

Little Bird



Camilla Way

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Way C.

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Way's first novel was launched to amazing reviews. Her second novel is a story of love, possession and identity, and is as compelling and addictive as her first. It took one second to snatch the child. One silent, unseen moment to pluck her from the world. In a click of a finger, a blink of an eye, she was gone. As if, like a bird, she had just flown away. Kate never speaks about the past, and you would never know at first who she was. But, if you looked closely, you might see how she glances nervously over her shoulder, as if she were being followed. If you paid attention, you might hear how carefully she speaks. And if you were to search, you might find the old newspaper clippings she keeps hidden away: Kidnap Girl "Like Wild animal", The Mysterious Disappearance of "Little Bird". But these are just fragments of a long buried past - another life, another girl. Secrets left unspoken, until now...


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Praise for *The Dead of Summer*

‘A modern day classic in the making’

Dazed & Confused

‘A beautifully written descent into darkness’

Glamour

‘So addictive you’ll devour it in one greedy gulp’

Cosmopolitan

‘Creepy, clever, compelling ... a cross between *The Cement Garden* and *The Long Good Friday*
... absolutely superb’

Arena magazine

‘The tale has all the right ingredients: the pace is compelling, and a clever double twist makes for a satisfying climax. Way writes clearly and evocatively, with a kind of tough lyricism’

Joanne Harris, author of *Chocolat*

‘This compelling psychological thriller is a real hair-raising read thanks to the gritty realistic writing’

She magazine

‘It’s hard to say what’s more impressive: Way’s plot, Anita’s utterly convincing voice or the evocation of the strange, eerie atmosphere. Whatever, it all adds up to something truly exciting – Way has just Got It’

London Paper

Dedication

For Dave

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PART ONE

one

Le Ferté-Macé, Normandy, France, 24 May 1985

It took one second to snatch the child. One silent, unseen moment to pluck her from the world. In a click of a finger, a blink of an eye she was gone. As if, like a bird, she had just flown away.

Georges Preton had seen no strangers in the square that morning, no unfamiliar vehicles in the street outside his shop. He had opened up at eight as usual, smoked a cigarette as he always did. He'd unloaded the first bread from the ovens, arranged his display of pastries, had wiped down the counter then flicked through his paper. At around eight-forty he had seen Thérèse approach from the furthest corner of the square, pushing an old-fashioned pram, and smiling down at her daughter as she walked.

In the white-tiled warmth of his boulangerie Georges had looked out at the morning. A beautiful day: clouds like scattered bread crumbs, the sun round and yellow as a custard tart. Through his window he'd watched Thérèse leave the child sleeping in her pram in the shadow of his canapé. They'd chatted, as they always did, she'd asked for some croissants and then she'd paid and left. An ordinary start to an ordinary day. The bell above his door had jangled as it closed behind her. A minute, that was all. A minute's worth of seconds and a second was all it took.

When Georges Preton, in the days and months and years to come, was to think back to the sound of Thérèse's scream, he would recall, simply, that it had been the sound of every nightmare, every hell. And when he remembered the eyes of Thérèse, as she hurtled back through his door, yanking the empty pram behind her, bashing it against the door frame, holding in her hand the pink, woollen, baby-less blanket limp and useless as a flap of blistered skin, he would remember the moment in which their eyes had met: the awful, mutual understanding; a shared, desolate premonition that no matter how many searches there would be in the days and weeks to come, no matter how many appeals made to the public or the number of policemen assigned to the case, the truth was the child was gone; she was gone and she would never be seen again.

Preton would always know that in that same brief moment, he had witnessed the end to the young woman's life – that in the second it had taken to snatch her child, Thérèse and all she was and might yet still have been had been taken, too.

two

The Mermaid, Dalston, north London, 21 September 2003

A rat's nest of a place. Men lining the walls clasp cigarettes and gulping down pints, their shouted conversations like the barking of dogs. Eyeing the door, eyeing the talent, fingering their mobiles and wraps of cocaine. Into that she walked; Frank saw her above the record he'd just raised, glimpsed her between his two friends' shoulders as they huddled there with him in the DJ booth. A girl walks into a bar.

'Frank? Frankie old son?'

But a girl had walked into the bar and Frank could see or hear or think of nothing else.

'Look lively. Track's about to end.'

Another record on the turntable. Craning his neck so he could watch her between the dancers. There she was, getting a drink from the bar. Thin shoulders, a flash of short yellow hair, turning back into the crowd then vanishing again into the clouds of pale-blue smoke, between the leather jackets, the fake tanned skin, the pints of piss-weak beer, swallowed up by yet another Friday night in London as if she had never been there at all.

He became aware of a swarm of eyes staring reproachfully from the dance floor. He elbowed his friend who looked round at him with a bleary, five-pints smile. 'Take over for a minute,' he said and began fighting his way to the bar, to where she'd stood, this moment in his life soundtracked, after an initial screech of needle on vinyl, by a Gary Glitter track set at the wrong speed. And there she was. There she was, thank fuck.

Small. She'd barely reach his shoulder. Short tufts of bleached hair. Dark eyes, blue and quick. A delicate chin. So slim that he knew that if he were to trace a finger along her spine he would feel every tendon and bone and muscle of her. Knew the touch, already, of her skin.

'Love? What do you want, Love?' The barmaid stuck her bearded chin in Frank's direction and he asked her for three pints. By the cigarette machine she stood amongst the barking crowds as if in an empty room and somewhere, somehow, a glam-rock paedo screamed on too fast. Frank sipped his pint and watched as she was approached by a tall, spiky looking redhead and a chubby brunette. She smiled, then, the girl. A smile that seemed to flood her face with light.

The hiss and thump of the needle in the grooves.

Time to go back. Put another record on. Sort it out, Frank. *Not till she looks at me. Not till she turns round and looks at me.* Tony the Turk with his sick, dwarfy legs steaming towards him, oily hair glistening red, blue, green in the disco lights. This is not what he paid Frank for, no way. Come on Frankie, gotta get going, move it. (*But just ... look at me. Look at me first.*) In mid conversation she half turned her shoulders, this stranger, lifted her chin, scanned the bar, searching for something. Searching for someone. Found him. Found his eyes, lifted her chin. Held him. Held him there, right there, in her gaze. When does love start?

Back at the decks Jim and Eugene, pissed and stoned and deep in inane conversation and fucking useless as they always were had not noticed, were the only people who had not noticed that the evening's musical entertainment was, and had been for some minutes, absent. Frank fought his way through the crowd again, past two kids swapping cash for drugs and a middle-aged woman passed out upon a table, and dropped a Beyoncé track on the turntable. The dance floor refilled instantly. Easily pleased, was the Mermaid's clientele. The night sped on, the place filled out, Frank's records keeping the dance floor rammed and the atmosphere about as good as the atmosphere ever got there. The three girls stayed by the bar meanwhile, a hundred eyes landing on them like rain, the brunette and the redhead porous, thirsty.

As he watched her, the hectic squalor of the Mermaid seemed to recede to a meaningless blur. She was dressed in a simple skirt and T-shirt, unfashionable plimsolls on her feet, her closely

cropped hair a yellow cap. The hard-faced pair next to her, the noise and flashing lights were just a monochrome haze against which she stood out in sharp, vivid relief. And as his gaze traveled over the small triangle of her face, the almost supernaturally large blue eyes, the slender neck, he felt almost as if her were touching her.

It didn't take her friends long to notice Eugene. It rarely took any woman long to notice Eugene. The effect was instant, like kindling under flame and Frank smiled at their sudden animation, the volley of glances that flew past him to where Eugene stood, oblivious and drunk, with Jimmy. For the next hour, Frank played his records, keeping one eye on the girl, the other on the ebb and flow of the pub. The usual Friday-night mess of east-end geezers with their shit coke and their mean-eyed women drinking cheap cocktails, and he wondered what she was doing there, what it meant. After a while he spotted his friends amongst the dancers, Jimmy pogo-ing out of time to the music, bellowing happily at the brunette's chest. Eugene chatting up the redhead, his eyes gleaming with either lust or booze. Frank wondered what had taken them so long.

And there she was, his girl. Stood slightly apart, a half-smile on her lips. And when suddenly she looked up and turned her eyes on him again he knew with a shock of certainty that he would hold that image of her, in the smoky flashing gloom of the Mermaid, glass half raised, the sudden, full, frank, petrol-blue gaze of her eyes on his. He knew he would look back on that image one day many years from now as the night he first saw the girl whose name he didn't yet know.

'How's it going old son?' It was two a.m., the Mermaid almost empty. Frank knelt on the floor packing up his records. He looked up to see Jimmy's flushed face peering down at him.

'Those birds are coming back with us,' he grinned. 'That dark-haired one's a right laugh. Eugene's tucking into the ginge already, lucky bastard. Think you might be stuck with their mate though is the only thing. She don't say fuck all, but as you know,' he winked, 'that usually means they go like a frog in a sock.'

Frank nodded, but continued kneeling for a moment, staring needlessly into his record bag, the realization that he was seconds away from talking to her freezing him to the spot. Finally he hauled his gear onto his shoulder and then reached down again to pick up his headphones. When he straightened, she was standing in front of him.

She smiled. 'I'm Kate,' she said. 'Do you want some help with that?'

The driver who took them home to south-east London turned the volume up on his radio, trying to drown his passengers out with LBC. Kate and Frank sat alone in the back seat of the people carrier, a silent audience to their friends in front who were noisily making their way through a hefty spliff and a bottle of whisky blagged from the bar.

And there they were, as simple as that. He could feel the soft weight of her leg against his, the heat of her shoulder on his arm. She continued to stare straight ahead, the same half-smile fluttering across her mouth, the air between them taut with possibility. Desperately he searched his mind for a topic of conversation but it remained blank. The silence lengthened. Panic shifted queasily in his gut. He was never normally like this with girls. Bit by bit that brief, sweet moment when their eyes had met in the bar receded. Why could he think of *absolutely nothing* to say?

She shifted her weight slightly and now her thigh burned through his jeans. His gaze fell to her hands, folded in her lap. The cab stopped at a light and he looked out at the black and yellow street, fighting the impulse to open the door and throw himself under the wheels of the nearest night bus – anything but this. The light turned green. The car growled and lurched. *Come on, Frank: say something*. She continued to stare ahead, her eyes revealing nothing. *Anything, say anything*. Frank pushed his hands beneath his knees and wondered when it was exactly that he'd turned into such a prick.

The cab sped on across Waterloo Bridge. He cleared his throat as if to speak and she turned to him expectantly, while the words died instantly in his throat. The air between them thickened, the world seemed to hold its breath in anticipation. But the silence lengthened, the tension withered and

at last she looked away. With a sinking heart he watched her gaze out at the floodlit buildings of the South Bank, the fuzzy, neon reflections strewn across the black river like the trails of fireworks. Soon they would be there and his chance would have passed. He was an idiot.

The car approached the Elephant. In no time they were in Deptford.

Too late. Too late.

He called to the driver to stop. Clambered awkwardly through the car, treading on the foot of the redhead who was sprawled across Eugene's lap, and almost falling onto the brunette, her hand on Jimmy's thigh. 'I'll see you later, yeah?' he said. He had bottled it and he couldn't bear to look at her now.

'What you doing?' protested Jimmy. 'Come back to mine!'

Eugene nodded through a cloud of smoke. 'You gotta come back, man. Come and party.'

'I'm just dropping my records off,' he lied soothingly. 'I'll come round after.' He got out of the car, tried to think of how to say goodbye to her, could only manage a brief smile, disappointment clutching at his throat. *Fuck it.* It was only after he'd unloaded his bags and the car had sped away that he turned and saw her standing beneath the fuzzy orange glow of a street lamp.

'I thought I might keep you company,' she said, her voice quiet, precise.

She had the most vivid face he'd ever seen, he thought. No make-up but full, red lips, a patch of pink high on each cheek, her eyes dark blue, speckled black. Dense and quick, like water running over rocks.

'Are we going in, then?' Amused, expectant.

'Oh,' said Frank. 'Yeah. Sorry. It's this one.'

He unlocked his front door and realized by the smell that he'd forgotten to take the bins out again. She followed him along the dark, cramped hallway to the lounge. The overhead bulb had gone, and he crashed around for a few seconds trying to locate the lamp.

