1

Clive fell in love with Martha at Oxford, in the final days of their last spring term. Realising her worth – afraid to leave her unattended – he begged her to join his family's annual Easter trip to France. 'It's very relaxed,' he lied. 'We can do what we like and' – the trump card – 'my parents will pay for everything.'

Martha agreed at once: 'I love France, and I love families.' She was studying French and Arabic, and she had no family of her own. 'I do have a father,' she told Clive. 'Aiden Doyle? He's a writer.' Clive shook his head but because he loved her he searched through shelves of second-hand books until he found one – *Wild Bird Calling* – to take on holiday.

Martha's reputation – she was described by various sources as a 'stroppy cow', 'a slag' and 'a laugh' – had kept Clive at a distance and in the end she had dealt with the matter herself: she had kissed him in a pub corridor, between the toilets and

the bar, and pressed him against the wall with a glorious, winning confidence.

To her evident surprise the kiss had been both revelatory and full of promise. She had pulled away and stared at his face in delight, as if she had not really looked at it before – as perhaps she had not. 'Well I never,' she had murmured, smiling. She had let her hands rest on his shoulders and leaned her hips against his until he would have done anything – anything – to keep her there.

Clive had never been in love before and he soon discovered that its terrors were at least as numerous as its pleasures. He could not bear to surrender this precious treasure over the Easter break, and he would have told her a pack of lies to make her come away. As it turned out, she was willing to come for something near enough the truth.

Peter and Val Barkes had discovered their 'adorably backward' French seaside town in the first years of their marriage and returned every year since. Their two sons, Clive and Tom, had played on the beach with buckets and spades, learned to swim in salted, lapping shallows and wobbled their bicycles along quiet lanes which wound between shifting, whispering dunes. It was only in recent years – since a budget airline had pounced on the local airport – that the resort had begun to be saturated by holidaymakers of a different type, whom Peter christened 'the hordes'. These visitors, oafish and insensitive, had spoiled everything.

The whole place was pronounced 'ruined' but Peter and Val continued to visit, coming at Easter to avoid the summer crowds. 'We won't be chased away,' they said. 'We found it first.' This

year, however, a heatwave brought an unexpected tide of tourists and the couple would not be consoled: first the town and now the climate had turned against them.

'It's global whatsit,' said Val, fanning herself with a laminated menu. 'It's too hot; it's not right.'

'What did your parents talk about in the old days?' Martha asked Clive. 'Before climate change and mass tourism?'

Tom and his friend Eliot both laughed when they heard this but Clive was embarrassed. He was frightened of Martha's judgement and began to see his parents with a keen, peeled gaze. No longer were they 'Mum and Dad' but now, 'Peter and Val'. What he saw – what he thought Martha saw – made him shrivel. 'My parents are being awful,' he apologised. 'I don't know what's got into them. They're not normally as bad as this.'

'They're not awful,' said Martha in surprise. 'They're lovely. Your mum is such a *Mum* – she's like the one in the ad for Fairy Liquid.'

Clive did not know whether this was a good or bad thing. In reply to something she might have meant he said, 'It's not short for Valerie, by the way. It's short for Valentine.'

When she heard this Martha laughed at him and said, 'You are funny.'

Clive had not meant to be funny. Worry made him tense; tension – or perhaps a bad oyster – made him sick. He lay in bed, wretched, clutching his knotted stomach.

'Are you ill?' asked Martha, looking down at him in the bed as she rubbed sunscreen into her face. She did not seem sympathetic, and Clive wondered if she had heard him in the bathroom, during the night.

It occurred to him that they did not know each other well enough for bouts of vomiting and diarrhoea in the same small space. 'I'll be better in an hour or so,' he said. 'You go on, to the beach.'

When she had gone he dragged himself to the *pharmacie* but could not bear to mime his symptoms and make himself understood. He returned to the hotel bathroom and hunched over the toilet to retch and weep. *This is not fair*, he thought afterwards, blowing his nose and gargling Listerine. He curled up on the floor around the bidet and remained there in a doze, waking now and again to wonder if anyone was missing him.

He was roused by a knock at the door and a shrill voice: Eliot's. 'Your mum sent me to find out whether you're ill. Are you? Clive? Hello?' She barged in and saw him on the floor. 'Shit,' she said. 'You look awful.'

Tom had said of Eliot, 'I'm bringing a girl but she's not my girlfriend, just my friend.' It was obvious he loved her, but not that she loved him. 'You can put us in the same room, Mum,' Tom had said in a gloomy voice. 'She won't even snog me. I've tried everything.'

Val's zipped-purse mouth almost disappeared when she heard this. 'May I remind you,' she said, 'that it's not only drinking and smoking you and your *friend* are too young for. You may think you're very grown-up but in my eyes – not to mention the eyes of the law – you're both children.'

'It's ironic really,' Tom mused to Clive. 'Most of the girls at my school are slags – much slaggier than the ones at the comp – but this one won't even kiss me for a fiver.'

'Too bloody rich,' was Martha's comment.

Tom had won a scholarship to school in London, a fact which never ceased to irritate Clive. 'Why do you care?' Martha said to him. 'Public school is for dickheads.'

'Slags and dickheads,' corrected Tom.

Now Eliot peeled Clive off the bathroom floor and marched him to the chemist. 'You've got to sort yourself out,' she said. 'It's not sexy to be ill – especially with bum-related stuff.' In a torrent of schoolgirl French she demanded medicine and swapped Clive's money for two packets of pills. 'One's for the squits,' she said, 'and the other's for constipation. You can do the fine-tuning.'

Clive took the paper bag from her and returned to his room.

