

Like Katherine

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Abstract

Vicky, a thirty something English radio journalist, has moved to Cape Town to try and work out what it is that's missing from her life and to fill the gap. At first she thinks she's found what she's looking for, but a series of unsettling events makes her realise she has simply brought her problems with her.

She goes back to England, ostensibly for work, where she is contacted by her stepbrother, Mark. They hardly know each other but he has a reason for wanting to find her. They meet and, for both of them, their encounters change the way they see themselves and their relationships. Vicky comes to understand more about her past and her family and, for the first time, to find a connection with her emotional life.

Part One

Chapter 1

“Vicky. This is fucking crap. We don’t speak to spokespeople.”

“I always think that’s bit of a contradiction.” It doesn’t matter what I say at this stage.

“We need the fucking minister. All this arsehole will do is pass the buck and it’ll all be a fucking waste of time”.

Do we have to do this dance? Every day? For a moment, I am all resentment and resist taking up hold but then I relent and we move off round the floor.

“Shaun. It’ll be fine....”

“Where’s the fucking minister?”

“The minister’s on a plane to Ghana for the whole of time we’re on the air.”

“What about the DG then?”

“He’s on the same plane.”

“For fuck’s sake. These people must have passports like phone directories.”

“Deon tried to get the minister all yesterday afternoon. She’s not talking even if she could. Which she can’t. But it’ll be fine. The spokesperson’s the one quoted in the Sundays, you can ask him all the difficult questions. You’ll give him rope and he’ll hang himself and you will be covered with glory because nobody does this like you do.”

“Well I hope they come crashing out of the sky in a ball of fucking flames.”

And we’re back to our seats, flushed but happy.

“Tea?”

He hands me a fresh mint teabag. Mrs Shaun Henry has recently decided that Mr Shaun Henry, radio star, man of the people, presenter of Cape News Radio’s morning show, has got to take better care of himself. She thinks this will be helped if he has herbal infusions rather than the six cups of black coffee that used to get him from 3.30am to 9am every weekday. I take the teabag and my own private jar of decaf off to the kitchen.

I don't think it matters which side you approach it from, four o'clock in the morning is a bad time to be up. Even those heady evenings when dinner has led to late drinks, a walk through the city and to someone's bed, by four your mouth and eyes are drying out and you're both turning back into real people.

Getting up in order to be anywhere by four is unnatural and inhuman and tears strips off your sanity. Four is the time I have to be here to guide this talk radio show onto the air. The task begins with shepherding its volatile, corrosive and occasionally brilliant presenter through the daily maze of his elaborate preparations. At this stage, the to-do list includes ego propping, handholding, fact checking and, and I have ceased to fight it, tea-making.

Our show is the background, so we're told, for nearly half a million Capetonian morning routines between the hours of six and nine. We are an alternative to the DJs that say 'that was' and 'this is' and 'welcome to it'. We live in a city where some things are right but many things are wrong and someone needs to ask questions. That's why we're here. Or that's why Shaun is.

He grew up in Mitchells Plain, apartheid's coloured 'model township' on the Cape Flats. When they hear the name, the city's genteel southern suburbs think immediately of brown faces with toothless grins, tattooed drug lords and cheap lives. There was plenty of that growing up, Shaun tells us, perhaps a little too often. We roll our eyes knowing that he now drives home in a different direction to a well-appointed, hacienda-style homestead on a thousand square meters with a lagoon pool and thatched lapa with bar.

But, in the eighteen months I've been here, I've learnt that in South Africa, where people come from is a powerful thing. If someone doesn't ask you, they're wondering. When they know, they're adding up the sum of what it means. So no one here can roll their eyes, actually. Shaun's dirt street, breezeblock, Cape-coloured credentials actually mean something. They get him out of bed when no one should be up and get him table thumping mad when more promises are broken. So, apart from anything else, they are making this radio station a lot of money.

And me? It's hardly my fight after all. An English girl with a home counties accent whose only cause, as one louchely pretentious BBC presenter I once worked with pointed out, is the constant search for the *grand peut-etre*. The short answer is that I abandoned London because I felt lagged, like a geyser. Nothing I touched there produced any sensation. I'm using the jagged edges of this half-hewn place to reach my nerves.

I return to our production nook with mugs. Shaun is hunched over his computer and somewhere in there a script is taking shape. Yesterday my afternoon producer and I decided who should be interviewed to explain why the water supply in Noordhoek is still off, why our weepingly beautiful World Cup Stadium is nearly bankrupt and when the sixth run of *Defending the Caveman* will start at the Theatre on the Bay. The spokesperson for the housing minister will talk to us about why the new blocks of flats built on either side of the highway from the airport are, without anyone ever having lived in them, falling down. And perhaps someone who has lost their dog will find it because we are a live show and we can make these kinds of things happen.

“All right?”

“Yes. Does Carrie know that the SA Open draw happened yesterday?”

“I’m sure she does. I’ll check”.

Fucking golf. That’s another thing. The gangsta-boy is now addicted to golf. I make my way to the newsroom where our newsreader is scouring SAPA and Reuters. She’s never lived down the time she missed the fact that Helen Suzman had died in the night so she’s permanently anxious to avoid a repeat performance. Carrie the sports girl is also scanning websites.

“SA Open?”

“Got it”.

I return to the production office but Shaun has taken the *Cape Times* to the lavatory. It seems all is right with the world.

At nine o’clock we all breathe out for what feels like the first time in three hours. Shaun balls up pieces of paper and shoots them into the bin. Now the red light is off, he is beaming and my long lost friend. The housing ministry spokesperson turned out to be gratifyingly hot-headed and had clearly missed the mail about media training. He’d tied himself in knots when pressed on what his department was doing to fix the crumbling houses, claiming never to have made previous promises that Shaun could quote at him chapter and verse.

“Didn’t you say to me, only six months ago, that this project would be finished this year, that people would be in those homes?”

“I said that was our aim.”

“Your words were ‘I guarantee that people will be having Christmas in their own living rooms’. Are you denying you said that?”

It was a triumph. Shaun had ended up standing up in the studio, bending over the microphone and getting that quiet and menacing tone he can only produce when he knows he’s pierced the lying politico jugular. That’s when I let myself look at his amber eyes that should be brown and the curve of his neck as it disappears into his collar. I love men I’m forced to serve. It’s a failing in my nature that I abhor because I grew up willing myself to be fierce. Maybe that’s why I do it, deliberately to let myself down.

We walk along the corridor and back to the production office. At a point we missed, the sun has come up. From the floor to ceiling windows we ignore a view that people travel thousands of miles to see. Our studios cling to the lower slopes of the cable car side of Table Mountain, now officially a wonder of the world. From here, the mountain swings away from us in green shrub that goes up towards sheer grey walls. Today the sky above it is a pale gold and it has its famous cloud tablecloth hanging lightly over its central edge.

I started my day at four so I feel sorry for those only arriving now who have a whole eight hours ahead of them. Shaun and I swivel in our new red chairs and lean back to enjoy the compliments of colleagues as they file past and tell him what a great job he did. I take my cell phone off silent and am relieved that there are no missed calls but as soon as I flick the button, it rings. I answer it as I get up and slide back the balcony door to go and smoke.

“Hello beautiful”.

My heart sinks. In the gloriously focused existence that is live radio, I had managed to put this out of my mind and now it’s rushing back in.

“Hi.”

“How did it go? I heard the housing guy. He got quite woes with your man.”

“If that means annoyed, yes he did”. I’m not playing nicely and I’m not well slept enough to try.

“Right. Well. I just wanted to say hello. You want to come round tonight? And, before you say it, I know you have to be in bed by nine. Maybe we both should be in bed by eight, eh?”

“I don’t know, Carel. Can I call you later?”

It’s early bed times that got me into this in the first place. I had left England behind and with it the sum total of my adult life, packed into boxes or unscrewed and restored to flat pack status and distributed around various attics and spare rooms. It didn’t amount to a great deal – books, lamps, cheap furniture, chipped kitchenware, unmatched wine glasses, stained cutlery and a few clip-framed posters. It also included an unsatisfactory boyfriend. Five thousand miles had made me realise just how unsatisfactory.

Cape Town was my clean sheet. A place to write myself any way I wanted. What I didn’t want was anyone in the cosy boyfriend slot. And then, one night six months after I got here, I had met Carel in some pretentious spot in the Cape Quarter. I was feeling thin and words were coming out in the right order. I wanted someone upon whom to focus the force of my fascinating otherness. Being English in South Africa is fairly commonplace but at that moment, it had felt exotic. Carel got in the way of the beam and was gratifyingly mesmerized. He was mildly Afrikaans and violently sexually attractive with soft, sandy hair, golden skin and the body of a swimmer – which he had been, he told me, in high school.

“Come on, I haven’t seen you since Sunday.”

I suck ruinously on my cigarette. I have changed to an ultra light brand that seems to have slightly less flavour than Cape Town’s pollution.

“No. I’ll only eat and drink things and want to stay up late.”

I’d simply wanted to sleep with him. It was a new wantonness I was rather proud of, part of my reinvention. But it was about sex not life. Weeknight fast food and television was not part of my plan. All his insecurities make him think that my reluctance to be part of his life means I look down on him along with the rest of the English-speaking population. We had split up several times over the past year but kept falling back towards each other in a miserable clutter of mismatched attraction.

“I promise I’ll make you go to bed early and leave you to it.”

“No. I’m exhausted and I don’t know what time I’m going to get away from here.”

He breathes out through his nose. In the background I can hear male laughter. To continue to channel Carel’s rather austere but irresistible sexual energy my way, I’d had to allow him to think we had some kind of real future.

I'd let myself be whipped round to his parents on only our second weekend, to create beetroot salad with his mother and look at his father's roses. They had nudged one another approvingly. He's in an office full of men whose women learnt everything they needed to know about beetroot salad in their teens.

"Listen, I've got to go to the wash-up. They're waiting for me. I'll call you later."

There is no reply. I press the red button, stub my cigarette into the earth of a grisly pot plant and slide the door back.

"Princess Victoria, you're revolting." Shaun is already standing by his desk, waiting to go and discuss his profitable morning with the rest of the team and to see if we can come up with a plan to do something similar tomorrow.

"Silence, colonized scum. I'll have you thrown into the tower." I have never had any ambitions to be the other side of the microphone. It is like doing a striptease every day. Sometimes the audience is wild with desire, sometimes it falls off its stool laughing. You never know which it's going to be. I don't think I could stand the suspense.

We go and sit round a table and talk about prospects for the next day's show. The room hangs out over the sloping road outside. I'm looking through the window and watching the up cable car pass the down one, as they will every fifteen minutes until the light goes. Even in spring, down at the tip of the continent, reaching towards the bottom of the earth, our evenings are long. They are one of the few things that remind me of being in England, one of the few things about it that I miss.

Chapter 2

The house is on the corner, surrounded by a low brick wall. It is perfectly square, like a child's drawing: white with two windows up and two down, with a red door in the middle. The roof is grey but there is no smoke coming out of the chimney in a squiggle. On this day, the sun is not out so the garden looks drab. It is long and neat but has no plants or beds. Just mown grass and a few shrubs. No attempt to compete with next-door's roses and bar-b-que area. At the end of the garden, shielded by a single piece of woven wooden fencing, is a washing line with a compost heap just behind it.

It is four fifteen in the afternoon. A boy opens the gate opens and walks up the path to the red door. He puts his bag down and pulls at the string round his neck until a key emerges from inside his school shirt. He turns the Yale lock and pushes the door open. He picks up his bag and goes in, slamming the door behind him.

There is no sound from the house. The air in the rooms is still chilly. During the day, the sun has not been strong enough to get through the double-glazing and the central heating is not yet on.

He goes through to the kitchen and opens the bread bin. Inside is a plastic bag containing only the two end crusts of a sliced loaf. He takes them out and smothers them with peanut butter, not bothering with margarine. Carrying milk in the glass he'd used that morning, he picks up his two slices, goes round through in to the lounge and sits on the sofa in his usual spot. He presses the red button on the remote. It's still kids' programmes. That's OK. He puts the milk on the coffee table and eats the peanut butter bread. He is dropping crumbs. After about half an hour, the phone on the wall of the hall rings. He doesn't answer it. He shows no sign of having heard it.

Chapter 3

For once I have got out of the station before twelve thirty. The sun is shining on one of Cape Town's teasing days of what passes for spring. I'm in my tiny white Korean car with the mountain behind me and, in front of me, people who aren't in much of a hurry.

High Level Road, up and over the hill. Down to my right and out of scale with the buildings around it is the huge, milky-white ring of the world cup stadium with the sea beyond it. Just before the stadium opened, the radio station spoke to a procession of officials, breathless with enthusiasm about the thriving hub it would become. Surrounded by a golf course and eco-park, people would go there, they said, just to have a nice time, something would happen every day. Now only the empty green grass sets off its curves. No one is near it at all.

It disturbs me. I have a fear of waste. I shout at people who throw away food that is past its sell-by date. I'm winded when I see children being piled with presents they can't appreciate. I can hear Sylvia's voice.

"Vicky, that's too much cream."

"I like cream."

"You can have too much a of a good thing."

"But I want some more."

"We can't always have what we want."

"Why not?"

"Because life's not like that."

"It's not fair."

"Life isn't fair."

I look at the silent stadium and I feel the same way. It is not the simple moral equation of how many houses could have been built for the money or how many desks could have been put in how many schools. It is simply that the place can never be wholly or properly used.

I drop down from High Level and drive along Main Road to stop at my regular spot to stock up on cigarettes and gin. Either side of me Sea Point unfolds its rows of convenience stores, electrical shops and food joints. As I hover to park, a minibus taxi swerves round me, hooting. My British sensibilities struggle not to take it personally.

Going into the bottle store, I hold the door open for a couple coming out, a tiny and ancient Jewish lady leaning heavily on the arm of her pink-uniformed maid. The lady is dressed for the excursion in a fur coat, gold earrings and Gucci sunglasses, her hair a perfectly set helmet of rich, artificial colour. The maid carries a plastic bag through which I can see the label on the Tanqueray bottle.

As they negotiate their way past me, a young man with very dark skin pushes between us, shades on his forehead, a phone clamped to his ear, a gold and black ring on his little finger. The three of us can do nothing but stop to let him pass. The fur-coated lady gives me a tight, resigned smile. I let my eyes slide over her, refusing to show solidarity with her 'us and them' cause. Instead I smile at the maid as she manoeuvres her madam through the door. When I come out, they are just pulling away from the kerb in a huge gold Mercedes. The maid is in the back seat and the lady, just able to see over the dashboard, resolutely positions the car in the centre of the road.

I stand on the pavement in the sun, and watch her go. She suddenly seems just one element in this complicated scene, this South African Breughel. A little surge of joy goes through me. I am part of something, there is significance in the air along with the smell of the sea and the exhaust fumes. Back in the car, I turn on CNR's afternoon talk show just as our regular cookery woman is telling our listeners why it's important to sprinkle salt on a brinjal.

I draw up outside my building and, before I am completely out of my seat, Macintosh looms up at me, appearing out of the pavement. He is holding a plastic Pick n Pay packet filled with empty soft drink cans.

"Hang on Macintosh. I'll sort the bag out now".

"Oh, God Bless you madam." His clothes and skin are uniformly weathered to much the same shade of brown. I have never seen him wear anything other than the trousers and torn jacket he now has on, except he keeps an army greatcoat in the manhole cover on the corner for when it gets cold.

Upstairs I unlock my security door and the front door and go inside to the smell of early toast. On my way to the kitchen, I press the ON button and my

laptop whirs into life. I decant leftover pasta into an old margarine tub and put it on top of a waiting bag of tonic cans and wine bottles. I've fallen easily into South Africa's unique version of 'trickle down'.

I lean over the balcony and yell for Macintosh, dropping the package to him when he appears below me. He catches it, beaming and nodding while he heaves his lungs around in a tubercular-sounding cough.

On my way back, I see that the blue Skype disk is bouncing up and down at the bottom of my screen, brandishing a little red number one. I look at my watch and do a quick mental calculation. It's nine thirty in the evening in Brisbane so I know who that is. I sit down and put on the headset and Skype tells me that I have, indeed, missed Hugh. My brother. I sometimes used the word as a child - "he's my brother", "I'm going to see my brother" - trying to feel it as well as say it. But I couldn't.

I click on his little green Skype egg and the system trills its calling noise.

"Ah there you are." Hugh's voice is cheerful with that slight, tell-tale lip smack.

"Sorry I missed you. I've just got back home. How are you?"

His video flickers to life. His Skype face looks ghostly and the position of his camera makes him stare at a spot somewhere above my head. Behind his, I can see the corner of a bookshelf and half a framed art exhibition poster.

"Oh you know. Pretty good. Weather's warming up and I've just about recovered from the festival".

"Have you recovered from that very bendy dancer who thought you were Martin Amis revisited?"

"Ah yes, her. She turned out to be a little bit troublesome."

"No, really? Didn't see that coming."

"There's no need to be so smug."

"Oh I think there is. Even from seven thousand miles away I could tell she was psycho. You didn't think her changing her Facebook status to 'in a relationship' during your first date was a clue?"

He laughs. Through technology, my brother and I now know each other a little bit better. We have discovered that we are the world's funniest people and delight in the newfound shards of personality that we seem to share.

"Well, what about you? How's Jarpie or Martinus or whatever the hell his name is? You still gobbling up the boerewors?"

He pronounces it 'berverse'.

"Don't. I'm trying not to think about it."

"Ha. He'll have you in the laager yet. Do they still do the laager thing? Anyway, I didn't call you to talk about that. I'm calling you to talk about Christmas."

"Christmas? It's October."

"You're in the Southern Hemisphere now, my dear, and October is positively last minute to be talking about Christmas. It's not the old country. People in these parts do interesting stuff that involves laughter and fun times. They don't subject themselves to ghastly rituals that make them want to slit their wrists every year. That's more an English thing."

"Oh, OK. I haven't got any plans at all."

"I was thinking of coming to Cape Town. It's Christmas, families should be together."

"Families?"

"I know. Call me sentimental but I was thinking about you the other day and I realised that we need to be more of each other's family."

"Christ."

"Yes, his birthday. Cause for celebration, in a large part of the globe I've heard."

"Great. I mean, I have no idea what I'm going to be doing and I won't be able to take that much time off but, *ja*. That would be cool."

"Good grief. You just said '*ja*'."

“Did I? *Ja*. I mean yes, I do that sometimes. I still sound stupidly English to everyone here, though. It’s the first time in my life I’ve realised that I have an accent.”

“OK. I’ll look into flights. I thought I’d come for a couple of weeks. It’s a quiet time for us and I’m not due in Adelaide until the end of January. Just helicoptering in to the festival office, shouting at a few people and bugging off again.”

“Is there really someone willing to pay you for what you do?”

“Astonishingly, yes. Anyway. Fantastic. We’ll have fun. I can meet some of your friends and that nice Hans you’re so fond of.”

“Don’t count on it and anyway, ‘Hans’ is German. You need a ‘Hennie’ or a ‘Gert’.”

“I’ll remember for next time”.

We ring off. Hugh says he is immediately going on to the net to find the cheapest way of getting here. I think it’s more likely that he’s going to slump in front of the TV and finish off the wine. That’s what I’d do. Something else we’ve discovered we share.

He is nearly twelve years older than me and we grew up in separate places. When I was about ten, I remember *The Reader’s Digest* telling me that the people genetically closest to you are your brothers and sisters. It seemed impossible that this awkward young man, who used to come for tea, bringing an occasional restless girlfriend and presents for someone much younger than I was, was my closest relative. I’d asked Sylvia about it. She was matter of fact. “Nonsense, your closest relative is your mother. And that’s me.” Although she wasn’t. Not really.

Waiting for the kettle to boil, I go over the conversation in my head and I’m suddenly filled with irritation. How very fucking dare he, actually? He doesn’t get to play at being a family just because he has decided – for reasons best known to himself – that he fancies having one. What would he know about it anyway?

I’m claustrophobic and furious. I need to move. I leave the kettle to get on with it and get into tracksuit bottoms, t-shirt and running shoes – I refuse to call them takkies – all still slightly damp from yesterday. Out of the heavy security door, I jog down the hill towards the chunk of deep blue water tucked between the buildings. As I get closer, exhaust fumes are gradually displaced by the

heavy smell of the ocean and I force myself to think only about the impact of each foot as it hits the pavement

Onto the promenade, and Lion's Head looms up behind the creams and yellows of the apartment buildings. On the other side, the sea is close and restless. Out on the horizon lurks a gigantic tanker. It's so huge it looks like part of the landscape but it will be gone by tomorrow. I pass the kids' play area where young mothers and black nannies are trying to tire out small children. At this time of day, the prom is filled with slim widows walking tiny dogs, students with headphones, illegal skateboarders and elderly men who walk in twos, talking about things that probably no longer involve them.

My irritation subsides with the rhythm of my pace. After all, it's just a brother coming to his see his sister, travelling half way round the world. We don't know each other very well. Haven't I longed for the easy way siblings are with each other, the way that comes from decades of fighting over who licks the bowl or laughing when the other one throws up from stolen parental brandy? Maybe Hugh has, too, and that's why he's coming. But he's still intruding in my brave new world. Anyway, I don't know if I'm ready to receive visitors, I'm not sure I want to be opened up for inspection.

My smoke-ravaged lungs are beginning to complain so I focus on the series of statues as they tell their story of the child and the dragonfly. Right now I am passing the second one, where the little girl meets the dragonfly for the first time. I make myself keep going, past her attempts to fly and then I'm at number eight where she gives up, devastated. By the time I pass the spot where she sprouts wings, I have to stop and force some oxygen back into my bloodstream. I bend over, resting my hands on the plinth of the final statue, the one where the girl and the dragonfly take off together. She is wearing a red and white striped swimming costume. I am pretty sure I had one like that when I was about the same age, when older people were buying my clothes.

Chapter 4

It is dark but the streetlight outside his window means he can see without switching on his bedside lamp. Still wearing his school uniform, he's lying on his bed with his hands behind his head, looking at the ceiling with his eyes wide open. Below him, he can hear the low mumble of two voices, a man and a woman. Occasionally the woman laughs. They have been talking now for about fifteen minutes. Eventually the female voice calls out.

"Mark, are you up there?"

"Yes."

"Have you had something to eat?"

"Yes."

The voices talk some more. It is impossible to hear what they are saying. He doesn't move. After another fifteen minutes, the front door opens and shuts again. He doesn't hear them go out into the road. Now the house is completely silent and the boy moves for the first time in nearly an hour. He sits up slowly, stands and crosses the room. From under his wardrobe, pushed far back where no one could see it, he takes a box. It once held a pair of men's golf shoes, size ten. He puts the box on his lap, removes the lid and, after a few moments, puts one hand completely inside it. He leans his head back and closes his eyes.

Chapter 5

It is Friday and everyone is happier. Even Shaun. Except that he is, inevitably, telling me that the guest in the profile slot has nothing to say.

“Shaun, this guy has just spent two weeks in a deep freeze. He’s getting ready to kayak round Iceland. Of course he’s got something to say.”

“It’s just a gimmick and he hasn’t actually done the kayaking yet.”

“A gimmick. Two weeks? In a deep freeze, for Christ’s sake! I’ve given you loads of questions. And he’s going kayaking with some guy with autism”.

“Hmmm.”

When the show ends at nine o’clock, we are like end of term school children, restless to be out of the door and resentful of the last few tasks that are keeping us from that. I was more or less proved right about the deep freeze man, although he wasn’t as forthcoming on the obvious questions about bodily functions and frozen extremities as I’d hoped. We are a tabloid station and our audience likes to know the gritty stuff. He had talked a great deal, though, and in a way that sounded like he could go on indefinitely. That makes a radio presenter very happy. Shaun is only thinking about his ten thirty tee-off time so I dismiss him, letting him off the wash-up for the sake of all our sanity.

After loitering on the balcony, smoking with the afternoon team, I go back to my desk and sit down. Even though it’s Friday, I must now face the procession of voicemail messages that our switchboard gleefully deposits while we are on the air. “Please hold, I’ll just put you through to his producer”. Our listeners are the lifeblood of the station, and for that reason we find them irritating, especially those who think that we actually want to hear what they’ve got to say.

The red LED display on the phone tells me there are eight messages. Jesus, do these people not have lives? I clamp the handset to my ear and open my notebook.

“It’s Tumi here from the Merrifield Children’s Foundation. We’re having a golf day on the 24th and we’d love it if Mr Henry could join us. We’d arrange transport of course...”

I write down her cell number knowing that it will be me who calls to tell her he'd love to but unfortunately he can't that day. The machine beeps.

"I heard the interview this morning with the lady whose son was knocked down by that drunk driver. My daughter was also knocked over but she didn't die, thank God. I think we should start a campaign...."

I hit 3 to go onto the next message.

"Er ... Piet Joubert, Wynberg. Listen, I don't know what you people think you're doing. I've emailed you three times about the *bergies* on the streets round here. They just leave shit everywhere and no one is doing anything about it...."

The problem is, of course, that we give the impression the station actually gets things done. And we do, sometimes. We can collect mountains of blankets or canned food with just a few on-air announcements and a phone in. We can get thousands of people fun running through the streets. We have paired up glazing companies with windowless schools and painting companies with flaking children's homes.

We act like we are the heart of a community. What people don't understand is that we do it on our terms. What they've missed is that bit in our mission statement that says we're here to 'offer prospects to advertisers'. That means we're mainly about putting something in the gaps between the life insurance spots ('it's not about you, it's about those you leave behind'), the vegetable promotions ('two cauliflowers for the price of one, today only') and the laxative ads ('predictable relief'). There are two kinds of problems – our listeners' actual problems and the problems it suits us to try and solve. Terms and conditions always apply.

I take down his number. I'll ring him on Monday. A call from the station will make him feel good about himself. The next four messages are a fax machine ringing the wrong number so I'm nearly through. The machine beeps again.

"It's Thembeni at the front desk, here. There's package here for you. Came this morning."

Clearly my cue to get out of here. I pack up my stuff and can't be bothered to wait for the lift so trot down the stairs. By the time I reach reception, I'm slightly breathless. Thembeni folds up his paper and smiles at me. From behind him he retrieves a brown, A5 padded envelope and passes it over his counter.

My name and the station's address are written on the front of it in thick black pen. I notice that whoever wrote it is has used the term 'Miss' rather than 'Ms' and think how old fashioned it looks. The envelope was 'remailed' in South Africa. There's no return address on the back. I look at Thembeni.

"Did you have to sign for this?"

"No, my dear. Just on top of the pile of mail downstairs when I picked it up now."

The envelope is light but bulky. Someone has used extra tape to make sure the flap can't come open. I stick my finger in the tiny gap at the side and rip through the paper. Inside is another envelope, smaller and white. It has no writing on the front and it, too, is sealed, but only just. It is full of something uneven and hard, which rattles and slides about. As I open it, the contents spill out over the top of the security desk counter and some drop over the side.

Buttons. About thirty of them, all shapes and sizes, tiny white ones, big coloured ones - blue, red, green.

"*Sjoe*. Careful. Here ... " and Thembeni retrieves those that are rolling away, trapping them and putting them back on the counter.

I peer into the envelope. There is nothing inside that says who it's from. Probably some elaborate teaser campaign, dreamed up by an over-heated ad agency creative trying to manufacture 'intrigue' while actually ending up with 'wank'.

I pick up some of the buttons. There are flat round pearly discs, a brass one on a stalk, a big round black one that might come from an overcoat. Some are covered in fabric, some have wisps of cotton still attached. They are not new, then. One in particular catches my attention. It's a glass button, ornate and shaped like a fifty pence piece with raised edges, textured all over with a flower at its centre. It's beautiful. But there's something else, something about it. As I raise my hand to look at it more closely, my cellphone rings a familiar number flashes on the screen. I snatch it up from the counter with my free hand.

"Victor!" it comes out in a rush of breath I hadn't realised I'd been holding.

