



September

Back in England an Indian summer lay in wait, each day a hot, sultry package encased in the freshness of dawn and dusk. Unattended for four weeks and fed by rain, the garden at Ashley House had swelled to the point where the house itself seemed to be sinking among the tidal waves of verdure and colour that surrounded it. Butterflies and insects bobbed lazily at the full fat flowers, splayed among the beds and bushes like the basking populace of a crowded beach, all heedless of the shortening days and the occasional tugging breeze that warned of change.

Serena, tracing the particularly busy traffic of bees to a crack in the lintel above the front door, thought of calling Sid, or a pest-control company from the *Yellow Pages* but didn't have the heart. The weather would turn eventually and the bees would die. They were living on borrowed time, on borrowed hope, clinging to the coat-tails of summer, just as she, Charlie and Ed were clinging to the feel-good shreds of the holiday and the new, desperate hope about the paternity test. Change, and reaction to it, would be forced upon them all soon enough. She only wished she knew where it would lead. The natural world might have its patterns, its enviable seasonal grand design, but she was losing faith in the notion that the existence of humans could relate to anything so comfortably certain.

As she turned towards the garden, Serena experienced a reflex of pleasure at the sight of it, so gloriously abandoned and rampant, so oblivious to its own imminent demise. At least all her loved ones were in good health, she reminded herself, and if Helen's God existed, He would surely see to it that the paternity test proved negative. Then, with time, she and Charlie could emerge from the separate corners into which Ed's crisis had propelled them and start to talk – to love – properly again. The terrible said things would be forgotten. The

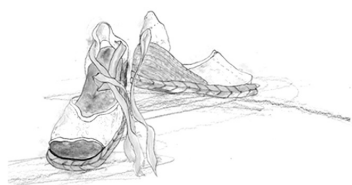


future would beckon, as it once had, so effortlessly.

And if the test was positive? Ed had been so certain, after all, so unquestioning of his culpability. Serena moved closer to the flowerbeds, humming to herself, aware that the prospect of an even so clumsily conceived grandchild still filled her with a sort of excitement. A dreadful thing, maybe, which Charlie had every right to distrust, but as solid and undeniable as the old walls of the house towering over her, soaking up the sunshine. She began to hum louder, picking flowers now, even those that were too full-blown to last more than a couple of days, dipping her hands carefully among the insects to preclude the possibility of being stung.

In London Cassie was waiting for the arrival of her period and the state of clear-headedness that she was sure would accompany it. As the heat ballooned and retreated with its new diurnal rhythm, she felt as if the world and the weather had stopped moving, suspending her in some timeless limbo in which there was no sense of where she had come from or where she might be heading. She sought refuge instead in the immediate demands of each day, working hard, a wary eye over her shoulder as she moved between appointments, and overseeing wedding preparations in the evening. While Stephen ploughed through the pile of invitations, complaining merrily about his aching fingers and the taste of the envelope glue, she sewed the finishing touches to Sylvie's bridesmaid dresses herself, closing her mind to everything but the challenge of attaching a lace trim to a velvet yoke, forcing the squeaking, reluctant needle through and out again, gripping ever tighter as her hot fingers slipped on the metal.

In a hotel bedroom near the Aldwych Peter, too, was learning to lose himself to the precious ticking of the present. The world of his family, his work, his guilt, his brother's troubles remained outside, in a parallel universe. When Delia had tried to talk of Julian and Maisie, in regular phone contact, apparently, since the family's return, he hushed her with a kiss. 'Not now,' he said. 'Now there is only us.' When, complaining of the heat, she tried to open a window, he prevented that too, not wanting even the toot of a horn to remind him of any reality other than the one at hand. 'You are the love of my life,' he said. 'Let me enjoy this little piece of you.' She tugged at the curtains but he pulled them back again. 'I want to see you . . . all of you.' She laughed and said he was impossible, while he peeled off first her clothes and then his own, touching and kissing her with precisely the reverence she sought,



which kept her hungering for lovers as well as a husband. In the heat their bodies slid against each other making unseemly noises and moving in ungainly ways, watched only by the glaring eye of the sun and a pigeon, which landed briefly on the windowsill before taking off in search of shade.

A few miles south Nathan Chalmer peered out of the window of his studio flat until Clem had emerged safely on to the pavement below. By the time she looked up he had already stepped out of sight, nearer the whirring blades of a recently purchased fan, which moved the air but did not cool it. Nathan sighed and ran his hands over his face. He had seen the sadness lurking in the child's expression and known that it was because of him. He liked his subjects to fall a little in love with him, and he with them. He knew how to do it too, how to open them up so that their vulnerability, their *essence* could find its way on to the tip of his pencil. With Clem it had been more intense than usual, so intense, indeed, that he had been half tempted to cross the line. Even that day, recognizing the care with which she had dressed, the thin white cotton T-shirt (no bra), the flimsy silk skirt, all showing off to him the alluring, toffee glow of her Italian tan, he had toyed with the idea of pursuing the seduction for which she so clearly yearned. It hadn't helped that she had been full of breathless, endearing talk, spilling the ups and downs of her holiday – the appearance of her beloved twin sister, the uncle's promise about her manuscript, her cousin's film script, the paternity test for her hapless brother. Listening to it all, Nathan had come closer than he cared to admit to scooping her up in his arms and feasting on the sheer energy of her, so young and pretty, a bud half burst.

But he had feasted enough, he knew: Clem's fragility and strength, that poised state between girlishness and womanhood, shone out of his finished painting, making it alive and good. He had a new subject now, Nathan reminded himself, a petite chocolate-skinned girl with full lips and enormous slanted brown eyes. He had found her on the tube, little cream headphones nestling in her ears, her beautiful mouth silently shaping the words of the tunes.

Nathan returned to the window to check on Clem's progress. She had stopped on the corner of the street and was talking animatedly into her phone. He hoped she was telling the cousin about his offer. He watched, pleased that he had given her something to take away, after all. And it hadn't been out of charity either: the boy could paint, that was plain. Although the product was still raw and untamed, talent blazed from every stroke. And where would he have been, Nathan mused, without his own first chance to exhibit? He'd have to



swing it with his agent, of course, but that wouldn't be hard, not these days, with the prices he could command.

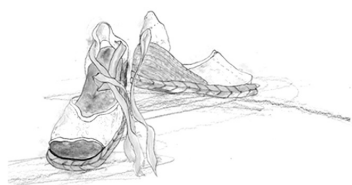
Clem had been so delighted that he thought for a moment she might bust out of her delicious shyness and kiss him. But an instant later she was grave-faced, eliciting a promise that her portrait wouldn't be exhibited at the same time. Nathan, not liking the demand, had prevaricated, muttering that the exhibition wasn't until December and she might have changed her mind by then. But Clem was adamant. Only her sister knew she had posed nude and she wanted to keep it that way. Her family had had a tough year and she didn't want to round it off by giving them any further shocks. When still he hesitated she threatened, with a cheek that astonished him, to walk away with Roland's paintings and forget the whole deal.

'You could be walking away with his future under your arm,' Nathan had pointed out, laughing.

'Well, it's my future too and I want to be in control of it,' she snapped, so strong and grown-up, so unlike the starving waitress he had first propositioned, that he had held up his hands in surrender.

Clem waited at the bus stop for a few minutes, enjoying the sight of everybody dawdling on doorsteps and the heat pulsing up from the pavement, caressing her bare legs. She was thrilled with herself about Roland. The most she had expected of Nathan was a few comments, or maybe, at very best, a suggestion that he meet her cousin to talk stuff through. But to offer to hang Roland's two weird swirling oil paintings in one of his own exhibitions had never entered her wildest imaginings – or Roland's, from the sound of the unRoland-like shriek that had pierced her ear on the telephone.

As a bus lumbered into sight Clem turned her back on it and began to walk, in no mood to be cooped up among the crush of body smells and people with desperate expressions on their faces. Sadness was seeping back into her, riding in on the knowledge that she had probably seen Nathan Chalmer for the last time. He had asked for Roland's address, so he could send details about the exhibition, he said, and also arrange to have the pictures returned to him afterwards. Clem jotted it down for him on a piece of paper, aware of the gentle rejection the request entailed. 'You were great, Clementine Harrison,' he said, when she had finished. Waiting with her for the lift to arrive, he had repeated the compliment, planting a fatherly kiss on the top of her head. 'You *are* great, never forget that.'



Clem took a detour into a park and sat on a bench, telling herself to have a little cry, if she wanted to, to get it out of her system. But then she spotted a kiosk and bought herself an ice cream instead, a plain orange one that melted almost faster than she could eat it. She wasn't *that* sad, she decided, licking her fingers afterwards. He was so *old*, after all, the whole thing would have been totally weird; not exactly the sort of boyfriend one would want to shout about, even if he was as famous as her uncle had suggested.

Clem left the bench and began to walk with more purpose towards the street. She was getting used to the situation already, she mused, just like she got used to almost anything with time. Like the Ed and Jessica fiasco, the whole notion of her brother fathering a baby. Back at Ashley House for a brief spell after the holiday, she and Maisie had even had a giggling conversation about names and whether, if there was a christening, they would want to attend. 'We could cut off the hems of our bridesmaid dresses and wear those,' Maisie had shrieked, leaping in front of her bedroom mirror to perform her best rendition of a simpering aunt. Clem had laughed till her eyes streamed, squawking admonitions but loving every moment, loving how they understood one another.

Maisie was coming to supper that night with her new boyfriend. Clem had phoned her mother to ask how to cook *coq au vin*. She had a list in her pocket of what to buy and how long to fry the meat and onions. And the bacon, too, she mustn't forget that. And garlic. Two cloves at least, her mother had said, clearly delighted to have been consulted. They had had a lovely talk, Clem disclosing that she had packed in the wine bar and applied for a couple of jobs on the Internet – one as a junior press officer for Southwark borough council and the other as a publicity assistant in a small publishing house. Serena had sounded so pleased, so *interested*, that Clem had almost told her about her manuscript. Then she had pictured it sitting in a dusty, untouched pile on Stephen's editor's desk and switched to the subject of her and Maisie's bridesmaid dresses instead. Her aunt was planning a final fitting for them at Ashley House the following month before Maisie started at Bristol, the idea being that the dresses could be stowed there afterwards, ready for the big day. They were worried, Clem confided to her mother because, since giving their measurements, she had put on weight and Maisie had lost some. Serena had laughed – a wild, exultant laugh which, Clem knew, was because she had managed to talk, like it was no big deal, about having got a bit fatter. Cassie was a wizard with a needle, Serena had assured her happily, and Granny too. Hems and seams could be altered. It didn't matter a jot.

Clem had saved inquiries about her brother till last, fearful that so dark a subject might



somehow shatter this new ability to report and share things about her life without the sense that they were being offered up for parental approval. But Serena had been upbeat about Ed, too. After initial resistance Jessica had co-operated with the test and the result was due any day, she said. ‘Keep your fingers crossed,’ she added, ‘but I have a good feeling that everything will be fine.’

Back at the flat, Flora and Daisy were busy in their rooms, practising for an evening concert. Clem had shut herself into the kitchen and was studying the heap of half-frozen chicken thighs she had bought at the supermarket when Daisy’s head appeared round the door.

