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Opening Extract from...

Greatest Hits

Written by Laura Barnett

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GREATEST HITS

Laura Barnett

W&N

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For Andy, of course

Each song is a lifetime. These songs are the memories.
Stevie Nicks

You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life.
August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

So it wasn't a failure after all! It was going to be all right now – her party. It had begun. It had started. But it was still touch and go.
Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*

8 a.m.

The day has begun slowly, gently, with a steady creeping into life. The dawn hazy – thin bands of cloud lifting into a pale blue sky – and the sun low and yellowish, promising warmth but delivering only deep, angled shadows.

A series of planes has made a steady procession up towards nothingness, or the unidentifiable place over the English Channel where each, as if by some ancient instinct, will turn its nose towards the Atlantic and pick up speed.

In Cass Wheeler's garden, partitioned from the Tunbridge Road by a series of high dry-stone walls, two rangy, sharp-faced foxes have emerged from their den behind the shed and curled up, doglike, in a patch of sun. At the narrow, blind turning that leads to her house – its sign, Home Farm, almost entirely obscured by thick coils of ivy that Cass hasn't cared to remove – a man, new to the village, has paused while out walking his dog, drawn by the faint outline of a memory. And then, after a moment, he has walked on, re-immersing himself in the shapeshifting cares of the moment, the dog shadowing his heels.

Cass has known none of this. She has been rising reluctantly from sleep, ignoring her alarm, chasing the vague, receding image

of a dream. A hall somewhere – not a large room; a school auditorium, perhaps. Shining parquet and the smell of chalk. Black plastic chairs arranged in expectant rows. Silence, measured by the metronomic tick of a wall-clock. The uncomfortable, tightening sense that there is something else she ought to be doing, somewhere else she ought to be, and she can't for the life of her remember what it might be.

The alarm shrills out again. She lets it ring, opening her eyes, abandoning the ghostly image of the hall. Here is her bedroom, her dressing-table, the soft pressure of her cat, Otis, stretching and yawning at her feet. Here is the pillow, cool against her cheek, which, on other mornings, has carried the weight of Larry's head; from which he has turned, on waking, and gathered her to him, and she has thrilled to the strangeness of his long body, his warm hands, after so many years of sleeping alone.

She thinks, *Where is Larry?*

She thinks, *Chicago.*

She thinks, *I could forget today, couldn't I? Just lie here, under the covers. Draw them up over my head and sleep.*

She thinks, *No. You have done too much sleeping. Today is the day you wake up.*

Downstairs in her kitchen, she makes coffee. Toast. Stands at the window eating – she can still hear her mother's voice: 'Sit *down* at once. Anyone would think you were born in a barn' – and watches a pair of foxes on the lawn, black-nosed and long-tailed, sleeping under a weak beam of sun. One wakes, lifts his head, and looks back at her. His eyes are impassive, dark-pupilled; there is, she thinks, something uncommonly human about his stare.

She looks away first, sips her coffee. When she turns back to the window, both the foxes have disappeared.

Kim has left a note on the counter; she must have written it after Cass had gone up to bed. She'd stayed for dinner, made lasagne. *How often*, Cass had thought, *have I sat and eaten Kim's lasagne, and yet I never tire of it?* Well, that wasn't quite true: on one of the worst days, Cass had taken a tray of lasagne from the fridge and the stench of it, that oozing, gelatinous gloop, had suddenly been more than she could bear. She had let the tray drop from her fingers, left the whole broken mess where it fell. Kim, later, had simply cleaned it up, and said nothing more about it. They can laugh about it now – had done so last night, as Kim had placed two steaming plates on the dining-room table.

'Won't smash these, will you, Cass?' she had said, and Cass had poured them both a glass of wine, and loved this woman: the woman who has seen so very much and never flinched from it; the woman who could stand to look at her even when Cass couldn't stand to look at herself.

Hope you had a good sleep, Kim has written. *I'll be round about three. On the mobile if you need me. Callum's calling at ten about the masters – he'll try the studio line. The caterers will be there at five, but I'll deal with them. Otherwise, you're on your own. Enjoy it, Cass, all right? There's no hurry. Take your time. Kx.*

That was a song, wasn't it? Cass can almost hear it, as if from a radio, turned down low. A deep-bellied chord, a man's voice. *Take your time, girl. It's only you and me.* Whose was it? Not Ivor's – not that reedy, fluting tenor. She closes her eyes; she can feel the answer lurking in a distant, shadowed corner of her mind. That's how it is, so often, now: the clear Technicolor of memory fading

to sepia, recollection a deliberate act. An act of deliberation. *Take your time, girl*. Damn it, it won't come.

Cass slams her mug down, sending a cool sluice of coffee spattering across the worktop. Otis, methodically washing himself at the window, shoots her a disdainful glance.

Forget it, she thinks. *It probably wasn't any good anyway.*

In her bedroom, as she dresses, the answer suddenly appears.

A pub – dingy, gleaming with horse brasses, men glowering over glasses of stout. A man with a guitar, pale and thin-faced, curly hair creeping down over the collar of his jacket. Ivor beside her: the tall, beloved outline of him, leaning down to whisper in her ear. *We're up next, Cassie. Don't be nervous.*

But she had been nervous, had felt the fear washing through her with each sip of shandy. She had wanted that song to last for ever – *Take your time, girl*, the man had sung, and she had wanted to say, *No,* you *take your time – just keep on playing, and don't ever stop.* But he had stopped, and Ivor had placed a hand on her shoulder, and she had reached down for her guitar. The men and the walls and the horse brasses, all of it had seemed to turn and buckle around her, and if she could have turned and run, she would have done so, and not looked back. But Ivor had pushed her forward, gently, and the fat man with the black, tufted beard had put down his beer and stood up on the stage.