He got up late in the afternoon and judged himself recovered enough to go to the beach. One of the landmarks of ruination noted by Peter and Val was a brand new ('monstrous') concrete toilet block, squatting beside the Café du Soleil. Today it might make itself useful.

Standing on the sand, wobbly and alone, Clive looked at the happy scene before him and realised with a sinking heart that those few short hours in bed had cost him his place in the group. Martha, Eliot and Tom were fooling around like three young kids; his parents were shepherding them with indulgent good humour. Adult conversation had been replaced by offers of ice-cream and reminders about sunscreen; the kids – 'You kids!' – did nothing but giggle, cheat at *pétanque* and try to push each other over on the sand.

Clive hovered at the edge of the game, uncertain. Martha had last night been his ally but this person before him, laughing with Tom, was a stranger. Her bare, sandy legs were planted wide apart on the beach and a rope of hair swung on her back. She looked as assertive, unguarded and free as a pony turned loose in a field.

Clive felt abandoned and out of his depth. He did not approve of giggles, which did not sound to him like laughter, but when she saw him Martha said, 'Clive! You're better!' in such an artless, cheerful voice he thought it must be all right.

'Just about,' said Clive. 'I feel pretty awful.'

He knew that Eliot was right and that while fortitude was sexy, illness was not. He knew what he should have said: 'Much better! Can I join in?' But he preferred not to help himself. He watched Martha drop her hand and turn away, and he felt the pleasant, seeping satisfaction of the victim.

'Rotten luck,' his father sympathised. 'I expect it was an oyster. The sea's not as clean as it used to be back in the day.'

'That's such crap, Dad,' called Tom. 'You don't know what you're talking about. We used to swim through shoals of floating turds, me and Clive, when we were kids.'

Peter pretended not to have heard and Val said, 'Please, Tom,' in a faint voice.

Clive stood for a little longer and then sideways, crab-like, approached his mother's folding chair and crouched beside it. 'Tomorrow,' he said, 'why don't we all do our own thing? You and Dad could go and look at a château or something – get away from us lot for the day.'

'We're not here to do our own thing,' said Val in surprise. 'We're here on a family holiday – and anyway I love "you lot". That wicked little Eliot makes me laugh, and your girlfriend's bottom is doing wonders for your father – do look, Clive, he's gone absolutely scarlet.'

But Clive did not look; he could not laugh; he would not relax.

Before dinner he lay on his hotel bed and listened to his brother and Eliot chattering to each other on their balcony. Martha was in the shower and Clive did not want her to hear them. Something had gone wrong, something untraceable, and it made him get to his feet and slide shut the balcony door.

Martha came back into the room naked, rosy and hot. Her hair was bundled up in a towel. 'It still stinks in there,' she said. 'Why have you shut the door? It's so hot.'

'The other two were making a racket.'

Martha pulled the towel off her head and turned herself upside down to rub at her wet hair. 'Are they shagging?' she asked.

'Shagging?' said Clive, shocked. 'No, they're talking.'

'Talking!' Martha uprighted herself and mocked him. 'How outrageous!'

'It was the smoke,' said Clive. 'The cigarette smoke was coming in. I'm feeling ill, remember?'

'How could I forget,' she teased, coming over to the bed and clambering up beside him.

Clive felt a flash of hot temper. 'Get off, will you?' he said. 'I'm not in the mood.'

Martha stopped where she was, prowling across the coverlet to reach him, and sat back on her heels. 'Now that you mention it,' she said, 'neither am I.' She retreated off the bed, got dressed, and left the room without another word.

Clive decided that if only Eliot would get off with Tom, he and Martha would be all right again. He tried to encourage the romance the next day.

'I do love Tom,' said Eliot, cycling along the sea road beside Clive, 'but not like that. It's not going to happen; I've told him a million times. Anyway, I'm in love with Mr Lennox.'

'Who's he?'

'My piano teacher. Really – I'm not joking: I love him.'

'You're being ridiculous,' said Clive. 'That's not going to happen.' Her crush distressed him. *Perhaps*, he thought, *I am protective of Tom.* 'Your teacher won't think of you like that,' he tried to persuade her, 'trust me.'

'You underestimate my feminine wiles,' Eliot replied. 'You don't know what it's like: sitting next to each other at the piano, all cooched up and cosy, nothing but music, him telling me where to put my hands . . . ' Sticking her nose in the air she pedalled away from him, laughing.

Clive watched her go – salted hair sticking straight up, a smut of freckles across her nose, torn-off denim shorts of Tom's and sandy feet in plimsolls – and he wondered.

'What does she want to happen?' he asked Martha. 'Sex? With her piano teacher?'

'Not sex,' said Martha. 'Love.'

This was right; Clive believed her. Eliot did not want to have

sex with Mr Lennox but she wanted him to love her best – more than he loved his wife, his children and his job. So much, in fact, that he would abandon everything and risk imprisonment: run away with her like Humbert Humbert, to live in a bedsit in a rainy town beside the sea.

The fantasy was absurd and Clive was prepared to bet that if any part of it had encroached on her reality Eliot would have been frightened and revolted. She loved and she longed to be loved, but the real thing when it came – Tom's wholehearted gift of himself, inside and out – was unattractive. She wanted something more painful and vicious: someone who did not want her.

Peter and Val admired Martha but they adored Eliot. She bowled them over. 'That girl,' chuckled Peter, 'is a real charmer. She's got pizazz.'

Val was protective. 'I hope she's going to be all right.' To Tom she said, 'You must look out for Eliot, Tom. She's just the type to get mixed up in silly nonsense; she doesn't take care of herself.'

'She cares about her hands,' said Tom.

