

There they go, two clever women of sixty, making their way through the wet towards the car. They've been to a literary festival; now they are going home: Dido to York, and Jeffrey; Georgia to London, and an empty house. Clouds roll back over the hills: it's clearing.

– It's clearing, says Dido, avoiding a puddle.

– Just as we leave. Georgia shakes out and furls her umbrella, and they stand for a moment, both tall, each with a different kind of elegance, taking it all in: the soaking emerald fields beyond the car park, the scattered sheep, the forest, dense as legend, smothering the Brecon hills. The canvas of the festival marquees sits pleasingly amidst all this; postmodern flags, slashed strips of parchment white, flutter at the entrance as the last of the rain blows away and the afternoon sun breaks through. From inside a marquee comes a burst of welcoming applause.

– We've heard him before, says Georgia, as Dido all at once looks wistful. – We really don't need—

– I know. It's just—

– It's been lovely. If we stayed till the end we'd have to stay another night.

– I know.

– And I hate arriving home on a Monday. Georgia is getting her keys out as they reach the car. – It puts me out of sorts. I like the week to start properly: breakfast at my own table, and things in view.

– As if you were still working, in fact.

– Quite. There is much to be said for routine. Georgia unlocks the car, and puts her umbrella in the boot, where their bags are already resting, bulging with books, new and secondhand. The town is the kingdom of secondhand books. They settle themselves inside, the travel rug folded on the back seat. It is a mark of something, to buy a travel rug, and Georgia had felt it when she did so. She starts up, puts the wipers on, then off, looks in the mirror.

– Are we clear?

– There's a dog, says Dido, looking to the left.

– Is there an owner?

– No. Yes. It's all right, he's seen us.

– The dog?

– The owner. He's calling him. You're all right now.

– I say! says Georgia, backing slowly. – Call orf your dog!

They both smile, seeing approximately the same self-important figure striding across some middle-England field.

– I shall miss you, says Dido, as they turn, and drive towards the entrance. Wild barking follows them.

– Me, too. Now, then. Georgia scans the narrow hilltop street, thronged with shoppers and festival-goers. Everyone has a carrier bag of books. – OK, she says, seizing a moment between a Land Rover and an estate car, and they drive slowly down the hill. A sheepdog with mad pale eyes hangs out of the back of the Land Rover, panting.

– More dogs than people, says Dido.

They drive beneath the banner strung across the street: *People say that life is the thing, but I prefer reading.*

– And so say all of us, she adds, lowering the window a little. The sun is getting stronger. It's all at once quite warm. – I must look up Logan Pearsall Smith when we get home.

– Oh, don't you know him? Georgia slows by the clock tower.

People are having lunch at the pavement café where they themselves lunched yesterday. – He was a favourite of Henry's father. She looks to the right and left on the main road. – Essays, mostly. *There are few sorrows, however poignant, in which a good income is of no avail.*

Dido laughs. – I must tell Jeffrey.

– And also – Georgia pulls out, and turns down the hill – *Thank heavens the sun has gone in, and I don't have to go out and enjoy it.* Or was that Sydney Smith? She picks up speed. – I always think of Smith when I visit Maud: *In the country one has the feeling that creation is about to expire before teatime.*

– How is Maud these days?

– Worrying. I've only seen her once since the funeral.

They pass the garden of a gallery, planted with strange wooden carvings. – Something will have to be done, but I haven't the strength.

– I've never known you not have strength. Perhaps Chloe could help.

– Perhaps.

– They do have things in common.

– I'm afraid that's true.

They're out in open country now, spinning along on a good smooth road between black and white Tudor houses, dazzling fields of rape, young corn.

Dido puts her hand on Georgia's arm. – It's been perfect. I've loved every minute.

– Me, too, says Georgia again, and then, as the toll bridge approaches – Have you fifty pence?

Dido opens her bag. They rattle over the peaceful Wye. People are camping in a field beside it, gliding serenely in canoes. The river mirrors swans, fishermen, early summer sky. They pay for their ticket and succumb to ices, pulling up beneath a tree to lick away at chocolate and vanilla. Then they're properly off, looking

out for the sign to Hereford, where Dido will catch the train to York, changing twice and arriving home at midnight. Jeffrey will be waiting at the station.

– How many books did you buy? asks Georgia.

– At least a dozen. At least. They're like drugs, those signing queues. And put me in Addyman's and I lose all reason.

They're on their way. They go through everyone they've heard. Enormous names fill the car.

– Just to look into Lessing's eyes.

– Benn was marvellous.

– He always is.

– Pinter was—

– Pinter. No more need be said.

– As he himself might have—

– Quite.

They drive on at one accord, as they have been since distant college days. There's not much traffic, out in open country: they've timed it well. Farmland stretches out beneath the hills, elaborate clouds are lit by the sun, the country air blows in.

