

Jar Baby

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Published in 2012 by Dexter Haven Publishing Ltd
Curtain House
134–146 Curtain Road
London
EC2A 3AR

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ISBN 978-1-903660-10-2

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

Typeset in Sabon by Dexter Haven Associates Ltd, London
Printed in Great Britain by CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading

Prologue

Stella is in Rohan's workroom. She is being fitted for a tailored bolero jacket, trimmed with dark ostrich feathers, as she has been every Saturday afternoon for the past five weeks. She will wear it for her *Vogue* photo shoot with her husband behind the lens. It is Rohan's idea of a joke. Making his mark. Stitching out his territory in rich plumes across his married lover's shoulders.

I saw it once in an early manifestation, when it was still in two neat pieces, dismembered. I pulled away its protective cloth when Rohan was out of the house for an early swim. It grasped the shoulders of the mannequin; separate feathers reaching like fingers towards invisible collarbones. The sleeves shone under the light, glossy as Stella's hair, and I stroked its length until my palms were damp and the place where my hand had been was a slick of navy blue.

Now they are locked in there together, Stella and Rohan. They have left the window open and I try not to focus on their gulps for air and exhausted chest laughs. I am under strict instructions not to disturb them under any circumstances.

In the Mercedes on the driveway Drake, Stella's driver, sits with his feet up on the dashboard smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. We always seem to be left like this, two outsiders on the gravel. He has tuned the long-wave radio to a station from far away, to a woman singing something languid and gasping in French. I think how I would love to let him into Rohan's workroom, to see him stroke all that silk for Stella's future dresses, where his fingers could pucker those smooth lengths to shreds.

'Cherry brandy,' he says and grins. People say that Drake is very good looking. He has thick, curly dark hair, tipped at the ends with white and silver. He has the type of lined face that shows the history of his smiles. Everybody likes Drake. He is the life and soul of the party.

'Hmmgh,' I say, because the brandy is hot and makes my throat contract.

'Smoke?'

I lean against the front wheel of the Mercedes and say, in my best impression of Drake, ‘Don’t mind if I do.’ I find it easier if I pretend to be Drake. I do not know why.

He laughs. He always laughs at me, but I do not take it personally. He knows the truth about me. He has told me often enough. He leans over to put the cigarette in my mouth and lights it for me. I am breathing his breath: tobacco, brandy and, unexpectedly, lemons. His body is wet with a faint film of sweat and I am once again aware of his own strong smell. It reminds me of the big wooden crates Rohan is sent from clients or cloth men in other countries. That trapped air from another time and place, which rises up like an out-breath when the lid is prised from its mouth with a crow bar. Finely stitched material, so many reds, exotic tealeaves – free from their caddies in soft mounds – candle wax, brown paper, dust.

I cannot explain it, this odd sensation, but as I smoke and lean against the wheel, for a moment I feel I am Drake. I part my legs, swing one arm over my left thigh with the hand dangling down, hold my cigarette between my thumb and first finger, and squint as I inhale. All of me feels like Drake, like a man whose job it is to drive a privileged woman around in a black Mercedes, who has entertaining stories about bar brawls and a different woman in every town or village, who can tell people what to do and make them do it. There is sun in my eyes, and smoke, and the sting of brandy. Maybe if I transform myself into Drake I can be free of myself, free of everything.

‘Come and sit with me.’ He pats the seat between his legs.

I do not know how to say no. I have known Drake nearly all my life.

On the seat next to him is a well-thumbed magazine with the familiar pictures I do not want to see.

‘Why will you never look like this?’ says Drake.

‘I don’t know,’ I say. I close my eyes and try not to think of those orange-skinned women stretched out and bent over, parting slick mouths, long legs, beautiful and not like me.

‘Don’t tease me Diana. You know full well.’

‘Because I am ugly,’ I say. ‘Because I am not like other girls.’

‘That is right,’ he smiles his wide smile. ‘And that’s nothing to be ashamed of. It means when people want to do these things to you they will do them because they can see past your ugliness.’

‘Yes,’ I say. This makes sense to me. I have heard it often enough. Everything Drake says makes sense.

‘Although, remember, I will probably be the only one who can ever see past it.’

‘I know,’ I say.

‘Which means...?’

‘I am lucky to have you.’

‘Yes. So...?’

‘Thank you Drake.’

‘You’re welcome.’

He puts his hand on the zip of my jeans. ‘You’re welcome Diana. Anything to make you happy. I do make you happy, don’t I?’

‘Yes.’

He uses his driver’s hat as an ashtray while he unbuttons the front of his trousers. I know what to do. I have been doing this since I can remember. Since the first time I sat on his knee. It used to make me vomit, litres of clear liquid that fell from my mouth by the toiletful, so much puke I thought I would shrink to nothing and be a pile of cloth and skin and dead hair. But that was a long time ago.

But this time is different. This time he puts it in me.

A French woman sings of unrequited love, wanting to forget through bursts of white noise. A slide show: the sound of Stella and Rohan. Drake’s unpolished boots on the dashboard. My half-smoked cigarette on the gravel. Drake’s sweat dripping into my face from his forehead. And the feeling: you have brought this on yourself.