He cringed when the light eventually revealed the chaos of his lounge. He hadn't done anything to the house since moving in three years ago apart from install a large sound system. There was a smell of damp, and leaky gas fire. A green, flowered carpet cringed beneath purple wallpaper. The furniture was sparse, had seen better days. But the worse thing, he decided, the very worse thing was that everything – every inch of space: the floor, the table, the sofa, the shelves – was covered in piles of records. Twelve-inch and seven-inch black, shiny orbs, naked or half-dressed in white paper sleeves or peeping out from colourful, cardboard covers. It was like a bizarre kind of record shop that had recently been burgled, he realised. He looked over at Kate, who stood surveying the room from the door.

'Interesting ... décor,' she said, a smile like a bird's wing brushing her lips.

'Yeah,' said Frank. 'Sorry. Bit of a dump. It was my Aunt Joanie's. I inherited it from her a few years back and I never got round to, er –' He rubbed his face and glancing at her, fell silent.

'You've done wonders with the place,' she laughed, and watched as he began picking up records from the floor and the sofa, making space for her to sit.

'You like music.'

He smiled. 'Yeah,' he agreed. 'I like music.' What was he going to do with her now, now that she was here?

'I'm sorry,' she said, after a short silence. 'About your aunt. Were you close?'

Frank shrugged, nodded. 'I suppose we were.' He continued to shift piles of records from one space to the next.

'Come and sit down.' She'd taken her jacket off, and he could see the goose pimples on her thin arms. He could not remember when he had last felt so nervous. And what was it about her voice? It was incredible, he thought, like music. When she stopped talking it was as if that final word hung in the air afterwards like the last note of a song, his ears stretching after it in the silence that followed.

They stared at each other for a moment. 'Coffee,' he said abruptly, and left the room.

In the pitch-black hall on the way to the kitchen, he tripped over another box of records and told it he was sorry. As he made the coffee and crashed through some washing up, his mobile buzzed repeatedly in his back pocket. Jimmy and Eugene, he supposed, and turned it off. His kitchen smelt of bad fridge. From the next room, he heard her put a record on. A Bowie track, *Life On Mars*.

When he returned she was standing by the window. She didn't notice him for a second or two, and he stood, poised in the threshold, looking at her slender neck bent over the record sleeve she held. He wondered what her skin smelt like. She turned to him then, and he felt himself flush with pleasure at her smile, momentarily dazzled. She put down the record and walked towards him.

Carefully, she took the mugs from his hands and put them on the table. She led him to the sofa, gently pulling him until he was sitting next to her. She reached for his face and drew it closer to hers and then grazed his mouth with her lips. Frank scarcely breathed. Next she kissed his brow, his cheek, his eyes, and, finally, his mouth again, her tongue flickering between his lips. Frank put his hand on her back, his long fingers tracing the dips and hollows of her ribs, pulling her closer to him. In the silence they kissed and he felt himself respond with a mad exhilaration as if he'd just stepped off a cliff.

The coffee went cold, the record came to an end. She took his hand and led him into the dark hall, then up the narrow staircase as if she'd been there many times before. In the doorway of his bedroom they stopped to gaze in at the room that like his lounge was strewn with records. Kate moved first. Lightly kicking the Stones from her path she led him to the bed, still holding Frank's hand she stepped neatly over the Kinks. With one arm she swept Aretha Franklin off the duvet, and sitting down next to John Coltrane she pulled Frank towards her. Letting go of his hand, she tugged her T-shirt over her head, and pushing Frank back onto the bed, she kissed him again.

three

Normandy, France, 10 April 1985

Nobody really knew the man who lived in the forest, and the few who were acquainted with him knew him only as 'the mute'. He would arrive in his rusty blue pick-up truck at a store in one of the villages some distance from the Forêt de Breteuil, and the shop owners who served him would be struck by a distant memory of the peculiar weight of his silence. And as they helped him take his provisions to the truck or collected money for his petrol, they would feel sure, suddenly, that they had served him once before, one day long ago.

Their conversation would be met with a pleasant, apologetic smile and the silent man would raise a single, bony finger to his mouth and sadly shake his head. Then he would pull from his pocket a note pad and write down his order, and the shop keeper would be struck by the frank sweetness of his gaze, would watch him drive away, wonder briefly who he was and where he lived, before shrugging and turning back to their day.

The young woman who worked in the charity shop in Argentan, however, had never seen the man before. Wham blared loudly from the radio and she was busy on the phone when the tall, grave stranger with the shy smile and slight stoop handed her the amount she had absent-mindedly rung up on the till. And so, ten years later, when the same man's body had been found in a forest twenty miles away, and when a picture of his face flashed across TV screens around the world, the young woman, whose name was Laure, would not remember that this was the same, silent person who had once bought bags and bags of clothes one afternoon a decade ago, for a toddler, for a child, for a young girl.

four

Forêt de Breteuil, Normandy, 1985

Her old life is soon forgotten, here amongst the trees. She's almost three. At first she babbles the few baby sentences she has learnt, but when the man does not reply, language too, is lost. There are no words in the forest. Hot sun and cool rain and freezing ice come and go and then return again, and her mother's smell and touch and voice, her home, everything is forgotten, the wind takes all that with it as it rushes and bellows and whips between the beeches and oaks, over the river, escaping through the snatching leaves, out, out of the forest, leaving her behind.

The small stone cottage is little bigger than a shack with two small rooms, a leaking roof, a narrow bed on either side of the wide hearth. Dense woodlands surround it, the nearest road eight miles away is only rarely used by passing truckers on their way to somewhere else.

The years pass. In the winter the forest is still and melancholy. The tree trunks rise black and gaunt from the snow like bones, only a few desiccated leaves remain, dead but not fallen. In the winter the cottage is thick with heat from the fire and the smell of stew cooking above the flames. They sit and eat and watch the burning wood, while outside, dense and black, the night sits and waits, sits and waits.

Spring returns and a new softness begins to creep across the shadows. Saplings rise from the barren ground. The trees, slowly at first, begin to sprout their buds. And then the pulse of the forest begins to gather speed, beating louder and stronger until almost all at once the trees are alive with noise and colour. A pale, green light creeps between the trees. The river flows thick with fish and the bracken rustles with deer, hares, squirrels, badgers, boar. The branches stir with birdsong.

When she is five the man makes a fishing rod for the child and teaches her to fish. Side by side they sit on the riverbank, waiting patiently for the tell-tale tug on the end of their lines. He shows her where to look for berries and where the wild garlic grows. She watches, delighted, as effortlessly he splits logs with his axe and builds for her a see-saw. He is stronger and taller than all the trees.

Soon she's entrusted with her own chores and each morning she tends the vegetable patch, checks the animal traps and fetches eggs from the coop, proudly bringing him her spoils. Later, she will watch in unblinking admiration as his quick, agile fingers expertly skin a rabbit, making light work of its glistening pink flesh and transforming the once hopping, furry thing into a hot and tasty meal. At night after they have eaten and she has grown sleepy by the fire, she hugs him tightly before she goes to bed and his beloved woody, smoky smell lingers in her nostrils as she drifts into sleep.

The man has shown the girl how far she's permitted to roam. No further than the river, nor past the very end of the third clearing, behind the cottage where their vegetables grow. She could disobey him. On the rare days that he sets off in his truck and doesn't return until after the sun has set, on these days she could run without him ever finding her. But where to, and why? Instead the hours of his absence are waited out anxiously; no sooner has the rusty blue truck disappeared from view than she begins to listen impatiently for the rumbling splutter of its return. Perched on the narrow front step or with her face pressed against the window pane she strains her ears and eyes for him, her hands clasped tightly to her chest to calm the twisting, gnawing there.

Once, when the man has been gone much longer than usual and the sun has long since set, the little girl stares out with growing dismay at the forest that seems to get blacker and denser with every passing second. At last she decides that he is never coming back for her. Panic-stricken she imagines setting out alone through the trees to look for him but she can no more picture a world beyond the forest than she can imagine a life without the man.

Eventually her anxiety forces her from the cottage and beneath the cold, silent moon she paces back and forth between the path and the river, insensible to the rain that has begun to soak her clothes and hair. And when finally he appears, struggling towards her through the darkness with a heavy sack

of supplies on his shoulder, her relief is so great that it takes him some time to prise her arms from his legs, to calm her anguished sobs. He picks her up and carries her into the house, rocking her gently on his lap until at last her tears subside and she falls into an uneasy, clinging sleep.

Only once do strangers come. She is eight. The man and the little girl are by the river when voices curl their way through the trees. It's the child who hears them first. She lifts her chin, alert suddenly, her ears straining to identify the strange new sound as words drift towards her like dandelion seeds on a breeze. And all at once something in her remembers; some small part of her stirs: a distant, half-forgotten longing rises inside her. Instinctively she gets up and moves towards the voices, towards something she hadn't even known she'd hungered for till then. And then the man has snatched her up, is running with her towards the cottage, his hand silencing her sharp yelp of shock. Inside the tiny house he wraps a shirt around her mouth, tying it so tightly that the tears choke in her throat. He pushes her beneath the small wooden bed and pulls the blanket down until she's in darkness, shivering on the cold stone floor. And then she hears him leave, the bolt of the door sliding heavily in its lock.

Later, when the fire's burning in the grate and the sky outside is dark, the man sits and holds her to him and wipes away her tears. Whatever lies beyond the forest is to be feared, she's certain of that now. She gazes up at him until the anger and hurt gradually leaves her. After a while, she reaches for his wrist and turns it to its white, fleshy underside. It's something she has done since she was very small, has always been drawn to the soft, white skin there, such a contrast to the rest of him that is so rough and tanned or covered in swirls of hair. She traces her finger along the delicate flesh, where pale blue veins pulse beneath the whiteness. He smiles down at her. All is well again.

Every night the girl lies on her narrow bed and listens to the sound of the man sleeping on the other side of the hearth, his slow steady breath mingling with the 'hee-wiiit' and 'oooo' of the owls as they move outside on silent wings. Each morning she wakes before the first light. Quietly, while the man sleeps, she slips out of the cottage and sits on the step, waiting patiently. As soon as the first light appears the forest seems to stretch and sigh expectantly. Mist hangs heavy between the trees; a warm muskiness rises from the bracken, foxes cease their dissolute shrieking and even the gurgling river seems to pause awhile. And then, at last, it begins.

Each first, tentative note is answered by another and then another. Gradually, the simple calls are replaced by a thousand complex melodies that weave and wind around each other, building layer upon layer until the forest is swollen with sound, the trees are heavy with song, and music falls like rain from the branches of each one. The sun floats higher in the sky bathing each leaf in a soft, pink light. And the forest is transformed by birdsong: it is saturated with music and it's magical, it's hers. The sound grows louder and louder until it feels to the child that the whole world is drenched in melody. But then, finally, suddenly: nothing. Only a silence that is as dramatic as the symphony it has replaced. The child rouses herself and returns, satisfied, to the house and the sleeping man.

At dusk on summer's evenings, the man and the girl sit together on a little bench in front of the cottage. While he smokes and stares thoughtfully at the fading evening light, the child performs for him the music she has learnt. From the loud, mewing 'pee-uuu, pee-uuu' of the buzzard, to the jangling warble of the redstart, to the warm cooing of the cuckoo and the 'chink-chink, chink-chink' of the blackbird, the child is able to mimic each one perfectly. Tika-tika-tika, she sings. Chiiiiiiiiiii-ew. She knows the music of every bird from the whitethroat to the kestrel to the guillemot to the lark. And the man smokes and listens, while he carves his gift to her: a little wooden starling whittled from a fallen branch.

They are happy together, the silent man and the wordless child. The days and months come and go, as the seasons attack, take hold, and then recede. But in the same way that night banishes the sun, and winter crushes summer in its fist, so too does darkness come to the man. It arrives without warning and lasts sometimes days, sometimes weeks, but it seems to her that when it comes it falls with such heavy finality there will never be light again. It is as if the mud from the riverbed has crept

up on him while he slept, as if its thick, black muck has seeped into his ears, his nostrils, through his mouth to choke him on its wretchedness.

At these times, the child can do nothing but watch and wait. When night falls she builds a fire and perches miserably at the man's side while he sits, immobile in his chair, with heavy, brooding eyes. Sometimes she creeps towards him and, lifting his arm, she brings the naked underbelly of his wrist to her cheek, but when he doesn't respond, she lets it drop listlessly to his side and returns to crouch by the fire alone. Some mornings he will not rise from his bed at all but will continue just to lie there, his knees bent almost to his chest, his face staring sightlessly at the wall.