"Good heavens, Victoria. Have you been running?"

"No. Well, no more than usual. How are you?"

“I am truly wonderful and at one with the world. A gloriously spray-painted lady from Constantia has just bought a wash-stand from me for seven times what I paid for it. I want to shower the world with gratitude. You, of course, are my chosen shower companion.”

“I’m honoured.”

“Of course you are and so you should be. Now we have the ‘who’ we just need the ‘when’ and ‘where’.”

“The Carnegie?”

“Where there is poo to be drunk and buttocks to be watched. I can think of no better place.”

“I’ll see you there in fifteen minutes.”

Thembeni is still standing up, looking at me like he wants to ask me something. To improve his chances, he picks up the envelope and holds it open while I tip the buttons back into it.

“Thanks very much ... see you Monday ... have a good weekend.” I’m speaking and walking at the same time, through the door, into the sunshine. Just outside, I stop in the recess of a fire escape and fold the envelope around itself. I can feel the buttons inside, even through the padding.

I’m about to put it into my bag, but something stops me. I unfold it again, opening up the top as wide as I can, sifting through the buttons with my fingers until I find it. The gold button. I place it in the centre of my hand and stare at it. As I do so, the pink of my palm is replaced by royal blue, traced with a faint gold pattern. Fabric, fine and light. I can feel it, cool but not soft. It rustles a little bit as it moves against itself. For a moment all I’m aware of is the button on its blue material. The traffic is silent, the buildings have gone, the sun is no longer warm on my skin. I’ve left this place.

Then, like an old reel-to-reel machine starting up, it all comes back. I lean against the fire door for a moment and take a deep breath, not sure what just happened or if anything did. Obviously I’m more tired than I thought. I put the button back, stuff the envelope into my bag and set off in the direction of my first drink.

Ten minutes later and I am blinking in the doorway of the Carnegie Café, my eyes adjusting to the dark, the half closed blinds blocking out the

strengthening sunshine and keeping in last night's rancid air. One of the many reasons Victor and I love the place is that Manny, the owner, resolutely flouts the law and lets people smoke inside after everyone who might object has either gone home or is too drunk to care.

Already seated at our table, Victor is gazing intently at the face of one of the beautiful student waiters that Manny lines up for him like a mail order pimp. The boy is grinning as Victor is gently trying to cajole him into sitting down.

"Nick, I absolutely insist that you join us for one glass. Just one. Manny will not mind in the least. He wants his customers to be happy and I am one of his customers, one of his best customers, *nogal*."

On the round marble top in front of Victor is an open bottle of Pongracz, our favourite treat. In it he has stuck two straws and a small paper umbrella. I sit down and smile at the beautiful waiter who looks grateful for the chance to escape.

"Pon-grah. You spoil me. Victor, Nick has things to polish. Let him go."

Nick immediately turns round and heads for the bar. Victor and I both watch him as he walks away from us.

"Cheers." I take a slug from my straw and push the bottle towards Victor who does the same from his, steadying it with his long, pale fingers. He is twenty years older than I am but his skin is smooth from diligent exfoliation and moisturizing. His pepper and salt hair is immaculately short with no signs of thinning and his chest, the bit that's visible at the open neck of his million thread-count shirt, is firm and white with just a tiny bit of crepe at the base of his neck.

"Congratulations on the wash stand."

"I know. Whoever came up with concept of 'distressing', I owe him a huge bottle of bubbly."

"Or 'her'. Don't you think it's more likely to have been a woman? A damsel in distressing?"

"Oh very good."

"One does one's best."

I am Dorothy Parker and Victor is Robert Benchley. This is our Friday afternoon table and we have been known to leave it only in the early hours of Saturday morning, people coming and going whilst we hold court.

“How are you, my darling? Are the listeners revolting? Is the ‘so-called coloured’ behaving himself?”

“Oh he’s all right. He’s probably at the halfway house by now and well into his third beer. I don’t know why they bother with the golf at all but he insists it’s a magnificent game.”

“It’s impossible to see it. Quite apart from the clothing one apparently has to wear. Can you imagine me in pink Pringle?”

“I can’t imagine you in pink anything apart from the obvious.”

“Victoria! Are you being lewd? I do hope so.”

The wine is beginning to ease the week away, combining with lack of sleep to create a delicious, otherworldly feeling. I’d been going to show Victor the buttons, but now they just seem silly, as does the idea that there is anything unusual about them. Instead, I decide to ask him about something else.

“Victor, what are you doing at Christmas?”

“Oh my God, Victoria. Please don’t tell me that you’re being sucked into that appalling vortex of forced jollity and over-consumption that obsesses the proletariat for months every year.”

“Careful, Scrooge. Ghosts will start appearing in your bedroom.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“My brother, Hugh, is thinking of coming over from Australia. I might do a lunch or a dinner or something at my flat. Would you come?”

“Is he handsome?”

“He’s forty five. Far too old for you. And anyway, he’s my brother, for God’s sake.”

“Darling if the champagne is cold, and the company is hot, I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Could I bring David?”

“Of course. It’ll be fun. We can pull crackers and wear hats and not watch the queen’s speech.”

I’m sounding enthusiastic but again, for a moment, I’m irritated. Hugh’s caper is interfering with my great escape. One of the things I’d left behind in England was the grim directory of ‘ought’ and ‘must’ that was Christmas at Sylvia and Len’s. I remember the three of us in the cold of the afternoon, me staring at them in their chairs, willing them to wake up so we could open presents. The end of my first university term, dragging my suitcase down the stairs of the residence with a stomach full of dread while everyone else laughed and waved and cheerfully slammed the heavy doors of parental Volkswagens. Hugh is doing to me what getting together with Carel has done – forcing me to beat my way along the tracks of the past. That is not the idea at all.

Victor and I exchange our straws for glasses. The first bottle disappears quickly. We move on to more affordable white wine and settle into the pleasing numbness of daytime drinking. We gossip about the few people we know in common and indulge in a lengthy and, to us, hilarious post mortem of last Friday’s marathon session, during which three sets of people had arrived at and left the table – one couple going away and coming back again after their dinner. It had ended only when Manny pointed out that it was three thirty and I had been up for twenty-four hours. And that it showed. Carel had been working in Paarl so there had been no backlash.

At around three o’clock, after Victor and I have given in to chicken mayo tramezzinis and chips and a third bottle, my cell rings.

“Hey there. It’s me. You must be through work by now, right?”

“Mmmmmm. Yes. Very definitely. Through with work”.

“You’re at the Carnegie with Victor.” It’s not a question. His tone reduces the temperature of the café by about two degrees.

“I am. I am. Come and have a drink if you’re finished.”

Victor perks up. “Ah. The delicious Carel. Tell him to come and join us. He can sit on my lap.”

“Victor says come and join us, too. Come on ... please.” I am thinking of the way his skin feels, of the way he looks directly into my eyes and says ‘come for me’ while we’re making love.

“No. I don’t need attention from Victor right now. Or you in this condition.”

“What condition?”

“Vicky. Is there any point in asking why you phone Victor when you finish work? I actually took the afternoon off. But no. Your other friends come first.”

“He phoned me.” My irritation is winning out over lust.

At the other end of the phone, Carel sighs.

“Listen. I’ll call you tomorrow. You’re not going to make it past five o’clock anyway. And I like my women conscious.” He says it with a slight laugh. He has relented.

As it turns out, he’s right. At four-thirty the Carnegie is beginning to fill with end of week drinkers and the noise level is going up. Nick has finished his shift and been replaced by another smooth-skinned and charming young man, but Victor has to go and meet an old actor friend.

I make my way carefully along the narrow crowded pavement, trying too hard to look sober. For the first time this year, the warmth of the sun has proper body. The doors and windows of the cafés are open. Some of the people I pass are in summer clothes, walking with arms full of flowers and wine bottles, buoyant with the promise of the evening to come. Back at my flat I open another bottle of wine, take a glass to the sofa and stretch out in front of BBC Entertainment.

I wake up with the TV still on at about ten o’clock and force myself upright and into the bathroom, swaying slightly as I clean my teeth. I undress, pulling off my clothes where I stand and leaving them in a pile by the bed. Naked, I crawl under the duvet. My last thought before I pass out is that I should have drunk some water.

Chapter 6

It is much later. The sound doesn't last long enough for him to know what it is that woke him. He lies perfectly still and listens, straining to hear it again. The light from outside is still shining through his curtains, so that he can see everything in his room in outline. Then he hears the sound again. It's the cry of a woman and she is being hurt.

Earlier that evening, he was watching television, a police series. A bad man was beating a woman, a man who hated her husband and who wanted to find him and kill him. The woman wouldn't tell the man where the husband was, so the man had hit her, again and again. She had not screamed but made little cries and whimpers trying to get away from him. She didn't call for help. No one would have heard her or cared. She had made the kind of sounds that he could hear now.

Not even completely awake, he sits up in the bed, both hands behind him, ready to push himself standing and across the floor to the door. He has to stop this. But he cannot do it alone. He is a boy. Instead he runs to the window and throws it wide open. He looks wildly in both directions. There is still a light on in the house across the street. Much further down the road there is a man with a dog.

"Help! Help us here!" his voice is cracked because he is starting to cry, but it still sounds loud across the quiet night. A dog begins to bark and a bedroom light goes on in another house opposite.

"Help!" It is louder and more urgent. His bedroom door flies open behind him and he turns. His mother is standing there in a dressing gown.

"Mark. What the hell are you doing, for God's sake?" Her voice is low and harsh.

He swallows. He cannot answer her.

"Get into bed. Right now!" she spits the words at him.

He runs across the room and gets back under the covers. She looks at him for a moment, her mouth flat and her eyes are narrowed. She blows through her lips and he hears the air come out as she turns round, closing the door behind her, closing it hard. He leans over the edge of the bed and takes out the box. Removing the lid, he places his hand inside.

Chapter 7

I open my eyes to daylight. For a moment I am filled with panic that I've slept through my alarm and I sit up with a start. Then the memory of last night and the realization that it's Saturday roll in and I fall back on the pillows. A wave of self-loathing washes over me. My mouth is dry and there is a sick headache roaming around the back of my skull. My eyes are full of shingle every time I blink, so I solve the problem by closing them.

I lie there, waiting for the blackness of the misery to pale, at least to dark grey. Somewhere in the block a baby is crying, a vacuum cleaner is droning back and forth. Outside a car revs its engine and people are shouting unintelligible things at each other. BBC Sound FX disc number 589 "Saturday morning urban atmos (Cape Town)". I risk a look at my watch. Nine thirty. This counts as a six-hour lie-in, although it doesn't feel like one. Eventually, the need for water and the bathroom force me upright. I wrap my dressing gown around me, put on slippers and shuffle to the kitchen.

The air inside the flat is still night cold although there is sunshine coming through the big windows, casting strong light on the walls. The place is a characterless cream throughout. I've done little to change that: a few photos in frames, some of university friends, one of Sylvia and Len. The furniture was cobbled together from station colleagues happy for the chance to get a new table or bed or sofa by passing on their old one. The kitchen stuff came from the stores here that are full of brightly coloured plastic things that look a bit more expensive than they are. It's amazing how quickly you can acquire the necessary chattels. Perhaps it's a natural human tendency, like the need to fill a silence.

The kitchen window faces out into a communal passage. As I'm mixing Berocca and waiting for the kettle, I watch the young couple emerge from the opposite apartment. They are talking and laughing, seeming constantly to curl round each other like kittens, never breaking contact even as they lock their door and walk down the corridor. They are, no doubt, off to breakfast with other kitten couples and later, perhaps, will spend time choosing cushions or picking out clothes for each other.

I examine my face in the mirror stuck to the cupboard. My cheeks are pink with dilated veins and there are circles under my eyes. Yesterday's mascara is crumbled under my lower lashes. I give myself a fake smile.

"Very attractive."

I go back to the sitting room with the strongest tea I can make and see my bag on the sofa. The nausea gets worse and tea slops onto the carpet.

“Fuck it.”

I focus on wiping the bottom of my cup with my dressing gown, looking down and away, trying to avoid eye contact with the bag. This is ridiculous. I put down the cup and fish around inside the bag until I find the envelope at the bottom.

I clear a space on the coffee table and tip the buttons out. They scatter and roll so I make a shield with my hand and body to stop them dropping onto the floor. This is only my second look but they're already familiar: the patterns on the fabric and the gleam of the mother-of-pearl; a big domed one made of plaited leather. Now they're here inside my flat, on my table, it's difficult to dismiss them as some cheap marketing ploy. Is it a joke? Is someone trying to freak me out? I shiver at the thought. Hangover paranoia. I run through a list of people I know here: other producers at the station; a few of Victor's friends I've met once or twice; Carel's crowd of IT guys I've seen at braais; the few women I've got to know through book club, media types in magazines and publishing, mostly. No one seems even remotely like they might be behind this. It just doesn't add up.

And the gold one, with its dull glow. I pick it up and think back to yesterday and the blue and gold fabric. From nowhere comes an image, hovering between memory and imagination: a woman smoothing down her blue dress as she stands in front of the mirror, looking at her face, her figure, patting her hair, turning to smile at the man behind her.

Somewhere inside me a thread tugs and, as though a camera has zoomed out from a close-up, I see myself in relation to the city, to its people spread out around me, oblivious to my existence. The floor gives way a little under my knees and, briefly, the room swims in front of me. I take a sharp breath in and the sound is loud in the quiet flat.

The doorbell pulls me back to myself but I don't move straight away. I don't want to let anyone in. It rings again. I get to my feet and go to the intercom in the hall. Carel's voice crackles through it.

“I heard there was a severe case of junk food withdrawal at this address. I have the necessary medication.”

Crap.

“Yup, it’s pretty bad.” I push the gate release and run back to the sitting room, holding the envelope under the edge of the table, scrabbling to push the buttons back into it. I fold it as small as I can and stuff it behind the books on the bookshelf, then I push my hands through my hair and run a knuckle under my eyes to try and get rid of the mascara crumbs.

By the time I open my door, Carel is on the top step carrying a Steers packet and grinning. I feel every inch of my body inside its pyjamas and shudder.

He’s upbeat. “And how are you this morning?”

“I’ve definitely felt better. Thank you for taking on such a dangerous mercy mission. I don’t deserve it.”

“No you don’t.”

He puts his arms round me, his hands under my dressing gown and down the back of my pyjama bottoms, walking me backwards into the flat. I know he thinks I owe him. It’s time for me to pay for my neglect. All I can think about is disentangling myself to escape to the bathroom. I have a deep suspicion of Hollywood sex scenes where people get just inside the front door and rip each other’s clothes off, scenes that forget the way that real bodies work.

He tries to kiss me on the lips but I twist my head away and bury it in his neck. He smells of soap and anti-perspirant and his skin is soft and dry. He brings up one hand and cups my breast and for one tiny moment we struggle.

“What about my burger? Doesn’t this medication have to be taken immediately?”

“This is why we have microwaves.”

“Please let me go and have a shower. I feel revolting.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that I don’t care? I like it when you smell of you.”

“Please....”

He closes his eyes and sighs.

“All right.”

“I’ll be quick.”

Under the jet, for the second time in an hour I hate myself for being in a situation that I don’t want, but one that is no one’s fault but mine. This thing was never supposed to get to morning burgers and dressing gowns. I slam my hand into the tiles. Why am I so good at letting myself down?

I stand there for longer than I said I would but definitely feel cleaner. I suppose there’s a solution to this but I can’t think of one right now. Right now, I get out of the shower and don’t bother to dry myself properly. I put the towel round me and go out, through the sitting room and into the bedroom where Carel is stretched out on the bed with his hands behind his head. I let the towel drop, my desire washed back by the water, and I make everything just one tiny notch more complicated.

An hour later, after a second shower and half a cold burger each, we are up and in Carel’s car driving over the hill. The sparkling optimism of a Saturday morning coats the city. People wave to each other in coffee shops, pleased with the magazine lives that, today, seem possible. The mountain basks in the sun and the access road to the cable car station already glints with cars. The queue will be forming, tourists from Germany, Holland, Australia, the world eager for the thrill of the view and photographs against the sweep of Table Bay as it disappears into the blue haze.

The road curves round, past the university and down through the trees. We’ve left the city centre behind us and are heading down the peninsula as it stretches out between the oceans. The Red Hot Chilli Peppers are pulsing out of the speakers and I sink down in the seat, grateful that the music is too loud for conversation. I think about the buttons, the way they just turned up, the stupid randomness of it. If it was some kind of joke, what was the point? Why would anyone bother? And was that someone going to watch me as I tried to piece the puzzle together, sniggering behind a computer monitor or from across the street?

I remember when I was very small, an uncle gave Hugh a carved wooden box with no hinges or fastening, nothing to show how to get into it. Hugh took a ring that I loved – fake gold with a plastic ladybird on it – and put it inside.

“Give it back!” I was furious. He’d handed me the box.

“Here Vicky. It’s in here. Just open it and get it out.”

He stood and watched me as I twisted the box around and around, pulling and scraping at it with weak nails. I could hear the ring rattling inside. The more frustrated I got, the more he laughed. In the end I threw the box at him and ran away, crying hot, angry tears, furious that he had got the better of me. The trick was to slide one of the sides and one of the back panels in a certain way and the lid would spring open. But I didn't know that, of course.

"What are you dreaming about?"

I turn the music down.

"Nothing. Does Liesel know when she's flying yet?"

Carel's sister is going to live in Australia with her husband and baby.

"They're not sure. They think probably the last weekend in January. Janu has still got some notice to work."

"How's your mother dealing with it? I mean Danielle's not even six months."

"Oh, she's already planning her first trip over there. You know what she's like. And they'll still probably speak to each other every day. I'm setting up Skype for her."

As we drive further south, I can see the plain of the Indian Ocean spreading out beyond the Cape Flats. Eventually our road runs along the edge of the land with the railway track between us and the water. We make our way through Muizenberg and St James, part of a slow line of cars, till we eventually hit Kalk Bay. The single road through the village is clogged with traffic. For a while we concentrate on nothing other than trying to find somewhere to park. The pavements are thick with people browsing in second hand stores and deciding where to eat lunch. Eventually we squeeze into a gap and walk down the road and across the railway to the harbour.

At the concrete quay, fishing boats are coming in with the catch of the day. Tourists hover while housewives negotiate with rubber-booted fishermen over their best price on whole yellowtail and tuna. There is a stench of the sea and boat oil. A seal is turning lazy somersaults just below us in the dark green water, hoping for titbits as the crews gut their haul.

Back up the car park, in Kalky's, we order two portions of calamari and chips. They arrive, mouth watering and steaming, vinegar already on the chips. It's my second meal out of polystyrene today but a hangover needs regular feeding. We sit on picnic benches with the food between us.

“You want to rent a movie this evening?” Carel is proud of his giant, flat screen TV.

“Sure.”

“Will you stay at my place?”

“I can. I should probably get home before lunchtime, though.”

He doesn't reply, just carries on eating, looking down at his food. Standing behind us, still in the queue, is an elderly couple, both in shorts and very white trainers. They're discussing the unfamiliar fish names on the menu in broad Yorkshire accents.

“Are you going to back to England at Christmas?”

“God, no. Why would I do that?” Immediately I regret being so unequivocal.

“Because, if you're not, my mom wants you to spend the day with us.”

“That's very nice of her but shouldn't it be just family? It might be Liesel's last Christmas in South Africa. For a while anyway.”

“She thinks of you like family.”

“I'm not sure what the station roster will be.”

He drops the piece of calamari he was about to eat and glowers at me.

“Fuck it, Vicky. You know this is what people do, in relationships? They spend time with each other and with their families. Or don't you do that in England? Are we just old-fashioned South Africans when it comes to this stuff? Sorry we're not up to your standards.”

He's furious but keeps his voice low so that the other fish and chip eaters can't hear him.

“Oh for fuck's sake, Carel. It's nothing to do with that.”

“Really? Isn't it? Is there any part of your life you want to share with me? You know, like a boyfriend?”

“Look, I'm just not sure what's happening. There's also this Hugh thing.”

“What Hugh thing?” This is going from bad to worse.

“You know, my brother, Hugh, in Brisbane. He’s thinking of coming over at Christmas. For two weeks. So I might do something at my place and we could ... I don’t know. I’m not even sure he’s coming.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know. I only spoke to him on Thursday. I haven’t seen you since then.”

“Will I meet him?”

“Of course you’ll fucking meet him. He’s my brother, he’s coming for two weeks. We might even end up together on Christmas Day. Weren’t you just saying that couples should hang out with each other’s families? So we’re bang on for your idea of how things should be.” I’m spitting the words back, matching his tone.

“That’s the whole point, Vicky. It’s my idea. And it’s not the same as yours. Do you even have one?”

“No Carel, you’re absolutely right. I have no idea at all. Not one. I leave it all to you.”

“Well that’s exactly how it seems to me ... You know this is fucking pointless.”

“Yes it probably is.”

We’ve been here so many times before, it just feels tired. I feel tired. In the past, I have stepped back from the edge and cajoled Carel back to me because, on balance, I’d rather be doing it than not. But this time, I’ve had enough.

He wipes his hands on a paper napkin.

“I think we should go.”

“OK.” I close the lid on the now congealed calamari and pick up the box.

“You’re not bringing that stinking thing in my car.”

“I’ll give it to someone who actually deserves it before we get there. Happy?”

He turns and walks out, past the chattering queue. As we're crossing the car park, a young coloured boy runs up to me, his hands cupped in front of him. He wants silver but food will do. I give him the box. Carel keeps on walking and I follow a couple of paces behind. Once over the railway line, I increase my speed until we are side by side, negotiating the narrow pavement.

"Carel?"

He doesn't turn his head and he has a child's pout.

"I think you might as well just take me home."

"Fine."

We drive back up the highway in silence. I am staring straight ahead, watching the blue mountain come towards us, the jut of Devil's Peak getting bigger as we go. Around the ragged rocks, the ragged rascal ran, back through the quiet city. When we arrive outside my building, I look at him for the first time since we got in the car.

"Goodbye. Thanks for the lift."

"Sure." He doesn't turn his head.

"I won't call you. You won't call me."

I wait but he doesn't say anything, so I get out and close the door, deliberately but not hard. He drives away, not waiting to see me inside.

Back in the flat, there is still a faint smell of burger.

Chapter 8

The boy is standing outside Boots. He has a small clear plastic bag with money inside. He holds it up level with his eyes and points to each coin as he counts it. One, two, three, four pounds, a fifty pence piece, two twenty pence pieces, three ten pences and a penny. That's more than five pounds so it should be plenty.

He goes in, walking between the make-up stands – Revlon, Clarins, Max Factor, Boots No 7, Charlie, Almay – bright, shiny walls of tiny pots and colours all around him. Behind the counters are ladies wearing white clothes, like nurses. They mostly have blonde hair and some of them are pointing and showing other women face creams and different coloured lipsticks. His mother has the same kinds of things and he can smell his mother's bedroom. The light is bright after the late afternoon outside.

He carries on further into the shop. Women wheel empty pushchairs, studying the shelves, while their tiny children trot up and down the aisles. He reaches the men's toiletries and picks up two small boxes of razor blades. In the next aisle he finds the plasters and chooses one roll of pink tape.

Now he can go back to the checkout. He's nervous. He doesn't look at the girl as she passes his three things under her scanner in case she seems curious about what he's bought. He keeps his head down and hands over the money. She doesn't react as he briefly meets her eyes when she gives him his change. Now he is outside and puts the razors and the tape at the bottom of his school bag. He walks back to the bus station and looks along the bays. There is a 337 in its spot. He jogs up the platform and gets on, showing his pass to the driver just as the doors are closing.

Chapter 9

I let myself into the flat, juggling papers and milk. I need a shower and to get through the Sundays. Time to decide what Cape Town will wake up to tomorrow morning. It could be worse, I could be my assistant producer who is even now making his way towards the office to start. His job is to set up interviews which means ringing people who almost certainly don't want to talk to him during this, their last precious bit of weekend. There are already things on the agenda. We have to follow up the housing story, there might be a cabinet reshuffle and people are complaining because they think they've been missed out of the census.

After I've got clean, I sit on the floor with coffee and the *Sunday Times*, *The Independent* and *The City Press* in piles around me. Two hours later, I have a list of suggested stories to talk over with Deon, but he's not answering his phone. I unfold my legs that are stiff from the run and climb onto the sofa, stretching out on my back so I can look through the open window. I can see the lower slopes of Lion's Head against the pale sky and hear the sounds of families from the apartment blocks around me. Outside people come and go in the street, car doors slam and I wonder what Carel is up to.

When I'd opened my eyes this morning, the events of yesterday had flooded back. 'Things will seem different in the morning', Sylvia's pet phrase. Her way of trying to banish whatever it was that was stopping me from going to sleep: a girl at school who had 'broken friends', a rare telling off by a teacher, a less than perfect test. I remember grown-ups saying 'school days are the happiest days of your life' and being horrified at the thought. I was trapped in the anxiety of being good, of being top, of not being part of the in-crowd. I was too grown-up, too brainy, too different with old, sort-of parents who had another surname, a pretend mother who said 'scent' instead of 'perfume' and 'looking glass' instead of 'mirror', and a surrogate father with false teeth and piles and who could remember the war.

Occasionally she would be right about the new day, but usually my spirits would sag – as they had today. Carel was at least real to the touch. Someone who proved I still existed, who had my number on his phone and knew how I had my tea. Maybe this is a bad time to drive away someone who cares – cared – about me. Sylvia had cared about me, of course. She'd had to. She'd always told me the same story of the day – the day I learned to walk, the day everything changed, the same words in the same order.

"I was sitting on the grass on the back lawn. You just pulled yourself up on the bench and started to walk towards me with your little arms held out. I was going to see your mother the next day. I couldn't wait to tell her. The doctors

had said she was getting better. They used to say to me, ‘your sister’s a real fighter, Mrs Crawford, she’ll pull through’. When you walked towards me, I knew everything would be all right. An hour later, the phone rang and they told me she’d gone. The first thing I thought was, now Katherine will never know Vicky can walk.”

My first steps, my first period, my first boyfriend, my first job. I’d been at Sylvia and Len’s house the day my mother died and I’d never left. Now Sylvia is dead, too, and only I know the story of that day. Is that why we need people? So that someone else knows our stories? Carel was hardly any use to me there. I didn’t ever tell him any of mine. He didn’t ask. Perhaps Hugh’s right. We’ve grown up apart, maybe now it is time for us to be more like family to each other, share the stories we’ve missed out on before it’s too late. Although some stories, of course, are not available for the telling.

My cell phone rings and I reach for my story list.

“Hi, what you got?”

The voice at the other end sounds even wearier than I am.

“Well, the Boks are arriving back from New Zealand so we can talk to Zane live at the airport. Trouble is we don’t know exactly what time…….”

And we’re back on the horse.

Shaun has the week off which always feels like a holiday. His stand-in is our afternoon drive presenter who makes it a matter of principle to be as calm and easy-going as Shaun is hysterical and demanding. On Thursday, I treat myself to a rare weekday – although strictly dry – lunch with Victor at the Carnegie.

“So, I’m a single woman and I’m planning to stay that way. For a while at least.”

“Oh, my darling. Well, I’ll miss Carl’s pert rear end but I’m not sure he was punching at your weight.”

“His heart was in the right place.”

“I never thought it was his heart you were after.”

“You have a point. It certainly makes Christmas a lot less complicated.”

“Ah. Were you going to end up end up grating carrots and turning the *roosterkoek* at the Pinelands palace?”

“Victor you’re such a snob.”

“All part of my charm, darling. Is the brother still threatening to pop in at the Yule?”

“I haven’t heard that he isn’t. You still keen to do something?”

“Definitely. I’ll bring David even though he has been a total swine to me for the last few weeks.”

“Vic, do you think you could gird your loins and try to fall for someone who’s at least a little bit gay? You know, just to give yourself a fighting chance.”

“Good God, no. Far too messy.”

“Are you talking literally or figuratively?”