‘Do you want the dog?’ he asks, rolling another cigarette, sprinkling Stella’s husband’s tobacco into the fold as he buttons himself back in. ‘Or we could have another go?’ He winks.

I say nothing.

With a conspiratorial smile Drake shrugs his shoulders, and at the touch of an electric button whirs down the partition between the

front and back seats of the Mercedes. There, a sign of hope, is Ruskin. Stella's dog. He pants, oblivious, and jumps up to lick my face. I ruffle his hair with joy and relief.

'What do you mean?'

Drake puffs out smoke rings, 'Well, lovely Diana, I mean why don't you take the dog for a run?' His eyes are closed now. He leans back in his chair and taps out a swing beat accompaniment on his knee.

'OK,' I say. I feel now grateful, and almost say thank you, but the words stop in my head and never reach my lips. I click Ruskin onto his purple leash, turn away from the car and walk very slowly, without looking behind me, towards Hat Cove – that other part of the beach, that secret stretch, which only Rohan and I know.

The tops of my legs are sore and sting wet.

The dog looks up at me with happy eyes. The little silver bell engraved with his name that hangs from his blue collar tinkles as his head trembles.

'What do you say?' Drake is looking at the magazine again.

'Thank you Drake.'

'It's a shame you will never be like these women Diana. These are the women men really want. But ah...'

He strokes his thighs with the back of his hands. 'We must do the best we can with what God gave you.'

'Thank you Drake.'

As I reach the pine trees which separate the house from the sand, Drake turns up the radio and sings along in caustic French. Above a falling clarinet solo he calls something out which I do not quite hear but sounds like, 'Ask Rohan about your real mother. Go on – I dare you!' I do not ask him to repeat himself.

An afternoon to myself, a dog of my own, hiding on the private beach, skipping and bounding between the rock pools and glutinous seaweed. We run and play and fetch sticks and shells. With each return of a piece of driftwood in Ruskin's mouth I start to imagine that he is really my dog, one I share with my real parents. It's not really a kidnapping, as such. I have been given permission.

Time escapes.

When Rohan appears just as it is getting dark, looking for me, or maybe for the dog, I panic. I have been watching tiny, near-invisible crabs skate and scabble in a rock pool, but now I hide behind the rocks as he calls my name. With each shout the dog begins to whine, and I know I have to keep him quiet. Above all things, I do not want to be found. I am not ready to be found.

I hold my hands over his soft face and keep his body still with my own.

‘Shh, Ruskin. Please be quiet.’ I am nearly on top of him, slowly stroking his face at first, then wrestling with his limbs to keep him still. There is a quickening of the thud, thud of his tail which slows, then stops.

One final thud and a cloud of sand.

When it is very late, when the sea is quiet and there are no gulls, I return to the house. Remnants of an un-thrown party for three are stacked on the kitchen counter. Balloons, flat in their plastic packets, rolls of crêpe paper – tightly wound wrinkles of red, blue and green – a cake on the table, painted with food colouring to look like a face, a row of lit candles for a mouth, burning to stubs. A plate with several half-eaten sausage rolls scattered with curls of pastry, covered with taut cling film, and, beside the cake, three elasticated paper hats, pink and silver spiralled cones. I have never had a birthday party before.

Rohan sits at the table, dark in the candlelight. He looks tired. His red hair is twisted with grease and, I think, secrets, his eyes threaded through with bright veins. He wears an open-collared shirt with stains like shadows along its front: coffee, butter, lipstick. He has bare feet and his trousers are rolled up to his calves. The copper hair on his legs is thick, and I know if I touched it it would spring back in my fingers like moss.

‘I was worried about you,’ he says.

‘Sorry.’ I do not sit down.

‘Have you seen Stella’s dog?’ He pushes the cake slowly across the tablecloth.

‘Ruskin?’

‘Ruskin. It’s just Drake said Ruskin ran off. I wondered if you’d seen him.’

‘No,’ I say. ‘I didn’t.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yes. I think I’ll have a bath.’

Rohan sighs and stands up. ‘Blow these out first, will you? It’s bad luck to leave your birthday candles burning.’

Half-heartedly I lean towards the cake and breathe onto the candles. I forget to make a wish.

‘Let’s go swimming.’

‘What?’

‘Let’s go sea swimming. Night swimming.’

I nearly say no. I think I have had enough of the beach, but the thought of the sea in the dark – the cold water and salt of the sea – makes me change my mind. I nod.

‘Come on then,’ he says. We are both suddenly very cheerful.

We run to the beach and the sand is cold. I kick off my sandals as we run, fully clothed, towards the water, all the time saying nothing, just running, running, then swimming. The cold water is everywhere and I swim hard, as hard as I ever have done. My head thumps with the rush of blood and me holding my breath under the water for too long. Everything is black, but I know the landmarks by heart, I do not need to see. My lungs ache. There is smoke on the horizon, and bubbles, and enough thick green and grey to push my eyes closed forever. I do not even flinch at the stroke of seaweed in the murk. There is just cold and dark and water and the sound of my breath held tight in my chest. Everything feels clear and bright and wonderful.

