know..." voice trailing off, Stephen's pale eyes flicking awkwardly back to his food.

"I just don't seem to have much appetite anymore, you know..."

"Wonderful puddings here, mother, black forest cake, you've always liked that."

"Oh I couldn't."

"Go on, enjoy it."

"Honestly Stephen...I don't know why you wouldn't let me do something simple at home."

And so it went. An old game and they both knew their parts well. He would try to please her and she would take pleasure watching him fail. What was once possibly raw pain had become this strange little cruelty. Her younger son had opted right out of the game. It was only later that Stephen told me he was taking pills. Manic depression. He should have told me before, I wouldn't have tried quite so hard to pull words out of him during lunch, wouldn't have been so upset by my failure.

Later over dinner alone with Stephen, I listened to him talk. His boyish face setting itself in such serious, adult lines. His brave mother, how much she had had to put up with. Living with an alcoholic husband all those years, having to send her boys to her parents when things were bad and later of course they were sent safely to boarding school. So she had to manage alone, with that husband, without Stephen to help her, because Stephen had always done his best to help. And then it had happened, one night a call from the police. Stephen was in his twenties, studying law at Cambridge, home for a weekend visit and thank God he had been, imagine if it had been left to Matthew. Of course Matthew would have done nothing at all and his poor mother would have had to cope again as usual, a lifetime of coping. But Stephen had been there, had gone with the police, identified the body, not too badly mangled, considering. And that's when he had heard that there had been a

passenger, a woman who was alive, but badly injured. His father's mistress it turned out and had been for eight years. Stephen never knew her name, the woman tried to tell him, but he wouldn't let her. She had called some weeks after the accident, when she was out of hospital. His mother had picked up the phone and then silently passed it over to Stephen, again so lucky he had been there, but he was spending as much time as he could with his mother, what else could he do? He wouldn't ever forget the voice although he had silenced it pretty quickly - low, rather hesitant, "You don't know me," it had begun, but Stephen had guessed. "I was with your father..."

"Yes," he had interrupted immediately dreading to hear more, his voice as stiff and cold as he could make it. "And none of us ever wish to hear from you again. Is that clear?" He had replaced the receiver. A cold supper with his mother had followed, and he had struggled to make conversation. I imagine she let him struggle and so the game began.

I had heard all this before, it was the thing that Stephen and I had in common and we offered it up to each other over glasses of wine shortly after we met. He his dead father, me my dead sister. After the wine and the exchange of stories, we went to bed together in his smart little town house. I was just renting somewhere small at the time. But I listened to the story again and knew when it was finished we would go to bed again. I wouldn't tell him what I thought of his mother because he wouldn't be able to bear it. And I pitied him so much then. This boyish man who had made himself so solid, the serious solicitor with heavy glasses and cultivated frown lines, broadening shoulders that were really not so very broad, to bear the weight of loss and grief and I would pile my weight on top too. I expected him to fill my life, to cover its silences and the space left by Helena, my noisy, lively, dead sister. In return I would make his life new, sweep it clear and make it sparkle. Ours would be a modern house with modern things and clean, sharp surfaces. We'd quieten our noisy ghosts, and fill our parents' silence with the bustle of our own life.

That's what I thought then, but now in this sad little bedroom on this shabby little island that's only a half island, I'm lying awake and none of that hope is left. Our ghosts are more substantial than either Stephen or me. There was one last weight to be added to Stephen's load, but he didn't accept it. He let his load come crashing to the ground. It was only a tiny little load, but it was more important than any of the others. He simply let it slip off his back and crash. And now we have a ghost to join the other two, wispy and insubstantial, but I hear her every night. Sometimes she is inside me, a moving mass. Sometimes a whisper, little sobs, babyish laughter and a voice that becomes confused with Helena's so that often these two ghosts merge into one. It's understandable, Helena is the one I knew best, the other remained nameless and voiceless.

It was Helena's name I spoke out loud at our picnic supper. It produced a moment of silence. Wiped off that look of delighted horror on my parents' faces at the sight of all that

exotic, decadent food. Stopped Stephen proclaiming on the Cambazola, its heavenly creaminess. What does he know, pretending like that, talking cheese and wine and opera, leaning invitations, programs and theatre tickets against the mantelpiece, a messy barrage to protect him from the drab mundanity that he grew up with. Does he forget that I know, that I know. So I spoke Helena's name, thrust her into the middle of us all. She always spoke her mind, expressed herself noisily. I was the quiet one. Even in death her name has more effect than my silent resentment.

"Cambazola," I said. "Helena loved that. Remember she spent that year in Italy? Did you visit her at all, mum, dad? No, you don't like flying, but it wasn't far you know, really easy. I just nipped over and we had a few days together. Helena, she was like a different person, no not different, more than ever like she was, it was me who was different, but I needed her to help me along." My words ran out, I stumbled over that word 'needed' and my energy drained. Then there was the silence and the looks and we all struggled on, but we had little appetite. I retired as soon as I could, in disgrace. Anger gone, everything gone.

CHAPTER TWO

A walk was proposed at breakfast the next day. It was one of the things to do on a holiday like this. A tour of the island, a little scout around. So we set off in sensible shoes, Stephen in the lead, the scoutmaster. It was hot and hazy, the air salty and a little rancid, the fertile rotting of water plants and microscopic animals. That smell that makes you take conscious breaths, breathing it in even as you wrinkle your nose in distaste. I lagged behind, my eyes lowered, slipping uneasily over my mother's exposed skin. Her lower legs, her arms bare and white, thin and flabby, sad, punished flesh. I came from that body, and it seems I hadn't wanted to leave it. "Such a hard time you gave me," my mother would tell me every so often. She relished the word 'hard', her lips lingering over it and curling a little at the corners, triumphant. "With you I suffered, hours because you wouldn't come out and in the end they had to force you, forceps, you can just imagine." A bruised, grey-skinned baby. And later when I had those headaches at school, migraines they called them, it seemed as if steel clamps crushed my head, just like those forceps. Whereas Helena, just eighteen months later slipped like a dream through the passage I had so painfully prepared.

We stood at the water's edge and stared at a couple of boys in dinghies, learning to sail, calling out to each other, their voices slipping out of control into high excitement. The beach was not a real beach, but a strip of coloured pebbles separating the scrabby vegetation from the duck-pond coloured sea. The pebbles, licked by the water, took on beautiful rich rust and chocolate colours. My mother made a small exclamation and then began pecking discriminately at them, turning them over and popping a few carefully chosen ones into the

pocket of her blue cotton skirt. "Have a look," she turned to my father, "some of them are lovely, do you remember the ones I collected on the Scilly Islands? That holiday." I remember. It had been a holiday they had taken after they were married, but before children. They had an old album filled with carefully pasted on photographs. Little captions underneath in my mother's handwriting, white pen to show up on the black pages. A large title in jaunty capitals, HOLIDAY IN THE SCILLYS! With an overlarge exclamation mark. They had been with friends, names I had never heard mentioned, Di and Teddy, Ellen and Simon. Helena and I had found the album one afternoon and paged through it wondering what had happened to these people, why had they vanished and melted away and had our parents really ever looked like that, young and dad a bit goofy, but smiling, and mum in that orange bikini, not one of those little ones, hers went all the way up to her tummy button, but still a bikini and dark glasses that slanted like a cat's eyes. We paged silently, slowly through the album our eyes catching each other's once or twice and then sliding away. I remember my hands felt clammy, my heart beating faster and when we heard footsteps we shoved the book quickly under a pillow.

"What are you up to girls?"

"Nothing," our voices in chorus.

"Well out you go now, for some fresh air. You can't be cooped up in here."

And out we went for fresh air, our daily dose in the damp grey of the garden. My mind filled with the bright orange of the bikini, the young sun-browned skins of my parents before they were parents. And I remember those small rounded pebbles that Mother collected although it was only after the discovery of the album that Helena and I made the connection. They were in a glass jar in the corner of the bathroom, filled with water, because without water their colours dulled. Every now and then they would become coated with slimy green algae and Mother would tip them into the kitchen sink to wash them in disinfectant. She called them her silly stones and we wondered if they were silly why she handled them so carefully and why she had that strange, tiny crooked smile on her face as she rolled them clean in her hands. After we understood, we stole them. Well, Helena did, but I was just as excited by it. She sneaked into the bathroom and whipped the jar under her jumper. "For our game," she said. So out they came into the garden with us for our dose of fresh air. We built a wall with them, for our fairy garden, that's what we said. But most of them were buried and scattered and mangled with mud. When mother discovered us she made desperate attempts to retrieve as many as she could while we stood silently and watched her frantic hands and twisted face.

"How could you? How could you?" her voice horribly high. And then Helena said it. "Piss off," she said in a flat voice. My mother turned and stared at her and then, with mud-stained arms and dress, she marched back into the house and locked the back door so we

couldn't come in. Later, when it started to drizzle, we went into the garage for shelter. There we sat on our bicycles, the stands down to prop them up on the mottled grey concrete floor. Aimlessly our feet pedalled backwards. It was a half-hearted, fruitless movement. There was no resistance, we were going nowhere.

Now on this beach that isn't really a beach, I turn and watch my mother's face as she bends to pick up pebbles. She sees me watching and pauses. "Come on Lizzie," she says, "help me choose some." And through the warm salt air I hiss at her, "Piss off!"

"Lizzie," Stephen's voice, shocked. My mother's face shielded and silent, my father's eyes will not meet mine, he moves one wooden step closer to his wife. And I leave them there and head off along a dust path that leads to trees.

The trees, oaks and sycamores, are not enormous, stunted probably by the salt air. But it is quieter and cooler here. Stephen has followed me, I hear the footsteps behind me, the intake of breath and know without turning around that he is the one that would have come after me. "Lizzie," he says and I keep on walking and still don't turn around.

"Lizzie, you can't speak like that. Lizzie, you have to try," his voice is scolding, but patient, the voice of a saddened parent.

"Speaking to your mother like that, well it's, it's childish."

He's right it was childish, I was borrowing a child's voice, Helena's.

"Lizzie," he draws alongside me, taking deep breaths. I slow down and look at him, see the worry in his eyes, the rumpled brow and I would feel pity if I could.

"I don't know how to say this, I mean it's been over a year now, and you've...we've got to get on with things. All sorts of terrible things happen, I mean we know that don't we, I mean with my father and with...with Helena, but you've got to get on with life, because I mean, well accidents do happen, don't they?"

With that word 'accident', my body fills with a slick of hatred, painfully pushing its way through numbed flesh. My eyes fix on his, note his damp skin, his dog-like expression, but I am now the sort of person who can kick a dog and I do.

"Accident," I leave the word hanging in the air, my voice, unlike his stammering, is clear and precise. "But Stephen, remember it wasn't an accident, was it. We should use the right word. Surely, as a solicitor you would understand that. Your clients have faith in you to come up with just the right words, don't they? So what word would you use, then Stephen?"

"Lizzie, please..."

"What, please what? It wasn't an accident, it was what we chose, wasn't it? The doctor was quite clear about that. The age of paternalistic medicine is dead, that's what he told us, he could not advise us, only give us the statistics. The choice was ours, we took the risks and faced the consequences. And that's what we're doing, facing them." My voice trailed

off, I'd lost heart. I felt tired and very small, maybe Stephen did too. He turned and walked away and I carried on along the path.

I even liked Helena's name better than mine. It's a beautiful, grand name. There is something strong and heroic about it, whereas Lizzie, well Lizzie...I tried to get everyone to call me Beth, like Beth in Little Women who died so sweetly and tragically of scarlet fever. A name that would mark me, even with something like death. But instead I remained Lizzie, diminutive, unremarkable Lizzie with a sister like Helena, eighteen months younger and two inches taller even when we were little. After that first afternoon, aged ten and eight, when we took shelter from the drizzle in the concrete garage, waiting for our mother to unlock the door; Helena and I returned every time the weather was bad, which was often. We'd set up our bikes, fixing the stands and whirring the wheels, a quick burst of effort, winding backwards, then letting go and hearing the long buzz, the sound of movement with no movement, pedalling backwards. But Helena pretended she was moving forward, sailing downhill at great speed, shooting forward either in pursuit of something wonderful, or escaping from something thrillingly frightening, depending on the game. And I watched her face, her lips slightly parted, her breath coming in short pants, blood reddening her cheeks, she would throw back her head, give it a shake as if some wind had blown hair over her eyes. She moved forward and I stayed in this dull garage, breathing stale air, watching my bright-faced sister with sad admiration, hoping that some of her life would rub off on me.

I needed Helena to protect me from the bland silence of our home, the wearing daily routine of porridge for breakfast, uniforms, school and homework, bedtime at eight. We lolled in our bedroom like grand ladies, describing our clothes, swathes of purple and ruby satin, high heeled satin boots, silk camisoles. We feasted on colours and textures as if they were more of the delicious pastries that we would consume when we were grown up with our own flat in London, right at the heart of the city, none of this messing about in the dull grey outskirts. Of course we would be out every night, concerts and galas, theatre, opera, ballet. Helena poured through magazines that she hid in her wardrobe, they were the source of her growing vocabulary of luxury and I drank it up, responding wholeheartedly. The games we played up in our bedroom with its magnolia walls and faded candlewick bedspreads allowed us to forget the scene downstairs, silences interspersed with the low rumble of flattened voices, our mother's pottering, plucking at cushions, rearranging crockery and my father faceless with his newspaper held up to hide his expression. We relied on those colourful games to obliterate the dull fear that downstairs was the future that awaited us both.

Then we were sent away from home, two different boarding schools because we were two such different girls, my mother told us. She said it quite nicely, but I knew Helena's was a better school than mine, a school for clever girls. Things always came quickly to Helena, my brain moved in slow motion. Sounds and signs had to make their way through what

sometimes seemed to be a dense mist. I was not always present. So we spent a summer filled with the welcome distraction of packing trunks and crossing things off long lists and our mother could fill her empty evening hours with the sewing on of labels. She frowned and sighed but it lent her expression and hands such a sense of purpose and we heard her mention it to anyone she could, over the telephone, down at the local shop, even to a neighbour or two whom she never usually addressed. "Well the girls are off soon and I'm not nearly done, all the things they need, you wouldn't believe, all that sewing." And they would exchange a similar look, small smiles, widened eyes, a shake of the head and even sometimes a little trill of a laugh, a brief human connection made.

School was a new world and you had to be born into it or else wander the corridors like a lost little ghost. At first those rows of beds, all the same except for a soft toy, well handled, propped up on the bedspreads, flimsy reminders of the past world of home, made me nervous. But so quickly, everything seemed normal to me, the curtains between the beds, when they could and couldn't be drawn, the narrow bedside tables, all the same with a reading light, and there was a rule about that too, one photograph allowed, mine was of Helena. My parents didn't belong in a place like this, they faded into a dimly lit world where I could no longer make out the lines of their faces. The rules, bells that marked time, the new language with different words for lessons and classrooms, mealtimes, punishments and rewards, nicknames for teachers and girls, and the purple and grey of our uniforms, became my life.

Helena and I had promised each other that we would write. As we ploughed our way through all those Enid Blyton boarding school books over the summer, Helena getting through three to every one of mine, we promised long letters that would tell all. I received one letter from Helena that seemed to strain at a chattiness it couldn't quite achieve, my answer was wooden. That was a thing about school, you had to sink into it, let it enclose you or you would remain an outsider. I made friends, not best friends, but a group where I belonged, assurance that I would not be left partnerless when ordered to pair up, that I would be picked for a team, not shamed by having to be assigned a place by a teacher. I thought I was doing well, that I could go on like this until my time here was done. Maybe I had found my place too quickly and easily for it to be long-lasting or maybe I missed Helena more than I would allow my conscious mind to realise. Whatever it was, there was some small empty place inside me that grew a little every year. It was not filled by the bowls of breakfast porridge, grey and steaming, the endless slabs of bread and jam we sat and ate in common rooms with threadbare furniture, on cold winter afternoons when it was dark at four. Our thighs, unnaturally white like slabs of lard, mottled blue with cold and then pink with the sudden heat from the one barred heaters. Like cows we were, chewing on our bread, munching slowly through heaped platefuls. And then Belinda came and I lost my appetite.

She was new and her skin was different from ours, not mottled and white, but an even honey colour. I didn't know you could get skin like that or what she must have spent her life feeding on to be so smooth and golden. Her hair was golden too, caught back in a high pony tail that swung as she moved. Her eyes were blue and liquid and when she smiled, her rounded face dimpled. Up close, I noticed her arms were covered by a soft blonde down, and then there was her smell, warm skin and baby powder. My nostrils were used to dried gravy, wax polish, damp games kit and the coal tar soap issued in the showers. As the scent of Belinda moved into my brain it reeled. I tried to be careful, I tried to be subtle and discreet. Of course she had a large following, girls who surrounded her with noise and bustle, there always seemed something to laugh about and she was their smiling queen. I lurked in the shadows of the group, quiet and watchful, pacing and uncomfortable as a trapped wolf. I looked for ways to get closer to her, to remain unsuspectingly in her presence. It was difficult because I was not her friend, she tolerated me, but I could not find a way to make myself become of any importance in her life.

Then there was the opportunity of the school play. Everyone had to take part and normally I would have gone for some minor role, part of a crowd and in a play like Robin Hood there were plenty such parts, surfs and general rabble and minor merry men. Belinda of course would be Maid Marion, there was no real contest. A few hopefuls tried, but they were quickly dismissed by the teacher in charge. She'd let them audition, give of their best, standing exposed to all eyes up in front, and then she cocked her crow-like neck, a small knowing smile on her face she turned and appealed to the class, her eyes like shiny beads in her shrunken bird face.

"What is wrong here girls?" She paused, her head wobbling, but of course no one spoke. She helped us out. "What should Maid Marion look like? What colour hair should Maid Marion have?"

"Blonde," we all chanted. And the head nodded more vigorously.

"And, what sort of voice?" We were unsure about the right choice of words for this question so the teacher answered her own question.

"Something light, feminine, gentle. Those voices I heard were booming. Maid Marion would not boom." And so Belinda was chosen. And if she was to be Maid Marion I was determined to be Robin Hood. I took my place at the front of the class and boomed. Surely Robin Hood was a boomer. But I was not right. At sixteen, I was small, compact and rounded with shortish pale brown hair and colourless skin. I wouldn't do for Robin. They chose a strapping girl with swimming team shoulders. But I did get the part of Richard the Lion Heart. No one else was keen on the part, it was small and I only came in at the end so there would be a lot of hanging around. My figure could be made more impressive with the help of cardboard chain mail and I could wield a plastic sword. Had to storm on the stage

and rescue Maid Marion from scoundrels and then make a long concluding speech about the glory of England – that suited me fine.

The evening of the dress rehearsal to be performed in front of all the school, I was full of fire. I'd grown very attached to my plastic sword. Standing in the wings, I practised a few feints and thrusts. And then to see Belinda, dressed in a deep blue velvet gown, her hair piled elegantly on her head, threatened by thick-legged oafs...I strode on stage, letting my boots come down hard on the wooden stage, wanting to feel the ground shake. I charged and wielded, filling my lungs and booming with rage. First there were a few titters and giggles. I ignored those. They were nothing. But they grew, they multiplied and became roaring laughter and I saw Belinda raise one long fingered hand to cover her mouth. I stopped, my mouth dried up and no words would come. I tried to shuffle off the stage, but Miss Crow was waiting with her wobbling head.

"No, no you have to finish. You have to be professional," pronounced slowly as though I were dim and wouldn't understand a word so long. And so I stood in front of smirking faces and spoke of the glory of England in a faint, dry voice. No more booming for me.

After I was released, I found a corner to wait until everyone had changed and left in noisy groups. A few glances were thrown my way, I felt them, but didn't raise my eyes to meet them, a few little giggles and whispers, but they could have been about other things. My humiliation was complete, it was no good pressing it further. And then I felt that hand on my shoulder and turned my head to look up into Belinda's face.

"It's not so bad," she said in her Maid Marion voice, "I thought you were quite good actually, just not right for a school play."

I could smell her. With my head twisted round, the tip of my nose was against her warm wrist. I turned the rest of my body around to meet her, but I remained crouched, kneeling before her. I took her hand in mine. She didn't withdraw it, I think she thought I was asking her to pull me up to standing. She gave a little tug, but I resisted it, held fast to her hand and leant my head over it, breathing deeply and brushing my cheek up and over her forearm, feeling the fine down, and then as I reached the crease of her elbow, I put out my tongue and licked the warm skin.

Everything moved very quickly after that. I remember Belinda's sweet face crumpling with horror, heard her run from the room and after that things were disjointed, like clips from black and white films where the sound and images haven't been properly synchronised or put in the right sequence. I stood in the headmistress's office and I was questioned, but I couldn't find any answers, a dull pain in my head, one of my headaches. She looked grave and worried. Everything seemed grey around me, I don't remember any colour. My parents came to fetch me, both of them silent and serious. I sat in the back, with one small bag. The rest of my things were sent on later. At home I lay on my bed and listened to the rumble

of my parents' voices as they decided what should be done with me. I missed Helena. She would have laughed, and pulled a face.

"Licked her, yuck!"

"I don't know, she smelt so nice."

"Yuck, Lizzie!" And we would both have laughed, loudly to cover the voices downstairs.

CHAPTER THREE

I don't know how I came to the manor house, I wasn't looking where I was going, simply keeping my feet moving along the path, and then the trees stopped and I came onto that scrappy sea grass and gorse and the house was perched on a slight rise, rambling, red roofed, clumsily impressive. There was an herb garden, abundant and bedraggled on the side where I was standing. A woman was working in it, wearing faded shorts and a straw hat. When she lifted her head and noticed me I saw it was Frances, the woman who had welcomed us and handed over the keys.

"How's it all going?" she called out and reluctantly I went over.

"Look at all this," she gestured at the wild beds, the profusion of rosemary, lush bunches of basil.

"Sea air isn't good for plants, but of course I nourish the soil here. You know I never used to be able to grow basil, it just stayed puny and rotted, but look now. It must be because I'm the one in charge now, they say that if you're not in charge of your life, you'll never be able to grow basil, or it's parsley, one or the other. When I was a younger wife I used to do all this sailing because that was my husband's love, and I always hated it. Now I'm old, I simply say I don't like it and I'm not going to do it again. Really it was as simple as that, there was no need for all that fuss, and now I can grow basil."

She had a good strong, cheerful voice.

"Would you like to come into the kitchen and have a drink of something? I'm going to stop for the moment." I followed her in through the back door, a sleeping cat on a ripped cushion, a couple of metal dog's bowls, and the kind of kitchen you would expect from a woman like this - warm and messy and welcoming. Butter and jam still on the oilcloth-covered table among letters and bills, some opened, a newspaper and a magazine or two. I watched as she took water from a bottle in the fridge. Her legs were bare and brown, lean, but with the dry loose skin of old age. The areas of brown were marked by small white sunspots. I must have spoken, made the usual polite remarks, thanked her for the water, told her we had everything we wanted because she did not seem to find me awkward, I felt very small sitting there in that room with someone so solid, but I wanted to stay for a while, to have a rest before I had to move on again.

“My boys will be coming later in the summer, with their wives and I’ve got two grandchildren, quite small still. They all love it here, well it’s away from everything, and it’s the kind of place where nothing is expected of you, don’t you think? At least that’s how I feel. And then they love the sailing.” She pulled a face and laughed.

“Do you have children?”

“My baby died,” I said. I hadn’t expected to say it. I watched her face fall and grow concerned.

“I’m so sorry,” she said her voice rich and warm and it was good to hear someone say it like that. Not many people had.

Before I left, Frances asked me to come back in the evening for a drink, to bring Stephen and my parents. She said her husband, Oliver, would tell us a bit of the history of the island, there were a few interesting titbits. “I do hope you like it here, Lizzie,” she held my eyes with hers without flickering away, eyes had been flickering off me for so long now and her touch on my shoulder was not fearful or hesitant. “It’s a muddy, salty place, but I do hope you like it.”

Oliver was round and cheerful and liked an audience. There was another couple there, also from one of the holiday cottages, Jeremy and Dominique. She was French and they had a little girl, a three year old, who was spinning around on the dry lawn in front of the house. In front of us was the North Sea, but it was low tide and a belt of thick, dark mud, smooth as leather separated the water from the land. A ragged rotting pier, its skinny legs bogged down, stretched out, but never reached the water. Birds wheeled around, screeching and darting for nourishment in the fertile mess. Oliver called out their names between pouring drinks. Oystercatchers, numerous sorts of gulls and ducks and geese. We drank, gin and tonics, wine, bottled water because the island’s own water was brackish and foul tasting. The pinkish evening light, our light summer clothing and the presence of smiling strangers brought out a holiday mood in the little group who listened attentively to their host, commenting and laughing where they could. Storsea had been owned during Victorian times by the brewer, Charrington. He built the manor as a retreat for alcoholics, hoping in his later years to make amends for the part he had played in sending so many down that destructive path. Much laughter and chatter about this, a few questions and a promised tour of the house.

“And I’m sure you’ve noticed the World War II pill boxes on your walks,” murmurs and a knowing nod from Stephen. I could see that he was wanting to speak, talk about his boyhood holiday here, but he was being polite, waiting his turn.

“Well Storsea was quite an important little place during the war. Used as an MTB base.” The French woman, Dominique, looked puzzled and my father filled her in.

“Motor Torpedo Boat base, MTB,” he explained carefully, enjoying himself, she smiled sweetly at him.

“That’s right, and you see those dry docks there and there,” he pointed with a plump finger and we peered and nodded. “Well they used them as launch ramps and those torpedoes were fired out right into the North Sea. So of course the island was a target and surrounded by pillboxes. Our boys were always thrilled by this, they spent a lot of time playing soldiers, and once they found what they were convinced was a German radio set. They brought it in, carrying it together as if it was a valuable treasure, their eyes all wide. Actually, it was just a cheap old TV, one of those tinny seventies ones, but I didn’t have the heart to tell them that. They spent most of the holiday playing with the old thing.” We smiled indulgently and the French woman, reminded of children, turned to look for her daughter. She wasn’t there.

“Joelle,” she called out, a little panicky. There was a general hum as the group broke up, moving a few feet in different directions. “She was just here...saw her a few seconds ago...just there on the grass...playing...heard her singing...can’t have gone far...no real danger.” Looking around I saw a spot of colour in the dark expanse of the mud a few metres away. As I began running, I heard with relief a loud cry come from the little bundle and I waded in, losing my sandals in the thick silky smooth mess. Two fat little arms, smeared with mud, two open fingered hands reached up to me as I bent and pulled the child out. Her parents were right behind me, I felt the weight of her small body for barely a second before I handed her over and they both enfolded their bodies round her, moving slowly back to the house, muttering little comforting words. Stephen’s eyes flickered over my face as I stepped shoeless from the mud. Dominique turned to me suddenly, smiling and happy with relief.

“Thank you.”

“It’s nothing, I was just closer by, you would have heard her soon enough. She was just fine. It’s irresistible that mud, just like playing in chocolate pudding.”

“Yes thanks,” her husband echoed and I gave a little shake of my head.

“I’m sorry about your shoes,” Dominique said and we both smiled.

Frances drew the couple and the child to the house. “I’m going to run a nice deep bath with plenty of bubbles,” she told the child. “Can’t let you go back to your cottage like that. And you know what I’ve got, a Teletubbies video, do you know the Teletubbies? My grandchildren adore them. Can’t understand it myself,” she said lightly addressing the parents now, “those creatures have no edge.” She raised a hand in farewell to the rest of us and the little group disappeared into the house. After polite goodbyes to Oliver, and promises for “another evening soon,” we made our way back to our damp little cottage and cold meats for supper.

Dominique knocked and peered through the door after breakfast the next morning. She'd brought a fresh, clean, squirming Joelle with her and some sandals. Stephen and my father had gone out for an early walk, and my mother was the only one with me, tidying up and clearing away.

"I wanted to give you these," she said holding them up. "They're not new I'm afraid, but I didn't know where you'd be able to buy any replacements."

They were strappy and decorated with turquoise beads. Like nothing I would ever buy. I wanted them.

"You don't need to, really, it wasn't your fault and I've got canvas shoes for here."

"Go on, take them," Dominique has a very appealing smile. Then Joelle took them clumsily from her mother's hands, ran towards me and held them up. I took them.

"There," she said loudly and simply. I smiled, my breath caught in my tightened throat.

"She likes you," Dominique said.

"I like her."

"You nice lady," Joelle said firmly.

"You're nice too."

I wished I had something to give her, a chocolaty biscuit, a sticky sweet. But ours was not a house for such things. So I just smiled at her instead. When they were gone, my mother said pointedly, "You can't afford to take your eyes off a child of that age, even for a moment." I slipped one foot in a turquoise sandal and couldn't help admiring it, it was a foot that belonged to someone else.

"I know, Mother," I said without looking at her, "that's why you kept us locked in the back garden and then sent us off to boarding school. You were keeping us safe."

"Lizzie," her voice spluttered after a short silence, "I've just about had enough."

"Enough?"

"This is ridiculous behaviour, your...your...loss does not give you the right to speak to me like this."

"My loss," I repeated blandly, considering the word, "and there is nothing to do with right in any of this."

I don't think much more would have been said even if Stephen and my father hadn't arrived back looking glowing and triumphant with a large bag of the famous samphire.

Stephen cooked the samphire that evening, a quick boil and lots of butter. It was crunchy and salty as tears, but it delighted him, seeming to open up a huge rush of nostalgia about that long ago holiday on Storsea. With my father he had found the long avenue of conker trees. "Matthew and I played there for hours. When you climbed those trees, as high as you could get, you were on top of the world, you were Superman or Batman or whoever you wanted to be."

“And Matthew was Robin, was he?”

Stephen paused briefly, but didn't answer. “We tore our clothes, of course and covered them in all sorts of muck. Mother would be angry, but she would always wash and mend them, she liked us to be well turned out.”

My mother nodded knowingly at this, her small smile seemed smug as if she were connecting herself with this wholesome image of good mothering. My skin prickled with irritation.