‘Two messages. Can you ring Theo? He wants to shoot your scenes before he goes back to uni and . . .’ She stopped, looking bashful and then hopeful, as Flora appeared beside her.

‘Jonny came round,’ said Flora, stoutly. ‘He wants you to help out with a gig this weekend.’

‘Does he now?’ Clem measured a careful tablespoon of oil into a frying-pan.

‘Well?’ said both her flatmates at once. ‘What are you going to do?’

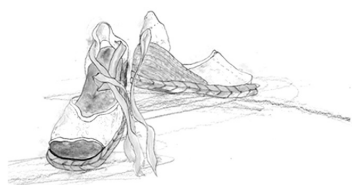
‘I have no idea,’ replied Clem, haughtily.

‘Well, we are cool, aren’t we?’ remarked Flora, folding her arms and giving Daisy a nudge with her elbow. ‘Should we have told him to fuck off?’

Clem took a step back from the frying-pan, which was spitting. ‘I don’t think so. I might do the gig . . .’ She frowned. ‘But only because it would be fun to sing again. So don’t go getting any ideas.’

‘Wouldn’t *dream* of it,’ they chanted, laughing.

‘Oh, bugger off,’ retorted Clem, laughing too. She returned her attention to the preparation of her meal, unaware until she placed the lid on a passably appealing mixture of meat and sauce that she hadn’t thought about Nathan for almost two hours. It was just something that had happened, she mused, something that had kept her going when she needed it and was now going to help Roland. And as for Jonny . . . All she knew was that she wanted to sing, that she felt *ready* to sing, ready to reconnect with the joy that for her was integral to the business of opening her lungs. Life, in its mysterious, complicated way, was getting good again. All that was required to make it perfect was the right result on Ed’s horrible test. Remembering her mother’s words on the phone, Clem crossed her fingers and managed, with considerable difficulty, to keep them that way all through running a bath and getting her clothes off. Flexing them free in the water, she began to sing, so lustily that Daisy



and Flora, tying black velvet ribbons in each other's hair, did a couple of high fives.

Sitting in line with the other interviewees, Keith ran his finger round the inside of his shirt collar, wishing he had picked a seat away from the windows where the glare of the afternoon sun was less intense. On the wall to his left was a poster entitled, *Hull: Regeneration & Vision: A City of the Future*. He had read this and the text underneath it so many times that he could have recited whole sections with his eyes closed.

Hull is fast turning from a hopeless, end-of-the-line town to the youngest, most exciting waterfront city in Europe. 'On a sunny day you could be anywhere in the world,' says Bill Crowley, development manager of Cityscape, Hull's urban regeneration company. Island Wharf, the first phase of the Humber Quays development, has a panoramic view of the Humber. The Fruit Market on the other side of the marina brims with old town charm. The East Bank of the river Hull is being transformed by riverside apartments and lies within walking distance of the city centre, connected by several new foot and cycle bridges. Projects at Albion Square and Quay West will improve shopping and a transport interchange at the £165-million St Stephen's development will be enhanced. Redeveloped residential properties are available at well below the national average while Humber Bridgehead and Willerby Hill offer state-of-the-art leisure facilities. With several luxury hotel developments in progress and a Michelin starred restaurant in the historic old town, Hull is bringing its vision of a new city to life.

Keith wished there was something else to look at, something that bore a closer, less ironic relationship to the tense, brooding atmosphere in the room. One job and a score of candidates. A couple looked older but most were definitely younger than him. All were men and not one seemed nearly as uncomfortable as Keith felt, strapped into the uncanny uniform of a suit and tie. A project manager on a rural housing development – who was he kidding? Worse still, he was only there because Barry had mentioned it to June, who had mentioned it to him. No harm in trying, she had said, having gathered through their snippets of doorstep conversation that Irene wanted him out and he had nowhere to go.

But maybe there was harm in trying, Keith decided now, when failure was so certain, when his inner battery of determination and self-esteem was so close to empty. He glanced nervously at the door to the interview room. Lately, the thought of the kids was about all



that got him off the sofa-bed – that and Irene banging the breakfast things, saying, with each clash of metal and china, ‘*Get out, get a life, FUCK off.*’

The door opened and the young man with the neat blond crew-cut and shiny suit who had entered twenty minutes before bounced out, looking pleased. Keith ran his damp palms up and down his trousers, trying to focus on what he would say, how he could possibly package his years of building-site experience into a convincing presentation of the possibility that he was ready to run a project of his own. He was getting nowhere when the quiet buzz of his phone sounded in his pocket.

‘Keith – it’s Stephen.’

‘Can’t talk now, mate,’ Keith muttered, swivelling towards the blinding heat of the window to avoid being overheard. He had only kept the phone on because there was a faint chance of three tickets to see Hull City play at the new stadium that evening. He’d cleared it with June already, just in case, but instructed her not to get Craig and Neil’s hopes up.

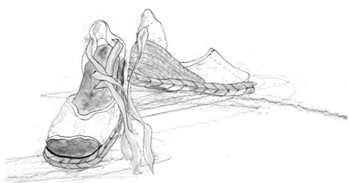
‘It won’t take long, I promise. I’ve got a request.’

‘Not like the last one, I hope,’ growled Keith, their unpleasant conversation of two months before flaring in his mind.

‘No . . . I’m so sorry about that. You were quite right. I felt really bad afterwards. Cassie and I . . . we’re fine now – *great*, in fact. It’s all systems go for the wedding – and that’s why I’m ringing. I’d like you to be my best man. Would you do that for me, Keith, as my oldest friend? There’s no one else who fits the bill.’

‘Blimey, Steve . . . I don’t know.’

Stephen laughed, undeterred. ‘I’ll take that as a yes, shall I? And don’t worry about the speech. Just tell a few of your old jokes, nothing too blue – not that one about the snake-bite anyway – thank the bridesmaids, usual stuff.’ He talked on, irrepressible, ebullient, almost manically so, Keith decided afterwards, as he reflected with deepening gloom on the implications of the commitment. It would be huge and grand, morning suits, microphones, marquees. But I would see Elizabeth, he thought suddenly, and stood up as his name was called. Elizabeth and all the rest of them, the old bird, sweet, porcelain-faced Serena, bumbling, cheerful Charlie and their messed-up son . . . Warmth, an entirely pleasant sensation that had nothing to do with the heat of the day, spread through Keith as he stepped into the interview room. How were they all? How would they deal with this bastard grandchild? Who had they got to take his place helping the doddering Sid with replastering damp walls and managing the rebellious glories of the grounds?



Even as he shook the hands of the interviewers – three, in an imposing line behind a long desk – memories of his spring at Ashley House flooded Keith’s mind. Leaving had been the right thing to do, but so hard – one of the hardest things he had ever done. No wonder, then, that his heart should soar at this legitimate, unexpected pretext to return. It would be brief but beautiful, as brief things often were. It would be good to see them all, to squeeze Elizabeth’s hand and tell her that, while not in his life, she remained in his head and would do so until the day he died.

‘Good afternoon, Mr Holmes. Please, sit down.’

Keith sat in the chair opposite the desk and folded his hands in his lap to conceal how they trembled.

‘Perhaps you could begin by telling us why you think your experience makes you suitable for this job?’

‘Hull has a vision for the future and I want to be part of it.’ Keith unlaced his hands and leant towards them, making eye-contact, resting his elbows on his knees. ‘I’ve managed teams on site for twenty years and am ready to take the next step up.’ June was right: there *was* no harm in trying. What else was there to do, after all?

That evening Peter bought flowers from the stall near his chambers, three extravagant bunches, two because they had dinner guests, ‘And one just for you,’ he told Helen, thrusting them into her arms, then running upstairs to shower and change.

‘They’re not due for an hour, you know,’ Helen called after him, then returned to the kitchen to check on the meal, all three courses of which she had prepared the weekend before and pulled out of the deep freeze that morning. She arranged the flowers in vases, placing one on the dining-table in the conservatory, one on the mantelpiece in the sitting room and one on the table in the hall, brushing off the dusting of pollen that fell on to the polished wood as she turned to check her appearance in the mirror. She had had her hair cut and coloured in her lunch hour. In the heat of the afternoon it had lost some of its buoyancy, but still looked almost too good for the dinner, which was merely a pay-back for a couple of sets of neighbours. The Wilsons and the Burridges would talk of mortgages, no doubt, and schools and what everyone was doing for half-term. Helen yawned, bored at the prospect, and decided that with her coiffure on such top form she could get away with her comfy black trousers instead of a dress.

On the way upstairs she glanced in at Genevieve, who was in bed cuddling her favourite



doll and listening to her tape of *The Little Mermaid*, eyes glassy. She popped into Chloë's room too, even though Chloë was on a school outing to the theatre. In her own bedroom, she stepped out of her work clothes and laid them carefully over the back of the chair. Peter was still in the shower, not singing for once. Helen lay on the bed in her bra and pants and closed her eyes. The blast of the shower was soon replaced by the sounds of running taps, brushing teeth and then the buzz of the electric razor, which Peter only ever used for an evening shave. In the mornings he ran a basin of water and indulged in the ritual of a blade and a badger brush, just as John Harrison had and his father before him. Familiar sounds were comforting, Helen mused, too pleasantly cool in her underwear to feel any urgency to get on with the business of dressing. The meal was ready, her makeup was fine; there was, as she had said to Peter, no hurry.

He emerged from the bathroom naked but for a pair of boxers, rubbing the sparse strands of his hair with a hand towel.

Helen patted the bed. 'Come here a minute.'

'Hadn't we better get dressed?'

'We've ages yet.'

'Where are the girls?'

'Genevieve's almost asleep and Chloë's out. *My Fair Lady*, remember?'

'Of course she is.' Peter rubbed again at his hair, even though it was quite dry. He opened the wardrobe and began to rifle through his shirts.

'Peter? Is something the matter?'

'Of course not.' He spun round with an amazed smile. 'Why ever would anything be the matter?'

'Come here, then.' It was Helen's turn to smile, not amazed at all, but full of sweet, obvious intention.

Carefully Peter hung the shirt he had chosen – salmon pink with double cuffs and a button-down collar – back in the wardrobe before moving towards the bed, trying to muster the right facial expression, trying to act the part – to be the thing he had been so effortlessly for twenty-five years. It was Helen, he reminded himself, Helen, his wife, to whom he had made love thousands of times. Helen, who asked for sex so seldom that it would be inexplicably unkind to turn her down and yet towards whom, as she lay there in her familiar faded bra and pants, he could muster nothing more than brotherly affection.

'We haven't done it for ages,' she whispered, stroking his arm as he stretched out next to



her.

‘That’s not true.’

‘Yes, it is. Twice in Umbria and not since we got back.’

‘Well, we’re both so busy and tired,’ Peter muttered, stroking a loose thread of hair off her face.

‘Do you like it? My hair? I had it done today.’

‘Yes, it’s nice . . . very nice.’

‘Not that the Wilsons and the Burridges are worth ninety-five pounds.’

‘Bloody hell! Is that what it cost?’ Peter cried, glad of something to latch on to, some distraction from the sheer awfulness of not desiring her. He *liked* her, God, he liked her – it was impossible not to: she was kind and clever and organized and undemanding and –

‘Mummy – Daddy – is it your bedtime too?’

