

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a vibrant red dress with a white floral pattern, is captured in a joyful twirl. She is smiling broadly, showing her teeth. The background is a soft, out-of-focus snowy landscape with a large, dark rock in the foreground. The overall mood is bright and optimistic.

*Life
Begins*

It's never too late
to start again . . .

AMANDA
BROOKFIELD

Life Begins
by
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Chapter One

I sit where only the tips of the waves can reach, slapping my palms at the foamy water. The sand is gritty between my toes, the ties of my sun bonnet tight under my chin. Big hands scoop me high. My father's face is close, leathered and smiling, his blue eyes sharp against his tan. When he throws me I laugh, safe in the knowledge that I shall be caught. My mother sits reading in a deckchair, her slender white freckled limbs neatly circled by the protective shadow of a large wooden parasol. She wears a blue sarong and matching headscarf, from which one wild curl of auburn hair has broken free to bounce across her forehead. As I shriek she peers over the black ridge of her sunglasses and smiles, her lacquered eyelashes blinking in the glare.

Charlotte unlocked the door and pushed, with some difficulty, against the pile of morning post lodged on the mat. As she did so her neighbour emerged from his own front door wearing his faded tartan dressing-gown and the backless leather slippers that exposed the yellow crusts of his heels. 'Happy Valentine's, my dear,' he barked, bending down to swap the empty milk bottle in his hands for the full one parked next to his recycling box. He straightened and clutched his back with a grimace.

'Thanks, Mr Beasley, same to you.'

'Young Sam well, is he?'

'Oh, yes, thanks . . . I've just taken him to school.' Charlotte, now riffling through the mail, cast a doubtful glance at the Volkswagen, which sat like a large frosted tea-cake next to the for-sale sign stapled to her gate-post. Late as

usual for her twelve-year-old's school run, she had hurled the contents of the kettle at the front and rear windscreens, only to have to chisel most of the ice off with her fingernails as the water instantly froze. Sam had watched her stony-eyed from the front seat, resting his chin on the top of his rucksack. The car had refused to start on the first three attempts, then performed its new clunking noise the one that hadn't yet lasted quite long enough to warrant further investigation, as they approached the roundabout.

'I expect you'll have a few cards in there.' Mr Beasley nodded towards her hands, showing off his yellowing teeth as he grinned.

'I doubt it.' Charlotte smiled. Her neighbour meant well, she knew. In the ten months since Martin's departure, each week had been peppered with similar efforts at communication. But it was a raw morning to be lingering on the doorstep and, of course, there weren't any cards. There hadn't been a home-made offering of gluey glittered hearts from Sam that year either, which was entirely understandable and healthy, given her son's advanced age, but it had caused her a moment's lament all the same.

'Sold the house yet?' Mr Beasley rasped, just as she was edging inside.

'No – but there's someone coming to look this morning. Any minute now, in fact . . .'

Charlotte glanced pointedly at her watch.

'Been a while, hasn't it?'

'A few months, yes.'

'And you've not found anywhere to go yet, have you?'

'No, Mr Beasley, I haven't.'

'I've forgotten, what was it you were looking for?'

'I –' Charlotte broke off, distracted by the envelope uppermost in her hand, brown, with a court stamp. 'Something

smaller, a little cheaper, a lot nearer the park,' she muttered, delivering a summary of the brief she had given Tim Croft the estate agent eight months before. Under her anorak her heart was pumping fast – relief, joy, a million things. It was the decree nisi – it had to be. She felt as if she had been pushing at a huge heavy door that had at last given way – no more hideous haggling over numbers, what she spent at the hairdresser or in department stores; no more miserable sessions with her pocket calculator and a pile of bills. It was all over at last. She was free.

Mr Beasley was sucking in his cheeks and shaking his lugubrious unshaven old face at the dank February sky. 'The park . . . Oh, they're pricy, those are, even the poky ones.'

'Really? Well, I'm hopeful, *very* hopeful.' Rejoicing now, because of the brown envelope, Charlotte clasped the pile of post to her chest and escaped inside.

There was still a palpable quietness about the place without Martin, almost as if her refusal to mourn the demise of their unhappy union meant some spirit of the house was doing it for her. In her wilder moments Charlotte even wondered if this was why it was proving so hard to sell. At other, saner, times it seemed grossly unfair that while Martin and his adulterous love, Cindy, could spread their wings in their new spacious riverside house in Rotherhithe, she was left trying to sell a property that seemed, no matter how many vases of fresh flowers she arranged around it, to exude something akin to an atmosphere of bereavement.

She took her time with the brown envelope – made herself a cup of coffee, found a biscuit, relished the moment. And once the document was in her hand she made herself read it, every word, skimming none of the jargon or small-print, forcing herself to recall the sourness of the final months and the sly anonymous note that had finally provided the

nudge – the courage – to put an end to the misery for good. *Your husband is seeing someone else, from a well-wisher.* Even at the time Charlotte had felt a sort of sick triumph – all the years of disintegrating affection, the needling suspicion, Martin’s denials – and there at last, in ten words, was the verification, permission to give up, as official as the stamped document cradled in her hands.

And now a house viewing – the first in five weeks. It was going to be a lucky day, Charlotte decided, flying with something like exultation round the ground floor rooms, shuffling papers into tidy piles and scooping up the random items that had found their way into inappropriate places: a wet towel, a phone charger, two odd clean socks. Arms full, she set off up the stairs, musing on the curious business of inviting strangers into one’s home, the compulsion it induced to present an image of perfection where none existed.

Arriving on the threshold of Sam’s bedroom on the top floor, she forgot all such notions and swore out loud. Drawers and cupboards spewed their contents like escaping entrails. Scattered across the floor, transforming the carpet into some sort of imploding mosaic, was the entire contents of the crate of Lego that had for months – or was it years? – been gathering dust under the bed. Strewn among this were his once treasured miniature Subbuteo figures, unsheathed CDs, sweet wrappers, a bowl encrusted with flakes of cereal, a plastic boomerang and a range of torn comics and magazines.

