The Tristan Chord

by viviandarkbloom

Summary

The beautiful chord: leading everywhere, leading nowhere, pressing a nerve, opening a vein.
prelude to a kiss or, would you like some wine with your epiphany?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Every something is an echo of nothing.

—John Cage

Go on singing.

—Orson Welles, F for Fake

Eighteen years.

Caroline sits in her Jeep outside Kate McKenzie’s house with the same disconsolate mantra, the same idiot refrain, rolling through her mind since the day she confirmed that her husband has been having an affair. How many months ago? Two? She can’t remember. Weeks? Seven, eight? She’s too consumed with the larger date now looming over her life: Eighteen years.

Was eighteen years of marriage a success or a failure? These days, many marriages don’t last half as long. Her parents were married for what seemed an eternity and were utterly miserable. Was it worth it? In that instance, obviously not. But she had thought she made John happy—at least as contented and satisfied as a housecat. Perhaps that was the problem; even the most spoiled of housecats yearn for the great outdoors, no matter how delusional and ill-prepared said felines may be concerning the dubious adventures out there in the world. She was a good wife, she thought. Organized and ran the house well, raised the children properly, listened to him, gave him advice, propped up his ego, proofread his novels, was good in bed per Cosmo Sex Tips. There was that one little thing in her nature, so buried and subsumed within her, she thought, that it had been hardly worth mentioning to him. But she now realizes that she has lied to him for, technically speaking, more than eighteen years so perhaps in the vast scheme of things, him lying to her for several months pales in comparison. She is the flaw in their marriage, the fatal crack in the foundation that led to the grand collapse.

Because that little thing was never completely buried. Over the years it would claw its way to the surface, like in a horror story when a reanimated corpse digs out of a grave—and by the way, Caroline thinks as recrimination burns a hole through her self-reflection in the rear-view mirror, that’s a lovely way of envisioning one’s sexuality. Eighteen years of guiltily masturbating to and fantasizing about gauzy remembrances of ex-girlfriends, a former secretary pre-Beverly and thank God she had quit to get married, a bikini-clad woman poolside at their hotel during a vacation in Cadiz, and the image of an underwear model glimpsed in Vogue (July 2004 issue, still breathlessly recalled so many years later). Eighteen years of living on scraps.

Not Kate, though. Kate was flesh and blood and as such too real, too achingly close, and too kind, with her blunderingly innocent and recurrent offers of if you ever want to talk about things—well, we’re friends now, aren’t we? Yes, they were friends now, through months of casual lunch dates and innocuous glasses of wine after work. But Caroline sees it now, these underhanded machinations of her reanimated-zombie sexuality. From the start she was aware of those rumors
about Kate. She had tried to pry more information about Kate out of the stalwart, gossip-averse Beverly who, like a sort of benevolent version of her mother, gently guilt-tripped her into rescinding those prurient petitions. In retrospect Caroline’s sense of decorum about Kate was as misguided and wonky as a teenager’s and she was surprised her behavior did not betray those irrational hormonal interests more frequently: *Like ohmigod Beverly, she’s wearing sensible shoes again, that’s got to mean something!*

But what does anything mean anymore? Eighteen fucking years. Now she’s old. She feels old. *When I look at my face in the mirror, there’s an old woman staring back at me.* She remembers this line from the song “Surabaya Johnny,” performed by some cabaret singer she saw so many years ago in Amsterdam. She and John were there alone, sans children. She remembers all too well the anguished near-shriek of the singer as she spat out the line and her own shuddering thought in response: *I never want to be that, that kind of woman, full of regret.* And John’s rapturous look as the woman performed. Did he find her attractive? Was he imagining himself as Surabaya Johnny, the loathsome but lovable traveling cad? They had several days apart during that trip; it was some sort of writing conference he was attending for work. Could it be that instead of work-shopping a novel he was work-shopping his cock instead? She had sensed he didn’t want her along, but, filled with his usual brand of faux enthusiasm, had empathically agreed when she suggested that she come with him. She was trying to be romantic, impulsive—all those things she thought he wanted.

She thought she was being a good wife.

*I never want to be that woman.* Too fucking late for that now, isn’t it?

She slaps at the rear view mirror.

“You have no heart, Johnny.” She says it aloud.

But really, she thinks. What am I doing here?

She pries her gaze away from the rear view mirror to see Kate, wearing a pair of jeans that make her look terrifically long-legged, walking toward the Jeep. She thinks of the smitten Virginia Woolf describing Vita Sackville-West as “stalking on legs like beech trees.” She’s sweating, largely because she turned off the air conditioning about fifteen minutes ago and stupidly left the windows rolled up and now she’s sticky and pale and bunched up and possibly resembles one of those damp, congealed balls of coconut rice found at dodgy Asian takeouts.

Smiling wryly, Kate lightly raps on the window, which slides down in surrender.

“Hi,” Caroline says stupidly.

“When I said you could come over,” Kate says, “I did mean you could actually, you know, come inside the house.”

“Yeah. I know.” Caroline blinks, looks down, hopes she is not blushing. Her blouse, a summery linen light as parchment, clings delicately to her back in a stucco of anxious sweat.

“It’s cooler inside,” Kate adds.

“Yeah.” Again. You fucking idiot, Caroline says to herself.

“And I have wine. The white you like—chenin blanc?”

“Any wine is good wine.” As a prelude to blubbing, Caroline’s bottom lip quivers. Over the past two months she’s already cried in front of Kate twice and does not want to make it a sad
bloated painful recurrence, like menstruation.

Sympathetic, Kate winces. “That bad, eh?”

She takes a deep breath, gets a grip. “It’s—nothing’s changed, nothing’s new. I don’t want to bore you with it all.”

“You won’t bore me. You at your most miserable is more entertaining than anything on telly.” Kate smiles generously to clearly indicate it’s a joke, dear.

“So my misery is humorous to you.”

Kate sighs. “Self-pity doesn’t suit you, Caroline.” She steps back, nods toward the house. “Come inside. Please.”

Despite no air conditioning, coolness in all forms is well orchestrated within the house: Ceiling fans and open windows stir the cross breezes and a mellow, laid-back bebop jazz from an old but lovingly maintained turntable fills the living room.

“This is nice—the music,” Caroline says as she sits on a couch.

Kate walks out of the room, presumably to fetch the wine, but then her head pokes around the vestibule so abruptly that Caroline jumps and nearly falls off the cushion. “Miles Davis!”

“Oingo Boingo!” Caroline blurts.

Kate bursts into laughter. “What?”

“Oh. I thought maybe we were playing a game, where we randomly shout out names of musicians or music groups.” Nervously Caroline fondles a throw pillow, yearns to smother herself with it.

“No, you—” Kate shakes her head, still laughing. “What you are listening to is Miles Davis. Do you like jazz?”

“I don’t know a lot about it. But I do, you know, usually like it when I hear it.”

Kate disappears again. Caroline braces herself for another puppet-like appearance but it doesn’t happen. Instead she returns five minutes later with two glasses and an open wine bottle swaying precariously in her grasp. As if daring Caroline to chug the contents, she sits the bottle on the low table in front of her sweaty and miserable guest.

As Kate pours, Caroline tries to revive the conversation. “I suppose I know more about classical music. Opera. My dad used to take me to the opera sometimes. Mum hated it, so, I was like his date.”

Kate makes a face. “That sounds—if you don’t mind my saying so—a bit creepy.” She flops into a chair near the sofa.

“No. It was fine, really. I liked it. I didn’t spend a lot of time with him when I was a teenager, so it was kind of a treat when we did do something together. Although it was strange to be the only person under the age of 40 watching the Ring Cycle.”

The rapture of Kate’s laughter is like another strand of music twining itself to Miles Davis’s riffs, joining with that sweet horn toward an ascension to heaven, and it’s all a key that unlocks something within Caroline that she thought would be forever withheld from her. “Oh God. I can’t believe he took you to see Wagner.”
“It was my first opera,” Caroline says proudly. Seen over the course of two evenings, it had been like running a marathon for the terminally unhip. But she was invested. Months beforehand, she had studied German. Pored over the libretto. Read up on the singers. And when the moment finally arrived she was fully prepared and, unlike her father, fully awake for every glorious minute of it.

“Usually first-time operagoers cut their teeth on something a bit more palatable, shall we say. Like The Magic Flute.” Amused, Kate shakes her head. “So you like Wagner.”

“That sounds like an accusation.”

“Oh, no. Not at all.” Kate sips her wine. “It’s not terribly fashionable to admit you like him these days, but I do. I mean, Tristan and Isolde practically changed my life.”

“Did it?” It’s like the heavens opening again—Kate sharing a crumb of personal information. Or maybe you’re finally poking your turtlehead out of your miserable bloody shell and paying attention? she chastises herself.

“Well, the prelude did. It was—amazing. Heard it on the radio when I was 13. Live broadcast of a Saturday afternoon matinee at the Met in New York. Mum would sometimes listen to it while she was preparing lectures. I’d never heard anything like it.”

Caroline frowns. “I can’t recall it.”

Kate puts down her wine glass and leaps to her feet. It occurs to Caroline that she’s nervous. Is that a good thing? she wonders. “Well, we must listen to it then, don’t you think?” Elegantly Kate lunges and kneels in front of the cabinet under the turntable and speakers. She opens it, revealing a raggedy rainbow row of music albums.

“People still listen to records,” Caroline says.

“Vinyl’s always better. Can’t stand digital. Always seems so tinny.”

“Oh.” Suddenly Caroline feels guilty for the merciless way she got rid of all her old records years ago at the advent of the CD age. Well, she doesn’t regret chucking the Roxette albums. Or Culture Club. Or Frankie Goes to Hollywood. Now she’s thinking of chucking the CDs. If she cannot erase the past eighteen years, then perhaps silencing the soundtrack of all those years would do. “That’s a lot of albums.”

Kate snorts. “Not even all of them.” She’s thumbing through them. “Still have some with my mum. Think she put them in storage, though. Oh, look.” She grins and pulls out an Oingo Boingo record—a seven-inch of “I Got My Baby Back.”

Caroline laughs. “I won’t tell anymore.” After giving the wine a perfunctory tilt-a-whirl, she tries it. Cool, crisp, dry, entirely satisfying. “Where’s your mum these days?” She thought Kate had said something about her mother living and teaching in the United States now, but it’s quite possible she had been too entranced by Kate’s eyes and too preoccupied with surreptitiously viewing Kate’s cleavage to say for certain; clearly, in her current mental state paying attention to detail was simply too much to expect.

Kate either ignores the question or is too lost in her search for Wagner. After a few minutes and some grumbling, however: “Ah! Here we go.” Jumping to her feet and awkwardly clutching the album, she seems younger to Caroline, coltish and eager and yoked to hesitation. Like so many young girls Caroline has taught over the years.
“Go ahead, put it on,” Caroline says.

Newly self-conscious, Kate shuffles. “I’m being a total nerd about this.”

“I don’t think that’s a bad thing. At all.”

“Well.” Kate looks guiltily at Miles Davis spinning on the turntable. “All right, then.” Carefully she removes that album, a black disc caught in the cat’s cradle of her fingers, and puts it away; Caroline catches the title—Relaxin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet—and thinks, how thoughtful, she must’ve thought she would relax me with that, she does not realize yet what a hopeless case I am.

On goes Tristan and Isolde.

As a child Caroline liked to imagine that the music on records existed in some other parallel universe, and that the musicians and singers who performed it existed in suspended animation until they were roused into performance by the needle on a stereo. The needle injected a secret serum into their flat, waxen world and brought them to life. Later, as her mind took a more scientific bent, she grilled her parents on RPM speeds and electromagnetic waves and Hertz frequencies with such regularity that (1) she had the epiphany that that they really did not know everything and (2) they finally bought for her a set of encyclopedias.

The prelude of Tristan and Isolde begins so softly that she barely notices that it has started. Kate, however, is intent on the trail, as a hound catching scent of her quarry. As she files away the Miles Davis album she kneels in front of the cabinet again and, with the turntable above her like an altar, raises her hand in benediction. “The chord there—did you hear it?”

“Um.” Caroline drinks more, feels as if she’s wading in the deep end of a very unfamiliar pool. “You mean that bit of, duuuuuuh-duh-duh-duuh-duuuuh?”

Kate has obviously heard more idiotic musical notation from her students, Caroline thinks, because she snaps her fingers and points at Caroline as if she just scored major points in the classroom. “Yes! Exactly. They call it ‘the Tristan Chord’—did you know that?”

Caroline shakes her head.

“Funny they call it that, because it’s not that uncommon or even particular to Wagner, really. You can hear it in a lot of other pieces by other composers, like Beethoven, Purcell, others—but I think Wagner kind of made it his own because it just lingers for so long, open-ended, for the nearly the entire bloody opera. It drives you a little crazy, making you nervous and yearning, making you want more—” Abruptly she stops, clears her throat, and rises from the floor. When she’s settled back into her chair with a glass of wine, she tries for a more general variation on a musical theme. “It’s weird. How music is. How it can always take you back to a certain point in your life. A certain memory. And then when you hear it again, you’re in that moment, and you create an even stronger tie to that moment every time you hear it, and then that creates a new moment. Like every time I hear this I think of that first time, in my mum’s apartment while she worked. And then I think of other times I’ve listened to it—like, um, Christmastime about two years ago, after my divorce—”

“—and now, on a warm, late summer evening, humoring your moopy depressed friend,” Caroline adds.

Kate laughs nervously, gulps down some wine. She slouches deep into the chair and drapes a long leg over its arm.
Caroline realizes she has somehow shut down conversation for the moment. Or Kate is wisely deciding to let the music do the talking for a while. She closes her eyes, tries to focus on it. So that was the Tristan Chord, she thinks—leading everywhere, leading nowhere, pressing a nerve, opening a vein, revealing a chasm where anything is possible. When the prelude gathers up its final notes like so many delicately frayed and aged petticoats and gently departs, leaving a guttural hiss filling the room before Act I begins, Caroline opens her eyes again.

Kate is looking at her rather intently. Her leg, still dangling from the arm of the chair, sways with the measured menace of a metronome. “Thought you’d fallen asleep.”

“No.” Caroline leans forward, takes the wineglass, and finishes it off. “It was beautiful.”

Kate is not meeting her glance. As if she had said, you are beautiful and uncorked a dangerous genie granting so many reckless wishes. As if the music itself possessed the power to finally loosen her tongue. Who knows, maybe it did. All she knows is that the chasm is wide open and this is the only lifeline through it all: This woman, these feelings.

“Eighteen fucking years,” Caroline says.

“What?”

“I’ve been saying that to myself all day—well, for months now.” Caroline stares at her hands until a barely perceptible tremble arises, as if willing herself into a crisis. “I’ve spent eighteen years denying who I am. Pretending that I was somehow satisfied with what I had—and I wasn’t. I’m not. I wanted a family, a career, but not—I thought there would only be one way to obtain those things and I was wrong, so fucking wrong.”

“Wow.” It’s all Kate can manage to say.

Not that Caroline expected anything else. What could one say to that? “Yeah.”

Regardless, Kate gamely tries assuaging her. “Whatever happens from here out—you know, it will be all right.”

“Will it?”

“Think so.” She sits up, leans forward intently. “You’ve just made a big realization about your life, and well, once that all settles in, you’ll feel better about things. More assured, confident. You’ll figure it all out.”

“That’s a nice—vote of confidence. Thank you.” On her way toward the most reckless thing she’s ever done in her life, she stumbles over banalities.

Ever polite, Kate lobs them back. “You’re welcome.”

Caroline grips the ballast of a sofa cushion. Oh God, what am I about to do?

Kate rubs her hands over her jeans, sighs, and jokes nervously: “So. Would you like some more wine with your epiphany?”

“No. What I’d really like to do is—” Caroline stops, takes a breath, makes certain that their eyes meet this time. “I’d really like to kiss you.”

“Well.” Amid the Germanic bellowing of Isolde as she protests being dragged off to Cornwall, Kate grins so beautifully and broadly that it makes Caroline more light-headed than the wine, and it seems to Caroline that they are both welcoming the chasm they are both about to fall through.
“It’s about bloody time.”

Chapter End Notes

So I had this fab (?) idea to include a soundtrack with each chapter in this story. But my ambition exceeds my technical skill, because I had issues getting the music to embed here. So I'm afraid for the time being you're just getting YouTube links, sorry.

Chapter 1 Soundtrack

Relaxin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet (The album in full.)

Teresa Stratas, "Surabaya Johnny" (From the musical "Happy End," written by Kurt Weill, Elisabeth Hauptmann, & Bertolt Brecht.)

Prelude to "Tristan and Isolde," Richard Wagner
The eve of St. Agnes

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

A part of kindness consists in loving people more than they deserve.

— Joseph Joubert

An engagement ring burns a hole in Caroline’s purse. Not really, but the mere existence of the ring—an impulse buy over lunch, also an unpleasant surprise that even something modest and tasteful costs a shitload of money these days and so she was hyperventilating in the Jeep afterward—brings a heated, dizzying flush to her face. Back at school, as the lunch break draws to a close, she’s standing outside on the steps, imperious over all she surveys like Scarlett O’Hara on the verandah of Tara and with Beverly at her side like a minor, patient suitor well aware that he’ll always be around no matter what incendiary tragedy may befall them. From across the grounds Caroline sees Kate and Michael Bloody Dobson chatting. They still talk. They’re still friends. In fact, they were having lunch today. She cannot fathom why and it annoys the fuck out of her but there is little she can do other than play the cool, accepting girlfriend. Hey girl, I respect you so much that I will never ever question your dubious shitty choice of friends. You could bring Hitler home for tea and I would make scones for him and serve them on my best china. You could invite Pol Pot to our wedding.

Wedding. Wedding?

Fuck. Don’t get ahead of yourself. You haven’t even proposed yet, knobhead. Fuck. When am I going to ask her? It will have to be done properly. On my knees? Should I hire a band? Rent out a restaurant? I don’t even know if she’ll like the ring—

“Caroline, are you all right?”

Caroline blinks, realizes Beverly is staring at her.

“You look a little flushed. You’re not—?”

“No.” Caroline squeaks irritably, realizing once again that she is at that stage of life where one gets asked about the specter of menopause with increasing and alarming frequency. Her mother, in fact, likes to trot out the question every fortnight or so.

“Oh.” Always hopeful for logical explanations regarding her superior’s behavior, Beverly looks disappointed.

Caroline returns to staring at Kate and the Wankpot. “Beverly, can you read lips?”

“I believe you’ve asked me that question several times over the course of my employment, and I regret to inform you that my answer remains the same.” Beverly pauses. “No.”

“Pity.”

“Don’t worry so.” Beverly hands her a printout of her monthly schedule and smiles. “Kate knows enough to take anything Michael says or does with a very large grain of salt.”

Later at home, the evening plays out as it has over the past few weeks: She and Kate have dinner with Lawrence, who eats rapidly, mumbles replies to their questions, and departs the first minute
he can without appearing overtly rude and thus risking the wrath of his mother. Then they dawdle at the table. Kate picks at scraps on her plate, then Caroline’s plate. Caroline sips wine and internally debates whether she should ask how lunch with the Wankpot went.

She doesn’t have to debate for long, because Kate brings it up. “So I had lunch with Michael.”

“I know.”

Kate narrows her eyes.

“You told me this morning,” Caroline reminds her.

“Oh. Right.”

“And I did see you with him later,” she confesses. “How is he?”

“Fine. He’s really, um, pleased with his classes this semester.”

“Good.”

“He asked about you.”

“Oh.”

“I said you were fine, and that we were really happy together, excited for the baby.”

Caroline is not certain that excited is the correct word for the staggering amount of anxiety she feels about the thought of raising another child again. Most of the time she’s nauseously nervous. She knows the tales of husbands and partners who have sympathy pains and nausea while their spouses are pregnant, and until now has always thought it faintly ridiculous. She is grateful that John, whose attempts at empathy frequently border on the pathetic and ludicrous, never acted this way while she was pregnant—probably because he knew she would have killed him. She recalls pregnancy as her body going into a state of siege, held hostage not so much by a fetus but a whirlwind of heightened emotions that took every ounce of strength she possessed in rigorous control of said feelings. In other words, she successfully avoided killing or maiming anyone during that wondrous time when she was incubating new lives.

Despite rare bursts of temper, however, Kate has managed this state of being quite beautifully, and in every sense; once again Caroline finds her gaze drifting from Kate’s face to the munificence of her breasts, barely corralled by the team effort of bra and blouse. God, Caroline thinks, please let her stay awake a little longer tonight because I will go mad if I can’t—she gulps, quashes the thought, focuses again on the conversation at hand, and forces a smile. “Great.”

When Kate perfunctorily returns that strained smile, however, she knows something remains unsaid.

“Is something wrong?” Caroline asks.

“No. Not really.”

“Did he say something about me?”

Kate rolls her eyes. “You think everything is about you.”

“What’s your point?” When Kate smiles and shakes her head, Caroline tries a different tack. “All right, then. Did he say something that upset you?”
Kate sighs, rubs her brow. “He’s a shit-stirrer. He’s always been that way. I should know by now, not to listen to him.”

Afraid that she will snap the stem of her wine glass in two whilst imagining it to be Michael Bloody Dobson’s neck, Caroline instead drums her fingers on the table. “What did he say?”

“It’s not important.”

“It is, if it’s bothering you—you shouldn’t allow anything to bother you right now. No stress, the doctor said.”

Kate smiles sweetly. “Who’s stressed?”

“Really?” She keeps the old headmistress glare trained on her lover; it’s surprisingly effective. About the only person it has never really worked on is Gillian, who would typically glower right back in an infuriatingly mocking fashion.

“God, it’s all so stupid,” Kate blurts, “and I told him I already knew—”

“Knew what?”

“All right.” Kate says. “He told me—he just had to bloody tell me this—” She sighs. “He said he saw you in town, month or so before Christmas, parked in your Jeep, kissing some woman. Who was not me.”

Fucking wanker. “Oh.”

“Yeah. See, that’s why I didn’t want to bring it up. I knew it would make you uncomfortable.”

“I’m not uncomfortable.”

“You are. Your voice just went into that squeaky octave.”

Caroline clears her throat, pitches her voice lower. “I’m not uncomfortable,” she repeats.

“Now you sound like Ian McKellen with a head cold.” Kate props her chin in her hand.

“Look. It doesn’t matter if I’m uncomfortable—I’m just, you know, sorry he brought it up and—shit, I mean—I don’t want you to be upset about it. I’ve told you. It’s over.”

“I know. It blindsided me a little. That’s all.” Kate sips water. “This was that woman you were dating, shagging, whatever? I mean, there was just one, right?”

She’s asked this before and, patiently, Caroline says it again. “Yes. There was only one. I don’t have that much pull.”

“I beg to differ. But all right.” She shrugs. “I wasn’t even certain I believed him at first. I mean, he said you were parked in an alley, and that really doesn’t seem like you—you’re so obedient behind the wheel, like a little old lady. But then, you kind of casually shagging someone doesn’t seem like you either.”

In a rather obvious and pathetic attempt to defuse the situation, Caroline had momentarily thought of whipping out the ring, which was still buried in her purse, and hastily proposing; instead, Kate has whipped out a phantom dagger to bloodily score the heart of the matter, outlining a target for a bullseye that she will never hit. Not because she’s incapable of it, but because she is far too merciful.
Too kind for me, Caroline thinks, too kind for her own good. “I wasn’t really myself at that time.”

Kate ponders this. Her jaw shifts. “And who are you now?”

“The woman who loves you.” Who wants to marry you.

“That sounds like something out of a film.” Thoughtfully, Kate drags a finger along the water glass. “I should ask Gillian—she’s the big movie expert, didn’t you say?”

Caroline nods. The mention of Gillian causes a series of twitches so pronounced that she is grateful Kate is looking away for the moment. Kate seems intent on being chummy with Gillian, which, of course, gives Caroline the shits. At the most recent family gathering on New Year’s Day, Kate went out of her way to chat up Gillian, who reacted with the bewildered wariness of a bullied child approached by the most popular kid in school. Was it only a matter of time before this all fell apart?

“I know you don’t want to talk about this,” Kate says.

“I don’t.” Caroline swallows. “But you can ask me,” she says shakily as her nerve gradually slips away, “anything. Whatever you want.”

Kate fixes her with a beautiful stare, so intense that Caroline knows she is incapable of replying in any other fashion than a truthful one, and while she futilely attempts to prepare as best she can for the question she anticipates—Who was she?—what Kate actually asks catches her so completely off guard that Caroline is acutely disappointed that she cannot unburden herself of the secret of having slept with her stepsister:

“Was the sex good?”

Caroline feels her jaw moving but no words come out, no truth settled in a velvet cushion of taradiddle—ah, my dear, why speak of matter base and profane when our love reigns supreme? Nor does she have enough opportunity to drape her expression in a condescendingly affectionate you’re-jealous-but-it’s-cute glance. What would it mean if she really admitted it? All of it? That woman made me burn, made me scream, made me nearly break my bed. I bit her, I clawed at her, I begged for her. Afterward I couldn’t wait until she left. Then I couldn’t wait until she came back.

“Well.” Kate smiles bitterly. “I see.”

“You see what? It was just sex. It was good, but it meant nothing.” She’s glad Gillian has made herself scarce since the holidays. Caroline considers it a miracle that they all survived that potentially disastrous family luncheon on New Year’s Day: Her mother and Lawrence vying for the most tactless comment award (Celia on the immigrants, Lawrence on the gays), a crying Calamity Jane who refused to sleep or eat although she did shit in abundance, and the glittering crown jewel in their dysfunctional family—Gillian, sullen and bountifully hungover, who apparently made no New Year’s resolution to up her fashion game because she showed up wearing a frayed plaid shirt with a hole at one elbow and jeans flecked with mud. Her bedraggled appearance was a source of embarrassment to Raff, who directed a steady stream of thinly veiled insults toward his mother until she told him to “fuck off or walk home,” thus causing both Alan and Caroline to chug their champagne cocktails, Kate to stare helplessly at the ceiling, and Celia to obliviously suggest that she and Gillian go shopping “for some new plaid things, what do you say?”

“You’re very defensive,” Kate observes. “And don’t you dare call me Captain Obvious.”
“Okay. I’ll only say you’re stuck with me,” Caroline says. “I chose you. I mean, there wasn’t a choice to be made. I wanted you all along. I wanted to be with you. I couldn’t stop thinking about you.” She looks out the window at the impenetrable winter evening, the dark chill that blankets everything. *You get everything you want and it’s still hard. Why?* “Are you saying it’s not good with us?”

“No. God, no,” Kate says emphatically. “But you went from, you know, carefree shagging to being with a pregnant woman who falls asleep on you whenever you make a move.”

“Christ,” Caroline laughs, ”you're not going to be pregnant forever.”

“No,” Kate moans, “it only feels like forever.”

Caroline takes her hand and the tight knot of her fingers unfurl under the shelter of Caroline’s palm. In one touch the tension seeps out of her and it amazes Caroline. *How is it, she marvels, that I, of all people, can do this to you? Why am I this fortunate?*

“Do you know,” Kate says, “it’s the Eve of St. Agnes?”

It is like her to randomly proffer some interesting bit of minutiae when she’s at a loss over what to say. Not unlike Gillian with her movie factoids. Don’t think about Gillian, she tells herself. “No. Didn’t know that,” Caroline says as she brushes Kate’s knuckles with her thumb. “Not much up on my saints.”

“Keats wrote a poem called *The Eve of St. Agnes.*”

“Are you going to recite it to me now? Woo me with poetry?”

Kate laughs. “It’s—oh God, like thirty or forty stanzas long. It’d put you right to sleep.”

“Then you better come up with something sexier.”

Kate hums. “Maybe that limerick Alan told me the other day, about the lady from Perth—”

“Oh no,” Caroline sighs. “Why don’t we just forgo the talky part of foreplay and just go to bed now?”

“Ah, see. Now you’re getting the hang of it. Get me before I pass out at nine o’clock.”

Caroline leans over and kisses her. It’s a kiss that mirrors the slow deep inevitability of night, of swimming blind into fathoms without fear. Everything falls away. She leaves Kate breathless for a moment to murmur, teasingly, “Who was Saint Agnes anyway?”

Kate smiles and cradles her cheek. “Patron saint of knobheads in love.”

Chapter End Notes

**Chapter 2 Soundtrack:**

_Uh Huh Her, "Human Nature"_
It’s only after the fact that Caroline realizes it makes for a good story.

She remembers waking up the morning of Gillian’s wedding in a diazepam-induced fog. While the drug usually helped her sleep, it did nothing to tame her subconscious. Nothing did. The doctor had been very insistent on prescribing it, and she did not know how to break it to him that her mind was constantly nightswimming through violent dreams and surreal scenarios and that she’d rather be wide awake, depressed, crying, and with some bare minimum paltry control over her unruly thoughts than to deal with these dreams and hallucinations that possessed a stranglehold on her mind. In one vivid nightmare she stared at herself in a bathroom mirror, mouth wide open like a gaping wound, and started ripping apart her cheeks from the inside out. Bloody chunks of flesh filled the sink.

The dream that morning was considerably less gruesome, but just as vivid: She was arguing with Kate rather intensely, over what she could not recall, and at one point Kate grabbed her with uncharacteristic force and said, this shit has got to stop.

Then she woke, bathed in sweat.

As she got ready, she tried to ignore the dream. She had to be on today. Had to drive the bride and her father to the venue. Had to look happy. Well, she was an expert on wearing masks; it was second nature, even without drugs. But as she stood in the bathroom dressed in a slip, willing herself to be the person that others expected while watching toilet water swirl into a becoming oblivion, the dream buoyed back to her.

What shit has got to stop? She pulled at a pair of stockings, inspected them for runs or ladders, then looked up into the mirror to make certain she was alone and not ripping apart her face or seeing the dead, even though she carried on the dream conversation within her mind as if the fluid movement from unconscious to conscious were a mere physical shifting of venue like walking from room to another. The shit where I talk to you and you talk to me even though you’re dead? The shit of this day when I have to pretend to be happy about a marriage I couldn’t give a toss about, where the bride acts as if she’s heading for the hangman’s noose rather than a honeymoon in Spain?

At the time Caroline had found it alarmingly easy to distance herself from everything that was
happening around her, even more so than usual; in that lone respect, the drug was truly wonderful. Over the summer she played the listless, dreamy-eyed agony aunt to everyone around her and no one noticed. Except her mother, who said nothing, who quietly carried her own guilt and misery in such an obvious way as if it were a boil requiring the lance. For a couple months she did not hear a peep from Gillian, wasn’t even certain she was invited to the wedding despite everyone’s affirmations to the contrary—until Alan timidly informed her that she was playing the exalted role of bridal chauffer on the hallowed day.

When the day arrived, her alienation reached its zenith. She felt as if she were a supporting player in a bad farce, surrounded by people who looked vaguely familiar but had no bearing on the bubble of grief that she inhabited. Gillian in bride mode was not her Gillian—not the foul-mouthed, funny, good-natured friend who always needed and ignored her pointless advice, nor the wild, rough thing that she had bedded. But then she admitted to herself that Gillian was not hers, and despite the opportunity lost to them so long ago now it seems, never was. Never would be. Still, she amused herself with thinking that if she were marrying Gillian, everything would be quite different. She’d make Gillian wear a certain pair of tight, button-front Levis, that green t-shirt that always made her eyes look so amazing and the reception would on the farm with pizza and wine and once everyone was well and truly pissed they’d simply steal away somewhere. Not Spain. Maybe Italy, South America, or New Orleans. Anyplace far away. Honestly, didn’t anyone else in the world understand what that stupid, stubborn, sheep-farming git really wanted?

Instead Gillian wore a dowdy dress that did not suit her—and, Caroline thought, too much makeup—thus giving her the appearance of a victim costumed for some ritual sacrifice and bringing to Caroline’s mind the old film *The Wicker Man*, about modern-day pagans conducting a human sacrifice except in this case they were definitely not sacrificing a virgin. Indeed, Celia holding her tongue about Gillian wearing white for the ceremony was, Caroline believed, a wedding gift for all involved. But from the very start that morning Gillian’s perpetually wary, hooded gaze hinted at the resignation of a trapped animal waiting with reined-in desperation for one last attempt at escape. Or perhaps that was an effect of the eyeliner.

Earlier, when she had arrived at the farmhouse and Gillian had dragged her into an empty bedroom, Caroline thought she was going to end up giving the bride some sort of Sapphic sendoff into holy matrimony. Diazepam, ever the easy-peasy cheerleader, said *sure, why not, cherry on top of the epic fucking shitcake*. As it was the night of that confession about Eddie, however, she was quite mistaken. Fortunately, Gillian had not murdered anyone recently—*thank Christ*, diazepam had said, *we really aren’t up to burying bodies in the barn, are we, Caroline, dear?*—and Caroline simply had to endure her panic attacks, rants about Gary, and blundering confessions concerning a couple half-assed shags with John and some bloke named Ollie, whom she rather stupidly invited to the wedding. By the end of the day, however, she was too tired to even care about Gillian’s final revelation concerning Robbie because she was limping, exhausted, covered in shit, and tugging at her wedding ring as a bitter reminder of everything she had and lost, and she almost hated Gillian because the act of marriage meant so little to her when it had meant so much to Caroline and there was not a single sacred or holy fucking thing about what was going on this day and she desperately needed a drink except that she couldn’t drink because she had to drive later and it was all such a fucking mess that later that night she cried herself to sleep as she once again fell into the dark smothering arms of diazepam.

In New York, she tells Ginika about Gillian’s wedding.

She thinks that the idiotically bleak fiasco of it all will prove amusing: the flat tire, the shit-covered dress, the broken heel, the vomiting groom. But instead of appearing amused, Ginika looks horrified on her behalf. It’s late on a Saturday afternoon and they sit in Ginika’s apartment after a day of aimlessly traipsing through Central Park. The maniacal song of an ice cream truck, charming the first time it was heard but not the subsequent eleven times in the past two days, rolls
in through the open window and provides an perfectly awkward soundtrack for her genuinely shitty story. If there is one thing Caroline misses about John it is his affable skill as a storyteller, his ability to grandly rescue her when she was unable to fully maintain the pretense of charm, let alone tell a simple story, during certain social functions. Whenever she would start to tank at telling some potentially interesting or funny anecdote about her sons, or her work, or her students, or even simply describe a picturesque vacation they had, he would sweep in, wrap an arm around her, and brilliantly fill those narrative lacunae.

Something approaching admiration, however, crosses Ginika’s face. “You’ve got balls,” she says in her marvelous, tough New York accent.

Caroline wonders what Kate would have sounded like, had she been reared in the States. Would she have picked up that wonderful no-nonsense accent? She can’t quite imagine it, even though Kate had once tried to imitate Ginika’s accent for Caroline’s benefit, mimicking her mother’s reaction to their impending marriage: What the hell’s the rush?

“No really,” Caroline replies. Nearly upside down, she hangs off the sofa—legs draped over the back of it, hair trailing along Ginika’s hardwood floor. Blood does not so much rush to her head as sluggishly sway to its destination. There are dust bunnies under a coffee table. She does not care. There are no rules, Ginika had said when she first arrived in New York. Cry when you want, scream when you want. Talk about her, don’t talk about her. Usually she never thrives under conditions of complete freedom and at first feels as if she’s simply scraping around, the same old square peg bloated with grief and nightmares in the same old bottomless hole. But sprawling like a demented monkey on someone’s sofa is terrifically liberating and so outside herself that she experiences a temporary contentment.

“To go to a wedding wearing a dress covered in shit?” Ginika is incredulous. “Yes, you do.”

“I was more upset about ruining those shoes. God, I loved those shoes.” At one point she had come dangerously close to braining Gillian with the broken one—which Gillian no doubt sensed, for the remainder of the drive to the hotel she remained mute as a mime.

“You know what I mean. Kate said you were tough-minded, and I thought that was good, good for her. She needed someone who would not take any bullshit from the world.”

“Well, obviously I was taking shit that day.”

That does make Ginika laugh. Miraculously it does not awaken Flora, who sleeps cradled in her grandmother’s arms.


The ice cream truck song fades away, its terrifying cheerfulness bleeding into dusk. It’s actually like a soundtrack for killer clowns, Caroline thinks, then: no, don’t think that, or you’ll have nightmares about clowns.

She closes her eyes for a moment before finally saying, “Diazepam.”

“Diazepam—oh, wait, right, that’s Valium.”

“Yep.”

“Maybe we should trade pills and see what happens.”

Startled, Caroline opens her eyes.
“I’m kidding.”

“I see now where Kate got her deadpan capabilities.”

Ginika smiles slightly, but when she looks down at the child in her arms that smile breaks fully across her face like a sunrise conquering the horizon and Caroline thinks this will kill her, it will kill both of them, this living breather reminder of Kate. “You’re in really great hands, kiddo,” she says to Flora. “Both mommy and grandma need meds.”

“Not forever,” Caroline says, and she cannot keep the tremor out of her voice. “It can’t be forever.” She’s never been acquainted with an emotion as varied and unpredictable as grief; it’s a piece of twelve-tone music, random and willful and running maniacal scales that crash ceaselessly within her. It’s like dying every day and being resuscitated into a closed coffin, knowing full well that grief, at the end of every day, will just go ahead and slowly kill you over and over again.

“It won’t be,” Ginika replies, but with a hitch in her voice. *At least not for you.*

They are silent for several minutes.

“I thought I saw her today,” Caroline says. “On the street. When I went out to the—what’s the little shop called again?”

“A bodega.”

“Bodega,” Caroline repeats. “I came out of there and saw this woman walking away from me—about her height, her coloring, her hair—” Caroline shakes her head. “I nearly ran after her.”

“Yeah.” Ginika sighs. “It happens to me too.”

In Ginika’s neighborhood of Washington Heights, Caroline is the minority. As conspicuous as she feels sometimes on streets with people of so many different colors, and sometimes speaking languages and dialects with which she possesses no familiarity, she’s grown accustomed to it and even enjoys it. There is a sense of disappearing into a crowd, blending into a painting, woven into a skein. Happy oblivion. Flora, she knows, will not exactly experience that kind of benevolent assimilation in Yorkshire. In moments of more fanciful thought Caroline wonders if she should move to someplace like New York. Or London. It doesn’t matter where she’ll be in the future, she thinks; she will always be chasing after ghosts. Ginika’s prewar apartment is filled with them—books as well, like any good academic, but photographs guard those bookshelves. There are many photos of Kate: as a girl with pigtails staring wildly at the camera, in Central Park. As a skinny kid proudly holding up an electric keyboard—her first musical instrument, a birthday gift. As a teenager hunched over a piano, wild hair obscuring her face but not her beautiful hands, which arc gracefully across the keys.

“I think that was from her Mingus phase,” Ginika had said. “It was Mingus Mingus Mingus 24/7.”

Kate also had a Vegetarian phase (“I had to buy Tofurky,” Ginika grimly informs Caroline), a Goth phase (“Oh God, the black lipstick”), a Rasta phase (“I was like, ‘what, you think you’re Jamaican? You know you’re actually Nigerian, right?’”). All these phases, all these iterations of personality of which Caroline had never known. She had not even scraped the surface. Instead of taking comfort she feels a profound disgrace, as if she has failed Kate all over again. Were you in love with the woman, or what you projected onto her? How well do you ever know a person?

This is what Caroline asks Ginika the next day when they are in Greenwich Village navigating crowded streets filled with tourists, grumpy old residents, rainbow flags, sex shops, men holding hands. And kissing one another. Caroline tries not to gawp like a yokel or cheer when she
encounters such visible gayness; with Flora strapped to her chest in a Baby Bjorn, she knows she looks like “some sort of Park Avenue wife who volunteers at the Met and who adopts underprivileged children as a hobby,” as Ginika described her earlier before guiltily adding, “But I know you’re not like that.”

As they stroll around after brunch, Ginika casually drops a bomb: Kate had an affair with one of her university professors—a woman, much older.

“That’s why I wasn’t surprised when she told me about you,” Ginika says. “You seemed to fit some sort of romantic prototype for her, at least whereas women were concerned. Older—”

“I was only five years older than she was,” Caroline whines.

“—powerful, authority figure.”

No arguing there.

“When I suggested she go into therapy after that breakup, man, did she get mad. But she was so depressed at the time, it scared me.”

“So this was—a major relationship?”

“For her,” Ginika says. “Not so much for the bitch who broke it off.”

“She never told me.”

“Well, it was like, nearly twenty years ago.”

“Yeah, but—” Caroline stops dead in the street. Irritated pedestrians flow around her.

Ginika stops too. Concerned, she touches Caroline’s arm. “But what?”

“It’s just—there are so many things I didn’t know about her, and I should have asked, I should have, but I was so selfish and caught up in my own shit, and at the same time I wonder, how well do you ever know anyone? But I could have tried harder. I could have been better.”

Close to tears, Caroline looks up and sees it amidst a sea of t-shirts—John Lennon, Bob Marley, NYPD shirts, and the classic I <3 NEW YORK—hanging from an awning outside a souvenir shop: a black t-shirt in white capital letters that screams, FUCK YOU YOU FUCKING FUCK.

“Great, even the bloody universe thinks I’m complete cunt.” Guiltily, she looks down at Flora, who is awake and drooling happily at the bustle around her. “Sorry, darling.” She keeps reminding herself that she and John swore incessantly while raising two sons and neither one appears to be particularly foul-mouthed. Yet.

Ginika winces skeptically. “You think the universe would talk to you through a t-shirt?”

“I don’t know. What does that mean, anyway?”

“Just a joke. Basically, it’s the most New York thing you can say to anyone.”

Caroline laughs softly, shakes her head. “God, Gillian would love that.”

“You should buy it for her.”

“Are you mad? She’d actually wear it everywhere and our parents would be very cross with me.”
Instead, she takes a photo of it and texts it to Gillian. Who is on her honeymoon, but who keeps texting Caroline blandly desolate photos of beaches filled with drunk, pink people, blurry sunsets, and the occasional luridly shaded cocktail. Never a photo of herself—or her new husband. Caroline finds a modicum of comfort in knowing that Gillian is nearly as miserable as she is. In response she has texted photos of practically every pizza parlor she encounters, and there have been many—if, as they say, Rome is the city of churches, then New York is the city of pizza. She even eats in one of these dubious, greasy pizza places one afternoon while waiting for Ginika to finish up some work at Columbia. The place is called Famiglia and one single bloody slice is about as big as her head, and for the rest of the day Caroline feels the slice moored in her stomach and imagines chunks of indestructible, insoluble cheese taking up residence in her colon like the crumbling palazzos that line the Venetian Grand Canal.

The indigestion contributes to her haunting sense of unworthiness. That evening she gets weepy on Ginika yet again and she cannot help but think that this woman will be deliriously happy to shove her onto that nonstop flight to Heathrow in a few days.

“I never said ‘I love you’ to her,” Caroline admits. “At least not—directly. She didn’t either, but —”

“Did you need the words? To hear them?”

Caroline wipes tears off her cheeks. “As affirmation, I suppose.”

“Yes,” Ginika concedes. “There is that.”

Flora is still awake—a good sign that she’ll probably sleep most of the night. Ginika leans over the bassinet, rocks her slowly, and continues. “But you don’t understand. Don’t be upset by me saying that—I know you loved her, I know she loved you.” She fusses over Flora’s blanket. “You see, before she loved languages, before she even spoke as a child, she loved music. Her face would light up whenever she heard anything. And I mean anything. Her father had this album of Robert Mitchum—that actor, of all people—singing calypso! Drove me crazy, it was so horrible. But you know what? Kate loved it when she was a kid. It was like her mother tongue. And then as she got older, music kind of became her way of communicating something important—either to other people or even just for herself, you know? Self-expression. When words failed, she always went through music. You thought she never said it, you thought you never said it, but you did, in a way. By listening, simply by being open to her music.” Ginika looks at her quite intently. “She played Tristan and Isolde for you.”

A painful throb ripples through Caroline’s head like a deadening bass note held far too long. There is no joy in the reverberation. “She told you that?”

Ginika laughs, and briefly recounts the panicked phone call she received from her daughter one morning that began: Oh mum, I’ve gone a bit mad. There’s this woman I work with, see, and oh, she’s kind of my boss, and married, but—“Yes. That’s when I knew you were something special.”

“I can’t listen to it now without thinking of her. It hurts too much.”

“It won’t always be like that. When you’re ready, you’ll listen again. And it’ll be different. You’ll see.” Ginika glances toward the open window, attuned to the music of the street—her street, her city. “Music always mutates. It can take you anywhere you like.”

That night as Caroline lies in bed, waiting for diazepam to gently steal her away into a land of unwanted dreams, she does recall the one thing that she did not tell Ginika; the memory seemed too personal and Caroline feels oddly guilty about that, especially in light of all the things about Kate that her mother has shared with her recently. It had been right after the first time they made
love, at Kate’s house. She remembers the dusk outside, the cool blue of the sheets against the warmth of Kate’s skin, the fullness of her breasts, the curve of her hips, the way she smelled, the way she tasted, all of it rolled into a singular euphoria. She remembers Kate stroking her hand, pressing a thumb into her palm.

*If you could hear any music you wanted right now, Kate had asked, what would it be?*

*Not Prince,* Caroline had retorted.

She laughed. *No, seriously.*

Caroline stirred and reached for her mobile, which, somehow, she’d had the prescience to place on the nightstand in case Gillian had further pressing questions about her mother’s lingerie preferences or if her mother in turn decided to question why this madwoman was buying her knickers. She typed out a quick search and lo, the internet brought up the music she desired: The third movement from Symphony Number 3, Opus 90, by Johannes Brahms. The tinny speaker of the iPhone in no way did the piece justice, but some kind of magnificence filtered through all the same.

*Do you like that?* she had shyly asked.

Kate had smiled and embraced her. *Yes I do like that, very much so. It’s perfect.*

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Chapter End Notes

**CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK**

*“Goodbye Pork Pie Hat,” Charles Mingus*

*“New York is a Woman,” Suzanne Vega*

*Third Movement, Symphony No. 3, Johannes Brahms*

*I dare you to listen to Robert Mitchum singing calypso*
Gillian smells rain coming. Piles of clouds ascend deeper and deeper into blue-sky deception. Her boots break up clots of mud as she walks the path toward the barn. She has been up before dawn, alternating between drinking coffee and drinking tea as she went in and out from the house. Then some sort of domestic miracle occurred and Raff was up feeding Calamity, so she didn’t have to think about doing that. He even made her some toast. Then he made more tea, and she was more impressed than incensed that his tea was hundred times better than her own; she has no idea how he acquired this particular skill. Jokingly she accused him of being a pod person and it spiraled into the inevitably unserious argument about which version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was better. Then she heard Robbie stirring upstairs and, with a piece of toast still crammed in her mouth, she bolted outside.

In the barn she sits and cleans tools. The hoof trimmer is starting to rust. If it rains—and it will—it might be a good day to get materials to fix the fence. Again. How long before Robbie is out of the house and off to work? Approximately 45 minutes.

She stops, listens to nothing. Except for the sheep scuffling in their pens, the havering wind. *The day is like wide water, without sound.* She has always liked the sound of that line, from a poem by Wallace Stevens. Years ago she found a book of his poems in the pub, left behind by some snotty American tourist who had the nerve to read while nursing a pint. Anyone reading poetry in the pub was spoiling for a fight and the poor sod was but a moment away from having tepid ale tossed in his face when he finally scarpered. After he left Ian, the owner, was about to chuck the book in the bin when she rescued it. Now it resides in an old tool chest in the barn, along with her other books. Ever since Eddie, she’s always kept books in the barn; what is now an eccentric habit was, with him, a dire necessity. Because anytime she had one in the house, he berated her mercilessly about it—*think you’re smart or something?*—and one time even threw some big fat World War II history book, something by Antony Beevor that she never finished, at her head. Nailed her with it, of course. He always had good aim. If he knew later on that she kept books in the chest, he never said. Perhaps that was her one allowance, the one thing she could have of her own. She can even hear him saying it: *You can have one thing and that’s it.*

The barn is also the dominion of his ghost. *Dominion of the blood and sepulcher,* as the Stevens poem went. She imagines Eddie jeering from the rafters sometimes, wearing that dun-colored jacket he had on when she killed him, with an artful spackle of blood and gritty brain matter alongside his head. Sometimes, like today, she greets him when she comes in. It only seems fitting somehow, show a little courtesy to someone you’ve murdered.

“Morning, Eddie.”
Morning, you murderous cunt. What needs done today?

“Got to fix the fence again.”

That’s what you get for letting Robbie do it, you stupid fucking cow. He can’t do shit. That’s why he became a copper.

Was Robbie aware that she spent half the night sleeping on the couch? She’s not sure. She’s not sure she cares.

Och, poor old you, sleeping alone.

In retaliation she sings. “‘Sweetness, sweetness I was only joking when I said, by rights you should be bludgeoned in your bed—’”

Aw, fuck off, Gillian, you know I hated the Smiths and that poof Morrissey.

She runs a thumb along the dull edge of the old hoof trimmer, disappointed not to draw blood.

Makes sense, though, dunnit? You liking a queer like that. Guess I didn’t quite fuck the queerness out of you, did I?

“Reckon not.”

Want to know what I know, sweetness?

She says nothing.

You want the one you can’t have, and it’s driving you mad. It’s all over all over your face.

Gillian hears sticky tromping outside, almost comically loud as if giving her fair warning that her solitude is to be disrupted; must be her father, because no one else would go to such trouble to announce themselves. He and Celia are slumming it for the weekend by staying at the farm. Celia takes tea in bed as if she were a marchioness visiting Downton Fucking Abbey except she receives her morning repast not from a servant but her doting husband. It’s yet another reason why Gillian is determined to spend the most of the weekend outside as much as possible. The house, her own home, smothers her now. Too many people about. Too many people who don’t understand her moods, her silences, who always want to talk about their fucking feelings or, worse yet, her fucking feelings.

Alan bellows a hello and, in stiff-wristed imitation of the Queen, Eddie waves goodbye.

Gillian puts the dirty rag and clipper on a table. “You needing something?”

Her father huffs with mock outrage. “I cannot come and visit you? Especially when you are never in house, it seems?” For obvious reasons, he hates coming into the barn and rarely ventures out to it unless it’s a matter of some urgency; almost as keenly as she does, he feels the ghost she cannot, will not always name. So it is a favor he will be wanting, or some kind of my dearest darling daughter, why must you be such a complete cunt to your new husband? type of chat. Although she’s never heard him use that word before and she believes she has been kinder to Robbie lately; she even consented to having it off with him a few nights ago after a suitably excessive amount of wine. It was all part of the first New Year’s Resolution she made: Be Less of a Cunt.

Gillian smiles skeptically. “So this is just a friendly visit?”

“Always.” He sits down next to her on the bench. “Well.”
Still grinning, she shakes her head.

He sighs. “Are you truly busy?” he asks anxiously.

Sensing that her peaceful day of shopping and barn-sulking is about to spiral into some kind of unwanted duty, Gillian holds in a sigh, brushes her hands against her jeans. “I’m not. What’s wrong?”

Alan winces. “It’s me heart medication.”

“Did you run out?”

He issues a long, self-lacerating sigh. “No. I—forgot.”

“You forgot to bring them?”

He nods.

“Thought you had a stash here.”

“Did. All gone now.”

“All right. We’ll do a run to the chemist in Halifax—”

“Don’t have prescription with me.”

“Can’t you call the doctor?”

Alan shrugs helplessly. “It’s Saturday, love. He’s off mountain-biking in Perthshire or some such.”


“Him or me?” Alan shakes his head. “Don’t answer.”

The dismal truth settles in. Gillian closes her eyes, hopes she looks appropriately martyrish. “So you’re telling me I have to drive all the bloody way to Harrogate to get your pills?”

Alan sighs. “I’m sorry. I really am. I know it’s bother, especially since I don’t have car.” Her father’s snazzy car breaks down more than her tractor does. “Well, you were going out anyway, weren’t you? For fencing?”

“How did you know?”

“You were mumbling about it last night. I pay attention to your mumbles, you know.” He smiles.

She softens. “Nice that someone pays attention.”

“I bet you’ll find them right out on kitchen counter. I put them there, thinking I’d see them as I packed up t’other day. Only take you a second. And you could stop in and see Caroline, say hello. You’ve not seen her for a while.”

“It’s only been a few weeks. Christmas,” Gillian mutters. Caroline gave her a gift basket from Marks and Spencer. She hates Marks and Spencer. But then she gave Caroline a windshield cover that she’d got for free while using her discount card at the petrol station. Regardless, she cannot tell her father that her second New Year’s Resolution was to see Caroline as infrequently as possible—in other words, not until next Christmas. “Sure she’s busy.”
“I don’t think. She’s alone this weekend.”

“Alone?”

“Aye.”

“You mean alone-alone?”

“Aye. Greg took the wee one to Manchester. He’s got family there—plus some work thing, insofar as what he does is really work. I try not to judge, but—”

Gillian interrupts. “Why would she let him take Flora to Manchester?” Her general impression of the flip-flopping, Jesus-bearded, bread-baking Greg—who, the one time he visited the farm, gifted them with some quinoa-walnut bread that tasted like rotting spongy sawdust although it did make her quite regular for a couple days—is that Caroline tolerates him along the lines of and similar to certain necessary evils of her life, like tampons, dental floss, and the occasional Spanx. Allowing him to abscond with Flora for an entire weekend sounds uncharacteristic of a sharp-tongued, self-loathing but self-serving control freak like Caroline.

“She said she wanted ‘down time.’ Reckon she’s earned it.” Alan looks thoughtful. “Still. Didn’t like leaving her alone all weekend, but she insisted.”

Gillian rolls her eyes. “She’s fine, I’m certain. Plus I don’t think if she’s wanting alone time she wants me barging in.”

“Perhaps not. But I’m allowed to worry about her. Takes me mind off worrying about you.” Alan squeezes her knee, shakes it gently.

“Me?”

“You.” He croons the syllable, rocking it to sleep in the comforting sprawl of his accent, and she feels like a child again. “Is everything all right, love?”

She misses talking with him the way they used to. With every breath she wishes a way back to the past. Before he met Celia again, and the avalanche of change that followed: Caroline, Calamity, Gary. Before Robbie realizing he loved her or whatever the fuck he imagines in his head. She wants to tell him, you want someone who no longer exists, but she never does. Not because she lacks the courage exactly, but because she knows this truth—similar to the truth about Eddie—would break him and she was not meant to do that to him, she was meant to offer herself up as redemption. No matter that the marriage went sideways before it even began. She is not a woman, she is not a wife; she’s a Roman candle lit and slowly, agonizingly consumed.

And now I know how Joan of Arc felt. Now I know how Joan of Arc felt.

She forces a smile. “Yeah. Everything’s fine.” What else is she supposed to say? I married the wrong person. I love the wrong person. “Why d’ya ask?”

“You’ve been working an awful lot. You don’t have to now.”

As if Robbie were an investment banker and she could sit around eating pizza all day. Not even willing to give him credit for what he does bring in, are you? she berates herself. “It’s good to have extra money. Not for spending. For saving. For the future. For Raff and Calam. You know? So yeah, I’m busy, but’s that’s no different than, well, ever.”

“I know, I know.” Alan placates her. Which she hates, but she lets it go because she’s simply
grateful that he’s here and that someone is concerned about her. He dithers a bit as he gropes toward the next painfully obvious subject. “And, er—what about Robbie?”

“What about Robbie?” she echoes. “Marriage has its ups and downs. You know that. You should know that, given—”

“This year past. Aye, I know all too well.” He purses his lips, shakes his head, and somehow Gillian thinks he’s still paying for all that. “But—”

“But?” she prompts mockingly.

“You don’t always seem—content.”

“Maybe I’m just not that type.”

“Now, I’ve never believed that. Moody, more like.” He smiles. “I thought you marrying would—I don’t know. Give you some satisfaction. Someone to share things with.”

“I’m making the best of it.” She stands up, hoping it will bring about a natural end to the conversation.

It doesn’t. Alan looks up at her. “That doesn’t sound promising.”

The gentleness of his tone coupled with the way he always sees right through her is so unnerving that she looks at everything but the clear, kind blue of his eyes. She even gazes into the rafters, where Eddie usually resides. But he’s not there and she is left alone with her own stupid culpability. Gillian shoves her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. “It’s—I don’t know. Too used to being on my own. I’ll sort it somehow.”

He stands. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Just stop forgetting your bloody medication, yeah?” Playfully, she pokes him in the arm.

He smiles. “Do you want me to ride along? To Harrogate?”

“No.” She kisses his cheek. “I’ll be fine.”

Ten minutes later, after swapping boots for trainers, Gillian sits in the Land Rover unable to summon the courage to even start the engine. She is old enough to know that love is not like in movies or books. You do not go mad. You do not cause scenes. You do not starve yourself or write demented poetry or join the army during wartime or stand outside someone’s house with a boombox. Sometimes love simply stirs sour within you like a sickness. You live off a stingy diet of memories, empty calories that fill you and leave you wanting more, always more. When alone you let the symptoms reign supreme and curl up in fetal surrender on a bed or a couch and finally admit it: I am sick with this. To set yourself right again there is the temporary cure of sex or drink or some sort of brief happiness like a job well done, a good laugh, a beautiful sunrise or sunset smeared across the sky, or your granddaughter smiling at you in a particular way, or your son making you toast.

For the moment, she must sit in the Land Rover and be sick with it.

Then a few kamikaze raindrops burst against the windshield with fat, brutal thwacks. Startled, she turns the key. Even after all this time Gillian still fears Caroline’s house, fears the memories there. In the past year she can count on one hand the times she has been inside the house; the worst time, of course, the day of Kate’s funeral. Seeing Caroline that broken had been light years of misery beyond the second-worst time, which was the horrible, awkward New Year’s Day luncheon
That day had been remarkably shitty from the get-go: The long, hungover drive to Harrogate with Raff and Ellie squabbling the entire time until they finally woke up Calamity with their bickering, and when they finally arrived and almost everyone piled out of the Landy—all still cursing and bitching and crying—she remained sitting behind the wheel, glaring at the house as if it were the Bates Motel. Then the moment she set foot in the guesthouse, her father decided that she should go over and help Caroline with the food while everyone else sat around with him and Celia and chatted and cooed over Calamity. Great, shuttled off to do kitchen work with the dykes, she had muttered under her breath—grateful that only Raff heard her even though he silently chastised her with a particularly dirty look, and she almost wished she could tell him that she was only being an arsehole because she was sort of probably most likely definitely in love with Caroline and could not even bear the fucking thought of setting foot in the beautiful house she now shared with her beautiful lover.

That she did enter Caroline’s house without the spectacular occurrence of spontaneous combustion was a minor triumph. She could not tell if Caroline looked disappointed or pleased that she was there. That was good breeding for you, Gillian thought; it got your head so far up your arse you don’t know what to think or feel anymore. But she had a temporary reprieve from unbearable domestic bliss: Kate was napping upstairs.

Apparently she slept a lot now—“like a cat,” Caroline said. “I don’t remember napping so much when I was pregnant, but that was a long time ago.” Caroline looked nervously splendid but also strangely relaxed and truly chuffed, as she herself were responsible for knocking up Kate. Gillian figured if any woman could pull off that particular divine act of procreation, it would be Caroline.

“Yeah,” Gillian managed to say as the palms of her hands tingled and her stupid heart pounded in her ears. She wanted to say, don’t worry, I won’t ruin this for you, not that I could, but I would never do that, I would never, and instead impulsively risked a joke if only because she did not know what else to do and so frantically clambered toward the familiar if crumbling terrain of their banter: “A good fifty years ago.”

It worked. Caroline grinned, offered her a drink, and then gave her a shiny fancy knife in order to chop up peppers and carrots. For the desperate sake of conversation and reestablishing their mutual roles as stroppy trailer trash and condescending Oxford bitch she thought of confessing that she was sort of seeing Robbie again, actually she had no idea what the hell was going on there and she was pretty certain that he didn’t either, and if she were being perfectly honest with herself she didn’t even want it to go on; it was merely force of habit, an occasional comfort, and frankly astonishing that someone wanted her enough to risk the stability of an otherwise questionable relationship. So best to keep the old trap shut, smile, chop vegetables, and hope that she might accidentally slit her own wrist and bleed to death all over Caroline’s blindingly white and no doubt antibacterial counter to avoid the rest of this interminable day. Happy Fucking New Year.

Then Kate was up, radiant and apologizing for sleeping in late, shyly greeting Gillian and then offering to help them before Caroline gallantly refused and bossed her to sit down—some things did not change, Gillian realized—and even as Gillian thought she could not bear Kate’s apparent perfection, easy grace, and genuine kindness for a single moment, she did. For the entire afternoon, no less. As Kate sat, sipped herbal tea—fucking lesbians and their weird tea, Gillian thought—and watched them chop vegetables, Caroline raised the subject of pregnancy again. Nothing could be a more safely universal topic than mothers and a mother-to-be bemoaning the aches and pains and swollen ankles and sore backs and full bladders and ravenous appetites that accompanied the incubation of human life.
Until Kate noticed that Gillian was not really complaining. “Listen to us going on, bitching full speed ahead. You’ve not said a single bad word about it.”


Neither Kate nor Caroline knew what to do with that particular piece of information, so they both stared at her—the former with a kind of wry admiration, the latter with that you are really a mad inscrutable bitch look with which Gillian was well acquainted.

It was true. For nearly nine amazing months Eddie did not lay a hand on her. He accorded her the same sacred reverence and tender care that he did an old bottle of brandy that his adopted father had given him on the eve of their marriage. During that time he doted on her, made her dinner with startling frequency, rubbed her feet, touched her with nervous gentleness. With some fondness she remembered the way his large, warm hand would splay over the fleshy globe of her belly. Then she recalled that the day of his funeral she drank all that precious brandy herself, smashed the empty bottle against the bedroom wall as if a hundred glittering shards would form a protection spell around the bed where she now slept alone, and threw up afterward.

Later that day as they prepared to leave she did actually think that, out of the sheer relief of surviving the day, she would throw up in Caroline’s driveway, but didn’t. After a day of noise and stress she wanted nothing more than a quiet journey home and so fervently she hoped that (1) Calamity would sleep the entire way, which she did because she was finally exhausted; (2) Ellie would hook herself up to a pair of earphones and zone out in order to avoid being the target of Gillian’s shit mood and Raff’s constant jibes, which she did; and (3) Raff would simply keep his cake-hole shut. Which he did not do because he was, after all, her son and blood did not run in his veins so much as that unholy Greenwood-Buttershaw blend of piss and vinegar.

While Raff did keep quiet for a spell, he maintained an unnervingly beady-eyed stare on her from the front passenger seat.


“What did you fall out with Caroline?”

“What d’you mean?”

“I mean like you barely talked to her today.”

“Talked to her when I was playing kitchen slave.”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh yeah? What about that bit earlier, calling her a dyke?”

“It’s nothing. Just didn't feel like working, whatever. I was tired. And it’s not like I called her that to her face.”

“So it’s okay behind her back, right?”

Gillian managed to glower at him for two seconds before returning her attention to the road.

For a while Raff went silent. Then: “Is it you don't like Kate?”

“No. I like Kate just fine.” Except for her being so fucking perfect.

Sighing, Raff shook his head. “Well, I just don’t understand you.”
“Who says you have to?”

“It would just be nice if I did.” He folded his arms and slouched down into his seat. Soon he was asleep.

Later that night she began the New Year as she had ended the last: drunk and angry. Your usual coeval state, as Caroline might have put it. She sent Robbie a text telling him to fuck off and they should stop doing whatever because she had been all alone on New Year’s Eve while he was off to a party with Cheryl—who did not seem a real person so much as a gooey confection of femininity, as if spending so many years in a uniform rendered her unable to approximate what a real woman looked or sounded like anymore—and then she passed out in front of the fireplace and woke around 3:30 a.m. to the smell of soot and the leaping orange glow of dying sparks.

Gillian puts all this aside now. By the time she hits Harrogate the rain has stopped and she has a plan: Park on the street, run into the guesthouse, grab the pills, and take off. If by chance Caroline sees her, she’ll just be all apologetic and claim busyness, that she just has to grab the pills and run. Busy. Everybody is busy. Best excuse in the world. Everybody says that.

Pretending as if she’s on a secret mission, she parks a block away and leaps out of the Land Rover. She is cool and calm and suave and only a select few know her true vulnerabilities, her tragic backstory. She’s James Bond prowling through a casino, stealthy and beautiful. Which Bond? Daniel Craig Bond. Does she want to sleep with Daniel Craig or be Daniel Craig? Maybe both. Why commit to either scenario? She zips past the colossus of Caroline’s Jeep Cherokee, unlocks the guesthouse door, and leaves it open a crack as she dashes in. Sure enough, the bottle of heart medication sits so prominently by itself in the stark island of the kitchen counter that she laughs as she pockets it.

Of course, there is a hitch in this grand plan: An electronic box near the door starts beeping loudly. Very loudly. Q did not inform her of this development. Nor did M or Money Penny or the ghost of Blofeld’s cat. But Celia did. Gillian remembers now: Celia complaining bitterly that Caroline had installed an alarm system in the guesthouse after a spate of robberies occurred in the neighborhood last summer. Now we have to remember a bunch of numbers! And every time we finally get it memorized Caroline changes it again! More “secure” this way, she says. Well I say we should have just gotten a gun.

And of course Alan, running under the quite logical assumption that his daughter was not secretly, miserably in love with his stepdaughter and as a result unwilling to risk even a minute-long interaction with the latter, did not even think about providing her with the code.

What would Bond do? He would have a gadget to neutralize the alarm. Gillian has a Swiss army knife, a used tissue, and half-eaten roll of Smarties in her jacket. Stabbing Caroline’s fancy alarm with a corkscrew is not an option, however tempting it may be. Or Bond would cleverly figure out the code. Frantic, Gillian taps in her father’s birthday. The box continues its ominous beeping countdown. Then Celia’s. Then Calamity’s. Then her own. She is about to try Gordon Banks’s birthday when she notices that the slightly ajar front door slowly, cautiously opens wider and not-so-magically reveals the person who she has gone to such desperately idiotic lengths to avoid.

Caroline stands in the doorway, clutching a raised cricket bat in such an elegantly athletic manner that Gillian wonders if in fact she actually played cricket at some point in her life, maybe the lesbians did that at Oxford, competing in immaculate whites right down to their gloves and then showering and orgy-ing together afterward after God, Gillian thinks, I should have gone to university. She looks no happier to see Gillian than she would a meth-head career felon with a semi-automatic rifle and thus asks in a deadly menacing tone, “What the hell are you doing?”

Gillian bites her lip. “Hi.”
Caroline twirls the bat in her hand as if she’s yearning to beat someone or something with it and Gillian is pretty certain she’s not seen Caroline look this angry since the demise of her beloved shoes on Gillian’s disastrous wedding day. She had meant to buy Caroline a new pair of those shoes until she found out how much the bloody things cost, then thought maybe Caroline would simply appreciate a decent bottle of red in recompense. Only problem is, the nice Italian wine she bought with that intent got drunk down one night after an epic row with Robbie about something stupid, but this all seems rather beside the point at the moment and she thinks she better say something else lest she get a cricket bat right between the eyes.

Before she can say anything, however, Caroline steps inside, brushes past her, and punches a sequence of numbers on a keypad near the door that disables the alarm. As the echo of the interminable beeping ping-pons around her skull, Gillian realizes that Caroline looks like hell. Incontestably beautiful as always, at least to Gillian, but definitely tired, pale, and disheveled. She wears a pair of dark, lounge-like pants, a shapeless gray jumper, a pair of slippers. Perhaps she was napping when she heard the alarm?

Head bowed, Caroline places her hand on the wall, bracing herself.

“You all right?”

“Yeah.” Caroline will not look at her. “Think I just have—the flu or something. A cold.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to disturb you. Forgot about the alarm.”

