
Opening Extract from...

The Party

Written by Elizabeth Day

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For Jasper

party

noun

1. a social gathering of invited guests, typically involving eating, drinking and entertainment.
2. a formally constituted political group that contests elections and attempts to form or take part in a government, e.g. 'faction', e.g. 'the party's election manifesto'.
3. a person or people forming one side in an agreement or dispute, e.g. 'the guilty party'.

I.

THE INTERVIEW ROOM IS SMALL AND SQUARE. A table, three plastic chairs, a high frosted window, the glass grimy with dust, strip lighting; our faces cast in dingy yellow shadow.

Two cups of tea: one for the female police officer, one for me. White with two sugars. Too much milk, but I'm not in a position to complain. The rim of my cup is patterned with indentations where, a few minutes previously, I bit into the polystyrene.

The walls are off-white. They remind me of the squash courts at the RAC on Pall Mall where, just a few days ago, I demolished an opponent who was several positions ahead of me in the club rankings. He was a banker. Florid face. Baggy shorts. Surprisingly lean thigh muscles. I dispatched him fairly swiftly: serve, slice, smash. The rubber thwack of the ball as it pinged into concrete, a dark green full stop at the end of each rally. Grunting. Swearing. Eventual defeat. Aggression contained within four walls.

The police station has a similar feel: a sort of bristling masculinity even though only one of the two officers interviewing me is male. The woman has clearly been designated 'good cop'. It was she who offered me the tea, said it would be beneficial. She also suggested two sugars.

'You know,' she added, meeting my gaze, 'after the shock.'

It's true, I hadn't expected the police to turn up on my doorstep this morning. It's only the second time in my thirty-nine years that I have found myself interviewed by the authorities. On both occasions, it has been because of Ben. Which is odd, really, given that he's my best friend. You'd expect best friends to take better care of each other.

The female police officer is short with rounded shoulders and a pleasant, freckled face. Her hair has been dyed that indeterminate

colour inexplicably beloved of middle-aged women, which is neither brown nor blonde but somewhere in between. A kind of beige. Brittle at the ends.

Her colleague is tall. One of those men whose height is his defining feature. He stooped when he walked through the door, holding a sheaf of papers in hands the colour of supermarket ham. Grey suit with a white mark on the lapel. Toothpaste, perhaps. Or the left-behind smear of a baby's breakfast. He is, I'd guess, in his early thirties.

The two of them sit across the table from me, backs to the door. The chairs have moulded seats with letterbox apertures in the back. We used to stack these chairs for school assemblies and end-of-term concerts at Burtonbury. A lifetime ago, and yet no time at all. Sometimes it seems as close as the next minute. Pencil shavings and plimsoll rubber, the scuffed mark of a trainer against the classroom skirting board. Dormitories with sagging beds. The creak of a spring as a boy shifted in his sleep. That constant feeling of unease. That was before I met Ben, of course. Before he saved me from myself. We've been saving each other ever since.

On the table, to one side, is a large tape-recording machine. Too big, really. I find myself wondering why it has to be so big. Or why, indeed, the police still insist on using cassette tapes in this digitised era of sound-clouds and podcasts and iTunes.

I've declined a lawyer. Partly because I don't want to fork out the necessary funds for a good one and I know, given the circumstances, Ben won't pay and I refuse to get stuck with some snivel-nosed legal aid type who can't distinguish his arse from his elbow. I don't think Lucy's parents will stump up either. After everything that's happened, I suspect my in-laws might also be disinclined to help.

'Right then,' says the woman, hands clasped in front of her. Short nails, varnished with clear polish. A tiny ink stain on the fleshy part between thumb and index finger. 'Shall we get started?'

'By all means.'

Beige Hair presses a button on the giant recording machine. There is a long, loud bleep.

'This interview is being tape-recorded at Tipworth Police Station, Eden Street, Tipworth. The date is 26 May 2015. The time is 2.20 p.m. I am Detective Constable Nicky Bridge.'

She glances at her colleague, who then identifies himself for the tape.

'I am Detective Constable Kevin McPherson.'

'Mr Gilmour,' she says, looking at me, 'would you introduce yourself with your full name and date of birth please?'

'Martin Gilmour, 3 June 1975.'

'Is it OK to call you Martin?'

'Yes.'

She clears her throat. 'You've been offered the services of a duty lawyer and declined – is that right, Martin?'

I nod.

'For the tape, please.'

'Yes.'

There is a pause. Grey Suit shuffles his papers. His head is lowered. He does not look at me. I find this curiously disconcerting, the notion of not being worth his attention.

'So, Martin,' Beige Hair says. 'Let's begin at the beginning. Talk us through the events of the evening of 2 May. The party. You arrived before the other guests, is that right?'

'Yes,' I say. 'Yes, we did.'

And then I start to tell them.

It begins with a door that wouldn't open at the Tipworth Premier Inn.

2 May

Tipworth Premier Inn, 5.30 p.m.

'I DON'T KNOW WHY they couldn't have put us up in the house,' Lucy said, slipping the plastic card key into place. 'Not like they don't have enough rooms.'

The light beneath the door handle flashed obstinately red. Lucy tried again, impatiently shoving the key into the slot and taking it out too quickly. I could see her getting annoyed but trying not to show it – that tell-tale flush across the back of her neck; the square set of her shoulders; a triangle of concentrated tongue just visible between her lips. I watched as she made several more clumsy attempts, my irritation rising. Who was it who said the definition of madness was doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results? Aristotle? Rousseau?

'Here,' I said, finally able to bear it no longer. 'Let me.'

