

Imagine a tree that can walk. Yes, actually walk. Think it's impossible? You're wrong. It's called the walking palm. Its thick dreadlocky roots rest on the ground rather than inside it, and when it has had enough of being where it is, it quietly uproots itself, like a long-wronged wife, and walks away, at a speed of just over one metre per year. In the time it takes the walking palm to flounce out, nations will fall, people will die of old age, ancient secrets will be told, and new-born babies will grow into actual people who . . .

Bryony and the children have gone, and Fleur is now listening to her friend Clem Gardener on the radio talking about the walking palm, *Socratea exorrhiza*, and the challenges of filming its journey. It took over ten years to film it walking just fifteen metres, out of the shadow of a recently erected logging station. On the time-lapse film it staggered along desperately like something that had just been born or was just about to die. But the walking palm certainly knows how to travel. It does not need tickets, or require transfers, or have to fill in visa forms. It does not put so much hand luggage in the overhead compartment that it falls on people. It just goes. Most species in Clem's Academy Award-nominated documentary *Palm* find some way of travelling, of course. If they can't move themselves around, then they produce seeds and get birds to move them, or animals, or us. And some plants have amazing ways of producing seed. The talipot palm, *Corypha umbraculifera*, which can live to over 100 years old and

only flowers once in its life, produces the biggest inflorescence in the world, made of millions of flowers. Now there's a real commitment to the next generation. Some of the 2,400 species of palms around the world are known to actually flower themselves to death. It's called hapaxanthly . . .

'You mean they *commit suicide* by flowering too much?' says the presenter.

'It's quite common,' says Clem, in her low, underwatery voice. 'They put all their energy into flowering – or, in other words, attempting to reproduce – and there's nothing left for anything else. Their roots wither and die.'

'So it's not just because it's beautiful?'

'Nothing in nature is "because it's beautiful", not really,' says Clem.

Fleur is finishing her tea. It's a homemade blend of dried pink rosebuds, passion flower, cinnamon and honey. It's very soothing. Since Bryony and the children have gone, she has also added some of the opium she grows in the garden. She looks out of the window of the old dowager's cottage that Oleander gave her on her twenty-first birthday and raises the antique teacup to the robin she has kept alive for the last seven winters. He cocks his head. Fleur is still in the cottage. If she goes out to do some gardening, there might be live worms, or the slugs that she sometimes puts in a saucer for him. But Fleur won't garden today. He'll have to make do with the dried fruit she put on his table yesterday.

'Oleander is dead,' she tells him through the window. 'Long live Oleander.'

She drinks deeply from the cup.

The robin understands, and begins to sing his oldest and most sorrowful song.



‘Mummy?’

Bryony barely hears the word any more.

‘Mummy?’

‘Hang on, Holl.’

‘OK. But, Mummy, just quickly?’

‘I’m trying to listen to Clem, Holly. You should listen too. She’s your godmother.’

‘Yeah, I know, and she’s also like my millionth cousin, a thousand times removed.’

‘She’s your second cousin, once removed. My cousin.’

‘We could have stayed at Fleur’s to hear her.’

‘Yes, but I think Fleur wanted to be on her own for a bit. And anyway, we’ve got to get home. Daddy’ll be making dinner. And you’ve got homework to do.’

Bryony turns up the car radio, but Clem has stopped talking. Now there’s a guy who had to be rescued from somewhere, possibly Antarctic Chile, although Holly was *Mummying* over that bit. The format of this programme is supposed to be a group discussion, but Bryony knows that Clem probably won’t speak again. At school she had a habit of saying one clever thing in every class, and then drifting off to God knows where while Bryony highlighted all her notes in one of three fluorescent colours and Fleur learned mindfulness by stabbing herself with a protractor. Every so often the biology teacher said something about how sad it was that these three weren’t at all like their mothers. In fact, at fourteen, their mothers – frail, beautiful Grace, bold Plum and the legendary Briar Rose – had also been terrible students, interested only in the Rolling Stones, but no one remembers that, because it doesn’t fit the story of how they become famous botanists. Or famous-ish. Or famous-ish mainly for disappearing while on the trail of a miracle plant that probably never existed, or possibly killed them all.

‘Mummy? Am I a tree? She said that people aren’t like trees, but I am, in a way, aren’t I?’

‘Yes, Ash. You are, in a way.’

‘More than I’m a *village* anyway.’

Having a son called Ash, while living in a village called Ash, hadn’t seemed anything worse than a bit cute when they named him. There aren’t that many botanical names for boys, after all, and at least Ash could be short for Ashley if he ever wanted to get away from the plant thing. Bryony’s husband James was very keen on the old Gardener family tradition, though, and in the end it came to a toss-up between Ash and Rowan. Ash himself has since pointed out that they could have chosen Alexander, William or Jack (in-the-hedge). On that occasion – Ash’s eighth birthday, or perhaps it was his seventh – James told Ash he was lucky not to be called Hairy Staggebush, Fried Egg Tree, Thickhead or Erect Lobster Claw, all of which are apparently real plants.

Bryony and James have no idea of the stupid conversations Ash has pretty much every day at school when someone asks him, yet again, why he’s called Ash when he lives in Ash, as if he named himself. Being named after a grandfather or a footballer or a TV character is fine. But a whole village? All kids know that no one should be named after the place they live, unless they are Saint Augustine or something, or Saint Stephen or Saint George – but in those cases you become famous first and *then* someone names a place after you. On his own, Ash likes being named after a tree that has magical powers. But he’s hardly ever on his own. He is dreading going to secondary school in Sandwich or Canterbury, where people will ask his name and where he comes from and both answers will be the same, which will make him sound retarded. He is already practising shrugging and saying ‘Oh, just some boring village’, but it’s not that convincing. Maybe the house will burn down, on some lucky day when there are no people or cats inside it (which is virtually impossible: there’s always life in Ash’s house), and they’ll have to move.

‘Clem doesn’t make cakes like Fleur,’ says Holly. ‘And she wears really weird clothes. But then I suppose that’s because she makes documentaries, and . . .’

‘Don’t you think Fleur wears weird clothes?’

‘No. Fleur’s pretty. She wears dresses. And *interesting* combinations of things.’

Bryony sighs. ‘Well, yes, I suppose everyone knows that dresses make you pretty.’

‘What does that mean, when you say it like that?’

‘Like what?’

‘Is it irony?’

‘How do you know about irony?’

‘Er, *school*? Anyway, Mummy, you wear dresses.’

It’s true. But while Fleur wears things you’d see in the thicker magazines, or on the size-zero celebrities she works for, Bryony usually wears a version of the clothes Holly wears but better cut and in darker colours: jersey dresses or big jumpers over leggings, all made by Backstage, Masai or Oska. What Bryony used to think of as fat people’s clothes. Yes, yes, of course all the styles come in S and even XS, but it remains unclear why thin people would need clothes with elasticated waists and asymmetric folds around the middle. Almost everything Bryony now wears goes in the washing machine at forty degrees and doesn’t need ironing. Bryony loves fashion, but it doesn’t love her. She’d like to be a Jane Austen heroine – or actually even one of the heroine’s shallow friends who only cares about fashion and won’t go out in the rain – but she’s way too fat for that. This season it’s all about clashing florals and colour blocking. You can clash florals if you’re a thin seventeen-year-old. If you do it at Bryony’s age you look as if you don’t own a mirror. If you colour block at Bryony’s size you look like a publicly commissioned artwork.

‘Mummy?’

‘I’m still trying to listen to this.’

‘Can’t you go on *Listen Again* later when you’re filling in your food diary?’ says Holly. ‘Anyway, Mummy?’

‘Hang on.’

‘Mummy? How many calories are there in a cake?’

‘What kind of cake?’

‘Like the cakes Fleur made.’

‘Did she make them? I thought she bought them. Or didn’t she say that Skye Turner sent them?’

‘No, Mummy, she said Skye Turner sent her cakes *once*. But they were like weird low-carb brownies or whatever. She made these ones. They were spicy and everything – not like stuff you can buy. Anyway, how many calories do they have?’

‘You shouldn’t be worrying about calories.’

‘I’m not worrying. I’m just interested.’

