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THIS BLEEDING CITY

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faber and faber

First published in 2010
by Faber and Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset by RefineCatch Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham

A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–25170–4

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Prologue

At the End of the City

I remember shouts far off across the trading floor, the humming of computers and the ringing of telephones. I remember streamers of sunlight that blazed into the room. I remember all of this. I remember the photo of you and Luka that sat in its silver frame on my desk. Then, shuddering, I remember the moment when a beam of light shimmered at the edge of the photo frame and I realised I'd left him in the car, and fear raced up my arms and into my chest.

Scattering research papers behind me, I ran towards the door and out to the elevators, jamming the button thumb-white hard. One lift went up, then another. I made for the stairs, taking the steps down five, seven at a time, then through the doors and outside. Dazzled by the brilliant May sunshine, I looked up towards the church and, behind its ancient and clean-cut spire, the car park.

A crowd of bleary tourists sat outside Pâtisserie Valerie sipping their lattes, dissecting enormous croissants whose flakes were lifted by the breeze and flung skywards. It was the breeze that gave me hope. The cool breeze that blew low over the waters of the Thames, up Gracechurch Street, along Bishopsgate and then lifted the hairs on my arms and the awnings of the Brushfield Street shops. I ran in a frenzy straight down the road as a white Escort van backed into my path. I swerved, heard yelling behind me, slipped on leather soles, and then was across Commercial Street and into the shadow of the church.

The church rose out of the murk of the surrounding buildings like an arm from a lake. I used to gaze at it while I worked. Standing with phone clasped between shoulder and ear, I would lose track of my thoughts as I stared at the spire. It seemed to represent something pure and hopeful as it battled to break free from its earthly surroundings. I wrenched my mind back to the present. It was heating up. I pushed open the door of the car park and threw myself into its damp air.

Cold railings were slick beneath my palms. I lurched, drunk with speed, from side to side as I climbed. Each turn promised to be the last and wasn't, each door promised to give out onto the lofty and dangerous roof and didn't, every floor was full of dark shadowy cars. Cars that had parked before me that morning, cars that hadn't been held up by a statistically improbable combination of red lights and stalled buses and elderly road-crossers; cars that would have been, if not a safe place to leave a two-year-old boy, then not a fatal place, not out there on the wide roof. As I came out into the impossibly bright daylight, I saw the Polo parked on the other side of the grey tarmac roof. Saw the baby seat over the top of which I could make out his blond head.

He wasn't moving. The window I had left open a crack reflected the sky. No sound of crying. My fingers against the warm metal of the door handle, fumbling with keys, then the door opened and the smell hit me and I clutched at the safety belt, struggled with the buckle and pulled at the black straps to release him.

A torrent of useless images assaults me when I try to reconstruct things now. A thin memory of breath pushed from tiny lungs, small chest rising upwards and quivering for a second and then nothing. His face was set very calm, none of the red rage I had expected. Mouth pinched and disapproving, flecked with yellow-white spume. His pale skin was pulled tight

around veined temples brushed with blond hair. I lifted him, his body limp and yielding. I pulled off his socks – I don't know why – and his feet were dark with burst blood vessels. His back was wet against his T-shirt and the sweat dripped circling downwards to the ground as I held him to my chest, poured a week-old bottle of Evian over him that I found scrabbling amongst torn maps on the floor of the car, kissed his hot face and fanned him and then into the car and down.

I cradled him as I drove blindly down the endless ramps and through red lights and up pavements towards Waterloo and when we arrived at the hospital I pressed his chest against my ear, allowing myself the luxury of a moment with him, and there – perhaps – the slow thump of a heartbeat. I ran into A & E shouting *Jesus help me Jesus my baby*. All was motion. Doctors took Luka from my arms, laid him carefully on a trolley, and set off down long corridors measured out by banks of strip lighting. I ran alongside stupidly gripping his little hand. The oxygen mask was too big for him and a male nurse with tattooed forearms held it to his tiny face. Finally a door I couldn't pass. I sat and dialled your number, my fingers fat and clumsy on the Blackberry keys.

