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The Poison Tree

Written by Erin Kelly

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ERIN KELLY

The Poison Tree


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STOUGHTON

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The way we'd go on summer nights
In the times we were children
And thought we were lovers.

'The River Road', Sean O'Brien

PROLOGUE

I let the telephone fall from my hand. Panic first cripples and then revives me. My fingertips tingle as they feel their way around the coffee table, scrabbling first for my car keys and then for my mobile. I seem to have eight limbs as I try to get dressed in the dark, pulling on my coat and a pair of oversize sheepskin boots that I usually wear as slippers. At the threshold I hesitate for a second, then rush back to my desk and fumble in the drawer for my passport and a credit card that I keep for emergencies. I pull the door behind me in silence, although blood roars and rushes in my ears. With shaking hands I double-lock it: whether to keep someone in or to keep someone out, I can't know yet.

Outside, I tiptoe, but there is a crack and a squelch as I flatten a snail beneath my sole, and when I tread in a puddle by the gate, cold water seeps through the soft suede and licks unpleasantly at my bare toes.

In the dark interior of the car I turn the key in the ignition and wince as the air blows icy cold, dispersing the fluffy clouds of my breath. My hands are so cold they feel wet; I am relieved to find a pair of woollen gloves bundled in my left pocket. Before putting them on, I use my mobile to cover the last caller's tracks. I call the house phone, wait for the click of connection and hang up before it has a chance to ring. The windscreen is opaque with frost and I do not have time to wait for the heaters to defog the glass. I wipe a porthole in the passenger window and squint back into the dark recess of the

bedroom window. If he had heard me, the light would be on by now. He would be silhouetted at the window, mouthing my name. Would that stop me? Would anything?

The car is pointed directly at the front of the house. If I turn the headlights on, they will shine into the window, so with no beams to guide me and only a smeared handprint of visibility through the windows, I pull out into the road. Only when I have guessed my way to the end of our lane do I switch on the full beam. The countryside is frosted and stark. Naked hedgerows cast eerie shapes on the road in front of me and the high banks of the narrow road throw up shadows that take human form. The dead, the missing and the missed surround me now, passive spirits who have become active ghosts. I am afraid to glance behind. They pursue me as I drive aggressively, suicidally, mounting the grass verge when I take a blind bend much too fast. The seatbelt digs into the flesh between my breasts as I make an emergency stop to avoid hitting the truck which suddenly looms in front of me. It's a filthy vehicle of indeterminate colour, tools loose in the back, moving so slowly that the driver must be drunk. I have no option but to slow to a crawl behind him.

I ought to use this enforced pause for rational thought. But there is nothing rational about this situation. I am driving alone in pyjamas and wet, clammy boots on a country lane in the middle of the night. Nobody knows where I am or why, and in dialling my own home I have erased the only clue I might have left. I had only been thinking of the others, but for the first time it strikes me that my own safety might be compromised if I continue.

A glance at my speedometer tells me that we are travelling at four miles an hour. I toot and flash, but by the cold blue glow in his cab I see that he is making a phone call. I map the road ahead in my mind. I have driven it so often that I know every pothole, kink and camber. I take a deep breath, crunch

the gears and plunge blindly into the passing place I calculate is just to my right. The driver of the black car coming in the opposite direction has had the same idea and we skim each other as we pass, with a sickening screech of paint on metal. I accelerate. Let him chase me if he wants to make something of it. My left-hand mirror is wrenched from its casing, and falls to dangle lifelessly at the side from a lone wire, like a severed limb attached to its body by a single vein. The retreating driver sounds his horn angrily, the Doppler effect making it drop a forlorn semitone as it continues in the direction of my house. The truck is between us and it is too late to turn and see if the driver was alone or carrying a passenger, if it was a regular car or a taxi.