“Both, darling. If I need any kind of fiddling about I buy in. Keep it clean and simple. You know that.”

“I know, but my poor old Victor gets battered when his favourite boys don’t understand how much of his heart he’s given them.”

“Less of the ‘old’. Anyway, you’re hardly an advert for true love.”

“Good point. I will cease and desist from advice immediately. Yes, come with David. It’ll be fun. I worked out that this is the first Christmas Day Hugh and I have spent together since the Christmas after I was born. It will give us an excuse to drink champagne.”

“When did we ever need an excuse? I take it *ton frère* likes to imbibe?”

“Victor. He’s my brother and his father’s son. If he didn’t, we’d have to suspect some kind of mix-up in the maternity ward.” I picture Robert, my father, on one of his occasional visits to see me at Sylvia and Len’s in the years after Katherine had died. He’s at the dining room table after Sunday lunch, his long fingers splayed on the rim of his glass, a cigarette jammed in the V between the first two. His other hand is gripping my shoulder, his face close enough to

mine that I can smell the whiskey and smoke on his breath. How old am I? Seven? Eight?

“Victoria. What will you be, do you think? When you grow up? What will you be? You have to know. Otherwise what will happen to you?”

There’s a lip-smack and a particular precision to his words. His grip on my shoulder is getting tighter and I’m trying to lower it without him knowing because I want to stay near him. And I’m trying not to cry because I don’t know what I’ll be. So what *will* happen to me?

I turn my attention back to Victor who is telling me about his drunk neighbour who helped him get his cat out of the roof after he’d pushed it through the trap door to try and find rats.

“Yang can be very fierce when he wants to be so I thought it was the obvious thing to do. But all he did was yowl and run away from me every time I tried to grab him. I couldn’t get any higher up the ladder so Alan came over but he was so pissed he couldn’t get further than the second rung.”

We pay the bill. Outside it’s cold and wet, the recent promise of spring well and truly broken. The weekend is nearly here – free of Carel, free of more or less everything. As I say goodbye to Victor, I realise that I have nothing to eat in the flat and head off in the direction of the supermarket.

Back home, I unpack Spar packets and fill the fridge with fat free cottage cheese, salad, yoghurt and smoked chicken. This time, I have succumbed to bringing home white wine although I know it won’t be there for long. I love drinking on my own, feeling the unwinding of the spring. When I was twelve or thirteen, I used to swig whiskey directly from Len’s bottles, waiting for the catch to click back and the tension to leave my body. When I had got far enough into the buzz, I would spread myself out on their high, wide bed and masturbate, freed by the alcohol, flinging myself about in the dark, all the time listening for footsteps on the stairs. Robert should have taught me that you can smell alcohol on the breath. I remember once lolling on Sylvia’s shoulder, looking up into her face.

“Heavens, what have you been drinking?”

“Nothing.”

She’d left it at that. Never mentioned it again.

I get up and stare out of the window. The rain has stopped and I try to summon the energy to go out for a run. The sky outside is colourless and, for once, the street is quiet. Across the road, I can see Macintosh sitting on the pavement with his back against the low boundary wall of the opposite block. He rummages in a Checkers packet and brings out half a roll. I wonder if he's eaten the other half or whether he found it in that state. He looks up and I duck behind the pillar of the window.

I have to write some notes for Shaun. I've managed to get him a face-to-face with Chris Martin just before Coldplay do their Cape Town gig, which means trawling the net to find the fact that's going to give us 'the question'. Shaun and I are united in our search for 'the question', the thing that will make celeb interviewees switch out of autopilot and really think about what they say. You can see it in their eyes. Afterwards we'll high five each other for every time we hear 'no one's ever asked me that before' or 'how did you know that?' Getting to that kind of question takes a lot of hard work. Usually mine.

I'll make a better job of it if I've forced some blood through my veins. I get into my running gear. I hesitate outside the block, trying to decide whether to go up to the scrubland just beyond the end of the road or down to the sea. Eventually I go with dry land and push myself up the first bit of the hill, the steepest part of the route.

As I get higher, I can see the sea down below me, slate grey and choppy. At the top of the road I go through the gate where the houses stop and the vegetation starts. The path winds through the low bushes, up and down over the mountainside. It's uneven and slippery. I can't think about anything except trying not to fall over and I'm beginning to regret coming up here. It's starting to rain again and it quickly picks up force. By this time, I'm sweating and the water hits my hot skin, painful and then the surface goes numb. This is pointless. I find the next gate in the fence and drop back down through the houses, zigzagging my way along the narrow roads and through footpaths until I get back to the junction with the larger road that's mine. I'm cold now and it's getting dark, the rain clouds getting in the way of the late afternoon light.

As I turn the corner, I see Macintosh. He's standing in the middle of the road swaying slightly and staring up the hill. There is no one in the street and luckily no cars are coming. I don't want to stay out here any longer than I have to, but I need to get him onto the pavement.

"Macintosh, what are you doing?" I call above the rain, standing level with him at the roadside but he doesn't turn towards me, he just carries on staring. I walk out into the middle of the road.

“Macintosh!” He turns. I can’t read his expression. His eyes are wide and I notice for the first time that they have a pale blue ring round the brown. He still hasn’t moved so I take hold of his sleeve and shout into his ear.

“Get out of the road. You’ll get run over.”

He walks with me but he tugs his arm away as we go.

“What’s the matter? Did something happen?”

He looks down moving his head from side to side.

“No madam. No ... no ... no.”

I wait to see if he’s going to say any more but he just carries on shaking his head. The rain is coming down so hard it’s difficult to keep my eyes open. There’s not a part of me that’s dry. Rivulets of water are running down Macintosh’s matted hair and beard, over his shoulders and dripping off the edges of his filthy jacket.

“Macintosh....”

But he turns away from me. Slowly and deliberately, he moves off down the street, leaving me standing looking after him. He turns the corner and disappears round the side of the building. There is a garage round there he sometimes goes to when it’s wet. All I want to do now is get warm and dry.

Chapter 10

The inside jobs are the easiest, especially in the summer when his mother and the visitors are in the conservatory. From the hallway, he can hear the glass door slide open and then there's plenty of time to get away from the pegs on the wall and up the stairs or into the lounge. Sometimes he'd even wait until he heard the door before he did it. There would be a tingling in his stomach and the palms of his hands would sweat so the blade sometimes slipped a bit.

When he started, he'd mainly stuck to inside jobs. As he became more skilled, he'd moved his activities out of the house. One Christmas Eve, he'd been up in the bedrooms in his mother's friend Julia's house. The adults were downstairs, drinking wine and smoking, their voices and laughter getting louder and louder. He'd found a room with coats piled high on the bed. He'd taken three or four then. Once he'd even done it on the bus: the man sitting in front of him and had draped his jacket over the back of the seat so that half of it was on his side. He always carried the blade in a special tiny pocket he'd made in the waistband of his shorts, tape wrapped round it.

He can remember when it began. He was young. When Mr Slater came back from the club or the pub and called his mother's name with that roar on the end of it, "Marjorie." That's when he knew to go to the big cupboard in the spare room. He would sit in the dark amongst the dusty shoes and the sharp smell of coats that have been shut up for too long.

Some of the lady's coats and dresses weren't his mother's. He didn't know whose they were. They'd been there when the two of them had moved in. In the winter he would slide his mother's sheepskin jacket off its hanger and put it round him, pulling the neck of the coat close to his ears and nose, smelling her perfume. He would twist the bone buttons, backwards and forwards, making his brain think about nothing. One day, one of the buttons had come off. He had been scared. There would be trouble. When the house was quiet he had crept out, the button in his pocket. He'd hidden it at the bottom of his box of soldiers, inside a tin tank. The next time his mother got the coat out, they were getting ready to go somewhere. She'd noticed it in the kitchen and given an angry sigh.

"Oh dammit. Look at that. I've lost a button. When did that happen? Wait. I need to get another coat," and she'd run heavily up the stairs.

His stepfather, impatient to leave, had rocked backwards and forwards on his heels. The boy just carried on sitting at the kitchen table. He'd said nothing. Just held on to what he knew.

Chapter 11

I'm soaked and freezing. I let myself in via the keypad at the main entrance and climb the first flight of stairs. As soon as I turn to go up the second I can see something is wrong. My security door is standing open. My insides turn to water and my chest constricts. I sprint up the last few steps and, as I get closer, I can see that the door itself is also open. The sound of my breathing seems unnaturally loud in the stairway. What if someone is still inside and they hear me? For a second I don't move. I want to go in and see what's happened but I'm too frightened.

I turn and run back down the stairs. There are two flats on the ground floor. I hardly know the people in them. A single guy lives in one, middle-aged and quite often home during the day. The other one belongs to a young couple, who are hardly ever there. I'm scared to make any noise by knocking on one of the doors. The block is weirdly silent. All I can hear is a kind of whining in my ears. I want to get out of the building but can't bear leaving my flat doors wide open.

I go along the passage and hit the release button for the door at the back of the block. As I go outside, I catch a movement out of the corner of my eye, a shuffling brown figure disappearing round the other side of the row of garages. Macintosh. Surely this has nothing to do with him?

I find the window of the single guy's flat and rap on it with my knuckles. There's no movement inside, no lights, no sign of life at all. I run back along the other way, to the windows of the other flat. The curtains are shut but a light is on. I bang on the glass with flat of my hand. Almost immediately, the curtain is whipped back and a woman's shocked face appears.

"I live upstairs," I shout through the glass. "My flat's been broken into. Please press your panic button."

She lets the curtain drop. I stand there, my throat closing and tears pricking at my eyes. The back door opens and the woman comes out, walking quickly. She must be about my age. She's wearing a brown velour tracksuit, her hair scraped back from a pale, round face.

"The security guys are on their way. Are you all right?"

"Yes. I just got back from a run and saw the door standing open. I didn't want to go in on my own. Thanks...thanks for that. Sorry if I gave you a fright."

“Fuck it, we live in these blocks because we think it’s safer. I suppose they must have followed someone in the main door. I saw that fucking *bergie* out here just now? He probably tipped them off you were out.”

“Oh ... no ... I don’t think”

“You take it from me. Every time I go out he’s watching this place. They’d just have to give him a half jack of Klippies and he’d tell them anything.”

“Hello?”

The guard from Field Force Security is shouting to us through the back gate. I unlock it from the inside and tell him what’s happened as we walk round to the front of the building. Inside, I let the two guards – both big and black in black uniforms and carrying solid looking weapons outside their bulletproof vests – walk up the stairs in front of me.

My heart is thumping. They draw their guns as they get level with the door and go inside. I stand on the landing, hearing them moving about and speaking to each other in French. One of them reappears in the hallway.

“It is OK. You can come.”

The woman from downstairs has followed us up here and we both go through the door with some trepidation.

In the sitting room, there is a mess. Furniture has been pulled around, one cupboard has been opened and books have been pulled off the shelves but the TV and stereo are still there. The contents of my bag have been spilled across the floor and the wallet is gone. I go through into the bedroom and all the dressing table draws have been opened. The two small ones at the top have been emptied. Scarves, costume jewellery, bits and pieces I liked but nothing of huge value. In the kitchen, my phone is still plugged in to its charger. Maybe I’d disturbed them before they’d had a chance to get this far. I pick the phone up and dial the number I’ve got programmed in for the local patrol car.

“Hi. Please get round to 5 Alderley Terrace. There’s been a break-in...yes it’s my house. Well... I’m the tenant.... No, no one has been hurt. The security guys are here.”

“Hello?”

One of the guards is calling me from the front. I go out into the passage and back towards him.

“You didn’t lock your door?” He’s looking at me with his eyebrows raised.

“Of course I ...” but I trail off. The keys are in the locks of both doors. I automatically look down at the tile under which I keep a spare set. Who knew those keys were there?

“That’s not very sensible.” The downstairs woman has spotted the tile where it’s been moved out of place.

“No. Obviously not.” I’m wishing she would go away and leave me to deal with things. Now that I’ve been back inside and there are men with guns here, I feel better. It’s shit but it’s normal shit. Now it’s stopping credit cards and straightening things out, putting things back on shelves and ... fuck. The books have been pulled out.

“Hold on. I just need to check something.”

I go back along the passage to the sitting room where the books are still all over the floor in front of the bookcase. Most of the top shelf has been pulled out. I get down on my knees and push the books around, looking underneath them, piling them up so that there are no hidden spaces where the envelope could be. Finally all the books on the floor are stacked and the carpet is clear. Nothing. It was on the top shelf behind these books and it looks like it’s gone.

“Something missing?” The guard has followed me into the room. His soft, Congolese accent grates on me.

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

At the very end of the shelf, much further along than I remember putting the envelope, there are about four books still in place. I pull them out and right up in the very corner, there it is. Still folded round itself, the writing just visible on one side. My sense of relief surprises me.

I show the envelope briefly to the guard and the woman who has followed him in.

“It’s OK. No harm done. Just thought this was gone.”

“Is it jewellery?” The woman is obviously very curious to know what’s inside.

“No, no. Nothing like that. Just sentimental value.”

I get up and herd them along the passage. The other security guard is waiting at the entrance. He too has caught sight of the keys in the doors.

“You left your keys?”

“Yes. Under the tile there. A spare set. I thought it would be OK but I was ... wrong. Lesson learnt.”

“The police will give you the case number. For the insurance.”

“Yes. Thanks. Thanks for coming round so quickly.”

They move off down the stairs, guns back in their holsters. The downstairs woman and I are now standing outside my front door together.

“Do you think it was someone you know? I’m not sure insurance will pay anything. No forced entry, is there?”

“Yeah ... of course ... that might be a problem.” Shot for pointing that out right at this minute. “Oh well, thanks again for all your help ...” I’m edging slowly back into the doorway, the envelope still in my hand.

“I’ll send a note round to everyone. We’d all better be extra careful when it comes to making sure no one follows us in the main door or when we’re buzzing people up. I’m Vicky by the way.”

“Oh. Jackie ... I’m telling you now, it’s that fucking *bergie*. When Mike gets home he’s going to find him.”

“I don’t think Macintosh is like that.” He isn’t, is he?

“Sjoe. They’re all like that.”

“Anyway ... I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t been in.”

“Well, I’m glad it’s not too bad.” She’s eyeing the envelope in my hand, not moving off. I take one step inside the door and she finally turns and walks back down the stairs, calling back over her shoulder.

“I’ll let you know if Mike finds anything out.”

“Bye. Thanks again.” I take the keys out of the doors. How can I have been so stupid? This is South Africa. You do not leave the key under the mat. You can’t break those kinds of rules. You just can’t. Before I have time to shut the security gate, I hear Jackie opening the main door and some deep male voices. The next moment, two blue uniformed policeman round the corner of the stairs.

“Hi ... come in.”

After taking a statement, written out in painstaking longhand, they finally leave, promising a fingerprint expert first thing tomorrow morning.

In the bedroom I try and remember what was in those drawers. I’m not much for jewellery and the bits and pieces Sylvia left me are stashed away in a friend’s safe in London. Here there’d been some silver earrings, birthday necklaces from friends, a couple of cheap-ish rings. Then I remember something else – a brooch, a small silver flower with an amethyst at its centre. It was in a pale blue box with a sprung hinge that made it snap shut. It had been Katherine’s. Sylvia had told me Robert had given it to her when they were first married. I had a few other things of hers, her wedding and engagement rings, a string of pearls, but those were all in London. By accident, the brooch had come out here with me, stuffed into a box or a bag with the rest of the everyday things. I’d never worn it. I’d hardly ever looked at it. Now it was gone.

Chapter 12

In front of him on the kitchen table is a plate with one half of a jam sandwich on it. The bread is dry and he is trying to finish a mouthful. It is summer and the door is open. Through it he can see a cat making its way up the garden. The grass is longer than his mother likes it but the cat is enjoying the cover, sometimes stopping and crouching low, convinced, he thinks, that it can't be seen. His mother is in the conservatory with one of her friends. Occasionally he can hear them laughing. They had their lunch in there, two plates of quiche and salad, two glasses of wine. Now they are drinking coffee. He knows that it's unlikely they'll come out before teatime. Robert is at the golf club. He will not be back until much later, smelling of smoke and whiskey, his face red and shiny. He won't have supper. He'll sit in his chair, snoring, his head lolling.

The boy looks back at the cat. It's playing a game of grandmother's footsteps and now it's much closer, stock still with a paw held in mid air.

'Pussy cat' he says it out loud but softly. It is black and white. It reminds him of someone. He has a snapshot of her in his mind, the tall, smiling woman with the brown, curly hair and green eyes. He remembers her well, even though he was very young, maybe three or four, standing on her doorstep with his mother. The women were talking. A black and white cat like this one had come along the passage behind the woman, winding itself round her legs. She'd spoken to it. Her voice was warm, runny music.

"Hello you. Have you left Vicky on her own?"

From somewhere towards the back of the house, he heard a sound, a wailing, like a little animal that was hurt. His mother and the tall curly woman swapped a smile.

"There she goes" his mother said. "Should we come back another time, Katherine?"

"No, no come in. If I waited for a good time I'd never see anybody."

They all went along the passage to the kitchen. The walls were pale, some stairs disappeared up to somewhere he couldn't see. It was dark after the sunshine outside.

On the kitchen table was a dark blue box with a cover over one end. The sound was coming from there and it was getting louder. He remembers not

knowing what kind of thing would make a sound like that. Now he knows, of course.

The lady reached into the box and picked up the baby. With sure hands she had smoothed down its vest and put it high on her shoulder, its face fitting perfectly into her neck. She carried on talking as she moved gently up and down, to and fro.

“She’s very good, really, Marjorie. Nearly slept through last night and she’s not even three months. I can’t remember Hugh sleeping through until he was on solids.

As soon as the baby put its face into her neck, it had got quieter. Now there was not much sound at all, just little sighs and sucking noises. The lady turned her head and rubbed her chin up and down over the baby’s ear and the side of its head. He couldn’t stop looking at them.

Now the baby was completely quiet. The woman turned it over and put it in the crook of her arm. It looked like it was asleep. She sat down on one of the chairs and held out her hand.

“Come and see her, Mark. Isn’t she tiny?”

He hadn’t wanted to at first.

“Go on, Mark.” His mother sounded sharp. “She won’t bite. No teeth yet.” And she laughed.

He walked forward and, without knowing why, he put his face down close to the baby’s face. He could smell a warm, alive, smell. He put his lips very gently on the baby’s cheek.

“Oh. What a lovely boy,” the lady had said, and she’d smoothed her hand over his hair and down the side of his head, tilting his face towards hers and leaning down to kiss him on his forehead, smiling with her eyes.

“Look what she does.” She picked up his hand and made him stick out one finger. Then she guided the finger towards one of the baby’s unfurled fists and stroked its palm with it. The tiny fingers curled around his so tightly he could feel the blood squeezing out. He squealed a little bit and nearly jerked his hand away, but the baby held on.

“See she’s strong even though she’s so small,” the lady said. He nodded, leaving his hand there, the soft, damp warmth of the fingers around his, hardly

daring to move, even to breath. But the touch had woken the baby up enough for it to remember why it was crying. It made a little whimper and let go of his hand. Then it started to cry properly, its arms waving.

“Where’s my lunch, mum?” his mother said in a silly voice. “Come on, Mark. We must go.” The baby was getting louder now. He didn’t want to go. He wanted to stay and see the baby have its lunch. What did it eat?

“We must go, Mark.”

“Oh it’s all right. I could do with someone to talk to.”

The wailing was all around them. The lady shifted the baby into the crook of her other arm and undid the buttons on her blouse, lifting out her breast, large and white with blue veins and a big, brown round part that was a little bit wet. He had stared. He had never seen a bare breast. He had a sense that it was a private thing but the lady didn’t seem to mind him seeing. It was something special for the baby.

It was really screaming now but the lady put her other hand behind its head and moved it forward. Suddenly there was silence except for the sound of sucking, the baby lying across her lap, its feet neatly together. He had looked round the side of its head. Its eyes were closed and he could see its jaws moving up and down, its red lips wet and stretched as far as they could go, not just covering the nipple but swallowing the white skin, their flesh fusing.

“There. That’s all she wanted, Mark.”

And she sat back a little, running a finger over the baby’s cheek.

He picks up the plate and tips the remaining sandwich into the bin. He can no longer see the cat through the kitchen doorway. Going outside, he spots it flattening itself to go under the fence into the garden next door. He walks round the side of the house and into the garage to get his bike.

Chapter 13

It is eleven thirty at night. I have to get up in four hours. In front of me is a whiskey glass, which is half full and fairly dark in colour. The water/whiskey ratio is around fifty/fifty.

Apart from the two open, empty drawers in the bedroom, the flat is pretty much back to normal but I don't want to lie down in it and go to sleep. I don't want to sit in it or stand up in it or be anywhere in it. I don't want to be anywhere except in this bottle.

A man, or maybe two, was in this room six hours ago. Hands that are not my hands were on the handles of the cupboards, on the spines of the books, on the doors. Feet that are not my feet on the carpets and the rugs, lungs that are not my lungs were expelling the air. Maybe some of the air I'm breathing now.

After the police left, I saw something glint down by the skirting board under the table in the hallway. I'd got down on my knees and peered at it – a plastic lighter with a serpent on the side. An every-day fragment from a real life that exists out there somewhere – a thumb to strike it, lips to hold the cigarette, eyes to track the course of the flame towards the tip, people to sit and smoke with, drink, eat with, be with. All that life was in here, shouldering my life out of the way. I had fetched a slotted spoon and raked the lighter towards me, scooping it up and putting it on the hall table. They can fingerprint it – exhibit A, the smoking tik addict who got away with some earrings and an old brooch.

I have to go to bed.

I take another slug of whiskey and light a cigarette – my last but one. In front of me, too, is an old Sunday Times Lifestyle section, open at the centrefold. The buttons are spread over it. I place my hands on top of them, feeling the textures underneath my palms. Maybe the fingerprint guy can brush them, too, while he's here, kill two birds with one stone.

In a little space of its own is the gold button. I run my fingertip over its smooth patterns, like pips. I pick it up and the glass picks up the yellow light of the lamps in the room and shows itself an old, rose-coloured gold. I close my hand around it, willing its life to flash before my eyes. I put it back down and swirl the buttons around, perhaps they'll reveal their secret through a pattern, like tealeaves in the bottom of a cup.

Outside, the street is quiet. An occasional car goes past, tyres hissing on the wet road. I pull my laptop towards me and type 'gold glass buttons' into Google. Suddenly the world is full of button enthusiasts. Nothing looks like my button, though. I try 'vintage gold glass buttons' and the screen fills up with more pictures and some do look like mine. Not exactly the same but very nearly. It seems that Czechoslovakia was once the centre of the glass button world. I keep paging through the pictures to see if I can find my exact button, as if that would be the start of the answer, but I can't find anything that's close enough.

I click on to Facebook, scrolling through the news feed – links to YouTube, snaps of crowded bars, a cat, two cats, urls about media trends, lists of drinks, "anyone want to go to the Langham later?", "Long Street rocking!". An idea occurs to me. I pick up the gold button and put it on the table, take a photo with my phone, upload it and make it my profile picture. In the status update I write 'Look at this button. Ring any bells?'

I have to go to bed. First, I drain the whiskey.

Chapter 14

He is seven, maybe eight. His mother is out and he is alone at home with Mr Slater. From his bedroom window he can see a white car driving slowly up the road. It stops outside and a woman gets out. Mr Slater shouts up the stairs.

“Mark?”

He stays silent.

“Mark!” Louder this time, angrier. “Stay up there and don’t come down till I tell you.”

The boy hears Mr Slater opens the door and then the woman’s voice.

“Robert!”

Is she crying?

“Come through here.” Mr Slater’s voice is low. They go through into the kitchen. The sound of their voices rises and falls. Suddenly Mr Slater shouts “No!” and the lady says something but he can’t make it out.

He comes down the stairs, one by one, his feet light. He creeps along the passage but by the time he reaches the kitchen door, he can hear nothing. He flattens himself against the wall outside. Then he does hear something. It is Mr Slater’s hard voice.

“I think you should go.”

They are coming out. The boy presses himself into the wall. The lady walks out first, she is using a handkerchief to wipe her eyes and she doesn’t see him. Mr Slater comes out behind her and sees him immediately.

“You little shit,” he screams so loudly. “I told you to stay upstairs” and he picks up the boy’s jumper and T-shirt at the top of his back, lifts him off the floor and turns him round.

“Oh Robert!” the lady cries out.

But Mr Slater throws him back into the kitchen and slams the door. The boy sprawls onto the floor, winded. He hears the front door close and the kitchen door open, but he stays down, his eyes shut, bracing himself.

Mr Slater is standing above him. The boy feels him nudging his stomach with the toe of his shoe, pushing his way into the soft part. When it is well in, he gives a shove with his foot, pushing the boy's breath out of him again. He keeps his eyes closed. There will be more.

But it doesn't come. Mr Slater takes hold of the top of both his arms and pulls him up.

"Look at me, you little runt...look at me!" He stands and opens his eyes. Mr Slater is leaning down, his face close to the boy's.

"You and I are going to forget all about this, do you understand?" The boy nods, once.

"Do you understand?" It is a shout now and there are drops of spit landing on his face. He nods his head as hard as he can, up and down.

"No one will know anyone came here, you hear me? Including your mother. And if I find out you've told her, you know what will happen?"

He keeps nodding and nodding.

"Get out."

He runs down the passage and up the stairs into his room.

Chapter 15

“Your time starts ...now! Where were the 2004 Olympics held?”

“Beijing.”

“No, Athens. How many ‘u’s are there in the word ‘scurrilous’?”

“One.”

“No, two.”

I don’t have time to reflect on this man’s performance since I’m keeping the score but, really. And he’s already won one of the opening rounds. I concentrate on the digital display in front of me as it’s counting down to the one-minute gong. When it sounds, contestant number two in this week’s semi-final of Cape News Radio’s annual general knowledge quiz (“brought to you by Bridge Van der Ruit – for all your financial needs”) has scored a rather miserable eight out of a possible fifteen, safely behind our first contestant who scored ten. The audience, either those who have been distracted from their Saturday morning shopping or those who have come down here specially, give a warm round of applause, but it’s something of a sympathy clap.

I look over at Shaun, today’s question master, and give him a fake smile. He winks, which sends a shiver through me. We have spent the morning commiserating with each other about doing a Saturday outside broadcast – complaining about everything from being forced to turn out in our blue CNR T-shirts and caps to having to speak to listeners face to face. But we both like them, more than we’ll admit.

Out here in the world, the audience translates itself from a series of easily disregarded voices on bad phone lines to real, three dimensional people who have jobs and houses and children who love them. They become reckonable with and they are all – or most of the ones we meet, anyway – fans. There are some radio presenters who find meeting listeners excruciating, but Shaun is Tom Cruise on the red carpet. And I can’t deny I enjoy being seen as a bit fascinating because I’m part of this magical machine that people let into their homes every day.

“Did Shaun really lose his temper that time with the Home Affairs guy?”

“You should be on the radio, you have a great voice”

“We wake up to you every morning, hate it when we travel and can’t get you.”

“What was it like, meeting Charlize Theron?”

We’re between contestants and there’s an ad break going out. I go over to Shaun who’s trapped on his podium surrounded by mikes, scripts and headphones.

“Do you need anything?”

“I need someone who actually has some general knowledge to be taking part in this so-called general knowledge quiz.”

“I know but it’s that Mowbray guy next, he was brilliant on Wednesday so I think he’ll do well. You want a beverage – coffee, tea, me?”

“No thanks.” He is matter of fact and I regret my tiny flirtation.

We are doing this broadcast from Canal Walk shopping centre, just one of the vast malls that are dotted around Cape Town. This Saturday morning it is full of people for whom this weekly visit is a much-anticipated family outing. Next to us is a gigantic Christmas tree designed, I’m assuming, to send them scurrying into the shops in a panic that it’s only just over two months till Christmas. The station manager’s PA is guiding contestant number three to the stage and I need to go back to my scoring post. Neo, the mid-morning producer, is sitting next to me with her timer and we get set while Shaun chats the next guy up.

