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All the Little Bird-Hearts

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Abstract

The novel, *All the Little Bird-Hearts*, is the narrative of an autistic woman and, as such, offers a rarely provided perspective. The majority of cultural and literary work on the subject of autism is observational, being about atypical people, rather than by such individuals. This thesis is an alternative to the traditional, externally constructed narrative on autism; rather than depicting the autist by their perceived failings at being neurotypical, it speaks from inside the experience and in the first person. When I first began writing this work, I listened to a radio panel critiquing a translated Japanese poem. The conversation centred not on the poem itself but focussed instead on the ways in which it did not conform to the English model of poetry. All beauty and meaning were inevitably lost in such a translation. If the programme had regularly featured poetry which varied from these applied conventions, it would have enabled the speakers to debate the Japanese poem from a point of appreciation, rather than via the perceived Otherness in the narrative.

The provision of authentic narratives on difference, such as *All the Little Bird-Hearts*, informs readers about conditions, cultures and communities which are otherwise constructed by people outside those experiences. A wider availability of minority authored writing also improves visibility for those who inhabit identities of invisible disabilities, such as autism, and augments the associated communities.

It is challenging to authentically represent a spectrum condition within the first-person narrative of one protagonist. The lived experience of ASC is entirely different, both from person to person and, also from day to day. However, there are central atypical traits and experiences which are shared, and this commonality is what *All the Little Bird-Hearts* speaks to. The novel is not an idealistic fiction, but one which acknowledges the various traits of the condition, illustrating communication differences, social confusion and alienation, and also the subsequent losses experienced by the atypical protagonist. It also depicts an autistic life,

though, which is often fulfilling and sometimes comfortable. These positive aspects are experienced by the protagonist, Sunday, when she allows herself to be unencumbered by expectations of neurotypical conformity and pursues her own model of behaviour and interests, as she does at work, for example, and in her friendship with David.

In the final scene in the book (p.299-3), Sunday shares a moment of engagement with a street performer and this is the conclusion of the narrative theme that encourages living without masking one's condition. The watching crowd silently predict that the performance will conclude with the throwing of glitter and, subsequently, they move out of reach before they are covered. Sunday, though, remains and enjoys the resultant sensory experience; it is the direct result of her different ability in predicting the behaviour of others, and one which she is then enjoyably alone in receiving. The narrated observation of the entertainer also provides a distance in which Sunday can be recognised as separate from the costumed entertainer, both by herself and by the reader. The scene is confirmation that Sunday is aware what performativity looks like and that is not for her.

All the Little Bird-Hearts is primarily a fiction in which the protagonist develops a greater understanding of herself and of her own specific needs and boundaries via the experience of personal tragedies and losses. This element of depicted self-development is not peculiar to atypical people but will be universal among readers of the work.

Table of Contents:

Page 1: Title page

Page 2: Acknowledgements

Page 3-4: Abstract

Page 5: Table of Contents

Page 6-299: All the Little Bird-Hearts (novel)

Page 301-319: *Dear Neurotypical People: the Autoethnography of an Inarticulate Subject*

(research paper)

Page 320-326: Bibliography

prologue

I live in a scooped-out valley of a town. Where orderly roads are buffeted by farmland on one side and then confronted on the other by the flat lake. The grey water spreads possessively along the length of our town and walls us in. The street behind mine is met abruptly by fields; land that slopes resolutely upwards and away from the town. The road out of here slices through the King's farm and this intrusion into worked land exposes the private rituals of cultivation. Tourists drive past the agricultural patterns of the country without understanding. They only want to see the lake, which I no longer care for. I have learned to love the land before anything else.

I have always lived here, so I know that the end of summer brings fire to the fields. The little windows on my airless bus home will be optimistically propped open and the passengers will fan themselves with their newspapers. We will pass unobserved by the post-harvest farm workers sitting on hay bales in the late afternoon heat. We will see the new gaps left by the harvest, will watch those toothless dry-mud mouths disappear as the farmworkers throw soil across them. The men are quick and lean; they move around the fields in rehearsed synchronicity. Bare-chested, they position themselves in the centre of the field, facing each other in an approximation of a circle while behind them child-sized flames consume what is barren on the land. Even if I look away, the smoke will still rush into my lungs and it will be something rotten, but sweet with knowing. And I will grind my teeth together, so I do not shout a warning and I will clench my hands into fists, so they do not fly at the window like birds trapped behind glass. Then I will repeat, *brucca la terra, brucca la terra*, to myself. This is the way Italians describe the intensity with which Sicilians work their land; *burning the earth*. I will whisper this to myself, as softly as a prayer, to make the fires seem good and pure.

This is the only day of the year that I see the flames for the warning that they are. It was first my family, and then Vita, who taught me that fire can be mistaken for light and can call to you in the same way. I know now that fire waits prettily and patiently inside little bird-hearts everywhere. That it behaves like light, but it burns. It burns even beneath the water and inside our homes.

our houses are lone twins

It was only three years ago that I saw Vita for the first time. The day began as my days always did then, greeting a daughter for whom adolescence meant allowing me increasingly smaller glimpses of herself. Dolly was already, then, becoming more a suggestion of someone, a shadow rather than the whole and encompassing person she had been to me when she was a child. I woke her before showering and dressing, then, predictably, had to wake her for a second time before going downstairs. I was in a longstanding white food routine that summer and my meals typically comprised of various breakfasts, toast, cereal or crumpets. On days when food does not have to be dry, scrambled eggs or omelettes can also count as white. I cannot tell if it is a day on which an egg is a white food until I hold one in my hand. It is a small but real joy to me that as an adult I can decide, without explanation, whether eggs qualify as white, and therefore, edible, on any given day. Without being told I am making a show of myself. That I am hysterical, attention-seeking and to be ignored until I eat something which is violently coloured.

Occasionally, and only in front of Dolly, I would showily eat something that did not adhere to my assigned list of foods. *You can eat normally then; you can do what the rest of us do without a fuss.* My mother said this, often. I answered her silently when she was alive and I continue to do so now she is dead: *there is a cost, mother, always a cost to such transgressions and I am the one who pays.* I am the one whose throat and body burn when I politely swallow down food of the wrong colour; it is my arm that itches when a neighbour greets me by lightly placing a hand on my objecting skin. I wear the marks of these encounters, these painful sensory interruptions.

In truth, though, the cost always felt less when it was Dolly for whom I performed. Because she is all that I have loved more than adherence to my routines. That summer, I was already afraid of what was between us; I thought of it as a well-fed creature who was expanding rapidly,

separating us further from one another every day. My response to Dolly's distance had always been to work harder on the illusion of normalcy. Whenever I was able, I concentrated on overriding my natural behaviours in front of her. In a white phase, I daringly added an admittedly pale, yet non-white piece of food to my meals, chopped and peeled apple, pale green grapes, a piece of poached fish or chicken. During a period when fruit and pink yoghurt were all I found edible, I would make us a plate of cheese and biscuits to share in front of the television and shudder privately as the dry crumbs spread out like fingers in my throat.

The previous year, a local cat had taken a liking to our garden. A taut grey creature who stared fixedly into the distance whenever approached, he was as a little statesman, affronted by contact, but straining to remain polite. Despite this apparent disinterest in our company, he visited us regularly for a time, bringing the small dead bodies of mice and voles. These he placed carefully at our feet, before sitting in apparent reluctance next to us, his body tense and his little face turned away. At first, we tried to pat him, but although he did not move from his chosen position, he visibly shuddered at our touch and, in his own unhappy way, he taught us to ignore him completely.

When I ate non-white items for my daughter, I held myself as tightly as the cat and, like him, I hoped the sacrifice would be appreciated wordlessly and without fuss. Dolly scrupulously refrained from direct comments on my attempts to challenge my style of specific eating. I chose, as I often did, to read her disinterest in me as discretion. In return, I refrained from describing to her how alarming I found the vibrancy and textures in the broad range of foods that she favoured.

I realise, now, that perhaps this gentleness between us was an imagining of my own. All the non-saying between us, the unspoken compromises, these felt like love to me. But I have come to see that my daughter does not find comfort in silence; that this is what *I* find there. I know,

now, that we are separate and unlike, in this way as in so many others. I should have remembered how quickly she came to hate that cat.

Shortly after I woke Dolly that morning for a second time, the door slammed, informing me that she had left for school and that I was now alone in the house. But voices from upstairs whispered insistently down to me in the hall. Her television had been left on, as it often was, to talk into the empty room like an elderly and confused guest. The set was then a recent gift from her father and the austere black boxiness of it was satisfyingly at odds with the otherwise girlish bedroom. These furnishings were her grandmother's choice many years ago and the Laura Ashley frills had not been to Dolly's own, more sophisticated taste for some time. She and I had planned to finally redecorate her room that summer, but this conversation had begun to be replaced by her wondering aloud about how she would be off on a gap year or away at university within a couple of years and after that, she would muse, one hand on her pointed Forrester chin, *how often she would actually return here? Because, you know, the travelling ... and new friends and, well, ... a career I expect.* When she said the word *career*, she gave a little intake of breath, the giggle of a child made to reference an embarrassing term in a biology class. Her conversation was often ungrammatical, lacking in clear subject or in structure, yet fraught with meaning. While she spoke in incoherent, broken phases about her future, her tone was especially light and lovely. Hers was a pretty song, and one designed to distract; much of what Dolly said to me that summer met this description. Her conversation was a beautiful trick so that the resultant wound was felt later and more deeply when she was no longer there. The cheerfulness with which she spoke of leaving was as terrible to me as the sentiment itself.

Although I had entered Dolly's bedroom that morning with the intention of turning the television off, the factual nature of the discussion prevented me from doing so. An elderly professor was being interviewed by a jaunty woman in a brightly coloured dress, the pattern of which was unsuitable for television, as it appeared to move and flicker independently, like a

competing programme onscreen. The professor was an authority on both Dickens and the conventions of the Victorian Christmas. He apparently spent his summers on a cruise ship from which he gave lectures and sold signed books, one of which he was holding and occasionally managed to get into the shot. He was obviously being filmed remotely and had been positioned at a point on the deck where the railings could not be seen behind his head and shoulders. He appeared to be floating, surrounded only by ocean and the motion of the endless sea cast sparkles around his tweed-covered upper body.

The newsreader in the studio was enthusiastic in a bright and uninformed manner, but conversation between them was complicated by their disparate locations. The satellite delay was not referenced or explained, and this created the appearance of hesitancy in the interviewee. In the immediate space after each query — *When did the British first start decorating a tree at Christmas? Why are Dickens' novels so long?* — the professor silently stared into the camera with his features resolutely unchanged. The presenter enthusiastically posed questions to the waiting professor; her patterned dress flickered uncertainly on the screen. Her judiciously performed interest somehow shaped the professor's unresponsive face into something hostile. Once each question finally reached him, his expression was transformed, and the process of a reply moved visibly across his face. But his initial, blank face and delayed answers were painfully reminiscent of my daily interactions. It took me back to an embarrassed parent elbowing the back of my school blazer as I silently organised perfect sentences in my head, but struggled to bring them to the surface, like a deft swimmer trapped underwater. Both strangers and acquaintances regularly repeat questions to me while I fail to respond within their indecipherable time frame. Their eyes fix on me still as though their sternness will somehow extract the unvoiced words.

The professor's answers, when they finally came, were minutely crafted. I could pass undetected, I thought, in a place where conversation functioned in this extended time frame.

Despite my interest in the content however, the delayed conversational response and the accompanying discomfort were so familiar that I eventually turned the programme off. The professor stared impassively out at me as he faded with the picture, a lone face in close-up, waiting in silence for the words to land.

I began to tidy Dolly's bedroom, enjoying the reclaimed silence in my home. As I pushed the curtains fully back to allow the already piercing early light in, I saw a small, dark-haired woman lying on the lawn next door. The house was a holiday home, owned by Tom and his wife who came for the summer holidays and for occasional long weekends every year. Locals did not typically take to the summer people, whose numbers had increased in recent years, but Tom was so affable he had managed to remain outside this category. He had three children; all were so close together in age and appearance that it had seemed for the past few years that they were bringing back the same unchanged infant back each summer and that it was the older children who were the newcomers. Tom's wife was fair-haired, and as soft-bodied and sweet-faced as a child herself. The woman in the garden was none of these things.

Her obliviousness to my gaze immediately moved me. She was on her back with her arms and legs spread out to a degree that looked unnatural, as though she had fallen from a real height or been positioned, unconscious, by someone else entirely. Here was the pleasure of observation without the ambiguity of eye contact, which costs but never confirms what you are being promised or refused. I once watched my baby daughter like this while she floated easily on her back across the screen of a scanning machine. *I have loved you longest*, I would tell Dolly when I felt sentimental, making my case in a contest that she did not, in any case, care to enter. *I knew you first*, I said, over and over to my daughter, *I watched you, loved you before you ever saw me*. I spoke first to her watchful baby face, and later, I addressed her composed woman-face with the same tender and misplaced ownership. Her eyes remained unchanged with age; always, she was suspicious and scrupulous in equal measure.

The woman who would become my own Vita lay on Tom's green-striped lawn, as sweetly motionless in the sunshine as the fruit trees that surrounded her. The previous summer had been a long season, augmented as it was on either side by a warm spring and a gentle autumn; at its peak, the airlessness had confined us indoors in the manner of a belligerent father. The year of Vita, though, began as a demonstration of sunshine, a visual performance of summer without real heat. Those early days were memorably bright with a hazy quality of light promising a warmth it did not provide. On reflection, that time seems now like something of a dress rehearsal for what arrived later that year, for the explosion of heat that paced up and down our hazy streets, with a fixed grin and outstretched arms aflame.

Vita's arms were spread out horizontally and her hands were placed upwards, as though waiting for expected gifts. Her beautifully pinned-up hair and the inky neatness of her tailored clothes alarmed me; such a formal appearance gave her position the suggestion of collapse or violence rather than intention. I ran downstairs and into my own garden, noisily slamming the French doors and then opening the creaky door of the shed, to check her response. Her head turned towards me and as she opened her eyes, we were looking directly at one another over the low wooden fence, the intimacy of her waking between us. Her lovely face, though, was serene, and she stood up to walk into her house entirely unselfconsciously, as though alone and unwatched.

Then my doorbell rang, and she was there. At my front door, sleepily blinking and stretching her arms behind her in the fake sunshine, fingers entwined behind her back. 'Mmmm...' she crooned softly to herself and then laughed as she saw me. 'I am not —yet — quite awake!' she said.

Qwaite awayke, I repeated silently to myself, *Quwaite. Awayke*.

I frequently mimic the pronunciation of others and have learned to keep this to myself where possible. I like to tap along with their syllables and trace both the emphasis and the softness.

The sharpness of Vita's vowels was that of a foreign speaker with an immaculate and studied accent. It was a deliberately acquired language, not one inherited from a parent. I listen to dialogue intently; since childhood, this practice has protected me from eyes that are always seeking mine in greetings or conversation. Expressions typically tell me nothing more than what is being said. The manner of speaking; the tone, the points of hesitations, the emphasis; this is what talks to me.

As a teenager, I had identified an elderly woman in the local bus queue as Swedish and she objected furiously. She had not been in the country of her birth since she was an infant, she said, and she could not understand how I had heard any trace of difference in her accent. She persisted in asking me questions — *Did I know her? Who had I been speaking to? Who was I?* The local aspect of her accent became more pronounced as though she were trying to persuade the other passengers; she became a non-flying bird flapping its wings to convince the others she belonged. Their response was to visibly retreat from her, as even I knew they would. *Don't try so hard, they can sense it*, my sister would caution me each day as we approached school and the girls turned their backs to me and only smiling faces to her. On the bus, the angry woman had come very close to me and put her hand on my arm, demanding to know who I was. I lowered my face and imagined she was talking in her native Swedish instead, so her words could not reach me. Sometimes I remember not to reveal that I can hear where people are from, where their people are from; at other times, the sheer pleasure of solving the mystery raises my voice and I am unable to remain quiet.

'Hello! *I am Vita*,' said the fragrant little woman who stood on my doorstep.

Duh-duh! DUHHH dee dee-dee, I imitated silently, searching for patterns that might suggest another county, or country, of origin or a social position. It helps enormously to use my fingers in the style of a conductor when I listen to conversation, but I have found this to distract and

perturb the speaker. At a first introduction, the speaker typically emphasises the greeting first and then their name, but Vita's deliberate pause on the personal pronoun gave her the air of an awaited celebrity — *Here I am at last!*

My father-in-law has a longstanding, and often referenced, friendship with a local and mildly celebrated actor. I had met the man several times at their house and each time he greeted me as if for the first time and with a fixed routine; he dipped his head and looked up modestly before announcing his name with a small and twisted smile, as if we were simply playing at formalities, because no-one needed to be informed as to who he was. Vita, though, was not congratulating herself. The excited tone of her introduction felt like an acknowledgement of something between us; her accented 'I' seemed to include me. It was as though I had been expecting her, or, at least, had been aware of her existence, shared some familiarity with her. *But it is always the duty of the established resident to make friendly overtures*, I thought. My etiquette book commits a whole chapter to neighbours and new acquaintances; it never mentions the possibility of you watching a stranger sleep before they awaken and appear at your front door. This woman's friendliness had cast me as a breaker of social rules.

'I saw you and couldn't wait to introduce myself. I wanted to meet you. My husband says I am so impatient to make friends I don't give anyone the chance to actually invite us anywhere!' she giggled.

Her laugh was loud and unapologetic, and she did not watch me to see my reaction and measure her own expression against it. She did not cover her mouth or try to swallow her amusement, as people do, but instead opened her mouth wider, displaying rows of shiny little teeth. *Calm down, calm down, quiet, quiet, quiet*, I had always been cautioned as a child when I made any noise. *Speak up, repeat that, say that again*, I have been told regularly as an adult, but Vita's admission of eagerness over etiquette removed all blame from me for this back to front neighbourhood introduction and I was grateful. Her accent carried the considered

precision of a moneyed life, of tennis lessons, private education and summers spent abroad. The tone was soothing and self-assured; that of a guest ordering drinks from an inexperienced barman. I realised that, far from being foreign, Vita had the most English accent I had ever heard. Her pronunciation was so clipped and perfect that even I, who makes a practice of detecting incongruities, thought it must be a deliberate and carefully executed performance, a parody. But her voice came cleanly and effortlessly to her. I thought then that, even if she swore, it would sound like something profound and considered. And this was proved true; Vita used coarse language frequently. She cursed easily, and the words fell away like discarded cigarettes, collecting at her feet but never touching her.

‘Why are you in Tom’s house? Are you a friend of his?’ I asked.

Close up, I could tell she was actually older than me. Her slim elegance made her appear younger from a distance. Her gently lined face placed her perhaps in her mid to late fifties, with sharp eyes and the kind of skin whose upkeep requires regular and carefully oiled exposure to sunshine. *She will not keep that colour in our town much past August. Nor will she have much opportunity to show off a tan here, covered as we mostly are in coats and scarves.* I told myself this in my mother’s voice, but even as I silently scolded Vita, I knew that this woman would be tanned all year round and that she would find plenty of occasions which demanded the kind of clothes that celebrated her sun touched skin. She was the colour of the glossy chestnut mare that lives on the King’s family farm, a rich, warm brown that speaks of careful breeding and maintenance. The horse was a valuable one; a prizewinning hunter who was professionally clipped and rugged warmly all winter, then covered with a special sheet every morning throughout the summer so that her colour was not bleached and made uneven by the sun. For a woman like Vita, that tone means frequent trips abroad and summers spent stretched out sun-bathing. The fruit pickers at the King’s farm are tanned, but theirs is a dusty and incidental high

colour, often touched with an angry red and broken by the white stripes that ill-chosen clothes have left behind.

There was a glittery sheen to Vita's body that I have never seen on anyone else. I do not expect to know another Vita. She is a person-shaped precious stone, something mined and brought up to the surface to live among the pebbles, a shiny reminder of our comparative dullness. Where I am pale and insubstantial, Vita is dark and deliberately formed, as real as a piece of marble. And as cold under your hand. I am a stutter of a person, a glitch that flickers; I am the air blurred by the summer sun.

'Tom? Oh, yes, Tom! He is a good friend of ours. Sweet, *sweet* man, isn't he? Sweet. And what is your name?'

Her unexpected presence on my doorstep that day was an awkwardness and I mentally leafed through the files of first meetings in my head. Although Vita was watching me, there was not that familiar tick-tock of waiting; she seemed entirely without curiosity or concern. Her steady gaze was without expectation and this was both new and pacifying. Eventually I introduced myself, trying to repeat the pattern of her initial greeting: *Duh-duh! DUHHH dee dee-dee.*

'Hello! *I* am Sunday.'

As I said my name, I stepped backwards to create space between us. I am constantly reversing away from people; the whole world is a revolving series of rooms that I have walked into by mistake. And I am never allowed enough time to settle but am instead called out into another room which demands another, unknown set of behaviours. Sometimes I back myself flat against a wall while escaping from an acquaintance and then I move sideways instead, crab-like and rigid-jointed.

Vita replied: 'You're Sunday? Fantastic, darling! Fantastic.' She was all approval, as if we had agreed to make up names and my choice pleased her.

I did not ask her to explain; long ago, I tempered the part of me that expects people to be clear. But accepting confusion means living alone down the rabbit hole. It means I must cling tightly to whatever realism and facts can be confirmed, to the accents and voice patterns that speak truthfully. It means a cartoonish life where the impossible and unscientific must not be queried, however peculiar they seem. The owner of my local shop does not greet me with the cheerful *hello* that he uses with other customers. When I go into his shop on overcast days, he asks, *what have you done with the sun?* He speaks sharply and without humour, as if I am withholding something material that rightly belongs to him. His other greetings for me include querying why I brought rain, or snow, or wind, holding me accountable for everything except sunshine. His preferred and commonly employed rejoinder is the equally nonsensical, *bring summer with you tomorrow, alright love?* and this is reserved for goodbyes. The man thanks me for pleasant weather in the polite and routine tone of someone handed their change. His son is now old enough to work on the till after school and he also credits me exclusively for the weather, using the same phrases and the unamused tone of his father, as if the older man is speaking through him. There is no reasonable answer to make.

I have perfected a sound like an exhalation for people who talk like this: *ha!* This effectively indicates that I am both amused by and understand their point. It is the answer to all social riddles which cannot be solved by stating the alternative option; *that's interesting*. People like this observation, too, but both responses must only be made during the silences between their statements and not spoken during their speech, even when they are repeating themselves. Do not reference their repetition or correct them, however factually wrong they are. Also, silence is sometimes a breath and not a pause in their conversation, so wait for eight seconds to be sure which it is before speaking. People, too, like eye contact. But not too much. I have a system for this, as I do for many of the social situations in which I find myself. I hold the person's gaze

for five seconds and then away for six, then back on for five. If I am unable to reach five seconds, I try instead for three before allowing myself to look away.

People do not like you to fidget, or tap your fingers, or to move much at all; they prefer stillness. And smiles. When I am in company for too long and holding myself tightly, I count the seconds until the other person stops talking and I can excuse myself to go to the loo. There is no average for this; people can often talk without encouragement for some time. When I escape, I will lock the door quietly, in my composed public manner. Once in this bliss of privacy, I allow myself to twitch and turn in every ugly and awkward pose that comes. I tick like a clock, repeating one movement over and over, until I have exhausted it. I pick at my skin, my hair and my clothes. I locate all my edges. For a long time, I assumed everyone had to constantly relieve themselves of the effort that company demands, until I mentioned the counting and the other tricks to my sister once and she laughed. When I told her exactly how I calmed myself, she said, *what? what are you talking about?* At first, she laughed and then she spoke to me in our mother's sharpest tone, which always, always, meant, *don't tell me this. Tell me nothing that makes you different, nothing that makes our family different.*

But the relief is what I focus on when you are speaking, and I frown back at you in concentration. So many rules and reminders that I can hardly hear a word you say. And then, too, I exist alone and in a different time zone than you, many moments behind your own.

On my doorstep, Vita took my move away from her as an invitation and walked inside, exclaiming on the similarity of our homes. She patted my wrist as she passed me, and the navy fabric of her suit was surprisingly soft against my skin. Her surety was something like perfume and I breathed it in. She commented favourably on the uniformly white walls that ran throughout my house, but it was in the non-possessive manner with which one approves a passing view or a glimpsed artefact. I knew, already, of course, that her own home, wherever

it was, would be riotous with colour of all kinds, visitors, pictures, clutter, noise. My house and Tom's are lone twins on the quiet street, two early Victorian buildings huddled together amongst a collection of mid-twentieth century semi-detached family homes. The wide rectangles of identical, paired glazing on these neighbouring houses gives the appearance of collective astonishment fixed on our two older and more ornately finished homes.

Tom's home, the first to be built and positioned at the far end of the cul-de-sac, enjoys the most private position. His house has the same large walled garden as mine and also has a sloping orchard which absorbs the rainwater that would otherwise pool over the surrounding gardens. The builder of our two houses went bankrupt before his plans to replicate the solid red brick houses, with their elaborate porches, along the street could be realised. The two detached Victorian buildings with their square and serious lines then, are incompatible with the smaller rendered houses surrounding them and this shared difference affords our homes an air of considered solidarity against their subsequent neighbours. The feeling I have for my home is painful; that of a spouse who has married above themselves and whose love is frequently interspersed with the cold panic of possible desertion. A house is something I could not have acquired for myself and I think, often, of the parallel life I might have had, housed in a disapproving institution or homeless and unwashed on the streets, frightening myself and others. My parents' hardworking and modest lifestyle meant they paid off the mortgage some years before they reached their tenth wedding anniversary, an accomplishment that astounds me when I consider my own paltry income.

Vita and I entered my kitchen, which still features the turquoise cupboards with amber crackled glass that my father fitted when I was a child.

'What a beautiful colour!' she said, stroking the units without self-consciousness, and as I might have done myself.

But it was already too late for me to change what I had planned to say. On meeting for the first time socially, I have found that people typically ask where you live and what your job is. Vita already knew where I lived, therefore, I had already prepared a line that described my work at the farm. I certainly had not expected this topic deviation into interior décor, and it takes time and effort for me to adjust my conversation or focus. I do not envy other people's ability to alter; I find it alarming. Their minds are like caught fish, shining and struggling and engaged in a perpetual and pointless circular motion. Those like me swim on, unaffected by the change in currents around them and progressing forward in their journey.

'I work at a farm. In the greenhouses.' It was involuntary speech; once I had said what I planned I would be able to continue along her route of conversation. But I knew she would find the timing of this information peculiar, so I deliberately said it quietly, almost to myself. Then I spoke more loudly again, 'My father built those cupboards himself. They have been here since I was a child.'

The freestanding units remain an incongruous burst of colour in my white, white house. My mother had no interest in interiors. The thing she loved was the water waiting outside and gently swaying; it was one road away and visible from her bedroom window. Whenever Walt asked her what colour she wanted any room painted, she always chose white. If he continued to ask, she would say, 'You choose, then,' and go silent on him. He could not bear her silences. So, he decorated according to her first answer and we had a white house, with all furniture and fittings chosen and arranged by my father. Walt worked in silence to build the turquoise kitchen, while my then eight-year-old sister and I, just one year younger, watched him from the hall for hours at a time. We reported his movements to one another in a formal, hushed tone as if we were anthropologists examining a strange and ancient ritual for context. *He is drawing on the wall with a pencil, he is holding a hammer, careful, he just saw me!*

Vita nodded approvingly at my father's décor; she was also enthusiastically counting the collective characteristics of our two houses. The architect and builder responsible had apparently been keen on embellishment and Vita noted each twinned flourish, each elaborate archway and fireplace that corresponded with that of Tom's. She was apparently pleased rather than disappointed by the reproduction of her temporary home; she told me this while she looked around and patted my arm distractedly, as casual as an intimate friend.

As children, owning the same things was perceived as the sign of a profound connection, an indication of shared taste and suitability for friendship. The girls at school bonded over matching satchels, coats or shoes. It was too late, though, if you acquired these things later in the term, if you asked for them on your birthday and wore them into school afterwards. When you returned to class with your new things, the girls turned to you with faces even more eerily blank than usual, and then back toward one another with identical smiles; your heart would float up to beat fast and fluttery in your throat, while the air around you contracted and breathing required more focus than you could find. But, even then, you knew that the coat and the schoolbag that perfectly matched theirs could never be discarded and replaced. How could you explain to your mother that these much-wanted garments now marked you as a target when you did not understand it yourself? You would have to wear them for another year, and they would now function as small corpses that trailed blood along the school floors and made you stink.

Each time you boarded the bus or entered a classroom, with your new bag stiff on your shoulder and your coat earnestly buttoned to the top, the children would have sensed you coming. You, doing an unconvincing impression of them. They did not need to alert one another because a dozen matching heads would be already turned in your direction. You could not safely wear the same as them, could not adopt the same hairstyle, or even eat the same type

of sandwiches because they were invested in keeping your difference clearly and permanently exposed. What they hated, even more than you, was the idea that you might successfully conceal yourself amongst them. Your bag and your coat were evidence of an attempt to fit in, proof that you wanted to go under the radar. Proof that, left unmonitored you might go unnoticed and this, most of all, made you dangerous.

One girl in my school year had an obvious limp, the cause of which I never knew. It was a hesitation, a one-sidedness to her step that required her to use a stick. Her name was Bethan and her best friend helped her on and off the bus each day. When her friend was not there, there were several local boys who would assume serious expressions and escort the girl carefully down the deep drop of the step, while they imagined the way to tell this story later; it would, of course, be recounted in a deliberately casual tone and with themselves as the hero. *I couldn't just sit there and watch the poor girl*, they would say to their girlfriends or to their mother, perhaps even their father if he was of a type, as our own was, to appreciate such behaviour. As the boys heard themselves speak, they would wonder to themselves why their tone was defensive, when they were, in fact, boasting of kindness.

When we were in the fifth year, an older boy, new to the school and very handsome, began to escort Bethan on and off the bus. If her friend, or any of the boys, attempted to help her, the new boy would coolly raise a hand to indicate that they were not needed. The two of them quickly became a couple and Bethan then enjoyed the social privileges, the attention and the invitations, that her boyfriend received. I looked on as boys, even those less appealing than the new boy, some from our own year, similarly augmented the standing of various able-bodied girls and I knew that these more ordinary characters would not have been enough to elevate Bethan's social status. Only the recommendation of a particularly special boy would allow her peers to overlook her faltering step. Witnessing Bethan's easy transformation by love left me

vulnerable to the advances of the King. I thought he could make my difference into something tolerable, as Bethan's boyfriend had so effortlessly done for her.

Of course, the limping girl was also forgiven her frailties because she did not attempt to disguise them and sneak in unnoticed. No one needed to be alerted to Bethan, who walked in her slow and uneven way and carried an obvious walking stick that marked her out. However, I was one of those who needed to be frequently named, just in case I disappeared amongst them. If they did not mark me, I obediently did so myself, with the coat or the bag that signalled I was trying to go undetected. There was a pattern to such things that could not be learned; you were born knowing. Or, like me, you would never know.

In my kitchen, I offered Vita a chair at the small table and told her the story of our matching houses and the builder who was bankrupted by optimism. I had always imagined an earnest man with a flimsy moustache, aspiring to house his community and shamed by his failure. She made the closed mouth exhalation that Dolly often used. It was an indication that the subject was too predictably comic to justify the effort that regular laughing requires.

'But I find it very sad. Don't you think so?'

Vita did not pause before replying; 'Sad? No! I think he was an idiot like me! I think of a new way to make millions every day too. Luckily my husband points out the holes in all my great plans.' She pronounced *my* as *may* and *husband* with an extended soft 's' like a hiss; *may huss-bind*. I tried this out silently to myself, *lucki -lay may huss-bind...* while she continued to talk. 'Our builder would never have gone bankrupt if he was married to Rols. And we'd be in a street of houses exactly like our two. Instead we are the special ones. I prefer it this way, don't you Sunday?' Both the use of my name and the inclusion as one of her 'special ones,' diminished all my sympathy with the hopeful, thin-moustached man who built my home and in doing so, lost everything he had. His loss became a gift of exclusivity to us. 'Rols does

houses. It's his thing. He's awfully clever at it. Too good in fact, because our townhouse sold the day it went on the market. Foreign buyers: you know.' She mouthed the last sentence in a stage whisper, showing her teeth.

I tried this unfamiliar new phrase out in silence while looking away from her; *Foreign buyers: you know*. I spoke as she had, holding my mouth away from my teeth as if the words themselves were unsavoury. *Foreign buyers: you know*.

'And even his unfinished properties are all reserved. But lovely Tom stepped in before we were *completely* homeless. So sweet of him. His wife's having another baby you know. Another one! She is on bed rest this time. *Complications*.' She said this word in the same confidential and toothy way she had referred to the foreign buyers. 'So, they won't be up here this summer.' She turned down her mouth in an exaggeratedly sad face as if emoting the information in an interpretive performance. *Look! This is how I feel about Tom's wife being on bedrest and unable to visit her second home. See?* Then, just as quickly, she was smiling again. 'That's why he lent us the house.' A silence fell between us. 'Do *you* have children?' she asked eventually. Her attention flickered around the room as though seeking evidence of any offspring; her yellow eyes resembled the glossy, black-centred discs used on expensive dolls. It was easy to imagine those eyes, round and unblinking, multiplied in the neat rows of a storeroom.

'I have one daughter. She is sixteen, though.' When I said this, Vita's doll eyes altered, softening or sharpening; all I saw was a noticeable shift. The faces of new people are particularly unknowable and disorientating. What is readable in their expression is often unhelpful, something like recognising the nationality of a foreign speaker yet not understanding the language itself.

'She's a grown-up then. Thank fuck for that!' Her clipped vowels softened the profanity, which she pronounced, *fack*. Hearing a person swear still made me nervous then; it typically

precluded some argument or fight in my experience. When Vita swore, though, the disparity between tone and content afforded a necessary distance, a kind of aural relief. ‘Our house in town was surrounded by children! And our friends were always reproducing. Now their babies are having babies. This will be a return to the world of grown-ups. At last!’

‘You don’t...?’ I spoke in response and trailed off as I remembered the personal nature of this question. It was on the long, long list of Things You Must Never Mention, along with everything else that I have ever wanted to ask. *How tall are you?* I want to know this of every stranger I pass. *Can you drive a car? Have you considered the effects of Italian unification on the South? Do you like to take the bus? And this book? Do you like this book?* I do not let these words out but swallow them back down daily; they crawl around like ants inside me, tickling, biting and unspent. Quietness is regarded as strange, but it is less demanding to people than questions are. I have not arrived at the formula for the number of questions one can ask; I do know that mine are always too many. And that one is not satisfying to either party.

‘Have children?’ finished Vita. ‘No thank you, darling. It looks bloody exhausting!’ *Blood-day*, I tried out to myself, smiling. *Blood-day*. That was a good one, although *fack* remained my favourite.

‘You’re married though.’ I would have known this even if she hadn’t already mentioned her husband. Whenever she spoke, her hands with their glinting rings danced impatiently as if hurrying her own speech along. In Vita’s exuberant presence, I thought, I might be able to do the speech conducting with my fingers after all.

‘Yes. And you?’ She merged the last two words into one, extending the final syllable and it sounded like *anddiu*? I used my three middle fingers to follow her words as she spoke, tapping them out on my leg and finishing on a light upward note, which registered in my hands as a gentle kind of interest and not a call to conform.

‘No. Not anymore,’ I said. *Not anymore*; I pronounced it this way on purpose because I liked the way her blended words had sounded. Mine, though, came out harsh and the consonants made a rat-tat sound, rather than the soft French style of her pronunciation. Vita’s face, though, became obviously softer and incurious in response to my tone. Married women are often interested in my divorce and probe anxiously for details, as if I might reveal one of my own mistakes and in doing so, arm them against my own fate. But Vita was too socially graceful to push me for gossip.

‘But I don’t have a child because I never wanted one,’ she continued, smoothly moving us both away from the disturbing subject of my former marriage. ‘I like it being just me.’ Then she added, ‘And Rols, of course.’ She gave a brief and brilliant smile and looked fixedly toward the window, as if at the request of an unseen photographer there. Her gaze remained there as she spoke; ‘He always says he couldn’t share me with a child. He’s sentimental like that.’

After a moment, she returned to watching me closely and I refrained from mouthing her words to myself. I considered what I wanted to say, which was that I imagined life could be very fulfilling without a child. I never planned to be a mother. I had not wanted to share the King; it was a position forced on me by parenthood. Yet I never actually had any piece of him except for the child who lived alongside me, a distant and disturbing version of her father.

I did not say any of this. Vita settled into her chair and shrugged lightly in the silence, as though displacing a small and unthreatening insect. There was a loosely tied bow below her throat, the thin fabric of a blouse that could only be glimpsed under her jacket and she rearranged the ends of this with one hand in a soothing, patting gesture.

Her fingers were small and her hands those of a child, despite the burgundy painted nails that shone darkly each time she gesticulated, which was often. I do not as a rule like to touch people, but I wanted to close my hand over Vita’s little hand just then, to gently still her fingers as they danced across her chest. Later, I did, and her skin was cold, as I knew it would be. I

knew things about Vita in the instinctive way that people like you know about one another. In that way I believed it was preternatural, until I realised it is the same way I know precisely how soil or plants will feel in my hands before I touch them. These things that I accurately discerned about Vita were not, as it emerged, the important ones. But still, what I did know of her came to me with an effortlessness which mimicked love.

‘Rollo works in town. He’s there now.’ She spoke with the acquired indifference of a raffle winner, as though her husband’s persistent absence was too much good fortune to claim as intentional. ‘We used to work together more, but I got old and he didn’t. Men don’t, do they?’ *Well, yes, they do*, I thought, irritably. *That makes no sense*. She pressed her hands together as if physically putting the subject away and smiled brightly, ‘What is your daughter called?’

‘Dolly.’ I could not, then, pronounce her name without smiling.

‘I *love* that name.’ Vita cooed. ‘So pretty! Mine sounds like a great old nanna....’ I knew that her expanded pronunciation of *nan-na*, with the upward inflection at the end, was an affectation, that she would have naturally used the word, *grand-mo-ther*, each syllable as tight and distinct as a swimmer’s breath. I knew because my own speech is also porous and mimics other people’s accents. The thing that exists between me and language, between me and other people, is flimsy and shifting. Vita had gently lengthened her vowels, perhaps to blur the difference between us. I preferred the sound of her real voice; Vita spoke like a Mitford sister, or a white-gloved debutante captured distantly on black and white film. I imagined myself telling Dolly about our new neighbour after work that evening. I would say, Vita doesn’t speak, she *trills*. Actually *trills*. Like a small bird. Vita was still talking; ‘...And if I chose my own name, that is exactly what I would choose. Dolly.’ She looked out to the garden as though seriously considering this, her parallel name. *Door-lay*. I never tired of hearing her say my daughter’s name. Not even when she called her *Doorls*. Not even at the very end. I expect I would still like to hear her say that.

‘It’s a shortened name, in fact. Dolly’s full name is Dolores after my sister. My sister, Dolores.’ I repeated the name in the hope that she might then say it too.

‘Your sister? How lovely, and I expect they are very close? Does she live locally?’ she asked.

‘She isn’t... didn’t.... Well, my sister isn’t ... here... anymore. Nor are my parents, in fact. It is just Dolly and me...’ Again, I trailed away, immediately sorry to have begun this and begrudging the fact that it would bring queries, exclamations of regret and most uncomfortably, attempts at solace. ‘Historically,’ I said, as though I was a teacher replying to a student query, ‘in Southern Italy, families believed in the rebirth of the soul to the extent that a baby would automatically be given the name of the most recently departed close relative or sibling. So, parents might give several of their offspring the same name, consecutively re-using the name of the child they had just lost. And that surviving child is favoured, because it has the soul of many and must be loved for all the others, too.’

Vita listened to me patiently. Then, when I finally fell silent, she echoed my last line back to me. ‘...And must be loved for all the others too? Yes, that makes sense.’ She leaned toward me and looked at my face, closely and entirely without self-consciousness. I began to feel that I had crossed some invisible social boundary that I should not have, had stepped off the path and onto the forbidden grass. I looked away from her and out towards my garden. But when she spoke again, it was with the deftness of a mother tightening her hold on a stumbling child; ‘Well, how lovely to give your daughter a family name then, darling. It’s entirely the right thing. And I can already tell that you love Dolly enough for them both.’

With this assurance, she gifted me a sureness that was then entirely unknown to me. It did not bring the blanketing comfort that I had expected of certainty, but rather, it whispered to something sleeping inside me. Something that had only ever been asleep.

the little face

As Dolly was named for her aunt, so my mother had been named for her late paternal grandmother, Meredith. The oldest of seven siblings who all saw her as a supplementary parent and struggled to pronounce her full name, she was only ever known as Mer. Neither of my parents had ever been outside London before they married. However, my mother was clear that her acceptance of any future spouse depended on a relocation to the lake district immediately after the wedding. Her family had been sent a postcard of Windermere when she was a child and she kept it for herself, hidden like a promise.

Like each of her siblings, my mother had a small crucifix gifted at her baptism that hung above her childhood bed. Each of the seven children eventually graduated from the well-used cot to their own bed, a fact which Mer managed to reference frequently and with an air of boastfulness. Walt, who had been unused to such luxuries as a child, used to laugh and say he always knew she had married beneath her. This gentle teasing made her unusually girlish and pink cheeked.

Above the rows of beds in Mer's childhood home, each of the children had their own small crucifix nailed to the wall above their sleeping heads. My mother took the elaborately carved wooden cross with her when she married. But she told us how, in her family home, it had held a postcard to the wall, slotted tightly in the space between Jesus' outstretched arms and the ageing wallpaper. I have this picture of the lake now; unremarkable and carefully preserved between thin paper in her private journals, the black and white image occupies the first page, where all stories begin. The back of the card bears a faint imprint of the wallpaper from her childhood bedroom, a densely climbing rose with curling thorns. This pattern once surrounded a girlish version of my mother, night after night, as she lay in her narrow bed and dreamed of the lake. I now read her diaries regularly. I read them as she taught my sister and I to study our bibles as children, picking up the book and allowing it to fall open naturally on the right page

for us. This is how I read all non-fiction, in fact, including my collection of books on Southern Italy and my thick book on etiquette with the gold-edged pages. I imagine the facts queuing up and waiting impatiently for me on the paper, each pushing up against the words in front of them, all wanting their own turn to inform. In the journal, my mother waits for me, to tell me all the ways in which I shamed and disappointed her.

My father, Walter, knew that his future wife had already rejected an earlier suitor who refused to move to the lakes. He added an uncharacteristic embellishment to the terms of their relocation, by acquiring a house with a modest view of the lake from the dormer windows in the attic. He loved my mother most, always; more, certainly than she ever loved anyone. Every Sunday and Wednesday of her forty-two-year marriage, my mother swam in the lake for twenty minutes, early in the morning before local walkers and summer tourists began to appear. Mer had bought a man's wetsuit from the lost property sale in the town hall and she wore this in the colder months with thick gloves and socks knitted by Phyllis, a concerned neighbour. The wetsuit seemed still to house a large man and loyally refused to cling to the woman-shape of its new owner. The broad shoulders, powerful arms and straight hips of the suit shivered away from Mer's rotundness, as though she was only a passenger.

During the winter of 1935, a visiting journalist took a picture of Mer wading possessively into the dark water. A national newspaper used this image to illustrate a sentimental article about what was now a drowned village near our own. The church, houses and school in the valley of Mardale had been purchased by the council and the dead in the graveyard all exhumed. This, so that the area could be flooded into a reservoir that would provide a large and rapidly expanding nearby town with adequate water supplies. 'Searching for the Lost Village,' read the newspaper title above my mother's head, as she peered into our own lake, some miles from what was once Mardale. If the journalist had known my mother, he would not have applied such a headline to her. After settling here, Mer sought nothing; she did not look beyond

what was then her own lake. It was lake water that ran through her veins, the lake that was the blood of my family, until the day it finally swept through our house and took them all. All except me.

Despite the grainy and distant quality of the black and white image in the newspaper piece, everyone in our town recognised the oversized costume of their only year-round swimmer and the picture subsequently featured on the front of the local paper. Mer wrote in her journal about the indignities of the local attention that resulted from the press; she imagined the cashiers stared at her while she shopped, and she resented what she felt were knowing and over-familiar looks from neighbours, as if they were complicit in a secret with her. She made her annoyance at such notice obvious whenever she ventured out among the locals; I imagined even those who had not seen the photograph withdrew from her protective aloofness. Mer's complaints are recorded at length in her journal and accompanied on the page by two pristine copies of the images, one from each paper, carefully cut and protected by a sheet of tissue paper that is now silky and thin with age.

Walt was moved by the photograph to keep a scrapbook on the reservoir and on the town, which I stored carefully alongside Mer's journals. His record began with the picture of his wife, which warranted a page of its own. He noted in his book that the artifice of the new body of water was incongruous in an area made beautiful by its natural lakes. *It's a bad business*, was all he would say when we asked him about the scrapbook. *A bad business*. Mer was not interested in his clippings; she did not care for whatever of the village remained under the reservoir.

The Lakes were Walt's second love. Our father, as is often the way, was even more protective of the area he had come to as an adult than those whose families had been here for generations. As a relative newcomer, Walt held the same fervent reverence for his locality that the recent religious convert has for his church. The district in which we were raised was beloved

by both our parents, for its dark lakes and the gentle reach of the lakeside verges which Walt referred to proprietorially as ‘doll-sized shores.’ He always claimed that this is where Dolores got her name, but neither my sister nor I ever believed that Mer would have allowed him to influence the name of her precious first-born. Not when we both knew she had insisted on naming even me by herself. My mother had continued to swim outdoors throughout each winter and during both her pregnancies, despite her husband’s protestations. I got my name from being born on a Sunday, a maternally allotted day for swimming, so my mother passed the early stages of her labour in the cold lake-water. My father liked to recount how my mother had swam resolutely on as he and Dolores watched her from his car that day, hoping to persuade Mer out of the water. He had a flask of hot coffee and shared biscuits with my sister, still a baby herself, while she held a warm bottle of sweet tea and laughed at the strangeness of this adventure from under a heavy blanket. This was a story he reserved for birthday dinners and anniversary drinks, for those times of performance when we temporarily believe we can reshape other people’s versions of ourselves. He would describe at length how he had watched my mother flinching from the tiny assailant within as she awkwardly dried herself in the stark early light. *Mer had her swim planned*, he would say, *and that was that. Like she was saying, this baby will arrive when I am ready and not before!* And while he laughed to disguise his pride, my mother would look away from him, her face unsmiling but soft as though she, too, was remembering that earlier time. Her life before the arrival of her strange and silent second child.

Dolores and I had suspected that her choosing my name, one that that Walt always found peculiar, was an attempt to distance me from him, to keep the three of them further from me. We never asked Mer if our father’s claim to have chosen Dolores’ name was true, which seems peculiar to me now that I had a child of my own, a child who allowed me no secrets. But perhaps Dolores and I never asked my mother because we preferred to decide for ourselves.

Because we all choose what to believe or remember of our childhoods. It is such self-selected and reshaped myths that provide the foundation for my family, for all families.

And I have begun to think perhaps Mer's choice to name me herself is evidence of an initial maternal interest. That perhaps our childish assumption that she always feared me is unfair. I know from her diaries that my mother did once, however briefly, harbour hopes for her awkward and troubling second child. But I know, also, that she could have continued to love me if she chose to. I understand, now, that maternal love is vast and sees only what it wants to see. After all, I love Dolly, still.

The house next door, which already seemed to belong more to Vita more than to Tom, had previously been owned by the Whites for several years. Mrs White was extremely sociable, but not in the assured and certain manner of Vita or the King. She was as unpredictable as a rescued pet who sometimes purrs in company and sometimes remembers its unfortunate past in a rushing of claws, so you cannot ever know whether it intends an embrace or an attack. She stood very close to people when she spoke, with her eyes fixed watchfully on the listener as though on a weapon. I found myself avoiding Mrs White. The imposed proximity of the little face and the bracelets that jangled on her thin arms confused whatever passed between us. *Call-me-Lesley*, she ordered, often and with the intensity of the villain in a fairy-tale, who could trick you into naming them as masters. The first time she instructed me to do this, I replied immediately, - *Lesley!* But it was uncomfortable, and I did not fall for it again with her or her husband.

A few months into our acquaintance, I was helping a newly walking Dolly up our front path when Mr White, *Call-me-Bob*, shouted to me from his front door. He admonished me gently about both my newly short hair and the condition of the King's car tyres. It was not the judgement that disturbed me. He was right that the family car was neglected; I had no interest

in driving, and the King was more comfortable in the farm's Land Rover than in the square estate model with its suggestion of domesticity and interdependence. We both ignored the large, ugly car on our driveway and what it represented, the family days out, the shopping trips and, most of all, the shared life. I pretended to be only a mother and not a wife, and my husband convinced himself and his young women, too, that he was a single man without domestic responsibilities.

Mr White's notice of my unkempt hair was another reasonable point. In fact, I took some perverse pride in the ugliness of the cut as it proved my bent to practicality, an underrated trait. The discomfort of his observation lay in the assumption of a familiarity between us which allowed some investment in his neighbour's appearance and safety. It was an uninvited intimacy; a proprietary claim that would only expand if acknowledged. I turned slowly towards *Call-me-Bob* with a blank expression. Although I raised my hand in acknowledgement, I felt myself redden and stiffen as though he had put his own hands on me. He met this silent discomfort with his own affront. Afterwards both the Whites were reserved with me; their only topic of conversation was the weather and even this on the strict condition that it was considered unseasonal. I could not decide whether I was relieved at their withdrawal or not. In any case, it was already too late to retrieve them.

People float around unpredictably like that, coming too close and then moving just out of reach, as if governed by a current outside their control. And then, one day, you finally reach out a hand and it is too late; they are gone.

This new and temporary neighbour, however, did not appear to be interested in incongruous weather or my reluctance to engage in personal or mechanical maintenance. The morning after our first meeting and shortly after Dolly left for school, Vita appeared at my door dressed in pyjamas. She did not re-introduce herself or apologise for the early visit. She moved easily,

elegantly through my hallway and into the kitchen as if these visits were a routine between us. Her conversation was without preamble or introduction; she talked as if we were already in the middle of an ongoing discussion. This lack of structure in her communication disturbed me. Conversation typically moves through prescribed stages. I did not want a visitor, however exotic, who talked in the ridiculous fashion of the shopkeeper and left no formula for my replies. I did not want to respond to this exciting woman with ‘Ha!’ - that code against confusion. It had been a long time since I had desired, or even allowed myself to believe in, the possibility of close contact with anyone. But I wanted it then, could feel the want beating like an excited little creature within me, rapid and rhythmic as a too-small heart.

‘Do you have milk? We have absolutely *nothing* in our fridge except wine. I am a *terrible* housewife. Rols always says he would *starve* in town without all the *friends and restaurants.*’ When she said, ‘friends and restaurants,’ she placed a hand on the outer side of each eye in a shielding motion and looked downwards, shaking her head slowly. It was as though she was emoting shame for a distant audience. Vita was extravagant and theatrical in all her expressions and I appreciated that then. I believed it made her easier to read, that it enabled me to communicate better with her than I had with anyone else. Her smile though, remained brilliant as she looked up at me winningly, hands still half covering her large eyes; ‘What *will* he do down here?’

‘There is a café in town. And a Chinese. There’s a Chinese that does takeaways. You’ll like that,’ I said, intending to soothe her as I would have done with Dolly.

I repeated her phrasing silently to myself; *no-thing* in our fridge; *ter-rible* housewife; *s-tarve* without *friends*. It was unclear, as yet, how this seemingly random stressing on such words related to the content of her conversation. I naturally speak in a monotone and Dolly sometimes imitated this, using an exaggeratedly robotic voice, so that I could not miss her

impression. ‘Good. Morn.Ing. Moth.Er,’ she laughed sometimes in response to my flat greetings, her arms and legs moving stiffly as though she were fashioned of metal.

Vita’s claim to an empty fridge and wifely failure was not self-deprecating but congratulatory. I knew this because when I checked her face, she was smiling broadly, thrilled that she did not function like the other women on our street. Vita’s face was open; she had the perfect combination of facial symmetry and a profound lack of interest in pleasing people. These factors made her face as seemingly easy to read as that of a child. This appearance of naturalness was, in fact, a construct, but a beautiful one. Her conversation, too, was appealing; I had not considered that our inability as wives might be celebrated. She sat at the kitchen table, leaning casually against the back of her chair as if she had been visiting me like this for years.

I did not know, then, that one could ask a neighbour to provide anything, especially if the lack of the item had been a matter of poor planning, rather than emergency. Vita yawned loudly as she watched me open the oversized white fridge that Dolly’s grandfather gifted us the previous Christmas. He had been replacing the older-style display units in the shop with clear fronted, square models that were edged in silver metal. I preferred my second-hand fridge to its modern replacements and enjoyed the rounded edges of the glossy white surface that curved into my hand like a friendly pet. I had been pleased with the gift as I do not like to make such expensive purchases. I still have a considerable sum in my account, but I cannot earn such amounts of money myself. That summer, my inheritance was exactly half what it had originally been, and I cannot tell when I would run out of money if I lived more extravagantly. I do not understand numbers enough to do anything but be careful of what I spend. I live on the presumption that I have just enough, except where Dolly is concerned.

I handed my visitor a cold bottle of milk and she placed both hands around it, in that covetous way people sometimes have when given warm tea. She was not going home. She had the requested item, but she was still there, still talking. I sat down opposite her at the small

Formica table that is one of the many relics from my parent's marriage. I do not drink tea or coffee; Dolly has made these things for herself since she was very young. Vita would have to wait until she got back to her own house if that was what she wanted. She was wearing an Alice band and a pair of blue-striped pyjamas which had the navy initials, RJB, monogrammed over one breast. The fabric was of the thin summer sort which makes little effort to conceal what it apparently covers. I could see her chest rising and falling through the light fabric as she spoke, could see her small breasts shift, unfettered and soft.

One of her legs was tucked underneath her and the other was splayed out, displaying her bare foot. It was a fragile and cold-looking thing, this foot, with a visibly bony and veined structure. I thought of the sturdy platforms that held statues and sculptures and I imagined the incongruity of the little foot in such a role. I had never had a visitor in nightwear before and was unsure whether her outfit would be on the list of Things That Must Not Be Mentioned, so I carefully did not. But when Vita casually compared her own dishevelled appearance to my plain and practical work uniform, it was me who blushed, as though my carefully observed omission was something more like a lie or a secret I was keeping.

Vita had a scar that covered most of her hand, a silvery-pink covering like fish scales that caught the light as her fingers moved across the bottle. I remembered, as I often do, the fish that used to cover this kitchen when my parents were alive. The fish that were placed across every counter, laid out and opened up like trusting patients. Upon his marriage, my father had spent what remained of his savings after the house deposit to buy a large fishing boat. During the tourist season, he took holidaymakers out early to fish, and on his return, he brought the catches to my mother to be prepared for the wives or landladies of these men to cook. Mer liked to watch for the glint of Walt's silver painted boat from her bedroom window, an early return reassuring her that the tourists were already satisfied.

Our little house smelt permanently of the lake and the shining fish that shivered in my parents' hands each day. Self-taught, Mer filleted and skinned as expertly as the local women knitted and sewed, her fingers came to know knives as theirs knew needles. Bones as delicate and white as baby teeth regularly littered our kitchen, as though it were the scene of a recent tragedy. The fish were laid gently across newspaper on our kitchen table; each labelled for the man who had caught them under my father's direction. A cod might be labelled *Colin*, this tied with thin string that cut into his fat middle section; a smaller skate could be named for *Mr D. Stone* or the more congenial *Pete*. Sometimes, to encourage returning summer customers who were often Londoners, she discreetly swapped the smaller fish with my father's more impressive catches. Those chosen for the upgrade could be recognised by their quicker step and louder voices as they left our house. These were wealthy and successful city-men, bankers and doctors, who did not doubt their own capabilities.

The visiting tourists came to our house to collect their prepared fish. They gathered in groups on our porch and they told my father that he was the clever one; *after all, the fishermen got paid to do what these men did for leisure*. Each said this with a feigned shyness appropriate to their first, accidental venture into philosophy. Each countered their borrowed humility with a noisy slap on my father's back or a heavy squeeze of his shoulder. Walt would make himself still during these rituals of status, absorbing their cheerful blows and balancing motionlessly on his feet as he did on the boat in bad weather. In such moments, I imagined he removed himself from his own body and retreated to thoughts of his beloved Mer. I too, had my own retreat, but mine was in the nineteenth century and populated by the people of Southern Italy; they spoke soothingly to me of superstition and traditions, of behaviours that could be traced. The smart men who slapped the fisherman's broad back did not want him to return their touch, did not want his weather-reddened hands on their pristine clothes and office-soft bodies. They

were keen to return to their wives and their guesthouse cooks, the paper wrapped parcels of fish newly heavy in their smooth white hands.

My father's boat was called *Liombruno* and had once belonged to Jerre, who arrived in the area with his wife a year before my parents settled there. By then, Jerre was already established as an admired fisherman. Anyone brave enough to guess at Jerre's heritage would be fiercely corrected; *Not Italian, no. I am Sicilian man! Si-cil-ia-no!* My father, fortunately, would have been characteristically incurious and unlikely to venture any assumptions about the boat owner's homeland when he went to buy *Liombruno*. Jerre, therefore, would have remained amiable and the two men were certainly on good enough terms for him to explain the folk tale origins of the boat's title to Walt.

The story was of a fisherman and his family, who were living in poverty because he suddenly found he could no longer catch fish. One day, the Evil One rose from the water and offered to fill the nets with fish every day, in return for the fisherman's next child. The fisherman, believing that his aged wife was now barren, agreed that in return for the promised fish, he would hand over any such child to the Evil One. A year later, the fisherman's wife surprisingly gave birth to the adored *Liombruno*, who as a teenager had to be returned to the Mer where the Evil One waited for him. I re-told this story often and in detail, personally fascinated but always unconcerned by the interest of my audience.

Neither of my parents ever forgot the long season of 1948, when their boat was only chartered for weekly journeys along the coastline and often returned with disappointed tourists and empty nets. Walt asked Jerre for advice and was offered a miniature statue of San Francesco di Paola – the patron saint of the fisherman. Walt, usually so scientific and practical, became passionate about the little figure, which remained in the boat from that time until it was sold on Dolores' death. The figurine did not immediately solve my parent's problems, however, and they suffered a year of poor catches until their fortunes changed. Years later, I discovered from

Phyllis that during this period my father briefly hosted gambling sessions for the tourists, in the back room of a local pub. The informal card evenings both entertained the disappointed visitors and brought in extra money when there were no fish to be caught. Finally, though, the fishing nets were again filled hourly, as if by unseen hands, and then, the following January, there was the unexpected arrival of baby Dolores to celebrate.

Jerre's account of the unfortunate *Liombruno* was a regular bedtime story at home, with Walt as the storyteller. My sister soon tired of this, but I could not hear enough of it. In an attempt to satisfy my appetite for Sicilian stories, Walt acquired a library book on Southern Italian culture. The book's immaculate condition and unstamped inside cover informed me that it had not been taken out before and my father eventually informed the library that we had lost the item. I had no interest in other books and read little else for several years, happily re-reading the library book again and again. After the lake took Dolores from her bed, my parents sold the boat and would not have *Liombruno* or, indeed, anything Italian mentioned again in their presence. Such a ban left me frequently mute.

'My parents caught fish,' I told Vita. 'My father was a fisherman here.' I told her.

'My father used to fish!' She said this excitedly, as if the activity were a rare and surprising one, a peculiar quirk the two shared. 'He liked shooting best though. Did yours?'

'No. He just fished,' I replied, looking at her hand.

And I looked, too, at the stained-glass window made of paper, made at school by Dolly years ago, and which is still displayed on my fridge now. The window is made of clear paper, surrounded by thick black card and the thin colours cannot help exposing whatever is placed behind them; the pastel tint being all that evidences the tracing paper exists. The pearlized pinkness on the back of Vita's hand made her seem fragile and breakable to me. But my

daughter neither made nor understood connections as I do; she always took satisfaction in telling me that I naturally focussed on the wrong details.

I knew that when I described Vita's visit to Dolly, she would lose patience if I talked about the peculiar shine of this scar and its relation to my parents' fish and her own childhood artwork; if I cited this pinkness as evidence of both our new neighbour's frailty and her obvious need of us. My daughter was a social scientist who did not allow this kind of talk; she would want other facts, and these were the things I tried to collect and bring home to her each evening. And I did not know which of these answers would be deemed allowable and which would mean my daughter sighed and disappeared upstairs for the evening. In the privacy of my thoughts, however, when I think of Vita, it is still the scar that comes to me first, before the other parts of which she is composed. My focus on apparently incongruous details embarrassed Dolly and her refusal to discuss such things was her way of training me to refrain from it. Like a husband who frowns and kicks his wife under the dining table when she accepts a third drink. Or when she talks about Sicilian rituals. My husband was one of those men. And he smiled handsomely throughout, which was somehow worse and certainly more effective than the kick. At least, the beautiful and undimmed smile was the part of this that successfully silenced me.

I needed to understand Vita's scar because she seemed impenetrable and yet something had marked her. I could not, cannot, conceive of her breaking, cannot imagine the force that would dare to smash open her skin enough to leave such a mark. It is such disparities that reveal a person, not, as my daughter believes, the things that all concur agreeably with one another; the scar told me more about Vita than the clipped accent, the confidence and the pretty face, ever could. And I need to collect clues on people, where Dolly does not. I spend hours alone putting social evidence together in silence; what did that sentence mean? Why did he speak quickly; was that anger or was he in a rush? Such investigation rarely comes to anything knowable, but I remain convinced there is a universal code to be broken, a pattern to be understood.

Sometimes I imagine how it would feel to access the effortless communication that Dolly and Vita enjoy. *Oh!* I would say, shocked at the ease of conversation, *I get it! I know what they mean, understand what they all want.* What would it be to live without the laborious work of translation, to hear and instantly know what you had heard?