When I eventually stop I am a good way out. My eyes have adjusted to the moonlight, I can see the orange lights from windows in houses along the shoreline. The sand is a flick of brown on a black wash landscape. The current is strong. I look about for Rohan but he isn’t there, so I panic slightly but only for a moment because soon his head is above the surface and he treads water beside me. He looks happy,

although his mouth is submerged in the water. His eyes are bright, no more bloodshot. We stare at each other through the night.

‘Rohan,’ I begin. Maybe it is time to tell him about Drake. Maybe he can make it stop. Maybe Drake is wrong and I won’t be sent away and locked up or worse. But nothing comes. I cannot risk it. I do not want to be sent away. And Rohan is not strong enough to hear it. I know he is full of his own sadness.

It is a long time since we have swum like this.

Gold moon and sand like glitter between my toes and in my eyes. Salt water in my mouth. Our legs kicking furiously to stay above water.

Rohan closes his eyes and pushes his head backwards into the sea. His red hair spreads outwards in the water like sun-dried seaweed, like tarnished foil, a Sun King let out at night. He smiles and opens his mouth as though to speak, but instead, for just a moment, puts one hand at the roots of my hair. I feel the scuff of his fingers against my ear, grooved and dry like driftwood. I wish I knew what it was like to have parents.

‘Happy thirteenth birthday Diana,’ he says eventually, as I scull the dark like water. ‘It will be a better year this year.’

1

On the evening of 14 March 2012, in the skies over the South Downs, a chartered helicopter travelling from London to the coastal town of Cowling suffered engine failure. Within a matter of seconds, thin strands of spring fog, flames and burning aluminium fell from the sky onto the footpath below. Among the debris was newly knighted fashion designer Sir Rohan Rickwood. A day that began with champagne, recognition and validation ended with broken glass, rubble and molten metal. Two occupants of the craft, Rickwood and the pilot, were found dead at the scene. Stella Avery, Rickwood's wife, the model and seventies style icon, avoided the disaster, having changed her mind at the last minute and stayed in London.

Rohan Rickwood: tailor, man of silk. Uncle Rohan was dead.

I used to think my mother was a mermaid with a slick tail. It is strange to think she ever lived, breathing air and not sea water. Secrets are more dangerous than truths. Truths are tangible and you can hold them in your hands until they make sense. Secrets leave room for reconstructions and interpretations. My entire life was made up of the interpretations of a lonely girl looking for meaning.

I never knew my real parents.

I still have the photograph Rohan gave me when I was a child. It is creased now, multi-folded through time: a faded black-and-white couple in Arran jumpers walking along the beach, a milk-furred golden retriever at their heels. Rohan said he took it himself when they visited him one autumn at Cowling. Before I was born.

He rarely talked about his sister and even less about her husband, but when he did – when his unpredictable temperament allowed – Uncle Rohan would regale me with elaborate retellings of my parents' accomplishments, their discoveries, their adventures across continents in the name of marine science. Dog whelks and sea slugs

were their shared speciality. Also ragworm and dune beetles and parched fronds of sea-holly. My mother – Dr Alice Everett – loved, and made her life’s work, coastal flowers: charted the life cycles of Stork’s bill, Scurvy grass and Lesser sea-spurrey. My father – Dr Will Everett – was England’s foremost expert on Guillemots. Apparently he could do the most uncanny impression of their distinctive call. A favourite party trick.

Will and Alice Everett died not long after I was born. A boating trip while on a scientific research trip. The bits of them I knew, snippets, anecdotes, flashes of their brilliance, were Rohan’s memories, passed to me across the kitchen table over soups and stews, over ginger biscuits and dark coffee, over the tailor’s dummy, pins at our feet. It was clear to me that Rohan’s feelings towards my dead father were of ambivalence, if not disdain. When he talked about my mother he would ring his hands in tight loops, or squint his eyes into tight creases. ‘She was beautiful, your mother,’ he would say. ‘It was taken from her. She couldn’t live the life she was destined to live.’

‘Do you miss her?’ I did not feel I had the right to miss what I had never known.

‘I miss what she was, what she could have been,’ he would say. ‘Before...’ A fist on the table and more whisky.

Once I asked if her hair was really that long – it is way past her hips in the photograph – and he said yes.

‘What colour was it, her hair?’

‘Reddish brown,’ he said. ‘Just like yours. Your mother was beautiful and funny and intelligent and kind. I could not have wanted a better sister. Life can be cruel Diana. It can take things from you before you are ready. It can leave you with dust.’

I liked to hear about her hair. It made her seem more real. More like me. When I brushed my own, I imagined hers threaded tight amongst the bristles. When I felt the sun on each strand, hot like polished coins, or when I tied mine up with a shoelace to take the damp thickness away from my neck on a sunny day, I wondered if her hair felt the same. I imagined she washed out the curls in her hair

with soapy water that final morning. One last time. Fingers with suds at the roots.

