Heartwood

A story

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Argotist Ebooks

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All biographies like all autobiographies
like all narratives tell one story in place of another story.

Helene Cixous (1937 -)

Heartwood

I

'He looks like a horse's arse, he smells like a horse's arse...' roared the rugby team as they charged around the quad. I tried to follow but I was laughing so hard I couldn't breathe. The lake of Dry Blackthorn between my head and my feet made walking difficult. Rakesh, the captain, scooped me up as he passed and set me aloft on his shoulders. 'Faster!' I yelled, kicking his sides. Fist in the air, I urged them on like some demented Boadicea. Rakesh tripped, pitching me towards the cobbled floor. Somehow he caught me and swung me up and around, whirling me until I was dizzy. I tipped back my head and looked at the sky, where the stars streamed as though they were on over-exposed film. Then he swung me low (sweet chariot) and laid me gently in an open dustbin. When he'd stopped laughing, he turned and walked away. We never spoke. When we were sober (which was, admittedly, not often) we ignored each other. I was his drinking buddy, the Absinthe fairy. Beyond that I did not exist.

'Come on,' said Mike, my Other Half, wedging his hands under my arms and hoisting me out of the bin.

'Good job it was empty,' I panted, dusting myself down.

'What shall we do now?' he asked, lighting a cigarette.

What I should have done now was go back to my room, make a large black coffee, and get on with my Shakespeare essay. But cider logic was in charge. 'Drink more, obviously.'

Mike offered his arm and we wove through second court, where the bar was calling last orders. As we wobbled over the shadowy cobbles of third court I looked up at Professor Rattigan's window but all was dark. My essay was due in tomorrow and I knew it was bad. I had to face it: the token Northerner from a bog-standard comprehensive simply couldn't cut it.

We stopped on the Bridge of Sighs so Mike could take a piss. 'Do you have to?' I asked, looking away in disapproval. Back home this was yobbery. Here it was high spirits.

"Fraid so,' he said. 'I couldn't wait'

'Well, I need to go too, but I bloody well *have* to wait, don't I?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Mike, buttoning his jeans. 'I reckon we could rig up a funnel and a hose pipe down at the labs. I could make it my final year project.'

'I'm not holding your hand now,' I said over my shoulder as I walked on into New Court. Music pulsated from the 'wedding cake', a pale Gothic folly added in the nineteenth century for the accommodation of gentlemen scholars and their servants.

'Maybe Cat's having a party,' said Mike. 'Let's take a look.'

'OK,' I said uncertainly. Cat was rather like Holly Golightly, except she went somewhat more heavily. I wasn't sure if she was my friend, or just someone doing the same course who stopped for the occasional chat. To be honest, I was intimidated by her famous parents, her beauty, and her wealth. I didn't want her to think of me as a hanger-on or an autograph chaser.

Mike poked his head around her door. All was quiet. No party here.

'Darling!' trilled Cat as she rose unsteadily from the table and teetered towards us. She gave Mike a lavish hug and a kiss on both cheeks. It may have been my imagination, but I thought she stiffened slightly when she saw me. If she did she disguised it winningly, hugging and kissing me, too, before returning to her seat, where she toyed with a leathery-looking fried egg on toast. She lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, then said: 'Fuck it,' and stubbed it out in the fried egg. 'That's boarding school for you. I've been living on crisps and fags for so long I can't eat anything else. Still, it kept me out of the way while Mummy had her *glittering* career. What's a minor eating disorder compared to that?' She poured herself a large slug of gin and downed it in one, slamming the glass on the table.

She looked like she was going to cry, and I wondered whether I should try to comfort her. I was about to risk it when Mike lunged for the stereo. I jumped as *Cabaret* blared from the speakers.

'Come on, old girl,' said Mike, rubbing her shoulder. 'Show must go on, and all that. Knock off the gin, it never helps. Here,' he said, opening her drinks cabinet. 'Let's make cocktails. Ursuls, you know how to make a Cosmo, don't you?'

'Erm,' I said. The only Cosmo I knew was a magazine.

Cat rested her head on Mike's chest and smiled as she closed her eyes. He stroked her hair fraternally. Then she jumped up. 'Cosmos ahoy! Get the vodka out the freezer, will you?'

I hastened to comply, helping myself to a nip in the kitchen – the Dry Blackthorn had worn off, leaving me with the social skills of an amoeba.

Cat attempted something complicated with limes and triple sec, while Mike did a really bad impression of Tom Cruise in *Cocktail* (to whom he bore a passing resemblance and never let you forget it). I hung around like a spare part, noticing Cat's underwear spread to dry on the radiators. Expensive little scraps of silk and lace. A far cry from the ninety-nine pence polyester that covered my beanpole modesty.

Just then Razz burst in, closely pursued by Sebastian, who was trying to stab him in the back with a large white mooli radish. They started mincing about to the music, and suddenly there was a party going on. 'Beedle dee, dee dee dee...' sang Razz, putting a pair of Cat's knickers on his head.

'Two ladies!' shouted Sebastian, as he tried to fasten one of Cat's bras over his t-shirt.

Mike settled down to roll a spliff and I, having downed two Cosmos, found that I suddenly had the talent and charisma of Liza Minnelli. I flailed about in front of the bay window, using a red-striped college scarf in place of a feather boa. Tiny panes of Grade 1 Listed glass reflected a composite of candle flames and fractured images: a sharp elbow, a stick-insect leg, a flick of hair that hadn't felt scissors for over two years.

'Hush!' Everyone ignored Cat, so she tapped a glass as if she were making a speech. 'Oh,' she gasped, splitting her fishtail skirt as she clambered upon a table. Glasses crunched. A bottle of wine toppled.

That got Razz's attention. 'Spillage!' He sprinted over and slid on his knees as though he were racing a cricket ball to the boundary. He stopped beneath Cat and looked appreciatively up her skirt.

'*Dirty,* Razz,' growled Sebastian.

Cat placed her stiletto heel on Razz's nose. He began to lick it.

'Darlings…' Cat persisted.

Sebastian turned the music off.

'Maybe this time, I'll be lucky... ' I yowled, spinning around to find everyone looking at Cat who was looking at me.

'Could you kill the vocals please, darling? I've got something important to say.'

'All right, love. We've not run out of booze have we?' Oh, my accent. I winced every time I spoke. I sounded so guttural, so barbaric that I was ashamed to open my mouth. And they never let me forget it. Even my so-called friends would do cruel impersonations. They christened me Cilla Black, although I came from Lancashire, not Merseyside.

'Run out of grog? Don't be ridiculous, darling!' Cat undulated like a charmed cobra.

'She's getting married,' wailed Razz, who prostrated himself in despair. When he realised that he had come to rest in a puddle of wine, he slurped contentedly.

Cat shot him a look which said, 'if only'. Despite film-star looks, her desperation seemed to repel all-comers. Then she smoothed down her skirt and said: 'I think there's someone knocking at the door.'

'Balls! It's the porter!' I ran to Mike, snatched the spliff from his fingers and threw it out the open window. He didn't seem to notice.

Cat edged the heavy, studded oak door inwards. She had a cigarette in one hand and a cocktail in the other, so it was perhaps inevitable that she slopped half a Cosmopolitan down her cleavage as the door caught on a rug. 'Oh. Hello, darling,' she said, patting ineffectually at her wet décolletage.

Razz grabbed the door and wrenched it open to reveal Nathan the Natski (Natural Scientist and all round anorak, never seen in the bar, and therefore a non-person to the drinking majority). Wisps of hair floated untidily over the dome of his already balding head. He was flushed, and his glasses awry.

'I'm trying to work,' he said grimly.

'Well don't! It's midnight on a Saturday. Come in and have a drink, darling.'

Nathan looked with distaste at Cat's gleaming wet bosom. 'We don't all have rich parents. Some of

us have to make our own way. I need this degree. Just stop being so selfish, yeah?'

'*I* haven't got rich parents. Some of us can work *and* enjoy ourselves…' Anyone who didn't worship Bacchus inspired irrational fury in me. Probably because I knew, deep down, that they were making something happen in their lives, while I was squandering my health and my money chasing this illusory euphoria.

Spurred on by guilt and fear I surged forward to continue the argument, but Nathan had disappeared up the spiral staircase.

'Jumped up little jism-monkey,' spat Sebastian.

'I'm not having this!' I snatched the mooli radish from him and lunged for the door.

I stomped up the stairs, heart pounding. Mike panted raggedly behind.

We stood, swaying gently. Nathan's outer door was closed, which meant that he most definitely did not wish to be disturbed.

I banged on the door anyway.

'Erm, I don't think he'll come out,' ventured Mike.

'Why not?' I asked.

'Would *you* want to come out and talk to you?' He grinned unconvincingly.

I shoved the mooli through the letterbox; the radish was beginning to disintegrate so I wiped the slime from my palms on to the back of my skirt.

'Look.' Mike pointed to a small, arched door. It was about five feet tall, made of wood and painted grey. It hugged the curve of the staircase. An inch of shadow indicated that the door was not properly closed. Cold seemed to leach through the gap.

'That's never been open before. Where does it go?' I asked.

'Tottenham Court Road,' said Mike gravely.

'Piss off,' I snarled.

'Well how should I know?' Mike's tone was slightly apologetic.

'You know everything. You went to public school.'

Mike turned the ring which raised the latch. The door swung open on well-oiled hinges. There was a smell of old dust.

'Are we allowed?'

'I can't see a "No Entry" sign.' Mike ducked and stepped inside. I followed. We crouched as we shuffled through a cramped passageway, and found ourselves on the lead flashings next to a gargoyle.

'Wow.' There was a gentle wind up here, which caught my hair and snagged it in my lip gloss.

We peered out over the Backs; a huge expanse of blackness which covered trees and water and ornamental lawns. A moorhen spiked the darkness with a disembodied cackle. Far away occasional street lights glowed weakly. It could have been the vodka, but looking up at the sky gave me the sensation of peering down into a bottomless well.

Mike sat on a ridge tile and lit a cigarette. The tip burned fiercely in the fresh air. It seemed to trace scarlet lines across my retinas. I sat next to him, my tights offering little protection from the cold rough stone. The Cosmos wore off and I began to shiver. Mike put his arm around me. He was tall but very lean – a walking advertisement for the slimming properties of cigarettes. Yet there was a wiry strength in him that I found comforting. He had on a checked Timberland shirt and I could feel the warmth of his flesh through it.

'Aren't you cold?' I asked him.

'I don't feel it.'

We sat a while in silence. Mike flicked his cigarette stub out into the darkness. I nestled into his shoulder.

'Shooting star,' said Mike.

'Where?' He pointed and I followed the line of his arm, but saw only fixed dots of light. I didn't let on.

'You're supposed to make a wish,' said Mike.

'OK.' What I would wish for, if my fairy godmother existed?

'It won't come true unless you say it out loud,' persisted Mike.

I got the feeling that he was prodding me in a particular direction, but didn't have a clue what he wanted me to say. So I told the truth. 'I wish I'd never started this degree.'

'Oh.' Mike lit another cigarette and inhaled deeply. He turned away. His jaw muscles bulged. 'By extension that means you wish we'd never met.'

'No!' Oh crap, I'd really put my foot in it now. 'I didn't mean that.' I stopped and took a deep breath, swallowing down my tears. How to explain? 'You excepted, coming here has been a massive fuck-up.'

'It's not like anyone died,' said Mike, trying to reassure me.

Give it time, I thought. But I said: 'I'm going to fail. How can I go home and face them? My Dad'll just go on about the waste of money, and the neighbours'll all point at me from behind their net curtains, gossiping about 'er from number 14 with ideas above 'er station.'

'So it's nothing personal, then?' asked Mike.

I smiled up at him and he brushed my cheek with a tobacco-scented finger.

'I could have a solution,' he said, fiddling with his Zippo. If I didn't know better I'd swear he was nervous. I'd never seen him so twitchy.

'I love you,' he blurted. Bloody hell! He'd said the 'L' word. Unprompted. This was massive.

'I love you, too.' Inside I was beaming. He'd said it first! What a coup!

'Yeah' he said, returning to flippancy. 'U2 are a really good band.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Don't be childish.'

'Why not?' he asked, eyes shining. 'I love being childish. I love children. And I'd love to have them with you.'

At the mention of children my heart began to thud. I hadn't expected this so soon. I needed more time to find a way of telling him. My jaw was locked. I couldn't speak.

Mike knelt down and took my hand. 'That's why I'm asking you to marry me.' Before I knew what had happened, he'd slipped a gold ring on my engagement finger.

'Aren't we a bit young?' I asked. 'I mean, are you sure this is what you want? There's no rush, is there?'

'I'm totally certain. Not only do I want to spend the rest of my life with you, but I think I've found a way to take the pressure off. When Mum married Dad she got a job in the family firm. There's a job waiting for me when I graduate, and if we're married then they'll find you a job, too. It might be a PA or something at first, but it means you can tell Rattigan to shove Shakespeare up his proscenium arch.'

I gaped. 'I don't know what to say.'

'How about "yes"? Think about it: we get to be together. No money worries. I'll end up in a senior position – I've got to, I'm the boss's son. And when you want to stop and have children... well, whenever you're ready. How many do you want, by the way?'

Tell him, said the voice in my head. *Tell him now, before this goes any further. Give him the chance to walk away.* 'Erm, I've never really thought about it.' Coward. The seeds of my deceit would grow into vicious thorns and I would reap as I had sown. But I couldn't find the words.

'Are you OK?' asked Mike. 'You look pale.'

'Erm, yeah,' I lied, 'I'm just overwhelmed.'

He cradled the back of my head in his hand, tangling his fingers in my hair as he drew me to him.

Some time later we decided to leave the stars to their own devices. Mike stopped in the narrow passageway. 'Hmmm.'

'What?'

'Door won't open.' He took out his Zippo and flicked the flame into life. The smell of lighter fuel was strong in the small space. Curved masonry and wavering cobwebs snapped into view. 'Someone's locked it. You'll have to shout for help,'

'Me?'

'I'm too embarrassed,' said Mike.

I pushed past him and shoved the door. I kicked it hard. The wood shivered but didn't move. 'Bollocks.'

'Yes, two.'

'Very funny.' I put my shoulder to it and barged. 'Ow!'

'I'm going to see if I can get a message to Cat,' said Mike, turning away.

'How're you going to do that?'

'Throw something down at her window.' Mike went back outside and started looking for missiles.

'Bloody engineers,' I muttered. 'Hello? Can anyone hear me? We're locked on the roof!'

There was a sharp sound, like someone had cracked a giant egg, and Mike swore loudly.

Eventually, the door swung open. In the bright yellow arch of electric light, Natski Nathan was silhouetted.

'I'm so sorry for disturbing you again…' I blustered, hating the role of groveller.

'You're lucky I was passing – I was just going down to the Porters' Lodge to report a smashed window.'

'Oh,' I gasped, rather too theatrically. 'Perhaps a bird hit it.'

'A bird *brain*, more like,' said Nathan.

'Oh dear,' I faltered. 'Do you think someone...'

'A roof tile. Quite deliberate. Upper class yobbery, if you ask me.' Nathan was tight-lipped with anger, and I shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, hoping that Mike could hear this conversation and had the sense to keep out of the way until I'd managed to get us off the hook.

I smiled nervously and rubbed my arms to diffuse the goose bumps.

'You look cold,' said Nathan, softening. 'Would you like to come in for a coffee?'

'Erm… thanks, that's really kind…'

'Nice one, Ursuls!' Mike emerged and put his arms around my waist.

'Say "thank you" to Nathan, he's just let us out.' I looked meaningfully at Mike, but he ignored me.

'Ta very much,' he called over his shoulder as he started his descent to the party.

I turned to thank Nathan again.

'I think this belongs to you.' He shoved the mooli into my hand and slammed his door.

II

Dr Wilfred Coote's house was up by the station. We plodded the mile and a half in a strung out, shivering gaggle - except Cat, who was in vintage Astrakhan. She walked next to Razz, pausing as he lit a cigarette for her. She took it in her suede-gloved fingers and coughed throatily. 'I don't see why the little shit can't come into college, instead of dragging the six of us all the way out here.'

'But then he couldn't inflict his toilet performance on us,' said Sebastian, pretending to undo his jeans.

'Ooh, baby, baby,' sang Razz in a horrible falsetto, sticking his bottom out and giving himself a resounding slap. 'Ow!'

Thus encouraged, Sebastian pushed his hand down the waistband of his 501s and stuck his index finger out through the button fly. He gyrated his hips and made a pink worm of his finger.

'Overly generous, darling. It's the little finger, surely,' said Cat.

'No way! It's a monster, one simply couldn't get that volume of flow from anything smaller.' Razz indicated diameter by making a circle with his hands.

'Stop it,' I cried. I wanted to laugh, but I felt a bit sorry for Wilfred. Perhaps he really didn't know what he inflicted on us every week. He had very little time for me, with my ragged state school education, but I couldn't help imagining his mortification if he knew what his public school darlings were saying about him.

At the approach of a black cab, Cat's hand flew skywards as though tugged by a puppeteer. 'If God had meant us to walk,' she said, 'He wouldn't have invented stilettos. Anyone coming?'

I couldn't afford it, but didn't dare say so.

Razz rushed to open the door for her.

Sebastian, bless him, stepped in. 'Hardly worth it, duckie. How awful to arrive early.'

Greg and Ivana had their minds on higher things and just kept walking. Greg was desperate for a graduate traineeship with a management consultancy, and had decided that chairing the organising committee of this year's May Ball was the best way to get there. Ivana was clearly going to follow in her father's footsteps as a psychoanalytic film critic. She spoke perfect English, but her continuous references to 'theophanic self-creation', and 'Wittgensteinian holism', meant that it was impossible to have a meaningful conversation with her.

Razz followed Cat into the taxi, slamming the door behind him. The cab swung into a U-turn and we were left breathing diesel fumes as Cat's cigarette rolled into the gutter, its tip still glowing.

'Once more unto the breeches, dear friend,' Sebastian sighed, offering me his arm.

The wind was Siberian (we checked in the atlas – as we suspected, there was nothing between us and Russia), and we were actually glad to reach the shelter of Wilfred's house. He lived in a street of nondescript terraces and Sebastian took out his diary to check the number before pushing open the rusted black gate. The hinges squealed like stuck pigs. We shuffled up the brick path, which led through a tiny front garden. Someone had once attempted a herb wheel, but a twisted old rosemary shrub was the only survivor of the wet fenland soil. Near the porch, a lanky rosebush tried to catch our coats. It was a thicket of thorns, crowned by one sad flower. The petals seemed pure white, but as we waited for Wilfred to answer the door, I realised that they were marked with tiny red imperfections as though a brush of carmine had passed lightly over their surface. A bad omen. No doubt intellectual bloodshed was about to take place.

Wilfred was our 'prac crit' mentor. As far as I understood it, 'prat crit' (as we called it) meant being given a grainy photocopy of some august but unidentified literature, and attempting to talk as pretentiously as possible about it; the more preposterous and tenuous your assertions, the better.

A shape appeared behind the dimpled glass of the door and we readied our polite smiles, only to be greeted by a smirking Razz. He nodded to the stairs. Wilfred was aloft, doing whatever he did before seminars.

We trooped through the hallway and into the long narrow kitchen at the back of the house. It was gloomy, and cold. Dr Coote didn't believe in central heating. We sat around the table, breathing into our

cupped hands, and smoothing our crumpled photocopies. The table was covered with an oilcloth, which may once have sported a William Morris print but was now barnacled with the remains of Wilfred's dinners.

A floorboard creaked above our heads. Then it started. A long, sonorous trickle, like a teapot held high and poured slowly into a bucket. I studied the accretions on the table cloth, not daring to meet anyone's gaze. Predictably, a sharp toot of a fart concluded Wilfred's piss. Then he flushed the toilet.

'Someone should tell him that we can hear,' hissed Cat.

'I think he *gets off* on it,' whispered Razz, horrified.

'We should try not to listen,' pronounced Ivana.

'Well, you're bringing the ear-plugs, duckie,' snapped Sebastian.

I was sitting next to him and I could see that he had scrawled 'Ivana punch you in the mouth' in the margin of his handout.

Wilfred descended. He wore a filthy painter's smock, charity shop jeans and open toed sandals. He gave the impression of being a penniless old drifter—although his sandy beard made it difficult to tell, we reckoned at least fifty—but he'd just published a book on the Victorian Novel with the University Press, and he did a lot of teaching for various colleges, so he wasn't without means. My feet felt like ice, and *I* was wearing boots and tights. He proceeded to make himself a coffee (he never offered us anything) and prepare his pipe. 'Anyone mind if I smoke?' he asked, wreaths of tarry vapour already drifting around his head.

'Yes,' I wanted to say. 'It's carcinogenic, it gives me a headache, it makes my hair stink, and I'll have to wash my clothes, which, given that I must watch them every second they're in the laundry in case the rugby team steals my knickers and hoists them up the flagpole, is a total waste of my time. Of course I mind, you prick.'

None of us said anything.

'So, how did we get on with this titbit?' Wilfred pulled on his pipe until his cheeks hollowed, and then sat back expectantly.

'It employs a periphrastic style,' began Greg.

'With a third-person close narrative voice,' added Razz, who seemed relieved to have got his shot away so quickly.

'This isn't the *Spotters' Guide to Literature*,' said Wilfred, tamping down his tobacco. 'Tell me something interesting.'

I resumed my fascination with the table cloth. Dried baked beans made the faded fronds of the William Morris print look as though they bore crusty orange fruit. The ticking of a clock became unbearably loud. I thought I could hear a cat mewling at the back door. He always picked on me, like a predator singling out the weakest member of the herd.

'Are you going to maintain your enigmatic silence this week, Ursula? Or is it possible that you may, for once, have something interesting to offer? It's hardly an equitable arrangement when someone sits in a seminar, sucking up ideas, and gives nothing in return.'

Taken aback by such direct criticism, I scoured my brain for something to say. All the notes that I had scribbled in preparation seemed utterly fatuous under Wilfred's gorgon stare. 'It seems to draw on other texts,' I began.

Wilfred pricked up his ears. 'Go on.'

'Well, it refers quite self-consciously to another novel.'

'Yes?' Wilfred's eyes were locked on me. I had his complete attention.

'The narrator mentions "Middlemarch"…'

'Yes…' Wilfred blinked, puzzled.

He was thinking through the implications of my argument. Hope blazed for a moment. I must have said something interesting! I decided to push home my advantage. 'And *Middlemarch* is another novel…'

Wilfred paused, pipe hovering, brows knitted.

Was he being deliberately obtuse?

Then his brows flew apart in amazement as he realised what I meant. 'This IS *Middlemarch*. The narrator is referring to the imaginary town from which the novel takes its name.' He spoke to me as if I was a five-year-old in the remedial class. He could not believe my ignorance.

'...' My voice died in my throat. No words could defend my crushing stupidity.

Wilfred's pipe had gone out and he tamped it harder than necessary. I knew he was already composing a letter of complaint to Professor Rattigan.

My cheeks were infernos. I wanted the creaky floorboards to splinter and swallow me up. Ivana may have sneezed, but it was more likely a stifled laugh.

I bowed my head and began to fill-in the margins of my handout with black Biro. Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! The word trepanned my skull until the sludge that passed for brains was surely oozing out. Why didn't I just give in? Marry Mike and keep house for the rest of my life. Clearly it was all I was good for. Who did I think I was fooling?

'I have concerns about the narrative structure. There is several novels' worth of material in there that needs to be unpacked. As it is, the time shifts and genre changes merely jostle ineffectually for our attention,' said the sainted Sebastian, stepping into the silence that my almighty gaffe had created.

The grey afternoon faded, but Wilfred didn't put a light on. I strained to see the blurred text, and the tears of frustration didn't help.

Wilfred made a steeple out of his hands and nodded eagerly as Sebastian burbled on. As usual, I was puzzled. Sebastian was talking about things that only someone who had studied *Middlemarch* in depth could have known. Surely the idea of 'prac crit' was to respond to the text as you found it, not to draw upon your prior (and very expensive) schooling. Once more, I seemed to have missed the point entirely.