What I had assumed was a headband was, in fact, a green silk sleep mask pushed up into Vita's dark hair and holding it back from her face. Her hair fell past her shoulders in sleek and precisely trained 'S' shapes, rather than curls, giving her the appearance of a smart partygoer, despite the pyjamas. The sleep mask was somehow more intimate than her thin nightwear; it was an item so private that perhaps only her husband and I had ever seen it, I thought. She took the top off the milk and drank straight from the bottle for some time. She audibly swallowed several times and was obviously making no attempt to drink quietly. I had not seen a woman behave in such a natural and unguarded way since Dolores. My sister too, had met her own needs in an open and unguarded manner, not attempting to conceal the satisfaction of addressing her hunger, her thirst, or the itch that she scratched while moaning lightly in relief. I watched Vita with fascination as she put the half-emptied bottle back on the table, her upper lip ringed in white. *Calling attention to a person's soiled appearance is correct,* I thought, *if this can be done discreetly, with sympathy and without drawing the notice of others.*

'You have a ... erm,' I looked at the wall behind her and made a repeated circular motion around my own mouth.

'Moustache?' she said. 'Does it suit me? Do I look pre-tty?' When I looked back at her, she was wide-eyed and smiling, and her hands were spread out to frame her face in a film star pose. She blinked exaggeratedly and made no attempt to wipe the milk away. Then she abruptly adopted her usual expression, already bored by the pretence of her beauty as a debatable subject rather than fact. Her loveliness was so evident that I felt sure it could hold no interest for her. To debate her appeal would have been to discuss the possibility of snow while staring at another

day of unbroken July sun. I liked her face enormously; it pleased me in the way that my ex-husband's looks once had.

'Your hair is marvellous,' she announced, looking back at me unflinchingly while I gazed at her. 'Is it your real colour?' As I began to speak, she held up a hand in warning. 'No, let me guess, darling, I am good at this.' She peered closely at my face. 'It is yours, isn't it?' I nodded. She leaned across the table to take a piece of my hair in her hand; with her elbows on the surface, she held the strands up to her face for inspection, as if considering it for purchase. 'I could already tell from your eyelashes. This is really pretty.' I enjoyed the way she pronounced *really* as *rahly*; it felt exotic and I mouthed it to myself in silence: *rahly-rahly-rahly*. 'Gorgeous,' she continued. 'Is your daughter's hair this colour?'

I nodded again. Dolly's fair hair was the one feature of mine that she was happy to possess. I thought of our hair as colourless and unfinished; it is more silver than blonde, with the cold blue undertones of my mother's hair. Mer's appearance had combined the solid, bosomy chest of a ship figurehead with cotton-wool clouds of hair that neither curled, nor fell, but floated, and which were gradually tinted from a natural lavender toned silver to a pale, milky-blue. It was the kind of artificial colour that on a less formidable woman would have summoned local children to follow her, they in turn wildly calling out their find like wasps communicating a sugary find back to the waiting nest. Indeed, Mer often wore a headscarf outside the house as though her own hair was yet another family secret to be kept. As I was myself. The bulkiness of our mother's lower body gave her legs the quality of a fused oneness, the tied immobility of a mermaid on land. My mother was clumsy, always uneasy with the floor beneath and like her I walk without trust, barefoot on stones.

My mother cut my hair, that of our father and her own too, at home every month. I objected to the regularity of this, feeling that our hair would not be merely kept from growing further, but would gradually regress, becoming shorter and shorter until we all had the same schoolboy

cut. However, Mer never trimmed Dolores' pale, gently waving hair herself, but took her to the women's hairdressers in town. I went inside once to meet them; the thick smell of chemicals stuck to my clothes and skin for hours afterwards. The women wore medical gowns and sat in rows below dryers that possessively enclosed their heads, so they could not move from their seats without calling for permission and assistance. Even as my own unforgiving haircut was repeated in the many mirrors around the shop, I was relieved not to have been taken there regularly as Dolores was. Our mother was very vain of her eldest daughter's silvery hair, more so than Dolores ever was herself. My sister and I would listen to Mer as she spoke to other mothers and we would nudge each other, not daring to laugh when we noted her trying to turn the conversation to Dolores' hair. *Of course*, she would tell her unmoved peers, *Dolores gets a lot of attention, looking the way she does. Her hair makes her stand out everywhere she goes. Everywhere.* The mother of Lucy Jones, whose gold streaked hair thickly nudged her waist, and the mother of Anna Prescott, whose hair hung always in a serene black curtain, even after we went in the lake together, and our own hair had turned to limp threads that exposed the fragile pink of our scalps; these were just some of the women who smiled back at Mer and said nothing.

A swimming cap covered in large plastic white flowers was procured for my sister and she was warned that if she didn't wear it *every single time* she swam, then she would be banned from the lake entirely. The cap was unforgivingly tight, and it took two of us to tuck all Dolores' hair inside it as the rubber squeaked unhappily against our fingers.

'Don't damage the goods,' she would warn me in the voice of our mother as we worked together on the beach to tuck her slippery hair out of reach of the lake-water. She mimicked Mer's shortened vowels perfectly, sounding more like a South Londoner than our mother allowed herself to. Although we laughed when she said this, it was solely in acknowledgement of her imitation; we made the same flat and unhappy sound, without humour. But we both

recognised our mother's ownership of Dolores' hair and we dutifully followed the rules she set, although it was a perfunctory care, the basic maintenance we might have provided for a spoiled and unpleasant pet.

If I had been excused, as my sister had been, from Mer's regular and brutal cuts, then we would have had identical hair. I was not permitted to have my hair longer than a couple of inches. But because nobody loved my hair, I was not discussed with my mother's friends as if I were an expensive new dress or a prized family recipe, as Dolores was. I was not made to wear an ugly and painful cap to protect my loveliness, because I was unlovely. I was not made to go to the hairdresser's and sit in front of all the mirrors with the other women fixed in place under the hot lights. Our mother was not frightened that I might go off with a man one day and never return; she was frightened that I would remain. She did not watch me as she did Dolores, but rather looked compulsively away from me. Sometimes, like this, it was better not to be admired and loved but to exist just out of sight. And when I needed to believe that, I would recall my sister saying *don't damage the goods* while we dutifully hid her hair under an ugly swimming cap. The hair which had somehow been claimed as though Dolores' beauty did not belong to her but was instead a currency for our mother to spend.

My own daughter was always proud of the pale and unusual colouring that our family carried. I had dreaded Dolly beginning school and learning that silver hair and pale eyes were not universally perceived as the gifts she assumed they were. But at four years old, her classmates apparently agreed with her self-evaluation and this unanimous approval continued to be the case. It was as if there had been a convention held somewhere in the few years between my leaving school and Dolly entering the world. At this event, it had been decided in concrete and binding terms that our colouring was to be considered not only entirely acceptable, but a qualifier of status and beauty. My daughter is like that; her people all come to believe whatever it is that she does herself and they do not know why they never object. Dolly was persistently

referred to as ‘charming;’ this effect was never achieved through any conformity, but was, rather, the base, snake-performing art practised by her father.

‘And does Dolly look like you?’ Vita continued.

I imagined my daughter’s smooth and unreadable expression, like that of the King; an unfixed thing engendered to please. Our house still has many photos of her, and it pleases me that our (admittedly rare) visitors confuse the pictures of Dolly and my sister for the same girl. My purse was on the table and I handed Vita the most recent photo from a selection that I kept in there. That I still keep in there. The picture had been taken two years before, and Dolly was pink cheeked and radiant, even in the grey tones of her school uniform and with her hair pulled sternly back from her face. She was looking off to the side and not so much smiling as laughing, at something or someone unseen behind the camera. A private joke, not for the onlooker.

‘No.’ I replied. By this, I meant to be clear that Vita should not judge Dolly by her mother, a point often made explicitly by my in-laws. ‘She is very clever. She’s going to go to university. She’s hoping to take maths. At Cambridge.’

I was not supposed to discuss this potential destination with anybody except Bunny and Richard, but I could not help saying it to Vita. Such magical ideas seemed suddenly possible in her presence. I imagined that girls in her world would routinely go to university, they would also attend parties in dresses with huge skirts and travel with smart luggage and they would know, as such girls do, that only good things could ever happen to them.

‘Marvellous! How pretty. And *clever*.’ Vita pronounced the last word with an excitable lowering of her voice, as if it had exotic and improper connotations. ‘Does she get that from you?’

‘No. I left school before the exams. I was on my own and I wasn’t... I’m not as quick as Dolly.’ My mind takes longer to start up, but when I am engaged, I can focus for days and spot

original connections between apparently unlike things. It is like possessing an electrical and involuntary force. Everything touches many, many other things, and these points of intersection are the only way in which everyday things can be properly understood.

There was a brief preference during my childhood for teaching semantics via relative relationships; at school we would be asked to consider such questions as - *Ice is to water as cheese is to ...?* School, at last, made sense and my teacher suspected I was cheating. I was separated from the other pupils and seated alone at a desk, for she could not understand how, overnight, I had begun to outperform the entire class. She did not puzzle over my new intellect for too long, as once we reverted to numeracy, she confirmed that I could not reliably tell the time or solve simple addition. And I could have told her, if she had asked, why I found the science of semantics so undemanding; relative definition is exactly how I experience the world, a place in which everything is defined, not on its own terms, but by what it touches. The purest comparison I knew only ever existed in the notes I made to myself on rough paper as I finished another test on relative meaning and waited for my classmates to catch up. It read: *the lake is to my mother as Italian folktales are to me.*

Dolly always worked efficiently at her schoolwork, with a little frown and a contained expression. I knew she was not witnessing the charges of apparently unrelated things connecting, as I do, the telekinesis of objects drawn together and colliding before they make sense. But neither did she sing to herself, make odd statements and offend teachers, so her way of working was infinitely more productive than mine.

‘I was at Cambridge. *History of Art*, darling.’ Vita’s voice was higher and thinner than it had been, and she gave a flat little laugh.

I laughed politely along with her, *ha!* as if we both agreed that the place and subject of her education was, indeed, an amusing admission. Vita looked at me intensely and frowned, which made thin cracks in the milk that was now set drily around her mouth. I stopped laughing. If I had the luxury of referring to my own degree, I would not laugh about it. When Dolly and I talked about her future at university, it was always in tones of reverence, on my own part at least. I typically pretend that education is not something I want for myself. It is not difficult to conjure the reasons I cannot go; the people, the noise, the untaught choreography of daily relationships, the academic community and, then, the inevitable expulsion from all that. Sometimes though, the books and the possibilities there seem bigger and more important than all this.

The year before Vita came, Dolly and I visited Lancaster University together on an open day. There was a painful pull in my chest all the time we were there, the jump-jump-jump of a trapped thing that would not be ignored. The library was thrilling, millions of fascinating voices held tight in books and waiting to share their secrets. And all around us, students stood, giggling and casually leafing through these works, before returning them to the shelves, entirely unmoved as though they were visiting an unremarkable place.

Dolly's father once took us to a coastal resort near his uncle's farm, where he spent summers as a child and now lives with his wife. It was late October when we visited, and the beach was quiet, colourless, and very, very cold. There were a group of local children playing stepping-stones on large rocks; as we got closer, it became obvious that they were actually standing on a collection of dead grey seals. Their lack of reverence was shocking. I gasped loudly and did not realise I had done so until the King shushed me. Dolly and I had never seen such creatures before. To us, they remained other-worldly creatures that belonged in storybooks along with fairies, unicorns and elves. I had not known seals could be glimpsed at Morecombe, either dead or alive. But here were they were, expired and abused, their shiny grey bodies utilised for games

and their beauty ignored. The young people in the library ignited the same despondency in me as the stepping children. The students smoked and chatted, their admiration only for one another. They looked at their friends with an interest they did not hold for the books that were all carefully organised and waiting to be picked. *Look!* I wanted to tell them. *Look at all those books I will never get to touch. You can read any of them. All of them.* The way I felt about university was the same painful feeling I had for the King. It was the fury of unmet wanting, the wanting to possess something not meant for me. I am compelled to covet these beautiful things, but not built to withstand their effects.

‘... But, of course, Rols did maths, too,’ continued Vita, with a now measured smile. ‘We met at university in fact. He was nineteen and I was twenty-eight. I was a *mature student*.’ She said this phrase in a slow voice that was not her own and laughed at the apparent ridiculousness of such a title.

‘Why?’ I said.

She smiled, ‘Why?’

‘Why weren’t you nineteen too?’

She sighed, and for a moment was silent. ‘I was engaged before, you see, darling. For a long time ... and it didn’t work out. I was quite *distraught*.’ She grimaced only as she said the last word and it was the fleeting expression of pain easily resolved. As if she had briefly felt the pinch of a small and invisible hand. She smiled broadly as she continued. ‘Daddy said I should go to Europe to recuperate; we have family in France and Holland. But I had a cousin already at Cambridge and somehow, I ended up there instead. So, there I was, a *mature student*.’ Again, she used a different intonation to pronounce this phrase. ‘And Rols wasn’t. Not at all. He even missed his finals to go to the races, which he never admits. I’ll tell him to have a word with Dolly when they meet. He loves maths, all that, can go on about it for *ages*. Poor Dolly! What

am I letting her in for?’ She stopped smiling and managed to look serious, despite the milk still settled on her mouth. One of her hands went up to smooth her hair and settled on her chest. She patted her pyjama top as if feeling for something lost, seeming to remember again how she was dressed and she sighed heavily, as though exhausted. Gesturing to her outfit again, she made a gentle and hopeless little motion of her long fingers. ‘I honestly haven’t unpacked *anything*, Sunday. I simply don’t *want* to. It isn’t *in* me to do it. Even my clothes. All I have is the suit I arrived in. Which needs cleaning.’ She paused thoughtfully here, as if considering who was responsible for cleaning her suit. ‘Rols chose to come to Toms ... we were actually offered a place in the South of France... but here we are, so I told him *he* can do all the unpacking.’ For a moment, it was like speaking to Dolly, who I frequently watched talking herself into petulance and then out again. ‘We’ve only brought clothes and a few of our favourite pieces, our paintings; everything else is in storage. Although now I’ve seen Tom’s interiors, well ... The removal man was so sweet; he actually offered to stay on and unpack for me yesterday.’ Yes, I thought, of course you would want to stay in the company of this woman. You would naturally try to remain near her, even when you were no longer being paid for your assistance. ‘But I said no,’ she continued, confidently lowering her voice. ‘I am *not* going to make it easy for Rols, darling. I am going into town today to get new stuff. I will just keep buying whatever I want until he arrives and unpacks.’ She sat up, rubbing her hands together and smiling right at me, a portrait of childlike excitement.

‘When will he be here?’

‘Hopefully not until I’ve got a *lot* of new clothes, darling.’ She was unsmiling, her eyebrows were straight dark lines and the thin line of milk still framed her top lip. Her short red mouth was triangular shaped, with a gentle overbite and I imagined, correctly as it transpired, that this would become something suggestive in photographs. It gave her a bird-like appearance, this sharp, curved-bone beak of a mouth.

Having Vita's full attention was like returning to the lake; first the tiny shocks alerted you to the sudden drop in temperature and then, when the water had numbed your body so much that you did not know, anymore, if you were cold or burning, the body finally acclimatised, seeping feeling back into your limbs with the warm comfort of morphine. A man once approached Dolores and me as we stood on the shore one morning preparing for an early morning swim. As he crossed the beach, he stumbled on the pebbles, but his gaze remained fixed on us, as if he had been sent with a specific task. He warned us that we must not swim during that initial cold-water shock, but ought to float instead until our bodies accepted the temperature. We nodded, and he walked away without further comment. The stranger was like that, abrupt and professional; a policeman alerting a motorist to a broken brake light. And with Vita, I found the stillness he recommended, this surrender to the shock, came naturally to me. I was engulfed by her. I was held up weightlessly within her gaze, exactly as I had once floated in the cold lake with my sister. It was a sensation like safety, and I thought, then, that perhaps I was bones after all and not paper. But Vita was still talking: '... to come with me? I suppose you're, umm, *working*?' Vita said 'working' as if it was a foreign and unfamiliar name that required concentration to be pronounced correctly.

'Yes. But I would rather work than go shopping with you.'

Her gaze was still fixed on me, but she remained silent for a time and I noticed the break in her pattern of speech. So far, she had only taken brief pauses in her speech when she specifically wanted a response and her words were like early fireworks; -tuh -tuh -tuh -tuh -tuh -tuh -tuh — silence -tuh -tuh -tuh -tuh -tuh -tuh -tuh — silence. I wondered if anyone had ever refused this charming woman anything before.

Then she smiled and clapped her hands together like a starlet in a silent film; 'Oh, I fucking *love* that. I love honest people, darling. It's so much easier to say what you think, isn't it? I bet there isn't much of that here though, is there? Everyone in these little towns is so polite. Inside

their little houses. *So* concerned with what other people think.’ She opened her eyes very wide and her mouth became a distressed ‘O’, her hands framing her cheeks. Then she laughed and patted my leg, her palm curling around my knee. ‘We aren’t like that though, are we Sunday?’ She removed her hand and placed it back around the milk, with a smaller and more private smile. I bet the neighbours here aren’t like us.’ She did not wait for an answer, which was fortunate because my etiquette book was clear that discussing existing neighbours with a new neighbour was an unacceptable practice. Instead, she drained the rest of the milk from the bottle, placing it back down on the table empty and facing both palms up in evidence of completion like a partygoer downing a shot. She stood up and directed her lovely, milky-edged smile at me again. There was a formal handbag next to her that I had not noticed before. She had set it on a chair of its own, rather than the floor, as if it were a beloved pet. She picked the bag up lightly in one hand and with her free hand she stroked the soft-looking leather in a self-soothing gesture. ‘Right. I’m going shopping then. Rols left his stupid car behind for me. I hate it, but he, well, he says it’s the only thing in the world that he loves as much as me. Have a good day at *work*.’ The final word was pronounced with an emphasis as if my occupation was a polite fiction between us, an agreed euphemism between old friends for something quite improper.

I saw Vita to the door and then watched from the doorway as she went to her husband’s red car and opened the boot. I already hated the stupid car, too. She pulled a pair of flat laced shoes and a thin pink sweater from the back and sat down immediately on the pavement to put them on over her pyjamas. She inhabited her body with the unselfconscious practicality of a toddler. Dolly always said it was unacceptable to go out in nightwear, even if I put a coat over it and even it was just a quick errand. It looked fine to me. It actually looked very good. Standing up, Vita waved cheerfully at me, not surprised but obviously expecting to find me still watching her from my doorway. I did not go back inside until her car was out of sight.

No, I thought, the neighbours were not like me and Vita. Not like *us*. We were different from them and the same as one another. I had never known a person who delighted in, or even admitted to, any similarity with me. Before Vita, I believed I was something ancient and unfinished. But if Vita values *our* eccentricities, I thought, I could prize them, too. We were the same and if she was able to breathe underwater or touch fire, then perhaps I also had those skills. It was like discovering that you are not the very last one of your own people. That there might be others out there who had lake-water for blood and paper for bones, as I do. The world seemed, for the first time, not only for those who have hard, little bird-hearts and a charming song. Not only for my daughter and for her father, the King.

Despite the joy of Vita entering my life, even she could not make shopping a leisure activity for me. The airlessness of clothing stores alerts me to the fire exits, but renders other women dull and docile as domestic pets. The overhead lighting forces their dazzled eyes downward to the racks carefully positioned for ease of contact. Their soft little hands identically stroke the clothes as they consider them; the subsequent rejection or acceptance of a piece is entirely incomprehensible.

At seventeen, looking for an outfit for my sister's funeral, I had instead become transfixed by another shopper, a slight and dark-haired woman. Her mode of selection consisted of quick, fluttery movements; I reached out toward the clothing and then withdrew my hand sharply after making contact, as though burned. The notion of receiving invisible direction was so compelling that I followed the dark woman, touching the same items she had touched, waiting for the sensation that would identically choreograph my own fingers. Eventually, the woman settled on a busily patterned blouse and moved briskly towards the cashier. The fabric featured tiny cockerels wearing jaunty green hats and dancing alongside tilted Martini glasses; each cocktail was topped with an olive speared through its red pimento heart. I placed my palm

expectantly against the one identical top left on the rail and closed my eyes. But it lay smooth and dead in my hand, cool against the relentless hot breath of the store. I wore the ugly blouse to the funeral of my sister and then to those of both my parents within the following six months. This was the first of my four acts of faith; the King would be my second, Dolly and Vita, my very last.

talk louder, talk normal

Due to Vita's unexpected visit, I missed the first bus and was uncharacteristically late to work. I was still opening all the greenhouse doors when David arrived to do a morning with me. He was only working a half-day on the farm that day as his parents had arranged to take him out for lunch. It was his twenty-fifth birthday the following day and they wanted to celebrate with him on their way to the airport for a fortnight in Italy. Despite my obsession with the place, I have never actually visited, and I was hoping to learn the details of where exactly they would be staying and what they planned to see, none of which David had been able to tell me. When they returned, their youngest son would no longer be living with them, but would be settled in a shared cottage that was situated on the farm and rented from the King's parents. It was the first time David's parents had been to the farm; their smart black car pulled up on the concrete yard outside the greenhouse at exactly one pm. It is difficult to keep a black car clean on the country roads round here and I grudgingly admired this badge of persistence on their part.

David is, still, often late by at least ten minutes and this should bother me, would bother me if he were anyone else. But I like the way he arrives; he comes in quietly and unless I happen to notice him, he begins his work without any announcement. When the King or Dolly enter a room, it is with a flourish and an expectation of acknowledgement, magicians with bright smiles and a rabbit in one gloved hand: *tah-dah!* When I was married to the King, he would start when he saw me; *why are you always creeping around? Can't you walk into a room like a normal person?* Dolly frequently asked me the same thing. In the same voice. It was unnerving to be critiqued daily by a different version of the same person, as if the second one was either mimicking or endorsing the first one's hatred of me.

That morning I looked up from my own planting to admire the immaculate line of greenery behind David and his skilled and careful hands. When I waved, he raised a thumb back, made

the half circle across his chest. *Good Morning*. He signed, as he generally does, in an amused and easy manner as if the greeting is just one of many pleasant things on his mind. I do not mind that my signing is characteristically choppy and clipped like my speech.

If someone spoke as David signs, people would describe their accent as lilting and melodic, like that of Mr Lloyd, a Welshman in his fifties, who is a regular at the farm shop. When Mr Lloyd talks in his calm and musical way about seasonal vegetables and the agricultural implications of the predicted rainfall, it sounds as though he is singing. I like to close my eyes when he speaks, and I think that perhaps I could come to love Mr Lloyd. He often has to repeat himself when we talk because I focus on the lovely sound and do not hear the intention. Mr Lloyd is very accommodating with my requests for repetition. He politely corrects the other customers if he thinks they are speaking too quietly or not clearly enough to me.

David still works with me most mornings and on the farm in the afternoons. During harvest time, he is needed in the fields more and often cannot come to the greenhouses for weeks at a time. I miss his quiet company during these periods. David can lip-read and speak clearly, because he was hearing for several years, he explained to me once. He contracted meningitis at the age of five and when he awoke in hospital, it was to a new version of his life: everything looked the same as before but there was no accompanying sound. The staff and his parents would open his door, move around his room and pour water in a glass, all in silence, like ghosts. When they leaned down to his bed to speak to him, their mouths moving more quickly than he remembered, he finally realised that this was not a trick, because their voices, too, were broken. *Talk louder!* he commanded, *talk normal!* And as he spoke, he found that his voice no longer worked, to his own ears at least. He explained all this one morning in the greenhouse, after an argument with his parents, a doctor and a housewife, who would prefer him not to work on the farm but to go to university, as his two brothers did. David, though, remained suspicious of

them and of their intentions, wary as if he was still the child who believed that they alone were withholding the sensation of sound from him.

His parents entered the greenhouse, announcing themselves with loud greetings, ‘Hallo! Hallo! Here we are!’

I flinched at the overt noise of them both, realising that I had expected David’s childhood version of the couple, had expected them to move their mouths as if speaking but to maintain a deliberate and mocking silence. I found myself watching their faces intently. Silver-haired and dressed in navy and beige, they could have accurately been cast as glamorous retirees, advertising expensive cruises or private healthcare. David’s mother wore a sharp ended necklace that spread itself out above her collarbone like a watchful pet. She and her husband strode towards me with their hands identically extended and I held my soil-covered palms up in a warning. They instantly stopped walking and waved enthusiastically at me from some distance instead.

David was already washing his hands at the little sink by the entrance. His father went to him and patted him hard on the back in a greeting. The sink is set low on the wall, as if for children, and he has to stoop a little to use it. His rounded shoulders and softened knees that day, though, looked more like a surrender than an adaptation for his height.

‘Where are you going on holiday?’ I asked them, raising my voice so it would carry across the greenhouse to where they stood. I signed at the same time, although David could not see me.

‘Italy! We’re going to Italy!’ They replied in one voice, both smiling.

‘I know. Where are you going in Italy?’ I said. This time, I only signed a few of the words; *Where, you, Italy?*

‘We are going to ... Lake Como!’ This time, it was David’s father who spoke. His wife watched him closely as if he had said something very accomplished.

I shrugged. ‘Ah, well.’ I was no longer signing along at all. It was not the South, but they looked happy about it. I thought about telling them some of the history of Sicily. Then I looked up at their expectant faces again and I returned to the planting.

‘We are very excited,’ said David’s mother.

I said nothing but carried on with my work. What could be said to someone who was excited to visit the Italian Lakes in the North, but chose not to go to the South of that country? I regretted their mistake, but it was theirs to live with.

‘Come on David,’ said his handsome parents in their large voices. ‘Let’s go.’ But he was facing away from them and could not know what they had said. They turned to me, collusively; ‘He is always running late, isn’t he? David?’

They looked at me expectantly, so I said, ‘Ha!’ and returned to my plants. I did not like these people, with their television outfits and their refusal to include their son in conversation, as though he were an adolescent being punished for some long-standing misdemeanour. David put his outstretched hand up towards me as he followed them out to their car. I waved brightly at him. He smiled tightly and made a large circle across his chest, *Sorry*. I smiled and waved again, *it’s fine* and went back to my work. He had told me that his parents did not learn sign language and insist that he lip reads and speaks with them. He does not like to speak; he is self-conscious about his voice now that he can no longer monitor it. When he was younger and keen to sign in the new language he had learned, his parents sometimes made him sit on his hands during conversation to prevent him from signing.

My own signing has improved under David’s tuition. I only knew some basic signs when he began work here. I focus on the speaker’s face to hear speech in noisy or brightly lit places, because the sounds all run together like paint, and my instinct is to turn away from it. People who notice my frowning concentration on their speech often assume I am deaf, and it is true that I do not hear as they do.

At fifteen, I found myself in a noisy pub with an unfamiliar man; Mer had sent me there to deliver the catch he had made with my father earlier that day. She insisted that I go to my room first to brush my hair and change out of my school uniform. On my bed, I found she had put out one of Dolores' outfits for me, a fitted skirt and blouse that sat unhappily on my frame, pulling at me like a tired child. When I looked up from dressing, I saw my mother staring at me from the landing. Her face was especially hard and watchful that evening, I noticed, and I tried to make some context for this. The week before, at dinner, Mer had told my father how a neighbour had just sold his ugly house for a large and surprising profit. Over dinner, my father had been politely interested, but his face had remained unchanged. Mer, though, transformed when she spoke about the money the neighbour's house had made him; her staring eyes had glinted like wet stones and she frowned as though she was already doing sums in her head. That concentration was evident in her face as she watched me dress that night.

'And wear my good shoes,' she said, her tone that of a warning. 'They're in the hall.'

I repeated the phrase as I walked to the pub; it had a tick tock, tick tock, stop, beat that suited my quick pace. *They're in the hall, feet together they're in the hall, feet together they're in the hall feet together*

I held on to the enormous fish, wrapped tightly in paper and string, and asked for the man by name at the bar, as Mer had directed. But when the man appeared, he handed the package straight to the barman and took me through to the garden, where I was introduced to a group of other men as his date, rather than by my name. He was tall, with very little hair and he looked old enough to be my father. When he spoke, he ended each remark with a little laugh, as meaningless as a cough. *Ha-ha*, he repeated flatly over and over while he talked. I sat in silence next to the man on a hard, wooden bench until it began to get dark and I whispered to him that I needed to use the bathroom. He nodded briefly and continued speaking to the other man. Coming out of the toilets into the loud bar, which was lit by overhead fluorescent tubes, I closed

myself off to the noise and light, and the hands that brushed possessively against me. I made my way, resignedly, back towards the bench, but before I got there, the face of the tall man was suddenly close to my own.

‘What’s wrong with you? You walked right past us! We moved inside. We were shouting at you! Ha-ha.’ His closeness made me very still and he looked back at my face carefully, as if searching for a recognisable defect. I remained silent. ‘Can. You. Hear. Me?’ he said loudly and with much showing of his large teeth, in what could have been aggression or fear. I could not speak. Then, more to himself than to me, he said, ‘Mer never told me that, did she. Ha-ha. Ha-ha.’ Turning back towards the pub, the tall man made a gesture of dismissal in my direction with a flick of his hand and I could finally leave, my apparent deafness for once a gift of freedom.

When I arrived home, Walter and Mer were watching the news, he with a hand placed reverently on one of her blanket-covered knees. He started a little at the interruption and then asked why I was late. His tone, as usual, was that of a mildly interested onlooker who did not wish to intrude.

Mer did not look up from the television but said in a sharp voice; ‘She was helping me. Someone has to help me.’

‘Someone has to help me. Someone has to help me.’ I repeated immediately in the same plaintive tone but much, much more loudly than my mother had said it. I had not intended to say it at all, but certainly had not wanted to say it so loudly. Typically, copying a statement or a phrase clarifies meaning for me, but occasionally it functions like a recycled piece of art, a creative practice of which Dolly was once very fond. That is, it communicates something different than the original did, but it speaks just as much to truth. I knew when this happened in my mother’s presence because she would stare at me hard and shout, ‘Walter!’ And then my father would appear and tell me to go, to my room, to school, to anywhere that was not near

her. When it happened with my sister and later on with my daughter, they would each laugh instead, in the same easy way.

And this must have been one of those instances because my father said, ‘Go to your room, Sunday,’ before Mer had even finished saying his name.

He and I both knew, already, that he would not ask me again for an explanation, even when we were alone. I could not be alone with my father; no-one ever could, because she was always with him. He carried her with him, within him and he would not put her down.

I did begin to tell Walt about the man once and he interrupted me: ‘You’re a good girl to help your mother. It’s right that you do.’ A group of local boys had a practice of cornering children in the street and making them repeat carefully scripted insults about themselves. I had been caught by the boys, as had many others, and my father spoke to me in the familiar and captured tone of their victims. I never raised the subject with him again.

David prefers to sign than speak in a voice that he cannot hear and does not even know himself, now that it no longer belongs to a five-year-old child, but to a man. It suits us both to work in silence and sign to one another across planted rows in the large greenhouses. Long before Martha’s Vineyard in America became a playground for rich holidaymakers, the area was peopled by disproportionate numbers of deaf residents. The early English settlers, from a remote part of Kent, brought with them a gene for deafness. A high rate of intermarriage among this insular society supported the recessive gene; for a substantial period, as many as one in four children were born deaf. The community typically used sign language from a young age, whether they were hearing or not. David would have lived well in such a place; his parents would not. Residents described how even groups of hearing people would naturally sign in conversation together rather than resorting to speech. I think of that community often, of both the hearing and the deaf signing easily to one another from their whaling boats about

approaching storms and planned family dinners. I imagine them working companionably together on windy fields where voices could not carry and signing to one another from great distances, triumphant and oblivious to the sound of the raging sea.

Many late nineteenth-century Americans perceived manual signing as a barrier to normalcy and specifically, to Christian practices. A resultant aggressive external policy was introduced to eradicate deafness on the island; mixed schooling provisions were removed, and local education was reserved solely for hearing children. Deaf students were instead sent to the mainland for specialist education, away from their hearing peers. Sign language became less commonly used in the Vineyard than speech. Spending time with non-hearing students from other areas increased the numbers who left Martha's Vineyard to marry outside their now divided community. Separating the hearing and the deaf in childhood meant that the deaf gene, reliant on local ties, was eventually dispensed with also. It was a clearance of people rather than an improvement of lives. David's parents, too, would rather ship me and their son off to another place than accept our difference. They would stand at the harbour and wave us off as though we were passengers on a cruise, not inmates of enforced normalisation. And we would not return to them, remade by the factory of acceptable communications and like his parents, in navy and beige announcing ourselves: *Hello! Hello! Here we are!* But rather, we would remain forever awkward and unfinished to their gaze, unsatisfactory and ghostly versions of themselves.

My greenhouses operate as an island of comfortable silence, a Martha's Vineyard for two. Here I am productive before I am impaired in any way. My condition does not accompany me when I am working but waits at the door. When I am alone, or at work, he sleeps outside, his dark head low on his paws; he resents the lack of challenge in the greenhouse environment, where no one speaks in riddles or looks at me oddly. Here is a magical space without social context

or burdens. But in the company of others the animal is fixed to my side, a smiling husband whose iron hand on me looks like affection, but functions as a reminder of who I really am. The wolf-husband's wiry whiskers graze my skin as he whispers into my ear, *talk about Italy go on go on don't look at their eyes oh no don't they don't like it at all look at the floor, the wall and isn't that music loud Sunday and aren't those lights too bright?*

Sicilian folklore is rife with such wolves; women were cautioned that on specific nights, such as Christmas Eve, they were not to allow their husband into the house on his first knock, but to wait for his third knock. It is said that one woman, roused late from her sleep and confused, answered the door on her husband's second knock. He reportedly ate her, for he was still a werewolf as she had not performed the third knock which would have made him human once again. I would have survived as a Sicilian wife, for I can follow rules as clear as these. But I was married to an English King, and so the wolf consumed me on my own doorstep. Minute traces of my blood are probably still detectable on the attractive brick archway of my porch. I never had a chance.

When I returned home from work that afternoon, the house was quiet, and I immediately knew Dolly was not there. The bones of our house are most relaxed in summer and the wooden front door opened smoothly. During rainy seasons, the entrances and windows swell up unhappily like a person made puffy with water retention, an Alice in shrinking shoes and tightening rings. Doors must be wrestled open here in winter and cold breathes through the ill-fitting sash windows whose dimensions appear to be random and decided on without recourse to the existing surrounds. I stroked the warm brick of the porch and went inside, going upstairs to shower before Dolly got home. From my bedroom window, I could see a fluffy white shape, motionless on the grass in Vita's garden as she had been herself days before. I assumed it was an abandoned toy of some sort until it jumped up and ran inside as if escaping an invisible

pursuer. It was a small dog with a pointed face and an impressive coat that bounced around his little body when he moved.

I left the French doors open in the warm evening as I prepared dinner and baked David's birthday cake. This is a tradition that I adhere to still as he is so pleased with the outcome, regardless of what I produce. I did not make cakes for my daughter's birthdays because they did not compare to the impressive creations her grandparents ordered from the bakery each year. On her sixth birthday, Dolly looked at the cake I had made for her and told me not to bother anymore. I think, now, I should have persisted.

I mixed the icing for David's cake and listened to Vita talking in her garden. At first, I assumed that her husband must have arrived home because she spoke in a conversational tone. But it soon transpired from the subject matter, a lesson on spoiled rugs and naughty pets, that she was talking to the little white dog. Vita, though, did not use a voice reserved for babies and pets; she talked seriously and without pause, her distinctive speech rising into a question before she answered each query herself.

I heard Dolly arrive home, waited for her to announce her own arrival to the empty hall and then called her into the kitchen. She was lovely that summer; I picture her often as she was that day, in her school uniform, with her pale hair tied up loosely away from her face and a heavy bag of revision books on her arm. She rarely wore make up and had a plainer way of dressing than her friends, which coupled with the lack of cosmetics made her look even younger. I flattered myself that this individuality was the influence of my own unfussy appearance rather than the extended demands of school study, revision and exams.

'Dolls, you're late. How was it today?' I put my arms around her and felt her stiffen, surrendering briefly to my embrace rather than returning it.

'Yeah, fine. No surprises. You know. Exams. Can we eat now? I've got to revise. Is that cake for tea?'

Our places were already set, and I served the food onto plates, laying Dolly's before her. She sat at the table in her queenly and expectant manner. Her meals were bought, prepared, served and cleaned away; at sixteen, Dolly was as oblivious to the processes behind this as she had been as a child. Such domestic trivia did not concern her but happened off-stage and out of sight. Dinner had been ready an hour before, when she was expected home. It had been kept warm ever since and it was dry and curling now, like a sea creature left out in the sun.

'It's David's birthday cake. I'll bring you some home tomorrow...' but she was already talking again. I put the cake into a tin and sat down opposite her.

'Great,' she said, looking down at her dinner. 'White food. Again. Yum.'

Now that we were sitting together, I noticed that the dinner was indeed very white, or at least cream coloured. But it was a Thursday and so we were eating rice and fish. Typically, I served salad or greens alongside it, but the more preoccupied I am, the whiter our meals become. It is a natural point of return and only Dolly's disgust drew my attention to this habit. I offered to grill her fish, so it would brown.

'That's still white food,' she said. 'It's just burned white food.' But she began to eat, although bovinely and without interest.

'I met the neighbour again this morning,' I told her. Dolly's face remained blank as she continued to regard her plate resignedly. 'You know, Vita,' I continued, encouragingly.

'Who?'

'Vita.' I nodded my head towards next door. 'Remember, I told you she'd moved in. Haven't you seen her yet? That's her red car at the front.'

'Nope.' She got up and took a bottle of tomato sauce from the fridge.

'Well, she told me that her husband took maths too and he could talk to you about it sometime.'

‘Ooh, Mum. The thrill.’ Despite her flat tone, she smiled at me. Dolly’s face, her mood, was what determined how I felt at any time and when she smiled, I, too, felt happy. I thought how tired she must have been, after another afternoon of exams and all the months of revision. She squeezed the sauce all over her food and gave a little exhalation of satisfaction at the bright red addition to her plate. ‘Ahhhh. It’s not white anymore.’ But she stopped eating her then pinkish dinner soon after that and opened the freezer. ‘Revision!’ she said, emphasising the final syllable like a farewell as she left the room with a box of vanilla ice cream in her hand.

‘Well, that ice-cream is white, anyway,’ I said a moment later, raising my voice so she could catch it. ‘And you couldn’t possibly eat all that,’ I finished. But she did not hear me, was already upstairs and I was talking to myself in an empty kitchen.

The next morning, when I opened the cake tin at work to present David with his birthday cake, we found that there was a large slice already cut out of it.

I frowned, and David raised his eyebrows, signed *Dolly*, by rocking an invisible baby in his arms. I did not sign my daughter’s name in this way, as he knew.

I pointedly spelled her name out on my fingers; *Yes, you are right. It must have been D-O-L-L-Y.*

He looked at the cake, at the careful icing and the cyclical face with the large missing section. *D-O-L-L-Y has good taste. Can’t blame her for that.* This time he signed each letter of her name and we smiled at each other. David’s face is good for reading; he wants to be understood, unlike Bunny or Richard, with their fleeting and changeable expressions.

He insisted that we had a slice each at break and again at lunchtime, but it was a deep two-layered cake, thickly covered in white frosting and he still had a lot to take home with him. Dolly’s small piece had not made much difference after all. But I did not take any home as I had promised her.

Dolly was revising with friends and did not plan to be home until late that night, so I ate a bowl of milky cereal alone before preparing her a cold chicken salad and putting it into the fridge. The doorbell rang while I was clearing away the salad remnants. Phyllis, an elderly and outdoorsy woman who lives at the end of our street, was standing on the doorstep expectantly. She was my court appointed guardian, at her own request, from the two years following my parents' death until I turned eighteen. Her brief daily visits meant I was able to stay on in my family home, rather than being assigned to the care system. Phyllis in fact, proved a better fit for me than my own mother had been. Her eccentricity and the upkeep of her smallholding left her little time to worry about the way I lived, but she always made herself available when necessary to help me with practical tasks, with arranging doctor's appointments and paying bills. She had a confidence, too, in my abilities, which she spoke of often and especially in the company of others, such as the court appointed social worker. Phyllis' faith in this regard was apparently undimmed by my slow progress and regular confusion, which remained a private matter between us, at her firm request. I recognised, even then, what an enormous commitment she had undertaken, and I think we were both relieved to be released from the arrangement on my eighteenth birthday. Although I still had to remind her several times that she was no longer obliged to visit me or to enquire into my needs and general wellbeing. Eventually I read the letter which officially released her from her commitment to me and she nodded back. She, too, had received the letter, she told me in a quiet voice. My reading it to her directly, though, seemed to help her adhere to our imposed release from one another, for she stopped the daily visits and, when she did come, she no longer asked if she might come into the house, but stayed on the doorstep.

Phyllis delivers home grown vegetables and eggs from her own hens along the street each week and that day it was our turn. A thin plastic bag containing carrots, tomatoes and a box of eggs were placed into my hands gently and with a knowing smile, as if we both knew that I

had been waiting for this and was now satisfied at last. The gift always comes with a modest disclaimer, *I couldn't use them, couldn't see them go to waste*. Phyllis could not reasonably eat all the vegetables she grows, or the eggs that her brood produces; she has at least fifteen hens and has lived alone since being widowed many years ago.

I had no need of the vegetables or the eggs as when Dolly was still at home, my in-laws always let me use the farm shop without charge. I was scrupulous about using this familial benefit fairly and regularly cautioned my daughter to do the same. She sometimes took friends there to fill their schoolbags with homemade biscuits, large, iced cakes and expensive chocolates which could add up to more than my modest weekly shop. The King and I avoided a financial settlement or maintenance in our divorce; the house was mine and he had little in his own name at the time. His parents had been generous with my daughter and I, supporting Dolly, particularly, in ways that their son might have otherwise. I knew this grocery provision would change, though, when she eventually left home, as Richard had begun to prepare me for this, in his peculiar rhetorical way, when I saw him in the shop. *You won't be shopping much when it's just you, will you? I expect you'll want to use the supermarket when Dolly's gone won't you?* And it seemed, seems, right that I should be independent of them when their granddaughter no longer lives with me.

'Thanks, Phyllis,' I said. 'It's kind of you.' There was no point in repeating the fact that the farm let me have all the fresh produce we needed. I had tried to convince her of this several times, but she remained determined to bring me eggs and it was quicker, anyway, to accept them than to protest. I began to close the door with the bag of produce in my other hand.

'...met them?' I only heard the end of Phyllis's question.

'Sorry?' I opened the door again.

'I said, have you met them yet; the new neighbours?' she repeated carefully, gesturing to Vita's house.

My instinct is always to be cautious with information. Etiquette demands that one does not discuss neighbours with each other (although if one is directly asked to do so, it is briefly permissible and indicates that the poor taste is on the part of the enquirer only). Speaking in factual terms, rather than expressing any personal opinions, though, is vital. I am the same as the customers who used the King's name, just to hold something sweet and thrilling in their mouths. Like children with chocolate. I wanted to say 'Vita' repeatedly until it was no longer exciting but natural, until I could casually possess a little of her. *Her mouth speaks of that which fills her heart*, my mother used to warn us. This line had been a family dinner favourite with her during my silent periods. For Mer, this quietness evidenced that my heart was empty, while within the bosom of my talkative sister beat an organ full of filial love. And perhaps this is what Mer intuited, when she spoke of my empty heart, that there was no place for her within it. She, herself, knew all about housing chambers where love should be. Even Walter knew that my mother's heart contained only lake-water, running cold and lonely inside her.

Our parents were never churchgoers, but Mer frequently demonstrated the unhappy difference between my sister and I by quoting lines from the bible. She did this with a resigned and distant expression, as if the criticism came not from her, but from God Himself. Mer was just His servant, dutifully reporting my inadequacies to the family. As children, my sister and I had once watched a film in which the occupant of a horse drawn caravan theatrically channelled spirits for paying customers who were eager to hear about love. Dolores gleefully pointed out that the actresses' heavily made-up face wore the same faraway look as our mother did when she quoted from the bible. Afterwards, whenever Mer spoke about my Christian failings, Dolores would widen her eyes and stare into the distance as if bewitched. If I smiled at this, it was immediately seized upon as maternal evidence of my innate ungodliness.

Walter's only contribution to this regular scene was to nod along solemnly with my mother. His was a different kind of bird-heart; it was full and loving, but only available to his wife. He

loved Mer more than she ever loved anything. He could no more have defended me than he could have defended any other item on her long list of dislikes and disappointments. His silence was more painful than Mer's criticism, because he privately assured me often that he did not believe in her version of me. In the presence of his wife, however, this view was Not to Be Mentioned. I kept his intermittent kindnesses to myself and only ever revisited his words privately and in silence.

On my doorstep, Phyllis was waiting patiently for me to reply.

'Yes, I have met her,' I told her. 'Vita. She is...' And I paused, because I find that I don't really know anything about her, even though I had spoken to her more in the last two days than I had with anyone else for some time. A fact appeared. 'She went to Cambridge university. *History of Art.*' I said this like a proud parent.

Dolly appeared behind Phyllis and patted the older woman as she slipped past us both into the house. 'Phyllis!' she said warmly, her voice carrying as she went into the house. 'I hope you've brought us some of your delicious eggs!'

Phyllis blinked happily at the compliment. 'Lovely girl, your Dolly, really lovely girl.' She pointedly watched Dolly disappear down the hallway before continuing, as if our conversation was confidential and potentially disturbing. 'I've been round there, of course, next door, with the eggs, you know, but there's been no-one in. For. Days. Even when the red car is outside.' She widened her eyes and frowned at this, as if puzzled by such absence and the lines already etched into her sharp little face deepened. 'I remember when Fran and Arthur lived there, do you? Lovely couple, they were. But, of course, it's all different now. It's all different.' She made a small, helpless gesture with upturned palms and her arms fluttered limply down to her side. Our street was in fact, entirely unchanged; many of the residents remained from my childhood and photographs my parents took in the early years of their marriage evidence the

same trees, the same neat hedging and private driveways that surrounded Phyllis and I then. ‘I even heard they are selling Lakeside. With all them children in it!’ Lakeside was the local Children’s home, an austere but lovely building on the edge of the town. I might once have been a resident there myself, if my mother had got her wish and, later on, if Phyllis had not offered to stand with me as she had. Her phrasing implied that the Home would be sold with the children included as part of the exchange. I assumed this suggestion was a tactic to continue the conversation, for Phyllis has always loved to talk.

‘No. I’m sure that is not right, Phyllis,’ I said, preparing to close the door again.

But Phyllis hadn’t finished yet. ‘I had to kill Florence, you know,’ she said conversationally.

Reluctantly, I opened the door again. *Ha* will not cover this admission. ‘Yes, okay,’ I said.

‘She turned into an egg eater and I couldn’t stop her. And then Sally started, and the others would have copied them too. I stopped Sally by filling the eggs with mustard water, but Florence had got a taste for them, she wouldn’t stop.’

‘So you killed her?’ I said. It did not seem possible that Phyllis killed one of her chickens, who she carried around her front garden like infants and introduced by name to anyone passing.

‘I strangled her, and I will do Sally, too, if she starts again.’ Phyllis clenched her bony fingers as if in memory. The tension caused a protrusion of the veins across the paper-thin skin on the back of her hands, giving her the claws of her own large avian family. She looked even more pointy faced than usual, as if I was disapproving of what she had done. I had not decided, yet, how I felt about her and her new, chicken-killing ways.

‘Well, yes. You will,’ I said, as nonsensical as my weather fixated shopkeeper, and I finally closed the front door.

Dolly called to me from the sofa where she was sitting with a can of cola and her salad - *Did you really make this, mum? It’s coloured food!* She wanted me to watch a television programme with her. It was a period drama, a poorly made series, but it made both of us laugh,

and this fact itself was a rare enough occurrence for us to watch it together. The younger members of the cast kept becoming too popular for the show and finding more worthy jobs, so the death rate was high. Previously unheard-of characters would be newly referenced in conversation one week, *my sister lives on the coast and is married to a vicar...* and then invariably appeared in the next episode, following an unexpected personal tragedy. The heroine was a young woman with a lovely face who permanently wore heavy eye make-up, even when she woke up in the morning and despite the nineteenth century setting. She was also fond of making the observation; *Papa would not allow that in his house.* Dolly and I joined our little fingers in a miniature hand-shake whenever this statement was repeated and we said it to each other gravely at every opportunity; in cafes with grubby tables, when I had messy hair, when she came home late, or I overcooked the dinner, or dressed inappropriately.

Dolly put her legs up across my lap; she was tall, much taller than me and her long legs were both familiar and foreign to me. Her body, when I knew it closely, when I carried her, fed her, bathed her, and dressed her, when I placed her carefully in her bed with the reverence of a priest performing a practised and holy ritual; that little body was rounded, warm and soft. And my devotion to that small and unformed person remains such that I cannot believe that tiny body does not still exist somewhere. Like the priest, my faith alone is enough to sustain my love. I do not require material evidence to believe in the continuation of her infant self. I care only for those fat little wrists and the tiny feet, as soft-skinned and tender as the underbelly of a tortoise, something too vulnerable to be exposed to the elements. I had not yet considered weaning Dolly when, at fifteen months, she began to laugh or move away when I tried to nurse her at bedtime. Southern Italian mothers historically weaned their babies by smearing their own breasts with coal, soot or spider's webs; I did not need such props to make my daughter turn from me. I still have her tiny first pair of shoes carefully preserved in a freezer bag which I keep in the rucksack that I always carry. Sometimes, when I am blindly feeling for keys or my

wallet, I touch the shoes instead. It is the minute perfection of them that blisters something inside me; the rush of adrenaline on entering a fight that is already lost.

I remember often my infant daughter's tendency to fall unexpectedly and sweetly asleep, at my breast, at mealtimes and during conversations or games, as if in sudden collapse. One Christmas, she fell asleep while opening presents, her snoring gently blowing the discarded wrapping paper up and down beside her face. Dolly's habitual surrender to sleep was what broke something hard within me, this damage to my heart which I never want to fix. These daily infant acts of faith rushed like water into the empty heart which my mother assigned me.

As a toddler, Dolly's preference was always to be near me. I never needed to hold tightly onto her or worry about her running off, as other people's children sometimes did when distracted. My daughter was always close, always watching me, like a tiny sentry posted at my side. She could not be in my presence without laying a possessive little hand on me. She would not allow the King to put an arm around me or let us kiss in her presence. Solemn-eyed, she would move us apart like a teacher at a school dance and position herself in the new space by my side, her back to her father and her eyes trained sternly upon me.

Long before that final summer she had stopped seeking such contact with me, but when she briefly hugged me, or cuddled up to me as she did that evening, the adolescent version of her was all edges and bones. When I did, occasionally, get close, her skin was smooth and polished, but unyielding. It was no longer the podgy little body I had loved and been loved by, but that of a sleek and powerful creature whose primary occupation was to separate from me.

A touch from Dolly, occasional and fleeting as it was, reminded me painfully that I was no longer the mother of that person who staggered around like a tiny drunk, who considered everyday objects both fascinating and hilarious, and regarded me as a perfect extension of herself. My daughter was then an elfin creature who met the strange new discoveries of each day, from pancakes to traffic lights, with a derisory laugh and a sideways look at me, as if to

confirm that she and I, alone, knew the ridiculousness of such things. The world was a joke that we shared. When I pointed out the habits of our town to Dolly, she would stand and stare with the reverence of an impressed student.

At exactly 8 am each morning of Dolly's childhood, we would go to our front window and watch the schoolteacher who lived opposite us as he locked his door and then checked the effect of this by aggressively trying to get back in without his key. Dolly and I often shared a plate of toast while we observed him, occasionally motioning with the little triangles to emphasise important points. *He looks smart. Is that a new briefcase?* we would ask one another at these morning meetings with the seriousness of work colleagues discussing vital projects. *Has he had a haircut? It won't do. It's far too short.* He would open his front gate, check his tie and click the fastening with a little flourish in the same routine. At the shops, we studied the habits and preferences of our neighbours and discussed the merits or strangeness of their purchases in authoritative voices.

As a teenager, though, my daughter began to observe me, alone, from that distant point we once shared. And it was from there that she witnessed my oddities, which alternately amused and disturbed her, the latter becoming more common as she matured. It was like living with a former lover, who no longer remembered you as such, but behaved as a lodger, parading his preferred girlfriends past you with a friendly wink. As if you had both agreed on the separation. Any mention of your intimate past would be received with a polite and distracted tolerance, as if you were unstable and must not be corrected, even when you were wrong.

My daughter was always more real to me than I am to myself, a blood member of the King's able farming family with their hard and powerful little bird-hearts, while I am from flimsy people made of paper and not bones. The lake took my family; it seeped easily into their failing bodies. I have not been in the lake since their deaths and sometimes that is because I fear I am enough like my family to be paper too. Sometimes, too, it is because I remember the

Marabbecca, a Sicilian creature who haunts water, and my sister is no longer here to convince me that he is a monstrous fiction created to scare children away from wells and reservoirs.

In the twenty years since all the dry drowning I have tried to live above the surface. But my condition did not remain in my childhood; it will not be confined to my little house by the lake, or be discarded with all the fish bones, as small and perfect as infant skeletons. This difference accompanies me uninvited and I exist uncomfortably in the shallows. I can pass as one of you for a time until I am submerged again. When it comes to claim me, it is sometimes the relief of summer broken by cool water and sometimes an undertow that drags me beneath.

A once popular Sicilian insult accused unimpressive people of having fish-blood in them and I know that whatever once ran in the veins of my family, whatever is in my own body, is something different from the King's people. Dolly is the only family I have left, but in every way that finally forms a person, she is a Forrester. As clever and charming and brutal as the King. My daughter is not *sangu du mi sangu*; she is not the *blood of my blood*. My family die from minor infections and drown in dry beds; these are deaths that Bunny and Richard would not understand. *Forresters*, they often said, when encouraging Dolly to improve her times tables or when announcing a new acquisition of land, *Forresters Do Not Give Up. Forresters Get Things Done*. The sign on their farm shop reads: *Forresters' Specialist Farm Shop*. I once asked Bunny about that; what exactly did they specialise in? And she smiled and told me patiently, *Everything, Sunday. Forresters are specialists in everything we do*.

Bunny was involved in a serious riding accident the summer after Dolly was born. She had not been wearing a hard hat when she fell, but a silk scarf knotted jauntily under the chin, as was her habit. She was left in a coma for some days and when she finally awoke, cross and confused, it seemed unlikely that she would ever fully recover. But within a month, she was back at the farm, greeting customers and scolding the staff. Whenever the accident was

mentioned, it would be an admiring query; *how had she recovered so well?* Bunny would lightly tap the side of her head and say simply, ‘Good breeding.’

Richard’s father and grandfather had been popular MPs, and the subsequent attention had perhaps shaped the family’s perception of themselves; they retained the habit of referring to themselves in the third person and in grand little soundbites. The extended Forrester family have endless nicknames, jokes and references of their own and use invented acronyms for everyday things. They speak a complex language and bond through this exclusivity, as I imagine a group of spoiled classmates might, opening their ranks only to the very occasional and committed new member. My daughter too, spoke of herself in the third person and made the proud Forrester family claims. As an infant, Dolly was the most substantial thing I ever knew, someone born surely too finished and complete to alter into a new and independent adult person. Sometimes I wake in the night, breathless and tight-chested, convinced that I have left my baby daughter behind somewhere. In my dreams, she walks uncertainly down long roads, with her arms outstretched, but she is always physically blocked from reaching me by the teenage version of herself. The year we met Vita, I existed already in a form of grieving, a refusal to accept that I had somehow lost my greatest love while I still lived alongside her.

As Dolly and I sat companionably together on the sofa watching television, the elderly father in the series and the subject of, *Papa, who would not allow that in his house*, talked to his wife about the recent loss of his brother.

The actor became impressively grim and white-faced as he said, ‘Being this old is like surviving a war where all your friends have fallen.’

And I knew, then, why Phyllis killed her beloved Florence, why she might still kill Sally. And I would accept her eggs gratefully next time she called and listen to her talk on the doorstep for as long as she liked.

dancing to the fraudulent sound

Vita never asked about Dolly's father again after that first meeting between us and this was, I think, to her credit. She knew, already, that further reference to him would have pained me and so she did not enquire further. She was instantly incurious when she met resistance in conversation, and she seemed to sense such resistance almost before it properly surfaced. This social delicacy is, I think, a practice of her class because I am used to fending off anxious enquiries from local wives about my own unmarried status. Vita simply did not enquire further after my initial, brief response and I was grateful. I had long kept a few impersonal lines ready to cover any queries about my divorce: *it was a long time ago; I am used to being on my own; it's over now, anyway;* and I have not said more than this, to anyone, ever. And even Vita did not merit a telling of the whole story. She, of all people, was not to know the damage that was done to me. I had been lost in my daughter's father; I was overwhelmed and reshaped by him at eighteen and have not yet recovered myself. If I had not already been odd when I met him, if I had belonged to people who cared for me and who were troubled by my decline, his influence would have been sympathetically described as an enchantment. But he is a charming and beloved man. The onlookers to our romance were from his side alone and so it follows that I am tilted, unreachable, and he, patient.

We met shortly after his family moved to the town of the tiny fires. His parents inherited the largest farm in the area, and they opened a shop for their own produce, which was a pleasingly rustic enterprise housed in a huge barn. It was popular with both locals and tourists and it was there I first met Alex, home on his summer break from university. Alex's parents told me that I was the only person to reply to the handwritten advert on their counter and they gave me the position in the greenhouses without interview.

Alex's mother, Bunny, is the daughter of a local grocer, whose family bought produce from her future father-in-law for many years. She worked as a midwife before she married and

remains poised to abandon her post and save the life of a troubled ewe or a baby in distress. Only hours after Dolly was born, Bunny came to the hospital to meet her first grandchild. She adjusted my daughter's swaddling efficiently, as though wrapping a parcel and ran her fingers down the window before advising us that the draught-proofing was unacceptable. There is a sense of permanent distraction about her, because she is excited by menace and by beating out little fires with her large and capable hands. Her husband has learned to accommodate the subsequent absence of spousal attention and his own speech rarely requires a response. Richard communicates chiefly in simple questions that he both poses and answers himself; *Is this the biggest shop in the county? No. Do we have the freshest produce around here? Yes. Is this an opportunity for you, Sunday? Oh, yes, it is. Yes. It. Is.*

I have always chosen to work longer hours than those set for the job. The greenhouses are marvellously silent, unattended by anyone but me and occasionally David, who is himself a quiet person. When I work, the dark and silky soil still satisfies my hands with a quality like gravity, the reassuring and even weight of a sought embrace. My hands are never at rest. Uneven brick, glossy plants and cold car doors all call out to be touched as I walk down a street. In shop queues, tinny music is muted by the darkly curling hair of a woman in front of me; it invites me to trace its squirming descent down her thick wool coat. I typically spend my time in public with my hands curled in fists against the silent requests made of them by all those things that I cannot touch. The call is most compelling when I am overwhelmed by lights and noise. I was born with this intolerance to noise and light and an accompanying greed for touch and smell; working in the greenhouses does much to temporarily aid my sensory imbalance.

On bright days at work, the small, aged panes of glass alternately catch and blink against the sunlight; a glinting and darkening that flashes like rapid movement. Stillness only settles over the greenhouse once the sun goes down. Above me, the white ironwork structure of the building stretches protectively over the glass ceiling like snow; it provides thin shadows for me

to work underneath when the flicker-flicker of daylight is too discomfiting. But it is the hours without sun that are my happiest times at work. I perform the same routine before closing the greenhouses each evening, checking each plant for water and warmth before leaving them. The heat of the good soil gives it a quality like sound, and it buzzes when touched. When I prepare the greenhouses for the night, it is as a practised mother of many, capable and reassuring.

The air in the greenhouses is often dull and odourless; it is only as I touch a leaf to examine it, or accidentally brush across a plant that the perfume of it is released. As I walk down the narrow aisle of herbs by the exit, I sense the plants strain towards me like little hands demanding a final pat before sleep. It is the scent of whichever leaf brushes against me last that I carry home on my skin. A local actor visited my school once; he had featured in a single episode of a science-fiction radio series that had been popular the previous summer. When he entered the hall, the rows of students remained still, stupefied by the heat and boredom of another assembly. As he spoke however, a dawning recognition of his voice began to rouse the audience, and this excited them into reaching out on either side of him when he walked out afterwards, down the centre of the hall. Small arms stretched towards him and when the doors closed behind the actor, it was the last girl to touch him who I turned my gaze toward. I found many reasons to be near her at various points that day, as though there was something left on her that I might still reach.

I am something useful in the greenhouse, a silkworm whose natural industry creates a material by-product. The process of farming silk was once common in the homes of poor Italian villagers. The women traditionally kept the tiny eggs in their bosom and took them to church to get blessed in this manner. The hatched worms were princely guests in the modest huts; fed leaves every few hours and kept at a careful temperature. Eventually, though, processing the silk necessitates killing the miniature worker inside the soft new threads, before he can escape and damage the silk. If the worm understood that completing his silk work meant death, he

would spin on regardless; I know this because my hands work with the same primitive compulsion. The silkworm and I dance along at the whim of our busy hands to a script that is not our own and cannot be altered, even to save ourselves.

My wanting hands and I were satisfied with my gardening work when Alex returned home on his first summer break from university. In those days, I rarely entered the shop while I was working, and he came out back to introduce himself to me. He strode purposefully into the greenhouse, looking for me, as though we had agreed to meet there. At the sight of him, I nervously immersed my hands fully into the soil where I was planting seedlings. His good looks were so generic that looking at him shamed me as it would a child gifted a book that is too young for them, a narrative that reveals itself too obviously. His appearance was too easy to favour and his presence itself seemed obscenely smooth and practised, like a warning. As he spoke, I fingered the crumbs of earth that moved in stagnant waves and broke dolefully over my skin. Like his father, Alex can hold entire conversations with himself and requires very little response or encouragement. In fact, he cannot remain silent and whenever he is spoken to, he nods and makes low *mmm mmm* sounds. These noises of encouragement come from deep within his chest, so they surface sounding like the growls of a dog warning against further movement.