‘About two hundred, I think. They were quite small.’

‘So in a day, you could eat, like . . .’

In the rear-view mirror, Bryony can see Ash screw up his eyes like a little potato.

‘Don’t say “like”, Ash. Say “around” or “roughly” or something.’

‘Like, seven and a half cakes,’ says Ash. ‘Wow.’

‘Yeah, but only if you eat basically nothing else,’ says Bryony.

‘Awesome,’ says Ash, in something like a loud whisper.

‘Cake is for babies,’ says Holly. At the party all the girls made sugar sandwiches with white bread and huge slabs of butter and honey to help the sugar stick and the grown-ups didn’t even stop them. The grown-ups were too busy smoking at the bottom of the garden and talking about whether they would rather fuck a fireman or an anaesthetist and looking at pictures of holidays on someone’s phone. Holly’s insides now feel a bit gluey. And the thought of the butter she ate – yellow shiny poo – makes her want to vomit.

‘How many cakes does Fleur eat, Mummy, do you think, in a typical

day? Or a typical week. Would you guess at closer to ten, fifty or a hundred? Mummy?’

‘As if anyone would eat a hundred cakes a day, you total spaz,’ says Ash.

‘Mummy?’

‘What? Oh, who knows? I think she makes a lot more than she eats. I think she likes the way they look more than the way they taste.’

‘Mummy?’ says Holly. ‘Is that why Fleur’s so thin in that case, if she only looks at cakes but doesn’t eat them?’

‘Who knows? Maybe she’s just got lucky genes. She’s always been thin.’

Lucky genes. Is that what it comes down to? Or maybe Fleur doesn’t eat family packs of Kettle Chips when no one is watching. Maybe she doesn’t add half a bottle of olive oil to a pot of ‘healthy’ vegetable soup like James and Bryony do, or use three tins of coconut milk (600 calories per can) in a family curry as James does. Maybe she’s still on the Hay diet, like Bryony’s grandmother Beatrix, who always talks of ‘taking’ food, never ‘eating’ it, and has given Bryony some kind of food-combining cookbook for the last three Christmases. Food combining means not eating protein and carbohydrates together. That would mean no Brie with crusty bread, no poached egg and smoked salmon on toast, no roast chicken and potatoes. Bryony feels hungry just thinking about it.

‘Mummy? Have I got lucky genes?’

‘Depends what you think is lucky.’

They have left Deal and are driving on the main road back towards Sandwich. It’s a warm day, and very bright. Spring is certainly coming. On the right, somewhere beyond the flat fields and the country park built on the old colliery slagheap, is the English Channel, with its wind turbines and ferries and migrating birds. On the left, more fields, full of scarecrows. In the distance Bryony sees the reassuring old Richborough Power Station cooling towers huddled together like

three fat women on an eternal tea break. Then, in one of the fields on the left, she suddenly sees something hovering, perfectly balanced above the scarecrows.

‘Mummy, why are we stopping? Arrrgh . . .’

‘Oh. My. God. Mummy, you are even worse than Daddy.’

Both children wave their arms and legs about, pretending they are having a car crash, as Bryony pulls into a farm’s small driveway.

‘Look at that,’ she says softly.

‘At what exactly, Mummy?’

A huge bird of prey. Swooping. It’s beautiful, and it’s just . . . there. Bryony struggles to remember the names of local raptors that James has told her. Could it be a hen harrier? A marsh something-or-other? A kestrel? Or do you only see kestrels in Scotland? It doesn’t matter; she can look it up in the bird book when she gets home. Maybe they can all look together.

‘Oh, I must tell Daddy . . .’

She begins noting its features. And then she sees the wire holding it up.

‘What are we supposed to be looking at?’

‘Nothing.’ Bryony restarts the engine. How stupid. How could she not have seen the wire from the road? The raptor is a fake, like the scarecrows. Even the starlings aren’t fooled; hundreds of them are flying around everywhere.

‘Mummy, did you think that was a real bird?’

Ash and Holly start to giggle.

‘Mummy, you’re a right wally.’

Which is exactly what James will say.



‘So how was your swim today?’

‘Fucking awful.’



Clem is rooting around in the drawer for something. They have finished listening to the repeat of her radio programme and the kitchen is suddenly very quiet. Ollie is not going to try asking about Oleander again. Or if he does he will make sure he does not mention the inheritance, which made him sound like a total cunt before.

‘What have you lost?’

‘My vegetable peeler.’

Despite being married, they have separate vegetable peelers, just as they have separate gym memberships at separate gyms with different swimming pools.

Ollie shrugs. ‘I haven’t had it.’

Clem sighs. ‘What went wrong at the swimming pool this time?’

‘This time.’

‘What?’

‘Well, you say it as if I’m some kind of twat who can’t even go to the swimming pool without some major drama, and . . . *What?*’

‘Nothing.’ She has now found her vegetable peeler, that minimalist piece of stainless steel that looks as if it would slash your wrists in an instant. Ollie’s peeler has a sensible rubber grip. With Clem’s you can peel every which way, as if you were fencing, or literally doing battle with your vegetable, really fucking killing it. Ollie’s just peels sensibly. Clem starts killing something. It’s a butternut squash.

‘Anyway . . . ?’

‘Well, OK, so basically I’d just finished in the gym when the bus turned up. And – don’t look at me like that – I know this is going to sound cruel but I totally wasn’t in the mood for twenty – yes, *twenty* – and no, I’m not going to say the word “spaz”, or “flid”, OK? – people with “learning difficulties”. Obviously I’m sure they are all lovely and wonderful and I’d fucking hate their lives but they don’t have enough helpers. And they don’t wash them before they put them in the swimming pool. And that pool is disgusting enough to begin with, as you know. Like, for example,

the clump of hair is still there. After a YEAR. Stop looking at me like that. And try not to slash your wrists with that thing. You think I'm exaggerating? OK. Right. One of them was literally a woman with a hunchback – WHICH I AM NOT JUDGING, OK – but she was also covered in hair. I mean she looked like a *yeti*. A hunchback woman *yeti* in my swimming pool. The guys are also all perfectly lovely, I'm sure, although my personal preference would be to have them wash before getting into a pool with me, but one of them not only does not wash, he wears these huge corduroy shorts that probably still have things – like used tissues, if he actually used tissues – in the pockets, and he goes to the deep end and just bobs up and down picking his nose while I'm trying to swim. And then there's this other one who is huge and black – YES, I KNOW IT DOESN'T MATTER BUT I AM TRYING TO PAINT A PICTURE FOR YOU – who does this superfast front crawl which is quite impressive really, but he keeps his eyes shut and his head entirely underwater so he spends his whole time mowing down babies and the elderly while the yeti shakes with fear and sort of moos in the shallow end. I mean, can't they just shave her?'

'Can you pass me the Le Creuset roasting tin?'

Ollie goes to the wrong cupboard and gets the wrong tin.

'I mean, is it unethical to shave a yeti-woman if you have one in your care?'

'I am not responding to this.' Does she almost smile then? Maybe not. 'I mean, you don't shave before you get in the pool.'

'Ha! You *have* responded. The woman hath . . .'

'You've got a hairy back. That's the wrong tin.'

'My back isn't that hairy. And I'm a man. Which one do you want?'

'The Le Creuset one.'

'I don't know what that means.'

'Yes, you do.'

'No. Unlike you I don't carry an inventory of our bourgeois cooking

equipment around with me in my head at all times. What does Le Creuset even mean?’

‘Don’t be a dick. It’s the one with the handles.’

‘If you mean the third-degree-burn pan, why don’t you say so?’

Clem sighs. Ollie gets the right roasting tin. And a beer.

‘They could wax her. How traumatic would that be? She could go to *Femme Naturelle*.’ *Femme Naturelle* is the beauty parlour that has just opened up around the corner from their house in Canterbury. If she’s in a good mood Clem sometimes jokes about going there for a Brazilian, or even a Hollywood. Her pubes are perfect as they are, of course: a little black triangle of something like AstroTurf or . . . The image is going wrong so Ollie abandons it. ‘*Yeti Naturelle*.’

‘That was almost funny before you spoiled it.’