'Ivor Tait and Cass Wheeler,' he'd announced to those who cared to listen, and then there had been no turning back.

What had they sung that night? She can't recall. 'Scarborough Fair', probably. Something by Joan Baez, perhaps, if she'd been feeling particularly brave. And she *had* felt brave, in the end: her fear had evaporated, as it almost always did, in the

moment she sat down on the stool, settled the reassuring bulk of her guitar upon her knee. Then it had begun: their slow, dancing courtship, over and under, under and over, as the strings of their guitars bowed and curtsied to the will of their darting fingers.

Slipping on her shoes, Cass thinks, *My God, I loved Ivor then. How could I not?*

She opens the curtains to the morning. Across the garden, the tiered glass and concrete of the studio roof is catching the sunlight, casting long, geometric patterns across the lawn. She had designed it herself on graph paper, accurately measured: the architect, Luke Bennett, looking over her plans, had peered at her over his black-framed glasses and said, 'Impressive.'

Anna, ten years old – gap-toothed and tousle-haired, her knees thin and bony below her cut-off denim shorts – had said, 'Wow, Mum. It looks like the *Starship Enterprise*.'

Anna. Cass stands for a moment at the window, one hand on her dressing-table, steadying herself. Down on the lawn, one of the foxes emerges from behind the shed, lifts his snout to the air, and sniffs.

She thinks, *Now. I am ready.*

The studio is cool and calm, quiet but for the monitors' steady electric hum. Callum and Gav have left the live room tidy: coiled cables, folded mike-stands, removed beer-bottles and ashtrays – not that there's so much of any of that now. Even Gav's only vice is working, in the course of each session, through a small packet of Golden Virginia Light. Cass has grown used, in recent months, to seeing the shadow of him outlined against the sliding doors to the terrace, hand cupped around his latest slender, hand-rolled cigarette.

The computers in the control room are at rest, blank-screened and silent. The console sleeps. Beside it, on the desk, lies a sheet of paper lined with notes in Callum's angular, boyish hand. *'When Morning Comes' – boost cello going into chorus by 3dB. 'Gethsemane' – repeat coda to fade. Javier – play softer.*

Cass smiles. He's a good man, Callum: careful, thoughtful, unlike some of the producers she's known. It was Alan who'd suggested him for the new record: Callum Sutherland had, he said, faced down a few demons of his own.

'Demons?' she'd repeated, smiling at the thought of them, swish-tailed, maniacally grinning.

'Well,' Alan had said, smiling back, 'you know what I mean.'

Cass had known exactly what he meant – had seen it for herself when Alan had brought Callum to Home Farm for dinner. He was thirty-eight, good-looking in a stubbled, brooding sort of way, with an actress wife, Andrea (he'd brought her, too), three Grammys and a shiny new 'Producer of the Year' award from the Guild.

His last job had been with an American pop starlet – or whatever they were called these days – whose album cover pictured her in a skintight white rubber suit. Looking at it – they were in the garden, smoking, 'talking business' while Alan poured Andrea another glass of wine – Cass had been unable to conceal her distaste.

'I know what you're thinking,' Callum said. 'But there's more to her than you'd think. She's strong-willed – knows what she wants, definitely doesn't take any crap. And you should have heard her singing voice before they brought me in.'

'Fair enough.' Cass drew deeply on her cigarette. 'At least you're honest.'

'Always,' he said. 'Learnt that the hard way.'

Later, over coffee, she'd invited Callum to her next rehearsal session with the band. A few days after that, she'd told Alan that this might, indeed, be the man she was looking for. The man who would treat her gently, and her new songs even more so.

'All right,' Alan had replied, studiedly casual, reaching into the pocket of his jeans for his mobile phone. He was glued to the thing, these days – said it was impossible to imagine *ever* having managed anyone, or anything, without it. And yet they had got along just fine without any of that for so long. Letters and telegrams and long-distance phone calls; LPs and hit parades and the slick-haired kids queuing outside the record shops. It was a different world now. What was the phrase Callum had used to describe it? *An analogue world*. That was the world she belonged to; who knew why this shiny new one should have any use for her?

Watching Alan's stubby, calloused fingers moving with uncustomary grace across the glass screen of his phone, Cass had felt the old fear rising, asserting itself. Her irrelevance. Her unimportance. Her new songs, so unexpected, so precious to her, as quiet and timorous as whispers, passing unnoticed amid the brash, ruthless, deafening clamour of the young.

She had spoken none of this aloud, but Alan had looked up, met her eyes with his.

'You don't have to do this, Cass,' he'd said softly. 'You don't have to do any of this. The greatest-hits record, the new tracks – all of it can wait. Or go to hell, if you want it to. It's up to you. It's always been up to you.'

She'd held his gaze for one second, two, three.

'No,' she'd said. 'I do want this. I need it, Alan. Please.'

At the open door to the listening-room, Cass waits for a moment. Alan and Kim have arranged it all for her: the stack of records on the table; the bottles of San Pellegrino arranged neatly in the fridge; the fresh mugs warming on the coffee machine. On top of the pile of albums, she finds another note from Kim. *Happy listening. Like I said, take your time. Kx.*

Beside it is a square white envelope. Cass slides a finger under the seal, draws out a Henry Moore sculpture printed on glossy card: bulbous, eerily smooth. Two women seated; beside one of them, a child, her hand resting on the woman's knee. Inside, in his oversized, square-angled hand, Larry has written, *Today, Cass, find a way to forgive her. And then – please – find a way to forgive yourself.*

He must have left the card with Kim, or posted it to her, from Chicago. Cass stands still, the card in her hand, picturing Larry's face. It had been to him, first, that she had described the idea that was gradually forming in her mind, assuming the shape and colour of firm intention. She was thinking, she'd told him, of putting together a compilation of her greatest hits, to accompany the new material. Not, she'd said, the obvious songs – the label had put *that* record out long ago – but the songs that meant the most to her. The songs that tracked the arc of a lifetime.

