Three Mothers

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Extract

Chapter One

Susie

Until she got ill, I thought I knew everything about my mother.

Three months or so after her death, we started clearing the house. My aunt Lottie persuaded us to do it. She was trying to help, of course, but even so, she annoyed me.

'Already?' I said, listening to my voice wobble, like a tightrope walker, down the telephone line.

She paused. 'You must take anything you want. Anything at all.'

'Really? How generous.'

'Of course you must,' she didn't seem to notice my knee-jerk sarcasm, although she must have registered my reluctance. 'But for Steve and Gus, you know, we ought to try and sort things out a bit.'

'I know, I know, we can't expect them to live in a shrine,' I said, although that's exactly what I'd have liked them to do. In fact, my brother Gus had moved in with some friends ('it's too freaky to be there,' he said), and Steve, my stepfather, was sleeping at his shop, but Lottie didn't know this, and I didn't tell her. She was bound to have an opinion of some sort, and anyway, it only strengthened her case.

So we set to work, one autumn weekend, Steve, Lottie and I, picking through the layers like forensic scientists, with black plastic bin liners, as the leaves fell from the cherry tree in the wind-swept garden. It was hard work, in every sense. There was so much stuff: pots and pans in the kitchen, blackened with use, the books (hundreds of faded orange Penguins, or cream-coloured *Livres de Poche*), the pictures on the wall, the clothes in the

cupboards – the things that defined my mother. They seemed to be waiting for her, rebelling against the facts. They had to be brought into line, I could see that; they had to be made to understand. It was difficult to do, though, wiping her from the world, almost like watching her die a second time.

I had some tapes already, my precious salvage. They were tiny little cassettes, which I'd recorded using a Dictaphone from work, during Mum's illness. I'd marked them 'Vera' or 'Helene' instead of 'Mum' and 'Granny,' perhaps pretending to myself that by using their names, I'd make it more of a dispassionate exercise, and I'd numbered them in sequence. For a long time I just left them in a box. I was superstitious about hearing Mum's voice, and besides, I needed time to absorb their contents. Her illness – and her death, which we'd known was coming – had forced me to try and see her as a person, but she wasn't quite the person I'd expected. I felt as if I'd found her and lost her, found and lost myself, all in one go.

I kept most of the photographs. Many of them were of us, me and Gus, and when Mum appeared she was often in the background, or out of focus, but there were a few nice ones, from over the decades. There was one of Mum getting married the first time, in very pointy shoes and a Jackie Kennedy hair-do, and getting married the second time, in a white trouser suit with shoulder pads. There was Mum as a toddler, with a floppy hat in a tropical garden, or as a young woman, sitting on a tartan rug at Devil's Dyke, smiling up at the camera, her pale legs curled awkwardly beneath her. There were a lifetime's worth of holiday snaps – pregnant, in the South of France, standing on bridges in any number of European cities, or with Steve, in Montreal, in a reindeer patterned jumper, with big, layered hair. There was a white-bordered snap of Mum outside hospital gates, clutching a tiny bundle to her chest, with a defiant smile, and stunned, car-crash eyes.

I didn't want the other stuff. It would have been too difficult to pick a few objects over the rest – I could see myself with crate-loads, it was just the kind of trick she might play from beyond the grave, to make me hobble through life, laden with her things. I left it to Steve, who dealt with such situations for a living, and could despatch furniture and kitchenware to the four winds with professional detachment, and Lottie, whose ostentatious efficiency felt like a flimsy defence against despair. I thought I was being restrained, but you don't get away that lightly.

Up until that spring, I thought I knew who I was and where I came from. I had my story, and I was sticking to it: I'd grown up, and moved on. That May, however, I began to feel that the past wasn't over, it was flowing in my veins. I realised that the people nearest to me were too close to see – they were the prism through which I viewed the world, and a puzzle I'd come back to for the rest of my life. I thought I'd escaped, but I was wrong.

So here it is – the story of my mother, and her mother, and the things they didn't tell me, until it was almost too late. Now I can see that it's also the story of me.

Helene

I sat on a bench in King's Cross, still amid the cross-currents of purposeful passengers, the shouts of the porters. It was raining outside, and the station floor was slippery with mud. The crowd wore damp woollen uniforms, glistening oilskins, and soggy tweed, and from time to time someone flapped an umbrella open, or closed. I watched the slow progress of the large station clock, and was anxious in case I had been forgotten. Another young woman sat a few feet away from me on the same bench, apparently engrossed in a paperback novel, and I glanced over at her curiously from time to time, wondering if she was waiting for the same reason I was.

I had been there nearly an hour. I thought of my baby daughter, and wondered if she'd settled easily for her nap. I remembered the last, illicit breastfeed I'd given her that morning – she was supposed to be fully weaned, in the few days before my departure, but still half-asleep, I'd allowed this secret consolation for us both, as we lay beneath my candlewick bedspread, the grey dawn seeping in around the blackout blinds. She'd clawed at me with such greedy absorption, her arm making a clumsy, flailing caress, and my tears, as they so often seemed to, had come with the milk.

By breakfast, the redness around my eyes was gone, and the baby was slurping a precious mixture of egg yolk and sugar enthusiastically from a spoon for my mother. Sitting together, opposite me, they had looked rather alike – their lively eyes peering out from within the folds of their chubby faces, my mother's hair drawn back in a tight bun, Lottie's few short wisps still thin and

patchy. As usual, the similarity made me feel both reassured and a little excluded. Baby Lottie held a spoon, which she banged against the table delightedly: my mother and I leaned forwards simultaneously, to move a tea cup out of her reach.

'Remember, cover your head in the sun. And ask for tea,' my mother said. 'The water will make you sick.' She was intent on practising her English, which added a theatricality, I felt, to our exchange – and she was a theatrical woman to start with, always playing to an invisible audience. 'Anything precious, keep it close. Inside the brassière is good,' she mouthed conspiratorially, although there was no one else to hear. How can she irritate me so, I wondered, even while I'm already missing her? She was a popular woman, mother-figure to many of the other tenants in our building, but the little quirks which others found endearing, I found tedious and affected.