Here is what he said to me on that first day: *I am Alex. You're Sunday? My parents say you've got the greenhouses running better than the farm. You've done all this by yourself? You did? Mmm, mmm. You like it here? Mmm mmm. I like being back. Like seeing everyone. Like meeting you, Sunday. I'm going to come back to see you tomorrow.*

I could only nod to his brief questions; my words stayed with me, unable to order themselves coherently. Yet when Alex left the greenhouse a few minutes later, he was unflustered by my muteness. He was smoothing his blue-black hair and whistling softly,

sweetly — a call that echoed around the glass walls. He came to see me again the next day, as he had warned he would. Whenever he was home, he came to the greenhouses often. He liked to talk while I worked silently and only nodded to his occasional questions. I overheard him with the customers when I brought plants into the backroom to be marked for sale, and I privately renamed him the King.

Historically in Southern Italy, when a man called on the girl he loved, he would not take a seat unless he was offered a chair specifically by her. This was a symbolic offer; a sign that the suitor was being considered as a future husband. When the King came to the greenhouse to visit me, he sat on one of the sturdy wooden worktops. I generally stood as I worked, but when I was handling young plants, I sat in a chair to remind myself to work slowly and conjure the gentleness they required. The wood of my chair was glassy with age, like a rock polished into stone by the lake. I kept it unseen, tucked under a work surface at the back of the greenhouse when the King was home. I did not offer my chair to him and he did not seek it.

Years later, when we were a couple, I confessed the King's nickname to him and he laughed delightedly, without a moment of self-doubt. But his name was, in fact, a warning my mother had given me many times. A favourite psalm of hers had cautioned, *Don't put your trust in princes, each a son of man in whom there is no help*. I should have known that this paternal figure, who offered nothing, was the King.

The King played up to his name in our early years together, arriving home after work he would announce in a borrowed, stern voice; *The King is here! Where are my subjects?* And our daughter would shriek with excitement at the very sound of him. It is telling that this game was the way they communicated best; he in someone else's voice and his daughter in another room, dancing alone to the fraudulent sound. And I, who laughed along, know at last that it is only in such a world, only in the context of their own artifice, that either of them love at all.

I am unable to address the King by his real name. I came to dislike it due to people's careless overuse. They littered their sentences with it; *Alex-Alex-Alex-Alex*, wanting both his attention and the feel, the claim, of his name in their mouths. He has the sort of rapid charm that assesses each person he encounters and manifests itself exactly as they need. I heard him reminisce with the older couples, deriding the new development and the loss of the historic village green that the houses had brought. Then I heard him speak with enthusiasm as the young families who had moved into the same starter homes came to his till with my plants in their hands, eager to discuss plans with him for improving their small gardens. The ease of the King's charm sang to me, but it was as unknowable as any other successful trick. Although I know, now, that any feeling the King had for me was a fragile and temporary thing, I remain dazzled by him. Our vision is, of course, as excited and impaired by stage lights as by the sun.

The elderly neighbours of our childhood kept a Larsen trap; a magpie held in a cage that allowed others of his kind to enter but not to escape. Arthur and Fran considered this type of bird a garden pest due to its appetite for more vulnerable peers and their eggs. They kept the original magpie for many years, and even named him like a domestic pet: *Robert*. The bird called passing friends to their deaths daily; his exuberant song seemed to be in collusion with his owners rather than the call of a fellow inmate. The music was made no less beautiful by its intent, but his little heart was hard in his blue-black chest. Arthur and Fran strangled the captured magpies in a weekly cull that which culminated in a bonfire of 1 corpses; sometimes my parents went next door on these evenings and the four of them would stand motionless and staring into the fire, unflinching even as the flames occasionally caught on something and sparks flew at their heads.

When I was fourteen, Arthur had a fatal heart attack. Fran released the magpie on the day of the funeral. My parents were in the garden; black-suited and quiet, they whispered together about whether they should go and check on her. Walt, his voice low and concerned, had

described to Dolores and me how they heard her crying, shaking the Larsen house and shooing Robert away when he would not fly, but tried instead to go back inside. She let the garden grow wild without Arthur, only occasionally acquiescing to my father's offers to mow the lawn for her. He would call over the fence and she would shrug nonchalantly as she sat in her plastic chair in her garden. Without looking up at Walt, she would gesture minutely around her with the cigarette that was permanently in her hand, *if you like*, as if granting him a favour.

Fran had been a beauty in her day, according to my mother, and this was still evidenced in old age by the way she moved, her gestures restrained and slinky in the practice of someone who does not need to draw the eye because they are confident of already being watched. My mother spoke reverently of Fran's beauty, as she always did about such people; but in a hushed voice as if in naming it she might inadvertently summon something bad. Perhaps she knew about the danger of *il malocchio*, that evil eye charged by envy. When she spoke of Dolores' face, too, she first glanced around her suspiciously and then lowered her voice, as if the fact of my sister's loveliness was confidential and not something that every person who looked upon her could recognise for themselves. Mer would never have been described as beautiful. Even my father, who remained as besotted with his wife as a newlywed, spoke of her as farming people speak of their stock; that is, with both affection and practicality. He called her 'strong,' 'hardworking,' and, on the odd occasions he drank, he would call for his 'glorious' wife. She always appeared by his side quickly, while insisting her response was 'only to stop him making a show of us.' But her eyes, as she took her place beside him, glittered with something hard that I think was pride.

Fran kept Arthur's garden chair next to her own right up until illness finally confined her indoors. Until then, she could often be seen fussing over his chair, cleaning it and positioning it in the sunniest spot, as if he was still inside the house and just about to walk out at any moment, shouting back at her to bring him a cold drink outside. The cage, too, remained in the

garden. Until Fran's death many years later, I was able to see the large wire box from my bedroom window. The empty cage had been secured shut and a magpie often sat on the delicately criss-crossed roof, darkly hunched over in affront, like a drinker at an abandoned bar. Only Fran could have known with certainty if that regular visitor was their own, adopted magpie. He was always alone and displayed the bald patches of attack on his wings; he seemed to have lost his bird-ways during his time as jailor and perhaps retained a taste for capture.

The wanting with which all the customers looked at the King's lovely face as he called, and the effortless way he enthralled them at no cost to himself, was the trickery of the magpie. The King and our daughter each have a little bird heart and a calling charm. The magpie in the Larsen trap too, must have shone as the birds considered him from the sky. It was only afterwards, when pressed close against him in the confines of his little cage, that they could realise that what they had mistaken for brilliance was simply the undisturbed grease of his flightless wings.

When I had been working at the farm for three years, the King finally finished university and moved back to the farm. In the evenings after work I replayed all the pretty things he said to me in the greenhouses. I studied the conversations that I overheard him having as I stared intently at the adverts pinned to the shop noticeboard or hovered protectively over my plants in the storeroom. He was a film that I watched alone each night. The King had developed newly wide shoulders and big arms over the past year; he managed these awkwardly, as if he was still surprised by his new size. He seemed both restless and oversized, like an animal grown too big for his cage. He knocked things off shelves and navigated doorways with difficulty, a toddler planted in the body of a grown man. There was a sulkiness about him; the blame for this change seemed attributed to his surroundings, rather than himself. I loved to walk through the forest at the far side of the lake back then. The tourists rarely found it and the locals were superstitious

about the place after the local headmaster hanged himself there some years before, followed shortly afterwards by his teenage son. The few people who did venture into the forest were themselves suspicious of other visitors. Once, in the centre of the woods, a man strode up to me and demanded I leave. He was as furious as I imagined one might be on finding a trespasser in their own home.

‘A girl ain’t got no business out here alone!’ he shouted at me. ‘No business! What were you *thinking?*’ After this outburst, he visibly deflated and became silent. He turned, still shrinking and walked forlornly away as though accepting that he was too late; I was already doomed to meet with some tragedy and could not, realistically, be saved.

I had not enjoyed my forest walks so much after that; the man’s acceptance of my hopeless state was somehow more frightening than a direct threat would have been. At work, I looked enviously at the King’s emergent broadness; he was now twenty-two and no longer boyish. I thought he could accompany me to the woods, if he did not always talk so much. And no men would stalk angrily up to me and order me out of the forest, or predict my demise if the King was nearby, silently unveiling his new frame, emerging from the woodland to reveal himself in impressive stages.

At the end of his post-university summer, I brought some plants into the shop. As he arranged them on the table, he spoke to me, without looking up.

‘I’ve decided to go travelling. I’m leaving next month.’

He had a confessional and defensive manner, as though revoking an earlier promise. The remaining grains of soil were warm on my unwashed palms and I closed my fingers, concentrating on the sensation. The King was still speaking but I could no longer process his words. He touched my shoulder without any pressure, as though theatrically demonstrating the act of restraint for an observer. He was watching me expectantly and I replied, still engrossed in the heat of the earth on my hands.

‘No,’ I said, unsure whether I was rejecting his plan to leave or the peculiarly weightless sensation of his hand on my shoulder.

‘No?’

‘No.’ And I left the shop with the good soil still buzzing softly on my skin. It whispered into my hands and my head with the gentle menace of winter bees, drunk on sleep.

He followed me. The King had never followed a girl; they came to him. They waited for him as bovine and broken as patients at a dentist’s clinic, their cheeks flushed with something that was not, yet, pain. He pursued me because I was the only thing he ever had to ask for, because he had not known what before.

And he never did go travelling. I remind myself of this now, when I see him marching possessively around his parent’s farm, hand in hand with his beautiful wife. Instead, a little under a year later, I gave birth to our daughter. And like the good Sicilian I wished I were, I named her for the aunt she would never know, for the girl drowned on land. For my love, Dolores.

the untraceable heart

My daughter was, of course, always as regal as the daughter of a king should be. Throughout my brief period of labour, none of the hospital staff were able to locate a heartbeat. The nurses mentioned the missing heart to one another with a querying note in their voice, as if one of them might suddenly recall having misplaced such an object and then return it. After four hours of labour, the invisible forces which had been making my womb painfully contract came to an abrupt halt. It was like being at the centre of a storm that suddenly stopped swirling around you. But it was not met by sunshine, or the certainty of a black night-time sky; there was just an eerie silence and the shame of exposure. The adrenaline that had been blanketing me crept away from my bed to hold the hand of another woman and the ache of my labouring immediately made itself known to my bones like hard blows. This is how my sister felt after she was thrown from the lake, I thought. I had taken quite a lot of gas and air, and it was the pebbles on which Dolores had lain that pressed into my back, rather than the thin hospital mattress.

‘Well,’ said a nurse placing a possessive hand on my eerily still stomach, which had been hard as bone throughout the contractions and was now soft and watery once more. She was a tall woman with cold, searching fingers. Her thin, arched eyebrows, wide eyes, and round mouth all convened to suggest a state of constant surprise. I supposed such a persistent expressing of shock was often inappropriate to a situation, as were my own, overly restrained features. It could not be helpful either, I thought, to appear as fixedly amazed as the nurse when the resemblance between her child and her husband was commented upon, or when she received the news of a friend’s engagement.

But, occasionally, her face must have suited an occasion and my labour provided such an example; she ran her hands over my now softened stomach and tilted her head to one side like a big-eyed bird sitting at my side. ‘You don’t see that every day,’ she said, pulling down a

clipboard from the bed headboard to write on it briefly. She shook her smooth, apple-round head in brief and rapid twitches, 'No, you don't.'

She left me alone for half an hour, during which time the King came to the hospital to look in on me and my underperforming body disappointedly. His visit was brief, and he left with the explanation that he would return after supper; his mother, apparently, had warned him that first babies arrived slowly, that my labour would take days and not hours. While he was away, the nurse with the bird head returned, this time with a short and smiling man.

'Just had time to finish my dinner!' the little man announced reassuringly when he entered my room, as if this dietary reassurance was the news for which I had been waiting with some anxiety.

My nurse informed him about the untraceable heart. He frowned in response and strode immediately over to the window, as if he had perhaps spotted it there. Then he knocked on the glass and put a hand up to someone outside with a broad smile. He turned and gestured to his nurse that she ought to attach her stethoscope to my rounded stomach and she demonstrated, with large theatrical movements, how the baby's heartbeat could not be found. Her permanently shocked expression added to the drama of her interaction with the doctor and I supposed the excitement generated by her amazed face must colour her life daily. As my own blank features did. I imagined the doctor would look from the nurse's incredulous expression to my own impenetrable face and then doubt my investment in my unborn child, with her refusal to appear and her absent heart.

'It is a new one,' said the nurse, considering her stethoscope, 'but it did work fine on my last lady.'

The doctor looked at his watch and then put his palms up as if to discourage further conversation.

‘Caesarean.’ He said this to the nurse in the manner of a guest ordering from a familiar but disappointing menu. As he left, he patted my shoulder absently. The receipt of his demand did not encourage any quickening of activity among the nurses, but rather induced loud sighs among the women and a general slowing of pace, as though a predicted crisis had already passed. The various motherly nurses who had intimately stroked my face and whispered, *it’s alright my love*, as I laboured breathlessly mere hours before, no longer spoke to me. I was not, anymore, an expectant mother, but a malfunctioning machine to be mastered. I reasoned that their subsequent avoidance of contact might have been either superstition or professional pride. Or perhaps it was a fear of contagion or blame that made the women turn away before they saw me sliced open.

The anaesthetist congratulated me on the complete loss of feeling in my lower body as I lay on the table in the operating theatre. I felt that the drugs were shrinking me, having transformed in minutes from a large pregnant body into being only a torso and arms. Two pretty nurses wheeled a large frame into the operating theatre and without conversation, they efficiently clipped a green sheet over it to screen the lower part of my body. Once the installation of the sheet was approved, this being agreed between the two of them with a look and a silent nod, the women stood back in a synchronised manner, as if staging a magic trick.

The untraceable heart was discussed with only mild interest during the procedure. *Of course, the baby is most likely dead*, the bird-nurse said conversationally to the young woman who was seated on a stool near my head and making notes. *There’s a code for stillborn on the top left. See?* The woman looked at the page and then nodded, *Oh, Yes. I see*. She reached over to me and touched my shoulder, *Excuse me. This is your first birth, isn’t it?*

I nodded politely and she made a consoling face; her mouth was exaggeratedly turned down, a cartoon of acknowledged tragedy, *Aww*. The expression was exaggerated and fleeting,

disappearing behind her smile as if she were a child pulling a sad face for a school play, while simultaneously distracted by her mother watching from the audience. She wrote something down and looked up at the nurse who smiled approvingly back at her. I could imagine the nurse telling her husband at dinner; *we had this lovely young girl in today for training. I took her under my wing, you know, Reg, like I do. I can't help myself. The other nurses say I shouldn't be so ...* And when she had finally finished, Reg would nod; perhaps he would be bird-like too, and would have listened watchfully and round-eyed, with his brown sparrow head tilted, exactly as his wife did. Then he would right the angle of his head with a fluttery shake of his bony little shoulders, as if drying off drops of rainwater, before he poured tea for them both.

The little man who had visited my room to announce this operation reached inside my midsection while in unhappy conversation with the anaesthetist, who was positioned at my head. The doctor frowned at the man as they spoke; I could feel his practised hands rummage blindly among my internal organs while he stared crossly at a point behind me. After much tutting, he lifted a tiny person from the pinkened ruins and held her aloft and above the green sheet, as though in celebration. The baby did not cry immediately, but first gasped loudly as if outraged, interrupted in an important task.

'It is a girl. You have a daughter.' His voice was unexpectedly formal, not that of someone whose hands were about to tidily rearrange my insides. The young woman making notes sighed loudly and made a correction to her page, with much scribbling out and the waiting bird-nurse shrugged, *It happens*. I appreciated the briefness of the doctor's announcement, the absence of description. All babies could reasonably be pronounced beautiful or little; his restraint, however, added to the theatricality of the moment. I imagined him as a medical student practising these moments alone and holding a towel wrapped bundle, before the reality became part of his daily life. At the beginning of his career he would have deliberately employed a quavering note of importance into his pronouncement as he held up the baby like a prize which

he had won himself. Gradually he had learned that there was more spectacle created by his underperforming at this life altering moment; like an actor schooled to speak more softly at moments of high tension, the doctor, too had learned the benefits of playing down his part.

A nurse came forward to take the baby from him and wrapped her in a sheet. The baby had not seemed naked until she was covered. But suddenly, she was naked. And in her presence, I, too, became a body once more, even if I could still only feel half of that body. Yet, in my newly hypervigilant state, my ears and eyes seemed enormous to me, every noise and sight exaggerated and meaningful. As the nurse passed me, she paused briefly and non-committedly to show me what she was holding, as if we were friends out shopping, her eyes already on the next item. The doctor began to sew me back together. He worked silently on me until he had finished. He stood back and squinted at his work.

‘There you are. All back in one piece,’ he told me, a phrase at once reassuring and alarming. He threw a cloth into a wire basket as he left the room, as casual as a boy shooting a basketball as he went off court, uninvested in the outcome of the shot.

The sheet was removed, again by the two showy nurses who seemed to be in sole charge of this piece of equipment. I was afraid to look down, but once I did, I saw that I was covered up, first by a sheet and then a reassuringly pristine white blanket. After the baby was checked and washed, she was placed on my chest. I was sorry that my heart was beating so fast and so loud that it would surely disturb her. She fixed her gaze on me and gave a single perfunctory cry which served to dismiss the hospital staff around us.

My peculiar half-awake body went into shock while I was still holding the serene baby. I started to shake, violently. I shook like an earthquake. I shook as though I wanted to bring down the whole building. I watched as my rubbery anaesthetised legs flailed as if powered by someone else. The bird-nurse immediately took the baby from my arms. She did so without a word or a glance at me; her silence and speed were as sharp as any reprimand. I had long

puzzled over motherhood, for I had not been mothered myself. My mind had never conjured anything like this.

When I dressed Dolly to go home from the hospital, I wrapped her in the pretty fringed shawl I had bought for her months before. The fringing was essential, I knew from my Sicilian studies; this detail caught the attention of witches, who would have to stop and count the decorative threads before they could harm the baby. I had also learned and now insisted, that no woman other than me could kiss my baby's face, for I could not know who among them was pregnant or menstruating and those women's kisses could harm babies. On first seeing my daughter, her eyes had seemed too ornamentally bright to be functional. But my daughter was born a watcher like her father and paternal grandmother. They all see and read people with the same, needy compulsion that I have for touch. The birth of our daughter brought an immediate change in the King's regard for me.

His parents had insisted we marry before we became parents. *Forresters do not have babies out of wedlock*, was apparently another item on the much quoted and never challenged family manifesto. On our wedding day, I had worn the only dress that still fitted over my growing stomach. It was a flowered and sleeveless cotton dress, bought for summer weather and entirely inadequate for a November outing. I wore one of my new husband's wool sweaters over the thin dress, the too-long arms covering most of my hands, and dark tights with work boots. The King was predictably handsome in a navy suit and my mother-in-law, neat in a fitted dress and blazer, unsuccessfully tried to persuade me out of the large jumper before we posed for the registry office photographer as awkward newlyweds. The one photograph I have of the day retrospectively indicates that she was right to have made this recommendation.

In the picture, one of my hands is up by my reddening right eye and the other hand is firmly held still by the King. All that day, my right eye had itched, and I knew immediately that this

meant my new husband would be unfaithful. I concentrated hard on creating an itch on my left side, to counter this, but the feeling never came. Although Dolly's grandparents have many silver-framed photographs of her, they have never displayed the one of her parents' wedding day or in fact, any of the King and I together. The photo of Dolly's christening shows her grandparents holding her in the same cream silk family dress and handmade blanket that Richard had once worn as a baby. The family surname, *Forrester*, is stitched possessively inside the long skirt, a claim of ownership to all those who have worn it.

The King remarried when Dolly was seven and there is a large photograph of the event on his parent's hall table. His new wife wears a white dress and a veil that dances fussily around her while she looks serenely out at the photographer. Her gaze is level and her hand firm on the arm of her new husband. Next to this is a smaller photograph of Richard smiling at a recent shooting party; he holds several pheasants by their thin necks in a possessive grip, their heads loll backwards uselessly. Dolly met her stepmother for the first time at the wedding, for which she performed as a bridesmaid. Her little white dress was a precise miniature version of the bride's outfit; this was an arrangement that apparently only I found unsettling. As though my daughter was, at the age of seven, a bride in training who would one day take over the duties of the King's second wife. Some months after the wedding, Dolly brought a framed photograph home from her grandparents and placed it on her bedside table. In the photo, she and her stepmother stand either side of her father, with their matching dresses and identical smiles, a tiny cult of their own making. I dreamt, often, that I was also in that line-up of his women, wearing that same white dress as a uniform; *we are handmaidens to the King*, we chanted. And he looked on benevolently while we posed; he was tolerant of our womanly nonsense. To a point. Even in my dreams, I knew that I did not, ever, please him.

The King's new wife was his second teenaged bride, and they did not have their own child for almost a decade. I did not know, however, that they intended to delay parenthood. I tried to prepare Dolly for the likelihood that she would not remain an only child forever; she was so accustomed to occupying the centre of mine and her grandparents' lives, and to at least counting with her father. Shortly after the wedding, I took her for ice cream at Jerre's cafe. When he placed the tray on our table, he patted Dolly lightly on the head and she moved away, smoothing her plaits in affront.

'Look, I put a flake in it for you, *Pupetta*,' he told her with a smile. He explained to us that this meant 'little doll;' it was a name which I occasionally used with Dolly myself.

'Yes, you did,' observed Dolly and she picked up the spoon without looking at him. Her tone was deliberately remote, like a mother expected to thank a teenager who had finally done his allocated chores.

'Thank you, Jerre,' I said sincerely. 'That looks really good.'

'You love this one too much,' said Jerre to me, still smiling. 'Too much. Back home,' here, he paused and gestured behind him to a framed photograph of his Sicilian village. He always did this when he spoke of the Old Country or of his family there. 'Back home, we say, kiss your children while they are sleeping.'

I knew this saying; I could have quoted it back to him in Sicilian dialect, but I did not. When Dolores was still alive, she tried several times to convince Jerre of my obsession with South Italy, but I denied it to him until she gave up. I never wanted Jerre's Italy, I wanted my own, the one I had created from books. I wanted the land I had come to know, that was fixed and unchanging because I made it so. Most importantly, my Italy was a knowable place.

'It is best, Sunday, not to let them always see the love,' he advised me cheerfully, before walking back to the counter to greet another customer.

As Dolly ate her ice cream, I told her that she ought to expect to become a sister one day, now that she had acquired a young stepmother. Dolly put her long, delicate spoon into her mouth and tasted the sweetness silently for a moment with a little frown, as though considering my suggestion. Then she looked across the lake and laughed, a short and private little laugh that did not include me.

‘Dolly,’ I said gently, ‘I know this is difficult, but it’s best to be ready for the news before it comes. And it is lovely to have a sibling. My sister was my best friend. You have her name because she was so special to me.’

‘But were you hers, Mummy? Were you her best friend too?’ I had never considered this, and did not answer, instead remembering the times that a teenage Dolores was unaccounted for, when I had no idea where she was or with whom, when she would finally return home and tell me in her sweet voice about the things she did at night with people I saw in the daytime, teachers, family friends, and local boys who still seemed like children themselves. But, in the café by the lake, my clever little child continued to talk; she did not need, or even care for, an answer about Dolores. ‘Anyway, they won’t have children. Daddy told me that they love each other so much they will never have a child. Because it would get between them you see.’ Dolly’s sharp little face was fixed on mine, watching me closely. ‘Because they love each other so, so, much.’ She took another spoonful of ice cream and fell silent while she finished it. ‘Because he thinks she is very pretty, Mummy. The beautifullest girl he has ever seen. Like a princess. Do you think that too? Do you think she is like a princess?’ Her expression was as serious and searching then as it was when she checked her spelling homework with me.

‘I think *you* are as lovely as a princess, Dolly.’

She shrugged and turned back to the lake view.

‘Yes.’ She said this impatiently, as though I had unnecessarily made a statement that was not in question. I looked down at my lemonade, the tiny bubbles all competing to reach the top.

‘They just love each other so, so, much and all the time. Grandma says she has never seen my Daddy so happy. Never at all.’ I did not need to look up to know that my daughter’s eyes would be trained on me, like a police dog watching for a flicker of movement. For once, I was grateful for my blank face, for the disparity between my state and my expression. I summoned the familiar and dull expression and it settled across my face as a curtain closed tightly against an intrusive neighbour. I turned my empty face towards the lake and thought of Dolores, who had been lovelier, even, than the King’s new wife. I think I was smiling when Dolly put down her spoon and pushed away her unfinished ice cream. ‘I want to go home now,’ she announced.

Before Dolly, the King had found my routines, my avoidance of noise and light, my obsessive reading and my special interests all appealing quirks. In his presence, I was acceptably idiosyncratic, a character in a romantic film. My interest in Italian culture has only expanded since childhood and when I find myself becoming mute in company, I often reach for a fact on this subject to remind myself that I am still present. When I did this in front of the King during our first year together, he would smile with amusement and wink at me knowingly; it was the closest thing we ever had to a private joke. He had enjoyed several holidays in Italy with his parents, spoke a little of the language and frequently suggested we holiday there. Although puzzled by my reluctance to go, he eventually accepted that my interest in the country was satisfied only by books on the subject.

After we had Dolly though, my previously endearing eccentricities disturbed him. After Dolly, when I referenced an Italian folk tale over dinner with my in-laws or in the pub at a too noisy table, the King raised his finger silently and traced a line in the air when no-one was watching, his silent acknowledgement that I had somehow scored a point. I was a broodmare with a once charming flightiness that became of concern once she had foaled. As a farmer himself, the King knew that livestock owners could not afford irregularities to be introduced into a good, long bloodline.

His family stabled a friend's horse on the farm, a glossy black creature who compulsively shifted his weight from side to side and snaked his neck helplessly as though it were pulled by invisible ropes. The horse resorted to these moves when excited or distressed; at feeding time, or when the wind blew through his stable. As he performed these tics, he looked more painfully human than the animals grazing peacefully in the field. But these behaviours were vices which legally needed to be declared before sale as they compromised the weight and appearance of the horse, lowering his commercial value. Consequently, he was banned from the vision of the other horses, in case his anxious habits spread amongst them, devaluing each of them as himself. I believed that the King would eventually banish me, too. But he did not; he went on to find himself a new kingdom instead and a queen to preside over it with him.

Dolly talked early and fluently, but she was late to walk; late enough for her grandmother to gently raise the possibility of Problems. Her grandfather Richard was characteristically rhetorical; *Is she the earliest walker in the family? No. Will she walk eventually? Yes.* We all knew, but did not say aloud, exactly what delayed developmental milestones indicated for a child of mine.

The King was relieved, then, rather than excited, when Dolly finally began to walk shortly before her second birthday. He added extra names to her party list immediately after this eagerly awaited development, summoning faraway family and friends to behold his newly mobile daughter. At the party, he held Dolly by the hand and walked her for the guests as though she were the hired entertainment. She frequently put her hands up to her father to be carried; she was tired by this prolonged performance of her new skill. He only pushed her down and frowned at her, refusing to yield. She surrendered to his insistence, to this relentless parading of her. Her legs were stiff with affront and this afforded a military aspect to her movement, the dignity of an injured man trapped in the march.

The time eventually came for her to blow out the candles on the cake that her grandmother had ordered, a castle made of Dolly's favourite black velvet sponge. The King allowed her to stop walking at last and he sat her at the head of the table in front of the stately cake and all the party food. She leaned towards the lit candles of her cake and took a large breath, but then exhaled softly with a sigh. Her gaze was fixed on her father as she pushed her little fists down into the bottom of the cake and flapped her arms like a trapped bird, showering him in blue frosting and oily red-black sponge.

Any relief her father found in his daughter finally beginning to walk lasted only briefly. Dolly was unwaveringly impervious to the King's appeal. His charm was characterised by ease but his relentless inspection of our daughter for my peculiarities prevented her from experiencing that effortless quality of his allure. At his parents' house for tea one afternoon, I pressed a finger against my piece of cake, as I generally do, to know the soft resistance of it. Dolly had recently dropped her afternoon nap; she was tired and not yet hungry. Instead of eating her cake, she absentmindedly put a hand across it, in a move similar to my own. The King immediately barred her touch by encircling her wrist with his own large hand and placed a fork into her fist with a speed that spoke of fury.

If our daughter became silent, as I routinely do, he would provoke her into speaking by withholding the things she loved best until she acquiesced and asked him for their return. Both Dolly and I visibly stiffened at the sound of her father's over-used phrase, 'Use your words. If you want it, use your words.' He did not, of course, want her to use her words, he wanted to hear her speak like him, to employ the ease of his own killing language. Most of all, he wanted to know that she would not become lost in my own sweet silence. I recognised his approach as one people tried with me as a child; in practice, however, it looked like the forcible waking of an exhausted person while they slept. Among Dolly's greatest treasures were the soft white bunny she had received for her fourth birthday, her bumblebee striped gloves and a large-

headed doll with oversized, anime eyes, the same too-bright blue as her own. The King regularly kept such favourites out of her reach until she surrendered her attempted silences. When he was at work, my daughter and I often slipped into an easy silence together. We enjoyed communicating through gestures we learned from a library book on teaching children to sign and could agree on an activity or a lunchtime choice by our hands alone. The frequently colonised Sicilians, I knew, had once used a sign language among their hearing community that was unique to themselves. This signing apparently developed to meet an historic need for private communications in the presence of foreign oppressors. The King did not allow the quiet knowing of each other; he did not want us to keep private thoughts from him. But he soon discovered that our thoughts were not what he wanted anyway.

When Dolly was four, the King and his mother cornered me at a family dinner. They persuaded me that she should be checked by the doctor in case she had a recognisable condition that could be treated. I agreed only because I could not argue for Dolly while she sat at the end of the table and could potentially hear them voicing their doubt in her. It was implied that the responsible parental response would be to intervene as early as possible so that the child did not come to resemble her mother. All mothers hope that their daughters will possess something of themselves. Our similarities were a happy outcome for me until they were framed as a criticism. My mother in law and my husband loved Dolly; if even they found her behaviours unacceptable, I worried that she eventually be alone with only me.

I aimed to briefly discuss every outing Dolly and I took together before we left home. These talks were a response to a childhood in which I had never been informed of the days' plans, but, rather, expected to follow my mother on her endless and mysterious errands in silence.

Instead of telling Dolly that we were going to buy her new wellington boots as I put on her coat and gloves, I would sign. I preferred to kneel down and show her with my hands. *We are*

getting the bus. We are getting you boots; then I would continue, *for the rain. And the storms. Puddles.*

And Dolly would sign back, hopefully, *ice cream, Mummy? Chocolate! I love ice cream! You love ice cream!* But, on the day of the appointment with the doctor, I did not kneel down and smile at her while she watched my hands dance in explanation of our shared day. I buttoned her coat and buckled her little navy shoes and signed; *we are going out.* As we walked to the doctors' surgery, we met Barbara, a sociable and elderly neighbour, who took every opportunity to talk. She spoke so much and so inaccurately that it seemed as if her words were degraded by overuse, like bones that were healthy when ensconced within but began to expire once exposed to the air. Her accent was not local, and her pronunciation suggested that her childhood, at least, had been spent in another part of Europe. The previous year, there had been a lot of complaints about local roads needing resurfacing and Barbara enjoyed keeping me updated on this, although neither of us had a car. She referred to the potholes as the *bolt-holds* and when she went for her weekly hairdresser appointment, she would inform us girlishly that she was off to get her *hairs* set.

Barbara greeted us and then addressed Dolly; 'Where is your Mummy taking you today, madam?'

Dolly spread her little hands out, her palms facing upwards in a gesture of *I don't know.* She laughed, as if she suddenly found it amusing that she didn't have this information.

She placed her hand back into mine, squeezing with her fingers as she looked up at me; 'I don't know. Where *are* you taking me Mummy?'

The trust my daughter placed in me that I would only take her to good places and the knowledge that she would walk willingly at my side to unknown destinations for this reason were privileges I did not deserve. How had I come to be the protector of this faithful and happy creature? Twenty minutes later, when the doctor asked about Dolly's health, I only pointed out

some dry skin on my daughter's elbow and he prescribed a tube of emollient cream. I consoled myself that my Italian book contained advice from many mothers who avoided the measuring or weighing of their infants as it drew the attention of the Evil Eye to the child's progress. It was right, then, not to discuss my child with others. Afterwards, I took Dolly for lunch at the lake café and she insisted on sitting on my lap; she held her fork in one hand and kept the other hand flattened possessively over my wrist on the table. Jerre came over to our table and smiled at me; he spoke to Dolly in the formal voice of a waiter: *were the fish and chips good, would she like more tomato sauce or orange squash?* She was typically chatty with adults, but that day she had not looked at Jerre, instead confirming she was fine before continuing with her meal. Occasionally she would turn to fork a piece of fish into my mouth, then dab gently at my face with her paper napkin, as if I were her own child. All around us, the other customers scraped their dainty metal chairs; they chatted and laughed noisily with one another. Dolly and I ate lunch quietly and stared out across the still lake.

In the months following this, Dolly devised routines, just for her father, that involved tapping each object she passed as she travelled to greet him. Her performance was ritualistic and repetitive, but most of all it was virtually identical to the way in which I move when distressed. However, there was one difference; while I cannot tolerate eye contact when I am compelled by touch, Dolly watched her father intensely as she moved. Our daughter became tense with concentration when I patted walls, traced the curtains and placed my palms flat on the cooling panes of our aged sash windows. But although she studied me in the intense manner of a dancer learning choreography, she never expressed these compulsions herself while alone with me, during the long days we spent together at home. Her school, too, reported that they never witnessed any such behaviour. In fact, she was an exemplary student, communicative and popular.

As he came into her bedroom in the mornings to wake her, she would not move into his embrace until she first patted the rug, the bedside light, the staring white teddy on her bed. Finally, she flicked the low shelf of books precisely, one by one, as though they were switches operating a vital machine. If he attempted to greet her before she completed these tasks, she would go rigid and scream until she was returned to her pattern of touching. Any interruption would result in her starting again from the beginning and the King soon learned to wait, rather than be confronted by Dolly repeating the compulsive circling of her bedroom, her little hands raised as though in surrender to an invisible force. She showed none of these behaviours when I went into her room and after only a few weeks, her father refused to enter it at all.

When he arrived home now and announced that the King was home, she no longer jumped up at the sound of his voice, but instead straightened up slowly, in the resigned manner of an aged person at the foot of an incline. Then she would patiently tap-tap her way through the hallway as though blind, each surface conscientiously covered by her tiny fingers before she reached her father and walked her hands from his feet up to his knees. He looked tightly away from her as though something perverse was playing out before him, withholding his gaze until she reached up to be lifted into his arms, her little hands finally spent. Once, he left her to complete the routine without waiting to be greeted, taking the stairs two at a time in his desire to escape. I watched Dolly silently from behind the glass door in the kitchen and as the King's footsteps faded, her attention was immediately taken by the favoured, huge-eyed doll she had rediscovered by the front door. She instantly stopped tracing the wall and began cooing to the little toy. She sat down contentedly to play; their identical blue gazes fixed on one another.

Three months after the routines began, the King came home late and let himself quietly into the house, appearing in the kitchen where I was giving Dolly supper. I typically run my fingers lightly over our food as I prepare it, to release the texture and smell into my hands and revive my blunted senses. When Dolly ate with me, she fastidiously avoided touching food directly

and her sense of smell was sensitive enough that she never held an ingredient to her nose, never worked to inhale the scent, as I do. The King sank into a chair next to her at the kitchen table and I saw Dolly consider him. She did not visibly acknowledge him, did not even move her head, but her eyes moved over him, scanning as a searchlight does for something lost. She began to laboriously consider each item of food, working soft fruit into the plate with her hands and sniffing it, marking her face as she ate. He watched her carefully cover her fingertips with yoghurt, like a criminal inked for fingerprinting. I was at the sink, meticulously applying hand cream and as he turned to me, his teeth were exposed by a curled and thinning top lip that twitched like something dying. Dolly's mouth did this when she was refused a new toy, another sweet; she would press her lips into a mobile tremble of a line while she considered what crying might achieve. But I had also seen this expression on the King before; I had seen his mouth shiver and thin when he collected the rat traps at the farm. He wore two sets of gloves to handle the alarmingly large box traps. The corpses had to be thrown onto the manure heap and he visibly recoiled at the sight of the glossy creatures frozen into spread-clawed parodies of aggression. In my kitchen, his rat-trapping sneer was visible to us before he could reorganise himself into something we wanted.

He left home early the following morning, while Dolly and I slept. He spent the day at his parents' house and returned to us late that night. I was unsurprised when, less than a week later, his uncle invited him to spend some time in the north at their sprawling farm, helping to improve the performance of their on-site shop. Family discussions focussed on the fact that the King had introduced locally made wine and craft beer, a move that was predictably welcomed by the wealthy community and tourists in our attractive lakeside town. He has never been a businessman and is entirely without marketing talent. His product has only ever been himself; the customers at his uncle's farm also apparently want whatever he offers.

He packed cheerfully for his planned month away and never returned to us completely. He began to be away for longer periods of time until we eventually stopped expecting him. We did not mourn the absence, but rather we watched warily for him as we would for the start of a predicted severe winter. Dolly's routines disappeared along with her father, as though neatly packed away in the suitcase along with his relief. Eventually he limited his visits to the town to just one or two weeks every year.

When he did come back, he and his new wife stayed on his parents' farm and treated Dolly in the enthused and unsustainable manner of distant relatives. He exclaimed showily at his daughter's height and at her apparently changing hairstyle. She has always had long hair and when the King visited, she religiously returned to a childhood hairstyle, wearing one broad plait that lies, heavy and flaccid against her back, like a trapped creature feigning death. I have come to understand that her strict observance of this hairstyle in her father's presence was a demonstration of his disinterest in her. But it was I who blushed and felt the hot humiliation when he commented blithely on what he views as the changeability of her appearance. My daughter did not redden; it was, after all an involuntary response and Dolly was not made that way. While I visibly flushed at the King's ineptness with his child, his daughter's complexion remained white, composed and even.

Dolly's grandparents and I pretended to one another that the King's absence was kindness to a needy relative, not an escape from his daughter and me. They spoke of him rarely, but when they did, it was in careful and confidential tones, as though he were a missionary in an unstable country. They said that managing his uncle's farm shop was *vitaly important work for the community*, and that he was *transforming conditions up there*. Dolly did not participate in these inventions of her father but referred to him, in his absence, as *that flashy wanker*.

a girl in a doctor's coat

A week after Vita moved in, I returned home from work to see her sitting on her own front step. She wore a man's tweed blazer over a red dress that became full-skirted tulle at the waistline. Her hair was glossy and darker than I remembered and as I approached her, I realised it was actually wet. She was holding a cigarette delicately, as if about to discard it and regarding her small bare toes with some concentration. I liked her little brown feet. I stood quietly while deciding whether to interrupt this reverie. But she looked up before I could speak, and her slight frown cleared instantly, replaced by a wide smile.

'You!' she said, as if this were my name. As if I was the only person to whom this title could possibly belong. 'I hoped I would see You today. Come! And sit.' She patted the stone surface beside her, and I dutifully sat down. She shifted slightly and the tulle arranged itself prettily across my work trousers, as if the fabric were animate and colluding in Vita's insistence on beauty. She flicked her finished cigarette butt away, rolling her finger along her thumb. Her spread hand remained in position for a moment afterwards, pointing at the discarded object.

'Why are you dressed up?' I asked.

Vita looked down at her dress, as if to remind herself what she was wearing. She touched her wet hair thoughtfully. 'I'm not. Rols finally brought back the dry-cleaning. And I just got out of the shower and this was hanging up. It was this or a tennis dress. Do you play tennis?'

'No. You are though. You are dressed up,' I corrected her. She wriggled her shoulders and spread her skirt out extravagantly with both hands as if in agreement.

We watched in silence as one of the Fraser girls parked opposite us and unloaded several small children from her car before taking them into her mother's house.

'Who are they?' asked Vita. But she was already standing before I could answer; her move created a little explosion of sparkly fabric and unfolding petticoat beneath her brown wool coat. 'I'm just going in for my ciggies. Stay there. Wait for me. Or would you like to come in?'

‘No,’ I told her. Dolly had lost her key the day before and I needed to see her arrive home and let her in. I put one hand flat against either side of the tweedy jacket; one of my palms touched the satin lining and the other rested on the rougher wool. It was not unpleasant. ‘Is this your husband’s coat?’

She nodded and when I let go of the fabric, she jumped easily up the front step and disappeared inside.

While Vita was inside, I considered what to tell her about the Frasers. I know too much about the people who live here. Perhaps they know too much about me also. If I told Vita about the Frasers, I would tell her about Linda, and I did not want to talk about that. The Frasers’ house neighbours Mr Atkinson on one side and Linda on the other. They had five daughters, all evidently carefully planned; when Dolly was young, we had found them a pleasingly symmetrical group, with one head height between each of them, from the smallest up to their mother. The girls had attended a school in the next town and did not mix with the local children, perhaps preferring, or perhaps simply being restricted to, the company of one another. Mr Fraser was rarely seen, but his wife and their daughters could regularly be observed, leaving their home and moving along the path in pairs. The pavement along our road is only wide enough at any point for two people to walk comfortably side by side. Mrs Fraser typically took up the front, along with her eldest daughter, and then they paired off by age with the youngest two at the back, holding hands. When the father joined them, he walked out and alone in front of them. The mother and girls dressed similarly, in long coats and wide skirts; the only allowance made for any disparity in their ages was their shoes. The pair leading the group wore noticeable heels, the following two wore heels of a lower height and the very youngest wore shoes that were sensible and flat-soled. The parading habits of this family put me in mind of a story I had favoured as a child, in which a group of animal families decided to behave as people. The animals dressed carefully and behaved in ways they perceived to be human. There was

much narrative attention paid to the animal's new habits and modes of dress and yet they were at their least convincingly human when they were acting for show, rather than on their instincts. The individual charms of the Fraser girls, the little skips and the unruly plaits, became increasingly subdued over time as each gradually morphed into the older girl in front of them and eventually, of course, into the mother herself.

Linda and her husband moved in next to the Frasers shortly after the King and I married. When Dolly was just a few weeks old, Linda began to bring me hand-knitted pieces for her. These offerings were carefully crafted and soft, with none of the hard edges and uncomfortable fussiness of shop-bought baby items. I was grateful for the knitted gifts and often invited her in to see Dolly, so we could stare at the baby together in admiration. Linda told me about her only child, a tall and lovely daughter who was at university in London, training to become a paediatric doctor. She told me this without any claim to involvement or influence, but as an onlooker at a site of natural wonder. Linda was a small person with delicate features and when she spoke, her mouth remained a careful little circle, as if she was confiding a surprising secret. Perhaps the maternal awe we expressed to each other was breathed like glitter into our lungs and settled there. Whatever Linda was to me became interior, in any case, and remained with me as such, even after I lost her.

There are wrens in our garden whose tiny forms compulsively shake with song, their cartoonish ball-shaped bodies unable to contain their volume, like a speaker turned up too loud. Linda, too, visibly quivered with feeling; happiness, sadness and excitement were all conveyed by her little mouth and her trembling frame. We were pilgrims who had finally reached the shrine; Linda's daughter and Dolly were the objects of our shared worship.

A few weeks after Dolly started school, Linda stopped coming to my house and I no longer saw her at the farm shop or in the street. When Phyllis brought me the eggs, she told me that Linda's daughter had been killed a month before. She was hit by a car as she returned home

from a late shift at her busy hospital. Apparently, a child had died only hours after being discharged that evening; subsequently there was speculation at the inquest about the emotional state of the young doctor as she walked out into the dark but familiar road, ignoring the traffic crossing only yards away. I imagined the long limbs and marvellous mind, nurtured and admired by so many of us and now all smashed into pieces like a carelessly dropped glass. I held Dolly tighter, kissed her more and thought, horrendously, that I no longer wanted to hear Linda's feelings about being a mother, now that they would necessarily be about loss. One Sicilian belief haunted me, and it was this: that the death of one type of person, an old man or a young girl, would indicate that two more similar deaths would occur. The corpses that followed the first would share the same gender and status. I wished I had not remembered this.

I left flowers on Linda's doorstep and a card with the lake on the front. This was the image of death for me, as the lake had been responsible for such events in my own life. As I walked home, I saw two pieces of paper left on the steps in front of the Frasers' house. Assuming they had been dropped there accidentally, I picked them up, meaning to post them through the door. But once they were in my hands, I saw that they were, in fact, parts of the same large picture, ripped in half. Together, they made up a drawing of a girl in a doctor's coat with Linda's own curly black hair; there was an oversized stethoscope around her neck that looked more like a gaudy necklace and elaborate wings on her back. The names of the family with all the girls appeared inside the bottom half of the card and totalled seven intact members, all represented in order of age, under their shared expression of love and concern for Linda and her husband.

I did not post the two pieces through the Frasers' letterbox, as I realised it had been damaged and returned by its recipient, who was quite as understandably deranged as I would have been in her place. When I read the card in the privacy of my kitchen, it was to find out the name of the youngest girl. She was the only one I still harboured some hope for, with her cheerful, out of time skipping, her frequently unbuttoned coat and poorly hidden absence of gloves. The

child had a tendency to stop and become immovably distracted by the feeling of either rain or sunshine on her neck, the various domestic pets on our road and on one occasion, a pornographic magazine which had apparently escaped from the bin outside the house of Mr Atkinson. He was indisputably the most respectable and senior resident of our street and when anyone spoke of him, they did so in their best voices. Phyllis had her own version of talking *well-do-do*, as she phrased it and she referred to him as *the man what lives next to all them lovely young girls*, as if his choice of house was itself something seedy and suspect that she was alert to.

I had privately given the youngest Fraser child whimsical names, thinking of her as a rebellious young Mabel or an independent and exotic India, the latter being a name I had long admired in a favourite novel. But in Linda's card, the scribbly writing of *Jean* evidenced itself as the title of the smallest girl. One day, I thought, this name would identify a sensible and steady woman, the creature she would inevitably become when she stopped dancing along the street and dressing in haste.

Jean has become that young woman; she lives at home and cares for her widowed mother. When I see her on the street, she is typically alone, and in a hurry to return home from whatever errand she is on. It is difficult to discern her married sisters apart when they visit; each is as smartly dressed and serious looking as another. The young women are uniform in appearance, their movements small and restrained and their voices low as though their conduct is being minutely scrutinized for any unauthorised pleasure.

Then Vita was back beside me, with another, already lit cigarette in one hand and the box in the other. Her lovely face was all concentration as she inhaled and then exhaled with a little shudder, staring into the distance, as if trying to process something unfathomable. She inhaled again deeply and nodded towards the Fraser's house to remind me of her earlier question.

‘What would you like to know?’ I asked Vita. ‘That is one of the Fraser girls. There are five. I can’t tell them apart, except for the youngest one.’ But I should not have been concerned about Vita wanting more information. She crafted conversation by herself and from nothing. She gently carried me along on her words and I could have loved her for that alone.

‘Five? *Five?*’ she laughed as she exhaled smoke, and the sound was pure amusement. My mother had laughed a lot, but she did not laugh from happiness as Vita did. She laughed to disguise the bitterness in what she talked about. *Mr Atkinson looks very friendly with the doctor’s wife, haha! Arthur’s bought a brand-new car, don’t know how he paid for that, haha! Our Sunday won’t get married, she’ll be at home forever, haha!* Vita, though, laughed whenever she was entertained by something, which was often. ‘Tom has ... what, four now? I can’t imagine being responsible for one other person, but four .. five? The idea of five coats, five pairs of shoes, even... If I had to find five pairs of gloves before I could leave the house. Well, I wouldn’t leave the house. I suppose that’s the problem, I would leave the house. On my own,’ she giggled to herself and put her forehead to her raised knees as though hiding from the possibility of these children. Then she turned and looked directly at me, her cheek pressed against the red net of her skirt. ‘Did you ever think about having more children? After Dolly?’

‘I didn’t think about having Dolly,’ I said, and she laughed again, patting my arm. ‘But she came along and then I found I did want her. Very much.’ I was immensely grateful for whatever magic had compelled me to fall in love with my baby, but just as fearful of that all-consuming love suddenly retreating in the same inexplicable manner. For the first time, I felt sad for my own mother, whose second daughter had not provided that other-worldly immediate enchantment that Dolly, and apparently Dolores, had. ‘It’s easier to love one, I expect. My parents didn’t want children at all. And they had two of us.’

Our parents had been scrupulously honest, and in their candour, also uncharacteristically modern, in telling my sister and I about their original intention to remain childless. Although we would have known, anyway, that their love was already portioned out; our father had Mer and she had the Lakes. Perhaps they did not tell us of their own accord. It is the sort of question Dolores, herself as real and fleshy as a warm infant should be, would have asked them without concern for her continued existence. Had I dared to query the degree to which I had been a wanted child, the answer would inevitably have rendered me even less substantial.

Both our parents had grown up in tiny houses that were tight with children. For them, childhood was a place where there was never enough of anything that was worth having and where the few things of value that did exist could not be adequately protected from the many little hands that sought them out. However, at the age of forty-four, my mother's doctor confirmed that the symptoms she had taken for menopause were instead the expression of an advanced first pregnancy. Dolores was born less than two months later and proves in the journals to have been an unexpected but immediate delight, a relentlessly joyful baby bestowed on a serious and hardworking couple whose peers were by then welcoming grandchildren. My mother's body, stirred late into fertility, apparently determined to produce another child and I was born less than a year later. For six weeks of the year, Dolores and I were twins and we enjoyed confusing our peers by telling them this without further explanation. My mother's diaries, however, note the difficulty that the close proximity of our arrivals caused her. Her journals do not disguise the resentment she felt at being forced to stay in hospital for two weeks after my birth, during which time she saw little of her firstborn, who was still only a baby herself. My mother underwent a sterilisation before my first birthday and whenever we passed a pram on the street or heard the birth announcement of a friend or neighbour, she compulsively referenced her own barren condition. She spoke of this in the low, flat tones of an incantation, as though reminding the gods of fertility that they had no further business with her.

My father acclimatised to late parenthood with less difficulty than Mer and featured in our lives as a distant but not unkind relative. He was often surprised when he came upon us in his house; he would visibly start when faced with these tiny intruders sitting nonchalantly on his chairs and eating biscuits taken from his cupboards. Then, he would raise a polite smile of acknowledgement as though expressing recognition to reassure both himself and his uninvited visitors. *Oh. Yes, there you are*, he would say benignly, to give the impression that he had not forgotten his children but had instead been actively looking for us. And with this he would walk briskly away, as though he had other small people to discover in the other rooms of his house. It was a game for Dolores to silently grab our father's large, furred wrist as he absorbedly read the paper or searched through delicate fishing equipment and then to laugh hysterically when he froze in shock or pierced his skin on a fish hook. However, the knowledge that I was able to startle a self-contained man like my father made me more silent and still, terrified of the monstrous power my existence held. My sister and I responded in our own ways to his perpetual astonishment at our existence. She, laughing and antagonistic, and I, with a transferred fear of what I was.

He was a tall and well-built man; long after his death, local people continued to refer to him with something between fear and admiration. I watched him once as he kicked off his shoes and dove gracefully into the lake to rescue one of the tourists, who had fallen from the fishing boat while taking photographs. Other men were already in the water, trying to save the drowning man, but mad with fear, he pushed away the float and pulled them underwater when they came near. Walter decisively knocked the flailing man unconscious with one punch and brought him to land, where he laid him on the stones with enough tenderness to draw sighs from a group of local women who had stopped to watch. My father's navy shirt clung sleekly to his body as he stood at the lakeside and pushed his hair back from his forehead, He called out sternly to one of the onlookers, a neighbour of ours and a former nurse, to come and check

on the man. Meanwhile the man lay gasping on the ground in his soaked suit, marooned in the heavy wool fabric, like a creature caught in a hostile place.

Our mother, having helped to raise her six siblings, was more obviously child-weary than her husband, who, along with an older brother, had been waited on by a family of capable sisters. His mother had died when he was just two, and he told with satisfaction how his sisters subsequently fussed around him to ensure he never felt her absence. The surprise that Walter continued to express about his own parental status was, for his wife, something more fatalistic, a dutiful resignation. Everything she said to me either concluded with, or consisted solely of, a long exhalation; this was a habit I copied for a time, due to my interest in speech patterns.

In year eight, my favourite teacher once turned very white and slipped elegantly from her chair. Her descent was snakelike and untroubled until she touched the ground. *Uuufffhhh*, she said, as her ribcage met the hard floor. I sat upright in my seat at the back of the room; *Uuufffhhh*, I responded in my mother's voice. Some of the students were already kneeling beside the teacher and they turned to stare at me, raising their heads sharply, one by one like performers. The teacher continued to faint regularly for several months, but each subsequent time she collapsed from her chair with the same gentle sound, it was me that the class eyed expectantly.

By the time she left her job to have her baby, the teacher was nocturnal in appearance, with bloodless white skin and an emergent tic that compelled her to blink emphatically, as though overwhelmed by daylight. She brought the baby in to the school office on his first birthday; he was fat and unwieldy against her little frame. I was spending lunchtime outside the office that day for querying a statement my teacher made in my literature class. I had much to learn, then, about editing my thoughts before speaking. School typically went like this: you are interested enough in the lesson to finally contribute. You do not believe that literature relays a universal truth, and this offends the English teacher daily. When you realise that this is the problem, you

tell him instead that he is right, his reading of Jane Austen is the only one and he becomes louder and more red-faced. The teacher sends you to stand outside the office and wait for the Headteacher. All passing staff ask you to describe your crime. You are not always sure of the rule that has been broken. This is an unpopular answer, so you use the waiting time to formulate a better one. You practise this on the next staff member who asks. It becomes evident that the best-received stories are those that do not involve inadvertently offending teachers but feature instead missing homework and forgotten games kits.

It does not escape my notice, now, that these more acceptable transgressions required an absence of some kind. There was always too much of me when I used language, which is why silence has so often been my refuge. Other students spoke endlessly without notice, but I used the wrong words in the wrong way. I do not speak a first language, although I read and think in one. I talk in a second language with a flat accent whose origins are unaccounted for and so considered an affectation. All speech is dangerously fluid, capable of conveying meanings in seconds that I could not have expressed deliberately if I had practised my conversation for days before speaking.

At my school, the office door was sometimes wedged open by a weighty brass frog with a beatific smile; these temporary shows of accessibility increased the nerve required to approach the door when it was alternately closed. The secretary was a loud woman who, like many of the middle-aged female employees at the school, favoured the set hair and tightly belted dresses of her youth; in consequence, these women always seemed costumed for a themed event to which we students, in the straight cut skirts and fitted shirts of our regulation uniform, were not invited. The heavy fabric of her patterned skirts puckered into wrinkles if she moved from her desk, for these were outfits designed for stillness. Any sighting of this aesthetic immediately moved me to pull at and further loosen the deliberately over-sized uniform I wore.

The secretary reached for the teacher's huge baby and her stiff petticoats deflated like an exhalation, sighing against the weight of his chubby legs. The sound spread sequentially through the net layers as through a disappointed crowd, *uuufffhhh*. She laughed as she mimicked staggering under the weight of him, but her lips were pressed firmly together. The laughter was musical and remote, as if someone were practicing scales in an adjacent room.

The baby hung stiffly from the red-nailed grip under his arms, like something frozen overnight and his expression was fixed and distant. His white all-in-one was the kind associated with new-borns and his largeness made the outfit a deceit, an attempt at something I could not qualify. *Uuufffhhh*, strained the skirt as the baby's fat-dimpled feet swung inanimately against the fabric with a metric and involuntary tick-tock motion. I saw his mother step back and her eyes flicker momentarily towards the open double doors that led outside. *Come with me*, I thought. But she did not look at me, looked instead back at the baby and I, as always, did not speak.

At home, Mer was uninterested in my evidence against the utility of extended sighs, perhaps because she kept the practice entirely for me. She watched Dolores, though, with the awe of a birdwatcher discovering a rare prize; she observed her firstborn at a distance with the same pride and the same silent monitoring. She was a remarkable mother, loving and patient. She sang in her melodic voice, read our favourite books over and over and made special meals. It was only when Dolores' preferences changed, and our mother adopted the new song, the new book or supper, that I realised I was simply an occasional witness to her mothering, not a recipient of it. If I stayed close to my sister, I could persuade myself that the smiles and warmth from Mer included us both.

Vita was watching me in that close and considering way that she and Dolly shared. She ran one hand thoughtfully up and down my arm; her cigarette was in her other hand and she held this carefully away, as if in demonstration of her care with me.

‘Perhaps your parents simply loved you differently than your sister.’ Her tone was soft and clear, and she lingered over the last vowel as if in thought, *sis-taaaar*. When she continued, though, her voice was sliced through with the sharpness of confidence. ‘People do that, even in families, you know. You are so funny, Sunday.’ She grinned at me, as if we had both known for some time that my humour was an accepted fact. ‘And so lucky. With Dolly, I mean. I would have liked a girl if I had had children. But Rols...’ she covered her face briefly with both hands, the cigarette obediently trailing smoke up and away from her, ‘I think I might have liked ... not a big gang like Tom has, or ...’ She pointed her cigarette accusingly toward the Fraser house of girls without looking in that direction. ‘But just one. Of my own. Like you have. Rols always made it sound romantic, that we couldn’t share each other with a child.’ She drew on her cigarette, hard and noisily, like someone taking a necessary deep breath.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘that does sound romantic.’ I could not imagine the King ever making such a claim about me.

She made a brief choking sound as she exhaled; it was almost a laugh. Almost. She spoke in a small, clipped voice that was not her own, ‘Except, you see, I haven’t had him entirely to myself.’ Then she shook her head and spoke again, sounding like herself this time. ‘It’s worked out for the best, I’m sure. And, anyway, I might have had a boy! Boys, eugh!’ She inhaled on the cigarette in a rapid gasp, then raised her chin and blew out a little cloud of smoke. ‘It’s bad enough living with a grown up one, right? Rols is fun but I miss my girlfriends *ter-rib-ly*.’ She extended the last word for extra emphasis and pulled a theatrically sad face, putting her head to one side and turning the corners of her mouth down. I reminded myself this was only a demonstration but still felt a mirrored grief tremble up inside me. ‘I’ve told him I will need to

go back to town at weekends while we're up here. Otherwise I will be missed. I really will.'

She smiled brightly, 'And, of course, now I've got you right next door too. I dreamt about you last night. We were out there,' she nods towards the garden behind, 'sunbathing. Oh, I *love* sunbathing. Do you?'

'I hate sun. And light. Oh, I *hate* it.' I was practising to see if I could catch the same intonations as her, but even when I copied her sentence structure, it sounded off. 'I would not sunbathe with you.'

Vita didn't laugh this time as I had expected her to, but instead asked me, in my own blunt tone; 'And what do you like Sunday? What do you dream about?'

'I like your dress. Although I would not wear it. It will keep you safe.'

'Will it, darling?' she said. Her lips thinned as she inhaled on her cigarette and I watched the fine lines rush to gather around her lovely mouth and then dash away fearfully as she exhaled. 'How?'

'The colour. Coral protects against *il malocchio*, against the jealous ones. But if you don't have coral, then you can wear red, like this.' I lightly pressed on the piece of her tulle skirt that rested on my trousers and immediately withdrew my hand; although it appeared soft, it scratched like wire. 'When Dolly was little, I kept a red ribbon tied on her pram. For the same thing, the evil eye. I always wore one, too, when I was young. Before my sister died. But, of course, she didn't need one because she was born in January, which is the very best protection. It even helps to protect your family, too. When were you born?'

'The year?'

'Which month?'

'August.'

'You should probably wear red then.' A lot of people would be jealous of someone like Vita. I supposed *il malocchio* must be trained on her wherever she was.

‘I like red.’ She flicked away another cigarette, again holding her hand in position momentarily after it had landed on the path. The watchful pose put me in mind of an archer whose elbow remained high over his spent bow while he waited to see if he had hit his target.

‘Good. You need to.’

We sat in companionable silence until I finally had to go and make dinner for Dolly’s return.

bears and angels

I did not see Vita for several days and I found myself thinking of her often. Whenever I left the house I did so deliberately loudly and, on my return, I walked slowly up the path that ran parallel with hers, allowing time for her to appear. I wondered what it would take to conjure her up to sit and smoke on her front step, to get her out on my street again.

I thought again of Linda who had become increasingly agoraphobic after her daughter died and eventually would not leave the house at all. Her husband took his camera out every day, attempting to capture that sole elusive image which would convince his wife that the world was worth re-joining. He runs the local photography club now and his pictures sometimes win competitions in the town paper. The photographs still have not succeeded, though, in persuading Linda of the beauty still left in the world. She remains inside and unseen. I invisibly stand with her, understand her disinterest in a world which no longer contains her daughter. I knew that her husband was called Vic, but we had never spoken, and he surprised me once by greeting my daughter and me by name. This acknowledgement felt like permission and I asked after his wife.

‘She’s still not been outside,’ he said. ‘It’s been almost a year.’ I remained silent, unsure what to offer as comfort and he continued; ‘I’m taking a photo every day, trying to persuade her out. Some of the photos aren’t very encouraging. It’s harder than you’d think. Could I photograph you and Dolly for her? She talks about you both a lot.’

He was a rounded square of a person, his breadth enhanced by wide shoulders and heavy arms. His small black eyes were framed between a dense beard and wiry hair, which conspired with his stature to give him a bear-like appearance. When he talked about Linda he looked reflexively from Dolly and me towards his own house, our conversation presumably leading his thoughts and his gaze back home. The flickering movement further added to his animalistic appearance; he seemed to be weighing up our response before meeting it with his own. Perhaps

if Dolly or I refused to be photographed he would shrug, collapse onto his front paws and lumber away without ever looking back at us. He moved, too, in that shivery and graceful way of bears, with a lightness that never betrayed his immense weight. His hands were huge on the camera, as if he were holding a child's toy and I wondered if it belonged to Linda. I could imagine her little face behind the camera, could see her using it to earnestly document her daughter's life; the graduations, the birthday parties and the gappy smiles left behind by lost baby teeth. Dolly was at that time preparing to play an angel in her school nativity and thought of little else; she posed solemnly for the bear with her head slightly bowed and her hands clasped together as if in prayer. I stood uncertainly by her side, wondering how to be enough to make Linda want to leave her house again.