– God, says Georgia. – London, after this.

– But it's lovely, where you are.

They slow at the approach to Credenhill, a charming village next to the headquarters of the SAS. Rolls of barbed wire top huge fences. Then they come to the Hereford road, and now the traffic thickens, full of Sunday outings. Georgia looks at the clock.

– We'll be fine, says Dido, and indeed they reach the station with a good fifteen minutes before the train to Crewe, and stand beneath hanging baskets filled with plastic flowers, watching the come and go of Sunday travellers, and a sweet young Labrador, being good as gold.

– Will you be all right? asks Dido. – All that long drive.

– I'll be fine. *Bookclub, Poetry Please*. I should be home by seven.

– Give the cats my love. Who's feeding them?

– Next door. They're very good.

The station announcement announces Dido's train. They gaze along the track.

– And Chloe, of course, says Dido. – Will you be seeing her this week?

– I expect so. And give my love to Jeffrey.

– I will. And he sends his.

Dido is painfully aware of Henry's absence from this exchange, but says only, again, as so often: – Will you be all right?

– I'll be fine, says Georgia, as she always does, and then the train comes in, and they settle Dido in her reserved corner seat, facing the engine, and heave up her bag on the rack. They kiss.

– Safe journey. We'll speak in the week.

– We will.

And Georgia climbs down, stands waiting, as the last door slams and then the whistle blows. They're off. Dido presses her hand to her lips; Georgia, always less demonstrative, nods and smiles as the blown kiss comes towards her. She stands there waving as the train pulls out, waits until it has rounded the bend, then makes her way out to the car park, following the joyous Labrador and his family, feeling a cloud of appalling loneliness settle upon her in moments.

– Stop it, she says aloud, but no one notices.

She reaches the car, unlocks it, has the radio on in a trice.

– Welcome to *Bookclub*, says James Naughtie kindly.

Georgia fastens her seat belt, and drives away.

London on a summer evening. *Pick of the Week* has taken her through the approaches: along the Westway and over Marylebone Flyover. Tower blocks glitter on either side: as always, returning, Georgia feels a pulse of excitement: this is the city, the splendid rush and throb. Everything starts here. But it's hard to sustain this feeling as litter blows along the Marylebone Road, and though her

spirits rise a little at the glimpse of blossom in Regent's Park they sink again at Euston, and the clog of traffic crawling towards King's Cross, where the building of the Eurostar network has held everyone up for years. Well. One day perhaps she and Dido will use it to go to Paris. Perhaps Jeffrey will join them. She passes the British Library, and here her heart does lift, for the Library's airy spaces have nourished her for years, and she knows that by tomorrow she'll be back in the swim of life in London, refreshed by a week in the country and getting on with things. Well, pretty much. As much as anything is a swim these days.

Georgia leaves King's Cross behind her, drives to the Angel, Islington, a place she has known for over three decades but where she now feels adrift amidst a sea of youth: spilling out of pubs, crowding the pavements, talking for England on their mobiles.

Upper Street, with its rich mix of shops and cafés, as every estate agent describes it, is basking in the warmth. The Screen on the Green is showing something interesting and French. Outside the Marie Curie shop on Highbury roundabout stand clumps of black bags and a little rocking horse. Goodness. How could you give away a rocking horse? Would you not cherish it for ever? If Georgia had a grandchild she'd stop and take it, dropping in a donation next day, but she does not have a grandchild – will she ever? – and she drives past, taking a last look in the mirror at the horse's scarlet reins, and turns into Corsica Street, leaving the traffic behind. She's almost home.

Highbury Fields is enjoying the evening sun. Queues at the ice-cream vans, tennis, joggers, dog walkers; ball games and the end of a picnic in the dog-free enclosure at the top. Chloe took her first steps in there, light years ago. Well, thirty years ago. Chloe is thirty-one this week. Dear God, where have three decades gone? Swimmers stand talking outside the pool, children shriek in the playground, cyclists spin by. All this activity, all this vibrant life. Georgia drives slowly through it all, up a Georgian terrace and

round, right round, into her own quiet street at last. Home again, home again, jiggety-jig, she hears her mother sing through the mists of time. There's a space outside her own front door: fantastic. She pulls up, turns off the engine.

For a moment she sits there, feeling she'll never move again. The sun is sinking over the rooftops, the Harrisons are walking up the street: she with the pushchair, he with their little boy on his shoulders. They wave and smile. Then they go into their house, and close the door. Georgia takes an enormous breath, and rallies. She gets out as stiffly as four hours' solid driving leaves you, stretches, heaves out her bag. Tomorrow she'd better have a swim. She points her keys at the car doors and hears the little beep as they lock. Modern times: so clever.