Charlotte gripped her bundle, fighting a host of familiar emotions – irritation, resentment, resignation, despair – and beneath that a guilty sense of responsibility. What sort of man would this boy of hers make, she feared suddenly, what sort of partner, husband? She was still standing in

the doorway, frozen with doubt and foreboding, when the doorbell rang.

‘Sorry, I’m early.’ The man, who had thick dark hair, peppered with grey at the sideboards and a large nose, visibly red with cold, extended a hand that gripped hers too firmly to suggest genuine penitence.

‘That’s fine . . . don’t worry . . . Come in.’ Charlotte managed a handshake through the tangled flex of the phone charger. ‘Though you’ve caught me slightly on the hop, I’m afraid, no baking bread or fresh coffee to win you over. You’ll have to take things as you find them.’ She deposited her bundle on the hall chair, inwardly scolding herself for managing to sound – a mere two seconds into the process – so apologetic, so *desperate*. ‘Shall we start with the kitchen?’

‘Fine. Whatever suits.’ He hadn’t even smiled when she said the thing about the bread and the coffee and now he was peering at the hall ceiling, right at the spot where Martin’s overflowing bath had yellowed the paintwork two years before. They should have had it replastered, repainted, of course, like the damp above the back door and the delta of hairline cracks that had appeared round the ceiling rose in the sitting room after Sam and six friends had performed gymnastics at a birthday sleepover. The house, Charlotte saw, with sudden, horrible clarity, was a testimony to the failure of her marriage, and not just for its subtle emptiness. It was like the proverbial millstone: ugly, heavy, holding her down. The sooner she was shot of it the better. She glanced again at her prospective viewer – visibly nervy, arms pinned stiffly behind his back – wondering if he would soften up at a hint that she would be prepared to accept something below the asking price. Tim Croft had been implying she should do as much for weeks.

In the kitchen she talked fast – too fast – about the

waste-disposal unit and how the sun lit the back of the house. Her visitor cast a doubtful glance at the garden, then at his watch. ‘You could nose around on your own if you’d prefer,’ Charlotte offered casually, leaning against the kitchen table, which wobbled because the bit of paper keeping it steady had, as usual, worked its way free. ‘It requires a bit of attention, I know, a lick of paint and so on.’ Stop trying so hard, she scolded herself, cocking her head, crossing her arms and then, for good measure, her ankles.

‘Thank you, but . . . well, to be perfectly frank, I can see already that this isn’t quite what I’m looking for.’

Charlotte clung to her elbows. ‘Oh dear. Never mind . . .’

‘I’m on my own, you see – that is, I have a daughter and don’t really have time for a house that needs anything doing to it, even a lick of paint. Also, from what the agent said, I’d thought it would be near enough to her school for her to walk. She’s just started at St Leonard’s and I have to get to work and the traffic round here is so bad . . .’

Charlotte pushed herself off the table and held up her hands to forestall the embarrassment of any further apologies or explanations. ‘Please, I know *exactly* where you’re coming from. My son is at St Leonard’s too, and I can tell you the school run is a pig from here – not as the crow flies, of course, which is where the A–Z can be so deceiving but with three main roads to get across . . .’ She shook her head in a show of ruefulness. ‘If that’s a priority then you would, in all honesty, be mad to buy this house. In fact, leave now,’ she joked, pointing towards the door. ‘I command it.’

‘Er . . . right.’ He offered her a doubtful smile and backed into the hall.

‘I’m on my own too,’ Charlotte found herself saying, as she trotted after him. ‘Wasn’t the plan . . . but life has a knack of not turning out quite as one expects, doesn’t it?’

You sort of look back at where you started, then at where you've arrived and think, *Yikes*, how did *that* happen? Like examining the lives of two quite unrelated people or –' She stopped at last, halted by the pained expression on his face and the speed with which he was doing up the buttons of his smart charcoal grey overcoat.

'Well, thank you, Mrs Turner. I'm most sorry to have put you to the inconvenience – you might tell your agents to be a little clearer about the details next time.'

'Yes. Absolutely. Of course. Goodbye then, Mr . . . er . . . ?' Charlotte could feel her cheeks burning. She had forgotten how to *be*, she reflected helplessly. These days, words and responses seemed to ricochet out of her of their own accord. She didn't miss Martin – how could she miss the source of so much unhappiness? – but was increasingly aware that having a husband, no matter how unsatisfactory, had provided some sort of essential *ballast* to her personality. Without it she was freer but also, still, until she got properly used to it, somewhat unbalanced, rootless.

'Porter. Like the beer.'

'Pardon?' Charlotte reached across him to release the catch on the front door.

'My name is Porter,' he repeated frostily, leaning out of her way. 'It's an old word for beer.'

'Is it? Right . . . Mr Porter, of course, I remember now . . . Oh, I say . . . wow . . .' she exclaimed, momentarily forgetting her embarrassment as he pulled a scarlet woollen pom-pom hat from his overcoat pocket and pulled it low over his forehead and ears. The general impression was not flattering. 'That's quite a hat.'

'Rose – my daughter – gave it to me for Christmas,' he muttered, his sallow face creasing into a flinch of a smile. 'But there's no room for pride when it comes to love, is there?'

‘No, indeed,’ Charlotte murmured, and fell against the wall with a groan of relief after she had closed the door.

The Asian girl – by far the prettiest of Tim Croft’s minions, with a silky curtain of jet black hair and large feline eyes – had a vase of roses parked next to her computer, twelve blood-red beauties with thick green stems and thorns as sharp as knives. Seeing them and the girl’s glow of happiness, Charlotte experienced a moment of wonderment that anyone could ever be so naïve as to take any aspect of giving and receiving Valentines seriously. Just you wait, she wanted to say. Just you wait and see where those roses can lead.