And when finally he returns to her, emerging blinking into the sunlight as if bewildered to find the world exactly as he left it, she will go to him and take his hand and lead him to the river to fish. Later they will tend the vegetables and chickens together, and eat their supper side by side on the little bench beside the cottage while the birds begin again their evening song.

five

The Mermaid, Dalston, north London, 21 September 2003

Into the bar she walks, winding between the bodies like cigarette smoke. She's here to celebrate her last day at the insurance firm where she's temped for the past six months. She's tired, would prefer to go home, but Candice and Carmen have insisted: they want to see her off in style. A Gary Glitter song screams suddenly through the room at high-speed like a rampaging gatecrasher. Kate stands by the cigarette machine and waits.

The Mermaid is packed with the sort of people discouraged from patronizing the bars and restaurants a few miles away on Upper Street where Kate, Carmen and Candice plan to head after they've taken advantage of the Mermaid's 3-for-1 cocktail offer. She has never been here before. It is one of those bars that has tinted windows and CCTV. Disco lights flash encouragingly from the dance floor: red, blue, yellow and green. She looks at the various groups of drinkers: the shaven-headed men in their tan leather jackets and their orange, wrinkly-cleaved women. They each drink and talk in short sharp bursts, all the while scanning the room with restless, flickering eyes. She buys a drink and stands by the cigarette machine, waiting for her friends.

And by the bar a young man stands alone, staring at her, as if she has just called out his name.

Candice and Carmen arrive. They are fond of Kate; girls like them always are. She's the quiet type and therefore impressed, they're sure, by their confidence and bravado. She is unfashionably dressed, so must be envious of their TopShop clothes and long flat hair. She has no man of her own so hangs (bless her) on their tales of flirting and fucking, their one-night stands with rich city boys. She is the blank canvas on which they paint themselves in the most flattering of lights. They will miss her when she's gone and feel vaguely outraged when she doesn't keep in touch.

The hissing and scratching of the grooves.

She notices that the man at the bar has returned to the DJ booth and put another record on. The dance floor refills and, between the swaying bodies, she examines the three men by the decks. The tall, dark-skinned man is very beautiful; his eyes cat-like, his lips full and mournful, his fingers long and graceful. Every so often he pulls a tiny plastic vial from the pocket of his jacket and takes a sniff in a sly, furtive gesture that belies the slow, sleepy sensuousness of his face.

The man next to him is stocky, solid, and has a large, open countenance with smiling eyes. He moves in big, expansive gestures and rarely stops talking, laughs a lot and loudly and is very tactile, slapping his friends on the back or ruffling their hair. He is very sure of himself; very comfortable in his skin. He's the sort of man, she thinks, who has probably changed little since boyhood, except perhaps for an almost imperceptible glimmer of doubt that slides at odd moments behind those keen, laughing eyes.

The third man is the man who had been staring at her by the bar and who is staring at her still. He's dressed in shabby jeans and a pale green sweatshirt. He has an attractive, sensitive face and his slim frame is tall and slightly awkward. She sees that while his friends become increasingly drunk, there is something contained, something infinitely calm about him. She notices that his friends glance at him often, as if to reassure themselves that he is still there, that everything is as it should be. After a while, she finds herself beginning to do the same.

'Fucking hell, Car, have you seen that bloke, there?' Candice clutches Carmen's arm and the two look over at the beautiful mixed-race man. Kate wonders what has taken them so long.

The night speeds up, bodies fill the dance floor, the man in the green sweatshirt upping the tempo with each song. She sees how lovingly he handles his records, how expertly he gauges the dancers' mood. His movements are fluid, sure. In this at least, she sees, he is sure. His two friends approach Kate and her colleagues. The beautiful man tells them his name is Eugene, the stocky, smiling one is Jimmy, and he offers to buy them drinks. Kate hangs back and watches the four of

them dance. She raises her glass to her lips and turns to the DJ booth to meet the third man's soft, brown gaze full on. She holds his eyes for a long time.

In the taxi that takes them to south-east London she sees that his hands are large with bitten nails. She's sorry when he pushes them beneath his knees, out of sight.

Standing in the doorway of his lounge in the tiny Deptford house she watches him across the chaos of the shabby, record-strewn room. As he blunders around shifting piles of vinyl she notices how the words bubble behind his eyes, come briefly to the surface only to be dismissed immediately with an uncertain smile. He clears a space for her on the sofa and she sits.

'You like music,' she says, after a moment or two.

'Yeah,' he shrugs and rubs his face. 'I play any old shit in the Mermaid. As long as they can dance to it they don't give a fuck. But, yeah –' he looks around at the mess of records as if noticing them for the first time and laughs apologetically '– yeah,' he says softly, 'I like music.'

Her arms goose-pimple in the cold room. She watches him, as he hangs there awkwardly before her, trying to think of what to say next. His entire body leans forward, as if desperate for her. She senses that he wants to touch her; that every speck of him longs for that. Abruptly, though, he leaves the room, muttering something about coffee.

She goes to the sound system and picks up a record at random from one of the boxes on the floor. She doesn't look at it as she places it on the turntable and raises the needle: she knows nothing about music. By coincidence, it's a song she recognises. Life on Mars. She freezes, immediately shoved by the familiar tune back to a different time and place. A small, cramped room in a New York apartment. A pink nylon bedspread. A young Vietnamese boy named Bobby who is covered in bruises and who still smells of his last customer's semen, a cheap cassette player that rattles as it plays the words, Is there life on Mars? Is there life on Mars?. Unexpected tears spring to her eyes.

She bends her head over the record sleeve and seconds later turns to see Frank standing in the door, the coffee mugs in his hands. They smile at each other and as she stands there gazing at him, she feels for the first time in a very long while that perhaps she might find peace, here, in this dark, messy house, with this tall, shy stranger, if only for one night. She feels as if she might perhaps sleep and not dream for once the same, old, terrible dream.

six

Forêt de Breteuil, Normandy, 1995

The child grows taller. Her light-brown hair with its strands of red and copper falls almost to her waist. There is a new restlessness within her that was not there before. Now, when the man gets into his truck she will try to jump in too, holding on tightly to the handle until he pulls away. And when he has gone she will roam further than she ever has before, looking for something, for somewhere else, but not quite daring – not yet – to wander too far.

She is almost thirteen. In recent months something has changed between them, a shadow has crept over their contentment. Sometimes, when they sit together in front of the fire at night she will turn and catch him looking at her in a way he never has before and although the moment passes an uneasiness will continue to linger in the air between them for a little while longer, like a slithering in the undergrowth on a dark and silent night.

One evening at the end of summer she returns from the river to find the man sitting by the hearth. A small fire flickers in the grate. She pauses at the threshold of the cottage, aware immediately that something is terribly wrong. Outside in the dusk, the birds have begun their plaintive evening song and she looks longingly behind her to the twilight forest. The man turns and sees her, and motions for her to come.

When she's seated next to him she notices that on his lap is a large wooden box she has never seen before. She wonders where it has been hidden for so long. The man's long silent fingers rest motionless on top of it for a long moment until abruptly and without looking at her he raises the lid and pulls from it a photograph of a young woman. The child cranes forward to see it, her heart skipping with excitement at this sudden, incredible image of another human being. He passes it to her and she takes it eagerly, marvelling over the square of grainy, faded paper, scrutinizing every detail as it lies there in her hands.

The woman is wearing a long green dress and her hair is thick and dark with a heavy fringe. Her smile is shy, secretive; her eyes are lowered to her hands which are clasped neatly together in her lap. The girl takes all this in with wonder until at last she is distracted by the man opening the box for a second time.

Next he pulls out the green dress itself. It's folded carefully, the fabric faded at the creases and it has a faint whiff of age. He hands it to the girl and indicates for her to put it on. But for a while she just sits with the dress in her lap staring down at the material as if hypnotized, her fingers absently, nervously, stroking the buttons at its neck. And though she doesn't raise her eyes she feels the air between the two of them crackle with something she cannot begin to understand. At last she turns to him and sees that he is unnaturally still: he doesn't tremble, doesn't breathe, doesn't drop his gaze from hers.

Obediently, she stands and pulls the garment over her head, smoothing it down over her T-shirt and shorts, hoping that the gnawing, twisting feeling beneath her ribs might disappear if she pleases him and does as he asks. But once the dress is on (the sleeves too long, the hem tumbling over her toes) and she is standing before him, her cheeks burning with something she has never felt before, she sees an expression of such pain flood his face that involuntary she gives a little cry and takes a step towards him. Just as she is about to reach for him however she falters and, confused, withdraws and takes her seat again.

A long moment passes before he gets to his feet once more and fetches the large workman scissors from his tool kit. Before she can understand what is happening he has begun to carefully chop at her hair until it matches the woman's in the picture. He sits back down while she cautiously strokes her newly shorn locks. He continues to stare at her for a long time, and then without warning he begins to cry. She has never seen his tears before and the sight horrifies her.

They sit there, the two of them, and the minutes, the hours pass. The man does not take his eyes from her and she, in turn, does not move, can neither abandon him to his pain nor think of how to comfort him. His tears are awful to her. Night falls; the fire dies in the hearth, and still they sit. Finally, when the cottage is completely dark and she can no longer tell where he begins and the night ends, she creeps into her little bed and lies awake, her heart thumping, while the man and the night sits and waits, sits and waits.

The next morning she rises before the sun and slips from the cottage to wait for the birds. But she takes no pleasure in their song today. She remains there for a long time, long after the sun has climbed above the forest. The small carved bird sits as usual in her lap, her thumb moving over the smooth contours of its head in slow, comforting circles.

When at last she ventures back to the cottage the stone floor is streaked in sunshine. A cloud of midges hangs in the doorway. All is still. She notices that the man is stretched out upon the bed. By his side lie the scissors, their large, clumsy blades streaked in red. She creeps closer. His eyes are open, staring at the ceiling. His left arm is wrist-side up and flung almost nonchalantly from his body. There is a deep, long wound that runs the length of his inner forearm, from wrist to elbow, the flesh and the tendons torn with force by the heavy blades. The wound is so deep she can see the bone. The bed is drenched in blood. The man's face is blue-white; he does not breathe.

She backs away to the farthest corner of the room and crouches there, her mouth wide with terror until, finally, she begins to scream. Outside, a flock of birds takes sudden flight and her cry rushes after them. Suddenly she springs from her corner, the little carved bird still clasped tightly in her fist, and she flees. Through miles of dense woodland she runs, further and further, long into the night, and the forest screams on around her.

seven

The New York Times

Monday, 15 August 1995

International News – France, Europe (Reuters)

The Bird Child Of Normandy

A female estimated to be 12 or 13 years old has been found in the Forêt de Breteuil area of Normandy, northern France. It is thought that she is Elodie Brun, who was abducted aged two from the nearby town of Le Ferté-Macé and has been missing since 1985.

Lorry driver Marcel Collet spotted the child lying in a ditch as he was driving along the edge of the 20,000-hectare woodlands at 5am Thursday.

‘I thought at first she was roadkill,’ recalls Collet. ‘When I realised it was a little girl I stopped. She was in a bad way. Her feet and legs were bare and bleeding and she was filthy. She seemed very frightened and would not answer my questions. I thought she must have been thrown from a car. It was very surprising, very upsetting, I didn’t know what to do.’

Collet eventually coaxed the child into his lorry so he could take her to hospital in the nearby town of Evreux. ‘My wife had packed some cheese and ham for me,’ he says. ‘That eventually did the trick.’

After two days the child was transferred to L’Hôpital des Enfants in Rouen. ‘It’s an unusual case,’ admits Doctor Bernard Dumas, chief paediatrician. ‘She has been with us for five days and although she appears to be physically well, she has not yet uttered one word.’

Psychiatrist Doctor Cecile Philipe has been monitoring the child closely. ‘We first assumed that her lack of speech was a reaction to some kind of trauma,’ she explains. ‘But it now appears that the child does not recognise human language at all. Instead she tries to communicate by making bird noises. Her range is quite extraordinary – it seems that she has learnt to mimic many different species. When she arrived she was holding a small, wooden bird and became hysterical when we tried to take it from her.’

Despite her lack of speech, the hospital staff have already become fond of their mysterious charge. ‘She’s a lovely kid,’ says Helene Duchamp, head nurse. ‘She’s enchanting. She can become withdrawn and upset sometimes, but often she’s responsive, even affectionate. The noises she makes are fascinating.’

The staff at the hospital call her ‘Little Bird.’

The police investigation continues. If the child is indeed Elodie Brun, the question of where she has been held for the past ten years – and by whom – remains as yet unanswered.

