

HarperCollins E-Books

ISBN 978-0-00-734635-6

The Rise and Fall of the Wonder Girls



Sarah May

Sarah May

The Rise and Fall of the Wonder Girls

«HarperCollins»

May S.

The Rise and Fall of the Wonder Girls / S. May — «HarperCollins»,

It's hard to keep a secret when the secret just keeps on getting bigger...Four teenage girls - Grace, Vicky, Ruth and Saskia - all at the same school; all with the same secret.October. Burwood. The corridors of Burwood Girls School are once more full of oestrogen; Platform number one at Burwood Station is packed with commuters waiting for delayed trains to London; the gym at Oasis Leisure centre is full of fading tans while leaves fall and pile up on lawns ripe for raking. Just like any other October. Until life gets turned inside out in this affluent South-eastern town when not one but four teenage girls fall pregnant.As the media descends on Burwood with unprecedented ferocity, headlines such as:WHO ARE THE BABIES' FATHERS?DO ALL FOUR BABIES SHARE THE SAME FATHER?GIRLS REVEAL PREGNANCIES WEREN'T ACCIDENTAL...ARE THE BURWOOD GIRLS PART OF A TEENAGE PREGNANCY CULT?...at first seem to corrupt this small, leafy, affluent community until we realise that the corruption was there all along, bubbling just beneath the surface.Before things get better, they're going to get much, much worse. But then, at the end of the day, the last thing anyone in Burwood wants is life to return to normal.

© May S.

© HarperCollins

Содержание

The Rise and Fall of the Wonder Girls	6
Table of Contents	7
four virgins go fruit picking	9
1	10
2	13
3	15
4	17
5	21
suburban satire	24
6	25
7	27
8	28
9	30
10	34
11	37
12	43
We need 2 talk. Tonite. S	44
13	46
14	49
15	52
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	53

The Rise and Fall of the Wonder Girls
Sarah May

HARPER

For Gabriel

Table of Contents

Cover Page
Title Page
Dedication
Four Virgins Go Fruit Picking
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Suburban Satire
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
The Poker Party
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
The Burwood Four
Chapter 38
Chapter 39

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Suburban Satyr](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Peace, Plenty and... Babies](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Praise for Sarah May's novels:](#)

[By the same author](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

four virgins go fruit picking

—summer—

1

Summer was shimmering and at its height as Tom Henderson drove his piebald red Volkswagen out of town with three seventeen-year-old virgins in the back. It was Ruth who—sitting in the middle between Vicky and Saskia—suggested fruit picking.

Tom said he'd drive them.

He had just about enough petrol to get there and back.

The windows were down and there was a Led Zeppelin CD playing that jumped when they went over potholes or when they braked suddenly like Tom was braking now, at a set of red lights. As soon as the car stopped, the 32°C with humidity that had been forecast regained its full weight.

'Jump them,' Vicky Henderson ordered her brother. 'It's, like, B-Movie empty—there's nobody around.'

'The lights are red.' Tom exhaled, uninterested.

'This is fucking unbearable.' Vicky groaned and turned irritably to Saskia, slumped against the opposite door, her face obscured by her hair, which had settled there when the car stopped. 'Why are you wearing jeans? Aren't you like melting?'

Saskia, high, was staring through the open doors of the Baptist Church they'd drawn level with—at an outsize flower display looming white in the shade of the vestibule. She looked down slowly at her denimclad legs and shrugged.

'Yeah—'

The lights changed at last. They left the Baptist Church behind and a hot breeze started blowing through the car again.

There were a lot of churches in Burwood. In fact, they still *built* churches in Burwood. The newest was completed only six months ago—at around the same time as the North Heath housing estate, whose population it had been built to serve. There was a pub next to the church, clad in the same bright sandstone, serving western-style BBQ ribs to the hungry faithful.

'And you're tanned,' Vicky carried on. She hadn't finished with Saskia. 'If I had your legs I wouldn't be putting them in jeans.'

Saskia sighed and continued to stare out the open window, her hair blowing around her face. She was thinking about the south of France where she'd spent most of July; thinking in particular about her father lying drunk and untidy on a poolside sun lounger while she tried to drag a yellow and white striped umbrella over to him so he wouldn't get burnt. That's how she spent most of her time: stopping her father getting burnt—one way or another. At least in France she'd had Ruth for company when Richard Greaves lost consciousness, which he did most afternoons.

She turned her head to look at Ruth, who was sitting beside her, and her eyes caught Tom's in the rear view mirror. Last summer Saskia had been in love with Tom. She kept a darkly detailed diary noting his every movement, gesture and look, and stole things from his bedroom that she never gave back—a ball of elastic bands, a pair of worn sports socks, a Smurf pencil sharpener, a Radio Mercury sticker, and a library copy of a D.H. Lawrence book he'd spilt aftershave over.

This summer she didn't love him any more.

Catching her eye now, in the rear-view mirror, Tom felt bad about the hours his university girlfriend Ali and he spent talking and laughing about Saskia's 'hingeless passion'—a phrase coined by Ali—and the way he'd just handed Saskia up to Ali, who could be cruel.

'How's Ali?' Saskia said suddenly.

'She's in India,' Vicky put in. 'Her parents think Tom and her are too close.'

'And what does Tom think?' Ruth asked suddenly—loudly, out of shyness.

'Tom doesn't think.'

'Shut up, Vick—'

Ruth kept her eyes on Tom—taking in his thighs, throat and wrists—and wondered what it would be like to sleep with him as the red Volkswagen left behind the retail parks where the good people of Burwood bought pet food and hot tubs, hitting a leggy stretch of road lined by garages, off licences, discount bedding stores, pubs that welcomed families and sold salad in kegs, Indian restaurants—one called Curry Nights had been made infamous a couple of years ago when an Alsatian carcass was found in one of their bins.

‘I went to school there,’ Ruth said, as they passed the primary school where she’d had her hand driven onto a rusty nail by another girl and had to go to hospital to get a tetanus jab.

Nobody said anything.

It was too hot to worry about somebody else’s memories.

They passed the St Catherine’s Hospice and the flat above it rumoured to house Burwood’s only prostitute. Local press refused to comment on the prostitute or the Alsatian carcass in the bins at Curry Nights, and it was the *News of the World*, in the end, that covered both stories. Burwood also appeared—that same week—in the *Financial Times*, featuring as one of the ten towns in the UK where men lived longest.

Burwood ranked number four.

Burwood was a good place to live.

From the air, the town looked like an untidy circle surrounded by a band of green separating it from London to the north and Brighton to the south. In other words, it had a lot more going for it than most places viewed via satellite.

Burwood long pre-dated its Domesday Book entry, and was now flourishing and thriving its way into the twenty-first century with an all-pervasive aura of stability and permanence that breathed promise to the world-weary. So saying, Burwood had its fair share of anarchists—the most notable being a poet who, two hundred years ago, published political tracts and distributed them from a hot-air balloon, unsettling everyone before eloping with an underage girl called Harriet. In cases such as this, however, it was town council policy to disinherit—no matter how famous their anarchic sons and daughters later became.

The Hendersons, hugely influenced by the *Financial Times* article—and the fact that the town’s historic centre already felt familiar, having been used by the BBC on a regular basis to film Jane Austen adaptations—were by no means the first immigrants, and wouldn’t be the last.

Burwood ended now abruptly on its eastern side, which was also its most picturesque. They’d driven through all the rings of the town’s life from its premedieval centre to the helplessly conservative, sprawling suburban villas built with optimism after the Second World War, and with disproportionately small windows behind which a whole generation came to terms with the horrors of war and the legacy of those horrors... perennial-filled borders, trimmed lawns and terrifying stretches of leisure time spent struggling to define the word ‘peace’. They’d passed through the industrial estates and were, finally, beyond the reaches of the executive satellite estates—by products of the post-1986 housing boom. Burwood’s last house was an old brick cottage shared by two octogenarian brothers who had been Conscientious Objectors in the last world war.

The red Volkswagen turned off the main road into open country, following a lane that sank beneath banks of hedge and forest where there was sudden shade and the sound of water before rising again in order to cross fading green and yellow fields. The forest was beech and ash and had once stretched from coast to coast, covering the land Burwood now stood on. Deepest darkest forest had been replaced by deepest darkest suburbia, where modern man and woman sought refuge, as their forest-dwelling ancestors had sought it in the forest. Like them, they mistook the shade-dappled depths for a place of innocence where a simple life could be led.

‘I hope they have raspberries,’ Ruth said, to nobody in particular. ‘I told mum I’d get raspberries.’

Vicky stared at her. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like to have a conversation about anything—let alone raspberries—with her mother, Sylvia Henderson.

‘Isn’t Grace working at Martha’s Farm?’ Saskia said after a while, trying to pin her hair back with her arm.

Ruth watched Tom suck in his left cheek and move his hands on the steering wheel.

‘I thought she already had a job?’ Vicky said, irritated that she didn’t already know this.

‘Yeah, but this is like a holiday job.’ Saskia let go of her hair again.

‘Why didn’t she say?’

‘Probably thought you already knew.’

‘Well, I didn’t.’ Vicky turned to Ruth. ‘Did you know?’

Ruth shrugged. ‘I kind of lose count of the number of jobs Grace does.’

‘Yeah, well, some people’s parents can’t actually afford to send their children to university so they have to pay for it themselves,’ Tom said from the front.

Ruth, upset, looked away.

‘There are loads of grants and stuff for people like Grace,’ Vicky said, defensive. Upsetting Ruth was her territory.

‘People like Grace?’ Tom cut in, angry.

Ignoring this, Vicky carried on, ‘In fact, she’ll probably be better off by the time she finishes—not like the rest of us, up to our eyes in student-loan debt. Cambridge are offering her a scholarship anyway, so what’s the big deal.’

Saskia said slowly, ‘I thought she was going for that NASA one at Yale?’

Vicky, no longer interested, didn’t respond.

Grace was one of their group, and Vicky was tyrannical about having up-to-date information on all members. She considered the group—*her* group—a profound social achievement given that she’d only started at Burwood Girls’ in Year 11. First she successfully penetrated an already-established group, then she amputated the excess, re-forming a splinter cell comprising core members only: Grace Cummings, Saskia Greaves and Ruth Dent. She put her rapid rise down to not only getting them into Tom’s university parties but even some London ones as well. Who else on all Satan’s earth could have got them into Lilly Allen’s brother’s eighteenth for fuck’s sake?

They turned right off the lane into Martha’s Fruit Farm and tried looking for a space in the field full of cars. In the end they parked at the top near a ridge of trees where there was a sandpit.

Ruth, worried, said, ‘D’you think they’ll have raspberries?’

‘Will you shut up about raspberries.’ Vicky pulled her skirt off the back of her legs, which were covered in an imprint of the car’s upholstery.

‘I only mentioned them once.’

‘You mentioned them like about a hundred times,’ Vicky said, moving off between the rows of parked cars, the air heavy with the scent of fruit on the turn.

They straggled slowly down the field whose early summer ruts had now been baked hard by the sun. By the time they got to the weighing-in hut at the bottom, all three girls had linked arms, their heads resting on each other’s shoulders.

2

Tom stayed in the car with the door open and lit another joint, sucking on it slowly while watching a black Labrador play in the sandpit just beyond the bonnet of the car. Through the windscreen he could see Burwood in the distance, but there was no resonance for him in the view. The Hendersons moved down from London two years ago and he'd only lived there a couple of months before leaving for university. He'd felt more at home in Bolivia than he ever had in Burwood.

An elderly couple—fruit picking veterans—returned to their car, a purple Nissan parked next to Tom's. Their determined faces were sweating under matching white sun hats with 'Crete' embroidered above the visors, and as they lined up their baskets of fruit on the roof of the car, he saw that they were still wearing the surgical gloves they'd bought with them to pick fruit in, now stained purple.

He finished the joint then got out of the car and, without bothering to lock it, followed the others down the field.

There was a crowd of people round the weighing-in shed and a woman inside was barking at them to get into a queue, but people were too hot and laden with fruit to comply.

As the crowd shuffled forward, broke up then reformed, Tom caught sight, briefly, of his old black and silver racing bike leaning against the side of the shed; the one he told his mum he'd sold to Grace last summer—only he never sold it to her, he gave it to her.

He remembered clearly riding it round to Grace's house and Grace answering the door in a dressing gown, holding one of her sister Dixie's dolls. Up until then he'd never realised Burwood even had a council estate. He'd rung the doorbell and while he waited, staring at a patch of wall next to the drainpipe where a lump of pebble-dash had fallen off, he'd decided that he was going to give Grace the bike.