They had been sitting side by side on the living-room sofa, after dinner, sharing a bottle of pinot noir. It was October, late evening, and they had not yet turned on the lamps: the colours were leaching minute by minute from the room, the grey shadows thickening around them, but neither of them, each intent on the other's face, had noticed.

She had told Larry that she had in mind one single day – an ordinary day, a day like any other – in which to listen to her music and make her choices. There was a simplicity, a crisp efficiency, about the plan that appealed to her. No fuss, no ceremony, just a portion of time allocated to the act of listening. At the end of the day, a party. Old friends, musicians, journalists, comrades-in-arms. She would play the new songs to them for the first time: make her new music known, as she must again make herself known to them, after so many years of isolation.

She had told Larry that she wanted this, wanted all of it, but she was afraid. Afraid of what she might hear in her past: in those songs with whose sound and structure she had so confidently framed her comprehension of everything that had not, in the end, proved comprehensible. Afraid of following the trail that must surely lead to what had happened. To all that she had won, and all that she had lost.

And Larry, throughout, had said nothing, sat listening, intent, expressionless. When he saw that she had said all she needed to say, he'd drained his glass, leant forward, and wrapped her in his arms. They had held each other, two lonely old fools embracing tightly in the darkness; and that, Cass had realised then, was the only answer she'd been looking for.

Now, alone in her studio in the clear-skied freshness of an April morning, Cass sets Larry's card down on the coffee table, in front of the stack of LPs. She takes a record from the top of the pile, slides it onto the turntable, and sits down to listen.

Track One
'Common Ground'

By Cass Wheeler
From the album *The State She's In*

It was early morning when she left
And the city, under a grey sky was still sleeping
A note left on the table lying flat
Held the secrets she'd been keeping

We have no common ground, my love
We have no common ground
So I am leaving with the dawn, my love
And I never will be found

Ooooooooooooooooooooo

Crossing that dirty green London common
As the sky turned from grey to blue
A suitcase, a long-distance airfare
And a life to start living new

We have no common ground, my love
We have no common ground
So I am leaving with the dawn, my love
And I never will be found

Oooooooooooooooooooo

Released 13 September 1971

Recorded June 1971 at Union Studios, London NW10

Genre Folk rock

Label Phoenix Records

Writer(s) Cass Wheeler

Producer(s) Martin Hartford

Engineer(s) Sean O'Malley

She was born Maria Cassandra Wheeler, in the back bedroom of the vicarage that faced the common, and the tall white cupola of the church it had been built to serve.

It was April 1950. Through the three hard days of her labour, the baby's mother, Margaret, watched the blossom bowing the branches of the apple tree outside the window, and prayed for release. But when it came at last, it was at a price: a small, damp-headed creature, ugly and mottled, screwing up its face against the light.

'Your daughter,' the midwife said, placing the warm bundle in Margaret's arms.

'She's beautiful,' Margaret said, though she did not think so. *All that*, she thought, *for this*, and closed her eyes.

Francis, the vicar, took the newborn girl from his wife's slackening grip.

'Cassandra,' he said under his breath: it had been his mother's name, and he'd have liked to pass it to his daughter, but a Christian baptismal name had seemed more fitting. Expected, surely, by the congregation, several of whom were downstairs now, making tea, occupying themselves with whatever it is women do at such a time; brisk, busy wives and mothers, who had arrived, a whole chattering, hatted flock of them, three days ago, when Margaret's torture had begun, insisting he remove himself to his study.

'You mustn't worry about a thing, Reverend,' they had said as one, and yet how could he not worry, confined to those four walls, pacing up and down while his wife's cries travelled through the thickly carpeted floor?

And now here she was: his daughter. Alive and well, though surely her colour was a little alarming. The baby stirred, opened

her eyes, and he saw that they were a deep shining brown, just like his own.

Hello, little one, he said silently, and he felt something for which he had not been quite prepared: love, of course – sharper, more visceral, than his love for Margaret, though that had its own particular piquancy; clearer, more focused, than his love for God – but also fear. The terror that he, alone, would not be strong enough to protect her.

'I'll put her down now, Reverend,' the midwife said, and Francis looked up at her in surprise: he had, for a moment, quite forgotten she was in the room. 'Your wife needs to rest.'

'Of course.' He handed his daughter over, and his arms, without the small weight of the child, seemed suddenly redundant. 'I'll be downstairs. There are women . . .' He trailed off, unable to quite define their purpose. 'If Margaret needs anything.'

'Yes, Reverend.' The midwife was already turning away. 'We'll be just fine, won't we, little Maria?'

Cassandra, he thought disloyally as he closed the bedroom door behind him. *Her name is Cassandra*. And then Francis went back downstairs to his study, where his unfinished sermon was waiting.

Maria grew quickly. At six months, she was crawling; at ten, lifting herself unsteadily onto her feet.

She hated sleep – resisted bedtimes, and found, once her motor skills permitted, increasingly ingenious ways to vacate her cot, and draw her mother from her bed. Margaret – delirious with exhaustion and her own inchoate, private pain – began to lose patience with her daughter: she had a lock installed on the door

of the child's room, and drew the bolt across after laying her down to sleep.

'Leave her, Francis,' Margaret said when they woke in the night to the sound of the child's distress, the beating of her tiny fists on the locked door. 'She'll grow out of it.'

