



Nicci
FRENCH

CATCH ME
WHEN
I FALL

'A FIRST-RATE CHILLER...
KEEPS YOU GUESSING
RIGHT TO THE VERY END'

Maria Claire



Catch Me When I Fall
by
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I died twice.

The first time, I wanted to die. I thought of death as the place where the pain would stop, where the fear would finally cease.

The second time, I didn't want to die. In spite of the pain and in spite of the fear, I had decided at last that life was where I needed to be: messy, scary, tiring, lovely, hurting life, with all its failures and its sadness, with all its sudden and unlooked-for bits of joy that make you close your eyes and think: Hold on to this, remember this. Memories can carry you through. Dancing in the dark; seeing the sun rise; striding through the city, lost in a crowd; looking up to meet your smile. You saved me when I could no longer save myself. You found me when I was lost.

I didn't want to be dead, but someone else wanted me to be. They tried very hard to make me die. I'm a person who people seem to either love or hate. Sometimes it's been hard to tell the difference between the two. Even now, when it's all over and I can look back at it like a landscape I've walked through and left behind, there are things that remain hidden, secrets lost to me.

Dying takes you to another place. All alone, you cross a line and nobody can join you there. When my father died, I was sixteen years old. I remember the spring afternoon when

he was buried. My mother tried to make me dress in mourning clothes but my father always hated black, so I put on my pink dress and my reddest lipstick and wore high heels that sank into the soft earth. I wanted to look like a hussy, like a tart. I smeared blue eye-shadow on my eyelids. And I remember the words the vicar said – ‘Ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ – and that people were crying and holding on to each other. I knew they wanted me to cry as well, and then they could have put an arm round me and comforted me, but my father hated people weeping. He always liked us to show the world we were happy. So I smiled through the service, and I think, because of the way everyone was looking at me, I even laughed a bit. My mother put a single white rose on his coffin when they lowered it into the ground, the way you’re supposed to. I took the bracelets off my arm and tossed those in, so for a few seconds it felt more like a pagan burial than a respectable English funeral. One of the bracelets broke, and its bright plastic beads rolled around crazily on the cheap wooden lid. Rat-a-tat-tatting on my father’s face.

For a while I thought I would go mad with loneliness and rage, although I never told anyone about that because I didn’t have the words. For ten years, I tried to get back to him. In despair. In love. In disgust, hilarity, loathing and revenge.

I died twice. Only twice. You’d have thought that with all my frantic striving I could have done a bit better than that.

So here they are, then. The people who loved me and hated me, who wanted me to live and who wished me dead, who tried to save me and who let me go. They all look happy. They are gazing at each other, holding hands; some of them are kissing.

I can tell that they are making promises to each other for the life ahead. That great and mysterious journey. Only one is missing.

Dying Once

I

‘I’m attracted to danger,’ he said. ‘Always have been. What can I get you two?’

I thought for a moment. Pace yourself, Holly. It was an hour since Meg and I had left the office but I was still buzzing. Fizzing. I once had a friend who was working as an actor. He’d told me how after a show it would take him hours to wind down, which was a bit of a problem if the curtain fell at half past ten and you had any ambition to fit in with the rest of the world. Mainly he found himself fitting in with other actors, who were the only people who felt like heading out for dinner at eleven and sleeping until noon every day of the week.

Another friend from college is a long-distance runner. She’s impressive. She almost got into the Olympics. She runs ridiculously fast and far just to get her body going. Then she runs a properly serious distance and punishes herself up steep hills. After that, the difficulty is to bring her body back to normal. She does more running simply to wind herself down. Afterwards she puts ice on her muscles and joints to cool them. I could do with that. Sometimes I feel I’d like to put my whole head into a chinking barrel of ice.

‘It’s not that difficult a decision,’ he said. ‘Meg’s already asked for a white wine.’

‘What?’ I said.

For a moment I’d forgotten where I was. I had to look around to remind myself. It was wonderful. It was autumn, but it was a hot evening and the crowd in the Soho bar was spilling out on to the street. It felt like the summer was going to go on for ever, winter would never come, it would never rain again. Out in the countryside fields needed water, riverbeds were dry, crops shrivelling, but in the middle of London it was like being by the Mediterranean.

‘What do you want to drink?’

I asked for a white wine and some water. Then I put my arm on Meg’s shoulders and murmured into her ear, ‘Did you talk to Deborah?’

She looked uneasy. So she hadn’t.

‘Not yet,’ she said.

‘We need to talk about this. Tomorrow, OK?’

‘Still or sparkling?’ asked the man.

‘Tap,’ I said. ‘First thing, Meg, before anything else.’

‘All right,’ she said. ‘Nine o’clock, then.’

I watched her and she watched the stranger walking over to the bar. He had a nice, open face: what was his name? Todd, that was it. We’d all staggered over from the office. It had been a hard day. We’d arrived as a group but gradually been diluted by the crowd. I saw familiar faces around the room, which

was full of happy people who had escaped from their offices. Todd was a client who had come in to check our proposal and he'd tagged along with us. Now he was trying to buy the drinks at the crowded bar. He was having difficulty because one of the women behind it was being shouted at by a rude customer. She was foreign – something like Indonesian – and the rude customer was yelling that she had given him the wrong drink. She was having difficulty understanding what he was saying. 'Look at me when I'm talking to you,' he said.