“And your father, what about him Stephen, what was he doing when you and your brother were in the trees and your mother was labouring with her needle?”

This time Stephen answered me, but ignored the roughness of my tone. Addressing my parents he confided, “My father wasn't around in the week. He was working, but he came at the weekends, mostly. We spent the whole summer here you see and it wasn't so far for him to come on a Friday evening. I'm afraid he was drinking quite a bit then, gin and tonic, he brought his own supplies. When he went overboard, Matthew and I could escape quite easily.”

“Up those trees,” I said, softly now.

“Yes, Lizzie.”

My father cleared his throat and my mother started collecting dishes. We dispersed in a flurry of activity.

Over the next few days, we explored the island with Stephen as our tour guide. Sometimes we went as a group, other times one or other of us pleaded tiredness, not Stephen of course, and withdrew to one of the dreary little bedrooms or off on a solitary walk. Then there were the shopping expeditions across to the mainland to gather supplies which required a careful study of the tides, a job which gave my father great delight. I had one or two swims, my body a pale shapeless mass in the murky water. But Stephen continued his reminiscences. We saw the field that Stephen remembered carefully piled with haystacks by a tenant farmer. He and Matthew had spent whole days pulling apart the neat arrangement and making a haystack city, not just a house, a city with tunnels to climb through and secret chambers. But a dog found its way to the innermost chamber and left behind a turd which Matthew discovered shortly after when he crawled right into it. Stephen gave a short boyish laugh, my father laughed too, my mother shook her head, but smiled.

“I can just imagine Dora's face,” she said, “I'll bet she had him cleaned up quickly.”

I could imagine Stephen's mother too, making short work of her moon-faced, shit-smearing son, scrubbing first skin, then clothes with those red-knuckled hands. A martyred, disappointed woman with her gin-swigging husband. Was he already having an affair? Was it work or the woman that kept him away? And Dora's only comfort, the older son, looking

on, observing and tasting, second-hand, her bitter disappointment, willing to spend a lifetime making it up to her.

And now Stephen was back on this island, speaking so fondly, so longingly with another bitter woman, and I am bitter, by his side, and those looks, those concerned dog-like looks he sends me, eyes not quite meeting mine, not making contact, could be the same as the ones he sent his mother, to console her for a disappointed life. I couldn't listen to any more, my breath was struggling in my throat so I moved away, out to find some air.

"Lizzie, where are you going, Lizzie, I thought we were going to pick some of those wild plums?"

"Leave her Stephen," my mother's low voice, "leave her, you can't pander to her. She's like a sulky child."

There is not very far to go on a small, salty, muddy island. Walking away is no grand gesture. It carries no more threat than a child hiding in the garden. My mother was right, and she was always so good at ignoring petty childhood rebellions. So I just walked wherever and concentrated on breathing and wondered if there was a conscious purpose in all those boyhood snapshots that Stephen was conjuring up. Was he trying to awaken pity in me, some fondness or even that painful kind of possessive love that is excited when you look at old photographs of someone you love, seeing a past that you were not part of, expressions of youth and happiness that you had no part in. But if it was that, if that, why did he bring my parents on this holiday? What sort of a husband seeking some connection with his wife would drag her parents along with them? For protection, I suppose, to keep viciousness at bay, keep the anger and grief contained rather than spewing hot as lava from that space in my belly.

Stephen did not want progression, he wanted maintenance. All that time when we were first married when I thought my life was moving forward at last, as it should do, as other's lives moved forward. As I splashed our walls with bright colours, yellow, I liked yellow. Hung curtains, did things the way we wanted them, modern and fresh and clean. With young friends and bottles of new world wine and food from all corners of the world. It was no more than playing games, the way Helena and I did, no more than pedalling backwards. Now I am just falling into line, joining the crow-like brigade of disappointed women, and Stephen and I will continue side by side, storing the grief of our "loss" in the hollowed out pockets of our body, silently just as my parents carry their loss, that other accident which wasn't really an accident.

CHAPTER FOUR

After the Belinda incident, my parents decided not to send me back to school. I don't know whether it was my mother or father who came to this decision or whether either of them needed to convince the other, but they both looked firmly set on it by the time they approached me. "You're sixteen, nearly seventeen," my mother said almost cheerfully. I think she was relieved that she wasn't going to have to face heads of schools, talk about what had happened, offer explanations and face their eyes on her, the mother of the licking girl.

"After all," my mother continued, "it's not as if you were ever the A-level type. Not like Helena. You would in all probability be going to secretarial school anyway. You'll just be starting a year or so earlier, getting a head start."

I sat on my bed, picking at loose threads on the faded candlewick bedspread, my head lowered. I could see their shoes, black brogues for my father, brown court shoes with horrid snub noses for my mother, both sets competently polished. My father shuffled and cleared his throat, wanting to escape. My head was too heavy to lift, weighted with the pain of another one of those headaches.

Off I went to Cambridge to a school with a flowery lady's name, meant I think to recall the old days of finishing schools. I was found lodgings in a shabby little house with three other girls and in yet another set of rickety rooms we were put through mind-numbing, back-aching paces from which we emerged bleary-eyed and desperate. Like the other girls, I highlighted my hair, frosted my lips and nails. We were always making a noise, jabbering and squealing, giggling, like a pack of small animals, reassuring ourselves that we were young and that this was a life we were having. We ate as little as possible, but made up for it with drink, indulged ourselves with gorgeous coloured potions and mixtures, sweet enough to mask the anaesthetising dollops of alcohol. And if you could get someone else to pay for the drink, a guy, an undergraduate, that was a triumph, a stamp of all-out approval.

Helena came to visit me. She hadn't heard where I was until her term ended and she got home to find I wasn't there. She spent two or three days, but the other girls were made uneasy by her presence, her sleek dark, unadulterated hair, her wide brown eyes that focused clearly, consuming details. At night she squashed up with me in my tiny bed, tucked up like spoons. On her second night we lay there unable to sleep as we listened to the gut-wrenching noises of a girl on her knees in the bathroom, vomiting up the alcoholic contents of her stomach.

"Christ Lizzie," Helena said turning to face me so that I could feel her warm breath on my face. Her face was silhouetted by the light from a street lamp escaping through the ill-fitting curtains. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"What did Mum and Dad say?"

“You know, nothing much. Mum said you wanted to come here, school wasn’t going well.”

So I told Helena, told her about Belinda, that I licked her, because she smelt nice and because she was kind and because she made life seem light and easy.

“Jesus, Lizzie, you make it sound like she offered you a taste of her ice cream and you took a lick because you hadn’t had that flavour before.”

“Sort of,” I answered in a whisper.

“Well if you were going to get chucked out of school and end up in this dump, you should have taken a great big bite while you were at it.”

We snorted and giggled.

“Should have taken the whole bloody cone,” Helena continued, sniggering as the heaving started up again, loud through the thin dividing wall.

At the station, waiting for the train to take her away, Helena held my pale brown eyes with her dark ones. “Seriously,” she said, “you’ve got to move on. You’re not some loser, some thikko and this, this place of yours, it’s squalid. It’s a dumping ground...Come on, Lizzie,” she said giving me a quick hug, “we’re going to be women with the world at our feet, we’re going to sample all the finer things in life...remember?”

Then the train came and took her away. She smiled and waved madly. I stood and watched. I remembered, of course I remembered, all those nights of imagining how it would be once we escaped our quiet house, and the low rumblings of our parents. But they were Helena’s games, I just played along. I never could keep up. I’d watched her, mouth open, whizzing along; I’d stay in the concrete garage.

Helena didn’t visit me again, not while I was at secretarial school. Even when we had the same holidays she was often away, invited to friends, girls whose names I heard, but never met. I continued with the course, taking a kind of pleasure in such practical, organised work. At night I joined the others, blended in. Sometimes a group of us were invited to college dinners by undergraduate boys. We trooped along like a pack of colourful noisy birds, perching along dusty sofas in large, cold college bedrooms, sipping sherries, while the boys, done up in their formal black strained to appear urbane and adult, their eyes flickering nervously, hungrily, over us. The shy ones hung back, waiting for the alcohol to take effect, for the late night disintegration to take place. The bolder ones traded banter with us, a strange courtship that combined a kind of flattery with insult. We were species, we were unshockable although we might gasp and widen our eyes in mock horror, pout in pretty offence. And always, always we could be relied on to laugh. The presence of an undergraduate girl among the party complicated things. The boys were pulled off course and were unsure how to play it, for these girls they reserved a different kind of banter, there was still that mixture of flattery and insult, but it had to be more subtle, hinted at, not so

easily obvious. With these girls they had to be ready to change tactics, to play a straighter or more sophisticated game depending on the reaction which could vary from complete disdain, to head on collision. With us, the secies, the wind always blew in the same direction. We ruffled our feathers and capitulated.

There was a girl who was often in our group, although I didn't know her well. I always noticed her because she looked as I imagined Tinkerbell would if she were not an animation, a Tinkerbell who hadn't slept well for a long time, with large heavy-lidded pale blue eyes and white blond feathery hair that formed a fluffy halo around her delicate head. With frosted pink lips, and white white skin, except for the dark smudges under those exhausted eyes, she looked as if fairy dust would fall from her as she moved. It was another of those college dinners, a group of four boys had invited us, but there had been some sort of misunderstanding. There was an extra girl, four secies and one undergraduate from another college. The college girl sat slightly apart from us, trying to look at ease. The boys brought in drinks and then huddled by the door speaking in low voices. There was a cocky one called Henry, who guffawed and spoke in a stage whisper we were meant to overhear.

"Oh god, what a cock up. We've got one too many, there are too many, we'll have to get rid of one."

"We can't do that," another, quieter voice.

Henry strolled forward, stood in front of the sofa and surveyed the little line of secies. The college girl, studied the contents of her glass distractedly.

"So girls, we've made a mistake, we've got to chuck one of you out."

"Henry," a hovering boy said nervously, trying to bring his voice under control. "I'm sure we can sort something out."

I willed the college girl to stand up, to say something. She was the odd one out, it would be easier for her to leave with some dignity, she could simply fake disdain for yet another of these tedious dinners and stroll independently off to the college bar. But she sat tight. Henry wasn't addressing her anyway. His eyes were moving over the four of us, the secies all done up for the evening, shifting and giggling nervously.

"Well, you needn't look at me," Tinkerbell said, pouting those frosted lips, raising those heavy lids and allowing them to droop again.

Henry's eyes focused on her, they narrowed cruelly, the rest of us quite forgotten. "But, I am looking at you, you gaping cunt."

There was an intake of breath around the room, a silence, broken simultaneously by a forced laugh from Henry, a squeal from Tinkerbell. I think the words had slipped out of Henry's unguarded mind, and he now had to brave it out.

“Henry, really...” one of his friends took two steps closer, his face glowing pink, but he was unsure what to do or say next. All his attempted urbanity drained from him and his shoulders drooped boyishly in his tailored jacket.

“Did you hear what he called me?” Tinkerbelle’s voice rose higher, a peculiar pitch that confused delight and hysteria. Henry seized on the confusion.

“You heard me,” he said, struggling for control. But even he couldn’t repeat the words.

In the end, neither Henry nor Tinkerbelle, I really can’t remember her real name, but that one suited her fine, came into dinner. Tinkerbelle had a little weep, her eyes grew pink round the rims, but her mascara was waterproof so it didn’t run. Henry patted her shoulder and moved a hand up her thigh. By the time he took her off to his room to console her she was sniffing and giggling a little. So in the end there was an empty place at the table, where Henry would have sat. His friend, the blushing one, sat on my other side.

“So, plenty of space after all that,” he said, not quite looking at me.

“Yes, a gaping gap.” I had meant it to be funny, but he hid his awkwardness in a flurry of activity, passing bread, pouring water. The evening was not a success. We couldn’t slip into the roles required although he did kiss me in a cold corridor on the way out, gently and kindly, in apology for his friend.

Tinkerbelle, and others like her, might never go on to become secretaries, or maybe only briefly. They would marry a Henry and carry on the game of insult and desire. Apologies would be in the form of outrageous gifts, something to laugh over with girlfriends. Other girls streamed into London, struggling for places in the more glamorous law firms and banks where the pickings were richer. I stayed in Cambridge and found a position in a small biotech company. It has been my only job, I am still there. I’m the only secretary and my desk has become a miniature world, I have found my own way of doing things, a series of systems I have worked out myself. There are four men in the office, three in a large open plan space, tinkering away, mostly silently, addressing me rarely and nodding brief thanks for orders of sandwiches and pieces of paperwork. Two of the three have speech impediments and keep words to a minimum. The business is owned by a youngish, energetic man, the inventor of the three products around which the company is based. He flits around speaking to the other three in what at first seemed a foreign language, but has, over the years become almost familiar. For long periods he remains closed in his office which forms one corner of the space. He is satisfied with my work, friendly in bursts, sometimes briefly entertaining, but I can’t say that I know him. We have no office get togethers, no one has drinks or eats their lunch together. When I got married, I simply entered my changed details on the relevant files.

I didn’t keep contact with the girls I had trained with, we dispersed and entered different lives. I was glad that Helena, when she came to it, chose Oxford as her university. Our

worlds had separated and I would not have wanted her to feel awkward, trying to fit me in with her friends. We no longer looked as though we belonged together, my clothes were cheaply professional, she was stylishly original. We met up at a few Sunday lunches at home, but they were grim occasions, purely dutiful. Criticism and tasteless food were dished up in uncomfortable portions by my mother.

“You’ll never have nice things, Lizzie, not with a job like yours, you’re not going places, you should be looking around.”

“Is that how students dress, Helena, and I thought Oxford was a smart place, it’s meant to be isn’t it? Does everyone look like that? I’m sure you know all about it, but I can’t think that it’s appealing, not to men.”

‘Nice things,’ that was always the final note. Life was about getting and having ‘nice things.’ And they were best got and had by appealing to a man. In our old bedroom upstairs, looking onto the garden that now seemed so small, Helena and I could laugh about it. Our mother and her ‘nice things.’ Our newspaper-reading, throat-clearing father who had so little to say to us. But the laughter was a little too forced, and carried with it the old desperation. Then Helena simply refused to come.

“Stuff her, stuff her and her meat and gravy,” she said over the telephone when I called to find out if she would be there one Sunday. So I went on my own, I don’t know what drew me back, maybe because it was a habit and I didn’t have very much else to do.

Then there was that month when I did not go home, that month when I couldn’t go because I had somewhere much more important to be. A whole month, with Helena in Rome. My boss, passing my desk at his usual brisk pace, halted briefly one morning as if he’d just remembered something. “If you don’t take a holiday in the very near future, Elizabeth, you risk forfeiting a whole four weeks, I can’t have employees accumulating days.” And so I rang Helena who was in Rome, doing the year in Italy that was part of her Modern Languages course and she said, “Come, come as soon as you can.” It didn’t take much organising: notice at work, one tired-looking houseplant and a set of keys, just in case, handed over to a neighbour who recognised me by sight but didn’t know my name. “I don’t mind if it dies, the plant, I’m not attached to it really,” I told her and she nodded vaguely, clutching it in one hand, swinging the keys in the other as if she wasn’t sure what to do with them. Her name was Sarah and she gave me quite a friendly wave when she saw me getting into the taxi with my suitcase, which I thought was kind of her.

Rome seemed to be a golden city, rich golden air, substantial columned buildings and people who talked and laughed in groups, making so much noise and watching and smiling at other noisy groups. Helena belonged, her body moved in the way of an Italian girl, neat and easy moving. And that golden light, it made her hair as rich as a polished conker. I have one photograph of that time, one of Helena and me together, I bought a beautiful

Venetian cut glass frame specially for it. It is the kind of photograph you want to leave out for others to see. We are standing close together, arms linked and Helena is laughing, you can see her teeth, gleaming teeth and a little piece of pink tongue and her hair all sleek. I'm smiling too, my eyes turned to look at her as she laughs at the camera. My hair is different. Helena took me to have it sorted out my second day there. "You can't go round like that Lizzie, that highlighted look is right out and it just looks cheap. Your hair looks dead, like dead straw." So in the photograph, my hair is also sleek, but much shorter, a sleek honey blonde helmet. I look a little like a happy pixie, contemplating the wonder of Helena. In Rome, Helena was truly beautiful.

We shared her room, which was large and high ceilinged with streaming light coming from two tall windows with that old-fashioned, uneven glass. The room was part of a magnificent, though slightly decaying, apartment with a fifteenth century courtyard, belonging to Helena's landlady, Signora Reale, a once handsome woman with stories to tell of disappointed love to whoever would listen, and a white puffball of a dog who needed constant walking. She left a rather squashed welcome cake on my bed, a panettone, Helena told me, and warned me not to be drawn in. "Just smile and keep moving when she starts talking, otherwise you'll get stuck, but you should be fine, her English is not great." I had four hours to myself in the morning while Helena worked at the University Press, translating sections of medical manuals into readable English. I got up late, soaked lazily in the enormous bathtub down the corridor with its roughened surface-worn enamel, shared a tiny coffee with Signora Reale and listened, less than half understanding, to her flow of words and walked her little dog, armed with a scooper in case of accident, stopping off in a small café near Helena's workplace, the kind for busy people with no chairs, just a counter, where I drank more coffee and maybe ate a Cornetto, giving the dog a crumb or two, waiting for Helena to join me. On my own, I was not very adventurous. Helena would ask me what I had done with my morning and then laugh and shake her head at me.

"Lizzie, you're in Rome, you can do anything. I expected at least a love affair or something."

But on my own, I found the chaos of the city a little scary, I needed Helena to lead the way. She had a little moped and she coaxed me onto the back of it. I hardly dared to open my eyes as we shot down narrow streets, pushed between lines of waiting traffic. I gripped tightly with my legs, imagining a knee cap crushed by a careless car, pressed my cheek against Helena's warm back and wrapped my arms around her waist.

"Not so tightly, for Christ's sake Lizzie, I can't breathe. Come on," I heard her voice rumbling inside her, "relax a little, open your eyes, look around." After a while I did, and it was wonderful, to sit safely behind my beautiful sister, and I knew what her face would look like even if I couldn't see it, and watch life rushing at and past us, such a colourful, busy,

peopled life. Crossing the street was more difficult, there seemed to be no system, cars and mopeds like whining mosquitoes came from all directions and didn't look like they would stop. You were supposed to stare them down and barge your path across. If you hesitated they ignored you. I couldn't do it, it felt like stepping off the edge of a precipice into a pit of monsters. Helena had to pull me. I held my breath, peeped out from eyes squeezed into slits, and she pulled me across, muttering a briefly impatient, "Christ, Lizzie."

With Helena, I went shopping and bought clothes I would never have tried on without her. She ran her hands expertly over leather and cloth, examining me with her head at a small angle, a little frown on her forehead. She nodded or shook her head, exchanged quick incomprehensible words with daunting sales girls. And when I hesitated, drawing in my breath at price tags, she simply said, "Just spend some money, Lizzie, or are you saving up for all those 'nice things'?" We laughed at this, quite loudly and the sales girl joined in even though she couldn't have known what we were talking about. So I bought the clothes.

I went out on one of those golden Roman evenings wearing honey coloured suede trousers that matched my hair and beautifully made shoes that belonged to Helena, a little big, but so elegant. In the crowded bus on the way to meet Helena's friends, I stood holding tightly to the cool metal pole as we rocked through the traffic, moving my toes in the borrowed shoes, loosening a hand every now and then to touch the surprising softness of the trousers. Helena stood facing me, our heads close together. Two hands were placed gently, but firmly on my bottom and began to caress it, expertly feeling its contours. My mind seemed reluctant to register the cause of the sensation. I stood frozen, unmoving except for the rocking bus. But a slow heat which gathered deep inside me and moved through my bloodstream until it shone red and hot on my face, was noticed by Helena.

"Lizzie, what's wrong? Is some bastard...Lizzie kick him, Lizzie..." Her mouth opened and I looked into its redness as the first Italian insults poured loudly out. The man behind me, middle-aged, unremarkable and expressionless knew his time was up and simply moved to hop out at the next stop, disappearing into the crowd.

"Jesus Lizzie, Christ Lizzie, I mean fuck it, you can't just let things happen to you." We had reached our stop and Helena was moving quickly and I was struggling in my slightly too large, but very elegant, shoes to keep up.

"This is a common thing in Rome, all this fondling and things and you're supposed to shout about it, make a noise, a nice big noise, not stand there and blush." Her head down, Helena stormed on, then she stopped abruptly and turned to face me, I bumped into her and a few others on the pavement narrowly dodged us. She put her arms around me and hugged me, speaking into my ear, "You've got to act Lizzie, make things go your way, you can't just ...drift. Anyway," she gave me a little push and carried on her way, "let's go and have a good time. You'll like them, my friends."

I did like them. They were wonderful to watch. Boys, young men with distinctive noses and very bright eyes and clothes you would never see on an Englishman. Girls with clear faces and easy style, flicking hands and throwing words to each other like playful balls. I was Helena's sister, so I was part of their group, they drew me in, speaking a little English, telling me their names. There was an Isa and Fabiana, a Michele, a Stanislau. I forget any others. I don't know how she got them, this little group that fitted so well, that knew where to go and what to order. Steaming bowls of buttered pasta with tiny slivers of white truffle, that made you want to suck their earthy scent through your nostrils, clean white slices of mozzarella that gave and melted on your tongue. I didn't know there was such food, like dishes snatched from some god's table. It was better than anything Helena and I had imagined we would eat when we were grown up and women about town, better than those oversweet pastries which were the best a brain could produce, used only to the diet of suburban England. So I ate and drank ruby wine that drew in my cheeks and blackened my lips. And I danced and kissed a boy with curly dark hair who moved his warm hands through my sleek new hair.

I did not mind so much when my time was up and I had to leave. Helena had made it come true, all those things we dreamed and talked about as children. She was living this lovely life that had no bearing, not in any sense, to the silent greyness of our childhood.

"You've done it, Helena," I told her seriously, "you've escaped completely. You have a dream life and I don't mind much whatever mine is like because I'll always be able to picture you here, with this life."

She laughed at me, she thought me very funny. "You're sweet Lizzie, and yes it is nice here. It's good fun. But it's hardly how I want to end up. I mean I spend four hours a day translating passages about various parasites that live in the gut, and what have I got? A nice room in a pretty apartment. Just wait Lizzie, I'm going to have so much more. And as for you, get a better job, you're in a dead end."

My small flat seemed even smaller and blander when I got home. My boss smiled and welcomed me back, his eyes lifted to my face for a second or two, but no one at work mentioned my new hair. My neighbour, Sarah, called round to return my key. My plant looked barely alive. "I'd chuck it if I were you," she said. "By the way, I like your hair, it suits you. We should go for a drink some evening. Maybe Friday if you're free?"

I was. Sarah gave me a new plant, a lush purple-blue hydrangea. "It should last for a while, but once the flower has gone, just bin it. You can't waste time over these things."

When Helena sent me the photograph, the one of us together, I bought the Venetian frame specially for it and put it next to the hydrangea. It was the first of my nice things. Me and my beautiful sister.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dominique found me on one of my solitary walks. She'd seen me as I set off down one of those narrow paths into the trees and called out. I turned and raised my hand in greeting as she and the child made their way in tiny steps towards me. Joelle's mouth and the front of her dress were smeared with plum. She gave a funny little smile exposing tiny white teeth also bloody with plum. I stared at her for a few seconds before I remembered I should be listening to her mother and giving some sort of response.

"So would you like to then?" Dominique looked at me and waited, she smiled expectantly.

"Like to..."

"Join us for a barbecue, on the beach, or rather on the pebbles. You didn't hear me did you?" she laughed, "too busy looking at this wild creature. It is plums you know, although it looks as if she's attacked and killed some little animal."

"Like plums," Joelle said and held one out to me that she'd been carrying in her small fist. The skin had burst and it was a little squashed, but I thanked her and took it. She studied me intently as I ate it, salty-sweet and warm.

"Yum," I said and rubbed my tummy. This made her laugh.

"A barbecue," I repeated rather blankly.

"Yes, I thought I'd drive over to the mainland and get some things. There must be a good fish shop where I can get something interesting, something local we don't know about. The tide will be about right soon. You could come with me if you like. Jeremy has rented a boat, a little one with a sail, a dinghy," she pronounced this carefully as if the word was new to her. "Maybe your husband would enjoy that?"

"Yes he would."

"Our two husbands can mess about in the little boat, then we can all eat and Joelle can have a little ride too, can't you cherie?"

The child nodded vigorously. Dominique looked down at my feet. I was wearing my canvas shoes, dirty and discoloured.

"The sandals didn't fit? I'm sorry."

"No, no they did, but they're so pretty. I didn't want to ruin them, not when I'm just tramping around."

Dominique laughed as if I'd made a joke. "That's when they're meant to be worn."

"I'll go now, I'll go and put them on and tell Stephen and then I'll come with you, help you with the shopping."

"Good."

We bought lots of good things. Dominique had got directions from Frances and knew where to find fresh meat and fish, good bread and cheese, chocolate and cakes. We overdid it because even the salty town with its caravan park on the outside seemed exciting after being on a muddy island for days. We stopped at market stalls, fingering useless things we didn't want, cheap Indian scarves because they were soft and colourful, clumsy blue-glazed pottery, miniature dolls houses the size of a fist, carved from blocks of light wood, doors and windows and creeping roses painted on. I bought one for Joelle. And then we went back, past the caravan park and over the little seawall and across that great quilt of dark brown mud to Storsea.

It was warm sitting on the pebbles and the food was very good. I'd watched Stephen and Dominique's husband Jeremy, out in the bland North Sea on the little rented dinghy. Fiddling with ropes and sails, calling out to each other in boyish barks, some laughter, and then some time of effortless, graceful, silent movement through the water, before more shouts, a clumsy lurch for the about turn, and then that beautiful gliding again. Their faces were pink and glowing when they joined us, damp from the sea, wet hair snaking down their legs. They ate wolfishly, biting and exclaiming their pleasure with mumbled sounds through full mouths. My mother had declined the picnic and stayed back at the cottage to rest, a headache she said, and my father after watching a bit of the sailing, standing up to his knees in the water, hands in his pockets, baggy shorts blowing a little sadly about his pale, old man's legs, turned and wandered back to find her. Stephen, without the need to play to my parents, was a boy on holiday, pink-cheeked, freckled and hungry. He should be like this, I thought watching him from the corner of my eye, he can't be like this with me, not now, so he shouldn't be with me at all.

"God this is good," Stephen said helping himself to more, "you know what my mother gave us to eat when I came here as a boy? Tinned frankfurters and d'you remember that horrible powdered potato, Smash it was called, well we had loads of Smash."

Jeremy nodded knowingly, Dominique looked puzzled.

"Yes," Stephen continued, "everything tinned and out of a packet unless we could pick it ourselves and we had to drink the water from the taps. Bottled water was only for the grown ups, too expensive to waste on children. God it was foul, makes me gag just thinking about it. I remember once creeping into the living room and quietly opening the cupboard where my father kept his supply of tonic water, for his gin you know, he was a bit of a drinker. Well I got hold of this bottle and I was so pleased with myself, all set to go and drink it in front of my brother, not offer him any of course, when my father grabbed my shoulder. He'd been asleep on the sofa, I hadn't even noticed him, didn't even know he'd arrived, he came and went a bit. Well he walloped me, really walloped me."

“Over a bottle of tonic?” Dominique asked looking confused as if she had missed part of the story.

“Yes,” Stephen’s voice was quite cheerful. He helped himself to a couple of plums.

“My parents were the same,” Jeremy said, “not the walloping, but thinking anything other than water was spoiling the children. A bottle of coke was pure luxury.” He and Stephen nodded together companionably.

“The English like a bit of deprivation, I think,” Dominique said, studying the two men curiously. “Luxury makes you uncomfortable.”

“Oh, it was just a generational thing,” her husband said dismissively, “now we’re guzzlers and stuffers just like the rest of the first world.” His daughter, to distract the adults from boring talk, pounced on her father from behind, wrapping her small arms around his neck. He made gurgling noises as if he were being throttled which delighted her. She squeezed tighter.

“Boat! In boat!” she ordered. Her parents bustled about putting on her little orange life jacket, fussing over the ties to see they were secure. She wore a blue cotton bathing costume with a little gathered frill running around her plump middle. Stephen and I sat watching. Stephen caught my eyes briefly before letting his lower and fall away, his expression once again guarded, before he arranged a smile on his face and addressed Jeremy in an overloud voice.

“Here, let me give you a hand.”

Dominique and I sat on the warm stones and chatted idly, watching the men and the child, smiling when she smiled and waving energetically back when she waved. When she returned she picked her way over the pebbles as fast as she could and plonked herself down on my lap, patting my thighs with cold, starfish hands. I felt the weight of her, her small wet bottom at first icy but warming quickly to match my blood temperature. I concentrated on my breathing, on loosening the quick knot of pain in my stomach. I didn’t look at Stephen, couldn’t bare his flickering eyes. But I know the pink boyishness of the afternoon would have left him completely.

“That’s a great photo,” Jeremy called out, picking up a camera, “smile you two.” Joelle parts her lips and shows two rows of tiny pure white teeth. I stretch my mouth, lowering my eyes from the camera.

“Perfect,” says Jeremy, “I’ll send you a copy.”

And tonight, in the cottage, with my parents in the room next door, lying together under the baby blue blanket, Stephen and I lie. We’ve thrown off the pink blanket because of the close warm air which smells of salt and the fertile rot of mud and seaweed.

“That story,” Stephen says into the dark, “my father beating me because of the tonic water. I didn’t finish it. I didn’t say that after he beat me, he cried. Not just tears down his

face, but a horrible sobbing and he fell to his knees and held me around the waist. His head was against my stomach. He made horrible sounds. I stood there all stiff, waiting for it to end. There's not much a boy can do with his father on his knees and crying. So I waited and when his arms loosened a little I escaped and left him there on the floor." Stephen pauses for a while and then mutters softly, "Poor bugger."