When they get in, Ash snuggles up in the conservatory with his nature book. Holly gets the spare laptop and loads a DVD onto it: something with a 15 certificate about bitchy schoolgirls that her uncle Charlie got her last Christmas. Bryony suggested this on the way home, mainly as a way to stop Holly pointing out every other fake bird that they drove past. The house smells of baking bread, as usual, and also chocolate. James must have made a cake too. So much cake in one day.

‘Why is she doing that?’ asks James, when he comes in from the garden.

‘Mummy,’ wails Holly from the conservatory. ‘Tell him you said I could.’

‘I said she could.’ Bryony kisses him. ‘How are you?’

‘I’m fine,’ says James. ‘Been baking.’

‘I can smell. Something lovely that I shouldn’t eat.’

‘Chocolate and beetroot brownies. Beetroot from the garden!’

Bryony doesn't ask if it's for a newspaper assignment. James bakes all the time: bread every day and cakes twice a week. Once James baked 'the most calorific cake in Britain' from a recipe in one of the tabloids so he could construct a witty piece about how he didn't think his organic eco-kids would eat it, but of course they did. Holly was actually sick: brown and pink vomit all over her bedroom. Bryony can't remember what caused the pink that time. Can't have been beetroot. Must have been jam. And why has James used fresh early-season beetroot in brownies? Couldn't he just have roasted it? Everyone loves roasted beetroot, and it roasts so quickly when it's so fresh. He could also have put it in a salad.

'Good to get more veg in the kids,' Bryony says.

'That's what I thought. And you can have one, can't you?'

She opens the fridge and gets out the Villa Maria Sauvignon Blanc she started last night. There's only about a third of the bottle left, so she finds another white and puts it in the freezer just in case. She walks across the room and selects an unchipped Dartington Crystal glass from the dresser. It's three minutes past six. The clocks went forward this morning, so in some way it's really only three minutes past five.

'Do you want one?' she asks James.

'No thanks.' He looks at his watch. 'How was your afternoon?'

'All right. Ash still won't go near the deep end when the wave machine's on, after whatever it was that happened last week. The party was pretty boring. Poor Fleur's in a state but not talking about it. Oh, and after we left Fleur's Holly remembered she'd left her blue scarf behind so we had to go all the way back to Deal. A lot of toing and froing, and she's basically had way too much sugar. Cake at the party of course, and some disgusting-looking sweet sandwiches, cake at Fleur's . . . But I guess at least she's eaten something. She's pretty scratchy now, though.'

'How is watching an unsuitable DVD going to help?'

How is giving her even more cake going to help? But Bryony doesn't say this.

'At least she's quiet.'

Bryony pours the wine. What is it about the first sip of a crisp Sauvignon Blanc on a mild early spring day? It's like drinking a field full of cold, slightly shivery flowers.

'And you say Fleur isn't good?'

'Well, as usual she didn't say anything at all about how she was feeling. I wish she wasn't all alone in that huge cottage. It must be so stressful having to suddenly take all responsibility for Namaste House and all the therapy and yoga and everything. And all the famous people who are always hanging around there . . . Although I suppose whoever inherits the place will probably sell up quite quickly, but then what will she do? It's all she's ever known. Of course she owns her cottage, but presumably whoever inherits the house will do some kind of deal with her so that the estate can be sold whole . . .'

'When's the funeral going to be?'

'A week on Thursday. They need time to get in touch with everyone. Potentially people could be coming from India, Pakistan, America . . .'

Bryony goes to the rack to find a bottle of red to open for dinner. Should she open two? No, one will be fine. But why not make it the 15.5% Tempranillo in that case? Get a bit of spice and warmth in her before the week ahead. She starts looking for the corkscrew, which is never where it last was. One of the things Bryony's father taught her was that you should always open a bottle of red wine an hour before you want to drink it, or longer if it's more than five years old. Bryony vaguely remembers the evenings when he used to open two bottles at once, and her mother would drink one of them by herself, before dinner, looking vampiric and oddly expectant. After dinner her father smoked hash and her mother drank the second bottle of wine and they talked about going back to the Pacific to continue their study of the Lost People while Bryony read Jane Austen and wished for the phone to ring.

‘Do you want to come and see something?’ James says.

‘What is it?’

‘Come and see.’

She sighs. ‘Hang on. I want to get this open. And I’ll have to change my shoes.’

Bryony uncorks the wine, takes off her boots and puts on a pair of dirty blue Converse trainers that she has set aside for gardening; not that she ever has time for gardening at the moment.

‘Holly? Ash?’ calls James. ‘Do you want to see what Daddy’s made?’

‘They’re all settled down,’ says Bryony.

‘Do we have to?’ calls Holly.

James sighs. ‘No, but you’ll miss something exciting.’

The kids put on their shoes and everyone walks to the bottom of the garden to admire the bird table that James has put together this afternoon, presumably between digging up beetroot and baking. Bryony doesn’t ask why he hasn’t been writing, and doesn’t say anything about the cats. She’ll have to get them bells. Then again, birds come to the garden anyway, and the cats kill them anyway, and she’s never actually bothered to get them bells before. Then there’s bird flu, although no one’s said anything about bird flu for ages. Why can’t she just like it? It does look nice where James has put it.

‘That’s lovely,’ Bryony says, kissing James again. ‘We can watch the birds from the kitchen. But you didn’t do it all today, as well as making brownies and digging up beetroot?’

‘You are so unbelievably gross,’ says Holly. ‘When will you be too old for kissing?’

‘Never,’ says Bryony. ‘We’ll still be kissing when we’re a hundred.’

‘It could be a lot worse,’ says James, raising an eyebrow at Bryony. ‘Eh, Beetle?’

‘Yuck! That’s even more gross. I know what you’re thinking, and I know what it means when you make your eyebrows do that. And when you call Mummy “Beetle”.’

The kids slink back off to the conservatory.

‘Remember the goldfinches?’ says James.

‘Oh God, yes. Of course. How could I forget something like that?’

How indeed? Although when you are working full-time and studying part-time it’s easy to forget things. But of course the goldfinches were amazing. One day last autumn – it must have been just before Halloween – ten of them turned up in the back garden. Given that there had never been any goldfinches in the garden this seemed to be something of a miracle. And they were so impressive with their bright red heads and wing flashes of pure gold, like peculiar little superheroes, all masked and caped. James declared them his favourite bird, and Holly said she thought they were too ‘bling’ but nevertheless ended up spending hours watching them through the binoculars that Uncle Charlie bought for her. The lunchtime after they arrived Bryony got chatting to the woman from Maxted’s who recommended sunflower hearts and niger seed, and a proper feeder for the niger seed, and a little hanging basket for the sunflower hearts, all of which Bryony bought. How unlike Mummy it was to come home with something that was not clothes, shoes, chocolate or wine! Anyway, these offerings also went down well with the goldfinches, and Bryony, James and the kids spent the next day trying without success to take just one good photograph, but the little buggers would not keep still, and . . .

Such strange, slow little birds, gathering their gold capes around them, pulling their red masks down over their eyes and settling down on the niger seed feeder for what seemed like hours, as if it was some kind of opium den. And the next day another ten showed up. And the same again for the next three days until there must have been fifty goldfinches regularly visiting their garden. They would all eat slowly and seriously for quite a long time, sometimes getting a bit flappy and knocking each other off the feeders but mainly just chomp-chomp-chomping like superhero-puppets controlled by very stoned

puppeteers. Then they would all take off and fly bobbing and tweeting around the village sounding like the ribbon on an old cassette tape being rewound. This went on for about a week, and then they were gone. Bobbing and tweeting their way across the Channel to Europe in a group of over 350, according to the Sandwich Bird Observatory.

‘I want to be ready for them this year, if they come back.’

‘They were so beautiful.’

‘Like you.’ James strokes Bryony’s face. ‘It’s still light,’ he says, ‘and warmish. You could put on a cardigan and bring your wine out here. I’ll get one of the deckchairs out for you.’