You arrived in a storm of contained energy, your hands moving very quickly as you spoke to the doctor. You were seven months pregnant and bore your great belly before you like a weapon. You were not crying. You stood over me and looked down but I couldn't meet your eyes. Your eyes were so dry, so far from tears, so cold. I turned away from you. I leant against the white hospital wall, pressed my forehead against the clammy plaster and closed my eyes.

Chapter 1

Edinburgh and London

Throughout university I dreamed about moving to London. Forever looking ahead, rarely pausing to savour bright moments, I raced forward. We all did. When Edinburgh winds pulled the scarf tightly around my throat, sent Vero nestling to the warmth of my arms, bent Henry low, shielding his streaming eyes with bony fingers, we urged ourselves onward, against the wind, towards London. The only friends we encouraged were those with London flats and London lives; we lived for the Easyjet flight on Friday nights, fluttering southward in our evening dress, champagne spilling from plastic cups as we landed.

In the headlong rush towards experience we blasted ourselves away from our youth, towards a future of wrinkled disappointment. But no one stopped to tell us that we should be sucking it all in, searing the images onto our memories, baking the emotions into our hearts. Because soon it would be all that we had.

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Vero was standing with her back to us, arms spread. Her black shawl shot out behind her in the wind, witchlike. It was early evening and the sun faced us, picking fingers of light through the towers and spires of the old city. Above a great cloud threatened rain. Darkness gathered. We began to run down the hill. Henry soon overtook us, his long legs bounding over tufts

of heather, mounds of earth. Vero tripped and I stooped to help her, felt the heaviness of her shawl against my cold fingers, the heat of her body beneath. Looking back up the hill, I saw night assembling in the east, knitting itself in the shadows of the Calton Monument. We sped downwards as rain stung our skin. Down and across the road and laughing into the bar of the Balmoral where Henry was already perched breathless on a barstool with a bottle of wine and three glasses. Memory dyes these days golden.

We existed as glamorously as we could. Henry, whose father ran a fusty broadsheet with plummeting circulation figures, received an allowance that paid the rent of our New Town apartment, enabled him to pick up dinner bills and buy drinks unthinkingly. Vero always seemed to have enough to get by. She had a rich uncle, doting godparents; the thought of Vero poor was somehow distasteful. She gave the impression of great wealth even when I knew she was down to her last ten pounds: money always appeared from somewhere, and she'd leave a pile of notes on my desk when I became desperate, a message from her scrawled across the uppermost Queen's face in eyebrow pencil.

I met Henry in the Teviot Underground bar on my first night at university. I had spent the day wandering in and out of large rooms collecting and returning forms, signing up for societies, enrolling in the options for my English degree. And everywhere I went, striding ahead of me with a cluster of wide-eyed girls in his wake, was a tall, angular boy with a shriek of blond hair and flushed cheeks. That evening I threw myself down into the cramped subterranean bar and the tall boy was sitting at a table in the corner. Whilst all the other seats at the table were occupied, he seemed somehow alone, his head jutting above the others, his eyes moving in shy circles across the room. He lifted his pint to his lips and I saw the girls watching

him as he drank, saw their gaze rest upon his throat, the thrust of his Adam's apple. He set his pint down, raised his hand and beckoned me over, smiling.

'You're doing English, aren't you, yes? Would you like to sit down? You'll have to grab a chair. My name's Henry Grey.'

We became friends very swiftly, tripping over ourselves in our conversation that night as we moved from the bar to a club and back to his room, which was cluttered with trinkets and books, hung about with rich throws and bright cushions. Black-and-white photographs lined the walls. The early days of our friendship we hardly slept, talked late into the night, explored the dark city together. He was eccentric and shy and trusting, his quiet voice lisped slightly and his long bony fingers fished for words as he spoke. And still the girls followed him, watched him in clubs as he danced in great spasmodic leaps, lost in the music, freed for a moment from his self-consciousness.