Tim Croft, warmly effusive as always, swept her into his office, poured her a cup of coffee and put on a good show of concern at her account of the viewing with Mr Porter. ‘Not the easiest customer,’ he had said, rubbing the neat semicircle of a beard that ran along his jaw-line. ‘The wife died apparently. Ovarian cancer – caught very late. Diagnosis to death in three weeks.’ He clicked his fingers.

‘*Died.*’ Charlotte clapped both hands to her mouth. ‘I assumed, when he said he was on his own . . .’

‘Tragic, of course, but there we are.’ Tim cleared his throat twice in succession. ‘The good news is I’ve had a call this morning from a Mrs Burgess who’s keen for an appointment to view your property next week.’

‘Oh good,’ Charlotte muttered, her mind still locked on to an image of the hapless widowed Mr Porter cringing under the force of her over-familiar chatter about the burdens of life and single parenthood.

Tim Croft’s big-knuckled fingers were flying over the keys of his computer. ‘Shall I offer her Thursday afternoon, say three p.m.? You don’t give Ravens Books your services on a Thursday afternoon, do you?’ he added, his voice softer

and more *knowing*, as if he rather relished the fact that months of failing to sell her house meant he had an intimate knowledge of her weekly routines. ‘Don’t despair, Charlotte,’ he went on jovially. ‘Everybody gets there in the end.’

Where? Charlotte wondered, nodding and smiling as she pushed away her coffee cup. Where did everybody get to? And how did they know when they had got there? ‘Thursday, three p.m., Mrs Burgess. Thanks, Tim. And I’ve been thinking about the asking price – perhaps I could take a bit off, but not too much or I won’t be able to afford to move. Things are *so* expensive by the park.’ She blinked at him, feeling suddenly in the mood for one of his boosting monologues about the market and things going up and down and possibly even repeating the stuff about getting there in the end.

‘Aha.’ Tim, never one to disappoint, patted the side of his nose. ‘I’ve had word, unofficially, that there’s something within your range on Chalkdown Road. A stone’s throw from the park, not in the toast-rack – it could be just what you’re looking for. The vendors have been advertising privately but I’m going to see what I can do.’

‘Wonderful, that sounds really promising. Thanks, Tim. Do keep me posted, won’t you?’ On her feet, ready to leave, Charlotte held out her hand, which Tim shook, but then, to her puzzlement, did not immediately release.

‘Charlotte, I was wondering . . . forgive me if . . .’

He had lowered his voice so much that she had lean across the desk to hear.

‘Only I just thought . . .’ he glanced warily in the direction of his colleagues . . . ‘it might be nice to . . . meet up . . . for a drink or something. Not tonight, obviously – I’m sure you’re busy tonight, of all nights – but perhaps next week some time, or the one after that?’

‘A drink?’ Charlotte whispered, casting a wary glance over her own shoulder as she eased her hand free. ‘A *drink?*’

Tim laughed, tugging nervously at the point of his chin where the hairs were longest. ‘Yes, you know, traditionally presented in a glass . . . sometimes with the accompaniment of food.’

‘Oh, my goodness . . .’

‘Not tonight, obviously,’ he repeated, patting the springy top of his wiry brown hair and gazing out of his office window, as if considering the logistical possibilities of diving over the filing cabinet and hurling himself through the pane.

The answer had to be no, of course. The man was her estate agent. While having vowed to girlfriends that, when ready, she would play the field with gusto – have some fun after all the years of discontent – it had never occurred to Charlotte to imagine the solidly built, square-faced Tim Croft as a target. He had a beard. She didn’t like beards.

But it had been a Valentines Day with no cards, she reminded herself, and she had her decree nisi safely stowed in the bulging beige file labelled *Divorce*, and maybe the still elusive urge to launch herself into the alien business of having a good time required a bit of a kick-start. And then there was the inescapable fact of feeling sorry for Tim – desperately sorry, with all the twitchy looks out of the window, the terror of rejection flashing like a red light. So, while still thinking, *No*, Charlotte muttered instead that she was out of practice with baby-sitters and that this might prove a problem since Sam, at twelve, still needed considerable supervision through the travails of homework, supper and being persuaded into bed.

‘My neighbour’s sixteen-year-old is always up for baby-sitting jobs,’ Tim gushed, forgetting to keep his voice down and eliciting a raised eyebrow from the Asian girl. ‘She’s

called Jessica,' he continued, with a little less exuberance, 'mad about children. I could give her a call. How about eight o'clock next Wednesday? Just to talk houses, if you like, over a drink instead of this filthy coffee.' He grinned, tugging his chin again, his eyes pleading.

Charlotte agreed, then spent the rest of the afternoon regretting it. By the time the tall black gates of St Leonard's came into view, pointing like a line of gleaming black weaponry towards the washed-out February sky, she had hatched and abandoned several elaborate pretexts to cancel. It was almost a relief to have the usual hunt for a parking space – scouring for gaps between driveways and double yellow lines – to distract her. By the time she found one the sun was already a sinking silver disc – more of a moon than a star. Watching it from the warm cocoon of the Volkswagen, aware of a subtle slide in her spirits, Charlotte hurriedly switched off the engine and stepped out into the raw chill of the afternoon.

'You can't park there. Your bumper's right over the end of my drive.'

'Is it?' Charlotte looked over the shoulder of her accuser, a jowly-faced man in a beret, seeing nothing but the unwashed hump of the Volkswagen. 'But I thought I –'

'There's a white line,' snarled the man, flecks of spittle gathering in the corners of his mouth. 'There's a white line and you've crossed it.'