'The didacticism of the author is ultimately at odds with the moral trajectory of Dorothea, reflecting the quasi-psychosis of the narrator,' pronounced Ivana. 'You can see this quite clearly in paragraph seven.'

Wilfred smiled as though Ivana's point was so obvious that it did not require further elaboration.

'I've got no time for it,' said Cat haughtily.

Wilfred looked up sharply as if he had misheard.

'It's a misogynistic work in which the heroine's desires are subordinated to those of a male character.'

'Time's up,' said Wilfred, rising to switch on a bare 40 watt bulb. He glared at Cat as though he was willing her to spontaneously combust.

We squinted at the contrast. The kitchen had been almost completely dark. Now we could see a fug of blue smoke wreathing the light-bulb. As we had not removed our coats, we were able to make a sharp exit.

I braced myself for the inevitable mocking comments on my Middlemarch balls-up. At any moment the 'our Cilla gets it wrong again, she's from Oop North, you know' diatribe would start.

'What a jism-swiller,' pronounced Sebastian cheerfully, careless of the fact that we were still in Wilfred's garden. 'You really had him going there!'

'Well done for being so anti-Establishment, darling,' said Cat, patting my arm. 'Ugh, my clothes stink. I should send the bastard my dry-cleaning bill.' She stroked her Astrakhan protectively.

I faked a smile to hide my bemusement. Sebastian and Cat seemed to think I'd done it on purpose to goad Wilfred. This was an escape of Houdini-esque proportions.

Just then a black cab pulled up at the kerbside. 'I took the liberty of asking him to come back and collect us. My treat. Get in,' said Cat.

Greg murmured something about having an appointment with a potential sponsor as he strode off, hunched into the wind.

Ivana said nothing and walked right past us as if we weren't there.

Razz did his usual door-opening chivalry thing for Cat, and extended the same courtesy to me. 'Fuck off, you poof,' he growled at Sebastian, who had pinched his bottom on the way past.

'Drinks in my set,' trilled Cat as the cab lurched into motion. 'I think we all deserve them.'

I began to cheer up. Here I was, hurtling towards a night of merriment with upper class people who actually seemed to like me. Stuff *Middlemarch*. I vowed there and then that I would never read it as long as I lived. A girl has to have principles.

III

16.01.1996

I point my incense stick at the blank, grubby wall, and I see blues, whites; a horizon of purity. Something emerges from the blocks of colour—it may be a sea shell—it becomes iridescent, something shifts and I almost feel the pure breeze on my face, can almost see forever, to where grey merges with blue at the seam of perception: a shade of purity which follows the wing of the dragonfly, and lights the rose petal to bed on perfect summer evenings. It can sometimes be guessed at in moments of absolute stillness, when the gauze between dimensions is pulled taut. Then all the exiled shades of purity gather on cloud tops as the sun sets and their silent song of yearning jars the soul.

If I don't eat that orange soon it will shrivel up and I will have wasted my money. With a sickening sense of the ridiculous, this ensnaring mesh of neurons has tainted my vision—the portal closes and the smoke noses its way along the flat, obscenely solid wall.

My journal was full of pretentious shit. All I ever wrote turned into a bad impression of Virginia Woolf. Like all good clichés, I was desperate to be a writer, but how did I become one? Reading lots of old books didn't seem to be helping. I twirled my incense stick, staring at the wall. There were no interesting shadows for an aspiring scribbler to daydream about, just chipped plasterboard that was sorely in need of a new coat of paint. Two rugby players had shared this set the year before and they had obviously practised by throwing a very muddy ball at everything in sight. Virginia Woolf didn't have to put up with this. No, of course she didn't: being a woman she wasn't allowed in.

'Helleau….' Anyone who wasn't expecting Sebastian would have thought that Kenneth Williams was at the door. 'Gor blimey, it smells like a Turkish brothel in here, missus!'

I stubbed the incense out on its wood and brass holder, and realised that the scent, *Aphrodisia*, was really quite disgusting. 'All right, Seb?'

'I will be once this is over with.' He didn't seem unduly concerned.

'Barbaric time to have a supervision.' My stomach was already somersaulting. I could only keep up the pretence for so long. One day soon they would realise that I was a fraudulent Northern dolt, and throw me out.

'Inhuman, my dear. You done the reading?'

I'd read it. I just didn't understand it. But I couldn't admit that, so I blamed drunkenness, which was always seen as a noble excuse. 'Hangover didn't help. What's the gist?'

'Some New Historicist drivel. Apparently knowing what size codpiece Shakespeare wore opens a whole new reading of *Hamlet*. Or something.'

Thanks, Sebastian, I thought. That might just help me survive another week. I grabbed a pile of critical papers and my *Complete Shakespeare*, clutching them tightly to dispel the tremor in my hands.

I pulled the inner door to my set closed and pushed the outer door so hard that it slammed. I was even more jittery than usual. My essay was seriously below par. Oh, it was a competent analysis of the supernatural in *Hamlet*, but competent analyses just didn't cut the mustard with Professor Rattigan. He expected to be presented with a brilliant new insight, week in, week out.

I checked the pockets of my riding jacket—one of Sebastian's charity shop finds, a fitted affair that some dressage-mad girl had outgrown. It wouldn't fasten on Sebastian, snake hips or no, so he gave it to me. This evening I wore it with a long flowery skirt and the ever-present Doc Martens (one split across the toe). I thought that I looked like a streetwise Jane Austen heroine, although the impression I gave was probably that of a pantomime dame who'd got dressed in the dark.

I thrust my papers at Sebastian and went through my pockets for a second time. No key. 'Fuck.'

'No thanks, I've just eaten.' He returned my papers, which were looking rather dog-eared. As I dropped half of them, Sebastian marvelled aloud, as he often did, at how someone so ditzy could get themselves to Cambridge from a Northern comprehensive school. I knew no Latin, couldn't speak French,

and had a black hole where the Eighteenth Century should have been. 'Who *did* you sleep with?' he asked, in his best teasing voice.

'I've just locked myself out.'

'The porters are gonna love you.'

'Why do you think I'm always bringing them sausage and chips at ungodly hours of the night? Anyway, how am I supposed to function when I live next door to this?' The lads in the next set were law students and presidents of the Legalise Cannabis campaign. They did a lot of practical research. A pall of smoke hung permanently in the corridor; the reek of skunk permeated the stonework. It went a long way to explaining the weird shit that I wrote in my journal.

'I wouldn't complain,' said Sebastian, breathing deeply.

'Swap?' On the name board at the entrance to the staircase, I found the Gothic lettering (completely at odds with the utilitarian concrete of the building) which said 'U. K. Hurley' and slid my sign to OUT.

'You mean you'd give up all this to share rooms with Razz? Suffering shagwits, you must be psychotic.'

'It *is* one of the symptoms of long-term cannabis use.'

As ever, North Court was thickly shadowed. The winter night was already closing down the sky. I wished I'd put my scarf on. A cough was malingering deep in my chest; I'd even thought about eating the orange that was desiccating on my desk. We rounded the massive bulk of the chapel. Its long windows flickered with candlelight and the high, pure voices of the choir wound about us like golden threads. Attending Evensong seemed positively inviting compared with the ordeal which awaited us.

'Could we claim religious persecution? This supervision is preventing me from attending a service.' Gallows humour often arose at this point.

'You *are* desperate! Ever been in?' asked Sebastian, inclining his head towards the Chapel.

'Once.' God and I weren't on speaking terms, on account of my brother's illness, but in my first year, my parents and my brother had come down for the carol service. There had been the usual trauma about car parking, because my brother couldn't walk far. And then more fuss about where he could sit, because he wouldn't be able to get up out of the pew. We'd all ended up snarling at each other, and I hated myself for wishing that I could have a normal family who did nice things together. I shook my head to chase the tears that were crowding behind my eyes. 'I'm supposed to be doing the reading next week.'

'Seriously?'

'Yeah. We're all meant to in our final year, aren't we?'

Sebastian pulled his 'ooh matron' face. 'I think my invitation was redirected via the Republic of Bin.'

'Oops.' I loved the fact that Sebastian had the breeding not to care about a faux pas.

'What you reading?' He seemed amused by my obedience to the Chapel authorities.

'It's from the Book of the Maccabees.' I wasn't sure I'd pronounced it properly. I thought Sebastian might snort as he corrected me—like he did when I said 'appendixes'.

'The Maccabees? Are you sure?'

Cool. I knew something he didn't. Sort of. 'That's what the letter says. It's in the Apocrypha, allegedly. I'll have to find it in the library.' I thought of my growing library fines. I'd try to time it so that the sympathetic librarian was on—if I coughed pitifully enough, she would sometimes waive my debt.

'Someone's winding you up. The Maccabees? Sounds like a pop group from the 60s. Hey, hey, we're the Maccabees, people say we maccabee around…' Sebastian sang into his fist as he gyrated. He whirled on to the grass, and we both checked surreptitiously to ensure no porter had witnessed the transgression.

'Shut up!'

We walked under the arch into Second Court. Here we left behind the depressing modern concrete of North Court and regained the cloistered stereotype of Elizabethan turrets. At the far side of the quad

the windows of the bar glowed invitingly. The light bounced off Sebastian's pre-Raphaelite curls. I thought, as I often did, that Sebastian's hair was wasted on him. Why couldn't I have glorious auburn cascades instead of straight, pale curtains? I pinched his bottom, hard, in retribution.

'Nay, Missus!' Sebastian whinnied exuberantly. 'I hope you're not going to charge for that.'

'You couldn't afford it.'

'Trollop.'

We forced our feet to move past the bar and on into the darkness of Third Court. We had reached The Landing. All levity ceased. Professor Rattigan's outer door was open and his inner door ajar. I tapped quietly on the age blackened wood. No answer.

Sebastian, summoning all his public schoolboy confidence, stuck his head around the inner door. 'Hello?' No trace of Kenneth Williams now. 'He's not there!' Hope and disbelief sparred in his voice.

The inner door swung open, as if pulled by an invisible string. Leaping backwards, Sebastian collided with me and scattered my papers on the rolling wooden floor.

'Balls,' I hissed, bending to scoop them up. This started me coughing. With a hand over my mouth, I stifled the hacking bark, just in case this conjured Rattigan from the ether.

Sebastian put a foot over the threshold. I stood behind him. Gregorian plainsong emanated from a tiny Bose CD player. I knew it was a Bose because in moments of extreme humiliation my eyes roved the room, seeking something, anything as a distraction. I lusted after it, and bemoaned the wastefulness of squandering such a thing of surround-sound majesty on atonal chanting. A mug, filled with foul-smelling herbal tea, steamed at the foot of his white brocade armchair. Our essays, marked in hieroglyph illegible to all but its author, lay on the arm of the chair.

I swallowed nervously. 'What shall we do? Say we came and couldn't find him?'

'Wimp! He can't have gone far. Let's get it over with.'

We hovered uncertainly.

'Time for spring!' Professor Rattigan emerged from a door at the back of the room, carrying a glass vase stuffed with perhaps a hundred scarlet tulips. He placed them carefully on the harpsichord beneath the window.

Rattigan was too young to know so much, with his large, dark eyes, high cheekbones and well-oiled quiff. He wore his trademark leather jacket, drainpipe jeans and brothel creepers. He had no right to look that cool as he dropped lightly into his armchair and took up our essays. My stomach lurched. I knew mine was inadequate.

'So, what did we make of Greenblatt's assault on *Hamlet*?' asked Rattigan. His gaze was so sharp that I felt sure he could look into my brain and see the vacuum where a critically-informed response should have been. I looked to Sebastian, but he had no intention of riding to my rescue; he was scribbling an urgent last-minute insight into his notebook. I chewed my pen, pretending to be deep in thought. And then I had a coughing fit.

'Sorry,' I gasped, covering my mouth with my hand as I failed yet again to employ one of the floral handkerchiefs my Nan had bought me for Christmas. I clamped my mouth shut and willed the bastard cough to go away. It wouldn't. It rumbled in my chest, spiked my lungs with hot coals. My lips quivered and then gave way to the most appalling gravelled hacking. Sebastian moved to pat me on the back, but hesitated, unsure if this was appropriate in the presence of Rattigan.

The man himself rolled his eyes. 'You'd better have a glass of water,' he snapped. He jumped up, robotic, and beckoned me to the kitchen. This was unprecedented. Many tutors lived in college, but you rarely got to see beyond their sitting rooms. The forbidden nature of their domestic spaces made them things of magnetic curiosity. Did somebody so clever go to the toilet? Have dirty laundry? Clean their teeth?

Rattigan snatched a small tumbler from the draining board and filled it from the tap. He passed it to me, his delicate white hand almost touching my big clumsy fingers. I spluttered as I tried to drown my cough.

'Your essay is assiduous,' he informed me. 'But it says nothing new.'

'I know,' I wheezed. 'I've never read *Hamlet* before, so it was a lot to take in...'

'You'll have to do better than this with your dissertation,' he said. 'The deadline for submitting your proposal is next month. I don't need to remind you that we expect original research, not a rehash of what you could find in the library.'

'Actually,' I began. 'I'm struggling with...'

Rattigan had already turned away. He began discussing Sebastian's recent trip to Stratford. I was about to hurry after him when I glanced across the hallway. His bedroom door was open. I didn't want to look, but I couldn't help it. There was a huge paper lampshade, which hung like a pale moon from the low, beamed ceiling. The bed was covered with a fringed blue throw, block-printed with stylised leaves. It looked Eastern. Every wall was lined with books. He probably read all night. No time to sleep.

Seeing Rattigan's bed was wrong. He was air and fire only. Baser elements did not apply. My pause was already suspicious. I wrenched myself away and joined Sebastian on the sofa, putting the glass on the floor (there was nowhere else) as I told myself not to kick it over.

'So the workshop at Stratford explored a feminist interpretation of Ophelia?' Rattigan's head was tilted quizzically, his cheekbones as sharp as his wit.

Sebastian wanted to be a director, involving himself with luvvies at every opportunity. 'The actor was having problems with feminine passivity. She didn't want to play a doormat.'

I got my pen out and waited, poised, to note Rattigan's response.

The professor snorted. 'Anachronistically projecting her twentieth-century world-view backwards upon a society with very different sexual politics.'

But Sebastian didn't know when he was beaten: 'Are you saying that Shakespeare doesn't transfer to the modern world?' Oh, he was bold today!

Rattigan loved it when students argued with him. All the more opportunity to swat them down. He made a steeple of his fingers, rested his chin upon their tips, and then delivered his riposte: 'I'm saying nothing of the sort. But let us not forget that Ophelia was played by a boy, and the part was written with cross-dressing in mind. Are you ignoring the transvestite in the room?'

Sebastian blithered.

'Ursula, what do you think?'

Crap. This moment never got any easier. Without my Dry Blackthorn shield I blushed horribly. I ran through every response I could think of and dismissed them all as risible. Then I opened my mouth, unsure of what was going to come out. 'I think…erm…I think that female experience is censored on the Renaissance stage…'

Rattigan's eyes flashed, but he didn't interrupt.

'These are works written by and performed by men. How can they possibly reflect female experience?' Suddenly I was angry.

'Aren't you being rather essentialist, attaching a text so firmly to its author's gender?' He was toying with me now, getting me just where he wanted for the killer blow. Stuff it, might as well be hung for a sheep.

'Yes, I am. No matter how clever our theoretical manoeuvring we cannot get around the fact that men and women are biologically different and therefore experience the world in different ways. Shakespeare may hold up a mirror to society, may show us what men thought *about* women, but he can't show us what half the population felt or experienced. There is not one single text by a woman for this whole Renaissance paper!' I started coughing again and gulped some water.

Seb gaped. We both looked to Rattigan.

'Remember the social context. A woman's mind belonged to her husband. Committing her thoughts to paper and sharing them publicly was absolutely taboo. Such a woman was unfeminine, morally corrupt, and not to be tolerated. Is it any wonder that there's a dearth of material?'

Rattigan had put me in my place. But the voice inside me wouldn't be quiet. 'I don't accept that women didn't write. They've just been hidden.'

Seb shook his head in admiration at my folly.

I couldn't believe what I was saying; it was like an external force had taken possession of my vocal cords.

Silently, Rattigan got up from his chair and went to his desk. My heart pounded as I studied my lap. With a slow sense of dawning horror I realised my hand had slipped: I had got blue ink on the cream linen sofa. Shit! I moved my skirt to cover it, hoping he wouldn't notice in the dim light. This wasn't the only supervision in here today. By the time it was discovered there would be multiple suspects.

Rattigan came towards me proffering a piece of paper. He said:

I'll be the custom-breaker: and begin
To show my sex the way to freedom's door…

In response to my puzzlement, he added: 'Elizabeth Cary. The first woman in England to write and publish a play in her own name. She claimed it was stolen from her drawer, but the damage had been done. She died penniless, irritating the Establishment until her last breath. She's on the postgrad reading list. I've marked it for you.' He smiled slightly as he resumed his seat.

I scanned down the closely typed page:

Weller, Barry and Margaret W. Ferguson. Eds.
The Tragedy of Mariam, The Fair Queen of Jewry
by Elizabeth Cary, The Lady Falkland, (Berkeley, 1994).

Elizabeth Cary. I said the name to myself over and over, until it became a charm against male academics. She was going to show me the way. I just knew that whatever she had written would bewitch me. Who was Mariam? I'd never heard of a Jewish queen. I burned to know, to hold the words, turn the pages, and hear this woman's voice down the centuries. The rest of the supervision passed in a daze, with Seb waffling about dramaturgy and Rattigan quibbling over textual variants.

'Where did that come from?' Seb quizzed me when we found ourselves outside Rattigan's door.

'I don't know. It was like someone else speaking.' And it was. My mind was empty when I opened my mouth, and yet those words came out.

'Fancy a drink?'

Of course I did. But I had something to do first. 'I've got to get to Heffers—I might just catch them before they close.' I waved Rattigan's reading list.

'Blimey, you're keen.' Seb raised an eyebrow. 'See you in the bar later?'

'I should think so.'

On the stairs we passed Greg and Ivana on the way to their supervision.

'What mood is he in?' asked Greg nervously.

'You should be OK. Ursuls has just impressed him,' replied Seb.

A faint glow of pride made me smile at Ivana. She looked right through me.

'Agghh!' We had reached the bottom of the staircase and something grabbed me around the waist. 'Mike, for fuck's sake!'

He had been lurking in the shadows, bored without his drinking buddy. 'This is a kidnap. You will be taken to The Mitre and forced to drink your own bodyweight in Addlestones.' He lifted me up and swung me around.

'Sounds great, but I have to go and buy a book.' I struggled from his grasp.

'A book? What d'you think this is? University?' Mike looked to Seb for support.

'Ridiculous girl,' pronounced Seb. But he winked at me as I ran off.

The front gate was still open, the lights of First Court already nebulous as the evening mist began to rise. I stepped through the massive wooden doors and turned right. As I crossed Trinity Street an

outbreak of bells and chimes marked the hour, calling hungry scholars home to dinner. Even the beggars in All Saints Passage were packing up. Heffers was almost empty, but not quite closing. Under the fluorescent strip lighting everything appeared garish, hyper real, as if the brightly coloured spines which lined the walls were about to leap out, quivering with the import of their content.

Mike often said, unkindly, that Heffers was so called because it only employed staff that lived up to the name. I hated to admit it, but on this occasion the woman behind the enquiries desk did seem bovine; bulgy-eyed, ruminating as she moved her large body in a slow arc to place a book on the orders shelf. I stood, expectant. She didn't acknowledge me. I got out my reading list and smoothed it upon the counter. Still she avoided eye contact. I coughed. She moved languidly for another book, and wrote something in a ledger.

'Excuse me…'

Still no acknowledgement.

'Excuse me; I need to order a book.'

She turned, reluctant.

'I'm sorry, I know it's late, but I need this book quite urgently.'

She took the reading list from me, and blinked impassively.

'I think you'll have to order it on import. It's American…It's underlined on that list.' I wanted to tell her how important it was, how exciting this discovery could be. But she made her lack of interest abundantly clear. I could have found the first draft of the Ten Commandments for all she cared.

She turned to her computer, the green cursor flashing weakly. She typed one-fingered, mouth open. 'It's not listed.'

'Maybe you could try the author name,' I suggested. 'Cary?'

She poked some more keys. 'It's not listed in the UK.'

'No, as I said, you'll need to order it on import. It's American.' I started to nurture a violent hatred towards her. I had tried and failed many times to secure a holiday job in a book store, and yet here was this ignoramus making a career out of obstructing the reading public.

'You'll need to order it on import. It's American,' she echoed, flatly.

'Yes! As I said… Could you do that for me please?' I felt like slapping her.

In reply she took up a Biro and a pad of triplicate carbon paper forms. Laboriously, she began to complete the details.

The lights blinked and then dimmed. Someone began vacuuming. I was running out of time.

Her slow, looped writing seemed to take minutes to form each word. I wasn't sure she had the details correctly, either. Eventually, she tore off the top layer of paper and gave it to me.

'Any idea how long it'll take?' I asked, trying to curb my impatience.

'A few weeks.' She was already switching off her computer, not looking at me.

'It's just that this book is really important for my research …she was the first woman in England to publish a play…' The lights went off. The woman locked her desk. 'Well, thanks for your help then.' She ignored me completely. I began to wonder whether I was really here or if I had gone straight to the pub and was dreaming this whole encounter in a drunken swoon.

Outside, a cold clear night had arrived. My breath came in clouds as cycle lights blinked along King's Parade. A thrush's song sweetened the deep blue sky. The front gates were closed so I nipped along Bridge Street. Ducking through the side gate, I remembered that I'd lost my key. I'd have to walk the length of the college to the night-duty porters' lodge at the Cripps entrance and beg for a spare.

The library lights blazed, and I decided to look up my text for next week's reading in Chapel.

Cat stood by the entrance, huddled in a leopard-print coat as she pulled on a cigarette. She had a textbook under her arm.

'All right, Cat, what're you doing?'

She turned to face me, and shot me a look of startling froideur. 'Know your place,' it seemed to say. I was reminded that while Cat had spent the summer cruising the Aegean on a relative's yacht, I had been fortunate to find employment in a nursing home wiping incontinent bottoms for £2.70 an hour. I had the

feeling that once we graduated (*if* I graduated), Cat and I would never meet again.

'Oh, hello darling,' she said, squinting. 'I haven't got my contacts in, didn't recognise you.' She threw her cigarette on to the cobbles and crushed it underfoot. 'I'm stalking.'

Cat had a thing for Rakesh, and staked out the library when she knew the rugby captain would be returning from lectures, hoping to catch a glimpse. It seemed unlikely that she wasn't wearing her contacts.

'Oh. Any luck?'

'Zilch. He must have gone straight to a practice. What are you up to? You're not seriously considering work at this hour, are you?'

'No!' I tried to make my tone indignant, as if I was offended that she would even suspect that of me. 'Just passing through. Then I'm off to The Mitre. Mike and Seb are already there.'

'Mahvellous. Stick that on the returns shelf, will you?' She pushed a volume of feminist theory at me. 'I simply couldn't get on with them. A bevy of moustachioed lemon-lickers, I'll wager.' Cat teetered away, the slender heels of her boots bending on the cobbles.

I offered my fines like a penitent, and borrowed the feminists myself—we had to write an essay on them for next week. It was the Head Librarian covering the late shift. She'd recently turned down my application for a postgrad traineeship in the care of old manuscripts. She never gave a reason, but we were both embarrassed. Perhaps she knew about my drunken antics. Anyone else I would have asked where the bibles were kept, but I hurried away, head bowed, and looked them up in the catalogue. I found a chunky volume bound in green board with *Apocrypha* lettered in silver on its spine. Flicking through, I saw the word Maccabees and knew that I was not the victim of a wind-up.

In Third Court, Rattigan's windows were dark. Had he gone out? Were all his friends as clever as him? Did he ever talk about the price of a pint of milk? Or tell dirty jokes? Then over the Bridge of Sighs, the Cam black and glossy as it gurgled along. The books were heavy and already I longed to put them down.