Todd came back clutching the drink for Meg, the two for me, and a beer for himself. 'They wouldn't give me tap water,' he said. 'It's from a bottle.'

I took a sip.

'So, you like danger,' I said.

'You make it sound stupid but, yes, in a way.'

Todd proceeded to tell us about a holiday he'd taken. He was cheerily proud of it. He and a group of friends had been celebrating something so they had undertaken a succession of dangerous sports across southern Africa. They had whitewater-rafted in Zambia, canoed past hippos in Botswana, bungee-jumped from a cable car going up Table Mountain and scuba-dived with Great White sharks.

'Sounds amazing,' said Meg. 'I don't think I'd have the nerve to do that.'

'It was exhilarating,' he said. 'Terrifying as well. I think maybe I liked it more in retrospect.'

'Did anybody get eaten?' I asked.

‘You go down in cages,’ he said, ‘and we didn’t see any.’

‘Cages?’ I said, pulling a face. ‘I thought you liked *danger*.’

He looked bemused. ‘Are you kidding?’ he said. ‘I’d like to see you jump from a cable car hundreds of feet up with just an elastic band for protection.’

I laughed, but not meanly, I hope. ‘Haven’t you read our brochure?’ I said. ‘We’ve arranged bungee-jumps. We’ve done the risk assessments, we’ve organized the insurance. I can tell you that it’s less dangerous than crossing the road.’

‘It’s an adrenaline rush all the same,’ Todd said.

‘You can get adrenaline off the shelf,’ I said. Was he going to be offended, or was he going to smile?

He shrugged self-deprecatingly and smiled. ‘So, what’s your idea of danger?’ he said.

I thought for a moment. ‘Real things, where it matters. Searching for unexploded mines and defusing them. Working as a miner – but not in Britain. I mean in Russia or the Third World.’

‘What frightens you most?’

‘Lots of things. Lifts, bulls, heights, bad dreams. Almost everything about my job. Failure. Talking in public.’

Todd laughed. ‘I don’t believe that,’ he said. ‘It was a good presentation today.’

‘I was terrified beforehand. I always am.’

‘So you agree with me. You like challenges.’

I shook my head. ‘Your bungee-jumping and

canoeing past hippos, that was in a brochure. You knew how it was going to turn out.' I heard a noise behind me and turned round. The man was complaining to the woman again, but worse this time. She was trying to explain and she was almost crying.

'What about you, Meg?' Todd asked, turning towards her. She smiled up at him shyly and opened her mouth, but I interrupted her reply.

'You're saying you like risk?' I said.

'Yes.'

'Adrenaline?'

'I guess.'

'Do you want to show me?'

'Holly!' said Meg nervously.

Todd's eyes flickered from side to side. I detected a flutter of excitement, but also of nervousness. What was coming?

'What do you mean?'

'You see that man at the bar, the one being rude to the girl?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think he's being a bully?'

'Probably. Yes.'

'Go and tell him to stop it and to apologize for his behaviour.'

Todd tried to speak, but started to cough instead. 'Don't be daft,' he said finally.

'You think he'll hit you?' I said. 'I thought you were attracted to danger.'

Todd's expression hardened. This wasn't funny

any more. And he had stopped liking me. 'It's just a way of showing off,' he said.

'You're scared of doing it.'

'Of course I'm scared.'

'If you're scared of it, the only way to get rid of the feeling is to do it. It's like scuba-diving with sharks. But without the cage.'

'No.'

I put my two glasses down on a table. 'All right,' I said. 'I'll do it.'

'No, Holly, don't . . .' said Meg and Todd together.

That was the only encouragement I needed. I walked over to the man at the bar. He was wearing a suit. Every man in the room was wearing a suit. He must have been in his mid-thirties, balding, especially on the crown of his head. He was florid-faced from the heat of the day and maybe from the week's work and his agitation. I hadn't noticed how large he was. His jacket fitted awkwardly across his broad shoulders. And I hadn't noticed that he was with two other men. He was still saying something basically unintelligible to the woman.

'What's going on?' I said.

He turned, startled and angry. 'Who the fuck are you?' he said.

'You need to say sorry to this woman,' I said.

'What?'

'You don't talk to people like that. You need to apologize.'

'Fuck off.'

He pronounced it with particular emphasis on the *k*, so there was a pause between the two words. Did he think I was going to walk away? Did he think I was going to cry? I picked up his drink from the bar. It was a tumbler. I brandished it at him, holding it barely an inch from his chin. It would be good to say that the whole bar fell silent, like in an old Western, but there was no more than a ripple of attention just around us. The man looked down at the glass, as if he was trying to see the knot of his own loosened tie. I could see he was thinking quickly: Is this woman mad? Is she really going to smash a glass in my face? For this? And I should have been thinking much the same: If he could insult and shout at some poor woman behind the bar for giving him the wrong drink, what would he do to me for physically threatening him? And I might have been thinking, as Todd had probably been thinking, that this man might be just out of prison. He might have a propensity for violence. He might especially enjoy picking on females. None of this occurred to me. I was just looking into his eyes. I felt the throb of the pulse in my neck. I had the vertiginous feeling of having no idea what would happen in the next five seconds.

