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BURNING THREAD

A Novel

By

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Submitted in fulfilment of the PhD: Practice as research in
The Contemporary Novel

Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

There is a Persian expression “khood mikesh” that loosely translates to “blood pulls”, a saying that describes the mystical connection of family. There are many ways in which this expression is used, most interestingly to describe family members meeting for the first time who are immediately close or share an inexplicable bond of familiarity, comfort and love. The overarching narrative of the novel is based on this idea; two related women albeit strangers, Layla and Lara, who share a connection despite their generational gap and geographical distance.

The novel starts with a young Layla in Persia weaving a carpet for her lover, a narrative device that allows the novel to travel to modern day London (and Lara) and then full circle to an aged Layla in Iran. Lara searches for something that she cannot quite explain and in doing so the novel explores a number of themes. Thematically it examines the age-old question of whether anyone is ever knowable, the construction of self and memory, and the concept of choice (which is constrained by race, culture, gender and sexuality, among other things). The overarching theme is the complexity of ‘love’ in all its guises and the lies we tell ourselves to justify our behaviour, abuse, addiction, control, infidelity.

The novel is written with three discrete sections and each one reflects different narratives. The novel has an introductory scene that acts as a prologue to introduce Layla, who is then seeded throughout the narrative. The first section Reunion, examines the relationship of Lara and Sebastian, the first policeman to arrive on the scene when Lara’s mother died. While Lara is more present throughout the novel, almost equal weight is given to the POV of both characters, with a view to looking at the construction of their flawed, and at times disturbing, relationship. The second section, Conversation, focuses on the relationship of Clarissa (Lara’s mother), Sam (Lara’s father) and Lyla. It is crafted to show the relationship of the characters partly through the conversation of Lara and Lyla, Clarissa’s notebook and their individual memories. The final section, Beginnings, returns to an aged Lara. It demonstrates how the betrayal by her lover shaped, not only Layla’s life but also the path to Lara’s existence.

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“For the sake of one wish yet unfulfilled he thought
but little of everything else that heaven had granted him.
That is how humans are made! If prayers remain unanswered,
do we ever reflect that it may be for our own good?”

Layla and Majnun,
Nizami Ganjavi

Tabriz, 1941

A drop of blood fell on to the half-finished carpet. Layla had been holding the silk thread so tightly that it had sliced into her skin. She leaned closer to the loom and rubbed the stain, only for it to smudge further into the butterfly. Its delicate cornflower wings were now blemished. She wondered whether Amir would notice the flaw; it was to be a gift for him on their wedding day. She unravelled her fingers from the thread for the first time in hours, stood up from the wooden stool and stretched to relieve the ache in her neck.

Drawn to the window, Layla was blinded momentarily by the brightness of the snow, which had come thick and fast in the morning, and seemed to have covered the whole of Tabriz, across the mountain peaks and enclaves, along the old walkways where thousands of feet once trod. Some said Tabriz was the birthplace of Adam and Eve; as Layla looked out across the cloudless sky, she could almost believe it was the origin of humankind. Everything seemed serene and calm; it was so silent outside, it felt like the world had stopped moving.

She was looking out for the boy who usually brought the post, hoping to see him come down the mountain pass, holding the letter she longed for. All her letters for the past month unanswered. It wasn't even that she could ask her father, Baba hadn't visited them for months. He had sent word that there was unrest in Tehran. Layla knew that already, she read between the lines of the newspaper articles praising the Shah. The world was at war and Persia wouldn't be allowed to stay neutral for long; no matter that the Shah spoke of impartiality, people always

took sides. Layla didn't wish for war but she hoped the unrest was the reason for Amir's silence. She closed her eyes and touched her fingers to her lips, haunted by the memory of the summer.

He pressed his lips against hers in the sand dunes. The gentle sound of the waves, the sea virtually lake-like in its calmness, his body shielding her from the relentless sun. His hand found its way underneath her blouse and rested on the bareness of her flat stomach. The heat of his calloused fingers as he stroked her skin. He groaned, tried not to put the full weight of himself against her but she could still feel the firmness of his body. In all the years they played as children, she couldn't remember a time that he'd touched her bare skin. He shouldn't be touching it now. Except one day she will be his wife and it didn't matter because wasn't she his wife already and had been ever since the day she had met him, eight years old. He had looked at her then with the same intensity as he did now; his eyes so black she could barely see this pupils. The first summer in Ramsar, they had arrived late into the night and she had barely fallen asleep, when the light of dawn touched the room. She stirred, her eyes opening to a face looming close to hers, studying her as if she was one of his butterfly specimens.

I'm Amir, he announced. Her throat was dry and she had to swallow three times before she could answer.

I'm Layla.

I know who you are. We've been waiting for you to arrive.

Now it was her turn to wait. Although Layla's eyes began to hurt from the brightness outside, the mountains always seemed to draw her in, the endlessness of them that held the secrets of the world. And she had always loved the sight of first snow even though the winter ahead would often be long and gruelling. Smoke rose from her grandparents' home, which was in a dell and more sheltered than their house. She hoped they were all right; she hadn't been able to visit for a while and now that the snow had settled, it would be even longer. There were times that Layla wished they had moved closer to the city as her father had urged, away from the remoteness of the village where one could be lost for days on end, but her mother was stubborn. Now with rumours of troops and war, perhaps it was a haven to be hidden away after all. From the corner a muted moan.

'Are you alright Maman-jan?'

'I'm cold,' her mother said, barely a whisper. It was the first time she had spoken since breakfast when she had refused to eat. Layla fetched a log for the fire even though it was already in full blaze, and placed an extra blanket on her mother, who appeared to be asleep again.

Back on the wooden stool, her muscles still stiff, Layla studied the carpet. Would Amir be touched by all the species of butterflies she had crafted for him, carefully copying from the patterns that she had sketched last summer in Ramsar?

She leant against the bed with the sketchpad resting on her knees. It was the third sketch; she sharpened her pencil again to draw the intricate pattern of the butterfly's wing. *Apatura iris*, she read the name aloud. It's the purple emperor, Amir said. She had to stop often to pull the display box closer to her face. There was a time that Amir didn't let anyone touch it, not even Layla, now he didn't refuse her anything. Amir was stretched out on the bed; he had crept in when Foroogh had left an hour ago. They were alone as they had been many times in previous years, except now it was different. Preoccupied with sketching, she hadn't noticed that he had grown bored of his book and was now watching her. His head was resting on his outstretched arm; he reached out and moved the hair from her neck. She startled and smiled, her eyes not leaving the sketch, and he watched the downy hair on the back of her neck reacting to his forefinger, as it traced a circle on her skin. He shifted himself on the bed until his head was next to hers, then he brushed his lips in the same place he'd just touched her. She tried to curb her desire. Growing up their relationship had never been confined, with this new intimacy it was difficult to revert back to a place of boundaries.

Amir...

Layla...

He put his mouth on hers until she shifted away from him. Sometimes she could hardly believe that this was how they were now, no longer the children of summers past but lovers of summers ahead.

It is not right...not proper.

You didn't seem to mind when we were on the beach yesterday. He laughed when he saw her blush and kissed her again. More fervent this time. When he pulled away, he could see the concern in her expression.

You are going to be my wife, Leli.

His hands stroked her arms, that were tanned even though she tried to stay out of the sun, then rested on her ribs.

We mustn't. Her voice was firm, harsher than she meant.

He moved away from her. She feared that he would grow bored of her lack of worldliness; he lived in Tehran, life was different there. Hadn't she felt it summer after summer?

Her half-sisters dressed in clothes that the Europeans wore, and shared conversations that Layla didn't understand. She could sense his irritation even though his face was turned away.

Amir...

Why won't you marry me now Leli, why do we have to wait? My mother was thirteen when she married my father...you're already a year older than she was...all this hiding and secrecy. I want everyone to know how I feel about you, how I have always felt about you.

It was the same argument they had over and over again for the past few weeks. She had begged him not to spoil their time together; she wanted to savour every moment.

You didn't feel that way about me last year.

Words full of a bitterness that she didn't feel. But she couldn't forget. The longing Layla felt when Amir barely seemed to notice her. It was the same longing she now saw in her half-sister's expression. Maryam had lost none of her loveliness except sadness touched the perfect face. Layla had seen no kindness from her siblings, but she wouldn't wish that on anyone.

Will you ever forgive me? His pained words, she knew he felt remorse. She reached out a hand and stroked his cheek.

Layla had told him she forgave him on the day she left the previous summer. But she had made none of the usual promises. And he had watched as she got into the car – unlike in other years where they had agreed to say goodbye the night before because neither of them could quite face the separation – and stood impassive as it pulled away. Yet there were tears in his eyes. She had pressed her palms against the window as though to reach out and soothe him. When the car started to pull away, she turned her gaze to the rear-view window, watching as he faded into the landscape of palm trees and green mountains. Even when she could no longer see him, she imagined that he was still there, staring after her.

Amir asked her again whether they could ever erase the previous summer, the same way he'd begged in his letters in the intervening months.

I have always been in love with you...even last summer, I was a fool. He took her hand and held her palm against his cheek.

One more year, Amir.

He sighed, perhaps from the sadness in her voice, and climbed off the bed pulling her to her feet.

One more year. I'd wait for you forever my love. You are my Layla and I am your Majnun, as we have always been.

She smiled at their childhood nicknames, not having the heart to remind him that the love story ended in tragedy.

I will always be yours, and you mine, he whispered.

Her mother spoke in a raspy voice from the corner where she lay.

‘What it is, Maman?’

But she wasn’t speaking to Layla, she was chanting a prayer. The rules were no longer observed; her mother didn’t face east nor did she have her prayer mat, God won’t care Maman, Layla had told her.

‘Where are you now, Allah?’ Layla whispered.

‘He’s here, Leli.’ Her mother’s voice so clear.

‘Maman?’

‘Allah is here. I can see him Layla, can you not see the brightness in the room?’

‘It has been snowing outside Maman, the light...’ But her mother was already chanting again.

Layla sat by her for a time, until the light in the room faded and her mother’s words became gentle snores; the pain ebbed away from her face as she slept. She thought about making supper, instead she wandered back to her carpet and picked up the threads. On days when Amir’s absence was unbearable she convinced herself that she had to finish the carpet, took comfort that by the time the last thread was weaved, it would somehow be right between them. On days like today, when her mood was more sanguine, weaving gave her no comfort. The weight of her sadness lay within its threads. Her tears and now her blood infused in the pattern. Although it held her happiness too, she had started it in the promise of their future.

‘Layla...it is the most beautiful carpet you have ever woven.’

Her mother’s face was turned towards the carpet; her eyes sharp and clear.

‘It’s not finished yet, Maman.’

There was something about her mother’s face in that moment that made it difficult for Layla to look away.

‘What do you see?’

Her mother smiled.

‘The colours, the lights, the tones...it’s far more beautiful than anything I have ever woven. I didn’t give many things to you my love, and I never wanted you to learn...but when I see what you have created...it’s a touch of heaven.’

Layla turned her gaze from her mother, towards the carpet, wondering whether perhaps her mother was hallucinating. And they stayed that way for a while, both staring at the carpet, so

quiet that Layla assumed her mother had dozed off again except when she checked, her mother's eyes were still fixed on the carpet.

'You're making it for him, Leli?'

'Maman?'

'The man that you love.'

In all the years, Layla had never mentioned him. The summers in Ramsar had not been something Layla liked to speak about, to talk of it would betray her mother somehow, even though it was her mother who had encouraged her to go that first year. It didn't mean that Maman liked it; even as young as eight, Layla understood that. She would have liked to have shared with her mother the pleasure of trips to the beach, learning to swim, the sunsets, the scratchy feel of sand against skin, the grand restaurants, and how in the evening she learned to read with her father's first wife. But even that would have only been half-truths. The summers in Ramsar mattered for one reason. And Layla never wanted to speak of him, for fear that it would ruin what was between them, the mystical connection that everyone in Ramsar could see. Their love was no secret, despite what they believed.

Today was different; today Layla couldn't deny Amir.

'I don't know whether he will ever see it, Maman,' she said after a long while, almost to herself.

'Leli, come here.'

Layla took her mother's bony hand, brought it up towards her mouth, and tried to heat the icy fingers with her warm breath.

'I know that you sometimes question Allah, that you read so much that you don't always believe the sermons you're told but I want you to know... things happen for a reason.'

Layla nodded, not because she believed it.

'Good and bad, you have to believe that there is a reason...it will give you strength when the light seems so dim, when it seems it is about to go out.'

Her mother squeezed her hand so tightly it hurt.

'Baleh, Maman,' she said to appease her.

'Layla, read me the poem.'

'Maman, I've read it to you a thousand times.' But Layla fetched the book nevertheless. She ran her fingers over the title; where was her Majnun? With a sigh, she began to read the verse.

After a while, her mother drifted off to sleep again. Layla stayed there, gently stroking her mother's hand and listening to the uneven raspy breath, then she inched herself off the bed but her mother suddenly reached out to her again.

'Your carpet will bring him much happiness Layla but if it is given in sadness, it will pass the sadness too.'

'I'm not sad, Maman.'

She kissed her mother's forehead, in the same way that her mother sometimes would in random moments of affection.

'Sing to me, Leli.'

'Maman.'

However, Layla started to hum an old love song.

Layla trailed her fingertips across the threads, with no intention to weave anymore that day. She carried on humming as she wrapped herself in her father's old coat. Outside the snow was so deep that by the time she was back inside, the wetness on her shins had already begun to freeze. She lit all the lamps, even though it wasn't quite dark enough, comforted by the smell of paraffin that she had loved since she was small.

Later that night, when Layla climbed into bed with her mother, the biting wind slammed against the shutters, and the moonlight seeped through the gaps casting shadows of unusual light. She had dragged the bed to the living room weeks ago, when her mother could no longer make the stairs. Her mother had watched with a smile; had she really once wished for a boy?

The mattress was warm when Layla tucked herself under the blanket. She moulded her body around her mother who was lying in a foetal position and barely took up any space. With gentle fingers she traced the length of her mother's spine, the flesh so withered that she could feel each bone in the vertebrae. Her mother didn't move. Layla nestled her face into her mother's neck, and took a long inhale. Despite her sickness, she smelt the same as she always had. Of honey.

In the moonlight, they walked along the shore, letting the break in the waves wash against their bare feet. Sometimes he stole a kiss. It was their last night together. They shared their dreams and planned where they would live, the type of home they would have. They talked about where they would travel and how many children they wanted. She told him of her aspirations of being a teacher, he appeased her because he didn't really like the idea of women working. He told her she could do what she wanted, because he was enslaved to her. Their whispers in the darkness

almost became a single sound, one voice. He read her mind, the way they had always been able to, he quoted from the poem, the same lines she had recited to him all those summers ago.

*Those who heard them listened in delight,
and so similar were the two voices that they sounded like a single chant.*

The fire had diminished during in the night; her mother's shivering woke Layla. She crept out of bed when it was close to dawn, stoked the fire and put on more socks. She placed another blanket over her mother, climbed into bed again to get warm. It didn't take long for the room to heat and soon her mother's shivers seemed to still. Layla climbed out of bed a second time, lit the stove and filled the samovar with water. Overnight it had snowed more, the ground was covered by at least a metre. She looked closely again at the butterfly she had crafted, yesterday's stain still visible in the early dawn light but today Layla didn't seem to mind. She would begin on another butterfly, the one that was his favourite. She would replicate in silk thread, every specimen that he had ever caught and kept in the display box. When she closed her eyes she could see him, teaching her about each one, his face so near to the glass that his breath left circles of mist on the pane. How old was he then? Eleven, twelve maybe...yet last year, when they no longer played as children but became something more, he would still study those butterflies and when he remembered she was there, he would seek out her gaze, realise she was already looking at him, and he would smile. In that moment, he was exactly as he had always been. The same Amir.

Layla set about breakfast, even baked some fresh bread, and when dawn finally broke the sun was so bright, it lit up the entire house. She walked to the window, wondering whether she could feel the heat of its rays. She saw him then, the boy that delivered the post, wrapped in his coat that was too big, and wearing a fur hat. She opened the door before he had the chance to knock.

'Salam, Miss Layla.'

'Salam, Hassan.'

'It's so cold everywhere... below freezing, they say there is going to be more snow, worse than last year.'

'How are your parents, Hassan-jan?'

'My father says he saw soldiers in Tabriz last week.'

Hassan stamped his feet against the ground; the sole of his boots seemed to have come away.

'British?'

'Russian.'

They chatted for a while, and when Hassan pulled out a newspaper from his inside pocket, Layla realised there was no letter for her. Hassan started to blow on his hands. She told him to come inside; he refused at first but he always did.

At the table, Hassan warmed his hands on the glass of his tea that Layla gave him. Layla knew that he had chosen the seat with deliberation. He didn't sit with his back to Layla's mother, that would be rude, but he made sure that he didn't look in her direction either. That would have been improper – even though Layla had covered her mother's head with a small scarf – it was *haram* for him to look at her while she lay in bed. Layla laid out the paper, saying she would read for her mother, even though her mother hadn't stirred. She glanced at a few headlines until she paused on an article about the war.

'The British told the Shah to expel any German citizens.'

Hassan nodded, as if he was worldly and already knew.

'The Shah nobly denied the request.'

Journalists were deliberate in their choice of words about the Shah, noble, gracious, splendid, but she wondered what they would write if they had a choice. Layla read the article word for word, worrying that there would be a repeat of the last world war of which the adults always spoke. Thousands of Persians had perished, starved and sick because the Russians and British had seized their food and medical supplies. The bitterness of occupation still resonated among her countrymen; they loathed the sense of entitlement of the British Empire and detested Russia equally.

When she finished the article, Hassan stood up to leave. It wouldn't be right for him to stay longer, but he couldn't resist the fire one last time and held his hands against the flames. Layla went in search of some of her father's gloves, even though they would be far too big.

At the door, Layla tried to look interested when Hassan warned her about the wolves his father had spotted close to the houses on the other side of the mountain.

'My maman says they are looking for shelter.'

On the mention of his mother, Layla fetched a bowl of rice pudding, flavoured with brown sugar and saffron, and sprinkled with crushed pistachios, which she knew Mrs Ebadi liked.

'God be with you, Miss Layla.'

'Goodbye, Hassan-jan.'

Layla watched as Hassan made his way back up the path, placing his feet in the footprints he had made earlier, until he disappeared around the side of the mountain. The frozen air had turned her cheeks pink and her eyes burned. She told herself that her tears were because of the wind, and not because she realised in that moment that even Amir he did write, the letter wouldn't make it to her until the snow began to thaw.

They were under the water, holding their breath for as long as they could, the salt stinging their eyes. Even when they came up for air, she went down again, loved the peace of the undersea. She waited until she felt the burn in her chest before she surfaced, and saw that they had swum a long way out, her feet didn't reach the seabed. She put her hands on his shoulders to steady herself, feeling the tightness of his muscles under her touch. He pulled her closer, drops of ocean on his black lashes. His forehead rested against hers, their mouths parted but didn't touch. His hand cupped the back of her neck, then ran down the length of her spine, his fingers wrinkled from the water. The sun began to sink into the sky, they would need to leave soon. A little while longer, he said.

Layla made herself tea, tore off a piece of freshly made bread, and went back to the paper on the table. But she was too distracted and soon resumed her place on the stool next to the loom. It didn't take long before she was meticulously weaving the silk threads, copying the sketches centimetre by centimetre. Butterfly after butterfly. Hoping that Amir would see her love in the carpet.

Layla could do nothing other than wait. For him. For a letter. That was all she could do. And pray.

Only when a letter finally arrived, it wasn't what she was expecting at all.

Reunion

“He broke my heart. You merely broke my life.”

Lolita. Vladimir Nabokov.

One

Lara watches the apartment building, obscured from the shadows of a shop doorway. The sun is going down; yet at the height of summer, it's still light. She has been waiting for a while, shivering even though it's still unbearably humid, hesitant because she can't remember how she came to be there. She thinks about leaving, more than once, except she's not sure where she could go. Perhaps she should just book a room somewhere; she can't remember whether she has any money. He is there then, at the apartment building, his back to her, fumbling at the keypad. His shirt is damp and creased; the sleeves have been carelessly rolled up, and a thin line of sweat runs along the length of his spine. His hair has grown down over the collar. Everything about him seems older than the memory she has of him. So many years had passed. She can't recall the last time they had spoken, although it doesn't matter to her now, it's just important that she gets to him. She steps out into the light, on to the cobblestones, and holds out her fingers to touch him, but then the door opens and he disappears. Her hand stays momentarily in the air, her fingers are shaking more vehemently now. Underneath the nails, dried blood. She looks about her before stepping back into the shadows. It takes a while before she has the courage to try again.

The apartment is hot and sultry even after Sebastian opens all the windows. It's on the top floor of a building that sits by the riverbank of the capital, a city that seems to be suffocating. He's slightly drunk; he'd like another beer but decides on a shower first. He strips quickly and soon the ice-cold water purges him of the pollution that clings to his skin, his forehead and palms resting on the stone tiles.

In the kitchen, the cat meows and rubs itself against his leg, reminding him of its presence. Not that he needed reminding, the litter's rancid smell had hit him as soon as he opened the door. He sighs at the cat and opens a tin of tuna, despite Sophie insisting on dried food. She'd probably call him petty; he'd tell her that it's the price to pay for always expecting her own way, her cactus on the windowsill, the fridge magnet with a quote by Coco Chanel, the pile of cookery books. And now a cat that he doesn't want to look after.

He is relieved to see a couple of cold bottles in the fridge; he opens them both, drinks the first almost in one gulp, and takes the other to the living room, where he slumps on the sofa. The late evening shadows pass across the brick walls and move along the wooden floor; outside the lights of the city trickle across the river. Sebastian never takes the view for granted. He had seen the apartment long before he knew about the inheritance, pretending to the agent that he was in the market because he'd always wondered what the flats were like along the river. And then a random phone call that his mother had passed and left him all her money. Sebastian didn't even know that she had any because he didn't really know much about her. Just vague memories of their arguments. As a child he would lay in bed – when it wasn't dark enough to fall asleep but he was too afraid to venture out of his room – and listen to their raised voices. His mother always said something along the lines of, I don't belong here. When she had finally left, he had assumed that she'd gone back to France. Decades later, he discovered that she lived in a small house in the next town from their family home. It was then that he came to understand what she meant about not belonging.

Sebastian's father had been too hurt to discuss the separation, and later he couldn't even if he wanted to. Sometimes when Sebastian thinks of her, he tries to remember the details, the sound of her voice, the feel of her skin, her scent. But he can't. He does remember how she pronounced her name, Juliette, with the soft sounding jay, and the way she said his name. No matter how long she lived in England she would never lose her Frenchness.

Alcohol makes you morose, Sophie had said on more than one occasion. He drinks the rest of the beer, wondering what she is doing at that moment in New York. The month apart might do them some good, although tonight he wishes he could also leave London behind for a while. He smiles in the half-light and stretches out on the sofa.

I'm not morose, Sophie.

The apartment is still; the radio plays Chopin, which lulls him to sleep.

A piano sonata is playing on the radio when Lara nears the door to his apartment. She hesitates before knocking; perhaps it's not a good idea. What if she is wrong? What if she doesn't know him or he doesn't recognise her? Another mouthful of bile; her clothes are wet, her skin hot and sticky. She presses the buzzer, holds it down. The door unlocks.

'Yes?' He is frowning, an expression she remembers.

'You're Sébastien.'

At first, he seems not to know her, then she sees a change in his expression.

'Lara?'

She collapses into him and he catches her as her legs cave.

Lara feels something cool against her skin; her eyes are heavy and when she opens them she has no idea where she is.

'It's okay,' a voice says. She tries to focus on the figure that looms above her. There's a look of concern about the face, his eyes seem to be frowning. She's lying down, her body sticking to the leather. She glances around, everywhere so white, she hasn't been here before.

'What happened...'

'You passed out. I carried you inside.'

'I know you...we know each other.'

'Of course.'

'You're Sébastien,' she repeats.

'Yes.'

'You were there...'

'What are you doing here, Lara?' He is looking at her quite intently. She can't control the shaking. She sits up; her head dizzy.

'We were friends—'

'I haven't seen you in years.'

'—weren't we?' Lara is looking at him so earnestly, he hesitates for a moment.

'We haven't seen each other in a very long time,' he says again, then as an afterthought he adds, 'but yes, of sorts.'

'I'm so cold.'

He fetches a throw from the other couch and wraps it around her shoulders. Lara is sitting quite still now, her hands clasping the edge of the seat.

'You're a policeman...you were there...at the house...'

'Well I'm not really a policeman anymore—'

'I thought you would be able to...but I shouldn't have come,' she says, looking about her again, until her gaze drifts to the window and settles on the river.

'Are you hurt?' He says, crouching down so that his face is level with hers. She shakes her head. 'Your shirt?'

She looks down at herself, touches the blood, which is dry and ingrained in the fabric, confused to see it there.

'Let me call a doctor.'

'I'm not hurt. Someone was hurt. I had to see you...'

‘Who was hurt?’

The cat jumps on to her lap.

‘Get down Vlad.’ He’s about to brush the cat off but she stops him, wrapping both her arms around the cat, then she looks back towards the river and grows still again.

‘We were friends, right?’ She repeats again and again.

‘Lara, can you tell me what you’ve taken?’

She tilts her head and studies him; she can see the concern on his face. Impatiently he brushes the hair from his eyes. He keeps looking towards the door, he probably wants her gone. Although, she somehow knows he won’t abandon her.

‘Should I go?’ She asks, not meaning it at all.

Not answering her, he asks how she knew where to find him. She shakes her head, repeating over and over again that she’s in trouble until he sits by her on the couch and takes her hand. She was right; he wouldn’t abandon her. He had been the same before when they had known each other. She looks down at their hands.

‘You need to tell me what you’ve taken.’

Her eyes stay on their hands until he shifts his away.

‘I can call a doctor...or is there anyone else?’

‘No,’ she almost shouts, then immediately regrets the outburst. Perhaps she’s wrong and he will throw her out at any moment. ‘I’m sorry.’

There is a long pause between them. She puts her hand on his knee.

‘We were friends...I didn’t remember... not until I saw you. You by the river, and I heard a laugh...you laugh... and I recognised you. You used to be kind to me back then. I remember that.’

He opens his mouth as though he’s going to ask her something then seems to think better of it.

‘Why don’t I make some tea.’

In the kitchen, after Sebastian puts on the kettle, he reaches for the whisky and drinks straight from the bottle. Lara, in his apartment, after all these years. His phone buzzes. He ignores Sophie; he wouldn’t know what to tell her. Part of him is thinking about getting Lara out of there, but he also wants to know what she wants. She looks afraid, and the blood. Bloodied Lara, just the same as when he had first met her. The image of which had haunted him over the years. He can’t let her go, not like this, without knowing. He takes another gulp from the bottle.

Everywhere is quiet. She should run. But she's so terribly tired. And she chose to come here. It was the first place she thought of, even though it had been a while since she had followed him. He walked past her, laughing; she wanted to see his face. In that moment his name came to her, Sébastien. He put his arm around the woman so that his elbow rested on her shoulder and his forearm hung loosely over her chest. Lovers. It had taken an hour to reach the apartment building. She could tell the place was his by the entitled way he leant forward and punched in the access code.

As Sebastian carries through the mugs, he is taken by the surreal moment in which he finds himself, Lara sitting in his living room, stroking Sophie's cat, that is now nestled by her feet. He hands her a cup of Sophie's camomile tea.

'Try and drink this.'

She startles at the sound of his voice. She bites her lip. She takes the cup.

'Where did the blood come from?' he says, despite planning a gentler approach. She looks down at her shirt again and says nothing.

'What kind of trouble are you in Lara?'

She shakes her head.

'I can't help you if you don't tell me.'

Still nothing.

'LaLa?'

Lara realises then that they must have been close; she hasn't heard this nickname in a long time. A memory comes to her. They're sitting in a café somewhere, she's drinking hot chocolate, the skin on her face tight because she'd been crying for a while, and his face intent and compassionate as he listened to her. The memory makes her eyes sting.

He kneels before her, careful not to touch her. She turns away from him, too embarrassed by the flow of tears which she can't seem to stop, no matter how hard she concentrates.

'I'm sorry,' she says.

He doesn't know if he should touch her but he can't leave her like that. He is careful about how he puts his arms around her. She succumbs to his touch, sinking into him; she's adrift and he's the anchor. They stay that way until his phone buzzes.

'I need to take this.'

Before he leaves, the duplicitous cat jumps on her lap again.

He takes the call in another room.

Lara can hear his voice but none of the words that he is saying. She strokes the cat and looks beyond the window towards the river. The unerring city lights sink into the Thames; it feels like the world is bleeding.

When Sebastian returns to the living room some moments later, Lara asks whether she can stay. He doesn't answer; instead he asks her more questions, which she doesn't answer. She keeps repeating that she just had to find him. He can't tell whether she is lying but he can see that she's afraid, that much is clear. At one point, she gets up, grabbing her dirty bag and heads towards the door.

'Don't go.'

He tells her to follow him and leads her to the spare room, where he makes up the bed. Lara watches him from a chair in the corner. At times he turns to her and gives her a reassuring smile but mostly her face is vacant like she doesn't see him at all. It's two a.m. by the time he finishes and Lara looks ready to collapse.

'All done,' he says, but his eyes are drawn to her bloodied shirt. 'Let me give you something else to wear.'

She looks down at herself.

'May I have a bath? I'm dirty.'

'I only have a shower... but of course...come on,' he says, and leads her to the bathroom where he hands her one of the towels that Sophie had carefully folded. She is sick then, all over herself and the clean towel, and the shaking is now uncontrollable. He takes the towel from her. Lara props herself against the wall and starts to undress. She pulls off her shirt, not seeming to care that she almost naked in front of him; it's him that turns away.

'Does my lack of modesty make you uncomfortable?' Her body sways; she holds her arms out to steady herself, almost in a dancer's pose.

'I can't let you get in the shower like this, you will fall.'

'You can join me.' There is a hint of a smile about her, an offer, and she reaches her hands behind to undo her bra. His hand covers hers.

'Leave it on, Lara.'

She smiles, and steadies herself by clutching on to his arm. He helps her into the shower. The design of the cubicle makes it awkward to steady her and adjust the faucet at the same time, and soon his clothes are wet.

‘Do you think you can stand alone? Perhaps lean against the wall.’

He is trying hard to not touch her, and even harder to ignore how lovely she looks.

Lara’s tears are back; the comedown isn’t helping. She’s violently shaking and her hair covers her face. He feels his own eyes sting; it had always been that way with her.

‘May I?’ he asks.

When she nods, he strokes the hair from her face. He reaches for a sponge, adds Sophie’s soap and brushes it along her shoulders. Her skin is pulled so thinly over her bones that any amount of pressure from him could snap them. He runs it over the scars on her arms and she presses her palms against the tiles, much the same way he had earlier. He lathers her bleached hair, thinking how brittle it had become; the life had been squeezed out of it, the way it had drained out of her.

Lara closes her eyes as his fingers massage her scalp. She remembers that he had washed her hair before, the way one might a lover, she wanted him to be her lover back then, but he wouldn’t.

They are finally out of the shower and he is wrapping the towel around her. He leads her to the bedroom and leaves her sitting on the edge of the bed in the spare room, to fetch a towel for himself and a change of clothes, and to clear up the mess. When he comes back ten minutes later, she hasn’t moved; it’s as though she is incapable of doing so without him.

He finds a clean t-shirt, which he helps her put on, and her wet bra soon soaks through the fabric.

‘You need to get out of your wet... things...your underwear,’ he says, but Lara doesn’t respond.

‘Lara?’

‘Yes?’

‘Did you hear what I said?’

‘My underwear?’

‘It’s wet.’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s not going to be comfortable to sleep in it.’

‘No.’

But still she doesn’t move. He sighs.

‘May I?’ he asks; she gives a slight nod.

He undoes her bra through the fabric. He reaches inside the sleeve of each arm and pulls down the straps. He puts the bra on the bed without looking at it.

He looks away as he reaches under the hem of the t-shirt, and pulls on the fabric of her knickers by the hip, as quickly as he can. Somehow the harder he tries to not look and touch her, the more intimate it feels.

‘Let’s get you into bed, Lara.’

When he pulls her to her feet, there’s a wet imprint of her on the duvet. The movement seems to wake her momentarily because she shifts the covers aside and climbs inside. He wraps the duvet around her, hoping that it will help the shivering, even though he knows the tremors have nothing to do with the cold. Lara puts her arms around him and won’t let go.

‘I’m scared,’ she whispers.

‘Nothing is going to happen to you here.’

‘Please stay.’

‘Lara...’

‘Please, just lie with me. I’m too scared to be alone...’

He sits for a while contemplating.

‘Just for a little while.’

He stretches out on the bed next to her, on top of the covers.

‘We were close?’

‘It was a long time ago, Lara,’ he says with a sigh.

‘But we were, weren’t we?’

‘You were alone... lost, you needed help.’

‘And you helped me?’

He doesn’t answer for a while, and from her breathing he thinks that she may have fallen asleep.

‘I can see bleeding.’

‘Where did the blood come from?’

Her breathing is heavy. Still, the right thing to do would be to call a doctor or one of his former colleagues but he can’t bring himself to do it. It would feel like a betrayal.

‘Lara?’

‘My mother was stabbed, wasn’t she?’

‘You say that like you don’t remember.’

But she’s lightly snoring, already asleep. He turns on his side to study her. She looks different, yet oddly the same. Older, wearier, more lovely. He had cared for her once. Deeply.

He reaches out his fingertips, about to stroke her face and then thinks better of it.

Sebastian inches away until he is standing over her, and it's only when his mobile phone beeps that he creeps out, tiptoeing towards his own room where he collapses on his bed too tired to undress.

I miss you.

It's evening in New York. His thumbs hover over the phone. Before he can find the right words, she sends another message.

How was your day?

Again, he hangs back. He sees that she is typing again.

You there?

OK, perhaps you're already asleep. If I don't speak to you, hope you sleep well. I love you.

He lies back now thinking of Sophie. She wants more from him; he had been considering for a while that he should give it to her. He keeps thinking of her words, men have all the time in the world and you are younger than me.

He tries to sleep but he's overtired. Resigned he gets out of bed again and wanders back to the spare room. He hadn't pulled the blinds in there earlier, and the streetlights cast a muted shadow across the bed. Lara is asleep on her stomach, half covered by the duvet, her bare calf hanging over the edge. He leans in closer to her face. Her lips are slightly parted and her breath is heavy. He lingers as if watching her sleep will help him figure out what the hell she's doing there.

Sebastian has not seen her in over ten years; they had met in the worse circumstances. She was barely a teenager back then, he wasn't that much older himself. She had lost her mother; how could he have turned her away? One day, she left. Disappeared. At first, he hadn't been worried, she'd do that, go missing sometimes. But after a while, when there was still no sign of her, he grew worried. He wanted to ask her stepfather but what would he have said? He thought for a time that she was spiting him; he decided to let things play out, assuming that she would be back in touch when she needed him. Except he hadn't expected that it would be ten years until that happened.

Now Lara is back, entirely incoherent about how she came to be there, or why – and that worries him, even more than the blood all over her. What is he supposed to do with that? The only thing he knows with any certainty, is that she's an addict. He reaches out and strokes her hair from her face, his earlier reticence forgotten.

Lara turns over, throwing her arm casually over her head. Sebastian holds his breath momentarily. When she doesn't stir he studies her for a while longer. He likes that he can keep looking at her uninterrupted, yet as she sleeps, a prickliness takes hold of him. He fetches a glass of water then heads towards the study; there's no way he will sleep tonight.

For a long while, Sebastian reads in his office and the apartment is calm and still, until Lara screams and startles him. There are a string of words, none of which are discernible. He shuts down the computer before hurrying to her.

'No,' she screams louder as he reaches her.

'Lara.' She is lost in another place. 'Lara.'

'No. Stop. No. I'm sorry.' Her breath is short and fretful, and when he takes her shoulders, her skin feels damp. He has to shake her hard to wake her. Her imprisoned eyes scan the room and then she stares at him but he can see that she hasn't registered who he is.

'Lara, wake-up, it's me.'

'Seb?'

'You were having a nightmare,' he whispers, as if she's still sleeping.

She nods, trying to calm her breathing.

'Do you remember what it was about?'

She looks at him awhile, still shaking under his touch, until he can't bear it and moves his hands away. She places her own hands where his have been, hugging herself in the darkness.

'He found me.'

'Who?'

Lara shakes her head.

'I feel awful,' she says, and looks awful in that beautiful way that Lara always looks.

'Stay with me. Please. I don't like the dark. Please, Sébastien.'

He slips in beside her, she presses herself against him and soon she is asleep again. His eyelids feel heavy and his last thought is that he will figure it all out in the morning. Outside the Thames laps in the moonlight.

Two

The duvet lies crumpled on the floor; the sunlight streams through the gaps in the blinds and the heat on his bare skin wakes him. Sebastian doesn't sleep in this room despite it being the master bedroom; there are too many windows and the weather has a way of seeping inside.

He finds Lara in the kitchen, fiddling with the coffee machine. She's still wearing his t-shirt, her legs long and thin; the bruises on her arms a deeper purple in the morning light. He looks around for his phone, not remembering where he had put it the night before.

'It's gone twelve,' she says, as though she can tell what he was thinking. She opens the lid of the machine and starts to look for the capsules.

'God, really?'

She nods but doesn't look in his direction.

'Here let me do that.' As he moves towards her, Lara moves away.

'Where are my clothes? It's time for me to go.'

He follows her, puts his hands on her arms. Lara flinches.

'It's okay. It's going to be okay.' He waits for her to relax. 'Come on.'

Sebastian leads her to the breakfast bar, his hand lightly on her elbow, and pulls out a stool for her. Lara perches, ready to make a run for it at any moment. Her eyes are clear, despite the agitation, but she's trembling.

'I need to go,' she says again, although this time she sounds less convinced.

'Let's make some coffee and then we can talk. Besides your clothes are still wet, I need to put them on the balcony.'

Lara nods and her eyes drift towards the window, looking out on the river the way she had the night before. He fills the cups to the brim then takes them to the bar and swivels her stool so that she is facing him. They are close but not touching, and sip coffee for a while, not talking. There is no colour in her cheeks. She has scraped her hair back so tightly that the skin on her face looks even more taut, the papery texture makes her look older than she should.

'Don't you need to go to work?' she asks, her voice odd in the quietness that had passed between them.

'I'm not working at the moment...'

'Not on shift?'

'I'm not on the force anymore.'

She looks at him, her chin tilted in a familiar gesture. He wonders whether she is going to ask him about it and hopes that she doesn't. He needn't have worried; she says nothing at all. After a while he asks her whether she's ready to talk about why she is there, hoping that somehow, she will be more forthcoming this morning. Lara bites her lip, but says nothing.

'I want to help you but I can't if you don't talk to me,' he says.

'Perhaps no one can help me.'

He takes her hand. She stiffens.

'Lara?'

'What happened last night?'

'What do you mean?'

'We were in the same bed. I didn't have my underwear on.'

'It was wet from the shower you insisted on. You had a nightmare Lara, you asked me to stay...don't you remember?'

She presses her fingers to her eyes and shakes her head.

'I'm sorry,' she says.

They sit in silence for a while.

'Your tattoos...'

She turns her arm so that her wrist is resting on her knees, and she glances at the artwork on her skin that stretches from the inside of her wrist all the way up her inner arm.

'Butterflies.'

He laughs.

'I can see that.'

She keeps staring at her arm.

'I know you are probably thinking how cliché—'

'Nothing you ever did was cliché.'

'Everything about me is a cliché.' She sounds bitter even though she laughs.

'Tell me about the butterflies.'

She looks at him.

'I used to sketch them from memory. Sometimes I didn't even know I was doing it. That's why I have them.'

Lara looks away then, embarrassed.

'Do you still sketch? I remember you were very good.'

She shakes her head.

'These images have something to do with her.' She says it so quietly, he thinks that he may have misheard her.

'Her?'

She doesn't answer.

'What do you mean?'

Her eyes stay focussed on his face.

'Lara?'

His head is beginning to ache; it's barely past midday and he is desperate for a beer. Lara's eyes are quite still as she looks beyond the pane, and he notices a pulse in the side of her neck.

'I remembered...when I saw the blood, that my mother was stabbed.'

'Whose blood did you see?' he asks, deliberately ignoring the reference to her mother.

'I don't know.'

'Is that why you are here?'

She shakes her head again; he sighs and wonders whether she can sense his frustration. The longer she's there, the more anxious he will become. And yet he is the one that wouldn't let her leave. Not without knowing why she had come back or why there was blood on her. The familiar stirrings of contradiction that defined them before. It takes him a while before he asks the next question, conscious to keep his voice even.

'Before you came here last night, a girl had been stabbed very near here. Could that have anything to do with the blood you're talking about, the blood on your shirt?'

She laughs, a bitter sound again, he doesn't remember her laughing like that before.

'I thought you weren't a policeman anymore.'

'It was on the news, one of my mates was the responding officer.'

She gives him a cold, unnerving look.

'You think I stabbed someone?'

He tries not to look away from her.

'It's just...well I haven't seen you in ten years, and the day you come back, with blood on your shirt, a girl is stabbed a few streets away. You said you saw blood...'

'Perhaps I had a nose-bleed.'

'Do you get nose bleeds?'

'Sure.'

It's not the first time he has questioned someone hostile, no use fighting fire with fire.

'You know, your tattoos...they're nice,' he says with a deliberate smile. The change of subject works because she looks at her arm and returns his smile.

'Thank you.'

'Do you know each of the species?'

'Would it sound odd if I told you that I have never found out...I didn't want to spoil the illusion of them. I think they are something to do with my mother.'

He realises that is what she meant earlier.

'May I?' he says, and she nods. He takes hold of her wrist and leans closer to her skin. He hadn't realised at first the infinite amount of detail that had gone into every butterfly. They were small, yet the tattooist has gone to great lengths to intricately draw the structure of each wing, the way a scientist would record an insect. They look alive. He studies them for a while longer; they are vaguely familiar. Absentmindedly, he traces the pattern with his forefinger. Perhaps she used to sketch them when he knew her.

'I feel awful.'

When she speaks it reminds him that he's still touching her, and he abruptly lets go of her hand. His reaction makes her smile. Then she licks her lips, holds her palm to her mouth and looks as though she might be sick.

'When did you last use?'

There is a moment in her eyes when she thinks about lying.

'This morning. I mean...yesterday morning. I don't exactly remember.'

'What did you take?'

She turns away. The tattoos are not the only blemishes on her skin. He takes her arm, and this time runs his forefinger along the pinkish bumps and scabs.

'Heroin. I know, I'm old school that way.'

She pulls her arm away from him then places them both behind her back.

'I can't cope.' Lara doesn't look at him as she says it.

'Do you have anything here?' He glances towards her bag discarded in the hallway. She fetches it, tosses it on the breakfast bar.

'I didn't mean—' He shakes his head.

She picks it up again and drops it on the floor by her feet. He exhales a long breath.

'I'm aching.'

'I can give you something for that.'

'Painkillers are not going to cut it, Seb.' She looks away from him, part mocking, part angry.

‘Stronger than painkillers. Something to relax you.’

‘Where are my clothes? I think I should go.’

Lara looks down at her outfit, weighing up whether she can get away with going out the way she’s dressed. Sebastian couldn’t bear the sight of the blood; he had to clean her clothes even though he didn’t know what he was washing away. He should probably have burnt her shirt. He remembers in that moment that Lara used to burn things. I’m a little arsonist, she used to mock. She’s off the chair again. One moment still, the other frantic.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I need to get out... besides, you don’t want me here.’

Sebastian sighs. Perhaps it’s true.

‘I didn’t say that... and, where will you go?’

Lara stops, confused, where would she go?

‘I don’t know.’

‘Look. Let me get you something for your pain and let’s figure this out.’

Lara had heard that from him before; he’d said it to her many times. Whenever she ran to him, because the world was getting too loud and claustrophobic, he’d say, let’s figure this out.

‘It will be alright for now, until we can get you on a programme of methadone or whatever they use these days.’

She thinks better of arguing against his presumption. He always wanted to fix everything but she needs a place to stay and at least she will be safe with him.

‘Okay.’

‘I have one condition.’

Before Sebastian has a chance to say what it is, she is pressing her body into his. He pushes her away.

‘Not that.’

She puts her hands in his hair.

‘Stop. I just want to talk, that’s the condition.’

Later, they are on the couch. She is stretched out now, her head resting on his lap, her body devoid of tension. There’s something familiar about them like this, her being tactile, him restrained. One of her arms is wrapped around his calf, the other discarded casually over her head. She senses that he isn’t entirely comfortable but he doesn’t move either.

Every one of the windows in the apartment is open; there hasn't been such a warm summer for years.

She likes the feel of his thigh muscle under her head. She remembers that he used to be a runner and decides to ask him about it later. She had gone with him once. Determined to keep up with him despite the burn in her chest, unfit because she always bunked off PE and had stopped dancing when her mother died. This apartment would be lovely for dancing, all the light, and the polished wooden floors; she can't remember the last time she saw a ballet. Where were her ballet shoes? The last time she had seen them they were hanging on the back of a door by the pink satin ribbons.

The radio is playing a pop song; Lara asked Sebastian to change it from the classical channel, she said the melodies were too sad.

"Funny you're the broken one and I'm the only one who needed saving."

Sebastian smiles when Lara sings along to lyrics now and then. He wonders whether she still has her guitar.

'Lara.'

'Hmmm.'

'Lara...can you tell me what happened yesterday? I mean what happened to make you come here?'

She can't answer, she's too tired. She doesn't know.

'Lara.'

'Yes.' Her voice is coming from a long way off. Far away. From the corner of the room.

'What happened yesterday?'

'I don't remember.'

'You don't remember?'

She's shaking her head. She wants to remember. She wants to tell him that.

'I was outside here and I had to get to you. And they were coming for me.'

'Who?'

'What?'

'Who was coming for you?'

'I don't know.'

'How did you know where to find me?'

'What?'

'Lara, open your eyes a moment. How did you know where I lived?'

Her eyes are bloodshot, the eyes of someone who is deep asleep and wakes suddenly.

'I don't know. I...I followed you once.' She closes her eyes again.

'No Lara, look at me. You followed me? When?'

'I...Seb, I don't remember. I don't know.' She starts to frown and tries to move away from him.

'It's okay,' he says, putting his hand on her cheek.

It's the first time that he has touched her since they drank coffee earlier. She's comforted by the feel of his palm against her skin, until he snatches his hand away as if her skin had burnt him. Lara frowns.

He presses his fingertips to his eyes.

'It's okay,' he says again.

Lara succumbs to sleep. He studies her face, she looks peaceful and then she lets out a long, deep sigh.

The late sunlight casts a different glow in the apartment. Earlier Sebastian had carried her to the bedroom and then watched her, as the afternoon air grew more oppressive.

'I'll come with you,' Lara says.

'I'm just going to get some food. You should stay here.'

Sebastian puts his hands on her arms. He had hoped that she would stay asleep, but as soon as he crept away from her, it was like she could sense his absence.

'No. No. I can't be here alone.'

She strains against him and he sees the panic in her.

'I will get you what you need. But you can't come.'

'Seb...please.'

'Your clothes are still damp.'

'I don't care.'

'I do.'

There is something about his tone that stops her. Something familiar, but she can't quite fathom what it is.

‘Can I have a drink? I mean a proper drink. It’s legal now.’

The last part she says with a laugh, he barely smiles. Back then, she used to watch him pour whisky after a long shift, *let me have some*. He would hold the drink away from her; *you’re too young*. He fetches two glasses of whisky. They sit on the edge of the bed and drink for a while. He tells her that he won’t go out and orders a takeaway instead.

Lara can barely eat. She’s agitated. She knows someone in Soho, not that she knows the exact street, but she’ll know it when she gets there. She glances at Sébastien, who is eating every mouthful with deliberation, and considers how she can get him to take her. But he won’t; he’s a policeman irrespective of whether he’s working or not. She studies him a while longer; it’s easier when he isn’t looking at her. She doesn’t think he’s changed much from when she first knew him, although there’s a cynicism about his expression that she doesn’t remember from before.

‘How old were you when we first met?’

‘That’s an odd question, Lara.’

‘How did we become friends?’

Sebastian stops chewing and looks at her.

‘Why don’t you remember?’

Lara looks unsure of herself. Sebastian sighs and wonders how they came to be here, like this.

‘Is it the drugs Lara?’

She tilts her head and watches him through narrowed eyes.

‘If I say it’s not the drugs, is the only alternative... that I’m lying?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘No.’

‘You think that I am lying?’

‘You keep saying that you don’t remember.’

‘I don’t.’

‘So what other reasons could it be other than the drugs?’

‘What if I said I didn’t know.’

‘I’d ask you what you meant.’

He thinks of her temper. The blinding rage and the tears. Is she angry? Is she out to seek revenge for something he did or didn’t do years ago? Is she suffering from some kind of post-traumatic stress?

'You think I'm lying.' Her voice now is quiet, almost defeated and she looks at the plate of uneaten food. Her remembers she would always look him directly in the eye when she told a lie.

'No, I don't think you are.'

She meets his gaze.

'Do you think the drugs might be the reason you can't remember?' His tone is gentler.

How can Lara tell him it isn't the drugs? For years now, she is plagued by images, and hollows, voids of places she has seen or been, always on the periphery, never quite fathoming what is real what isn't.

'I think it might be the drugs.' It's the easiest answer.

After a while he says, 'We didn't become friends in the best circumstances.'

Three

Sebastian walks alongside the river that looks dense and bleak despite the late sun glistening on the water's surface, and he wonders, as he so often does, how many people have died in those brackish waves. Outside the air isn't any less oppressive than the apartment but the suffocation is from the inside.

He thinks of Lara alone in his apartment. He remembers her as she was on the day that they met. She had blood on her hands. It was her mother's blood. The stain of it almost translucent against her sallow skin. It was that image that came to him in his dreams, her standing over her mother, and looking at him with her sharp, green eyes. The room always looked impossibly white in his memory; the figure stood quite ghostlike. Pale. Willowy. Fierce.

Clarissa Saunders was stabbed one afternoon in November. Life seeped out of her as the wind drove the final leaves from the trees and the frozen mist slayed the last of the summer blooms. The Surrey police had investigated for months; everyone cared. Now it was just another cold case, unsolved like countless others and no one cared. Except he still did; he thought of Clarissa often, even during Lara's absence. Most officers said that the details of their first murder case stayed with them; his was certainly etched into his memory.

The day that Clarissa Saunders died, Sebastian was still a beat officer in Godalming and had been taking a statement next door. Mrs McCarther – he even remembers the name of Lara's neighbour – was describing a bracelet in laborious detail, and he was thinking about his transfer request for the Met. When Sebastian had signed up to the force after dropping out the first year of university, he hadn't thought the job would solely be dealing with drunken teenagers who either threw punches or vomit in the sleepy villages around Guildford. That day, Sebastian was on early shift and desperate for work to be over. Instead he had to deal with Mrs McCarther's tears, handing her tissues between sentences. He remembers the room vividly, the floral curtains, the redbrick fireplace, the pile of old newspapers. He sat there wondering why she hadn't thrown them out. Sebastian told her they that would do their best to find her items; they both knew it wasn't true.

They were wrapping up the interview when he heard a feral, pain-filled scream, which reminded him of a fox cry in the stillness of insomnia. Mrs McCarther had looked up from her

tissue. There was a second scream, louder and even more frantic than the first, followed by incoherent shouting. He remembers thinking that it might be a domestic because even in sleepy towns there were raging hands.

Maybe I... He had said and nodded towards the door.

Yes, yes...

Help me. A plea this time.

He had hurried towards the door with Mrs McCarther following him. There were only two other properties at the end of the cul-de-sac; Mrs McCarther lingered in the doorway as he jogged down towards the neighbouring house.

It's the Saunders' place, she had called out after him.

His thick rubber soles crunched against the gravel drive, and when he reached the door, which was ajar, he realised that the hysterical shouting was coming from a single voice.

Hello?

Leaning inside he saw the bloody smears, his pulse quickened. On the side cupboard, a set of keys, a chain with a ball of faux leopard fur.

Help me.

He crossed the threshold. There she was, the source of the scream, just a girl. Blood on her hands. She was bending over a woman whose blood had bloomed out into a giant poppy against her faded, lemon shirt. He remembers flinging himself down, almost shoving the girl aside, and putting his ear to the woman's mouth. No breath from the still body.

Call an ambulance. He had tried to find a pulse, could he feel anything? Something faint perhaps. Covering her mouth with his mouth and those beseeching eyes that would haunt him for the rest of his life. His first dead body.

Call an ambulance. He had shouted at her.

I already have.

What's her name?

Mummy. Her voice quiet and resigned; it belonged to an entirely different person to the one that had screamed moments ago. He had looked at her then, sharp green eyes.

Her name?

Cee-cee...Her name is Clarissa but they call her Cee-cee. Mummy. The last word spoken to the dead woman.

Cee-cee. He had called to the body that lay before him. Cee-cee, Cee-cee, can you hear me, Cee-cee? Saying the words even though she couldn't hear him and would never hear him or anyone again. Get a towel, quickly.

He remembers the sound of the siren. The girl had hurried back with a towel and handed it to him. He had shoved it against the wound to stop the blood, not thinking straight. Not worrying about whether it would do more harm than good. Not thinking of fibres contaminating the wound and the crime because, the first rule the sanctity of life. Even though there wasn't any life.

Hold it here.

The bloodied, guilty knife lay discarded, perverse against the pale silk carpet. Her eyes followed his, but it wasn't the knife she saw.

There's blood on her carpet.

He had moved away from the girl and her mother, talked into the radio receiver on his left collarbone and called for backup.

He remembers the paramedics coming through the open door.

In here.

A man and woman rushing towards the lifeless body. The woman moved the girl aside and signalled for Sebastian to take her. The girl looked at her hands as though, somehow, she had only just seen the blood. He followed her sightline and looked at those hands. She turned them over and was looking at her palms; he noticed the paleness of the skin on her inner wrist, soft and pure. Her breath became quite shallow.

Get her out of here. The other paramedic had called over his shoulder. Sebastian had led her outside towards the ambulance. She struggled for breath; he remembers almost having to catch her, she was like a drunk who hit the air for the first time. Manoeuvring her to the edge of the ambulance, just as she started to scream for her mother. Not knowing what else to do, he sat next to her, put his arms around her.

He remembers the heat of her face against the wool uniform and the stillness of her body as it rested against his. The agonised wait even though it was barely minutes before CID arrived. Another PC from his unit placed blue and white tape around the perimeter. He had tried to set himself free but the detectives had signalled to him to stay with her and headed towards the house. The female paramedic came out, and when she reached them she knelt so her face was level with the girl's.

My name is Annabel. Can you tell me your name?

Nothing from the girl in his arms. Annabel had looked at Sebastian who had shrugged his shoulders.

She's in shock. Annabel mouthed. He nodded. He lent forward so that his head was touching the girl's, his ear close to her mouth but not moving his arms away from her body.

Can you tell me your name?

Lara. Between sobs.

Okay, Lara. I'm not going to go far but you are going to have to let me go for a few minutes so that Annabel here can take a look at you.

He had tried to loosen her grip.

Please Lara.

She let go. In that moment, he hadn't known whether it was shock or anxiousness but he felt a sudden emptiness and wished that he were still holding her. Annabel had taken hold of both of Lara's hands. He started to walk away.

No. Don't go.

I'm not going anywhere far, Lara. I'm going to talk to the officer inside, I will come straight back. Okay? Annabel will look after you until I get back.

Annabel placed a red industrial blanket around Lara's shoulders. He wondered whether red was a deliberate choice; it had been his favourite colour until that day.

He remembers seeing the body lying as it was and joining the CID officers in the kitchen, Lara's bloody hand-marks on the counter and on the phone. He doesn't recall what was said; he was probably in shock himself although he tried hard to pretend he was okay. After a while the DS came to find him.