I pick up my crazy pace. Only a speed camera, predicted by a luminous sign, persuades my foot to the brake. On the borders of the town the scrubby roadside verges give way to narrow pavements and trees thin out to accommodate houses, a pub, a petrol station. Lamp posts appear, imitation Victorian globes like a parade of tiny moons, and I realise with a corresponding lucidity that this is it. The event I have been expecting and dreading for a third of my life is finally here.

It suddenly feels very hot inside the car. My hands are sweating inside my gloves, my eyes are dry and my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth. I have given up so much and done so many terrible things already for the sake of my family that I can only keep going. I do not know what is going to happen to us. I am frightened, but I feel strong. I have the strength of a woman who has everything to lose.

I

I try to see the city through his eyes. It has only been ten years, but London has changed. Will he notice the subtle developments of the last decade? Does he register the lack of telephone boxes or the proliferation of Polish grocers? What about the plugged-in pedestrians with white wires connecting their ears to their pockets? The red circles on the road that welcome us into and usher us out of the congestion zone? I'm dying to know what he is thinking. His eyes, though, are fixed on the sycamore pods and leaves stuck under the windscreen wipers. Running commentary has never been his style, but this silence is unnerving.

Alice is talking enough for the three of us, a high-pitched stream of consciousness that spills from the back seat. She has made this journey from South-east London to our home on the Suffolk coast four times a year, every year of her life. She loves travelling home through town, preferring to inch through dirty streets rather than cruise around the motorway, even though it adds hours onto our journey. I always save this route for a special treat, when her behaviour throughout our visit has been particularly good, or when she and Rex have found saying goodbye harder than usual. Sometimes I drive through town when I need to think, knowing that Alice's nose will remain pressed against the glass as the car crawls from suburb to inner city to suburb again, that the questions she asks will be about what that man is selling or what that building is, rather than another discussion about why Daddy has to live so far away.

But this afternoon's detour isn't at Alice's request. As we creep along Holloway Road, her favourite part of the journey, her focus is inside the car. She does not seem to mind her demotion from the front seat to the back. She ignores the Caribbean barber's she loves to wave at and the metallic, space-age university building we saw being built, panel by shiny blue panel. We even pass the grimy mobile store that holds such a strange fascination for her without the usual argument about when she will be old enough for her own telephone. We stop at a red light and with a click and a giggle she slides out of her seatbelt and squeezes between the driver and passenger seats. Her twiggy fingers weave in and out of Rex's hair, tugging it, massaging his scalp, shampooing it and revealing silver threads around his ears and temples. She shoots out rapid-fire questions one after the other without waiting for answers.

'Will you take me to school when I go back next week? Will you drive Mum's car or are we going to have two? Lara's mum and dad have a car each but she *still* walks to school. Don't you think – oh my God, you can come swimming now! What's your best stroke? Mine's front crawl. Will you take me swimming?'

'I'll do whatever you want,' says Rex, and Alice kisses the top of his head. Her knees fold forward and nudge the gear stick while an elbow knocks against my head as I try to negotiate the Archway roundabout. I shout at her when I had sworn I wouldn't, not today. She shrugs off my scolding. The car swings to the left as I take the exit for the Great North Road. Rex crosses his legs, folds his arms and shifts in his seat. He knows where I'm going. Perhaps he was expecting it.

Archway Road is unusually clear, and the three of us cruise underneath the bridge in the long, low autumn dazzle. The neighbourhood has been gentrified in the decade since we lived here. We pass a designer baby boutique where a charity shop used to be. The off-licence which would sell us two

bottles of nasty wine for five pounds, even at three in the morning, has now been upgraded to a wine merchant's, and even the old pubs and restaurants look cleaner and brighter than I remember them: more plate glass, fewer metal shutters. But Archway still has some way to go, I think, as I swerve to avoid chunks of glass exploded from a bus stop window and scattered across the street like ice cubes.