‘Genevieve, darling . . .’ There was a catch of gratitude in Peter’s voice. ‘Shouldn’t you be asleep?’

Helen, less delighted, told their daughter to go back to bed.

‘*You* come with me,’ replied Genevieve, folding her arms in the manner of someone well beyond her years, someone with all the time in the world to negotiate.

‘I’ll come in a minute,’ insisted Helen, firmly.

‘Can I have a story?’

‘Maybe . . . yes . . . Yes, you can have a story, if you go *now*.’

Peter put his arms round his wife and kissed her tenderly on the lips. ‘She’s awesome, isn’t she?’ he murmured. ‘Just like her mother.’

Helen wriggled upright. ‘You didn’t want to anyway, did you? I could tell, so don’t deny it.’

Peter opened his mouth to attempt a denial, but faltered under the honest inquiry of her gaze. She knew him so well, too bloody well. ‘No, I guess I wasn’t totally . . . er . . . The truth is, there *is* something on my mind.’

‘I knew it,’ Helen snapped, managing to look at once triumphant and hurt.

‘The fact is, this paternity test of Edward’s . . . More is hanging on it than you realize.’

‘Really?’ She sounded insulted now, as if he had accused her of not caring enough about the woeful position of their nephew.

‘If the baby proves to be his,’ explained Peter, in a rush, anxious not to lose her sympathy before he had started, ‘then . . . well . . . Charlie is worried, among other things, about their



financial position, supporting it, education and so on . . . so much so that he has asked me if I would consider taking over Ashley House.'

Helen laughed, astonished and disbelieving. 'For goodness' sake, they're not that broke, are they? And, anyway, it's out of the question, isn't it? Peter, you told him it was out of the question, didn't you?'

'No, I didn't,' admitted Peter, wearily, 'at least, not exactly. You see, there are other considerations too . . . Running the place, he's found it hard. He says he and Serena have not been at all happy there. He seems to think they need a fresh start.'

'Fresh start?' Helen sneered. 'You – we – *gave* them a fresh start. They live in one of the most beautiful houses in southern England, they have *everything* they ever wanted.'

'That's not strictly true, is it? I mean . . .'

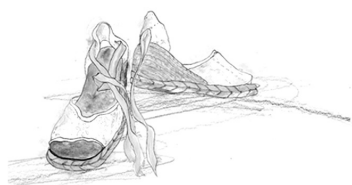
'You mean Tina, which was several years ago and which, if you recall, was one of the reasons you felt moved to hand over the bloody house in the first place.'

'Yes, Tina, but also, what with Mum . . .' Peter ploughed on, thinking bleakly of how contrastingly well Delia had understood and sympathized with the situation, how, in spite of all the difficulties facing them, she, too, had been excited at the notion of his acquiring a *pied-à-terre* in town. 'And now this business with Ed . . .'

'What's that got to do with the *house*?' wailed Helen, getting off the bed and starting to pull on her dress, then remembering her decision about the trousers and taking it off again, messing up her hair in the process. 'The whole thing sounds mad to me, totally mad.' She turned to him, trousers in one hand and hairbrush in the other. 'As you well know, I have never had a strong desire to live in the country. I do not want either to give up my job or to spend fifteen hours a week on a train. In addition, Genevieve has only just settled into her school and Chloë would hate the disruption of leaving hers. Your brother is clearly in a state of utter panic even to have suggested such a thing, which in the circumstances is understandable. What is *not* understandable is that you not only failed to recognize that but have, without telling me, agreed to the whole insane plan.'

'I have not agreed,' protested Peter, weakly, wishing with all his heart that he had undone her bra strap and kept his mouth shut.

'Really? Oh, good! Well, in that case we don't have a problem, do we?' At which point a squeal of 'Mummeee' floated to them from along the corridor. Helen, still glaring, set off to respond to it, but then paused in the doorway, sighing heavily. 'Charlie is all cut up about Ed and looking for things to blame,' she said, sounding much more conciliatory. 'It's clearly



bonkers.’

Peter remained on the bed after she had gone, in despair over his own ineptitude. Of course it was bonkers. Helen was right – she was always fucking right. Hadn’t he been aware, even as he responded to Charlie’s initial cry for help in Italy, that his perspective had been warped by his feelings for Delia, together with the unforeseen, alluring prospect of being given a second chance to assert his claim to the family home? It wasn’t helping Charlie he had been interested in, so much as helping himself.

Applying his intelligent, logical mind to the situation, Peter studied his own selfishness as if it were a specimen under glass – closely but at a clinical distance. How he *felt* about it all remained unchanged. He simply could not countenance either giving up Delia or turning his back on the possibility of taking over Ashley House. Everything seemed to hang on the result of the paternity test. If the baby turned out to be Ed’s and Charlie really couldn’t manage financially, there was a case to be made for the proposition of moving there. Helen would see that. She, too, was logical, good at weighing arguments: it was one of the many traits he valued in her.

Peter pulled the shirt back out of the cupboard, then swapped it for a plain white one. To wear pink required a certain exuberance and the argument, with the contemplation of his various dilemmas, had robbed him of that. White showed off his still striking tan, and was the colour of innocence, he mused bitterly, studying his reflection in the mirror but avoiding his own eyes.

In the Arndale Centre a poster advertising vitamins featured a pregnant woman with long, glossy auburn hair and a toothpaste smile. She was lying in a bikini on a beach between two palm trees, her belly a beautiful smooth olive slope, rising in the space between her hips and her ribcage with all the grace of an exotic sculpture. Next to her lay a handsome blond-haired man, smiling adoringly, one arm on hers, the other round a chubby-legged toddler, who was squatting beside a sandcastle.

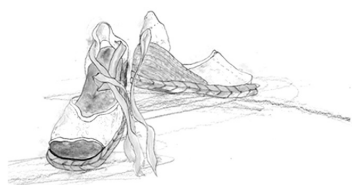
Jessica stopped to look at the poster whenever she wandered through the arcade, feeling each time a little angrier, a little more despairing of her own ugly state, not just without a man but with a belly that had swelled sideways as much as outwards, mysteriously taking with it any shape her thighs had once possessed. Her bum, too, had inflated, then collapsed, like a punctured beach-ball, while her bust was so big she had had to buy several bras.

The poster was outside Mothercare where Jessica found herself drifting most days. She’d



pick things up and put them down, browse through the rails of miniature outfits, trying to equate them with the kicking creature clearly bent on destroying her body as well as her life. It was wrong to feel like that, she knew, and not what she had planned or imagined. Bella, the girl she'd mentioned to Ed who'd had a baby, had spent her pregnancy preening and boasting, relishing the attention and the excuse to give up school. Jessica had seen her a couple of times since, proudly pushing her pink buggy, with bags and baby toys dangling off it like decorations on a tree, her mum in tow, spewing to anyone who would listen about how emotionally mature Bella was and how great to be a grandmother at thirty-nine. It was shite, all of it, of course, but better than having a mother who didn't speak at all except to yell about the flat being a tip and how she had the dumbest daughter in the world – dumb enough to turn down Jerry's offer of a full-time job and to agree, like some brainless cow, to the Harrisons' bee in their bonnet about a paternity test. If Jessica was so bent on having the kid, she said, she should have made the Harrisons hang on, got some money first, played the thing out.

Jessica hadn't liked the test. Amniocentesis, they called it; a long word for a long needle. She hadn't watched – kept her eyes tight shut – trying to keep the doubts out. Of course it was Ed's. The Jason thing had been months and months before and on the couple of times they'd gone all the way he'd pulled out, spilling his come on her belly. Of more concern was the time with Jerry; but he'd been inside her so briefly – just as long as it took for her to scramble to her senses and use her hand instead . . . Surely no baby could have resulted from that. Behind her squeezed eyes Jessica had nevertheless found herself imagining a single sperm – fat, stubborn and goofy-faced, like its producer, swimming up the tube towards her womb, like some gross, burrowing worm. Not having even entertained such a possibility before she agreed to the test, it now haunted her. Jerry himself didn't even know she was pregnant, since she'd left the salon before it had got obvious. When he called, out of the blue, to offer her the full-time slot, she'd been as sharp and unfriendly as she could manage without actually telling him to fuck off. He'd tried to chat anyway, asking about her rubbish GCSE grades and plans for the future, wheedling as he always had for her to like him. Jessica, looking at the handset resting on her bloated belly, had had to suppress a sudden, vicious urge to tell him everything – give him some of the worry that she now dragged around like a ball and chain. But she'd known there was no point. If by some sick fluke the kid *was* his, she'd die rather than confess it, to him or anyone else. She'd rather chuck the thing in the canal.



‘Can I help you?’ asked a shop assistant, nosing in like they always did the moment she touched anything. ‘Can’t be long now,’ the woman added, nodding at the bare bump protruding between Jessica’s T-shirt and stretch-waist jeans. ‘How many weeks?’

‘Not enough,’ snapped Jessica. ‘Not bloody enough.’ She thrust the little yellow and green vest she had been holding into the woman’s hands and ran out of the shop, her belly straining as if it was trying to break free. By the time she got to the poster she was breathless, sweating hard and close to tears. She didn’t want the stupid baby, Ed’s or anyone else’s. Her mother – all of them – had been right. She had not thought it through, the *grossness* of it, the sheer impossibility of things working out well. Ed had phoned just once since he’d got back from his swanky family holiday to say that if the kid did turn out to be his he didn’t want anything to do with it. She would get money and that was it. Nothing more. ever. He had shouted the last word, his voice cracking like he wanted to cry.

Jessica began to weep in earnest, sinking to her knees under the poster, as if prostrating herself before an altar. What an idiot she had been and all because of some dim hope about keeping Ed and not liking being told what to do – not by the stupid, pompous judge of an uncle, or Ed’s goggle-eyed parents, or her mum, being smarmy and grasping after cash as usual. If they’d begged her to keep it she’d have probably flounced off to the abortion clinic that minute. What a cretin she’d been – what a fucking cretin.

‘Are you all right, dearie?’

Jessica shook her head, unable to speak.

‘Oh, and look at you, *expecting* and all . . . Poor love. Let’s get you up. There we are, that’s better. You look like you could do with a nice cuppa.’

‘No, I’m all right, honest.’ Jessica wiped away her tears, managing a weak smile for her rescuer, a tiny, shrivelled lady with a beaky nose and legs like pencils. ‘I just . . .’

‘I know, I know . . . Cried my eyes out when I was expecting mine. Lovely, though, when they come – you’ll see.’ The woman patted Jessica’s arm, then launched herself back at the crowds of shoppers.

For a moment Jessica was tempted to run after her, take up the offer of tea, see what the old dear said when she explained that her baby was the biggest mistake of her life, too unwanted to be lovely to anyone. But when she looked again, the tottering spindly figure had disappeared, swallowed up in the busy tunnel of the arcade.

The result of the paternity test arrived the next morning, a slim white envelope with the



name of the hospital printed on the back. Pamela, standing in the hall, tying her headscarf in preparation for a visit to Marjorie, with Poppy springing at her heels, heard the postman come down the steps, whistling one of his tuneless tunes, and saw the envelope land on the doormat. With her long-sighted eyes, she spotted the official stamp of the hospital and knew at once what it contained. Excited as always by the postman, who sometimes gave her a biscuit, Poppy sniffed it once, then put her nose to the crack under the door and whined softly.