I took the plastic card, still sweaty from her fingers, and slid it into place, leaving it for a few seconds before smoothly removing it. The light went green. The door clicked open.

'That's exactly what I was doing,' Lucy protested.

I smiled, patting her on the arm. There was a minute retraction in her pupils. Almost imperceptible.

'Here we are, then,' she said, too brightly.

We rolled our suitcases into the standard suite. Calling it a suite was optimistic. The floor space was almost entirely swallowed by twin beds. A reproduction of a bad watercolour depicting ladies on a beach hung skewed above the headboards. By the television, there was an electric kettle and a jam jar filled with teabags. Plastic packets of UHT creamer lay scattered around its base, as though

some invisible milky tide had swept up and left them there like pebbles on a seashore.

Lucy immediately unwound the cable and took the kettle to the bathroom to fill it from the basin tap. It is the first thing she does on arriving anywhere. When we travel abroad, she will take a foil packet of English teabags with her.

I sat on the edge of the bed, feeling the friction of man-made fibres against my chinos, and slipped off my loafers. I checked my watch: 5.37 p.m. Ben wanted us at the house by 7 p.m. for pre-party drinks, so we had a little over an hour. I eased myself back onto the pillows and closed my eyes, hearing Lucy bustling around as she put on the kettle and unzipped her case, unfolding the swishy evening dress she had brought to wear and hanging it in the bathroom where, soon, I knew she would draw a hot bath in the hope that the creasing would magically erase itself in the steam.

These are the things you learn over the course of a marriage: other people's habits. Those incrementally acquired ways of being: a gradual evolution from attractive quirk to something pointless, stupid, illogical, obsessive and finally maddening. It takes someone else to pick up on them, to be driven to the edge of sanity by their repeated appearance.

'I mean, how many rooms do you think they have in their new mansion exactly?'

I ignored the question for a few seconds, hoping to fool her into thinking I was asleep.

'I know you're awake, Martin. I can tell. Your eyelids are flickering.'

For fuck's sake.

'Sorry,' I said, and sat up. 'I don't know.'

'Well I bet it's plenty. And you're his oldest friend, after all.'

'Mmm.'

The kettle boiled, sending a bloom of condensation halfway up the mirror.

'Has something happened between you two?'

'God no.'

This was not strictly true but, at that stage, I didn't feel she needed to know the particulars. It would have involved too much explanation and, to be honest, I didn't have the energy. There were things my wife – my pliant, adoring little wife – would never understand about the bond between two men.

'They've got loads of family staying,' I said, unbuckling my trousers in preparation for getting changed. 'Not just Ben's but Serena's lot too. I don't think Ben wanted to inflict that on us.'

Lucy, a mug of tea in one hand, came over to me. She tilted her head. Moist brown eyes looked at me expectantly. A pulse beat in the purplish semi-circle beneath her left socket, as it always did when she was nervous. She placed her free hand tentatively on the small of my back. I could smell her tea-rose perfume. I used to find that fragrance deeply charming. It was, like Lucy, modest and unshowy. That night, it caught in my throat. Too sweet. Too soapy.

'I'm sorry, I'm—'

Lucy dropped her head and withdrew her hand.

'Of course,' she said. She turned away. 'Only …' I could see her weighing up whether to say what was on her mind. 'It's been months.'

Not this again.

'Has it?'

She nodded.

'I've had a lot on my mind. The new book.'

I had just delivered a lengthy manuscript on post-Impressionism to my publishers. They hadn't been especially enthused by the idea but my agent had talked them round. Pointed out that there was a major Manet retrospective coming up at the Tate and who better to write the definitive work on it than esteemed newspaper art critic Martin Gilmour? I had something of a reputation. My first book, *Art: Who Gives a F**k?*, published five years previously, had established me as an enfant terrible of the art world, the critic who dared to call out bullshit and say things as he truly saw them.

In truth, the contents were not particularly explosive. The title had been my agent's idea. Credit where it's due: it sold by the

truckload. It became the kind of book people give their trendy friends at Christmas. I've seen it in the downstairs loo of some fantastically fashionable, architect-designed house (curtain walls and basement studies). I'm pretty sure no one actually read it from cover to cover. Apart from Lucy, that is. Lucy is loyal to a fault. Always has been.

We met thirteen years ago when I was working on the *Bugle*, London's pre-eminent evening newspaper (although, admittedly, there was no competition at that stage. The free-sheets and the morning *Metro* only came along later). I had wangled myself a position as maternity leave cover for the deputy arts editor and Lucy was the desk secretary. In those days, you could still smoke in the office, something I did regularly and self-consciously, only too aware that when I took a drag on a cigarette my twenty-something cheekbones were highlighted becomingly to anyone who might be looking.

I didn't notice Lucy for several weeks. She existed as a pleasant blur on the periphery of my vision. She was a plump, prettyish girl with owlish spectacles and shoulder-length brown hair that was neither straight nor curly but instead manifested itself unsatisfactorily in the liminal space between. Her hair, I would subsequently find out, was a source of constant frustration. The rain had only to glower threateningly from an unbroken grey cloud for it to start frizzing at the ends. On wet days, Lucy wore her hair up in a velvet scrunchie as the Duchess of York used to do. There always was something delightfully out of step about Lucy. She was in floaty florals when everyone else was in figure-hugging pencil skirts. She wore men's brogues and had thick, sluggish eyebrows. She was of a different time. Part of her still is. I have never worked out which time, exactly. It could be that the one she belongs to hasn't been invented yet.