Grace, in her dressing gown, stared at him.

He prompted her. 'The bike?'

She carried on staring at him before switching her gaze to the bike. 'The bike—shit. Sorry. Just a minute.' She disappeared back indoors.

Too late, Tom realised that she was getting the forty pounds they'd talked about on the phone the day before.

'Wait—' he called out, wanting to follow her, but just then there was the slap of wet feet on pavement and Grace's nine-year-old sister, Dixie, appeared round the side of the house leaving a trail of wet footprints behind her. She stood on the corner in a pink polka dot bikini with bows at the side, water glistening on her legs, watching him through a pair of goggles and wearing a smile that was missing two bottom teeth.

They took to each other immediately.

'Who are you?'

'I'm Tom.' He held out his hand and Dixie shook it wetly in hers.

'Yeah, but who *are* you?'

'A friend of your sister's.'

'Like a boyfriend?'

'No, just a friend.'

Dixie contemplated him. 'I never saw you before.' She paused. 'I'm having a sleepover tonight.'

Before Tom had time to respond to this, Grace reappeared at the front door and Dixie ran off up the side passage and into the back garden again.

'Forty pounds, right?' Grace handed him an envelope.

'Leave it,' Tom said, embarrassed.

'You said forty pounds—on the phone.'

'Yeah, but—'

‘What?’

Grace looked angry.

‘It doesn’t matter—about the money. I mean, just take the bike. I changed my mind about the money.’

‘What made you change your mind?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You said forty pounds. On the phone.’

‘Yeah, but—’

This had gone on and the sun had moved round the side of the house until it was filling the front garden.

Now Tom saw her, standing over by the ice cream van with her back to him. While he was watching, she stood up straight, laughing. She looked like she was having a good day. He should go before she saw him.

‘Hey, Tom.’ She’d seen him—was smiling straight at him.

‘Hey.’

She came across the grass in her flip-flops and a bottle-green T-shirt that said ‘Martha’s Crew’. Grace didn’t look like she belonged to anyone’s crew—let alone Martha’s. Tom watched the boy in the ice cream van watching Grace.

‘What brings you out here?’

He hadn’t seen her for a year, and this wasn’t the kind of thing—a year ago—she would have said.

‘I’m my sister’s chauffeur.’

‘She’s here?’

‘Somewhere.’

‘Anyone else?’

‘Saskia—Ruth.’

‘I didn’t know they were back from France.’

Tom didn’t say anything.

She squinted across at the fields laid out below the weighing-in hut, trying to pick out her friends.

He saw that her fingertips were stained purple.

‘You’re not picking anything?’ she said.

‘No—’

For some reason this made her smile.

‘How’s the bike doing?’ he asked

‘The bike’s doing fine. Only one puncture so far.’

‘You should change the tyres to Kevlar—they won’t ever puncture.’

‘Okay—’

Was she laughing at him?

‘They sound expensive though—and I still owe you for the bike.’

‘Fuck that,’ he said, genuinely angry.

She was about to say something when a voice started yelling, ‘Grace—Grace,’ from inside the hut.

‘Shit—I better get back.’ She disappeared into the crowd round the weighing-in hut and didn’t look back.

Tom and the boy in the ice cream van were left staring at each other. The afternoon felt suddenly pointless—as though it had been going on for too long.

3

Vicky followed Ruth to the far end of the raspberry field, whose boundary was marked by a narrow strip of woodland unable to cast any shade because the sun was too high in the sky and falling on it at the wrong angle. The earth was hard and tufted and, with a serious headache beginning due to the day's dope diet, Vicky kept losing her footing. She picked the biggest raspberry she could find, put it in her mouth then spat it out again.

Ruth stopped picking. 'You okay?'

'Tastes funny.' Vicky wiped her mouth. 'Do they taste funny to you?'

Ruth took one of the raspberries out of her punnet. 'Tastes fine. Maybe you just got a bad one.'

They carried on picking, the heat close around them.

'Where did Sas go?'

'Redcurrants.'

Vicky, bored, had stopped picking and was now just trailing after Ruth. 'Redcurrants?'

'Said she'd never picked redcurrants before.'

'What d'you do with redcurrants?'

Ruth continued to make her way up the row, too intent on picking to respond to this.

Behind her, Vicky said, 'Matt was meant to phone at twelve today. He's been on holiday and he said he'd phone when his plane landed, but he never did. No message—nothing. I'm meant to be going to a party with him this weekend.'

She looked up instinctively as a plane went overhead, nosing down towards Gatwick. 'I can't believe you and Sas didn't meet anybody in France—like, anybody at all.'

Ruth had stopped picking and was staring at something in the distance, her shoulders so taut with concentration that Vicky had one of her brief, habitual anxiety attacks that their GP at Park Surgery refused to prescribe her Diazepam for.

It was the plane—the plane that flew over just then; it had crashed. She just knew it. Any minute now there'd be smoke and debris and the field would be full of soft, torn, bloodied body parts. Any minute now the silence would end and she'd see freshly twisted wreckage and freshly dead people. What if Matt's flight had been delayed? What if Matt was on that plane?

The two blues she took out of her pocket now and put into her mouth had, until recently, belonged to her mother, Sylvia, whose anxiety attacks their GP at Park Surgery had been happy to prescribe Diazepam for.

She'd been taking Sylvia's prescription Diazepam since she was fifteen—when the burglary nightmares first started. It was the same every night—she'd wake up around two, convinced she heard someone crossing the gravel drive, walking up the side of the house and letting themselves in through the patio doors. She'd lie in bed flushed with fear and barely breathing, listening to the intruder's footsteps on the stairs, and waiting for her bedroom door handle to start turning. That's when she'd take the Valium, put on her i-pod, and curl up under the duvet—whatever the weather.

'What is it?' she tried not to scream.

Ruth, distracted, said, 'Does that look like Mr Sutton to you?'

'Mr Sutton?' Vicky's eyes grazed the fields spread out around them, still looking for smoke, still sniffing the air for blood.

'Over there.' Ruth pointed.

Vicky felt herself start to calm down. The sky was clear—no smoke. The plane that had gone overhead had landed safely.

'I'm sure that's him.'

Vicky looked. Ruth was right. In the next field was their Art teacher, Mr Sutton—whose home address they'd taken from confidential staff files so they could send an anonymous Valentine's card.

Mr Sutton was the youngest male member of staff at Burwood Girls', and taught art under an overwhelming barrage of oestrogen that manifested itself in the various totemic gifts he was recipient of—from an envelope full of pubic hair to a photograph of a pair of bare breasts.

'What's he doing here?'

'Picking fruit—like everybody else.'

'Shit—look at me.'

'He's two fields away, Vick.'

'Yeah, but *we* can see *him*. So are we going over—saying hello?'

Ruth was blushing. Confident—and often caustically funny—with family and close friends, she was pathologically shy with most other people.

'Come on—you know you've got a thing about him.'

'I know, but—'

'And we haven't seen him for ages.'

Ruth shrugged and turned away. 'Wait—he's with someone.'

'Who?'

'He's talking to someone.'

As Vicky continued to stare, the gradient of the field, which sloped gently downwards, seemed suddenly much steeper. The next minute she grabbed hold instinctively of one of the raspberry canes as the entire field lurched out from under her feet.

She'd never had such an intense or sudden attack of vertigo before.

'Vick?' Ruth said, turning to her, worried. 'What happened? You looked like you were about to black out.'

'Vertigo—I just took some Valium.'

'What colour?'

'Blue.'

'How many?'

'Two—like, 20mg or something. Don't look at me like that.' Vicky broke off. 'It's Saskia!'

'What?'

'The person Mr Sutton's talking to—it's Saskia.'

4

Still high, Saskia drifted down between the rows of netted redcurrant bushes able to feel every crevice and ridge beneath the thin soles of the sandals she'd bought at a market in the south of France. Mel and Tony were pre-divorce friends of her father's. Richard Greaves had known Mel since university and the Greaves stayed in their villa at St Julien most Julys. During the first week, before Ruth arrived, Mel drove Saskia to the local market—a girls only trip—and for a whole two hours she'd tried to be Saskia's mother, then she got bored with the idea and moved onto something else. Before she got bored she bought Saskia the sandals she was now wearing—had worn all summer, in fact—and a bracelet made of bottle tops that African immigrants were selling on blankets, which Ruth had admired when they picked her up from the airport in Montpellier. Saskia had been so pleased to see her she'd almost given it to her before changing her mind and deciding to keep it.

A plane passed overhead. She watched its shadow move solidly over the ground and redcurrant bushes, her eyes following it as it ran over the rows—until she saw Mr Sutton. *Was* that Mr Sutton from school—picking redcurrants just like her, approximately five rows away? She wasn't convinced it was. Saskia believed in UFOs; she believed in ghosts, parallel universes and monsters like the Yeti that evolution had stranded, and sometimes she got confused and saw things out of the corner of her eye that never quite materialised when she really concentrated.

No—Mr Sutton was definitely there. He was waving at her.

Saskia didn't wave back, she just carried on staring.

He hesitated then made his way over to her row.

'Hey,' he said, pleased to see her. Saskia was one of a handful of pupils going on to study art at degree level, and he kept this coterie of girls close.

Saskia finally emerged from what her grandmother used to refer to as one of her 'brown studies'—lapses of attention that had induced her mother to have her tested for epilepsy as a child—and smiled back at Mr Sutton.

He was wearing shorts and a yellow polo shirt. The effect was stodgy and preppy and just not him at all. Her dad wore polo shirts; they'd been bought for him by his ex-wife, who was also Saskia's mother, because he never knew what to wear when he wasn't wearing a suit. Now her mother was dressing a different man, and although her dad made an effort—post-divorce—not to wear the polo shirts, he also made the mistake of not throwing them away. He came across them when he was looking for something to decorate in and after that they once more became fixtures in his casual wardrobe even though they were covered in paint stains and smelt of white spirit.

For this reason, although she didn't know it, Saskia had always associated polo shirts with helplessness, and seeing Mr Sutton wearing a yellow one confused her because he'd never struck her as helpless before. It was like somebody had got to him before he could get to himself, and it made her feel sorry for him.

He must have read something of what she was thinking in her eyes then because he paused, suddenly awkward. 'What are you picking?'

'Redcurrants.'

He held up his punnet. 'Me too.'

She nodded, gesturing to the redcurrant field they were standing in the middle of. 'Yeah—'

'I can't believe I just said that.'

She nodded again. 'Yeah—'

He laughed. 'So—how's it going?'

'Fine. How's your summer been?'

He had no idea how his summer had been. 'I went to South Africa.'

She didn't ask him who he went with—if anybody. 'How was it?'

‘I can’t remember.’

Saskia laughed.

He twisted his neck like it might be stiff. ‘What about you? What have you been up to all summer?’

‘I went to the south of France with my dad.’

‘Get any painting done?’

She shook her head. ‘I had some ideas—made a few sketches.’

‘I’d like to see them.’

She nodded, aware that she had no intention of showing him the sketches she made after seeing Tony and Mel in the kitchen that night when she’d got up for some water. ‘We were staying with some friends of dad’s,’ she blurted out, trying to distract herself from the memory of Mel bent over the marble kitchen surface, her breasts pushed into a pile, her hands gripping the edge of it, and Tony behind her. It had looked fierce and ugly with about as much choreography involved as taking a crap, and now she was scared of the whole thing. ‘They had a pool and stuff.’

‘Sounds great.’

‘Yeah—the first couple of weeks were, then my dad and his friend Tony sort of remembered that they never really got on and that my dad’s always fancied his wife.’ Saskia heard herself saying it and couldn’t believe she was saying it, but couldn’t stop herself. ‘And Tony, who’s been holed up in paradise for about two years too long, was like drunk the whole time and then dad got drunk and then they started rowing.’ She paused for breath, horrified. She hadn’t told anybody this—not even Ruth, who’d actually been there—so why was she telling Mr Sutton in the middle of a field of redcurrants?

He was staring at her, about to say something when suddenly there was a woman standing next to him wearing black wraparound sunglasses that made her look like a beetle. She’d appeared from nowhere, had her hand on his arm, and was smiling at them both.