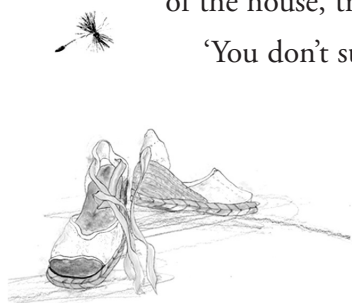
‘Not today, darling,’ murmured Pamela, approaching the mat, then glancing over her shoulder along the hallway to the half-open kitchen door where her grandson and his parents were enjoying the mindless, comforting ritual of family breakfast. She should pick it up, of course, bending carefully as she had to, these days, especially in the mornings when her bones felt stiff and unwieldy as if a night’s repose had glued the joints. Instead, staring down at the envelope, Pamela thought of all the bomb talk on the radio that morning, the home secretary’s plea for public vigilance, how any odd behaviour, any odd packages were immediately to be reported to the appropriate authorities. Here was an explosive package, all right, she reflected sadly, but not one that could be defused or taken away.

Poppy was whining more insistently now and scratching at the door. Pamela hesitated for a couple more moments, then reached across the dog and unlocked the door. Poppy bounced through the gap and Pamela, careful not to tread on the envelope, followed her. It was their bomb, after all, not hers, and if she delivered it to the table she would be forced to wait and deal with the fallout. She would deal with it anyway, of course – the news, good or bad, would be forced upon the entire family soon enough – but for now her own future beckoned: coffee with her old friend and a tour round Crayshott Manor. Even Poppy, frisky as in her puppy days, had sensed all morning that something exciting was going on, something beyond their usual stroll down the lane.

She trilled a goodbye, closed the door and wondered what state she would find them all in when she returned.

A little over an hour later, Ed slammed the same door behind him and ran up the steps to the drive. Unaware of his mother watching from an upstairs window, her heart bursting, he looked about him, at the silver birches, at the lane, at the path leading round the far side of the house, trying with almost comical obviousness to decide which way to go.

‘You don’t suppose he’ll run away again?’ said Serena, dropping the curtain.



‘No.’

She approached Ed’s bed, where Charlie was still sitting, arms dangling open and useless, head bent. She looked about her, at the framed photographs of Ed posing with school football teams, at the Airfix models and plastic trophies on the shelves, at the two moth-eaten teddy bears abandoned on top of the wardrobe. ‘We’d all got our hopes up. Now we must be strong for Ed.’

‘Strong . . . for Ed . . . yup.’

‘Charlie, this isn’t the worst thing that could have happened.’

‘Isn’t it? Really? And what would have been the *worst* thing?’

‘You know what.’

He frowned, tapping his temple with his index finger, as if to encourage his brain to embark on the retrieval of an important fact. ‘Ah, yes . . . something *happening* to Ed. That would have been worse, wouldn’t it? Because of what *happened* to Tina.’

‘Charlie, don’t, please.’

‘The fact is,’ he continued, ignoring her, ‘something *has* happened to Ed, something pretty fucking terrible, and I reserve the right to say that, at the top of my voice, if I want to. Just as you have the right, Serena, darling, to pretend that you’re upset when in fact you’re rubbing your hands with glee at the prospect of getting your hands on –’

Serena let out a small cry, raising her palms as if to defend herself from a physical blow.

Charlie stood up, tugging at his shorts where they had hitched up round his crotch. ‘Sorry, that was too harsh. I’m upset, forgive me.’ He crossed the room to look out at the now empty drive. A wind had picked up and was raking through the branches of the silver birches, sending a scattering of leaves on to the grass below. ‘Do you know?’ he added, putting his hands into his shorts pockets, his voice matter-of-fact. ‘I really thought it was going to be okay . . . the test. I really thought it would be okay.’

‘Things still can be okay,’ whispered Serena, hugging herself. She was still reeling from the sting of his words. *Rubbing your hands with glee* – of course she wasn’t. She just couldn’t help loving the idea of Ed’s child. Even if she never met it, she’d love it. That was all.

Charlie shook his head. ‘No, no, they can’t, not for Ed, not for any of us . . . not really.’

‘That’s nonsense. You’re talking nonsense.’

But Charlie was in his own dark world. ‘I realized, thinking about it all in Umbria, that our time here, at Ashley House, has been jinxed from the start. It was never meant to *be*. Accepting Peter’s offer, coming to live here, has been a hideous mistake. Deep down you’ve



been feeling as much yourself all year – you can't deny it. "We have *failed* as a family." Those were your exact words . . .'

'It's been difficult lately, I admit, but when I said that I never meant –'

'No, you were right. It's time we both recognized it . . . recognized it and moved on. My mother has certainly recognized it . . .'

Charlie laughed darkly. 'She's planning on leaving us, did you know? I saw the form – an application for a place called Crayshott Manor. She'd put in Poppy's details and everything. Christ, Dad must be spinning in his grave. The deal was that we looked after her, do you remember? Talk about a botched job . . . Jesus.'

'No, I didn't know that,' said Serena quietly. She had gone to sit on the bed in the indentation left by Charlie. She could feel his warmth still on the linen. It made the coldness of his voice almost impossible to bear. 'I'll talk to her.'

Charlie shrugged, thrusting his hands deeper into his pockets. 'Nah . . . I shouldn't bother. She'll tell us in her own good time. Anyway, she might change her mind when she hears Peter's taking over.'

'Peter?'

'I asked him, in Umbria, explained the position, said the way things were looking it would be money we needed rather than this roof over our heads. If Peter takes it we can revert to the original plan of whatever cash Mum leaves being split between me, Cassie and Elizabeth. The last thing Peter needs is more money – he's drowning in it.'

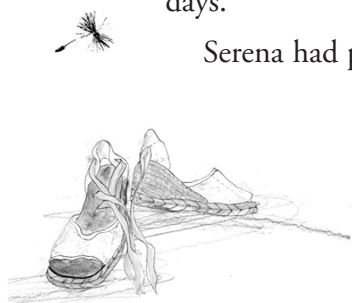
'We need more money?' Serena gripped the edges of the bed, feeling, even though her feet were planted firmly on the carpet, as if she might fall off it.

'To – pay – for – the – child,' said Charlie, giving equal accent to each word, as if he was spelling out a difficult sentence for a foreigner. 'I presume you had thought about that, hadn't you, in all your secret plotting to get the thing born?'

'I don't need . . . I don't deserve this.' Serena stood up very slowly, fighting the dizziness that threatened to topple her to the floor. 'This – this is not how it should be,' she faltered, trying, in spite of everything, to cling to her knowledge of the fact that somewhere behind this cold, accusatory voice was the kind man she had married. Distress had warped him . . . warped them all.

'No, you're right there. This is not how it should be. We'll see Cass through her wedding, then move out, further east, near Brighton, maybe. It's well in the commuting belt, these days.'

Serena had put her hands to her ears. 'Stop this, Charlie. You're not making any sense. I



don't want to leave Ashley House. Giving it back to Peter would break my heart.'

He laughed, a hard, sharp noise, like a gunshot. 'Would it, now? Well, that means we'd still have one thing in common anyway. Mine snapped months ago when our son committed the worst error of his life and you took his side instead of mine, when it struck me that you're not over Tina and never will be –' He broke off, as the room and his wife's ashen face came back into focus. 'Sorry, I –'

'No. Never mind. It's what you feel.' Serena began to move towards the door. Her breath was coming in odd, heavy spasms, making it hard to talk. 'You're right. I'm not over Tina. I never will be. The love I have for her sits here . . .' She pressed her knuckles into her ribcage. 'It will never go and I don't want it to. My love for Ed is like that too and –'

'And me? Where is your love for me, Serena?' Charlie knew the question sounded ugly. He knew, too, that with his own feelings in such disarray and the extent to which in recent weeks at least, he had been *unlovable*, he had no right to ask such a thing. 'Where do I fit in?'

Serena stopped with her hand on the door. 'You are my husband,' she said simply, giving him a sad smile, then leaving the room.

Charlie looked out of the window through a blur of tears. On the windowsill was a photograph of his father with Ed, aged about five, on his lap. His father was pointing at the camera with his pipe, and saying something into his grandson's ear, something compelling, clearly, judging by the alert expression on Ed's face. Thinking of his son's glazed misery as he scanned the letter that morning, Charlie began to sob. Serena, with all her talk of love, was missing the point. He loved Ed beyond words, of course. And he loved her too, still, somewhere within the deep, dark anger that had overtaken his heart. But it wasn't enough, not when it was pitted against his now permanent sense of failure, not just as a parent and a husband but as a custodian of the beloved family home. How had he ever imagined he could do a better job than Peter? How had he thought he and Serena were strong enough? They were flimsy and hopeless, their stewardship doomed from the start. The sooner they got out the better.

Charlie pulled out his handkerchief and wiped the tracing of dust off the photo before blowing his nose. He wouldn't go to work that day. There was too much on his mind, too many phone calls to make – to the Blake family, to Peter, of course, maybe to an estate agent or two. It was never too early to start. And, badly as he had handled living at the place, Charlie wanted to manage the leaving of it as well as he could. There could be grace in



failure, after all. Strengthened a little by the thought, he turned the photo face downwards before he left his post by the window, unable to bear the thought of the two alert pairs of eyes, his father's and his son's, watching him retreat from the room.

Ed found the key to the barn in its usual place above the lintel. Inside, it was hot and airless. Dead flies were scattered on the windowsills. In one corner the crisp white tendrils of a dead spider plant trailed over the sides of a ceramic pot. He went into the kitchen and ran himself a glass of water. Hearing the hum of the fridge, he looked inside and saw several cans of lager. Taking one, and another glass of water, he returned to the sitting room, levered open a couple of windows and sank heavily into an armchair. Lighting a cigarette, he inhaled slowly and deeply, surveying the empty room through a thickening, pungent grey mist and thinking of Keith's brief but intense tenure as the family handyman – the countless offers of friendship, his obvious keenness on Aunt Elizabeth, the extraordinary rescue of his grandmother. It was a total shame the guy had left, Ed reflected, wishing suddenly that Keith was parked opposite him with that open, unjudging look he had, like he knew something was wrong and wanted to help.

Ed belched, thought about getting a second can but drank some water instead. He needed to talk to *someone*. Not about the bloody baby – he'd known all along that it was his, that the stupid paternity test was a red herring. He had been even more sure when Jessica had agreed to the test, as if she had nothing to be afraid of. No, what was burning inside Ed now was the new knowledge that the mess he had got into wasn't just *his* mess, that there was a bigger picture, which involved his pa rents and what he had once regarded as the solid future of his family.

After hanging around in the drive he had gone back inside, seeking the sanctuary of his bedroom, never imagining that his parents, who had raced after him when he left the breakfast table, would still be there. Hearing voices, he had stopped at the door, pressing first one eye and then his ear to the crack, his heart galloping. That they were arguing was nothing new, although since the holiday he had thought they were getting on better. But with his ear glued to the crack, taking in all the stuff about failing and being jinxed and money and *moving*, Ed had realized not only that they weren't getting on at all but also the extent to which he had been seeing everything solely from his own point of view. Of course he had recognized the strain of his predicament for them too, but not the hugeness of it.