She walks through her front gate, brushing the lavender with her bag. The window-box geraniums have come on inches, just in a week. When she's settled in, she'll do the evening watering: comforting thought. And there are Tristan's ears, just visible behind the scarlet flowers. She unlocks the door, puts the bag down, stands there. The house smells shut up and feels as dead as a doornail.

– Come on, she says to the dusty air, and then: – Hello?

And the soft drop of cats from table and sofa to floorboards sounds at once. They're padding through sleepily; Isolde makes her little sound.

Fond embraces. – Thank God you're here.

Along past the stairs to the kitchen. Note on the table, a week's post, Saturday's milk in the fridge. Unlock the door to the garden. It's tiny, but they made it just right. Alchemilla and white forget-me-nots spill over the brickwork, the tulips are stunning. There are shrubs packed into every corner, a birdbath, a little pond. Last year a blackbird nested in the holly in the corner: in time for Henry to watch the male fly in and out to feed his mate, though not to see the fledgelings fly. Nor did he see the little bluetits emerge from the box on the wall: four, though one fell two weeks earlier, smack on

to the brick path. It died as only a nestling dies: naked, blind and tragic. Georgia, when she found it, had (unusually) sobbed her heart out.

Now she stands there, looking at it all. Entrancing cream sprays of love-lies-bleeding turn a flowerbed into a wedding. Gentle moss covers the plinth on which Athene rests, her lovely stone head placed perfectly in that corner, ivy trailing down. Just in a week, everything's clumped up. Here are the cats, asking for supper. Tristan twines round her ankles. Isolde drinks from the pond. Birds sing from gardens all around, the traffic is a distant hum.

– OK, says Georgia. – Here we are again. And she turns decisively, goes in to shake cat food into dishes, read the neighbourly note, go to the loo and return to pour a drink, opening the bottle put in the fridge when she left, all ready for her return. She takes the glass into the garden, sips, rests it on the birdbath. She turns on the hose. Here comes the magical pattering fall of water on to earth and leaf and brick. The sinking sun just catches it all. She's home.

– How was it? asks Jeffrey, over breakfast. – Give me the highlights.

Dido, still in her dressing gown, shocking on a Monday morning, but what the hell, pours coffee for them both. Last night she'd been almost too tired to speak. Sunday service on two different rail companies, each as hopeless as the other. *We apologise for the late arrival* . . . Give me strength, she'd said to Jeffrey, giving him her bag. – Poor you. She kissed him. – I'm sorry.

– Not your fault. Let's get you home.

She'd fallen asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

– Well, she says now, reaching for the toast. – Benn was the star, I suppose. Benn and Lessing. Put all the young things in the shade.

– And Pinter?

– Pinter was Pinter, as Georgia would say. Looking better.

Jeffrey passes the marmalade: last jar but one of the batch she'd made in January. – And Georgia? he asks her. – Coping?

– When has Georgia not coped? We enjoyed every minute. Dido yawns. – But I'm shattered.

– You have a nice quiet day. Jeffrey takes a look at the clock, and opens the paper.

– I shall, says Dido. Oh, the bliss of retirement, and nice quiet days. Not that she often has many. – Pass me the other bit, she says, and Jeffrey passes a supplement full of media chitchat. She gazes at the cover of a new magazine devoted to cosmetic surgery. A glance

in the mirror. God, she looks a wreck. A face should be lived in, Georgia has always said firmly. A face should be real. Botox is for bimbos and has-beens. Dido turns the pages. Massive cuts at the Beeb. They don't know anyone there now.

– And the B & B? asks Jeffrey, from behind the headlines.

– Heavenly.

Jeffrey gives a sudden snort.

– What?

He reads out Hoggart on Blair. They giggle. – Bremner was brilliant last night, he says, then looks at the clock again. – I must be off.

– What are you up to today?

– It's Monday, it must be America. The Civil War. He folds the paper, swallows the last of his coffee. – Then a couple of meetings and a tutorial.

– Only one?

– Someone who couldn't get out of bed for the last.

– Tut-tut. And you're fitting him in?

– Her. Out of the kindness of my heart.

Dido shakes her head. – I haven't heard a thing about your week, she says, as he pushes his chair back. – How was it?

– Pretty much like this one. He drops a hand on her head as he passes. – I should be home by six.

– I'll have something nice in the oven. I'll be up to speed by then.

– Jolly good.

And he's gone, taking briefcase from the study, jacket and safety helmet from the hall. She gets up to watch him unlock the garage and wheel the bike out down the path. Sixty-two and – at least in summer – he cycles off to work as if he were a student still. He looks up at the gate, gives a wave. A helmet does nothing for a man, especially with glasses, but no matter: Jeffrey's tall, he's well-made, he can carry it off.