Most nights, Francis buried his head deeper in the pillow, and obeyed. But there were times, in the early hours, when he simply couldn't bear it any longer, and then he would creep from the room and cross the landing, open the door to find his daughter hoarse, exhausted, her cheeks wet with tears. He held her, then, as he had held her that first April morning, and walked up and down before the curtained window, telling her the stories he dimly remembered from his own childhood. Mowgli in the jungle, the panther Bagheera; Tom, the chimney sweep, who fell into the river and lived there, among the otters and the reeds.

Maria would grow calm, then, and watch him. Those moments in the night – his own soft whisper; his daughter's staring eyes and tiny hands, opening and closing like the buds of some strange, exotic flower – became so precious to Francis that sometimes he went to her even when she hadn't begun to cry.

By day, too, Maria could not sit still. New outfits were ruined within hours, marred by grass-stains (she loved to slip from her mother's hand and roll across the churchyard turf), or the masticated remnants of food. In church, if left to her own devices, she would run up and down the nave, scattering the embroidered hassocks, offering the loud, inarticulate, wordless tune that, at eleven months, she had begun to carry with her everywhere.

'She's running wild, Francis,' Margaret said. 'I'm at my wits' end.'

And she was: the church ladies began to voice concerns, to mount delegations that would arrive at the vicarage most mornings, insisting they take charge of Maria for a few hours 'to give poor Margaret time to rest'.

Under the ladies' care – mothers, most of them, and proud, capable housewives; certainly nothing like Margaret, whose long-held fear that she lacked some essential aspect of the maternal instinct was, she felt, being confirmed with each passing day – Maria was transformed. With them, she sat quietly, absorbed in her game: an abacus; a doll; a set of building-blocks. Sometimes, the ladies brought their children with them, and then they played together, Maria and whichever toddler was placed before her that day.

'See,' the ladies said. 'There's nothing wrong with her – she just needs the company of other children. Perhaps if she had a brother or sister . . .'

But no second pregnancy was announced. Privately, the ladies suspected it never would be; there was talk that the reverend's marriage was a troubled one, that he and Margaret no longer shared a bed. This was untrue – the spare bedroom was pristine, kept only for guests – but it was clear, even to the infant Maria (though she was not, of course, yet able to give voice to such knowledge) that happiness had eluded them. And Margaret herself was elusive, too: her mother seemed to shrink from her daughter, to have no interest in her at all besides the basic desire that she be clothed and fed. So Maria sought that interest – demanded it, in the only ways she knew how.

One morning, returning from the vicarage kitchen with a fresh cup of tea, Mrs Harrison found her son, Daniel, set down to play with Maria just a few moments before, screaming at the top

of his voice, a red mark on his cheek that surely must be a bite. That was too much: Mrs Harrison called the vicar's wife down from her bedroom. (Margaret wasn't sleeping, just lying silently, watching the shadows shift across the ceiling, and wondering how much more of such a life she could possibly endure. *Surely*, she was thinking, *there must, somewhere, be more for me than this*.)

Downstairs, Margaret confronted her daughter. 'Did you bite Daniel, Maria?'

The child stood frozen, motionless, staring up at her mother, her dark eyes huge, sorry, full of the questions to which she could not yet place the words. *Why won't you play with me? Why won't you touch me? What is wrong with me? What am I doing wrong?*

Margaret stepped forward, then, and drew her right hand, quick and hard, across Maria's left cheek.

'You're a vicious little madam,' she said, 'and I wish I'd never had you.'

The room was silent for a long moment – the girl open-mouthed, the livid bruise already blooming on her skin; Daniel confused, reaching for his mother, whose own voice had stilled in her throat. Then Maria began to cry, and Daniel did the same, and Margaret turned on her heels and ran back upstairs, slamming the door behind her.

Later, home from evensong, Francis asked his wife what had happened to their daughter's face.

'I slapped her, Francis,' Margaret said. 'Do you expect me to pretend otherwise?'

Things seemed to improve once Maria started school. She liked it there, tripped off uncomplainingly each morning towards the

imposing Victorian building with its high, narrow windows and lingering smells of floor-polish and boiled carrots.

She had a teacher named Miss Meller, who was young and pale and nervous and spoke quietly, in a small, melodic voice that seemed to well up from somewhere deep in her throat. One day, when they were studying world flags, Miss Meller told the class that she had been born not in England but in a country called Poland, far, far away.

The children considered this.

'Why did you come here, then?' a boy asked. His name was Stephen Dewes; Maria found him dull and silly, with his neatly ironed blazer and the stick insect he'd brought to school once in a cardboard box for show-and-tell. *Not much of a pet*, Maria had thought. *If* I *could have a pet, I'd keep a tiger.*

'Because of the war,' Miss Meller said, and she looked so miserable that even Stephen Dewes – whose uncle had, like so many, gone off to war and never returned – knew better than to press her further.

Maria was intrigued by Miss Meller, after that: by her pink-rimmed nose (she seemed always to have a cold); by the fine slivers of thread that trailed from the sleeves of her cardigan. Miss Meller wore her hair in a bun, which would begin the day at the top of her head, and slowly work its way down, pulled inexorably by gravity, until, by afternoon registration, it was sitting right on top of her collar. She liked 'Art' – she said the word so, grandly emphasising its initial letter – and gave the children sheets of thick, coarse paper on which to draw their families, their pets, their holidays.

Maria drew tigers, ferries to France, a smiling phalanx of brothers and sisters.

'But you don't have any brothers or sisters,' said Irene. She was six and had three brothers and a hamster called Hammy, and was Maria's best friend.

'It doesn't matter,' Maria said. 'It doesn't have to be *true*.'