Standing, shaking, in the corridor for those few minutes, Ed felt as if his life was fast-



forwarding towards a living nightmare, taking the last shreds of his pathetic, youthful innocence with it. How could his parents think of handing Ashley House back to his uncle and aunt, to Chloë and Theo? It was *their* home, not his cousins'. Even if his grandmother chose to leave, it would still be their home. Such was Ed's conviction that he had almost burst into the room to exclaim it to them; but then his father said the stuff about his mother not being over the death of his little sister and he had backed away towards the landing, heart quailing at how complicated everything was, how *connected*, and how thick he had been not to see it that way before.

Sitting in the barn now, going over it all, Ed's thoughts kept returning to the subject of money. For all his father's wild talk about failure and jinxing, money seemed, as ever, to lie at the heart of everything. In all their various stilted conversations about supporting the baby, both parents had only ever said that they would foot the bill until he was ready to assume the responsibility himself. So much so that Ed had begun to take this aspect of the situation for granted. In addition to which, he had only ever thought in terms of weekly or monthly amounts, what it would take to keep Jessica and the child out of his life. It had never occurred to him that such amounts could build to the sort of total that might cause his father to move them all to some poky house in Brighton. In truth, he had been fixing his hopes on going away at the first moment he decently could, after the dreaded birth – and his aunt's wedding, of course, he'd have to hang around for that. He had been planning a year out at least, funded, with any luck, via a job at the Rising Sun, washing up or serving tables, five quid an hour plus tips. But now Ed could see that this wouldn't do, not just the five quid but the whole idea of going away. He needed to be around, to earn proper money, take what pressure he could off his parents. He had good A levels, after all – there must be something he could do to earn a decent wage. And he could use his five thousand to kick-start things. He'd get on the Internet that afternoon, Ed decided now, squeezing his empty beer can till it collapsed, start filling in applications. Jessica deciding to keep the baby was a disaster, but he could see now that it was *his* disaster, not anyone else's. If his parents left Ashley House it wasn't going to be because of him.

Lost to such thoughts, Ed didn't hear the creak of the stairs or Roland pushing open the door. At the sound of his cousin's shy 'Hello,' he jumped as if he had been shot. 'Christ, you gave me a fright.'

'Sorry.' Roland hovered uncertainly by the door, still gripping the handle. 'Thought I'd find you here.'



‘Did you? And why was that?’

‘You left the front door open downstairs. It was banging. Sorry about the test result, by the way. That’s really tough.’

‘Yeah, it’s a fucker, all right. Do you want a beer? Keith left a load of cans in the fridge. Help yourself. Why did the guy leave, by the way? Was it some falling-out with your mum?’

‘How should I know?’ Roland muttered, unwilling to discuss a subject he had pondered, with some embarrassment, himself.

‘Because I sometimes got the impression that the two of them . . .’

‘Yeah, but they’re not now, are they?’ interjected Roland in a tone curt enough to indicate that he considered the matter closed. He fetched himself a beer and went to sit on the sofa, all the while keeping a wary eye on his cousin, who had lit a new cigarette from the stub of the last and was smoking with the glazed intensity of one lost in true crisis. Roland, who had come up to the barn with the intention of saying all sorts of mundane, comforting things, could not think now where or how to start.

‘Well done on your paintings, by the way,’ Ed burst out, ‘getting into a proper exhibition. Bloody fantastic. Cheers.’ He raised his crushed can.

‘Thanks.’

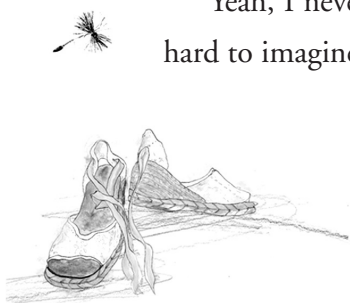
‘You just do your own thing, don’t you, Roland, mate? Always have, I suppose.’

‘Have I?’ Roland frowned, uncertain as to whether he was being criticized or congratulated. ‘I guess I learnt to cope on my own pretty early on . . . what with Mum and Dad splitting up and so on, and then Mum, well, she’s never been that *sorted*, if you know what I mean, though I have to say recently she –’

‘Bloody right! We – all of us on the fucking planet – are *alone*,’ agreed Ed, eagerly, leaping up from his chair to fetch two more cans of beer and dropping one into Roland’s lap. ‘It’s only just dawned on me . . . I mean, take this whole sick situation I’m in, it’s like all along I’ve been waiting for something to happen that will fix it, like it might *go away*, when of course it’s not fucking going to.’ He slumped back into his chair and sighed heavily, as if the outburst had exhausted him.

‘I know this might not be a totally helpful thing to say,’ ventured Roland, after a few moments, ‘but . . . I never liked Jessica. Even when we were kids I used to think there was something . . . not right about her.’

‘Yeah, I never liked her either,’ Ed muttered. ‘Felt *sorry* for her sometimes, though that’s hard to imagine now. Amazing what lust can make you do,’ he added, managing a ghoulish



smile.

‘Amazing,’ agreed Roland, dropping his gaze as he recalled the flick of Carl’s tongue between his teeth, the gentle pressure of his palm pushing against his lower back, pressing their hips so perfectly together, like two interlocking pieces of a puzzle.

‘But I’ve decided I’m not going to let it ruin everything,’ continued Ed, talking fast again, his voice filled with fresh conviction. ‘I’m going to start looking for a proper job so Mum and Dad don’t have to worry about bailing me out . . . Do you know? They’re so worried about money that they’re thinking of handing this place back to Uncle Peter. Can you believe it?’

‘Blimey! That’s drastic.’

‘Fucking right it’s drastic. It’s also stupid and just not going to happen, not if I have anything to do with it.’

‘Theo would be pleased, though,’ said Roland, absently. ‘He always minded, you know, about his dad handing this place over to yours.’

‘Did he, now? Bloody Theo, I might have guessed. I can just see him playing lord of the manor, can’t you, with all his snotty Oxford ways?’

‘I like Theo.’

Ed made a growling sound. ‘So did I, once upon a time.’

‘What he did,’ Roland pressed on, ‘phoning his dad when you turned up at Clem’s, he only meant for the best.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know he did.’ Ed sighed, then drained the contents of the second can. ‘And having a father who gives away somewhere like Ashley House . . . I guess I’d have been pretty pissed off too. But we’re not giving it back,’ he added hastily, ‘I can tell you that for nothing. What’s done is done. Like Uncle Eric handing the place over to Granddad – that was never a problem, was it?’ He leant forwards, rubbing his palms together. ‘Ready for another beer, old chap?’

‘No, thanks. And I don’t think you should either, Ed.’

‘Don’t you now?’ said Ed, nastily. ‘I’d have thought you of all people would be used to a spot of *excess* drinking, what with the amount your mother puts away.’

Roland went red.

‘Sorry, mate, below the belt.’ Ed struggled to his feet, aware that he was hot and giddy.

‘Actually she’s not drinking much at the moment. She’s better.’

‘Good . . . really pleased.’



'You're not the only one with bloody troubles, you know, Ed.'

Ed sat back down. 'I know that.'

'Well, you don't behave like it.'

'You have to admit I've got more than my fair share at the moment.'

'Well, I'm gay,' said Roland, glaring at him. 'Go on – laugh. You clearly want to.'

'No, I don't . . . Christ, that's a bit heavy . . . Fuck . . . Are you sure?'

Roland remembered again his recent encounter with Carl and experienced a reflex of recollected pleasure, like being stabbed in the gut, but nice . . . really nice. 'Unfortunately, yes.'

'But I thought you and Polly, that girl . . .'

'We went to primary school together. We were always just friends. It was when she wanted more that I began to see it wasn't for me.'

'Right . . . I see . . .' Ed left his chair and went to open another window. 'And is there . . .?'

'Yes, but don't ask because I won't tell you.'

'Of course . . . I . . . That's fine, of course.' Ed continued to fiddle with the window latch, fighting both astonishment and groping for the correct response. He might have laughed once, he knew, not that long ago either, when the world had still been a benign black-and-white place, something he imagined he might command instead of something that had the power to kick him in the teeth. 'Well . . . er, thanks for telling me.'

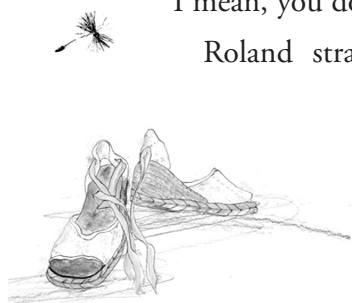
'Thanks for being okay about it.' Roland stood up. 'I'd better be going. Mum will wonder where I am. Shall I say I haven't seen you?'

Ed shrugged. 'It doesn't matter . . . Say what you like. Your mum, does she know about . . . what you just told me?'

Roland shook his head. 'Not yet. I – I don't think she'll be too pleased. She wants grandchildren and stuff.' He smiled, managing a show of bravery he did not feel. 'And as for my dad . . .' The smile crumpled. 'He'll go ape-shit, and it's not like we've ever got on that well anyway. He's supposed to be coming over at Christmas . . . Guess I'll have to break it to him then.'

'But surely you don't have to *break it* to either of them,' exclaimed Ed, grimacing with horror on his cousin's behalf, quite forgetting, for a few lovely moments, all his own worries. 'I mean, you don't have to tell anyone, do you?'

Roland straightened his shoulders, raising himself to his full, impressive height,



managing to look manly in spite of his still milky skin and the glint of fear in his wide brown eyes. 'But then I'd be living a lie, wouldn't I?'

'Yes,' conceded Ed. 'I suppose you would.'

'I was thinking of a letter – to my dad – to sort of ease the blow. What do you think?'

'A letter . . . Maybe . . . Yup, letters can be good. Best of luck with it, anyway,' concluded Ed, awkwardly. 'And I won't breathe a word, I promise. You can trust me on that . . . unlike *Theo*.' He pulled a funny face and they both laughed.

Ed waited until Roland had gone before he closed the windows and gathered up the empty cans. His cousin's confession had made him feel better about his own woes: it had helped him to see that life was complicated and difficult for everyone. Gay! Christ, poor bastard. It occurred to Ed in the same instant that Roland's decision to tell him might have been an act of generosity rather than personal release, that he had guessed somehow it would make his cousin feel better.

'Impressive,' muttered Ed, as he closed the barn door. And the idea of a letter wasn't bad either, he mused, slipping the key back on top of the lintel, then setting off up the path towards the house. With a paper and pen he might be able to set out his own thoughts clearly, explain to his parents how he planned to handle things from now on, how he had never meant to muck everything up for everyone else, how . . . how he was sorry. Ed stopped on the path, swiping angrily at a fat horse-fly as he absorbed this small but awesome oversight. He had not apologized. He had been too full of self-pity even to consider it. It was several minutes before he began to walk on, striding through the overgrown tangle of blackberry briars and long grass, his gaze fixed on the slates of Ashley House.

'Okay,' said Theo, scratching the now substantial thicket of his beard, and gesturing with his arms. 'I want you, Ben, to get up from the bench first and then, Clem, you stay where you are, your eyes following him. You don't move, but your whole body is, like, full of the desire to, and then just when it looks like you're going to give in to it you reach out and touch the briefcase to remind yourself of your other destiny.'