I reached over, and took the baby from her. It was like a non-verbal language we'd developed, passing this plump parcel between us, attending to the small practical details of her care, communicating anger, annoyance, or affection, and most of all, perhaps, sharing the chance to be useful, in those months when powerlessness ate away at us like a wasting disease.

The baby searched my face for a joke, and I kissed her too hard. I knew her body better than my own: the rolls of fat around her limbs, the squidgy little hands, the exact degree of support she needed to sit, and to stand. I wore a new suit for my journey, with shoulder pads and a vaguely military cut, and I was worried that Lottie might mark it. 'Does she know?' I wondered again, 'can she sense something?' I reminded myself that of course she couldn't, but somehow the fact of her not knowing made it feel all the worse, as if I had to know for both of us.

Until a week before, I had been expecting that we would all travel together. Folded next to my ticket and papers, in my fawn leather handbag, was a hand-written letter, and the paragraph I knew by heart, picking apart the sentences as though they contained coded information, until I could probably have recited them backwards. 'Dearest,' my husband had written, 'the climate here is not healthy for a child, and the political and military situation is still unstable. I really think it best you leave her, for the time being at least, with your mother in England. However' (he always wrote and spoke as if he had access to the highest, most

privileged sources, and for a long time, I trusted that he did) 'the news in general is good, and I am confident the waiting will soon be over, and we will be able to begin our life together as a family.'

He had never seen our baby, and so, perhaps, it was easier for him to imagine she would wait – like a dry seed, patient in the dark earth, unfurling at some mysterious starting signal, as the first irregular droplets of his attention came seeping through the topsoil. I, on the other hand, had been a closer witness – although no less passive, I often felt – to her slow-motion explosion from my ovaries, the rapid doubling in weight, the inbuilt compulsion to smile, to grasp, to sit, to crawl.

Leaving the flat, alongside the sick sense of disbelief that lay in my stomach, there was also a fluttering excitement. Train times were not divulged, and the secrecy around the journey added a certain glamour, and made me feel a part of the war. I was young, and found it hard to 'also serve' by wiping up dribbles and keeping vigil by the radio. Stepping out into the street alone, I pretended to myself I was on some secret mission of national importance.

I sat on the bench, and watched the clock, and listened to the rain rattle on the station roof. After some time, a uniformed private appeared, and asked me politely to follow him. Although I had been waiting for so long, I still felt startled and unready. I gathered up my things, and hurried off to find my train.

Susie

The year after I graduated, I spent a weekend in Paris with my mother. Mum had been attending a conference at the Sorbonne, and I had been visiting my boyfriend Toby, whose family had a house in the Loire. We arranged to meet at the last minute, realising we'd be in the city at the same time, and stayed together in a cheap hotel for two nights. '*Maman et fille*,' the proprietor kept remarking, with a smile, as if there were something wonderful in this fact, although perhaps he was just bored with, or offended by, all the romantic weekenders, or just trying to be friendly.

As time passed, the weekend acquired a glow in my memory, partly because of the beautiful spring weather. It had been a long time since we'd been on holiday together, and it felt strange to spend time alone with Mum. She was recovering from a bad cold

– her hoarse voice and general fragility alarmed me. Later, this concern became linked in my mind with her subsequent illness, although in fact, they were a couple of years apart.

Mum had a life-long love affair with France ('weird, considering she's a kraut really,' Toby said, in the jokey, ironic tone he used as a sort of habitual disclaimer, to indicate he knew this was stretching it a bit). It was something to do with a wish to identify herself as a continental, anyway, or perhaps just her age and class, since a lot of my friends' parents are the same, going on about their second homes – and it made her a great, if sometimes rather gushy travelling companion.

There were the usual irritations, of course. She had an annoying habit of peppering her conversation with sarcastic asides in French ('*tant pis*,' or '*ça se voit*'), and a memsahib manner in the Moroccan restaurant on the first night (she tended to reminisce self-importantly about her colonial childhood to waiters, and I was never sure quite how this would go down). She wounded my pride by smiling at my attempts to speak French, and was characteristically vague, forgetting the hotel keys in her room, and leaving either her bag or her glasses behind almost every time we sat down. There were so many old resentments and flashpoints to be navigated carefully around for the trip to be a success, and these cast shadows over even the more mundane topics. The new context, however, helped me to transcend these frustrations, and to see her with a bit of distance. I enjoyed sitting opposite her in restaurants, listening to her translate the menu with such enthusiasm. For moments, we managed to relate to each other simply as two grown women together, and I think it was a novelty we both enjoyed.

While we were crossing a bridge from the Ile de la Cité to the Left Bank, the sun came out. We squinted in the unaccustomed brightness – almost the same pucker on almost the same brow – our faces pale as mushrooms, after months of overcast weather. The light danced on the water, and behind us, Notre Dame crouched like an insect, heavy with scribbled detail. 'Do you remember that awful joke Gus used to tell, about Quasimodo?' I said, and Mum shook her head, and smiled, the very mention of his name drawing us closer, making us a family. I related it badly ('his face rings a bell') and she pulled a face, and laughed, and the warmth was bliss on my skin, and all my senses strained to absorb

the softness of the sunshine.

'I sometimes wish I had a video camera inside me,' I said, 'which could record sensations and smells as well as sights.'

'You do, darling,' Mum said. 'It's called your memory.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' I said. 'I should remember to switch it on more often.' A pleasure boat passed beneath us, under the bridge, the passengers pointing, and shading their eyes. 'Do you ever do that thing, of deciding to remember a particular moment?'

'Oh yes,' she said.

'I'm always doing that. And then a better moment always comes along just after, so I try to remember that instead.'

'I remember the very first time I did that – or the first time it worked, anyway. It was outside the white house we had in Dhaka, so I must have been really quite little. There had been a heavy rain, and there were puddles in the yard, and one of them had that oily, rainbowy effect you sometimes get, and I said right, I'm going to remember that *forever*. And, evidently, I did.'

We made a small detour, to avoid some tourists taking a photograph on the pavement. 'Bit of a banal thing to pick, when you think about it,' Mum finished up.