This was true. 'They're the only part of me that's any use,' Eliot said, looking down at them.

One night she played the piano for them in the lobby. She stood in front of them and announced, 'This is a sonata in D major by Scarlatti. You can clap at the end, but not in the middle.' She frowned – serious, for once – and then sat down and lifted her hands.

Afterwards she boasted to Tom, 'Now I can make your

parents do anything I want, you watch.' It was true: before they could gather their wits she had persuaded Val and Peter to get up the next morning at the crack of dawn and drive the whole party – yawning like kittens – to a town famous for its *marché aux puces*.

The outing was like an unexpected day off from school due to flooding or snowfall. The structure of the group disintegrated – to Clive's relief – and for the duration of the morning they were not a family but a gathering of six runaways.

Val could not stop giggling. 'It's getting up early,' she apologised, laying a tipsy hand on Martha's arm. 'It makes me light-headed.' She insisted that everyone eat breakfast – hot chocolate and croissants in the town square – and that Peter give them holiday money to spend in the market.

'Petty cash?' said Peter. 'I'm not sure I can spare it—'

'Oh, *Pe*-ter,' said Val, taking his wallet from him and distributing the notes.

'Right,' said Peter, regaining the ascendancy, 'this is the assembly point. We'll reconvene at noon.'

At the appointed hour Val appeared carrying a bird cage and Martha a penknife, 'For my dad'. Eliot had bought herself an old khaki jacket, ex-army, covered with pockets and smelling like a wet marquee. It was too big but she put it on and did not take it off. 'I've always wanted one of these,' she said. 'Do you think someone died in it? Can you see any blood?' She searched each pocket for clues.

Tom produced from his pocket a brooch – a gold-and-black-enamelled bee with a spark of diamanté in each eye – which he

wrapped in a napkin and gave to Eliot. She was speechless, turning it in her hands. She put both arms around his neck and kissed him a delighted thank you, saying, 'You're adorable. It's the nicest thing that's happened to me ever.'

Clive had found nothing he wanted and had returned his father's money. Now he was furious: his brother had shamed him in front of Martha. 'That must have cost you double,' he snapped at Tom. 'You've broken the rules – so typical.'

'Hush, Clive,' said Val. 'We've all had a lovely time. Don't spoil it.' She patted Eliot on the knee. 'Thank you, dear, for bringing us – it was such a good idea to come.'

But now Martha was offended. Why had Clive not bought her anything? She snatched at Eliot's buoyant mood with teeth bared. 'Aren't you hot,' she asked her, 'in that jacket? You must be roasting.' She said it several times.

To hear that tone of voice made Clive's heart sink. Eliot and Tom – bold, curious, light-headed and silly – had reminded Martha that life used to be more fun. 'I think I've had enough of Miss Fox for about the next thousand years,' she said to Clive. 'She's a cocky little brat, and your parents have been completely taken in.' Eliot had annoyed her, Peter and Val had disappointed her, and Clive had failed her. He heard the accusation in her voice; he heard his stomach gurgle; he wanted to go home.

Peter and Val's routine had been upset by the trip to the market and at lunchtime they forgot their usual strictness. Eliot drank Campari, and Tom two glasses of beer. 'All kids drink in France, Dad,' said Tom. 'It's the norm.' He burped. 'Normageddon.'

His mother pursed her lips but did not remonstrate. Even when Eliot wheedled a cigarette out of her jacket and lit it Val said only, 'Dear child – do have a care for your poor little lungs.'

In the car on the way back to their hotel Val snorted, woke with a start and yawned. 'I'm pooped,' she said, and put a hand on Peter's knee. 'Why don't we have room service and an early night,' she asked him, 'as a treat?'

Ranked behind him in the two back rows of the people mover – 'It's a type of car, Dad,' Clive had sneered at the rental kiosk. 'Don't you even know that?' – Eliot and Tom started giggling and Clive shrank with shame. Martha, sulking, gave no sign of having heard.

At the hotel Peter and Val seemed elderly and incapable. 'I'm all at sixes and sevens,' said Val in a worried voice. 'It's the early start, and wine at lunchtime.' Peter collected their room key and steered his wife upstairs.

Martha went to telephone her father. 'I haven't spoken to him since I left,' she accused Clive.

Tom sidled up to Clive and asked him to order drinks which he and Eliot could have upstairs. 'They won't serve us,' Tom said. 'The staff, I mean. I think Dad must have told them not to.'

Clive rang down to the kitchen. Minutes later an unsmiling waiter delivered two bottles of red wine on a tray. His disgust was palpable. Clive paid him in cash, too frightened to ask for change, and the waiter took a slow moment to fold the notes into his waistcoat pocket before he withdrew.

Tom whisked in through the balcony door. '*Merci*, *monsieur*,' he said in a camp voice, picking up the tray. He was over-excited; he thought Eliot might kiss him tonight.

Clive fretted. He got into the shower and worried there, lathering his head, and then lay on the counterpane and turned the pages of his book. Martha did not return.

When he woke up later – stiff, cold and only half-covered by a damp towel – she was asleep beside him, her back as uncompromising as a sandbag. Clive stared at her shape and wondered what had woken him. There was a noise; lifting his head from the pillow he saw Tom, stepping into the room from their shared balcony.

'Tom?'

'Help – Clive – help – quick –'

Martha was awake – entirely awake – at once. 'What is it?' she said, sitting up and switching on the light. Clive flinched and blinked; his head felt dim; he was confused.

Tom said, 'Eliot keeps being sick' – his voice fluttered with panic – 'and she won't stop. Please – come – quick –'

Martha pushed the bedclothes back and got up in her pants. She picked up a vest from the floor and pulled it on. 'How much has she drunk?' she asked, already following Tom through the open door.