The girl says she wants you. We can't get anything out of her. He followed the DS back towards the ambulance.

Lara, this is PC Lawson, the officer you were asking for.

Hi Lara. Speaking with a calm voice, the way he had been trained.

She's dead, isn't she?

I'm sorry Lara. He said, keeping eye contact. Her eyes were then oddly dry.

Your father is on his way home. The DS said.

My stepfather.

Sorry. Your stepfather.

She had looked down at that point, she was done with the conversation.

Do you think you can tell us what happened, Lara? Sebastian had said. A car pulled up alongside the ambulance. A man, dressed in a dark suit, ran towards them.

Lara, oh my god, what's happened? Are you alright? What—

The DS stepped forward.

I'm Detective Sergeant Geoff Lonsdale. You are?

Tim. Tim Saunders. What happened...I live here...someone called me...Lara's my daughter.

Stepdaughter, Sebastian had thought.

Mummy's dead, she announced.

Still no tears.

Later when Sebastian lets himself in, there's no noise. Lara's door is shut. He opens it slowly; she hasn't moved.

In his room, he collapses face down on the bed, too tired to undress.

Shallow images flicker one after the other. Lying white on the hospital stretcher. Dead eyes. Blood-drained face. She's suffocating. They're suffocating. No air. His mother is baking cookies, smashing plates; the cat spills the milk, bottles and bottles empty on the floor in floods, large engulfing puddles, dripping through the floorboards.

He is sitting on the middle step of the narrow stairway; his mother's case is by the door. They are arguing in farcical whispered voices. He doesn't know whether he should laugh or cry. His mother's heels bang against the stone floor of the hallway, tiles that she had chosen. She always looks too glamorous for their life. His father is chasing her, begging.

Please Juliette.

His mother picks up the case, turns to face her husband. She sees Sebastian on the stairs. His father turns to face him. His mother opens her mouth and closes it again then opens the door.

Mama?

She turns and looks at her son.

Sébastien, Mama will call you.

Bye Mama. He calls out against the closed door. He runs to his room, his feet stomping on the stairs, his father's voice calling him.

Sebastian, *Sebastian, Sebastian.*

Four

‘Sébastien.’ Lara looks down at him, dressed in her own clothes; the blood a faded pink stain. He wishes he had burnt it.

‘You were dreaming.’

She hands him a cup of coffee; he sits up and takes a sip. He likes that she remembers how he takes it.

‘It was a long night,’ he says as though he’s talking to himself. Then, as an afterthought, he asks her how she is feeling. Instead of answering, she tells him that she hadn’t realised he had such a lovely view; an odd thing to say given that she’d been looking out of the window since she arrived.

‘Why are you up so early?’ he says instead.

‘It’s seven; I seem to remember that as the time you always got up when you weren’t on shift. You ran...?’

Lara brings her thumb towards her mouth and starts to chew the skin around her nail. *Stop biting your nails*, he used to tell her all the time, but particularly when she was sketching and would stop to analyse her work, tearing the skin away with her teeth until she bled.

‘I think I should leave.’

Sebastian drinks more coffee before he attempts to speak.

‘Where will you go?’

She looks away from the window and towards him.

‘I’m not sure. Home I guess.’

‘Home? Do you live near here?’

She shakes her head.

‘Where do you live, Lara?’

She shakes her head again.

‘Where’s Tim?’

‘Tim?’

She looks like she has no clue who Sebastian is talking about. But then announces that Tim is dead with an emotionless expression.

‘God, I’m sorry Lara. When—’

Lara pinches the bridge of her nose, her signal that she doesn’t want more questions.

‘You don’t have to go.’

‘I know it’s just—’

‘You aren’t well.’

‘I’m fine.’ But her voice is hesitant. ‘I can’t stay here.’

He remembers that just before she disappeared, she needed constant reassurance. *Promise you won’t leave.* He understood what it was like for her; she’d lost her mother.

‘Of course, you can stay here.’ He puts down the coffee, gets out of bed, and reaches for his clothes. Lara wanders over to the window and faces away while he gets dressed. It all seems like a false modesty after the last couple of days.

‘You have a life. You have a relationship.’

He stops short of denying it.

‘She’s away for the summer. Besides, it’s not serious.’

‘It looks serious.’

‘Let’s not get into all that now. You came to me because you are in trouble and because you know I’ll help you. You are safe here. With me.’

He joins her at the window, looking at her through the reflection. They aren’t the same any more. They are both adults. She looks away from him but as a concession, leans her body against his. They stand for a while contemplating the river until she moves away from the window, quite suddenly, as if the view had become unbearable.

‘Why don’t I fix us some breakfast and we can talk? You promised yesterday but you really weren’t very forthcoming.’ He smiles to take the sting out of his words. She smiles at his smile.

‘I can’t carry on like this—’

‘I have what you need.’

‘I don’t know, Seb.’

Sebastian makes breakfast but she barely touches her food, just sits at the kitchen bar, sipping coffee and watching him. He eats to give himself time to think and finds that he’s quite hungry. She’s looking at him with a half-smile.

‘Lara you need to eat something.’

‘I need to take something.’

‘And you will when you’ve eaten.’

Lara glances at the food with a reluctant look on her face. To appease him, she picks up the bacon sandwich and takes a bite. It's smothered in tomato ketchup; she used to eat it that way. It looks as though chewing takes an unconscionable amount of effort. His eyes brush over her skeletal frame until they focus on her face, which is so drawn that her eyes look even larger in the hollows. The bruises on her arms and legs are fading but now he notices the angry patches of dry skin.

'What, you don't like what you see?'

'I was staring, I'm sorry.'

He leaves then. Locks himself in the bathroom.

'Seb?' Lara is at the door, pressing against it, her voice soft. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it—'

He opens the door.

Lara can't read his expression, and she thinks perhaps he wants to choke the life out of her. Instead he pulls her towards him, and holds her almost too tightly. She succumbs, buries her face in his chest, and inhales, he smells of sweat and something citrus. Pleasant and vaguely familiar. She has an image of them, standing in the hallway of his old house.

They were by the door, she was crying, desperate to leave, but he wouldn't let her. He was holding her, too tightly, suffocating her, she told him she couldn't breathe, but when he let go, she missed the feeling of him. She had buried her face in his chest again and his arms reluctantly went about her, more gently that time.

They are sitting on the balcony. Beneath them, tourists are milling around the riverfront. Some are sitting sharing a glass of wine; others are taking selfies against the backdrop of Tower Bridge. Sightseeing boats move up and down the Thames; today the brackish river looks calm, the sun is staying hidden in the ash sky. But the air is hot and humid.

'Remember what we said Seb, we take it in turns.'

He had suggested this as a ploy to get her to open up. The morning had gone by without him learning anything.

'I remember, Lara. So, come on, answer mine first.'

'Where do I begin?'

From the moment you left, he wants to say. 'Why don't you start with what led you to my door, how did you even know where I lived?'

Her eyes are focussed on the wine; she holds the glass up to the light.

‘That’s two questions. A while back, I saw you walking down by the river. You were near the Southbank. I recognised you. At first, I couldn’t remember from where, then I remembered...your house, with the Georgian, bay window—’

‘You didn’t really remember me but you remembered my house?’

‘It suddenly came to me that we had been close, which sounds strange now, given the circumstances... I guess I remembered that you looked out for me after my mother. And I couldn’t quite figure out how I’d forgotten. Anyway, you looked like you but different. I don’t know... it’s odd really. I found myself following you. The same way I used to...back then,’ she says. ‘I used to follow you, didn’t I?’

‘When was this... when did you see me?’

If Lara notices that he doesn’t answer her, she decides not to say anything. Instead she sips more wine. She shrugs.

‘I answered your question, now it’s my turn. What’s the name of your girl?’

He laughs. ‘I don’t think it would be right to call her my girl. She’s over forty. Her name is Sophie.’

‘Sophie.’ Lara repeats, tilting her head as she says it. Sebastian shifts in his chair; he doesn’t want to talk about Sophie.

‘You know, it must have been her you were with when I followed you. You walked all the way from the Southbank. I’d been to a Damien Hurst exhibition at the Tate.’

‘Diamond skulls.’

She laughs and shakes her head.

‘Butterflies.’

‘Of course.’

‘He’d created this room full of butterflies.’

‘Like London Zoo?’

She laughs again at that.

‘Sort of...you could see caterpillars, cocoons, or some other stage of metamorphosis. But when you looked down, so many were dead.’

‘He was creating the cycle of life.’

But Lara isn’t listening, her eyes are unmoving; it’s as though she is back at the museum.

‘And some were dying...they were suspended in the air but their wings barely moved.’ Her breath catches. ‘I’m like that, a trapped butterfly that can’t flap its wings.’

‘I won’t let you fade.’ He leans forward and takes her hand, turning her wrist. ‘Did you see any of these butterflies?’

She smiles her melancholy smile, then asks whose turn it is.

‘Mine.’

‘That’s hardly fair,’ she says, laughing.

Sebastian shrugs with a smile, and thinks for a while before speaking. ‘What happened the day you came back, you say you just needed to get to me, do you remember anything?’

‘Not only does that sound like more than one question, it sounds like you are interrogating me. I know what you policeman are like.’

He’s sad for her in that moment because she does know, even though there is a touch of humour in her voice.

Lara’s sullen voice, somehow even worse on the recording.

–I don’t know.

–Who do you think it was? The interviewer had asked her.

–I don’t know, someone connected to a guy my mother is sleeping with.

–Which guy?

–I don’t know. She’s always sleeping with someone.

‘I don’t remember Sébastien,’ she says after a while, ‘you know, sometimes I lose time.’

He thinks she’s telling the truth.

‘Is that what happened when you came here? What about home Lara, where do you live?’

‘It’s my turn Seb, you asked your question.’

‘Come on Lara.’

‘What does your Sophie do?’

‘She’s teaching at the moment. And she’s not my Sophie. She’s just Sophie. Look...Lara, I can only help you if you’re honest with me.’

And with a sigh Sebastian gets up saying he will fetch more wine. Sebastian picks up both glasses and heads towards the kitchen, hopeful that she can’t see the extent of his frustration. He opens the bottle, stealing surreptitious glances in her direction. She has tied her shirt into a knot by her stomach; at least he can’t see the stain. She gets up and leans over the balcony, reaches out her hand as if she is trying to touch someone below. A couple of times she waves; he assumes that one of the passers-by looks up and catches her gaze. It makes him smile. She always used to have a way of bringing him out of any mood by her distracting actions, like pirouetting so many times until she lost her balance. When he joins Lara again, he resolves to remain calm and patient.

'My turn again,' he says, handing her the wine glass.

'Ply me with more alcohol and I'll tell you anything.'

'Do you remember that you used to say that you couldn't understand why anyone became an alcoholic?'

'That I do remember. Sanctimonious little shit, wasn't I? And look at me now.'

He does. Lara starts to blush.

'My turn.'

'That wasn't my question,' Sebastian says with a laugh.

'Well it sounded like a question to me...so it is my turn. Tell me about Sophie.'

'That's hardly a question, Lara.'

'Would you please tell me about Sophie?'

He sighs.

'Sophie is forty-three. She's a barrister, that's how we know each other. But she gave it up a couple of years back to study a PhD in literature. For the past two years she has been spending her summers in New York, teaching on a programme for high school kids who either want extra credits or have failed literature. That's where she is now. In New York. We've been dating for nearly two years but as I said, it's not serious.' He tries not to think about how Sophie would view his summation of them.

'Is she serious about you?'

He is about to say that it's his turn but he's tired of the back and forth.

'Yes.'

'Do you love her?'

'No.'

'Does she love you?'

'She says she does.'

Lara is quiet now and he wonders what she's thinking.

'What about you Lara? Is there anyone?' He finds himself holding his breath for a moment.

'It's complicated.'

'We have time.'

'Would you act like a jealous lover?'

As soon as the words are out, she regrets them. But he just smiles. Lara can't read him at all; Sébastien's face gives little away. He tells her he wants to know about the missing years. She

finds herself remembering that she had been in Europe, although she can't remember when. They talk about her living in France and Germany. The images fade out. He asks her whether that is where she went when she left, but she shakes her head. There was a fire, so large, the smoke burned her eyes, but she couldn't resist putting her fingers into the flames. She rubs her fingertips together, as if she could still feel the charred sensation. There was screaming. A hospital. She remembers the nurses in and out of the room, the small tub they'd hand to her with the little pills. But it wasn't a hospital; she wasn't wearing hospital clothes. It was a prison. Or at least sometimes it felt that way, because she had a small window and everything outside was green, except she couldn't go out, she could only watch, unless he was with her – what was his name? – the soft, infuriating voice. There was an art class on the lawn.

Would you like to go out there, Lara? Your stepfather says that you're an artist.

She didn't want to talk to him; she wanted to tell him to fuck off.

Do you remember the night that you came here, Lara? Do you remember the fire?

Just stop. She said it so quietly that he asked her what she'd said. She sighed and shook her head.

Well at least you're talking now, that's a start.

Lara knows she is not making sense, but he doesn't seem to mind too much. She is telling him about coming back to London, light on detail. She realises she is going to be late for work, but she can't quite recall what time her shifts are or remember what day it is. They'd be looking for her. He asks her where she works. She wipes a hand over her face.

It's a private club in the heart of Kensington. There's no way in without the right connection. The club, which is a really just a bar for a certain type of client, opens at around ten in the evening and closes at four. All the servers are clothed the same; this month it's long black dresses that wrap over across the breast, held together somehow by a belt. They each wear the same varnish on their fingers and toes. She pauses to look at her hands; her nails are devoid of colour. The clients are regulars, wealthy; the women know them all by name. Sometimes a hand will slip into the slit at the front of a skirt; if the security nods towards the server, they let it go. That's all the client gets though. Not without negotiating. They are watched. All the time. Everywhere. Even in the bathroom. The camera in the corner winking its red eye. Every night a different combination of women, that way they haven't got time to be close. The women will never leave. But it's not that bad. It's a step up from where they have been. They wear designer clothes; they eat fine food. They get paid at the end of the evening. Towards the last part of the

shift, the burn is there. The longing, the desire. They watch the clock, not much longer now. The pinch of the needle; the warmth that creeps through them. The pay is what they live for.

She sets down the empty glass and puts her fingers to her eyes; the light has started to bother her.

Sebastian is trying not to imagine her in the club. Did she feel something when she was with them? He squeezes his eyes shut; he knows she's watching him.

'You're better than that Lara,' he manages to say.

Lara starts tracing an imaginary pattern on her jeans with her forefinger.

'Am I? There's not always a choice, Seb.'

She looks towards the river. Sebastian leans forward and puts his hands on the outside of her thighs. She covers his hands with hers, moves them so they are now on top of her legs and guides them up towards her crotch.

'God, Lara.'

He gets up to be away from her. He walks to the sink, pours himself water, gulps it down, pours another. His head hurts. From the sink he turns to her, she hasn't moved, she's watching him. He returns to the balcony, bends down so that their faces are level. He takes her hand. They sit that way for a while.

It's late afternoon. She's talking too much now, mostly random sentences, seldom coherent. He's a little drunk, looking at the Tower of London on the other side of the Thames, remembering the poppy display along its lawns from a few years back.

'I want to find out what happened to her.'

'Who?'

'My mother. I was there, when she died. I remember that... I remembered it when I came here two nights ago.'

'What made you remember?'

'Blood. I saw blood.'

She had already told him that.

'Whose blood Lara?'

She shakes her head. Then she whispers, 'I think I may have hurt someone.'

He looks at her a long moment and then he does something she doesn't expect; he starts clearing away the dishes as if she hasn't spoken at all. She watches him carry them to the sink. Whatever reaction she was expecting from him, it isn't this.

Sebastian fills the sink with soapy water and takes time washing each item, occasionally glancing in her direction. He should call the police, or at least one of his friends. And what then? They'd take her into custody and she'd be referred because she's clearly having some kind of breakdown. Or the whole thing could be a lie. He thinks about how different his life would have been if he hadn't heard Lara's screams that day, and if they hadn't met. There were many times back then when he wished that he hadn't run into her again at the police station.

The second time Sebastian saw Lara, it was about six weeks after her mother died, he had been coming off an early shift and she was sitting outside an interview room. He hadn't recognised her at first.

Officer Lawson.

She was thinner than when he'd last seen her but he guessed that was what happened when you find your mother brutally murdered. He hadn't been sleeping too well himself. She was wearing an oversized hoodie and her jeans were faded and ripped. She looked like any other teenager. He stopped momentarily; the officer he was walking out with waved goodbye.

Hello, Lara.

You remembered my name.

A woman came out of the interview room then and approached them. Lara rolled her eyes.

Lara are you ready to go in now?

Give me a minute. She didn't look at the other woman as she dismissed her. She's a social worker, she said, not attempting to hide her derision or speak quietly.

Sebastian nodded and ran a hand through his hair.

Does it get easier?

Sorry?

I mean seeing dead people. Do you get used to it?

She looked at him unwavering, and he noticed that the sun from a small window caught the amber flecks in her eyes and made them look unnaturally yellow.

It's not ever easy.

At the time, he didn't know but he considered it to be the truth. Over time, he had come to know that he was right. He remembered holding her by the ambulance.

You tried to save her.

She began to bite the skin around her thumbnail.

Do you think if you found her instead of me, that you would have been able to save her? What if I hadn't pulled out the knife? I've read that it can sometimes be more fatal than to leave it in place... do you think that's true?

Try not to do this to yourself. We can't change the circumstance of events, no matter how much we think about it.

It's not fair. Her eyes widened; he could see the tears. She looked childlike for the first time.

Lara? Tim came out of the room.

She turned towards him, wiping her eyes with the cuff of her sweatshirt.

This is the police officer that—

Yes, I remember.

They shook hands.

I'm off-duty now, sir. I'm sorry for your loss, Lara.

At that point he turned away from them and headed to the entrance with the uneasy feeling that they were watching him. When he reached the doorway, he glanced briefly in their direction but they were already gone.

He had listened to that first interview over and over again. They all introduced themselves. Tim, the social worker, her lawyer and Lara. Two officers interviewed her but the lead was a woman; they thought she might open up more that way. But it was only ever Lara's voice that he was interested in.

—The girl was wearing a grey hoodie, and jeans. Her hair was tied up in ponytail.

Her voice was breathless as she described the girl she had seen fleeing from the scene. Sebastian pictured Lara, outside the interview room, as she was on that day, dressed in the same clothes that she described, her hair in a ponytail.

—How the hell am I supposed to know who she is?

—Lara. Tim's voice.

—She was probably connected to the guy that she's sleeping with.

Not even a pause for her stepfather who was sitting next to her. Tim stayed silent, not a rebuke or denial.

—Who?

—I don't know, but there is bound to be someone. She's always fu...sleeping with someone.

There was no humility to her voice, just a weariness. He often wondered whether his colleagues also picked up on the fact that she was talking about her mother in the present tense.

–I got into an argument with one of my teachers at school and I came home. I passed the girl on the road near my house, by Mrs McCarther’s... I had the key in my hand, but the door was open. Tim and Mum are paranoid about locking the door when we are home. I knew something was wrong... I pushed open the door... I must have dropped my keys on the floor... and I went to the living room. She was there on the floor. Alive–

There was a pause in the recording.

–Lara, shall we fetch you more water?

There was no answer; Sebastian wondered whether she had shaken her head or whether she was holding back her tears.

–I ran to her, she was looking at me, her mouth was open, she was trying to say something...I saw the knife... I just pulled it out of her and then I started to scream... I think.

–Lara, can you tell us what happened then?

–The police officer came.

–PC Lawson?

–Yes.

It was the first of a number of interviews and they would always ask her the same questions, over and over. Her account was always the same. When Sebastian had arrived at the scene, her keys were on the sideboard, except later they were found in the bushes. Her bloody handprint was on the inside of the door and on the handle, which was inconsistent with what she told them, she said the door was open so why were her handprints on the inside door handle? At what point then did her bloody handprint come to be there?

She wasn’t lying when she said her mother had habitual affairs. The victim’s notebook eventually confirmed that. It told them many things about the victim except the name of the man she was sleeping with. Not that it mattered to the lead detective who held on to his theory, and that was that Lara Saunders had killed Clarissa Saunders in a fit of rage.

Lara comes inside; she smiles at him when their eyes meet, and then heads towards the armchairs. He picks up a clean glass and washes it again.

The window opening carries a cool breeze and from outside they can hear hum of collective voices. When he joins her, she’s doodling on the edges of a newspaper; another familiar pattern, but he can’t fathom where he’d seen it. He will buy her some proper pencils. He remembers the charcoals that she used to use.

'Stop watching.'

'I haven't seen you in so long... I can't believe you are sitting here.'

'I am.'

Lara is sitting in the small armchair. He imagines himself sometime in the future, staring at the empty seat. He knows that he will never be able to look at it again without thinking of her. She has looked up from her sketching and is watching him.

'What are you thinking about?' she asks.

'The day we met.'

'I didn't kill my mother you know.' Her voice is matter-of-fact; it's a statement, not a denial. He is careful not to say anything.

'I know what you all said about me... that I killed her. Nobody believed me, I knew what you all thought.'

Sebastian wants to deny it, to say he wasn't like the others.

'Did they ever look for someone else?'

He wants to find the right words but it doesn't seem to matter, she is talking almost to herself.

'God, to be free of everything. The dreams. I wake up sometimes and I don't remember how I came to be somewhere...and I think maybe they were right...because I'm just somewhere else and I lose hours of my life...but it's the drugs...isn't it?'

She looks like she might cry and he can't bear it. He lets the time drift between them. She's quiet then, calm even, despite her earlier words.

'We need to figure out what happened to you Lara. You said you may have hurt someone. Can you tell me about that?'

She starts biting her thumbnail.

'I don't know.'

'Lara--'

'No really Seb, I don't remember.'

'But you think that you may have hurt someone.'

Lara puts her thumbs to her temple and presses hard. Tim had taken her to countless therapists about the blackouts. They all had their theories. And it had nothing to do with drugs.

'I remember a knife... and there was blood. My hand was on a knife.'

'Lara... that sounds like the day we met--'

'I dropped the knife. And then I was here.'

'You dropped the knife too, the day we met.'

'The day my mother died.'

'Is that why you said that you think you hurt someone?'

Yet that wouldn't make sense either because there was blood on her shirt. Sebastian tells himself that it might be a nosebleed, as she said. He runs a hand through his hair, realising that he's making excuses for her by looking for an alternative explanation. But isn't that what people do, look for what they want to see, for what they want to believe?

'I have an image of blood covering the butterflies, so much that I can barely make out the pattern. But then sometimes I see them so clearly.'

'Your arms were covered in blood?'

'That's not what I mean.'

He shakes his head. It is getting worse; if he calls anyone he will lose sight of her again. Would that be such a bad thing? He could go back to his life; perhaps visit Sophie in New York. He'd like to go to a baseball game; hang out in Central Park. Lara is biting her lip.

'Can you remember anything else, Lara?'

'I remember Italy.'

'Italy?'

'I was in Rome.'

'Recently?'

'When I was eighteen...I remember because I had a birthday cake, white icing and ballet shoes, eighteen candles, and I thought it's a cake for a little girl not for an adult.' She speaks as if she has only just remembered.

'With Tim?'

He waits for her to continue but she doesn't say anything.

'Where did you go all those years ago. You disappeared, Lara.'

She contemplates him for a while, half-sad, and it seems that she won't respond.

'It was a long time ago.' Now her voice is slow. He wants to ask her what she remembers about back then, when they were friends. More than anything however, is the desire to understand her motives for coming back into his life.

'Can you tell me anything about when you came back from Italy?' He says with a sigh.

'Is that what you were thinking about?'

'Not really. But it's what I would like to know about for now.'

She looks away momentarily then her focus returns to her sketching.

'It's a long story.'

'I'm not going anywhere.'

She smiles without looking at him.

Marc had seen her milling around the airport as he waited for his flight to London. She was slumped on a plastic stool, her hands cupped around the ceramic mug in a way that suggested she was cold even though the air conditioning had stopped working. Rome in the height of summer and no air conditioning; no wonder the passengers looked more irritated than usual. The heat didn't seem to bother her. 'I'm Marc,' he said, after some innocuous small talk about the heat. Lara, she replied. 'That's a lovely name. Really,' she rolled her eyes.

On the flight, he charmed the passenger who sat beside her to swap places. 'We just got engaged,' he said, and they mixed up our seats. They talked all the way, and by the time the flight landed, he had offered her a lift home. 'You don't have anywhere to stay,' he said, 'well you must stay with me of course. No funny business. They shared a life for a while, and then he grew bored. They went to a party, some rich guy's place, she felt awkward and uncomfortable. He took her into one of the rooms, said they would have fun. The men were waiting for her.'

She closes her eyes then, refuses to think about it anymore.

'Oh my God, Lara. What happened to you?'

'After a while you start thinking that it has to be something about me...these situations, I must do something...'

 She doesn't finish her sentence.

'I don't believe that.'

When she turns to him, her complexion is even more pale, and there's something cold about her gaze.

'You wonder why I forget?'

But he sees that she is not really asking the question of him. As fleetingly as she looked at him, she is back sketching again.

'What was his name?'

'Marc Channing,' she says, 'that is something I won't forget.'

She presses her fingertips to her eyes.

'I can't come off the drugs like this. I need something stronger.'

Lara throws the pen on the table suddenly. He fetches her another drink. She wants to throw it in his face but she drinks it in one gulp instead.

Later, they study each other in the muted light of the Sebastian's room. They lie, not touching, just watching. He has pulled the blinds to shield them from the sun. He notes her lines, her wounds. He's aware that she too is seeing all the blemishes of his life, the weariness in his unshaven face. He watches her eyes grow heavy again as the drug spreads its way through her body.

'Did she die?'

'Who?' He had been about to ask her whether she meant her mother.

'The woman you said had been stabbed. The other day.'

'You remember that...yes.'

'Who found her?'

'A couple went into the alley and found her lying on the floor. Someone had stabbed her in broad daylight.'

'How do you know all this?'

'A mate.'

'What a horrible way to die.'

'It seems that it's the way most people die these days.'

'Perhaps for you as a policeman.'

He doesn't correct her and say ex-policeman, he just agrees with a perhaps. There must have been something else she registers in his tone because she asks him if he's all right. He likes that even though she's sleepy she is asking after him. He says, of course he's okay, but she doesn't believe him.

'You always cared too much, even back then. I remember.'

'Or perhaps I didn't care enough.'

She gives him a weary smile and shifts slightly on the bed, closing her eyes.

'I want to find out what happened to my mother.'

'Is that why you came to me?'

But she stops answering his questions. They lie that way for a while, long enough for him to think that she might have fallen asleep. Despite his busy mind, the silence is restful. Life should have been in turmoil because of Lara, and yet somehow her presence also settles him. His eyelids grow heavy; but before he has a chance to fall asleep, she speaks.

'How did you manage to go out last night? One moment I was awake and then I was out.'

'I gave you something to help you sleep, remember?'

Of course, she didn't.

'It's just I was really knocked out, I didn't hear you go or come back.'

She opens her eyes to meet his gaze, and he is looking at her with an expression that says, is it such a surprise that you can't recall.

'You were in a state...the alcohol and painkillers must have sent you over the edge.'

'I don't have any clothes.'

'Don't worry.'

'I'm not wearing Sophie's.'

'I'll buy some things for you when I go out later.'

She thinks again of getting to Soho, but in that moment the warmth in the room is making her very sleepy.

'I'll come with you,' she says, between heavy breaths.

'Stay inside today. You need to rest. And we can go out tomorrow.'

'Okay.' She would agree to anything right now.

'Lara.'

'HMMMMM.'

'Promise me something. Promise me you will stay here until we figure things out.'

Five

A stream of light beams into the hospital room, falling upon his face. Milan hasn't opened his eyes in days, but they are blinking now. His mouth is raw and dry; there's a tube in his nose, tubes everywhere in fact. The room is a dirty white; he doesn't quite know where he is, he wants to move but there's a searing pain in his chest.

The door opens, there's a nurse.

'Try not to move,' she says, her voice tired.

'W...' his voice is lost.

'It's okay. You're in hospital.'

He starts tearing the tube away from his nose. She reaches for the alarm. A doctor comes next. They explain. He's been stabbed. He's lost a lot of blood. He remembers.

For two years he had looked after her. She lived in one of his many apartments; it was her own home. He had freed her.

I'm at your mercy. The last words she screamed. He hadn't seen the knife, just felt its sharpness pierce his skin, his flesh, and the liquid warmth of his blood. She stood over him, the knife in her hands. He had never seen her face before, not that one anyway. That was not his little bird.

This is my favourite, he told her, stroking his fingertips over the small tattoo under her left breast.

What my little bird?

You're my little bird.

She picked up his phone, called emergency services, told them that she'd stabbed her husband. She dropped the phone close to his head, close enough that he could hear the voice asking where they were. She leant down, kissed his lips. He was too weak to move away from her. She lingered a while longer, his blood on her shirt. The thousand pounds worth of shirt that he had bought for her. She had a wardrobe full of them. He had given her everything; he even let her keep her dirty habit. There was something about her, she had reminded him of his daughter. Not like that, he wasn't sick; he had never wanted his daughter in that way. She had been a troubled little soul, Katya, what child hung themselves at eleven? Katya, his sweet baby,

he is crying now and doctor is injecting something into his arm. He has plenty of time to heal; now they just needed him to be strong.

Much later when he has his strength back, the police will come and take a statement. They will tell him that his wife had made the call, and he'll tell them that she was not his wife. They will ask him what happened and he will tell them that he doesn't remember. They won't care much, they know exactly who he is. The police aren't dumb, they know the career criminals, they know who commit the crimes; they are just short of the evidence. They will figure he deserved it. In fact, they will think it's a shame that the knife didn't do more damage, or that they aren't entirely rid of him. They don't think the world will be worse off without him. They will barely smile, shake his hand politely, follow-up with a half-hearted offer to call them if he remembers anything. They only see one side.

Afterwards he'll find out that she had emptied the account and the safe, he has no idea she knew the combination, but the money is the only thing that is missing. When he looks about the place, nothing has been touched; everything is as he'd left it. He'll find everything he's ever bought for her still there, exactly as it was. Nothing has been taken. Not the clothes, or the jewellery. All the bags and shoes neatly stacked in rows exactly how the housekeeper had organised them. He thought that she'd been happy, his little bird. He had given her the life. He had loved her more than the others. Later, lying in the darkness, he will relive those last couple of days trying to figure out what had happened; she had never shown any signs before. No indication that she was capable of harming him. She loved him, she told him so, I love you Mikki. He'd always been kind to her, except that one time when she was so high that she'd mentioned Katya, asking him such a terrible thing, and he had slapped her hard then he fucked her hard. What happened little bird? He will say aloud to the empty space. But he will never know, as he will never see her again.

At the counter, as the woman places the items into a bag, Sebastian realises that the clothes he has chosen for Lara are for the girl ten years ago, not for the woman now. He remembers the designer label on her shirt. Whatever the life she was leading, she had expensive clothes. He would need to come back, perhaps with Lara. He imagines making a space for her in his wardrobe, her belongings entwined with his own; he'd have to put Sophie's things away. He owes her a call. There had been endless texts that he hadn't answered. Soon after he pays, he finds a quiet street and dials her number.

'Hi, I was so worried about you. Why haven't you called?' Sophie's voice sounds equally concerned and acidic.

'Tied up with the hearing. How are you anyway? How is your day? How are the kids?'

He wonders whether she will argue about his deflection, and he thinks he hears her sigh.

'It's the same old, same old. Same story, different kids, but the same type. I've got to get them to read Harper Lee when they'd rather be playing sport or on their phones. Summer school is torture and I am the torturer.'

She laughs then. He smiles. Odd that he would miss her laughter. They speak a while longer. She asks him about the enquiry; he avoids her questions. They talk about Vlad; he realises that he hasn't fed the cat although he doesn't tell her that. He will open another tin of tuna as a treat.

'I miss you Sebastian.'

'I miss you too Sophie.' Odd too that in that moment it is partly true. He could really do with a beer.

He stands in the street for a while contemplating, as people brush past him to get to the tube. He walks a little way, through the small groups that have congregated outside pubs; people are out because the sun casts a different light on London and they want to make the most of the warm weather. He retraces his steps and joins the other commuters on the underground.

Visiting time is over but the staff always let Sebastian in; they know that his job dictates unsociable hours – he hasn't told them he isn't working. His father is standing by the window and as soon as Sebastian walks into the room, he knows he will have to clean him.

In the bathroom, he helps his father take off his clothes; they smell of sweat and urine. When his dad is in the shower they talk about the weather. By the time he has his father settled again, the sun has set and it is almost dark outside. They wouldn't have time to paint. The last visit he had fetched some large white paper and they'd spent an hour painting. Sebastian had filled the page with three-dimensional cubes; his dad had splatter-painted all over the page. A psychologist would no doubt have a field day.

In the modern art world that would be genius, he had said and when his father looked confused he said, that's nice Dad.

Why are you calling me that?

Because you are my Dad. His father nodded and carried on painting.

He kisses his father's forehead and says goodbye.

'How are you son? How is Sophie?'

Sebastian's smiles over his sadness.

Lara wakes to the sound of his voice somewhere; her head aches. She doesn't know what time it is but she knows it's not early. She feels cold and shivers despite the heat. She needs a fix and wonders again how she can convince him to give her more. Rule one Sébastien, the addict has to want to give up. This hadn't been a choice for her. She creeps out of his room towards the one she slept in the night before. She needs some time alone. There are shopping bags on the bed but she ignores them. Her bag is on the floor. She hunts for her phone. It isn't there. She's certain she had it but it's hard to be sure when she'd been so high. She just needed to run from them all. The girls. The broken bodies. The dead eyes. And slowly the world unravelled. Mikki told her she would never have to be with anyone again, but then he had hit her. So hard that she thought her jaw was broken. And later, it was as though it hadn't happened at all. They had sex, and all the while, all she could think about, as he thrust and thrust, was how she was lost in the body that imprisoned her.

Something on the edge of her memory, it's there but she can't get to it. The medication he's giving her isn't enough. He would drip feed her like this and not care that she didn't want to stop. She's aching everywhere. He can't bear to see her for who she is; he needs to believe the lie that he had created. She can't make it better, not the pain. She needs her phone. Or she needs to leave. Her phone is gone. Had he looked through her things? Had he taken it? He's trying to rescue her again. But Seb... LaLa is dead. They all killed her. You killed her. Always trying to make things better but making it so much worse. But she had run to him, hadn't she? Somewhere within her she wants to be the person that he sees, the person that he believes in, the

person that he wants to love. She remembers that version of herself. Where had she gone? Had she disappeared in Paris or Berlin, maybe it had been Rome after all. Or maybe it was with you, Sébastien. She sees it in his face, the depth of his desire. He wants to protect her but he can only do that if he owns every part of her. She had thought she'd experienced ugly things but it turned out she still knew nothing of the world; there was always worse. Who protected me from you, Seb? The apartment is quiet now.

'Hey, there you are.' He smiles at her.

'Have you seen my phone?'

He's going to lie; she sees it on his face.

'I want my phone.'

'You didn't have a phone.'

'I want my phone,' she repeats again and plans to keep repeating until he gives it to her.

'Lara, you said you didn't have a phone.'

'I want my fucking phone.'

He fetches her bag and tosses it towards her. 'This is what you brought with you.'

'Where's my phone?' she screams.

He doesn't answer; he leaves without saying anything.

He takes a beer and sinks into the sofa. The cat, finally fed, rubs itself against his legs. He picks her up and places her on his lap. She starts to purr. Vlad had given birth to a litter of five kittens in the cupboard under the stairs of Sophie's house in Clapham. At least one of us will have children, and Vlad's not even a girl, Sophie said. He would have laughed had he not heard the sadness in her voice. Sophie deserves better, than him anyway. He imagines her in New York alone. He thinks of his mother dying alone. And then about Clarissa. Death is never far behind him. Ever since he'd met Lara.

He was walking home from work; it was bitterly cold but dry. He liked coming off shift on days when the sky was cloudless, and he could see the white puffs of his breath; the air so sharp that it made his cheeks red and his sinuses sting. It always helped when he had a difficult nightshift, the fresh air could rid him of the soiled feeling he carried with him. Lara was there, following him. When it first started he had decided to ignore her. Perhaps that way she would grow tired and give up. But it was getting worse. Somehow, she seemed to know his shift pattern. He'd been receiving phone calls at work but the caller wouldn't say anything. Just wait on the line while he kept repeating hello. The week before, he had been at dinner with a paramedic, who he

had been interested in for a while, they had a window seat and he had glanced out into the darkness, catching sight of her on the opposite side of the road, half hidden by a shop doorway. He decided that it had to stop; he would confront her next time.

He had spotted her almost as soon as he left the station, so he walked a while until he reached a bend in the road. He caught her quite unaware. She was walking with her head down, so used to the route that she had grown complacent. She almost ran into him. He had been quite mad, but when she looked up into his face, her chin slightly angled and her sharp green eyes not flinching away, the anger seem to drain out of him. He had taken her to a small café, ordered himself a full breakfast and she had asked for a bacon sandwich with extra ketchup. He drank espresso; she drank hot chocolate.

She looked thinner. The hollow of her eyes, deep and purple. She told him that she was suffering from nightmares. He listened. She buried her head in her hands on the table.

Your hair is the colour of the Sahara, he said, not meaning to say it aloud.

Have you been there? She asked; he smiled but didn't answer.

The clouds intermittently cover the moon; the light in the apartment shifts with the shadows that drift across the room, somehow making the space more sombre. He wonders what she's doing. He drinks the rest of the beer in one gulp then instantly wants another.

Have you been there?

He was a little boy camped in the desert in Egypt. His mother's disdain, she hated the sand. The desert sky lit by stars; angry whispers floated in the shivering air. He would never be like them. He would never let himself love anyone. All that heartache and no one had even realised that his mother died.

She is there at the doorway to the living room. He will need to watch out for how silently she moves.

'I feel sick.'

She's pale, but she is most of the time. He places his hand on her forehead; there's a clamminess about her skin.

'What can I do to help? Do you want me to pour you a drink?' Do you want a shower?'

'Can you take this pain out of my body?' Lara wraps her arms around him, in a way that the pain might pass through her and into him

'Give me something,' she whispers.

'Lara. We have to get you off this.'

'Please.'

'Let me fix you a drink, something strong to take the edge off.'

She lets go of him, wanders to the sofa and sits where he was sitting. She pulls her legs up and rests her forehead on her knees. He checks his watch, it's too soon, fetches the bottle and pours her a drink, then another, and a third. He can see her ease into the alcohol.

'You can't fix me.' The sadness in her makes him feel suddenly melancholy.

'This isn't about fixing you. This is about helping you.' He brushes the hair from her face. She looks at him with a forlornness that he used to find endearing. Now it just makes him ache.

'Sometimes I want to die.'

'Don't say that.'

'Why because you don't want to hear what I really feel?'

'No, because I don't want to think about you dying.'

'You don't even know me anymore.'

'I know you.'

'I was thirteen when we knew each other.'

'You were almost fifteen when you left.'

She takes his hand and lays it on her breast.

'You want me. I can feel it.'

He snatches his hand away.

'Don't.'

Her bitter laughter fills the space between them.

'It doesn't matter, Seb. It's only sex.'

'Don't talk that way.'

'They can have my body... you can have my body...'

'It's ugly, Lara. Stop it.'

'Why? So that you can carry on believing I'm innocent. I wasn't even that when I was innocent.'

He loathes the ugliness of her words.

'You've been through a lot, Lara. You have every right to feel bitter.'

'How can you know what I've been through?'

'Everything you've told me and... I know something happened to you before we met—'

'Are you trying to say I was already fucked up at thirteen?'

'—something so awful that you would rather run than deal with it. You can recreate yourself but it always catches up in the end.'

'You sound like one of the idiot psychologists that Tim used to drag me to.'

'So, you remember going to psychologists?'

'Of course, I remember, are you trying to catch me out?'

'Why don't you tell me what you do remember?'

She sees her mother's blood soaking her blouse, dripping onto the carpet. Bloody handprints everywhere.

'Do you remember how you used to be scared that anyone you loved would leave you?' Sebastian doesn't give up this time.

'Stop it.' She covers her ears with her palms.

'See, you are not so different to how you were when you were thirteen.'

'Now who's ugly?' She tries to leave but his hands clamp her to the seat.

'I'm here, Lara. With you. Now. I am not like the others.'

'Aren't you?' She looks at him as though she loathes him. She is saying he is worse than the others. The air grows heavy between them. He turns away from her.

'I didn't mean that.'

She takes his hands; he sees that there's humility about her then.

'Fuckit,' he says, but he lets her hold his hands. She strokes her thumb over his knuckles.

'Tell me about when we first became friends.'

'Tell me how you don't remember.'

'I used to follow you.'

He laughs then.

'I used to follow you everywhere.'

'Yes.'

'It's so strange. I felt this unspeakable connection... you found me, you found my mother.'

'You were a lost little soul.'

'That's why you were so kind to me. You're a good person, PC Lawson.'

'That was a long time ago and, by the way, I was a detective sergeant by the time I left,' he says with another small laugh.

'You're changing the subject.'

'At least you remember my surname now.'

She returns his laughter.

'What else do you remember?'

'You used to buy me hot chocolate. You sometimes let me bunk off in your house, although you also gave me a hard time too.'

Sebastian told her that they couldn't be friends. But one day, she was at his home.

What the hell are you doing here?

She looked afraid of his anger.

You can't come in.

Wet from standing in the rain for so long and waiting for him with a defiance that he begrudgingly admired, she'd looked quite suddenly defeated. And that was the moment he was lost. Next thing, Lara was in his kitchen, drinking hot chocolate with her hair wrapped in a towel and dressed in his old sweats.

'You felt sorry for me.'

'It was unethical to let you into my house, into my life'

'You felt sorry for me. Little orphan Annie.'

'I did feel sorry for you, Lara.'

'Because of my mum.'

'No one should see their mother like that... you were a kid...lost.'

'I didn't have anyone else. Only you.'

'That's not strictly true... you had Tim.'

'Tim?'

She tries to recall the last time she saw Tim but the memory is lost to her. Forever understanding and patient, he wasn't even her father.

'Lara?'

'I wanted you.'

'Don't.'

'You could've done anything to me... I wanted you that badly.'

'You didn't know what you wanted.'

'I knew. And you refused.'

She remembers wrapping her arms around him, trying to kiss him. The memory so vivid she almost blushes. He would calmly put distance between them, patiently untangling himself and offering her a lemonade. It used to make her so angry.

'I was an adult, only a couple of years younger than you are now. You didn't know what you were doing.'

She laughs but this time it sounds bitter.

‘I knew what I was doing. I was the one in control.’

He shifts away from her.

‘In all those times that I came on to you... you turned me away...I used to feel so humiliated. But tell me one thing... did you never want to?’

‘Why are you doing this, Lara?’

He presses his fingers to his eyes.

He thinks perhaps she is back to torment him, for the things he had done. To punish him for the past, something he could never change.

‘Was I that unattractive to you?’

‘Lara, stop it.’

‘I admire you really. I may have looked and acted like a grown up but I wasn’t.’

‘Lara...I’m sorry...’

‘I was obsessed with you. You know that don’t you?’

He doesn’t want her to say anything else.

‘If I told you I want you now, would you still resist me?’ She moves her hand to his crotch.

‘Lara. No.’

She’s astride him, her mouth covering his.

In the bedroom, Lara sleeps. He contemplates the familiar crevices on the ceiling; his eyes trace them the way they do on the nights that insomnia gets the better of him. Her body’s in a foetal position and she holds his arm between hers. He had come too quickly so he’d made love to her a second time to show her that he could act with more restraint. But it wasn’t enough, there seemed to be an insatiable need in her and he suspected it had little do with sex when she was kissing him again. He wondered whether he would ever satisfy her and as they made love, he let his mind drift to all the men that might have satisfied her more. He offered her drugs. He tried not to be hurt when she was quick to accept, and when she took them it felt like he was paying her. She would be out for a while but not before the sadness. The comedown after sex. She begged him not to leave her but he knew that it had little to do with him. Now she sleeps and he feels damned.

She wasn’t entirely wrong about obsession. They had been friends, no matter how unlikely. No matter the age difference. For a long time, he had kept it that way. They fell into a

pattern; he'd come home from shift and she would be there, lingering in his road outside his house. The mid-terraced house with bay windows; she told him that it was lovely. At first, he had encouraged her to go to school, it was his duty as a policeman, in the end he didn't even do that. He told himself that he was offering her a refuge; she was grieving, motherless. He would listen when she talked, not that she did much. She'd sketch sometimes while he was getting ready to go to late-shift. Sometimes they'd watch a movie, normally in silence; sometimes she'd play her guitar. He'd always drive her home; drop her at the end of the road. Never wanting to go near that house again. He should've put a stop to it then but he felt the connection that she so openly talked about and he quietly denied.

She never knew how hard it had been for him. Sometimes it was difficult to remember she was only a child. He wasn't that much older than her, not really. He started noticing more about her, the paleness of her face, the sharpness of her eyes. Her sensuality. The way her hair would fall across her face when she played the guitar. The smoothness of skin on her neck as he watched her sketching. Her feet in his lap when they watched a film; her gentle voice when she was humming a new melody. He kept fucking other women to distract himself from thinking of her.

Lara shivers in her sleep; he pulls the sheet over her naked body. He feels wretched in his powerlessness.

Sometime late in the night, his phone buzzes. He shifts out of bed, reaching for his clothes. Lara doesn't move.

In his own room, Sophie tells him about her day. His voice sounds quite normal. He tells her that he misses her. They talk a little about the new book she's reading; he tells her about an article she might find interesting. Nothing in his life is stable; he's walking on sodden ground.

Seven

He is not there when she wakes; her throat is burning. She calls his name but there's no answer. She wanders to the kitchen, she needs water. She's too hot. She yanks at the window but it won't move. They're all locked. There are no keys. She dropped her keys; the door to the house was open. Her mother lying, bloody on the carpet. She needs air; there's no oxygen. They are suffocating her. The door is bolted shut. She screams in terror. She doesn't want to stop; he is making her. He can't accept who she is; he's always controlling her. She likes the oblivion. She screams again.

Stop flirting with him Lara. If you do that you're asking for it. He's too old for you. These men prey on girls like you, they're paedophiles. What is the difference between him and Gary? Her mother's voice is cold.

What is the difference between him and Gary? It repeats over and over. Consent, she wants to say.

Go put on your knickers with the yellow pansies. She learned how to be obedient; he loved her.

You need to open your mouth, Lara, his tongue hot and sticky. He held open her legs with his knee; he made her stand in that triangle position sometimes for an hour. His hand rubbed her, hard and rough.

Do you like it, Lara?

Yes.

Do you like it?

Yes.

His breath fiery and stale.

Special little girl. Remember our secret.

He should not have been the first one. He should not have been the first kiss. The first time. Did you not suspect anything? Were you so wrapped up in what you wanted that you refused to see? But it's too late. The knife, it's there. The anger burns and rages. The knife plunges into the body, piercing the skin, digs into the flesh. She hadn't touched the knife other than to pull it out. She didn't kill her; I did not kill you. Mikki is looking at her, his eyes wide.

No. She screams.

‘Lara.’ Sebastian shakes her to wake her from her screams.

‘Lara?’

She sits up, abruptly, her breathing shallow. He puts his hands on her shoulders.

‘Deep breaths,’ he says, and mimes the action. She copies him, deeply inhaling and exhaling until she calms, then she leans back against the headboard, brushing his hands away from her.

‘I want to get high.’

He moves away; she’s angry but he’s feeling it too.

‘You need to get clean.’

‘Have you ever been high Sébastien, do you know what oblivion is like?’

‘Lara—’

‘You’re a wanker.’

‘I have a friend here. He’s a doctor.’

He wonders how much Joshua heard from the kitchen.

‘Oh.’ She turns away from him.

‘Shall I call him?’

‘Does he have anything that will make the pain go away?’ Her voice now devoid of anything other than sadness.

‘I hope so,’ he says.

Sebastian fetches Joshua and sees from Joshua’s expression that he has, in fact, heard everything. He introduces them, lingering when Joshua takes out his blood pressure pump.

‘I’m going to ask you to leave while I examine Lara,’ Joshua says.

Resigned, Sebastian heads to the kitchen. He sits down with a coffee, listening to their muted voices but unable to discern what is being said. He gives up trying because he’s weary beyond anything he has ever felt before.

Sophie had told him she loved him just before they hung up and he heard her voice break. Please don’t cry, he had whispered into the phone. She told him she didn’t know what she was doing, that she thought she had made a mistake that she should go back to the law. He didn’t know what to say. She asked him about work; he told her that he didn’t want to talk about it.

'He is keeping me here against my will,' Lara says, the blood pressure strap tight around her forearm.

The doctor pauses for a moment; she has his attention now.

'That's a serious accusation...are you saying that Sebastian has imprisoned you here?'

Lara looks about the room. The doctor doesn't believe her.

'Has he harmed you in any way?'

'You're his friend.'

'First and foremost, I'm a doctor and you're my patient. Whatever you tell me...'

'He is trying to control everything.'

Sebastian is drinking coffee when Joshua finds him. He offers Joshua a cup, expecting Joshua to refuse but instead he sets his case down and asks for it black.

'Look... it's none of my business,' Joshua says.

'No, it isn't.'

'I'm a doctor, when you get me involved I have an obligation.'

Sebastian is about to tell him he doesn't care about any of that but thinks better of it.

'Yes, of course,' he says instead. 'Look, I'm sorry. It's been really difficult and I'm really tired.'

'Yes, I can see that.' Joshua takes a long drink before speaking again. 'She needs help, Sebastian.'

'I'm here.'

'Professional help.'

'I can help her.'

'It's not going to be enough.'

'I'll make it enough.'

Joshua pauses a while.

'You won't be enough. I don't have to spend much time with her to know how troubled she is. Until she gets professional help, she will never break the habit, you know that, and there is little you can do...short of chaining her up until every last bit of it has left her and even then, unless she has the will, she'll be back using before you know it.'

'You are talking about Michael not Lara.' Sebastian turns away. Although they met through Michael, they never mentioned him. Sebastian had been deliberate about his. Until now that is. Joshua had never asked why Sebastian had looked the other way; his son should

have been in prison and Joshua should have been struck off. That didn't stop Joshua knowing that he owed a favour.

'It's not Michael or Lara. I'm talking about addicts. It's addiction.'

'I know all about addiction.'

'She seems confused. I know that addicts will say anything to get what they want. When I asked her how she came to be here, she didn't seem to know.'

'I know that you are saying all this as a doctor, but I have known Lara for most of her life. I know what she needs. She needs stability.'

Joshua sighs, and in concession says, 'I know and Michael was an accomplished liar too.'

'Come back in a few of days. I promise you, she'll get better. If not, you can do your Hippocratic duty and we'll get her into one of those places that you sent Michael. Okay?'

When Joshua puts down the coffee cup, half-finished, Sebastian is relieved. At the door they shake hands and Joshua makes his way to the stairwell; it looks to Sebastian that he has an air of with a heaviness about him and Sebastian regrets getting him involved. But where Lara is concerned he has always been willing to do anything.

The investigative team weren't sympathetic. They were dissecting Clarissa Saunders; at least she had the decency not to shag someone in her husband's bed. He knew from the files that there was no other evidence, no hair, fingerprints, or DNA – other than semen – and no evidence of non-consensual sex. No hits on the system. Clarissa didn't have a mobile phone; she made no calls on the landline. The working assumption was that Lara had stabbed her mother, most probably in the heat of the moment. Lara's story didn't add up. But soon they realised they weren't getting anywhere. Sebastian had read the psychiatrist's reports, who posited that Lara might be subject to a psychological fugue – Sebastian hadn't a clue what that meant – they thought that the girl she described as running away was in essence a manifestation of herself, someone she had created because she couldn't cope with the idea of what she had done. A dissociative episode. The murder team thought it highly likely that Lara had made the whole thing up. The CPS thought the case would be too tenuous and were reluctant to prosecute.

–What jury is going to convict a bright, pretty little thirteen year old kid, who has never been in trouble with anyone, is popular at school, and doesn't have any issue with alcohol or drugs and doesn't suffer from any mental disorder or condition, other than the one we want to impose on her – which frankly... well you know my thoughts on that... and believe that she came home from school one day and stabbed her mother? They clearly didn't have a great relationship but then she's a teenager and they're not meant to get on with their parents. If every

teenager stabbed a parent when they got mad, we'd have an epidemic on our hands... It's more likely she killed herself.

The investigative team thought it was a stretch. But the CPS said it didn't matter. The victim clearly had issues. A defence team would argue that she was suicidal from the notebook, and there's the reasonable doubt.

The notebook did seem to change things but they didn't give up, not for a while anyway. Every time Lara was interrogated, she did not waver. She would leave the station with a stony look on her face, telling Tim and her social worker that she wanted to be alone, and walk straight to Sebastian's house. As soon as he opened the door, her resolve would break. Sebastian would hold her while she fought with tears. Inconsistency aside, Lara clearly believed she was telling the truth.

Sebastian goes in search of Lara who is sketching when he finds her. She doesn't meet his gaze but he senses there's no animosity. He sits down beside her, leans over so that he can study the sketch. It's a pattern, a large petal, with smaller flowers and leaves inside. He remembers her old sketchbooks; she'd never do her homework in front of him but she'd often take out her art book and draw. She bites her lip; he always found that endearing. Her hair has fallen over her face. He tentatively brushes it away and tucks it behind her ears. She looks up from her sketch and smiles. They stay that way for a while.

It's hot outside but the day is colourless. At times the clouds splinter and the sun's rays beam down in strips. He imagines those veins of light are pathways to heaven.

Now they lie facing each other but not touching. He wants to put his hand on her cheek but thinks better of it. A couple of times he watches her lips peel apart, feels the sigh of her breath until her mouth closes again.

'You were dreaming the other day when I woke you. What were you dreaming about?' she says at last.

'My mother I think,' he says. Odd that over the years the dreams of his mother and Lara were sometimes interchangeable.

'You never really mentioned her except that you told me she was French.'

'That's why you started to call me Sébastien.'

'You only ever spoke of your dad.'

She lays her palm against his cheek, the same way he had wanted to earlier, and it makes him smile. Her eyes look tired.

‘There’s not much to tell.’ He looks again at the rays outside the window.

‘I can’t imagine you with a mother.’

His laughter is soft. ‘That’s an odd thing to say Lara.’

‘What I mean is, well... you are so self-sufficient. Always in control. I can’t imagine you relying on anyone, not the way a child relies on a mother.’

Would it be wrong for him to tell her that he relied on her, even though she was only a child? Sometimes when he thought back to their time together, he realised how lonely he’d been. She takes her hand from his cheek and shifts on to her back so that her gaze is directed at the ceiling. Perhaps she isn’t speaking about him at all.

‘Did you ever rely on your mother, Lara?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ Lara covers her face with her forearms.

‘She left when I was very young,’ he says, after a while. ‘I barely remember her.’

She turns her head towards him.

‘That’s sad. Have you ever tried to find her?’

He doesn’t want to talk about his mother or how it made him feel when he found out she’d died the way she did. Undiscovered for three days. Had she planned it or was it an accident? The incessant questions he’d never have an answer to, none of which he wants to share when they are already so tainted. He takes her face in his hands, now.

‘As it turns out, I’m not very adept at finding missing women, despite being a detective.’

He presses his lips against hers then lies back.

‘Do you mean me?’

‘You didn’t say goodbye. You left without a word. I didn’t know what happened to you.’

‘Did you look for me?’

‘I went to your house.’

‘And I wasn’t there?’

He looks at her.

‘Everything was packed up. There was a for-let sign. I asked your neighbour, she said that you left suddenly, where did you go?’

‘You won’t believe me.’

‘Try me.’

‘I don’t remember.’

Sebastian shakes his head.

‘I mean... I remember something. A hospital... I think. I remembered the other night. Being here, around you, I’m remembering some things.’