– Bye, calls Dido as he wheels away, and returns to the breakfast table. She must make a list.

Not quite yet, perhaps.

Bathed, dressed and in her right mind; unpacked, the books piled up beside the bed, the washing turning, Dido consults the calendar. This nice quiet day is just as well, as the week looks rather busy. Tomorrow the Centre, Wednesday the book group, and supper for everyone here. She can tell them all about the festival. Thursday the Centre again; Friday – what does that say? Buttock? Surely not. She tries it again, with and without her glasses. She should know Jeffrey's angular hand by now. Sturrock. Sturrock? Who he? Sturrock drinks. Oh, well, she'll find out tonight. Saturday's free, so they might go to a film; Sunday the children are coming to lunch.

She washes up the breakfast things, looks through the post. A week away has brought her mailings from the Early Music Centre and the open-air theatre in Rowntree Park. There's a couple of postcards, a request for a reference from an old pupil, a reminder from the dentist. Life's gentle tapestry resumes. Nothing that can't wait. She reheats the last of the coffee and makes her list. Jeffrey is far from incapable, but the cupboard is largely bare. Sustained all yesterday by a B & B breakfast (very good) and railway sandwiches (dismal) she's in need of something nourishing tonight. No doubt he is too. And what is she to give everyone on Wednesday?

The clock ticks, Marr questions meaningfully from the kitchen, the sun comes in at the open window. Dido loves this room: a breakfast room, a morning room, light, well-proportioned and facing on to the garden. She loves the whole house, always has done, knew when they found it, thirty years ago, that it would see them through, and it has: two careers in two small studies, one doubling as guest room; two (almost three) children, lots of friends; student lodgers, everyone mucking in: busy, busy years.

There's still a lot going on now, and Jeffrey is three years off retirement (when the mortgage will finally be paid, extra loans and all) but the children are more or less settled – Kate more, Nick rather less. And she – she has her time to herself at last. That she has chosen to fill it with many things is as it should be: she still has plenty to give. But she doesn't have to. After thirty years' teaching, fifteen as head of department; after all those courses, adding on experience and qualifications for her retirement years – *Relate*, the Samaritans, the Diploma in Counselling – Dido, when she so chooses, can go to a literary festival with her oldest friend, soak up literature and country air for an entire week, and still – bliss – have the next day off to potter. She's lucky. She knows that apart from that long sad time with the lost baby – oh, those dreadful days – she's been pretty fortunate all her life. Nobody's life can be without its sadness, and that distant time was hers. But she's worked very hard, she's done her stuff, she's allowed to enjoy it all now.

She finishes the list, drains the coffee, gets up and sees herself once again in the mirror. She's fit, she's tall and lean, she's active; she feels – on the whole – so young. Catch her back view in the street – good jeans, good navy sweater – and she could probably pass for forty. It's always a bit of a surprise to see the grey in the well-cut head of dark hair, the lines. She goes over, looks in the glass more closely. Does she imagine it, or is there, already, that telltale circle round the iris that shows you are getting old? Not older: old. She takes off her glasses, puts them on again. There's just a thin thin line, a milky pale circle.

Perhaps a little rest after lunch, a little feet-up. But now: shopping. Action. Where are the keys?

It's a bright and beautiful morning. Dido spends a happy hour or so prowling round the shops. Out on the Welsh borders, the approach of high summer had been borne on every gust of air, rich with heavy soil and cowpat, blowing over the forested hills, new

crops and glossy grass. Here – here, it’s summer in the city. A lesser thing? A different kind of thing. The breeze from the river rustles the trees, clouds sail over the Minster and the pale stone of the city walls is washed with sunlight. Everything is fuller, feels as if it will last for ever: the creamy candles on the chestnut trees, the pink-splashed magnolia on the corner of their street.

She crosses the main road. Cyclists spin past as she walks down Peasholme Green and makes her way to the pedestrianised streets of the Quarter. Here she is again, and it’s as if she’s never been away, the clock of Holy Trinity striking eleven, tourists queuing at the Roman Bathhouse, the market stalls piled high with summer veg. She can smell cheese and geraniums.

It’s good to be back.

Now then. She gets out her list. A contented hour goes by.

Dido lunches on tomato and lentil soup from the health-food shop, and oatcakes and cheese from the deli. She listens to *The World at One*, finishes the paper, dispatches with firm kindness two Jehovah’s Witnesses. She rings Georgia, but Georgia is out. Crisp tones invite her to leave a message. This she does. What is Georgia doing this lunch time, she wonders, climbing the stairs. Which is worse, in widowhood: to stay in an empty house or to return to it? How different – she knows this instinctively – is the emptiness she has all around her now, a steady quietude she can fill in any way she chooses, knowing that its hours are limited to Jeffrey’s working day; that his key will sound in the lock; that he’ll give her the campus gossip over a drink in the garden, that she’ll fill him in properly over supper with details of her week away; that they’ll watch the news together, read in bed together, fall asleep without having to give anything a thought.