Behind the glasses, Saskia recognised Ms Webster who’d taught her Physics in Year 9. For a moment she wondered what on earth Ms Webster—who also coached the Burwood Girls’ Netball A Team—was doing at Martha’s Farm as well. Then she realised: Ms Webster was here because Mr Sutton was here; Ms Webster was here *with* Mr Sutton.

He’d been to South Africa with Ms Webster. They’d lain on the beach together, swam in the sea together, and had sex in a hotel—and other places—together. Now the yellow polo shirt—Ms Webster was wearing the same one—made sense.

‘Typical,’ Ms Webster said loudly, triumphantly, holding a basket full of redcurrants up in the air.

Saskia stared at her, her mouth hanging open awkwardly.

‘So much for his contribution to jam making.’

Saskia didn’t know what to say—she’d never had a jam-making conversation before.

‘I just saw Grace as well,’ Ms Webster carried on.

‘Grace works here,’ Saskia said without thinking. It sounded mean—when all she’d meant to do was say something because she couldn’t carry on standing there with her mouth hanging silently open, feeling like she’d just got drunk in high heels.

‘Well—we’d better be going,’ Ms Webster said, her hand still on Mr Sutton’s arm, turning him round, steering him away. ‘Enjoy the rest of your holiday.’

‘I will.’ Saskia was jabbing the front of her sandal repetitively against a ridge of earth and now the crust cracked and crumbled.

Mr Sutton turned back towards her. ‘I’m in and out of school the next couple of weeks—if you’ve got anything you’re working on or want to show me before the beginning of term.’

‘Thanks—’

Another tug on the arm and he was led away again, only to break free a second time.

‘Oh—and I hope that’s not permanent.’

Saskia stared at him. She had no idea what he was talking about.

‘Your neck. The scorpion.’

Her hand went to her neck. ‘No, it’s—no.’

He smiled, paused, then turned and walked away with Ms Webster.

Saskia kept her hand on her neck, covering the temporary tattoo that had come free with one of her music magazines. Her eyes followed Mr Sutton and Ms Webster in their matching polo shirts and South African sun tans all the way to the weighing-in hut.

They were arguing.

By the time Vicky and Ruth reached Saskia, standing inert still in the field of redcurrants, the black Peugeot convertible belonging to Ms Webster had left Martha’s Farm in a loose trail of dust. Neither the driver, Ms Webster, or the passenger, Mr Sutton, looked like they were going home to make jam.

‘Did you speak to him?’ Vicky asked, breathless still from the Valium-induced attack of vertigo.

Saskia nodded vacantly.

‘And?’

‘What?’

‘What did he say?’ Vicky was beginning to lose patience.

Saskia was about to mention his reference to her tattoo when she decided not to. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Sas—’ Vicky insisted.

‘He went to South Africa—on holiday.’

‘South Africa?’

Saskia sighed, her hands dropping to her sides. ‘With Ms Webster.’

‘Webster?’ Vicky screamed, the screams echoing across the fields. ‘No—fucking—way. Are you sure?’

‘She was standing right here in front of me, Vick. They were wearing matching clothes.’

‘Like—how matching?’

‘Yellow polo shirts, shorts and Birkenstocks.’

‘That is so depressing. How come we didn’t know anything about this? How did she get to him?’

‘End of last term,’ Ruth said.

Vicky turned on her. ‘Why didn’t you say?’

‘I don’t know that—I’m just guessing. Staff drinks and stuff.’

‘Staff drinks and stuff? They went to South Africa together, Ruth—they’re practically married.’

She paused. ‘Webster. Why didn’t I see this coming?’

‘Webster’s okay,’ Ruth ventured then paused. ‘Isn’t she?’

‘Webster’s not okay, Ruth. She’s like the wrong side of healthy, like too healthy, like under all that lycra she wears she’s got no genitals or something.’

Nobody said anything.

Saskia’s hand remained over the temporary scorpion tattoo as they trailed slowly over to the weighing-in hut, expecting to find Grace there—only to be told by the boy in the ice cream van that she’d already gone.

‘She had to leave early—something about a puncture. I offered to take her home in the van, but—’ His eyes moved curiously over all three of them as Vicky emptied her raspberries into Ruth’s already full container and stepped away from the hut, crushing the ones that fell beneath her sandals. She stood, bored and dizzy, aware of the ice cream boy’s eyes on her, but too overwhelmed by the thought of Mr Sutton and Ms Webster to react.

The ice cream boy stared at the red spots in the dust and tried hard to think of something to say. He was still trying as the girls walked back up the field towards Tom’s car.

‘Webster’s totally wrong for Sutton,’ Vicky started up again then broke off, staring into Saskia’s punnet. ‘Why *did* you pick redcurrants?’

Saskia stared at the redcurrants, trying to remember.

‘I wanted to paint them. Remember that triptych I did of the rotting quince?’

‘No.’

‘I was thinking about doing another one with redcurrants.’

‘Morbid.’

‘It’s only fruit.’

They got to the top of the field where Tom was sitting in the sandpit, banging on an old plastic cup with a lolly stick and making a child with blond curls laugh.

‘Looks like I’ve got to go, little man,’ he said when the girls arrived. ‘See you around.’

Vicky glanced at the toddler without interest as Tom handed him the plastic cup and stick and watched him try to reproduce the sound he’d been making.

‘Did you manage to meet up with Grace?’ Tom asked as they got back in the car.

‘No—she already left—had a puncture or something. We’ll probably catch up with her on the road. Can we get some windows down?’

5

They caught up with Grace about a mile down the lane where it left the fields and sank into forest.

Tom slowed the car when he saw her up ahead on the opposite side of the lane, pushing her bike.

‘Isn’t that *your* bike?’ Vicky said, staring.

‘I sold it.’ Tom threw the rest of the joint he was smoking out the window.

‘When?’

‘Last summer.’

‘To Grace?’

‘You know I did.’

They pulled up alongside her.

Vicky leant out the back of the car and gave a slow, exaggerated wave.

‘You should have said,’ Tom called out.

‘About what?’ Grace called back.

‘Needing a lift.’

‘I don’t need a lift.’ She smiled at him.

Saskia and Vicky were leaning out the car, waving.

‘You’ve got a puncture.’

‘I know, but I didn’t want to leave the bike.’

‘Come on, get in,’ Tom said, ‘I’ll put the bike on the roof rack.’

Without waiting for a response, he drove past her and carried on for a couple of hundred yards, until he got to a passing place where he pulled in, got out the car and jogged back to where Grace was.

‘There’s some rope—’ he called back to Vicky, who was hanging out the window still, watching him ‘—in the boot.’

She pulled her arms and head back into the car and let her head flop against the back seat.

‘Are you getting the rope out the boot?’ Ruth asked.

‘No—I’m too depressed about Sutton and Webster.’

‘I’ll get it.’ Ruth got out of the car, stretching herself. She poked at the junk in the boot, looking for the rope.

Through the open hatchback, she saw Vicky climb between the two front seats and get into the driver’s. The next minute, Vicky started the car up and put it into gear. It jolted forward then stalled, the boot flapping.

Tom broke into a run back towards the car as the engine started up again and a basketball rolled out of the back onto the lane.

Saskia got quickly out of the car and joined Ruth as the engine started to grate.

‘Vicky!’ Tom yelled, sprinting now, his footsteps loud on the tarmac. ‘You’re flooding the engine.’

Grace was wheeling her bike towards Saskia, Ruth and the car when there was a series of sharp splintering cracks in the woods to their left and two deer broke suddenly out of the dense line of trees, passing so close their flanks grazed Saskia and Ruth before they swerved, hooves slipping on the hot road surface, stopping Tom in his tracks, vaulting the basketball then disappearing into the woods on their right.

They were gone, leaving behind them an unsettling silence that hadn’t been there before.

Tom, shaking, hadn’t moved. ‘Shit—’

‘I never saw deer so close before,’ Ruth said, breathless. ‘I mean, I felt them—they actually touched me.’

Grace dropped her bike on the side of the road and went up to Tom. ‘You okay? Something must have scared them—in the woods.’

Vicky got out the car and walked towards them. ‘What was that?’

‘Deer,’ Grace said.

‘They passed so close, they actually touched me,’ Ruth said again.

Ignoring Ruth, Vicky said to Tom, ‘I think you’re out of petrol.’

‘Out of petrol? You just flooded the fucking engine.’ He was angry with himself for being so shaken by the deer.

‘I didn’t flood the engine—you’re out of fucking petrol.’ Vicky turned and started to walk off up the lane.

‘Where are you going?’ Tom called out after her.

‘Home.’

‘How?’

‘The bus—there’s a stop at the top of the lane on the main road.’

‘So you’re just going to leave my car in the middle of the fucking road?’

‘It’s your fucking car.’ Vicky carried on walking.

Tom didn’t say anything. He picked up the basketball and started to bounce it rhythmically on the road.

Ruth, Saskia and Grace hesitated, uncertain how the argument between brother and sister had started or how it had got to this point. Vicky had already disappeared round the bend and out of sight.

After a while, Ruth shut the boot. ‘You want help pushing it or something?’

‘No point—we won’t get it started in second without a hill. I’ll come back later with dad and pick up some petrol on the way.’

Just then the ice cream van from Martha’s Farm came up behind them, sounding its horn. The boy inside leant out of the window. ‘What happened?’

‘The engine’s flooded or something,’ Saskia said, diplomatic.

Tom carried on bouncing the ball.

The boy in the ice cream van turned to Grace. ‘They caught up with you then.’

‘Yeah.’

‘D’you want a lift?’

‘My bike.’

‘We’ll get that in the back no trouble.’

Grace hesitated and glanced at Tom, who kept his eyes on the ball and didn’t look up.

‘I’ve got room for one more,’ the boy said, pleased.

‘I don’t mind getting the bus,’ Ruth put in.

Saskia drifted slowly towards the ice cream van. ‘You sure?’

Ruth nodded as Grace turned back to Tom. ‘How are you getting home?’ she asked over the soft rhythmic beat of the ball on the road.

‘We’ll get the bus—it’s fine,’ Ruth said again, trying not to look at Tom, who didn’t comment on this.

Saskia got up into the front of the van, excited. ‘Can we put the music on?’

The boy didn’t respond—he was too busy watching Grace standing beside the van with her bike.

Tom stopped bouncing the basketball.

‘I think I’ll walk back.’ He paused, looking at Grace. ‘You feel like walking with me?’

She didn’t say anything; within seconds was standing beside him.

‘What about your bike?’ the boy said, quietly devastated, and trying not to sound frantic.

Tom turned to Grace. ‘We can lock it to the roof rack and I’ll take it home with me when I come back for the car later. You’ve got a lock for it?’

Ruth’s momentary decisiveness was gone, and its departure left her looking stranded.

'Ruth,' Saskia called out from the ice cream van, and the next minute, Ruth was climbing up beside her as Tom started to bounce the basketball again.

The van pulled away, the boy glancing in the rear view mirror at Grace.

Grace and Tom stood in the road and watched the van disappear, a canned version of *Au Clair de la Lune* starting up the moment it was out of sight.

At the sound of the music, they smiled suddenly at each other.

Feeling immediately lighter, Tom kicked the ball hard, into the forest.

'Why did you do that?'

He shrugged, still smiling, then lifted her bike onto the roof of the car. Grace chained it to the roof rack.

After checking the doors to make sure they were locked, he jumped down into the ditch the deer had vaulted earlier.

'You coming?' He watched her, waiting for her to change her mind.

'Which way are you going?'

'Shortcut.'

She jumped down into the ditch beside him. 'I'm wearing flip-flops.'

'You're not in a hurry for anything?'

She shook her head.

'So we'll go slow.'

She hesitated then followed him into the woods.

suburban satire

—autumn—

6

Bill Henderson woke at 5:15 just like he did every morning, including weekends, only at the weekend he didn't have to get up. Today wasn't a weekend, and the world was even more silent than usual due to the heavy fog October had pushed over Burwood during the night. Bill didn't know about the fog yet, but the silence was so intense he woke with the sound of a low pitched hum in his ears that he thought was the under-floor heating they'd had installed downstairs until he remembered that the central heating wasn't programmed to come on until seven because Vicky said the sound of it woke her up. It was the same sort of humming he heard Scuba diving that summer because of water pressure.

Still puzzled, he executed the neat sideways roll he'd perfected over the years, which enabled him to vacate the marital bed in the early hours without waking Sylvia. Landing softly on the carpet in a stress position, he moved silently out the room. He then crept downstairs to the loo where he peed in the dark because switching the light on triggered the extractor fan.