'She's very creative,' Miss Meller told Margaret at parents' evening. 'But tell me – does she have a tendency to make things up?'

At home that night, Margaret caught Maria by the wrist, held her in front of the hallway mirror.

'See that face?' she said. 'That's the face of a liar, Maria. A naughty little liar. Don't *ever* let me catch you lying again.'

Her mother's grip was tight on Maria's arm. She began to cry, her crumpled face reflected back at her in the glass: dirty-blonde hair, brown eyes limpid, damp, under her uneven fringe. When her mother let her go, she fled upstairs to bed, where she made a nest under the covers, and sobbed until no more tears would come. Then she took out her pad of paper and drew an aeroplane, aiming its wingtips towards a shelf of sky, a wide, smiling beach ball of a sun.

After that, Maria preferred to keep her stories to herself.

Irene lived in a house on the other side of the common. It was smaller than the vicarage, and on just two floors; two of her brothers shared a room, and Irene and the third brother – Max, who was nine, and always muddy – had bunk beds. Her father went to work in an office, and her mother was pretty and friendly; she would sit the girls up on the kitchen counter as she made their tea, and ask them what they had done that day at school.

'Arithmetic,' they would say, or, 'spelling.' Then Irene's mother would ask them which subject they liked best, and Irene would say, 'reading,' and Maria, always, would say, 'art.'

Irene's mother had a piano. It was in the front room, which was painted yellow, and was never quite tidy. Sometimes, after tea, and before Irene's father came home from work, Irene's mother would let the girls sit on the sofa and listen while she played.

Maria loved that room: loved the colour of the walls, which seemed to her like pure sunlight, trapped and held fast; loved the rough and tumble of it, the toys waiting where the children had left them; the brown rug, soft and thick as a bear's fur, on which she and Irene were sometimes allowed to lie and roll around, as if on a patch of warm grass.

But, most of all, she loved listening to Irene's mother's piano. It sounded nothing like the dusty, unreliable instrument the church organist, Mr Raynsford, kept in the vestry, or the ancient baby grand old Mrs Farley thumped about on during school assembly. Irene's mother didn't play hymns – 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross'; 'There Is a Green Hill'; 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind': all the tunes Maria had heard since infancy. Irene's mother played music with no words. Music that rose and surged and soared, and then fell away to nothing. Music that seemed to pour from Irene's mother's fingers as they moved over the keys: forming first one pattern and then another, according to no will, it seemed to Maria, other than their own.

Often, as her mother played, Irene would grow restless; she would shift and fidget on the sofa, or lean over and whisper in Maria's ear, 'Let's go and play with Hammy.'

Maria would shake her head. 'No. I'm listening.'

Sometimes, when she had finished, Irene's mother would sit quietly for a moment, her head bent forward, resting against the cool wooden body of the piano. Then Maria would want to ask her to play again. But Irene would ask for ice cream, or one of Irene's brothers would appear in the doorway, and Irene's mother would get up from the piano, close the lid, and Maria would be filled with a strange sense of loss that she was too young to understand.

One afternoon, while waiting for Irene to retrieve her dolls from her room (she had four, each with a different hairstyle and outfit, and would usually permit Maria to play with the second prettiest, a blue-eyed blonde named Sylvia), Maria stood in the hallway, watching the piano through the open door to the front room.

Suddenly, she found herself walking in, lifting the lid, and fitting her small hand-span to the cool ivory of the keys.

She didn't press down at first, afraid of making a noise – the children weren't supposed to touch the piano, or to enter the front room alone. But then her fingers seemed to move without her permission, and a fractured blur of noise came up from the belly of the instrument.

Maria jumped back. Irene, coming in with the dolls, let out a gasp. 'What are you *doing*?'

Irene's mother came in then, too. She walked up to the piano; gently, she closed its wooden lid.

Maria hung back, waiting to be scolded, but Irene's mother bent down to her, took her hand. 'I did ask you not to touch the piano, Maria. But I can see that you're drawn to it. Would you like me to teach you to play? I tried to teach Irene, and the boys,

but they all got bored and gave up.' To Irene, she added, 'Didn't you, love?'

Irene shrugged, and looked cross.

'Would you like that, Maria?' Irene's mother said again. She was still holding her hand. Maria nodded, and in that moment, she was filled with a love for Irene's mother so pure, so strong, that she wished she could stay there for ever, in that yellow room, with the warmth of Irene's mother's hand in hers.

'We must ask your mother, then, when she comes to collect you,' Irene's mother said, and Maria's spirits plummeted: surely her mother would say no. And indeed, when Margaret arrived at six o'clock – barely greeting her daughter, standing awkwardly in the hallway, impatient to be gone – she tried to do just that.

'Well,' Margaret said, 'that's very kind, Mrs Lewis. But I should think you have enough on your plate with all these children, don't you?'

Maria felt her heart slip into her mouth.

'Oh, they keep me busy,' Irene's mother said lightly. 'And I can't promise to turn Maria into the next Myra Hess. But I'll teach her a few scales. Then, if she takes to it, perhaps you might like to find her a proper teacher?'

Margaret gave a tired smile. 'Well, as I say, that really is very kind of you. Thank you. If you're absolutely sure you can spare the time.'

That night, after Margaret had tucked her into bed, Maria imagined it was not her own mother crossing the carpet, closing the door behind her, but Irene's: cool-skinned and sweet-smelling, and drawing after her the soft, pealing music of her piano.

*

Maria liked watching her father in church. She saw him, there, as a man distinct from the father at home, with his slippers and reading-glasses, his *Daily Telegraph*, the sweet, bemused expression he wore as Maria's mother crashed and thundered around the kitchen, or fell into implacable silence, lying motionless for hours behind the closed bedroom door.