Edinburgh surged past in a parade of black-tie dinner parties and reeling balls and trips to magnificent houses in the Highlands. With Henry's help I lied and sketched out stories that allowed me at least a weekend pass, a short-term ticket into the midst of this high-living crowd. Henry and I stumbled from lectures to the pub, from the pub to meet Vero at Montpellier's, then drunken to dinner and dancing.

When Vero came into my life it was still Freshers' Week, and Henry had gone for dinner with a friend of his father. There was a party for English students at the Voodoo Rooms. I was wearing a rented tuxedo with a clip-on tie; I felt awkward and out of place amongst the boys in their tailored dinner jackets and the girls in their silver gowns. The music was too loud, and I was bored of looking at the beautiful blonde girls stumbling gracefully across the dance floor to speak to boys they had known for simply years, the boys who had been at the local

public school, the boys whose fingers had been the first to slip scratching under the waistband of their sensible white panties.

I walked out into the late September night. I remember the crowds heaving around the Café Royal, the glow of Princes Street reaching out before me like an arm heavy with jewelled bracelets. I lit another cigarette, unclipped my tie and dropped it to the pavement. I heard a noise, perhaps a voice, and looked up. On the balcony of a room at the Balmoral a girl was standing, watching me. She upended her glass and sent it spinning down to crash on the stones below. She blew me a kiss and turned back inside. I walked across the road and through the heavy revolving doors into the hotel.

I sat and drank a beer in the low-lit bar, chatting idly to the barman. He was a graduate student and we were talking about his research and the cold of the city in winter when he suddenly fell silent. I turned around and it was the girl from the balcony. She was half-turned away from us, standing in the entrance hall of the hotel. She wore a backless black dress and high heels and stood beneath the great chandelier. Under the intensity of the light it seemed as if she were captured in a black-and-white photograph. The light bore down on her very pale skin, her black hair, her dark brow. But then our eyes were drawn down her face towards red lips moist with champagne. She threw her head back and laughed to herself, then stepped out into the darkness.

The barman looked dazed and then motioned as if to shoo me out.

'You have to go after her. Go! The beer's on me.'

I went out into the cool night. A red coal glowed on the edge of the terrace, over towards the corrugated roof of the railway station. I walked over and found her there, smoking. She smiled as I approached, took me in her arms and kissed me, smoke and booze and a mouth dry from champagne. When

she pulled away, I put my jacket around her shoulders, letting it fall gently down onto the bare, goose-bumped skin. With her cigarette gripped between her teeth she grinned at me and crossed her arms over her chest to turn the collar up.

'Hello, I'm Veronique. People call me Vero. What's your name? You're very handsome.'

We walked back into the hotel arm in arm. She scampered over to the front desk and picked up a chocolate wrapped in foil. She unwrapped it, letting the foil fall shimmering to the floor, and placed the dark chocolate in her mouth, chewing thoughtfully as she walked back towards me. She was wearing high heels that would have rendered any other girl of our age hookerish but on Vero they seemed to confirm her sophistication. In the lift she kissed me again and I could taste the bitterness of the chocolate, could feel how it clung to her tongue, left a film on her teeth. I ran my fingers down her back and felt the tautness of her shoulders, the soft cartilage ridges of her spine. She spoke in a voice that was rich and deep and wicked.

'I'm at a party some guy is throwing. He has rented the whole floor and a girl on my law course asked me to come with her. Boring people, but it's free champagne and it's more fun than the place I was at before. Shall we go in?'

The lift doors opened and music and cigarette smoke and laughter filled the air. Vero walked down the corridor first, trying the doors, looking for wine. A boy wearing tartan trousers and an untucked tuxedo shirt staggered towards us.

'Vero. Thank God. I thought you'd left. So good to have you here. Everyone is getting stuck in down the hall. Come and have a dance with me.' He tugged at her arm.

'No thanks.' I stepped forward, lifted the boy's hand from Vero.

'Who are you?' He looked very drunk, his face reddening as he brought me into focus.