Vita still did not appear on my street. If I had wanted to entice someone out, I would have shared my recent images of her. I would have shown her lying on her back on the grass, fast asleep in the warm sunshine; laughing cheerfully at our bankrupted builder; sitting at my table in pyjamas with her mouth ringed in milk; sitting casually on the pavement and fitting shoes onto her bare feet with the sweet focus of a child. These were all things that were worth being out in the world for. Late that night, as if I had summoned her through recalling these visions, Vita knocked on my door.

'I'm lonely,' she said when I let her in. I was barefoot in pyjamas and she was wearing a long dress and heavy jewellery at her throat and earlobes. There were no hellos, just a bald announcement of her feelings and intentions. It was like communicating with a child. 'I don't like being alone in the house and Rols isn't coming back for days. I haven't spoken to anyone. For hours! I want to be in here with you.' How easy Vita was to understand. This bluntness, then, was what she meant when she sat in my kitchen with milk around her mouth and gravely informed me that we were alike. If everyone talked in this way, instead of telling riddles about

weather control and chicken killing, I would not need to endlessly translate. Dolly was already in bed; she only had two exams left and she now wandered the house disconsolately on the evenings she was home, which were rare. She had begun to remind me of my father when he had circled the same house possessively and equally unsure of what he was looking for; she now found my continued presence as inexplicable as he had.

Vita was not talkative that night, but quiet and practical. She sent me back into the front room with maternal bossiness. I could hear her searching familiarly through my kitchen cupboards before bringing a plate of toast and marmalade into the front room. It was the first time in years that I had watched television with anyone except Dolly and we stayed up for hours. We ate together and laughed at programmes that were not supposed to be funny. Sometimes we just laughed because the other one was laughing. Vita fell suddenly and sweetly asleep, exactly as Dolly had as a small child and I gently put a blanket over her so that she could sleep undisturbed. When I awoke briefly on the sofa, she was gone. In historic Sicily, men who woke in the night to find their wives gone would know they had married a witch, a ‘strange woman,’ or a *strii* and so a *manga* would be employed to provide a solution to his spousal predicament. Sometimes the cure killed not only the witch but also the real woman inside.

I think it was the cold that woke me briefly that night, the particular kind of sudden cold that reveals itself in summer between midnight and the sun coming out. The soft blanket was still spread out on the sofa next to me where Vita had been. I was shivering lightly as I crawled underneath the cover like a loyal pet and Dolly found me asleep there in the morning, with the leftover toast on the tray. The television was still on and we watched the tiny heads of newsreaders nod sternly at us while they described a terrible fire which had occurred the night before. Piper Alpha, an oil rig off the coast of Scotland had exploded; grainy footage showed the burning oil spreading over the surrounding North Sea like kindling. The giant flames atop

the black water seemed impossible, apocalyptic. Dolly was immediately fascinated but I found I could not watch it.

After a long week without any more visits from Vita, I arrived home one evening to find a letter of hers among my own. I did not understand why the letter pleased me until I realised it brought me a reason to see her. I stood at her door for some minutes and then she was there, already talking animatedly as if we were in mid-conversation. When I passed the large envelope to her with the beginning of my prepared explanation, she took it without interest and placed it on her hall table. I remain childishly convinced that all post contains life changing news; therefore, the sight of my mail brings enormous anxiety and excitement. While I appreciate this is an excessive response, the visceral effect that letters have on me is undiminished, each morning brings the potential of drama. The King used to leave his post unopened for hours, sometimes days, as Dolly does, until I reminded him about it and then he would hold up his hand in dismissal. *You open it, then*, he would say. *Just don't tell me about it*. But it is illegal to open someone else's mail and I did not, although I would have liked to.

She said, 'You,' again, she made the word 'you' seem like an intimate address to which blushing with pleasure was a reasonable response, 'you are a much better wife than I am. You bring my post, keep me supplied with milk, and you listen to me talk nonsense all night until I fall asleep. I am going to call you Wife.' This intention was announced with some gravity as though it were an honour being bestowed, so I did not laugh, did not say, *Ha!* She kissed me efficiently on both cheeks and walked away up the hall without pausing in her description. I stood for a moment in the open doorway, 'Wife! Come in!' she shouted. I closed the front door behind me, and it seemed she was already relaying a story to me about a *bossy little person* she had recently encountered at the farm shop. 'And the man kept asking me what I wanted. Really, he was just telling me what he thought, but *as if* it was a question. He said, 'You'll be wanting

steak, won't you? I expect you will.' No thank you, I said to him. And he said, 'Men always like beef best though, don't they? I expect you're a lovely cook, aren't you? Yes, you will be. I can tell. Yes, I can.' No, I told him, I am, in fact, *horrendous* in the kitchen and all I ever cook is lamb chops. But my husband doesn't mind, because apparently I make up for it *hugely* in the bedroom.' When she said the word, hugely, she extended the first vowel sound, making a whistling sound. I attempted this effect as I followed her obediently down the hallway. *Huuuuuge-lay.*

She was still complaining cheerfully when we entered her kitchen. Some moving boxes were still visible, but the house looked cosy and Tom's pieces of furniture were obviously good. The fluffy white dog appeared at her feet and looked up at her with dark eyes as shiny as plastic. She picked him up with one hand and clasped him to her chest, where he remained, motionless and rigid, as if with self-consciousness. The dog was small and appealing to such a degree that responding to him was shaming, like falling for an obvious deception. He was as pleasing and ridiculous as a carefully constructed toy. A board of men in lab coats might have compiled data on the most appealing canine traits and subsequently created the formula to produce this creature.

Vita was talking: '... And this man blushed and finally stopped asking bloody questions. He said, 'Right. I'll just wrap up some lamb chops for you then.' She laughed, amused at his embarrassment. How fortunate she was to remain a bystander. I absorb other people's emotions; they are greedily encompassing like children who will not let you finish a conversation. They dance showily at your feet, costumed performers who refuse to be ignored. *But I am here!* they say, *and you must feel what I feel.* And the shame, the fear, whatever it is, leaks from them into my body, causing my own cheeks to flush and chasing my heart to beat faster, clicking their fingers theatrically in demonstration. *One-two, one-two, one-two. Like this, like this,* they say. The little dog had been entirely still in Vita's hand, but he shook lightly

against the rising of her chest as she laughed. He blinked sadly and stared past me and into the distance.

‘That’s where I work. At the farm. Not in the shop. Well, sometimes in the shop,’ I told her. Bunny and Richard are openly opposed to me spending time with customers, but occasionally, it becomes very busy and they are forced to relent. When this happens, one of them comes to collect me from the greenhouse, typically Bunny. She brings me a clean towel from the shop cupboard and watches me while I wash my hands and smooth down my hair at the sink; it is as though she is supervising an unhygienic toddler.

‘Oh, *that’s* where you work. You might know him then. He’s a smallish man, one of those country types, cords and tweed and ... all that, darling. Quite handsome I expect, in his day.’

‘That’s Richard. He’s my ...’ Who was he to me now? He wasn’t my father-in-law anymore, but we remain something like family. ‘He’s Dolly’s grandad.’

‘Oh, great. I’ve only just found you and already I’ve offended your people. Sunday, I am sorry. You do know he thinks I’m mad? Or at least sexually deviant?’ Her face had a familiar look. It was an expression of acknowledged but allowable unruliness: Dolly in a new dress and covered in mud; Dolly coming home late on a school night or found smoking in the garden on the morning of a maths exam. The telephone rang and Vita picked it up instantly in a practised manner. Of course, her telephone rang all day.

She said briskly, ‘Hello?’ Then, ‘Darling! Can’t talk, I’ve got Sunday here.’ Pause. She smiled broadly at me. ‘I mean, Wife. I’ve got Wife here.’ She laughed at his response and then said curtly: ‘Yes. Later. Bye!’ She nodded at the telephone; ‘Rols. He’ll be home tomorrow.’ All family offence acknowledged, and apologies apparently dispensed, her expression changed again into something soft. Without warning, Vita handed me the dog like a parcel that I was here to collect.

‘Now, Wife, you sit there with Beast,’ she said fussily, indicating a wooden chair at the small table. ‘He doesn’t like being held standing up; he’s too small and the height frightens him. What shall I get you to drink? Tea?’

Beast was frozen in my arms and I sat down at the table, but he continued to hold himself rigid as though playing dead. His fluffiness disguised his thin frame, and the peculiar little skeleton was easy to trace through his fur. His protruding ribs, like a set of infants’ toes, were discernible against my fingers and I put him down gently on the floor. His initial contact with the wooden floor was soundless, his body too light to make any noise. The only audible sound as he walked away was a light clip of his claws on the wood, the rhythmic tip-tap of a practised secretary typing with long nails.

‘No thanks, I’m okay,’ I said. ‘I don’t drink anything hot or ...anything that is not fizzy.’

‘So you drink champagne and lemonade? I can offer you either of those.’ She laughed; it was a short and musical sound.

‘Well, yes. I do. And... tonic water.’ I was ridiculous. It was the inevitability of these moments, these declarations I had to make, that made company so alarming.

‘Marvellous. I’ll make us cocktails then. Fizzy ones.’

Vita moved happily around the kitchen, taking various bottles out of boxes. Her silence and the profile of her face reminded me of my first sighting of her, asleep in the garden. In a voice loud enough to carry above the noise, I asked her where Rollo worked and how long he had been away for.

‘Can’t talk, darling! Concentrating!’ she says.

When she finally placed blueish drinks on the table, it was with some satisfaction. I raised the glass to my lips and tiny bubbles escaped into the air and onto my face like small and uncertain fingers.

‘Hold on. Wait!’ Vita said and left the table to rummage in another box, this one marked ENTERTAINING in thickly drawn capital letters. She returned, smiling, with miniature yellow and pink umbrellas and dropped one in each of our glasses. ‘Found them! Cheers! We’ll toast to you and Dolly coming for supper on Friday. Rols will be home and he can’t wait to meet you both. You will come?’

Dolly’s final O’level took place the following day; she spent the rest of the week either out celebrating or involved in excited phone calls with her classmates. At home on Friday evening, she changed into a favourite green dress and flat brown sandals. She was lovely, and I kissed her delightedly while I told her so, not caring that this would make her cross. The dress was very short, but so plain that the length of it was naive and sweet, like a childish outfit outgrown but sentimentally favoured. None of her clothes were patterned and this had been the case since she was of an age to choose her own clothes. Since Dolly was small, whenever I wore any piece that was not a single colour, she typically raised her hands and blinked theatrically as if blinded. My own wardrobe has, therefore, come to resemble my daughter’s singly coloured pieces, which is, I suppose, a style of some kind. I had chosen a black skirt and a loose white blouse, which must have been appropriate because Dolly did not comment. We were expected for 8pm, and so we left home just five minutes before this. Arriving early is just as rude as being late.

‘For an 8pm invitation at a private home,’ I reminded Dolly as we approached the front door, ‘guests must be prepared to leave at 10.30pm. We will announce our preparations for going at this time and then allow the host to agree, or to persuade us to remain for a short time if that is his preference. Okay?’

Dolly nodded and, on their doorstep, she asked, ‘And what is the penalty if we do not observe these rules, Mum? Is it very serious?’ She laughed, then and pulled the knocker loudly.

Vita's glossily red front door was opened by a tall man. His smart suit was at odds with a leanness that made him appear boyish and even younger perhaps, than he really was. He touched his already smooth, dark hair before extending his hand to hold first my hand and then my daughters. As he leaned towards us, a powdery smell rose off him and filled the hallway. It was the impersonal, soapy fragrance of an infant with a scrupulous caretaker. The smell of a man with shiny pink fingernails, ironed pyjamas and an insistence on pure silk ties and monogrammed handkerchiefs. I blushed as I remembered Vita the morning she had come to my house for milk; the initialled pyjamas had been his. How strange to have seen this stranger's nightwear before we had even met. He wore a thin moustache in the style of my Victorian builder and thin-rimmed round glasses. He had an open and lovely face with a gentle expression.

'Sunday and Dolly, how do you do? *I* am Rollo.' He used the same inflexion as his wife, the same inference that he was the one we had been expecting, waiting for. 'How lovely that you were both able to come. Please.'

And he made a sweeping elegant gesture behind him into the long hallway. Dolly immediately understood and moved down the hall towards the kitchen door. Rollo was waiting for me to pass him too, and I filed obediently into line between them both like a child flanked by her parents. We passed the front room where I could see that some efforts had been made to unpack the remaining boxes. Tom's house was tasteful and restrained, with none of the flamboyance with which Vita presented herself. It looked like a house which Rollo could have arranged though. The expensively furnished house was more representative of his own formality than the exuberance of his wife.

I heard Vita before I reached the kitchen. 'You're Dolly!' she said loudly. Then, 'Oh, you are *gorgeous!* Are you really only sixteen?'

I winced to myself, did not need to see my daughter's response to know that this kind of exclamation embarrassed and annoyed her. But I moved round the open door to see the two of them in a friendly embrace. They were laughing, and Vita, who was considerably shorter than my daughter, was reaching around Dolly's middle and pretending to extend the length of her green cotton dress.

She tutted in comic disapproval, 'You girls with your minidresses! Mind you, even this old thing would be a mini on you, wouldn't it?' She gestured at her own, exotic outfit. Vita was wearing a long kaftan in a thin, silky fabric. It was something another woman might wear over their bikini on a foreign beach and, indeed, the strappy outline of her dark underwear was faintly visible through the material. However, paired with Vita's centre-parted black hair, pale skin and various pieces of thin gold jewellery, it became a special evening dress.

'I think you look lovely,' said Dolly in a serious, quiet voice that I had not heard her use before. And they laughed and talked in lowered voices which I could not quite make out. I heard Dolly say something about celebrating and knew she must be talking about the end of her exams.

After looking forward to introducing the two of them, hearing them giggle together made me feel uncomfortably like the newcomer myself. I had wanted a little of the glitter from each of them to fall on me as I stood between them and they listened to my introduction in silence.

Dolly had her back to me, and Vita looked up to see me first. 'Wife!' she said. 'You look so pretty. Dolly is so like you.' Her voice and gaze were both unusually serious and I moved forward to receive her kisses, already forgetting that I missed her introduction to my daughter. 'Come on, I'll show you round the house. Or have you already seen it all? With Tom?'

'I've been here before, but it was a long time ago. Before Tom.' I thought uncomfortably of Fran and Arthur who had lived here for so long and still could not really imagine the house really belonged to anyone but them.

Vita's eyes narrowed as she looked closely at me; *can she tell I do not want to talk about this?* I wondered. And, apparently, she could, for she took my arm and Dolly followed us Dolly and I on a tour of Tom's house. Vita gave all the rooms extravagant titles, *and here is the parlour, the bedchamber, the lavatoire...* like an estate agent overselling something ugly. We both found her charming, we both laughed along. I think, now, that she was laughing at Tom's relatively modest house. At my house. Our homes have identical first floor layouts, but Vita's bedrooms were beautiful, carefully furnished by Tom's wife, where ours, with the exception of Dolly's room, have always been the functional but impersonal rooms of an economy guest house. Tom's house has the worn glamour of an ancestral holiday home. The soft furnishings were once obviously richly coloured, but then faded, as if they had been out in the sun for many summers along with their leisurely owners. The gilt corners of chairs, picture frames and mirrors were also gentled with age into a restrained and black speckled gold.

'I want this painting. It is so pretty. Tom has some lovely art, doesn't he?' said Dolly, when we were standing in Vita and Rollo's bedroom. The picture my daughter coveted hung opposite the bed; it showed an early twentieth-century couple in wedding clothes, the new bride gazed inscrutably at her bouquet of orchids while her husband looked at her profile, his delicate face earnest and puzzled. I had already chosen my favourite of the many paintings around the house; it hung in the guest room and depicted a pensive looking mother whose brood of plump children sat around her feet as though in organised restraint, their soft, dimpled hands all poised as if ready to reach out and still her.

'It's mine. *Ours,*' Vita corrected herself. 'All the paintings our ours. We brought our best paintings. They are too big for the house, but we didn't want to leave them in storage. Luckily Tom's walls were covered in photographs of the children, so we just swapped them with ours. Did you know this is only one of his holiday homes? His family have ...' Dolly was still looking

at the painting. 'Are you interested in art, Dolly? I must take you to my in-law's place; they have a small Canaletto, and we have friends who own a beautiful Panini.'

'Gosh,' I said, carefully copying their shared, wide-eyed expressions. We stood together in a rare moment of silence in the bedroom, as though all processing our admiration for these painters. Canaletto, Panini, I pronounced silently. 'Italians? And would they be from the South or the North? Whereabouts?'

Dolly laughed, and Vita made a satisfied little sigh, as though she had expected my response; 'Oh, Sunday, I do love you,' she said. And she reached out with her easy touch to take my arm.

Painted subjects are easier to read than their physical counterparts. One can watch them for as long as required with no thought of committing excessive or inadequate eye contact. In such pictures, clues of intent which in real life are easy to miss, are instead deliberately sprinkled throughout. In real life, the details I am drawn to are often secondary and these often mislead. And in a painting, of course, the artist intends all the uncomfortable truth he has put there, somewhere within the beautiful image, to be read. In life, the opposite is more often true.

Every look, every conversation, is a performance which tells me little. This is everyday social contact: you are late to the theatre, you take your seat, self-conscious, a little breathless and determined to catch up with the story unfolding on the stage. But it is impossible. The actors all speak in low voices and their faces are identically vacant. You must be silent. You look instead to your immediate neighbour, hoping their expression will tell you something about the tone of the play. And they turn to stare directly back at you. And their face is impassive, will only ever be impassive, as polished and prized things always are. You realise that they will never show you a readable expression. That they, like the whole audience, like everyone you already know, like everyone you will ever meet, are blank-faced statues.

Just like you.

Rollo was waiting for us downstairs in the dining area that runs off the kitchen. This room was built over one long ago summer by Arthur and remains the sole architectural difference between our homes. He appeared in the double doorway between the rooms with a flute of champagne for each of us. We did not keep wine at home, because we did not entertain, and I had never seen Dolly drink anything alcoholic. I expected Rollo to ask my permission before he gave her a drink. But he did not, and she took the glass from him graciously and as though pre-dinner champagne were a nightly habit of ours.

Rollo raised his own glass, and at my side, Vita did the same. ‘To our new friends,’ he said, and his voice was low and serious. ‘Vee tells me that you only drink champagne, Sunday. Very sensible, considering what I have been served in some private houses.’ He patted his hair again, in the gentle and comforting manner his wife used with her little dog. He spoke as if my avoidance of still drinks was the calculated ploy of a sociable wine connoisseur. Any drink that is not sparkling runs down my throat insidiously, spreading rather than making itself known as fizziness does. The finest wine Rollo has ever tasted would still make me gag unless I consciously took it in careful, tiny sips.

‘To Wife, Dolly and champagne! And to the end of O’levels. And the end of school!’ said Vita, laughing.

Dolly and I clinked our glasses with each of theirs and then with each other. We each made identical little turns, in our revolving pairs, without moving our feet; it was like a polite dance in which one does not show favourites. Dolly had two high points of colour on her cheeks as she looked at Vita. I touched my own face and wondered if I looked like that when I was in Vita’s company. The room was quiet for a moment and as we regarded each other, carefully dressed and engaging in unfamiliar rituals, I considered what it was we were promising. And to whom. My glass was delicate and thin stemmed, but it was made of crystal and weighed

heavily in my hand. At last, Rollo asked Dolly a question about her exams, and suddenly the three of them were exchanging stories about revision and test strategies. I listened to them talk; they were excitable and quick to laugh at one another and at themselves.

As a toddler, Dolly would gasp in panic whenever she was exposed to the wind, as if it were taking her breath and suffocating her. Over time, she relaxed and allowed it to move past her without concern. But while the King had laughed indulgently at her shock, I understood how she had felt. The gasping for air was how I feel in company, struggling for breath and not finding it. I was unsure why I had wanted to come here to Vita's. We had never been to a friend's house together and I did not even know Rollo. In fact, I would perhaps have cancelled if Dolly had not agreed to come. In just a couple of years, she would probably be away at university and we would not be able to do such things together anymore. We do not have shared people or a community to bond us. Her grandparents are entirely hers and she does not get along with David, although I tried to soften her feelings towards him. If I did social things with her now, attended uncomfortable events and made new friends, then when she was faraway, I would be able to call her and say, *do you remember when we went next door for dinner and we had that lovely soup? Vita got me the recipe and it came out really well. I'm going to make it when you come home for the holidays.* I could write and tell her about my visits to Vita and Rollo's new house, their recent garden party, their new car. There would also be the visits they made to me, when they would stay in Tom's house and we would reminisce about the long summer they once spent here. My daughter would want to come back and hear about these half-familiar and half-unknown things for herself. And some of Vita's appeal would transfer onto me and these things would call Dolly back.

The table was set formally, with several sets of different sized cutlery, multiple glasses and tall candles in silver holders. I had imagined Vita entertaining in a more relaxed way, with the pride

she took in being non-domestic. But there were two low vases of cut flowers and a heavy white tablecloth and napkins. There were even stiff place cards for the four of us, small and carefully written in green ink, with a large outline of our first initial and then a name underneath. My card was opposite Dolly's and it confusingly read, 'S' and underneath *Wife*. I hoped that Vita wrote the cards; I did not want to think of a man claiming me as a wife ever again, even in humour. Even in Mr Lloyd's sweet and lyrical voice.

'Vita,' said Dolly admiringly and rather bravely, I thought, to use an adult's first name so casually, 'the table looks lovely.'

We sat down at the table and Rollo poured more champagne, while Vita brought us prawn cocktail in wide glasses. It was beautifully presented, lettuce and seafood drowned in a pale pink sauce dusted with specks of paprika and one large prawn wrapped over the top of each glass like a question mark. I have read the chapter on cutlery; I was confident about which to use with each course. Each of the others, including Dolly, smoothly picked up the knife and fork at the outside of their place settings and I felt as though we had all passed a secret test.

'This is really good,' I told Vita. 'I like the gentleness of it.' The starter was all green and pink pastels, soft creamy tasting food with no sharpness.

'Oh, it's not me' she said cheerfully. 'I don't cook. Rols made most of this himself. He unpacked a lot of boxes, today, too. Didn't you darling?'

'*Most* of this?' He raised an eyebrow at her and smiled. 'And what exactly have you prepared, Vee?' He called her this and never used her full name. Instead, he called her *Vee* and *Queenie* softly and with a smile, as if these were private and loving jokes between them. I could not, though, imagine this formal and precisely moustached man interesting my Vita, who was excitable and loud, who delighted in and drew attention to her own blunders. Then she moved over to him and leaned close to tell him something. They looked as natural and relaxed as if they had spent their whole lives together, with both everything and nothing left between them.

‘What were you doing today?’ I asked her, surprised at Rollo’s domestic industry.

Vita leaned forward to me and covered my hand with her own.

And, as she spoke, she gave a resigned shrug; ‘I *always* take a nap and a long bath before dinner. It’s a habit now and I don’t see any point in changing it.’

‘How was the tour, Sunday?’ Rollo asked me. ‘You and Dolly must have spent time over here, I expect? With Tom and his family.’

‘We don’t know Tom like that. We know who he is, but we don’t socialise with him.’ I said.

‘Isn’t it funny, Rols?’ said Vita. ‘We always know everyone, don’t we?’ She said this as if referring to a naturally occurring phenomenon which she had never understood. ‘Am I terribly nosey do you think?’

‘You? Queenie, *you* are a complete horror.’ He paused and smiled softly at her as if he had just expressed a sentiment of love. She did not hear him, she was already distracted and laughing with Dolly. ‘What I really admire about Tom,’ Rollo continued, ‘is his commitment to charity. He is a good friend of Ed Taylor actually. Did a fundraiser last year at the bank. You know, for Lakeview. He’s hosted a few before for different causes, but this one was fantastic. Great fun. Do you know Ed? Runs Lakeview?’ I nodded uncommittedly, but he was satisfied enough with this to continue. In Vita and Rollo’s world, I had already learned, people were all expected to know each other. Their whole social circle was connected; they went to school or university together, they holidayed, partied and hunted in the same fashionable places, and always, always, there were distant family members keen to introduce them to someone useful. I had not considered before meeting Vita that acquaintances could be more beneficial than injurious. I had not understood, then, that people could be played like instruments to produce whatever sound you demanded of them. ‘Ed is marvellous, isn’t he? He takes in all the kids the other places don’t want; he runs Lakeview more conservatively than the new Children’s

Homes. It's all therapy and first names in residential care now, according to Ed. He's more conservative of course. And he and his wife are very, very good to those children.'

My sole experience of Edward Taylor was attending a talk he had given at the town hall the previous December, 'Lakeview: A History.' Leading up to the event, there had been local rumours that he would be announcing his early retirement that night due to a minor administrative misdemeanour. Whatever the truth of these whispers, the suggestion cleverly aligned that evening's attendees with him as we felt ourselves protectively taking the side of a hardworking man against an ungrateful council. He was charming with the formal bearing and authoritative voice of an aristocrat. Tall and dressed in a well-fitting dark suit, it was easy to imagine Rollo and Mr Taylor as brothers, never mind peers or acquaintances. The hall was full on the night he addressed our town. Lakeview housed an unknown and private community, who were schooled on site and rarely seen outside the grounds. Rumours about the residents were persistent and often creative, so locals were naturally curious about the children. The Council Officer in Charge of the Home, a small, sweating man in a pale-yellow shirt, also sat on the stage, along with a young and gentle looking woman who was briefly introduced as the children's Home Economics and Physical Education teacher. They both watched Mr Taylor's back gravely as he strode around the stage. 'Freemasons!' whispered a man seated next to me as if I had asked him a question pertaining to the subject. His wife pressed his elbow and shook her head disparagingly at him. I smiled politely and stared ahead, but he continued to mouth the word at me, raising his eyebrows at me and nodding theatrically towards the stage, as if encouraging me to intervene with this new information.

Mr Taylor had spoken about Lakeview and the importance of charity in a Christian community. He did not speak about the teenage girl who drowned in the lake six months before and had subsequently been named in the local paper as a resident of the Home. He told us that

the resident children were educated on site purely because the local schools were reluctant to take them. As he said this, he spread his arms out in an encompassing gesture and we all shrank back from such an association. Many of the audience were parents whose children attended those unwelcoming schools; they began to fidget at this point; the fathers adjusting their ties and the mothers pursing their mouths and tapping their shiny earrings. Their movements gave them an impression of restlessness and Mr Taylor responded with tragic stories about those that he called 'our children.' *Our* children, as if the town was an unwieldy and careless couple who had accidentally left dozens of their offspring behind like forgotten parcels with Mr Taylor, his Officer in Charge and the sweet-faced teacher. Mr Taylor told a lot of terrible stories about the lives that the children at the home had suffered before they had come to him. A few were orphaned, some were neglected or abused and some, he said, looking gravely at his audience, were Very Bad, but they were all, each and every one of them, Very Sad Children. And they all needed our help and our support, he told us, his face brightening handsomely with an expression of encouragement.

Mr Taylor had large, clear features which lent themselves to the stage and he emoted effortlessly as though it were his true profession. His expressive face was like a loyal choir that repeated and reinforced all that he told us. The Officer and the teacher, too, frowned knowingly along with the tragedies of which Mr Taylor spoke, and nodded to the happier tales, as though they, too, knew all these stories first-hand. The commitment and oneness between the three figures gave their performance the gravity of a sermon.

Afterwards, the sweet-faced teacher served tea and coffee in little green cups and encouraged us to look at the photographs that were displayed on two large boards behind a tray of thickly cut biscuits. Barbara and Phyllis were there, looking at the photographs and Vic, too was studying the pictures, no doubt with a more professional, and less sentimental eye. These biscuits, announced the young woman, had been made *especially* for us by the Lakeview

children that afternoon. She told us this in the manner of someone bestowing a valuable gift; however, after she spoke, some people discreetly put their biscuits back down on the serving plate, untouched. I was pleased to see that Barbara and Phyllis remained unwaveringly committed to their own free tea and biscuits. The teacher had the gentle and resigned expression of a model in an advertisement for home appliances, and she featured on one of the larger photographs, drowsy-eyed and bare-legged in a mini skirt and a ruffled shirt, along with a brief personal history that stated she had once been a child resident of the Home herself. At thirty years old, she now had a bedroom of her own at Lakeview and had never lived anywhere else. The images traced the history of the Children's Home in black and white, and these were accompanied by brief lines of explanatory and misspelled text. There were also photos of some of the children, these presumably selected due to their appeal, for they were beautiful faces, despite their wary and sometimes resentful stares.

We learned from the display that the Home was first built for a group of doctors and optimistically called, 'The Lakeview Clinic,' although it was too far away to provide any views of the water. The evergreen trees across the front of the property that now entirely screened the Home were evidenced in photographs as the neat and boxy plantings they had once been. Lakeview is several streets away from my home, at the end of a long row of terraced houses that back onto the railway line. It is an enormous, red-bricked building, a pillared rectangle in the centre symmetrically flanked by two smaller and still sizeable wings. There was an austerity to the building, with no relief provided by the decorative elements that Victorian builders seemed to favour in the rest of our town. I imagined the man who built my home would have looked unfavourably on the simple and unfettered lines of Lakeview, whose grandeur was of proportion rather than architectural flourish. When the huge city hospital was built in the early part of the century, the council bought the local clinic and opened it as a Children's Home. The clinic sign was repainted to include the Home's Latin motto. This transformation was shown

in a photograph taken at the opening ceremony of the Home, which also displayed what was then the still glossy wrought iron fencing and gates expected by those wealthy patients. *In pulvere vinces*, the repainted sign read, and this was translated below: *In dust we win*. The same elaborate black script announced that it was *Lakeview Community Home with Education* and a line of smaller writing alluded to the names of the Director and the Officer in Charge.

At the end of the evening, people left the large meeting room to be confronted with a wooden donation box on a table in the narrow hallway. Everyone put money into it as they passed through to the exit. Some of the women tapped their husband's arms through the thick sleeves of winter coats, encouraging them to donate more money and then discreetly put more in from their own purses when they passed the box themselves. We were all thinking of those Very Sad Children, with their tragic stories and hoping our modest donations might have improved their Christmas that year.

I did not tell Rollo about the town hall speech; I felt small and intrusive talking about the Home and the people inside it as if I knew them when I really did not. All I knew about them was the stories told by Mr Taylor that night alongside the collection of photographs. It was an evening of sadness made tolerable by beauty, of lives carefully curated to incite sympathy and, most of all, donations.

I listened as Rollo talked about his admiration for both Tom and Ed, and in that moment the three of them somehow became one impressive man, a force of strength, kindness, and charitable compassion. And Vita and Dolly studied him so carefully when he spoke that I watched their admiring faces instead of his, and I deliberately thought what I imagined they were thinking: *here is a good man*.

The main course was hare, which Rollo had brought up from London, where it had apparently been marinating in wine for a whole week. It was extremely dark and rich, with a gravy that was almost black. I wondered what Dolly would think of this food, but she smiled politely when Vita placed it on the table and looked entirely unmoved as the hare was spooned generously onto her plate. I was unsure, myself, about this dark and strong-tasting meat, but I tasted small bites of it and drank after each one. The accompanying greens were buttery, salty and served in individual tiny copper pans. This was the opposite of the pale, bland food I favour when anxious or out of routine.

‘Do you like hare?’ asked Vita. ‘We love it, don’t we Rols? It’s our absolute favourite. That’s why we made it for you.’ She smiled brightly at her husband, who seemed to blush under her gaze as much as Dolly and I did. ‘Why *Rols* made it for you.’

‘Well, I’ve never eaten game before. I don’t...’ I began uncertainly, but Dolly spoke firmly over me.

‘It’s really very good,’ Dolly said, addressing both of them, as I should have done. ‘You must give my mum the recipe, Rols. Were you at work today?’

‘Yes, I’ve been in town all week.’ Vita and her husband both referred to London as ‘town,’ as if it were not a city, but in fact was the sole town in the country. As if our homes were not also in a town made up of streets of houses, and roads, and shops, pavements and street lighting, but were in fact nestled alone together in a quaint hamlet. When they went back to the city, they told me they were going, ‘into town.’ If they went out here, they named the place they were going to instead; ‘I’m going to the dentist,’ or, ‘We are off to the grocers.’ They saw our own town as a poor impression of their beloved city. ‘We are at the end of a project and I’m just popping in and out when they need me,’ he continued. ‘It is rather an exciting one. Beautiful proportions.’ He leaned back and eyed Dolly carefully as if considering whether to tell her more and then evidently decided he would. ‘It was a factory building with warehouse

space upstairs and it is turning into some rather fantastic apartments. I would happily live in one myself if they weren't all reserved. I mean, if they were ready now, we might have moved into one instead of coming to Toms. We actually would have Vee, wouldn't we?' He said this as though their acquiescence to live in a place was the ultimate evidence of quality.

'Mmmm.... possibly we would. Or perhaps living up here will turn me into a country wife!' We all laughed agreeably at the ridiculousness of Vita conforming to either part of this title and she looked pleased.

'So, are you a builder?' Dolly asked Rollo.

'Not exactly a builder. We renovate, mostly we turn commercial buildings into residential. There is a lot of scope for that in town and Vee has a great eye. Sometimes we make apartments, sometimes houses.' He pronounced 'houses' with a peculiar vowel emphasis; he actually said 'haices' so it would rhyme with 'faces.' I repeated this silently to myself several times, *haices, haices, haices*, then looked at Dolly and Vita who had both been listening to Rollo with entirely serious faces as though he were announcing a political development on the evening news. 'In fact, an opportunity has come up here. Lakeview? I didn't say earlier did I, but it's coming onto the market. The children all have new places to go to, so I could be in very soon. I'm hoping to buy it directly from the council, before it goes to auction. It would be a good project to keep me busy for the summer here.' He looked at Vita, 'To keep us busy here.'

'He is being modest.' Vita told us. 'Rols is *famous* for his houses.' *Rahls is fay-mousse for his haices*, I repeated back to myself in silence. 'At first, I used to help out, but now it's really his thing. I just choose the wallpaper.' She frowned, 'But, Rols, I thought you had already bought the place?'

Rollo touched the side of his nose and gave his wife a meaningful look.

'Steady on Vee! I'll talk all about it when it's signed off. With all of you. In the meantime, we are enjoying our little holiday up here. Of course, we have known Tom forever. He's

enormous fun,' said Rollo. Vita smiled warmly in agreement at the mention of this name, like a child hearing a mention of Christmas and her husband looked softly back at her. They were alone together for a brief moment, remembering whoever they were when Dolly and I were not there. What was it to be part of such a casual and intimate exchange? 'We could even buy a place up here, couldn't we darling?'

I nodded and replied firmly, 'Yes.' As if the three of them were just waiting for me to confirm their future housing plans. And, after a moment of silence, they all laughed, and I joined in. Vita put her hand possessively over mine again and it seemed that the four of us had been together for years.

While Dolly and Vita discussed the quality of the only local clothes shop, Rollo asked me about the large house at the top corner of our street. A striking mid-century building with an impressive protruding wraparound window whose sweeping views must incorporate both directions of the road, it is as revealing as it must be panoramic. I told him how a quiet couple once lived there for several years with their teenage son. He was a tall, thin boy with a friendly smile and attended a local private school, whose morning bus left later than ours, leaving him time to stand in his window and watch us as we passed his house on the way to the bus stop. He liked to stand at his bedroom window naked and watch people's faces as they saw him, his smile fixed and serene. At night, he would stand in darkness until passers-by drew parallel with his window. Then he lit a lamp to reveal himself, his bony ribs and chest darkly shadowed, while the area below his waist was efficiently highlighted as in an operating theatre.

At this point, Vita left the table to go to the kitchen and Dolly moved to help her. Rollo stood up but remained at the table. This was something he did whenever any of us left or entered a room. Every time he moved, a light waft of his soapy smell resettled around us, and I found myself pausing to appreciate the unchanging quality of the fragrance, as I do in the greenhouse

when working on a good plant. The smell of a person usually changes over the course of a few hours. Dolly, for example had come in from our garden earlier and she was warm, and her skin and perfume together had a discernible sharpness. But then, as she sat still and chatted to me, the edge of the heat on her softened and the smell of her shifted too, becoming cool and sweet. When Vita greeted me this evening with a close embrace, she covered me in a musky amber based perfume and I knew that when I kissed her goodbye later, the warmth of the house, the candles, the alcohol and the coffee will all have combined and become a new fragrance on her skin. The unchanging quality of Rollo's smell was appealing; it gave him a fixedness that I admired. The permanence of people in any sense is a pleasing and rare thing. The more symmetrical a person's face is, the less likely they are to smell unpleasant to those of the opposite sex. This gift to the owner of a symmetrical face is apparent superiority in sperm count or egg production. The King, of course, smelt of nothing; after a summer day working on the farm, his sweat was as odourless as fresh water. I imagined he and his new wife, with her heart shaped face and childishly dimpled cheeks, would prove as fertile as their herds of reproducing cattle.

When Rollo was seated again, I stood up and watched in fascination as he immediately copied me. But then, rather than following the others into the kitchen, I sat back down. Rollo, too, sat down, without querying my move and placed both elbows on the table. His action informed the now familiar soapiness of him; it resettled comfortingly around us both like scented dust motes. He laced his fingers together and placed them thoughtfully under his chin, his fingertips just grazing his jawline.

‘And the naked boy?’ he said, pointing with one finger at me.

‘For three years, my sister and I passed him daily on our school journey,’ I told Rollo, ‘and we always wondered, what had come to him first; the exposing window or the compulsion? Perhaps he moved there as a typically private teenager and found the huge window called him

to pose. Or had his parents deliberately chosen that house as a gift for their exhibitionist child?’ I explained how I was unnerved by his exposure, but Dolores found his nakedness an amusing diversion, an alternative and unthreatening view on our school journey.

But I did not tell Rollo how once, on a hot summer day, my sister stopped in front of the boy’s window to unbutton her school shirt. At thirteen, her chest was still undeveloped, and she did not wear the small white bra that Mer had bought her. When our mother told her to wear it under her school shirt, my sister would do so without comment and then she would casually remove the bra while we sat at the bus stop, without pausing in conversation or attempting to conceal what she was doing. Once news of this reached our mother, she no longer insisted on the bra being worn. Dolores found bodies only amusing or functional; she was entirely unselfconscious about her own and openly ridiculed those of our peers who, like me, she regarded as physically inhibited. So, she stood braless and bare chested on our street, squinting up at the boy against the sunshine while he looked frankly back at her as if the two of them were in conversation.

Neither did I tell Rollo what she said to me afterwards, what she often said to me: *We are all just bodies, Sunday*, she would say, laughing. *All except you, and I’m not sure what you are.* And it was true that Dolores was very much her body. Sugar and boys, both in various and sometimes seemingly unappealing forms, brought a depth of pleasure into her brief life that that some people do not know in a whole lifetime.

‘After the family moved away, a middle-aged married couple moved in, and they have been there ever since. Both solicitors with their own practice. They positioned twin desks along each side of that window when they moved in. They’re retired now but you will still see them sitting at their desks a lot.’

This was what I told Rollo at the dining table while he listened and nodded politely. But I did not say what I really believe; that all of us who have been here long enough to remember the naked boy still see him standing at the window. That we watch as he flicks his light repeatedly on and off, his pale lower body appearing and disappearing again into darkness. That his nakedness was a distress signal that we could not read then and still cannot.

The others were now back at the table, Dolly with a jug of cream and Vita with a large gilt-edged bowl containing pink-stained poached pears. She served the fruit and raised her eyebrows at each of us in turn for confirmation that we would like cream poured over our pudding. She looked to Rollo first and, laughing, he spread both hands out to indicate that she should not hold back on his portion. Both Vita and my daughter had begun the evening in more casual outfits than mine, yet while the earlier starched formality of my shirt and skirt had collapsed, their appearance had only become more attractively dishevelled. My outfit, though, had become somehow dowdier over the course of the evening and I felt that apologising for this would slow my aesthetic decline.

When it was my turn for Vita to brandish the jug at me in query, I shook my head, *no*, and said, ‘I didn’t realise you would be dressing up tonight, sorry.’

‘You mean Rols, not me, don’t you? Don’t worry, he can’t help himself. He only ever wears suits. Thinks he’s James Bond.’ She told us a story about her husband visiting her in hospital years before as she recovered from an appendectomy. She pulled a face when she mentioned this medical term and moved on quickly, so we didn’t have time to ask questions, although I had several. Rollo was apparently wandering the hospital one Sunday, looking for his wife’s room, when the husband of another patient, saw this immaculately dressed man striding the corridors, and had taken him for a visiting consultant. After resolving the man’s concerns about his wife, Rollo had cheerfully answered questions and offered reassurance to neighbouring patients, as well. He even apparently procured a stethoscope along the way, which he draped

easily around his neck and tapped absent-mindedly while he read the fever charts. After the spontaneous tour and the removal of the stethoscope, he found himself at his own wife's room well after visiting hours; getting past the ward nurse had required a lot of complimentary conversation about the cleanliness of her ward and the attractive fit of her uniform. 'And she still sends us Christmas cards!' Vita finished triumphantly, as if this were an aim of all the patients which she and Rollo had successfully managed.

My in-laws, too, have stories that they tell about each other and these typically augment the family brand, the abilities and characteristics unique to Forresters. Neither Bunny nor Richard, though, manage to look like Rollo, who focussed on his wife when she spoke as though he had never heard the account about himself told before. It was easy to imagine this man performing on a doctor's round, sauntering authoritatively around a hospital and inspiring the confidence of complete strangers. He was charming enough to alter himself with ease.

After her story, Vita raised her champagne glass and announced in a queenly fashion, as though establishing a new rule, *Fridays are Sunday's days!* And Dolly and Rollo loudly joined in, laughing and waiting for me to raise my glass, too, so we could all clink our glasses together.

Rollo talked while we ate his smooth pears, which were so sweet and marshmallow soft that they no longer tasted like fruit, but an artificial confection that might be found in the jar of an excellent sweet shop. He told us about a dance held at his boarding school, speaking with apparent reluctance. The event was attended by pupils from a local girls' day school and he entertainingly positioned himself as an awkward and socially inept teenager amongst a crowd of sophisticated peers. He had apparently missed several romantic opportunities with various girls that night and his friends delightedly pointed this out to him only once they had themselves benefited from the newly lowered standards of his disappointed admirers. Rollo was good at storytelling; his handsome face and obvious confidence raised the comedic value of his former ineptitude with the opposite sex. His easy self-deprecation was unexpected and attractive in a

man who was otherwise so formal and composed. When he talked to one of us individually, he reduced his presence to something less, deliberately creating a space into which the other person could expand. But when he was entertaining us all, he spread out into something immense and commanding.

Vita and Dolly watched him over their puddings, their spoons paused in concentration. They smiled in unison and laughed at him together like old friends, easily and without self-consciousness. A breaking of something hovered between them, always threatening to announce itself and unexpectedly settling or retreating; everything that was amusing further heightened by the fact that they were together. I recognised this as something of what Dolly and I shared when she put her legs across my lap and we laughed at the girl who shook her head and said sadly that *papa would not allow that in his house*. But, perhaps due to the recentness of their acquaintance and the addition of champagne, Vita and my daughter were almost delirious; when they laughed at Rollo's admissions, they clapped their hands and tears ran down their faces. It was unsurprising that Vita embraced excitement with such ease, but I had never known Dolly in this state of near hysteria, even when she was a child. Dolly had been born remote and reserved, I believed. Yet that night, I was already seeing a different version of my daughter. The effect Vita had on me was not this exterior and obvious change, but something more private. Dolly's uncharacteristic exhilaration, though, simply provided more evidence of Vita's charm. *This is my child, and this is my friend*, I thought possessively, as if in silent introduction.

Rollo's smile was as easy and engulfing as the Kings; it was their product, and one which they would never run out of. Rollo could have been the result of a composite sketch which accurately depicted a privileged man in his late thirties. He had fine-boned features, smooth skin and a thin, well-kept moustache. His face was symmetrically pleasing but bereft of individuality or character. This was not the case with Vita, whose direct stare only confirmed

her loveliness, whose tiny defects, such as the delicate overbite and heavy, straight eyebrows, served to promote her features beyond obvious prettiness and into beauty. There is a Sicilian proverb that claims a girl cannot be termed beautiful until she has had smallpox. That is, the smallpox was once considered inescapable and so a girl's appearance could not be properly judged until she had survived the illness. Only after suffering the disease could her remaining looks be qualified. Vita, though, would be no less remarkable after suffering this illness or, indeed, any another. Her face was knowing and did not rely on youth, on innocence or on the smoothness of her skin, as Dolly's does. There was something less quantifiable about Vita and in person, as in photographs, her image was stately and direct. She expected to be admired and did not, therefore, seek it. There was none of the wanting about her that mildly attractive people have, none of the waiting for approval that weighs heavily between you until it is addressed and agreed. Often, even the parents of lovely children, too, wait for an admiring comment and if it does not come, they will raise it as a subject themselves. It is like a tic, this incongruous referencing of the height, symmetry and loveliness of oneself or one's child. Because I have involuntary habits myself, I shrink from those I see performed, unlike Vita, who has never possessed or practiced such tics.

The pair of them were seemingly onto the disparity between their looks, because in all the silver framed photographs of them around their dining room, Rollo looked away from the photographer, typically towards Vita when she was featured alongside him, or, when alone, simply out into the distance. Even Rollo's earliest photo caught him in this pose, a chubby little boy of two or three years old, looking uncertainly out to the side of the frame. Vita, meanwhile, looked intensely into the camera, over and over again, with various hairstyles and dresses, but her gaze remained direct. Sometimes her stare looked like a challenge and in other photos, it was as if she was searching for something she could not find.

Rollo passed a decanter towards me.

‘Port,’ he said. ‘You’ll break your fizzy rule for this one.’

‘No,’ I said, looking at the glass, stained an uneven pink by the thick liquid and sporting black-red marks in places like tiny blood clots. ‘I definitely won’t.’

Rollo shrugged minutely and passed it to Dolly on his left. She was speaking to Vita and did not pause in conversation but poured some port into the smallest glass of her collection. Then she passed the decanter to Vita, who was listening intently. Vita tapped my shoulder and, while still focussed on Dolly, she indicated that I should pass the port to Rollo. He poured his drink with some satisfaction. The liquid looked old and unhappy at being disturbed; it has a quality of graininess, like water brought up from the bottom of the sea. The peculiar passing of the port was like a dance I had not rehearsed. Later at home, I looked it up in my etiquette handbook, a much consulted and thickly paged book from my teenage years. Apparently, the port must be first offered to the lady on the host’s right before being passed back to him, then it is passed to the guest on his left but, the author warned sternly, the port must never reverse.

The others continued to pass the decanter and refill their glasses.

‘Would anyone object to my smoking?’ asked Rollo.

We all agreed we did not, and he immediately offered a cigarette to each of us. I saw Dolly hesitate but eventually she shook her head, no. After Vita took one for herself, he tapped a new one to the front of the box in an easy move. He waited while she took it into her mouth and then he concentrated on lighting the cigarette for her. She stared remotely past him into the kitchen, unmoved as a queen, but I was fascinated by his deference. The lighter went out twice and he persisted, shaking it expertly in one hand. When he finally succeeded and moved back into his seat, she looked directly at me and winked, as if she knew I had been watching them. In her look, what had been between them seemed transferred somehow, into to a secret between us.

Once he had lit his own cigarette, Rollo poured more port into his glass and said to me, ‘I hear you and my wife are having sleepovers already?’

‘No, we aren’t,’ I said, factually. ‘Vita left before the morning, so it wasn’t a sleepover.’ Rollo remained silent, and his face had the blankness peculiar to polite expectation. His was a deliberate pause, as though I had just begun to tell a story and so I did.

I told him the folklore that I had remembered when I woke that morning on my sofa to find Vita gone; ‘In historic Sicily, when a husband awoke to find his wife gone, he knew she was a witch to be dealt with. So, he would go to the *maga* and ask for a way to fix his wife, even if it meant killing her. One man was told to remove the magic salve that his wife kept under the bed and to replace it with a plain ointment. That night, when his wife jumped from the window, covered in the salve and ready to fly, she fell instead heavily down to the ground. Her husband found her lying in the street below with broken bones and she never flew again.’

Rollo said nothing, but Vita, who I did not realise had been listening, cut in smoothly. ‘Goodness, Wife,’ she said. ‘What *are* you talking about? I hope you aren’t giving Rols ideas about getting rid of me!’

As she stopped talking, her little dog walked in. He was looking toward the French doors into the garden and was somehow deliberately casual, like a teenager timing his late appearance in the hope of being offered a drink by parents who had become relaxed after an evening of wine. He went straight to Dolly’s side and sat at her feet, looking up at her expectantly. But she was in conversation with Rollo and did not look down at the little dog. Each time she gestured or moved in her chair, Beast shifted hopefully from one front paw to another and then tensed his little body, rounding his back in expectation of being picked up. At these moments of stillness, he was even more toy-like. I could not wait any longer for Dolly to notice him.

‘Dolly, look!’ I said, interrupting her mid-sentence. ‘Isn’t he funny?’ My daughter and Rollo both turned, but it was me they looked at and not the little dog. I pointed at him encouragingly

and said, 'He is so tiny!' The sudden silence held my observation in the air, and it echoed, so obviously true that it was meaningless. The intensity of this collective attention was too much for the dog, who began turning repeatedly around on the spot as though this was one of his manufactured functions.

'Ahh, sweet,' said Dolly to me in a soft voice. She and Rollo both smiled at me identically and then she turned back to him again. 'And what did the exam panel do about it?' she asked him.

'Well, we had written just enough to pass, so we got our degrees anyway. And more importantly, we won a lot at the races. When we wrote home, we had to bump up our degrees a bit, obviously. As a boarder, you grow up away from your family; it's best to let them invent you in your absence.'

Vita leaned forward and banged the table. 'Rols! I'm too drunk to make good coffee.' She stood up and he, too, was immediately on his feet. Smiling, she said, 'Will you bring some in for us please? Yours is much better than mine.'

Dolly also stood up and we followed Vita down the hallway. Our house is arranged differently at the back from Tom's and we had our meals in the kitchen, rather than having a separate dining room. While we ate dinner, this house had been an entirely new one and not a version of our own. However, the front room is both ours and not ours. Tom's furniture was arranged formally, and the many pieces were obviously antique while our room is furnished for comfort with two soft sofas covered in cushions and blankets. This room didn't have a television but did have a record player and the neatly arranged bookshelves held dozens of records along the lower shelves. Vita flicked through them impatiently and then selected one. She smiled confidently at Dolly and I, who sat next to one another on straight backed armchairs.

'I'll put one of Rollo's on to keep him in a good mood.'

The record featured an orchestra playing a classical and familiar piece; a beautiful sound that made my skin shiver in response. Perhaps, I thought, I could have been such a wife as this, could have played the King his favourite music, could have made him into someone who wanted to bring me coffee. I had never thought of my husband in such terms, as a malleable person whose temperament or emotions I could affect. Rollo appeared in the doorway with a tray and he paused briefly to acknowledge the music, closing his eyes momentarily with pleasure. Vita had already cleared a space on the coffee table for his carefully arranged tray, moving the piled magazines and books aside. The bond between them was sweetly visible and as he put the tray down, she leaned forward to kiss him briefly on the cheek. I did not expect him to acknowledge this gesture, but his features softened at her touch. In my home, I did this dance alone, every move tailored towards Dolly but received at best with cool politeness.

Beast had somehow made his way up onto Dolly's lap and he was curled up on her, as frail as a kitten. His black eyes flickered momentarily as though his batteries were low, then he was gently snoring. Dolly balanced her coffee cup saucer on the sharp spine of his little back, but otherwise she seemed unaware of his presence. I resolved not to mention him or his appeal again. I refused a coffee and Rollo asked me what I would like to drink. Vita stood up and he moved to follow, but she patted him back down with an easy gesture.

'Come on, Wife!' said Vita to me. 'Let's go and see what we can find.'

In the kitchen, she took another bottle of champagne from the fridge.

'No,' I said, 'please don't open that for me. Do you have lemonade?'

'Lemonade; bleugh! Don't worry,' she smiled. 'I'll happily drink coffee with one of these on the side and so will Rols.' She put the champagne on the counter heavily and I began to believe that perhaps she was drunk, as I had not when she announced it herself. Turning her back to me, she put some of the pans into the sink, filling them with soapy water. 'He's lovely, isn't he, Rols? I can tell you are going to be great friends. He doesn't take to everyone, but he

understands already how I feel about you. And Dolly is *sweet*.' She turned off the tap and looked at me closely, as I did with my daughter when she was being obtuse. I never knew what it was that I was looking for and I assumed that Vita, too, was watching me blindly. Perhaps due to the champagne, I had a brief image of her eyes, enlarged, detached and fixed entirely on me. She was still watching me as she said, 'Isn't she? Very sweet.'

We went back into the front room, with our bottle and more glasses. Dolly stood at the elaborate marble fireplace with the little dog at her feet. Rollo was seated in one of the upright chairs opposite her. She had left her coffee cup on the table and was gesticulating with both hands in explanation while he listened to her as earnestly as a student. When he saw us, he immediately stood and Dolly dropped into her chair with a swift and invisible movement, as though in collapse.

'More champagne, Queenie?' He asked Vita. 'I thought you said you were already drunk.' But he ran an index finger over her hand when he took the bottle from her and, as he poured a glass for each of us, he was laughing. It was 10 pm, I noticed on the mantelpiece clock and I allowed for 25 minutes to finish my drink before announcing our departure.

We were invited for the second Friday supper before the first one even finished, and I appreciated the lack of wanting this left.

As we were leaving, Rollo kissed us both goodbye in Vita's hall and said, 'See you next Friday!' as if it were a longstanding arrangement. As if we were a close family who reserved this night each week solely for one another.

I imagined myself frowning earnestly when the King's parents insisted on Dolly spending another weekend at the farm with them. When I refused this future invitation, I would arrange my eyebrows into the straight and sorrowful expression that Vita's naturally took, would adopt that downturned and triangular pout of her short little mouth. *I'm afraid Dolly must be home on Friday night. We always spend Fridays with Vita and Rollo.*

When we turned to wave from the top of the path, Vita was smiling, leaning sweetly on Rollo. She was holding one of his hands with both of hers, so she did not wave back, although he did. His wave was finite and precise; the gesture added to the almost military impression he gave, with his straight-backed posture and formal suit. Beast stared out silently from behind them, a tiny parent indulgently overseeing the extended, post-party goodbyes of enormous children.

Vita smiled up at us from her husband's shoulder and said, 'Yes. Do. Come early. Come at 6 next time and we can have girls' drinks until Rols gets back.'

the shiny scar

The following Friday supper was the blueprint for our evenings next door, for a short summer of dinners that were a charming combination of predictability and drama. The former was supplied through our hosts' observance of form and the latter by their performative natures. Vita, Dolly and I lay on our fronts across velvet lined blankets in the back garden awaiting Rollo's arrival. Beast curled up and slept alternately on the curved incline of Vita or Dolly's lower back in the sunshine. Each time they disturbed him with their gesturing, their storytelling and laughter, the little dog sighed resentfully. Dolly talked on about people and personal events, most of which I had not previously heard, and I listened as silently as a junior secretary taking dictation. Vita's accounts were glamorous and decadent, sometimes shocking. I do not tell personal stories in conversation, cannot rework them into something amusing that begins with self-deprecation, but which ultimately recommends me. Their recounted tales, though, reminded me of many Italian sayings and sometimes I told them a translated version of these. After all, they were using their stories as folk tales themselves, selecting one narrative to show us about something else. Mostly, I listened and did not add a postscript to the things they said. Dolly and Vita simply wanted to show themselves to one another through their own stories. I was an onlooker.

That evening, as we lay in the sun, we heard from Vita about a friend who had recently disappointed her. The woman had shared a great confidence that was intended to stay between them. She was not telling us of her friend's indiscretion for entertainment; she was warning us that she did not accept friends who behave that way. The misdemeanour had occurred at a dinner party with many guests and Vita, seated in the middle of a long refectory table, had overheard the secret repeated as evidence of her own wildness, and found she had no option other than to laugh lightly along with the other guests. She had learned, though, not to trust the

friend, and would never again tell her even minor facts about herself. *A dog scorched by hot water becomes afraid of cold water, too*, I agreed gravely.

Dolly nodded, not at me, but exclusively at Vita; she had found this disloyalty to be common among some of her own friends, she assured our host. My daughter talked about the recent break-up of her friend Lucy's parents. Lucy is a small, clever girl who had been close to Dolly since primary school and apparently the divorce had led to a welcome increase of holidays and presents. *If two fight, the third one wins*, I said. I liked Lucy very much and hoped that Dolly was right, and she was not suffering from the change, but was instead coasting through it on a wave of extra parties and treats. Dolly had not seemed to miss the King, ever, and perhaps she assumed, therefore, that Lucy did not care for her father either, that she too did not feel the daily loss.

Dolly smiled at Vita and nodded her head towards me; 'She can do this all night you know. And never repeat the same saying.'

Vita reached across the blanket and tapped my arm lightly, which felt like a gesture of acceptance, or perhaps that was what I wanted it to be. It was precisely the type of spontaneous and pleasing touch that I was unable to make. I briefly considered saving up this gesture to copy and perform on someone else. But I knew, really, that such copied behaviours do not translate well; their success relies on instinct, which I do not have. I will hesitate and overthink the touch, which will make it uncertain like a question, and by that point the tap will have lost all social context. The recipient of my arm tapping will blink and look at me expectantly, as if I have started a query that I did not finish. *Yes?* they will ask me as I retreat in silence with reddened cheeks and my hand still stiffly raised from reaching out.

Eventually, out in the garden, Dolly gesticulated too much, laughed too loudly and finally disturbed the little dog from his attempts at sleep. Vita laughed at his grumpiness and called him Grandpa. *Sorry Grandpa*, she would say as he lost patience and stalked away on his little

feet, his too-long nails tapping on the path, *are we having too much fun for you?* Beast would go through the French doors and collapse instantly onto the parquet floor, which was still lit and warm from the daytime sun. The three of us drank champagne and ate crisps and peanuts out of a blue floral soup tureen, licking the salt off our fingers. Vita told us that the enormous tureen was a family heirloom and part of a beloved 18-place dinner set that was left to them by Rollo's grandparents. The rest of the set was boxed up with many other possessions, in storage, she said, as the china set alone would have filled what she termed his 'modestly-sized' kitchen.

They would not be able to retrieve all their beautiful things from storage until they left what they called 'the little house.' Although, with the addition of Arthur's extension, Tom's house was larger than my own home, which has never seemed small to me, even when we were a family of four. My mother would have loved to own a piece like the tureen; the sheer size and ornateness of it spoke of enormous dining rooms peopled by unmoved guests so used to beauty they would not even notice the tureen amongst the tableware. The fact that I saw and coveted the piece, just as my mother would have, gave us away. Mer would have placed such an item inside her locked glass cabinet and warned Dolores and, particularly, me, never to touch it. If the tureen had been ours, it would have been the most beautiful object in our house; would have stared disdainfully out at us through the glass as we worshipped it, a little deity in our midst. My sister held onto things too loosely while I hold on too tight, but despite this, the breakages in our home were more often mine than hers. Mer's mistrust of my handling beautiful objects brought a transgressive element to the casual adoption of Vita's antique bowl as a vessel for outdoor snacks.

It was almost 7 pm when Rollo finally appeared in the French doors of the dining room. He did not look like a man who had just driven many hours to get home to us but was instead buoyant and immaculate in a well-fitting dark suit. He looked demonstrably pleased to see us sitting in his garden and waiting for him to bring us dinner, as if we were his beloved and

expectant children, rather than his wife and new neighbours. Vita had told us that he was going to Harrod's food counter before he left town, on a special visit for our dinner. We knew, therefore, that he would have brought with him boxes filled with luxuries that evidenced his care for us.

When Vita saw him, she stretched out happily on the blanket and shouted; 'Daddy! What have you got for my dinner?'

I could not play along, for this paternal address was too close to truth. Dolly and I were more childlike there, lying on our tummies, giggling, eating crisps and eagerly awaiting a paternal arrival, than either of us ever managed in our own infancy. So, I blushed instead, but I quietly enjoyed the routine, the care and the inclusion provided by this kind man. And even Dolly, with her careful and measured expressions, was visibly pleased when he arrived, with his smiles and warm greetings and promises of the special dinner he has bought home for us. My mother would have respectfully termed the style of Vita and Rollo's hosting as Gracious Living; being their guest is a step by step demonstration of prescribed etiquette.

'Wait until you see what I've brought with me,' Rollo announced cheerfully.

Then, smiling, he pushed his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose with an index finger, his eyes bright. And for a moment, he was not a man slick with manners, but simply a boy excited to show us something he cared about. He drained his glass and went back into the kitchen to variously warm food in the oven or arrange chilled slices on oversized white plates edged thinly in silver. We knew that, just like the previous week, he would make little towers of the food and circle it with swirls of cheerfully coloured sauce that looked more like cosmetics than something edible. We would compliment him on his cordon bleu presentation and discreetly give each other knowing looks as parents do, silently congratulating ourselves on his pleased smile.

When Rollo finally called us inside to eat, he was keen to list the courses he was serving, and we listened attentively as he talked about each dish. He held the back of our chairs while he seated each of us and he remained standing excitedly while we assembled our dinner choices. There was paper-thin smoked salmon on warmed blinis and cold roast beef with various side salads, all bought at Harrods delicatessen and arranged beautifully by Rollo. Vita fidgeted as he talked us through what he had brought home; she was obviously distracted.

As soon as he paused, she spoke. Her voice was wan and intimated that she was drawing on the final reserves of her patience; ‘Did you bring pudding Rols? I was hoping there would be strawberries.’