It was the unpredictability of Margaret's moods – there were also weeks when she would rise each morning humming to herself, clear-headed and capable, steering her way through days marked out with meetings of the flower-arranging committee, the ladies' prayer group, the parish council – that defined the atmosphere of the vicarage. There, Maria's father appeared blurred, not quite in focus: a quiet man, watching his wife as he might an animal of whose reactions he could never feel quite assured.

In church, Francis was different. He grew taller. On Sundays, he wore a white surplice over his black cassock – he had taught Maria the correct nomenclature, showed her the garments hanging, starched and pinned, in the vestry – and a white stole tipped with gold. She watched him process along the nave, his head lifted towards the altar, and above it, the great north window, which sent shards of coloured light scattering across the heads of the congregation, and she felt her pride swell and thicken in her chest.

When he spoke from the pulpit, he did so in a fine, warm baritone, and the worshippers looked up at him, and listened. Maria, herded back into the church with the other children from Mrs Harrison's Sunday school, would stand beside the arched entrance to the lady chapel, and watch her father, and believe that he was speaking only to her.

She remembered nothing, consciously, of the nights when Francis had lifted her, pink-faced and bawling, from her cot, and walked her up and down, speaking of stories she didn't yet comprehend. But he still liked to read to her, even now that she was eight years old and happily spent hours reading by herself. It was a special treat: after tea and homework, Francis would call Maria into his study, close the door, and take down the book they were reading together from the shelf. They were grown-up books – *Great Expectations*, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, *A Pilgrim's Progress* – and they would read until Maria's eyes began to close, her head to fall back against his chest, though she always did her best not to allow herself to dive headfirst into sleep.

Sometimes, Margaret would open the door, and stand there watching them.

'I don't know why you bother, Francis,' she'd say. 'They're far too old for her. She doesn't understand a word.'

But I do, Maria wanted to cry out, though her father would only reply, mildly, 'It's as much for my pleasure as for hers, Margaret. Leave us be.'

Once, during one of these reading sessions, Maria dared to ask her father, in the slender portion of silence that fell as he turned the page, 'Why doesn't Mummy like me?'

Francis looked down at her, his gaze frank, clear.

'What a question, Cassandra,' he said. He used her middle name sometimes, when they were alone, and she thought of it as their own, private code. 'She's your mother. Of course she likes you. She *loves* you. But she feels things more deeply than most people do. Her skin is . . . thinner than most people's. She's not as strong, so we must be strong for her. Do you understand?'

Maria did not, but she nodded and said nothing, so that her father might continue to read. As he did so, she settled back against his chest, enjoying the slow music of his voice: its comfortable cadences, its resonant rise and fall.

There was a photograph on Margaret's dressing-table, in a silver-plated frame.

Maria saw it only a handful of times through her childhood, on the occasions her mother permitted her to sit on the edge of the double bed – unmade, the pillows still bearing the faint, rumpled impressions of her parents' heads – while she applied her face-cream, her powder, her perfume.

So rare and special were these moments that Maria experienced them with a particular intensity, each sense seeming sharpened, more acute – the sweetish, floral cloud of scent; her mother's face reflected in triplicate by the three-leaved mirror – and the framed photograph etched itself indelibly on her mind.

A slim, smiling, clear-skinned woman in a knee-length cotton dress; not beautiful, or particularly glamorous, but carefully, painstakingly, put together – her hair neatly curled and set, her legs shining in immaculate, unladdered nylons. Margaret Lyall, nineteen years old, couched in a deckchair on the back lawn of her parents' house in Colchester, the looming silhouette of a man's head just visible above the bottom left-hand corner of the frame.

Decades later, Maria – Cass, by then, of course – would find the photograph among her father's papers and puzzle over it, wondering who that ghostly disembodied shadow had belonged to. Cass's father? Her grandfather? Or an old boyfriend, later

tossed aside by her mother in favour of the new curate, Francis Wheeler, almost twenty years Margaret's senior?

For Cass would be familiar, by then, with the details of her parents' unsuccessful marriage, as her childish self had never been. At thirty-two, she would be able to see them clearly. Margaret Lyall, the ordinary suburban girl, swayed by the interest of the man – the vicar, no less – to whom she could look up from the pews, watching his spare, unhandsome features rendered glorious by the dual magic of authority and conviction. Francis Wheeler, the older man, settled on the priesthood after an unhappy decade in the City, looking about him for a woman to make his wife, to root him to a parish, a home, a family. The couple's move to London; the gradual realisation of how ill-suited they truly were; the slow onset of Margaret's black moods, her rages, her lassitude.

No name was ever given to her mother's malaise – at least, not in the child's hearing. And so Maria was left with the assumption that she herself was the author of her mother's unhappiness – that if she could only be different, better, somehow *other* than herself, her mother would be happy once more.

On those rare mornings, then, when she was alone with her mother behind the closed door of her parents' bedroom, Maria stayed absolutely silent, concentrating so hard on not moving that her limbs would ache with the effort for a good while afterwards. And it seemed to her that with each dab of the powder puff, each spritz of scent, her mother was transforming herself, turning back into the young woman in the photograph: easy, unburdened, free.

*

In the year Maria turned nine, whole months passed during which Margaret did not take to her bed. She was busy again, frenetic with activity: committees, cooking, laundry, church bazaars. And other, private engagements whose object she did not divulge to her daughter, and which began to draw her away from the vicarage for broader and broader stretches of time.

Several times, on her return from school, Maria found the house empty, the front door locked, and was forced to cross the busy road to the church to find her father or Sam Cooper, the handyman, and ask them to let her in.