James is always trying to get Bryony outside in the fresh air. Perhaps more fresh air will help her become more like ethereal, perfect Fleur, who has been known even to sleep outside when the moon is full. Although he has never said this, of course. He says Bryony is beautiful. He says Bryony is beautiful and then Bryony begins to think poisonous things like this. Anyway, James will bring one deckchair out and Bryony will sit in it alone, while James cooks dinner. That’s the offer. Is it a good offer or a bad offer? Would it be better if she decided that she wanted to come and sit outside and got the deckchair herself? Once James told her she made too much of things, adding meaning that was never there. Bryony laughed and reminded him that being an estate agent meant having to do that all the time and that she couldn’t help it if it was now in her nature to make cupboards sound like spare bedrooms. Although of course what he was objecting to was her tendency to make spare bedrooms sound like cupboards.

‘This isn’t for your column, is it?’ asks Bryony.

‘What?’

‘I don’t know. Making a bird table. I mean, the goldfinches won’t come back until October or November. If they come back at all. In the meantime are you going to write about how hilarious it is when one of the cats brings in a bird? How Daddy has to deal with it because Mummy’s too grumpy, or too squeamish, or late for a viewing, or at



a seminar . . .' Or hungover, but that sort of goes without saying these days.

James's column is on page four of the glossy magazine of the biggest selling liberal weekend newspaper. It's called 'Natural Dad'. On the facing page there's a column called 'City Mum'. The idea is that James, once a well-known nature writer but now better known for his column, writes about living in the countryside with his two down-to-earth children and his increasingly bad-tempered wife. City Mum writes about her children's friends' ten-grand birthday parties in Hampstead, and wonders whether to buy her offspring shoes from Clarks like her parents did, or Prada, like her richest friends do.

'Hey, chill, Beetle. What's the matter?'

'Nothing. Sorry, I . . .'

'It's not as if you *have* ever cleared up after the cats in your life.'

'I do when you're away. It's horrible.' She sighs. 'Anyway, look, I don't want to start anything. I'm sorry. I'm knackered, and upset about Oleander, and I've still got to do all my reading for Thursday.' As well as being a partner in the estate agency, Bryony is doing a part-time MA in Eighteenth Century Studies. 'I just worry that you spend too much time on that column. I want you to be able to do your serious work, that's all.'

'I know you do.' James touches her arm lightly. 'But work doesn't always have to be serious. Come on, I'll get you a deckchair. I'm making a Thai green chicken curry for dinner. And then of course there's brownies. I'll do the washing up and you can get on with your reading.'



'Well, that's enough of my boring life. How about you?'

Charlie frowns. 'Well,' he says, 'where to start?'

Who goes on a blind date on a Sunday night? Even Soho has a kind

of Sunday feeling, as if it has stayed in its pyjamas all day and just can't be arsed with all this. Charlie looks at Nicola, sitting across from him in the too-trendy, contemporary Asian restaurant she probably booked online. The music's too loud. She's wearing a silky dress in a kind of wine colour that makes her look faintly leprous. She's a mathematician doing a postdoc at King's. At home Charlie has a new orchid book that came just before he left (no, there isn't post on a Sunday: it was delivered to Mr Q. Johnson next door by mistake two days ago). He wishes he were at home reading it, with an espresso from his beautiful Fracino machine. He almost says something about the orchid book. He almost says that the thing about him, the main thing, really, although definitely not the thing you'd notice first, especially not if you happened to be blindfolded while he was fucking you, is that he loves seeing orchids in the wild in Britain. Apart from the bit about the blindfold, that would be a great line for a first date. Or maybe it all sounds a bit off-putting? The blindfold would be silk, and from Liberty, and – of course – handwashed between uses. He says nothing. He actually just wants to get this over with.

'I'll nip to the loo while you think about it,' says Nicola.

She slips on a tiny cardigan that stops under her arms. She's wearing very high heels. Every woman in here is wearing very high heels. She's probably been here before, perhaps with an ex, or with students from her undergraduate days. Charlie sighs. He can't be bothered with all this tonight. He sees a footballer he recognises walk in and joke with the doorman, who slaps him on the back. He picks up his phone and finds a text from his father telling him that his great-aunt Oleander is dead. Well, that's . . . Gosh, poor Fleur. Charlie texts her. Then he texts his cousin Bryony to ask how she and the family are. Then he begins composing a text to his sister Clem that combines sadness about Oleander with congratulations on her radio thing. But it's too hard, so he temporarily abandons it and flicks quickly to MyFitnessPal to add the carbohydrate grams he just accidentally had

in his starter. Checks his hair in the reverse camera, not that he cares what Nicola thinks about his hair. Charlie often checks his hair when he is alone. It's quite nice hair. He likes it. Especially this latest haircut, which . . .

Nicola's back. Through the uncertain fabric of her dress he can see her knickers digging into the flesh of her otherwise OK bottom. Charlie likes a biggish bottom, but ideally on a much skinnier girl. How can she bear to be out in public like that? A thong would not solve the problem. He hates thongs. But there are lots of seamless knickers nowadays and . . .

'So,' she says.

Charlie puts his phone away. The main courses arrive. He has ordered halibut with Malaysian chilli sauce, which is probably full of sugar that will give him a headache and rancid vegetable oil that will give him cancer. She is having monkfish with Chinese leaf cabbage and jasmine rice. Charlie does not eat rice.

'Well, obviously you know I work at Kew.'

'That must be amazing. Do you get to go and hang out in the glasshouses whenever you want?'

'In theory. But no one really does.' And no one uses the libraries either, in case they bump into eager ethnobotany students who want to talk about different kinds of latex, which is the white gunge that comes out of some plants when you cut them, or be reminded whether it's paripinnate or imparipinnate leaves that have a lone terminal leaflet. Charlie always buys his plant books from Summerfield, Amazon or Abe, and then no one else can touch them or make them dirty or try to talk to him about them. He often feels like a lone terminal leaflet himself. Quite an elegant one, naturally, and on a very rare plant.

'So what do you do exactly? What's your job title?'

'I'm a family type specialist.'

'What does that mean?' She smiles. 'I know nothing about plants,

except sometimes from Izzy's drunken ramblings. She's always going on about mint and herbs and stuff.'

Izzy, aka Dr Isobel Stone, is the mutual friend who has set them up. She's a world authority on Lamiales, the order of angiosperms that contains mint and herbs and stuff. Charlie first got talking to her in the tea room about a year ago after an incident involving a member of the public and a rather mangled herbarium specimen that turned out simply to be *Lavandula augustifolia*, one of the most common plants in the UK, if not the entire universe. The member of the public wrote around seventeen letters about his 'mystery plant', each one more offensive than the last, eventually accusing everyone at Kew of being 'blind, intellectually stunted bastards'. Since then Charlie and Izzy have often had morning coffee and/or afternoon tea together, and Izzy has become the colleague that Charlie would never really fuck, but about whom he will masturbate if his fantasy happens to take place in a work setting. On Thursday Izzy gave him the address of this restaurant and a phone number and raised an eyebrow, and Charlie wondered if he *could* in fact fuck someone from work until Izzy said that her friend Nicola was expecting to meet him there at 8 p.m. on Sunday. It was all a bit awkward because Charlie had said he was available before he knew who he was meeting. And then Izzy told Charlie that Nicola had not stopped going on about him and his 'great body and beautiful eyes' since seeing him in a picture Izzy put on Facebook. Of course, desperate, fawning women of this type will often do *anything*. Which in one way makes the whole thing less . . . but in another way it becomes so . . .

'Um,' says Charlie, 'well, say you've gone to the rainforest and collected a plant but you don't know what it is and you send it to Kew for identification, I'm the person – or one of the people – who decides what family it's in, and therefore which department it should go to for further identification. Like if its leaves are a bit furry and it smells of mint I send it to Izzy. Or one of her team.'

‘So you get mystery plants?’

‘Yeah, all the time. But mostly we solve the mystery quite quickly.’

‘That’s so cool.’ She pours more wine. ‘So what’s a botanical family again? I last did biology at GCSE. Plants are too real for me.’

‘It’s a taxonomic category. One up from genus. From the top it’s kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species. Well, that’s the basic structure anyway. The rice you’re eating now has the Latin name *Oryza sativa*, which is its genus and species. Its family is Poaceae. Or, basically, grass.’