That day stuck in my memory, though – Mum's childlike delight in finding the restaurant in St Germain still open, the fish soup, the view over crisp tablecloths on to the busy street. It was surprisingly warm, and the white wine made me woozy. I was missing Toby already, which was perhaps why my conversation was fuller than usual of his views and ambitions, veiled beneath the first person plural – we think this, we hope that.

I could feel a distance in my mother which usually signalled disapproval – something she deliberately wasn't saying – and it irritated me intensely. Perhaps because of the wine, I decided to confront her about this. 'You don't really like Toby, do you?'

'What makes you think that?' Mum asked, carefully.

'Oh, I can tell. It's pretty obvious. The way you talk about him. The way you don't talk about him. It's OK, I don't mind.'

'Actually, I think he's very sweet, most of the time. One does have to be a little cautious, though, with these college relationships.' She paused, fished in her handbag, and lit up a Benson & Hedges, with a long, hungry drag.

'When are you going to give up?' I said. As a little girl, I used to hide her cigarettes. I knew, at an early age, that cigarettes could

kill you, but she seemed so invulnerable to me that this was a rather abstract concern. I think it was more that I liked the rare sense of power it gave me, and the feeling of being in the right.

'God, sweetheart, I don't know.'

'Anyway, you met Dad at university.'

'Precisely. Actually, I met your father before we started, but I suppose the real *coup de foudre* came then, yes. Heady stuff, of course, but it can be rather, I don't know, a thing of its time. You're still changing so fast at that age.'

'People grow up faster these days,' I said, resentfully. 'And Toby's not like you think – he's quite insecure, actually – although I suppose he can seem a bit full of himself sometimes,' I conceded.

'Can't they all, babe,' Mum laughed her big, throaty laugh. 'Can't they all.'

The weekend was quite enough: we were beginning to get on each other's nerves, embarrassed by the infantilising effect we seemed to have on each other, and keen to beat a retreat into the blissful independence of adulthood. We wanted to control each other. We each took the other's deficiencies far too personally, or perhaps we were frustrated by the possibilities we saw in each other, which only an infuriating stubbornness prevented from being fully realised. After a while, the effort would become too much for one of us – the slow, ominous rise in atmospheric pressure would lead inevitably to headaches, tetchiness, and then an explosion, usually over something quite trivial. I was keen to go before the pattern ran its course.

Even so, on leaving her at the Gare du Nord, I had a moment of panic. It seemed an unnatural place to say good-bye – one wants to leave one's parents at home, waiting on the doorstep for one's return. It was partly something about seeing her at a distance, in that great cavernous space, a stout, middle-aged woman in a dark green raincoat and violet scarf, her short, dark hair streaked with grey. She looked so small, from far away, and so like all the other people in the crowd.

For a moment, I had a sense that there was something important I'd forgotten to ask her, or to tell her, or to give her. I wanted to call out to her, to find some reason to go back. Instead, I waved to her on the concourse. I could still feel the imprint of her forceful kiss, on my cheek, as I made my way through the crowds.

I'd had maternal feelings for as long as I could remember – even as a child, perhaps. I dreamed about small things – alive, and in danger of being squashed or accidentally eaten – that I had to look after. Tiny, talking tangerines needed my protection; I gave birth repeatedly, painlessly, to a half eaten corn on the cob, or to a kitten ('they're all little animals to start with,' the midwife said). Sometimes there were actual babies, with spooky, see-through bodies, the size of a finger. Invariably, they met some horrible end.

We had no money for a child, though, and there was plenty going on; I disentangled the dreams from my waking thoughts each morning, as I brushed my hair. I supported Gregor through his doctorate with a variety of translation jobs. I paid the rent on our cluttered little flat in Camden Town, with its gas meter, dusty cheese plant, Indian cotton bedspread – picking up socks, newspapers, ashtrays and leaflets off the floor, and drawing the curtains, daily, to let the light in. We got a cat, called Leon, after Trotsky.

We spent a lot of time with a tall Canadian called Steve – a friend of Gregor's with a Frank Zappa moustache which seemed a little ridiculous, even at the time. Steve flirted with me, supplied Gregor with the occasional joint, and brought his new women round for approval and spaghetti bolognaise. Many of the people we'd known at college were in London – there were pubs and parties to go to, and benefits and talks and demos. In the summers we travelled, hitch-hiking around the Mediterranean, sleeping on beaches, living on bread and tomatoes.

Back home, however, my stomach gave a little lurch when I saw babies on buses, and I tried not to stare. I became interested in the children of friends, and a little too anxious to coax smiles from them. Their warmth and weight called to me – I wanted an excuse to touch, to smell, to bury my head. These embarrassing, sometimes quite frightening urges felt strangely like a perversion, and I learned to hide them. On visits, I played the role of everyone's favourite young auntie, letting the children pull on my beads and my hair, chasing them round the kitchen, until some over-indulgence, some imbalance of power they could feel but not name, made them uneasy, or over-excited, like hounds that scent blood. Their mothers looked at me with sympathy, but took back the frac-

tious infants with an easy, tired familiarity that, in itself, stung me. I tried to curb my growing interest in buying presents for friends with new babies. Fingering a rack of baby-gros, I felt a tightness in my chest, and had to make an effort to breathe and speak normally. 'It's as if you're high in here,' Gregor said.

Then, as the decade drew to a close, Gregor was offered a lectureship at the new university in Sussex. He'd always found financial dependency difficult, so this role reversal was a relief to us both. We put down a deposit on a narrow, cream-painted house in Brighton – bubbling and flaking on the outside, as though suffering some dreadful skin disease – with peeling wallpaper inside, and a long, sloping garden. Steve, who had a van, helped us move down, but his relentless references to suburbia, or 'plastic people', and his clowning around – lampshades on the head, gurning at the other drivers on the motorway, endless renditions of 'Oh I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside', with a Canadian accent – suddenly irritated us more than before.