They'd been in the house over two years, but in the dark mornings, half awake, the layout sometimes caught him out. He aimed his pee as best he could in the glow from the sitting room sidelights that were on timer switches and programmed to come on at five in the morning. Not flushing the chain was also part of the morning's silent routine, one that contributed to the sometimes overwhelming feeling in Bill that he had in fact died without realising it, and was haunting rather than living in his home.

He padded through to the kitchen, put the cooker hood light on and poured himself a glass of milk, which he drank standing in front of the fridge where there was a diary kept up with magnets that had survival maxims for life as a woman written over them—that Sylvia, drunk, read out to him like he hadn't heard them a million times already.

He checked the diary every morning, with a fledgling curiosity at this early hour for the insight it gave him into the lives lived by his wife and daughter during the week. There in front of him was a list of cryptic biro scrawls that held the key to everything happening in this house he'd paid for and that he felt like no more than a squatter in. It occurred to him that all he would ever need to surmise about these two people—one to whom he was bound because of a religious ceremony, and the other through genes—was contained here in this diary.

Today's list was long:

5km / hair @12 / POKER / flowers—Panino's / Tel. Tom re. nxt w/e—Ali coming?

Then, in caps, with an asterisk either side:

* POKER PARTY *

Then, in lower case and without asterisk:

rem. Bill

It was strange seeing his own name written in the diary. Puzzled, but not particularly concerned, he put his empty glass down on the surface and stared around the kitchen. He was forgetting something. He'd stood in this exact spot the night before and Sylvia had asked him to do something first thing in the morning when he got up; something important, and now he couldn't remember.

He went through to the sitting room, still trying to recall what it was, and attempted to operate the pulleys that opened the curtains—curtains that had cost them more than a month's mortgage payment.

They swung heavily apart, not responding to his touch as they did Sylvia's, and there he was all over again in the pyjama bottoms and T-shirt he wore to bed. The T-shirt infuriated Sylvia, who couldn't understand why he refused to wear both parts of the two-part sets she bought him. Even when he explained that he didn't like to end his day in the same way he began it by doing up a row of buttons. She still didn't understand.

He enjoyed observing himself hovering above the lawn's dark outline while simultaneously suspended in a fragile replica of the sitting room.

This morning he looked like he was standing in a cloud and it took him a while to realise that nothing untoward had happened to the outside world; it was only fog.

He waved at himself and smiled, then, suddenly embarrassed, went back upstairs to the spare bedroom where he kept his minimal wardrobe of mostly suits, clothes to play golf in and a couple of outfits he wore when they went out socially as a family. These were the outfits he stood in while listening to people whose names he forgot as soon as they told him, talking about operations they'd had or cars they drove. Sylvia's people.

He dressed without looking at himself in the mirror, shaved in the downstairs bathroom where he kept his shaving soap and cologne, then left the house, tiptoeing across the gravel that marked the threshold between him and the dawning day.

Two Fridays a month he went up to London to do a day's auditing at Pinnacle Insurance's Head Office.

Today was one of those Fridays.

7

Sylvia Henderson was between diets, and sleeping badly. She woke about thirty minutes after Bill Henderson left for work, and couldn't see anything when she opened her eyes because of the black-out blinds she'd bought to ease her irregular but persistent bouts of insomnia. She knew, instinctively, that Bill wasn't there. The smell of him in the bed was always stronger once he'd left it. After unconsciously processing this fact about Bill—that he'd left for work—she stopped thinking about him.

They'd been married too many years for her to think about him when he wasn't physically present.

In fact, even when he was it was sometimes difficult.

Tomorrow night, Sylvia was having a poker party.

Nobody in Burwood had ever had a poker party before.

If only Bill would stop creeping and shuffling about, and start acting like the sort of man who was married to the sort of woman who held poker parties for forty people.

The Hendersons had been to hell and back, which *wasn't* to say they'd been to the Congo, but *was* to say that Bill Henderson had lost his job—unexpectedly—and had a breakdown. Leaving Sylvia to conceal this fact from just about everybody they knew (including themselves) while simultaneously attempting to sell the 1.2 million London home in order to get rid of the 600k mortgage, pay Vicky and Tom's final terms' school fees (£8,500), and put together the Henderson re-location package.

She'd been looking for somewhere they could shine—after The Crash, the Hendersons needed to shine—and chosen Burwood after seeing an article in the *Financial Times* ranking it as fourth highest in the country for male life expectancy, and eighth lowest for teenage pregnancy. These figures spoke affluence, and with the proceeds from the sale of their London Life, the Hendersons bought number two Park Avenue—the largest house on the street—and set about making arrangements for their own Second Coming.

The house had been undervalued for a quick sale—messy divorce, the estate agent who showed her round explained, with as much polite regret as he could muster.

Bill got the job she persuaded him to apply for at Pinnacle Insurance after pumping him with Prozac until he was well over the limit, and in spite of the fact that he was holding out for a job teaching maths at a school in Malawi, which she knew he wouldn't get because she'd shredded his completed application after promising to send it recorded delivery.

Sylvia's rise to top of the pile here on Park Avenue had been—much like her daughter Vicky's at Burwood Girls'—astronomical. Most of their neighbours had been easily won over by her Phoney Femme Fatale persona —everybody, that is, apart from the doctor's wife at number five, who had an unsettling sense of humour, and the two retired diplomats who lived with their Down's Syndrome daughter at number seventeen.

Both the doctor's wife, however, and the two diplomats, had accepted invitations to her poker party.

Sylvia was going to win.

8

While Sylvia lay in bed not thinking about Bill, Bill moved slowly through the fog on Hurst Road in the same direction and with the same frantic plod as the other commuters—towards the station that connected them with the country’s capital: London.

The behaviour of the human traffic on the pavement was the same as the traffic on the roads, despite the fact that they didn’t have a vehicle. Bill had been classifying them over a long series of Fridays. There were the tailgaters who stayed on your heel and refused to pass even when you slowed down virtually to a stop; the centre crawlers who seemed to take up the entire pavement and refused to move over; the obsessive overtakers who insisted on accelerating past you only to immediately slow down so that you were forced to overtake in turn only to find them once more accelerating on your right in a repetitive pattern that could cover the entire Hurst Road stretch to the station itself.

He never spoke to his fellow commuters—nothing more than shifting shapes in this morning’s fog—and yet over the past two years their faces had become more familiar to Bill than his own family’s: to the extent of noting absences on the platform, and wondering why. He’d filled in the hundreds of hours spent toeing the line along the front of Platform 2 while waiting for delayed trains spuriously christening his fellow commuters. There were Zombie Extra, Sid Steroid, The Obliterator, Super Slut, Hobo Becoming, War Criminal, and Dartford Tunnel (so-called for obvious reasons involving over-use by members of the opposite sex), who would have got the title of Super Slut if Super Slut hadn’t already been taken. For some reason they rarely showed together for the 6:08 train. Something that had initially led Bill to the conclusion that Dartford Tunnel was Super Slut on a bad day, which she in fact wasn’t.

Super Slut always got a seat on the train, and Sid Steroid always stood as close to her as he could; close enough to share both his inherent and artificial body odours. If Bill ever stopped to think about it—which he didn’t—he’d realise that he spent a disproportionate quota of the day’s emotions on these commuter fictions: from wondering whether the festive season would bring about some sort of consummation for Sid Steroid and Super Slut to wondering how it was that Zombie Extra and The Obliterator always managed to get through the train doors first even when they’d been standing at the back of a platform cluster.

He’d served up a few of his better stories to Sylvia—such as the time Zombie Extra took a seat vacated by a generous gentleman for Super Slut and how it had come to blows between Zombie Extra and Sid Steroid—but Sylvia wasn’t interested. Sylvia was only interested in the names of people at Pinnacle Insurance who held more senior positions than him.

In fact, she hadn’t only been uninterested in his Zombie Extra versus Sid Steroid story, she’d looked worried and initiated one of her off-the-wall discussions on how St John’s Wort was a genuinely effective herbal alternative to Prozac for the treatment of depression, and how it had changed Barbara Phelps’s husband’s life. When he’d asked who the fuck Barbara Phelps was (let alone Mr Phelps who had a Life), she’d looked at him and said, ‘Precisely.’

He continued to stalk through the fog towards the station.

Sylvia had revisited the St John’s Wort conversation again last night and this had somehow run into a criticism of his lack of initiative when it came to Tom and spending time with Tom. Despite speaking to Tom on the phone and seeing him when he came home to visit and get his laundry done, Bill hadn’t yet chartered a yacht for the weekend and learnt to sail it across the Channel like Mr Phelps, who had a Life, had with his son—cross-Channel sailing being, apparently, the Litmus test for those who were, and those who weren’t paternally engaged. So their relationship was completely dysfunctional.

He was still thinking about last night as he reached the traffic lights just outside the station and drew level with Zombie Extra. Poised on the edge of the kerb and ready with the rest of them to make a road-dash across now heavy traffic, he remembered what it was Sylvia asked him to do last night.

‘I forgot to empty the dishwasher.’

It wasn’t until Zombie Extra turned to stare at him that he realised he’d said it out loud.

9

In the darkness, Sylvia's ears clearly picked out a tapping, scuffling sound and for a moment she thought it was Bill—maybe he hadn't left for work yet after all. She lay still and concentrated. There it was again. It wasn't Bill.

She'd been hearing it for about a week now and told herself they probably had mice. Whatever it was, it sounded like there was more than one of them, which meant they were breeding.

Not wanting to spend any more time alone in the dark, she hit the light switch she'd had installed—one on her side of the bed, one on Bill's—and the bedroom was instantly illuminated with just the right wattage: low because her eyes had become increasingly light-sensitive recently. Rachel Dent, the Hendersons' neighbour to the right and Sylvia's best friend of two years, said it was a side-effect from the Botox, but Dr Forbes said this was unlikely, and Rachel was only saying that because she had a needle phobia and couldn't do Botox herself. Sylvia had a top-up done earlier in the week ready for tomorrow night's poker party, and was eager to see if the Botox magic she'd got so addicted to had taken place—it usually took about three days for her face to process the agedefying contents of the injection.

The small, busy sounds stopped and she got quickly out of bed in the camisole and French knickers she still had the body to carry off.

Putting on the kimono Tom brought back for her from China, she went into the en-suite to check on her face. It really was unbelievable. She pushed up her sleep-ridden brown curls (L'Oréal colours 232, 141 and 303) pulled out some grey strays—and could have passed for Debra Winger in *An Officer and a Gentleman*, on only £300 a shot. Given that Botox Heaven was so accessible, she couldn't understand why there weren't queues round the block for it. The number of her friends who hadn't tried it yet—and who were in her opinion wilfully sabotaging their few remaining prospects—amazed her. Surely electing not to do Botox was as close to self-harm as a woman her age could come without actually drawing blood.

She smiled.

Her face, above her top lip, remained expressionless but she felt that this lack of expression gave her poise and a definitive sort of elegance; the sort the late Princess Diana used to have.

Sighing, she yelled, 'Vicky!' through her daughter's bedroom door before going downstairs and into the kitchen. There was Bill's milk glass by the sink, which meant he'd forgotten to empty the dishwasher again. She was half tempted to leave it until the evening, but that would only irritate her all day. Like that time he kept forgetting to empty the bin and she'd hauled it out into the middle of the kitchen floor, where it had stood, overflowing, and all he'd done was walk round it day after day—not getting the point.

'Vicky!' she yelled again, up through the ceiling this time, as she got the pan out the cupboard and started to make porridge.

Porridge was good for her. It had been good for Kate Winslet. The nutritionist had told her that. Sylvia had gone through a bad patch two years ago, just before they moved, skipping breakfast and living off crackers, bananas and emetics. The morning bowl of porridge had done just what the nutritionist promised: re-instated regular bowel movements and aided weight loss. The resulting weight loss far exceeded her expectations when she realised it wasn't just her own jeans she could now fit into, but her seventeen year old daughter's as well. She made a point of trying on Vicky's jeans—her weight barometer—once a week.

She went to the foot of the stairs. 'VICKY!'

There was the sound of a toilet flushing and water running.

She went back into the kitchen and laid out two bowls on the black marble surface she still wasn't convinced went with the granite floors.

Vicky rounded the corner, bleary and grey.

Sylvia, concentrating, filled the two bowls with porridge before looking up. 'What happened?' she said, taking in her daughter.

Vicky hauled herself onto the bar stool and stared at the steaming bowl of porridge. 'When?'