And then the man's face relaxed into a smile. 'All right,' he said. Delicately he took the glass from my hand, as if it might explode. He downed it in one. 'On one condition.'

'What's that?'

‘I buy you a drink.’

I started to say no and looked round for Todd. He was gone, as was Meg. I wondered at what point they had fled the scene. Was it in anticipation of what might happen? Or was it when they saw what actually had happened? I gave a shrug. ‘Just do it,’ I said.

He was quite gentlemanly about it. He gestured to the nervous barmaid. He nodded at me. ‘This woman – what’s your name?’

‘Holly Krauss,’ I said.

‘Miss Holly Krauss tells me that I was rude to you and that I ought to apologize. On reflection I think she is right. So, I’m very sorry.’ The woman looked at me and then at him again. I don’t think she understood properly what was going on. The man, whose name was Jim, ordered me a double gin and tonic and another for himself.

‘Cheers,’ he said. ‘And, incidentally, she really is a bloody awful barmaid.’

I gulped back my drink and he ordered me another, and from then on the evening speeded up. It was as if I had been on a big dipper and it had climbed and climbed all day, and at the moment when I held the glass under Jim’s chin it had got to the highest point where it perched for a moment, then began to descend more and more quickly. The bar began to feel like a party where I knew quite a lot of the people or wanted to know them or they wanted to know me. I talked to Jim and his friends, who found the

whole episode with the glass very funny and kept on telling it, teasing him about it.

I was talking to a man who worked in the office across the courtyard from us, and when he headed off with some friends along the road to a private club for supper he asked me along and I went. Events occurred quickly but also in snapshots, like moments illuminated by a strobe light. The club was in an eighteenth-century townhouse, all shabby wood panelling and bare boards. It was an evening where everything seemed easy, available and possible. One of the men at the table where we ate was the director of the club so he was joking with the waiter and getting special food for us to try. I had a long, intense conversation with a woman who worked for something amazing, a film or photographic company or a magazine, and later I couldn't remember a word of it. The only thing I remembered was that when she stood up to go she kissed me full and hard on my mouth, so that I tasted her lipstick.

Someone suggested we go dancing. He said a new place had just opened not far off and it would be getting going about now. I looked at my watch and saw that it was past midnight; I'd been up since half past five. But it didn't matter.

We all walked there together, a group of about ten people who, until an hour or so ago, had been strangers. A man put his arm round me as we walked and started singing in Spanish or Portuguese or something. He had a beautiful voice, very deep, which

boomed out into the soft autumn air, and I looked up and saw there were stars in the sky. They shone so bright and near I almost felt that if I reached out I would be able to touch them. I sang something too, I can't remember what, and everyone joined in. People were laughing, holding each other. Our cigarettes glowed in the darkness.

We ended up near the office again. I remember thinking I'd come full circle and that I was less tired than I'd been when I left. I danced with the man who'd sung in Spanish, and with someone who said his name was Jay, and then I was in the women's toilets where someone gave me a line of coke. The club was small and crowded. A black man with soft eyes stroked my hair and told me I was gorgeous. A woman, I think she said she was Julia, came up and said she was going home now and maybe I should as well, before something happened, and did I want to share a taxi, but I wanted something to happen, everything to happen. I didn't want the evening to end yet. I didn't want to turn out the lights. I danced again, feeling so light on my feet it was almost like flying, until the sweat poured down my face and stung my eyes and my hair was damp and my shirt stuck to me.

Then we left. Jay was there, I think, and maybe the singer, and a woman with amazing black hair who smelt of patchouli and other people I remember only as silhouettes against the sky. It was so beautifully cool outside. I pulled the air into my lungs and felt

the sweat dry on my skin. We sat by the river, which looked black and deep. You could hear the tiny thwack of waves on the bank. I wanted to swim in it, to lie in its dark currents and be swept away to the sea where no one could follow me. I hurled in a handful of coins, though only a few reached the water, and told everyone to make a wish.

‘What’s your wish, then, Holly?’

‘I want it to be always like this,’ I said.

I put a cigarette into my mouth and someone leaned towards me, cupping the lighter in their hands. Someone else took it out of my mouth and held it while he kissed me and I kissed him back, pulling him towards me and gripping his hair in my hands, and then a different person kissed me as well, his lips on my neck and I tipped back my head and let him. Everyone loved me and I loved everyone. They all had tender, shining eyes. I said the world was a more magical place than we knew. I stood up and ran across the bridge. With each step I felt that I might never land on the ground again, but I could hear the sound of my footfalls echoing around me, and then the sound of other footfalls too, following me, but they couldn’t catch me. People were calling my name, like owls hooting. ‘Holly, Holly!’ I laughed to myself. A car swept by, catching me in its headlights and letting me go again.

I stopped for breath at last, near an arcade of shops, and they found me there. Two of them, I think. Maybe, maybe not. One grabbed me round the

shoulders and pushed me up against a wall, and said he'd got me at last and wasn't going to let me go. He said I was wild, but that he could be wild too. He picked up a brick. His arm arced back over his head, just a few inches from me, and I saw the brick sailing through the air. There was a loud crack and a violent star spread in the plate-glass window in front of us and a pyramid of tins collapsed on their shelves, and for a second it was as if we were going to step through the perfect star into a different world and I could be someone entirely new. New and fresh and whole.