‘Rice is a type of grass?’

‘Yep.’

She sips her wine. ‘What’s a human a type of?’

‘Monkey. Well, great ape. Hominidae.’

‘Oh yes. Of course. I knew that. Everyone knows that. What about this cabbage stuff then?’ She holds up a forkful of wilted greens.

Charlie frowns. ‘You’re not going to make me identify the whole meal, are you?’

‘No. Sorry. I’m being silly.’ She smiles weakly. ‘Forget it.’

‘It’s probably *Brassica rapa*. Chinese cabbage. In the family Brassicaceae. The mustard family.’

She puts some in her mouth and chews. ‘Cabbage is a type of mustard?’

‘Yeah, kind of. The mustard family is sometimes known as the cabbage family.’

‘So cabbage is a kind of cabbage.’ She laughs. ‘Wow. Excellent. OK, next question. Where are you from?’

‘Originally? Bath.’

‘Oh, I love Bath. Gosh, all that lovely yellow stone – what’s it called, again? – and those romantic mists. Do you have any brothers or sisters?’

Charlie doesn’t tell her that Bath stone is called Bath stone. ‘I’ve got a sister. And a cousin I’m very close to. And, I guess, two

half-sisters I hardly ever see, because . . .' He doesn't really know how to end this sentence, so he doesn't bother. Instead, he looks at Nicola's wrists. He tries imagining them bound with rope. Cheap, itchy rope. He imagines them bleeding. Just a little. Perhaps just a tiny blue bruise instead. One on each wrist from being held down and fucked. Face-fucked? No, just fucked. Obviously she'd have consented to all this, but it's amazing how many women do. In fact, a lot of women have only slept with Charlie because he's offered to tie them up. You know, as one of those jokes that aren't really jokes. But he doesn't really fancy Nicola, with or without rope etc.

There's quite a long pause.

'God, you're hard work, aren't you?' She grins. 'Don't look so serious. I'm teasing. What are their names?'

'Clematis. That's my sister. We call her Clem. Bryony's my cousin. My half-sisters are Plum and Lavender, but they're just kids still. My father remarried after my mother went missing on an expedition . . .' Nicola doesn't respond to the missing mother thing, which is odd, so Charlie explains about the family tradition of giving a botanical first name to anyone not certain to keep the famous Gardener surname, although of course Clem kept the Gardener name anyway when she married Ollie. Then he explains about his great-great-grandfather, Augustus Emery Charles Gardener, who was a famous horticulturist, and his great-grandfather, Charles Emery Augustus Gardener, who was supposed to be overseeing a tea plantation in India but ended up falling in love with a Hindu woman and founding an Ayurvedic clinic and yoga centre in Sandwich, of all places. And then his grandfather, Augustus Emery Charles Gardener, who . . .

'Can I tell you about the desserts?'

Nicola immediately looks up at the waiter, and Charlie realises he has been boring her. Good. Maybe she'll leave and this will be over. He has had enough to eat, and definitely enough carbs, but agrees,

after some pressure, to share an exotic fruit platter. He'll have a bit of kiwi or something. But he insists on ordering a glass of dessert wine for her. He likes watching girls drinking dessert wine for reasons that would probably be disturbing if he ever thought about them. He has a double espresso, which won't be as nice as the one he could have at home.

'So why are you on a blind date?' Nicola asks him.

Charlie shrugs. Right, well, if she doesn't want to know any more about his family, she won't hear about his great-aunt Oleander, who just died, and who used to be a famous guru who even met the Beatles. She also won't hear about his mother, who is not just missing but presumed dead, along with both Bryony's parents and Fleur's terrible mother. And the deadly seed pods they went to find in a place called – really – the Lost Island, far away in the Pacific. And that's Nicola's loss, because it's really a very exciting story, with loads of botany in it and everything. But then all girls like Nicola want to talk about is how many people you've slept with and what your favourite band is and how many children you want.

'I don't know,' he says. 'How about you?'

'Izzy sort of took pity on me because I got dumped.'

'Sorry to hear that.'

'What's your history . . . ? I mean, when did you . . . ?'

'I got divorced about ten years ago.'

'Mine was last month.'

'Was it bad?'

She shrugs. 'We'd only been together for three years.'

'Yeah, but I mean, did you, were you . . . ?'

'What, in love? Yes. Well, I was. How about you?'

'I suppose I was. Yes. Just not with my wife.'

Nicola pauses. Sips her wine. Puts her finger in her mouth, and then in the bowl of salt on the table, and then back in her mouth again. Why on earth is she . . .

‘So who did you fuck instead?’

Charlie’s cock stirs ever so slightly at the sound of the word ‘fuck’ coming out of her full, quite posh, red-lipsticked mouth. She reapplied her lipstick when she went to the loo. He likes it when girls bother to do that.

‘It’s complicated.’

She sighs. ‘Right.’

‘How about you?’

‘What, did I fuck anyone else?’

Again, a very slight emphasis on the word ‘fuck’. The consonance of it. Another small stir.

‘Yes.’

She smiles. ‘I can’t tell you that. I hardly know you.’

Eyebrows. Smile. ‘We could change that.’

‘Really? How?’

‘Go out to the fire escape and take off your knickers.’

She pauses, looks shocked, but probably isn’t. Laughs. ‘What?’

‘You think I’m joking?’

‘I’m not sure. Er, most men wouldn’t quite . . .’

‘But what if I’m not?’

‘Surely we could find somewhere more comfortable to . . .’

‘But the excitement is all in the discomfort.’

‘Well . . .’

He looks at the door. His watch. ‘I mean, if you have other plans . . .’

‘Take off my knickers.’ She acts like this is a joke, could still just about be only a joke. ‘Right. OK. So I’m standing on the fire escape in the freezing cold with no knickers on. And then what?’

‘You put them in your mouth.’

‘I’m not doing that.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, why should I?’



‘So that people are not disturbed by your moans of pleasure. Or pain.’

‘I’m going to feel really stupid anyway. I can’t . . .’

‘Well, just take them off then. I’ll pay and then come and join you in a second.’

‘And you won’t be long?’

‘No.’

She flushes a little and gets up. ‘OK. Don’t be long. I can’t believe . . .’

Is it always this easy? Yes, when you actually don’t care.

Afterwards, Charlie drives his green MG back to Hackney. The house is just off Mare Street on a long road of huge Victorian houses in various states of renovation. Charlie and his ex-wife Charlotte (how much fun that was when they met: ‘I’m Charlie,’ ‘Hey, so am I!’, although it became complicated later on when they started opening each other’s letters by accident and one of them was That Letter from Bryony) split the proceeds on their flat in Highgate in a way that only their lawyers understood, and he ended up with just enough for the deposit on the Hackney place. He worked out that unless he asked his father for money, he could just about afford to continue living in London only if he bought a tired old student let, did it up a bit, and advertised for some housemates. He took two weeks’ holiday and painted all eight rooms, including the ceilings, while a friend of a friend with a sander did the floors for a hundred quid. So now here he is, living with two art students, a fashion blogger and a jazz musician. The main problem with the place is that the previous owner, Mr Q. Johnson, who now lives next door, insists on Charlie still keeping garlic on all the windowsills to keep bad spirits out of the house, and drops in every few days to check that he does. He has also not changed his address with the Labour Party, *Disability*, *Spin*, *Saga* and various other companies, so most of the post that comes to Charlie’s house is for him. It seems particularly unfair that Charlie’s post often goes

to Mr Q. Johnson for no reason at all, especially when it is clearly marked number fifty-six.

When Charlie gets in, the band is practising in the basement. He watches a bit of *La Dolce Vita* on BBC2, then makes a cup of fresh mint tea and takes it to bed. He should have left Nicola on the balcony without her knickers. It would have been a hilarious thing to tell Bryony next weekend. But, mainly out of politeness to Izzy, he gallantly went outside, stuffed Nicola's knickers in her mouth and fucked her. She was quite pissed by then, so he managed to get his dick halfway up her arse before she realised what he was doing. But, again because of Izzy, he was super-polite and took it out like a nice, well-mannered boy and reinserted it in her vagina. Which is why he doesn't understand the text message he now has from Izzy: *How could you???* He texts back, *Be more specific?*, but does not get a reply.