'I don't know,' said Tom and then added, miserably, 'She just kept downing it.'

Clive got to his feet, fumbled into a T-shirt and shorts and went after them.

All the lights blazed in the next-door room and a bitter,

stewed smell of vomited alcohol made his throat smart and his stomach clench. Eliot had been sick all over the bedclothes and in a splatter on the carpet. Claret-coloured stains bloomed on the sheets; chunks of food were glued to the skirting board. Now she was propped against the door frame between bedroom and bathroom, flopping sideways like a worn-out teddy bear. She was white-faced but berry-mouthed and her hair was crimson-tipped and clogged with sweat. Clive stared at her, revolted.

'Eliot? Eliot?' Martha was crouched on the floor, holding Eliot by the shoulders and speaking into her face.

'Do we need an ambulance?' Tom asked in a blanched voice.

Martha did not answer him, and Clive was speechless.

Now Eliot moaned, hinged and scratched up a dry heave. Then she spoke: 'Oh God I feel so bad.' It came out in a seagull's mewl.

'Are you going to be sick again?' Martha asked her.

'It hurts it hurts,' Eliot wailed, 'oh God –' She leaned over and gagged, but nothing came up. The breath rattled in her throat.

Clive said, 'What shall I do?'

'Call room service,' said Martha. 'Get that waiter up here.' She wetted a towel and wiped Eliot's face and hands. 'Eliot?' she said. 'Don't worry: you're going to be all right.' Eliot clutched at Martha's arms and started crying and gulping. Martha put an arm around her shoulders and a palm against her sweating, grey forehead.

The waiter arrived and gave Clive a long, cool look before

turning to Martha and Eliot, crouched in their heap on the floor. Martha – in her pants and damp, stained vest – turned her face up to him. Clive could see her breasts, her bare thighs and her knickers and he knew the waiter would be looking too; he wished she had been wearing more clothes, or wearing these clothes differently. Somehow the sweat and the smell – and even the ragged, fluttering seagull on the floor beside her – only increased her attraction.

Martha spoke in rapid, fluent French and the waiter nodded and frowned. Stepping into the bathroom he turned on the shower and soaked a hand towel in the basin. Then he crouched and, with Martha's help, hauled Eliot into the bathroom. The door was closed behind them.

Tom and Clive were shut out but they continued to stand where they were and listen to a conversation they could not comprehend. For ten minutes they heard intermittent discussion, occasional retching and the patter and hiss of the shower. Then the bathroom door opened and the waiter emerged, holding Eliot under the arms as if he were ejecting a local drunk from the bar downstairs. He tugged her into Clive and Martha's bedroom and slung her on to their bed. Martha perched next to her and the waiter fetched a blanket from the cupboard and tucked it round them both. Eliot, now exhausted, was forced by Martha to stay awake and take continual sips of water. Tom – desperate to do something – fetched his Discman and gave them a headphone each, asking, 'William Orbit or Leonard Cohen?'

Eliot's complexion had now settled to a waxy pallor – 'You actually look quite cool,' encouraged Tom, 'like a zombie.'

Martha's tanned skin, by comparison, looked as tempting and restorative as a jar of honey. The waiter certainly thought so – Clive saw his fingers brush her bare shoulders as he arranged the blanket.

'My throat hurts,' complained Eliot.

'It's all the puke,' said Tom. 'No smoking for a day or so, Chuffy.' He was so relieved he shivered with a kind of hysteria.

'Please,' whimpered Eliot, leaning into Martha's shoulder, 'I'll never smoke or drink again so help me God.'

A chambermaid appeared, at first curious and then dismissive, and dealt with the mess of the neighbouring room. Clive handed the waiter every remaining note he had. Still not a word had passed between them. Clive knew he had been blamed and that he could not have defended himself in any language: it had been he who had ordered '*les enfants*' – as he heard the waiter describe Eliot and Tom – their wine.

For the rest of the week the secret united Martha and Clive, and so did a new sense of responsibility. Tom begged his brother, 'You won't tell, will you?'

Clive hesitated – here was power – but Martha broke in, saying, 'No, he won't.'

The distance between the elder and the younger two grew again: Tom and Eliot were children; Clive and Martha adults. Clive had got his wish – but there was a spoiler: Eliot decided that she owed her life to Martha and began to worship her. While Martha bathed she sat on the lid of the loo and painted her nails. When Martha ate, Eliot ordered the same. A hundred

times a day Eliot asked Martha, 'Is it "*le*" or "*la*"?' In the evenings they swam together alone, their heads bobbing in the water for what seemed to Clive like hours: talking, talking, always talking – no doubt, he fretted, about sex and men in general, and himself and Tom in particular.

Somewhat to Clive's surprise his relationship with Martha survived the incident and the holiday. He judged that the trip must have been, overall, a success when she reached for his hand beside the luggage carousel. 'Come to my house,' she said. 'Don't go back to College.' So Clive abandoned his single room on the Quad for Martha's grubby, shared house in the Cowley Road.

All this was good – it was far more and better than he had expected – but Clive recognised that their roles were as set, now, as if they had been married for a decade. The period of settling-in was over and he would play supplicant to Martha's mighty goddess for as long as they were together. He had learned that as long as he loved Martha his happiness would only be a tributary of hers; she would be the only source of his contentment. He waited at her hand and foot on bended knee. If she wanted to see him he was summoned, but if she did not she would tell him to leave her alone. 'You're getting on my nerves,' she might say, almost teasing but not quite. 'Come back tomorrow, when I've begun to miss you.' Clive was at the mercy of these savage instructions. He could see that it demeaned him to obey, but he saw no other way to keep her.