Oh dear.

Poor Georgia.

They went back such a long way, the four of them. Taking her

shoes off now, sinking on to the bed, Dido sees images come and go from the past: the punting, the parties, the cycling to lecture and seminar, the intensity of it all. She and Georgia had missed each other in the first year, clicked in the second and never looked back. That the men they both liked, then fell in love with, should also be friends was – well, that was what Oxford was like, when it went well, as it had for all of them. Finals. Moving to London: Henry to the civil service, Jeffrey to UCL, she and Georgia both to the Institute for the post-grad teaching diploma everyone did when they didn't get jobs in publishing, or didn't know what to do. Or even – good gracious – wanted to teach. Solid working lives began.

All around them, girls in Laura Ashley frocks got pregnant, wept at the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, never told their parents. Clouds of dope filled the air at every party. People went to India, to the Rent Tribunal, found squats in Brixton and occupied Grosvenor Square. Dido, Jeffrey, Henry and Georgia did some of these things, but not many. They did not drop out: indeed, they held on tenaciously to the lives for which everything – professional parents, good schools, and good examples – had prepared them. They married in their early twenties: Dido and Jeffrey at Finsbury Register Office, Georgia and Henry in Islington Town Hall.

Then Jeffrey, after years as a 0.5 at UCL, doing his Ph.D. the whilst, leafed through *The Times Higher* one more time, and saw the post at Fountains. He applied. He got it. Dido bought champagne.

Jeffrey's grandparents had come from Yorkshire: in moving back there, he was returning to his roots. But – how exciting – he was looking to the future in a brand-new university, full of sixties promise. Mist, the moors, the ruined abbey, all linked the place to the past: Fountains had depth, it came out of tradition. But its spacious campus, brick and gleaming glass, its stunning lecture halls and airy teaching rooms all proclaimed a vision of the future: radical, pioneering, unequivocally modern.

It was, of course, right in the middle of nowhere. You couldn't actually live there, not as a member of staff. Brand-new students caught filthy colds making a dash for brand-new halls of residence across the windswept grounds, but staff would have to commute. There was no railway station. Jeffrey, young and fit, decided to remain so by cycling out there, at least in spring and summer. His parents lent him and Dido enough for a deposit on a wreck of a house in a run-down suburb – now one of the most desirable districts in York. They moved; they settled down.

And Georgia and Henry likewise, in London. Combined incomes (excellent civil service, shocking teaching) bought them a Highbury flat. Promotions bought them a house.

The babies came: Kate for Dido and Jeffrey, Chloe for Georgia. That birth was natural and hellish: Georgia wanted no more. Dido and Jeffrey did, and Nick arrived. One of each! How fortunate they were.

Years passed. Settled, interesting, enviable lives took shape. Sometimes Dido thought: we're too lucky; this can't go on. Then came tragedy, with baby number three. A little girl, unplanned, and all the more beloved: a gift, a blessing, a darling new member of the family.

– Can I hold her?

– Can I?

Ella. Even now, she thinks of her.

Sometimes Georgia said on the phone, or at Easter in the Lakes: When Henry and I retire – it seemed donkey's years away – we're going to do VSO. Make ourselves useful.

– You're useful now, said Dido.

– Yes, but one must never give up.

Over the years this idea came and went. The women, in any case, would retire five years before the men, unless they took early retirement. Neither wanted to. Everyone was fit.

Georgia said on the phone that last autumn, after their holiday in France, all four together again: – Henry's a bit off colour.

Unheard of, except for things like flu.

– He's feeling a bit ropey, still, she said a week or two later. – I've told him to go for a check-up.

He went. He was sent for a blood test.

That was it.

Dido has intended to listen to the afternoon play, but drifts off with *The Archers*. A summery breeze blows in at the open window; so does the scent of the syringa at the garden gate. Footsteps go past. She sleeps.

Chloe is washing a lettuce in a beaded jacket. Edmund comes in. Rain is falling, soaking the window box and splashing off the black-painted fire escape, where pots of geraniums stand. Chloe shakes out the lettuce and a shower of water mirrors the rain in a flurry. Edmund switches the light on.

– That’s better. He sets down the shopping. – How are we doing?

– Fine. I’m going to ice the cake in a minute. Did you get soaked?

– I made a dash for it.

– Well done. Have we got everything now?

– I think so. Coffee?

– I’ve been drinking coffee all morning; I’m wired. Let’s have lunch.

– Soup and cheese?

– Soup and cheese. And a bit of salad.