It's very complicated, trying to organise a wake. Fleur has no idea who is even coming to the funeral. But afterwards, everybody should be invited to Namaste House for food. Of course they should. But there could be ten people or a hundred. How is Fleur supposed to know who will come? If even Augustus and Beatrix are going to come then anything could happen. Oleander changed a lot of people's lives over the years. But many of them must be dead now: dead, reincarnated and living completely new lives. Could you contact someone who . . . ? Fleur shakes her head. How stupid. Because it's so complicated organising a wake she is watering all the plants in Namaste House for the second time today. This is something Oleander and Fleur used to do together each evening. Doing this makes Fleur feel almost as if she *is* Oleander, and of course you don't have to miss someone if you are them, and . . .

The orangery is attached to the west wing. At this time of day it

is filled with the soft colours of sunset with only a whisper of moonlight. Fleur has looked after the orchids in here since she was a teenager. Some of the ones she propagated are getting on for twenty years old, but there are others that are much older. Their roots reach out like the thin arms of the starving and desperate, although it's all a big act because they know that Fleur knows exactly how they like to be misted, and when. Fleur waters the frankincense tree in the centre of the room, touches its bark, as she always does, her hand coming away smelling of the heat and damp of faraway places. The orangery is where the celebrities come to relax by day, to breathe air produced by rare plants and to look out at the orchard with its wise, old trees. The orangery is vast, but the celebrities won't share it. If one celebrity finds another one already here then she, or more probably he – for some reason the residential ones are usually male – will instead go all the way to the east wing where they can choose the cool Yin room with the peppermint water fountain, the small, hot Yang room or the Dosha Den, full of black velvet cushions stuffed with down and dried roses.

Sometimes one of the newer celebrities will make an observation about the lack of a coherent spirituality in the house. The massages are Ayurvedic, because Ketki does them. Ish, Ketki's husband, does both Ayurvedic and macrobiotic consultations, and is also a trained acupuncturist and cranial osteopath. The food is mostly Indian, sometimes Ayurvedic, and made by Ketki's ancient aunt Bluebell. She specialises in kulfis – Indian ice creams made with condensed milk, cardamom pods and saffron – but which she often makes into the shape of Daleks. Everything else is a jumble of Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Hinduism, Wicca and who knows what else. Oleander famously believed in 'everything'. There's a tapestry halfway up the west-wing staircase with a profound religious significance that no one can quite pin down, not even the Prophet, who has an eye for such things.

After checking the first floor again, Fleur goes down the east-wing staircase – avoiding not just the tapestry but also the White Lady, who often comes out on a Sunday, or after someone has ‘moved on’ – and through the library with its huge peace lilies and rubber plants and that tarry, tobaccoey smell of old leather bindings, and she wonders where on earth Ketki could be. She checks the orangery again, and the kitchens, with their unmistakable smell of fenugreek, coriander and, of course, the curry plants, which Fleur now waters for the third time today. All around are big Kilner jars of yellow split peas, red, brown and green lentils, four different types of rice, whole oats, sultanas and desiccated coconut. Silicone Dalek moulds, but no Bluebell. A half-drunk mug of Earl Grey tea, but no Ketki.

This is infuriating. There is, after all, so much planning to do. Ketki has said she’ll make curries for the wake if Fleur will help. She has also suggested that her two daughters might come up from their professional lives in London and do some cooking. Unlikely, frankly. And Fleur herself is actually going to be quite busy on the day of the funeral and . . . Fleur sighs. Goes up to the second floor, with its long corridor of guest suites with the original servant bells that she had mended years ago, and then to the third floor, to the original servants’ corridor where the ‘servants’ still live and in which the bells sometimes still tinkle, late at night, if one of the celebrities has overdosed, become enlightened or wants a cup of hot chocolate. Now, of course, it’s just Ketki, Ish and Bluebell up there, but years ago Fleur and her mother had their cramped little rooms at the north end of the servants’ corridor. And, after her parents’ disappearance, Bryony stayed in one of the old servants’ rooms for almost a year until James’s parents took her in. Ketki’s daughters – dramatically rescued from somewhere in the Punjab region, by Oleander, who saved them from almost certain abduction, rape and forced marriage – to Muslims, *imagine* – grew up in the house. They were joined at the south end of the servants’ corridor by their cousin

Pi, who was himself rescued, but from something else entirely, quite a lot later.

Of course no one has suggested that Pi, who moved out of his tiny room years ago and is now a famous author in London, should come and make curries. No one has suggested that *his* eldest daughter should take time off from *Vogue* photo shoots to come and make curries. His wife never comes to Namaste House so at least that isn't an issue. But anyway, why not get Clem, Charlie and Bryony – Oleander's actual relations, who are presumably about to inherit everything – to come and make the curries? The Prophet has, to Fleur's knowledge, never even been in the kitchen, but that doesn't mean he couldn't help in an emergency. But some things never change; however much time you spend with supposedly enlightened people, in a house so brimming and glowing with enlightenment it's sometimes like being in one of those fish tanks that . . . *Shut up, for God's sake.* Fleur closes her eyes. Enlightenment is so difficult and tiresome, and Fleur isn't sure she's going to get there in this lifetime, but she could really do with a stiller mind. As usual, when she tries to stop her thoughts, her ego goes into a sulk for about one second and there's peace. Then the whole thing starts up again.

She eventually finds Ketki folding towels in Treatment Room 3. It's almost as if the old woman has been avoiding her.

'There's still time to get it catered,' Fleur says. 'We've got the money.'

Indeed. Those packages that the Prophet still sends off. And Fleur's big ideas, like those huge clouds floating above everyone until suddenly, splat, you are covered in rain. There's absolutely no shortage of money. Even after the Inland Revenue came round a couple of years ago. Especially when one of them went away with his own mantra, a yin/yang necklace, a shaved head and a fondness for chickpeas.

'I want to do this for Oleander,' says Ketki. 'She would have liked . . .'

'She would have liked you to be able to relax and grieve for her

in peace. We've got no idea who's going to turn up for this. There'll be the press as well. I mean, not in the house, obviously, but causing trouble around the place. You know what they're like. I mean, let's face it, *Paul McCartney* might come. He probably won't, but . . .'

'Paul McCartney.' Ketki bobbles her head and almost smiles. She and her family arrived at Namaste House not long after George Harrison had been there, at least according to the tabloids, for a two-week meditation and yoga retreat with Oleander and some notorious wise-woman Fleur barely remembers but who used to live in the rooms looking down on the orangery that the Prophet now has. Fleur has a dim memory of patchouli oil, guitars and smoke, although most of her childhood was like that, especially before her mother disappeared. But by then there were mixing desks and DJs as well. The wise-woman grew the rare, impossible frankincense tree from seed, Fleur remembers. She put a spell on it, or said she did. If someone sold this place then what would happen to the frankincense tree? No one else would know how to look after it. Perhaps a botanical garden would take it, although moving it would probably kill it. Fleur will have to ask Charlie.

'Well . . .' says Ketki.

'And I'll have some people back to the cottage afterwards.'

'What people?'

'You know, Clem, Bryony, Charlie, if he comes. Pi. I guess just anyone who's around and wants to stay up late chatting. I'll do a small supper. That way we won't disturb you, Bluebell and Ish.'

Ketki knows that 'chatting' means drinking too much, and 'staying up late' means having sex and taking drugs. She's read her nephew's novels. She knows what Fleur does in that cottage. She turns back to the towels.

The room smells of the oils Ketki uses in her massages. For a long time she made her own essential oils from flowers in the garden and grew marigolds to use in her aromatic face packs. In fact, once upon a time Fleur was her assistant, and learned how to make all the classic

Ayurvedic plant remedies, massage oils and balms. Together they used to grind sandalwood and cinnamon sticks, and make their own besan flour from chickpeas, although Bluebell often insisted they use her flour, which was a bit more lumpy. They grew and harvested hibiscus flowers, marshmallow roots and chamomile. They even grew their own turmeric in one of the greenhouses. Now Fleur runs the whole show and insists that most of the oils and dried plants come by mail order, although she does still let Ketki help collect the rosebuds, lavender and rosemary. The only thing Fleur harvests is the opium which, yes, Ketki also knows about.