‘Yes, Vee,’ he laughed. ‘Lots of them, more than even you could eat. The huge ones. And profiteroles too.’ She smiled widely at him in return and drained her glass, which he refilled in one practised move. He looked at Dolly and me, ‘Vee only cares about pudding. She doesn’t even like restaurants.’

‘I *do* like eating out, Rols. I just don’t need to try every single new restaurant in town on the day it opens. They’re all the same in the end. Same food, same faces, blah, blah, blah.’ She tilted her head from side to side with each word of her final sentence. ‘You fall for it and I don’t. And I don’t always want to eat *haute cuisine*.’ She extended the final word, *cuisiiiiine* and rolled her eyes when she said it. It was the expression I remembered Dolly wearing when she discussed her seventh birthday present. *But, Grandfather, I like black ponies. I don’t want a white one.*

‘I know, Queenie, and I prefer plain suppers too, when it is just the two of us.’ He looked down to put some mustard onto his plate with a tiny silver spoon; when he spoke again, his gaze flickered back to us, but his head remained bowed, momentarily giving the appearance of shyness or modesty. ‘My wife says I have a taste for nursery food. If she cooked at all, I would

be very happy with homely dinners.’ Rollo stressed the word, ‘very’ and the emphasis exposed his peculiar pronunciation; *vah-ee, vah-ee*.

Vita also did this with her ‘r’s and I was undecided whether it was the accent of privilege or an actual speech impediment that they shared. It was a habit best expressed in the words, ‘very’ and ‘really,’ so it was not exhibited as much as I would have liked. Vita and Rollo were like the King’s family; they shared the same moneyed confidence that ranked their personal experience at the centre of the world. The language they all speak, therefore, is brutish with hyperbole and lacking in modifiers. Disappointing events in Vita’s life were not *really bad*, but *terrible!* A holiday or a busy day of sales in the farm shop was not *very good* for Bunny or Richard; instead, it was, *marvellous!* or *heavenly!*

‘But would you really like it if I made your dinner and then complained when you were late home?’ *Would you rah-ly lake it? Would you rah-ly lake it?* I silently copied her pronunciation often; this phrase, though, along with her swearwords, was one of my favourites. ‘Or, when you didn’t come home at all? That wouldn’t work for you, would it, darling?’ Vita said. Her voice was soft, and she smiled, but it was a measured expression, more like a showing of teeth than a kindness. She repeatedly stroked the shiny scar on the back of her hand, touching it as though it were a distressed pet. ‘You would not want that sort of wife,’ she continued, speaking almost to herself.

Rollo patted his hair and nodded at his wife; ‘I’m sure you’re right, Vee,’ he said pleasantly. ‘Now, who would like another drink?’ He reached behind him for an unopened bottle on the sideboard and brandished it in the air. The bottle was green glass with a light sprinkling of dust as if it had been carefully powdered. It looked old and as if it should not be drunk but discarded. ‘Look what I’ve got! If you didn’t love me before, you will soon!’

Vita and Dolly pushed a wineglass forward from their complicated groupings of crystal. My place had a water tumbler and flute, but theirs had at least four glasses and sometimes five.

Dolly did not finish every drink she was given, I was relieved to notice, but instead tried a little of it all. He put a warm hand on my shoulder and refilled my glass with champagne. ‘I know you’ll be sticking with this, Sunday.’ They would always serve strong-tasting wine that I could not drink alongside dishes that were themselves rich and dark. I did not develop a taste for wine that year, but I did find it progressively easier each week to attempt a taste of the startling food as I recognised the patterns of the evening from the previous Friday supper.

After pudding, Dolly cleared the table, while Vita prepared a coffee tray noisily in the kitchen, carrying on her conversation with us through the open door. Rollo and I smiled at each other as she talked away. I marvelled to myself at the level of ease with which she could speak, requiring neither encouragement nor response. She was telling us about a wedding she and Rollo had attended that spring.

‘It was actually her late grandmother’s dress and *we* thought it quite lovely.’ *Kwaite larvelay*, I mouthed. ‘Didn’t we Rols?’ Rollo looked at me and silently held both his hands up in a gesture of confusion. We both laughed quietly, and he patted my arm in a little gesture of complicity. I was quite consumed with my feeling for him as we sat side by side, solid and sweet as he seemed then. ‘She doesn’t have the bosom for a square neckline. Not like you Sunday, you have a tremendous bosom. Doesn’t she Rols? Tremendous....’ Rols put his hand to his throat and pretended to choke on his wine. Dolly was in the kitchen and I heard her snort, with laughter or derision, I could not tell.

‘Yes, Vee, Sunday has lovely boobs,’ he called out to his wife, smiling at me as if this were a perfectly normal conversation. He looked directly at me, entirely unselfconsciously. ‘You really do,’ he confirmed in a lower voice.

It was the first time anyone had ever commented on my body; not even the King had spoken about me, to me, in this manner. It felt like intimacy to have my physicality not only discussed but approved in such a casual way. This was just one example of their ability to manipulate

reality. Vita and Dolly were fairly flat-chested in that aristocratic and athletic way that suggested they were fashioned for horse riding and estate management, rather than for a lifetime of domesticity and nursing infants. In comparison to them, I was able to fill a modestly sized bra, but ‘tremendous’ was not a title anyone would have awarded my chest. That truth did not prevent me from sitting at Vita’s table just then and feeling suddenly buxom.

Of course,’ Vita continued, ‘that girl doesn’t have the hips for bias cut satin, but it was a sweet gesture to wear the dress ... Apparently, she is going to have it made into a christening gown. And quite soon, I would think,’ she let out a musical little laugh as we absorbed the implication of this; then, she continued in a serious tone, as if correcting an over-exuberant child. ‘Although, as I say, the dress was very unforgiving, and she had always did have that sort of robust, outdoorsy shape, so...’ When Vita qualified other women’s looks, which she did frequently, she would simultaneously stroke her collarbone as if checking that her own bones were still traceable. She fell briefly silent and I imagined her out in the kitchen where I could not see her; she would be thinking about the heavy-set bride and tracing a hand concernedly along her own clavicle, feeling with relief, the slender throat above and the visible sternum projecting below.

Rollo noted the silence and instantly began to talk; ‘How is ...’

But he was immediately silenced. Vita had resumed her story and she raised her voice as her work in the next room became louder, cups and bottles clinking together. As she began talking again it was clear that the briefly serious tone had been replaced with a more informal one; ‘The mother-in-law, though, Sunday, is simply unkind. The dress wasn’t *quite* as much of a disaster as she says. That family think they can have the final say on everything. People....’ She appeared in the doorway a moment later with the coffee tray. ‘.... can just be so *unnecessarily* unkind, can’t they?’

I spoke as she put the tray down on the table; ‘The tongue does not have bones, but the tongue can break bones.’ It was an Italian saying and one of which I was particularly fond.

Vita laughed as she poured the coffee into three little cups: ‘That’s very true! I must remember that one.’

The tray contained a plate of the paper wrapped petits fours that Rollo had brought home to us. These miniature cakes were to become a trademark of the dinners he provided us with. He favoured the most artificially coloured selections, the pastel blues, pinks and greens, all flamboyantly decorated with bows and patterns. I had never seen them before; I did not know the little treats were even available in muted colours until Vita pointed this out to us all while comedically disapproving of Rols’ choices. He liked to eat several of the fat squares at once, a lean man playing at greed until Vita cheerfully scolded him for the vulgarity and mass of his choices.

I typically had no idea who the people were that Vita talked about. She spoke as if we had always mixed in the same social circles and the resultant immersive, yet distant intimacy with these exciting people was pleasurable. It had the appeal of a film, the undemanding appeal of watching while not being seen.

‘You know,’ she would say familiarly to me, when I asked which of their many friends she was referring to; ‘*Sophie*. The tall, blonde one. With the lipstick? And the *awful* husband. *Sophie!*’

And we would smile at each other because we both knew I was happy just to listen to her, whoever or whatever the subject. I loved the effortless of Vita’s conversation and the earnestness of her opinions; her hubris satisfied me vicariously, like an uncoordinated onlooker losing themselves at the ballet. I could disappear inside Vita’s continuous and inclusive stream of words, which required no encouragement to come down, but fell as light and unprompted as

rain. Sometimes the calm confidence of Vita's voice brought my words back and sometimes they did not come at all. But Vita did not seem to mind which of these responses I had, accepting my silence or my occasional interjection with the same, unsurprised continuation of chatter. She did not speak in order to entice me outside, to draw me out of my tunnel and then pin me there, as others had, including the King. She was simply expressing sound as a singer might practise offstage, a musical demonstration whose intention was not reciprocation. Of course, now I know Vita's little bird-heart, I remember those one-sided conversations differently. I see that my frequent muteness was a convenience to someone who was soft-feathered and sharp-eyed. And who sang away to herself in my presence, happily and without interruption, for she knew I had no song with which to call back.

Dolly and I had left the first supper before midnight. On this second visit, though, Dolly paused at the front door and sweetly offered to stay on and help to clear up.

'Sleep over!' said Vita immediately. 'We haven't had an overnight guest here yet. You will be our first.' They both looked at me expectantly.

'But you haven't got your things though,' I said to Dolly who was smiling and leaning almost imperceptibly towards Vita.

Vita made an easy, pushing gesture with one hand as if displacing something that weighed little; 'I have everything she could *possibly* need. For a month. I do keep a very well-stocked guest room, Sunday. You've seen them! I love having guests.'

'Alright then. If you like. I'll see you tomorrow Dolly.'

'Great!' Vita smiled and shut the door firmly between us. I could hear her talking to Dolly as they went back down the hallway, 'In town, Dols, we always....'

Late the following afternoon, Dolly finally returned. She told, with some excitement, how Vita had asked her to do some laundry and light cleaning next door on Saturdays. They had not yet engaged local domestic help. I was surprised to hear Dolly had already accepted as she never volunteered to do such things at home, even for herself. I did not ask how much, or even if, she was being paid and I am surprised, now at this omission on my part. I can only put my lack of enquiry down to an understanding of the excitement that being in Vita's presence generated.

The previous summer, Dolly had become involved with an older boy and her dismayed grandparents intervened, insisting she find a part-time job to occupy herself instead. They eagerly offered to continue with her generous allowance if she agreed, and also to match whatever wages she made. She refused to work at the farm or in the shop, but instead took a job at Jerre's café. I think this venue was chosen because her boyfriend could easily visit her there on his motorbike, unobserved by Bunny and Richard. But Dolly only worked in the café for a little over a week before she returned home early one Saturday afternoon, white-faced and unfriendly.

'Dolly! Are you ill?' I said, eyeing her sickly complexion.

'No. But I am not going back to work for that dirty old man,' she replied evenly. She dropped down onto the sofa, crossing her legs along the length of it. 'What's for dinner? I'm starving. I've been looking at food all day.'

I was immediately filled with an uncomfortable and propulsive energy. I could not remain still and shook with a fury I had never felt before. While I paced the room, red-cheeked and disorientated as though I had developed a sudden fever, Dolly confirmed coolly that Jerre had not touched her. It had instead been his staring at her and commenting on the details of her appearance: her body, her hair and her clothes, that had unnerved her. Then, that morning,

when they were alone in the café kitchen, he had asked her if she had sex with her boyfriend, if she liked it. I put a blanket over her as she lay on the sofa, brought her lemonade, toast fingers and boiled eggs on a tray, as I had when she was unwell as a child. No, she insisted, she did not want me to speak to Jerre, or to her grandparents, and especially not to the police, because there was nothing to tell them. Later there was a knock at the door and when I opened it, Jerre's wife, Santa was there, as white-faced as Dolly had been when she returned. Santa's black hair was, by then, thickly streaked with grey streaks and this, coupled with her pale face and light grey dress, gave her a ghostly presence as she shakily placed a thick envelope in my hand.

'For your daughter,' she said, spitting the final word like an insult; *Door-taaa*. Her once heavily accented English had altered over time to accommodate a little of the local pronunciation, but just then her fury countered this, and she again sounded like a Sicilian visitor grappling with a borrowed language. 'We will never see her back. Never. You tell her this,' she warned, looking at me directly. She turned to leave, then and I felt a return of the fury that had roused me before.

'Have you come to apologise? For your husband? Dolly is fifteen. Fifteen,' I said, my voice insubstantial and filmy like cheap fabric.

Santa stopped on the path and moved very slowly around to face me once more. When she spoke, her voice had settled into something steady and certain: 'My husband has no interest in a little girl. A little girl with white skin and the hair all white like a witch.' She gestured roughly around her own head in the shape of a cloud. 'You know this. I give her job.' When she said, 'I,' she raised her chin and banged her hand hard across her throat, with her fingers spread apart. 'Jerre says, no, Santa, this girl is no good, I know it. He says she is *presto matura, presto marcio*.'

It sounded beautiful, poetic. What was there to hurt us in those lovely words?

I shrugged; 'What is that?' and Santa looked levelly at me, as though we were friends confiding in one another.

'It is early ripe, early rotten. And he is right. Is a disgrace. Disgrazia! And you,' she pointed a finger accusingly at me, before tapping it against the side of her head, 'you know this. You *know* this.'

She turned and left, in a sweeping gesture so furious that to me, who spoke and gestured little, it appeared almost like a performance. I found myself repeating her words back to myself; in my distress the musicality of her accent soothed me. *Early ripe, early rotten. Is a disgrace. Disgrazia! And you - you know this. You know this.* I tapped out the rhythm of her speech on my arm; the content of what she said could not touch me when I made it into music. Fortunately, Santa was not there to overhear; I have angered many people with this response to distress or anger, but it is involuntary. I have come, now, to appreciate the tapping and the speech repetition as a management skill. I recommend it. I went back into the front room, still tapping with one hand and showed Dolly the envelope.

'From Santa. Do you want me to open it?'

Dolly sat up, gesturing for me to pass the envelope to her; 'That was quick! Was Jerre with her?'

'No,' I told her.

'Good. The dirty old bastard,' she said, lightly and without feeling. She was distracted, thumbing through the envelope, concentrating on counting the thick wedge of money, which was obviously much more than a week's wages, was perhaps a whole summer's worth of her earnings. Once she had counted the amount, she smiled, then looked up and looked at me as I watched her closely. She shrugged; 'I can't help it if he likes the look of me, can I? People do.' Her voice was thin and cold like water.

Several weeks later, I realised that her grandparents were continuing to match her weekly wage. Dolly never told them or the King about the end of her job with Jerre, carrying on the pretence that she was working various shifts there all summer. And I said nothing. On a hot Saturday afternoon some weeks later, she suggested we go down to the café for ice-cream.

‘Wouldn’t that be difficult for you?’ I asked her.

There was a short and uncharacteristic pause before she responded, ‘Oh, yes. I suppose it would. Yes, it would,’ she said eventually. And her face was as calm, as lovely and as untroubled as the lake in summer.

The cleaning at Vita’s, however, seemed like good practice for the kind of self-discipline and independence that would serve Dolly at university a few years later. She had not worked since her short period at Jerre’s, although most of her friends had jobs, regardless of their family wealth. Her grandparents and I had always planned to cover all her bills while she studied for her degree in comfort. She did not need more money; she had never wanted for anything. Even on the rare occasions when I would have preferred her to wait, Richard and Bunny would immediately give her the cash for whatever she wanted, a new record player or another expensive pair of shoes. Sometimes Dolly used the money to purchase the desired item and sometimes she spent it in ways that were undisclosed. She knew this easy and extravagant level of support would continue to be the case throughout university and even beyond.

Both my in-laws and I were eager to overfill any reported monetary gap: when she went away, she would only ever have had to imply the other was not fulfilling their financial role, that she was missing any item, even those considered a luxury by her fellow students, and extra cheques would have been hurriedly sent. We all wanted Dolly to be comfortable but more than that, I think we each wanted to win her. To be the one who saved her and to see that invulnerable girl turn to us with relief, with any care that we ever existed at all. The unexplained desertion

of a patron or family member might fit reasonably into the narrative of a desperate girl trying to improve her small and unpromising life. One of Mr Taylor's Very Sad Children, perhaps, might have found their only escape by leaving their family behind. But I cannot pretend, even to myself, that this was among the reasons for Dolly leaving as she did. I imagined that under Vita's practised and exacting gaze, my daughter would be considerably more domesticated than me by the time she went away at eighteen. My sister and I would never have considered university for ourselves, would not have thought it possible and I had already begun to feel the difference that my daughter's future plans would position between us. I worried about university, worried that Dolly would come home with earnest young people, who would demand brightly coloured vegetarian meals and then argue about subjects of which I knew nothing. And I worried, most of all, that she would never come back once she left.

Dolly did not, however, exhibit any new domestic interest at home that summer, but she did develop some peculiar tastes that must have come from next door. Her visible new habits included cream cheese and marmalade sandwiches, and a tightening and shortening of the pronunciation she once had. Admittedly, she had always reserved a precise and clear manner of speaking purely for her grandparents, who otherwise would correct her pronunciation when she sounded like one of the locals, like me. Once she met Vita though, her vowels almost instantly hardened to become rapid and clipped, like a rebuke. She no longer called me Mum, as she had for many years, but reverted to the childhood address of Mummy or, rather, Marm-may. Peculiarly, it was in Vita's clear voice, that she called me *Marm-may*. *Marm-may*, I will not be here for dinner tonight. *Marm-may*, I am staying next door, I am going to London. I am leaving now, *Marm-may*. More evident, even, than my new title and my daughter's elevated speech, was a new sharpness. There was a growing watchfulness about her that summer, as though she were gathering evidence to prove something I could not defend.

Dolly, then, stayed overnight next door after each Friday supper and this was quickly extended, first into the weekend itself and then into weekdays too, until her absence from home was more often due to plans with Vita than with her friends or grandparents. She stayed in the guest room, which in Vita's house was the rectangular room positioned at the front of the house. In our own house, Dolly's bedroom was in the same location. Within weeks, she began to keep some clothes and belongings in her second room and referred to them both as her own, as if Vita and I were divorced parents with a shared claim on her. And I was jealous of something that summer, of this easy transference perhaps. I could have told you I was jealous even then, but I could not have said whether it was my daughter or Vita whom I envied.

the blueness of chilled milk

I left my sister alone as she lay dying. At sixteen, I went into the bedroom of the first Dolores to take our shared hairdryer and was relieved to find her sleeping, smiled to myself at the laboured breathing which I took for snores. The Sicilians consider light sleep to be *the sleep of cats*. Dolores, however, did not sleep the sleep of cats; she slept hard and could not easily be disturbed. She had recently begun working in a local hotel and the shift patterns meant she often slept in as I left the house for school in the mornings. Our parents, in their turn, left before I was up; my father walked my mother to the first of her cleaning jobs at the row of imposing Edwardian houses whose front gardens ran down to the lake. From there, he went on to the harbour to begin his own work and my mother had her lunch overlooking the lake every day. On rainy or wintery days, she retreated to the small bus shelter that fronted the water and ate there. She inhaled something there that she needed, and she brought it home in her lungs to be conserved until her next lake visit.

When it was too cold even for this, she drank coffee in Jerre's café by the lake and he tolerated the fact she brought sandwiches from home, as he would not have with other customers. Walt told me once that Jerre kept a box of Sicilian earth from his family smallholding in the old country. He and his wife had brought this filled box with them when they came to England as newlyweds and it was placed ceremonially under the bed each time she gave birth to another little Anglo-Sicilian. In this way, the six children were all born on the soil of their homeland. Their shared attachment to place perhaps explained Jerre's softness towards my mother and his acceptance of her flagrant use of his café for shelter, even if their commonality remained unspoken. In Jerre's own town, a fisherman and his family were lower in status even than peasants.

Our schoolfriends who lived nearer the school typically went home for their lunch, but Mer never allowed my sister and I to do so. She had refused this even when we attended the primary

school which was close to our home. The weekday lunches of my childhood were my mother's time alone on the lake front; her afternoons were reserved for preparing the fish caught by Walter's customers and he typically lingered in the kitchen or on the terrace outside, just to be close to her. By the time Dolores and I were teenagers, she made the same lunch each day for all four of us. This comprised two heavy slices of the national loaf that she had learned to make during rationing and before she became a mother; she continued to bake this throughout her life with an air of resigned martyrdom. Her soft and wounded manner suggested there was a personal sacrifice made in not buying the soft, white bread which our peers brought to school each day. My sister and I coveted the cake-like sandwiches we saw at every school lunch; Dolores would sometimes persuade a classmate to swap with her. Our mother's bread tasted always damp and undercooked. It was packaged along with home-prepared fish paste or a small piece of local cheese. To this, she added an apple from the garden, sometimes a square of dense homemade cake, or flapjacks, all unappealingly weighty and wrapped in the same brown paper she kept in large rolls for the fish. Dolores loved sweet things to a degree which seemed not so much a preference as a character trait or a genetic gift. Among our peers were competitive runners and gymnasts or students whose academic focus defined them; my sister practised sugar consumption with the same fervour. She often ate hot chocolate dry from the jar with a spoon, a habit our mother enabled by keeping large quantities of Dolores' preferred brand at home without comment. My sister's jacket pockets, handbags and drawers all held little stashes of sweets and chocolate, even cubes of sugar taken from cafes. Subsequently, she always received the biggest pieces of any home baking. None of us enjoyed sugar so much as we did Dolores' excitement when she was handed whatever sweet item we had saved for her. When I shop now, I still pause to look at the displays of chocolate, cakes and brightly coloured sweets on her behalf.

When I was pregnant with Dolly, that became who I was. My behaviours and decisions were no longer entirely my own. I believed sometimes that I was a vehicle being driven around by the tiny and ruthless person working inside me. It made pregnancy tolerable, enjoyable even. It felt like turning off the switch to a machine which requires enormous and exhausting amounts of energy to power. People who perform on instinct do not keep vast libraries of information in their heads, they do not concentrate in company as if in taking an important exam. They do not need to shut down frequently and turn off all the lights to find relief. And even then, find that peace does not often come.

The day Dolores lay dying in her bed was also my first day of school without her. It was my final year, and my return marked the end of a long, warm summer. My sister and I had been in the water each evening of the holidays that year. Then, in August she had taken six days of holiday from her chambermaid position and we had swum together two or three times each day, challenging one another to keep going and only allowing ourselves to emerge when we were too exhausted to last any longer. By September, the edge of coldness was already beginning to threaten, but we always wanted to extend the swimming season for as long as we could. Dolores and I had an unspoken agreement not to mention the transition until the cold visibly manifested in our bodies, until the post-swim shiver and blue skin began to outlast both our lakeside dressing and brisk walk home.

The night before, the water had become unexpectedly vicious as my sister floated sleepily across the waves on her back and I dried myself on the shore. She was a strong lake swimmer, her body inherently trained to the sudden currents in a way that pool users were not. The function of my swimming was exploratory. I was convinced that one day I would discover, deep in the water, the thing that drew my mother there and that it would become a shared and bonding secret between us. Dolores did not search the water when she swam, did not care to

know what my mother saw and loved there. My sister's lack of curiosity regarding our mother was characteristic of her in all things. She had an indolence about her, an acceptance that enabled her to find joy without examination; it was a gift I coveted. As she swam lazily out that evening, though, allowing herself to follow the gentle pull of the light currents, the water changed. The water was insistent, pulling Dolores inside and then expelling her violently out onto the stones where I stood, motionless with fear. Her skin was seal-grey, and I looked up at the sky, expecting a sudden darkening. But the bright yellow pink of the late sun persisted, colouring all below it, except Dolores. She lay gasping at the edge of the water, an offering considered and rejected by the lake.

I did not know, then, that neither of us would ever swim in the lake again, that the lake had only just begun and was coming for all of us. It is not always possible to recognise an experience as the final of its kind; such things are often known only in retrospect. But I am grateful for what I did not know as I stood and shivered on the shore that evening. The secret was that an ending was approaching my family.

We had walked home afterwards in a silence that I did not question. I enjoyed this subdued version of my sister, who resembled me then, while dying, more than she ever had before. I could not see, as we walked home together in the darkness, that my sister was still submerged, was, in fact, a dead girl walking. I did not know, then, that she struggled that night with an invisible and watery enemy, that she was kept somewhere below the surface and unable to summon help.

The morning I left Dolores in bed, I sat alone on the bus, missing her company now that she had finished with school. The bus followed the popular tourist road that offered views of the lake in which Dolores and I swam together daily. It was placid as I passed it, an entirely different creature to the one it had been the previous evening. I did not know as I sat on the bus to school on the first day of the new term and then went to each of my lessons. I did not know

until I had been home from school for several hours. Until my mother, growing impatient, finally stopped calling and went upstairs to tell Dolores to come down to dinner. Instead, she found her beloved child cold and still, oblivious to the heavy duvet that optimistically blanketed her blue skin.

Walt and I heard the screams and went upstairs to find my mother pointing at Dolores in shock; ‘My. Child! My. Child!’ She moved towards the body with her arms out, as though prepared for an embrace that would be returned.

As I stood in the open doorway, I copied her exclamation, *My. Child! My. Child!* The flattening and the emphasis were unusual. I spoke under my breath, but I expect it was still audible; I was less discreet back then. And, of course, I was very distressed, although I do not think this was necessarily evident. Then I found myself speaking out loud. My voice had never sounded, to my ears, so clear or so definite. ‘You must not touch her, mother,’ I instructed. ‘If you touch a child’s corpse it will turn black.’ I knew this from my book on Sicily.

She came at me so fast it seemed she was flying. Walt had to position himself between us and he shut me in my bedroom while an ambulance was called.

Hours later, when I heard them carrying the body of my sister out, I went out onto the landing and followed them out of the house. It was with reverence that I sang the only Italian song I knew as I escorted them to the ambulance. The song was from my book on Italy and was dedicated to the *Borda*, who visits children in their beds if they do not sleep.

Lullaby, lullaby,

the Borda binds beautiful children with a rope

With a rope and a cord,

binds the beautiful children and then holds them,

*with a rope and a string,
binds the beautiful children and then kills them.*

My mother lay on the sofa in our front room while Walt and another man hovered uncertainly in the doorway as if awaiting instruction. I sang louder as I passed them in the hope that Walt would join the procession for Dolores. Even in death, we could not distract him from our mother. My singing did not rouse Mer; she was fast asleep and fully dressed. Entirely still, with her shoes on, her coat buttoned, and her handbag placed on her midsection below her clasped hands, she seemed like a displayed corpse herself, so great was her determination to be back with Dolores. Later I learned she had been heavily tranquilized, and she remained in this chemical suspension of time for many weeks.

One day I found Mer in my sister's bedroom; she was sitting on the bed with her face hidden in a piece of Dolores' clothing. The door was open, and she had heard my step out there on the landing, so I went in and placed my hand lightly on her shoulder. It was a gesture I had seen passing like a baton between my parents since my sister died.

'You were a great mother,' I told her, attempting the soft tone in which they often spoke to one another. 'You really were.' Her shoulder stiffened and turned to rock beneath my hand.

She inhaled deeply and spoke on her exhalation; 'Get the fuck out,' she said. Her voice was so low it was barely audible. This calmness was more disturbing, even, than the shouting.

I had assumed she and I could peacefully agree she had been a loving mother to Dolores, that our shared observance of this might soothe her. When she finally did speak to me again, it was to ask minutely detailed questions about my last swim with Dolores. As I tried to answer her, she cried, noiselessly, so she did not miss any of my reply. Her relentless tears were made peculiar by the deliberate silence that accompanied them, as if this crying was a rehearsal without full costume, or sound. My English etiquette book advised that six months of deep

mourning was acceptable for the loss of a husband and for a child, three months, but this time frame was not adhered to in our home. My parents never came out of mourning but became greyer and more distant with each day that passed. Neither did they observe any of the Sicilian funereal habits; mirrors were not turned to the wall in the week following Dolores' death. Salt was not sprinkled on the entrance to our home. We even went directly from the funeral to our house, without first stopping in a public place, although I encouraged them to do all these things, explaining the importance of such rituals. But pointing out these infringements to my parents turned my father's face red and brought my mother too close, made her loud and trembling.

My parents insistent questioning – *What happened? Why didn't you tell us? Why didn't you check on her?* – lasted until their own deaths. They believed my answers could raise Dolores from the lake and I, too, sometimes felt my words might bring my sister back. But I was haunted by the prospect of her emerging once more from the water, now eerily dry and accusing, perhaps even blackened from my mother's greedy touch. Immediately after Dolores' death, I embarked on two months of silence so that I could not inadvertently summon the grey and gasping sister that I remembered. The coroner brutally termed the death; 'dry drowning' - this is something like burning to death after escaping the fire.

My sister had always diverted our parent's attention from the inadequacies of their younger child; her extrovert nature both shielded and amplified my tendency to silence. She was a translator working between me and our parents and offering each of us the version of the other that they sought. My characteristic muteness was a cause of ongoing embarrassment to my parents, who positioned themselves close enough to their youngest child at public occasions that they could invisibly prod me into speaking. I am generally quiet, but occasionally verbose; once the words come, I am interrogative, and language is an excavating tool. Dolores' absence exposed the family as the grave and joyless group that we were. The memories we had built,

the comical and sentimental moments, were immediately paused; filming was permanently ceased. All we had been was orchestrated by Dolores and without her, all turned to silence.

My parents each succumbed to premature death within six months of their daughter's passing. Each died from what were typically non-fatal conditions, my mother contracted pneumonia and my father got a minor infection; these were not resisted or fought against but were instead welcomed as transport. Before being hospitalised, Mer swam in the lake through the early stages of her chest infection as she once had those maternal contractions. The lake was all she had left after Dolores' death. During this final illness, Mer's pallor, once the temporary sign of a recent swim, permanently became the blueness of chilled milk left on the doorstep, a paler shade of her hair. Dolores' body was the same colour when it was carried out of our house, I noted privately. When visiting my parents in hospital, I consciously tried to summon the easy language of my dead sister, knowing that her words would have restored them. My speech is formal and will not soften, it does not beckon. Both my parents remained unmoved, unreached and I saw what the doctor's optimistic charts could not calculate; my parents simply did not wish to continue. Walt initially went into hospital for a planned minor operation shortly after my mother was admitted by ambulance. When I visited him, he asked only after my mother; he spoke of nothing else. Beyond bluntly requesting a drink or another cushion, Mer spoke to me only once in the three weeks she lasted.

Near the end of her life, my mother finally spoke in a rare moment of full consciousness. She turned to look closely at me as I sat next to her hospital bed, a book in my hand. I could feel her watching me, but I kept my eyes fixedly on the page. *Sundays are special occasions in many Italian families and among paesani from various regions of Italy...*

'You're not wired right, you,' she said. She had deteriorated rapidly during the last week and her original South London accent returned more strongly each day, seeping like water

through the rounded vowels she had cultivated during her time in our lakeside town. She no longer sounded like herself, or at least not like the version of herself that I knew. I waited expectantly for her to say more, but she lay back in bed, breathless, and stared up at the ceiling. Her bony chest rose with each shallow breath and then fell too deeply, as though repeatedly collapsing.

After watching her terrible chest rise and fall in on itself for some time, I spoke into the quiet of the ward. The other patients were mostly asleep, with their curtains drawn around their beds.

‘I know,’ I said to her as she lay in the bed, rigid with resentment. I wanted to find the thing that would soften her and make her finally understand that I was trying. The lack of visible social effort on my part was what Mer always criticised me for most harshly. I believed even then, that if I could only convince her of my constant attempts at social normalcy, she would forgive my resultant failure. She thought my difference was a deliberate pose, thought my remoteness was something I was consciously doing to her. As if, deep down, I had always known all the secrets of communication, just as my sister had, but only I had wilfully turned away from that knowledge. ‘I know, Mer. There is a village in Sicily, some miles from Partinico.’ She closed her eyes at the mention of Italy, but I carried on determinedly, ‘This place existed like a monument. It was built during Mussolini’s regime and there were houses, a school and a town hall. But it was a demonstration of a village, there was nowhere to work, no way for people to live and earn money there. And so, the buildings remained empty, only resembling the human towns all around them but providing no purpose. I can’t forget that village since I read about it, because I think that’s me. A studied impression of a real person. But I have tried so hard. I am trying *so* hard.’

My mother made a short sound deep in her throat; it could have been a laugh or a cough. I persuaded myself it was the latter. Then she reminded me of the story she told my sister and I, often, about imposter children who are left by the elves to replace the real children they steal.

‘But these changelings,’ she said, ‘these are only imitations of children and good mothers always know the difference. *I* knew, Sunday. My own mother knew. Did you ever hear her use your name? Not once. She called you, That Girl. That Girl, she would say to me, That Girl watches us as if she is behind glass. And she would never look after you. Not even when I begged her. As she said the word begged she grimaced, showing both sets of her small teeth in a terrible smile. ‘And I did. All the time. She wouldn’t even let me bring you to see her after the party. You scared her.’ A young nurse was circling the ward, topping up the plastic tumblers of each patient and my mother fell silent again as she watched her progress. The clock above the ward double doors became unbearably loud, filling the large room and I looked back to my book for comfort.

The party to which she referred, of course, was my parents’ pearl wedding anniversary. It was the sole social event we ever hosted as a family of four. I was seven years old and quietened the festivities by plunging my hands into the much-admired centrepiece at the table, a trifle encased in the thick glass of an exhibit. The music that thumped around me like an overworked heart was pleasingly muffled by the pliant sensation of jelly and the drily separate crumbs that crawled antlike along my arms. When I held the contents of my fists against my face, vanilla flooded cleanly into my nostrils, instantly dimming the flashing party lights and the gasping faces of the guests. It soothed with the tingle of sensitivity restored to a numbed hand or foot.

As an adult, I no longer indulge my desires as party stoppers, but occasionally allow my hands to pat the edges as I walk down streets; the studied nonchalance on my face belies the intent that directs my fingers. During school trips to the local theatre, where I would drown in

noise and lights, I found some relief in leaving my seat to study the working of the mixing desk. The engineer would minutely alter the vertical rows of buttons; as one was pushed up, he brought another one down as if in silent reply. For me too, one sensory interruption can be manually quietened by the deliberate amplification of another. Like a family of demanding children, my senses must be continually supervised and managed.

When the nurse finally reached us and leant close to refill the glass, Mer extended a bony finger to tap her shoulder. It took a visible effort for her to perform this minute gesture.

‘Tell her to leave. *Please,*’ my mother stage-whispered to the woman, nodding at me. Her voice was loud enough for the patients on either side to hear what she had said. She pronounced the word ‘please’ breathlessly, as though it was costing her valuable air to continue speaking.

The nurse slowly straightened up. She looked at me and not at my mother.

Her cheeks were flushed pink and she said to me, in a genuine and confidential whisper; ‘They don’t know what they’re saying sometimes, when they’re like this.’

As I turned to go, my shrinking mother spoke from her bed. Perhaps the nurse’s gentleness with me, her apology on my mother’s behalf, had been audible from the bed.

No longer whispering, Mer said conversationally to the entire room, ‘I never did like that girl.’ Her reclaimed accent made the word ‘girl’ sound like ‘Gail’ and I momentarily persuaded myself to believe that she was referring to someone else, a forgotten and fictional woman named Gail, who we had both once known and disliked. My mother continued, unflinchingly direct. She raised her hand to point at me, and all of us, the nurse, the patients and myself, knew exactly who she was naming. ‘Her. No, I did not like her. *Never did.*’

And it was not the condemnation of me that was painful, for I already knew this pronouncement of her feelings to be true; it was the public announcement and the flippancy in her voice that finished me. She had spent my early days hoping to find something appealing in

me, I was certain, for she saw herself as a good mother. We both knew she had been such with her oldest child at least. Before Dolores discovered the pleasures to be found outside our home, she frequently chose to be with Mer; they liked to cook together, read and draw, and, listening from the doorway, I often imagined myself in Dolores' place. And in this way, at this distance, I learned about Mer's other voice, which was soft and sweet. I had heard my mother sing love songs with a little catch on the lyrics she felt and I knew what it might be to have her softly stroke your hair and laugh at the silly things you said. I had been a witness, at least, to her maternal love. I knew the flatness of her resentment as she lay dying. For years afterwards, I consoled myself with the thought that wanting your mother to find something worthwhile in you was probably the most normal condition I would ever find myself in.

as she performs

The emerging fixed pattern of our Friday evenings with Vita and Rollo both excited and soothed me. At each dinner, I gratefully noted each small recurrence. It felt peaceful and not as though I was out with new people, being presented with new foods and listening to new conversation. Just as Dolly and I spent each Friday evening next door, Vita also arrived regularly at our house throughout the week on unscheduled but welcome visits. Sometimes she came alone, uninvited, and sometimes Dolly brought her without any prior warning or discussion; we had never experienced this casualness and ease with anyone before. When the three of us were together for another spontaneous evening, I imagined, fondly, that we were experiencing what we would have had with Dolores if she had survived into adulthood.

When Vita came to us, she was dressed sometimes in nightwear, sometimes in glamorous dresses, but her style of appearance was never referenced or explained. Once she appeared in only a large towel and with wet hair, as if she had rushed out in an emergency, but her manner was as calm and queenly as ever. She came on those nights because Rollo was away, or at the pub, or because he was simply busy, and she needed constant attention. She never appeared nervous about being alone in her house, indeed, nothing seemed to make her nervous; she simply had an unimaginable desire for company. I imagine this constant wanting to be highly inconvenient and like a thirst or hunger which must be met daily. She really could not be by herself at home for more than a few hours, which I found endearing, as aloneness is the thing I do best, and she was otherwise so very able. She never made it up to the spare bedroom but regularly fell asleep on our sofa instead.

Dolly gave her our spare key and sometimes Vita let herself in while we slept on upstairs, unaware of her presence until we came down in the morning to find her there. I bought a soft pink blanket and a matching pillow which I put on the shelf in the front room, purely for Vita's use. She was at once childlike and sophisticated; simultaneously enjoying my care as I tucked

her in on the sofa and telling me gossipy details about the latest scandal she had heard in London. It was an appealing combination and I think one which my daughter also possesses. My sister, too, although she did not survive much past childhood, possessed this kind of dual charm, not ever being quite finished; neither entirely naive nor wholly adult.

I enjoyed the feeling that a third person now lived with us, at least some of the time. Of course, it was not just a third person; it was Vita. And so, our fixed little family of two unexpectedly expanded. The fourth, Rollo, was a beloved but distant paternal figure, extra attentive and kind.

It became the custom for the three of us to have an early supper together on Saturdays while Rollo hosted boys' dinners at the pub; usually Edward Taylor would be there, along with the owner of the largest local hotel, a well-connected estate agent and council members, including some of the planning committee. I learnt who attended each week because although Vita and Dolly never ate at the pub, they usually went to meet Rollo and his guests for drinks after dinner with me. At our supper, Vita would always be full of compliments about my daughter's apparent housekeeping gifts and maintained a cheerful silence about the whiteness of the food I served for the three of us. She always ate large portions of whatever I cooked, and I had noticed with pleasure that Dolly, too, ate better, clearing her plate uncomplainingly, on the nights that Vita joined us.

One evening, Dolly arrived home at around six pm and opened the back door, pausing to speak before she came properly inside.

'Rollo's back in town tonight, so I've brought Vita for supper. Okay, Mummy?' she said, in a gentle voice, quite unlike her own. Then she stepped into the kitchen and Vita appeared behind her with a container in her hands. They were both wearing black leggings and oversized denim jackets with the sleeves rolled up to expose thin silver bangles on their wrists. I could

smell their similar perfume; it was something too musky for Dolly and too light for Vita. This positioning somehow defined and expanded the age gap, the multiple differences between them. The distance enforced by the perfume pleased me. It felt like a space between them that I could occupy.

I was standing at the stove in my pyjamas and staring at the fish poaching in milk. It was absorbing to witness the liquid split between creamy whiteness and a watery grey swirl, not for culinary timing (my method of poaching is so gentle it could not really go wrong) but for reasons of aesthetic interest. I cook by smell and not by watching a clock, which I cannot accurately read in any case. I know when a cake is ready by the suddenly heightened vanilla scent in the air; this is what tells me when it is cooked through and not yet dry. I cannot time several different items which would traditionally be served together as a hot meal. Instead I am used to eating only one hot element and for this to be accompanied always by cold or room temperature foods. I am always slightly shocked when eating food which has been prepared by someone else to find that several dishes are served together at a similar temperature. Rollo had been right, though, when he described food preparation as relaxing; the kitchen being, for me, a laboratory for heightening senses in a controllable way. I felt very quiet that day, and unnecessary conversation seemed like an exertion that, while possible, would leave me compromised later. Like running a mile when you are unfit but technically able.

Both women greeted me warmly, with Vita embracing me first. As always, she was attuned to my mood in a manner that seemed more like magic than social ease.

‘Dolly told me about your quiet days. Is it a quiet day today?’ she whispered into my ear: *isitaquietdaytodayisitititititititititit* and I nodded back at her. *Yes.*

Dolly kissed my cheek several times, deliberately making an exaggerated sound that echoed around us as though we were in a vast ceilinged cathedral and not a small kitchen. She used to perform this showy kiss when I picked her up from primary school. When she reached her final

year, her classmates all believed themselves too old for such public affection, or even to be collected from school. Dolly, though, continued to stand in the playground and open her arms to me every afternoon in the queenly manner of an aged grandmother. She opened the fridge and made a silent and unreadable gesture with her hands to Vita who nodded briefly back in reply as she sat down at the table. I thought of David's clear signing and imagined myself again in that historic Martha's Vineyard community, where everyone was a fluent signer.

But the informal signs between Vita and my daughter were indecipherable, another social code that could not be learned. Dolly took two cans of cola from the fridge and put hers down before pouring the other into a glass for Vita.

'Do we have ice, Mummy?' she asked. Her return to this more juvenile maternal address was recent and pleasing. I thought it comforted her to return to childish ways in that last summer before she left home. But before I could reply, she turned to Vita and spoke to her in a low and confidential tone. 'There won't be ice, Vee. We *never* have ice.'

There was a small Tupperware box on the table in front of Vita and she removed the lid with a flourish. Then she leaned back a little to admire the offering, her hands crossed modestly on the table, as if she were trying to contain or conceal her excitement. I looked inside the container. It was raw mince with three liquid yellow egg yolks as thick and glossy as frosting in the centre. At that time, the local bakery was displaying a birthday cake decorated with a tennis racquet made entirely of fondant. Each string and screw were minutely fashioned and perfect. Like the cake, the tartare was neither quite the ingredients it was made up of, or the treat that it claimed to be. I had not realised that food could be made so dishonest.

'I thought we could have this as a starter? We had it for lunch, and this was leftover. It's all seasoned and everything. It's Rols' speciality. Do you like it?' She carefully served the contents of the container onto the three plates already on the table.

‘How do you cook it?’ I asked, without much interest, either in the red food or in extended conversation. I had dinner planned and did not want to cook another dish and certainly nothing so red.

Vita smiled brightly; ‘You don’t, silly. It’s steak tartare? My favourite thing. Minced steak with an egg yolk.’ I thought I must have misheard her. She continued talking, ‘Rols even separates the egg for me. I don’t touch eggs.’ She frowned even as she considered this.

‘But... Raw beef and eggs? Do you really eat that?’ The milky steam of the fish filled the kitchen and must be ready, but I was looking at Vita’s food. It was so complicated, so messy and basic that it barely resembled edible ingredients. The breadth of people’s tastes in all things continues to be surprising. I want my choices narrowed so that they do not become overwhelming. I let the first, the least colourful, and the easiest, find me. It is impossible to understand the need to deviate from repetition, this ceaseless wanting for the new and the colourful. Yet people’s yearning for variety touches me, too, as a demonstration of hope, or perhaps it is faith. Whatever it is, I am without, and wanting. Their childlike belief that there is always something as yet untried, but superior; a different dress, or house, or menu, only to be discovered by those who keep looking, keep trying.

I looked at Dolly, who sat at the table drinking her cola without ice. ‘Dolly, have you heard of this? Eating uncooked mince?’

As I turned back to the fish, Vita and Dolly both laughed, the sounds so similar that they could not be told apart.

I heard the scraping of a chair and felt a hand on my shoulder, as light as an insect landing on me; ‘Dolly had it for lunch last week at ours, didn’t you?’ said Vita. She stood so close to me, though, that I could feel her breath on my hair as she spoke. Then, in her psychic way, she answered my unspoken question; I would not have asked it out loud, but she knew it. ‘You were at work, Sunday.’

Dolly nodded casually, ‘Yep. It’s lovely, actually. My favourite thing that Rols makes.’ She smiled at Vita and shook her head, ‘She’ll never eat it, you know. He was right.’

I imagined Vita and Rollo sitting with Dolly in the formal dining room next door eating this concoction, while discussing my imagined adverse reaction to it. Vita’s favourite classical music would be playing while the yellow and red ran together around the meat on their silver edged plates. I put my own serving of mince and yolk back into Vita’s container and rinsed the thin trails of blood off my plate. It seemed so primitive to eat like this. Certainly, it was impossible to reconcile such culinary habits with our neighbours, who frequently visited smart London restaurants and, who even at home, ate like spoiled food critics. How could Vita be repelled by handling eggs and yet put this into her mouth? By the time I cleaned the blood off my plate, Vita and Dolly were already eating their portions.

‘Rols is in town for a birthday party. I told him, no, darling I am not going, I am a country lady now, darling. Didn’t I, Doll? I said, *I am a country lady.*’ *A country lay-dee!* I repeated to myself, tapping along on the counter. They smiled at one other knowingly, like children pleased with their daring, and Vita repeated herself. ‘Didn’t I?’

‘You did.’ Dolly agreed, mimicking Vita’s seriousness to repeat the words herself; she did not get the emphasis right. ‘I am a country lady. He couldn’t believe it! He said,’ she turned to me and spoke slowly as if imparting a fact of great importance, ‘he said, but it won’t be a party without you, Vee.’

After they finished their gory starter, we ate the milky fish on coloured plastic trays in front of our favourite television show and Dolly explained to Vita about the girl with the judgemental papa. She instantly found this hilarious and was soon quoting the infamous phrase at us both, although she could not master the wistful quality of the daughter, as Dolly did, with a quivering chin and impressively watery eyes. Sometimes, even as we laughed, I found myself unconsciously reaching out to comfort my daughter as she performed the role. When I was

reminded that Dolly can become anyone at will, I thought, too, of the young child she was the summer that she played at being me and saw off the King. Dolly flickered convincingly between characters like a Victorian clairvoyant, all clever and cynical show, tricks concealed below a frilled tablecloth. She would appeal to an audience of heartbroken parents, with her large eyes and her ability to read people. She would know what they wanted to hear, and she would speak earnestly, as if it were truth.

Vita was too much herself to act otherwise and convince as a captured girl. When Vita said cheerfully that her *papa would not allow such things in his house*, she was so obviously not under anyone's rules or interested in conformity that the reference became comedic solely for reasons of dissonance.

The four of us were eating pudding at the Friday dinner that week when I overheard Dolly and Vita discussing a visit to Lakeview the following day.

'But don't you have work to do here tomorrow?' I asked Dolly. 'Why would you go there?'

Vita cut in smoothly before my daughter could speak, 'Dolls has got things so organised here that she gets it all done in a couple of hours now. And she has a real eye for interiors, doesn't she, Sunday?'

'No.' I said. 'She isn't interested in houses. Or interiors. Not at all, are you Dolly?' I emphasised the name, did not want my child to become *Dolls*, another title awarded by Vita, like *Rols* and *Wife*.

Dolly was eating apple pie and she remained silent as she continued to eat in small, determined bites. She frowned a little, pulling down her eyebrows and conjuring tiny lines across her forehead. With her spoon, she pointed to her pudding as if in apology for being unable to speak.

Vita continued, 'We do want her to help us out with Lakeside. It's challenging to start a redesign while the building is still *inhabited*. Such a lot of children and furniture everywhere.' When she said the word, children, her upper lip drew up, showing her teeth. Dolly, looking on, made an identical expression, as if they smelled the same bad thing. 'It's so ugly really. I'm only doing it because Rols is so taken with the place.'

Rollo interrupted, 'Queen Vee. It is beautiful. Beautiful. It will be incredible when we finish it.'

She did not acknowledge what he said, but her face instead remained hard as she addressed me alone. 'He is paying a lot more than it's worth you know. Because he wants them to have the money to rehome those children somewhere more suitable. Somewhere more practical. We are all so lucky, Sunday.' She gestured around the table, at the four of us, as though we were a family who share the same home, the same lifestyle. 'It's easy to forget how fortunate we are sometimes.' Her tone, too, was tight and unfamiliar.

Rollo was at his wife's shoulder, pouring wine into her glass, his hand lightly on her back. 'But I don't understand. What can Dolly do for you?'

The three of them were looking at one another as if deciding something. They did not need words; they were communicating as silently as my classmates had when I was young. People pitch themselves now as then, at a frequency I cannot hear. I imagined a pack of dogs gathered outside in the street, their bodies still and ears pricked as they listened in too, nodding solemnly along with the decision conveyed.

Finally, Rollo spoke: 'Actually Sunday, we have taken Dolly over there a couple of times. When she's been over here helping Vee in the house or ... out shopping with her. They're always together aren't they? So, it's natural that she would end up over there. Vee has been so pleased with her, you know, and we wanted to introduce her to the business. To see if there

was something she might do.’ He cleared his throat and continued, ‘We wondered if she could help out there too. Just for the summer, of course. Until she’s back at school’

‘But why didn’t you tell me you had been over there together?’ I asked the other two, whose faces seemed unusually serene.

‘Mummy, this isn’t a big deal. I had a good time over there and I like the work. It’s interesting. I want to learn about business, and I like Rols’ people.’

‘Which people?’ I asked.

‘The architect.’ She pauses and considers before continuing. ‘The people who are going to be on site, the carpenters and the plumbers. In fact, I already know some of them, Mummy. You know them. Guy and Chris who worked on the farm last summer? And William, Lucy’s brother? *You know*. And Vita and I are going to London next week to look at the interior shops and the wallpaper and fabric places. And we are going to Harrods. And Oxford street!’ Her face had become flushed and she looked sweet and uncomplicated with excitement. She looked at Vita who was silent and whose face was unusually blank and remote. She visibly composed herself and her voice, when she spoke again, was stern and censorious. ‘I know it’s not your thing, but I don’t want to work at the farm. I certainly don’t want,’ she gestured vaguely with both hands, ‘this.’ Her gesture of distaste was confusingly restricted to a small space immediately around her, as if it were Vita and Rollo’s attractive dining room she was rejecting, rather than my life, her grandparents’ farm, or our little town.

I had nothing to say, could not disagree with her pointing out the difference between us. The King and her grandparents would like Dolly to be involved in such a business; they would also appreciate those connections that Dolly was keen to foster. What do I know about such things, about networking and career progress? If my parents had not worked hard, leaving me the house and a modest, but helpful cash inheritance, my daughter and I would probably be homeless. My wages at the farm are below those that my mother took home as a cleaner and I

have never applied for another job. I would interview like a newly arrived foreigner, unsure of protocol and wary of the language. I had no place telling these glittering people that my daughter was not permitted to work with them. But I did. I tried to keep her, as I tell myself now.

‘No. Dolly, I don’t think you should be working now or going down to London. You’ve only just finished your exams,’ I said. ‘And you will be starting A levels in September. You should be spending the summer with your friends.’ I looked at Vita and Rols. ‘She can’t do this. It’s too much.’

There was a silence at the table, punctuated only by Dolly’s heavy sighs.

‘That’s fine, Sunday,’ said Vita carefully and clearly, as though we were some distance apart, rather than next to one another. ‘If you feel that way, of course I won’t take Dolly to town or let her help out. Would you let her come tomorrow though? Because the children would be very disappointed if I don’t take Dolly with me; they really don’t want an old lady like me around. Rollo and I can start measuring up while Dolly distracts them. He didn’t get much done when he went on his own. In fact, he had some equipment stolen.’

Rollo put his hands up in protest, ‘Well, stolen is a strong word, Vee. Certainly, I left the premises missing one or two tape measures. But things do get lost on jobs, so...’

They debated for a moment as to whether he had been careless or a victim of petty crime at the Home and it seemed that Vita won. When it finally fell silent, the three of them looked at me expectantly.

‘Dolly can go tomorrow, but that is all,’ I told them, feeling like a parent sternly addressing my family of children. The three of them looked back at me; their faces were distant and unmoved and as unlike children as they could ever have been.

Vita’s husband nodded smoothly at her and then at Dolly. And I, too, nodded, aware of my daughter watching me closely with an encouraging expression fixed on her lovely face.

Vita smiled at me brightly before excusing herself to prepare the coffee tray. Rollo immediately got to his feet and she made a downward sweep with her hand, which saw him sit back down as quickly as if force had been used. Dolly followed her into the kitchen, and they left a silence behind them that was rare in that house, where hosting was an art. I noticed a pack of cards on the sideboard.

‘Do you play bridge, Rollo?’ I asked keenly. ‘I could play all night, but I should warn you, I am excellent. My father taught me to play and he always said I was a natural.’

‘We will play tonight,’ he announced grandly. ‘Let’s see how much of a player you really are.’ He patted his tummy with satisfaction as if he had just eaten something unexpectedly good. Then he carefully poured himself the last of the wine; the darkly green hued glass turned the liquid within black. When the wine flowed out fast and red, the altered colour was like a trick. I knew that when Rollo looked up, he would have crafted a question designed to lead us into discussion. He deliberately controlled the conversation between himself and other people, like a ball he bounced constantly from one hand to another to distract their questions away from himself and into a winning spot. It was only that; a craft, a skill, and it could not touch or move him more than any other game.

Vita concluded the evening before half past ten by announcing her tiredness. The three of us responded by standing up as though suddenly realising we were all late for something else. Dolly was staying over, and I left without either the promised game of Bridge or a mention of dinner the following Friday. Were we, simply, after several Fridays in a row together, so ensconced in the weekly habit of dinner that it no longer needed to be formally referenced? Or was it, instead, a period that was never to be repeated? My etiquette book recommended responding to such omitted invitations with ‘quiet dignity.’ Any insult, whether intended or accidental, will fail to register if one ignores being excluded and manages to refrain from all

enquiry either directly or through a third party. The absence of an expected invitation was, apparently, a chance to show one's breeding by being magnanimous and restrained.

That night, and the following day, I went over and over the previous evening, replaying all the conversations, but the only poorly received comment was my refusal for Dolly to work on the Lakeside renovation and to travel to London. I could not, afterwards, justify this ban, which I imposed mainly because they had not told me about the visits, even when I must have had dinner with them, spoken with them directly afterwards. Dolly was not my property, I reasoned, she spent time with her grandparents, her friends and her father. If she wanted to widen her circle to include Vita and Rollo and to experience the world of work, then it was my role to support and encourage this. I felt as I had when I was a child, before I let go of my anxious hold on Dolores. Something similar had whirled and scratched inside me when I first began to hear my sister coming home in darkness.

Long before she reached Dolly's age, my sister had frequently padded up our carpeted stairs, smelling of something other than herself as she passed my bedroom in the early hours of the morning. Eventually I no longer dared to look up at her from my bed, to see her expression or her dishevelled appearance. I did not want to wonder where she went or who she went there with. I needed to prevent the fluttering concern from entirely consuming me.

When I was woken by the sound of my sister tripping over the front doorstep and giggling nervously to herself, I did not allow myself to think about her. I picked up my Italian book in the darkness instead and held it to my fast-beating heart as I recalled the various traditions to which the Southern Italians adhered. I absorbed myself in facts. I lost myself in the routines and rituals that were first performed in the villages of Southern Italy, in those communities who for hundreds of years and without question or deviation, held tightly on to their beliefs. I admired the perseverance of a people who could retain their identities even when they

emigrated and lived in another country who did not care for the newcomers' way of living. It was on those nights that I first understood why the history of Southern Italy spoke to me. Why their stories felt like a gift so real I could hold them in my hand. They were a people who were connected to their locality, whose identity was primarily defined by their village, by that *campanilismo*, as was that of their neighbour, who loved their region in the same way. But when the new state of Italy attempted to homogenise their local identities and when poverty, too, forced them to emigrate in unprecedented numbers, stripping entire villages of their male numbers, they did not surrender to the ways of their second new country. They were steadfast in their expression of their village identities, resettling in America among those from the same area, not simply from the same country, and continuing their local practices, speaking in their own, distinct language and not that which was dictated to them by the new Italy. They were not in America to plant, they would not succumb to the melting pot offered by a powerful nation, but instead they stood and celebrated their difference of culture.

I, too, wanted to live with my own people, with others like me. And if I could not, if I found myself stranded and alone in my behaviours, I still wanted to live in the way that felt natural to me, celebrating and protecting the rituals, the life, in which I believed. I dreamed of growing up to become a good, if faraway, citizen of Salerno, or Palermo, or any part of Sicily that would have me. I hoped all this for myself when I was a child hearing Dolores creep through our night-time house. She and I did not speak about her late-night adventures, but I did tell her how I felt about those Southern Italian villagers.

'You want to go to Italy?' she replied.

'No, I do not want to go to Italy. I want to live like the villagers do, to be a Southern Italian here. Where I will know what to do.'

And in an entirely irrelevant, but well-intentioned response, Dolores scrupulously cleaned out one of her emptied hot chocolate jars and stuck a label across it on which she wrote,

Sunday's Italian trip. She put it on a shelf in our kitchen, where it remains today, and directed all of us to put our spare change into it and then to observe as the coins transformed into an amount vast enough to buy passports, air tickets and hotel accommodation for the four of us when we travelled to Italy. Within days, however, each of them was using the collection jar for petty cash withdrawals instead and I did not care. I was not saving for Italy. I was studying to become a proud Southern Italian villager; someone whose identity was so fixed that even a move to America could not displace it. I think I still am.

I consciously return to those Italian studies whenever the scratching creature inside my chest is reawakened, whirling around as he gathers momentum. It still pleases me to think of him trying to access my heart with the points of his too-long nails, only to find me unreachable, entirely absorbed, as I am, in my Italian book. I imagine him raging silently on in my chest, as unjustly furious as a robber meeting an impenetrable door.

'She had plans with Rols,' said my daughter in greeting as she came into the kitchen alone, her palms held upwards in theatrical surrender. 'What colourful thing do we have for dinner this evening?'

'But she didn't mention that yesterday. Chicken and potatoes,' I was at the kitchen counter mixing salad dressing as we spoke. 'And salad. Where is Vita?'

'I don't know. They're doing something.' Dolly said, sitting down at the table expectantly. It was laid for the three of us and there were bread rolls arranged on a napkin within a small basket, just as Vita always had at her dinners.

'But I was expecting her here though. We will see her on Tuesday, won't we?' I felt, then, as if I had inadvertently banned that which I wanted from my home and for the first time ever, Dolly no longer felt like all there was or even, like enough. She shrugged in response to my

questions, and I resolved to try and concentrate on her instead, a practice which had once been effortless. ‘How was the Home today? What are the children like?’

She drummed her fingers lightly on the table. ‘It was fine. They are sweet kids.’ I smiled; many of the Home’s residents were teenagers and some of these would have been the same age as my daughter. ‘But really, the building is falling to pieces, so I think they are excited about the move.’

‘When are they moving out?’ I asked.

‘Some of them have gone already, to a big place in Lancaster. And the children who are going to foster homes are leaving on Monday. So, it will be all ours after that.’ She rubbed her hands together as if trying to generate warmth. ‘I told them what we are going to do to the place, and they were really interested.’ I raised an eyebrow at the casually employed ‘we’ as she thickly buttered a small roll and then put it into her mouth whole, as she used to when she was little. She chewed and then swallowed, ‘What *they* are going to do.’

How odd, I thought, that my child talked about these strangers as if they were family or very longstanding friends. But I had already planned what I would say about this and so I continued.

‘Yes, well, I have decided it’s fine if you go over there again. To the Home. And to London with them if you want to. Sometimes. But you must let me know exactly when you are going and where you are. It all sounds fine anyway. I was just surprised that you hadn’t told me about it before. And Vita didn’t.’ I sounded to my own ears, like a sulky child.

Dolly, though, was surprisingly gracious. She had matured so much already that summer that I felt ridiculous for daring to tell her where she could go and who she could see. ‘Mummy, it’s fine. You always get strange about new people. I told Vita and Rols, and they totally understand.’ She smiled, winningly. ‘And I told them you’d change your mind too. Don’t worry about it.’

I prepared two supper trays so we could eat together in front of the television instead, and as I did this, I wondered if I was strange about new people. We had never had enough of those in our lives for me to have developed a pattern for it. My daughter's gentle face and tone did not match her words, which felt sharp and disloyal. Her father can predict people's behaviour like this; he, too, would have guessed on my relenting about Dolly working with Vita and Rollo. He shared intimate knowledge about others easily, as though secrets were just another disposable possession to be given away. When we were married, he would tell me about his affairs, with a rueful and keen expression, describing each woman in greater detail when I did not try to discover more about them. I expect that meant, in turn, he discussed me with those women, too. It felt imperative that my child did not speak about me and my oddities to the new neighbours, though, I realised. For without this new friendship, that is all Rollo and Vita would have been. More neighbours.

Dolly cut into my thoughts. 'They will be able to house the children much better now. Because of Rols. It's so expensive to run Lakeview, Vita says. It costs six times more to keep each child there,' she looked at her hands here and carefully held up six fingers to demonstrate. It was not the gesture itself but the way she counted up to six, her earnest concentration, which made her look far too young, suddenly, to be working, even as a pretext for being a companion to Vita. 'Six times more to live there, in a big old house, than in a foster home. Rols says the council don't find them good enough foster families though. He says they need purpose-built Children's homes, smaller than Lakeside. It's criminal, he says, for the children to live with bad foster parents or in huge institutions with leaky windows and ancient plumbing.' She pronounced the word, 'criminal' with a dramatic and seemingly random inflection, like an incompetent actress on a radio play and fluttered her hands as if in agitation I heard her roll and soften the 'r' in the way that Rollo and Vita did. Perhaps it is an affectation, then and not an impediment, I thought. The word 'institution,' too, would have come straight from Rollo.

He could have persuasively constructed Lakeview as a Dickensian ‘institution’ and then positioned himself as the rescuer. ‘He wants the council to commission him to find sites and manage new residential builds. Once we finish Lakeside.’