‘A hospital?’

‘I think so... except I wasn’t sick.’

She remembers talking, not that it was helping, because they wouldn’t let her out otherwise. And the nurses, in and out with their pots of pills and inane chat. She tells Sébastien everything she recalls, which isn’t much. She remembers Tim visiting her and that they talked about her mother.

She sees Tim’s face as he was that day, concerned at the mention of her mother – he always fretted over Lara – she had felt this terrible lump in her throat and she swallowed many times to get rid of it, except it hurt more with each one. Tim had put his arm around her; she hadn’t shrugged him off. Poor Tim. He was the only one who had been a constant in her life. He was everything her mother wasn’t and Lara had always treated him with disdain. She probably would continue to do so. But in that moment, she just wanted him to take care of her, and Tim had always done that. She thanked him; there was an awful moment when she thought he might start to cry. I’m your dad, he had said. And she had smiled at that, because although he wasn’t her dad, even if she carried his name, he was the closest thing to having a father she’d ever known, his unconditional, and abiding love. Did that even happen? It did in her mind.

Sebastian is quiet for a while.

‘What are you thinking about?’ she asks.

‘Why didn’t you try to find me sooner?’

‘I don’t know. I was living a different life.’

‘What kind of life?’

‘I don’t really want to talk about it.’

They lie in silence for a while.

‘If we want to piece together how you got here that night, we need to talk about these things. You must have been somewhere.’

She doesn’t answer for a while.

‘You know about... Marc...I told you about that, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well after...I lived in an apartment above the club for a while. Most of us did.’

‘Who?’

‘The other girls that worked there.’

‘Friends?’

She shakes her head.

'You're my only friend.'

He puts his hand to his mouth and sighs into his palm. She smiles. He takes her hand and turns it over; he caresses her inner wrist with his index finger, then he slowly strokes each butterfly in turn.

'You say you used to live above the club, did you move?'

She closes her eyes; he sees the battle on her face.

'I don't remember... I don't remember.'

'I want to help.'

She sits upright.

'I need a drink; do you have any wine?'

She runs a hand through her hair, combing it with her fingers.

'I need a haircut...I need to get out, get some air. It's suffocating in here.'

Sebastian sits up and puts his arm around her. Her body's rigid. His fingers move her chin so that she's looking at him. She sighs and in a gesture that seems more an act of resignation than affection, rests her head on his shoulder. He contemplates the changing light of the late afternoon sun.

'Do you want to go for a ride?'

'Ride, what ride?' She moves away from him and he sees that she is smiling; the type that reaches her eyes, and the light picks up the amber flecks as he had remembered so many times.

'I have a motorbike. You'll need to suit up. It will be warm but if you're game...'

'I'm game.'

They weave through the traffic of London and head towards Kent. Once they are through the Blackwall Tunnel, they have the freedom of the motorways. He drives too fast. And each time he speeds up he can feel the excited tension in her body, her arms tightening around his waist. Through the wind, he thinks he can hear her laugh. If he could suspend time and hold the moment forever, he would.

They stop at a burger place as promised. While he lays out their food, Lara pulls off the jacket and sits on the kerb in her vest top. Her shoulders are damp with sweat; he notices the curve of her triceps as she stretches out her arms. He remembers one time that they had taken a drive and Lara had asked to go to the beach. It was a hot summer afternoon; Lara had stripped down to her knickers, her adolescent breasts supported by a flimsy mauve bra. He had told her

to put her t-shirt on; she had laughed at his prudishness and said it was like a bikini. He didn't like the way people looked at her androgynous body. Her semi-nakedness had been unbearable.

'I'm starving,' she says.

He hands her a burger and fries, but most importantly the banana milkshake. Some things haven't changed.

They arrive back at dusk and by the time they are in the lift he can see she's shaking. She barely talks, a pensive look about her. When they're inside she turns to him.

'It's freezing.'

'Let me get you the pills.'

She takes hold of his wrist, her hand cool against his skin.

'I feel awful. I need something more.'

He can see the flash of anger in her eyes; she's building up to something. He takes her wrist and leads her to the kitchen. He pours her wine, and gives her the pills. He will have to change the place he's keeping them. She almost snatches them from him and gulps down the wine. Her cheeks are scarlet. Tears of sweat are seeping down her neck and chest; the shaking's uncontrollable.

'I'm going to be sick.'

She runs to the bathroom and he can hear her retching. He follows her, sits beside her, holds back her hair. She pushes his hand away.

'Get out,' she says.

'Lara.'

'Get out now.'

This time it's a scream. He knows better than to push her.

In his room he can hear her heaving over and again. He feels wretched himself. He paces the length of the room. She's crying now. He wishes he could bear the pain for her. The tears do not stop. He can't leave her like that. This time he lingers by the door; she's doubled over clutching her stomach. Her cheeks are smeared with a film of vomit and sweat.

'Lara.' He bends down to her.

'I'm dying.'

He helps her to her feet.

'I need it the way you need me.'

He flinches.

'You don't need this, Lara. It's killing you. You need to get off this stuff.'

'No, no, no.'

He helps her to the spare room, is about to fetch a towel to wipe her face when she clutches his t-shirt in her hands.

'You need to help me.'

It seems like the face is no longer hers.

'Give me a sec.'

He returns with a wet flannel and some pills. Lara is tearing around the room, her bag in hand, searching for her shoes.

'Lara.'

'I'm leaving, you can't stop me.'

'Lara, calm down. I can't help you when you get like this.'

'You're not fucking helping me.'

He takes hold of her arms. She tries to shrug him off.

'Stop it. Now. I have some pills, they will help you and if you still want to leave I won't stop you.'

She hesitates for a second, he holds out the tablets.

'I was sick last time.'

'These are sedatives... they will make you feel better. Doctor Talbot prescribed them.'

Lara looks at the tablets then at the door. She takes them from him, drinks the entire glass. She sits on the bed, looks out the window, still clutching her stomach. He sits beside her, not touching her; her body is still shaking.

'Perhaps it would be a good idea to get into bed.'

'No, I'm leaving.' But her voice is heavy.

'May I?' He says, holding up the towel to her. She barely nods. He takes her chin and wipes her face.

'I need to lie down.'

He pushes aside the duvet and helps her undress. Her blinking eyes become laboured. He tucks the duvet around her shivering body and begins to move away when her fragile fingers stop him.

'Stay with me.'

He's hesitant.

'Please.'

He lies down beside her but on top of the covers so that he can't feel her flesh. He wouldn't cope with touching her right now.

She had been coming to his house for over eighteen months. They had a terrible argument – it was probably his fault, he had been working back to back shifts – he told her to leave him alone. She screamed she would leave him alone forever. He hadn't seen her for over a week. He thought perhaps his rejection had finally gotten through to her; he needed to distance himself for both their sakes. Except, he felt rotten. He went on a date with one of the duty solicitors; he knew she had a thing for him. They flirted for a while, he needed a distraction and asked her to dinner. He wanted to feel normal and lose himself in someone else. He didn't usually bring women back to his house; he'd always opt for theirs. He told himself that he could only sleep well in his own bed but deep down it was because he didn't want to soil the space they shared. That night though, his date was as drunk as he was and she lived out of town. He was so angry with Lara for disappearing, and desperate to ignore the gnawing fear that she would do something to spite him, he broke his own rule and invited his date back. He just couldn't face going home alone.

There was passion on the couch; they were half dressed, hands and lips all over each other. The drapes were not drawn. It was dark inside; outside it was raining heavily, the wind pounded the rain against the window in angry bursts. The solicitor screamed. He couldn't now remember her name.

There's someone at the window.

He saw her too, her wet face pressed against the pane in the muted street light. She moved away when their eyes met. He rushed to the door. There was no sign of her out there; he looked right, up the street, and then left. No one.

No one is out there.

She didn't believe him, which irritated him more than it should, given the lie. There was nothing gentle as they fucked with the drapes still undrawn.

Eight

Lara dreams of the pink house on the hillside in Tuscany, of a landscape of olive groves, citrus trees and pea-green fields. A woman is laughing, telling her in broken English to eat. She smiles; the woman is everywoman, mother earth. Tim is there. He looks happy. Happier than he had ever been with her mother. The sun's warmth is on her shoulders, her stomach bloated from too much pasta. She can't remember ever feeling as settled. She could stay here like this. With them. Forever. This perfect family. The flames engulf the house. There's a terrible piercing scream that sounds like a siren but isn't. They are talking to her, but she can't hear them. She walks upstairs, except nothing is familiar. She's in someone else's room. She can't stay there. She's an imposter. She runs.

She cries out in her sleep.

'I need to pop out Lara.' Sébastien's voice

'Okay.'

'I'll be back before you realise I'm gone.'

Lara waits for the front door to close before she gets out of bed. She sits for a while on the edge in case that he comes back. He doesn't. She dresses quickly, grabs her bag and some change that he has left in a bowl by the front door. Enough for a tube fare. Not enough for anything else but she doesn't need money to get what she wants, she has other things to offer. She leaves the apartment, without even a glance because she is not planning to come back. Not that she has any plans other than to get to Soho.

The sunlight blinds her eyes when she leaves the apartment block, she checks the street both ways before stepping out on to the cobbles, and merges into a crowd of Italian tourists. She walks with a small smile along the river towards London Bridge, passing children who are running in and out of fountains of water. People gather around the pop-up bars, sipping pink, summery cocktails, and workers eat sandwiches on the grass patches that sit in front of the luxury flats. A football match is being shown on the large, temporary screen. Women have slipped off their sandals, men their t-shirts.

The tube is suffocating, unable to bear the sticky heat she jumps out at Waterloo, aiming for the river and makes her way across the Hungerford Bridge, then up past the National Gallery. There was a time when she couldn't walk past without popping in, but now she passes with her head down. She stops fleetingly by her favourite art shop but she doesn't go in there either, because she's beginning to feel sick and nothing really matters to her anymore other than where she is going. She almost marches through the crowds, bile in her mouth that she swallows, because she knows it will all be better soon, and she finally reaches Soho. She was right before, when she thought that she'd know the dealer's place when she got there. Her hand forms a fist but when she knocks, it's so feeble no one will hear her. She pounds on the door with the flat of her hand, putting all her strength into it until she hears the bolt unlock. When the man opens the door, he smiles.

'Hey beautiful, long time no see.'

Nine

‘Marc Channing?’

‘Who wants to know?’ He doesn’t see the metal bar until it’s too late.

Later, when he is in hospital, barely able to see through his eyes, his breathing intolerable through the broken ribs, the police ask him what he saw. He saw nothing. He hadn’t seen the attacker’s face. Nothing distinguishable about the features. There wouldn’t be any DNA; the assailant had been wearing a hat, something over his face, gloves.

‘It was a he then.’ One of the officers says.

He wants to say of course it was a fucking man, a woman couldn’t do this to him, but he can’t quite find the will. It isn’t like he’s going to press charges even if he had the faintest clue who did it.

‘It’s likely someone you know, nothing was taken and it was in the alley by your house.’

He wants to say something sarcastic about a waste of time. But all he can see is an image of himself. Lying there with the metallic taste of blood in his mouth, in broad daylight, and the chemical stench of piss, he thought he couldn’t feel more pain until the boot connected with his stomach that one last time.

‘That is for Lara.’ The voice whispered close to his ears.

Who the fuck is Lara, he thought, seeping into unconsciousness.

Ten

Sebastian drives too fast to get home. The sun's low in the sky and there's an incandescence about the day. He opens the door and the apartment is still.

'Lara?' He calls out to her. She isn't in her room. He can see the ghost of her on the unmade bed; his t-shirt that she slept in, lay discarded on the floor. He takes a few deep breaths but it doesn't help.

'Lara?' He tears through the flat but he knows she's gone.

It doesn't take him long to get to Soho, that's where he tracked her to. He'd learnt all about tracking devices when he worked as part of a special taskforce. Lara only has one pair of shoes.

He takes the bat out of the car. He doesn't bother with knocking; there are screams as the door crashes in. She's there amongst the other bodies that are more like corpses with their comatose faces.

'What the fuck—'

Which is fitting as the guy is already fucking her. Sebastian heads towards them and rips the man off her. He swings his bat, knocking the man to his knees and away from her. Lara, barely clothed, with her eyes half open, has an odd smile on her face. He grabs her by her arm; she hangs from him like she's boneless.

'What the fuck man.' The guy says again as he tries to get to his feet. Sebastian flashes his badge.

'What's your name?'

'Fuck you.'

He lets Lara go and heads towards the man, with the bat held in the air as if he's actually on a baseball pitch.

'Vince. My name is Vince. Look she came to me, she didn't have any money.'

He turns towards Lara. He picks up her t-shirt and covers her but not before he sees the bite marks of Vince against her white skin. He hauls Lara to her feet and almost drags her out of the room.

'If she ever comes here again and you don't shut the door in her face, I'll come back and I

kill you next time.'

'Fuck you.' Vince calls after him.

Back in the sanctity of their world, his world, he lets her sleep. He will not leave her. He can't let it happen again. She needs to get clean and he will do anything to make sure that she is. Anything. She sleeps for hours. He watches her. Looks at her naked body and pictures Vince fucking her. He can smell Vince on her. If she carries on this way, she'll die. He imagines Lara as the stabbed girl in the alley, the life draining out of her, her skin sallow. He could weep, for his life. The life that is lying passed out in front of him. Except he can't.

And still Lara sleeps.

In the depth of the inky night, she screams and curses. For a while she can hear the radio, it soothes her until she feels the binds around her wrists. She screams again. She tells him that she left because she was tired of him. That he was always trying to control her. She taunts him with the time he had come close to hitting her, because he saw her with a boy from school and she had laughed at his jealousy. She calls him a nonce for hanging around the school gates. She calls him sick.

She says she's sorry and starts to beg again. He couldn't let her screams drift further into the night. He had neighbours; he didn't need any complaints or any questions to answer.

She's crying; the sobs are lost somewhere in her throat. The gag in her mouth stops any sounds. She begged him. His face was steely but she could see his eyes. He was punished. She would punish him. Soon the lack of oxygen is suffocating her, she can't breathe, choking on her own breath. Blackness takes over.

It's quiet in her room. He leans inside; he can see a mass on the bed, but her face is hidden. One pale arm is outstretched, handcuffed to the wrought iron headboard – Sophie's choice. She's so still. For a moment he considers that it might be a ploy to get him to release her but her body is so lifeless that he is compelled to see if she is alright. He is relieved as he approaches to see that her chest moves with each shallow breath. Even when he is close enough for her to react, she doesn't. He wonders how long this state will last; he knows he should leave her alone but he lingers nevertheless. He reaches out his hand to push the hair away from her face but

thinks better of it. With a sigh, he looks at her outstretched arm. There is something so familiar. They are something to do with her, Lara had said.

Rushing to his study, he unlocks the safe and removes the file. Long after Lara had left, he listened to the interview recordings. There was a certain sweet torture to hearing her voice. He couldn't help but picture her, as she was when he had first seen her, with blood on her hands. It had smeared up the inside of her forearms and he had stood staring at the bone protruding in her wrist, which he later learned was called the ulna. He often imagined touching the unblemished skin that covered that bone. When he listened to the interview, he would close his eyes as her voice echoed from the headphones, she would be there again but dressed in her tartan skirt, carrying that rucksack on her slender back.

He imagines he hears Lara's breath through the brick walls. He thinks of her lying in the navy sheets, her delicate pale wrists, the hair matted around her long neck.

It had been at least two years since Sebastian last opened the file. Before Sophie. On the inside sleeve is a photograph of Clarissa. Sebastian unclips the picture, brings it towards his face; he knows the image in its infinite and sparse detail.

'Who killed you?'

The doubts never left. He takes the copy he made of Clarissa's notebook out of the evidence envelope. He opens it, as he's done countless times.

"Opening the notebook with its blank, crisp pages, it occurred to me that it was time to write about the things we will never talk about. Why now? Perhaps because the dark days are here more often now; the shadows are closing in."

It wasn't entirely clear who Clarissa was referring to when she wrote, we. It seemed like she meant Lara, but at times, the things she wrote should not have been for her daughter's eyes. However, it was difficult to see who else it could have been for. Most of the time, the passages were difficult to follow; they jumped all over the place. He knew she was an alcoholic, and sometimes that's how it felt to him, that he was reading words of someone who was drunk. Unstable and unreliable. After Lara was gone, he felt he had come to understand Lara more through her mother's erratic prose.

He reads another few passages and then puts it down, unable to read more. He rubs his eyes.

Clarissa had doodled on the corner of the pages, some were butterfly etchings, a little like Lara's, but not entirely the same. Clarissa clearly didn't sketch as well as her daughter, Lara had

inherited that ability from someone else. The butterflies weren't as intricately crafted and there were no light to the drawings. At times it looked as if Clarissa had kept shading incessantly, until the original shape could barely be seen.

He pictures Clarissa mulling over her words, absentmindedly doodling. He thinks of Lara's skin, the single cornflower butterfly on her inner thigh, and the small bluebird under the curve of her left breast, half hidden, only seen when she's naked. He wonders whether that was her intention, the pleasure of finding them. He thinks of all the other marks on her skin and how he had run the soap over all her blemishes. He picks up the photo of the crime scene and studies the photograph as he had done countless times, always hoping to find something different. He doesn't know how long he sits there studying the image until he sees at last what has subconsciously been gnawing at him. The carpet.

Weeping, shaking, freezing, burning, sweating, vomiting, she begs: let me die. But she is alone. He can't hear her; nobody hears her. They live this cycle intermittently for hours. Then days. She hates him. Despises him. She's afraid of him. She will kill him. Her body is shutting down; he is killing her. The front door slams shut; she's alone. Please no, don't leave.

Her mother stands above her; looks at her with a slight smile, the one she had sometimes when they had been in a good place together. Her mother is shaking her head, hardly discernible but it's there all the same.

I'm in pain, she says. She wishes her mother would reach out her hand and touch her head the way she did when Lara was small. Those cool fingers always made her feel better. I'm in pain, she says again, but her mother hasn't heard her.

Poor child. Her mother says, the same slight smile.

Help me.

Her mother tilts her head, shaking it again.

I can't help you; her mother's voice is soft.

Why won't you help me?' She's screaming now.

I'm dead.

No.

Yes. You killed me.

The pain momentarily seems to leave her. Her mother touches her then, cold fingertips exactly the way she remembered.

Then kill me too. She's crying again, the pain is back and it's even fiercer.

Kill me. Kill me. Let me die. Over and over. Begging. Crying. Screaming. Weeping.

As soon as he opens the door to Lara's room, he is hit with the smell of urine. He takes her to the bathroom, her body shivering in his arms. He doesn't lock the door, she tells him she hates him; he lingers, trying not to let the words have meaning. When she opens the door, she pauses, a remorseful smile on her face, and she holds out her arms like she is about to embrace him. Except she isn't. She shoves him as hard as she can; he stumbles. She is past him, out of the door and running down the corridor. He almost has to tackle her; he grabs her, she screams, he clamps his hand over her mouth, half-carries, half-drags her back to the apartment. He slams the door shut with his foot, wondering whether anyone has heard them. Inside she breaks loose again, spits at him, kicks, screams, punches; her waiflike body surprisingly strong until he finally gets her back to the bed where he cuffs her, gags her. She is crying then begging for him not to. He will get her clean, even if it kills him.

His devotion is not to the thirteen-year-old version of her, but all of her. As soon as they were rid of the disease that imprisoned her, she'd see that.

The room is stale and putrid. The poison has left her body. Her eyes are calm. Not frenzied. Dead.

She is quiet and still. He unlocks the binds, she doesn't scream. He holds the glass to her lips; she drinks the water like someone who has been in the desert for days. She rubs her wrists. He asks her if he can help her to the toilet, she nods. He has already emptied out the medicine cabinet.

He changes the sheets while she washes. He opens the windows and lets the fresh air into the room. He lays out clean clothes, makes her hot chocolate with marshmallows. When she returns to the room, he leaves.

She hates the very bones of him, but she doesn't want him to leave. She makes him promise to stay with her, even though she's through the worst of it. Her body feels better. She's weak but the edge of yearning has somehow dissipated. She longs for it but it doesn't control her now. It has been a long road back from purgatory. He was right and she detests him for it. Yet there they lie. He envelops her. She can feel the warmth of his breath on the back of her neck but she knows he's not asleep. She takes bitter comfort that he's trying so hard not to touch her. She loathes that she wants him to, that she wants him deep inside her so that she's no longer herself but an extension of him. He controls everything, her freedom, her body, her being; she is lost. She wants him to control her. To shut off the noise, the screaming birds. The dead butterflies.

She reviles him, but she despises herself more. He's good for her. He has always been good for her. But good is sometimes as ugly as bad.

Sebastian had asked her if she wanted to sit outside, she had looked to the window and shook her head, it would feel like torture, she had said. He had opened the windows instead; today the breeze is cool.

'At times I wish that when I shut my eyes, they would remain that way forever.'

'Don't talk that way.'

'If you truly cared, you would want what I want.'

'All I want is for all this to be fixed. For you to get better.'

'Do you think I'm broken? People don't break.'

'No, I didn't say...look, I know you are not broken.'

'But I'm never going to be better.'

Eleven

Sebastian cooks them dinner. He doesn't know whether she will come out of the room. It's her choice. Then Lara is there, faint, but more alive than he has seen her since she's been back. She slips on to the stool at the breakfast bar.

'It smells good,' she says. He pours her a glass of wine.

Her skin looks pink, as though she had tried to scrub herself clean of the toxins. She has pulled her hair up into a tight bun, the way she used to when she danced. He puts some bread in front of her; she tears off a small piece of crust and dips it into the olive oil. Her chewing is slow and laborious. He puts the plate in front of her. They eat in silence.

Later, he stops by her room to ask if she needs anything.

'I'm not going to make any noise.' She can't hide her fear.

'I know.' He lingers. She doesn't make a move to undress. She doesn't want him there; he feels wretched.

'I need to go out Lara.' She looks even more afraid of being alone than with him. Perhaps she thinks he will tie her up or lock her in, and despite the urge, he knows that she's better, at least as good as she would ever be. He needs to leave before it gets the better of him.

'I won't be long.'

'Where are you going?'

'To see my dad.'

'Are you taking the bike?' It's the first time he'd seen her smile in days.

'I can do.'

'Can I come?'

Sebastian's father is doing a puzzle when they enter the room. It's tiny pieces, at least a thousand, maybe two, but his dad had managed a whole chunk. Sebastian can't remember whether they had ever done jigsaws together, he can't remember much of his dad after his mother left.

'Hi Dad.'

His dad looks at him.

'Why are you calling me Dad?'

She slips her hand into Sebastian's. He looks at her.

'Because you are my Dad.'

He looks uncertain.

'Juliette?'

'No Dad.'

'Hello Mr Lawson, I'm Lara.' She takes a step towards him and holds out her hand.

'Call me Edward.' He smiles as he says it, taking her hand and holding it between his.

'You remind me of someone I once knew,' he kisses her hand.

'Lara, remember he is of a different generation.' Sebastian winks at his dad.

'It's called charm son.'

She laughs. She tries to take her hand from his dad but he clutches tighter.

'Juliette?' Edward says.

She looks at Sebastian.

'It's Lara, Dad.'

'Oh...I get confused sometimes.' He looks at Sebastian.

'Yes, sometimes. Now let go of Lara's hand.'

Edward looks down at their hands, and drops hers quite suddenly.

'What puzzle are you doing?' Lara asks.

'Was I doing a puzzle?'

Sebastian sighs.

'I was only teasing. I've been at it for days.'

She sits next to him and examines the pieces.

'So, is she your new girl?'

Sebastian smiles at Lara and sits on the other side of his dad.

'Lara and I go way back, she's always been my girl.'

She looks at Sebastian. He hopes that she can forgive him.

'Do you remember when we first did a puzzle, Juliette?'

Sebastian sighs.

'Why don't you remind me, Edward?' Lara smiles and looks for a piece.

'It was in the flat in Kilburn. It was cold, and we had no money and we couldn't go out. Then you said that you had seen an old puzzle in the cupboard that the former tenants had left and you went to fetch it. It smelt damp, and there were pieces missing but we sat with blankets around us and finished that puzzle. Do you remember, Juliette?'

‘Yes, I remember.’

He stops and looks at her then. He smiles, and Seb remembers that smile, in those odd times his parents shared a moment, when there wasn’t any shouting because his mother was in a good place.

‘You look pale, Juliette.’ His father reaches out a hand and runs it along Lara’s cheek and then he turns abruptly to Seb.

‘When are they bringing breakfast?’

‘It’s nearly bedtime. If you are hungry perhaps I can get the night staff to make you a sandwich.’

Edward leans towards Sebastian and whispers, ‘they are trying to starve me in here. I haven’t eaten all day.’

‘We can fetch you something,’ Lara says.

‘Breakfast?’

‘Not yet, Dad.’

‘Why are you calling me Dad?’

‘Everyone is chasing shadows,’ Seb says aloud, embarrassed when he realises Lara is looking at him. She takes Edward’s hand and hands him a piece.

‘Edward, look I found a piece that fits.’

‘Good girl. You’re very pretty. If I were younger...this lad wouldn’t stand a chance.’

She steers his hand towards the space in the puzzle.

It’s the early hours; she can’t sleep. He can’t sleep either, so they decide to eat ice cream. The apartment is lit by the streetlights; none of the blinds are drawn. They’re lying on the floor, on a silk rug his dad had brought from China. The only trip that his father had taken in all the years of planning his retirement but Alzheimer’s has no mercy. Lara eats the coffee ice cream straight from the tub. He wishes they could watch an old, black and white movie, the way they used to, even though she was a teenager and shouldn’t even be into those types of films, but he feels too reluctant to suggest it. He knows that before him, she watched them with her mother.

‘How long has your dad been that way?’ she says between mouthfuls. His eyes are drawn to her mouth.

‘For the past ten years. It wasn’t that bad in the beginning, I used to look after him but then he went out one day and got lost and couldn’t remember his address. That’s when I moved him to a home.’

She covers his hand with hers.

'It must have been hard.'

He shrugs.

'He wasn't much of a father.'

'Well if he wasn't much of a father, it's kind that you look after him.'

He shrugs again.

'How often do you visit him?'

'I try to visit most days.'

'What about since...I've been staying here?'

'When I can.'

He's lost in thought for a while and then he feels the need to be kinder to his father, not wanting her to get the wrong impression of the man that tried but couldn't quite seem to make things right.

'It's not that he wasn't a good person. He wanted to be a good father... but after Juliette left, things were hard for him...and I can't blame him for that.' It's true, that part he always understood. Love has a way of being all consuming, until it isn't. He's glad when Lara turns the conversation away from his family even if it is to speak of her own.

'I don't think my mother was a good person.'

'Why do you say that?'

'I don't know really, I was only thirteen when she died...but she was an alcoholic and she made Tim miserable...'

'Maybe it wasn't her fault that she was an alcoholic.'

'Because it isn't my fault that I'm an addict?'

'Was an addict.'

She surprises him by laughing. He rubs his eyes; part of him wants to sleep forever, another for the moment between them to last. He sees that she is studying him and he gives her a small smile, she surprises him by leaning forward and kissing him fleetingly.

'We didn't get on,' she says after a while, as if he doesn't already know. 'That's why everyone thought I killed her, isn't it?'

'Not everyone did, Lara.'

'By that you mean, you didn't.'

He gives a weary smile.

'Tim didn't.'

'How did everyone know we didn't get on? I mean...Tim wouldn't have said anything.'

He shrugs his shoulders but says, 'the police have a way of finding these things out.'

'I remember at the time you used to say that you didn't know what was going on with her case.'

'I didn't.'

'Really...you wouldn't ask when we were as close as we were...'

When he doesn't answer she continues.

'It used to upset me, that you wouldn't tell me anything... even though we were friends...'
She seems to remember much more now. He is thinking of the best way to answer her and wonders where she is going with the conversation.

'How could I? I asked the normal questions that a PC would ask but...well...I was conflicted...'

'Not really.'

'Lara.'

'We were only friends.'

He stays silent for a while then says, 'even so.'

'I wish I knew what happened to her. I wish I remembered more about her...I know I was angry at her all the time but now I can't seem to remember why.'

'What else do you wish?'

'I wish that I knew whether I killed her.'

'Lara.'

'You could help me find out what happened to her...couldn't you get access to her file?'

'If the detectives couldn't find out then...'

'But they wouldn't have tried to find out the way I would.'

'What would you do?'

'I'd find out who the girl was... What if she is the daughter of the man she was sleeping with.'

'You used to believe that back then.'

'And you didn't believe me.'

'It's not that I didn't believe you... But they didn't find anyone.'

'Did they even look?'

'I'm sure they did...'

'But you don't know do you? If you couldn't ask, how would you know?'

He doesn't reply. But Lara is not giving up.

'Tim knew about her affairs...I guess he would've said if he had known who it was.'

Sebastian still doesn't say anything. Her mother was having an affair, Lara wasn't wrong. And it was plausible that her mother's lover had a child, but would she have killed Clarissa? And why had Lara described someone that looked so much like herself? If she'd made her up, wouldn't she have described someone else entirely?

'I'm not a policeman anymore, Lara,' he says in a tired voice.

Lara is studying him.

'What happened? You always loved your job.'

'Can we talk about something else?'

'Even as an ex-policeman you could get the file, right?'

'For God sake Lara.'

'But you could, right?'

'No, not really.'

'You can't get it or you won't try?'

'I wouldn't be able to get the file.'

He turns away from her; there must be something about his expression or gesture because she doesn't say anything for a while and when she does, she changes the subject.

'I was in love with you,' but the breeziness about her voice is betrayed by the look of wariness in her expression. What is he meant to say to that? He feels like he is constantly navigating her fragility. Or maybe it's not that at all, but his own vulnerability. It takes him a long time to respond, and the only reason he does is the expectant look of her expression.

'I'm not sure that it was love. You needed someone.'

'Does it make you feel better about all that rejection if you think that it wasn't real?' There is a light humour in her voice and he laughs to hide what he feels. They both say nothing for a while.

'I didn't reject you. We were close if you remember...do you remember?'

At times it's difficult to believe that she is not somehow playing him. She'd always been far cleverer. Even back then, her maturity seemed well beyond her years, and he often considered she was manipulating him. It once occurred to him that she might have wanted to be close to find out about the case but as soon as those thoughts presented themselves, he was quick to dismiss them. She was always so vulnerable.

'Did you love me, even a little?'

'Would it make you feel better if I say I did?'

'Maybe.' She smiles. He smiles back; he knows in that moment he is lost to her and he knows better than to admit to anything.

‘What superpower would you have if you could choose?’ she asks, and he laughs aloud.

‘Okay that’s a bit random but...I guess in my line of work, I’d be bullet proof. How about you?’

‘I’d fly.’

‘Of course.’

He shifts on to his elbow so that he can look at her; she offers him a spoonful of ice cream. He refuses and tells her that he’d eaten too much already but doesn’t say how he would much rather watch the seductive way she eats it. It occurs to him that he finds most of her actions and movements seductive. The way she brushes her hair by putting it to one side; the way she fiddles with her loop earrings when she tries to put them in without a mirror; the way she stretches after sketching, her arms so long and thin, as she reaches for the ceiling.

She takes a few more mouthfuls.

‘I hate that people keep birds in cages; the life fades out of them. Even feathers look sad to me. I found a peacock feather once, they’re meant to be the most beautiful, but it looked forlorn.’ She tells him again about the butterfly exhibition; to her it’s the first time. He pulls her to him and she rests her head against his shoulder for a while.

‘The ice-cream is melting.’ She pulls away. ‘Now that I’m not using, perhaps we can piece together what happened in my past.’

‘Are you ready for that, Lara?’ He says it with such earnestness that it makes her hesitate.

‘I don’t know if I will ever be ready. But maybe this is as good as it gets.’

‘It’s just that I’m worried for what the past may open for you.’

He runs his fingertips over the scars on her arms.

‘You’re the one that has been badgering me since I got here to remember...now that I have a chance...you are telling me that I should leave the past in the past?’

He had stopped asking her about the blood on her shirt, he didn’t want to know about it anymore.

‘I’m not saying that.’

‘What are you saying then—’

‘Lara, it’s late.’

‘You must know someone who could help...it can’t be that hard to get the file, come on Seb, one of your friends—’

She’s back to that; he’d hoped for a second that she’d let it go.

‘I think that if I could figure all of this out...the voids...the images...what happened to her, then maybe I would be better. Something inside me...I know it sounds cliché...dramatic—’

‘Okay.’

‘Okay... you’ll help?’

He nods but his eyes are still on the skin on the inside of her arm.

‘It’s like you were trying to engrave a thousand cuts,’ he says, still holding her arm.

‘Perhaps a thousand cuts that are self-inflicted is better than death at the hands of someone else.’ She leans away, gets up, and heads towards the kitchen. He doesn’t follow.

She’s lying on the bed; he stands in the doorway. She knows he’s going to lock the door. She told him that she lived a lifetime without choice. He promised her that she’d be free to choose as soon as she was rid of its hold.

‘Is it true what you said about why you left? The things you said about me—’ He hates how insecure he sounds.

‘I don’t remember what I said, I was going cold turkey remember—’

‘You said you hated me, that I was controlling, is that what you think?’

She pauses a while; he can see she is trying to find the right words.

‘You said that’s why you left the first time too, because I was suffocating you.’ Now that he had started, he can’t let go.

‘Well I was obviously talking crap because the first time I can’t remember.’

Her words fall flat. Truth is, he doesn’t know what she remembers or doesn’t remember.

‘I was just living... but when I saw you that day... walking along the Southbank. Perhaps the drugs fucked up my brain.’

‘You really didn’t remember anything until then... that your mother was dead—’

‘Of course, I knew she was dead... but I guess I’d just shut out how she died.’

She holds her fingers to her temple.

‘And you shut me out too.’

‘Do you know what this is like?’ Her voice is loud, he can’t tell whether she’s angry or just defensive, and can’t help wondering what is real what is contrived. Nothing about it makes sense; nothing about them did either. This dynamic that he didn’t understand, not now and not back then. Why had he let her consume everything? Mistaking his silence, she says, ‘sorry for shouting... that was wrong.’

For a moment she looks unsure of herself, not in the way she was vulnerable before, but uncertain about him. He tries to smile.

‘I can’t be in prison, Seb. I don’t need to be locked up or locked away... I need to make sense of everything and I can’t do that if you carry on acting like you have to save me... I don’t want that... I want you to help...that’s why I came to you, the same way I did back then... I shared a terrible experience with you... and for that...I think we shared a connection... we share a bond.’

He nods because he doesn’t trust himself to say the right thing.

‘You will help me won’t you, Sébastien?’

‘I said I would.’

Just as he is about to leave she asks him how he found her.

‘I don’t have a phone so I know you couldn’t have tracked me that way.’

‘I was a policeman.’

But his attempt at humour is lost on her. Instead she studies him, her eyes squinting. She gets out of bed, moves towards him. He thinks for a moment that she’s going to strike him. She kisses him on the cheek instead.

It’s somewhere close to dawn because the light outside is changing from that blackness of dead night to a translucent inky blue; he has wandered from room to room, unable to sleep, her words going around and around. He lingers by her door a number of times but then decides against it because he’s drunk and he knows that he doesn’t know what he is doing. His body aches, deep within his bones and his mind feels like it’s on fire. Burning and melting. He remembers the first time she was in his garden burning photographs, his former girlfriends melting into the flames. He ends up in the study, drawn to the file as always. Sebastian hadn’t worked on Clarissa’s murder, not officially. After the Surrey detectives lost interest in her case, he invented a reason to review the file. He was a sergeant by then, no one queried him. He took copies of everything. Shortly after, he moved to the Met. What would happen if he showed the file to her? Before he gives himself time to think about what he is doing, he takes a lighter from the top drawer of his desk, puts the file in the bin and sets it alight.

The following morning, he showers while she sleeps and only wakes her when he absolutely has to leave. She doesn’t open her eyes.

‘Lara, I have to go out. I’ll be back at lunchtime. Josh is going to stop by.’

‘You getting him to babysit.’ She still hasn’t opened her eyes but she smiles.

‘If you need anything. Anything. If you feel like you’re slipping...’

‘I’ll be okay Seb. You can’t watch me forever.’

'You have beaten this Lara, life can begin again.'

She sighs in her sleep.

Everything is on fire, the flames are close to her skin, the smoke making her eyes smart. Her head burns, no aches, but then the fire is gone. Snuffed out. It's cold. The room is unnaturally white, it burns her eyes, almost as much as the fire. He is there, above her. She feels his fingers digging into her neck. He isn't smiling; he's expressionless as he is pressing, not hard enough for there to be no air, but enough for her to feel the searing heat from lack of oxygen. *Mikki*, her lips are forming the shape of his name but there is no sound. He presses his weight against her, his eyes not leaving hers, looking at her with the same expression he has when he is deep inside her, in that panting way of his, ripping her in two, but she suffers all the weight of him. Her mother is crying, weeping in fact, from those dead eyes that never stop beseeching. She can't bear the weeping; it's loud and silent. Tim is holding her mother, hushing her, whispering for her not to cry, telling her that everything will be alright, his hand soothing her spine like she is a child but her mother's sobs grow louder and ever more silent. Sébastien is there, by the window, looking out in the darkness, his profile quite beautiful in the muted light; he won't look at her, he won't turn away from the window. I'm dying Seb, help me, save me, because that's what he does, rescues her. Milan, her Mikki, is ripping her in half; there is blood everywhere. Sébastien, Sébastien. This time the scream is there, resonating around the room, through the hallways of the house, touching the other girls who weep, stolen, bought and sold like cheap fabric from china. Seb turns away from the window, towards her then but it's not him; it's Mikki and he is sad, the tears in his eyes. Seb is ripping into her, his face, that age-old anguish of his love and pain. She tries to turn away from him but she can't move, she's locked in, then she is free of him. He is weeping then and she vomits, except it won't come out, it stays within her. She is there alone.

Twelve

Lara is lying on her stomach, in the middle of the living room, in a halo of light. Vlad is lying by her head. Sometimes she holds out her hand and runs her fingertips along the wooden floor. Vlad's paw tries to catch her fingers but the cat is too lazy to move. Sometimes she turns to look at him, her eyes too bright in the sunlight, and he thinks that she has the same eyes as the cat.

'Did you ask any of your friends for the file yet?'

'Not yet, no.'

She sits up and looks at him.

'I haven't had the chance, LaLa.'

'Don't do that.'

'What?'

'Don't humour me; I'm not a kid.'

He looks irritated; she remembers his expression from all those years ago, it used to intimidate her, now she feels equally as irritated.

'Why don't you tell me about the day you came to my flat, Lara? Why don't you tell me why you had blood on your shirt?'

She remembers this too, his desire to prove a point. 'I was high as a kite the day I came here.' She deliberately keeps her tone flat and hopes that her face is as neutral.

'We seem to go around in circles,' he says, resigned.

'Perhaps if you get the file, we could stop going around in circles.'

He leaves the room. She knows he's angry and equally trying to control his temper.

'Did they find who killed the girl in the alley? She calls out.

'It's not my case, Lara.'

He comes to the doorway, lingers there. She shrugs. He sighs.

'There's a grainy CCTV showing someone, male...they think, going into the alley just after her. But they can't see his face. Apparently, it looks like he's a kid, from the way he moves, his build. Probably another gang thing.'

'Do you think they'll find him?'

'I don't know. It's not my case.'

'At least we know you are still in touch with the police.'

He doesn't say anything.

'Why did you leave the force, Seb?'

'Lara.'

'Sébastien.'

He is waiting for her to get ready.

His phone buzzes. Sophie. He doesn't pick up. She calls again. And a further three times. He takes his phone to the balcony and picks up the fifth call.

'Where are you?' Her voice is desperate.

'I'm just about to go out, why, are you okay?'

'No. I've been trying to get hold of you and you aren't answering any of my calls.'

'Something came up.'

He doesn't quite know what to say; his grip on the phone tightens.

'What is the matter, Sophie?'

'You're lying to me.' He can hear that she is crying.

'Don't be ridiculous. The hearing is tough. I'm not sleeping well.'

'What? You make me worry more when you don't tell me things...have they said anything? Is the suspension permanent? I'm coming home.'

'What? Why?'

'I just don't feel...I don't know.'

'You're overreacting.' He says when she pauses. She won't like that, it would make her angry and she'd hang up. Except she doesn't, she's not even hiding her tears anymore. He feels rotten.

'Sophie, I'm okay. And I'm due back there tomorrow. You can check up on me if you like.'

'I don't mean to check up on you. I'm so far away and it just feels like something is going on with you, and you weren't answering and I was worried...'

'I'm okay, Sophie.'

'I want to come home.'

He tries not to react for a moment.

'Why would you do that? It's a few weeks, I need to focus on this Soph, even if you were here I wouldn't be very present.' The last part isn't a lie.

'I need to get back there. To you. I need to see you, to support you, to show you that everything is okay.'

'You're being overly dramatic, Sophie,' he realises how cruel it is to say that to her. 'I know you support me, it helps me through it...but if you came back, I'd feel worse. What if it all comes to nothing? How would we both feel that you had left the kids and your responsibility?'

'I'm going to check out flights, I guess I'll have to give them some notice before I leave. I don't care what you say, Seb. I'm coming home.'

When he doesn't say anything, she asks after the cat and it is like they hadn't had the fraught conversation. He sighs and tells her that the cat is getting fat. She almost laughs.

Lara is at the window of the balcony, watching him.

'Sophie, I have to go.'

'I love you, Seb.'

'See you soon.'

Lara had not taken her eyes from his as he wraps up his call. It feels like he is caught having an affair.

'Was that your girlfriend?'

'She's not my girlfriend.'

Lara shrugs her shoulders.

'Well...not anymore LaLa. I guess she hasn't been since the moment you came back.'

She turns away from him.

'I've disrupted your life, you know that your life is easier without me.'

He takes hold of her shoulders and turns her to face him.

'I can't talk to you when you're walking away.'

When she looks at him, she looks empty. Even a little bored.

'Life was more straightforward before you walked back into it but it wasn't easier.'

She says nothing for a while and when she speaks it is like she hadn't heard him at all.

'You lie so easily to her.'

'None of this is easy,' he says with a sigh, 'but she's on the other side of the world, I can't tell her it's over like that.'

'Would you lie so easily to me?'

He shakes his head but it doesn't make him less of a liar. He has always lied to her.

‘Lara you used to say that we were connected. I think I remember you calling us soul mates and me giving you a hard time about how immature a notion it is, and then you were gone...and then back...I think you must know now how I feel about you...’

‘Feel about me? Really?’ She faces him with something he hasn’t seen in her before. ‘Do you even know me. I don’t even know parts of me. My obscurities. Do I dream? Do I remember? Do I lie? Maybe it’s all a lie. Maybe I know exactly who I am.’

‘Stop it, Lara.’

‘Because it’s the truth?’

‘Because I can’t keep chasing your shadow...because I don’t want you to disappear again, I want to figure out what is going on with you, I want to help.’

‘If you truly want to help, you must know it all starts with my mother.’

‘I know.’

‘So why won’t you help.’

‘I want to, I’m just afraid of what it will do to you if we go back to that time... the things that happened to you... there are blanks in your life Lara, what happens when we fill those voids... what is that going to do to you?’

She does something he doesn’t expect, she steps towards him and wraps her arms around his waist and rests her cheek against his chest. He lightly puts his arms around her, always careful for it not to develop into something more until she wants to.

‘I won’t disappear.’

She says it so quietly he barely hears her.

‘Can you promise me that... that’s all I’ll ever ask of you.’

He tightens his hold on her, and she runs her fingertips up the length of his spine. Perhaps they should stay here instead.

‘Come on,’ she says, ‘I thought you were taking me on a date.’

She pulls away from him and heads towards the door. He follows her with the uneasy knowledge that she hasn’t promised him anything.

They walk along the Thames; the City of London winks at them from across the river. She holds his hand; he struggles to keep the smile from his lips. They eat dinner in a small Japanese restaurant; she uses chopsticks like someone who had been brought up in Tokyo. She tells him that she doesn’t want the evening to end; he tells her that it’s just the beginning. He hails them a cab that takes them to Sadler’s Wells and she hugs him when she realises that he’s taking her to the ballet.

‘How did you remember?’

‘I remember everything about you.’

She watches the ballet, he watches her. The smile on her face, the sadness in her eyes, the way her head tilts one side to the next, the way at times her left hand mimes the movements of the ballerinas.

Back home, they sit outside on the balcony. She faces him, her feet in his lap. He watches her eyes light up in the glow of the candle. She tells him how dance is the main thing that she shared with her mother. He doesn’t say that he already knows, instead he encourages her with a nod of his head. The faraway look on her face, as she transcends to a place that he would never share.

The entire apartment is now lit with candles. It’s too warm inside but there is a sense of serenity about them. He almost wishes that they could stay this way but it’s him that breaks the silence.

‘I hope that when you remember your mother, you think of good things and not just...the end.’

Lara touches her necklace. He had been surprised when he’d seen her wearing it earlier, a part of her that had survived everything. She had always worn it when he had first known her; she had told him it was a gift from her mother on her thirteenth birthday.

‘Do you think of...Juliette?’ she asks, distracting him from asking her about it.

He realises then that he expects her to share everything and yet had shared little of himself. He rubs the balls of her feet.

‘At odd times. She died when I was thirty.’

‘You didn’t tell me that earlier...why did you not tell me that?’

He shrugs his shoulders.

‘Sébastien?’

‘I don’t like talking about it... Well it’s not a big deal... I didn’t really know her... She wasn’t in my life...except for the occasional card. And yet she left me everything. That’s how I could buy this place.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s not a big deal,’ he repeats.

Her face looks peaceful in the amber light of the candle; he smiles but only to appease her.

‘What did she die of?’

‘Lara, I don’t want to...’ he sighs, ‘an overdose.’

He moves her feet away, stands up and reaches for their wine glasses.

'Sometimes I remember good times with my mother, but there weren't very many.'

Lara's voice stops him.

'Lately I keep seeing her lying there, with that knife in her and the blood everywhere. I remember an argument, we said some terrible things, but we had so many arguments and I can't remember whether it was that day or not. I remember seeing her lying there, thinking what a terrible way to die, like she was someone else, not her, and I wasn't me at all. The girl I passed, I looked at her, thinking who the hell is she because we lived in that cul-de-sac with only three houses and both the neighbours were old...perhaps she was a burglar because one of our neighbours had been robbed...and then the door was open, and my mum was lying on the floor and I thought, as she was dying...how helpless I was because when I was sick my mum always knew what to do...she had long cool fingers and she'd stroke them across my forehead and she was gentle and kind, so far removed from the woman that always seemed to be in disdain of everything other than alcohol... my mother... well, she seldom made any sense.'

Sebastian had sat down again, still holding the empty classes.

'Did anyone ever look into the case after I was gone?' Lara looks at her hands, and when he doesn't say anything she looks at him. 'You know, other than suspecting me, I think they said it was a possible suicide... Tim did say she was depressed... but who would kill themselves in that way? And when I found her, her eyes... she looked like she didn't want to die. Lately, I have been dreaming about her a lot.'

'What do you dream?' He thinks of his dreams, the recurring images of being left, different each time.

'I dream about the knife going into her skin and the look on her face. I dream that I killed her.'

Sebastian puts the glasses down and takes her hands.

'You didn't kill her.'

'How do you know?'

'You'd remember.'

'Except that's just it, I don't. And I do blackout, I wake up somewhere and I have no idea how I got there or why. What if I did kill her?'

'You didn't kill her.'

'But how do you know that? Was there any evidence that it was someone other than me? Did you ever find her?'

'I know.'

'Did they ever look?'

‘Of course.’

‘And?’

‘They didn’t find anyone. It doesn’t mean she didn’t exist.’

‘But it doesn’t mean that it wasn’t me either,’ she says. There’s a silence then, as he tries to think of what to say.

‘You’re not capable of killing anyone.’

Lara rolls her eyes.

‘Same old Sébastien. You always want to believe the best. But everyone has a dark side. Me. Even you.’ She’s challenging him to deny it.

‘Everyone is capable of dark thoughts, of doing dark things but what makes us civilised is our ability to stop ourselves,’ he says.

‘Except sometimes we just can’t stop, can we?’

He looks away from the heat of her eyes.

‘Do you want another drink?’

‘No, I’m good.’

He misses the dependent Lara.

They’d agreed that she should walk back alone. He resisted the urge to stay hidden and follow her. He tries not to show her his relief when he answers the door.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen you with dark hair,’ he says, instead of the many things he wants to say.

She runs her hand through her hair, which has been cut above her shoulders.

‘I think that I have never had hair this dark or this short. Well?’

‘You look beautiful.’

She heads towards the mirror that hangs in the hall. He follows and looks at her through her reflection. His hand touches the silky hair, much the same way her own hands had moments ago.

‘A new me.’

‘I liked the old you.’

She looks at him like she is about to say something, however whatever is on her mind stays there.

‘I’ll put the kettle on,’ she says instead.

He stands in the hall. He picks up her bag.

'Do you want tea?' She calls out. He drops the bag without opening it, and heads towards the kitchen.

'No, I'll have a whisky.'

'You know, my mum was a drinker.'

She digs out some peppermint tea. He finishes his drink and pours another.

'She wasn't a nice drunk either.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Nothing.'

She takes her tea into the living room and sits in her chair.

'I wish we could go out and watch an old movie.'

'Do you want me to see if there are any on?'

She doesn't say anything, just wanders out on to the balcony. He follows her, leaving the glass behind. He sits close. They both look out onto the Thames. At least she is safe now, he thinks. He tells her he has something for her. When he gives her the guitar, she presses her lips to his mouth.

Later, Lara's stretched out on his bed, the guitar discarded beside her. She holds the newspaper close to her face.

'Looks like you need glasses.'

'I can't believe people still buy hardcopies,' she says putting the paper aside.

'What were you reading?'

She folds the paper hands him the article. He'd already read it.

'An article about underage sex and consent,' he doesn't mean for his voice to sound so dismissive.

He tosses the paper on the bed.

'Girls getting married as young as thirteen... earlier in some cultures... there's no consistency in Europe. All the trafficking that goes on, even in our precious London, the police know and they do nothing...it seems everywhere is a little fucked up.'

'Are you trying to make a point?'

She looks at him like he was quite mad.

'What are you talking about, Sébastien? Not everything is about you.'

He realises then that this may have been about her, a way to tell him all she had been through. The moment is gone, Lara he picks up her guitar and starts strumming.

'It really depends on the circumstances,' he says, instantly regretting how pathetic it sounds, because it's not what he meant.

For a while, Lara concentrates on the tune she's playing. She stops suddenly, puts the guitar down again and looks at him.

'You're making this all about you.'

'What is that supposed to mean?'

He's angry even though he had thought the same thing himself.

'I mention the police and you feel you have to defend them. I saw them Seb, girls that were brought here and chained up like animals, fucked over and over until they didn't care anymore, drugged, then tidied up ready to perform. And the police knew.'

'Is that what happened to you, Lara?'

'Fuck you, Sébastien.'

'You know my name is Sebastian.' He clenches his fists. She sees it in his face and there is a hint of a smile about her.

'Screw you, Lara.'

Lara looms over him in the grainy evening light. He has passed out, too much vodka. He thought about her leaving as he downed glass after glass and decided, in that moment, he didn't care.

'Come to bed,' she says.

'What time is it?'

'It's two.'

He shifts off the sofa; his tongue feels arid.

'Come to bed.' She says again, this time putting her hand on his thigh.

He is unsteady on his feet. He sees her look at the bottle, it is a quarter filled.

'Knock yourself out,' he says, as he leaves.

In the early hours of the morning, she joins him in bed.

'I want to make love to you Sebastian, not sex.' She's whispering as though he is asleep but he's been awake for hours. 'I want to look in your eyes when you are deep inside me and for you to see me.'

He reaches out for her. He kisses her mouth softly; she tilts her head back, closing her eyes again.

'No, keep them open, look at me.'

He lights all the candles, before he climbs back into bed, slips off the t-shirt that she has been wearing – his t-shirt that now smells more of her than him – and runs his tongue along her collar bone, she shivers, his lips brush the skin where the butterflies fly, her fingertips caress the length of his spine, ‘I’m going to kiss all of you,’ he whispers, she shivers again. Every time she closes her eyes he tells her to open them, she bites her lip so hard that her teeth leave an imprint, and when he finally draws level with her, and is deep inside her, she looks into his eyes, as she promised.

Afterwards, she sleeps holding on to his arm. He doesn’t sleep at all.

Thirteen

Lara is walking along Shad Thames, and stops by her favourite artisan café to buy a coffee. Everyone else seems to be eating ice-cream, but she likes hot drinks even in the heat. She's going out alone more often now but never for too long. She knows that he worries when she's gone. She sees the relief in his expression every time she comes back, feels it in the too casual way he hugs her.

She hasn't lived on this side of London before, it feels different to the west and she likes it. Her favourite part is to sit on the grass verges along the river, especially when the workers are eating their lunch. She watches them often, wondering what it would be like to work in an office. Normal people going about normal life.

It's late afternoon and unnaturally warm again. The coffee burns her tongue. For a moment she's tempted to stop at one of the pop-up bars and drink something cool and fruity. But she doesn't. It's getting easier to resist now, and she feels stronger for it. She will thank Seb, if she ever gets over the resentment. She looks at Tower Bridge, and realises that she has never seen it lift. As a child she'd always pictured Tower Bridge in the nursery rhyme, it didn't make sense to her that the underwhelming London Bridge would merit a song. Even worse, it wasn't even the original structure – that was somewhere in America. She'd learned that on a river cruise, a party for some Middle-Eastern clients. It's odd the things that she seems to remember.

She decides to head back but is hemmed in by a crowd of people lingering by HMS Belfast. And in that crowd, she sees a familiar face. She shivers; the downy hair on her arm lifts from her skin. She looks again, their eyes meet, fleetingly; she smiles and looks away, as if they are strangers. But she can't resist glancing back; this time she can't see him at all. She makes her way through the crowd, moving people out of the way with a gentle nudge. They smile, *mi scusi*. When she is free she doesn't hurry in any way or walk with any haste. But as soon as she can, she ducks underneath one of the arches, hides in the shadows. She checks up and down the street; there's no one there. She crosses the mini version of a European piazza, relieved to be nearly back.

Sebastian acts casually when he hears the key in the lock. He calls out, asking whether she wants a drink. She's carrying flowers. She finds a glass vase and turns on the tap but too much, because the water splashes everywhere. She swears, reaching impatiently for a dishcloth. His head is turned towards the newspaper but his eyes are on her. Her skin is still pale, despite the time she spends in the sun, but her cheeks are red. He is about to ask her how she is, but he thinks better of it. Their eyes meet. She gives him a dismissive smile. He smiles back and looks away. Lara is better; he knows it. It's just a matter of time.

Lara is working out a song she'd heard on the radio, but her fingertips are feeling sore from strumming on the guitar strings too hard. She is out of practice. Sebastian seems distracted. She places the guitar on the chair next to her and wanders over to him. She puts her arm around his neck. He takes her hand and kisses the inside of her wrist. They sit that way for a while.

'This could be our life you know,' he says.

'Sitting side by side on the sofa.'

He laughs.

'I mean we could build a life for ourselves here.'

'What about Sophie?'

'I've told her it's over.'

She squeezes his hand.

'Was it difficult?'

'I don't want to hurt her.'

She leans her head against his shoulder and closes her eyes.

'You can have a normal life, LaLa.'

She laughs at this. 'Oh Seb,' she says and kisses him.

'Don't you want a normal life?'

'Work, home, holiday...maybe a child or two.'

'Don't mock, Lara.'

'I'm sorry Seb... I didn't mean...'