Will and Alice Everett were scattered at sea, so I never visited a grave. I suppose I always thought they were out there somewhere. Especially my mother, her hair curling around her like pond weed, a cocoon for a new birth. On her way back home from cold Canadian waters. A tide mother. I never knew how long it would take, but have always known the sea works this way. It brings things back to you. In time.

Where was I when I heard the news? I do not remember exactly. There were newspaper sandwich boards propped out in the street: 'Designer killed in chopper inferno', 'Just knighted: design world mourns tragic Rohan'. There was rolling news on the radio, the TV, but it didn't really sink in. Not at first. Over the years, I had become skilled at evading most mentions of either Rohan or Stella, like those adults you see who still, without realising, effortlessly miss the cracks in pavements in case some long-forgotten, imagined childhood terror should catch up with them. Interviews, showcases, TV documentaries all passed me by, myself safe in the knowledge that things were better now, that I need not cling to the past or their way of living. That I had recovered. But this time it was impossible to avoid. One phrase was repeated over and over, a dated expression that drew me in, 'no suspicious circumstances'.

Rohan's funeral was held, just over a week after his death, at St Joseph's church in Rain, a small village between Cowling and Brighton. I only heard about it from a Radio 4 arts programme I'd seen mentioned in the newspaper. It had been put into the schedule before his death, and kept in as a sort of tribute. His name, stamped out in black and white under 'Pick of the day' made me feel something, a stirring, a curiosity, combined with an unexpected, unwanted, need. I think I just wanted to feel a connection. I had seen neither Rohan nor Stella for ten years.

Ronnie and I had listened while doing the washing up. It had, for once, been mostly about Stella, how she had contributed considerable

cash to restore some especially rare organ pipes at that church: ornate, blue, Rococo cylinders which rose high up into the rafters and were carefully embossed with leaf-gold birds of paradise. Apparently, said the narrator, the restoration was part of a bigger project across the South East to relaunch monumental, ecclesiastical buildings as tourist attractions rather than places of worship.

‘So God is truly dead,’ laughed Ronnie. ‘Coincidence about the name. *Rickwood*. You’re not related, are you? You’ve always had such *style*.’

I shook my head but didn’t say anything. A movement of the head is not the same as a lie.

The church’s squat round tower, of tightly packed grey and brown stones, was certainly picturesque. I approached the graveyard from the nearby train station, stopping to read a poster stuck to the gate which proudly informed passers-by that St Joseph’s was to be one of several Sussex locations used in a new BBC adaptation of *Middlemarch*. I wondered if Stella had parted with all that cash because she had imagined, in some far-off future, the look of their coffins as they swung dramatically through those substantial wooden doors. Never too late to make a grand entrance.

It seemed good form not to wear black to a tailor’s funeral. I dressed in purple, bright like they use in church during Advent, with a low-fitting, wide-brimmed hat that hid my eyebrows but not my eyes. I painted my lips scarlet in honour of Stella, a sort of joke that didn’t even make me laugh. I considered wearing dark glasses for disguise, but I soon realised I need not have worried. On the shingle outside St Joseph’s nobody knew me.

In clusters around the church stood mourners in elaborate, or self-consciously understated, apparel gathered in mini communion, rearranging stoles, asymmetric hats, sweeping haircuts coloured in neat lines away from tight skin. There were people I recognised immediately, television personalities, singers, actors, models with silk handkerchiefs at their eyes, arms draped around older, over-groomed

men. People who had, as Ronnie and I would have giggled together had she been there, *had work done*. 'Freshened up' is what magazines call it, although in real life there didn't seem anything fresh about it. There was something rather sorry about it, about trying to hold time still in a stitched skin bag, something that made me feel I'd forgotten something important.

Although they showed no sign of recognising me, I immediately knew several faces of guests at Rohan's many soirees. I remembered them, women clinging to his words with the wine and the smoke, and laughter, always laughter and shut doors, beds unmade, eyes at keyholes, ears at walls. I tried to remember names, but I didn't really know them, these women. They were similar now to what they were then, but their hair was slightly higher, their make-up slightly thicker. I could not help but admire the coiled green felt-and-wire hat on the head of a woman in a white flared trouser suit. It crept up from the top of her ears, round and round, until it reached a summit about a hand's length above her head. It came to an exacting point, and was capped with a green PVC ball that made me think of olives in Martinis.

These women reminded me of the rows of females in Rohan's fitting room. I caught glimpses of them through the keyhole. There were always women in Rohan's fitting room: ladies in fine dress, girls, wives of rich men from our village, from faraway towns and cities. They were indistinguishable from the mannequins. Women came from miles around to be pinched in at the waist by him, to be cut off at the knees. They paid good money. But behind their backs he raised his eyebrows. Silly women. Always caring about their figures, trying to tempt a man, to entice him, with their narrowness, their controlled curves. 'You are better than that, Diana,' he said to me. 'You are not like them. Your mother was not like them, and neither are you. She wore clothes because she loved them or because they amused her or because she liked the colour of the lining. The first ever dress I made was for her, and she wore it to weed the garden.' He sighed. 'I have never been more pleased with any other piece I've made. Never. No. She was not like these women. And you are not like them.' I was

never quite sure how this made me feel. It was like Drake said. I was different.