“Now, Derek, you were our highest scorer of the week this week. D’you think you’re on form this morning? You’ve got ten to beat. What are the chances?”

“Well, Shaun, it depends on what questions you ask me.”

A ripple of laughter from the audience.

“OK. Well. Relax and breath ... Your time starts ... Now. Where were the 2000 Olympics held?”

“Sydney”

“Correct.”

“How many ‘s’s are there in the word ‘success’?”

“Three”

“Correct.”

He’s doing a lot better than the last guy. As I make marks on my sheet, Neo nudges me and nods her head in the direction of the people at the side of the tree. I scan the crowd and, at first, I don’t see what she wants me to look at. Then I do and my insides turn to water. Standing on the edge of it, his arm round a slim girl with long, dark hair and pale skin, is Carel. She is saying something to him and laughing up into his face, leaning against him slightly. I can only look at them for a moment or I’m going to mess up the score. I force myself to concentrate on the rest of the round. I make it thirteen points.

“And Vicky, how did Derek do?”

I get my nanosecond on the air now and I mustn’t get it wrong. I dig Neo in the ribs and scribble ‘13?’ on the paper in front of her, raising my eyebrows, hoping that she’d also been keeping count. She gives a faint nod and I lean into my mike.

“Shaun, Derek scored thirteen points and has gone into the lead.”

My voice booms out over the PA and I cringe at the quiz show tone of it. If he didn’t realise it before, Carel can’t fail to know that I’m here now. While the audience applauds enthusiastically, I look back in Carel’s direction. The two of them are still in laughing conversation and, as I’m watching, he pushes a lock of her hair behind her ear. So this is no coincidence, this is Carel wanting to show off his new and lovely friend who it’s taken him about five minutes to find. God, he’s pathetic that he’ll travel halfway across the city just to prove to me that he’s moved on. I’m repulsed by his need to do this but at the same time there’s a gnawing deep in my midriff, seeing him with this willowy, soft girl in her leggings and denim jacket and slim face with its cheek bones. For a second I allow an image to flash through my mind, the curve of Carel’s neck, his bare shoulders moving above me.

“I didn’t know you two had broken up?” Neo is looking at me sideways.

“Yes, pretty recently, but obviously not too recently for some people.”

“Hectic.” Neo is a lot younger than I am.

We’ve handed back to the studio for news, sport, weather and more ads, which gives me a chance to get scripts in order and check the question files

on the computer. I'm grateful for the fact that there's something I need to be doing. He's the one who has to decide whether to come over or not. I keep looking at the screen. I'm somehow aware that he has moved but keep my eyes down so I'm genuinely taken aback when I look up and find he's standing directly in front of me.

"Carel!"

"Hello Vicky."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you."

He's speaking in an odd, deliberate way.

"Really? Here?"

"I wanted to tell you something face to face."

His self-dramatisation is infuriating but he's making me nervous.

"I don't know if you've noticed but I'm in the middle of a live radio programme. Can we do this some other time?"

He carries on as if I haven't spoken.

"I won't introduce you. I don't think you'd get on. I just wanted to tell you that she and I have been together for a while. And that other Saturday, when we had sex in your flat? I'd come straight from her place."

I feel winded and don't know what to do with any part of my body. Above the noise of the crowd, I can just hear the PA and the newsreader coming to the end of the weather, which means we only have a two-minute spot break and we're back live. Before that I have to take Shaun his next pages of running order. I pick them up and, although it's the last thing I want to do, I move out from behind the table.

"I don't ..."

"She's always known about you. I didn't tell her much. Wasn't that much to tell."

"Carel ..."

“That’s all” and he turns and walks away, back towards the girl. I stand stock still, listening to the final sting on the spot break.

“Vicky!” Shaun is yelling at me from across the floor. I come back to life and run over, give him the sheets and return to my seat just as he starts talking.

“You’re listening to 102.1FM, Cape News Radio, coming to you this morning from Canal Walk with a live audience ... are you live?”

The crowd cheers.

Two hours later I am driving back down the N1, past the piled up container yards and cranes and disused diesel engines rusting between the railway lines. The sun is out and there are sweeps of white cloud in the blue above the city and the mountain.

Near the centre of town, I turn left and begin to climb through the main roads and the narrow streets. I’m not exactly sure of my route but I know where I want to get. Eventually I’m high up amongst the layered elegance of Oranjezicht. I find myself in the same road as the guesthouse I stayed in when I first got here. I slow down and draw in to the kerb opposite its smooth, ochre wall, the number in brushed steel subtle by the heavy pedestrian door, the house invisible from the road. I remember the taxi drawing up outside it the day I arrived. It was a morning like this, the sun dazzling on the sea in the distance.

I can recall the burning sense of the unknown that I’d had then. As the door had buzzed open and I’d dragged my case into the gravelled courtyard, I had welcomed that feeling, rejoiced in it, revelled in it. It was one part of a glorious whole that I’d created by flinging myself off the ledge of the safe life I’d left behind. This superb city was waiting for me and I was waiting for me, the right, powerful version of myself that I’d always longed to create. A self strong enough to take the risks I was running from. Night after night in my London flat I would rock myself to sleep, pushing away the terror that time was being wasted even as I lay there. A finite amount of precious moments, moments I was not using as I should for reasons I didn’t understand.

While I’m sitting here, the car idling, my foot on the clutch, the wooden door opens and a woman comes out. I recognize her as the owner who’d met me that morning, her face the first one I’d looked into properly since I’d arrived, the first proper conversation I’d had. She has their small dog on a lead and

her daughter is with her. I remember the daughter, too, Sabine. She was eleven then and still very much a little girl. Now she is a teenager, wearing leggings, a short skirt and pumps, her hair in a high ponytail and slightly to one side, earrings and some make-up. As they check for traffic, the woman looks over in my direction and smiles vaguely but there's no real recognition. They are laughing as they cross over the road and walk away along the pavement behind me.

I pull out and continue until I hit Molteno Road as it charges straight upward. I turn left, revving the car over the stop streets until I get to the very top, parking at the bottom of the path that winds its way through the scrub of the mountain's lower slopes. I get out and look up to the main cable car station with its satellite destination perched on the very corner of the rock, high above it, the line of the sandstone's flat top etched sharp against the sky. I turn round and lean against the bonnet. Spread out below me is the whole of the city bowl, a mosaic of creams, reds, greys, browns and blacks fanning out around the high-rise buildings of the centre, petering off into the dark greens of Signal Hill and Lion's Head. Beyond that, the sea.

I'd come up here the first time I'd driven in the city, determined to see it from as high a place as I could find, the tiny hire car struggling to deal with the gradient. I'd stopped in this exact spot and simply looked, thinking about the people in the buildings, the lives they were living, the energy they were generating, the versions of the future they could offer. The night of our first official date, Carel and I had ended up here, too, at my suggestion. He'd said something like 'this view is as beautiful as you'. I'd nearly laughed at him but I didn't care what he said. I was still full of the thrill of it all, of him, of me, of the lust, of my charged existence. At last, when I put my hand in the fire, I could feel myself burn.

But it wasn't real life. It was the ultimate lucid dream. Think it, do it, try it and if it doesn't work, push off the ground and fly on, thousands of miles between me and the waking world.

Now even that charmed sleep has gone, chased away by the grind of four o'clock starts, by Saturday hangovers and the length of Sunday afternoons, by running out of cigarettes at three in the morning, by the buttons, by the break-in, by Carel.

This is real life now. I stare out over the city, feeling the deadening layers returning. The burn of the fire was simply an illusion. The breath of my faithful travelling companion is cold on my neck and my courage falters in a way I thought I'd left behind.

Chapter 16

It is a winter afternoon. The sky is dark outside and there is rain against the windows. The boy is sitting in the kitchen while his mother is peeling potatoes.

“Mum. What happened to the lady he ...Robert ... was married to?”

“Why are you asking me about that?”

“I just wondered.”

“How do you know he was married to someone else?”

“Because Hugh and Vicky must have had a mother. Right?”

“Her name was Katherine. She died, Mark. Before...before Robert and I became friends. A long time ago.”

“Did I ever meet her?”

“No. Well once, perhaps, but you were too young to remember.”

Part Two

Chapter 17

It's the trees that winch me back, the fuzz of bare twigs standing out against the pink winter sky, a different kind of sky. And the air. It breathes straighter here, harder, thinner.

A train going the other way shoots past the window and I jerk my head back from the cold glass. As a child I would terrify myself trying to imagine what if someone had a hand or even a head out of the window when trains passed like that. What if it were me? What if it were Sylvia? I used to love the speed, though. While we were waiting on the platform, the inter-city expresses would go through the station, not slowing for a second. 'The train now approaching platform three is the fast train to...stand well back behind the yellow line'. I would lean over the line, as near as I could, hearing the roar getting louder. Looking down the track, you couldn't see the speed head on but then there was the sudden burst of noise and buffet of wind as it thundered through, death just a few feet away.

We're slowing down, coming in to a station, passing the rows of terraced back gardens, the undersides of lives. People get on and off. Once the doors have wheezed shut, we pick up speed again, funnelling between hedges and fields. A watery, low sun is just beginning to break through, lighting up the wetness on the grass. As we get closer to Canningbury, my low feeling gives way to the tingling of adrenalin. What will I find this time?

The train grinds to a halt with the tang of burning rubber. When I get out, the cold hits me after the overheated fug of the carriage and I bury myself further into my collar and scarf. No one looks at anyone else as we go down the stairs and out through the turnstiles. I turn left out of the main door of the station and immediately left again, through the long, dim tunnel that goes under the platforms, reeking of urine and always damp and cold even in summer. Behind the station, I go up the hill, past the pub and the red brick houses, the Quick Call corner store and the school playing fields. Hardly anyone is around. The kids are all inside in geography or maths or technical drawing or music.

I turn down one of the wide, leafy roads that come off this one and stop outside the driveway of number twenty-three. All the properties here are large and detached with wide gateways and big cars. This one isn't so different but, if you look closely, you can tell it's not just another house. There's tarmac where the other places have gravel and several cars are parked, too many for one family. I go into the porch and ring the brass bell, hear the thump of sensible shoes getting closer. An ample black woman in a blue tunic opens the door with a big smile.

“Hello, my darlin’. You visitin’? Come on in.” Her West Indian accent surprises me after so long in South Africa.

She holds the door back for me to go through and the sweet smell of air freshener makes my stomach twist. The carpet is thick and pink and there’s a reception desk in what used to be some well-to-do family’s hallway.

“You wan’ some tea or coffee my darlin’?”

“Tea would be great, thanks.”

I sign the book, giving my name, the time of arrival and the name of the person I’m here to see. As I’m writing, the manager appears carrying files.

“Vicky! It’s good to see you again. How was your flight?”

She thinks I came here straight from the airport.

“Oh, fine. You know, you eat, you drink, you sleep badly, and you’re here. I’ve been in London for a few days with a friend, actually.”

“Oh, that’s nice. He’s not bad today. I think you’ll find him on the landing.”

“He’s liked that spot since he moved in.”

“He needs to check on what everyone’s up to. He is in charge after all.”

We laugh together, grown-ups talking about a child. The West Indian nurse re-appears with a tray, which has a teapot and two cups and a plate of ginger biscuits.

“I was ‘bout to take it up to him anyway.”

“I’ll take it up. We can go into his room.”

“Thank you my darlin’. I’ll come up in a bit. See if you all right.” She pronounces it “ar-right.” I don’t know. Will I be ar-right?

I take the tray and go down the passage to where the stairs go up, a chair lift bolted to the wall. I walk steadily, balancing the tray. His chair, I know, is round the corner so it’s not until I get to the very top that I will be able to see him and he me. On the last step, I look round the wall. He’s there, his walking frame to one side of the winged chair, his hands folded in his lap. There are

several doors off the landing and all of them are open. From one of the other rooms, a TV is blaring out the theme to *Hawaii 5-O*. He is looking straight ahead, smiling and nodding, humming along with the music.

“Der der de-de, derrr, derrrr, der-der de-de derrr,” his voice is surprisingly firm. As I come into view he looks directly at me, and smiles.

“I like this one, don’t you?”

I smile back.

“I do. It’s the one with the surfer.” I put the tray down on the small table by his chair and take his hands, leaning down and kissing him on his warm, dry cheek.

“Hello Len. It’s Vicky” and I look directly into his watery, hazel eyes. At the sound of my voice and my name together, he comes into focus. I can see it, like those celebrities getting the unexpected question.

“Hello? Vicky?” and he lights up in an open-mouthed smile.

“How are you?” I squeeze his hands, squatting in front of him. He searches my face, trying to stay with me. But he’s going.

“She’s a lovely girl, isn’t she?”

“Yes. A lovely girl. Do you mean Vicky?”

“I asked them whether they wanted to borrow the car, but he said he was all right, you know?” And now he’s gone.

“Look I’ve brought you some tea. And some ginger biscuits. They’re our favourite, aren’t they? Shall we go into your room?”

‘All right, let’s go.’

‘In and out the dusty windows’. It’s a game we used to play. You stand in a circle, make arches with your arms and someone skips in and out singing ‘In and out the dusty windows, in and out the dusty windows, in and out the dusty windows, who will be the leader?’ He always makes me think of that.

I move his walker round in front of him and put my hand under his elbow to help him stand. He’s up with only the lightest of pressure; his body lingering

defiantly while his mind is taking its leave. All the time we're moving in our slow dance, he's talking to me, asking me unanswerable questions.

"I haven't managed to tell her yet, do you think that's a problem?"

"No, I shouldn't think so."

"Well she said it'd be all right till Thursday or was it Friday?"

"Who said?"

"Oh, you know. The one who wanted the, the...the...oh, I don't know, I can't remember." Even his own gossamer thread has blown away.

We go through one of the open doors into his wide, bright room, a bay window at the end of it. Along one wall there's a high single bed with a nylon quilted bedspread, peach-coloured with frills round the edge. What would Sylvia have said? In the corner is the en suite bathroom with its two pull strings, one for the light and one for emergencies. How does he avoid getting them mixed up, I wonder. The room is warm and clean and has little about it that's personal. One or two bits of furniture from the old house – the green velour reclining chair with its motor, the coffee table.

He gets to the chair and lowers himself into it.

"You want some tea, Dad?" I call him that sometimes.

"Yep, yep. That's lovely. Just a bit of milk and one sugar."

"I know how you have your tea," I laugh. "It's me, Vicky. I came to live with you and Sylvia when Katherine died. You remember?"

"Of course I remember. How's South Africa?" He startles me.

"It's... great. I'm enjoying the job. And Cape Town. It's beautiful. A lovely place to live. You can see the sea from outside my flat."

"Oh yes?"

He looks out of the window, the net curtains just parted enough for him to see out. He drops his voice to an urgent whisper.

"Come here... quickly."

I get up and go across, looking with him, down the damp back garden to the tall evergreens at the end. I can't see anything out of the ordinary.

"I thought I saw someone in that tree but I can't see him now."

The dusty windows.

I press my lips together to stop the tears that are threatening. To turn away from him, I walk over to the shelves along the wall at the foot of the bed that are packed with framed photographs. My graduation picture is there. I look fresh-faced even though I hadn't slept for two days. Sylvia and Len, after making their way carefully up the M1, had insisted on the official photographer while I scoffed at the conventionalism of it all.

And there is the two of them before a work do. He is smiling broadly over a maroon bow tie. She has tight lips, looking down, a shirt-waister dress and beads, her hair that used to be dark, salt and pepper. She'd never succumbed to dyeing.

A picture of Sylvia on her own, one of those portrait shots against a cardboard sky that was so popular in the fifties. She's slightly side on, gazing into a fake distance. A younger version of Sylvia with a smooth face and high dark hair – make-up even – and an expression that said good things were to come. It was an optimism she'd lost by the time I met her.

There's one of Sylvia and Katherine, their heads close together, obviously sisters. Katherine is holding a baby and they're both laughing into the baby's face. The baby is me.

I pick up the one of young Sylvia and take it over to him.

"You know who that is?"

He doesn't say anything, just holds the picture between his hands, looking down at her face. I dip my head a little to try and see his expression. He has his lips thrust out, his eyes wandering over the image, assessing it, as if he's choosing a piece of china for his collection. I ask him again.

"Who's that? Do you know?"

He looks up at me, frowning.

"I know her, don't I? I did know her. This is a good one of her."

“It’s your wife, Sylvia.”

“Oh, yes, of course” like he’s remembering where he’d met someone he’s being introduced to at a party.

“I reckon that’s how she looked when you two got together.”

He carries on looking at the picture.

“She was lovely. We didn’t know each other long, though.”

“Well, I dunno, over forty years is quite a long time.”

I’m sitting on the arm of his chair now, looking over his shoulder. He turns his head and looks up at me.

“She’s a lovely girl, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she’s a lovely girl.”

He hands the frame to me and goes back to looking out of the window. I return the picture to its place and go back to the arm of the chair. I can’t touch him. We’ve never done that. Sylvia had taken on the mother role pretty easily but Len and I had never been quite sure who we were for each other. Right now, though, I want to be closer to him, to will some of my strong, fresh brain into his misty head, thank him for having me to stay for so long. We both look out onto the lawn with its brown winter patches. The manager’s husband is walking across it with a wheelbarrow full of leaves, heading for the compost heap.

“That’ll be good for the garden.” He’s right, it will.

For a while we play at talking. His voice is strong and firm, each word a real one, sometimes a sentence. I wonder if talking like this is nice for him or whether it’s all one long struggle. Then I’m aware that his breathing has deepened and I look to find his head tipped back against the chair. I slide off the arm and kneel down beside him, taking his hands.

“Len....” and I shake him, gently, so that he opens his eyes.

“I’m going to go. But I’ll come and see you again before I go back to Cape Town.” It’s always now that I wonder if it would be better just to stay away. Out of sight, out of mind. There’s a soft tap on the door and the Jamaican nurse comes in.

“Hello Len, darlin’, you got a visitor today?”

I get up.

“I’m going to go but I’ll come back before I fly off.”

“Ar-right darlin’. I’m goin’ bring him some lunch. We’ll see you soon, won’ we, Len?”

I kiss his cheek.

“Bye, Len.” He looks up at me, his face clearing then clouding again.

I’m half way across the room before I hear him sing out.

“Bye-bye, Vicky.”

Chapter 18

It's well past midnight and he's only just got back from a long job far away. Sitting at the computer in the cramped office, he's supposed to be checking his job sheet for the next day but he's on the internet. His boss doesn't approve of Facebook but he hasn't actually blocked the site. Not much has happened since he was last here. He searches for her page. The computer is slow but it eventually arrives.

Her profile picture comes up. When he sees it, he sits straighter in his chair, runs his tongue over his lips, swallows.

There it is, the gold button.

Do you know Vicky? If you know Vicky, send her a friend request or message her.

He's been waiting for this but now he's unsure. For a minute, he does nothing. Two minutes.

He starts to type.

When he's finished, he gets up, puts on his leather jacket and picks up his helmet. Tomorrow he's got a long way to go.

Chapter 19

The door closes behind me with the solid sound of old wood. I am relieved to be out in the cold, away from the hot, sweet air of the home. Blessed relief. Blessed release. 'It would be a blessed release' isn't that what people say?

By now the sun is properly out and, though the cold is raw, the day feels like a better bet. I walk back down the road towards the station. It's only noon and I can't get back to London before six. There'll be no one home and, stupidly, I don't have a key to Tim's house. I find my return ticket in my pocket and, when I arrive at the platform, study the overhead TV screen for a stopping train. Half an hour to wait. I sit down and light a cigarette, carefully rationing my cheap South African supply.

The train arrives and we chug slowly through the southern countryside, creaking in and out of small stations with people stepping on and off, two or three at a time. Three stops later and it is my turn to get out. I'm the only one walking down the stone steps and through the deserted turnstile. Outside the station, I'm a little way off one end of the narrow high street. I have a fair distance to go and I walk as fast as I can, the warmth spreading through my limbs. I take off my scarf and open my coat as I heat up.

I weave round elderly shoppers as I pass the family butcher, the off-licence, the newsagent, the small Sainsbury's and then along the front of the council offices, The Black Swan, two antique shops. Eventually I'm turning left and up, past the cricket green with its fringe of brick cottages, past the rows of oak trees and the village school to the stone church on the hill.

Through the lych gate and into the churchyard, the old iron pump is just inside by the hedge. My job was always to fill the metal watering can. Not today. I pick my way over the damp, matted grass, round the anonymous humps and between the gravestones. Till I find them, lying quietly together.

My grandparents, side by side.

Jessie May Thomas nee Chapman born 27th January 1908, died 9th February 1987 aged 79 years

Horace Charles Thomas born 1st April 1902, died 9th October 1984 aged 82 years

Thy remembrance shall endure into all generations.

Next to them.

Sylvia Joan Crawford nee Thomas, born 13th May 1935, died 6th
November 2008 aged 73 years
Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.

And finally, on her own.

Katherine Louise Slater, nee Thomas, born 4th September 1940 died
8th May 1979 aged 38 years
Where there is much light, the shadows are deepest.

I stand at their feet and read the words again. Words I've read all my life, every week with my arms full of flowers brought from Sylvia's garden. The only words Katherine ever left me. Can she see me? Am I closer to her standing by this wet mound than when I'm on the other side of the world? Kids at school would say 'aren't you sad your mother died?' and I'd say 'I never knew her'. It was Hugh who had lost her, not me. He was the deserted child. 'You can't miss what you've never had'. That's what Sylvia said and she was right about most things.

But I'd ask her over and over again 'What was she like?'

And Sylvia would tell me: about playing in the bluebell woods, smoking their first cigarettes together behind this church, how she'd hated maths, loved French, how kind she was with children, how she'd met Robert at a dance – a charming, brittle young man with a moustache, dazzling because he went to a university. She'd told me how she and her sister had visited pubs, arm-in-arm with their new husbands, playing darts, how Hugh's arrival had put a stop to all that. But she'd never told me what made Katherine angry, if she could be difficult, what her voice was like, how she smelt, whether she liked sex. Maybe that's why I'd kept asking. One day Sylvia had been impatient.

"Just look to yourself, Vicky. Then you'll know."

Perhaps she was sad because there would never be any new stories. But I didn't understand what she meant. I'm still not sure I understand.

We're on a hillside. If the sleepers were to sit up in their cold beds they would have a wonderful view of the neat countryside. It's brown and muted now, but wake up in spring and you'll have daffodils in your laps and the unimaginable green of the shooting hedges to light up your eyes.

Wake up, wake up!

All I can hear are the crows flying to and from the church tower.

The perspiration is drying on my skin, the chill returning as the winter sun goes down. I look at my watch. Three-thirty. I put my scarf back round my neck and turn away from the inscriptions, making my way across the plots to one of the gravel paths. The churchyard is too old for straight lines. The ground has shifted in places so the headstones lean this way and that. Family budgets have varied – from simple wooden crosses with peeling paint to grand stone caskets with lead inlays. As a child, I would frighten myself by peering through the gaps under the caskets' top slabs, convinced the bodies were just inside. Signs say 'please keep off the grass as a mark of respect' for those in unmarked graves. I remember thinking that being stepped on was at least some company.

The church is behind me, no longer in regular use, locked up. I go up to one of the windows and put my face close to it, trying to see in. But I can only see my own reflection, batted back by the dust on the other side. It's time to go. Time to leave them behind.

I walk back down the hill towards the village and the station. As I go past the green I try to imagine Sylvia and Katherine growing up here, a war going on somewhere else. I think of them whispering in the dark, sharing their speculations about what being a woman might mean, full of excitement for the future. Back up the quieter high street and on to the station platform. The next train to Waterloo is in twenty minutes.

After the ease of Cape Town, I forget how much energy London takes. From Waterloo up the Jubilee and round the District line to Turnham Green and a walk to the light of Tim's doorway. He lets me in and we sit in the kitchen, drinking wine and smoking, gossiping about university people while his girlfriend, Lucy, cooks pasta.

"Do you think you'll ever live in England again, Vicky?"

"I don't know. I'm only just getting the hang of being over there. I like coming back here but I don't miss anything when I'm away. I think I'm there for now."

“What about the job?”

“Oh, it’s OK. South Africans think that anything from the UK or the States is automatically better than anything they’ve got. It works pretty well for me.”

Later on, in my white room at the top of the house, I think back to the weeks leading up to my getting on the plane to Cape Town, packing, going to farewells. People thought I was a hero, bravely striking out on my own, setting off for a country where I knew no one, doing something most people only talk about. I’d kidded myself I believed that, too. But I knew it wasn’t true. Bravery would have been staying where I was.

I don’t want to turn out the light and I reach for my laptop. Hugh’s online.

“How is the old country?” He’s grinning from the screen wearing shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt that proves even the Australian sun can’t change his skin colour.

“Fucking freezing to use a meteorological term.”

“Yes, that is usually about size of it in November. You need to pick your trip times better.”

“I know. I came in winter once before and vowed never again. Anyway, it’s fine. At least they have central heating unlike the bloody South Africans who get taken by surprise every year when it actually gets cold.”

“Eye-wateringly hot here today, though.”

“Bully for you. A little tip. There’s a certain age beyond which ‘sleeveless’ isn’t a great idea. You’ve reached that age.”

“ ‘Get fucked’ he explained. What are you doing there anyway?”

“I’m staying with my friend Tim and his girlfriend. You know, the barrister? You met him once. We were at York together.”

“That’s not what I asked. Did something happen? One minute you were in Cape Town and the next you’d disappeared off the face of the earth.”

“Well, I’m in Chiswick, nearly the same thing. It was a combination of stuff. The station needed someone to come and do a reccy for their Olympics

coverage, preferably someone who knows the place and who can press flesh with the BBC and I ... I just felt like a change of scene. So I volunteered.”

“Are we still on for Christmas, though? I keep looking at ticket prices and they’re rising at the same rate as my cholesterol count. Is it safe to book? If I leave it much longer I might as well buy a house there, it’ll cost about the same.”

“Oh I’ll definitely be back by then. Part of the deal about me coming over here now was that I would work all Christmas and New Year.”

“So what am I going to do?”

“Oh, I’ll have time to eat and drink and be merry with you. I’ll just need to go in most days. It’s not very taxing. The whole country closes down and we play music most of the time. God knows what’ll happen if Mandela snuffs it on Christmas day. We’ll have the stand-in traffic guy doing the obit.”

“I’ll have another look on Expedia and I’ll talk to you again before I finally take the plunge.”

Of course, being here isn’t only about work.

“I went to see Len yesterday.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Much the same. Not really with us. But who knows? Maybe it’s all still going on inside and he just can’t communicate it.”

“God don’t. I’ve always dreaded that more than anything. Like being on an operating table and able to feel everything but not being able to tell anyone.”

“There was a famous bit on Radio 4 when a woman described exactly that. Real ‘can’t get out of your car in the driveway’ stuff. She made it sound every bit as appalling as you’d imagine.”

“That’s a cheering image.”

We arrange to speak again once Hugh’s got some firm dates. It’s nearly one in the morning and I’m lying on the bed, everyone else was asleep hours ago. I go to Facebook and update my status complaining about the cold and

bemoaning how warm it is in Cape Town right now. I wander through the news feed, following links to South African stories and media bits and pieces and watching YouTube bollocks. I'm not sure when it arrived, but I notice a little red '1' has appeared on the friend icon in the corner of the screen. I click on it.

Mark Langham has sent you a friend request. There is no message attached to it

Well there's a thing. Where the fuck did he suddenly pop up from? I try and remember the last time I saw him. Not as adults, surely. He wasn't even at Robert's funeral. Hardly surprising. Robert had done all he could to play the wicked stepfather and Marjorie, Mark's mother, had done little to protect him. That's always been Hugh's version, anyway. Not that he'd been around much. He'd been in his last year at school when Robert and Marjorie had got married and then out of the house as fast as his legs could carry him.