Down the street a crowd of parents had now gathered in front of the gates. Charlotte could see Theresa in her funny hat with the ear-flaps talking animatedly to Naomi, whose twin three-year-old boys were tugging at her arms. 'I'm only collecting my son, I won't be a moment.' She cast the man an imploring look, hoping that his obviously advanced age might make him more likely to succumb to the dubious

faded charms of a pallid thirty-nine-year-old with violet smudges under her eyes and messy auburn hair, which had begun the day as a bun but was now bursting out as a makeshift ponytail.

‘If you don’t move, I’m phoning the police. We’re fed up with it, I tell you, *fed up*. Every bloody day it’s the same. Useless bloody women parking your huge bloody vehicles across our driveways . . .’ He paused, perhaps at the realization that the Volkswagen did not match this insult, or perhaps because tears were pouring down Charlotte’s face.

Appalled by herself, swiping furiously at her cheeks, Charlotte ducked away and stabbed blindly at the door with the car key.

‘Five minutes, then,’ the man snapped, backing off and shaking his head. ‘And I’d better not find you here tomorrow.’

Sam was easy to spot – face masked behind his flopping shock of white-blond hair, shoelaces and shirt tail trailing, his rucksack bumping along the Tarmac like a recalcitrant pet on a lead. Several classmates were horsing round alongside, towering above him as they all seemed to now, their pubescent bodies ripe and thick for manhood. Sam, with his waif-like smallness and stick-thin arms and legs, cruelly in evidence thanks to a wayward decision that morning to wear shorts, seemed more closely related to the skinniest of the girls.

‘Sam!’ Charlotte hurried towards the gates, blinking away the ridiculous tears. He hung back, inspecting something on the sole of his shoe while George, unmistakably Theresa’s son with his thick dark curls and round ruddy-cheeked face, bowled out of the group for brief but enthusiastic entrapment in his mother’s arms.

‘Mah-jong, my place, a week next Thursday,’ yelled

Theresa, dodging the lollipop lady as they set off towards the mud-spattered Volvo on the opposite side of the road, where the bobbing, pig-tailed head of her youngest was visible through the passenger window.

‘I don’t know how she does it,’ said Naomi, strolling over with the twins, who were now hanging from their sister Pattie – she had been in the same class as Sam since nursery school but now turned up her nose at play dates with boys in favour of closed-door consultations with girlfriends. ‘Four children, four schools. The woman’s mad.’ Charlotte nodded and smiled at this well-worn line of commentary. They admired Theresa – organized, cheerful, self-deprecating, with a high-powered medical consultant of a husband who was often away presenting papers at important conferences. She would claim she wasn’t coping but managed to cope superbly all the same. With the friendships between their children wavering, it had been Theresa’s idea that the mums should keep seeing each other anyway over games of mah-jong (she had no time to read a book a month, she said, and abhorred bridge). Sporadic, enjoyable, the sessions had started at about the same time as Charlotte’s marriage had entered its death throes, and proved nothing short of a lifeline. The warmth of her friends’ support had been like oxygen, giving her the strength to plunge back into the awful disintegration going on at home.

‘I thought Theresa had decorators in,’ remarked Naomi, making a desultory attempt to pull the twins off their sister.

‘She does, but they’ll be gone by then.’

‘Leave Pattie *alone*,’ Naomi shouted, in a gunfire explosion of impatience that had the desired effect, before turning back to Charlotte and saying, in the mildest voice, ‘Jo’s asked me to pick up Ellie because the au pair’s sick. Have you seen her?’

Charlotte scanned the thinning group of children. Josephine Burrows, a marketing executive with three children and a history of problematic home-help, made up the fourth of their close-knit group. Ellie was her youngest; two elder brothers got themselves to and from a school in Wimbledon by bus. ‘Hey, that’s her there, isn’t it? On that wall, reading.’

‘*Reading*. Do you hear that, Pattie, she’s *reading*, without being asked.’ Naomi glared at her daughter, before switching her attention back to Charlotte. ‘Hey, are you all right?’

‘Yes, fine, absolutely fine.’

Naomi cast her a quizzical look. ‘Martin hasn’t been renegotiating Sam’s weekends again, has he?’

‘No . . . in fact, this morning the decree nisi came through. At last.’ She punched the air.

‘So why the long face?’

‘Oh, I don’t know – hormones possibly, and not selling the house . . . and, just maybe, accepting a *date* with my *estate agent*. I tried to refuse,’ Charlotte wailed, ‘but it came out wrong.’

Naomi was guffawing in a manner endearingly at odds with her petite frame and delicate features. ‘Well, I think that’s great. So long as it’s not the fat old one, but the nice youngish one with short hair and he’s not married.’

‘Of course he’s not married,’ Charlotte put in a little sharply. ‘I’m hardly likely to play that game, am I?’

‘Nope, I guess you’re not,’ agreed Naomi, still laughing. ‘And don’t worry about the house – they always sell in the end. Remember it took Graham and me eighteen months to get shot of our first place in Milton Keynes? The market had nose-dived and refused to come up again, but here we are, safe and sound, in sunny Wandsworth. Now, I’d better retrieve Ellie and get this lot home.’ She gestured with

sudden weariness at her twins, who were playing a vicious game of tug-of-war with a pencil case. ‘You said you were going to have a good time, remember?’ she added, perhaps still not convinced by the expression on Charlotte’s face. ‘That you were just going to go with the flow, *enjoy* yourself. It’s been months now and you were so unhappy . . . Do you remember that, Charlotte? How unhappily married you were?’

There was a trace of impatience in her voice; enough for Charlotte to roll her eyes, say, ‘Of course,’ and signal to Sam that it was time to head for the car. She felt impatient with herself too. The turning point she had longed for had arrived that morning and here she was already finding reasons to be blue.

She walked fast but Sam skipped on ahead. There were red patches on the backs of his knees – a flare-up of his babyhood eczema – and a bruise on his calf. Charlotte hurried to catch him up, the self-pity displaced by the much more understandable and familiar sensation of guilt – for what she and Martin had put him through, for knowing only too well what it felt like to be the child of a cheating dad. ‘You okay, love?’