Chloe tears a few leaves into a bowl, Edmund puts things away, Chloe opens a carton of country garden soup. They move round one another as companionably as only a couple with no sexual interest in one another can do. Edmund is an actor, currently appearing in *China & Glass at Heal’s*. Previous productions have included *Bedlinen* and *Christmas Lights*. His extra-curricular interests are male, and at present unsettled. Chloe is hoping someone interesting might pitch up at the party: someone she’s

never met before, who will be – she'll know at once – The One. At thirty-one, this very week, she has faith that such a thing can happen, though since her father's death she has had little energy left over from the huge emotions of grieving. It's getting a little bit easier. She no longer cries every day, indeed has not cried for some weeks. She's giving a party, the first for eighteen months. She must be getting better.

She and Edmund sit eating Saturday lunch at the kitchen table. The kitchen is also the dining room, and indeed the sitting room. It has a double aspect, with three sash windows: one overlooking the fire escape at the back, beyond sink, stove, fridge, cupboards, and two at the front, looking on to Charlotte Street, several floors below. A sofa slumps beneath these front windows, between more cupboards, shelves, etc. A little yellow lamp, which Chloe found in a junk shop on a visit to York, perches on a cupboard heaped with this and that. The telly is shoved in a corner. The walls are a very dark antique green, nicely setting off window-box daffodils in spring and geraniums in summer. There are one or two posters in frames. This is not the age of the poster – such as it had been for their parents' generation, where no room was complete without Lautrec's *Jane Avril*, or Che Guevara, or Liv Ullmann's mournful gaze – but Chloe and Edmund have settled on Matisse and Hopper, both from Tate Modern shows. Chloe is sick of the Hopper now: that woman gazing out at nothing from an empty room – too many postcards have dulled its effect. No matter: she's part of the furniture.

The room, in short, is comfortable, has atmosphere, and though it's pretty small for a party, better too crowded than too empty, and there's always the fire escape. This is reached through a door at the back of the landing, and those without vertigo will be fine out there, so long as it stops raining.

It stops raining. Black-painted ironwork gleams. Edmund cuts another slice of walnut bread and offers it to Chloe, who declines.

He takes it himself and adds the last of the Brie. Geraniums sparkle at the window in the emerging sun. A happy afternoon of preparations lies ahead.

The party is making up for the fact that last year, Chloe's momentous Thirtieth, there had been only drinks and cake with Georgia in the garden at home. Neither of them could face more. Georgia had wanted to make an effort. Please don't, said Chloe. This is just how it has to be. It was six and a half weeks after the funeral. They sat in the summer evening, listening to the radiant cruelty of the blackbird's song.

– I'm so sorry, said Georgia, for the hundredth time, as if Chloe's fatherless state were all her fault.

– Stop it. Let's cut the cake.

Georgia did so, biting her lip.

– He loved you so much.

– I know. Me too. You too. Poor Mum.

The cats came out to join them. Isolde made her way to the pond, where the frogs were enjoying the deepening sun. She sat very close to the edge.

– Don't even think about it, Chloe told her. The cake was delicious, lemony, creamy, light as a feather. She let her mother pour another glass of fizz.

– Thanks. Cheers again. They chinked their glasses. Tristan sat washing by Georgia's wrought-iron seat.

– Do you think they know Dad's gone?

– I'm sure they do. Isolde sleeps in his chair all the time.

Chloe burst into tears.

One or two neighbours came over for supper. Dido phoned. Edmund kept his distance: today was a mother-daughter thing. Chloe stayed the night, sleeping in the room of her childhood with Tristan beside her: waiting on the bed while she had her bath, starting to purr as soon as she switched the light off. He came up

to the bed and settled himself right next to her on the pillow, almost smothering her.

– Darling puss. What would I do without you?

In the morning, she and Georgia left the house together after breakfast: Chloe to go to the office and Georgia to Birkbeck, where she had classes until the end of term. Then she'd retire. Then what would she do? Life without Henry yawned ahead.

They walked down Highbury Fields with all the other people heading for the tube. Dogs raced about. Early swimmers left the pool with wet hair, unlocking their bikes from the rack, checking their watches. Chloe checked hers.

– What time's the shoot? asked Georgia, as they overtook a pushchair.

– Not till eleven, but I have to pick up all the stuff first. It's OK, I'll make it.

Beggars were waiting outside Barclays Bank. Georgia and Chloe walked briskly past, and stood waiting at the lights. Already the Holloway Road was roaring.

– Henry often used to give to them, said Georgia, using his name for the first time that day, and the last. People at work didn't want you to keep going on.

– He was a sappy date, said Chloe. – I never do. Well, I do sometimes, if they're busking. Not if they just sit there with those poor dogs. OK, let's cross.