He gets up, tells her he needs a drink. She sits looking out on the river. She imagines the life that he suggests, and there's a part of her, from some time in her past, which finds it appealing. Had she ever settled anywhere? Random memories but not in any order. They had moved from place to place, long before Tim; she must have been very small because she remembers looking up at her mother, who was always so long and thin to her. They looked for a new place to stay, her mother's hand engulfed hers – when had that stopped? She was crying: I

want to stay here, she said, we can't baby, her mother said. School after school; it was difficult to make friends that way. And then there was Tim, nothing like her mother's usual lovers, stable, kind, patient, except her mother treated him with more derision than anyone else, and she'd married this one. And then there was.... But she couldn't let her mind go there, not today. She hears the doctor's voice, where is your happy place Lara? London Zoo in the butterfly enclosure. Are those butterflies the images that she had? But when she closes her eyes, there's something else, a painting.

Sebastian comes back carrying their drinks and hands her a glass of wine. He's drinking whisky. She takes it, places it on the table without taking a sip. Sebastian slumps down next to her. She thinks for a while about what to say.

'If I had an ordinary life, I would go to university, study something to do with the arts, although I guess I'd have to think about actually getting some qualifications to get there. I never finished school anywhere. Some days I'll come home from university, make us dinner. In the evenings we could go out, either a long walk along the river or we would stay home. I'll sketch and play the guitar. Some days you could fix us dinner. You'll ask me to go on a run with you and I'll lock myself in the bathroom until you got the hint that there was no chance. I'd take up ballet again.' She smiles.

The radio plays an old song that his father used to listen to; he used to think that it was a song for his mother. He gets up suddenly and holds out his hand, perhaps it's a song for him instead.

*If you want something to play with
Go and find yourself a toy*

'Are you making a point with this song?' she says, but stands up anyway. He pulls her into his arms, then starts to half-sing, half-speak the lyrics.

'Seriously, Seb, these lyrics are so cliché. I can't believe how corny this is.'

But he tightens his hold and she senses a need in him, so they dance to the rest of the song in silence. When it's over, she steps back from him and for a moment, it is awkward between them.

'Is that what you think, that I'm playing with your heart?'

'Is it so bad? Would life be so terrible?' he says, his voice still quiet.

She has never seen him so vulnerable; he had never been candid about how he felt. He was always so restrained in the way he was with her. An image of them comes to mind from a long time ago; they're kissing and she's fearful of the passion between them.

'Lara? Is it so bad?

'I'd never have a child,' she says suddenly, 'no matter how desperate you'd become, I would not let myself be convinced.'

'I don't care about that.'

'I want to go to Italy. I think I was happy there.'

'We could go wherever we want.'

'I'd ask you to drink less. That would be a condition. I grew up with a drunk, I would never choose to live with one again.'

'It wouldn't be hard for me to stop.'

'Not like me, is that what you mean?' There's no malice in her voice though.

'I will promise you anything. This...thing between us...is real.'

She looks at him for a while longer then wanders back to the guitar and starts to strum again, ignoring the hint of a smile on Sebastian's lips.

At two in the morning the storm rages. It's a biblical rain; the lightning strikes across the Thames, and the electric thunder crashes into the night sky. It wakes him. He reaches out; Lara isn't beside him. She has pulled a chair up to the window, sits hugging her knees in the darkness, and watching the downpour. He gets out of bed, joins her at the window.

'It's lovely,' she says. It sounds like she has been awake for a while.

'Is that a fire?'

'It was struck by lightning. I saw it.'

'I hope it doesn't spread to one of the old buildings.'

They watch it together. Then he says, come back to bed.

But Lara doesn't sleep.

He sleeps late into the morning; time seems to have lost all meaning. He walks to the fridge and takes out the milk. He looks around for a note; she has started to leave post-its for him when she pops out to the shop. Nothing. He drinks from the bottle. He heads towards the shower and strips off his clothes.

He thinks about what they could do today; perhaps he'll take her on the bike. He wanders into the spare bedroom. Her guitar is propped up against the bed, but her sketchpad is gone. Perhaps she is out somewhere sketching. He texts her. He hears a ping. He calls her, a ringing tone. He rushes to the office; the phone that he bought for her is on the desk.

'Lara,' he calls, as if she is there somewhere, even though there is nowhere for her to be. The filing cabinet has moved. The safe is open. The money is gone. He uploads the tracking system; it tells him that she is here, somewhere within the flat. He tears around, to pinpoint its location. It's in the bin in the kitchen. He thinks he might be sick. Her bag is in the hallway where she always kept it.

But Lara is gone.

Sebastian searches all over London, day and night. To the place in Soho. To the club she had worked in Kensington. She hadn't been wrong; all the women were dressed the same and had a dead look about them. He hadn't slept in over thirty-six hours; he knew that he could only find her if he had his wits about him. He'd rest then start again. It is the early hours when he opens the door to the apartment. He hears movement in the bedroom; he sighs with overwhelming relief. Lara is back; she'd come home. He rushes towards the door.

'Lara.'

'Sebastian?'

Sophie's barely awake. She'd been lying on the right side; it was her side of the bed.

'Who's Lara?'

Fourteen

Tim sits under the shade of an orange tree with a book about olive farming. He put it down a while ago, laid it out flat rather than turned the corner of the pages – he hates when people do that – to enjoy the Tuscan hills. He had never thought that he would settle anywhere other than England but he adopted Italy as home. No matter that he could barely speak Italian; he really tried, formal lessons, listening for hours on end on the headphones Maria had bought him, but he just couldn't get a handle on it, *grazie, prego, buona notte*. Maria laughed at his pronunciation for even the most basic of words.

He'd left the farmhouse a couple of hours ago; Maria knew that it was because her grandchildren were coming over. She squeezed his hand when he said he was going to check on the olive groves. She had smiled and said good, even though Tim didn't know a thing about olive farming.

They left her room exactly as she had left it. To change it now would mean giving up hope; he had to believe that she would come back one day. He remembers the day she left clearly. That morning it was bitterly cold, icy winds and dew dusted the fields that otherwise looked barren in the aftermath of an unforgiving summer. The air was filled with a veil of ash from a wildfire that had been sparked the night before; they had all watched from the window as the flames spread across the landscape engulfing one of their neighbour's houses. Neighbours entirely in the loosest terms, the closest house a few hundred metres over the hills. Later they found out it wasn't a wildfire at all, some kids thought it would be fun to set light to a bale of hay.

Lara liked the early hours; she'd be out for a morning run before breakfast. That morning, nothing. He had let her sleep, or so he thought. It was nearly lunchtime before Maria looked in on her. *She's not here*. Maria said it with a nonchalance that made Tim fool himself that Lara had got up even earlier, or that she had slipped out when they were doing some of the chores around the farm. Her running shoes were by the back door. Her toothbrush was still in the cloakroom by the kitchen, sat in an old jam-jar that she'd rescued from the bin because the glass was an unusual shade of blue. Everything in her room was in its place, the guitar popped up against the bookshelf, her sketchbook on the dresser. Her favourite mauve sweater on the

back of the door. The butterfly necklace was missing from where it usually hung from the mirror on her desk. He had swallowed hard at that point; he could try and fool himself but the only thing that was important to her was that necklace, she didn't wear it anymore but she would never leave it behind. By the evening, despite Maria's assurance that she'd be back, he knew she was gone.

He went back to England. But it was futile; the place that they had lived in had been sold years ago. It didn't stop him hanging around in Godalming. He had sat outside the old house, which looked the same but oddly different, and watched as the new family came home. Soon the lights were on, the disparate music of the various teenagers was playing loud enough that he could hear it, and he had thought to himself, at least now it's a happy home. He had always wanted that for her, but it had always been beyond them. They were a family but not a healthy one.

You are good father, il mio amore. But he had never been able to protect her, least of all from her mother.

There had been no humility for Lara even at Clarissa's funeral. She had stood stoically by her mother's grave, an impassive expression on her face, no tears, listening intently as the vicar performed the sermon. Seeing her like that was a terrible strain and it took much effort not to break down, to be strong for Lara. And the police there too, they couldn't leave her alone, not even then. His eyes had brushed over the mourners, if you can call them that, they were his friends and colleagues, none of them had really known Clarissa. Even in death, she was a solitary soul. He had wondered whether that was what drove her affairs, the loneliness of her existence. There wasn't anyone lasting in her life, her only committed relationship was with alcohol; it was a suffocating and controlling friend.

When the vicar finished sermonising, Lara had leaned into him, her mouth close to his ear.

Do you think that cassocks are heavy to wear? Her tone was flat, emotionless.

Maria is climbing up the hill to join him; she is carrying a small picnic basket. He imagines the children are having their afternoon nap. He sighs. The only hope he has is that one day she'll come back. He refuses to think that she's dead. He'd feel it if she was, wouldn't he? That's what parents say, don't they? Until sometime, way into the future, when perhaps a shallow grave would be unearthed and they'd find her in it. He shudders. As Maria reaches him, she knows that he is thinking of Lara, she can always tell.

'I thought you would be here,' she says.

‘I love the smell of oranges.’

They eat their lunch mostly in silence. Maria asks whether he wants to go back to the house for a nap but he wants to stay out a little while longer. She understands but she reminds him to be in the shade and cover his face if he wants to sleep. He tells her he has no intention of sleeping and she laughs by way of response. He watches her walk down the hill, then lays back on the blanket and closes his eyes for a few moments.

When he wakes, the light has changed slightly. He sits up, rubbing his eyes, and sees that a figure is walking towards him. A woman. Not Maria, much younger, by the way she walks. He squints as she gets closer, and rubs his eyes again. He knows that walk; he’d know it anywhere. He stands just as she is close enough to see his face. That is when he begins to cry, because he is dreaming of Lara again and he calls her name, in his broken voice. She hesitates but only momentarily. She holds out a palm to his cheek.

‘Tim.’

He holds her face with his hands while he studies her. He doesn’t quite know how she came to be in his arms, but he holds on to her so tightly knowing that any moment he will wake and she will be gone again. Lara, he whispers. He feels the sting in his eyes, the heat of the sun on his arms; perhaps he is suffering from sunstroke, he thinks, all the while holding his daughter, the ghost of her that will disappear in any moment, and knows that Maria will be furious that he has sunstroke again, particularly after warning him. Dad, she whispers against his chest. And in that moment, he knows that she is actually there.

Sometime later, when the sun sits low, and the sky turns the lazy blue of late afternoon, early evening, they are still sitting side by side on the picnic blanket. Her hand is between his. They’ve talked some but mostly they pass the time in a restful silence. He only cares that she is back and when she is ready to tell him why she left and why she is back, he will be ready to listen. And if she tells him nothing, he doesn’t mind that either. She asks whether she can stay and he is so overwhelmed that she is not leaving again that he begins to cry. After a while, she stands, helping him to his feet and they make their way to the house.

Nothing has changed. It is exactly as Lara remembered. The house on the hillside.

Maria fetches the panettone that she had made for a special occasion, which they have with freshly brewed espresso. They try hard to act normally, too hard, so it’s a relief when Lara asks if

she could rest for a while. Tim finds himself following her, even though he doesn't want to crowd her but Lara doesn't seem to mind. She gives him a gentle smile when he opens the door to her old room.

Everything is as she left it. She wanders around, touching the items of the teenager that left all those years ago. Her breath catches momentarily at the sight of her ballet shoes hanging at the back of the door; that's where they had been, all this time. She sits on the bed.

'It's okay if you want to lie down, Lara.'

'Is it?'

'It is. This is still your room.'

Nothing belongs to her anymore, but she lies back for a moment.

'There was a fire, wasn't there?'

'Yes. The night before you left.'

'And before, I was in hospital...there was a fire then too.'

Tim tells her about the fire the night before she disappeared but Lara is already asleep, not even stirring when Tim slips off her shoes, and puts a blanket on her.

All night, Tim sits by the door of her bedroom. At some point, a sleepy Maria brings a chair and sits by him.

Close to dawn Lara wakes, her mouth dry and it takes her a few moments to remember where she is. She can hear birds. She can't remember the last time that she'd actually heard birdsong. She tiptoes out of bed, desperate for water and finds Tim and Maria sitting by the door; they seem to sense her presence because they are both suddenly awake. They set about breakfast with no mention of them sitting vigil.

When they've eaten, Lara says she wants to go for a walk. Tim is about to say that he will go with her but Maria rests her fingers on his forearm and he hesitates.

'You'll come back though, won't you, Lara?'

She brushes her lips against his cheek, and tells him she will.

Later that evening, Tim tells her that he needs to fetch something. Lara is at the window, holding a cup of tea between her palms.

'Are you okay?' he asks.

She nods, not really trusting herself to speak.

'I have something for you...only because of the things you asked me about your mother... you don't have to read it.'

She sees that he is holding a police evidence envelope.

'What is it?'

'Her notebook.'

She reaches inside the envelope and pulls out the notebook; it is royal blue with a giant butterfly on the front.

'What is this family's obsession with butterflies?' She says with a small smile.

'That was always your obsession, Lara,' he says. 'You got it for her the Mother's Day after your mum and I got married. You must have only been about six or seven, you knew exactly what you wanted to buy her.'

She smiles, wishing that the memory of it wasn't lost to her.

'I should've given it to the police sooner than I did but I couldn't bear for them to have it... I didn't want to them to dissect her every thought. And then....well, I wondered if there was anything that would shed any light on...well...you know.'

'Have you read it?' She says, after a while. But she already knows the answer.

'I haven't. When I first got it back it felt like it would be an intrusion, a betrayal of sorts... a breach of her privacy. Then after time passed, well I didn't want to be consumed by it all again.'

She holds it on her lap, her fingers lightly grazing the cover.

'Do you think there is something in here that would shed some light?'

'I don't know, but they seemed to give up afterwards.'

'The police?'

'Yes.'

'It doesn't leave me, you know, this doubt... about that day.'

'I don't imagine it does. But you were a child, Lara. Don't lose sight of that...and your mother wasn't...'

'I know.'

It falls silent between them.

'Anyway... I always planned to give it to you...but I wanted you to heal first and I guess...'

'Tim...it's okay.'

'I did love her, you know.'

'I know.'

'It might...'

'It will help me,' Lara says, and touches his hand so that he is reassured. This time it's a comfortable silence until she notices that he is staring at her arm.

'You don't approve.' Her voice is teasing. She couldn't remember a time when Tim voiced his disapproval, so unlike her mother in that way.

'Not really, in general. But yours are understandable.'

'Why?'

'The carpet.'

Fifteen

‘Who is Lara?’

How should he reply? She is everything and nothing. That he doesn’t really know because a person never truly knows someone else. That she is the sum of all the transitory fragments that he pasted together throughout his life. The life that changed the day that he met her.

Should he tell Sophie about how they were back then, when he lay night after night wondering whether Lara knew about how he felt? Sometimes it felt like she was oblivious, others that she knew exactly the effect she had on him. He should have stopped her coming to his house; he should have stopped a lot of things. Should he confess that the first time they had sex, Sebastian had been drunk?

It had happened after an achingly long shift, and a half a bottle of whisky. She had climbed on to his lap; he had tried to push her off but not very hard. She leaned into him. Don’t, he said. Her mouth grazed his. Stop, he said. At first, he willed his lips to be impassive. She kissed him harder. Her breath tasted of mint and lemonade. Her tongue touched his; he kissed her back. It took hold of him; a kiss that was interminable, lasting, unbreakable, until he was lost in her. He doesn’t remember much about taking her clothes off; he wasn’t particularly gentle or kind. Her hands were all over him; his hands were all over her. Her half cry; he was inside her, her arms and legs wrapped around him, until he almost couldn’t breathe. A sickening sound as she cried out in orgasm, his instantaneous shame. He could have wept. She had dismissed his remorse and talk of virginity, told him he wasn’t the first. He told her that it would never happen again; he said it each time after sex. Sometimes he convinced himself that she knew what she was doing. Other times that his love meant it was all right. Nothing was right. In the eyes of the world he was an aberration. Any attempts to revert to a place of chastity proved fruitless.

Should he say that that theirs had been a blighted relationship, not least because she was thirteen when they met and not quite fifteen when they had become lovers? Should he say that it haunted him almost as much as her leaving? And then, what? That she had reappeared somehow, as if he had constructed her return. Only to disappear again... if she was there at all.

That his only hope now is that he would find her again. That he would spend a lifetime chasing her shadow.

At that point, he breaks down. He gasps for breath; he tries to speak. Sophie doesn't understand; Sebastian is barely coherent.

'You're not the victim here,' Sophie says.

Despite the lies he tells himself, he knows.

Don't suppose this was ever about love. It was the space that existed between them. Their relationship was blighted from the first moment he saw her.

Sixteen

All she had of her mother was the carpet. It was the only thing of value that her mother owned, far more exotic than anything Lara had ever seen. Every time they moved, they rolled it out and the new place would become home. She would lay flat on her stomach in the centre, finding the butterflies and other creatures in the silk threads, cocooned in its safety. She could pretend anything, that she wasn't in a new house, that she wasn't going to a new school, that she didn't have to try and make friends all over again.

But it was soiled by her mother's blood.

The blood had spilled from her chest over her ribs on to the threads. Her favourite cornflower butterfly barely discernible. No matter how she scrubbed and scrubbed, she couldn't rid it of the faint pink stain. Until she set it alight. The flames spread through the thread in an array of hot fiery hue. Silk and wool turned to ash. When something was soiled she had to burn it. Until it was consumed in the flames, until there was nothing left but cinders. And charred dust. She screamed. And couldn't stop.

Conversation

“I think it is all a matter of love; the more you love a memory
the stronger and stranger it becomes.”

Vladimir Nabokov

Interview by BBC Television [1962]

One

The day that Clarissa Clay died wasn't unique or special. It was November, and cold. Dark in the afternoons sometime around four, all very depressing. It wasn't significant in any way other than it was the last day of her life. That was what she was thinking as she lay there, that the day of her death really summed up her existence, insignificant. It was an odd sensation, losing blood the way she was, the wet feeling that reminded her a little of when her water broke, a large puddle on the floor that couldn't possibly be related to her, except it was, it came out of her.

Clarissa Clay's life wasn't flashing before her, and she wasn't thinking about her regrets. Except that wasn't entirely true, because she started thinking of Lara and realised that her biggest regret was yet to come. And when her thoughts turned to Lara, she knew that she wouldn't be capable of thinking of anything else.

There were things that Clarissa Clay wished she had said to her daughter; advice that she wished she had shared. But in the past few years they had stopped talking so she had started writing in a notebook instead. It was a gift on Mother's Day, inscribed with, '*you are the bestest mummy in the universe*', because apparently the world was too small. Clarissa thought that one day she might share its contents with her daughter, but as she lay there, she thought of Lara finding it and felt suddenly quite ashamed. She would never be able to explain what it all meant, and her words now seemed wholly inadequate. She had written it with such deliberation; she thought she sounded poetic. She knew the words off by heart, realising in hindsight how banal and self-serving it all was. She saw her words on the page, her lips moved slightly as though she were reciting them.

What would Lara make of it?

Clarissa Clay wasn't cut out for motherhood – odd that in her last moments she thought of herself as Clarissa Clay even though it hadn't been her name in a while – just because she wasn't cut out to be a mother, didn't mean that she didn't love Lara. She did. As much as she was capable of loving anyone. She had loved so little in her life. When it came down to it, she had only ever truly loved two people: Lara with an instinctive ferocity that Clarissa found bewildering, and Lyla. In that moment, as she lay there, and her breaths were becoming slower and heavier, the image of Lyla's face came to her; the flatness of her cheeks, the gentle pout of her lips, the sharpness of her green eyes. Clarissa Clay opened her mouth to say sorry, and let out her last breath.

Two

Lara glances out of the window as a longboat sails down the Chao Phraya River, past the hotel, and the late sun casts a burnt glow on the water's edge. The notebook sits open and rests loosely on her knees.

Opening this notebook with its blank, crisp pages, it occurred to me that it was time to write about the things we will never talk about. Why now? Perhaps because the dark days are here more often now; the shadows are closing in.

You will wake up one morning, just an ordinary day, and when you look in the mirror it won't be you. The image will not be of your face, it won't be how you see yourself in your imagination. You will think about all that you've seen, all that you could have been. All those unfulfilled aspirations. And that non-descript day, staring at your face, you will think – is this it? Was this all that life was supposed to be? No moment of brilliance, no fifteen minutes of fame. The reflection will tell you everything as you bid farewell to the dewy days. Life's disappointments etched there if you care to look. Staring at lost time. The roads not travelled.

There is no regret about the path that led me to Lyla, no matter the pain that followed.

Lara had read it at least a dozen times. Once she read it backwards. Sometimes she just opens it randomly on a page and reads the entry, not expecting to find anything different but seeking comfort in the familiarity of the words. Words that reflected thoughts that weren't entirely coherent. Clarissa hadn't written with any chronology; she just wrote where the mood took her.

Lara had travelled here almost on a whim; her mother would've liked that. And now she sits in the same hotel, and is drinking a second Bloody Mary just as her mother had *picture me alone in a bar in Bangkok sitting at a table by the window, drinking Bloody Marys, watching the longboats sail past*. Clarissa had made a choice that day sitting in the hotel, and that tenuous decision had led to Lara's existence. Lara closes the notebook, and then immediately opens it again on a different page.

You are always contemptuous about me not sticking at anything, passions and obsessions that start and then fade out, aren't you? Do you remember my art phase? Then, of course, you graciously accepted the ring from my jewellery class but you were unable to keep the scorn from your eyes. But when you were little it meant we weren't tied down, we had adventure, we didn't do ordinary things. We didn't bake cakes or cookies. But we were spontaneous. Like the time we went across the channel for no reason other than getting on a boat. You ate ice cream even though it was freezing cold. We didn't step off into France though, we came straight back. You fell asleep on my lap; there was something melancholy about your still face. My eyes stung looking out into the darkness of the water.

Do you remember any of that?

But you don't want spontaneity, nothing whimsical or impulsive. You want safe. It took me so long to see that you're not like me at all. I feel the weight of your judgement, even though you are a child and half of what I imagine can't possibly be true. But I need to not give up this time. I need to remember, for your sake as much as my own. You should bear in mind there are always three sides to the story; there is your side, there is the side of the other person and then there is the truth.

There have been so many times that I wanted to write down my memories of her but I would sit there with my pen in hand and I wouldn't know where to begin. And I would give up. I want to make sense of it. To explain how it all happened. To construct a way to tell you about Lyla. She led me to your father. And I know that you have wanted to know about him for as long as you can remember, but it was never about him. It was about Lyla.

Let me paint a picture of her for you because Lyla's face couldn't be more perfect if an artist painted it. Her skin was flawless, and I mean not one blemish. A small upturned nose. She had wide cheeks and a pointed chin. Her hair was black. I can think of many adjectives to describe the intensity of its blackness but nothing that isn't cliché. You'd mock me for that. All I can say is that Lyla really was quite lovely.

I can't remember everything about living in Thailand, even though it was perhaps the happiest time in my life, but I recall random moments. The girls getting dressed ready for the cabaret, feathers, sequins, their faces so perfectly painted. Spontaneous laughter, vicious arguments, and paying-off the police so that they'd turn a blind eye. The tourists in Patpong, staring wide-eyed at the half-dressed girls who lingered in the doorways of the bars, boys and girls selling their wares in the streets. Lyla's cousin Maile, when she first came to the club, her everlasting laughter and desire to see the good in all things. Maile as she was in the end, lifeless on the metal table, her body bruised and broken. Lyla with an intense expression whenever she was going over the books, her pronounced overbite, her infectious laughter, the silent tears when she mourned her absent mother. The graceful way she used chopsticks; I'd sometimes stop between mouthfuls and just watch her. The way she walked as if her feet were hovering inches above the

ground. Her femininity made me feel awkward and clumsy. Irony was that she said when she watched me dance, and she only ever saw me one time, she felt awkward and clumsy.

You danced around in your tutu whenever we were home, whichever home it was at the time. First position, plié, second position, plié, jeté, jeté, jeté, watch me mummy.

I miss her so terribly. Where is she? The club has gone. I tried to find it – don't you love the internet? – it's something else now. She is lost to me. Writing about it has made her real all over again. People say you shouldn't look back that you should look to the future and live in the moment. I've lived in the moment but it's no good, I'm stuck in the same place, in the void I created all that time ago, the one that was left after Lyla.

Lara orders another drink and watches as the sun sets on the river. As she sits there, she has a singular thought. She has to find Lyla.

Three

Lyla likes rituals. There is something comforting about the same routine, perhaps because it is the only certainty in life. She likes to have afternoon tea in the hotel bar where she watches the guests, and generally finds a sense of calm by looking out to the ocean. But first, she collects the mail from the lobby. The receptionist – Lyla can't remember her name because the girl is fairly new and she isn't wearing her name badge – fetches the paperwork. When the receptionist returns from the office, she is holding a bundle; there's more mail than usual. She hands it over and, as an afterthought, tells Lyla that someone is waiting for her.

'Who?'

The girl reaches for the pad where she had written down the guest's name.

'Miss Saunders, she arrived two days ago.'

'Does she have a complaint?'

'I asked what she wanted...she didn't say, but she said to tell you she is waiting for you in the bar.'

'Did you tell her that I have my afternoon tea there?'

'No, Mrs Lyla. I didn't say anything but she said she'd wait anyway.'

Lyla lingers for a few moments then reminds the receptionist to wear her name badge, before heading to the bar.

There are only a few people milling around; a couple still dressed in their swimwear sipping cocktails, a man at the bar reading a Russian newspaper, and a young woman sitting alone by the window. She's quite still, not really paying attention to her surroundings, her gaze focussed towards the ocean. Lyla hopes it won't take long as she wanders over.

'Miss Saunders?'

When the young woman turns her gaze, there's something about her expression that is vaguely familiar.

'I understand you are looking for me.'

'Are you Lyla?'

'Yes,' Lyla holds out her hand, 'how can I help you, Miss Saunders?'

The young woman studies Lyla's face and then, as if she realises that she's staring she takes hold of Lyla's outstretched hand.

'Would you please join me for a moment?'

Lyla hesitates; she doesn't like strangers and there is something about Miss Saunders that makes her uneasy. With an imperceptible sigh, she pulls out a chair, and as soon as she does, a waiter approaches them with a jug of water and two glasses.

'Your usual tea, Mrs Lyla?'

Lyla turns towards the guest.

'Would you like a drink, Miss Saunders?'

'Another tea would be lovely. And please call me Lara.'

'Two teas,' Lyla says; the waiter acknowledges with a slight bow.

'Our names are similar,' Lyla says, and despite trying hard not to, shifts in her chair under the weight of Lara's stare.

'Krabi is really beautiful. It seems a beautiful place to live...I was told this is your hotel.'

'No...well not all mine anyway; it belongs to my husband.'

Lyla looks about her, at the view that most days she takes for granted. The hotel is set in a private bay with the villas staggered in amongst the palm trees and emerald vegetation. Every room has a view of ocean, and the large magma rocks that sit in the sea.

'May I ask you about your husband?'

'What about him?'

'Is his name... Sam?'

For a moment Lyla thinks she's misheard her.

'Sam?'

'Yes...I'm sorry that was a bit odd...but—'

'Why do you ask about—'

'I'm looking for him, for Sam,' Lara says and brushes her hair from her face with impatient fingers.

'What...who are you?'

'Look, I'm sorry. I hope you're the person I've been looking for, I thought you were—'

'You've made a mistake; my husband's name is John.' Lyla is surprised to hear how dispassionate her voice sounds.

The young woman looks unsure of herself, and in that expression, Lyla sees something familiar about the eyes. She studies her face for a while, the shape of her jaw, her mouth.

'Are you...?' But she can't seem to finish the question.

‘What?’ Lara’s voice is quiet, another familiar expression shifts across her features.

Lyla shakes her head, not in denial but more because she can hardly believe it.

‘You’re Cee-cee’s daughter.’

‘It is you then, you are her. You’re that Lyla.’

Lyla sits nodding slightly, as she often did when gathering her thoughts.

‘It was presumptions of me to come here.’

‘Miss Saunders...’

‘Please call me Lara.’

Lyla sighs.

‘You look like very much like her.’

‘You aren’t the first person to say that.’

‘Is she here—’

Lara shakes her head.

‘Why are you here?’

‘I wanted to meet you. You and Sam...my mother was happy here with you.’

‘It was all a very long time ago. I don’t know what your mother told you—’

‘Nothing...well not directly.’

Lyla studies Lara’s face for a while; Lara doesn’t look away.

‘You look like him too, you know, you look like Sam.’

‘Then you knew...I wondered if you did.’

Had Lyla known? Not in a definitive way.

‘From what I learnt from my mother, I thought you would be with... are you still in touch with him?’

‘I’m sorry. Sam’s...he’s...’ Lyla can’t bring herself to say the word. It’s so final. The childish notion that if she didn’t say it aloud, she could continue to believe that he was out there, alive somewhere else in the world.

‘Dead,’ Lara says.

Lyla signals to the waiter to bring more water. As soon as the waiter finishes filling the glasses, they both take large gulps. It takes a while before either of them is ready to speak again.

‘What happened to him?’

Lyla tries not to think about how Sam died. She was told it was a heart attack and for years afterwards, she would have nightmares where he was gasping for breath, as the spasms took hold of him and she could do nothing to save him. Lara has drifted off. Her gaze is focussed on the sea, much the same way it had been when Lyla had first walked into the bar.

The colour seems to have drained away from her already pale face. Without saying anything, Lyla hands Lara a serviette that she uses to wipe her eyes.

'Is there anyone I can get for you?'

'I'm alone.'

'Lara—'

'Krabi is really beautiful. It doesn't look real...the rocks in the ocean like that.'

'Sam loved it here, we had all these plans of living here when we were old... that's why I moved after... anyway, it's secluded, it's not for everyone but we like it.'

'Did my mother ever come here?'

'Not with me, no.'

'You all lived in Bangkok.'

'Yes. We owned a bar...your mother worked there as well... and then she left... and well, things were different.'

'I was there recently.'

'Bangkok?'

'I wanted to see where she lived... I don't even know if I was looking at the right place. I stayed in the same hotel she stayed in before she met you.'

Lyla asks her what else her mother had told her about her time in Bangkok. Lara explains that she hadn't even known that her mother had visited Thailand, let alone lived there. It was typical of Cee-cee to be so mysterious.

'I didn't know about any of this, not about Sam, or you, until recently.'

'She didn't tell you about your father?'

'No.'

They sit for a while, Lyla trying to piece together what had been in Cee-cee's mind to deprive Lara of her father, and Sam of this child. But Lyla had never really understood Cee-cee's motives for anything. And then thinking of Cee-cee after all this time, Lyla suddenly misses her. The quiet smile. She sees her as she was when they had first met.

'Sorry,' Lara says.

'Sorry for what?'

'Well, you know...you were with Sam... and well—'

'Did she tell you anything about what happened?'

Lara doesn't answer.

'The end was... let me put it another way...we were happy for a while. Your mother was...my best friend...although that doesn't really explain the depth of our relationship.'

'It's sad the way things ended between you. She wrote that you were the person she felt most close to.'

'It was all a long time ago.' Lyla doesn't want to remember. It had taken her a long time to get over it, if she ever really had, and the way she did was to avoid it.

'Since finding out...I keep thinking that I might have been better off...with him...even though I know nothing about him.'

Lyla leans forward, she reaches across the table and lightly touches Lara's knuckles.

'Why do you say that?'

'My mother was...' Lara can't find the right words.

'Challenging?'

'Something like that...she did unforgivable things.'

'I find that nothing is unforgivable when you love someone.'

Lara slips her hand away from Lyla.

'Did you...forgive her?'

The waiter arrives with the tea, and they sit in silence while he pours it. Lyla opens her mouth, and closes it again. She doesn't know the right thing to say.

'I thought if I found you... then maybe I could understand,' Lara says at last.

'You should speak to your mother.'

'I can't. Besides, it's not just about her.'

'Is that why you came looking for your father? I'm not sure that he knew your mother that well really...which is going to sound odd—'

'Partly...I don't know really.' Lara leans forward slightly and takes some deep breaths.

'Are you alright? You look like you might be sick.'

'I haven't eaten.'

'Your hands are shaking.'

Lara puts her palms on the table and tries to steady herself. She had smoked a joint the night before, to take the edge off. And it had left her queasy today. She thought she had it under control. She should have eaten something.

'You've had a shock.'

'Anxiety,' but Lara can't quite form a sentence and Lyla has a way of looking at her that makes Lara think she sees everything.

'I'm also an addict, which doesn't help.'

Lara touches her fingers to her lips in a way that looks like she hadn't quite expected to say the words.

'An alcoholic?'

'Like my mother you mean?'

For some reason, this seems to calm Lara, who now looks unnervingly still.

'She was an alcoholic back then too?'

'Well...not officially...it was what I thought, I guess I never really knew for sure.'

'I'm not addicted to alcohol...it's drugs. I haven't used in months...it's just it's a bit of a crutch...I don't know what I am doing.' The last part Lara says with a sigh, rubbing her eyes, in a gesture that reminds Lyla of Sam.

'You should eat,' Lyla says, and despite all of her reservations, adds, 'come back with me, let's go to my villa.'

Four

Clarissa was drunk, her head resting on her outstretched arm on the bar.

I am Lyla

Hello Lara.

No. No. Ly-la.

Ly-la.

Yeah.

Clarissa smiled. Lyla smiled.

I'm Clarissa.

Lyla repeated her name a couple of times but it didn't sound right, probably because Clarissa was mumbling when she told her.

Why don't you call me Cee-cee?

People call you Cee-cee?

Yep, Clarissa Clay...Cee-cee...but not in a long time.

Why are you so sad Cee-cee?

My boyfriend is in love with someone else.

And you love him?

Yes...no. I don't know.

So why are you sad?

I don't want to go back.

Then don't go back.

It's not as easy as that.

It's easy if you want it to be.

Clarissa smiled. Lyla smiled.

It had been a lousy few weeks even though they were meant to be on holiday to fix things. Fucking Ed. Fucking Emma. She started to laugh; fucking Ed was fucking, fucking Emma.

What is so funny?

It's not funny; it's pathetic.

It's at that point that Clarissa passed out. Lyla sighed. She reached over and brushed the hair from Cee-cee's face. There was something pathetic and yet oddly endearing about her. Normally Lyla would ask one of the bouncers to help the customer out of the bar and into a tuk-tuk but there weren't many customers like Cee-cee. Instead Lyla called the bouncer and together they helped Cee-cee out of the bar, to Lyla's apartment.

The following morning the apartment was quiet, despite the guest. Lyla had to go out, so she knocked on the door of her spare room and when there was no answer, pushed it open. Cee-cee was sleeping both arms thrown above her head like a baby. Lyla smiled; her grandmother always said that babies slept that way because they were comfortable with the world. Lyla didn't have the heart to wake her. Instead, she set the table for breakfast. She laid a table of bread, fruit and cheese, and then picked a light blue orchid from a plant that she kept by the window and placed it in a small shot glass.

It was late in the afternoon when Lyla returned, she wasn't expecting Clarissa to be there, but she felt an inexplicable disappointment nevertheless to see the breakfast plates had been washed and stacked on the draining board, and the spare bed neatly made; it looked like no one had been there at all.

Lyla was dreading another long shift. It had been busier than usual all week in the bar and she also had a dress to finish; the bride was due for a final fitting in two days. She needed someone to manage the club but the only person Lyla trusted was Maile, and Maile just wasn't up to the job. Running multiple businesses was making Lyla rich, but she had barely slept in days.

By the time she arrived at the club, she had a headache and was more irritated than usual. Clarissa was sitting at the bar in the same spot as the previous night.

So, you're back?

Yes. I wanted to thank you, for letting me stay with you.

You're welcome.

Why did you let me?

Because you needed a friend.

Clarissa smiled.

Five

Outside the air is fresh and Lyla signals for a golf cart. Lara puts her hands to her eyes as though she is trying to shield them from the sun even though she is wearing sunglasses and the sun sits low in the sky. Lara asks if they could walk for a while instead; Lyla is about to tell her that the villa sits at the top of the mountain and the path is steep but shrugs her shoulders. On the path to the villa, neither of them speaks. A baby monkey runs into their path, and Lara bends down to stroke it. Lyla warns her that she shouldn't touch it, that they are wild, but the monkey is soon making its way on to Lara's shoulders. They only walk a few steps before the mother comes out of hiding and hisses at them. Lara sets the monkey down and it scampers off to its mother. When she looks at Lyla, she smiles.

They finally reach Lyla's place. The villa is a two-storey building, made of glass and hard wood. Lara seems quite taken with it; Lyla remembers she had a similar reaction when she had first seen the villa.

'Come on,' Lyla says, she takes out a key that she has on a chain around her neck. 'I lose everything.'

The sun's rays fan out on the sea making the water appear as if it's on fire beyond the window pane.

'So...she named you Lara.'

'Yes, why do you say it like that?'

'She may have named you after me in a way.'

'I thought she named me after a character in a book.'

'Is that what she told you?'

'Sort of...'

Her mother used to watch Doctor Zhivago when she was having one of her melancholy days. She would always start crying somewhere in the middle of the film. Lara was too young understand but she used to sit quietly and colour the pictures her mother drew for her. One time her mother pointed to the screen and said, her name is Lara...just like you. It's one of my

favourite books. Lara was confused because it was a film and not a book, but she didn't ask any questions. She was happy just to be sitting there.

'When I knew your mother, she always looked for meaning in things.'

'That doesn't sound like her.'

'You sound angry with her.'

'Angry? No. Not really.'

'Well things were never easy with C... your mother.'

They look at each other in a way that suggests they agree, although neither knows the other's truth.

'There was a darkness in her,' Lara says and shrugs.

'We all have a little darkness.'

It occurs to Lyla that Lara speaks of her mother in the past tense.

'Was?'

'She died when I was thirteen.'

An image comes to Lyla of Cee-cee in their old apartment, looking out of the window onto the market, the sunlight catching the pale smoothness of her skin. Sitting on the white cushion, with a smile at something she'd seen below. Lyla hadn't wanted to remember and didn't like to dwell on the past, because it was incapable of ever being changed, no matter how much anyone wanted it to. The tears are there, despite everything.

Lyla says she's sorry to Lara and escapes to the kitchen. Hathai looks up from preparing dinner. She rushes to Lyla, pulls out a chair and fetches a glass of water. Lyla doesn't say anything, just sits and sips for a while. She thinks of Cee-cee lying on her stomach, her head turned towards the sun, the light changing the colour of her eyes. It takes a while before Lyla is able to return to Lara, who hasn't moved and is still watching the ocean.

'I'm sorry, it was insensitive of me to tell you like that,' Lara says, except she doesn't look particularly sorry.

'What happened? Did she...suffer? Lara?'

'I don't think so... the end was quick.'

Lyla nods, not quite knowing what it means but not wanting to ask either.

'Where did all the trouble begin?' Lara says.

'The trouble began long before she met me,' Lyla says but her voice is so quiet that Lara barely hears her.

Six

For a second night, Clarissa ended up in Lyla's apartment. It was late, long after the club closed, and Lyla was sitting on a small chair, her legs resting over the arm. Clarissa was by the window, her eyes fixed on the market, her suitcase at her feet. They'd lost track of time, but it was sometime close to dawn.

The sane path would be to go back to Hong Kong, finish training and qualify as a solicitor, Clarissa said. She had been talking incessantly.

Lyla listened, mostly. She watched Clarissa with a sense of fascination; it was the first real conversation she had with a *farang*, other than Sam but he didn't really count. She never really spoke to the tourists in the bar unless she had to.

How did you come to be in my bar? Lyla asked

I chose it because I'd seen it a few nights ago. We'd been out all day, wandering around the temples. I remember the day because we had taken a longboat ride along Chao Phraya River, past the boat people. You know that fucking bastard bought me a conical straw hat from an old lady that rowed up to our boat, he thought she was sweet because she didn't have any teeth. Anyway, we were too tired to go out anywhere fancy in the evening so we came to Pat Pong. Fucking Ed couldn't keep his eyes off the strip bars. I poked him in the ribs and he whispered, you can't tell the boys from the girls. I said, what does it matter, they are all beautiful to me.

Lyla smiled at this. Good to know, she said.

Anyway... I was so upset from what happened yesterday, that I came back here and went straight to your bar. It looked the most welcoming.

Also, good to know.

I sat on one of your high stools, because...well no one was there yet and I like sitting at the bar...your server asked me – well shouted really – you want beer? Which I found funny but I said, no, not beer...give me something local. She poured me a drink... Lao Khao I think, and said have whisky. She poured it neat. I drank it in one gulp...well, it was not whisky.

Lyla started to laugh; Clarissa stopped momentarily and smiled.

You know I'm not normally like this, Clarissa said.

Like what?

Talking so much.

It's okay. But I think we should have some food. Are you hungry?

When Clarissa said she was, Lyla rang down to the bar and half an hour later, a large plate of fresh fish and noodles was delivered.

Tell me what happened with your boyfriend, Lyla said then took a mouthful of noodles.

I want to tell you about more than just that day. Just so you know...that it wasn't all bad. It was all very romantic when we got here, you know. We went to Koh Samui first...and every morning we used to have breakfast on the lower balcony of our villa to the tender sunrise over the sea...the waves looked iridescent.

Lyla nodded, only half listening but Cee-cee didn't seem to notice.

There was always expensive champagne in an ice bucket and a tray of exotic fruit. A watermelon carved into the shape of a lotus flower.

It does sound very romantic, Lyla said.

Then everything changed. Clarissa sighed.

Maybe you can tell me the rest another time.

I want to tell you everything now. Because after tonight I never want to talk of him again.

Okay.

But Clarissa wasn't waiting for her approval, she carried on talking as if the words were burning her.

I knew that fucking Ed was having an affair after about six months in Hong Kong. We had this terrible row and I left in the middle of the night. Have you been to Hong Kong?

Lyla shook her head but didn't tell Clarissa that she had never been outside of Thailand.

I went to Victoria Peak, this beautiful place above the city, where you can see all the lights of Hong Kong...and I felt so alone. Then I went back...to him.

When Clarissa returned that night, their lovemaking was fraught; Ed crushed her in his embrace until she felt her lungs had been suffocated of oxygen. His vicelike embrace left no room for thought; they had sex, primitive and wretched. That night he slept in her arms, exhausted. She didn't sleep at all. After the infidelity, which he denied, he bought Clarissa flowers every day for a week. How she hated them. The grander the bouquet the bigger her resentment. He talked about love, longing, even marriage was mentioned, but the ugliness lingered. Sensing it in her just made him more intense. When he was at work, she'd take a flower from each bouquet one-by-one, pull the petals off and tear them into tiny pieces.

Why did you go back to him?

I wanted to believe him...he was my first real love. I wanted it to be real.

When did you realise it wasn't?

Clarissa remembered every detail about the end. The way the sky opened up, a biblical rain that she would see many more of during her time there. Within moments they were completely drenched. They got back to the room, wet and euphoric. They ran to the bathroom and began to strip and he wrapped a white towel around her, and then the pace of everything changed. He was looking at her, and she could hear the water from the tap dripping against the ceramic sink. He was looking at her in a way that she didn't understand but he was certainly aroused, she could see his erection through the soaked material of his shorts.

Clarissa put her head in her hands at that moment.

I'm being overly dramatic.

Tell me the rest of the story, Cee-cee.

Clarissa told her. How they'd made love and afterwards she'd fallen asleep only to be awoken by the sound of Ed's voice on the phone to his lover. The brutal argument. She left, and walked for hours, in the downpour, the rain on her skin hiding the wetness of her tears.

And you didn't go back?

No that's when I came here. And found you.

They shared a smile. Clarissa said she was done talking about Ed. Lyla was ready for bed but Clarissa seemed animated. She said she'd gone past the point of being tired. She walked about the apartment, her fingers brushing over various pieces of furniture. She picked up a framed photograph.

Who's this?

Sam. He's my partner.

Your business partner?

Yes. And, my love partner.

Does he live here?

Sometimes.

Seven

'Did your mother tell you how she ended up here?'

'My mother didn't tell me anything. I have an old notebook of hers...it was as if she partly wrote it for me...but really...I think she wanted to relive her time here... I seem to know her better now than I did when she was alive.'

'You were only a child when she died. We see things differently as adults.'

'It wouldn't have made a difference if she was alive now; we didn't have that type of relationship.'

'But her words will only tell you one side of the story.'

'Funny, she wrote that. She didn't paint herself in a good light.'

'That seems like her... she liked to say things like that.'

'She was full of theatrical notions.'

'At the beginning of our...friendship...I would have disagreed with you. In the end...well she was a different person. I guess I will never know which version was the real Cee-cee.'

'You were kind to my mother.'

'It didn't seem to matter much in the end.'

'But you helped her when she was lost, she wrote that. She didn't want to go back to Hong Kong and you let her stay with you.'

'She lived in Hong Kong with her lover, did she write about that?'

'Not in any detail. I went to Hong Kong. I didn't like it much.'

'They came to Thailand for a holiday. That's how she ended up here. Did she write about the end of the relationship?'

'She wrote that it was raining on the day she walked out on him. She said it was symbolic. Whatever that means.' Lara shrugs her shoulders and Lyla doesn't offer any details.

'He left her here with only a letter and went back Hong Kong.'

'She kept it.'

'The letter?'

'Yes, it was in her notebook.'

'I thought she had thrown it away. What did it say?'

'He said he wanted her to go back. That he was sorry. I guess she had other ideas.'

'Did she say why she kept it?'

‘Not really.’

She pulls out the notebook from her bag and opens it. Lyla looks away; she can’t bear the thought of seeing Cee-cee’s handwriting.

‘When I was small, I used to write my mother letters and she wrote that she was sad when I stopped.’

‘I could see how that would make your mother sad. You know, your mother was always writing.’

‘I used to be cruel to her about that.’

‘How cruel can a thirteen-year old be?’

‘You would be surprised.’

Lyla wants to say that she doubted that but something about Lara’s expression stops her.

‘So, you went to Hong Kong and now Thailand...you are trying to follow in her footsteps.’

‘It’s not that...it’s difficult to explain.’

‘You came to find out about your father?’

‘Let’s say something is compelling me...I mean I felt compelled to come here...to find Sam...to find you...’

‘To get answers?’

Lara shakes her head but doesn’t offer an explanation.

‘It’s sad that she kept the letter all those years,’ Lyla says after a while.

‘My mother had many affairs...an endless line of broken relationships. Men always meant too much to her.’

‘Is that why you think your mother kept the letter?’

But Lara doesn’t answer, she is thinking of the words her mother wrote, and almost recites them.

‘She carried her luggage to the lobby bar, placed the envelope on the table in front of her and when the waiter approached, ordered herself a bloody Mary.’

At that point, Lara turns her gaze from the window.

‘I can see her sitting there, unzipping the case that he had packed for her, so neatly that the case was half empty. And that whenever we went anywhere and she had to pack anything... she wrote that she’d see that suitcase, packed the way it was, so neatly...the neat ending.’

Hathai comes from the kitchen, carrying a number of dishes. She lays them on the table that sits by the window and when she’s done, pulls down a sheer blind. It shields the table from the heat; the sea looks even more mystical beyond the translucent fabric.

‘Come and eat,’ Lyla says. Lara hesitates for a moment.

‘Is your husband not here?’

‘He’s in Bangkok tonight on business. He’ll be back in a couple of days.’

‘Is he away a lot?’

‘He goes to Bangkok often.’

Lyla lays out two plates. She’s not hungry but she’d eat to encourage Lara; she seems to feel responsible for Cee-cee’s daughter the way she had felt for her. Lara joins her at the table, as Lyla spoons an equal amount of food for them.

‘And you didn’t want to go with him?’

‘I never go unless I must.’

In the shadows of Bangkok, the past waits for Lyla, lurking in the doorways and streets, hiding in the marketplace and hovering along the river pathways. Walking with Cee-cee during one of her fitness fads, just before dawn, stopping to talk to the people that lived on the boats. Sam taking her to dinner in one of the most expensive restaurants where the customers were only *farang* or elite Thai families that could afford to eat there, laughing as Sam ordered most of the dishes on the menu but only ate white rice. Everything else gives me indigestion, he said.

As they eat, Lyla feels the need to talk about Clarissa.

‘Her path here wasn’t straightforward,’ Lyla says.

‘I know.’

‘I can try and tell you about her life before.’

‘And still I wouldn’t know her.’

They both have to craft their own narrative from the fragments they know; a life that is all but forgotten. For Lara, there is only one version of Clarissa; it is difficult to think of her as anything other than a mother, and an inept one at that. She knows that Clarissa was once a person with aspirations and desires, not just the singular, flawed person that Lara knew. But what did she really know of that Clarissa? The curious fragments of her life that she chose to share in a notebook that Lara hadn’t even known existed until those months ago. Selective memories that were entirely vague that even Clarissa acknowledged to be imperfect and blemished. There were so many gaps that the Clarissa who existed before Lara could only ever be an imagining.

Eight

It didn't take long for Clarissa to feel at home in Bangkok. Within a couple of months, she felt as though she'd always lived there. Mainly it was her and Lyla; that's when she liked it the most. Sometimes, Maile stayed with them. But Clarissa was yet to meet Sam.

It was mid-afternoon a few days before Sam was due to visit. They hadn't been up for long; Lyla had insisted that Maile stay because it had been a late and troublesome night at the club. One of the tourists had become violent when he found out the server, who had gone out with him during a break for some impromptu foreplay, was a ladyboy – it was how the women in Lyla's bar described themselves.

It's not like the club tries to hide it, Lyla had shouted at the tourist.

Clarissa was the one who diplomatically suggested that a night in a Thai prison wouldn't be good for anyone.

Just think yourself lucky that you were able to share some intimate time with such a beautiful woman, she told the tourist, as she walked him out of the door.

Another reason that Lyla liked having Cee-cee around.

It was hot in the apartment and the windows were open; outside the market was bustling with tourists. Cee-cee was teaching Maile to write, it was not going well.

Maile, you need to practice more if you want to learn. Clarissa tried to keep the frustration out of her voice.

She can't write in her own language, what makes you think that she will learn English? Lyla said.

Lyla, that is not helpful. Clarissa tried not to smile. But Maile found it as equally amusing as Lyla.

I don't know why you think Lyla is so funny, Maile, Clarissa said.

We are family, we find the same things funny.

Ah yes, remind me again how you are related?

They explained that they were from neighbouring villages, distant cousins on their mother side – although Lyla didn't really like to talk of her mother. Lyla was raised by her grandmother, who was Maile's great, great aunt through marriage.

You still don't get it do you, Cee-cee? Maile said with a laugh.

Not really.

Lyla left them to get ready for her shift.

Tell me about Sam, Clarissa asked Maile, when Lyla was out of earshot.

What do you want to know?

What's he like?

Very nice man.

What does he look like? He looks very handsome from the photograph.

He's very old.

Maile.

Maile started to laugh at that point, loud. Well...Lyla calls him Papa, she said, by way of justification. Don't roll your eyes Cee-cee.

Is that why Lyla is with him, because he looks after her like a father?

No, Lyla...she just loves Sam.

It felt to Clarissa there was a meaning to Maile's words that she didn't quite understand.

Tell me what he's like.

Maile put down her pen.

He's very nice.

You've said that already.

But there are some rules.

What rules?

Sam does not speak about his life away from here. He does not speak with anyone other than Lyla and me. He knows that we are family.

Anything else?

You'll find out soon enough Cee-cee. Lyla had returned and stood in the doorway. Clarissa turned her face to hide that she was blushing.

When is he coming? It was Maile who asked.

Sunday.

Sam arrived late on Sunday afternoon.

Lyla flung herself at him as soon as he unlocked the door. Clarissa hung back and watched as they stood holding each other, for longer than was comfortable. Sam's eyes were closed and it seemed like he was inhaling Lyla's scent. He was shorter than Lyla, a great deal

older than his photo, overweight and balding. It was only when they separated, that Sam realised they weren't alone.

Cee-cee, come and meet Sam.

Clarissa stepped forward, holding herself upright; she wasn't as tall as Lyla, – something that Lyla loathed about herself, and blamed on her German father, Clarissa told her to be grateful as she had also inherited her father's light green eyes, which everyone loved about Lyla. Clarissa was suddenly conscious of what she was wearing. The t-shirt that she had doodled all over in blue ink, and worn denim shorts that had a large slit at the top of her thigh, her tanned skin visible through the tear.

Cee-cee is staying with me, with us.

Sam looked at Lyla for a long moment, his head tilted to one side, then he turned his attention to Clarissa, a wide smile on his face. Clarissa held out her hand for him to shake, which he turned over and kissed, his lips leaving a slight dampness on her skin.

You're very welcome, he said. He put his suitcase down and announced that he was making tea. Clarissa looked at Lyla, who just smiled with a shrug.

Later that evening, when the apartment was lit with scented candles Sam told them he had gifts. He apologised to Clarissa for not bringing her anything. She told him that she would never expect him to bring her anything. She hadn't meant for the words to sound quite so off-hand. Clarissa had agreed to go to the club, even though it was her night off, so that she could cover for Lyla, and she was late. But Lyla insisted that she stay for a while longer. Sam handed Maile a small box – which contained a gold pendant – a bag of unsalted pistachios, her favourite, and box of rosewater nougat. Maile clapped when she opened every gift.

And for you my dearest Lyla.

He unrolled a carpet.

Clarissa was thinking what an odd gift, but Lyla knelt down and rested her palms on the rug. The carpet was made of silk, so tightly woven that they could barely see the thread. It looked more like a painting with its delicately cast colours, intricately crafted with butterflies that appeared to be alive.

Clarissa looked at Lyla but Lyla's gaze was directed at Sam. They were locked in a moment and it seemed that something intimate was passing between them. Clarissa turned away, heavy with the weight of her intrusion.

Nine

Lara is quiet and she doesn't touch her food.

'You should eat,' Lyla says, as she pours two glasses of water. Her gaze dwells on Lara's arm. She wants to ask but doesn't.

'There are too many memories,' Lyla whispers and then takes a mouthful of food so that she doesn't have to talk for a while.

'I'm sorry, I realise that sometimes I can be abrupt,' Lara says.

'My husband says the same thing about me.'

'I shouldn't have asked about your husband's trip. It's none of my business. None of this is any of my business really.'

'Of course it is, they were your parents. I would want to know if I were you.'

Lara doesn't look convinced by Lyla's words.

'My husband goes away a lot but never for long. Not like Sam. He used to go away for months on end.'

'Why?'

'He had a family back home.'

They sit for a while contemplating what that means for Lara.

'And you were okay with that...his family I mean.'

'He was a good person.'

'And your husband... he is a good person?'

'Yes.'

'And you love him the way my mother wrote you loved Sam?'

Lyla sighs and shakes her head. Her eyes sting and she can't remember a time recently when she felt so emotional.

'That is a terrible thing to ask, I'm sorry. I say I don't mean to pry and I'm doing it again. I have so many questions but they should be about Sam, not you.'

'I won't ever love anyone the way I loved him. But I do love my husband. He's kind, not quite in the same way as Sam – you should know he...your father... didn't have a mean bone in his body. I met my husband about ten years ago, years after Sam. I had sold the club years before that. I decided to sell it after your mother really.' That wasn't entirely true, she'd decided to sell after Maile.

'I'm sorry.'

Lyla wants to change the subject.

'You said something earlier about men meaning too much to your mother. I don't think keeping the letter was actually about ex-lover – she called him Fucking Ed, you know, that made me laugh.'

Lara nods, it was a side of her mother than she would never experience.

'I think she kept it because of her time here. She used to tell me that she felt like Thailand was her true home. Perhaps she wanted to hold on to that time.'

'That makes sense...we never settled anywhere...and she did write that she couldn't remember anywhere that felt more like home.'

'That wasn't tactful.'

'She acknowledged that too, she said, and I quote, this may hurt you but I already owe you a lifetime of apologies. I don't even know how old I was when she wrote that. I was still a child when she died, not that I thought of myself that way back then, and she was right in a way, she did already owe me a lifetime of apologies.'

Lyla wants to say sorry, a though she's responsible somehow. Lara starts to eat and the moment is lost.