Anyway, back then, Lucy hadn't made much of an impression other than of being someone who answered the phone and said 'hello' when one walked into the office. Did the odd tea round. Once, I saw her return from her lunch break with her fingernails

painted a glossy black and this had momentarily sparked my interest. More going on there than meets the eye, I thought. But then I forgot about it, turning back to my keyboard to bash out five hundred words of guff on the latest insufferably pretentious graduate show from Central Saint Martins or a Hollywood actress of negligible talent who had some hold over the newspaper's proprietor.

It wasn't until my second, or even third, month there that Lucy made any sort of lasting impact.

I had been asked by Ian, the section editor, to knock up a piece on the return of the 'Great American Novelist'. There was some tenuous peg, I seem to recall – a debut by a muscular young author who had been hailed as the new Tom Wolfe. I had tried to farm out the writing of the piece to a willing freelancer, but it was just before Christmas and none of my regulars had been available so I'd decided to have a go myself.

I was sitting at my desk, discussing who should be included with Ian.

'There's an argument to be made for Jay McInerney,' he said.

I nodded, as if I were already across that. 'And DeLillo, of course,' I added. 'Wolfe. Can we get away with Franzen?'

'Definitely.' Ian leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his rumpled shirt. 'You've got Philip Roth, I'm guessing?'

'Sure, sure,' I said, even though I hadn't thought of Philip Roth and hadn't, at that point in my life, read a single one of his books.

There was an audible tsk-ing sound from the other side of the desk.

'I mean, if we're going back a bit further, we could look at Salinger …' I continued.

The tsk-ing turned into a loud, impatient grunt. Ian's lips twitched at the corners.

'Do you have something to say, Lucy?' he asked, amused.

'No,' she said, face flushed. 'Actually, I mean, sorry, yes, yes I do.' She coughed and a pink dot appeared in the centre of each cheek.

'Please …' Ian said, motioning with one hand that the floor was hers.

'Well, have you thought of, you know, including any women in your list?' she asked, her voice gathering momentum and volume as she spoke. 'It's just always the same boring, old, white, men. I mean, soon you'll be citing John bloody Updike.'

I scoffed, while mentally reminding myself to include John Updike. How could I have overlooked John Updike? It was those kind of mistakes that made me stand out. That made me look like a boy who didn't have a home full of packed bookshelves but who instead relied on his mother's *Reader's Digest* for reading material.

'… who basically write everything with their dicks out and who all congratulate each other on being so fantastic,' Lucy was saying, 'when really their "state of the nation" novels are just family dramas repackaged with extra testosterone. You know, there are incredible female authors in America who, just because they write about families and have these … f-f … awful covers with close-up photographs of children and sandcastles, they just get ignored all the damn time.'

She dropped her head. Hair fell loose across her pale forehead.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I just …'

I smiled at her. How sweet it was, I thought, to feel so impassioned about something. She caught my eye and smiled back, lips parting just enough for me to see her precise, straight and entirely sensible teeth.

'Blimey,' Ian said. 'Didn't realise we had Emmeline sodding Pankhurst sitting here. So who would you suggest, then?'

'Anne Tyler, Joan Didion, Donna Tartt,' Lucy said without looking up. 'And that's just for starters. That's if you even agree with the fundamental premise of there being something that is "The Great American Novel". Which I don't, by the way.'

Ian chortled. 'Thanks, Luce. Remind me, what did you study at Bristol again?'

'English,' she mumbled. 'And it was Durham.'

'Thought so.'

'I actually think it's a good idea,' I said, surprising myself at the sound of my own voice. 'We should include some women.'

Lucy grinned. Her glasses had slid down her nose and she pushed them back up with a single nail-chewed forefinger and I noticed, as she did so, that her hand was shaking.

'Thanks, Martin,' she said and she looked at me with shining eyes.

The more I got to know her after that, the more I was charmed in spite of myself. She was so respectful, so admiring of me, so fundamentally grateful that I would pay her any attention. And I, in turn, found her intelligent and interesting company. She knew a lot.

We started taking lunch together. At first, it was just a hurried sandwich in the staff canteen but soon we graduated to the restaurant across the road from the office where we sat in wooden booths and drank wine from a magnum that the waiter would mark off at the end of the meal, charging us according to how many inches we had drunk. It was only a matter of time before lunch turned into an after-work drink in the pub – me: a pint of Guinness; Lucy: a gin and tonic. (I never liked Guinness. I only drank it when I was trying to give the impression of blokeishness.) After six months, we were having dinner. We both had a penchant for Persian food and would seek out the best places for a night-time meal of aubergine stew and lamb with barberries at the wrong end of Kensington.

And then she kissed me and I didn't know how to say no. It was on the pavement outside a brightly painted eatery called Tas or Yaz or Fez or something similar. We were standing under a streetlamp, dank drizzle coating our faces like wet muslin and I found myself looking at her face, at the speckles of moisture on her unfashionably large glasses, at the discreet jiggle of extra flesh just underneath her chin, at the double freckle on the lobe of one ear so that it looked as if she had got them pierced even though she was one of the few women of my acquaintance who hadn't.

'Too scared of infection,' she had said, explaining it to me once. 'Too scared of everything.'

She isn't stupid, Lucy.

It was as I was looking at her that Lucy's expression changed. Her eyes – brown, lively – acquired a liquid quality, as though their brownness could seep out if left unguarded. I realised, too late, that what I was seeing in those darkened pupils, was lust. She leaned in, clasping her hands behind my neck and I succumbed because it was easier than anything else. And would it do so very much harm?

Her lips were soft and doughy. The kiss became moister and more enthused. I could hear a faint moaning sound coming from Lucy's throat and then I pulled away, hands on her shoulders, a firm, paternal, 'We shouldn't be doing this.'