Neither of us have been here for over a decade but I can still drive this street, anticipate those lights, make these gear changes, on autopilot. I could do it with my eyes shut. For a reckless second, I'm tempted to try, to close my eyes and lock the wheel on a right curve. But I make the double turn into Queenswood Lane wide-eyed and unblinking. The noise of the city falls away as we enter the secret sliver of wildwood, where the ancient trees muffle the sirens and the screeches of the street and the half-hidden houses occupy a dark green private universe, cushioned by money as much as by trunk and bough and leaf. I drive carefully between the expensive cars, their wing-mirrors tucked into their bodies in case someone unfamiliar with the road drives too quickly and knocks into one. But I am more familiar with this lane than any other road, including the one I grew up in and the one I live in now. It's the setting for most of my memories and all of my nightmares. I know every old brick wall, every bump in the road, every lamp post. The 1860s apartment block with its Italianate walled garden still sits alongside that glass-and-concrete bubble, someone's vision of the future from the 1960s that would never make it past the conservation society today. Stern Victorian townhouses tower over a pastel-coloured fairytale mansion. Their windows glower down at us.

I deliberately don't look towards the last house, the place where everything happened, before the street surrenders to the trees. I focus on the road as the leafy tunnel swallows this car for the first time and park up with the house behind me,

telling Alice that Mummy and Daddy need to stretch their legs. She tumbles out of the car and skips into the trees, her tracksuit a flash of pink through half-undressed branches. The little red lights in the heels of her trainers wink at us like tiny eyes.

‘Don’t go too far!’ I call. We watch as she drags her feet through the fallen leaves, tracing letters with her toes, staining the hem of her trousers with flakes of wet bark and leaf mould. She doesn’t know it, but she’s playing yards away from the spot where she was conceived. Rex speaks first.

‘It’s got to be done, I suppose.’ He circles the car to open my door. I get out and point the key fob at the car, and it locks with a pow-pow noise. Rex raises an eyebrow. ‘Very swish,’ he says, taking the key from me and examining it as though it contains an entire album of hi-energy dance tracks. I close my eyes to make the turn and when I open them, there it is. Exactly where we left it, I think – although where could it have gone? The four-storey townhouse surrounded not by cars and concrete but by lime and plane and birch and oak; half stucco, half grey brick, it really belongs on the end of a terrace in Islington or Hackney. Its incongruity is one of the things that always made its presence on the edge of the forest so magical. It has changed, of course. It looks naked, cleaner and more metropolitan than ever now that someone has pulled down the dark green ivy which covered all of the side wall and half the front one and found its way in through the windows in the summertime. The creamy stucco gleams, not a single peel or crack in the paint. It looks *innocent*. But then, so do I.

The flaked black paint on the front door has been replaced by flawless turquoise gloss, and the golden lion doorknocker gleams. The steep front steps – formerly a death trap of long-dead herbs tufting out of broken terracotta pots, lone rollerskates, empty wine bottles and never-to-be-read free local newspapers – have also been restored, and instead the

door is flanked by two perfectly symmetrical bay trees with twisted stems in aluminium pots. Six recycling boxes are stacked neatly and discreetly behind a magnolia tree in the front garden. Instead of the unworking bell-pull which no one ever bothered with, there are six buzzers. The first time I ever came here, I spent ten minutes looking for just such a row of doorbells bearing different names. It didn't occur to me that people my age could live in the whole of this building rather than occupy an apartment within it. I don't need to get any closer to know how the place has changed on the inside. Without peering through the white-shuttered windows, I know exactly how the interiors of these flats will look: coir or sisal carpeting, because the battered floorboards were beyond restoration even for the most dedicated property developer. The black and white hall will have been renovated, an original feature that will have added value to the house price. It was in a terrible condition when we lived there, and afterwards, there was that terrible stain . . .