The Sun

14 September 1995

Kidnap girl ‘like wild animal’

As more SICKENING details of the Elodie Brun case emerge, *The Sun* has learnt that Brun, 12, can only communicate in GRUNTS AND WHISTLES. After 10 years in captivity she is more wild animal than human, experts say. Evil Mathias Bresson, 42, swiped the TRAGIC TOT in 1985 and kept her prisoner in his secret woodland lair. FULL STORY ON PGS 4,5,6,7

Pictured: Deserted foresters’ shack where depraved Bresson trapped Brun for decade.

Science Tomorrow magazine

October 1995

‘Little Bird’ takes flight amid storm of controversy

The extraordinary case of Elodie Brun, the child found in a Normandy forest last month, has taken a new twist that looks set to reignite one of the most fiercely debated issues in cognitive science – how we learn to speak.

The twelve-year-old, nicknamed ‘Little Bird’ due to her astounding ability to mimic birdsong, was abducted in 1985 by Mathias Bresson. A mute since birth, Bresson took the child to a remote hideaway in the heart of the 20,000-hectare Forest de Breteuil, where the two lived for ten years until Bresson’s suicide last month.

Since it emerged that the girl has no knowledge of language, she has been attracting attention from scientists and linguists worldwide. Until now, our knowledge of how the brain acquires language has stemmed largely from theoretical arguments. Experts from Noam Chomsky to Steven Pinker have long debated the extent to which it is innate or learnt and how far is it affected by environment, brain lateralization or other cognitive factors.

No definitive answer has yet been reached because cases of ‘feral’ or ‘isolated’ children – children who have grown up without language – are extremely rare. But, for Elodie Brun, at least, a glimmer of hope has arrived in the shape of Doctor Ingrid Klein, head of cognitive science at New York University. Klein, an acclaimed expert in psycholinguistics and author of three seminal books on the subject, has been granted permission to take Elodie back to her home in Long Island, New York, in what could be one of the most important studies in this field in recent times.

In an exclusive interview, Doctor Klein told *Science Tomorrow*, ‘Speech is fundamental to what makes us human and I believe I will be successful in teaching Elodie to speak as well as you or I. Although she has led an extraordinary life, she is a happy, healthy and bright child with no evidence of having suffered any physical or emotional damage. My work with Elodie with the help of US government funding and with adequate scientific monitoring will, I hope, prove that not only is it possible to rehabilitate such a child but that she will be able eventually to live a normal life and integrate fully with society.’

The decision to move Elodie so far from her homeland and family has been met with controversy in France, however. But as Elodie’s mother is now unable to care for the child herself she has reportedly given the plan her full approval.

‘This is not just a scientific experiment,’ says Klein. ‘I have Elodie’s mother’s support and I am a mother myself. I believe that the best place for Elodie is in a nurturing environment where she can be helped by experts at the top of their field. That place is with me and my team in the US.’

The notion of the ‘wild child’ has captured the public imagination since the legend of Romulus and Remus. The idea of the uncivilised being taught to function normally in society is the stuff of both myth and romance. However, it’s a sad fact that such cases rarely end well. If an isolated, confined or feral child has not learnt to speak during the so-called ‘Critical Period’ outlined by Lenneberg and supported by most neurologists (see box, left) they will never learn to do so. Once rescued, nearly all such children fail to be successfully integrated into society and remain forever institutionalised.

If Klein is successful her findings will not only mean a happy ending for ‘the bird child of Normandy’, but also significantly increase our understanding of how the human brain acquires language, in what could be one of the most important experiments in cognitive science for some time.

eight

Deptford, south-east London, 22 September 2003

When Frank woke with Kate in his bed he watched her sleep for a while and willed the moment to last a little longer. Sunlight shone through dirty windows throwing the shadow of a dead geranium across the sleeping girl's cheek. He dreaded her waking up – the inevitable moment when she opened her eyes and realised where she was and made embarrassed excuses about having to leave, how she never does this sort of thing, how she's actually seeing someone else and then the hurried lies that she'll phone him. The bullshit he usually gave, he realized, and wondered when it was that he'd last cared about a girl.

A crow swooped past the window, cawing noisily. Kate woke with a start, her eyes fixed at once on his. After a second or two she smiled and cupping Frank's face, drew him towards her and kissed him. Relief flooded his veins.

'Tell me,' he asked later, when they were contemplating each other across the tangled sheets. 'Where are you from? You're not from London, are you? Are you American? What were you ...'

She touched his lips to quieten him. 'Later,' she said. 'Another day.' And then she said, 'I have to go.'

'When can I see you again?'

'Soon.'

'Tomorrow?'

It was gone five by the time he walked the twenty-minute journey to his mother's flat. A late-September day when the first cool tendrils of autumn begin to unfurl and creep through the last watery sunlit warmth of the year. The sky was pale and damp, nicotine stained. Kids yelled to each other in the remaining hours of the weekend, lone cars approached then growled on past, cats blinked at him from windowsills. And it felt like his blood sang. Like every smell and sight and sound was new and improved and unbeatable quality and he had never felt so real and certain before, never felt so sure of himself and his place in the world and it was all because of her.

At Chrysanthemum House Frank whistled as he sprang up the eight flights of stairs to his mother's floor. Outside her door he paused on the narrow landing and looked out at the familiar view. Beyond the estate he could see southeast London spread out before him. New Cross, Lewisham, Deptford, Greenwich: a vast grey sea turning and tugging in the twilight, while in the distance the towers of Canary Wharf gazed down upon it all, unmoved.

Directly opposite, Gladioli House and Hyacinth squared up to each other in the failing light. From one lone window a white and red flag of St George fluttered resentfully in the breeze. In the scrubland below a few skunk-dazed kids lounged upon a bench, mumbling to each other from beneath their hoods while a girl dragged her screaming pushchair past a sign that said No Ball Games. Frank turned to unlock the door with his spare key. Next to it, uneven letters scratched into the brickwork said, 'Eugene Rules', and 'Jimmy is a bender'. He grinned as he let himself in.

'Mum?' The familiar bleachy heat of his mother's flat hit him full in the throat. He found her on the sofa, boredom and loneliness draped around her shoulders like a favourite cardigan and he felt his spirits nosedive. If it hadn't been for the fact that she was dressed in different clothes, he would have sworn that she hadn't moved a muscle since he'd last been there two days ago.

'You all right then?' he asked, sinking into the sofa next to her while the TV blared in the stuffy lounge.

She nodded without looking up.

'Been up to much?'

She stabbed the remote at the TV set until David Dickinson loomed orange on the screen. They both knew she didn't need to answer that: she hadn't been outside for almost a decade. She had not

once left this flat for nearly ten years. Restlessly he got up to fiddle with things around the room. On the coffee table, by a pile of Tarot cards, sat a variety of unopened aromatherapy bottles. Along the mantelpiece was a selection of runes gathering dust. The shelves were full of various self-help books ordered from the pages of a Sunday supplement. Frank scanned their spines and knew without having to look that each one would be bookmarked a few chapters in, showing the point where his mother had given up and gone back to the sofa and the telly. He sat back down. 'Any good?' he asked, nodding at the screen.

'Nah. Load of bollocks.'

He sighed. Outside, a train rattled and roared along nearby tracks, a familiar sound from his childhood – the noise of strangers hurtling onward somewhere beneath him, while up here, in this flat, nothing changed and nothing moved. He went to the window and tried to relive the moment when he had kissed Kate goodbye that morning. From his doorstep he had watched her walk the whole length of his street (she wouldn't let him call a cab or even walk her to the station), until all he could see was the yellow cap of her hair disappearing around the corner, and he'd finally closed the door and sat on his sofa for twenty minutes, grinning into space. He smiled again at the memory and went to make some tea.

On the way to the kitchen he stopped at his old bedroom and gazed in at the peeling FHM posters, the queue of plastic dinosaurs on the window sill, the cork board cluttered with pictures of him, Eugene and Jimmy as teenagers, a collection of ancient gig tickets, flyers for all-night raves, line-ups for long-forgotten Glastonburys. Sitting on the single bed he slipped his hand beneath the mattress to pull out an old photograph hidden there. He hadn't looked at it for years, but now he stared at the familiar picture, absentmindedly smoothing out the creases with his finger. A summer's day in some long-forgotten pub garden, his mum and dad clutching drinks and smiling shyly at the camera. He was aged nine or ten, sat between them on a bench eating ice cream. Frank's eyes rested on his father's face. A few weeks later he'd gone out for cigarettes one morning and never come back.

Out of habit, Frank searched the sun-dazzled eyes for clues, but not too intensely, not anymore. The old grief had faded to almost nothing now, just a faint scar, albeit one that flared occasionally at odd perplexing moments, or when he spotted, fleetingly, his father's vanished face in his own. Mentally he sifted through the memories: a smell of tobacco and soap, a croaky laugh, a red tartan shirt, huge hands around him, throwing him into the sky. Memories of memories perhaps, rather than the real thing; he didn't entirely trust them. Since that morning fifteen years ago, his mother had not once mentioned his father to him again. He pushed the photograph back beneath the mattress and went to the kitchen.

Leaving Chrysanthemum House an hour later, Frank felt his mood lighten as he checked the time on his mobile: 6.30 p.m. Twenty-five hours exactly until he saw Kate again. He headed in the direction of the Hope and Anchor where he was due to meet Eugene and Jimmy and smiled as he wondered how they'd got on the night before.

He had met Jimmy within minutes of his first day at Morden Comprehensive. White-faced, Frank had sat gripping his Star Wars pencil case and trying not to make eye contact with any of the other terrified eleven-year-olds in the unfamiliar classroom. He hadn't even noticed the large, stocky boy on his left. Their teacher, Mr Jacobs, had just begun bellowing the register when suddenly the kid had elbowed him in the ribs. 'Oi,' he'd hissed. 'Got any fags?' Frank had turned to see a fat face covered in freckles with two small round eyes staring back at him.

'Nah,' he'd whispered. 'Don't smoke.'

He'd turned his attention back to the front. A moment later the boy had nudged Frank again. 'Do us a favour, mate?' he'd asked. 'Tell the teacher you feel sick and need the bog.'

Frank stared back at him, horrified, and shook his head. 'Nah,' he said. 'No way.'

Immediately, the kid had waved his arm in the air. 'Oi, Sir!' he shouted, pointing at Frank. 'Says he feels sick, Sir. Wants me to take him to the bogs, Sir.' Thirty heads had swivelled in Frank's direction and, mortified, he'd ducked his head.

The teacher peered at him. 'That true?' he'd asked suspiciously. Frank had swallowed hard, and shrugged, while his new classmates looked mockingly back at him. 'All right,' Mr Jacobs had sighed. 'Off you go then. Hurry up.' Jimmy grinned and dragged Frank to his feet.

'Cheers mate, I owe you one,' Jimmy had said, once they'd reached the toilets and he'd fished a crumpled fag out of his pocket. 'I was gasping. Want one?'

Frank glanced anxiously at the door. In five minutes the bell would go and someone would come in. He was going to get caught bunking off on his first day and it wasn't even half-past nine yet. He shook his head, lent against a blue radiator and stared through wired glass to the empty playing fields below. He couldn't even remember his way back to the classroom.

'You all right?'

Frank suddenly realised the boy was peering at him intently.

He'd shrugged. 'Yeh.'

Jimmy finished his cigarette and contemplated him for a few moments, his brows furrowed. Finally the penny had dropped. 'You're not worried about *this* place are you?' he'd asked, amazed.

Frank stared at his shoes and shook his head unconvincingly. 'Nah,' he said. 'Course not.'

Jimmy chucked his fag butt into the urinal and slapped him hard on the back. 'You'll be all right,' he grinned. 'Stick with me, mate. You'll see: this place is going to be a fucking breeze.' He held out his hand and Frank reached for it, doubtfully. 'Jimmy Skinner,' said Jimmy, grasping Frank's hand.

'Frank Auvrey,' said Frank.

Their friendship had been an unlikely one. By the end of that first week it was abundantly clear not only to Frank, but to the other kids and to the teachers too that in the pecking order of Morden Comprehensive, among the bullies and the geeks, the popular and the hated, the invisible and the lunatics, Jimmy would rule: Jimmy would be top dog. He wasn't particularly cool or good-looking, but he possessed such an endearing combination of charm, confidence and wit (not to mention two notorious older brothers in the years above), that he was respected and liked by almost everyone he met.