She looked at me sadly.

'Why not?'

'I … well, look …'

'We get on well, don't we? I mean, I like you.' A meaningful little lacuna. 'I *really* like you. Can't we just … see where it goes? I'm lonely. I know you're lonely …' This came as news to me. The truth was, I did feel alone but I thought I had masked it sufficiently well from prying eyes in the office. At that stage, Ben was getting more serious with Serena and I was increasingly at a loose end in the evenings. Whereas, previously, the two of us had frequently gone drinking in Soho, starting off in a private members' club before graduating to dinner at Quo Vadis and a nightcap at the Atlantic, these days Ben was more likely to stay in cooking pasta and watching films with Serena. He had asked me to find my own place so that she could move into the mews house I had shared with him since we graduated.

'Time to grow up, mate,' he had said, slapping me on the back. Touch came so easily to Ben. It was something I both hated and loved about him.

So perhaps I was particularly vulnerable to attention when Lucy came along. I realise now that is not an excuse.

I walked her home that evening. She lived in a surprisingly nice flat off the North End Road. I say surprisingly because I had

assumed, from the dowdiness of her clothing and her penchant for buying men's jackets from charity shops, that money was tight. It turned out I was wrong about that. Lucy's parents were quite well off, in a hearty, middle-class kind of way. They had sent their three daughters to private school and lived in a red-brick farmhouse in Gloucestershire. At Christmas-time, they attended the carol concert at Tewkesbury Cathedral.

I deposited her at the door.

'Come up,' Lucy said, tugging at the sleeve of my coat.

I shook my head, feigning regret.

'No,' I said, trailing my fingers down her cheek. 'That wouldn't be right. Next time.'

I kissed the top of her head, inhaling Timotei and light sweat, and walked away, raising one arm aloft as I went.

'See you tomorrow,' she called out to my retreating form.

For whatever reason, the evening with Lucy had left me experiencing an uncomfortable surge of different emotions. I thought of my mother, of the way she looked at me when I told her, when I was back from school one Easter holiday, that she shouldn't say 'settee' but 'sofa' and that the way she pronounced 'cinema' without elongating the final 'a' was embarrassing.

I found myself walking towards Brompton Cemetery and although it was late and I knew the main gates would be closed, I also knew from previous visits that there was a point in the wall on the Lillie Road where the stones had come loose and you could crawl through quite easily on your hands and knees.

This I did, the palms of my hands gathering up bits of twig and pine cone and leaving a latticed indentation of dirt across my skin. I stood, brushing myself clean. A piece of lichen had lodged itself in my hair. I shook it out.

The cemetery stood in the gloom of night, half lit here and there by a weak streetlamp. Gravestones and silhouetted stone angels loomed out of the shadows. Some notable historical figures were buried nearby although I'd never tried to seek out their graves. My favourite gravestone (if one can have such a thing) was

to mark the passing of a young man called Horace Brass who died at the age of sixteen in 1910. His name was carved in looped art nouveau cursive.

I started walking towards it, hands in my pockets. A man fell into step beside me. I glanced to one side and saw that, no, this was not a man but a boy. A teenage boy, like Horace Brass, pale and thin as a silver birch. He had greasy hair and spots around his mouth.

'Looking for company?' he said.

'No,' I said too loudly. 'No I don't … I mean, I'm not.'

A fizz of anger in my solar plexus. I doubled up my pace and walked swiftly back the way I had come.

The next day, I was late into the office. I had a migraine, I recall, and with every step I took, the ground felt too far away for my feet to make contact with it. I sat at my desk, shading my eyes from the sunlight spooling through the windows, and flicked through the latest issue of the *Art Newspaper*, pretending to concentrate on the words. When Lucy came in, she smiled at me and I remember this internal surge of relief that she still liked me. In Lucy's mind, I was still the man she had kissed outside her front door, the man she had wanted to come upstairs, the man she respected and liked and enjoyed spending time with. In her mind, I was the nice Martin Gilmour. I was the Martin Gilmour I wanted to be.

I smiled back at her. That day, we went again for lunch together, taking our supermarket sandwiches to sit on our coats in Kensington Gardens. I kissed her, taking her face in both my hands, conveying a tenderness I almost felt. She tasted of prawns and mayonnaise. I felt no stirring, no passion, no love. But there was affection there, and fondness too. And there was an understanding of sorts. I am sure of that. I did not pull the wool over her eyes, as my mother might have said. Lucy knew what I was. Really, she can't complain.

Of course, nothing is as easy as it first appears. I used to like Lucy so much, truly I did. Over the years, that like has been dulled: brass left unpolished. The same qualities that drew me to

her: an uncomplicated view of the world, her mild eccentricity, her un-groomed refusal to make the best of herself and above all, her adoration of me, now set me on edge. And then there's the children thing, naturally. I'd always told her I didn't want any of my own and she accepted it in the beginning. But that was before her friends started popping them out with alacrity, posting twelve-week scans and pictures of bleary-eyed newborns on Facebook with humdrum frequency. Our socialising changed – it was no longer nights in the pub but picnics in the park surrounded by screaming toddlers, or early-evening barbecues, the timing of everything defined by when babysitters could be relied upon to arrive and leave or when Isadora or Humphrey or Matilda could be put down for their naps.

Oh, and isn't Lucy wonderful with kids? Look at how she plays with them! Forever kneeling down to meet their eyes; taking them by the hand; running after them in a game of tag, her floral dress breezing round her knees. She had six godchildren. But every time she went to Tiffany to buy a silver charm bracelet or engraved tankard for yet another christening, something within her hardened. She lost that yielding softness she once had.