'Charlie Wales. Friend of Vero's. She asked me along. Hope that's OK. Pleasure to meet you.'

Vero and I walked past him and into a room full of sweating bodies. We dodged through the crowd, picking up a bottle of champagne on our way, and out onto the balcony. We sat and talked and drank and discovered that we were living on the same staircase in halls, that she had been watching me for a few days, had seen me walking past earlier and recognised me more than she thought she should – like an old friend who hadn't happened yet was how she described it. We kissed gently, curled up in the corner with my jacket over our legs. Days dyed golden.

I remember a dawn. October in our final year. Vero and I had broken up, made up, broken up again, started seeing other people. But still she and Henry and I were inseparable. We had flown down to a house in the South of France, excitement fizzing off us as we slouched onto the plane to Nice, feigning ennui but secretly glorying in the glamour of the invitation. We stayed up all night at a club in Cannes and rode back on woozy mopeds through the thickening morning air, beeping horns and accelerating up hills scented with rosemary and lavender and wild fennel. We lay like discarded plimsolls around the pool. The dawn sky was a conch, pink fading out to white in the heavens. Swallows flung themselves down low over the pool to catch insects, the water dyeing their tawny breasts turquoise. Vero trailed her feet in the water and I saw the fingers of the pool's forgotten night-lights dance up her legs, becoming lost in the shadow where her thighs met under a denim mini-skirt.

One of the twins whose parents owned the house had rolled joints and we blew smoke skywards. Henry talked in a slow and lazy voice, describing cloud formations, the migratory patterns of birds. Vero laid her hand on my chest and I leant

down and bit into the skin between her thumb and forefinger. She pushed the hand further into my mouth, wincing at the pain and then smiling at me. She rolled away into the pool and dived under the water, her black hair spread out like kelp behind her as she swam. Kicking off her skirt and turning a circle to remove her T-shirt, she lifted herself up on the other side of the pool wearing only her pants. The boys whistled and she turned and looked straight at me as the sun rose behind her.

I longed to live with the light touch that our friends at Edinburgh achieved, longed to move with the same soft padding foot through the world, unconscious and uncaring of the weight of a life lived pressed close against cold necessity. I wanted to offer Vero that existence, hold out to her the future of thoughtless spending and uncaring extravagance that I knew she coveted.

When she first left me, towards the end of our first term at Edinburgh, I burned with envy at the gifts that her flush-faced aristocratic new boyfriends heaped upon her. I liked to think that she was only playing with them until I was rich enough to keep up. I used to sit at the end of her bed as she told me about the break-up of another relationship; I would flick through the fashion magazines and interiors magazines on her desk as we talked, and I was certain that if I could buy her these glamorous dresses, take her to these sun-dappled hotels, furnish a home with these lavish objects, she'd be mine again. And when we moved down to London, I had but one desire – to become swiftly, splendidly rich.

Our entire social circle was going into the City. The stock markets had risen manically all the time we were studying, and the banks and brokers, insurance companies and law firms saw graduates as a source of cheap, hungry labour. The pact was clear – give us your twenties and we will make sure you

don't have to work in your forties. There were stories of recent graduates receiving million-pound bonuses. They'd come back to do the Milk Round, shooting their cuffs and talking over-loud in the pub where they'd buy us all drinks. But my friends had an advantage over me. Their fathers all worked in the City, or had close relationships with the banks that supported their property empires, shipping lines and chemical plants. In order to continue to exist alongside them, I too sent off the job applications, turned up at the recruitment fairs, bought books on accountancy and corporate finance. I would earn more in a year than my father had earned in his life, secure Vero and a gilded existence, buy my future with my youth.