"Why are you telling me this?" I ask after a while, into the dark, staring upwards towards the low ceiling.

"I just want to. Because I just thought what a poor bugger he was." We lie silently for a while and then I hear the sweep of Stephen's hand along the bottom sheet towards me. I can feel its heat next to, but not quite touching, my leg.

"Hold my hand Lizzie."

"Why?"

"I just want you to."

And I do hold his hand, because he asked me to and I know he's a poor bugger too, but his hand feels too hot, slightly damp and after a while I pull my fingers away and curl my body up like a foetus. I pretend to sleep. But I think of the photograph taken on the beach. Me with a three year old girl on my lap, her small hands pressed onto my thighs, browning a little in the sun, her little white-toothed grin. If they did send me the photograph, if I did open an envelope in a few weeks time, dropped by the postman onto the mat in my yellow-walled, light-floorboarded hall and opened the envelope to see that photograph with perhaps a scrawl in black ballpoint at the back, Dominique's writing I'd imagine, that distinctive French handwriting they all seem to have, "In memory, of a perfect summer's day," something like that and then she'd sign their names; would I frame it, leave it out like my photograph of me and Helena, another perfect day, more smiling faces, or pop it quickly in a drawer on top of that large brown envelope which lies there, unopened and face down?

I knew what it was when I saw it, when I picked it up off the floor. Matt brown envelope, addressed to Mr and Mrs Stephen Wright, stamped with the name of the hospital. I left it on the hall table. It wasn't moved and Stephen said nothing. It stayed there until I couldn't bare to see it anymore and tossed it into the drawer, holding it by the corner between two fingers. They recommended the photographs, the doctors did, strongly recommended, research had proved that it helped the grieving parents, helped them to have a picture or two of their dead baby. But that was the tricky thing with us, I never knew whether that tiny creature with paper thin, hairless skin, reddish purple with eyes fused shut like a blinded kitten was a baby or not. They called it a foetus, a few weeks away from being viable, not quite qualifying as human. They showed the little thing to me, encouraged me to touch it, to pick it up, that was also strongly recommended. Then it was taken away, removed and the photographs followed.

CHAPTER SIX

I didn't see much of Helena when she returned from Rome. She was busy, busy with her finals, she got a first. I was told about it by my mother over the phone and she saw it less as an occasion for triumph than as an opportunity to reproach me for my lack of success, my mediocre job, my single state. She never realised that what I felt for Helena would never be jealousy. Then there were job interviews and Helena went in on the tail end of the roaring tide of the Eighties that took so many graduates into the caverns of the big banks, like so many happy plankton swept into the mouths of whales. There were 'Golden Hellos', incredible starting salaries, possibilities of mortgages on smart flats, everything you needed to be grown up and on the move. I went to London to see Helena's new flat. It was empty except for a double bed in the bigger of the two bedrooms, an enormous sofa in the living room that looked like piece of sculpture and the fitted kitchen, everything brilliantly white and untouched. Helena's little bundles of clothes, her few cardboard boxes and the cluster of cosmetics on the white tiles of the bathroom looked somehow sad.

"Enormous isn't it?" her voiced bounced off the empty walls and un-curtained windows, sounding hollow.

"Yes."

"Of course I haven't got started on it yet. Just wait until it's finished. It's going to be beautiful."

"Of course it will."

"Just difficult to find the time."

"Have they been to see it, Mother and Father?"

"I haven't managed to tear the old sod away from his newspaper. I think I'm beginning to forget what he looks like. He's probably all wrinkled and grey like a death's head behind it and we'd scream with horror if he popped his head over it. Scary stories for our children, their grandfather, the man with the newspaper head. As for the old bat, I wouldn't let her come here even if she'd asked, no 'nice things', imagine the comments. Anyway, fuck them, I just wanted you to see it."

"It's great Helena."

"Yes, it is isn't it?"

And she smiled at me, but her mouth seemed tight and there were shadows under her beautiful dark eyes.

We went out to dinner that night, racing away in her new car, a dark green Renault Clio, a Daddy's Girl car, only she bought it herself, not outright, just a down payment, still plenty

owing, but her prospects were good. She drove recklessly, revving the engine needlessly, taking a dangerously tight gap at a roundabout. The driver of the other car hooted angrily.

“Jerk,” Helena muttered. Her skin looked pale, a little ghostly in the orange street lights. I studied her as she gripped the wheel tightly, her knuckles bony, her profile sharper than usual, she’d lost weight, but the dark eyes glittered familiarly and her mouth was parted with the excitement I remembered of a child on a stationary bicycle willing herself forward in her mind.

“What you looking at?”

“You. Slow down.”

She laughed at me, but not happily.

We joined a group of her friends in a great noisy hall of a restaurant, something new, something just opened, the latest with blue lights and lots of chrome. Her friends all seemed to talk at once, all so eager to get their words out, to be constantly moving their mouths, to join in with the clamour. MBAs, American of course, anything else was purely lame, were they worth it, earning potential, which areas were on the up, snap up a flat quickly, like a goldmine, go for it, get in there, mortgage yourself for all your worth now, no wimping out. For a moment I was drawn by their energy, a thick force I almost wanted to touch, the muscles pumped in their cheeks as they chewed their food with lean-boned jaws. The food was good, finely arranged, but they stabbed at it indiscriminately, like sharp-beaked birds, there was none of the ease, nothing of the slow moving pleasure of that evening in Rome. I was the only one to order a pudding, a beautiful raspberry red jewel arranged on a large blue glass plate, decorated with spun sugar. I focused on allowing the edge of the spoon to slip into the moist give of the mousse. I let it sit for a moment on my tongue, feeling the prickle of the sharp sweetness before it slipped down my throat. The darting, glittering, edginess of these people tired me, their bodies would be too hard for comfort.

We went dancing, an exercise in stamina rather than anything else, we might as well have gone for a jog and then Helena and I returned to her flat. With only me to watch her, she let her body slump.

“I haven’t even made a bed for you or anything, Lizzie, and now I’m too fagged out. You’ll have to sleep with me.”

I made us hot chocolate and we lay huddled in her big bed, the walls grey and empty in the city light.

“Christ, we’re like two old cronies with our cocoa and pyjamas,” Helena said flatly.

She looked like an exhausted child. Dark eyes in a pale face, tangled hair and stick-like arms protruding from an over-large T-shirt.

“At least it’s quiet here,” I said. “too much noise tonight, all those voices on and on...”

“I like the noise. It makes me think things are happening, life is exciting, it’s just like now, when it’s quiet, when I come home and I’m alone and it’s quiet, I forget what all the noise was about, all that bustle and struggle just falls away and there’s just this great big dark pit with failure lurking like some monster in the shadows, waiting to get me, smirking all over its ugly face. You see there’s all this expectation, and there’s only working and getting, or failing, the rest is just a huge blank space.”

I sipped rhythmically from my mug of cocoa, taking comfort from the milky sweetness, listening to my sister’s voice in the darkened room. She didn’t drink, just held the mug with both hands wrapped around it as if for warmth although the room, the whole flat was a little stuffy. She wasn’t looking at me, she held her head straight, facing the great blank wall opposite. But I watched her and I thought, “I’ll get something for that wall, some unusual prints, something bold and coloured for her to look at. I’m not going to leave her with a wall like that.”

“Did you have those little books at school, Lizzie? Autograph books we called them and we all had to sign each other’s and write funny little poems in them. They were a real craze. Did you have them at that school you went to?”

“Don’t know, don’t really remember.”

“But you must do. Little books, pages all different colours, lots of pink and purple, and most girls wrote sickening little things, “Roses are red, violets are blue, sugar is sweet and so are you...” That type of rubbish and then signing their names all elaborate and decorating them with hearts and curls and anything that would make them look more significant. But I always did the same thing, squeezed my lines right at the beginning or end of the book. “By hook or by crook, I’m the first (or last) in your book.” And you had to be sneaky, write all around the edge of the page so no one could slip in before or after you. It wasn’t the words that mattered, it was standing out, being noticed for something, by hook or by crook.”

She was quiet for a moment, I heard us both breathing. She didn’t turn her face to me, I don’t think she was expecting an answer or any kind of comment from me. So I said nothing and after a while she continued, her voice flat.

“And that’s what I’m like, Lizzie, that is all my life is about, getting noticed, just climbing up the next step so you can shout down at the others, ‘I’m the king of the castle’, and then they catch up and you’ve got to move on, and there’s always the possibility that you’ll slip and just end up underneath all those climbing feet. Look at our parents Lizzie, the old bat only had us because that’s what you did and she had nothing else to do and the old git too, maybe that’s all it was for him, who knows?”

Suddenly her voice rose up, a little high, a little urgent, her neck whipped round to face me but her features were blurred in the dim light, I couldn’t make out her expression.

“D’you think there’s anything, Lizzie, is there anything I can do that would make him look at me, make the old fart put down that fucking paper and look right at me and like what he sees? Maybe even say something, I don’t know, anything, what fathers are supposed to, supposed to say. I mean there are things you expect, you can expect things can’t you, as a daughter, from a father...?”

“I don’t know.” I said it quietly, almost a whisper. It was all I could think of to say.

“That’s just it Lizzie,” Her face was back to the wall now, her voice deadened again, “we’re just two little by-products of convention, and you don’t mind about it. You don’t expect anything in particular, you just go on, like a dropped leaf on a stream, and if you get held up, stacked against a lump of scum, you’ll just stay there until you’re washed on. Like tonight, I saw you, you didn’t like them did you? Didn’t like the conversation. But you wouldn’t have tried to change it or throw in a line to get a reaction, instead you just stop listening and order a pudding, and eat it and the best part is, enjoy it. I did see, you know, you were savouring every mouthful, the look of it, the taste, the colour. How do you do that?” Her voice was lively again, rising in a genuine question, the pale face turned to me, her lips parted so I could see the whiteness of a few teeth, the blackness of her mouth.

“It was delicious,” I said, “sharp and sweet and fruity, and the texture, firm and soft, just right, and did you see that spun sugar, so pretty, smoky, like caramel...”

Helena laughed, I was glad I made her laugh even if there was a brittleness to it.

“And if I’m a leaf, although I don’t feel very much like a leaf, what the hell are you?”

I was trying to make her laugh again, but it didn’t work.

“I don’t know. When I sit in this flat, like this in the dark I don’t know, but when the noise and the day start, I just move and keep moving and jumping about and doing whatever everyone else does, just a bit louder and a bit faster because I can.” She reached over and picked up my hand, held it loosely in hers, against her hot, dry skin.

“I need you to be there, Lizzie, in your funny little house, doing that funny job, and eating puddings. I like it that little things can please you.”

“Lots of littles there,” I said, “Loser Lizzie with her little life to make you feel better about yourself.” My words were entirely without resentment, there was not a trace of bitterness in my tone, Helena knew that.

“And Helena the Hero will gather all the fruits of success and save Loser Lizzie from a life of obscurity, transform her into Lovely Lizzie and they will both become fine women with the world at their feet.” I made my voice deep and American, a superhero’s voice to make her laugh, and she did, a bit weakly.

“You are Lovely Lizzie, you’re lovely now and I’m no hero, so don’t count on me.”

“I’m not being serious,” I said dismissively. She slumped down in the bed, pulling the sheet up to her neck, curling her body up.

“But you are a bit, you are being a bit serious.”

“Not,” I answered, lying next to her. Her body made hardly any dent in the mattress, she really was much too small.

I did not sleep well, the air in the room was too stuffy and I did not want to wake Helena by trying to open a window, anyway there would probably be window locks and all kinds of things. So I lay and listened to her breathing, she muttered a bit, but I couldn't make out any words. In the morning I left her asleep and slipped out to buy some breakfast. I found a place that sold chocolate croissants, still warm and I bought some good coffee because Helena seemed to only have instant which was very unlike her because good coffee was one of the things we always said we would have when we left home. It was one of those things women who have the world at their feet always have. I also bought her some flowers, a great big expensive bunch of perfect roses, their petals an unusual orange, like flames. She was still in bed when I got back so I arranged everything nicely. She didn't have a vase, surely someone must have given her flowers before, my sister was the kind of woman to have admirers. Even I had a vase, two. I put them in a plain white jug, which was not the right thing, it detracted from their beauty a little and then there wasn't even a table to put them on and I had to place them on one of the firmer boxes. The croissants I put on another box. It looked like a children's tea party, children pretending to be grown ups.

I woke Helena and she wandered through, pale with dishevelled hair and bruised eyes, her legs thin and white. She rubbed her eyes and looked at the flowers and the breakfast arranged on the boxes. She smiled a little and didn't move, and then silent tears slipped down her face. I didn't notice until she gave a sniff, and then her mouth crumpled. I moved quickly towards her, held her bony shoulders. I wanted to press her face into my chest, but I was the wrong height for that, so pushed my face against her breast which wasn't as comfortable as it should have been. She curled her swan neck and rested her chin against my head, letting the tears fall into my hair. Her chest heaved painfully when she gulped for air, a shuddering which was sometimes restraint, sometimes release. We stood and I don't know how much time passed and then she said, her voice thick, but almost normal, “Fuck it, let's eat the croissants.”

We sat on the floor, eating off white plates balanced on boxes. The pastry was light, buttery, flaky, the chocolate warm and melted. It gathered at the corners of our mouths and we darted out pink pointed tongues to gather it up, there were no napkins.

“Good,” Helena said, her mouth full. She sipped the coffee, closed her eyes appreciatively, “Good.” She ate two croissants, finished a second cup of coffee before she spoke again. The contours of her face, swollen by the tears, were resuming their normal shape.

“Don’t worry about all that,” she waved her hand in the air, “I’m just dog-tired, working too fucking hard. No time to get this place fixed up. Jesus look at it, cost me more than I’d ever dreamed possible and I’m camping. Next time, next time you come, Lizzie, you won’t believe it. It’s going to be perfect, a boudoir, a luxurious modern boudoir for a woman of the world...and her sister.”

I smiled, lips stretched, “You drive too fast, Helena.”

“Oh that,” another wave of her hand.

“You shot right out at that roundabout. You didn’t even look.”

“I looked, you just didn’t notice. Don’t worry, I’m not stupid. I realise nobody’s going to notice me if I’m dead, so what would be the point in that?”

Later that day, I found the prints I wanted to buy her, large fantastical flowers, coloured, but not too brightly, opening strange petals invitingly. I think I might have liked them more than she did, but I wanted her to have them, for that blank wall of hers. Of course the frames were not right, too ornate, but she could always get them changed, sometime.

“Or I’ll sort them out for you when I come next time,” I told her, making my voice bright.

“Thanks,” she nodded and smiled.

Giving her the pictures made me feel better about leaving her. I offered to stay another night, take an early train back to Cambridge and work in the morning, but I was relieved when she said no.

“Got things to do,” she said and I didn’t ask what. Hugged her goodbye and didn’t quite look her in the eye. I wanted to be back in my own little house and I was sure Sarah from next door would call round, she often did on a Sunday night and we’d watch something on TV, drink wine and make a sort of supper from whatever there was in the fridge. But I’d call Helena, I told myself, I’d call her more often, and come and see her again soon. I’d tell my parents to call. They should visit her, I’d tell them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I suppose you want Sunday lunch.” At the sound of my mother’s voice, I felt like quietly replacing the receiver and pretending I hadn’t called.

“No, well, actually, I’m busy this Sunday, but...”

“Busy with what? You haven’t been for weeks. Your father’s been asking...”

Had he, what would he ask?

“It’s about Helena...”

“She hasn’t been to see us either, hasn’t called. I suppose she’s busy too?”

“She’s got a new flat and...”

“Well, I know that, at least I know that, something very smart it seems. But she would, wouldn't she with that job of hers, I can't believe how much she earns...and how's your job Lizzie?”

“Fine. But I think it would be nice, I think she would like it if you went to see her, you and dad.”

“Well, she hasn't invited us.”

“You could call, you could call and say you want to see her place, you really want to see where she's living.”

“Well, she could call, couldn't she, she could simply pick up the telephone and give us some sort of invitation. If she doesn't invite us, how do I know she wants us at all? She might just say she's busy, like you do...”

I was going out more often. Sarah worked for a firm of lawyers and had a circle of friends. She included me and we had fun. Going out for drinks, dancing once or twice, although everyone at the nightclub seemed so terribly young. I wore my Roman clothes, and one of the men with a very boyish face and sparkly eyes asked me out to dinner, just on my own. He was called David and he thought I was sweet and we ate together a few times, spent a night or two in each other's beds, watched films and even cooked large indulgent meals for each other. Then he was offered another job, a better one and he left Cambridge. But I still had Sarah and her circle of friends.

When I called Helena, she was speaking another language, the language of the bank that had little meaning for me. It sounded falsely tough, falsely complex, her tone was indulgent, but laced with impatience as I supposed a busy father might sound with a daughter. Except for just one time, I was the one to call her. I asked her about her flat, had she changed it, painted it, bought anything, and how were the prints, did they look good, had she had any time to change the frames...

“For God's sake, Lizzie there's more to fucking life than interior design.” Her voice hissing and angry, and the receiver plonked down. I sat and looked stupidly at the phone for a moment before very carefully replacing the receiver. Then two nights later, very early in the morning, two or three, she called. David was lying next to me, he struggled to open his eyes, stared confused and bleary before allowing his body to slump heavily down into the bed again.

“I just want to ask,” Helena said, her voice a little too precise as if she were keeping it under control. “I just want to ask if you have one single memory of our father doing anything with us at all.”

“Helena...”

“Just tell me.”

I thought for a moment, I could hear her breathing down the line. David made a little enquiring noise, but I held up a hand to quieten him.

“No, I thought not...” there was a break in her voice.

“Yes, yes I can. He taught us to ride our bicycles, didn’t he?”

“Did he?” Such a small, broken voice.

“Yes, on that quiet road round the corner, the dead end with no cars. Don’t you remember?”

“No.”

“Going up and down, one at a time. He held onto the back, to balance us and he kept on calling out, ‘Pedal, just pedal, don’t look back.’ And I was terrified he was going to let go, so I kept turning to check he was still there and then the whole bike would swerve and I’d nearly fall and he would have to steady it. Don’t you remember?”

“No. Was I there?”

“Of course. You learned quicker than I did. I was too busy calling out, ‘Don’t let go, don’t let go’ and he would shout out, ‘Don’t look back, don’t look back,’ until finally I didn’t look back and he did let go and I stayed upright.”

“And me?” small pleading voice, not the voice of my Helena. She didn’t even have that voice when she was a child.

“You just went careering forward, no looking back at all. Dad was shouting ‘slow down’ instead.”

“Really?”

“Well that’s what I remember. And then there was Cornwall.”

“Cornwall?”

“Yes, you remember that holiday there, sunny all the time and we had those huge melting ice creams and Dad took us in the waves, shooting us over the top of them.”

“I remember mother always telling us not to get sand all over ourselves. How do you not get sand all over yourself when you’re eight years old and on a great big yellow sandy beach?”

Her voice had recovered, that horrible smallness had vanished and my Helena was back. I laughed and she laughed and she said, “Come and see me soon, Lizzie.”

“I will,” I said.

And afterwards, afterwards with the receiver replaced, the connection between us broken, I lay sleepless in those early hours, heavy with loneliness, even with the gentle rhythm of David’s breath sounding in the pale light. He would be gone soon and whatever we said, we wouldn’t keep in touch. And in her room in London with its blank walls and packing cases, Helena would also be lying awake, awake and alone, trying to focus on those memories I had fed her. A father running behind his daughters’ bikes on a quiet road lined

with good-sized, well cared for houses, the front lawns neatly clipped; a strong-armed father lifting his light as a feather daughters over the frothy waves, shooting them over like glossy-skinned little seals, so that their mouths opened with the thrill of it, excitement with no fear, because he would catch them again and make it safe. I had told Helena the truth, I had those pictures stored away like old film reels, blow off the dust and play them again, a little shaky, a little unreal with that touch of technicolour, and of course it could be said that they were the kind of images I could have seen over and over again in any number of American films, the ones they show on TV in the afternoons: the plots all interchangeable, men being good fathers, strong and smiling men, there to give you a good warm feeling before the bad things happen. What if that was all it was, a couple of images pulled from second rate TV, to fill in the gaps of childhood memories? That's what I'd fed to Helena, expecting it to sustain her, expecting it to quell that high, hungry little voice of hers.

But I'd always done that for Helena, she'd painted the pictures of the future, I'd provided the pictures of the past. Like those two bad mice in the Beatrix Potter tale that broke into the doll's house to discover that the magnificent banquet laid out before their greedy little eyes was plastic, nothing sustaining there. I was Hunca Munca feeding my Helena with food, brightly painted, but hard and stuck to the plate and maybe even now she was losing her temper at my unsatisfying offerings, smashing those shoddy images, crying in that horrible high voice. I should call her back, even though we had laughed together, I should call her back, we could both be awake together and I could tell her how it is, how it was, me filling in the blanks for our father, just as he filled in the blanks of his crossword, every weekend.

The paper would arrive, smacking onto the polished parquet every morning and he would bend to pick it up with a little grunt, a little forced exhalation of breath. During the week he'd carry it off with him to work like a little trophy, but at the weekend, he'd sit at the dining room table, the room was quiet and no one went there. We ate in the kitchen and he could be guaranteed his peace. Except I watched him, curving my body around the doorframe, cool and shiny with high gloss white paint, hooking a bare foot around the grooves of the wood. I kept myself small and thin, measuring my breath which sounded so noisy in that still, silent air. I watched his brow furrow with concentration, that little smile and scurry of hand activity that marked success. Sometimes he would look right at me, his expression softened and almost painfully kind. The first time this happened, I started to move towards him, he looked as if he wanted to say something important to me, but then I noticed the shiny glaze of his eyes and knew he was thinking, thinking and not seeing, working out a clue to that little maze of blanks. When it happened again, I remained unmoving, freezing my body so that it was as unnoticeable as a piece of furniture. It was usually my mother who found me and shooed me away, outside from under everyone's feet,

outside for some fresh air, taking a duster to the paintwork to remove the stickiness of my finger prints.

Almost morning and still I haven't slept. I could still call her, still call Helena and tell her of this more certain memory, our father and the crossword. That little lift of his chin when he had cracked it, a little black letter in each white space. Rocking back on his chair and that smile, small, but of such deep satisfaction, and the little muttered "Ah" or "Done", not very loud, but perfectly audible from where I was standing. But she wouldn't want to hear this, this was not what she was after. There was no part for her in this. But I'm sure, sure now that I think more carefully that I really do remember his fingers on the slipped chain of a bicycle, mine or hers it hardly matters. Remember that sudden crunch and slip, the lack of resistance that sent the pedals spinning with no movement to match. Then his fingers, large man's fingers, streaked with grease, fitting the links over the metal spikes, working with a familiar slow assurance, a lift of the chin and that softly muttered "Done."

I could call her now, call and tell her this, say I know it isn't enough but it is something and at least I could hear her again, check on that voice. All the rest, I could say to her, all the rest I filled in for him, we did, and we couldn't know what was true or not because he left us with so few clues, it wasn't even as if they were obscure, they were just not there. There were those photographs, with Mother in the bikini, and him, our father, although he wasn't that then, wearing one of those pairs of tight fitting old-fashioned trunks that made Helena and I look at each other and giggle like the little girls we were. There he was, a slim dark man, with the smile and white teeth of an old-fashioned movie star. So we dressed him up like Cary Grant, a charcoal suit with knife-edged creases and a crisp shirt. I had him pacing the hospital corridors, looking up as nurses with bolstered curves bustled efficiently past, carrying little trays, the younger ones giving him a quick sympathetic smile, but no talking, this was a silent film. Helena added the cigarette. They all smoked in those days, especially waiting for a wife to give birth somewhere behind some closed door. In those days, they weren't allowed to watch, the husbands, so we left my father in a corridor, watching his face, his young face with a frown of concern, his long-fingered man's hand removing a cigarette case, "A silver one", Helena said, with his name engraved, Martin Roberts, from an inside pocket of that smart dark suit. A cigarette in the mouth, pinched between two fingers as he lit it, a silver lighter to match, that was Helena's contribution and then I added the smile, his crossword smile, small and satisfied. About the rest we couldn't agree, the pictures didn't come so easily, the matron announcing the birth, "A daughter Mr Roberts", which one of us? With my father so young and to add to the drama it must have been me, the first born. But we know what it was like with me. With me it was sheer hell, so my mother would not have been lying fragrant and peaceful with thick cotton sheets folded just so, to show off her nightdress, white with just a touch of lace. Helena wanted Doris Day, coiffed blonde hair and

one of those smiles. "Maybe with you", I said, "not with me". With me, she would be pale and sweaty and her eyes smudged with pain. So here it fell apart, the end of the film reel, left flapping, round and round, the end slapping loosely.

We did not know what could have happened after this, what happened to our dark young man with the cigarette case. All we know is he got a job in a heating company and was some sort of manager, responsible for the transport of fuel around the country. Maybe it was a fine thing to start with, something a smart young man, just starting out in life, but with a wife and baby on the way, could be satisfied with. A reasonable salary and it needn't be forever, other things would turn up. Only they didn't, or maybe he just lost the energy to look around, and then there was that salary, nothing special, just enough for an acceptable house in the suburbs, enough for a life that passed muster. The train swallowed him up every morning and spat him out in the evening, home through the front door to a wife with a cold cheek and a mouth tightening with unmet expectations. Not a good job, not one to be mentioned, the less said the better and not much room for improvement. Somewhere along the line, on one of those train journeys back or forwards, my father must have sprung a leak, a little piercing in his fabric, not immediately noticeable. A fine trickle of sawdust leaking from the bag, hollowing it out until it billowed like ill-fitting clothing, the slow haemorrhage tidied up and swept away. A man doing crosswords, with a disappointed wife and two daughters, painting pictures to fill in the gaps.

I didn't call Helena because the morning came and David was off and I had to go to work. When I got home, I thought, as soon as I got home. But she would still be at work, no point calling her there. Later, I would call her later, when I could be sure to get her on her own, then I'd say, then I'd ask, do you remember the cigarette, d'you remember how you insisted on that cigarette, and the silver case with his name engraved, Martin Roberts in swirly writing and a lighter to match? I hoped she would laugh and sound normal, but she might say, she could say, "For God's sake Lizzie, what are you talking about?" But I'd phone, I'd phone later. But later Sarah brought round a bottle of wine and said, "So, how's wee Davie then?"

"Gone," I said. I made chicken salad and we drank the wine and I felt so tired with so little sleep.

"When's that sister of yours going to visit us?"

"Helena?"

"Yes, you know, the beautiful one in the photograph I look at every time I'm here which seems to be almost every day at the moment, so I'd understand if you were getting sick of me and I'll be off soon. But when's this really beautiful, really successful sister who's making bags of money going to come and see us here? We'll take her out and give her a good time, tell her to come, tell her your friend Sarah wants to see how beautiful she is in the flesh."

“I’ll tell her,” I said. I’d call her soon and tell her, tell her to come for a whole weekend. Lots of time to talk over a whole weekend, things that can’t be said over the telephone. But I didn’t call and she didn’t come.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Are you sleeping, Lizzie? Are you sleeping?” Stephen whispers as we lie on the bed with the candy floss pink blanket in a room damp with sea air, the salts leaching like fungus through the walls. I should answer, I should answer because it’s the first time he’s whispered to me in the night for so long, ever since... He’s left me alone fearing my damp face and the tears that just fall and fall, but worse my anger, that spitting hot larva that bubbles and flows out, inarticulate, misdirected. But I lie and don’t answer, because the anger is there, a cold solid lump filling me up so that even words can’t get past. It sits in my tightened throat, filling my mouth like nausea. There was that call, my father which was strange, he was never the one to call. He was clearing his throat, clearing his throat because his words were sticking.

“Well, the thing is Lizzie, there’s been an accident.”

“An accident?”

“Helena.”

“Helena’s had an accident?”

“Bad, Lizzie, a bad accident...Lizzie are you there?”

“Yes.”

“Her car, Lizzie, she shot out, fast, other driver couldn’t stop. She’s, she’s dead Lizzie.”

He told me that on the telephone, clearing his throat in between words, and my knees went weak so I sat down and held the phone. I wanted to see her, I wanted to see my Helena, check her face and see if it looked peaceful now, because I knew what it would have looked like at the moment of her death, as she flattened the accelerator, her eyes alight, lips parted to show gleaming teeth and desperation tightening her skin like a mask. She would be in a hospital, clean and laid out as if she were resting and I could just look at her and touch her cold pale skin to say goodbye.

“Which hospital?” I asked, “I can come now, I could be there in just a couple of hours.” Maybe she would still be warm to the touch, I didn’t know how long it would take for the blood to cool.

“Well, Lizzie, the thing is, the accident, well it was a few days ago and we...”

“Days ago...”

“She, her body was a bit, well a bit battered, we didn’t want to upset you, to see your sister, we thought it best, and she’s been cremated, a little service, but we’re going to place

a stone in the little church, you know where we go at Christmas and a few of her friends will come, a colleague or two from work...”

A little service, a little stone to mark her death, in a little church a short walk away from the concrete garage where on a damp day my bright-eyed sister, pedalled backwards and pretended to be hurtling forwards to a life of everything, watched by me, but I wasn't watching close enough or well enough.

I went with my mother to pack up her possessions. It didn't take long, so much was already in boxes, not yet unpacked. Some beautiful clothes that I would never wear, a few 'nice things', very few and those prints still in their ugly frames. The pictures were ugly too, I could see that now, those great gaping flowers, their centres dark as pits.

“You'd better have those, Lizzie,” my mother said pointing quickly, her face averted, “what strange pictures for Helena to have, not her taste at all I wouldn't have thought.”

The bile rose up in me then and I wanted to spit it out at my mother who knew nothing of Helena's taste, who had never been to see her. But I didn't have the energy, I never seemed to have the energy.

And now, and now when my husband calls out to me in a whisper and wants to hold my hand, my body is a leaden weight, heavy yet insignificant, hollowed out and pumped full of anger and fear.