Then the alarm broke over us, nasal shrieks that seemed to be coming from every direction, and he took me by the wrist. 'Run.'

We ran together. I think there were still three of us but maybe there were only two by then. Our feet seemed in time. I don't know why we stopped running, but I know we were in a taxi, speeding along empty streets, past shops with metal shutters and dark houses. A fox froze as the taxi approached, orange and still under the street-lamps. It slipped into a garden, a slim shadow, and was gone.

After that, there are things I remember and don't remember at the same time, like something happening to someone else, in a film or in a dream you know you're having but can't wake up from. Or, rather, it was like something happening to me, but I was someone else. I was me and not me. I was a woman laughing as she went up the stairs in front of him; a woman standing in an upstairs room with one dim

light in the corner, an old sofa heaped with cushions and, hanging from the ceiling, a turquoise budgerigar in a cage. Was there really a budgerigar piping away, looking down at her with its knowing eyes, or was that a strange hallucination that worked its way into the bright fever of the evening? A woman looking out of the window at roofs and night-time gardens that she'd never seen before.

'Where the fuck am I?' she said, letting her jacket slide to the floor in a puddle of darkness, but she didn't really want to know the answer. 'Who the fuck are you?' she asked next, but she didn't want to know that either. It didn't matter at all. And he just laughed anyway and pulled the curtains closed and lit a cigarette, or perhaps it was a joint, and passed it to her. She could feel excitement throbbing loose and deep along her veins, and she sat back in the sofa, against the cushions, and kicked off her shoes and curled her bare legs up under her.

'What shall we do now?' she asked, but of course she knew what they would do now. She undid a button on her shirt and he watched her. The budgerigar watched her too, daft sharp trills coming from its beak. She drank something transparent and fiery and felt its heat bolt through her body until she was molten at her core. There was music playing and it felt as if it was coming from inside her skull. She couldn't tell the difference between the beat of her feelings and the notes of the song. Everything had joined with everything else.

For a bit she was alone in the room with the music, and then she wasn't alone any longer. I wasn't alone any longer. I lay back, feeling soft as the river we'd sat by, and let him take off my skirt. We were on the sofa, then on the floor. Fingers fumbling with buttons. If I closed my eyes, lights flashed behind my eyelids and it was as if there was a whole strange world, over which I had no control, waiting to explode in my brain. So I kept my eyes open on this world, but I don't know what I saw. Cracks in the ceiling, the leg of a chair, a wall a few inches away, a face coming down against mine, the twist of a mouth. I tasted blood and ran a tongue against my lips. My blood: good. The carpet burned my skin: good. Hard fingers on my arms, on my body, digging into me. Me and not me; me and this other woman who was pulling off her shirt, buttons spraying on the floor, falling back on a bed, hair spreading beneath her; hands pulling off her bra; a weight on her. Closing her eyes at last and finding herself in a bright-lit world, full of shapes and exploding colours and rushing darkness.

'This is so strange,' she said. I said. 'Don't stop.'

There was something crawling along my cheek. A fly trickled down towards the corner of my mouth. Without opening my eyes, I moved my hand and brushed it off and I heard it buzz sluggishly away. I could tell without seeing it that it was one of those fat, late-summer flies, heavy with blood and decay. If I were to squash it, it would leave a purple-brown stain.

I didn't stir, but I knew something was wrong. I managed to squeeze one eye open and felt pain screw its way into my brain. I touched my lips with my dried-up tongue. They felt puffy and cracked. There was a foul taste in my mouth: stale, smoky, greasy, dirty.

All the colour had gone now. My one eye was looking through the gloom at a door with a scruffy grey towelling robe hanging from a hook. I swivelled my gaze to the left and saw the dull grey half-light of dawn coming in through the thin curtains. I held my breath and kept absolutely still. I heard the sound of steady breathing behind me. I closed my eye and lay there while the last shreds of dreams dissolved, until at last I was face to face with this day and this self. I touched my face, which felt numb and rubbery, like

a mask. Silently I counted to fifty, then opened both eyes and gently shifted my head, feeling a queasy pain ooze round behind my forehead and flood into my temples.

Gradually I made out objects around me. I was lying on the left-hand side of a double bed, under a crooked pale duvet with a large L-shaped rip in the middle. There was a single square window quite high in the wall, an exercise bike under it that was draped with a pair of jeans and a bra. A nylon sports bag lay near the door with a squash racket on top of it. A wardrobe stood half open to reveal a few shirts on hangers. A pile of magazines tottered in the corner. A bottle of wine had tipped on to its side. The toe of a trainer poked out from under the bed. A tissue was screwed into a ball. An ashtray, a few inches from my face, overflowed with cigarette ends, which had spilled across a pair of striped boxer shorts. A digital clock showed a sickly green 4:46.