‘I suppose there’s James,’ Fleur says. ‘He’d probably help. He’s a good cook.’

‘Who is James?’

‘You know. James Croft. Bryony’s husband.’

James is just one of several people Ketki believes Fleur to be involved with, secretly.

‘Help with what?’

‘Make curries for the wake, if that’s what you really want to do.’

‘I just think that we should.’

Oleander always said that the word ‘should’ should always be ignored. Then she laughed until whoever she was talking to noticed the paradox.

‘OK,’ says Fleur. ‘I’ll do a big soup, then, as well.’

‘Lentil soup I think,’ says Ketki. ‘And several carrot cakes.’ She bobbles her head again, which means it’s all settled.

When Fleur leaves the room she thinks of going to see Oleander, and then remembers that Oleander isn’t there any more. She sighs. Ketki’s husband Ish is in the meditation area, reading the *Observer*. Fleur half tries to catch his eye, but he doesn’t look up. Ish doesn’t hear very well now, and it’s possible that he just has not sensed her in the room. Then he does look up.

‘Go easy on her,’ he says. ‘She has lost her oldest friend.’

'I know,' says Fleur. She does not add that she has now lost almost everyone, and is probably about to lose almost everything.

Here's what Fleur's ego says, stirred by these thoughts. It says, What about *me*? What about what *I've* lost? It also says, Lentil soup and carrot cake? But that's what they make for the retreats. That's what they make for the spa weekends. That's what they *always* make, even though basically everyone who comes to Namaste House now requests a low-carb diet, and absolutely no one eats pulses of their own accord any more apart from Madonna and Gwyneth Paltrow. And anyway, Oleander is dead. She is *dead*. Can they not, *just this once*, do something different? Can they not have . . . (even the ego sometimes needs to pause and think, although this is often just for effect) cocktails and canapés? No. Of course not. Well, *Fleur* will have cocktails and canapés over at the cottage. She'll cook aubergine and homemade paneer wrapped in poppy leaves and intricately flavoured with her homemade black spice blend, and then a fragrant pistachio korma with soft white rice, and little mousses made from bitter chocolate and quail's eggs. In the cottage they will see off Oleander in style, whatever Ketki wants to do in the house. Fleur tells her ego to shut up. Of course she does. But she has to acknowledge that it has come up with a lovely menu. And it would be good to make the thing in the cottage different from the thing in the house. And have something for all the gluten-free, low-carb people like Skye Turner – if she comes – and Charlie – if he comes. She will hand-make some chocolates too. Rose creams, and hibiscus truffles.

Back in the cottage, she starts making a list, remembering what Oleander has been saying so much recently: on the level of form, nothing matters. In this world, you can do what you like. *Doing* is not what makes you enlightened. This is good, after all the things Fleur has done. She may have put off enlightenment for now, but she hasn't put it off forever.





On Monday morning there's a knock at Clem's door. It's Zoe.

'Hey,' she says. 'You busy?'

'I wish the university server would explode again,' says Clem. 'Or whatever it did last time it lost all my emails. Come in.'

Zoe comes in but doesn't sit down. She is very tall and always has her blonde hair tied up in a ponytail that would make anyone else look eight, or a bit backward. Today she is wearing ripped jeans, cheap pink flip flops (even though it is only thirteen degrees outside) and a faded yellow Sonic Youth T-shirt. She has a ring through one nostril and never wears make-up unless there's something official going on, like her job interview, for which she wore black eyeliner only on her top lids, sheer red lipstick and an oddly intoxicating perfume that smelled like a bag of sweets left in a men's locker room for too long. She teaches screenwriting.

'I'm just on my way to staff development,' Zoe says. 'Do you want me to steal you some Jammie Dodgers?'

'What is it this time?'

'Dignity in the workplace.'

'How can anyone be dignified in any workplace?'

'Yeah. I'll definitely make that point.'

'God.' Clem stretches languidly and slowly spins her chair away from her computer. 'I'm being smothered in family.'

'In what way?'

'Oh, sorry, don't worry.' She smiles, and shakes her head as if she had water in her ears. 'Thinking out loud.'

'No, go on. Your family is always interesting.'

'Oh, OK, well, my great-aunt just died – no, don't worry, it's all right, I barely knew her. She's the one who took in my cousin and my best friend when our mothers went missing – you know about that, right? And she used to hang out with the Beatles and everything . . . ? Anyway, my grandmother Beatrix, who's about a hundred and fifty and should not know how to use email, is basically driving

us all mad making arrangements for her and my father to come to the funeral, even though they totally hated her. They thought, or think, that Oleander – that’s my great-aunt – was responsible for the deaths of my mother, my aunt, my uncle and my best friend’s mother.’

‘Why? What did she do to them?’

‘No one knows. Back in the late eighties they went off to find a miracle plant and never came back. We think the plant has this seed pod that looks like vanilla and has supposedly magical or mystical properties – only no one knows how to get the good effects without dropping dead. Oleander wasn’t even there.’

‘Wow. Now there’s a screenplay.’

‘Or a nature documentary.’

Clem’s office smells lovely, but in a way that Zoe can’t quite fathom. It’s not any particular one of the lavender candles, or the large succulent plants, or even all of them together, although they probably contribute to it. Today there’s also a scuffed cardboard box containing small plants with white flowers, but they are new and the smell is always there. What is it? It could be Clem herself, perhaps. It’s damp forests, but in a good way. Perhaps a touch of the tropics. Clem is the only person in the department to have bare floorboards in her office instead of the institutional carpet. She has also had all the fluorescent lights removed from the office. Yes, *removed*, which is about a thousand times more weird and interesting than just deciding not to turn them on, which is what a normal person would do. Instead of the lights she has various old Anglepoise floor lamps that she says she found in a forgotten cupboard somewhere in the basement. And instead of having an institutional computer whirring away all day, she has a silent, beautiful, tiny laptop that she brings from home in a thin canvas bag. Sometimes she even puts it away in a drawer and works in sketchbooks instead. Zoe only started working at the university in September, and so far her office contains not much apart from the desk, chair and beige computer the department gave her. She has a

bright orange carpet that, apparently, her predecessor actually *chose*. She aspires to something like Clem's office, but with an iMac and a bit less sadness.

'This place would be improved if there were fewer emails in general – like a ban on any emails from family, friends and partners, for a start. And, of course, students.'

'Don't let them hear you say that,' Zoe says. 'They love you.'

It's true. The students do love Clem. They love the fact that she directs real documentaries, and therefore can tell them how to do it. Clem also replies to their emails, even if she often takes a couple of days – OK, sometimes a week – to get around to it. But some lecturers never reply to emails at all, which is pretty shit when you're paying over three grand a year to do a course. Clem never tells anyone off for anything. She makes low-key jokes. She doesn't patronise them. When she hears them talking about sex instead of lighting ('Oh. My. God. You actually slept with her and no one told me? I don't care. I'm SO happy for you') she simply raises an eyebrow and watches them all explode into giggles. She has never been late for a class, and always gives them fun things to do, like those spoof nature documentaries where they get to do the worst possible voiceover to go with their footage of rabbits or blackbirds on campus ('*The blackbird is now surely thinking, Why is that Emo tosser pointing a camera at me?*'). She's old enough for them not to be aroused by her. She certainly doesn't freak them out as much as Zoe, who is much closer to them in age and appearance and has worked on things they actually watch. Most of the students know that Clem was nominated for an Oscar, but they haven't seen any of her documentaries, not even *Palm*. But several of the boys in the class have wanked themselves silly to things Zoe has written, especially that teen lesbian drama set in Wandsworth. It's pretty crazy, being taught by someone whose words have made you, well, do *that*.

'How have you even got time for staff development?' Clem asks

Zoe. 'I mean, I hope you're not being too stretched. I don't remember this coming up in your probation plan.'

Zoe shrugs. 'It's new. Different. Defamiliarising, probably. I might get something to put in a screenplay. Also, of course, I'm working towards my Very Important Equal Opportunities Certificate.'