“Lizzie, Lizzie, hold my hand.”

My fingers twitch and my hand falls against his arm, he takes it and sweeps me up against him and then, my face pressed against him, I sink my teeth into his shoulder until I taste blood. He only makes a small cry, because of my parents in the next room I suppose, and then releases me. Two limp and silent bodies, beside each other, not touching, hoping to sleep at least part of the night.

At breakfast we are mostly silent, a few mumbled communications, but mostly the clink of cutlery, crunching and chewing of toast and cereal. Stephen is wounded and hasn't the strength to carry us along on a wave of words. He doesn't look at me, he'll have to keep his shirt on for the rest of the holiday, the bruise on his arm with the tiny tear will look like what it is, the bite of a wife. We sit here feeding ourselves, my mother pushing butter slowly onto pieces of toast and posting them into her mouth as if she were taking medicine. We chew like cows, our eyes all sliding away from each other. And there is nowhere to go, nowhere to escape, on an island surrounded by a belt of thick, dark mud. I try a spoon of cereal, a corner of toast, a sip of tea and they have no taste and there is no room to fit them in a body already filled with waste.

I couldn't stay, couldn't watch us not watching each other anymore, my mother's glare fixing itself every now and then on the top of my head, two inches above my eyes. If I were two inches taller, Helena's height, I'd meet those eyes. Chewing and dabbing at dry lips with

a napkin, and glaring at my head. So I pushed away my plate, my bowl and left the room, outside before whatever was filling me exploded, childishly, or dissolved into fruitless tears. And I walked and walked, my legs moving fast and rhythmically, some movement, any movement, even around in a wide circle, around the island with the tide in and no way out.

“Have you been jogging? You’re breathless,” Dominique, smiling and nut brown, has there really been so much sun? I feel half-baked when I look at her, my skin mottled and doughy.

“Your face is red,” Joelle tells me, studying it with her head cocked to one side, “Like a tomato.” She giggles and I smile.

“Just walking fast.”

“Where?” Joelle, again.

“Nowhere.”

“That’s funny.”

“It is.”

“We’re going to the main house, for lunch,” Dominique said, “Frances invited us. Jeremy’s got the boat out again and he’s asked Stephen to join him, although, I don’t know, it looks like the weather is turning, wind picking up, but maybe it will be more fun for them like that. Stephen said he didn’t know where you were, that you’d gone for a walk...”

“Yes, after breakfast...”

“And now it’s almost lunch. Come with us, Frances won’t mind, she suggested it, said she knew what it was like to have a husband obsessed by boats. She’s cooking mushrooms that she found, first of the season, shows summer’s coming to an end.”

“Yucky mushrooms,” Joelle piped up in her high baby’s voice, her eyes turned up to her mother’s face, gauging her reaction delightedly.

“No, not yucky, Joelle, delicious you’ll see.” She reached down and lifted the little girl up, swinging her in the air and then as she landed, tickling her ribs with long brown fingers so that she crumpled into a ball on the ground, kicking her legs and laughing.

“So you’ll come?” she said to me, “you’ll be so hungry with all that walking.”

“Yes.”

Frances met us by the back door, smiling and greeting us, “Quite windy out, might rain later. I thought we would eat in the kitchen.” That warm, fragrant room brought my body back to life, my bare legs which I hadn’t realised were cold, lost their numbness, my glands prickled painfully at the smell of frying mushrooms, wetting my dry mouth. A dog lay half under the table, his tail thumped the floor as we entered but he didn’t get up.

Joelle gave a thrilled squeal and scuttled over, crouching under the table, patting the black and tan fur with tiny hands,

“Joelle, careful...” her mother cautioned. The dog raised its head, a German Shepherd, mouth parted, pink tongue lolling to one side.

“He’s smiling at me, he loves me,” Joelle crooned, putting her head onto the dog’s body, half lying on top of the animal.

“Don’t worry about him,” Frances said, placing a reassuring hand on Dominique’s arm. “He’s harmless. His name’s Difa, D for dog, silly isn’t it, one of my sons named him. He’s so old now, he just likes lying in the kitchen and keeping his bones warm, I think his joints ache sometimes, he struggles to get up. So I just let him lie here and then he potters in the garden with me. But harmless, he’s quite used to children.”

In the warm air of the kitchen, the earthy taste of wild mushrooms in my mouth, watching tiny white fingers burrow into the soft dark fur of a sleeping animal, sipping slowly from a glass of red wine, listening to the buzz of talk, little laughs, stories, I wanted to stay quite still, unmoving. I would like to be Difa dog, lying on the warm floor. I wanted to stay with the child and the two women with the easy rhythm of their talk and movement. Wine poured, a fluttering hand for emphasis, a mouthful savoured, eyes glancing casually to check on the child, smooth exchange of words, taking pleasure, unquestioned pleasure. Stories from Frances of visitors to the island, glimpses of little dramas played out on this half island. She’d seen everything, almost everything over the years, a wife with throttle marks around her neck, a pale husband who was meant to be composing but couldn’t compose, so he wrecked his little cottage and went for his wife’s neck. Short-lived fury, quickly burnt out. Lives on the edge or the half edge, mud-edged lives. And adultery, there’s always plenty of adultery, Frances told us, easiest way to break monotony, but so temporary, so unsatisfactory.

“And you,” Frances smiled at Dominique, “a French woman on this so English island.”

“Yes,” she said simply and gave a very French shrug. Her accent was strong, but not over-emphasised. She spoke English correctly, without peppering her language with French words and phrases, she was French with no need to draw attention to it.

“But I live in London, and all the time we have to be smart there, and my husband is English so he likes to be messy, so we’ve come here.”

“To be messy?” Frances’ voice rose in delighted laughter.

Another shrug. “Yes, muddy and salty. He is very happy and so are we.” She smiled and inclined her head towards her child, who looked up.

“I like mud,” she said.

“And you,” Frances’ voice, but both women look at me, “why did you come?”

“My husband, Stephen, he came before as a boy, and we needed a holiday...” I try not to look at the women as I speak, try to make my voice normal, but it trails off and I fall silent and look at their faces, turned to me, small smiles, waiting quietly.

"I bit my husband last night," I tell them, holding their eyes.

"Bit?" Dominique says.

"Yes, I tasted blood."

"Why?"

"I don't know, I just did it, and he hardly made a noise, just something stifled," I glance quickly at Joelle, but she has her face pushed into the dog's fur and is humming to herself, not listening, adult talk no more than noise. "My parents, you see, were in the next room, and I don't know if I wanted him to make a noise or not."

"I see," said Frances and Dominique nodded.

"So I have a biting wife and a family who came to get messy. Well," she said, topping up our glasses, "have a little more of this and then I'll make some coffee and I have some excellent chocolates I was given. You can have a bite of those instead..." She smiled, Dominique gave a laugh, and I suppressed a nervous snigger. Joelle raised her head, pleased that the grown ups were not being so boring anymore and might be ready for play.

The rain hadn't come, the grey clouds cracked open in places allowing a stormy yellow light to fall in shafts. Frances took us to her orchard to pick plums, Joelle riding a little tricycle hauled out of the attic and dusted down for the grandchildren who would soon come. The salt air had rusted the blue paint of the little machine and it whined and squeaked in tiny rhythmic complaints as Joelle's childish knees pumped it insistently down the pale shale paths. We picked bags of fat purple plums, the thin skins close to bursting. Joelle insisted I ate one with her and in my mouth over-ripe plum mixed with the taste of wild mushroom and I remembered the weight of her small damp bottom in my lap, and wondered what I was to do with all this long life that was left.

CHAPTER NINE

I hadn't set off to look for her. It seemed like I'd just let my legs carry me, another one of those walks to give my body a purpose, one foot in front of the other, watch out for rocks, stay on the path. The island was becoming more familiar to me, the scruffiness of it, the salty rot of the air, almost pleasing, almost fresh after a night in the closed cabin of the bungalow. I hadn't given Stephen a chance to say he would come with me, just gulped a cup of tepid tea and made a jam sandwich to take with me. I didn't eat much of it. The butter was a little rancid, left out of the fridge too often so it had that vague meaty aftertaste that even the sweetness of the jam couldn't mask. I broke pieces off, scattering them at intervals, knowing that some bird or mouse would be happy to discover these little treats. It was good, good to walk and scatter such easy gifts. And then I found I was there, just like the first time when I had seen her working in her herb garden, that patch of lushness, cut

into the yellow, salt-burned grass. The same straw hat, shielding her face for the sun and from me. I stood and watched, and then took a few tentative steps closer, not wanting to interrupt her rhythm as she bent, uprooting weeds from the soil, tossing little wilting bundles to one side. Working quickly, knowing without hesitating which was the weed and which the plant and I couldn't help staring.

"Well are you going to come and give me a hand, or just stand there like a little Victorian waif outside a baker's shop?"

She stood straight and looked at me, pushing her hat off her damp forehead and smiling warmly. My mouth twitched but didn't quite make it to a smile. I hadn't realised that I'd moved so close, hadn't realised that I'd been looking on with such undisguised longing at this little piece of Frances' life that seemed so removed from any aspect of mine.

"Well come and join me," she said. "I could do with a hand, hard on the back this weeding and I'm going to need to lift some potatoes too, there's a fork just there, maybe you could do that."

I said nothing and for a few seconds we looked at each other, the smile, a little amused now, was still on her face.

"Well, are you coming, Lizzie?" she said at last.

"I don't mean to interrupt," I said, the words stumbling out of my mouth, "I know, I imagine gardening is a peaceful thing, you may want to be on your own."

"If I wanted to be on my own, I would tell you. At my age you can get away with a certain bluntness. One of the pleasures of getting older." She held out her hand then, inviting me graciously into the overgrown enclave of her garden. We worked together, companionably and after she had given me a few instructions, mostly silently. My scalp prickled and grew damp in the moist heat, little rivers of sweat running down my face, wiped away by grimy hands. The scent released by the hot soil as we ripped up fattened weeds, was so sweet it caught the back of my throat. I would come again, I thought, if Frances would let me I would come again. I'd never lifted potatoes before, pushing the prongs of the garden fork into the soil, driving them in with a firm push of my foot, turning the soil and sifting, pouncing on the dirty plump tubers with the delight of a child picking up shells.

"Small pleasures," Frances said as I turned to her triumphantly, my hands full and dirty. But she said it kindly.

In Frances' kitchen, I stood at the sink, watching the dark soil dissolve from the potatoes under the running tap, the cold water leaving my hands cleanly pink. Through the open window came the distinctive smell of Storsea, hot, briny, fertility on the turn, mingling with the yeasty sweetness of the kitchen, a thick scent that I breathed in deep. Frances handed me a tall glass of iced water and I held it briefly to my hot cheek before taking a long swallow that I could feel move right through my heated insides.

“Good isn’t it?” Frances said.

I nodded.

“Cake?” she offered.

I nodded.

She came back from the pantry with two pieces of chocolate cake, thick and rich. The kind that takes your mouth by surprise, making your glands ache. I ate and said nothing, feeling my body go languid, wanting just to be here in this kitchen with the accumulated clutter of life about me.

Frances gave a little laugh.

“You really are like a little Dickens character, a waif brought in from the cold, or rather the warm, eating up your cake like a good orphan.”

“Good cake,” I answered smiling back.

“I suppose you’d like some more?”

I held out the plate to her with my head to the side and my eyes widened, doing my best to look like an appealing little Oliver Twist. She laughed loudly and fetched more cake.

“I have to keep it hidden in here or else my husband gets at it,” she called out. “He’s not supposed to eat things like this - cholesterol. Here you go, Little Dorrit.”

“No,” I said. “If I was Little Dorrit, I would be far too polite to wolf down cake.”

“Well, I think it’s quite a good name for you. You have an old fashioned reserve, Lizzie. You hang about on the edge of things as if you don’t quite belong, quiet and formal and a bit hesitating and then you go and say surprising things, like the other day at lunch, with Dominique, about biting your husband. We weren’t expecting something like that from you. I imagine Lizzie, that you’re the kind of woman that gets under people’s skins once they get to know you.”

I looked back at her, not knowing what to say, my face warming.

“It doesn’t bother you what I said does it,” Frances continued, looking at me closely, “I like noticing things about people, I find them more and more interesting as I get older, I suppose because I worry so much less about myself. Ageing has removed a restraint, it seems to have given me a freedom to be direct in a way I never was when I was younger. It hasn’t been quite the same for my husband.” Her voice trailed off as if she were thinking, her eyes narrowing a little as if to focus on some picture in her mind, then turning back to me, she opened her eyes wide and shining.

“You should have seen him, Lizzie, you should have seen my Oliver when he was a young man.”

I thought of the cheerful, tubby man I had met, rather short with a circle of bare skin on the top of his head and wondered what it was that could make his wife’s eyes shine like that.

“I think the world was like one huge toy shop to him. He had this enormous enthusiasm about everything he did, a fearless energy that had nothing dark or aggressive about it, just a boundless cheerfulness. Nothing was impossible to him. “It’s all there,” he used to say, “it’s all there for the taking, Fran.” Of course I loved him for it. I couldn’t resist him. I was pulled along in his wake – a waterskier with wobbly ankles behind a boat with too much horsepower. I hung on, gritting my teeth and mostly managing to smile, but Lizzie, most of the time I was terrified.”

She stopped, reaching out for her glass of water, an expression on her face I hadn’t seen before. She looked older, the lines of her face more marked, but the shadow of uncertainty that clouded her eyes belonged to someone young and unassured. I think she had forgotten, just for a short moment, that she was here in her kitchen, that she was talking to me. The dog wandered in through the open back door, padding slowly, his claws clicking against the tiled floor, pink tongue hanging out in the heat.

“Oh, Difa,” Frances called jumping quickly to her feet and filling the dog’s bowl with fresh, cool water. He took a few loud laps while she stroked him. When she took her seat again, her face was restored.

“Business was a game to Oliver, one he was very good at, but it wasn’t the money that excited him, it was taking risks. He liked sailing close to the wind, and as I said, Lizzie, I’ve always hated sailing. Twice Oliver lost heavily and we had to sell the house we were in, move into a flat with the boys when they were little. Oliver was unphased, his appetite for life unaffected, and of course he made it all back, even more and there was a big house and a boat and wasn’t it all wonderful and of course I smiled as much as I could and said yes because that was the role I had been given, standing on the sidelines watching and cheering. A cheerleader, that’s what I was, pompoms and a little skirt.” She laughed, a good clear laugh that made me smile back.

“There was one time Lizzie, one time when we were having supper, this was the time of the tiny flat and Oliver was eating, eating hungrily and talking, telling me about his plans. And I was nodding and hearing his excitement, watching his great unstoppable appetite; but I was so tired, Lizzie, so tired, with both boys still up in the night, and the flat small and messy and overrun with baby things and I couldn’t eat, my stomach was too tight with worry. I felt so thin, as if my skin was lying flat against my bones, no cushion of fat, no hidden reserves. I could hear his voice, hear the animated tone, but I didn’t really listen to the words. I’d heard them, heard them all before and I’d hear them again, a lifetime of hearing and watching. And you know Lizzie, at that point I thought, I just couldn’t do it anymore, just couldn’t carry on. I sat still and confused, wondering how it could have happened, that my life had become a bit part in someone else’s game. I felt frozen, immobile as a stone while everything hurtled forward leaving me behind. Endless days stretched out in front. But they

did pass Lizzie, the days did pass and things got better and worse and then better, and I did love him Lizzie, I do. It's just that I remember that point, that frozen point – when you feel like a piece of driftwood stuck forever on some beach, and then the tide rises and you get swept back in again.”

Frances paused. We looked at each other and then she stretched out a hand, lightly brushing my cheek, her fingers moving to the corner of my mouth, rubbing a little.

“Cake crumbs, Lizzie,” she said, laughing softly. “And some icing, here...” She dipped a finger in her water and rubbed around my lip, her eyes focused on the task. A mother's gesture and it made my eyes prick painfully. I didn't move, didn't speak.

“All done,” she said, kindly. She must have noticed the brightness of my eyes, the gathering of moisture round the corners that I struggled to contain, bending my head away to make a fuss of Difa, lying sleeping on the floor. He lifted up his heavy head to give me a tolerant stare before dropping back to sleep with a long groan. I was relieved when Frances spoke again.

“If I were asked, Lizzie, I would say that I'd had a pretty ordinary life. No great tragedies or traumas or adventures, but even an ordinary life doesn't feel very ordinary. I look at Oliver now, and sometimes I think it's sad that I hide away the chocolate cake from a man like that who always loved to eat, and still would if I gave him the chance. I wonder if I'm depriving him of something, trying to make him different, but the truth is, I don't want him dying of a heart attack, I want him here, with me. I still watch him sometimes, pottering about with the boats when the boys come and I still wonder if he would like something more exciting, but then I see him with our grandchildren and I'm amazed how careful he is with them. Insisting on life jackets, fitting them carefully himself, lifting them in and out, so patiently and I love him for it. But I don't spend too long watching or thinking about it, because it's my turn now, Lizzie. So I go and dig my garden, and grow my herbs, and forget about the sailing.”

When I left that day, the smells of the kitchen clinging to my skin, I took away a bag of potatoes, a little soil still clinging to their dirty yellow skins. We ate them for supper, baked with a little butter. I walked back that way every now and then and if she was in her garden she would call out to me and I'd join her, weeding and digging and watering. Checking on the progress of the carrots, pulling them up from the sweet-smelling soil, and crunching through their pale orange skins. There were more drinks, more cakes and talk and sometimes I made her laugh, telling her about Stephen's mother, Dora, nothing like David Copperfield's little wife, who is the only other Dora I know. Dora Wright, not a pretty, scatterbrained little darling, dying conveniently young. I acted out her heavy-handed martyrdom, giving a damp little sniff and stiffening my mouth into a prune of disappointment, whitely pursed to suck up guilt as if through a straw.

“Don’t come all the way just to see me,” getting that tone just right, dropping my voice to force the listener to lean closer, stoicism laced with self-pity.

“Yes, the dress is lovely, just not a colour I would choose and such a shame it doesn’t fit.” A woman who can’t be pleased and I allowed myself a sharpness that was funny rather than painful. Frances’ delighted barks of laughter disturbed Difa’s sleep forcing up his heavy head. He gave us a slow, exhausted stare before sinking to the floor once again. As Frances wiped her eyes damp with laughter, I felt myself expand, liking this different version of myself she offered, a woman who could make people laugh, get under their skins and stay there.

CHAPTER TEN

I was one of those women who had dreams of the baby inside me. Mostly she was a little girl with too much curly dark hair for a baby and a smile with tiny little white teeth, like little white seeds. In my dreams she laughed at me for my worries, not unkindly, just laughed like a tinkling fairy as if she knew better. Of course there were worries, worries and pregnancy are inseparable in these times, with all those books, all those chapters and lists of what can go wrong. It’s called being informed, must have folic acid, but not too much Vitamin A, can cause birth defects. Stay away from soft cheeses, lysteria, but must have enough calcium and oh no, you haven’t got cats, better handle with gloves, toxoplasmosis can cause blindness. And caffeine, it has been linked to miscarriage, more than four cups a day, significantly increases the risk. There are statistics and tests to carry out. “Try not to worry,” says the nurse as she draws out test-tube after test-tube of my blood, dark red and plentiful, looks healthy enough, but must check up, just to be sure, just to be sure.

“It’s normal procedure,” Stephen tells me as I examine the purple flowering bruise in the crease of my arm where the needle has sucked, “It’s meant to reassure, like getting a survey done before you buy a house.” So I am a house, its rafters prodded for rot, its basement for damp, a second-hand car checked for rust, the engine revved and tuned in case it proves unreliable. Stephen buys books, follows the weeks and ticks them off carefully. Tells me how I will be feeling, how I will look inside and outside. But even as I answered the sheets of questions from the visiting midwife, watched as they ticked boxes; handed over the little vials of urine, and felt the tightening of the blood pressure band around my arm, I knew there was a quiet, secret, untouchable place, deep in my core that kept me warm with quick surges of pure burning happiness, wordless happiness. I felt it as I sat at my desk, sipping coffee, decaffeinated, pausing between filing and typing; as I wandered dreamily through narrow Cambridge streets, pausing to choose fruit or vegetables from the market, lingering and enjoying the colours and shapes; as I nodded smiling at the books Stephen held out to me,

the text blurring, those strange diagrams, cross-sections of women's insides, bearing no relation to me.

I bought my food like an old-fashioned French housewife, smelling and feeling the fruit, preparing everything with meticulous care and pleasure. I was aware of taste, chewed slowly, liking the thought of the nourishment passed through me to the life inside. And I bought things, little things, carefully and slowly. A little toy rabbit, small and pale yellow, soft and velvety to the touch, a fleece for the baby to lie on. I liked to unwrap my purchases for Stephen, show them to him, finger them again before I wrapped them again, but they made Stephen nervous, his eyes darted over the little toys, and baby things. "A little early, Lizzie, best not, best be careful, tempting fate." I didn't know he believed in fate, a manner of speaking he said. I thought he believed the books with the lists of things that can go wrong, the faultiness of women's bodies, that can in most cases be corrected by doctors if caught early enough, if all the right tests are done, as they should be. I smiled and laughed a little at his worried eyes, just as my baby laughed at me in my dreams. She grinned widely when I fretted over what to feed her, my round body tossing damply in the sheets. I could see my dream face pale and tighten in ugly anxiety, and that dark haired imp face grinned showing her little teeth, "chocolate," she told me without words, "a bowl of melted chocolate." Of course, what else? And she lapped at it like a contented kitten. And then I didn't know where to put her when she was born, a baby small as a mouse. I found a brown paper bag to carry her home, but she gnawed through that, falling to the pavement and making off into the crowd laughing at her frantic mother, a baby as small and fast as a mouse. I brought a cage for her, a mouse's cage with thin stainless steel bars, a drinking bottle and some soft straw and my baby, my little dark girl opened her mouth wide to laugh at me. I woke up rumped and puzzled, but Stephen didn't want to hear about the dreams, didn't give me time to go over the details or finish my sentences.

"Don't worry about it, I'm sure it's normal, this dreaming."

"I'm not worried, just telling you, it's funny don't you think...?"

"You just rest, I've got to get going, just rest, everything's quite normal..."

Always that word, normal, and his eyes beginning to shift and slide away from my face.

So when I dreamed of a different baby, I didn't say a word about it. Not a little dark girl this time, a boy, just one dream of a boy, pale and golden-haired, beautiful as an angel, but still, eyes closed, laid out like a little corpse, limbs perfect as carved wax, except that the hands and feet were missing. Limbs that finished bluntly, no wound, no blood, just an absence. It was something I had done, something I had eaten or taken, some secret drug that I hadn't been honest about. Doctors and nurses shook their heads and wouldn't meet my eyes, everyone quietly sorrowful and I crouched down, throat open and raw sobbing and moaning, but making no sound. But then he opened his eyes, luminous blue, where would a

child of mine get eyes that blue, and a sweet smile. There was no pain, he didn't mind his blunted limbs, he didn't blame me. The dream left me quiet and sobered, I carried myself carefully, but even in the cold, the February chill biting at exposed skin, the blood pumped warm and red in my body, my cheeks glowed, little hollows of my face filling out, making me look young.

Down a road of 1930s pebbledash terraced houses, I found the Friends Meeting House, a bland box-like building where the yoga class would be held. There on a thin nylon carpeted floor, unlined orange curtains blossoming with brown, giant flowers hanging in the steel-framed windows, a one bar heater to take the chill off the air, I joined a group of women, preparing our bodies for the birth. The teacher a trim, dark lady, mother of five stood before the gathering of pale, bloated women, baggy tops hanging limply over swollen bellies, leggings too often washed pulled over misshapen legs, bare feet dry-skinned, heels cracked. She set out, her face serious, her voice like a chant to convince us that what our bodies would go through would be the most intense experience that life had to offer a woman. We needed to make ourselves strong, to bear ourselves like queens. Like queens we performed our awkward movements, tried to locate hidden muscles, and during our break, sipped at hot tea, hands folding around garish mugs, fingers crumbling Digestives and popping cubes of calcium-rich cheddar almost religiously into our mouths. It was our birth, she told us, our act and we must take control, not just let it happen to us and we smiled, a little embarrassed, but pleased, and quietly so proud of our bulky forms as we bundled them up to go out into the damp cold of a winter street, with its rows of ugly houses, unrelieved by any greenery.

Stepping out, still full of queenly feelings, I hailed a passing taxi, a lift home, I deserved it, why not. I sat on the worn upholstery of the backseat, looking out at the grey streets. It had begun to rain, softly. I was pleased to be warm and dry, pleased that all the results had come back with nothing to worry about, all those extracted tubes of dark blood, the vials of urine, all showed I was normal and healthy, the risk to my baby minimal. I'd had the first scan, filled my bladder with water, exposed my pale ever so slightly swollen belly, covered in glutinous gel to an ultrasound, and received my reward, a sketchy picture of a tiny, big-headed water creature that would be my baby. Stephen was relieved and delighted, the lines of anxiety on his face relaxed, he'd been so worried, I didn't realise how worried he'd been as if he expected something to be wrong, as if he were waiting for bad news. But it was all fine and we were planning a celebration, a dinner out just the two of us, and now I could sit back in this battered taxi, and allow it to carry me home, my cheeks glowed warmly, I felt sleepy.

"Where've you just been then?" the driver called out cheerfully, glancing in his rear view mirror.

“Yoga class, I’m having a baby.”

“You’re never, you’re far too young and anyway the bump doesn’t show.”

“Four months,” I couldn’t keep the pleased pride from my voice and the man responded.

“Well it suits you, some of them look sick as dogs, but you you’re glowing, positively blooming as they say.”

“Thank-you.”

“Going home to put your feet up are you? Need plenty of rest and feed yourself well, have a good old fry up, my age they tell me I can’t do that, bad for me, but you, a pregnant lady, you can do anything.”

And that’s what it felt like, I could do anything. I slept beautifully, prepared delicious meals, ate as if I deserved each mouthful I took, I smiled easily, my softened, warmed skin glowed and my hair thickened. I was expanding along with my body, becoming something more than I was before, properly filling a place in the world. Stephen and I began to speak of our child, we talked about changes in the house, a colour for the room, speculating gently how things might be, how they might change. Stephen was still a little wary, didn’t want to go too far down this future path, he broke into our day dreams often with his cautionary, “early days yet, Lizzie, early days.” Seeing his crinkling spaniel brow, the darting of his eyes, I was indulgent, I kept quiet. I had the whole of the night-time to dream and those strange stretched-out hours before Stephen returned when I sat in the house, curtains open, lights off and absorbed the evening winter light, sometimes tinged with yellow, sometimes a luminous orange, fringed with grey-blue and then my mind was empty of everything except the colour.

Our parents had to be told. Stephen said his mother was delighted. I couldn’t form any picture of a delighted Dora Wright, but I asked for no more details. My parents of course would have to be visited. “Go on your own,” Stephen said, “spend a bit of time with your mum.” I looked at him oddly. I suppose he imagined that we would have a sudden new bond between us, a special female bond of motherhood, he would have liked the thought of that. And because I felt untouchable I agreed and found myself at a hastily prepared Saturday lunch, cold meat and potato salad, a little limp lettuce and one of those relentlessly grey days when there is no sky at all. My father tried for a little cheer at the news, offered to open a bottle of something.

“Don’t be stupid,” my mother snapped, “she can’t have anything like that, damage the baby.”

“Right,” he said, giving up, beginning on his beef. I drank tap water, tinny and too warm.

Later when my father had left us, clearing his throat, and heading towards his study, my mother leaned into me.

"It'll be hard you know." I smelt lunch on her breath. It was the closest she had come to me for years. Then she straightened up, smoothing her blue patterned skirt over her knees. Her throat was beginning to loosen and sag, the skin shook a little as her head moved.

"With you, I suffered. Forceps."

"I know. You've told me," I answered as blandly as I could. "But then it was easier with Helena, wasn't it? Besides, there are all sorts of things for pain these days, epidurals and things."

Her mouth twisted scornfully, "You can't just run away from pain, you know. Your generation, always imagining you can run away."

She rose. "Come on, I'd better give you some things I've been keeping. Better give you them now seeing as you hardly come these days and there's no telling if I'll be seeing you before the birth and that."

"You could come and see me. You could come to Cambridge."

She didn't answer and I followed her up the mushroom carpeted stairs, watching her careful placement of one sensible navy shoe after another. She took me into our old bedroom, Helena's and mine. Still two beds, the same worn candlewick bedspreads, but the walls painted a fresh, unmarked magnolia, a single unremarkable watercolour of some country scene that had nothing to hold the eye.

Opening our old wardrobe she took out two identical packages wrapped in brown paper and tied with garden string. There was an H in thick black felt tip on one, an E on the other. My mother passed them both over.

"You might as well have them both. No use me keeping the one." Piled on top of each other they obscured my view of her face although they weren't heavy. I took a seat on the end of the nearest bed, Helena's bed. The springs creaked, same mattress then, but there would have been no reason to change them, I didn't imagine my parents had many visitors needing a comfortable bed for the night.

"What's in them?" I asked staring up at my mother over the parcels. She remained standing, not looking at me.

"Baby clothes, your old ones, yours and your sister's. I kept a bundle for each of you, just the best ones. A little worn of course, a few stains I couldn't get out, specially yours, you were never a good eater, but they're quite good enough to come in useful." For a moment, perched awkwardly on the end of the bed, balancing the musty bundles, my toes turned inwards like a clumsy child, I found nothing to say. She turned on me then, her face sharp as a rodent's.

"I suppose you don't want them, turning your nose up, everything new I suppose that's what you're after, brand spanking new." I thought about shaking my head, but my neck had tightened up and no movement came. She brought her head in closer to mine, her words

hissed out of her tight mouth. "You think everything's just fine don't you, you with your husband and a baby on the way, but it's not like that, you'll see." Then with a quick turn on her heel she left the room, left me sitting on the edge of the bed with a pile of old baby clothes. I heard those sensible shoes of hers clipping across the parquet floor of the hall, calling out to my father. "She's just off, Martin. Lizzie's just off. Aren't you coming to say goodbye?" Loud throat-clearing and a door opening. I pulled my body up off the bed, piled the two parcels neatly on top of each other, and made my way down the stairs,

"Ah, just off are you Lizzie?" my father's voice was too loud in an attempt to sound hearty. "I'll give you a hand with those shall I, can't have you carrying too much these days."