Not one for useless pity, the Head Bitch reasserts herself with an impatient sigh. “So I guess I have to ask again—what are you here?”

“Oh. Shit. Right. Um. Dad forgot—”

“—his pills.”

If Gillian were not simultaneously smitten with and sorry for this woman, she would be profoundly irritated by Caroline once again being right, and perhaps concerned with her father’s continual memory problems. “How did—”

“He’s always forgetting them. It’s like he has a suicide wish. Well, if I were married to my mother I would be thinking like that too.”

She steps closer to Caroline, but cannot risk touching her; this current iteration of their relationship does not allow for that easy affection anymore. Even while they were sleeping together, Caroline typically eschewed any kind of physical affection outside the bedroom and even in that sexual arena, indulged in not much beyond the vigorous and sublime necessities of foreplay. Except for a few certain times when the combination of wine and a symphony of stresses weakened her defenses. On one rare occasion the afterglow included not just snoring and bitching, but permitting herself to lie in Gillian’s arms. As she did she unfurled a long, beautiful sigh, very feminine—a sweet signal granting Gillian freedom to map out elaborate imaginary firmaments from the gold-dust freckles on Caroline’s arms and shoulders, to rummage through her thick hair and rediscover both the silky undergrowth and the babyish fuzz at the nape of her neck, to surreptitiously observe the fixed, incontestable blue of her eyes, to trace with her lips the gradient of Caroline’s eyebrow. All while ignoring the sluggish throb of her own heartbeat, a slow, panicked refrain of oh shit, oh shit.

This is nice, Caroline had said. I don’t have to be anyone. Initially Gillian accepted this drunken verbal slurry as a bit of nonsense, but in retrospect it all made sense. It was too dangerous for her to be herself, ever. While it’s obvious that Kate had made much more headway than she ever did,
Gillian wonders how far she actually got in terms of plumbing Caroline’s depths. Like *Journey to the Center of the Earth* except this foray in the name of science would be *Journey to the Center of the Bitch*.

So no, it’s all too risky. Gillian’s muscles lock into resistance and she shivers at the effort, as if bracing herself for some test she is certain to fail. The scent of a familiar sweetness hits her. It is not the citrus-scented shampoo Caroline always used, that fancy organic shit she had bought for William’s fragile scalp. No, it’s a very familiar and beloved scent that tinged so many of their erotic interactions: Wine.

“You’ve been drinking,” Gillian says in a tone of flat-out wonder.

Caroline hums. “Just a bit, Captain Obvious.”

“It’s around eleven in the morning!”

“Well, you know, it’s one of the seven habits of highly successful people: Always get your important tasks done in the morning.”

Rubbing her neck, Gillian stares helplessly at the sky, but no divine intervention could poke through that miasma of thick gray clouds no matter how desperately she wants it because, as frequently happens with Caroline, she feels out of her depth. “What’s going on?”

“What’s going on? You tell me, Marvin Gaye.”

“Oh, God. You’re not going to be serious,” Gillian sighs. “Not surprising. All right then, we’re going over to yours and I’m putting the kettle on.”

Finally Caroline makes eye contact: It’s the Head Bitch Glare in all its icy glory; for Gillian, however, it’s as desired and yearned for as a heated, swoon-worthy look of love because it means she at least merits some kind of emotional reaction, even if it’s absolute fury. “I haven’t exactly invited you over.”

“Well, you’re going to invite me,” Gillian retorts, “or I’m going to call your mum and tell her you’re so deathly ill that she needs to come back here right now and nurse you back to health.”

“Fine.” Caroline shuffles out the doorway, and before completely surrendering to teatime throws out one last defiant insult: “Cunt.”

“So much for all my New Year’s resolutions.” Gillian follows her and locks the door behind them. “Get moving. Some tea will sober you up.”

“Your tea sucks.”

“What it lacks in taste, it makes up for in strength.”

“Do you know,” Caroline says, “you’ve just summed up your own character quite nicely?”

As if some failed knight-errant, Caroline trods slowly, discouragingly back to her palatial home while dragging the cricket bat behind her. The tip of the bat bounces and scrapes loudly over the driveway as Gillian clenches her molars against the unbearable noise. Once inside and imbued with caregiving purpose—and nimbly jumping over the bat as Caroline deliberately drops it in her path as they go through the hallway—Gillian doesn’t really think about actually being in the house until she’s standing in the kitchen: *I kissed you here.* Then the urge for something stronger than tea takes her over but alcohol is obviously out of the question. For now, anyway.
Caroline sits wearily, bent over the kitchen table and with her head propped on her folded arms.

“I could make coffee,” Gillian suggests.

Caroline shrugs.

Gillian stares down the French Press that sits on the counter. It can’t be that hard. Can it? For Christmas Gary kept his gift-giving uncharacteristically modest and bought her some sort of coffee-making contraption called a Chemex—a deceptively simple but ridiculously daunting thing she has not used to make coffee with because, as he explained over the course of twenty excruciating minutes, the temperature of the water has to be just so and the beans freshly ground and you must pour the water a certain way over the grounds while reciting a prayer to an Aztec god or what the fuck ever. He keeps asking if she’s tried it. In all honesty she could reply that she did, because one evening she used it to make Jagerbombs. And they were indeed delicious.

She opts to make tea. As the kettle boils and she dumps leaves in a pot her mind spins helplessly—what to say, what to do? Unlike before, no easy silence fills the space between them. Genuine curiosity—and not a default of dread, as with Robbie—always fed and nurtured their silences while gently spurring her wonderment, her fascination with what goes on in Caroline’s head. She has waited for thoughts that never quite found expression in speech; now it seems even more unlikely that drink and whatever despair Caroline is experiencing will provide some sort of magical gateway to her mind.

While the tea steeps, Gillian wipes her hands on her jeans and sits at the table. “Want to tell me what’s wrong?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

“Really?”

“Can’t force you to talk to me,” Gillian says. “But I’m not going anywhere, least not until I get some tea in you. Maybe something to eat? Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“All right.”

“If you go on being nice to me,” Caroline says, “I don’t know if I will be able to bear it.”

If ever Gillian has uttered an insult more laced with love than now, she cannot say for certain. “Knobhead,” she whispers.

“That’s better.”

Gillian gets up, pours the tea in a huge mug that sports an Oxford crest. Might as well have a mug that says “snotty posh bitch-twat” printed on it a hundred times, she thinks. She sits the mug in front of Caroline and together they watch steam swithering from the mug. Farming sheep for so many years has taught Gillian the value of patience—waiting out the weather, waiting for the strays to catch up, waiting for the stubborn ones to weary themselves beyond further protest. Not that she ever really attempted application of this particular virtue to humans; so many of them hardly seemed to warrant the effort.

“I know I can’t help,” Gillian finally says. “I know it. But I can listen. If you like. If you want to talk. That’s all I can do.”
This statement of intent brings about a shift in the atmosphere. Either that or the clouds outside were passing over mighty fast. The silence is calibrated via some internal switch somehow, back into a sweetly familiar frequency.

“Do you know,” Caroline begins, “that today is the Eve of St. Agnes?”

Gillian shakes her head. “Who was St. Agnes?”

“Patron saint of knobheads in love.”

Of course, Gillian cannot fathom the significance. Perhaps an anniversary of some sort? She thinks back to this time last year, as shitty then as it is now: She was sneaking around with Robbie and despite her reservations, that made things exciting between them for a while—at least until the Dildo Incident, thank you and fuck you, Cheryl. And Caroline? Was it around this time last year that she asked Kate to marry her? No, Gillian remembers dismally, that was Valentine’s Day: Caroline was pulling out all the stops and proposing marriage to a woman she truly loved and Gillian was on an accidental date with her half-brother. At least one of us had a good Valentine’s Day, she had wanted to say to Caroline when they talked about the wedding over the mobile, but the awkward agonies of the conversation severely compromised her magnanimous tendencies. Even afterward she narrowly refrained from repeatedly smashing her mobile against the tractor.

“Keats wrote a poem about her. St. Agnes,” Caroline is saying. “Last year, on this day, Kate recited part of it to me. Not the whole thing. It’s a long poem. She said it was long. But she just—rolled it out, started reciting it off the top of her head like it was nothing. And I thought, well, shit, this poem is as complex as a chemical formula, in its own way. And she knew it by heart. I always underestimated her. I always underestimate everything. Even though I think I’m not.”

“What do you mean?”

For several long minutes, Caroline says nothing. Then: “Do you want to hear a story?”

Gillian pokes at a callus on her hand, thumbnail slicing into dead, thickened skin. No pain? Right then, proceed. “Sure.”

“One morning, long time ago, when I was at Oxford, I was walking through the Parks. It was very early, not a lot of people were out yet. Believe it or not, I’d been at a party the night before. Drank myself silly, passed out, woke up on someone’s couch with a quilt over me. So I left, walked back to my rooms. I’m taking a shortcut across the croquet lawn and off in the distance, on the other side of the field I see this bloke playing with his dog—this big, black, mean-looking dog. I’m not good at breeds. It might have been—what is it, a Schnauzer?”

Gillian smiles. “Probably not.”

“Rottweiler, maybe? Anyway, it was something Germanic-sounding and evil-looking. Nazi dog. Bloody huge and terrifying. So suddenly this dog, this big black death machine, stops jumping around and looks in my direction. Right at me. And then boom—he takes off like a shot, this bullet of teeth and muscle heading right at me. He’s moving so fast I couldn’t think what to do. I just stood there. Paralyzed with fear. Blink of an eye, he’s practically in front of me. All I could think was that this thing is going to rip out my throat and kill me and that would be that. I’d be dead. No future. No career. No life. No love. No children. Nothing.”

“Obviously that didn’t happen.”

“No. What happens is, this bloke blows a whistle and the bloody beast suddenly stops dead right in front of me. Sat down. Even wagged his tail, like he was expecting me to throw him a steak as
a reward for scaring me to fucking death.”

Gillian exhales a breath. “Jesus. You were lucky.”

“That’s exactly it. It’s all so random. You see? You’re just going along, living your life, thinking everything is great and then this thing rushes up to meet you, to rip your throat out. And there’s nothing you can do. It’s gotten to the point where my mind is like that now. You know? I’ll be fine for, for a while and then some thought, some memory comes roaring up like the black dog and it catches me by the fucking throat. I feel like I’m always waiting for it. For the black dog. For the anniversary of one of the best days of my life followed by the worst. One on top of the other. I’m just waiting and waiting. And it does me in. Time passes, but I don’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everything is on a loop in my head. Going over and over again. Not just, not just what I feel but what she felt when she—what she must have thought in that last moment before she—oh, fuck—” Caroline’s voice breaks. Then she breaks altogether.

The escalation from seemingly pointless story to uncontrollable sobbing catches Gillian off guard and a black dog of her own comes running for her: that horribly surreal moment in hospital when she heard Caroline’s cry from the waiting room, as she sat beside a man she barely knew who claimed to be her brother and after agreeing to marry a man she did not love. It can’t be, she had thought. Stubbornly she had clung to the sole comfort that as her life continued its inevitable descent into unwanted choices masquerading as love and safety, Caroline at least would be happy. She got the second chance, the house, the new family. She got the girl she wanted.

Now Caroline curls in agony as the tetanus of memory runs poison through her blood, twists her nerves, spoils her mind. Gillian fears she’s about to slide forward and fall out of the chair and so without thinking she kneels in front of Caroline, to catch her if she falls. Instead she leans heavily into Gillian, her head dropping against Gillian’s shoulder as her crying continues unabated.

The requisite unsatisfactory words of comfort do not come to Gillian. She thinks that this woman, who spills tears of such copious intensity that Gillian’s threadbare jacket has surrendered the damp to the shirt beneath it, deserves far more than that. She deserves something akin to a story, a beautiful lie built on incontrovertible truth. Because sometimes lies are not lies but necessities for survival. Gillian knows this better than anyone; she would not have survived the entirety of her first marriage otherwise.

She cradles Caroline’s head and breathes shhhhh against her hair. “It wasn’t like what you think,” she whispers into Caroline’s ear. “Wasn’t like that at all.”

“It was quick and it was peaceful, and in but a few seconds your mind goes through a million thoughts, a million things and you can’t focus on a one but all together they’re like a dream, and they can be beautiful, every one of them beautiful, and she wouldn’t think of death or pain but life because that’s the kind of woman she was, you know that, and she thought of you, her life with you, and the baby she was going to have with you. She thought of all this and it was a comfort and she wasn’t hurting. She wasn’t. She was dreaming of the future and remembering the past. She was thinking of you and dreaming the rest of her life with you.”

The crying slows down, elides into whimpering, and then a bit of hyperventilating that worries Gillian because she has no idea what to do when someone hyperventilates—a hyperventilating sheep she can figure out, but sadly a human is out of her wheelhouse. But this quickly passes and Caroline soon breathes a deep steady rhythm against her damp shoulder.

God, Gillian marvels at herself, where the hell did all that come from? Maybe reading poetry was
good for something: necessary grandiloquence when your back is against the bloody wall.

She stops congratulating herself when Caroline sits up, ramrod straight.

“Gillian,” she says. Her voice has dropped a solid, solemn octave into a range redolent of recitative. Sometimes her voice got this deep and soft when they were in bed; it possessed a plush quality, as if you could simply sink into and luxuriate in every single word she said. But no, that can’t be what’s happening now. Perhaps in this moment the intent of the tone is colored for confession, and Gillian tallies up several probable admissions, mostly ridiculous save for one of desperate sublimity:

1. I voted conservative in the last election.
2. My mother is actually an android, which means I’m part robot so you can cross having sex with a robot off your bucket list.
3. I loved you, I did. I loved her too, but I felt something for you.
4. I’m going to upchuck now all over your trainers.

Judging by the horrible pallor of Caroline’s face and the nervous way that she keeps swallowing, Gillian is pretty certain it’s the last thing.

She leaps to her feet, twisting her knee in a rather painful fashion, and grabs the first thing she sees that could function as a vomit-catcher: An enameled Dutch pot sitting atop the stove, gleaming and polished by the artisanal sweat of strapping, bearded French craftsmen. It probably cost the entirety of her month’s salary at the store. She shoves the pot under Caroline’s face in the nick of time, staring out the window as Caroline heaves away until she signals the end of the act with a long, horrible groan.

“Done?”

“Oh, shit.” Slumped against the chair, Caroline presses the back of her hand against her mouth.

“Oh God. I’m so sorry.”

“S’all right.”

“No, it’s not.” Caroline sprawls face down on the table.

“Look, it’s fine. It’s great.” Gillian sits the pot of puke on the floor. “Vomit always reminds me of my wedding day.” It’s out of her mouth before she knows it.

Caroline’s back shakes and she fears another crying bout is on hand, but then Gillian realizes that she’s laughing and thinks of that old Joni Mitchell song: *Laughing and crying, it’s the same release*. It was another crucial thing, aside from learning how to properly pleasure a woman and making your own granola—albeit not at the same time—that her teenaged self had picked up from the Hebden Bridge lesbian hippies: An appreciation of Joni Mitchell. She grins stupidly and starts giggling.

“Oh God,” Caroline says between laughter. “It’s really awful, but I was grateful he threw up—because it took the focus off me.”

“It did.”

As the laughter subsides, Caroline remains in her position face down over the table and says,
“Why are you still married?”

“Too lazy for divorce, I guess.” Also, the inertia of pity. Just when she thinks she’s worked up the nerve to give him the heave-ho, he does something terribly sweet and she feels obligated to give him another chance. She’s always a sucker for stereotypical romantic gestures: Flowers, chocolate, a nice dinner. Everything will be fine for a while until a moment of clarity takes her, usually in the middle of the night when, caught in the silvery glaring crosshairs of moonlight from the blinds, she reminds herself that he knew Eddie was beating the shit out of her on a regular basis and did fuck all about it. Then her body, usually ever reliant in matters of unaccountable strength and dubious pleasures, betrays her: she skitters away from his embrace, squirms out of his touch, dodges the crash landing of his kiss. The intoxicating persuasions of wine and gin that merely heightened every encounter she had with Caroline are now the sine qua non of her sex life.

The honeymoon had been one long sunny blur of avoidance. She would wake every morning well before he did, swim in the hotel pool until her muscles ached, eat a huge lunch, go for a walk, return to the hotel, and fall into a dead sleep the rest of the afternoon. She had no idea what he did while she slept, because he was never in the room then. To him, the whole concept of a siesta seemed nothing more than a prime example of European decadence. He hated to swim. He possessed no curiosity about the town near the resort. In the evening they usually drank and ate dinner with another couple, this bloke from Brixton and his Danish wife. One night after an epic amount of drink, and while Robbie and the husband played pool, she thought she had kissed the woman while they were together in the bathroom, or maybe the woman kissed her, but that could have been some sort of sloppy drunken hallucination, a desperate wish borne of boredom that did not come to pass. The last four days of the honeymoon she spent in bed with food poisoning and with Robbie repeatedly chiding her that seafood in a foreign country is never to be trusted. She had never been so happy to be ill in her entire life.

She shakes all that off and nudges the now-tepid mug of tea toward Caroline. “Drink.”

Caroline sits up and gives it a bleary-eyed look of suspicion. “Want me to vomit again?”

Gillian grins. “Just drink the bloody tea.”

As Caroline gulps it down, Gillian takes the pot to the bathroom for disposal of its contents. Unfortunately she notes that Caroline ate something orange at some point; of course it was probably something alarmingly healthy, like organic carrots. She examines the seat carefully for any spills, sees none, but still wipes down the seat anyway.

When she comes downstairs, Caroline is standing. She’s still in the kitchen, rubbing at her eyes with a fist as a child would, a pouty quiver to her lips as if she were rudely awakened and torn from the nefarious pleasures of Neverland. She stares out the bright window. The rain has let up and a weird, ethereal post-storm light cascades into the room, bright as a nuclear flash. The world’s on fire and Gillian’s aching hands overflow with nothing and she wants to give in to this fleeting apocalyptic mood and say God knows how many things she should not say, and she does not. In the sudden stubborn lift of Caroline’s chin and the subtle elegance of her stance reasserting itself, Gillian sees that Caroline is recovering herself and so she drinks down regret with a single breath. It’s as smoothly, numbingly familiar as wine.

Then Caroline turns around and blinks in surprise, as if she had truly forgotten Gillian is still present. Troubled and twitching, she runs a hand through her hair. “Can you help me with something?”

Gillian nods even as she mentally kicks herself for being a too-agreeable, love-struck pillock. “Of course.”
Caroline reaches for her handbag, opens it, and pulls out a bottle of pills. Without looking up she thrusts it with a childlike determination at Gillian, who is startled by the length of Caroline’s arm as she would be by a captive hawk unexpectedly unfurling a wing. “Can you get rid of these for me?”

Gillian takes the bottle. It’s diazepam, nearly full. “How long have you been taking these?”

Caroline covers her eyes. “How long do you think I’ve been taking them?”

“Jesus,” Gillian says. “So you’ve stopped now?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you go cold turkey on this?”

“Not exactly. I’ve been tapering off. Trying to do it gradually.” Caroline rubs her face. “That’s why I let Greg take Flora away this weekend. So I could do a full stop.”

“Does your doctor know you’re doing this?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. Look, he’s a wanker. I’ve wanted to stop for months but he keeps giving me a bloody script and I just realized I had to do it without his so-called help. Last dose I took was two nights ago, just half a tablet. Then last night I just couldn’t sleep. The black dog was sitting on my chest. So this morning I thought if I had some wine, that would knock me out a bit and then I had too much, but it was this lovely little pinot noir, it went down so smoothly—”

“Do you still have it?”

“Yeah,” Caroline replies, pleasantly surprised. “Do you want some?”

“Yeah. I want to pour it down the drain and hit you over the head with the bottle you stupid fucking knob.”

While Caroline looks genuinely wounded at the vehemence, she reverts to form and attempts to joke out of it. “Wow, I’m sensing a lot of anger, Gillian. I need to process this.”

“Don’t throw me off with your lesbian doubletalk. You shouldn’t be going cold turkey on shit like this, you shouldn’t be mixing pills with alcohol—you know that! You’re not stupid.”

“Technically, I wasn’t mixing the two.”

“It stays in your system a long time, bullshitter. I’m not a chemist, but I do know that.”

Caroline shrugs helplessly. “I’m just trying to get better as fast as I can because—for Flora, if nothing else. I have to get my shit together.”

Gillian says nothing because the snarling rage that she usually feels when dealing with the willfully obtuse—her husband, her son, the world at large—has overtaken her and she cannot bear that she’s directing it at Caroline, of all people. Who is not obtuse, and who needs her help.

After a judicious length of silence, Caroline asks gently, “Will you get rid of the pills for me?”

“I’ll just flush them down the toilet now.”
“No, don’t do that. It’s bad for the water supply.”

Gillian, who had been walking toward the stairs, stops and whirls around. “Oh, Christ. Pray tell then, how do you want them disposed of?”

“Sorry. Look. Do it your way, however you want to get rid of them is fine. Well, except selling them.”

“Like I’m really going to do that.” Although it was tempting, Ollie had a friend—no. “All right. One condition.”

“Hmm?”

Gillian shakes the pill bottle at her. “You call me. Tomorrow morning. Let me know you’re all right. Or if you need anything.” Gillian pauses. “I’m serious. If I don’t hear from you, I’m coming here. And I’ll bring your mum.”

“Always threatening me with my mother.” Despite the complaint, Caroline smiles. “All right.”

“When’s Twatwaffle coming back?”

“Who?”

“Greg.”

“Oh. I thought you meant John.” Caroline frowns. “I have too many twatwaffles in my life.” She shakes her head. “But, um, he’s due back tomorrow night.”

“Good.” Gillian tucks the diazepam bottle into her jacket. “Between this and the heart pills, I feel like a bloody drug dealer.”

“Like that time you showed up here looking like one—” Caroline begins and, just as abruptly, stops. She’s strayed into verboten territory.

That time. It wasn’t memorable so much for getting fucked in the hallway, no. It was memorable for the pointillism of dusk, the air so cold she wanted nothing more than burrow in that bed forever, the slow and sensual journey of Caroline’s lips along the canal of her spine upward from the dip in her back to the base of her neck, to certain words whispered against her ear: *I’m not done with you yet.* It should have been wonderful, it was wonderful, until the painful, stunning realization that no one had ever paid such detailed attention to her body, not quite like this.

As Gillian nervously looks away, Caroline takes a deep breath and starts again. “I appreciate this very much. Thank you. For everything.”

Gillian nods.

“Well.” Caroline stretches. “I feel like a lie down.”

“Yeah.” Gillian clears her throat. “I should go.”

“I don’t want to boot you out,” Caroline says, “but you don’t have to stay on my account.” Self-conscious, she shrugs. “I don’t think I need a babysitter anymore.”

Gillian offers a compromise: “I’ll wait till you’re asleep.”

“If you like.” Caroline shuffles off toward the living room couch. “I already feel much better.”
“You look better.”

“I look like shit.”

“Well, very good shit, at least.”

Caroline laughs.

Gillian washes out the puke pot, the teapot, the mug. In the living room, she finds Caroline sprawled on the couch, already breathing deeply and making that growly prelude to the orchestral nightmare of snoring that usually follows. In sleep she arches, sighs loudly, and rolls her ass in an unintentionally lovely and inviting way.

In response Gillian paces and demands of herself deeply unsexy thoughts. Sheep placenta. David Cameron. Robbie's toenails. Seeking distraction, she stares at a group of photos clustered on the wall. Caroline has apparently taken a Stalin-like approach to her ex-husband, because there is no evidence of John’s existence to be found. There’s an old photo of Celia and Kenneth, judging by the clothes and the hairstyles, circa mid-1970s. Then a picture of Caroline and the boys on some holiday a good eight or ten years ago, standing on a pier of some posh marina with long, elegant boats bobbing in the background. Everyone looks happy, even Lawrence. This younger version of Caroline has shorter hair, sort of shaggy-chic, and she wears a cropped coral-colored top over a one-piece navy blue bathing suit. Her long, tanned legs look amazing. Not helping, Gillian thinks. Then a recent photo: Kate with William and Lawrence, standing outside in the local park. There are Christmas decorations twined over on a lamp in the background. Predictably, Kate and William smile sweetly and Lawrence looks as if he just consumed a turd. Actually, Kate looks beyond sweet and falls somewhere in the category of luminous. Gillian attributes it to pregnancy. And being in love with the photographer. Jesus Christ, Gillian thinks, have I ever looked that good? She has always been mystified at her power to attract. Maybe Cheryl the cunt was right—it’s purely pheromones. She’s always giving off some sort of reckless chemical. She’s not fit for human consumption. She should be in a bubble. She should be a pillar of salt.

Kate’s image in the photo appears to have a hypnotic effect. Either that or she’s well and truly knackered, which is usually par for the course. Because now Gillian can hear Kate’s gentle, low voice: Well done handling all that, Imaginary Kate says.

“Thanks,” Gillian says.

Maybe you’re not such a plonker after all.

“Oh, good.”

Just kidding. I never thought that. Caroline’s the one who thought that. But you're a good person. You need to take care of her. Because no one else will do it properly.

"Dunno about that."

Trust me on this. I know you care about her.

“I do.”

Glad we got all that sorted. Oh, by the way, while you're here, could you fix the garbage disposal? It's still making that horrid noise it did like a year ago.

As her own reflection leaps off the photo’s glass frame, Gillian rubs her eyes, shakes her head, and then stares up at the ceiling. “Oh Christ, I’ve really gone round the bend.” Then a horrible,
slurping growl—the noise akin to a zombie chowing down on corpse brains—sends a jolt through her and she bumps into a table. It is, of course, Caroline’s snore.

Gillian walks over to the couch and stares down at the beautiful, drooling, snoring creature before her. “You ridiculous woman,” she says. It seems as good a note as any on which to leave.

As she drives along a long empty stretch of road, she spots an old RAV4 pulled over, suffering from an obvious flat tire. A white-haired woman stands beside it, looking helpless. Gillian’s initial thought is that she’s perfect bait for a serial killer, that someone like Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs* could emerge from the vehicle like a swift, menacing jack-in-the-box, knock out his victim, and stuff her in the trunk. As she pulls over to help the woman Gillian thinks if this happens to her, she’ll be on the news tomorrow and Caroline will feel terribly guilty, so it will be completely worth it. But no serial killer leaps out of the RAV4 as Gillian goes about the business of changing the tire for this older woman, who reminds her a bit of her mum, who she has been thinking of more than usual lately—her mum, also winner of the runner-up prize in the love department. Then she realizes the woman is actually the grandmother of some classmate of Raff’s. After Gillian finishes they chat briefly—sons, grandbabies, school—before the woman, professing eternal gratitude, gets in the SUV and drives off into the vanishing point.

Alone, Gillian stands in the middle of the road and pulls out the bottle of Caroline’s pills, amused that the name on the bottle displays a trifecta of typos: *Carolyn MacKensie-Dawsyn*. She opens the bottle and pelts the pitted macadam with a mini-hailstorm of diazepam. For good measure she grinds several under foot while tucking the empty bottle back into her jacket, thinking it might be safest to dispose of the container in the bin at home. It starts to rain again. She tastes the drops on her lips, inhales the sweet rich damp earth rising to meet her, and reaches out for the tantalizingly low fluted clouds flayed out across the flat gray of the trees and the mountains. Her outstretched arm levels with the horizon as she imagines the clouds are truly within her reach and that she’s bearing witness to a marriage between heaven and earth. When she arrives home she is tired, so tired that when she goes to bed that night her exhaustion is satisfyingly genuine and, for once, there is no need to feign sleep when Robbie climbs in beside her.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER 4 SOUNDTRACK:

The Smiths: *Bigmouth Strikes Again*

The Smiths: *I Want the One I Can’t Have*

Joni Mitchell: *People’s Parties*

Beach House: *New Year*
And now good morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.
--John Donne, “The Good Morrow”

There is no epiphany, no lightning bolt, no miraculous recovery. Nor will there ever be. But when Caroline finally realizes all this, she recognizes it as an ending and a start.

About three hours after Gillian leaves her home, she wakes up to a headache more caused by mild dehydration than alcohol, a pleather-like coating of vomit in her mouth, and a niggling sense of humiliation. The first thing she does, of course, is brush her teeth. Then she showers, letting the water get as warm as she likes as she rests her head against the water-beaded tiles, waiting for tears that do not come. Crying in the shower is practicality; a teacher at the school—who had lost her husband to a heart attack only a couple years ago—advised her on that last year, when she was deep and alone in mournful trenches. The field of grief runs fallow now. In one sense she is relieved; in another, she reaches the next necessary level of quiet devastation in finally acknowledging the dirty work of time in diminishing Kate’s memory within her, that with every day she will forget certain details about Kate and the time they spent together, things like the way she smelled or the sound of her voice, the nervous way she would pluck at her sweater, or the way she tapped a spoon on a bowl before eating soup or porridge or anything in a bowl, really.

She spends the day tidying up, reading, eating some sort of leftover vegetable pilaf thing that Greg made earlier in the week. She sleeps on the couch again so that the thrumming lullaby of the house can pull her into sleep; it’s almost like sleeping outside, with the occasional lonesome chirp or vibrato of appliances like electronic crickets, the digital lights twinkling like stars. Before falling asleep she dwells on the mortifying day that’s about to pass. It’s not so much that she vomited and cried in front of Gillian; she knows Gillian capable of forgiving multitudes, albeit usually to her own detriment. It’s that she told Gillian about the black dog, the beast that now reigns as the symbol of her depression. She’s never told anyone the story about the dog except John, and he had acted like such a fucking writer about it that she instantly regretted it: How big was the field where you were walking? Was it sunny or rainy? Was it cold? Were you hungover? Why did you get so pissed at that party the night before? Are you sure you didn’t do anything to provoke the dog? And she had never told Kate because she deemed it potentially too upsetting for a sensitive pregnant woman, once again giving in to the irrational and protective instincts that left her wanting to keep Kate in some sort of perpetual emotional and physical bubble until the baby had been born.

At least Gillian usually possesses the good sense of knowing when to listen, when to talk, when to amuse. The next morning, the news radio broadcast prompts memories of Gillian’s Monty Pythonesque BBC announcer imitations, usually piled together in glorious non-sequiturs: Today, in Halifax, a sheep shat. Scientists hail a remarkable breakthrough in the study of snotty bitches.
She smiles, drinks her coffee. Then straightens in her chair as some residual drunken sludge from
the day before bubbles to the surface of her mind: You said something. Gillian had said something,
a bunch of things actually, while she was crying. A river of words, a wild and gentle susurrulation
fell against her ear as Gillian cradled her head. This is all Caroline remembers. The sensation of
language, incomprehensibly beautiful. Perhaps the words did not matter? All that mattered was the
recitative, low and gentle, carrying her forward.

Later that morning she’s typing up notes on a lecture for a class she’s teaching when Gillian texts:
You okay

She almost types yeah but hesitates, thinking that Gillian deserves more than one lousy syllable, at
the very least an effusive paragraph of grammatically correct praise and thanks and a promise of a
really good bottle of wine or a nice lunch somewhere, or both. Then the kettle goes off, Lawrence
calls to say he’ll need a ride home later, and it’s forgotten. Until two hours later, when Caroline
hears a commotion outside her door: Well ahead of schedule, Celia and Alan have returned.

Slightly wild-eyed and with the judgmental chill of January clinging to her like a shroud, Celia
sweeps in and, while pulling off gloves with the melodramatic flourish of a surgeon who has
failed a patient, wails with maternal horror: “Gillian said you were ill!”

“No, no, I’m fine—”

Celia clamps deathly cold hands on her face. “Oh my God, you’re burning up.”

Caroline jerks away from her touch. “You only think that because your hands are freezing, Mum.”

Alan leans over her and peers intently with his kind, watery blue eyes. “You don’t look too
peaked, love.”

“I’m not. I’m—” That’s when Caroline notices that Gillian’s leaning in the doorway of the
kitchen, and when their eyes meets her smug smirk breaks into a grin.

“What was it again, Caz?” Gillian shifts, crosses her arms. “Stomach flu?”
“Yes. Stomach flu.”

“Not hungover?” Mock innocent, Gillian bats her eyelashes.

“No,” Caroline grinds out the syllable as her mother brushes hair away from her face.

“You could do with a trim, you know,” Celia says.

Alan pats Caroline’s shoulder. “I’ll the put the kettle on.”

“Do we have a thermometer? A real thermometer? Not one of those silly ones that blink and beep —”

She slaps away Celia’s hands. “Stop fussing over me.”

“Never. Someone has to take care of you,” Celia says. As if truly earning the final word, she tucks a lock of hair behind Caroline’s ear.

Caroline glances over at Gillian, now attentive and quiet and with the bundled energy, the nervy repose of a sheep dog; the boundless affection she could give away with ease tempered by experience and expectation.

Gillian ducks her head, rubs her neck. “Gonna shove off, Dad.”

“Oh.” Kettle in hand, Alan looks disappointed. “Are you sure, love?”

“Yeah. Got things to do.” Their eyes meet and despite the clarity of Gillian’s gaze, she remains as inscrutable to the dozy Caroline as ever—even more so because Caroline remains hung up on her lack of recall concerning yesterday’s events. What did you say to me? As Gillian turns to go Caroline leans forward and attempts standing because she wants to rush at Gillian and say—what? Thank you? Are we friends again? Instead she is successfully blocked by her mother’s stout form, as immobile as a sheep in the middle of a country road, and tethered by Celia’s firm but affectionate grip upon her shoulder.
“See ya later,” Gillian says to no one in particular.

She’s already gone, the door closing behind her, when Celia says softly, almost as an afterthought, “Goodbye, Gillian.”

Hours later Greg returns with Flora, and Caroline is grateful that her mother and Alan are still underfoot so that they can absorb his senseless patter while she sprawls in front of the telly with Flora on her lap. A documentary on Tesla—containing no information that she doesn’t already know—is slowly lulling her to sleep, but Flora will have none of this: She reaches out and seizes Caroline’s nose in her chubby fist. With the merciless assessment of a child, Flora stares her down. It’s not like that old poem—My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears—a poem that Kate would have known, would have recited with ease. She does not see herself so easily reflected in this child who is, nonetheless, hers. Her daughter.

The worst will come—a wedding anniversary, a funeral anniversary, the rainy days when her chest aches—and she’ll cry again. And then it will pass. “And spring,” she says to Flora—who of course knows all her thoughts, even the half-finished ones that find themselves spoken aloud. “Spring will be here before we know it.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Soundtrack:

Simon & Garkfunkel: April Come She Will

PJ Harvey: You Said Something
Indeed, as a rule, everybody turns out to be somebody else.

—Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*

The moment that Greg over-enunciates the phrase *organic ground flax seed* into Caroline’s ear is also the very moment that Beverly walks into her office brandishing rainbow stickers. Naturally in terms of interest the latter easily trumps the former; indeed, Beverly tying a shoelace or even blinking is inherently more fascinating than anything that comes out of Greg’s mouth.

“Chia seeds,” Caroline says absently against the tiny speaker of her mobile as her attention span meanders like a tumbleweed through the desert-like mental landscape that Greg inspires.

He sighs. “No, no, Caroline. Flax seed. Organic ground flax seed.”

“Oh of course. Wheatgrass seeds.”

“Oh, I see what you’re doing,” he chuckles. “You’re so clever, as your mum says. So you’ll pick it up on your way home?”

“Yeah, yeah. No problem. I’m leaving now.” How did this happen to me? she thinks. How did I get another husband? Or am I the husband, picking up pantry items for the little woman on the way home from the office? No, the answer to the pointless rhetorical question on how she got this floppy-haired muppet in her life is quite simple: You were so absolutely mad with grief and so desperately doped up to the gills that, had you thought of it at the time, acquiring a gorilla as childcare would have been a legitimate, valid option.

“You’re perfect,” Greg says.

Recently Caroline has noticed how much he parrots her mother; they get on ridiculously well, which is another strike against him. She knows her mother would gleefully sacrifice a litter of puppies, kittens, or any other adorable baby animal if it would bring about some sort of miraculous romantic relationship between the two of them—or between her and any man, save the possible exception of John. Perhaps the flax seed is a key ingredient of some insidious warlock brew, a heterosexual love spell he’s concocting that will render her helplessly in flip flops, eating quinoa bread, and deprived of decent orgasms for the rest of her natural life, and she’s certain of the latter part because Kate was diplomatically tepid when Caroline jealously badgered her for a report on how good he was in bed. *He was all right* was the final verdict and Caroline knew enough about Kate’s prevarications to correctly interpret this as a state that clings delicately to the underside of mediocrity; Kate had expressed a similar opinion about tapioca pudding that was carefully noted by Caroline, who, in her smidge of spare time, had created a spreadsheet of pregnant food cravings, and tapioca’s aggregate rating left it well below even the dismal bland brick known as raw tofu.

Ah, the romantic statistician, Caroline thinks derisively—even as she agrees with Greg on her own unassailable perfection: “I know, I know.”

“Thanks so much.”
“Hanging up now.” Merciless, she presses the little red phone icon.

Beverly holds up two rainbow stickers.

Caroline smirks. “Is there something you’re trying to tell me?”

“Very funny. You recall those nice young people from the gay student support group—the ones you spoke with last month?”

“I do.” It had been Beverly’s idea. Despite all the predictable reasons she trotted out for Caroline’s involvement with this group—support for at-risk youth, giving back to the community, more specifically her community, and providing Caroline with something to do that would potentially get her head out of her arse, not that Beverly phrased it that way—it had been a good idea. It made her feel useful, not to mention nervously flattered that during this meeting/speaking engagement a couple teenaged lesbians were shamelessly checking out her legs. She should have worn trousers. Or a sackcloth.

“They sent a very nice thank-you letter—and these lovely rainbow stickers.”

“Lovely indeed.”

“So. Where are you going to put them?”

Caroline opens her mouth but thinks better of it as Beverly warns, “Don’t be cheeky.”

“Who says I have to put them anywhere?” she whines.

Beverly’s eyebrows twitch.

“It’s not that I’m ashamed—it’s just, I mean, it’s a rainbow. As far as symbols go, it’s a bit twee, don’t you think? I’m not twelve years old anymore. Well, not that I liked rainbows then either—I’ve never cared for unstable phenomena that show off. Why doesn’t my community have a really fierce, beautiful symbol?”

“Like a drag queen?”

“Now you’re being cheeky. No. I mean, like, something majestic, like an eagle—” Caroline stops, holds up a hand. “No, no, right, never mind, that’s the Nazis. Maybe a puma? A cougar? A leopard? The leopard could be sort of multicolored, you know, it could have rainbow spots—”

Beverly sighs as she places the stickers on the desk.

She hates it when Beverly sighs. “What?”

“You’re certain you’re not ashamed? Uncomfortable?”

“Really? Honestly? No. I just talked to a bunch of gay kids and everyone in the local school authority knew about it. Every student and parent attached to this school, everyone I know personally and professionally—they all know my personal history now. I couldn’t be more visible than if I rode a rainbow unicorn to work. For better or worse, I’m the Big Lesbian Widow now.”

But who’s bitter? she thinks.

“Well,” Beverly begins, “the thing is—”

“What’s the thing?”
“I think people are talking.” Beverly pauses.

Caroline knows why people are talking, but prompts anyway: “About—?”

“About your current living situation.”

Ah Greg, the perpetual cuntblock. “You’re saying that people think I’m involved with Greg now.”

“Yes. I think some people are assuming that you’re gone back to being—” Beverly takes a dramatic breath. “Straight.”

“God.” With a decisive flourish, Caroline closes her briefcase. “That’s the worst thing people have ever said about me.”

They burst into laughter.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Beverly says. “Remember the rumor that went around a few years back about you fancying livestock? Adrian Tomelty created that photo collage of you with cows—”

“Yeah. It was very satisfying to suspend him. Creative little bastard. Ah well, who knows? Maybe I should take up with some nice animal. Gillian does have a very handsome ram named Bertolucci.”

Beverly laughs again. “No offense to Mr. Bertolucci, but I think you can manage a human being.”

The vote of confidence is appreciated. She picks up the stickers and taps them thoughtfully against the desk. “All right then. Walk out with me and we’ll christen the Cherokee.”

“Really?” Beverly gasps a little.

Caroline gives her a curious look. “You seem quite excited by this.”

There is a pause.

“It’s been a slow day,” Beverly admits.

Together in the parking lot, Beverly applauds quite lady-like as Caroline slaps one of the rainbow stickers on the rear bumper of her Jeep Cherokee. But as she drives away—the beaming Beverly in her rear-view mirror—regret quickly kicks in and she frets that the rainbow sticker will make her beloved Jeep a target. Could she scrape it off somehow, without damaging the vehicle too much? Maybe Gillian knows how to do something like that. Then she imagines surreptitiously plastering the second sticker on Gillian’s Land Rover and wonders if Gillian actually knows the significance and symbolism of the rainbow. Probably, thanks to those Hebden Bridge hippie lesbians who initiated her into their Sapphic finishing school. Since Gillian first told her about those women, Caroline has reexamined and reconsidered her initial awestruck, vicarious wonder. Because seriously—what kind of dodgy dykes go around seducing fifteen-year-old girls? At that age it was one thing to be fumbling about with a teenaged potato like Robbie, quite another to be actively seduced by someone older who should have known better. It troubles Caroline now, particularly since realizing that Gillian has never talked about it aside from her semi-sleepy confession the first night they spent together. But then she does not talk about Eddie, either. Or even her husband, who is—at least the last time Caroline checked—robustly alive.

When she pulls into the driveway, she is not surprised to see Gillian’s Land Rover there. Ever since that horrible vomity and weepy day a few months ago, Gillian has remained in sheep dog mode and at times seems to fabricate increasingly ridiculous reasons to show up in Harrogate on a
regular basis. Some reasons—such as driving her father to doctor’s appointments or taking Celia shopping, the latter item an extra-credit exercise in masochism—possess some legitimacy, but others, such as coming all the way from Halifax to present her father with a library book on the topic of the Italian Front in World War I, possess a baffling yet typically Gillian-like wonkiness.

On that day—having spotted the unannounced appearance of the Land Rover from the kitchen—Caroline had opened up the front door to see Alan standing outside the guesthouse holding the aforementioned book with a puzzled look and Gillian nervously shifting on the doorstep with an intense frown of concentration that quickly transformed into wide-eyed disbelief as if, to her own astonishment, she had successfully summoned Caroline to the door with nothing but the power of her mind.

“Hi!” Caroline said, smiling.

Gillian, on the other hand, only blinked wildly.

“Are you okay?”

Gillian rolled her shoulders, rubbed her neck, then stuffed her hands in her pockets. “No. I mean, I was just going to ask—I’m fine. Thanks. I was—I was just going to knock, well, maybe, it’s not important, I thought, was kind of, um, hesitating, and then you opened the door, and I—well, I was just, I just wanted to know how you were.”

“I’m good.” Caroline replied. “Thanks. How are—”

“Gillian!” Alan bellowed from across the way. “I’ve read this book!”

“Well bloody read it again, because you obviously forgot that the Italians were shit military strategist!” Gillian shouted back.

Caroline stepped back from the doorway. “Do you want to come in?”

Gillian turned apprehensive, as if Caroline had instead invited her to partake of some ritualistic satanic sacrifice. “No, no.” She stared at her trainers. “Thanks. I’ve got to go, got things to do.” She paused, shuffled. “With sheep. The farming thereof.”

“Yeah.” Caroline leaned in the doorway, folded her arms. “I seem to recall that is a thing you do.”

“Do you want to take book back?” Alan hollered.

Gillian whirled around and screamed, “No! FOR CHRIST’S SAKE I’M TRYING TO HAVE A CONVERSATION.”

“I don’t want to argue with you about trench warfare again!”

“Are you sure you’re—” Caroline began, and paused. She was going to finish up this solicitous query with “all right” but thought of going more specific with “not drunk” or, given Gillian’s family history, “not having a stroke.”

“Actually, um, I gotta go.” With a thumb’s up, Gillian turned, stumbled into a hedge, hopped in the Land Rover, and was gone. So much for conversation.

Then, rather conveniently, the house started falling apart. Or so went Caroline’s melodramatic assessment of it to anyone who dared to ask a question as simple as, “How are things?” There were leaking pipes in the bathroom, then the kitchen, a cracked doorframe, creaking floorboards, a broken railing on the staircase, and woodwork that required painting—the last item part of Kate’s
ambitious plan to paint the nursery that never came to completion for obvious painful reasons. In addition, the Jeep developed an oil pan leak and a cabinet door broke in the guesthouse. While Gillian could not permanently fix a tractor to save her life, these other things she could repair, and did so, with apparent ease.

All these services quietly rendered tallies up a considerable amount of emotional debt and a guilty sense of obligation incurred toward Gillian—especially when Caroline throws in the disposal of her pills, and here she realizes that this is another shared secret between them, like Eddie—the result of which is that all these worries are now poorly bundled together in the package of dutiful anxiety that she calls existence.

Resigned to this state of being, at least for now, Caroline arrives at home. House keys in hand, she’s about to open the front door when it’s flung open by Greg, who thrusts Flora at her as if he’s rehearsing a scene from *The Lion King*. Except that the musical accompaniment to this scene is a very loud Mozart concerto that makes the doorframe vibrate. Greg is seriously invested in the belief that frequent exposure to Mozart will instantly transform Flora into a baby genius who simultaneously solves trigonometry problems while discovering new planets and translating the known works of Aeschylus. While Caroline likes Mozart a great deal and can only hope this dubious factoid possesses some merit, she notes that Mozart does not seem to be doing much for Greg’s level of intellect.

“Thank goodness you’re home!” he cries. “I’m on the line with my editor—can you take her?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

Baby handoff completed, he scurries back to his lair. Flora looks pleasantly surprised to see her and offers her a toothy, drooling smile: *Hey blonde lady, it’s you again.*

“Honey, I’m home.” She kisses the top of Flora’s head. “Has Auntie Gillian built us a panic room yet?”

Predictably, no response.

“Well, let’s go see what the madwoman is up to then.”

In the kitchen they find Gillian semi-sprawled on the floor, half out of sight as she fumbles with something under the sink. Even over the vibrating glory of Mozart, Gillian has heard the click of heels on hardwood and calls out a “Hiya.”

Ah, Caroline thinks, the great challenge of the garbage disposal. For a while Gillian has been oddly obsessed with fixing it, even though Caroline told her several times not to bother because it’s always made the same dreadful grinding racket since day one. It had been John’s bright idea to get one; had he not installed it himself, it would have been downright brilliant. As such the garbage disposal ended up as the perfect metaphor for their marriage: Great expectations doomed as fundamental flaws revealed themselves and as reality set in they both half-heartedly attempted fixing things, until she grew to resent his ineptitude and quasi-helplessness and he resented her resentfulness, and the noise got progressively worse until both could bear it no longer.

Additionally Gillian’s current location and position on the floor reminds Caroline, unfortunately, of the first time they had it off. How Gillian fished around underneath the sink to retrieve the bottle of whisky that John hid there, how one tiny drink—well, that and a bottle of wine—made both of them so stupidly bold, how one night seemed to change everything. At least for a while, anyway. To Caroline’s relief they seem to be friends once more; it’s almost as if certain things, and by certain things her censorious mind means filthy satisfying shags, had never happened between them, and this reversion to their original solid state has made her happier than she’s willing to
concede to anyone. It’s almost perfect.

Except for one thing. The only downside of stopping with the diazepam is the triumphant resurgence of her sex drive, as if her ovaries had been on some sort of holiday and have returned fully refreshed and bringing back from their travels the useless, unwanted souvenir of distracting desire. Last week while perusing an online news site she became entranced by a photo of some female football player—she couldn’t be bothered to notice a name, let alone a team or even a country—a bit on the short side, caught in a glorious balletic mid-leap with powerful calves flexed, hair obscuring most of her face, and a bright spray of glossy high-definition sweat glistening along her rosy cheek and sculpted neck. Thus aided by the pic and a glass of that wonderful pinot noir she successfully masturbated for the first time in nearly a year, felt inexplicably guilty about it afterward, couldn’t fall asleep, cried a little, got up and consumed nearly an entire pint of salted caramel nut ice cream while cleaning the refrigerator, and then shouted at Greg about a coating of gingery beard stubble he left in the bathroom sink. The shouting definitely made her feel better.

So the last thing she needs is Gillian hanging about too much whilst playing handyman, appearing all sexily competent and skilled and fondling tools in her beautiful strong hands while squirming around on the kitchen floor in tight jeans that reveal the waistband of her underwear. As she is now. The exposure of knickers confirms that today is a periwinkle blue day, a relatively low danger level on the color-coded Gillian Greenwood Panty Threat Alert System. Regardless, Caroline senses some peril in identifying that the anonymous footy player now eternally relegated to her wank bank—of course, she saved the photo to her hard drive—possesses strong, stumpy but quite pleasing legs quite similar to Gillian’s. Does this mean she has a type? Short, stroppy bitches? Was Kate some sort of glorious exception to the rule?

Then Flora jams a tiny finger in her ear, the gesture serving as both a reminder that her little fingernails need clipping and an effective way of bringing Caroline back to her senses.

“Thank you,” Caroline says to her daughter.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Gillian calls up from the floor.

“I wasn’t—”

“What?”

“Oh, never mind.”

“No, no, wait—” Gillian scrambles away from sink, stands up, and flips the switch of the garbage disposal. Like a Lamborghini it now purrs smooth and low. Unabashedly proud of her achievement, she grins.

Successfully Caroline represses any acknowledgment or sentiment concerning that adorable smile or how it makes her feel because she’s truly stunned that the bloody disposal is, at last, not at a decibel level that might drive one to homicide. “It’s not making the noise anymore!”

“Now you can thank me,” Gillian announces.

“Thank you. What was wrong? Was something stuck in it?”

“Well.” Abruptly Gillian turns serious and sighs. “Severed finger.”

Horrified, Caroline stares.

Another quick grin. “Gotcha.”
“Twat.” Apologetically Caroline glances at Flora, who is, she hopes, too distracted by Gillian playfully tweaking her nose to register the word *twat.* “Really. What was wrong?”

“Rubber gasket were the wrong size.” Gillian kneels down to the floor and marshals together scattered tools; gently, she places them in a neat row in a battered, rusty old red toolbox. “So I got a new one and put her in. That’s all it took, really. Should have figured it out sooner.”

Toolbox, Caroline thinks. That’s what I should have gotten her for Christmas. She had known damned well Gillian would hate getting a gift basket and felt guilty about sorely lacking the impetus and imagination for decent gift-giving last year. Especially since Gillian had been on her best behavior at Christmas—sober, twitchy, wearing a dress, feigning enthusiasm for pointless presents and treating her husband with the diplomatically discouraging affection of a cat hater keeping a persistent tom at bay.

“How did that happen?”

Gillian snorts derisively. “Might want to ask the knobhead who put it together in the first place.”

“That would require a conversation with my ex-husband.”

“Well.” Gillian closes the toolbox and stands. “That explains everything, dunnit?” A strand of her hair has escaped the captivity of its ponytail and fits against her cheek in a lazy sensual curve.

Caroline is not sure if her compulsion to tuck that hair back is driven by her usual obsessive, neurotic need for everything in its place, simple affection, or complicated desire. No doubt all three, but luckily her arms are full of baby. “I feel like I should be paying you—something. For all the things you’ve been doing around here lately.”

Vigorously Gillian shakes her head. “Don’t owe me anything.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Not even for the rubbery, er, jiminy cricket thing you put in?” Caroline bounces Flora, who wriggles restlessly against her.

Gillian laughs softly. “No.”

“Couple bottles of red?”

“Well.” Gillian hesitates. “Not going to say no to that.”

“Good. I know just what to get and I’ll give them to you next time I see you. And you could—I mean, do you want to stay for dinner?”

“Can’t.” Gillian taps the toolbox with her foot. “But thanks. Got a shift at the store.”

Exempting the times when Gillian actually shares physical space with Robbie, it is alarmingly easy to forget that she is actually married to him. She never utters a word about him, and Caroline only hears dispatches of marital woe via her mother and Alan about the gender-role reversal of their near-constant fighting: He wants her to stop working so much so they can spend more time together, she thinks he’s being naïve about money. While she knows the real reason behind the fighting, she does not know why Gillian is still with him. Gillian can fix many things, she thinks, save her own broken sense of self.
“Besides, you people are driving me up a wall with all this bloody Mozart.” Disdainfully Gillian waves at the air and then nods at Flora. “Can’t be good for her.”

“No?”


“So you’re saying my daughter will grow up to be a wealthy serial killer who’s a Conservative PM?”

“Well,” Gillian says in a squeaky baby-talk voice, “she’ll be the cutest little serial killer in the North!” She tweaks Flora’s nose again.

Flora seems down with this future foretold, or at least with the nose tweak, because she giggles loudly.

“As long as she’s wealthy,” Caroline says. “I hope that means my nursing home will be nice.”

“Yeah. But seriously, if any of your kids is going to be a serial killer, you know it’s going to be —”

“Lawrence.”

“Righto.”

Done with conference calling, Greg flip-flops into the kitchen. “Caroline, did you remember my organic ground flax seed?”

“What?”

“My organic ground flax seed! For the bread I’m making.”

“Oh. No. Sorry.” Caroline is fairly certain that she has never said a less meaningful sorry in her entire life.

“Oh, drat!”

Gillian shoots her a wide-eyed look of mock horror. “Yeah, Caz. How is everyone to get fiber in their diets and have regular bowel movements if you drop the ball with the organic flax seed?”

“Gillian, let me put you on notice right now: The two words I never want to hear come out of your mouth again are bowel movements.”

“Well, it’s true,” Greg adds peevishly. “Fiber is very important.”

“Everybody shut up about bodily functions right now. Flora and I will go pick some up. All right?” Caroline bounces Flora again, and speaks directly to her, because she is clearly the sanest person in the house: “We love the Jeep, don’t we, darling?”

“You love the Jeep,” Gillian says. She grabs the toolbox and follows Caroline out the door. “Bet next time I come over I’ll be fixing your loo.”

“What? Why?”

“Bowel movements.”
“Shut up. Jesus. By the time you’re done with this house I’ll owe you a winery.”

“That’ll do me just fine.”

Outside Gillian circles the Jeep with a critical appraisal and Caroline panics, fearing she’ll find yet another thing wrong with it, that her x-ray vision will detect an engine about to explode.

“How’s the oil pan?” Gillian bends over to look for evidence of a leak under the vehicle.

Caroline appreciates the posterior view for a brief second before staring at the ceaselessly fascinating façade of her home. “Oily, I assume,” she replies, gazing intently at a drop of bird poo on a windowpane.

“HOLY SHIT, CAZ!”

Caroline jumps. God, is the Jeep really going to explode? She clutches Flora tightly and is ready to sprint—in heels, no less—through a multitude of well-manicured lawns to an approximately safe distance. “Oh God. What’s wrong?”

“You’ve got a giant bloody rainbow sticker on your Jeep!”

“Oh. Yeah. Thanks for telling the neighborhood.”

Gillian looks rather pleased with herself.

“I’ve got a second one. We could put it on your precious Landy.”

“Are you mad? My reputation can’t take much more. Some goon squad of pillocks would probably set it on fire like they did the last one.” Gillian opens the door of the Landy. “See you later, yeah? I should check your basement sometime, make sure you don’t have any dead animals in crawlspace or the like. Thought I smelled something off today, and it wasn’t Miss Flora’s poo or the bloody avocado and sprouts lasagna or whatever.”

Quietly disappointed at Gillian’s departure, as well as the prospect of eating something with sprouts, Caroline watches her drive away.


“Did he say ground flax seed?” she asks Flora.

Flora, sitting in the shopping cart and gnawing on a fig roll, is noncommittal.

“Shit, I don’t want to have to text him.” She’s aware of a woman standing within earshot and thinks that she’s probably going to get a lecture on swearing in front of an infant, or drawn into another agonizing conversation that begins with a harmless oh-she’s-lovely compliment but then winds down that treacherous road where she is painfully, socially obligated to explain the complicated parentage of the tiny being in the shopping cart who has fig smeared all over her face.

Now the woman also faces the formidable lineup of flax seed as she stands next to Caroline, who thinks maybe she should just get out the extra rainbow sticker she has—yes, Caroline, you are so completely a raving carpet-munching homo lesbian dyke now that you randomly carry around rainbow stickers in your fabulous clutch purse—and slap it right on this twat’s forehead.

Any such action is truncated when the woman murmurs, “World of wonders, isn’t it?”
Caroline turns and takes a good look at her. It’s Fake Hippie Nigella Lawson. Who possesses the given name of Jennifer but, as Caroline was moodily informed during the Christmas holidays last year by her son and William’s Oxford friend, Dylan, actually prefers to be called Sacha because it’s a family nickname. Now Caroline’s excruciatingly exacting mind does not know what to call her, but for the time being surrenders to Sacha because it seems to fit this current incarnation—whom, this time around, Caroline finds more pleasing. At least at this initial first glance. Sacha possesses a broad, disarming smile and looks quite unlike she did when they met nearly a year and a half ago on their bad, brief coffee date. No sunglasses this time, no designer clothes, no surliness, and no complaining about Pakistani taxi drivers—so it’s much easier to focus on the positives: a beautiful woman in a simple v-neck t-shirt that hints at some impressive cleavage, faded jeans that obediently follow her curvaceous hips, luminous dark eyes, and abundant black hair tumbling over her shoulders. Although true to her hippie style she also wears some chunky necklace that looks like it’s made out of hemp and cheap gemstones.

Caroline decides that a simple greeting seems innocuous enough: “Hi.”

“Caroline. How have you been?”

“Good.” Caroline smiles, then worries that it looks forced. “Good,” she repeats. Maybe if she’s lucky, Sacha will be distracted by her best attribute, her legs. Alas, Sacha is neither an impressionable baby lesbian nor a randy sheep farmer easily swayed by black stockings and high heels, and so her kindly gaze remains well above cleavage level and oh God, Caroline thinks, I am such a fucking idiot for being so easily misled by a pretty package.

“I’m glad, really. That’s good.” Sacha pauses, and continues with surprising gentleness: “I know it’s been an extremely difficult year for you, to put it mildly.”

Vaguely Caroline remembers that she and Dylan had sent flowers when Kate died. They were no doubt lovely and tasteful as was every other floral arrangement sent during that time, but it didn’t change the fact that she had wanted nothing more to torch every single fucking one that she received in a bonfire of grief and rage.

Acknowledgment of her annus horribilis is an awkward thing and, having gotten that bit out of the way, Sacha turns her attention to Flora. “So this must be Will’s baby sister!” Sacha sidesteps Caroline to get closer to Flora. “Well hello, sweetheart. You are beautiful, aren’t you?” She glances at Caroline. “She’s adorable.”

“Even more so without biscuit all over her face,” Caroline says. At least I don’t have biscuit on my face, she thinks, but absently touches her cheek all the same.

Sacha entrances Flora on two counts. Here stands before her a person (1) with brown eyes instead of blue, and (2) who wears a chunky necklace that is so clearly a textbook illustration of forbidden baby toy that it’s probably on a consumer alert list somewhere. She lunges forward and a tiny sticky hand grasps wildly for the necklace.

Jesus Christ, Caroline thinks, she even charms the baby.

“Oh no, darling, one pull and the whole thing will fall to pieces.” In lieu of the necklace, Sacha offers a finger, and the amiable Flora accepts it—even though her eyes remain on the shiny prize around Sacha’s neck.

“Just like life,” Caroline says cheerfully, then kicks herself six ways to Sunday for allowing her typically bleak humor to surface much too soon in this fragile predating process. If indeed, that is what was going on here. And if not, Caroline thinks, just enjoy it while you can.
But Sacha smiles drolly and her dark brows twitch with amusement. “Indeed.”

At this point Flora tosses her half-eaten fig biscuit on the floor. Gallantly Sacha, with a paper napkin pulled out of a jeans pocket, retrieves it and wraps it in a paper ball that she’ll awkwardly clutch for the remainder of the conversation. This act of cleanliness and courtesy is noted with approval by Caroline, who now advocates for grocery store workers in a way she never has before, all thanks to Gillian and even though Gillian still refers to the customers who frequent her place of employment as “shitty spoiled arseholes.”

“So. Er—” Unsure of Caroline’s attention, Sacha stumbles.

Meanwhile Caroline retrieves a baby wipe from her purse and swipes at fig goo on her daughter’s face. Clearly unhappy with this development, Flora starts crying. “No, come on, sweetheart,” Caroline cajoles her. “This is the organic cucumber wipe— you like this one, remember?”

“This could have tragic ramifications,” Sacha says. “She could associate organic cucumbers with emotional trauma for the rest of her life.”

Caroline’s face falls into a grin. She is in a grocery store talking to a funny, attractive woman who, all right, acted like a twat last time they met but who is putting in some effort to be kind to her and it could be nothing but pity and good manners and nothing could come out of it except a nice conversation, and clearly she hasn’t the faintest idea how to act reciprocally, and so she just reminds herself again to enjoy it even if it ends in sixty seconds. She picks up Flora before a serious squall of tears can commence, and that does the trick— tears subside into blubbering, spit bubbles, and a cranky face as Flora resigns herself to her mother’s muddied and awkward attempts at putting herself out into the world as a functioning human.

“So.” Sacha runs a hand through her abundant hair.

“Yeah?”

“We got off to a bad start,” Sacha says. “Completely my fault.”

“I know,” Caroline replies pointedly.

She offers a brilliant self-deprecating grin.

Charm away, Caroline thinks.

“I’m sorry. Really, really sorry about it. It’s just—” she sighs. “I wasn’t interested in meeting anyone new at the time, and I got so passive-aggressive about the whole thing. Because your Will is very, very persistent.”

“Yeah. I know. I made him that way.”

“I’ll have you know he talked you up something fierce. How smart you were, how funny, lovely, wonderful—and how he thought you needed support, someone to talk to, and I thought, God, I don’t want to have to hold someone’s hand after a bloody breakup. But he kept going on, plowing away: couldn’t I please just meet you once for a drink, and then, damn him, he pulled that face— surely you know that face?”

“Oh.” Caroline smiles. “The Pleading Puppy Face, you mean?”

“Yes!” Gently Sacha clasps Caroline’s arm and Caroline tries not to read too much into it, which is admittedly difficult to do because it feels like an eternity since anyone outside her family has touched her, affectionately or otherwise. “Oh God, yes. Is that your doing as well?”
“No, his father is really good at looking sad and pathetic.”

“I see. Well, he made that face—” Sacha stops and imitates William’s Pleading Puppy Face to such perfection that Caroline bursts into laughter. “—and, as you know, it’s so completely effective that I absolutely, positively couldn’t say no.”

“Yeah,” Caroline says. “All right, apology accepted.” She pauses. “It was an apology, right?”

“Most definitely.”

“Okay. I get it. I understand. And in turn I’m so sorry you got emotionally manipulated by my adorable son.”

Sacha laughs again. “Good, good.”

Over an awkward pause, smiles are exchanged while Caroline internally screams, what does this all mean?

“So,” Sacha says, “perhaps, if you like, we could try again sometime? Meet up for a drink? Coffee?”

“Oh.” So it does all mean what she thinks. Well done, numpty!

Sacha quickly backtracks. “Or not, if it’s too—”

“No,” Caroline blurts. “I’d like to.”

“That’s great. Your mobile hasn’t changed, has it?”

Pleasantly surprised at this quick escalation into the positive, Caroline hears herself saying, “No. It’s still the same. So please, um. Yeah. Call me.”

“Wonderful. So I’ll talk to you soon.” Sacha gently rubs Flora’s arm with a finger. “Goodbye, cutie.”

She’s talking to the baby, right? Appreciatively, Caroline watches her saunter away; perhaps her type was simply a decent, funny woman with a great ass? No exception to that rule here.

She continues the shopping excursion in such a happily distracted state that it’s not until the drive home—the boot filled with wine, ice cream, baby wipes, carrots, and various sundry produce—when she realizes she’s forgotten the fucking flax seed again.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK:

Joan Jett: Handyman

Mozart: Violin Concerto No. 5 in A Major
We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.

-Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*

Ollie talks.

Not that Gillian listens. She’s too absorbed in the mundane task of fastening her bra, a simple action frustrated by a twinge of back pain, a lingering stiffness in her shoulder, and her own condemning thoughts: You are getting too old to shag in a van.

Apparently she’s not getting too old for Ollie, because he keeps coming back for more; she’s continually mystified, flattered, and unable to resist. He’s too beautiful. As St. Augustine submitted to God, so Ollie serves the body beautiful and, as a result of daily devotionals with sacred shiny machines, he is close to physical perfection. He’s a Greek bronze come to life, not unlike the ancient statues that Gillian saw in museums when she was a kid on school trips; she had longed to touch those statues, but whenever she got too close the teacher always boxed her ear. Sometimes with Ollie she believes she could attain complete satiety with the most basic appraisal of mere touch—stripping him down and gliding her palms over the subtle musculature of his smooth skin, limbs, torso, and marbled ass. Sadly he’s not in this for indulging her weird, whimsical worship but rather getting off as quickly and intensely as possible. Which, needless to say, is something she’s mastered quite well over the years.

As such her interactions with him frequently disappoint, her sexual and aesthetic experience diminishes substantially with the inevitable occurrence of one very simple thing: He speaks. She wishes that she had kept a written record of all the epic bloody nonsense that has come out of his mouth over the years, because she could have gained some kind of minor social media fame and parlayed a book deal out of it to boot: *Sh*t My Stupid Shag Buddy Says*. It occurs to her that as far as sordid shag buddies go, she has run the gamut from an Oxford graduate to this, the man who thought that when his sister was pregnant with twins, she’d be pregnant for eighteen months rather than nine. It’s her typical anti-accomplishment: From the gutter to the stars and back again.

As Ollie blathers about football he leans over to tie his trainers and this singular movement initiates a glorious symphony of muscle and flesh in stirring, magnificent counterpoint with one another. His body sings. She longs to trace the perfect trapezoid muscles within reach but doesn’t, knowing that he would interpret this as an overture for a second go-round, which she’s not really up for because of the pulled muscle in her lower back courtesy of the morning’s battle with a hay bale. So she lets him go on and on about Liverpool and the proliferation of their bloody stupid fans up North.

“They’re everywhere,” he says. “Everywhere! I don’t get it. I mean, there must be a Brazilian of them here.”

Gillian successfully resists the urge to bang her head on the side of the van.

“Don’t you think?” He gazes up at her.

Aw, bless, he’s trying to engage her in conversation; it would be touching if it weren’t so pathetic.
“A Brazilian,” she says flatly. She rubs her aching shoulder and pulls on her hideous yellow work polo; she has to give the store credit for picking the one color that makes all pasty white people—in other words, the vast sad majority of Yorkshire—look like utter shite.

“Yeah. You know. Like a lot. Like more than a million?” Ollie rolls his eyes. “Know math is not your strong suit Gillian, but Jesus, everyone knows that.”

“It’s billion,” Gillian enunciates with a certain sarcastic slowness that immediately reminds her of Caroline—and that makes her want to slam her head against the van until she is unconscious. “You mean billion. Not Brazilian.”

He’s skeptical. “You sure?”

“A Brazilian is a person. From Brazil.” She forces out the point between clenched teeth: “The country.”

The lightbulb goes off over Ollie’s handsome head, offering only a bare minimal illumination of knowledge. “Oh. Right, right.” He nods vigorously. “Okay. Yeah. That makes sense.” Slow, graceful, and lazy, he pulls on his shirt. “We doing this next week, maybe?”