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One Wednesday night in December I came back to the house in Fulham from another failed interview. I held the CEO's card in my hand until it was damp and Tube-grubby, letting it fall between the bars of a basement skylight as I walked up Parsons Green Lane. The card bore a leafless tree in raised silver. Silverbirch Capital was one of the aggressive credit hedge funds that had colonised the West End in recent years. They didn't tell me in so many words that I hadn't got the job, but the receptionist handed me my coat with a particular reserved sympathy that I had learnt to recognise and fear. We both knew that I carried the stink of failure about me. She held out my battered trenchcoat and gave me a gentle pat on the shoulder as I left. I placed a cigarette between chapped lips as I stepped out into the biting wind. Arabesques of unsettled snow blew up around me as I trudged along Berkeley Street and down into the Tube.

A grey-brown surgical glove lay in the road outside the

house in Fulham. I searched for keys in the lining of my jacket, trying not to tear my pockets any further. The gate to the house squeaked its familiar greeting and I opened the door and, for once, Henry and Vero were both there. Vero had cooked cassoulet and the house was warm and fragrant and full of light.

As I walked into the dining room Henry popped the cork on a bottle of champagne he'd stolen from his father's cellar and sipped off the foaming spume that tumbled down the green glass.

I threw my coat on a chair in the corner. 'I didn't get the job.'

'Did they tell you that, Charlie? Bet they didn't. Bet you got it.' Henry leapt up, came over and hugged me, put a glass in my hand and I saw Vero standing in the doorway of the kitchen watching us and smiling.

'Well, they didn't say so exactly, but I know the score by now . . . Although I think the CEO liked me. But I just understand so very little about their world.'

'You'll be fine, darling.' Vero's voice was a purr, soft as the shawl that sat around her shoulders. 'You're so down on yourself. Look at you, eh?' She took my chin in the fingers of her left hand and turned my face to the light. 'We need you to stay happy. It's such a shame to see you with your beautiful face all wrinkled up like that. I count on you, Charlie. Count on you to make things seem bearable. Remember that. Now we eat.'

Vero hummed to herself as she brought the steaming casserole to the table and served us and we sat around and talked and reminisced self-consciously nostalgic, our voices delightfully gnarled with cigarettes. It was a kind moment in a godawful year. I leant over and planted a kiss into the pile of Vero's thick, smoke-sweet hair.

Snow fell and began to settle. Henry opened red wine and we watched the snow build up around the French doors

leading to our tiny concrete garden. We remembered scenes from our childhoods. In her husky voice Vero described the Normandy of her youth and her crippled father – a brilliant surgeon who had contracted polio working at a hospital in Sierra Leone.

'. . . And we were so full, just staggering, walking along lanes after lunch. My brother and I would hang back, smoke cigarettes, my father surge ahead in his wheelchair. I remember the sun hitting the grass at such a low angle, just exploding off the dew . . . My papa would wake me sometimes, four in the morning, and drag me to his room to listen to a piece of Bach that had ripped him from his sleep, or to shout at news of American elections . . .'

Henry's world was altogether more difficult. His parents lived between Chelsea and Suffolk, desperately grasping onto an image of old England. His sister, Astrid, had tried to kill herself. His speech, like his eyes, seemed to approach things hesitantly, worried that things might move before he got there.

'. . . My father wrote a piece on, well I suppose it was on difficult teenagers, but it was really just about Astrid. For the weekend section. Astrid was poleaxed by the thing, poor girl. So ashamed to have it all out there, public. I think perhaps it was after that my mother decided to put her in the home. If you . . . Maybe you'd come and visit her some time. It would do her good. I noticed that my parents seemed to give up on each other once Astrid had gone. As if they had been trying for her sake . . .'

My own story was terribly mundane. A childhood of various shades of grey. Some name-lost girls and dabbling in drugs, but this only made it more depressingly similar to every other kid growing up in a seaside town listening to music that spoke of the glitter and thrill of the city. I longed for escape and Edinburgh had provided that – as far away from

the dismal south-east as I could get. I had written plays for my tiny school theatre, dreamt of becoming a playwright or a theatre critic, and Edinburgh with its Festival and an English course centred on Shakespeare had seemed perfect for me. Of course when I got there the parties and the coke and the glamour took over and the theatre was something we attended only occasionally, always drunk, and left in the interval.