In New Court, I saw that the great doors which led on to the Backs were still open. The lawns were grey velvet in the dusk. Nothing moved out there. It was still, perfect. Like the portal to the other world that I so often dreamed about. I stood, breathing the cool sharp musk of damp earth. Then the girl who practised primal screaming let rip and a host of blackbirds chinked angrily in response.

Someone was walking towards me through the cloisters. The figure wore a thick anorak, the lights from nearby rooms flashed on his glasses. He stopped in front of me. The path was too narrow to pass him.

'Evening.' Nathan smiled broadly.

'Hello,' I said, feeling unaccountably awkward.

'What're you up to?' he asked

'I've just been to the Library.' I hefted my books and he nodded approvingly. Perhaps he thought his good influence was rubbing off. 'You?'

'Careers presentation.'

'Oh, what are you hoping to do?'

'I'm not sure. Consultancy. Something that pays well!' He held his palms out as if to say: *How can you blame me? You and I both know what it means to be working class.* 'And yourself? Any plans?'

'I don't know,' I lied. It would be a while yet before I could look someone in the eye and tell them I was a writer.

'Well, you'd better think about it. Some of the best vacancies have already gone. Unless you plan to marry into money.' He chuckled at this.

I forced a smile, and shifted impatiently from one foot to the other. My books were a dead weight. And I knew that if I asked, he would carry them for me. I needed a way out of this conversation. 'You'll be pleased to know that Cat's in The Mitre tonight, so she won't disturb you.'

Nathan looked disappointed, as though I thought of him as a killjoy.

'I'll be going later. You're welcome to join us if…' Oh shit, did that sound like I was coming on to him? I started coughing and couldn't stop. I turned away, and put my books on a window ledge as I

clutched my sides. 'Sorry,' I gasped.

'Here.' Nathan proffered a cough sweet.

'Thanks,' I choked.

'You should probably go to the doctor about that,' suggested Nathan. 'And maybe wear a warmer coat.' He looked as though he was about to offer me his.

'Yeah, I know. Anyway, must be off.'

'Listen, I'm just going to get something to eat… fancy braving the Buttery slop with me?'

'Oh, erm, thanks, that's really nice of you to ask, but I've already eaten.' Liar. 'Maybe another time?' I pretended to check my watch. 'I'm late. Must dash. Bye!' I moved past him, feeling a sharp pain in the sole of my foot as I did so.

'Hold on!' Nathan shouted.

Crap. What was he going to say? I turned, relieved to see that he was not down on one knee, but holding my books out to me.

'Shit, sorry. Forget my own head if it wasn't attached.'

'I didn't have you down as a bible scholar.' Nathan indicated the *Apocrypha*.

'Oh, not usually. I'm reading in Chapel next Tuesday.'

'Good for you. Maybe I'll see you there.' He smiled and scurried away, hands in his voluminous pockets.

I walked on, limping as each step sent a jolt of pain through my left sole. I kept my back turned until Nathan should have been out of sight. Then I crouched, put my books on the floor and unlaced my boot. It was my key. I must have put it down the side of my boot so I didn't lose it. All that way for nothing. And a hole in my tights as well. I turned and retraced my steps slowly so as to avoid catching Nathan up. He seemed like a really nice guy, but I was engaged now. I couldn't even begin to consider him in that way.

I thought about not going to the pub. I was hungry. I could have a cup of tea and a sandwich, and read some feminists. But my friends were waiting for me. And I'd just got through a supervision with Rattigan. I'd earned a pint. I dumped my books on the desk and turned to go out again without even switching on the light.

IV

Mike couldn't believe I was actually going to read in Chapel. It was a waste of good drinking time, for starters. And volunteering to speak in public was proof of insanity. He helped me dress, laughing delightedly when it became clear that my laundry situation dictated the wearing of a Wonderbra. The perceived inappropriateness of this action seemed to please him inordinately, even when I put my demurest long pinafore dress over the top. He insisted on accompanying me to the Chapel door, guffawing all the way.

The harsh cold made my nose run and I thought to blow it while I had the chance. I fumbled in my coat, quietly smug that I had at last remembered to take a handkerchief out with me. But my gloved fingers were clumsy and they managed to extract the entire contents of my pocket before scattering them over the floor: cough sweet wrappers, receipts for library fines, hair bobbles, and a dirty old penny. I bent to retrieve the litter when a squall of hail pounced, sweeping up the handkerchief and carrying it away, a fading white splash in the dusk. I started after it, eyes watering as I squinted into the wind. I realised it was hopeless and stopped, exasperated. But then, as the light failed, the clouds broke and exquisite blue sky appeared, lit from below the horizon. It rendered the chapel absolutely black, a forbidding hulk, its windows flickering dimly in the gloom. We should not have been worshipping in there, but out here where the sky became ever paler and brighter. If God existed, that was Him.

'Look,' I nudged Mike but he was busy struggling to light a cigarette in the sleety wind.

'Mmm?' he asked, lips clamped around the filter.

'Look at the sky. Isn't it amazing?'

'It's dark. What're you on about?'

'Never mind.' I'd tell my journal about it later. 'Have you got a tissue?'

'Who d'you think I am? Great Aunt Maud?'

'Thanks a bunch. Come on, I'm going to be late.'

'You're actually going through with it?' Mike dragged on his cigarette and exhaled luxuriantly.

"Course I am.' I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. 'I can't very well leave them in the lurch now, can I?' But more than a sense of duty to the Chapel authorities, I felt deeply obligated to all the women who had gone before me, who never had a voice. The right to speak in public and be heard, even if the words weren't mine, was not something to be cast aside lightly.

'I've got to go in. Are you coming?' I asked Mike.

'You must be joking. I'd turn to ash if I crossed the threshold.' He pulled up his collar and did a bad impression of Count Dracula.

'You're just scared it might show up the hollowness of your existence.'

'It's too full of beer to be hollow. See you in The Mitre afterwards?'

'Yeah. I've no idea how long these things last. But I'm sure you'll be in no hurry to leave the pub.' I kissed him goodbye.

'Hey,' he said over his shoulder, 'we could get married in here.'

'What?'

He'd gone, black greatcoat blending into the darkness.

He was right. Alumni could marry in the Chapel. But before that I needed to tell him the murky secret that was inscribed in every cell of my body.

The Verger was brisk but friendly. He showed me where to sit, and where to stand when I got the nod. Then he gave me some tips on speaking in public. Yeah, yeah, I thought, I think I can handle a bible reading. Once the service began, I realised that I'd forgotten to confirm two crucial things with him: the location of the nearest tissue, and the content of my reading. I suspected I'd mixed up the reference, and was about to read something bizarrely irrelevant.

Heart pounding, I walked to the lectern. I found my place and looked up, blinking as candlelight

flashed off something shiny in the front pew. Trying desperately not to sniff, I ignored it and bent my gaze to the closely-printed letters. For a moment they swam like alphabet spaghetti. Get a grip, I scolded myself, pinning down the first word with my index finger. I read the reference competently: '*1 Maccabees, Chapter 2 from The Holy Bible, King James version (Apocrypha).'* And as there were no 'u' sounds to negotiate, I even managed to tone down my accent.

But then began a geyser of mispronounced names: *'In those days arose Mattathias the son of John, the son of Simeon, a priest of the sons of Joarib, from Jerusalem, and dwelt in Modin. And he had five sons, Joannan, called Caddis: Simon; called Thassi: Judas, who was called Maccabeus: Eleazar, called Avaran: and Jonathan, whose surname was Apphus.'*

Who where these people? Why were they so obsessed with the male lineage? Didn't they have mothers? Wives? Sisters? Had they sprung from the mud fully formed?

Tongue-tied, I pressed on: '*And when he saw the blasphemies that were committed in Judah and Jerusalem, He said, Woe is me! wherefore was I born to see this misery of my people, and of the holy city, and to dwell there, when it was delivered into the hand of the enemy, and the sanctuary into the hand of strangers?'* This was better—a bit of drama with no strange names to trip over. Then the shiny thing in the front pew flashed again. What *was* it? I had almost begun to think it a divine message, when I realised that Nathan's glasses were winking at me. What was *he* doing here? I could feel myself getting flustered. I lost my place and stammered. The Chaplain inclined his head attentively, hinting that my pause was already too long.

My nose felt full and wet. I didn't dare sniff—I was speaking into a microphone and everyone would hear it. But I couldn't wipe it either—I would have to use my sleeve and people were looking at me. I hoped desperately that I could get through the reading before the snot-wave broke. The sensation was ticklish. Please don't make me sneeze, I begged. Then it fell, a perfect pear-shaped drop, and landed with a plop on the Holy Bible. Had the microphone picked it up? Trying to pretend this was all a bad dream, I bowed my head and continued.

'Her temple is become as a man without glory. Her glorious vessels are carried away into captivity, her infants are slain in the streets, her young men with the sword of the enemy.' So, the feminine appeared at last: nationhood personified as a defiled woman. Hardly worth the wait. This translation had been written when Elizabeth Cary was alive. Beyond shame, I sniffed loudly. Was this a reflection of what she had to put up with? *'What nation hath not had a part in her kingdom and gotten of her spoils? All her ornaments are taken away; of a free woman she is become a bondslave. And, behold, our sanctuary, even our beauty and our glory, is laid waste, and the Gentiles have profaned it. To what end therefore shall we live any longer?'*

Good question, mate. I scurried back to my seat at the side of the choir, eager to make my escape. We had a few more hymns (which I pretended to sing along with) and a blessing. I didn't say 'Amen'. I wasn't speaking to God. Not after what he'd done to my brother.

As soon as was decently possible, I slipped out of the side door. I told myself that Nathan came to every service. He hadn't come especially to hear me read. So why not be polite and say 'hello'? What was I scared of, I wondered, as a volley of freezing rain slapped my cheek.

The Mitre was warm and loud. I sank into the seat that Mike had saved and noticed gratefully that he already had a pint of Addlestones lined up for me, the cloudy liquid swaying gently as Seb hit the table with his fist.

'We've got to do *Hamlet*. It's the daddy—what every director cuts his teeth on.'

'Isn't that a bit of a cliché?' I asked, downing a gulp of cider. 'What about something like Margaret Clarke's *Gertrude and Ophelia?'*

Seb looked at me in disbelief. 'Are you on drugs? Who's gonna pay to see a load of feminist tosh?'

I took another swig of cider to dilute the bile rising in my throat. 'Well, couldn't we be a bit subversive, have Hamlet played by a woman? Or how about Ophelia being played by a man? That's not even subversive, that's just historically accurate.'

Seb snorted in derision. He was flushed, his curls awry.

I glanced at Cat for support, but she stared right through me to a far horizon. Her cigarette had a long tail of ash that was about to fall off. I pushed an ashtray towards her and smiled. Not a flicker.

'Hmm,' mused Jocasta, a girl I didn't know well. 'Perhaps I *could* play Hamlet.' A consummate luvvie, she had been a children's TV presenter and retained the poise that being on-camera instils.

'Oh, come on,' said Seb. 'And I suppose you want Razz to play Ophelia?'

Razz looked up from his pint. 'Eh?'

'You could hold auditions,' I ventured. 'I fancy trying out for a part.'

'With your accent, dear girl? No, no, we'll find something back-stage for you. And we'll have none of this gender-bending right-on nonsense. It's all agreed: Jocasta's going to play Ophelia, she's a trained performer.' Seb belched loudly to emphasise his point.

Jocasta glanced at me then quickly looked away. She smirked into her glass.

'Where did you train?' asked Mike, who normally took no interest in things theatrical. His hand was on my thigh, but his attention was entirely on Jocasta.

'Oh, I did some National Youth Theatre. Nothing to write home about. Now then, whose round is it?' Jocasta drained her glass, and turned it upside down to emphasise her point.

Mike jumped up. 'What can I get you?' he asked Cat.

'Cyanide,' she spat.

Something was warped. The world was off-kilter and I didn't know what to do about it.

Three pints of Addlestones later and the room was spinning. This was good. The world had felt off-beam: now there was a reason for it. There'd been a reshuffle when Mike returned from the bar with Jocasta's Martini and I ended up moving next to Cat, who said nothing as she stirred her cocktail morosely with a cherry on a stick. I knew the theatre was a sore point with her—she hated living in the shadow of her family dynasty, and was absolutely determined never to set foot on stage, even though circumstance seemed to keep pushing her towards it. More than one barman had suffered the Arctic blast of her cold shoulder after asking her to supply autographs from close relatives.

She was in a dangerous mood: a brittle frivolity that could shatter into tears if I didn't tread carefully.

'Are you going to do the publicity for Seb's little enterprise?' I asked cautiously.

In reply, Cat took a beer mat and scribbled on it:

Sebastian Plumstead presents
A Sebastian Plumstead production
Directed by Sebastian Plumstead
Starring Sebastian Plumstead
Featuring Barbie Doll Jocasta

I snorted at the last line. Cat aped Jocasta's precious mannerisms in response. Really, she was a brilliant actress. We huddled closer and started to whisper viciously as Seb, Mike, and Razz danced attendance on the beautiful, blonde, professionally trained Jocasta.

After the landlord had raised his voice, wedged open the doors and removed our drinks, we were finally prevailed upon to vacate his establishment. Jocasta bid us good evening and tripped off home.

'Got to get our beauty sleep,' cackled Cat, a little too loudly.

We stalwarts meandered along King's Parade in search of junk food. Mike tried to pull us towards the Mobile Death Van in Market Square, but Cat and I, who had an arm each, held him back.

'Nay!' shouted Seb. 'Things sweet to taste prove in digestion sour.'

'What *are* you blethering about?' asked Mike, who couldn't understand Shakespeare even when he

was sober (which kind of made two of us).

'He means: don't make the coroner write "suicide by cheeseburger" on your death certificate,' explained Razz.

'Gardi's,' announced Cat, and we all swung up Rose Crescent, Razz playing leapfrog with the bollards.

Cat always headed for The Gardenia (est. 1926) when she needed an ego boost. The staff adored her and often refused to take payment for her order.

'Chips, please!' mocked the proprietor good-humouredly as he started to shovel them into white polystyrene trays. The smell of fried food made my mouth water. I hadn't eaten since some stale cream-crackers and Dairylea at lunch. I was so hungry I could barely stand up. Addlestones-on-an-empty-stomach syndrome was in full effect.

Everyone groaned as Mike announced an elaborate burger order (extra chilli, extra onions, no greenery whatsoever).

'Eat no onions or garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath,' proclaimed Seb, who became the walking embodiment of fridge-magnet Shakespeare when the Stella Artois was flowing. He puckered his lips, trout style, and planted a smacker on Razz's cheek.

'Just for that, I'm having a kebab, and leaving the leftovers in your room,' replied Razz.

I fell on the chips with indecent haste, burning my throat as I wolfed them down. The tang of the vinegar and the piquancy of the salt grains as they spiked the creamy starch sent me into delirium. My body was craving nourishment but for some reason I would not feed it properly. I was always studying or drinking. No time to eat. No money for food. This behaviour was reinforced by Mike, who saw meals as a waste of stomach space that could be better occupied by booze. My hunger-induced mood swings were written off as female whining.

As the calories kicked in and my blood-sugar rose I realised just how catastrophically drunk I was. I needed two pints of water and sleep. Pale and quiet, I clung to Mike's arm. At the Porter's Lodge I hung back while Cat smiled winningly and proffered a parcel of lukewarm chips. Bob, our favourite porter, grimaced and shook his head. But he opened the gate and let us through. He winked to indicate that he hadn't seen us. We dispersed silently. Students returning after midnight had their names taken, and anyone who made a habit of it was reported to their Director of Studies. Ironic, really, that it was Rattigan who drove me to drink in the first place.

I kept thinking that I could feel an indignant gaze drilling into the back of my head. I stopped regularly to look up at the dark windows, dreading the twitch of a curtain as a senior fellow who had got up to relieve his port-strained bladder happened to peer out and spot us. We would be apprehended. There would be disciplinary proceedings. Fines I couldn't afford. Letters to parents who were already disappointed in me.

My paranoia irritated Mike, but he too was sufficiently worried to keep quiet as he dragged me along.

Crossing the Bridge of Sighs, the darkness began to weigh heavily on me. It seemed to ooze through my clothes and crowd at the edges of my blurred vision. The night was bitterly cold and I realised that I could no longer feel my hands, or Mike's arm. The darkness began to make a rushing sound, like a wave hissing over rocks. Everything was unreal. Except the long black tentacle of grief that had taken root in my stomach and was twining up my chest and into my throat.

The next thing I knew, the darkness had pinioned me: I was horizontal. No shoes or jacket, but the rest of my clothes intact. I shivered and someone pulled a duvet around me. I seemed to be in bed. But whose? 'Is that you?' I faltered.

'No,' said Mike.

It was only when I tried to laugh that I realised I was crying. A huge choking sob left my mouth.

'You're not going to chunder, are you?'

In reply, I sobbed harder. The grief had escaped.

'Hey, what's the matter? The chips didn't look that bad.' Mike rubbed my shoulder unconvincingly.

The darkness was filled with a wailing noise which I knew, somehow, was connected to me. But I had no control over it.

Mike attempted a hug. I resisted, desperate to prevent the transfer of mascara and snot to his person. I always did this alone: in the shower; on hill-tops; behind a locked door. He should not have seen. It was too early in our relationship, too much to expect another human being to handle.

'Ursuls, what is it?' Mike pulled me into a sitting position and put the bedside light on.

I fought for possession of my body, forcing my lungs to inhale and my eyes to open. Then I squinted queasily and wiped my nose with the back of my hand. Realising that I was in my own room, I reached into the bedside cabinet and pulled out one of my Nan's hankies. Good job she'd sent a six-pack.

'Sorry,' I sniffed. 'It's nothing. I'm OK now.'

'Bollocks! You can't do that and then expect me to turn over and go back to sleep. You can tell me. I'm your fiancé.' He tried to smile, but he looked cross and slightly suspicious.

'It's my brother.' That started the tears again.

Mike waited patiently.

'Put the light out,' I snivelled, 'I can't do this if you're looking at me.'

In the darkness Mike held me and I mumbled into his chest. 'He has... he has muscular....' I couldn't say the name of the vile condition. 'He has a muscle-wasting disease.' I stopped and breathed raggedly. 'He's going to need a wheelchair.' Another tearing breath. 'Steel plates in his spine.' A howl of anguish. 'I should be at home with him.'

'He's got your Mum and Dad.'

'Yeah.' Fresh sobbing as I conjured them in my mind. 'But it's tearing them to pieces.' My Dad couldn't work any more, which made money tight. The doctor had him on anti-depressants, sleeping pills, and tranquillisers. They didn't seem to help and the side-effects were awful. My Mum hadn't cried in years: if she started she wouldn't stop.

'How old is he?'

'Thirteen,' I gasped.

'Is there any medication?' asked Mike gently.

'No.' This time I conquered the tears. 'It's genetic,' I croaked.

'Does that mean you'll get it too?'

'No, it means I'm a carrier.' The penny was about to drop.

'So that doesn't affect you, right?'

'Probably not, but it'll affect my children.' How long would it take him to call things off?

'Oh.' Mike sat up and lit a cigarette. The glowing tip stared at me like an angry Cyclops.

'His doctors think there'll be a cure in the next ten years,' I gushed, failing to mention that my brother might not live another ten years. I was grasping at straws, no matter how insubstantial, anything to bridge the abyss that I had opened. 'Once they've mapped the human genome, they hope they'll know how to treat it.' *Think* and *hope* were all I had.

'Well that's all right then, isn't it?' Mike sucked thoughtfully on his cigarette. I heard the air hiss through the filter, and I thought about his poor scorched lungs. Did I want a chain-smoker to be the father of my children? I'd always imagined that one day I could make him stop, but I didn't have much to bargain with at the moment.

'Dad says that there are two sorts of problem: "right now" and "one day". The "one days" generally take care of themselves. I wouldn't worry about it.'

'It's not a future problem for my brother.'

'No,' he said, dousing his cigarette in a glass of water on the bedside table. 'I'm sorry about that. But it is for us.'

He wriggled down the bed and I put my head on his shoulder. Soon he was breathing deeply, hands twitching slightly as his nervous system logged-off. I lay staring at the window, watching the curtains shift in the breeze that sighed through the ill-fitting glass.

V

Heffers came up trumps. Only two weeks after my closing-time order, a thick butter-coloured envelope graced my pigeon hole. Elizabeth Cary awaited (if I would be kind enough to call in and settle my account). I felt bad about hating the woman on the enquiries desk. I looked for her so that I could thank her personally, but she wasn't in evidence (not as if she could hide behind a shelf, Mike's voice hissed in my head).

The book was a large paperback. The covers were mainly black, apart from an extravagant filigree of sea-green swirls around the title. In the middle of these swirls was a cream rectangle which bore the following legend:

ELIZABETH CARY
THE LADY FALKLAND

THE
TRAGEDY
OF MARIAM
THE FAIR
Queen of Jewry

WITH
THE LADY FALKLAND
HER LIFE
BY ONE OF HER DAUGHTERS

She had to be as good as Shakespeare. Better. I couldn't bear the expectation that I had heaped upon this play. Opening the cover would be like opening Pandora's Box, or the Ark of the Covenant; sparks would fly, knowledge would be unleashed, its power could sear the flesh from my bones.

I sat cross-legged on my bed with the book in front of me. I picked it up and smelled the new paper. Flicked my thumb along the sharp edges of the freshly cut pages. I closed my eyes as I tried to imagine the woman who had written it. Could she feel me, over the centuries? I imagined her as a fearless pioneer, quill in one hand, flame of liberty in the other. Then I opened the cover. I rushed through the editorial notes, the scholarly introduction, and the list of illustrations. The play began with Mariam, alone. Good! A strong female lead. She asked '*How oft have I with public voice run on?*' And then:

> *Excuse too rash a judgement in a woman:*
> *My sex pleads pardon, pardon then afford,*
> *Mistaking with us is but too too common.*

Cary, you traitor! What did you mean by having your female lead apologise for opening her mouth? I threw the book down as though it was dirty. Had I endured weeks of breathless anticipation for this? What was I going to write my dissertation on now? I had less than a week to find another topic. Deflated, I decided to take out my bad mood on the Saturday crowds and barge my way to Sainsbury's for baked beans, bread, and a bag of oranges that I wouldn't eat.

Irritated from being photographed by tourists desperate to capture a *gen-yew-ine* undergraduate, I slammed my door loudly and flopped down on the bed with a newspaper. On the front page was a picture of a robed woman wearing a black headscarf. Her face was contorted with grief as she proffered a dead child to

the camera. Her home lay destroyed behind her, cooking pots crushed by broken slabs of concrete, steel wires poking out at crazy angles. The words of my bible reading echoed uncomfortably: *her infants are slain in the streets, her young men with the sword of the enemy... All her ornaments are taken away; of a free woman she is become a bondslave.* There was a long article about the political situation in the Middle East. I felt compelled to read, to try to understand why history kept repeating itself.

Mike woke me when he got back from rowing practice. I refused to accompany him to a late lunch: if we were going out tonight I needed to work now. I had a dissertation to panic about, as well as prat crit preparation and an essay on feminist readings of *Othello*.

'Ursuls, you don't have to do this any more.' Mike spread his arm to indicate the books and papers that littered the desk and the floor and the bed.

I imagined myself as a well-groomed PA, a woman-about-town who read glossy magazines and sipped white wine spritzers. Nothing on her mind apart from where to eat lunch and which bar to visit after work. It seemed a lot more fun than this academic drudgery. When Mike grabbed my hands I allowed him to hoist me up.

I rifled through the newspaper and tore out some Pizzaland vouchers, which got you three courses and a bottle of wine for a sum that even I could afford.

So we walked, in our Doc Martens and baggy Levis, up Sidney Street.

'How was rowing?' I asked, trying to take an interest (I'd read a magazine article that said you should).

'Rupes was on stroke and he kept catching crabs.'

'Cripes. Has he been to the clinic?' I regretted this because the article also said that you should not make fun of your boyfriend's hobbies.