'I wish she *could* follow him,' said Clem. 'I mean, he's supposed to be her soul-mate, isn't he?' She pulled a face at the boy sitting next to her, one of Theo's university friends and actually called Ben in real life. Under Theo's direction they had already kissed and had a blazing row, an ordeal that Clem, to her amazement, had found rather easy. Although Ben, arriving that morning with lanky hair and sleep in his eyes, wedged among the camera



equipment in the car Theo had borrowed for the trip, had hardly looked the ideal leading man, he had proved to be – instantly and obviously – a tremendous actor. Subsequent exchanges had revealed that he had played Romeo for the National Youth Theatre in his gap year and was shortly due to appear as Hamlet in a student production at the Oxford Playhouse. He had the ability to speak his lines as if they had only just occurred to him, as if they really were his own words. And when it came to kissing he had been so immediately intense and assured that Clem might have thought he was trying to tell her something, had he not subsided into his lanky, quiet self the moment Theo shouted, ‘Cut,’ and stepped out from behind the camera.

‘The bomb in the briefcase is already ticking,’ Theo reminded her. ‘It’s going to go off anyway, so she might as well get it to the right place.’

‘Victoria station.’

‘Yup – at least, *a* station, I haven’t decided which.’ They were in a small, wrought-iron-fenced garden that Ben had suggested, not far from Chancery Lane tube station, ideal because it was open to the public, yet not widely used.

‘And I – she is definitely going to die?’

‘Yes, she is . . . Clem, I don’t have time for this, we’ve got a lot to get through.’

‘Couldn’t she leave the case and race off in time to avoid getting killed and catch up with lover-boy instead?’ They all turned to see Jonny strolling towards them, a packet of biscuits tucked under his arm and four paper cups of coffee pressed between his hands.

‘Oh, Jonny, good man.’ Theo glanced at his watch, wondering at how the time was racing and whether he had been wise to let Jonny Cottrall in on things, particularly given that he and Clem were clearly back together. When he had arrived at his cousin’s flat that morning, it had been Jonny who answered the door, still pulling on a T-shirt, an impish grin on his face. ‘He’s just going, aren’t you?’ Clem had declared, emerging, noticeably pink-cheeked, from her room. At which point Jonny had asked Theo, in his direct, inoffensive way, if he could offer his services to the film project as an odd-job man and, more significantly as far as Theo was concerned, by having a go at composing a soundtrack. Tone deaf himself, unable to remember the sound or names of tunes, Theo had been wondering what to do about this very thing, so essential to a good, finished film. ‘And we could use my van,’ Jonny had added slyly, as if he knew about the little car Theo had borrowed, in which Clem would have to sit on Ben’s lap to travel between locations.

‘Seriously, mate,’ Jonny continued now, handing out the coffees and tearing open the



biscuit packet with his teeth, ‘I love a bit of drama as much as the next man, but if you want to make it on the big screen, these days, you have to have a happy ending, don’t you? Clem could uphold her cause *and* get her man, couldn’t you, babe?’ he said, giving her a nudge as she took a biscuit.

Clem nodded but then, fearful of pissing off her cousin, said she was only there to follow instructions and would do whatever Theo thought best.

‘I’ll shoot it both ways,’ said Theo, at length, ‘make my final decision when I edit. Are you happy with that, Ben?’

‘Your call, man.’ Ben lit a cigarette and moved away from them.

‘Boy, have I missed you,’ murmured Jonny, pressing himself closer to Clem and giving her a dreamy look. ‘Nothing was the same – the band, life, nothing.’

‘I missed you too,’ admitted Clem, dunking her biscuit in her coffee, then quickly getting her lips round it before it fell apart.

‘You didn’t *enjoy* that snog, did you?’ muttered Jonny next, scowling at Ben, now deep in conversation with Theo.

‘Yuk! No way – just *acting*.’ Clem giggled, enjoying the new sense of power she had in the relationship, so unlike her hang-dog approach before the split. She had enjoyed, too, sharing with Jonny the million things that had happened since they had seen each other, all the ups and downs, astounded that she could ever have imagined a life lived alone was better than one with its doors open to other people. When she had heard the result of Ed’s paternity test, via Maisie, it was Jonny she had phoned. He had come round at once and they had sat up half the night talking it through, not making love until the sky was grey with the promise of morning, when touching each other felt like an expression of how close they were already instead of a way of *getting* close. They had put the Durex on carefully, though, together, rolling it right down, each aware in a new way of the magnitude of what they were doing, of the life-force behind the pleasure.

‘By the way,’ said Jonny, linking arms with her while they finished the dregs of their coffee, ‘I saw your uncle just now.’

‘Peter?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘But you don’t know him, do you?’

Jonny looked hurt. ‘Last summer, remember, when I came for that day and half your family were there and –’



‘Oh, yes,’ Clem interjected, a little sharply, remembering the day only too well. It had marked the start of her suspicion that Jonny and her sister had shared rather more than the same biology teacher.

‘The thing is . . .’ Jonny glanced at Theo, who was getting ready to get going again ‘. . . he was with a woman.’

Clem laughed. ‘Oooh! A *woman* – you don’t say.’

‘Not your aunt Helen.’

‘Yeah, like a client or a colleague or . . . We’re not far from all the law courts and stuff where he works.’

‘They were holding hands.’

Clem turned to look at him, still more disbelieving than astonished. ‘That’s impossible. My uncle *Peter*? He just . . . well, he just *wouldn’t*.’ She laughed. ‘He’s about the most old-fashioned, upright, *boring* adult I know.’

‘That may be true, but he has a bird,’ declared Jonny, taking her empty cup and dropping it into the bin next to the bench. ‘Being boring doesn’t mean you don’t want a screw on the side. He’s probably been at it for years.’

Seeing Theo approach, Clem tugged at Jonny’s arm.

Observing something conspiratorial in their manner and sensing it was connected to him, Theo said, ‘Look, I can’t have any plotting, you two. If you’re not on board, Jonny, if both of you aren’t totally up front with me about any issues . . .’

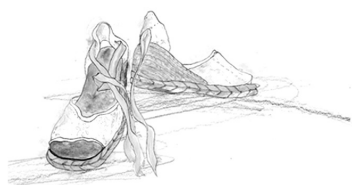
‘No, we’re not – I mean, we *are*, totally on board,’ Clem assured him.

‘I don’t want any funny business, okay? Music or no music, Jonny, we’ve all got to behave like professionals, okay?’

Jonny saluted, then winked at Clem and trotted off to ask a couple of new entrants to the little park if they would mind skirting round the area that was being used for shooting. Returning to the scene, he sat carefully out of everybody’s way in a patch of dappled shade and watched all that Clem did with a singing heart, wanting, every time Theo asked for another take, to yell that she was perfect. As the heat intensified he slipped closer to the tree under which he had sought protection and began to think about tunes, trying to feel the right pulse for the scene, how and with what instruments he might communicate the parallel tensions of a broken heart and a ticking bomb.



Later that day, mulling over lists of possible hymns for the wedding, to the background



accompaniment of the last night of the Proms, Stephen and Cassie, too, were immersed in contemplation of the stirring power of music. Having said he knew very few hymns and would go along with anything she suggested, Stephen turned out to be full of controversial opinions. ‘Love Divine’ was too dirge-like, he said, and, no, he had never been keen on ‘Dear Lord and Father of Mankind’ and what about ‘He Who Would Valiant Be’?

‘Against all disaster’ . . . I’ve never really liked it much.’

‘But it’s such a jolly tune.’

‘Okay, but only if I can have “Love Divine” and “O Jesus I Have Promised” . . .’

‘I don’t even know that one. How does it go?’

‘Well, it’s got several versions but the one I like best is . . .’ Cassie started to hum, just as the strains of ‘Jerusalem’ began to flow from the television. She reached for the remote but Stephen put out a hand to stop her.

‘Look at that,’ he murmured, evidently transfixed by the television cameras pulling back out of the Albert Hall to reveal the sea of people in the park, old and young, babes in arms, Union flags fluttering, swaying as one before the big screens relaying the concert to the open air. ‘Quite a sight,’ he breathed.

Cassie looked first at the screen and then at her husband-to-be. He was close to tears, she saw suddenly, and with some amazement. His Adam’s apple was bobbing furiously and he was clenching his jaw to control the tremors in his cheeks. ‘Can we have this one too . . .?’

‘Sure, why not?’ Cassie said lightly, aware all the while of a coldness creeping round her heart. She wasn’t keen on the Proms, all that grand, sentimental emotion, cheap, somehow, too easily tapped, too *unearned*. I should love him for this, she thought, for being so easily distracted from my little effort at singing, for being sentimental enough to weep at the Proms. It should be endearing. But, glancing again at his twitching face, she felt only pity and a faint repugnance. Love is hard work, Cassie reminded herself, clenching her own jaw in recognition of the fact; all veterans of the science agreed it needed working at, compassion, understanding, forgiveness . . . and, my goodness, hadn’t she tried all of that? Especially lately, fighting her knowledge of how he had tailed her, like a stalker, fighting her disappointment at the red streak in her pants and the rising suffocating sensation that no haphazard natural methods would get her what she wanted, and that if she decided to pull out all the stops on the long, arduous quest to have a child, the man she was to marry was not the strong, willing companion she needed to see it through.

I don’t love him, she thought, the screen blurring as the horrible enormity of this



admission sank in. And we're not yet married so I don't have to carry on *trying* to love him. Her own throat was working now as the implications of this – held in check for so long – stormed her consciousness: caterers, present lists, flowers, the photographer, the wedding cars – all would have to be cancelled in gruelling letters and phone calls. And then there would be the ordeal of telling her family, letting them all down too, although in the few weeks since Italy, when she had been removed once more from their immediate orbit, this aspect of her situation seemed, for those instants at least, marginally more manageable. It was her life, after all, Cassie reflected bleakly, looking at the still fresh decoration of her and Stephen's sitting room and longing suddenly for the chance to occupy it – to occupy any room – without the pressure of his swinging moods dominating the atmosphere. She couldn't handle him any more, carefully or otherwise: it was destroying her.

'It is moving, isn't it?' said Stephen, seeing her glassy-eyed expression and misinterpreting its origin. 'It was the one event that used to make my dad cry, stupid bastard. He'd sit watching it each year over his can of Guinness, snivelling like a three-year-old. Funny, isn't it? I can actually think of that now and feel sort of fond of him – glad it gets me by throat, too, like it's some small daft thing we have in common.' He switched off the television. 'They wouldn't bother to reply to an invitation, by the way, I can tell you that now. They'll turn up or not, depending on their mood and whether they feel up to the journey . . . Hey, cheer up, love, you look quite cut-up.'

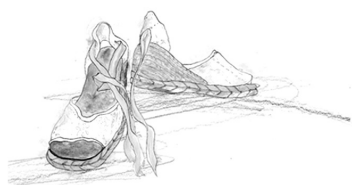
'Do I? Sorry, I'm fine.' Cassie stood up quickly and went into the kitchen, where the remains of their supper needed clearing away. With trembling hands she set about scraping soggy lettuce leaves and abandoned Bolognese into the bin. She crossed to the sink, ran her hands and as much of her arms as she could under the cold tap, then flicked water at her face. Now was not the moment to say anything. She was too unsteady, still too caught off-guard by the rush of her own emotions, the awful certainty as to what had to be done.