"They're light," I answered. But he took them from me anyway.

"Where're those flowers?" he said from behind the parcels, "Those ones I got from the corner shop.

"Those special offer hyacinths?" My mother's voice still carried a hint of spite.

"Hyacinths, that's right. Lizzie can take two or three bunches, beautiful colour, beautiful scent."

"What do you mean beautiful, you can hardly make out the colour, they're still closed and they smell of nothing much, never will even if they do open, hot house flowers, forced, never amount to much, that's why they were selling them off cheap. Still she can have them all if that's what you want."

"I got six bunches," my father said, "we'll keep three, Lizzie can take three."

I fetched them myself from the kitchen. They were standing unceremoniously in a jam jar. They would be a beautiful deep blue when they opened, you could tell that from the ones that were just about to burst and they smelt fresh and clean, a hint of the deep sweetness to come.

I drove off, the brown parcels on the back seat, the hyacinths on the front seat next to me. I hadn't managed to get my father to meet my eye, but he'd put out a hand in the direction of my shoulder, his fingers brushing my coat before he drew them away again. And he had given me flowers, in his manner. He had given me hyacinths. I smiled and turned to wave at the two figures of my parents, standing outside their front door. They looked small and crumpled, my mother, missing my wave as she turned to go back into the house, my father's arm raised only at half mast. Still, the hyacinths. I would have loved to have told Helena about them.

Then it was there on the right, just around the bend, the little church, quite pretty, but not remarkable where our family went, had gone, at Christmas and Easter. The church where Helena's ashes were marked by a stone, a small stone with her name and dates, a simple recording of her existence. I'd never seen it. I missed the ceremony. I had that kind of flu where you can't lift your head from the pillow, my bones filled with pain and Sarah even took

time off work to look after me and spoon soup and aspirin into me. So I had an excuse. I hadn't wanted to go to see that. My Helena ending up like that. But now with my nicely rounded stomach and these hyacinths I ought to go. I could leave them there next to her stone and maybe they would open. I had no idea whether her stone was ever visited, by my mother or my father, together or alone or even by someone else, whether there was someone else who remembered her, enough to visit her stone, one of those friends I had met, one of those group with all that straining energy in their bodies. And if it were my parents, what would they say when they saw three bunches of special offer hyacinths lying before her stone. I didn't know if they talked about her, couldn't guess the thoughts in their heads. But although I slowed the car, lifting my foot off the accelerator, slowing around the bend, I missed the turn off to the church. I didn't turn back.

During that journey back to Cambridge, what had seemed like fullness, hollowed out. I was a punctured sandbag slowly emptying. All that languid happiness, the contented connection to life began to trickle out of me. It had been no more than the firing of hormones and chemicals in my pregnant body that had led me to hang on the words of a new-age yoga teacher, step in queen-like state from a shabby room onto an ugly street and glow with pleasure at a cabbie's compliments in the badly sprung backseat of his taxi. Not a queen, just small and pale as a weed growing in the shadow of the stronger plants. A parasite. I could be who I was, accepting, unambitious as long as Helena was there, forging ahead, with me playing in the white water of her tracks. And when she stopped and turned around, expecting for once something from me, that phone call, I'd offered nothing. There was no substance to me. And I was to be a mother, a woman who already relied on her dream baby to reassure her and still her fears.

"Darling, you're exhausted," Stephen's furrowed brow. I caught a glimpse of my ashen face in the gold-framed mirror of our freshly painted yellow hall.

"It's been too much for you, all that driving. I should never have let you go alone. Why don't you go up to bed, maybe a warm bath, I could bring you up a cup of tea, how about that?" A weak nod from me. And there on the crisp bedspread, I curled, the mother, leaking and deflating, tears sliding out from under my lids and my husband patting and comforting me as he would a child. "It's normal, such a hormonal upheaval, normal, quite normal to feel like this, the book said..."

And it never came back, whatever it was that had made me happy. I still took care of myself, eating well, going to those yoga classes, trying to rest. But I slept fitfully and did not dream of my little girl any more, although I felt her move in me more often now. Helena took her place, she was there almost every night as I strained my eyes to look at her face, to judge her expression as she wrapped her fingers around the steering wheel of her car, the dark green Renault that she never finished paying for. Often she was blurred, I couldn't

make out the lines of her face and I woke with painful, swollen eyes as if they had tried to swivel right round in their sockets, to turn and stare at the picture of Helena that moved in my night-time mind. She could have had those eyes, the same eyes she had as a child on those rainy days we cycled with backwards spinning tyres in the garage, when she saw things I could not, exciting things that made her eyes bright and wide and her lips open. And the car coming, the one they said she did not see, was it a moving shadow at the corner of her eye or did she see it first and then lay her foot down on the accelerator so that the red needle of the dial jumped and her car shot forward to kill her? Would she have done that, for a thrill, put lives other than her own at risk, for something to obliterate the deadened weariness I had heard in her voice that night, the fluttering bird-like panic and fear of a terrible nothingness that awaits if all is not as it should be? Would my Helena have done that? And if so, if so...

As my eyes became bruised with disturbed sleep, my skin colourless, Stephen's brow was constantly furrowed. I did not think it would ever straighten properly again, there would be lasting wrinkles when all this was done. But I think, after all, it had been those furrows that drew me to him that night when Sarah, a little drunk perhaps, introduced us so abruptly. Lizzie and Stephen, lots in common, dead sister, dead father, little apologetic smiles at each other, lowered eyes raised and a face concerned and sensible. A man to take care, a man to let me continue like some half awake person, drawing in the world in small, restricted doses, through nostrils, eyes, mouth and fingers.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I sat, twenty weeks pregnant, on a low-backed beige covered chair in a waiting room that they had tried to make a little friendly, adding one or two plants and keeping everything light-coloured and as soft as possible to make it different from those long blue linoleumed hospital corridors we had had to come down to get to this unit where they scanned unborn babies, keeping a sharp outlook for defects. Stephen sat next to me. There were one or two other couples, we tried not to look at each other, to keep as many seats between us as possible, not to raise our voices so they could be heard. Stephen picked up a newspaper, cleared his throat. Irritated, I inched away from him, looking furtively at the other couples, both men stretching their knees wide apart and shuffling. A woman, no more than a girl with a sprinkling of livid spots on her pale chin, placed a pink-nailed hand on her man's denim leg. He appeared not to notice and kept his head rigidly forward, focused on the blank, bone-coloured wall. They were the first to be called away and they left relieved to be released. The other man wore a suit, like Stephen. Both men, taking time off work, their first fatherly duties, there for their children even before birth, keeping themselves busy with

their papers. The other woman, her pregnancy barely visible, probably there for her first scan, leafed through a magazine. She raised her eyes as she turned a page and caught me watching her. She smiled briefly and we both lowered our eyes. I picked up a magazine, paging through without focusing, the shiny pictures a jumbled mess of colour. There was no need to be nervous, this twenty week scan a mere formality, a chance to view our baby, consider its sex, all the other results had been so favourable.

My pale round belly exposed and covered in cold gel, Stephen's eyes fixed to the screen as the white-coated radiographer, her voice soothingly calm, pointed out our baby's anatomy, the head, the little beating heart and we listened to it, our baby's heart like the sound of a galloping horse, all as it should be and Stephen's smile grew. They could have taken a picture of his face for any one of those magazines they had piled out there in the waiting room, the proud father, erect and boyish and smiling across the smeared bulge of his wife to the grey shading that marked his baby out as normal. The head, the heart, the organs, not the sex, she couldn't tell us that, not the way our baby was lying, but I didn't need to be told, I knew that already, although I said nothing, tried to copy Stephen's smile, but no one was looking at my face.

"Just want to take a look," the radiographer's voice was still calm, we could detect no note of concern as she hovered around the head area. "Just another look, no need for any alarm, just checking..." And she was quiet for a moment, the flow of her voice drying up and we all watched the screen, Stephen fighting to keep up that smile.

"What, what are you checking?" The silence had gone on too long and Stephen couldn't help breaking it. The white-coated women turned to us, she smiled, her face, her smile, quite calm.

"These scanners have improved considerably in the last few years," she said. We watched her blankly. "We're picking things up that we still don't quite understand. The technology has developed beyond our ability to analyse its findings."

I wanted to cover my belly, I felt cold lying exposed, the picture of my black and white shadowy baby had been frozen on the screen, focused on the head area where the doctor marked out two tiny transparent areas on either side of the brain.

"We're seeing more of these, we call them cysts, little pockets of water and sometimes they just disappear, they may be nothing. A few papers have been written, but the figures are not clear, we're not sure. Nothing to worry about, but I'd just like you to go and have a word with one of the consultants." As she spoke she wiped the gel briskly from my stomach, pulled down my top. Before we could find any words we were ushered from the room. No one asked whether we wanted the picture of our screen baby.

A few whispered words at the reception desk. We waited awkwardly, like children at a new school, not filled in about the rules. "A nurse will be along shortly," the radiologist

announced and smiled, but she didn't look at our faces, and that calm, soothing voice had an automatic quality about it, she would have a different voice for home. She ushered the remaining couple through to the room we had just left, I felt the magazine woman's eyes flicker curiously over me before the door shut, but I never met her look. I didn't look at Stephen either. I reached out and took his hand, and holding hands we waited for the nurse, plump and efficient, to lead us to the consultant.

It wasn't even a room they took us to. It was a corner of a blue linoleumed ward, with one of those high hospital beds which the nurse indicated I should climb onto. I didn't want to lie on it. I wasn't sick. So I sat, my legs dangling over the side, unable to reach the floor and Stephen stood to one side, just within reach, while the nurse closed curtains around us to make a room. And then in they came. A middle-aged, round-faced consultant, white coat over a dark suit, highly polished black shoes, led by the nurse, her rubber soled, white shoes squeaking once or twice on the disinfected floor. And a student, we didn't mind a student did we, no pause to allow for objection, before the doctor continued, glancing at his notes, held firm by a clipboard and then up to stare at the space between my body and Stephen's. The student looked bored, shuffled on his feet and turned his head around to examine various items of machinery in the room. No one, it seemed, was looking at anyone else, five adults in a small curtained room, looking at spaces.

"The scan shows that the foetus has exhibited what we call choroid plexus cysts," a glance at the clipboard. I can't see what he is looking at, maybe they've given him the picture of my shadowy baby, that tiny white grub moving in the blackness of my blood, her heart racing like a galloping horse. "These cysts are a soft marker for Edward's syndrome." A glance up at the space between me and Stephen.

"Edward's syndrome?" Stephen's voice.

"What is Edward's syndrome?" I ask. Both our voices are steady and calm. There is no other way to be with a doctor like this, a bored student who gazes distractedly around and a nurse watching for our reactions. This room is not one for crying in. I dig my nails into the palm of my hand, healthy nails, strong, all that calcium I've been filling my body with. The pain focuses me.

"Edward's syndrome is a chromosomal disorder, like Down's. But rarer. It occurs in about one in five thousand babies and with these cysts, which as I said are a soft marker, your baby has a chance of about one in one hundred of exhibiting this syndrome. Now the cysts might clear up and we'll book you in for another scan in say four weeks to check on that. Of course your other option is an amniocentesis which would clear up any doubt, but of course that carries its own risk, about one in one hundred, so as you see..."

We knew about amnios, Stephen's books had informed us well, a needle sunk through the belly to extract a little of the amniotic fluid which could be used to test if the baby was a

dud or not. But as the doctor said there were risks, a risk in wanting a guarantee of a normal baby.

“So,” the doctor raised his head, again focusing on the space, giving a tight little smile in summary. “You will need to think things over, review your options, and this is my card in case of questions.” He handed a card to the nurse who hesitated not knowing which of us to pass it to. Stephen held out his hand and took it. I kept my fist clenched, nails digging into palms, throat filled with hatred for this man, this doctor who wouldn’t look at me, who never held out his hand to me, keeping a safe distance between us. What I should have done, what Helena would have done is open my mouth, force out a loud voice, demanded more, more of everything, information, advice, care and attention. But I sat, my legs dangling over the edge of the high metal bed, sat with my nails digging into my palm and watched the doctor leave, curtains swept aside for him by the nurse, student following, walking into the wings of his little theatre after he had performed his little role, carrying with him the picture of my baby, two circles drawn around those puzzling little shadows of her brain. And if Helena could see me, sitting, just sitting, she would say, “Christ Lizzie, Christ,” her lifelong frustration at my inactivity, my hesitation to act. A leaf she called me, dropped on a stream, backed up against scum.

While I heard Helena’s voice, sounding in my head, at work, in my dreams, walking to the shops and carrying out the routines of life, Stephen made himself busy accumulating facts. He read up about Edward’s syndrome, “One in five thousand Lizzie, what are the chances, one in seven thousand some books said, which is right, don’t they know, but what are the chances? A grossly malformed baby it says, few, if they’re born, survive past a few months, misshapen head, heart problems, blunted limbs, club-like feet, rocker-like, Lizzie, that’s what the books said, but we saw Lizzie, we saw the scan, we saw our baby there, all perfectly normal that’s what the radiologist said, everything as it should be, you heard her, and we heard the heart, so loud and strong it made us smile, I saw you smile Lizzie when you heard it, everything normal except for those blasted little cysts. I’m going to make some calls, I’m going to get to the bottom of this, abominable behaviour that doctor, sauntering in and informing us in that callous fashion. I’ll find someone else, they’ll have someone better, I’ll get it straightened out Lizzie.”

Was it for this I married him, when Helena was no longer there to push me on and back me up, to pull me along in her wake? Someone to fight my battles so that I could continue to float, to float and stick as the current directed. But I carried a passenger now, a little insect, clinging to the leaf, my little pale grub of a baby, who moved inside me as Stephen spoke, bumping the walls of my body, stretching out her limbs and beating gently against me, hands or feet I didn’t know, rocker-like, is that what it said, and my tiny girl, the one of my dreams with curly dark hair and perfect little teeth, opened her mouth and roared with laughter at

such absurdity. But the laughter changed from child's to woman's. Helena's laughter loud and strong, strong as that racing heartbeat we both heard, that made us smile, Stephen and me. Helena's laughter would make people smile, it rushed out of her and took over, she was always laughing that time in Rome, making people turn their heads although she seemed not to notice that. And then it was different, in London it was different, it cracked and crumbled. And I did nothing except buy her some ugly prints for her blank walls and while that doctor outlined my little girl's possible fate, early death and rocker like feet, a heart that wouldn't work when I had heard it, I had heard it...I had sat and dangled my legs and done and said nothing.

Stephen found me another doctor. "GP said he was the best, youngish but the best. Very good GP that, said he had heard of another case like ours, baby turned out fine, perfectly normal. I said you needed your mind put at rest, and he agreed, can't go through the rest of your pregnancy with a worry like this on your mind, spoils it all. It's meant to be so exciting, Lizzie, you have been excited Lizzie, you've been so happy, I don't want that ruined, not when they don't seem to have their facts straight. Only about four papers written on these cyst things, they haven't got their facts straight yet, they're just firing things at us to cover their arses. This doctor will set things straight though, Lizzie. Reassurance that's what we want, isn't it Lizzie, reassurance that everything is normal."

Stephen didn't come with me to see Dr Mason, the youngish, but best obstetrician they had to offer. He had a meeting set up with a new client, but said he'd cancel like a shot if he thought it necessary, but he was so sure that everything would go well and my mind would be put at rest and if he had to be honest he found hospitals and doctors in general upsetting, they rendered you powerless, reduced you as if somehow everything you had accumulated in life simply dissolved and became worthless, did I know what he meant? But I was to call, I was to call the moment I got home, fill him in.

I had to take the morning off from work, explained briefly and quickly to my employer during one of his whirlwind trips through the office. "Of course, of course," he said, one foot out of the door. Mention doctor or complication and he didn't want any more details. "Just make sure you get through those files I left on your desk, I'll need that all done for Thursday, and have you sorted out your maternity replacement, well, as soon as possible, Lizzie." A small, quick, busy smile and off he went. I took a taxi up to the hospital. I wore my work clothes, a light grey suit with a skirt with a stretchy waistband from the maternity section of a department store. I'd made sure my underwear was matching although I was not sure I would be examined at all, but there was something about doctors, like headmistresses that made you want to appear at your best.

I arrived early, you could never tell with the traffic and I wouldn't want to keep him waiting, must be very busy, being the best. In the end it was me that was kept waiting,

about an hour in a crowded room with a lot of fagged out looking women, some with small children that they exhaustedly reprimanded in flat voices from time to time. Some, as I was, glancing up every few minutes at the oversized, slow-moving clock that occupied most of one wall. The kind of clock you might see in a classroom, plain and undecorative, but fulfilling its function. Others simply sat as if they could sit all day, not waiting for anything. And then I was called. Straightening my skirt with moist palms, pulling down the stretchy waistband to the right place over my expanded stomach so that the hem would lie straight, just below my knees, then following one of those soft-shoed nurses down another long blue corridor and into the room of Dr Mason, busy writing at his desk, not looking up at me, but signalling me to sit with one hand, while he continued to write with the other. I sat and remained quiet, waiting for him to finish whatever he was doing, as good as any schoolgirl. Then he looked up and smiled, looking me full in the face and I smiled back full of gratitude to be made so aware of my existence with the full-on look and smile after that long hour of anonymity in the waiting room. I could see that he was youngish, a boyish face, the smile charmingly crooked and only the faintest of lines beginning around eyes and forehead.

“You’ve had a bit of a rough time, haven’t you?” It was all going to be alright. The voice, kind, but not too soft, somehow melodious, and the face leaning towards mine, so I could see the texture of his skin, a few more lines, not too young, that was good, not too young. For a terrifying moment I thought the tears that pricked my eyes might spill over, but I tightened the muscles of my back, sitting bolt upright and made good use of my nails against my palm and it worked. I did not want to be a melting, weeping woman, mopping at herself with crumpled tissues. I wanted to face this doctor as he faced me, to be told it was all alright. But he’d turned away now, back to his desk. Drawing with a pen on a piece of paper, a round circle, two little circles on either side of it. He pushed it over towards me, keeping his eyes focused on the paper, his voice changing and becoming brisk.

“Here we have the head, with the cysts exhibiting on either side, sometimes we see just one cyst, other times there are two as in your case, we don’t know the significance of this, but either way these cysts are a soft marker for Edward’s syndrome and your baby has a one in eighty chance of being born with this syndrome.” I looked at the little circles. I wanted the man to look at me again, to be what he had been just minutes before.

“One in a hundred was what I was told,” was all I said.

“One in eighty is more correct looking at all the statistics as we have them. And it is not so bad. It means your baby could be absolutely normal and wondering what all this fuss is about, on the other hand if it is a case of Edward’s syndrome the baby will be unlikely to live beyond, well not much beyond a couple of months, so it’s not something you’ll have to live with, not the same as a Down’s baby.” His voice was brisk, but with a cheery upbeat as if what he was telling me would bring comfort. I said nothing, beginning to hear the soft roar of

blood in my ears, my heart thumping almost as loud as my little girl's when I listened to it with a stethoscope.

"But the heart," I said, "her heart, my baby's is normal and the scan they showed us, normal growth, normal size, and the heart so strong, we read, my husband read that Edward syndrome babies have so many things wrong with them, so many things and mine is just fine, just those little sacs, just those tiny things and she said, the lady who did the scan said they're seeing things nowadays that they're not sure if they can interpret correctly and..."

Dr Mason sighed gently as if mustering patience, fished about in a pile of papers in his desk and found the scan of my little girl, one among others. He put it up on a screen so that we could both take a look. And there she was, a pale, rounded form, frozen in darkness, there to be examined by the eyes of professionals, highlighting her defects in coloured pen.

"Mrs Wright, the cysts are the only marker visible as you say, but I don't think you can draw too much comfort from that. Other signs could manifest themselves further on in the pregnancy. And these cysts themselves may shrink or disappear altogether, that too may mean nothing; so while I could book you in for a further scan in four weeks or so we may be no closer to having a clear answer as to your baby's condition."

"So what, what happens, what must I do?"

"I can't tell you that Mrs Wright, the age of paternalistic medicine is over. I can't tell you what to do, I can inform you of your options, give you information and then the choice is yours. That is how things work nowadays. And if I didn't give you all the facts, then you would have something to say to me if things didn't all turn out well, now wouldn't you?"

The ground had shifted, I sat slumped, uncomprehending. My arms folded across my stomach. He was angry, about something of which I was just a small insignificant part. He had pretended for a moment that he saw me as a person, and then forgotten, involved in hospital politics and procedure. I and my baby no longer existed, represented only by his little diagram, a large circle for a head, two smaller circles for those special little cysts that would push my child into the great sea of statistics in which the doctor sailed, negotiating the winds and trying not to get wet.

"So Mrs Wright, there is only one way of being almost one hundred percent sure that your baby is normal and that is the procedure of the amniocentesis. Are you familiar with what that involves?" A silent nod from me. "This procedure does carry a risk of miscarriage in about one in one hundred cases, but it is carried out using ultrasound so that we can be very precise about the position of the needle and mistakes are rare, nevertheless there is still the risk. Or else you can do nothing. Proceed with the pregnancy as normal and hope for the best. The choice is yours."

And then the tears started. I didn't really care about them anymore, they just came and flowed and didn't stop. Dr Mason was embarrassed, I could see that. His face became

boyish again and he handed me a box of tissues, looking at me nervously out of the corner of his eye. Scribbling something down on a card and handing it to me.

“This is my secretary’s number, Mrs Wright, in case you have questions. I’ll call a nurse for you.” He left hurriedly, gathering his papers up messily and walking quickly out of the room. I sat and cried and two nurses came and stood either side of me, watching me cry.

“A glass of water, Liz, do you want a glass of water?” sing-song pitying voices. Liz, why are they calling me that? What did the youngish, but best Dr Mason whisper to them as he hurried away, a bit of comfort, call her by her first name, shorten it, more comforting, more homey. “Liz,” they say, “Liz what you going to do?” And I cry and shake my head at their water and their comfort, shake my head as I feel kicks coming from inside me.

“Just leave me,” I tell them and feel the exchange of glances over my head.

“We can’t do that Liz, you see, the thing is, we need this room, the next patient...”

Of course, of course, time’s up and I must find a call box and call a taxi, snivelling like a child in the backseat, the driver silent, turning on the radio. I gave him ten pounds and didn’t wait for change.

CHAPTER TWELVE

There were a few of those days that happen toward the end of summer, quite perfect and warm and still. Something to remember, Frances said, something to hold on to during all those dull grey days when the air is salty and liquid with never-ending drizzle. Dream days, and I walked the island, the time slipping past now, holiday nearing an end, and then what, then what? Back to our ever so modern little home, recently decorated, still smelling of paint, a baby’s room, sunflower yellow, little Beatrix Potter prints, not yet hung, a cot I’d bought because there was a special offer at the department store when I’d got my maternity suit, that pale grey one for work and doctor’s visits. One or two things, a velvety rabbit and that fleece, so soft to lie on and in the white clean cupboards, two brown papered parcels, marked H and E in my mother’s heavy hand. I never had brought myself to open them, to see those faded little stains of past baby meals, and now, perhaps my mother would want them back, or they could be passed on to Oxfam along with the rest of the things, if anyone wanted them, baby’s clothes, stained and over thirty years old, you’d have to be desperate. And I’ll throw in those prints, the ugly, great flowers I bought Helena, those ornate frames all wrong for her, I couldn’t have been thinking clearly, in such a hurry to fill those spaces for her, those blank walls. Would have done better to have stayed another night, stayed and helped her unpack a few boxes, shared some supper, listened to her a bit, she wanted to talk, to let out some words, but I left, and then I didn’t call nearly enough, too easily put off by that rudeness of hers, the way she could chuck in a swear word or two, hit you like a slap,

“more to life than fucking interior design,” she said, and she was quite right, more to life than fucking most things.

She’s taken to following me. I’ll be walking, along those shale paths that run next to this duck-pond of a sea, my head filled with ghosts, and I’ll hear her, a little laugh, a giggle and the light crunch of tyres on broken shells, the squeak of a rusty bike. And I’ll turn and see her face, the little smile, the perfect seed pearls of white teeth and it will take me a while, take me some time to smile and call out, “There you are Joelle, were you sneaking up on me?” And then she’ll laugh some more. All tinkley and triumphant, so pleased with herself. Dominique is never very far away, lying somewhere in the sun, a skin so beautifully brown, golden and somehow moist, young skin, younger than mine, my cells have lost their plumpness, beginning to dry out. Sometimes she’s collecting things, pebbles, those pretty pebbles that pleased my mother, sorting them, taking only the best, or else she’s just sitting, daydreaming in one of her summer dresses, looking quite peaceful with her head at a tilt. Dominique could be in one of those French films, the kind where nothing much happens that I’ve always loved, but infuriated Helena although she went with me once or twice. “Well what the hell was that all about?” she’d say over a drink and I could never really tell her, though I loved the slow pace of it all, the idly moving camera, catching looks that passed between people, the texture of skin, the movement of a dress, the feeling of a life wrapping around you, rich and bright and warm. Dominique always looks up when she hears Joelle laugh, looks up and when she sees me, smiles and waves and sometimes I join her, sitting together with our legs stretched out in the sun and her daughter pumping her little legs up and down to drive forward that rusty little trike she seems to have adopted as her own. Joelle makes noises like a little animal, bunny-hopping or springing around for no apparent reason and then plopping herself down on her mother’s lap, or mine, flinging her arms around my neck, calling me horsey, a ride horsey, a piggyback horsey.

“Don’t be a pest,” her mother says.

“Not a pest,” the child insists.

“No not a pest,” I say and hoist her up on my back and trot around, clicking my tongue.

“Faster,” and we canter and turn in circles and crumple to the ground, me out of breath, and Joelle calling for more, Dominique smiling widely and me saying, “enough, now, enough, horsey is tired out.”

There’s going to be a party at the big house, the weather is too good to let it pass by unmarked. Perfect for a barbecue, windless warm air like this so rare in England, warm as blood so you hardly feel it on your skin, still light so late, although that will begin to change soon now, nights drawing in, days shrinking. A day like this, Dominique says, reminds her of her wedding day, a perfect day, this still heat and everything just right, a green lawn and her nieces playing in their pretty cream dresses, flowers and one of those French wedding

cakes, a tower of profiteroles dripping caramel, so decadent compared to the pristine iced whiteness of the English equivalent. A perfect French Catholic wedding with Jeremy smiling at everyone and doing so well, even if he didn't understand it all. "And you Lizzie, what about you?" she asks smiling still at her own picture, her own memory, "how was your wedding?"

"Simple," I say, "just simple, registry office you know, I had a friend with me, and Stephen his brother, just simple." She looks disappointed so I add, "but good, it was good." She wants more details, I can see, but I don't want to give them. I don't want to say that I couldn't have a church wedding, not in that church with Helena's ashes and her little stone. And if it had been any other church, my mother would have bristled, she did anyway. "Well I'm not coming to any registry office, honestly Lizzie I don't know why you can't do things the right way, you've never been able to do things the way they should be done, but you'd think, this once, your wedding, it's not something to take lightly..." But I didn't take it lightly. In that square room with magnolia floral wallpaper, Stephen and I bound our lives together. And my knees trembled as I spoke my vows, shook like two little animals caught in a bag, they knocked like a cartoon character's. I tensed my jaw between words to stop my teeth chattering, and my signature in the book could have belonged to a child of five, learning to write. Stephen never stopped looking at me, kept his eyes on my face and he looked, well he looked so proud. Behind him stood his brother, Matthew, his round pale face looming, moon-like over Stephen's shoulder and on my side there was Sarah, in some dress that looked like water, carrying a bunch of sweet smelling flowers, tuber roses and gardenias. She'd done that herself, a surprise, filling the air of the closed room with a heavy, rich scent. And when it was done, the book signed and all official, she made a face at me, bug eyes and a crooked smile to make me laugh as we filed out of the room. In the best restaurant in Cambridge, five kinds of bread and their matching butters, served up by serious waiters, Sarah and too much champagne made me laugh again, we laughed at the involved descriptions of dishes, or at nothing and it was catching because even Matthew started smiling and two spots of colour appeared on those pale cheeks and Sarah said, "will you look at that, I knew you could do it," which made us laugh again. And all the time, all the time Stephen watched me. "Can't keep your eyes off your bride can you, Stephen?" Sarah said and he shook his head. I can't really remember what sort of day it was, but it seemed bright and warm as we were driven off, a weekend in the country, we didn't want more, didn't want to put off beginning our new life. In the car, driving away from a furiously waving Sarah and Matthew with one arm half raised, his face still pink, his small smile a little sheepish, my body felt different, replete, nourished as if, for once, I'd eaten my fill. I thought that that was perhaps what it felt like to have full attention turned on you, like some great sun beating

down. And I've got it, I thought, I've got it and I felt the thrill of a child, rather a puny child, who unexpectedly wins a party game.

I think there had been perhaps a little too much champagne; even before we got to our country house hotel, cosy and secluded which was what we were after, Stephen's eyes clouded over. He let his heavy head fall into my lap, his skin a little clammy against my folded hands. I moved them, placed one gently on his hair. "Lizzie," he said, his voice muffled as he spoke into my dress, not a bride's white dress, but something beautiful and shell pink that I thought I might wear again. "Lizzie, you don't realise do you, you don't realise how much I need you." The words slurred a little, my lap feeling damp, maybe he was crying a little, that damp leaking from the eyes that too much alcohol can bring. I smiled a wife's indulgent smile, but a small prick of fear, and another like a little dart of pain, made me shift my body, shuffle to find comfort with that heavy head on my lap, as I tried not to think what substance I had that would fill the dark cavern of another person's need.