‘Pardon?’ A man in a wonderful deep blue suit cut slim at the waist turned towards me. I was startled. Nobody knew me.

‘Sorry. Nothing,’ I said. ‘Talking to myself.’

The man in the magnificent suit stared at me, a flicker of recognition on his pink face. We knew each other.

Sir Jimmy Trowse. Stella’s first husband. Rohan’s best friend.

‘Diana!’

‘Sir Jimmy.’

He looked me up and down. I remembered a time when he didn’t see me. When he flung words out of his mouth, above my head, to the loveliest of Rohan’s rejects in the smokiest corners of the most lavishly decorated rooms. I was invisible then, a clump of child who could watch, could wait, could see. Suddenly I was one of those grown-up women, stitched into fine cloth, stroked in silk, sucked in at the waist in stiff darts.

‘You have some...’ he reached out to take a piece of invisible fluff from the collar of my dress. His fingers stayed there, resolute, on the purple downturned flap.

‘Thank you,’ I said. New Diana – Dee – the Diana I had become since leaving Cowling, would not stand for this uninvited contact. I would have laughed at him. Told him off for being an old leech, fake-shuddered and made a joke. Together Ronnie and I would have rolled our eyes and slipped our arms around each other’s shoulders. Instead I stood before him with his fingers on me, blushing, quite red. There was a unexpected thrill in it. In being chosen.

‘Have you seen my darling ex-ex-wife? She hoped you would be here.’ Sir Jimmy let his hand fall from my dress, speed-reading pearl buttons with the backs of his fingers.

‘No,’ I said. I looked around sharply with an impulsive fear that the woman who had stolen my home would be there, over my shoulder, catching me with her once husband’s hands upon me. But there was no one.

‘She’s about here somewhere. She’ll be delighted to see you. You’ve been quite invisible, haven’t you, these past years, despite her best efforts?’

I did not want to engage Jimmy Trowse in any conversation about my new life. I did not want the words ‘despite her best efforts’ to raise fury in me. Efforts? I pulled my hat further down my forehead and began to step away.

‘A little, I suppose,’ I said. ‘I’m going to look at the church. Gather my thoughts.’

‘Of course. Of course.’ He didn’t mention Rohan or offer condolences. He shrugged and twinkled.

Before I had a chance to say anything more a woman stepped onto the gravel who took all of my attention. A vision! Like the ascension of the Virgin in the illustrated Bible. This woman: mid-fifties with an intense mouth, fairly wide hips and turquoise glasses on a red string around her neck.

‘Who’s that?’ I said. ‘That woman?’

‘Who?’ Sir Jimmy looked about him and didn’t seem to see her. How could he not?

I nodded in her direction. ‘The one by the steps with the big specs.’

Sir Jimmy frowned slightly and gave a little shrug. ‘Oh her. She’s nobody. Nobody of any interest anyway. That’s Glenys Pimm. The academic. Married to Victor Eve.’ He turned and looked towards a tall, young brunette in four-inch heels and a grey fur coat. ‘Jodie!’ He bellowed and started towards her. ‘OK Diana. Looking forward to seeing you at the wake. Nothing like a bit of dinner and dancing, eh?’

I laughed a small laugh. A polite, disinterested laugh. ‘No, nothing like.’ But he was already gone.

Glenys Pimm, I thought. What a wonderful name. Pimm. You couldn’t say it without parting then pressing your lips together. Pi-mmm. Glenys Pimm had shoulder-length chestnut hair that she’d segmented off and pinned up into neat whorls with – I imagined – old-fashioned bobby pins. She wore scarlet lipstick – like Stella’s – and did

not lift her glasses onto her face. They sat, askew, the metal rim of the arm, surely, against her left nipple. I tried, through the people gathered about her in their power groupings, to see what kind of shoes she was wearing. I imagined them to be high-heeled, crossbar leather, perhaps brown, or unexpectedly, playfully, Robin Hood green, but before I could really see she had disappeared with the rest of the crowd into the arched doorway.

Inside the church the stained-glass windows refracted coloured light onto the thick white walls. The high-arched roof, made with fat beams linked at their tips, seemed to hold something cold and quiet, a different kind of atmosphere. As I sat, in one of the pews towards the back, I looked upwards and imagined surveying the whole thing from on high. I had an unchecked thought that maybe Rohan, the ghost of Rohan, was up there in the thin air, transparent, watching us make a show of grief below. I tried to meet his gaze but immediately looked away, my eyes drawn swiftly to the patent of my shoes.