2

Finals blotted the landscape. Clive knew he would not excel – he did not have the ability – but his mother would not believe him. 'You might get a First,' she said. 'You never know.'

'No, Mum,' said Clive, 'I do know: I won't.'

'You might,' she soothed. 'Don't put yourself down.'

He snapped at her, 'Mum! Leave it, will you?'

'I'm just—'

'Forget it!'

Martha was expected to get a First. 'Bloody expectations,' she grumbled. 'The bane of my life.' Her father, she said, would be satisfied with nothing less. 'It's either that or my dead body.'

Clive met Martha's father only once, but it seemed enough to satisfy all parties. On their way to his cottage – a perfect May

morning – Martha said, 'You know he's a writer, don't you?' She was nervous, which was unusual, and she seemed keen to signal to Clive that his occupation would explain or forgive what lay ahead.

'I read that book about the raven,' lied Clive. 'It was great.'

As they drove up to the little house, Clive could see Aiden Doyle sitting on a stone bench beside the front door. They parked the car – borrowed from Martha's housemate Viv – and walked right up to his feet before he stirred. 'I suppose I should get up,' he said in a well-furred voice.

'Don't be silly, Dad,' said Martha, bending to kiss him. 'This is Clive.'

'Hello, son.'

Aiden put down his glass to shake hands, and Clive realised that when Martha had said 'writer' she had meant 'drinker'. He felt a weariness spread through his limbs and a certainty that the day would not – could not – be a success.

Martha opened more wine and they sat outside on the bench in a row. 'PPE?' Aiden asked Clive. 'Something to do with gymnastics?' He snickered, scrabbling for a match from the box on his knee.

'Dad, don't be a tit,' Martha said. 'Clive's going to be a barrister.'

'Criminal?'

'Commercial,' answered Clive.

'Ah,' sneered Aiden. 'Your bank manager will very proud.'

It was a long day, and at the end of it Martha was quiet. As they drove back into Oxford she suggested, 'Shall I drop you

off?' Clive's heart sank: if she did not want him at her house tonight, he must have failed.

Alone that night and all the next day Clive trod water, waiting to be told he was dumped. The next evening Martha came to see him in his room. She pulled him down to sit beside her on his single bed. 'I'm sorry about my father,' she said. 'He was a pig to you. He's protective, that's all.'

Possessive, thought Clive, *not protective*. He was touched, however, and aloud he said, 'That's all right.'

Martha fiddled with his fingers in her own. Clive loved it when she did this – it was as if she had muddled them together and forgotten whose were whose; as if she cared as much for his as for her own. He braced himself. The thought of losing her almost made him choke. 'Clive,' she said, 'you know I love you, don't you?' She had not said it before. Clive held his breath. 'I love you,' she went on, 'because you're everything my dad's not. You're kind and good, and you look after me.' She turned her head to look at him – shy, for once – and he thought he might collapse, he loved her so much.

One Saturday they were surprised at home by a ring at the doorbell. Clive found Eliot on the doorstep. 'Fuck it's cold,' she said, stepping over the tiled porch floor, 'and I've walked miles. Any chance of a cuppa?'

She was on a school trip but had ditched the Ashmolean and come to visit, dressed in the army jacket, a pair of leggings and laced, black boots. 'It's my new look,' she said. 'It's kind of Patti Hearst minus the machine gun meets Patti Smith minus the microphone.' The gold bee clung to her lapel.

Neither Clive nor Martha wanted to entertain her. They shut her in the kitchen like an untrained puppy whilst they held a consultation outside.

'I've got so much work to do,' said Martha, panicking. 'I can't be distracted.'

'Don't worry,' soothed Clive. 'I'll take her out for a pizza or something.'

Eliot ate a packet of Monster Munch, pulling it from one of her jacket pockets, and made herself a Nescafé. 'You're so lucky,' she said. 'School is prison. I can't wait 'til I'm a student.'

She had been expelled from Tom's London school and sent to board in the country. *Eliot's know-all attitude*, her head teacher had written in the letter of expulsion, *does not augur well for a happy future.*

'Stupid cow,' was Eliot's comment. 'I bet she had to look up "augur" in the dictionary.'

The new school was 'dull as shit. Apart from music. If it wasn't for that I'd run away and marry a millionaire.' She was coarse and foul-mouthed, and Martha was getting irritated.

Clive intervened. 'Look: Martha wants to work – shall we go and get a cup of tea?'

'Fuck that,' Eliot said, grabbing his wrist to look at his watch. 'Let's go to the pub.'

Already the pub's interior was clouded by a haze of blue cigarette smoke which hung at eye level in the weak morning light. 'What'll it be?' said the landlord to Clive. The place still smelled of last night: stale beer and stale ashtrays, not freshened yet by today's spilled pints and stubbed-out fags.

Eliot pulled herself on to a stool. 'I'll have a Coke first,' she said, 'and then a Bloody Mary.'

'You're not eighteen, young lady,' said the landlord. 'So you can stick with a Coke.'

Eliot blinked, opened her mouth and shut it again. 'And a packet of dry-roasted peanuts,' she said in a small voice.

They carried their drinks to a corner table. 'That was so embarrassing,' said Eliot. 'I never normally get stopped.' She took a pack of Marlboro from a pocket and lit one.

'One day you'll be glad to look your age and not three years older,' said Clive.

'One day, maybe,' said Eliot, 'but not today. Anyway, I'm nearly sixteen – my birthday's next month. I'm going to have a party. Will you come? I'm going to invite Mr Lennox, my old teacher, and get him to dee-vee me. I'm not at the same school now, so he won't get the sack.'