After this happened for a third time, Margaret presented her daughter with a set of keys, tied together with a length of string.

'You can be a good girl, can't you,' she said, placing a kiss on Maria's cheek, 'and let yourself in after school?'

In truth, Maria didn't mind those hours in the afternoon, alone in the cool kitchen, spreading thick slices of white bread with butter and strawberry jam. In her mother's absence, the house was quieter, free of tension; and sometimes, if Margaret were still not back in time for evensong, Maria and Francis would improvise a rudimentary tea – boiled eggs and soldiers, or ham, lettuce and salad cream, eaten at the kitchen table with a rather rakish, celebratory air – as if they were enjoying a picnic, or a holiday.

On the occasions when Maria did arrive back from school to find her mother at home, Margaret's mood was breezy, even affectionate.

'Not to worry,' she said when Maria nervously showed her the ink-blot on the sleeve of her new cardigan. 'I was terribly clumsy at your age, too.'

Another afternoon, finding Maria reading in the living-room (she was working her way through the adventures of Nancy Drew), Margaret lingered for a moment in the doorway, watching her. When Maria looked up, self-conscious, bracing herself for criticism, she saw her mother grinning at her.

'My bookworm,' she said. 'My little reader.'

And then, one bright Saturday in late autumn, Margaret announced at breakfast that she was going to take Maria shopping.

'A ladies' outing,' she said. 'Won't it be fun?'

Francis, looking up from his *Daily Telegraph*, caught Maria's gaze, and smiled. 'What a lovely idea, Margaret.'

And they *did* have fun: riding the bus across the common, stepping off outside the big department store, pushing open the heavy brass-handled doors to enter the crowded, brightly lit lobby. For Maria, Margaret bought two dresses, a skirt, a jumper and a pair of navy patent Mary Janes; for herself, a Revlon lipstick in a frosted-pink shade called Raspberry Icing, two blouses and a set of mysterious undergarments shrouded in white tissue paper.

Then they had tea, lemonade and iced buns in the café, and Maria looked around her, swinging her legs, watching the other mothers sitting with the other daughters, and feeling, finally, that she had done something right.

Afterwards, in the ladies' toilets, Maria watched her mother apply the new lipstick, blot it carefully with toilet paper, and then draw her head back, taking the measure of herself, and smiling at what she saw.

Not long after that, Margaret organised a party in the church hall for Maria's tenth birthday.

Maria, Irene and their other friends from school – girls whose names would soon slip entirely from Maria's mind – were set to work making paper chains, while Margaret and the other mothers laid out sponge cakes, prepared sandwiches, poured jugs of orange squash. Mr Raynsford's piano was brought through from the vestry, and the children played musical statues, and pass the parcel, and when they had tired of their games, Margaret – flushed and exuberant in her Raspberry Icing lipstick – hushed them, and announced that the birthday girl was going to play them all a tune.

Maria had been practising; as she walked up to the piano, she caught sight of Irene's mother and her heart quickened its beat. It was some years, now, since her first tentative assaults at the piano in Irene's front room, and they had not come to much: each time Irene's mother tried to sit with Maria, to guide her fingers through the major scales, Irene would appear, sulky and wheedling, or one of her brothers would come through from the garden with some new boyish demand. And so a teacher had been found for her – Mrs Dewson, a whiskered, elderly parishioner, whose house, a few streets back from the common, smelt of damp and wet dog – and Maria had been permitted, once a day, to practise on Mr Raynsford's piano. And though her hands were still lumpen and fumbling on those slippery, treacherous keys, those hours in the vestry, and in Mrs Dewson's front room, were precious to Maria; and as she practised, she heard Irene's mother playing, and it was Irene's mother's face that she held in her mind.

That day, at her birthday party, Maria played Bach: the Prelude and Fugue in C major from *The Well-Tempered Clavier.* Reading the name on Mrs Dewson's sheet music for the first

time, Maria had pictured a kindly, red-faced German – a publican, smiling at his customers over beer-pumps of polished brass. *A man of good temper.* And the prelude did seem to soothe her spirits: after several weeks of missed notes and broken chords, Maria found that she could play it, if not well, then at least fluidly, and its arpeggios, rising and falling, began to follow her through her days, and to spool unbidden through her mind in the sweet, unguarded moments between sleep and dream.

At the party, she played the piece through almost from memory, looking only once at the sheet music propped on the stand. When she finished, the silence in the room seemed deafening; and then there was clapping, and the babbling murmurs of the other children, and she felt her mother's arms around her, and heard her voice in her ear. '*Very* good, Maria. Very good. Happy birthday, my clever girl.'

She felt her mother's touch, the echo of it, for a long while after Margaret had let her go. As Maria found Irene and her other friends, and danced to the record somebody – Margaret, she supposed – had put on, a great happiness rose in her. So it was true, she thought: that other hard-faced, angry mother had disappeared, and this kinder, prettier one had come to live with them for ever in her place.

Two weeks later, a Saturday, Maria came downstairs to find Mrs Harrison and Mrs O'Reilly preparing breakfast.

'Your father has been taken ill,' Mrs Harrison said.

Maria stared. 'Where's Mummy?' she said, and the women exchanged a quick, furtive glance.

'She's gone away on a little holiday,' Mrs O'Reilly said. 'Nothing for you to worry about, dear.'

She laid a plate of scrambled eggs down on the table. Maria looked at the yellowish mass, fighting a rising nausea – she hated scrambled eggs – and said, 'Aren't Daddy and I going too?'

There was a short, tight silence.

'Eat up, child,' said Mrs Harrison. 'Don't let your breakfast get cold.'