What would I say if he really were there? I had believed, hoped, when I first moved to the city, that he was sorry I had gone away, that he often thought of me, that his life was not complete without me in it. I saw it as a sort of punishment for him. I imagined him coming to find me, rescue me, beg me back. Maybe that belief had sustained me all this time. When I heard the funeral announcement on the radio, when there had been no phone call, no one asking me to be there, no apparent desire for the long-lost niece to return home for the burial, I wondered if he had actually *forgotten* me. Or worse, that he didn't care. This thought had filled me with terror. That I could disappear completely, that he could live without me just as I'd learned to live without him. It was unthinkable.

A string quartet, seated near the carved wooden font, played something beautiful yet overtly grand, Beethoven I think. If only Ronnie were there, to tell me. The church was full now. Packed tight. So many people had arrived for the ceremony that some stood at the back and along the sides of the church, against the walls. Fashion-packed.

And in came the coffin.

The lid appeared to me a trap door just waiting to spring open, to send pieces of him tumbling out along the aisle like contents of a dropped suitcase. I remembered his shoulders, round rocks for swimming, and could only think that this heavy box, carried by unknown dark-suited men with bowed heads, held pieces of him, legs, arms, shoulders, hair, all blood and mangle from the accident. For the first time since I'd heard of his death I allowed myself to imagine those last moments, his body, ripped, burnt – what? Orange and pink pieces of him falling from the sky like body-part confetti, his final thoughts. Of what? Of whom?

How could I live now I knew I would never see him again? I had thought, believed, I never wanted to see him again. This was easy when I knew where to find him, when I could imagine him in his house, in his workroom, standing out by the sea. As his coffin passed me, silver handles waiting to be rapped like doorknockers, I wished I was somebody who cried, like the women in bright hats in the rows in front of me, but there was nothing apart from a dull ache in my legs and hands. A scraped-out stomach and mouth. Tired and dry. I had lost Rohan a long time ago.

And then, when I thought I might get up and leave, when I knew this was nothing like an easy goodbye, that there was no place for me at a funeral where I was anonymous, unwanted, I saw, amongst the mourners who walked with the coffin, side by side, Stella and Toby.

That face.

He looked just the same as he did when we were teenagers: the same black hair, now shorn to his scalp. That body, dressed in what Rohan would have undoubtedly labelled 'a cretin's idea of a fine suit of clothes'. I could tell he'd gone to the trouble of having it made especially for him, that he couldn't, after all these years, bring himself to buy something off-the-peg. I imagined his lovely-limbed body being fitted at a gentlemen's tailor, probably on Jermyn Street or Saville Row, one with a good reputation but not one with flair. Rohan always said Toby had the potential to look truly exquisite in clothes, if only

he had the imagination and inclination. He obviously still had neither, but he did look appealing. Stella would think he *cut a dash*. And his eyes – oh those eyes! – as blue as block colour in a fresco painting; a perfect slot of time cut out from the past and patched neatly into the present. You could hardly see the joins.

And Stella. Stella was dressed mostly in black: a silk shirt-dress over wide-legged trousers, pointed green leather boots with brass buckles, leather bangles up her left forearm. She had a long, olive-green silk scarf wrapped around her head, a turban with only a pale slice of hair hanging out behind one ear. Still the same Stella. Bleak and breathtaking. My whole body shook with rage and resentment. I was shocked to feel how much I hated her.

Pinned to Toby's left lapel was a crimson tulip, wilting: his own tribute to Stella. When she first moved in she had insisted on fresh tulips every day of the year, no matter the season. Rohan used to send me to the florist to pick them up and I used to spit onto the stamens. As a child, and then a teenager, I called her the Human Broom. In public she always wore her hair in a huge, fat chignon, with extra hairpieces pinned on top for good measure, on some days even sporting ridiculous hats for extra effect. Her locks resembled a carefully constructed celebration cake, her body was as narrow as a pole.

When the vicar began to speak, I couldn't stop staring at Toby and the Human Broom.

How could they?

The day I saw them together was as vivid in my memory as if I'd caught them, then, embracing in the aisle of St Joseph's. The two of them stood, by Needle Rock, far out on Cowling beach, bound together, like a couple in a sepia photograph. Despite the heat there was a vicious wind from the sea. Stella's white-blonde hair whipped around her, slapped against her cheeks like seaweed against rocks in a gale. Toby's hands were on the back of her neck, a thumb on her chin; so much worse than if his palms had been pushed into the trifle frills of her skirt – a sign of tenderness as well as lust. I had replayed this image in my head many times. Sometimes I would vary what they

were wearing, or the length of Stella's hair. Sometimes I would make her fat, or old, but nothing could take away its potency. It was always the same kiss. Their hands and lips. Connected.

I knew then it had been a mistake not to bring Ronnie.

People I had never met, or seen before, stood up at the lectern to tell unknown anecdotes about the man who had taught me to tie my shoelaces, to eat with a knife and fork, to thread a needle and make a hem. A woman in her fifties in a grey ball dress and bare feet. A young man with blue twists of long hair. A teenage girl in a pair of long cotton shorts and a ruffled lemon blouse. An old man with black-and-white striped trousers and an intricately decorated walking cane. Each began with, 'The thing about Rohan Rickwood was ...' as though each of them held the secret to his soul in one easily digested turn of phrase. I couldn't make out how any of them were related to Rohan or Stella. None of them introduced themselves, as though it went without saying who they were, how important their link to the coffin on the stand before us.