'I don't know when, but you look like shit.'

'Thanks.'

'Are you feeling okay?'

'No.'

'Ill?'

'Don't think so.' Vicky stuck her spoon into the porridge then let it drop against the side of the bowl. 'I can't eat this.'

'It's what the nutritionist prescribed—plus it's freezing out there.'

'You've been out already?'

Ignoring this, Sylvia said, 'So you need something hot inside you.'

'I can't.'

'You'll be hungry mid-morning, and end up buying a muffin.'

'And?'

'And—' Sylvia faltered. 'That's no way to eat.'

'That wasn't what you were going to say.'

'What was I going to say?' Sylvia pulled herself up onto the other stool.

'I don't know—something about muffins and getting fat.' Vicky paused. 'You think I'm getting fat?'

'I think you should eat your porridge—you need to eat properly...out all the time...takeaway pizza.' She paused. 'There's no balance.'

'Are we still talking about food here?'

'What else would we be talking about?' Sylvia started to eat. 'It just occurred to me...'

'What?'

'That your jeans haven't been through the wash much recently.'

'So?'

'So?'

'So, I don't like wearing jeans all the time and anyway we're not even allowed to wear them to school.'

Sylvia nodded slowly. 'Well, we all need to be careful.'

'I don't believe this. You've started already and it isn't even eight o'clock.'

'You're the one who won't eat their porridge,' Sylvia observed.

'I was diagnosed bulimic less than two years ago and you're telling me I'm fat? I mean, I'm like no therapist or anything, but I'd say that's dangerously counter productive.'

'Is that a threat?' Sylvia asked. 'As I recall, you had symptoms of mild bulimia—that's not the same as being diagnosed bulimic. It was to do with the depression and the binge eating and you're over that now.'

'Yeah—over that; all done and dusted with that one.'

'Are you trying to initiate a conversation about depression, Vicky? Is this a cry for help?'

'A cry for help? If I'd gone down that road I'd have fucking lost my voice by now.'

'Are you trying to tell me you're depressed again?'

'I love the way you stress the "again"; like, here we go *again*, here's Vicky getting all boring and time-consuming *again*.'

'So are you?'

'What? Still boring?'

'Depressed—'

‘Nooooo!’ Vicky shouted.

Sylvia waited. ‘Your porridge is getting cold.’

She watched as her daughter picked up the spoon and shoved in mouthful after mouthful, until the bowl was empty. ‘You want to watch you don’t get indigestion.’

Vicky stared at her, her mouth full.

‘I just need to know you’re on top of things. This is an important year for you. I know you’re hearing it from your teachers, but you need to hear it from me as well—and dad.’

‘Dad doesn’t even know what year it is—and you never made O Levels let alone A Levels. So what are you talking about?’

Sylvia resisted the instinctive urge to take a swipe at her daughter’s face—primarily out of respect for the fact that Vicky had actually made the effort to put make-up on this morning. She used to hit Vicky a lot as a child and was of the opinion that a ‘tap’ never hurt anyone. Vicky had—possibly—been tapped more than Tom, but then Vicky had been a difficult child, even as a toddler. ‘Curdled,’ her mother used to call it. Some children just came out like that—curdled. So, ignoring the reference to her lack of higher education, Sylvia said, ‘I just want you to know that your dad and me are behind you at this point, which means you’re free to focus on the opportunities ahead.’

‘Oh my God, you’re talking in platitudes. Did you take an evening class or something and not tell us?’

Sylvia drew herself slowly off the bar stool and Vicky instinctively flinched as she took a step towards her.

‘Why are you so angry?’

‘Because I’m sick of you talking to me like I’ve screwed up already when I haven’t even taken my mocks yet.’ Vicky stopped. ‘This is about me not getting Head Girl, isn’t it? You think me not getting Head Girl was because I’m not on top of things.’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘God, it must have been awful for you having to break the news to all your friends—about me not getting Head Girl. How humiliating for you.’

‘So I thought you’d get it—what’s wrong with that?’

‘I keep telling you but you won’t listen—there’s no way anybody other than Grace was going to be Head Girl this year.’

‘So it was a foregone conclusion?’

‘Pretty much.’

‘But I thought you said people voted?’

‘People did—’

‘You’re making it sound like the whole thing was rigged,’ Sylvia said, interested.

Vicky, who’d been staring strangely at her, got down from the stool, went over to the dishwasher, opened it—saw it was full—then shut it again.

She turned round, arms folded. ‘Have you had something corrective done?’

Sylvia, startled, said, ‘What?’

‘Your face—it looks like somebody just ironed it.’

‘A good night’s sleep.’

‘Ruth reckons you’ve had corrective surgery.’

‘When did she say that?’

Vicky shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Some time. I asked Tom and he said “no”, but now I’m not sure. There’s definitely something different going on with your face.’

Sylvia touched her face with her fingertips then held protectively onto her throat under her daughter’s gaze.

‘Have you been getting Botox?’

Before Sylvia had time to defend herself, Vicky’s face contracted suddenly.

‘What is it?’

‘Sick—I’m going to be sick.’

She ran past the breakfast bar and upstairs.

Sylvia waited.

The sound of retching—distant—came from upstairs.

She went to the foot of the stairs. ‘Vicky? Are you okay?’

No response.

‘There’s air freshener up there—not the one with the orange lid that smells like old men—I’m writing to Airwick about that one. There’s a can with a blue lid—Topaz Haze or something?—use that.’

Still no response.

‘And you might want to have a shower while you’re up there. Your hair looks like it could do with a wash. I know you already did your make-up, but—’ She paused; her throat felt hoarse. The sound of banging came from upstairs. ‘Vicky?’

She needed a boyfriend, Sylvia thought; that was the problem. She walked slowly back into the kitchen, opened the dishwasher and shut it again.

Rachel must have mentioned the Botox to Ruth—why else would Vicky have come up with that crap about her having corrective surgery? Well, who needs any sort of Heaven at seventeen—least of all one where they inject you with Botox?

10

Vicky went next door to number four where the Dents lived—in a house half the size of number two, built in the fifties on a plot where stables for number two used to stand. She walked to school most mornings with Ruth—partly out of convenience but primarily because out of all her group, it was Ruth she liked best. Ruth had been the first friend she made in Burwood as an unwilling urban transplant who spent most of her time shut in her room dazed with loneliness and the amount of time she spent on Facebook.

The friendship had been engineered, in the beginning, by their mothers—Sylvia, in order to offload, and Rachel out of generosity—and in many respects it mirrored the burgeoning friendship between Sylvia and Rachel themselves, who became inseparable when Rachel started to emulate Sylvia. After bringing the Hendersons back from the brink, meeting somebody who wanted to *be* her was the best thing that could have happened to Sylvia.

It was the same for her daughter, Vicky.

Despite inauspicious beginnings—Vicky initially mistook Ruth’s choking shyness for aloofness—Ruth was soon buying Vicky wholesale.

Vicky had been to a pathologically competitive girls’ school in London that regularly provided the worlds of business, banking and government with leaders. It was intimated to the girls that reproduction was for the weak and stupid and that using your womb as nature intended was a less suitable fall-back position in life than having a breakdown and doing VSOS in Central Africa. Vicky had been on track for 12 GCSEs—including Ancient Greek and Chinese—and total mental and emotional collapse.

Ruth’s early feelings for Vicky, clouded as Vicky was in the aura of the city she’d been forced to leave behind, were ones of reverence, and Ruth’s reverence healed Vicky in a way nothing else could have done. The more Ruth wanted to be Vicky, the more Vicky loved her. Ruth understood that, for Vicky, living in Burwood was like living with a permanently infected wound. Despite having spent the past nine years of her life happy in this small commuter town nestled in the valley of affluence between the North and South Downs, she now learnt to actively despise it—and the people in it—for Vicky’s sake.

Just as when Vicky fell in love with Mr Sutton, Ruth was expected to do the same in order to keep her company.

While Vicky was often cruel to Ruth—nobody else was allowed to be.

During the cruel phases, Ruth maintained a sobbing silence and simply waited for Vicky to come back round.

Saskia was nowhere near as devoted as Ruth, but she was swayed by the Aura of London surrounding Vicky. A complicated home life and an inherent and distracting talent for painting prevented Saskia from becoming worshipful, but Vicky liked her because she was beautiful.

She liked Grace the least.

Grace had so many part-time jobs—including raising a younger sister their mother was never home to raise herself—that she was rarely able to commit to the social life of the group, and this bored Vicky. Any latent chance of real intimacy had now been buried under Grace’s appointment as Head Girl.

This morning the Dent family—apart from Ruth—were already out on the drive.

Nathan Dent, Ruth’s stepfather, was trying to get something off his shoe and Rachel Dent was trying to get into the car because she was volunteering at the hospital that morning. The Audi estate was emitting the mellow, warning ping it had been programmed to make when the driver’s door was left open too long.

‘My shoe,’ Nathan said over the voice of the Sat Nav, Giselle, who was trying to initiate conversation.

He stared down at the toe of his right shoe. What he had taken for a mark was in fact a cut in the leather. Between yesterday evening and this morning, something had either wilfully or unwittingly lacerated the leather across the toe of his shoe. The shoe was now irrevocably damaged...flawed...imperfect. Imperfection brought on nausea and panic, which led to bouts of unaccountable rage—like the one he experienced briefly now, standing on his drive on a Friday morning.

‘It’s ruined.’

Rachel looked down at the shoe he’d pushed through the gravel and fog towards her for inspection.

‘Where?’

‘There. Completely ruined.’

‘Is not so bad. Can’t you get repair?’ She’d dropped her pronouns and forgotten her tenses like she used to do when she first learnt English; something she only ever did when she got anxious.

‘*It* is not so bad. Can’t you get *it* repair-*ed*. Look, I know you don’t care.’ He paused, but Rachel didn’t respond to this. ‘But the shoe’s beyond repair and—for me anyway—that’s frustrating. I walk home in a perfect pair of shoes and by the next morning—mysteriously—they’re completely ruined.’ He paused again. ‘And that’s frustrating.’

Rachel continued to remain silent. She wasn’t being obtuse, she just had no idea what she was meant to say—how to respond without aggravating him further, which she was bound to do. With an effort, she leant suddenly forward, aiming clumsily for his cheek, and missing as Nathan turned to meet her kiss. Her lips bounced uncomfortably off the side edge of his chin and she mumbled ‘sorry’—aware that it was last night she was apologising for...for having fallen asleep when he wanted to make love to her.

Nathan calmed down as soon as her misjudged lips touched his face. The shoe was forgotten. ‘Okay, well—I’d better be off,’ he said, sounding almost cheerful now, and even managing a small smile.

Rachel watched him walk down the drive in his beige CIA Mac, nodding at Vicky Henderson who was backed up against the red brick wall that separated number two Park Avenue from number four. He got to the gate post, which was fast becoming obscured in bamboo, stepped in a puddle, cursed, shook his foot, then crossed the road, narrowly avoiding the bus going into town that nobody ever used because everybody in Burwood owned a car. Even the elderly shunned using their bus passes in favour of battery operated mobility aids.

By the time Nathan got to the junction with Hurst Road, he was wearing the tight smile he wore most of the time for his dealings with the world: a quietly overbearing, sarcastic smile that the majority of people were unwilling to probe behind.

Nathan Dent was the product of an over-hygienic childhood; the recipient of a slow, trickling paternal and maternal love, so you couldn’t blame him really—for his smile. You couldn’t blame him for the other legacies either—the propensity to dress like he sold audiovisual equipment in Currys, and the habit of scrubbing at his hands and nails with a toothbrush when they got dirty. His childhood had left him with a bitter taste in his mouth and a capacity for measuring himself out—both professionally and personally—in careful, dispassionate doses. Marrying Rachel, in fact, was the most ambitious thing he had ever done in his life. It was also, importantly, the only time he’d ever not been in control of himself. He turned down Hurst Road and across the park to the offices of Pinnacle Insurance where he sat in a booth and protected the world against itself.

‘You okay?’ Vicky asked Rachel, embarrassed. She had to say something—she’d been standing there the whole time and was still backed up against the wall, shoulder to shoulder with brick and bamboo.

Rachel smiled at her—confused by the question.

‘You?’

Vicky nodded.

‘You don’t look it.’

‘A bit fluey—that’s all.’

‘What’s your temperature?’

‘My temperature?’

‘You look like you’ve got a temperature—you didn’t take a reading?’