I suppose it didn't help that Ben and I were so close. Difficult for any woman to come into that situation and hope to get my undivided attention. But, as I often told her, that's the way it had always been. Ben and I went way back. Best friends from school. So close we had, at one stage, been informally christened by his mother as 'Starsky and Hutch'. Later, Ben's wife Serena had coined a different phrase.

'You're always there, aren't you, Martin?' she had said. 'Ben's little shadow.'

For whatever reason, the moniker had stuck. Little shadow. Even Ben calls me it now. I'm in his phone under 'LS'.

The real reason we weren't staying at the house on the night of the party was that Ben hadn't asked. Lucy was right: there were more than enough rooms to accommodate a small army of guests even on the night of his fortieth birthday. And, yes, I had been

offended by this omission. I'd left it too late to book anywhere decent. Their new house was in Tipworth, a bucolic Cotswold village overburdened with twee shops selling novelty oven gloves and packets of fudge, but severely under-served by decent hotels. All the nice boutique places were fully booked when I tried, by other guests, most of whom, presumably, would have got their PAs to do it for them. Ben's fortieth was going to be a grand affair. Le tout W11 in attendance.

In the end, the only place available was a Premier Inn just off the motorway roundabout. The room cost £59.99, which seemed absurd.

'Are you sure?' I had asked on the phone when the receptionist recited the price list.

'Yeah. Breakfast not included. But there's a Little Chef across the road.'

The glamour!

And now, here we were. Lucy upset in the bathroom. Kettle boiled. Me standing trouserless on scratchy carpet. As I unpacked my dress shirt and bow-tie, I didn't explain why Ben hadn't asked us to stay. It unsettled me to have to stare it in the face.

Although it would have taken us less than ten minutes to walk to the party, Lucy insisted on a taxi.

'Shoes!' she said, pointing down to a pair of bright red, sparkling, strappy heels.

'Very nice,' I lied. 'Are they new?'

She flushed with pleasure.

'Yes. I got them off eBay.' She twirled her right ankle, the better to show off how truly garish they were. Like every conventional woman, Lucy likes to pretend she is unconventional by buying attention-seeking shoes. In all other respects, she was playing according to type: a long A-line dress in a stiff, dark green material with two thin straps, her shoulders covered by a pale red pashmina. She held a tiny evening bag in one hand. I knew, without it being opened, that it would contain a folded tissue, a lipstick worn

down to the nub, a pen, a compact mirror and our hotel room key. She would always insist on carrying a hotel room key.

'Have you left the key at reception?' I asked, by way of a test.

She shook her head. 'You know I never like to do that. What if they go in and steal something?'

'You do realise they have a master key?'

'Well,' she said, climbing indecorously into the taxi. 'Still.'

The cab driver turned back to look at us.

'Tipworth Priory?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'How did you know?'

He chuckled. 'The way you're dressed sort of gives it away, mate. Not normally that much call for black tie around these parts.'

Ben and Serena Fitzmaurice were famous for their parties. It was a point of pride for them. This one was ostensibly Ben's fortieth but was doubling up as a housewarming. They had bought the seventeenth-century Tipworth Priory a few months previously. It was their second home.

During the week, they lived in a white, stucco-fronted house in the expensive part of Notting Hill. At the weekends, or so they had told me, they needed 'more space' for the children.

'We just want to get away,' they had said, as they pored over glossy brochures from estate agents with three names and no ampersand. It baffled me as to quite what they were getting away from. Still, it wasn't for me to try and fathom the desires of the super-rich. I had nodded and murmured sympathetically when they talked in this way and soon enough they'd stumbled across Tipworth Priory in a picturesque part of Oxfordshire that had fields and sheep and all the requisite trappings of the countryside, while also comprising cafes that served soya lattes and organic mackerel salads in light-filled converted chapels. An outpost of a Soho private members' club had just opened up nearby, doing wonders for the local economy, if not the local inhabitants, who promptly complained to the reporters at the *Tipworth Echo* that they were being priced out of their own villages.

In fact, Ben and Serena had had their own run-in with the local press at the time contracts were exchanged, involving a kerfuffle over the eviction of a handful of elderly monks who still lived in the Priory. The Fitzmaurices confided that they felt it had all been terribly overblown and the monks became, in their retelling, a light-hearted dinner-party anecdote designed to highlight the amusing narrow-mindedness of benighted country folk.

(I read subsequently in the *Echo* that a new location was found for the monks in a nondescript Oxford suburb. They are now housed in a purpose-built block sandwiched between a multi-storey car park and one of those discount stores that sells value packs of pickled onion crisps and more plastic clothes pegs than anyone could reasonably need over the course of an average lifetime.)

With the monks out of the way, Serena and Ben were able to set to work on the interior. They did a lot of things involving faux-rococo marble fireplaces, built from monumental stone veined with grey like the bloodshot white of a wide-open eye. The chandelier in the main drawing room was imported from Italy – a splintering waterfall of glassy splendour, which, on closer inspection, revealed itself to be constructed entirely from upended wine glasses. It was, Serena and Ben thought, a humorous accent; a sign that although they recognised beautiful design, they were not ones to take themselves too seriously. But I knew that the chandelier had cost £250,000. More, if you count the packaging and transport costs. I couldn't help but admire the grandiosity of it. The sheer, unthinking excess.

I hadn't seen it since the renovations had been completed, over three weeks ago. In spite of myself, I was intrigued to look at what they'd done to the place. I wondered whether Serena's somewhat déclassé penchant for white lilies and plush carpets and luxury hotel fixtures and fittings would have denuded the building of all its character.