'How considerate of you,' said Clive.

'I'm a nice girl,' she said. 'Anyway, when did you lose your virginity? Were you drunk? Was it a one-night stand? Was she some gopping minger covered in zits?'

'Shut up,' flushed Clive. 'It's none of your business.'

But Eliot was not listening. 'Oh my *God*,' she said. A peanut fell from her mouth on to the table.

'What?'

'The most good-looking man I've ever seen in my life has just walked in,' she said.

Clive followed her stare. '*That* man?' he said. 'I know him.'

It was Danny, an old boyfriend of Martha's whose existence haunted Clive. 'It was just a sex thing,' Martha had said of him.

'A lot of fun, but not exactly a meeting of the minds.' Nothing could have made Clive feel worse. *Just a sex thing.* Viv had also slept with Danny and described him as 'the best shag of my life.' Clive did not know what this meant – big cock? Unlimited stamina? The guaranteed delivery of multiple orgasms? – but he did not like the sound of it. Both women had agreed, 'He's a total bastard,' which meant no more or less than irresistible as far as Clive could tell. He feared and hated Danny, and dreaded a chance meeting.

Now Eliot pestered him: 'Can you say hello? Can we go and sit with him? Can you get him over here?'

Clive was about to say 'No!' and suggest they went somewhere else when Danny came over. 'Don't I know you?' he asked Clive. 'Aren't you a friend of Martha's?'

'I'm her boyfriend. I'm Clive.'

'Right. Listen – can I pinch a fag?'

'Yes, of course,' said Eliot. 'They're mine.' She pushed the pack towards him. 'I'm Eliot.'

'Thanks,' said Danny, taking one and lighting it. 'I only came in for a quick half and a slash – I'm on my way to the races.'

'Races?' said Eliot.

'Yeah, it's a local thing – a point-to-point.'

'Can we come?' asked Eliot.

Clive shot her a look but she ignored him.

Danny pondered them both and blew smoke through his nostrils. 'Sure,' he said, 'if you like. Just let me go and have a wazz.'

He disappeared into the Gents.

'Don't you have to be back at school?' Clive said to Eliot.

'Not 'til seven,' she said. 'I can get the bus. Come *on*, let's have some fun. If you don't want to come I'll go on my own.'

This was enough to persuade him. 'All right,' Clive said, 'we'll go.'

Danny climbed into a large, dirty Mercedes which was parked outside the pub. Eliot slid across the leather back seats. 'This car is fucking cool,' she said. Every 'fuck' startled Clive like the sudden bark of a dog.

'It's not mine,' said Danny. 'It belongs to a woman who owes me money.'

Eliot picked up a stack of sports pages from the seat next to her and asked, 'Are you a bookie?'

'Sort of,' said Danny. 'Sometimes.'

'But I thought you were a student?' said Clive.

Danny laughed. 'Student? No, mate. Didn't see the point.'

They stopped for fuel, Coke and cigarettes before Danny headed south-west towards the high, pale crease of the chalk downs. It was a raw day to be outdoors: the approaching hills looked cold and bare and a torn, white sky scudded behind them. The hedges beside the road were black and glittering after a long night's rain.

Eliot rummaged through a box of cassettes next to her in the back. 'I like your music.'

'Pass me something and I'll put it on.'

She was struck by a sudden shyness. 'Oh,' she said, 'no – it's OK.'

There was something already between them – a current; a recognition – that Clive did not feel party to. Without Martha he had lost his mooring; he did not know where to put himself, or what sort of person to be. He felt a cold key turn in his guts, and he wished they had not come.

Danny turned from one road to another, each more slender than the last, following yellow-painted signs that stuck out from the hedges and read, 'Race Meeting'. A sloshing, puddled lane led them into a greasy field where the heavy Mercedes glided to a stop. 'We'll never get out,' said Eliot cheerfully. 'It's a swamp.'

A white-faced crowd stood hunched against the blast of wind and ice-splintered rain. Two tents – one labelled 'Beer' and the other, 'Food' – billowed and guttered on their ropes. Children with mottled, marbled faces were galloping through the chalky paste, skidding and jumping to keep warm. Dogs trembled at the end of their leads, hovering above the turf as if they could not bear to stand or sit.

Clive stared through the car window. He yearned for the fug of Martha's bedroom: the flickering blade of the gas flame; the smell of her Golden Virginia; tea going cold in the mug and a stilted trickle of condensation puddling on the window sill.

'I'm going to freeze my tits off,' Eliot said.

Danny was unfazed. 'Not if you drink enough,' he said. 'Guinness and whisky—'

'Yum.'

'—and there are coats in the back.'

They got out of the car – even Clive swore when the wind

hit him – and Danny pulled a long, dark-checked cashmere overcoat from the boot. 'This looks expensive,' he said. He handed it to Eliot.

She put it on, knotted the belt and said, 'Holy crap, this is gorgeous. I'm never taking it off.'

Clive turned to look and saw a person quite altered: dressed in a woman's coat, Eliot had borrowed a woman's glamour. Danny lifted his head from the boot and looked her over. 'Wow,' he said, and Eliot glowed.

Clive felt a pinch in his heart. 'Anything for me?' he asked. Danny passed him a green cagoule and a pair of rubber boots and Clive dithered, dismayed. He wanted to be warm but not to look ridiculous. He shrugged his way into the anorak and looked down at himself.

Eliot saw him and laughed. 'Jeremy Fisher,' she said, her wicked little head cocked to one side.