We were silent for a time as the snow continued to fall and the air above us grew blue with cigarette smoke. I watched Vero fiddling with a strand of hair, wrapping it around a finger. It almost caught in the end of her cigarette and she moved backwards, surprised, saw I was watching her and cast me a swift, shy smile. I cleared the plates as Henry put his feet up on the windowsill and sang softly to himself, his voice coming through the smoke-filled air in whispered bursts. Vero joined him when she knew the words. They both laughed when she got them wrong. They were singing nursery rhymes and Christmas carols and I felt breathless and tired and happy.

Then Vero went off to bed, and Henry and I opened another bottle of wine and he spoke in his gentle voice, all angles as he sprawled in his chair trying to get comfortable. He leant backwards and stretched out his fingers, plucking words from the air as he spoke. His lips were purple from the wine and his cheeks had a high colour, but his eyes were always cool and distant.

Henry was taking photographs for a book about London's homeless for a publishing friend of his father. He took pictures of grey-eyed tramps under grey bridges above the grey-watered Thames. He spread out some of these pictures on the table. I saw a man holding his child up to the camera as if trying to ward off some evil, an old woman wringing her hands above a fire in an oil drum. I felt that Henry somehow felt himself to be safer behind the lens of a camera. It was his

way of approaching the world head-on. Henry continued to look down at the pictures as he swirled wine in his glass. His voice came quickly.

'Do you . . . do you still love her, Charlie?'

I looked across at him, sighed out a stream of smoke.

'Of course I do. I think I might always love her.'

Henry put his fingers down on the table so that their tips turned white. His eyes filmed over for a moment, then rose towards me out of the dim light.

'I remember seeing the two of you when we were first at Edinburgh, looking to the two of you as, as I suppose some sort of representation of how things could go right. How things might work out for the people who deserved it.'

I laughed hollowly.

'Christ, Henry, I don't call this worked out. I'm a member of the long-term unemployed, she's doing a job she hates, and all I can think about is how to earn enough money to get back with her. That if I was able to whisk her away to the sun, away from London, it might reignite something. Tragic, isn't it?'

'No. No, I really don't think it is tragic. It's a bit sad for the moment. But things will work out for you two. And at least you have each other.' He lifted his hands from the table and held them out in front of his face, examining his fingernails and the skin of his knuckles in the flickering light. I took a sip of wine.

'I did something very strange last Thursday, Henry. I had been to an interview at an insurance company on the Strand, a middle office job. Not amazing pay, but I'm slowly losing my previously exacting requirements. I just want any job now. Anything that wouldn't be a complete humiliation. I only had £20 to last me the week, and so I decided to walk home. It was five in the evening and I figured it would take me an hour.

'It was raining very gently but insistently – you know the

sort – and soon my shoes were slopping and my trouser-legs soaking up the puddles. I was standing outside the Ritz and a cab passed and sent up this great wall of water that drenched me, and I knew I'd have to dry-clean my suit again. At first I was furious and then just crestfallen. I decided – fuck the money – I'd go into the Ritz for a drink. I walked in and it's all so gold, and I stood there dripping, steaming, as fur-lined women waddled past me towing their fat husbands. I must have looked lost because three porters came scurrying over to ask how they could help.'

I leant over and filled Henry's glass, then refilled my own. I moved to sit alongside him. We both faced out of the window into the dark where the occasional flurry of snow was caught by candlelight.

'I was shown through to the bar and, of course, the cheapest beer was seven pounds, and I had been hoping that it would be glamorous and thrilling. I think I went in there to remind myself why I was after these City jobs in the first place. But it wasn't thrilling at all. There was a table of middle-aged women who had been up to London shopping and were drinking ridiculous cocktails with umbrellas and glacé cherries. But otherwise the bar was empty.

'I sat for a long time over my beer, listening to the terrible jazz and the sound of cars tearing through puddles outside. Then a girl I recognised came in. Suzie Applegarth – do you remember her? She was in the year above us.'