As we approached Tipworth Priory that evening, the taxi indicating into the long sweep of driveway, the overall effect was

impressive. Our route was lined with spherically trimmed box hedges, each one encircled by a purple halo of light. The Priory exterior was Grade-I listed so, much to my relief, Serena hadn't been able to get her paws on it. The resplendent Cotswold stone was intact, emitting a warm buttery glow in the dusky sunshine. There was still stained glass in the windows. On the front lawn was a large marquee, bedecked with flowers in purple and white. A fountain featuring a stone boy with an urn tilted forwards on his shoulder had purple and white petals floating in the water. As the taxi came to a halt, we heard the electric whir of a generator and the facade of the house became sharply illuminated. I got out of the car and noticed that a giant 'B' and 'S' in the same shade of virulent purple were now being projected from some unseen source of light onto the wall. Typical Serena.

'Yes,' said Lucy. 'They don't like to do things by halves, do they?'

The taxi driver snorted.

'You can say that again, love.'

I shot her a look. She started to pick at the tender flakes of skin edging her thumbnail. The fare was £6.60. I handed over a ten-pound note and waited for the precise change.

'You should have given him a tip,' Lucy said, as we walked up the steps and tugged on an ornate pulley system to ring the ancient bell.

'At that price? Not likely.'

I could hear footsteps echoing on flagstones and then the door opened and Ben was there, arms flung wide, shirt untucked, bow-tie undone round his neck, hair a wild mess of curls, broad smile on his face.

'Hello, my dears!'

He ushered us in, embracing Lucy and giving her a kiss on each cheek, then crushing me into a bear hug and slapping me on the back. 'So pleased you could come early,' he continued, leading us through a hallway strewn with Moroccan rugs which occasionally parted to reveal a series of gravestones. Lucy's heels click-clacked against a 'Dearly Departed' and when I looked down, I realised I

was standing on 'Emily, beloved wife of …' How strange, I thought, to end your life like this. Buried in a priory graveyard and now merely flooring for a rich man's party.

'Forgive the chaos,' Ben said. 'Pre-party madness, you know how it is.'

We passed a group of girls in black skirts and white shirts with their hair pulled back in ponytails of varying degrees of severity. One of them smiled as we went. Another one bobbed, almost a curtsey.

'I'm just so glad I get to see you guys before it all kicks off,' he was saying. 'We both are. There's never enough of a chance to chat at these things, is there? Not to the people you really want to talk to, anyway.'

He was breathless in his chatter. Charming, as ever, but underneath there was an accent of nervousness. It was unlike Ben to be nervous. Probably anxious about the guests arriving, I thought.

'This place is spectacular, Ben,' I said.

'Yes,' Lucy added. 'Really …'

Ben paused for a second and raised his head, as though sniffing the air.

'It is, isn't it? We got super lucky. It's going to take months to do up properly though. Months. We haven't even started on the chapel. I'll show it to you, LS. I know you love your architectural history.' He clutched Lucy's arm conspiratorially. 'Such an old fuddy-duddy, isn't he, Luce? That's why we love him.'

It was a source of amusement to Ben that whenever the two of us went anywhere together, I would seek out the local church and find a point of interest: an unexpected fresco of St Peter holding the keys to heaven; a war memorial erected to an only son called Arthur; and once a pew cushion embroidered with 'This Too Shall Pass'.

We followed Ben to the end of a wide corridor, the walls adorned with black and white family photographs in uniform clear perspex frames. This led into the kitchen, where Serena stood, surrounded by half-unwrapped bouquets of flowers, the

stems a tangle of bloom and pollen. Around her stood a group of waiters and one man wearing a floppy khaki hat and a safari jacket with countless pockets.

'Serena,' Ben purred. 'LS and Lucy have arrived.'

She looked up, her face vague. It took a moment for her gaze to click into place.

'Of course! Of course! Sorry, sweeties, totally slipped my mind. Hang on a sec.'

She turned to the man in the jacket. 'Tom, these are great, thanks. Much better than the other flowers.'

'We'll have to re-plant,' he said gruffly.

'Mm-mm. I know, darling. We will.'

Tom exited the kitchen, his boots leaving a speckled trail of mud as he went.

All at once, Serena was a flurry of insincere compliments.

'So gorgeous to see you! Martin' – she had a way of saying my name which stretched all the vowels to the point of snapping – 'you look very smart. Oh, and Lucy, what a … what a …' She gave a tiny pause. '*Pretty* dress. Where's it from? Is it Donna Karan?'

'No,' Lucy said. 'Monsoon.'

'So sorry we couldn't have you to stay. Just. You know how it is. Family. Extended family. Friends flying in from abroad.'

'Of course we do,' I said. 'It's no problem. We're just delighted to be here. And to see this, this …' I made a great show of looking around in an awestruck manner, 'palace. Truly, Serena, you do have the most impeccable taste.'

She didn't reply but gave another dazzling smile. Serena hadn't yet dressed for the party and still managed to look more glamorous than any of us. She was wearing cut-off jeans and a loose white blouse that somehow managed to be both shapeless and sexy. Around her neck, a silver chain, the heart pendant fitting snugly in the gap between her clavicles. Her hair was in rollers and her eye make-up heavily done – black-brown smudges the colour of a bruised nail – but she wore no lipstick and, as a result, her face had an untethered quality, like one of those children's picture books

with different panels to flick through for amusing variations on face, torso and legs.

'I said I'd show LS the chapel,' Ben said. 'You girls will be able to make your own fun for a bit, won't you?'