Lyla also has many questions of her own yet part of her wants to know nothing, for Lara to leave so that she can pretend none of it happened. She could go back to the place where Cee-cee was alive somewhere, estranged, but breathing, to the place where Sam had not fathered a child with the person that she loved. What good would come of Lara being there? It probably wouldn't even help Lara, who seems as troubled as her mother. Perhaps she has inherited all of Cee-cee's pain, a pain that Lyla hadn't fully understood, even when they talked about the things that pained her.

You can't fix everyone Lyla.

I'm not trying to–

Your need to rescue people, including me, is to do with your mother... Don't give me your stony look, Ly.

You're drunk, Cee-cee.

Clarissa was wrong because when it really counted, Lyla had turned her back on Cee-cee. It was Maile's death that changed everything.

Ten

Life fell into a different pattern with Sam visiting. Clarissa liked Sam; it was difficult not to. She was attracted to his eyes, so black that she could barely see his pupils. She liked how his mannerisms often communicated more than his words. The constant nod of his head when he was pondering, the biting of his lip when he found something amusing but didn't want to laugh aloud. When he didn't wish to answer a question, he'd move away to attend to something urgently. He'd place a gentle hand on Lyla's shoulder when he knew something was bothering her, to show that he was there but giving her the space to think. And yet, Clarissa felt displaced.

One evening, after Sam had been there for a couple of weeks, Clarissa came home from the club and struggled to fall asleep. It hadn't been a particularly tough shift, nor was it particularly hot. She'd always prided herself that as soon as her head hit the pillow she was out. Lyla told her that it was because she had nothing to worry about; Clarissa just shrugged her shoulders. She spent so many hours trying to get comfortable, then decided it would be better to stop fighting and get up. Dawn was breaking into the apartment.

Sam was already in the kitchen setting about tea and eggs when she joined him.

Sit, sit I will feed you, he said.

There were times that Clarissa was comforted by the early mornings, mainly for the peacefulness. But she didn't mind Sam's presence, she found it easy and soothing in a way. He was already smoking, the long ash of the cigarette about to fall.

Every time I am up early, you are always awake. Do you always get up this early? She asked him.

Always.

Even at home?

I get up early wherever I am in the world.

Do you travel a lot then?

Not as much as I used to, not many countries welcome us anymore.

I've been meaning to tell you that the carpet you brought Lyla is... beautiful. I wish I could find a better word.

Clarissa noticed a change in his expression.

What? She asked.

What do you mean...

What were you thinking when you started to frown?

I was thinking of my father. It was his, you see...well his and my mother's...it was a wedding gift...but really it was his.

Why his specifically?

He loved that carpet. In the end...well he was so sick...he used to talk to it...that sounds unusual I know.

Did he have dementia?

God no. He died of cancer. Sam laughs, he could see why she would think that after what he had told her.

So, what did he used to say to the carpet?

Sam stopped momentarily and looked at her to see if she was making light but Clarissa was serious.

Mainly, he used to quote poetry. I didn't really hear what he was saying but he would chant soft lines of verse. Sometimes he would stare at it for hours and then he would start to cry.

Sam reached for a tissue and wiped his face. He stubbed out his cigarette and lit another.

I can see why the carpet would move him... I have never seen anything like it...it seems like you were close.

Not really, no. My father was a quiet man. He mainly kept himself to himself. It was like he lived in his own world. My mother was the boss. She would tell him what to do and when to do it.

Did your mother not want to keep the carpet?

No, she was the one that wanted it gone. She said it had cursed my father.

Cursed? How can a carpet be cursed?

Haven't you heard of magic carpets?

Are you serious?

He smiled then.

You're teasing me?

Maybe.

Well if magic carpets exist, it would definitely qualify. When I look at it for long enough, the butterflies seem to move.

Maybe that's why my father loved it. He was a lepidopterist.

Your mother must have been heartbroken by your father's death.

She cried like a baby. The only time I ever saw real emotion from her was when my father died.

That's so sad. She must have really loved him

He shrugged his shoulders.

I don't know.

Why do you say that? Are you not close to your mother either?

God no. My mother is a very cold woman.

Sam thinks about his first memory of his mother. He was meant to be asleep, lying on his stomach on her bed, but he was watching her through his lashes, his thumb in his mouth. She was staring at her complexion, sitting quite still. He wondered what she saw. When he looked at the reflection, he was drawn to how lovely her face was even though he was too young to fully understand what lovely meant. Over the years he would study that same face, the perfect proportion of her features; he imagined her to be one of the princesses from ancient Persia that were painted in the miniatures. But there was an inexplicable, impenetrable quality about his mother that made him wary of her. The older he became the more strained their relationship. He told himself they hadn't bonded from the very beginning. For those first few months of his life he wasn't with her. It was one of those times that his family referred to but never really explained. His mother had been sick, the details of which he had never discovered, although he suspected it was connected to mother's resting periods as they came to be known. It reminded him of Ramadan, instead of fasting from food, his mother would give up the outside world. As a baby of only a few weeks old, he had been shipped off to his aunt, which was odd given the relationship of the sisters. Sam always assumed that their lack of closeness was because his aunt was only his mother's half-sister. Auntie Layla had just given birth herself, his cousin Ramin was six weeks old when Sam came into the world, and she became his wet nurse.

It was like I had twins, Auntie Layla often said.

The boys were brothers. They grew up in the shadow of each other; Sam's happiest times were when he was with Auntie Layla and Uncle Jahan – who really was his uncle, well, great uncle anyway – it was home. The boys were so intrinsically linked that they even spoke their own language. No one understood them, although sometimes when Sam saw a wry smile touch Auntie Layla's face at something the boys said, he did wonder. They may have been brothers but they were opposites. Ramin was born intense. Sam, on the other hand, was so laid back in temperament that Ramin said he had to poke him sometimes to see if he was actually alive.

Your aunt sounds like an incredible woman.

She is. You know, Clarissa...

He always said her name with deliberation, rolling the r and making the s sound seductive.

I did love my father.

He told her about the odd moments of warmth: holding his father's hand in the park, fishing in the Caspian, his father bent over his butterflies, his face close to Sam as he recited the different breeds. His mother, on the other hand, had a remoteness that suggested she couldn't be touched.

Your family sound interesting.

Aren't all families interesting?

Not mine.

Tell me something about them.

There's nothing to tell.

Nothing at all?

She realised then that he had shared a moment of his life with her, even though Maile said that his family were off limits. She felt the need to share something.

I actually did have a twin, Clara. My parents fought over names, my mother chose Clara, my father wanted Clarissa. They thought they were funny.

You say had?

She died when I was nine.

He sat down next to her at the kitchen table.

I'm so sorry... what happened?

She fell from a tree and broke her neck.

Clarissa didn't tell him that it was her fault, that she had dared her sister to balance on one leg, that Clara was only up there in the first place because of her. Her parents blamed her, even though they hollowly reassured her it was an accident. Because Clara was always there, in the liminal spaces, and Clarissa could never live up to the expectation of the life that her sister would never have.

I'm sorry, Sam said again and covered her hand with his. They sat that way for a moment until Sam got up again.

I think the eggs are ready.

Is there enough for me? Lyla said from the doorway, with an expression that Clarissa couldn't read.

Have mine Ly, I was just on my way to the club.

Clarissa liked the solitude of the club in the mornings. Sometimes she needed quiet, other times she would go there because she was feeling despondent. On occasion Maile would be there too, clearing away glasses, not that she needed to, but that's what Maile did when she was restless. Maile was there that morning, but for a different reason, she was coming back from a one-night stand with a tourist. That happened sometimes too, and usually when it did, Maile started talking about love, her favourite subject. That day was no exception.

You don't need a man to be loved, Clarissa said, getting angry for some inexplicable reason that Maile was an incorrigible romantic.

I don't want to die alone, Maile said.

You have us; we are family.

But in her melancholy state Clarissa wasn't sure she meant it.

You know, Cee-cee, I don't know what I would do without Lyla.

I can understand that. Have you always been close?

Yes, when I was little, I used to look up to her. I had many brothers and sisters but it was Lyla that I was closest to. She was always so strong. She was different but she didn't care. I wanted to be like her.

Is that why you...

Became a lady boy? Maile started to laugh.

No. I was always like this. For as long as I remember I used to steal my sisters' clothes. Once my father got so mad when he saw me in this lovely pink dress, my face so pretty with make-up, he locked me in a small cupboard all night. When I cried, he would bang on the door with a broom so after a while, I stayed quiet. I hated the dark and it was so dark in there that I peed myself.

Oh Maile, that is so awful.

My brothers used to beat me to teach me how to be a man, tell me to fight back. I couldn't.

Maile spoke about her childhood as if it belonged to someone else.

It was Lyla who accepted me...who always gave me love.

No wonder you idolised her... your family was so cruel.

I didn't care... I had Lyla. She is the person that I love most in the world, and the only person that shows me love. And then she found Sam and I see that there is another chance of love for me too.

You think that Sam loves her?

Of course. Maile looked at Clarissa as if she was quite mad for asking. I wish someone loved me the way that Sam loves her, she added after a while.

You deserve to be loved, Maile. And it's not just Lyla that loves you, I love you too, Clarissa said.

And you love Lyla. And you will come to love Sam. We are a family. Maile went to the bar, singing a pop song out of key and set about making some freshly squeezed juice.

Clarissa pondered everything that Maile had said; her own family didn't seem so bad in that moment.

A week later, Sam left. They were back to normal for a few months.

Eleven

‘What was he like...where he was from? Was he upset when my mother moved in with you?’

Lyla thinks about Lara’s questions but she doesn’t have time to answer before Lara is talking again.

‘I don’t understand why you let my mother into your life. It doesn’t make sense...you had Sam, you had the club, friends. A life.’

‘Sometimes there’s a connection that isn’t easily explained.’

‘You said earlier something about it being easy to forgive people you love. I was her daughter and I found it hard to love her.’

‘She wasn’t so hard to love when I knew her.’

‘That doesn’t make sense either.’

‘As I said, you’ve only seen one side. There was something about her. She felt it about me too. You must have had those times, when you get close to someone really quickly because you seem to make sense as a pair.’

‘Not really no. I find it hard to be close to anyone.’

‘Well I can’t explain it then other than to say that is just how we were... we grew close quickly. She became part of my family, my family at the club, my family with Sam. Sometimes I think our connection had something to do with my father being German. I wanted to explore that part of myself. I know she wasn’t German but she was from the west, Europe...I wasn’t good at speaking German back then but English—’

‘You speak German? You speak English fluently.’

‘—that was part of the appeal perhaps. It wasn’t that I knew my father but I am half-European. And I had no idea of the culture.’

‘So, it was because she was European?’

Lyla laughs at this.

‘No, that’s not the only reason...and yes, I speak German, Spanish, a little Italian... I never found languages difficult.’

‘My mother wrote that she was awed by your intelligence. That you could practically do anything, she said she admired that about you.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘Did you admire anything about her?’

‘Yes...but it’s hard to put it into words. Cee-cee had something charming about her, well that’s how it appeared in the beginning. She was clever and funny, she made the people around her feel really special.’

It had taken some years before Lyla allowed herself to remember the kinder side of Cee-cee. She wants to tell Lara about it but she doesn’t know where to begin. She wants Lara to know that her mother had a sense of humility. The way for example that she knew everyone in the market by name, and how she would always ask after their sister, who was having a baby, or their father who had a spell in the hospital. Cee-cee was always the last one to lock up during the raining season so that she could let in Aroon – the homeless man that for most of the evening, they waved away from the club – who would sleep under a table near the door. She thought Lyla didn’t know, not about that or the street children that she would often buy food for. She wanted to tell Lara the way Cee-cee would spend hours patiently trying to teach Maile to read, knowing that it was a useless no matter how hard she tried. The way she would stand as a dressmaker’s model, time and again, for long periods, never complaining as Lyla went about her work. It is Lara that speaks however.

‘The only thing that was special to my mother in the end was alcohol.’ There’s no malice in her tone, despite her words.

Hathai appears quietly and collects the plates.

‘Do you want any dessert? I can have Hathai fetch something from the restaurant.’

Lara shakes her head. The sun has almost sunk into the ocean, melted copper against the waves.

‘Cee-cee liked ice cream. Not our ice cream...Hagen Daas or Ben and Jerry’s. We often collected it in the evening just before work, and then when we’d get back from the club, we’d share it. I don’t even like ice-cream, I only ate it to keep her company.’

‘We could be completely full and my mother would say there’s always room for ice-cream.’ Lara smiles at a vague memory. ‘Was it Sam that changed your friendship?’

‘Not entirely... and not in the beginning.’

‘But he did eventually?’

‘I don’t know if he was the cause but he was certainly part of the reason. For a while we were happy, like we were destined to find each other. But your mother had a way of breaking things.’

‘It was just how she was wired.’

'I think there is a destructive quality in us all. If there wasn't, humanity would be a lot happier.'

Lyla pauses for a while to think of how she wants to explain to Lara in a way that isn't damaging to Cee-cee.

'We can be in a situation and everything is fine, perfectly content... happy even... but then suddenly it's not enough. We want more. We don't need more... we just desire it. And that desire is all we can see... we throw a bomb on that lovely place.'

'Is that what you think, that my mother wanted more?'

Lyla doesn't answer that question, instead she picks up another thread.

'I think it changed between us after an affair your mother had.'

'Another affair. Who was it this time?'

'He was South African. His name was Dirk.'

Twelve

Clarissa had been in Thailand for eighteen months and there was much that she loved. Watching the girls get dressed for a show, the heavy scent of the flowery perfume, the sweet-greasy smell of the stage makeup, laughing late at night when the club finally closed, sharing a bottle of Scotch, the arguments between the girls, the making up, paying-off the police, bailing out the girls, the tourists, the residents. Lyla. Everything about her. The way she'd adjust clothes, pins in her mouth, always dressed in loose black trousers and black t-shirt. She was never overly made up, even when she was working in the club. Her hair was only ever tied in a ponytail, or left long and straight; she never wore the elaborate styles that the other girls did. On one hand Lyla was almost boy-like, on the other her femininity made Clarissa often feel vulgar.

Ironic that Lyla said the same of Clarissa. One night, just before closing – there wasn't a set time, the bar closed when customers dwindled, but some nights, they would keep it open anyway – Clarissa, a little drunk, climbed on stage and danced the ballet recital she did when she sixteen, odd that her muscles and limbs remembered the steps. The stragglers and the staff broke into applause when she gave her final curtsy. Clarissa had a glimpse of what it would have felt like to make it, which was far removed from the sixteen-year-old who was told that she'd never make the grade.

So graceful Cee-cee, you make me awkward and clumsy, Lyla had said.

Clarissa found herself watching Lyla all the time. Mesmerised when Lyla would practise Thai Chi, the way her body moved, her elongated arms drifting through the air. The way Lyla would sit cross-legged, receipts and cash in piles on the floor, as she balanced the books. The authoritative way Lyla would deal with the police; they treated her with deference, even though they disrespected the other women. Cee-cee started to feel differently, before when Lyla would casually put her arm around her, or reach out and stroke Clarissa's arm, it hadn't meant anything. Now when Lyla touched her, there was nothing casual about it. Clarissa wondered whether Lyla felt the same or whether nothing had change for her at all.

It started to bother Clarissa so much that she became restless and fell into an affair to distract herself. They bumped into each other, quite literally, in a market when Clarissa was

shopping for dinner. He introduced himself after picking up the vegetables that had ricocheted in different directions.

Bloody hell. Dirk. Dirk Bogarde. You look exactly like him.

Who?

Never mind, Clarissa said.

She told him some time later that her mother idolised the actor, that she used to watch all his black and white films on Saturday afternoons.

The affair lasted a few weeks; Clarissa told herself that he was a good distraction. Dirk was travelling the world; she'd teasingly asked him if he was trying to find himself. He told her that he'd been a banker in a previous life, but after a problem with addiction he had decided to take time away from it all. Travelling through Far-east Asia was perhaps not quite the right place for a recovering addict, she'd said.

Dirk was curious about the club but Clarissa made it clear that she didn't want him to visit. She was worried that his presence would change the way Lyla would see her. On their last night together, they were lying naked in his bed; her fingers were in his hair, his hand stroking the curve of her left buttock.

Come with me. Although there was a casualness about the way he said it, his breath had become uneven.

I live here.

But there's nothing holding you here. Working in a club isn't a career. We'd have a blast travelling.

I don't have any money.

I have plenty enough for both of us.

He did not stay in backpackers' hostels.

I have a life here.

You can have a better life with me.

When they said goodbye, Clarissa walked most of the way to the Patpong, despondent and vacant.

Clarissa grew melancholy.

Lyla decided it would be good to get them out of the city for a while. Clarissa's wretchedness clung to her all the while she packed. Lyla didn't try to talk to her. As the train left Bangkok, and seas of the emerald forests and mountains replaced the grittiness of the city, something seemed to shift. After a couple of hours, Clarissa was ready for tea. They changed trains along the way, ate sticky rice and fish from a small stall by the transit station. The second

part of the journey, there was intermittent periods of sleep. Clarissa was trying to read a novel but she couldn't concentrate; they played cards instead. It wasn't a game that needed conversation. Lyla's face rarely hinted at how she was feeling; she was a master of poker. Lucky for Clarissa, the bets were small. When they reached their destination it was early evening, and as they alighted the train, Clarissa's body was stiff from sitting so long but the sadness had drifted away. They walked the mile to Lyla's village; Cee-cee's head rested on Lyla's shoulder. They walked by the rice fields where Lyla used to work when she was small.

The air in the village was so pure after the pollution of Bangkok that it seemed to heal the impurities of Clarissa's life. They didn't do much except eat; Yaya took care of them. That's what grandmothers do, Lyla said. Every day they would take a long walk, holding hands or Lyla would casually drape her arm around Clarissa's shoulders. They meandered through the paddy fields and around the temporary lakes that were created after the torrential downpours of raining season; often they walked in silence, occasionally they talked. It was the one time that Lyla was candid and open about her life.

During a walk one day, Lyla told Cee-Cee about the memories she had of her mother. She explained that her mother was often spaced out, slept all day and shooed Lyla away whenever she was close. There was a moment that Lyla remembered, and she believed it was the last time she had seen her mother, that her mother showed her a rare moment of tenderness. She told Lyla to sit with her by the fire, took a hairbrush and started to comb through Lyla's hair that had now grown beyond her shoulders. That was when her mother told her about her father. He was tall and blonde, with the purest green eyes.

Your eyes, Clarissa had said.

Lyla smiled. Her mother said that they were in love. Although, Lyla told Clarissa, that part she took with a pinch of salt.

My mother was a whore, love was probably in her head and definitely not in his heart. Clarissa told her that she shouldn't speak that way about the woman who gave her life. She hadn't meant to sound so sanctimonious, particularly given her relationship with her own mother.

Lyla's mother explained that he was from Germany, a place in Europe, and that one day he would take her there. Lyla said, I am seven years old now, and he still hasn't come.

Her mother hit the back of her head with the hairbrush; their moment was gone. The goodbye. Years later she learned from Yaya that her mother had died from – and Yaya whispered this bit – the sex disease. The sex trade was a growing problem; other than all the sexual diseases, Lyla explained to Clarissa that many young men, women and children were often

trafficked and that the one thing she wanted to offer at the club was safety. They walked for a while longer, both in a contemplative silence.

When did you know?

Know what?

That you wanted to live this way?

Lyla started to laugh.

I mean you're not like the other women at the club.

No. I don't feel the same. I wasn't worried about being a certain way because I was neither.

But you chose this.

When I was small, I wasn't like the other children. The boys in the village were cruel and I gravitated to the girls, but they weren't much better. I was different. And I had to choose. So, I ended up with all the kids that were different for one reason or another. And I guess people prefer to put a label on it.

Clarissa leaned over and brushed her lips against Lyla's cheek, close to her mouth. Lyla smiled.

By the time they returned to Bangkok, the sadness had been healed and Dirk was to become a memory. Life was settled for a while.

Some weeks later, there was an incident involving Maile. She suffered two broken ribs, a cut on her cheek – Maile fretted about whether it would leave a scar – and a black eye. Countless times Clarissa had told all the girls to be honest. They always made light. No matter how much they got into trouble. It didn't seem to matter how many times they were bailed out or got hurt. Clarissa was angry. With Maile. With Lyla. They were in the sitting room; Maile on the couch. Clarissa was pacing.

You have to stop putting yourself at risk. Clarissa wasn't even trying to keep the irritation from her voice, despite Lyla telling her it would serve no purpose with Maile.

She needs to rest Cee-cee.

And you Lyla... why don't you do something? You know she takes risks...you're meant to be family.

What do you want me to do? Lyla may not have been shouting but anger was there, under the surface.

Stop her from taking all these stupid risks. It's your club.

And?

You could stop all of this. With Maile. With the other girls.

And how could I do that?

Pay them more so they don't have to go with these fucking evil...

I'm not a whore Cee-cee, Maile said. Her head was covered by her arm, partly to keep out the light but mostly to hide the bruises.

I'm not saying that, Maile. Clarissa's tone was softer now.

You are saying that, Lyla said. If you think they go with men because they don't have enough money, that is what you are saying. What you don't realise is that they don't go with men because of that... most of them...Maile included...are looking for love.

Like you and Sam?

But before anyone else could say anything else, Clarissa left, slamming the front door on her way out.

After Dirk there was a string of faceless others, none of them mattered much, mostly they were a distraction. Lyla didn't seem to be affected by Clarissa's affairs, or if she was, she didn't show it. Sometimes for the sake of a reaction, Clarissa felt the ugly need to inflict pain.

Is that what you truly believe Ly, that we will all find someone that will love us for who we are?

Lyla turned to Clarissa. I found you, didn't I? Lyla was smiling but her eyes were cold.

I don't mean us Ly, I mean someone you can share your life with the way you want.

It was cruel of Clarissa; Lyla was in love with Sam. Later, when Clarissa couldn't sleep – she hated leaving things unresolved – she went to Lyla's room and when Lyla saw her, she lifted the covers and shifted over. That night, Clarissa pressed herself into Lyla's back and wrapped her arm around her. Lyla held Clarissa's hand. It became their pattern. She had everything she needed with Lyla.

Thirteen

They're eating ice cream, mostly in silence. Beyond the window the sun has gone but its light lingers on the water's edge, in a pool of burnt gold and the moon is visible in the sky.

'So, you are saying that that things changed after her affair and the trip to your village?'

'I'm not quite sure that things changed exactly like that...I think that, as with most relationships, they go through periods of change.'

Once Cee-cee had asked Lyla about the transient nature of her relationship with Sam, she asked where Sam went when he wasn't with her and where he would call home. Lyla had replied, wherever he is happy. It was then that she noticed, although she couldn't pinpoint the exact start, that Sam's presence for Cee-cee had morphed from an easy companionship to a gnawing resentment.

'Are you Buddhist?'

'Why do you ask?' Lyla laughs.

'You have a nice laugh, Lyla. I've read somewhere that it's the main religion here, I always think Buddhists have it all figured out.'

'I'm not sure about that.'

'I also heard that Buddhists believe that existence is suffering.'

'Well that I agree with, the human race has a way of creating its own suffering.'

'Is that what you think of my mother?'

'I honestly don't know. I liked that about her though, that it was difficult to know her.'

'You liked the challenge.'

'Not at all, it just made her interesting. She was unpredictable. But not in bad way...well not at first anyway. She would do things that you wouldn't expect her to...kind things...She was my model you know.'

'Model?'

'I was a dressmaker...she used to be my model. And I thought she would complain but she would stand there, unmoving, and quiet.'

'My mother could be very still sometimes. She would sit there for hours on end, unmoving and it was only because she blinked occasionally that I knew she was alive.'

Lyla can almost see the shadows that pass over Lara. She wants to lighten the mood.

‘You know, it’s how I met your father. I was making a suit for him. I could see he was watching me but I wouldn’t meet his eye. Then he asked me my name.’

Lyla starts to laugh which makes Lara smile.

‘What’s funny?’

‘He couldn’t say it. I asked him what name he liked... he gave me the name of his aunt, so I said – I choose that name.’

‘His aunt was called Lyla?’

‘No. I mispronounced it at the time, I had only just been learning English, but he didn’t tell me until years later.’

Lyla remembers telling the same story to Cee-cee and the way Cee-cee had looked at her without any humour.

What was your name before Lyla? Cee-Cee asked her.

Malivalaya. It was the name Yaya gave me...my mother called me something else. But I was too young to remember what it was.

It’s lovely.

But Lyla is easier.

‘Not everything was her fault,’ Lyla says when she’s finished with the ice cream.

‘She blamed herself, if it’s any consolation.’

‘It’s not. Did she leave anything else with the notebook other than the letter?’

Lara thinks for a while, wondering what Lyla is hoping for.

‘There’s a sketch of her. It was drawn in pencils but there’s so much intricate shading, it looks like a photograph. Did you draw that?’

Lyla laughs again.

‘No, I can’t draw at all. That was Sam. Do you have it with you?’

Lara takes out the sketch and hands it to Lyla.

Lyla remembers the day clearly; it was raining heavily. It was too early to go to the club so they were stuck in the apartment. Cee-cee was lying on the sofa, her arm casually discarded over her head, a worn-out book propped against her knees. She used to read passages aloud sometimes; Lyla wasn’t moved by the words as much as the sound of Cee-cee’s voice as she recited them. Sam was sitting opposite and he began to sketch. So many of those sketches were destroyed in the floods. Lyla hands back the sketch.

Lara glances at it; it has a different meaning now that she knows it was her father's artistry.

'I want to know about Sam. Tell me something about him. She barely wrote of him. She started by saying that she would tell me about the man who fathered me...but she wrote mainly about you.'

Lara drops her spoon into the bowl, and looks down at the melting ice cream.

'Perhaps it wasn't hers to tell.'

Before Lara has a chance to ask her what she means by that, Lyla says, 'what do you want to know?'

'He was an artist?'

'He had a talent but he wasn't an artist. I think it relaxed him. He says some of his happiest times was when his aunt taught him to draw and paint.'

'It seems he talked a lot about his aunt.'

Lara contemplates this for a while.

'What did he look like? Do you have any pictures?'

Lyla shakes her head.

'Many things were destroyed in a terrible flood we had one year.'

'What about where he was from? She didn't even know that.'

'Iran.'

'Iran?'

'Yes, Iran.'

She is not entirely English, which had felt strange to her when she read it in the notebook, but now she knows where she is partly from.

'You're like me, Lara, you half belong to a place that you probably don't know.'

Lara contemplates all she knows of Iran, the country that makes up half her heritage. And she realises that she knows so little. A country somewhere in the Middle East. Oil. Islamic. Death to America. Nuclear Weapons. Sanctions.

'Did he live there?'

'Yes, when he wasn't here.'

'And you mentioned he had a family.'

'He didn't really speak of them much. The aunt he was fond of. His father died some years after we were together—'

'Anyone else?'

'I think a child, a son.'

'I may have a brother?'

‘He would be quite a bit older than you.’

They sit for a while. Outside the only light is from the hotel’s reflection on the ocean. Lyla stifles a yawn – not that she is physically tired, she had slept until lunch.

‘Did it bother you that he had another family?’

Lyla wants to say no, that she was happy with how things were, that Sam had given her a life that she could never have envisaged. Growing up with her grandmother, she had the smallest house in their village, now she owns a hotel.

‘I wish it didn’t. Perhaps that explains why I had such a deep relationship with your mother, she became my family the way Sam had a family.’

‘But she wasn’t happy, was she?’

‘No, not after a while...she felt like a substitute.’

‘Is that what she was?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘So, she was in some way?’

‘No, and perhaps that was my fault...I wasn’t very good at making her see that she wasn’t a substitute at all.’

‘Is that what you mean when you say she wasn’t entirely to blame?’

Fourteen

At times Clarissa thought it was odd that they lived the life they did, anything could happen and everything did happen. At times it would be jarring. Other times she'd think what difference does it make anyway? As Lyla always said to her, people are just people.

It all changed. Nothing dramatic. The gradual tipping of a delicate balance.

One particular night Lyla and Clarissa were sharing a bottle of wine, the apartment was lit with a few candles and incense sticks, the scent of frankincense in the air. It was after another one of Sam's visits. That time, Lyla seemed so sad. She said it was because he hadn't been well. Clarissa suspected it was more than that. Neither were tired, even though they'd barely slept; earlier in the evening they had bailed out one of the girls again, which had taken longer than normal, and then they had both worked at the club. In the muted light, Lyla's face looked dewy, and her eyes were the colour of amber. They were sitting on the floor, on the carpet. Their gaze held for a while, until Lyla reached out and stroked her forefinger along Clarissa's cheek.

Something started to shift in Clarissa. She told herself it was not sexual.

I have never had sex with Sam.

What...why?

He cannot.

What do you mean?

He's never seen me naked.

Clarissa sat for a while not saying anything, thinking how she hadn't seen Lyla naked either, even though Clarissa often walked around the apartment without wearing much.

That's not a healthy relationship.

The conversation grew fraught. Lyla said that she wouldn't explain their relationship even though she was the one to bring it up. Clarissa got angry, she hated it when Lyla dismissed her. She picked up the wine glass and threw it against the wall. She hadn't thought about what she was doing. Lyla looked at her for some moments, then got up and headed towards her room.

In bed Clarissa began to cry. She didn't know why. They were not loud tears but Lyla seem to sense them, because she was there in the doorway.

Cee-cee.

And then she was climbing into bed with Clarissa and holding her in the darkness

A week later, Sam was back, and Clarissa, who since that night had been sleeping with Lyla, was relegated to her cold bed. She started to grow resentful. She found herself not wanting to be near them and yet when she was away from them, she miserably contemplated everything they would be doing in her absence. She stayed out; there was a different man most evenings. Unlike with Dirk, she was vocal about them; Sam would shake his head gently in reproach. It didn't take him long to confront Clarissa, even though Lyla said nothing.

You don't need to have these...relationships, love.

Clarissa should have told him not to be a hypocrite.

You have Lyla, Sam, I'm lonely.

He patted the seat next to him; she thought about finding an excuse, instead she sat down. She wouldn't look at him until Sam put his hand on her chin and turned her head towards him.

Does it make you feel less lonely?

I don't know what you mean.

He studied her for a while and she willed herself not to look away from him.

You're still sad love. It's not right to live this way.

Clarissa wanted to scoff, to tell him that he was a fine one to talk. She wanted to ask him what was healthy about his life with Lyla, being in love with her and not being with her, loving her but not quite enough. She wanted to say much and said nothing.

Perhaps it's time to move on.

She hadn't been thinking that at all, except when she said the words, it seemed as though it was all she was thinking about. Sam covered her hand with his and sighed. He caressed her cheek with his thumb. She kissed his cheek. She liked the feel of warmth in his fingers. He looked at her; she couldn't take her eyes from his. He put his mouth on hers and then pulled away. She kissed him with passion, then stopped herself.

I'm sorry, he said.

She shook her head.

That shouldn't have happened.

It was late afternoon; Clarissa was lying on her back on the carpet, her knees bent up, the back of her head resting on her arms, and her face turned towards the window. The sun was warm, its rays highlighting the downy hair on her cheek. Sam picked up his pad, and sharp pencil and

started to sketch her. Clarissa did not move; if her eyes weren't open, he would have said she was asleep. That is how Maile found them.

What are you doing?

Clarissa turned her head from the window. Sam carried on sketching.

It looks like the butterflies are flying around your head Cee-cee, Maile said.

Clarissa gave a faint smile and then turned towards the window again. Maile leant over Sam's shoulder to look at his sketch, nodded in appreciation, and went to the kitchen.

Where's Lyla? She called out.

At a fitting. Clarissa spoke so quietly her lips barely moved.

She's always out these days.

Perhaps Maile had only stated it as a fact, but it sounded like a criticism. Clarissa sat up, stretched her arms above her head and went to her room without speaking. Sam sat in the same position shading in parts of the sketch even though his model was gone. After a while, he glanced at the place where Clarissa had been lying. His eyes didn't leave the space for some time, staring at the carpet the way his father used to. He put down the pad with a sigh and reached for a cigarette.

Where is Cee-cee? Maile said, carrying a glass of freshly squeezed juice.

Sam shrugged his shoulders then left the room as well. Maile picked up the pad. Sam had captured the smoothness of Cee-cee's skin and the way the light had reflected off her body. Maile was seeing Cee-cee as Sam saw her; a sense of sadness about the face, a beauty in her form. Maile put down the sketch and sighed.

Did Lyla see the change? Did she notice Clarissa laughing with Sam? Did she hear their conversations? Their growing closeness? Did she see the lingering touches between them? The new way that he looked at her? Did it gnaw at her that Clarissa could give him something she couldn't? He became a pawn between them; he was the channel that they used to punish each other. At least that is what Clarissa wanted to believe.

After Sam's visit, they fell into an uncomfortable existence. It was a while before things went back to normal between them. Perhaps they never did.

Lyla had sensed the change in Clarissa, however the more time passed, the more difficult it became to address things. But she was the first to break. A few weeks after Sam's visit Clarissa was at home; about to go to the club. She'd started writing and lost all track of time. Lyla came home around four am, mildly irritated that Cee-cee hadn't turned up. She was tired. They went

through the niceties; Lyla was about to go to bed when she asked Cee-cee what she was writing. Clarissa told Lyla that she was writing about her life in Bangkok.

Why?

I don't know, for when I go back and want to remember. There was an unnerving stillness to Clarissa at that point.

You are going to leave?

Clarissa was about to say of course not, but in that moment random thoughts of home came to mind: Yorkshire pudding, wellington boots, country walks, London, pinstripes and broadsheets, timetabled trains that never kept time, umbrellas, the smell of cut hay, thrushes and hedgerow, pubs, afternoon tea in quaint tearooms. What did Lyla see in her expression? Lyla went to Clarissa then, put her arms around Clarissa and crushed her, by holding her that way Clarissa would never leave. That night, Lyla slept in Clarissa's bed. She stroked her forefinger along Clarissa's cheek. Their lips brushed. Clarissa fell asleep with Lyla's arms about her. Did Clarissa still try to believe that it wasn't sexual?

Lyla moved around Clarissa like she was the centre of everything; the power had shifted between them. Clarissa could sense a growing desperation in Lyla. Lyla started to alter parts of herself. She became less feminine. At home she dressed in loose androgynous clothing, her face clear of make-up. To her shame Clarissa let Lyla change for her, morph into something she didn't want to be. She did everything to please Clarissa and Clarissa let her. And if that wasn't enough, Clarissa became more demanding, jealous of anyone or anything that had Lyla's attention. Clarissa wanted every piece of Lyla, knowing that the fear of Clarissa leaving was what drove her. And Clarissa played on that fear, and her desperate desire to be loved and needed.

Sam called to say he wouldn't be visiting for a while because his mother was sick; it made Lyla even more insecure. The more anxious she became the more control Clarissa seemed to have. In bed one night, neither of them could sleep. Lyla was lying on her side, stroking her finger down Clarissa's neck.

You are going to leave.

I'm not.

I'm not enough for you.

You mean everything to me Ly.

But I can't give you what you want.

Clarissa hated it when Lyla started talking that way; her words angered Clarissa for the truth in them.

What do you think I want?

You want a man.

You are a man. She felt sick as soon as she said it.

Is that how you see me? Lyla laid back and away from Clarissa.

Of course not.

The silence sat between them for a while.

It's how you want to see me.

Clarissa was about to deny it but stopped herself. They couldn't move forward. Clarissa loved her, she desired her but she couldn't accept her. She was no different from Sam even though she had scorned him for it.

Would things be different between us if I was a man?

She wanted to say no. She wanted to say but you are a man except she'd already committed that sin.

Of course not.

Cee-cee?

I don't know.

A cloud settled over them and Clarissa resented Lyla for making them face it. They were happy, weren't they? Why couldn't Lyla leave it alone?

If I lived as a man, would you stay with me?

I thought you hated labels.

Would you?

Clarissa should have said it wouldn't have made a difference. She should have told Lyla that she loved her. To her shame those words were left unsaid.

I don't know.

Lyla stopped taking her hormones.

And they grew wearily inseparable.

Fifteen

Lyla is quiet now; it's clear that she is somewhere else. Lara wants to know more about Sam but she finds that she's hesitant. She thinks about the intensity of the relationship between her mother and Lyla, and wonders whether that is what Lyla is thinking of; her face is almost expressionless. Except those watery eyes.

Lyla suggests they move to the more comfortable chairs, and this time Lyla stretches out on the sofa, where she closes her eyes for a moment. Lara looks at her face, so much of her is exactly as her mother described. She wonders how old Lyla is and then she thinks about how old her mother would be if she were still alive.

'I'm sorry, it feels like it's been a long day,' Lyla says but she doesn't open her eyes.

'I should leave. I've overstayed my welcome.'

'No, not at all.'

'I imagine it's opening up a lot of memories for you.'

'I haven't thought of your mother in a while.'

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come here.'

'You need to get what you came for... that sounds all wrong. You wanted to find your father and you've had terrible news. I've had terrible news. But I can try to help you.'

'You don't owe me anything, Lyla. You certainly don't owe my mother anything.'

'Maybe. Maybe not. But I owe your father,' she sits up and stretches, 'do you want to stay here? I have a spare room.'

'No, I should go back to my room.'

'There's going to be a storm tonight.'

'It doesn't look that way.'

'It will be a big storm and then tomorrow, it will be gone.'

'Like me.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm leaving tomorrow.'

'When?'

'Early.'

'We can see each other before you go, I'm not good in the morning but I can get up for breakfast.'

'I'm leaving even before breakfast.' They both know it's a lie.

'Okay. Then stay here for a while longer now. We can talk more. You can tell me about what happened with your mother when she left here. Tell me about your life.'

'And afterwards, you'll tell me what happened with Sam after she left?'

Lyla nods.

'I will tell you all I can.'

Lara doesn't know what she remembers and what is a construction of time. Long spells that are forgotten, memories that don't quite seem real. How could she describe anything other than what her mother had written for her? The only parts of her past that were real were the accounts she found in her mother's notebook. And what of that? Most of it didn't make sense. Perhaps her mother had been drunk when she wrote some fragments even though she said she didn't want to drink when she wrote. She often wondered what her mother would have made of her words when she reread them.

Lara tells Lyla of a vague memory of being young. The long spells that her mother spent in bed with the curtains drawn all day. Lara would sit in the corner of the room and play with her stuffed rabbit, without making a sound, comforted by the soft snores of her mother as she slept. It didn't matter that they moved around; she had the carpet, she had Mr Rabbit and she had her mother.

Lyla listens with her gaze focussed on the window and Lara can see that she is thinking of something specific, perhaps a time that she had spent with Clarissa. She decides not to intrude, so she sits in silence for a while, thinking of her own past.

'Was she a good mother?'

Lyla has been quiet for so long that the question takes Lara by surprise. She resists the urge to say of course not. But as the memories come back to Lara, they are not all bad.

The routine of having to get up at the same time every day, put on the same clothes, eat breakfast and walk to school, may have bothered everyone else, but Lara was comforted by it. Clarissa had given her a digital wristwatch and Lara knew that when the numbers said, "8.00" – she knew her numbers one to ten – she should wake her mother. She remembers that she liked those walks, her hand engulfed in her mother's. They didn't speak but it didn't matter. And when it rained Clarissa would give her a plastic umbrella, and its concave shape covered Lara down to her chest. Her mother would never take an umbrella for herself. No matter how hard it rained. The water wouldn't bother her; she would be entirely drenched, her hair clinging to her face and she didn't even seem to notice. For some reason, Lara liked that about her mother.

Sixteen

It was raining when Clarissa landed in England. She didn't know where she would go and for a while she wandered around the airport terminal, everything seemed familiar and strange at the same time. She set her suitcase down and sat for a moment, which turned into an hour. She decided to check in to the nearest hotel and sleep.

Clarissa found herself back in Oxford, probably out of nostalgia because she always gravitated there when life wasn't going the way she wanted.

Once when Lara was about four, just after the death of Clarissa's parents, a restless Clarissa decided she wanted to visit her student haunts. It was nine in the evening but she couldn't wait. She tried to wake Lara but her daughter didn't stir so she carried her to the car, and laid her on the backseat. Then she went to fetch some clothes, which she shoved into a supermarket bag, and soon they were on their way. On the outskirts of Oxford, she pulled her mini into a motel, checked them in and carried Lara to the room. She put her to bed, then climbed in beside her, fully dressed, and fell asleep. Oxford turned out to be nothing but disillusionment. She found a familiar pub, memories of billiards and drinking games but inside everything had changed. Lara told her mother she was hungry. Clarissa checked her watch, it was late in the afternoon and Lara had only been fed a small box of cereal, which she ate without milk, and directly from the box. Clarissa found a table in the corner. When the food came she watched her daughter with a smile. Lara ate sausages, awkwardly stabbing at the pieces that were cut up for her and scooping such large forkfuls of mash potato into her mouth, she couldn't close it. Clarissa tousled her hair. Lara watched her mother, unsmiling.

Her trips to Oxford would never last long, Clarissa would spot a new wave of students, dewy faced and full of fearless ambition, and suddenly couldn't stomach being there.

When Clarissa first arrived back in England, she stayed in Oxford for a few weeks, thought she could build a life there, and then she found out she was pregnant. Thailand became real all over again. She thought about going back, dreaming of their reunion. Lyla's face haunted her. Sometimes when she was asleep, she thought she heard Lyla's delicate footsteps and would wake calling out to her. In the unfamiliar darkness, the realisation that Lyla was lost. She came to

appreciate how much Lyla meant, berating herself for not just loving Lyla for everything she was, rather than everything she wasn't. Bereft in her aloneness, her hands on her stomach, she'd ask her unborn child how she would heal.

Lara arrived at four in the morning and for a time, life was settled. Clarissa felt that Lara was the other half of her, an expression that she had scorned until that moment. They went from place to place; every time Clarissa felt suffocated by the town or city, she'd pack their bags and they would be on the move again. Clarissa called it an adventure. Their life wasn't predictable; they had no time to be bored. Lara looked happy in her own little world. Or that was what Clarissa wanted to believe. They moved around too much, Lara hated saying goodbye to each place they lived. They lost many of their things but Mr Rabbit was the worst. For weeks later, Lara would look about her, wherever they were, as if something was missing. Perpetually searching. Mr Rabbit with the long legs and long arms, and no face. Just two sewn black dots for eyes. She couldn't sleep without him. When they lost Mr Rabbit, she chose to sleep with nothing else, not even Clarissa.

They were living in York. Clarissa chose it because she'd dated a guy from York once and remembered that he was a chorister for the York Minster. They lived in a small terraced house with a bay window; it was a concrete jungle on one side but overlooked the park on the other. They moved there in the summer and Lara learned to do cartwheels in the small, mesh-fenced garden. It was Lara's favourite house so far; it was the first place she called home.

But then the leaves turned, and dampness filled the air. The winter was insufferable. Outside the trees were devoid of all their leaves, life was empty. Barren. The air was bitter with ice and snow.

Mummy, why does the Robin have a red bit?

Lara watched the birds eat the bread they laid out for them. Robins were her favourite. She kept asking Clarissa if she could play with the neighbour children but Clarissa didn't want her to go.

It wasn't a nice neighbourhood; Lara was small for her age and the other kids were older. Clarissa knew she shouldn't think it but they weren't kind children. Lara thought they laughed with her but their laughter rang false. Lara came to understand that. But that day she sat in the bay window and pushed her face up against the pane, her breath forming tiny puffs of condensation. Clarissa decided that she should let her go, wrapped Lara up warm and watched as her daughter ran up the hill, her neon yellow coat and red wellingtons bright against the snow.

It was Clarissa's turn to watch through those Georgian windows. But the whiteness gave her a headache. A short while later, Lara rang on the bell. Her face was as pale as the day around her, her eyes were filled with tears that spilled onto her cheeks even though she was quite expressionless. An angry scratch flared down the length of her cheek. Her left wrist dangled at an odd angle. She lifted it for Clarissa to see, like she were showing Clarissa something special. It was broken.

It seems there was no easy answer; the breast of a robin was either to attract a mate or deter the enemy.

It was the summer before Lara was about to start school; she was eating a jam sandwich in the garden, there was no other food in the house. She was chatting away in a soft voice, but no one was with her. Two butterflies, danced close to her head. She put her plate on the ground next to her and was up on her feet. She chased after the butterflies, now they were all dancing in circles.

Clarissa decided they should have a picnic because the day was so bright, and the sun deliciously warm. She rolled out a rug in the garden. Lara was picking the petals of Clarissa's carefully planted rose garden and throwing them in the air like confetti. On the ground Lara laid the fallen petals into a circle although she hadn't picked quite enough to finish it. Clarissa was watching through half-asleep eyes, her body spread out on the rug, her cheeks warm from the sun.

Can I share the blanket mummy?

Clarissa sat up and shifted over, then poured Lara a beaker of fresh lemonade. In Clarissa glass the lemonade was mixed with vodka. They sat side by side; Clarissa's knees were drawn up so that her elbows rested upon them, the sun hot on her shins. Lara was restless and soon picking more petals. Clarissa was about to tell her to stop picking the flowers, but instead called out for her to mind the bees. She laid back down on that blanket again, with a smile on her lips, and her eyes drifted shut again.

Lara's first day of school arrived; it was difficult for Clarissa to let go of her daughter's delicate hand. Lara didn't want to go either, her body pressing into her mother's legs at the school gates. Clarissa worried because Lara was small for her age. The skirt was too big; it hung from Lara's waist, the hem down past her knees. The other children brushed past, playing games while their mothers stood in huddles. The teacher came to collect Lara. She bent down so that her face was level with Lara's, and asked her what her name was.

LaLa.

She means Lara, Clarissa said.

The teacher took your Lara's hand from Clarissa. Clarissa gave a faint smile, she knew that the teacher would take care of Lara.

It was one of Clarissa's days; she couldn't face getting out of bed. It was sometime between late morning and early afternoon and Lara must be hungry but the little sparrow could graze on the crumbs of anything she could find. Her chatter resonated from somewhere; she was dressed in some unusual ensemble, clashing colours never seemed to bother her, and she loved Clarissa's heels, her small feet pushed to the toe of her mother's shoes so that they would stay on. Clarissa, lying in bed, imagined Lara in one of her daughter's make-believe places, clapping in Clarissa's shoes, and it made her smile through her sadness.

Lara was lying on the flat of her stomach towards the edge of the carpet. With her finger she was tracing the edge of the design of one of the many butterflies she discovered. She told her mother it was her favourite but she said that every time she found one. This particular butterfly was blue, the colour of cornflowers. She called to her mother to come and see. They lay together examining the design. The wings of the butterfly, even though it was only about five centimetres, were a delicate-lace pattern. Lara said it was magic.

Clarissa turned away to hide her tears of another memory.

Seventeen

‘Would you mind if we go outside for a while? I like the feel of the salt air in the evenings, and the sky looks particularly lovely tonight.’ Lara stands as she says it, not leaving much choice.

‘Of course, I often sit outside in the evenings. There is something fresh about the air.’

The moon overshadows the sky, clear and luminous, like a super moon, but there are clouds that drift and cast silhouettes across the ocean. They sit next to each other on a swing on the balcony; the sea seems far away. Lyla pushes the ground with her feet and it sets the swing into a gentle rocking motion.

‘May I hold your hand?’ Lara asks.

Lyla turns towards Lara, who is still looking at the ocean; she’s afraid to meet Lyla’s gaze.

‘I’m sorry that’s such an odd request but it feels like I haven’t touched anyone for a long time. Half the time it feels like I’m drifting through the world and no one is real.’

Lyla sees in her, then, an older version of the child that she had been imagining, playing alone while her mother failed to navigate the world. The life of isolation that she described. Lyla takes her hand and thinks in that moment about how different life would have been if Cee-cee hadn’t run away or if she had come back. She doesn’t say any of this to Lara, the heat of her touch too soothing to ruin.

‘See, I’m real. You are here. In Krabi. By the ocean, where the air is pure.’

Lyla inhales slowly.

‘Is that why you moved away from Bangkok? The air?’

‘There was something cleansing about leaving that life behind.’

‘People always say you can’t run away from your problems.’

‘I didn’t run from my problems. There wasn’t anything left for me there. Everyone that mattered had gone.’

And besides John likes it in Krabi she thinks, but for some reason she doesn’t say that to Lara.

‘But what of you Lara, are you running from problems?’

Lara squeezes her hand but she doesn’t say anything.

‘I could give you the notebook to read if you would like.’

Lyla shakes her head.

‘That would be an intrusion and a betrayal.’

‘It’s funny, that’s what Tim said. She’s not here to complain.’

‘But we are...who’s Tim?’

‘I don’t owe her anything,’ Lara slips her hand away, and unties her hair with impatient fingers. When her hair is entirely free of the braids, she starts to plait it again.

‘Was she ever a good mother?’

‘Why do people talk in absolutes? I don’t even believe in good or bad.’

‘Was she?’

‘No.’

‘Could no one help her? Your grandparents?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t remember them. And they died before I had a chance to know them. They died without having anything...my mother was confused. She wrote briefly of that time and then she had a list of questions. Most of the notebook is a list of unanswered questions.’

Her mother couldn’t understand how her parents, who were so ordinary, could built up so much debt. She pondered what they did; was her father a gambler? Her mother an addict? Did they travel the world and blow all their cash? Had they invested in all the wrong companies?

‘Perhaps if she hadn’t burned all their papers, she might have gotten to the bottom of it.’

‘How bad did things become?’

They were living in her dead grandparents’ house; her mother knew that once it was sold and the debts were paid off, there would be nothing left. They had run out of money, at the height of summer, when the long days made it even worse. They were out of food. One silver lining, Clarissa couldn’t afford any booze.

Eighteen

Clarissa's parents died in a road traffic accident. She packed up their belongings, gave notice to the landlord, and told the school on Friday afternoon that it would be Lara's last day. Lara had barely completed a term in that one. They left for Surrey Saturday morning. After the funeral, which was paid by an insurance policy her father had left for her in the top drawer of his desk, she discovered that her parents were in debt. Even the flat that they had downsized to wasn't really theirs; they had entered into an equity release scheme that meant it had to be sold. Clarissa didn't know how they had created so much debt but then again, why would she? It wasn't as though she had seen them much since her return. And the few times that she did, they were as disinterested in Lara as they had been in Clarissa.

Clarissa had to clear out the apartment. She found the first box and sat, with a smile, looking at her old school books and reports that talked about the child version of her, that sounded like someone else entirely. And then there were the old crayon pictures, which were methodically dated and named.

Lara sat quietly, not disturbing her mother, colouring-in complicated pictures with an array of hues, shading some places darker and others more gently, and never going over the lines. There wasn't a spot on the page that hadn't been filled with her pencils. And when she'd finished, she'd look at the pictures unsmiling, expressionless, even though they were beautifully crafted. She sharpened all the pencils, lined them up and made sure the nibs were of equal lengths. She started on another page; her hair fell over her face, hiding her expression.

Except those crayon pictures in the box weren't Clarissa's drawings at all, they were fake, they were Clara's. Clara would colour for hours while Clarissa would laze in front of the television; Clara always let Clarissa claim them.

Five boxes in and Clarissa was sick of it, she tore up the papers without even looking.

They didn't need much; even the basic things were beyond Clarissa at times. She blamed it all on being back in Surrey; the place that had never been home even though she had spent eighteen long years there. She struggled to find work, held a couple of paralegal positions for a while but they didn't last long because there was no one to collect Lara. She made friends with a couple of

the other mothers but there was a limit to the number of times that she could ask for a favour. Jobs that worked in line with the school day were hard to come by, even the supermarket and coffee shops expected longer hours. She tried her hand at free-lance editing. Some work came in for a while, but the more time went on, the more difficult it became to keep to deadlines. They were quite broke. She couldn't remember when she first forgot her rule about only having a drink in the afternoon. The school run was the hardest. By the time she got home, her hands were shaking; she needed something to ease the pain. One drink wouldn't hurt. It didn't really affect her day, she managed to pick up Lara on time and she even took her to the park. When they got home, she went to lie down for a while. They'd have dinner later; Lara was a good girl. It was dark when she woke up. She found Lara in the kitchen. When she got closer she saw that Lara was playing with matches, lighting one after another. In a moment of anger, she snatched the box from her hand. Lara had looked at her with distaste.

You know you shouldn't play with matches.

Lara shrugged, the same distasteful look on her face. She struck Lara then, right across the cheek. Lara flinched; her eyes filled with tears but she held her head up, unwavering, not allowing herself to cry. Clarissa turned away.

May I go to my room Mummy?

She couldn't look at her daughter.

Yes, you may go.

Day after day. Lara was quiet. So hungry that she ate the last few mouthfuls of cereal with slow deliberation. It was summer, a longer day for Clarissa to entertain her. Most days they walked to the park, because Clarissa suddenly felt the urge for routine.

One day Clarissa and Lara sat on a bench by the lake, close to a woman and a toddler feeding the ducks. Lara eyed the stale bread that the woman had left in the pushchair. Lara sidled closer to the bread, watching the woman as she was distracted with her child. Her fingers reached out and touched the plastic bag but then the woman came towards Lara. She unravelled the plastic, and held out a slice.

You can feed the ducks with us, she said.

Lara moved towards Clarissa and buried her face in her mother's lap. Clarissa turned away, a sting in her eyes.

Some days later, they were in the park again. They had a picnic blanket, but Lara was playing on the swings leaving Clarissa to cry. There was no work. There was no food. A man was watching from a nearby bench, trying to find the courage to come over.

Hello.

Clarissa was about to say something about wanting to be left alone. But there was something about his timid face that stopped her.

I'm Tim.

Tim had been on a long hike and was dressed in an old knitted vest despite the heat. The way he was dressed made him much older than his years. When Clarissa turned towards him, the salty tears still wet on her lashes, he asked her if he could buy her tea. Clarissa accepted his invitation. It felt soothing to speak to another adult, to share the burden of everything that had happened, even though he was a complete stranger. He looked at her without any judgment, and she just felt calm.

When Lara found her mother, she stared at Tim with wary eyes, until she spotted the large Victoria sponge before her mother that hadn't been touched. Clarissa pushed the plate towards her daughter, and when Lara didn't move, she said, go on.

Tim invited them to dinner; Clarissa didn't refuse because they wouldn't have eaten dinner otherwise. And that's how it began. They drifted into a relationship that was more friendship – almost like Tim was asexual – but Clarissa liked the companionship. He was good for them. When he asked Clarissa to marry him, even though he knew his feelings weren't reciprocated, it wasn't a difficult decision. He provided them with comfort, a home in Godalming. A place for Lara to grow up. He told Clarissa that she had given him an instant family, one that he had always wanted but had somehow passed him by.

They married in the local registry office. Lara sat in a chair in the corner, looking through the book on butterflies Tim gave her. Lara memorised all the names. Sometimes she sketched them; and when they were neatly coloured, she always gave them to Tim.

Clarissa and Tim waited until the wedding night. Clarissa told him it was a bit late for that, the ship had already sailed for her, and countless times. Tim replied that it didn't matter, that he was old fashioned. She wanted to know more about his life before and all he told her is that it was different with her, he hadn't wanted to marry the others. The wedding night was nice. And afterwards their life was nice too.

Lara treated Tim like she did Mr Rabbit; someone to pull about that loved her regardless. They were all happy for a while. Nothing ever stays the same.

Lyla started coming into Clarissa's thoughts. She imagined the conversations they would have if she ever saw Lyla again, a replay and edit of the many conversations that Clarissa regretted. She wanted to say sorry, that even though she led Lyla to believe that men mattered more than her, that Lyla wasn't enough for Clarissa, it wasn't true. Lyla thought she was only a

distraction for Clarissa, that something was lacking in her. It couldn't be farther from the truth. Lyla was everything.

Clarissa began to chase that same feeling, with relationship after relationship. Some lasted months, others days. Tim turned a blind eye. By then it was too late for him; he was already committed to being Lara's father, and nothing would make him ruin that, not even her mother. Clarissa was the chain-smoker of relationships, starting one before the other was fully put out, always searching for the essence of a feeling. Nothing could live up to the memory of Lyla. There was one who came close; she even left Tim for him.