“Maybe.” She tucks her shirt into her jeans; she wore jeans to work today and not blah polyester trousers and amazingly the manager didn’t call her out on it. Ollie said it was because her ass looked stunning in them. He rarely compliments her, so she figures it must be true. Again she thinks of Caroline, who once said You should always wear jeans, it ought to be the law of the land—woozily stated after one nap, two orgasms, and three glasses of wine, so she was feeling uncharacteristically munificent that day. And again she wishes she would stop thinking of Caroline, at least immediately after shagging idiots.

Ollie laughs. “It’s weird. You’re really like a bloke sometimes.” He pulls a face. “Shit, that sounds really gay, doesn’t it?”

She stares at the abandoned used condom on the floor of the van—flaccid, sad, and inanimate, as if it were the eviscerated hydroskelton of some strange jellyfish. “Yeah. It does.” She grabs her jacket, pushes at the van’s heavy door with her good shoulder, and she’s free. For the moment, anyway.

Ollie’s van and her Land Rover are near Shibden Park. She had suggested it for the rendezvous, fancied the thought of going on a long walk in the park afterward, then realized that Robbie would be home, waiting for her, wanting tea before going in to work—not that he’s incapable of fending for himself, but if she doesn’t show up back home in a timely fashion after work it will appear suspicious. Thanks to Celia, Robbie was already wary of Ollie. During a dinner one evening at the farmhouse, not long after their return from the honeymoon, Celia reported her brief encounter with Ollie at the wedding to all present: So you know him well, Gillian? Celia had piped up with her typical fraudulent, passive-aggressive innocence. Afterward, assaulted with Robbie’s persistent nagging, she had to finally come clean and admit that she’d had a thing with Ollie back in the day—this wonderfully vague phrase covering, in a Bill Clinton-esque fashion, both the distant past and just a few days before her wedding. It isn’t her fault that her husband never challenges the dubious nuances of her half-truths.

Predictably he had been furious: Jesus Christ, how many of your former shags did you invite to our wedding?

Rather than adding to this short list a name that would have surprised the hell out of him, she only told him to fuck off, sulked in the barn for a while, and later inhaled the better portion of a bottle of shiraz before passing out on the couch for the night.
Like an arthritis flare-up, this current feeling of wifely obligation passes awkwardly, painfully, and brings sweet relief when it’s over, so she can be easily tempted to stop at a nearby pub with the most ubiquitous name ever: The Red Lion. It’s not her usual so she is beyond perplexed when, as she enters and makes a beeline for the loo, the kindly gray-haired bloke behind the bar nods in greeting—and says her name.

She stops dead.

“How’re you doin’, lass? How’s the wee one?” he says.

She nods like a puppet. “Great. Yeah. Great.”

He holds up a glass. “Set you up?”

“Yeah. Cheers.”

She bursts through the door of the ladies’ room. Blessedly alone she grips the sink for support, rests her hot forehead on the cold greasy mirror, and closes her eyes in a useless attempt to stem the damp, nauseous tide of cheap air freshener merged with piss. It comes to her, slowly: She has been here before, months ago, in the fall. Barely three months married and already giving in to Ollie, to drink, to everything. It was the same thing as today—fucking him in the van, feeling like a shit, rolling into the pub, and cauterizing her frayed nerves with drink. Only in the fugue state that follows does the hollow pressure in her head and chest finally deflate. Then later, in the hangover state, the buildup to the hollow feeling simply begins anew. It is the very definition of stupidity, these same acts performed over and over again with the expectation of different outcomes. But it is the only way she knows to get by.

She remembers now that the bartender’s name is Lenny and after Christ knows how many lagers last time she was showing him pictures of Calamity that were on her mobile, and at one point she was picking and peeling at an inlet of hardened dry skin along her thumbnail, stubbornly working at it until the tender layer underneath showed pink and raw and sore and had said to him, *what do you do when you don’t have the courage to do things proper?*

She doesn’t remember what he said. Pity. He may have solved her life problems with a few words and she doesn’t recall a damned thing.

Afterward she ate fish and chips in the Land Rover, hoping to sober up. Instead she fell asleep for nearly an hour until some well-meaning, concerned Good Samaritan—a thin, anxious-looking woman with a tiny dog—came along and rapped loudly on her window to make sure she was not dead. Luckily it was not a copper or, even worse, a copper who knew Robbie. By that time, however, she was clear-headed enough to drive home.

In the loo she washes her face and hands, stares at water beading along her skin. Does she smell like Ollie? She sniffs at herself. Like most men his age, he seems to believe that copiously anointing oneself with a bucket of cologne is all the daily hygiene required. Not that she thinks Robbie would really notice; his sinuses are wrecked and he wouldn’t smell sheep shit if he were standing in a pile of it. For a copper, he has a bad nose for detail all around. Still, if he attempts getting affectionate with her it’s best to play it safe, so she ends up swiping at herself in a half-hearted frenzy with sopping, soapy paper towels. Now she smells like cologne and cheap soap. The well-worn phrase *whore’s bath* comes to mind. Living the dream and its lexicon.

Once done with that, she plants herself at the bar and downs the pint that’s waiting for her. Her hands stop shaking. Her mind pushes a rowboat of thoughts adrift into soothing darkness. She shows Lenny the bartender some new photos of Calamity sitting atop Bertolucci. Gillian had been amazed that the old tup tolerated a toddler on his backside, but perhaps it’s a sign that Calamity is
the heir apparent to the farm as opposed to Raff, who usually eyes the sheep as if they are nothing more than giant hairy stink bombs.

When she arrives home, Robbie is awake and puttering around. Lately he works an evening shift and usually sleeps through a large chunk of the day. He agreed to take the shift, he told her, so that they aren’t at each other’s throats so much; maybe if they gave each other some space, he said, things would get better between them. She has no idea why he thinks things will get better or why she lets it continue. No, that’s wrong, she accuses herself: You let it continue because you are a coward and you are weak. You are afraid of being alone, unloved, and flat broke.

Let’s just say you are afraid of everything.

She hangs up her jacket. “Sorry I’m late.”

“S’all right,” Robbie says. He’s rummaging loudly through a kitchen drawer but stops for a moment to give her a look of apprehensive affection—afraid that what she’s done is worse than what he suspects. “How was work?”

“Same old same old.”

The rattling of the drawer contents begins anew, the pressure blossoms in her head and she thinks of how Eddie would sometimes press a thick forefinger into her temple, the pain from this simple gesture so intense and dizzying she would nearly pass out, and say, *Think, Gillian.*

Amazing thing, the body. All blood and feeling constrained by thin membranes, and with the slightest bit of pressure you burst apart.

Gillian grits her teeth, forces a pleasant tone that is completely undermined as she slams a pot onto the stovetop. “You looking for something?”

“Scissors,” Robbie says.

“Sewing kit. In the bedroom.”

The rummaging stops. Relieved, she closes her eyes for a split second before fetching the container of leftover beef stew from the refrigerator. She does not pour the stew into the pot so much as layer it, as if it were wet cement forming a new pavement. When she had made it last weekend Caroline and Flora were over for dinner, and Caroline had suggested thinning it out with wine. Like she was going to waste decent wine on *this* shit. She sighs and lights up the stove.

“What’s this?” Robbie pipes up.

She turns around. “What’s what?”

He’s holding a champagne cork. “Taittinger’s? When were you drinking Taittinger’s?” He laughs.

*Oh you—stupid slapper, stroppy trailer trash, foul-mouthed slattern. Who do you think you are? Someone worthy of fine champagne?*

It’s been said that the past is another country; in Gillian’s case, it is more than that. It is an enemy combatant. Sentiment is pure propaganda. Any object that could possibly function as a passport into this hostile territory runs the risk of emotional high treason and as such is mercilessly discarded. When Eddie died she trashed or burned nearly everything he touched. Including herself. But there were clothes, photos, keepsakes, a napkin with a heart drawn on it from their first official date, all consigned to the flames or the rubbish heap. The cork is an emissary from a different part of the past, however, and she should have got rid of it but couldn’t. Not yet, anyway.
The cork, the same one she absently touched to her lips that night as she stood in Room 503 of the Belgravia Hotel, fully clothed and ready to leave but unable to as she helplessly stared down at Caroline, sprawled face down on the bed in a dead sleep.

*Oh you.*

Gillian jams a wooden spoon into the dense, beefy glop of stew, which plops ominously like a volcano stirring from a dormancy of a thousand years. “Don’t remember when.”

Robbie has always possessed a particular facial expression of sneering incredulousness that has always irritated the sheer ever-loving fuck out of her—most likely because Eddie had a similar expression. “Don’t remember? How could you not remember?”

“Probably because it was a New Year’s Eve and I was completely pissed like I always am on New Year’s Eve.”

He frowns. “Looks recent.”

“Suddenly you’re an expert on cork?” she snaps. “Going to run forensics on it? Is this *CSI: Halifax*?”

“I’m just curious.”

Read: suspicious. So best to go on the offensive. “Maybe I drank it that New Year’s Eve I was here alone while you were off partying with Cheryl. Ever think that?”

“Christ!” He scowls at her, tosses the cork back in the drawer. “How many bloody times do I have to apologize for that?” He stomps upstairs.

She kicks herself for leaving the cork in the drawer. But it would have appeared even more suspect had he found it in its original location—stashed it in her underwear drawer among a clean tangle of bras, knickers, socks, and a vibrator. She wonders if he’s planning on using the scissors he’s retrieving to stab her. She wonders if he’s ever stumbled upon the vibrator. When he comes back downstairs he’s in uniform and the heated stew is ready. They eat in silence. He feigns profound absorption in a game on his mobile and she flips through one of Raff’s copies of *GQ*.

Raff’s sudden interest in men’s fashion is courtesy of Gary, who told him that “only well-dressed men are taken seriously.” Would Gary consider the Dalai Lama well dressed, then? The men in the magazine are dapper and handsome, the women thin and brittle. She does not understand why so many men find women like that attractive.

She hears Eddie in her head. *Easier to bend, easier to break, aren’t they? Silly, isn’t it? Men should appreciate a challenge. Like you, Gillian. Because God it was fun breaking you.*

Her hand shakes. She wants a drink. Later. By the time she is washing up and counting down the minutes before Robbie leaves for work, Raff and Calamity are back from a visit with Alan and Celia.

It seems to Gillian that Calamity could run before she could even walk. In fact she runs too fast, talks too much, and even for a small child maintains such a manic pace at times that Gillian wonders if someone is slipping her pure sugar on the side. God knows what Ellie’s mother feeds her when she visits over there, she thinks. After running circles around her father and Robbie for several minutes she finally collapses melodramatically on the floor at Gillian’s feet, clinging to her grandmother’s leg as if it were a mighty tree trunk and she a determined, protesting environmentalist resisting arrest.

“Sheep, Gran,” she warbles. “*Sheep.*”
Ever since her big day riding Bertolucci, Calamity’s interest in sheep has grown exponentially. “What? You want to see ’em now? Maybe later, sweetheart, when I’m done here. Yeah?”

“Only if you take a nap,” Raff says firmly. “You’ve been running around like a banshee all day. I’m tired just looking at you.” He kneels down and begins the careful extraction of Calamity from her contorted position around Gillian’s leg.

As Raff carts her away a wail goes up, followed by inevitable tears of protest. Mercifully it does not last long; minutes after she hits the couch she settles into an exhausted sleep. Raff comes back, sits at the table, and begins devouring the remnants of Robbie’s meal.

Amused, Robbie watches. “Did they not feed you?”

“Salad,” Raff drawls around a mouthful of beef.

Robbie hums sympathetically.

“What’s news?” Gillian asks absently.

“The usual. Oh, and Grandad is convinced you have Alzheimer’s or a brain tumor because you keep giving him all these books he’s read.”

“So the old man who always forgets his heart pills thinks I’m barmy. How should I know what all he’s read? He’s been reading a long time, y’know. Can’t keep track of everything.”

Raff grins. “Told him you’d say something like that.”

“So no news is good news, I guess,” Robbie says.

“Actually, there is a bit of news, about our Cazza.”

Much to Caroline’s eternal annoyance, Raff has taken to calling her Cazza; she tolerates it as well as Gillian’s use of Caz—which is to say, barely. Sometimes Gillian wonders if Raff has some kind of crush on Caroline; given the usual tarts that catch his eye, it’s a step up. Perhaps reading GQ all the bloody time has given him a taste for posh twats.

“So what’s the news?” Gillian prompts.

“Well, looks like she’s got herself a girlfriend.”

Gillian is glad she’s facing the window. She waits for the sky and the land to do their usual trick of calming her, bringing her peace. She studies the thin band of clouds frosting the blue sky, the way the wind presses into the long, faded grass. She squeezes the steel wool pad in her hand. Watery brown gunk from the pot she’s been scrubbing for ten minutes surrenders to the drain and she predicts by the end of the week she’ll have to take apart the pipes again to work out the clog. Didn’t expect Caroline to remain on the market forever, did you? Despite the fact that she is a middle-aged woman with a baby, not to mention older children, a drunken twat of an ex-husband, and a royal bitch of a mother.

Put like that, Gillian asks herself, why are you so keen on her, you dozy cow?

She dries her hands with a towel and turns around. Keeping her hands busy always settles her nerves. She can tell by the way Raff looks at her that he’s waiting for her to trot out some smart-arsed remark, some homophobic putdown.
“Good,” she says softly. She clears her throat and tries it again—this time firmer and louder, and almost convinces herself. “That’s good.”

“You meet her?” Robbie asks.

“Brief-like. She was leaving when we showed up. They were kind of giggly together. It was cute.”

Gillian twirls the limp, damp dishtowel into a sinewy rope and attempts fashioning a hangman’s noose out of it—appropriate, size-wise, for the neck of a Chihuahua.

“So.” Robbie’s voice drops into a conspiratorial just us lads tone. “Is she—”

“Nice,” Raff says. “Very fit.” His lusty appreciation withers under his mother’s glare and he clears his throat. “No, but seriously, she seems, um, cool. Didn’t talk to her for long but she was funny, smart. Her name is Sacha. Works in finance or something like that. Her son is a mate of William’s.”

Gillian frowns. She remembers Caroline’s pseudo-date with some woman whose son also knew William. But that one was named Jennifer. How many fucking middle-aged lesbians does William know? How often does he pimp out his mother to them?

Raff finishes off the last of Robbie’s stew. “There was an article on her and her family in Courier yesterday—Celia was telling me, God, I think even Celia likes her—anyway, family’s real posh and they set up some new scholarship fund for, you know, ‘underprivileged students.’” Raff employs the good old air quotes around the phrase—a Caroline sarcasm specialty, and again Gillian suspects that he has a crush on Caroline, even as she simultaneously acknowledges the fierce irrationality of her ridiculous jealousy. At this pathetic nadir she is even jealous of the Jeep Cherokee; she’s seen the way Caroline caresses its shiny flank—

Oh Christ, you are bananas.

“Maybe you should apply,” Robbie says.

“I’m not underprivileged, I’m just a humble farmer’s son. Right, Mum?”

Gillian hums absentmindedly.

“Mum?”

“Yeah?”

Amused, Raff smirks. “Why are you making a noose with the dishtowel?”

Robbie stands. “My cue to leave, before she gets ideas.”

Oh, that joke isn’t funny anymore. “‘You should know/Time’s tide will smother you,’” Gillian sings tunelessly whilst admiring her homicidal handiwork.

Robbie stares at her.

“Leave it,” Raff says. “She’s just quoting the Smiths again.”

Is it sad, she thinks, that my son knows me better than my husband? Even Caroline knows that her brain is, at best, nothing more than a Random Quote Generator for Morrissey or movies; any bleak mumbled comment that comes out of her mouth is usually acknowledged by Caroline with a roll
of the eyes and a weary, oh God, are you quoting Morrissey or a film noir again?

After Robbie leaves, she starts scrubbing the sink; she is finally at liberty to brood. He once told her that she had a talent for looking sad. She assumed it was meant as criticism but now fails to see the problem in looking the way she feels, and if she feels like shit most of the time so be it.

Raff lounges on the sofa with the conked-out Calamity, watching an old Jason Statham movie—Gillian thinks it’s the one where he beats up people with a cricket bat but who knows, maybe he does that in every film, there may be a film where he beats up people with merengue tarts for all she knows. Raff is also texting with someone on his mobile, muttering “shit” practically every time it chimes, an indication that it’s Ellie and they are arguing about something again. Meanwhile she gets on the computer, waiting forever as it starts up; as usual it creaks and whirs as if tiny hamsters are within the hard drive, spinning away on various-sized wheels and operating elaborate gears and levers, initiating a rodent-sized Rube Goldberg contraption that sets the internet into motion. This is where your imagination has taken you, twat, she tells herself: Sitting in front of an ancient crap machine that will help you stalk the new girlfriend of your stepsister who also happens to be your former shag buddy and with whom you have the grave and stupid misfortune of being in love. It’s exhausting. She yawns. After a good ten minutes she is finally online and hopping to the Courier’s website, where the fluff piece on Caroline’s new piece is found easily enough.

In Gillian’s mind there are two types of Englishwomen: The Roses and the Weeds. Fair Caroline, of course, is a Rose: blond and blue-eyed, pale and elegant, seemingly perfect, secretly thorny, and bitchily unrepentant when blood is drawn. She herself is, of course, a sturdy English Weed: tough, available, and usually trampled upon by blokes in obsessive pursuit of the Roses. John alone is proof of the paradox. When they weren’t shagging, they were drinking and talking about Caroline; a shared love-loathing of the same woman bonded them more than sex ever did.

But Jennifer Elena Sacheverell Easley Parmenter—Jesus Christ, Gillian thinks, what kind of person needs five fucking names? No wonder I’m so fucking confused about what her bloody name is—is a voluptuous variation on the Weed: A bit horsy-looking but well-groomed, well-dressed, and possessing abundant dark locks a la Nigella Lawson. Not to mention big tits. No, she is not a common English Weed; this lady’s not for trampling. She’s the weed that will wrap with luxurious abandon around everything in a garden till it’s hers, that will scale the stonewalls of the mansion until her wild garlands smother everything in sight. In the photo she’s smiling handsomely, about ready to burst out of her blouse, and sandwiched between two happy teenagers, one of whom is, Gillian is pretty certain, Paul Jahri’s cousin. She recognizes that supercilious Jahri smirk, although these days whenever she runs into Paul—now firmly under the controlling thumb and thunderous thighs of his new wife—he looks as peevishly glum as Tony Blair during the Iraq War.

Gillian reads on. Jennifer—Sacha? Whatefucker— is a CFO of a digital music company. Even though she and her fucking ex-husband, a fucking barrister, both went to fucking Cambridge she fucking supported her fucking son when he wanted to go to fucking Oxford. Her fucking father is a fucking marquess and—here Gillian dies a little—her fucking Italian mother is a fucking “member of the distinguished, aristocratic Milanese family” that includes the filmmaker Luchino Fucking Visconti, who fucking knew Monica Fucking Vitti.

Defeated, she leans back in the chair. Sure, great. That’s just great. She manages one final, rallying thought: Can Sacha/Jennifer put her entire forearm up a sheep’s rectum? Bet not. Top that, bitch. “Fucking slag.”

Gillian does not realize she’s said this aloud until Raff calls loudly from the couch: “Who’s a fucking slag?”
“The Queen.”

“Too right. Always thought she was a bit tarty with all those hats.”

She scowls, realizes her mother was right so many years ago: *Someday you’ll have one of your own, and they’ll be mouthing off to you the way you do to me, and you’ll be sorry then.*

She is very sorry indeed. About a lot of things, but not that.

The Visconti connection. It’s a sign of fate mocking her, telling her to fuck off, that despite all her pathetic hopes to the contrary she’s not good enough and never will be. It’s stupid, so stupid, to think, to hope, to feel this way. Because Caroline needs someone like this, all money and class and philanthropy and sophistication and big tits. Who wouldn’t want all that? This woman is marrying material. I’d even marry her myself, Gillian thinks. If, however, Caroline does marry again, Gillian would have no recourse but to attend the ceremony. No passive-aggressive avoidance this time, no playing the sullen, spurned lovelorn cow. By not pressing the matter and not insisting that Gillian attend her wedding to Kate, Caroline had given her a huge pass. Fortunately during that time Celia was enough of a pill that any regret or disappointment pertaining to Gillian was surely a very distant afterthought for Caroline. It’s possibly the greatest gift Celia ever gave Gillian: Her innate, insufferable, selfish twattness easily overshadowed Gillian’s sullen withdrawal. But Gillian cannot be a coward a second time over; she owes Caroline that much. She’ll attend Caroline’s wedding to Miss Long Name Horse Face Big Tits with Money. She’ll drag along that bloody old bitch of a stepmother of hers by the scruff of the neck if necessary. She’ll give Caroline away. She’ll host the reception—well, she’ll make Gary host the reception or at least pay for all the booze. She’ll lead a gay pride parade. She’ll babysit the passel of multicultural babies they’ll adopt. She’ll put a rainbow sticker on her beloved Landy.

Then Raff is gently resting a hand on her shoulder and, in a spastic fit of surprise, she falls off the chair. The perspective from the floor reminds her how tall he’s gotten—and how much, at times, he looks like Eddie. Fortunately the resemblance ends at the purely physical and Raff’s expression of genuine, startled concern counters any kind of potential traumatic flashback.

“She’s vetting Cazza’s lady!”

She nearly falls down again, this time with sheer relief. Despite how mouthy he gets with her at times, Gillian knows that her son is essentially good-natured, perhaps to a fault; she gives full credit for this to his grandfather’s influence. Whatever it is—a big heart, pure naiveté, or maybe he is just not as perceptive as she once hoped he would be—she is achingly grateful that he mistakes the aggrieved, anguished jealousy of an ex-lover for the noble-minded protectiveness of a stepsister.

Like a boxer ducking the knockout punch, Gillian bobs around, rolls her shoulders, and releases a long breath.

Now that he’s mentioned it, she did have four cups today. She waves her arm at the computer screen, flailing so much that she narrowly misses clipping him alongside the head. “I can’t, you know, I don’t want—I don’t want her to end up with some slaggy tart.” As she says this, she realizes that it is essentially true; she would never want Caroline involved with someone who would cheat, disappoint, lie, or take advantage ad infinitum. Like me.

Raff peers at the screen, as if closer examination of Sacha’s cleavage will reveal her moral character. “What makes you think she’s slaggy?”

“Looks like she’s always, um, traveling a lot. New York, London, other places—might have a girl in every port.” Abruptly Gillian sits down, closes the browser window with a sharp keystroke. “Don’t matter what I think anyway. As long as—” Oh God, oh God, can I say it?

Raff looks expectant.

“—you know, as long as, as, Caroline’s happy.” See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?

He hums, and she’s not certain if he’s merely appeasing her. But he’s lingering, and it occurs to her that he didn’t dislodge himself from the sofa for nothing.

“Is there something you wanted?”

“Yeah.” Raff shoves his hands in his pockets. “Wanted to talk to you.”

Gillian rolls her eyes. “Shit.”

“What?”

“Not pregnant again, is she? Ellie?”

Raff goes from zero to 100 on the disapproval speedometer. “Oh for God’s—you and your filthy mind!”

“Legitimate concern, don’t ya think?”

“She’s not. All right?”

“You’re certain?”

“You are really too much at times. Well, most of the time. She’s not pregnant.”

Gillian folds her arms. “Bloody hurrah for birth control.”

“I’m trying to be serious with you,” he says, exasperated.

“All right, all right. Sorry.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re shit at apologies?”

“It’s a very long list, my beloved son and heir.”

He continues glaring at her.

“No, really, I am sorry. All right? So just, just, you know, tell me what you’re gonna say.”

Raff shakes his head. “Okay. Look. So, um, you know since Harry’s moved back in his house, he’s been a bit—sad. Ellie thinks he’s getting depressed. When he had boat, you know, he always
saw a lot of people, was always out and about. And now he’s not going out so much he doesn’t see his friends as often, even granddad.”

“Yeah. I know.” Now that Alan is married to the Duchess of Harrogate, he does not have as much time for Harry anymore. She’s given Harry a standing invitation for Sunday dinner, but aside from that, does not know what else she can do. Between sheep and shagging, babysitting and arguing, drinking and pining like a stupid cow over someone she can’t have, she doesn’t have the time to park herself in a pub for hours arguing with Harry about footy, what all the Spice Girls are doing now, or the precise ingredients of a proper Worcestershire sauce.

“She worries about him a lot now, Ellie does,” Raff says.

Gillian doesn’t like where this is going. Particularly because she’s not convinced Ellie worries about anything other than money and makeup.

“So me and Ellie were thinking,” Raff begins slowly, “about moving in with him.”

Gillian stares into space. Just when it seems the day could not get any worse. She makes shit decisions, has a shit marriage, has shit feelings that she cannot get rid of. Not to mention she still has a bloody metric ton of leftover shit stew thicker than Ollie.

“For a bit, anyway,” Raff adds quickly. “Just see how it goes, I mean, maybe we’ll drive him mad, maybe having Calamity around 24/7 will drive him mad—” He stops, desperate to gauge her mood. “Are you okay?”

Gillian stares at her hands. She had thought that having so many people around the house was the problem. Maybe she is the problem. Because everyone looks at her as if she’s a bomb they cannot possibly detonate and they’re only biding time until the inevitable explosion and, like the dumb sidekick who insists on staying put as the hero defuses the bomb, only Robbie is fool enough to hang around. She always thought she would be fine whenever Raff decided to leave home. She never wanted to be one of those overbearing mothers obsessively doting upon a son—as Caroline is with William. But here she is, chest so tight that she fights to breathe, silently laying claim: But you are mine, you belong to me. You were with me during the worst period of my life, you were the only thing I lived for.

Finally she manages a word, even sans sarcasm: “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Is this really—really what you want?”

“Don’t matter what I want,” he says. He frowns. “I don’t want to leave, but I think it’s the right thing to do.” Nervous, he rubs his arm. “Like I said, it’s not forever and if it don’t work we’ll be back.”

“The right thing to do.” The repeated phrase rolls through the hollows in her head and chest.

“I’ll come over and help when you need. And yeah, we’ll still need your help watching Calamity sometimes.”

“None of this sounds practical.”

“Practical?”

“Yeah.” She forces a laugh. “Not our family’s strong suit, you know. You don’t have a car. How you gonna get over here?”
“Harry can bring me. Or Robbie said he’d give me rides sometimes—” Having stepped on a conversational landmine, Raff stops.

Too late. “Wait. You talked about this with Robbie before saying a word to me?”

“Yeah.” He sighs. “All right, I did. So what? I talked about it with him first to see if he thought if it were good idea, if he thought you would be all right with it.”

Like he would fucking know what I’m all right with. “And did he think it was good idea?”

Raff rolls his eyes. “Yeah, he did. In general, I mean. But give him some credit, he did know you’d have a fit.”

“Who’s having a fit?” Gillian snarls.

“Well, you are. Your face is red and that vein in your neck is popping a bit. You’re too young for stroke, you know.” As she fumes, he continues. “Robbie thought it was a win-win for everyone, you know? Harry would be happier, and me and Ellie and Calamity aren’t underfoot and driving you crazy anymore—and I know we drive you crazy. Well, I know me and Ellie drive you crazy. And he thought it might be good thing for you and him, to be alone more—and um, work on stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“You know.” He clears his throat. “Your, um, relationship stuff.”

Not that it’s been any secret that they’ve been having problems; the only person who doesn’t interrogate and then lecture her about Robbie is Caroline. Gillian has long suspected the only reason why is Caroline’s own mighty—albeit understandable—absorption with her own issues. Now it turns out that she’s absorbed with Horse Face Big Tits Money as well. Gillian pinches her brow painfully.

God, I’ve got to stop thinking that else when I actually meet that posh bitch I’ll call her that. Well, thinking of her as “Posh Bitch” isn’t good either.

She takes a deep breath and Raff’s eyes glaze over—this again—as he correctly anticipates her going completely off. Which she does, even bringing out the heavy artillery of the air quotes, thank you Caroline: “’Relationship stuff? Relationship stuff?’” she shouts. “He might want to work on getting his own bloody head sorted first. One minute he’s taking that late shift so he don’t have to see me, now he wants to be alone with me all the time? It’s like he took two fucking different Cosmo relationship quizzes and couldn’t decide what to fucking do!”

“Don’t be so shouty and sweary!” Raff hisses and nods at the couch. “You’ll wake her. Jesus, might be good to get her away from all your swearing.”

“What? You think Harry don’t curse?” The breathless sensation lodges in her chest again—sorrow or heart attack? Who knows? Who cares? “You think I’m unfit somehow? To be around her?” she blurs. Her reflections and questions always arrive too late, it seems, and only after the excesses that prompt them—the outbursts of emotion, drink, sex that color the aftermath, leaving her doubtful of everything. Like a visitor to another land bearing fresh witness to ruins of a catastrophe: how did this happen? For someone so in thrall to the moment and following her darkest instinct, the present is yet another confounding country.

Befuddled, Raff squints at her. “Where’d that come from? God, no.” His mouth twists into a frown. “Look. I just want to do what’s right, you know? I want to get something right for once.”

This maddening urge, Gillian knows all too well. To get something right. To not fail at
relationships, work, life. She’s been marked for failure since fifteen, since the day she told her mother she was pregnant. No amount of atonement afterward—extra chores, avoiding boys, studying harder—seemed to matter. So what was the point of trying? To this day she still sees in her mind the emotions eliding across her mother’s face: shock and anger culminating into disappointment. The memory remains indelible. So this is her legacy to him: the perpetual spinning wheel of fucking up.

“It’s awful to feel that way,” she says, surprising herself.

He smiles ruefully. “Innit, though?”

“You’re—you’re doing all right, you know. You’re doing a good thing. A kind thing, and—” Gillian stares at her feet. “Yeah. All right.”

“You’re okay with it?”

“Yeah,” she lies.

He hugs her.

“Don’t get sentimental on me,” she mumbles into his t-shirt, which smells of that horrid manly-man shower gel he uses, and stew. God, she thinks, that stuff is potent. I should burn it.

He laughs, kisses the top of her head. “Sorry, old woman.”

She closes her eyes, wishes the day would end now.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK:

“Sexy Boy,” Air
“Lost Cause,” Beck
“Every Day a Little Death,” from Stephen Sondheim’s A Little Night Music.
If Caroline were drunker, she might assume she was in a church.

And if it were a church, it would be a cathedral of haute cuisine. For she stands in the kitchen of Sacha’s house, tipsily teetering on heels while eating a bag of crisps, and ridiculously in awe at the space she occupies. She’s always been proud of her own kitchen, but this one is right out of an Architecture Digest spread. It’s shameless house porn and almost as arousing to her as photos of sweaty anonymous lady footy players. The stainless steel appliances gleam in contrast to the dark wood cabinets and the Italian marble counters, and everything is backlit with track lighting that bathes the room with warm reverence. If there were a window in the kitchen it would be, most likely, a stained glass rendition of Julia Child raising a whisk to the heavens. Instead there is a magnificent vaulted skylight with a terrine of black night served in a glittering silver frame and Caroline imagines that in the sunny light of day St. Julia’s voice faintly filters down from the sky to offer a falsetto blessing of bon appétit.

It would be worth sleeping with Sacha for the kitchen alone. Fortunately she is also funny, sexy, and smart, so sleeping with her would not exactly be a chore. And there is even another erotic enticement: She speaks Italian, something that, not unlike Kevin Kline’s character in A Fish Called Wanda, leaves Caroline a little giddy with arousal. Gillian would be awfully proud of her for remembering an obscure detail from a film that’s nearly thirty years old, she thinks. Indeed, Sacha is now in the hallway of the darkened house, speaking in Italian while on the mobile with her mother; a glorious burst of Italian is punctuated with the flatly chastising and very British outburst of Mum.

That one syllable signals a brief reversion to English. “Maybe you should just leave it,” Sacha says. A pause, a laugh. Caroline is embarrassed that she can hear the conversation, even though seemingly nothing of import is discussed. “Si si si. Yes, I know. Devo andare.” With the mobile still glued to her ear she struts toward Caroline, plucks the half-eaten crisp bag out of Caroline’s hand while giving a rather saucy look of disapproval. She drops the bag in a shiny, bulletlike bin that reassuringly shushes there there, I will make your indestructible plasticy garbage go away and as the lid closes soundlessly and seductively, Caroline’s consumerist heart goes pitter-pat. Then she admires Sacha’s curvy form for probably the millionth time this evening, and wonders if she’s missed an opportunity or a signal. She’s been thinking that a lot through the five dates they’ve had thus far. Should I call them dates? Caroline questions herself. Encounters? Meetings? Oh fuck it.

The first date was coffee redux, and it went so well that she drank three cappuccinos and was up most of the night—which was fine because she used the time wisely to quietly freak out about every significant aspect of her life, thus getting all that emotional nonsense out of her system, at least for a day or two. The second was lunch at a nice café. Their hands touched at one point and Caroline spent the better part of an afternoon trying to figure out if that meant something. The third was lunch at the house with Flora and extended family tripping around surreptitiously—even Raff, who was visiting his grandfather and Celia that day with Calamity Jane in tow. To Caroline’s enormous relief Gillian wasn’t with them, because she has no idea how Gillian might react to the prospect of Caroline dating someone: Homophobic? Jealous? Indifferent? Or, knowing Gillian’s exceptional talent for putting her foot in it, she might have clumsily outed herself as a previous shag and provided some sort of coarse sexual endorsement: Yeah, Sacha, thumb’s up on this one’s oral skills, if you know what I’m sayin’. Who knows, that might have moved things along quite
significantly. The fourth progressed to dinner at a very posh place and ended with a hug and a kiss on the cheek and afterward Caroline kicked herself for not adequately pimping herself out: Her blouse could have been more low-cut and tarty, her skirt shorter.

Tonight seemed a setback of sorts, at least to Caroline: They went clubbing. Gay clubbing. The clubbing of gay baby seals—not really, but trapped in a dim room with flashing lights and loud electronica seemed as terrible as the actual clubbing of seals. Was she being “friend-zoned,” as they called it? But it seemed presumptive to assume she was in any kind of romantic zone when they’d never even properly kissed yet. They met up with a few of Sacha’s friends including Helen, who was the BFF; Caroline was still trying to discern if the two of them had ever slept together because their familiarity was couched on that vast labyrinthine level of either very old friends or fond former lovers. She was asked to dance by three different women, all of them younger, and she wondered there was some sort of betting pool or competition going on among these glittery and fashionable young people: See if you can get that blonde MILF to dance. I bet it would be hilarious, she probably dances like Belinda Carlisle in a Go Gos video. She did not dance but did get phone numbers from two of the alarmingly young women—at first Caroline worried they were former students she’d forgotten, and she imagined if she slept with either one blackmail pics would be on the internet in a flash and a lurid story would appear in the Courier that would beat the hell out of any boring profile of Gary going on about his dear old long-lost dad: Senile lesbian headmistress beds former students! “Education is a lifelong journey, especially below the waist,” says Caroline McKenzie-Dawson. Nonetheless Sacha had seem quite impressed, although Helen remarked that it was probably because Caroline was “new blood” on the scene, and that made her feel a bit like a clubbed gay baby seal.

Meanwhile, Sacha pulls out a bottle of Pellegrino from the cavern of the Sub-Zero refrigerator. “I’ve got to go, Mum. I’ll call you over the weekend. Sunday. All right?” She presses a thumb to the mobile’s screen, terminating the call, and rolls her eyes. “God.”

Caroline frowns. “Everything all right?”

“Oh, it’s all this nonsense with Squeak.”

Despite the imperious Italian matriarch, Sacha’s family is so thoroughly, eccentrically upper-class English that Caroline scarcely believes it. They are like something out of Wodehouse, like the Mitfords on crack except sans the fascistic tendencies—at least as far as Caroline knows. At any rate it’s all so confusing that she’ll need to start a spreadsheet to keep track of the nicknames, the sexual orientations, the addictions, the various peccadilloes: While not divorced, Sacha’s parents have not lived together for nearly twenty years. Her mother spends most of her time in London or Lake Como. She might, or might not, be having an affair with a priest. Her father is a retired professor and minor poet with a roomful of unsold chapbooks and a penchant for drag. He has a Dame Edna coffee mug. Her older brother, called Rooster or Roo or Roo-Roo because of his habit of prideful chest-puffing, has been in and out of rehab several times and was once arrested for soliciting a prostitute. Then there are the younger brothers, the gay twins, known as Bubble and Squeak after their favorite breakfast meal; their sexual adventures and various travails blur together in Caroline’s mind similar to the panels, plotlines, and anatomically idealized heroes of Greg’s jarringly saturated graphic novels.

“I keep getting Bubble and Squeak mixed up,” she confesses.

“My dear Caroline, I won’t quiz you on it. Everybody gets them mixed up, even Mum. It’s perfectly understandable. But for the record, Bubble is the solicitor. Squeak is the art historian who is currently a barista.”

“Oh, that’s right. He’s the one who wants to go to Columbia.”
“Yes. Presumably to learn about roasting coffee beans.” Sacha anoints ice cubes in a tumbler with a generous pour of sparkling water. “Water?”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks.”

“Booze?”

“God, no.”

“Frankly I think he just wants to pick up boys there but I must be circumspect when discussing gay things with Mum. Even after so many years, she’s still a bit put out that her womb incubated three homosexuals.”

“Three out of four. A marvelous success rate.”

“I’m afraid she doesn’t see it in those terms.” Sacha drains the glass. “Are you hungry?”

“Well, you threw out my bag of crisps.” Caroline pouts.

“Because they’re disgusting and unhealthy.”

“You didn’t say anything when I bought them.”

“My conscience stirs slowly.” Sacha hums. “Speaking of: I could make you some pasta.”

“Are you joking? It’s after eleven.”

“Not at all! I can make pasta in my sleep.”

“It’s all right. I’m not that hungry.”

“Cheese? Olives? You must eat something.” Before further protests are lodged she pulls out various foodstuffs from the fridge and Caroline leans against the counter—an old French zinc bar, she was told, that had been whisked away from a condemned Parisian property by an eagle-eyed antiques dealer.

“So.” Caroline taps the zinc bar. Within the past several minutes she has finally paid attention to the fact that while she knows a lot about Sacha’s family, her ex-husband, her son, and even her job, she knows little of the woman herself. This leaves her at a distinct disadvantage, especially since she spent Date One venting about her perpetually annoying ex-husband and Date Two getting borderline blubbery about Kate. It’s a wonder Sacha consented to see her again. “You’ve told me about how your brothers got their nicknames, but I don’t know how you got yours.”

“I haven’t?” Sacha sits tiny plates of food on the counter. “I thought it was obvious—it’s from my middle name. Sacheverell.”

“It’s an unusual name,” Caroline replies. “Got to be a story behind it.” Sacha is either exceedingly modest or carefully guarded. Most likely both, and in that respect she’s not unlike Kate. But whereas Sacha has crafted an outgoing, headstrong personality as the result of being the only daughter in a pack of English eccentrics and further tailored for the challenges of a high-profile and occasionally stressful job, Kate’s steely stubbornness lay underneath her appealingly shy, laid-back charm.

“Well.” Sacha sighs. “I’ve told you about my father’s literary aspirations. Are you familiar with the Sitwells?”
Unfortunately, the name does ring a bell. “There was a Mr. Sitwell who lived on the street where I grew up,” Caroline says. “Once when I was twelve he tried to lure me into his house and when I refused he asked to see my knickers, and then when I ran away he threw a bag of prunes at me.”

Sacha is appropriately appalled. “Oh God.”

At the shocked look and the sudden turn in the conversation, Caroline cannot help but burst into laughter and, relieved, Sacha follows suit. “No, no, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to distract you with tales of near-molestation.”

“But we need to acknowledge and process, and—”

“No. Stop acting like a hippie therapist and tell me about your Sitwells.”

“They were a literary family, now rather obscure and practically unheard of outside of this country.” Water glass empty, Sacha swigs Pellegrino straight from the bottle with unrepentant gusto and Caroline finds this so unexpectedly erotic that all the finger foods before her are easily ignored. Her hunger shifts into a different zone. “My father made a passing acquaintance of one of the Sitwells, the youngest one, named Sacheverell. He was a poet and writer. My father thought that Mr. Sacheverell Sitwell would be a great help in getting his own poetry recognized and in print through a real, legitimate publisher. So he gave Mr. Sitwell some lovely first editions, allowed him to stay at the vacation home in Lake Como, bought him a lot of mediocre bloody lunches at his club, and so on and so forth. When Mum was pregnant with me, he decided he would name his second child after Mr. Sitwell—regardless of gender, although when I was born Mum fought him on it and they settled on Jennifer as a Christian name to alleviate the overall weirdness, but it didn’t really work.”

“Mr. Sitwell was unimpressed?”

“That and it did not alleviate the weirdness.”

Caroline laughs.

“I don’t suppose you have a nickname.”

“Sorry to disappoint. My parents weren’t very imaginative or creative.” Caroline shrugs. “My stepsister calls me Caz, sometimes. Even worse, her son calls me Cazza.”

“Making a note to myself to call you neither.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, which one is your stepsister again—?”

“Gillian.”

“Oh, that’s right! The Slapper!” Sacha says gleefully, as if Gillian were a much-loved character in some farcical novel.

Caroline groans. “God. I shouldn’t have told you about all that.” During Date Four, her tongue loosened by one glass of wine too many, she relayed the story of Gillian’s wedding much as she did to Ginika last summer; but this time around, like a bonus DVD in a boxed set she provided extraneous and marginally interesting background material on Gillian’s checkered romantic history—all the while carefully omitting her own position on that sexual chessboard as a cowardly white knight in a perpetually awkward l-shaped retreat—which added, so she imagined, additional depth to ludicrous tale of Gillian’s marriage. “If I’d known you liked to give nicknames to everyone—”
“Well, ‘the Slapper’ is an easy one to remember, isn’t it? But—” Sacha’s voice drops into a lower register—not exactly innuendo, but one that offers the promise of intimacy. “I haven’t come up with one for you yet.” She pauses. There is no mistaking her appreciative gaze. “You defy easy categorization.”

It’s a charming thing to say to a chemist, Caroline realizes. Her eyes meet Sacha’s and heat touches her neck, a warm blush that, she hopes, will not spread to her face.

“Did you have fun tonight?” Sacha asks gently.

“I did. Honestly.”

“I know it’s not really your scene.”

“It’s not, but it’s always good to try new things. And I like—“ Caroline clears her throat. “I like being with you.”

“Good. I like spending time with you too. I like you.” She leans against the bar and hugs herself, the gesture quickly giving the appearance of vulnerability. “But this means I have to be honest with you.”

“We can be just friends,” Caroline interjects—because it’s always better to reject yourself than have others do it for you. “It’s cool.” She winces and reminds herself to never say the word cool ever, ever again. Gillian may get away with mumbling cool in the correct fashion—completely offhanded, casual, and yes, cool—but when she says it, she thinks the effect similar to Princess Anne attempting to rap.

Sacha laughs. “You’re putting the cart ahead of the horse very quickly, my dear.”

“Oh.”

“But you see, I have—a situation.”

“Oh shit. I hate situations.”

“Yeah, yeah. Rightfully so.”

“Are you going to tell me you’re still married?”

Sacha looks arch. “Unlike you, I’ve been successful at getting rid of my husband.”

“Go on, rub it in,” Caroline sighs. Sacha’s ex was back living in London before divorce papers were even filed. John, however, still appears as a grizzled ghost on her doorstep periodically and recently informed her that he was working on a memoir—“the cautionary tale that is the sad disintegration of our marriage.” Caroline expects that the phrase mad bitch lesbian cow will recur frequently, and she wishes his editor the best of luck in scaling down such epic level of repetition. “Let me guess again: You have a venereal disease.”

“No.”

“Secret love child?”

“No.”

“Breast implants?”
Sacha shoots her a look of mock outrage.

“You’re a Kardashian?”

“Even more insulting.” Sacha exhales, and runs a hand through bountiful, messy hair. “All right, here we go. For a few months, I’ve been sort of seeing someone. In London. It’s really not serious, I only see her when I’m down there on business. I mean, she’s so different, we’ve nothing in common, and she’s so—young.”

Caroline braces herself for a university student. “How young?”

“All of 31.”

“Oh, well done.”

“You’re the one who was getting attention from twentysomethings tonight, my dear.”

“So you have a shag buddy.” It’s okay, I had one too!

“That sounds so coarse and vulgar and completely accurate.”

“Sorry, Lady Sacheverell.”

Sacha sighs again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to withhold this from you.” She bites her lip. “I wanted to see how things went with us at first. You know? I wanted to see if there was a, ah, natural affinity, shall we say. Potential for, perhaps, something more.” The lip-gnawing grows fierce as she sways nervously in a solitary dance. “Is there? Or did I fuck it up?”

“You were testing the waters. Being cautious.”

Sacha admits it: “Playing it safe.”

“Yeah. That. Something I understand very well.” Caroline rides a surge of disappointment to the realization that she is unusually unperturbed by this development, although in turn her lack of perturbation perturbs her. Does it mean she really doesn’t care about Sacha, that there is no real potential for a serious relationship? Does it mean she doesn’t want a serious relationship with anyone at all and that she will remain eternally scarred by the loss of Kate and utterly unable and unwilling to commit to anyone ever again? Or perhaps it’s way too early to know that or too soon to impose demands of fidelity on someone’s she not even slept with yet?

She runs a hand along the beautifully smooth zinc bar. “So. We are in—a situation room.”

“Good one.” Despite her amusement, Sacha is still with serious intent.

“If we’re going to talk about situations, I’ve got a million. Which I’ve been boring you with since day one. For starters, there’s my emotional situation: I’m a mess. Sometimes. Think I’m getting better, though. And I have a weird living situation right now—”

“Weird?” Sacha is incredulous. “It’s a bloody feminist utopia: You have unpaid childcare from a man who adores you—and you’re not obligated to sleep with him. You’re not even nice to him. It’s a beautiful thing.”

“He gets very testy if I criticize his bread, though. But look, I’m pushing fifty and I’ve got a young child to raise. You know that. I know. But still. And let’s not even discuss my mother.”

“Good. Let’s not discuss mine either.” Sacha smiles wryly.
“You know, I’ve always been very risk-averse. Sometimes that’s good, especially when it seems you’re the only sane person in the household. But those very, very few times when I’ve taken risks, they’ve paid off. Despite everything that’s happened, and the way things have happened, those risks—I don’t regret.”

The zinc bar—the stupid, beautiful zinc bar—remains the only obstacle between them. As she walks around it, Caroline nervously taps out on it a Morse code of Christ help me, I’m going in. When she stands in front of Sacha—who looks pleasantly startled as her lips part in expectation of a kiss—she takes it as a good sign that they are just about the same height. Sacha is not as tall as Kate, but not as short as Gillian. Maybe it’s right. Maybe it’s a good fit. And it’s a good pH-balanced kiss, between the sweet burn of God I really want you and the velvety alkali of because I like you, I’m being all respectable and shit and waiting for some obvious sign before sticking my tongue in your mouth. It is different from what she has experienced before and perhaps, just perhaps—here she sinks her hand into Sacha’s soft, thick hair, giving the go-ahead to deepen the kiss—it is exactly what she needs.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK

“Stockings,” Suzanne Vega

For the perfect example of Belinda Carlisle dancing: “Head Over Heels,” Go Gos
I'm neither the loosening of song nor the close-drawn tent of music;

I'm the sound, simply, of my own breaking.

—Ghalib (trans. Adrienne Rich and Aijaz Ahmad)

It’s one year and three months, almost to the day, since Eddie’s death and Gillian sits outside a teashop in Hebden Bridge pretending to read a newspaper as the sun goes down. The fading light laps against the paper, a liquid gold wave disintegrates the lines and words that she was not really paying attention to. The wind dogears the paper, pummels it, demonically possesses it until she crumples it in her hands.

It’s her birthday and by request she spends the day alone. Her father—the social animal, everybody’s best mate—was puzzled by this wish but nonetheless agreed to watch Raff. So after a day of reading and walking alone she finds herself outside this teashop witnessing a pink-orange sunset challenge the drab monochrome of the town and this time, with the newspaper twisted in her grasp, she cannot furtively disguise her glance at the dyke club up the street. It’s Friday, Happy Hour, and a slow trickle of women clocking off work enter the club: some in your standard office-wear suits, some in leather jackets, some loosening their hair as they walk, some in heels, some in jeans. The weekend yawns before them all, of unavoidable chores and status quo boredom, of video games and parties, movies and telly, lovemaking and arguments, dope and drinks.

Her heart and head pound; the rhythm beats her into a stupor of indecision. Just going in and having a drink would mean nothing. She wouldn’t even have to talk to anyone. She could just sit there and look, not bother anyone. Nothing wrong with that. It means nothing, she tells herself again. She likes men, she really does. She likes their strength, their muscles, the rough whisk of stubble against her cheek. But this, there is this. This curiosity, this desire. She watches another woman stride into the club with nary a thought. This is different and she is drawn to it because of the indestructible amber of memory, because of a woman—that fucking bitch—who touched her years ago, and how perfect it was, and how she has wondered for years if that perfection resided in the woman herself or if it would be significantly different somehow with women, and she thinks she must find out, she must know. She must be pursuant of this knowledge, she thinks. Great. She rolls her eyes. You sound ridiculous, like a high priestess of some sex cult.

Then she thinks of her mother, rather, her mother’s hairdresser. Bloke named Ben, dark, slender, soft-spoken and shy, but whenever Gillian chatted him up he was wickedly funny and kind. Mum had her hair done at his shop for years and she remembers that he joked with her mum as well. Always laughing about something or other. But later, always later in the sanctity of her home Mum would always go, oh, that poofer, that fairy, if he didn’t do me hair right I wouldn’t bother with him. Her father would make vague chastising noises, reminding her that the fairy saw combat
in the war so he really couldn’t be all *that* bad. Thus, from the far-off land of the dead Eileen Buttershaw once again manages to drop judgment upon her feckless, immoral child.

Gillian shoves the paper into a bin and goes off into the evening. She’ll go to the movies, to the theater that always shows old movies and foreign films, and watch *Claire’s Knee*. Afterward she’ll hit the pub and end up in her car with a bloke, both of them almost too drunk to perform properly, but she will manage to get him off anyway. He’ll thank her, zip up, stumble off, and she’ll sleep it off until she’s sober enough to drive home.

*Caroline laughs.*

*It’s the first time, they are in her bedroom, and Gillian’s mind is pillowed in a euphoric buzz, she imagines bees circling her head in a crown of glory; it’s that sort of overexcited thrum after being out in the sun all day and you are finally released into the sweet cool dark with the memory of the sky burning bright in your mind and a glaze of sweat dissolving on your skin. Well, she’s drunk too—there’s that. Caroline is also drunk and they’ve already fucked once, and it was as good as she imagined it would be—and when the fuck does that ever happen? They are both half-dressed and Caroline kisses her belly, unbucks her belt, breathes in her scent. Then the laugh breaks the spell and tickles her skin, and Gillian cannot help but giggle even though she aches and wonders if Caroline is laughing at her, if she is once again being the fool—making the assumption that someone so good, so beautiful would want her like this.*

*You’ve been mistaken before, with women. Christ, you are mistaken with everyone.*

“How?” Gillian finally manages to prompt. She waits for Caroline to say, sorry, this was a mistake. I wasn’t serious. It is a mistake and she knows it. It is also as inevitable as breathing.

“You’re jeans are so bloody tight, I can’t get them on.” Still laughing, Caroline presses the back of her hand to her face; it’s a girlish gesture, sweet and uncharacteristic and endearing and Gillian thinks, I will fall in love with you and it will be terrible. “How the hell d’ya get these on every day?”

“Well.” Caroline flops on her back, rolls over, and summons the fortitude to crawl, crab-like on her elbows, up the length of the bed so that they are face to face again. She kisses Gillian deep and slow, her tongue a wave pouring words directly into Gillian’s open, willing mouth: “They’ve got to come off so I can taste you. Scientific fact.”

Then she’s in the barn at night. The generator roars and the light swings with ax-like menace over her head and she is looking, frantically, for her lost screwdriver. Raef is there and yelling at her, *why are you looking for that now you lost that years ago* and she’s shouting back at him to leave her alone, and there is so much shouting and so much light that she nearly misses it—down in the hay, gleaming preternaturally like the holy grail: her favorite screwdriver ever, the one she thinks that Monica Vitti ate, that caused her death.

*A netting falls over her face and she wakes up.*

Some are blessed with erotic dreams of beautiful celebrities, or phantasms or adventures worthy of an epic film, or surreal scenarios demanding lengthy written interpretation in a journal. For Gillian, her sleeping subconscious overflows with the remembrance of fuckups past and beloved lost screwdrivers.

The sensation of something on her head is real enough, though; it’s her own underwear. She swats it away and squints at the woman from the club last night, who stands beside the bed and gazes
down at Gillian—naked and bound in twisted sheets—as if she were a dog who just destroyed a much loved pair of pricey heels.

The woman is dressed in an oversized black jumper and fairly ugly tights of an abstract pastel nature. “Oi,” she says, raking a hand through very messy bleached blonde hair. Gillian tries to remember her name. Sadie? Susan? Siobhan? Given that she’s a Hebden Bridge type with a bloody pottery wheel and a bookshelf of poetry, could she be Saffron or Safflower or Studebaker?

She stops thinking of random S names when the woman speaks again. “You’ve got to shove off. My girlfriend’s gonna be here in about a couple hours. She’s coming up from London.”

In the light of day last night’s pickup looks older than 35. Which means that I must look about 70, Gillian thinks. She rubs her face, clears her throat. “Never said anything about a girlfriend,” she says.

“Yeah, well. You never said anything about being married,” the woman replies, with a rather arch glance at Gillian’s tanned hand, more specifically, the nakedly glowing white band of skin on her left ring finger that obviously went unnoticed last night in the dark club.

Gillian too stares at the incriminating finger and wonders where the hell she put the ring this time. Hopefully in the glove compartment of the Land Rover. A month ago she went into a panic because she couldn’t find it at all. Of course Robbie noticed and sulked about it for days on end. Fortunately it turned up at Caroline’s: She had removed it while repairing some woodwork there and left it sitting on a table in the hallway. Caroline found it. She texted a photo of it to Gillian with the caption, Can I sell this on eBay?

Putting all that aside now, Gillian smiles sheepishly and hopes she looks suitably charming enough to request a quick shower. The woman shrugs an approval. Gillian goes into fucking ninja panther mode; she’s showered and dressed in twenty minutes.

Afterward she finds the woman sitting at a table in the tiny eat-in kitchen; there is barely room on the table for the cup of tea that sits there. Mildly incensed that she’s not offered a cuppa—surely there is some rule of dyke one-night-stand etiquette being violated here—Gillian pulls on her jacket and decides to make an exit. “Right, then. Thanks. See you ’round.”

“Wait.” The woman follows her into the narrow hallway of the apartment. There is barely room for both of them and Gillian feels claustrophobic as she bumps into a hallway stand that, like the kitchen table, is littered with minutiae.

“D’ya wanna do this again sometime?” the woman asks.

It’s a surprise because Gillian thinks the sex was a bit sloppy and half-arsed. Even though she’s not wandered into a lesbian club in a few years, she hadn’t expected to pull so quickly. All these years she thought lesbians somehow held women to a higher standard and were kind of picky but apparently that’s not the case. Or maybe she’s just getting lesbians in general mixed up with Caroline in particular. But then even the mighty Caroline stooped to her level. She looks at the table, covered with mail, a tiny bowl filled with housekeys, paper clips, ATM receipts, a packet of Mentos with a spiraling paper tail. A credit card bill gives a name and she seizes upon it. “I don’t know, Shelley,” she says.

“That’s my girlfriend’s name.”

“Oh.”

The woman’s eyes narrow, but her mouth twitches with amusement. “You don’t remember my
“name, do you?”

“Um.”

“Rachel.”


“That’s all right, Gillian Greenwood.”

Gillian guffaws nervously. “Ah. Yeah. That’s my name.”

“And you’re a farmer, and you have a son, and a granddaughter—she’s cute, by the way.”

“Yeah. She is.” Good Christ, Gillian thinks. Do I show photos of Calamity to everyone when I’m pissed? She even forced Ollie to look at them the last time she met up with him. He didn’t like that; the thought of having it off with someone’s grandmother left him barely capable of getting it up.

“Right. Well, look. You’ve got my number.” Rachel is a smoker. She lights up her second one of the day and judiciously uses a scrim of smoke to obfuscate, to render into mystery her vague pronouncements. “I know how it is. Sometimes, you just cannot shut it off. Feelings. Desires. Whatever.” She’s smirking around the cigarette as she pins down Gillian with carefree accuracy; it’s when you don’t even try to hit the target that you somehow manage to nail the bullseye. She takes a step toward Gillian, who thinks God, if she’s going to kiss me I hope she takes the bloody fag out of her mouth first, it could be dangerous. Instead, she merely drags a nicotine-scented thumb across Gillian’s lips. “Don’t you think, Gillian Greenwood?”

Yep, time to scarper. “My regards to Shelley,” Gillian says.

She laughs, Rachel does.

Out the door and halfway down the block, the imprint of this woman’s body upon her own is already a fleeting memory, set ablaze into disintegration by the morning sun slicing horizontally into her line of sight like a razor across the eyeball—how vividly she remembers that image from Un Chien Andalou and nothing else about the bloody film. It must have been at the local cinema here when she first saw it, probably alone and probably high, when she was sixteen, maybe seventeen. Foreign films always seemed better that way. At times in her life when nothing made sense, sitting in a darkened theater alone with a mystery always seemed the perfect cure, a potent reminder that there were things and stories and images more beautifully baffling that what she thought and felt. Maybe that’s what you should have done last night, knobhead, she thinks. The morning is perfect and she thinks this weekend will be perfect too—not just because she’s free of Robbie, who is away on some extended fishing trip/stag party with a bunch of mates from work, but because she will see Caroline tomorrow for lunch, and hopefully sans the girlfriend. Not that she’s met Sacha yet, and not that Caroline has even officially verified the having of a girlfriend. The last time she awkwardly broached the subject—last week, whilst changing the oil in the Jeep Cherokee and with Caroline nervously looking on because anything involving her automated fourth child was a cause for concern—Caroline had dismissed serious talk of Sacha with oh, we’re just hanging out.

Gillian knows horseshit when she hears it. Caroline does not hang out. She grants audiences, makes appointments, schedules activities on a ruthless timetable. Even back when they were shagging Gillian usually felt as if she were on the clock and if she didn’t deliver an orgasm per hour she would be docked a week’s worth of wages. Caroline may hang laundry, hang fire, have a million hang ups about a million things, and could indeed hang someone up by their bollocks
with her righteous anger, relentless arguments, and clever insults, but she did not hang out. Gillian is uncertain what this emotional stonewalling means—Caroline could by trying to spare her feelings by pretending it’s not serious when it is, or maybe she doesn’t want to jinx it, or perhaps her usual neurotic fears and trepidations were, as happened nearly one time too many with Kate, muddying the waters too much.

Then she wonders if Caroline is really planning on taking Flora to the shore at all this summer; not long ago she’d mentioned the possibility to Gillian, even shyly offering an invitation. *You could come along, bring Calamity. Then we’ll just lie around on the beach and let them run riot and make us feel old.* The idea is appealing because she knows that even just a touch of tepid English sun would prompt an explosion of gold dust on Caroline’s skin, and she remembers all too well the ebb and flow of freckled constellations mapped along Caroline’s arms, shoulders, and chest and quickly she is bereft at the thought of never tasting those rarefied stars ever again.

She stops walking, closes her eyes, and lets the sun slug her full in the face. So much for getting it out of your system, for thinking that if she had it off with a woman that would take care of it—for a while, anyway. But here she is only hours afterward, still stupidly smitten. She exhales and consults her mobile, looking for a place to get coffee. Unsurprisingly there is a coffeeshop on the next street, and once there she finds it’s populated with the kind of dubiously employed and sporadically washed arty types that Caroline routinely mocked and who roused in Gillian a livid kind of envy: Did these people not have jobs? Children? Grandchildren? Sheep? Were they all sitting around sulking and composing bad poems to snotty bitches they were in love with? As she waits in a dismally long line Gillian allows her mind to roam and graze in the field of bad poetry.

*Hey girl give me some cabernet sauvignon*

*Cause you really really turn me on*

*Girl you’re spicier than tarragon*

*Don’t want you to keep your clothes on*

Maybe it could be a song lyric. If she could get Adele to record it, she’d make a million.

She gets a proper cappuccino. It’s not glutted with excessive whipped cream or chocolate syrup or weird spices. Not that she minded that usually, but nothing pleases her quite like something done right, without bells and whistles and too much fuss. To go with it she orders an overpriced scone. The scone is worth the cost: It’s orange and currant and as she takes a big bite the warmth and sweetness of it fills her mouth. She sprawls on a tatty sofa near the shop’s vast picture window and these very simple pleasures—the morning, the coffee, the food—convince her once again that she can really live within the limitations of her life, but as she continues staring out the window a pair of coppers meander into view, and one of them is Cheryl.

Chapter End Notes

**CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK:**

“Feels Like We Only Go Backwards,” Tame Impala

“Paris,” Scratch Massive & Daniel Agust
At approximately the same time that Gillian orders cappuccino in a Hebden Bridge coffeehouse, Caroline wakes up alone in Sacha’s bed. It’s only the second time she’s stayed overnight at Sacha’s house and while it’s unsurprising the wakeup routine remains disorienting, certain things contribute to it. For instance, the bedroom—courtesy of some rather high-tech, soundproof window blinds—is dark and silent as a tomb. So dark that Caroline has no idea what time it is. She’s pretty certain it is morning, however, since Sacha is not there. At any rate she hopes it’s morning because it would be a relief not to stumble about a strange house in the dead of night courtesy of her middle-aged bladder, a trek that releases her into the labyrinth of the equally blackened hallway and terminates into the daunting, cavernous bathroom; the first time she stumbled her way out of the bathroom while naked and half-asleep her tender, uncovered muff endured a frigid, stainless steel assault from an annoyingly phallic modernist doorknob.

Additionally and to her supreme dismay, she has discovered that Sacha is one of those appallingly productive early morning people. No urgent duty rouses her out of bed at first light, like a flock of sheep or a young child; rather, some primal, circadian rhythm compels her to rise up and do yoga, check work email, cook, garden, and argue via mobile or Skype with friends, family, and unfortunate employees, all of it well before the sun reaches a respectable height in the sky. Caroline, on the other hand, is content to lie in the soothing bedroom-tomb and let her mind race through its particular brand of morning calisthenics: How late is it, is Flora all right, is Greg successfully perpetuating the fiction to her mother and Alan that she rose early to deal with some work crisis, hence her early morning absence from the house, and she shouldn’t be lying about that anyway, she is a grown woman for Christ’s sake and perfectly free to sleep over at her girlfriend’s house—and are they girlfriends now, really? She told Sacha she was cool—yes, she had said stupidly used that word again—with the London Shag Buddy Situation. And why did I agree to that? Caroline wonders nervously. Perhaps because last night at three a.m. she had a beautiful, sweaty naked woman on top of her who, after so much vigorous and attentive lovemaking, wanted to jump up and make her spaghetti carbonara right then and there simply because Caroline had mumbled, I’m peckish. At that crucial stage Caroline would have been cool with Sacha invading a defenseless, underprivileged country. She talked Sacha down from a three-course meal to a cheese plate, figs, marcona almonds, and as Sacha nibbled gooey brie from her fingertips with sybaritic skill that brought to mind her other oral accomplishments, Caroline fuzzily proclaimed that yeah, it’s cool, your thing in London. It’s okay for now.

To which Sacha expressed doubt and insisted that they would need to thoroughly talk it over—like good little lesbians, Caroline had thought but did not say aloud, because it sounded like one of Gillian’s more boorishly homophobic comments. Then Sacha mentioned that she had a friend who did “mediations,” usually for couples, not that they were really a couple yet because they would have to talk about that too—here Caroline suppressed a sizable groan and a savage eye-roll but fortunately the bedroom was still fairly dark, save for the romantic fire hazard of a large candle on the nightstand that cloaked her bitchface in chiaroscuro—but perhaps her friend could help them “navigate a satisfactory resolution to the issue” (here, Caroline thought, Sacha sounded like a woman who had indeed studied law and finance at Cambridge) and then she mentioned that sometimes the mediation concluded with a purification ceremony involving the burning of incense, usually frankincense or sandalwood (but here, back to the lesbian hippie verbiage) but they didn’t have to do that part if Caroline didn’t want to, because “that doesn’t seem like your thing” (and here, Caroline ruefully realized that already Sacha knows her better than imagined). In conclusion, no conclusions were reached because then Sacha ate a honey-drenched fig in such a
magnificently erotic fashion that Caroline had no other recourse but to shove her back down on the bed and return in full all the various sexual favors she had gratefully received earlier that evening.

Just as she wonders if spaghetti carbonara is an appropriate breakfast dish, the bedroom door opens and Sacha flies in, a freshly showered whirlwind still in a silk bathrobe with her mobile, the damned thing, still attached to her ear.

She plants a quick kiss on Caroline’s cheek. “Good morning, sunshine.” The blinds are opened and as Caroline squints suspiciously at the sunlight like a petulant vampire, she is also cruelly exposed to the banality of a work-oriented phone conversation: “Yeah, I get that, but if we’re going to make that kind of decision about back-end development we need to see how it affects the whole company. It’s only common sense. I don’t want to cause extraneous work for anyone but I need a prospectus, at least, from these people. Surely they have one, and if they don’t we shouldn’t even be considering their services. Liam? Hold on.” Sacha leans into the hallway and bellows, “DYLAN! BRING CAROLINE A CUP OF COFFEE.”

From downstairs Caroline hears an incoherent male shout.

“Oh shit, oh fuck.” She gasps, sits up, and clutches a sheet to her chest. “Dylan’s here?”

Surprised, Sacha leaves both her underling and the mobile dangling. “Yeah—I told you he was coming up. The other day, after we had tea.”

“Why don’t I remember that?”

Sacha pauses guiltily. “I suspect it was a mistake to tell you while you were feeling me up. Anyway, he arrived last night, after we went to bed, and don’t panic, he always has headphones on, so he didn’t hear us—”

“Yeah, but Liam is hearing us now, isn’t he?”

Sacha shrugs. “He’s heard worse.”

Caroline is not assuaged by this.

“Anyway, I did tell you that Dylan’s up for the weekend, going to the Kasabian concert to Manchester—”

“The who?”

“No, not the Who. It’s overrated prog rock. He’ll make you a mix, you’ll loathe it. Darling, I have to finish up here, so I’m going back into my office. Be back in a jiff.” Sacha rushes out, leaving the door open.

Caroline has not encountered Sacha’s son since they started seeing each other. He knows, of course, as does William, who seemed quite over the moon at the development—at last, his sneaky matchmaking had come to successful fruition. But with regard to Dylan, so mopey and emo that he makes William look like a crackhead at a rave, she has no idea what his reaction will be and thus toward that end, she believes that being fully clothed would place her on a more equitable footing. Frantic, she gazes longingly at her clothes, piled on a chair across the room. *Shit.* Did she have time for a naked dash over there? And if she made it there, what should she put on first? Blouse, then pants? Or the other way around? Which part of her anatomy would be less traumatic for a young man? There is a not a stray wrap, pajamas, nightgown, blouse, or t-shirt within easy reach, nothing she could use to cover herself with except for some goddamned scarf from Afghanistan uselessly draped over the headboard of the bed, and that would barely cover her tits
anyway.

Her brain is still caught in the *tits or snatch, shirt or pants* conundrum when Dylan arrives with coffee.

Sacha’s son combines his father’s tall, lanky build and his mother’s dark good looks to handsome effect. His sullenness, however, is purely his own, and his eyes have the cool, ascetic gleam of an aspiring monk profoundly bored with the mundane, physical world. He studies philosophy at Oxford and Caroline suspects that in a few years he’s going to be making coffee alongside his equally unambitious uncle. He wears a black t-shirt that says *Kasabian* on it in pink letters—more nonsense to Google, Caroline thinks—torn dark jeans, and is incongruously poised with a rather dainty pansy-covered teacup and saucer.