As I inched myself up into a sitting position, I saw there were smears of blood on the sheet as if painted on it in a couple of delicate brushstrokes. I stared straight ahead, then gingerly swung my feet to the floor. I stood up and the floor tipped under me. I instructed myself not to look round, but it felt as though an invisible wire was tugging my gaze and I couldn't stop myself darting a glance backwards to the shape in the bed. I saw hairy legs poking out from the duvet, a shock of darkish hair, an arm over the eyes, a mouth slackly open. That was all. I turned

away again. I didn't know who he was. Didn't want to know. Mustn't.

I needed a pee, so I crept towards the door and pulled it open cautiously, wincing at the little groan it gave. There were gritty floorboards underfoot and opposite me a door, which I pushed. It didn't give on to the expected bathroom though. There was a carpet, a bed, a figure that shifted, then lifted its head and mumbled something thickly, out of deep sleep. I closed the door. I felt clammy, nauseous.

I found the tiny lavatory and sat down shakily on the toilet. My cold, sticky body felt as if it didn't belong to me, and I had to make an enormous effort to stand up again and make my way into the living room. I was hit at once by a locker-room smell of bodies and a late-night pub smell of smoke and beer. The room was strewn with clothes – his, mine. The table lay on its side, a broken mug beside it; another ashtray stood among spilled butts; crumpled beer cans rattled against my feet and a bottle of clear schnapps lay on its side. A garish picture was tipped sideways on the wall, and there was a red smear daubed beside it. There was also a strangely neat circle of what looked like brown rice on the floor. With a stab of memory, I looked up and saw the budgerigar's cage hanging above the spilled seed. The bird was asleep.

I picked up my skirt from behind the sofa and found my shirt, crumpled in the corner. Only one button remained and it was ripped along the armpit.

One shoe was under the table, its heel wobbly. After nervous fumbling I found the other in the corridor outside the bathroom. Holding my breath, I edged my way back into the bedroom and collected my bra from the exercise bike. It reeked of alcohol – schnapps, maybe. There was something sticky under the ball of my foot and when I looked down I was standing on a used condom. I peeled it off and dropped it on to the floor.

I couldn't find my knickers. I knelt down and peered under the bed, then retraced my steps along the corridor without success. I'd have to go without them. I needed to get out before the man or the person in the other room – or the bird, for that matter – woke and found me. Skirt, bra, flimsy torn shirt, whose hem I knotted round my waist. Sore feet into wobbly shoes. Jacket over the top over everything, but it was one of those stupid affairs with a single decorative button and scarcely concealed the mess underneath. I longed to be in a pair of flannel pyjamas under clean sheets, minty breath, clean limbs . . . Bag, where was my bag? It was near the front door, its contents slopping out in a heap. I shovelled everything back in, opened the door and closed it softly behind me, scuttled down the stairs and out into the grey street, where weariness hit me. For a moment I had to bend over to catch my breath.

Where was I?

I made my way to the end of the street and read the

name. Northingley Avenue, SE7. Where was that? Which way did I go to get anywhere else? My watch – still miraculously on my wrist – told me it was 5:10. I looked up and down the deserted street, as if a taxi would suddenly appear and scoop me up, then took a deep breath and set off in a random direction. It took so long to cover any distance; nothing seemed to get any closer. It was cold before the sun came up properly and I was crawling like a mucky slug along the road of unlit houses.

At last I came to a road where there were shops and one, a newsagent's, was just opening. I ducked under its half-lifted grid and approached the man behind the counter. He looked up from the papers he was stacking and his eyes widened. 'What . . . ?' he stuttered. 'Have you been mug –?'

'Can you tell me the way to the nearest Underground station, please?'

His gaze hardened into something like disgust. I put up a hand to pull my jacket closer together and tried to look nonchalant.

'Straight that way for about half a mile.'

I bought a bottle of water and a little pack of tissues, then fished in the bottom of my bag for change.

'Thanks,' I said, but he just stared at me. I tried to smile, but my face wouldn't obey me. My mouth seemed too tight to move.

Strange people travel on the Underground at dawn. People stumbling home at the end of the previous

day overlap with people at the beginning of the next, still bleary from their beds.

A man with gorgeous long dreadlocks came and sat beside me at the station while I was waiting for the first train out and played his mouth organ. I tried to give him some change but he said he wasn't a beggar, he was a wandering minstrel and I was clearly a damsel in distress. So I gave him my packet of cigarettes instead and he kissed my hand. My knuckles were grazed, my nails dirty.

When I was on the train I poured water on to a wad of tissues and dabbed at my face. Mascara, blood. I tried to see what I looked like in the window, but I was just a pale blur. I dragged a brush through my hair, and changed for the Northern Line and Archway.

I arrived at my dark green front door at ten to six and felt as if I'd climbed a mountain and run a marathon to get there. I opened the door with the double set of keys and eased my way into the hall. I dropped my bag on to the floor by the metal step-ladder and the tins of unopened paint. I kicked off my shoes and went into the kitchen, where I drank two glasses of water in quick succession. Outside, it was grey and windless. The tree in the back garden hardly stirred. I took off my shirt and pushed it deep into the rubbish bin, pulling tins and coffee grounds over the top to cover it.