While Gregor was still unloading his books, Steve and I sat under the cherry tree at the bottom of the garden, smoking. 'Don't do this,' Steve said suddenly. 'It won't suit you.' I looked up in surprise, from behind my hair, but saw only his spindly, denim-clad legs, as he rose to his feet and strode back towards the kitchen door. I wanted to ask him what he meant, but I suppose I must have had some idea that there were things there I didn't want to unearth. I didn't get a chance, anyway, because after that he said his goodbyes, and walked out of my life for over ten years.

The house used to be a bed and breakfast, and we kept the old sign that said 'Vacancies/No Vacancies' hanging over the fireplace, as a memento. We stripped off the worst of the flowery, mildewy wallpaper, and had gas fires installed. We put some of our posters back up, this time in clip frames (a Cezanne print, a bull-fight poster, and a poster from the Paris demonstrations, of a sinister-looking gas-mask behind a microphone, 'La Police Vous Parle, Tous les Soirs à 20h'). We bought a sofa from Habitat, and some big glass jars to keep pasta, rice and pulses in. We had a kind of tacit agreement not to mention the number of bedrooms – Gregor colonised one of them, at the top of the house, for his books, papers and typewriter. When I forced open the rickety, sash windows, I could smell the sea.

I found a job teaching French at a local sixth form, where I was

regarded with some suspicion, with my long hair, my scruffy clothes, and my radical views (the other teachers were mostly older, brisk and neat). I stopped taking the Pill – Gregor was actually the one who suggested it, and I agreed, with a mixture of fear and relief. I knew he wasn't entirely ready, but I wasn't sure he would ever be. Besides, I felt I was in danger of becoming a stalker.

At that point, the strange dreams stopped. Ironically, I had never felt less broody. Brighton seemed full of women with rainproof head scarves and string bags, or tired-looking girls with pushchairs. There was a seediness to the city, particularly out of season, that made me think of the darker side to the dirty weekend stereotype – young mothers in bedsits, back-street abortions, or the suicides that, I was told, sometimes washed up on the shingle. Our new life made me feel as if the pair of us were acting the part of adults, pretending to be grown-ups in some kitchen sink drama, or perhaps on *Mr and Mrs*, that grotesque TV show in which a married couple answered questions to show how well they really knew each other, to win a holiday, or some desirable consumer durable.

I went to see our new doctor, without telling Greg. I'd had my suspicions for a while: the butter was rancid, I couldn't bear the smell of rubber in the car – it was either a baby or a stomach bug. I didn't want a big song and dance about it every month, though – I wanted to be sure – and moreover, part of me didn't believe it was possible. I sat in the waiting room, surrounded by battered copies of *Reader's Digest* and *Women's Realm*. The doors and windows had that blobby, grid-effect glass in them, and I could just see the muted colours and blurred shapes of the people moving outside. Inside the consulting room, there was a high, leather examining couch, and the smell of surgical spirit. The doctor sent me off to pee into a small plastic pot, and told me with a beneficent smile, almost as if he'd inseminated me himself.

I stood in the kitchen, while the cat wound himself ingratiatingly around my ankles. It was dark outside and the windows were cloudy with condensation, from the potatoes boiling on the stove. I heard the yank of a handbrake in the street outside, an engine hum into silence, and the slam of a car door.

Suddenly, I felt scared. Telling people these things is what makes them feel real. Part of me felt remote, watching from the

outside with a kind of detached interest, and thinking 'am I reacting normally?' This is the kind of moment, I thought, that you rehearse for in your head, and I wished I had the courage to do it with flair, in a way that would make a good story, later on ('. . . and Gregor nearly fell off his chair,' I imagined myself saying, to general hilarity).

Then footsteps, the key in the lock, and Gregor was standing in the hall, unbelting his leather jacket, raking one hand through his hair, humming beneath his breath. I thought of you inside me – a tangerine, corn-on-the-cob, kitten creature – the size of a microbe, perhaps, of an unformed idea, doing a leisurely backstroke, through the mysterious depths of my amniotic fluid.

Susie

That night, I dreamed about Mum. I was massaging her forehead, the way I used to as a little girl, when she had a headache. Mum had always made great claims for the success of this treatment – it made me feel clever and powerful, with my 'magic fingers'. It was more of an atmosphere, really, than a story. I woke and saw the light streaming into the bedroom; mounds of clothes lay all around, and Toby sprawled beside me beneath the duvet. I remembered that the results of Mum's tests were due.

I hadn't seen her for some time, although I received reports on the telephone – later, with that irrationally self-absorbed guilt such things provoke, it seemed almost as if the world had been waiting until my back was turned. Apparently, Mum had been feeling ill for several weeks. She'd lost weight, and her skin had developed a yellowish tinge.

Hepatitis, the GP said, and they needed to find out what kind (after a little anxious research, I could only ascertain that A sounded the best and D sounded the worst). It made sense, because she'd made a trip to Asia and North Africa a few months earlier, a big-deal nostalgia-tour, revisiting some of the places where she'd lived as a child. I couldn't at first understand why she'd sounded so relieved about this diagnosis. 'To be honest, darling, I was scared it might be, you know . . .' she tailed off, on the other end of the line, suddenly uncharacteristically coy.

'What?' I said.

'You *know*. The Big C.'

I was living in a shared house in Camberwell. My boyfriend Toby and I had the largest bedroom. Toby was going to be a formidable human rights lawyer, but for the moment, he was doing a law conversion course, working in a bar, and growing a goatee beard that seemed rather silly, even at the time. We lived with my best friend from college, Zoe, a pretty Texan with a stud in her nose. Zoe wanted to work in the media, and was making coffee and doing the photocopying for a TV production company. The fourth tenant was a large German postgraduate student, called Christina. I had signed the lease – I was the one who knew what day the bins were emptied, and the one who most often went shopping (although we all stole Christina's crisp bread, when the cupboards got really empty). Our hall was full of other people's post, a big batik wall hanging (a present from Mum's trip) and boxes of stuff waiting to be recycled.