'Hey,' Stephen called from the sitting room, his voice low and lazy, sickeningly confident, 'had any thoughts about next Monday?'

Next Monday . . . next Monday . . . Cassie's mind raced, her sole concern being to remove the need for him to enter the kitchen, to stop him seeing her before she had composed herself. 'Your birthday?'

'Ten out of ten. That new Thai restaurant I was telling you about the other day, do you mind if I book it?' His voice was closer.

'Lovely,' Cassie almost shrieked. 'Go right ahead.'



‘Not your favourite food, I know, but, then, it is *my* birthday.’

She heard him laugh, then the thump of his feet on the stairs. Cassie remained motionless, staring at her reflection in the kettle, a warped, Disney version of her face. She had made him happy and now she was going to destroy him. She clenched her face, making her reflection still more distorted, more akin to the ugliness swelling inside. All her love for him had turned to pity; all her kindness had become calculated, cautious. There was no true reciprocity, no balance, no trust. The knowledge that a lot of his problems stemmed from his difficult childhood made no difference. She had wanted to be his wife, not his healer.

She would, however, be kind, Cassie decided, dabbing her wet face on a tea-towel, at least more so than he had been with her. She would make no mention of the pathetic spying, simply explain the central, more important truth that the form of love he sought from her was too cloying, too oppressive. She would explain that she could no longer play down her desperation to have a child, that she would prefer to take the medical route alone, than with him as a reluctant partner.

Cassie filled a saucepan with milk and scoured the back of a cupboard until she found a jar of hot chocolate, a sticky, dusty old thing that dated back to her days of living alone. She hugged herself while she watched the milk bubble and heave, shivery suddenly with cold, while inside a new loneliness took shape, worse than anything she had known during her singleton spells, worse, even, than all her longing for Dan Lambert, borne as it was on a sense of immeasurable separation from the man now creaking round the bedroom floorboards overhead.

A moment later the milk had boiled over, producing an acrid smell and thick brown stains round the ring. Cassie sat at the table to drink it, gripping the hot mug in both palms.

Ed stayed up most of that night composing his letter, first on his laptop and then, wanting to make it as personal and immediate as he could, copying it out by hand. He laboured slowly, trying to make his famously scruffy writing look neat, only noticing when he got to the bottom of the page that all the lines sloped at a childish angle, as if the words were trying to run off the page. He struggled, too, over how much to say, to what extent he should reveal his eavesdropping that morning. In the end he decided it didn't matter, that the prospect of being responsible for the implosion of his family's entire and lovely way of life was too important to worry about such niceties.



The point is, I am the one who has made a mess of everything, so please don't let it muck up the whole family as well. If you decided to leave Ashley House all because of me and the money worries I have caused then I would never forgive myself. So, please, let me use my trust money to pay whatever Jessica will need to start off with. In the meantime I am going to begin some serious job hunting so that I can continue to make whatever monthly payments are decided. I'm not saying I think it's going to be easy but please let me try. I'm afraid it will mean me living at home for a while yet to save on rent etc.! But in time hopefully I'll be able to set up somewhere on my own. One thing I am also sure of is that I don't want to be involved with Jessica or the child beyond giving them money. I'll pay – literally – for my mistake, but I don't feel up to doing any more. Jessica knows this already.

Lastly, I want to say that I am sorry for all the worry I have caused you when you have both been so decent and didn't deserve it.

Love Ed

It was by no means a perfect letter, but as the night wore on Ed lost the clear-headedness required to improve on it. The next morning he woke early and stole downstairs to leave it on the doormat for his parents to find under the morning post.

He was hurrying through a bowl of cereal, wanting to be gone before anyone else came down, when his grandmother, silent in her slippers, came shuffling into the kitchen.

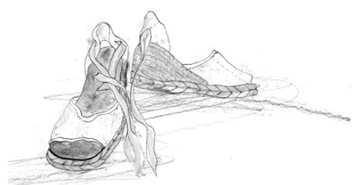
'Darling, this is early for you, isn't it?'

'I couldn't sleep,' Ed muttered, his mouth full of cornflakes.

Pamela sighed, folding her arms and looking at him fondly. 'Well, you do have a lot on your plate, after all.'

Ed nodded warily, loath to be drawn into analysis of his situation. The letter had got a lot of stuff out of his system, cleared his head, and he didn't want to go over it again, least of all with his grandmother. But Pamela seemed in no mood to press the matter and merely asked if he wanted a cup of tea.

In fact, the old stick was good at not saying anything, Ed mused, watching her fill the kettle and make a fuss of Poppy and Samson, who were twining themselves round her legs in the hope of breakfast. She had had her own low spots during the year, he reminded himself, wondering suddenly, with his new awareness of perspectives other than his own, how on earth she had pulled herself together, wondering *where*, literally, her delicate birdcage of a frame had accommodated the unhappiness that, just a few months ago, had



driven her to the point of suicide.

‘You’re not really going to leave Ashley House, are you, Gran?’ he blurted, forgetting he wasn’t supposed to know, forgetting anything, indeed, but his new, overwhelming desire to keep the world he knew and loved from pulling apart.

Instead of asking how he had found out or telling him off for being nosy she laughed softly, pushing a thin straggle of her loose, silvery hair off her face. ‘That’s the last thing you should be worrying about right now, young man.’ She took Ed’s empty bowl and put it in the dishwasher. ‘The fact is, dear, I rather want to leave. I’ve been a lodger here for a while now. Poppy and I want our own little nest, don’t we, darling?’ she murmured, putting out her hand, which the dog nuzzled dutifully and then, smelling a trace of Ed’s cereal milk, licked. ‘Do Mum and Dad know my plans, then?’

Ed nodded meekly.

‘Well, thank you for telling me, dear,’ she replied, stirring as she poured water into the teapot. ‘I shall talk to them about it. You see, I’m still only on the waiting list,’ she added brightly, undeterred by Ed’s blank expression, ‘so nothing is likely to happen for a while yet, not till after the wedding anyway.’

Hearing someone coming downstairs Ed, muttering about having things to do, let himself out of the back door and ran round the side of the house towards the garden.

‘It changes nothing,’ said Charlie, slapping the letter with the back of his hand, some ten minutes later. ‘Good of him to write it, a good effort, but out of the question, of course.’ Serena, who had read the letter first, amid murmurings of surprise and admiration, stared at her husband in disappointment. ‘Is it?’

‘Of course. He needs more education, not a job. It’s up to us to support him – any decent parent would do the same.’

‘But we let Clem –’

‘Yes, and we shouldn’t have done. Clem is *wasting* herself. She’s not even working in that wine bar any more, is she? Which rather begs the question, what the hell *is* she doing? Christ . . .’ Charlie shook his head.

Serena took a deep breath and tried again, resisting the temptation to be side-tracked by an attempt to defend their daughter. ‘But Ed’s trying so hard. He must have overheard us yesterday, poor love. It’s made him finally grasp what’s at stake and he wants to prevent it. Surely, if we *did* let him get a job it would –’



‘– mean we can all stay here?’ Charlie snapped, using the new armour of steeliness with which he now seemed to approach everything, good or bad. ‘I don’t think so.’

Serena, who had been clutching a pot of coffee, set it down carefully in the middle of the table, exactly half-way between her plate of toast and her husband’s. She felt she was at some half-way point herself, that if she moved too suddenly in either direction, some vital, indefinable balance would be lost for good. ‘So, leaving here . . . it isn’t just about money, then?’

Charlie made a sort of hissing sound through his teeth. ‘Money’s part of it, all right, but you know bloody well that it’s about many other things, too, so please don’t demean yourself by pretending otherwise.’ Hearing her gasp at his harshness, he drummed his fingers on the table and stared up at the kitchen ceiling, as if some wisdom or patience might be retrieved from the strings of garlic and dried flowers suspended above them. ‘I tell you what, we’ll put the whole matter of the house on hold till after the wedding, okay? I’ll talk to Peter today – explain that the proposal stands but we’re sitting tight until the end of January. Okay?’ he repeated, using the tone of one acquiescing to the demands of an unreasonable child.

‘What’s on hold till January?’ inquired Pamela, who had been upstairs to get dressed and do her hair.

‘Oh, all sorts of things.’ Charlie abandoned his half-eaten toast and reached for his briefcase.

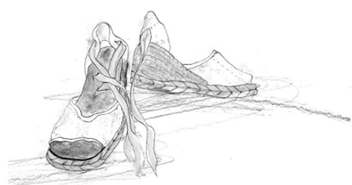
‘Are you in a rush, dear?’ asked Pamela, feigning innocence when she knew, from the atmosphere – like walking into a wall – that they had been arguing again. No doubt because of the test result, which, with set, grim faces, they had told her about on her return from Crayshott the day before. And now the bomb is exploding, she thought, feeling a fresh swell of pity for them, so neck-deep still in the crisis. ‘You’ve ages yet, haven’t you, Charlie dear, unless you’re catching an earlier train?’

Charlie looked at his watch. ‘Do you know? I think I shall.’

‘Well, take your brolly, won’t you? The weather’s going to break today, they said so on the radio.’

‘Did they? Right. Brolly . . . good idea.’ He looked round the kitchen, a little desperately, as if lost suddenly as to the best way of leaving it.

‘Charlie, darling, Serena, this might not be the best moment but . . .’ Pamela patted her bun, as she always did when she was nervous, finding comfort in its silky tightness ‘. . . I gather from Ed that you know, anyway, about me wanting to move to Crayshott Manor. I



just wanted to . . .’

Charlie put his briefcase on the kitchen table and turned to his mother, smiling brilliantly. ‘There will be no need for that, Mum, no need at all.’

Pamela wrung her hands, looking anxiously from Serena’s soft, concerned expression to her son’s tight smile. ‘But I want to go, dears, really, I –’

‘There is no *question*,’ repeated Charlie, almost savagely.

‘Charles,’ replied Pamela, her voice wavering but imperious, ‘you will not tell me what to do.’

Charlie groaned. ‘Mum, the fact is, you want to leave Ashley House because, what with one thing and another, it’s been a stinking year.’ He cast a dark look at the old yellow sofa to which Serena had decamped, curling herself into a tight ball. ‘And because Serena and I have not been the custodians any of us had hoped we would be.’ He cleared his throat, proud suddenly of what he was about to say. ‘Peter and I have all but agreed that next year he will move in here instead. Peter and Helen,’ he repeated, prompted by the bafflement on his mother’s face to wonder if she had chosen that moment to have one of her absent spells. ‘Once Cassie is married, Peter and Helen are going to live here instead. They’ll manage it a whole lot better. It will be marvellous for everyone, especially you.’

‘Marvellous for me?’ echoed Pamela, her expression switching from bemusement to irritation. ‘But I’ve told you, I’m going to Crayshott. I’m on the waiting list –’

‘But that’s silly. You’ll be much happier here with Peter in charge, you know you will. He’s so much more like Dad.’