The stairs seemed so steep that I went up on all fours. I crawled into the bathroom and took

off the rest of my clothes. I bundled them up and shoved them into the bottom of the laundry basket, under the others. I looked at myself in the mirror and it was hard not to scream at the sight of the person looking back at me: the bleary, grubby, stained, smeary, bloody woman with the swollen lips, reddened eyes and a bird's nest of matted hair. I was like something that had been left out for the bin men to take away.

I made the shower as hot as I could bear, and then I made it hotter, burning needles of water puncturing me. I washed my hair till my scalp stung. I soaped my body and scrubbed it as if I could rub off an entire layer of skin and emerge renewed, uncontaminated. I brushed my teeth until my gums bled. I gargled with mouthwash. I rubbed cream into my face, sprayed myself with lotion, shook talcum powder wildly, rolled deodorant under my arms.

I went into my bedroom, where through the curtains the dawn had become day. The alarm clock showed 6:11. I made sure it was set for 7:10 as usual, then slid under the duvet and wrapped my arms round my knees.

'Holly?' muttered Charlie. 'Time is it?'

'Ssh. Go back to sleep. Everything's fine.'

As I fell asleep, I remembered I had forgotten to put my wedding ring back on.

‘Holly. Holly, I’ve brought you some coffee. It’s twenty past seven.’

For a moment I lay with my forearm over my eyes to shield them from the glare of the morning. My limbs were heavy, my mouth was parched, my head throbbed and my throat ached. I couldn’t face the day; I couldn’t face Charlie.

‘Holly,’ he said again.

I moved my arm, managed to open my eyes and look into his nice face, his brown eyes, and could see no disgust or surprise. ‘Good morning, Charlie. You’re up early.’

He looked warm and solid, in a shabby, unshaven, homely way. He worked at home, so he didn’t have to put on a suit and a public self like I do every day, standing in front of the mirror and applying a glossy face, lipstick and lying eyes; smile, Holly, smile. He was just wearing his old grey cords and a long-sleeved, mustard-coloured shirt with a fraying neck.

I heaved myself up on to one arm and took a gulp of the coffee. Harsh, hot, black.

‘Late night?’ he asked.

‘It just sort of went on and on.’

‘I didn’t hear you come in.’

‘You were fast asleep. God, is that the time? I must have slept through the alarm. I’ll be down in a second.’

I closed my eyes once more and heard him leave. I’d had a couple of hours of fragmented sleep, and now I had about three minutes before I had to become a person again among all the other people pretending to be people. I pulled the duvet over my head and made myself consider the events of the previous evening. It wasn’t really like thinking. I felt I was being punched by someone who was skilled in such things, the blows aimed at the soft areas of my body where they would leave no mark. I found it difficult to breathe. I gasped and coughed, as if I had been washed ashore by a large wave. I thought of that woman last night – me – laughing and flirting and being so reckless and yielding to every temptation. No, not ‘yielding’, *courting* every temptation. The life and soul of the party. Now she just seemed like a ghastly, trashy bore. I thought of myself in that room, that other bed, with that man – whoever he was.

That’s the thing, with love and sex: people write songs and poems and make movies and we swoon and fantasize about it and we all want it or we want it to be better. But in the end when it happens, when you’ve left the club, when the clothes are off, it’s just a spotty back and a stained sheet and an awful flat somewhere in a nasty bit of London you’ve never been before and a slimy, crinkled-up condom on the carpet, which makes you want to throw up. I thought

about going downstairs to the kitchen, sitting down opposite Charlie, telling him what I'd done last night while he'd been peacefully sleeping in our bed. The sheer stupid, squalid, ugly, nasty pointlessness of it. I imagined the way the expression would change on his face as I told him, and I squirmed further into my duvet and groaned out loud in the muffled darkness, sickened by what I'd done. If I could turn back the clock, leave the bar when Meg had done, leave the noise and lights and laughter, and come home to my husband, go to sleep innocently curled up at his side between clean sheets, wake this morning with a clear conscience . . . If only, if only . . .

Part of me knew quite well that I'd changed my life. There was a little voice in my head saying, 'You've committed adultery.' I remembered religious education lessons in school, fragments from the Bible about how you could commit adultery in your heart just by looking at someone with lust. But I hadn't committed adultery in my heart, or even in my head. I'd committed it with my body, the body I'd scrubbed so ferociously in the shower, as if I could wash it all out of me. I couldn't tell Charlie about it. It would be cruel and, like a great stain, it would pollute everything in our life.

I'm good at lying. I always have been. Since that autumn day eleven months ago, so blustery and bright and full of promise, when I tugged him into the register office, followed by the two bewildered, shy witnesses we'd grabbed from the street, I've lied lots

of times, lied and pretended and faked, but never like last night. That was a first.

I heard Charlie downstairs, the clink of china, a clatter of mail falling through the letterbox on to the bare boards of the hallway, and I pulled the duvet off my face and squinted out into the room. My legs ached and my eyes ached and there were swollen glands in my neck. Perhaps I was getting flu, I thought hopefully. Then I'd have a reason to hide from the world just a little bit longer. But I knew I didn't have flu, just a hangover and a guilty conscience.