Over the course of Dylan’s friendship with William Caroline has met him perhaps no more than half a dozen times, but at the moment it appears as if encountering her naked and in his mother’s bed is as commonplace to him as standing in her kitchen chatting about classes at Oxford, for he drawls at her in the tones of a bored next-door neighbor, “Hey, Caroline.”

“Oh, Dylan.” It’s a dismal attempt at sounding casual, for her voice careens into the squeaky octave, as Kate had described it. *And what a perfect time for you to think about Kate, you bloody numpty.*

He places the cup and saucer down on the nightstand. “I don’t know if this is any good. For some reason mum only had Robusta beans. Tends to run bitter despite my best efforts.”

“I’m sure it will be good. Thank you.”

“Did I put enough cream in?”

“Yes. Thanks. I’m surprised you remember.”

“My therapist says that because of my ambivalence toward authority figures I sometimes try too hard to please them.” He pauses. “I mean, you are more a symbolic authority figure than anything because of your job and the fact that you’re sleeping with Mum complicates it further. I don’t know. I’ll have to hash that out during the next session.”

“This is a lot to take in before coffee, Dylan.”

He ponders this while scratching a fashionable scruff of facial hair along his chin. “Right.”

Awkwardly, she reaches for the cup while pressing the bedsheet to her chest.

“It’s OK,” Dylan says. “You don’t have to cover up. I’ve seen naked women before.” Another pause. “Well, mostly mum’s girlfriends. Well, ex-girlfriends now.”

“I see.” While Caroline has been unsuccessful in attaining an aggregate figure on how many women Sacha has slept with, she is starting to believe that, as with Gillian’s sexual past, *don’t ask, don’t tell* might be the ideal policy to pursue.

Dylan, however, possesses little to no capacity for filtering sexual musings. “I’m not sure I’m into women,” he says. “At least not right now.”

“Another good topic for therapy.” Caroline toasts him with the teacup.

As if the increasingly boundary-challenged conversation has somehow activated his mother’s maternal telekinesis, Sacha shouts from the other end of the hallway: “DYLAN, PLEASE
DON’T WEIRD HER OUT, ALL RIGHT?”

Dylan steps into the hallway in order to scream back. “WE’RE JUST, LIKE, TALKING, OK? LIKE TWO NORMAL ADULTS.”

“YOU’RE NOT AN ADULT AND YOU’RE NOT NORMAL.”

“NEITHER ARE YOU AND AT YOUR AGE THAT’S REALLY EMBARRASSING, YOU KNOW?”

Caroline sips coffee. “Okay, now I’m starting to feel at home.”

Nearly an hour passes in which Caroline showers, dresses, fusses over her hair, and finishes her coffee. Sacha remains barricaded in her office. She feels silly sitting attentively and fully dressed on the edge of the bed, so she makes the bed and then wanders downstairs. She finds Dylan outside on the patio facing the garden, sprawled in front of a table and with a long leg draped over the arm of a chair, staring into the void of his mobile.

She regards the carefully cultivated chaos of the rambling yard. Wild, but not too wild is how Sacha described it, and Caroline the plodding scientist is reluctant to commit to the theory just yet that the condition of her garden is some measure or reflection upon her character. More data required.

She sits at the table. “Do you think she’ll be much longer?”

“Dunno. I think her merger got fucked up.”

“Merger?”

“Oh God, it’s so boring I can’t even talk about it. D’ya want more coffee?” He pushes a half-empty French press at her.

She drinks more coffee. The passage of time makes her increasingly nervous, because in a couple hours she has to fetch Flora from a play date with a preapproved group of toddlers from carefully vetted families. Also, the sooner she gets back home the better; it lessens the chance that her mother has somehow extracted from the hapless Greg the real reason she was not home this morning. She tried to tutor him in the excruciatingly fine art of lying to her mother, but it was like trying to explain basic physics to her science-challenged sons. She had carefully crafted an early morning-school-emergency lie involving a fiction of a bird trapped in a building overnight that set off an alarm that would require her presence in an official but useless capacity. Greg peppered her with a barrage of annoying and anxious questions—What kind of bird? What’s the protocol? Could there be a bird flu alert issued?—that indicated to her he would crack at the first imperious eyebrow twitch from Celia.

Dylan shoots her a sly glance. “Have you seen William’s beard yet?”

“His—what?” Her shriek breaks the squeaky octave range.

“Check it.” Dylan flashes his mobile at her, revealing an Instagram photo of William with his girlfriend. William sports a ridiculously bushy reddish beard and wears a tattered flannel shirt that looks as if he nicked it from Gillian.

“Jesus Christ, it’s like a badger died on his face,” Caroline wails.

For the first time ever, Caroline hears Dylan laugh. “Ha! That’s awesome.”
“Are we sure it’s real?” Caroline says hopefully. “Maybe he’s just wearing a fake one—having a laugh—"

Dylan regards her with the seriousness of a seasoned therapist. “That’s an epic level of denial.”

“I’m very proud to admit that I’m very good at denial. But that thing—it’s an abomination.”

“Yeah, I tried to tell him it’s not a good look, but the girlfriend likes it, so—” Dylan shrugs.

Caroline sighs. “Straight women.” She shudders at the memory of John’s unshaven face scraping against her skin. Whenever he did not shave on a regular basis she wanted to punch him. Well, over the course of eighteen years she wanted to punch him at least once a week, and perhaps that alone should have been a key signifier that the marriage wasn’t quite working.

“Mum,” Dylan says.

Caroline looks over her shoulder as Sacha, dressed in a Greenpeace t-shirt and jeans, emerges from the house. She’s barefoot, beautiful, and once again in her life Caroline finds herself in the unbelievable and surreal position of having attracted a woman who seems so thoroughly out of her league that she cannot help but wonder if the Samson-like source of her magnetism is that stupidly expensive organic citrus shampoo that she bought for William and that she’s now been using for a couple years now. If it lured Gillian over to the dyke side, she thinks, it must be potent. I must buy a lifetime supply of it.

“We have a new nickname for Will,” Dylan tells his mother. “Well, Caroline gets credit for it.”

Sacha lays a hand on Caroline’s shoulder, and Caroline feels slightly giddy at the contact. “Hmm?”

“The Badger.”

Sacha laughs. “Oh God, you showed her that photo.”

Horrified, Caroline looks up. “You knew about that?”

Sacha apologizes with a kiss. “Yeah, sorry. I was trying to think of a way to break it to you, obviously Will is too terrified to say anything to you—”

“What?”

“Wait, have you eaten anything?” Sacha glares at her son. “Dylan, did you not offer her any breakfast?”

He shrugs. “I’m not the one who left her sitting around all morning.”

“It’s all right.” Caroline reaches up and squeezes Sacha’s hand, plays the peacemaker. “I’m not really hungry.”

Sacha pours herself a coffee and flops into a chair, close enough so that she can prop her feet in Caroline’s lap. Her feet are clean and soft, damp with morning dew and lined with scraps of recently cut grass. The ease of affection is startling but not unwelcome, but she’s reluctant to do anything as innocuous as rub Sacha’s feet, let alone kiss her, in front of Dylan.

Dylan, for his part, senses as much. He rolls his eyes and stands up. “I’ll leave you two now.”

“You don’t have to,” Caroline says.
“No, she’s going to apologize a lot right now and it’s going to be really sad and embarrassing.”

“Everything I do is embarrassing to you,” Sacha retorts. “My very existence is embarrassing to you.”

“It’s cool. My therapist says that’s normal,” Dylan says. He disappears into the house.

Melodramatically Sacha stares up at the sky. “Christ.” She sighs, and looks at Caroline. “He’s right. I’m so sorry, ditching you like that. This bloody merger is a mess, I’ve got to do conference calls to New York later, and—” Sacha stops, shakes her head. “Oh shit, I’m babbling. I’ve no excuse. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s all right. I understand.” She presses a thumb into the plump arch of Sacha’s foot and as Sacha sighs contentedly she skims an unwanted memory from the forefront of her consciousness: Massaging Gillian’s foot through a dirty old sock and then, days later, marveling at the naked, elegant curve of the same foot’s arch as they lay in bed together.

Sacha pouts. “I didn’t get to have breakfast with you.”

“Next time. You can make me spaghetti carbonara.”

“You really have to go?” More pouting.

Caroline’s resoluteness wobbles, but somehow she manages to remain firm. “I need to pick up Flora from a playdate in a bit, and God knows what my mother is thinking. She hasn’t texted.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“No, I think it just means that Alan hid the mobile from her again.”

Sacha laughs, but grows serious again rather quickly. “I’m really sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Caroline repeats gently. “Shall I call you later?”

“Since I’m going to be tied up with New York calls, I’ll call you when I’m free. Um. Also.” Sacha reaches for the coffee on the table and gulps it down nervously. “I’m going to London for work this week—leaving Sunday night.”


“I don’t know if I’m going to see—I mean, I’m going to be really busy.” Sacha sighs again. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“I’m okay with it. But you don’t seem to be okay with me being okay.”

“No, I’m okay—well, I don’t, I don’t know.”

Caroline feels an eyebrow twitch coming on. “You don’t trust me to know my own mind?”


“You better go see Dylan’s therapist.”

“Don’t get me started on that wanker, I pay him a hundred quid per session. But look, I want to be clear: You give me the word and I’ll end it. Eighty-six it.”
“No. We talked about it last night—”

“No, really, and trust me, one should never make decisions immediately after sex. It’s how I ended up living in Croydon for two years.”

Caroline puts Croydon on a short list of questions along with did you ever have it off with your best friend and did you really have a threesome with your ex-husband and another woman or were you just drunk and taking the piss? “You’re probably right, but listen—I have given it serious thought, and you know what? Everything is fine the way it is. I don’t want the pressure of making big decisions and big commitments. I’m not ready for that. I just want to be with you and enjoy being with you. And I am, and it’s good, and I hope it’s good for you—”

“It is,” Sacha interjects softly. She intercepts Caroline’s hand.

Her speechmaking stumbles, she blushes. “Oh. Good. That’s good to know. I just want that to continue as long as possible. All right?”

“You’re being very, well, nice, for lack of a better word.”

“Oh no, I’m not a nice person. I’ve told you that. But this isn’t a matter of being nice. It’s about me—trying a different approach. In a way, it’s about me trying not to be so insufferably me for once in my bloody life.”

Sacha gazes at her unkempt garden. “That’s quite a sea change you’re attempting.”

“I know.”

“You will tell me if it’s a problem. Won’t you?”

“I will.”

Sacha renews her pouting campaign. “Do we get to make out a bit before you go?”

Grinning, Caroline goes in for the kiss. “Oh yes.”

On the drive home, Caroline ponders the ambitiousness of adjusting her entire risk-averse persona from the extreme of I like you, we’ve had sex, let’s get married to I’m your very cool nonmonogamous girlfriend. Last night Sacha made a point of reminding her that this is not a one-sided arrangement: You can see other people too, you know. But the mere thought of seeing other people is, frankly, exhausting. That and she cannot think of anyone she’d like to get involved with—she gnaws her lips and relents: okay, yes, there is perpetual temptation of Gillian. But Gillian remains married, albeit unhappily, and that is a complication Caroline cannot abide. Besides, she sees Gillian almost every week in a satisfactorily platonic arrangement; they’ve shifted back into the familiar steady pattern of teasing, comfortable friendship that they possessed before sleeping together. Even though Gillian’s particular brand of attractiveness remains persistent as a splinter and stealthily burrowed under her skin.

Last week Gillian’s near-weekly pilgrimage to Harrogate involved helping her father with a bit of gardening and also heralded the arrival of a heretofore unseen t-shirt, something that seemed an anomaly in Gillian’s brightly mismatched, bargain-bin wardrobe: It was a very simple midnight blue. As a result, the color neutralized the intense palette of her eyes in a dramatic way; her pupils edged along the spectrum into a pale, icy blue. As she blithered happily about an old movie she rewatched recently—something about a motorcycle gang that worshipped a cult of frogs and Beryl Reid was in it, and it sounded so weird Caroline accused her of making it up, to which Gillian patiently countered Caz, it was the seventies—Caroline had stared with fascination at her eyes until Gillian shook her head like a wet dog and growled, “Shit!”
“What?”

“Do I have hair in my grass—er, grass in my hair again? You keep staring at me.”

“Oh, no, no. Sorry.” Kicking herself, Caroline quickly tacked on a lie: “I thought I saw some but you’re fine.”

Absently Gillian finger-raked hair lightened by the summer sun—and perhaps something in a bottle as well. Although she’s never been partial to the fair-haired, Caroline finds this summery look pleasing on Gillian, as she does the muscled, tanned forearms.

So quite naturally she had to counter this reassertion of futile desire with an insult. “Might help if you combed it every once in a while.”

“Piss off, you,” Gillian said. Then she grinned sweetly and unfortunately Caroline found this more pleasing than the combined effect of her eyes, her tan, her t-shirt, and everything.

Arriving home, Caroline finds she has a spring to her step that counteracts the expectation of dealing with her mother. No walk of shame here, she thinks. A spring of shame, if you will. But once inside the house she finds Greg sitting in the kitchen, waiting for her and wringing his hands in an awkwardly distressed fashion like a nun who unexpectedly finds herself at an orgy.

She sighs and drops her purse on the counter. “You blew it, didn’t you?”

Greg bites his lips, nods, and pulls out his mobile. With a single keystroke he brings up a clip of Whoopi Goldberg in Ghost intoning, “You in danger, girl.”

“Shit.”

He moans. “I know. I’m sorry. I tried, really, but God—she’s relentless.”

“It’s all right. It was naïve of me to expect you to achieve success at the very first go. It took me nearly thirty years to successfully lie to my mother.”

“She said she wanted to talk to you first thing, when you got back.”

“Right. If I’m not back in an hour it means I’m dead and you’ll have to pick up Flora.”

Over in the guesthouse Caroline finds Celia alone with a pot of rapidly cooling tea. Foolishly Caroline attempts pleasantries. She smiles and chirps, “Morning!”

“So.” Celia says. She stands erect and Caroline envisions some sort of classic western standoff. If only they had guns everything would end with merciful quickness, because she’s fairly certain she’d be a better shot than her mother.

Caroline attempts the blasé look she frequently adapted as a teenager. “So?”

“Where were you?”

“Don’t ask, don’t tell. Can I have some tea?”

Celia exhales wearily and waves at the teapot. “You were spending the night with that woman again, weren’t you?” Despite Celia’s outward approval of Sacha—her pedigree, money, and charm went a long way—she still could not wrap her head around the concept that Caroline was actually having sex with a woman. Again.
“Yep.” Caroline sits and pours out a cuppa. “And if you’re going to give me shit about it, I’m going to get up and walk right out of here.”

“Well. You’re a grown woman, you’ve a right to do whatever you like and the world does not revolve around you.” Celia folds her arms.

“Oh boy, that’s the quote of the day. All right. What’s wrong?” A bolt of panic hits Caroline as she looks around. “Where’s Alan? Is he okay?”

“He’s fine. Off on his morning ramble with Harry, thank God. He really needed it today.”

“What’s wrong?”

Celia’s mouth bends into its usual frown of disapproval. “More like who.”

“Gillian.” Caroline shakes her head and sips tea.

“Who else? She’s really done it now.”

“What’s happened now?” Caroline asks, already bored. She expects Gillian’s had another furiously tedious row with Robbie over missing socks in the laundry or the shitty way he fixed a fence or misplaced her tools or that she uses too much oregano in her cooking—which Caroline happens to agree with, but she’d rather hit herself in the head with a mallet than waste energy in such a pointlessly banal quarrel with such an epically obstinate woman.

“She was arrested this morning,” Celia replies.

Caroline fumbles the teacup and mediocre oolong sloshes over her knuckles. Irritably she wipes her hand with a napkin while ignoring the escalation of her heartbeat. “Are you kidding?”

As official bearer of bad news, Celia straightens her cardigan. “I’m afraid not.”

Caroline’s first overwhelming thought is Eddie. Gillian must have told Robbie. Why, she doesn’t know. Based on their conversations, she had been convinced that Gillian would take that particular truth to her grave. And she should have, because Caroline knows as well as Gillian herself that Robbie’s blind obedience to his job permits no mercy, even to the woman he has alternately loved and hated for over half his life. He dared to ask Gillian for forgiveness; the braver act of granting it, however, is something well and truly beyond his meager capabilities. Caroline knows the ways of the coward better than most and yet despite all that she too fails to forgive—because she believes without a doubt that she never would have permitted Gillian to be hurt the way she was for so many years. I would have killed that fucking bastard myself.

The thought startles her and she releases a tense, shuddering breath.

“Good Lord, Caroline,” Celia says, alarmed. “It’s not as bad as you think. She’s all right and out of the hoosegow already.”

“What happened?”

“Gillian was at a coffee shop in Hebden Bridge this morning. What she was doing in Hebden Bridge at that time of day is anyone’s guess. She told Alan she was seeing a man about buying a new tractor. I’m thinking she was just seeing a man, period!”

Wearily Caroline slouches in the chair. “Speculation aside—”

“So she’s in this coffee shop sitting at the window and who does she see strolling by? Cheryl.
And Cheryl sees her. You can imagine what happened."

“Oh no.”

“Words were exchanged. And that led to an altercation—”

“Oh Christ,” Alarmed, Caroline straightens. “She didn’t—did she hit Cheryl?”

“Sort of.”

“What do you mean?”

Relishing the moment, Celia takes her time to deliver the line. She clears her throat, sips her tea. “She shoved a scone in Cheryl’s face.”

“A—scone?”

“Yes.” Celia pauses. “Orange zest and currant, I believe.”

“A scone,” Caroline repeats in tones of wonder.

Celia nods. “Assault with a deadly scone, yes.”

They stare at each other for what seems a mini-eternity before bursting into uncontrollable laughter.

“Oh God.” Caroline wipes tears of laughter from her eyes. “This is horrible. We are horrible. We shouldn’t be laughing.”

“Oh no,” Celia replies. “We should. It’s truly ludicrous.”

“So—did Alan bail her out, then?”

“No. She called Gary, of all people. He got her and took her home. She didn’t want to face Alan. And Robbie—well, I’ve no idea what Robbie knows, if anyone’s even contacted him. He’s away for the weekend on that fishing trip. This may be the straw that breaks the camel’s back, you know. Very embarrassing for the wife of a policeman to be arrested for assaulting a fellow officer.”

Sod Robbie, she thinks. “Is Alan all right? Is he really upset?”

“Oh,” Celia sighs. “Not too badly. At this point in his life I think he realizes that Gillian will be Gillian no matter what.” Celia sits down at the table and nibbles at a biscuit. “This morning, after she got home, he spoke with her—tried to chastise her about it all. He said, ‘Don’t you feel bad about anything?’ She said, ‘I feel bad that I wasted such a good scone on a bitch like that.’”

The laughter begins anew.

“Oh God,” Caroline manages between hyperventilating giggles. “I’m a horrible person. I’m going to hell.”

“I suspect I’ll be keeping you company.”

“But really. This is serious. What if she goes to jail or something?”

“For something like that? If I were Cheryl I’d be embarrassed to even speak of it again, let alone risk it becoming public knowledge in a courtroom. ‘Yes, your honor, this stroppy little woman hit
me, a trained police officer, in the face with a scone because I called her a slag and oh, did I mention that other time I publicly humiliated her in a completely vulgar and stupid way?"

Celia refers to, of course, the Dildo Incident. “I didn’t know you knew about that.”

“Raff’s Ellie told me. Honestly, if I’d been Gillian then I would have hit that woman over the head with that, that thing. She’s lucky she only ended up with a scone in the face, I say.” Celia sips her tea. “Anyway, Gary will help Gillian sort it, I’m sure. You know he likes to swoop in and play the benefactor. And remember, he’s married to a solicitor.”

Caroline finds a modicum of comfort in this. For everyone’s sake she tries to like Gary, but the fact that she first met him on the worst day of her life seems an indelible black mark against him. Despite this she recognizes in him a fatal, shared flaw: that compulsive urge to fix things, to make everyone happy and then resentfully hoard the meager crumbs of gratitude thrown one’s way.

Playfully Celia shoves a tea tray in her direction. “Can I shove a jaffa cake in your face, dear?”

The laughter starts anew until, like the end of Ravel’s Bolero, the juggernaut of giggling and cackling tumbles to a crashing halt when Alan comes through the front door. By way of greeting he offers a long-suffering frown.

“Oh, Alan,” Celia says guiltily. “I’m sorry, love. We didn’t mean—”

He waves a hand at them, summarily dismissing and forgiving.

“Where’s Harry? I thought he was coming by for tea.”

Alan hangs up his jacket. “He has to get back round to house. He’s babysitting Calamity whilst our Raff goes and shouts at his mum. Besides, I’m not feeling much for company at the moment.”

Caroline rises quickly.

Alan gives her an affectionate, exasperated look. “No, not you, love. You’re family. Sit.”

Caroline sits, realizes she is hungry, and attacks the jaffa cakes. Her mobile pings and for the moment she ignores it. She wonders if it’s Gillian, asking for advice on legal counsel or what to wear for a courtroom appearance. She also wonders what, rather who, Gillian was doing in Hebden Bridge. It seems a bit of a hike for a mere shag. During this new phase of their friendship Gillian has remained surprisingly discreet about who, if anyone, she might be shagging on the side, probably because she knows Caroline would not approve. Not that it’s stopped her before.

“What can we do to make you feel better?” Celia asks solicitously.

“Nothing, dear,” Alan replies. “Really, I’m fine.”

“Do you want to come over to the house? Greg and I are cooking together. He wants to make a chocolate soufflé.”

“You better go,” Caroline advises Alan around a mouthful of cake. “I think he’s trying to steal your woman.”

This draws a chuckle from Alan, which was her intent. “No, I’m just going to sit in garden for a spell, if you all don’t mind.” He kisses Celia on the cheek. “Go make your soufflé, I’ll be over in a bit. I promise.” Then he’s out the back, into the tiny fenced patch of yard allotted to the guesthouse.
Crisis averted for the moment, Caroline surrenders attention to the mobile. The text is from Sacha: *Pls tell me D. not too weird today. He gets weird when I get involved with someone new.* Someone new. Is it that common an occurrence that a pattern has been detected? She frowns.

Celia clears her throat loudly and, looking up, Caroline is confronted with the Maternal Glare of Disapproval.

“Are you texting that woman?” her mother demands.

“She’s sending me tit pics. Want to see?” Caroline wiggles the mobile in her mother’s direction.

“Oh, stop it.” Celia rests a hand on the doorknob. “Are you coming?”

“In a moment.” Caroline feigns absorption in her mobile. After Celia leaves with a huff and a slam of the door, she types a quick response to Sacha: *You worry too much. He’s fine really. Will call later.*

She pockets the mobile and goes out the back of the guesthouse.

As expected, Alan sits on a bench smoking a cigarette and, at first sight of her, tosses the fag on the ground and crushes it underneath the heel of his shoe. “Oh, damn it.”

Caroline sits next to him and pats his leg. “It’s all right. I won’t tell.”

“Appreciated.”

In the weeks after Kate died Alan would sit with her for long spells—at least, in the never-ending purgatory of grief, they seemed long. Sometimes they would talk—about everything, about nothing—but mostly he would sit with her, be with her, his mere presence more a balm and a comfort than anything else at that time. Even booze, even pills. And because of what happened with the pills a few months ago, she now knows that Gillian has inherited her father’s gift for filling the voids, her emotional lacunae, with grace and solace. Recently Celia passively-aggressively suggested that Caroline “have a chat” with Gillian about the state of her discontent; Caroline demurred, thinking that she couldn’t say anything to Gillian that she hasn’t already said. Now she thinks that if Alan asked the same of her, she would gladly do it. For now, the best she can do is to return the favor of quiet companionship.

When he finally speaks a few minutes later, it’s not what she expects: “This is all my fault,” he says.

Startled, Caroline looks at him. “Now how do you figure that?”

“She’s not happy. She keeps pretending, keeps trying to convince me she is happy, but I know she’s not. So she acts out, like she used to when she was a teen, causing all sorts of trouble. And I think it’s—well, I pressed her to marry Robbie. Thought he would be good for her. Stable. Strong. I thought she needed to be with someone like that. Thought he could handle her.”

Caroline bursts into such merry laughter that it leaves Alan smiling in bewilderment. “Now what on earth—”

“You thought *he* could handle Gillian?”

“Aye.” Alan shoots her a wry look. “Bit of a miscalculation, wouldn’t you say?”

“I don’t think there is a man alive who can handle Gillian.” Or a woman? Caroline wonders.
Alan grows quiet again. “Maybe you’re right,” he finally agrees. “You see, I didn’t listen to her and I should’ve. After Eddie died, she weren’t serious about anyone. I kept hoping she’d meet some nice fella. She told me she weren’t the marrying kind. Liked being on her own, she said. Didn’t want to rely on anyone. Didn’t surprise me too much—she’s never liked relying on anyone. She’s always been like that.”

“Stubborn.”

He nods.

She nudges him affectionately. “Wonder who she gets that from.”

Alan scowls and harrumphs.

“She’ll be all right,” Caroline says. *I think,* she does not say.

He nods. “Aye. All she needs is—” Alan pauses, frowning as the list of things that he thinks Gillian needs spirals off into infinity.

“Hmm?”

“Well, for starters, a damn good solicitor.”

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK:

"Seeing Other People," Belle and Sebastian

"She's Losing It," Belle and Sebastian

"I Fought the Law," the Clash
“Congrats,” Ollie says.

Carefully Gillian taps her glass of lager to his. “Thanks.”

It’s Friday night at the White Horse. The beer flows, the men talk, and if 1970s pop rock be the food of drunken aging Yorkshire gits, Gillian thinks, play on.

The White Horse is her pub, her place. Like the music warbling in the background, the pub remains largely unchanged since 1972. The bar top is sticky, the stools and tables cracked and lashed with forty-odd years of idle abuse, arguments, sagging arses, and graffiti, and a photo of England’s 1966 World Cup team is taped near the cash register and faded nearly beyond recognition. Over the years this humble shitty pub has been the scene of many of Gillian’s sexual foibles and triumphs. So she’s known here, but not just for obvious slag-related reasons—Ian, the owner, knows her father and the farmers amongst them do offer a soupcon of respect to a woman who dares run a farm by her lonesome. She may be a slag, but she’s their slag. When she first met Ollie here—she tries not to dwell on how young he was at the time—she thought he was taking the piss with all his dopey come-ons (wanna see inside my van?) and half-assed compliments (you look good for someone your age). But he was persistent, she was horny, and the rest of it fell into the neglected narrative of Gillian Greenwood, local sex legend.

Legend in my own mind at any rate, she thinks, and puts a serious dent in the second lager of the evening.

Ollie grins. “So you’re really not going to jail?”

“Nah.”

“No fine? Nothing?”

“Nope.” Well, there was a bit of community service. She would have to commit to landscape work in a park for few weekends. It sounded fun, except for the part about wearing the little orange vest—but honestly, if the judge thought that making her of all people work outside was somehow a punishment, he was pretty barmy. Gary’s wife, Felicity, was indeed a miracle worker, but Gillian believes that the judge was amused to no end by his first-ever assault-with-a-deadly-scone case and that also weighed in her favor. Suck it, Cheryl. Eat my scone.

“You’re like Velcro.” Ollie gapes in open admiration.

“Think you mean Teflon.”
“Oh. Yeah. Science really does my head in sometimes,” he says. “And what about, um, Robbie?”

She slips a hand between his legs, squeezes the inside of his thigh. That sends him sitting up straight.

“Change the subject, please.” After the Scone Incident Robbie packed a bag and left, kipped with a mate of his for a few weeks. After the deluge of inevitable relief and the anticipation of emancipation, the usual guilt triumphed over these elated states and she presented herself to him, tearful and apologetic. She never imagined, however, that he would be so moved by this show of repentance—which was perhaps not as melodramatic as Henry II as played by Peter O’Toole at Thomas Becket’s tomb, but nonetheless couched at the same level of quivering self-abnegation—that he would give her another chance. She took it as a sign from God. Or Peter O’Toole, maybe. So Robbie is moving back into the farmhouse this weekend and she decided it was time for a reset, a clean slate. One last hurrah with Ollie and then she would be good. She would be a good wife. She owed it to him. He forgave her—he forgave her the Scone Incident, at any rate—so she could forgive him anything and everything.

That’s the plan, Batman. Despite all this incessant regret, however, a business card with the contact information of a divorce lawyer resides in her wallet. After the successful hearing with the judge Felicity took her to some toff lawyerly pub to celebrate their victory; even before the watery, overpriced cocktails arrived Felicity casually pushed the card across the table at her. The man listed on the card was a friend, she said—very good, and very affordable. Just an option, she added reassuringly.

Meanwhile Ollie stares into the silver-flecked mirror above the bar, turns around, and then turns back. “Don’t look now,” he says, “but this crazy-looking bint over there near the jukebox is eyeballing you something fierce.”

Nose still buried in a glass of lager, Gillian also looks into the mirror and is confronted with a reminder of her worst romantic escapade at the White Horse. The bloke’s name was Tim. She met him at the farm supply store where he worked; he flirted with her mightily over a transaction of tine clamps, antifreeze, and a pair of work gloves. He gave her a discount and she offered to buy him a drink. Days later they met up at the White Horse. She thought it had potential to be something other than a series of random shags because he seemed kind, gentle, smart, and genuinely interested in her. He bought her a case of her favorite wine and she even made him tea for Christ’s sake; given that any domestic gesture was usually tantamount to an engagement ring with her, it was a big bloody deal. But after a couple months of all this grand Yorkshire-style romance, it got back to her that he lived with another woman—had been with her for years, in fact. Which explained why she had never stepped foot in his home, and that made her feel like the biggest numpty who ever numptied. While Gillian had never been above sleeping with someone who was married or otherwise coupled, the blatant lies that came with the territory usually proved a breaking point; she didn’t like playing people any more than she liked being played. She ended it with him.

Fred, Gillian’s all-knowing colleague at the store, knew Tim’s common-law wife/partner/whatever and had warned Gillian that she was, to use what he called his “technical term,” quite bonkers.
Gillian knew that on Fred’s elaborate scale of crazed women—elaborate because quite frankly he considered all women crazy, which explained why he was a reluctant celibate—quite bonkers was close to complete nutter and as such a very bad thing. One day when she drove Fred home from his shift, he saw the woman on the street and pointed her out to Gillian. She had wild frizzy hair, a ferociously focused walk, and Gillian had to admit at the very least that this was an individual she would do best to avoid.

"Probably won’t rest till she puts both your tits in a wringer," Fred had said.

And now, by stalking or happenstance, here she is. Of course that was all years ago now—in fact, a good year and a half before her father became reacquainted with Celia. It was over. Gillian ended it and she couldn’t be faulted for that knobhead lying to her. Could she?

She doesn’t want to find out, that’s for damn certain. She scatters crumpled pound notes on the bar and stands. “Let’s go,” she says to Ollie.

Irritated, he wrinkles his nose. “I’m not done.”

She seizes his pint and in one smooth pull effortlessly downs the remainder and slams the empty glass on the bar. “Now you are.”

Two steps into her exit strategy, however, the woman known only to her as “Tim’s quite bonkers common-law wife” blocks her way. Ollie may have found it extraordinarily easy to cockblock someone as useless and nonthreatening as John, but this frizzy-haired, wild-eyed woman is another matter and he remains resolutely behind Gillian. The woman holds a can of beer in her hand and Gillian stares at it because it’s bright red and she swears it says HELL on it, which seems wildly appropriate because all hell is about to break loose, not to mention that the next song on the jukebox—for Ian is in an Elton John mood tonight after he heard that Elton and his husband were adopting Malaysian triplets—is “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road.” The somber piano chords begin, Elton starts to sing, and the woman swings her arm in a wide, quick arc. A combination of fist and beer can smashes Gillian squarely in the face and just as Elton ruefully observes should have stayed on the farm, should have listened to my old man, she goes down in a torrent of pain, exploding beer, and blood.

It’s a good solid blow, admirable that someone so squat and puffy could pack such a punch but that’s the power of crazy for you, and it sends Gillian bowling over a chair and landing under a table. She’s unconscious for nearly three minutes, which is long enough for Eddie to stop by and say hi and she’s not surprised, because whenever violence and pain fucks with her body, time and memory fucks with her mind. He kneels beside her and this time he’s as young and brightly handsome as he was when she first met him. He grins, playfully tsk. Och, Gillian. Can’t take a punch the way ya used to, eh old girl? Well, we’re all getting older now, aren’t we? Oh, except for me. Eternal fucking youth and all that.

Then she’s awake and sitting upright in a chair. Well, someone is holding her in the chair so she doesn’t fall out of it and Danny, who works with Ian behind the bar, is daintily dabbing at her face with a dirty-looking towel as if he’s Monet with a paintbrush and she’s a bloody canvas. “Ooh, Gillian,” he says. “Good thing you have a big nose, kinda took the worst of it, I think, but it don’t
look broken.”

She’s never thought of her nose as particularly big, but apparently it’s a night of various revelations, including the terribly pertinent confirmation that some people sure can hold a fucking grudge.

Everyone yells, everyone talks. She hears Ian bellow, “Get that bitch outta here!” At first she thinks he’s talking about her, then happily realizes they are booting out Tim’s quite bonkers common-law wife. Someone is moaning “Jesus Christ” over and over and she realizes it’s Ollie and seriously, if anyone should be calling upon a higher power, it should be her. Someone puts ice on her face wrapped in a towel and the sharp cold makes her gasp. Blood limns her mouth. Someone else says something about calling the police but Ian shuts it down; he hates coppers, in fact half-threatened to ban Gillian from the pub simply because she married one. Admittedly it is a compelling argument for divorce.

Everything moves too quickly, everything is too loud. She closes her eyes. This time she goes away to a moment of rare peace. Driving to Scammonden Reservoir with her best mate from school, bare feet sticking out the car window, bitter tip of a joint on her tongue. The kind of brilliant hot day where you don’t mind that you’re sticky with sweat and where the sun blinds and burns in equal measure and scalds away layers of old self. Bluebells drooped along the pathways and the water they swam in was as warm as the shit ale they drank. Hours later the splendor of dusk laid shadows over everything, outlining darker dimension and richer detail to the leaves and trees, and the silent water tempted her with deeper fathoms. As her friend napped she caught the petal of a plucked bluebell in the interstice between thumb and forefinger and found it softer than the translucent page of an old book, softer than a woman’s skin and she wished to God she didn’t know that last bit but that’s the way knowledge is. You cannot unlearn, you cannot untaste, you cannot undo the fucking knots in your throat and your heart for as long as you live. You cannot.

When she returns to the present time, Ollie is patting her cheeks in a particularly irritating way. They are in his van outside the White Horse. The engine idles and his handsome, anxious face is bathed in the phosphorescent glow of the dashboard.

“You awake?” he asks.

“Fuck off” is, of course, the first thing out of her mouth.

He shakes his head. “Yep, same old Gillian.”

She licks her lips, tastes blood. “That’s the fucking problem, innit it?”

“Ian says I got to take you to A&E, they got to check your head. Make sure you don’t have concussion or something serious like that.”

“No.”
He scowls. “Ian says if you don’t behave I’m to call him and then he’s gonna call your dad.”

Defeated, she slumps in her seat. He puts the van into gear and they roll on over darkened roads that go on forever, the traffic lines on the road hiccup and break apart at comforting and recognizable intervals as if somehow documenting the ebb and flow of pain in her head and face. She thinks of bluebells.

Silence is interminable to Ollie. “Do you want me to call him? Robbie, I mean.”

“No.”

“No?”

“The fuck did I just say? No.”

“Why not?”

“Why do you need to know?”

“Just making conversation, trying to help.”

She stares at the road. When it gets blurry she panics. No need. Not concussion, just tears. A different kind of head trauma.

Somehow he manages to stay quiet for five minutes. Then: “Too bad we didn’t get to have it off. I’m a little, uh, backed up, if you know what I mean. Haven’t had a shag in nearly a week.”

“Very tragic.”

“You don’t think you could—I mean, just a lend a hand, maybe?”

At this point in the evening any type of facial expression makes Gillian’s head buzz like the old off-the-air sound the telly made when she was a kid. So while she cannot muster an appropriate look of incredulous outrage, she tries her best to convey said emotion with the considerable power of her glare. Her shirt and hoodie are splattered with blood, she reeks of lager, and Christ knows what movie monster she most resembles. She wonders, briefly, if she should be flattered that he still wants her—or her hand—in such a condition, but then reminds herself that sex is as mundane to Ollie as a cuppa and that he’s always a hair’s breadth away from plowing his dick into anyone or anything, really.

There is nothing left to do but to go full Caroline Elliot on him. “If you don’t shut the fuck up right
now,” she says calmly, “I will rip off your cock and beat you over the head with it until you are dead.” Perhaps a bit more graphic than anything Caroline might say, but the icily murderous impact of the threat is definitely in the spirit of the magnificent Head Bitch.

The rest of the way, he sulks.

At the entrance of the A&E she tells him to go home. He makes a half-hearted protest, saying she should not be left alone. This time she threatens to skewer his bollocks and cook them on a grill. He leaves. With only minor wobbliness she walks in on her own. Despite the fact that it’s a Friday night in Yorkshire, land of the perpetually drunk, violent, and high, the A&E is not terribly busy. A distracted nurse gives her forms to fill out. Sitting in the waiting room gives her full confirmation of how wretched she looks: Across from her are a tired young woman coddling a crying infant and an elderly overweight man, and both stare at her with undisguised horror. Fresh blood trickles from her nose and a thin drop scrawls across the form like a signature.

Apparently someone must have decided that she’s too scary for the waiting area, so within minutes she’s ushered into an examination room. Nearly half an hour later a nurse shows up, flashes a light in her eyes, asks her questions: Name, age, what year is it, who is the PM? Gillian thinks of answering Churchill to the last one but decides that now is not the time for cheekiness because it might bring about a stay in a mental ward. The nurse cleans up her face, puts a plaster across her nose, and leaves. Time passes. The nurse returns with a doctor, who is young, handsome, Indian, and possessing an East End accent. He’s flashes the light in her eyes again, calls her Mrs. Greenwood, talks about filing a police report. She tells him she doesn’t know who hit her and doesn’t want to bother with that. He gives a thin-lipped look of disapproval, but does not pursue it. Instead he orders an x-ray and a CT scan to rule out head trauma.

There was a time when I was in a hurry as you are
I was like you—

I cannot be hearing Olivia Newton-John, she thinks.

As he scribbles down notes in a chart, she catches her reflection in a mirror over the sink: Black eye, gauze stuffed up one nostril, a huge honking plaster crookedly spanning her swollen nose.


The doctor wheels away from her to toss a scrap of bloody gauze in the bin.

“Was that a show on telly? That American show, on HBO?”

Now I don’t mean to make you frown
No, I just want you to slow down—

“No. Hey, Doctor, um—”
“Patel. Doctor Patel.”

“Yeah. Can I ask you something?” Her voice wavers.

He puts on a concerned doctor face. “Of course.”

“Are you—hearing Olivia Newton-John?”

“Yes, Mrs. Greenwood,” he sighs. “I’m afraid I am.” He pulls off rubber gloves and bins them. “Denise must be on shift tonight. She always changes the music to this, this stuff from the seventies!”

“Yorkshire is permanently stuck in the seventies,” she tells him.

“You’re telling me! God, I can’t wait until my internship is over and I can get back to London.”

As Olivia Newton John solicitously inquires after Gillian’s mellowness, this state is all but guaranteed when Dr. Patel gives her a rather large dose of oxycodone. When the requisite scans are done she finds herself back in the waiting room and her mind is as fluffy as a dandelion head, with various inconsequential seeds of thought detaching and meandering through space and time. She wants ice cream. Is there an ice cream museum? There must be. Did she really proposition the butch-looking x-ray technician? Where is my hoodie? Oh wait, I’ve got it on. She sinks down into the chair, pulls the hood over her head, and the world grows dark and soft and lush as she thinks of kittens.

Then it gets weird. So fucking weird. Someone sits beside her, and that someone looks like Caroline. It cannot be Caroline because no middle-aged woman could possibly look this good at nearly two o’clock in the morning under fluorescent hospital lighting. It must be a hallucination, an apparition spurred on by the drugs: Foxy-Oxy Caroline. The real Caroline is either in Harrogate cocooned and snoring in 400-thread-count bed sheets whilst dreaming of spreadsheets and chemical formulas or she’s at that posh bitch’s house having mindblowing, multiorgasmic sex on 800-thread-count organic bed sheets.

The apparition resembling Caroline gently pushes the hood off Gillian’s head. To make matters worse the hospital is now spewing out Tony Orlando and Dawn, and not just any Tony Orlando and Dawn song, but something that soppily harkens to the beauty of this woman she loves:

The stars won’t come out
If they know that you’re about
’Cause they couldn’t match the glow of your eyes

Tony Orlando knows what’s going down. Tony Orlando knows her soul. Which, if she were in a more rational frame of mind, would disturb her greatly.
Then Foxy-Oxy Caroline rests a gentle hand on her thigh. Gillian stares at it. The sexy apparition speaks. Initially Gillian resists focusing on the content of what is being said because what if it’s backwards Latin and this woman is really a devil and she’ll burst into flames and transmogrify into Eddie, who’s come back from the dead to drag Gillian down to hell like the statue did to that guy in that stupid opera? And why were there statues in hell anyway?

“—do you understand? Gillian? Oh God, do you have a concussion? Have you seen a doctor yet?” Caroline halts the interrogation and surrenders to her usual blunter instincts. “I mean, Christ, you look like complete and utter shit.”

Profoundly relieved, and even though every muscle in her face aches, Gillian smiles crookedly. “Oh bless, it is really you.” Tony Orlando agrees: Caroline! We could make it together! The further from here, girl, the better! But wait—he’s not really singing “Caroline,” so fuck him anyway. I am done with you, Tony Orlando, Gillian declares.

The Very Real, Not-a-Hallucination Caroline irritably crinkles her nose. “Who the hell did you think I was? Mother Teresa? All right, I’m going to find out what’s going on, and when I come back perhaps you can manage telling me why that knobhead Ollie has my mobile number.” With the singular intent of a lioness on the African plain, Caroline is on the move and seeks out the weakest member of the pack—in this case a young but slow-moving nurse who blinks apprehensively as Caroline assaults her with questions while gesticulating authoritatively in Gillian’s general direction.

Gillian knows exactly how Ollie obtained this information: At her wedding reception. With the party in full swing and while she contemplated the various possible directions her life could take as represented in a grim multiple choice—(1) file for divorce first thing in the morning, (2) take both tickets to Spain and never return, or (3) fling herself off a cliff—her son had tipsily collaborated in an ingenious lie with Lawrence whereupon they convinced the quite inebriated Ollie that Caroline had once been the drummer for the Bangles and despite being a has-been for twenty-odd years still possessed valuable connections in the music business that could bring great and lasting success to the terrible, terrible Oasis/Blur cover band that he was part of and that was called, incredibly and unfortunately, Duck Kayak. Thus the mobile number of a melancholy middle-aged lesbian enduring one of the worst traumas of her life was placed in the hands a complete and utter plonker. Fortunately Ollie was too fraudulently star-struck to ever call and once she started having it off with him again, he had gushed excitedly about how Gillian was “sort of famous ’cause you’re related to the Bangles’ drummer”—well, the jig was up then and it was left to her to disabuse him of this tragic drunken tale. Obviously he never deleted the number from his mobile; perhaps, Gillian cruelly speculated at the time, he didn’t know how.

Minutes later Caroline returns with the harried Dr. Patel in tow. The doctor clutches a manila folder of scans. Everything looks normal. No signs of swelling or bleeding. She should go home and rest, get some sleep, have someone check on her every few hours. She’s very lucky, he says, and then gently chastises her for not telling him that she’s suffered a concussion before—there was evidence of previous trauma on the scans, and that always puts one at risk for a repeat episode. With his unwavering patience and pretty dark eyes he waits, expecting his silent shaming will extract a tearful confession that will nonetheless prove entirely useless because the perpetrator of the previous injury was long dead.
Caroline folds her arms and glances elsewhere.

“Yeah,” Gillian says. “Well.” Shakily she stands, grateful for the intervention of Caroline’s strong, supportive hand circling her bicep. “First rule of fight club, doc—”

With a sigh, the doctor rises as well. “Everybody makes the *Fight Club* joke, Mrs. Greenwood.” He shakes her hand. “Good night and take care of yourself. Please call if you experience any of the symptoms I mentioned to you previously.”

She doesn’t remember the symptoms. As he walks away, Caroline gently steers her toward the nurses’ station to finish up the discharge process. “Guess he told you, Mrs. Greenwood.”

“Piss off, Mrs. Elliot.”

“Be nice, I’m driving, plus I have your oxy pills.”

“I’m trying, but I think the drugs are wearing off already.”

Afterwards Gillian sits wearily in the Jeep Cherokee and stares at the quasi-nuclear glow of the hospital. When Caroline slides in the driver’s side, she jumps. She still cannot believe that Caroline is here, let alone that this surreal night has even happened, and a jumble of thoughts and words desperate for articulation claw through her guts and catch in her throat.

Caroline stares through the windshield. “Shit. I left my jacket in there. Stay put, I’ll be back.”

The car door closes behind Caroline and Gillian watches her stride back toward the A&E entrance. She notices that Caroline is wearing trainers, blue and white Asics; she thinks she’s never seen Caroline wear anything other than heels or primly feminine flats before. Maybe boots, once or twice? Well, one does not throw on one’s fancy fuck-me pumps to fetch one’s dissolute stepsister from the bloody hospital in the middle of the night. Trainers and jeans and a wrinkled shirt are obviously appropriate A&E attire—and with Eddie-like ferocity the realization hits Gillian that this is probably the first time Caroline’s been in or near hospital since Kate died and it’s probably triggering all sorts of shit, all kinds of feelings, within her. And it’s all Gillian’s fucking fault.

Her head swoons against the dashboard with a painful thump, causing a chain reaction of agony that rolls through her and terminates in a dry heave as a dull, insensate nausea racks her entire system. She bursts into tears.

Then the car door opens, the cool night air rolls in, and the bewildered Caroline, clutching an anorak that she borrowed from Greg—and if Gillian were paying attention she would weep fresh tears for the sheer sorrow of glorious Caroline clad in such a thing—stands helpless and apparently too afraid to get in a vehicle with a pathetic sobbing woman. “Gillian? What’s wrong?”
She’s crying uncontrollably. She cannot remember the last time that she has cried this hard. And God, everything hurts. She blubbers, chokes on tears, and finally manages to say, “I’m such a fucking idiot.”

Caroline tosses the jacket in the back, sits behind the wheel, and closes the door. “Gillian,” she says softly, and Gillian imagines she speaks this way when chastising a beloved but thick student. She places her hand on Gillian’s back.

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m a fucking idiot—I’m sorry, I’m sorry, dragging you out here in the middle of the night—you shouldn’t be here, it shouldn’t be you here, it’s so fucking stupid, I fuck everything up all the time and I disappoint everyone and I can’t stop doing it and I just keep hurting everyone over and over and over—and I—I—” I am too aware of your kindness and your hand between my shoulder blades and I remember too well the first time you touched me, really touched me, that night oh God that night, your hand so warm curled on my neck, fitting so sweet and snug there like wine or poetry on the tongue and then you pretended it meant nothing when it meant everything, it meant everything to me. She stops, gulps down air, cannot say all this, cannot say it ever. Her face is damp against the pebbled grain of the dashboard and fuck it all, her apparently huge nose hurts.

But Caroline gently prompts her to continue: “What?”

“I—I’m getting snot all over your dash,” she wails. The tears begin anew.

“Oh.” Caroline says. “Who cares? Flora has projectile-vomited on that dash countless times.”

Snuffling, Gillian recoils from the dash.

“Actually, I’m just kidding. Sorry.”

Gillian stares at her through a wash of tears.

Caroline smiles nervously and brushes hair away from Gillian’s face. In an accidental-on-purpose cheek caress, she blots away random tears with her thumb. It feels so good, so good that Gillian struggles not to close her eyes, signaling rapture—a feeling that she cannot admit, a state that Caroline does not want to witness.

“Thought we needed a bit of levity,” Caroline says.

It baffles her to no end, that this woman knows when and how to break her moods. Despite the pain Gillian returns the smile, the rictus of a broken marionette. “S’all right.”
“Here.” Caroline torques awkwardly to fetch her purse from the back seat. “You need a tissue. Well, a lot of tissues, actually.” She fumbles in her purse and thrusts something white and wrinkly at Gillian.

Gillian swipes at her face with it, only to realize it’s damp and slimy and reeks of cucumber. “What is this?” she mumbles.

Caroline squints at it. “Oh, shit. I’m sorry. I gave you a baby wipe.”

Gillian blinks at it.

“It’s organic.”

“Smells like a vegetarian wiped his arse with it.”

Caroline laughs, gives her proper tissues. Gillian offers another shaky ruined smile. Caroline stares at her rather intently and Gillian looks away all too quickly, fearing scrutiny and feigning interest in the modernist blood spatter along her chest as she swipes at her face with tissues. “Thank you. For coming to get me.”

“Anytime,” Caroline says. She seems dead serious and utterly lovely, then clears her throat and buckles herself into the seat.

“Really?” Gillian realizes how dry her mouth is, how her voice rasps and scrapes, how some emotion tries to break the chrysalis of night.

“Really,” Caroline says. It must be the lighting in the parking lot—a trick of shadows and hope—that makes Caroline look so bashful, as if she had just confessed some long-simmering feeling. The expression is fleeting, however, as she turns the ignition and the Jeep purrs into life. “Look, I really don’t fancy driving you all the way to Halifax at this time of night. How about you spend the night at mine. You can sleep in Will’s room.”

“Yeah. All right.”

They drive in silence for a while. The highway leading to Harrogate beckons, but it hurts to look at the yellow-pink rancid candy glow of the highway lights. Gillian sinks deeper into the seat and closes her eyes.

“Ollie was not exactly forthcoming with details on this evening’s fascinating events.” Caroline turns onto the highway. “So are you going to tell me what happened?”

“Forget it, Jake. It’s Chinatown.”
As Caroline groans at yet another film allusion bounding over her beautiful head, Gillian smiles again and falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK:

“Goodbye, Yellow Brick Road,” Elton John
“Have You Never Been Mellow?” Olivia Newton-John
“Candida,” Tony Orlando and Dawn You guys, this clip is simply extraordinary because it features Tony Orlando WITHOUT HIS MOUSTACHE!
“A History of Lovers,” Iron & Wine
**float like a butterfly, sting like Patrick Macnee**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Hey, Rocky!”

Gillian opens her eyes.

Lawrence looms over her. He tosses a folded fluffy towel on her stomach. “Time to hit the showers.”

It’s the third time this morning that Gillian has been awakened from her accommodations on Caroline’s sofa. The moment she arrived at the house last night, and before her ever-dutiful hostess could march her upstairs to William’s room, she crashed on the couch like a shipwreck survivor hitting the beach and fell asleep to the lullaby of Caroline proclaiming *you’re going to be really uncomfortable there, you twat* and then, with a resigned sigh, throwing a heavy, sweet-smelling quilt over her.

A few hours later, right around daybreak, Caroline roused her to a repast of tea and painkillers, *just making sure you’re not dead.* If Gillian was dead she was certainly in heaven, because Caroline wore lovely baby blue silk pajamas and if she were feeling anywhere close to 100% she would have run her hands all over the silk-clad munificence before her, divested Caroline of those beautiful bothersome clothes, and they would have made love with such thorough and exhausting passion that any thoughts of that ridiculous posh hippie bitch—despite photographic evidence to the contrary, Gillian imagines that in the off hours Sacha dresses like Stevie Nicks under the influence of a good bit of hash and white wine spritzers—would be quickly discarded to some eternal mental rubbish bin. Instead she endured a sleepy rambling lecture on opioids, hydration, and constipation, and settled for quietly worshiping the suggestive drape of the pajama top over Caroline’s breasts before the oxy made her conk out again for a couple hours.

Then she dreamed she was raising llamas.

The next time she awoke she was eye-level with Flora, who gnawed on something resembling a piece of banana as she wobbled unsteadily on chubby toddler legs, and with the million-dollar question writ large across her tiny expressive face: Who *is* this vaguely familiar, bruised and bloodied monster on the couch? When Gillian cleared her throat and gently croaked her name, Flora made a rather piercing banshee-like squeal of pleasurable terror and careened away as fast as those stumpy little legs could carry her. She heard Greg laugh and coo soothingly, a smattering of baby talk, and she was out again.

Now it’s Lawrence. In her current drained, damaged, and drugged state, he proves the ultimate test of her mental fortitude. He strikes a boxing pose and skips around in some spastic approximation of a professional fighter.

“Stop moving,” Gillian says, and the growly, sleep-rough *don’t-fuck-with-me* tone of her voice mercifully brings him to standstill.

Unfortunately, he continues to jape: “Hey, Rocky! I coulda been a contender!”

Grunting, she sits up, rubs her stiff neck. “You’re mixing up two different movies there.” Like mother, like son, she realizes.

He tries again: “Rocky, watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat!”
“And now cartoons.”

“Did you win the fight at least? I mean, that’s a lot of blood.” He nods at her t-shirt—Jackson Pollock working solely in the medium of red.

“Nope.”

“Ah, sorry. I’d have bet on you, though!”

Gillian thinks this may have been the nicest thing he’s ever said to her. She shrugs, holds up the towel she’s clutching. “So I’ve been ordered to shower.”

“Mum says you smell like hospital, cheap lager, and despair.” He cackles. “And you can borrow some clothes after you clean up—well, a shirt anyway, at least. Mum says she’ll wash that one for you. She pulled out some of Will’s old things and put them on the bed in his room for you to look at. Even, get this, some of his lovely knickers too! Like you would really want to wear those. She’s really demented sometimes, I think she’s got like, what do you call it, ‘gender dysfunction’? Makes a lot of sense when you think about it. Anyway. I was like ‘disgusting, plus also those are way too frilly for Gillian’—ha! Then she was like, ‘drunkards can’t be choosers’ and I was like, ‘d’ya think she really wants any part of her anatomy close to something that contained Will’s bollocks?’ Then she told me to piss off and get you up.”

Gillian wonders if these past few years she’s been wrong in attributing Lawrence’s overall cuntyness to his father alone. “Thanks for the update.”

“All right, Rocky, I’ve got to shove off. Don’t throw in the towel, at least not until you’re done with it!”

“You’re hilarious.”

“Really?”

“Not really.”

“No one gets my humor.” Lawrence shakes his head sadly and adjusts a strap on his backpack. “I’ll leave you with the first rule of fight club—” He pauses, raises a finger.

Gillian observes the hamster wheel in his brain spinning away. “Well?”

“Shit. Forgot.”

“Off you go, then,” she says.

“Right, right.”

After he leaves, Gillian sits on the sofa and visually parcels out a soothing blank space on the wall, perfect for staring. “Everybody makes the Fight Club joke,” she says to the empty room. The house is quiet—too quiet, indicating both the lack of a certain small child and her chatty caregiver. Probably a play date; recently, Caroline had wryly remarked that Flora had more of a social life than she did. Obviously Alan and Celia have not stormed the house, meaning that Caroline has somehow kept them in the dark on last night’s incident. Gillian glances at her cracked mobile sitting on a side table. She doesn’t have to pick it up to know the battery’s dead, because it’s been silent all night long.

The calm before the storm. She wishes she could sit on this couch all bloody day, and yet at the
same time wants to crawl out of the house without a word and go—anywhere, nowhere. Some place where she would not be found. For the moment she cannot bear the thought of facing Caroline. Or anyone, really. Apparently last night’s snotty crying jag did not completely purge her of a lifetime of shame and inadequacy. Nibbling her fingernails, she contemplates escape. First thing, she needs to fetch the Land Rover, which, she hopes, remains parked near the pub. If she hurries she might get home in time before Robbie’s anticipated yet dubiously triumphant homecoming; he was supposed to arrive late this afternoon, before his evening shift. But what does it all fucking matter anyway? He will take one look at her face and suss it all out and he will be angry, they will argue, he will sulk, she will apologize, she will not care. When did you ever care? What have you felt for him over the years, other than pity? He seemed so desperate to have you, always. Why else did you agree to go off with him that time, to the cricket pavilion? You thought, why not, why not, he’s nice, maybe I will feel something—maybe you have been waiting over thirty years to feel something you are never going to feel.

Allowing such thoughts free, uncensored rein—it must be drugs, it must be exhaustion—sends her lurching forward with her head nearly between her knees in anticipation of vomiting. That would be a fine thing, upchucking all over Caroline’s lovely carpet, but fortunately last night’s combo of kebab and beer does not make an appearance. She swallows frantically, inhales deeply—and smells coffee. It is no small exaggeration to state that the slightest whiff of this potent elixir—she knows damn well how good Caroline’s coffee is—commences the lengthy process of regenerating every cell in her body. Well, all right, Gillian admits, it is a huge, ridiculous exaggeration. But just imagine how good it will taste, how good it will make you feel. Jesus, is that all it takes to bring you back from a vomit-coated mini-fucking nervous breakdown, you pathetic pillock? She plucks at the fluffy towel, sighs, and gets up.

After showering she stands in the bathroom, wrapped in the luxurious towel, bracing herself as she cuts a swath of clarity through the condensation on the bathroom mirror with the edge of her hand. Surprisingly, she looks almost human again: The swelling around her nose is drastically diminished. But the dark, purple-black crescent remains hanging under her left eye like a sad, surreal moon and the gash across her nose is composed in varying shades of red, jaggedly outlined in seeping crimson, partially scabbed over in scarlet and ruby and mahogany. She needs a new plaster for the cut, but hesitates briefly before violating that peculiar, stringent rule of contemporary etiquette: Do not look into someone else’s medicine cabinet. She may be a slag and a fuck-up and a killer, but she has to draw the line somewhere. Oh, fuck it.

The cabinet is shockingly packed to the gills with nearly empty perfume bottles, ancient aftershave, abandoned shampoos and leaky nail polish bottles and blush and antiseptic tubes crumpled with years of overuse, and one final item prompting Gillian to snort with amusement: a pristine, dusty foil of birth control pills. It is pure Caroline, a complicated and surprising mess behind a beautiful shining façade; yet despite the impressive muddle, if you’re patient, there are rich and surprising resources to be discovered behind the uncompromising exterior. Gillian unearths a dented tin of plasters. When she’s dry and dressed, clad in the sartorial splendor of an old black t-shirt that announces I AM THE STIG and also memorializes William’s brief fascination with Top Gear, she finally works up the courage to venture down into the queen’s lair.

Caroline is alone in the kitchen, leaning against the counter with a stupid Oxford mug in one hand and her mobile in another. She frowns at the mobile. She wears a white blouse over a white tank, dark jeans, and is barefoot—consummate, casual MILF perfection, as if she has just stepped out of some glossy, twatty posh women’s mag article about Having it All in Your 40s. Turn the page of the imaginary magazine, Gillian thinks, and there’d be me in an ad for substance abuse or herpes treatment.
The lady of the house senses she is not alone, lowers the mobile, and offers her unexpected houseguest such a genuine, unencumbered smile that Gillian starts thinking in a very melodramatic fashion that like a tubercular heroine in an opera or an overstimulated maiden in eighteenth-century novel, she will surely die if she endures any more undeserved kindness this day.

“Morning, Rocky!” Caroline says.

Kindness is intolerable, childish ribbing is acceptable. Gillian breaks into a grin. “Whose idea was that?”

“Great minds, you know. A rare mother-son symbiosis. Sit down. Shouldn’t even bother asking, but—coffee?”

Grateful, Gillian nods, sits, and watches black gold rush into a cup from a French press.

“We even have a tagline for you,” Caroline says. “‘Float like a butterfly, sting like Patrick Macnee.’”

It’s an admirable collaborative creativity. “Old Patrick Macnee or Avengers-era Patrick Macnee?”

“Dead Patrick Macnee. How do you feel?”

“Like someone hit me in the face with a beer can. Oh wait, someone did hit me in the face with a beer can.” Then and there Gillian decides that the title of her eighteenth-century novel shall be The Slag of Halifax and she will be the first tragic fucking heroine in the history of literature to die of injuries sustained by beer can.

“So now I’m finally getting bits and pieces of what happened. Checked your mobile yet?”

“Dead as Patrick Macnee.”

“You sound pretty pleased at that.”

“Not keen on everyone having a go at me from now until the end of time.” Gillian shrugs nervously. “Well. Except for you.”

Caroline smirks. “You’re keen for me to have a go at you?”

“What? No, no,” she stammers. “I mean, you’re the only one who hasn’t, I mean, I assume you’re not going to, but, uh—”

“I’m not going to have a go at you. Relax.” Caroline sits and vigorously rubs her hands together. “But shall I catch you up to speed on everything now? I feel a bit like your personal assistant, bringing you coffee, telling you everything you should know as your day begins—God, I feel so competent! I wonder if Beverly is this satisfied in her work. Probably not. But then she never complains. I should probably talk to her about—”

“Caz.”

“Oh, right, we’re talking about your thing.” Caroline gulps coffee. “First: Your father and my mother know nothing.”

“Didn’t we establish that a long time ago?”

“They are wonderfully, consistently obtuse, aren’t they? At any rate, your dad is off on yet another ramble with Harry. Is he in training for the geriatric Olympics or something?”
“Male bonding,” Gillian replies. “He worries about Harry.”

“No wonder Mum is sitting over there sulking. Anyway, Raff showed up at the farm this morning with Calamity. Naturally when he didn’t find you there he went into a bit of a panic. He called Robbie, of course, and Robbie had no idea where you were. Then Raff called me. I told him you’d been in a, ah, minor accident but that you were here and you were fine—gave him no details, leaving that to you. Then Robbie called. Repeatedly.” Caroline’s expression flatlines into dour martyrdom.

Gillian sighs. Robbie’s particular combination of tenacity and temper meant that he typically plowed through the world like a bulldog dragged along by the thinnest scent of the tiniest scrap of meaty outrage, and God help anything or anyone in his way as he pursued his conception of the proper course of action.

“It’s not your fault he’s a pain in the ass,” Caroline says. “He talked to the bloke who tends bar at your pub—Donny? Danny?—and found out what happened. Since then he’s called me three times, bitching about everything from you not answering your mobile to not knowing if you were OK and how awful and unfair and horrible that was, and then asking why you called me instead of him, blah blah blah, don’t worry, I didn’t tell him that your Cheeseman Casanova called me, although he knows you were with Ollie—your bartender friend spilled the beans on that, not me. He wanted to come over and bring you home, but I told him I would drive you over when you’re ready—and only when you’re ready. I don’t feel like doing domestic drama on my day off, even if it’s not my own.”

“Thanks.” Gillian cannot help herself: “‘Cheeseman Casanova’? Seriously?”

“Yeah, sorry. Sacha has this mania for nicknames. I think it’s rubbing off on me.”

At the unfortunately suggestive phraseology, Gillian’s filthy, jealous mind ventures into illicit territory. She folds her arms and commands herself not to pout even though she feels her lips plumping into said expression. “Hate to think what you lot call me then.”

Caroline gives her that patented, overpolite smile. “Fritatta?”

The pout curls into a scowl. “You two call me ‘frittata’? Is that Italian for ‘slapper’?”

“No, knobhead. It’s food. It’s like an omelet except you stick in the oven. I’m asking if you’d like some.”

“Why would anyone do that to a perfectly good omelet?” Gillian retorts. Figures, must be some stupid fancy Italian thing that Caroline’s picked up from Sacha, because she keeps mentioning how Sacha is such a good cook and made spaghetti carbonara for her recently. It’s only a matter of time before Sacha wins a Nobel Prize for cunnilingus or becomes famous for rescuing a hundred puppies from a burning building.

“It’s good, trust me—I made it.”

Jealousy barely in check, Gillian nonetheless realizes she’s being a pretty lousy and ungrateful guest. “Yeah. Sorry. That sounds great. Thanks.”

It is good, all cheesy and restorative, and she plows through two pieces as Caroline watches with amused pleasure, chin propped in hand. “Are you finally going to tell me what happened last night?”

“Thought you said Robbie told you.”
“All he said was that you were attacked by a mad bitch.”

“All about the size of it.” Through several mouthfuls of eggs, cheese, and tomato, Gillian relays a Cliff Notes version of Chapter 80 of *A Slag in Halifax*: “In which our heroine is easily duped by a farm store salesclerk and a dreadful hash of consequences are served.” During her narrative Gillian admires the fine struggle of self-control that Caroline displays in various attempts to rein in her facial expressions. It’s a vastly entertaining panoply of micro-emotion from *okay. I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt to I’m not judging you, honest and finally yes, I am totally judging you, wow you have epic shit taste in men, even worse than me and look who I was married to, Gillian.*

In the end, however, whether it’s due to lingering affection or family loyalty, Caroline remains firmly on her side and casts disgusted final judgment on the mad beer-can pugilist: “God. How pathetic. Talk about holding a grudge.”

Gillian laughs mirthlessly. “Thought the exact same thing after she walloped me, when I was on floor with blood all over.”

Caroline shakes her head. “You’re really lucky, you know. You could’ve been badly hurt, could’ve had a serious concussion—and, well, if she’d hit you with a bottle, the bottle could’ve broken, cut an artery, you would’ve bled out in a matter of minutes. You would have been dead.” In a gesture of surrender, she throws up her arms. “Completely dead.”

With a sigh, Gillian pushes away her empty plate. “Would’ve saved you a trip to A&E then.”

“Don’t be funny.” If Gillian is not mistaken—and she could be absolutely off, her senses and emotions are so heightened and out of whack not only about this woman but also *everything, everything, everything*—Caroline is now looking at her with a particularly merciless yet reassuring, clear-eyed affection. “What are you going to do now?”

Gillian slouches forward, sinking against the table and resting her head on her folded arms. Even Caroline’s bloody table is comfortable. “About what?”

“About everything.”

“Big question.”

“You’re a big girl, Gillian. You can handle the grown-up questions.”

“You mean about Robbie.”

“For a start, let’s say.”

Gillian shifts and cups the back of her neck with both hands. “Let him forgive me. The way he always does,” she whispers. Except that he will never forgive her the one thing that matters most. For a long, quiet moment she stares into the woodgrain of the table, until the crisp lines blur into parallel shadows. She anticipates that Caroline is gearing up for a lecture, a pep talk, or some sort of well-meaning diatribe, or who knows, maybe she’ll go off on another caution about the side effects of oxycodone.

“There might come a time,” Caroline replies gently, “when he won’t forgive.”

Surprised, Gillian looks up at her. Behold, the Kinder, Gentler Caroline™: Battered and softened by grief, rescued by the love of a good woman who apparently makes frittatas and fancy spaghetti. “You think I’m wrong. You think I should just end it?”

Caroline shakes her head. “I’m done with telling you what to do.”
“Because I never listen.”

“Yeah, you never listen, but that’s not the point. I’m not—maybe I’m not the best person to give advice on relationships.” She rises and starts corralling together this morning’s breakfast plates and bowls for the dishwasher.

Like a beggar, Gillian trails behind her with a dirty, empty plate. “If you’re not gonna give me useless advice, who will?”


“I’d rather ask Ally Sheedy. Or Judd Nelson—he’s probably got time on his hands.”

Caroline pointedly ignores another film reference. “I don’t know what to tell you. I’m trying to be more, you know, relaxed and easygoing about things, go with the flow, take things as they come —”

Gillian laughs.

“What?”

“Could you sound any more clichéd?”

“I’m not clichéd!” Caroline’s sputter of outrage elides into a giggle.