She was watching me for my response. Dolly and her father were the only people who have ever been able to read my face; it remains blank to most people, including me. They are gifted translators of people, of course, and I am without a social language. I have a photograph of myself holding Dolly the day after she was born. I know I was high, at the time, on a post-labour cocktail of drugs and hormones, but my flattened expression tells nothing of this, or of anything inside. Even my eyes, fixed on the photographer, who I think was Richard, look dull and disinterested. But I remember the intensity of feeling I harboured after birth, the wanting to inhale and consume the little body I had recently produced. I even, briefly, understood those peculiar stories of tiny, sweet-faced creatures eating their young and leaving no trace in their immaculate plastic cages, those notorious little rampages in suburbia that made their owners shudder even as they shared the news at the school gates the following day. Possession is a form of love, after all. The warm weight of my daughter in my arms was all I had ever wanted, before I even knew I was wanting. Before Dolly, I had thought myself to be missing the basic components which would make me human. Her little body made me real and not paper like my own family; just as I had made her, she, too fleshed me out. Yet, when I look at the one picture of myself as an unsmiling new mother, I wonder, *where was I?* Inside I was euphoric, transported suddenly into the world of others. But none of that is visible in my flat stare. *What was it like for Dolly to be mothered by that hard and unmoved face? Perhaps even my own mother’s disapproval was better than that.*

‘What does Rollo know about foster care?’ I asked.

‘Mummy!’ *Marm-may!* She spoke in a warning tone, as if shocked by my irreverence. ‘He went to *boarding school.*’ This said in hushed tones as if she had revealed a secret and

devastating revelation. In fact, Rols often referred to his time at a well-known public school, where he had studied alongside the sons of rich and aristocratic families, many of whom were even wealthier and better connected than his own. His time there, punctuated as it was by exotic holidays and regular visits home to the family estate, did not sound particularly brutal. School was where he first learned to make money, he had told us proudly; he had taken bets on national sporting events and expensively supplied his peers with various contraband from cigarettes to spirits. He had apparently even arranged, on occasion and for a large sourcing fee, for a friendly local woman to visit boys in their dormitories, an admission which Vita immediately laughed off as one of his poor-taste jokes.

I laughed. ‘Not really the same thing is it, Dolly? I expect there are benefits to being raised in a foster home, though, whatever Rollo says. It’s easier to care for children in a family environment isn’t it? And in a more comfortable place. You would rather have been brought up here than in an enormous building by various strangers, however kind they were.’

‘But he knows what it is like to live in an entirely unsuitable old building. With cold showers and freezing cold rooms.’ Dolly pouted unhappily, either at the suggestion of Rollo being uninformed, or at the thought of his boy-self inhabiting inappropriately heated accommodation. ‘He says new buildings are the way forward. Not paid foster parents or huge old houses.’ She blinked at me uncertainly.

Invoking her domestic situation with me had apparently not helped my argument for the desirability of foster homes. And who could really appreciate the benefit of a devoted parent at their side, when they had never personally known anything else? I expected that the freedom created by a procession of lively children and a rotating group of untrained staff would thrill any visiting teenage girl. There would be good people working there, and there would be unkind ones, too, who would have been ready to take advantage, just as there are in any organisation. As there are at the King’s farm. But they were children, and vulnerable ones at

that, and I found myself disagreeing with Vita, Rollo and even Dolly, about the level of care that such a large and unwieldy place could provide.

‘Well, I certainly would not want to live in a Home. Even a new one,’ she said unexpectedly, and I thought that I had perhaps underestimated her attachment to me, and to our home, after all. ‘The kids don’t even have their own stuff; they wear clothes from a shared pool. I asked one girl where she bought her jeans from and she said they weren’t hers. They showed me where the house clothes are kept, sorted by size and shared by all the kids. It’s like a really bad shop.’ She shuddered with distaste, as remote, as perfect and as private as a cat.

I remembered Dolly as a child in Jerre’s café, eating ice cream from a tiny spoon and sternly instructing me about the love her father had for his new wife. *Because they love each other so much. All the time. You don’t see what I see, Mummy. You do not see it.* Beside her in my thoughts, my mother smiled grimly; *You’re not wired right, you.* And my sister Dolores flicked her pale hair back, dripping water and laughing as she said, not unkindly, *I don’t know what it is that you are, Sunday.*

Our supper was ready, and we each took a tray into the front room, although it felt peculiar that there were just the two of us again. We watched television together distractedly and Dolly left to answer the telephone long before the programme finished. I could hear her on the telephone in the hallway, speaking to Vita.

I avoid the telephone wherever necessary, using it only for short and necessary calls, or for Dolly. My mother had found this aversion particularly troubling and for a few painful weeks when I was a teenager, she had ordered me to answer the telephone when it rang, whether we were all at home or if I was alone. Dolores, who loved the telephone, and my father, who used it only for work, were both ordered not to answer it, for this task was mine alone. Typically, the phone went unanswered during mealtimes, but she changed her position on this and would

point a raised fork first at me and then out into the hallway when the shrill tone was heard. I fidgeted and spoke over the floating voices that had no faces to follow. I misheard and took messages that made no sense. I sweated and became nauseous. I began to run out of the house at the sound of the first ring, regardless of bare feet and inappropriate clothing, or hide upstairs and become nervous simply passing the handset in the hallway. Fortunately, Mer quickly tired of the outcome of my brief period as her home receptionist. Casual callers quickly hung up on my stuttering and confused replies and I translated the queries of the more persistent ones into inscrutable messages and, at last, she forbid me from touching the telephone at all, as if it were an item I longed to use. She could not have brought herself to release me from my telephone duties without first convincing herself that this new prohibition was another form of discomfort she had imposed on me herself.

‘Vee! Vee!’ repeated Dolly from the hallway in mock outrage. And then, ‘No, don’t bother. She’s changed her mind. It’s fine. Leave it for this week. No, she wouldn’t anyway. She doesn’t like the telephone.’ She made a snorting sound that could have indicated disapproval or mirth. ‘I know! I *know*.’

And I, in the sitting room of my late parents, remained immobile and silent on what they would have called a settee and what Bunny insisted was a sofa. It was that mounting panic in which you are so scared of doing another wrong thing that you are frozen into stillness. It is like a social coma. Some people see it and move hurriedly along, either embarrassed or uninterested. Others are drawn to it; they will step closer. These are the ones who first check you are still breathing; they will stick pins in the soles of your feet and scratch them lightly along your wrists. This is where it begins.

Dolly remained uninterested in discussing the etiquette of Friday Night Dinner for the rest of the week. She knew Vita and Rollo had plans on the Friday to which we were not invited, but she did not remember who these involved. She was focussed on locating a favourite blouse and packing her bag as she was going to stay with her grandparents for the weekend. She made a studiedly casual reference that the King might make a short visit to the farm at some point. She reassured me that she would be back to help Vita on Saturday as usual and then go back to her grandparents afterwards. The Friday evening passed slowly, and I did some work in the garden, hoping Vita or Rollo might come outside. At nine o'clock, I was at home alone and in pyjamas, but still expecting Vita to knock at my door. She would be in one of her long and flowy dresses, with gold threads of jewellery around her throat and wrists. She would be barefoot, with her hair worn loose and shiny, in that way my mother termed 'undone'. She would be breathless and expectant: *Wife! Why are you still here? Aren't you coming over? Get dressed!* But she did not arrive and when I finally went to bed, it was in an empty and quiet house.

love is a demonstration

After a long weekend which should have contained Vita and Dolly, but had neither, working on Monday was a challenge. The plants seemed to have rapidly deteriorated and become fragile, despite my increased attentiveness. Their thin bodies were needy and disagreeable beneath my hands, which in turn, felt like clumsy and oversized tools. The plants responded to the distress of their caretaker as young children do, by signalling their own need more insistently, their own panic fluttering at the edge of their demands. My fingertips typically work in conversation with the plants and it is a language I understand. I feel their wanting and meet it coaxingly, with water, with light, shade, or replacement soil. That day, though, work was more like a social interaction, communication interrupted by interference like a lost voice on the radio, occasionally coming through and then fading back into undecipherable crackles. *This soil is too dry, no, it's oily and this leggy plant needs pruning, but not that hard.*

David worked diligently opposite me, the neat plants behind him making an orderly row. He had let his hair grow longer that summer, and he occasionally touched it with one hand, a suspicious, light stroking as though the feel of it were still unfamiliar, while he occasionally signed to me with the other.

Several times during the morning, he knocked on the counter to get my attention, then signed; *You okay?*

I fussed around Dolly every month during her period and she responded by becoming increasingly indifferent to my attention. I offered her paracetamol and hot water bottles and she recoiled, becoming more remote until I felt myself to be part of her temporary discomfort. If I bothered her too much in this or any other aspect, she would crossly pack her things, and go and stay with Bunny for a time. This was something she did when she was unhappy with me for any reason, sometimes simply because my dinners had become too white. I never go to

the farmhouse uninvited and so I telephoned Dolly every evening at 6pm when she stayed there. When I called to check on her, Bunny answered the telephone and gave me unsolicited advice on how to deal with a daughter who is menstruating or otherwise troubled. For a woman who has dealt with so many human and animal births, she is surprisingly genteel in the language she uses to describe periods.

‘While Dolly is *hors de combat*,’ she advised me, often and without invitation, ‘it would be best for you not to mention her condition. It doesn’t help, Sunday. She doesn’t like you fussing. After all,’ and here she would pause briefly for effect; ‘Dolly is a Forrester.’

The family name was always pronounced by its members in this way; preceded by a short little breath and then exhaled grandly with an excited emphasis on the first syllable. I never challenged Bunny, querying neither her demands on my daughter’s time, or her grave parental advice, which generally relied on my changing something central about myself in order to please her. Dolly loved her grandmother; for this reason alone, I remained polite, although the invisible and rigidly observed lines between the farm shop and the greenhouse greatly aided my diplomacy. Bunny and I still move cautiously between our two marked positions on the farm; as if standing at the front door of a stranger, we await an invitation before we will advance further.

Although it pained me when Dolly rejected my gestures of maternal help, I found myself adopting the same stance of exaggerated politeness with David when he enquired about my feelings. Formality is a familiar and reliable retreat of mine.

I am fine. Yes, yes. Thank you, I signed, my actions becoming more precise each time he asked the question. Eventually, I acquiesced to his obvious concern. *Dolly was here all weekend and I missed her.*

Was she? he signed back, his mouth downturned in doubt. *Here?*

Yes. Why? I signed.

I went in to see Richard today. He and Bunny were away all weekend. At a wedding. David signed. He smiled and continued. *Someone very important, Bunny said.* I could imagine David standing impatiently in Richard's kitchen, waiting to be told something about the harvest or about crop rotation plans and instead having to listen to Bunny showing off about the social circles in which they moved. He looked serious again. *Dolly was not with them.*

Okay, I signed. He looked at me. *I don't know!* I signed, as if in response to a question, before I went back to the plants.

All that morning, the air in the greenhouse felt dense and unyielding, as though the plants were greedily storing all the oxygen for themselves. Eventually, David tapped on one of the glass walls until I looked up from the work counter.

Lunch, he signed, and smiled briefly. *Aren't you hungry yet?*

He looked a little older with his grown-out hair but remained boyish. I followed him over to the table where we often eat together. I have always cared for this good and gentle boy who is easier to care for, who is warmer and more responsive than my own shining and slippery child.

When I was a new mother, it took me some time to get used to the question favoured by both strangers and acquaintances; 'And is she a *good* baby?' This, said with a nodding head and an expression that I came to know as expectant, cajoling.

'Oh, no,' I would say sincerely. 'She is awful. *Terrible.*'

And people would murmur and move away. At her christening, which was tastefully hosted by my parents-in-law, Dolly was placed into the arms of Bunny's sister. This woman was, herself, a mother of four and she held Dolly efficiently, admiring the satin-edged white blanket which generations of Forrester babies had worn before. I had not wanted Bunny to wrap my

baby up in that blanket. I explained to her about the utility of the everyday fringed blanket against witches, but my mother-in-law did not hold with superstition and claimed devastation if the baby did not appear in the knitted heirloom for the christening. All the Forrester family behaviours seem more ritualistic, and certainly, less meaningful, than any of the Italian traditions I know, but I have never convinced any of the King's family of this. The formalities they observe seem to serve no purpose other than to impress upon others the status of the Forrester people. Wear the proper clothes, say the proper thing, go to the proper places. You must, of course, have been to the proper school and have proper parents. There must be a proper family around you. It is acceptable, among proper people, to say, 'Fuck,' (which I do not), and 'loo,' but not, 'Pardon,' or 'toilet.' Proper people can have a sofa, but not a settee, and they have a drawing room, or a sitting room, but never a lounge. Bunny repeatedly corrected me on these things until I asked her to explain why these words, which I had grown up using, offended her. It is the only time I have ever seen her blush. Forresters do not get embarrassed.

Bunny's sister turned from Dolly to me, smiling, and asked, 'Is my great-niece a good baby? She doesn't look like a Forrester, does she? More like you. Does she sleep well?'

I like talkative people, but multiple questions like this leave me scattered and silent. I tried to extract one clear query from all that information. Everyone who has seen Dolly has remarked on her Forrester looks, I could say that. But is it rude to disagree or is that conversation? I realised I was scratching my scalp, the feel of my nails on the sensitive skin reaffirmed my presence in the same way that weight does. *There you are*, I thought, as if finding the friend from whom I had briefly been separated. Time was passing, and the two women were looking at each other now, giving up on a response.

I finished my champagne, which doubtlessly increased my cheerful tone as I replied, 'No. She's absolutely dreadful. Never sleeps.' One of the catering staff was already refilling my glass and I smiled gratefully at him.

Bunny's sister was watching me with her eyebrows raised, and her head held to one side, as if she was listening for an evasive sound frequency. I noticed that she had my daughter's eyes, the same chalky and artificial-looking colour peculiar to the women of that family. How strange to be having a conversation about my baby with a person who regarded me doubtfully from the same large, milk-blue eyes that Dolly herself had. A person who denied their family likeness as if defending an institution that required protection. I don't even want the baby to look like one of you, I thought. Forresters prize themselves so highly that they are suspicious even about the genetic similarities in infants, keen to weed out the deliberate copies and mimics. For who would not want to be a Forrester, even by stealth? The expectant silence continued; obviously, this woman was waiting for me to say more.

I took another sip of my drink and continued, brightly; 'Never sleeps for more than an hour. Nope, she is not good. Not *at all*.'

And Bunny tapped her sister's arm in a private little Morse code of instruction, and they carried my baby away into the group of smart people, most of whom I knew only a little, if at all. After the party, when everyone had left, and the caterers were noisily collecting glasses, the King and his father went out onto the farm to check on the lambs, about whom both men were curiously and sweetly paternal. In the newly quiet house, Bunny came to sit with me on the sofa. I felt pleasantly trusting towards her, mostly from the socializing and champagne. Since the birth, I had spent all my time alone with Dolly and rarely kept adult company. I had also been strictly teetotal during the pregnancy, despite disparaging comments from both my in-laws about fussy young mothers and their modern superstitions about alcohol.

'You love Dolly, don't you?' my mother-in-law said to me, her eyes fixed on the baby in my arms. I laughed awkwardly. She might have said, *You are Sunday, aren't you? Or, you have two feet; is that right?*

I tried to explain my position to Bunny, as I try to understand the world, via analogy. I told her how my sister had been best friends with a set of identical twins the year before she died. She spent every day that summer with the girls, bringing them to our house and parading them along the street like paired exotic pets, with their carefully matching clothes and their habit of permanently linking arms. She had been the sole non-family guest at the twins' birthday dinner, which was held at the towns' smartest hotel on a hot August evening. When she came home that night, I wanted to know about the people, the music, the food; it was, after all, a place I was unlikely to ever visit myself. But Dolores had one topic of conversation about the evening.

'There were lots of presents from the family.' She spoke slowly, as if working out a puzzle. 'But the twins didn't give each other gifts, or even cards. When I asked why, they said that it was like writing a card or wrapping a present for yourself, too odd and embarrassing. They even blushed when they talked about it. They squirmed, really.'

Dolores was knowing, as Dolly is. Both my sister and my daughter would have been able to address a card to a twin sister with the same face as themselves or speak openly of maternal love to strangers at a party. When you can know people at a glance, see their thoughts and predict their next move, nothing feels too close or intimate. They were born with the ability to read faces like text. Each, too, could conjure and convincingly express the response that would make them likeable, and in turn, trusted. They function as reflective surfaces, as hard and automatic as glass. But, for me, the borders between myself and others are blurred; people are without neat edges and it is not always clear where I end, and another begins. So I understood the twins' self-consciousness at naming one another separate, their refusal to write a card that felt as though it was for themselves. I had the same overlapping of self with Dolly for a long time and it followed that publicly favouring my child was, in fact, an expression of self-admiration. She was first an expansion of myself rather than a whole, new, person. It is the love my mother felt for the lake, a defining and sharp-edged little stone that lives inside you;

sometimes it catches painfully, reminding you to whom or what you really belong. And that scratching little pain is a welcome reminder that you are not alone after all, that there is something out there that is so much more than you. It is the relief of your confirmed smallness in the world.

I told Bunny, too, how when September came, Dolores wordlessly took up with another girl, but the twins continued to wait for her at the bus stop. They gazed wistfully after my sister as she glided past them with a thoughtful look on her face, as though she was trying to recall their exact place in her distant past. Dolores loved like that, briefly and feverishly. But her attention was so visibly demonstrated that it always felt as if it would last forever. It was from her that I learned not to believe in love which is performed for onlookers.

When the fishing tourists admired the beauty of our lake, Mer would nod briefly in polite agreement and press her lips together tightly, as if to prevent herself from talking. Now that I have Dolly, I told Bunny, I know what my mother was thinking: *That is my love and it is not for me, and certainly not for you, to speak of.*

When Bunny reprimanded me after the christening, then, I defended myself with these memories of inarticulate love. I explained to her in detail how the twins' fused selves and my mother's oneness with the lake, were connections, like mine with Dolly, that did not easily translate into language. I told her how the Sicilians have a special term for this pull between mother and child; *mammismo*. She smiled tightly, and looked intently away from me, as if trying to locate something momentarily lost. I recognised this expression as one she adopted when past patients approached her, wanting to share the details of their lives; the baby that Bunny had guided into the world with her capable hands and who was now at primary school, or perhaps a longstanding complication in their own recovery from the birth. These women obviously felt connected to her as their midwife and were confident that she would be invested in their continuing maternal stories. Bunny, though, would straighten her posture and arrange

her face into that contained and distant smile that remained polite but also conveyed that she was being interrupted on her way somewhere very important. And the women would fall silent, leaning slightly backwards as though a door had been unexpectedly closed on them and they watched as Bunny moved elegantly away. The little smile was evident as Bunny listened to me talk and I, too, was closed in until I fell silent. She stroked Dolly's little brow which was furrowed in sleep as though in deep concentration.

'Yes, yes,' she said brusquely, as if we had already covered all the possible discussion of the twins, of my family and their demonstrations of love. 'But,' continued my mother-in-law, her long finger continuing to trace the minute wrinkles on Dolly's face, 'with the baby, people don't understand when you say she is not good. It makes them uncomfortable. So, don't.'

I looked down at Dolly as I replied, 'Don't make them uncomfortable?' That seemed like an entirely unachievable aim, and one whose success or failure I would, in any case, remain oblivious to.

'Don't say that anymore. About Dolly.' As she spoke, she removed her index finger abruptly from the baby's crumpled little face. Then she put both hands on her own thighs with a congratulatory slap and stood up decisively as if we were business-people who had agreed on something serious and were reflecting, post-contract. 'I'll get you a coffee.'

Bunny does not care that I do not drink anything hot and continues to make me tea and coffee whenever she has one herself. She behaves with me like the firm parent of a tantruming child; *continue as normal and refuse to notice her protests.*

I did not tell Bunny my concerns about the new Forrester in my arms. That my sister never folded anything or anyone carefully inside her bones and loved like that and I was already unconvinced that Dolly could, either. Seers need to keep you always in their sight like a prize; they will not nestle you within as something precious. Something that is sometimes warm and gentle, but occasionally, if you turn away, it becomes jagged and sharp enough to make you

gasp. This is a focussing pain; it is what kept my mother's eyes trained on the coastline, even after the dry drowning, when she had finally come to despise the lake. It is what makes me return, over and over, and always alone, to the Southern Italy in my mind. Such a capacity for love should have been evidence enough of our maternal abilities. Yet both Mer and I were to lose our daughters; only our fixations remained with us. When I am unforgiving, I believe my mother and I retained only that which we held on to most tightly. And that was not our children, but our obsessions.

I am unlike Bunny who believes love is a demonstration and something to be sold to an audience; that it is a trick or a deception. And I am not Dolly, who wants to convince me that the showy affection between the King and his wife is proof of devotion. Since my daughter was born, I have fallen asleep each night to images of her in my mind and I wake every morning to the same thought: *Dolly!* It is how I can continue to live, now, without her, because my love for her remains constant; it is as fat as a beloved pet and receives the same frequent attention. It is more, certainly, than conjuring polite and pleasing lies for party guests. My love knew and named imperfect and even bad without flinching when Dolores was alive and now does so with Dolly. Because it is unaltered by truth and does not rely on goodness, which is, after all, uncommon.

David, though, is a good man. I used to imagine that he and Dolly might get together when she was old enough and it cheered me to think of his kindness gentling some of her abrasive quality. But I quickly realised that they did not even like each other. If Dolly came to the greenhouse, she waited for me outside rather than speak to David. Initially, I assumed that this was due to an awkwardness about his flattened speech and the intense face-watching he requires in order to lip-read. But of course, Dolly did not entertain feelings of awkwardness. It would not have benefited her to do so. After their first few meetings, I tried to reassure her that David would

be keen to talk to her and that he was used to slightly laboured conversations with non-signers. Dolly was on the sofa, wearing pyjamas printed with tiny rabbits and reading a library copy of *Lady Susan*. At that time, she was very taken with Jane Austen and was re-reading all the novels chronologically.

She shrugged and replied without looking up; ‘Great. He’s happy to talk to me. But I don’t want to talk to *him*.’ She turned a page with a showy flick of her hand, signalling that our conversation was finished. Dolly’s friends did not cut their mothers’ conversations off in this way, I knew, from observing them together. In fact, other mothers spoke to their children with the seniority that Dolly reserved to address me. Although this assuredness was typical of my dealings with my daughter, it sat oddly with her smooth and girlish face.

And David, too, did not want to discuss Dolly. His face closed into stillness when I spoke about her, as though he were a good student tolerating a necessary but unpopular class.

Usually David and I have lunch together in a favourite corner of the greenhouse. I take the shaded side and he, with his tanned skin, seats himself opposite, underneath a large square of glaring sunshine. That day, I did not want to talk to him about where Dolly had been and instead, to make him laugh, I told him about the steak tartare incident, emphasising my disgust at the dish.

Your face! He signed, pointing towards me and comically assumed a look of revulsion to mirror my own. Then he considered my response; *Although*, he signed, *fair enough. I would not eat that shit either.*

I waved an admonitory finger at him for the swear word and he grinned back, entirely pleased with himself. We both know I don’t really mind his language, but this pretence of gentle rebuke is something we do occasionally, and it seems to satisfy us both. It fulfils my instinct to mother him and perhaps meets a maternal need in him, too, whose own mother is so

aloof and immaculate. My own daughter, since she was a toddler, became instantly and violently outraged at the mildest disapproval of her behaviour. So, instead, in the greenhouse, David and I act out a parent and child relationship where I can caution him because he knows that it is qualified by care.

Dolly says it's really tasty, though. She loves it, I signed back, feeling protective of the admittedly bizarre taste my daughter shares with Vita.

David nodded, his expression serious. *Yes,* he signed. *Yes, I can imagine she does.*

After he left, though, to begin his afternoon work on the fields, I was glad to be alone. I was rethinking my routines and it unsettled me. Fridays had been allocated to Vita, as had many of my evenings, and now I had to rework this. It was not a matter of one missed week that had been explained; I had heard nothing from them and therefore it seemed that the evenings next door, and the nights at my house with Vita, were finished. The future plans I had made to call Dolly back from university through Rollo and Vita already seemed juvenile. It was ridiculous that I had ever believed I could hold onto any of them after Dolly left. I was failing to foster any lifestyle, any relationship, that would secure my daughter's interest. I resolved that I would do whatever was required to keep my friendship with Vita. And this would enable me to keep Dolly.

After work, I went to Vita's house and knocked at her door and there was no reply for some minutes. But, as I turned, finally, towards my house, she appeared, dressed in a short kimono and with her face shiny and clean.

'Oh. You,' she said.

I had my invitation prepared and so I did not respond to this but repeated my lines; 'Hello Vita. We haven't seen you for a while and wondered if you would like to join us for supper tomorrow? We are having chicken with a cream sauce.' I hesitated and then spoke into the

silence. ‘Because Dolly told me Rols is away and I know you don’t like being at home on your own.’

The final line was unscripted and voiced as a response to her stillness; an effort to claim some knowledge of her on my part, some reason for my being before her, talking. However, as soon as I had spoken, it seemed vaguely daring to have referenced her husband and her domestic arrangements; our friendship had cooled so dramatically. I felt I was an interruption; it was like catching someone in a private moment, an uninvited intimacy clumsily taken. But Vita did not rush to reassure me with an embarrassed apology, as people do when inadvertently discovered in an embrace or aggressively berating their children. Instead, she slowly took a lighter and a package from the console table next to her and lit a cigarette. Her eyes remained fixed on me throughout, as if I were a stranger whom she could not afford to look away from.

‘Dolly said,’ she paused to inhale, and then exhaled deeply, an exaggerated smoky sigh. ‘She said she is allowed to come to Lakeside. Is that right, Sunday?’ Not *Wife* anymore, then.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ I repeated.

‘And she can come to London with me? Yes?’

‘Yes. She can.’ I did not ask if they had already taken her to London, if they had all been there for the weekend past. It was already too late.

‘Because you know, her grandparents are very happy for her to be down there with us,’ Vita was watching me closely as she spoke.

‘I didn’t know that you had spoken to them ...’ I said. ‘When did you see them?’

‘We’ve been in for drinks with them a few times,’ Vita said. She inhaled slowly again and as she blew out the smoke, her face began to soften behind the little cloud. She raised an eyebrow and lightly shook her head as if in denial; ‘They invite us in whenever we pick Dolly up from the farm. We have to accept *sometimes* or they’ll be *offended*. So,’ she said, ‘we’ll see

you here for Friday dinner this week, won't we.' And this was not a question, but a statement of fact.

I felt myself blushing with pleasure and I smiled; 'Yes, that would be lovely. Thank you, Vita.'

She patted my arm and moved to close the door between us. As I reached my house, I heard her door opening again; 'See you soon, Wife,' she shouted cheerily. *Wife*. And I waited for the comfort to descend, knowing I should have felt that I was winning once again by being back in her favour. But it did not seem like I had won. Rather, I knew I had given away something valuable without even realising I once held it in my own hand.

On Friday evening Rollo was home early enough to greet us as we arrived and he held me for an extra moment when he greeted us at the front door, silently acknowledging our period without contact in his gentlemanly way. When he released me, his round glasses were slightly askew, and he adjusted them awkwardly, with both hands, as though unfamiliar with this occurrence. Before we sat down at the table, he proposed a toast to me; it was a vague and wandering address, as though avoiding something unsavoury. It was as if our routine had been interrupted by my taking an unsanctioned trip which could not be referenced. Vita asked Dolly to help her bring dinner from the kitchen and for a moment, Rollo and I remained silent, listening to them chatting animatedly and clinking plates in the next room.

'Rollo,' I said, before he could say something smooth and distracting, 'are the plans at Lakeview going well? Have the children been moved out now?'

'Yes, it's empty now, which makes things easier. But we have some concerns about over-developing such a large single unit in this area. Property prices have a different ceiling here which I hadn't planned for.' His gaze flickered towards the closed kitchen door and sighed lightly. He took a long sip of red wine and when he spoke again, I saw that his teeth were

stained pink. Rollo's small teeth gave him a childish look when he smiled, a schoolboy playing at being one of the grown-ups. His glasses were large and performed like another borrowed prop of maturity. I liked the incongruity of Rollo's face against his sophisticated suits; the little teeth and oversized glasses only added to his charm. 'But I mustn't bore you with the day job - shall I top you up?' He reached toward the bottle without his usual enthusiasm, his pose and restraint that of a formal sommelier rather than a party-loving host.

'No, thank you. But I do want to know about it. It's Dolly's job at the moment and she doesn't tell me much at all.'

Rols patted his already smooth hair and then stroked his smooth jawline, as if feeling for regrowth. Well...' he began, stretching out the vowels, *weeeell*. 'Hmmm, well, it's complicated, darling.' Rollo did not often call me this; although Vita used the word frequently and indiscriminately, even as a reprimand, her husband did not.

Vita appeared in the doorway holding a large platter of antipasto with both hands, 'Look what I have made!' she said cheerfully.

Dolly followed behind her with a glass bowl of brightly coloured salad.

'What you have made?' teased Rollo. 'That's funny, I seem to remember buying that in Harrods deli only this morning.'

Vita put the platter onto the table and placed Dolly's salad bowl alongside it. 'Nonsense, darling,' she said, entirely seriously. 'Now go and get the salad dressing so we can eat.' She patted his bottom as he walked past her to the kitchen. He made an exaggerated jump away from her as if startled, then he immediately stepped backwards into her still raised hand and they both laughed. They smiled broadly and solely at one another when he returned to the dining room, holding several glass bottles of dressing.

Dolly watched them thoughtfully and I wondered if she was remembering the short time that the King and I had lived as a couple. And that he and I had never behaved in this intimate

manner, with practised little routines and responses reserved only for one another. Vita and Rollo's playfulness suggested that the time they spent alone would never be enough to express their attachment, that it necessarily spilled out into their public life because it was too large to contain privately.

'Sunday,' Rollo said, 'let me talk you through this antipasto. It is a little different to the one we had before. This one....' The three of us had already begun to choose items from the platter and as he talked on, he fussed over our plates as if we were infants being carefully weaned. He was at his most ebullient and distracting, putting pieces on our plates and raffishly removing those which he said we would not enjoy before dropping them on his own plate. I already knew that I would only be eating the white bread from my side plate. I knew, too, that none of them would mention this when they cleared the plates and saw my starter untouched. And I looked at Vita and Dolly protesting but laughing along excitedly with him and I did not ask any more questions.

After dinner, Dolly brought the coffee tray in from the kitchen and she put it down carefully next to Rollo. She looked out onto the terrace.

'It's still warm, isn't it?' she said. 'Let's take it out there.' She paused before moving the tray, and looked at me, 'Is that okay with you?'

My daughter's association with our neighbours seemed to be encouraging a gentleness which I had never seen before in her. I nodded happily and followed her outside. She frowned with concentration as she set out three tiny cups, a jug of cream and a French press on the narrow garden table. Rollo and Vita followed us politely outside, as if this were our house and they were the guests. He nodded for Dolly to pour his coffee and, with some enthusiasm, they discussed the French press, which he brought home recently after a trip to a casino at Deauville. At home, Dolly always used the same saucepan my father had for making coffee.

Her grandparents were definitely more concerned with tea and Rollo's press seemed to be a symbol of sophistication for her. Dolly had already informed all of us how making coffee in a saucepan was basic and old-fashioned by comparison.

'We'll get you one in John Lewis when we are in town, Dols. You can choose it yourself,' said Vita airily.

'No, don't, Vee,' said Rollo. 'I will get a proper one for her next time I go to France. Just like this one.'

And Vita did not respond crossly to his command, as I had thought she would. Instead, she beamed at Rollo as if he had unexpectedly yielded to an overly optimistic request. Dolly, too, smiled at him, her face unusually open and she put down the press to give him a brief embrace.

'Thank you, Rols! I will use it every day!'

He leaned back in his chair with a deep inhalation and his chest visibly expanded, the garden lights bringing his handsome face out of the darkness. The coffee tray also held Rollos' garishly coloured petits fours and an iced soda water for me, served in a heavy crystal glass. I coveted their crystal for the reassuring weight of it in my hand. The surprising heaviness of small crystal glasses somehow makes them both alive and trusting; they double in weight like a sleeping child in your hold. *Here I am*, whispers crystal, *I am made heavy by my trust in you*. Rollo and Vita always kept soda water in now, just for my visits. Their attention to my preferences touched me; I had not been known in this way before and found acceptable. There I was seen, and approved of, even indulged. It was the closest thing to intimacy that I have ever known.

I have heard families speaking of one another's eccentricities as Rollo and Vita spoke of mine. I had begun to notice that, just like my new friends, other people laugh about their loved ones' observance of peculiar habits, but with the same fondness of possession. *She wears a coat even in summer. He won't talk to anyone before breakfast*. I realise, now, that my mother

could still have loved me, if she had chosen to. It is possible to know the oddities of people and to love them regardless. I want this to comfort me, but it does not. I had always thought that I was an unloved child purely because of my peculiarities. Since Vita and Rollo and their cheerful celebration of my strangeness, I wonder if there was something else Mer witnessed in me, something that she found not simply different, but abhorrent.

On the terrace, Vita and Rollo decided to show us the complicated first dance which they learned for their wedding. This event had taken place over twenty years ago, he reminded us, as he made an uncertain face. Vita was wearing a sleeveless yellow dress without jewellery and her skin was even more deeply tanned than when we first met. Rollo, lean and handsome in his dark suit, was an excellent dancer and he began by taking their routine very seriously, but she kept forgetting what came next. They gave up on their recreation of the original and finished the dance by circling the terrace instead with her standing barefoot on Rollo's big, shiny shoes. She kept a comedically pained expression on her face and held her exposed limbs all stiff like a little doll, while the rest of us laughed so much, we were actually crying instead. But Rollo was so gentle and patient with her that I was grateful for the laughter to cover my tears. I had not, have not, ever been looked at or held in such a way. And I hoped that Vita knew her good fortune and did not take it for granted. But, like Dolly and Rollo, she did not have to sacrifice very much of herself to be loveable and this, perhaps spoiled them all for others. Should great love be attained without effort? I do not believe that anything so easily won can be prized at all.

When we began to feel a chill on the terrace, we moved indoors to the front room and watched as Dolly leafed familiarly through Tom's vast record collection.

Occasionally, she held one up and Rollo said, 'No!' Eventually, he shouted, 'No! What is wrong with that fucking man?' *That fucking man.* 'He listens to a load of shit! Shit!'

Unlike Vita, Rollo swore very rarely, but when he did, it had the same effect on Vita as someone leaving or returning to the table had on him. She would leap to her feet as though summoned. That evening she rose from the sofa instantly, gesturing silently for Dolly to move away from the records before crouching in front of them herself. While Vita flicked efficiently through the records, Dolly sat down without a word; her gaze was fixed on Vita as though studying her process. Vita quickly found the record she wanted and when she put it on, Rollo settled back into his chair and closed his eyes.

‘He’s tired,’ she said to me. ‘All this driving...he doesn’t need to be going back to town so often, but he is so conscientious. To a *fault*, I think.’ She and Dolly exchanged a glance, which Vita broke first, looking away with a slight blush as Dolly continued to watch her, thoughtful and unmoved.

‘Rollo told me that Lakeview is becoming more complicated?’ I said to Vita as she sat down next to Dolly on the sofa, uncharacteristically fidgeting with her hair and smoothing her dress down.

‘Yes, it has.’ She stopped picking at her clothes and sat back against the cushions. ‘He told you we have to break it up?’

‘Yes, he did.’ I replied with more certainty than was required.

‘So, we are splitting the estate. The grounds will be sold off in plots once we get the permissions in place. And the house will be divided up into several units. You know, apartments. Very nice ones. Possibly a retirement block. Rols is just looking at the numbers before Dolly and I start to design.’

‘Yes, he showed me his plans earlier,’ said Dolly. ‘I still think some of our initial ideas could work by just shrinking down some of the layouts, Vee.’

Rollo snored lightly as they talked on about the apartments, about bathroom suites, kitchen plans and colour schemes. They discussed what their own perfect house would look like, and

apparently, it would have been aesthetically very similar and situated in London. The two of them sounded as much like a couple as Vita and Rollo did, their communication easy and effortless, interrupting each other smoothly without the need to apologise. The music played on as the two women spoke; it was a classical piece and one of Rollo's many favourites.

At work the following week, David commented on my recently restored cheerfulness. I told him about the evening before and he nodded encouragingly.

Excellent. The mysterious neighbours, he signed. And then, impatiently, exaggerating the movements as though raising his voice; *Go on. Tell me.*

And I told him about the champagne, the petits fours, the stories and the laughter. When I talked about Vita dancing on Rollo's feet, I did an impression of her, stiff-legged and confused, and he shook his head.

You would have laughed. It was funny, I signed. *And they have given Dolly a summer job. She is going to work in their building business.*

Why? He signed.

Because they are kind. Friends. I added the last word randomly, because I could not explain why they wanted to take her to Lakeside or to London or why she would want to go. I imagined she would be roped in to perform menial chores, telephone calls and orders, of which there must be plenty. Dolly would probably lose interest in going to Lakeside after some work there, once she saw how thin the veneer of glamour is on such places.

How old are they? he signed.

My age. No, A little bit older than me, I replied. *He is perhaps 40?* I considered Vita's age then remembered our conversation about how they had met at university. *So, she he is almost 50.*

He nodded and went back to pruning; the small secateurs looked like a pencil in his large hands. After a few moments, he tapped on the table, so I would look at him.

Is he handsome? he signed to me. His signing became rapid, and I concentrated to keep up. If he had been speaking at that speed, I would have been floundering. *This man? And is she? Are they rich?*

Yes, and yes, I signed back, deliberately abrupt in my repetition. I considered the final question and signed, *They have nice things. Yes, rich.*

And Dolly? he signed. He reverted to using the sign for a children's dolly, cradling it in his arms, but I ignored this. He repeated the sign; *Dolly likes them?*

I nodded, tightly. David nodded to himself, as though considering, and carried on with his work. While I was still watching him, he put down his secateurs and signed, his eyes still on the plant in front of him.

You are a good mum, he signed. *And Dolly ...* here, he stopped and almost imperceptibly shook his head. He looked up and signed, *Really good,* before he went back to the rose.

When I tried to engage him in conversation again, his responses were brief. His face was closed down as though in repose, and I thought he must have been tired; perhaps he was still adjusting to living away from home and alone, for the first time. At lunchtime, knowing he would be working out on the hot fields all afternoon, I got a bottle of lemonade and a packet of biscuits from the farm shop and put them both in his rucksack.

something markedly different

The following Friday Dolly suggested we wear similar black fitted dresses and identical velvet Alice bands to dinner. We had not matched outfits since she was very young, and I found it touching, although I disliked the fit and fabric of the dresses she insisted on. When we arrived, Vita met us at the door in one of her brightly patterned kaftan style dresses and I was glad she had chosen something markedly different from what we both wore.

She greeted and kissed us both, then she stood back, clapping her hands and making a little shriek as if just seeing our outfits for the first time. ‘You two look so sweet! Dolly and I did that the other day didn’t we Dols? To go shopping? It was so lovely.’ She leaned in towards me and lowered her voice as if imparting something Dolly should not hear. Her perfume surrounded me; it had notes of almond and marzipan, the sweet and artificial smell of celebratory feasts. ‘The cashier told me she could tell instantly we were mother and daughter... imagine!’ She looked away modestly, sweeping past us to close the front door and then gestured expansively towards the kitchen.

As we walked ahead, Vita followed us and kept on talking; her much raised tone demonstrated that Dolly and I were both included in the conversation now, that perhaps even Rollo, if he was already somewhere in the house, was also intended to hear. ‘I think it was just the matching outfits though; it’s deceiving isn’t it? Even if you aren’t anything alike. It makes you *seem* similar. Even if you aren’t, really.’

Dolly turned to smile back at me as we entered the kitchen. I noticed that her hairband had moved backward a little, allowing random strands of hair to escape and I reached up to fix my own in the same, looser style.

Over dinner, Rollo talked about his plans for Lakeview, gesturing as expansively as a television magician. I watched his hands as he weaved them through the air and had to remind myself to listen to what he was saying.

‘The alterations are going well. The council have been extremely...’ he paused as if considering how to phrase something sensitive and then continued, ‘receptive. They are very good chaps you know. Accommodating. They realise they need new life in the area, new ways of thinking. Lakeside is going to make some beautiful apartments.’

‘Have you got the builders on site now?’ I asked him.

‘We have, yes. For the moment at least.’ He looked at Vita and as she looked back at him, her face was unusually blank. She looked, then, as faces generally do and it unnerved me, as if she had somehow disappeared behind her features. One of the reasons I loved Vita’s face was that it was so mobile and expressive that I felt like one of you in her presence. Like a mind reader. Rollo continued, ‘But we have just received a very good offer. From a company in Lancaster who would like to buy the plots once the planning comes through. They want to take over the conversion of the main building from us, too.’

‘Oh no!’ I said. ‘Are you going to take it? Dolly will be disappointed, won’t you?’

‘Well,’ said Rollo, ‘it is an excellent offer.’ He had put down his knife and fork to take a long drink. As he swallowed, he put down his wine glass and spread the fingers of both hands out, his palms facing upwards. The pose could have been that of an evangelical speaker or of someone trying to catch stray pieces of something falling from above. He took another drink, ‘Selling would free us up. We could return to town whenever it suited us, rather than staying here until the build is complete. I think Vita has taken to country life rather better than me.’ He righted his glasses, pushing them back up in that gesture I had always found endearing, then he continued the upward gesture, fixing his hair in place with the same hand. He looked

directly at me. For once, his expression bore no suggestion of his easy smile. 'I'm getting rather itchy feet, I'm afraid, Sunday. I'm ready to go back to town soon.'

I began to flick through the rolodex in my mind, that limited reference for human behaviour. This conversation had begun to feel like the announcement of an ending. I recalled the King talking about positive change, about company expansion and personal growth, all key words that alluded primarily to his leaving Dolly and me. I thought, too, of Dolores' grim silence just before she died and of my parents' last conversations; these had typically been focussed on practicalities, the garden, the milkman account and which of the neighbours needed to return borrowed household items. None of them had looked at me steadily, as Rollo did, and announced that they were ready to leave. Perhaps this simple and flattened announcement was not, after all, the way in which people actually ended things. It seemed, at once, too simple and too abstract to openly refer to one's exit plan before executing it.

'But you are staying here for the year, aren't you? Vita said ... or you said...' I was still flicking through possible interpretations of Rollo's announcement and could not remember which of them it had been, or when, but I believed it had been said. Or implied, at least. 'One of you said that you might buy a house up here. And not go back to town, to London. At all.'

Vita patted my hand. 'We haven't even accepted the offer, darling. We don't know that we will take it. Nothing has been signed.' She looked at Rollo and stroked her forehead with one finger in a repeated and horizontal motion. It looked, to me, like a sign as deliberate and exact as any that David made in conversation. 'And, anyway, we've still got this house for a few months, Sunday. Nothing's really changed.'

'Thank goodness!' I said. 'I am really looking forward to seeing what you and Dolly do with the apartments.'

'It's fine either way,' said Vita, her voice unusually low as if she was speaking from a distance. 'We have other projects which Dolly can help me with.'

‘Are you buying more houses here?’ I said, excited at the thought of them making more commitments in the area. ‘Where are you thinking?’

Everyone had put down their knives and forks by now. The meal that night had been a complicated sweet and savoury affair; chicken with sticky dates, yellow rice dotted with raisins. I had retired from the main course to eat bread instead. My dinner plate was still full, and this, I knew, would not be mentioned, a fact which made me happier than I could ever have explained to my hosts. Vita stood, beginning to clear the main course from the table. Dolly stood at the same time and she carried Vita’s little pile of plates into the kitchen. Vita smiled down at me.

‘We don’t have any firm interests here, Sunday. But we have a lot in town. And you are okay with Dolly visiting with us down there now, aren’t you?’ She put an arm around my shoulder and rubbed it vigorously with her flattened palm, as if I were cold. ‘We are so lucky to have you two.’ There were four of us at dinner. And I did not know which ‘we’ were the lucky possessors, or which of us were the owned pair. I took some comfort, though, in the fact that we were somehow paired up, and that I was not alone in this equation of fortune. Vita should not have studied History of Art; she could have been a professor in semantics.

Rollo told me about the new car he was planning to buy that weekend when he returned to town. The quality of the leather seats was apparently a quality peculiar to this model alone, and one which he was keen to detail. He knew facts about that car which rivalled my depth of knowledge in Sicilian tradition. He fell silent as Dolly came into the room with a glass bowl of trifle, as he always did when pudding was brought to the table, to allow the two women their moment of performed domesticity. He sat very straight in his chair, though, and in an even more formal pose than usual, his chest stretching the neat confines of his navy suit; the evidence of his obvious pride in his new purchase was childlike and moving. I had not

imagined Rollo would feel so serious about anything except, perhaps, Vita. I had only ever been close to Dolly, who talked a lot, but told me little about what she cared for. Of course, I realised, Rollo and Vita would have their own lake, their own Sicily, and I could only know it when I was in a more longstanding relationship with them. Dolly was followed by Vita, who was carrying Beast and the little dog leaned against his owner as he sat up, watching her face as if fascinated. He did not hold himself tightly, as dogs often do when held, but surrendered completely like an infant would, his limbs floppy and trusting.

‘Vee!’ he said earnestly. ‘This looks wonderful. And tell me, did you make it yourself?’

This was a script they ran at every dinner, the idea that Vita had made the pudding herself; this pretence sometimes extended to other courses, but always applied to the final course. Vita always served the pudding and did so in an uncharacteristically modest way, which added to the impression that the confections were of her own making. We all played along, complimenting her sincerely each week, as if the course was all her own work. And, each week, she blushed prettily and fussed with the pudding, debating its qualities and the ways in which it might be improved. I could not, of course, eat any of the enormous trifle. It always strikes me as something an unsupervised child might put together; the layers of basically all textures mixed together, then randomly doused in sweet sherry and covered in hard sugar sprinkles, as if there were not already enough competing tastes present. It is so overblown and loud, the polar opposite of white food. I see, now, why as a child I objected so dramatically to the trifle at my parent’s anniversary party, although I still could not explain it to Mer in any way that she would have understood. I was responding to the noise of the trifle, which, as an adult, I can turn away from. I have learned to reduce sound by distracting myself; it is a useful but exhausting process that is also time limited.

Vita asked if I would like some trifle and I declined bluntly.

‘It’s just not right. There is too much to it. It’s so ... busy,’ I explained. Vita was holding the silver serving spoon still poised in the air, as if demonstrating it as a possible instrument of discipline. For a moment, I thought I should have just mumbled about how I am too full, but it looks delicious, really it does, and I just couldn’t eat another thing. As I would have said at anyone else’s table. *Never just say what you are thinking*, Mer often reminded me, *nobody wants to hear that*. ‘Or, er... it reminds me of school cafeterias.’ That seemed better and certainly less personal.

And then Vita laughed loudly, and the other two looked up from their conversation, startled by the sudden noise. She stood up and launched the long spoon into the trifle, where it landed noisily across the pudding, exposing and mixing the different layers, some of which rose up onto the tablecloth. Then, leaning over the table towards us, she placed an unlit cigarette in her bottom lip and let it dangle crookedly to one side.

With one hand on her hip and the other poised over the spoon, she said; ‘Quiet, you lot! Who wants some of this lovely cake?’ *lover-ly kaaaayke!* Her new accent was actually very believable and certainly better than her attempt at the girl from our programme with the strict papa. It was the precisely enunciated cockney that a classically trained Nancy in costume would conjure to sing *As Long as He Needs me*, her corseted cleavage enhanced by the arm held up to her cosmetically applied black eye. *But all the same, I’ll play this game...*

Rollo and Dolly must have had no idea why Vita had suddenly become an angry dinner lady, but they laughed along good-naturedly and held out their bowls as if her performance was perfectly normal. As Vita served some trifle into a silver edged bowl for Dolly, she addressed Rollo.

‘Rols, do go and get a plate of cheese and biscuits for Sunday. Of course she wouldn’t eat *trifle*. Trifle! Why would you buy a pudding like that?’ We all smiled at her admission that the pudding was Rollos’ choice and not a homemade dish. And her voice was her own again, crisp

and commanding and lovely. My mother would have said something like this, would have apparently accepted my refusal as something predictable and reasonable. And she would have commanded my father or Dolores to go and get me a plainer alternative to the original dish; when they began to follow her instruction, she would have shouted at them to sit back down again. It was a trick. But she learned, at least, not to make me eat the offending item; we both knew it would make me gag and this, thankfully, made her uncomfortable. At Vita's house, too, there were tricks. But they were not exposed over tantrums thrown at the table, they were played as a long game and could only be recognised some time afterwards.

Vita did not ask Dolly or Rollo if they wanted pudding, as she did me, but simply served the trifle into three bowls.

Once she had finished, she spoke again. 'Sunday, Rols is going back to town tomorrow. Dolly and I thought it was a good time for us to visit too.' She smiled brightly and picked up her spoon. 'Okay darling?'

'You mean London?'

'Yes, town, London...' Still holding the spoon, she spread her hands out, palms up in a gesture of openness or perhaps, impatience.

Rollo returned to the table with a plate of roughly cut cheese and some crackers. He had foregone the elegant presentation which he always seemed to enjoy, and I watched him as he sat down, looking to find a reason for this change. Dolly passed his pudding across to him.

'Thanks darling.' As he took it from her, their hands touched, and he held onto hers absent-mindedly for a moment. She looked sharply at me as if I had suddenly called her name.

Vita stood up and I was surprised by the firmness with which she guided Rollo smoothly back into the kitchen, whispering softly to him and closing the door behind them.

Dolly and I remained at the table in our usual silence for some moments. It was not for us to guess at what they were discussing in the kitchen, just as it was never for Mer or the King to comment when I spoke of Sicily, or speech patterns, or etiquette.

‘So you are going to London tomorrow then, Dolly?’ I said.

She nodded, unsmiling and began to eat her pudding, taking small and perfunctory bites. She did not share a preference for sweet things with her namesake.

‘You are ridiculous, Mummy.’ She spoke in a soft, sweet way that suggested infinite patience. ‘Trifle should not frighten you.’ She stabbed the air with her spoon and made a ghostly noise. ‘Wooooo!’

After pudding, we listened to Rollo’s classical music while he apparently dozed in his chair and occasionally woke briefly to critique whatever track was playing. None of us commented on the music or his responses to it but politely fell silent whenever he spoke, as if we had been waiting for his review and were just filling in the time between his silences.

‘Why is Rollo so keen to go back to town? I thought you were both enjoying it here.’ Vita shrugged and picked up her glass, clearly disinterested in the conversation.

‘Well, I am excited to be going ...’ Dolly began.

‘But have you changed your mind about staying on?’ I spoke to Vita and as if Dolly had not spoken.

‘We have interests in London you see, darling, and it’s important for us to keep up with our contacts. Otherwise he won’t hear about new opportunities. We mostly convert buildings that were offices or commercial places, and they sell quickly. They are becoming rarer. That’s why he hopes Lakeview will be taken over, so he can work on other projects. And do more nationally. And perhaps start sourcing or renovating buildings for councils.’

‘Yes, I told her about that,’ interjected Dolly.

This was not an answer as to why he had lost interest in our town, so I waited for her to continue.

After a short pause, she said, 'He is, you know, staying connected, and so on. And property is quite a little world of its own.' She looked at me without expression.

'But does he need to actually need to *go* there? For work?'

'Work! Work is terribly vulgar, darling.' Her voice was suddenly different, borrowed. She smiled and it was not her own, but something tight and restrained. 'That's what Tom would tell you.' As she spoke, she gestured around the elegant room as if Tom was still somehow inside this, his second home and not in London with his frail and pregnant wife and their children. We looked towards Rollo as he slept on, still immaculate in his suit and his shiny leather shoes. And then she spoke again and in her own voice, which was still confident, but sweet and soft, as her version of Tom had not been. 'People like Tom don't really work. Not in the way we know it, Sunday. Rollo and I are extremely comfortable; we have nice things, but we aren't like Tom. He is the oldest, so he will have a lot of family money'. *Famil-ay mon-ay*. 'Rols has an older brother so he won't get anything.'

'Don't his parents like him?' It was difficult to imagine anyone disliking Rollo. And surely if such a charming man was your own, your love would be enormous and augmented further with pride at the admiration he received. It would be like being the parent of a much-loved celebrity and a little of the public's awe would naturally fall on you. It would not be the experience Mer had with me, but perhaps like being the mother of Dolly. Or Dolores.

Vita laughed, but it was not in her usual and involuntary way. The sound was contained and finite, the teeth-showing snort of a displeased exotic pet. 'Like him? Rols? Of course they like him. Everyone loves Rols.' *Ah-vary-won laaaves Rols*. She made this statement with the reverence of Bunny making another confident pronouncement on the Forresters. Then she looked at Dolly, who was nodding encouragingly, as if they had already confirmed this point

about Rollos' appeal many times between themselves. 'But the estate must remain entire you see. Rols' father only got it himself because his brother died before inheriting.'

Dolly leaned forward, 'Was that Freddie?' She glanced first at Vita and then at me. She leaned towards me to put a hand over my arm, as if breaking bad news. There was no pressure in the touch. Her hand was entirely weightless and without warmth; if I closed my eyes, I could not have known it was there. 'He shot himself Mummy. Didn't he, Vee? Before you even met Rols. How sad.'

Vita nodded gravely. 'Yes, Dolly. How sad.'

And I found I did not care for them so much that night, as they sat prettily side by side on the sofa trying out morose expressions for an Uncle Freddie neither of them had ever known.

The following Tuesday, I came home from work to find Dolly and Vita sitting together at the kitchen table. They were quiet and hunched over their coffees as if very cold. They both had their Levis on; they wore these jeans in a distressed and baggy fit. Above this seemingly relaxed style though, their thick belts would be strapped as relentlessly tight as that of corseted actresses in a period drama. Dolly was wearing a navy silk jacket which I had not seen before. It was appliqued with butterflies and flowers and had lots of tiny badges sewn all over; it was fussy and unlike her usual style. Vita wore a similar jacket in red silk. Both looked up with similar little smiles when I came into the room, but did not perform their usual greetings, the kisses and girlish exclamations.

'Hello you two.' I said. 'How are you? Did you have a good time?'

They looked at each other as if silently deciding which of them would respond. Dolly took a slow sip of her coffee and Vita spoke.

'We're fine. We had a lovely time and Dolly met lots of our friends.' She looked at me thoughtfully. 'We got some ideas for our new house, too.' She stood up and made a fluttery

and impatient gesture with both hands, ‘You know, fabric shops, wallpaper, that stuff.’ She patted first Dolly and then me on the shoulder as she passed us on her way out. ‘I’m off for a nap. See you on Friday, Sunday.’

I sat down opposite Dolly in Vita’s chair but did not speak until I heard the front door close behind her.

‘Where did you stay? Who with?’ I asked Dolly.

‘They’ve got a new place and Rols went there. Vee and I stayed in a hotel. We could have stayed with Rols, but Vee wanted to make it special. Their house is a terrace, and it hasn’t even got a functioning bathroom at the moment, but it’s awfully grand. It will be, anyway, when we have finished it.’ I no longer queried her use of the collective ‘we.’

Dolly was sniffing her coffee intensely, as if there were something specific in the steam that she needed to absorb before properly waking. I went to the cupboard and found a packet of chocolate biscuits which I pushed across the table towards her. They were continental style thins wrapped in gold foil, a present from one of Rollo’s trips that glittered against the otherwise ordinary contents of our pantry. ‘You need some sugar, Dolly. It will wake you up. Tell me about the hotel.’

My daughter stroked the shiny wrapper without interest. I raised an eyebrow at her, and she paused, as if recalling her weekend and deciding how best to describe the place in which they had stayed. Apparently, though, she decided she would not after all, for she continued, ‘It was ... an expensive London hotel. You know. Everything you’d expect. Do you mind if I just go up to bed for a bit?’

I got a tray and put a glass of milk and the biscuits on it. She watched me as I rinsed out her coffee cup and arranged her tray, then she picked it up with a nod. She started towards the door,

then stopped; ‘I’m supposed to go over to the farm for supper. Could you ‘phone Grandma and tell her I’m ...’ she paused, deciding what to say. ‘I’m not well?’

I nodded immediately, shamelessly pleased to help Dolly cancel on her grandparents and happy to be at the centre of the deceit for once. It often felt as if she, Bunny and Richard were in on a secret without me.

I listened to her progress upstairs; when she reached the top of the stairs, I raised my voice to be heard; ‘And are you not well, Dolls, or are you tired?’

She must have been on the landing then, and as she replied, her voice was fading along with her step and I could only just make out what she said.

‘Tired,’ she said.

Dolly’s tone so expressed her exhaustion that I was reminded of the drama classes she used to love as a child. She joined the group at the age of five, just after the King left. She was a self-contained child, and I knew little of what she was thinking, then as always. At the end of each session, a few of the children were invited to perform a feeling for the assembled parents to guess at. Dolly was a favoured student, chosen every week to be in the group expressing various emotional states at the end of the class.

The selected students would walk up to the teacher, one by one, tiny figures in identical, long-sleeved black leotards that emphasised their skinny arms and legs. The teacher would whisper their word to them. Most of the children were self-conscious or forgot what exactly they were demonstrating, which shaped their performances into vague, but authentic suggestions of sadness, tiredness, crossness; all these merged into one and distracted from what they were supposed to be performing. On one occasion, Dolly was the last to go, and she stood patiently at the teacher’s side while they watched a new student stamp weakly on the spot in a diluted version of fury. I saw Dolly and the teacher exchange private smiles; however, when

they looked back to the child, they were both identically blank-faced, all evidence of their amusement suddenly wiped away. My daughter has always had this effect on people; they naturally fall into unspoken collusion with her, an understanding that unites them with her and against another.

‘Dancing?’ offered the child’s mother, who did not quite understand the exercise. ‘Darling, is it dancing?’ This infuriated her daughter, who was then able to rage authentically, and her mother immediately guessed right, beaming with pride and breaking the rules further by clapping excitedly.

The teacher was seated, so Dolly stood at a similar height next to him. After he whispered the word to her privately, she covered her mouth to repeat it carefully back to him, then tilted her head at a delicate angle of query. He nodded lightly in agreement and gestured languidly towards the spot where the children performed. There was a rumour among the parents that the teacher’s father was someone very important in the theatre and the man’s ambivalence towards his work, the occasional enthusiasm and the subsequent apathy of his teaching, somehow gave the whispers more credence. He seemed predestined to work in drama, rather than to have chosen it for himself. Dolly walked forward, elegant as a ballerina, and paused. She was waiting for the room to settle before she began, as the teacher had often counselled the children to do.

The mother of the angry child, pleased with her perceived recent triumph, was already guessing; ‘Ballet? Or is it patience? Or fairy? It’s fairy, isn’t it?!’

But other than this, the room was quiet, and Dolly looked down at the floor. When she looked up, her sharp little face radiated warmth and her eyes shone. Her smile was not the stretched and fixed grin conjured by theatrically minded children, but an indication of bliss. I did not recognise the expression as anything I had ever seen her express before.

‘Happy! Happy!’ the children were already shouting out, and Dolly did a solemn curtsy, her eyes cast downwards in the demure pose that I remembered seeing female performers execute at curtain calls.

As we walked home together afterwards, I asked her what had inspired her to act so well, so convincingly.

‘Did you think about something happy, like Christmas?’ I asked her. ‘What did you think about?’ I said, genuinely curious.

She was only half-listening to me while fiddling with her thick gloves; it was a cold afternoon and had been threatening to snow for several days. Eventually she answered, but impatiently and without interest, as though she were thinking of something else. ‘I thought - *happy*. That’s all. And then I stopped thinking it and it went.’ She tucked her hand into my arm, suddenly focussed on me. Dolly flicked a light onto people, as the King did, and, once seen, it is impossible to look away. ‘Can we get hot chocolate now?’ she smiled at me. It was not the bright smile of the drama class, but something more measured and moderate. My daughter and her father always were precise; even in seduction, nothing unnecessary was given and nothing was ever free.

Sometimes, that summer, I had come downstairs in the morning to find Vita sitting quietly in my kitchen, wearing her dressing gown and smoking a cigarette. Vita was a different person early in the day; she moved slowly and talked little, like a patient emerging from a long confinement. She also liked to smoke while sitting on our front step or her own identical one; she did this in her pretty nightwear, or occasionally (and my favourite), still dressed in a glamorous and becomingly dishevelled way, from the night before. It pleased me to see her on the front steps of either of our houses, her colourful clothing fanning out around her on the austere stone floor like something spilled or thrown. Our Victorian builder must have imagined

that it would be severe-looking parents and lines of neat children stepping over his threshold, all shining boots and serious faces. He could not have conjured an image like Vita perched on his front step, as indeed, nor could I, before she came. Straight out of bed and draped in silky fabric or clad in a brightly coloured minidress paired with my slippers, her hair falling out of whatever style she had constructed the evening before, Vita was always a vision. After she had smoked two cigarettes, which she needed to do in complete silence each morning in order to wake up properly, she gradually returned to form. She was at her most cutting in the mornings, when she first recovered her voice and Dolly and I laughed along with her little cruelties.

Vita did impressions of the local people; my surreal shopkeeper, who did not address her, as he does me, about the weather, but instead gave her shy and mumbled compliments, like a teenage boy with a crush. She also copied Phyllis, with a loud, carrying voice, and an imaginary chicken tucked under one arm. Our favourite, though, was her impression of Bunny, whose background is certainly more privileged than my own, but who is not from asset-rich farming stock like her husband, or a wealthy and well-connected urbanite, like Vita and Rollo. My former mother-in-law married up, both socially and economically, something that Vita saw the first time they met. Marrying so well is not accidental; it takes focus, said Vita, and she ridiculed Bunny for the apparent efforts it must have taken her to become a Forrester. She never mocked me, although I, however briefly, was also a Forrester wife who came from a lowlier position. When Vita was Bunny, she lowered her voice and wore a pained expression.