'Very funny, dear. Josh got a bit stroppy cos it messed up his rhythm.'

'It all sounds terribly homoerotic,' I sniped.

'Yes, well, that's about all your degree qualifies you for, isn't it?'

'What's that?'

'Spotting homoerotic subtexts that actually don't exist.' Touché.

'None so blind as those who will not see,' I countered. Stuff the magazine—this banter was much more fun.

We were approaching Parker's Piece. My hands were cold so I shoved the nearest one in Mike's coat pocket. He seemed to like this, and pulled me closer to share his body heat.

'Do you think Parker minds everyone walking on his piece?' he asked.

'I don't suppose there's much he could do about it, even if he did.'

'He must have a big piece—look how much land it takes up.' Mike waved towards the large rectangle of scruffy grass. Some local kids were playing football, and a few students were attempting a hung-over jog. A delivery van rumbled past and Mike guided me around the automatic barrier rising in its wake. 'Oops. Hideous bollard accident narrowly avoided.'

After half a bottle of the house white, my disappointment with Elizabeth Cary was almost forgotten.

'Imagine the universe as a sponge cake…' said Mike, trying to explain his theory about the origins of reality. He paused to chew on a piece of pepperoni.

'No,' I interrupted, feeling flushed and brilliant. 'Stop thinking about the universe as a single entity. Think about the sponge cake as something else, something we don't understand. Our universe is like a currant in the cake, rising up and away as it cooks. And there are countless other universes, other currants, all moving away from each other as the cake expands in the heat…' I glugged more wine.

Mike laughed. 'You mean there could be lots of you and me, sitting in other Pizzalands in other currants?'

'Yeah, except in a parallel universe you might be eating salad and drinking water.'

Mike slopped his wine as the absurdity of the thought hit him. Then he asked: 'How do you explain

glacé cherries?'

'Dark matter!' I shouted triumphantly.

The waitress hovered, embarrassed, as she tried to enquire if we wanted more wine. Of course we wanted it. But could we pay for it? Mike ordered and then waved a twenty pound note at me. He'd been home last weekend and his father had come up with the goods. What it was to have well-off parents.

'Let's go island hopping.'

'What?' I wasn't sure I'd heard correctly.

'Let's go island hopping in Greece this summer.'

'OK. Cool.' This was what a writer should be doing! Living in the moment. Throwing caution to the wind, putting their faith in expanding fruit cake. Even as I thought this, the knowledge that I couldn't afford it made my cake collapse in a soggy heap. I didn't want to spoil the moment by saying so.

'Dad's offered you a summer job. As a trial run, before you join us officially.'

Was Mike a mind-reader? 'Wow. Thanks.' I'd only met Mike's parents once: laid-back chain-smokers with a fabulous wine cellar who, marvellously and improbably, seemed very kindly disposed towards me. 'Have you told him about our engagement then?'

'He knew I was going to pop the question.'

'You didn't ask my Dad for my hand in marriage, did you?' I demanded, suddenly alarmed.

'God, no. I know you feminists. Not a piece of property and all that. You'd have strung me up by the balls, wouldn't you?'

'Yes.'

The waitress returned with a fresh bottle of wine. She filled our glasses and we drank a toast.

'To our summer.'

'To our summer.' Mike's eyes were alight with wine and laughter and our shining future. My pitiful pissed-up confession seemed to have been forgotten.

This was amazing. No need to think about a job. No need to wipe old men's arses. And if my dissertation didn't work out, so what? Mike truly was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

The door banged and a tramp lunged for the salad bar. He got a handful of hard-boiled eggs before the manager noticed and shouted, 'Oi!'.

Laughing, the tramp was out the door and away before the staff could get anywhere near him.

'Sorry about that,' said the manager to no-one in particular. 'We're having a lot of trouble with theft at the moment.'

The tramp had left a sharp, foxy stink. Garlic fumes wafted from the kitchen, and the acrid smell dissipated gradually.

'It'll be good practice,' said Mike, gulping more wine.

'Stealing hard-boiled eggs?'

Mike rolled his eyes. He should have seen that one coming. 'You living in London with me, going to our office every day.'

'For when we're married?'

'And you're my PA.'

'Oh. I'm going to be *your* PA? Permanently?' This must have been discussed with his father at the weekend. Nice of them to let me know. 'I don't want to sponge off you for the rest of my life.' I took a big gulp of wine. 'I want my own career. As a writer.' There, I'd said it.

'You can do that in your spare time.'

'When I'm not ironing your shirts?' Suddenly I was angry. Mike was offering me an escape, but at what cost? It felt like I was being asked to sell my soul.

'We'll have a cleaner. I need you to charm the clients. After the elocution lessons, of course.'

My silence caused Mike to laugh hastily. But I knew he was back-pedalling from a serious proposition that hadn't gone down as he'd expected.

Lightning flashed inside my brain. I'd misjudged Elizabeth Cary. Here was I, at the end of the twentieth century, struggling for the opportunity to write. How much harder must it have been for her, the

pioneer, the one who went first? Never mind what her characters did or didn't say about women's rights. The fact that she had published at all was amazing. She deserved another reading. This couldn't wait. I threw some money on the table and stood up.

'Ursuls, where's the fire?' asked Mike through a mouthful of fudge sundae.

'I've got to go. There's something I have to do.'

'What, now?'

'Yes, now. Sorry. I'll see you later.' And I ran back to college, pizza and wine churning around my stomach. I felt bad about leaving Mike. He had been anticipating a lovely, boozy afternoon, and now there he was looking like a gooseberry with only an infeasibly large ice-cream for company. But it couldn't be helped. Elizabeth Cary needed me. And I needed her.

There was hardly anyone in the library. I picked a computer in the corner, with a view of the river and a chestnut tree. I waited impatiently for it to boot-up. The little egg-timer seemed frozen. I was really shaky with computers—I'd only recently been brave enough to try using them, and I always had to ask some Natski for help. I looked around for any potential knights in shining armour. The computing suite seemed deserted. Then I heard the rapid click of keys. At the other end of the room a figure hunched over one of the larger, powerful PCs that physicists used to model sub-atomic particles. I recognised the anorak. It was Nathan, with his back to me. I couldn't ask him, it would seem like a cheesy chat-up line: 'Oh, Mr Clever Man, I'm such a dizzy blonde, please help me with this new-fangled machine.' I willed the egg-timer to move. And suddenly a blank document appeared. I wedged *The Tragedy of Mariam* open with my elbow and began to type.

A slight pressure on the back of my chair made me look round. Nathan was behind me. 'Afternoon,' he said. 'I thought you'd still be sleeping off last night.'

'Well, I would be, but this can't wait.' I turned back to the screen, making it clear that I wanted him to go away. I tried to continue typing, but the computer had other ideas. A dialogue box popped up with an error message. Laboriously, I manoeuvred the mouse until the cursor hovered over 'OK'. I clicked repeatedly, but it kept coming back.

'Hmm. Interesting,' said Nathan. 'Do you mind?'

'Not at all,' I said, suddenly grateful that he was there. He leaned over me and typed rapidly. A rash of gobbledegook covered the screen as his fingers flew across the keys. I shifted to one side to get out of his way but I couldn't help noticing a green, earthy smell and a slight tang of sweat, as if he'd been running by the river.

'The connection to the server's gone down,' he said.

'What does that mean?' I asked.

'You can't save your work.'

'Shit. Have I lost it?'

'Not necessarily,' he replied, extracting a floppy disk from his pocket.

He slipped the disk in, pressed some more keys, and the computer started to whir. 'You're safe now. Just remember that you're working on the A drive. Back it up as soon as you can.'

'Right,' I said, not really understanding. 'Thanks.'

Nathan picked up *The Tragedy of Mariam* and a strange anger flared inside me. Put it down, I wanted to shout. You don't know what you're doing.

'Is that Mariam as in the evil Herod's wife?' he asked pleasantly.

'Erm, yeah, I think so.' He was a Natski! How could he know that?

'So you chose your bible reading carefully.'

'No... They told me to read that. I thought it was as bit random, actually.'

'Wow! What a coincidence.'

'Coincidence?'

'You were reading about Mattathias, the Che Guevara of the Old Testament.'

'Really?' I was used to being humiliated in class, but I resented being made to feel thick by someone who didn't even study my subject, and was a nerd to boot.

'Yup. And his great, great...' he counted on his fingers and frowned. 'His great, great, great granddaughter was Mariam. She was married off to Herod to keep the peace.'

'Oh. Did it work?' Curiosity conquered my vanity.

'For a while. He was delighted. She was the most beautiful woman in Judea...' Nathan gazed into the far distance, a smile playing on his lips, which, I noticed, were fuller and paler than Mike's. I fancied he was half in love with her.

Bizarrely, I was jealous. 'How do you *know* all this?'

The setting sun cleared a low band of cloud and streamed in through the bare branches of the chestnut tree. The room was suffused with a rosy glow, which added to my impression that Nathan was blushing.

'Oh,' he laughed nervously. 'My favourite artist is John William Waterhouse. Have you heard of him?'

'Erm... I think so.' This was outrageous; I was being shown-up by a physicist.

'He's best known for his pictures of Shakespearean women. You know the famous one of Miranda looking out to sea? From *The Tempest*?'

'Oh, yes,' I lied.

'Well, I love his work. There's a great story behind each piece, and his use of colour and texture, the deference that he shows to the feminine form...' Nathan seemed to realise that he was holding his hands up as if to caress the shape of a woman. He checked himself and stuffed his hands in his pockets. 'I collect prints of his paintings. One day I'm going to buy a real one! I suppose it's the anorak in me. I got some from that poster sale in the Corn Exchange. They're in my room if you'd like to have a look... I mean... not that... I mean, I'm not trying to...'

'No, of course not,' I smiled encouragingly.

Nathan gulped down a large breath. 'Anyway, he did a great one called "Mariamne Leaving the Judgement Seat of Herod". I looked up all the history. I'm sure it's the same woman. Do you use the internet?'

'Oh, erm, not really.' At school, computer lessons were only for the kids who had their own PCs at home. We sat and watched while they showed off. I was technologically illiterate.

'I'll show you, if you like.'

'Oh, well if you have time...'

Nathan pulled up a chair and moved the keyboard and mouse over to his side of the desk. 'Watch me and then you'll be able to do it yourself.'

I got lost right where he closed down my document and clicked on some blue blob. Then the egg-timer twirled and a picture appeared. It was gloomy, with lots of gilding and shadowed carvings. But in the foreground, on blue-veined marble steps, was a woman in a white gown. I wasn't sure if the woman wore a black mantle, or if it was her hair that fell so thickly to her waist. Her eyes were like dark holes in her pale face. A slender chain cut across her gown, binding her hands. A swarthy man with a beard sat on a throne, head bowed in despair.

'Wow, you can almost feel the tragedy.'

'That's right! He doesn't want to condemn her, but as King he has no choice. He has to kill what he loves.' Nathan's eyes shone behind his glasses as he looked directly at me.

'That's amazing. Thank you so much.'

There was an awkward pause, during which my stomach gurgled excessively.

'Well,' said Nathan. 'I'd better let you get on.' He picked up his satchel and made for the door.

'Thanks again,' I called, but he had already left. I felt odd. Inadequate, indebted, and yet somehow warmed and uplifted. Could we be friends? Would it be fair? Was I using him? At the very least I owed him a floppy disk. Perplexed, I returned to the computer and realised I didn't know how to get my work back on the screen.

VI

Elizabeth Tanfield was born in approximately 1585. She was the only child of Sir Lawrence Tanfield, a wealthy lawyer. She endured a lonely, affection-starved girlhood, her mother insisting on strict formality at all times. The young Elizabeth filled her time reading and teaching herself languages. In this she was indulged by her father, who went against the convention of the times by providing her with books and tutors.

She began *The Tragedy of Mariam* around 1603 but it was not published until 1613. The circumstances of the play's publication are unknown, but at the time the play was written Elizabeth Tanfield had recently become Elizabeth Cary, Lady Falkland in a marriage of convenience that was fortuitous to the Cary family, if not to the young woman herself. It is therefore tempting to conclude that Cary chose to write about an oppressed wife because it reflected her own personal difficulties.

Cary clearly had problems adhering to the prescribed ideals of feminine behaviour. According to one of her daughters, who wrote a biography of Cary, 'those that knew her would never have believed she knew how to hold a needle unless they had seen it,' (Weller & Ferguson, p.186) and

> dressing was all her life a torture to her... she was not able to attend to it at all, nor was ever her mind the least engaged in it, but her women were fain to walk around the room after her (which was her custom) while she was seriously thinking on some other business, and pin things on her and braid her hair; and while she writ or read, curl her hair and dress her head... (Ibid., p.194).

Similarly she was terrified of horse-riding, but did so because her husband desired it. Indeed, so desperate was she to please her husband that she adopted the motto 'Be and seem', indicating the psychological toll that the pressure to conform must have taken upon her.

Rattigan looked up. 'You're not writing a biography.'

'Er, no.'

'So don't tell us about her life unless it's relevant to your analysis of the text.'

'Right. OK.' I flushed with disappointment. I'd worked so hard on this, re-reading the play and devouring the footnotes until the spine was furrowed and the binding about to give way.

'Remember, the author's dead.'

I nodded, as though this fact was so obvious that it wasn't worthy of comment, and scribbled a note to go and look it up: clearly, I hadn't been invited to the author's funeral. 'Do you think,' I ventured, 'that I could write my dissertation on Cary?'

Rattigan paused. The furrow between his brows grew deeper. 'It's possible,' he said. 'Although so far you haven't demonstrated much ability in this area. You'll have to dedicate yourself to it completely for the next three months.' He stopped again, and passed his hand across his forehead, as though wafting away excess brain activity. 'There's a Gender and Writing conference at the Central European University in Budapest. Presenting your research there will help you to raise your game.' He handed me a piece of paper. 'The college will fund you—just complete an expenses form at the office.'

Rattigan sat down at his harpsichord and began a Bach prelude. I was dismissed.

Outside, my mind whirled. He didn't think I was a lost cause! I looked at the conference details. A week in Budapest, over the Easter vacation. Mike wasn't going to like it. Tough. Elizabeth Cary and I were going to Hungary. I went straight to the office and picked up my form. Then I realised that I didn't have a clue how the conference process worked. Surely there was some protocol to prevent any old Tom, Dick or Ursuls pitching up with a half-baked, sub-standard paper. Did I write them a letter? Ring them up? As usual, I would have to swallow my pride and ask Sebastian.

VII

I'd gone home for the Vacation, declining Mike's invitation to spend Easter with him. I had to finish my conference paper, and spend some time with my family, who feared they were losing me to my posh London friends. There was always an inquisition about why I hadn't won a scholarship, and where all my money had gone. On my first night home I quarrelled with my Dad because I'd spent 75p on a bunch of daffodils for my bedroom.

'No wonder you've never got any money,' he remarked.

'Well, you don't give me enough to live on,' I retorted, shoving my Doc Martens on so I could flounce off for a moody walk. 'Oh, for fuck's sake!' The warm wetness seeped into my tights.

Our new puppy had pissed in my shoes. My only shoes. To add insult to injury, this was the puppy that I had begged and pleaded for from the age of five. The year after I left home, there it was. I threw my DMs at the back door and stomped out of the kitchen, my flouncing exit ruined.

I heard my Mum concur that I was a 'little madam' so I went to talk to my brother. Through the dimpled glass door of the lounge I could see the back of his Liverpool F. C. Goalkeeper's shirt, with No.1 Grobbelaar printed across his narrow shoulders. He still followed football, even though he was beginning to accept that he would never be able to play it. He was sitting in front of the television with *Sonic the Hedgehog* on his Sega Megadrive. Because of his illness he got every toy and gadget (and puppy) he wanted. I didn't resent him this, but it did seem a bit rich for my parents to have such a go at me. I had very few clothes, my shoes were split and I couldn't afford a haircut. Surely I was entitled to the occasional treat? I had been shocked when I learned that some girls in my year were doing escort work but now I could see why. If I wasn't so gawky and socially inept I might have considered it myself. Would that please my parents?

As I opened the door, my brother looked around and smiled. 'Ay, mate!'

'Hello lad.'

At least *he* was pleased to see me. I went into the lounge and knelt down behind him, wrapping my arms around his little chest, resting my chin on the back of his head, feeling his warm silky hair against my throat. *Sonic* chirruped inanely. And all the time, I was thinking 'don't die, don't die'.

My Dad dropped me off at the National Express depot in Liverpool: I was catching the overnight coach to Heathrow for the flight to Budapest. He hugged me very tightly, and I blinked away tears as he helped me to stow my case in the luggage compartment.

'Bloody 'ell!' shouted the beer-bellied driver, taking the case from my Dad. 'Wharravyergorrin there? A dead body?'

'It's books. Sorry.' I wasn't sure what was required at a conference—would people ask to see your references? Or expect you to study in your free time? Consequently, along with my one smart skirt (which would look particularly fetching with split, pee-soaked Doc Martens), I'd packed several volumes from the Gender Studies shelf of the college library.

'I hope they won't charge excess baggage,' said my Dad, biting his thumbnail.

'Well, the college is paying for it,' I replied pointedly, and then immediately regretted it. I'd never been abroad on my own before and I knew how anxious my parents were about their one healthy child getting on planes and fending for herself in a foreign country. I knew my brother felt it, too, because it was something he could never do. His horizons were contracting as mine expanded.

I settled into a window seat about halfway down the coach and waved at my Dad, who stood looking up at me. He seemed drawn, and the orange street light cast deep shadows under his eyes. This was too painful. If they wanted me to be a success, then they had to accept that I must to go out into the world and do things. I couldn't make them proud if I stayed at home and worked in a supermarket. I got up with the intention of going to the coach door and giving my Dad another hug when the engine revved and I lurched forward, banging my head on an air-conditioning nozzle.

Two peroxided girls on the back seat laughed loudly. 'A bit early to be legless, isn't it?' asked the one with drag-queen eye shadow.

'She must be an alky, she's got hair like a witch,' replied her mate through a thick wad of chewing gum. She blew a bubble and popped it loudly as if to emphasise her point.

I ignored them and dropped gratefully into my seat, cheeks on fire. Idiot, Idiot, Idiot, drummed the woodpecker in my head. When I looked up we had turned out of the depot and left my Dad behind. There was a hot, tight band around my chest. Why could I never please him? Elizabeth Cary's father had indulged her with books and tutors. But then he'd married her off to a socially superior man. I'd managed to organise that all by myself. Perhaps marrying Mike would help me to mend fences with my Dad: it would take money out of the equation.

The upholstery was itchy and the seat dug into the small of my back. If I wasn't going to be able to sleep, I might as well do something useful. I took out my conference paper and read it repeatedly—when my turn came to present, I'd be so terrified that the carefully typed words would become unintelligible squiggles. Learning it by heart was the only way I could do it.

Just then the peroxided nuisances on the back seat decided to inflict their music on everyone else. They were sharing one set of earphones from a Sony Walkman, charm bracelets jangling as they sang along to a distorted, tinny rendition of Garbage's 'Stupid Girl'. Well, quite, I thought. That makes three of us.

I looked at the conference schedule. At least I was up after lunch on the first day, so there'd only be a few hours of nervous fasting—my stomach would become a cement mixer and I knew from bilious experience not to put anything solid in it. But the other speakers in my panel were cause for concern: I was sandwiched between a Romanian linguistics expert and a Senior Lecturer in Gender Studies. Presumably I was the comedy filling. I should have stayed in London with Mike, planning our engagement party. I was utterly out of my depth: I didn't know how to behave or what was expected, whether my paper was too simplistic, or too long, or too controversial. I wished I'd had the nerve to ask Rattigan to look at it.

The tone-deaf Walkman wearers now staged a picnic. Cans fizzed open, cue much squealing as one girl got sprayed with a solution of sugar and E-numbers. Then a bumper pack of rancid crisps exploded accidentally on purpose. They smelled like pickled onions and they made my eyes water.

What drives you on
Can drive you mad
A million lies to sell yourself
Is all you ever had

The girls squawked along, spitting gobs of chewed crisp. Unable to concentrate, I stared aimlessly out of the window.

Around Birmingham the steward dragged a trolley down the coach. The under-age moral arbiters bought four mini cans of Coke. As soon as the steward's back was turned, one took a bottle of cheap nasty vodka from her fake designer bag and proceeded to dilute the soft drinks.

'All right, chuck? What can I get for you?'

I turned from my scrutiny of the back seat to find the steward smiling at me. Blushing unaccountably, I ordered a cheese and tomato sandwich, a bag of salt and vinegar crisps, and a cup of tea.

'Nothing to drink, love?' His blue eyes sparkled. He had curly black hair and a ready smile that showed lots of white teeth.

'Oh, I ordered tea...' But I desperately wanted a Dry Blackthorn.

'I heard you the first time. Just checking if you fancied a bit of the hard stuff.' He gestured at the ready-mixed gin and tonic, sweet white wine, and chilled cider ranged in little cans on the bottom shelf of the trolley.

'Oh, not tonight thanks.'

'I bet you say that to all the boys.' He winked at me.

I laughed, feeling my blush intensify. 'Not usually, it's just that I have to catch a horribly early flight.'

'Only winding you up, love. No offence. If you change your mind, I'd love to buy yer a drink. I'll be at the front nattering to the driver. These over-nighters bore my tits off.'

'Thanks. I'll bear that in mind if I can't sleep.'

'Fingers-crossed you don't drift off then.' He shot me a brazen look which left me in no doubt that a free can of cider was not the only thing on offer.

I woke up with a cricked neck, somewhere on the M25.

VIII

Budapest was bone-numbingly cold, and I was glad of the thermal vests that my Nan had given me as a going away present. They were filming *Evita*, which gave the whole city an unreal air. Palm trees lined freezing streets, and men in Argentinean military uniforms lounged around waiting for their call. The local strip joint had a sign saying WELCOME MADONNA (who was starring) in its front window. A man rode a bicycle with a huge rack of hair bobbles attached to a vertical framework. He'd cut a picture of Madonna from a magazine and stuck this to his back mudguard, as if to say: 'You, too, can look like this with one of my peach satin scrunchies'.

I felt odd from lack of sleep, and the shiny new conference venue seemed like a weird hallucination behind the rusted old iron curtain. My stomach twisted and my mouth was dry. Far from people staring at me, which I had dreaded, they were all completely ignoring me. Everyone else seemed to know each other. There were lots of hugs, back slaps and squeals of recognition. The roar of voices crashed over me, and I retreated until I washed up against a blue-tiled wall. Dizzy, I allowed myself to slide down the wall and sit cross-legged on the prickly carpet.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the cool solid feel of the tiles at my back as I listened to the insistent ding-dong of the lifts disgorging delegates. Polished shoes paused, and then walked on. Realising that I looked strange, I took out my notebook and pretended to be writing down an idea that just wouldn't wait. I wondered why we had been asked to arrive so early when the keynote speech was hours away. Despite my nerves I was ravenously hungry. I'd eaten nothing since my sandwich on the coach. The airline had no vegetarian food: I didn't realise you were supposed to order your meal in advance. And there were no biscuits here. Would anyone notice if I fainted?

I scribbled in my notebook, wondering if I showed up at the airport whether they would let me on the next flight home. I missed Mike. He'd know what to do. He'd go out for a smoke and immediately become firm friends with fellow members of the nicotine alliance. Perhaps I should go outside and ask someone for a cigarette?

'Excuse me...'

I ignored the voice. It couldn't possibly be talking to me.

'Excuse me, are you Ursula?'

'Yeah.' I leapt up too quickly and saw stars. They cleared to reveal a girl of about my age with long chestnut hair. She was smiling at me.

'I'm Kirsty.' She held out her hand and I shook it.

'Hi, Kirsty. It's so nice to see a friendly face!'

'Tell me about it. Everyone else seems to know each other. I asked the organisers to point you out to me. I think we're going to be room-mates.'

'Oh, cool. What brings you here?'

'I'm in my second year at Oxford—my supervisor thought it would be good experience for me to see what happens at a conference. I can't believe I'm sharing a room with someone who's presenting!'