“Didn’t say you were clichéd, just all the drivel coming out of your mouth right now—I mean, how many more can you come up with?”

“One day at a time!” Caroline starts rattling them off. “Chillax! Chill out! Take it easy! Kick up your feet!”

This prompts a bout of laughter between them. “Oh God, stop,” Gillian begs between guffaws. But Caroline has saved the worst for last: “Sit back and smell the roses!”

“Oh, fuck that one. Always makes me think of funerals. Like you’re just lying around dead smelling flowers or some such.”

“Gillian dear, you’re so negative,” Caroline mocks in falsetto imitation of her mother. She shuts the dishwasher, hits a button, and it whirs to life. As the laughter fades and a comfortable silence falls between them, Caroline goes for more coffee. She splits the remainder of the French press between their two mugs. Gillian wonders if there exists a mug that has Oxford Bitch written on a hundred times in various obnoxious typefaces. It would be a great gift. Somebody needs to get on that shit. Then she wonders how Caroline can look so inexpressibly beautiful doing something as mundane as leaning against a kitchen counter drinking coffee.

“Look, I will say one thing, all right?” Caroline begins.

Gillian knocks back the last of her coffee and sighs affectionately. “Knew you couldn’t keep your gob shut.”

“Just let yourself be happy, you know?”

“More fucking clichés.”
“No. Listen. You don’t—you always do for others and never for yourself. You’re not going to make it all up, you’re not going to atone for what happened with Eddie by making yourself miserable. Even if you think there is atonement to be gained, well, if you go about it by just doing things to punish yourself, that’s not the way. You’ll never get there that way.”

“Atonement,” Gillian says. The word reverberates with the fullness of a bell.

Caroline looks right through her in such a way that she trembles.

“Yes,” Caroline says. “That’s what you tried to do by marrying Robbie. I know that. You once talked about penance. But you see, you’re trying to make right something that is impossible to change now, and seeking pardon from someone who has no right to grant it to you.”

In all their previous conversations Gillian has never articulated this, at least not very well. She thought Caroline would not understand, would never understand, but she does. And she does not know how the hell that happened, when this emotional osmosis occurred between them. It’s time and pain and persistence scraping away layers: trailer trash and idiot whore, stepsister and secret lover, and now what? As much as she has longed to be known, to be understood, to be forgiven, it terrifies her that someone—in particular, this woman—is so close to encompassing all this, her very essence held in unknowing hands.

“I don’t think there’s anything to atone for. The best thing you could possibly do, you’ve already done it: You raised a good son. You’ve given him a good life—one where he wouldn’t be knocked around by his father. You know that would have been inevitable. You know that. So maybe you just—move on now. Give yourself a good life. Do good things. I think that would get you closer to—I don’t know, acceptance or a state of grace than anything else.”

Caroline squeezes her forearm; a thumb accidentally presses into the radial nerve and sends an agonizingly joyful jolt through Gillian and a blush tickles her ears. Furious that her body would rebel in such childish fashion, she stares at the floor. She hasn’t blushed in years, not since the early days with Eddie, not since—no, don’t think about that. She notices her socks are mismatched. Can’t manage to dress properly, no wonder you can’t manage your own emotions.

“Just like that, eh?” she whispers.

“Yeah. No.” Caroline says ruefully. “It’s not that easy.” Her touch skims Gillian’s arm until her fingers lightly clasp Gillian’s wrist as reassuringly light and treasured as a beloved bracelet, and gives it a playful shake.

It’s sweetly, innocently affectionate; the way they used to touch each other. Gillian misses that. She also misses the rest of it: the thrill of secrecy, the sense of that exclusive alliance against everyone, the intoxications of a greater kind of intimacy. Months ago she had come damned close to saying something to Caroline. To what end, she was unsure. She was perpetually unsure. But for what seemed like a hundred times over the course over those months she had mulled over what to say, how to say it. A melodramatic confession of love would not do. Given the practicality of Caroline’s nature, she would have to be persuasive and present arguments; if she had the skill, she would have prepared a bloody chart or a graph. Instead she tried building a case for it in her head: I think we could be good together. I know you would make me happy, and I would work so hard to make you happy. If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s hard work. I can take care of you and I can help you take care of Flora and I’d love her like my own—it’s easy to love a child, as easy and natural as it is to love you. That’s when it would all derail—she could not say love, not yet, it would probably spook Caroline and when she thought about it she wondered if she really had anything to offer a woman who already had a built-in nanny service in the shape of gormless Greg and who possessed a beautiful, moneyed suitor in the form of Sacha. She had nothing. She still has nothing.
But here she stands and, without thinking, effortlessly tangles her hand with Caroline’s because she always operates purely on instincts and impulses that, despite the essence and urgency of the emotions that drive them, have mysteriously failed to serve her very well. She takes Caroline’s hand and unfurls it carefully as if it were bundled pages of rare manuscript—the living word within her stupid clumsy grasp—every finger an individual page and the palm a broadside containing a great manifesto or summation of its possessor. Broad lines intersect tiny capillaries, and one wavering vein grows bold and sweeps across the palm like a train line racing toward the wrist, a calcimine blue path camouflaging the beating red within. Gillian is on a quest for that pulse, that heart and before common sense can intervene, her lips touch Caroline’s wrist and she swears she feels a heartbeat rising to meet her kiss, imagines a sweet animal burring in tandem with her nervous breath.

“Oh,” Caroline says.

The startled tone of that single syllable prompts in Gillian a hundred flashbacks encapsulating a thousand mistakes and she knows that, once again, she has fucked up. Instinctively she straightens. Whenever Eddie went off on her she would always attempt to stand taller, to take it the way he wanted her to. Cowering or attempting any kind of self-defense only made the blows fall heavier and faster; it was always better to stand straight and take that one single slap or punch or wound rather than endure a flurry of fists delivered with the intent of prying her open like a prized oyster and pummeling her into nothing, a pearl crushed into glittering dust.

She almost wishes Caroline were like that—would slap her, hit her right now and get it over with. Fists were easier to take than words. She waits for the blow as the two words she has said in her life more than any others—with the possible exception of fuck or shit—tumble nervously out of her mouth. “I’m sorry.”

Slowly Caroline pulls her hand away, blinks frantically, and pinches her brow. “Why’d you do that?” Once again sounding like the head teacher disappointed with a star pupil.

“I’m sorry,” Gillian repeats helplessly. “I don’t know.”

An edge of irritation seeps into Caroline’s voice. “You don’t know?”

“I mean, I can’t, I can’t turn it off. I still find you attractive.” She swallows. “Beautiful.”

“Like you find Ollie beautiful?” The edge of irritation is now honed with sarcasm.

“It’s different with you, you know that.” Beauty is beauty to Gillian and while she’s not one to mull over the particulars in any one person regardless of gender, it’s obvious that Ollie is beautiful like a lazy wave at the shoreline and Caroline is beautiful like the sublimity of the whole fucking sea.

She knows at the moment Caroline is not ready to hear that; her anger percolates with the same slow potency as her coffee does: “Bollocks. You think you can just bounce around from one person to another? Sleep with Ollie one night, then me the next, just like that? Come into my home and act like I’m just yours for the taking? I know you’re bored and lonely and too afraid to end your shit marriage but I’m not some bloody sexual pit stop for you.”

Yes, I am bored and lonely and a coward, Gillian thinks. And you are too. And I have ghosts. As do you. There are ghosts between us. How can you not see it, how much we are alike?

Yet another thing that Caroline is not ready to hear, because she is in full rant mode now: “I don’t want to get caught up in whatever fucking mess your romantic life is these days. I don’t want to be somebody’s bit on the side. I don’t want to be—a Judith.”
Gillian’s brow furrows. “You’re not anything like Judith. It’s not the same thing.”

“Maybe not, but I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want to be—”

“—a person who makes mistakes?” It slips out. Gillian winces.

Caroline flings her arms in surrender. “Oh for Christ’s sake. I can’t deal with this. Get your own house in order and don’t muck about in mine.” She stalks out of the kitchen.

Gillian reels, head ringing and heart hammering away worse than after last night’s knockout punch. She cannot breathe, cannot endure the thought of estrangement occurring between them again. If you can beg Robbie for another chance to make things right, she tells herself, you can beg her too. It will only be harder because it means more, and because Caroline will be unmoved by cheap sentiment, ridiculous promises, and the threat of tears. Dazed but resolved and yet on the verge of hyperventilation, she wanders down the hall and finds Caroline now in furious housewife mode: tersely folding the blanket that Gillian used last night, punching a pillow under the guise of fluffing it, flinging a used tissue with unerring accuracy into a small bin so discreet that Gillian hadn’t realized it was there. Great, now Caroline will think she’s a bigger slob than she actually is.

Stupidly she stands there, desperate to be noticed. Of course, her serial-murderer-in-a-mask-having-an-asthmatic-attack heavy breathing pretty much guarantees that. Speaking of serial killer, Caroline has a pretty good Hannibal Lechter glare going on right about now. As tempting as it is to joke her way out of this, Gillian gulps down air and apologizes.

“Atonement.”

“I am really sorry.” She stares at the floor. “Know I’m always saying that to you. I didn’t—I didn’t mean to overstep with you. It’s easy for me, to want to be close to you like that, but you’re right, I’m a fucking mess and I need to sort out so much right now, don’t even know where to begin. And, I know, I know you’re seeing someone and I don’t want to mess that up because I really want you to be happy, your happiness is important to me, maybe even more than my own. Know that sounds pretty—stupid, but there you have it. You really deserve it. And I don’t want to mess up things with us either. That’s been good. You know? Real good, us being friends, and, and, you, you are really important to me.” Her chest aches and her eyes are damp, but she wills herself not to cry. “You’re the only person I can talk to. I mean, really talk to, and I don’t think I can stand losing that.”

She thinks Caroline looks impressed at this expression of remorse. She thinks Caroline is never impressed with anything she does, except perhaps the time at her father’s birthday celebration last year when she did a headstand after having four glasses of shiraz and a cognac. Sure, she nearly pitched feet first into the roaring fireplace afterwards but had been worth it to hear Caroline softly say wow—which successfully countered Alan groaning, oh you pillock—and she thought of all the harebrained things that boys did to impress her when she was a teenager. Clearly she has not evolved emotionally much beyond a teenaged boy. But perhaps this was a start, or would be a new start between them.

“Yeah, well.” Caroline’s combative stance slackens. “That wasn’t on the table, that option—never speaking to you ever again,” she says. She flops onto the sofa in a comfortable sprawl and carefully flexes her toes.

Cautiously Gillian takes this as an invitation to sit as well, so she perches on the edge of the sofa with her restless hands clasped around a knee and the full fathom of a cushion between them, ready to leg it at the first sign of displeasure from the queen. She tastes a salty chaser of tears in the back of her throat, but the easy silence between them gradually sets things right and soon she breathes easily again.

For a woman who succeeds at looking so elegant otherwise, Caroline is a world-class sloucher.
She’s sunk deep into the sofa, staring up at the ceiling. “I have my own complications,” she admits.

Gillian blinks. She stumbles forward with a gentle interrogation. “You mean with Sacha?”

A nod.

“Thought it was going well?”

“It is.”

“What’s complicated then?”

Caroline expels a here-we-go breath and continues to talk at the ceiling. “She’s in London right now. She goes down there about every month, for work. She travels a lot and—well, that’s not the problem, really. She has a, uh, shag buddy in London.” A delicate pause punctuates the awkward irony of discussing her current lover’s shag buddy with her former shag buddy who wanted so desperately to attain the seemingly exulted status of being Caroline’s lover. Not that she has ever properly acknowledged the existence, let alone depth, of Gillian’s feelings.

But then, Gillian thinks bitterly, who the hell wants to step right into the murky depths of a dirty puddle?

“It’s a younger woman, no less,” Caroline continues. “She said it’s not serious and offered to end it. I could tell she didn’t want to, she wasn’t ready for that. At least not just yet. So I told her it was all right for now. Then she said it was all right if I wanted to see someone else, and there you have it. Don’t know what to call it exactly, but we are oh so very fashionably cool, Vincent.”

Gillian scowls. “What kind of lesbian horseshit is this?”

“Pray do go on, Mrs. Greenwood. I eagerly await your meditations upon the state of monogamy.”

“Seriously, call it what it is. With men and women it’s called fucking around. Cheating.”

“It’s not cheating. There’s no cheating involved. It’s something else. Something different.”

“Yeah. Horseshit.”

Caroline dismisses her with a regal hand wave and a long-suffering sigh. “Okay, I’m not discussing the concept with you.”

“Fine, because it’s bollocks. I mean, it’s not really you, is it? And yeah, by the way, I know I’m a cheater.”

“The problem is you shouldn’t have married,” Caroline says. “Not him, at any rate.”

Who she should have married is conveniently left open for debate. Blushing again, Gillian rubs the back of her neck. “So you’re not—happy with this, er, arrangement, whatever the fuck it is?”

“I don’t know.” Caroline returns her gaze to the ceiling. “I wanted to try something different. Do things a different way. Feel like every relationship I’ve had, I’ve been pursuing some blind ideal.”

Gillian clears her throat and risks a joke. “I’d say with John, that was a really blind ideal.”

That gets a grin out of Caroline. “You don’t know how charming he can really be, especially when he wants something. Well, he used to be like that. He completely sold me on the fantasy of a perfect heterosexual marriage, the perfect family. Toward that end he pursued me relentlessly—
perfect heterosexual marriage, the perfect family. Toward that end he pursued me relentlessly—poems, flowers, gifts, the whole bit. And when someone wants you that badly, sometimes you can totally fool yourself into thinking you feel the same.” Smile gone, she stops. “And that it will fix whatever is broken within you.”

“You really felt that way?” Gillian marvels at this. Broken is an emotional stage far beyond merely screwed up or the at times, charming-sounding a mess. Broken is a state Gillian knows very well. There’s no amount of mending that remedies it, just crawling out of it as if it were a car wreck and, if you can manage, never looking back.

“Yeah. I did,” Caroline says, and Gillian can see the total recall of that state scrolling over her face like a bad movie. Then she closes her eyes and shakes it off. “With Kate it was different, but the same. Thought with her I would have the perfection I didn’t have the first time around. I thought, you know, I deserved it after putting up with John for so many years. I wanted it badly. And I thought she was so perfect, so good, everything would be right with her. I put her on a pedestal without even realizing it, and at the same time there were so many things I didn’t know about her, but I convinced myself it didn’t matter. I chased her with the same crazy intensity that John did with me. Badgered her to move in with me, buy a house with me, marry me. Always pushing, pushing, pushing. Like Sisyphus with the bloody rock. Sometimes I think if I hadn’t pushed so hard, if I had handled everything differently with her, she would—she would still be alive.”

“Can’t feel guilty for that. Can’t take responsibility for that.” Gillian nibbles her lower lip. “If I can throw your own advice back in your face, you can’t atone for it, ’cause there’s nothing to atone for.”

Caroline laughs. “And so the student becomes the master.”

“What have I mastered?”

“Horseshit, Gillian. You have mastered horseshit.”

“But that was a damn good speech you gave me out there.” Gillian nods toward the kitchen. “You just don’t want to forgive yourself anything.”

“Neither do you,” Caroline retorts.

“Yeah. We’re both completely fucked.” Gillian laughs ruefully and allows herself to sink deeper into the sofa. “So what’re you going to do?”

“Don’t know. Some days I think it’s fine. I don’t even think about it when I’m with her, really, until she mentions London and I automatically think ‘shag buddy’—now that would be one hell of an ad campaign for London, wouldn’t it?”

“We’ll get cracking on that next time we open a bottle of red.”

“Then other days I wonder what the hell I’m doing. Maybe I’m just being a bloody doormat for a lesbian Casanova. Maybe I’m just waiting to see if she makes the decision naturally, rather than have it forced on her—that she’ll pick me because she wants me.”

“If she doesn’t pick you, she’s an idiot,” Gillian says roughly.

“Thanks.” Caroline smiles. “So I guess we both have our own Casanovas.”

“You think Ollie is really in Casanova’s league?” Gillian asks incredulously. “It’s all about quantity, not quality with him. Casanova had better standards than that, didn’t he? It’s all for nowt anyway. I didn’t, I didn’t have it off with him last. Was gonna, but, it was gonna be the last time. I was—last night, well, plan was to end it with him. I wanted to get things squared before Robbie
came back. It was supposed to be the last go ’round. No more messing about with him or anyone else.”

Not surprisingly, that opens a conversational door. “You’ve been seeing others?”

“Not others—Christ, you make it sound like I was having it off with an entire footy team. Just one other person, all right? That time I was in Hebden Bridge—”

“Ah. The Scone Incident!” Caroline cries out gleefully.

“I’m so fucking glad it has a name.”

“I’m sorry Mum keeps making scone jokes. I’ve told her to stop, honestly. As you were saying—that time was someone else? Who was the bloke?”

“Someone I met in a club.”

“Uh-huh.”

A nervous, shallow breath and Gillian goes for the crucial reveal: “And not a bloke.”

“Oh.” This time, Caroline’s oh hits a high note of genuine surprise, and it leaves her as slack-jawed as the perpetually stoned and perhaps slightly inbred clerk at the petrol station closest to the farm.

Gillian laughs. “Shit. Now that was worth telling, just to see the look on your face.”

Caroline recovers herself. “Well,” she replies archly. “You’ve been busy.”

“Not that busy. Only saw her the once—though she called me the other day, wanted to meet up. So I guess I, uh, acquitted myself well in that department.”

“Well, ah, you normally do. In that department.”

Another blush heats Gillian’s neck. This time she enjoys the wild flush across her skin and despite everything her stupid, stubborn heart beats faster.

Caroline is quiet for what seems a good long while. “Do you remember the time you were here, when Will showed up? You were in the bathroom and you ran the hairdryer—?”

Twitchy Gillian nearly falls off the sofa, startled not just by Caroline speaking after such a long silence, but the usually verboten subject matter of their shagging past. “Yeah.”

“I came back into the bathroom and told you he was here and I was—shit, I was numb and terrified, I didn’t know what the hell to do or what to say to him. And then you kissed me.”

Caroline pauses. “And—God. It was amazing. If I hadn’t been sitting down I would have swooned in your arms or fallen at your feet.” She closes her eyes. “It was one of the best kisses of my life—and mind, I’ve had my share of great ones. But sometimes I still think about that bloody kiss.”

“Well, shit,” Gillian says. “Wish I could remember what I did.” She doesn’t remember anything special about it except that it was really fucking good, but then practically every time kissing Caroline was really fucking good. At the time, however, she was walking a wire emotionally and every moment spent in Caroline’s presence always resulted in a spectacular fall. Like now.

“I don’t think it could be replicated. It was like—Maria Callas hitting a spectacular high note at the
height of her career or something.”

The name sounded familiar. “She the music teacher at your school?”

She expects mocking, but gets a shyly affectionate smile instead. “No,” Caroline says.

“Right.” Gillian drums her fingers on the sofa’s edge. “Might be fun to uh, try. To hit that note again.”

Caroline groans. “You’re completely, utterly out of your fucking mind.”

“About a lot of things, it’s true. And maybe ’bout you in particular. Either that or you are the sanest part of my life.”

“If I am the sanest thing in your life, then I would say you are well and truly doomed.”

“No convincing you otherwise?” Gillian’s leg judders furiously and heat smothers her neck.

“I don’t know what I’m doing half the time. I don’t know—maybe you’re right,” Caroline says. “Maybe this isn’t really—”

Gillian leans over, rests the warm palm of her hand against Caroline’s face, and meets Caroline’s panicked blue eyes.

“—me,” Caroline whispers.

She doesn’t recall giving herself permission to go in for a kiss, but she’s doing it anyway and apparently so is Caroline. The problem is she moves with the wary, reverential slowness of Indiana Jones approaching a booby-trapped idol, hand twitching and mouth dry, and Caroline rises surprisingly quickly from a seemingly immutable state of lounging. It all leads to an inevitably painful collision of faces and an involuntary bleat of pain from Gillian as her still-sensitive nose squashes against Caroline’s firm cheekbone and she blinks dizzily from a lightning flash of pain. So much for romance.

But Caroline is apologizing profusely and profanely—“Oh shit, I’m so sorry”—and tracing her nose, her cheek, her lips with gentle fingertips. “Your poor face. You still look like hell. I can’t believe you look like hell and I still want to kiss you.”

“No. Of course not. What knobhead told you that? It’s perfect.” Her lips cautiously follow the trail mapped out by the fingers moments ago: nose, cheek, lips—Gillian wonders helplessly when the last time was that someone kissed her on the nose—before going off course, brushing her ear with a whisper: “You’re perfect.”

Gillian shivers. “Not really.”

“No. Not really,” Caroline admits while placing an immaculate row of evenly spaced kisses along the column of Gillian’s neck, and never before has Gillian so appreciated her obsessive-compulsive tendencies.

From the kitchen a mobile dings loudly, repeatedly. “Should—Shouldn’t you get that?” Gillian manages to say. It’s a fine example of self-sabotage because predictable Caroline has breached her flimsy t-shirt in a bold bid for a breast grab.

“No,” Caroline says.
She’s not done being an idiot and so asks again. “No?”

“No.” A finger lazily draws an infinity loop on her stomach, the touch on sensual playback and retracing itself over and over.

Gillian confirms it again: “No.”

“Yes,” Caroline says, and kisses her lightly on the lips. The delinquent kiss loiters, waiting for troubling continuation and exquisite depth.

“Yes,” Gillian breathes.

Before Gillian can suggest moving upstairs, everything lurches from the sensual slo-mo of a 1960s French romance to the helter-skelter mania of a Benny Hill sketch: The front door opens, Celia bellows her daughter’s name, Caroline disappears like government funding for an arts program, and Gillian flops face first into the soft warmth of a sofa cushion. Her nose hurts again. She hears Caroline shout bathroom at her mother, the stomping of feet up a flight of stairs, Celia’s peeish protest, and a moment of silence.

She sits up. Then realizes Celia is in the room with her.

“Gillian?” Celia gasps. “Oh good Lord.”

“Celia. It’s not as bad as it looks—”

“What on earth happened? I wish someone would tell me what’s going on!”

“What—?”

“Robbie’s outside. He’s very agitated, to put it mildly. He said he’d come to pick you up, that you’d had an accident? But why are you here?” Celia sits on the sofa and peers at Gillian with the same merciless scrutiny as Dr. Patel did last night.

“It was—nothing, really. I was at the White Horse, there was a misunderstanding, and um, I went to A&E, and I just thought it would be, uh, easier to, uh, call Caroline to come get me—” The fractured story now out there, Gillian trails off and the roar of her heartbeat drowns out whatever Celia is saying, until her stepmother touches her face with unprecedented gentleness and because it’s so completely unexpected she cannot help but flutter her eyelids helplessly.

Celia regards her very seriously. Like a mob wife carefully contemplating vengeance, she asks, with quiet deadly authority, “Who did this to you?”

It’s touching, really. Before she can reply, however, Celia presses on: “Was it Robbie?”

Her instinct is to laugh, but the expression on her stepmother’s face belies no mockery. Of course, she realizes, if Robbie is indeed outside seething with anger he would be the most likely variable in this violent equation. “Jesus, Celia. Swear on my mum’s grave, he’s never laid a hand on me. He’s just pissed ’cause I got into a scrape with this mad bitch down at the pub, and I called Caroline instead of him.”

“Who is this ‘mad bitch’?”

“Long story—ancient history.”

Celia’s moment of protectiveness passes. She frowns, and Gillian is once again reminded of the judgmental gene passed down from mother to daughter. “I assume it was about a fellow.”
“Yeah, but, like, a long time ago. Don’t even remember his name.” She has no idea why she says this. Celia’s face frumps deeper into disapproval and before she can say anything stupider, Caroline materializes again, her fraudulent bathroom break over.

“Well,” Caroline says crisply, as if she’s about to chair some sort of tight-arsed meeting of emotionally repressed schoolteachers. She is composed, inscrutable, and Gillian can scarcely believe that minutes ago they were snogging with increasing fervor on the couch.

“As I said to you while you were running away like a lunatic, Robbie’s come to fetch Gillian,” Celia informs her.

“I see,” Caroline says. Which, in Oxford Bitch parlance, is equivalent to fuck that shit.

“Are you having bladder problems, love?” Celia makes a vague gesture at the general vicinity of Caroline’s crotch.

Caroline glares at her mother and then nods at Gillian’s feet. “Better put on your trainers. Hang on, I’ve cleaned your hoodie. The t-shirt’s in the wash.” She disappears again.

“Yeah,” Gillian mutters into the air. As she pulls on her trainers and Celia blathers, her wrecked, wild heart begins pounding in her skull again. When Caroline returns with the clean hoodie and a polite, perfunctory see you later on her lips, she won’t quite look Gillian in the eye. Gillian is almost relieved as she is escorted out of the house by Celia whilst imagining herself as Montgomery Clift at the end of A Place in the Sun, going to the electric chair with thoughts of Elizabeth Taylor dissolving deliciously within his doomed mind.

Outside the house Robbie paces in front of the Land Rover. She reckons it would be too obvious to hug the Landy and not her husband. Although she must give him credit for retrieving it from the White Horse and mumbles a genuine thank you as they get in. They are silent for a long time as they wind out of Harrogate. That’s all right by her. But the silences between them have never been the kind that she shares with Caroline.

When they hit traffic, however, his patience finally gives out. “For Christ’s sake!” He thumps the steering wheel with his fist. “Are you going to say anything?”

She is surprisingly calm; perhaps the last dose of oxy hasn’t worn off yet. “What do you want me to say?”

“I’d like to know why the bloody hell you were at the White Horse with that piece of shite a day before I move back home to be with you. What’s that about, Gillian? What am I supposed to think? I thought you wanted what I wanted. I mean, what was that all about then the other week, all your tears and pleading and such, if you didn’t want me to come back, if you didn’t want me to forgive you?” The rest of the ride back to the farm is scored by a soundtrack of grievances spanning the years, from John to an abortion that happened over thirty years ago, her drinking, her men, everything except the unspoken undertow that sinks them both: Eddie.

There is a word for the imprint of light particles behind the eyelids, those multicolored shapes and lines seen with eyes closed. She can’t remember it. She closes her eyes and the captured world beneath her sight flashes in patches and skeins of vermilion and yellow. When she opens her eyes the mottled gray skin of rain and dirt covering the windshield cannot diminish the sun. Her hand hovers against her face. Fingers shutter the light.

The Land Rover rolls to a stop and she’s home again. As she gets out of the vehicle she realizes he’s still shouting at her, but the words are now swallowed in wind. Walking toward the house, she spots her bolt cutter laying in the yard in front of the barn. She always keeps her tools
organized. Always puts everything away at the end of the day. Always. They are not mere things. They are investments. They must last. She thought he understood that about her. That she needed order in her life. After failing to impose harmony or balance in her life otherwise, that was how she justified the decision to break under the dull blade of his persistence after so many years.

And then there was penance: Another useless tool.

She heads toward the barn and picks up the bolt cutters.

Robbie follows. Having poured out his heart in so many angry words, he is breathless and together they are finally a peerless match, both numb in a void of emotion.

“Fuck sakes,” he says. “Will you please say something?”

Her thumb presses a patch of blossoming rust. “I can’t do this anymore,” she says.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK:

“Walking on a Wire,” Richard & Linda Thompson

“History Eraser,” Courtney Barnett

“Captured Light,” The Amazing
“I can’t do this anymore,” Caroline says.

For the past five minutes she has been vigorously scrubbing the aged zinc countertop in Sacha’s intimidating kitchen. And rather gleefully at that, for she had finally discovered a flaw in this culinary fantasy land: a cluster of spots on the zinc near the the cutting board, a black blight that will not give way under the combined and determined forces of non-toxic plant-based cleaner, hypoallergenic sponge, and one mightily obsessive-compulsive woman. Finally, with a defeated sigh, she tosses the sponge into the sink.

Briefly terrorized by the cleaning spree and wisely keeping her distance as result, Sacha now risks venturing into Caroline’s orbit. She leans against the counter, close enough so that her jean-clad hip playfully nudges Caroline.

“Good,” she replies.

Caroline scowls.

Sacha smiles. “Because I hate to tell you, it’s not really dirty.”


“It’s just part of the patina, darling. Haven’t you noticed it before?” Sacha hesitates, then leans in and kisses her quickly on the cheek. “Are you all right? You’re jumpy as a cat.”

“I’m fine.” Caroline takes the sponge again, fussily wipes the counter. “But. Well.”

“We need to talk.”

“Oh, now you want to talk?”

“I daresay most women regardless of sexual inclinations would be quite pleased to be greeted as you were on arrival.”

Caroline blushes.
Two days prior Sacha returned from her London trip and, in a breathless phone call from the train station, proffered a dinner invitation to Caroline while berating a cab driver, approving a payroll via email, and sweetly flirting—Caroline assumes that part was directed at her and not Sacha’s overtaxed assistant Liam, who was also in the cab and echoing his boss’s excoriations that the driver was a “raving, mentally deficient cock-munch.” This sterling and impressive example of multitasking contradicted all current scientific wisdom and that alone intrigued Caroline the empiricist enough so that she could place all thoughts of gentle wrist kisses from battered sheep farmers out of her mind. She accepted the invite.

She had hoped that dinner—pasta, wine, and the resultant withdrawal of bloodflow from brain to belly—would put her in the proper dulled but relaxed mindset to discuss their relations and to confess to something that she wasn’t certain required admission or absolution. But when she arrived at Sacha’s earlier this evening with the abyss of endless discussion and negotiation yawning at her feet, her careful agenda became abruptly derailed when Sacha opened the door and before even saying hello snogged the hell out of her—a welcome reminder that they were indeed lovers and not partners in a law firm.

While absently agreeing to an offer of an aperitif Caroline was led to the couch, quickly divested of her trousers, and brilliantly realized that she was the aperitif. Of course the moment Caroline tried to slow it down a bit and change course was the very same moment that Sacha peeled off her t-shirt and arched sensually to unhook her bra, and quite frankly stopping at that crucial moment would be akin to asking Ella Fitzgerald to stop in the middle of a Cole Porter song. Even so, Caroline recognized—and appreciated—a preemptive strike when she saw one: A brilliant opening move to not only put off the inevitable and awkward question of what sexual transactions had occurred in London, but also an assurance that regardless of those transactions Caroline was still very much desired.

Of course, she had managed to think shortly before climaxing, this kind of exceptional manipulation is what happens when you date someone with a law degree from bloody Cambridge.

Dinner had passed pleasantly enough with the usual talk of children and work, but with no questions resolved and no admissions aired; as for the latter item, she wonders how much it truly matters. Caroline does not know if it what happened with Gillian should be categorized as a minor transgression, a fleeting moment of weakness, or a sweet promise of more to come and among all these options she spins as futilely as a sports car caught in a snow bank. Unsurprisingly, she hasn’t heard anything from Gillian. In fact, she thinks she doesn’t deserve to hear from Gillian ever: Bolting off the couch like a teenager caught with her knickers down and then hiding in the bathroom for nearly twenty minutes, thereby leaving Gillian to the bloody mercies of the Dawson Inquisition, was hardly her finest moment. Gillian’s last look of dazed chagrin before departing that day indicated that forgiveness would be, at best, hard-won.

Caroline sighs and leans into Sacha. “It was a very lovely greeting indeed,” she whispers into Sacha’s ear. For good measure she nips the earlobe as well, earning a pleased shiver from Sacha.

“That’s more like it.”

“But yes, you’re right. We have to talk.”
“Ah.” Sacha grabs the wine bottle and refreshes their glasses. “To the living room, then.”

Caroline sinks into an overstuffed couch and Sacha opts for sitting on the floor, leaning against a chair and a throw pillow. For some insane reason she enjoys sitting on the floor and Caroline casts it as some sort of yearning for lost youth—as if she’s still envisioning herself as a dashing young revolutionary at Cambridge sitting around in her rooms getting high, listening to Gang of Four, and arguing over Marxism and poststructuralism with a devoted coterie of both former and soon-to-be lovers.

“So.” Sacha tucks a pillow under her bare feet. “Do you want to ask the obvious question or do you just want me to answer it?”

“Well accustomed by now to Caroline’s random judgmental moments, Sacha rolls her eyes and self-consciously plucks at the t-shirt. “Never mind. But here it is: I didn’t see Rowan.”

“Rowan?” Caroline imagines a too-thin twentysomething dressed like a schoolgirl who is probably flexible as hell and doesn’t get back spasms while trying out new sexual positions.

“Yes, Rowan. That’s her name.” Sacha sips the wine. “I didn’t have much time and to be honest, I didn’t really want to see her.” She sighs. “She’s lovely and all, but for all the effort we put in to maintaining contact, I don’t know if it’s worth it. To keep it going.”

“Maybe you’re getting old,” Caroline teases.

Sacha laughs mirthlessly. “You and me both, old girl.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Ahh. Well. I think I’m going to end it.” She toasts Caroline. “How does that sound?”

Oh God, Caroline thinks, she sounds pleased, and she thinks I should be pleased, and I think I should be pleased, and I am pleased, but—Caroline shakes her head to banish the idiotic web that her circular mindset quickly weaves. “It’s great. Really. All right then, so how does that affect us?”

“How would you like it to affect us?”

“Christ, Sacha. You know I hate it when you talk to me like a therapist.”
“Sorry. Look. It can change things—we could be exclusive. Or remain as we are.” Sacha grins mischievously. “We will have to—and I’m afraid to say this because I know you’ll hate it too—process it.”

In spite of herself Caroline laughs. “Yeah. We will.” Just as abruptly, she stops laughing because—speaking of processing. “But first, I need to tell you about—something.”

Sacha gives her a rather arch look. “Really?”

“No, it’s not serious, it’s nothing like what you think—I just want you to know, I want to be honest.”

“It’s all right,” Sacha replies gently. “Did you sleep with someone else?”

She asks it as matter-of-factly as if inquiring what Caroline had for lunch. Caroline hedges. “Not exactly.”

Patiently Sacha continues the guessing game. “You’ve met someone?”

“No.”

“A-ha!” Excitedly Sacha leans forward and places her wine glass on a table. “One of those young women tracked you down, didn’t they?”

“What?”

“You remember them, from the night we went to the club with Helen—”

“Oh, no. No. It wasn’t them. Er, one of them. Any of them.”

“Now I’m disappointed. Are you going to make me keep guessing?”

“It’s just so bloody ridiculous, and it was just a kiss. Well, a couple of kisses. I don’t think it’ll happen again.”

“Okay, that’s cool, but I’m just curious—”

“Does it matter?” In the whiny petulance of this response Caroline finally sees where Lawrence gets that particular aspect of his bitchiness. As tempting as it is, she can’t blame John for everything.
“Usually when people say that, it does matter.”

“It’s embarrassing,” Caroline protests.

“That only heightens the intrigue, dear.”

“For you, but not for me.”

Sacha sighs. “Caroline, I told you about the time my husband caught me going down on his life coach. It can’t be any worse than that.”

She bites her lip, glances out the window. I could just run off now, couldn’t I? Make an excuse—oh God, let the toboggan ride to hell commence. She releases a breath. “It was Gillian.”

Sacha blinks. “Gillian,” she repeats.

She can see the name isn’t conjuring up the appropriate person in Sacha’s memory banks. Before Sacha can ask, which one is Gillian again?—because she seems to get Gillian mixed up either with Felicity or Ellie or even Beverly depending upon her level of interest and/or distraction on any given day—Caroline grinds out her humiliation: “My stepsister.”

Sacha looks as stunned as she did when her mother recently confessed that sometimes she uses store-bought pasta sauce; Caroline had been present during the phone call and, witnessing Sacha’s expression and the mobile slip out of her grasp, immediately assumed someone had died. “The Slapper?”

Caroline winces.

“You shagged the Slapper?”

“No, I didn’t shag her. We just kissed, and I really wish you wouldn’t call her that.”

“Sorry, sorry. All right. So.” She shakes her head vigorously. “Okay. Surely this didn’t all happen out of the blue, did it?”

“What do you mean?” Caroline attempts not to squirm in an obvious fashion.

“I suppose I’m asking if you’ve been aware of it, of an attraction to her? Or if you noticed she was interested in you?”
Caroline chugs her wine. “Yeah, it’s—yeah. On both counts. And I thought it was, er, over and done with.” As if they are in a confessional, she lowers her voice. “We had—I mean, we had a bit of a thing a while ago, but it’s over, and a lot’s happened since—I got married to Kate and I have Flora, then she got married—I mean, he’s kind of an idiot, but to each his own—”


“What?”

Sacha gestures furiously like a football referee calling a penalty. “Back it up a bit. Are you saying you and Gillian had an affair?”

“Well, I don’t really think of it that way—more like, you know, shag buddies.”

“Okay.” Sacha holds up a finger. “Hang on. Oh, mother.” She rises from the floor and disappears into the TV room. Caroline hears rummaging. When Sacha returns, a rather fat joint dangles from her lips and an old Zippo lighter sparks in her hand as she tries to resurrect its flame.

Now that the truth is out, Caroline decides it’s pointless to be nice and lets her judgmental freak flag fly proudly. “Is that really necessary?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t have gotten through Cambridge, marriage, and living in Croydon without it.” Sacha gets lit, inhales, holds the breath. Her nostrils quiver with effort, then a stream of smoke shoots out of her nose. She sighs contentedly. “Helps me think. Seriously, if not for some excellent hash beforehand I wouldn’t have aced my O levels.”

Caroline realizes she could be dangerously close to losing ground here, that in this turnabout a fickle twentysomething in London could appear vastly preferable to an emotionally stunted middle-aged twat. “So,” she asks timidly, “what do you need to think about?”

“It’s odd.” Sacha coughs and stares thoughtfully at the joint. “I don’t know. Seems odd you never told me this. You’ve told me loads of things about your exes at university, about Kate, even about that Vogue underwear model who’s number one in your wank bank.”

“Like I said, it wasn’t a big deal. And it happened a while ago.”

“And you’re embarrassed, you say.”

“Well, she’s my stepsister, for Christ’s sake. Some people would look askance at that.”

Sacha nods in what Caroline interprets as a sympathetic fashion. “Suppose so.” She takes another
hit, holds it, and unfurls another dramatic exhalation. “She wasn’t a pillow queen, was she?”

Unfamiliar with the term, Caroline frowns. “What?”

“Meaning she didn’t just lay there in bed and let you do everything, if you get my drift.”

_She’s staring at the ceiling, heart hammering, fist tangled in a sheet, sweat cooling between her breasts, fairly mortified at how loudly she just screamed and how wet she was. Then Gillian emerges from underneath the comforter, smiling shyly, hesitantly in that way of hers when she so desperately craves the smallest act of kindness, the tiniest gesture of approval. She pushes hair away from her face. “Was that okay? I can keep going.”_

Sacha laughs. “God, you’re blushing, that’s a good sign. That’s good. Because some straight women are like that when you finally get them into bed, you know, don’t do a bloody thing except kiss like they’re performing in some shit porno.”

Caroline wants to say that Gillian isn’t exactly straight, but that seems neither here nor there at the moment. Sacha is taking it all in and no doubt the more she thinks about it and the more she smokes, the more she’s going to realize that Caroline is a colossal fuck-up and not worth any offer of exclusivity or even a continuation of what they have, and so at this point Caroline yearns for nothing more than a contact high from the pot.

She stares at her empty glass. And more wine.

“So how did this come about?” Sacha asks. “You kissed her? She kissed you?”

“The latter.”

“Okay. If I may ask, what led up to this?”

“Can I have some more wine?” Caroline squeaks.

The half-empty bottle of Barolo is fetched. Thus fortified by the most excellent Nebbiolo grape, Caroline spares no detail: From Ollie’s phone call to Gillian bewildered and walking out the door the next morning, everything is recorded for guilty posterity even as she tries to downplay it by emphasizing Gillian’s overall wretched state, black eye and bloodied nose included as if she were motivated by not much more than pity, and even as she loathes herself for doing that.

“So yeah,” she says to Sacha. “Something might have happened. Maybe. I don’t know. But it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to get involved with anyone who’s married. And I haven’t heard from her since that day. She may regret it and she may be embarrassed by it herself. I don’t know. It’s not necessarily something that’s going to develop. It’s not something I want to develop.”
“Still, that’s quite a story. Tells one a lot.”

“Tells you what, aside from the fact that Gillian has shit taste in men?”

“And great taste in women—don’t sell yourself short.” Tired of her position, Sacha sprawls out on the floor, bringing to mind da Vinci’s Vitruvian man accompanied by a smoldering joint. “But seriously, let’s take another look at it, shall we? If I may, let me review and sum up events thus far as accurately as short-term memory recalls—”

“Considering you’re smoking dope I’d say accuracy may be in question right now, bugger your O levels.”

“Oh indubitably, my dear Caroline. Please, I invite you to correct any misrepresentation of fact.”

Caroline folds her arms. “You’re really acting like a lawyer now.”

“So the Slapper—”

“Gillian,” Caroline stubbornly inserts.

“—had a fight with her husband and decides to head down to the pub with her toy boy, and before she can shag him in the back of her truck or whatever—”

“It’s not a truck, it’s a Land Rover, and I think when they have it off they use his van.” And Caroline wants to hit herself in the head for knowing this.

“—some twat whose man was shagged like 50 years ago or something by the Slapper—”

“Really wish you’d stop calling her that.”

“—goes mental and punches her out and the toy boy takes her to A&E and ditches her there and then he calls you and you, the giant numpty that you are, end up in hospital at 3 am—”

“It was more like 1:30.”

“—to hold her hand and drive her home, except you take her to your home, let her sleep it off, give her a really great breakfast—”

“I’d already planned on making the frittata, Will was coming home for the weekend.”
“And coffee—”

“There’s nothing incriminating about giving someone coffee. Although I did use the Indonesian beans that she likes.”

“—and let’s not forget that you run interference with her husband and son and the rest of the world while she mopes about like a bad sad puppy, and then she throws a half-arsed pass your way and you get all sanctimonious because you like getting sanctimonious and then, and then—you give in to her bad sad puppy face and save but for your mother at the door, you would’ve shagged her right then and there on your stain-proof couch.” Sacha extends both arms forward in a flourish similar to when a performer takes a bow. “You’re welcome. Oh Christ I think I’m hearing imaginary applause.”

Silent, Caroline stares out the window. That bloody stupid pillock slapper trailer trash sheep farmer.

“Well,” she finally says.

Sacha hums and looks up at her expectantly.

“When you put it like that, it all sounds rather bad.”

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK:

“I’m Always True to You in My Fashion,” Ella Fitzgerald

“The State I Am In,” Belle & Sebastian
Hey, y’all. Happy New Year, and thanks for reading!

xiv. the art of almost

* 

It’s Friday afternoon, the time of the week when a sense of loss hits Caroline at its hardest. She comes home to an empty house because more often than not Greg has Flora out and about to either the library, a park, or a playdate and for an hour or so she will sit in the kitchen with a glass of wine and stare out a window as the light shifts, as a pile of mail remains untouched on the kitchen table because she is always too afraid to discover some random thing addressed to Kate—a clothing catalog or university alumni newsletter, or some plea from an impoverished classical music society asking for money and typically from some remote part of the country that always astounds Caroline and makes her wonder if Kate gave money to every rural, rinky-dink organization with a French horn.

On this particular rainy Friday afternoon, however, she’s not home for more than five minutes when Alan and Celia come over, thus forcing her to be genial and put on the kettle. They sit at the kitchen table making valiant attempts at small talk and waiting patiently for the ritual of tea to commence with whatever obvious announcement they intend to make. Alan fingers the grain of the table with the same delicate, easy touch he uses in playing piano; it’s a charming nervous habit.

“Just a bit of news,” he says.

Her mother snorts, folds her arms, and shakes her head.

He tells Caroline—with Celia harrumphing a Greek chorus of disapproval after nearly every sentence—that Gillian’s chucked Robbie out of the farmhouse and asked for a divorce. “She’s even retained a solicitor,” Alan says, astonished.

Celia neither snorts nor harrumphs derisively at this bit; in fact, she also appears momentarily impressed by this rare moment of prescience from her stepdaughter.

“I’ve taken liberty of asking her over for dinner tonight,” Alan says. “I hope—that’s all right?”

Caroline feels the concerned-smile mask, that stale accessory from a lifetime of pretense, slip easily into its accustomed place and burrow into her muscles like a tick. “Of course,” she says. Relieved, Alan smiles. “Oh good, good. Thank you, love. She needs to be around family right now, I think.”

Caroline stares at her untouched tea.

Celia sighs. “She didn’t seem that upset.”

“You don’t know her.” Alan says it perhaps more sharply than intended and then adds softly, as if
When they leave Caroline confronts the black screen of her phone, its mocking, monolithic denial. She presses a button, bringing up the lock screen: a photo of Flora in the park. There are moments still when she thinks Flora looks so much like Kate that she cannot bear it. She does not call.

When Gillian arrives a few hours later she spends her time beforehand hovering in the living room talking with her father, playing with Flora, and pointedly avoiding Caroline. She wears a new blouse that is a dark red dotted with paisley and she looks terribly handsome in it. At first Caroline thought the paisleys on the shirt were little amoebas floating and swimming about in a scarlet sea; she decides it would be funny to tell Gillian this but when she points at the blouse and sputters, hey, amoebas, Gillian just frowns in confusion.

At dinner Gillian restlessly flexes her hands as if working out arthritic pain or absolutely desperate for something to do, something to fix, and so when dinner is served she seems immensely grateful not for the food itself but for the preoccupation of eating. Her fist coddles the stem of her wineglass. She grips cutlery like an inmate, expecting to do battle with anyone who would dare touch her plate. She has two servings of everything. Even salad. Celia asks if she’s eaten today and as usual Caroline looks underneath this seemingly harmless question for a bitchy subtext. Ever unsure, she gives her a mother a foul look. But no one speaks to Gillian of the topic that hangs so thickly in the air, as if it were rancid cologne. And this thought reminds Caroline of the overwhelming aftershave that Robbie sometimes wore. She always wondered how Gillian endured it. But then she always marvels at how Gillian has endured everything.

After dinner Gillian helps clear the table, bringing out plates to Caroline in the kitchen. In the accidental rhythm of taking and stacking plates in the dishwasher, their hands touch and Caroline drops a plate that catches awkwardly, safely between the tines in the machine. Gillian softly stammers a sorry and stares too long. How many times, Caroline thinks, did she almost break under the intensity of that gaze because she did not understand why this woman looked at her so —why she seemed to crave Caroline’s friendship and confidence, acceptance and approval even while instigating every sabotaging act she could think of in between those moments. In those days, as her discoveries about Gillian’s past culminated in the confession about Eddie, her view of Gillian shifted from brain-dead, low-life trailer trash to wounded animal. It was still an incomplete picture of the woman because she had no real conception of Gillian’s loneliness, largely because she was so trapped within her own misery.

And perhaps, Caroline thinks, I am still.

Gillian stuffs her hands into the back pockets of her jeans and walks out of the kitchen.

* 

On Saturday she meets Sacha for lunch. Ever the rigorous businesswoman—at least when not stoned—Sacha is fond of saying that every meeting should have a purpose. But Caroline is fairly uncertain of the intent behind this lunch date: It could be the proposed terms of a potential merger or the systematic dismantling of an arrangement that no longer suited either party. Sacha’s sartorial choices seem ambivalent at best, at least to the obtuse Caroline: a blouse wantonly unbuttoned and revealing cleavage, a short skirt tight over the powerful swell of her thighs, and black knee-high boots. It’s both enticement and statement: whatever you decide, it’s all a win-win for me, baby.

Despite the uncertainty of everything between them they manage cordiality very well. The evening when she confessed all about Gillian ended with Sacha finishing the joint all by her lonesome and saying wow a lot, and Caroline idly trying to seduce her as a distraction from what Sacha must be thinking and what Caroline surely did not want to feel. But then Sacha put on some Van Morrison and promptly fell asleep; after an entrancement with a song that mysteriously
reminded her of a girl she’d been infatuated with at Oxford, Caroline left.

Now, over salads and sparkling water, Sacha calmly plays a waiting game while Caroline displays the same set of nerves she had during her viva exams at Oxford, when she vainly groped through her own eternal existential crisis of what constitutes the right answer when so many theses possess equal validity or so many variations will still get you a satisfying result.

After lunch and with her regular driver unavailable, Sacha asks for a ride home; ever the obliging knob, Caroline agrees. In front of Sacha’s house they sit in the Jeep awkwardly, quietly, as Caroline anticipates—but does not receive—an invitation to come inside.

“Well,” Sacha says wryly, “we didn’t really resolve anything, did we?”

Before she can say anything Sacha’s hand drops lightly on her knee with the same delicate, seductive intent as a lace handkerchief deployed by a heroine in an eighteenth-century novel. Caroline stiffens, inhales sharply, and dives into a kiss that surprises her with its intensity but shouldn’t, because it’s the smoke and mirrors of lust, intransigent and fleeting as the pupils in Sacha’s ever-darkening eyes. She kisses and nuzzles Caroline’s neck as Caroline lightly touches the edge of her damned-short skirt, just before her fingers glide along the soft skin of the inner thigh below it.

Sacha’s ragged breath catches in her ear and she thinks yes, yes, this but then Sacha’s tongue traces the whorls of her ear before a whisper falls against it: “You still don’t know what you want, do you?”

It all comes crashing to a halt as she sits there breathless and aroused, her grip sinking sweetly into Sacha’s thigh, and she thinks, I want something I do not have the courage to possess.

Somewhat reluctantly Sacha pulls away while smoothing out her skirt. She looks out the window. “I have to go to New York,” she says.

New York makes Caroline think of Ginika. They haven’t seriously emailed in a while. Although she does send photos of Flora on a regular basis, complete with running commentary on Flora’s activities and what she eats and wears and likes and watches on telly, but with nothing of substance about her own life accompanying them. She could not bring herself to write: I’m seeing someone. She’s nice. I like her. She’s not like Kate, no one is like Kate and you know that but what else am I to do?

“It’s for a month,” Sacha says. “I know you’re busy, and there’s Flora, but—perhaps you could come over, maybe a long weekend? It might—be fun.”

“Yeah,” Caroline says. “I don’t know. We’ll see.”

“Think about it,” she says. She opens the door of the Jeep and pauses—glorious booted leg flung out over the footboard, well-heeled foot assuredly on solid ground.

She manages a smile. “Think about me.”

The door closes.

*

On Sunday evening there’s an engagement party for Raff and Ellie at a pub; what the happy couple calls a “fancy pub” is something that prompts Caroline to bring along hand sanitizer and aspirin for an anticipated headache. It is the second engagement party they’ve had because after the first one they broke up for a while. Caroline’s escort for the evening is William, who deigned
to come up from Oxford for the event. In the Jeep, with William driving, they make bets on how long it will be before Raff and Ellie break up again. William is generous and says three months. Caroline says three hours. She never underestimates the power of alcohol.

In addition to the immediate family there is an alarming amount of young women present, all Ellie’s friends. The mother of the prospective groom is at the bar with Gary, her hapless half-brother who, acting on orders from their father, is feebly attempting to keep her from drinking too much. But Gary is clearly shit at playing Mother Temperance because Caroline recognizes not only that dangerous, determined glint in Gillian’s eyes, but also notes that Gillian sits in front of two empty champagne glasses and a full tumbler of gin and tonic.

O glorious gin, Caroline thinks. How I loved the taste of you in her mouth.

“You missed the toast,” Gillian says by way of greeting.

Gary folds his arms. “And a memorable one it was,” he says.

Gillian takes up Gary’s derisive cue. She stands, holds aloft the gin and tonic and, dramatically clearing her throat, recites:

Roses are red
Violets are blue
Life is shit
And marriage is too

“Oh,” William says.

Gillian nods. “Wrote it m’self.”

“That so?” Caroline drawls.

“No one’s speaking to me now,” Gillian says proudly, and then claps her brother on the shoulder. “Cept old Gary, innit that right, mate?”

Gary pinches the bridge of his nose and it’s clear that whatever regrets he possessed about getting involved with his biological father’s family are now splendidly, fully realized.

Effortlessly Caroline seizes the gin and tonic from Gillian. Gary laughs and Gillian narrows her eyes.

“That’s how it’s done, son,” Caroline says to him. “Like candy from a drunken sullen baby.”

Gillian continues her useless glaring. “I’ll just get another one.”

“You do that, then.” Defiant, Caroline rattles the ice cubes and sips the drink. She decides that, thus armed with free booze—and judging by the taste, Gillian insisted on the good stuff—now is the ideal time to socialize with her mother. William takes his leave to offer congratulations to Raff and Ellie. Later, she rendezvouses with him at the back of the pub; wisely he has placed himself as far away from shouty drunken bints as possible. She polishes off the gin and tonic while listening to him bitch about a professor who’s giving him a hard time by demanding that he reads the entirety of the Aeneid in its original Latin.

“A little Latin never hurt anyone,” she tells him. Meanwhile she watches Gillian, who has a new drink and also seems to be engaged in an actual conversation with Gary. Perhaps after a few glasses of anything Gary becomes interesting.
“It’s not a little, it’s an entire bloody book of the stuff. You know I’m not good at languages.” He frowns. “I’m not even sure I’m good at English.”

“But you’re majoring in English, darling.”

“I know.”

Half an hour later they initiate the exit strategy: They will work the room separately, say their goodbyes, she will hit the loo, and they will meet outside in twenty minutes. He thinks twenty is too optimistic, especially since Harry is drunk and will no doubt recite filthy limericks that will make everyone infinitely more uncomfortable than Gillian’s toast.

“Be merciless,” she instructs him.

He grins. “Easy for you to say.”

As she’s legging it toward the restroom gin and exhaustion—possibly work, possibly Sacha, possibly everything—hit her harder than she would admit to anyone and she thinks Christ I am getting old, and the woozy fatigue only intensifies when she sees Gillian loitering in the lobby just across from the ladies’ room, arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

“Going to the ladies’?” she says.

So as not to make eye contact, Caroline fumbles with her purse. “Yeah.”

Gillian nods at the men’s room. “Waiting for Gary.”

“Leaving already?”

“Turning into a young people’s party. Time to bugger off.” She shifts, juts her hip, rolls her neck, stares at her feet. Sometimes Gillian’s nervy intensity amuses her and yet there are moments, like now, where it strums a deep, heavy chord within her and she is so scared, almost repulsed, by that unerring echo within her chest that she yearns for the attenuation of this connection. For it is a connection, and one that she can no longer deny.

Gillian flicks a glance her way before locking eyes with the carpet again. “Can—can I talk to you?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Caroline shrugs tiredly. She imagines at this bleary point in the evening Gillian just wants to talk shite about Robbie, because earlier today Alan hinted that Robbie was already being difficult about the divorce, or Raff, because his mother thinks he’s much too young to marry. She turns toward the restroom and Gillian falls into step beside her.

Given the amount of females currently in the pub, the ladies room is miraculously empty. Gillian touches her arm protectively—perhaps possessively?—and scans the restroom suspiciously, as if she’s checking it for secret assassins, surveillance bugs, or maybe even Michael Bloody Dobson. Sarcasm is on Caroline’s lips when Gillian places a hand in the small of her back, forcibly steers her into a stall despite Caroline’s squawk of hey, kicks the door shut, ignores another protesting syllable, pins her against a cold and hopefully not-too-slimy wall, and kisses the hell out of her.

It’s rough and hard, like the very first time they kissed. But this sloppy groundwork, this fierce, attention-grabbing flourish gradually transforms into deeper, slower, and sensual, something that gets better and better, an ardent give-and-take that defies expectation: When she thinks Gillian is winding down to stop, she keeps going. When she surrenders all sense of decorum and common sense and takes in Gillian’s tongue, sucking with abandon, the kiss crawls to a stop and Gillian retreats teasingly to nibble and caress her lower lip. When she thinks it’s done, Gillian only
redoubles her efforts. It’s a thousand kisses condensed into one, a book of a thousand pages fluttering to conjure the beauty of a single word, a thousand sensations distilled into one moment: the tang of gin coiled in their mouths, the cold steel at her back, Gillian’s hair brushing against her cheek and Gillian’s hands squeezing her hips, at last those beautiful hands have found a task worthwhile, her buckling knees, her thrumming heart, her furious awareness that this wonderful kiss takes place not in a forest glade or a five-star hotel in France—I dreamt that one night, your head upon a perfect white pillow, your body bound by my touch and my tongue tracing cords and tying knots and bows all over your skin and undoing them over and over as if you are the greatest gift, it was so romantic I had to stop, I had to force myself once again awake into this world—but a fucking toilet stall ripe with the disinfectant reek of piss water in a Yorkshire pub, the bitter hard stone of everything between them but oh, digging down to it through all this sweetness like biting into an overripe fruit, yes, this always has and always will be worth it—I cannot stop this—and that thousand-page book is on fire, everything must be rewritten, reworked, retold because the fire, this fire, consumes it all.

Gillian’s heavy head falls against Caroline’s chest and she whispers, “Is that—is that like what you remember? Is it?”

Her lips brush against Gillian’s forehead and she strokes Gillian’s hair, as soft and fine as she remembers. Before she can say yes, and more, Gillian trembles against her and Caroline realizes that she’s crying.


Then a commotion of young womanhood goes off just outside the entrance of the restroom, a fusillade of screeching and laughter like a warning shot off the bow, followed by a declaration against all mankind: God, he’s such a wanker!

Like a shot Gillian leaves the stall, slamming the door behind her. Caroline is too dazed to do anything more than register the plash of running water, the creak of the towel dispenser, the rush of ambient noise as the main door of the restroom opens and then closes. She stands there for what feels not an eternity, but rather more like a very long Joni Mitchell song. She slaps the wall with her hand and her palm sings with pain. She retrieves her purse from the floor, takes out a compact. Her cheeks are red, her eyes unfocused, her lipstick smeared. The only thing she can rectify is the lipstick. She wipes it all away with a tissue and despite a shaky hand deftly reapplies it to her satisfaction; in her recent life as an emotional wreck, she’s gotten rather skilled at remaking herself with a trembling hand. She feels like an artist attempting a self-portrait in a hall of mirrors with a broken hand. In every crippled stroke the art of self-deception. In every fragmented gleam the art of almost.

The girls outside finally pile into the bathroom, a garish cacophony of voices bouncing off concrete and tiles: —mind her, she’s always in a mood. So I said to him, do you really think I’m going to do that? I’m not stupid, you’ll put it on Snapchat you sod.

When Caroline comes out of the stall silence thuds down like a theater curtain abruptly dropped mid-performance; she’s more than accustomed to having that affect on anyone under the age of twenty. Three girls goggle at her with apprehensive fascination as if she’s a dancing bear off her chain, which all but confirms that Ellie must have told them all that she’s a lesbian. As she washes her hands Caroline politely refrains from suggesting they try out for the witches in Macbeth.

One of them, however, does possess some semblance of manners. “Are you all right? You look a bit flushed.”

“Oh. Yeah. Just a bit too much, I suppose,” Caroline replies. She dries her hands.
Two of the girls laugh politely. The third one, however—who appears to be the bitch ringleader—
clucks condescendingly. A toss of her shiny bouncy hair punctuates her disdain.

Caroline looks at her. A raised eyebrow, a cool glare is all it takes to put the girl in her place; the
snotty demeanor drops and she gets frightfully doe-eyed.

Slowly, emphatically, Caroline pats her arm. “Sweetheart,” she says, “if you really think that’s all
it takes to put me out for the night, you’re completely fucking mistaken.” She sails out the
restroom.

And so the combined effect of not only getting properly kissed by Gillian Greenwood but also
ensuring herself a memorable, satisfying exit somehow salvages the entire bloody weekend.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK:

“The Art of Almost,” Wilco

“Your Ex-Lover is Dead,” Stars
The book of miracles

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The tragedy isn't that love doesn't last. The tragedy is the love that lasts.

—Shirley Hazzard, *The Transit of Venus*

“High fructose corn syrup.”

The phrase, dropped like a gauntlet at dinner, brings idle conversation to a halt. It is spoken by Lawrence, who points in a very melodramatic *j’accuse* fashion at Flora.

In turn, Flora blinks at him slowly, decides he’s playing at something, and giggles.

Why do I not have normal children? Caroline wonders. One is terrified of Latin and cries at soppy commercials on telly, the other apparently hears voices and is seriously considering going to clown school. The jury, however, is still out on Flora. *Please be normal,* she silently begs the child. *If I screw you up somehow, I won’t be able to bear it.* Meanwhile the others assembled around the table—Alan, Celia, and Greg—stare at her, awaiting a Solomon-like proclamation on Lawrence’s bizarre declaration.

Caroline makes them wait. She gulps wine, girds her loins, and unfurls a mighty sigh. “What are you on about?” she asks Lawrence.

“She said it.” Lawrence wags his finger at his sister. “The other day. Quite clearly, I might add. At breakfast, I swear she was looking right at the cornflakes box—”

Greg gasps. “You didn’t let her eat any of those, did you?”

“What? No.” Irritated at the interruption, Lawrence screws up his face in a profoundly unattractive fashion, the expression on a scatological scale somewhere in the not-so-vast plane between taking a shit and actually smelling one.

“Good,” Greg says, “because they do have high fructose corn syrup in them. Corn flakes are the devil.”

God, I am going to be completely pissed before this night is over if this keeps us, Caroline thinks as she polishes off her second glass of wine. “Can I quote you on that?”

“That’s not the point,” Lawrence says. “The point is, like, totally out of the blue, she just says ‘high fructose corn syrup.’ Just like that. And I was like, ‘What did you say?’ And she looked all smug and wouldn’t say anything else! Not a single word. And she won’t say it now. She just won’t. I’ve been trying all day to get her to say it.”


Celia pinches her brow.

Thoughtfully Flora regards her dinner plate. She positions several tiny pieces of broccoli upright
on their stalks near a mound of uneaten casserole, creating a little mini-forest surrounding a hilly terrain. Caroline interprets this as a potential clue to a future occupation: Maybe she will become a naturalist. Or an urban planner. Or a demented celebrity chef.

“See? Nothing. She’s gaslighting me,” Lawrence says.

“Very significant achievement for two years old,” Alan observes. His mobile pings and he pulls it out of his pocket.

Celia glares at him. “Don’t look at it.”

“Just a peek.”

“I said don’t look at it.”

“I’m looking at it.”

“Don’t look at it.”

“I have to!” Alan protests.

“It’s dinnertime. You’re being very rude.”

“You know I have to,” he repeats. “Could be urgent.”

“They’re fine. The worst is over, that’s what the weather service says.”

“It’s still raining,” Alan says plaintively.

It’s been raining for a week, and as a result the valley is flooded. Well, Halifax is flooded; as for Harrogate, Caroline cannot help but summon words of wisdom from Gillian’s own personal saint, Morrissey: the rain falls hard on a humdrum town. It’s not exactly flooding of biblical proportions all around, as a rather hysterical local weatherman had decreed, but bad enough that Gillian’s farm and sheep have felt the effects: washed-out roads, power out, ruined hay, sheep driven to higher ground, and bad enough that Raff has been bunkered at the farm alone with his mother for three days and serving as the reluctant point person in keeping everyone else informed via increasingly irate and desperate texts to his grandfather.

“Well?” Celia prompts. “What does our Raff say?”

Alan squints at the mobile and enunciates slowly: “‘Is matricide a crime?’”

Lawrence gives his mother an inscrutable look. Caroline glares back in a manner that, she hopes, conveys that she will not be very easy to kill. Which he should certainly be aware of by now. He sulks and resumes surveillance of his sister, who tosses a piece of broccoli in his direction; whether it’s a peace offering or a come at me bro challenge cannot be discerned.

“Oh, dear,” murmurs Celia.

“Also, they’re almost out of toilet paper!” Alan places the mobile on the table. “That settles it. I think I should go out there.”

“But the roads may be bad, love.”

“Roads are fine now, rain should stop tomorrow.”

Celia’s eyes narrow. “Thought you said Gillian isn’t convinced the rain will stop.”
“Well—”

“She knows rain,” you said. You always make her sound like she’s some sort of bloody American Indian, out on the prairie doing a rain dance.”

“There’s a mental image,” Caroline says. She starts clearing the table.

Alan frowns. “Harry will come with. If I ask, he will. We’d be all right, together. I just want to know they’re all right, want to see with my own two eyes.”

“Why don’t you sleep on it?”

“Sleep on it,” Alan grumbles. “You’re just hoping I’ll forget.”

“Yes, dear, I am.”

In the kitchen Caroline stacks plates on the counter and grabs a casserole dish to scrape out before putting it in the dishwasher. As she turns around she finds her mother has magically materialized before her with the shocking stealth of a malevolent, enchanted garden gnome; rearing back to avoid certain collision, the contents of the dish—mixed remnants of noodles, various vegetables, and crumbly tofu in some kind of peanut sauce that Greg said was inspired by West African cuisine even though Caroline thinks he probably knows as much about West African cuisine as she knows about Renaissance poetry or the inner workings of her Jeep—find themselves gloppily splayed against her chest before gently sliding down her shirt and plopping onto the kitchen floor.

She counts to ten—normally an effective way of tempering her reactions, but in this case with random food gunk clinging to an expensive silk blouse finds herself going full-on sacrilegious: “Jesus Fucking Christ!”

Lawrence enters the kitchen and then quickly backpedals out.

“Must you sneak up on people like that?” Caroline shouts.

“Must you swear like that? Gillian really is an awful influence on you.” Celia frowns at the floor.

“Now that’s a right mess.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“I’m sorry but I wanted to talk to you alone, while I had the chance,” Celia says in an undertone.

“Well you’ve a captive audience now, so fire away.”

“You need to go to the farm tomorrow.”

Of course, the old woman would ask her to do precisely the one thing she does not want to do. “Why?”

“If you don’t go, Alan will and he’ll drag Harry along, and those two together—good God. If they don’t get stuck in the mud somewhere or lost God knows where while chasing errant sheep, Harry will drink all of Gillian’s wine and you know how she gets about that. In other words, they will drive her right ’round the bend and none of us, ever, will hear the end of it—well, I won’t hear the end of it, because she’ll blame me for not keeping her father put. She said as much to me when the rains started. She actually called me, can you believe it? She never calls me unless someone has a gun to her head. But she told me to keep him here.” Celia pauses to recharge from this breathless petition and plays with her necklace—pearls, a gift from Alan on their first anniversary. “He’s in
fine fettle these days but I know, I just know, he will push himself trying to help her if he goes out there now and I don’t want him to risk making himself sick again.”

“I understand, but why me? Why not send—Greg?” As Caroline marvels at the nonsense out of her mouth, Celia seems to seriously ponder it but exactly five seconds later they burst into simultaneous fits of laughter.

“You are really funny sometimes,” Celia chortles.

“I know. Missed my calling.”

“But really, love. It’s not like you’d have to actually do anything strenuous. Just take them some food, you’ve got that leftover origami—

“—orecchiette,” Caroline says.

“—oh, and toilet paper, and just sweep the floors, wash the dishes, say an encouraging word or two and you’ll have done your duty.”

Like a wife, Caroline thinks.

“So will you?”

She sighs. “If you think it will—”

“Ah, wonderful! Thank you, love! You’ll go tomorrow then, will you? I’ll tell Alan right now.” Celia whirls out of the kitchen.

“I didn’t say yes yet,” she shouts at Celia’s retreating form.

Celia cackles triumphantly. “You’re my favorite daughter!”

She stares at the greasy smears on the floor.

The beginning of the flood had arrived at a most inopportune time: immediately after the pub kiss, which had left her fiery-cheeked and dazed on the ride home, quietly holding herself as she stared at pearl drops of light random and fleeting against the panorama of darkness. Twice William asked if she was all right. Later, alone in bed, she touched herself briefly and found no satisfaction in doing so. Bored before I even began, she had thought and then, oh Christ, quoting Morrissey, and finally, dismally she threw herself off the cliff into sleep. She woke to a morning heavily cloaked in rain and fog, the relentless downpour hissing with such persistence that when it briefly let up three days later the air rang with empty glory, not unlike the ripe silence following the violent peal of church bells.