So I don't say much, when Dominique looks at me wanting more, her eyes wide and light brown, yellow-brown like a cat's.

"No it was just, nothing fancy, a good simple wedding." Dominique smiles and shrugs her shoulders. "You're funny Lizzie," she says lightly with none of that intensity that Sarah could have when her funniness wore thin, towards the end, when I couldn't give her what she wanted, or take what she said I needed. She said I was letting us both down and that wasn't funny at all, but I was past caring then, past caring. I think of her now though, as I sit next to Dominique and her child darts around us like a bird, chirping, "funny, funny, funny," picking up the word from her mother.

For the party, wooden tables were pulled out onto the sparse yellowing grass under the apple trees, and the barbecue, a little rickety on its wheels, the paint-work rusty from salt air, lit and left to smoulder so that the coal would be just right for cooking later on. Frances had visitors, her brother, Samuel and a large bear-like man with a vast chest and round belly and a neat beard, a few shades of grey. Frances called him Ruby, which made him smile, a nickname or maybe he was a Reuben, no one asked in the end. She called him an old friend, and there were smiles about that too as if shared memories were bobbing about in their minds. There had been a fishing expedition, a net cast under the rickety pier. They'd been lucky and caught eight huge grey mullet, a good enough excuse for a party even without this glorious weather.

So we sat out in the cool of the evening and ate fresh charcoal-grilled mullet, carefully filleted by Frances' brother, a rather fussy man, so much younger than her, with that peculiar slenderness and tiredness about his wide set grey eyes that spoke of years of indulgence, drugs rather than alcohol. Maybe he had been a hippie, he was of that age, and now, nearing fifty, he seemed to function on a lower level than his sister, not entering into the

conversation much after his job of removing bones from the fish was done. His quiet vacancy, with his fine, slightly hooked nose and those wide eyes, might come across as pensive depth to a much younger woman, a girl, and I was sure that all his lovers would be women barely into their twenties. Frances treated him with indulgent impatience, occasionally issuing orders which he carried out without much change of expression. There was sweetcorn, also grilled on the fire, a little blackened but popping warm and sweet into our mouths. Joelle's little T-shirt was quickly smeared with stains. She spent much of the time under the table feeding Difa Dog with titbits, humming to drown out the low rumble of uninteresting adult talk. My mother, I noticed, ate little, this wouldn't be her kind of food, she would have preferred a parsley sauce or something to drown out the taste of fish and I could see she was both intimidated and a little disgusted by Ruby's loudness. He spoke and ate incessantly, little morsels of fish occasionally flying across the table or becoming trapped in his beard until Frances leaned over and mopped with a paper napkin. "Ruby, what sort of a name is that, for a man..." I imagined her saying. But my father, my father was enjoying himself, nothing to do with the food, he never minded what he ate, but he had found a little corner next to Oliver and they were talking fishing in great detail, they would move on to a discussion about the area, little snippets of interesting fact, that's what my father liked, what he found soothing. Really, if I thought about it, my father was probably having quite a good holiday, pottering about, finding a little unexpected company and perhaps it was kind of Stephen to have organised it and brought my parents along, whatever his motives. Sitting here, under the apple trees, in one of my summer dresses, with Dominique's turquoise sandals on my feet, sipping wine, red wine that pulls at your mouth and white that slips down so effortlessly, I feel almost young, almost pretty as if I weren't such a different woman from Dominique who chats animatedly to my husband, bright as a butterfly in her summer colours. And her husband, Jeremy, leans his face closer to mine, offers to fill my glass and says, with English gusto, "Isn't this wonderful?"

"Do they still do that Battle of Maldon re-enactment, the locals?" Ruby booms across the table to Oliver, "wasn't it all supposed to take place at this time of year, tenth century wasn't it?"

"Oh, they haven't done that for a few years now, no one to organise it, I suppose," Frances says, reaching over to dab at Ruby's mouth, "Pity, it was fun."

"Battle of Maldon, of course," Stephen is enthusiastic, "I never thought about it, but of course it was here, wasn't it? Fantastic, that epic poem, full of great heroes giving up their lives for the sake of honour."

Samuel lets out a little humph of bitter amusement, sips his wine quietly.

"Well it actually took place on Northey, next island along," Oliver explains, "These Danish raiders set up camp there demanding tribute, but didn't seem to realise about the

tides and so the English leader, Byrhtnoth of Essex, with his men, sat waiting on the mainland and they shouted insults to each other across the water, waiting for the tide to ebb and the causeway to open up. Of course it was pretty easy for the English to pick the raiders off one by one as they came across the causeway.”

“So, a great English victory?” Dominique asks.

“Not at all,” Oliver continues, settling himself well into his seat, enjoying all eyes being turned on him, “not at all. You see, Byrhtnoth was suffering from what could be described as a bad dose of English fair play. He decided to let the Danes across the causeway, so they could fight on equal terms on the mainland. Honourably brave, or foolhardy, depends how you look at it, any rate Byrhtnoth was cut down and the English lost.”

Ruby gives an exaggerated groan, helping himself to corn on the cob and biting into it ferociously. “And did massive slaughter ensue?” As he spoke he sprayed one or two plates nearest him with corn husks. My mother’s lips tighten with disgust, but Ruby remains unaware, intent on the story.

“Well,” Oliver pauses for effect, taking a slow sip of his wine, “of course quite a few men fled, but a group of Byrhtnoth’s thanes, decided to stand their ground and fight knowing to do so meant certain death.”

“Rushing into the arms of death and picking off as many Danes along the way, ha, like it!” Ruby roars. Samuel, expels a quick disdainful breath through his lips. “What are you scoffing about, Sam old man,” Ruby turns his shaggy head to face Samuel’s lean form, “all sound a bit too energetic for you does it?” He smiles at him good-naturedly.

Samuel looked at the ground, examining one of his bare feet as if he had no intention of addressing the rest of us. “Those things, courage and honour and bravery, have to be put in context. It must make the world of difference as you charge at some spike-wielding Dane, to know, to be certain that some afterlife awaits you, some happy hunting ground, or some hall with roast meats and wenches, I don’t know. I mean, really it was no more than suicide, and look how we treat those sad fucks who decide to call it a day and think of what they’re facing, diving right off the edge into, well, nothingness.”

“So what you’re saying...” Oliver leans in, but my mother gets to her feet. Her voice is clipped throwing a false note into the flowing, murmuring evening.

“Thank you so much,” she says, addressing Frances and Oliver, her hosts, “Lovely evening, but I think we must be making our way, it’s the heat you know, tires me out, but lovely idea, a fish barbecue, very unusual.” She glances at my father, waiting for him to rise and murmur his polite thanks, an echo of hers, to follow her back to the salty little cottage and the dank little room with the pale blue blanket on their double bed, but it’s as if he hasn’t heard her and she stands for a second or two at a loss, like some actress whose co-star has forgotten his cue, and improvisation is not one of her strengths. Her mouths opens silently,

then closes and I see her eyes dart once again in the direction of my father, carrying a quick flicker of panic. It is Ruby who comes to her rescue, rising noisily to his feet, with a crash of a plate against a glass, which luckily remains upright, he booms across at my mother, "But you can't possibly leave now, that would leave our numbers short for our game. The re-enactment of the great epic poem, The Battle of Maldon, how about it? The locals are fed up with it, so we must step in and keep up traditions, ten of us here, quite enough..."

Frances laughs loudly and is joined by Dominique, the rest of us smile and Joelle, hearing the word game and the laughing, shoots out from under the table, messy as a little barbarian, Difa pads out after her and stands with his tongue out, looking exhausted. Joelle hops about in a circle, "Me too, me too in the game."

"Well of course, of course, and the dog, wouldn't be complete without," Ruby says addressing her seriously.

But my mother does not feel herself saved by Ruby from her awkward moment. For her, he has made it worse, she is bewildered, unsure whether this absurd suggestion of a game is serious or not, and all those little gulps and bubbles of laughter erupting around the table she believes, I can see by the tightening mask of her face, are directed at her. She remains stiffly standing and at last my father rises slowly to his feet and echoing thanks and goodbyes, they leave the table which has grown noisy and disjointed with merriment.

I watch, I watch the retreating backs of my parents, upright yet somehow diminished, so small as they walk away into the evening light. It is only then I notice that it is just beginning to get dark, one of those still long, light summer nights, one of the last. Frances and Oliver bring out candles, some for the table and some propped up in little bags of sand for the ground. "Music, we need music," Ruby calls out loudly and imperiously, carried away with the thought of being some glorious tenth century thane and Oliver wheels out a gramophone player on a long cord from the house.

"Yes, yes, I know what you're all going to say, old-fashioned but it still works."

He puts on Bill Haley and the Comets and we all exchange looks of surprise and delight, how many years since we heard this, but so irresistible, it pulls us out onto the lawn, the grass dry and coarse under our bare feet, shoes kicked free, as we follow Ruby's lead, his bellow of "Great, bloody great," as he throws himself into the music, mouthing the words, sweating profusely as he rocks around the clock. Joelle flits between us, her tiny child's limbs copying our movements and Difa stands watching, his mouth open and drooling in the heat.

The music changed, perhaps it was Frances, concerned about the redness of Ruby's face, the sweat soaking his shirt. It changed to Perry Como, to Glen Miller and Doris Day, soothing music, soothing words, floating out into the night over dry grass and a sea the colour of a pond. Wartime music, made for people to forget, such mush, but so very sweet

sounding, on a night like this, so good. We danced together, swapping partners without speaking, smiling, floating from one to another, and I ended then with Stephen, pressing against him as I had against Ruby and Oliver, Jeremy, but not Samuel, he danced alone for a while and then sat on the ground by the dog, finishing up wine and watching. Pressing against Stephen, his body like the others, like mine, salty with sea air and sweat, warm, but the skin just beginning to cool in the night air. Comfortably pressing and turning with the music.

“Que sera sera, Whatever will be will be...will I be pretty, will I be rich?...Here’s what she said to me...”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Ruby, I mean what sort of name is that, for a man?” My mother, fiddling with her toast, breaking bits, a thin scrape of butter, a tiny amount of jam and then posted through her lips, chewed as if she might have a pill in her mouth, a self-righteous swallow. She spoke to the air over the two packets of breakfast cereal, All Bran and Cornflakes, no nonsense cereals, the same two packets we had bought at the local supermarket the second day we arrived. My mother had placed them in the middle of the table every morning of the holiday, right in the central flower of the patterned oilcloth which protected the varnished pine table during mealtimes. Then back they went into the cupboard, mostly untouched.

“And music, we heard music didn’t we Martin, kept us up, sound travels in a place like this, but still it must have been loud, and that child, I’ll bet she was kept up till all hours when she should have been safely in her bed. They’re a perfectly nice couple those two, but I can’t say I approve, how old is she, couldn’t be more than three or so...”

My father made no comment, his face in a newspaper, the rustling of the pages his only form of communication. He must have been up early when the tide was low to make it across the causeway and back in time for breakfast. All the way across a causeway, a thick ribbon of fertile mud with the gulls screaming in his ears, to get his newspaper. He could have picked up some fresh bread from a bakery, still warm. It would have made a change from the packet of sliced bread, a little stale but still just alright for toast. Toast with a thin scraping of butter, a smear of strawberry jam, and my mother’s voice filling the silence.

Stephen is quiet, there is a shyness about his silence this morning, his flickering eyes. My eyes flicker away too, remembering the strange comfort of our bodies resting against each other last night while we danced, the music so startling after two weeks with little sound except the screech of sea birds and the high pitched, rhythmic beat of the halyards against the masts of the boats, wires singing against metal. And then music and human voices singing sweet happy words taking over the night. As we left, turning around and lifting our

arms in greeting to the shadowed figures of our hosts under the dark apple trees, Stephen and I held hands, a couple, our feet crunching on the shale paths, our breathing audible and waving to that other couple, to Dominique and Jeremy who carried the small sleeping bundle of their child.

I'd never seen my parents dance, even as a child. There had been one or two dinner parties when Helena and I were little and we'd crept out of bed, quiet as mice to spy on the grown ups. Stifling giggles, pressed against the back of the sofa, we waited to hear or see something that would make us draw in our breath or widen our eyes at each other, but the excitement came from the secrecy of it all, the courage required to pinch a chocolate from a nearby bowl and make it back safely to our bedroom, rather than from the empty hum of adult voices. Under our bedspreads we would force out giggles, muffle them with our hands although there was no one to hear, and share the chocolate, minty and disappointing as toothpaste. There should have been music, there should have been dancing. Maybe it had all been and passed and we'd missed it, back in the days of those old photographs when our mother had eyes like a cat's and an orange bikini.

"So, I'm presuming if there was music, that that old fool Ruby, really what sort of a name... didn't persist with the ludicrous idea of acting out that barbarian battle." My mother helped herself carefully to the one spoon of sugar she had with her morning tea. Delving precisely into the bowl and then giving the spoon a little shake so that the sugar lay level, another little shake, it must be exactly level, no curve of excess allowed and then into the tea, lightened with just a dribble of milk, a stir or two and the teaspoon placed with a little clink on the saucer. The cups in the bungalow are an ugly beige, bought in cheap bulk load for all the cottages I suppose, but I'd seen my mother perform this same ritual with different cups over the distant stretch of my childhood and it wouldn't stop, she would do it every day for the rest of her life. Delve, shake, shake, stir and clink. That little clink, did my father hear it anymore, did it make him flinch, or had he shut his ears to the noise, drowning himself in a mass of newsprint. I couldn't shut it out, it sounded now in my brain, a clink and a clink, punctuating my mother's voice. And then a little sip of tea, the merest little slurp and the long swallow, the movement of her throat, swallowing her tea like medicine.

"Making a virtue of those barbarians, tenth century or not, slaughtering each other like animals. Hacking each other's limbs off and what not. Mind you he could easily have looked the part, that Ruby, did you see his manners, uncivilised. I wouldn't have thought the Hubbards would have a guest like that, a friend of theirs, but you can never tell, so completely..."

"Uncivilised, "I finished for her, guessing at the word and she raised her eyes in surprise at my voice. I held her look, examining her face. The clinking sound in my brain had stopped, I was solid and focused.

"I would say it is uncivilised not to visit your daughter's flat, her first flat she chose and bought all on her own, not to visit it until she is dead and then to rummage through her things like a rat."

I think I can hear the sound of an intake of breath, a faint, "Lizzie!" which would have come from Stephen, but I keep my eyes on my mother's pale face, pale even after two weeks of fresh air and so much sun, an unusual amount of sun.

"And did I ever tell you about Helena's driving, the way her foot hovered between brake and accelerator, twitching between the two, making up its mind and then suddenly laying itself flat down on the accelerator, taking a chance when it should have been the other, should have been the brake, to be safe."

"Lizzie, don't," Stephen's voice, stronger now, the scrape of a pushed back chair.

"Did you think, that that is what happened, that she laid her foot down flat, charging at death, just like those barbarians you despise, preferring that sudden thrill and oblivion to a life measured out like flattened teaspoons of sugar."

"How dare you." My mother's voice shakes with anger, tight and cold, her head wobbles a little with controlled fury.

"She was my sister, and I was the one she called, not you. She called me to talk and I am worse than you, worse, because I knew and I should have gone to see her..."

Last night, back late from a party with music and the comfort of close dancing bodies and hand holding, Stephen and I had tiptoed into the damp little bungalow, trying to be quiet, trying not to wake my parents as we felt our way through the dark, bumping against the ugly furniture and stifling giggles, feeling our way out of clothes and into bed, lying close. And just before sleep, a real sleep, deep and dreamless, the kind I haven't had for so long, there was the scent and feel of skin and hair, and I remembered her, the beds we shared. Remembered her now, my eyes locked to the outraged face of my mother who tells me, "You have no right..."

"You want to know what she spoke about, the last phone call? She spoke about you, Dad, well rather she wanted me to tell her something, anything, about you. You see she couldn't remember, couldn't remember anything about you except the newspapers and how you never looked at her. I told her about the bike riding, you taught us to ride, up and down that road, I remember, but she didn't. Up and down the road and I was frightened and she wasn't, do you remember, Dad?"

I'm still looking at my mother, her tight angry face, but I hear my father's voice, "Enough," he says, "enough," the dry croak of an underused voice, a squeaky wheel needing oil. I turn my head slowly to look at him, newspaper allowed to fall to the table, collapsing a corner into his cup of tea, luke-warm now, he never does finish his cups, the dry paper sucking up the liquid, growing soggy. My eyes travel up, up from the paper with its corner of

damp and black print like marching ants, up to the direction of that strangled voice, his mouth open and dark as a hole and then his eyes. They don't flicker and fall away, don't drop down to the paper, lying awkward and bent as a collapsed bird on the overly-bright oilcloth. They look at me those eyes, straight at me, just like Helena wanted and they are old eyes, burnt out, hollowed out, painful eyes and I don't want to look at them.

"Enough, my girl." My girl he calls me, my girl, and there is a horrible broken appeal in his voice, a crack of desperation. He is claiming me for his own. My father, the man with the dead end job, his train journeys and crosswords, and now not even that. Retired, the years until he dies stretching out, to be spent with my mother and the memory of a dead daughter who he gave up on, who he couldn't even look in the eyes. But he's staring at me, this empty bag of a man, the stuffing all trickled out and the horror that I feel in thinking that I could be like him, really his daughter, the kind who gives up, just lets it happen, no fight, turns to a bitter rage. I want to spit things at him, say anything that would make me different from him, sever the connection. Things I should have said long ago. Then they might have made some difference. If I had called him, rather than my mother, told him to visit Helena. If I had called him after speaking to her and hearing that high girlish cry in her voice. I could have said, "Helena has no memories of you, Dad. You are just a blank to her." There would have been a great deal of throat clearing I'm sure, but it would have given him a chance, a warning. Too late now, things left unsaid for too long, and now it's too late. The fabric of my father is so flimsy, it would be too easy to rip it to shreds with a few cruel words. So I look at him and say nothing. My eyes are the first to fall and flicker, back to my mother and her smouldering anger, so much easier to accept.

"Lizzie, this is monstrous," my mother's voice, its sharp edge a warning, to hold me off, keep me at bay.

"But I am monstrous, mother, worse than any of those barbarians. They gave great roaring battle cries, well so I imagine, and wielded weapons to kill as many of the marauding enemy as they could. And it seems to me there was a sudden spontaneous energy to it, bloody and murderous, a heated frenzy that burnt itself out in battle, whereas I, you know what I did, mother. I lay on a table, a hospital table stretched out with my belly exposed..."

"Lizzie, stop," Stephen's voice, with an appeal I deafen myself to.

"My belly exposed while they prod with a needle, sense the right place and insert a needle while I lie there like some medieval witch, the fight all gone from her, having her devil's marks probed."

"Lizzie, it wasn't like that, it was all very precise, they used ultrasound so they could find the safest place, there was nothing medieval, the latest technology, they said..."

"Very clean, it was very clean and they smiled, they told me to relax, "Just relax, Mrs Wright," they kept repeating my name."

“Lizzie,”

“You know, those English, hacked down by Danes, at least they fought about it, killed a few enemies, added some blood to the gory mixture of dead and mud, but I just lay, just lay while they inserted the needle. So macabre just to lie still and let them do that, and you watching Stephen, watching with your brow all wrinkled up like a spaniel’s while that doctor aspirated the liquor, wasn’t that what they called it, Stephen, weren’t those the words they used for sucking up the liquid that kept our baby safe and floating.”

“Just a little, Lizzie. They just took a little to test.”

“Yes, to test if our baby was a dud or not. You see we couldn’t be one hundred percent sure, there was doubt cast over her, and so we chose to take the risk.”

“A small risk...”

“A risk, a one per cent risk.”

And we’re all quiet now, staring at the debris of breakfast, crusts of toast and cold cups of tea. Over the remains, my mother speaks precisely.

“Well, I don’t know what you think you’re doing Lizzie, holding us all to ransom with your nasty words, your nasty thoughts. Complaining about the choices you’ve made, were they right, were they wrong, well the thing is frankly, you’re lucky to have them. I didn’t, women of my time didn’t. You got pregnant, and there you were, no choice in the matter, and there, Miss Lizzie, you were, and if it spoiled everything, there was nothing you could do about that. Lumbered, you were lumbered.”

So I turned then and left my lumbered mother, and my father with those sad old eyes that I didn’t want to look at any more, and my husband, my husband, silent now, standing in the low-ceilinged room, with its cheap furniture and sweating walls. Walked out of the front door, turning down one of those little shale paths running through the short yellow-green grass, burnt by sun and salt. Walked away, quickly and evenly, feeling a breeze on my face, the still heat of yesterday gone now, great banks of cloud building with the bruised, heavy look of rain.

That day, the day I got home from the hospital, from my appointment with the youngish but best Dr Mason, handing over ten pounds to the taxi driver, fumbling with my purse and handing over the money, not wanting any change, not wanting to prolong the moment when yet another stranger could look at my exposed face, swollen and mottled with tears, could look and feel whatever they wished, pity, curiosity, or nothing much at all, my face laid open to them. I retreated into my home, scurrying through the front door like a frightened rabbit into its burrow, down the narrow tunnel of my hallway, lightened by the yellow paint and the stripped and polished floorboards, but dark without electric light, even in the afternoon light, even now that spring was so nearly here. Over the telephone my voice was small and

pinched, nails into my palms, that old trick, to keep me steady, keep me distracted until I could speak to Stephen. The secretary sounding formal, "He's in a meeting, is it urgent?"

"Yes, urgent," my voice rising, sounding not like my own.

"I'll connect you Mrs Wright."

And then Stephen, concerned, but a little formal, there must have been someone with him in his office, a client, an awkward situation. But my voice shattered and rained down in little pieces and he said, "Lizzie, I'll be there as soon as I can."

And I curled up on our bed to wait. Wouldn't be long now, five minutes for him to give some kind of explanation, then out to where he parks his car, a short walk along the pavement along that busy road with sandwich shops, a new bar, one we hadn't tried, so many new places in Cambridge now, spanking new and hopefully modern, but they don't last long, change hands and a new sign goes up or else they revert, revert to the comfortably shabby which bring in the crowds. Stephen would press the button at the pedestrian crossing, wait impatiently for the lights, wanting to get to me, couldn't be more than fifteen minutes, maybe twenty, traffic, it was unpredictable and they were always working on the roads, tearing them up suddenly, laying pipes, widening pavements, causing disruption to the endless flow of slow-moving cars. A half hour, maybe it would be a half hour before I heard the key in the door, and his footstep on those smooth boards, his highly polished black shoes walking firmly down the passage to find me. Schoolboy shoes I call them, although no schoolboy ever kept his shoes so shiny, it's what clients expect Stephen says, but he does get a strange pleasure from polishing his shoes, his expression so intent, a faint pink glow of satisfaction. So I wait, I wait, curled on my side on our bed with the Indian bedspread, my knees tucked up like a child, like a baby, foetal position they call it. Inside me my baby kicks, not a baby yet, still a foetus, not yet viable. I don't know what part of her knocks at the walls of my womb, does she use her hands or her feet? I can feel hard bits, but don't know, don't know which limb, if it is blunted, unformed. Rocker-like feet. That was what one of the books said, rocker-like feet. A half hour and he isn't here. I stare down at the bedroom rug, an oriental rug we bought together just after we married, a converted barn shop hung all over with Persian rugs, the floors, the walls, draped over the rafters, a mass of jewel-like colours, changing that stark English barn into something exotic, almost decadent. A quiet hush of knotted silk that made me want to take my shoes off and walk over them. So hard to choose, to single out just one of them. I think my mouth must have dropped open, because I remember Stephen's finger under my jaw, pushing it shut gently and smiling at me, so pleased. And the patterns, some so detailed and intricate, little golden birds in a tree with some sort of fruit, glowing because of the light on the silk and others bold geometric colours, rougher in texture. I couldn't choose, couldn't choose and we spent hours and were served tea, apple-scented in little glasses so we felt far away from England.

The one we took home at last, carefully rolled and gently placed in the car, was blue and red and green and gold with little shapes that looked like fantastical flowers, some exploding in little twisted tendrils reaching, but not quite touching the other shapes. Still curled, I looked down at our rug that we had chosen so carefully and brought home as if it were something alive, a new pet. Waiting for Stephen, not understanding how the time passed, how long it could take for his dark blue car to roll smoothly down the streets, I followed the patterns with my eyes, down all the little paths they took, losing myself and having to start again, in the centre of the flower and out again down all those little coloured twists and turns.

At last I heard him, the quick steps, hard and echoing on the wooden floor, we should get a rug, a rug for the hall, but it's so narrow and dark it would be a waste. Footsteps and then he calls, "Lizzie, Lizzie..." and comes to find me, walking silently now over our rug, carrying in his hand a bunch of daffodils, thick sap-filled stalks with long pale yellow blunted buds, only just beginning to open, jostling and bumping against each other as he moves towards me, his forehead rippled with concern. Was it the flowers that made him take so long, was he pacing up that busy street looking for the kind of newsagent that kept a bucket of seasonal flowers outside along with the piles of newspapers? Maybe a petrol station, maybe he was out of petrol. I don't even like daffodils, not picked and in bunches. They're for fields and gardens, clustering under trees, inside they open too quickly, shrivel round the edges and lose their freshness, and then their smell changes, something rank with a hint of cat urine. While I had waited, curled on the bed, distracting myself with the patterns of a Persian rug, Stephen had searched for daffodils, buying flowers, buying some time perhaps to work out what to say to a wife with a blotchy face and swollen belly printed with a question mark.

What he said was "Lizzie, Lizzie," and bent over me, kneeling on our rug and curling over me so I could smell that particular smell of offices on his dark suit. He put the daffodils in a glass of water on my bedside table where they leaned out at odd angles, their stems too long. He plumped up my pillows and brought me hot chocolate in a mug and while I sipped it, perched himself awkwardly at the end of the bed, knees off to one side, body twisted round to me as he listened to me, the horrible wait, that doctor with his statistics and the nurses, calling me Liz, "what you going to do Liz?" and then nowhere to go, "we need the room, Liz." Stephen sighed and murmured, shook his head and rolled his forehead. "Rest, he told me, you must rest. It'll be alright." And then he left me, "Sorry Lizzie, I have to go, difficult to put off, I'll be back early, soon as I can, you'll be alright, just rest and I'll be back soon, anything I can get you...?" So I spent the rest of the afternoon there on the bed with the spring light coming through the window, but fading fast, so that the ivory walls of the room became grey. I stared at the walls, at the rug, and the daffodils, awkwardly scattered in their glass.

It was only later that Stephen spoke about heads in the sand. “We can’t afford to hide our heads in the sand, Lizzie,” his voice reasonable and sensible, but he was no longer looking me in the eye. His gaze fell somewhere off to a corner of my face. I imagined us, absurd as ostriches, our bodies curled as we buried our heads. But I wasn’t sure what we would be hiding from, all those statistics the doctor had given me, but he’d said the choice was mine and my choice was to do nothing, no more scans, no more checking. My belly was large and round with my baby somersaulting and kicking, knocking to let me know she was there. And her heart, fast as a galloping horse, how could it be, how could it, that she could be so twisted and malformed that she wouldn’t have more than one or two months of life. But, “Don’t hide your head in the sand,” Stephen tells me, “as Dr Mason said...”

“Dr Mason? When did you speak to him?”

“Well, I, after you called, you sounded so upset Lizzie, so... and so I called, to see if I could iron things out, narrow things down.”

So those daffodils, it wasn’t the daffodils that had kept him. While I had waited, the time slipping past, curled up on the bed, imagining him hurrying, his shiny black shoes down the pavement, his dark blue car nosing through traffic, stopping for those daffodils; he had been talking to the doctor, the best on offer, boyish Dr Mason who scurried off at the sight of tears leaving me with his card and two nurses.

“I was waiting for you,” my voice was blank.

“I know, I’m sorry, I just thought, if you were so upset, I should know what was said...”

“You could have come home, you could have asked me.” My voice depleted, flattened. Stephen hadn’t wanted to see me before he’d armed himself with the facts. Wanted to come to me with a decision forming and solidifying in his head. He’d built up arguments in his head as he walked the pavement, climbed in the car and those daffodils, a pale yellow decoy, given as a parent might offer sweets to a child left standing too long in the playground at the end of the day. In the child’s mouth, sweetness and disappointment would mingle bewilderingly, and those flowers, wafting little gusts of spring into the heated room, would soon leave behind that peculiar smell of rot.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the two weeks on Storsea I’ve done so much walking. My legs have grown firmer, I’m less breathless. But it has no purpose, no goal in sight or place to be reached, an island after all. Not so much walking as pacing, the relentless pacing of an enclosed animal, nowhere to go. Those few times, two or three, no more, when I’ve headed off to Frances’ little patch of garden, hoping to find her there, hoping to join her, digging and turning soil, sitting in her kitchen, tea and talk; but not now, not for now. There are only so many times

when you can sit and breathe in the air of someone else's life, hoping it will give substance to your own. For Stephen there has been that bit of sailing, Jeremy a lifesaver rescuing him from loneliness, boyishly pottering about in the dinghy, allowing him moments of respite. He's got freckles again and his skin is ruddy. And my mother, I've seen her go for morning swims, wearing her one piece costume, a robe tied firmly round her waist, picking gingerly over the pebbles with her soft white feet, her thin dry old woman's legs, knees bony as a water bird's. Discarding her robe, she pulls the costume self-consciously over her flattened behind, creeping towards the brackish water, wading in then sinking, her long neck with the prominent tendons of age, stretched uncomfortably above the surface of the water, thinning hair piled up on her head to be kept dry. Her mouth is pursed tight against stray splashes of water, her limbs working dutifully under the surface to inch her along. My mother, my disappointed mother, lumbered by Lizzie, never allowing her head to dip below the surface, keeping her head up and dry, while her husband bumbles and potters, clears his throat and buries himself up to the neck in newsprint, hiding those haunted eyes.