‘Yep.’

‘I thought maybe a coke and a slice of chocolate cake at that nice café.’

It was a cheap ploy, Charlotte knew, but like many of the simplest stratagems it worked. The past could not be controlled – what was done was done – but the future, she reminded herself, was now more within her power than ever.

Sam’s face lit up as she had guessed it would – a treat in recent weeks and beautiful to behold, like curtains parting on daylight. ‘Let’s dump your bag in the car and walk. Or

maybe run,' Charlotte cried, taking off down the street the moment the car door was closed, knowing he would overtake her in seconds, loving it that she could still astonish him.

Chapter Two

There is a workshop – always – wherever we live; a dusky, woody-smelling room lined with shelves of small, sagging boxes, each containing different-sized nails, bolts and screws. Hanging along the wall above the workbench are hammers, screwdrivers and spanners, arranged in graduated order of size, the smallest so appealing that I long – as with the smallest of my beloved babushka dolls – to fold it tightly in my palm. Sometimes – the scenes merge – my father lets me sit on his lap to help tighten a piece of wood in the vice. I use both hands to work the heavy handle, then watch the tightening clench of the metal jaws as he finishes the job. Like teeth, he says, a monster’s teeth; and he presses his mouth to my neck and I squirm and squeal with that afraid-pleasure that comes so easily to a child.

The following Wednesday afternoon Sam ate tea with more than his usual methodical reluctance, cradling the side of his head on one hand and using his fork to spear too-large pieces of chicken and solitary slices of carrot and potato into a barely open mouth. Charlotte sat next to him with a mug of tea, resisting the urge to reprimand. They had already had a scuffle about not being able to eat in front of the television, which she had managed – within a hair’s breadth of caving in – to win.

‘I won’t be out for long. A nice girl called Jessica is coming to baby-sit. Are you okay with that?’

Sam placed a shred of carrot in his mouth and chewed slowly. ‘Whatever.’

‘Dad phoned. I’m dropping you there straight after school

on Friday as Cindy has the afternoon off. He said they might take you to the cinema. That will be nice, won't it?'

'I guess.'

'School all right?'

He raised his head to look at her, his pale blue eyes flashing with scorn behind the straggle of his hair. 'School sucks.'

'Miss Hornby said you're doing much better this term, that you –'

'Miss Hornby is a spastic.'

'That's a horrible word, Sam. You're not to use it about anyone.'

He dropped his fork on to his empty plate and pushed back his chair. 'Can I watch telly now?'

'Don't you want a pudding – yoghurt or maybe a biscuit?'

He shook his head, sticking out his chin, reminding her momentarily – vividly – of Martin.

'How about a yoghurt *and* a biscuit *while* watching telly?'

Sam knitted his eyebrows together, fighting her kindness, the softness of her voice, holding out. 'Can I play on the computer?'

Charlotte drummed her fingers on the table, pretending to think. 'Yes, but only *after* eating and . . . let me see . . . I think that will require a hug too. A massive, gigantic one that no one else need ever know about.'

Sam shuffled towards her and allowed himself to be held, while Charlotte felt a swell of emotion as strong as the one she had experienced when the doctor first tugged him free of her womb and placed him, tiny and slimy, in her arms. She put her nose into his hair, treating herself to an inhalation of the little-boy mustiness of his skin, feeding the animal need that had begun that day in the hospital, so instantaneous, so all-consuming that she had looked at Martin hovering by

the bed with a sort of wonderment that she could ever, until that moment, have had the remotest knowledge of what it meant to love.

An instant later Sam had wriggled free and was delving into the biscuit jar.

‘Did you have games today?’

‘Nah. Can I take two?’

‘Yes – hey, let’s see that bruise a minute.’

‘What bruise?’

‘There, on your leg, and there’s another by your elbow. Two bruises.’ Charlotte tried to grab his arm, but he snatched it away and skipped out of the kitchen.

An hour later she was welcoming a pimply-faced teenager and Tim Croft into the hall, noting with mixed feelings the effort the estate agent had made on her behalf – his wiry light brown hair, lustrous from washing, his beard freshly trimmed, his large teeth gleaming. In place of the usual work suit there was a tan leather jacket, a black polo-neck jumper and faded blue jeans, tight enough to reveal either a natural athleticism or hard work at the gym.

In fact, he was quite attractive, Charlotte realized, tensing rather than relaxing at the observation as she ushered them into the dining room to meet Sam. Her own ablutions had been limited to a hasty bath, followed by a torturous scanning of her overcrowded wardrobe for an outfit that would appear presentable without communicating any suggestion of a conscious desire to please. Pulling faces at her reflection, feeling, with some disgust, like a teenager who had gone nowhere, learnt nothing, she had settled at last on a staid (too staid) pair of chocolate corduroy trousers and a cream top with mother-of-pearl buttons.

‘We – I – keep the computer in the dining room so I can see if Sam’s eyes are going square, don’t I, darling?’ Charlotte

chattered, trying to strike a tone that would make up for her son's rude growl of a hello. 'I bet you're good with computers, aren't you, Jessica?' she prompted, peering over Sam's shoulder, pleased to see it was dancing dots that were transfixing him, which meant a harmless football game as opposed to something sinister, like a chat room, whatever they looked like. Martin had been in charge of all that – child locks, spam blocks, firewalls and other ungraspable concepts that constituted technological health and safety. The extent of her own abilities, as Sam knew only too well, reached no further than websites and emails.

'I'm not bad,' Jessica replied slowly, exposing heavy rail-track braces that Charlotte suspected might account for the poor girl's evident reluctance to speak.

'Shall I show you round, then?' he offered, fighting fresh doubts about the evening and her selection of the cream top, which she had forgotten had an infuriating habit of riding up to her ribcage.