At least Raff will get a good laugh out of seeing her in Wellies; she will actually get use of the pair that she bought years ago at the last threat of flooding. In fact, she is excited to wear the boots because they are a lovely, glossy black that will go smashingly with practically anything. Oh Christ, she sighs, and imagines the women’s mag headline: Dressing for Natural Catastrophe: What to Wear!

The drive to the farm the next afternoon is fraught with detours and muddy roads along a horizon that reminds Caroline of a Rothko: dark gray land and light gray sky cauterized together with a ragged white line across the horizon, the gleaming line absorbing every bit of light that daytime can possibly spare. Splinters of thin, light rain fall against the windshield. In the drive up to the farmhouse the Jeep gets caught in a muddy rut; she manages to back out and then maneuver around it, but the flood-damaged dirt road is bumpier than usual and despite the Jeep’s otherwise
excellent shock absorbers Caroline gets a shaky, tediously unsatisfying ride that brings to mind the nadir of her sexual relationship with John.

As she pulls up within sight of the farmhouse she sees that Raff has spotted the Jeep from afar and he awaits her impatiently, bouncing on his heels. She is unprepared for the intensity of his greeting: He throws himself into her arms like a long-lost son or lover. She doubts she will receive a similarly enthusiastic reaction from Gillian; Christ knows you certainly don’t deserve it, she thinks.

“Thank God!” he says. “A normal person.”

“It’s nice to be thought of in that way,” Caroline replies.

“Please tell me you brought—”

“—toilet paper, yes, and pasta, sandwiches, biscuits, salad—”

“None of that healthy stuff for us,” Raff says. “Oooh, look at those fancy Wellies! Very chic, Cazza. You look like a farmer on telly—like you could be on a show about a sheep farmer who solves murders all the time.”

Caroline rolls her eyes in mock exasperation. “So where’s your mum?”

“Out in barn. I find it’s best to keep her out there, away from polite society.”

After they’ve unloaded the Jeep she reluctantly follows Raff out to the barn while he talks of dead sheep, wet hay, and power outages; the sheep were two dumb, young ewes that fell down a ravine, some of the hay might be salvageable but at least half of it might be bad, and the power is back on.

They find Gillian pulling an empty wheelbarrow into the barn. From the knees down her jeans and boots are spackled with mud. Her left elbow looks skinned and the sleeve of the flannel shirt on that arm is torn, and her hair is greasy and pulled back into a ponytail. At the sight of Caroline she drops the wheelbarrow; the clatter echoes and Caroline jumps. Gillian frowns and tugs at her work gloves.

Over the past week Caroline has rehearsed various speeches in her head ranging from the florid to the plainspoken, but all these thoughtful peregrinations made her wish she could simply present Gillian with a Venn diagram of intersecting emotions where each panic-riddled state or practical consideration included Gillian as the common element. Additionally the circular aspect of the diagram alluded rather obviously to Caroline’s typical mental roundabouts on the subject. Even allowing for Raff’s presence, what comes out of her mouth is still light years from either an articulate summation of the current chaos of her mind, or a poetic expression of inchoate desire:

“I come bearing toilet paper,” she says.

As expected she gets Gillian’s flinty look of irritated incomprehension, not unlike the time Greg tried to educate her on the nutritional value of mung beans in refutation of Gillian’s steadfast refusal to eat anything called mung.

“Sometimes you don’t get the hero you want,” Raff says as he claps a hand on Caroline’s shoulder, “but the hero you need.”

Gillian shuffles, stares at the floor. “That’s great.”

“There’s food,” Raff adds. “She’s brought food.”
“Good.” Gillian pretends that peeling off work gloves and tossing them onto a tool bench is an effort requiring both massive strength and supreme concentration.

Resigned to his mother’s surliness, Raff merely shoots her an exasperated look.

Look at me, Caroline thinks, but now Gillian busies herself with wiping dry the handle of some dangerous-looking tool that could easily be used for disembowelment and so she quickly turns her attention back to Raff. “Are you hungry?” she squeaks at him.

“I am, but I was gonna shove off—” He hesitates, fixing a glance on his mother. “—if that’s still all right.”

Gillian nods, digs around in her jeans pocket. In flight, the keys to the Landy flash across the barn. Raff swipes at the air and catches them. His face softens as he jiggles the keys in his palm. “You sure?”

“Yes, yeah. I told you it’s all right. So go on already, go see your girls. Come back tomorrow.”

Not content to proffer a mere thank you, Raff strides across the barn and engulfs his mother in a bear hug. Caroline allows herself to be amused at the spectacle of Gillian squirming, looking irritated, then pleased, then smiling, and then berating her son’s manhood: “All right, stop hugging me before you start growing ovaries.”

Would that be such a bad thing? Caroline decides not to say this.

“I love you, man,” Raff drawls oafishly in imitation of an American drunkard.

This makes Gillian chuckle and Caroline experience a brief fit of jealousy. There was a time when she used to make Gillian laugh; was that gone now, did the leaden intensity of this thing between them somehow drain the light from their relationship as the cursed, bloody flooded valley drained the sun from the sky?

She clears her throat and asks, “Is there anything I can do?”

Back to the squinty glare. “Yeah.” Gillian grabs a wide broom. She swaggers in Caroline’s general direction and then effortlessly tosses the broom at Caroline, who manages an awkward catch of it. “Sweep in here. Muck it out a bit.”

Once again irritated at Gillian’s behavior, Raff asks pointedly, “What are you gonna do?”

“Well,” Gillian drawls as she continues walking away from them, “since we’ve got toilet paper, thought I’d celebrate by taking a shit.”

They watch her leave. While she walks down the path to the house she occasionally glares up at the sky, as if daring it to rain more.

Raff shakes his head. “She’s really too much.”

You have no idea, Caroline wants to say. Instead she hugs Raff again before he sprints out to the Land Rover. As he drives away, he waves with frantic, grateful desperation, as if she ceded a place on a lifeboat for him. It’s like Titanic and she is Leonardo DiCaprio, Raff is Kate Winslet, and Gillian is the fucking iceberg. No matter, Caroline smiles bravely in a quintessentially English well chaps we’re doomed fashion while waving listlessly back at Raff and murmuring, “God help me.”
After sweeping the barn Caroline sits gingerly on an ancient stool that should be consigned to the woodpile. The stool wobbles and abruptly she stands. She rubs her back, stares at the large metal tool chest tucked under the tool bench. The red enameled exterior has clearly seen better days; the tool chest’s squat body is covered with dents and dings and dirt. There are five drawers of varying sizes, ranging from the smallest at the top to the largest at the bottom. The largest drawer looks a bit crumpled, as if it had been targeted in Gillian-driven fit of pique; as a result, it does not close properly. Caroline is not certain what compels her—other than sheer nosiness—but she pries open the drawer. It is crammed with books: Both paperbacks and hardcovers, all in varying stages of age and decrepitude. History, poetry, literature. Even a Stephen Hawking book. Philip Larkin. J.B. Priestley. Wallace Stevens. Barbara Tuchman. A book called *The Transit of Venus* catches her eye—her hope that it is actually about astronomy is immediately dashed by an abstract, pastel cover that indicates it’s a novel or perhaps poetry. Some of the paperbacks are warped with damp, their pages as furbelowed as the skirts of a Victorian matron.

All of these, Gillian’s books—as hidden and damaged as she is.

Caroline knows now that she has misjudged Gillian from day one. Thought she was reckless when in fact she possessed patience borne from a lifetime of denials and disappointments. Thought she was fragile and frail until Caroline discovered the untold muscles and sinew coiled under her skin and the sure and steady grip of her hands. Thought she was an uneducated rube and not a woman who secretly read books in a damp dim barn—probably because she didn’t want her shit husband to find out and knock her upside the head and who does it now simply because it’s a force of habit or is unwilling to admit to anyone that she needs the grace of solitude. Or both. Thought she was incapable of fidelity or love when she would gladly accept the smallest scrap of anything remotely resembling love, including its many seductive duplicities.

*Tell me a lie, tell me you love me.*

The glinting rain, which had stopped shortly before she arrived, picks up again, deepening the puddles and dips along the rough path that leads to the farmhouse. She imagines Gillian walking this path everyday, through all kinds of weather. Day in, day out. Sun warming her skin, wind stiffening her clothes, rain soaking her bones, snowflakes dusting her hair. Or on days when she’s hungover, or menstruating, or too wired on coffee, or walking with a spring in her step because she had if off with someone she met recently and it was good. Or walking slowly because Eddie has broken her ribs and they’re still mending.

Gillian told her this story while in that strangely lucid state of drunkenness that lent itself to her compulsive confessions: She had been too frightened to go to hospital because they would have asked too many questions, so she spent a fortnight in bed feigning a bout of flu to everyone until finally, with her torso bound up with bandages—the perpetrator himself had gently wrapped her up while crying and saying *it will never happen again, I swear to you*—and stuffed with as much paracetamol and oxycodone as she could take, she went back to work, doing some light chores every day. The path to the barn every morning was the hardest bit, she had said, like walking a gauntlet and every uneven step sent waves of pain beating against her core; once she got past that, everything seemed easier. A miracle then, a bloody fucking miracle that she did not die, a miracle that the man Celia Dawson reacquainted herself with after so many years was not just a widower but a bereft parent showing them photos of his lost child—a handsome, weary woman with haunted eyes the elusive shade of sky, sea, and earth commingled. *There, that’s her, that’s my Gillian.*

Caroline riffles the stiff, yellowed pages of *The Transit of Venus*. As words flutter by she encounters her name in the book several times. There are signs and miracles on this rainy day to be interpreted and treasured in equal measure, and the last one is divination for the disbeliever: She stands here looking at Gillian’s books and know that this, all of this, is heading where it’s heading.
despite her complete and utter lack of faith.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK:

The Smiths:
“'There is a Light That Never Goes Out’”
“'William, It Was Really Nothing’”
Patricia Barber:
"'You Don't Know Me'"

NOTE:

The great Shirley Hazzard died recently, so the reference to her novel in this chapter is a hat tip to an extraordinary writer who, I fear, will not be as remembered and revered as she should be.
interlude

Ostensibly, the reason she’s there is to fix Maurice’s Bentley.

Gillian sits on the creeper, the heels of her trainers dig into greasy cold floor of Maurice’s garage, her back pressed against the passenger door of the car. The door leading to the house is open and music spills down the connecting hallway; some opera that’s been playing the whole time she’s been working on the car. This music, whatever it is, has the peculiar effect of lying low and rustling pleasantly in the background until it rears up and demands notice as in the gently aggressive manner of a sheep butting one’s hip. As she fixed the car she would stop, listen, and wonder what was being sung, what words were making her pause in her work and shiver delightedly; whatever it is, it’s not in English or in French, which she knows well from school.

The car—a 1967 Bentley—is now repaired. At least she’s pretty certain it will run. Presumably no one in all of Halifax could fix it, which Gillian finds pretty bloody hard to believe. No, she thinks, the real reason is so that Maurice can ply her with fancy teacakes, including the ginger biscuits she likes, and deploy his usual brand of gentle persuasion in service of her parents’ seemingly never-ending, nefarious campaign to have her attend university—something that, as an added bonus, would get her away from Eddie. This civilized, food-based approach, Gillian admits, is infinitely preferable to her mother’s shouting and her father’s wounded, passive-aggressive silences.

The voices interleave the silences and the music so effortlessly that she cannot believe such beauty exists. How something so ephemeral, so glittering and delicate, can also lace through her blood with the rich danger of a drug, a siren’s song. Because she sits there, unmoving, as the voices cross, fade, and blend together, as they mark indelible celestial paths around her, as the notes ascend heavenward and at the same moment weave closer and closer to her very being. It’s like a hand pressing on her heart and for one indelible moment she cannot breathe.

Then Maurice comes in, scuffling softly in well-worn slippers, cardigan rumpled and tie loosened after a long day of work. He half-kneels to offer her another cup of tea. “Did you fix it, lass?”

She takes the cup, nods, and wheels away from the car. “Think so. Give her a try.”

With gleeful anticipation, he rubs his hands together and slides behind the wheel. The car sputters, coughs, and roars to life. Over the purring of the engine Maurice shouts, “Oh, Gillian, that’s grand. You’re a genius.”

The hot tea scalds her tongue. She winces. “What is this?” she says abruptly.

He turns off the car and steps out. “Just your average Assam, dearie.”
“No, I mean—the, the music. What is it?”

“An opera by one Claudio Monteverdi,” he says, and then rattles off something in another language.

“That Italian?”

“Yes. You should study Italian, you know.” He shuts the door of the Bentley. “Your dad says you’re good with languages. You did very well with your French, I hear.”

She shrugs and tilts the teacup. The flat surface shifts, revealing bits of leaf suspended beneath the amber.

Amused at her lack of response, Maurice smiles. He’s given it enough of a go today—fed her, made speeches, endured her adolescent sulks and shrugs. “So you like the opera?” he asks, pleased.

“Yeah, it’s, it’s b-beautiful,” she says, and gnashes her lower lip. She hates this stammer, which has plagued her since childhood and always asserts itself in the reckless convergence of words and feelings and thoughts rushing through her, everything moving too fast and as a result sometimes her mouth is either too far behind or too far ahead of adequate articulation or careful expression.

“It is.”

“That last bit there—it sounds like it’s, um, it’s two women singing.”

“It is.”

“It sounds like—” Her cheeks are warm.

“—a love song? It is.” Maurice smiles easily as if to say, of course—why not? He’s worldly in a way that his best friends are not. He’s lived abroad, traveled widely. Nothing new under the sun, he likes to say. Including love and its opposing forces.

She looks up at him, face ablaze, yearning undisguised, and in that one glance he sees it—he sees her, sees what she’s hidden and struggled with for more than a year now. In a quick spasm of surprise his brow twitches. He blinks.

“Gillian—” Maurice begins gently.

But she’s with Eddie now. She’s thrown in her lot with him. That very morning she laid in bed
with him, head on his chest as he talked about the future and how he wanted a farm and he was so happy and excited, almost childlike, and held her so very tightly unlike anyone had ever done before. She drank in his scent, his warmth, and felt a safety, a closeness that she did not think possible with anyone. They would have a farm, they would raise a family, they would be happy.

That was something, because a year ago she thought she would never love anyone ever again.

With the teacup clattering in her grasp and tea pitching over the side into the saucer, she stumbles upward like a lamb catching scent of life outside the barn, wild and ready to bolt.

“I should go,” she says. “I should—I have things to do.” She hands Maurice the teacup, gathers her tools together, and on a parting note tells him that she wants a farm, and a life, with Eddie.

Chapter End Notes

This is a short flashback chapter. Next one will be definitely longer!

Also, I don’t know if there is a Brit equivalent word/phrase for a mechanic’s creeper, my research fell short on that.

CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK:

"Pur ti miro," from Monteverdi's The Coronation of Poppea

(The actual duet is not as long as the clip. It's over in five minutes...the rest is just clapping, bravas, roll credits....)
if you do not love me I shall not be loved
if I do not love you I shall not love
Samuel Beckett, from Cascando

A plunk and a splash and Gillian wakes up.

Her arm, resting on the rim of the tub, had finally slipped into the bath. The noise roused her, the raw skin on her arm stung as it hit the water. She’s been in the tub long enough that the water is too cold, her hair is starting to dry, and her toes are swollen, colorless raisins. Whether this has served long enough as a diversionary tactic, she’s not sure. Hiding in a bathroom for an unspecified amount of time is a move straight out of Caroline’s own passive-aggressive playbook. Perhaps Caroline appreciates the delicious reversal of the maneuver; she might be downstairs right now stroking her chin like a thoughtful supervillain while murmuring to herself, well-played, Gillian Greenwood, well-played.

Sitting on the loo while looking at Raff’s bathroom reading—a bevy of mindless lad mags—got boring fast, so she had decided to take a bath. That she got in a nap while being passive-aggressive should earn her a gold star in multitasking. She drops a damp washcloth over her face and enjoys its sour, shroud-like suffocation. Tiredly her mind roams like a transistor radio on a cross-country trip, fading in and out of frequencies conscious and unconscious and rescuing from the ether thoughts and images with strangely satisfying randomness. A few months ago Caroline told her that sometimes she still talks to Kate in her head. It made Gillian feel slightly less crazy for taunting her dead husband in a barn, and from that she takes further comfort in recalling thirty-year-old conversations with a dead friend so vividly that she can almost believe Maurice is still alive. Such is the power of the dead over the living.

She gets out, drains the tub, and wraps herself in a towel. In the hallway on her way to the bedroom she hears the distant, distinct lilt of Caroline’s voice from downstairs—actually in this instance the lilt bends under the weight of a Morrissey-like weariness, a strong indication that a mobile conversation with Celia is occurring—and realizes she’s lost the passive-aggressive battle, that Caroline has successfully laid siege to the farmhouse. Ah, hubris, Gillian thinks as she enters the bedroom and shuts the door. How stupid to think she could outmaneuver the queen, that steely-eyed bitch who rivals her stubbornness, who always plays to win. She sags against the door. Except, apparently, in matters of love.

She will not dress to impress. Not that she ever does, really, but now there’s well and truly no point to it and so she throws on a pair of jeans that have both knees shot out, a frayed t-shirt, and a mismatched jumper against the nibbling chill of summer night. Then, arms flung out Christ-like, she falls back onto the bed. She used to do a variant on this when she was young and went swimming at the lake: standing on a dock, pretending to be shot by a sniper, freezing, and then doing a backward freefall into the water. Always got shrieked at by her best mate: You’re gonna break your neck, Gillian! Of course she never did and, from the soft blue embrace of the water, she would laugh at her friend, the sky, the insensate fates out there that marked the shivering trees
and the undulating tide but not her, never her.

The bed is, once again, hers alone. Robbie is back in his old house, which he had never sold and had rented out to a mate from work. While uncertain if the retention of the house was careful if cynical foresight on his part or sheer laziness, she’s willing to bet the farm on the latter. All trace of him is gone except two large suitcases of clothes taking up space in her tiny closet. Despite her repeated threats to burn them or give them to a charity shop he refuses to pick them up; he ignores her terse texts and instead besieges her with guilt trips and pathetic entreaties for reconciliation. Then it’s her turn to ignore him. The thought occurs that with regard to Caroline she is as stubbornly spiteful as Robbie is with her—the immovable object resisting the forces of change around it—and this realization makes her even less inclined to move from the bed. Painfully she pinches the bridge of her nose. Stupid, she thinks. Stupid because Caroline belongs to someone else, even if that someone else is, as far as Gillian is concerned, a clueless bloody twat for not realizing what lies so easily within her grasp.

From the open window she hears the familiar tinny percussion of the rain pinging on the edge of the water trough, light and persistent—then lingering heavy drops, three in a row, tap tap tap. It stops. She counts forty seconds. It resumes. It’s a pattern she knows well, for she’s heard it all week long, all year long, all the many years she has lived here. She knew yesterday the rain wouldn’t stop yet—stupid bloody forecasters—because no one counts the drops, no one feels the gaps and silences between them, no one lies awake and listens to the rain quite like she does.

With the magnificent hiss and percussion of the rain’s concerto washing over her, she falls asleep.

Wake up you fucking bitch, wake up wake up wake up wake up

Crying and gasping, she sits up. The air is thin and cool. She cannot drink it down fast enough and her mind chants its usual mantra following nightmares: Gone, gone, gone. The sky is darker—faded periwinkle, painterly and flat with a thick smear of clouds across the pretty backdrop, a minor masterpiece desecrated by an embittered apprentice. She’s clutching a quilt. She does not remember covering herself with the quilt, which is usually draped over a chair in the corner of the bedroom except in the dead of winter. So either the shade of Eddie, despite the typical brutal wakeup call, is feeling particularly charitable toward her at the moment, or Caroline covered her with the quilt before leaving. Because Caroline cannot possibly still be here. It’s getting on. Gillian grabs the mobile from the night stand in order to confirm the time—muttering shit when she sees she’s been asleep for nearly two and half hours—but there is no way to confirm the lingering presence of ghosts or Oxford bitches other than actually getting her arse out of bed and going downstairs.

She knows every creak, squeak, and groan of the house, knows what noisy floorboards to avoid in the hallway, knows that if you put enough weight on the bannister it will make a telltale peep and playfully threaten to give way under your touch, knows that the third step from the bottom will betray you every time, and even if you get that far you’ll have to hopscotch to the kitchen and then be careful not to let the screen door slam behind you. The house is an enchanted trap, a fucked-up cautionary tale; once its prisoner, Gillian is now its sovereign, lordling over sheep and ghosts and unwanted guests and yet tiptoeing foolishly down the stairs to avoid detection in her own home, something she has not done in years.
In the living room she finds Caroline asleep, slumped in an uncomfortable-looking position on the couch, half-sitting, half-sprawled, resembling an abandoned, suicidal marionette: head pillowed on the armrest, long legs jutting at uncomfortable-looking angles, hands in curled stasis in her lap, face obscured by waves of blonde hair, and snoring softly.

Quickly she glides past this poor slumbering queen who has somehow stumbled into her toxic mythos. But fairytale magic has transpired: the house is clean, at least cleaner than it has been in weeks. The grotty swamp near the door has been mopped away and the muddy boots and trainers that were there in a grimy discarded pile are neatly aligned on the now-sparkling mat. The dirty jumpers, muddy jeans, and plaid shirts strewn here and there throughout the house are in a basket, ready for washing. The floors are swept, the dishes done, the kitchen table wiped down and piles of mail, newspapers, and magazines are neatly stacked upon it. A pot of tea is on the stove, a tray of sandwiches covered with a translucent plastic lid is on the counter.

Suspiciously Gillian regards the sandwiches. Despite the fact they were put together with many of the same commonplace ingredients she would find in her own kitchen, they approach a chef’s level of competence: cut on precise diagonals revealing beautifully even striations of each ingredient. Their perfection bestirs an inordinate amount of resentment, which builds as she realizes she is furious about fucking sandwiches of all things, and that steeps into bitterness as she shoves one half of a delicious perfect sandwich in her mouth and nearly groans at how good it is —chicken salad with tarragon. Of all the fucking posh toff twatty spices, tarragon. Twenty minutes later she’s devoured two of them and washed it down with a cup of tea, cold but still good. Before she can work herself up into irrational indignation about enjoying pretentious food, she hears the creak of the floor in the living room and by the time she summons the courage to turn around Caroline is leaning in the doorway, gorgeously disheveled and running a hand through the glorious mess of her hair.

She blinks and smiles uncertainly and this drowsy, sensual vulnerability makes Gillian ache all over. “Sleep all right?”

“Yeah,” Gillian says. “Thanks.” In the hope of frantically shoring up some pointless small talk she turns her attention back to the counter, but nothing comes to mind and she finds herself staring helplessly out the window, the land and sky as always a consistent comfort. The rain, possessing a light of its own, flashes silver against the dusk. There is a conversation unspoken, a reckoning that lurks around the corner but she does not possess the energy for pursuit anymore—pursuit of either Caroline or the words that will resolve their emotional stalemate—and Caroline, she knows, does not have the stomach for it. Maybe it’s all a bad sign but she doesn’t know anymore; she’s spent her life frantically rushing past so many omens of ill portent that the art of discernment and interpretation is like her French: a woefully forgotten skill.

“Thanks,” Gillian says again. “For the food. For cleaning up.”

“You’re welcome.”

Then she undercuts the gratitude with a jibe: “Know your mum made you come out here.” She had all but threatened Celia with bloody murder—which, admittedly, felt enormously satisfying—
if her father so much as entertained the idea of coming out to the farm to help right now. But someone would have to be the fall guy and quite frankly if Caroline's life were a film noir it would be titled *Dial M for Martyr*. Better competent Caroline, however, than Greg with his flip-flops and mung beans, and who once told her that sheep made him “terribly anxious.”

“It wasn’t a bother,” Caroline replies. “At all.”

“But you should go.” Gillian forces it out while furiously drumming the kitchen counter. “It’s getting late. Roads still aren’t good. Harder driving at night.” She hears Caroline sighing, shifting—tiny movements rippling through the house amid the susurrations of the rain, two pieces of music vying for prominence in her mind.

“Do you want me to go?” Caroline asks softly.

She lets out a hollow laugh. “You really have to fucking ask?” She raises the teacup to her mouth—and finds it empty. Then nearly jumps out of her skin when she realizes Caroline has crossed the room and stands next to her.

Caroline takes the cup, her fingertips graze Gillian’s knuckles. “Let me make you a pot of fresh.”

“No. I—it’s all right. Don’t need it.” As usual Gillian’s body betrays her. First, that *stupid fucking stammer*, and then idiotically discovering that they are standing too close, that she’s practically leaning into Caroline and somehow together they’ve initiated the fumbling first steps into an awkward embrace, an accidental intimacy emblematic of their entire relationship. She doesn’t know what to do with her hands, whether to touch as a lover, a sister, or a friend. She’s been all of these things and none of these things. So she just stands and allows it to happen: the deceptively easy fit of their bodies together, the arm around her waist, the neat tuck of her head under Caroline’s chin, her hot forehead falling to gentle rest on the bower of Caroline’s collarbone—all of it caught in the sweet undertow of sweat and that citrusy shampoo she apparently still uses.

Her breathing goes shallow and she thinks that once again she’s surrendering to scraps like a starving dog. But that’s the thing about starving. You need the scraps to live. She closes her eyes, feels Caroline’s warm breath on the top of her head.

“You kissed me,” Caroline murmurs into her hair.

It doesn’t sound like recrimination. Nonetheless Gillian plays her favorite get-out-of-jail-free card: “I was drunk.”

“So you regret it?”

Too tired for lying. “No,” she replies.
“Good. Neither do I.”

Gillian does not care what happens next because if nothing else she has this: an admission of want, along with the urgency of the rain’s tap tap tap outside providing the perfect counterpoint to the languid unfurling of the moment.

“There was this book I read about a year ago,” Caroline says. “Found it in Kate’s office after she died.” Caroline pauses, and then finds the courage to continue. “Didn’t seem like something she would read, but she always surprised me, you know? Her tastes were always so far ranging, so unpredictable. I—” She hesitates again, and Gillian feels the movement of her throat rolling through muscle and bone. “I almost thought this book was some bloody sign from beyond, like she left it there for me to find and read after she was gone. Know that sounds ridiculous. I thought that because it was called The Natural History of Destruction and I felt like I’d been annihilated myself, destroyed in a way and that there was absolutely no way of coming back from the loss of her. But this book—this book was about Germany during World War II. It was fascinating. And depressing. I hadn’t known there were so many bombnings and firestorms in so many different cities—knew about the big ones, of course. Dresden, Cologne, Hamburg. The one in Hamburg, that was probably the worst. Forty thousand people dead, entire city virtually destroyed. But, but one of the things that fascinated me was that after all this death and destruction, the natural world regenerated itself in this strange, unprecedented, rapid growth. So unusual at the time, studies were done about it. Tree and flowers sprung up faster than anyone thought possible. Life came back with a vengeance. Who could have imagined that out of these ruins, this complete fucking decimation of all life something beautiful would arise, so quickly and so powerfully? I was thinking about that book today because I saw the books you keep in your barn, Gillian—I didn’t mean to snoop but the drawer was kind of open—” Caroline stops and laughs gently, self-consciously. “Well, all right, it wasn’t, but at that moment I wanted to know something about you, anything, even if it meant finding out what stupid bloody tools you have even though I wouldn’t be able to identify half of them, and then I thought maybe, maybe you should read this book. If you haven’t already. You’ve read a lot of history, yeah? Maybe you know this. But if you don’t—maybe you need to know this story because in a way I think it’s your story too, because I think you’ve defied everything that has ever happened to you by being here and alive and beautiful and it is amazing that you are here, it is amazing, you are amazing.”

The cadence of her voice over Gillian’s head belies the intent of the words and once again she’s back in Maurice’s garage, skimming the surface of great beauty. Then stupidly she thinks of the Smiths, the immaculate shimmer of a guitar overlaying a song about pedophilia or suicide or fat girls in love with closet cases and ruffians or headmasters beating the shit out of you. The more she tries to pull herself out of this lovely stupor the more entrenched she remains, eyes closed and head resting upon Caroline’s shoulder. It is a disbelieving, disorienting thing to suddenly be seen, to be comprehended by someone who beforehand only tentatively lifted the cover of the book of your life, who has never read beyond the pale, academic introduction of your story. Here is someone cracking the spine of that book and diving in, mining the text in a way no one else has before, striking a vein rich in blood and gold.

“You asked me that night if it was like it was before. It wasn’t,” Caroline continues. “It was better. It always felt right and that frightened me. I’ve asked myself since the first time we were together—if what I felt was wrong, if I was using you, if I should have told Kate—and fuck, I should
have, but I didn’t. I couldn’t, I didn’t.” Caroline stops. “Fuck. I don’t know what my point is, except—I did not, could not ever dare allow myself to feel for you.”

Gillian’s eyelids twitch. She does not move but to blindly raise a hand to touch the soft down of Caroline’s cheek. Lips grace the inside of her wrist, where the veins crisscross like tracks at a busy railroad station and the switchback of her blood follows unknown courses, a tongue traces a route to the terminus of her palm. Then her fingers are in Caroline’s mouth, damp and soft and dangerous as her fingertips rest tentatively against the sharp blade of teeth. At this her blood is up; she remembers this exchange of trust so well. When they kiss it is surprisingly tender and confident and quite unlike the others that delineate the history of kisses exchanged between them, a history witnessed in her mind as time-lapsed photos: the chaste sisterly pecks on the cheek, the full onslufts designed for domination, the lazy postcoital ones that could go on forever, the determined, carefully plotted nips leading to grander pleasures. This time is different because it breaches narrow categorization into a significant marker in Gillian’s life in this house, in this room. The kitchen is where he hit me the first time and where he broke my ribs. It is also where I told him I was pregnant and he was so happy he hugged me and spun me around, laughing. Now she can add where Caroline said beautiful things to me and kissed me like it meant something.

It’s also where I remember she’s strong in more ways than one because Caroline is half-nudging, half-lifting her onto the counter, where her ass gently collides with the sandwich tray and sends the empty tea cup clattering on its side—she never liked those cups anyway, and it prompts a darker memory of how they were bought out of desperation at a charity shop to replace all the cups she and Eddie had flung at each other during an epic row. She had actually nailed him a few times—Christ, he had laughed like a fucking devil and she paid for it later, but the fleeting, fearful illumination on his face as he touched a smear of blood on his head and realized that she could hurt him too was worth the hundred hells that followed.

Hell, oh hell. They are kissing again. Gillian shivers. She thinks of cities on fire. A hundred hells, a conflagration of histories.

Of course Caroline senses the mood change, stops, pulls back, and touches her cheek. “Are you okay?”

“It wasn’t the first time Hamburg had been destroyed by fire—in the war, that is,” Gillian blurts. “I-it also happened like a hundred year before that. 1840s, 1842, maybe? Not as many people died, city wasn’t quite as destroyed. Funny, they call the first one the great fire, the one during the war was worse. Much worse. More people died, for one thing.” Gillian blurts it all out at once, then gnaws her lip, gnashes her teeth, and curses herself, blithering idiot that she is, for allowing her nerves to trample all over this moment where she’s practically wrapped around and writhing against this woman that she has wanted for what feels like forever.

But Caroline smiles, tucks hair behind Gillian’s ear, and then sneakily caresses it. “I didn’t know that.”

“No?” It’s surprising. Caroline knows everything.

“Tell me.”
That Caroline is so willing to follow her lead, to do whatever she likes—whether it’s kissing or an impromptu history lesson, making tea or making love—sets everything right and the hollow pressure, the ceaseless recurring hollow pressure within her, deflates steadily. Shyly she gazes downward. Caroline’s hands rest lightly on her twitching thighs. This is happening.

“The great fire of Hamburg was also a, um, landmark case in insurance history.” Fuck sakes, she tells herself, please shut up.

“Oh,” Caroline says, with that placating, sweetly affectionate tone she uses at times on children, animals, and Alan when he goes on about the Tories.

“Re-reinsurance history, actually. Had a sixth-form history teacher who was weirdly obsessed with insurance. Did real well in his class, though.”

“I see.” She kisses Gillian’s forehead. Then lightly traces Gillian’s eyebrow with the tip of her tongue and it hits Gillian that no one has ever done that to her before, and the strangeness of it all leans into the undeniably erotic, so much so that she must babble further to regain her equilibrium.

“Did so well in the class, m-my dad wanted me to be an insurance agent.”

“How perfectly dreadful,” Caroline replies archly. Her mouth lingers near Gillian’s. Her breath smells faintly of sandwiches and tea, the seductive reek of a civilized animal.

“Had nice hair, my teacher did.” Mr. Trainor. Pudgy, a bit spotty, red-faced, bespectacled. But God that hair, like Robert Redford in his prime.

Caroline’s hand is at her back, sliding up her t-shirt, cupping the column of her spine and bracing her against the inevitable swoon.

Because Christ all mighty she is set to faint dead away. “Blonde,” Gillian whispers. “Like—like yours.”

She has one hand tangled into Caroline’s perfectly aged but obviously expensive chambray shirt whilst the other goes for the gold, the thick glory of her hair. Caroline’s mouth is warm, slippery, tasting of tea, sharp and strong and comfortingly familiar—she hums and Gillian devours the sound, cannot get enough of it, her bare heels dig hard into the back of Caroline’s calves as the humming goes deep and low, triggering some kind of brief fugue state where she will not remember until the next evening what happens next: kissing in the doorway of the kitchen for a long time, Caroline peeling off her jumper and tossing it cavalierly God knows where (found behind the recycling bin two dizzy days later) and pressing her against the doorway beam, Caroline’s hands sliding up her t-shirt, under her bra, and touching her in just the right way, persistently teasing and caressing, palms delicately brushing her nipples, until the declaration of I
want to be in your bed cut through the dreamy fugue and Gillian takes to the stairs two at time, noisy fucking staircase be damned.

In the bedroom once again she falls, spread-eagled, back into the bed. This spectacular surrender seems infinitely more dangerous than blindly flinging herself into a lake because Caroline, head tilted, watches her for such a long slow moment that Gillian interprets tender regard and a commitment to memory as the banality of regret and begins to lose her euphoric nerve.

“IT's like you were diving, almost,” Caroline finally says, sweetly awed. She kneels over Gillian, touches her hair, and pulls it gently. Gillian arches, bares the feast of her throat, and allows her clothes to be slowly removed.

They move with the ease of swimmers, the element of sex not unlike water; under the great force of the sea, you cannot help but summon forth grudging gracefulness lest you perish in panic. Touch flows smoothly over bodies, every movement like strokes pulling them toward the line of the horizon: Caroline’s fierce, mermaid wriggle-kick as she removes her jeans, the smooth backstroke as she discards her shirt. With the fervor of a novitiate Gillian believes that she knows Caroline’s body better than any other lover before or since. The force of this preoccupation—the absence of possession, the mind yearning for what it does not have—inscribed lines in her memory as a pen digging into a notepad and mastering nothing but strokes of indelibility, the intensity of which may diminish but will never completely disappear. She rolls a finger along the curve of Caroline’s bare hip. Memory is a sixth sense. In the quickening dark through touch alone, she is reacquainted with the stretch marks that embarrass Caroline, the freckles that irritate her. And scars of note: the nacreous clot from an appendectomy—she was 37 and ridiculously proud of the fact she drove herself to A&E from work after teaching all day. The jagged thin line along the side of her knee from where she fell off a bicycle and onto a broken bottle—she was 23, at Oxford, and despairingly drunk over a breakup. Gillian has always wondered how many girls she was miserable about during her brilliant academic career at Oxford, enough, presumably, that someone like John became a viable romantic alternative.

Caroline clasps her wrists, pinning her against the bed but for a moment until she recalls that Gillian doesn’t like being held down and then her hands straighten with the careful slow precision of a mechanized bird readying for flight, her palms press gently into Gillian’s wrists before gliding across her arms. Her mouth tracks over Gillian’s body, over breasts and stomach and thighs, brushes a teasing breath and a tender nuzzle against her pubic hair, before doubling back and moving up her body again. What began gently intensifies and Gillian grants herself free rein—something she has not done, well, probably, since the last time they were together. She has spent the past two years fucking in order not to feel. Sometimes it was easily faked, particularly when both parties were so desperate for deception; other instances required bare minimal effort for the crucial release that kept her from going completely mad. She’s wet, grinding helpless and slick against Caroline’s skin, desperate to feel Caroline’s mouth on her cunt but not yet, not yet—Caroline will bite her lips, dig into her skin, grip her ass, bruise her thighs, as if she were a delicacy to be torn and refished, destroyed and devoured in equal measure. When at last she’s claimed and Caroline is licking and sucking her off with tortuous abandon, her hips rise off the bed and she buries a hand in thick hair and touches veritable, living art, this gloss of blonde in evening blue, and helplessly she thrusts against Caroline until a rhythm takes hold, cradled with reverence as if by a cupbearer while riding teeth and bone and when she comes she forgets everything, she forgets herself.
Then the rain, the racketing of her heart, the cool air falling crisp like a fresh bed sheet over the sweat on her chest. The feint of dusk teases light and promises darkness along the ceiling and walls, the chair and the dresser. The year after Eddie died she painted the bedroom and rearranged the furniture in it, even scraped together money to buy a new bed, all to scuttle the memory monsters in her mind. It didn’t work. She can still walk into any room of the house with the taste of blood in the back of her mouth.

A needless, frantic fear blossoms and she props herself up on elbows, is about to ask, did I hurt you? when she hears a sigh of strange contentment from Caroline, who lies in half-sprawl across her, damp face pressed against her hip while lazily stroking her thigh.

“I’ve missed you,” Caroline says.

Time proves a better architect for memory, giving structure and substantiation through distance. Time and this—whatever it is. For herself she calls it love even if she still believes, as she does, that it is nothing of the sort for Caroline—fondness and lust, a serious case of like.

She slides down the bed and reverses their positions, carefully placing herself between Caroline’s thighs, pushing, pushing, entering her, slow and steady until Caroline’s kiss dissolves into raw pulsing gasps that fill Gillian’s open mouth and it’s sweet, there’s honey in her throat, between her legs, running wild through her veins and sticky against her skin, persistent gold and relentless like the rain, which rains and rains and reigns all night long.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK:

Sharon Van Etten: “Love More”
Angel Olson: “Sister”
Portishead: “It’s a Fire”

The book Caroline talks about is W.G. Sebald’s On the Natural History of Destruction.

Chapter title shows that Shirley Hazzard is still on my mind, I reckon; her last novel was titled The Great Fire.
long day’s journey into freak-out

Chapter Summary

Just to be super pretentious and annoying, this chapter is broken up into three parts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

one sunday morning

It is not daylight that awakens Gillian but awareness of time pressing in on her—a merciless internal alarm clock suffering a severe malfunction today because under normal circumstances she’d be on her feet for hours by now. The last step in surrendering to the conscious world is the most painful one: she opens her eyes to a blindingly bright bedroom. After so many days of pissing, sodding rain Mother Nature got cheeky and lo, here’s a sunny warm day worthy of a tropical beach confirmed with a blue-sky striptease courtesy of the fluttering curtain.

Flat on her back, she squints at the ceiling’s white glare, wriggles a bit, and there it is: the delicious awareness of Caroline pressed against her. The day expands exponentially. She raises her head for confirmation and sees blonde hair and a lightly freckled arm draped over her waist, feels heavy hot breathing—miraculously, not snoring—against her upper arm.

Everything would be perfect save for the mobile on the nightstand that starts ringing. While she patiently waits for it to go to voice mail, the reaction from Caroline is akin to poking a hibernating bear: She rumbles loudly and lunges wildly over Gillian—who, as a result, gets unceremoniously smacked in the face with a tit—seizes the offending phone, squints at it, stabs a button, and attempts plastering it onto Gillian’s face. As the phone slides off her cheek Gillian hears a tinny male voice chattering away who is, in all likelihood, Raff, while Caroline rolls away from her and with a lovely snorty growl falls back asleep.

So much for the afterglow. Gillian bobbles the phone. Even with it closer to her ear she can’t hear Raff very well, and wonders if the old mobile is finally dying on her. The mere thought of its demise is actually quite liberating. Maybe she’ll decide not to get a new one. Maybe she will become the only farmer in Yorkshire not to own a mobile. Even Pete, who owns the farm closest to her and is so old that he calls Alan “lad,” has one. Then she realizes she’s holding the phone the wrong way around, with the hearing bit pointed past her chin.

Righting the phone, she plops right into a ranting, raving run-on sentence: “—and I’ve called Nev already and of course since it’s Sunday no one’s working but him and he can’t get out right away and on top o’ that everybody’s stuck in mud or broken down somewhere and I’m sorry, that’s the best I can do, so go on, have your bloody fit already, it’s all over but the shouting as they say, go on, go on.”
“What?” Gillian is still in blink-at-the-ceiling-oh-God-that-was-wonderful-last-night mode.

“Did you not hear what I just said? I drove the Land Rover into a ditch.”

She winces. Such furious enunciation, such painful shouting. She continues blinking at the ceiling. Several long seconds disperse into the summer air as she tries to muster the appropriate amount of outrage but at the moment all she can think is, how did she make me come three times in a row?

“Oh,” she finally says.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Are you drunk?”

This time she manages to keep a grip on the mobile while yanking it away from her ear to avoid the worst of the shouting, although she does catch the bit about being drunk. “Knackered, is all,” she says. In a futile effort at waking up, she vigorously rubs her face. “You all right?”

The unexpected maternal concern waylays Raff’s fit. “I—yeah, I’m fine. And the Landy’s all right, really, not wrecked, just stuck in mud.”

“What happened?”

“Oh.” Raff drags the syllable through an elongated groan of frustration.

Gillian knows the sound well—this sad abbreviation of oh, I’ve done something stupid—it’s a family speciality, both the sound and the stupidity. Now she knows exactly what happened and sighs. “Took the shortcut to Harry’s, didn’t you?”

More shouting on his part, more wincing on hers: “Yes, I took the bloody short cut!”

Even in the best of weather, this infamous short cut to Harry’s house is a trial: a narrow, winding dirt road lined on one side with a fence older than Methuselah and on the other side with a wicked slope to a bog of indeterminate depth. Why no one thought to erect fencing on the bog side of the road is anyone’s guess and Gillian knows better than to put such a simple question begging logic to any denizens of the dale because she’d probably get in return some epic horseshit tale involving nubile shepherdesses, infidelity, murder, ghosts, curses, and whiskey.

“That bog is all mud now, and I couldn’t get her out. Needs towing, like I said.” Raff groans. “And don’t say I told you so, I know you did. Happy now?”

She turns toward Caroline, whose back rises and falls in slow, sleeping rhythm, and rediscovers the freckled map of the stars that she saw only in her mind’s eye the night before. The vault of heaven has cracked open and spilled these burnished stars along Caroline’s skin and her hands
and mouth are desperate to navigate once more by these beloved stars. Her fingers hover just above skin, swooning over the coordinates of Cassiopeia again and again, the repetitive motion as necessary as a heartbeat.

“Yeah,” she says, smiling because no one can see. “I am happy.”

“Now you’re taking the piss,” Raff says angrily.

“I’m not, honest.”

“Seriously, I feel shitty about it, I don’t need you messing me about on top of everything—”

“Raff. Hey.”

He groans again.

“It’s all right. Okay?”

This time a sigh.

“It’ll get sorted. So you called Nev?” Nevin was the knobhead who ran the nearest garage. He was also the first idiot Gillian slept with after Eddie died, begetting a long line of abysmal, regrettable sexual partners. He has since lost hair and gained a beer belly, so now she conveniently forgets whatever she saw in him other than desperate affirmation that she was still reasonably desirable to anyone.

“Yeah.”

“Good. Then just sit tight till you hear from him. Don’t call him again, you start nagging him he’ll never show up. Call me once he’s got it out. Okay?”

“Yeah, all right.” He sighs again. “I am really sorry.”

“Shit happens.” Another stellar moment of maternal comfort, Gillian thinks.

As if commenting on this universal truth, Caroline unleashes a completely unexpected and utterly savage peal of snoring.

“Sink clogged again?” Raff asks.

No, I’m in bed with my stepsister and we’ve spent the better part of last night shagging each
“other’s brains out. “Um, yeah. Just a bit. So I should—”

“Right. I’ll let you go.”

“Yeah. Oh, one more thing—”

“What?”

“Once it all sinks in I will probably string you up by the bollocks.”

“Aw, bless.” He chuckles sardonically. “Now there’s the mother I know and love.”

She rings off, tosses the phone in the general direction of the nightstand, and misses. It clatters to the floor. Caroline’s head lifts off the pillow as she mutters “Jesus” in a voice whiskey-sweet with sleep. In response Gillian places her lips against Cassiopeia and the sky shifts under her mouth, the stars dust her tongue. Caroline pushes against her and grabs her arm, pulling it across her waist as if it were a safety belt. As she clears her throat, her chest rumbles and Gillian tastes the raw vibrato of the body at work, a guttural song for an audience of one.

“Everything all right?” Caroline manages to ask. Her cheek, partially obscured with hair, is mottled pink and cream from sleep in Gillian’s rough, cheap bedsheets and she is still here, she has spent the night in this unholy bed in this cursed bedroom and this alone is so utterly unbelievable to Gillian that she is perched on the edge between great happiness and great ruin and it is no wonder that for want of anything she does not want to get up ever.

She kisses Caroline’s flushed cheek and sets out on a tour of the constellations along the shoulder and arm; the Big Dipper and Orion come easily to mind, touch, and tongue but as for others, well, she cannot recall them and so maps new constellations. My name on your skin and no one else will know, not even you.

“Perfect,” she says, over and over as she marks every kiss and freckle, an incantation that leads them both back to sleep.

An hour later she wakes up alone, the room brighter and warmer and the disorientation she feels suggests that last night and earlier this morning was some sort of prolonged, feverish erotic dream. But no—she sits up and sees a pile of Caroline’s clothes on the chair in the corner. She assumes that Caroline is in the shower, but does not hear the water pipes or any other sound of activity from the bathroom. Naturally this leads to a rather paramount concern: There is, potentially, a naked woman roaming her farm. Perhaps the ever-rational, science-loving headmistress has finally lost her mind. No one’s ever gone barmy from having sex with me before, Gillian thinks, but there’s a first time for everything.

Common sense prevails: Or maybe, just maybe, she’s put the kettle on. While naked. Which could be dangerous. Thinking that she may need to supervise this activity, Gillian gets up, throws on a t-
shirt and pajama bottoms. She looks out the window—sunny and breezy with a chance of naked women in the forecast—and gnaws her lip while staring at a barnyard booby-trapped with sticky mud and dank puddles that cannot dry fast enough. What has happened here is new but not new, and she has no idea what to do or what to say. Well, she knows what not to do: Don’t say I love you, don’t pledge eternal fidelity or devotion because you know she won’t believe it because you’re just bloody old slapper anyway.

In her head Gillian’s more censorious lectures of self-recrimination and restraint are usually cast in her father’s voice so it’s slightly disturbing, to say the least, to sort-of hear him going on about how best to conduct a half-assed lesbian affair with her stepsister—half-assed because Caroline already has a girlfriend and she’s not sure how to handle that. Hell, Caroline doesn’t seem to know how to handle that. Maybe she needs to call what’s-her-face from Hebden Bridge to help her sort through this lesbian horseshit. There’s got to be a Dyke Handbook. There’s got to be a morning after. She rubs her brow. No, no thinking of melodramatic shit 1970s songs right now.

By this time she’s biting her fingernails again and automatically berates herself for it; this time the voice in her head sounds like Robbie, because her nail-biting was one of his pet peeves. As was her drinking, her cooking, the way she dressed—come to think of it, her very existence was his pet peeve.

This time, when she condemns herself for the hundredth time for marrying a man she did not love, it is in her own voice.

Then the creak of the bedroom door and Caroline is there—in a dressing gown nicked from the bathroom and holding a plate of fluffy golden scrambled eggs. Gillian wonders if she is dead. Or dreaming. The dressing gown is a tartan plaid of green and blue that Gillian had initially bought as a birthday gift for her father a few years ago until a series of ill-advised laundering attempts on his part shrank it; in her more paranoid moments she thinks he did this on purpose because maybe he didn’t like it but at any rate, this resulted in Gillian taking default possession of the gown. Even in its shrunken state it is still big on her, but she likes that. She likes it even more so on Caroline—it fits her well and reveals a pleasing bit of calf.

This unbelievable image of domesticity breathes life into a story she has told herself many times late at night when she was too tired to go on and too drunk to care: We live together. Our children are always underfoot. We work too much. When it gets hard we can barely manage to be civil. But at night you are home and tired and after dinner you pour yourself a glass of wine, you push back my hair and lay your hand on the back of my neck like you do and that means everything is all right. We’ll sit around and watch telly and you’ll bitch about your day and on Sunday mornings we’ll make love because Sunday is sacred and quiet and it feels like the end of the world and we can take our time, and I’ll fall asleep after and you’ll let me sleep in while you get up and make me coffee.

Then Caroline says, “It’s weird.”

The storybook closes and Gillian resists the urge to gnaw her fingernails again as she goes into a tailspin: Of course it’s weird, it shouldn’t have happened, you have someone new, someone better, you could not possibly feel anything real for me despite all your fine words and big ideas last night. She attempts leaning against the windowsill with the casual, worldly confidence befitting a
woman of her age and experience but instead gets momentarily entangled with the curtain. “W-what’s weird?” she mutters, while furiously batting away the curtain.

“You’d think by now I’d know how you like your eggs,” Caroline says. “We’ve known each other long enough—well.” She shrugs apologetically, half-heartedly raises the plate. “Anyway, thought you might be hungry—”

“Oh,” Gillian says.

United in postcoital awkwardness, they stare at the plate.

Then Gillian grins stupidly and hugs herself, as if Caroline is offering her an engagement ring or an epic love poem she wrote with the blood of angels on the smoothest of antique vellum or, best yet, a purebred ewe. And it’s not as if Caroline hasn’t fed her God knows how many times before, but these incremental kindnesses fray the edges of so many incontrovertible memories that she can imagine an eventual softening, a dissolution of the rough fabric binding her to the past and blinding her to possibility.

Caroline, however, interprets the smile as commentary upon a dish that does not live up to her Le Cordon Bleu standards. “It’s not my best effort—” she says apologetically.

“No, no—I didn’t mean—thanks. It looks grand and I am hungry, really hungry. Thank you.” Gillian seizes the plate.

She is about to spear a yellow cloud of egg with a fork when Caroline asks, “So for the record, how do you like your eggs?”

In response it seems quite natural, more than natural, to reel Caroline closer by pulling at the knotted belt of the dressing gown so that she is close enough for blonde hair to brush Gillian’s cheek and that it is absolutely impossible not to kiss her. Repeatedly. “I like them scrambled,” she says between kisses. “Served to me in my bedroom.” One more. “By a beautiful, snotty bitch.”

“Well.” Caroline’s hands skim her hips and find anchor in the waistband of the pajamas, and she presses her face into Gillian’s neck. “Got it right on the first try, then.” There’s no response to this because no mere moan or gasp can completely convey the sweet shivery pleasure of a neck well nuzzled. “I made coffee,” Caroline murmurs in her ear. “Forgot you had the Chemex that Gary got you.”

“Y-you actually used that thing?”

“Yeah. Gave it a thorough washing first—it smelled suspiciously of Jagermeister.” She gives Gillian a wry look and a kiss on the cheek before darting out of the room.
Still convinced that a dream or an altered state of consciousness or being is responsible for all this, Gillian stands alone in the bedroom, blinking slowly. Then she shrugs and decides to just go with it, to enjoy both the food and this quasi-honeymoon bit of bliss for as long as it will play out. Sitting cross-legged on the bed, she digs into the eggs—which are real and, of course, so perfect in taste and appearance that Gordon Ramsey would weep with joy. But when Caroline returns with only two mugs of coffee and no more food, she panics that she has made some sort of romantic faux pas: “Oh, shit.” She raises the plate. “We supposed to be sharing this?”

“Nope. All for you.”

“Did you eat anything?”

“Toast.”

“Toast?” Gillian scoffs.

“Yeah, I—oh, do you want toast?”

“No. God’s sake, sit down. Feel ridiculous, having you wait on me hand and foot in my own home.”

“Don’t be silly,” Caroline says. She settles in beside Gillian, reclining against the headboard, legs crossed at the ankle, and drinks her coffee. Strong sunlight catches the gold glint of fine, sparse stubble along her pale legs. After a moment she rests a hand on Gillian’s knee. There are a million things that need saying but for the moment this concert of silence reminds Gillian that there is no one else in the world with whom she can fully share her solitude.

Several satisfying minutes pass by, enough so that she welcomes casual conversation once again: “What was that phone call this morning?” Caroline asks.

Gillian takes a deep, calming breath. “My idiot son drove my Land Rover into a muddy bog.” She looks at Caroline, whose jaw drops with mute horror. “Now that’s something, when it leaves you speechless.”

“You’re being very calm. Did you sneak out, track him down, and kick his arse already without my knowing it?”

Gillian points at her with the fork. “I’ve always loved the way you think.”

“Where’d this happen?”

“Shit road out near Harry’s. First time I ever drove your mum out that way, she called it ‘the road
leading to the end of civilization.’ Anyway, Raff says she’s just stuck in bog so we’re waiting get
towed. Thanks to this fucking flood everyone is stuck somewhere, needing fixed, needing towed. And it’s Sunday to boot. So God knows when I’ll get her back.” Done with the eggs, she deposits
the empty plate on the floor beside the bed.

“There anything I can do?”

Gillian straddles her and begins to undo the thick knot of the dressing gown, lays bare one
shoulder. “Give you one guess.”

“Naked prayer circle?”

Her lips touch Caroline’s collarbone. “Aye, you’ll be hollering for Jesus when I’m done with
you.” Then she gets distracted and discovers freckles heretofore uncharted. This constellation is
shaped a bit like Andromeda. Lightly she traces them.

Head tilted back on the headboard, Caroline observes her lazily. “It’s like you’ve never slept with
anyone who’s had freckles before.”

Christ. She noticed. Like a child about to touch a hot stove, Gillian pulls her hand away. “Oh.
Sorry.”

Caroline gently seizes her hand, kisses her knuckles. “It doesn’t bother me, really. ” She smiles,
almost shyly. “Just not used to it. No one’s ever made a fuss over them before.”

She wants to say, it’s like gold dust all over you but doesn’t because she thinks it sounds too
twatty. Instead she parts the dressing gown further and lays bare the smooth plain leading from
Caroline’s throat to her chest, her belly, to a hint of pubic hair. “Almost a shame to take this off,
though. Looks damn good on you.”

“It smells like you.” These words, whispered against Gillian’s ear, bring on another shivery bout
of pleasure enhanced by the sharp nip of her ear and the gentle violence of this is almost too much,
the frightening line between pleasure and pain blurs. Of all the borderlines crisscrossing and
dissecting her mind into fearful, feral fiefdoms, this one is the most dangerous and as such access
is routinely denied, and has been for a long time.

But now? She pins Caroline’s wrist against the headboard and kisses her rough, a way that
they’ve both responded to well in the past—and she remembers the last time they were in this
bedroom, which seemed very long ago but wasn’t. It was only the second or third time they’d
fucked and right before Caroline had been very solemn and lovely and said, quite serious,
something that no lover before or since has said to her: don’t ever let me do anything to you that
you don’t like, that you don’t want. Despite that caution, Gillian could not override that innate
need to provide pleasure at any length and satisfaction at any cost; fortunately Caroline was and
remains an attentive and observant lover, knowing when to push the boundaries and when not to.
Gillian attributes this to her scientific background—imagining that, as a chemist, she’s used to
dealing with volatile, toxic substances.

Like me, Gillian thinks—a thought quickly banished as Caroline continues nibbling on her ear and murmurs, “Take off your shirt for me.”

She releases Caroline’s wrists and, too eager to make a show of it, quickly discards the shirt. “Anything else you want?”

Caroline admires her, clasps her waist, pulls her closer. Still smiling, but with that imperious glint in her eyes. “Anything I want?”

The familiar border crumbles. Gillian hesitates, then: “Yes.”

“Well, then. I’ll tell you what I want. What I really, really want—” She pauses, kisses Gillian’s neck gently, gently, then bites and sucks with enough intensity that they both know a mark will be left.

Gillian sputters out a laugh. “Spice Girls reunion?”

“Shit, that was not intentional,” Caroline groans. “That bloody song, it’s like one of those intestinal parasites you can never get rid of—”

“Focus, Caz. Parasites are not sexy.”

“Ah, right, right. Hang on.” She resumes with the neck-kissing while slowly, cautiously touching Gillian’s ribs, then the underside of her breast. “Better?”

“Y-yeah.” That Gillian manages to say anything seems miraculous. She takes a deep breath. “Tell me—what you want.”

“I don’t know. It’s not sexy enough.”

“Come on now.”

“Was just a random thought.”

“Tell me.”

“You should move your books into the house. It’s damp in the barn and not good for them.”
In a fit of laughter Gillian collapses, rolling off her and thus losing her topping advantage.

Giggling, Caroline crows “ah-ha!” and drapes a log leg over her torso, pinning her down.

“All right, you win. That was not sexy.”

“Au contraire, winning is always an aphrodisiac for me.”

“Bloody figures.”

“But books are sexy too.” She continues feasting on Gillian’s neck with the sybaritic intensity of a vampire toying with her food. “Almost as sexy as you.” She pulls back and studies Gillian’s body with eyes and touch, plucking at the waistband of her pajamas. “It would be nice to have them close by, wouldn’t it? In case you ever want to read in bed. Or, er, read in bed to me.”

Confounded—and suspicious—Gillian blinks at her. “Why’d you want a stammering old pillock like me reading to you?”

“Because I like the sound of your voice,” Caroline replies, as if it’s glaringly obvious.

“I’ll repeat the question, then.”

“Oh come on, you only stammer when you’re angry or worked up about something—well okay, that is like ninety percent of the time but still, you could stammer your way through the entirety of Shakespeare and I’d love every second of it.”

Gillian stares up at her and despite all evidence to the contrary remains fundamentally unconvinced that anyone with half a mind would find anything remotely attractive about her, let alone a cursed, much-loathed defect of speech. “All right. I’ll—I’ll build bookshelves, then. In the fall. Good project for when things slow down.”

As usual Caroline is mystified by thrift. “You could just buy a bookcase.”

She rolls her eyes. “No.” Scrambling, she frees herself from Caroline’s leg and regains her status on top. She regards Caroline carefully, plotting her next move—where to begin, where to begin? —while Caroline plots of how to lure her further into the trap of capitalism.

“I could buy you one,” Caroline offers.

Gillian traces her torso, fingers strumming the soft, ridged plateau of her ribs. “No.”

“For your birthday.”
God, Gillian thinks, the one time I want her to shut up. “No.” Determined, she lurches upward and kisses Caroline soundly.

It doesn’t work. “Christmas,” Caroline exhales after the kiss.

“No.” Time for serious diversionary tactics: the breasts.

Ardently she kisses, sucks, teases, and then with her face pressed in the smooth plateau between caresses both breasts—and is both irritated and impressed when Caroline squeaks out, “Arbor Day.”

Gillian continues on her merry way downward, confirming between kisses: “No.”

Caroline pulls at her hair and writhes wildly underneath her. “Morrissey’s birthday,” she gasps.

“Was in June,” Gillian points out. “Already past.”

Her hands remain tangled with Gillian’s hair. “Stubborn bitch.”

“Isn’t he, though?”

Caroline’s laugh is truncated by a sharp moan as Gillian’s mouth arrives at a particular erogenous zone: the crease between torso and thigh, the femoral artery running wild beneath her kiss. “Oh fuck—that feels good.”

Her fingertips graze pubic hair, the back of her hand drags along the interior of Caroline’s thigh. “Give up?”

“If I say yes, will you keep going?”

“Say yes, say no, say uncle.” She grins.

“You win, my lovely girl,” Caroline says.

She basks in the beauty of the moment, the woman before her. The curtain twists in the breeze as if a flag marking the moment of surrender, the distant sound of a lapwing calling peewit lazily winds through the warm thicket of summer air, and the rich boundless contours of Caroline’s body are reminiscent of odalisques seen in museums when she was a teen—the kind of paintings that brought about a revelatory unease in her—and she thinks she has never seen Caroline look so relaxed when naked, and beautiful, so beautiful.
She dives in. The patience she cannot be bothered to extend to people or situations because they’re all too bloody complicated she finds instead in reading, working, fixing things, and making love. She remembers well how Caroline likes it—slow and easy, the teases, the feints, penetration at the right moment—it is a gift to be inside her, to taste her, to be penitent and powerful all at once.

Caroline’s fingers are flexing rhythmically as they push through her hair and press into her scalp. Her urgent touch falls away and her palms press against Gillian’s shoulders before her nails bite into Gillian’s skin. “Jesus,” she moans, then “oh God,” and Gillian half-expects to hear invocation of the Holy Ghost next but when she hears her own name in a reverential susurrus, she decides she’s beyond pleased to be included in this sacredly profane trifecta.

_apres-midi du farmer_

After so much pleasure in so short a span of time, Caroline’s sense of duty has percolated with such fury that it spills into her subconscious and the list of things she has to prepare for in the coming week drops into her wakening mind with the fierce magnificence of an unexpected Beyoncé song released on the internet.

She would sit up dramatically save for the fact that she is tangled up with Gillian, who is draped over her, dead asleep, and drooling on her breast. Her frantic efforts to grab Gillian’s mobile from the nightstand in order to check the time wake up her slumbering companion, however briefly: She makes a mewling noise and rolls off Caroline and onto a pillow. Finally Caroline snags the phone, hits a button, and is informed by the greasy cracked screen that it is nearly 2:30 in the afternoon, 2:24 to be precise; this discovery leads her to utter an oath reserved for only the direst of emotional circumstances and crises:

“Jesus Fucking Christ on a Cadbury Egg Hunt!”

Again Gillian makes a kittenish noise.

Caroline nudges her. “It’s 2:30!”

This time Gillian makes an _oh really_? kind of hum.

Sadly, Caroline realizes it is time for deployment of the always-effective headmistress roar: “Gillian!”

Wide-eyed, Gillian bolts up with the ferocity of a reanimated zombie. “Shit,” she groans, then blinks at the mobile in Caroline’s hand. “Did Raff call about—”

“—no, he didn’t call about your fucking Landy!” Caroline says, even though (1) she has no idea if this is true, and (2) she understands on a profound, Bee Gees how-deep-is-your-love level the pure, unconditional devotion of a woman for her automobile. Nonetheless she leaps out of bed
and pulls on the plaid dressing gown, which somehow ended up on the floor during the morning’s
sexual shenanigans—oh yes, hastily shoved aside when she had pressed Gillian against the
headboard and started fucking her and she can’t imagine how many scratches are on her back now
as a result—no, she begs herself, don’t start thinking about that. “It’s two-thirty in the bloody
sodding afternoon and I have things to do, I have a proposal to write, a budget to look at, teachers
to interview for the fall, playdates and meetings, it’s a whole long list in my head, and, and—don’t
you have things to do?” she marvels.

“Well,” Gillian says. “It’s all relative, really.” She rakes hair out of her face and smiles.

Philosophical naked women are a particular weakness for Caroline and she wants nothing more
than to crawl back into that bed with that woman. Then she wants to slap herself straight into
sense but instead reverts to what she does best, which is ranting: “Oh God, my mother has
probably left a hundred messages on my mobile, Lawrence is stranded in Sheffield with Angus
but who knows, maybe they’ve finally consummated their relationship, and it’s probably a miracle
your father isn’t here or Raff or the goddamned Land Trust—I need to shower—”

“Oh. Yeah.” Gillian makes a move to get out of bed.

“No, Halifax succubus!” She thrusts an accusing finger at Gillian. “We are not showering
together, I cannot risk shower sex with you.”

“Halifax succubus?” Gillian muses aloud. Then, as Caroline stomps down the hallway and into
the bathroom, shouts after her: “Should be able to shower when I want in my own house,
y’know!”

“Wash up in the sink!” Caroline yells just before she leaps into the shower and confronts the
unpredictable water pressure, grimacing as bitterly cold water spikes her skin.

Which, about five minutes later, Gillian does. “My own bloody house,” she grumbles good-
naturedly whilst at the sink.

“You’re using up the hot water.”

Gillian cackles maniacally. “Damn right I am.”

“I’m sorry, but you are a perpetual temptation and I am but a weak, mortal woman.”

“Don’t talk fancy at me. I get it, you’ve a list of things you want to do. Me, I’ve just a got a list of
things I want to do to you in a shower.”

Caroline’s resolve dwindles rapidly, going down the drain like the suds from the Jack Black True
Volume Shampoo that she’s using and assumes is some sort of leftover from either Raff or
Robbie’s testosterone toilette, but it appears to be the only shampoo in the stall.

“Or a bath,” Gillian continues. “That’d be fun too.”

“Next time, then.” A silence, as Caroline realizes she has committed to this happening again. While on some level that seemed obvious, this casual promise gives the last twenty-four hours or so substance, makes it all real. Despite the stinging shampoo in her eyes, she arches on the balls of her feet in happy anticipation of Gillian’s response.

“Yeah,” Gillian replies softly. “All right.” Something clatters. “Oh, I um, have a toothbrush for you here. Gonna get dressed and put the kettle on.”

Out of the shower Caroline attempts multitasking: While wrapped in a towel she waves Gillian’s ancient hairdryer at her wet hair while trying to brush her teeth with the never-used toothbrush. Then she gets seriously distracted by the thought of Gillian just randomly having a new toothbrush available for her use. Does she have a stockpile of toothbrushes available for sexual conquests? With the toothbrush lodged in her foaming mouth and the hairdryer spewing hot air at her head, she noses around the bathroom looking for a secret toothbrush supply, but the medicine cabinet only holds an alarming amount of plasters, gauze bandages and surgical tape, antiseptic creams, and antibacterial sprays all necessary to the life of a woman constantly surrounded by sharp and dangerous objects. Guiltily Caroline stares at herself in the mirror. She has toothpaste in her hair.

About twenty minutes later she is mostly dressed and plowing through a second attempt at multitasking: trying to pull on socks while hopping down the hallway. Obviously Gillian has heard this irregular thumping from downstairs because when Caroline is on the steps—socks on, not hopping—she finds Gillian waiting at the bottom of the stairs, rocking back and forth as she does sometimes when nervous, holding a cup of tea and gazing up at Caroline as if she is some sort of adoring concierge.

“Your mobile rang,” Gillian says.

Gratefully Caroline takes the tea. “Why didn’t you answer it?” She wants to kick herself. She’s not your bloody personal assistant. She’s not Beverly. “No. Um. Sorry. I meant, you could have answered it—if you wanted too.”

This prompts a derisive snort. “You kidding? It was probably your mum.”

“Probably.” She sips the tea and realizes she is as nervous as Gillian is. She is about to awkwardly go in for a kiss when Gillian darts away and mumbles that her mobile is in the kitchen.

In the kitchen, she peruses the phone. Of course there are about eight voice mails from her mother, all variations upon the classic theme of where the eff are you? and what the hell is going on? She girds her loins and calls.
“What the eff are you doing out there?” is the first thing Celia says. “What the hell is going on?”

“Why Mum, I’d have never guessed it was you.”

“We thought you’d be back by now. Is Gillian actually making you work?” Celia pauses before tendering the delicate inquiry in a shrill tone: “Are you handling sheep?”

“No, everything’s fine, we’re all intact, and I have not laid a hand on a single sheep.”