Burying my head in the sand, that's what Stephen said I would be doing if I did nothing, just burying my head in the sand, hiding from the truth. But the truth, it seemed, could only be determined by a needle into my belly, into the fluid where our girl swam, protected from bumps and blows. "It doesn't make sense," I told him, "it doesn't make sense, I don't believe there is anything wrong with her, little puddles of water, shrinking sacs of water and they want to stick a needle in her for that?"

"You're not listening, Lizzie. No one is going to stick a needle in the baby, they use ultrasound precisely so they don't stick a needle near her, just remove a little fluid then we can be sure, then we know exactly where we are."

"And then?"

"And then we deal with that. One step at a time. But can you cope, Lizzie, can you really cope with spending the next four months, not knowing, feeling our baby move and not know..."

And so I gave up, just like that I gave up on her. I have always given up too easily.

All those games of hide and seek I played with Helena in the rattlingly empty hours of childhood, I was always the one who gave up first. If I was hiding I would find some dusty corner or hole, somewhere small to crawl in and tuck up, shutting my eyes with the belief of a much younger child that this would make me invisible. In the beginning there would be that fluttering shiver that combines fear and excitement, holding my breath at the approach of footsteps, but then after lingering tantalisingly close they would move away, and then there was just the dust and the dark and no noise at all, silence and the discomfort of cramped limbs. Time hollowed out and I would lose my nerve, calling out, "Helena, Helena, I'm here, over here." She was impatient with me, "Oh Lizzie, you've spoilt it now, couldn't

you just hang on, I would have found you.” Then it was her turn and creeping around our quiet house, searching for my sister, time would do that strange thing again so that it seemed forever that I was looking for her, with no sign at all, no curtain moving, no suspicious crack in a cupboard door, and a silence so strong it sang in my ears. The only way to drown it was to call out, “I give up, I give up.” Helena would emerge, that look on her face and “Oh, Lizzie,” on her lips. “Ten minutes, that was just ten minutes you lasted that time.”

I don’t know how long I lasted with Stephen, a few days, maybe I stretched it out to a week, but time was of the essence, that’s what he said, what the doctor said, in these cases time was of the essence. They’d book me in as soon as they could, it would take a while to get the result, about twenty days or so. We were cutting it fine if we intended to act on the result. Twenty-four weeks the cut off point, when our baby would be considered viable, a human and no longer a foetus and termination would be complicated. It was when I could no longer be sure whether my head was in the sand or out of it, that I nodded numbly. “Ok,” I said and Stephen nodded back and moved his hand towards mine in some unfinished gesture that just brushed my skin before he made the call, in another room where I wouldn’t have to hear what words he used.

So I tramp the paths of this little island, the weather turning, gusts of wind driving salty air up my nostrils. And the smell of the mud, rich and thick, teeming with tiny organisms, shedding hardened skins and minute shells, ingesting and secreting pellets of mud in an endless cycle of fertile rot. It is the kind of mud that draws a child, watching her small white feet disappear into its darkness, pulling them free with a wet suck. I could wade in now, take off these pretty sandals that do not really belong to me and wade in up to the knee, sink down, kneel and lie, like one of those thanes cut down in battle except that there would be no blood, no missing limb and besides I haven’t the nerve, haven’t the courage although it would be my sort of death, a mere giving up, nothing active, nothing like shoving a foot down, hard and flat on the accelerator. So I walk on, stepping rhythmically in my borrowed shoes that pull away from my heel and slap back again, a little loose for my feet. I turn away from that great mess of mud having left behind only those sandals I lost at the beginning of the holiday, old and worn, plain scuffed leather, not worth fishing around for, forgotten in that flurry of pulling Joelle free. Two weeks ago that was, two weeks and the holiday almost over.

The pains started the day after I had lain on the steel-framed bed with my round belly exposed and everyone smiling and polite, reassuring me, pretending it was some happy occasion, an everyday event to lie still as a corpse while a doctor approached with the needle, a crease of concentration on his boyish brow. They felt like period pains, a low down cramping that I pretended wasn’t there, made myself a cup of tea and tried to read a

book, to relax as they had told me to. "Try to relax, Mrs Wright," they said and I'd taken another day off work, I'd really have to find a replacement, perhaps take early maternity leave, I'd sort it out, sort it out soon. I held the mug of tea against my stomach feeling its warmth, trying to draw comfort from that, but the next pain was more severe and as I got up to make my way to the telephone I felt a warm wetness between my legs that I knew was blood even before I checked it with my fingers and saw the sticky redness. There was an ambulance and they said try to relax, there were things that could be done, drugs they could inject me with, that would hold her in, keep my baby where she was, give her more time. But what was the point of that when if that little bit of fluid we had risked her life for, that little bit of aspirated liquor showed she was not worth a life and they injected me with another drug that would make my body chuck her out. "Just you lie still, Mrs Wright," they told me and I lay still and because they were doing their best I even offered a weak smile in between cramps. That was the extent of my capitulation.

It was too late for drugs and bed rest, it had gone too far. The placenta had pulled away from the uterine wall and the blood was coming fast now. So Stephen was called and in a small room with thin cotton curtains, light blue with a pattern in an attempt to be homey, I breathed in gas through a mask, breathing deeply to ease the pain of the expulsion of my daughter, my husband present but unable to watch, unable to meet my eyes, clenching his jaw and willing himself to stay in the same room as me, witness to this event. They took her and cleaned her up a little, brought her over for me to see. It was thought best for the parents to see their dead child, although she couldn't be considered a real child, three weeks and three days short of being viable. I was right, she was a girl, a tiny girl no bigger than a man's hand. She could have lain in Stephen's hand if he had held it out to her, but he had turned his back and wouldn't look although one of the nurses encouraged him, putting her hand on his arm and saying, "We'll give you a moment, Mr Wright, a moment alone with your wife and baby, before we need to take her away." But he didn't turn around, just stayed where he was without moving. So I looked at her then, my non-viable child, eyes fused shut and skin so thin her blood showed through, purplish red. So tiny, not given time, not enough time to grow into the child I saw in my dreams with the dark hair, too much of it and the little teeth. But she could have, the little limbs, smaller than a doll's, were quite perfect, no blunted ends, no rocker-like feet. "Look at her," I told Stephen, my voice sounding strange and hoarse, my throat raw in the dry, overheated air. "Look at her." He turned slowly, as if moving in water, a quick frightened glance at the little creature, but not at me, not at me. Then he was gone and for a moment I was left alone with her, my little kitten, my little mouse, and the smell of blood, a sweet, rank fertility swamping the odour of hospital disinfectant. Then they took her and she was gone.

I was going to head off, away from the mud and sea, through the patches of gorse to the trees where the green seemed more brilliant against the dark grey of the laden clouds. I would be able to find shelter there when the rain came. That was when I heard the little squeak, a high whine sounding through the gusts of wind, and a little laugh. I turned, blinking, arranging my stiff face into an expression to greet her. I was not ready, did not want the encroachment of this child, messy-headed and grinning, achingly small fingers curled around the handlebars of her rusty trike. And her face, lips parted in a smile that showed the milky little teeth, so sure, so sure that I would be pleased to see her, would welcome and play with her. It would be so easy to change that little face, close the lips and hide the teeth, replace the open expectancy with disappointment. A firm, "not now," barked out, a quick scowl would be all it would take and she would hesitate, crushed, and turn that squeaking trike back, away from me to her mother.

But I said, "Joelle, hello," my voice bright and cheerful, my lips curving up in a smile. She said my name back to me, "Lizzie," her childish voice with the strange little accent very young children have, learning to form their words. "Leezie," she said sounding a bit like her mother. So I welcomed her and waved to Dominique, that bright spot of colour there in the distance on the pebbly beach, raised my hand and waved, a sign that Joelle was with me and all was fine and I imagined that she waved back, but the wind was blowing my hair over my eyes and it was difficult to see clearly. Brushing my face free, I narrowed my eyes to focus on her form of shimmering colour, the red of her dress almost glowing against the muted tones of bad weather.

"Does Mummy know you're with me? Did Mummy say you could come and find me?"

The child nodded vigorously. "We saw you, funny lady Leezie. I come find you." I nodded and smiled. Yes Dominique knew, that spot of red was moving further away now, graciously leaving her child in my care, lending me her child with the benevolent arrogance of the happy, sure that I would want her.

Moving along the path by the sea, I played with Joelle. Grandmother's footsteps, me standing a short distance ahead of her while she tried, as silently as possible, to creep up on me, that un-oiled tricycle a giveaway I pretended not to hear. I would whip round every now and then with a look of fake fierceness and she would freeze, trying to remain still while I glared at her with widened eyes, but her little chest heaved with excitement and she was breathless with laughing. When I turned my back, she would pump those small legs again, racing to reach me, to touch me before I looked around again and caught her in motion. When I felt that little hand press the small of my back I was supposed to give chase, and I did, but the trike was unsteady on the shale path and tipped the child up into a patch of grass and gorse that pricked her bare legs and made her cry. I comforted her then, folding her little body into mine and examining a scratch, pink but no blood drawn. I kissed the top

of her head, breathing in the sweet smell of her hair and when the tears had stopped, I tickled her to make her laugh again. Lizzie, Leezie, the funny lady, with a mind full of pictures of death.

“Should we go and find Mummy now?”

“No.”

“I think we should, she might be getting worried and look, it’s just about to rain.”

“No. More play.”

And then the rain began to fall, in fat drops, the slow beginning before a solid downpour. Picking the child up, I made my way towards the trees where we would be more sheltered. With my back pressed against the trunk, the weight of the little girl wrapped around me like a monkey, her cheek smooth and firm and wet against mine and the smell of the rain, achingly fresh, a clean cool wetness so different from the sharp rotting saltiness of Storsea sea and water, time stilled. The world became this moment, the cells of my skin absorbing the damp air, plumping out and making me something other, a young woman with the weight of a murmuring child in her arms, listening to the rain falling on an umbrella of green leaves.

It brought back another time, the first time I can remember when the world both shrank to a moment, and expanded infinitely with an explosion of happiness that even as the thrilling shock ran through me I knew I would lose again just as quickly. But the memory would be there, always there to savour, like the taste of nectar on the base of the dark red tubular flower that my ten year old hand reached out to pick, lifted to my mouth and sucked. Nectar like watered honey on my tongue, and the sun warm on the side of my face, and Helena looking at me her mouth working excitedly, explaining the game. I couldn’t hear her, my mind was too full of the sun and the flower, a warm day in the garden and my sister there, a brown smudge of mud on her face. Later that evening, sent to bed too early for a light summer evening, Helena not wanting to talk because she was reading, and unable to lose myself in a book as she could, I went downstairs for a drink of water, an excuse to move my restless limbs and met a look from my mother of utter distaste, covered by the thin crust of parental concern, “In bed now, young lady, this minute, you look exhausted.” She might as well have said, “Out of my sight.” Off I went, a glass of tap water, hollowed out inside but with still a memory of sweetness on my tongue.

And it slipped away from me now, the disturbing, fleeting happiness of a moment of rain and leaves and a child, gone as I realised I held another woman’s little girl, that we were both soon going to become soaked and cold and the trunk was digging uncomfortably into my back. Had Helena had a moment like that, the day in her car, smelling of new leather, the temperature regulated in its clean contained space so that she wouldn’t have felt the air around her, neither hot nor cold in her city suit. And perhaps some music playing, a tape on the new machine, filling the car and her head, with the touch of a button. I don’t even know

what she might have listened to, I didn't even know that much about her, I can only guess, only guess how it might have been for her that day, her foot squeezing down, a rush of fluttering excitement deep in her belly and her head full of music shutting out thought. A moment, a moment, like one of mine, of quick, all-encompassing happiness. And then when it passed, too late. Or maybe it had passed, too quickly and that was when her foot went down. Only guesses.

"Right, back we go," I said and maybe my voice carried with it a note of harsh disappointment, no more fun, the end of a game. Joelle's face crumpled and she wriggled in my arms, shaking her head, protesting. I felt a quick surge of anger with her. What did she want, what did she expect from me? I would return her to her mother, she would need a warm bath, some dry clothes, frail things children, she might catch cold, they're not meant to be left out in the rain.

"We'll make a dash for it, your mum will be looking for you..."

"She won't, she won't...want to go in the little house."

"What little house?" The child was making demanding little stabbing motions with one arm in a direction away from the one I was intending to go. The trees were no longer protecting us and our skins were growing slick with rain. I couldn't hold the little body any more and I lowered her to the ground before she slipped from my arms.

"Pill house, little pill house," she cried out wildly before tearing off. I gave chase, realising suddenly what she meant. She was heading for one of those pill boxes, crouching low and grey among the gorse and brambles like some monster tick, sucking at the land. Its concrete had darkened in the rain. Inside it would be gloomy and dank, just a little thin light coming through its slit windows, but Joelle was insisting.

"We must go back, Joelle," my voice calm and reasoning as water dripped down my face. I circled her waist with my hands, trying to keep hold of her, to lift her against me again, wanting her still and passive, a little warm animal to hold. But she wouldn't keep still, she waved and stabbed her arms.

"Want to go in here! Want to play houses!"

So I gave up and in we climbed. Down into the concrete box, that smelt of urine, human or animal I couldn't tell. The air was dry and close and in the dim light I saw the scrawling on the wall, the absurd markings humans make on any surface to assert their existence, even here. Even here on this scrabby little estuary half-island, in this redundant war bunker, Eric and Jamie, a Keith and some scribbled name I couldn't make out wanted to assert that they had been here on a particular date. They had been here, and marked their miserable bit of territory, with a piss and a scrawl and sometimes it seemed, a screw. "Jamie and Lisa shagged here", in red with a misshapen heart around their names, that wobbly heart made me smile a little. I imagined Lisa, pulling up her dirt-smeared knickers, and kneeling on the

earth to fill in that heart. Perhaps they snuck over from the mainland, these teenagers, townies or holidaying in the caravan park, daring each other, over the mud in the dark, or pinching rowing boats, the oars slapping the brackish water and disturbing the wild fowl. To end up here, to end up here in a concrete box, where soldiers fifty years before, teenagers themselves, had marked out time.

I was here now, with a child who didn't see what I saw, a child excited by the thought of a game. "You be the mummy and I'll be your little child." She was a good child and then a naughty child and I had to tear around after her and scold her and then hug her and she giggled and pretended to cry like a baby and all the time she issued instructions. "Tend I wouldn't eat my nice supper and 'tend I wouldn't go to bed and got all my clothes dirty and you were very cross..." I obeyed my instructions, knowing how it felt to play in a concrete space with the rain falling outside. Lucky there were two of us, lucky so lucky my mother was lumbered with two, well after me I suppose she thought why not, might as well, might make it easier, what after all would she do if there was just me, just me to send out for doses of fresh air. Much more difficult to make just one child stay for an hour or two in a grey garage, two and it could be seen as virtuous in an old-fashioned style of parenting, one and it became cruelty.

So I played with Joelle. "Tend we're sisters," she ordered.

"How old are we?" I asked. After a pause she answered, "Eight."

"We're both eight, are we twins?"

"No nine, I'm nine and you're eight, so I'm the big sister and you have to listen to me."

I listened to her, it was her game not mine. Her game that made us run away from our horrid mummy, running madly round the dirt floor of an ugly pill box, Joelle's face lit up through its slit eyes to reveal a face of delighted horror. As sisters we set up home together, we have, "all lots of treasures," Joelle insisted, "and we play all day."

We hadn't been very good at it, our family, setting up home. The game that children play over and over again, turning cushions and rugs and cardboard boxes into houses. It was all my mother had to do, it sucked at her energy, but she couldn't get it right: even recovered, her chairs sat awkwardly in her rooms like random thoughts, never connecting or becoming part of a whole. Her objects were never anything more than objects. Even as child I could feel it, a coldness, a lack of comfort that made me peer longingly into the lighted windows of other houses that seemed to hold out a promise of something more. Those lighted windows, glimpsed from a moving car or in a walk down to the local shop, that might teach me how it was done, how to get it right. It's what I'd tried to do with Stephen, what all those yellow walls and sanded floors had been about, and that other little room, almost all ready, except for the baby, no baby for it. Playing at houses, we hadn't been very good at it, any of us. Helena hadn't even unpacked the boxes. But Joelle, Joelle thought I was doing a

grand job. She could see it, our perfect home, a home for two sisters, eight and nine, in this stinking dank box of concrete.

“Tend these are our beds where we sleep and ’tend this is our kitchen and we make little choc cakes with pink icing...”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Lizzie, Lizzie...” I did not quite register the voice, until I saw his face, the head appearing bodiless in the gloom, a red-skinned face all creased with worry and bewilderment. Joelle had changed the game, she was now the mummy and I was a baby, crying for a bottle which she was preparing in the patch of dirt that had become her kitchen. What Stephen found was his wife squatting on the ground, rocking and bawling while the three year old child stood silently in a dark corner. Seeing that face with the ever-present crease heavily marked between the brows, my stomach hollowed out and filled with a bitter anger at the fearful doubt it expressed. At the same time a bubble of absurd laughter exploded in my throat which I masked as yet another baby cry. I didn’t get to my feet, I didn’t stop the crying. He approached me slowly, treading softly as if he were confronting something wild and not human. What did he think? What did he think I was doing?

“Lizzie, Lizzie,” he said softly, tentatively, extending his hand slowly towards me.

“Bottle all ready, stop crying now baby.” Joelle trotted up and shoved an imaginary bottle towards my mouth. I sucked and swallowed greedily while she smiled with satisfaction.

“Hello,” she said simply to Stephen, marking his presence without turning to look at him.

“Hello,” he answered awkwardly after a slight pause, uncertain at first who was being addressed. I rose to my feet now, stretched out my legs, stiff from all that bending and met Stephen’s eyes.

“We were playing a game,” I said clearly, my eyes studying his face, locking his eyes on mine to stop them sliding away. “We were playing a game, what did you think?”

“I don’t know, it was raining, you’d been gone so long...”

“Yes, Joelle, game’s over now, we’ve got to get you back to mummy, she’ll be worried.”

I picked the child up and handed her over to Stephen who clasped her clumsily, turning and carrying her out of the concrete box.

Outside the rain had stopped, the air cool and fresh, all the vegetation washed with the yellow-green of early autumn. Dominique came running up, “There you are,” she said breathlessly, a relieved smile as she took her damp child into her arms.

“We were playing in the little house, good game,” Joelle told her.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “you must have been worried.”

“No, no, not really, I knew she was with you, if she was with you I wouldn’t worry, I thought it was that, taking shelter somewhere with all this rain. It’s just, just if she were on her own, that mud...”

“I’m sorry Dominique, sorry you’ve been worried,” I moved towards her putting my hands on her shoulders. She leaned her face towards me and we touched cheeks, her skin smooth and damp. Kissing the top of Joelle’s head, I said, “She’s a bit wet, probably needs a warm bath.”

“I’ll take her,” Dominique smiled at me, her eyes flickering over to where Stephen stood, apart and silent, then back to me. “I wasn’t really worried you know,” she raised one hand to touch my cheek. “Thank you for looking after my child, I knew she was alright with you.”

I watched her walk away, carrying her little bundle, the child chattering away and Dominique echoing her and exclaiming. I couldn’t make out the words, it sounded like a kind of singing. We were left then, Stephen and I. Just the two of us in the damp scrabble of brambles and gorse, a muddy stretch of turbulent sea and a crouching concrete box.

“You doubted me.”

“Lizzie, I...for Christ’s sake it’s been over an hour, a three year old child and...Christ Lizzie, after all that was said in the cottage...your mother and...all so horrible and I didn’t know, I didn’t know what to think, Lizzie...”

“What do you think, Stephen, looking at me with that face, what do you think?”

Stephen’s face, that heavy line between the eyes, the crooked corrugations scraped into his forehead, the eyes set into creased flesh. And yet that pink skin and the snub nose, a boyish face, a boy prematurely aged with fear. Our eyes locked and we said nothing, hearing only the sounds of the island, those birds and the sailing boats, washed by rain, the slight breeze starting up that high singing, halyards against the masts. For so long I had mistaken Stephen’s fear for seriousness, the grounded gravity of a man who made decisions, sensible decisions, a man who would see me through. I’d shut my eyes and held out my hand, just as I’d let Helena pull me with a “for God’s sake Lizzie”, across the mad traffic of Rome’s streets, just as I’d sat with closed eyes on the back of her moped, arms wrapped around her thin body as we hurtled forward, my life in her hands, my fear parcelled and handed over to her to deal with.

“I lost my nerve, Lizzie,” Stephen’s voice was small and cracked and dry. “I’m so sorry, Lizzie, I lost my nerve.”

He turned then and began to walk, not the direction Dominique and Joelle had taken, he walked away from the Manor house and the collection of holiday cottages, towards one of those paths that led to the quieter part of the island, the cleared patches where the samphire grew. There wasn’t far for him to walk, never that far on an island as small as this. In the end he would have no choice but to walk back on himself, turning in a circle, back to the

beginning. I walked with him, our eyes on the ground watching our feet find their way through the shale and rock and low-lying vegetation. He was keeping away from the trees, keeping to the edge of the land, following the black band of mud and the stretch of cold North Sea.

When he began to speak, his voice lost its dry croak, the words sounding quite clear in the rain fresh air, punctuated by the sounds of our breath as we pushed our bodies over the uneven ground.

“I remembered the smell of this mud, as soon as we reached the causeway and I smelled it, through the windows of the car. I remembered it from all those years ago, from when I was eleven. That rot, that fertile rot, it stayed with me. It’s a shambles this island, Lizzie, an accident of nature, a pile of mud thrown up here. Just mud and brambles, and no amount of money can make it anything else. It will always be scruffy, a boy’s paradise, a paradise for a boy from a London suburb, living on one of those endless streets of houses in rows with patches of lawn to mow of a weekend. So many places to hide away, to escape into boyish games with just that edge of brutality that allows you to forget, to shut your eyes to the slow, painful disintegration of a marriage. That’s what I should have written about when the summer ended and the usual school essay was required. I could have written about the games with my brother, pushing him in the mud and holding him down just a little too long, wanting to squash his face in the thick, black ooze of it because some worm of anger was twisting through me and I didn’t know what to do with it except appease it through some pain inflicted on my brother. He never fought back, not properly. I wanted to struggle with him, to have some excuse to beat the hell out of him, but he didn’t resist, just a few weak cries and his pale face looking at me. Christ, even the sun couldn’t get to him, just didn’t sink into that skin. Whereas I burnt as red as a berry, a face full of freckles like a healthy English schoolboy, so that the teachers smiled at me. “A good holiday, Stephen,” they said, “looks like you had a good holiday, now write all about it.” And I didn’t write about my mother, trying to keep the cottage and us clean and mend all the rips in clothes, summer cotton shorts and shirts, so easy to tear, so many branches and bushes and thorns to blame it on. I watched her try to keep order, to keep all the salty dirt and damp and disorder of the shabby little island out of the shabby little cottage, and fail. She failed and that gave me a bite of pleasure, like a quick nip of alcohol that leaves a lingering aftertaste of something foul. I didn’t write about that, didn’t write about any of that. I churned out a schoolboy essay, a boyish summer idyll, nice and wholesome as they like it. Good outdoor activities, catching fish and picking oysters off the rocks, and that samphire, that went down well that samphire. I put in all those words that get you high marks, words that teachers love, lots of ‘undulating’ and ‘resonating’. I won a prize and it was read out in class. Lots of beaming and a book token.”

Stephen gave a small short laugh. His hands dangled heavily, wearily at his sides, swinging like weighted pendulums with the movement of his body, his marching legs. Those hands, fingers like spatulas, not tapering and elegant. I used to tease him about his fingers, holding his hand in mine, enjoying how small and neat it made mine feel. Spatula fingers. I almost reached out and took one of those heavy hands, with the same impulse I would have relieved him of a bothersome bag he was carrying, taking my share of the burden. But I left it, marching in step, a pace or two behind.

“It was easy then, Lizzie, so easy to please and give them what they wanted. A formula, a set of rules, apply them and trot it out. Good marks, appearing like magic. Results that pleased my mother with that wordless kind of pleasure I could see in her face. A look about her mouth and eyes which suggested that at least she had this, at least life had given her this, a clever son, a clever son offering up his achievements to her in compensation for a failed marriage and a second child who would never quite be right.

I kept on giving her what she wanted, because it was easy and because, in some way, it appeased my guilt. The guilt of not being able to do anything more for her and for that uncomfortable seed of knowledge which germinated that summer on this island, that I do not like my mother very much.”

Stephen’s hands, Stephen’s capable hands, that’s how I had thought of them. Putting myself in his hands, square and solid, handing over my little life. And now they hung, slab-like and useless, heavy and ungainly at his side. Helena had told me, when I had stood and blushed and allowed myself to be fondled by a stranger on a Roman bus, she’d told me I can’t just let things happen to me, not just drift. Make a noise, she said, make a big noise. I’d made no noise, let it happen, I just let it happen. And afterwards when they had taken my baby away, my thin-skinned mouse wrapped in one of those pink blankets they use for baby girls, I’d lain pale and silent on my hospital bed. A baby girl, but not yet human, fused unseeing eyes, tipped into the incinerator along with other bits of cast-off flesh. Would they have kept her in the blanket, kept her wrapped or did they just tip her in, launder the pink blanket and use it again for the next baby girl, this time whole and fully formed? Would they have answered these questions if I’d asked them? But I asked nothing, just lay silently, a drip in my arm to recover the blood loss, bring some colour back to my washed out skin. Needles, and blood pressure and temperature, constant monitoring by nurses with quick tight-lipped smiles, eyes darting professionally over the instruments, recording and moving on to the next patient. Handing over pain killers to be swallowed with luke-warm water from a plastic beaker, pills to sedate, to help me sleep. I needed no sedation. I lay like a boneless creature, a creature without limbs, in my tiny side room, insulated from the outside and overheated, watching through the window as other women shuffled past, stooped and

pale and bloated from their ordeals, wearing their pretty girl nighties, barely covering their swollen breasts, off to the nursery to suckle their babies.

Stephen came, he came and sat with me. He brought daffodils again that wilted in the heat and smelled rank. Spring flowers, Easter flowers. I'd seen arrangements carried in for other women, pastel flowers all sweet smelling, with little eggs and blue bunnies, little yellow chicks set among them. Excessive, celebratory arrangements to make tired women smile. Stephen sat with a rumpled forehead, I lay passive and white and there was not very much to say. He sat dutifully in the plastic chair as long as he could bare it, relieved when the waiting time was over. On the third day, Sarah came. "These smell off," she said, indicating the brown-edged daffodils. She chucked them away, replacing them with the freesias she'd brought, filling the room with a clean lemony smell. "Christ Lizzie," she said turning to me, her eyes warm and hurt and angry, "Christ, why didn't you tell me, why didn't you say something, talk to me about it?" She'd been calling and leaving messages and at last she'd gone round to our home and confronted Stephen. "He didn't want to talk," she told me, "he was all shifty and evasive, but I wouldn't let him off the hook. He was sitting there, you know Lizzie, with the lights out and a bottle of whiskey. He smelt of it Lizzie and he wouldn't look at me when he told me, as if you two had done something wrong, it was more than just sadness, it was, it was guilt. But it's not your fault Lizzie, not yours or Stephen's, you made a decision together, you did make it together didn't you Lizzie? Christ Lizzie, Christ, why didn't you come to me, why didn't you tell me? We could have talked Lizzie, I might have helped. God, oh God Lizzie, it was terrible to see him, Stephen. He was just leaking tears when I left, leaking and he smelt of whiskey. And you Lizzie," and with her large warm eyes turned on me, I knew what she must see. A husband and wife, Lizzie and Stephen weighed down by the punishing misery of responsibility. Her arms around me, her hand stroking my face, her freesias and the string of little kindnesses she offered up once I was home, back in my life with Stephen, the routine of work resumed, could offer no alleviation.

And now we marched, my husband and I, our feet lifting over the lumpy ground, boggy and rank from all that rain, my sandaled feet turning brown with mud, ruining my shoes, ruining my pretty borrowed sandals. You couldn't make out their colours anymore, the turquoise covered with mud. One pace behind him, I watched the swing of his weighty hand, the curving blunted fingers, his neck with the faint creases of age marking the skin, reddened by the sun, and that line, the softened fuzzy line where his hair met the skin, curling in a little where it had grown over the summer. He'd get it cut, before he went back to work, he'd pop in for a trim, that old fashioned barber's shop down that little side street where they had dark leather swivel chairs, and used those electric shavers for the little hairs on the back of the neck, leaving it pink and smooth as a schoolboy's. I remember once, once I used to kiss the back of his neck, liking the softness, the smell of shop shampoo. A

world away, a world away, for a husband and wife tramping round a muddy island with nowhere to go.

“She’s like one of those ancient gods, my mother.” Stephen didn’t direct his voice at me, he just spoke with that flattened tone of a narrator, to no one in particular, thoughts made loud. But I listened. “An insatiable appetite, demanding constant sacrifice, small offerings to appease the injustice of her life. A bottomless pit, it’s a bottomless pit. Always that tight little smile, a restrained smile with the implication that whatever I achieved was, after all, only her due, and I could with a little more effort do better, much much better. A law degree from Cambridge, good, very good, but such a shame I didn’t quite make a first, now that would have been an achievement. A position with a big Cambridge firm, good, but face it, Cambridge isn’t London. I like my work Lizzie it suits me, suits what I am. I thought I knew my limitations, a planning solicitor, just right for me. A series of rules, like a piece of graph paper to fit over a problem, rounding off each problem, each little hitch with a little dot on the nearest line so that everything could, with a bit of compromise, fall into place. And if it went wrong, there was no human cost, no great emotion, just frustration. A building might not get built, of financial concern to those involved, but nothing to keep me awake at night. A bounded job, Lizzie. And then, Lizzie, there was you.”