Clarissa announced that she had fallen in love; the man was an actor, who had a certain degree of celebrity. She packed up their belongings, ignoring Tim's tearful pleas. Lara had filled her rucksack with every book and stuffed animal that Tim had bought for her. And as Lara stood there, holding Tim's legs in a final hug, Clarissa waited stony faced by the door. But when Lara started to cry – a sound so harrowing, because Clarissa had never heard her daughter sob before – she took Lara's hand, desperate not to cry herself.

The day they moved into their new house, far grander than anywhere she had ever lived, Clarissa felt more content than she had in a long time. She was the envy of all the mothers at the fancy prep school; they coveted Clarissa's life. How lucky she was to have him, the actor who publicly showed his devotion. Everything glittered on the outside. On the inside it was anything but gold. Because it wasn't about Clarissa at all.

Nineteen

'I thought that she would be better back in England. When she left, I knew she would go back, I thought it would help.' Lyla had always taken comfort in her belief that moving away was best for Clarissa.

'Why did you think she would go back? She wrote that she wanted to travel.'

'She was sad; she talked about going home. People often go home when they are feeling lost.'

'Maybe England wasn't her home.'

'Well, she went back to a place that was familiar. I'm glad she had that at least.'

'Why do you even care what happened after Bangkok? Perhaps she deserved everything that happened.'

'Not really, no. It makes me sad to think of her that way.'

'She always got involved with the wrong men...like that would somehow fix the hollowness. She was destructive and cruel...especially to you.'

One moment Lara is whimsical and sad when talking of her mother, the next moment she's bitter; she reminds Lyla so much of Cee-cee. And there was no helping Cee-cee.

'She stole from you and she knew you loved Sam.'

'I didn't know what happened between them, not really. I suspected after she left but we never spoke of it.'

'How were things between you after her...how were you?'

'Sam wasn't the same.'

'In what way...actually don't answer that. Just please tell me more about how he was before her.'

But Lyla has something else on her mind.

'Do you think it's true?' Lyla is sipping tea that Hathai has brought out to them. Lara sits with her feet up and her arms wrapped around her shins.

'Which part?'

'The part that I was enough?'

'Did she ever treat you as though you were?'

Lyla doesn't answer.

'I'm sorry...I don't mean it to sound quite so cruel.

'You're angry at me because you can't be angry with her. And to answer your question of whether I felt as if I was enough...yes...for a time anyway.'

'You are far more gracious than I will ever be.'

'Look Lara, your mother had many lovely qualities. She was smart, and warm. She was loyal...she fought hard for everyone at the club. She knew how to deal with the police, the suppliers. There was something about her that we were all drawn to.'

Lara doesn't say anything for a while.

'Your mother was fiercely protective of me.'

'I'm sure she was until she wasn't.'

'Did she never find lo...' But Lyla can't finish her sentence. Lara knows exactly what she was going to say.

'Love?'

'I was going to say that yes. You said she was always chasing men.'

'She fell in love with someone. Not my stepfather. And we moved in with him for a while.'

An image haunts Lara. She was alone in her new bedroom that was almost bigger than the entire downstairs of Tim's house. She was having a nightmare when her mother woke her. The crying stopped, not slowly while she calmed herself, but quite abruptly. Her mother changed her pyjamas and asked her if she wanted to come into their bed. She shook her head, I'll be quiet, she whispered. Her mother stripped the sheets and when it was clean, she left and climbed back into bed with her lover. Leave the light on, she called after her mother. She lay in the darkness, listening to them in the other room. Is she alright? Yes, a nightmare...she wet the bed again, she hasn't done that for years. Kids go through these phases. Don't worry. It will blow over.

'But she didn't stay with him?'

'No.'

'Because she was no longer in love with him?'

'Something like that.'

The house went up in flames; they were far enough away to be safe, close enough to feel the heat. The smoke drifted into the atmosphere, consuming the air. The fire engine arrived just as

the first floor disappeared, collapsing and consumed by the blaze. A crowd gathered to watch, the firemen shouted for them to stay back. He came running towards them.

Thank God you're safe. He was looking at Lara. She shifted behind her mother, to shield herself. Then his eyes were on her mother's face.

You did this...it's lucky that I wasn't in there, he screamed at Clarissa.

It wasn't luck. It was poor planning on my part.

I'll have you arrested.

Lara covered behind her mother and squeezed her eyes shut.

No, you won't. It won't be just your home that is destroyed.

They turned away.

'I can see by looking at you, the same disquiet I saw in your mother.'

'Disquiet?'

'It's a word my husband likes to use. And I think it is a word that says a lot.'

'Disquiet or is it damage you see? Perhaps I inherited it somehow.'

'Maybe...there is an awful thing about life, and the patterns and cycles it places on us. We are a victim of birth and those patterns or cycles will only change if we choose to break them.'

'You're not what I expected, Lyla.'

Lyla laughs at that and sees that Lara is smiling, her mother's smile.

'And what is it that you were expecting?'

'I don't know.'

'You're not the first person to tell me that I'm not what they expected.'

'Do you think Sam would have done a better job?'

'I can't answer that but I think she should've come back. We could have taken better care of you together.'

'It wasn't all bad with her.'

'Tim sounds nice.'

'Yes. He is. But he was too soft... she walked all over him. He knew about all her affairs but he didn't do anything about it.'

'Maybe they were a distraction, perhaps that's what she did when she was feeling lost...it makes sense, she was like that here too. But that doesn't mean she didn't love him... or you.'

'To the extent that she was capable of loving anyone.'

A breeze begins to shake the palm leaves; the clouds drift across the moon. The cool air touches their faces, salty and damp.

‘Let’s go back inside, the wind is growing stronger. The storm will be here sooner than you think.’

Lara lingers outside. She can hear the ocean waves as the wind makes the current stronger. It would be lovely to rest for a while; she had been on the move since she left London all those months ago – or is it years? She can’t remember when she decided to come to Thailand; she certainly hadn’t thought of it when she first read her mother’s words. It had been odd to see that her mother still thought that the only thing that mattered to Lara was the identity of her father. She had wanted to know as a little girl when she realised it wasn’t just mothers that picked up their children at the school gates; but that was before. It almost became as irrelevant as everything else; she thought her mother would have known that at least. Yet what did her mother know of her, or her of her mother? They existed, until her mother didn’t.

Her mother’s wide eyes and her lips moving, but silent and the world is mute.

Lara stands up to shake herself free of the image. With a sigh she follows Lyla inside but she is alone in the living room. She wanders over to the cabinet that holds a number of photographs. Lyla and her husband on their wedding day; she picks up the frame. Lyla looks lovely in soft pink, an orchid in her hair. She’s taller than her husband, and much younger.

‘I made that dress.’

Lara jumps.

‘I didn’t hear you come in.’

‘I’m sorry I startled you.’

‘One of the last memories of my mother was her hemming a skirt for me. I sat and watched her and there was a comfortable silence between us that day. You made this dress? I wondered whether you were still dress making.’

‘Yes, I can still make a lot of money dressmaking, not that I need it. Sometimes old business acquaintances from Bangkok call me to make something for a wedding or other occasion. Normally I say no and they offer me so much money. But sometimes I say yes because I want to remember what it feels like.’

‘Did you always want to do that?’

‘Always.’

‘So why did you own the bar?’

‘That was your father’s idea; where do you think I got all this money?’

‘Another thing about him. He was wealthy?’ Lara says, piecing together the disparate facts she knows about Sam.

'He was very wealthy. He had a lot of money...do you need money, Lara?'

Lara shakes her head.

'No, not at all.'

'I could—'

'No.'

Lara's voice isn't raised but there is a finality to it that makes Lyla sigh.

'It's my turn to tell you...I have to be fair. You wanted to know what life was like when she left. What is it you want to know?' Lyla asks.

'You said something about her having affairs and being lost, do you think that is why she slept with Sam? Because she was lost?'

Lyla can see that Lara is angry; she had been angry too but she learnt that if anger had nowhere to land, it often diffused. Lara is watching her.

'She wanted to hurt me,' Lyla says, answering the question that neither of them would ever truly know the answer to.

'But why would she want to do that if she was the way you say she was?'

'It was complicated.'

'Everything is and was always complicated. You had a complicated relationship with her. She had a complicated relationship with Sam. And it sounds like Sam had a complicated relationship with you...and where does that leave me?'

'Complicated.'

They both smile. Lara's anger drifts out towards the ocean and drowns in the sea.

'Where does that leave you?' Lyla repeats. 'It depends on what you wanted from Sam.'

'Clarity.'

They're quiet for a while; Lyla considers whether Lara will ever have the clarity she needs.

'Why do you think that my mother did what she did?'

Lyla ponders this for a while.

'Did she write about Maile?'

'Mie-leh? That's how you say it? She mentioned her. She said that she was your cousin, that they were close and that they had a really bad fight one time. That she couldn't make amends.'

They both know the time she's referring to.

'Nothing else?'

'No. Why?'

'I think she slept with Sam because I rejected her. I was hurting because of Maile.'

'Maile meant a lot to you?'

'She meant a lot to all of us.'

'I know something bad happened to her but I don't know what.'

Lyla sighs.

Twenty

After Lyla stopped taking the hormones, she wasn't faring well. Her body couldn't take the abrupt change. But it suited Clarissa to ignore it. Lyla was weak but Clarissa didn't pay that any mind; she loved nursing her so much, to hold Lyla as she drifted off. They barely went to the club anymore. Clarissa went sometimes, but Lyla said she couldn't face it. Lyla was changing. She would do anything for Clarissa to stay. Clarissa knew the damage she was inflicting but she couldn't stop herself.

Maile was the only one that was allowed to visit and she was the only one that wasn't afraid to say the truth. One day, weeks after Lyla had become a recluse, Maile couldn't hold her tongue.

What are you doing Cee-cee? Her mouth unsmiling.

I don't know what you mean.

You are killing her.

She's fine. She's just caught a cold.

I'm not talking about that. You should not do this Cee-cee. She loves you. You are killing her.

It went on that way for a while, until Clarissa lost her temper. Lyla locked herself in the bathroom so she didn't have to hear anymore.

It is none of your business, Maile.

It is my business; she is my cousin.

Clarissa started to laugh.

Are you kidding? Cousins? You have some vague family connection and you have held on to it so much because of your pathetic need to feel love.

Maile had stopped then. Cee-cee, she said, her voice quiet and ragged.

Clarissa felt the weight of her own cruelty. Get out, she screamed instead of making it right.

You can't mean that.

Get out.

Lyla doesn't want that.

Lyla doesn't want you around here all the time, always hanging on to her with your neediness.

Neither of them could quite believe Clarissa's words, but she was too stubborn to take them back. Maile looked at Cee-cee one last time and left without saying anything else.

Clarissa stood for a while, in the wake of emptiness left by Maile. Clarissa wanted to go after her but she was unable to move. She wondered whether Lyla had heard it all. She knocked on the door of the bathroom. Lyla didn't answer. She knocked again, and again.

Lyla, I'm sorry. I'll go find Maile, tell her I'm sorry. Although Clarissa would never get the chance.

Lyla still didn't answer. Clarissa was frightened. She banged and banged. Still nothing. She called Lyla's name over and over, contemplated breaking the door down. Then she heard a faint sound. Lyla was crawling. Clarissa heard the sound of the key being turned.

The image of Lyla was forever imprinted in her memory. Lyla was laying naked on the floor, blood streaming from a gash on the side of her head. Clarissa looked down at her body. Her small, shrinking breasts. And her shrivelled genitals. Did Lyla see pity or disgust on Clarissa's face? Because she turned her head away. Clarissa wrapped her in a towel and put her to bed. That night Clarissa begged Lyla to start taking her medication again.

About a week later, late at night the police came calling. They'd bailed out the girls so many times, but the police never came to the flat. They wanted Lyla to identify the body. In the morgue, the duty officer pulled back a white sheet and they both looked upon a face that wasn't recognisable. Then Lyla leant in, studying a spot behind the ear of the dead girl. The small heart tattoo. Lyla identified Maile with a remote expression on her face. Clarissa began to scream, clawing at Maile until the police pulled her away.

They were quiet in the car home; there wasn't anything to be said. As Lyla opened the door to the apartment, Clarissa's tears were back. There was no comfort from Lyla. She went to her room, saying that she was getting ready for the club. Clarissa went to her own room. For days she stayed that way, calling for Maile then Clara. And still Lyla stayed away.

At Maile's funeral Lyla stood with the other girls from the club, away from Clarissa. The *farang*. There were tears from the girls as they held each other in comfort. Lyla was composed, looking somewhere remote, an empty expression on her face. She had cast Clarissa away.

Clarissa knew her time in Bangkok was fading, that she should've left but she couldn't, she just held on. She agonised over whether Lyla wanted her to leave but she was afraid that if she

asked, Lyla would say yes, so she said nothing. She hoped that Lyla would forgive her and that maybe time would heal them. They were distant for weeks.

Sam's arrival eased the tension for a while, until it didn't. If Sam noticed a rift between them he didn't mention it, perhaps he thought it was because they were mourning. Lyla had changed their shifts so they barely worked together. Clarissa preferred it to when they were both at the club and Lyla avoided her. It was hard not to remember those early days.

Their late-night laughter haunted Clarissa. Their intimate voices, soft and indiscernible, tormented her.

The raining season was upon them, although they were yet to have the first real storm. One evening, Lyla was at the club and Sam was sketching Clarissa. She was dressed in a t-shirt, sitting by the window and watching the rain.

When did you first come to Thailand? Clarissa asked.

Sam was shading in a particular part of his drawing and didn't look up when he started to talk.

My country was at war.

That must have been so frightening.

It wasn't bombing all the time. There were long periods of ceasefire...and a false sense of calm would settle on us, we almost forgot we were at war at all.

Where do you live?

Tehran.

How long would the ceasefires last?

Sometime months, sometimes years...we would think life was normal and then the bombing would start again on a random afternoon. When the sirens rang through the streets, we'd huddle together under the wrought iron staircase silently thinking the same thing; would the next bomb land on our house? Thanking God when it didn't. Sam stopped sketching and examined the page.

So, that led you to Thailand?

He started shading another part.

I started to get migraines.

Sam's migraine would start when the first crack of anti-aircraft bullets rang through the air and become so debilitating that by the end of the raid, he wished the bomb would land on his head.

Your migraines started because of the war?

Clarissa didn't turn her gaze from the window; she found it soothing to watch the rain and listen to the raspy tone of Sam's voice.

Sam explained that his headaches had started after his cousin Ramin died. He couldn't bear Tehran then, not because he was afraid to die, but for what the war had stolen from him. The screeching sirens were a reminder that Ramin was never coming back. And even when the raids stopped, the headaches would continue their hold over Sam because he couldn't stop thinking of his cousin, the source of the pain. The doctors couldn't even give him medication because the lack of drug supply. Sam tried everything. Once he packed up the family in the middle of the night, and they travelled north to their holiday home. He thought if he was away from Tehran the migraines might stop, but the Caspian held its own memories.

One of my friends often visited Thailand.

And you came here together?

In the summer of 1983, Sam decided to get as far away from Iran as possible, but there weren't many destinations he could travel without a visa. Thailand was easy. As soon the plane took off, his headache seemed to dissipate. That visit lasted two months; his family forgave his prolonged absence because he would bring them the items that were rationed in the war. From then on, as soon as the bombing began, Sam would leave.

Why are you sighing?

My son.

You have a boy?

Yes.

What's his name?

Arash.

Sam tried to tell himself he wasn't being selfish but he could never rid himself of his son's forlorn face. During the war he felt justified, all these years later he bore the weight of guilt.

How old is he?

He's fifteen. Sam lit a cigarette.

He had an awkward relationship with Arash. He thought of how his son was when he left this time. Goodbye Baba, Arash had said, and held out his hand in the way that said he was now a man. Sam had pulled Arash into an embrace and realised that his son was now much taller than him.

Clarissa briefly looked at Sam's melancholy face and decided it was time to change the subject.

Tell me about when you met Lyla.

Has she not told you?

You tell me.

I met her that first visit to Bangkok, when she was working as a seamstress. She was very young. She sat on the floor cross-legged as she adjusted the legs of my suit, and I watched her from the reflection in the mirror.

Lost in the moment, Sam describes the way Lyla held the pins between her teeth; the soft line of her jaw as she tilted her head in concentration; the elongation of her creamy neck. When she finished he had asked her to go for a drink with him; her gaze met his in the mirror, pausing, she was entirely taken aback by his question, and he had bitten his lip because he was taken aback by his question too. She smiled then; he noticed that her front teeth were crooked and she had a slight overbite. She said yes, her smile not faltering.

And you fell in love? Clarissa's said in a whimsical voice.

Love. Until Lyla it wasn't a word that Sam truly understood, not in that sense anyway. He understood love in the way that he felt deep affection for certain people in his life. His father. His child. His aunt. Ramin. After Ramin, Sam went through life like someone who had perpetually mislaid something, not so unlike his father after all. But that day when Lyla had met his gaze in the mirror, while he was holding in his stomach and standing as straight as he could, he felt something stir somewhere and that's what he considered it was, love. They had been together for over ten years; the only time he ever felt at peace were the intermittent periods he shared with Lyla.

Love is complicated, he said.

Clarissa stood up then and joined Sam. She looked at the sketch of her, and her breath caught.

I love the way you see me. You make me look so...unsullied.

Her eyes started to smart.

There is something intriguingly unknowable about you Clarissa, he said. But I would never see you as sullied.

Sam turned her chin towards him, and wiped away the tear with his thumb. They sat that way, quite still for some moments, and then he pressed his lips to hers.

After those biblical storms in Bangkok, they'd go out to see the damage. Signs had fallen off, roofs had been blown away, bits of wood, metal and paper were strewn across the market. Clarissa didn't stay around to see the aftermath of the storm she created.

Sam had his head in his hands; he was dressed in boxers and his stomach hung over the elastic waistband. He looked old sitting there.

You cannot tell Lyla, he said, his eyes almost begging.

Ultimately, Lyla was all that mattered. To both of them. Clarissa picked up her clothes, and went back to her room. She could smell Sam on her; she wanted to shower, to scrub away their betrayal. But it was too late, she heard Lyla's key in the lock. She wondered whether Sam was still awake, whether he contemplated telling Lyla despite what he'd begged of her. But the flat was quiet.

Clarissa couldn't sleep; she tiptoed towards their room. From the doorway, she saw that Lyla was asleep, Sam's arm casually thrown over her.

Clarissa pulled out her suitcase, often pausing to see if there was any movement from the other room. There was an odd sense of serenity that night; it felt as though all was calm with the world despite the wild rain outside. She opened the wardrobe but there wasn't anything that she wanted to take. She grabbed a few clothes, stuffed them into the suitcase and when she was done, tiptoed to the door. Her hand was on the handle, then she hesitated. She slowly turned to look at the flat, and before she thought about what she was doing, she was rolling the carpet to one side. The safe that Lyla kept in the floor had over twenty thousand pounds worth of dollars in cash. She looked towards Lyla's room. She put some of the cash into the suitcase and the rest in her bag. She relocked the safe and then started to roll back the carpet. She remembered how Sam had unwrapped it for her. It was then that she decided that Lyla didn't deserve it.

Sam thought there was no way he could sleep after his act of betrayal, but when Lyla came home and climbed into bed, as she did every night, moulding her body to his, he had soon drifted off. He was up early as usual; before he opened his eyes, he remembered what he had done. He shifted in the bed and got up as quietly so as not to disturb her. He hoped that Clarissa would be awake so that he could talk to her, apologise, beg her again not to tell Lyla. Oddly he wasn't worried about how Lyla would react towards him; his remorse was that he had acted in a way that would cause a rift between Lyla and Clarissa. They had been content before Clarissa came into their lives but everything changed and they couldn't go back. Despite his casual jealousy, he knew how much it meant to Lyla to have someone like Clarissa in her life. It was as if Clarissa was Lyla's soul mate. And how could he begrudge Lyla when he couldn't give her what she wanted? He knew that Lyla loved him, but she was more alive when Clarissa was around. He wouldn't come between them, except he did, and in a way that Lyla would never forgive, if she ever found out.

No one was awake when he put the kettle on but he hoped Clarissa would join him soon. Lyla knew that they often had breakfast together and she left them to it. He lit a cigarette, set the table. He brewed tea and drank two cups. She wasn't joining him. He'd have to wake her. As soon as Sam walked into the living room, he knew something had changed. The room felt oddly empty; it was feeling Clarissa's absence too. And then he realised what was missing.

Sam and Ramin played war with plastic soldiers, sitting on the edges of the carpet. As an adult Sam played backgammon with his father, in the middle of the carpet, where the forest in the design grew dense, sitting cross-legged around the wooden board. His father would sometimes stop and stroke his palm over its silk texture. The rug was part of them, for all their flaws, and now it was gone. He missed his family in that moment, no matter that they were imperfect.

Sam slumped down on the sofa, staring at the place the carpet used to be. That was where Lyla found him hours later when she finally woke up.

Twenty-one

‘We realised that she’d taken the money but it didn’t matter. The carpet did. But she knew that. Sam was in a terrible mess. At first, I thought he was upset about the carpet. I thought he blamed me because...well, things were not the same between us. He kept telling me how much I meant to him, which was when I started to suspect. He left for Iran after about a month after your mother left, and for the next year or so, he only visited a couple of times. But almost as soon as he arrived, he would start talking about leaving. He was quiet, subdued. Perhaps I was too.’

‘She really damaged you.’

‘Then he left and never came back. I waited and waited. Maybe not only for Sam. Finally, I found out that he had suffered a heart attack. He always thought he had indigestion, eating all those peppermint tablets, I told him to go to the doctors, but he would just laugh and light another cigarette.’

Lyla wipes her eyes.

‘I’m so sorry, Lyla.’

‘And I’m so sorry, Lara.’

They smile at that. It’s almost dawn.

‘My mother died not having answers to the many questions that she had for you.’

‘Is that what you are doing, trying to answer those questions for her?’

‘I don’t know. At first, I wasn’t going to do anything, but then I found myself in Hong Kong.’

‘Something was drawing you here.’

‘Yes...I thought it was because of her notebook...the things she wrote in there...that it might be that I was searching for Sam or you.’

‘But it isn’t that?’

‘It is going to sound strange.’

‘You think it’s the carpet.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Your arm. I might not have seen it since the day she left but I remember every detail.’

‘When I read that she’d taken it from you...I felt I had to follow its path.’

‘The path of the carpet?’

'I told you it would sound strange.'

'Perhaps. But I understand.'

'I set fire to it.'

'What?'

'I burned it...the carpet.'

Lyla lets out a long sigh.

'Is it crazy when I loved it so much?' Lara asks, and although Lyla thinks that Lara isn't really expecting an answer, she tells her that it depends on why. Lara shrugs, perhaps she doesn't even know why.

'What were your mother's questions?'

When Lara starts to recite them, she imagines her mother asking the questions – Did she cry when she woke and found me gone? Did she come to find me? Did I leave a void? Did she feel empty? Betrayed? Hurt? Was she relieved? Did she wish she could turn back the clock and start all over again? Does she think of me ever? – she thinks about her mother's voice, the tone, the intonation but she can't quite recall it. She sighs and looks towards Lyla who has an odd smile about her face.

'I would have said yes to all those things if she came back.'

'It's sad that she died not knowing that...perhaps it would have saved her.'

'Do you think I could have saved her?'

'She was in love with you, Lyla.'

Lyla is about to deny it, but she knows that it's true. The difference was, Lyla had loved all the sides of Cee-cee, even the ugly parts.

Lara presses her fingertips to her eyes.

'Would it shock you if I told you I'm responsible for her death.'

Lyla takes Lara's hand.

'I'm sure that's not true.'

Lara looks at their hands, the same way in which she had earlier. In that moment she feels safe, that is what her mother must have felt too.

'Will you tell me what happened to her? How did she—'

'Die?'

Lyla nods.

Lara pulled out the knife and threw it on the carpet, the blade repulsive against the delicate silk threads.

'There was a suggestion in her notebook that she wanted to end it...'

'She killed herself?'

'I don't know.'

Lyla sees Cee-cee then, laughing aloud with Maile, the small dimple by her left eye, turning to face Lyla, her eyes suddenly intense and soft.

There are so many questions, but in that moment, Lyla doesn't want to know the answers. It takes a while before she's ready to speak.

'I'm sorry you've lost your mother, despite all you've told me, and I am truly sorry that you never got to know Sam.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'It matters... but Lara, you may never know the truth of it all...and your mother would want you to live your life...I know that about her.'

Lara shrugs. Lyla hesitates for a moment.

'Will you tell me why you burned it?'

Lara shakes her head.

Lyla had been so upset that Cee-cee had taken the carpet, far more than the money Cee-cee had taken. Yet she knows in a way that it wasn't Lyla's carpet either.

Lara takes Lyla's silence as a sign of her disapproval.

'I'm sorry that she stole it. It would be here with you now if she hadn't taken it. It wouldn't be destroyed.'

'Lara...that carpet was more yours than mine. It belonged to your grandparents. It doesn't matter what you did to it... it was yours.'

They are both quiet for a while.

'I couldn't seem to let go...even when I forgot all about it...'

'You forgot...'

'It's complicated...and I don't think I can even begin to explain.'

'Perhaps that's the reason you can't let go of it, something about its history is holding you.'

'Do you believe in things like that?'

'Anything is possible.'

Lara looks at Lyla like she is about to say something, but then she gets up, ready to leave.

'What will you do now?' Lyla asks.

'I'm not sure.'

'Will you go home?'

For a moment it seems Lara doesn't understand the question.

'I can't go back yet.'

'I know the path forwards can sometimes feel unreachable if we aren't at peace, but you may not get all the answers you're looking for.'

'The only connection to all this is you and you've told me all you can.'

Lyla looks at her for a while. She thinks about not telling her, perhaps then Lara would go home and make a life for herself. Maybe it would be kinder for Lara if she cut herself free from the threads of the past. But she senses that it will never be that way for Lara.

'Not everything.'

Lyla tells Lara to wait for a moment. When she comes back she has a piece of paper that she hands to Lara.

'What's this?'

'Sam gave me it for emergencies.'

'And you kept it--'

'It's been years but it might be a connection.'

Lara takes the paper; with her forefinger she traces the number as though somehow it connects her to the person who wrote it.

'Thank you.' She says, her voice almost a whisper.

'If you want to trace the carpet, or whatever it is you are truly looking for, you should go to where it began.'

Lara absorbs those words for a while.

'I can see why my mother was so drawn to you...thank you for not turning me away.'

Before Lyla manages to say anything, Lara is at the door.

'Lara.'

Lara turns just as Lyla reaches out for her. For a while they stay that way, in an awkward embrace.

'Take care of yourself. You don't have to be them, you know?' Lyla says, when they finally part.

'Lyla if anyone comes looking for me, please don't say I was here.'

Lyla wonders what trouble Lara is in but she doesn't ask. And then Lara is gone, out of the door and down the path. In the darkness, she watches as Lara walks away, down the mountain. Soon she can't see Lara except for the fabric of her white shirt, almost fluorescent in the moonlight. And then the storm comes; Lara carries on walking as though it isn't raining at all.

Twenty-two

When something ends, even if you expect it to, there's still a sense of loss. Even when you want it to be over, there is still wretchedness. Sometimes I contemplate finality. In a way that goes out with a scream. Not to drift to sleep quietly but to feel the pain of it, knowing that there is no turning back.

It's becoming a habit, writing late at night. My body is stiff from sitting so long. The house is calm with the ambient sound of night. The doors are locked. We are safe from the outside world. Outside it's raining.

There was a tropical storm the day I left; as I walked across the market the rain whipped my face and made my skin sting. I have wanted to write about leaving her all day but now I'm reticent. The details are faded and oddly clear. Are they even memories? None of this was written at the time and recollections are horribly flawed. We don't really remember, we recreate; I'm recreating my own narrative.

The light in Bangkok had been suffocated by swamping clouds. The darkness was closing in, consuming all the light and energy until nothing was left except the unbearable blackness. I was lost. Adrift. I hadn't planned it, and yet I was choking. Nothing could centre me, not even Lyla. And then I did the only thing that I could to end it with finality and destroy any chance of ever going back. Afterwards, I ran, the act of ultimate cowardice. I didn't stay to face all I had done and it wasn't enough. I took her money and something they both held dear. I can't atone for my sins or ask for your forgiveness because my actions were indefensible. Lyla could never forgive me. Can you?

When I realised the irreparable damage that was done, I ran back to Tim. He took us back without punishment or judgment. You weren't right. I thought he could fix you. Because you loathed me. But it turned out you despised Tim equally. Now I wish I could go back to that time, before you were harmed, to the days where you would dance carefree. When we went back, Tim sensed something had happened but he couldn't bring himself to ask me about it. Would he have forgiven me then? He was burdened with your pain although he caused none of it.

I've tried to tell you to stay away from the boys you're hanging out with, they won't heal you. Your eyes were stony; you felt nothing. You said you won't take advice from a hypocrite. You refuse to believe in my love and need to keep you safe. You burnt that bridge, you said. You spurn my desire to spend time with you, to be let into your world. You despise my presence, my questions, my yearning to be your mother. You burnt that bridge, you said again.

Last night, I felt sad listening to the haunting melody you strummed on your guitar. You stopped suddenly and somehow that made me feel worse. For a while it was quiet until the crying foxes, and the branch of the birch tree tapping against the window. There was no rest, unable to sleep, and drifting from one room to the next, comforted by your breath soft and unfettered in the muted darkness.

The heating is on but there seems to be a dampness about the house, stealing its way into my skin and through to my bones. Every time I set out to write I ponder all I've written. Staring at my script, I frown at my words, and my lack of lyricism. But they are permanent now, inked onto the page. My words are here forever.

When you were little you used to write me letters all the time and leave them in various places. On the doormat, on the fridge, on my pillow. You wrote sweet letters, sad letters, sorry letters. Always with a different colour paper. Always decorated with hearts, kisses and butterflies. Each time you signed off with how much you loved me. Perhaps they stopped when that was no longer true. If I'd have known you would stop writing them, I wouldn't have been flippant. You never really know when something is going to end.

The words are real, no deleting or editing or embellishing the ugly; this is the way real life is.

The first daffodils have broken through today. Purple crocus. Dewdrops. Only last week there was a scattering of snow. You turned thirteen. You are still so impossibly young, with that insufferable old head of yours. You almost hugged me when you opened your gift. The butterfly charm. You put it straight around your neck. You smiled, the slimmest smile. But that was enough. You looked happy.

My favourite memory of you as a little girl is lying on the carpet. You liked to lie on it and spread out your arms and legs. You liked to trace the patterns with your fingers. You liked finding the birds, the dears and the butterflies. Always the butterflies. You used to be sad when we moved house, but we would roll out the carpet and I said that it was a piece of your home that you could take everywhere.

Sometimes I look upon your face and remember. You are the daughter of a man that I knew as Sam but I don't have anything else to offer you. I can't even remember where he was from. I know nothing of his heritage or the country he was born. His name is incomplete. Other than an aunt, I can't remember much of what he told me about his family. I think he had a son, I think he told me that. I'm sorry. I seemed to have failed you again. I only know for sure that he was kind and he was the love of Lyla's life, and I think she was the love of mine. The love of my life before you. This won't make sense to you. Sometimes in your face, I see her. The delicate slant to your pure green eyes. The flawlessness of your pale skin. It's not possible but it is somehow.

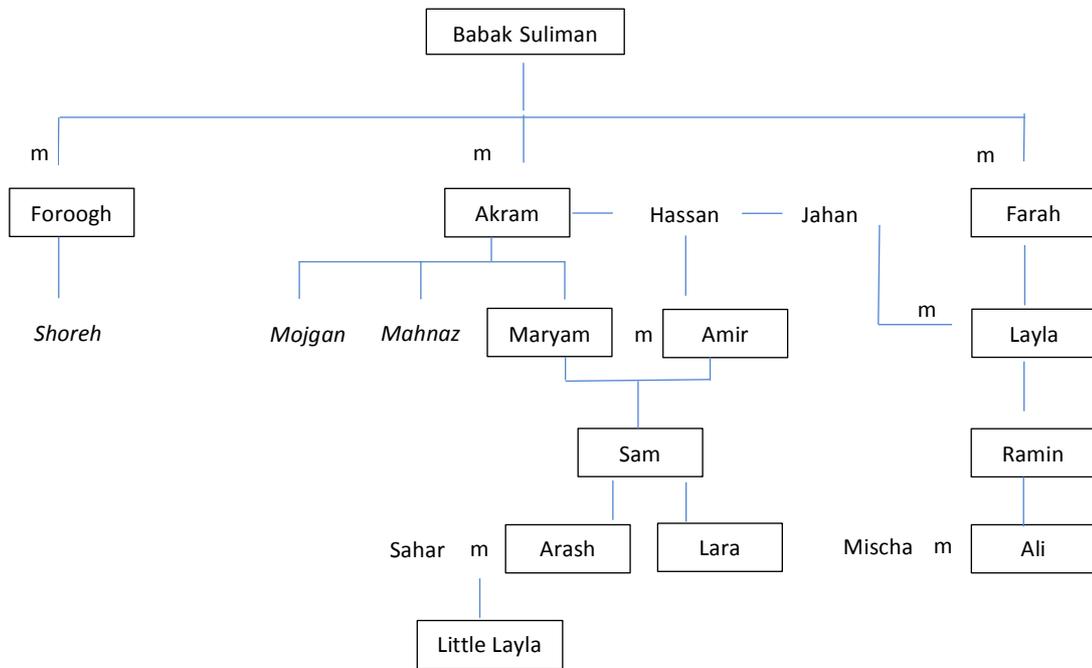
Beyond the window, the ground is frozen with white crystals, the sky pure and cloudless. The melody of a tune you are playing echoes around the house. I picture you tracing your fingers around the rim of the carpet as a little girl. We are at the end now. There is much I wish I could change but I wouldn't change you.

Beginnings

“Those who heard them listened in delight,
and so similar were the two voices that they sounded like a single chant.
Born of pain and longing,
their song had the power to break the unhappiness of the world.”

Layla and Majnun,
Nizami Ganjavi

The Family Tree.



One

The villa is veiled among the relentless high-rises that the city seems to now favour. It's in the most affluent neighbourhood of Shemran, in the north heading towards the Alborz, where only the rich live, and where the atmosphere was once as pure as the mountain air. Now the city is suffocating and it grows too fast. It bleeds into the villages, consuming the land and it creeps far into the mountains.

In the villa, Layla sits by the window but she doesn't see much anymore. It's not because of her failing sight. It's the altered landscape. Tehran has grown into a place that she barely recognises; it doesn't feel like home. It has never really been her home. She looks towards the sky, where there isn't even the flimsiest of clouds, and against the horizon there is a cloak of thin ash. They need rain to clear the smog but it's too late now. They'd probably have to wait until late autumn.

Her home is full of people preparing for a party. There's always a party of some sort. This one is a wedding. She's seen many weddings. Births. Funerals. They think that she is waiting for her own; they're wrong. But she is waiting.

Caterers are busy preparing the dining room. They all have a purpose, each with a dedicated task. One man lays out the cutlery; he makes a semi-circle of spoons and forks, biting his lip as he designs the table. Another man is fashioning the serviettes into roses, humming an old folksong. A young woman, who is still wearing her headscarf despite being told she doesn't have to worry, carries a large tray holding a pyramid of fruit. She inches the tray on to centre of the table, mindful not to topple the apples.

They don't acknowledge Layla sitting there; she is absent, almost invisible. Perhaps it's because she is unnaturally still, unflinching and unmoving. At times though, her bony hand reaches out and takes a small piece of crystallised sugar. She pops it into her mouth then sips saffron tea in one fluid movement. She sets down the hourglass cup when it's empty but for a few stray leaves that linger at the bottom.

'Layla-dear, would you like more tea?'

Her grandson's wife takes the glass away without waiting for a reply.

Mischa takes the glass into the kitchen, irritated. Mischa just doesn't like old people. You're not so young Mischa. Her husband thinks he's funny. He isn't.

Mischa imagines all the things she could do with the villa; she had suggested that they could buy some small apartment for Layla but her husband dismissed it, *it's her house* and that was all that was said on the subject. Her real wish is to live in America, and what seems to be the infinite freedom of it. But given the way the world is moving, it's never going to happen.

The doorbell chimes.

'Who would call now?' she says aloud to nobody in particular. At the door Mischa smiles to see Sahar and Layla-koochaloo.

They call her Layla-koochaloo not because she is particularly small – in fact she is the tallest in her class and the same height as all her cousins despite being the youngest – but because, of course, of Auntie Layla. Even when they are not in the company of Auntie Layla, they call her Layla-koochaloo. Little Layla doesn't mind. She likes being part of the pair, little Layla, old Layla.

Little Layla runs to the old lady and hugs her quiescent legs.

'Salam,' she says.

The old lady who is now looking at the workers outside as they transform her garden for the party — who is not too old, or too senile, but has mostly stopped trying to make conversation because people don't tend to listen anyway — turns away from the window and towards the little girl. She winks and smiles.

'Leave Layla-joon alone,' Sahar shouts over to her daughter.

Layla winks and smiles again. Little Layla lays out her paper and colouring pencils at the old woman's feet, and starts to sketch.

'Are you well Layla-joon?'

Sahar shouts at the old lady as she sets down a glass of fresh tea, and heads back to Mischa in the kitchen. Sometimes Layla wishes she were as deaf as they believed, or that her mind was disintegrating the way they assumed. The inanity would be easier to bear. She sips her tea.

Somewhere in the apartment a tray holding wineglasses slips from hesitant fingers and smashes against the stone floor. The shattering sound momentarily stops the little girl. Layla puts her palm on the top of the child's head.

'Let me see.'

The little girl picks up the paper and shows her the sketch.

'Very artistic.'

'My baba says you were a great artist, Auntie. He says that you could make art out of anything. He says you could even weave carpets.'

Layla smiles.

'Did you make this carpet?' The little girl points at the carpet that she is sitting on.

Layla shakes her head.

'I stopped making carpets a long time ago.'

Most days, Layla would watch her mother weave for hours. She liked seeing the threads entwine, excited to see what pattern would come out in the end. Layla wanted to learn but her mother refused to teach her. Maman had higher aspirations for her daughter. When Layla asked her mother why she didn't stop – Baba had many houses and her mother didn't need to weave – her mother said that it was so much part of her now that weaving had become like breathing. Layla knew to stop asking questions; when her mother grew tired of a conversation, Layla would be given more chores.

Late at night Layla would crawl into her mother's bed, thinking about the carpet her mother was weaving. She would place her small cold feet between her mother's thighs, where the skin was soft and flabby but deliciously warm. She sought her mother's hand in the dark. Her mother hummed an old lullaby.

Arusake gashange man, inja khabideh

Ruye takte makbmale abi, germez pushbedeh

My beautiful doll is sleeping here,
on a bed of blue velvet, she is wearing red.

Sometimes when she stroked her fingers across her mother's hand, her delicate skin caught on callouses that were caused by holding the thread too tight.

Layla sighs, would she ever stop mourning? Longing to see that face one last time, to feel the touch, or the reassurance of her temperate smile? And then over time, the grief grows deeper, friends, lovers and sons. That is the way of the world. Life and death. Not much extraordinary about an ordinary life.

There are even more caterers around the table now. They have set out candelabras and flowers. Layla bends towards the little girl and whispers something in her ear. The little girl gathers her pencils and waits for Layla to stand.

Little Layla is concentrating on moving them towards the room, her hand tightly engulfed in her great-aunt's thin hand.

'Where are you going Layla-koochaloo?'

Sahar comes towards them but the little girl pays her no mind. Sahar can't fathom the relationship them; little Layla seems to prefer the old lady to anyone else.

'Layla?'

'We are going to Auntie's room, she's going to show me pictures.'

Sahar opens her mouth and then closes it again. Where was the harm? At least little Layla would be out from under her feet for a while so she could help Mischa with the preparations without fearing those alert little ears.

'Alright,' she says, as if she was being asked permission.

Inside Layla's room, the little girl stretches out star-shaped on the middle of the bed. She watches the fan above her spin. They don't need it on, the air-conditioning keeps the house cool, but she likes the way it rotates, imagines what it would be like to hold on to one of the blades and to be spun around.

Layla finds the photo she is looking for and hands it to the little girl, who draws it towards her eyes and squints against the image. In the child's eyes, Layla sees his eyes, as they were when she had loved him.

The woman in the grainy monochrome is looking off camera and there's a hesitancy about the subtle smile. Wrapped in her arms is a baby.

'Is that you?'

'I'm the baby. That is my mother.'

Two

Layla was born one Sunday in 1926. Her mother didn't remember the exact date, and Baba made it a point never to remember anyone's birthday. The only reason Maman remembered the year was because it was the same year Reza Shah had his coronation. Her mother charted everything against the king's reign, revered because he had overthrown the Qajars.

The Qajars gave away territory like handing out sweets at New Year and all in exchange for their own riches. Her mother said this more than once. Reza Shah is building a new Persia. Apparently, we will be able to travel from one side of Persia to the other, she told Layla.

Not that her mother had any intention of ever leaving Tabriz.

Layla often wondered what her mother would make of the modern world. She hadn't even lived to see how her beloved Reza Pahlavi fell from grace. The aspirational general, who rose up against the Qajars and claimed the crown, spent years amassing an army for it to crumble within a week. She didn't know what her mother would think of his young son placed on the throne instead, who spent more years out of Iran being schooled in places in Europe that her mother had never heard of, and she knew her mother would not have liked who put him there. Over the years, Layla observed her country pass from one king to the next, and then its regression through revolution and war. They were rich; they were poor. They were a nation divided for as long as she could remember, death to the Shah, death to America, sanctions, despotic leaders in the modern world both east and west, protestors lying bloodied in the streets. Layla was glad her mother hadn't seen that.

There was nothing unusual about the particular Sunday that Layla was born; all Maman said was that she was glad it wasn't a Friday, the day of rest. It was winter, daylight was sparse, and the day after Layla was born, the snow came. It would be some weeks later that Layla's father was introduced to his new daughter. He now had five daughters and no sons. Her mother told her that when he lifted Layla from her crib, he began to cry. Layla had asked her mother whether her father cried because he wanted a boy. Her mother told her that she had asked Baba that very

same question; his tears weren't that he had another daughter, he cried because he said the life of a girl was never easy.

The little girl picks up another picture.

'That's my Maman and Baba on their wedding day,' Layla tells her.

'He looks old,' she says.

Layla laughs.

'Yes, he was older than her actual father.' When the little girl looks confused, Layla says, 'my baba was older than my grandfather.'

The little girl ponders the picture for a while longer.

Layla smiles, her parents were an unlikely match.

'What were their names?'

'My mother was Farah, my father Babak.'

Farah was almost past the age of marriage when she met Babak. It wasn't that she didn't have suitors, she had many, but she knew that once she married, she wouldn't be able to weave as much. There was something unusual about the carpets she created; people would study them like they were paintings. The way the colours were cast together, seemed like there were touches of actual sunlight. The three-dimensional scenes, one could step into the garden or forest, and the creatures she wove, a hummingbird, a deer, a butterfly, hidden in the pattern, would hover overhead. Layla would take great pleasure in being the first one to find them.

Carpet making was a part of Farah; some evenings, when her body and eyes felt drained of energy, and she just didn't think she could continue, her hands would carry on weaving like they belonged to an entirely different being. And in that moment, she would dismiss the notion of marriage, she couldn't stop weaving even if she wanted to. Until she met Babak.

'My mother's carpets lay in the many affluent homes in the capital, rumour had it that even Reza Shah owned one.'

Little Layla smiles.

'Was your baba a carpet weaver too?' She contemplates the photograph for a while longer.

'No, my father was a business man. They met because he used to buy my mother's carpets.'

Babak's carpet shop in the old Bazaar in Tehran became the most profitable of his businesses because of Farah's carpets. Customers pre-ordered with a specific design; they asked for all kinds of patterns, colours and shapes; can we have only roses? Can it be green and gold thread? Can it be circle-shaped? Farah could barely weave them fast enough to fulfil his orders.

The summer just before Farah met Babak, Farah grew quite unwell, a terrible bout of dysentery. Layla's grandfather fretted over his daughter, all his focus had been on her since his sons had left. There were many times that Farah wished she could set off to Abadan in the south, the way her brothers had, and have the freedom to work in the oil fields. When Farah told her father how much she missed them, his sanguine words, *everyone leaves eventually*, made her even more sad.

He only cares about the carpets, Farah had said to her mother between bouts of fever.

He wasn't always that way, things changed when Layla died, her mother told her.

If it wasn't already confusing enough, this was a different Layla.

'There was another Layla in the family besides you and me?' Little Layla says.

'Yes, apparently so.'

'What was she like?'

'I don't know, I never met her.'

What becomes of a family in the wake of a lost child? The life that did not grow, but was left in the shadows touching on the lives that did.

Baba told Layla that he grew impatient for Maman's carpet and travelled to Tabriz to collect it, and that when he saw her mother for the first time, he became entirely infatuated. He said that he asked Layla's grandfather that same day whether he could marry Maman. Her grandfather had said, I don't know Haj-agma.

'Why did they call your Baba Haj-agma, I thought his name was Babak?'

'Because he completed the pilgrimage to Mecca, my love.'

'What's Mecca, Auntie?'

'I'll explain another time.'

Layla doesn't feel like talking about God or religion.

'So, what happened then, why did your mother decide to marry your baba?'

'I don't really know, my love,' Layla says after a while.

Layla's grandfather had deferred the marriage proposal to his daughter — not because he believed in her right to choose, he was no different to other men in that regard — because his daughter's talent meant that they had grown quite wealthy and he believed that, as with every other suitor, she would say no. He would then save himself the embarrassment of directly offending Haj-agma. He left Babak and Farah alone for five minutes and when he went back, Haj-agma was smiling. Layla's grandfather could never fathom why his daughter said yes. She was never interested in money. Babak was much older than Farah, shorter, overweight, balding; she had far more handsome suitors. And Babak already had two wives and four daughters.

The little girl asks Layla whether her mother also had more than one husband. Layla ponders for a while on how to respond; there is no way that she can answer without more questions. They briefly discuss fidelity. She takes some time to explain how things used to be different, although — she thinks, but does not elaborate — times aren't so different.

None of this makes sense to the little girl, who is now frowning.

'And why did your mother marry someone so old?'

'Back in those days, it happened all the time. Many young girls would marry older men. Not only that, but some girls got married when they were very young. My grandmother married by grandfather when she was thirteen.'

'My cousin Zara is thirteen.' Little Layla starts to giggle then.

'I know it's funny now, but it was normal when I was your age.' Although Layla thinks, but doesn't say, it should never have been normal.

'I want another story about your life,' the little girl announces.

Layla smiles. She thinks for a while and looks for a specific photograph. When she finds it, she hands it to the little girl.

'This is where I grew up. We lived in a small stone house on the side of a mountain about a few hundred metres from my grandparents. In the garden there were date, walnut and pomegranate trees. In late spring golden wisteria grew in abundance. In winter the snow was so deep that we would lose our legs in it.'

'Who are all these people?' The little girl had chosen a photograph of her own from the tin; she wants a different story.

Layla holds the picture close to her face with a half-smile, half-sigh.

'That's my family.'

'Are they my family too?'

Layla strokes the little girl's head.

‘Yes, they are your family too.’

Little Layla studies the photograph and wonders how she could be related to such odd-looking people.

‘Which one are you?’

Layla points to herself as a child.

‘That’s you?’

‘Yes.’

‘You look more beautiful than anyone else.’

That’s what Amir had said too, that she was more beautiful than them all.

Layla runs her fingertips over the image. She hasn’t seen it for while although she regularly looks at the other photographs in the tin. It always makes her wistful. It captures the day that she considers one of the happiest of her life, not for any particular reason, except it was before everything happened, when Maman and Baba were still alive, and there was still something left of her own sweet innocence.

‘That’s your great-grandmother, my sister Maryam.’

The little girl contemplates the image of her great-grandmother for a while.

‘Is my great grandfather there too?’

‘Yes. He is the boy standing next to me.’

Layla can almost feel the warmth of Amir’s fingers on the small of her back as they waited for the photograph to be taken. She had loved him even before the photograph. His sweet breath of mint tea and honey, his lips brushing hers in the darkened shadows of the garden, the fervent whispers of love, marriage, the dream of their life together, the heat of his body pressed into hers, the chants of poetry, you are my Layla and I am your Majnun, the long yearning glances, his eyes always seeking her, no matter where they were. She remembers him on his wedding day.

‘Are you crying, Auntie?’

Layla shakes her head.

‘Are you sad because they’re no longer here? Don’t worry, Maman says when people die they are always here, you just can’t see them. They might be here with us right now in the room.’

‘Yes, they are here. They live in our minds, our hearts, in our cells.’

The little girl places her palm on the place she supposes her heart is, trying to feel her ancestors inside.

‘What are cells?’

'You'll learn that in science class.'

The little girl gives a theatrical sigh.

'Not more classes.'

Little Layla takes out another photograph.

'That's me, when I was fourteen.'

The summer that they had grown up. Amir took the photograph when she wasn't looking. They were on the beach. She had her father's camera because she wanted to take a picture of the sunset. It was growing dark, she was sitting close to the water's edge, Amir's sweater wrapped around her. It wasn't cold, but she was shivering from the drop in temperature after a day in the sun. Her gaze was directed at the sea; they were going to be late for dinner. They risked too much but couldn't stop themselves. That was what she had been thinking when she heard the click of the camera.

Little Layla is holding up the picture close to Layla's face, trying to find the young woman in the photograph in the old woman's complexion.

'Can you see me?' Layla says, with a smile.

'I think so,' she says, 'I hope I look like you when I grow up.' She hands back the photograph. Layla's gaze lingers on the image for a while. He came to sit by her, wrapping his arm around her. When we get married we can still spend every summer here, he whispered against her hair.

Little Layla becomes distracted and wanders over to the cupboard where Layla keeps the jewellery box. Ali constantly berates her for not putting her gold in the safe but what was the point of having lovely things if they were hidden away? Little Layla strokes her fingers over the top of the box but she knows better than to open it without permission. Last time she had done that at home, Maman had slapped her with her slipper.

'Bring it here child.'

The little girl carries the box over to the bed. They open the lid and together lay out each piece of jewellery. She asks Auntie Layla if she is allowed to try it on knowing that her Auntie won't say no.

Little Layla has a ring on each finger, many necklaces coiled around her neck when her mother knocks and opens the door.

'What are you doing? Is that all right Layla-joon?'

'Yes. Yes,' Layla says, no happier about the intrusion than the little girl.

Sahar lays a plate of watermelon, apples and small cucumbers on the bed beside them, eyeing all the gold laid out in rows. Little Layla picks up a cucumber and takes a bite so large that she is barely able to close her mouth. Her mother tells her to mind her manners. Sahar stands rather awkwardly for a few moments, says, right then, and leaves with an embarrassed smile.

The little girl takes another bite, bigger than the first.

‘Do you want some Khalé?’

‘Nothing for me.’

Layla looks at the photo again. Amir is calling to her. It was taken just after they had played a game of volleyball, the first time that she had been away with her family for a summer by the Caspian Sea. They are all there in the photo; Baba, the wives, her half-siblings, and standing behind her, close enough that she could still remember his warm breath against the back of her neck, Amir.

‘So, you didn’t live with the rest of the family?’ The little girl says between mouthfuls. Layla had thought that little Layla had lost interest.

‘No, I lived with my mother in Tabriz. I was eight years old, older than you, when I first met the rest of the family. We spent every summer in Ramsar.’

Three

It was the summer of 1934; the year that Persia was renamed Iran by Reza Shah. In Ramsar, the grand hotel was still a year from completion. In Tabriz floods engulfed the land in the height of summer.

I don't want to go. I don't see why I have to go. I want to stay here with you.

Her mother sighed, Layla wouldn't let up and Farah was weary. Her fingers ached and she couldn't manipulate the threads in the same way. The light in the room was dim despite the midday sun. It's not the light dear Farah.

You will love it when you get there, Layla.

But I won't love it as much as being here with you.

What? Of course, you will, with all your siblings to play with? Better than being here with your boring old Maman.

I don't want to go Maman, what if they hate me?

Nobody is going to hate you. Enough now Layla. Baba will be here soon. He won't want to hear talk like this.

I want to stay here with you.

The summer will be over before you realise.

Later that evening, long after the sun turned the sky copper orange and sank into the mountains, a sleepy Layla, hand clutched tightly to her mother's in the darkness, made her way up the narrow walkway to the road. She felt the unusual mix of apprehension and excitement as she carried her half-empty suitcase. The car would meet them at the top of the road; the pathway to their house was barely wide enough for a vehicle and there was nowhere for it to turn around, as Baba discovered the hard way. They reached the top of the hill as the lights of the car came around the bend.

When they'd first discussed visiting Ramsar, Baba tried to convince Farah to come too but he didn't push too hard. He hadn't forgotten how the spirit drained from her delicate face in Tehran; he didn't want to see that again. He had been so upset with his other wives; he knew they were behind her heartache. But Farah would say nothing other than, who can blame them?

The car came to a halt and the driver got out to open the door for Baba. Layla could barely see her father's face in the darkness. He reached down and took the suitcase from her; it was only then that she realised how heavy it was. The driver opened the rear door and Layla climbed inside. Babak moved towards his wife.

No time for tea my darling? He asked, reaching a hand to Farah's cheek.

I have packed a flask for you.

She handed him a basket and a small tea urn. Her mother leant into the car so that her face was level with Layla's and her rough fingers brushed the hair away from her daughter's face. Baba placed the basket alongside the small case.

There's enough food in here to feed us for a week my love.

Farah had filled the basket with bread, still warm from the oven, honey, pistachios, pomegranates, and dates. Baba closed the door on Layla and guided Farah away from the car.

Layla could see her father leaning close to her mother's ear and the slight nod of her mother's head. And then Baba did something that she had never seen before, he reached out and pulled his wife into his arms. Farah laid her cheek against his chest, her face turned towards the car but Layla couldn't make out her features in the darkness.

When they finally drove away; Layla waved at her mother from the rear window, but all she could see was the wispy fabric of her mother's white chador floating in the moonlight.

Layla puts the pictures to one side, takes off her headscarf and lets down her hair. It's grown long again; her hair was always prolific.

'Can I brush it?' the little girl asks.

'Of course.'

The little girl fetches the brush from the dressing table. Amir had also liked to brush her hair. He'd spend hours teasing out the tangles, you can brush it harder, she often said, but he wouldn't, he would carry on brushing it as gently.

Layla's tired. She woke early, as she does every day, for prayer. For many years the same ritual but only ever in the morning, she didn't pray the other times that she was meant to. When dawn breaks, she lays out her mat, placing the small taupe-coloured prayer stone facing east. She covers herself with her chador, kneels, no matter the stiffness in knees, and begins her chant. The words of prayer are spoken in Arabic, she doesn't know what they mean but it doesn't really matter. She doesn't really know who or what God she's praying to, sometimes it is the universe, other times it's mother nature, mostly it's a spiritual being that she believes exists everywhere and deep inside her. Every day, she prays for them all, her family that are alive around her, and then

she lists the names of everyone who's gone, blessing and remembering them in turn, Maman, Baba, Jahan her husband, Ramin her son. And she prayed for Amir.

When the little girl is done, Layla leans back until her head reaches the pillow. Little Layla leaves the jewellery in a pile and lays out her colouring paper again.

'Are you going to sleep Auntie?'

'Maybe for a little while. How about you, do you want to rest before the party?'

'No. I only sleep in the afternoon when Maman makes me. But I'll stay here and stop anyone upsetting you.'

Layla closes her eyes with a gentle smile on her lips. Little Layla runs her chubby fingers over the creases and crevices in the old woman's face.

It hadn't taken long for Layla to fall asleep in her father's car. The night sky was the colour of ink and, other than a delicate coating of stars, the headlamps were the only light in the blackness. They bumped along for a while until they reached a stretch of road that was smooth. Baba spoke in gentle whispers to the driver.