Maria ate as much as she could bear. With each mouthful, she pictured her mother as she had been at the party: bright, animated, moving quickly around the room with the platters of sandwiches and cake. She wondered where she could have gone, and why she would have left the two of them behind. She would ask her father, of course – he would know. How could he not?

Setting her plate aside, she said, 'Where's Daddy? Can I see him now?'

Mrs Harrison placed a hand on her shoulder. 'Don't ask so many questions, Maria. Your father needs to rest. You can see him later.'

Through the course of that long, peculiar day, Maria stayed upstairs, listening to the noises from the rest of the house. The front door opening and closing; footsteps on the stairs; women whispering in the hallway. She tried to draw, to read, to continue with the game she and Irene had devised in recent weeks – Maria's new Sindy doll had fallen out with Irene's, and was now attempting to win back her friend through a series of impassioned letters of apology – but she couldn't concentrate. There was a picture in her mind: her mother, packing her dresses and cardigans into a case, and stepping off alone across the common while Maria and her father slept on. And her father himself, downstairs behind the closed door, wrapped in his mysterious suffering.

By mid-afternoon, Maria could bear it no longer: she slipped from her room, went down to the first-floor landing, and stood outside the door to her parents' bedroom. She placed her ear to the door, and heard a low, inarticulate, shuddering sound. Was her father hurt? Was he in pain? Ought she to go in to him? She placed a hand to the brass doorknob and was just about to turn it when Mrs O'Reilly appeared at the top of the stairs.

'What are you doing, lovey?' she said softly. 'We said your father needs rest. Now, is there a friend you might like to stay with tonight?'

When Irene's mother came to collect her, she spent a while with the church women in the kitchen. Maria waited outside, but the women hadn't quite closed the door, and snatches of their conversation floated out through the gap. *A terrible thing. None of us had any idea. Just upped and left this morning. A note on the table. The reverend's beside himself.*

Irene's mother was the first to emerge. She saw Maria standing there, beside the door, but she didn't chide her. Instead, she knelt down and pulled Maria into her arms. 'Come on, love. Irene's so excited you'll be staying the night. Max is going to sleep in with the other boys. We'll have a party.'

She was true to her word. There was fish and chips for tea – real fish and chips from the chip shop, still wrapped in greasy newspaper – and jam roly-poly. It was all so exciting – so deliciously out of the ordinary – that Maria was able, for a time, to forget the strange, unsettling events at home.

After tea, they played a game where each person wrote the name of a celebrity on a piece of paper, and then stuck it to their forehead, and everyone else had to guess what was written there. Maria guessed hers quickly – she had Elizabeth Taylor – but

Irene's mother took an age with hers, which was somebody called Charlie Parker. When she finally got it, she pretended to be cross.

'Trust *you* to come up with that, Tony,' she said, and kissed Irene's father on the lips. And then Maria remembered her own father, lying in the vicarage all alone, making that horrible sound. She wondered again where her mother had gone, and felt a dizziness come over her, as if she was standing on a very tall building, and looking down at the long, long drop below.

'I think my mother's gone away,' Maria whispered into the dark, when she and Irene were tucked into their bunks.

'Where?'

'I don't know.'

'Are you going too?'

'I don't know.'

'Oh.' Irene was quiet for a moment. 'Well, if not, maybe you could come and live with us instead. But I suppose your father would be lonely.'

In the morning, Maria woke early, and dressed while Irene was still sleeping, expecting that Irene's mother would take her home in time to change for Sunday school. But when she went downstairs, nobody else was up. She sat quietly for a time in the kitchen, watching the clock inch towards half-past seven.

At a quarter to eight, Irene's mother pushed open the door, her long hair hanging loose over her cotton robe. 'You're up early, love,' she said. 'No church today, all right? Let me make you some breakfast, and then we'll have a little chat.'

While the rest of the family slept on, Irene's mother made Maria toast with strawberry jam, and told her that Margaret had decided to go and live somewhere else.

Maria stared at the wall. She had the incommunicable sense of an emptiness opening in some deep part of herself: a void, a fissure, on whose edge she might so easily lose her footing and fall. She swallowed. Her voice was unsteady as she said, 'What do you mean? Are Daddy and I going to go and live there too?'

'No, Maria love.' Irene's mother's voice was low and gentle. Her face, in the grey morning light, looked very young – as young as the woman in the photograph on Margaret's dressing-table. She reached across the table for Maria's hand; her own was warm, soft, with two faint whitish circles on the fourth finger, where she had removed her rings.

'For now, at least,' she said, 'I think you and your father will be staying here in London.'

Months later, just before she went to Atterley for the first time, Cass – then still Maria – found a note on her father's desk.

She shouldn't really have gone in – she wasn't allowed to enter her father's study alone – but Mrs Souter, the new charlady, had been dusting and sweeping, and left the door ajar while she stepped out into the garden for a smoke.

Dear Francis, the note said. *Len Steadman and I are in love. My happiness has come as a surprise. I feel, with him, that I really might be able to live a different kind of life.*

We are moving to Canada, the note said. *Toronto, we think. Len has a sister there.*

There is no common ground between us any more, Francis, the note said. *I did try my best to love you – both of you – but I have never felt that either of you really loved me. You're as thick as thieves, the two of you. So close. So full of secrets. And Maria will be better off without*

me, I think. I know I have not been a good mother to her, though I have tried. Please believe that I have tried.

I have written to Lily, the note said. *You must know how difficult that was for me, and I hope that you will accept the help she is offering.*

I will try, in time, the note said, *to earn God's forgiveness, but I will not dare to ask for yours.*

Maria hadn't quite finished reading when she heard Mrs Souter coming through into the hallway. She put the note back where she found it, and never saw it again.