Inside the station, they kissed goodbyes, Chloe keeping an ear out for the Silverlink train to Camden Road.

– Thanks, Mum. I'll phone you tonight.

– You don't have to.

– I might want to talk to you.

Georgia smiled. They went their separate ways.

That was then, this is now. Chloe, in celibate cohabitation with Edmund since answering an ad in *Loot* in 1999 (so they saw in the

Millennium together) is preparing for her birthday party. Behind this energetic day lies her birth, thirty-one years and three days ago, in the maternity unit of University College Hospital, smack bang between this flat and Birkbeck College, as it happens. Behind her lies primary school, where no one, in the late seventies, had wondered why, at seven, Chloe was still struggling to read. She was bright, she had a wide vocabulary, she was just taking her time. Georgia should stop fussing. Behind her lie the endless after-school extra sessions from the age of eight, once Georgia and Henry had taken matters into their own hands, taken her to an educational psychologist, and had his verdict.

Dyslexic? Chloe?

- Better to have a proper diagnosis than watch her struggle on.
- But she can't be. There's no one in the family—
- Maud, said Henry.
- Oh, God.

Behind Chloe now, icing her cake in childhood's pink and white, listening to the cricket, as Henry used to do, lies the transfer to secondary school: first the comprehensive behind the Holloway Road where no one minded about her dyslexia, lots of other people couldn't read or spell, and then the rapid transfer to a sappy independent school for girls where you didn't have to pass the Common Entrance if you didn't want to.

The whole thing was a nightmare. It went on and on.

- Not going to university? But Chloe, you must. You're so clever, you must. They'll give you lots of support—
- I don't want any more fucking support, OK?

It was dreadful. Slammed doors, white faces, nobody speaking. Georgia was worse than kindly Henry.

That's enough now. Chloe licks icing off the knife, feeling her head begin to spin as she lets all these memories come back. At thirty, you review the past: you have to. She hadn't last year, because the present had been so all-consuming. Now she is doing

it, twelve months and three days late, as the sound of the traffic floats up and in through the open windows, the sun shines, showing the dust up, and England declare for three hundred and fifty-six for six.

- I'm not going, and that's that.
- Then what are you going to do?
- Go to art school. What's wrong with that?
- You can't draw. Sorry, but it's true.
- You don't have to *draw*.

Georgia, not for the first time, put her head in her hands.

Behind Chloe, finishing her icing, setting the cake to dry on the bread board, lie four years of installations, mixed media, video workshops, computer graphics. Byam Shaw off the Holloway Road for Foundation, Central St Martin's for the Dip. She left in 1995. Now what? She went to work in Liberty, where she had temped for two summers. She moved from kelims to curtains to fabrics. People bought bolts of Liberty-printed cotton, understated linen, swathes of William Morris, over the counter, and often, as she unfolded these fabrics and cut off lengths with fabulous sharp scissors, Chloe experienced pure pleasure. What had begun as a pleasant summer job became a passion.

After a while, she realised:

- I should have done *textile* design.
- Never too late, said Henry. – I'm sure we could—
- No, no, it's OK. Forget it. I don't want to drag on being a student.
- It wouldn't be a drag if you—
- I said forget it.

But what could she do? Spend her life in Liberty, rise to being a buyer? That might take for ever, and her dyslexia might really matter if she had to order stuff, and write to people. And the pay was—

Then it happened, lying on the sofa with Georgia's *Vogue* one

Sunday afternoon. Home for lunch, everyone in a good mood. Chloe, coffee cup resting precariously on her midriff, leafed through shots of sulky young women wearing lingerie in barns, boots in the desert, a silken slip of nothing in a rocking chair. Every interior shot (so not the desert, where only a camel loomed) was bestrewn with beautiful objects: antique cup and saucer, a green glass jar crammed with lily of the valley, an open book (old) whereon a pair of glasses rested (new, Dolce & Gabbana). Chloe noticed them all. After a while she picked up a Laura Ashley catalogue Georgia had left on the coffee table. Not the fashions, the furnishings one. She settled down with it.

A chalk-pink armchair (deep, deep), with mahogany feet and gleaming castors, rested on scrubbed floorboards. Books and a candelabra (cream candles in rosebud holders) stood on a chest, before an old gilt mirror. French doors led to the garden; there was just a bit of an easel. Chloe found herself thinking she could look at this chalk-pink chair for a long time, and would have much pleasure in choosing, herself, that candelabra. She turned to bedlinen: heaps of quilts and cotton lace, waffle pillow cases (Oxford) were flung across a four-poster. A spray of blossom stood on the bedside table, a dressmaker's dummy was hung with a little fur wrap the colour of *café au lait*.