I climbed out of bed, and searched the bedroom for something clean and uncrumpled enough to wear to work. It was the 90s, and we were young – full of easy self-righteousness about the Criminal Justice Act, the cones hotline, and 'back to basics'. I had just started what I thought of as my first *proper* job, although I'd done plenty of crap jobs – waitressing, temping and so on – and it was turning out to be less different than I'd expected. I dressed quietly, so as not to wake Toby. Then I found a patch of exposed cheekbone to kiss, between the rumpled duvet and the rumpled blonde hair – the pull of his warm, sleeping body hard to resist – before gently closing the door, on my way out.

I worked in a cramped office, full of overflowing box files, overlooking a square in Bloomsbury. Midway through the morning, I telephoned home – which is how I still thought of the house in which I'd grown up – to ask about Mum, but after eight rings, the answerphone clicked in, and I decided not to leave a message. When I got back after lunch, there was a post-it note on my desk: 'Gus rang.' This alarmed me. Gus was my younger brother. He almost never called me, and wouldn't have rung just to chat.

I called back again, and it was Gus who answered. 'Oh, hi Suze,' he said.

'I got your message. What's wrong?' Out of the window I could see pigeons and plane trees, and office workers eating their sandwiches on benches.

'It's Mum,' he said. He sounded gruff and peculiar. 'She's here. I think she wants to talk to you. Suze . . .?' for some reason, I could feel my heart thumping, and taste the coffee I'd drunk earlier rising in my throat. 'It isn't good.'

'Hello, Susanna,' Mum said. Just hearing her voice reassured me. 'We just got back from the hospital.' She paused. 'I'm afraid that they say it is cancer, after all.' She managed to sound both apologetic and melodramatic at once. Because she was on the end of the line, talking to me, I couldn't really take it in. My first thought was, 'Well, it can't be all that bad.'

I asked questions – what kind, what next. She didn't seem to know very much, but mentioned an operation. 'They've not been particularly reassuring about it so far,' she said, dryly.

'I'll come right down,' I said.

'Only if you want,' Mum said. 'I don't want this to be too . . . disruptive.' Her 'courage in adversity' voice made me feel bizarrely irritated with her.

'I want.'

'That would be nice,' she said, as if conceding a small defeat. 'You've nearly missed the blossom for this year.'

I told my colleagues – surprisingly calmly, it seemed to me, but when I wrote down my home phone number for them, I noticed that my hand was shaking. I rang Toby. 'I've got some bad news,' I told him; he thought I meant I'd have to work late.

A sympathetic colleague gave me a lift back to South London. Watching the ornate roofs of the big Bloomsbury hotels go by, I had the feeling that perhaps I ought to be crying. I tried to talk through the news with her, hoping to clarify things for myself. 'I hope you don't think I'm cold,' I said.

'God, no,' she said. 'It's not a competition.'

Back at the house, Toby was in, with the TV on, and a large book on 'The Law of Tort' lying open on the coffee table. He followed me upstairs, and I began throwing clothes into a shoulder bag. 'I'm here for you,' he kept saying, and he kept trying to hug me. It hadn't occurred to me that he wouldn't be there for me, and seemed to be missing the point, somehow. I hugged him back, briefly, and worried about catching my train.

In the back of a minicab, weaving through the traffic to London Bridge, I remembered my dream, and wondered for a moment if I still had magic fingers. Then I started to cry – big, dry, gulping

sobs, almost, I was distantly aware, like a bad actor. Losing my composure so completely in front of a stranger was frightening: I panicked for a moment that I might not be able to get it together again.

'Are you OK?' the driver asked, with precise, African articulation, 'do you want me to stop?' I wondered where he was from – Mum would have known, probably, and might even have been there. Unable to speak, I waved at him helplessly, to drive on.

Helene

The train gathered speed as we left King's Cross. London was laid waste around us. The rows of houses reminded me of rotten teeth, with blackened gaps, some crumbling away, the few, here and there, that still seemed good, like a joke really, a reminder of the others' deficiencies. Doors opened onto nothing, bedroom wallpaper was exposed, lavatory bowls hung over thin air. It seemed so brutally invasive one almost felt embarrassed, but compelled to look.

The logic of our lives had disintegrated, and those things we thought of as permanent had been exposed as matchstick and dust, precious possessions reduced to rubbish and filth. Some places looked like a stage set, a flimsy façade, so jarringly, recently rearranged; the older sites, already overgrown with brambles and buddleia, made me think of the ruins of some ancient civilisation. It made me feel hopeless, as we thundered through the suburbs – it left me suspecting a futility in all of our attempts to construct order and meaning. People sometimes think that it was just the East End and the docks that were destroyed, but all I can say is, you should have seen the rest of it. The whole city was an immense field of ruins, from end to end. There was something deeply depressing about the mess.

The countryside looked more normal, as we made our way north, although the station names had been painted out, at the start of the war, to confuse the potential invaders. All the way, I had the idea that I might change my mind: at the last minute, I could just say no, and turn around, and the thought made me panicky. I ate the cheese sandwich which my mother had given me, in the tin box which I used to take to work. Dusk fell, and then the thick,

blanketing, pre-industrial dark roared by the windows. We drew down the blinds and I tried to sleep.

In the night, I woke suddenly, as if someone had spoken my name. For a moment I couldn't remember where I was, and felt for the baby next to me – since her birth, I'd been subconsciously aware of her proximity, in the way one is aware of one's own limbs, even when asleep. The rhythmic rattle soon reminded me I was on a train, and I could feel the strangers sleeping around me. I had to remind myself that she hadn't fallen down a crack, or onto the floor: she wasn't there. My breasts were hot and hard, still in tune with her hunger, uncomfortably full with her bedtime feed. I tried to conjure for myself, over the miles, the fast, shallow breathing that usually calmed me back to sleep, and the extraordinary way she radiated peace.

The next day, I changed trains in Glasgow. By now, there were almost a hundred of us, other wives, with square-shouldered coats and jaunty hats, carefully set hair, chunky heels, and nervous, scarlet smiles. They had suitcases and trunks; some of them had their children with them, and seeing them was uncomfortable for me. We exchanged details about our husbands, as a sort of shorthand for ourselves, and I told a few of them about Lottie.