'Thank you, Mrs Turner.'

'Excellent.' Tim, clearly the happiest by far of their unlikely gathering, slapped his hands together and strode across the room to ask Sam who was playing who and where they stood in the league. Charlotte warmed to him, especially when – getting glimpses during the course of her guided tour with Jessica – she saw the hard time Sam gave him in return, his eyes not leaving the screen, his answers monochrome and monosyllabic. 'The estate agent, he had snorted, when she confessed the identity of her escort. 'What for?' Charlotte had hesitated, stumped by the multitude of possible answers, all inappropriate (because I felt flattered and sorry for him, because since your father left the only male I have spent time with is you, because with the closure I so craved within reach I seem to have been pitched into a

baffling, maddening state of immobility, of back-sliding, of retrospection . . .). ‘*Hab!*’ Sam had spat the word into her silence, making his special gagging face as he bounded up the stairs.

‘Are you ready to go?’ Tim met her and Jessica as they returned to the hall.

‘I think so, unless there’s anything you want to ask me, Jessica?’ Charlotte murmured, smiling encouragingly at the girl, who had chatted very sweetly between having the fridge pointed out to her and receiving instructions about bathtime and bed. ‘He’ll argue about going upstairs, of course. So don’t give in, will you? He can leave his light on if he wants . . . He likes to sleep with it on. Not that I’ll be late –’ Charlotte broke off, flustered with Tim cracking his knuckles and Jessica staring at her feet, both clearly dying to get on with things.

‘I thought we’d get out of town a bit.’

‘Did you?’ Charlotte gripped the buckle on her handbag and looked out of the window, straining to focus beyond the blur of her reflection to the neon lights of bars and shops streaking behind. Tim had escorted her down the street to a sleek two-seater she had never seen parked outside the estate agent’s. It was more like being in a cockpit than a car. Outside, what she could see of the world seemed equally compressed: huddled figures scurrying under the dark March sky, phones pressed to their ears, each absorbed in the tight, complicated package of their own life. *Relax*, she scolded herself. *Go with the flow*. After further doubts and several postponements, her expectations for the date were almost too low for disappointment. Fun, not love – how hard could that be? And if it went wrong she could relay it as hilarious anecdote to her friends; prove to them, and

herself, that she hadn't lost her sense of humour, that the long stint of playing the complaining wronged wife was well and truly past. Charlotte inhaled and exhaled deeply, releasing her grip on her handbag and noticing that the hard edge of the buckle had left a red ridge across her palm. Like a lifeline, she mused, determined not to let the nerves back in, a new, vivid lifeline, pointing who knew where?

Beside her, the padded leather steering-wheel made small swishing sounds as Tim slid it between his palms.

'Don't worry, not too far. We're heading for Kingston. Are you too warm?'

'No . . . I – Well, maybe just a little.' Charlotte shifted her legs away from the island of controls while he pressed various buttons. She could smell his aftershave, a faint but penetrating scent of something citrus. Beneath his earlobe were three long hairs that he had missed with the razor. Every time he changed gear his elbow brushed against hers. The outline of his thigh muscles was surfacing visibly through his trousers as he worked the pedals. 'Look, Tim,' she blurted, 'I think I might have given you the wrong idea – I mean, accepting to come out tonight. I never meant –'

'I know.' He shot her a grin. 'Seriously, it's fine. I made it difficult for you, didn't I? Bulldozed you into accepting. I can be like that, I'm afraid, when I get an idea into my head.'

'The thing is, I only recently . . .'

'Separated? I'd worked that one out a while ago. I'm not long out of a relationship myself,' he added smoothly, swinging off the main road. 'Ten years, you think you've found your soul-mate and then *pfiff*,' he clicked his fingers, 'you're on your own, watering dead pot plants and watching crap on the telly and wondering what the hell happened to your life. You have to do something about it or you go mad.'

'Yes, you do,' Charlotte agreed, liking him so much that

it was all she could do not to confide the going-backwards feeling, haunting her still, every time she had least reason for it.

‘So, I thought, why not have a drink?’ Tim continued. ‘Even with a girl who doesn’t fancy you, even,’ he pressed on, unperturbed by Charlotte’s failure to interrupt, ‘if that girl is a client and every rule in the book warns against mixing business and pleasure. Ah, here we are.’ He braked sharply and turned past a wooden pointing arm carved with the words ‘El Ranchero’. A few moments later they had pulled up in front of two large wooden ostriches guarding a walkway to an empty stretch of decking and a large door. ‘A friend recommended it. One of those Spanish tapas places – nothing heavy, snacks and drinks. Just a bit of fun, eh?’ He leapt out of the car and gallantly opened her door, then jogged ahead to be able to offer the same compliment at the restaurant entrance.

The ostriches were hideous close to, crudely carved and so poorly attached to their moorings that their spindly legs juddered visibly as a gust of wind whipped across the car park. But Tim beckoned her towards the warm, bright interior with the confidence of a hotel doorman, and soon they were settled most comfortably on bar stools in front of chilled white wine and dishes of prawns, ratatouille and fluffy miniature tortillas. They talked easily and at length about houses; prices, streets, deposits, surveys. Tim had several funny stories about difficult clients and collapsing transactions, one in particular involving a milkman and a pet cockerel that made Charlotte laugh so hard she almost fell off the stool. And then, quite suddenly, when she was truly relaxed and off her guard, Tim announced that he had liked her from the start, that from the instant she had walked into his office it had been like a light going on. ‘It’s okay,’

he assured her hastily, patting her hand as she flushed and squirmed, ‘you’ve made it clear how you feel and I understand – I *respect* – that, but . . .’ he lowered his voice ‘. . . even as your friend I would like to know all about you, Charlotte Turner, or at least a *little* more?’ he pleaded, turning the confession into a joke by holding up his thumb and index finger as if indicating a tiny portion of something edible.