It was typical of Jimmy's personality that while others might have been surprised by their friendship, it hadn't crossed his mind for a second that it should be any other way. And while everyone else might have assumed that the benefits were all Frank's, they were missing a crucial factor of the partnership: Jimmy needed Frank as much as Frank needed Jimmy. Whereas Frank's fears and insecurities were on an impressively mammoth scale, encompassing as they did: accidental death, other people, nuclear war, unspecified future tragedy (including unemployment and homelessness), being murdered by a burglar while he slept, and his mother's probable, eventual suicide, such things did not feature in Jimmy's somewhat simpler outlook on life. Instead, his secret anxieties were more straightforward, and included such things as spiders, strange-looking food, and ghosts. Thus, Frank could afford to be admirably, reassuringly *laissez-faire* about his friend's more manageable concerns while at the same time basking in the novelty of Jimmy's absolute refusal to take anything much very seriously. Above all, however, the key to their friendship was a simple one: they made each other laugh.

They'd met Eugene a few weeks later. They'd found him hanging by the hood of his jacket from a fence post not long after the last bell had rung one Tuesday afternoon. He had been trussed like a mental patient, his coat arms tied behind his back, his face a red, spitting ball of rage as he'd writhed and wriggled up there on the post, trying in vain to free himself. Jimmy and Frank had watched the kid struggle for a bit while they sucked on blueberry ice poles. Eventually they'd looked at each other, shrugged, and gently lowered him to the ground. The boy had stood before them, hiccuping and sniffing furiously, scrubbing at his eyes and nose with his stretched-out sleeves.

They'd recognised him as the skinny, mixed-race kid who'd joined a different class to theirs at the start of term. He had a staggeringly uncool afro, and huge brown eyes with long lashes like a girl's. There was something a bit pikey about him too – the sort of kid who Had Problems. He wore shit clothes and had an uncared-for look and there was something a bit mad and angry in his eyes, like he'd be a good laugh to wind up. In other words, he was the sort of kid who walked around practically begging to be hung by his hood from a fence post.

'What's your name?' Jimmy had asked eventually.

'Eugene Jones.' Nobody said anything for a bit, and the kid had gazed at his shoes, his eyes filling with tears again. Frank had looked away, embarrassed.

Finally Jimmy had gone over and patted him clumsily on the shoulder. 'All right then,' he'd said. 'Pack it in now.'

And to Frank's surprise, Eugene did.

'State of you,' remarked Jimmy, impressed.

The three boys looked down at Eugene's stretched-out sleeves, the hole in his trouser knee, the skuffs of dirt and blood on his hands and face.

'Yeh,' agreed Eugene. 'This kid called me a coon so I spat in his face. Then all his mates jumped me.'

Jimmy emptied half a bag of Skips into his mouth and thought for a bit. 'Your mum give you grief, will she?' he asked, conversationally.

'Ain't got a mum,' said Eugene. 'Live at Eglington Lodge don't I?'

Oh. Foster kid, then. Probably a trick, thought Frank. Probably got a gang of mates round the corner who're going to jump us any second. Frank wondered when they were going to get a move on. But Jimmy had stood rocking on his heels for a while, considering the situation. 'Come on then,' he'd said at last. 'Might as well come back with us. *My* mum will sort you out.'

The three had trailed out of the gates and just like that, on the walk over to Jimmy's, it had happened, the way friendship does when you're a kid; instantly and irrevocably. Jimmy and Frank were stuck with Eugene now, and he was stuck with them, and an understanding settled over them without them ever really thinking about it; an unspoken acceptance that it was the three of them now. Eugene dried his tears and followed them back to Jimmy's house, back to the first and last real home he'd ever really love.

Frank smiled as he rounded the corner onto the New Cross Road, the Hope and Anchor just visible in the distance. He stopped and found something to listen to on his iPod, then continued on his way.

For Frank too, going round to the Skinner family's pebble-dashed semi after school had been like stepping into a kind of heaven. Jimmy's dad was a taxi driver, and outside their front door the black curves of his hackney cab had gleamed proudly from the kerb, infusing number 11 with a kind of authority and glamour cruelly lacking at Chrysanthemum House. Inside, it was noisy and messy and smelt of gravy. Jimmy and his five brothers and sisters all looked identical, with broad, good-natured faces, the same sandy hair, freckles, and small, keen blue eyes. Into the front room they would all pile, every day after school, all the brothers and the sisters and their assorted friends, squashed onto the three enormous sofas that lined the walls or sprawled out on the tufty orange rug, arguing and yelling and shoving each other out of the way. Jimmy's mum would hand out endless plates of fish fingers and beans, and while he ate Frank would stare adoringly, from the corner of his eye, at Jimmy's dad, immense and silent in his armchair after a hard day's cabbying, his arms enormous and tattooed, his lips pursed and his eyes impenetrable while the telly blared and the gas fire burned.

At 7pm exactly, Jimmy's mum would rouse herself and say, 'Right then, whoever ain't one of mine can bugger off home now.' The various friends and visitors and hangers-on would reluctantly peel themselves from the sofas and drift off into the night, back to wherever they'd come from, to somewhere else they'd much less rather be.

And the same thing would happen every evening. Frank would wait patiently by the front door in his Parka while the hunt began. Because as soon as it got to five to seven Eugene would silently slip from the lounge to loiter somewhere else, hoping that the Skinners would forget all about sending him back to Eglington Lodge. It became a nightly ritual. All the brothers and sisters would tear around the house looking for him until finally he'd be found, wedged behind the kitchen door, or standing in the bath behind the shower curtain, or lying still and silent under Jimmy's bed. Mrs Skinner would be called to haul him out from wherever he was and frogmarch him to the door to make sure he finally went. But then she would always hug him tightly, Jimmy's mum. 'You go straight on home now, love,' she'd say, as she watched Eugene drag his feet down the front path. 'I'll see you tomorrow, OK? You'll come back tomorrow, won't you?' And there'd be something anxious in the way she asked, as if she was afraid of never seeing him again. He'd had that affect on women, Eugene, even then.

When Frank walked into the Anchor and saw Eugene standing alone at the bar he felt a brief and unnerving flash of shock at the disparity between the twelve-year-old kid he'd just been remembering, and the reality of the 25-year-old man he now saw before him. The intervening years had been good to Eugene, physically. The small, messy kid was now over six foot tall, his limbs grown lean and muscular, his face angular and handsome. But there was something about the difference between the two images, something that Frank suddenly realised had been lost from his friend's countenance that, when he reached him at the bar, moved him to grip his hand a little tighter than usual, to hold his shoulder a little longer than was necessary when they greeted each other.

'Easy, man,' Eugene complained. 'Nearly spilt my fucking pint.'

Frank smiled. He saw Jimmy emerge from the gents, still doing up his fly. 'Mr Auvrey, the man himself,' he slurred enthusiastically, already pissed, launching himself at Frank and pulling him to him into a beery, smoky hug. 'All right, sunbeam? How's it going?'

'Not so bad,' Frank laughed, and ordered a new round for the three of them.

Jimmy contemplated his friend while he sipped his pint. 'Fucking happened to you last night then? Eh? Got that little whatsername bird back to yours pretty sharpish didn't yer?' He gave Frank a congratulatory pat on the back and didn't wait for an answer. 'Just goes to fucking show. Always the quiet ones. Bet she went like a good 'un too, didn't she?' He nodded his head sagely. 'Mine was a dead loss. I should have stuck with the mousey one. Mind you, your bird was almost catatonic, weren't she? Thought she was fucking you know, what's the word, deaf and dumb at one point, didn't open her trap once. Those two me and Euge had, oh dear me. Sniffed all our gak, didn't they? Went through the whole fucking lot, so spangled in the end my one was good for nothing. Did my Elvis number for them and everything, fucking passed out, didn't she? Total waste of time.'

He finally noticed that Frank hadn't said anything. 'What happened, then? Any good?'

Frank looked down at his pint, struggled for a few moments to keep his face straight and lasted exactly four seconds. Jimmy gazed back at his friend, taking in his shiny eyes, the wide grin, the way he suddenly seemed taller and surer and better looking. 'Oh dear,' said Jimmy, shaking his head sorrowfully. 'Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.'

PART TWO

nine

L'Hopital des Enfants, Rouen, Normandy, 5 November 1995

In the hushed white room the people come and go. At first fear lies heavy upon her senses, like a thick layer of snow, and she's scarcely aware of the sharp, acrid smell, the bright lights, the repetitive swish and whine of the swing door through which emerge yet more faces and footsteps and hands and eyes that probe and stare, probe and stare. And so she sits on the little, white bed, dressed in crisp, white pyjamas, the small, carved bird gripped tightly in her fist. She sits, motionless and calm but in the depths of her, behind that still, quiet gaze, she has returned to the forest and sees only the leaves, smells only the bracken and the river, hears only the birds that call to each other from the trees.

At night, from somewhere behind the now-still door, shoes squeak upon linoleum, machines beep, urgent trolleys trundle past. And beyond her window, from out of the orange-tinged blackness where the grey buildings loom and sulk across the street, drifts the distant noise of a world she can't even begin to fathom; the sounds of growling, mumbling traffic, of unimaginable lives being lived beneath an unimaginable sky. And when sleep at last comes for her, it takes her on its soft, silent wings, back, back to the forest, where she flies and swoops and soars, to rest once again within its leafy arms.

And yet she has a brave heart, this child that has emerged from the woods like a hatchling from its egg. Slowly, gradually, beneath that thick, freezing fear there begins to stir the first tentative shoots of something else: a strange long-dormant impulse that grows ever more insistent. Gradually, she becomes accustomed to the faces that appear to her each day, and her ears begin to tune into the sounds that they make, a strange but infinitely seductive sound that seems to pierce the fear and confusion like sunlight through leaves.

And then: something else. Like the dragonflies that used to flit across the surface of the river, long-forgotten images begin to land briefly upon her memory: a woman's face, a certain smell, and, stranger still, snatches of a nursery rhyme, words spoken by her and understood; a woman's voice responding to her own. But they are impossible to hold onto for very long; too soon they take flight, disappearing once more into the sky. Nevertheless, some deep, instinctive part of her begins to respond to the voices of these white-coated strangers, to unfurl and reach towards them like a seedling towards the sun.

At first she tries to offer the birdcalls that had once given her such pleasure in the woods. But although the people smile and nod their encouragement at her whistles and her coos, her chirrups and her twitters, she knows that they're not right, are not what's needed now. Sometimes she feels as if a flock of frantic sparrows are trapped inside her chest. In vain she tries to free them, but her throat will not obey her, will only allow, at best, meaningless gurgles and grunts. Her frustration grows until, from out of the strange, dark world that lies beyond her window, into the white, hushed room walks the woman with the pale blue eyes.

ten

Locust Valley, Long Island, New York, 7 January 1996

High Barn is very large and made of wood and glass. It stands alone on a hill and from her bedroom window she can see the garden's well-kept lawns, a winding road, a copse of trees and then in the distance, the quiet roofs of a small town. She remembers little of her journey here. A meal at the hospital, a car ride through dark streets where exhaustion had come from nowhere, filling her eyes and nostrils like mud. She recalls being led through a large, frightening place full of light and people, walls of glass through which she could see monstrous metal birds roaring to the sky. Later she had woken only once, groggy and confused in a small narrow bed, a low drone all around her, a row of closed white shutters, a pale, cold light. And then, oblivion again.

She understands only that she's very far from home, that her old life and everything familiar and loved is far behind her now. This bedroom has sloping ceilings and a pattern of rose buds on the walls. Each night she dreams of the silent man, the stone cottage, the forest. Each morning she wakes in this strange, new bed and waits for the woman to lead her down to breakfast.

The woman is very tall and has yellow-white hair tied tightly back from a face that's long and pointed as a whittled stick. Her pale eyes are rimmed in pink as if perpetually sore and sometimes the girl will catch little glimpses of the skin on her arms, patches of flaky redness. It's this tenderness, this rawness that Elodie at once and will always associate with the woman whose name she understands is Ingrid long before she can say the word.

And from the beginning she understands that Ingrid is all she has now: the one constant amidst the strangeness, the one link to her old life and her only means of navigating this new one. Ingrid's hands are very white, cool and dry to the touch, and in those first few days, the girl, Elodie, clings to those slender fingers as if to a twig dangling from the highest branch.

The house has many rooms filled with soft, elegant furniture very different from the few crude pieces left behind in the cottage. On the gleaming wooden floors lie thick, muted rugs. Slowly, under Ingrid's patient, pink-eyed gaze, the child begins to explore her new surroundings. The shelves full of books, the strange box that fires shockingly into noisy, colourful life at the touch of a button, a large blue bowl filled with dead, perfumed leaves. Each new object she explores tactilely, sniffing and touching until it's known to her. And wherever she goes she takes the little carved bird with her, her fingers always circling its smooth round head or tracing the delicate grooves of its wings.