We had come to the most deserted side of the island, as far away from the cottages as you could get. It was the scruffiest, bleakest side. Stephen stopped on a little rise of land, a pile of loose rubble, covered by a latticework of creeping weeds. The land fell down in an untidy tangle of gorse to that smooth thick black mud, the inescapable mud, teeming like a prehistoric swamp with microscopic life and death. He’s looking at me, my husband. I’m not looking back, but I can feel him looking at me, his eyes boring into the side of my face so that it burns even in this cool, damp end-of-summer air.

“Lizzie,” he says, “you’re cold.”

My clothes are damp, the skin of my arms goose-fleshed, but not cold.

“You’re cold Lizzie, you’re shivering. I should have thought, should have brought something with me, I left the cottage in such a hurry...”

Shivering, but not cold. My body shaking with thin, hot judders of anger. That he should look at me now, here, now after all these months, after more than a year, a year and three months of flickering eyes, sliding fearfully away from me. And silences filled only by words that are just noise, irritating and useless as gnats. Now my husband who has kept his eyes lowered, frightened of me, frightened to look at me, has moved nearer to me, standing close so that I can feel the heat of his body. Still I don’t turn to meet him, my head pointed forward to the dismal sea, my neck as rigid as iron. I can see clearly the picture he conjured up, two boys, the older pink and freckled, snub-nosed and robust as a fifties English schoolboy, a Just William of a boy and his quiet, pale solemn-faced brother. Standing on a scruffy rise

chucking pebbles into the soft mud and watching them disappear, sucked under, their arms moving back and forward, jerking in quick, violent little movements, crouching to scabble around in the dirt for more ammunition. Returning as late as they can, knees embedded with dirt, to be scrubbed pink and raw by a tight-faced mother with disappointed eyes while their father pours a quick nip of clear gin into a glass, a dash of that precious tonic water coveted by his sons, running through his mind all the reasons he can give to leave as soon as the tide is low, as soon as the causeway is clear. For this boy, this Stephen, I can feel that clench of pity, an inner softening. But for the man he has become, who stands so close to me now, whose breath brushes against my cheek as he says, "And then there was you Lizzie, then there was you," my blood heats with anger, pumping through my body, chasing through tiny capillaries to parts that had become numbed and blue with disuse. So close he is standing and what will I do, what will I do if he puts a hand on me, a warm hand on the raised skin of my arm, those spatula fingers curling round and holding on?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"And then, Lizzie, there was you. At the bar that night, you remember that one? We haven't been back there for a while, years now. Trying to look like a London bar, cocktails and leather arm chairs, too large, not comfortable I thought. I didn't know how to sit on them, perched at the end or letting them engulf you, either way I'd look silly, feel awkward. So I ended up standing at the bar, leaning on one elbow so that I would look relaxed although I wasn't. Sarah invited me, coaxed me out, "oh come along Stephen do, do you good, whole crowd of us." It was over with Emma, I told you about her, a little. It had left me feeling shrunken, I'd been the wrong sort of person for her, I'd spent a couple of years getting it half right, a few months when I extended myself like an exhausted racehorse with a whip-yielding jockey, a pattern I'd followed a couple of times before. No good, I lost, revealed myself to be a painted up nag and she left, London, of course. I had a beer, drinking quickly, hardly tasting it, and then I felt ready to look at the people I was with. Sarah in the thick of things, you know how she is, and then you, Lizzie, curled into one of those large chairs. I could see the point of them then, curled like a kitten, not quite part of the group. Not isolated or anything, just content to be in your own cosy space with the sound of voices around you, that's how it seemed. Sarah threw a couple of remarks to you, a ball tossed out to the fielder to make her feel part of the game, and you caught them, tossed them back elegantly in a way that put the others at their ease. I watched you then, and as the babble of voices rose and became indistinguishable, you did something I couldn't forget. You picked up your drink, it was some sort of cocktail, the kind you used to drink, another world now and I can't even remember the name, something to do with the sea, I remember

asking you when finally I spoke to you and thinking then that it was a good sort of name. It wasn't the colour of the sea, it was red, a clear bright red, somehow layered, lighter at the top, more brilliant at the bottom. You picked it up, held it up towards the light, completely unaware for that short moment of everyone around you, and admired the colour. I could see it, your face open at the pure pleasure of it, the colour of the drink and the sip you were about to take.

The tiny tip of your tongue came out, pink as a cat's, pressed against your lip and disappeared. When you took your first sip you closed your eyes, raised your head a little, so that your throat stood out, it looked very white in that light and it moved with the long, slow swallow you took."

He was silent again, just his breath coming and going, against my cheek, I can feel it, wanting me to look back at him, thinking his words will make me look back at him. I struggle to hold myself still, to keep the spinning anger contained. If he moves any closer now, if he tries to touch me with one of those heavy warm hands of his, I will turn on him, bite him again like an animal, draw blood. To spit and bite like a mad cat for all the words when they weren't there. And for those words of his that came, reasonable and neatly packaged, winding into my inert form as it lay on our bed, having waited, having waited too long for him. Feeling through my tight-as-a-drum belly, the hardened limbs of our baby, stamped by a question mark. "Mustn't hide our heads in the sand," he said, a voice so smooth, firm and certain. That question mark could be lifted, erased, a simple procedure, really the risk was minimal. No need to hide our head in the sand, like some frightened primitive, technology was there to help us, to take away the worry, so that we could know, not guess at things, but really know.

It was then that I felt his hand, the fingers curling around my cold bare arm as I had imagined they might. A second or two for the feeling to penetrate my senses, sink through the thick distraction of my anger, my eyes flicking down and across to check. Loosely encircling my arm, thick, blunt fingers, reddened by the sun, small tufts of bleached hair at the knuckles. As I wrench my arm away, my other hand swings around, nails out like claws, ripping at his cheek, leaving red tracks. I stare at them, at his face and he stares back, no flickering now. He touches the scratches, one hand lifted to cover them for a moment, then the hand drops at his side. He didn't check for blood although I can see it, tiny red bubbles along the grooves of flesh. We stare at each other, his eyes, pale blue, screwed up against the light, watery, the whites run through with threads of red; and mine feel large and focused, unblinking, yellow as a cats. A cartoonist would have drawn little daggers coming from my eyes, aiming at those blue ones, little daggers and baby lightning bolts over my head.

“So that’s it. So easy to please, aren’t I? Give me a shiny red drink and I’m happy. A shiny red drink like you’d hand over a red lolly to a toddler. Much easier than all these difficult women, much easier than your fucking mother, you could offer the world to her and it wouldn’t loosen her lips. Go for Lizzie, see how easy it is.” I spat out the words, not shouting, but spitting like a hissing cat. I saw a little goblet of liquid land on his top lip. A tiny little white ball. I don’t know if he felt it, but he didn’t wipe it away. He stared at me, eyes screwed painfully open, unblinking and shiny.

“You’ve no idea, you’ve no idea what it was like for me to be with you Lizzie, to see your pleasure. You were a good place for me to rest my eyes. That’s what it felt like, resting, being something more than myself or other than myself, a world away, a world away from trotting out required responses, achieving required results, coming up with a set of satisfactory answers that were mere approximations, dots on a grid, forced into a straight line.”

“But you had those answers, you trotted them out for me as I lay on the bed. I lay and listened to you. I’d waited too long, and then you came, everything discussed and worked out with the doctor. Neat answers, spoken so reasonably, so calmly. ‘Mustn’t hide our heads in the sand,’ you said and I don’t know if you were looking at me then, because my face was turned into the pillow, and even if I’d looked at you, I wouldn’t really have been able to see you, it was getting dark in the room do you remember? Getting dark because I’d waited so long for you to come home and I hadn’t put on any lights. Were you looking at me when you said those things, were you Stephen? When you came up with those answers were you looking at me and was I a good place then for your eyes to rest?”

The thunderbolts had gone, the daggers erased. My voice had begun to shrink and anger no longer held my body up straight. It was as if my bones had grown soft and crumbled and I sat heavily, a boneless heap of flesh on the bank. Stephen crouched down next to me, his body hunched next to mine, an arm around me that I registered but could hardly feel.

“Lizzie, I’m so sorry, Lizzie I panicked. It was panic that made me call the doctor, that made me speak to you like that.” His voice was urgent, mine came out flattened.

“Panic. You panicked.” He must have known what I was thinking, that panic is something hot and raw, something immediate. It doesn’t let time lapse, hours pass and come out cool and reasonable, so neatly and sensibly packaged.

“My panic is a cold thing, Lizzie,” he told me, his voice sounding now unutterably sad. “A cold, educated, controlled thing, Lizzie.”

We perched here, the two of us, two shapeless masses on this raised ledge, looking out to that nowhere place of mud and sea, a halfway house between river and sea, not much of one thing or the other. My bones had left me, and now all the juices of my body began to

leave too, pouring silently but unstoppably out through my eyes. I would be left, a dried husk, a shed skin to be wafted carelessly by the wind into that stretch of sticky mud, to disintegrate there, to be consumed by all those tiny creatures, busily getting on with the process of life and death. I leaked out through my eyes, my vision blurred and my husband talked.

“Don’t you remember, Lizzie? Don’t you remember how happy you were with the house and the yellow walls and the baby on the way? The way you ate Lizzie, so carefully, so pleasurably. I always loved the way you ate, Lizzie, taking you out to special places for dinner, the slight widening of your eyes as the plate was lowered, your hand on the table cloth, the fingers clenching a little. You’d always stop, stop talking, stop listening, to admire. And that little cat lick before you tasted. And then with the baby, there was something more, some added pleasure. It made me nervous, Lizzie, an edgy little seed planted in me that grew as the baby grew in you, spoiled my pleasure so that I could only watch yours and worry. That little rabbit you bought, that little velvet rabbit, do you remember Lizzie? You were so pleased with it, wanted me to feel how soft it was, and I was scared Lizzie, at the look on your face and the expectation. I couldn’t not think how it would be if something went wrong. All those hidden processes inside you, beyond our control. You, just giving yourself up to them, while I watched and couldn’t do anything. I read all those books, I thought that if I understood it, if I could see what was happening, I could play some part, could be like a director signalling from the wings. I read about all the things that could go wrong, so many things. Most babies are born normal, they said, they all say that, most births go as planned and then they go into detail of all the ones that do not. From then on Lizzie, I just waited, just waited for something to go wrong.”

My tears had stopped, the wind had dried my face leaving my skin stretched tight with their salty residue. My vision cleared and I held my body straighter, the bones beginning softly to reform. Ahead of me that open stretch, mud and sea. Over that lunch of wild mushrooms, Dominique had asked Frances what it was like, what it was like to be here all year round, to look out at the flat salt marshes in winter when the sea is cold and grey and there isn’t the distraction of visitors. She watches them, Frances said, watches and lives with them, noticing all the little changes of the wind and the light, the tides and after a while she said she thought she knew them, understood their patterns, these muddy plains lying so flat and open as if offering themselves up to anyone who cares to look. But now, she said, she knows that they are full of secrets, covered by that blanket of mud, and she’s just standing on the edge, watching and guessing, always feeling just on the verge of beginning to know them. We’d have to come back, she said to us both, to Dominique and to me, we’d have to come back, many more times and at different times to see why she could keep looking at the muddy stretch of them forever. I looked now, licked my dry tight lips so I could

speak and said, my voice low and even, "You didn't even look at her. You didn't touch her or hold her. You didn't look and then you left me alone."

"Lizzie, Lizzie, I'm so sorry," his voice rose and cracked. His body was against mine, we were two hunched bundles pressed against each other as if protecting each other from the cool sea air, the wind with a little icy bite to it. I didn't move myself away, I let his arm stay around me pulling me closer. It was worse, I knew that now, worse for him not to have seen, not to have looked at her, our daughter.

"It's how I lived my life, Lizzie, barricading myself against failure, yet all the time preparing myself for it, preparing for disappointment. So when it came, that question mark hanging over the head of our baby, those two unexplained cysts, soft markers they called them for some horrible genetic disorder, it seemed preordained. I just slipped into my allotted role, arming myself with facts and information, building my barricade, and all the time expecting the worst. I couldn't see her or feel her, hidden away inside you she was no more than a symbol to me, my failure, my inability to protect myself or you and then that phone call with the doctor, he offered me the chance to wipe the slate clean, one test and we could be sure, we would know. And I took it."

"And I let you. I gave up. Gave her up."

More than a year between our daughter's death and this summer on Storsea, a slow, dull passage of time, viewed through glazed, flickering eyes. No touching other than the brushing against each other of two animals who inhabit the same darkened burrow. But we turned to face each other now, still crouching and small on the ragged bank, turned and stared, recognising in each other a similar sorrow, the sacrifice of our child to our fears. My husband's face, rough-skinned, open-pored, streaked with the blood-bubbled grooves from my nails, looking at me with pale blue exhausted eyes, a face like an old schoolboy. With one hand he fumbled under his shirt, withdrew a matt brown envelope, a little damp where the rain had got to it, the surface a little warped. He handed to me, but I didn't take it, just looked. Of course I recognised it, the white label with Mr and Mrs Stephen Wright printed in black and the stamp of the hospital. It had come through the letterbox, landing with a little fluttering crash on the sanded floorboards I had once been proud of. We left it lying there, pushed to one side by the opening door, but left on the floor, each of us waiting to see what the other would do. Then after a day or two I picked it up, using just two fingers I placed it on the hall table, face up, waiting to see what Stephen would do. It stayed there, gathering dust, until I flicked it into the drawer below, briskly, as I would handle a dead mouse, only one finger touching the paper, dry and brown as dead leaves.

It hadn't been opened, still firmly sealed. I looked from it to Stephen.

"Why here, why now?"

“I thought...I brought it with me. Some days I carry it around. I thought if I met you, one of your walks, I hoped...”

“Why here, Stephen, why did we come here, this place Storsea? And my parents, Stephen, why would you bring them too? What a thing to do, put us all here, this island that was in your boy’s world...”

“I couldn’t stay in our house any more Lizzie, couldn’t be there with that freshly painted little room, a room not even finished waiting to be dismantled. Coming here was running away, a backwards running, some little bit of boy’s paradise falsely preserved. It wasn’t thought out, Lizzie, I know it seems planned as if I were in control, coming up with the idea and booking the house, the car with the right maps and a hamper of food. The details are what I’m good at Lizzie, the details and not the living.”

“Running away, Stephen, running away with your wife and parents-in-law in tow...”

Stephen gave a weak smile, a sound escaping from his body that could not be called a laugh.

“I’m a coward Lizzie. I’ve always been one, half-hearted living. And then back here on this island all the memories twisted out the neat shapes I’d formed of them. They’ve overwhelmed me, Lizzie. I thought I was nothing like my father, a drunk, dumping his wife and children, off with some floosy, going and getting himself killed. Only I don’t even know if she was a floosy, I wouldn’t let her speak that day she phoned, wouldn’t let her have any words, cut her off, did I tell you Lizzie?”

I nodded.

“That poor bastard, that’s what he was, my father, a poor sad bastard, trying to get a bit of joy in life. There should be a bit of joy in life and really I’m like him Lizzie, I’m just like him. His drinking, those little nips of anaesthetising gin, no different from my facts, my neat little reams of rounded off facts to protect me from anything too raw, giving me a vision as skewed as any drunk’s on a blind bender. And your parents, your parents, Lizzie, I hauled them along, the great family man that I am, posing as the good son because I was too terrified to be left on my own with you, scared of what we would and wouldn’t say. I wanted them there, as witnesses to us, of what we had become, witnesses to the disintegration of our marriage and because I knew that they would see what I wanted them to – a difficult woman, resisting her husband’s every attempt to be reasonable. I know that’s what your mother saw, she got hold of me one day, one day when you disappeared, off for one of those walks of yours, Lizzie, those walks that seem to take you hours, gone for hours without a word. Well she got hold of me, ‘a word in my ear,’ she said, told me you’d never been easy, a difficult child she said, never got properly started in life, and she’d been so surprised, so relieved when you’d found someone like me to take care of you. She could see I was doing my best, but sometimes, with some people, even the best was not enough

and she would understand, that's what she said and she frowned to show how sincere she was, how seriously she was taking all this, she would understand if it all just didn't work out. She was letting me off the hook your mother, giving me a respectable out."

"Why didn't you take it Stephen," my voice bland and flat, looking at the envelope he held so tightly, his fingers white-edged. "Why didn't you just piss off one day when I was out, leave me to come back and find myself stranded with my parents, my mother with that knowing look and my father with no look at all. You could still do it, Stephen, just piss right off."

"Lizzie do you think that of me, that I would let a woman like your mother let me off the hook, that I would listen to anything she said about you? You'd be alright you know, Lizzie, if I were to leave, you'd be alright. You have something that draws and keeps people. I know, I can see, with Frances who you hardly know when she said goodbye to us the other night, saying we'd have to come back, come back and stay longer, it was you she was looking at, her eyes were on you although she was nice and polite to me, her warmth was all for you. Dominique too, I can see it. Jeremy and I, well, it's about boats, nothing personal, a take it or leave it cheerfulness, but without the boats...So if I were to leave, if I did just piss off, what then, Lizzie? What would I be? I know what you wanted me to be, I know what I seemed when I married you, Lizzie and I wanted to be that, the strong one, but I'm not, Lizzie, just not and if I left you now, I'd be nothing more than a man who couldn't look at his own daughter, his own little dead baby, left it to his wife and then couldn't face her. What would I be? And then, and then, even gin wouldn't do it. I'd be worse, so much worse than he ever was, my father. At least he had some warmth, Lizzie, he had some of that even though we tried to freeze it out of him."

"I don't want a dutiful husband, Stephen, I don't want a hollowed out sack of a man with the stuffing knocked out. I had a father like that, Helena and I did, and it did us no good."

"Take this, Lizzie," A broken, splintered voice, rising like a child's and breaking. The clear narrator's voice, smooth and flattened, gone now. He held out the envelope to me, his heavy hand shaking a little, those washed out blue eyes of his begging. "I didn't leave her behind, I brought her with us. I couldn't look at her on my own. I told you, Lizzie, I'm a coward, but if I was to look at her now, if we both could, look at her together, that could be counted as brave, couldn't it? It would be an act of courage, wouldn't it, Lizzie?"

I reached over to him then, a small nod and half smile and my hand on his tight fingers, held there until the grip loosened and let go and I took it from him, that firmly sealed envelope. I pulled back the flap, tearing it carefully so as not to damage what lay inside.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We held her between us, one hand each on either side of the photograph. Together we looked at her. My little creature lying in the folds of a pink hospital blanket, pink for girls, so at least they acknowledged that even though she was not yet viable, three and a half weeks away from being human. Such thin skin, with the blood lying purplish red beneath it, eyes closed, fused shut, but she's more, more than I remembered. A mouth, a perfect little mouth, proper lips slightly parted, they could open and cry and suck, they would have done if we'd given her the chance. Curled and tiny and beautiful my little girl, I didn't really see it then, so beautiful those little hands, unbelievably tiny, and the mouth set in a way, she looks too old and too young at the same time with the creased delicacy of her skin. Beautiful, beautiful my girl, and I wish, my body growing warm with the wish that I was looking at her again, and not just at this image.

"We never gave her a name," I say out loud and I'm surprised how steady, how normal my voice sounds. "We never called her anything."

Next to me, Stephen's body is crumpled, but he holds his head up, looking at the photograph as if forcing himself, as if in some act of penance. He didn't look then, but he will look now and his face is tight with horror. The sobs that come from the cavern of his chest are dry and heaving, they sound painful.

"Christ, Jesus, Lizzie, what have we done?"

He is seeing her for the first time, and I have had a year, more than a year to think about what we had done. Now as I look on her image again, I see that she is beautiful and I want to give her a name.

"Frances," I say, "I'd like to call her Frances." A good name Frances, a prettiness to it, but strong. And I like to think, I would always like to think, that if we had left her to grow, if we had had faith in ourselves and her and let her be born, she might have become a woman like the Frances of Storsea. I'd like to think that when I was old and dead and buried that my daughter lived in a house with a warm, messy kitchen, a old dog asleep under the table, a bowl for the cat and friends to cook for, children and grandchildren coming to stay. Pouring dark red wine in glasses and frying up wild mushrooms. A woman who can dance on her lawn and wipe the food besmattered beard of an old friend, and give some comfort just by her life and the way she lives it to a woman hollowed out by loss, weighted down with guilt. "So we'll call her Frances, shall we?" I say, although I'm not really asking. Stephen nods wildly, his face still stricken, struggling to speak, to suck air into his lungs before it is expelled in grief.

"Anything, Lizzie, yes Frances, if that's what you want, Lizzie."

Frances Wright. Our daughter, Frances Wright.

And now I want to bury her. I know it won't really be her, just her image, her image in a photograph. The real Frances Wright, our daughter, was put in an incinerator, in her pink

blanket or not, I wish I knew, flesh to ash, an attempt to wipe the slate clean, except it's never left clean. A sacrifice of what was best in us because of what was worst in us. And for sacrifices, for child sacrifices, didn't they always take the best, those ancient civilisations who believed in such things. And now I need something, some ritual, some ceremony, something, to mark her passing.

"Come," and I stand and hold out my hand to my husband's crouching form. He takes it and I pull him up. I lead him and he follows down from the raised bank, treading carefully over the rough ground, easy to trip over the loose stones and down to the edge of that band of mud. Stephen hesitates then, looking down at his feet, his shoes and up at me. I give his hand a little tug, walk straight on, pretty sandals and all, into the smooth, silky, suck of the mud, and he follows. As it gets deeper, up to our knees, it's hard work pulling a leg free, curling and gripping with my toes so as not to lose my shoes, my pretty, borrowed turquoise sandals, then down into that dense ooze again and the other leg pulled free, careful not to lose balance. We hold hands, leaning and stumbling as if in a strange slow-motion clumsy dance, the dance of two people who have no control over their limbs. He follows me, Stephen, like a little lost boy, quiet and unquestioning, like his brother must have followed him all those years ago when they were boys, trotting pale-faced behind his big brother who carried in his head the quick hot desire to push the pale face down under the mud, to hold it there just a little too long.

I stop now, we have gone, I think, far enough. The mud, now over my knees is deep enough and I turn to Stephen. We face each other, two feet apart, in my hand the photograph, gripped tightly at the edges, blown by the gusts of wind. The envelope has gone now, that pale brown casing crumpled in my hand and let go, blown away like any dead leaf.

"I want to bury her, bury her here."

"If you're sure, Lizzie."

I am sure. This mud, the thick smell of it rising up into our nostrils, its brackish dampness, home to all those organisms who can only survive in this middle area between salt and fresh, their tiny bodies breeding and dying adding to the sediment of centuries. And maybe even, the bones of those old warriors of Maldon, holding life cheap and rushing foolishly brave to their deaths. And now Frances Wright, our daughter. Not her, but her image, which is all we have. Each holding an end we push the photograph down, pushing down, but not losing our grip so that it will be pulled down as deep as we can get it. Blanketed by the dark swamp of it, covered until slowly, bit by bit, the image will begin to disintegrate, giving off bits of itself like the shed exoskeletons of minute organisms, becoming part of it all, the great reeking mess of primeval mud.

Stephen is the first to let go and straighten up. But I remain bent over, my arm almost up to the shoulder in mud, my nose just skimming the surface, but I want to leave my fingertips just touching the surface of my girl's image, just for a moment longer, while I can still feel it. Then I straighten too and we stand there, the two of us, empty-handed, coated and smeared. I must have a spot of black on the end of my nose. Stephen wipes it with his cleaner hand and I give him a small smile, he echoes it. We stand, exhausted now, witnesses for a short while longer of our daughter's burial. Two muddy adults. I don't even know who was there for Helena, when she was turned to ash and my parents tried to wipe that slate clean, leaving just that sad little plaque in a suburban church to mark her. A few friends from work they said, but which ones? That too I would have liked to have known. I think of those people I met with her in London, small muscles bulging in their tight sharp jaws as they chewed their food, caught like bits of prey between tense teeth, and dancing, dancing as if it were running, a physical test. They wouldn't have known my Helena as she was, as she could have been, so I wish it had been me, I wish I had been there, I wish I could believe that someone who knew her and loved her could have been there as witness. So I'll stand here a moment longer with my drained, muddy husband and watch the place where the image of Frances sank underneath.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The summer had not gone. The next day was warm and clear, the light breeze cool, but with no bite to it. A reprieve, Frances said, an Indian summer. Indian summer reminds me of Indian giver, but one gives you something, the other gives and then takes it away. No one says that anymore, Indian giver, but our mother taught it to us. "Don't be an Indian giver, Lizzie. You can't give your sister something and then take it away." And to Helena, when we were little, I was an Indian giver. I liked to give her things, clothes of mine, necklaces, I didn't want them, they were just things, but when she took them and smiled and put them on, she did something to them that made them instantly desirable again. I wanted them back to see if whatever magic ingredient she had bestowed would stay, would pass back to me and stay. But I couldn't have them back, my mother said. "Don't be an Indian giver."

"Yes," said Helena, "don't be a injun."

Now in the sun on the damp sand, the surface already drying to dust in the sun, Joelle turns, her bare feet scuffing the sand, liking the feel of it. "Injun, Injun summer," she says turning in the sun. She carries a bag of plums, warm and bloomy, dipping her small hand in every now and again, biting and letting the juice run down her chin, her neck and staining her dress.

When Stephen and I had returned to the bungalow, wet and shivering, bog people covered with black mud, and Stephen's cheek, livid with scratches, my parents said little. My mother's face twisted at the mouth as if with the taste of something bad, her eyes sticking and lingering on those red marks, a little knowing glance in my direction, but nothing said. And my father with that indirect gaze of his, cultivated to miss its mark. We took our turns in the bathroom, washing ourselves clean, Stephen, transformed and glowing, antiseptic cream on the scratches. My mother told us then. She wanted to leave, when the tide was right tomorrow morning, they had looked it up, she and my father wanted to leave. The holiday, she thought, had come to an end. This said with a twist of her mouth and a glance at me, hoping, I suppose, to read guilt or a little shame on my face, hoping to make me lower my eyes. I looked back at her. I wouldn't have to mind about her now that she had said it, said what I already knew, about being lumbered, lumbered by her daughter. Well now I could un-lumber her, we could un-lumber each other. My parents could go back to their neat as a pin house with the patch of lawn to mow, sofas to re-cover in never quite the right shade or pattern, so that in a year or two they would have to be done again, something new picked out. Back to the house in a row of houses, with its concrete-floored garage to keep the car safe and dry, to store, in a darkened corner, the bicycles that once belonged to their two daughters, unused now, lying on their sides.

While my parents disappeared behind the closed door of the box-like, low-ceilinged room where they had slept, folding away their limp cotton summer clothing, Stephen and I prepared a meal for ourselves. Opening the old-fashioned fridge with its creaking door and cracked paintwork, its cold stale smell, to bring out slices of ham and the ends of a cheese, finishing what was left, eating with the hungry, quiet companionship of survivors.

"You could stay on, Lizzie," Stephen said, turning to me, his voice soft and his breath on my face. "I'll take them. I'll drive them back. You could stay on for a few days." I nodded, smiled at him, grateful for his kindness. I reached up then and touched those marks on his face, held a cool hand lightly against the heat of them. He held my wrist, held my hand in its place covering those wounds.

"Sometimes it takes so much, so much to be alive," he said, dropping my wrist, my hand falling away. But we were alive, it was Helena who was dead, Helena and our baby girl. I wondered then, if my parents in their quiet bedroom, were listening to the low rumble of our voices, listening as Helena and I used to do. A silent house with just that murmuring to mark the presence of life.

That night we slept, a heavy exhausted sleep and woke to a sky that was clear, with just one or two smoky wisps of cloud. And when I went to see Frances, to tell her of my plans, she said that about an Indian summer, summer returned.

“Of course you must stay on, Lizzie, of course. You couldn’t possibly waste weather like this, stay on more than a few days if you can, there’s no one coming after you, not at this time of the year. Shame about your parents, but you stay on. You’ll meet my grandchildren. It’ll be very lively.” And Dominique smiled when I told her, “Good,” she said, “and tell you what, Lizzie, just an idea, if you’re in no hurry, to get back, you could come to France with me and Joelle. Poor Jeremy has to go back to work soon, but Joelle and I always spend a few weeks in a little village in the South with my mother, we go every year. I’d be so happy if you could come, and Joelle too, I know she would.”

“Come, come,” said Joelle, “come Leezie.”

“You will love it Lizzie,” she says and she smiles at me, a wide smile, white against her dark skin. “Such beautiful markets, you’ve never seen such fruit and vegetables, laid out like that, such colours, and the smell of it. We’ll go shopping Lizzie.”

“And get new shoes for you.” Joelle is looking down at the sandals, her mother’s pretty sandals with the turquoise beads. I’ve ruined them, wading into the mud like that. Salt and mud have distorted the delicate straps, and although I tried there was no way of removing all the dirt, it clung. For a moment all three of us, looked down at my feet. Then Dominique laughed, “Yes, new shoes, we could get you new shoes.”

I would stay, I decided, and I would go to France, a week or two to end the summer. Stephen nodded when I told him, nodded and gave a small quick smile of acceptance. I touched him then, lifted first one hand up to his arm, felt the give of the skin beneath his thin shirt, then the other arm. I held him and moved closer, so that we touched, our faces pressed against each other, our bodies touching quickly, but firmly. And I watched, watched as they packed and climbed into Stephen’s dark blue car, my mother turning away from me, my father reaching out awkwardly with one hand, a flailing clumsy gesture that never quite made contact. A small smile from Stephen, his eyes fixed on my face and then they were gone, enclosed in the car, moving slowly away, slowly over the causeway, the raised ridge of dirt road over the black belt of dark mud. In an hour or so the tide would begin to rise, covering it all, cutting us off once more from the mainland. Standing with Dominique and Joelle, I raised a hand in farewell, watching the careful progress of the car, and the little girl, turning in the sun, eating her plums. She held one out to me, purple-red, almost black with ripeness. I bit, through the thin skin, into the jammy warmth of it and as the juice ran into my mouth, I lost sight of the blue car. We stood there, two women with the world at their feet, two women and a little girl with lives to lead, eating plums.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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DEDICATION

For my daughter Bethany

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