Vicky shook her head—did the Hendersons even have a thermometer?—too close to tears to speak. Ruth’s mum always had this effect on her. She remembered the time she’d been upset and Rachel had hugged her and kissed the top of her head. She couldn’t remember what it was she’d been upset about, but she remembered Rachel’s warmth.

It was strange—number two Park Avenue was full of family photographs...hanging on walls, sitting in frames, secreted in albums, and yet Vicky had virtually no memory of ever having been held or embraced by Sylvia. At number four Park Avenue, there were no photographs and yet Rachel was forever hugging Ruth—it was one of the things that struck Vicky most when she first got to know the Dents. Mother and daughter did other things as well as hugging: swapped books, had manicures, make-overs...even spent entire days in spas together...things that baffled Vicky, who spent most of the time drowning under matricidal urges.

Ruth appeared then at the front door.

‘You want me to lock this?’ she called out to Rachel.

‘Go ahead.’

‘What was all that about?’

‘When?’

‘Out here—just now. I heard dad shouting.’

Rachel shrugged and opened the driver’s door.

‘You girls sure you don’t want lift to school? I’m going straight past there.’

‘We’re fine,’ Ruth said.

‘Last chance?’

‘We’re fine, mum.’

‘Okay—’ Shaking her head, she took out the sunglasses she wore whatever the weather from the glove compartment. Then, putting the car into gear, accelerated hard so that pebbles from the drive sprayed up against the body of the car and caused scratches that would at some future date be detected by Nathan, who would expect a full explanation including the use of pronouns as well as the definite and indefinite article.

11

Left on the drive, Vicky and Ruth checked to see what the other one was wearing. The style the sixth form at Burwood Girls' went for was nineteen-twenties shot through with eighties Gothic—retro silk dresses in pastel shades over black tights with pumps gone to seed and lots of costume jewellery: Goth flappers.

They were both appropriately dressed.

'We're going round the long way,' Vicky announced.

'But, Vick, we're already running late.'

'I want to check in on Sutton.'

'Sutton?' Vicky rounded on her. 'Oh, Sutton—yeah, okay.'

'Are you feeling alright?'

Ruth nodded, preoccupied, and they started to walk.

The long way took them on the route past Mr Sutton's new house on Dardanelle Drive and sometimes they got a sighting of him leaving for work on his bike. At the beginning of the Michaelmas term he and Ms Webster had moved in together and Vicky had to get the new address out of the files in Mrs Harris's PA's office.

'Your dad's a total fuck up,' Vicky said as the Audi disappeared out of sight into the fog, Rachel waving enthusiastically. 'And your mum's so nice, I mean—how did it happen?'

Ruth shrugged. 'Nathan's okay. I know how he comes across, but—'

'What?'

'He's always been pretty good to us.'

'Shit, listen to yourself, Ruth. Save me the passion.'

'Passion's what he's up against, Vick. She fell in love with my dad during a war—they used to make love while the Serbs up in the mountains above the house were firing down on them. That's what Nathan's up against.'

Vicky stared at her. 'She told you that?'

'I was conceived under gunfire.'

'You talk about that stuff?'

'I'm her daughter—who else would she talk to about it?'

Vicky, walking beside her, couldn't even begin to contemplate initiating a conversation with Sylvia about her conception. Would Sylvia even remember?

Fifteen minutes later, they were crouching behind the line of conifers that ran alongside Mr Sutton and Ms Webster's front lawn.

'Webster's car's still there,' Ruth noted, whispering.

Just then the front door opened and Julia Webster herself appeared, yelling something over her shoulder back into the house. She was wearing a North Face jacket and a lot of fleece on her outer extremities.

'My God—have you seen the fog?' she called out.

'She looks like she's going on a field trip,' Vicky observed.

Ruth let out a muffled snort.

Julia remained poised in the porch. 'I'm going,' she said into the fog.

After a while Mr Sutton appeared, barefoot, a tea towel in his hands.

Ruth and Vicky gripped each other's arms.

'Why does he have to look so fuckable?' Vicky hissed, taking in the jeans and T-shirt he was wearing.

Ruth murmured faithfully, in agreement—her mind elsewhere—and they continued to watch through a natural peephole where some of the hedge had died.

Julia tilted her face up and as Mr Sutton leant dutifully to kiss her, she grabbed deftly hold of his chin and kept their faces together.

‘Grotesque,’ Vicky mumbled. ‘Like—genuinely grotesque.’

Julia checked his face briefly as they pulled apart, unsure how to read what she saw there—despite the fact that he was wearing a smile—and went over to the sports car, opening the door.

‘Don’t forget—IKEA tonight,’ she said lightly.

‘Shit.’

‘You forgot.’

He nodded and pulled his shoulders up to his ears before letting them drop again. ‘Do we have to?’

Through the peephole in the hedge, Vicky and Ruth were still holding onto each other.

‘It’s bookshelves for you we’re going for. I just thought you might want your art books out of those boxes they’ve been in all summer.’

‘Okay—’ he responded, flatly.

‘You don’t sound like it’s okay.’

‘I don’t?’

‘No, you don’t.’

Ruth and Vicky worked hard at stifling the excited laughter that was threatening to erupt from behind the line of conifers.

Julia stared at him. ‘We’ll talk about it later.’ She hesitated, forcing a smile. ‘You’re sure you don’t want a lift?’

‘No—I’ll cycle.’

‘Well, don’t forget your lights. You’ll need them in this fog.’

‘I won’t.’

Julia hesitated again then got in. She gave a light wave before putting the car into gear and reversing off the drive.

Mr Sutton continued to stand in the porch, slowly drying his hands on the tea towel he was holding as the car’s engine revved without resonance, pumping out carbon monoxide fumes that hung in the fog and had nowhere to go.

Vicky felt suddenly nauseous.

Eventually the car moved off and Mr Sutton waved vaguely as it disappeared into the fog. After a while, he went back inside.

As the door shut, Vicky clutched at Ruth’s arm.

‘They’re not going to last,’ Ruth said, jubilant.

Vicky shook her head, rapidly.

‘Vick? What is it?’

‘I think I’m going to be sick.’

‘You can’t,’ Ruth said as the colour left Vicky’s face and she started retching uncontrollably over the hedge, shaking with the force of it.

‘Vick?’ Ruth, worried, pulled back as much of Vicky’s hair as she could while Vicky held onto the street sign for Ypres Drive, panting and waiting for the shaking to subside. This part of Burwood had been developed in the sixties and seventies, built on land once farmed by tenant farmers who lost their lives in the First World War. Without the men to labour on it, the land became untenable. By the time there was the labour force the world had changed and the men had changed with it.

‘Tissue,’ she said, through her nose, trying not to swallow in case it triggered another gag reflex.

‘It’s got Olbas oil on it,’ Ruth said, trying to shake the pencil shavings off. ‘Mum got a box of them when I had flu that time.’

‘I don’t care what it’s got on it, I’m puking my guts up here, Ruth.’

Vicky blew her nose, wiped her mouth then spat into the tissue before pushing it into the hedge.

‘D’you think you should go in today?’

‘I’m fine. Apart from the fact that my mouth tastes disgusting.’ She took a bottle of water from her bag, swilling a couple of mouthfuls and spitting them into the hedge as well.

‘You just puked in a hedge, Vick.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘You’re taking too much Valium.’

They started to move away then stopped suddenly as the front door opened and Mr Sutton appeared, carrying his bicycle over the threshold.

Ducking again, they watched him try to put on his helmet, struggling with the catch until, frustrated, he finally managed to get it done up. Then he switched on his lights and cycled off into the fog, the red light on the rear of the bicycle blinking at them.

‘They’re never going to last,’ Ruth said again as the red light disappeared.

Vicky didn’t say anything. She took a couple more sips of water and held onto her stomach. Her throat hurt and she could taste nothing but vomit.

They started walking in the direction of school again—Ruth waiting for Vicky to comment on the row they’d just witnessed.

‘What if I’m pregnant?’

Ruth stopped. ‘Pregnant?’

‘The puke—that’s the second time this morning—and I’m late.’

‘How late?’

‘About four days.’

‘Is that normal?’

‘No.’

Vicky carried on walking and Ruth had to break into a run to catch up. ‘Wait—Vick!’ She was about to grab hold of Vicky’s arm when her phone started to ring.

‘Are you getting that?’

‘Like—no. I mean—’

‘What?’

‘Could you be—pregnant?’

The phone stopped ringing.

Vicky nodded.

Ruth rounded on her. ‘You and Matt? You never said anything.’

‘You know—when I went up to town for that party in Pentonville with those weird Welsh guys.’

Ruth took this in. ‘So—have you said anything to Matt?’

‘What—about being four days late? I’m not filling his head with all this shit just because I’m late.’

‘You’re the one who said you thought you were pregnant.’ Ruth paused. ‘You did take precautions, right?’

‘Like, no—of course.’

‘So how could you be pregnant?’

‘It’s only like ninety-eight percent protection. Maybe I’m the two percent that got away.’

‘Ninety-eight percent?’

‘You never read the back of the packet?’ Vicky broke off. ‘We talked about babies and stuff—that weekend.’

‘You only just started sleeping with him.’

Vicky shrugged.

They passed the school coaches that brought girls from outlying villages, parked on Richmond Road, and the pavements became suddenly dense with girls from the lower and middle schools, in uniform.

They turned in at the school gates, making their way in the same direction as the rest of the morning traffic between borders full of pruned rosebushes towards the main building. The younger girls walked in clusters, fast, socks falling down, bags slipping off shoulders and hair coming loose from clips and bands they were only just learning how to put in themselves.

A teacher, semi concealed by the wall of uniformed bodies, called out, 'Come along, girls.'

'You should take a test, Vick.'

'I'll give it a few more days.'

'There's a chemist up on Grace's estate—it's where everyone goes.'

'Who's everyone?'

'Come on—you know what I mean,' Ruth lowered her voice to a whisper. 'That's where Tina Branston went.'

'So that's like—what—one other person?'

Ruth didn't say anything.

'Move along girls,' the same teacher called out again.

Vicky had a sudden memory of walking through reception at the end of the summer term and seeing Tina Branston there, so heavily pregnant she could barely walk. Flanked by a teacher, she was en route to the isolation room opposite the Head's office where she sat all her GCSE exams so as not to be a distraction—or pollutant—to the other girls. Vicky remembered catching Tina's eye—and being the first to look away.

'You make it sound like people are heading in their droves up to the chemist on Meadowfield Estate when you're talking about one other person. Tina fucking Branston.'

'Sorry,' Ruth mumbled. 'Anyway this is totally different to Tina Branston. I mean, as of January you'll be able to vote, have a credit card, get married—you're practically adult. Tina was like only sixteen or something. Plus she didn't even know who the father was. Plus you don't even know if you're pregnant.'

'Tina Branston had a boy,' Vicky said. 'She posted a picture of him on her Facebook.'

'How come Tina's got computer access? I thought she was meant to be like completely poverty-stricken?'

'You can pick up a computer for like a couple of hundred quid, Ruth, or maybe she stole it—I don't know, but the point is she posted it there for everyone to see and it was like, fuck you all, I did it, I'm happy. Now what are you going to do about it?'

'Yeah—' Ruth said, unconvinced.

'And people said some real shit about her.'

'Vick—we said some real shit about her. In fact, we said some real shit *to* her.'

'Don't you sometimes wonder?' Vicky carried on, no longer interested in Tina Branston.

'About what?'

'About the point of all this?'

Ruth took in the parked bicycles in the shed and lines of girls moving towards the group of Victorian buildings whose roofs were barely visible in the fog. This was how things were and they didn't bother Ruth, but she kept this to herself.

'Matt was talking about dropping out,' Vicky carried on. 'He says the course is shit and that all the lecturers are on ego trips and can't be bothered to teach undergraduates. As a student you're just revenue to the university and loan bait to the banks. He was talking about this commune his friend lives on down in Sussex—they make cheese and stuff and sell it. He was talking about going to live down there for a while; getting his head straight.' Vicky paused. 'He was talking about me maybe going with him.'

'Vicky, you can't—'

'Why not?'

'Girls!'

It was Ms Hadley—popularly referred to as Bride of Quasimodo—a disabled teacher who'd been hired, impressively, well before the era of equal opportunities. She taught English, had goggle eyes and crutches, the rubber stoppers on the bottom of them sounding strange as she made her way through the fog towards them. In Year 7, Ruth had locked her in the book cupboard and hidden her crutches. She'd scared herself—it stood out as the singular large-scale act of cruelty in her life so far, and she still didn't know what came over her that day.