'Out of bed, Holly,' I ordered myself and, like an automaton obeying its master's command, I sat up, headache clanging round my skull, and put my feet on the floor. I waited for the room to steady, then shuffled into the bathroom where I washed my face in cold water. I stared at myself in the mirror: the darkish blonde hair that Charlie used to say looked like a lion's mane, the grey eyes that gazed back at me candidly from under thick brows, the wide mouth that smiled out at me so brightly. How was it possible that my mind should be covered with a layer of sooty grime while my face looked so fresh and happy?

'You can't fool me,' I hissed at myself, wrinkling my skin in a hideous grin. 'I know you, Holly Krauss. You can't fool me.'

'Are you going in to work at the usual time?' Charlie pulled a letter out of its envelope, glanced at it, then crumpled it into a ball.

‘I’ve got to. I’m seeing Meg at nine. And there’s someone I need to deal with first.’

Charlie looked round. ‘That sounds ominous,’ he said.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘And then we’re going to be frantic, preparing for next weekend. It’s going to be a nightmare. Who was that letter from?’

‘Next weekend? I didn’t know about next weekend. What’s happening?’

‘I told you. Twelve executives crossing a pond on a raft. To help them bond. What are you doing today?’

‘Stuff, you know. You want breakfast?’

‘Maybe,’ I said dubiously.

I had woken up thinking I would never need to consume anything more than coffee as long as I lived, but suddenly I felt the sort of ravenous shaky hunger that makes you think you’ll faint. Had I eaten anything last night? I went through the evening as if I were fast-forwarding a video. There was lots of talk and drinking and cigarettes. Occasionally I’d catch sight of some food on my internal video but although I’d pushed it around on my plate I hadn’t eaten much. I looked further back in the day. I’d forgotten about lunch and, in all probability, about breakfast as well, although I’d got up at five thirty. Had I become some new sort of human being who didn’t require sleep or food?

I rummaged in the fridge, and found myself nibbling a slice of pork pie, and then I drank a liquid

yoghurt. It all tasted like chalk, and the combination of the different foods made it even worse, different kinds of chalk coating my tongue and the roof of my mouth. What a strange thing, I thought, to take things from the outside world, mash them up in your mouth and push them down into your body so that some of it becomes part of you. It was enough to put anybody off their food, except that I had an unassuageable craving in my stomach. It wasn't so much appetite as the sort of signal a robot might send out when it required charging up.

Charlie was scrutinizing me. 'Here, have some more coffee. I could make you something proper, if you want.'

'It's all right.'

'Bacon and eggs, an omelette, sausages, except we haven't got any sausages. Or bacon, actually. And I'm not sure about eggs. We've got bread, though.'

'No, no,' I said, laughing – trying to laugh, needles of pain in my head. I was in the audience and on stage, all at the same time, watching myself impersonate a normal woman. 'What are your plans last night?'

Charlie looked puzzled. 'Did you say *last night*?' he asked.

'Did I?'

'Last night I was here. Tonight I don't know. Do you know?'

'We could do something. Or nothing. That would be good.' I went and stood beside him, putting my hands in his thick, clean hair, bending forward to

smell his warm morning cleanliness, to place a kiss on his warm cheek. 'Charlie?'

'Mmmm?'

'Oh, nothing.'

I reached across for my mug of coffee, but fumbled it and it smashed to the floor, the coffee spreading in a puddle at my feet.

'It's all right,' Charlie said. 'I'll clear it up.' He squatted on the floor, picking up the pieces, mopping at the spillage with kitchen roll.

'It was the one we bought together at that pottery near Brighton.' I felt near to tears.

'I can fix it.'

'No, you can't. I'm so sorry.'

'It's just the handle, Holly. Look. I'll glue it and you won't even know where it was broken. Leave it to me.'

I stared at him, and thought: Now. Tell him now. Don't rush off to work. Instead, take his hand and look into his face. Talk to him honestly, for once in your stupid life. But then there was a sharp knock at the door.

'I'll get it,' I said.

It was Naomi from next door. She had moved in at the beginning of the year and she was our only friend in the street. She looked as unkempt as I felt. Her hair was standing up in wild, dark curls and she was wearing slippers. 'I'm on the scrounge,' she said, stepping into the hallway. 'I'm all out of coffee.'

‘We’ve got plenty, and there’s some in the pot. Have a cup.’

She looked nervously from me to Charlie. ‘If you’re sure . . .’

‘I’m on the way out, but Charlie’s here.’

I left them together in the kitchen and stepped out gratefully into the street, where no one knew my face or name.

I quite like it when we have projects that are impossible because then people are grateful when you manage anything at all. That was how Meg and I first met, nearly five years ago now, although sometimes it feels we’ve known each other for ever and it’s almost a shock to realize that she wasn’t around in my childhood and adolescent years. We were both in our first jobs and we were the dogsbodies in a company that was a total shambles. One day a woman arrived to check the arrangements for the following day and Derek, our boss, had forgotten all about it. As if that wasn’t enough, he shut himself away in his office. After about an hour, I went in without knocking and he was crying. Even now I can remember his wretched, crumpled face and his red eyes. He looked desperate, so I told him it would be all right. We’d make sure of it. He held my hand in both of his and told me his wife had run off with her decorator.