Flattered, her instincts softened by wine, at a loss as to what to make of this man with his twists and turns of tone, so *unknown* (so unknowable, as it seemed, after fifteen years of living with the same man), Charlotte countered feebly that there was nothing to tell and what about him? She found herself deciding in the same instant that the beard wasn’t so bad. At least there were no specks of oil or food in it; he had been careful about that, dabbing with a napkin between mouthfuls. He ate daintily, too, for a man, which she liked. Martin had gone into a sort of trance when it came to food, shovelling in forkfuls, incapable of sensible conversation until his hunger was appeased.

‘I asked first.’ He topped up her glass.

‘Okay, let me see.’ She took a sip, and then another. ‘A potted history would be roughly . . . born in Sri Lanka – or Ceylon, as it then was – because my father was into tea, then we moved to Constantia in South Africa –’

‘*Tea* in South Africa?’

‘No, wine by then.’ Charlotte laughed. ‘Okay, I’ll leave it there.’

‘No, no,’ he protested. ‘Don’t leave it there. Go on. I want to hear more.’ He ran his fingers across his lips in a charade of zipping them shut.

‘I was despatched to boarding-school at the tender age of nine. A few years later my parents came back to England for good, to Tunbridge Wells. My mother still lives there.’

We don't get on too well. Er . . . what else? Oh, yes, my father died when I was eighteen. I had just started at Durham University. That's where I met my husband. We had Sam, moved to London, separated last year, divorced this – I hope.' Charlotte picked up her glass and put it down again, twiddling the stem and smiling shyly. 'I think that's about it. A simple thing, a life, isn't it? The bare essentials, I mean.'

'Oh, yes, so simple,' Tim agreed, although his attention had long since drifted from the substance of the conversation. He liked the way she had left the top three buttons on her cardigan undone, drawing the eye – deliberately, he was sure – to the modest swell of her breasts. They looked in pretty good shape, too, given that she had had a kid and had to be pretty close to forty. Through the thin cream wool of the top he could just make out the edging of her bra. Or maybe it was a camisole, a piece of pretty silk with a lacy trim. And her mouth was enticing, having the natural cherry redness that so often went with auburn colouring. In his view it was even more irresistible now that the lipstick had worn off.

It was wrong, Tim knew, to let such thoughts in. He had said he understood how she felt, so he should stick to that, play out the charade of wanting friendship. Talking was so important to women, sharing feelings and so on. Phoebe had rammed that home often enough, ticking him off for not listening to her, for having feelings that were either insufficient or never about the right things.

'What about you?'

'Pardon?'

'Your potted history.'

She was leaning on the bar and turned towards him to await the answer, resting her left cheek in the palm of her left hand, her sharp green eyes properly alive at last. A

moment before, she had run her fingers through her hair, raking it off her face and letting it fall in two silky sweeps across her ears. Tim suddenly remembered reading somewhere – in one of his men’s magazines probably, brought out of hiding since Phoebe’s departure – that such preening by a female denoted genuine physical interest. Body language was everything, the article had said. Undisguisable, it proved that behind the elegant structures of our sentences – the so-called *communication* that Phoebe had been so keen on and eventually abandoned – humans were no more advanced than the rest of the animal kingdom. Love, hate, hope, fear, desire – none of it needed any words. It was all there in eyes, hands, elbows and legs. You just needed to know how to look for it. Inspired, Tim mirrored her position – elbow on the bar, head resting on his hand. Making eye contact, holding it as he moved closer, he delivered the less than inspiring pronouncement that his father had been an electrician and then, with great speed and, he hoped, gentleness, lowered his mouth on to hers.

After rain the grass sings. I listen, standing in the shade of the jackfruit tree, its great emerald leaves dripping. Above me one of the fat knobbly green fruits dangles, heavy with moisture, big enough to kill, my father says, should it land on my head. I look up, studying its gnarled features – like an old man’s face – wondering what it would feel like to die, or whether it would be like sleep, which you couldn’t feel. I am supposed to be asleep now. It is after-lunch time when the heat sits like a pillow on your face and the strays lounge in scraps of shade, snapping at flies. My mother thinks I’m lying on my bed under the whirl of the ceiling fan, the amah nodding in the wicker chair, my lunch settling. She is meeting someone, a someone with a girl my age whom I was supposed to meet, too, but who is unwell.

I cross the grass, my bare feet sinking into its new softness, leaving

prints that do not last. I look through the hole in the fence and see the gardener curled in a Z-shape next to his tools, the white-pink soles of his feet towards me, his thin black legs like dusty sticks. Around him, half over him, the bougainvillea and frangipani explode like the fireworks on the Queen of England's birthday. I am bored, the thrill of disobedience quite gone. I think of my mother's friend's sick child and wonder if she is nice. I wonder whether she has lovely dolls with elaborate clothes like my playmate Freya, who has gone back to England. I want to be in England too, near the Queen who has such grand birthdays, near Freya and her toys and her mother's homemade scones.

My skin prickles in the heat. My hair is wet on my neck. Through the hole the gardener stretches, raises his head and looks towards me as if he can see through the wood. I scamper back across the grass. The door of the workshop is ajar and I slip through the opening, one leg first, then my head and shoulders. It is almost as good as diving into the sea from the jetty – the plunge of my hotness into the wet cold. But then something snags. I pull but I am caught. I can hear the gardener approaching the fence. I can feel his eyeball boring through the hole, rolling in its socket, looking for trouble. He will find my amah and tell on me. He likes her. They sit on the back step sometimes sharing the juice of a king coconut, sucking at two straws, their lips close. I pull harder and hear the rip of cotton. Looking down I see that a rusty nail has gashed my shorts – my favourite gingham shorts. The front panel hangs open; the torn edges are frayed and brown, like a wound.