I glanced at Lucy, who was standing in the corner next to an enormous Smeg fridge, holding her pashmina tightly, her mouth set in a mutinous line.

'Of course, sweetie,' Serena said. 'But at least get them a drink first!' She laughed – a tinkling sound like teaspoon against saucer – and poured us all a glass of Veuve Clicquot that was already chilling in an ice bucket by the industrial-sized sink.

Ben took our glasses and led me back the way we'd come.

'We're still waiting for some of the furniture,' he said as we came to a halt in front of a stone fireplace. The mantelpiece was the same height as our heads. The central recess had been filled by dozens of altar candles, waxen wicks pulled straight and ready to be lit. 'Stuff Serena picked up in France. Some bigger pieces from a friend she has in Bali.'

'Not tempted to light a real fire?' I asked.

'Ha! No. Serena wanted it all to be candlelit tonight. Adds to the—' He broke off, lowered his voice and assumed a cod French accent, '*ambience*. So I'm told.'

He put his arm round my shoulders and drew me to him. He was still grinning. Still determined to show what a jolly time he was having and how relaxed this all was and wasn't it all just good clean fun between friends. Perhaps he forgot how well I knew him. I had, after all, made a lifetime's study of the planes of his face. Tonight, there was a twitching light to his eyes, a kind of fevered alacrity that meant his gaze kept shifting over surfaces and people, never once steadying to meet my own.

He dropped his arm, took a gulp of his champagne and waved me into a narrow corridor, darker than the others, which led off from the main aspect of the house.

'I think you'll like this,' Ben said. He pushed open a door, the hinges blackened and creaking. There was a lingering smell of

incense. In the half-gloom, I could make out the hulking form of an altar and a font.

'Sorry guys, don't mind us,' Ben said, stepping across a cable. Two men in black T-shirts bearing the words 'Sono-Vision Inc.' above a logo of three interlinked circles were applying miniature screwdrivers to a series of speakers.

'Quite a production,' I said.

'Ha!'

The chapel looked almost entirely as it must have been when the monks had left. There were open hymn books on the shelves, the pages fluttering in the draught of a closing door. It was as if the former residents had been forced to leave halfway through a service, abandoning all their possessions in their rush to escape.

It reminded me of Victor Hugo's house in the Place des Vosges in Paris: untouched since his death, everything still in its rightful place. But then you saw Hugo's death-mask, placed casually in a box on top of the desk, and you realised how macabre it all was, how strange the human impulse to keep everything stagnant, frozen in aspic. When my mother died, I couldn't wait to be rid of her. I arranged for a swift cremation and when the notice came from the funeral directors that her ashes were ready for collection, I ignored it. What do they do with uncollected ashes? I never found out.

'Spooky,' I said.

'You have no idea, LS. No idea. There's a ghost, you know.'

He went on to say that the ghost was said to hang about the medieval graveyard, just by the ornamental maze they had planted to entertain their four children – Cosima, Cressida, Hector and Wilf (known to the family as Bear). The ghost was referred to locally as 'The Brown Monk'. He was believed to walk through the walls of the house making a soft, low, moaning sound.

'You don't believe in all that though, do you?' I asked.

Ben shook his head. 'No, but … Serena. You know how she is …'

Yes. Yes, I did.

The first time I met her, at a restaurant situated at the top of one of London's newest skyscrapers, Serena had leaned across the table and clasped my forearm. She did it so quickly, I had no chance to remove my cuff from her grasp and so we sat there, uncomfortably, while she looked at me earnestly with those chlorine-blue eyes and said 'Ben's told me so much about you. I already know we're going to be kindred spirits.'

I gave a non-committal smile. The non-committal smile is one of my specialities.

'I can see the child in you,' she said and as she spoke, a strand of blonde hair stuck to her lip gloss and stayed there, bisecting the lower half of her distant, beautiful face. Behind her, I could see the dark sweep of the city: the carcass of recently erected scaffolding illuminated by a foggy moon and the red twinkling lights of Canary Wharf, sequenced like the LED display of an unreadable digital watch.

'It's so important, isn't it?' she said as the first course arrived. 'To keep that childlike wonder about the world.'

She removed her hand, pleased with herself. There was a single wrinkle on her smooth forehead and it seemed to have been placed there expressly to denote concern and empathy.

Serena was the latest in a long line of girlfriends. But even I had to acknowledge she was different. Prior to this, Ben had had a type. He was handsome and came from money. His life had been almost too easy – public school, Cambridge, hedge fund manager – and as a consequence, he sought out difficulty in his personal attachments. He liked neurotic girls with ripped jeans who smoked too much and cut their own hair. They never lasted for more than a few months and Ben had always been the one to end the liaison.

Often, I would have to mop them up afterwards. They would come to me, these girls, a muddied mess of tears and eyeliner, and I would always tell them the same thing: that Ben just wasn't ready to settle down and who knew if he ever would be and it wasn't them, it was him, and he adored them in his own way but he

couldn't help it, he just wasn't ready. And they would nod and bite their lips and then, after a cup of sugary tea and a few crumbs of cake (they would never eat the whole slice), they left my flat, never to be seen again.

I liked these girls, probably because I never felt threatened by them. They had no designs on my friendship with Ben. They respected our unbreakable bond. We knew each other better than anyone else in the world, you see. No woman could compete with that. Like I told them: not their fault.

Until Serena.

Serena, with her casual confidence, bowled him over. They met on a skiing holiday. Of course they did. That's where people like that meet. It's either Verbier or St Tropez.