She said, 'We use our indoor voices, don't we? We talk quietly, don't we? We make statements into questions? Because we have,' at this point, she shook her shiny hair and looked around anxiously, before whispering, '*money*. Everything is a bit *embarrassing*.' Part of this comedy was the ridiculousness of Vita performing self-consciousness; she was so supremely certain of herself. Vita was a marvellous mimic, but she was always Vita, an essence too powerful to be eradicated, even momentarily, by an impersonation, however cruel or skilful.

Bunny-Vita spoke of her Forrester privilege in hushed and shy tones; ‘*pretty baby, new car, gifted child.*’ She talked of her love for charity and announced with a sad smile that that her work was, ‘For the *poor* children. I’m very *sensitive*. I care *too much.*’

Dolores would have appreciated this, I thought, when Vita performed, and Dolly and I laughed again. I can still imagine my sister and I as teenagers, spotting the exotically dressed Vita chain-smoking unapologetically on the next-door porch as we walked off to school in the mornings, and being thrilled with our discovery.

My mother would have been disparaging of Vita. She would have relegated our glorious neighbour to the group of ‘lazy mares;’ those local women who did not conform to Mer’s exacting ideas of decency and whose eccentric dress or manners she correlated with low morals and promiscuity. Idleness was one of the two behaviours she found the most unforgivable; the other was peculiarity and both were criticisms often aimed at me. She frequently held Dolores up as a beacon of decorum and normalcy. While my mother lectured me on this, my sister would stand behind her and entertain me. She would flip her skirt up to expose her knickers or hold her hands together as if in prayer. In either pose, her face would be serene and when my mother turned, Dolores would frown and nod along with her as if in concerned agreement.

Leaving Vita, sleepy, friendly, and half-dressed, at home while Dolly slept on upstairs had felt a little like being a husband going out to work. For a brief time that summer, I was a man who was indulgent where his family were concerned, a responsible provider and protector.

Vita, too, must have felt something of this. She regularly waved me goodbye from her step, kissing my cheek, then squinting her eyes as she exhaled smoke from one side of her mouth; ‘Have a good day at the office, darling!’

And I walked around her in my utilitarian workwear; it was ugly and plain, although I never thought of it in such terms before Vita came, with her silky, bright clothes and her delicately soled sandals and shoes in every colour. I had never seen an adult wear red footwear before.

Or green, or gold, or silver. But I did not need lovely shoes; indeed, I did not need to be lovely, because Vita did that, excessively. So instead I went off to work in my sturdy boots, my mud coloured trousers and loose shirt. All those items that David or any of the male farmworkers would comfortably wear themselves.

And Vita and Dolly gradually increased their time in London, though, the visits and the sleepovers became less and less frequent, until eventually, I could not quite believe they had ever happened. I had even begun to go to Friday dinners alone, meeting Dolly next door as if she were one of the hosts and not part of my household. I was pleased, then, when she came home one Friday at the end of July, even though she went straight upstairs to shower and change for dinner. When it was time to leave, I knocked on her door and when there was no reply, I went inside.

‘Dolly?’ She was lying on top of her duvet, looking up at the ceiling thoughtfully, as if considering it. ‘Are you ready to come next door?’ I asked, but I could already see she was newly smart in a violet taffeta mini dress which I had not seen before, paired with electric blue sheer tights.

She and Vita often wore brightly coloured tights and accessories, in shades that did not feature anywhere in the rest of their outfit, as if deliberately chosen for their incongruity. There was also a lot of heavy gold jewellery, of a weight and width that looked highly uncomfortable. So much of Dolly’s wardrobe that summer was new, bought on their London visits by Vita, who often had similar, if not identical pieces herself. I had begun to feel sentimental on the rare occasions when I saw Dolly in any outfit that was not chosen and purchased by Vita. The taffeta dress was very Vita; sleeveless, full skirted and it fanned out prettily on the white cotton sheets.

Dolly had insisted on only plain white bedding since she was very young. Her grandmother had gifted her a pink floral bed-set from Harrods for her last birthday, and although Dolly

thanked her effusively, the set remained unused in a cupboard, still folded pristinely in its white tissue paper. The green brand name was repeated all over the thin paper, as if in objection to being overlooked. This reminded me how my daughter had once been like me in her regard for plainness. During her time with Vita she quickly developed a taste for colour and fussiness in her clothes and accessories, wearing versions of whatever Vita herself favoured. The remaining white sheets reminded me of my daughter's recent alteration; the change in her felt like an ending, rather than one of many transitions that would eventually lead to her adult self.

'Mmm, yep,' she agreed, without moving.

I sat down on her bed, putting her feet across my legs, so we were sitting as we used to on our Tuesday nights on the sofa, and I leaned back against the wall. 'Dolly,' I said, 'do you like working for Vita?'

'Well, I work for Vita *and* Rols actually,' she pointed out, her gaze still fixed on the ceiling.

'And do you enjoy that?' I asked.

'It's money, isn't it. A lot of money, in fact,' she said, her voice flat. She looked down at me without her usual indifference, as if suddenly interested in what I would do. She watched me closely as she continued, 'It's more money than I have had before. Loads more than you and Grandma give me. And I don't even spend it on clothes because Vee is always buying me more.' She gestured apathetically towards her wardrobe, which we both knew was full of new things, so many that some were still unpacked, wrapped in tissue paper and left in their bags and boxes. She brought her arm back to her lap and laced her fingers together over her midsection. She was serene and untroubled as she lay there, motionless. 'I'm just saving it all. It's a lot.' She was looking at me expectantly, but I was unsure how to respond.

'Lucky you! Perhaps you could save it for university.'

She snorted humourlessly and her mouth remained in a firm and unmoving straight line. Then she turned her gaze back to the ceiling above. 'I suppose I could. But I won't.' She put a

hand on my arm, then, distracted, she straightened her fingers out to examine the flaking nail polish, their lack of repair a rare reminder of her girlishness. ‘Ask Rols about me tonight...’ she paused, still considering her nails, ‘he says I am doing a *marvellous* job.’ She emphasised ‘marvellous’ by stretching the syllables out slowly. This was a habit that Vita, too, had with hyperbole. They each stilled their tone at the point of exaggeration; it had the effect of self-parody. Like a girl at a staid dinner announcing what *enormous* fun she is having, the emphasis gave a peculiar air of cynicism. Dolly began to speak again, but then stopped and I remained silent, waiting. Eventually, into the silence, she said, ‘Do you miss me at home?’

I thought of nothing but my daughter for hours after I waved them off each Saturday. I did not know, then, that we were about to attend what would be our last Friday night dinner. That they would start going to London for long weekends which increasingly ran into the week too. Dolly came home less, and Vita often came with her when she did, as if they were a couple who I might reasonably expect to see only in each other’s company. I watched the three of them leave every Saturday morning as they sped down our quiet street in Rollos’ new car, which was the same colour as the first stupid one, with loud disco music playing from the open windows. Vita would only drive on short journeys; *I don’t have the concentration darling. I fall asleep after twenty minutes in the car!* It surprised me, though, that Dolly travelled in the front seat next to Rollo while Vita sat in the back. In my own household, even the celebrated Dolores would not have been offered the front seat because it was strictly reserved for the wife of the driver. Dolly told me that Rollo listened to Radio 1 on the journey to London and to Classic as he drove home. To get him in to the right frame of mind for each place, she confided once, earnestly, as if I were an outsider compiling facts on each of their preferences, as if this were something I cared to know.

Now, when I remember those early mornings that I watched my daughter leaving, I do not, as I did then, allow myself to stand and silently watch Dolly go. I do not stand motionless at

the window as she climbs serenely into the red car and Rollo closes her door with a flick of his hand. In my dreams, I run to my daughter, pull her from her seat (she does not object to this as she would have in life, but instead surrenders to my embrace) and take her inside with me. But I am unable, ever, to prevent the rows of Lakeside children from being removed from their too expensive Home to be scattered amongst strangers as randomly as salt.

‘Of course I do, Dols. I would rather you were here. But you were so keen to go with them,’ I said.

‘I think they really need me though. You know?’ She smiled, indulgent as a fond mother herself. ‘Rols says Vee is only really happy when I am with her. Even when we are just at home together. He says he doesn’t know what she would do without me. What he would do, either.’

‘What do you do? Is it mostly telephone calls? Arranging deliveries? Things like that?’ I asked, genuinely interested to know how she spent her days with them.

Dolly started as if slapped. ‘No! No, it is not. I help Vee here. And when we are in town, we see people....’ She pointed vaguely in the direction of her wardrobe again, ‘... we go shopping. For interior pieces too. Whatever needs doing. You know,’ she looked at me appraisingly. ‘Or perhaps you don’t really know. You’ve only ever worked at Daddy’s farm, haven’t you? So, I suppose it’s hard for you to imagine what work is really like. It’s complicated keeping your boss happy, you just have to adapt, to do whatever needs doing.’ She leaned slightly forward, but remained lying down, so the gesture was more a raising of her chin. ‘Rols told me that Vee was a bit troubled before they came here,’ she continued in a low voice, as if the two of them might be hiding somewhere in our house, listening to her.

I patted her leg in a slow and reassuring action; ‘You don’t have to work so much this summer. It’s too much. You are away too much. And you can’t be responsible for Vita, she is an adult. When did you last see Grandma and Grandad? Or Daddy? I’m proud of you for

working hard, but you don't have to tire yourself out. Shall I tell Rollo for you? He'll understand. And Vita will too. Shall I ...'

Dolly immediately sat upright. 'No! What *are* you talking about? Don't.' Her tone was sharp, and she shook her head, either at me or in the process of correcting herself. 'You are mad, Mummy,' she continued, but her voice was gentle, now, as though she were lightly admonishing an entertaining toddler. 'Come on, let's go.'

The dinner next door was a little plainer than usual, but still strange. Rollo brought us a soup which he called *vichyssoise*; when he pronounced this word, it was with an impeccable French accent and a peculiar stretch of his fingers as though he were a conductor. The soup was not simply cool but iced like a cocktail. A salty vegetable cocktail. I tried one spoonful.

'Rollo.' I took a big gulp of my tonic water. 'This is terrible. It is not soup.' And he put down his own spoon immediately, laughing as he passed me the breadbasket instead. They always had soft white rolls with dinner, although Vita and Rollo rarely ate them.

'Don't rich people eat bread?' I had wondered out loud at an early Friday dinner.

There were always uneaten rolls left over at our dinners and Rollo used to wrap them up in an unused napkin for me to take home. The use of the square white linen rather than a plastic bag was a very Rollo gesture, and I kept the napkins because I knew he would never ask for their return. I have them now, folded and immaculate in a cupboard.

Vita told me that people who entertain formally often served food that was rich and heavy; in consequence the guests tended to eat less of the starchy dishes. 'But a good host insists on lots of fresh rolls at the table, because parties work best on a theory of comfort and over-abundance. So, the trick is to provide too much of everything, especially the inexpensive things. My guest beds, too, are always piled with pillows and blankets,' Vita said as seriously as if she

were talking about a long observed religious practice. ‘Because it alludes to that feeling of overstocked comfort.’ Dolly, by her side, had nodded along with equal earnestness.

The main course was coronation chicken with various salads and small savoury pastries that had been carefully folded in on themselves. Rollo passed around the serving bowls and got up to make sure that everyone had exactly what they wanted. His own plate, though, contained little; he was the only one of us drinking red wine and he quickly had to replace the first with another bottle. During dinner, Vita and Dolly spoke mostly between themselves and in little bursts of energy, like over excited children. For the first time at a Friday dinner, there was no pudding for Vita to present to the table; instead Rollo brought a tray of cheese and biscuits in from the kitchen. He passed me a small plate and I took some slices of cheddar. He pointed to a soft, white-crust ed cheese and with his other hand he made a circle of silent approval, as if the recommendation were a secret between us, so I took a piece of that, too. He did not take any for himself but passed it down to the others.

‘It’s great how those two get on, isn’t it?’ he said, as I, too, watched them in conversation. ‘Vita always used to say she couldn’t stand children, teenagers.’ He said the word, *teenagers* carefully, grimacing downwards on the first syllable and drawing out the word into separate parts, as if unsure of it. *T-eeen-a-geers*. ‘I knew we would never have a family. Even when we first met, we both knew we never wanted all that. Although Vee did have a little wobble recently. It has been really good for her being up here. Dolly was just what she needed. She really loves Dolly. No doubt about that. No doubt.’ He finished his wine and showily checked everyone else’s glass, as if playing a waiter to someone at the back of the room, before he refilled his own, emptying the bottle. ‘What about you Sunday? Did you always know you wanted to be a mother?’

‘No, I did not.’ My response was immediate and firm. Perhaps it was too firm, because Rollo remained quiet, waiting for me to say more, to soften what I had already said. How could

I explain motherhood when I did not understand it myself, could not even speak to other mothers, like Bunny, in relatable terms? Eventually, it came to me. ‘After the Unification of Italy, huge numbers of Italians migrated to America. To other countries, too. But when these newcomers arrived in America, and they were asked about their origins, they referred to their local village, rather than their country. It was often the American officials who told them they were Italian. Some of the immigrants didn’t have a sense of Italy as a country at all. So, they discovered that they were Italian without knowing they were such. It was their new country that showed them who they really were, where they had come from. That’s how I have felt since I had Dolly. Like being a mother took me to a place where I got a new title, a new identity; yet it was who I always was. In my blood. I just didn’t know it.’ Rollo nodded, and took another drink from his glass. With his other hand he gestured encouragingly to me; *keep going!* But my Italian-maternal analogy was exhausted, and so I turned the conversation back to him. This was a trick I learned from both of them; he and Vita handled discussion like expert craftspeople, manipulating language into something new and deliberate in their hands. ‘But of course, Dolly isn’t quite a child anymore, though. Or even a teenager. She is quite adult in some ways, I suppose. But she is still so young, really. What were you like at her age?’

He raised an eyebrow, ‘Haven’t you heard enough about my errant schooldays?’ And it was true that many of his stories came from his time away at boarding school, where he had apparently escaped expulsion narrowly and on a regular basis.

‘Okay, at eighteen, then. I suppose you were at university ... had you already met Vita?’

‘No. Well, yes. Not really. We met when I was in my second year, so...’ He spread his hands out, then lightly clapped them together, in a gesture of closure. Then he glanced momentarily at Vita, who was listening intently to Dolly. ‘We are so looking forward to Dolly’s party.’

‘Dolly’s party?’ I said.

‘At the farm, the garden party,’ he clarified.

He was referring to Bunny and Richard’s annual garden party, which this year was going to celebrate Dolly’s O’level results.

‘Oh! I didn’t know you would be there?’ I said. I was made to feel extremely fortunate to receive an invitation each year. Bunny made a special trip to the green houses in midsummer to present me with the engraved white card, so stiff that even felt through the envelope, it seemed outraged and aloof. She handed the invite to me with a light giggle of excitement. It was addressed to me in my maiden name, with a Ms and not a Mrs. Dolly was never included in the invitation, because, as she patiently explained, she was family, so technically she was actually the inviter, the host.

‘Guess what this is? It’s that time of year again!’ Bunny said this every time she came with the stiff white card; sometimes she added a little woo-hoo! noise and made a gesture as if pulling down an invisible chain, too, which David particularly appreciated if he was there to witness it. This year, she had omitted that part of the invitation ritual and he had commented afterwards on the absence.

I had learned to smile in response to the delivery of the invitation, to thank her and not to tell her I that did not want to go. Dolly insisted it looked peculiar if I did not attend family events.

‘Dolly is keen that we go, so ... And she tells me her father is coming down for the party, too? We haven’t met him yet, so we are looking forward to it. She hasn’t stopped talking about the baby,’ Rollo said.

I was confused. Why would they care about meeting the King? I only saw him annually, at the garden party and Vita and Rollo were neighbours, not family members.

Rollo was standing up. 'Excuse me, Sunday.' He left the table briefly and returned with the port. When he sat down again, he moved automatically to pour the port into my still full champagne glass and I quickly put my hand over the top.

'No, Rollo. Thank you.'

He laughed, 'Sorry, Sunday. Wrong glass. And, of course, you don't like it. Here.' He put the port down and looked at the others. Then he stood up, slightly unsteadily, to offer Dolly and Vita the port. Both of them shook their heads, *no*, and waved him away without looking up or pausing their conversation, as though rebuking an intrusive waiter. Rollo took his seat again and refilled his port glass. 'I am really tired. All this driving ...' he said this to no-one in particular and pushed his hair back off his forehead, as though hot. He had the heavy, straight hair that I associate with privilege, with people like him, people like Vita and Dolly, too. Perhaps it is a result of genetics, of the good breeding that the Forresters and others like them claim; the years of careful nurturing by a team of admirers; the nannies, teachers and parents all invested in a successful outcome. Like the prizewinning animals that populate the King's farm, such people are glossy-coated and selectively bred.

'Rollo,' I said, as I remembered. 'You said something about the baby? What baby?'

'Exactly! What baby? God, I am drunk. Sunday, please ignore me. Vita will be furious if she hears all the nonsense I've been talking tonight. Terrible hosting,' he continued, shaking his head and wagging his index finger as though berating someone else. He stood up and stuck his elbow at me crookedly; I saw how unsteady he was on his feet. 'Come on, Sunday. It's our secret. Help a drunken old man into the sitting room and you can choose the music.' I quite liked this version of Rollo, who was less smooth and polished and wanted my help. And it was with real fondness that I took his arm to help him. He leaned on me a little as we left the table, with Vita and Dolly eventually following us. Like a couple, their heads were close together and their conversation was pitched low so only they could hear one another. Even as I watched

them, it felt something like a memory; Dolores and I must have looked like that, I realised. And I am glad to have had that once myself, for I do not think I will ever have it again.

childish little arms

Dolly stayed at home the night before her O'level results were due, an increasingly rare arrangement and one which I was grateful for. In the morning she was downstairs before me, sitting at the kitchen table in a white nightdress that had been a favourite of hers when she was much younger. I had not seen her wear it for some time, had assumed it discarded along with other outgrown clothes. The nightgown was sleeveless, trimmed with broderie anglaise and although it had been bought primarily because it was originally ankle length in a satisfyingly Wendy from Peter Pan way, it had quickly come to sit above her knees. It was startlingly at odds with the sophisticated wardrobe she had acquired since working for Vita. She had made coffee in the press bought for her by Rollo but apparently had not yet eaten. When she spoke to me, she kept her eyes fixed on the table.

'I should tell you something, Mummy. My results might not be what you are expecting. I didn't work as hard as I should have.' Her eyes were hard and glittering, though, as if she were waiting for something promised to her.

'Dolly, you worked really hard. All that time you spent revising,' I pointed out. I moved from the fridge to place a hand on her exposed shoulder, my other hand holding onto the cold milk.

'I was out. I wasn't revising. You are so literal. So basic. If I tell you something you just accept it because you can't come up with an alternative scenario. That's not trust. It's stupidity.'

'I know you are feeling nervous, Dolly. Everyone worries on results day; it's perfectly normal.' I was determined to soothe her, to keep her calm until the post came.

'Do they? And how would you know that? Oh, yes, from all your vast academic experience.' she said, stirring sugar into her coffee. She looked up through her eyelashes and even at that moment, I felt a jolt of admiration for her loveliness. 'Am I right?'

On the rare mornings that Dolly was home, the French press bought for her by Rollo in Deauville was always on the table. I had come to dislike this object, with its silver lines and smug perfection. Dolly treated it with reverence, rebuking me if she found me cleaning the press, or putting it away, as only she was apparently allowed to handle it. I flinched at her words but did not reply to her question.

‘You will want to take that to Grandma’s with you, won’t you? When you stay over for the party?’ I said conversationally, indicating the coffee press.

I cooked her favourite poached eggs and served them on a thick slice of ham. She had finished several cups of coffee, but little of her breakfast, when we finally heard the letterbox opening. She jumped up and when she came back into the kitchen, she was holding a piece of paper.

‘I’ve done it,’ she said to me, warily as if in defence against a challenge. She looked very tired. Or perhaps it was relief on her face, I can’t be sure. ‘I’ve got seven As. And one B.’

I could not allow myself to be proud as it suggested I shared some responsibility for my child’s achievements. But I was filled with something like awe. I automatically reached for her.

‘Dolly,’ I said, speaking into her neck, as she released herself; ‘that is incredible. Well done!’ And she smiled, but she was silent and when she sat back down at the table, she exhaled through her nose. It was the soft little sigh that my mother began to make in her sixties, whenever she took a seat or stood up from a chair.

‘I didn’t even study. I didn’t do anything for this,’ she said. Her voice was flat.

‘Dolly! You worked very hard. All those evenings revising...’ I said.

‘I hardly ever revised. On those nights. Or at all, in fact.’

I thought she was making a kind of confession and my reply was intended to comfort her; ‘Dolly, you have done really well. You should be proud of your results,’ I said. She remained

silent. I could not tell what was happening. ‘Dolly?’ I said, too sharply, and she looked up, surprised I was even there.

She was not confessing anything to me; she was really talking to herself, and I happened to be in the room. Interrupted in her thoughts, she kept her gaze fixed on me. Her face had a burning concentration that I had not seen on anyone before. When she spoke, her voice was low and controlled, the same unchanging and unmoved tone as a doctor relaying bad news.

‘It’s all so easy, Mummy. So fucking easy. It all just ...’ she snapped her fingers together and they made a satisfying, noisy *click*, like a shot going off. She leaned back in her chair and looked past me, up at the ceiling. ‘Why do you struggle? What is it that you find *so* difficult?’ Her voice broke a little on the final word. She threw her hands up in the air and I thought of her at drama class, imagined her at five years old in her black leotard, being whispered to by the teacher and raising her childish little arms in performance. *Frustrated*, I wanted to guess out loud at her piece of theatre, but I did not. ‘If I listened to you... if I lived like you do... I would be too scared to do anything.’

‘We’re different,’ I told her. My voice, even to my own ears, sounded flatter than usual.

‘You are even worse than I thought. Because this,’ she gestured around her and then to the window. ‘It’s so easy! And you can’t even do it.’

‘I like my life, Dolly,’ I told her.

‘This isn’t living. It’s ...’ she paused, then spat out the last word like something filthy, ‘*small*.’ I had never seen her so furious. I had never seen her angry, I realised. Surely, I thought, surely, she has been angry before. Had I missed her anger, or had she deliberately kept it from me; another secret my child could not trust me with?

I found, though, that I was telling the truth. I did like my life and I did not want to live like her, or like Vita, however easy they found it. Everything came effortlessly to them and was therefore replaceable and without value. Dolly does not know if she has it in her to struggle, I

thought. Or even to try hard at something, or with someone? She does not know what it is to be misunderstood, or disliked, or simply not adored. When I put my hands on my plants, or immerse myself in Sicilian culture, I am gifted with something more than I really am. The awkwardness of being no longer exists when I am part of these other worlds and aligned with something bigger. I would rather be a tiny person who wonders and trembles at their surroundings, than rule over everything, manipulate it to my preference, and in doing so, come to despise it. Dolly left the table and went next door, still in her nightdress and with her results paper in her hand, without saying goodbye. And although I heard her come home later that night, when I was in bed, she never really returned to me.

Vita put a note through my door explaining that Fridays were not good for dinner anymore, that she would be in touch when things were less chaotic. That was the word she used; ‘chaotic.’ And I returned to my previous routine, to the life I had once lived without them.

After her results, Dolly came home very little and generally, she returned only to collect clothes or belongings. When I asked about where she had been, she would answer that she had spent a few days in town, even though this was not always true. If I challenged her or Vita about the presence of Rollo’s car, or about a brief local sighting of them when they claimed to be in London, they were flippant in response. They had always just been briefly home before leaving again, they would assure me in turn; even if their stories varied, their unflustered demeanour was identical. Typically, Dolly came home in clothes that I did not recognise. She had always been fastidious about her possessions, but that summer seemed to develop a perverse pleasure in leaving new items on the floor of her room, sometimes only wearing them once or not at all, before abandoning them to the discarded pile under her bed. Eventually, I collected them all up and washed everything that was not made of an exotic material. I took everything else to be dry-cleaned, and, by the time she returned home to pack for the garden party weekend, the

cellophane wrapped items all hung pristinely in her wardrobe; the hand-washed items were folded in her drawers. She did not mention any of this and I found that I did not, after all, want to discuss my domestic efforts or her new clothes, either.

One Saturday morning, Dolly came home alone to collect some clothes for London. She wore a short shift dress which I had not seen her wear before, and I thought it too short to wear for anything except perhaps the beach. Did people wear dresses on the beach? Vita's clothes, too, often seemed like unfunctional beachwear, the revealing and impractical style and fabric that I once admired had come to seem primarily impractical. Since working with Vita, Dolly had stopped wearing the oversized fluffy jumpers and the tight-fitting jeans that she previously spent hours shrinking in the bath. She had begun to dress fashionably and uncomfortably, and as if she were pleasing someone other than herself. She was dressing to another person's requirements, something I have never been able to do. I wonder how it would feel to satisfy someone's aesthetic wants so effortlessly, to know intuitively what was expected and what would appeal. The King, certainly, would have liked me to know such things; and then, presumably, to care for them, too. His second wife dresses like his mother; both women are as clean and tidy as good nurses. She appears to live for her husband's good opinion, which is for the best as his approval is so fragile and delicate a thing. Too insubstantial for me to cultivate and keep, even though I spend my days handling seedlings as fine and breakable as babies' bones.

Dolly's silver-blond hair was pinned up neatly. She had painted thick black lines along her upper eyelids, which extended their natural line and gave her a watchful look. We had a fox living in our garden last winter, in a hole under the shed, which had been there, and empty for years. We had assumed that he was injured, because he first appeared looking awkward and thin. He only came in darkness, slinking in and out of our garden occasionally, with his shoulders held high and his head down low, like a criminal, ready to bolt when necessary. But

at our last sighting of him, some months later, he was glossy, and his bones were no longer visible. Looking at my sharp-eyed teenage daughter, I thought that perhaps the fox was not injured after all but was instead very young and growing into himself under our gaze. I was glad, just then, for each plate of milk and dog food that I had carried down to the end of our garden every night the winter before.

‘Do you want to go to London, Dolly?’ I asked her, only half-turning as I stood at the counter preparing cereal. ‘You look tired. You could stay in with me instead,’ I pointed out, as if she did not already know this.

I felt her resting her chin lightly on my shoulder and she stood there silently for a moment.

‘If I stayed here this weekend, what would we do?’ she asked eventually, in the encouraging and slightly dreamy tone she used when she asked me for stories as a child.

‘What do you want to do? We’ll do whatever you like,’ I told her.

She opened the fridge and took out a Tupperware box of leftovers; ‘Mashed potatoes? Is this tonight’s dinner?’ she asked.

‘Yes. And mainly potatoes, but essentially it is a vegetable soup,’ I corrected her.

‘With white bread?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘And vanilla custard afterwards ... I could do cheese and crackers.’

And she laughed quietly to herself, a short and musical sound. I felt her tense and draw back from me; she straightened up and shook herself as if getting rid of something.

‘Off to work then,’ she left the kitchen, and I heard the front door close quietly behind her. As always, once I heard the door close, I went to the bay window in my front room. From there, I could discreetly watch the three of them getting into Rollo’s second car, a vehicle as stupid as the first.

Rollo opened the passenger door in a sweeping and deferential motion, as if making up to a wife for his recent inattention to their children. My daughter received all attentions without

acknowledgement; they were, after all, what she was used to, and Rollo's courtesy was no different. It was part of being admired. She took her seat in the queenly and elegant way she did with her grandmother, with me, with everyone who offered her something. And everybody did.

Every August, Dolly's grandparents held a garden party at their rambling farmhouse. The themes varied and often expanded to include an event or achievement within the family. The year when the King remarried, for example, the marquee at the garden party was decorated with white flowers and photographs of the couple on their big day. When Dolly was born, the subsequent party had a pink theme and a baby announcement card on each table. That summer, the party was celebrating Dolly's O'level results and there were many pink balloons and shiny silver banners announcing Congratulations!

The day of the party was unnaturally bright, and I knew that Richard and Bunny would insist all the guests stayed outside in their large and beautifully kept garden. I grimly prepared for what would be a day of discomfort, choosing a long-sleeved white shirt, loose blue skirt, dark glasses and a wide brimmed hat. This, although I anticipated that the other women would wear large pieces of jewellery and tight-waisted sundresses, some with bare shoulders, building on their already established tans. A hat is correct etiquette for garden parties of course, and I would privately count the number of women who did not wear one. I knew some of them would be noting my oddities in conversation and behaviour; perhaps later they would bring them to Bunny in cupped hands with their heads bowed, little offerings to the mother of the King.

Dolly was dressed thoughtfully. She wore a boxy hat with a white ribbon, a navy dress, and a single strand of pearls. All of these were chosen and bought by her grandmother; they were too solemn for a young woman and resembled the formal wear Bunny herself favoured. But my daughter was still radiant, without make up and wearing her hair loose under her hat. The incongruously mature style of the dress and necklace only emphasised her young face. We circled each other in our little hall awkwardly before we left home, unused to attending formal events together. That is, I was awkward, Dolly was entirely relaxed and unfazed. A party held in celebration of her, at which she will be the star turn, was an afternoon with which she was

entirely comfortable. She was naturally gracious, was so even before Vita and Rollo, but her social ease had flourished even further since she began working with Vita. If this afternoon had been a party for me, I am certain I would not have attended. I did not want to see the King talking to his pretty wife, or Richard and Bunny greeting impatient friends, all of whom work to the same rapid and unfathomable script.

But I could not miss a party for Dolly. I could already imagine her wedding; the guest list would be the same as today, because Richard and Bunny would arrange it all and their people must be kept happy. I would pace my hall as I am now, and my mother of the bride outfit will also mirror today's effort, being technically appropriate but not quite right. Dolly would be a beautiful bride, her lack of nerves affording her a strange and soporific distance. Her absence of fear gave her the same quality of remoteness that my anxiety instils in me.

I had hoped Rollo would be able to take us to the party, but he and Vita were going to the farm straight from London. Vita had apparently been reluctant to go without Dolly, but Bunny insisted that Dolly spent the day before the party at the farm to help with preparations. So, without Vita next door, Bunny had to drive over to the house to collect us. *My friends don't want to see you two getting off the bus*, she had insisted with a high-pitched laugh and an unsmiling face. And she held the passenger door open to Dolly, as deferential as a chauffeur. My daughter got into the car without comment or thanks. I sat behind them and listened to them talking, interested as always in what it was that they discussed together. My daughter never spoke about her grandmother, but Bunny talked to me about Dolly whenever we met, her eyes sharp and her voice hopeful with the possibility that she knew something that I did not. These are conversations in which I was grateful for the blankness of my expression; even Bunny, with her watchful eye, could not know from my immovable face what I was hearing for the first time. The Land Rover's engine rumbled collusively above the sound of their voices as I listened. All I could discern was that Bunny was asking questions and Dolly was answering

these briefly, looking out of the window which muffled her voice further. When we arrived at the farmhouse, Bunny turned off the engine and sat motionless for a moment, allowing Dolly to admire the large porch, which had a pink and white flower arrangement built in the shape of an archway.

Dolly leaned across the seat to kiss her grandmother on the cheek.

‘Well,’ she exhaled. ‘The house looks very pretty.’ Her voice was restrained, correct, and entirely empty; both the tone and phrasing were recognisably my own.

Bunny and Dolly went through the open side gate hand in hand, the older woman now an infant led by my daughter. I followed them through into the garden, where the rest of the King’s family were waiting. They were a handsome group, a living demonstration of what a comfortable life, good genes and focus can accomplish. My daughter was moving purposefully towards her grandfather and the King, no longer allowing Bunny to still her and enjoy the *ta-da!* moment of reveal at each detail of the party. However, even without Dolly at her side, Bunny continued to gesture around her like a wilting game show hostess, a move that incorporated the open sided canvas tent, with the buffet and the bar laid out underneath and the uniformed staff fussing around both areas. Dolly embraced Richard and her father, before moving to her stepmother. As the woman raised her arms to return Dolly’s greeting, I noticed her distended stomach pulling against her tunic dress and I flinched, stumbling slightly backwards on the even grass. The group turned to look at me in collective acknowledgement and I held up my palm, a sign that could be interpreted as either *hello!* or *stop!* Then I found I was walking into the house and through the kitchen, while Bunny shouted helpfully after me that *I needn’t go indoors; guests are using the gardeners’ lavatory over there. Over there, Sunday!*

The downstairs loo is at the side of the farmhouse and from there I could hear cars pulling up on the gravel and the voices of guests as they moved into the garden, strangely hushed as

they presumably scanned for people they knew. Vita's voice carried through the loudest, clear and authoritative, and she sounded as if she were hurrying a less enthusiastic Rollo along, although they were not late. I took off my shirt and sat on the floor. My mind and my body were on fire and there was not enough water in the whole lake to put them out.

An insistent rapping on the door was followed by a woman saying, 'Are you ever coming outside?'

I thought it was Vita, but when I finally stood up and opened the door, Dolly was standing there. I was ashamed by my disappointment; I had spent little time with Dolly that summer. I imagined future birthdays and Christmases, long summer holidays, where Dolly had other commitments, with people she did not yet know. And now I would also be sharing her with another new little person. One who was half the King and would naturally have his charm.

'Mummy, why are you...?' she gestured at my half-dressed body. Then she shook her head, dismissing the query. 'Vita's here. And Rollo. Are you coming out to see them?'

'Yes. Dolly, you didn't tell me ... she... is pregnant?'

'No. What do you think?' She was watching my face intently; 'I will be a big sister. I am thrilled.' Her words are flat, as though scripted and read for the first time. She sounded again like her own, unkind impression of me.

'I am very happy for you.' This was the proper tone of a party conversation at the King's family home, measured and polite. Although the fact that I was dressed in only a bra and a skirt probably negated the propriety of our talk. I tried to add the words, *a little brother or sister for you!* But I found that I could not, after all, say this. Dolly returned to the garden without either of us mentioning that I was crying. Soon afterwards, there was a knock on the door.

'Are you coming out? Dolly says you aren't in the party mood?' Only Vita would use a phrase like *party mood*. She was the party. 'I met your ex,' she continued cheerfully. 'Quite pretty, darling, but God, how dull!' Her tone was conversational as if we were face to face; she

spoke in a loud voice which any of the visiting strangers or the King's family might have overheard.

I opened the door. Vita was in a bright red dress; her delicate, matching hat featured a red-netted veil that obscured and exposed her face in a contradiction of modesty. I had missed her face intensely I realised as I found myself examining the netting between my fingers. Her lips, too, were painted bright red, which I liked very much on her. She did not move but instead stood patiently while I traced my fingers along the trim of her hat, feeling the peculiarly soft and inflexible veil. No-one else, even Dolores, would ever have let me do this, no-one has ever stood in a comfortable silence while I patted their hat, their hair, their clothes. Concentrating on the feel of the veil beneath my fingers made the heat and the noise less fierce.

When I finally dropped my hands, she moved past me into the little room. 'Your face!' she giggled cheerfully, 'here, let me sort you out. And, by the way, that is the ugliest bra I have ever seen. Where would you even buy something like that?' She lifted her dress, showing her entire body, but pointing at her bra, as if the rest of her were somehow irrelevant. 'Look, Sunday, this is a bra.' Her underwear was lace and satin, small and navy blue. Her breasts rose above her bra in the same unhappy way that her hips and legs appeared to be escaping their own encasement, as if in discomfort from a rapidly decreasing space.

I sat down on the loo and shuddered as I considered her underwear, as I had never considered the appearance of my own, which I selected solely on the grounds of the soft material and the pale colour.

'I think your bra, and your knickers are terrible. I would never wear those.' *Terrible* was a word I had acquired from Vita. As a result, our conversation often sounded sometimes like that of excited children, sometimes more elevated; we threw around the longest and most pleasing words we could conjure up without regard for pointed sentences.

Vita laughed cheerfully and stuck out one hip in an overblown pose, her body still exposed. I remembered her in my kitchen, weeks ago, the pleasing lack of concern over her milk covered lip. *Do I look pretty?* I knew, of course, that the King's wife would also wear this sort of pleasing underwear, of the type designed for aesthetic display, rather than the comfort of the wearer. Perhaps that was why I disliked it, not just for the imagined discomfort it conjured. I could not imagine what bra I would have chosen for someone else to look at, but I was certain I did not want the sort that would prove suitable for an onlooker. Suddenly, I was very tired and thinking only about the cool familiarity of my home. I had left all the curtains drawn, as I often do at times that were both demanding and bright, and it means the day never quite gets through.

Vita filled the sink and floated several tissues in the cold water. She produced a large make-up bag from her purse; she selected several items, which she lined up on the sink, as efficient as a doctor preparing for surgery. She placed the cold tissues lightly over my eyes and cheeks, leaving me in a cool darkness. Then she waited for some minutes, while I felt the coolness soothing my skin. She chatted easily and without pause about the guests outside. No response was sought or required, so I let her words float past like music, as I did when I listened to Mr Lloyd in the farm shop. I received only pieces of information; there was a woman wearing a silk floral dress that Vita coveted, another wearing sharp-heeled shoes that kept getting stuck in Bunny's prized lawn. Rollo had already apparently rescued the inappropriately shod woman twice while she floundered ridiculously on the spot; it was with some pleasure that Vita described how the woman's arms flailed about while her feet were restrained as if in cement.

'I mean; is she a *child*? Who would wear those shoes to a *garden party*?' Vita sounded genuinely perplexed by the error.

Of course, Vita would have dressed correctly for any event. And she would have done so without recourse to an etiquette guide like mine. Flat shoes on a yacht and knee length fitted

boots for hunting, the leather of the latter would be clean but gently worn; if the boots were too pristine it would suggest that they were bought for the event and flaunting the newness of belongings is always vulgar. The 'breeding' that prepared Bunny to be a good Forrester wife was the same imperceptible force that directed Vita to wear the right outfit for all occasions. And if she did not wear the right thing, she would have known it, and she would have found it funny, as she did when she sat on the doorstep on our street, clad in a silk robe and my work boots, with a cigarette in her hand. And that, then, became something quite different; for it was a wrongness that was enchanting and not at all common or gauche.

I thought of the woman outside, who was in the wrong shoes, but who did not know her error until she had started to sink slowly into the lawn. Perhaps she caught her husband's gaze as she began to drop downwards; at the same moment, they might have realised; *Oh, no!* The other guests would know, as Vita did, that the woman had made a mistake, that she had dressed inappropriately. And the woman would give herself away when she did not laugh unselfconsciously, as Vita would have done. Instead, after several miniature descents, the woman would blush, apologise and limp awkwardly to a nearby chair; she would refuse to leave her seat until the party has finished and she could walk, bare-foot and shame-faced, to her husband's car.

Vita talked and talked and did not pause for replies. Her voice in the darkness and beneath the cool was again like pleasant background music. My throat and chest began to expand back to their proper capacity, so that I could breathe again; it as if Vita's words had brought in the air I needed. It was like being back with Dolores.

Eventually, Vita stopped talking and put her hand on my shoulder. 'I am going to take the tissue off now, darling,' she warned, as gentle as a mother. Not my mother, but a mother. Light flooded in like a blind being snapped open and I was back in the loo at the terrible party. She began to apply her make up to my skin, her cool fingers moving lightly across my face. Her

hands were always cold which was a gift she had. However, the light could not be properly dimmed even by Vita. It made me as uncomfortable again as one of my failing plants; hot and overexposed; always, there is too much light. ‘You do know, Sunday, don’t you?’

‘What?’ I asked, adjusting to the too-brightness which must be endured.

‘That Rols and I... that we care about you. Greatly.’ She shook her head minutely, ‘Forget it. Move on!’ She pointed to the door, ‘I’m going!’

‘We care about you. Greatly. Forget it. Move on. I’m going. We care about you. Greatly. Forget it. Move on. I’m going,’ I mouthed the words back to her, only just audibly and she drew back at first. She gasped and her hands went up to her mouth. Then she put her arms around me for a moment in a tight hold that was unlike her usual, easy embraces.

Outside in the garden, the King and his pregnant wife waited.

We went through the double French doors together and Vita took me to the marquee, where a breeze moved through the rolled-up canvas sides. She ordered us both champagne and ordered me to drink mine as fast as she downed her own. Then she asked for both glasses to be refilled and advised me to sip this one; she was already on first name terms with the friendly barman and I imagine she would be the first to be served if a queue appeared later on. Dolly appeared at Vita’s side.

‘You haven’t spoken to Daddy yet, have you?’ she smiled at me and then at Vita. ‘Vee, tell her she needs to say hello.’

‘Of course, darling. We’ll go over now, won’t we, Wife?’ says Vita as she took first my arm and then Dolly’s too.

As the three of us made our way towards the King and his wife, Rollo joined us, falling into step on my other side. He greeted me uncharacteristically quietly, as if we were in an organised and covert operation that demanded we did not draw attention to ourselves. He was tanned and

handsome in a pale linen suit with an open necked white shirt; I had never seen him without a tie before. I felt I had caught a high-ranking officer out of uniform, mid-change and exposed. The King, of course, intuited that we were making our way over to him and he turned smoothly, as though performing a rehearsed camera close-up, to acknowledge our approach. I was briefly ashamed of the degree to which I loved his face. There could be no excuse for being seduced by what had already been confirmed as a trick. He is simply so well crafted, a demonstration of what a face ought to be. I admired him again, as I always do; a beautiful building still has architectural and aesthetic value, regardless of the terrible things that go on within.

‘Sunday!’ The King leaned in towards me. I was apparently further from him than he realised and so he was forced to step further forward after his first kiss and even on his second attempt he did not quite make contact with my cheek. ‘Vita. Rollo. So how are you all enjoying being neighbours?’

‘We feel very lucky.’ Vita’s speech was clipped and direct with him, more like my own than her usual, excitable chatter. ‘Sunday is fantastic. We don’t *ever* want to move.’

‘But Dolly tells me you are all off again soon?’ The King was gleeful, as if the move were his own idea and he were in charge of Vita’s housing arrangements himself.

‘Well, we will go back to town at some point, yes. But now we have Sunday, so we will be coming back to visit.’ She had not mentioned Dolly as a reason for returning and I glanced over to make sure this had not been noticed. And Dolly was smiling and must have been unconcerned. Vita put an arm on my shoulder then and leaned into me; her smallness making me the mother of that pose. ‘And we have the house until October, so there’s really no rush,’ she continued. Vita remained brusque, still an elegant version of me, and Rollo took over with his easy charm, chatting to the couple about the housing market in London.

Vita remained lovely, but Rollo’s pleasant looks were downgraded by the presence of the King, as were those of all the men present. Rollo looked more feminine next to Dolly’s father;

he was smaller in feature and build than the King. His eyes were slightly enlarged by his thick glasses and this wide-eyedness challenged his masculine appeal; the King has long eyes that narrow as if in permanent displeasure. Those disapproving eyes that make you want to do better, to *be* something better under his gaze. Rollo's face had none of the sharp angles of the King, who has the symmetrical angularity of a film idol, lit to perfection. This knowledge made me defensive of Rollo, who had been so much kinder, so much more accepting of Dolly and I than his competition had ever been. And how would I stand up to Vita, if someone was to compare the two of us? I would not have. I tried to cast Rollo as the hero as the two men talk, but the King's beauty would not allow it.

'You have to eat whatever you crave,' I told the King's wife, who was listening to the two men in silence. She didn't respond, so I repeated loudly; 'Hey? You need to respond to your cravings. Whatever they are.' She and the King both looked at me, but still she did not speak, so I continued, my words expanding to fill the silence. 'Sicilians say that a pregnant woman must feed all her cravings. If the woman ignores her desire for something, her baby will be disfigured by the lack of that food. For example, a woman who does not ask her neighbour to share the fish she can smell cooking will have a baby covered in scales. You must always ask for whatever you want.' *But you can only ask for things and not for people*, I found myself thinking. *You did not ask for my husband. And I would not have shared him if you had.* The King's wife did take what she wanted, but not in the Sicilian way. She stood next to what she wanted, her hand resting proprietorially on his arm. As I fell silent, I begin to feel that pregnancy was perhaps an inappropriate subject for polite conversation. I remember, too, how the King's face hardened when I spoke about Italy and I could feel myself reddening. I found I was unable to look at him, did not want to see his mouth tighten and his eyes all dark and flinty.

‘Yes, I’ve heard that, too,’ said Vita, patting my back gently. ‘A friend of mine ignored her cravings for strawberries and her baby had an enormous strawberry birthmark. Excellent advice, Sunday. And did you follow that when you were pregnant with our lovely Dolly, too?’

It pleased me that she referred to Dolly as ours in the King’s presence, as if he had no claim or involvement but was merely an onlooker to the family Vita and I had created together. The King’s wife was watching Vita uncertainly, with her white-gloved hands crossed over her rounded stomach as if in protection. Of course, the King’s second wife would be correctly dressed; her white gloves were immaculate, and her hat was becomingly trimmed with real flowers. The rest of the group, though, looked at Vita with smiling faces. She was a good friend; being married had not been like that. The King never helped me along with conversation as she did. He laughed at whatever I said for the first year we were together and after that he would flinch and hold his mouth in a pinched line when I spoke, as if he believed a demonstration of his own silence would silence me, too.

‘Yes,’ I replied earnestly. Although what I had wanted most for myself when pregnant was the King. And he was not for me; not then, or ever. The King’s wife was looking up at him and had taken hold of his hand, but his gaze was fixed on Vita, who was especially pretty when wearing the hard, glinting smile that she reserved for new people. I did not want to be on the King’s arm, as his wife was, ever again. I had already been round-bellied and dull and had lived only for a brief glimpse of his affection.

‘So, you’ll be busy too yourselves soon, I hear? Congratulations!’ Rollo continued. He had to reference the fact he had been told; he could not insinuate that the pregnancy was visible. *Congratulations*, that word which covers so many situations and which I cannot use in conversation, because it requires both substantial consideration and prior knowledge. People seem thrilled to hear it in the proper context, but this term demands an understanding of their very private desires. How can you always know that they even want the outcome for which

you are congratulating them? What if they are embarrassed by the specific change and you draw uncomfortable attention to them by celebrating it?

Rollo raised his glass and we all looked at the King's wife, who limply held her glass up in response. She was lovely in a clean and uncomplicated way, with her shiny skin and her square, white teeth. I imagine she smells permanently of soap and laundry. She would give birth without complaint and return to her normal self within moments of the baby being born, as all the King's cattle do. That was not the way I gave birth; I lay on the operating table afterwards and shook so hard that my eyes rolled back, and I heard my teeth rattling in my head. The nurses had to restrain my flailing legs with their sharp fingers, to prevent me from injuring myself, they said later when they saw me examining the bruises they had left behind. *But I am injured!* I thought, although I could not speak, could not explain this to them.

When my eyes were my own again, but my body was not yet, I watched as the women held grimly onto my protesting, numbed legs and I still could not feel their gripping hands. I looked away from them and stared upwards; once my eyes became accustomed to the brightness of the lights, I could see all the red dots of blood that speckled the ceiling. I imagined the unnatural force which it would take to bleed upwards and splatter the white paintwork in such a manner. *Was my own blood up there now among that of all those other women?* I counted the bloody dots and reached the one hundred and forty-seventh circle before my body began to still. The nurses moved away uncertainly, revealing a clear-sided box. Dolly was inside it, a bee-shaped thing wrapped tightly in yellow and positioned stiffly in my direction. She watched me sternly through the plastic crib as my violent shaking progressed to a tremble. I hoped that they would take her away, but they did not. Even then, I knew that this first sighting of me would be indelibly marked on her cloudy and unblinking eyes. Sometimes, I think she has not forgiven me yet. Dolly could not lose control of her body; she is the master of so much more than herself.

But I knew that I did not want to carry another of the King's all-seeing children with their milk blue eyes and their tiny bird-hearts. I would rather remain alone in the greenhouses and in my house by the lake. Dolly and I would still be visited by Vita and Rollo after they eventually moved. The King's woman was welcome to what was coming to her. A watchful little Forrester, who would not even need to listen to know all her secrets.

Rollo and the King were deep in conversation about obscure farming techniques. Rollo said things like; 'Well, of course horses should never be allowed near agricultural ground.' To which the King would quote a statement made by his uncle which negated this theory. Then, as the King recommended another farming approach, Rollo will politely detail how European farmers would disapprove of it. They sounded like schoolboys competing for the superiority of their beloved fathers. Or perhaps this is how wealthy people argue, I thought; they come at it from behind another person and are not required, then, to acknowledge their own differences with one another.

Vita was talking to the King's wife, recounting the story of a friend who recently gave birth. 'And she couldn't walk for weeks afterwards! Still wets herself when she laughs ... which she doesn't do much, admittedly now, because she is so tired. Baby has colic, you see. Screams all the time. Gosh, well; motherhood! Can't say it has ever appealed to me. But you,' she paused here, to inflict her most winning smile on the woman. 'You will be an absolute *natural*, darling. It's *such* a blessing.' She paused again, unsmiling now. 'Isn't it?' Her question met with silence for a moment. Then, as the woman began to speak, Vita patted her arm. 'I know, I know,' she said in a very soft voice, quite unlike her own. Then she smiled brightly at me in the manner of a newsreader transitioning from a tragic story to the fun item; 'Come on, let's go and get drunk.' She looked at the King's wife, 'Oh. Sorry. We would love you to join us, but...' She pulled an exaggeratedly sad face and gestured broadly around the woman's midsection, the

circles covering a vast area many times larger than her actual stomach. As we walked away, Vita carried on over her shoulder. ‘...congrats to you though! Best of luck!’

The King’s wife was smiling uncertainly as she shrank into the distance behind us, blinking hard as though dazed by the sun. She appeared misshapen from afar as she had not close up. She became a rounded circle of a person, a planet with thin and weightless limbs. The King took one of her white gloved arms firmly in his own, as if anchoring her and I imagined her circular figure, filled with air and not with a sibling for my daughter, floating, balloon-like as he attempted to hold her down, alarm on his lovely face.

Vita took my hand as we walk towards the bar and links her fingers through mine; ‘What a drip! God! What *was* he thinking, darling?’

While Vita got us drinks at the bar, I sat down at one of the tables, which all featured stiffly posed flower arrangements. I stroked the roses which were real but might as well have been plastic; all were entirely without smell and their precise uniformity in colour and size marred any natural aesthetic. I had offered to pot up some plants for the tables, which could have been given as party gifts later to the departing guests, or planted up in the garden after the party, creating a new flowerbed to mark the celebration. Bunny declined; allowing me to dress the tables would have caused great offence to the local florist, apparently a close friend of hers, who would also be attending the party. I had asked Dolly about the florist; she did not know her name and had never met her. When I looked up from the unscented flowers, I recognised the woman seated opposite me. Carole was another guest who my daughter probably would not know; I expected she had received an invitation purely on the strength of her regular and generous patronage of the farm shop.

‘Beautiful flowers, aren’t they? And Dolly looks lovely,’ Carole said brightly to me, her eyes fixed on my daughter, who was some distance away and posing for a photograph with her grandparents, one on either side of her.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Like my Evie. Evie-loves-the water,’ she told me in a confidential tone, as if the other party guests were waiting for precisely such information but she had chosen to gift it to me. Carole has two adolescent daughters whose existence dominates all her conversation. When she speaks about them, she acquires the look of an aged widow recounting something lost. She describes her daughters in sentimental and disjointed fragments, as if trying to make sense of confused memories. Sometimes, when she comes into the shop and talks about the girls in her intense and searching way, I find myself uncomfortably convinced that one of them must have recently died or met with some other tragedy. Their life, though, seems to remain free of excitement or even interest.

‘Evie loves the water?’ I repeated, as if for clarification, but actually in order to create some time to craft an appropriate response. Did this woman want me to tell her one of Dolly’s activities in return? Other mothers did not typically require shared information, but rather seek a show of returned interest in the life of their own offspring. Normally the stories were more carefully crafted, however, in both structure and subject; a child who likes water was so routine that I am unsure how to proceed with this conversation.

‘Yes, she does! She is *such* a swimmer; I expect Dolly has told you all about it, though.’ Her eyes returned from the distance to focus on me. It created an uncomfortable feeling. The assumption that Dolly, unprompted, would tell me about a girl I did not know and who can swim is a peculiar one. *Is that what the other mothers discuss with their daughters? The preferences and behaviours of their child’s acquaintances?* I could not recall Dolly ever telling me about any of the hobbies of her peers. Or even her own. She swam. I swam. We did not

need to talk about it. What was there, even, to discuss, in those facts? Carole was still watching me, and she repeated herself; ‘I said, I expect Dolly swims at the lake with my girls? She’d have told you about my Evie.’ Eventually, I shook my head firmly, No. *I am already full. I am full of information, of facts and words that occupy me, that overwhelm me, in fact. I do not want bits of your life to carry around with me too.* This is what I wanted to say, but I remained silent. Carole raised her eyebrows, causing several half-circle lines to form above them and emphasising the depths of her effort with me. ‘About Evie’s swimming? And her competitions?’ She was prompting me because she wanted an answer.

‘No. No, Dolly has never talked to me about your girls,’ I said, honestly, and glad to finally be dealing in facts.

‘Well, of course,’ said Carole, ‘we can’t all have that kind of relationship with our daughters. Can we?’ She was smiling, but her eyes remained unaffected by the expression. A smile that does not affect the appearance of the eyes is a sign of falsity. She did not really want to smile at me because I had said something wrong. So, I remained silent while I considered reparation and I smiled deliberately widely at her as I thought. Mer used to say my facial expressions were too small, too restrained. *Smile more, try harder! Always, try harder! Why don’t you try?* Only Dolores ever thought I did enough, smiled widely enough, tried hard enough. And, for a time, Vita did, too. I decided to provide Carole with some information on my reluctance to let Dolly swim in the lake with her friends. Mothers shared seemingly random facts about their lives. It was just knowing what exactly they wanted to hear back from you that was difficult.

‘My sister drowned in the lake,’ I told her. ‘And my parents, too. Well, not exactly *in* the lake, but some time afterwards.’ Carole was staring at me, unblinking. ‘They all died because of the lake, anyway.’ And as I spoke, the information landed, and it pained me. I realised that my voice had become very quiet and I was muttering this to myself, so I repeated what I said, loudly this time, and still Carole did not say anything at all. I thought I was more socially

appropriate and polite than Carole, who was not even trying to respond to what I had told her, at some personal cost to myself. Under her squashy hat, I noticed her hair, which was the dull brown of a child's fat crayon. It was evenly curled, and the ends were first pinned under and then into, the nape of her neck. It looked terribly uncomfortable, but the texture of it was fascinating. I would have liked to touch it and feel the restrained, net-like structure in my hand. 'I like your hair, Carole,' I told her. I took off my gloves and touched the loose bun under my own hat in an attempt to create the sensation of touching her coiled hair. I stared at her hair and imagined my hand was on it, tracing the roughness I imagined it would offer. 'I really do like your hair.'

'You two look serious,' said Vita, announcing her presence by placing a hand on my back, as I had often seen Rollo do to her. She was not wearing her gloves anymore either. She sat down and placed two drinks on the table. 'What am I missing over here?' She looked at Carole and reached out a hand to her, 'How do you do? *I am Vita.*' The way in which she always phrased this introduction, never contracting the 'I am,' was rather grand. As if we had all been waiting for a Vita to arrive and finally, she had come to claim her title. And perhaps this were true. I, at least, had been waiting for her.

Carole shook the proffered hand; 'Carole,' she said. 'Lovely to meet you.' In fact, she ought to have returned Vita's 'How do you do?' and I was pleased she did not. Neither was she wearing or holding white gloves.

'Lovely to meet you,' returned Vita. Her expression was unusually flat, and I know she was sharing a joke with me by copying Carole's address, acknowledging that we both knew Carole had got it wrong. 'And how do you know Sunday and Dolly?'

I was glad Vita referred to Dolly and me as a couple. She and Dolly so often spoke of their shared plans and preferences that I, too, had found myself beginning to think of them as a pair, separate from me.

‘We my husband and I, we are good friends of the family. Of the Forresters.’ Carole had apparently learned to pronounce the name in the way Bunny did, emphasising the first syllable, then the short pause, before quickly proceeding with the rest of the name. ‘And how about you, Vita?’

‘My husband,’ Vita paused to locate Rollo and gestured in his direction, ‘and I are great friends of Dolly *and* Sunday.’ Her emphasis on the connective somehow spoke of pride in this connection and also expanded my small family into something far more substantial and impressive than the Forresters. ‘We just think the *world* of them both.’ And we grinned at each other and I felt like a bride, as I never had.

‘Sunday and I were just talking about,’ here she paused for effect, ‘My. Daughter. Evie. Evie-loves-the water,’ continued Carole formally and very clearly, as if announcing her child’s full name to a waiting official. ‘The only thing Evie loves more than her swimming is art. Since she was very small, she has always drawn foxes’ heads as a circle with two triangles. It is very stylized. Very artistic. Everyone always says so.’ She was looking into the distance, in that peculiar way of hers, as if recounting distant and painful memories.

I had still produced no response to this unsolicited information about a child whom I do not know personally. Swimming and drawing were routine among my daughter’s friends, and it would not have occurred to me to share Dolly’s participation in these activities with minor acquaintances. Would ‘that’s interesting?’ be appropriate? People typically responded well to this.

I looked to Vita, who was nodding patiently at Carole, as if waiting for further explanation as to why she is being told about Evie-loves-the-water. But, for once, I was ahead of Vita; I knew this is the full statement.

‘That is very interesting, Carole,’ I said.

‘Isn’t it?’ agreed Vita instantly. ‘Fucking fascinating. Fox-heads.’ She looked at me, nodding and exaggeratedly narrowing her eyes, as if in serious contemplation. She magnified her expressions deliberately for me, I thought, so that we could communicate wordlessly, as other people did. Carole, who had been visibly startled by Vita’s enthusiastic swearing, nodded slowly in response to this apparent recognition of artistic talent. She was obviously glad to have been joined by someone who recognised the gravity of the discussion.

Vita took my arm showily, ‘Sorry... er...Karen? We have just seen a neighbour who we must speak to. Excuse us.’ And she led me over to Phyllis, who was sitting alone and staring into her glass.

Phyllis looked up and smiled enthusiastically as she recognised us. She was wearing a bright pink hat with a collection of brownish feathers tucked into the ribbon trim. As we reached her, I realised they were chicken feathers, presumably from her own flock. Vita kissed her loudly on both cheeks, and I patted her arm awkwardly.

‘Hello,’ I said. ‘I like your hat, Phyllis.’

She reddened but smiled and her hands went up to her hat, patting it as if checking that the feathers were still in place. ‘Do you dear? It’s always been a favourite of mine. It needed a little updating, but I’m always happy to give it an outing.’

Vita said, ‘You look lovely Phyllis. It is a very pretty hat. How *clever* of you to fix it up.’ She pronounced the word ‘clever’ slowly as though it were a word that might be difficult to comprehend. She leaned forward to pet something in Phyllis’ lap and they both cooed at the little creature. At first, I thought it was one of her chickens, but it proved to be one of the family of farm cats who all looked identically brown and thin. It was impossible to tell which were friendly or wild and so I avoided them all.

‘I love cats,’ said Vita. ‘But Beast is so anti-social.’ She smiled at Phyllis, ‘He’s my little dog. When his time is up, we are definitely getting a kitten.’

‘I haven’t seen your little dog. Where do you walk him?’

‘I don’t,’ said Vita. ‘He’s too little for walks.’ Phyllis was looking intensely at Vita, but she had already straightened up and was shading her eyes from the sun and looking over the garden, perhaps for Rollo or Dolly.

‘Has Sunday told you about her cat Vita?’ asked Phyllis, smiling up at me.

‘I don’t have a cat, Phyllis.’ I said.

‘Exactly,’ said Phyllis triumphantly. ‘You *don’t* have a cat. You never have.’

And this was one of the reasons I loved Vita, still. The King would have walked off to speak with a more glamorous guest, leaving me frowning at Phyllis in confusion. But Vita, I knew, would solve the puzzle, gently and with a social grace so abundant that it settled on me, too.

Vita had already taken the chair next to Phyllis and was looking at her encouragingly. ‘You’ve been here a long time, Phyllis, haven’t you? I bet you know all about Sunday.’ I had never told Vita about the period of guardianship that Phyllis had once held. My scrupulous silence on the matter was, in fact, evidence of my regard, but I knew it might be taken as an absence of such. This awareness, though, did not alter my need to keep it to myself. One of the qualities I loved most about Vita was her easy lack of scrutiny, so unlike the demands of other people and the offence taken when they discovered something you had not disclosed but apparently should have done, according to their rules. Vita bounced lightly in her seat like an excited child. ‘Tell me about the cat. The whole story. Oooh, I love *stories!*’ On the last word she spread both arms out widely, demonstrating the breadth of entertainment that Phyllis would be providing.

Phyllis turned to Vita happily as they both stroked the cat on her lap.

‘Well,’ she began, turning both her hands palm up as though opening a book. ‘Sunday was about six, she was obsessed with a story about a family who lived in a caravan. She carried the

book with her everywhere and read it to anyone who would listen. She even took it to bed. She was always asking her mum, 'Where is our caravan?' And we all told her that she lived in a house, instead, which she accepted. There were two children in this book: a girl and a boy. Sunday asked where her brother was, and we said that families are different, which was fine. The family in the book also had a cat, however, and this is what caused the problem.'

She paused dramatically at this point, like a newsreader looking down the lens at the scene of a tragedy, lights flashing behind him as he began to speak, *what caused the problem was...*

Vita touched her arm, 'Go on, Phyllis.'

'She used to ask, where is the cat? Long after she gave up on the caravan and the brother. Where is the cat? she would ask everyone on the street. Running around as if she had just lost it.'

'How sweet!' Vita said cheerfully. 'And did she finally get a cat?'

'Oh dear no. You didn't know Sunday's mother. Very strict she was,' Phyllis glanced quickly at me. 'But of course, it was different then. Children weren't spoiled like they are now. You should see those Fraser girls with their dad... Oh, they...'

'She threw the book away.' I told Vita. 'She watched me looking for the book and finally she told me not to bother. That she had got rid of it because she could not listen to another question about it.'