'We should probably add that to your next probation report. It'll look good.'

'Yeah. Anyway, I just wanted to see if you're maybe around for coffee later.'

'What time does it finish?'

'Four thirty, I think.'

'A whole day?'

'I believe there are case studies. And role play.'

'OK, well, knock on my door when you get back. I'm sure I'll still be here. At this moment I feel like I'll be here forever.'

'Cool. By the way, what's in the box?' Zoe asks.

'Chilli plants. Do you want one?'

Zoe shrugs. 'Sure. Well, I mean, are they hard? I so do not have green fingers.'

'They're easy. They're just annuals, as well, so . . .'

'What's an annual?'

'They just have one growing season and then they die. One of my PhD students needed them for his film so I brought some in. Now they're looking for homes. They grow really nice chillies. Quite hot.'

'I do love chillies.'

'Yeah, I'm kind of addicted too. I'll bring you one later.'



Cocks.

Hundreds and hundreds of cocks. Perhaps three of them are in fact birds with feathers and beaks and so on, looking rather ridiculous in

this context. But the rest . . . Some of them are in men's mouths. Some of them are in women's mouths. Some of them are in teenagers' mouths. Some of them are in men's anuses. Some of them are in women's anuses, hands, or stuffed between their breasts. Most of them are in women's vaginas. Some women have one cock in their vagina and another in their mouth. Some have yet another cock in their anus. The images are accompanied by captions, for example, 'Young teen gags on hot cock' or 'MILF takes it both ways'. Beatrix meant to type 'clocks' into Google Images, but here she is, looking at cocks. To be properly accurate, it was last month that Beatrix meant to type 'clocks' but actually typed 'cocks', at which point she was prompted about what level of safety mode she wanted. Since Beatrix has never much cared for being protected from things, she switched safety mode, whatever that even was, off. And. Well. *That* was a strange afternoon.

Today she meant to type 'cocks' (although if she was discovered, then, of course, 'clocks' was what she really meant . . . *Very* shocked indeed . . . Can't imagine what sort of perverts would actually choose . . . Unmitigated filth . . . etc. etc.). In fact, for the last month she has been doing this almost every morning after early trading is over. It's not ideal, though, now that she's used to the images. She wants something more, but she doesn't know what. There are too many black cocks on Google Images. Beatrix liked them at first, but now they seem vulgar, and she has realised that at least some of them must be fakes. Some of them are as long as an arm. Beatrix has discovered that she likes medium-sized white cocks: the kind of cock she imagines her husband would have had. She never saw it erect in all the years they were married. She felt it enter her and withdraw from her but she knew she shouldn't touch it or acknowledge it in any other way. He did the minimal amount of touching needed to get it into her. She tried to manually stimulate him once, but he moved her hand away and she had the impression for some weeks

afterwards that he thought she was some sort of . . . Well, some sort of whore.

Black whore. Asian Whore. Teenage whore. Whores gagging for it.

Cartoon whore.

Now *they* are strange.

Beatrix's orgasm flutters through her like a tired goldcrest. Afterwards, she gets up and makes herself a pre-lunch gin and tonic. In the kitchen, the laptop showing one of her ADVFN stock-market monitors flickers blue, red and green. Mostly blue today, which is good, although that often means red tomorrow. Once the blood goes back to wherever it came from, Beatrix finds she can't quite believe that she just looked at all those pictures of miserable looking people being, frankly, violated (she has to be honest with herself and admit that 'in the moment' she likes the miserable ones best, but anyway). Beatrix feels very flat at this time of day, around about the time she used to take Archie for his walk. She could still go on her own of course, but she doesn't. At first she enjoyed seeing other people out with their dogs, but now she doesn't. She used to feel like a dog-owner who had lost her dog (in relation to Archie she can't say the word *died*, and even the word *death*, used so frequently about friends, relatives and even a husband, a word that she previously felt was clean, to-the-point and brave, is so wrong in this situation; just as it was about her beautiful daughter Plum) in some sort of temporary way, but now she doesn't; now she's just an old woman doddering about on her own, and it's as if she never had a dog. It was two years ago when he . . . Well, anyway, it was not long after that when she began scrapbooking her investments (a strategy taught by that incredibly tall man at that strange seminar she went to in London), which was why she was looking for pictures of clocks, sort of, but never mind that. Beatrix can't possibly hold the thought of what she just did at the same time as thinking, however fleetingly, about Archie. She sips from her drink and gets one of the scrapbooks down from the

shelf. The tall man (what was his name?) had suggested scrapbooks based on sectors: travel and leisure, perhaps, or food and drug retailers. But grandchildren works for Beatrix. Not precisely as they are in real life, but . . .

This is her favourite one, really. In Clem's scrapbook she is not married to ghastly Ollie. Clem is married to Bill Gates, who is not just rich and powerful but surprisingly easy to cut out. This gives Clem a potential budget of billions. What would she do with all that money? Quite clearly, she'd change her life completely. Of course she wouldn't want simply to be Bill Gates's trophy wife. In the scrapbook, Clem has decided to leave her lecturing job in London, get a PhD in Botany and set up her own botanical garden somewhere in the West Country. Her father Augustus, alone again after the sudden death of his young second wife Cecily – from something viral, Beatrix imagines, something old-fashioned and messy like Spanish flu – will pick up his gardening gloves again and become Chief Botanist. Yes, it's based on the Eden Project, and that's what Beatrix has used for her scrapbook, but in her mind it is much more beautiful, and is closed to the public on one day a week when Clem gives tea parties and talks about science and the latest plant research projects. Instead of going off to silly places in JEANS to film palm trees wandering about (which Beatrix doesn't really believe in) Clem spends her days floating around orchid houses in perfect white dresses. She never has periods. Occasionally she gives press conferences in lemon Capri pants. The Capri pants are from Dior, of course. And from about 1982. But that doesn't really matter. Sometimes Beatrix puts things in her scrapbooks simply because she likes them.

Beatrix has a copy of this month's *Vogue* and a pair of scissors and is planning Clem's outfit for the funeral on Thursday. There's a Reiss dress worn by Kate Middleton that would work, although is it too cheap for someone married to Bill Gates? Then again, if it is too cheap for a billionaire, then maybe it's within the range of a relatively well-off grandmother taking her granddaughters to London for shopping and

lunch (Saturday) and art galleries (Sunday). Last time they went to an art gallery Clem made her look at a skull covered with diamonds and a sun made of dead flies. This time Beatrix will choose. Perhaps those botanical illustrations at the V&A. They won't be able to get an outfit in time for the funeral, of course, but that's fine; since Beatrix's scrapbooks exist outside normal conceptualisations of time and space, the outfit can be added much later. And the scrapbooks are to help visualise investments anyway. Not that Reiss is listed on the Stock Exchange, but still. Maybe one day it will be. Beatrix wonders where a busy young woman like Clem – either the imagined version or the real one – might buy a funeral outfit in a hurry. Then she buys some shares in ASOS.

After she has checked her email – nothing from Clem, Augustus or Charlie – and moved on to Bryony's scrapbook – now there's a problem – the Schubert begins again. It's not that Beatrix does not like Schubert. She does like Schubert very much. Sometimes when she's searching for c(l)ocks on the internet she does it with Schubert's String Quintet in C Major playing on the stereo system that Augustus bought her for her ninetieth birthday. Schubert's String Quintet in C Major is, to use a word that Beatrix has learned from the internet, 'dirty'. It is also quite 'rough', the last movement in particular. But she likes to choose when she hears it. Not that the person upstairs ever plays the String Quintet in C. It's always the piano sonatas. Because of the c(l)ocks, Beatrix has missed *You & Yours* on the radio, which is just a lot of old people moaning, really, but can be helpful when she is in the mood for shorting. But she has no intention of also missing *The Archers*. Would the kind of person who thinks it appropriate to listen to Schubert at full-blast at midday also be the kind of person who would remember to switch it off in time for *The Archers*? Perhaps not. Beatrix goes back to her study and Googles 'spying on neighbours'. Around a million hits come up, but most of them are just more pornography.