I like that he is modernising Persia, don't you?

Layla leant sideways until her head rested on the suitcase. It smelt of mothballs.

I don't like to say, sir.

Go on, you are free to talk to me. You know that. Are you not happy with the changes he is making to the country?

It's too much.

In what way?

The driver didn't answer.

You must admit that the roads are better. Baba wasn't giving up.

Yes Haj-agma.

And it's not a bad thing that he wants children to go to school is it? Why shouldn't everyone be educated? I think everyone should be able to read.

Layla's mother couldn't read or write.

Not every job requires you to read, sir. And all this with the hijab...why does he comment on what women should wear? It's a matter for God not for any man, King or otherwise.

Baba had known better than to question God.

He is giving women a choice, Baba had said instead, except one year later the Shah abolished the veil altogether.

The mullahs say that he is against God. He made theology students serve in the army. They are men of God. Not of war. Why he is spending all our money on an army?

Babak had thought about that. He didn't think it was smart for the Shah to make military service compulsory for theology students. It wasn't wise to make adversaries of the clerics; the people of Persia revered religion, so the clerics wielded power and the Shah was arrogant to court them as enemies. Baba sighed in the darkness. Religion and politics. Theology and monarchy. The contradictions didn't bode well for the future, no matter how much he liked what the Shah was doing for the country.

But Babak couldn't possibly know the extent of this foreshadowing, and how the reverberations of that time would echo over the decades until 1979 when a grey-bearded Ayatollah would wipe out centuries of monarchy.

When Baba spoke again, he wanted to lighten the mood.

Did you hear this talk that he is going to change our country's name to Iran? We are Persians. We will only ever be the Persians of Cyrus the Great.'

The driver laughed.

Yes, we are always going to be Persians no matter who tells us otherwise.

Layla wondered what Maman would think about the conversation. She believed in God and in the Shah.

Soon the men were chatting about other things like the new motorcar that her father had his eye on and Layla drifted off to the sound of their soft voices.

Four

Layla momentarily wakes when she hears her granddaughter-in-law barking acerbic orders at the caterers. Mischa had been in charge since she moved in, sometimes Layla forgets that it is her house at all. Lying there, she thinks about what will happen to her home when she is gone. They will probably knock the villa down and replace it with some monstrosity. That's what everyone was doing. All over Tehran, Layla's life was being wiped out; she had stopped visiting places out of nostalgia because they were long gone, replaced now with the sadness of memories. Her father's house was now a shopping mall, her first home with Jahan, a sushi restaurant. Even the villas in Ramsar had vanished, gone were the wisteria and pomegranate trees, the butterfly filled orchard and the rose-garden that her father had planted. No more larks. She hadn't been back for decades. Maryam had sold it a long time ago; she sold everything.

It wasn't until the late evening that they arrived in Ramsar. They had driven straight until sunrise and then the driver had pulled the car underneath a row of poplar trees and laid out a blanket. Baba carried Maman's packed food and began to lay it out. Layla found a spot away behind the trees so she could relieve herself. Baba spread honey on to the flat bread and rolled it up into a tube so that Layla would find it easier to eat and the men sat drinking the now lukewarm tea. Soon they were on their way but the heat was intense. No air was coming through the windows.

By late morning they were in Zanjan; Baba decided they should stay until the searing heat subsided and that would be hours. He knew the town well, he often stopped there when he travelled from Tehran to Tabriz, and he told Layla that there was a place near the local bazaar that served excellent kebab. The driver laid out the blanket next to the car again, after he had covered the vehicle with an old sheet, and stretched out. He was asleep within moments. Layla put on the thin cardigan her mother had knitted her but Baba took her arms back out of the sleeves.

You don't need this Leli.

But Maman says, I shouldn't have bare arms in front of strangers.

Maman wouldn't mind.

He took her hand and they started out towards the town. She walked with a smile; it was the first time she had held Baba's hand. In town, after her stomach was full, Layla stretched out on the wooden bench in the restaurant and closed her eyes. Baba drew her towards him so that her head was resting on his lap. Her breath grew heavy as she listened to the whir of the fans and Baba would swat away an occasional fly when it buzzed too close to her ears. She couldn't remember how long she slept but when they made their way back towards the car, the air was notably cooler.

They arrived in Ramsar in darkness. They pulled into a narrow road, and through a walled off area; the compound contained three adjacent villas.

Which one is your house, Baba?

They are all my houses, Leli.

When the car stopped, the door of the smallest villa opened and in the dim light, Layla could make out a silhouette of a woman.

We will be staying in this one.

Baba took her hand and made his way towards the opened door. He greeted the women with open and warm affection, but not quite the way he was with Maman.

Layla, this is Foroogh.

Salam Foroogh-khanoom.

Salam Layla, come in, come in.

Layla held on tightly to her father's hand. Foroogh leant down, far more nimble than her hunched shoulders would suggest, and removed Layla's shoes. She took the girl's hand from her father and led her to a bedroom. There was a single white bed, and a small pink wardrobe.

This is your room Layla-dear. This is your bed.

I sleep with my mother... I thought I would be with Baba.

By mentioning her mother, Layla was reminded of how far away Maman was, and instantly felt the tears that she had kept at bay throughout the journey.

I tell you what. If you don't like your own room, I have plenty of space in mine, and a bed that's big enough for another little person.

Later when Layla was lying alone, thinking of her mother, she let those tears of homesickness finally fall, until in the darkness, she could hear her father's voice in the room next to hers and his tone began to soothe her.

Thank you for showing her kindness.

I was so unkind to her mother, and it saddens me to think of how we behaved. God forgive me.

Farah doesn't blame you.

I blame myself.

I'm sorry for all the pain I caused you, my love.

Many men wouldn't be sorry at all. I understand Babak, we were young when we got married. Our parents thought we would be a good match.

And we are, I trust you more than anyone. You are my family... you are like a sister to me.

I understood about Akram...

I asked you if you wanted a divorce...I put the house in your name. You know I would always look after you.

And what would people say of me if we were divorced? My father would have insisted I go home, and what of our daughter? Her husband?

I know. I'm sorry.

I wasn't jealous of Farah. If anything, I felt sorry for her...and she was sweet. But I did nothing to stop the cruelty...I think I was tired of being supplanted by younger versions of myself.

There is only one you, my dearest Foroogh.

God forgive me, I'll make it up to Farah through Layla.

Thank you.

Layla learned that night that Farah was Babak's third wife. It was the last thought she had before she finally drifted off.

The following morning it was the heat of the sun streaming through the sheer nets at the window that woke her and she was startled to see the face of a boy looming over her. He was studying her as though she was a specimen of, perhaps, one of the butterflies she later discovered he liked to catch and study. His eyes were so dark that they looked black. She was about to scream when he introduced himself.

I'm Amir. I know you are Layla, we've been waiting for you.

'Mamany.'

Ali is on the bed beside her, holding a cup of tea. Little Layla had left her colour pencils and paper on the floor, and had disappeared. Ali smiles down at her. She smiles back. Her only grandson, indulged, spoiled, prone to terrible bouts of arrogance, but kind and endearing too. The sun rises and sets with grandmother, he often said, he meant it.

‘The workmen are going to be in the garden putting a hardwood surface over the pool. I just wanted to tell you because there is going to be a lot of banging and I didn’t want you to worry.’

His voice is slightly raised when he speaks to his grandmother lately. She smiles, even Ali has fallen into the trap of assumptions about her. She’s still in there, the same Layla. The body has changed, the face is older, but her mind is as sharp as it had always been.

You’re far too clever for the rest of them, Leli.

Layla’s father made a ceremony of introducing her to the family; they stood in the entrance hall of main villa, the one that was occupied by her other stepmother, Akram, and her half-sisters. Layla was introduced to each of the adults in turn – not that she would remember any of their names even after the many summers in Ramsar – there was at least twenty of them, and she awkwardly took the hands that were held out to her, while her cheeks grew visibly hot. Amir, who could sense her discomfort, stood close by, a reassuring presence even though they had only just met. Then there were half-sisters; the twins Marjan and Mojgan were the eldest, and impossible to tell apart, and the youngest, Maryam, who, even to Layla’s immature eye, was quite beautiful. The sisters regarded her with a polite aloofness, careful to mind their manners in front of Baba. When the group disbanded, with promise of lunch in Baba’s favourite restaurant, Baba told his daughters to look after their younger sibling. However as soon as he left, they also disappeared. Amir took her hand; do you want to learn to fish?

Day after day the children played. Running as fast as they could, their feet sinking into the sand, until their calves gave way and one of them would tumble. Amir irritated and equally impressed that Layla could run so quickly, almost as fast as him, Layla mindful to keep pace but never to overtake. Holding their breath for as long as they could underwater until the salt stung their eyes and the saline burned their throats. Climbing the tallest tree, the twigs and offshoots thinly slicing their skin, their legs and arms full of scratches. Night after night, the sleep of exhaustion.

Layla had been in Ramsar for a couple of weeks when she first heard her half-sisters mocking her. It was the same day that Amir had finally shown her his picture box of butterflies; he pulled it out from under his bed and laid it on the mattress with care. Layla didn’t touch the box, because Amir had given her strict instructions not to, but at times her face was so close to the butterflies that her breath steamed up the glass. He told her the names of each specimen, an expert lepidopterist.

One day, I will paint a picture of your favourite one, she said.

They decided to go outside and hunt for butterflies in the walled garden where the abundant flowers enticed all sorts of creatures. They hadn't been there long before they heard the voices of her sisters, so they quickly found a place to hide, hoping that the girls would bypass the garden – they were always hiding from her sisters – except the girls headed straight there and within moments discovered Amir. Layla had wanted to warn him that his feet were poking out from under the bush, but it was too late.

Where's your little dahati? Maryam said. Layla had bitten her lip when she heard them calling her a village idiot. Although her sisters were always polite, Layla could sense that they didn't like her. She could see the way they all watched at her when they thought she wasn't looking.

Baleh, your little donkey, one of the twins said. She speaks funny, from the other twin.

Maman says she's a Turk. Maryam again.

Layla hadn't heard that before but it dawned on her then that she did speak two languages, Farsi and Tabriz's own language. Perhaps she was a Turk, but didn't everyone always make jokes about Turks and their stupidity?

Maman says that your little Layla's mother is a lowly carpet weaver. Maryam was not giving in. Layla was about to come out of her hiding place, and ask Maryam what exactly was wrong with her mother being a carpet weaver when she was the best in Tabriz. Amir's words stopped her.

She's not my anything, Amir said.

She listened as her sisters continued to mock her and silently willed them to all leave. They must have to go soon or they would be late. Once a week, they'd all traipse to the beach; the staff would set up the parasols and lay out the picnic, and then they would be given the rest of the day off. There were so many people that Layla and Amir had to walk quite some way to be away from them all. Last time they started to build a castle and a fort; it had taken them so long that the tide came in and washed most of it away before they were finished. Just when Layla couldn't bear it any longer, her muscles cramping from being in the squat position so long, her step-mother's voice called from outside the garden.

Mahnaz, Maryam, Mojgan, where are you?

Layla once asked Foroogh why Akram had the biggest villa; Foroogh had said something about wanting to feel important. Layla didn't really understand, she shrugged her shoulders and continued to colour a sketch that Foroogh had drawn for her.

Mahnaz, Maryam, Mojgan, come now. And Amir, if you are with them nephew, you come too.

Her voice was getting angrier. Layla heard them all run off but she waited a while longer before she crawled out from under the bush, scraping her knees on the stones and shingle, and feeling the sting of every graze. She was alone in the walled garden.

Where's Amir?

It was the first time since Layla arrived that Foroogh had seen her without Amir; she knew something must have happened. She studied the little girl's face; her cheeks were so red, it looked as though she was sunburned. Layla shrugged in answer to her question; Foroogh fetched her a glass of water.

Amir had always been bored during the summer because he was the only boy. And then Layla came. She wasn't like the other girls, she wasn't afraid of the tall trees or racing on the beach. She had even started to learn to swim. Not complaining about the coldness of the water or the strength of the current. She sat with him when he cast his fishing rod in the sea and helped put the worms onto the hook. He had shown her his butterfly collection, she hadn't moved at all when he explained all the different species to her. He was even teaching her to play volleyball; the adults wouldn't let them into the evening game until Layla could at least set a ball and hit it over the net.

Layla and Majnun, Amir's father nicknamed the children.

Who are they? Layla asked Foroogh one evening, as she climbed into bed. Foroogh told her about Nizami Ganjavi, the great poet, and his epic poem of the young sweethearts.

Layla and Qays were from different tribes and became bonded from the moment that they set eyes upon each other at school. They remained loyal to the other throughout time, even though they were kept apart. Qays expressed his love of the young Layla through heart-breaking poetry and everyone thought he was quite mad. They called him Majnun. Layla's father would never allow his daughter to marry someone senseless, and sadly, their separation did drive Qays quite mad. Layla withered away until she eventually died of a broken heart. It was only then that Majnun was set free.

What happened to him?

He died as well and joined Layla.

That's not a good story.

But their love was the greatest and purest. No one could break the bond. That's why Nizami wrote about them and created such beautiful poetry.

Layla had looked deep in thought for a time, while Foroogh tried to remember some lines from the verse that she had memorised as a child. She would ask Babak to see if he could send

for the book so she could read it to Layla in the evenings. Layla finally said, we are not Layla and Majnun...Amir is not at all mad; she turned her head into the pillow and closed her eyes. Foroogh laughed softly as she left the room.

Layla with her wide forlorn eyes; Foroogh wondered what had happened between Layla and Majnun. She had grown fond of the little girl and having someone to look after rekindled a sense of purpose in her. Foroogh had found life wanting since her only child had moved to Ahvaz. She hadn't even met her grandchildren; her only connection now was a brief letter that she received from her daughter occasionally.

It took quite some cajoling before Layla told Foroogh what her sisters had said. It didn't surprise Foroogh. She'd have a word with Akram to rein in her ghastly children. Foroogh might not be close to Akram but she knew that Akram would listen. Akram always maintained a civil regard for Foroogh, even if it wasn't genuine. When there were just two wives, Akram took consolation that she was younger and more desirable. Farah changed everything; their husband's attention was elsewhere. Akram didn't have the status of the first wife nor the affection of the newest bride and her resentment was not just directed at Farah, it extended to Foroogh, as if somehow, she was to blame for their husband's wandering interest. Outwardly Akram displayed a great deference, but both women knew it was far from what she felt.

Foroogh took Layla's hand.

You're far too clever for the rest of them Leli, ignore them.

Is it all right if we don't go to the beach today?

Yes of course. And what should we do instead, bake, read, sketch?

I don't mind.

Perhaps we could go to the farm; Baba forgot to pick up the eggs this morning when he fetched the milk.

She would have to ask the driver to swap his afternoon off and accompany them. There was still no reaction from young Layla.

They have baby chicks, Foroogh said, you'll be able to hold them.

It was the first smile Foroogh had seen on Layla since she had come back from playing with Amir.

Can I really?

Yes...Shall we invite Amir?

No.

By early afternoon Layla had forgotten about her sisters in the walled garden. She stopped thinking about what they would all be doing on the beach, or whether Amir would miss her. She

played with the animals in the farm: petted the lambs, cupped the chicks gently in her hands and chased the dog, and he, in turn, chased her. She ate *koloocheb*, a speciality from the northern region, a soft cake-like cookie, with a centre of crushed dates, walnuts, cinnamon and cardamom. She told Foroogh it was her favourite; Foroogh told her that she'd buy a box for Layla to take home at the end of the summer. The farmer gave her a spoonful of fresh cream; Layla sat at the wooden table in the kitchen and licked it clean.

Meanwhile on the beach in front of the villa, Amir waited. He stood looking towards the villas hoping somehow it would conjure up Layla, even though he had been told she was gone for the afternoon. Why hadn't she told him? Where had she gone? Why hadn't she invited him?

Don't worry my boy, she will be back for dinner.

Uncle Babak ruffled his hair. Why would he say such a thing? As if Amir cared when Layla would be back. He went to the shore, picked up some pebbles, and threw them so they skimmed off the water's edge, counting how many times he could get them to bounce, to show that he wasn't bothered at all. But he soon grew bored of that — especially when the pebble bounced six times, which was a record, and there was no Layla to be impressed — and Amir went to sit on the blanket that his father had laid out on the sand. He thought that Baba was asleep under the straw hat that rested on his face.

Why don't you fish? Why don't you swim?

Hossein asked, like it was a bother to have Amir sitting there, as he was, quietly contemplating the waves. It made him feel even more sullen.

Why don't you play with your cousins?

Amir looked over at the girls. He hadn't gone near them after speaking with them this morning in the walled garden. And then he thought about Layla, hiding, listening to everything they said. Was that the reason she was gone — because of his idiot cousins? It didn't make much sense that she would not take him with her; it was nothing to do with him. He rested his head on his knees and wrapped his arms around his legs. His cheeks grew hot and he became more despondent. He had been angry with Layla at first and now he just wanted her to come home.

That evening, Foroogh declined dinner with the family. She told Babak that Layla was tired and that it had been a long day. Babak knew that something was up with his youngest child and he suspected it had something to do with his other daughters. But his grandmother always said adults should not interfere in the relationships of children; let them sort it out amongst themselves.

Foroogh cooked the fish that Baba had brought her from the fishermen that morning; Layla sat with a pen and paper and wrote out the alphabet. Foroogh recited some words for Layla to write.

You are a clever little girl.

Foroogh put her arms around Layla and gave her a squeeze, which reminded Layla of her mother, and she felt sad that she hadn't thought of her for a while.

Five

The banging stops momentarily. Layla walks to the window and looks out on her garden below. The pool is now almost covered. She sees them there from all those many years ago, her son, Ramin, jumping from the highest part of the garden wall, straight into the pool. Her nephew Sam laughing from the water. The boys had been born weeks apart and they were as close as twins, inseparable, much to the despair of Maryam. Sometimes Sam told Layla that he preferred her to his mother. *You mustn't say that*, Layla always said in return. Sam would stay with them for days on end, until his Maryam sent Amir to fetch him. He would sound the buzzer and Layla would look at him from the window. He never came up. She would wave and he would give her a gentle, pained smile that would always make her a little sad.

Layla remembers in the height of all those summers, when the boys turned so dark because she'd given up telling them to get out of the sun, she'd bring them pistachio and rosewater flavoured ice-cream, served in dishes her husband had brought her from a business trip to France. She would sit in the shade by the roses and watch as the sun would instantly dry their wet bodies.

Ali wanders out towards the workman, and she remembers him as a little boy, splashing around in the pool with Ramin. She remembers Ali being stung by a bee, howling for her to make it better.

You need to stop picking the petals my love.

The roses are turning brown; they aren't watering them enough. She remembers her husband out there every evening watering the flowers, even when he had grown sick he didn't stop. He had the rose garden planted for her, and as long as Jahan looked after the flowers, all would be well with them too. When Ramin was a young child, he would drag a chair over to Jahan, and they would sit side by side. Jahan always put out two chairs in the evening, long after they lost their boy. He'd sit by the flowerbed, waving his arm back and forth, until Layla fetched him in. Except that last year of course, the petals faded much like his health; when the last petal had fallen, nobody had the heart to tend the garden.

The workmen are now weaving lights among the trees.

'Be careful of the roses,' Ali shouts, 'they were planted by my grandfather.'

He looks up at the window then and sees his grandmother looking down into the garden. She waves at him.

The roses would be there all the while she is there and after she is gone, what would it matter?

The morning after Layla had heard her sisters in the walled garden, she woke to find Amir having breakfast with Foroogh. He smiled when he saw her, such a delighted, infectious smile that she could do nothing other than smile back. Layla and Majnun.

*“They were children and did not realise what they were drinking;
no wonder they became drunk,
He who is drunk for the first time, becomes deeply drunk indeed.
And heavily falls he who has never had a fall before.”*

The rest of the summer they spent in the shadow of each other, where did one begin and the other one end?

Aloft in a tree, one that she had climbed by following the imprint of his step, angling her feet the way he did, she could not look down. Instead she focussed on his smiling face and somehow his eyes rested the shiver in her limbs. They spied on the passers-by, who had no idea that they were being watched; they listened to words they should not have heard, their whispered laughter blotted out by the breeze. The summer was drawing to a close and she was leaving.

I am your Majnun, he told her.

Then I am your Layla, she said.

He had leaned forward and pulled her to him among the branches and twigs.

*“He was drowned in the ocean of love before he knew that there was such a thing.
He had already given his heart to Layla before he understood what he was giving away...
and Layla? She fared not better.
A fire had been lit in both – and each reflected the other.”*

Layla looks out into the garden, alight with memories, watching people preparing for a party, perhaps her last party. Sometimes she wonders why she had lived so long, when everyone else

was gone. But there had been times when Layla thought her life was over. Even from that first trip to Ramsar.

Layla's father hired a yacht one day that summer and they had spent the day in the middle of the Caspian. Even Foroogh came, although she sat inside for most of the day. Akram wore a straw hat with a wide rim and looked as glamorous as the film stars that her sisters liked. Layla was leaning over the edge, her fingertips trailing in the water, her eyes focussed on a shoal of fish. The next moment, she was in the depths of the sea. She tried to remember the strokes that Amir had taught her but the current was too strong. She swallowed mouthfuls of water that was so salty it burned her throat. Then she stopped fighting, the sunbeams faded until they blackened out.

The wooden hardness of the boat's deck scorched her back as she coughed up water. Baba's face, above hers, was drawn and fretful; someone was thanking God. And Amir was dripping wet in his clothes; he hadn't even hesitated, the only one that was a strong enough swimmer to jump in after her. She remembered the hands pushing her into the sea but those hands remained forever unidentified.

'Layla-dear the guests will be arriving in a couple of hours, Ali wants to know whether you need help with getting ready?'

Mischa walks straight to the wardrobe and examines the rows of chadors and headscarves. She also sees the clothes that she can hardly believe Layla would ever have worn. All the top designer labels and some of them untouched; it isn't the first time Mischa has seen them. When she first starting dating Ali, he used to wait until Layla was out and then sneak Mischa inside. One day, after they had spent most of the afternoon in Ali's bed, she asked him if she could see the rest of the villa. He hadn't wanted them to go into his grandmother's room, but those were the days that he didn't like to say no to Mischa either. She had opened the wardrobe and seen the clothes.

Ali, these clothes are beautiful. Why hasn't she worn any of them?

Ali had shrugged his shoulders.

Where did they come from?

Paris mainly.

She went to Paris?

My grandfather travelled the world on business. She wouldn't go with him so he said he would buy her the world and bring it to her.

Why didn't she wear them?

Mamany always said that she was a simple woman with simple tastes.

Ali had started to laugh.

What's so funny?

Mamany is anything but simple.

It's difficult to see Layla as anyone other than the old lady that sits there now, with her papery skin and hunching shoulders. If Mischa were smaller she would have gladly worn some of the outfits. Fashion had its inevitable cycles. She feels sad that they are all sitting there, unworn, unappreciated.

Mischa turns towards Layla and back to the wardrobe. How sad the effects of time, but hadn't she seen it? The changing texture of her skin. The difference in her hair, she'd once been able to tie it back with impatient disregard. There was a time that Mischa couldn't care less because she looked lovely anyway. The whimsical nature of youth, so short and unappreciated, but once gone, forever chasing its shadow. And one day, I will become Layla.

'I have the love of my family. Enduring love.'

Mischa startles at the sound of Layla's voice. Layla speaks so seldom these days and now she can read Mischa's thoughts.

'Family is what is important,' Layla says.

And by way of agreement, Mischa's hand inadvertently touches her stomach. Mischa hasn't told Ali yet; she can't quite work out what is holding her back. Neither of them had really desired a child, despite being pressured from all sides of the family. And it had seemed that they wouldn't have one even if they wanted to, not without intervention anyway. They had stopped worrying about being careful for a long time. And then this, she could hardly believe it. In fact, she only believed it when she went for the scan because there were no other symptoms. She didn't feel sick, or radiant, her body had barely changed. The only sign was that her clockwork cycle had stopped.

'I have something for you.'

Mischa watches as Layla walks to the chest and pulls open the bottom drawer. How had she not noticed the fluidity and suppleness of her movement? She realises that she hasn't noticed much at all where Layla is concerned. Layla sits on the bed and pats the mattress beside her. When Mischa sits, Layla hands her a box, tied with a lemon-coloured ribbon.

'I have been saving it for a special occasion.'

Layla's voice is assured and clear. Had that always been so?

'What special occasion Layla-dear?' Mischa doesn't shout.

Layla smiles. Mischa doesn't know how but Layla knows. Had it been the simple touch of her hand to her stomach? She is about to panic and then she stops. It's a relief to share the secret even if it's unspoken. Mischa opens the box that Layla has given her and inside is a charm bracelet.

'It's a birthstone for each member of our family. Jahan, Ramin, God rest their souls, one for you and Ali. Now you can add to it.'

Mischa's throat feels dry at the sight of the ruby; she's represented, even though she'd treated Layla with indifference. She leans forward and hugs Layla, the frail, bony frame. She can't ever remember embracing her like that before.

'It's such a lovely gift. I'm so glad you are here with us Layla-dear.'

In that moment, Mischa means it.

Jahan had put it on her wrist on their fifth anniversary. It wasn't the finest piece of jewellery that he'd bought her over the years but it was the dearest. She wore it always until one day the clasp had come free and she lost it in the thicket of bushes in her garden. It was gone, only found when the leaves of summer fell and the gardener had seen something shining against the earth. That was the summer of tears; losing the bracelet came to symbolise all that she had ever lost, Maman, Baba, her innocence, her love. Jahan had tried to console her with the promise of an identical one, and she could not find the words to explain how it could never be replaced.

When the gardener unearthed it, she had been so elated that she found herself in tears again; this time Jahan rolled his eyes and said, I live in a mad house. The jewellers replaced the clasp, added a safety chain but she would only wear it on special occasions, and each time it was on her wrist, her fingertips would absentmindedly brush the chain.

Layla misses her husband terribly. She only knew the extent of her love when he was gone. At times, she can almost feel him pressing his lips to her forehead or her cheek as he had always done, forever unassuming, never demanding, blending into their life in a way that he was barely noticed until he wasn't there at all. She had come to love him. He told her she would, even though she hadn't believed him. He had given her hope, when all she had wanted was an end to it all.

Layla lies on the top of her bed and closes her eyes. The light in the room has changed; the sun had begun to lower in the sky. The guests would be there soon.

'I'm tired,' Layla says to the empty room. She feels fingertips brush her cheek.

'We are waiting for you,' Jahan says. Layla opens her eyes but there is no one there.

This time when she closes her eyes it's Amir she remembers, however not how he was in the end; they are in the sand dunes in Ramsar. He is touching her cheek; his lips are on hers, softly at first and then more passionate. His tongue finding her tongue, his breathing heavy, his fingers probing the top of her spine and then he is crushing her until she can no longer breathe.

You are mine, he says over and over again. I want to tell everyone and we can be married soon. She pulls away. Wait. She was nearly fifteen but he was impatient because they had agreed to wait one more year.

Her world came to revolve around the summers in Ramsar the same way the earth moved around the sun. And their childhood love grew with them into adolescence and then it was all-consuming. It wasn't fitting in those days for boys and girls to behave the way they did, everywhere together to the point that they didn't know where one of them started and the other ended, but somehow everyone accepted it of them because they were Layla and Majnun.

When Layla arrived home after that first summer, she wasn't the same as the child that left. Farah felt it too; Layla didn't need Farah quite so much. Farah felt despondent; she approached each subsequent summer pretending to be swept up in the excitement that Layla felt, with a sense of wretchedness. Every time Layla came back from Ramsar, she seemed even more refined. Her daughter was clever, her head always buried in books and not just Persian novels either. There were British, French and Russian authors. Sometimes Farah would pick up a book, open the page and marvel at all the words written there, proud that her daughter could decode the script, in awe that the black patterns had meaning to her. Other times Farah grew angry; what difference would it make that Layla could read? How would it help her when she finally settled down with a family of her own? How would the books help her be a better wife or better mother? And yet, had Farah ever really wanted those things? She'd only got married because she was tired of her father's demands of weaving.

Farah feared that Layla would grow bored of Tabriz and want to live in Tehran, the great sprawling city, with too much noise and bustle. She hated Tehran, where people took tea at tables, talked kindly to someone's face only to whisper cruelty when the back was turned. She despised the modern boutiques and that the streets were filled the motorcars, the women that walked around without hijab, wore make-up and fashioned themselves in clothes that the Europeans wore, or worse still, styled themselves like American starlets. Everyday, during her time in Tehran, Farah was miserable, even though her husband bought her the best loom and most expensive silk threads. One afternoon when Farah could bear it no longer, she woke her husband who was taking his usual afternoon siesta, and announced that she was moving back to Tabriz.

The year that Layla was thirteen, a week before Layla was due to leave for the summer, Farah asked her outright not to go to Ramsar. Farah blamed the threat of war, said that the British and Russians didn't like the undertone of the relationship between Iran and Germany. Words that Farah had picked up when Layla read the newspaper aloud in the evenings. Farah even started to teach Layla to weave in the hope that it would keep her there that summer.

There isn't a war in Ramsar, Layla had said. Layla's tone was not quite cold, but she realised how dismissive she had been, and said please don't worry Maman, the summer will be over before you know it. Her mother needn't have worried, Layla's trip was cut short that year and it was the first year that Layla was pleased to get home to Tabriz.

Every year the journey to Ramsar felt longer. Baba had a new motorcar that was apparently faster than the previous one but it didn't seem so as they drove. Layla couldn't wait to see Foroogh; they always shared a late supper on the day she arrived. After they talked for a while, an exhausted Layla went to bed, knowing that at the break of dawn Amir would be there as he had been each summer since her first trip.

It was the summer of 1939, just before the start of the second world war; the world was about to be in turmoil, hers already was.

Each other summer she would sit with Amir that first morning where they'd spend the first twenty minutes barely speaking. Foroogh would wander in from the kitchen and serve more tea, saying something along the lines of "Amir, why don't you tell Layla about the fish you caught on Monday," or "Layla why don't you tell Amir about the new book you're reading." It didn't take long before they were back to how they always were, Layla and Majnun, crazy about one another and inseparable. But that summer was different. By nine o'clock, having been up since five, Layla finally gave in and ate breakfast.

Amir didn't come, even after breakfast was long finished. She thought perhaps he was ill; Foroogh told her that it was more likely he was sleeping. She told Layla that Amir was a young man now and that young men often slept late in the morning when they didn't have to work. Foroogh reassured Layla that she would see him at lunch; Baba always arranged a family meal in his favourite restaurant along the seafront on that first day. Layla reluctantly accepted that it would be a few more hours before she saw Amir again and it felt like very long hours.

When they finally approached the restaurant, Layla tried to appear calm. But it wasn't fooling Foroogh, who took Layla's hand, to still the tremble in Layla's fingers. Layla kept wetting her lips, and her eyes darted around, which made her feel even more apprehensive, until she decided to focus on the ground.

Inside Amir was the first out of the chair, hugging Layla like she was his lifeline but there was something different about the embrace. He was fifteen now, and he barely looked like the same boy of last summer. He'd grown tall; his face full of stubble where he hadn't bothered to shave, when had he started? His shoulders were broad and his scrawny body had filled out. When Amir let go of her and Layla finished greeting all their friends and relatives; Foroogh and

Layla went to sit by Baba. Layla had assumed that Amir would follow them, like every other year, and ask the family to make a space for him next to Layla, instead he made his way back towards her sisters. She sat with the menu held up high so that no one could see how red her cheeks had become.

She tried hard not to look in his direction and when her eyes did settle on him; he was either laughing or engaged in conversation with her sisters. She could see that his attention was mainly aimed at Maryam. She felt an envy that she had never experienced before; her half-sister had grown up too. Layla had heard Baba tell Maman about the many suitors he was receiving for his daughter. In fact, Baba was rather keen on one young man, the son of a businessman who owned a number of gold shops in the bazaar. Maryam was beguiling; Layla watched the way her sister's eyes fluttered, she managed to look demure in one way, and seductive in another. Maryam caught sight of her younger sibling watching her and gave a half smile. Layla felt wretched and by the time they went home, she was exhausted. She fell asleep at six and didn't wake until the following morning.

Amir was already there when she came out for breakfast and for a time it felt that things were back to normal. They talked for two hours straight, planned a summer of volleyball, strolls at dusk, a visit to the hot springs; he promised to teach her a new swimming stroke that he'd learned called butterfly. She had laughed and said that they'd finally named a stroke in his honour. But then a silence fell upon them, he sipped his tea, she nibbled some bread, he smiled at her, she pushed her hair off her face. Amir stood up, told her that he would see her later. But later never came. It was a solitary summer; Layla did all the things they discussed but alone. Mostly she sketched; the beach, the butterflies, the grand hotel, the villas, the adults, Amir. She had so many sketches of him, that during their months apart she would take them out each evening and study them.

At times, Layla would be close enough to hear Amir fretting over whether Maryam was too hot, or hungry or entertained enough. She would watch them from a distance; Amir would wave at her with the same smile in his eyes that reminded her of the boy he used to be. Layla would wave back casually careful not to show that inside a piece of her was withering like the jasmine he used to pick for her.

Seven

Layla feels cold from lying so still. She shifts slightly, Jahan whispers that it's time for her to get ready for the party, that their grandson is waiting for her. She misses her husband. She tells him as much, late at night when it's dark outside, yet Tehran is always restless. And when Jahan doesn't answer, Layla makes it a point to remember one of their happy times. They had many. Tonight, her thoughts are not far from the Caspian, but when she thinks of Jahan she thinks of Chalous not Ramsar. Jahan suggested a trip to the north but neither of them had the heart to go back to Ramsar.

They were on the beach, watching Ramin running in and out of the sea, trying to escape the breaking waves.

Do you remember when you smiled at me as you collected shells? Jahan asked her.

I do, she said, and took his hand.

Jahan had always been there, in the mayhem of the family. Why had she noticed him on that particular day? Perhaps she could sense his kindness when she needed it the most.

They were all at the beach. Layla was dipping her feet into the shore, watching the waves break around her. Amir sat with her sisters; sometimes she could hear his laughter ride across the wind and skip around her.

Jahan watched her from the shadow of the parasol. He felt a sense of sadness as Layla walked along the shore stealing surreptitious glances towards his nieces and nephew. He didn't like them much; they were all too spoilt. Except perhaps Amir, who, although equally spoilt, had a degree of humility about him. But his nephew seemed distracted by his sister's children, which somehow disappointed Jahan. He had always found Amir and Layla's relationship endearing, little Layla and Majnun, as if somehow epic love did exist. Amir's current motivation was far less ethereal. It was normal of course. The boy was becoming a young man but Jahan was disappointed in Amir nevertheless. To Jahan it felt like Amir had discarded young Layla. He sighed. He couldn't fathom why it should bother him; he had never experienced the type of love that he suddenly felt whimsical about. With a cotton handkerchief, he wiped away the sweat from his forehead and wondered why he had agreed to go to the beach. It was too hot for him

but if he hadn't come to the beach, what else would he do? All his time was taken up with work, and life was beginning to slip past him. There was something about the family at dinner the previous evening, the way they interacted with each other, teasing but warm, that quite suddenly touched him. It wasn't that it was particularly unusual, most of the summer was the same, but he found himself watching them in a way that he hadn't before. When Jahan was asked if he would join them at the beach, he found himself hesitating rather than his usual refusal. Come on, you need to relax, his brother said. He had agreed, even though he knew that when he turned up at the beach dressed in his shirt and trousers, they would mock him. But his brother was right; he did need to relax. Or maybe he had agreed because he had seen how forlorn young Layla had been and it touched him then as it did now.

Amir walked towards them. Jahan could see his nieces watching Amir, with their heads closely knitted together, whispering behind raised hands, as though somehow the wind would carry their voices. They were up to something and Amir was in charge. Amir headed straight to Babak who, like Jahan, had his gaze directed at the shoreline.

'Babak-sir, we were talking, we were wondering whether it would be all right if we went to the cinema tonight. I will act as chaperone for the girls, if Mohammad takes us and waits outside. Perhaps if we go early, we can visit the new ice-cream parlour beforehand. They are showing *Gone with the Wind*.'

Babak pondered for a while, not taking his eyes from the shoreline.

'Are you taking all the girls?'

Amir looked over to his cousins, they were counting on him.

'Yes, the four of us.' Amir said, and nodded towards his cousins.

'What about Layla?' Jahan didn't know why the words slipped out of him.

Amir looked towards the shoreline. So, it turned out, Amir did know where Layla was after all.

'She's too young, uncle-dear.'

'She wasn't too young for the past five years Amir-dear,' Jahan said and then sighed. He really should stop talking and read the paper.

'Take the girls,' Babak said, 'Foroogh and I will take Layla out.'

Babak picked up the paper and began to read. The discussion was over.

Amir wandered back over to his cousins, but his eyes kept drifting towards Layla. She was picking up shells. She had lifted her dress at the hem so that she could carry them in her skirt. It seemed at that moment she sensed the eyes watching her as she looked up. But she did not look

towards Amir and her sisters. She looked straight at Jahan. And she smiled. He smiled back. He couldn't remember a time that she had ever looked directly at him nor him at her.

Layla went back to picking up her shells and Jahan looked over to Amir who was still watching her.

Layla wonders, as she often does when thinking of that summer, whether they all knew at the time how hurt she was; at thirteen she didn't realise her heart was broken. Baba always seemed to know what she was feeling; later she came to see that perhaps Baba had cut the summer short because he understood things more than she did. She was glad when her father told her they were going to Tabriz early. And just as she was leaving, Amir, her Majnun, was back. Had her love faltered then? What would have happened if the summer had turned out differently?

The day after the visit to the cinema, Amir woke late, with a feeling of hollowness. Even after breakfast, he felt empty. It was the first day this summer he hadn't woken with a sense of excitement over Maryam; the way she brushed against him, her feet seeking out his under the table, her fingertips grazing his arm. Last night, she talked of being the age of marriage; he was attentive to her but for different reasons. When the twins had gone to bed, they found some time alone and he was ready to promise her anything. But this morning, as the sun rose in another cloudless sky, he felt nothing. Some itches just need to be scratched, his father had joked with him a couple of days before. His father was gone now. He had business to tend to in Tehran, which actually meant his father was hankering after a game. Amir now shared the villa with Uncle Jahan, who, although never one for much conversation, seemed to sense Amir's restlessness.

'Maryam called for you earlier.'

Jahan didn't look up from the account ledger in front of him. It seemed to Amir that his uncle was always working, the antithesis of Amir's father. Thank God for my brother, his father would often say, Jahan has the brains for business. Amir wondered whether his father would also have the mind for business if he didn't focus all his time on gambling.

'I don't feel like going out today,' Amir said. He felt like going back to bed and staying there.

Jahan nodded, yet to look up from the ledger, then he seemed to pause. He looked across at his nephew who had started to head towards his room.

'By the way, Babak has to go to Tabriz tomorrow on urgent business.'

Amir stopped.

'Layla is going with him.'

'She's coming back though, right?'

'I don't think so. I think Babak will head straight back to Tehran.'

'But summer isn't over yet.'

In that moment Amir felt a heaviness about his limbs and suddenly breathless. He headed to his room, slumped down on his bed, and covered his face with his arms. He had barely seen her all summer and he suddenly missed her terribly. She had been the reason that he loved the summers in Ramsar; she was his best friend, his light... his love. And this year, he hadn't given her any mind. Majnun would not have treated his Layla that way.

*"You are like a butterfly, my friend,
which flutters around in the darkness,
searching for light.
Take care that you do not become a candle which,
crying bitterly,
consumes itself in its own grief."*

Layla spent the morning packing. She was keen to get back to her mother although she tried not to show Foroogh. For the past five years, Foroogh had looked after her every summer and each time they said goodbye, she knew that Foroogh would cry as soon as the car pulled away. This year, Foroogh seemed a little more frail; everyone around her seemed to be fading, and for Foroogh's sake Layla was sad to cut her trip short. Foroogh was packing a farewell picnic — she would take too much food as usual — at least the two of them could enjoy their last day together. Just before noon, Layla came out of her room to find Amir sipping tea in the living room with Foroogh. Layla opened her mouth, closed it again, and only managed a subdued hello, and only because she saw that Amir's eyes were red.

'What's the matter?' She asked, forthright.

He looked embarrassed.

'Nothing. I just came to see you.'

'Oh.'

'Would you like tea, Layla-dear?'

Foroogh was already heading to the kitchen before Layla answered. Layla sat down opposite Amir; he avoided looking at her.

‘Are you alright?’ Layla asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sick?’

‘No.’

‘What then?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Alright then.’

Layla turned her gaze to the window.

‘Why do you ask?’ Amir said, only because he didn’t want her to look away.

‘It looks like you’ve been crying,’ she said, matter-of-fact, she couldn’t care either way.

‘I heard that you are going home tomorrow.’

‘Yes. Baba has business in Tabriz so we decided that I’d go now to save him going twice.’

‘I wasn’t expecting you to leave so soon.’

Layla shrugged her shoulders.

‘What about the rest of the summer Layla?’

At that moment Foroogh came back into the room and set down the tray before Layla. She had brought in a fresh cream cake for them both. Amir might no longer be the boy of previous summers but Foroogh didn’t think him quite the man yet. He smiled and took a bite. Layla sipped her tea.

‘Why don’t you ask Babak to stay; you know he won’t say no to you...if that’s what you want.’

‘Why would I want to do that?’

Amir’s fingertips brushed the crumbs from his upper lip and Layla could see that he was beginning to sweat. It certainly wasn’t the heat because all the fans were on full blast and Foroogh had the coolest villa in the compound. Amir always sweated when he was nervous, upset or about to tell a lie; Layla wondered whether he had an argument with her sisters.

‘Do you want to do something today?’ he asked.

‘I’m sorry I can’t, I’m going on a picnic with Foroogh. It’s our last day together and we won’t see each other for a long time.’

The final words used to belong to them, at the end of the summer when they were morose at the prospect of parting for another year.

‘Darling, you can go with Amir.’

In that moment Foroogh felt sympathy for the boy even though most of the summer she had been quietly cursing him.

‘No Foroogh-dear, this is my last day and I want to spend it with you.’

There was no malice in the statement, because there was no malice in Layla. Yet in that moment Amir turned notably pale. Foroogh wondered why it had taken Amir so long to realise. Foolish boy.

‘You can join us Amir if you would like.’

Foroogh avoided looking at Layla when she made the suggestion. Layla didn’t realise in that moment that if she turned Amir away, it would weigh heavily on her heart later.

*“For the sake of one wish yet unfulfilled he thought
but little of everything else that heaven had granted him.
That is how humans are made! If prayers remain unanswered,
do we ever reflect that it may be for our own good?”*

Amir looked less forlorn and more hopeful. Perhaps the summer could be rescued after all.

‘Would that be alright, Leli?’ he asked. He looked eagerly towards Layla who shrugged her shoulders.

Layla could have said that he didn’t want her to join them the previous evening when they had gone to the cinema, even though he knew how much she loved movies, and how much it hurt her to think of him with her sisters, who had never been kind or treated her as a sibling. Or she may have reminded him that he hadn’t wanted to spend any time with her for the entire summer and how he had been oblivious to her longing and melancholy.

‘Yes,’ she said instead.

If Layla had let matters rest there, when her longing for Amir had been blighted, and she had become less susceptible to all his charms, and realised, as is necessary, that Amir was terribly flawed, might she have suffered less? It had plagued Foroogh too, what if she hadn’t interfered? Foroogh never found the right time or words to convey how much that very question played on her mind and how sorry she was to Layla for that day. And Layla didn’t have the opportunity to tell Foroogh that she was not to blame, not for one minute. But she had learned long ago there were no winners in the game of what if.

Eight

There is music playing in the villa, the guests will be arriving soon. Layla shifts slightly. Amir is sitting at the end of her bed and is looking at her intently; he is the young man he was of that summer. His hair is long, lighter at the tips as it usually was after months in the sun. His eyes are as black as they were on the first day she'd seen him.

'Do you remember we were Layla and Majnun?'

He is untroubled now; he is full of youth and life, as he was back then.

'I do.'

'What else do you remember?'

'I remember that I experienced many of my first experiences with you.'

'Like what?'

'Sea...sandcastles, shells...trees. The first time I went to the cinema.'

'Is that all you remember?'

'We had lovely summers when we were children.'

'Every summer with you was lovely,' he says and he smiles, so familiar that her breath catches.

'But things changed,' she says.

'Like what?'

'We grew up.'

'Who are you talking to Mamany?'

Ali has his hand on her cheek, a look of concern in his eyes.

'I was dreaming darling.'

Her face is wet as if she has been crying. Had she been crying?

Ali is dressed into a silk suit and is cleanly shaven; he has come to wake her for the party. She can hear the band setting up, the occasional tuning of an instrument.

'May I come later to the party Ali-dear? I'm not myself today. Perhaps a little later.'

Ali had not known his grandmother to ever feel unwell. It made him uneasy; she was all he had left of his past. He didn't know his mother's family; she had left when he was too young

to remember much about her. His father had left for war and never came back. He remembers waiting for him by the living room window, watching the street below, expecting his old lime-coloured Mercedes to turn the corner and navigate its way between the concrete borders on either side of their road. Long after the family was told he was missing, Ali still waited.

‘Are you alright Mamany?’

‘Yes darling. I’m perfectly well.’

He doesn’t look convinced.

‘Can I bring you anything?’

She shakes her head and touches her fingers to his cheek, strong hands that always caught him.

‘I saw that you gave Mischa your bracelet...I know how much it means to you. That was very generous Mamany.’

She smiles at him. Mischa still hadn’t told him.

‘Who should I give it to if not my grandchildren?’

He leans down to kiss her. She holds him to her, perhaps longer than she had in a while.

‘Are you sure you are alright?’

‘Of course.’

Ali frowns, much the same way as his father. They look so alike, her son and her grandson and nothing like her. Tall, and blonde, even the colour of their eyes, grey eyes, much like the Russian. They’d been warned of the Russian troops in Tabriz, the city overrun with Soviet soldiers. That’s how she came to label the father of her child: the soldier. She had feared him before the birth of her son, the image that haunted her, the deadness in the eyes, the smell of damp and sweat. She had wished the hands that held her down had squeezed the life out of her. After her son was born, the beauty of the child, her boy, the image of the soldier faded until it became nothing more than a distant reflection because when Ramin was born, he was only ever Jahan’s son. Her husband was the only person who knew the truth; when Layla refused his marriage proposal she felt compelled to tell him why. She hadn’t thought for one moment that Jahan would want to marry her after he knew; she assumed he’d want to marry a virgin like the rest of them. Except it turned out not to matter, it didn’t change Jahan’s mind or how he felt. And slowly Jahan gave her a life that, piece by piece, healed her.

‘You can rest for a little while longer Mamany, I’ll come get you when the guests are here.’

‘I’m tired,’ Layla says, because suddenly she is.

‘We have unfinished business.’

Amir's eyes hold hers without even a blink.

'Have we?'

'Do you remember the summer when we agreed to get married?'

'I remember all the summers.' Her voice is weary.

'But that one was special; I discovered you all over again.'

'That's because you had lost sight of me the summer before, you were distracted with someone else.'

'Why won't you let me remember the good times?' he asks, growing quite agitated. He is as he was the summer that he chooses to forget.

Layla sighs again.

'I can't help what I remember any more than you can.'

'Don't people create their own history by remembering only what they wish?' Amir's voice is calm now, the question is not for her at all.

'I like to remember it all. It's how I became who I am.'

'It's not the summer I want you to remember,' he says, 'I never want you to remember that time.'

'I know.'

'It's the following summer I want you to remember, the summer that is the most precious to me.'

'I know. And I do remember.'

At the crack of dawn, he would be there, every day, eating breakfast. And with her as late in the day as was allowed. Even then, he would sit outside her window and they would whisper long into the night. In the interests of seemliness, Forough told them to be careful.

She will be my wife, he said.

But it's not official yet, Forough would say.

That was the one topic the lovers argued about.

You are fourteen, my mother was already married at your age.

One more year my love, I have to know that my mother will be all right.

Except Farah would never be all right again. Amir would get angry and he could have quite a wicked tongue, berating her for her immaturity and unworldliness, but he would soon be full of regret; he loved her, he was her Majnun.

He would wait for her, of course he would, he would wait forever. She had grown so much in one year; she wasn't a child, yet she hadn't lost the spirit of innocence. He was glad she

was nothing like the girls he knew in Tehran. He didn't want her to be anything other than his Layla.

The adults talked about the war.

Reza Shah upset the English when he cancelled the oil-concessions eight years ago; they've been looking for an excuse to draw us in.

Yes, but they got other concessions.

Did you hear BBC broadcast maligning the Shah?

They aren't going to let us remain neutral.

Tabriz isn't safe. The Russians will take the north.

As the summer drew to a close Amir begged Layla to marry him again, to come to Tehran as soon as she could; Tabriz was no longer safe. She implored him to let them enjoy the last days of the summer. He told her that the way she spoke often made him think that it would be their final one.

Their passion grew heavy in the sand dunes; they both showed restraint. She wanted them to be pure for their wedding. He didn't have the heart to tell her that he had lost that battle a while ago.

The summer was ending. The grief was palpable, it was in the waves, the drifting clouds, the browning leaves, the burnt land, the cumulative wind, the last of the giant barberries, the lowering sun, the final tides, the lasting moon.

Nine

Early 1941, and the snow engulfed the lands, cold, bitter and frozen; spring was a long time coming. And then the narcissus and hyacinth broke through. The world was already at war. Reza Shah wouldn't declare for either side; he refused to expel the Germans and didn't renounce Hitler. The British weren't happy. The Russians weren't happy.

The first sign of Russian troops.

Finally, the letter that Layla had been waiting for arrived. Except it wasn't from Amir. A letter from Foroogh, her father had passed and was already buried in the gold-domed mosque in Tehran.

Are you there Layla? Her mother asked countless times.

Layla read the letter by the window, as green shoots started to penetrate the melting snow. Layla pictured Foroogh writing with her frail hand, the delicate black script so beautifully crafted. Layla wondered what Foroogh felt, as she wrote the words.

My love, I have to tell you that Amir and Maryam are getting married. They are waiting until the end of summer as a sign of respect for father. I am deeply sorry to be the one to tell you but I suspect Amir hasn't the courage to tell you himself. There is so much to explain, but I fear none of it will give you any comfort. I wish for you to come to Tehran. I'm going to Ahfaz soon to be with Shoreh, and it would mean so much to me if you came too. Please tell your mother she is most welcome.

Gone were Layla and Amir's plans whispered in the shadows on the Caspian. Layla would not move to Tehran to be with him and they would not spend their summers in Ramsar. An ephemeral dream constructed in youth and love, vanished with the melting snow.

By the time summer came, her mother was gone. It was unbearably hot when the Red Army marched on Tabriz. The Russian troops occupied their city for a second time, Layla was glad her mother hadn't seen the city seized for a second time. In the stone house in the mountains, Layla mourned. For her mother, for everything that she had lost.

Amir is still sitting on the edge of the bed. He is interchangeable. Sometimes his face is that of the ten-year-old boy, and then the lover he had been as a young man, and now the man he was on the day he died. She hadn't been there, only seen the lifeless body hours after his passing. His wife had deprived Amir of Layla in life, and even as he cried out for her in death.

'You didn't come,' he says.

'I'm sorry.'

'I died of a broken heart.'

'Don't say that.'

'It's the truth.'

'There are many different truths. Your truth and my truth were not one and the same.' She smiles at him to take the bitterness out of her words, because she hasn't felt bitter towards him in a long time.

He changes again to the young man that he was on his wedding day. She had loved him the most that day, when he would never be hers again.

'I didn't recover. Not ever.' He is crying now.

'I didn't wish that for you.'

'You cursed me. The carpet you gave me on my wedding day, with such sadness in your eyes, it cursed me. I could see your sadness and feel your pain every time I looked at it.'

'I wasn't in pain. I came to be happy.'

'I was never happy. Not after you. I was your Majnun, driven to insanity because I could never have you.'

'I didn't wish that for you, I wanted you to have love, I wanted you to be happy.'

'I was never happy,' he repeats.

Layla moves off the bed. The music is too loud for sleep; she'd have to join them soon. Her grandson would worry even though nobody would really miss her there. She would sit in the corner, smile as the guests would awkwardly greet her and watch as they danced to music that, other than being sung in Persian, had no meaning for her. A house full of strangers that tonight she can't face because inside her room there are people that want to hold her. She walks to the wardrobe and takes out a mosaic box; Jahan had bought it for her when they visited Esfahan. They had sat on the banks of *si-o-se-pol* bridge on a balmy evening, watching the Zayanderud river flow past them, eating pistachio-saffron ice-cream, and listening to a young man chant his poetry against the breeze of summer. Ramin had counted each of the bridge's arches over and again; Jahan had teased him that there had been a mistake when they named it the thirty-three bridge.

Layla kept the box all these years as it held all the memories that mattered. But that's all they were, memories. Everything had disappeared the same way the Zayanderud River had dried up under the bridge, leaving nothing but the dust dunes of the old riverbed. Inside the box, she pulls out her son's hospital wristband. The name has faded. She reaches for the small lock of hair, holding it towards her nose as if perhaps she would still be able to inhale the scent of him. She had always loved the way he smelled as a baby, the sweetness of the honey soap, and even the sourness of her regurgitated milk.

She takes out a vial of sand from the beach in Ramsar.

Her feet sank into his footprints and they ran so fast until one of them fell. She could've overtaken him so many times, instead she shadowed him, following his bare shoulders, and liking the way the wind played with his slightly overgrown hair. The feel of the sand, warm and soft under her bare feet.

Layla wonders whether the desert sand on the banks of Bandar-Abbas, where her son fell for the last time, fighting a war that enlisted soldiers on a whim of patriotism, felt the same. Most of the soldiers were boys who were handed guns with the promise of martyrdom. She picks up his identity tags. As a boy Ali would play with them; she promised to give them to him when he was older because she wanted Ali's memories of his father to be more than a name etched on metal. But what could she tell him? They told her he died a martyr; she didn't tell them that all the men had been needlessly sacrificed for ignoble cause. Ramin hadn't gone to war because he loved his country; he went out of his disillusionment. He had been forever campaigning against the Shah, willing the revolution. And then he had watched as one by one, people were executed without trial, and it didn't matter if they had stood against the Shah, just that they didn't belong to the right group. It wasn't clear whose side he was on anymore. One despot replaced by a regime of zealots. Ramin couldn't let it go; he had coveted this life and he couldn't heal. It was an internal scab that he picked and picked. And he bled inside. Nothing could console him. Then there was war, a new purpose. To what end? Her son was gone. It was all in vain. Ali had stopped asking for the tags a long time ago.

She picks up another item and smiles at the ticket from the first time she went to the cinema. They had sat there all day, hiding between showings, so that they could watch the film over and again.

The invitation. Her sister's faded script on the formal invite.

'Why did you keep it? Why did you come to my wedding?' Amir is there again, dressed in the suit that he wore on his wedding day.

'I wanted to give you the carpet that I made for you. I wanted to hold my head up high above the shame.'

'You had nothing to be ashamed of, the shame was mine.'

It's time now. Layla can't sit there any longer; she owes it to her grandson to go to the party. She doesn't break her promises to him. Since her son had died in the desert land, she stepped into his vacant shoes and became parent to Ali. She had tried to appeal to Ali's mother, but she said she was living a different life now, a forced tear, an insincere speech; he will be better off with you Layla-joon. Over the years she considered whether she could have changed things; what if she had curbed her son's growing disenchantment? Would he be there now? Would her grandson's destiny be changed?

It worries me that he speaks out against the Shah.

He is a student, that's what students do. Jahan always appeased her.

But he is angry about everything. Today he was ranting about the new law. He said the Americans cannot be tried in Iran even if they commit a crime here. He was so angry.

He's not the only one, it's upsetting a lot of people. They think the Shah is saying the Americans are superior to Persians. And Ramin is studying law. That is what he is meant to do, question the law. If he isn't passionate about these things then what's the point?