There will be magnolia walls with flat television sets flush against them, stainless steel kitchens, each boxy white bedroom with its own frosted-glass bathroom. It had been sold, but not until a long time after the police and the press had gone. The redevelopment had begun as soon as the yellow incident tape had been taken down and the cameras and reporters had moved on. Only then did the estate agents begin to throng the house. I had often imagined the swarm of suits trampling polystyrene and paper coffee cups discarded by reporters, looking beyond the building's grisly history, seeing only the rare opportunity to sell a sensitively converted character property in a highly desirable location, situated seconds from the Tube and on the edge of the historic Queen's Wood.

The violent physical reaction I was half-expecting – a swoon, or a full faint, or even vomiting – doesn't come. Rex too is calm, indecipherable, and it's he who has the most, and the

most gruesome, memories of this place. It was his home for twenty-four years and mine for only one summer. Alice breaks the reverie, dropping five feet from a tree I hadn't noticed her climb, bored now, asking Rex for a can of Coke because she knows I'll say no. I shrug and let him decide. Tonight, we'll sit down and establish some ground rules for dealing with Alice before she becomes hopelessly, irretrievably spoilt. But today, I'll let Rex play the indulgent father. One day won't hurt.

She gets her drink, but not from the newsagent near Highgate Tube; I bet it's still owned by the same family. They might not recognise me, but of course they would remember Rex. They would have sold enough newspapers with him on the cover. Instead, we drive up Muswell Hill Road and I let Rex and Alice jump out and into a more anonymous convenience store. Did I ever go there? The fruit and vegetables piled up in front of the shop, their dull skins patiently absorbing the fumes from my exhaust, do nothing to jog my memory. Rex and Alice are in there for a while, and it's not until she emerges, red-faced and holding out her hand, that I realise I haven't given him any money.

Before we've even reached the North Circular road that links Rex's old part of London to his new home, Alice has slipped out of her seatbelt again and is lying across the seat, kicking at the air, singing to herself and spilling sticky cola all over her clothes and the car seat. Ten years fall away and I remember another journey on this road. It was the day Rex's credit card arrived, and we celebrated by driving to the supermarket to stock up on all the food and drink we could cram into my little Fiat. Rex sat beside me losing a wrestling match with the sunroof, while Biba took up the whole of the back seat, so Guy can't have been with us. She dangled a cigarette out of the left-hand window, her feet poking out of the right-hand one in a desperate attempt to cool down. I can feel the gummy heat of that summer now. I remember the prickle of my heat

rash and the way the sweat from my body made my cheap purple t-shirt bleed dye onto my skin like an all-over bruise. I remember the way perspiration gave Rex a permanent kiss-curl in the middle of his forehead, like Superman. I can still see the criss-cross sunburn lines on Biba's back. A pink leg comes between me and the rear view mirror.

'Put your seatbelt on, Alice,' I say. She walks her feet up onto the ceiling, printing a thin layer of leaf mould in the shape of her shoes across the pale grey ceiling. She's testing me and I fail. 'I said, put your fucking seatbelt on, Alice!' Or did I say something else? Rex looks at me in horror while Alice, more interested in the unfolding drama than offended by my swearing, is suddenly silent and upright.

'What did you call her?' he says in a whisper, and at the same time Alice asks, 'Who's Biba?'

2

My mother still has the letter. It is dated January 1993 and tells the reader that I have been awarded a scholarship to study modern languages at Queen Charlotte's College. It is stuck to the mirror in my parents' hallway, the letterhead bleached by light and time but the main body text still decipherable. When I had opened it and we had all read it three or four times, she pasted it to the mirror for safekeeping, accidentally using my father's extra-strength wood glue, and the bond was permanent. My mother went mad, not because the mirror was ruined but because she had denied herself the opportunity to brandish the letter at bus stops and bank counters and street corners. She was all set to ask the college for another copy just for this purpose until my father talked her out of it, even though he was as proud as she that the first person from our family ever to enter further education should do so at such a prestigious university. I noticed that in the months that followed we had more visitors than usual, and my mother would serve them cups of tea in the entrance hallway, a strong picture light trained on the gummed glass.