'Are you seriously thinking about not going to university?' Ruth whispered.

'I'm seriously thinking about not even finishing my A Levels.'

'Vick—'

'I just want to be with Matt.'

'But what would you do on this commune?'

'I don't know—make cheese?'

'How come he even knows about it?'

'I told you—he's got a friend there—Ingrid.'

Ms Hadley was standing in front of them, legs splayed awkwardly beneath the long skirts she always wore. 'Bell's rung,' she said, her voice sounding automated through lack of intimate conversation with anyone.

Vicky stared at the silver and turquoise necklace she was wearing, and wondered how cripples could be bothered to adorn themselves—especially female ones. What was the point?

Ruth flicked her eyes over Ms Hadley's deformed chin, at the point where it sank into her neck, then looked away.

Thousands of girls had passed through Ms Hadley's withered hands over the years, but she never forgot a face and she'd certainly never forget Ruth's because it was Ruth who locked her in the cupboard that day. She'd cried, as silently as she could, behind the locked door and that was something she hadn't done on school premises either before or since, in all her long career. So, no, she'd never forget Ruth.

Ruth smiled awkwardly.

Ms Hadley didn't return Ruth's smile; she just carried on staring.

She carried on staring as the girls shuffled past her, legs and sticks splayed over so much of the pavement they had to pick their way through the pruned rose bushes in the borders.

'Freak,' Vicky whispered, when they were still within earshot.

'Vick—' Ruth warned her.

'So, what? You know what she keeps in the back of her car? A snow shovel—all year round.' She paused. 'Hadley's probably on the FBI's most wanted list.'

'For what?'

'Killing sexually attractive young girls.'

They went into the main building by the entrance to the side of the Upper Hall and the first person they saw was Mr Sutton standing at the foot of the stairs.

'Hey, you two,' he said brightly, under the impression that this was their first meeting of the day.

Vicky hated it when he said this, lumping her and Ruth together as though they were children.

'Catch up later.' He grabbed hold of the banister, setting off at a run up the flight of stairs to the top where the art department was.

Vicky turned on Ruth. 'Why did you do that?'

'What?'

'You waved.'

'So?'

Vicky did an impression. 'It was idiotic.'

'So? Where are you going?'

‘I need to find a water fountain—I can still taste vomit in my mouth. I’m sorry,’ she said, grabbing hold suddenly of Ruth’s hand and squeezing it.

‘It’s okay.’

‘Will you come with me—to get the test?’

‘Course. Have you told the others?’

‘Not yet. Listen—I’ll see you at break.’

Ruth nodded. ‘It’ll be okay. You know that, don’t you? I mean—even if you are—it’s only a fucking baby. It’s not like the end of the world or anything.’

Vicky smiled and gave Ruth’s hand a final squeeze then pushed forcefully through the set of double doors and disappeared down the corridor.

Ruth hesitated at the foot of the stairs then got her phone out her bag. One missed call. She checked the number and smiled—a new sort of smile she’d been wearing for about two months now, one that Nathan had noted across the dining table, and that unsettled him.

12

Saskia Greaves swung her legs out of bed and made her way over to the window where she opened the curtains—still just about hanging from the few remaining plastic hooks attached to the rail. Her bedroom window usually commanded a view over the strip of wasteland that was their back garden, the neighbour's garden to the right—containing a miniature Swiss chalet housing two bloodhounds—and beyond this the Unigate milk float depot.

This morning the drone of the milk floats sounded distant and all she could see of them through the bank of fog was their headlights. There was another light hovering at eye level—one of the floodlights that went on at around 4:00 a.m. and was usually attached to an arching branch of steel—now suspended in fog.

She stood motionless, her mind moving rapidly.

Turning away from the window, she put the toadstool night light on that she'd had since childhood and picked up her mobile. She went back over to the window.

We need 2 talk. Tonite. S

Once the text had been sent, she remained by the window, tapping the mobile gently against her teeth.

At last, sighing, she moved over to the pile of clothes heaped against the chest of drawers. There was no wardrobe in the room. The chest of drawers were here when they moved in, only the bottoms had since fallen out of the drawers so she'd just started leaving the clothes in a pile by the side instead. This meant it was sometimes difficult to separate the washed from the unwashed clothes and after a while they all got the same smell—damp wallpaper, rotting carpet and other things the survey had failed to shed light on and that Richard Greaves hadn't really been in a fit state to take on board at the time of purchase.

She found a couple of tops in monochrome shades and then put on the skirt she'd taken off the night before and thrown on the floor by the side of her bed, the legs of which had broken on one side so that it was propped up with National Geographics and manuals for computer software that no longer existed.

Then she went downstairs where there were no curtains at any of the windows—apart from a blind in the kitchen—so the morning's low calibre lighting had already made its way in.

Picking up a slice of pizza from the box on the coffee table—last night's? The night before that?—she wandered through to the kitchen, opened the fridge door, stared inside, shut it again then took a couple of bites from the slice of pizza and started to make coffee.

She checked her dad's timetable, blue-tacked to the wall, and saw that he had morning classes starting at nine.

'Dad!' she yelled from the foot of the stairs, her mouth full of pizza. 'You've got a nine a.m. start. Dad!'

She took a cup of coffee upstairs and went into the only other bedroom in the house, pulling the duvet back enough to reveal the small head and sleep-ruffled grey curls of Richard Greaves. Then she went over to the fitted wardrobe and selected one of the dark heavy suits—first checking for cigarette burns and other stains—and hung it on the sliding door, the one that was still in its runners, where he'd see it when he woke up. The other door was propped against the wall with a serious dent in it, Richard having recently crashed into it when drunk.

His suit collection pre-dated their post-divorce move to the two-bedroom terrace overlooking the Unigate milk float depot. It was the legacy of his producer at Sky TV days, and most of the collection still fitted him despite the weight he'd put on. The suits had lost a lot of their original impact because they no longer had any expectations of the man wearing them—but the cut couldn't be denied.

Saskia had stored them in a box when he got fired and the box had been put in the van along with everything else when they left their old house on the north side of Burwood. They'd stayed in the box while he took a year off on his redundancy money and tried to write a book, and they'd come back out of the box a year ago when he'd taken the job as a Media Studies teacher at Burwood Technical College.

'Dad—time to get up—come on.' She stood at the foot of the bed and waited as the duvet shifted and Richard rolled onto his back.

She went over to the curtains and opened them. 'There's a thick fog out there today—look.'

But Richard didn't look; he was too busy watching her—and had stopped being interested in fog a long time ago.

'You okay?' he said after a while.

Saskia smiled at him, but didn't say anything.

'What's that you're eating?'

‘Pizza.’

He sighed. ‘You out tonight?’

‘Maybe. What about you?’

Richard nodded slowly. ‘There’ll probably be drinks after work.’

‘Who with?’

‘People.’

They stared at each other.

‘Well,’ Saskia said at last. ‘Just let me know.’

Richard sighed again.

‘Come on, you’ve got to get up—you’ve got a nine a.m. class.’

‘Not today.’

‘Yes—today; it’s the module on sitcoms and you’ve got notes for it already—those ones we worked on this time last year; I put the green folder by your bag next to the door. Come on—’ She lifted the duvet and tickled his feet.

‘Okay—I’m up.’

She leant over and gave him a kiss on the forehead before disappearing into the bathroom and putting on her make-up. After this she picked up another cardigan from the pile in the corner of her room, and a scarf that she wrapped round her neck at least four times before poking her head round his bedroom door once more and yelling, ‘UP!’

‘I’m up,’ he mumbled, sitting swaying on the side of the bed.

‘See you later.’

‘Yeah. Love you.’

‘Love you too.’

She went back downstairs, unlocked the front door and stepped out into the fog.

13

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Richard Greaves listened to his daughter leave the house, and waited. Sometimes she forgot stuff she had to come back for, but not this morning.

He exhaled loudly, unaware he'd even been holding his breath, and collapsed backwards onto the bed. This morning he was feeling the *most* unhappy he had felt since he'd first started waking up in the morning feeling unhappy, which was about five years ago. Something terrible had happened in his life; more terrible than discovering the love letters written by a man called Peter Jenkins to his then wife, Caro; more terrible than being laid off from Sky TV and having to pay most of his not generous redundancy package to Caro and her new partner, Peter Jenkins; more terrible than living in a two up two down overlooking the Unigate Dairy depot. What made it worse was that he couldn't talk to anybody about it; not even his sister—the only member of his family he was still on speaking terms with—and definitely not Saskia.

He lay there staring up at the ceiling, which had been hastily wallpapered in order to hold it together—by the son of the woman who died here—before they put it on the market. The upstairs bedrooms had also been washed in a single coat of magnolia that the wallpaper underneath—a ghostly pattern of miniature posies—could still be seen through. The imprints of the elderly woman's furniture could be traced as well, in the pile of the carpet from the decades it had stood there.

The lamp hanging from the ceiling was a deep, helpless burgundy, and had tassels. There were brown stains on the inside of the shade where water had, at some point in time, dripped through the ceiling. Sometimes he was so hung over when he woke in the morning that he thought he heard the lamp muttering at him in a language he couldn't understand—a dead language like Aramaic. His sister phoned him while that was happening once and told him he sounded like crap and he'd asked her how a person who was getting taunted by a lampshade—in Aramaic—was meant to sound, and then she'd hung up.

This morning it wasn't taunting him—in Aramaic or anything else.

Sighing, he rolled over and felt under the bed for the bag of cocaine he kept taped to the frame.

His dealer lived on a farm about three miles out of Burwood. He bred spaniels for gun dogs and Richard came across him because he had a lap top that was playing up—this was when he was writing his novel—and the spaniel breeder did a sideline in computer repairs. Richard left the farm with a fully functioning lap top and 4g of pure Bolivian—yet another of the breeder's sidelines, it transpired.

Hauling himself once more into an upright position, he shook out a line onto the small metal tray with a picture of the Natural History Museum on it that he kept by the side of the bed specifically for this purpose.

He did the line, closed his eyes, and waited.

When he opened them again, the surfaces in the room had become sharper and brighter. By the time he got dressed in the suit Saskia had hung out for him, the interior of the house was virtually dazzling.

Downstairs, he felt that the kitchen could almost pass as the sort of kitchen other—ordinary—people had.

He poured himself a glass of milk and stood drinking it, staring at the two photographs Bluetacked to the fridge door—the only two photographs in the entire house, in fact. One was of him and Saskia scuba diving in France, and the other was of him standing at the bottom of a trench in the Somme where a relative of his had died during the First World War.

You could tell a lot about a middle-class family from examining their fridge. A well-stocked interior indicated physical health, and a well-stocked exterior (fridge magnets) indicated an attempt, at least, in projecting emotional health. The Greaveses' fridge was both empty, and unadorned—apart from the two photographs.

Richard picked up his bag and the green folder containing Saskia's notes for that morning's class on sitcoms and, feeling fretful—the only discernible trace of his earlier despair—but remarkably buoyant, pulled the front door loudly shut.

That was all he had to do.

As long as he left for work in the morning, kept the front garden clear of litter, and put the right recycling in the right bin, he was left alone.

The world didn't care that a coke-addicted divorcee lived at number twenty-four Carlton Avenue with a daughter he was incapable of looking after—or that he'd slept with a minor in one of the upstairs bedrooms.

Richard took the same amount of cocaine most mornings to help him out of bed, out of the house and into the dark green Skoda that had been designed with Saabs in mind. He used to make people laugh—his ex-wife, Caro, included—at his Skoda jokes, but that was when he drove a Saab. Now, as a Skoda driver, he wasn't entirely sure of his footing when it came to telling Skoda jokes, and didn't know any jokes about Saabs.

The fog was beginning to lift and the early morning world of Burwood shone through the diminishing grey as he drove the Skoda out of town towards the new bypass and Technical College.

Once there he made his way to the far end of the car park and parked beneath a bank of Scotch pines where traces of fog still hung. This was where he always parked because nobody else ever did.

He shunted his seat back, picked up the bag of cocaine he kept on the floor under the driver's seat, and did another line from the Skoda's dashboard. After this he got his phone out his bag and dialled the number he'd been thinking about dialling all morning. She didn't pick up. He thought about leaving a message, but in the end decided not to.