“Did she tell you what Raff did to the Land Rover?”

“Yes.”

“Has she murdered him yet?”

Caroline winces at the regrettable hyperbole. “No. How’s Flora?”

“Oh, lovely as usual. She and Greg are in the garden right now looking at worms.”

“Worms,” Caroline says flatly.

“Yes, apparently after the rains she found a few while playing and she is quite fascinated with them. Earlier today they discovered ladybugs and slugs. She’s putting them all in your Oxford travel mug. She’s been asking after you. We told her you were off saving the sheep from the flood.” Celia laughs.

When Lawrence and William were younger, she had thought nothing of the occasional weekend trip that would take her away from them—the conferences, the supposedly romantic long weekends and adult-only vacations with her husband that, with time, usually ended up with them both drunk and arguing more often than not—so she does not expect the acute, palpable stab of guilt that radiates through her chest and leaves her standing senseless and numb and, once the call is over, staring at a black screen and thinking I should be there, I should be the one showing her bugs. Duty and expectation always came easy to her and she embraced it with fervor; it was a privilege to be entrusted to care for children, to run a household, a school. She could not love Flora any more than she already does, but the responsibility of this child is fraught with a meaning that has, over the past two years, nearly crippled Caroline with endless self-recrimination and doubt.

She’s still staring at the phone when Gillian comes into the kitchen. When Gillian sees the expression on Caroline’s face she dials back her big, sweet grin and jams her hands into her pockets. “Everything all right?”
“Yeah,” Caroline says perfunctorily. “It’s—” She shakes it off, smiles, and reports the only thing that matters: “Flora is collecting bugs in the garden.”

“Got a curiosity about ’em, doesn’t she?” Gillian grabs an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter and starts washing it. “Calam has this picture book—all drawings of animals and such. It has a few pictures of insects in it like a spider, a ladybug, and a caterpillar, and a butterfly—well, when Flora was here last, I showed her the book and after we’d looked through the whole thing she kept turning back to the insects—she really liked the caterpillar and the butterfly. I was trying to tell her that the caterpillar turns into the butterfly but I don’t think she was having any of that, kept looking at me like I was off my nut.”

Helpless, Caroline glares at her. “You know my own child better than I do.”

Gillian rolls her eyes, and to Caroline’s mild horror wipes the apple on the front of her jeans. “All recent developments, Caz. You know how kids are. One week they’re keen on one thing, next week it’s something completely different. You can’t notice everything.” She heads back to the living room and calls over her shoulder, “Come sit and finish your tea, yeah?”

Instead of heeding the suggestion, she makes the mistake of checking email on the mobile and encounters several tedious messages about setting up and conducting interviews for the new teacher. Her stomach churns. Wandering into the living room, all thoughts of worms and caterpillars and teachers and interviews fly out of her head, for Gillian’s particular brand of rough but indisputably feminine sensuality is on full display: she sits in a sprawl on the couch, legs extended and feet bare, lazily chewing on a bite of the apple. It’s so undeniably erotic that she stops dead in her tracks. Then Gillian looks at her knowingly, lustily—*o the mighty Caroline McKenzie-Dawson wishes she were an apple, doesn’t she*?—and the conflagration of desire and emotion burns hotter and brighter.

“C’mere,” Gillian says around a mouthful of apple.

Caroline shifts nervously. “No,” she blurs.

A sardonic laugh. Gillian keeps eyeing her. “No?”

Self-conscious, she looks away from Gillian’s beautiful eyes and feels as awkwardly on display as when she was nineteen years old and attending a lesbian and gay social at Oxford for the first time.

“I’ll let you have a bite of my apple,” Gillian singsongs.

Caroline laughs. “I seem to recall hearing a story like this a long time ago.”

“If it’s the story I think you mean—don’t know if I should be flattered or insulted.”
Caroline crosses her arms. Usually she feels quite self-important and in charge when she does this, but in this moment the gesture feels more as if she is somehow barely holding herself together.
“Be flattered. Very flattered.”

“So you’re just going to stand there like a numpty ’til you fall over.”

“Very likely, yes.”

Humming, Gillian finishes the apple, rolls the well-gnawed core in a napkin, and places it on a side table. She leans back into the couch again and in this manner of voluptuous repose resembles a wild queen of the forest bored with both debauchery and duty and awaiting the one subject that will liven her mundane existence, and so softly issues a summons: “Caroline.’

Well. Unable to resist the devil’s draw, Caroline fights off the almost imperceptible buckling of her knees and strides across the room.

Gillian seems surprised by this as well; she is clearly not expecting to be boldly mounted, have her face cradled in Caroline’s hands, and to be kissed so senselessly that her eyes glaze over similar to when she has consumed three or more glasses of wine and prompting Caroline to silently congratulate herself on being a similar form of intoxicant.

“Jesus,” Gillian exhales.

The insistent pounding of blood in her veins drives her on. “When can I see you again?”

Gillian’s eyelids flutter. “W-whenever you like.” Then, as if remembering something: “Wednesday.”

Clearly Caroline has forgotten it too. “Wednesday?”

“Yeah. Gonna be at your place anyway. Remember? Taking Dad for his checkup.”

“Oh. Right. You’re still—going to stay for dinner?”

“Of course. Unless you don’t want—”

“No. I want you to.”

“We won’t have time to—”
“I know.” Caroline pauses. Her mouth moves, the words struggle to come out, but finally do: “It—it’s enough just to see you.”

“Yeah?” Gillian’s pupils blossom, dots of ink from a divine fountain pen that drop a dark expanse into those amazing irises, and that stupidly prompts Caroline to think of some old song from the 80s—oh you’ve got green eyes oh you’ve got blue eyes oh you’ve got gray eyes—and God help her, she’s pushing Gillian down on the sofa and they’re at it again: Clothes discarded in a whirlwind of haste except for Gillian’s jeans, which are always a bit of an ordeal to pull off and seriously, she deserves another orgasm for accomplishing that task alone but instead she slips a hand between Gillian’s legs and cradles her cunt, possessed of great patience despite the nervy curl of her fingers and waiting for the single tremulous please whispered into her neck before entering her. She particularly likes to watch Gillian’s face at this moment: the tense lines around her mouth slackening into pleasure and eventually release. In the Mobius strip contortions of sex satiety becomes need and after she comes Caroline moves against her roughly, grinding against her thigh until the surprising intensity of the climax falls over her like a wave.

Afterward she does not fall asleep so much as enter a drowsy fugue state while lying there on the couch and more or less on top of Gillian, who at some point managed to pull a quilt over them against a vigorous, chilly cross breeze; even in the summer, the farmhouse living room stays surprisingly cool. Silence here is different than at home, in Harrogate; silence here intensifies the smallest sound and the swish of the wind ruffling a newspaper reigns equally with tires on gravel, bleating sheep, a leaking faucet, and her own obvious comments: “It’s so peaceful here.”

In response Gillian merely hums and strokes her hair, her glugging heartbeat providing a backbeat to the torch song of her blood, the muscles of her forearm twitch restlessly in the clasp of Caroline’s hand.

“I have to go,” she finally says.

“I know.” Gillian says it clearly, strongly, as if she has been bracing herself for it in every action and breath since the moment they kissed the night before.

Despite her reputation as someone operating on pure reckless impulse, Caroline knows that she mulls things over to the point of obsessiveness; perhaps that is why the execution and results of her decisions are less than ideal—classic overthinking, pummeling things in her mind to such an extent that no action seems ideal or even makes sense anymore. It would not surprise Caroline that in the aftermath of all this Gillian has been cogitating mightily all along—perhaps more than she does herself. Perhaps Gillian thinks that this is not the beginning of anything but merely a sex-saturated coda to what they had been before, because there is simply no way of going forward. So she could back out, save a scrap of dignity while rescuing Caroline from violating whatever vague code of ethics she lives by, a code at times impenetrable and incomprehensible to Gillian and seemingly bent by the arbitrary whim of a woman in constant conflict between desire and expectation.

“Can—can I say something?” Gillian begins, and Caroline finds it heartbreaking that she seeks permission to speak up in her own home.
She presses her face against Gillian’s sternum, the boombox that contains a very complicated heart, and tastes the sweet salt of sweat. She thinks of how, as a child, she would press her face against the stereo speakers in her father’s study, desperate to catch the warp and hiss and delicate strains of music, as if she wanted to taste the sound—and laughing in delight when an orchestra would rise up and knock her back on her arse. “Of course.”

As usual the mix of thoughts and desires that go through Gillian’s mind tumble out in poorly congealed fashion; Caroline likens it to following an elaborate recipe in a cookbook where the result turns out to be an edible yet spectacular mess that in no way resembles the glistening food porn photo in the book itself. It’s particularly true in this case, where she is obviously trying her damndest to ensure not only Caroline’s happiness, but her own: “I just wanted to say it’s, it’s okay. If you want to keep seeing her. Sacha, I mean. Yeah? I want you to be happy. And I’m happy being with you like this, spending time with you when we can. I want to be with you, and, and I don’t know what—what that could be like, you know? Well, yeah, maybe you don’t know yet either. But, I’ll, I’ll take what you’re willing to give.”

It is at this crucial, awkward, and somewhat inconvenient moment that Caroline finally remembers she already has a girlfriend.

_to an evening star_

On the drive home the evening sky is so spectacular that Caroline eschews sunglasses, boldly squinting westward into white and gold and pink and orange—she stops counting at seven different colors and thinks, if only the skeins of the sunset could be gathered and woven into one fantastic word that would adequately describe them. It is the time of day when one should be sitting somewhere with a drink or walking across the moors, in either instance the ideal being alone or with the right person.

It would have been nice to fit in a walk with Gillian this time. In times past, whenever she visited the farm they made a habit of going for a walk together. The last time, however, seems a lifetime ago and she has since molted several skins of grief; it was about seven months after Kate died and not long after Gillian had married Robbie. For no reason in particular it had been a bad week and she had only gotten through it on diazepam-driven automatic pilot and wanted nothing less than enduring a family dinner at the farm. But Alan had twisted his ankle while gardening and so it was Caroline’s chauffeuring abilities and not her company that was desired. While straining at the effort of bare civilities, she avoided a nervous breakdown and got through the meal. Afterward, Gillian—rocking on heels, peering at Caroline from under bangs desperate for trimming—shyly mumbled a suggestion that they go for a walk, as if for all the world Caroline would refuse this mad idea when in fact she was seconds from collapsing under the chaos of the household and if she heard Robbie tell more banal police adventure about drunkards at the pub she would scream.

She dreaded the possibility that Gillian might use the walk as an opportunity to bitch about Robbie and/or enumerate a list of recent shags. Instead Gillian prattled softly about the land, in that sweet low burr she used only with those closest to her. It was late autumn and late afternoon, with the sun hugging the horizon and shooting through the sparse clouds in a last blaze of glory, throwing shadows and gold on the dales and copses, the moss and hedgerows, the evergreen heather. They had taken a different path than times before, one Caroline was not familiar with, so Gillian would stop and point out things. *Down a ways,* she said, was the stream where she and her father used to
fish when she was young. And there, that old broken fence along that bridleway—used to jump over it with ease. Probably break my neck now.

On the way back they encountered Gillian’s closest neighbor, a wizened, gnarled old farmer named Pete and his sullen middle-aged son. While Gillian and Pete made impromptu arrangements to help each other at harvest, the son mercilessly appraised Caroline as if she were a ewe at a country fair—not quite top notch in his silent estimation, but she would do.

Under normal circumstances she would have no problem summoning a few choice words cutting him down to size. But she was tired, tired of being mercilessly judged by any male idiot with an opinion, and she grew increasingly enraged. She glared at him, trembled, and her jaw tightened in a massive effort to not scream what the fuck do you think you’re looking at? Then, without breaking conversational stride, Gillian casually took her hand. She could breathe again; in fact, she released such a hoarse, shuddering breath that Pete gave her a concerned look. His son glanced down, caught sight of the clannish, protective gesture of her hand in Gillian’s, scowled, and turned away.

Meanwhile Gillian laughed at Pete’s joking efforts to sell her an aging ewe. Then the men went one way and they went another. Gillian kept hold of her hand for a while, even gently swinging their arms back and forth as they walked in silence. Then she told Caroline that after Eddie died Pete, ever the dealmaker, had been mad keen to match her up with his unmarriageable son—complete eejit, she said. Makes Robbie look like Stephen Hawking.

That made Caroline laugh. Few things made her laugh back then. Even now, it’s not as easy as it used to be. Now. She realizes that she has not had a proper panic attack about all this—resurrecting this affair, what it means, how it will play out—and so she pulls over abruptly on the side of the road, breathing heavily at the shock of the new and the old commingled together in this thing called life. Way to go, she thinks derisively, think about Prince—one of Kate’s favorite musicians—now of all times. She recalls how Kate had initially proposed painting the nursery a very lurid shade of lavender in honor of the Purple One; Caroline had to rely on a steady supply of ice cream and sexual favors to convince her otherwise. She chuckles aloud at that—and abruptly stops. She has arrived at the point she has dreaded for so long now, where memories of Kate were growing relatively painless because now she is strong enough to forsake the bad ones and hold dear to the good ones. For so long pain had been the only thing convincing her that she had loved, that it was real, and the void it would leave too terrible to contemplate.

She stares at the sunset. The white edge of the multi-skeined sunset cedes to blue and the glint of the evening star. This morning she witnessed not the sunrise but the nascent blaze of bright heat from the open door in Gillian’s kitchen, standing there barefoot and in a dressing gown not her own, eating buttered toast with cunty fingers—all the perfections of English life distilled into one moment, as an always-obscure writer once posited. For the first time in what felt like a lifetime, she had been content. She sighs and climbs back into the Jeep Cherokee. Hedonistic pursuit of another moment like that will have to wait.

An hour later she pulls into the driveway of the house and is unsurprised when accosted by her mother and Alan the second she steps out of the vehicle.

“Well,” Celia declares, folding her arms. “We thought you’d gone native out there.” She nods at
Caroline’s Wellies, which Caroline has retrieved from the back seat and are baptized with grime.

“You do realize Gillian lives in a house and is not some wandering gypsy around a campfire?”

“You’d never know by the way she acts sometimes,” Celia replies.

Rather than contradict this, Alan only grumbles in agreement.

Caroline sighs. “What’d she do now?”

Poking at his mobile, Alan brings a series of Gillian’s terse texts on screen and, once read, resemble a form of cranky beatnik poetry:

Im ok
just leave it
hes an idiot
fuck I want brandy snaps
don’t lecture me old man
christ

Alan rumbles, “Not one bit of relevant information!”

“Except the bit about the Brandy Snaps,” Celia observes helpfully.

“Like getting blood from stone!”

“At least she didn’t call you a mad old dyke,” Caroline replies, recalling Gillian’s most infamous text to her, for which Caroline had to endure a drunken, stammering, nearly incoherent apology several months after the fact. By that time she had completely forgotten it and on recalling it once again, thought Gillian had deserved to call her far worse in light of the events that had transpired between them. Blame yourself as usual, Caroline thinks. When Alan pulls a face of pure despair—sometimes she thinks her mother’s melodramatic antics are a poor influence on him—he squeezes his arm affectionately. “Don’t worry so—she’s fine, really. And given everything that’s happened, the farm could be in far worse shape. She was in, um, good spirits when I left.” Now she longs for the camouflage of sunglasses because she’s fearful that the luscious glaze of her eyes and the rosy glow of her cheeks will somehow announce to Alan that she has spent the better portion of the past twenty-four hours fucking his daughter.

Fortunately Alan moves on to the Land Rover Drama. “Land Rover’s out of the mud, at last. All she needs is cleaning up.” He chuckles, shakes his head. “Aye, poor Raff, that’ll keep him busy!” He kisses Caroline’s cheek and murmurs, “Well, anyhoo. Welcome back, love. See you at dinner.”
“Although God knows when that will be,” Celia mutters, as Alan heads back to the guesthouse. “A lot has happened in a day,” she says to Caroline, and matches her daughter’s gait as they meander to the front door.

“Yes,” Caroline sighs happily—then, before the old woman could get suspicious, reforms it as a question: “Yes?”

“Lawrence keeps going on about clown school.”

“Well, it may be the only chance he has, you know?”

“William broke up with his girlfriend.”

“Told him he should shave that bloody beard.”

“John called. He’s out of rehab but he’s still writing a memoir about you.”

“You think Meryl Streep would play me in the film? She’d love the challenge of a new accent.”

“I’ve saved the worst for last,” Celia says, and then intones grimly with her flair for the dramatic: “Greg is making tofu.”

“Oh shit,” Caroline wails. While Greg is a decent cook, his ambitions sometimes exceed his natural talents; she is still discovering bits of chocolate here and there stuck to countertops, appliances, and various crevices courtesy of this spring’s Great Souffle Debacle.

“He’s having woman trouble,” Celia says, as if this justified destruction of her kitchen.

She groans. Recently Greg had become enamored of a woman named Brigitte; on first glance she seemed as compelling and attractive as a Malibu Barbie still trapped inside the box. What nudged Caroline’s apathy into active dislike was this woman’s barely concealed consternation regarding Flora’s mere existence.

Speaking of whom, when Caroline opens the door Flora, like a tiny determined rugby player, rushes at her, crashing against her shins. She scoops the girl up into her arms.

Flora’s default greeting these days is an enthusiastic “Hey!” with arms raised.

“Hey yourself, sweetheart! I’ve missed you.” She notices that Flora is desperately trying to wipe tofu goop from her hands onto her orange hippo t-shirt. “God, why are your hands so white?”
Celia opens her mouth.

Caroline is one step ahead: “If you make any sort of racist comment right now I will smother you to death with tofu.”

“Everyone is so sensitive these days,” Celia complains. She shrugs dismissively. “Fine, I’m leaving. Maybe you can talk some sense into him.” She nods toward the kitchen. “He is like a woman and you like women, as we all know.” On that barbed note, she departs.

“Tofu,” Flora says, quite clearly.

On one hand, Caroline is disappointed not to hear her say *mum*—which she hasn’t done yet but Greg has assured her that Flora said it the other day while pointing at a picture of her; on another, she’s relieved that Flora has stopped saying *shit*. At least for now.

The kitchen is indeed a wreck and Greg sits morosely at the table, surrounded by old cookbooks, soybeans soaking in a pot, and batches of tofu in various blob-like states and stages, as if he is Dr. Frankenstein brooding in his lab and flanked by brains in jars and convict corpses ready for reanimation. Her first thought is to snap a pic and text it to Gillian with a caption: *The Tofu That Ate Harrogate*. Over the past year, she has made a concerted effort not to treat him like complete shit; it seemed an easy enough goal to achieve once she became truly cognizant of the fact that while she may have lost a wife, he suffered a loss too: one of his oldest and closest friends, the woman who kept his confidences, offered him advice, and vetted his girlfriends. Clearly there is no replacing Kate. But she could do better in providing some sort of emotional support for him—although she fears her lack of diplomacy may rear its ugly head if he ever seeks an honest opinion of Brigitte.

Caroline attempts to joke him out of it: “There’s really no need to out-lesbian me, you know.”

His pathetic attempt at a smile resembles the sad rallying look of a Labradoodle on a rainy day.

“Right, then. What’s wrong?”

“I think I’m in love,” he says.

Gently she juggles Flora, who squirms restlessly while smooshing tiny sticky tofu fists against her face.

“Mum!” Flora barks, as if to say *pay attention to me and not the nitwit who made tofu in your kitchen*.

“Well.” Caroline grins ridiculously. The day could not possibly get any better. “It’s wonderful to be in love.”
Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK:

“One Sunday Morning (Song for Jane Smiley’s Boyfriend),” Wilco—oh, but it’s long, like this chapter.

“Temptation,” New Order

“Everything Hits at Once,” Spoon

“Evening Star,” from Richard Wagner’s Tannhauser (Franz Liszt transcription)
What time is it in the Milky Way?

Chapter Summary

Apologies for the delay in updating! Next one will be sooner, promise. Thanks again to all of you for reading.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

her eyes are closer to me than my own honor

~ Anne Carson

“Are you going to put the tofu in the sauce?” Greg asks.

Wooden spoon poised above a pot of tomato sauce, Caroline hesitates. It is Wednesday evening. She is tired. The day—filled with interviews of teaching candidates, meetings, chatty texts from one lover in New York that she largely ignored and morose ones from the other one who was meeting in Halifax this morning with her solicitor about her impending divorce and Caroline sort-of ignored those too, a toddler who wanted and got, thank you very much, Christmas lights put up in the living room, in August—is fit to burst at the seams. Thus she gazes longingly over Greg’s shoulder at the glass of wine abandoned on the dining room table and is damned if she’s going to ruin her perfect Marcella Hazan tomato sauce—the simmering translucent half-onion poaching in a fragrant bloodbath—with crumbly bits of protein that resemble glue paste falling off ancient discarded wallpaper.

Helpless, she prevaricates. “Um.”

“No?” Greg pulls the Labradoodle Pout face.

“Well, Gillian’s coming for dinner and she likes things that are, you know—” Caroline pauses while attempting to find the most innocuous yet accurate term to describe Gillian’s culinary sensibilities, which are as omnivorous as her sexuality: If she’s hungry and it’s not a lot of fuss she’ll have it, even if it gives her indigestion.

But then you are an awful lot of fuss, Caroline reminds herself, and so goes yet another theory.

Greg wastes no time in supplying a descriptor for the woman he takes for thick-headed rube, even though he is too well-bred—and afraid of Gillian—to say in polite company: “Simple?”

“No,” she retorts defensively. “I’d say her tastes are more classic. Pure. She has a very, you know, refined palate.”

Skeptical, he nibbles at a corner of his beard. “Isn’t Gillian the one who ate a chicken kebab she
dropped on the kitchen floor?"

“It wasn’t the floor, it was a kitchen chair, and the five-second rule was met.” As a rigorous scientist Caroline knows the five-second rule is absolute bollocks but as an unsparing bitch she will do anything to win an argument. “And, y’know, Alan and mum will be here too, and they aren’t that keen on tofu either.”

“Well it’s just sad, I think.” Greg folds his arms. “That they won’t try new things.”

“Have you ever slept with a man?”

“I fail to see why you keep asking me that question.”

“Just making a point this time. Gillian might try the tofu chips. Especially if she has wine with dinner.” She pauses. “Like, an entire bottle of wine, but yeah, she might.”

“She’ll probably just wrap them up in prosciutto like you do,” he replies morosely.

“It’s a testament to the sturdiness and versatility of the chip.” She smiles brightly, considers this a good save. “Hey, I ate the amaranth porridge this morning.” All the more reason to reward herself with wine tonight. Greg’s penchant for randomly assigning certain foods to days—Tofu Tuesdays, Amaranth Wednesdays, Quinoa Fridays—has only affirmed Caroline’s commitment to a parallel schedule of inevitable alcoholism.

Before walking away, he reverts to the Labradoodle Pout. His courtship of Blackburn Barbie, aka Brigitte, has not been going well and as a result he has been as mohey as Morrissey around the house. In turn Caroline has ramped up efforts to be kind and supportive or, at the very least, less bitchy—for starters, eating amaranth porridge without complaint. In addition, she consented to doing yoga with him on occasion; her motivation here is purely selfish, because she realizes that keeping up sexually with the likes of Gillian Greenwood may require a level of flexibility suitable to a preteen gymnast, or at least as close to that state as her sad-sack, wine-fueled, middle-aged body can attain. The other day during their marathon post-flood shag session she got such horrid back spasms at one point that Gillian leaped out of bed and started getting dressed because she assumed a trip to A&E was imminent. But a back massage, a glass of wine, and a story about a runaway lamb safely recovered during the storm fixed her up just fine.

Or maybe it was the timbre of Gillian’s voice as she relayed the tale of the lamb, floating ethereal as smoke above her as she lay face down on the bed, muscles melting under a vigorous work-over: Poor damned thing, she were afraid of the rushing water, y’see, so I had to cross over to the other side, grab her, and carry her—imagine me, wading through a stream, water up to my knees with a lamb across my shoulders, bloody lucky she’s so tiny and I know that creek bed like the back of my hand. When the spasms and pain finally subsided she rolled over, practically into Gillian’s arms, and stared up into those eyes which, at that moment, were the softened green-gray of the hills on a cold rainy day.

Gillian then smiled and said, better?

In response Caroline squeaked that she would really really really pretty please like to try that position again.

Nah, Gillian said. Can’t send you back to Harrogate all busted up. Besides, I’m rather enjoying you naked, helpless, and on your back—and in the 37 minutes that followed, she made absolutely certain that Caroline enjoyed it too.

But yoga is worth a try, lest she earn a reputation as a pillow queen—and that particular phrase
riles up thoughts of Sacha, who is still in New York and whose initial copious outpouring of archly romantic texts at the beginning of the trip has dwindled down to an occasional flurry. Like this morning’s perfunctory check-in: a photo of the sunrise from a penthouse, a snarky recap of a dinner party, asking about Flora and work. Neither texts nor thoughts have led Caroline anywhere closer to a clue on what or whom she really wants. There is a lot to be said for being in the moment, Sacha had once said, and in this particular moment she is making spaghetti sauce and looking forward to seeing Gillian and admitting to herself she has a ways to go before completely fucking everything up, so there is that. For the moment she will settle for occasionally fucking up her back; at this morning’s quickie yoga session her back gave out a mere ten minutes into the routine, prompting Greg to chirp that the first downward dog is always the hardest while clearly under the illusion that his commentary was in some way helpful.

With the sauce at perfect simmer she sprawls in a dining room chair for a moment, drinks wine, smiles at the frosty white glint of the Christmas lights from the living room ceiling that reflect into the hallway, and briefly persuades herself that she is queen of all she surveys when reality so far has only proven that she is nothing more than everyone’s bitch and a pushover for a three-year-old. She knew the moment Greg brought up Christmas plans last night at dinner—a pointless topic of conversation given that she can barely plan an outfit for the following day not to mention that she has her head up her arse about two very different women and if she has to eat quinoa pilaf one more time this month she may go mental—that a seed of holiday longing would be planted in Flora’s attentive, obsessive mind. The child spent the morning relentlessly grilling Caroline about when Christmas would occur and, more urgently, about the appearance of Christmas lights: where lights? when? Which devolved into the terse, repetitive command of lights! as if she were a tiny demented film director.

So she got the lights.

Appeasing a child can be easy enough; a middle-aged sheep farmer a far different matter and especially when you take sex out of the equation. She has no idea what frame of mind Gillian will be in when she arrives for dinner. Her one-liner texts from the morning consisted of bitching about parking in Halifax, the lateness of the solicitor, the bad cup of tea she had at an overpriced shop, and then later, her father’s never-ending critique of her driving as she took him to a doctor’s appointment. Over the course of the day Caroline experienced uneasy moments of doubt, fearing that Gillian might yet again reconsider divorce, might give Robbie yet another go. If nothing else, her hopefully-soon-to-be-ex-husband is expert at mining and manipulating the deep well of Gillian’s remorse to his ultimate advantage—performing an emotionally elegant sleight-of-hand that magically strips away her ragged self-esteem under the guise of stalwart support, convincing her that despite evidence to the contrary she fails at everything and possesses nothing but raw, naked vulnerability. A bizarro world version of the emperor’s new clothes, and gaslighting at its finest. She is certain Robbie does not possess enough self-awareness to know what he does; it is precisely in those who lack it that the most craven impulse outs itself with unerring cruelty.

Meanwhile Lawrence arrives home, glares uncomprehendingly at the living room’s Christmas-in-August décor, and mutters a hit-and-run insult on the way to the refrigerator: “You’ve lost your mind.”

For an infinitesimal moment she regards him, and then raises her glass in a toast. “Probably genetic, so welcome to your future.”

He rolls his eyes, drops a satchel on a chair. “Our future is the shitshow outside.” He guzzles neon-flavored Powerade. “Gran and Alan are in the driveway shouting at Gillian.”

“Right.” Caroline sighs and returns to tending the sauce on the stove, poking at the onion softening slowly under its pearlescent dome.
“Please tell me we’re not eating weird shit tonight,” Lawrence begs.

“Spaghetti.”

“Thank God.”

The dinner guests plow through the doorway unannounced and without knocking. Gillian resembles a weary, wounded fox pursued by two gabbling old hounds—furrowed, scowling, and wincing at the sniping cross-conversations that whizz past her ears. She wears one of her better flowery dresses and a matching navy blue cardigan sweater. The color-coordinated ensemble indicates that she asked Raff to pick it out, a task he does routinely, as he recently confessed to Caroline, but also reluctantly: This kind of thing will put me right into therapy, I know it will, he had said.

Greetings are, apparently, out of the question as Alan and Celia carry on conversing. “What do you mean, the doctor wants to change your medication?” Celia says.

Alan sighs. “It’s nothing, just a wee uptick in dosage—”

The remainder of the sentence goes unheard because Gillian finally meets her gaze and grins, and Caroline’s besotted brain goes on the blink at this live demonstration of collision theory: The chemical reaction, the charge that always existed between them is different now, the limits of those preexistent bonds are broken and altered into something new and viable and intense, and in the anguished relief and the reliable comfort of mere proximity now runs a strain of undisguised joy.

At any rate, she is pretty certain it’s not just the fact that she offers Gillian a very generous pour of a very good white.

As Gillian gratefully downs the vigonier, Alan sighs. “We’ll talk later,” he says to Celia. “Right now we are discussing Gillian—”

The mere utterance of her name brings about a reversion to a perpetual solid state of anger. Nose buried in the now-empty wineglass, Gillian seeks reprieve; she closes her eyes and inhales deeply, as if she can absorb each and every boozy airborne mote of wine. Then: “No,” she replies edgily. She sits the empty glass on the table and its jarring scrape marks a change in mood. “We’re not.”

“If you agree to settlement—” Alan begins.

“No, I won’t.” Gillian exhales violently, nods at the empty glass. “That’s all right, then,” she drawls, and then sets her lusty sights on Caroline in such a pointedly restrained fashion that a clandestine current of meaning crackles beneath innocuous conversation, and they both know that this combination of glance and tone will be interpreted by clueless observers in multifarious ways—as an in-joke about the wine or a veiled sarcastic commentary on divorce, present company, life as a whole—except the correct one.

At least this is what Caroline hopes, because she notices her mother’s eyebrows arch in a curious fashion.

“Settling would be the easiest solution,” Alan continues, oblivious to how his daughter’s eyes rake over her stepsister.

Caroline looks away, bites her lip, gives the sauce an agitated stir that splatters the stovetop. “Glad you like it,” she replies softly.

“There more?” Gillian asks in an undertone that makes her shiver.
“Oh yeah.” Worrying that her quick assent runs a bit too throatily sensual, she clears her throat in such a larynx-shredding way that she sounds like Rumpole of the Bailey straining on the shitter.

Solicitously Celia fetches her a glass of water.

Alan reaches a point of shouty exasperation with his obstinate offspring. “Are you listening to me?”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Gillian is right there on the summit with him. “Yeah, I am, Dad. But what you don’t get is, is, it’s done. I’m done. I’m not getting back with him, that’s a pipe dream, and I’m not giving him some sort of ‘financial settlement’ either—”

Oh, the finger quotes, Caroline sighs dreamily. How elegantly she employs them.

“—and if you think I’m going to ask Gary for money you’re out of your f-f-bloody mind, he and Felicity already done enough for me. No, the quickest and cheapest way to get out of this bloody mess of my own making is my way.” Then, despite her best efforts, she surrenders a couple f-bombs: “And if it means I have ‘adultery’ written on my fucking divorce petition and ‘whore’ written across my fucking forehead, well then, let’s just leave it, all right?”

This effectively silences nearly everyone but Lawrence. “Wow. Dinner might actually be interesting for once.”

Before Caroline can defuse the tension by offering drinks all around, Gillian seizes her by the wrist and, with a gentle tug, leads her out of the room. “Going to have a chat. Be right back.”

“Here we go again with the girl talk,” Celia says indulgently, as if Caroline and Gillian are teenagers gallivanting off to talk about boys and jewelry and makeup.

“Talk some sense into her, Caroline!” Alan barks.

“Someone stir my sauce!” Caroline shouts back as she is led down the hallway, helpless as Richard III with the kingdom falling down about him, sauce probably ruined and the battle surely lost. Did Richard feel this euphoric as he headed for the fall? At the very end, what did he feel other than sheer relief at the inevitable?

“What is this thing in the sauce?” she hears Celia trill.

Alan is apprehensive. “It’s not the tofu, is it?”

Before she can scream no it’s not the bloody tofu Gillian gently shoves her in the bathroom, slams the door shut, locks it, and before Caroline can eke out a word of concern or affection Gillian claps a hand around the back of her neck and kisses her ruthlessly—that all-consuming kiss that she specializes in, the kiss of Don Juan’s reckless daughter. They pinball around the tiny bathroom, collide against the sink, knock a hand towel off the towel rack, and kick the metallic bin that sounds a scuffling hiss followed up with a booming gong. She nearly trips over her own feet but instead plops down right onto the toilet seat, opting to give Gillian credit for steering her there rather than lust-driven clumsy happenstance, which accurately describes her dance style circa 1989 and usually at its most frenzied to Dead or Alive’s “You Spin Me Round.” Then Gillian is on her lap—kissing her throat, biting her ear, fingernails of one hand etching the border of her scalp while the other eagerly cups her breast. She gathers a fistful of Gillian’s dress, the scratchy-soft fabric binds her knuckles and balls into her palm; self-bondage is the only thing preventing her from clawing bare skin with her nails and sliding her hand between those thighs and that is good because they are too close to fucking and the deep, sweet thrumming that rolls through Gillian’s throat drives her absolutely mad and she’s never been like this with anyone else before,
no one, not John, not Kate, not Sacha or even some anonymous bint on the dance floor, no one. She has never been ravenous and reckless like this, never before abandoned her carefully considered plans of what love was or how it should be conducted. Love the abstraction, love the reality, dovetail dangerously into the current moment.

The kisses slow down and in the hunger that lingers between them, like silence seeded into and enriching the adagio of a symphony, Caroline realizes that their burning savor is not from desire or wine alone but running along the familial lines of whiskey. She breathes gentle accusation into Gillian’s willing mouth: “You’ve been drinking.”

It hardly seems unexpected, this pattern typical of Gillian: comfort sought in a bottle or a bloke. Should be glad it was the former and not the latter, Caroline thinks. So far as she knows, anyway, but then she can hardly demand sexual exclusivity when Gillian has given her free reign with Sacha. Their collision, their chemistry, has not completely broken all the bonds, nor recalibrated all the equations and reactions and networks. It has not—and most likely will not—reconfigure this whole complicated mess of molecules known as Gillian Greenwood, and this tempers Caroline’s disappointment.

Gillian pulls away slightly and squints comically, in the hope that playing up the role of lovable drunk will allay any potential Carolinian outbursts that simmer beneath a beautiful breastbone clad in an overpriced, casual linen blouse.

“Did. You. Know,” she drawls, punctuating each word with a soft jab at Caroline’s sternum, “that for the past two and half years, ever since they got married, Dad and your mum have been cruelly, cruelly hoarding a spectacular bottle of single-malt scotch in their little love shack, a bottle they got as a wedding present from the bloody vicar?”

Caroline sighs, groans, buries her face into Gillian’s neck—and inhales the weird manly shower gel that Raff owns and that his mother, out of sheer laziness, uses as well, and it possesses the power of a thousand colognes magnified into one spicy scent, like cheap cinnamon roasting in a toxic gas fire. On an actual man she would find it absolutely repulsive, but on a woman, this woman, it’s an inexplicable turn-on and so she sets to feasting on Gillian’s throat, but careful not to leave a mark. “I did not.”

Distinctly aware that she has offered herself as first course on the dinner menu—at least for the hostess—Gilliam stammers and squirms. “I n-needed to, um, reward myself for today.”

“Speaking of rewards—” Caroline whispers. She releases the dress around her hand—and herself from the bonds of being good—and slips it between Gillian’s legs, fingers flat along her warm thigh and touching the scrunched elastic boundary of her panties, and then someone pounds on the door with such unbridled fury that Caroline knows immediately that it’s her most troublesome and stroppy child and she is both grateful for and infuriated at the unintentional cuntblock.

From her comfy perch in Caroline’s lap Gillian attempts an elegant, faun-like leap to safety but instead elaborately and drunkenly staggers, kneels, and twists, inadvertently graceful as if she’s attempting an Orthodox Jewish wedding dance—but for the saving grace of frantically latching onto the sink she nearly ends up face down on the tiled floor.


Because Lawrence only pays attention to shouting, Caroline has no recourse to volley back a bellow. Which, given a heightened level of sexual frustration, is easy enough: “TELL HIM NOT TO GET RID OF THE ONION. I HAVE PLANS FOR THE ONION.”
Whilst straightening and smoothing out her dress, Gillian stares at her suspiciously.

“IT’S ALMOST READY AND IF YOU DON’T COME OUT NOW YOU’LL BE EATING TOFU CHIPS ALL NIGHT.”

“ALL RIGHT. WE’LL BE THERE IN A MINUTE.”

“HAVE YOU WASHED MY SHIRTS YET?”

“FUCK OFF, I’M NOT YOUR SERVANT.”

“BOY YOU’RE JUST REALLY MOTHER OF THE YEAR, AREN’T YOU?” She hears him stomp away.

“Mother of the year,” Gillian echoes. Tipsily she giggles, leans against the sink, hugs herself, and Caroline is struck—not for the first time—by the fierce singularity of her solitude, witnessed many a time in crowded pubs, at weddings, during dinners, over cups of tea and glasses of wine, even lying next to her in bed. You cannot fix people. This Caroline now knows. She spent eighteen years indulging John’s fantasy of being saved from himself and those efforts were, in fact, the essence and bedrock of their marriage. But the urge to fix and to save and to make right remains deeply inculcated in her; it is a force that compels and confounds at once.

Wobbly, she gets up. In two steps she’s in front of Gillian and grips the edge of the sink with both hands, thus penning the shepherdess like one of her ewes. Not that she wants to trap Gillian, but rather retain meager control over not only the situation but also her wandering hands. In response Gillian’s fingers tap the buttons of her shirt, drumming out a subversive Morse code, dots and dashes of defiant desire. “You going to tell me what happened today?”

“Didn’t drag you in here to talk,” Gillian says, with a tug on Caroline’s blouse. A kiss, a nip of the lower lip, the sweet shock of pain. “There’s nothing to tell.” The lie is followed by a softer, wetter kiss. “It’s shit. It’s toss. It’ll be over soon.” Gillian pauses and there is a sensual wavering of the moment, as a flag in full furl before the wind dies down, all revealed in the microcosmic flutter of her eyelids. “We can talk later. If you like. After dinner.”

“All right.” Caroline is grateful she’s still holding onto the sink’s edge, because her knees buckle. “You look good. Really good.”

Gillian barks out a laugh and gives her a playful push. “You hate this dress.”

“What? No.” Automatically, Caroline straightens with indignation.

“Called it a peasant dress once, you did.”

“I did not.” Even as she denies it, she can hear herself saying it while in that cabernet-tinted cloud of repressed emotion that she operated in when they first met.

With an eyeroll, Gillian shoves her against the bathroom door, bites her neck, her earlobe, runs a wild, unrepentant tongue along the gentle swell of her throat, and hisses “peasant” at her.

Caroline shivers. “Must’ve been drunk.”

“Or just being a bitch.”

“Or that.” She sighs. “So. Shall we? Once more unto the breach, then?”

While brushing back the bangs from Caroline’s forehead, Gillian smiles with undisguised
fondness; it’s unnerving, exhilarating, so much so that Caroline is caught deliriously off guard. “Comb your hair first,” Gillian replies. Then, with an exaggerated look at Caroline’s chest: “And calm your tits.”

As Caroline takes mortified account of over-exuberant nipples, Gillian darts out of the bathroom. She exhales a long breath, brushes her hair, and wills her body into submission.

In the kitchen Greg has taken over. She sets the table. Gillian gets more wine. Alan and Celia seriously debate whether Alan’s doctor resembles Richard Harris “before he started looking like a drunk.” Lawrence ignores everyone and everything except his mobile. Flora runs amok and takes it upon herself to show the Christmas lights in the living room to Gillian, who reacts with the appropriate awe and outlandish questions that make Flora cackle with delight: Did you put those up yourself, love?

Dinner starts out pleasantly enough, if only because everyone sublimates a spectrum of frustrations with pasta. Sacha would approve, Caroline thinks—and quickly quashes that thought as she admires her own plating expertise.

“The sauce is great,” Greg says, and then adds teasingly, “despite the lack of tofu.”

Caroline leans back. “Yeah? Thanks. And thanks for helping.”

“Your own recipe?”

“No. From Marcella Hazan.”

Lawrence, of course, tosses in the first conversational Molotov cocktail. “That another girlfriend?”

Gillian chokes on wine in such an elaborate fashion that it distracts Flora from endlessly twirling—and eventually wearing—the spaghetti on her plate.

As his daughter violently coughs and wheezes into a napkin, Alan shakes his head. “Always eats and drinks like a convict, she does. Gulping down everything.”

“Marcella Hazan was a food writer,” Caroline replies patiently to her idiot son. “And she’s dead.”

“Was she a lesbian?” Lawrence drawls mischievously.

Celia sighs. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Spastic fit over and done, Gillian wags a finger at her wineglass. “That’s, um, really, really powerful stuff, Caz.”

“Then maybe you should stop for the night,” Alan says.

Gillian gives him a disingenuous, snarling smile. “Well, old man,” she begins slowly, “maybe you should—”

“—have dessert!” Caroline interjects as Gillian glares at her, boldly telegraphing a reproach for preventing her from telling her father to fuck off.

Exhausted from an afternoon of father-daughter verbal sniping, Celia jumps in rather desperately: “What is for dessert?”

Beaming proudly, Greg pats his belly to indicate that a culinary delight is headed to the table: “Strawberry banana tofu ice cream.”
The family scatters to the wind: Lawrence scuttles upstairs, Celia murmurs something about biscuits at home that need eating before they go stale and drags her grumbling husband away lest he take up verbal fisticuffs with his surly daughter again, and Greg engages Flora in a game called “A Night at the Races,” where he and Flora run up and down the hallway in a very obvious attempt to tire her out. Briefly Gillian joins in the race until she is reprimanded for running with wine, and then disappears into the living room.

All this happens as Caroline cleans up. Afterward she relieves Greg of parental duty and gets Flora in the bathtub, where she is copiously splashed and anointed with suds in the process. Prelude to bedtime includes more running around upstairs, then the reading of a tale involving pandas playing badminton—the lesson implicit in the story involves good sportsmanship but Caroline’s takeaway is that maybe pandas shouldn’t be playing badminton to begin with. At the end of the tale Flora is still awake and demands more panda adventures. So Caroline improvises a story of a panda chemist who creates a magic potion that turns humans into pandas. As she rattles off ingredients for the imaginary formula—lewisite, calcite, phosgene oxime, titanium, feta cheese, pseudoephedrine, monkey brains, eucalyptus oil, banana farts—Flora falls asleep to the litany and Caroline dismally realizes that all her children are bored silly by her beloved chemistry.

Downstairs she finds Gillian alone, sunk into the couch, shoes kicked off, bare feet on the coffee table and terribly close to a glass of wine. Despite the relaxed pose her restless hands wrestle in the soft, inviting arena of her lap. She stares up at the small, white lights that limn the dimensions of the room and form an unimaginative rectangular constellation around them. Gillian likes starwatching, can rattle off useless facts about the planets, and Caroline swears to God that she heard Gillian say Cassiopeia the other day when they made love—a faint, ardent susurration on her skin. Caroline knows little about stars except that they collapse and break apart and their remnants hold court in the glimmering corridor of a nebula. Perhaps that’s it, Caroline thinks. There is no fixing or handling Gillian—who looks up at her now and smiles. There is nothing to do but gather together her bright broken pieces and keep them safe.

“This is nice,” Gillian says. “With the lights.”

The glow of the room brings her back to the Eddie confession, the two of them sitting on the sofa in Gillian’s home in front of the fire. In the years since they have sat together in silences ranging widely from the amiable to the charged, and so much has happened since that evening: Deaths and births and marriages and divorces and in the midst of it all is this woman whose presence in her life, whose volatility she cannot contain or really even fathom, remains fixed and constant.

Tiredness kicks in, the flow of lust runs sluggish in her veins. That and Gillian looks fairly knackered as well, so she doesn’t have to worry about another barely controlled makeout session. But before attempting any gesture that could be viewed as more than sisterly affection by even the most objective bystander, she glances around. “Where’s Greg?”

Gillian stifles a yawn. “Went out, he asked me to tell you. Meeting his lady friend for a drink.” She snorts and says the woman’s name in a wispy falsetto: “Brigitte.”

Sputtering a laugh, Caroline dives into the couch next to her. “Oh God. He told you about her.”

“Yep. Know everything about her now. Like, for example, she got perfect A levels—”

Caroline snorts derisively. “So did I.”

“Course you did. I know what kind of wine she likes—”

“What?”
“Fucking chardonnay, Caz.”

“Is that different from regular chardonnay?”

Gillian grins and leans into her. She takes Caroline’s hand in her own, her thumb presses into the fleshy swale of Caroline’s palm, massaging a sweet pressure point that makes Caroline sag contentedly into overstuffed cushions. “Get this, she cried at the end of Titanic. I mean, I cried at the end of Titanic but only because I’d just wasted three hours of my bloody life watching it.”

“I fell asleep during Titanic,” Caroline confesses.

“Smartest decision of your life.”

While Caroline is content to have Gillian’s head resting against her shoulder and her hand massaged and caressed ad infinitum—as such they sit in silence for several long, exquisite minutes—she wonders if the subject of the day in divorce court should be raised. She hadn’t even known about the event until Alan mentioned it yesterday. Gillian has so many layers of unpredictability that sometimes in comparison other people appear almost logical, forthright, and uncomplicated. Of course, the limitations of her emotional intelligence force comparison with Kate—wondering once again if Kate had untold contradictions and complexities of character, or if Caroline was simply too selfish and self-involved to put forth a real effort of discovery. Think we all know the answer to that, twat, she tells herself. If Kate were alive, would she still be blundering through existence with a wife who was largely unknown to her? Has Gillian, through her own desperate needs, somehow inadvertently brought out powers of perception in Caroline that were otherwise dormant?

Sod it, she thinks, and asks cautiously: “Was it bad? Today?”

Gillian groans and, to Caroline’s disappointment, releases her hand and sits up—rather, hunches and hovers nervously over the coffee table. “Same as it ever is. My brilliant history of disappointing everyone. See it on everyone’s face. My dad. Robbie. Even your mum.” She reaches for the wine, stares into the glass. “Maybe someday you’ll look at me like that.” She gulps down the last of it and before Caroline can vigorously deny the claim, plows on. “Let’s begin with the old man, shall we? He cares what people think, my dad does. Remember when Gary gave that interview and ‘outed’ him, so to speak? Well, he’s acting like this is on the same level, it being on ‘public record’ that I’m an adulterer. Like who gives a shit anymore about things like that. Anyone who knows me knows it’s my fault anyway, right? Yeah, I know, you’re gonna say not my fault, shouldn’t have married Robbie, should have embraced a life of lesbianism—”

“I’d never say that,” Caroline replies.

Gillian squints at her accusingly. “Probably thinking it.”

“I think that about every woman, really.”

This, at least, makes Gillian grin for a moment. “But the thing is, I did marry him, I did cheat on him—I did.” She repeats it softly: “I did. And it’s just one more thing I’ve done wrong in a very f-fucking long list and every time he looks at me, I see him ticking off things in that mental list”—her index finger spasms and marks off items in imaginary list written on air—“all the things he knows I’ve done, all the things he suspects, and, Christ, it’s all m-messed up, really messed up—you know why?”

“Why?”

Gillian stares at her with the same sneering incredulousness that, most likely, greeted Robbie when
he made the following suggestion: “After all this shit we talked about with the bleeding lawyers today, as I’m leaving he waylays me and says he still wants to get back together. Work it out. He looks at me as if everything about me is wrong, that I am the source of all his misery, and he still wants me. It completely does my head in. Is that what love is supposed to be?” She shakes her head, burrows back into the sofa. “He’s wanted to marry me since he was sixteen—he, he said that to me once. His way of proposing.”

“He’s not sixteen anymore,” Caroline replies. “And neither are you.” She thinks of Robbie—who never set foot outside of the country until his honeymoon, always wears the same shirt-and-tie combo to holiday gatherings, who still owns a Yorkshire rugby team blanket that he bought some thirty-five years ago and always insisted using it as a throw on the marital bed and then got quite cross with Gillian when she used it as bedding for an arthritic old sheep dog.

“Even when I was sixteen, I—Jesus, I didn’t want to marry anyone. I mean, I didn’t know who I was. Couldn’t find my arse with both hands. Still can’t.”

“It’s not love on his part,” Caroline says as she absently tucks hair around Gillian’s ear. “It’s an inability to grow up, move on, let go. He thinks he has some special claim on you, because he was your first—”

Gillian stretches and sits up, moving out of Caroline’s grasp. “He wasn’t.”

“Wasn’t he?” Admittedly Caroline is unsure of details; trying to establish some sort of shagging timeline with regard to Gillian’s romantic past has always seemed a fool’s quest, or at the very least an effort warranting a first-class historian possessing patience and superior spreadsheet skills beyond her own modest capabilities.

“I mean—he, he was the first person I had it off with, but he wasn’t the first person I loved.”

“Eddie, then,” Caroline says. Which makes sense. Gillian has never said as much explicitly, but in her stories about Eddie his magnetism, charm, and good looks were easily envisioned and Caroline vividly imagines the façade of his rough, alluring beauty, as if he were some kind of modern Dorian Gray, that overlaid the monstrous, festering piece of shit that he actually was.

Poised attentively on the couch, Gillian tucks her hands under her thighs. It’s a new trick, Caroline has noticed, a move to prevent her from biting her fingernails. Instead she ends up gnawing her lower lip. “No.”

Caroline pauses. “Oh.” She hopes that she has struck the right note of calm interest and not condescending, snotty-bitch surprise.

“You want to ask, I know.”

“You’ve no obligation to tell me anything,” Caroline says firmly, then continues in a slower, gentler tone: “I can guess, based on things you’ve told me before.”

Gillian says nothing, only frowns and looks away.

“It was one of those women? From Hebden Bridge?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve never talked much about them. Or—her.”

“It was a long time ago.”
“You were very young.”

This statement of fact, framed however cautiously, lingers as an accusation and puts Gillian on the defensive. Which Caroline did not mean to do, but there was no other way of putting it out there. She rolls her shoulders. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“You were fourteen.”

“Fifteen,” Gillian corrects absently. She stills her restless hands, her fingers interlock and lace together tightly over her knee and remind Caroline of a puzzle she had as a child, she thinks it was called a bamboozler, where the challenge is careful dismantling followed by skillful rebuilding. Gillian looks up again at the orderly constellation of white lights that bathe them in a Milky Way of memories. It takes 25,000 light years to travel to the Milky Way, a journey that would be an epic mind-fuck of time’s perpetual collision: future, present, past. What time is it in the Milky Way? Caroline wonders. With increasing distance the past entices, always, and Gillian is no more immune to it than Robbie or anyone else.

“You’re thinking it was wrong,” Gillian says. “That she hurt me, took advantage of me. Maybe that’s all true. Yeah, I guess, I guess maybe it is. But you don’t understand. You don’t know how it felt—how I felt. It was like, like a new world for me and I was the bloody center of it, she made me feel that and—I really, really believed it, all of it.” She pauses. “Including the part where she said she loved me.”

With this crucial piece of the Gillian Greenwood puzzle in place, a design looms large, a pattern discerns itself. Enough so that Caroline requires for the moment no further details, no more components. Even though Gillian adds softly, “And I loved her.”
Chapter Summary

Flashback chapter, and a departure from style (for now, just because it's a flashback).

Please note, trigger warnings: mention of abortion and underage sexual activity.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1. the escape artist

It’s the Year of the Abortion. Gillian only calls it this in her head and in her diary: Written in a looped, thickly traced imprimatur of deep, cheap ballpoint blue—wishes she had an oh-so-symbolic red pen but doesn’t—underlined, defiant, and knowing full well that her nosy mother would read it. Despite this bit of all-caps bravado she does not quite possess the courage to write down all the things she wants to put to paper. Like how the morning after the D&E that began and ended with a doctor’s lecture and scowl, she stared into a toilet bowl of blood—oily clots and thickened skeins, specimens poised on the water’s surface as if on slide under a microscope, like in science class, she should be in science class—and her knees buckled and it was an act of sheer will to keep upright because she has already caused enough trouble, is the source of her mother’s tears and rages, her father’s silences, Robbie’s wounded befuddlement as she froze him out, all of it worse than the blood in the bowl, than the abortion itself.

Thus a resolution to be good: Extra chores around the house, studying more, assiduously avoiding any kind of interaction with and/or mention of boys. No matter how hard she tried, though, the perpetual undercurrent of parental resentment lit up her nerves and sent sparks of rebellion flying through the house. She swore at her mother’s passive-aggressive comments, matched her father in sulking, and got horrid, lurid purple streaks in her hair that unleashed a torrent of abusive verbiage from her mother more extensive and obscene than announcement of a pregnancy did. Her father had just sighed and said Oh, Gillian in that way he had, half a haiku of disappointment that cut her a thousand times more than the elaborate brow-beatings from her mum.

Then summer. The streaks in her hair grew out and when she bobbed it she appeared alarmingly wholesome—particularly in a school uniform, so it is a relief to chuck it in the bottom of the closet for a few months and avoid the leering sarcasm of certain headmasters: playing the nice girl next door now, are we? Being good, she realizes, is a tiresome affair, garnering no tangible reward, nor even a baseline of respect. She starts staying out late again, staggering in at any time between midnight and five in the morning, and usually digesting a late-night snack of leftovers and opprobrium from whichever parent had stayed up late for the honor of shaming her.

These nocturnal preoccupations come courtesy of another big event in the Year of the Abortion: Antje, Gillian’s best mate, buys a used Fiat. She lives in a council flat with her mother, who is Dutch; her father, a drunken native of Sowerby Bridge, occasionally shows up at the flat for attempts at reconciliation with his wife and daughter until his fists and his drinking override the tenuous established peace, and he ends up leaving again for the deleterious combination of rehab and flophouse.

Gillian has no idea why Antje—possessive of blonde supermodel good looks, who was also
smart, cool, and widely admired by all—has ever given her the time of day. She possesses no illusions about her own appearance, and suspects they are friends largely because she makes Antje look good in comparison—pretty but not too much so, the Belinda to her Dido—this comparison leaping to mind thanks to Maurice playing Dido and Aeneas the other week whilst she and her parents were having tea at his; after too much sherry he tipsily enacted the plot with salt and pepper shakers and various other condiments. (Dido was a bottle of Ballymaloe Relish.) Conveniently she could blame her parents for mixed messages. Her father, always kindly biased toward one and all, said that she was beautiful, while her mother would only say, grudging and suspicious, there’s something about you.

In comparison to what Antje has splendidly in spades, something is really nothing, and that elusive something did not serve her well in the plan she had hatched last year to be noticed by the great and mysterious Eddie Greenwood. Antje knows him, had introduced them at an outdoor party near the reservoir one time, where Eddie said ta by way of introducing himself and then later don’t lean on that, love when she dared to press her ass against the precious shiny flank of his newly renovated Corvair. Via the social misfit’s favorite kind of osmosis—artful eavesdropping—Gillian absorbed several facts: he was the older brother of her classmate Robbie, worked in a garage as a mechanic, which she liked because she liked working with autos and fixing things too, and Christ in heaven he was the gorgeous eighth fucking wonder of the world when he dove flawlessly into the reservoir. Awkwardly, and with Antje’s eh, why not? approval she set to the task of befriending Robbie in hopes of getting closer to Eddie. Similar to John Elliot’s impervious ignorance to the subtext of Gillian’s frequent interrogations concerning his estranged wife, Robbie seemed oblivious to her persistent questioning about his brother, and before she knew it she was in too deep with him. Which was easy enough to do because he was kind, laughed at her dumb jokes, and appeared interested in her to a degree that no one else was. Exempting the strange force of Robbie’s desire for her, nothing remains of the fantasy she craved nor the relationship she never meant to have.

So she finds herself at the reservoir once again on a summer night, but this time alone with Antje—their hair damp from a swim, trading a joint, and staring up into the encroaching night as just-visible stars knit infinite, unseen pathways into blackening blue.

So that’s that, eh? Antje says.

That’s that, Gillian echoes.

Antje hums sympathetically. Brilliant plan didn’t work.

Nope. Gillian releases a cloud of smoke, an offering to the starry sky. Didn’t fucking work at all.

They collapse into giggling that leaves them breathless, because there is nothing else to be said about it all.

A fortnight before the school year begins anew they go to a punk club in Manchester, all cavernous chill, blood red anarchy symbols and slogans on the grotty walls, bloated with smoke, and with a bad band doing covers of Joy Division until they’re boozed off stage and someone starts cranking the real thing through the speakers. While Antje flirts with some bloke from the shit band because she thinks he looks like Adam Ant, Gillian tries finagling a pint from the bartender, who rolls his eyes at her alarming baby face and tells her to piss off—and finds herself pressed up against a woman at the bar also vying for alcohol.

The woman smirks and buys her a pint. Gillian is relieved the club is dim enough to camouflage her burning blush. Over the past year certain feelings have, on occasion, simmered within her, forcing periodic, half-hearted self-denials of the realization that she fancied some girls a bit, and watched them much the way she did certain boys and thus in a manner distinct from that of her
friends—not the casual critiques of how Claire wears her lustrous hair and how Rita does her flawless makeup and doesn’t Sandra look amazing in that skirt, but something different. She is ensnared by ineluctable details: softness and grace, perfume and clean sweat, the long legs of the headmaster’s wife, just to name a few.

In the dark of the club the color of the woman’s eyes are unfathomable. Her hair, long and wavy, looks dark brown, auburn—or maybe that was a trick of the magenta light that hovered sadly around the empty, beer-sodden dance floor. She wears the seemingly incongruous combination of a leather motorcycle jacket over some sort of flowery print dress, and Doc Martens. So incongruous it seems genius, at least to a fifteen-year-old. She lives in Hebden Bridge, she tells Gillian, and studies art at Bradford. She smokes. Curlicues from her cigarette unravel slowly in contrast to the pounding, transformative flurry of music relentless as hummingbird wings.

*Day in day out. Day in day out. Day in day out.*

Gillian’s heartbeat matches time with Joy Division until Antje roughly grabs the scruff of her collar and slurs into her ear, we’re leaving, Mike is taking us to a party.

Irritably she wrinkles her nose. Who’s Mike?

Our new best friend, Antje hisses, so stop flirting with this dyke and let’s go.

_This dyke._ The phrase vibrates, her neck prickles. But as Gillian shrugs apologetically and turns to go, the woman grabs her rucksack by the strap, fishes out Gillian’s notebook of French that she was studying in preparation for the fall, and scrawls a name and an address on a blank page in the back. Only the name swims into cohesion: _Julia._

Stop by sometime, yeah? Julia says. I have interesting friends. She smiles. And better drinks than here.

Outside the dark air is purer and sweeter, even as a lorry roars by, and the guy named Mike points at a white van while Gillian stops dead on the curb and thinks _ax murderer._

Then Antje presses the keys of the Fiat into her palm, the sweaty warmth of her hand a shock. Follow us, she says.

Don’t have my license yet, you know that.

Don’t get caught, then. Before crossing the street to the van, she squints playfully at Gillian. That woman gave you her number?

Well, address. Yeah. So?

Oh nothing, Butterbean, Antje coos.

The nickname, used ever since they were in grammar school together, soothes Gillian’s ire just a touch. Don’t mean anything, she grumbles.

Jesus Gillian, you were looking at her like a bloke, Antje cackles—and nudges her gentle-like, nipping at her with a quick, blurry kiss on the cheek, and says, S’all right, silly, I don’t care. You only live once.

Following Mike to the van she sways through the street and the trench coat she wears flutters and flares; a streetlamp coronation drops a wreath of light on her blonde head. She pops into the van and she’s gone. Even though they remained friends for years after this, Gillian has always framed this image as a closing shot, the final scene in the movie of their youth because twelve years later
Antje will be dead of an overdose in some bloke’s apartment in Manchester and Gillian will be married to Eddie and the first thing she will think of when hearing about it will be, you were always looking for the perfect way out, you always wanted to escape the shit life here, well you did, you finally did. In death, she envied Antje far more than she ever did in life.

2. A different shadow on the wall, a stranglehold of a certain feeling

A few weeks pass before Gillian makes the move one day after school. Getting into Julia’s building is no problem; the lock on the main door is broken, and every floor is connected by a thread of dingy hallways reeking of cabbage or unidentifiable root vegetables—a hundred years of cheap food sweltering and stewing in misery. Standing in front of the correct door on the fourth floor, she knocks. And waits. Knocks again. Nothing. While anxiously biting her lips, she hears an ominously slow thumping on the stairs that grows closer and closer. Then singing, a basso profundo of all force and no tone: Reap the wild wind.

Then, exaggerated and trilled ridiculously: Reeeeeaaaap the wwwwwild wwwwind.

Appearing at the end of the hallway is a large man with wild, curly black hair and a herringbone overcoat. He grins at her, which does absolutely nothing to soothe the panicked pounding of her heart; at a glance she can tell that she barely reaches his shoulders, her waist is probably as big as one of his thighs. Slowly he sways toward her, hulking and humming Ultravox, drunk or stoned or both and, like a battered old ship guided to shore by an invisible tugboat, lumbers right past her to the corner flat next door.

Fumbling with a set of keys, he nods at the door of Julia’s flat. She’s not in, love. Be around in about an hour or so.

Oh.

You’re welcome to wait, he says, and the door to his flat slowly opens. Want to come in?

N-no, I’m okay. I’ll just wait out here.

He smiles again. Smart girl. Prolly watch all those slasher movies, don’t ya? They’re like a public service announcement these days, aren’t they? He pushes the door open wider. Tell you what. I’ll leave the door open so we can chat.

Gillian remembers she has a Swiss army knife in her rucksack. My luck, she thinks, I’d probably end up stabbing myself if he comes at me. Okay, she agrees warily.

I’m James.

Right.

All right Miss Mysterious, you don’t have to tell me your name. Where’d you meet Jules?

Jules?

Julia, ya numpty.

Oh. Club over on Carlton.

You mean that shite place that always plays Depeche Mode?
Gillian hesitates. She likes Depeche Mode. No, the one with the anarchy symbols.

Jesus Christ you’ll get the clap from just sitting on the shitter in that dump. Fancy a cuppa?

Sure.

She hears a clatter of dishes, the sound of a kettle popped, running water.

You’re just a wee bairn, he says. What’re ya doing in a shithole like that, eh?

Listening to music, she replies, and trots out the lie she has prepared for nearly every stranger she meets: I’m eighteen.

If you’re eighteen, he snorts, then I’m bloody Methuselah.

Tired on being on the backfoot, she decides it’s time to grill him by seizing on his weird accent: You Irish?

He gasps. You wound me, child! Glaswegian, born and raised.

Sorry.

Trust me, I’ve been called worse. He carries an old wooden desk chair into the hallway and presents it to Gillian with a florid curtsy and she thinks of an old cartoon she saw with a bear pretending to be a butler. Thought ya should be comfortable, he says. Five minutes later he brings out a cup of tea, goes back into the apartment, and Gillian feels like she’s being set up for some Monty Python skit and a giant blancmange will come barreling down the hallway and smother her to death.

I’m assuming she wants to paint you, James calls out into the hallway.

Gillian squeaks. Me?

You’re pretty enough.

She paints? Then Gillian remembers: She’s in art school, numpty.

He sighs. There’s nothing more painful than a wasted compliment. O the fairer sex, thank heavens I don’t have to bother with you lot.

That was a compliment, then?

James laughs. Come inside, take a look. I have some of her paintings here. Her flat’s too bloody small for most of ’em.

Gillian hesitates.

I swear I’m not a rapist.

That is s-something a rapist would say.

Fair point, ya cheeky little bint.

He ignores her. She finishes the tea, frowns nervously into the empty cup until the curious embrace of fate wins out and she surrenders, wandering cautiously through the open door into his flat.
It is larger than expected. One half of it is sparse—mattress on floor, electric plate, small refrigerator—but a migration and density of objects creeps along the southern exposure: paints in containers and on brushes clustered in empty rusted coffee cans, the effect of it all pulls the eye to the canvases in various states of process that crowd and dominate the wall that they lean against.

The biggest canvas is the most colorful one, a painting unlike anything she has seen hung in dusty museums or anyone’s home. A landscape of the world on fire—swaths of red-orange-gold meltingly thick on a blue and lavender background, the brightness chasing a darkening violet blue to the very edge of the canvas, to where you imagine the night begins. Her eyes flicker among the alternating lines of drenched color and she marvels at how these individual, distinct lines come together into a thrilling whole, as the frames of a film coalesce into a single second of motion. Something else magically takes shape: A hauntingly familiar hatched stack of lines near the bottom of the painting, its identity confirmed with a 90-degree head tilt.

That’s the mill! she exclaims.

Yup, he says. As the title evinces.

There is a ribbon of rough white canvas at the painting’s bottom right. She kneels, and there it is, in a thin pencil scrawl almost too illegible to read: view of calder valley sunset no 27, the mill

Oh.

He laughs not unkindly, his heavy, bearlike tread creaking the floorboards as he walks over to the painting.

It’s something, isn’t it? he murmurs, as if seeing the landscape for the first time. Folding his arms, he sighs with undisguised affection. Bitch has the nerve to paint better than me.

Another cup of tea and several biscuits later she’s so caught up in his conversation, his world—he talks of his hometown of Glasgow and its art history, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and symbolism and Art Nouveau, all while doodling on a large sketchpad and continually topping off his tea with scotch—that she almost doesn’t notice Julia walking in through the flat’s still-open door. Late afternoon sunlight cuts across the room and the artist herself rivals the startling beauty of her work—same Doc Martens, same leather jacket over a frayed linen blouse, and an old corduroy skirt, and Gillian receives confirmation that her hair is a rich russet brown and her eyes, filled with sunlight, are light hazel, sort of green-gold. The sum effect is that she is unlike any woman Gillian has ever encountered before, different than her classmates, her teachers, her mum’s friends.

She rests a hand feather-light on Gillian’s shoulder as if they’ve known each other forever and Gillian hears the delicate racketing of silver bracelets near her own ear, a click-click as if something is locking into place—oh happy prison, keep me here forever—and Julia says, in a voice flecked with a toff accent that Gillian hadn’t noticed the first time around, James, you’ve stolen my stray.

3. drink and dope and Derrida and Depeche Mode

Gillian starts coming round regularly. First it’s weekends, then a sprinkling of days during the week after school, casually dispersed just so that she doesn’t appear a desperate clinger-on. Sometimes there are up to a dozen or so people crammed in Julia’s tiny, tidy flat—apparently she uses James’s significantly larger space as a default studio—sitting around smoking, drinking, eating, getting high, and talking about books, music, art. Even though she is terrified of saying anything amongst this gaggle of university students and penniless artists—she still hasn’t
recovered from the shame of enthusiastically admitting she liked Wordsworth—nonetheless she feels remarkably grown up and sophisticated and is mostly content to sit around and take it all in. Well, to take in the restless hostess at the very least: At these times Julia is always on the move, fetching drinks, talking, pacing, trying to get people to eat homemade protein bars or granola or disgustingly verdant smoothies.

She’s a bloody hippie, James always says. Talk a good game, pretends she’s a Wire fan or whatever, but you see, whenever she’s alone she’s making fucking granola and listening to Joni Mitchell.