'I wouldn't be impressed yet. You haven't heard my paper.'

Kirsty and I clung to each other like the last two people on earth. Together we found the toilets and tidied our hair. Then we discovered a vending machine on the back staircase and shoved in forints until its entire stock of chocolate came tumbling down the chute. As we stood in a corner, swooning while the sugar worked its magic, two men approached us. One was tall, broad and blond, and looked about thirty. The other was shorter and younger, with a dark, floppy fringe that dangled over his eyes.

'Good day, ladies. I am Kurt,' said the blond with the broad shoulders. His handshake was long and warm. 'This is Guy.'

The younger man blew his fringe out of his eyes. 'Hey,' he said. 'English chicks. Cool.'

Predatory American, I thought, not so cool. 'Pleased to meet you,' I lied.

'This is your first time, no?' asked Kurt.

Kirsty and I nodded weakly.

'Then it shall be our pleasure to assist in your … how would you say? ...initiation.'

The PA system crackled, and a stream of syllables seemed to indicate that something was about to happen.

The lecture theatre hummed like Babel. Polyglots shrieked and hooted to old acquaintances at the other side of the room. I could hear different varieties of trans-Atlantic twang, and the Received Pronunciation of Europeans who spoke such good English you couldn't tell their nationality. A woman with a cut-glass accent called for quiet, tapping the microphone repeatedly until only whispered conversations continued. I only knew she was Finnish because it said so in the conference notes.

'Welcome to the Languages of Gender interdisciplinary conference,' she beamed. 'I hope you find it stimulating, provocative, and above all enjoyable.'

Kurt and Guy had performed a pincer movement, so that Kirsty had Guy next to her and I had Kurt next to me. At the words 'stimulating' and 'provocative' Kurt and Guy exchanged glances. As the applause started up, Kurt touched my arm and smiled. I twisted my engagement ring to make sure it was prominent and laid my hand on my knee.

At lunch I could barely hold my coffee. The saucer filled with slops as my hand refused to stop trembling. The keynote speaker had been so urbane and suavely amusing. There was no way I could compete. And all these people! I had no idea the audience would be so large.

Kurt asked me if I was OK, and when I voiced my fears about the size of the audience, he explained that we would now break up into parallel sessions, so only people with a particular interest in my subject would choose to come. That was worse! Obviously nobody wanted to hear me. That was why they put me between two distinguished speakers. Kurt and Guy assured me that they had both chosen to hear my paper, even before they had met me. And if you'll believe that, I thought...

I was to present in a seminar room on the top floor. There were seats for about thirty people, and not all were filled. I was shown to my place on a dais at the front. The Romanian linguist said a brisk 'hello' and continued to write quickly. It looked as though she hadn't finished her paper. The Senior Lecturer in Gender Studies was nowhere to be seen, so I sat down and tried to breathe deeply. Beyond the double-glazed windows, a strangely silent city stretched away in the winter sunshine until snow-capped hills filled the distance. Not long now, and my humiliation would begin.

The Romanian, whose name, shamefully, I couldn't pronounce, sat on the front of the desk and chatted amiably about psychosocial something-or-other. She paused frequently to think about what she wanted to say next, and seemed so casual about the whole thing that I thought she must be on tranquillisers. She finished to a crisp gust of applause. There were some good-natured questions, mostly prefaced by greetings from people she hadn't managed to speak to in the lobby.

Then it was my turn. Time slowed down. Each heartbeat echoed for an eternity as the facilitator introduced me.

'A timely re-evaluation of feminist practice, from one of the vanguard of the next generation of critics,' she said.

If my jaw hadn't been locked, I would have laughed. She had set me up to fall flat on my face. I couldn't move or speak. This must be what it felt like to have your drink spiked. Get a grip, I scolded myself. As my legs were no longer connected to my brain, I decided to remain seated. I put my paper on the desk and I kept my hands on my lap where, white-knuckled, they clutched *The Tragedy of Mariam* as though it was a talisman.

I recalled an article on how to speak in public, which advised you to focus on one member of the audience and pretend you were talking only to them. Other people didn't realise what you were doing, and it made you more engaging, allegedly. Every time I looked up, Kurt was beaming back, apparently in rapt anticipation of what I would say next. I knew that this was a bad move, but I ended up reciting my entire paper to him alone. I expected at any moment to be interrupted, derided, and belittled by someone older and more experienced. The critics whom I was contradicting were probably sitting in this very room. Kurt's smile became my anchor.

Improbably, I got through the paper unscathed.

The facilitator, a plump medievalist from Exeter, thanked me for my thought-provoking contribution. 'As our third panel member has not arrived, we can spend longer on questions,' she said cheerfully.

Shit. 100% extra torture, free with this conference. My legs trembled under the desk. Now they would savage me.

Kirsty, my ally, raised her hand. 'Did Shakespeare know Cary's work?' she asked.

'Almost certainly, he did. It's a similar story to *Othello*—King Herod loves his wife Mariam so much that he ends up killing her. But Cary wrote her play first. You know that line in *Othello,* "one whose hand/ Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away/ Richer than all his tribe"? Well, the Folio text actually says "base Iudean", which is how the Elizabethans would have written "Judean". That seems to be a clear reference to the Herod of Cary's play. Later editors who didn't understand the reference corrected it to "Indian".' I didn't know where this voice had come from. It sounded self-assured, authoritative.

'Of course, how fascinating,' said Kurt, who was hanging on my every word. I may have been mistaken, but I thought he winked at me. 'You argue most persuasively that it is unhelpful, and indeed patronising, to read Cary's work purely in the light of her gender. And yet I am intrigued to know—would you therefore advocate a complete dismissal of the author's *physicality*?' He seemed to relish getting his mouth around that word.

'No, I think there are fundamental differences in how men and women experience the world. Pregnancy, for example...'

'You're spouting essentialist garbage!' Here we go, I thought, the gloves are off now. 'The only differences are those constructed by the oppressive patriarchy. You're a victim, Sister. They've brainwashed you.' This from a highly strung American who looked like she needed to eat some cake.

'Surely it does a great disservice to everyone if we pretend that we are all the same?' Keep your nerve, I told myself. This can only go on for so long.

'Difference is socially constructed,' she screeched. She was red in the face and clearly upset.

I didn't know what else to say. I shuffled my papers, trying to buy some time.

Then Kurt got up and walked towards me. What was he doing?

'Madam,' he said, beckoning, 'if you would be so kind.'

My legs would not co-operate with me, but they did what he said at once. Creeps. I got up, put the *Tragedy of Mariam* down on the desk, and stood next to him.

Kurt climbed upon a table and held out his hand for me to join him.

I was sure that this was highly irregular, and not the done thing at a conference. I hesitated.

'Please,' he urged, extending his hand once more.

'Go on,' said the Romanian, 'I want to see what he's going to do.'

'Yes, go on,' began a chorus.

I looked to the facilitator, who smiled her assent.

Well, at least the questions had stopped. I felt the strength in Kurt's arm as he pulled me up.

'With respect, Madam,' he said to the American, ' I have to agree with Ms Hurley.' He took off his jumper and began to unbutton his shirt. He pulled the collar apart to reveal a well-muscled expanse of golden skin.

The Romanian craned her neck appreciatively.

Kurt continued. 'Here we see the physique of the adult male. Now I can exercise all I like, but without hormonal and surgical intervention, I will never attain the shape of the adult female. This is not a social construction but a clear physical difference.' He put his hand on my shoulder and turned me in profile. As I turned I saw Kirsty diligently taking notes. I hoped she wasn't going to quote this in an essay.

Kurt's hand brushed my neck as he moved me back to face the audience. Most people wore good-humoured expressions, some nodded in agreement, others displayed bemused smiles, or raised eyebrows, but the American had gone a violent shade of puce. I was afraid she was having some kind of fit.

'Now, shall I remove the skirt?'

Bloody Hell, he was going to undress me! I braced myself to resist.

People laughed.

'That won't be necessary, thank you,' said the facilitator. 'Your point was very well made.'

The highly strung American harrumphed. She sat with her mouth pressed into a straight line as her cheeks smouldered. I couldn't understand why she was so cross.

Just then the door opened and the third presenter barged in, knocking a chair over with her enormous backpack. There was a smattering of applause as we got down from the table, but people were distracted by the new arrival. By the time she had settled all her bags at the front desk there was no room for me, so when Kurt pulled out the chair next to his, I had no choice but to accept his chivalry.

The more I tried not to look at him, the more I did so. He winked every time he caught me staring. It was like my body no longer belonged to me. I couldn't help myself.

IX

Kurt rounded up all the younger delegates to sample the Budapest night-life. I was wary about going with him—it was not so much his friendliness as my response to it that worried me—but Kirsty was keen. Probably because Guy was going too. She giggled at all his clunking innuendos. I hoped she knew what she was doing. I got the feeling that we were both playing with fire, but there seemed to be an irresistible momentum to the way our evening was progressing.

People kept coming up and congratulating me on my table-top performance. Every compliment seemed a calculated insult to the American woman. I felt bad about this so I asked her if she would like to join us.

'Thanks,' she smiled thinly, 'but I have a plane to catch. Good luck, Sister.' She nodded at Kurt as if to say, 'you'll need it'. She fought with her rucksack, trying to zip it closed over a bulge of papers. Brusquely, she refused my offer of help so I left her to it.

Kurt took us to a cellar bar, with bearskins nailed to the wall. We sat on half-barrels and as we glugged huge bottles of the local 'dragon beer' the conversation became raucous. Cruel comments about the angry American, whose name was Barbara-May Blunt, began to surface.

'What a bitter old hag!' shouted Kirsty.

'Barbara-May Cunt, more like. What she needs is a big cock,' added Guy, doing a high-five with Kirsty.

Kurt drank slowly, seeming to savour each mouthful. The giant bottle looked small in his hands, but for someone so big he had a surprising languid grace. He must have seen that I was not comfortable with the offensive free-for-all going on around us. He turned to me and said quietly, 'So, from where do you come in England?'

'Liverpool' I replied, reluctantly, because I was not a Scouser, but it was the nearest city to my home, and you couldn't expect a German to understand the difference between Scallies and Woollybacks.

'Ah, the Beatles,' he said, smiling. And then, sombrely, 'Heisel'.

'Yes, that too,' I conceded.

'You have someone at home?' he asked pleasantly.

'Yes.' I flashed my gold engagement ring at him.

'His name?'

'Mike. He's an engineering student.'

'Lucky guy,' said Kurt.

'Thanks. How about you?'

'Andrea. She is a... how you say... sculptress.'

'Oh, wow.'

'But Berlin is far from here. And Liverpool even farther. There are no tears over what is not told.'

I was smiling too much and drinking too quickly. I was flattered and appalled and I didn't know how to respond. Kurt was so interested in my research, so calm, so focused on me. His hands lay still on the table. No searching for cigarettes or fiddling with lighters. His mouth would taste clean. Just beer. No bitter tang of smoke. What if this was the done thing at conferences? I felt immature and out of my depth. Perhaps I would be better off as Mike's secretary, letting him handle all the difficult situations.

I looked to Kirsty for help. She was very drunk, and Guy was pretending to be. They sang 'Don't cry for me Argentina' at each other. I applauded as their caterwauling stopped.

'Hey,' said Guy, 'let's see some real night life. Take us somewhere sleazy!'

'Please, what is sleazy?' asked Kurt.

'It means seedy,' volunteered Kirsty.

That didn't help. 'Disreputable,' I volunteered.

'Ah! Verkommen.' Kurt brightened. 'Follow me.' He helped me into my coat and took my elbow to guide me through the maze of barrels. As we reached the stairs he put his hand on my waist to shepherd me past a crowd of revellers who had just arrived. His touch caused little thrills of electricity under my

clothes. What was wrong with me? Or, more worryingly, what was right with him? I focused my concern on Kirsty instead. Guy had to push her up the stairs. She was very slight, and clearly not used to drinking. Great. Cue a sleepless night listening to her breathe in case she choked on her own vomit. At the very least, a holding-hair-off-face-during-puking scenario was on the cards. I needed to get her back to the hotel and get some water down her.

Outside, the cold seemed to rouse Kirsty. Guy took one arm and I took the other. 'March or die!' yelled Guy.

'Please, there is ice,' said Kurt, offering me his arm.

'I think I'm OK,' I bluffed. At that moment Kirsty lurched violently and if Kurt had not grabbed me we would all have gone over on the slick pavement. So I looped my arm through his, relishing how solid he felt beneath his fleece, and berating myself for doing so.

We passed a bizarre building with scaly mirrored sides. 'What's that?' I asked.

'The Hilton,' said Guy, gurning at the puzzled diners on the other side of the gold-tinted glass.

I turned away, feeling that I should appreciate my time here more maturely. After all, I might never visit again. And certainly not as a single woman. I walked towards the river bank, where mist was thickening. Trees grew starker, blacker, and the moon gained intensity.

A floating seed or a piece of down tickled my cheek. I moved to brush it away, and found Kurt's hand there. He laced his fingers with mine, bent his head and kissed me. I told myself that I didn't have time to protest. That had I not been so shocked I would have slapped him. But I said nothing as we walked on over the Chain Bridge, Guy with his arm around Kirsty, I with my arm hooked through Kurt's.

Bronze statues glinted green in the half light. I fancied their eyes flashed accusingly. My mind was protesting. I was drunk, thousands of miles from home, with people I didn't know. I couldn't have found my way back to the hotel if I'd tried. Stupid girl. But my body didn't care. It found Kurt irresistible and would do anything to stay with him. I looked out across the muddy swirls of the Danube. At that moment, the lights of the Chain Bridge flickered into life. I stood, transfixed, as the cloudy water became midnight blue.

Kurt kissed me again and this time I embraced him. His presence was hyper-real, utterly exhilarating. I didn't feel like this when I kissed Mike. Did that mean we didn't have chemistry? It takes more than chemistry to build a life with someone, said the prissy little voice at the back of my head.

Barricades blocked our way. The sun seemed to be shining. I looked up at the source of this unexpected heat and light. A crane on the back of a flatbed truck thrust a battery of spotlights a hundred feet into the sky. Beyond the barricades was a military parade with decorated soldiers on glossy horses. The buildings around them were bleached, and the colours of their uniforms glowed as though they were made of stained glass.

'Hey,' said Guy, pushing forward, 'let's crash the set.'

'I don't think that's a good idea,' I began, rushing to grab Kirsty as Guy left her swaying, unsupported.

The security guard didn't speak much English. When he heard the American accent he thought it best to let us through and allow somebody else to deal with the problem. Dozens of people with clipboards and walkie-talkies rushed about like they were on speeded-up film. A group of soldiers lolled on sand-coloured motorbikes.

'Guy, what are you doing?' I asked.

Kurt seemed quietly amused as he stepped forward to help me with Kirsty.

There was a second barrier, beyond which we could see the actors' trailers. 'I'm gonna meet Madonna,' said Guy, striding forward as if he knew exactly where he was going.

'Can I help you guys?' asked a huge American man with an earpiece and no doubt a gun beneath his sharply-cut suit. He was wearing wrap-around sunglasses against the glare of the spotlights.

'We, um, we just wondered if you needed any extras,' squeaked Guy, who sounded like he'd been sucking on a helium-filled balloon.

'She's not filming tonight,' said the huge man, with a knowing smile. He pointed back the way we

had come. 'Feel free to grab a coffee from the catering tent. You look like y'all need one.'

We did as we were told. Even Guy was quiet. I couldn't help but admire the man's technique. He was so polite and professional, but we all knew what he really meant: don't even think about it, you pissed-up celeb-spotters—I've got your number.

Of course there was no catering tent, at least not that we could access, so we shambled on, Guy exaggerating the encounter into a wild tale he would brag to his Frat boys when he got home.

Eventually we stopped outside the strip club with the WELCOME MADONNA notice in the window.

'Do you think she's in there?' asked Kirsty.

'Hell, yeah! She's doing a pole-dance right now,' said Guy.

Kurt made us pose for a picture. Lasciviously. We were still blinking from the flash when a cheeky Cockney emerged from the doorway. 'Evening, ladies, gents. How about some quality filth in a nice clean environment?'

'Hey, less of the clean,' hollered Guy, who was already searching his wallet for the entrance fee.

Just then Kirsty puked. Spectacularly. Drinker's reflex made me jump to avoid splash-back on my long-suffering shoes. Guy whined that he'd got carrot flecks on his Kenneth Coles. The Cockney started yelling; she'd hurled up on his threadbare strip of red carpet.

'Let's go,' said Kurt, lifting Kirsty as if she were a damsel in distress. He strode quickly.

'It will freeze,' shouted Kurt over his shoulder as the Cockney continued to gesticulate at the vomit on his VIP carpet.

Outside the hotel we tried to clean Kirsty up, courtesy of one of my Nan's hankies. I was sure she would not have approved. Especially as it got binned afterwards.

Guy held Kirsty while I did the best I could. His hands wandered from her waist, over her breasts and hips, so I was careful to give his fingers an accidental wipe with the puke-stained rag. He didn't say anything, but he rubbed his hands surreptitiously on his jeans. 'Hey, you want me to sit with her while you two get back out there? No point screwing up everyone's night.'

'Thanks,' I said, trying to keep the anger from my voice. 'But I've had enough, anyway. It's been a long day.' The drink had worn off. I was mortified at my behaviour. *What were you thinking?* I screamed at myself. Mike was the best thing that had ever happened to me, my defence against Rattigan and his impossible demands, my knight in shining armour come to rescue me from the dole queue. Would I really throw it all away for a drunken shag with a cynical player who I'd never see again? Apparently so. If Kirsty hadn't puked, I wouldn't have been able to stop myself. I had no self-control and no morals. People at home had words for girls like me.

Kurt seemed to accept defeat as I hugged him goodbye. He smelled of fresh air and soap. 'You will come next year?' he asked.

'I'll try,' I lied. Who knew what I'd be doing next year? I wouldn't have a rich college to pay for me. And if I was still with Mike, then I couldn't allow myself to be within a thousand miles of Kurt. I couldn't be trusted.

We shook hands and he kissed me on the cheek. 'Good night.' He handed me a business card. 'Keep in touch, yah?'

Despite a sleepless night, I couldn't be cross with Kirsty. Not only had she chundered unassisted, but she had also put a stop to my fornication. As I lay in the dark, waiting for the room to stop spinning, the thought occurred to me that I should finish it with Mike for his own good. Not only was I a walking genetic disaster, but clearly a budding adulterer. He'd be better off without me.

Next morning I telephoned Mike. I had to ask Reception to place the call for me and the line was terrible, but eventually I heard a ring-tone. It rang and rang and I thought that he wasn't going to answer. Finally, there was a sleepy 'Yello?'

'Good morning, Mr Morgan-Jones, this is your alarm call.'

'What?'

'It's me.'

'Who?'

'Me!' I was getting tearful by this point. He was supposed to recognise my voice immediately and delightedly.

'Ursuls? What do you want?'

'Do I need an excuse to call you?'

'You do when it's disgustingly early.'

'Oh. Well I thought it would be good practice for when I'm your secretary.'

'That won't be in your job description, I can assure you.'

'So, how's it going?'

The line crackled and went dead. I had the most awful suspicion that Mike had crumpled a newspaper in front of the receiver and then cut me off.

I was in a booth in Reception, so I had to swallow my tears and my guilt. I knew immediately that the only thing to do was forget last night ever happened. There were two witnesses. Neither of them knew Mike. I was safe. There was no way it would get out. But did I have the nerve to keep quiet? And what did that say about our relationship? The desolation hit me like a vodka shot: unpleasant but exhilarating.

I realised the woman on Reception was asking me for something. Apparently the phone call cost £12.

Perplexed, I accompanied a pale and shaky Kirsty in her search for chocolate cake. Too late, we realised that our mission had taken us right past the strip club.

'Let's walk quickly,' I said.

We crossed the street with our heads lowered. There was a pile of sawdust on the scrap of red carpet.

'Gosh,' said Kirsty. 'That beer was awfully strong. I don't usually do that sort of thing.'

She held on to my arm as I accelerated. Too late, the cheeky Cockney jumped out. I braced myself for a tongue-lashing and Kirsty cringed.

'Ladies!' he shouted.

I paused, ready for the tirade.

'What's the hurry? Why not take time out for some quality filth?'

'Is it in a nice clean environment?' asked Kirsty, squeezing my arm to indicate that he hadn't recognised us.

'Erm, yeah, it is as a matter of fact.'

'Then we're not interested,' I replied. We ran off giggling. Then stopped, panting, as our hangovers kicked in.

We found a pink-painted tea room, staffed by women in tight corsets and full satin skirts. It was kitsch, but we enjoyed marvelling at the mountains of candied fruit, exotic chocolates, and the huge sugar castle which acted as the centrepiece to their display. Mozart played quietly and the tinkle of silver on porcelain soothed our dragon beer heads.

Kirsty chewed slowly, eyes closed as the chocolate endorphins flooded her system.

I took out my little 35 mm camera to see how many shots I had left.

High on glucose, Kirsty said, 'Hey, let's do some arty shots.' She took my camera and stepped backwards, almost tripping a waitress with a tray of steaming teapots, until she could get the chandelier that twinkled over our green marble table.

The harassed waitress began to clear our plates. 'Just a moment,' said Kirsty, 'I'd like some more chocolate cake, please.'

The waitress nodded and bustled off. I was sure she wanted us to go and get in someone else's way.

'Now then,' enthused Kirsty, 'let's see the ring!' I took it off and handed it to her. She mouthed the engraving to herself: *Semper Amemus*.

'It's Latin,' I explained, '"Our Love Is Forever".'

'Wow, how romantic.'

To steer the conversation away from romance, I said: 'Elizabeth Cary had the words *Be and Seem* engraved upon her wedding ring.'

'Gosh, how intriguing.'

The waitress dumped more cake on the table and Kirsty attacked it. When nothing but crumbs remained, she said: 'Perhaps it means "be one thing, but seem another"?'

'That's what I thought. But it's a bit of an odd thing to have engraved on your wedding ring, isn't it?'

'Doesn't say much for trust and openness in her marriage.'

'No, quite.' I fussed with the tea strainer to hide my blush.

Kirsty put the ring on the table so she could take some close-ups of it. She liked the way the shadows played over the engraving.

'I don't think they'll come out,' I ventured, not best chuffed at the prospect of coughing up several pounds for a wallet of hopelessly blurred photographs.

Suitably refreshed with sugar and caffeine, Kirsty and I decided to walk off our hangovers by exploring one of the city parks. We came upon a statue of a hooded monk. Cast in greenish bronze, he rested his massive bulk upon a white stone plinth. His face was obscured by the hood, and on the plinth was the legend ANONYMVS. The book in his right hand was open, although illegible. In his left hand was a stylus, worn shiny and golden by repeated touching. We didn't know who he was, but we guessed that people touched the stylus for luck so we did the same.

'You're bound to make it as a writer now,' said Kirsty.

I smiled at her enthusiasm. She was only a couple of years younger than me, but she seemed so childlike in her innocence, and her belief that everything would work out for the best. Long may she continue, I thought, feeling old and cynical.

We had walked such a long way that we decided to risk getting a tram back to the hotel. After a minor incident with the ticket machine, and a debate about the direction of travel, we both sat quietly, sleepy with cake. At the next stop an elderly man got on, immaculate in his black Wellington boots and newly-trimmed moustache. The tram shuddered and the man sat down. He held a piece of patterned paper. Reverently, he unfurled it to reveal a tiny bunch of snowdrops, foraged from the hills above the city. A gold band flashed on his finger.

I felt for my engagement ring, a comfortable habit that I'd developed in the months I'd been wearing it. There was nothing there. I looked down to confront the horror of a bare finger. 'It's gone!' I shouted, grabbing Kirsty's arm. 'I must have left it in the café!'

X

The Cambridge tour bus had stopped. The maroon, open-topped monstrosity sat right in front of my study window, blocking my view of the off-licence across the road. It would sit for a good half-hour, belching out black fumes as the canned commentary spouted platitudes in twelve languages.