I don't remember the wedding very clearly. Just a registry office and snacks in a pub in Tarenton. I'd been about six. I do remember Len drinking too much and Sylvia being bad tempered, holding my hand too hard during the service. Then there was another entry for Sylvia's Book of Proverbs.

"I told your father straight – don't think that now you're married you can have her back. It's not like I've borrowed your lawnmower and you've moved to a house with a garden."

Mark had been there, too.

I click on his profile and find it's unprotected. Mark Langham, Tarenton, Avon. The information is sparse. His birthday: 3rd October, 1974, nearly four years older than me; his school, John Milton Secondary; friends 11; likes Bristol Rovers and something called the Severnshed. His profile picture is still Facebook's blue and white silhouette. I look under photos. There is one – a group at a pub table, three men with pints of dark beer and a woman with white wine. I'm unsure which is Mark so I hover the mouse over the picture to bring up the tags. There he is, at the far end of the table. He's smiling but it's guarded. He's wearing a collared shirt, thinning dark hair, his face pale and sharp.

There are a few messages on his wall but they're not recent: Stuart says 'Hey, Mark. You coming Saturday? Give me a call'; 'Happy birthday Mark, hope you have a good day' from someone called Tina. I click on Tina's name. Is she a girlfriend, maybe? No, Tina is married to someone called Brian and has two children.

I travel through a few of his unprotected friends – photos of groups in suburban gardens, windswept knots of people on beaches, dinner and lunch tables, babies, toddlers. I can't see him in any of the pictures.

I click 'confirm', get under the duvet and turn off the light.

Chapter 20

It is 5am. It won't be light for another two hours at least. He's here because he's picking up his tool bag. Normally, he would have taken it home with him but he wanted to log on.

She has replied and she has accepted. He goes to her page, to her pictures. Now he can see her. And he can see how much she looks like the woman with the baby. How much she looks like her mother.

Then he's a boy, back in his bedroom. He is sitting on the floor by his bed. As usual, the only light is from the streetlamp outside. He has the box on the floor in front of him, his hand resting lightly on the buttons. He moves it around and he can feel the different textures underneath his palm and the pads of his fingertips.

He is thinking about them and about the big cupboard in the spare room. They are separating themselves from him. He has been sailing with his arms wrapped round them for so long, his face up close to them. And now he drops them over the side of the boat and gradually they are drifting away, changing shape and colour as they roll and bob in the water.

Maybe, one day, he would be able to tell her about that time. Maybe it would help her. And she would say 'thank you, thank you, nobody ever told me about that' and she would throw her arms round him because he had given her something only he could give.

He puts his fingers on the keyboard and begins to type.

Chapter 21

I can't remember the last time I was on a bus but the smell is familiar, a bitter mixture of sweat, old oil and regulation disinfectant. I wedge myself into the corner of a double seat as we lurch and sway round mini-roundabouts and into roads that are surely too narrow for us, missing the wing mirrors of parked cars by inches. The bus speeds and slows, idling loudly while teenagers and pensioners with bags get on and off. I would really like to smoke but the days of a fag on public transport are long gone.

Dear Vicky

Thank you for accepting my request. I hope you are well. I wonder when we last saw each other. I know you live in South Africa now. I have always wondered what its like. Im still in Tarenton. My mother moved away but I like the place. Too quiet for some people. Im glad we got in touch.

Yours

Mark

I lean my head on the window, giving myself over to the rhythm of the stop and go, the gears going up and down. I try to recall what Mark looked like. He must have been about nine or ten at the wedding. I think they made him wear a bowtie. Robert had taken me over to Marjorie, and Mark had been standing next to her, a small solemn boy.

"Say hello to Vicky, Mark."

"Hello." I remember he didn't smile. He'd stood on tiptoe and pulled on Marjorie's arm until she was forced to lean down towards him as he tried to speak into her ear.

"We don't whisper in public, Mark. Vicky's your ...stepsister. Robert is Hugh and Vicky's father. She went to live with her Aunt Sylvia when Katherine died – a long way away from us."

He'd just nodded.

Dear Mark

Good to hear from you. Yes, I'm living in South Africa – in Cape Town. I work in radio – for a station called Cape News Radio. It's a fascinating place. I'm also glad we've got in touch. What are you up to now?

Vicky

Marjorie and Mark had never come with Robert on his visits to Sylvia and Len's. It hadn't seemed strange to me. In the way that children have, I'd always just accepted that somewhere Robert had another life. And Sylvia had made sure it stayed that way.

"I thought it would be confusing for you. It was bad enough as it was, having your father pop up every six weeks and then disappear again. It was simpler to leave things the way they were."

I don't remember being confused. I didn't call him 'dad'. When I was tiny I called him 'Bobba' and after that I didn't call him anything. I liked his visits most of the time. He bought me a piano and called me his princess. I would sit on his lap and he would tell me how clever I was. But there were the other times, after he'd been with the bottle all day, and Sylvia and Len were taking their nap. He'd sit down and call me to him.

"Victoria, come and talk to me".

He'd light a cigarette with his huge silver lighter, squinting at me through the smoke, looking me up and down.

"What have you got to say for yourself?"

I remember wanting to please him, to say the right thing but not knowing what that was. I would stand stock still, my stomach knotting, wondering what was coming next. Usually, he would let his eyes wander over my face, searching for something. Then he would lean back.

"Go away now." And I would run from the room, not going near him again until I knew Sylvia and Len were up and about.

Just once he touched me, taking my face in both his hands, leaning forward with his eyes narrowed.

"Your mother shouldn't have left you." And he'd let go suddenly, pushing me back with a slight shove, nearly making me cry out. I'd run to Sylvia's bed, lifting up the eiderdown and crawling in beside her. She'd woken up half an hour later and found me there.

“Oh, Vicky. Were you feeling sleepy?”

“I was a bit cold.”

I'd kept my face away from her, not sure if it looked like I'd been crying. She'd hugged me, not asking any questions. That Sunday afternoon, Robert had been more unsteady than usual walking to his car, taking five minutes to get his key into the ignition. We had peered at him through the net curtains at the sitting room window, knowing he'd be angry if we went outside.

Hi Vicky

Sounds exciting id love to see South Africa some day but I don't travel abroad. I went to tech after school. Your FB page says ur in London. im working up there at the end of the week....

Eventually we reach the stop. I get out and the door swishes shut behind me, the bus toiling off with a stench of diesel. I'm unsure which way to go and look again at the address I've written down. And then I see it, on the corner as he'd said.

I turn the cold metal ring of the door and hear the sound of the latch echoing inside. Outside the day is crisp and bright and, for a moment, I can't see anything in the dark entrance hall. I can just smell the damp air and hear the traffic muffled by the thick walls. As I get used to the gloom, I can see there are benches. Above them are notice boards, papers curling and faded. I shiver inside my coat. In front of me is a second door with a bigger metal ring. I turn it and hear that echo, too. The heavy wood swings back and I go into the church itself.

I turn round from pushing the door closed and the high, broad volume of the church stretches away from me. I stand and gaze up and around me, my mouth open, dazzled. Above the altar is a huge stained glass window split into six arched panels, several smaller windows of the same shape are set in to the walls. The winter sun streams through them so the reds, yellows, blues, greens and golds of the pictures are glowing jewels. Apostles gaze up at their God and Jesus hangs down from his cross, his hands running with blood. The Virgin holds her child, looking out over the rows of pews with calm eyes. The sun projects hazy versions of the images onto the hemp matting and tiles of the floor so that the colours multiply. Tiny motes of dust are falling in the shafts of light.

“Hello.”

The voice is quiet but echoes against the vaulted ceiling. I whip my head round but I can't see anyone and I can't work out exactly where it's coming from.

"Hello?"

"Vicky I'm up here."

Now I can follow the voice and see the bottom of a wooden ladder, the top disappearing into a ball of bright light shining through the clear glass at the centre of one of the windows. The voice is coming from the middle of it so I reply in that direction.

"I hope I'm not having some kind of vision."

I hear the wood creak as he climbs down the ladder. I can finally see him, now, against the whitewashed wall. But he doesn't say anything. Have I offended him? Maybe he's religious – that's why he does this. But then I hear him swallow and suck in a breath and I remember where I've heard that kind of thing before.

"I don't think so."

Mark has a stammer.

He's walking towards me, quite short and slight, in jeans and a maroon collared shirt. Around his narrow waist is a tool belt with various metal bits and pieces I don't recognize. He's tucking a rag into one of the loops as he comes down the aisle. Again I hear him suck in a breath.

"Thank you for coming. I don't get visitors very often." He has a soft West Country burr.

"It's a pleasure. What an interesting thing to do."

"It keeps me out of mischief."

I look up and round the windows.

"Jesus ... I mean, sorry ... what's happening with that guy?"

Up to our left is a window depicting a male figure, obviously in agony, chains around his hands and feet, with swords piercing various parts of his body. Mark laughs.

“They used to use the windows to make people behave themselves. The swords are the seven deadly sins attacking the body. The chains are binding him to Satan.”

“Oh. Well, quite right too, don’t want the masses getting uppity.”

He doesn’t smile but looks at me intensely, as if he’s waiting for me to say something important.

“Do you travel around much ... doing this?”

“All the time. Sometimes the windows need to go back to our workshop. But if the repair or the cleaning can be done on site, then I do it.”

He nods and keeps nodding, reinforcing the point, all the time looking at me.

“I have a slight stutter. Usually only when I meet people for the first time.”

I give him what I hope is a warm smile.

“Let’s sit down. Take a pew.” And he, too, smiles properly. His teeth are small and yellow. We sit across the aisle from each other.

“Are you supposed to be sitting down on the job?”

“There isn’t anyone who’s going to notice a.... part from you know who.”

For a second I don’t know what he means but then he jerks his head upwards.

“Oh the main boss. Of course. Are you ... do you do this because ...”

“You mean, am I a God botherer, and that’s why I do his windows?”

“Well, kind of, yes.”

“Not even a bit. I like pictures and art and wanted to do something with my hands. I wasn’t much for schoolwork. Not like you.”

How does he know anything about me and school work?

“Does it take long? To train I mean?”

“Officially two years but you never stop learning. I enjoy that about it.”

“Doesn’t it get a bit lonely with just Jesus and Mary and the disciples for company?”

“That’s one of the good things. It gives me time to think. I need time to think.”

I nod, not sure what to ask next but he takes his cue.

“What is it like? Living in South Africa do you miss England?”

I’m about to give my stock answer, my celebrity autopilot one. But the light coming through these ancient windows makes me hesitate.

“It’s funny. I never felt I was from anywhere until I left England. Now I get it. I’m from here. For everyone I meet in Cape Town, I was born the day I got there. I sometimes miss people who knew me before then.”

He says nothing. Just nods some more. There’s stillness about him that I quite like. He doesn’t seem bothered by the silences between us.

“I don’t know many people from when I was a kid, either.” He laughs. “And I still live where I grew up.”

I grin at him. “Oh dear, that’s a bit of a shame, isn’t it?”

“When was the last time you came toTarenton?”

“God. I don’t know. Sylvia and I used to visit Robert and Hugh in the school holidays sometimes. But I was only about five or six. Since then I’ve been maybe ... twice. For the wedding and a school thing for Hugh. Why?”

“Oh. Yes. It was his last speech day do you remember I was there too?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Was he?

“I’ve always been a bit embarrassed about it.”

“Embarrassed?”

“Yes. I asked if you were sad about your mumdying. It was one of the main things I knew about you. Stupid kid thing to say, really.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell. What did I say?”

“You said ‘I never knew her’. I remember thinking, what must that be like? Having a mother you never knew.”

“I’m used to it.”

“Why don’t you come down when I’m not working and see the place again. We can have a drink or something?”

“Oh ... no, I can’t. I’m working these next few days and I’ve got a couple of people to see. There won’t be time this trip. I’m sorry.”

He nods and looks up at the window behind me, and around at the walls.

“I’ll be here for the next....two days. But I’ll be there at the weekend. Let me know if you change your mind. We can go for a walk round. I think it will.... help you.”

“Help me?”

He looks at me, his eyes dark, a shaft of light hitting his shoulder.

“Well it’s where you’re from isn’t it?”

In bed, after too many nightcap whiskeys, I stare at the ceiling and think about the church, about the light coming through the windows and about the colours. It wasn’t God that had lifted my spirits. It was the people, the long-dead craftsmen who had built that place.

I think about Mark helping to restore their beauty. It makes me like him, somehow, although I don’t know anything about him. I have no idea how it must have been for him, living with my father or how that awkward, bolted together family had worked. Robert, sharp, bitter and unpredictable with drink. Marjorie feeling her way into Katherine’s space, probably realising that no one, not even her new husband, would ever think she could come close to filling it. Hugh desperate to escape, brooding through school holidays and counting the months until he could walk out of the door and never come back to that place, where every room contained his mother.

And Mark. Rattling and rolling around that house, a pinball bouncing off their half-turned backs. What chance did he have? How would he know that the ground would stay firm beneath his feet?

Chapter 22

The next day I have a ten thirty meeting with two producers at SportLive FM, a commercial station that belongs to the same group as Cape News Radio. On the tube, rocking slowly into the centre of London, I join the downcast eyes of the late commuters. The train isn't too crowded at this time of day, most of us have a seat, young men with headphones, women sunk into coats dusty from the city. This used to be my every day. I remember looking at the closed faces and fretting that I might be just another pale, ordinary worker.

The studios are in a converted warehouse about half a mile from Vauxhall tube. I'd lived round here when I'd first come to London. As I emerge onto the pavement, I get that sudden sickening surge of the forgotten familiar, when everything is completely strange and as if you only saw it yesterday all at the same time: the rail bridge, the off licence, the miserable park on the corner. I used to walk through it every day.

After twisting my A-Z round a few times, I find the tiny side street and the warehouse complex. It's all contemporary urban with acres of glass and frosted writing, a massive logo over the entrance. When the buzzer goes, I pull the frameless door open and go in to the reception. It has life-size pictures of their tanned young presenters, down-lighters on wire tracks and an impossibly thin receptionist with black hair and electric lips.

"I'm here to see Steve and Andy."

"And you are?"

"Vicky Slater, Cape News. I mean, Cape News Radio. It's a station, not a magazine for super heroes."

Her expression doesn't change.

The SportLive guys are friendly but not interested in what I've got to say. They have to let us use their studios because of the group thing. We discuss the programming CNR wants to do from here, what times our presenters can come in, how the ISDN links will work. Nothing we couldn't have done on the phone, but it's good to meet face-to-face. Towards the end of the session, one of them, skinny and sarcastic, looks at me over the red table.

"You're English aren't you?"

“Yes. But I live in Cape Town.”

“Nice. I came out for the World Cup. Went to Cape Town and Durban. Pretty cool place but doesn’t the crime get you down?”

“Sometimes. You just have to be careful. There’s crime everywhere. At least we have crime and nice beaches.”

“What did you do over here?”

“I was working for Radio Four just before I left, *You and Yours*.”

He turns down the corners of his mouth and nods slowly.

“Wow. Interesting move.”

I can see what he’s thinking. I’d have thought the same thing once.

“Yes... it has been. Very interesting.”

He carries on with the slow nodding.

“London’s kind of where it’s at though, wouldn’t you say? In the media kind of thing.”

“Well, it’s where some things are at. Sometimes here I used to get the feeling everything’s been done before. Just the same ideas going round in circles.”

He purses his lips.

“Well, I don’t know. There’s the whole digital thing – that’s a whole new world – to quote Aladdin.”

“South Africa’s pretty advanced when it comes to technology.”

“Sure. I’m sure you’re doing good stuff.”

Patronising git. I can see his face closing over, thinking about the next thing.

“OK, well that’s about the size of it. I’ve got your contacts, I’ll be in touch. It was good to meet you.”

I go back through the reception where the thin girl is on the phone. She looks up as I pass and waves a vague 'bye' as I go out the door and onto the cold street.

I've got some time to kill so I decide to go past my ex-house. After a few minutes walk, I turn into Charterhouse Road, a long curving street of tall, narrow houses. I'd lived at number seventy-four, about half way down. When I get there, I stand on the opposite pavement, looking across at it with its steps up to the front door and huge sash windows. The curtains are open and I can see the lights hanging from the high ceilings and remember its dark metal fireplaces and cream walls.

To afford the rent, I'd shared with four other radio people, the dining room making do as an extra bedroom. We'd come and go and occasionally collide in the sitting room on the first floor with various boyfriends and girlfriends. There were dinner parties and late nights drinking whiskey, lolling on each other's beds. We'd ruined the carpets and never cleaned behind the cooker, refusing to think for a moment that we could ever turn into the kind of people who cared about either.

As I look at the next door house, I remember we had a running joke about the well-to-do family who lived there with their farmhouse kitchen in the basement, complete with Aga, hankering for the country but having no stomach for the commute, the lack of art-house cinema or the presence of actual cows and therefore actual cow shit, their massive 4x4 used only to bring the shopping back from Sainsbury's. We used to call them 'the family numb'. We knew better and what's more, we would do better, keep the faith and remain hard and sharp and unencumbered by the mundane. It occurs to me now that the reason we lived our lives at a hundred miles an hour was to fend off the fear of our own human desires – for connection, for safety, for love. We were the numb ones, not the neighbours.

The house seems severed from me, now. These days, the windows close to protect other people and I'm intruding.

I walk on down the street, away from the Vauxhall tube end, towards The Oval. The northern line is better for where I need to go, anyway. Further down, there are big council blocks on the opposite side of the road to the well-to-do houses, the two worlds observing each other.

Half way between the end of Charterhouse Road and the tube, I see a church. I must have walked past it scores of times but I've never noticed it before. It's end-on to the street, so all that's really visible is the narrow front and the archway of the main door. As I get level with it, the door opens, and a couple

comes out, he holding the door open for her to go through. For some reason, I hesitate slightly. Seeing me slow down, the man continues to hold the door, inclining his head with a smile. It would be awkward just to walk on past him, so I go inside.

If I've come in for a repeat of the light show I'd had in Mark's church, it's not to be. The place is smaller, the roof is not as high and, although there are a few stained glass windows, the sky outside is grey and, in here, it's just gloomy.

At the front, a few steps down from the altar, a man is standing at a lectern, paging through a book. He's wearing a suit but with a black shirt and a white dog collar. The vicar is in. I'm about to turn round and walk out when he sees me.

"Is there something I can help you with or would you like to just sit?"

"I'm just ...," ridiculously, the phrase 'I'm just looking' pops into my head, "... going to sit. Thanks."

"Of course."

I have no idea what I'm doing here, but I slide into the end of the nearest pew, putting my bag on the seat beside me. The vicar carries on with his book, occasionally turning a page. I look around at the windows. One shows a blue hooded Mary holding the limp body of Jesus, all sinews and bleeding palms. She is substantial and smooth while he looks like he would break if she squeezed him too hard. There's another woman – I'm guessing, Mary Magdalene – kneeling at Christ's feet.

Suddenly, a memory comes back to me, of being with Sylvia and Len in a church somewhere. I was young, maybe six or seven, and it was at the beginning of a service – perhaps a wedding or one of the handful of occasions when we went to church just because it seemed the right thing to do. Sylvia certainly didn't hold with a God who could steal her sister without giving it a second thought and Len, from what I can recall, never expressed an opinion.

I remember sitting down and getting a shock as they both, without warning, slipped from their seats and on to their knees, eyes closed, leaning their foreheads on clasped hands, elbows on the hymnbook ledge. I had no idea what they were doing, I remember pulling at Sylvia's shoulder, frightened she was crying. She had shrugged me away but a moment later she'd raised her head and seen my puzzled face. She put her arm round me.

"You should always pray when you first come in to a church."

“What were you praying about?”

“Oh I don’t know, just to keep everyone healthy.”

I’d already asked her about what she believed because school made such a big deal about Jesus.

“But you don’t think there is a God.”

“It’s just a mark of respect.”

I wonder how you could respect something that you didn’t think was there?
Why would you pretend?

“Just tuning in?”

The vicar has come down the aisle and is standing by the end of the pew. I feel like a fraud. I can see why other people believe in God, but I’ve never managed it.

“Um. Yes. It’s just good to be ... somewhere quiet.”

At that moment a siren screams past on the road outside and we both laugh.

“Are you in a hurry?” His voice is warm and round. I can imagine him being comforting at bedsides and joyful at weddings.

“No, not really.”

“I was wondering if you could do me a huge favour, I have a tricky reading to do later...at a funeral. It’s an elderly lady who wanted a particular poem but there’s no one to read it except me. I’m all right with the biblical stuff but I’m not sure about this. Would you mind listening ... while I read it?”

“Sure. I work in radio. I can give you some presentation tips.”

I say it with a laugh but his face is full of serious wonder.

“Oh, dear Lord. Isn’t God an amazing presence in our lives?”

I nod faintly.

“I’ll give it a go.”

As he goes back up the aisle, I wonder whose funeral it is. I like the sound of her, someone who wanted poetry instead of the bible, the sort of person who’d have good friends for wine drinking and book clubs and tours of the Mediterranean. But then there’s no one to read the poem.

The vicar is behind the lectern so I straighten up and look attentive. He clears his throat and speaks in what I imagine is his sermon voice, loud and slightly singsong.

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

I recognize it. Robert Frost. I remember it from ‘A’ level English classes. The vicar’s voice bounces off the walls and the secular words do, he’s right, sound a bit out of place. After the last line has echoed away, he pauses for a moment then walks back down the aisle.

“How was that?”

I’d heard a certain lack of conviction in his voice.

“It was fine. I think the main thing is not to let the rhymes take over. It’s the meaning that’s important.”

“Yes. Maybe that’s what I’m concerned about. Transience isn’t a very Christian idea. We’re more rooted in the eternal,” and he gives a rather rueful laugh. “So, in your professional opinion, you think that will do.”

“I think whoever it is would have been ... will be happy. Who was she, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Not at all. She was a retired lady who lived alone in the parish, eighty-six, a reasonable innings. She used to be a lecturer at UCL, I believe.”

“Is there no one who would read it for her?”

“There’s only one or two family members but they’re much older. They asked me if I would.”

“It’s nice of you. Especially if you’re worried about it.”

“I don’t think I am. God wants us to enjoy his gifts, however long we think they’ll last.”

I smile at him.

“Thank you. Bless you. I must go and get ready.” And he walks away down the aisle.

I look up again at the smooth Mary, the thin Jesus, at the beseeching prostitute and wonder what God’s gifts actually are, apart from condemning us to failure. Being in a church for too long always makes me angry. Why is it never possible for us to have kept our end of the bargain?

In school prayers I’d always hated the insistence that I couldn’t, even if I stayed good for a whole month, be worthy of the crumbs under the table. And then there’s the twisted trick of the eternal. Maybe Sylvia’s indoctrinations were successful and I simply can’t stand too much of a good thing. But surely the reason the lady lecturer had chosen Robert Frost was to remind those around her coffin that, without death, all we have is stagnation. With it, we have a chance of the new. To me, that sounds a lot more attractive than spending eternity being reminded of my shortcomings.

I let myself out through the heavy door. The raw air is fresh, even with its traffic fumes, and I head for the tube.

Chapter 23

Newbury, Hungerford, Marlborough, Calne, Chippenham, the names on the motorway signs are a catechism I learned before I was five. Sylvia didn't do motorways so our journeys to Tarenton wound their way through these crowded town centres. I was very young and needed entertaining so each one of them had its own landmark. Hungerford. Is there a narrowboat in the lock? Marlborough. Who's the first to see the white horse carved into the hillside? Calne. Can you smell the pork pies baking?

Much sooner than if I'd been travelling with Sylvia, I'm in the centre of Tarenton, in the wide main street, cars parked down the middle. It looks more familiar than I expected. The King's Head is easy to spot.

Mark is at a small table in the corner, a pint of lager already in front of him. As I approach, he stands up and smiles at me. I don't know whether to kiss his cheek or shake his hand but he solves the problem by moving off towards the bar.

"What would you like?"

"I'll have a dry white wine, thanks."

I sit down in the chair opposite his. The pub is crowded with Saturday lunchtime drinkers, standing round in clumps, paunchy men in T-shirts, women in high street casual. This had been Robert's local but I realise I've never been inside it before, never been here since I was old enough to go into pubs.

Mark is back with the drinks. He's smiling.

"You find it OK?"

"Yes. Easier than I thought. The trick is not to think too hard, like playing a piano piece you haven't played for a long time."

"I wouldn't know. Not much of a pianist."

There is a pause. He looks down at the table, places his hand flat on it, a gentle deliberate movement. His knuckles are big, standing out, his fingers long and slim, roughened by the work.

“When did Marjorie move away?”

“Oh, she sold the house just after Robert died. I moved out when I went to tech and she didn’t want to live in it on her own. She’s in Oxford now.”

“Do you see much of her?”

He has his glass halfway to his lips and he holds it there for a moment, looking at me steadily over the top.

“No not very much.”

I ask him about his life here. It consists mainly of travelling to churches around the country and coming back to Tarenton for evenings and weekends, a few friends, occasional trips to see Bristol Rovers if they’re playing at home. Then it’s his turn.

“Why did you go? To South Africa, I mean.”

“I’m not sure. I wanted to get away to look back and now I seem to be there for good. Or for a while anyway.”

“If I got away from this place, I don’t think I’d look back at all.” He gives his rare laugh.

“You don’t have to stay here. You work all over the country. Why don’t you move?”

He shrugs.

“It’s what I know. Where would I go, anyway?”

We eat fish and chips and have another drink. We don’t mention the past, the connection we have. We don’t talk about Robert, about Mark’s life with him, about the fact I was born in the local hospital. But all the time we’re talking, I’m thinking about it, trying to imagine him living with my father and his mother, trying to picture him and Robert together, having a conversation. But I can’t do it. And what is going through Mark’s head? Is he thinking about the same thing? This connection we have or don’t have?

“You want to go for a walk, then? Maybe go....past the house?”

Perhaps he is.

“Yeah. Sure. Let’s do that.”

I insist on paying the bill and we leave the pub, walking to the end of the main street, busy with Saturday shoppers. We turn left, right and left and on into the residential area. The roads here are quieter, lined with cars and bare trees. Some of the houses are detached, some are semis. They aren’t big but they’re well kept, gardens neat.

We walk for about ten minutes and there it is, red face brick with its long narrow garden. Unremarkable. Four square. I’m struck by how much smaller it looks – isn’t that the usual thing with places you knew only as a child? The windows, two up and two down, are dark and blank. ‘Soulless’, Sylvia had always said ‘no character and no privacy on that corner. Your mother never liked it. I don’t know why she let Robert talk her into it. He just thought he’d got a good deal.’ When Marjorie married Robert, she and Mark had moved in with him to this house, into the home he had shared with Katherine, where they’d been living when I was born. The house I left when Katherine went into hospital with the leukaemia that would kill her.

As we stand here, we could be incidental passers-by. No one in the cars going past would know we had both lived in it, that our parents had fought in it, had sex in it, that we had cried in it, eaten in it, slept in it. I can hardly remember the inside. I can just about picture the pale seventies orange of the kitchen walls, the rough stones round the fireplace. Nothing else.

“You want to go in?”

“What?”

He holds out his hand and opens his fingers to reveal a single Yale key.

“I know the people. I thought you might like to go in. Just to have a look.”

“Won’t they mind?”

“They gave me the key.”

“All right.”

We cross over the road and Mark walks ahead of me up the garden path. He opens the door with one smooth twist and goes straight in, then holds it open for me, standing back as I go past him. As soon as I'm in the narrow passage with the stairs rising up from it, the years drop away. The colours are brighter, there is more light, but the smell is the same. Mark is looking at me.

“It's weird isn't it? This is our family house. But we don't know each other.”

“I suppose it is.”

“I used to wonder why you never came here.”

“I did come here sometimes, with Sylvia. But that was before Robert and your mum got married.”

Through the open door of the sitting room I can see a sofa, coffee table, the fireplace. I go in.