That James knows what she’s like whenever she’s alone has, on more than one occasion, guiltily tied Gillian into knots of jealousy; it’s not until she drops in on him late one afternoon to find him hung-over all the way into bleary-eyed incoherence and with a scruffy, peroxide-blond punk boy in his bed that his particular intimacy with Julia all makes sense. Insofar as anything she feels, thinks, or sees nowadays makes sense.

It certainly doesn’t make sense, Gillian thinks, that after a night of drink and dope and Derrida and Depeche Mode—some in Julia’s circle had grudgingly copped to liking the band, which made her feel cool again—to make granola at four in the morning but by Christ they are doing it. Everyone is gone, including James, who has staggered back to his flat, and she watches as Julia scoops the cooled granola off a baking sheet, dump it into a bowl, and shove it under Gillian’s nose.

Try it, says Julia. Not the burnt parts, though.

Gillian grabs a nutty, sticky clump of the granola and pops it in her mouth. It’s sweet and warm, and she could easily down the whole bowl. It’s good, she says.

Bet you can’t taste the spirulina!

No, because I don’t know what the fuck that is.

Julia laughs and sits across from Gillian at the space-green Formica kitchen table, which, as she had proudly told Gillian, had been fished out of a dumpster—by James, of course. She stretches out long legs, flexes her bare feet. Gillian notices that the bottoms of her feet are grayish-pink from running around barefoot all night.

So, she drawls, my little foul-mouthed friend, my sweet and tender hooligan—

Am I really a hooligan?

Don’t sound so pleased, Gillian. You certainly like to talk that way, don’t you? But that’s not you, you’re smart. Can’t help but wonder, though, if you’re thinking ahead. Do you want to go to university?

My father wants me to work in insurance, Gillian replies with a shrug. Civil service, maybe.

Julia bursts into laughter.

No, really.

Why?

Because I—like helping people? Gillian speculates helplessly. Which is bollocks because the thought of actually dealing with people all day sets her teeth on edge. It’s because the old man wants her to work in some boring desk job that will keep her out of trouble.
But what do you want to do?

Julia asks her this question all the time. Because she’s so unaccustomed to anyone actually asking what she would like to do with her future, usually she just shrugs or changes the subject. But the late night, the cheap chianti, the joint has worn down her stroppy protective layer.

I don’t—don’t know, she says. Travel. Go to France. Maybe Netherlands, Rotterdam—Antje’s got family there, we talked about going someday.

You’re learning French. I saw it in your notebook.

Yeah. Thought maybe if I got good enough, I c-could be a translator. I could live and work anywhere, then.

You could, Julia says softly. She has a habit of gazing so intensely at Gillian, and for such seemingly long, uninterrupted intervals—half a minute seems eternity—that Gillian wants to tell her everything but then she stops and wonders if Julia is really seeing her and not an object in light and shadow, something to be committed to paper or canvas in paints and oils and pens, rendered useless and casually discarded in the process.

Gillian stares at the floor. Are you really going to paint me? she mumbles.

You don’t want me to, do you?

With a don’t-give-a-fuck shrug, Gillian redirects her look at the kitchen wall, where there is a worn and torn film poster of Cocteau’s *Orphée*, and gnaws futilely at a hangnail.

I don’t usually paint figures. People. She pauses. Well, not anymore. Thought I was never good at it. But James said I should try again, and figurative work, that’s his thing—he’s so good he caught the eye of Lucian Freud, you know. So when I saw you, I thought you might—inspire me.

Me?

You’ve got a good face. An interesting face. Mark my words, there’s more beauty in character than anything you’ll see in a bloody magazine or on telly.

Gillian feels a blush coursing up her body, from chest to neck and further, and as the tips of her ears tingle, she blurts out, You should paint Antje. She’s way prettier than me. She’s beautiful. I mean, she’s, she’s like a painting come to life anyway. Like a, a Botticelli or whatever.

Why would I want to paint a painting? Julia grins teasingly. You sound like you’re in love with her.

No. I mean, I love her—she’s my best friend.

I like her. Bring her round again.

Nah. She’s too busy shagging this guy she met, he’s in a band.

Not that horrible Joy Division cover band? Julia is aghast.

Gillian’s silence confirms it.

They laugh.

Then, sighing, Julia looks out the window. Jesus Christ, it’s nearly dawn.
My parents will be freaking out.

You can call them. James has a phone—you could dash over and use it. Nothing will wake him now.

Gillian shakes her head. Fuck them.

Julia doesn’t push. She rises, relights the joint she’s been working on most of the night, and starts puttering about clearing up the party mess while Joni Mitchell plays jazzy and low in the background.

*But you know I’m so glad to be on my own—*

Calder Valley sunrise seems less spectacular compared to the painting of its sunset. Gillian stands near the kitchen window and she’s just tired and high enough—and crashing ever so slightly—to imagine that the pastel cresting of dawn over the tops of the buildings *is* a painting, something created in the vapid studio of her unimaginative mind. Absently she nibbles at her fingernails again and tastes the smoky bitterness from a joint on her fingers and amidst the layered bass that rolls through her like blood and the jangling guitar, Julia lifts the hair away from the nape of Gillian’s neck and kisses her there.

*Still somehow the slightest touch of a stranger*  
*Can set up trembling in my bones*

Is this okay? she whispers.

*I know no one’s going to show me everything*  
*We all come and go unknown*  
*Each so deep and superficial*  
*Between the forceps and the stone*

Gillian is afraid to say yes, even more afraid to say no. She touches Julia’s hand, which rests on her hip—a tentative signal, a flashing warning light to go slow. *Hejira* means journey, this much she has learned from puzzling endlessly over Joni Mitchell. But there’s no telling what the point of the journey is or where it will end up. But this morning it takes her to this woman’s bed, where she’s stripped down blank and naked as a new canvas. Her partially clad, fumbling fucks with Robbie—and a couple others—did not prepare her for the wholesale vulnerability of being like this in someone’s bed. For appraisal with sight and words and where the hot greed of her response is tempered with a thousand kinds of touches and kisses, a sweet hell of foreplay where the ache created by the slightest contemplation of forever dwells—she knows it now and will never, ever forget it because it is here that she learns how to beg without regret.

Slow and gentle, Julia parts her legs and studies her cunt as closely as her face or any other part of her body; it is impossible to know within the fine, feathered interleaves of aesthetics and desire where the artist’s detachment ends and the lover’s appreciation begins.

*L’origine du monde*—the origin of the world, she says. It’s a painting. By Courbet. Beautiful. Almost as beautiful as you. She sighs. Christ. You are really lovely and I can’t help myself.

Gillian manages one last final, whispered *please* before it begins. The immersive shock of someone going down on her for the first time sends her shivering into a sublime state of frightening pleasure. She can’t relax, can’t enjoy it. Like diving, an innate instinct for self-preservation mingles with the exhilaration. But with slow persistence, and a couple soothing breaks—*take a breath, love*—she comes.
Later, an impasto of fickle November sun and shadows marks the prints on the bedroom wall—a Georgia O’Keefe, and the pink flag of the Wire poster flutters a good-morning kiss—dapples their tangled limbs, and underneath her head her new lover’s heart marks time in a steady swishing beat, like an oar hitting water while she breathes in the happiness of a moment that she never wants to end.

Maybe I’ll take you to France, girl, Julia murmurs before falling asleep.

4. the forceps and the stone

On the day of her 44th birthday Gillian takes her usual solitary, celebratory ramble and finds herself in Leeds, in the city’s beautiful main library and on the brink of an unavoidable chasm into the past. Prominently on display, as thick and large as a cutting board or even the bloody registry for Westminster Abbey, is a mammoth coffee table-type book called *Contemporary Scottish Artists* and she thinks of James for the first time in God knows how many years. The spine makes a tiny creak of protest when she opens it and she shoots a panicked look at the librarian, who is pretending not to watch her. She finds him listed in the index, and there is his work on page 457: a soft-lined impressionist pastel sketch of a handsome, fair-haired man sitting on a park bench beside the name JAMES HEATH ADAIR, the sprawl of his life contained within parentheses: (1958–2007). Nearly thirty years ago she had cried in his lap, face pressed into dirty, paint-stippled chinos, while he soothed her with hair-stroking and platitudes over the impossibilities of first love and helplessly, stupidly quoted Nick Lowe at her—*you’ve got to be cruel to be kind*—in order to justify his best friend’s sudden and permanent decampment to her native London.

Now she struggles, and fails, not to cry in front of the librarian who frowns openly at her, ready to give her the boot should salty tears mar the glossy pages of their fancy new book.

It takes another year to summon forth courage to look up Julia; the convenience of finally having a computer at home, after she scrounges up enough money to buy Raff a decent one for school use, affords her all the stealth and privacy required for this niggling, fortuitous task. Late one night, the shit internet connection somehow tremendously improved by three glasses of wine, she googles Julia and finds photos of a professor living in northern California with closely cropped gray-white hair and wearing glasses—here is the book she co-edited called *Methods and Modalities in Art Education*, and here is a photo of her in a studio wearing worn denim with a bandana at her throat, the same throat Gillian kissed fewer times than she wanted, here are hands that fucked and caressed in a black and white photo, caught in broad gesticulations as Julia stands in front of a class wearing a plain white blouse and a spangled necklace, here is her wry half-smile and Gillian wonders how many students have fallen for that smile and that seductive line about Courbet, and here is the reacquaintance of loss nestling soft and wild against her, here is its gentle unpredictability, here is loss begetting loss, and here she falls asleep on the couch after another few glasses of wine and thinking, I always knew you would end up in California.

Even though she drifts off to a vision of California cliffs and coasts, her unconscious mind teems with recollections of Eddie: Nearly two years after Julia left Hebden Bridge she ran into him on the main drag in Ripponden, where she’d gone looking for a summer job.

He’s alone, leaning against the old Corvair that Robbie claimed they’d rebuilt together, but later Eddie tells her he did it all himself because Robbie is a fuckwit. He’s just as beautiful as she remembers, tall and golden-haired, broad-shouldered and square-jawed, wearing a dark blue Fred Perry polo and a pair of Ray-Bans. As she approaches, he grins. This close she notices his teeth, two crazy paths of crowded, crooked enamel. It releases him from the burden of perfection, from the fantasy that existed in her mind. It places him within her reach. He hoots with self-conscious laughter and shyly ducks his head, like James Dean in *Giant* confronted with and confounded by
the mere presence of Elizabeth Taylor. When he removes the Ray-Bans and finally looks at her, she is lost to him.

Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK:

“Digital,” Joy Division
“Reap the Wild Wind,” Ultravox
“Hejira,” Joni Mitchell
“California,” Joni Mitchell
the mercury suite

Chapter Summary

This is the final chapter. I decided to end the story here because it was getting too unwieldy, too long—my essential purpose in getting the characters together is completed, and so this chapter (in its own rambling, unwieldy way mirroring the whole story) is meant as an epilogue of sorts for those who are tired of my verbosity and circuitous way of telling a goddamn story. But there are still enough time jumps—flash forward! flashback from the flash forward! and then another flash forward!—and overall gaps in that, if you like, you can hang around for the next installment to have those lacunae filled. Yes, friends, it’s a fucking tetralogy. So here’s the chance to get out while you still can.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1. variations in the key of fubar: five years later

But how long, babe, can you search for what’s not lost?

—Bob Dylan, “I’ll Keep it With Mine”

The string quartet takes up Vivaldi’s “Spring” with gusto and everyone watches the bride walking down the aisle. Except for Gillian, who can’t be bothered to look at the woman her son is marrying and Caroline, who, from the perspective of six rows deep and ten months in America, stares at the back of Gillian’s neck and is once again lost.

The woman Raff marries today is not Ellie but the daughter of his uncle’s business partner. Her name is Mandy Brandingham. She has preternaturally white teeth, gym-sculpted biceps, and the eager, entitled assurance of many women of her age and status that, under normal circumstances, masks a panoply of neuroses and fears.

Vaguely Caroline recalls having the energy, at that age, for such a sophisticated level of emotional subterfuge. No longer. When she left England last year to take up a visiting professorship in New York, Raff’s tangled affair with Mandy had just begun. Predictably his breakup with Ellie was messy and his mother furious, but it provided Caroline—in the throes of her own protracted, fractured relations with Gillian—with yet another reason to get the hell out of the country. Fleeing in timely fashion was truly in character, as was quietly acknowledging and then utterly ignoring both what she was doing and the ramifications thereof.

Apparently things got serious between Raff and his new girlfriend because three months ago, while she and Flora were still in New York, she received a wedding invitation in a flouncy font and engraved vellum so thick one could serve dinner on it. Flora greatly admired the beautiful script and relished the opportunity to drawl, trill, and chant Mandy’s name at every occasion as if it were an incantation to some higher state of being, a mythical white savior, at times sounding like
an inebriated Irish priest giving himself last rites: Long have I loved yew, Mandy Brrrrrandingham!

Although Caroline felt enormous empathy for any woman brave enough to attempt a serious romantic relationship with the son of Gillian Greenwood, she ignored the invite. Raff texted entreaties at every turn and even threatened to call her. She texted come at me bro. He replied, thats old Cazza just like you. She ignored him again.

Until two weeks ago when, on a warm, rainy Saturday, he made good on the threat and called—having cannily waited until she was back in the country so that the call wasn’t ridiculously expensive. She had been driving back to the rented flat in Hebden Bridge, where she and Flora were staying, from a meeting with the realtor in Harrogate. In order to properly express herself and to shield Flora from witnessing emotional excesses served in a rasher of foul-mouthed invective, she pulled over into Lister Park and left the girl, happily absorbed in a game on the iPad, in the Jeep as she paced along a muddy track within vigilant sightlines of the vehicle and where she could rail with delicious, cathartic abandon:

“You cannot seriously fucking think your mother wants me at your wedding!” she screamed.

“I don’t care!” Descendent from a long line of shouters, Raff gave as good as he got. “It’s my wedding and I want you there. And seriously? You want to be serious? You two need to knock this passive-aggressive bullshit off and talk already.”

“For months I’ve called, texted, I even wrote her a letter—like I’m a fucking consumptive invalid in a fucking Bronte novel. She ignores me. She doesn’t want to talk to me, let alone see me!”

“It’s—she’s completely miserable. She don’t know her own head anymore,” Raff said. “All she ever does is work, and she’s mean to everyone except Calam and that stupid, half-blind sheepdog of hers.”

For a moment Caroline put aside fury and a sarcastic remark—to truly marvel at the continued existence of Gillian’s now-ancient, nearly blind, and essentially useless sheepdog. “Steve McQueen is still alive?”

“Yes,” he groaned, “bloody thing herded a dozen ewes into a lake the other week. Anyway, she’s been nothing but a raving bitch for months—Mandy is completely terrified of her, you know.”

Indeed, this was quite the feat because super-confident Mandy—whose favorite word was super, have a super day, Caroline! she always chirped in farewell whenever they encountered one another—typically moved through the treacherous modern world with shark-like confidence.

“She’s a mess,” Raff continued. “Beyond the usual sort of mess she is. I mean, she doesn’t even sleep in her own bed anymore. Always on the couch now.”

This sent Caroline reeling and seeking a tree for support; her throat constricted, acid raged in her stomach. She sleeps on the couch. Like you slept on the couch for months after Kate died. She thought of the chilly bedroom in the farmhouse—the sagging mattress, the frayed curtains, Gillian stirring restless in the night and gone by first light. In the demimonde of early morning wakeup, her fingers would inch across the bed, blindly searching not for the woman who was already gone but a discarded t-shirt half-tucked under a pillow: she would lay there for long minutes, face pressed into that bundled shirt, before finally opening her eyes to the lukewarm cup of strong, bitter tea awaiting her on the nightstand.

“And then,” Raff went on, “there’s Proust.”

“What?” Caroline blurted, her jealous, fretful mind immediately leaping to the conclusion that
Gillian was wooing someone named Proust—woman, man, dog, sheep? Fuck, it could be anything or anyone—in Halifax-inflected French. Actually her French was quite decent and when they vacationed in the Pyrenees a few years ago all the locals had been flirtatiously delighted by her accent.

“She’s—she’s trying to read Proust!” The confession started out as a mumble and ended as a plaintive roar, as if he were painfully admitting that his mother was a meth addict who drowned kittens for a fix.

She accepted this with dutiful numbness as she has with every miserable turn as of late. Nothing more to be said, really. Gillian was miserable and reading Proust. Caroline was miserable, technically unemployed, technically single, and selling a house that she had lived in for almost half her life. Still, curiosity won out.

“In French or English?” she asked. If the former, she was ready to be impressed beyond words and would regret everything all over again. Could she come to terms with losing a woman who read Proust in French?

“Jesus Christ”—Raff sputtered angrily—“will you just focus, please? No fucking normal person reads Proust in either French or English for fun. It’s because they’re miserable fucking gits!”

Later, when apprised of this literary development, William and his literature degree from Oxford would concur with Raff’s assessment.

“Please,” he said tightly, “just come to the wedding and talk to her.”

The spotty rain intensified and a particularly plump raindrop dangling from a tree branch plopped right on her head. She yearned for lightning to strike. “This will all go massively tits up. You know that.”

“No. Listen. She’s going to behave. I made her promise on granddad’s grave—no drinking, no swearing, no bad behavior at wedding. Seriously. I literally dragged her out there and made her take a vow in front of his head stone. And I told her you were invited and that she should gird her bloody loins and just deal with it because she’d have to see you sooner or later.”

Her resistance crumbled but she said nothing while appreciating the convenience of crying in the rain.

“Caroline.” As his mother always did, he spoke her full name when dead serious and, additionally, read her silences very well; the interstices of digital hisses and scratches wove accordance between them, the two people in the world who loved that stubborn, broken woman the most. “All right?” he added, so softly that she almost did not hear it.

She barely managed to get it out: “All right.”

“Good,” he sighed. “Sorted, then.” To lighten the mood, he went on: “You can bring a plus-one—you’ll need backup. Not a woman, though.”

“Why would I—?”

“Bring a bloke but someone not offensive, like William or Greg. Ta.”

Before Caroline could counter-argue the point of Greg’s offensiveness, Raff rang off. And before she could seriously contemplate what the hell she had just committed to, the sky unfurled a sheet of rain and she made a dash for the Jeep.
As she sat behind the wheel dripping wet and quietly devastated for the remainder of the day, Flora lowered the iPad, took one look at her, and opened the glove box to retrieve a box of tissues. At eight years of age her daughter was already far more competent than most adults Caroline encountered on a daily basis and she did not know how she—and Greg—managed to raise such a well-functioning child. But then she did not know how she raised someone as kind as William or emotionally stunted as Lawrence—well, she and John tag-teamed the latter into dysfunction, that much was obvious. Nonetheless it all seemed dismally apparent to her that after three children, she still didn’t have a fucking clue how parenting really worked.

Flora blinked at her with steady sympathy. “Still fubar?”

Startled, Caroline looked at the girl, who was at times such a mirror image of Kate that sometimes it ached terribly. She lost Kate and Kate lost this child, this chance to be a mother. Now she has lost Gillian as well.

Or perhaps not. She sleeps on the couch. Caroline was now desperate enough to potentially ruin a wedding—and with the groom’s blessing, no less.

Caroline wiped her face with a tissue and confirmed it: “Still fubar.”

She had Gillian to thank for the aggravation of introducing Flora to this unfortunate acronym. Months ago, she was both enraged and touched to discover that while Gillian pointedly ignored every attempt at communication Caroline attempted, she still emailed Flora on a regular basis—this revealed during an otherwise tedious and excruciatingly long and lurching crosstown bus ride in Manhattan:

“How is everything fubar with Gillian?” Flora demanded.

Caroline gaped. One minute Flora was talking about a “basic” girl at her school and now it was Gillian and fubar. The toxic rumble of the bus perfectly represented the churning of her stomach. “Did you just say fubar to me?” Did you just stab me in the gut with mention of my wayward lover, child of mine?

“Yeah. I don’t know what it means, except that something is kind of bad.” Inquisitive, Flora cocked her head. “Is it a swear?”

“Kind of.”

“So I shouldn’t say it?”

“Well, perhaps not in polite company.”

Flora’s eyes narrowed. “Is it a Scottish word?” Before passing away two years ago, Celia had managed to bestow upon her granddaughter a talent for cheating at card games and a powerful suspicion of all things Scottish.

“No. Where on earth did you hear that word?”

Immediately Flora looked guilty and she had her answer.

“Of bloody course. When?”

“I emailed her.”

“She doesn’t have email.” Caroline sighed at the traffic, wondered if she should reconsider her Uber boycott. “Does she?”
“Of course she does: ingloriousshepherd@gmail.com.” Flora gave her poor old technology-impaired mother an exasperated look. “She sends me photos of all the sheep and Steve McQueen too.”

“Is that thing still alive?”

“Of course he is. He ate one of her trainers the other week and then upchucked all over the quilt in the living room. So are you going to tell me what fubar is?”

“Ask Gillian, since she seems so intent on improving your vocabulary.” Caroline pinched the bridge of her nose. Discussing her former lover with an eight-year-old on a crosstown Manhattan bus during rush hour seemed a particular hell that revived desperate, dormant hopes of a higher power. She glanced out the greasy window and saw a man pushing a grocery cart filled with trash bags against the slant of sunlight that fell across the long avenue, both sun and human moving faster than the bus.

“She said I should ask you.”

Impulsively Caroline let the word “bitch” escape her lips.

She expected Flora’s militant response, because the child never let her get away with anything: “You’ve said that’s not a nice thing to call a woman.”

“No, but it’s perfect for an ‘inglorious shepherd.’”

It was Friday evening, a night of the week when they had a standing dinner invitation with Ginika, who was hosting them tonight at her apartment. While the adults sat at the dining room table chatting and cutting vegetables for a salad, Flora marched out to the dining room table and sat down authoritatively with the iPad in her clutches as if she were a CEO opening a meeting in which she intended to fire every department head.

“All right,” Flora said in clipped tones, “I emailed Gillian and asked what fubar meant and she wrote back a bunch of stuff I don’t understand—I think she was drinking the Jagerboobs again.” She shoved the iPad in Caroline’s general direction.

Noting Caroline’s reluctance, Ginika intercepted the tablet. “Let’s take a look,” she said, and then read aloud: “Your mum thinks I am fractious ungracious belligerent and rude.”

“She gets surprisingly eloquent when drunk sometimes,” Caroline confirmed.

“I’ll need the dictionary again,” Flora said to Ginika, “but Gran, your dictionary is awful because there was no fubar in it.”

“Dictionary’s older than me, honey.” Ginika continued: “She is fairly unreliable but always right.” She shot Caroline an amused glance. “Shade is being thrown.”

“Seriously,” Caroline complained, “I get so much shade now I’m in a perpetual bloody rain forest.”

“She fears undergraduates bearing awful rosé.”

“Now that,” she admitted, “is very, very true.”

“None of this answers my very important question!” shouted Flora. “What is fubar?”

Ginika finally took pity on her granddaughter. “Oh, for God’s sake,” she sighed. “Sweetheart,”
she said to Flora, “fubar is an acronym. You know what those are, right?” The girl nodded. “Okay. So yeah, your girl Gillian is messing with you. See in the each sentence, the f…u…b…a…r together?”

Flora frowned at the sentences. “Yeah, okay, but what—”

“Fucked up beyond all recognition,” Ginika slowly supplied, and paused. “Get it? It means when something gets so bad you don’t even know what it is anymore. Understand?”

Comprehension dawned over the girl’s face. “Oh! Now it all makes fucking sense!”

Caroline glared at Ginika. “Do you know how long it took before I got her to stop saying that word?”

Ginika shrugged apologetically. “It was only a matter of time. She would’ve googled it eventually.”

“I could have fucking googled it!” Flora wailed and melodramatically smacked herself in the forehead. Defeated, Caroline buried her face in her hands.

“Damn,” Ginika said with genuine admiration. “This kid is a real New Yorker.”

Real New Yorker or not, Flora took for granted that they would return to Yorkshire. Regularly she would meticulously list all the things that she missed, and she did this both verbally and in writing because, as she enjoyed pointing out, Caroline was like Steve McQueen the sheepdog: sort of cute, but old and forgetful. Prominent items on said list were her friends, the ginger biscuits from the bakery near their house, her bike, her brothers, Raff, and the ovine holy trinity of the sheep, the dog, and the farmer.

In the end it was Greg who accompanied Caroline to the Raff and Mandy nuptials; she took great personal umbrage at the fact that her sons had adult lives now far away from the ancestral home. Greg’s mother took Flora for the weekend and off they went to the wedding venue, a boutique hotel two hours away near Borrowdale. They arrived late and spent a few frantic minutes in front of the hotel as Caroline properly tied Greg’s tasteful yet playful bespoke polka-dot bowtie. As he squirmed she flashbacked to the hundred times she adjusted ties of all kinds for John and the boys; playing impromptu valet for helpless males was yet another aspect of compulsory heterosexuality she did not miss.

Even with her hands so close to his vulnerable neck, he wouldn’t stop oozing encouragement. “Sometimes,” he said, “you need to take a calculated risk. Not a gesture that’s senseless or cruel, just—bold. Something borne out of love.”


“The thing about bold—well, like in color, in art—a little can be enough.” Bowtie perfect, he smiled. “I think you can manage a dab.”

She cannot help but think of Kate’s boldness at the wedding of her mother to Alan; how she came back, how they kissed and danced in front of everyone. And how, after that slim moment of hesitation and despite everything that happened later, she has never regretted a thing—even when she allowed herself to acknowledge how much agony Gillian was in at that time. That kind of dramatic public gesture, however, is not Gillian’s style. She appreciates the hidden message, the quiet declaration: A flower pressed into a book, a new screwdriver with a ribbon around it placed in her tool chest, a mash note tucked under her favorite coffee cup. Caroline’s only hope is to beckon, to pluck a cautious chord of their shared, secret history and hope Gillian will respond.
Reluctantly she will play the twatty role of Orpheus—always Orpheus, she thinks dismally, because that has been the terrible pattern of her life: looking back and fucking up.

So she sits through the ceremony, visually dwelling in the shadowed, tense trapezius leading into the nape of Gillian’s neck, laid bare by a professionally done chignon, a sensual harbor of many memories: *the salt of your skin sweet in my mouth, your pulse under my teeth.*

After the ceremony she and Greg hang back during the photo ops and congratulations. Like a queen on a chessboard she waits to make her move, for all the pawns to fall away in inevitable bloodless carnage. A camera flash encompasses the happy family and in the aftermath she catches the photo-dazed Gillian blinking and then squinting at her warily from across the room—a look indicating that if she had her way, there would indeed be blood.

But by the time she and Greg navigate the crowd to offer congratulations to the happy couple, Gillian, the tricky rival queen, outmaneuvers her and is nowhere to be seen. Raff smothers her with a cologne-infused bear hug and whispers, “thank God you’re here” in her ear. Before she can say anything of substance to him, Mandy nervously blathers at her about Oxford because Mandy also went there, and quickly she is dragged over to a group of apple-cheeked young white people, where she is introduced as a fellow alum—a considerably less awkward label than “my mother-in-law’s stepsister and ex-lover.” After a load of idle Oxford chatter and a conversation with Gary and Felicity—in which it becomes clear they still view her as some sort of superlative Gillian-wrangler, the shepherdess of the shepherdess—the crowd thins out into a larger room for the reception and at long last she spots her quarry alone near an entryway: Arms folded and stiffly poised, watching people file out of the room as if she is not a significant member of the wedding party but rather the most sullen and least helpful usher in the entire western hemisphere. Even though Caroline knows she is merely hiding in plain sight, the invisible plumage of her vulnerability and self-perceived insignificance a most effective cover.

Caroline puts one well-shod, heeled foot in front of the other and makes her way across the room. Up close and personal, she allows herself a few moments to take in Gillian’s astonishingly elegant appearance: She wears a minimal amount of makeup and a dress befitting the mother of the groom, a dark royal blue that is tastefully shimmering and so sophisticated that Caroline suspects someone interceded and bought the dress for her—possibly Felicity, who always has the right touch in dealing with her obstreperous sister-in-law and, despite her obvious faith in Caroline’s abilities, sometimes makes Caroline doubt if she herself ever did.

“You came,” Gillian says briskly, all too ready to dismiss and move on. “That’s nice.” And of course she would say that, being the type to use the word *nice* as the most damning insult imaginable—worse than *cunt,* really.

Having long since moved up in rank from Captain to General Obvious, Caroline replies, “I did. Congratulations.”

“I’m not the one who got married.”

“It was a lovely ceremony.”

Gillian shrugs. “No one threw up, so I consider it a win-win.”

Taking note of the escalation in snark—oblique references to Robbie were never a good thing—she decides it’s time for the big gambit. Once again she offers up a silent thank you to whatever benevolent forces in the universe that allowed her to book a tiny room at this overpriced hotel on the weekend of a wedding. She opens her clutch. “I wanted to give you something.”

“Gifts are usually for the happy couple,” Gillian deflects sarcastically—but her brow contracts
with consternation as Caroline extends the key card, slotted between index and middle finger. “What is this?”

Caroline looks at her, plays the chord: “Your get-out-of-jail-free card.”

Her face lays bare minute flashes and feints of pain and pleasure to the extent that Caroline has no idea what to expect—indeed, that is the glory of Gillian—but this expressive, silent symphony indicates remembrance: One night years ago in a Halifax hotel, one last chance, one last fling. Things unsaid, lies unchallenged, and one indirect admission. As it has for so many years, all of this hangs uneasily between them.

Tell me a lie, tell me you love me.

She is about to lose her nerve and retract the key card with a terse apology and retreat head-on toward the open bar in ignoble defeat when Gillian, as if committing to a bargain she will inevitably regret, reaches out and cautiously plucks it from her fingers; transmogrified into Doctor Faustus, all the world’s knowledge within easy grasp.


Gillian is frowning at the keycard when Calamity Jane—who, Raff told her recently, now insists on the more grown-up moniker of Emily but still barrels into her grandmother as if they’re soccer hooligans at a championship match—ignores Caroline while announcing that the cake is being cut and they must go now or they will never, ever get any cake. And so, with a puzzled, apprehensive backward glance at Caroline, Gillian allows herself to be carted away by a nine-year-old.

Whether Gillian decides to follow through and come to her room is—well, something she’s not prepared to think about. So she seeks out the open bar anyway, where she finds Greg chatting with one of Mandy’s Oxford friends, both of them in the glassy-eyed stage of incipient drunkenness courtesy of some tropical nightmare of a drink resplendent with pink straw and orange umbrella.

“Is it a go?” Greg blurts when he sees her, all while she gets another onceover from this particular Oxford alum, who had eyeballed her earlier when they first met and seems to think she might do for a MILF-flavored shag in the coat room after a few more glasses of neon whatever.

“She took the key,” Caroline says, attempting to sound nonchalant even though she glows and grins so that the bartender gives her a generous, frothy pour of champagne.

Not unlike Flora when she sees sparkles on an article of clothing, Greg spasms into a little leap of glee.

“Let’s not get carried away,” Caroline says in her best mum voice, even as she downs the champagne in one gulp and chastises herself for doing so.

“No, no,” Greg retorts excitedly, “this is good! That’s half the battle right there. Now, you don’t have to worry about me, I’ve already set up a ride back home—”

“I told you, you don’t have to bother. I’m not going to try to seduce her. I just wanted some place to talk with her alone for a bit, that’s all. Neutral territory.”

He starts giggling. “Oh sure, you spent all that money on a hotel room just to talk.”

“Damn it, we argued about this all the way up in the car.” If not wearing heels, Caroline would be tempted to stamp her foot. “I told you the plan, I’m sticking to it. I’m serious.”
He snorts and hoots even louder and Oxford Alum, now eavesdropping without compunction, butts in. “What’s all this about, then?”

“Oh God,” Greg straightens, wipes tears from his eyes, wags his finger at Caroline: “She thinks”—another manic peal of laughter—“she thinks she’s not going to hook up with her ex at a wedding!”

Oxford Alum bursts into laughter. “Aw, bless.”

“I know!” Greg squeals. “Isn’t she adorable?”

“Seriously. I’m not hooking up or whatever. I’m a lesbian. We don’t do that.” No sooner does she say it than Caroline realizes how extraordinarily stupid it sounds, particularly in light of a personal history where she more or less deliberately got drunk with a woman that she was unreasonably attracted to and while in love with someone else and this is where we are now, numpty. She’s never been certain if she abysmally failed Lesbianism 101 with that move or achieved some sort of stratospheric Einstein level of romantic dysfunction.

“Bullshit,” Oxford Alum retorts. “My cousin’s a lesbian. She gets shagged every wedding she goes to. Even the straight ones. Especially the straight ones.”

She attempts a different tack. “Look, I’m an adult, a grown bloody woman,” she says. Oxford Alum hums appreciatively and although flattered, she ignores it. “I mean, do you think—” But the champagne flute has miraculously refilled itself and it seems the only right thing to do is drain it again, after all, it is a wedding. “—I have absolutely no self-control?”

“Oh sure,” Greg mumbles and Oxford Alum purrs, “Another round, love?”

She is tempted by a third pour, but turns it down. “All right, that’s it. I’m done with you both.”

“No, wait!” Greg yelps. “Hug for good luck!” Before she can run away—fucking heels—he has her in an embrace while breathing heavily into her ear a benediction from a contemporary, tequila-infused Nietzsche: “Amor fati!”

“Greg.” Caroline says with quiet desperation. “We have never hugged before.”

“I know,” he purrs delightedly. “Isn’t this wonderful?”

Everybody is in a huggy mood. When she leaves Greg behind she spots Mandy surrounded by a phalanx of bridesmaids; the bride launches herself at Caroline, flinging those pythonesque muscular arms around her neck and the fear that Mandy is going to put her into some sort of wrestling headlock looms very real. “Caroline!” she cries, as if they are former rival debate team captains who had an ill-fated affair and are now acutely embarrassed by it every time they see one another to the extent that a natural affinity is painfully exaggerated—wait, Caroline remembers, that really happened. Except it wasn’t a debate captain, it was a girl she first met at the research library whom she ran into at a party and the exquisite foreplay of an argument about isotopes resulted in awkward finger-banging in the host’s bathroom. Now when she encounters this woman during alumni weekends they embrace with giddy enthusiasm, as if they have shared some rich personal history instead of a rickety past composed of isotopes, lager, and bad sex.

All Mandy needs, she knows, is an ally in her campaign to win over Gillian, hence the desperate embrace and even more desperate move of picking her as said ally. “I saw you talking with her,” Mandy slurs, not daring to invoke the name of her dreaded mother-in-law. She pulls away and with drunken tenderness cradles Caroline’s face in her sweaty hands. Everyone is drunk and sweaty; it’s like some heterosexual horror film and she must escape before she is terminally
infected with hetero-spores. “Was she horrible to you?”

“No, it’s all right—”

“She’s so awful to me all the time,” Mandy moans. “I feel like, like I try and I try to get on with her, but I don’t know what to do anymore.” Her face spasms as she falls deeper into the hole of drunken confession: “And I hate sheep, Caroline. I really fucking hate sheep.”

“Well, let me figure out my relationship with her before I can figure out your relationship with her. And the sheep.”


“I know, darling.” Caroline smiles as a brilliant idea occurs. “May I steal a bottle of wine?”

Armed with a bottle of red that Mandy demanded from the bar and a corkscrew in her purse—because it’s always survival of the drunkest in north country and also her last ditch effort with Gillian involves using the corkscrew to flatten all the tires of the Land Rover, well no, not really, no yes really, you fucking liar, you, daughter of Celia Dawson, who are you kidding, you’d kneecap her just to get five minutes alone with her—Caroline goes up to the hotel room and, opening the door, discovers to her horror that a ridiculously huge king-sized bed dominates the cozy room.

“Jesus Christ,” she mutters aloud. “I’ve booked the Shag Suite.”

Nerves settle in like a late season blizzard, an unexpected entrenchment of anxiety that coats every emotion and decision with a freezing, paralyzing layer of crippling self-doubt. She ignores the wine and paces the tiny length of the room. This was a mistake. She played it badly. Even if Gillian shows up, she thinks, the moment she sees the bed she’ll assume the worst, give Caroline shit, and leg it. Maybe I should just leg it. She groans, opens the wine, considers chugging it straight from the bottle even though there are pristine wine glasses wrapped in sterile tissue paper atop the desk. Then she wonders why they thought to put a desk in this tiny fuck den of a room. She flops down on the bed and stares at the ceiling for half an hour. How did things get so fucked up? She sits up, gradually reworks herself into another emotional lather, gnaws a knuckle to keep from screaming at herself. When pain burrows beneath the skin, she lets go. A red scrawl marks the indentation of teeth on skin: Sign on the dotted line, please. As she touches tongue to blood the door clicks.

Gillian walks in, closes the door, and leans against it. There are three things in the world that Gillian Greenwood loathes with unequivocal passion: posh people, large crowds, and fancy dress—four if one counts Jennifer Lawrence winning a Best Actress Oscar for portraying Mother Teresa but that is neither here nor there at the present moment save for the fact that the film is Mandy’s favorite “girl-power” movie. Regardless, this deadly three-way traumatic confluence occurs on a day that symbolically marks a significant transition in her relationship with her son and renders her glassy-eyed and staring listlessly not at Caroline, whom she hasn’t seen in nearly ten months, but at a blank spot on the wall.

Perhaps if nothing else, on this stressful day she has provided a much-needed sanctuary for Gillian, who stares into space for a very long minute as if she is in a Barry Lyndon-era Stanley Kubrick movie. Gillian had forced her to watch this movie once. Fifteen minutes into it she promptly dozed off and when she woke nearly two hours later with a horrible neck cramp from using a sheep farmer as a pillow, the bloody thing was still going on—and Gillian was also asleep.

Finally, Gillian inhales quite audibly. “Had to get the hell out of there,” she says. Language rouses her; she blinks, spots the oasis of wine on the desk, and makes a beeline for it. “Too many people
down there.” She pours out a glass. “Asking the same bloody questions all the time. I was babbling. Well. You know how I get.” Frowning, she picks up the bottle. “You took a bottle of wine?”

“With the bride’s blessing,” Caroline replies.

“Margaux,” Gillian notes. Despite approval of the appellation, she quickly gulps half a glass down. “Not messing about, are they? Loads better than anything I’ve ever been served at a wedding. Even my own.” She taps the bottle. “Suppose I should start being nice to her. Mandy. Shit.” She rubs her brow. “Promised Raff I wouldn’t drink today.” Sighing, she puts down the glass. “Or swear.”

“Well,” Caroline says slowly, “I guess it’s true then.”

Gillian will not look at her. “What?”

“That I’ve always brought out the best in you.”

For the first time since setting foot in the room, Gillian smiles grudgingly, wryly, glances at her quickly, too quickly for a proper read—and then looks out the window again. “Why did you come?”

“Why do you think?”

“Open bar, I reckon. Got the good stuff, as you see.”

“You stopped talking to me.”

“It’s—well. Didn’t know what to say to you anymore.”

“I suppose that’s fair enough.”

“Seemed pointless to try to—to—really talk about anything when you’re across the pond.”

“I’m here now.”

“Still hard.” Gillian nibbles at her lip. “Nothing to say but I told you so. I told you I would—told you long ago I would mess it all up.”

“You didn’t. It’s not entirely your fault.”

Gillian shakes her head. “What’s the point?”

“The point is I’m here.” she rises from the bed and walks over to Gillian, an act basically accomplished in two long strides. “You know, I didn’t have to come back. What’s holding me here, really? My parents are dead. Will’s in London now, Lawrence is in Hong Kong doing fuck knows what with Angus, creating bitcoin sex robots or whatever—”

“Developing bitcoin mining software,” Gillian corrects.

“—whatever. I don’t have a job here, I’m selling the house—”

“Wait.” Stunned, Gillian stares at her. “You’re—you’re selling the house?”

Caroline plows on. “—and Flora loved New York, and Ginika didn’t want us to leave. I could’ve negotiated staying on at the college longer. But I came back. Like I said I would. Because of you.”
This registers, but not in the way Caroline had hoped. Scowling, Gillian rolls her eyes and polishes off the glass of wine. “F-fuck off,” she spits out. It’s her first fuck of the day and they’re off to races, to the first great competition of many a relationship drama: who will start shouting first. “Poor you, eh? Come off it. This isn’t about me. You never do anything you don’t want to do.”

“And neither do you,” Caroline snaps. “I wanted you to come with me, you could have come with me—”

“Are we having this argument again?” Gillian snarls incredulously. “What the hell was I going to do in New York? Herd sheep in Central Park?”

“You could have done something. Something part time. Or, you wouldn’t have had to work—”

“Sit around and do nothing?” Gillian, who has worked nonstop her entire adult life, finds the notion inconceivable. Caroline knows it was a silly thing to expect, as she recalls from their vacation in France years ago. When she wasn’t worrying incessantly about the farm and annoying Raff about it via text several times a day, she hiked and swam and drank wine as if in training for some imaginary middle-aged farmer marathon. That she always possessed enough energy to make love the way she did, and as often as they did, was truly a marvel.

The lost glory of that time together, and all the potential it had represented, makes Caroline ache—and, predictably, lash out. “Yeah, okay, all right then. You fucking win. You fucking win because you stacked the bloody deck against me from the beginning. You told me I should accept the job. You said you were all right with me going away for a while. And so I took it. And then you just—withdrew. Acted like it was the end of everything. Acted like it was my fucking fault for doing something that you encouraged me to do.”

Gillian retreats into sullenness. “I’m allowed to change my mind, aren’t I?”

“Not when you don’t tell me!”

“I didn’t want you to go,” Gillian cries.

This admission, this anguished shout, sets the room ringing and brings Gillian to the verge of tears. She drops back, sitting onto the edge of the bed, felled by her own emotional exhaustion. “I didn’t—I didn’t want to be that person. You know what I mean? Needy, clingy. I didn’t want to be selfish. I knew why you were going. Wasn’t about the job, not really. I mean, it sounded grand but I knew the real reason: You were doing it for Flora. And it was right, the right thing to do. She needs to spend as much time as she can with her grandmother—her real grandmother. She needs to know that side of her family. It was a perfect chance. Perfect plan. But, it’s—there, there was no room for me in it.”

“You’re wrong. You’ve always been part of the plan, Gillian. Always. Nothing was going to change that.”

“Plans have a way of changing.” Gillian pauses, and then adds gently, “You should know that more than anyone.”

“Jesus.” For a moment Caroline masks her face with both hands, if only to prevent herself from screaming, you fucking frustrating woman. “Yeah, things don’t work out the way we want sometimes. But you didn’t give it a chance. I was gone barely four months and I had to hear from your son that you’re seeing someone else?”

“Didn’t mean for that to happen.”
After so many months of blaming herself for Gillian’s behavior—she had grown distant after her mother’s death, carried on a flirtation with another woman, said that maybe, who knows, Jennifer Lawrence did deserve an Oscar—she wins the shouting contest: “That’s a shitty excuse and you know it!”

“It’s—it’s not an excuse,” Gillian says softly. “There’s no excuse.” She stares at her hands. “I wanted to know what it was like. To be with someone who wasn’t you.” At Caroline’s irritated look of confusion, she blathers out an explanation: “I don’t mean—sex. I mean, the rest of it, just being. You know? Thought it would be easier somehow. Just being with, with someone—more like me. Regular person, not a toff, didn’t go to university. I mean—” Gillian laughs mirthlessly. “She managed a pub, for Christ’s sake.”

Caroline indulges in a momentary vision of beating this nameless, bodiless pub slattern within an inch of her miserable life with a pair of heels. But murder fantasies are not conducive to attempted reconciliations with one’s ex, so she files it away for contemplation on some fine day when she’s caught in traffic on the M60. “So what was it like?”

Gillian is silent for long enough that Caroline can torture herself on a rack of emotional inadequacy for an exquisitely hellish eternity. “Disappointing,” she finally admits. She stares at the now-empty wine glass, still cradled in one hand. “Did you sleep with anyone in New York?”

“Great. You want me to hurt you now. Is that it?”

Stoically Gillian nods, takes it because she thinks she deserves it. “Seems only fair.”

“Yeah. I did. Happy? Like Sacha once told me, American women love the accent.” Mere mention of Sacha always hits a nerve; judging by Gillian’s facial twitch, this time is no different and she instantly regrets it. God, you are such a fuckup, she berates herself, you cannot stop hurting her. For fuck’s sake, do better.

“Went out a few times with someone. Liked her well enough, but—” Caroline stops, sighs. “Last time I saw her we went to this ridiculous restaurant, it was one of those farm-to-table places with a twee name—‘The Country in the City’ or something dim like that. Anyway, we go in, sit down, and I find myself staring up at this huge bloody painting of a Swaledale ewe. Staring down at me like some sort of judgmental fucking sheep god. So I just started—talking about sheep.” Still in disbelief at this, even months later, she shakes her head. “And you, of course. Up until then I’d never said a word about you. And then it all came pouring out. So that was that. Went home alone and—despite the fact that she seemed somewhat impressed that I knew random facts about sheep—didn’t hear from her again.” Caroline pauses. “I nearly called you that night. Knew it was early enough and you’d have been awake. Even though you weren’t taking my calls and I just would have said the same thing to your voice mail that I’ve been saying to you for months. But you never listened. But you’re here now and I’m saying it one last time and I hope to fucking God it finally sinks in: If I had to do it over again, I wouldn’t have taken the job. I would’ve fought harder to fix things between us—but I can’t do it all by myself. Still, I would’ve done anything—and still would do anything—to get us back to where we were, or as close to it as possible. And all of that was true and will always be true.”

Wincing, Gillian stares down at the tasteful Berber carpet, rubs her neck, struggles to contain herself. Absurdity helps, and she does a comical half-turn to glance at the glorious mattress she’s sitting on. “This is,” she says, “the biggest fucking bed I’ve ever seen.”

Caroline stifles a groan. “Seriously, I didn’t mean—it wasn’t intentional.”

“Well, that’s disappointing.” Massaging her temple, Gillian closes her eyes for a moment. “I
haven’t had it off with anyone in months, and you’re here, and—” She sighs. “—you look damn good. Just like you always do. So I’m operating on limited, ah, reserves of self-control and I haven’t made a sh-shitty, impulsive decision in, oh, maybe two days—no, wait, twenty-four hours because yesterday I agreed to go shopping with Mandy’s mum next week. So I’m about due to wreck myself.” She lets the empty glass slip out of her hand and drop to the carpet. It does not break. It does not break and Caroline interprets that as some holy sign that the connection between them is still intact and unbroken. Meanwhile the practical side of her maintains that it’s also a testament to physics and damned good craftsmanship. Gillian shakes her head. “That’s all bullshit. The truth is that I, I need you, and I just can’t—I can’t do without you.”

In Gillian-speak this is, perhaps, a major admission because this ever-practical woman of action frequently speaks of doing, of making do, no matter what: Getting on with it, not making a fuss. It is Englishness in the extreme and Caroline sort of admires it save for the fact that she knows it’s complete bollocks, particularly since Gillian’s magical capacity to make do vaporized during the past year and everything went to shit.

Naturally Caroline requires a wee bit more assurance. “It sounds like what you’re saying is,” she speculates somewhat sadly, and while shakily gripping the edge of the desk as a ballast in a sea of emotion, “is that I’m just another bad decision you keep making.”

“Well, love,” Gillian says with a low, ragged breath, “if that’s true, then you’re the best bad decision I’ve ever made.” Here at last Gillian is neither queen nor quarry, but a woman reluctantly copping to a need greater than pride permits—to love, the most superlative force beyond her control. In this moment Caroline experiences perhaps the biggest epiphany she’s ever had concerning Gillian: Jesus Christ, she’s a control freak. Just like me. Does this seal the fucking deal or what?

Gillian has never said I love you. Caroline has always accepted this because the emotional sense of it all squared up with an almost scientific accuracy that she appreciated on several levels. If the unconditional substance behind the words were withheld from the formula, how could one expect or hope that the equation would yield what was so desperately desired? How could the substance of love be purely reciprocated and acknowledged when it was routinely degraded and commingled with disapproval over dubious sins, backhand blows and bruises, slurs and insults, cigarette burns and broken ribs? But the poisons of the past did not leave Gillian incapable of love. Rather, they served as an amalgamation, not unlike the union of mercury and gold; the contagion of the former extracts the purest form of the latter.

She sits down next to Gillian, who maintains masterful eye contact with both the carpet and the abandoned empty glass, which bleeds a stylish single strand of Margaux. Gillian’s breathing hits a nervous hitch as Caroline takes her hand and drags a thumb over the terrain of her palm, making reacquaintance with familiar calluses and lines, taking note of a new scar in the meaty part of her palm—a ragged, silvery flare, a flash of mercury.

As a girl, Caroline fell in love with mercury. At thirteen she witnessed a chemistry lab where a sheet of gold, subsumed by mercury, gave off a fiery dying burst of glitter before forming a shiny silver lump that, when dissolved in the proper solution, refined itself into gold. The protean beauty of its movement—breaking apart, coming together so effortlessly—fascinated her. Mercury, poisonous and pure.

When Gillian pulls her hand away, Caroline thinks she wants to die. Instead she shifts, stretches out, and rests her head in Caroline’s lap with a great contented sigh while her fingers—curling, trembling, reflexive—gently dig into the inner edge of Caroline’s thigh, just below her skirt. The delicate silk of the stockings buckles darkly, playfully threatening an ominous collapse of the space-time continuum. The heat of Gillian’s breath sifts through fabric and warms her skin.
Caroline swallows at this quick intimacy. There is never any middle ground with Gillian; she’s either skittish or standoffish or unhesitant and unsparing. For her part Caroline always responds—sometimes too quickly—to this, the animal in her, to the instinctual attraction that has pulled them together and forced them apart more than once and that has, currently, unraveled their lives.

For the moment she keeps her senses, rallies the patience she developed long ago in rigorous training to be a scientist. Transformation requires time. Perhaps less important but also a salient point: The stockings she’s wearing are bloody expensive and she doesn’t want them sacrificed on the altar of Gillian’s particular kink of rending her stockings to shreds. Good stockings tear prettily with lingering hisses and crackling pops, like a needle circling the end of a record before it is yanked judiciously from its groove. This silent soundtrack within her mind provides easy, arousing recall of the first time, now so many years ago: At the farmhouse, messing around on the couch—well, she was on the couch half mad with foreplay while Gillian was on her knees, teasing her with a kiss here and a lick there—then curling her hand over the top of one black stocking and ripping it with the proud mastery of an impresario parting a curtain to reveal her latest production. Predictably she had been absolutely furious and insanely turned on, alternately growling and moaning you bitch, you fucking bitch before coming against Gillian’s face. Half an hour later they were sitting down to tea with the parents and the children, she bare-legged, sticky-thighed, and with underwear stuffed in her purse while Gillian lazily devoured cucumber and egg sandwiches and smirked at her from the head of the table, and with the discarded black stockings balled up under a cushion of the couch. For all she knows the stockings could still be buried there. Unless, of course, Steve McQueen found them and ate them.

“Raff said you’re reading Proust.” Would casual yet literate conversation somehow lead her back into a blessedly mundane everyday existence with this woman?

Gillian stirs and shifts; no longer face down in Caroline’s lap she presents an elegant profile, even though her cheeks are flushed, her eyes rimmed with red, and her hair rebelling against the constraints of the chignon. “It’s f-fucking hard. Too rich for my blood. But it keeps pulling me in. I keep going back, like I keep hoping I’ll get—get accustomed to how good it is.”

“So you think it’s worth the effort.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

The sun fills the room; it has been bright since Caroline first came in, but it’s only now that she notices. Her mobile rings. Then stops. Among the dark gold strands of Gillian’s hair—which faintly reeks of some quasi-botanical fug courtesy of whatever high-end salon that Mandy dragged her to—are threads of silver caught in the tumult of spring light.

“I love you,” she says.

Gillian smiles and it is, of course, mercurial—formed in an alchemical duel of wonder and doubt. “You do?”

2. I am on a lonely road and I am traveling

*The person one loves at first is not the person one loves at last, and that love is not an end but a process through which one person attempts to know another.*

—John Williams, from *Stoner*
Sixteen months after her father dies of a heart attack, Gillian is on a hiking path of modest difficulty along an unimpressive mountainside in the French Pyrenees when she stumbles and falls to her knees—dizzy, chest tightening—and immediately assumes she is going to die of the same thing. Dirt digs into her knees and she cannot breathe. After an excruciating minute in which she convinces herself that dying in the Pyrenees wouldn’t be such a bad way to go after all, at least she would die happy, her breathing regulates itself and she realizes that what just happened is nothing more than an old-fashioned panic attack spurred on by altitude sickness.

She staggers off the path and finds a broad, old tree trunk to sit against, where she can guzzle water—from a bottle branded with an Oxford crest that was a present from Caroline, her idea of a joke—and pull herself together. During the flight here Caroline had lectured her at length about thin air and altitude sickness, all while self-medicated with gin and tonics in lieu of the anxiety pills that she forgot to take because she loathes flying. But the tension that flourished in her chest minutes ago is something Gillian is quite familiar with. Right after Eddie died, panic attacks were the slab of butter on her daily bread. Every day she waited to be arrested, to be caught out. Even months, years after the inquest. Time, the essential element in the corrosion of memory and suspicion, was not moving fast enough, not working in her favor—because Robbie would never forget and would be breathing bullishly down her neck for as long he lived.

It’s not as if anything is terrifically bad at the moment, though—aside from the lingering ache of losing her father. And dealing with his widow. In her grief Celia’s behavior had become, at times, unbearable. She sought to include her daughter-in-law in an exclusive club of mourning that Gillian wanted no part of, to cannibalize remembrances of Alan that existed outside of the life she had shared with him; at least it felt like cannibalizing and not merely sharing, because suddenly she yearned to know what he was like when younger—and married to Gillian’s mother. This touched the sacred ground of childhood, a territory Gillian would yield to no one save the possible exception of Caroline, who continuously dealt with the strain of running interference between them. The unexpectedly pleasant result of all this was a bold decision on Caroline’s part: Showing up unannounced at the farmhouse during teatime and dropping plane tickets into Gillian’s lap—a fortnight in France, just the two of them, everything arranged, Raff blackmailed into taking care of the farm, don’t ask—and then declaring in her inimitably bitchy but loving fashion, you better bloody say yes, because the tickets are nonrefundable.

Things were good with Caroline. They were together—not living together, not yet, though they’d talked about it. Even so Gillian had been nervous about the vacation, tense and snappish for weeks before the trip, and they argued over everything from how much to pack and the best route to the airport and every time this happened Gillian acknowledged the apprehensive coil of fear tense and furled in her gut, a malignancy festering within for untold years. Sometimes it shatters into infinite pieces or dissolves into a weakened state, but it is never long before a vicious regrouping of elements—loss, pain, fear—reconstitute its bothersome form. In the time she has been with Caroline the strength of the coil has vacillated wildly, but it always maintains a frustrating fluctuation coeval with the unpredictable expanse of love.

Love, she thinks. So that’s what that was all about just now. She stares down the steep path angling back into the village where they are staying; a sky of humid clouds hunches over this world, over the greenery of the hills and valleys and crags that unexpectedly remind her of home—save the panorama of slate blue and white-capped mountains, so elegantly dramatic that they can’t be anything but French. Still. No escaping where you come from. No escaping yourself.

Yesterday they got lost trying to find prehistoric caves in Niaux and discovering, on arrival, that they had missed the last tour of the day. Driving back to the cottage, the Citroen broke down. As she fiddled with a hose clamp it started to rain and Caroline held a flimsy umbrella over her while humming Beethoven’s Emperor Concerto—heard on the radio earlier—as “motivational music.” Flush with the triumph of the fixed car they drove defiantly through a thunderstorm to a nearby
village and found a ridiculously picturesque inn for lunch: faded landscape paintings on the walls, dust on the windowsills, old couples eyeing them suspiciously, and an amusingly surly waitress. After a two-bottle lunch they spent a long time sobering up over coffee, much to the consternation of the waitress, who had to endure two middle-aged Englishwomen giggling more than any of their kind had the right to since the advent of Brexit. When they were sober enough to drive back to the cottage they made love for the remainder of the afternoon, the long, slow tenor of it reminding Gillian of the old days when they were still on the sly, when Caroline would scheme to spend an afternoon at the farmhouse and together they would strive to avoid anything remotely resembling adult responsibilities.

The intensity of the summer storm had darkened the bedroom, the rain’s shadows winnowed across the ceiling and the far wall in a soothing visual lullaby. She was flat on her belly as Caroline’s knuckles slowly navigated the tricky pathway of her spine, sliding and tapping a silent song that followed a musical score set forth by the blood coursing within her. She was half-asleep when Caroline said, I don’t want to jinx anything, but I haven’t been this happy in, well—she laughed softly—a really long time.

Gillian’s eyes fluttered. She yawned, her lips parted, and she almost said, Maybe we should get married then. But she didn’t. Nothing prevented her from saying it except the perpetual turning of the fucking screw, the coil of fear tightening in its familiar way, reminding her that she shouldn’t spoil this perfect moment by throwing that particular wrench in the works, that Caroline is done with marriage because she had the perfect wife and nothing would ever compare to that. Best let things go on as they are.

She has never seriously wanted to marry anyone. At least not to the point of asking. With Julia, she had been too terrifically young to think beyond fantastic daydreams of freedom and travel—and perhaps the minor, unearned fame of being an artist’s muse. With Eddie, she never imagined him serious enough for settling down, particularly with the likes of her. As many in their group of friends liked to remind her—Antje, of course, the sole exception—being with him, she was punching well above her weight. Whenever he brought it up she always categorized it as another one of his manic whims, because he had a million of them: backpacking through Europe, moving to Argentina, moving to Indonesia, becoming a DJ, buying a boat, a farm, a scrap yard, starting a cheese-making business. It finally seeped in when he bought a ring and proposed. And when it actually happened—standing in front of a sleepy-looking vicar and reciting cookie-cutter vows while sweating profusely into a scratchy new dress because she had impulsively consumed a hash biscuit beforehand, stupidly thinking it would settle her nerves—she could scarce believe it. But her parents were happy, Eddie was magnificently handsome in his shiny new suit, and frankly she thought she could do no better.

And still she believes it.

She had not known what to say to Caroline’s admission of happiness. She has spent a lifetime fumbling over words, awestruck over their beauty and substance. It’s why she has always sought them out so intensely in books and poems and stories, in dazzling monologues from artists and narcissists and fools. She picks through language like a survivor of a fire obsessively looking for keepsakes in the ruins, in the scorched earth of meaning. Love burns as much as language. As proof, she holds a lifetime of ash in her mouth, a lifetime of words given as freely as pleasure—for comfort, for placating, for others to see in her whatever they want to see and to take whatever they want to take from her. But with this woman, with her exacting mind and standards, Gillian experienced a regret unlike anything else she’s felt before: the frustration and futility in not finding the right words for the right person. It’s almost like keeping a secret from herself.

The secret stashed away, that afternoon she only tasted joy, the lingering finish of sex ripe in her mouth, better than any wine. She set off the riot of their bodies together, spanning the swells and
curves of breasts and hips and thighs and ass, her tongue snaked wild and defiant up the canal of Caroline’s back. While entering her gently and fucking her slowly, waiting for the sweet inevitable pushback against her hand, Gillian bit her ear and whispered, *You always set up a trembling in my bones.* The words not her own, but always serving as the coordinates that have marked out the impulsive course of her life.

*I don’t think I will feel this again for anyone,* she said the next morning—but to herself, once in the luminous roar of the shower and then later while making coffee and watching the swirl of hot water over sweet dark grounds, as if cautiously testing out a new lyric for a song, a fresh line for a poem.

On the mountainside the fermentation of clouds give off stifling heat, the taste of rain. Gillian gets up, needlessly shakes the water bottle to confirm that it’s empty, and begins the descent back to the village. The coil of fear knots together, breaks apart, shatters into a seemingly infinite void. It will return, as usual, but not for now. Never before has falling apart felt so wonderful.

3. not even a Smiths song

*No, it's not like any other love*

*This one is different, because it's us*

—The Smiths, “Hand in Glove”

*Wer wagt mich zu höhnen?*

The overture is over, the sailor has sung, and Isolde, the wild Irish princess, rails in German about mockery while thirteen-year-old Flora McKenzie-Dawson lies on the living room floor awash in the sounds of Wagner, blank-eyed and staring at the ceiling.

Suppressing a smile, Caroline turns down the volume of the music with a slender little remote, tilts her head to better look at her daughter, and says, “Well?”

Flora does not move a muscle, save for her eyelids as she blinks helplessly. “I—don’t—get—it.”

Caroline rises from the sofa, stretches, and rubs her back. “All right, then.”

“‘All right then?’” Frantic, Flora sits up. “What d’ya mean, ‘all right then’?”

“Ready for tea?”

“No, really.” The girl clambers to her feet. “What was I supposed to hear?”

“Told you, sweetheart. It’s just a chord. If you blink, you miss it. But no worries.” She saunters out to the kitchen. “Want a sandwich?”

“What? No!”

“Salad?”

“God, no—Mum, *wait.*” Teenaged stomping pursues her through the hallway. When it comes to adolescent thumping and lumbering about she never thought anyone would give Lawrence a run
for his money, but this lanky girl rumbles through the house like a dinosaur because while Flora may possess Kate’s graceful, loose-limbed beauty, these aspects are counterweighed by the clumsy goofiness of her genetic inheritance from Greg.

Maybe she will outgrow it, Caroline thinks—as Flora bumps into a hallway table and squawks “Ow!” as she does nearly every time she walks past the damned thing—or maybe not.

She is at the age where she seeks clues to herself in bloodlines, wondering how much biological imperative will dictate her life and interests. Caroline thought it a bit daunting for her, to have a mother who was a musician and a father who is an artist; already an overachiever, Flora has bestowed great creative expectations upon herself. Earlier this year, under Greg’s eager tutelage, she made a go at learning to draw. Despite her intense, laborious efforts she managed sketches less sophisticated than the average toddler and was not fooled by her father’s endless encouragement and copious praise.

And two years ago—long haunted by a photo she’s seen many times in her grandmother’s apartment, the one of Kate playing piano—she committed to having piano lessons. As a tutor Caroline picked a fusty old Romanian who claimed to have studied with Daniel Barenboim. A dozen lessons revealed Flora’s lack of aptitude and general impatience with the process; the final, fateful lesson ended with the frustrated teacher berating Flora, leaving her in tears, and Caroline snapping the pendulum off his vintage metronome and calmly informing him to vacate the premises before she shoved both pieces of the object as far up his ass as she could manage.

 Apparently this lack of musical ability vexes her still. As Caroline pours out tea, Flora slumps disconsolately against the kitchen counter. “I didn’t hear it. I didn’t get it.”

“Darling, it’s all right. It’s not a test.”

“No, it’s a big deal. This was your epiphany.” Flora pauses. “Right?”

“It was,” Caroline admits softly.

“And I’m not getting it.”

“Well, it was my epiphany after all—I don’t see why you would necessarily get it. But you said you wanted to know when I knew, and how I knew, so—” Caroline opens the refrigerator, stares at the contents, sighs. “Yogurt? Fruit?”

“No,” Flora wails emphatically.

“Teacakes?”

“Stop asking me about food.”

“All right. Going to keep pouting?”

“Yes.”

Turning around, she finds Flora now sitting on the counter—a verboten behavior. Playfully she smacks the girl’s thigh. “Down. Go sit in a proper chair.” As Flora sullenly slides on the counter Caroline cannot help but kiss her cheek. “We’ll give it another go some other time. I’ll play it for you again.”

“I’m hopeless,” Flora moans, now sprawling so dangerously low in a kitchen chair that Caroline wonders how she manages not to pour herself onto the floor. “I will never understand music.”
“Now seriously, it’s not like I understand it any better than you.” With the boys, Caroline always found teenage melodrama tiresome; with Flora, it’s amusing. Nice to know I’m growing up too after all these years, she thinks derisively.

She piles biscuits on a plate and deposits it in front of Flora, who shovels two digestives at once into her mouth and mixes it with a mouthful of tea, a childhood eating habit; when much younger she loved to open her mouth and reveal the masticated paste of biscuit and tea to anyone who cared to look, and Caroline is grateful she’s outgrown that particular culinary ritual. But some serious mulling is going on in that feverish teenaged brain.

Quite naturally, she has grown more curious about the mother she never knew. Most of the time Caroline does not mind answering her questions and telling her stories about Kate. In these moments the sensation she experiences is akin to someone poking and digging at a scar—it doesn’t exactly hurt, but the mere thought that something could successfully penetrate that nacreous, sacred shield makes it tingle in distress, leaves her nervous as hell.

Thus Flora’s next question takes an about-face into a surprising direction: “What about Gillian?”

“What about Gillian?” Caroline echoes in confusion and turns around.

“I mean—how’d you figure it out with her?”

She rubs her brow. “Oh, Jesus.”

“Really? It was Jesus’s doing?” Flora giggles at her own cleverness. “Ha! Maybe that bearded rando was onto something—you remember? When we were in London and that weird guy kept following us because he thought she was a vicar?”

“You’re just being cheeky now.”

“I can’t help but be cheeky,” Flora retorts. “You never give any real answers.”

“You know how we met—”

“You know how we met—”

“Yeah, the great family legend—the epic meeting of brain-dead trailer trash and snotty bitch.” Flora adds, almost apologetically, “I’ve never said but seriously, you were really mean to her that first time, it’s no wonder she called you a bitch.”

“She stole my parking space. It was a dick move. Anyway, you know, it’s all like they say on Facebook: ‘it’s complicated.’” Caroline pauses. “Do they still say that on Facebook?”

Haughty, Flora shrugs. “How would I know? Facebook is for grannies.” She downs another biscuit. “So. You’re saying you didn’t have a big epiphany there? No weird little music chord? No opera?” She smiles mischievously. “Not even a Smiths song?”

Despite the breakups, the doubts, the complications, everything with Kate possessed a seemingly straightforward trajectory, an inevitable linearity. How then to explain the complicated pathways and terrains of a relationship that seemed as complex as an entirety of the Dales? How to sum that up with one single chord? If there was but one chord, there were infinite variations of it, a beautiful reverberation that lead everywhere, lead nowhere, pressed a nerve, opened a vein.

All Caroline can do is stumble through a half-assed explanation for an impatient teenager. “It’s, um, hard to say, really. Everything was very different with her. There wasn’t one moment, one epiphany. Just a bunch of moments strung together, so—maybe, I don’t know, it was, like, like a song I heard a lot? A soundtrack? I don’t know. It—confused me sometimes. I didn’t know what it all meant, or what I was feeling—and I’ve always ignored what I was feeling at my own stupid
bloody peril. But then.” Resigned to fate, she sighs. “I’ve always been like that.”

“Why’d you ignore it?”

“Fear. Foolishness.”

“How do you stop being afraid? Or foolish?”

“Well, love, that’s the problem,” Caroline replies. “You don’t. Your mileage may vary, as they say. All depends on how you handle it.”

“Not very encouraging.”

“Ah. Well. You’re young, still.”

“Hate it when you say that.”

“You’ve your whole life ahead of you to meet people and fall in love and make mistakes—”

Flora rolls her eyes. “Here she goes.”

“Take the piss all you like. But I’ll tell you one thing.”

“Words of wisdom, can’t wait.”

Caroline leans in and kisses the top of her daughter’s head. “You just haven’t earned it yet, baby.”

“Ah-ha! So you’re telling me there was a Smiths song involved!”

“Shut up and eat your biscuits.”

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK:

Nico, “I’ll Keep it With Mine”

Antonio Vivaldi’s “Spring,” arranged/recomposed by Max Richter (Yes, I know it was used in "The Crown" but I thought of it before I saw that particular episode, SO THERE.)

Joni Mitchell, “All I Want”

The Smiths, “You Just Haven’t Earned It Yet, Baby”
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