Jimmy Trowse, when it was his turn, got a happy cheer as he stepped up in his special blue suit.

'Well here lies as spectacular a champagne socialist as there ever has been.' Pause. 'And I should know. I taught him all I knew.'

Nervous laughter. A few loud voices from the back.

'I know it is not long since he died. I know the temptation is to weep and wail and quiver with a rush of grief. But I know he would not have wanted it. Not Rohan. Not Stella – I'm sorry my darling to speak for you but do forgive me. You were both far too stylish for any of that.' He held up his hands and she nodded. She looked neither happy nor sad. Her face was still, and expression seemed to have been washed from it. Botox, I mouthed, then held back an inappropriate giggle. 'Try and imagine them, as they were that night, before it all happened. Smug, happy, pissed.'

Stronger laughs.

'I would not be surprised if many of you are thinking that if this accident had happened twenty years ago, the police would have been

rummaging in my briefcase for wire cutters by now ...’ More laughter. ‘But that was the great thing about Rohan Rickwood. He could make you forgive him anything. Make you laugh with some unexpected turn of phrase, or just seduce you with a mere swish of his crimping shears.’ He ran his hands through his thick hair. ‘He had that universal quality, that earthy charisma, a desire for self-improvement that cut through any challenge. And, of course, if that failed he’d just ply you with enough good booze so you’d forget why you were angry with him in the first place.’

There were loud laughs and nodding heads all around me. Jimmy Trowse showing off at Rohan’s funeral, and me, hidden at the back, extraneous.

‘Oh,’ and he pointed at the congregation, ‘and don’t forget, the main reason we all loved him: he sure as hell knew how to make the fairer sex look like she needed a good *fuck* ...’ He slapped his hand over his mouth, feigned shock. ‘Oh, sorry Vicar, sorry *God*, for my *naughty words*, but being *men* I’m sure you are both well aware of what I’m talking about...’

A lot of laughter then. Jimmy Trowse pulled a hipflask out of his jacket pocket, raised it, then took a good swig. ‘I’ll miss the bastard. And as for Stella, I’m sure I speak for everybody when I say that you are not alone. And nobody wears a Rickwood dress quite like you do.’

And then, this man who had behaved, in front of the altar, in front of God, in a way that would have been unacceptable at any normal human being’s funeral, aimed a round of applause at the coffin of my dead uncle. After a few solitary claps he was joined by others, then others, until soon it seemed to me from my seat at the back that the entire body of the church was full of the sound of hands coming together, loud, enthusiastic, full of something I could not be part of, full of joy for what they believed, what they thought they knew, to be a life well lived, cut short, but worth something.

I sat completely still. I do not remember if I clapped. I had thought I wanted to say goodbye, to let go once and for all, but now I had so

many unanswered questions. It did not help that my name – and those of my parents – were not mentioned once in the whole sycophantic, revisionist retelling of a life. Just one nod towards me, just one simple mention of the old life, would have pacified me, would have stopped the sear of fury in my chest, the scorch of injustice in my lungs. I had always believed I had rejected the old life. Sitting in a wooden pew at St Joseph's, I realised that the old life might have rejected me, and that was different.

'As you all know, Stella has decided not to speak at the funeral,' said Jimmy as the applause subsided. 'She has said that there are not enough words, that they would be wasted.' Stella was looking down at her hands. I thought it odd that she wore no hat. She was always such a one for etiquette. I could not see the whole of her face, just shots of her like she was appearing through one of those old-fashioned slide projectors. 'She is happy to speak to anyone at the wake. Bring her a glass of champagne and give her your favourite Rohan memory. That's all she wants.'

In my head the words: what about *me*?

I had intended leaving after the funeral, but Jimmy Trowse cornered me in the doorway on my way out.

'Crematorium, then wake,' he said. 'Come in my car with me Diana.'

'No. No thank you. I need to get back to town.'

'Nonsense. You're coming with me.' He held on to my cuff.

'No, really. I'm not going to the crematorium.'

He shrugged. 'The wake then. We're having it at the Metropole.'

I looked blankly.

'Let my driver take you. To Brighton. He knows where it is. He's got keys to my room. Have a shower, a couple of gin and tonics. Freshen up.'

I found it unbelievable that I had been 'chosen' by Sir Jimmy. I knew the routine. Rohan had told me about it in the pre-Stella days, drunk, boasting. He and Jimmy would survey any public gathering

and choose a list of three women each. First choice and two reserves. In the unlikely event that none of the three women were interested, Rohan and Jimmy would swap lists and give the other's choices a go, by this time too bored or too drunk to care. There were variants of the game, like the time fifteen models of similar age, frame and features came to the house for a week to be fitted for Rohan's spring collection, and to be photographed on Cowling beach. Jimmy challenged Rohan to start at one end of the line-up, he at the other, and see who got to the centre model first.