I felt worse by then. I was agitated and dizzy, hot and frantic. My poor breasts burned and prickled, and it felt as if the ducts within them had solidified into seams of iron ore. We got off the train and took a bus, to a field on what felt to me like the very edge of the world. By then, the chirpy enthusiasm of the rest of the group was also fading, and we gradually became less like a schoolgirls' outing, and more like the groups of refugees on newsreels, our carefully set hair-dos ruined by the wind, our chunky heels sliding in the mud. We waited in a row of Nissen huts, crowded with our luggage and some rudimentary metal furniture.

Tearfully, I confessed my discomfort to some of the other women. 'Milk fever,' one of them said, knowledgably. 'We ought to find you a doctor.'

The naval doctor I saw seemed bemused and rather embarrassed. He dosed me up with vast quantities of Epsom salts. I had to pump the wretched stuff out myself, bending over a basin like an animal. I spent three days tossing and turning in the rough blankets, making the trip back and forth to the nearest privy. The other women were kind and sympathetic, but I was miserable and humil-

iated, and it was extremely painful.

Gradually, my wretched, ridiculous bosoms went down, and my temperature subsided. I had felt essential, full of love, and milk, and now I just had soft little rags, squeezed dry. There was no longer any question in my mind about turning round and going back. We had been warned not to communicate our location to anyone, and I hadn't been able to telephone home. It seemed to me I had been travelling for a week, and I felt as if I should be in another continent already. It was almost as if I'd had something amputated, the shape of which I could still feel in the air. I was left feeling empty and drained, but also strangely light and free.

Then, finally, word came to get ready, and we hurriedly snatched up our stuff. I wrapped myself up against the wind, and trod carefully, and watched the choppy grey water, and it wasn't until the vast cliff face of the ship was almost upon us that I really looked up. The enormous, dizzying bulk of a great ocean liner loomed above me. One huge funnel belched smoke into the sky. There were rows and rows of faces, peering over at us. At that moment, even from the depths of my misery, I thought to myself, well, this might not be quite so bad after all. There were thousands of men, all in uniform, lining the decks, and gazing down at us: just *staring*.

Vera

We carried on going to work and doing the house up, but the new information added a surreal undercurrent to life. Gregor was daunted by the news ('bloody hell, that was quick'), and, at first, alarmingly quiet. Then, for a day or so, he was triumphant, and wanted to announce to the world that we had 'a bun in the oven', or that I was 'up the duff'. I didn't want to tell anyone yet, and made him promise, on the verge of tears, suddenly so adamant that he agreed to hold back. After a couple of days, he didn't seem to want to talk about it any more, either. 'You're right,' he said. 'Let's keep it quiet for a bit.'

I wanted a chance to get used to the idea myself, first. It still felt as private, and as tenuous, as a missed period, and I didn't feel ready for excitement and congratulations. I felt as if the announcement would turn me, and my insides, into public property. I had a

dream in which my womb had been placed in a glass case as a science exhibit. I worried about my new job – perhaps they'd feel that I'd tricked them, or let them down. The stories about 'fallen women' and 'the wages of sin' that I'd heard all my life were so powerful that I had to keep reminding myself that I was married, and grown-up, and it was actually OK for me to be pregnant, and not a dark, shameful tragedy. There was also the secret fear that, after years of quiet yearning, I suddenly, perversely, might not be able to seem as unequivocally happy as perhaps I ought. I even worried, for God's sake, about the cat, and how he would adapt.

Not telling people was also peculiar, however, and made me feel a little mad. 'Oh, we're fine, pretty much the same,' I said to friends on the telephone, and enthused defensively about life outside the capital; 'yes, thanks, settling in well,' I replied to my colleagues, and gushed about the sea air.

I spoke to Sheila, my oldest friend and co-conspirator from school, with whom I'd set the world to rights so many nights – over barley wine and Woodbines, or cider and mentholated cigarettes, and lately over red wine and the Gauloises that Gregor and I bought in bulk on holiday, in soft, blue-paper packets. Sheila was feeling jaded – she was just coming out of a relationship with a beautiful young Australian, who'd done industrial quantities of LSD, developed a paranoid fear of electricity, and lost all interest in sex. I did my best to console her, but after I put the receiver down, I felt lonely and strangely guilty, as if I'd been secretly plotting to change teams.

We went to dinner with some of Gregor's new colleagues, in a big house in Lewes, with a hallway full of the debris – blotchy paintings and teeny tiny wellington boots – of the sleeping children upstairs. Over the *coq au vin*, I searched the faces of the parents around the table for clues, and read too much into every little sign of contentment or complaint. The thing that was different was so much in my head, so much in my daydreams – it actually felt very like my old, illicit fantasies about what it would be like to have a baby, and it was sometimes hard to believe that anything real had changed.

Yet inside, my whole mental landscape was shifting; my whole internal world was turning on its axis. Alone with Gregor, sitting in the bath or over the washing up, I initiated a few conversations along the lines of 'can you believe we're going to be parents?' in

which I'd go a little further down the path each time, tentatively verbalising my thoughts, until I reached the point at which it felt uncomfortable, hearing something so intimate, so risky, and so fantastical, spoken out loud.

Gregor didn't seem to understand, 'What's there to talk about?' he said. 'Isn't it a bit late for that?' While handling fruit at the greengrocers, while cycling into work, with the wind in my face, or driving across the downs in our rattly little Triumph Herald, I felt pangs of betrayal towards my girlhood, and all those imagined futures I might once have had; sudden moments of mourning for my free, simple, empty self, and for a state of solitude that I felt I'd never quite have again.

I felt slightly sick all the time, as if life had suddenly become a never-ending car journey, and I was overcome, at intervals, by a debilitating tiredness. Ironically, I was introducing the upper sixth to 'La Nausée', and I would discuss the text with the class, fixing my eyes steadily on the clock at the back of the room, and breathing deeply in an attempt to overcome my own queasiness. Sometimes it was too much for me, and I had to make a dash for the white tiled toilet across the hall, retching into the ceramic bowl whilst holding my hair back with one hand, and then dabbing ineffectually at my mouth with the hard, green-paper hand towels, before returning to my bewildered students, and the next agonisingly slow paragraph.