On the kitchen table where they eat their meals, a large silver eagle stands, its half-raised wings perpetually poised for flight. In the window, a glass mobile throws squares of blue, green and red light upon the floor. There's a framed photograph of a little boy hanging upon the wall. Nothing escapes Elodie's careful examination. Even Ingrid must sit patiently while the child explores her with slow and careful fingertips. Every day, fastened to her blouse or sweater Ingrid wears a brooch. It's in the shape of a cat and Elodie likes to trace its sharp, sparkly edges, to touch the eyes made from clusters of shiny red stones that glint and twinkle in the light. She notices that a few of them have come loose, leaving behind black, sightless craters. She wonders what became of them – those tiny lost specks of red.

At High Barn, meals are eaten from large white plates three times a day at the kitchen table. Elodie and Ingrid sit opposite each other, always in the same chairs, and as the small neat portions are doled out to her, she thinks about the man in the forest, of the steaming rabbit stew they would make together then eat from chipped bowls. Afterwards, she would wash them in the river, returning to find the man smiling, waiting for her to sing to him. She sees again his thick fingers nudging tobacco into flimsy squares of paper while he listens. The pain slams into her. On the long, polished table the reflection of the silver eagle gleams.

One evening when Elodie has been at High Barn for over a week, she follows Ingrid to the kitchen for dinner as usual but stops in her tracks to see a stranger sitting there, a large glass of wine

in front of him, a suitcase by his feet. Ingrid's husband Robert is a thickset, stocky man with curly brown hair only lightly touched with grey. They consider each other for a moment or two and then he raises his eyebrows and smiles, an easy grin that pulls Elodie at once across the room towards him. Ignoring her usual place setting she takes the chair beside him, staring up at him with wide-eyed curiosity, while the man gives a short burst of laughter and Ingrid, her lips pinched into a tight, thin line, slides Elodie's plate across to her.

As Elodie eats she takes in the man's thick wrists, the heavy features of his face, the incongruously small chin. She watches the way he drinks with large rapid gulps, the way he bites at his bread; how when he finishes his meal he drops his cutlery with a clatter, stretches and gives a loud, satisfied sigh. She feels a nip of disappointment when he takes his plate to the sink and then, with a brief word to Ingrid and a smile and a wave to her, takes his suitcase and disappears up the stairs. Left alone Elodie ponders this surprising turn of events. She had thought that only she and Ingrid lived in this large, many roomed house, and is intrigued to discover her mistake.

It's some time before she sees Robert again. Every day he leaves early in the morning, often not returning until after she's in bed. At the weekends he keeps to his study and the only sign of him is the faint rumble of the radio or television seeping from under his door. Often he will disappear with his big suitcase for weeks at a time. And mostly she and Ingrid keep to the top floor of High Barn, in the little room full of mysterious equipment that she will one day refer to as 'the schoolroom'. Sometimes a whole month can pass where she doesn't see Robert at all.

On the rare occasions that the three of them do eat together, Elodie begins to sense something in the air between Ingrid and Robert that troubles her. Although their voices are calm and quiet when they speak, there is nevertheless a strange, shivery tension that hovers in the gaps between their words. Sometimes Elodie will wake in the night and hear angry, raised voices, the slamming of doors. Gradually she begins to sense that the raw tenderness of Ingrid, the sadness she sometimes sees in her is somehow worse when Robert is at home, and that there's a subtle loosening of tension when they hear his car disappearing down the long, gravel drive each morning.

But she has little time to dwell on it. Her new life is too full of new experiences, too overwhelming and all-consuming for Robert to feature very heavily in her thoughts.

'Cat.' 'Sky.' 'House.' 'Tree.' Elodie understands that everything in the world has a corresponding sound, and that everything she and Ingrid do together is with the aim of helping her decipher them. The instinctive hunger that had begun to take root in her at the hospital returns and gathers strength, and it's Ingrid, she understands, who holds the key. Wherever they go, whatever they do, whatever they see, everything is labelled for her. 'Chair.' 'Window.' 'Elodie.' 'Ingrid.' 'Bowl.' A constant stream of words accompanies their daily walks together. 'Car.' 'Tree.' 'House.' 'Man.' 'Cat.' She understands that the games they play in the room next to her bedroom – the picture cards, the puzzles, the books – are all somehow linked to this endeavour. And she sees, too, that Ingrid's determination to teach her is as intense as her own desire to learn.

'Eeeee.' 'Ooooo.' 'Esssss.' 'Tuh.' 'Puh-puh-puh.'. Over and over she tries to mimic the shapes Ingrid makes with her mouth, to produce the same sounds that come from her teacher's throat. Over and over she fails.

At night in her dreams the silent man waves to her from the window of his rusty blue pick-up truck, before slowly driving away, disappearing between the trees. Sometimes she half-wakes in the darkness and believes for a moment that she's back there, in the cottage in the woods. For a moment she hears the sound of the wind in the trees outside, the man's low snores. In her half slumber she smiles and thinks how, in a moment, she will rise and go to listen to the birds' dawn song. And then she wakes and even as the stone walls of the cottage melt away, she's reaching for the little wooden bird, clasping it tightly in her fist as if to squeeze what comfort she can from it.

Occasionally Ingrid will take Elodie with her on her errands to the nearby town. On their first visit to the food store while Ingrid pays at the checkout Elodie slips away to wander alone through

the aisles, stopping now and then to marvel at the neat, colourful rows of boxes and tins. At the fruit counter she picks up a banana, biting into the hard, rubbery skin before throwing it to the floor with a grimace. Next she trails a bunch of grapes across her face, first sniffing and then nibbling at the little purple fruits, rolling her eyes at the sweet explosions on her tongue. She spies an elderly man staring at her, amazed, across the aisle and going to him she circles her arms around his waist and rests her head upon his belly. Moments later she finds herself being pulled gently away, and while a dozen astonished customers look on, Ingrid leads her quickly out of the store.

Every week Ingrid takes Elodie in the car to the big, red-bricked building in the middle of the city. As they drive she stares out of the window and marvels at what she sees. What shocks her most about this new world is all the people in it. There seem to be as many people as there are blades of grass or stars. Everywhere she looks, there they are: smiling and talking and frowning and laughing, and each of them, somehow, connected, connecting.

Inside, the red-bricked building is exactly like the hospital she left behind in France and sometimes they spend the whole morning there. Often she must lie perfectly still while a white dome glides noiselessly over her head. She notices that the men and women who lead her down the long white corridors to this room and that, and who put her on this bed or that chair, who shine lights in her eyes and stare and point things out to each other on the flickering screens, all share the way in which they behave towards Ingrid. She sees how keenly they listen to her when she speaks, how careful they are to do as she asks. She sees that they are a little afraid of her. And a part of her recognises this nervousness, this fear of displeasing, of disappointing, of provoking that brief, flash of impatience in those pink-rimed eyes.

She has been at High Barn three weeks when Colin and Yaya arrive. Two strangers who walk into the schoolroom next to her bedroom one morning while she and Ingrid are looking at a picture book together. Later, she will understand that they are graduate students, handpicked by Ingrid to assist her in her work, to make the endless reports on her progress over the coming months. But on that morning she knows only that from the moment they arrive, with the smell of the wind on their coats, their arms full of boxes and files and their faces lit with curious, excited smiles, that they bring a sudden warmth and light to High Barn that hadn't been there before.

The man, Colin, is quiet and always busy setting up cameras or writing things down or fiddling with the tape recorder or laying out the games and books and cards, but he smiles at her a lot and pulls faces to make her laugh. It's Yaya she loves the most. Yaya with her soft, tinkling voice like rain on the river, her glowing, dark-brown skin the colour of the earth, her long skirts and the rainbow scarves wrapped around and around her head, her bracelet of little silver bells that jingle when she walks, the warm, natural ease of her. When Elodie makes a mistake Yaya smiles and says, 'Never mind, little one. Never mind.' And even before Elodie knows what these words mean, she understands the kindness of them.

Over the following weeks the four of them settle into a routine. Every day, after breakfast, Elodie watches eagerly from the schoolroom window while Ingrid sets up the equipment for the day. She notices that whatever they do is led, always, by Ingrid, and that Colin and Yaya treat her with the same careful respect as the people in the hospital.

The days pass, and then the weeks, the months. She has got better at mimicking the sounds the others make, of pushing her lips into the correct shapes. She understands that this is a picture of a cat, this is a bed, and that a chair. She understands, but still the words will not come. The sounds she offers are not right, she can tell by the almost imperceptible tightening of Ingrid's lips, the increasing disappointment in her eyes.

Each week, she and Ingrid make the trip to the hospital and every visit there is someone new to meet, some new stranger to be stared at by. Sometimes these strangers come to the house, and watch silently while she plays with Yaya and Colin. She knows that they have come to see her, that they,

like everyone else are waiting for something. Once she tries to sing to them, the old calls and noises from the forest, hoping that they will make them happy, but they are not what's wanted now.

And then, a year after arriving at High Barn, it happens. She is standing by the schoolroom window when she sees Yaya approaching across the lawn below, carrying her big red bag with the tassels and laughing with Colin. Suddenly, something in that moment fuses in Elodie's brain. The image of Yaya and the sound of her name. 'Yaya.' It escapes her mouth before she's even aware what her tongue and lips are doing. 'Yaya.' As effortlessly as a breath.

She turns to Ingrid, who is staring at her open mouthed, the pen that she had been writing with poised in mid-air. 'Yaya,' she says again, pointing through the window to where she stands in the garden below. And seconds later she's in Ingrid's arms, being hugged so tightly it takes her breath away.

From that moment words grow and multiply on her lips like leaves on a vine. It's pure joy to her, this sudden mental unbolting and now that it has begun, she cannot, will not stop. Her hunger for new words is limitless. 'Sky.' 'Chair.' 'Me.' 'Ingrid,' she says. 'Table.' 'House.' 'Balloon.' The four of them work harder still, and even after Yaya and Colin have left for the day she and Ingrid will often continue until supper. As the words multiply and become sentences – 'Elodie go there' – as she begins to master plurals – 'One spoon, two spoons' – and negations – 'No! Don't want that' – and questions – 'Where Colin?' – as her grasp of grammar and syntax becomes ever more accomplished, she begins to let go, a little, of her old life.

Sometimes, alone in her room at night, she will allow herself to wander beneath the forest's ceiling, will linger in the cottage by the fire and smell the embers burning in the hearth. Sometimes she will let herself rest for a while by the man's side, smiling up at his sad, grey eyes. But then she will rouse herself, and push the memories away. More and more often now she will leave the little carved bird behind in her bedroom when she goes to the schoolroom each morning.

Each of Elodie's successes and accomplishments binds her closer to Ingrid. Day by day, a new warmth grows between them. Often she will look up and find herself the focus of that pale-blue gaze and sees a new softness there. Now, when Elodie takes her hand or puts her arms around her, the tiny resistance, the barely perceptible tension she used to sense has gone. Now, Ingrid returns her embraces freely, takes her hand with a brief, reciprocal squeeze.

One morning the two of them take a trip to Oyster Bay. Although they've been there many times before, the sight of the ocean never fails to amaze the child. As soon as they arrive she heads as usual straight for the water, impatiently shedding her shoes and socks as she runs to jump in the shallow waves. Usually Ingrid watches from the beach, calling her in too soon to return to the house to work, or to keep an appointment at the hospital. Today however Elodie looks up in amazement to find her standing next to her in the surf, her shoes and socks dangling from her hand, an unexpectedly shrill laugh escaping from her lips.

And Elodie works hard to keep Ingrid's affection, anxious not to provoke the flashes of displeasure that her mistakes can sometimes bring. At night, when she's woken by the sound of slamming doors or raised voices, she awaits the next day's lessons unhappily, immediately scanning her teacher's face for the familiar, tell-tale swollen eyes and creeping redness on her arms.

One afternoon she comes to the kitchen to fetch a glass of water when she finds Robert sitting at the table eating a sandwich.

'Hey, Elodie,' he says.

'Hello.' Shyly she sidles up to him and watches him eat for a while. One of his hands rests next to his plate and she silently admires how square and large it is. Somehow, Robert's broad shoulders, his scent, the stubble on his chin, the deepness of his voice seems focussed in that one hand lying so innocently upon the table top. On impulse she takes a step closer and rests her own upon it, comparing her pale, slender fingers with his. Quick as a flash he slides his hand out from beneath hers and brings it neatly down on her fingers, trapping them on the table. She giggles and does the same. Quicker and

quicker they take it in turns to pounce upon the other. But, 'You win,' Robert says at last, ending the game with a smile. Abruptly he rises and puts his plate in the sink.