If my mother was a whirlwind of enthusiasm then I was the calm at the eye of the storm, watching the celebrations and preparations with the detachment that was my way back then. For I had a guilty secret – or what felt like one at the time, before I knew what guilt and secrecy really felt like. The thing that I did not have the heart to tell anyone, not my parents or my teachers, was that where they saw burning ambition

there was only inertia. The four languages I had mastered by my sixteenth birthday had come effortlessly, and when I was praised for my dedication and clutch of precocious A levels I felt like a fraud. The ability to wrap my tongue around alien sounds, to master the clicks, lips and rolls of foreign languages, was something I'd always been able to do. As a child, I could mimic the accents in the soap operas my parents watched, perfecting Liverpudlian and Mancunian and London accents. When I was ten, we went abroad for the first time, to Spain: I came home almost fluent in the language, and my secret was out – I could pick up new languages as easily as the other children at my school copied radio jingles and cartoon catchphrases. After basic instruction in the grammar and syntax, it was usually a case of ploughing through a novel or two with a dictionary by my side, or watching a couple of foreign films with the subtitles on, and it was in. It's a science, not an art. It's something I can do, it's not who I am. Before I met Biba, it was the defining thing in my life, and had I not met her, I expect that it still would be.

The name of the college conjures images of Regency buildings, a Nash terrace housing oaky libraries and elegantly striped seminar rooms, or at least it did to me when I submitted my application form. It couldn't have been less like that. The main campus on the north side of the Marylebone Road was a cobalt-blue, sixties-built tower block, double-glazed to keep the traffic noise at bay. The windowless corridors were painted the sickly pea-green of military hospital bedclothes, and the flecked grey vinyl floors reflected the neon strip lighting on the ceiling. It was a horrible combination, able to steal the colour from the cheeks of the youngest and rosiest students but once I got over my initial disappointment at not being able to waft through quads in crinoline, I grew to appreciate the place. It had a neutrality about it that's important when you're studying several different languages.

The student halls, however, lacked not just romance but also safety and privacy. I was allocated a grimy shared studio in Cricklewood which had the twin disadvantages of being too far out of the centre of town to be cool and not being far out enough to be comfortable. Emma, my room-mate, was a friendly, horsey type from Surrey with a warm laugh and immaculate vowels and was clearly even more terrified of our new neighbourhood than I was; her pressed pastel clothes marked her out as a moving target on the strip-lit greys and blacks of the Broadway. In our introductory lecture we met Claire and Sarah, two other students in the same position. Friendship was instant, inevitable, necessary.

'I can't bear it,' Sarah told us as we waited for the bus on Edgware Road, arms aching with the weight of textbooks in stretched Blackwell's carrier bags. 'I'm going to ask my father to buy somewhere. He'll rent it to us for less than we pay here. Are you in?' I thought she was joking, but by October the four of us were ensconced in a houseshare in Brentford, a West London hinterland with no Tube station. But the house was clean and airy, and the street was safe. It was not the student life I had been expecting: we never burned a joss stick or stole a traffic cone or slept until noon. But it was different enough from my old life to feel like progress.

They all had nineteen years to my seventeen, having taken gap years, and seemed worldly and sophisticated to me. Their world was one of tennis clubs, aerobics classes, theatres and restaurants. What their friendship lacked in bohemian adventure it made up for in shared experience, a revelation to me after the loneliness of school. We did everything together, including travel. Queen Charlotte's had a unique reciprocal network of exchange programmes with similarly eccentric language departments all over Europe, and the course involved frequent and intensive trips abroad. I always felt so sorry for the exchange students who came from the great and ancient