“Thank God they've changed the fire. You remember the monstrosity that was there?”

“Of course I do. It actually didn't really heat anything. I remember sitting on the sofa in my duffel coat doing my homework.”

“I don't ever remember being in this room much at all when we visited. I remember the housekeeper – what was her name?”

“Mrs Bruton. Yeah.... she stayed on for a while after Marjorie and Robert got married but Mum and she didn't get on.”

“She didn't like Sylvia much either. When we came she'd look under the beds and into the oven to see if she was cleaning properly.”

“We can do the kitchen last. Let's look at upstairs. Do you want to go upstairs?”

“Yes, why not? I can't imagine I'll be back this way any time soon.”

I follow him along the passage, up the stairs – which turn half way – and on to the landing. The main bedroom is at the back. I stand in the doorway of it, not wanting to intrude too far into the room. After all, this is someone else's house. This was my parents' room, the room I was conceived in, probably –

an ordinary couple doing an ordinary thing. I try to imagine their bodies here, real, warm, blood and bones, eyes and hair. Moving round each other, easily naked together, relaxed with each other's smells and sounds and morning breath. It seems impossible that I started here.

Mark is behind me in the passage, standing by the open door of the room on the corner. It's a girl's room now, with pink walls and a princess bed, Hannah Montana on the duvet.

"I remember this being Hugh's room."

"He moved to the spare room when Marjorie and I came."

"Did you get on?"

"No. But we didn't not get on either. He wasn't here most of the time."

"Were on you on your own a lot?"

"Marjorie worked in Tarenton and Robert went into Bristol every day. I ... didn't see much of either of them. But that didn't matter."

"Weren't you lonely?"

"I told you. I need time to think. I've always needed it."

The next room along is still the spare room by the look of it. It's painted cream with pale green curtains, not much in it except a bed and a night stand. All along one side is a huge built-in cupboard that I don't remember.

I can still see the streetlight shining through the curtains onto the blue-flowered wallpaper while I lay in the strange bed, just able to hear the adult voices from downstairs. Knowing I mustn't get out, I'd call out for a glass of water. Sylvia would bring it, fussing and irritable.

"It's time you were fast asleep young lady."

"I can't sleep, the light is coming in."

"Just close your eyes and think nice thoughts."

And she would go out and close the door, leaving me wondering what sort of thoughts she meant.

“It’s like it’s a totally other life.”

“I’ll bet you didn’t think you’d ever see it again.”

“I didn’t. You’re right.”

“Let’s go to the kitchen.”

We go downstairs and along the passage to the back of the house. It’s much more modern now than I remember it, a stainless steel gas hob and a giant fridge freezer. But it still has a table and chairs at one end. From the window I can see down the garden to the fencing.

“Well this has gone up in the world. Sylvia was always complaining about the cooker. This is very posh.”

“Marjorie didn’t cook much. She and Robert went out a lot.”

“And what did you do?”

“Ate sandwiches mostly.”

There’s a silence while we both look round the room. I unlock the back door and step into what is now a scullery, but which used to be a paved area with a plastic table and chairs. Mark stays inside, leaning against the sink.

After walking down the garden, I come back in, locking the door. Mark looks at me.

“Do you think Robert was ever unfaithful to Katherine?”

“What? God knows. Sylvia never said anything and she never had a good word to say about him. I don’t think so, though.”

“I’m pretty certain he cheated on my mother.”

“Why do you think that?”

“I was at home with him on my own one day and some woman came to the house. They had a fight. He found me trying to listen to the conversation. I thought he was going to kill me. He was a bastard.” He spits the word out, like it’s something bitter.

I think back to Robert calling me his princess ... and of his hand squeezing my shoulder, of him shoving me away. I have an urge to reach over to Mark, to touch his arm. But I don't do it.

"I know you're not like him, Vicky. You're like her. Like Katherine."

"How would you know that?"

"Will you do something for me?"

There is something slightly strange in his tone, a detachment.

"What kind of thing?"

He pulls one of the chairs out from the table and puts it more or less in the middle of the floor. He moves it a few times, as though the exact spot is important. He doesn't look at me at all.

"Mark. We've had a look round. Let's go."

He says nothing. When he's satisfied with the position of the chair he looks up at me.

"Will you sit here?"

"Mark...."

"Please."

I try and read the expression on his face but get no clues.

"What is this about?"

"Can you imagine Katherine in this kitchen?" He's still speaking in this otherworldly way, which is beginning to irritate me.

"Of course not."

"Maybe sitting on a chair like this?"

"I can't. You know I can't."

"I can."

“What are you talking about?”

“Vicky.” He’s speaking very quietly. “There’s a reason I can. I came here and I saw her. She was sitting exactly where you are now.”

“You met Katherine? When?” How can he have met her?

“Exactly there. And she was holding you in her arms.”

“Me?”

“You, Vicky, her baby she put you here....,” and he comes over to me and lays his hand, just lightly, on the side of my neck. I pull back from the touch. He’s too close. I can smell deodorant, washing powder and underneath a faint animal scent. He feels the movement, takes his hand away, crouching down in front of me, looking up into my face.

“She did this,” and he picks up my right hand, lays his index finger in the centre of it and closes my fingers round it. “You held onto me so tightly. I can feel it now.” He’s smiling up at me, his eyes shining.

“Think about it, Vicky, I was touching you and her at the same time. I could feel you both, smell you both. I kissed you on your cheek and she kissed me. I watched her feed you, give you her milk.” He is whispering now. “ She was lovely, Vicky she was kind. And she loved you she loved you so much.”

I want to get away from him, but his voice stops me, his words more fluent than I’ve ever heard them. Why is he doing this? What does he want? ... And this picture he’s showing me. As he speaks, I feel an internal stitch being pulled tight, that tugging of a thread. His eyes are locked on mine and he moves his hand up again, only this time he’s reaching towards my chest, my breasts ...

“Mark!” He jumps, snatching his hand back. I get up, increasing the distance between us. He stands too, more slowly, keeping his head bowed, his arms hanging by his sides.

“Mark...,” I say it softer this time. I don’t want to hurt him. “It’s interesting. I don’t have ... there aren’t many people who knew the two of us ... not really anyone who’s still alive.”

“I know.”

His voice is quiet and flat. I feel sorry. He didn't mean anything physical, surely.

"I haven't thought about Katherine and me like that. I just think of her as ... gone. I sometimes forget that I was with her for several months before she died."

Still not looking at me, he picks up the chair and puts it back where it was at the table.

"I just need to go to the bathroom." And he walks out of the door.

Glad of the break, I look around the kitchen. Now that I've been in it longer, I can see more of the room it used to be, as it would have been when Mark saw Katherine, I suppose. His intensity was disturbing, but ... I stare at the spot where the chair was, trying to conjure up a picture of the woman and her child, imagining her hands on me, her arms around me. The baby's hands are my hands now, its eyes are mine. I've looked into her face. Those images are somewhere in my head. Locked away.

Upstairs the lavatory flushes, a door opens and closes. I'm nervous about him coming back into the room but more awkward than anything else. I'm not afraid of him. I hear his feet on the stairs. When he appears in the doorway, his face is bland, blank.

"I said I'd meet someone later. I need to go."

"Of course."

We go along the passage and out of the front door. The lock clicks behind us and he puts the key back through the letterbox. At the end of the path, we stand face to face.

"Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

"No. It's close to here." He swallows. "Thank you for coming, Vicky. It's been good to see you again."

I step forward quickly and give him a brief hug. Again I get that animal smell. It's not unpleasant. I take him by surprise and for a moment he stands, stiff and straight. By the time he begins to raise his arms to return the hug, I've already stepped back.

As I'm driving up the motorway, I replay the scene in my head. The further away I get, the less sure I am about that moment. Was he going to touch me? I can't imagine so now. But he clearly planned the visit, got the key. Was there something sinister or did he just want to tell me that story, in that house? I'm touched by his desire to tell me about Katherine but I'm also disturbed by it. His intensity is out of place. We don't know each other. We have no meaning in each other's lives.

Then there's what he said about Robert. It could well be true. I don't think that Robert cared about anything much after Katherine died. Poor Marjorie. Poor Mark. The picture of that life is getting clearer. It's not a pretty one but it's nothing to do with me.

The phrase Mark used in the church comes back to me. 'It's where you're from.' I don't even know why I said it, that thing about coming from England. I certainly don't come from Tarenton, I just happened to have been born there. I don't come from anywhere, really. I've always liked it that way.

And then there was what he'd said before he moved his hand towards me, when he was describing Katherine and me together. What is that thread that I could feel being tugged somewhere deep inside me? What is it attached to?

Chapter 24

The room is getting lighter because the sun is about to come up. He sits on the edge of his narrow bed with his feet flat on the floor, hands on his knees. There is enough light in the room to make out the outlines of the furniture – a bedside table, a set of drawers, in front of him a wardrobe, the bevelled mirror just able to give him his reflection. He stares at it, the hollows that are his eyes, the outline of his head and narrow shoulders, the pale, sharp edge of his forehead. He swallows. His mouth and throat feel dry.

He leans over and switches on the lamp on the bedside table then gets up and kneels down in front of the drawers, opening the bottom one and taking out the box. Back on the bed, he opens the lid and places his hand inside.

He picks up handfuls of buttons and lets them slip through his fingers, like beach shingle. He closes his eyes and tears slide out from their corners, making flat trails down his face.

Chapter 25

December the first. Even cynical London has to acknowledge that Christmas is coming. When I lived here, I used to love the times the city developed a kind of collective consciousness: in summer heat waves when the pubs would spill out onto the pavements, the evenings light till ten o'clock and us all imagining ourselves in Florence or Barcelona; in December, too, when the dark days are brightened up by the artificial light of the late-opening stores and alleys ring with choruses of office workers letting down their hair.

I'm walking up the section of Regent Street between Oxford Circus and Broadcasting House, considering how likely it is that I am going to bump into someone I know and how very much I don't want that to happen. It's five-thirty and pitch dark, but the shops are ablaze. Against my better judgement, I'm going to Tim's chambers' party in some trendy bar called *Vanilla*. His girlfriend, Lucy, has lent me a little black dress, which, as I make my way along the pavement and negotiating out-of-town shoppers, I can feel is quite a lot too little.

I walk up towards All Souls and turn right and left, the streets getting darker and quieter. I find the entrance to the place, understated, a black awning and manicured trees in pots. A blonde girl in black checks my name off a list and I hand my jacket over to another one who looks like she was cast from the same mould.

Down the stairs it's nearly impossible to see. The room is black and the furniture glowing white in the ultra violet lights, red neon tubes snake round the walls and over the bar – which is long and shiny stainless steel. I head straight for it. The place is already fairly full and I reckon quite a few of the diehards have been here since lunchtime. Everything is free so I choose champagne, down one glass quickly standing at the bar and take another straight away. No point in messing about.

Just as I'm trying to work out my next move, I spot Tim and Lucy coming towards me.

"Hey, Vicky. Really great you could make it. Have you been here long?"

"One drink's worth, so no, not long."

The music is loud so we have to yell into each other's ears, bending our heads towards each other.

“You look pretty good in Lucy’s dress.”

At the mention of it, I try and push the skirt down a bit further.

“I’m feeling a bit exposed to tell you the truth.”

“Don’t worry. It’s dark and most people are pissed already.”

“Thanks, that’s comforting.”

I look around the room. I don’t know anyone and I don’t want to be a burden to Tim. The Black-Eyed Peas are telling me that *Tonight’s Gonna Be a Good Night* but I’m beginning to wish I hadn’t come. I’m not in the mood for this kind of thing and office dos don’t mean much to anyone who doesn’t get the jokes. To illustrate the point, a group of suited men over to my right burst into raucous laughter, one of them repeating the punch line of his story while pointing at his colleague.

“Wouldn’t you like me to introduce you to a nice lawman? There are some single guys in the office and we’re not that bad when you get to know us.”

I give Tim a fake smile and Lucy takes pity on me.

“Vicky and I’ll get some more drinks. You go and play with your mates and we’ll come and find you in a bit.”

We head back to the bar. My second glass is nearly finished. The problem with champagne is that it doesn’t mix well with other drinks so you have to keep drinking it once you’ve started. Lucy passes over another one.

“We don’t have to be here long. If Tim wants to stay, you and I can get a cab back.”

When we’ve both got drinks, Lucy nudges me and nods towards the group of men that Tim is standing with.

“That guy Tim’s talking to. Wasn’t he at York with you lot? His name’s Richard something or other.”

I look over and see a shortish, dark man grinning at Tim and waving one hand around. Unlike most of the men there, he isn’t wearing a jacket.

“Oh God. Yes. He used to be something to do with the student radio station. Totally up his own arse.”

At that moment, Tim looks over towards us, turns and says something to Richard, who also looks in our direction. There's no choice but for the pairs to join. Yes, Richard (it turns out the 'something' is Jessop) and I remember each other and yes it's been a long time. Tim sees someone he needs to say hello to and Lucy goes with him, so we're left shouting across the space between us. He continues on the same tack.

"When were we last in the same room?"

"I don't know. Graduation probably."

"I hear you went to the BBC."

"Local radio and then Radio Four. I'm in South Africa now, though. Cape Town. A talk radio station."

"Shit. That's quite something. I've always wanted to go to South Africa."

Oh, hasn't everyone?

"You should. It's a great place."

"Lots of crime, though."

"Would you like another drink? I've finished mine."

It turns out that Richard never fulfilled his radio ambitions. After university he travelled a lot and ended up doing some kind of post-grad environmental qualification and is now a right-on management consultant.

"We work with companies on sustainability. Try and find alternative ways of doing business."

"Is that why you're not wearing a jacket?"

I'm dangerously near the point where I'm finding myself the funniest person in the room. To his credit, Richard also finds this amusing, and I warm to him slightly. He leans towards my ear again.

"Listen, I'm fed up having to shout. Why don't we go and get something to eat. I'm starving."

I don't want to offend Tim but I don't want to stay much, either. Plus the idea of some male attention – even from Richard, who is short and bland – is appealing.

“OK. Let's just go and see what Tim and Lucy have to say.”

We go over and I mention we might be going to eat and would they like to come. They say no and Tim gives me a significant look. When Richard goes off to the bathroom I grab him by the elbow.

“You're sure you don't mind? I feel a bit bad after you've invited me to your lovely party.”

“God no. You don't know anyone here and Richard seems to be a bit taken with you.”

“Oh crap.”

“Said you looked good in that dress.”

“I'll be in bed by eleven o'clock.”

“OK. But if you're not, come home.”

“Very amusing.”

Ten minutes later, Richard and I are sitting across from each other in a small Greek restaurant just down the road from the trendy venue. Now there's no deafening music and we can hear ourselves talk, I'm wondering whether this is such a good idea. The buzz of the champagne has worn off in the night air and now, suddenly, I'm on a date.

We order a bottle of white wine and ask the waiter to bring us two mezze platters rather than risk choosing specific dishes in front of each other. Richard asks me a bit more about South Africa and I try and think of something to say about environmental management consulting, but don't do well. So I go for a subject I know a bit more about.

“So, is there a 'Mrs Jessop'? Or a 'Mr' if that's more appropriate?”

He doesn't look offended which I approve of. Instead he gives a short laugh.

“No. Neither of the above. There was a ... what ... a fiancée Jessop for a bit, is that right? Anyway. I was engaged. It didn’t work out.”

“What went wrong?” The wine has now taken over from the champagne.

He blows out, puffing his cheeks.

“I don’t know. I’m sure she explained all the reasons to me very fully at the time. I wasn’t ... *available* enough. That’s what she used to say. I think she meant emotionally available. Isn’t that what you girls are after?”

“Shit. Don’t ask me. I’ve never cracked the relationship thing, either. So it would be unfair of me to make any demands.”

“Well that’s a refreshing view.” He leans forward slightly, both his hands flat on the table.

“So there isn’t a Mr ... Someone?”

“Oh ... no. Not even nearly. I mean I was seeing someone in Cape Town but that didn’t turn out well. Cultural differences.”

“A black guy?”

“No. Afrikaans. Much more tricky. Chip on his shoulder the size of Table Mountain. He had problems with my emotional availability, too. Come to think of it, he’d probably get on well with the ex-nearly Mrs Jessop. We should engineer a meeting.”

I’m not putting my glass down very often but it remains fairly full. This is nothing to do with the fact that I’m not drinking the wine, just that Richard is quite good at getting more into it. I’m quite drunk but I don’t care. I have no interest in this man and, if he’s going to buy me wine – which I hope he is – then I’m going to drink it.

“Do you still have family over here?”

“A bit. My uncle is in a home about fifty miles out of London, he’s got dementia. He and my aunt brought me up. My mother died when I was a baby.”

“Shit, I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right. I don’t remember her. I’ve got a brother in Australia.”

“Oh...I’ve got a sister in Melbourne”

As he tells me about his doctor sister and her husband, the echo of my words come back to me. “My mother died when I was a baby.”

I’ve been saying them ever since I can remember but they’ve never meant anything. I’m always slightly surprised when people react with compassion, reassuring them straight away that I don’t remember her, frightened I might be defrauding them of their sympathy. Now it’s like I’m hearing the words for the first time, fresh and raw. I feel my throat closing and my eyes prickle. Tears are welling up and I try not to blink.

“Sorry, Richard. Will you excuse me a second?”

“Of course.”

I push back my chair and make my way between the tables, giving all my concentration to not leaning to one side or the other. I find the ladies, go into a cubicle, close the lid of the toilet and sit down hard, clamping my hands over my mouth. Even so, a huge sob escapes through my fingers. For a couple of seconds, I feel like I’m going to cry properly. But I gulp in one breath and another and, as quickly as the feeling came, it disappears. I sit there for a bit, my hands still over my mouth, my elbows on my knees, staring at the cystitis cure advert on the door in front of me. As the writing swims, I realise that I’m now quite pissed.

I take some more deep breaths, pee anyway as I’m here and go outside. In the mirror over the sink, my eyes look red but it’s difficult to know if it’s from tears or drink. I do some repairs and go back to the table and what remains of the wine and the mezze – and Richard, who’s looking puzzled.

“Are you OK?”

“Yes. Thank you. I’m fine. Just got ... caught off guard.”

“Very mysterious.”

“I know. I’m absolutely fascinating.”

I don’t remember much about the end of the evening. There was more drinking, wine and then whiskey, a cab West, which I’m glad I didn’t have to pay for. Outside Tim’s house, with the taxi meter running, Richard had kissed

me, pulling me to him awkwardly, his tongue searching around inside my mouth, his hand on my breast. I responded briefly, mostly from guilt at having let him pay for everything, but then pushed him off, saying thank you and good night as I scrambled out of the cab, not looking back as I wove up the path and found the lock. In the past I might have invited him in, just for the satisfaction of seeing the effect I could have. But even through the wine I knew the last thing I wanted was to wake up with Richard.

When I do wake up, I'm lying in a star shape on the white bed, fully clothed. The light is still on. As I claw my way back, I am aware of nothing, then a vicious throbbing at the back of my head. There's also a deep-seated nausea. My mouth is dry, my eyes grainy. I groan, the vibration bringing some slight relief. I turn over onto my side and try and find a cool part of the pillow for my burning cheek. The headache and nausea intensify. The bedside radio alarm says it's four-fifteen. I close my eyes and concentrate on lying perfectly still, trying to fight off the knowledge that I have to get up, get undressed, pee, potentially clean my teeth and get back into bed again. This seems a mountain too difficult to climb.

I turn over. Too suddenly. The decision about how and when to go to the bathroom is taken for me. I roll off the bed and land briefly on all fours, getting up and, still more or less crouching, make it to the lavatory just in time. Thank God for yuppie friends with en suites.

Afterwards, as I splash water on my face and sluice out my mouth, I raise my head a little, looking at my reflection in the splashback. In the white bathroom light, my skin is pale and there are circles under my eyes, I can see the lines on my forehead and at the sides of my mouth. I'm reminded of what women say, about getting to the age when they catch sight of their mother in the mirror. Is that what I'm doing? When she died she was five years older than I am now. Not so very different in age. Is this one of the pictures the baby saw?

I go back to bed. When I wake up again it is still dark. I try and go back to sleep but I'm hangover wired and I squirm around thinking about the grope in the cab, my sudden tears in the restaurant. And about Mark. How he'd looked as he told me about Katherine. His voice. And the way he withdrew after I'd been sharp with him.

Finally, I wrap the duvet around me and go out onto the tiny balcony. It's London, so it's hardly quiet but there is a stillness. The sky is clear and, even over the lights of the city, I can see some stars. It's freezing and I light a cigarette so my breath is like smoke and is smoke by turns. I keep rolling Mark's words round in my head. Trying to give his story dimension, to give her dimension.

He has touched her, heard her voice. I've touched her and heard her, too. But I can't remember the feel or the sound. Given what I do for a living, I know how easy it is to record people's voices. But, even now, even though I record things every day and I know how much it would mean to have the sounds of my life to keep, I haven't captured the people in it. I never recorded Sylvia's voice, haven't recorded Hugh's, not even much of my own.

Why do we squander opportunities to be the curators of our own lives? Is it because we're waiting for the final version of things before we commit? Don't we know that, when the final version comes, it's too late? Maybe that's why Katherine never left me a message. To write one would have been to admit that the end was inevitable. And when that fact was unavoidable, the chance was gone.

Now this strange, pale man is trying to fill a tiny part of the silence although God knows why. In some ways, Mark and I have as much connection as I've got with Katherine. Maybe more. At least we've had a conversation.

Chapter 26

“It wouldn’t surprise me.”

Hugh is looking thoughtful. He’s been in Darwin for the past week so we haven’t spoken. This has been my first chance to tell him about Mark and Tarenton and Mark’s theories on Robert’s fidelity – or lack of it.

“I wasn’t around much at the time but I never got the impression he was that devoted to Marjorie. Who would be?”

“What’s wrong with Marjorie?”

“Nothing she’s just insipid.”

“Nasty word. What word would you use for son Mark?”

“Mmmm ... ‘cowed’ probably. I didn’t see him much, though. Don’t think he and the old man got on that well. I remember coming home and finding him sitting on the sofa in his duffel coat. When I asked him why, he said ‘Mr Slater won’t let me put the heating on’. Still called him Mr Slater even though they lived in the same house. Why’s he got in touch now, do you think?”

“Dunno. I think he just saw on Facebook that I was in the UK and thought, what the hell?”

“Does he want to be mates?”

“Not sure. Didn’t get the feeling he wanted anything in particular.”

I’d told Hugh about going to the house and seeing his old room. I hadn’t told him about Mark and Katherine or anything that Mark had to said to me about it.

“Are you going to see him again while you’re there?”

“I shouldn’t think so. I think we’ve done our thing.”

We talk a bit more about a woman he met while he was in Darwin and about the fact that his South African flights are now booked. He tells me the number

and time. I can't imagine taking him back to my flat. In the damp cold of London, the place doesn't even seem real. The gap between being here and being here again has closed up, as if I never left.

I'm not sure why I didn't tell Hugh about Mark's story. Perhaps because I thought he would dismiss it. He was the keeper of the memories when it came to Katherine. He'd had twelve years of her after all, but he'd never told me much. He always gave the impression that, if he got his pictures out too many times, the colours might begin to fade and he would begin to lose them. And I'd always gone along with that. After all, he was the one with the real loss. I couldn't think that he'd have much time for cowed Mark's version of her. And I couldn't bear the idea of him ripping this treasured thing to shreds. So I don't tell him about what I'm doing this afternoon, either.

Mark and I had spoken on the phone. He'd sounded pleased to hear from me. I hadn't been sure. His reply to my Facebook message was very matter of fact. Just a number for the phone he carried with him on jobs.

"I'll meet you at the Turnpike Café, it's a greasy spoon in Shepherd's Bush." Greasy spoon. I hadn't heard that phrase for a while. When I lived in London, I spent a lot of time in the little narrow cafes, drinking frothy fawn coffee and eating their all day hangover fry-ups.

I'm sitting in a side booth, the bench seats covered in brown plastic. The Formica of the table is slightly damp after a recent wipe-down and the windows are steamed up from the coffee machine. There aren't many people in. Two youngish couples that look like students and an old guy steadily working his way through a white oval plate of egg and chips covered with brown sauce.

I have a large mug of coffee in front of me and I'm wishing I could smoke like you used to be able to. I'm also trying to work out what I'm going to say. I've been trying to plan it all the way here.

The door opens and it's Mark, his narrow shoulders looking more substantial in his leather bike jacket. He's wearing that guarded expression, like he's trying to second-guess what's going to happen next. It changes to a slight smile when he spots me and slides in to the seat opposite.

"How are you, Mark?"

“I’m all right. How are you? I wasn’t sure I’d see you....before you went back.”

“Well you said you’d be up here and I don’t know when I’ll be over again.”

The waiter interrupts us and writes Mark’s coffee order on his little pad. We’re both silent until he goes away.

“Are you looking forwardto getting back?”

“I haven’t thought too much about it. It’s been good catching up with people here, actually. Better than I’d thought it would be. How’s the job going, anyway. What is the job, actually?”

He smiles, properly this time.

“I’m justcleaning windows.”

“Like George Formby.”

“What?”

“George Formby ... he used to sing a song called “When I’m cleaning windows” and play the ukulele. Have you never heard of him?”

He shakes his head. I grin.

“That’s what comes of having ancient parents. Too much Radio Two as a child.”

“My parents weren’t so much younger.”

“You mean Marjorie and ... your biological father?”

“Either father.”

“Where is your real father?”

“In America somewhere. He left Marjorie when I was three. I can hardly remember him. He never had muchto do with us after he left. Don’t think she wanted him around, anyway.”

“Was there another woman?”

“Yeah ...but she didn’t last long, apparently. Then he left the country.”

“You ever hear from him now?”

“No....no point.”

His coffee arrives. While he tears open two little brown paper packets of sugar, I look around the café. Only the old man is left, sitting in front of the empty plate, smeared with egg and sauce. He’s staring straight in front of him. There’s some clattering from the kitchen. It’s two-thirty, the lunchtime rush, such as it was, is over. Now it’s time for cleaning down the surfaces and a fag out by the bins.

Mark and I talk about nothing. I tell him about SportLive but not about the other church, about the trendy venue but not about Richard. He tells me about going to see Bristol Rovers lose. I say he is an unlikely football fan and he agrees.

“It’s something to do on a Saturday. I have a mate who goes.”

He has a mate. What did he tell the mate about me? Did he tell him?

A slim girl walks past on her way to collect the old man’s empty plate. I ask her for another mug of coffee. I turn back to Mark and find his eyes are already on me. Looking down, I move my lighter around the table, putting it at different angles to the box of cigarettes.

“I’m glad we’ve met. I hope we’ll stay in touch.”

“I hope so too.” He’s giving nothing away.

“I just wanted to...when we saw each other at the house, things got a bit...I want you to know that I’m glad you told me about Katherine, about seeing her and me. I’ve been thinking about it a lot. This is going to sound stupid but it’s made me feel closer to her somehow.”

“It doesn’t sound stupid. It’s why I wanted you to know.”

“I was wondering about that. I mean ... why do you care?”

“I thought ...that it would help you.” That phrase again.

“Why do you think I need help?”

“Everybody needs a ... bit of help.”

“Do you?”

He takes a sip of coffee and puts down his cup, keeping his eyes on it.

“I’ve never expected any.”

I put my hand out and touch his forearm. I can see him flinch.

“Do you want help from me? Is that what this is about?”

“This isn’t about.... anything. It’s just something I wanted to do.”

“So why not get in touch years ago if it was so important?”

He looks down at his cup again.

“I didn’t want to upset you.”

“Mark, you haven’t. Honestly.”

“I mean, I didn’t want to upset you by telling you about her, telling you what you’d missed. I thoughtyou’d be sad. But, a while ago, I thought you should know anyway. I wanted you to know her. And it wasn’t right that you only knew him. I wasn’t sure that anyone would ever tell you....properly.”