Jahan had pulled Layla towards him; there was always a gentleness about his arms as he held her.

I wish he wouldn't fight about everything.

He'll learn, he whispered against her hair.

But Ramin hadn't.

Forough wrote letter after letter.

You must come here Layla-love, there is much unrest now. The news that the Shah is losing control. The British are already in the South, there is news that the Russians have taken the north. I can't think of you alone. It's not safe for a girl of fifteen. I will send a driver for you. There's nothing left in Tabriz for you now, God rest your mother's soul.

Layla walked home from her daily visit to her mother's grave, thinking of handing Amir the carpet on his wedding day, looking him in the eye so that he would feel every lie he told. Her mounting anger, the bitterness suffocating the tears that her mother deserved.

The soldier was following her, calling out in a tongue that she didn't understand, and then he caught up with her. How had it come to pass that she ended up in the barren wasteland?

The smell of damp, sour sweat and nicotine as the sky turned to dusk. She had begged him in a tongue he didn't understand. Cries lost in the mountain mist. Bloodied and numb. He was remorseful and sobbing like a lost child on the roadside. He could have killed her. She wished he had.

When Layla arrived home, not quite sure how she made it home, she found herself moving towards the loom. She took her place on the stool, picked up a thread, from where she had laid them out in rows and knew that she would never weave again.

'Layla?'

He is still dressed in his wedding suit.

'No more, Amir. Please.'

'It should have been you. I dressed thinking of you. When I said those words, it was you that I was saying them to.'

'Enough.'

How had she ever managed to watch him marry someone else? A day that she had wished, for her entire life, that she could forget. Amir in tears. Much the same way he is now standing before her. His head was bowed, as the sermon was chanted. It was the first time she was free to look at him, knowing that he would not return her gaze. She had been careful not to meet his eyes until then but even when she wasn't looking at him, it didn't make him any less the centre of gravity. And as she watched him during the ceremony, they all watched her.

How would Layla react? Who knew? We thought Amir would definitely choose her. What happened to Layla and Majnun? They thought she couldn't hear them.

She had wanted to die that day. And as Amir said his vows, a deliberate smile set upon his face, Layla kept hoping that he would stop, turn to her and tell her it was all a mistake. Instead she listened as he repeated his vows, to the tone of his voice, quiet and poetic. And when it was over, and the newlyweds turned to their guests, Amir, with the same smile on his face, began to cry. Everyone shifted awkwardly at the sight of his tears.

Foroogh held her hand tightly.

We have to congratulate them, and then we will be free to leave, Foroogh leant over and whispered in her ear.

I'll never be free again; she had wanted to say.

They stood in line, waiting. Layla knew he was aware of her. She could see that he kept licking his lips over and again, and that his cheeks were quite flushed. Her sister embraced her; it was the first time in all those years that they had ever touched. Maryam had won the game that

only she played. Layla faced the groom, her face unmoved; she held out her hand to him, and when his fingers touched hers, all the sorrow that existed between them passed through that touch. And then she let go.

“I have not only lost you; I no longer know myself.

Who am I?

I keep turning upon myself asking

What is your name?

Are you in love? With Whom?

Or are you loved? By whom?”

Amir watched as Layla walked around the room graciously saying her goodbyes, the same smile that had been there all day. It had been torture with Layla there, but nothing was quite like the purgatory when she wasn't. His bride was not without her charms, the simple dress swept over the delicate curves of her body, her neck long and caramel. It's just she wasn't Layla. And that night when the lights were off and he touched her in the darkness, it was Layla's face that he imagined. The firmness of her spine, the slenderness of her arms, the tiny mole on her neck just behind her earlobe. When Maryam groaned, it brought memories of the time they were together in Ramsar; the first time he had betrayed Layla. They had been fully clothed when they lost their virginity; he had barely been inside her before he withdrew and ejaculated all over her skirt. And on the wedding night, in the moment he heard her groan, it was the first time again. Layla's image vanished, replaced by his wife's pink cheeks and sated breath. As he rolled away from Maryam, a sense of resignation settled over him. It was the night his son was conceived. And so, all was not lost, Sam managed to bring light to Amir's darkest day; but over time, as his son grew, he came to see that his son belonged to Layla almost as much as he did.

'I felt you everywhere. You tortured me.' Amir says between his tears.

'I'm sorry'.

'Oh Layla, my Layla, I was your Majnun. From the day we met until the day I died. And I was tormented for everyday in between.'

'Why are you telling me all this now?' Layla is weary of it all. She'd had a happy life. He needs to let her be.

'I tried to tell you once before.'

Ten

The boys were playing in the pool, she had been calling for them to come inside but they had carried on as though they hadn't heard her. Sam was going to be late; his family were due to travel to Ramsar that evening.

It was 1953; in the outside world, Mossadegh had been overthrown and the young Shah, with his glamorous queen Soraya, was back with the help of the CIA, although they wouldn't admit it until decades later. But that was outside, they were cocooned safely in the villa compound.

Layla looked out into the garden and could see that the boys hadn't moved from the pool. They were taking turns in their favourite game; how far could they swim under water without coming up for air. Layla was about to call them again but she sighed, they wouldn't listen; it was time to fetch them out.

Come on Sam.

Sam knew that Auntie Layla meant business now that she was by the poolside. She had that no-nonsense look about her, eyes wide and no humour about her mouth. He really didn't want to go to Ramsar, he wanted to stay here with Ramin and Layla. This was a happy home. Auntie Layla bent down and held out her hand to him. He grabbed her arm; she was too strong until Ramin joined in.

No. Don't you dare, she said.

They dared.

Amir had turned up as Layla was coming out of the pool.

What's going on? he said. Amir started to laugh because they were all laughing. He reached for one of the towels that Layla had left on a nearby table for the boys and handed it to her. Then he ordered the boys to come out of the pool and they were soon running upstairs, leaving puddles on the marble floor.

I'm sorry. I tried to get them out. I hope that you aren't too late. She was still smiling and twisting her hair to wring out the water.

You look so beautiful, Leli.

The words just escaped out of him. Only sporadic words had passed between them in all those years, so that at first, Layla thought perhaps she had misheard him. But her cheeks grew red nevertheless, the same way they used to in Ramsar when he caught her watching him. They stood in an area of the garden that was obscured from the house; perhaps the shadows gave Amir the courage because he had pulled her to him then, his mouth near hers, close enough that she could feel the warmth of his breath. It was a moment too long before she turned her head away. Amir let go of her abruptly, ran a hand through his hair and lit up a cigarette.

I'm sorry I shouldn't have done that.

No, you shouldn't.

You don't know... I have all this pain, so many words to speak and I lock it away.

Keep it that way, Amir.

I haven't heard you say my name in all these years. Leli...

Amir, stop this. I don't want to hear. Keep those words locked where they belong.

But words... sometimes they need to be spoken.

No... they don't. It would make all the pain come back.

The pain hasn't gone for me; it is still there.

Then it will have to stay there.

I still love you. My Layla, I am your Majnun.

You married to my sister. Majnun disappeared that day. And I am not your Layla... I married to your uncle. We chose our paths.

Layla had been too gracious to say that it was a path Amir had chosen for them; he had set their lives in motion.

If I could go back, I would never have married her.

She had grown angry then.

Why did you? Foroogh says your father was in terrible debt and that he couldn't ask Jahan so he went to Akram.

I did it to save him. My aunt made our marriage a condition.

You could have said no.

I wanted to help my father. He begged me. He told me his life was over, so I bartered my life instead. If I could go back, I would do things differently.

No. You wouldn't. It wasn't just your dad...you were used to a certain life and she could give that to you.

I didn't care about being rich...I did it for my father. Leli...you have to believe me.

She thought about arguing. No circumstances would have made her choose the path he had.

It doesn't matter anymore, Maryam gave you what you wanted.

The one thing I truly wanted was you.

You had me but you chose something else.

She felt no sense of retribution that Amir was suffering, no matter that he had betrayed everything about them. She didn't want Amir longing for her or in any kind of pain. Layla had learned to forgive. Not from her parents or the countless sermons she had listened to in the mosque. It hadn't even come from Jahan with his infinite patience and understanding. Ramin. For him, she forgave everything.

Layla please.

Amir, you must not talk this way. It's too late.

Just tell me you love me Leli, the way you used to.

I cannot.

I know you don't love my uncle.

You're mistaken; I love your uncle very much.

Amir had looked at her a while longer, opened his mouth a couple of times but then walked away without saying anything else. Layla had wrapped the towel around her head and followed the boys inside, making puddles of her own.

*“But the turning of heaven reveals what fate has decided,
without pity for mortal man.
Where in the end, is he to go, who loves without being loved?”*

Layla sighs. Amir comes closer to her on the bed.

‘I asked for you when I was sick, Maryam said she told you but you wouldn't come.’

‘That's not true. I didn't know.’

‘Would you have come?’

‘I would have come.’

‘I died calling for you.’

‘Why are you here now Amir?’

Layla turns to him. He is a boy again, with sand in his hair and dirt under his fingernails.

‘To play.’

Layla smiles and then she is alone.

Eleven

Half an hour later, Layla walks out into the party and takes a seat away from the live music, by the window. The bride is quite lovely, dressed in a silk dress and a gold tiara in her hair. Layla had met Mischa's cousin only once before, when she'd come to ask permission to use the house, something that her grandson had insisted upon. The groom, whom she hadn't met, is dressed in a sky-blue suit and, in between dancing with his young bride, disappears to the kitchen where he drinks vodka shots with a group of men while one of the caterers keeps watch at the door. Little Layla is stretched out across four velvet-covered chairs that have been pushed together, her arm is trailing over the edge, her fingertips lightly touch the floor and her eyes twitch as she dreams.

When the bride sees the old lady, she takes the groom's hand and together they walk over to thank her. Other guests that know Layla come over one by one to show their respect. Some bend to kiss her sallow cheeks; others shake her bony hand. Ali comes to sit by Layla for a while, he doesn't say much. She suspects Mischa has told him the news. Her grandson is afraid but Layla knows the light a child can bring, even a child that isn't conceived in love. And Ramin, for all his imperviousness, had surprised everyone when Ali was born with his infinite patience.

'Are you alright?' Ali leans into her; the music is so loud he has to shout.

'I was thinking about the past,' she says.

'About your own wedding day?'

She smiles.

Layla hadn't really had a proper wedding.

Foroogh told Layla of Jahan's marriage proposal.

When Jahan approached Foroogh – he didn't know who else to ask – she had refused to tell Layla at first. Foroogh told him that she was responsible for Layla, and didn't want her to rush into anything when she was hurting. There was plenty of time for Layla to meet someone else and forget all about Amir. Except Foroogh knew it wasn't true, that somehow Amir would always be there.

You are too old for Layla, Mr Jahan, fourteen years is too much of a gap, Foroogh said.

She didn't like that older men married young girls, some as young as thirteen. Her own sister had barely hit puberty before she was married off to a neighbour that was already middle-aged, and every time Foroogh looked at their wedding photograph, it made her sick. Her sister still looked like a child, with her flat chest and painted lips.

It's not what you think, Foroogh-jan.

And what is it that I think, Mr Jahan?

I'm not marrying her for that... I'll wait...until she is an adult... and even then...only when she is ready.

So, why Layla? You know that her heart belongs...

But Foroogh didn't finish her sentence.

I can give her the life she deserves.

And what about you Mr Jahan...what do you get out of it? There are many young women who would love to have a husband like you. You could have the pick of anyone. Why her? Why Laya?

With her father gone, she has no one to look out for her. He thought that my brother would take care of her...because of...

But this time, he didn't finish his sentence.

Amir?

My sister orchestrated this. Amir...I think my nephew thought he was doing the right thing by bailing out his father. My brother is weak. My sister has treated Layla unfairly.

Surely you can appeal to your sister for Layla's share of Babak's fortune. I have set some money aside for her.

You know my sister.

I know they are your family, but this isn't yours to fix.

It is more than that...I will look after her forever. I'm a simple man. There would only ever be her.

Why Layla?

He didn't speak for a while.

When I look at her...there's a light in her. Even now.

He blushed then. Foroogh patted his hand.

Yes, there is.

There was a part of Layla that was desperate to say yes; she had started to feel sick every morning. But she knew that Jahan was a decent man and it wasn't his burden to carry. Foroogh

told him of Layla's refusal but he insisted on seeing her anyway. They spoke for an hour. At times she bit her lip to stop herself from crying. Assuming her tears were about Amir, he told her that his nephew had been the victim of circumstance. She told him about the soldier, that she suspected she was carrying his child. Not once did she meet his eye. He put his hand over hers, and told her he would always look after her.

She had gone with Jahan to the local registry office, dressed in a long-sleeved navy dress despite the heat. Afterwards she had walked with Jahan and Foroogh to the nearest restaurant where she had nibbled on flat bread as nothing else would stay down. Foroogh thought it was nerves. Layla wondered whether she could ever love the baby; her husband always told her that she would. He had been right. He had been right about many things.

It's not something I will ever take from you; I will wait until you are ready to give...to share.

He had waited until long after their wedding night.

We have our entire life. There's no rush.

It wasn't fixed but it wasn't broken either.

At that moment a young woman, one of Mischa's many female cousins, begins a dance; she is holding a knife decorated with a ribbon. They are ready to cut the cake. She dances before the groom but won't hand him the knife. He throws some money in the air and soon the children, the ones that are awake anyway, are collecting the notes from the floor. The woman hands the knife to the next girl, who begins to dance, and so it goes until, towards the end of the song, one girl finally hands the knife over. The groom takes a piece of cake and puts some in the mouth of the bride. The bride does the same.

Layla remembers watching Amir dipping his little finger into honey and putting it into his bride's mouth.

'Do you want some cake, Mamany?' Ali interrupts her reminiscences. Layla nods, she might not care much for weddings but wedding cake, on the other hand...

Foroogh and Layla left the wedding party soon after the ceremony and long before the cake was cut.

In the car on the way home from Amir's wedding, Layla rested her head against the window and cried, deep pitiful sobs. Foroogh reached out a comforting hand but Layla didn't seem to notice. They sat that way, neither speaking until finally the car pulled up just outside of Foroogh's villa.

Layla moved her hand away from Foroogh, wiped her face on the sleeves of her dress and said, that is that.

It is all right to mourn Layla-dear.

Not for Amir, not anymore. He is my brother now, and that is that, she repeated.

Foroogh was about to say something, and thought better of it. She had interfered once and wouldn't do so a second time. In fact, Foroogh never talked to Layla of Amir again. And it seemed painfully ironic to her, as they walked together along the narrow pathway to her house, that like the poem, they were never meant to be. She suspected that they would always be an unspoken yearning, more from Amir than Layla, but that was the price he paid. Poor Majnun.

Little Layla wakes and begins to cry. Her mother, who has been dancing and hoping that Layla would sleep through, walks over to her daughter, lifts her quickly, in the hope that she will be able to settle again. The tears won't stop. They are soaking the strap of Sahar's gown. Sahar's eyes scan the room and they settle on the old woman. It's her only hope so Sahar carries the crying child towards Layla. Layla holds out her arms and Sahar carefully places the child on the old lady's lap. Soon the tears abate; Sahar sighs.

'Bring her to my room, she can sleep there.'

'Are you sure Layla-dear, what about the wedding?' Sahar barely masks the hope from her voice.

'I'm tired too. I'll stay with her.'

Sahar lifts the girl again and they head towards the room. Arash is there beside them then, frowning, and in that moment, he briefly reminds Layla of Maryam.

'Let me take her.'

He lifts Layla into his arms; she rests her cheek against his shoulder, and wraps her arms around his neck. Arash beckons Sahar to go back to the party.

'How are you Auntie-dear? I had been meaning to come to say hello,' he says as they walk towards her bedroom.

'I'm fine, my love.'

Once inside the room, Arash places his daughter on the bed, pulls the cover over her and turns to his great aunt. She looks quite lovely this evening. There is always something about her eyes that seems to reach out to him; they're a place of solace. He has been told that she was quite captivating in her youth. There were so few photographs of her; she had never liked to have her picture taken. The few that existed were destroyed in an air raid; luckily the family were outside

of Tehran. Jahan always insisted they leave when the bombing started, to a villa surrounded by pomegranate trees, that they owned in Fasham. When they arrived back, half the house had been destroyed. Arash doesn't remember much of being really young but he can still clearly recall seeing the rubble of his aunt's house and his father's tears when he looked upon the remains. I grew up in that house, his father said and he had taken out a cotton handkerchief – he never used tissues but always kept neatly folded cotton handkerchiefs, that Arash's mother ironed for him – and wiped his eyes. His father had certainly loved Aunt Layla, more than my own mother, he would often say. The house was rebuilt but by then, everything had changed.

Most of Arash's childhood was spent in the care of his mother and her sisters. But it wasn't all bad between him and his father. Sometimes, in their happier moments, Baba took Arash to the bazaar where they'd eat a meal in one of the small restaurants and Baba would ask him about school or wrestling like they were two old friends catching up. He also remembers that when he was about eight or nine and couldn't sleep, he would creep downstairs long after his mother sent him to bed, to find Baba. They'd sit and play a few rounds of backgammon, and Baba always let him win. Arash sighs again; he misses his father. The war had taken its toll on them; for a while they struggled and that was the start of the long periods of Baba's absence. Trips to Turkey to buy merchandise, but when Baba went to Thailand that was the best. Arash loved it when his father returned and opened his suitcase, all those treasures. He still had the jade elephant his father had bought for him when he was eight. He looks down at his daughter; little Layla is asleep again. He bends down and kisses her forehead. Baba had not been the best father but nothing had ever replicated the feel of his strong arms, or the familiar smell of nicotine mixed with spicy cologne or the reassuring sound of his heartbeat, when Arash pressed his ear against his father's chest. Until his father's heart stopped beating.

'Where are you?' Layla asks.

'Thinking of my dad.'

'My lovely Sam.'

'He wasn't always a good father, Auntie.' He hadn't meant his words to sound quite so bitter.

When he was a small boy, he would cry the entire day his father left until his mother grew weary and slapped him hard. His overbearing mother who wouldn't let him into the house from school until she stripped him down to his underwear and dragged him to the shower. His father laughing, teased Arash that he was born dark skinned but his mother had scrubbed him so much over the years that his skin had gone white. When Arash was older, he no longer cried when his father left but instead grew increasingly resentful. In the end, he barely spoke to Baba. In fact

when Baba died, he tried to think of the last words they had spoken to each other but he couldn't remember.

'I know my love, I know. We all have our demons, in the same way we have our angels.' Auntie Layla's words interrupt his thoughts. That is true, he thinks, as she looks down at his daughter. Arash shrugs but he smiles at her as well; his great aunt always said these kinds of things. Besides there is no need for such moroseness, it's a party after all. He kisses his aunt and leaves in search of his wife.

Twelve

'I'm glad you are back.' Amir is sitting on the edge of the bed, next to the little girl, whose face is peaceful in sleep. He is looking down at her face; he raises his hand as if to stroke her cheek, the way he used to stroke Layla's when they were young, but his hand stays in the air.

'She looks like you when you first came to Ramsar.'

Layla smiles.

'You do remember everything.'

Little Layla stirs.

'Who are you talking to Auntie?' Her voice is sleepy, her eyes still closed.

'I'm talking to myself and my memories.'

Layla lies down next to little Layla. She doesn't close her eyes because Amir is still looming, his eyes beseeching.

'I told you I did.' Her eyes are wet again. Layla was true to her word, she never spoke of the time with Amir again, perhaps because there were no words to describe what they had meant to each other.

'We should have got married as we planned,' he says, coming to sit by her then.

He seems so tormented, even now, when they are in different spaces, different times. She should have told him all those years ago what happened to her, that she was carrying someone else's child. Perhaps then he would have been set free. But she had promised Jahan that she wouldn't ever tell anyone.

'I couldn't marry you even if you hadn't married my sister.'

He stops then. Looks up from his own grief.

'Why?'

'If I tell you, will that set you free?'

'Do you think that is why I'm here? To set myself free?'

'I don't know why you are here.'

'I'm not here at all. I'm just a part of you'

Layla smiles then through her tears.

'I know,' she says.

*“When Layla broke the chain of the world,
she went, thinking of you lovingly, faithful to the end.
Your grief in this world has always been hers
and she has taken it with her to sustain her on the journey.
The longing for you did not die with her.
Behind the veil of the earth, you cannot see her eyes,
but they are looking for you,
following you wherever you go.”*

The music has stopped. There is a gentle tap at her door. It’s Arash come to take Layla. The sun is not quite up but the light of dawn is upon them. The guests have all gone. The caterers are now shuffling around in the garden clearing away the aftermath, she watches from the window. Soon there will be the call for Morning Prayer.

‘I didn’t expect you to be up Auntie,’ Arash says, as he moves to where little Layla lies and perches on the side of the bed. He looks at his daughter, the hypnotic rise and fall of her sleeping breath, and wishes he could sleep right there.

‘There’s plenty of time for sleeping,’ Layla says, only briefly taking her eyes from the window. Her voice is clear and she seems far more alert than Arash, who has drunk a little too much of the awful vodka that his work colleagues had made and hoped to pass off as Russian.

‘The wedding is over. I’m not surprised you couldn’t sleep with all the noise.’

There’s a slight sway to his body; he can’t find his balance even though he is sitting.

‘I wish I could sleep right here; Ali went to bed hours ago.’

Layla turns towards him, and she looks at him as if she hadn’t seen him before. Arash thinks that perhaps she is beginning to forget but Ali always tells him that she is still as sharp as ever. Arash isn’t feeling all that sharp right now.

‘Are you alright Auntie-dear?’

For a moment he thinks that she hasn’t heard him.

‘I’m fine. I was just thinking about how much you look like your grandfather.’

‘Lots of people say that. I wish I knew him more. I don’t really remember much about him.’

Layla smiles.

‘Did you know him well Auntie? I mean I know that he was your brother-in-law, but I was wondering if you knew him well.’

She watches him for a while, so long that he thinks perhaps she won't answer.

'Yes, I knew him very well. Before we all grew up, we spent many summers together in Ramsar. Your grandfather taught me to swim, to fish, to play volleyball. I know almost every species of butterfly.'

Arash smiles, he still has his grandfather's display box; the once white frame now discoloured and faded. But the butterflies are preserved as though they had been caught yesterday. He can't imagine Layla doing any of those things but then again he finds it difficult envisaging old people ever as young people.

'Was he like me? I mean not the way he looked as you say, but the person he was.'

Layla wanders over and sits next to him, waiting so long before answering he almost forgets what he asked her.

'Arash-dear, Amir was not like anyone I ever knew.'

They sit together in silence for a while, neither really in the mood for talk, and the sun begins to rise. Arash gathers himself, kisses his aunt on her papery cheek, picks up his sleeping daughter and heads home.

Layla is restless. She decides to head to the garden to watch the sunrise, perhaps drink tea by the roses and wait. Outside one of the caterers fetches a pot of tea and makes sure she is comfortable before he goes back to clearing away the debris from the night before. By the state of the garden, she can tell the wedding was a success. She hopes that the marriage will be too, although it is never quite as people believe. She hadn't thought much about that when she had accepted Jahan. Once she had asked him whether marriage had turned out the way he had expected. He pondered a while then told her that he had never contemplated marriage so he had no expectations.

Why did you marry me then? She asked, and would have been disappointed if he started talking of love, not because she had any doubt that he did love her, but because there was more to them than just love.

I needed saving. She thought about it for a while and convinced herself that he had meant she and her unborn child had needed saving.

You did save me.

I was talking about you saving me. She had heard him correctly.

Saving you from what?

He had smiled at her then.

From a life without you.

The sun rises. The same caterer now brings her a plate of bread, honey, cheese and walnuts and freshens her tea. There is a chill in the air, unusual for early autumn; one of the other helpers fetches a shawl and places it around her shoulders. Normally couples preferred spring to get married.

The autumn, when Layla felt so desperate she considered ending her life and that of her unborn child, Jahan had given her hope.

Autumn makes me sad, she once told him, everything dies.

Jahan had covered her small hand with his older, and wiser, hand.

It will begin again.

'Madam, there is someone here that is asking to see you. Are you expecting anyone?' The head caterer looks weary; she imagines he is keen for them to be finished so that he can head home. She knows that he has his own family who are waiting for him. His wife will fetch him a quick breakfast; he will sleep for a while before he is up again and moving to his next job. He works seven days a week; her mother would have been sad for him, he didn't get a day of rest not even on Friday.

Layla looks towards the garden gate and the young woman that is standing beyond the door.

'Yes, please open the gate.'

The young woman walks towards them; Layla can see the driver lingering by the gate. He leans against the wall and lights a cigarette, Layla imagines he smokes many cigarettes. The young woman had told him to wait, she hasn't decided yet. Layla hopes that she will stay; Tehran is going through one of its many periods of unrest, there's safety behind the walls.

'Please sit down,' Layla says. Her breath catches momentarily; there is no mistaking the father of the girl. The young woman pulls a chair out and sits; her eyes never leave Layla's face, a serene smile about her. The caterers set another place at the table; they bring more tea, and an extra plate. The girl picks up the tea but before she takes a sip, she hesitates.

'I'm Lara,' she says.

'Yes, I know.'

The old lady nods and leans over, reaching for the young woman's hand. She notices the butterflies intricately painted on the young woman's skin. She had crafted the same butterflies all those years ago. The young woman's gaze turns towards her arm and she sighs; she has something to say, she wants to tell Layla how they came to be there. Layla wants to tell her that there is no rush, they have time, but she squeezes the young woman's hand instead. They sit that way for a while, quiet and serene.

'It's peaceful here,' Lara says.

'Yes, it is.'

One of the caterers starts to sing an old folk song, the rest of the workers join in at the chorus.

A petal from one of Jahan's roses drifts towards the ground. The trees weep. Forlorn. But spirit exists in their limbs. They're not dead. They yearn for the sun. From the dark shadows. Light rekindles life.

SITUATING DOCUMENT

A Life in Translation:

Land, Language and Labels

Genesis and exploration

In the summer of 1988 when I was seventeen, I stood in the searing Shiraz sun, temperatures somewhere in the forty-degree Celsius range, begrudgingly wrapped in a long, shapeless coat to hide the outline of my body. My head was covered with a scarf; my hair was matted and clung to the back of my neck. The drive from the city to the barren lands of the ruined palace felt much longer than the hour or so it took, because I was wedged between my rather large aunt and sister in a taxi (long before the days of air-conditioning) where the only solace from open windows was an arid wind. Any resentment soon dissipated when I stood at the foot of Persepolis – Pers-polis as pronounced by the Persians although the Farsi name is Takhte-gamshid. My eyes were on the pillars, half-listening to the guide explaining how the army of Alexander the Great set light to the grand palace in a fit of drunken rage. The guide told us that Alexander burned the palace because of his unrequited love of the Persian princess Roxanne.

Subsequently I've learned that this was unlikely; firstly, while Alexander did have three Persian wives including Roxanne (some say she was an Afghan commoner), evidence suggests that he was in love with one of his generals. As with any narrative there are different versions; Diodorus Siculus (as cited by Wood 2004) recounts that soldiers burned Persepolis '...a madness...took possession of the minds of the intoxicated guests ...to set fire to the palaces.'¹ Now evidence suggests that the burning was premeditated, a 'systematic firing' and Alexander suffered a terrible sense of remorse when he saw the palace in flames, belatedly ordering his men to extinguish the fire.² Alexander is a paradox; revered as a hero, he was an undefeated conqueror but he also loved art and culture (he studied under Aristotle). Everything we know of him is told from a European perspective: the Persian account is less accessible; '...the story of

¹ Michael Wood, *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great: A Journey From Greece to India* (London: BBC Worldwide Limited, 2004), p. 104.

² Bill Yenn, *Alexander the Great – Lessons from History's Undefeated General* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 99.

Darius' point of view is yet to be told'.³ Certainly a version that doesn't portray Darius with 'effeminacy and cowardice' (or depict the ancient Persians as savages in the way the blockbuster movie *300* does) would be most welcome⁴.

While listening to the guide's version of the burning of the palace, I was somewhat distracted by my English father; he explained that when he first saw Persepolis he had an overwhelming sense that he'd been there before, and it was unlike him to have romanticised notions. I recall that a number of British servicemen, dating back to the mid to late 19th Century, had inscribed their names in the stone structures of the pillars, which, despite being a terrible act of defacement, created its own layer of history. Somehow it made my father's notion appear less absurd.

When I was a little girl, my grandfather (on the English side) used to recount stories of his youth, sitting on the edge of my bed in a small, shared room. There were two beds and down the centre was a row of books delineating space because the tidy child was fed up with the messy one. Large psychedelic flowers were pasted on the wall, and there were curtains to match. As Grandad told his stories, it was difficult to imagine a world in which the grey-haired, papery-skinned old man, whose fingertips were stained yellow and smelled of nicotine, was ever young. He told the same stories so many times that they are still alive to me even though he died when I was ten. At fourteen, he used to travel from Bermondsey to Kent to earn money picking hops; how did he do that in 1916 when they were in the middle of World War One? His brothers fought on the front; he was one of sixteen siblings. Joe came back from the war with 'shellshock', but I can't recall now whether that was World War One or Two, and then lived out his days in an institution after they found him trying to drown himself in the sink. Walter and Lily played with matches in the parlour and Lily's hair caught fire. Uncle Ernie was cantankerous and lived like a pauper even though he was wealthy; this was true, my dad inherited a sum of money when Ernie died (and there were many offspring of those sixteen siblings).

Why is any of this relevant in respect of *Burning Thread*? Other than a love of narrative being seeded from a young age, emerging from these initial thoughts comes a number of themes. On a holistic level it is difficult to have a mixed heritage and not think about identity, and while the intention wasn't to write about how heritage impacts identity as a subject matter in itself, it became apparent during writing the novel that questions of identity featured quite heavily. This occurred on two levels; firstly, as a basis for the exploration of character it was less about the

³ Wood, *In the Footsteps*, p. 101.

⁴ Ibid, P102 & Kaveh Farrokh "The 300 Movie: Separating Fact from Fiction" (August 15, 2014) <https://kavehfarrok.com/articles/nordicism/the-300-movie-separating-fact-from-fiction-1/>

archetypal ‘who am I?’ but rather who is anyone and whether it is a knowable proposition. Building on the idea that we are predisposed to certain perceptions about people, and that we see what we choose, thematically I explored this through love (and loss) in all its brutal and flawed aspects. Secondly it was an exploration of the many layers that contribute to identity such as genetics, gender, parentage, culture, religion, politics, location and so on and how these factors might constrain us. While the novel doesn’t contemplate the wider subject of free will (although it was never far from my subconscious, you can’t write a narrative about a culture so intrinsically linked with religion and entirely ignore the existential question of free will), it does explore to what extent we have real freedom in our decision-making given the constraints of our identities.

I also wanted to examine the effect of memory on our perception of self and others as a construct of identity. Did my grandfather sit there in the way that I remember? Did he imagine certain events or were they things he was told, or did they actually happen? Had my father visited Persepolis in a previous life? Was I standing hot and impatient at the foot of the ancient ruins wrapped in a shroud because the Islamic Republic of Iran had imposed it upon me? Neuroscience tells us that not only is the brain flawed in the way it accesses memory but that the memory itself is a construction, a narrative we create about the past, rather than a record of an event. Even if we film an event and replay that recording, we can never entirely replicate what we felt at that time. Perception and logic is linked to emotion according to neurologist Dr Stephen Novella⁵ and therefore our narrative is contingent upon how we feel, when we perceive people and events. In *Burning Thread* the construction of memory featured across each discrete narrative, where there is an exploration of the cross-generational impact of memory. Granddad’s mind was sharp until he died at the age of seventy-nine; while my Persian grandmother who died at the age of eighty-four – if that was her age because it wasn’t entirely clear – barely knew her family. She looked at my face and recognised the connection, even if she didn’t recognise me: ‘I know you are one of my grandchildren my love, but I don’t know which one.’ Through Layla, and to some degree Clarissa, there is an exploration of loss of self through aging, where holding on to the past becomes increasingly significant. Through Sebastian’s father, we see loss of self through loss of memory. Throughout the novel, the main characters are dealing with their memories: Sebastian in how he chooses to remember Lara and Lara with her fragmented recollections; Lyla in trying to only remember the positive aspects of Clarissa; and finally Layla, who in some sense, lives in the past. Each of the characters is partially constructed through individual memories and the perception of the other characters (and none of them are reliable).

⁵Stephen Novella, *Your Deceptive Mind: A Scientific Guide to Critical Thinking Skills* Professor Stephen Novella, (The Teaching Company, 2012) L. 1. Available at: <https://www.audible.co.uk/pd/Your-Deceptive-Mind-A-Scientific-Guide-to-Critical-Thinking-Skills-Audiobook>

During the research for *Burning Thread*, and given my strong tendency towards female characters, it was difficult to ignore the MeToo movement. On a daily basis there were abuse, discrimination and grooming cases being discussed on the news; it triggered thought around my own experiences and unfortunately I have more than one story. My mother didn't like the disparity of gender roles in Persian society, even before the revolution; she said England was better but she knew nothing would be perfect. Although Iran isn't as restrictive as some cultures from that region, it is a man's world, exacerbated by the Islamic government. As a subject matter, I wanted to explore control, abuse and disparity in its many forms and show it exists, even in the more progressive societies. Thematically this echoes across each of the discrete narratives.

Structuring (but mainly, restructuring) the novel

At the start of my research project, I made the decision to complete a novel that was commenced during my Masters programme as a study on how to write an extended piece of prose. This was an invaluable exercise as it changed the approach I took to writing *Burning Thread*. The way in which I write is visual; at first, I picture a scene (as if I'm seeing the setting and the characters in a photograph or through a lens) before I write it. In my first novel rather than write in a sequential way, one scene after another, I wrote various scenes that didn't occur chronologically in the plot. With a novel of many characters and plot lines, it was an onerous task to put together the disparate scenes. In *Burning Thread*, I wrote each narrative in a sequential way so it was tightly plotted and I approached it almost as three separate projects. I had an idea of overall plot and wrote each scene as they occurred in that plot. It wasn't without its issues; it was difficult to build momentum and to achieve the right pacing between significant scenes. In the end however it worked better to write the novel in this way.

Writing about memory and exploring the theme of whether we can ever know anyone, in terms of form I wanted to reflect the way in which we remember (not in a linear way but as fragments) and how we enter in and out of various narratives at any given moment in time. Conceptually I wanted to replicate that in the way the novel is constructed, using varying viewpoints, characters with fragmented memories, and narratives that are connected through circumstance. I contemplated writing a number of different stories before I settled on a three-narrative structure, and I studied novels that had been written in parts or with different narratives held together by one thread. The notable novels in terms of structure and form as a

study for *Burning Thread* were *The Vegetarian* (Han Kang), *the Golden Notebook* (Doris Lessing⁶) and *A visit from the Goon Squad* (Jennifer Egan). Kang has the same characters but the narrative is told from different perspectives; Egan has different narratives linked together by specific characters; and Lessing adeptly played between notebooks and narratives. I decided on three discrete narratives; to write shorter pieces felt limiting given the themes involved and I wanted enough space to develop characters. At the same time, I was deliberate in choosing to limit each narrative to a particular, short period in each instance – a snapshot of life with those characters – to reflect the idea that we only ever experience a partial view. We cannot see or know everything about a given situation and our view of how others are/behave is always based on our own perception. To some extent it is almost impossible to be impartial, how we perceive others is based on our own character and belief system (our own identity). By structuring it in this way, I wanted to show how knowledge of others is always partial (to varying degrees) and constrained.

Whose narrative did I want to write? A character stayed for weeks; a little girl, dressed in the traditional clothing of rural Iran, weaving a carpet. Persian carpets are depictions of Islamic art, usually complex in design, and often revered as the finest in the world. There is an expertise to carpet selling: how many knots per centimetre, what thread – entirely silk or touches of silk – hand or machine made, what region. The carpet became a narrative device – which allowed the story to travel through time, location, and family – and to connect each narrative. A mystical element that the carpet could bring happiness or sadness was loosely inspired by the tradition of Magical Realism. Most notably is Laura Esquivel's, *Like Water for Chocolate* where the emotional state of the protagonist Tita is infused in her cuisine, and also Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (and the machinations of the Buendía family). This is not ignoring the regional influences, such as *1001 Arabian Nights*, and the existence of magic carpets in various narratives. Loosely in terms of plot, the idea was that the carpet would be created in Iran and eventually end up in England – but how?

Narrative one: Reunion

This is the longest narrative, made weightier because Lara is the character that features in all three sections, but also the section that was pared back most substantially on redraft. The oppressive nature of Sebastian and Lara's relationship was set against the deliberate backdrop of an unusually warm summer in London: heat and suffocation.

Without delving into my own history, the choice to contemplate child abuse (as one area of abuse) wasn't facetious and that experience meant I was unable to consider reading *Lolita* until

⁶ As an aside, and an example how connected the strands of my research came to be, Doris Lessing was born in Iran.

relatively recently and solely in contemplation of writing this narrative. My novel isn't a pastiche of *Lolita*, although I acknowledge that there are some parallels between the characters. Lara, similar to the character of Lolita, is at an age of sexual awareness when she meets Sebastian and I wanted to reflect that the balance of power always lies with the adult regardless. At the same time I was mindful not to polarise the male characters on the basis that nothing about the human condition is one-dimensional or black and white. Sebastian is neither hero nor villain; his complex desires and contradictory behaviour is designed to portray reality. He is someone who generally tries to do the right thing, but is utterly obsessed by one person; at first she is a thirteen-year-old girl. The age was a deliberate choice.

The law is clear that an adult who is involved in sexual activity with someone under the age of sixteen is committing an offence, unless they reasonably believe that the person is sixteen or over — but a child under the age of thirteen can never give consent.⁷ The interesting component is the cut-off age of thirteen; perhaps becoming a teenager is the arbitrary measure of maturity.

In this case Sebastian is guilty of sexual abuse because he knows that Lara is not over sixteen; he is tormented by his own moral dilemma, society's view that he is a paedophile, and his own justification that it was only ever about one woman/girl. There are stereotypical views on paedophiles and I wanted to explore predatory behaviour insofar as it comes in all shapes and forms. In this regard, *Lolita* was useful as a study in character. Nabokov was deliberate in creating the charming Humbert Humbert, his narrative voice is engaging and affable (except for his predilection for young girls) and that was of interest in respect of my own construction of character. I almost liked Humbert Humbert until he describes: '...her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep'.⁸

As an aside, the influence of Nabokov with regards to this project is not limited to *Lolita*. The epigraph in the second section is taken from an interview Nabokov gave to the BBC in 1962⁹ and reflects his views on memory, which speaks to the entire novel. As a study of literary translation, his ability to craft prose in a language that wasn't his native tongue and his view on translation was a key part of the research. In some ways there are less serious echoes in the novel itself, in *Vlad the cat* and *Amir as lepidopterist* — I was struck by one of the last conversations Nabokov had with his son. He talked of a butterfly, as if it was a foreshadowing

⁷ Sexual Offences Act 2003 section 9

⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (London, Penguin Modern Classics, 2000) p. 176.

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (London, Penguin Modern Classics, 2011) p. 8.

of his own death: “a certain butterfly was already on the wing” and something in his glance said he did not believe he would see it again.¹⁰

When I contemplated the narrative for this section, I had a vision of a girl with blood on her hands and no recollection/understanding as to why it was there. It is known that memory can be manipulated and that people are selective (intentionally and unintentionally) about what they remember. Scientific research demonstrates that recollections are fragile and malleable; a number of experiments have been conducted around the effectiveness of implanting false memories (the research of Elizabeth Loftus on the malleability of memory was particularly useful to my project).¹¹ Amnesia as a framing device seems overdone, however psychological fugues are less so and more fitting for the character I wanted to create. In layman’s terms, it has been shown that as a response to trauma some individuals suffer a fugue (a dissociative episode), a survival mechanism to block out what happened. In extreme cases certain individuals reinvent themselves entirely with no memory of their former lives. I was deliberate in not giving Lara any formally diagnosed condition. Drugs, dissociative episode, dishonesty – we don’t know what drives her. For credibility purposes, Elizabeth Howell’s *The Dissociative Mind*¹² was particularly useful in explaining how disassociation manifests itself.

The narrative wasn’t designed to adhere to the genre of detective fiction; the death of Clarissa was solely used as a premise for my characters to meet. While it involves a crime, it doesn’t follow the genre tropes of either (a) police procedure (these sections were deliberately streamlined) or (b) discovering who killed Clarissa (where dissociation would have been explored more as a plot device). The ‘did she or didn’t she’ component is never meant to be answered; it represents the idea of the ‘unknowable’.

While the carpet started out as the only link between the sections, as I began writing this narrative the idea of familial threads took shape (mainly because of the fractious relationship between Lara and her mother) and this was developed to further connect the various parts.

Narrative Two: Conversation

When I was fourteen, my father and I visited Tehran but the night we arrived, after months of ceasefire, Iraqi planes started a bombing campaign. My cousins were all terrified but I didn’t appreciate the gravity of the situation. I didn’t live through the war. I stayed one week and then was safely back in England. My cousins never had a choice; because of where they were born they were restricted.

¹⁰Lila Azam Zanganeh, *The Enchanter: An Adventure in the Land of Nabokov* (London, Penguin Group, 2011) p. 10.

¹¹Elizabeth Loftus, ‘Creating False Memories’, *Scientific American Inc* (September 1997) p. 70-75.

¹²Elizabeth Howell, *The Dissociative Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2005)

During that visit my uncles were on a business trip in Thailand (one of the places they were free to travel and bring back goods to alleviate rations). The idea of Sam and Lyla was conceived from an anecdote my uncle told me of one of his friends who became involved with a “ladyboy” (this term is universally used in this context and not disparagingly) although his friend was entirely unaware that she – and I don’t use this pronoun lightly – was transgender. When I was in my mid-twenties, I walked through Patpong market for the first time, and I recall the women, in their flamboyant clothing, standing at the entrances of the bars that lined the market. At the time I, too, had no idea that many were transgender.

I don’t know what it feels like to be at odds with the gender you are born with and I was reluctant to write from the perspective of a character in the trans community, to delve into the struggles with gender identity, even though I was keen to write about gender in this way as a construct of identity. This reticence was about representation. On this topic, I saw an old friend recently and during the evening he asked me whether he was in my novel. Before I had a chance to respond, he asked whether any black people were in my narrative. I didn’t answer which made him laugh, and we got into a discussion around representation and the debates around cultural appropriation; and further, into the meaning of censorship and artistic expression. He was bewildered. In response to Lionel Shriver’s speech on cultural appropriation, a number of authors were asked their view and largely felt that writers should be free to write what they want. Specifically, Kamila Shamsie: ‘...don’t set boundaries around your imagination. But don’t be lazy or presumptuous in your writing either.’ A. L. Kennedy, ‘Fiction doesn’t appropriate, it creates...’ and Stella Duffy, “Write what you know” is a tired maxim that most writers abandon eventually, “write who you are” is even more restrictive.¹³

I settled on the perspective of Clarissa, who is in love and in a quasi-platonic relationship with Lyla. During my four years of teaching, students were often candid about their own experiences around gender struggles, and one of the concerns raised centred on the stereotypes of token characters portrayed in fiction. My own friendships are not forged on the basis of someone’s sexuality, gender or race and I wanted to take the same approach to my characters. Lyla isn’t introduced as ‘transgender’ (Lara doesn’t label her). In the same way we don’t see heterosexuality as a defining component of our heroes and heroines in literature – ‘queer theorists scorn the tradition of “homosexual” and “heterosexual”¹⁴ – I didn’t want Lyla to be seen solely in this way. That said, I couldn’t ignore that barriers exist; through Sam and Clarissa

¹³ Lionel Shriver, ‘I hope the concept of cultural appropriation is a passing fad.’ *Guardian Books*, 13 September 2016 and, ‘Whose life is it anyway? Novelists have their say on Cultural Appropriation,’ *Guardian Books*, 1 October 2016

¹⁴ Dinitia Smith, “Queer Theory” is Entering the Literary Mainstream’, *The New York Times*, 17 January 1998

we see how they place constraints on their relationship with Lyla because she doesn't conform to their notion of love (and gender).

Life in Bangkok is portrayed through the past recollections of the characters rather than as a setting for the narrative but in order to write authentically, extensive research into the trans community in Thailand was conducted. There were a number of texts, podcasts and programmes that offer insight, particularly 'Ladyboys' shown on Sky TV.¹⁵ I am not inclined to list the podcasts, as is predictable with the Internet I found myself down some interesting rabbit holes. There wasn't much by way of literature other than the above, but a book that was useful was *Ladyboys – The Secret World of Thailand's Third Gender*¹⁶, the real life accounts of the 'Kathoey' (trans people). As an aside, there are other reasons that the narrative of Iran and Thailand are linked:

Since 1983, when Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa permitting the acceptance of transgender people in society, sex reassignment surgery has been available and Iranians can take out loans for the surgery. In fact, except for Thailand, Iran carries out more sex reassignment operations than any other country in the world.¹⁷

I restructured this narrative extensively, partly from a style perspective – at first it was written as first person and some components as second person – but also from a framing angle. Initially Lara wasn't present in the text other than Clarissa addressing her directly through the notebook and the entire section was written as a notebook/diary. It was too disconnected from the first narrative and focussed too heavily on the transgender community. Upon revisions, it became about Lara's discovery of Clarissa (although that isn't her purpose) through: (a) the notebook, (b) the conversation she has with Lyla, and (c) their imaginings of Clarissa's past. This reflects how people are a summation of various representations, what we see, what we are told, what we imagine.

Narrative Three: Beginnings

This is the overarching narrative although it is told last. Of the three narratives, it was the easiest to write and needed the least amount of restructuring. This narrative is about redemption, an idea that forgiveness and hope can exist. In light of the current global political divisiveness, I endeavoured to present a different perspective about Iran. Remember Shah Darius. We seldom

¹⁵ 'Ladyboys' *Documentary*, Sky Living, 2012

¹⁶ Susan Aldous & Pornchai Sereemongkonpal, *The Secret World of Thailand's Third Gender* (Ireland: Maverick House, 2008)

¹⁷ Rachel Banning-Lover, 'Where are the most difficult places in the world to be gay or transgender?' *Guardian*, 1 March 2017

hear of Iran's literature and culture; it is hidden beyond the veil of the western media. Layla's narrative was plotted against the key moments in Iran's modern history, which led to extensive research into the political and social development of Iran during the twentieth century. Russia also features throughout *Burning Thread* (not only the literary references) through its geographic proximity, the sharing of the Caspian Sea, and its tempestuous history with Iran. This narrative could have developed into a standalone novel; therefore, there were choices that had to be made in respect of brevity in places, for example, I was unable to consider all of the significant events in Iran's modern history that would have had bearing on life in Iran. I had to choose where to streamline the plot (e.g. Farah's illness/death) and characters (alluding to the friends and family on the trips to Ramsar but without further development). This section was determined by the structure and the fact that it was the concluding part of the overall narrative rather than being standalone.

While fluent in spoken Farsi, I can't read Arabic script (Farsi uses the same letters except that it should be noted that there are thirty-two letters (sounds) while Arabic has twenty-eight). It occurred to me as I was writing this narrative that I was thinking about the story and characters in Farsi. The tone that emerged was different to the others two sections; the style was more expressive and whimsical, and with more of a narrator presence.

In Shiraz, after we travelled to the Persepolis, we also visited Hafez's Mausoleum. One of the many disparities in the dichotomy of my heritage is the relatively small amount of Persian literature I have read. For a while, I read the works of Hafez, Omar Khayyam and Rumi but translations are limited; we are geographically (there is a limited access to and knowledge of foreign literature) and linguistically (not everything is translated and our reading of foreign texts is inherently reliant on translation) constrained in our reading material. For this section I had two aims: (1) writing about Iran in a way that pierces the media bias, (2) retelling a Persian narrative in my native language. In John Barth's *Literature of Exhaustion*, he discusses the concept of recreating seminal works, and how it can be improved upon through rewriting without actually having to go through the process (as in Borges's story "*Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*"). Barth contemplates rewriting "The 1001 Nights, complete with appendices and the like, in ten volumes, and for intellectual purposes I needn't even write it."¹⁸

Needless to say, many stories have been retold in various guises; for example, every Shakespeare play, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Grimm's fairy tales. Joyce's *Ulysses* uses a framework based on Homers, *The Odyssey*. I considered the seminal work of Fedowski's *Shahnameh* (The Book of Kings) but for a number of reasons – one of which was the notion of

¹⁸ John Barth, *The Literature of Exhaustion: The Friday Book; Essays and other Non-Fiction*. (London: the John Hopkins University Press, 1984) p. 69

people being kept apart because of perception – I settled on the epic poem of Nizami Ganjavi, *Layla and Majnun*. It is interesting to note that this was a folktale (there are different versions depending on region) long before Nizami wrote his version. My rendition is also about doomed lovers; Amir (like Majnun) is tortured because he is kept from his love but as a result of his own weaknesses and mistakes.

There are two relevant versions of Layla and Majnun in English: a translation by Paul Smith¹⁹, which is close to the original verse structure (in terms of rhythm and rhyme), and an older translation from the 1960s, that is written in a prose poetry form²⁰. For the purposes of my narration, I used this earlier translation by Rudolph Gelpke, not because it is more ‘accurate’ but rather because this text served my narrative. As Nabokov posits, speaking of a translation of a Russian poem, that sometimes, literal translation can be problematic:

Now, if you take a dictionary and look up those four words you will obtain the following foolish, flat and familiar statement: “I remember a wonderful moment.”...For no stretch of the imagination can persuade an English reader that “I remember a wonderful moment” is the perfect beginning of a perfect poem. The first thing I discovered was that the expression “a literal translation” is more or less nonsense.²¹

The more literal rendition of Layla and Majnun was less accessible. To be clear, my narrative wasn’t a retelling as such, and I used the poem only as a framing device for my characters.

As our reading of foreign texts is inherently reliant on translation, and my own imaginings of this narrative in Farsi, it made me consider the art of translation in literature. Nabokov wrote lyrical prose in a language other than his mother tongue: ‘I abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second rate brand of English...’²². In my novel it is a different type of translation, not a direct conversion of written Farsi (I had to rely on a translation for Layla and Majnun) but an expression in English of a narrative imagined in Farsi. Translation adds another layer of creativity to the narrative; Nabokov posits that a translator ‘must have as much talent, or at least the same kind of talent, as the author he chooses.’²³ Lydia Davis stated upon translating *Madame Bovary* ‘there is room for plenty of different English versions’ and goes on to say, ‘we must get to know our own language even better when we are translating.’²⁴ Authors and translators have unique relationships; Laila Slimani describes Sam Taylor’s translation of her novel, *Lullaby*: ‘It is magic when you feel that

¹⁹ Paul Smith is a translator of Sufi poets from Persian, Arabic etc and various other texts

²⁰ Rudolph Gelpke, *The story of Layla and Majnun*, (New York: Omega Publications, 2011)

²¹ Vladimir Nabokov, ‘The Art of Translation’, *The New Republic*, 4 August 1941

²² Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 317

²³ Nabokov, *The Art of Translation*

²⁴ Lydia Davis, ‘Some Notes on Translation and on Madame Bovary’, *Paris Review*, Issue 198, Fall 2011

someone understands and respects your work so much. When I read my book in English I always think: that's the exact word I would have chosen.²⁵

Literary Traditions

Throughout this situating document, I have referred to various literary inspirations but I think it is also worth mentioning realism, as a literary tradition, and its influence on my writing. As a child, I enjoyed Dickens (notably *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*), who is labelled as a realist writer, although, on reflection, Eliot was correct that his work was playing to stereotype rather than reflecting reality: '...his preternaturally virtuous poor children and artisans, his melodramatic boatmen and courtesans.'²⁶ As a literary tradition, realist novels are dense in detail about life, families and society, through which theme is explored. Tolstoy reflected gender disparity (among other themes) of Russian society through the treatment of Anna compared to Vronsky, and Eliot's narrator in *Middlemarch* satirically addresses the role of women in the nineteenth century mainly through Dorothea. As a tradition, my interest continues to more modern texts such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, an example of contemporary realism.

A device often used in this tradition is that of the omniscient narrator – James Wood perhaps describes this more accurately as 'authorial omniscience'²⁷ – and I experimented with this during my first novel where I used an Eliotic narrator that existed as a separate character. Wood acknowledges the view that some consider it out-dated, although there is also an argument that it is re-emerging as a novelistic device²⁸. In the first draft of *Burning Thread*, I continued the practice of using an omniscient narrator but the tone didn't fit with the concept that we never truly know anyone. Through the various redrafts, and specifically in respect of the first two narratives, I moved away from the separate narrator's voice and used a more limited third person (using a free indirect style in relation to viewpoints). In the third section, there is perhaps more of an omniscient narrator presence, as the style of this narrative suits a more realist approach. Overall, rather than adopting an omniscient narrator in a formal sense, there are instances where I have used a more fluid and casual approach of prolepsis, and perhaps this breaks Flaubert's rule that an author should be "present everywhere and visible nowhere".²⁹

It would be misleading however to suggest that any one tradition is the sole influence of this project. I thought a great deal about what inspired me to write such tense and fractious

²⁵ Claire Armitstead, "It's a silent conversation": authors and translators on their unique relationship, *Guardian Books*, 6 April 2019

²⁶ George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', *The Westminster Review*, July 1856

²⁷ James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London Vintage 2009) p. 5.

²⁸ *ibid*, p5-6 & Elliott Holt, The Return of Omniscience, *The New York Times*, 8 September 2016.

²⁹ *The letters of Gustav Flaubert 1830-1857*, translated by Francis Steegmuller, (Harvard University Press, 1980)

relationships. Over the years I've been drawn to novels depicting complex and difficult relationships. Such novels are not restricted to only one literary tradition. To provide some examples: each of the characters in Du Marier's gothic novel *Rebecca*, Mrs Danvers, Rebecca, the second Mrs de Winter and Maxim, have unconventional relationships. When I revisited that novel for research, I thought about how we, as readers, are ready to forgive Maxim for murdering his first wife because of the way in which Rebecca is demonised; would readers forgive Lara if it were certain that she killed her mother? Similarly, in *Jayne Eyre*, we think little of Mr Rochester locking Bertha away until we have an alternate version of Antoniette in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (which is read as more of a modernist text). The fractious dynamic between Daisy Buchanan and Jay Gatsby, as well as the characters themselves, is perhaps one of the reasons that we keep revisiting *The Great Gatsby*. The unorthodox relationship of Tomáš and Tereza in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* – which, as an aside on the point of translation, was first published in French, rather than the original Czech – is at the heart of the novel. Therefore, realism is not the only tradition that influenced my work; it is specific novels that speak to my interest in people, relationships and the human condition.

Recently I babysat my two nephews and they asked me to lay down with them when it was bedtime (a typical delaying tactic). My six-year-old nephew wanted to discuss who the 'best' superhero was, rather reminiscent of Lara and Seb's discussion, and I argued the case for Superman (my nephew favours Batman). My brother tells me that it's a regular topic of conversation in their house. As I put forward a number of Superman's strengths, my nephew kept saying, 'yes but remember kryptonite.' There's not much argument against that. The nine-year-old told me he was more of a Star Wars fan than Marvel and DC (I liked that he used the name for the comics) and proceeded to tell me the backstories (entirely made up) for the lesser-known Jedi. We somehow got onto the topic of Cinderella and the six-year-old said he didn't know the story and hadn't watched the film. I kept trying to remember the Brother's Grimm tale but regrettably all that I could picture was the Disney adaptation. So I started to tell him a version of that but soon Cinderella had a slightly different vibe, she was more about empowerment and partnership rather than living happily ever after – it's an old folktale, I figured there is definitely artistic licence here.

Some stories are designed to be retold and perhaps my nephew will tell his own version one day; life has its inevitable circles. I wonder now though, what my nephew's recollection of that night will be, whether he will remember it as fondly as I do or whether he will remember it at all.

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