Clive blushed and tried to think of a reply but Eliot had already turned away, trotting alongside Danny towards the beer tent. Clive slid and floundered behind them. *Jeremy Fisher*. He smarted.

The marquee was stifling and clammy and roared with noise. Everyone seemed to be drunk and laughing. Eliot looked around, delighted. 'This is going to be fun,' she said, but Danny was steered away by welcoming arms and without him she seemed to deflate. 'I'm hungry,' she whined, 'and I want a drink. Will you buy me one?' They pushed their way to the bar. Eliot whispered, 'Why am I getting funny looks?'

'Because you look like an anti.' It was Danny, appearing beside them.

'Do I?' Eliot looked down at herself. 'Anti what?'

Danny laughed. 'Come on, get the drinks in and we'll go outside for the first race.'

Clive ordered three pints of Guinness and three whiskies and they swallowed them in that order. Eliot went pink and cross-eyed. 'Shall we put some money on?' she asked Danny.

'Put a tenner on Mr Bricks if you like – but don't go blaming me if he doesn't win.'

'Clive, have you got another tenner?'

'It's my last one.'

'I bet it's not – you're always loaded.'

'Not loaded. Careful.'

'Not around me you're not,' she jeered. 'Come on – don't be such a tight-arse.' She followed Danny out into the wind.

Clive placed the bet and joined them by the finishing post. Danny was standing behind Eliot and had wrapped both arms around her to keep her warm; her heels rested on the toes of his boots and she was leaning back against him, laughing.

Looking at them Clive felt a stab of pain that surprised him. He turned away to recover himself, before it showed on his face. These feelings were alarming; he did not want to name them. He was confused. He would have felt better with Martha here but nevertheless he was glad she was not. A mass of people stood and jostled him and he thought he might be trampled underfoot or lost like the frantic dog which trailed a scarlet lead and scanned the crowd, over and over, with worried eyes and a dipping, searching nose.

The noise was non-stop: talking, laughing, calling and shouting that grew to a chorus and then to a blurring, beating roar as the race began. Behind it the commentary fogged out of the loudspeaker but Clive could make neither head nor tail of it – how could anyone? It was deafening but incomprehensible – and nor could he see anything but heads, legs and mud.

'Come on, Mr Bricks!' shouted Eliot. 'Get a fucking move on!'

A tidy couple beside them turned at her voice with eyebrows raised and Danny said, 'Sorry,' to them and then added, 'I can't take her anywhere,' and squeezed Eliot until she yelped and wriggled in his grasp, wild with whisky and excitement. Clive, watching, felt a throb of anger. *She is not yours*, he thought. But whose?

The pulse of the crowd became more thunderous still. 'Christ alive,' said Danny, leaning forward, 'he's going to do it.'

He did not shout, but Eliot did: 'Come on! Come on!'

Clive could not seem to raise his voice; he could not bear to hear his feeble bleat amid that dreadful roar. All around them people yelled, cursed, stamped and shook their fists and then in a gasp and a blur the two leading horses ground past the post, filthy and exhausted. At once the noise became an indeterminate groan of relief or disappointment. Eliot turned to Clive. 'How much did you put on?'

'That tenner I had.'

'Only ten quid? Fuck! We could have minted it. What have we won?'

'What did you get? Nine to one? Something like that?' Danny quizzed him.

'Something like that,' lied Clive. It had been more like seven.

'Well, that's not bad,' said Eliot, rolling her eyes to the sky as she did the maths in her head. 'Plenty for cakes and ale!' She snatched the betting slip from Clive's hand. 'Come on, Pops,' she said, 'let's go and fetch our winnings.'

But neither money nor beer could bring Clive back from where he teetered, at the edge of a blind rage. He sensed Danny and Eliot pulling away from him as if they had climbed into a little two-seater and left him standing at the kerb.

'Why are you in such a grump?' Eliot asked him, back in the tent with more drinks.

'Because I should be working,' said Clive in a sulky voice. 'I can't just piss about.'

'Piss about?' said Danny. 'This is my office. I've made a killing today – you've brought me luck.' He ruffled Eliot's hair and kissed her hot cheek.

She blushed and stammered, 'Have I?'

Clive had had enough – he wanted Eliot's joyous, laughing attention turned to him and if he could not have it, he wanted to go home. Now she was trying to pick a horse to back in the next race: 'Some of these names are hilarious,' she said. 'What about Miss Demeanour? That's got to be worth a fiver.'

'You're what my nan would call "a caution",' commented Danny.

'Or, Frankly Marvellous? That's a good one for you. Hey, here's one for Clive,' she went on. 'Rigger Tony. Geddit? *Rigatoni*. Isn't that a kind of pasta?' She turned to Danny. 'Clive's real name is Tony but he hated it so he swapped.'

'Swapped it for Clive?' They both looked him over.

This was not the attention Clive had wanted. 'No one calls me Tony anymore,' he said.

'My dad was called Tony,' said Danny. 'He's dead now.'

'That's shitty,' sympathised Eliot. 'I had a brother who died when I was a baby.'

In the silence that followed, Clive, with dark fury, considered his family: alive and well, and at home in Amersham. Peter would be in the garden, Val in the kitchen and Tom in his bedroom with the music on loud. They would eat a homemade curry later and then Tom would say, 'I'm going out,' and his mother would try to stop him. 'Must you?' she would say. 'It's so cold. Don't you want to stay and watch a film with us?' Tom would kiss her and go, nonetheless.

'Amersham is so convenient,' Val always said. 'It's only forty minutes to John Lewis on Oxford Street.'