She was blonde and tall and striking. Lean muscles. A sugary scent. Hair that swung from side to side as if advertising itself. She worked in an art gallery, although as soon as they got engaged, she gave up the job. She was the kind of person I had always assumed Ben would find boring. We used to laugh about the dull Sloanes with their made-up careers and their reliance on Daddy's trust fund and their weekends in the country in Hunter wellingtons and padded body-warmers.

But I underestimated Serena. Because although she looked boring (beautiful, yes, but undeniably boring) she possessed this unspoilt quality. She was deeply naive. It wasn't stupidity, not exactly, but rather a sense of other-worldliness, as if she had never quite found her place on the planet. A more unkind word might be 'ditzy'.

For whatever reason, Ben was smitten. I realised, that night, when I looked across the table at him, desperately wanting him to look back, that Serena was there to stay. Ben turned to her and, with the pad of his thumb, stroked the stray strand of hair away from her mouth, then kissed her with excruciating tenderness. And I knew things were going to change.

It wasn't a perfect marriage. They had the requisite children, each one precocious and adorable in a slightly different

way from the one that had come before, and as Ben broke away from the company he had worked for since graduation to build up his own business, they spent more and more time apart. Serena, ever vague, never understood the pressures of his work. Ben, increasingly preoccupied, had no time left over to devote to the emotional maintenance of his wife. She grew harder. The naivety I had once noticed became polluted by a certain world-weary assessment of things and people – of their value; their cost. Ben loved her still, of that I was sure. He just wasn't in love with her.

I don't think either of them really cared. They put on a good show. Serena had aged well, thanks to the judicious use of fillers administered by a discreet plastic surgeon and the unparalleled youth-preserving tactic of having very little to do. She became one of those glamorous, wealthy women who don't have enough to occupy their time and who attempt to fill it with charity luncheons and a nebulous search for meaning. She went on Ayurvedic retreats and meditation weekends, leaving the children in the care of two full-time nannies and a dedicated housekeeper who wore a dark uniform designed to look not too like a uniform. She spoke a lot about 'connections' and 'auras'. Ben was kind to her. In public, they made a good pair.

But she still had her 'ideas'. And one of these, Ben told me as we stood in the chapel, was to do with the ghost at Tipworth. He said she had arranged for a local exorcist to come and perform some charade that would 'release the negative energy'.

'How does one find a local exorcist?' I asked. 'Do they advertise in the *Yellow Pages*?'

Ben laughed. 'Fuck knows. I mean, does the *Yellow Pages* even still exist?'

'Trust Serena …' I let the thought dwindle, unanswered.

We stood side by side for a few seconds, as the light outside slid into paleness. The coloured panels in the windows sent rhombuses of pink, green and blue across the worn stone floor.

'You're not drinking,' Ben said, accusingly.

I looked at my champagne flute. It was true. I hadn't taken a single sip. My fingertips were clammy from the accumulated moisture on the side of the glass.

'Sorry.' I smiled, then raised the glass. 'Here's to you, Ben. Your new home. And, happy birthday.'

'Thanks LS.'

We clinked. But I felt again, looking at the studied vacancy of his face, that something was amiss.

'My oldest friend,' I said, trying once more to elicit some sort of spark of recognition. But he shuffled uncomfortably and still couldn't look at me.

'Listen, LS. We need to talk.' His voice was dry and reedy. 'About …' He gesticulated broadly with his free hand, as if painting treble clefs in imaginary sand.

I waited. One beat. Two. Blood pumping. Muscles clenched.

'I've got a business opportunity I want to discuss with you.'

Relief. The flush of it almost physical.

'Oh,' I said, trying not to think of all the things he might have said. 'Interesting. Tell me more.'

I made an effort to keep the pleasure out of my voice. Ben had never asked me to join him in any kind of business venture before. I'd always been a little offended at his failure to do so. Of course, in the early days, I didn't have the necessary funds. But since the publication of *Art: Who Gives a F**k?*, my bank balance had been conspicuously healthier. Published in twenty-one languages. In the *Sunday Times* bestseller list for twelve solid weeks. The royalties kept rolling in.

Now that he was offering me an in, I was delighted. It meant he trusted me. It meant I was just as good as any of his trustafarian friends.

'It's a little investment idea I have. A new casino-style resort in Montenegro.'

'Ah. Montenegro: the new Monte Carlo.'

'Ha!' he said again. 'Very good, LS. Yes. Should use that as a slogan, really.'

I took a sip of champagne. The bubbles pricked my tongue.

'Of course. When do you want to have this chat? Not now, surely?'

He shook his head, the curls in spasm.

'No, mate, no. We'll find a quiet time after the party. With the wives.'

I raised my eyebrows.

'I mean … it will involve them too.'

'How intriguing.'

'We can do it once the guests have gone.'

'I suppose it would have made even more sense for us to stay the night then. I mean, the Premier Inn has its charms, but …' As soon as I spoke, I realised I sounded defensive.

Ben groaned. 'I knew you'd be pissed off. I said as much to Serena.'

'I'm not pissed off.'

'You are, LS. I can tell. Listen, it's a family thing. We've got all these aunts and uncles and in-laws. You know what it's like.'

I walked up the aisle of the chapel, trailing my hand along the edge of the hymn-book rails. When I got to the altar, I noticed dust on one fingernail. *You know what it's like*. One of his phrases.

'No, Ben,' I said, turning back to him, my voice reverberating off the vaulted ceiling. 'No, I don't. You seem to forget I have no family.'

In the failing light, I could no longer see his expression. His glass, empty now, hung lazily from his hand.

'You're it,' I said, but too quietly for him to hear.