The old man who had been sitting and staring stands up slowly, unfolding himself from his seat, and shouts towards the back of the café in a Scots accent.

“Will ye ask Brenda for the parcelBrenda, I want ma parcel!”

Without replying to him, a voice from behind the closed kitchen hatch echoes his words like a court official.

“Brenda, Charlie wants his parcel!”

And, from further away still comes a muffled reply. The kitchen voice comes back.

“She says to hold on two minutes.”

The man heaves a huge sigh and turns towards us.

“I can’t bloody go without ma parcel. She knows that. Ah can’t.”

Mark looks up at him and, unexpectedly, grins.

“Women, eh? What can you do? Gotto love them.”

“Aye, you’re right enough there, son.” He looks at me.

“Tha’s a fine young man you’ve got there, lass. Hang onto him.”

A wide woman in a blue overall comes through the swing doors carrying a plastic carrier bag filled with wrapped packages, grease already soaking through some of the paper.

“There you are Charlie. See you tomorrow.”

“Thanks darlin’. See you tomorrow. See you, son, miss.”

And he turns and goes out of the café, the smell of chip fat wafting behind him. The wide blue woman picks up my empty mug.

“He’s like part of the family. Been coming in here for ten years or more. You want another coffee?”

“No ... no thanks.”

She moves off back behind the doors. Mark watches her go and then looks down at his watch.

“I’d....better get back. This is the last day of the job.”

“Of course.”

“It’s my turn.”

He pays for our coffee and we go out into the colourless afternoon. I’m going up towards the tube, he’s heading back into the houses, back to church.

“OK, then.” And I step forward for another brief, dry hug. This time he’s ready for me. I feel the slight pressure of his arms and then we step back from each other. He smiles.

“I’llbet you didn’t think you’d....come to England and find a new....brother.”

I laugh, already caught up in the momentum of leaving.

“Oh, please. I haven’t got to grips with one brother, I’m not sure what I’d do with another one. I’ll see you on Facebook when I get back to Cape Town.”

Still smiling, he gives one quick nod, turns and walks away

Chapter 27

He is one of the few that came off the stopping train, moving quickly while most of the people around him are ambling. But no one takes any notice of him. It is getting dark and cold and he realises that a shirt and a jacket will soon be pretty useless against the freezing air. For that reason and because he can feel the effects are beginning to wear off, he stops just outside the station and fumbles in his pocket for a tiny plastic bag. He takes out one white pill and puts it on the back of his tongue.

Out on the high street, there are knots of shouting men, younger than him and already full of lager, eager to take advantage of the pre-Christmas spirit. His throat is dry. He turns into the off licence that is pouring yellow light onto the pavement, the beep of its door alarm constant as party-goers stream in and out. He lines up with a bottle of cheap whiskey in his hand and gives the pasty girl his money. They don't make eye contact. While he's waiting for his change, he gazes up at his image on the CCTV monitor, as if he's surprised to see himself there.

Back outside, he turns left and makes his way towards the darker end of the road, where most of the shops are closed and road forks to go up the hill. Once he's away from the streetlights, he unscrews the lid of the bottle and drinks, throwing his head back and gulping, once, twice, three times. He puts the whiskey back in its plastic carrier bag and turns up his jacket collar. Sliding the bag onto his wrist, he cups his hands together and blows into them as he walks. There are no people in this part of the small town.

He follows the fork up the rise and keeps going. The occasional car goes past, blinding him with its lights and forcing him onto the soft uneven verges. Very few pedestrians come up this way. He's away from nearly all the buildings now. The only one in front of him is the church.

He goes through the old gate and stumbles slightly on the uneven path. He is not sure where he's going. He's been here only once or twice before and there is hardly any light. He can just make out the outline of the church and of some of the gravestones. It is not yet completely dark and, on the horizon is the red glow of the nearest town. He stops and sits on the bench just inside the gate. He swallows another pill and washes it down with more of the whiskey. It has a rough metallic taste.

He gets up quickly and branches out from the path in the direction he thinks he needs to go. He keeps tripping over the humps and kerbs of the graves,

impossible to see in the dark. Once he actually falls into the wet grass, the bag bashing against a kerbstone. For a moment he's terrified he's broken the bottle but the thick, green glass is intact.

He is no longer feeling cold. Instead he feels separate from himself and calm. Yes, he is calm. He's not sure how long he looks but eventually he finds them. Finds her. He sits down and has some more whiskey. He runs his hands over the stone, feeling the carved letters and numbers under his fingers, the marble as smooth as glass. He leans his head against the top of the stone. He's tired. Very tired. He wants to sleep.

Chapter 28

“Vicky, I know I’ve woken you, I’m sorry... Vicky, are you there?”

The bedside clock says it’s 6am.

“Hugh? What the fuck ...?”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s early. I put off calling as long as I could.”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Mark’s in Canningbury Hospital. He got picked up in the middle of the night full of booze and pills. They think he’ll be all right. Marjorie phoned me from there. She said he’s been asking for you.”

“Shit. Should I go down there?”

“I think that’s what she was after.”

I’m properly awake now.

“Hang on, what’s he doing in Canningbury Hospital when he lives eighty miles away?”

“Well that’s the thing. They found him in the churchyard. Our churchyard. By the graves.”

“Fuck.”

“A bunch of kids had gone up there to smoke dope and piss around and they found him at about one in the morning. He’d been there for a while, mainly half dead of hypothermia.”

“Is he awake? Has he told anyone why he was there?”

“I don’t think so. Marjorie hadn’t managed to speak to him when she phoned me.”

“Jesus.”

“He show any signs of this when you saw him?”

“No, well ...no.”

He gives me the ward details and rings off. I collapse back down in the bed.

“Fuck.”

I replay the café conversation in my head. Had I said something? I'd wanted to make him feel better. Maybe this is nothing to do with me. But then maybe it has. And I'm getting on a plane in thirty-six hours.

I bash my hands on the mattress. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Canningbury Hospital sits on the side of a hill just outside the town's ring road. One huge central block rises up from a maze of low buildings, all the same stained grey. Today its rows of windows are blank, reflecting the pale light of the sky.

My taxi draws up outside the main entrance, where a jovial blue and white sign welcomes me and tells me that we're all part of the Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust. I give the driver money over the back seat of the cab.

“You want me to wait for you, love?” He's angling for a quiet hour with a cup of tea and *The Sun* while I visit whatever ancient relative he thinks I've come to see.

“No, I'm not sure how long I'm going to be.”

I get out and go through the automatic doors. People are criss-crossing the wide foyer, some with flowers and balloons, some in pyjamas rolling drips and carrying cigarette packets, heading for the tiny smoking room. It's one of the few parts of this place that I know well, the tiny, rank room with its broken chairs.

Just over three years ago I'd spent a fair bit of time in it while Sylvia succumbed to the massive stroke she'd had in the kitchen one October morning. She was already living on her own by then. Len had become too confused, too difficult for her to look after at home. She'd still been in her dressing gown, the kettle in her hand. The cleaning lady had found her, unable to speak or move although she was still conscious.

By the time I'd got here, she had sunk below the surface. I remember walking into the ward. The curtains were round the bed and I had panicked, thinking I was too late. I went in to the cubicle and the nurse taking her blood pressure must have seen my horrified expression. She smiled at me.

"It's OK. She comes and goes but she can hear you."

"Sylvia?"

I'd sat down on the chair by the bed and taken hold of her hand.

"Sylvia can you hear me? It's Vicky."

She had some grip left. Her thumb was on the back of my hand. At the sound of my voice, she moved it just once, a single sweep back and forth, a gesture of comfort. That was the last time she'd communicated with anyone. I spent the next two days by her bed, speaking to her, but she never seemed near to surfacing. I would come and go – to eat, to smoke, and to sleep. Sometimes she appeared to stop breathing. The first few times it happened, I'd be convinced that she'd finally gone. But then she would start again. The only way to tell for certain she was still alive was to watch the vein pulsing in her neck. I would stare at it, wondering what things would be like when it was finally still.

Eventually, her breathing became loud and they told me that the end was coming. I stayed in the hospital that night but wasn't there when the vein finally stopped its little throb. A nurse called me from the bare side room I was sleeping in. I arrived just a few minutes after the final breath and picked up her warm hand. I couldn't take it in. The second mother I'd got through. The only one I'd known.

The reception desk directs me to the ward. I walk through blue, shiny corridors with signs pointing this way and that – X-ray, renal unit, oncology, paediatrics – until I get to the general medical wards and find 3C. I stop at the nurses' station.

"I'm looking for Mark Langham. I think he came in last night?"

A sister looks up sharply.

"Are you a relative?"

"I'm his ... stepsister."

“He’s in the third bay along in the corner. The curtains are round but you can go in. I think your stepmother is with him. She said you might come.”

Stepmother. The word rolls easily off her tongue.

I walk past the six-bed bays, full of mostly elderly men in various states of consciousness, all reduced to a single, hospital identity. In the third bay, the corner bed is, indeed, curtained off. I stop by the door not knowing what to do next. Seeing either one of them under these circumstances seems difficult, both at the same time, impossible.

The curtain moves and Marjorie is walking towards me down the ward. The last time I’d seen her was at Robert’s funeral, eighteen years ago and she looks pretty much the same. A small and neat frame, her grey hair cut short and perfectly styled. She’s wearing navy trousers, a pale blue turtleneck, loafers. A cardigan is draped over her shoulders.

She doesn’t immediately recognize me. Only when she gets half way down does her face show any signs of registering who I am. She increases her pace but doesn’t smile.

“Oh, Vicky. Thank you for coming.”

There is no hint of a hug or a kiss. Not even a handshake. She has Mark’s sharp face but her eyes are pale blue. Her cheeks are floury with powder and her lipstick is beginning to bleed into the lines round her mouth.

“How is he?”

“He looks pretty terrible but they say he’ll be all right. If someone hadn’t found him when they did ... well ...,” and she draws in a breath.

“Can I see him?”

“You can.” She sounds doubtful. “He’s still very sedated. They say he should be left to sleep for now. I was just going to get some coffee. Do you want to come?”

“Yes. I’ll just...,” and I walk past her and up the room to the bed, go round the curtain and there he is, lying on his back, a straight line under the thin blankets. There’s an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth and his face has

a grey tinge. His arms are outside the covers – thin, their skin blue white, veins protruding. There’s a drip in the back of one hand.

I want to feel compassion for him but mainly I’m just horrified that he could do this to himself. I reach out and put my hand on his. It’s icy. The skin is rough and dry, the humps of the knuckles prominent. There’s not a flicker of reaction.

“Mark?” I say it softly but immediately I hear Marjorie’s low voice behind me.

“I think it’s best to leave him for now. He needs to rest.” She must have followed me up the ward.

“Sure. That’s fine.” I speak without looking round.

“We’ll come back.”

Downstairs we find a table in the corner of the coffee shop and order cappuccinos.

“So, how long have you been in England?”

“Oh, just over a week. The station needed someone to come over and I hadn’t been for a while.”

She looks at me and gives me a tight smile that doesn’t reach her eyes.

“I gather you and Mark had been in touch recently.” She has a curious, clipped way of speaking, as though she’s only letting out the bare minimum of words.

“We got in touch on Facebook and met up a couple of times since I’ve been over. It was nice to see him. He was interested in what was going on with me and he hasn’t any reason to be, really. ”

She looks up, sharply.

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, we hardly...”

“You shared a father after all.”

“Marjorie ...”

She lets out a breath.

“I’m sorry. I’m just ...,” and she rubs both hands over her face, “... very tired. I drove down at three this morning and haven’t had any sleep since. And, of course, I’m upset. I thought we’d left all this behind.”

“All what?”

“He’s done this before. When he was twenty. Some girl had broken with him. He’s never been very successful in that area. I think he saw a counsellor for a while afterwards. One of those types bound to tell him all his problems were actually my fault.” She gives a dry little laugh. “I don’t know exactly what Mark’s problems are about. Perhaps I *am* to blame. Life with your father wasn’t easy. For either of us.”

I take a risk.

“So why did you stay with him?”

“You’re not the first person to ask me that. I didn’t see a lot of the things that were obvious to other people. He could be charming.”

I nod, mainly to get her to keep going.

“And, even when things got a bit rocky, I couldn’t leave him. I honestly felt that if I did, he would do something terrible. He never got over your mother’s death. Not properly. I think he loved me as much as he could.”

I wonder if she has any idea about the other women, if there were any.

“Were you happy?”

“I made the best of it. Mark’s father had left when he was tiny. I was alone. I wanted to be married and Robert wasn’t ... difficult all the time. We had ups and downs, but so does everyone. We had a normal life. And that’s what I wanted. For me and for Mark. A normal life.”

And her face is saying that she did the right thing.

“Shall we go back upstairs?”

Chapter 29

There is a woman sitting by his bed in a blue dress.

“I’ve brought you something.”

And from her lap she picks up a package. It’s a baby. It’s waving its arms and putting its hands up into her face. He tries to lift up his hand to touch the baby’s cheek but his arm is too heavy. He wants to ask her ‘Have you come to take me home?’ but he cannot get the words out. She hears him anyway.

“I’ve come to take you home. We’ve both come.”

He breathes in. He can smell them. Two distinct smells.

“Come home, Mark. We miss you.”

“I’ll be home soon.”

The words come out easily now, flowing out over the woman and the baby, covering them with a gleaming sheen that is his love, covering them like the thinnest veil. They look back at him through the veil and he smiles. They all smile. He looks at the baby.

“Can you see me?”

“We can see you, Mark. Come home soon.”

“I love you forever.”

And he reaches out and puts his arms round them both and they all three laugh and laugh.

The sheets rustle as his arm twitches. His mother looks up from her magazine. She sees his eyes are closed but the lids are flickering.

Chapter 30

It is four in the afternoon and I have been here five hours. Mark has opened his eyes once or twice, when a nurse has taken his blood pressure or felt his pulse, but he hasn't said anything, just gone back to sleep. Marjorie and I manoeuvre round each other, taking ourselves on pointless errands, going for endless cups of tea and coffee, reading magazines, anything that means the time actually spent sitting side by side by this bed is kept to the absolute minimum. We exchange a few words about our lives, discuss current events here and in South Africa – the rugby, next year's Olympics, the weather, Jacob Zuma, the coalition – all while the elephant in the room breathes shallowly next to us.

She's downstairs phoning her neighbour about feeding the cat. I go back along the ward. There are only two other men in it. One is permanently asleep or in a coma or something. The other is a gruff military type recovering from a stroke. A mild one, he'd told me earlier.

"Right as rain, now. Home tomorrow if the sawbones gives me the discharge papers." He's interested in my living in South Africa.

"Mandela good news for the country d'ya think?"

"Of course. He did something I don't think anyone else could have achieved."

"New lot don't sound so hot, though?"

"It's a difficult job. There are no short cuts. You have to go through the stages, do the learning."

"Huh. Getting like that here these days. Hardly see a white face on the street any more." I'd forced a smile and moved off, back to the smoking room.

Now the major is dozing. Everything is quiet. Mark's bed is still curtained off but as I go round the side of it, I see that he has moved. His head has turned to the side and he's no longer lying completely straight. Marjorie's still away phoning. I lean down and touch his hand.

"Mark?"

He opens his eyes and looks at me. He's frowning. He tries to speak but no words come and he twists his head as if he's trying to get away from something. I lift the oxygen mask off his nose and mouth and pull it down under his chin.

"Hi."

He turns his head away from me and retches. I look round frantically for a bowl – which I can't find – and at the same time hit the call button. Luckily it's quiet and a nurse appears quickly, sizes up the situation and brings a kidney bowl from the opposite bed. I retreat, feeling feeble and nauseous. After a few minutes, the nurse reappears.

"He's all right. Not much to come up. I'll give you another bowl. He's got some water. Horrible coming round after a stomach pump."

"Fine. I'll be fine. Thanks."

I go back and find Mark without the oxygen mask holding a closed plastic cup with a straw.

His head doesn't move but his eyes swivel towards me as I come round the curtain. He's sitting up, propped against crackling hospital pillows. He's a bit less grey than he was, but his face is still drawn and the places under his eyes are dark.

"What day is it?" It's barely above a whisper.

"It's Saturday. About four o'clock. How're you feeling?"

He doesn't say anything, just gives a tiny shrug, turning down the corners of his mouth. I don't know what to do. I don't even know if he wants me here.

"Why don't you sit down."

I draw up one of the hospital chairs. As I do, he takes the hand without the cup from under the covers and lays it down on the white blanket, that gentle, deliberate movement I've seen before. On the back of it there is a puncture wound from a previous drip, a bruise with a tiny crust of blood in the middle.

"Is there anything ...?"

But he turns his head away and I see his chest heave. I wonder if I should go, but he lifts his arm towards me and I take his hand. It's dry, with bones light

and close beneath the skin, like a bird's skeleton. His breathing is back under control. He doesn't say anything for a while, then he swallows hard.

"I wanted ... I wanted to go and see her." And he moves his head from side to side on the pillow, his eyes closed. "It was... cold...."

His hand is slack and icy in mine. I put my other hand on top of it. From the contact of our skin, perhaps some of the warmth from my body might spread through his. I lean forward and cup my palm against his cheek for a moment then sit back again. I feel a tiny increase in pressure from the hand I'm holding, and I sweep my thumb – once, twice – across the back of it.

From somewhere further up the ward, I can hear the sound of Marjorie's voice. She's asking one of the nurses when the doctor will be making his next rounds. Mark's eyes are closed. I pick up my jacket and go round the curtain, meeting Marjorie half way down the ward.

"He's awake." I say, and I carry on walking, past the beds and out into the corridor.

Opposite me is a door with a notice that says 'Family Room'. Inside, they've tried to make things homely – flowers on the table, a sofa, and a box of tissues, prints on the walls. But the hospital room isn't far below the surface.

I sit on the edge of the sofa and turn my hands over in front of me. The palms are damp and I wipe them on the seat fabric. I look at them again, slowly making fists and then uncurling my fingers.

I keep looking. They are the same hands. I can feel skin on my skin. I touch my face. As I do, the first wave comes over me and a sob comes out, this time it's followed by another and another, mingling with the memory of the countless other sobs that have echoed through this room. I let my head fall forward onto my knees and I cry, letting the waves crash with a rhythm. Never had her, never knew her, never knew me, never told me, never mind, never mind, never say that again, never. Never, never, never. Mind, mind, mind

Chapter 31

I pay the cab outside the wide front of Number 23. The porch is warm as I wait for a response to the bell, the winter sun has been trapped by the glass during the afternoon. The door is opened by a woman I don't recognize, except for her regulation blue tunic.

"You visiting?" An East European accent.

"I've come to see Len Crawford."

"Of course. Come inside."

As I sign the register, the owner comes out to greet me.

"Oh, Vicky. You said you'd come back. I'm so glad. He's in his room. Not so clever today. He's in bed, actually. But go on up. We've taken him some tea."

Upstairs, I knock on Len's door. I don't hear anything so go in anyway. He's propped up on fat, white pillows in his single bed. He's wide-awake, though.

"Hello Len." I cross the room and sit in the chair by his side. His tea, untouched, is on one of those trolleys on wheels.

"Hello, love." His eyes focus on me, and he smiles but I can see he doesn't know who it is.

"It's me, Vicky." I'm using the voice that people use with the very old and the very young. "I'm going back to South Africa tonight so I just wanted to say goodbye."

"Oh yes."

"Your tea's getting cold. You want me to help you?"

"No, you're all right. I expect they'll be here in a minute."

"You getting up today?"

"Oh yes. Definitely getting up. Have to be there by ten at the latest. It's very nice of you to come and see me. What have you been up to?"

"Well, I've been in London mainly."

“Business up in town, then?”

“That’s right, business.”

His bed faces away from the bright bay window but towards the shelves on the wall. I put my head next to his, trying to get as close as possible to the view he’s got of the rows of framed pictures.

“You’ve quite a rogues’ gallery up there, haven’t you?”

“Yup. Keeping an eye on me.”

They’re all there: Sylvia as a young woman; Sylvia and Len; Katherine and Sylvia together, holding me. And there’s one other picture, up in the corner of the top shelf, that I hadn’t noticed the last time I was here. I get up and take it down.

It’s a snap of Sylvia and me outside the Tarenton house. I look about three and Sylvia is holding me on her hip. It must have been taken on one of our visits, before Marjorie and Mark began to live there. Sylvia’s face is turned towards me and I’m looking straight towards the camera, my eyes screwed up a little against the sun, my arm is round her neck. I get the picture and hold it close enough for Len to see, giving him his glasses.

“Here, Len, put these on. Tell me who this is.”

He obediently puts them on and takes the picture from me.

“Oh, yes.”

“Who’s that, Len?” He lets his eyes wander over the image.

“That’s the little girl who came to see us.”

“Did she come often?”

“All the time, always enjoyed it.”

“Whose little girl was she?”

“Pretty little thing.” He looks up at me, giving me back the picture.

“I expect she had to go home for her supper.”

Part Three

Chapter 32

“Tea?”

“Coffee. And put some fucking brandy in it.”

“What happened to combating our free radicals and upping our antioxidants?”

“I’ve decided I like free radicals. They’re more interesting at parties.”

Sometimes I wish there wasn’t a Mrs Shaun Henry.

“You got the Pearson release?”

“Got it. Go away now. Five more hours and I’m outta here. You’re holding up progress.”

In the kitchen I lean on the counter with both elbows and yawn hard enough to unhinge my jaw. It’s been nearly two weeks but I’m still not properly back in the routine. At least we’re nearly at closedown. Once the country hits the sixteenth of December public holiday no one cares till mid January. And the sixteenth of December is today. Tomorrow, Shaun is off to his house in Yzerfontein and I get a series of easy-going stand-in presenters, more and more inexperienced the closer we get to Christmas.

I return to the production office carrying grey coffee.

“Sorry. This isn’t exactly your finest Arabica. I have a horrible feeling it might be Checkers’ own brand.”

“It’s fine. After green tea it’ll taste like angel tears.”

“Are you just going to go up the coast and flop about for a month?”

“Yip. Can you think of any reason why I shouldn’t? The kids are happy, Monica’s happy, I’m happy. Sounds like a plan to me.”

“Think of me grinding away here every day.”

“I probably won’t. Anyway, haven’t you got your brother coming?”

“Yes. He arrives on the twenty second. It’ll be weird. It’s the first time we’ll have been together on Christmas Day since my mother died.”

“Wow, that’s...,” Shaun’s eyes stray back towards his computer screen and something he’s spotted that needs tweaking in the script “...quite something.”

“Is there anything you want?”

“I want it to be nine o’clock... No, thanks, I’m nearly there.”

I take my cigarettes and slide back the glass door to the balcony. The sky is getting light and from here I can see the sea, choppy with the South Easter, although it’s not too strong this morning. I shield the flame with my hand and sit on the picnic table, hugging my knees, feeling the slight head rush from the nicotine. Drinking tea in Tim’s kitchen just over two weeks ago, it was like I’d never been to Cape Town, never had a different life. Now it’s almost like I’ve never been away from here, but not quite. The image of Mark in hospital. That’s a picture I’ve still got in my head.

I don’t know how long I was in the family room. I think someone may have opened the door while I was there but then retreated, concerned that they were intruding on private grief. As if grief can ever be anything other than private. However long it was, when I looked up it was dark outside.

After I scraped my face with paper towels, I went back to the ward. Marjorie was by the bed and Mark was asleep again, on his back with his head turned to one side, one hand still outside the covers. If she noticed I’d been crying, she didn’t say anything, just thanked me for coming.

“He fell asleep a little while ago, I’ll tell him you said goodbye.”

I couldn’t just go. I’m the straw that broke this poor camel’s back. I’m not sure there’s anything I can do about that, but I had to speak to him. He mustn’t find I’ve gone while he was sleeping.

I could feel Marjorie’s eyes on me, daring me to wake him up. I didn’t want to make a fuss because I didn’t want to expose him to her questions later. As far as she knew, I was a distant family connection doing the right thing. If she saw any more significance to it than that, her mind was going to work in who knew what direction. She’d want to know what we’d talked about, whether it was the reason he was here in this bed now.

What could her son say to her? Why should he have to explain anything to Marjorie, anyway?

I stood there for a couple of minutes, silently begging him to wake up, but he didn't move. I leant down and Marjorie took a step forward.

"Vicky..."

But I'd already squeezed Mark's hand. He opened his eyes and I could see he didn't know where he was. I crouched so my face was level with his.

"Mark. I'm going to go. Take care. We'll...be in touch, all right?"

He nodded, just once.

I gave Marjorie a brief hug, feeling her thin shoulders through the wool of the turtleneck.

"Thank you for coming, Vicky. I...we appreciate it" and she smiled her wince of a smile.

"I'm glad I could come."

"I'll walk out with you."

She was now properly curious. So far she'd asked nothing but I could see the balance was tipping. She walked a few paces with me.

"Oh no... I'll..."

"Mum..." Mark's voice was full of reasons why she had to go back to the bed.

It's the Day of Reconciliation so we open the lines and ask people to tell us their stories about making up with friends and family, or if they have someone they'd like to be reconciled with. Not the most imaginative topic, but on public holidays we start from the premise that no one is listening and, if they are, they don't want to make much effort.

"And it's Lindy from Tokai. Hi Lindy. What's on your mind?"

“Hi Shaun. Well, I didn’t speak to my youngest sister for over twenty years. You know, when I got to that twenty year anniversary, I realised I couldn’t remember what we were fighting about in the first place. During that time she’d moved to Canada so we had no contact. Last year, I thought – enough is enough and I rang her up. We both just cried and cried on the phone. She and her husband are coming for Christmas next week...”

“Lindy, that’s a lovely story. I hope you all have a fantastic Christmas together...”

“Thanks Shaun, I just want to say to people... you know, life is so short ...”

“You’re right, Lindy, you’re right. Colin in Milnerton...”

“Hi Shaun. It’s all very well talking about reconciliation. But it takes two to tango, know what I mean? I’ll think about getting reconciled when thugs stop making me and my kids feel like we’re not safe in our homes...”

And on we go.

A couple of days after I got back, I’d rung Marjorie. She was at home although Mark was still in hospital.

“He’s getting better, I think. They’ve got all the drugs and alcohol out of him but he’s still suffering from the after-effects of the exposure. I’ll go again tomorrow. I just wanted to get back to my own bed.”

“Is he talking much?”

“No. He’ll answer questions about how he’s feeling but I haven’t tried to talk to him about anything else.”

She’d kept in touch by SMS since then. Mark regained his health slowly and, when he was strong enough physically, they’d put him in a psych ward. I sent messages back, blandly warm, wishing them both well, strength, *sterkte*.

At nine o’clock, Shaun leaps out of his chair and runs in pretend slow motion round the studio, pumping his hands in the air, his face screwed up in a cartoon ‘yeeeeeeaaaaaaaaah’.

“All right, all right. Calm down. We’re not all sprung from here yet.”

He runs up to me, holds my face in his hands and kisses me – briefly – on the lips. I’m ashamed of the spark that zips through me. I try and cover it up by remaining mock stern.

“Don’t think you can get out of things that easily. I need you for another fifteen minutes at least.” But I can feel myself blushing.

I actually can’t think of anything to keep him here. We don’t even have a show tomorrow. Soon we’re all spilling out into the sunshine, now with its proper summer power. I have to do some shopping. Presents for a few people in the station and, in less than a week, I have a guest to think about and a party to prepare for. I’ve decided to go properly southern hemisphere and have my dinner on Christmas Eve.

Cape Town is beginning to heave with tourists and Gautengers who are already swarming to the tail end of the country, like fleas on a dog. I drive round the Gardens Centre car park for about fifteen minutes, going up and down the levels until I finally spot someone coming out. Pick n Pay is full of people cramming trolleys with the supplies necessary for their congregations in second homes, rented holiday houses, their own back yards. I negotiate my way round the crowded aisles, bumping into families who are already nearing breaking point, children beside themselves with the promise of Christmas and parents wondering how they’re going to get through the next nine days.