'Wilkomen,' said Seb, prancing into the room.

'Benvenido,' I replied wearily. Knowing the word for 'welcome' in twelve different languages didn't really compensate for the noise and the smell.

'Now then,' said Seb, perching on the edge of my desk. He picked up a mug of cold nettle tea and sniffed it. 'My God,' he yelled, putting his hand to his forehead. 'You're turning into Rattigan!'

'I wouldn't mind if it gave me half his brain power.' My eyes were unnaturally bright from lack of sleep, I had a large furrow between by eyebrows from reading all night, and most worryingly I had begun to drink herbal teas as they helped to clear my mind. I had to face it: I *was* turning into Rattigan.

'I come bearing good news,' smiled Seb, confidentially.

'I doubt it,' I grumbled, as the tour bus commentary switched from Japanese to Italian.

'About your role in *Hamlet,'* said Seb, walking his fingers over the page I was reading.

'You mean I've got one, despite my accent?'

'Yes, indeed. A motley crew of yokels, fools and bit-parts.'

'Thanks a lot.' I'd never believed Seb would actually give me a role. I thought my accent was protection. Now, instead of being pleased, I saw it as just another distraction—I had to finish my dissertation.

'You'll need this,' said Seb, tossing a CD at me.

'Why?'

'Because you have all the singing parts! You're going to come on and warble during the scene changes. Just a bit of fah-lah-fiddle-de-dee. The tunes are on there. Rock on,' he said, grabbing his crotch with one hand and making Devil's horns with the other.

Before I could put Seb right about my singing abilities, he had bounded from the room and I was too busy to chase after him and remonstrate. Tutting, I stuck the CD in my knackered old stereo. Whatever it was, at least it would block the noise from the tour bus. I turned up the volume. It was some sort of madrigal with excessively posh high-pitched male voices. I turned back to my notes, determined to ignore it. But something about the words made me stop reading and listen:

Sing we and chant it, while love doth grant it.
Not long youth lasteth, and old age hasteth,
now is best leisure, to take our pleasure.

They were right. Old age was hastening, so long had I spent writing my dissertation.

The bus roared off, leaving a pall of black particulates dispersing slowly in the gentlest of breezes. I continued to struggle with a chapter on the sexual mores of seventeenth-century England, but I was distracted by a delicious, spicy smell. It was not my pond-water tea, nor my incense, which I had used up and not replaced because I hadn't been shopping in weeks. It certainly wasn't perfume as I couldn't afford any and Mike had yet to take my hints. I decided it was an olfactory hallucination brought on by malnutrition: I was living on toast, supplemented by the odd vitamin pill to stave off scurvy. I got up and leaned across the desk to open the window. Perhaps it was the bedding plants in the border beneath? As I worked I had watched the gardener grub up the sweet-shop blobs of polyanthus and replace them with ditzy polka-dots of pink and white begonias. They weren't scented.

I took a gulp of the soft spring air. How I yearned to go for a walk! But I couldn't. The dissertation deadline was looming. With a sigh, I returned to my book. I picked up a pen with the intention of making a note to the effect that verbal incontinence was just as bad as, and probably symptomatic of, sexual promiscuity for Elizabethan women. But I found myself writing something else:

The air is spiced with gilly-flowers. It hangs on my face, soft and warm like the breath of a lover...

Where did that come from? And what in the name of Shakespeare's codpiece was a 'gilly-flower'? Clearly I was going mad. Worse, I could hear the voice in my mind. It was young, female, with a slight lisp. I could see a knot garden, with close-clipped herbs laid out under a summer sky. This was too weird. I stood up and rubbed my eyes. Then I turned to the semi-circle of books strewn on the floor behind my chair. Kneeling, I picked each up and threw it aside until I found the one I wanted: *Elizabethan Garlands*. The gilly-flower was the forerunner of the garden pink. Its name reflected the 'pinking shear' effect of the ragged petals. This research was creeping into my head and distorting my reality. I needed a break. The CD continued its mercilessly merry tune:

All things invite us, now to delight us.
Hence care be packing, no mirth be lacking,
let spare no treasure, to live in pleasure.

I tried to sing along and winced at the croak that resulted. This was going to be embarrassing.

XI

I submitted my dissertation on a bright afternoon in the middle of May. I walked back from the Faculty Office feeling bereft. West Road was lined with new leaves, and students relieved of their final year projects skipped lightly to the nearest pub. There was no reason to read Elizabeth Cary any more. I could forget her and move on—my final exams were looming, after all. But I didn't want to. She had written other things. There were references to another play, poems, and political writings that she'd burned. What were they? What had we lost?

Cary had written her play, so good that it influenced Shakespeare, before she was twenty years old. She put me to shame. But I had an idea that grew, forbidden and secret, in a shady corner of my mind. I didn't want to be a critic, analysing her text. Nor did I want to be her biographer, restricting myself to the historical record. I needed to be free to understand her. To imagine my way into her mind, she who had gone first and left the door open for me.

Mike was waiting as I rounded the corner to my staircase. 'How's my favourite girly swot?' He gave me a congratulatory hug. I'd got him to leave me alone by promising that he could keep me in the pub as long as he liked, once the dissertation was done.

'Um, a bit down actually. It feels like a bereavement.'

'Don't be daft. You're free. Free as a bird with a drink problem!' He spun around, spreading his arms like a half-cut albatross. 'Now, the wine's on ice. What do you say we mosey on down to the river bank and watch the tourists crash their punts?'

Oh, I was tempted. I grimaced. 'I can't. I've got to start revising for my finals.'

'You promised!' Mike looked like a man who'd just caught his fiancée cheating on him.

'I'm sorry, but I've got to work.'

'We've been over this. You don't need to worry. Most secretaries don't even have degrees.'

'I have to do my best.' Suddenly the idea of being a glossy PA with an empty head repelled me. It wasn't just my pride. Rattigan had smiled at me when I handed in my dissertation. I had a chance of getting a respectable degree. I wanted to carry on researching Cary, so I was trying for postgrad funding. It was so unlikely to materialise that I hadn't mentioned it to Mike yet. But we needed to talk about the PA situation. 'I can't rely on you for a living. How's that different from prostitution?'

'Ursuls!' For the first time since I had met him, Mike appeared to be hurt. He seemed to slump.

'Look, that came out wrong.' I reached up and kissed him. 'But if I don't give this my best shot, I'll regret it for the rest of my life. At least you know I'm not a gold-digger.' I resolved not to divulge my academic ambitions at this juncture. But I was sure he'd support my decision, once he realised how important it was to me.

Mike smiled faintly. It was different for him, he didn't care. University was just a formality before he took up his birthright. He'd get a Third, like his father before him, and not give a toss.

'It's only for two weeks, and then we've got the whole summer. I'll see you for last orders?'

'Yeah, OK, I understand.' He slouched off despondently and I was not certain that he did. I knew this was a dangerous game; pushing him away, leaving him at a loose end. But I wasn't going to sacrifice everything I'd worked for just to go drinking with him. We had the rest of our lives for that.

XII

Finals were over. There was nothing to do but wait for the results. Mike sat with his back against a weeping willow. I lay at right angles to him with my head in his lap, idly twirling the engagement ring that was so nearly abandoned in a Budapest café. That, along with several other details of the trip, remained classified information. What Mike didn't know wouldn't hurt. Or so I told myself. He was reading James Clavell's *Tai-Pan*, a doorstop of a thriller that he'd almost finished in the 48 hours since he'd bought it. He turned a page every minute, rhythmically, his eyes never still.

'How can you read so quickly?' I asked, looking up at the gaudy covers. I stretched out on the riverbank, feeling the parched yellow grass needle the skin on the backs of my legs. Beyond Mike's hands, and the book, the faded green willow trees darkened as the sky drained of light.

'It's exciting,' he answered. 'Not like your historical wank.'

'It's not wank, it's…'

'I know. The work of a pioneer. One day people will find Clavell just as difficult.' He mimicked my voice and wiggled his hips as he spoke.

'Oi!' I raised my head and watched a half-submerged beer bottle clink gently against the bank.

'Give us a cherry,' said Mike.

'I've eaten them all.'

'Glutton!' He tried to tickle me. I squirmed and *The Tragedy of Mariam* almost fell into the river.

'Idiot,' I snapped.

'Don't speak to me like that, Ursuls.'

'It's important to me.' Last week I'd caught him trying to draw a moustache on a portrait of Elizabeth Cary that was reproduced as an appendix to her play. She looked pale and serious, with a thin, hard set mouth, a jewelled beehive and massive skirts that were covered in Catherine-wheels of embroidery. One hand rested on her stomach, and it was difficult to tell if she was in the early stages of pregnancy, or if it was just the material in her skirts that caused the swelling. Her left hand hung at her side, holding a lace handkerchief. She had lace cuffs and a lace ruff, and tiny feet encased in buckled shoes. She looked uncomfortable.

'I get the feeling that book means more to you than I do,' said Mike, sulkily.

'Don't be daft. I just wish you'd treat it with more respect.' I tried to sound apologetic.

'Well, come on then, tell me something interesting.'

'OK, this is weird. You know the play's about Herod's wife?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, she was descended from Judas Maccabeus.'

'What does she want? A medal?'

'And what did I read in Chapel?'

'I don't know. The *TV Times*?'

'An obscure passage from the Maccabees, all about her ancestors.'

'So?'

'Well, don't you think that's spooky? Like an uncanny coincidence?'

'No. Coincidences happen all the time, we just don't pay any attention. You only noticed because of your obsession.'

'You're boring.' Right then I realised that I missed Nathan. I hadn't seen him since before the exams.

The air was cooling quickly now. I lay back in Mike's lap and shut my eyes, wondering how Cary had felt about her husband. I tried to imagine the two of them together; keeping house, making babies. The idea of Mike and me as husband and wife seemed even more remote and unreal.

Mike closed the book with a snap.

'Finished?'

'Yup.'

'Any good?'

'It was all right.'

'What do you mean?'

'Ursuls, you seem to forget that not having done an English degree, I can still enjoy reading a novel. No post-mortem, no forensic analysis, just finish it and give it to a charity shop.'

'I think *I'm* going to write a novel.'

Mike snorted. '*You?* What about?'

'Elizabeth Cary, obviously.'

'How tedious. No-one's gonna want to read about that old trout.'

'I think they will. She was an amazing woman.'

Mike yawned. I wanted to hit him. Why couldn't he acknowledge Elizabeth Cary's importance?

'Fancy a pizza?' Mike brushed grass from his shirt and offered me his arm.

'No,' I said, hugging *The Tragedy of Mariam* to my chest.

XIII

'Brace yourself for an entry!' shouted Razz as he careered down the steps and into the sunken courtyard in front of the library. He brandished a wooden sword, his trousers rolled up to his thighs, long white cricket socks pulled over his knees and black plimsolls on his size 12 feet. Unsurprisingly, a gaggle of tourists had stopped to photograph him. Razz was Polonius and I was his son, both of which statements are clearly preposterous.

The blonde, beautiful, professionally trained Jocasta walked up and down declaiming her lines, gesturing affectedly and bowing to the tourists.

Seb had acquired a girlfriend, a fresh-faced hockey player who didn't drink and had no interest in the theatre. Helen stood watching, as she always did, distracting Seb and infuriating us. More disturbingly, he'd shaved his head, and I mourned the loss of his auburn curls almost as much as I mourned the cooling of our friendship.

I turned to make my exit, only to walk straight into Jocasta as Ophelia, who had entered from the wrong side of the stage. She squawked and dropped to the floor, even though it was her fault. If this had been a football match she would have got a yellow card for diving. No-one made any attempt to help her up.

'Cut!' shouted Seb, ambling over with Helen in tow. 'Ursuls, can you exit the other way?'

'That's going to look awkward,' I said, trying to remain civil.

'Well, surely you can make it look less awkward?' beamed Jocasta, who had regained her poise surprisingly quickly. 'After all, that's what we actors do, isn't it?' Her smile unnerved me, like she knew something I didn't.

'I can try. But wouldn't it be easier to just do as we'd agreed?'

I looked to Seb for help, but he had turned to Helen and we watched, horribly fascinated, as he began eating her face.

'Oh, for fuck's sake get a room!' hollered Cat, who was putting up posters on the pillars outside the library.

Seb and Helen ignored her.

'Right,' she said, through a piece of Sellotape that she had been about to cut with her teeth. 'What we need is a cast night out. *Funkdafied*, this Friday. Do I make myself clear?'

We nodded. Seb and Helen squelched.

XIV

I took one last, dissatisfied look in the mirror. My clothes screamed jumble-sale disaster rather than retro chic, but they'd just have to do; I was late as it was.

Seconds later I gave a little yell and scampered back to prevent the door from closing. I had almost locked myself out again, narrowly escaping another half hour in the porters' lodge trying to explain how it had happened while they strung me along with raised eyebrows and sarcastic comments. Now, what to do with my key? Might as well shove it down my bra, in the little pocket where the pad that was supposed to give some idea of a cleavage went. I took a deep breath and left the room, closing the door with a decisive click.

'But you're not dressed up,' whined the bloke on the door.

'What do you call these?' I demanded, pointing to my flares.

'Trousers,' he smirked, trying to be funny.

'Look,' I snarled. 'I am wearing orange bell-bottoms and a red nylon top which quite obviously clashes with them. In addition, I have blue eye-liner and frosted pink lip-gloss. I would say that more than qualifies me for free entry to your seventies night.'

As I was speaking a chap in a fright-wig and pyjamas was waved through free of charge. 'And he's not even in seventies gear, he just looks like a tosser,' I continued, exasperated.

The bloke on the door shrugged and held out his hand. Great. I got dressed up like a Care in the Community case and still had to fork out three quid. I was two pints of cider down on the deal, I calculated, as I queued to get my hand stamped. I stumbled down the stairs on my platform heels, descending into humid, throbbing darkness. Sweat and alcohol dripped from the blackened walls. It wasn't called The Boiler Room for nothing.

'Ursuls! Urs-uls!' Cat's crystal tones cut through the roar of voices. 'Hello darling,' she trilled, reaching up to give me a hug. 'I'm so glad you're finally here. There's no-one of any interest. Let's get you a drink...' Cat took me by the hand. She had poured herself into purple satin hot pants with matching knee length boots, completing the ensemble with a shimmery lilac halter-neck. All the men in the room were mesmerised, but none of them had the nerve to come up and talk to her.

The bar was relatively calm as most people were well on their way to being inebriated and falling around on the dance floor had become the preferred activity.

'Hello, ladies,' smiled Rob, our favourite barman. 'What'll it be tonight? Ten million pints of cider?' He reached around his magnificent beer belly to pat the Strongbow pump.

'Just two for starters,' said Cat in her cut-glass voice, reaching for her original Biba handbag.

'Let me get these,' I pleaded, feeling like a freeloader. I had about £9.70 left before my overdraft ran out. Cat was rich, but that was no excuse to let her pay for everything. Rob held up his hand.

'On the house, ladies,' he said, tapping the side of his nose.

'Oh, he's such a poppet,' giggled Cat, taking a sip of the cold, sweet liquid.

I nodded my agreement, downing several large gulps of cider in the hope that it would lend me some poise.

'Have you finished your funding application?' asked Cat.

I shook my head wearily. I had come to the dispiriting conclusion that very few people shared my belief in Cary's importance, and even fewer had the wherewithal to fund me through a Master's degree. I was firing off desperate requests to charities and research councils, but I knew I was wasting my time.

'Never mind, darling. You'll do it, I know you will.' Cat stroked my arm supportively.

I felt my skin prickle with tiny electric shocks.

'What's the sticking point?' It was good of Cat to feign an interest.

'The Roundhulme trust wants an essay on Euripides. *Medea*,' I answered glumly.

'Ooh,' enthused Cat, 'don't you just love it at the end when she turns into a goddess and the chariot comes down from Heaven to carry her away? Mummy adores that role. She says: "That's not a tragedy, it's a triumph!"'

I sighed. 'Cat, your ideas are so much better than mine. How do you know so much?'

'That's what comes of going to public school. They stuff your head so full of facts that all you want to do is drown your brain cells in cider. Oh, look!' Cat pointed to the dance floor where Rakesh, the rugby captain, had torn his shirt off and was twirling some slip of a first year around his head. 'Magnificent, isn't he?' she asked, licking her lips.

I nodded lamely. He was so out of my league that I shouldn't even have been looking at him. Besides, it was disloyal to Mike, who was by no means ugly.

'Look, Mike's a nice guy, darling. But don't sell yourself short. Rakesh would love to go out with you,' said Cat as though she could read my mind.

'Me? Don't be ridiculous.'

'He won't talk to you because he fancies you. That's why he paws at you when you're both so drunk you couldn't have a conversation if your lives depended on it.'

'Now you're taking the piss,' I said, blushing. But it was true: there *was* an awkwardness between us when we were sober.

Cat drained her plastic glass as the first bars of *Dancing Queen* blasted through the room. 'Come on,' she shouted, grabbing my hand. 'Let's boogie.'

I tried to force my body to move gracefully in time with the music but I was just too gangly. Cat, gyrating in her hotpants, soon drew a crowd of admirers. She twirled around, weaving her hands above her head and I tried to copy her, but my foot tangled with something behind me.

'Oh, careful darling,' said Cat and I turned to see that I had staggered into someone's wheelchair.

'Sorry!' I shouted. I recognised the lad in the wheelchair—I saw him around college occasionally, but I'd always been too much of a coward to introduce myself. I smiled and tried to dance with him as he twitched his arms to the music. Idiot, Idiot, Idiot went the woodpecker in my head. Of all people, I should have empathy with a wheelchair user. But it just terrified me. This was what my brother would have to put up with, if he lived that long. The woman pushing the wheelchair scowled at me as she bent to adjust her charge's feet. I got the strange feeling that I was staring at myself.

Desperate for a way out, I looked above the froth of Cat's ringlets (freshly hennaed in protest at the loss of Seb's crowing glory) and was hugely relieved to see Mike hovering by the DJ booth, talking to Jocasta. The music was so loud that he had to shout into her ear. Trying to look confident and desirable, I walked towards him. 'Hello,' I said, noting that he hadn't made any effort to get dressed up.

'Um, hi,' replied Mike nervously, shifting his weight from one cowboy-booted foot to the other. Jocasta smiled excessively and tripped off to the Ladies. I waited a split-second for a kiss from Mike. And then my instinct told me that it wasn't going to happen. He just didn't want to share my pink-frosted lip gloss, I reassured myself unconvincingly.

'Can I get you a drink?' I asked.

'Um, yeah, sure.' Mike flicked at an invisible speck on his suede jacket.

'Don't go away!' I said over my shoulder as I headed for the bar.

I handed Mike a plastic pint of lager. He took it without a word and downed almost half of it in one gulp. 'So,' I began. 'What have you been up to since this morning?'

'Erm, nothing,' answered Mike.

'And what are you doing tonight?' I asked mischievously.

Mike looked at me over the rim of his pint. It was a strange way to look at your fiancée: quizzical, not at all friendly. 'Anyone would think you were flirting with me,' he said quietly.

'What?' I asked, certain I could not have heard correctly.

'Anyone would think you were flirting with me,' repeated Mike. There was a hard edge to his voice.

'I thought that's what your betrothed was supposed to do,' I laughed nervously.

'We need to talk,' said Mike, leading me towards the exit. Seb and Razz were chasing each other, playing 'pinch the bollock' in ever decreasing circles. Inevitably one of them slipped in the slurry of beer and cigarette butts. Five minutes ago I would have laughed heartily at the mêlée, and probably joined in. Now I skirted them, feeling a cold, dead weight gather in my belly.

We barged through the crowd and scrambled up the stairs, pushing blindly along the corridor and out into the cool night air.

'What's the matter? Allergic to Abba?' shouted the idiot on the door.

There was a sizeable crowd waiting to get in and some cheered ironically as they saw us leave. Towards the tail of the queue, Nathan and his Natski friends were staggering about. They must have allowed themselves a night out to celebrate finishing their exams. I put my head down and hoped Nathan wouldn't notice me; this was no time for pleasantries. I thought I'd got away with it when he gripped his friend's arm and pointed. 'That's the woman I'm going to marry.'

What? Didn't he know I was engaged? We'd exchanged a mooli radish and talked about pre-Raphaelite painters. He'd seen my nose drip as I read in Chapel. Marriage wasn't the obvious next step. It must have been drunken bravado, I reasoned. Unconvinced, I walked faster. If Mike heard, he didn't respond.

The gates that gave from New Court on to the Backs were still open and we went through into the deep May dusk. We sat on a bench which looked out across the dark grass. Behind us the scent of honeysuckle oozed from the ancient stonework.

Mike hunched over, hands on his knees, and looked straight ahead. 'We have to split up.'

'What?'

'I've met you ten years too soon.'

Above the rushing of blood in my ears I could hear my future collapsing.

'I want to marry you, but not yet.'

'That's OK. We don't have to get married. We can still be together.'

'No, we can't. I can't ask you to wait for me.'

'Wait for you?'

'While I go off and…'

Suddenly I could see us from above, like we were in a film. I was no longer myself, but an actress playing a character called Ursula. Mike was talking but I didn't care what he said because I already knew the answer.

'It's Jocasta, isn't it?'

Mike was crying.

I got up and ran. Mike called after me but I ignored him. I pelted through New Court, heels echoing on stone as the sobs tore at my chest. My lungs were on fire. Reaching the Bridge of Sighs, I paused and looked down into the water, hands grasping cold stone. Portishead's 'Roads' ran endlessly through my brain:

How can it feel, this wrong
From this moment
How can it feel, this wrong?

Moonlight flickered on the river, moorhens chattered in the reeds and far away an owl hooted. The beauty of the night felt like cool water on my scalded heart and slowly my breathing became more regular. Why couldn't I be like Medea? Where was my divine ally in my hour of need? Where was my chariot? Where the thunderbolt to strike down this devious rat? I was just a mortal woman who had been deceived like multitudes before her.

I picked my way over the cobbles of Third and Second Courts. My platforms felt awkward, like great cloven hoofs. Perhaps I was wicked, over-reaching myself in my pride and ambition. In my lust for Kurt. And now I was being punished. I staggered forward, a drunken stilt-walker, the sinews in my ankles protesting as I pushed them to crazy angles. Then, inevitably, one of the cobbles came loose in its mortar bed and shifted as my heel struck it, turning my ankle. A whip of white fire flicked down my calf and wrapped itself around my heel. I found myself sprawled on the floor, my eyes level with the cobbles. The pain stopped my breath, and I lay insensible, forgetting everything except the agony in my foot.

Presently I realised that I could see a pigeon feather, and tiny shards of glass glimmering under the stars. Unbelievably, the world was still here. I pushed my hands against the ground and was surprised to find that instead of sinking into the earth, I was raised into a sitting position. I looked up, dazzled by the bright steel of the moon.

Tendons straining, eyes watering, I removed my shoes. Then I managed to stand. I walked barefoot, glad to reach the smooth paving as I turned left into North Court. The Chapel brooded, a dark hulk that glowered at the rest of the college. Desperate for a crumb of comfort, I crept towards the entrance, blinded for a moment as I was engulfed by its huge black shadow. I turned the iron ring in the door. It was locked.

Well, I heard my Nan say. *Nothing for it but to go home and get to bed.* Glancing around to make sure I was not observed, I fished the key out of my bra and let myself in. I pulled the outer door shut behind me, and then pushed the inner door closed too. That told any prospective visitor that I most definitely did not want to be disturbed. Without putting the lights on, I blundered my way to the bedroom and flopped down on the unmade bed. I felt a lump under me. It was one of Mike's t-shirts. It still smelled of him. I clasped it to me and let the tears come.

XV

The hum of traffic filtered through my sleepy brain as grey light oozed under the curtain. Out there, phones were ringing in the doctor's surgery; the tobacconist was unlocking his door; people were buying bagels from Nadia's and riding bicycles to rowing practice. How could they just get on with it, I wondered, when it was all so bloody painful? As if in answer to the question, my Jim Morrison poster began to fall down. 'No-one here gets out alive,' warned the thin red letters as the creased paper unpeeled itself from the grubby wall. 'Marvellous,' I grunted, burying my head under the tear-soaked pillow.