Pamela’s normally pale face had blanched to sheet white. She glared at Charlie and then at Serena, who was still curled up in the far corner of the sofa, as if she were attempting to disown the proceedings. ‘Do *not* call me silly, Charles Harrison, and do not drag me into whatever plots you’re hatching with your brother. I will *not* be happier with him, as you so crudely put it. Nor do I consider it relevant that he bears more than a passing resemblance to your father. You’re like him, too, you know, especially when you’re being obstinate and arrogant. But your father himself is *irreplaceable*. That I ever allowed that fact to make me desperate – to put you two through so much – is something for which I will never forgive myself.’

‘Pamela, really, there’s nothing to forgive,’ murmured Serena, unfolding her legs and starting to listen intently.

‘A stinking year it may have been,’ continued Pamela, ‘but some years are like that. When



you've lived almost eighty of them you get to know it, believe me. The fact remains that I *want* to move to Crayshott Manor. I shall be able to take all my favourite things, including Poppy. I know I shall be very happy there. I *want* to go,' she repeated, 'and will be most displeased if you start ascribing motives for my departure that do not exist. Now, you'd better go or you'll miss your train.'

Following Charlie out to the drive, Serena was almost exultant. 'You see? It's not us – she wanted to go anyway.'

'It doesn't change anything,' Charlie muttered, casting a forlorn glance at the house, as if he were saying farewell to it already.

'Look, take the day off,' Serena pleaded. 'Talk to Ed with me – about his dear letter.'

'I'll see him tonight,' snapped Charlie. 'I'll explain that moving isn't really his fault, that deep down I'd always felt it was wrong to let Peter give me this place.'

Watching him open the car door and slide into the seat, Serena had the strong, sudden sensation of him sinking away from her, like someone in the last stages of drowning after they have given up the fight. It struck her in the same instant that, despite his solidity and wide, warm, elastic face, he was as delicate as she was, as damaged by all that they had been through. Yet the emphasis of concern had always been for her – from him, from everybody.

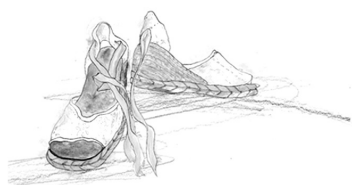
'Charlie . . .' She reached into the car to touch his shoulder, aware that she was reaching across a far bigger and more difficult divide than the car door. Hadn't he reached for her many times? Wasn't that what strong couples did, grabbing each other, going up and down, like a pair of self-balancing scales? Serena found his shoulder and squeezed it, thinking suddenly of Keith lunging for Pamela in the blinding cold of the lake. Wasn't that what love was? Being prepared to reach for someone in hopeless dark?

'I'm late,' said Charlie, removing her arm and pulling the door shut. A moment later he was swinging out of the drive and down the lane, driving so fast that Serena could hear the clunk of metal as the car pitched and rolled among the sharp, stony edges of the pot-holes. By the time she arrived back at the gate a few drops of rain had landed on her cheeks and bare forearms, and a sharp wind was tugging the now flowerless clematis loose from its moorings round the front door.

'He never took his umbrella,' remarked Pamela, watching her daughter-in-law closely, as she came back into the kitchen.

'No. And now it's raining.'

'He needs you, dear,' said her mother-in-law, softly, 'now more than ever.'



‘Yup.’ Serena bit her lip, resisting the urge to say that being needed wasn’t enough, not if the person in need had decided to give up. She picked up Ed’s letter and carefully folded it back into its envelope. ‘I must talk to Ed.’

Pamela pointed at the back door. ‘He wolfed his breakfast and then –’

But Serena was already outside, feeling, as she called Ed’s name, as if she was darting between spinning plates, each one losing its momentum and in danger of toppling to the ground.

She found him, to her intense surprise, in her studio, fiddling with something on one of her shelves. ‘Darling . . .’

He spun round as she entered, holding something behind his back.

Serena, all set to talk about the letter, to say how brave it was, how much it meant to them, was momentarily alarmed. ‘Ed, what were you doing? What are you hiding?’

Ed blushed and hesitated. Then, slowly and with huge reluctance, he pulled his arm from behind his back.

‘A *duster*?’

‘I – I was . . . cleaning.’ He dropped his gaze to the floor. ‘It had all got a bit messy in here and I just thought, well, I guess I thought that if I cleaned it up you might feel more like coming in here and doing . . . what you do.’

‘Oh, Ed, oh, darling . . .’

‘Have you read it?’

‘Your lovely letter? Yes, Dad and I have both read it – thank you, darling, so much – but . . .’ He was staring at her so eagerly she had to look away. ‘But we both feel your education is more important and –’

‘We can’t give this place back to Uncle Peter, we simply *can’t*,’ Ed wailed. ‘At least, not because of me. Yesterday, when I heard you and Dad talking, I couldn’t believe it. I mean, all that stuff Dad said, he doesn’t really mean it, does he?’

‘I’m not sure your father knows what he feels about anything at the moment,’ Serena murmured, unsurprised to hear confirmation that Ed had eavesdropped on their ugly conversation. Glancing at her worktop, she noticed, with a wrench, that it had been tidied to a state of geometrical order that bore no resemblance to the treatment of any workspace Ed had ever occupied. ‘Oh, sweetheart, you’ve made it so nice in here. Thank you.’

‘But from what you’ve just said it’s all pointless, isn’t it? I thought my letter would help, make things better . . .’



‘Your letter was wonderful –’

‘I *meant* it, you know,’ he said bitterly. ‘Every word. I’ve applied for two jobs already – one at an estate agent’s, offering *fifteen thousand* a year. That should be enough, shouldn’t it? If I live here and don’t have bills and –’

‘Ed, darling, we know you mean well but –’ Serena tried to hug him but he fought her off, stumbling against the shelves and knocking over a vase.

‘Shit.’

‘It doesn’t matter. Leave it.’

‘You can’t have it both ways, you know,’ he said viciously, catching the vase before it rolled off the shelf and looking for a moment as if he might hurl it to the floor anyway. ‘It’s, like, you and Dad, for years you’ve hated me for being irresponsible and yet now, when I try, you won’t let me take any responsibility either. It’s fucking not fair.’

‘*Hate* you? How can you think such a thing?’ Serena took a step away from him, reeling. ‘We love you. We just want what’s best for you.’

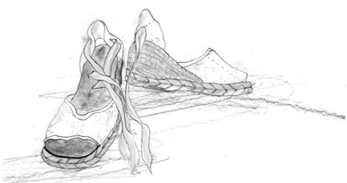
‘Well, let *me* deal with it, then.’ He glared at her and then, with no warning, burst into tears, trying vainly to conceal it with the aid of the duster.

‘You’re right,’ Serena muttered, after a pause, close to tears herself, exhausted by the traumas of the morning and her growing sense of powerlessness over the abhorrent prospect of her brother-in-law taking over their home. ‘We should let you deal with it, but . . . no one has to make any big decision today, or tomorrow, for that matter – even Dad can see that. There’s months to go before the baby’s due. Anything could happen. We’ll work it out *together*. Okay?’

She had slipped her arms round him as she spoke and he didn’t resist. Now, in spite of being so much taller, he was clinging to her, crying too hard to speak. Her son in her arms – in spite of the dire circumstances Serena felt a huge gratitude for the simple beauty of the fact. But he was right. He was eighteen, a grown-up, trying to do the right thing, and he deserved their support.

‘Everything’s changing,’ he muttered, pulling free and blowing his nose on the duster. ‘Everything’s changing, and it’s all my fault.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ she said softly, handing him a tissue and tucking the duster into her pocket. ‘Things were changing anyway.’ She frowned as her thoughts drifted back to Charlie, to all the battles still to be fought, and the realization that most of them were probably related, still, to the chasm left by their little daughter. ‘Life always changes,’ she



added sadly. 'It's one of the few things you can count on.'

Outside the rain was falling more thickly. Serena let out a small cry of dismay, then took Ed's arm. She leant into him for the walk back to the house, fighting the unsettling notion that her love for her son and her husband occupied two worlds, and that she was stretched to breaking-point between them.

In the taxi on the way back from the theatre that night, Helen snuggled against Peter, resting her head on his shoulder, seeking intimacy in the way she had seemed to do lately at every opportunity – almost, Peter couldn't help thinking, as if her tracker-dog instincts had sniffed out his reticence and wanted to expose it.

'So this wretched baby *is* Ed's, but the Ashley House business is all on hold.'

'Yes and yes . . . at least till after the wedding, Charlie said.' Peter's tone was guarded. His brother had called just before curtain-up, sounding angry and bewildered. In the company of friends all evening, there had been no time to sound out Helen on the matter. Since their argument she had gone out of her way not to mention the subject, a sure sign that she was mulling things over and coming to a view.

'So we're to become a great-aunt and -uncle after all. Poor Ed, poor all of them. Do you think,' she continued, after a pause, still, maddeningly, giving no indication of where she thought the new position left them, 'that some people attract bad luck? I mean, like Charlie and Serena . . . After all they've been through and now *this*. It doesn't seem fair. I thank the Lord we're not in their shoes.'

Peter nodded, gritting his teeth. She said things like 'thank the Lord' a lot, these days, not in a normal swearing-adult way but as if she really was making a statement of gratitude to her Maker. It annoyed him intensely.

Helen snuggled closer to him, not seeming to mind his silence or the wetness of his coat, which had received a thorough soaking in their quest for a taxi. 'We must do what we can to help, I suppose, even if that means . . . I'm not saying I desperately want to go and live there, but if it comes to that, if Charlie and Serena really cannot manage financially then I can see it would be our duty to step in and help.' Surprised that the comment, which she had been steeling herself to make for days, should have prompted no response, Helen lifted her head and looked at him. 'Peter? Did you hear what I said?'

'Yes . . . of course,' he replied hastily. 'Of course, and thank you. I knew you'd understand. We're in a difficult position . . . very difficult.' Peter returned his gaze to the



rain-streaked window, thinking, as he had been all evening, not of the multi farious dilemmas facing his younger brother or his wife but of Delia, whom he had met briefly that morning. Just for coffee and a walk. Better than sex, he had told her, during the precious moments she had allowed him to hold her hand. The rest of their time together had been rather more fraught. They had to stop, she had insisted, because of Julian and Maisie. His niece had actually been to her house – sat on the leather sofa and drunk her tea. It was all too dangerous, too close. It broke all her rules. One last time, he had begged her. Could they meet for one last time at their place near the Aldwych – so easy to get to from his chambers – or anywhere she liked? He would meet her anywhere, for one last time. She had agreed eventually and his heart had soared. Another meeting meant there was hope. She might not love him quite as he loved her, but she did like him, he was certain, and hated, as he did, the thought of giving it all up. The Aldwych place, the week after next, just . . . Peter pressed each finger in turn against his knees, as he counted . . . nine days. Two hundred and sixteen hours. Not so long to wait, he reasoned, although as he sat with his loyal wife in the taxi, it felt like an eternity.

By the time they got to Barnes Helen had fallen asleep. When he nudged her she woke like a drunk from a stupor, so reluctant to leave her dreams that he had to shake her almost violently. ‘Oh . . . Peter,’ she muttered, clinging to him, her voice drowsy, ‘I dreamt you’d gone . . . that I’d lost you.’ She opened her eyes properly and smiled. ‘But here you are, all safe and sound.’

‘Of course I’m here,’ Peter growled, rummaging in his wallet for notes. ‘Where else would I be?’