I want to cry but I don't want to be found. Inside the darkness of the workshop it is like being stroked by cool fingertips. It is soothing to be stroked. My amah does it sometimes when I cannot sleep, running the backs of her roughened nails up and down my legs and arms, humming one of her funny songs that have no tune.

I step towards the worktop where the vice gleams in the dim light. I am taller now and can reach the tools pinned along the back. Knowing they are within my grasp makes the urge to touch them less strong.

Even the tiniest screwdriver, with its neat tip and little wooden handle, looks ordinary. I sigh, sensing something lost as I turn back towards the room.

It is only then that I see them. I see the whites of her eyes first, huge in her black face. She makes no sound as she presses her lips to my father's ear. I see the back of his head, the hair curling up from his shirt collar. He is on top of her, on the rush matting next to the dolls' house whose roof came loose and which he has promised to fix. He is on top of her and moving. His trousers are round his ankles, his shirt tails trail over his backside and thighs. The moment holds, endless. I know what they are doing. I know because Freya has told me, giggling as she points up under the skirts of her dolls.

The eyes are wider, whiter. As her lips leave his ear he stops moving and turns his head towards me. But I am already running, out of the shed, my gashed shorts flapping. I race back across the grass, past the butterfly petals of the flowers, past the hole in the fence. The whip of the sun stings my head. The ground, dry now, is silent and hard, yet I feel as if I am running through air, upside-down, weightless, lost.

Jessica had been surprisingly nice. She had let him stay up late and told him about trying to eat only fruit for ten days straight and a boy named Darren who never called. It had reminded Sam that once upon a time, before the new silliness at school about who liked whom and how much, he had got along pretty well with girls. Once upon a time, even longer ago, he had actually quite fancied having a kid sister. George had one called Matilda with puce cheeks and knotty hair who would fetch and carry for him like a slave. On one occasion she had eaten Airfix glue because George asked her to, and then not told on him, not even when George's mum – a terrifying spectacle, eyes popping, her face livid – had screeched about dying and stomach pumps.

It had occurred back in the days when George still invited

him to tea. Sam had witnessed the episode in awe, both on account of the display of sibling loyalty (to have such an *ally!*) and the shouting – not just by George’s mum but by George himself and his little sister and the brothers, joining in for good measure. And then, suddenly, like a storm passing, or a language everyone but him understood, there had been rounds of hugging and quietness and toasted muffins. Returning to his own household, Sam had felt more acutely than ever the *not* talking going on between his parents – his father shaking the newspaper like a shield, his mother laying knives and forks with fierce, terrifying precision; it was like white noise, constant, invisible, deafening.

Hearing an echo of it now, in the dark of his bedroom, Sam switched on his light. He had a favourite *Astérix* book that lived under the bed for emergencies, but for some reason he wasn’t in the mood. He stretched instead, to his very fullest, pointing his toes and fingertips in the hope that it might have some permanent effect on his length. His body was invisibly diseased, he was sure of it. Each night for weeks now he had been measuring himself against the babyish wall-hanging of a tape-measure that lived behind his bedroom door (a giraffe with a grinning mouth and a lolling tongue; it had occupied that spot ever since he could remember) and each night there was no change. After his nice time with Jessica Sam had felt especially hopeful, especially *tall*. He hadn’t even tried to cheat as he usually did, but had pressed his palm lightly on the flat of his head and kept it steady while he performed the contortion necessary to get a reading. And yet it had been the measly five feet two it always was, just by the tip of the giraffe’s big black nose.

Staring at the stupid creature now, feeling it was staring at *him*, Sam experienced such a wave of loathing that he scabbled in his bedside drawer, among penknives, flints

and other treasures, for his darts. Balancing on the mattress, he hurled all three across the room in turn, pinning the giraffe's silly cartoon face to the wall. His mother would tell him off, of course – *holes* in the *wall* when they were *selling* the *house*. Sam mimicked her under his breath as he bounced back under his duvet. He didn't want to move house anyway, and she was the one who had got his hopes up about growing – *any minute now*, she always promised, *any minute now*, saying what was nice, as per usual, instead of what was actually true, so you couldn't trust any of it, not really.

Sam was almost asleep when he heard a car pull up in the street outside. Ducking up under the curtains, he couldn't help thinking how cool the estate agent's long red sports car looked next to their silly old Volkswagen. To console himself he thought of his dad's BMW and Cindy's Saab, both black, both convertible. The cars sat on the hard standing outside their new home, gleaming, sleek, like two members of the same family. They had matching bikes as well, and all the gear to go with them – helmets, pumps, Lycra T-shirts and shorts. Recently they had given Sam a bike too, as an early birthday present, his dad had said, so they could go on expeditions together. They hadn't done that yet, but he had been out with Cindy a couple of times, along the walkway next to the river, which had been sort of fun but also weird, like they were playing at having a good time instead of really having one.

Half on the window-sill now, his knees aching with cold, Sam waited, wondering why his mother wasn't getting out. He opened the curtain wider, craning his neck to get a better look, wishing he had Superman's laser eyes so he could bore through the roof. Then, suddenly, the passenger door swung open and there she was, looking as she always did in her old black overcoat.

Sam slid back under the bedcovers, pulling them up to his chin. She would come up, surely. She would because she always did. She always had, even during the worst times, after shouting and door-slamming when not even the dark could hide the puffiness in her eyes and he knew that the slightly salty taste of her kiss was from crying.

And yet now those same lips might have touched the hair-framed mouth of the estate agent . . . during that time in the car, those long minutes. Sam exhaled slowly, closing his teeth round the cotton fringe of the duvet cover. When the landing creaked, he rolled on to his side, burying his face in the pillow. He couldn't control anything, he realized, good or bad. The mattress tipped as she sat down. Sam didn't move, not even when he felt her mouth brush the crown of his head, soothing the exact spot that had failed to outgrow the giraffe.