Eventually I’m in the car and winding my way through the traffic, back to Sea Point and the flat. As I’m going in with shopping bags, the woman from downstairs who’d helped me on the day of the break-in emerges from her door.

“Have you been away?”

“Yes. A couple of weeks in England. Work mainly and some ... family stuff. Glad to be back, though.”

“Really? If it were me, I’d have just stayed there.”

“What are you up to for Christmas?”

“We’re going to Mike’s parents’ place in Hout Bay. His sister will be there, too. You?”

“I’ll be right here. I’m having some friends round on Christmas Eve.”

“You ever get any joy from the police about that break-in?”

“No, not a word. Fingerprints didn’t show anything as far as I know.”

“Mike did speak to that *bergie* who’s always hanging around, but he didn’t get anywhere.”

“I can’t believe he had anything to do with it.”

“Well, I think you’re kidding yourself.”

“I’ll talk to him next time I see him.”

As I’m closing the door to my flat, my phone beeps. It’s an SMS from Marjorie.

Mark out of hospital tomorrow. M

Chapter 33

He is watching his mother put things into a bag. She's talking but he's not making out any of the words. He believes that she's describing what is going to happen after they leave this place, where she will drive him, what they will do.

It's easier if he closes his eyes. Easier to ignore her, easier to pretend that he, too, can be ignored. He cuts himself free and thinks only of the view from this window, the wide white sky, the brown patches on the grass and the brick wall at the end of it. The window is open and he can hear the cars and lorries on the road. The voices of two women float up to him, he can't hear the words but he thinks one is complaining about her job at this place, her friend agreeing that something must be done. He can smell their cigarettes, hear the gravel crunching under their feet.

He is holding one hand with the other one, conscious of the texture of his own skin.

"Mark?"

He opens his eyes. His mother is looking at him.

"What did you say?"

"I said I got an email from your boss. He's not worried about when you go back. Says you must concentrate on getting better."

He nods. Better than what? Better than he was before? Better than ever? Better not dwell? Better to have loved and lost? What if you haven't done either? You can't miss what you never had. Better get better get better get better get better.

Chapter 34

It's only Monday night, but school's nearly out so I'm living dangerously, which usually means one thing.

"Victor. Look at you. Have you spent the last three weeks on the beach?"

"Good God, no, darling. Far too damaging to the epidermis. I had a spray job. What do you think? Too much?"

"On you, it looks good."

We are in the Carnegie. There's a marked absence of beautiful young men. They're all back with their families, safe from the clutches of Victor and his mistletoe.

"How was the trip to the old country? Did you meet any pale and interesting Englishmen?"

Jesus, if only you knew.

"No, nothing like that. Just some old friends and a couple of BBC people. It was good to see the place again, but I'm very glad to be back."

"Well, I should hope so. This is your home, now. We can't have you waltzing off at the drop of a hat."

He leans forward and squeezes my hand with his long fingers. It's the first time I can ever remember him touching me apart from our greeting pecks on the cheek.

"Well I can tell you one thing. The cost of a glass of wine in London is enough to make anyone emigrate. Especially if you're spending rand."

"Ah, yes. No wonder the British are so uptight."

"I'm not uptight, am I?"

"God yes, you'd need a tractor to pull a needle out of your arse."

I play-hit him on the shoulder with the back of my hand.

“My darling, Victoria. You are the least thorny English rose I know. What are we having for supper on the eve of the Yule?”

“That’s a very good question and I’m glad you asked it. I’m not sure but it won’t be turkey.”

“Thank goodness. In fact, I didn’t know you cooked.”

“I don’t but I’m hoping that Hugh does.”

“Hope is a dangerous thing.”

Unusually, we don’t get slaughtered. Victor has ‘an appointment’ somewhere in the Greenpoint fleshpots. I walk back to the flat. The sun is only now going down and the evening is still warm, people are on the streets and bars have their tables outside.

Back home, I get out of my clothes and put on a sarong and vest. I open the windows and let in the breeze. There’s music coming from one of the other flats in the block, a start-of-week party night, the big holiday. I don’t feel very connected to the celebration, but I’m glad to be back here. In England, I told everyone who’d asked me, how happy I was living in Cape Town. Every time, I’d had a niggling sense that I should have my fingers crossed behind my back. After all, I’d left here with my brave new house rocking on its foundations. Now I’m sinking back into the place, the city gathering round me, familiar, benign. I remember the night of the break-in. It wasn’t just the invasion of the robbery itself. Something else was giving way underneath me. Now the ground feels firmer, the fault lines fusing shut.

Thinking of the robbery reminds me of the buttons. I’d put them out of sight at the bottom of the wardrobe in a box full of all kinds of bits and pieces – bank statements, old address books, photographs, farewell cards, letters. Clutter from my English life that had seemed vital at the time. I pull out shoes and boots to find it. The brown padded envelope is on top.

I sit down on the carpet and tip the buttons onto the floor. Even though I haven’t seen them for weeks, I could almost draw them all one by one. I put a few in my fist and open and close my fingers. They move, the fabric-covered ones catching against each other, the domed woven leather one warm, the mother-of-pearl cool against my skin.

I pick out the gold one and run my finger over it, over the smooth beads of the surface, feeling the tiny imperfections where flecks paint have come off. Does it carry something with it? Or did it simply land on a spot that was already tender? Now this little collection of ordinary things seems so much in the present, it's impossible to imagine it's bringing anything from the past. They are just part of this time as it becomes part of the next time, which will become part of the next and the next.

I scrape them up and put them back in the envelope. When I pull the box towards me, I see a folder of photographs I'd collected together to bring on the trip but which I'd never done anything with. I take them out – me aged six or seven on a merry-go-round, my college rowing crew, Sylvia and Len's house just before it was sold, the picture of Katherine and Sylvia holding me and, at the bottom, my parents' wedding photograph. I'd forgotten it was in there.

They're in the usual pose, the couple in the middle, flanked by parents, fronted by bridesmaids. Robert, his hair swept back, a thin moustache, proudly straight and serious, his eyes sincere. I look at Katherine's black and white smile beaming out at me, hugging his arm tight with hers, unaware of what was to come, of how she would leave us all behind. And how, one afternoon, without knowing or meaning to, she would give a small, lonely boy a special secret.

"You left us both in the lurch, Katherine." I say it out loud and trace my finger round her face. If she had stayed alive, Mark would never have lived with Robert in that square brick house with a mother who didn't seem to notice. If she had stayed alive, I would have lived there, probably, with a mother who did notice. Or that's what we've all come to believe.

As it was, Mark suffered more than me. Could I have done something to stop his breakdown? Did I cause it? I can't describe what Mark wants but I have a sense of it. I can't give it to him. If I try there's a chance I'll get sucked into something I can't sustain, run the risk of failing him again. That mustn't happen.

I go and sit at the table, my laptop already open on Facebook, and pay him a visit. Nothing has changed on his page for weeks now. What is on your mind, Mark? Answer the question. I open a message box.

Dear Mark

How are you? I hope you're feeling better. I often think about you and your windows and the beauty you're putting back into the world. I hope the work helps you, too.

Yours
Vicky

I sit and look at the words for several minutes then I hit send.

At four o'clock in the morning in Cape Town, it is midday in Brisbane. Hugh is packing and I interrupt him on Skype to wish him *bon voyage*. He has news for me.

"You do realise that we only have a year to live."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Mayans said the world is going to end on the twenty-first of December, 2012 and the Mayans knew their stuff."

"So, not only is this pretty much our first Christmas together, it might well be our last."

"Tragic but true. Actually, if we're being accurate, they didn't say the world would end. They just didn't put any more dates on their calendar. I suppose while they were doing it, it looked far enough ahead not to have to worry."

"You mean like saying yes to helping someone move house or going to a charity quiz night because it's months away?"

"Yes, something like that. Or planning this trip. I'm going to be there tomorrow. Can you believe that?"

"Not if you don't go and catch your plane you won't."

"You have a point. See you tomorrow."

"Good grief. You will."

December the twenty-first, the summer solstice, our longest day. In England it is the shortest. Which means the longest night. I sent the Facebook message two days ago but Mark hasn't replied.

After the show, I go home and sleep for a couple of hours. When I wake up it's a sticky afternoon. The sun is still coming through my open window and I can smell the sea. I need to move but I don't want to run.

Down on the promenade, I find Cape Town is on summer duty. Little kids are on the narrow beaches and trotting in and out of the tidal pool. I let the joggers go by me as I look out towards the horizon, the air filling up my lungs. In London, you never breathe properly. The statues of the girl and the dragonfly have been cleaned up for Christmas. The labels that had been ripped off have been replaced, her swimming costume repainted. I remember running along here to work off the irritation I'd felt about Hugh's visit. I can't conjure it up now. In fact, I'm looking forward to it.

That makes me think of Sylvia. "No point in looking forward to things, you'll only be disappointed."

I remember the delicious anticipation of Christmas and birthdays, lying in bed unable to sleep with excitement but keeping quiet about it. When the longed-for event arrived, she was capable of smiling and laughing, too, but the happiness was always treated like an unexpected bonus, which somehow made it feel like a loss.

Did she become like that, worn down by a too-ordinary life, a sense that things hadn't turned out as she thought they might, by Katherine's death? Or was it simply not in her nature to feel joy just because the grass was beneath her feet or the sun on her shoulder?

I reach one of the sets of steps down to the beach and realise that I haven't touched the sea once since the weather got warmer. I slip off my shoes and walk down onto the coarse sand. The tide is quite high and in a few steps I hit the water, full of Antarctic bite this early in the season. I find a rock to sit on and let the water pool round my feet, turning my face up to the sun and looking at the red glow behind my eyelids.

Sitting with the warmth on my skin, I'm filled with sadness for Sylvia, the woman whose daughter I became. Perhaps her insistence that I'd suffered no loss when Katherine died wasn't just her lack of an emotional imagination. Maybe she was trying to protect herself from yet another disappointment. Perhaps her fear was that, if I recognised the loss, I would also recognise that

she, Sylvia, could not make up for it. She would be left with only the satisfaction of being proved right again.

I feel a sort of compassion for her. But, why didn't she see that, whatever else came up short, at least life had given her me? I wasn't a disappointment. At least, I don't think I was.

My skin is starting to burn even this late in the afternoon. It's time I got some things done. There's someone else to cater for from tomorrow and my fridge of lettuce, Provita, cottage cheese and gin is probably not enough to sustain a forty-five year old man. I walk back up the road making a list in my head. It's probably about three years since I made my brother a cup of coffee and I can't remember whether he takes sugar.

Chapter 35

Although it's freezing outside, the church is quite warm. But then he is sitting right at the back, next to one of old iron radiators. It's a mid-week service so the few people listening to the sermon with him are old. They're wearing sensible anoraks with scarves and hats, stout shoes. The men have big ears and noses, the women, jowls and permed hair.

He casts an eye round the windows. The glass isn't in great condition, but it's not too bad. Directly above him Jesus is feeding the five thousand. Opposite and a little further down, the Angel Gabriel is looming over Mary. Today the sun is coming in and the vicar is talking about Jesus being born. At the front of the church is the children's nativity scene, a tinsel and cardboard star on a wire over the stable. He can't see the plaster figures inside very well but he knows who's there. The vicar is on to the bible reading.

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”

He's glad to have this time to think. Things are clearer. There is one more thing he will do. Just one.

Chapter 36

It is the twenty second of December and I'm on the N2. The road is busy – with 4x4s towing caravans and trailers, family saloons, their back windscreens packed with pillows and wrapped gifts, vans with surfboards and windsurfers tied to their roof racks, people going to and fro, foraging out their spot for these precious few weeks.

As I park the car in the airport multi-storey, I'm nervous. I look around, trying to see the place with the eyes of someone who's never been here before. What kind of first impression does it give? If you walk out of the brand new airport, its lines soaring, you might think that your preconceptions about Africa are way off the mark. But drive back up the highway and see the shacks falling into the filthy water on either side of you for kilometre after kilometre, and you quickly realise that not all those ideas are wrong.

I'm waiting with everyone else, trying to work out from what passengers are wearing, which flight is coming through. You can spot the ones who have come from Europe, swathed in layers and boots and beaming as they see the sun pouring in the windows of the arrivals hall.

I love watching people as they come through the sliding doors, scanning the crowd, trying to hide their uncertainty. Then seeing their expressions change as they spot their people: teenagers home from their gap year and mum trying not to sob; little kids ducking under the barriers and running up to daddy, their mother smiling behind them as he gathers them up; grey-haired grannies given big bunches of flowers by grandchildren who only know them from the pictures on the sideboard. I usually stand there like an idiot, tears pouring down my face.

I'm beginning to wonder whether I've been so bound up with other people's reunions that I've somehow missed Hugh. I look at the knots of people behind me, to see if he's already somewhere in the hall. But then, there he is coming through the doors, a wide-brimmed leather hat on his head, khaki shorts with brown knees. He's at that uncertain scanning stage. I'm carrying a sunflower, which I wave above the heads of those around me, pushing my way through to the front. He comes over and we grin at each other stupidly, the metal barrier between us.

"I'll go round."

"Good idea."

I stand with my flower waiting for him. I can't believe that he's here. It's been only my city for so long. He lets go of his trolley and squeezes me with one arm and then with both. I put my arms round his neck and kiss his cheek.

"Well, I made it. Nice place you have here though someone's left a bloody great boulder in the middle of all the houses." I can hear his accent.

"I know. I've been trying to get them to do something about that. How was the flight?"

"Oh god. Some woman behind me got her wee into a complete froth about how far the seat in front of her was tilting and kept hitting the back of it. Poor guy in the seat didn't know what to do with himself. She was muttering on and off for hours."

"Well, let me take you away from all this."

As we drive into the city, the mountain up ahead then the docks spreading out below us as we go over the brow of the hill, I'm ridiculously proud of Cape Town, like I'd laid it on specially. Hugh seems duly impressed.

"It is a beautiful spot this, isn't it?"

As he says it, I realise how much I care what he thinks about the place and, more than that, about whether I'm doing the right thing by being here.

"Yes. It certainly beats Streatham High Road. If you throw yourself off a building here, at least you've got a good view as you go down."

I suggest the first thing we do is go back to the flat so Hugh can have a shower and unpack. I lie on my spare bed watching him as he puts piles of T-shirts in the drawers I've emptied.

"So, I've been doing some reading and my main priorities are going to Robben Island and up the mountain. But I'd also like to see the radio station. Would that be possible?"

"Yes. I spose it would. Why don't you come round after the show one day after Christmas. The place will be like the *Marie Celeste* but you can picture where it all happens."

"Cool. You're working most days, right?"

“Yes, but I’ll be through by ten thirty, eleven at the latest. About the time you want to get up, probably.”

“Excellent. I’m going to have a shower.”

“Of course. The two blue towels are yours.”

He gets together his sponge bag and a T-shirt and underpants and I’m suddenly awkward.

“I’ll leave you to it.”

“What are the chances of you finding something to celebrate my arrival?”

“Isn’t it a bit early, even for us?”

“Certainly not. It’s always six o’clock somewhere.”

“Ha. I remember Robert used to say that.”

“Yes. I know. It was a bit more sinister with him but the principle’s a good one.”

I go into the kitchen and get the bubbly out of the fridge. As I take off the foil and unwind the wire, I wonder who it is in there, standing under the shower, washing his body, a body that I’ve never seen, never shared a bath with or a bedroom, not even swum with? Who does he think is in here pouring drinks?

The sun is co-operating for Hugh’s first afternoon. After lunch at the Carnegie, a chance to check out my local, I drive him out through Bantry Bay and Clifton where the other half are busy leading their spectacular lives, past Llandudno to Hout Bay and round Chapman’s Peak Drive. Every time I see the ocean road through someone else’s eyes, it carries me away all over again.

“Do you come out here a lot?”

“Not as much as you’d think given it’s right on the doorstep. My weekends don’t seem very long, somehow.”

“It’s interesting, mine sometimes seem endless. When you get to my age everyone’s married with two point four children and they ... what do you call

it? ...'cocoon' at the end of the week. Even when I'm invited round to people's houses I sometimes feel I'm intruding."

"Are you sorry that you haven't ended up with all that?"

"Sometimes. I often wonder what it would be like to have a child."

"I can't imagine it. Maybe someday you will, though. That's the nice thing about being a bloke. Look at Anthony Quinn, he was producing them when he was over eighty."

"Oh God. That doesn't sound very appealing either."

"Are you exhausted? Do you want to go back and sleep or have you another hour or so left in you?"

We're coming down into Noordhoek and I want to take Hugh to the beach.

"I can sleep when I'm dead."

The car park is half full. We leave our shoes in the car and pick our way down the boardwalk and across the boulders, onto the wide expanse of sand. The wind is strong enough to blow up a slight haze above the flat surface of the beach but not so strong that you can't open your eyes. Occasional gusts take our breath and voices away. The tide is out and light dances on the water in the distance. The first real waves are breaking quite far out and there's a wide expanse of shallow water with tiny white horses. The sea smell is strong.

We run out into the wide space, laughing for no real reason, our hair blown around. The ridged surface of the sand is wet and hard, making it easy to run. I feel like I could keep going till I get to Kommetjie, at the other end of the beach. Hugh, too, is infected with energy, his limbs flying all over the place. We race about like children, splashing into the icy foam at the water's edge until we're out of breath. Then we fall into step, walking along in the shallows, and I take his arm.

"When was the last time we were on a beach together?"

"You have to get me a drink every time one of us starts a sentence with 'when was the last time...?'"

"We'll each have one. We'll both be pissed. Thank you for coming to see me."

“It’s a pleasure. Well, I hope it will be. In answer to your question, I think it was probably Weston-Super-Mare when you were about three or four. Not quite like this, though.”

“You’re telling me. Weston is just one huge expanse of mud from what I can remember.”

“Yes. You got stuck in it and bawled your head off.”

“Did I? What a wuss.”

“Robert made me come and rescue you.”

“Made you? Weren’t you in the business of being nice to your little sister.”

“Not very much, no. I thought you were a brat.”

“I probably was a bit of a pain. Anyway, I’m not surprised you were hacked off. Your life had gone more than a bit pear-shaped.”

“You could say that.” And he grimaces slightly.

“I think you’ve done very well for your first Cape Town day. Let’s go and have some tea.”

“What the fuck is tea?”

We walk back up the beach not saying anything. My skin is tingling, sticky from the salt. I feel clean and happy, elated by the water and the space.

Again I think of Sylvia. What would she have made of this place? What would Katherine have made of it? In another version of life, my mother and my aunt might have come to visit, walking along this beach arm-in-arm, their hair whipping over their faces, wearing sunglasses and long shorts, toenails painted different shades of pink.

We tumble into the car, our hair wild and our cheeks burning. Hugh grins at me.

“That was fun, thank you.”

“Fun! There’s a word. When was the last time you had fun?”

“I think that means you owe me a drink.”

“And so it begins.”

We go back home and, after two glasses of wine, Hugh’s eyes are beginning to close.

“Is the jet lag catching up with you?”

“Well my body thinks it’s two am. Even I’m usually in bed by then. I think I should hit the sack. I want to be raring to go tomorrow.”

“Of course. Go on, go and collapse. I’ll see you when I get back from the station.”

We discuss keys and security codes and he takes himself off to bed. I’m thinking that it would probably make sense for me to go too, when the doorbell rings.

“Yes?” I bark down the intercom. I hear nothing and then something, someone speaking. I can’t make out the words but I think I know who it is.

“Macintosh, is that you?”

He says something else but I still don’t understand.

“Hold on. I’ll come down.”

I can see him peering through the glass door. I open it, letting it rest against my back to stop it closing. I leave the security gate shut and look at him through the bars.

“Where have you been, Macintosh? I haven’t seen you since I got back. Are you all right?”

He looks down on the ground and mumbles something, but I can’t make out what he’s saying.

“What?”

“Madam, I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry about?”

“The other madam, she says”

“Don’t worry about the other madam.”

“She says I steal.”

“She just needs someone to ...get cross with.”

“They said”

“Who said? Are you talking about the break-in? Did you see something?”

He nods.

“Why didn’t you tell someone?”

He doesn’t reply.

“Macintosh. That day, in the rain. Something was wrong. Did something happen? Did you do something?”

He’s swaying and there are silvery rivers of saliva running down his chin from the corners of his mouth. He reeks of fresh booze. He brings up one hand and wipes it roughly over his face, over his eyes. Almost imperceptibly, he nods.

“Did you tell someone about the keys?”

“They ... throw this down.” And he thrusts his hand towards me, jerking it to show that I must take whatever he’s got. As soon as I do, he turns and shambles off.

I look down. I’m holding the small pale blue box. When I click it open, the brooch is gone. I look up.

“Macintosh!”

But he keeps on walking, just flaps one hand to the side to wave away whatever questions I might have.

Chapter 37

There are three cracks in the ceiling. He's been lying on the bed looking up at it for two hours. It's beginning to get dark. His mother calls up from downstairs.

"Would you like something to eat?"

He doesn't answer. Instead he swings his legs over the side of the bed, light headed as he sits up. He pauses on the edge, breathing deeply.

Once he feels better, he goes out of the room and along the passage to the office. The computer is humming, its screen rolling with green, red and blue shapes. When he sits down, he watches it for a minute, letting his mind fill with nothing but the colours.

Eventually he puts his hand on the mouse and the screen comes to life. He goes onto the net and opens Facebook and sees her far-away life. Hugh has arrived it seems. Pictures of a mountain, a beach. A different profile picture, now. That's all right. How long does he look at it? Five minutes? Ten minutes? After a little while, he goes to his own page, clicks on his list of friends, finds her picture, clicks the icon, chooses 'unfriend'. Clicks.

Chapter 38

The scent of virtually unprocurable cologne is wafting up the stairs and with it the sound of well-modulated male voices. I stand by my open door as Victor and David round the corner, wearing crisp cotton shirts and Bermuda shorts, each carrying a dark green bottle in both hands.

“Are you expecting a party?”

“Darling. I always come prepared. I was in the scouts – or, at least, I’ve tried several times to be.”

I kiss them both on both cheeks.

“Homosexuals are so fragrant. Every home should have at least two.”

They go through to the kitchen where Hugh is basting the chicken with one hand, holding a gin and tonic with the other.

“Huge! At last ...” Victor flings his arms around him. Luckily, Hugh works in the arts and puts down the spoon just in time.

“Victor. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“All of it scandalous, I hope.”

As they greet, I see Hugh through Victor’s eyes, rangy with creases at the corners of his mouth and a bald patch. But what’s left of his hair is still dark and his face is full of intelligence.

“Drinks. I have *Pon-graah*, Victor, David? Will that do?”

“That would be very nice.” David is a cellist who looks petulant even when he’s laughing. He’s Victor’s latest crush but, as far as I know, is very straight. Victor takes a glass from me and raises it in Hugh’s direction.

“It’s very, very good to meet you, Hugh. I was beginning to think that Vicky was making you up.”

“I am the stuff of many people’s fantasies, so I’m told.” And he twinkles a little in Victor’s direction.

“Vicky, your brother is flirting with me. Didn’t you tell him I’m not that kind of girl?”

I raise my glass at him.

“Happy Christmas, Victor.”

Hugh takes a sip of the cold, sparkling wine.

“Not bad. It’s obviously not just rugby and racial oppression that you guys are good at.”

“We have many talents, Hugh. Finish messing about with that bird and come and let me tell you all about them.”

I remember that I’m supposed to be the hostess.

“It’s OK. I’ll sort the chicken and start the vegetables. You go through and I’ll join you in a minute.”

I put the chicken back in the oven and follow Hugh’s detailed instructions, putting broccoli and carrots in the steamer and boiling the kettle for the peas. When I’ve got as far as I can, I go through to the sitting room.

My little table is set with candles and crackers. There’s even a fake tree on top of the bookshelf. The men are lounging on the sofas, well into their first glass. Victor waves me over to sit next to him.

“Ah Victoria, what are you hoping for in your stocking?”

“Less thigh than is in there at the moment.”

He laughs and kisses me on the cheek.

I’d been nervous about how it would go, worried that Hugh would have no time for Victor’s waspish camp or that Victor would find Hugh too full of himself or that David would just sit and sulk. As it was, everyone made the effort, laughed at each other’s jokes, bothered to ask follow-up questions. At one point, I looked round the table and tried to make myself believe that Hugh was here, talking to these men, seeing me.

It's half past eleven and I am crouching in front of the fridge. Victor and David have just staggered down the stairs and Hugh and I are drinking wine by candlelight, ignoring the smeared glasses, dirty plates and empty cracker halves on the table and the chaos in the kitchen.

"Is this a one day game or a five day game?" Hugh is shouting from the sitting room.

"Wait. Patience is a virtue. I have another bottle of white wine in here somewhere."

"At least one, I should hope."

"I've got plenty. It's just not all cold. Don't worry, one out and one in."

I find the bottle I'm looking for behind the chicken carcass and go back to where Hugh is sitting on the floor leaning against the sofa. I sit down next to him, open the bottle and pour some more wine into his glass. His head is tipped back and his eyes are closed.

"So. I get the feeling there's still more to tell about the boy, Mark, and his graveyard exploits."

"Do you? Why do you get that feeling?"

"Because I can't believe that it was all just a Hardy-esque coincidence, your being there and his falling apart so spectacularly."

I take in a big breath and let it go.

"It's not that easy to explain."

"Try me, I pick things up very quickly."

"I think he wanted ... he wanted something to come out of getting in touch."

"What sort of thing?"

"I, I don't know. I couldn't work it out properly and he didn't tell me."

My voice gets slightly husky. Hugh raises his eyebrows but I don't say any more.

"You alright Vicky?"

“Katherine left me, too, you know. Not just you. She left me, too. And I’m her ... daughter, Hugh. I lost the one person who could make me feel that being me was all right.”

“Geez. How did we get on to that?” He puts his arm round me. “I know, you lost out. I know you did.”

“Do you? So why won’t you ever talk about her, why don’t you tell me about her? You knew her for twelve years.”

He doesn’t speak, just stares straight ahead. I look at the side of his face, his jaw muscle flexes. I wipe my nose with the back of my hand and take another mouthful of wine. After a while, he clears his throat.

“I hadn’t thought about it like that ...” He nods. “I will.”

Tired and drunk, I slump back against his arm and the sofa. We are quiet for a while. Cars go up and down, voices float up from the pavement.

“Do you ever think about how our lives might have been if she hadn’t died?”

He runs his finger round the rim of his glass a couple of times.

“Sometimes.”

I hear a shout from the street and I look down at my watch.

“Happy Christmas.”

He grins. “Same to you.”

Christmas Day afternoon and I’m panting up the road, trying to force a bit more of yesterday evening’s alcohol out of my pores. The street is quiet. Many of the usual residents are away and those who’ve stayed are lying low, the Jewish population not too bothered about all the Christian fuss.

I key in the security code of the main door and lean on the wall just inside it, trying to gather some strength to get up the stairs. I’d left Hugh in the flat reading *Spud* – one of the presents I gave him this morning. He’d given me a pendant with an opal set in silver. While I’m getting my breathing back under

control, I catch sight of something in my post box. I don't get any letters worth opening – even at Christmas – so I hardly ever look in it. Sticking out of the slot now, though, is the corner of a white padded envelope. My box key is on the ring with my door keys, which are in the pocket of my tracksuit pants. I unlock the little door and pull the envelope out.

It has been airmailed from the UK and my address is handwritten on the front in careful, sloping writing. I go upstairs and let myself into the flat as quietly as I can. As I go past the spare room door, I can see Hugh sprawled on his bed, his mouth open slightly, his breathing loud and the book on his chest. In the sitting room, I sit on the sofa and tear the envelope open. Inside is a card. On the front is a stained glass picture of Mary holding her baby. Inside, the printed text says:

The dawn from on high will break upon us,... to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Luke 1:78,79

Underneath that, in the same writing as on the front:

I'm OK. Happy Christmas.

I turn the card over. Taped to the back is a button. A gold, glass button.