Chloe lay on the sofa, thinking. Someone must compose all these shots. Someone – who? – must have decided on that little fur, realised how subtly it set off all that cotton. Someone must have spent days scouring junk shops for that green glass jar (or dug it out of her grandmother's cupboard). Chloe had a good eye: everyone said so. Really good. She could do that.

- I could do that.
- What? Georgia was deep in the reviews.
- Be a stylist.
- A what?
- Never mind.

* * *

Chloe went to interviews dressed to kill. She played up her art school training like hell. At last she was taken on: as a junior in a company called Dot & Carrie, the names of the two women who founded it, whose stylish logo involved a dot and a bag. The bag was crammed with marvellous things and accompanied Chloe to studios all over London.

She loved it. She was very good at it. After a while, she was made Senior Stylist.

She had never looked back.

To hell with dyslexia. Who cared?

Chloe began the best years of her life. Along the way she made many friends and went to bed with men, as you did. Quite a few men liked the look of her. And yet. Life was busy, life was full. And yet.

– What I want, Chloe said to Edmund one evening in the spring of 2004, drinking wine after work in a bar in Primrose Hill, – what I want is to love someone as much as my parents love one another.

– They do? You're lucky.

– No, they do. They really get on. When I was little, I could hear them laughing in bed.

– You really are lucky.

– How can I ever hope to find something like that?

– I have no idea. My parents divorced when I was three. Shall we talk about me now?

So it went on. That summer, Chloe and a group of people went on holiday to Spain while her parents and Dido and Jeffrey went reading in France.

– Dad isn't feeling too good, Georgia said on the phone a few weeks later.

– He looked brilliant when you all came back.

– I know. It's probably nothing.
So it all began.

It can't be true. It can't be.

Now, a year and a half after her father had sat his wife and daughter down, and told them what he must, Chloe is choosing what to wear for her party. Then, the nights had drawn in, and Georgia had drawn the curtains against the autumnal garden and dark street. They listened to Henry's quiet voice. Now – now, in the heart of London, the early summer rain has blown away and far below people are sitting outside pavement cafés. Greek music, lively chatter, the sizzle of Greek cooking, all waft upwards and through the open windows; taxis tick and high heels hurry – to her door? Please not yet, please don't be uncool and early, I'm not ready yet.

– Edmund? How long are you going to be in there? Edmund!

The shower is turned low; he'll be out in two ticks.

Chloe, in her kimono dressing gown, all silk and birds, goes back to her bedroom and surveys the heap. The only thing she's sure of are the shoes.

For her thirty-first birthday party, just about to begin, Chloe – five foot eight, inheriting some of her parents' height; size twelve; short dark hair in a feathery elfin cut round her elfin, unjaded face, marvellous eyes (everyone says so) – wears her beloved beaded jacket, even though she's worn it to death. Beneath is a dead plain little black thing just on the knee, fishnet tights and the shoes, which are just fantastic: black and white leopard print with scarlet heels (two-inch) and scarlet toes.

– Yes?

– Yes, says Edmund, in faded green velvet. – Very yes.

– Audrey Hepburn? She raises an endless and invisible cigarette holder to a scarlet pout. – It has been said.

– Not by me. Hepburn was a size eight. He sees her face. – Dear Chloe. Hepburn to the life.

– What time is it?

– Time I gave you this.

A little flat box, wrapped in gold tissue paper and tied with golden thread.

– Oooh . . .

Inside, the finest, slenderest, most understated yet extravagant—

– Oh, *Edmund!*

– Put it on?

She puts it on, taking off the jacket, turning to the mirror, hardly daring to breathe in case she breaks the clasp, or the thread, even though it's been hand-knotted by mice. There.

– Gosh. Yes?

– Perfect.

– Everyone will ask if they're real.

– The certificate is in the box.

– So it is. *The finest selected black seed pearls . . .* Oh, Edmund, thank you. She kisses him. – Thank you, thank you! Let's have a drink.

They have one, listening to Billie Holiday. The room is full of pre-party cleanliness and order: heavy bowls of olives, sparkling glasses, tealights everywhere.

– Cheers. Happy Birthday.

– Cheers. Chloe is suddenly full of nerves. – Just tell me that tonight I'm going to meet—

– We know everyone who's coming.

– Someone might bring a friend.

– I hope they don't all do that.

– But someone might.

– The only person I can *really* see you with, said Edmund – to tell you the truth, is Jez.

– Jez?

– Isn't that his name? Your photographer? I think he has his eye on you. I think you'd look pretty good together.

– Looks aren't everything.

– Since when?

– Jez is married, Edmund.

– I know.

– And has a daughter.

– I know.

– Well, that's the end of that, then. Chloe reaches for the bottle, and jumps as the doorbell rings.

– Anyway, she says, going to the window, glass in hand, to see if she can see who it is down there – my mother thinks photographers aren't real people.