'OK,' I said. 'Thanks.' I wasn't going to *do* anything. I wasn't even going to go. It is just easier, with someone like Jimmy, to consent and then make a deft escape.

'Great!' He raised his eyebrows. 'Wonderful.'

To the sound of strings and a trumpet the mourners at Uncle Rohan's funeral stepped out onto the shingle. There were photographers weaving in and out of the various groups, as though it were a wedding. At least the coffin was not being buried. Rohan was afraid of being buried alive. Not much chance of making that mistake here.

It was time to go home. To make my escape. I took one last look for the mysterious Glenys Pimm, but she was nowhere to be seen. I felt disappointed. I would have liked to have seen her shoes.

'Diana!'

I turned to see Toby Farrow striding towards me, his too-short trousers pressed against his body in the wind, the outline of his legs drawing my eye.

'Toby.' He swung towards me, tried to embrace me. I think he would have tried to lift me and swing me about if it wasn't for my crossed legs and hastily folded arms. 'I'm so glad you're here. I didn't know how to get hold of you. We didn't ... Look! It's you!' He held his arms wide and shook his head. 'Diana!'

The trousers of Toby's suit skimmed the top parts of his ankles, and the creases in the sleeves were not quite close enough to the seams. The jacket's lapels were sixties-style, thin and insubstantial, unsuited to his now clean-shaven head. Despite this, despite the bad choice and bad fit,

I liked the material of his suit: some kind of cheviot, textured and a very dark green, the colour of moss on a tree.

‘Yes, it’s me,’ I said. ‘I wasn’t going to come. It was a last-minute decision.’ This much was true. ‘I thought it was the least I could do, to come.’

‘And you’re coming to the crematorium?’ He looked over his shoulder and threw his head about as though looking for something, or someone. ‘It may not be too late for you to do a reading... or say something...’

All eyes upon me.

‘I’m not coming.’

‘What?! You’ve *got* to. You can’t just turn up and disappear like Cinderella.’

I laughed, but my voice came out horizontal, monotone. ‘I can’t come. I have to get back.’ All these dull, flat phrases. The opposite of sparkling conversation.

‘Oh. Oh. Yes. Of course.’

It’s Toby! Toby Farrow! Say something clever. Anything.

‘But can we stay in touch?’ He pulled an empty chewing-gum wrapper from one of the pockets in his trousers and a short pencil from his jacket. ‘I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for *years*. I’ve been working on something. I didn’t know how much you knew. I don’t want you to get the shock of your life. Today is not the time for it. I haven’t been able to talk about it... Oh, I’m rambling like an old woman... Just tell me we can stay in touch.’

Say no, that’s all you have to do. Go home to Ronnie. Be happy.

‘OK.’

‘I want to talk to you about this film I’m making.’

‘OK.’

He handed me the pencil and wrapper. ‘Give me your number. I know I can’t trust you to call me.’

I wrote down our actual phone number on the blue paper. It would have been so easy to slip in a wrong digit, to make up an entire row of numbers.

'I'm off,' I said.

'Yes. Right. Well. Good to see you. You sure you don't want to hang around and say hello to Stella?'

Good God no. 'Not this time. I'll miss my connection.' This was a lie. My ticket allowed me to catch any train I liked. An afterthought: 'Oh, is your mum here?' I looked about for Trudy. Plump, honest, reliable Trudy. She had lived in the house opposite ours through much of my childhood and had never failed to provide me with cakes, tea and the teenage magazines that Rohan had so forcefully forbidden me from buying.

'No,' he said. 'She's back in Cowling.' He looked about him for a moment. 'This isn't really her scene.' His face darkened and then he nodded. 'Well you take care.' Then two neat kisses on either side of my mouth. Hands on my shoulders.

'Bye Toby.'

'Bye Diana. I will call you.'

I ran along the church path, away from the flash of blonde hair I caught in the corner of my eye.

On the train I thought of Toby's legs, of that curve of skin behind his ear between his hairline, his hands on my shoulders, searing holes like cigarette burns through my dress. I thought of Stella's thin face, her fine bones and expressive fingers. Rohan in pieces, thrust into a hot furnace, no longer real, or even *there*.

At Victoria I changed into jeans and white shirt and wiped off my make-up, stuffed my dress and hat into my backpack. No need to provoke questions when I got home. Ronnie thought I had been at work. I walked home through Holborn, just as it was getting dark. There were rubbish collectors on every corner with sacks and big gloves and stubble. Central London is the only place I have ever lived that the binmen don't whistle at girls, although there was one man, one man in a small white electric sweeper who drove very slowly around the streets where we lived, collecting glass. He followed me sometimes, on my way back from the tube, drove alongside me. He

seemed harmless, would ask me, endlessly, on dates, where I worked, what I did, who I was seeing. His name was Carson and he was from Nigeria. He was there this evening. The usual questions. This time I told him I was a journalist for the *Times*, that I wrote pieces on theatre and high fashion, that I really could not stop because I was on my way to interview a famous playwright over dinner.