A key turned in the lock. I stiffened. Was it the Bedder? I could do without Sandra letting herself in, making cups of tea and sitting on the end of my bed for early morning girl talks.

With relief, I realised that it couldn't be Sandra because today was Saturday. But the fact remained that somebody was opening my door. Was it Mike, come to tell me he'd made a horrible mistake? My stomach lurched at the thought. 'Piss off!' I shouted.

'Ursuls, darling, there's no need to take that tone.'

'Cat?'

'The one and only,' chirped Cat as she bustled into the room laden with bags from Nadia's. She began to unload paper cups and plump packages on to the bedside table. The smell of freshly-brewed coffee made me salivate. I sat up and prised the plastic lid from a tall latte.

'Full-fat and fully-caffeinated,' declared Cat. 'These are emergency rations.'

'How did you get in?' I asked, wiping the froth from my mouth with the back of my hand.

Cat paused for a moment. 'I told the porter a little fibette.'

'Oh, Cat! What have you said this time?'

'Can't be helped, darling. I simply had to get in and see you. Now,' she said earnestly, taking my hands in her own, 'how are you?'

'Oh,' I sighed, 'gutted, humiliated, used, furious. And you knew, didn't you?'

Cat made a non-committal shrug. 'I had my suspicions.'

'You tried to tell me, but I wouldn't listen. God, I'm so stupid.'

'Oh, darling, don't beat yourself up like this. Eat something, will you? I wasn't sure what you'd prefer, so I got cinnamon and raisin, plain with cream cheese, walnut and cranberry, onion with salad…'

Even though I had been through a lifetime's supply of tears, I began to cry.

'What is it? Is it something I've said? Did I get the wrong bagels?' Cat was all concern, smoothing the hair away from my face and dabbing ineffectually at my cheeks with a pink tissue.

'No!' I wailed, grabbing the tissue and blowing my nose with gusto. 'You're just so nice and I don't deserve it…'

'Yes, you do. Now stop wailing and eat,' said Cat sternly.

After a few mouthfuls of cinnamon and raison bagel and half a cup of latte, I began to feel almost human again. Cat perched on the end of the bed glancing through a copy of the *Financial Times*.

'Just keeping an eye on the old trust fund,' she explained bashfully.

The paper crinkled crisply, accompanied by little clicks of the tongue and sharp intakes of breath from Cat. Late May sunshine filled the room and I felt a strange kind of peace settle around me.

'Oh, I took the liberty of collecting your mail,' said Cat. My peace was, it seemed, to be short-lived. 'Here.' Cat thrust a bundle of letters at me. Reluctantly, I took hold of them. It was always bad news. I leafed through them gingerly.

'Student loans, student loans,' I sighed, throwing the envelopes with Glaswegian return addresses to one side. 'Bank statement,' I said, steeling myself to break the seal and peep under the flap. 'Eek!' That joined the pile of unwelcome missives. Hiding between these envelopes was a Basildon Bond job from the biscuit tin where my Mum kept her stationery. My address was written in a small, crabbed hand. A note from my cheeky, adorable, terminally ill little brother. I put that under my pillow to cry over later.

Next was a glossy black envelope addressed in silver script. Cat raised her eyebrows as I made a hash of opening it.

'Oh.'

'Not bad news, I hope?' Cat leaned forward attentively.

'No. I've been short-listed for a job.'

'Well done, darling.' Cat held her hand out to inspect the letter.

Mike didn't know, but I'd been applying half-heartedly for jobs. I needed Plan B in case my postgrad funding didn't come through. And, although I hadn't realised it, in case my fiancé dumped me. I'd sent a flippant, half-baked application to one of the big ad agencies. They thought it showed potential.

'Gosh, it says here you're one of ten from thousands. Are you going to go to the selection day?'

'Do I have a choice?'

'There's always a choice, darling. And I'm choosing that chocolate muffin.' Cat lunged for it and closed her eyes as she bit into the moist, dark sponge.

And then a piece of A4, folded over and stapled together, my name an illegible scrawl that the porters could only decipher with years of practice. 'Rattigan. I wonder what he wants?' I tore open the note, squinting as I tried to comprehend its content. The paper looked as if a drunken spider had taken a bath in a pot of ink, and then decided to go for a walk. I threw the note down on the bed. 'Oh bollocks! Big, fat, hairy bollocks!'

'What is it?' asked Cat, brows wrinkled with alarm.

'He doesn't think my funding proposal will cut it. Trying to "reinvent the wheel" apparently. I've got two days to re-write the whole thing.'

'Right,' said Cat, standing up and folding her *Financial Times* decisively, 'What you need is a makeover.'

'What?' I stared up at her through bleary eyes.

'Get dressed. No arguments. I'll wait in your study.'

'But I've got work to do,' I said weakly as Cat strode from the room. Shocked at her unexpected display of friendship, I got out of bed and pulled on my one pair of Levis and an old Fruit of the Loom sweatshirt. I really had misjudged her. I stumbled into my study, wincing as my swollen ankle took my weight. Cat was sitting at my desk, leafing through *Medea*. One side of the page was Greek and the other was an English translation. Cat was definitely reading the Greek side. 'What shall I do with these?' I asked, holding the orange polyester flares at arms' length.

'Give them to Sandra,' replied Cat, laughing. 'Come on.' She held out her hand and I took it. 'Key?' she enquired, a smile playing on her beautiful face.

I patted my front left pocket in reply.

XVI

May Balls are held in June. Just another bizarre convention to snag the unwary pretender. The college buzzed with anticipation as the transformation began. Sawing went on from early morning to late at night. Mysterious marquees appeared on the Backs, along with canvas-swathed structures which might turn out to be fairground carousels, bungee jumps or cocktail bars. Each member of the organising committee was desperate to make their mark, to achieve that extra bragging point for the CV that was going to land them a gold-plated corporate career.

Temporary fences were erected and a squad of 'security professionals' from the best London establishments was drafted in to patrol them. Tickets were like diamond-dust: scarcely available unless you were a current student, and changing hands for thousands on the black market. College residents who had no intention of going to the Ball, and just wanted a quiet night in, would be locked in their rooms at 6 pm. Amazingly, this applied to staff as well as students.

I had been looking forward to this day for months. It was to have been my reward for working so hard while dressed like a drudge. One last Bacchanalian blow-out before we went to carve our own paths in the unforgiving world beyond this cloistered privilege.

Now it was all rather awkward. Mike's Dad had bought my ticket as an engagement present. I'd offered to return it, but as Jocasta already had her own ticket, and Mike needed to assuage his guilt, he insisted that I kept it. 'Dad would want you to have it,' he said. I was being bought off, I knew. But I so wanted to go, and I would never be able to afford it otherwise.

Cat opened a bottle of Veuve-Clicquot, which we sipped as we got ready in her set.

'Dignity, my dear,' she said as she curled my hair with tongs. 'Courage and dignity.'

'I'm just going to feel green and hairy,' I protested, draining my glass and causing Cat to singe my ear as I tipped my head back.

'There will be no hint of the gooseberry about you tonight. Forget him. You can take your pick, ma chére.'

Cat pinned up random sections of my spiral-curled hair. My pale, straight curtains were gone. I had cascades of spun gold. Cat fixed it all off my face with a black velvet ribbon. 'Cover your glass,' she ordered as she doused me in hairspray.

'You should be a hairdresser. You're amazing.'

Cat snorted. 'I spent my childhood in dressing rooms watching them coiffure my mother. I suppose it just sank in by osmosis.'

I was wearing a black polyester negligee, reduced to £1.50 in the Ethel Austin sale. I wasn't usually a negligee kind of girl, but my dress seemed to demand an appropriate undergarment. The skirt was a cascade, layer on layer of dusky-petalled chiffon that swished luxuriously around my legs. The bodice was pale pink satin, over-sewn with a delicate filigree of black lace. A border of black sequins glistened along the gently scooped neckline. It had come from a second-hand clothing warehouse out in the wilds of Lancashire. The proprietress was not sure of its provenance, but it was handmade, definitely pre-war, and possibly a lot older. Someone had added the sequins in the 1950s, she guessed, but the bodice was so deftly tailored that it must have been made to measure for a rich girl. Miraculously, it fitted me like bespoke couture. It seemed destined to be mine, but when the owner said it cost £40 my face fell. I was already stretching my overdraft limit. The second miracle was that my Dad smiled indulgently and got his wallet out. They'd just had a grant for a new boiler—he could spare a bit.

I imagined Mike's face when he saw me in it. Almost like a rehearsal for our wedding: this is what you'll get when I walk down the aisle. See, I can be glamorous with just a little bit of money behind me. My delight seemed to be infectious because the owner threw in a pair of Victorian black lace gloves. They were elbow length, and had black pearl buttons all the way along the inside of the arm. I felt like my fairy godmother had landed, and I couldn't wait for the moment when Mike would knock on my door, present

me with a carefully chosen nosegay, and offer his arm as I walked, his princess, to our night of revelry.

How brittle and foolish those daydreams seemed now. Stupid girl, believing in fairytales. Why was I dressing up? For what? Just my self-respect, to show Mike what he was missing.

Cat turned me in profile in front of the leaded bay window and dusted glitter on my eyelids. As I closed my eyes under the tickle of her sable brush, I felt the warmth of all the hours I had spent in this room; drinking, laughing, irritating Nathan with after-hours musicals. I doubted he would be going tonight. Far too frivolous for his taste. And a no-anorak dress-code. Trying to quash the bitterness rising within me, I concentrated on what a gracious and tolerant hostess Cat had been, always ready with hot-buttered toast at 2 am, restocking her drinks cabinet for yet another cocktail session.

Even as Cat laid a hand lightly on my shoulder, I felt her drifting away, growing distant. On the outside, we would move in such different circles. I saw how it would go: invitations to holidays that I couldn't accept because I couldn't afford them, sporadic Christmas cards, and then nothing. Social exile. Alone and broke Up North, where an Oxbridge education was something shameful, to be concealed. "Ark at 'er, lah-de-dah, up 'er own arse.'

I belonged nowhere. I'd had a taste of a life I couldn't lead, and it had ruined me. I'd even miss Rattigan. Who would challenge me now? Would I forget everything I'd learned, and just sink back into mediocrity? There was no summer in Greece. No London job. Mike had well and truly pulled the rug from under me. I was headed for corporate hell or the dole. How I had squandered my opportunities. My parents would be devastated. I wanted to curl up and disappear. The future was a dark, cold void that I was about to be pushed into. I wished with all my heart that I could have my three years over again. I wouldn't drink, or waste my time falling in love. I'd be like Nathan, unpopularity be damned. I'd work hard and be on committees and get myself a proper job. But it was too late. This had all been a dream that was already growing dim as I woke to the hopelessness of my situation.

'Perfect! Now let's get you dressed.' Cat held the taffeta skirts as I stepped into them. 'Breathe in,' she instructed as she laced up my bodice.

I twirled in front of her full-length, gilt-framed mirror. I didn't recognise myself. Perhaps I could become someone else. Leave Ursuls behind.

'That would cost a great deal of spondoolicks in London,' noted Cat.

'The woman just wanted to get rid of it. Said she'd had it for years, nobody scrawny enough to get into it.'

'Bitch,' said Cat, as she struggled to pull her dress over her hips.

We teetered slowly down the spiral staircase. We couldn't hold the banister because a thick rope of wild-flowers and white fairy-lights had been twined around it. So I leaned on the wall and Cat leaned on me, and we both tried not to tread on my voluminous skirts.

'My feet are already killing me,' I said through gritted teeth. But the dress would not be demeaned by a pair of battered Doc Martens. It was black kitten-heeled sling-backs or nothing. Obviously I had bought them in a charity shop and they weren't quite the right size.

'Nonsense, darling. Have a vodka cocktail, that's marvellous anaesthetic.' Cat had on a gold chain-mail sheath dress that fitted like a second skin. As we emerged into the lazy warmth of New Court, the evening sunlight fractured into tiny sparks of fire as she moved. Her lips were a perfect red Cupid's bow, her eyes black-winged like Audrey Hepburn's. She even had the cigarette holder to match.

'You look fantastic,' I said. 'Who are you after?'

Cat dragged deeply on her cigarette and looked at me from under her heavy eyelashes. 'Why should I be after anyone?'

'I don't know. I just thought you look so good, you're bound to get whoever you want...' I was floundering. I felt like I'd insulted her, but I didn't know why.

'Tonight, darling, is about you and me. Girls together. Who needs a man?'

'Not me,' I said, wondering if I could prove it true.

We linked arms and minced as quickly as we could to the Anchor, where pre-Ball drinkers were gathering. College would now be thoroughly checked by security. It would sit silently under the honeyed sunshine until 7 pm, when those with tickets would queue outside the gate, and have a plastic wrist-band fitted before they were allowed back in.

The Anchor was surrounded by penguin suits and horsey girls in Laura Ashley flounces. The noise was staggering. Hoots, shrieks, cheers, and yells. Too much excitement, too much champagne.

'Most of this lot won't make it to midnight,' sniffed Cat, insinuating herself on to the wooden staging that stretched out over the river, and served as a spillover area for the pub. She'd spotted the rugby team, distinguished by their bulk and their red bow-ties. Wolf whistles indicated that they had seen us, too.

'Ladies,' Rakesh bowed theatrically. I expected him to pick me up and throw me around, but something about the dress made him stoop and kiss my hand. Cat stuck her hand out to ensure she got the same.

I scanned the crowd nervously. Was Mike here? This was going to be cripplingly embarrassing. I needed allies around me.

'Wait here, darling,' said Cat. 'I'll go and get us a drink.'

'I'll come with you,' I replied quickly. 'You'll be ages.' She had already disappeared into the crowd. I turned back to the shelter of Rakesh, but he was absorbed in a drinking game which seemed to involve running around hitting his team-mates over the head with a tin tray.

Someone touched my arm. 'Ursuls!'

'Oh, Mike. Hi.'

'How's it going?' His tone was politely impersonal, as if he was making small talk with a shop assistant.

How could he do that? Was he made of stone? *You've just ruined my life. How do you think it's going, you heartless bastard?*

'Oh, good, actually. I've got an interview for an ad agency.'

That got Mike's attention. He seemed slightly miffed, as though I should have been paralysed with grief. 'Cool.' He lit a cigarette. He seemed in no hurry to go anywhere. Was he testing me?

I didn't know what to do with my hands, so I picked a rosemary sprig from one of the planters that marked the edge of the beer-garden. I rubbed it between forefinger and thumb, crushing it with all my pain until the antiseptic scent bled over my palm and I realised too late that I had surely ruined my gloves. There was hot raw jelly where my heart should have been and the sight of Mike made it quiver revoltingly. I'd stopped sleeping with his t-shirt. I'd washed it and put it away in a drawer. The tears were subsiding. I'd eaten a little toast. But a relapse was imminent. I couldn't stand to be near him. He had black Raybans pushed up over his spiky hair, a cigarette poised jauntily between his lips. He looked hot in black-tie and he knew it.

'You look different,' said Mike quietly.

'Oh. Is that good?'

Before Mike could answer, Jocasta appeared at his side. 'Darling!' she exclaimed, and stuck her tongue down his throat. Mike staggered and I almost puked. Then she turned and said, 'Hello, dear. How lovely to see you out and about already.'

Cheeky bitch. I smiled viciously.

'Interesting dress,' she said. I could tell she was furious that I had upstaged her white muslin and seed-pearl swags, which looked disturbingly bridal. She had doll-face make-up, with fake freckles, a red dot on each cheek, and day-glo pink lips.

'Oh,' I sighed. 'This old thing? It's amazing what you can find when you have a rummage.' This was absolutely crucifying Mike and I wanted to relish his discomfort. But I just felt sorry for him, so I offered a conciliatory smile. Then I started to giggle.

Mike attempted a puzzled grin.

'Sorry, it's just that... your lips... you're wearing Jocasta's lipstick!'

Mike blushed furiously. I'd never, ever seen so much as a flicker of self-consciousness before.

Jocasta licked a tissue and attacked him with it.

I turned away to spare him my laughter and walked straight into a tall man in white-tie.

'Ursuls!' He appeared delighted to see me.

I took a step back. He looked familiar but I couldn't place him. Close-cropped hair, kind brown eyes, high cheekbones, and a generous mouth. 'Nathan?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'I didn't recognise you.'

'It's amazing what a haircut can do. And I've got contacts now.' He passed his hand in front of his eyes. 'Thought I'd better smarten myself up. I start work next month.'

'Wow. Did you get what you wanted?'

'Kind of. But I won't be buying any paintings just yet. How about you?'

'I've got a few irons in the fire, but something's just fallen through.'

'I heard. I'm sorry,' said Nathan, nodding in the direction of Mike and Jocasta who were screeching at each other like fishwives. 'May I?' He handed me a rose.

'Oh.' I looked up at him, questioning.

'No strings attached, just a flower for my friend.'

'Well, thank you.' I sniffed it. The scent was glorious. Lemon tea and peaches and honey. The shell-pink petals were tightly packed, still half-furled.

I fixed the rose to my bodice. 'How clever of you to pick just the right colour.'

'Well, I had a bit of help there.' Nathan nodded to Cat, who was scything through the crowd with a bottle of champagne and three glasses on a tray which she held above her head.

'Hello, darlings. Mon Dieu, what a bitch of a queue.'

'Cat?' I said accusingly.

'Don't know what you mean, darling,' she smirked.

'Cat's been learning how to use e-mail,' explained Nathan.

'So I see.'

I couldn't help but be moved at Cat's antics. I suspected that Nathan's makeover was also her idea.

'Where did you learn to shift champagne like that?' asked Nathan.

'Oh, darling,' said Cat, warming to her audience. 'I spent the most ghastly gap year waitressing in Paris. You wouldn't believe the lecherous old bastards...'

I'd head all the stories before but the champagne disappeared agreeably quickly. Giddy with the bubbles, the three of us went to queue up.

'Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth!' shouted an actor dressed as Bottom from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Pucks and Titanias served fizzy pink love potions. Flowers and fairy lights dripped from every surface. We rushed through college, exclaiming as we noticed each transformation. The Bridge of Sighs had become Titania's bower, strands of wild-flowers woven through the intricate stonework until the river could only be guessed at. Everywhere little tents and booths offered different cocktails and amuses bouches.

After an Oberon's Delight, which was an odd shade of blue, and a Puck's Perversion, which was an even odder shade of green, we decided to attack a mound of glittering jewelled fairy cakes. 'Do you think they're meant to be eaten?' I asked.

'I'm about to find out,' said Nathan through a mouthful, spraying crumbs down his tuxedo. Cat and I yelped hysterically as we tried to brush edible rubies from his lapels. His chest was broad and it felt warm under his jacket. I was careful not to let my hands linger. Just friends. A girls' night out.

We came to a booth, striped and pennanted like a jouster's tent. It was staffed by travelling types who offered henna tattoos. Cat hoiked up her dress, placed her foot on an up-turned beer crate and demanded a snake from ankle to thigh. I got a circlet of ivy around my upper arm, and Nathan, sportingly, agreed to a scrolling pattern on the back of his hand. Thus marked out as revellers, we became Pucks in

the greenwood, running joyously as children, whooping and whirling, just because we could. Cat was right, I couldn't feel my feet. Or my heart.

We entered New Court and I squealed, because a punt was grounded in the middle of the lawn. It was filled with ice, and on top of the ice were stacked hundreds of bottles of champagne. 'Just the one bottle?' asked a man dressed as a Renaissance butler, liveried in green velvet.

'Each!' retorted Cat.

His gloved hands released the cork with barely a whisper and he wiped the first bottle before handing it to me.

Just then a man in khaki slacks with a large camera approached us. '*Daily Telegraph*,' he said. 'Delighted to see you having such a josh. Might I have a few words?'

'If you're quick. We're waiting on a couple of bottles,' said Nathan.

'Would you say this was an absurd playground for the over-privileged?'

'Not at all,' said Cat. 'We've all worked very hard. And I'll have you know my friends here both went to state schools...' Here she paused and lowered her voice theatrically, 'In the *North of England.'*

'Is that so?' asked the journalist, incredulous. 'In that case, we must have a photo.'

Cat and Nathan had now acquired a champagne bottle each. We shuffled together in front of the punt.

'Are you chaps members of any societies?' he asked. 'Good for the caption, you know.'

'Oh yes,' I said, 'the Veuve-Clicquot Destruction Society.' At that we clashed the necks of our bottles together and upended them, getting more champagne down our fronts than in our mouths. 'Cheers!'

The journalist smiled and thanked us.

We surged out on to the Backs, where an ABBA tribute band had started up in a huge white marquee.

'Come on,' said Cat, dragging me forward as 'Voulez-Vous' began.

The rugby team was already in there and before I knew it I was back to my Absinthe Fairy antics, sitting on Rakesh's shoulders as he charged around the dance-floor. I saw Seb, pilled-up, doing his 'big box, little box' hand movements in front of a glazed Helen. We'd drifted apart since Helen arrived, and since *Hamlet* had starting falling to pieces. The performance was next week but nobody seriously expected it to go on.

Suddenly Razz slid on to the dance-floor on his knees, a pint of lager in each hand. Inevitably he spilled them and Rakesh slipped, leaving me at the bottom of a scrum. 'Spillaaarge!' went the shout, until it drowned out the band. I tried to wriggle free, cursing the beer that was soaking into my dress. We were all terribly drunk, and I became a little fearful. I could quite easily be crushed under all these big, silly men. A hand reached toward me and I took it. My dress was snagged under somebody's knee, and as the hand pulled, my skirts tore. The hand was strong, with a scrolling pattern across it. I was yanked upright and face-to-face with Nathan. I smiled up at him. 'Thanks. It didn't smell very nice in there.'

'I'll bet. Perhaps tiddlywinks is more your sport?'

'Oh no, far too strenuous.' We were still smiling at each other, and I guessed that, like me, he was saying anything he could think of, just to elongate the moment.

'Shit. Your dress is ripped. Was that my fault?'

'Not at all. Anyone who rolls around on the floor with the rugby team deserves everything they get.'

'Let's find the seamstress.' Nathan offered his arm and I took it.

My feet felt strangely free. I had left my shoes in the scrummage. My lack of heels emphasised our height difference, and I looked up at Nathan all the way to Second Court.

On the first floor landing, a tutor's sitting room had been commandeered for the evening. A small lady in large glasses sat with an Anglepoise lamp and a huge box of cotton reels, ribbon and net. Two girls were already queuing.

'I'm not sure men are welcome in here,' I said to Nathan, indicating a girl in her underwear who

was waiting for her dress to be fixed.

'Oh,' said Nathan, flushing.

'I'll tell you what, why don't you go back to Cat? I'll see you in the marquee as soon as I can.'

'OK,' he said. 'If you're sure.'

'Honestly. You're missing Bjorn Again.'

It was a relief to sit down, on my own. One of the girls had a serious problem with a stiletto heel that had pierced the skirt of her sequinned dress and drawn a huge tear which was now moving up to her thigh. She was instructed to disrobe, and hand her dress over. The girl waited in nothing but a thong and tit-tape, and I understood at once why the lighting was so discreet. The small woman with the big glasses ran the dress through her sewing machine and the girl gasped as a magical repair was effected.

The other client had made the classic mistake of squeezing into a dress that was a size too small. She'd busted a move on the dance-floor and ripped it. Now she confessed that she couldn't afford to buy it, and had been going to take it back to the shop in the morning. The seamstress took a dim view of this, and the girl sobbed loudly as she was lectured on the importance of supporting local retailers. She was sent away safety-pinned.

Like a weary A&E doctor, the seamstress did not care how I had damaged my dress. She knelt and examined the torn flounce with an expert hand. Then she took out a large pair of shears. 'I'll have to cut out the rip to stop it spreading. But it won't be seen under all this material. It can be replaced quite easily. In fact the bodice is much older than most of these skirts—it's a common problem with this style. It's a nice piece. Has it been in the family a long time?'