We had nothing to lose. We were only twenty-two, and everything seemed possible. We phoned the woman, got some details about the company, then

found a hotel and cobbled together some exercises from talking to people around the office. We stayed up the entire night preparing cards and little speeches. The next day, well, it wasn't the greatest office away-day of all time, but Meg and I worked like dogs getting people to cross a carpet with only a plank, a rope, a bucket and a couple of other stupid things, and we flirted and sparkled until our faces hurt – or mine did, at least. Meg is the straight man in our double-act. She doesn't flirt – when she likes a man, she gets clumsy and abrupt, laughs in the wrong places, blushes to the roots of her hair. And she never shows off. I do, and when I do she looks at me with an expression that's a mixture of indulgence and faint anxiety. She has a faint crease between her eyebrows from when she frowns. It makes her look as if she's about to burst into tears.

We did it all day and we did it in the bar all evening. Just after midnight the woman from the company came up and hugged us and said, thank you, thank you, thank you, that we had saved her job, and then Derek the next day, he was so emotional he started crying again. I sat there again and said reassuring things and looked at him. I remember shivering. We were both on a high wire, making it look easy. All it took was a glance down, the realization that there was no safety-net, and you slip and fall.

And yet at the same time it was the biggest high of my life bar nothing. I've heard people say they have a recurring nightmare that they are on a stage

and a play is going on and they don't know their lines. That day showed me that it wasn't my ultimate nightmare at all. Quite the opposite: it was something I sought out. My nightmare begins when the show is over.

It wasn't many months later that Meg and I decided to go it alone. I had never met anyone I liked as much as her. I think she was almost the first person in the whole of my adult life I didn't feel the need to put on an act with, didn't need to try to charm or impress. I always knew she was kind-hearted, and in a peculiar way I felt that I was a better, or less bad, person when I was around her. Perhaps, in my twenties, I had at last found my first real friend.

We could have called our company something New Age like Swish or Enthrall or Aspire but we stuck with KS Associates, which is brilliantly derived from Krauss, my surname, and Summers, which is Meg's. We paid an old art-school boyfriend of Meg's five thousand quid to design a logo for us. Imagine the K and then imagine that the sideways V is the top half of the S, which continues below, then curves back and almost touches the bottom of the straight bit of the K. It's rather hard to picture unless you see it. We thought it looked quite classy, but when we had the party in our office to celebrate the launch of the company, someone pointed out, late at night when we were all quite drunk, that it looked like the wheelchair sign you see on disabled toilets. But it was too late to change and, anyway, Meg and I

decided it was probably only an effect noticed by the very drunk.

I like the impossible, but there are limits even to impossibility. The previous week one of our staff had gone off on maternity leave and another woman had resigned and we had two away-days coming at us, like something very big and very heavy. As I stood on the Underground platform, for the second time that morning, with my aching head and sore throat and a sense of disaster hanging around me like a toxic miasma, I started to reassign the two absent women's duties in my head and work out a rough timetable and think of what lay ahead in the next seventy-two hours. The train burst out of the tunnel and I suddenly thought: Wouldn't it be nice to let myself tip over like a tree in front of it? I would never have to work out anything ever again. After all, in a hundred years I'd be dead anyway. Everybody on this jam-packed platform would be dead, most of them probably after years of loneliness and illness. I'd just be arriving early. And there are no spreadsheets in the grave. And no greyness. Just blackness, or nothing. Or maybe even as a surprise bonus there would be heaven and I would meet my old budgies and hamsters and my rabbit and my cat from when I was a little girl. And I would see my father again.

But then I saw the face of the driver, homely, jowly, unshaven, shockingly close, and I saw us, the crowd on the platform, from his point of view, all

teetering on the edge over the rails. Did he have nightmares that one day someone would jump?

Our office doesn't look like what my father would have called a normal office. Not that he ever worked in a normal office. At least, it's not what normal fathers would call a normal office. We found it on the edge of Soho and took over the lease from a dot com company that had gone bust. It has no walls, no partitions, no doors. There's just a series of parallel tables like a modernist monk's refectory. There's a poky so-called conference room, but usually when we have a meeting with clients, we hold it at another long table on a dais at the end, where the abbot would sit. It has industrial-looking lights hanging from the ceiling and people have lockers but no set desks or terminals – except me, because apparently wherever I sit I make such a mess that no one wants to take my place. We inherited the design from the dot com company and have never got round to changing it. Meg and I have promised each other that one day we'll have it converted into real offices with walls so we won't have to stare at each other all day, but I doubt we'll bother.

I walked through the door at five minutes past eight, which, considering everything, I thought deserved an entry of its own in the *Guinness Book of Records*. The office was empty and silent. Good. I had about half an hour. I made myself a cup of coffee and got to work. I heard a noise and looked round

sharply. It was probably something out in the street. I couldn't help smiling nervously at my situation. I was like a burglar in my own office. It took only a moment to locate Deborah's files. It was an easy task because for the most part I knew what I was looking for. Like any skilled thief, I had cased the joint well in advance and I knew where the plunder was to be found. I felt a brief glow of satisfaction at being proved right, but this was quickly replaced by a sour feeling about what had been done. I photocopied some of the papers, then replaced the files in the locker just as I heard footsteps on the stairs.