Disappointed, Elodie gazes around the room, anxious to keep him from leaving. At last she spots the picture of the little boy on the wall and carefully reaches up and lifts it down. Robert is still standing with his back to her when she brings it to him and taps him on the arm. 'Picture,' she says.

He turns to her and when he notices the photograph in her hand a look of such sadness falls upon his face that Elodie takes a step backwards in surprise. Wordlessly they stare at each other for a moment, and then, taking it from her hands, Robert crosses the room and gently puts the picture back on the wall.

At that moment, Ingrid comes into the room. 'We're waiting for you, Elodie,' she says, a hint of displeasure in her voice, and obediently, Elodie follows her from the kitchen.

The way the words multiply is mysterious, organic. Her understanding seems to work on a level below her consciousness, where language spreads instinctively like wild fire. But for all the natural ease with which she learns, she cherishes every new word, marvelling and crowing over them when she's alone at night. Each one a hard-won treasure.

The more she learns and the wider her vocabulary grows, the happier she becomes. From the moment she wakes until she goes to bed, she talks. Alone in her room she will name every object she can see, or open her window wide and call out to the trees. 'Come on now, chatter box,' Ingrid will say as she takes her down to breakfast. 'Hurry up.' But Elodie will notice that even as she scolds her, Ingrid's face shines with pride.

For some months Elodie's trips to the hospital have included regular visits to a Doctor Menzies. Unlike the other specialists, Ingrid and Doctor Menzies always greet each other warmly, with a hug and kisses. But these sessions are almost unbearably dull to Elodie. The activities she's made to do seem pointless. Often she'll be told to draw a picture, and will then be asked endless questions about it. Sometimes she'll be asked about her old life in the forest, and Elodie will answer as best she can, all the while staring restlessly out of the window. Other times the doctor will give her dolls to play with, while she watches and makes notes, scratching away with her pen in her notebook. When, at last, the hour finally drags to an end, she's made to sit outside, while Ingrid and the doctor murmur to each other behind the closed door.

It's after one of these sessions that Elodie firsts asks Ingrid about her mother. They are in the midst of reading a story about a family of bears when she interrupts and says, 'Do I have one?'

The anxiety that flashes across her teacher's eyes is brief and almost imperceptible. Ingrid sits down in the chair next to her, and it's a while before she answers. When she does, her voice is very careful. 'You do have a mother, yes, Elodie,' she says. 'But she's very far away and not very well. You will see her soon, when she's feeling a little better.'

Elodie nods, and turns the page. After a pause, Ingrid continues reading. 'Who has been sleeping in my bed?' she says.

Only one strange incident mars the contentment of this time; something confusing that happens one afternoon, shortly before they are about to finish work for the day. Ingrid has been called to the telephone and Colin is busy packing up his movie camera and files of notes when Elodie wanders from her desk to where Yaya sits. Putting her arms around her neck, she idly plays with a strand of black, springy hair that has come loose from the older woman's headscarf, tickling her ear with it until Yaya starts to laugh and pulls Elodie towards her in a hug.

But their laughter comes to an abrupt halt when a sound from the door distracts them and they both turn to see Ingrid staring in at them.

Elodie isn't sure what it is about the expression in Ingrid's eyes, only that both she and Yaya react to it instantly by jumping apart. It's brief, the look she shoots them before quickly turning away, but Elodie is seized by unaccustomed and confusing feelings of guilt. The moment passes. Quietly, Elodie goes back to her own chair and her books and the four of them continue with their work.

But still Ingrid's expression confuses her. Later that night when Elodie is getting ready for bed the little gnawing feeling of doubt returns. There had been something unrecognisable in Ingrid's eyes, a dark and painful thing she couldn't understand. That night, when Ingrid comes to say good night, instead of the brief kiss on her cheek that she usually bestows, Elodie finds herself pulled into a tight embrace. And when Ingrid releases her, the sense of unease lingers.

eleven

Deptford, south-east London, 15 December 2003

Historically, Frank's track record with women wasn't great. At twenty-five, it wasn't that he ever really found it a problem attracting girls – it was the keeping hold of them he always seemed to struggle with. He had a habit of falling hook, line and sinker for a person, putting her so high upon a pedestal that the only inevitable direction they could go after that was down. All would be great for the first few months, but then, out of the blue, entirely without warning, everything he had once found so charming about her would start to sour. Her laugh would begin to grate, in mid conversation she'd say something dumb, he'd notice that when she stayed she'd leave her things all over the bathroom floor. Suddenly, reality would come screaming into focus and the relationship would become instantly and irretrievably intolerable. Pretty rich, he knew: he was hardly catch of the year. But there it was.

When he was ten, something happened to Frank that would stay with him forever. It was a few weeks after his dad had left and his Aunt Joanie had taken him and her spaniel Bongo to Greenwich Park. It was a beautiful day and the place had been full of sunbathing tourists, picnicking families, kids playing football. The dog had been running in circles at their feet as they walked, and Frank remembered thinking how strange it was that the sky was so blue and the air so warm when inside he felt so horribly cold, so horribly grey.

'You're going to have to be a big, brave boy now Frankie,' his aunt was saying as they tramped along. 'The thing is, sometimes grown-ups find life difficult ...' He tried his hardest to block out her voice but suddenly he couldn't bear it any more. Why was everyone talking like his dad wasn't coming back? Why had his mum not gotten out of bed for three weeks? It was disgusting, *stupid* the way they were all talking. He pulled his hand from Joanie's and throwing a stick for Bongo, began to run.

Ignoring his aunt's call he threw the stick further and further, tearing after Bongo up the steep hill, on and on until he'd left the crowds and Joanie far behind. Of course his dad was coming back. Of *course* he was. He ran until he was in a part of the park secluded from the rest, on the heath side, near the deer and the big oak trees. And then he'd seen her. Under a tree twenty yards away was a girl of about seventeen, her legs stretched out before her, a book resting upon her lap. Bongo was sitting next to her, his big stupid tongue lolling out. Both of them watched him as he approached.

'Hello,' she said, when he reached her.

He had opened his mouth to speak, but it seemed he'd forgotten how. The sun was low in the sky behind her and shone through her curls so her face was framed in a flaming halo of golden red. Her eyes were luminous; dragon-fly green. Never, never had he seen anything so beautiful. He could barely breathe, certain that if he even blinked she'd disappear, or he'd wake and find himself back in his bedroom, staring at his collection of dinosaurs. A feeling of perfect calm settled upon him.

She was very slender, across the pale skin of her chest was a faint sprinkling of freckles. Through the thin white cotton of her top he could just make out the swell of her breasts and he felt himself flush red as something unrecognisable began to stir in his underpants. He gazed at her. Everything – the green of her eyes, the golden red of her hair, the blue of the sky – was supernaturally bright. With a little sigh, Bongo had flopped down and rested his head in her lap, and Frank had almost groaned with jealousy when her small, white hand had reached over and stroked the dog's ears.

'Are you lost?' she'd asked.

And even though he wasn't, not really, he had nodded. She'd smiled, and after considering him a while said, 'Don't worry. I'm sure you'll find your way back.'

He felt as if he could stand there looking at her for the rest of his life. The world was perfectly silent, perfectly still. The sun sank lower in the sky. Just at that moment he heard Joanie's voice calling him. 'Frank! Frank!' His name drifted to them like a sound from another world. He held his breath and willed her to go away.

‘Who’s that?’ asked the girl.

‘Auntie Joanie.’

‘Ah.’ She continued gazing at him for a while, and then smiled. ‘Well then, Frank,’ she said, ‘give me a kiss and then you’d better go.’

As if she was an exotic bird that might take flight at any moment, very, very slowly he had knelt down and carefully kissed her cheek.

She smiled. ‘Bye then, Frank. Be good.’

And then he had turned and run towards Joanie’s voice, Bongo racing after him.

‘Did you see her?’ he asked urgently, when he reached his aunt. ‘Did you see her?’

‘Who?’ Joanie had squinted over in the direction he’d run from, scanning the grass. ‘No dear, I don’t see anyone.’

He had turned and raised his hand to shield his eyes from the sun, but Joanie was right: there was nothing there. The girl had vanished.

Since that day he had tried to find her again, had got into the habit of searching for her in crowds, of scanning the faces of every passing woman, but nothing. Sometimes in his dreams he would find himself back there, under the tree the summer he was ten, but just as he was about to kneel down and kiss her, he’d wake. Occasionally, listening to music, he would come close to finding again that sense of beauty – there amongst the notes and melodies and beats – but it was never quite enough: the thing he was searching for was always just out of his reach. His whole life he had been trying to find that perfection again, and in Kate he knew he had found it; he had found her.

At first, their meetings were maddeningly infrequent. Kate was the most evasive person he had ever met. She had no mobile phone, moved from job to job, avoided talking about her home (to which he was never invited). And yet, just when he was about to give up hope of ever seeing her again she would appear at his door or at the record shop where he worked, saying simply, ‘Hello, Frank,’ with that same, breathtaking smile of hers beneath that same, steady gaze.

But still she would offer nothing concrete for him to hold onto, and he was always under the impression she might disappear at any moment. Whenever they parted she would leave no trace of herself. And he had never met anyone who talked so little about themselves – women, in his experience, always liked to talk about themselves. For hours. In contrast, Kate’s silence was like a blank sheet upon which people were invited to draw whatever version of her they wished.

‘Your accent,’ he said, the second time they met. ‘Sometimes you sound American. Did you used to live there?’ Her response – a short, blithe account of a New York childhood, a car crash that had killed her parents, her move to London to live with an aunt – was so brief and delivered with such a lack of detail that he had hardly been able to land on any part of it and, almost without him noticing, she had asked a question about the record they were listening to and he had been talking enthusiastically about it for a full ten minutes before he realised the original subject had been abandoned.

And he didn’t press her. Frank was good with mystery, with a feeling of being always slightly in the dark. He was used to it, knew where he stood with it. Ever since his father had disappeared – seemingly slipping between the gaps in the pavements one day without so much as a backward glance – he had spent much of his life since wondering what the hell had happened. It was how he loved his father now; in the absence of the physical man his affection had become coloured and finally replaced by a vague, persistent bafflement.

Once or twice he would come across Kate lost in thought and it was like glancing through a window at something he shouldn’t see, something private. With her guard down, just for a second, he would see an altogether different girl looming into view behind those dark blue eyes, like something emerging suddenly from behind a tree. It was like catching sight of a fox streaking down a London street at night; an unexpected glimpse of something wild. But the moment would pass, she would sense his presence and alter instantly back into Kate. These moments would provoke in him an almost

unbearable protectiveness, and yet a part of him would be relieved too, frightened of having to deal with something he wasn't sure he was ready for, something that might demand unknown, difficult things from him.

He was falling in love. Despite the strangeness of their relationship at the heart of it lay something true, he was certain. And when, two months after they met, she didn't turn up to meet him as planned his anxiety was unbearable. Two days passed, and then two more, and still she didn't phone or come. Each hour without hearing from her was agony. He was certain that this time she had gone for good. Finally, sick to death of his dark thoughts he had gone to the pub in search of Jimmy and Eugene – anything to take his mind off her.

The Hope and Anchor is a vast Victorian hulk of a boozier that looms malevolently over the New Cross–Old Kent Road junction. Inside its cavernous interior the flock wallpaper is covered in photographs. Yellow, curling Edwardian prints show the neighbourhood lit by gas lamp and patrolled by horse-drawn carriages. Others depict the pub in its sixties heyday: various monochrome gangsters, minor celebrities and glamour girls caught in frozen animation before the same flocked paper. In one, Ronnie and Reggie Kray leer into the camera with dead eyes and mephitic grins. Amongst the photos hang a selection of mysterious brass ornaments interspersed here and there by dead animals in glass cases. The wall above the bar meanwhile is dedicated to the landlord's boxing trophies, celebrating the now chain-smoking, balding cirrhotic despot's vainglorious past.

The three of them had been drinking here since their mid teens and the ancient juke box still played the same selection of tired eighties pop. As Frank walked through the door Madness sang One Step Beyond. The air was thick with cigarette smoke and he squinted in the dimness – thick maroon velvet curtains blocked out the afternoon sun. In the Hope and Anchor, it was always midnight.