'Yes, of course. I think our parents are friends. She's . . . she's very pretty. Rather thick, but lovely to look at.'

'Well, she sat at the bar and ordered herself a drink; she didn't notice me sitting there with a thimbleful of beer left in my bottle. She ordered a glass of champagne and perched there at the bar, very still, and she looked terribly happy. After a while Toby Poole came in, looking slightly older than he did

at Edinburgh. He swept Suzie up off the stool, and they hugged for what seemed like ages before he ordered himself a beer and they sat very close together, touching each other as they spoke. I caught some of what he was saying. All about his job, and a fund he had been asked to manage. He loosened his tie, and she insisted that they have another glass of champagne to celebrate.

'When they left, I waited a moment, paid my bill and followed them. I scooted across the road and stood in the shadows. But they weren't going far. Only down to Le Caprice, where they sat at a table in the window, and ordered more champagne. I stood in the rain, watching them from the shadows across the road, envying both of them so much. Wondering why that kind of easy success didn't come my way. I left after an hour or so and walked home feeling terrible.'

Henry was still staring out into the darkness. I could see his ghostly reflection in the dim light. Then he turned towards me and clutched at my hand, his eyes suddenly bright, his voice jagged.

'You shouldn't feel jealous of people like that. They . . . they haven't got a patch on you. Bloody Toby only got his job in the first place because his father is a non-executive director of the bank. As soon as you get a job, I know you'll do better than these oafs. Charlie, you . . . you shouldn't be hiding in the shadows. You weren't made for that. What about giving up on the City? I know the money is crazy, but you won't enjoy it. That work does nothing for the soul. Look at poor Vero. She hates her job, completely miserable. Why do you want to be like that?'

I lit a cigarette and thought for a moment. Henry swirled his wine in his glass.

'It's hard for you to understand, Henry. You've always had money. You've always moved in that world, the world of our

friends at Edinburgh. For me, it was something very new, painfully different from what I had known before. I spent my childhood watching my parents worry about money. It wasn't that they were very poor. They were just middle-class, I suppose. But they never had enough cash, and it just ate away at them. They used to tell me how everything they spent on me was such a great sacrifice for them. For me to have piano lessons, a new football kit, whatever toy was a playground necessity. And going shopping with my mother, I'd watch her agonise over every purchase, wringing her hands in the middle of Safeway. So even as a very little child I had this sense of money as something vastly important, crucial to a happy life.'

I felt myself growing angry, stood up and began pacing, conducting my words with my empty wine glass like a baton.

'Then I came to Edinburgh, and suddenly there were all these people who had never worried about money. And they lived these glamorous, spectacular lives. You and Vero both seemed so extraordinary when I first met you. Like something out of a novel. I had always done well – admittedly in the very small pond that was Worthing High School – but I was a success at everything I tried. Schoolwork, the plays I wrote, cross-country . . . So I just presumed that if I tried hard, I could make sure that I never had to worry like my parents did. And as I saw more of the lives that you people lived, I wanted to be one of you.'

I sat down again, lit another cigarette. Henry took one from the packet and held it unlit in his mouth for a moment, then turned towards the black window and I saw the flare of the match die down to flicker against his face.

'You're a strange chap, Charlie, so worried about the future. I try not to think about the future at all. I'm . . . to be honest, Charlie, I'm absolutely terrified of growing old. There's the problem with having a gilded childhood. You never want to

leave it. I think it's maybe why I take photographs. They give me the sense that I can pause time. Slow things down and not have to face the ghastly idea of responsibility and getting old and ill. I'm only twenty-three and already so much seems to have passed . . .'

I fell asleep with him still talking, my face pressed into the table; I was vaguely aware of him ruffling my hair and then I was alone.

I sat up suddenly and picked crumbs from my cheeks. It was still very dark outside. I heard Vero's alarm going off. It was this that had woken me. Her hand fell down upon the clock heavily. She sighed, padded down the corridor to the bathroom coughing. She was at one of the big law firms, was specialising in corporate debt restructuring. She had wanted to work pro bono at Amnesty or Liberty but got sucked in by the slick machine of the Milk Round, snared by the salary.