'Oh, er, no. Just a lucky find. Thanks.'

'Look after it,' she said, peering at me over her tortoiseshell frames. 'With a bit of luck, your own daughter could be wearing it in twenty years' time.'

I ran out, pushing my unformed grief to the back of my mind.

At the marquee, I couldn't see anyone I knew. 'Man After Midnight' began and I looked around frantically for Cat. This was our song. A three year anthem to getting ready for wild nights out, prancing around her set with Blancs de Blancs coursing through our veins. There was no sign of her. Or of Nathan, or of the rugby team. Even Seb had disappeared. Where was everybody? I tried to dance, but I felt stupid. This should have been one of the best nights of my life. Instead it was becoming a desolate endurance test. Where could I go? What could I do? The security people wouldn't even let me into my room until the morning. Was I to spend the rest of the night wandering about on my own? Fighting the panic which beat like wings in my chest, I realised that this was what it would be like on the outside. No-one to turn to. A hard and lonely existence stretched before me: no money, no friends. Just the regrets of a wasted youth.

Fighting tears, I left the marquee and tried to think rationally. Where would they go? I wandered back towards New Court, over the grass which was deliciously cool to my poor abused feet. It was after midnight now, and the pre-dawn chill began to penetrate my flimsy taffeta layers. I stopped to warm my hands over a brazier. I looked up. The wedding cake was spotlit purple like some drug-induced parody of its former self. The sky above was scored with the searing beams of a laser that defied and defiled the darkness with its lurid green fall-out. The colours were all wrong. I got that warped feeling again.

The night was reaching maturity and many had over-indulged. I trod very carefully as I noted the broken glass strewn everywhere and the vomit on the steps into New Court. I didn't want to go back in there. I wanted to stay in the cool and dark out here, where no-one could see that I had lost my friends. Before me was a border of summer flowers pricked with tiny white lights, like a host of glow-worms. Here and there, the lights picked out an individual flower: a blue delphinium, the graceful horns of a purple columbine, a white foxglove swaying in the breeze, its speckled throat trumpeting a silent song of joy. The air was heavy with the scent of summer. And here I was, alone. Get used to it, I thought.

I heard a faint grunt and the flowers swayed. It couldn't be a hedgehog, it would be scared off by the noise and the light. I looked more closely. My brain refused to process the signals from my optic nerve. I had clearly lost my wits. Slumped against the stone wall at the back of the border was Mike. And astride him, eating him alive, was a woman. She had a cascade of auburn curls. Her gold dress glittered darkly in

the shadow of the wall. In the glow of a fairy light, a henna snake circled her thigh. Cat. About to have sex with Mike. I didn't say anything. Indeed I was not capable of speech. But some sixth sense must have made Cat aware that she was observed. She looked around.

'Darling,' she said, pushing herself upright against Mike's shoulders, and pulling her dress down. 'Don't be like that. I gave you Nathan. You can't begrudge me this. You've finished with him.'

I was not aware of thinking or doing anything; I just stood and stared at Mike and his horribly glazed expression. And then my legs were moving. I was running out into the darkness, away from the lights and the noise and the horror. I found a bench at the far side of the marquee and I leaned on it as I retched. Nothing came, but my chest continued to heave. The heaving became sobs and I wailed into the night. My lungs were burning, my throat raw.

Eventually I could cry no more. I felt light, empty. Already there was a faint milkiness in the Eastern sky. Every night has its dawn, I told myself, remembering some cheesy song. I stood and breathed deeply. A gentle wind dried my cheeks. *You're well rid of him*, I head my Nan say. *Good job you found out what he was like before you married him.* And now I knew Cat's true colours, too. She'd always been very tactile with Mike, and I'd dismissed it as sisterly affection. Now I remembered how she'd leave her Rigby & Peller bras airing on the radiator by Mike's favourite armchair, the times she'd fallen drunkenly against him, or collapsed into his lap. What a puppet mistress she was, getting Jocasta to do her dirty work and split us up so she could move in for the kill! How tempting it would be to melt into Nathan's arms and forget about them all. But that wasn't right. He was second best. I had to face facts: I still loved Mike.

I wandered further into the darkness, until I heard the burbling of the Bin Brook, which ran along the edge of college land. I stumbled along the bank, feeling grass and twigs on my bare soles. I lifted my skirts clear so I could see my feet, pale in the shadows of the trees that lined the little stream. I stubbed my toe, and as I placed my foot again, more carefully, I was aware of a strange smoothness, as though the ground had been polished. I placed my other foot, and it made a slightly hollow noise, as though I was standing on a trap door. I hoped that I was. Wherever I dropped to would be better than this place of loneliness and betrayal.

I looked around, turning slowly like the ballerina in a musical jewellery box. As my eyes grew used to the darkness, I noticed that the ground was illuminated by a faint glow from a streetlight on the other side of the brook. I gasped as I realised that I was standing on a tree-trunk as big as a table. I knelt to caress the polished wood, smoothed by rain and wind, furred by mosses, which obscured the rings of the heartwood. I wondered how old the tree was, what secrets it mighty heart could tell. I seemed to recall that a huge oak had stood here in my first year. It had been struck by lightning that autumn, and felled before it collapsed.

Beyond the distant thudding bass lines, I thought that I heard the tree's leaves whispering, and saw them flashing green in the light of a summer long passed. I guessed that it must have been planted when Elizabeth Cary was alive. How had she felt, married off to a man she barely knew? And I wondered then why I had even considered marrying Mike. I didn't need to. I had a choice. A whole realm of opportunities that Cary was denied. I might be lonely and poor, but I could write. That's what I would dedicate my life to, doing whatever I had to as long as I could scrape by, as long as I could repay Cary for going first, for opening the door to me.

I laid my cheek against the cool moss and wished the tree could speak. It may have seen Cary. Her son had attended my college, although the only record of him was his reservation of the tennis courts. If only she could talk to me down the centuries, and tell me what it was like for her.

Something changed in the air around me. A barely perceptible shift in pressure. The warmth and solidity of another body.

'I've been a complete twat,' said Mike.

I knelt and looked up at him, and it started me crying again.

He lit a cigarette with trembling hands, the smoke acrid on my raw throat. 'I've made the biggest mistake of my life.'

I sniffed angrily, wiping my nose with the back of my gloved hand. The rosemary scent lingered

and I breathed it in, hoping its astringency would hold me together.

'Ursuls, can you forgive me?' He threw the cigarette down and ground it under his heel.

I couldn't speak. I clenched my jaw and looked towards the glimmering in the East. Suddenly an arc of light fizzed into the sky like a crude shooting star, obscuring the dawn with a sickly green glare. It exploded with a hollow bang. The fireworks had started. Mike knelt beside me, staring at the ground as he spoke in a dull monotone.

'You are the love of my life. I don't need you to wait for me. That was stupid. I don't want to be with anyone else.'

I felt like the tree stump was shaking under me so I stood up and stepped on to the path. I motioned for Mike to do the same. This was all getting too theatrical. Still I couldn't speak.

'I want you to write. I know you can do it and I'll support you all I can.'

'Really?' I croaked.

Starbursts lit up the sky. Great chandeliers of flame hung suspended against the blackness, their brilliance dimming even the laser beams.

'Yes, really. I don't want you to be my secretary or iron my shirts. You're better than that. I want you to follow your dreams.'

'Thanks.'

He tried to take my hand.

'Don't,' I spat, shivering with revulsion as I thought of how he had touched Jocasta and Cat as he had once touched me. The sky shimmered with lilac, silver, red and gold sparks. The glowing embers hung, trembling in the darkness until the wind pushed them askew. There would be ash all over the streets and people's gardens tomorrow. *I hope no-one's left their washing out,* said my Nan.

Eventually the whizzing and booming stopped and the last particles of flaming ore fell to earth. Remembering that I, too, would soon return to the earth, a burned out husk, I reached for Mike's hand. He took it and held it so hard that I thought he would break my fingers. But I liked the pain. It proved I could still feel.

'You're not wearing your ring,' said Mike, feeling under the lace of my gloves.

'No. You broke off the engagement.'

'I'm an idiot.' He held out his hands to me. I took them, partly because I was shivering and I needed to move. He held me to him, lifting me half off my feet as we waltzed round and round in the grey dawn light. The warmth of his body was delectable and I suddenly felt drowsy. How tempting it was to lay my head on his chest and fall asleep.

'I'm dizzy,' I gasped.

Mike stopped and held me by the shoulders.

I looked at him through half-closed lids.

'Ursuls, will you marry me?'

'No,' said a clear voice that was not my own.

Mike froze and then his hands dropped to his sides. 'Never?'

'I don't know. Not yet. Look, you can't just pretend that everything's back to normal. I need some time on my own. To think.'

'Oh. Where are you going to go?'

'I don't know.'

'Can I come with you?'

I smiled, exasperated. And then shivered violently. I was cold, hungry and exhausted. Mike put his jacket around my shoulders. Then he hugged me and kissed the top of my head. 'Come on,' he said. 'Shall we go and wait for the survivors' photo?'

'I don't think I have.'

'What?'

'Survived.'

College was like a war zone. Everything was destroyed. Bottles littered the grass. Half-empty glasses lined every alcove and windowsill. Flowers wilted in the rising sun. The champagne punt had been turned over and now a row of tail-coated youths slept soundly upon it, like penguins resting after a long swim. Others lay where they had fallen, untroubled by the clean-up team as it got to work with black bin-liners. The dream was over for another year. For me, it was over forever.

Mike gave me a piggy-back to my room so I could put some shoes on to protect my feet from the broken glass. I splashed my face with cold water, cleaned the mascara from under my eyes and tidied the wisps of hair that had fallen around my face. Then I took his arm and we made our way towards the front gates. Rounding the corner of the Chapel we came face-to-face with Nathan. He beamed as he saw me, but then his face fell. I could see how it looked. I was still wearing Mike's jacket and I was holding his arm.

'Where did you go?' I asked, my heart pounding as though I'd been caught doing something wrong. 'I looked for you,' I said. 'After the seamstress.' I felt like I'd taken a wrong turning that I would never be able to go back and put right.

'I looked for you, too,' he said sadly. 'I spent all night looking.' He spread his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. His voice was slightly petulant, as though I had let him down. He had dark shadows under his eyes, and stubble made his jaw look dirty. It may have been the effects of wearing contact lenses all night, but his eyes were red-rimmed. I realised that I'd lost the rose he gave me—probably in the rugby scrum.

'I'm so sorry I missed you.' My voice sounded thin and untrustworthy in my own ears. Nathan clearly suspected that I'd hidden from him. Did he think I'd ditched him deliberately by sending him away from the seamstress? But this kind of thing always happened—everywhere was strange, people looked different. Why hadn't we arranged a more specific meeting place? I disengaged myself from Mike and stood on tiptoe to kiss Nathan on the cheek. I wanted to show them both that all options were open. 'We're just going for breakfast. Please come.'

'Yeah, come on mate,' said Mike, not daring to contradict me.

The three of us shuffled awkwardly into Second Court. I kept my arms folded, inviting contact from neither. I could feel their rivalry simmering around me, as though I was a particle caught in a laser beam.

In First Court the rave tent was still going, and the last few party animals flung themselves around in ever-tiring movements, like bunnies without Duracell batteries. At the entrance to the tent a gold dress reflected the rising sun with blinding hostility. Cat was draped around Razz, who staggered about with a bottle of vodka in his hand. Cat had a cigarette dangling precariously from her lips, dropping ash down Razz's shirt front. She was mumbling incoherently. Razz was taking no notice.

I stood and watched her. I thought that I would feel hot, violent hatred towards her. But actually, I just felt sad, and sorry for someone who couldn't be happy, despite having every advantage in life.

'Oh dear,' said Nathan, oblivious to Mike's grimace.

'Can we go?' asked Mike, shuffling uncomfortably.

I stood my ground. Mike and Nathan waited obediently, as though they couldn't leave without me. Eventually Cat looked up and her vodka soused brain realised that I was watching her. 'Selfish cow,' she spat. 'What do you want two for?'

I felt a strange prickling on the back of my neck, like it was being lightly brushed with thistle-down. I looked up at the flawless blue sky. Sunlight winked from each of the little panels in the mullioned windows of the gatehouse. I stared at the tower. I'd always wondered who lived up there. It was out of bounds, no visible means of access. Something caught my eye. A dark figure behind the shards of light. It seemed to be wearing robes, or a cloak, and from the incline of its head it was looking straight at me. I stared back, and it felt like our eyes locked. The sun had moved around behind the gatehouse and now it struck the stained glass, which shone with intense blue light. The beauty of it stopped my breath and caused tears to stand in my eyes.

The champagne and the cocktails had sent me witless. Although I could not possibly have seen it, I knew that the figure had kind, dark eyes and I heard a voice in my head which whispered 'Be and seem, be

and seem'.

'Ursuls?' Mike was shaking my arm. 'Are you OK? You zoned out there.'

'Erm, yeah, sorry. I thought I saw someone up there.'

'Who is it?' asked Nathan, squinting up at the window.

Mike put his Ray Bans on. 'Nah. There's nothing in there. Just a trick of the light. Have you been on the absinthe again?'

'Probably,' I said. 'Who knows what was in Puck's Perversion?'

'Who knows, indeed,' replied Nathan. 'We should be grateful if it *was* only absinthe.'

As we reached the front gate we were forced to step over two bodies blocking the entrance. Sebastian had passed out on top of Helen, who stared impassively at the bosses on the ceiling of the gatehouse. Judging by the size of her pupils, she was in the middle of a trip. So much for the clean-living hockey player.

King's Parade was soaked in thin, clear light. Those who had not indulged in the unreal carnival were beginning their day. Slowly, a powerful hum made itself heard, like a great hive of frantic bees. Footsteps, voices, a constant murmur as people walked in and out of shops, punctuated by the urgent bells of cyclists who tried to move through the swarm. A radio blared from an open window, announcing the approach of another scorching afternoon. I felt nothing but unearthly tiredness, and emptiness... each moment passed with a tick that echoed in the hollow silence of reality.

Tourists stared at us. Many hastened to photograph the authentic revellers who had stumbled into their domain of sunshine and sightseeing. Passing King's Chapel, I looked upwards. The spires were white against a harsh blue that intensified with every heartbeat, growing denser and denser, until it seemed like a dome of indigo porcelain that would shatter in the heat... I needed to sleep. The world was overwhelming. I yearned for darkness. This was too hot, too bright. Already my cheeks stung under the strong sunshine. I was sure they were going pink, like veal in a hot pan.

We tramped up the stairs to Fitzbillies. The café was already crowded but we found a small table in the far corner and squeezed around it. I sat by the open window, which creaked in the gentle breeze. The breeze carried with it the suggestion of hot dusty pavements, the tang of geranium leaves, frying meat and doughnuts, dank undertones from the river: the scent of a perfect summer's day. This was no longer my realm. I was leaving Cambridge and going back to the real world, with its grey weather and ugly buildings.

I ordered Earl Grey and a blueberry muffin. Mike wanted black coffee. Nathan went for a full English. We sat in silence, but it wasn't awkward. We were all too tired to feel anything except thirst.

Then the rugby team shambled into the room.

'More toast! More toast!' was the constant chorus. They spilled their tea, and called for replacements.

'Ketchup! Ketchup! I must have ketchup!' yowled Rakesh as if his life depended on it.

The harassed waitress stopped cleaning up the pools of spilt tea and rushed to fetch the ketchup, only to be harangued by an imperious voice: 'Brown Sauce! I simply cannot eat my bacon without brown sauce!' This, I realised, was Razz. Without Cat. He was treating the poor waitress like a skivvy.

'Fat is digested by bilious emissions of the liver...' began Rakesh, who was training to be a doctor. 'When the liquefied food reaches the small intestine....'

This was too much for Razz. He belched loudly and lurched towards the bathroom, neatly bypassing the digestive processes that Rakesh had been so kind to explain.

Chairs scraped as the rugby team decided that sleep and paracetamol were the only things capable of curing their wretchedness. Leaving a generous pile of bank notes on the table they shuffled from the room, groaning and muttering, negotiating the door with great difficulty. There was a loud thud and a half-hearted attempt at an argument. Then their shuffling footsteps and beer-thickened voices died away, leaving the café to sunlit quiet.

They had left a variety of tea-sodden newspapers in their wake and Mike rescued them before the

waitress binned them. He picked out *The Daily Mail*, passed *The Sun* to Nathan and left me with *The Telegraph*.

Our order arrived. I leaned my elbows on the table and breathed the bergamot fumes from my teapot. They seemed to bring me back to myself. I looked at Nathan, dipping fried bread into his egg, and Mike draining his coffee mug. The sunlight was so pure, it was like I was seeing them both for the first time, with their stubble and the shadows under their eyes, the lipstick smudges (in two shades) on Mike's cheek, and the champagne tide-marks on Nathan's shirt front. I felt oddly protective towards both of them. I realised how fragile they were and how easily I could hurt them. A strange, giddy feeling whirled about in my stomach. I didn't need either of them. And that made me powerful.

Mike must have felt me looking at him. He put down his mug and turned towards me. I smiled and picked up my paper. It took me a while to get it to co-operate, being damp and crumpled, but eventually I managed to peel the first page away from the second, and with a little help from Nathan was able to open it out. A black and white photograph took up half of page 3. It looked familiar, but strange, like something from a dream. There were three friends, their whole lives before them, laughing delightedly as champagne coursed down their chins. I looked like a toff! You couldn't tell I was out of my depth, and spoke like a woollyback. Now it was a lifetime ago. *The trappings of privilege?* Asked the caption. *The champagne destruction society gets to work.* I laughed in spite of myself.

'Let's see?' asked Nathan through a mouthful of black-pudding.

I spread the newspaper out for him, trailing the corner of the page in his baked beans.

'May I keep this?' he asked.

'Of course, it's not mine.'

Carefully, Nathan tore the picture out, folded it twice and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

Mike was immersed in his paper and seemed to be oblivious.

Nathan stood.

'Are you off?' I didn't want him to slink away dejectedly.

'It's past my bedtime. There's a vague plan to go punting later. I'll be at the Cripps lodge at 3 if you fancy it?'

'Oh, I'd love to. If I'm not asleep.'

'Of course,' said Nathan quietly.

Not with Mike! I wanted to shout. Instead I squeezed his hand and said, 'Sweet dreams.'

'Yeah, see you mate,' mumbled Mike distractedly.

As Nathan left I noticed a *sotto voce* argument going on at the table next to us.

'He was *twice* your age!' hissed a man with a large red wine stain on his shirt.

'So? You didn't have to tell him I was "only" fifteen, did you? I've never been so humiliated!' retorted a girl in a flouncy lilac gown.

'*You* were humiliated? Who was the one who had to go chasing after you? Who had to cause a scene in the middle of the hypnotist's act? You just went off with the first man who offered. Anything could have happened...'

'I'm not stupid. I knew what I was doing...'

'No you didn't, you were drunk...'

'Not as drunk as you...'

'That's not the point. I'm old enough to control myself but you... you just don't know when to stop, do you?'

'Oh, stop going on! You're just jealous because you didn't get any female attention...' At this she paused and looked meaningfully, under her lashes, at him. 'You just wanted to ruin my evening out of spite!' She almost spat the final word at him.

He was allowing himself to become provoked.

She was needling him into losing his self-control: she was right, she did know exactly what she was doing.

'Will you please believe that I was acting in your best interests?'

He was interrupted by a loud sigh of boredom.

Taking a deep breath, he tried again. 'I know at your age you think you can do anything you want, but... I know what men can be like... I am one myself!' he added, trying to lighten the tone.

'Allegedly,' said the young girl, so quietly that most people would not have heard.

The man threw down his fork and grabbed the girl's wrist so hard that tears stood in her eyes.

I stood abruptly.

Mike looked up.

'I've had enough,' I said, glaring at the man and his young companion. The man let go of her wrist and stirred his tea as if nothing had happened. I threw some money on the table. 'I need to sleep.'

Mike followed me down the stairs. He took out his cigarettes. 'Bollocks.'

'No, none here,' I replied.

'I'm out of cigarettes. Can you hang on while I dive into the newsagents?'

'I wish you'd give up.'

'Why?'

'Because I don't want you to die of lung cancer.'

'Won't be a minute,' said Mike, ignoring me.

I carried on walking. Here I was in split Doc Martens and a torn, beer-stained ball gown. I had no job, no money, and no man. Why did I feel so light? I stopped outside Trinity and sat on the wall in a gap between clumps of padlocked bicycles. What was I doing? *Be and seem* said the voice in my head, and I understood what it meant. Just being, on my own. Not being one thing and seeming another, but happy in my own skin. I breathed deeply, watching the endless whirls and eddies of tourists flow around me. Some stopped to take my photograph and I smiled obligingly. Then I recognised a figure in the crowd. It was very slim and walked precisely. Brothel creepers, black drainpipe jeans, Harrington jacket, *Times Literary Supplement* tucked under one arm.

'Good morning,' said Rattigan, registering no opinion about my appearance, 'I've been meaning to talk to you.'

My heart began to pound. What on earth could Rattigan have to say to me? I must have failed! Why else would he need to talk to me?

He sat on the wall next to me, the crease between his eyebrows deepening as he squinted in the brilliant sunshine. 'Do you have anything lined up after graduation?'

'Erm, not really. I'm still waiting to hear from a few places.'

'You want to write, don't you?'

'Yes.' How did he know that? I'd never mentioned it to him.

'I think I might be able to buy you some time.'

'Oh.' Why did he care?

'How do you feel about living in Italy?'

'Erm, I don't know. I've never thought about it.' I realised at this point that Mike had caught me up and was waiting at a polite distance. He was right in the flow of tourists, and they collided with him as he stood obstinately, arms folded.

'There's a scholarship going spare. A college just outside Milan. Bed and board. Do what you like. It's meant to be for language students, but no-one's applied for it this year. What do you think?'

'It sounds wonderful, but what would I live on?'

'You could teach English.'

'I don't speak a word of Italian.'

'You'll learn.'

Here was my friendly Goddess, swooping down from the heavens to rescue me from drudgery. 'When do I have to decide?'

'Now. If no-one's taken it by this evening, it will lapse.'

A crow landed on the wall beside me and began to peck at a discarded choc-ice wrapper. It put its head on one side and fixed me with its shiny black eye. 'Go on,' it seemed to croak, the sun striking blue

fire from its feathers.

I looked at Mike, who was lighting a cigarette. He wasn't going to like it, but then he no longer had the right to an opinion.

I looked around at the hordes of people, each engrossed in their own little lives, oblivious to the choice I was being asked to make. What would my parents say? It was better than being on the dole. And if I learned Italian, that might help me make a living. I remembered the dark loneliness of last night, felt the cool moss of the tree stump on my cheek again. And I remembered my vow to Cary, to grasp the opportunities that she never had.

'Yes.' Quietly, and then louder as my mouth got used to the idea, 'Yes, I'd love to go. Thank you so much.'

Rattigan looked at me and smiled quizzically. 'Go and see the office, they'll tell you what to do next.' He got up and hurried away. He'd already wasted several minutes of reading time.

The crow screeched and took off, its wings almost brushing the top of my head as it swooped low over the forest of tourists.

'Did I just hear you say you were going to Italy?' asked Mike.

'Yes.'

'What about your interview?' Mike ground his cigarette under his heel.

'Stuff it.'

'What about us?'

I looked at him, fiddling with his Zippo. And I realised that in twenty years' time he'd still be doing it. Still working for the family firm. Comfortable. Unchanged.

'Ursuls, what do you think you're doing?' He grabbed me by the shoulders as if he meant to shake some sense into me.

I pushed his arms away and down until I was holding them against his sides—a move I'd suddenly remembered from a self-defence class during Freshers' Week. I laughed and let go. 'I think I'm going to write a novel.'

About the Author

Ursula Hurley is fascinated by truths and how we voice them. Working in hybrid and experimental forms, her (non)fictions play on the fault lines of genre, using the gaps as spaces to tell. She lives and works in Greater Manchester, where she teaches Creative Writing at the University of Salford.