Still clutching the phone, he got out the car and headed towards the glass and steel college building. It wasn't until he got half way across the car park that he realised how cold his legs were.

Feeling suddenly sick with fear, he checked to see that he'd remembered to put on the suit trousers—he'd once got as far as the bypass before realising that he was only half dressed. Yes, he was wearing trousers; it was his socks that he'd forgotten to put on.

Reassured, he passed through the automatic doors into reception where he saw Polly—who taught textiles and made her own clothes—standing waiting for him.

'Richard,' she said, coming towards him in one of her own designs, her voice long and mellow from decades of breathing exercises. 'I was hoping to catch you—' She paused, hauling her hair slowly back over her shoulders and laying a hand on his arm. 'Everything okay?'

He'd once made the mistake of crying in front of her when he gave her a lift home, and now she thought she had Fast Track Access to him.

He stared at her hand, but it didn't leave his arm.

'I really need you to confirm re. the Transcendental Yoga Retreat.'

Lost, he probed his mind for references to a Transcendental Yoga Retreat. Was this something they'd actually discussed? Her tone seemed to suggest so—at a worryingly concrete level. Her tone seemed to suggest that she was going to carry on probing his Chakra points until he caved in—and said 'yes'.

While waiting for a response, her hands started brushing at the shoulders of his jacket, dusted with fallout from his nostrils after the line he did on the Skoda's dashboard.

Could he tell Polly about his problem?

'Look at all this dandruff. You're stressed,' she said. 'I've got some wonderful oil for scalp conditions.'

Their eyes met. 'I just don't know if it's my thing—a Transcendental Yoga Retreat.'

'Did you go to the site?'

He shook his head.

'Go to the site—have a look at it—then make your mind up.' Her hand was still on his arm.

‘The thing is—I’ve got quite a lot of complicated personal stuff going on at the moment.’

Polly nodded, interested.

Richard looked around him.

The college building was optimistically open-planned so ironically reception—the main thoroughfare into the college and usually crowded—was often the best place to have a private conversation.

‘I’ve been involved with someone.’ He broke off when he saw the look on her face. ‘Not seriously,’ he said quickly. ‘I mean—for me.’

‘I didn’t realise,’ Polly mumbled, upset.

‘I should never have started it.’

‘So—you’re breaking it off?’

‘Trying to.’

‘Why trying to?’

‘She’s not getting the point.’

All this was good—what Polly wanted to hear—and she would have been reassured by it, exuberantly so, if it hadn’t been for the fact that Richard’s facial expressions were changing by the second and there were beads of sweat along his upper lip.

‘She doesn’t understand the...impossibility...I mean, it’s my fault for starting it in the first place, but the...impossibility...of it carrying on.’

‘So talk to her...tell her.’

Richard let out a strange, high-pitched giggle.

‘I keep trying to, but she’s obsessed. It’s her age—’

‘Her age?’

Richard nodded. ‘I mean, she’s quite young.’

‘How young?’

‘Young.’

‘How young?’

He scrunched up his face. ‘Seventeen.’

‘Seventeen!’

A group of students turned round and stared at them then swung away again, laughing.

‘For fuck’s sake, Richard.’

He winced. ‘I know.’

‘No, you don’t know.’ Polly paused. ‘She’s not a student here, is she? Please God, don’t tell me she’s a student here.’

He shook his head. ‘Look, I really need to talk -’

‘I’m no professional.’

‘I just need to talk—to somebody. Later? After school?’

The bell sounded and she started to move off through reception.

‘Please—’ he called after her.

She turned and looked at him before disappearing through the double doors leading to Art & Textiles.

He shuffled over to the reception desk, feeling cold inside, and slid his elbows across the glass surface. ‘I don’t suppose—’

The receptionist turned, in her headset, to look at him.

‘I don’t suppose you keep spare pairs of socks behind there, do you?’

She carried on looking at him, sighed, and turned back to her magazine and the article on celebrity house foreclosures she’d been reading.

14

On the Meadowfield Estate—Burwood’s only council housing—Grace Cummings was tying a French plait in her ten year old sister Dixie’s hair while Dixie, who was going through a major *Sound of Music* phase, tried to pick out the tune for ‘Edelweiss’ on a mouth organ she got in a Christmas cracker the year before.

Their mother—Nicole Cummings—had been working at Fleurs, the florist, for a year now. She used to have a job cleaning until Grace bullied her into applying for the one at Fleurs when it was advertised in *The County Times*. Despite the early start—which left Grace in charge of getting Dixie to school—working with flowers had changed Nicole in a way nothing or nobody else ever had. For the first time in her life, she had a career rather than a job, was sitting exams to get accredited and even—poised on patchy lino inhaling the green perfume of cut flowers on the threshold between life and death—nurturing a silent ambition to run a florist’s of her own one day.

When Grace had finished, Dixie shook her head smiling and ran a hand over her hair. ‘Emma’s going to be so jealous.’

‘Here, put this on,’ Grace said, handing her a duffel coat that used to belong to her.

‘Not that one—it’s scratchy.’

‘It’s the only one you’ve got and it’s cold so put it on.’

Dixie conceded. ‘D’you want to be a hairdresser when you grow up?’

‘Not really,’ Grace said, distracted.

‘So what d’you want to be?’

‘I want to go up in space.’

‘People still need their hair cut in space.’

They were running about five minutes late.

‘Who’s picking me up from tap tonight?’

‘Me.’

‘Can I wear my tap shoes to school?’

‘Where are your school shoes?’

‘I left them in the back of the car.’

‘You’re sure?’

Dixie nodded.

‘What about your trainers?’

‘Can’t find them.’

Before the job at Fleurs, Nicole had been seriously thinking about re-locating to Perranporth in Cornwall—to a council flat overlooking the beach and some municipal palms.

She didn’t sleep well, and didn’t read the *Financial Times*, so didn’t know about the reassuring statistics concerning crime, teenage pregnancy and male mortality—or that Burwood was a good place to live. Only last week she dreamt she woke at two a.m.—to the sound of the neighbour they backed onto beating his disabled wife with a shovel, out in the garden. When she looked out the bedroom window, however, there was nobody there—no grunting, enraged shovelwielding husband, and no terrified, disabled wife scrunched up on the lawn in threadbare moonlight. Unfortunately there was nobody lying beside Nicole in bed, and when she got up there was no article attached by magnets to her fridge door that she could read in order to dispel her fears. So the dream stayed with her, made worse by the fact that she was sure she’d heard an ambulance in a nearby street just before dawn, and hadn’t seen the disabled woman since.

Eventually they left the house, Grace pushing her bike and the metal plates on the bottom of Dixie’s tap shoes ringing out on the pavement, the echoes muffled by fog.

They cut down an alley where Grace remembered being pushed into a pile of nettles when she was about Dixie's age. The attack was still vivid in her mind because she hadn't seen it coming, and couldn't understand it. Like the time that girl in the red anorak had put a stone inside a snowball and knocked out part of her tooth so that now she had a different coloured bit in one of her front teeth.

'Emma says she can do the splits but I haven't ever seen her do it and every time I ask her to show me she comes up with some excuse so now I don't know whether to believe her or not.' Dixie paused, waiting for Grace to comment, but Grace—who'd been even more distracted than usual this morning—didn't have anything to say. 'She says she can sit on her hair as well but I've actually seen her do that. So—' Dixie swung her head, pleased at the slapping sound the French plait made against the back of her coat.

'I hope Ms Jenkins isn't sick today. She was sick last week and we had Ms Clarke whose hair's pulled back so tight you can see all the veins on her forehead. She makes us put our heads on the table with our thumbs up and keeps on shouting "Silence" even when nobody's talking. How can you talk less than silence? She made Emma and me sit apart and I had to share with Mandy who smells like going to the toilet and has to go to the hospital to have her bath 'cause her mum's in a wheelchair. That's what Emma says.'

'When am I going to meet Emma?' Grace said at last, making an effort.

'Emma's mum says she's not allowed to come to our house so I've got to stop asking her. It's because of the dogs near us—the ones that don't wear leads that might have rabies.'

'She said that to you?'

Dixie nodded. 'Maybe her mum'll let her come now you're Head Girl.'

Grace ran her hand protectively over Dixie's hair.

'Ms Jenkins said microwave food isn't good for you—is that true?'

'Probably.' Grace felt exhausted and the day hadn't even begun.

They were almost at the school crossing where she'd recently agreed to leave Dixie and let her go through the school gates on her own.

'I told Ms Jenkins you were Head Girl, but she already knew. She said one day they were going to have to put a blue plaque up on the school to say you'd been a pupil there.'

Grace smiled.

'What's a blue plaque?' Dixie asked.

'It's like a sign—they put them on buildings when a famous person's lived or worked there.'

Dixie stopped. 'Are you going to be famous?'

'Who knows?'

Grace watched her younger sister cross the road with the Lollipop Lady, who gave her some sweets. When Dixie got to the other side she waved the sweets triumphantly in the air.

She gave a final wave before disappearing through the gates into the crowd of children and parents.

Grace could still hear the tap shoes. She waited until she couldn't hear them any more before getting on her bike, preoccupied, thinking about what Ms Jenkins had said about the blue plaque, and feeling suddenly tearful.

As she stopped at the next set of lights, she heard somebody call out her name. 'Grace! Grace!' It was her Physics teacher and Form Tutor, Ms Webster, in the car that had pulled up beside her.

'I didn't see you at netball practice yesterday,' Ms Webster shouted through the open window.

Grace played Wing Defence on the B team. She should have been on the A Team, but her commitments at home prevented her from going on any of the tours.

'Sorry about that,' she shouted back.

Ms Webster nodded, looking at her. 'Anything wrong?'

Grace shook her head, her mind still on blue plaques.

The lights changed to green and she waved, moving instinctively forwards.

A few seconds later, Ms Webster overtook, calling out, 'I'll see you at school.' She wiped at her face where something wet had fallen then accelerated past Grace, who kept her head down because she'd started—inexplicably—to cry.

15

Down in the basement gym at number two Park Avenue, Sylvia Henderson was listening to *The World's Greatest Arias* and focussing on the weights because she'd noticed movement in her underarms recently—a lack of solidity that bothered her. She was used to working out with Rachel—who was still trying to get pregnant at the age of forty-four—in between Rachel's miscarriages.

As she gasped and a whole host of sopranos sang, her eyes flickered over the garden, on eye level and bleak at this time of year in its early winter wash of browns. The garden was one of the few things in her Brave New Suburban World that frightened Sylvia. Even more so when she'd realised that in Burwood you weren't only expected to spend time *in* your garden but *with* your garden.

At the Park Avenue Residents Association Summer Barbecue there was a large-scale trade in cuttings, which had alarmed Sylvia into drinking herself way above her limit and spending far too much time with a man with halitosis who kept chewing at his nails.

Despite having walls still papered in Laura Ashley and floors carpeted in dog hairs, Dr Fulton's wife, Jill, had a social standing on the Avenue it was difficult to de-stabilise due to her horticultural reputation.

Sylvia enjoyed eating in the garden; she enjoyed getting Tom to light the fire pit when he was home—Bill was too depressed to be trusted with this task—and enjoyed sunbathing on her Plantation recliner. She didn't enjoy anything that required her to kneel or wear old clothing, and anyway—lost interest once the summer was over.

She'd gone to a nursery just outside Burwood that was often on TV and spent vast amounts of money on plants guaranteed to give architectural effect, but still couldn't make the garden come together. It overwhelmed her—and it knew it.

She could feel it now, in its winter nudity, taunting her—and wished the fog hadn't lifted.

Shifting her eyes away from the garden, she continued pulling weights until the phone started to ring.

She answered it, panting.

'Mum? Are you okay?'

'Tom—'

'You sound weird.'

'I'm down in the gym.'

'Is now a good time to talk?'

'About what?'

'The weekend.'

Tom sounded tense; stressed. His usual lightness—that herself and others found so endearing—wasn't there.

'Listen, mum—I don't think I'm going to make it.'

'Tom—'

'I know.'

'My poker party.'

'I know—'

'I've told everyone you're coming.' She indulged rapidly in the image of Tom in his Dinner Jacket moving through her guests. 'What am I going to say to people? My God—'

In her distress, she'd inadvertently turned back to face the garden and was now staring at the randomly planted oleanders, olives, *Dicksonia antarctica* and eucalyptus trees looking like a band of horticultural misfits that had broken rank for the final time, never to re-group again under her command. She knew she'd seen *Day of the Triffids*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.