Vita put both hands up. 'I know what to do! I have an idea!' As if we had found ourselves in a sudden emergency which she was going to solve. She stood up and gestured impatiently for me to sit in her chair next to Phyllis. Then she promptly sat down sideways on my lap, her small frame warm against me. 'We should get you a cat, Sunday. Shouldn't we Phyllis? Do you know anyone who has kittens? I know someone in town who breeds Siamese. Beautiful creatures, but you wouldn't want one in your house...' And already, Vita was regaling Phyllis and me with a story about a Siamese cat who ruled her friends' house, who sat at the head of

the dining table during smart dinners and spat at anyone who tried to move it. This cat walked unchallenged along the long table during parties, amongst the decadent food and the crystal glasses. And Phyllis and I listened and laughed and we both forgot instantly about my book, about my mother and all the sadness. And this was another gift of Vita's. I was no longer preoccupied, always, by fact, by whether the Siamese actually existed. By whether he was really walking, disdainful and thin-hipped, through formal dinner settings in a smart house somewhere. Phyllis and I smiled at one another as we listened to Vita. The stories were evidence of Vita's care for us. And that had become much more important than the truth.

Waiters began to circulate among the guests with trays of champagne and I watched as one of them handed the King's wife a narrow flute. She took the glass from the young man without eye contact or acknowledgement, as though reaching for her drink from a conveniently placed table. She was softer and more appealing close-up than she was from a distance. From my position she was more like the wedding photograph version of herself, an assured and stern woman, comfortably in charge of the King. I know something that is more telling than a fleeting expression; I have learned to see inside to the repeated pattern on their hearts. It is that phrase that first woke them roughly from childhood sleep, that sudden recognition of self while in a crowded place one day that suddenly set them apart from everyone else, the separation of self that both terrifies and exhilarates. The King's little bird-heart bears only his own lovely image, while his wife has a heart that reads, *I can, I can, I can*. Linda's heart reads, *mother* and has an epigraph - *mother without a child*. I do not allow myself, though, to imagine the hearts of Vita or my daughter; I am not ready to look beneath the mechanical tick-tock and identify whether it is a clock or a bomb inside them.

'Speeches, I think,' said Rollo into my ear, indicating the circling waiters, straight backed and precise as dancers. He sat down next to me, and winked at Vita, who looked back at us,

unmoved. The afternoon sun cast precise shadows on her face through the hat netting; each enlarged square framed a tiny piece of loveliness, an eye, a cheekbone, one nostril. The resultant pattern made the sketch of an artist preparing to paint her.

‘Sort of.’ I said. ‘Really it’s just Bunny making family announcements. And bits about the farm. It will all be about Dolly and her O’levels this year.’

Bunny was shushing people in an authorial way; she has been chairperson of the local W.I. for as long as I have known her, and it is easy to imagine her in this role. She would have been one of those children who told off her classmates when they wore dirty shoes, who scolded them when they playfully swapped names to confuse visiting supply teachers. Her shyness is reserved solely for talk of her fortune, altered through marriage alone. Eventually, the spreading quiet among her guests was to her satisfaction and she took her place next to her husband in a peculiarly showy act of deference. The King stood on the other side of Richard. He is taller than his father, with impressively square shoulders; his generically handsome face and broad smile believably cast him as an actor paid to attend, a brand representative for the Forresters. Typically, Richard thanked the attendees and then introduced Bunny who would give a speech outlining all the family’s achievements since the last party.

‘Thank you all for coming today to celebrate with us.’ Richard began, then, instead of turning to Bunny, he continued to speak. ‘And we have a lot to celebrate this year. Firstly, we are so very proud of our lovely granddaughter. As many of you know, Dolly recently got her O’level results. She was awarded seven A’s; Seven!’ He did not mention the eighth, the B grade, which surprised me. ‘And, of course, the school are very keen for her to stay on for A levels. But Dolly also found the time to get a job in property development this summer!’ He did not entirely use his usual jaunty way of speaking which was structured around rhetorical questions. He also spoke as Bunny did, in short boastful epigraphs; it was uncomfortable to hear his wife’s voice come through him. I thought she must have prepared his talk. Each of his

lines were followed by a silence in which to let the references to family accomplishments settle. Only when the audience began to fidget and mumble amongst themselves did he talk once more. 'She has decided not to return to school but to explore this new career.'

It is a summer job, I thought irritably, a couple of months which seemed to mainly involve shopping and lunches with Vita, and it was never a career. She was, in fact, starting her A-levels the following week. Was Richard simply making up news to show off this year? Bunny should have made the speech after all; she had never lied in all the years she had done it. Surely Dolly's exam results were enough. And the baby. There was bound to be talk of the baby, I realised. Richard should have been happy enough with these facts.

Richard obviously decided he had allowed enough time for the last announcement to land and he began talking again. 'And if Dolly gets bored of London, there is always plenty of work to do back here as you can imagine. Can't you?' He gestured at the fields around him and frowned in a stagy way. It was not amusing, but some of the guests laughed faintly and those who resisted instead fidgeted in their seats or sipped their drinks in acknowledgement of his efforts at humour.

Vita and Rollo were drinking their champagne and watching Richard disinterestedly. Both of them were leaning back in their chairs and had their eyes half-closed, although it was impossible to tell if this was an expression against the sun, the speaker or simply the length of the party. Richard looked across admiringly at Dolly, who was now arm in arm with both her father and her grandmother; 'We are thrilled for Dolly and very proud, although we will miss her terribly. Won't we? Please, raise your glasses to Dolly.'

There is a general hum of approval and Dolly stepped forward to stand next to Richard.

'Thank you, Grandad. And all of you.' She was the gracious bride I had imagined earlier, benevolent and serene. 'I would like to make a toast. If I may.' She paused demurely to look at Richard for permission and he, thrilled, nodded in encouragement. I saw five-year old Dolly

in her drama class; her teacher whispering, *play modest* into her ear before she took to the stage. She bit her lip uncertainly before holding up her own glass; ‘To my Daddy, my other Mummy,’ she paused here to share a meaningful glance with the King’s wife who was standing, swollen at his side, ‘... and of course, the big news - the new baby! I can’t wait to meet him! To my brother or sister and our growing family of Forresters!’

The guests all stood to raise their glasses in a toast and the King, who did not normally speak at all during these speeches, stepped forward. ‘To my daughter, the working woman!’ he said in a loud and carrying voice. And I realised that the reason he did not join in with speeches was that he was simply too watchable. Bunny and Richard, of course, knew better than most people that their son’s appeal was too distracting for a shared platform. When the King continued, his eyes were on his daughter and not on the entranced crowd; ‘To Dolly’s new life in London!’

I became very small, perched as I was on the narrow, hard seat; I was suddenly intensely aware of my bones, my elbows pressing into my own ribs and my protruding anklebones flat against either side of the chair legs. The Forresters all congregated at the front of the marquee together, with Dolly shining at the centre; the whole family seemed to be growing to fill the garden, joyfully expanding while I shrank.

I could not speak for some time. Rollo left the table to join a group of middle-aged men who were drunkenly playing croquet on the edge of the party and Vita, too, went off into the crowd. Eventually, I rose and went to find Vita, who was in giggly conversation with one of the barmen.

‘Vita,’ I said, ‘when did you and Dolly decide she wasn’t going back to school? Why didn’t you tell me? You are taking her away to live in London? Without even talking to me?’ I had expected to cry when I finally spoke, but, instead, my entire body felt dry and tight as if

incapable of producing a single tear. It seemed as if there were dust floating inside me rather than blood and fluid. That, since Dolly's announcement, I had become only wood, dust, sand, hair, and bones inside skin. I had been remade, new, of everything that could choke you. And I had to speak through this dehydrated version of a real person.

Vita had a cigarette in her mouth and her eyes were closed as if in deep concentration. She smoked in the way some people drink tea, with that almost erotic surrender, closed eyes and short little gasps of pleasure. Interrupted, she took the cigarette from her mouth in an abrupt movement and waved away the smoke; her lips were a little paler now, but still red.

She opened one eye below the stiff red netting of her hat; 'Are you *very* cross darling? We only spoke about it – yesterday? It was Dolly's idea; I was surprised, in fact. And you know me, I'm simply not interested in domestic arrangements, am I?' She inhaled deeply on her cigarette and opened her other eye slowly, blinking as if emerging reluctantly from a pleasant dream. After a moment's silence, she exhaled and closed both eyes again while white smoke gently wreathed her face. I did not want to admire the way that the lashes of her closed eyes shadowed her cheekbones. She opened her eyes and flicked her cigarette onto the pristine lawn, watching as it faded out. She stood up and briskly smoothed down her red dress, unsmiling. 'Not at all.'

By 6.30pm, most of the guests had begun to leave, which was quite right. It was the correct time for exiting a garden party that began at 3pm. Those that start at 4pm ought to finish at 7.30pm. Dolly, the King and his parents lined up by the side gate, saying their goodbyes. The King's wife had already gone into the house, showily holding onto her stomach, as if her condition needed any more attention drawn to it. I imagined her taking off her shoes and lying on Bunny's sofa, ready to be discovered by the King when he went inside. As the garden began to clear, I remained seated with Vita and Rollo, who were still relaxed and squinting into the

low sun. It was uncomfortable to look at people who would not wear sunglasses in that brightness. I felt as if I were being forced to absorb the light along with them.

Eventually, Vita got to her feet and Rollo immediately followed, standing up and noisily finding his car keys in his pocket.

She held out a hand to me; ‘Come on, Wife, I will take you home. Dolly is staying here tonight, isn’t she.’ As we walked towards the gate, she continued, ‘Will you come on Friday for a last dinner with us?’

I remained silent. But I found that, for the first time, I was not looking forward to a Friday supper with Vita, Rollo and Dolly. I would prefer to be at home, already dressed in pyjamas and walking around my garden, checking on my plants. When I tried to alter this homely preference to an evening next door, wearing smart clothes and eating complicated food, I found that I could not.

We walked down the garden to thank Bunny and Richard, and to say goodbye to Dolly. They were still in the peculiarly formal row at the gate, thanking each guest as they departed. I hesitated before joining the line. *A queue! To speak to my own daughter!* Rollo must have felt my reluctance because he, unusually, went ahead of Vita and me. His rigid adherence to etiquette meant he typically danced around behind us, closing doors and seeing us to our seats, treating our movements like those of unpredictable children. For once, I followed him and then submitted to perfunctory kisses from Richard and then Bunny. Even the King kissed me goodbye; I think it was the momentum of a procession of goodbyes rather than an expression of care.

When I walked away from him, he said ‘Sunday.’ His tone was abrupt.

I stopped and turned; ‘Yes, what?’ I had been surprised to hear his wife say, ‘Pardon?’ to one of the waiters earlier. I wondered what the King would think of that. Would he correct her,

as he frequently had done with me during our short marriage? He had schooled me not to use this word. I tried it out myself, loudly, ‘Pardon?’

‘It’s just a way of saying *goodbye*. Saying someone’s name. That’s all. Isn’t that in your book?’ He sighed and looked away from me, smiling when he saw it was Vita in her pretty red hat who was the next guest in line to be thanked and kissed. I saw him unconsciously squeeze his hands open and closed as if in anticipation of holding her, like an infant presented with playdough.

‘Arrivederci,’ I smiled. ‘That’s Italian. It’s a way of saying goodbye.’

When I reached my daughter in the line, we both spoke at the same time and I immediately quietened, allowing her to speak first. Her cheeks were flushed with high dots of colour and her eyes shone. She looked like someone with a fever, I thought.

‘What do you think Mummy?’ she said, ‘about my news?’

‘We only talked about school the other day,’ I replied. ‘You never said you weren’t going to go back. When did you decide all this?’

But she was already looking behind me, towards Vita, who would be greeting her next and her reply was meaningless. *I’ve been thinking about it for a while... a real experience... love working... wanted to surprise you.... Knew you’d be thrilled...* None of it was the truth; it was simply a collection of words chosen to placate me in that moment. Neither she, or the Forresters, or even Vita and Rollo, were keen for me to shout and cry under the gaze of the other guests.

I thought of Vita’s frequent touch on my arm, the reassuring weight of her firm hand. I reached out to pat my daughter’s arm in the same way, and she looked down at my hand as if in surprise.

‘Dolly, have you really decided? To leave school. To move to London when they leave Tom’s.’

‘Yes, I have. Good. Thank you so much for coming, Mummy,’ she said flatly. And she lightly kissed both my cheeks. She kept both her arms fixed to her sides as she embraced me, which gave her an uncharacteristic awkwardness. Her gaze was behind me once more, her eyes fixed again on Vita.

Rollo walked back to me and held out a beige linen-covered arm; ‘Can I escort you to the car, Sunday?’ He nodded at Dolly and his wife, deep in discussion. Dolly had already turned away from me towards Vita, so I was facing her back and could not hear their low conversation. Rollo smiled at me, his eyes softening honestly with the expression. ‘They could be some time, I’m afraid. Vee really loves a long goodbye.’

It was a calming exercise, getting me to the car in the company of the Forresters and their friends; I was eyed as warily as an infant bridesmaid at a society wedding; a concern to onlookers.

When Vita finally got into the passenger seat, I told them both that I was tired, and also that I would not be coming to dinner on Friday. This was met with a silence which remained with us for the short journey home. When Rollo pulled up in their drive, Vita went indoors immediately and without a word to either of us. She was barefoot and must have left her shoes in the car, for she was not carrying them. Her formal dress, the high, netted hat, along with her pale and naked feet and the silence of the street were disconcerting when put together; she looked as though she was emerging from an accident or in the process of sudden flight. Rollo stood on my side of the car; he opened the door for me without looking away from Vita. He, too, was watching her walk away. And perhaps he also felt something of the oddness I felt, shared my certainty that something was not right, for he did not say goodnight with the usual formal kisses that were as quick as pinches. Instead, he embraced me, pausing to put his chin into the dip of my shoulder in a sweetly child-like pose. Then he rested his cheek against the side of my head, gently displacing my hat a little, and he spoke quietly.

‘I do so hate the end of summer,’ he breathed into the space next to me, as if addressing someone standing by my side. ‘It’s that crushing back-to-school feeling.’

As he straightened up again, I patted his arm. The thin linen fabric felt damp and hot beneath my hand; he must have been terribly uncomfortable. When I was almost at my front door, he shouted something at me, and I turned. He was still standing at his car, as if he were too tired to go indoors and he looked smaller and more crumpled than I had ever seen him. He took his glasses off and wiped them. Then he tucked the glasses absently into his trouser pocket, before finding them again and putting them on.

There was something unnatural, almost frightening, about Rollo being in any kind of disarray. Phyllis was burgled once, a long time ago; it happened while she slept upstairs, alone and untroubled. She told me that the most difficult part of the whole experience had been waking to the unfamiliar chaos in her organised little study, of which she had previously been so proud, and so particular. It felt, she said, as though she were a ghost, walking through her home after her own death. Her hands had shaken as she spent weeks reordering all her papers and she had not known if it was fear or fury that made her tremble. I imagined Rollo looking at himself as Phyllis looked through the disorder of her home, sadly putting himself back together, smoothing out the creases of his suit and his forehead, touching his sad little face. The process of repair would itself cost him something, though, as it had cost Phyllis. A small but visible mark would remain, irreparable.

‘What?’ I shouted back at him.

He called out again, louder this time.

‘I said, Goodbye, Sunday!’

‘Goodnight, Rollo.’ I waved back. And I knew, somehow, that it was the last time I would ever see him.

The garden party was the beginning of an end. At least, it was the beginning for me. For Dolly, Vita and Rollo, the conclusion of that summer must have been ticking slowly and noisily away for some time. The following day, I woke with a painful wisdom tooth. On the Monday, I called David to tell him I was taking the day off work; he agreed to check on the plants. I didn't get paid for Mondays anyway. I booked a dentist's appointment for the afternoon. After breakfast, I sorted some post and performed other undemanding domestic jobs, still dressed in my pyjamas. When the telephone rang, I failed to get to it before the caller hung up. The shrillness of it had pierced the quiet of my house and I was still feeling interrupted when the doorbell rang half an hour later. When I opened the door, Dolly's grandparents were standing there, characteristically stiff-backed and brisk. Bunny was holding keys in her hand, which I recognised by the small, pink-haired troll doll which hung from the keyring. It was my daughter's.

'Oh! You're in. Now, we don't want any nastiness,' warned Bunny, as if she had found herself unexpectedly in the centre of a fight. 'We are just going to get Dolly's things and then we're going.'

'Hello Bunny. Hello Richard,' I said, trying to catch up with them. Richard nodded, but Bunny was still eying me warily, as if I were something interesting and unpredictable. 'Would you like a drink?' I asked. 'Why do you want Dolly's things?' I stood back, politely. 'Would you like to come in?' They were still silent. 'Where's Dolly?' I asked; I was entirely lost, but the feeling was not unfamiliar to me and I waited for reason to catch up with the conversation, as it generally does.

'Richard. You go upstairs and pack her bedroom.' Dutifully, he jogged up our narrow stairs with two large, heavy-looking suitcases that bounced loudly on each step. 'Now, Sunday. No nonsense, please.' She held up both her hands theatrically, palms outwards, as though playfully warding off a child's unthreatening blows. She was speaking slowly and carefully. 'I am going

up to help Richard. I would like you to bring me whatever you can think of that Dolly might also need.'

'Where is she?' I could not tell what was happening. Was she in hospital, injured? What facts were they keeping from me? 'Will you take me to her?' I reached out to Bunny and unselfconsciously grabbed at her bare arm as if I was falling.

Bunny stepped neatly backwards, and my hand grabbed at nothing, unbalancing me, so I placed a palm against the wall to steady myself. Bunny did not move, but shouted, 'Richard!' As she called for him, she did not move, but continued to stare at me in her unblinking and watchful way. She repeated herself, louder this time and in an even more shrill tone. Richard appeared at the foot of the stairs and walked down slowly.

'Look, Bunny, I haven't even started packing, I think you should do it. It's all ... girls' things, isn't it?' he said, crossly.

'Richard,' I said, my hand still flat against the wall as if it were stuck there. Bunny stared as if afraid to move her eyes away from me. 'Please tell me what's happening. Is Dolly hurt? Is she still at yours?'

When he finally spoke, it was not in his own cheerful and questioning way. Instead, it was the quiet and deliberately slow voice that he used with distressed and difficult animals on the farm.

'Dolly is not coming back, Sunday. Do you understand? She is going to live with us until she goes to London.' His palms were raised as if to indicate that he was not armed, was not going to fight with me. In Sicily, at a different time, I could reasonably have fought him simply if he stood during a seated confrontation. He led me into the kitchen and guided me to a chair. I sat down, and he placed a glass of water in front of me, as if being thirsty had caused my reaction. Bunny was watching from the hall and when he joined her again, I could hear her whispering excitedly, although I could not hear what she was saying.

I might kill her, I thought. She is a small woman, and it would not have been difficult to do. By the time I had decided against this, I heard them both upstairs in Dolly's room. After some time, they appeared again in the hallway, Richard holding both the suitcases. I watched them warily from the kitchen table; Bunny was struggling nervously with the lock, an actress playing at escaping capture. Richard held the suitcases tightly, as if I might steal them, and his exaggeratedly resigned air reminded me of a debt collector I had once seen in a bad film. Bunny flinched with fresh excitement when she saw me.

'Now, Sunday. Remember what I said? No nonsense please.' Her voice was high, and her cheeks were flushed with something like pleasure. Her body quivered visibly with expectation; I thought that just then she could have been played to produce the music of a string instrument.

I moved past them and raised my arm over hers. Bunny gasped loudly and drew back at the gesture while I flicked the lock up in one easy movement. Richard tried to position himself between me and his wife, but the bulkiness of the cases and the narrowness of the hallway prevented him from doing so. Bunny, still thrilled with excitement, scuttled out of the house with Richard following her more slowly, a case in each of his hands. I would not speak to them, would not please Bunny with further questions and I would not allow them to see me still standing there as they drove away. Instead, I went up the stairs and got into Dolly's bed.

That evening, I called Bunny and Richard's number; after only a few rings, Dolly answered. Her voice sounded untroubled, but when she heard my voice, she immediately hung up. I subsequently called back several times and each time, Richard told me that Dolly did not want to talk to me and that I was not to call again. The fifth time I called, the line was engaged, and it remained that way for the rest of the night. I thought of Jerre in the café advising me solemnly against spoiling my daughter, *Kiss them when they are sleeping, Sunday*. Had I done this to her? Did I watch over her too much or not enough? I trusted my child, always, more than I had myself; perhaps that was how I lost her.

Without Dolly to come home for, I spent longer days in the greenhouses and my hands were never empty or still. I was in permanent, greedy contact with the pleasing textures, the smooth leaves, the oily earth, and the cool metal of the counter surfaces. And all these satisfied like a hunger met. With my hands muted by soil, I am pure calm; it buzzes happily on my fingers, the only sound around me. Hours pass without notice and I do not stop for a break or for lunch unless David is there to remind me. I am a well-designed machine. This is the other world access, the sublime gift for which I would willingly pay with all that I cannot do and every face I cannot read. It would be an easy sacrifice if the choice were ever offered, this visceral ecstasy or the art of social interaction and fleeting conversation. I imagine this offer, if it were ever made, would be posed by an immaculate man, someone like Rollo, persuasive and proper. My transformation would require drugs of a complex kind that would lessen my intensity but impair my focus, and therapies that would focus on normalization above self-expression. Like that generation of deaf children forced to sit on their hands rather than sign, I, too, would disappear inside, my true nature trapped behind an orderly appearance of myself.

The bliss of sensory experience at a precisely set level is a rare gift, though, and I accept the price of it. I am instantly made whole when my environment is carved into manageable pieces. The greenhouse reveals itself politely to me in small slices of information. It is this morphine-like comfort that I live for, the knowledge that this is accessible to me every day. If loud noise and artificial light does not pain you, you cannot know the sublime relief of silence, of dullness. I have known both states; I have learned to live through the chaos and wait for the reward of stillness, knowing it will eventually come for me.

The Friday after Dolly left, I returned from work to find two spare keys left pointedly on the otherwise bare kitchen table. She must have collected Vita's key, too. I could not imagine Vita would have cared for the childish spite of returning it. I immediately separated the two keys,

putting one into a drawer, for it was not the return of them that perturbed me, but the oneness of them, their identical pairing on the table. A small jug of flowers had been moved from the table to the kitchen counter, presumably to add some drama to the reveal of the abandoned keys. This showiness brought me comfort, for it was not the behaviour of a person wanting independence, but the attention seeking action of a young girl who would surely choose to return.

Her bedroom initially looked unaltered; however, a check of her now empty wardrobe and drawers confirmed that she had been back to retrieve the clothes that her grandparents had left behind. My only suitcase, a little-used wedding gift, had also disappeared. She had not taken any of the sentimental items, the gifts, and the photographs, which I believed she would want. This, too, added to my belief that she would be returning to live at home again soon. But, just a few weeks later, Bunny came into the greenhouse. I had not seen her since she came to my house for Dolly's things and she had refused to update me on any aspect of my daughter's welfare whenever I called. David had just left to work outside, and I was finishing my lunch alone, while I planned how best to reorganise a line of seedlings that were not growing well. It was a satisfying little problem that I was happily immersed in privately solving, a warm bath that I was not yet ready to get out of. Bunny walked in, and then looked around interestedly, as though surprised to find herself here, as though she had taken a wrong turning. I said nothing, but I watched her as I continued to slowly eat my sandwich, the conjured water around me rapidly dropping in temperature and appeal.

'Sunday. Hello.' She spoke slowly and deliberately, as though carefully starting an engine, and then subsequently spoke in a rush, eager to get through the question; 'I wondered if you had heard from Dolly recently?'

I found I was standing up.

‘Where is she? I thought she was with you?’ I said, ridiculously, as if Dolly would have remained positioned in one place, like a book or a vase. As if Bunny and I were quarrelling over the safekeeping of a simple and replaceable possession.

‘She said she was going to sleepover at Vita’s a fortnight ago. Not in London, but next to you. Just overnight. We don’t know where she is right now. Could she be at yours?’

‘She doesn’t have a key.’ I said, remembering the two keys on the table, identical and shining.

‘I’ve been to the house several times and they were never there. I wondered if you had seen their cars there at all?’

I considered this; I had not seen their cars for some time, and I had watched out for them. I had put the absence down to the different hours we kept.

I shook my head, ‘I don’t think so.’

‘A friend of mine called Tom and he told her that Vita and Rols left his house a couple of weeks ago.’ And I knew from the quick and dismissive way she pronounced Vita’s name, and the soft, thoughtful way in which she said *Rols*, that Vita was the one she did not care for. It made sense to me that the mother of the King would fall, too, for Rollo’s easy charm and be alarmed by the same quality in a woman. ‘They have left Toms’ for good. He says. They have gone back to London. But Dolly didn’t say a proper goodbye to us.’ She paused and then spoke again, ‘We had been talking about her staying on with us. To work on the farm instead of going to London. I thought she was going to stay. But she didn’t need to go away like this...it’s ... Does she have many things at yours?’ she asked.

‘Nothing she cares for. Did she take everything she had at yours? All her clothes?’ I asked.

Bunny considered this, ‘Yes, she did. But...’

‘There is your goodbye,’ I told her. It did not make me feel better that she was now standing where I had stood.

I got the next bus home and walked up the path to Vita's house thirty minutes later, not knowing what I was looking for or hoping to find. I knocked on her door, went through the open side gate and into the garden. And it was Tom's house again. There was no sign they had ever been there. When I peered through the French doors and the windows, the grand paintings had all gone and, from the walls where they had hung, small children smiled hopefully back at me instead. There was a small scratching noise in the small shed near the house. I assumed a local cat had somehow got trapped in there, but when I opened the door, I saw it was actually Beast. His recently lovely coat had developed a yellow-grey tinge and he looked aged. There was no food visible in the shed, although there was a large bowl with a little water in it. I was unsure if he had been abandoned deliberately or believed lost.

I remembered Vita carrying him around her house and garden, as natural as a mother with a baby, so casually that it seemed as if she had forgotten he was even there. He, too, relaxed happily in her hold, his short legs and round apple-head bobbing along in surrender when she moved around. I thought of her placing the little dog carefully in my arms, and of her laughing fondly at him on Friday nights in her garden when he finally slunk away from her lap because she was too fidgety for him. She openly fed him bits of her dinner from the table, even though she furiously told the rest of us off if we did the same. I had assumed the rule that she alone could feed him had been made because she intended the dog to favour her, just as we all loved her first. I had once believed we all cared for one another and this included Vita's feelings for each of us. Were even her demonstrations of love for the little dog another of her performances of feeling? Of all Vita's behaviour that summer, her apparent desertion of Beast was the one that spoke of maliciousness. It is an act that I cannot easily connect to simple self-interest. He is my dog now and I have persuaded myself that this is what she intended when she put him into the shed on the day they left and closed the door on him.

It was easy to imagine Vita and Dolly slipping effortlessly into separate, new lives. Lives that would be unfailingly comfortable, glamorous even. Most of us have our vulnerabilities, those things we love that make us fragile. But not those two. And if this keeps them safe, it is not a security I envy. I remember Dolly's face on the day that her exam results came, as easily and unfairly won as all the money Vita ever gave her. I watched her when she realised that she would never have to struggle, when she learned the ease with which money, people, admiration, all came to her, uninvited and so, uncared for. And these things can never hold any value for her; they are too easily and immediately replaceable.

When I think of Rollo, it is not the glamour of his smile, his lovely suits and his funny stories, to which I return. I think, instead, of how he looked standing on his drive after the garden party for Dolly; he was tired and hot, the linen jacket and trousers all lined and hanging crookedly. He knew that he would be leaving Tom's house soon, and he knew, too, that they were taking Dolly with them, that she was never coming back to me. That he had made some arrangement with his wife to keep her happy and which involved Dolly living in their home and being kept expensively by them. His face is sweaty and disappointed; he is uncomfortable and overdressed. That is Rollo.

Due to recent overcrowding in prisons, there has been some debate in the press about capital punishment, last performed in the 1960s. When interviewed on the evening news, a senior prison warden argued that those who received life sentences became both more depressed and dangerous once they accepted that they would never leave prison. These prisoners essentially realised at that moment that they had nothing left to lose and so they valued nothing. This realisation was a terrible thing to witness, he said, and his old face collapsed sadly when he described this. Then he reminded his interviewer that he was not easily shocked, that he had

previously seen dozens of executions take place. But these people were profoundly more difficult to deal with, he said, because they no longer cared for anything. This disconnectedness made them a risk to everyone they encountered in prison. This was how the warden framed his case; he felt that if capital punishment was not acceptable, then life sentences, too, needed to be outlawed. People with nothing to strive for, those without hope, would be better dead, he said, as he looked directly down the camera and at me. These people had already had their humanity taken away. I see Dolly and Vita as those prisoners with their life sentences stretching uninterruptedly out before them. Hardened and discontent in the knowledge that there is nothing they need to try for, nothing that can ever touch them.

After Dolores died, my mother did not give up on the lake. She continued to watch it, but from a growing distance and with a feeling of shame. Her connection to the lake eventually became something sordid that she resigned herself to, regardless of what it did to her. This is how I love Vita and Dolly. I can still picture Vita, laughing as she dances on Rollo's feet in her yellow dress, or red-lipped under her veiled hat in the sunshine. And I remember Dolly mocking another of my white dinners or mimicking the girl whose papa did not approve of her. Always, though, they are smiling, and I can see, now, that their eyes are not. However, I am still drawn to Vita and Dolly and I hold tightly to my memories of them.

I have learned that to love means to get burned occasionally by fires that seem at first like lights, those that do not happen yearly and after the harvest. These fires are not the Sicilian farmer's intense and transformative journey across an agricultural field, not *brucca la terra*, but are flames started by beloved people who want things that you do not want. When these people get the things that they want it may just hurt you. It is not intentional, not often, but it will hurt as if it were. It will hurt like fire that lives on your skin and it will mark you forever in the same way.

I have chosen to accept this rather than to make myself forget. So I do not have to feel the shame my mother felt for continuing to love her lake. So I can still love them.

Epilogue

1991

I immediately know I will keep the letter from Dolly, although it is brief and factual. It is not worded as either a request or an invitation. There is no address or telephone number to which I can respond. She recommends the brunch at a café in Lancaster that we visited together years ago on our university visit and announces that she will be there on a Saturday in two weeks' time. It is not quite an invitation, but more as though she is letting me know her own plans on a particular day. I read the letter through several times before deciding that I am welcome to go to the café too. When I see Bunny and Richard at work, I do not mention that I have heard from Dolly, just as they do not tell me when they visit her. We used to play a game about the King in his absence and now we do the same with his daughter. I know when they have seen her; I do not need to be told because when they return, they are smiling and generous and full of happy secrets. I know my child is well because they hold their knowledge of her possessively to themselves. They are shinier and lighter when they have seen her, they do not leak concern in worried looks and hissed whispers in the way that they would if she were troubled. She is my beloved child; I do not need the lists of her wins and achievements to share with acquaintances, as they do. I only need to see her to know if she is content. If I can see her face I will know. I ache for the sight of her as she does not for me; she is not mine, but I am, painfully, hers.

From the café window, I see my daughter some way down the road opposite. I immediately and involuntarily raise my arms at the sight of her. I experience happiness and excitement viscerally now that I let the feeling direct my arms up and my fists to knock repeatedly on nothing but air. I do not have a mother, a husband, or a daughter to please anymore; I no longer

resist the urges to tap, to touch, or to twitch, or wave my hands, as these people insisted I do, but allow them instead to travel through me uninterrupted. I believe this surrender has, strangely, made me more still, because such twitches only multiply when they are stored up inside.

She is shaking an umbrella and I watch with fascination as she rolls it up. I marvel at the perfection of her woman hands now as I did when they were the tiny hands of a baby, busy and satisfied, and grabbing at nothing but air. She is marvellous. She squints towards the cafe as if against bright sunlight, but the day, in fact, is overcast with intermittent bursts of heavy rain that flash and then disappear, the temper of an infant too tired to sustain his bad mood. It is unclear whether she can see me past the customers seated at the window. I am a pale-eyed, pale-haired woman dressed in grey; it is easy enough to believe she has not noticed me, despite my recent and enthusiastic knocking on air. She remains out on the street, looking toward the café and I find myself standing to my feet, as if pulled by some invisible thread, like Rollo rising politely from the table at those Friday night dinners.

Dolly's fawn coloured coat, tan boots and bag are smart and carefully co-ordinated. Her hair is shiny and neatly cut just above her shoulders and her expression is soft and untroubled. There is a patterned silk scarf expertly arranged around the collar of her coat. I imagine the home of such a person; a carefully but comfortably furnished apartment, with walls painted in calming tones and just the occasional contemporary painting or oversized ornament to avoid resembling the home of her neighbours, whom she often visits for coffee or a glass of wine. Perhaps there would be a boyfriend, a regular visitor who would bring her breakfast in bed on Saturday mornings. He would not be embarrassed by any of her perceived eccentricities, by any of her interests or behaviours, but would instead value them. He would encourage her to see friends and to attend the non-compulsory work meetings that would secure her future promotions, even if she then missed his sister's birthday dinner or the new film that he would instead wait to see

with her at a later date. He would listen and never silence her when she said unexpected things, expressed unusual opinions. If she spoke out of turn in company, he would not see it as such. He would not kick imperceptibly at the bones of her feet under tables to remind her who he was. He would not attempt to reshape her, would not wish to do so if he could.

She turns and walks back down the street, but her step is slow and unhurried, as though she is early for an appointment and simply passing the time until she ought to arrive. She moves like Jean, the little girl who grew up opposite us, who skipped down the street and invited distraction into her path. She will not become Jean, who stayed at home entirely to care for her mother. *If she stops, I think, if she stops or if she looks back, I will go to her.* But Dolly does not stop, does not look towards the café again and by the time she reaches the end of the street and disappears around the corner, her stride is familiar and determined.

When I leave the café, I move toward the square where a crowd of people, families, couples and the occasional lone figure like me, all stand hypnotized. Their gazes are all fixed on a street performer, a small woman dressed in gold. Her clothes are tight-fitting, and her skin is painted the same metallic colour as the fabric, so that it is impossible to tell what parts of her are clothed and what is exposed. She dances balletically and there is a fixed smile on her little gold face. As she dances, she moves towards and then sternly away from the crowd. I shuffle closer, wanting to look at her. The people, too, lean towards her and then step back as she approaches them again. Their collective movement is as natural as the horizontal breaking of a wave. When I finally get to the front of the crowd, she lurches conclusively towards us all, with her gold arms raised and her gold fists clenched. The people step neatly back together, silently choreographed by their shared ability to predict what will happen next. I alone am motionless, riveted, and unashamed with wonder.

I know, since I have come to understand the nature of people, since Vita, that the unexpected and beautiful will not always hurt when it finally reaches you. That sometimes it will be lit as brightly as fire and yet not burn. The dancer's arms complete their circular motion above her head. Her hands open and their weightless contents spare the watching crowd, who stepped back as one and so remain immaculate and untouched. The dancer's fistfuls of secrets are released over me alone; it all comes down on my clothes, my skin, as light and silent as snow. It is glitter and I am gold.

Dear Neurotypical People:

The Autoethnography of an 'Inarticulate Subject'¹:

¹ 'Inarticulateness ... originates with restricted language skills but is generally overlaid by other factors including a lack of self-esteem, learned habits of compliance, social isolation or loneliness, and the experience of oppression.' Booth & Booth, 1996.

This thesis challenges the experiential and theoretical construction of autism that is expressed within the mainstream narrative. Such lack of representation can only be countered via provision of the practice-based research and first-person discourse that are lacking in narratives concerning autism, where empirical findings have long been privileged. The other central intention of my work was to examine and celebrate the potential of the specific subject focus that often accompanies autism. The methodology employed for both these outcomes was the writing of an autoethnographical novel, *All the Little Bird-Hearts*. The book is narrated in the first person by a female autistic protagonist, Sunday, who expresses my specific subject focus. For Sunday, the chosen subject functions partially to decode the broader community, but primarily for the personal gratification of engaging with the interest.

My own semantic and ideological approach was thoroughly deconstructed during the academic process, while the methodology and the examination of monotropic focus remained intact. The project was originally titled, 'The Atypical Special Interest as Therapeutic Practice.' However, the semantics of the 'special interest' and the function of 'therapeutic practice' were both problematised by subsequent research. During the early stages of my work, I joined those within the autistic community who reject the term 'special interest' as a form of exoticization, an Othering of acquired expertise. This trait is referred to instead here within the context of 'monotropism';² the interest itself is referenced alternately as the 'chosen, focussed or close, subject,' emphasising autistic autonomy. My research, too, disincentivised the intention of 'therapeutic practice' that featured in the original title, exposing this as an assimilation of the societal belief that autism requires alteration in order to be acceptably expressed.

The authenticity of any identity, and the subsequent community, is reliant on representation and expression by those who inhabit it. The cultural and medical narrative on autism, however,

² 'Monotropism - being extremely attention-tunnelled.' Murray, D., Lesser & Lawson, 2005.

has been built on empirical studies³ rather than on shared autistic experience or the workings of our autistic brains. Autism has been conceptualised largely on neurotypical⁴ observation and the resultant theories. This is an industry that is primarily peopled, and therefore narrated, by NTs. Our atypical traits have been studied and documented, not as a means of understanding or celebrating difference, but as a means of extinguishing that difference. As a construct of NT fascination, the autist exists as a problem to his creator, who seeks to remake his subject in both nature and narrative. Scientific and academic perception of neurodiversity is external and subsequently, reductionist; the cultural and literary narrative on the condition naturally reflects this paradigm. My novel seeks to address the lack of authentic literary representation, to privilege the autistic viewpoint and broaden identity recognition in terms of gender and generation.

The autistic subject is typically imagined in masculine and juvenile terms; young boys appear to be the vehicle in which autism is most compelling to readers and audiences. *The A Word* is a multi-season BBC drama featuring a young autistic boy named Joe Hughes⁵. The show examines the condition as experienced by the boy's NT family, primarily regarding the challenges and problem-solving they associate with his identity. While there is a level of awareness raised by autistic representation within a primetime setting, the programme depicts neurodiversity at a remove and from the NT position. Characters frequently conflate the condition with the possessive determiner, *your*, or *his*, suggesting autism is transient, distant and not an identity in itself.⁶ This referencing is more than a casual semantic disparity; it is a destabilization of identity via the cultural narrative. Characters on the programme do not

³ Murray, F, 2019.

⁴ Henceforth, the author will abbreviate neurotypical to NT.

⁵ The only other autistic character in the series is another young male, Mark Berwick.

⁶ 'Most of us who have an autistic spectrum diagnosis prefer to think of ourselves as 'autistic' as opposed to 'with autism' – the unspoken message in the latter terminology being that – were it not for the autism – we would be complete people.' Andrews, 2006.

prepose other fixed characteristics in a comparable way, do not refer, for example, to *your* blackness, *her* femaleness, or *their* heterosexuality.

The Good Doctor is a three season American drama⁷ which also features a young autistic man, but no female autists.⁸ The autistic character, Dr Shaun Murphy, again features largely as a puzzle to be solved by his NT peers, but he is presented as holding significant abilities which are directly connected to autistic traits. The series also endeavours to depict Dr Murphy's own experience, primarily focussing on his monotropic focus. The artistic depictions of his visually based, almost magical, problem-solving in the workplace are centrally positive and function as a useful counter to the stereotypical literal-minded autist. The programme's representation of monotropism as a functional dream state is highly authentic and informed the tone of my own narrative.

Mark Haddon's 2003 novel and now play, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, is, perhaps the most celebrated fiction associated with autism. Again, the (perceived as) atypical character is a young male, but, unusually, the narration is his own and is first person, enabling a more authentic representation. The novel is regarded as 'almost a set text for people interested in the condition.'⁹ However, the author himself is more circumspect and states that *The Curious Incident* is:

not a book about asperger's. it's a novel whose central character describes himself as 'a mathematician with some behavioural difficulties'. indeed [the narrator] never uses the words 'asperger's' or 'autism' (i slightly regret the fact that the word 'asperger's' was used on the cover).¹⁰

Haddon (b), 2009.

⁷ *The Good Doctor* was renewed for a fourth season by ABC in February 2020.

⁸ The American series is based on the original South Korean programme of the same name, which also featured an autistic male protagonist.

⁹ Harris, 2016.

¹⁰ The book cover expressly states that Christopher Boone, the narrator, has 'Asperger's Syndrome.'

Haddon's novel has successfully raised autism awareness despite authorial non-specificity regarding autistic identity. This obvious dichotomy between intention and reception illustrates the lack of authentic representation within autistic narrative. *The Curious Incident* is reported by one reader as a diagnostic signpost; after recognising his own proclivities in Haddon's protagonist, he subsequently sought an ASC diagnosis. Prior to reading the novel, this reader perceived himself as:

... faulty. That's the root of the depression and the low self-confidence. So to read these things on a page was emotional. It was *visual*. I could see that someone understood.

Adams, 38.

The lack of autistic representation that is female, adult and authentic, is, therefore, crucial to enabling self-identification for a broader demographic. Identifying cultural stereotyping of autism does not lessen the relevance and necessity of existing popular representation, but rather argues for greater diversity. Female self-referral for diagnosis has been further problematised by the external construct of ASC as 'an extreme masculine brain.'¹¹ This academic and NT gendering of neurodiversity is counterproductive as it distances woman from the condition and therefore, further impedes the self-identification that aids diagnosis.

There is no novel comparable to Haddon's that features an autistic female protagonist; there is, therefore, no such resource available for girls and women who share Adams' search for identity. My work, *All the Little Bird-Hearts*, has an atypical female protagonist who narrates in the first person. Such a presence conveys to the female autist that, like Adams, she is not 'faulty,' but simply not NT. The writer Jeanette Winterson has described the autonomy that comes from the writing or locating of self within a narrative:

¹¹ Baron-Cohen, 2002.

I realised that I needed to read myself as a fiction as well as a fact. The facts weren't looking good for me – I had nothing, and I was nothing. And I thought that if I understood myself as a story I might do better, because if I am the story, I can change the story.

Winterson, 3.

Narrative self-representation forms, augments and protects the culture of its subject. The dominant discourse on autism, however, is primarily an extrinsic discussion and at best an external address; both these approaches disrupt the development of autistic culture. NT studies on autism are predominantly inference based and subsequently provide insecure representation; theories formed on observation cannot function as an expression or a manifestation of self. The autistic presence within narrative is correlated with the augmentation of associated culture in two stages here. Firstly, the NT model of autism is examined within the context of its external construction; autoethnographical extracts from my work are then employed to demonstrate the utility of the atypical text as a provision for authentic cultural material.

The traditional methodologies of autistic investigation rely on the surveillance of autistic subjects; such acts of translation naturally privilege a discourse of pathology. Autism is measured primarily via an evaluated lack of adherence to neurotypical norms; the condition is subsequently reduced to a series of impairments which require intervention and alteration. Within this environment, autism is characterised not as a specific and acceptable way of being, but as a failure of conformity to NT behaviour. The autistic experience has typically been framed by theorists, who represent us as inadequate NTs, rather than as a distinct community with the associated value and culture that would be afforded to a recognised and discrete minority. Atypical writing of the self necessarily counters the NT construction of autism. As a

form of writing which is, itself, ‘inherently a cultural practice,’¹² autoethnography represents and augments associated culture. However, the emergence of such autistic self-expression is problematized by the longstanding dichotomization of autism and narrative, which has been maintained by both theorists and the pathologizing of neurodiverse behaviours.

Narrative (and storytelling) enables complex cultural communication and debate; it is a unique form of representation that is necessary to build identity, benefiting the self and augmenting the resultant community. The traditional practice of Othering autism problematises atypical engagement with story, rather than recognising textual practice as crucial in informing autistic narrative and associated culture. The Theory of Mind¹³ ‘deficit’ is central to the NT construction of autism and defines the condition via the absence of mind-reading and social imagination. This perceived impairment negates the autistic presence in the understanding or generating of fiction. The reported inability to reference mental states¹⁴ that defines impaired ToM would automatically ensure incompetence in the creation or understanding of fiction.¹⁵ Perceived limitations in social-emotional, cognitive, and linguistic knowledge and abilities have been linked with an inability to share understandings of events and experiences through narrative.¹⁶

Non-autistic theorists typically position autism as inhibiting the understandings crucial to engagement with both fictional and realist narratives. The list of neurological traits ascribed to autism which prevent the meaningful writing or processing of narrative is substantial; firstly, there is an assumed autistic disinclination to narrate events. There is also a reported atypical inability to structure events, to construct causal relationships and to employ meta-representation.¹⁷ The latter is a particularly problematic claim for the autistic subject, as

¹² Boylorn, 2006.

¹³ Henceforth, the author refers to Theory of Mind as ToM.

¹⁴ Tager-Flusberg, 1992.

¹⁵ Losh & Capps, 2006.

¹⁶ Loveland & Tunali, 1993.

¹⁷ Zunshine, 2006.

fictional characters are imagined constructions rather than representations of self and such ‘self-awareness cannot occur without metarepresentation.’¹⁸ The fiction writer requires metapsychological ability in order to first attribute to others beliefs which he does not hold himself and then to represent these beliefs; this process is fundamental to literature. Finally, there is a perceived autistic deficit in creative imagination, metaphor and analogy,¹⁹ in narrative evaluation (causal language and explanation of protagonist’s thoughts and feelings).

The representation of autistic comprehension as fixedly literal rejects the autistic’s ability to engage with central aspects of successful fiction, such as metaphor and analogy. Storytelling benefits the universal human need to foster social understanding and interaction. Literary and scientific practitioners typically agree that narrative promotes empathic response; ‘The purpose of story – of every story – is to help us interpret, and anticipate, the actions of ourselves and of others.’²⁰ Individual engagement with narrative could, therefore, reasonably be expected to alleviate issues associated with perceived ToM impairments. Successful stories actively *require* characters to repeatedly make inaccurate ToM assessments; Mr Darcy’s early misreading of Jane’s feelings for Bingley are central to the narrative arc of *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth, in return, progresses the storyline by initially reading Darcy’s motivations wrongly. The events of the play *Othello* are driven solely by the protagonist’s consistent misinterpretation of both his wife and his close friend Iago. Creative ToM interpretations are, therefore, *essential* to authors; the ableist privileging of mind-reading as an immediate and singular act, rather than a process, limits creativity. The myriad of potential in the unknowable interior states of others is what informs and enriches fiction. The complex and fluid ToM attributed to the autistic mind is not a barrier to literary engagement but is a functional skill which serves the conventions of authorship.

¹⁸ Frith, 1992.

¹⁹ Murray, S., 2008.

²⁰ Cron, 2016.

Autism in the cultural narrative is signified by the most demonstrable and visible of behavioural traits. The centrality of this medical positioning has externally pathologized and problematized the behaviour as evidence of atypical impairment. The autistic with a chosen subject is subsequently perceived as deficient in normative empathic and social ability; such standardization limits use of the subject within autistic practice. As a result of this perception, the potential function of hyper focus has been inadequately addressed as an atypical tool for social understanding and participation. Subject focus has instead come to function in the cultural narrative *as* autism; it is further represented as an isolating and anti-social device. In the 1988 film, *Rain Man*²¹, the autistic character's relationship with his NT brother is crucially problematised by his persistent focus on counting and categorizing their environment. Within the context of the film, Raymond's subject focus is responsible for both alienating him from his only relative and rendering him vulnerable to manipulation.²² His numerical interest (and considerable ability) function as an external demonstration of ineptitude rather than an internal source of pleasure or expression.

It is the lack of autistic self-representation which informs such narrative demonisation of monotropic focus. The absence of autistic presence in the cultural narrative privileges NT representation; this normalizes the external and visual depictions of atypical traits, rather than the nuances of internal experience. The diagnostic construction of subject focus 'as a restricted range of interests' is also enforced by the reductive narrative of pathology.²³ When subject focus is narratively employed primarily as an autistic identifier for the NT onlooker, the device relies on pathos for dramatic effect and this minoritizes the autonomy of the autistic.

²¹ Despite this film being released over thirty years ago, 'Rain Man's influence on how autism is thought of culturally [remains] incalculable.' Knights, 2018.

²² Raymond is unknowingly utilised by his brother, who is in debt, to 'count' blackjack cards in a casino.

²³ 'Atypical strategies for the distribution of attention seem to underlie both sets of diagnostic criteria currently in use, i.e., those in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases* (ICD-10 World Health Organization, 1992).' Murray, D., 2005.

Monotropism is a trait that can be employed to enable the social, academic and creative engagement of the autistic. I wrote to reclaim and celebrate this quality which has been externally debased through a narrative formed on external observation and medicalisation.

The fictional narrative has been cast as a neurotypical space, in terms of reader, protagonist, and author. Literary exclusion is commensurate with the perceived lack of self-awareness and empathy among the autistic community. However, reading and authoring fiction can provide a fundamental role in social instruction and in overcoming the challenges of atypical mentalization. The monotropic focus and specificity of subject that characterise the autistic predisposition to a close interest have historically framed it as another abnormal behaviour to be eradicated and suppressed. This research positions literature (both reading and authoring) and the monotropic focus as positive structures that can actively support the social and academic engagement of the autistic. Autistic culture is disenfranchised by hegemonizing discourse on the subject which speaks *to* us and *of* us, rather than advocating visible self-representation and authentic narrative on the condition.

Since the mid twentieth century, Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) and Behavioural Engineering have maintained a popular status as interventionist autistic practices. The central founder of this approach, Dr Ole Lovaas once named autistic people ‘monsters’²⁴ who required his ‘construction’ to be built into people. The highly influential Lovaas spoke to the dominant discourse on autism when he assigned neurotypicals the role of creating the autistic person.

You have a person in the physical sense — they have hair, a nose and a mouth — but they are not people in the psychological sense. One way to look at the job of helping autistic kids is to see it as a matter of constructing a person. You have the raw materials, but you have to build the person.

²⁴ ‘Believe me, [the autistic patients] are monsters, little monsters.’ Dr Ole Lovaas, interview in *Psychology Today*: 1974.

Lovaas, 1974.

ABA is founded on Lovaas' thesis; that the autistic requires construction by an NT, not solely for perceived treatment, but essentially, to exist as a person. This dehumanization of the autistic is an ableist device, constructed to justify interventionist approaches, and it continues to profoundly inform the contemporary narrative on autism. The entrenched rhetoric on the autistic is a fiction that professes to be factual; such invention is best answered and disrupted from within fiction. The genre of autoethnography enables an address to the dominant narrative, to the current author(s) of autistic representation. The address itself is an inversion of the Othering process and highlights the wholly extrinsic nature of the NT narrator's relationship to the subject. This acknowledgement of the source destabilises the existing narrative, creating space for autistic writers to reconstruct themselves while contributing to autistic culture.

In 2017, Netflix released the first season of a series set on a fictional college campus. The programme focussed on modern race relations in America and was called *Dear White People*.²⁵ This title was contentious enough that a faction of critics called for a boycott of the Netflix platform itself.²⁶ Detractors took to social media to encourage debate on what the response might be to a project titled, *Dear Black People*. The suggested inversion of the title was satisfactorily countered with the thesis that the dominant cultural narrative was, in fact, already founded on such an address.

The media has always been, 'Dear Black People, 'Dear Black People, speak correct English,' 'Dear Black People, stop being thugs and go to school,' 'Dear Black People, get off government assistance and get a job.'

²⁵ Simien, 2017.

²⁶ Siczowski, 2017.

Finley, 2017.

The predominant cultural narrative frames and defines minorities – the discourse on non-white culture, for example, is characterised via racial stereotyping and a perceived non-conformity to majority culture. When a minority culture is imagined or represented by a narrator of principal culture, the resultant voice speaks primarily to difference and the subject is contextualised via a lack of adherence to mainstream norms. Such an address cannot authentically represent other ways of being or foster empathy and understanding between cultures. Popular books on autism offer to *Explain the Enigma*²⁷; or consider autistic communication via titles that debate autistic communication by querying: *Do We Speak the Same Language?*²⁸ As an autistic person, my community is not addressed through such questions, rather, we are considered externally as a problem for NTs to fix. Such a narrative on autism does not represent their subject but excludes them; these are accounts of surveillance voiced by, and addressed to, a non-autistic audience.

The expert writes from the outside looking in. The subsequent account has the advantages of observation and information, but these are somewhat cancelled out by the lack of personal experience.

Williams, (b), Foreword, ix.

It is precisely this lack of representation which my writing speaks to. I write from within the experience, not from the distant and empirical reporting on the autistic person that is observation based.

‘Dear Autistic People,’ the dominant narrative says, softly at first, ‘be quiet. And be still. And don’t fidget. Don’t stim. Don’t repeat yourself.’ Eventually, and more loudly, it says, ‘stop

²⁷ *Autism; Explaining the Enigma*, Una Frith, 1989.

²⁸ *Communication Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Do We Speak the Same Language?* Olga Bogdashina, 2004.

fixating on that sound, that subject, that stim, that song.’ And, then, after all the observations and interventions, it speaks again. The tone is sharp like a slap or a warning; ‘Dear Autistic People,’ it says, ‘be neurotypical now, or at least act as if you are.’

In writing the novel that forms part of my doctoral research on autism and narrative, it was imperative that my narrator addressed the onlooker; that audience who had held her within their NT gaze for so long and who dominated the narrative on her condition. I frequently address an onlooker in my narrative, as if in naming them as seen, I am reversing the gaze in which autists have traditionally been imagined.

I knew you first, I said, over and over to my daughter, I watched you, loved you before you ever saw me. I spoke first to her watchful baby face, and later, I addressed her composed woman-face with the same tender and misplaced ownership. Her eyes remained, always, suspicious and scrupulous. Often, when she watched, I wanted to ask her what she saw. Because, of course, I knew even then that I would never know the world as she did. Or, perhaps, as you, too, know it.

Lloyd-Barlow, 12.

But the relief is what I focus on when you are speaking, and I frown back at you in concentration. So many rules and reminders that I can hardly hear a word you say. And then, too, I exist alone and in a different time zone than you, many moments behind your own.

Lloyd-Barlow, 19.

I also employ the second person in order to both position the reader next to the narrator, and in the final sentence of the following extract, in order to demonstrate self-awareness:

Every look, every conversation, is a performance which tells me little. This is everyday contact: you are late to the theatre, you take your seat, self-conscious, a little breathless and determined to catch up with the story unfolding on the stage. But it is impossible. The actors

all speak in low voices and their faces are identically vacant. You must be silent. You look instead to your immediate neighbour, hoping their expression will tell you something about the tone of the play. And they turn to stare directly back at you. And their face is impassive, will only ever be impassive, as polished and prized things always are. You realise that they will never show you a readable expression. That they, like the whole audience, like everyone you already know, like everyone you will ever meet, are blank-faced statues.

Just like you.

Lloyd-Barlow, 131.

Augmenting autistic culture requires authentic narrative presence and the representation of autism as a specific and discrete way of being. Literature and art are central to this movement as they are to all cultural and social progress. Autism is often accompanied by a talent for connectivity which enables creative links to be made between unlike things. The social model of disability which characterises the NT presentation of autism does not typically denote the joy to be found in abilities associated with the condition. However, the representation of positive atypical traits is essential to autistic culture and the joy of forming context via relativism is, therefore, referenced in my novel implicitly via the Italian references and also directly:

There was a brief preference during my childhood for teaching semantics via relative relationships; at school we would be asked to consider such questions as - *Ice is to water as cheese is to ...?* School, at last, made sense and my teacher suspected I was cheating. I was separated from the other pupils and seated alone at a desk, for she could not understand how, overnight, I had begun to outperform the entire class. She did not puzzle over my new intellect for too long, as once we reverted to numeracy, she confirmed that I could not reliably tell the time or solve simple addition. And I could have told her, if she had asked, why I found the science of semantics so undemanding;

relative definition is exactly how I experience the world, a place in which everything is defined, not on its own terms, but by what it touches. The purest comparison I knew only ever existed in the notes I made to myself on rough paper as I finished another test on relative meaning and waited for my classmates to catch up. It read: *the lake is to my mother as Italian folktales are to me.*

Lloyd-Barlow, 48.

These examples from my own writing adhere to the thesis that it is not narrative structure itself which prohibits atypical engagement; such exclusion is not constructed in language or form but is a social and cultural process.

I am grateful to have harnessed the power of monotropic focus in my academic life. I have a profound interest in Southern Italian culture, which I experience as informing apparently unrelated subjects. All my higher education studies in English literature were understood via my own focussed subject. This is not as academically incompatible as it may appear; the correlation between capitalist practice and the veneration of the family in the Victorian era, for example, is comparable to the commercial basis of Italian *paesano* and of the accompanying focus on family. And with Cold War narratives, the post-war mistrust that breeds paranoia of Otherness can be reconciled with the suspicion evoked by outsiders in the frequently invaded and colonised country of Italy. This is how I understood such themes as I studied, by making patterns that I could recognise between the taught subject and my known focus; it was not explicit to the reader in the final work, although direct quotes from my Italian research remained in all my writing. By retaining the subject closest to me, I also employed the creativity and concentration afforded by my focussed interest.

The chosen subject functions as a powerful mechanism for the protagonist of *All the Little Bird-Hearts*. In my novel, Italian culture and folk-tales inform Sunday's social understanding and response; the subject is as a method of translating the world around her, while enabling a

comfortable personal distance. Such autistic focus must be recognised as a gift to be pleurably utilised, rather than as an obsessive and isolating behaviour. This subject provides my protagonist with a fixed and known universe, unlike the NT one in which she lives: it also functions as a framework by which she can filter social interaction.

Historically in Southern Italy, when a man called on the girl he loved, he would not take a seat unless he was offered a chair specifically by her. This was a symbolic offer; a sign that the suitor was being considered as a future husband. When the King came to the greenhouse to visit me, he sat on one of the sturdy wooden worktops. I generally stood as I worked, but when I was handling young plants, I sat in a chair to remind myself to work slowly and conjure the gentleness they required. The wood of my chair was glassy with age, like a rock polished into stone by the lake. I kept it unseen, tucked under a work surface at the back of the greenhouse when the King was home. I did not offer my chair to him and he did not seek it.

Lloyd-Barlow, 82.

My protagonist, therefore, believes she has communicated that she has no romantic interest in the young man. Sunday also adheres to the Sicilian tradition of naming her baby for a deceased relative and when a new acquaintance compliments her on this choice, the narrator enjoys the approval more profoundly because it implicitly acknowledges her own loyalty to Italian tradition. Within the novel, the person whom the narrator is interacting with is typically unaware of Sunday connecting herself to another tradition. Yet the focussed subject in each case provides the protagonist with a sense of structure and identity. The social application of her knowledge need not be factually correct or be universally relevant; the narrator is a translator of NT culture, and the act of translation is individual. The novel demonstrates the creative and social utility of atypical subject focus.

The subject of Southern Italian culture, then, that enabled me to engage with academic study, continued to fulfil this function during my doctoral research. My work encouraged me to become involved with the autistic community²⁹ at my university, attending a group which included undergraduates, postgraduate students and staff. This was my first experience of being with autistic peers and communicating our shared experiences. The concept of autistic self-narrative as the means to develop discrete identity and culture deepened over the course of this community formation. Autistic peers taught me to recognise and value the concept of autistic identity and crucially, of autistic expression and practice. My academic process requires the presence of my focussed subject and conflating the peer experience with the former provided clarity in this regard.

Southern Italian migrant communities in America provide a useful working framework for the minority identity that seeks to build culture and community autonomously, rather than to accept homogenisation. I employed the model as a structure to identify the cultural protectionism required to stabilize autistic identity and augment associated community. The Italian immigrant in America preserved ethnic identity through specific geographical and cultural practices. The habits of these post-*Risorgimento* immigrant communities are a functioning model for the building and protection of discrete minority culture like autism. The characteristics of identity groups which operate outside or contrary to, majority culture, require cultural and narrative presence. Whether the minority identity is expressed via race, religion, disability, gender or sexual orientation, it is the privileging and expression of one's specific culture that enables the development of discrete communities. The contemporary reluctance to recognise difference is not acceptance, but rather, the call to acculturate.

Post-unification Italian migration to America characterises the protectionist culture of the Italian villager in both physical and cultural spaces. The unprecedented resettlement itself

²⁹ SYA, University of Kent, 2019.

occurred largely in response to the imposition of national identity. There was also a visible geographical pattern of resettlement and the corresponding specific village identities which persisted in the new country. Both these behaviours speak to the local patriotism, to that intense *campanilismo* on which Italian identity is founded.

Italian Americans have retained an independent culture while processing diaspora and statelessness³⁰ and concurrently resisting the dominant national position of American homogenization. Diverse Italian village culture has survived both transplantation through physical migration and ethnic stigmatization within the majority discourse of America. The traceable perseverance of such an identity demands enquiry and application within interdisciplinary fields.

The privileging and expression of minority identity correlates with the context of the social model of disability, specifically within the field of Autism studies. The traditional model of disability functions to homogenize minority experience, representing divergence from normative values as an issue to be corrected. The Italian American identity is securely established within the notoriously fragile and complex territory of intersectional space that minority identities inhabit. This conflation does not function via direct comparisons between the two minority identities themselves, but rather as an applied practice for the expression of emergent autistic culture.

The perseverance of Italian immigrant identity is rooted in the visible expression of their own minority practices; this functions for me as a formula for augmenting and protecting autistic identity. This conflation is an example of the way in which the autistic individual navigating the atypical world lives creatively; he is constantly framing and interpreting his experiences via his chosen subject. It is a joyful process, and one which cannot be observed or understood via

³⁰ The Italian immigrant as 'stateless' particularly describes post-unification migrants from the South, whose identity was primarily defined by allegiance to his village (as expressed in *campanilismo*) and for whom the term 'Italian' was an identification applied by Americans and other *stranieri*.

the empirical methodology which characterises the existing narrative on autism. Diverse and authentic representation in the arts is crucial for demonstrating value in (and by extension, protecting) the various traits and behaviours which comprise autistic identity. Such representation within the humanities would engender a revision of the medical and cultural ideologies, of those external constructions which posit creativity and analogy outside atypical expression. Augmenting the existing narrative on autism with autoethnographical writing aids self-identity, community and broader societal awareness.

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