He found Jimmy and Eugene playing pool and he fetched himself a drink, glad suddenly, that he didn't have to make conversation. Almost immediately he began to wish he hadn't come, that he'd stayed at home with the curtains drawn and the stereo on full blast. He barely had the energy to lift his pint he was so hacked-off. After a while, Jimmy potted the final ball and came over.

'Not seeing Kate tonight?' he asked after the hellos were over with and he'd sat down.

Frank winced. 'No.'

Jimmy glanced at him questioningly, but taking in Frank's face, merely nodded. Eugene began to shout loudly into his mobile phone.

'How're the savings coming?' asked Jimmy after a brief silence. 'You must be nearly there now.'

Frank had to think for a moment before he realised what Jimmy was talking about. He'd been saving for the past year, trying to get enough money together to go travelling, and it had, until he met Kate, been the subject uppermost in his thoughts. 'Oh,' he said vaguely. 'Yeah ... you know. Still saving.'

Jimmy shot him a puzzled look, but Frank ignored him. How could he possibly explain how he felt? That he was half mad with thoughts of a girl he hardly knew? That nothing mattered at the moment apart from the one desperate hope that he would see her again. He knew exactly what his friends' response would be: *Stop being such a fanny, Auvrey.*

'You want a game?' asked Eugene, nodding over to the pool table.

'Nah, you're all right,' he said, continuing to stare into his pint. Now that he was here, he just couldn't be fucked to talk to them. 'You have another one.' He pretended not to notice the look that passed between them.

He watched them play for a minute or two, before sinking once again into his own thoughts. He felt with Kate as if he'd discovered a whole new country that he was desperate to explore if only he could find where to catch the boat from. How then, when Jimmy asked about his plans to travel could he even contemplate Greece, Turkey, Germany, France? What the fuck did he care about those places – boring, bland, flat compared to Kate – if they were somewhere she was not? He didn't even have a phone number for her. He hadn't seen her for nine days.

‘Fancy a line?’

He suddenly realised that Eugene was talking to him.

‘Might cheer you up a bit.’

‘No. You know I don’t do that shit.’ He must have spoken more sharply than he’d meant, because Eugene was pulling a face.

‘Suit yourself. Jim?’

Frank went to the bar and tried to think up an excuse to leave. When he returned he realised that Jimmy and Eugene were arguing about something and half-heartedly he tried to get the gist.

‘Well, what’s the point?’ Jimmy was saying. ‘It’s Sunday for fuck’s sake. Just chill out for a night – lay off it for a bit.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Grumpily, Eugene got up and moved off in the direction of the gents. ‘Just say no, right? Thanks, Jim. Gotcha.’

When he’d gone, Jimmy turned to Frank and appealed to him. ‘It’s starting to do my head in. Seriously, Frank, I’m worried.’

He shrugged. ‘He’ll be all right. You know what he’s like.’ To be honest, the subject bored him. He’d never been into drugs himself, but everyone and their dog seemed to be coked up at the moment – it was a national sport. No big deal.

Jimmy nodded unhappily. ‘Yeah. It’s just that he’s spending all his time with those wankers down the Feathers. Andy Mitchel and that. You know the kind of shit they’re into.’

Inwardly, Frank groaned. Not this. Not now. He couldn’t bear the thought of Eugene becoming one of those sad fucks whose lives revolved around the dole office, the pub, and his next fix. In fact the thought was so depressing he refused to allow it as a possibility.

He shrugged non-committedly. ‘He’s always been like that. We’ve had this conversation ever since we were kids. He’s a grown up, Jimmy. It’s not our job to rein him in all the time is it? And to be honest I’ve got enough to worry about other than Eugene’s benders.’

He realised that Jimmy was looking at him strangely. ‘Fair enough,’ he said. A silence fell.

‘Look, Jim,’ Frank said, getting up. ‘Sorry, but I’m feeling a bit gyp. I’m going to head on home.’ Eugene had just re-emerged from the gents and he waved over at him. ‘Have a good night, yeah? I’ll give you a call in the week.’

On the edges of Deptford he passed vast sites of half-built apartment blocks. Bill boards boasting designer living with river views. White towers of little square rooms with the same dimensions and soullessness as the council flat he’d grown up in five minutes down the road, only with Italian-style taps and a £300K price tag. He felt his mood worsen.

And then, turning the corner, his spirits soared as he spied a familiar flash of yellow hair outside his door. She was sitting on his step smiling up at him as he approached. It was all he could do not to shout out with relief: the world sang.

twelve

Long Island, New York, 1997

She is fourteen when she first asks Ingrid about the photograph. They are eating breakfast one morning when her gaze happens to fall upon the image of the little, blond child and she asks, 'Who is that?' vaguely remembering Robert's reaction to it the summer before.

'Eat your breakfast, Elodie,' Ingrid pours more coffee, and looks pointedly at Elodie's bowl of cereal.

'Yes. Who is that?'

'That is my son, Elodie. Our son, Anton. When he was a little boy.'

Elodie continues to spoon Cheerios into her mouth. 'Anton. Where is Anton?'

Ingrid doesn't answer for a moment. In the silence Elodie stretches across the table to trail her fingers along the sharp lines of the silver eagle, its gleaming half-raised wings. She hums a tune she has learnt from a television advertisement for detergent.

Ingrid's voice, when she speaks, is very quiet. 'He lives in England, Elodie, in something called a boarding school.'

'Oh,' says Elodie, mulling this over. 'Why?'

It's the sound of creaking floorboards that alerts them to Robert's presence. In the forest there had been a stagnant pond in which the water had sat dank and green beneath a layer of rotten leaves. Once, she had broken the stillness with the end of a stick and had recoiled in shock when a large, slime-covered toad had suddenly sprung out at her. This is what she thinks of when she sees the look that slithers between Ingrid and Robert at that moment.

Ingrid breaks the silence first. 'Was there something you wanted, Robert?'

A second, and then another, drips icily by, before Robert drops his eyes and turns away. 'No,' he says, quietly. 'Nothing.'

'Go and get dressed, now, Elodie,' Ingrid tells her. 'You have an appointment with Doctor Schultz at nine.'

Later, she will be able to recall this incident vividly, because it happens on the morning that the blood comes, an event that would render every detail of that day unforgettable. Ingrid had already prepared her for her first period. Only a few months before, soon after she had turned fourteen, she had sat Elodie down and carefully explained what would soon be happening to her. She had used unfamiliar words and though Elodie had nodded and said she understood, the subject had fallen from her mind in the time it had taken to turn the TV on again.

She is about to get into the shower when it happens. It's not until she's removed her pyjamas and is about to turn the tap on when she looks down and notices the smears of blood. 'Ingrid!' Her cry is so loud and panic-stricken that she hears her footsteps on the stairs almost immediately.

In the few seconds that it takes Ingrid to grasp the situation, she stands in the doorway, her startled face looking in at Elodie as she shivers, naked on the bath mat. Within moments she has fetched sanitary napkins and clean underwear, turning on the shower and gently pushing Elodie beneath the water. Afterwards, wrapping her in a towel she patiently explains what has happened to her. Soon, Elodie is back in her bedroom, dressed and reassured, a mug of coco in her hands.

But later that evening, alone in bed, something from the incident lingers in her mind, something quite separate from the shock of her first bleeding. In the moment that Ingrid had opened the door and gazed in at her, something had passed between the two of them that had reached Elodie even through her confusion and panic. She had been undressed in front of Ingrid before, but this was the first time that she had been conscious of her nakedness. In the few seconds before Ingrid had grasped the situation, Elodie had become acutely aware of her new, small breasts and the soft down of hair that had recently begun to sprout between her legs. And as she'd stood there, shivering on the bath

mat, she had felt Ingrid's gaze linger on her body for a moment. She wasn't sure what she had seen there, in the other woman's eyes. Like a black crow landing briefly before quickly taking flight again. The moment passed, and almost immediately Ingrid had dropped her gaze and begun to busy herself with helping her.

Soon, Elodie grows accustomed to her monthly bleeding, but the strangeness that passed between them in the bathroom that morning stays with her, and for reasons she cannot even begin to explain to herself, she takes to locking the door now, whenever she undresses.

It's a few months later when Anton arrives. It's winter, Christmas time, and recently Elodie has been woken more frequently by the sound of angry, raised voices and the slamming of doors. One afternoon, not long after Yaya and Colin have left for the day and Elodie is sitting in the schoolroom finishing her lessons, Ingrid leaves her desk and comes to sit beside her.

'Elodie, do you remember I told you about my son, Anton?'

She nods. 'Yes.'

'Well, he's coming to stay with us for a little while.'

'Oh. Is he nice?'

'Elodie. He'll only be here for two weeks, but you will notice certain changes. You will eat your meals up here, that sort of thing. Things will be a bit different for a short time, just while Anton's here. Do you understand?'

'OK.'

The first change is the locked door. Although she's never been allowed to leave the house by herself, she's always had free range of all the rooms. Now, however, the door at the end of the landing which separates her top-floor quarters from the stairs to the rest of the house remains locked. Yaya and Colin are on vacation, and so her days are spent alone with Ingrid.

With each day, Ingrid seems to grow more distracted and unhappy, and Elodie notices that the flaky, raw patches on her arms have begun to flare again, sometimes into angry, red welts. One afternoon she looks up from her books and sees her absently scratching at herself, seemingly unaware of the tiny specks of blood that have begun to appear beneath her nails. Quietly, Elodie gets up from her seat and goes to her, gently taking the slim white hand in her own, while Ingrid looks up, startled, blinking in surprise at what she's done.

But often during the few weeks of Anton's visit, Elodie is left alone. In Ingrid's absence she whiles away the time staring out of the window, trying to catch a glimpse of the stranger who's so mysteriously kept apart from her in the house below. Mostly she watches the little TV set that Ingrid has recently allowed her to have in the corner of the schoolroom. Through endless cop shows and soap operas, romantic comedies and late-night thrillers, Elodie stares unblinking at a world beyond High Barn that she can barely comprehend. Jerry Springer and Oprah Winfrey, *The X-Files* and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, Letterman and Larry Sanders, *Hill Street Blues* and *America's Most Wanted*. With no Ingrid to monitor what she sees, two or three hours will pass without her stirring, and she'll watch an infomercial for skin cleanser with the same open-mouthed incredulity that she'll watch a report from Death Row. There she sits, night after night, while love and death, sex and betrayal, murder and redemption in all their myriad variations are played out before her in a billion pixellated images upon a nine-inch screen.

Later, in bed, beneath the silent darkness, her fingers caress and stroke her new, changing body. And day by day, a nameless hunger grows.

Only twice does she catch a glimpse of Anton during his stay. The first time, she is standing at her bedroom window when Ingrid, Robert and a tall, slim teenage boy emerge from the house onto the drive. The boy has long messy hair that hides most of his face and a tense, tight way of holding himself, his fists clenched by his side. It's strange, watching the three of them without their knowledge; they seem small and far away somehow, like characters in a movie. She sees Ingrid speak to Anton, her pink, anxious eyes fixed nervously on her son's face. And though she can't hear them

she sees that the words that escape the boy's barely open lips in reply make Ingrid flinch as if he'd struck her. She sees, also, the quick flash of enjoyment that momentarily lights up Robert's face, even as he puts a remonstrative hand on Anton's shoulder.

The second time, she spies him standing alone at the very end of the garden, between the two cherry trees. And although he has his back to her, something strikes her about his bearing; the droop in his shoulders, the still, somehow defeated way he remains at the edge of the lawn as if reluctant to return to the house. Silently she wills him to turn, desperate suddenly to see his face. But just at that moment Ingrid returns to the schoolroom with her supper and Elodie obediently takes her seat, instinctively keeping quiet about what she's seen.

It's a few days later that the police come. She's woken in the night by Ingrid and Robert arguing more loudly and more passionately than usual. She is lying there in bed waiting for them to stop when the red and blue lights start flashing across the ceiling and she hears the sound of a car pulling up on the gravel outside. Going to her window she watches as a police officer leads Anton from the back seat up to the house. It's too dark to see clearly but she notices that he puts up no resistance and waits silently next to the policeman while his parents come to the door.

Elodie sits and waits in the dark, unable to hear anything but a low rumble of voices from the kitchen below. When after half an hour the policeman leaves, the shouting starts immediately. Elodie can't make out Anton's voice, only Ingrid's shrill pleading and Robert's exasperated bellow. But at last she hears the front door slam and from her window sees the boy running across the lawn. At the end of the drive he pauses and looks back at the house. For a split second his gaze falls upon her bedroom window and she retreats quickly back into the shadows.

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