During free periods, the exhaustion would overcome me – a powerful undertow, dragging me down in great, enticing waves – and I would sometimes lose consciousness, as suddenly and completely as if I'd been drugged, slumped forwards on my marking. I would wake to find dribble in the margins, and fragments of a seventeen-year-old's scrawl imprinted across my forehead. At lunchtimes, if I had the staff-room to myself, I would lie on my back on the floor, and stare up at the sunlight filtering through the orange woollen curtains, and the dust particles dancing round the brown checked easy chairs and ring-marked coffee table. It was hard to keep up the pretence of normality.

My breasts were growing. The feeling reminded me of adolescence – they were hot, and sore, and heavy, swelling up like one of the bawdy cartoons on the postcards they sold at the sea front. It was strange, this feeling that my body, which for many years now had simply delivered the expected degree of pleasure or pain

at the appropriate moments, suddenly had an agenda of its own. Even my T-shirt hurt, and my bras were suddenly too small. I'd always had a fairly average bosom, certainly in comparison with the film star icons of my teenage years, and although I didn't waste my time with some of my class-mates' methods ('I must, I must, I must increase my bust') and later grew to appreciate the infantile nature of society's fixation with the breast – well, there was a part of me that was also secretly rather impressed with my magnificently curvaceous new cleavage.

On Saturday, I consulted books about pregnancy in the municipal library, checking neurotically for any of my students who might be around as I did so. The books available were either briskly medical, with intricate line drawings of the foetus in utero, or filled with matronly advice for new mothers, with diagrams on the different ways to fold a nappy, and sections entitled 'He's Apt to Change His Eating Habits'. They were compelling, but scary – I felt rather as I had as a teenager, reading 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' under the bedcovers, trying to work out what exactly was going on, with the added intrigue of wondering what the nuns would make of it all. It was rather like a language, I told myself, practising the words under my breath – episiotomy, post partum, layette – and there was nothing like knowing a bit of the vocabulary to make me feel better about things.

That night, though, in bed, hot tears welled up and slid down my cheeks. 'I'm going to lose my figure,' I sobbed on to Gregor's shoulder, and then, amending the thought, 'I'm not sure I'm really cut out to be a mother. It's a bit much, to have to go through all this for someone you don't even know yet.'

'But you're like a goddess,' Gregor whispered, tracing my flank with one hand. 'A fertility goddess, swollen with fecundity.' We had been together a long time – he knew the sing-songy tone of voice which would soothe me, but I felt he was going through the motions, lacking in real empathy.

'A puking goddess, you mean.' One of the library books that afternoon had insisted that pregnancy wasn't an illness, but a completely natural, healthy state. It felt like an illness to me, though – and besides, I reasoned, feeling unwell was presumably just as 'natural' as feeling great. I sometimes consoled myself, when I had flu, with the thought of epic battles being fought out in my mucus and my bloodstream, and there was a similar sense of

something big going on in my body in which I – as a person – was only incidentally involved.

'Ten per cent extra for free,' Gregor drew me closer. 'Two for the price of one.' The wooden wind chimes at the window murmured to themselves, and the silver light from the street lamp outside spilled through the curtains. 'Your body's working miracles, behind your back. It's bound to take it out of you.'

He started to press himself against me. My skin felt too tender to be touched, even by the sheets. The aching exhaustion reminded me of a feeling from childhood, which my mother had briskly dismissed as 'growing pains' – I wanted unconsciousness to swallow me up, and could already feel the downward spiralling towards sleep when I kept my head still. 'Please, don't,' I moaned, rolling away, and burying my face in the pillow.

Susie

Out of the window, I watched the countryside spool past: green and gold pastures, stately old trees, pillar-box red station furniture. People slept in their seats, a look of drained suffering on their faces.

My brother, Gus, met me in the station forecourt, waiting behind the wheel of Mum's big old Volvo. He got out as I approached. He had the same boyish face as before, but transplanted on to a taller body, with broader shoulders. He looked bewildered, lost, as if he had been expecting someone else.

I kissed him on the cheek. 'Are you OK?'

'It's so fucked up,' he said, as he lobbed my bag into the boot. We got in, and he slammed the door. 'She's been talking about dying.'

I released a deep, shaky breath. 'Typical,' I said.

'Yep,' Gus echoed. 'Drama queen.'

There it all was, the same tatty old town – the greasy cafés and wrought-iron balconies, the chimney pots and gulls, the peeling cream house-fronts and steep elegant streets, sloping down to the sea, which still surprised me with its scale. There was something strange about the way time passed there. On my intermittent visits back, I felt as if I saw it as a time-lapse film, all sped up – the accelerated blossoming and withering of districts, a flash of colour

as bars and shops opened, changed their name, then closed, the swarming growth of new glass, fresh brickwork, or scaffolding. I recognised street names with surprise, as we passed. The information belonged to a part of my brain, a part of myself, no longer in use, buried in the substrata of my personality.

It was also strange to see Gus driving, changing gear unthinkingly with his large, man's hands. He was talking about Mum's eyes. 'She looks like an alien,' he was saying. 'She frightens little kids.'

Gus was on a 'year off' that threatened to become longer, retaking an A level, working at Oddbins, and partying hard. Usually he irritated me, because things seemed to come so easily to him. He had that inconsistent maturity that the kids of divorcees often acquire, and was a master of manipulation, it seemed to me. Gus took after Dad, with his mass of unruly ginger curls. I have straight brown hair, and pale blue eyes; 'you've got your mother's eyes', people sometimes said. Usually, I was indignant, cynical, a little jealous, but now, I felt a surge of protectiveness towards him.

Mum met us in the hallway. Seeing her hit me as no telephone conversation could. She looked shrunken, frail, and suddenly, much older. It was as if she'd been freeze dried. Small folds of flesh, around her neck, her cheeks, her arms, had gone, as if they'd been sand-blasted away, taking a certain softness from her face and leaving new angles beneath. Her normally pale skin had a vivid, mustard tinge, and the whites of her eyes were a stunning lemon yellow. I thought of the plastic we'd stuck on to the car headlights for long-ago holidays in France, when I was a child, to change their colour. I felt sick, and scared.