universities and found themselves housed in the misleadingly named International House, a grotty little tenement just under the flyover on the Edgware Road. But we made the system work to our advantage, pooling our travel grants so that we could afford to hire a car rather than pay four individual fares and rent apartments rather than stay in hotels. By the end of the four-year course, there was barely a museum or art gallery in western Europe we hadn't visited. We ate together, cooking, shopping and washing up done by strict rota. Every eight weeks, a hairdresser came to the house and gave us all the same haircut. And we dated together, too, all hooking up with members of the QCC rugby team at their Christmas 1994 ball, a glorified disco held on HMS *Belfast*. Simon, a full back who owned his own tuxedo, asked me to dance. By the time I found out that grace and coordination on the rugby pitch and dancefloor did not necessarily translate into the bedroom, the relationship was already established, and besides, I liked and admired him. He read all the broadsheets from cover to cover every weekend. He always called when he said he would. He taught me how to marinade a steak and choose the right wine to drink with it. He was the first person I ever heard use the phrase 'New Labour'.

My parents had worried that student life would send me 'off the rails'. In fact, I had given them the opposite cause for concern: my father once accused me of being middle-aged at twenty. I put this down to insecurity on his part: it must have been hard, I thought, for him to see me growing away from the world I was born into and assimilating into a different class with new and intimidating rules and values. I was happy to have friends and to belong and to progress. As I neared the end of my course, the only uncertainty was whether I would continue to study or take an internship in an embassy somewhere. This I had decided to leave to fate, intending to take the first opportunity that presented itself. I held my life

loosely in my hands, unaware that it was about to relinquish its grip on me. In the space of a week, apathy suddenly gave way to a passion I had not begun to guess I was capable of.

I transferred the file from hand to hand. It was a hefty sheaf of paper, perfectly squared off and fastened with treasury tags. The pages contained twenty thousand words of thesis comparing self-conscious theatre in Italian and German, an undertaking as humourless as it sounds. The compulsory literature module was the only component of my degree that didn't come easily to me, but after I had submitted my dissertation my degree was all but over. Only a handful of exams remained, and exams were the easy bit (although I knew from past experience it was a good idea to keep this theory to myself).

I let the file drop into my tutor's in-tray, where it landed with a gratifying thud. Outside, the sun was shining. I had been in the library for so long I had forgotten what a blue sky looked like. I rolled up my sleeves as far as they would go and felt the sun on my skin for the first time that year.

They were waiting for me at home. Claire, Sarah and Emma were perched in a row, two pairs of feet in slippers and one in socks, resting on the edge of a pale cream sofa that had cost more than my travel grant for the whole year. They had been watching a film but had paused it when they heard my key in the lock. Julia Roberts' wide laugh, struck through with a white flickering scratch of videotape, hovered on screen. Sarah held the remote control in her hand and was twisting it round and around. A tyrannical control over the television and video was her only abuse of the power she gained from her father's ownership of the house.

Claire glanced meaningfully at my feet, and I dashed back to the hall and kicked off my shoes. A tack of chewing gum was stuck to the sole of my right shoe. In a tiny, pathetic and

deeply satisfying act of rebellion, I deliberately transferred it to the carpet.

'And why are you three sitting here like the three wise monkeys?' I said when I came back. I slapped my forehead. 'It wasn't my turn to cook tonight, was it?' Even as I spoke I knew that wasn't the case. We had played tennis last night, which meant today was Sarah's turn. Three heads shook, matching glossy bobs swinging like shiny hoods.

'Simon's here,' said Claire. 'He's in your room.' That was unexpected. Simon and I never saw each other on a Thursday. The girls didn't meet my quizzical gaze but stared at their laps instead. 'You'd better go up.'

He was leafing through the only book in my room that he would have deemed masculine enough to warrant picking up: a biography of John Lennon that my dad had left here when he'd last visited. When he saw me he tossed it away so quickly that I knew he couldn't have been reading it properly.

'Hello, Karen,' he said. We didn't kiss. 'How are you?'