This comment irritated Clive every time he heard it. 'Mum, it's not. It's an hour to Baker Street, and then you have to change to the Bakerloo line, and there's the taxi from here to the station, *and* back again in the evening. It all mounts up.'

But his mother would play deaf, look away, and not respond.

Clive had never heard before about Eliot's dead brother – he wondered if she were even telling the truth. She was a climbing weed that twisted round them, rootless and threading, a clinging twine. She would attach herself to anyone. She had been Tom's – Martha's – his parents' – and then this morning –

for a moment only – she had been his, but now she was Danny's. Danny had eclipsed them all.

'My dad was a bastard,' he was saying. 'I was glad when he died.'

'My mum's a cow,' commiserated Eliot.

Clive was sick of the pair of them. 'I want to go,' he said. 'I'm cold.'

'You should drink more,' said Eliot.

'No – you should drink less.' He hated himself but he could not resist: 'I don't fancy cleaning up your mess again.'

Eliot flushed and said nothing.

'You can both relax,' said Danny. 'No one's going anywhere until I'm done.'

'I like your job,' said Eliot. 'I'm going to be a concert pianist when I grow up, and Clive's going to be a barrister.'

'I'm grown-up already,' spluttered Clive.

'A barrister?' said Danny. 'That's good – I can come to you when I get done for illegal gambling.'

Eliot giggled. 'And I can come to you when I divorce my first millionaire.'

They both laughed.

'No you can't,' said Clive. 'You'll need a solicitor – and anyway, it's a different kind of law.'

At last they were back in the car and Danny turned the heater to full blast. 'Where's school?' he asked Eliot.

'Ugh,' she said, tipping her head back on to the headrest. 'The other side of Swindon. Why?'

'Because we might as well drop you off.'

'Shit, that would be amazing,' said Eliot. 'I was just thinking how much I didn't want to sit on that frigging bus.'

Eliot had got into the front – 'Come on, Clive, be fair, you were in the front on the way' – and Clive the back. He was the toddler strapped into its seat; the dog kept behind a grille; the spare wheel in the boot. He stared at the backs of their heads and hated them.

On the road again, Danny switched on the radio and a piano concerto poured out like a torrent of water.

'Can we have this?' asked Eliot. 'It's Brahms.'

Danny turned it up. 'Brahms what?' he asked, impressed.

'Second piano concerto,' said Eliot. She tugged at her earlobe, self-conscious. 'Not just a pretty face, you see,' she joked.

Clive could not bear it: 'Proper little madam, aren't you?' he said, 'with your hockey stick and your piano lessons.'

Eliot said nothing, and Danny reached forward and turned up the radio's volume.

They drove in silence until Eliot cleared her throat and said, 'It's the next right turn.' Pulling in between wrought-iron gates the headlights swept over what looked like miles of parkland.

'Blimey,' said Danny. 'Can I stay too?'

Eliot giggled. 'Only if you wear a skirt – no boys allowed.'

'I could teach you sums.'

'I wish,' sighed Eliot. She pointed into the dark and said, 'Hockey pitches, tennis courts, running track. That's the science department' – they passed a jumble of modern buildings –

'and that's the headmistress's house.' As they drew alongside a stolid little bungalow she added, 'The stupid turd.'

At the end of a slick, black drive the car scrunched on to a lake of gravel. Danny pulled up in front of the house: a vast, sand-coloured building which sheltered behind six towering columns. A flight of stone steps led up to the front door and on either side of the bottom stair lay a stone lion with crossed front paws and a 'Have you been drinking?' expression.

'For Christ's sake,' Danny said, putting the car into 'Park', 'it's a bloody palace.' They all three sat in contemplative silence for a moment. Then Danny turned to face Eliot and asked, 'Will you be all right?'

'Yes of course,' she said. 'And thank you for a lovely day.' It was a different voice from the one which had demanded beer and cigarettes, and it sounded much younger. As she fiddled with the door handle Clive saw that she was trying not to cry.

'That's all right, pet,' said Danny. 'It was fun, wasn't it?'

Eliot nodded.

'Here, you'd better take some fags,' said Danny. He handed her the pack from his pocket. 'And what else? Have a look in the glove box.'

Eliot clicked open the glove compartment and pulled out a Twix bar. 'Can I take this *and* the fags?' she asked, sounding happier. 'I'll pay you back.'

Danny laughed. 'Yes, you can.'

Clutching her presents Eliot turned in her seat. ''Bye, Clive,' she said. 'See you in London. Come to my birthday, will you? Both of you? It's in a month.' She opened the door and got out. Then she said, 'Oh shit, the coat,' and started to take it off.

'Keep it,' said Danny. 'It suits you.'

'Really?' Eliot was ecstatic. 'Thanks.' She put the cigarettes and the chocolate in her pocket and tied the belt tightly around herself.

'Hang on,' said Clive to Danny, 'I'm going to get in the front.' He got out of the car and tried to grab Eliot's elbow as she turned away. ''Bye, Eliot,' he said. He had thought he might hug her but she had stepped just out of reach and was walking away from him, turning up the collar on her wonderful coat.

She sang out a loose 'Goodbye' over her shoulder.

Clive watched her go up the steps, two by two, until Danny said, 'Get in, will you? It's too bloody cold to hang about.'

Martha lifted her head and laughed when Clive told her they had been asked to Eliot's birthday party. 'How sweet,' she said, poised above her revision.

'Do you want to go?'

'Go? Are you mad? I'm trying to get a First, Clive, not a degree in being a teenage dropout.'

'It's Primrose Hill. Isn't that your neck of the woods? Where your dad used to live?'

Martha gave a snort. 'Believe me, Primrose Hill is a long way from Kilburn.'