'Well, this is a bit of a bore, isn't it?' Mum said, and kissed me. I started crying again.

We went into the kitchen, where crying seemed to be the new conversation.

Steve, my stepfather – a big, well-meaning bear of a man – heated up tomato soup and made a salad. An old friend of Mum's, Cathy, was also there: she was almost like an aunt to me, a small, birdlike Liverpudlian with blonde hair and a maternal way about her. Mum was itching so badly she couldn't sit still. She said that her tears stung her. 'I suppose they must have bile in them,' she said.

Steve, who was Canadian, was trying to be positive, 'we're

gonna fight this, hey?' he kept saying, 'we're gonna beat this', and 'it's not such a bad time of year to get sick'.

'It's OK, we're allowed to cry,' Mum said. 'We've been so brave all day. I always thought I was one of those excitable continental types, but I surprise myself. It seems I do have a stiff upper lip, after all.'

I looked around the table. The faces, in a pool of light from the low hanging lamp, were distorted with shock, and shining with tears. It was like a bad dream in which everything was familiar but altered. The kitchen looked the same as it always had – the cork board with postcards, lists and timetables pinned to it, two spindly avocado plants, grown from stones, on the window sill, and the faded Provençal cotton curtains which hung from the work surfaces, concealing saucepans, colanders and earthenware ovendishes.

'It's funny. These are the kind of things you rehearse for, in your head,' Mum was saying. 'Yet when it comes to the point, one's thoughts are really quite banal.'

The meal was punctuated with telephone conversations, close friends and family ringing to ask about the tests. I didn't want Mum to tell anyone about the cancer – childishly, I felt that if she didn't tell them, it might go away – but she was almost brutally direct. It seemed as if through telling people, she was forcing the news into herself. I could hear her voice, from the hall, in crisis mode, and could all too easily imagine the other side of the conversation: shocked, practical, sympathetic. It was my way of reacting too – very female, very British, adamantly coping, spinning a swift web of solidarity against the unknown – 'yes, of course, I'll keep you posted.' Hearing it from a distance, however, something in it also revolted me. I hated listening to this new reality becoming established, and taking root, as well as the speed and efficiency of the process, the jostling to be at the centre of things, and a barely-concealed hunger for drama.

Mum came back in, aware of our eyes on her, and sat back down. We talked about the hospital. She told us about lying in a tube, inside a scanner that clunked and vibrated as it looked through her flesh in slices, like a loaf of bread. Despite the shock, I could hear her beginning to make it into a story. 'I couldn't believe that sign on the shelf,' she said. She sounded perplexed. 'In the room where they told us. Did you see it? It said HAVE A

NICE DAY. Someone should take that down.'

'That's terrible. You ought to mention it to them,' Cathy said.

'You're an old hand at all this,' Mum said. 'I suppose.' Cathy's husband had died of cancer, six years earlier.

'This is very different,' Cathy said. 'Cancer is such a catch-all term. This isn't what Mike had.'

'And who wants to be a cancer veteran, anyway?'

Cathy began to blink rapidly, and then to cry. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'It just seems so . . .'

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to . . .'

'Do you want a tissue?'

I tried to change the subject. 'How's Will?' I asked. Cathy's son was the same age as I was, and we'd been to the same school. He was abroad, teaching English.

Cathy pulled herself together. 'He's OK, I think. Still in Bratislava, but he says he's coming back in the summer. I was beginning to worry he'd be over there for good.'

It grew late, and Cathy said her goodbyes. Gus had vanished into his room, and Steve went to his study, ostensibly to work, but really to finish his beer and play patience on the computer. I wanted to help Mum clear up, and she wouldn't let me, an edge of irritation in her voice that nearly started me crying again. She said that she wouldn't be able to sleep because of the itching, so she might as well have something to do. I sat in the kitchen chair, watching her. We talked about my new job.

'It's OK, I mean, there's nothing actually wrong. It's just not like I expected.' I didn't know how to communicate the disappointment I felt with the world, and my intimate relationship with the office photocopier and fax machine – what scared me most was that she might be disappointed on my behalf, so I focused on the bigger picture. 'It's as if you learn this secret language, all these catch-phrases, social exclusion, capacity building, gender empowerment, blah, blah, and then people will give you money. It all seems so cynical, somehow. It's almost as if they're spending money to keep things pretty much as they are.'

'It sounds incredibly interesting, though, darling. We're so proud of you, doing something so worthwhile. I'm sure, when you've been there a while, you can change the way they do things, shake things up a bit, cut down on all the red tape and so on.' She sounded exhausted.

'Huh. I doubt it.'

'Oh, I'm sure you can. Just what the world needs, a few more sparky young women in charge. Show those men in suits a thing or two.' I could hear her feeling for a familiar interpretation – left versus right, wimmin versus patriarchy, idealism versus pessimism. As usual, it frustrated me: I felt she wasn't really listening to what I was saying.

I couldn't bring myself to say goodnight. I had that same feeling again, that there was something important that I'd forgotten to ask, or to say. I was like a child, afraid of the dark, and just being near her seemed to help. I was scared that once I left her, the news would begin to sink in. After a while, though, she must have got the feeling I was waiting for something. She enfolded my hands in hers. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I don't have anything very profound to say. I didn't want to put you two through this.' She ran a hand over my hair. 'Why don't you go to bed? You look terribly tired.'

I slept in my old bedroom. Orange light, from the street lamp outside, leaked in through the curtains, making familiar shapes on the walls. The shelves were filled with books from different parts of my life – *Letts Revision Guides*, battered paperback copies of *Ballet Shoes* and *The Little House on the Prairie*. Dear God, I thought, this is all wrong, there must be some mistake. I will wake up and everything will be back to normal.

I slept badly, my brain troubled with formless thoughts, and an enormous problem I had to work out, in diagrammatic form. In the middle of the night, though, I woke with a powerful sense, almost like the continuation of a dream, that everything was going to be OK.