So many of our friends had fallen into the same trap. Laura and Mehdi were two of our closest friends from university, a couple who had stuck with us when we stopped calling anyone who didn't have a title and a trust fund, a couple whose solid and unspectacular love had encompassed us even in the foolishness of those starstruck days. Now they lived down the road in Fulham.

They had been persuaded that an accountancy qualification was just what two idealistic anthropologists needed to get under their belts before they went off and explored the world. And they bought into it – the idea that they could work hard for a few years and then leave to research tribes in the Kalahari, early civilisations in Java, fossilised femurs in the foothills of the Andes. But the exams and the drudgery and the grey misery of figures and spreadsheets and inventory levels and accounts receivable were taking their toll. They knew they were eating into their future with every day that they didn't dare to

set off into the great uncertainty of the world; they were paid just enough to live in London but not enough to save, and already they looked defeated, already Mehdi had the air of a man at forty-five, hair thinning, friends gone, wondering where the fuck it all went. All of that hope.

That December morning I ran to the window in the front room at six and watched them pass by as they did each morning, walking down the dark street together, hand in hand. I could see that they walked in silence, heads down against the cold, Laura's scarf streaming out behind her like smoke from a chimney. I made my way upstairs. We were all stranded, all of us trapped by London and money. All of us waiting for life to begin. I flung myself through the door of my room and into a grumpy sleep.

The clock read ten minutes to eleven when I crawled out of my duvet. My room was the smallest and sat next to the bathroom at the back of the house, perched above the kitchen like an afterthought. It had been tacitly agreed that I wouldn't pay rent until I found a job. I felt bad about this, but my friends were generous in all things, and I loved them for it. My phone was ringing somewhere in a pocket.

'Hello? Yes? What!'

I had got the job. It was the CEO of Silverbirch, an institution I had heard about even at Edinburgh. Sharp and violent moneymakers who were paid bonuses that read like telephone numbers. The CEO said that he had liked my anarchic approach to the markets. Thought I would be a useful contrary voice on the team of analysts. My maths and accountancy would need some work, but they'd train me up. I would start on £22,000 a year plus benefits. Could I be there on Monday at eight? Yes, yes, of course I could. Of course. I hung up and drew back the curtains to reveal a world new-made by snowfall. The brightness stung my eyes and my tears carried on flowing as I

shouted, jumped onto my bed and bounced up and down and laughed. Henry came in, his hair pointing straight upwards, a kimono worn over a pair of striped boxers.

'You got the job? I always knew you would. Let's celebrate.'

He threw his arms around me and wouldn't let go even to descend the narrow staircase. We flopped onto the sofa and Henry opened a bottle of Scotch and poured it in a golden stream into my mouth. It spilled down from my lips onto my chest and Henry took a long swig and passed the bottle back to me. The sharp liquid stung my chapped lips as I felt the warmth hit my belly. We spent the day drunk watching television and it slowly settled in that I had a job. That I would be able to afford the rent. Start paying off my student loans. Answer the phone to anonymous numbers without the worry that they'd be heavies hired by American Express. I called Vero first. Before my parents, before anyone. Her happiness confirmed my own. Her voice was hushed at first – she was in the law library revising. Then I told her and she shrieked and I could feel the stares of her colleagues down the line and pictured her jumping up in delight.

'Oh Charlie . . . That's so wonderful. I'm so proud. God, everyone wants to work at Silverbirch. Trust you to get a job there of all places. I knew we had something to celebrate last night. I love you.'

She told me she loved me a lot. I didn't like it because she had never said it whilst we were a couple. Only when our relationship had become broadly platonic did she start using the words of love. I heard her come tiptoeing, very late, into my room that night. She muttered something under her breath, laid a soft kiss on my forehead, and edged the door quietly closed as she left.