'I'm fine,' I said, swinging down on the bed and hoiking his legs up over my lap. I had intended to squeeze his toes but had second thoughts when I saw that his socks were damp with sweat. 'This is a surprise.'

'I might as well get straight to the point,' he interrupted, speaking like the management consultant I believe he subsequently became. I had heard him use this voice over the telephone, and when ordering (for both of us) in restaurants, but never to me before. He took his legs off mine, and I felt the dull buzz of pins and needles.

'We've been together for a couple of years now.' There was no disputing this fact. 'And we'll be graduating soon.' He left another pause, so I nodded. 'And I think it's time for a fresh start all round as we both enter our adult lives. Our professional lives.'

The titles of the books on my shelf zoomed in and out of focus. I knew what was coming next, and felt only the linguist's scholarly interest in how he would phrase it.

'I think that we shouldn't see each other any more. With immediate effect.' He waited for me to fill the silence that followed. I thought back twenty-four hours to the uncomfortable sex we'd had on his creaking bed in Fulham, my mind absently tracing the outlines of European countries in the Artexed whorls of his ceiling while he grunted his way through his short repertoire. I reflected on two years of interminable Sundays spent watching rugby matches in the pub and felt a mad little flutter of relief that I would never, ever have to go to a Firkin pub again.

'That's fine by me,' I realised.

'Really?'

'Yep. I think it's for the best, too. I take it the girls know.'

Simon nodded. 'I said I wanted a serious talk and they . . . I thought they should . . . just in case you . . .'

The three of them probably still had their film on freeze-frame, waiting anxiously for my wails of grief, or perhaps they were looking up, expecting Simon's body to break through the ceiling in a cloud of plaster and rubble and for my wailing, heartbroken face to appear in the ragged hole above. I didn't care to imagine the conversation in which my boyfriend had told my friends that he was planning to dump me so I blocked it from my mind. I could do that with things I didn't want to think about, like snapping shut a book.

'Don't you want to know why?' he asked. I had a pretty good idea, and it took the shape of his mother, hair like a curly helmet, finger like a jabbing spear. 'Not the right sort of girl . . . Fine while you're at university, but you've got to start thinking about the rest of your life now, Simon . . . Things that don't matter when you're young become important when you're in the real world . . . I know she's clever, but the novelty

of that will wear off. She'll want to work, you know . . . And those parents of hers, with that accent . . .'

'Not really,' I said. Simon looked angry. I realised he'd rehearsed a speech that would let me down gently, and relished depriving him of the opportunity to deliver it.

'I think you'd better go,' I said, getting to my feet. The numbness had worn off my legs now and a sense of lightness suffused my body. 'Tell the girls I'm going to stay up here for a bit.'

I smoothed out the indentation his legs had left on my duvet cover. A thick, black hair from his head was on my pillow. I pinched it between thumb and forefinger and dropped it in the waste basket next to my bed. I re-homed the John Lennon book and scanned my room for any other evidence of him. There was only a framed photograph which I couldn't be bothered to take down from the wall. The low voice he could never quite manage to suppress into a whisper resonated through the crack under the door as he spoke to my friends. Since when did they become his confidantes, I wondered?

I sat on my bed and waited for the tears to come, but I could only coax a few drops from my eyes, even when I looked in the mirror and tried my hardest to feel sorry for myself. My reflection gave an infectious smile. Instead of grief or anger I felt only a sense of reprieve and freedom.

That night, I could not sleep. I was more wide awake than I knew it was possible to be, alive with potential, sharp and bright. I thought only of the things I could do, unfettered by a relationship. Crop my hair. Blow my savings on a ticket to China and learn Mandarin. Get a job in a nightclub. It was time for my second reinvention. I had the sense that I had effectively been sleepwalking my way through my four years at university, and I had only one summer left in which to redress the balance.

That's the thing about sleepwalking. You can walk, eat, hold conversations and even drive cars in perfect safety. The danger comes from waking up too quickly.