Speaking of Love

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Extract

Iris's story

I have come home, after a long and difficult journey.

I travelled alone and it was some time before I realised that I had arrived.

* * *

I am in Wales to tell my stories.

My bedroom is high in the watchtower of a mediaeval castle and through the window I can see the tiered lawns that cascade down from the castle walls to the Bristol Channel. Pennants flutter from the tops of the striped storytelling tents on the jousting field.

I stood in one of those tents last night. It was cavernous and empty, but I sensed a thousand pairs of eyes and a thousand pairs of ears. I shuffled self-consciously onto the wooden stage and found that my head was too heavy to lift, my voice too reedy to carry.

I had to force myself to breathe and it took me half an hour to find my voice. If that happens on Sunday my storytelling career will be stillborn.

But people tell stories all the time.

When I was in Salem a man told me about a nurse who arrived to take him to the ECT block with an umbrella.

'To keep the snow from my head,' he said and he laughed.

He told me that he and the nurse had walked side by side along the snow-covered path between snow-covered lawns, under the snow-laden trees. He told me he'd seen rabbit prints and deer prints in the snow, and the parallel prints of the patient and the nurse who'd gone before. He told me he'd walked in fresh snow because he wanted to see his own footprints on the

way back.

'That's the only important thing,' he said, and he slapped his thigh like an old-fashioned music hall entertainer. 'Footprints.'

I don't know what happened to him, but I'll never forget his beautiful smile nor his story, which never made me laugh.

People forget stories too.

I forgot how my mother died. All I could remember was that I had been with her. And when my father refused to talk about her I knew that was my punishment because I had failed to prevent her death.

He threw everything of hers away but I salvaged the hospital bag of her clothes from the dustbin, and I wrapped the heavy *Carousel* records that they used to dance to in my grey school cardigan and hid them in my room. I kept a lavender bag of hers under my pillow and one night I watched, through the bannisters, as my father fed photographs of my mother into the fire. I was too young to understand that he did what he did because he was locked in; all I knew was that I was locked out.

So I lived in my small upstairs room and had conversations with the characters in the books I read until, one winter evening, one of them replied. It said my name, 'Eereece', the way my mother said my name. And then I realised that it was my mother.

'Remember, Eereece, that I shall always love you,' she said, with a smile in her voice. I heard the smile too.

She only came at night, but she came often.

In the morning, when I opened my eyes and realised she wasn't there, an ache would fill my throat until I was sure it would burst open. Even now if I smell burnt dust on an electric heater a lump forms in my throat and reminds me how I used to sit on the floor under the window, by the heater, and close my eyes and long for her to return.

When she came she told me the stories she'd always told me, and sometimes we just talked. But I never asked her how she died because she always seemed so alive.

And then the goblin turned up.

He came when I started to drop things.

I broke one of the *Carousel* records that I'd watched my parents dance to and the spine of my mother's collection of French fairytales split one night when it fell from my hands.

The goblin hissed out, 'Fumble fingers, fumble fingers', every time I dropped something. He lived in a corner of my bedroom. It became The Corner I Was Terrified Of.

One evening, when my mother's lavender and vanilla smell filled my bedroom she told me that the goblin wasn't there. She said he was just a figment of my imagination. So I stood and faced the Corner. I told the goblin he didn't exist. I said I never wanted to hear his voice again. But as I pulled the eiderdown up under my chin I heard him hiss and I saw his long, pale cracked fingers stretch out towards me from the Corner. I heard him lisp, ''Syour choice, Iris. 'Scompletely your choice. But if I no longer exist then your mother no longer exists. 'Sup to you Iris. You choose.'

Of course there was no choice. My mother's voice was as precious as my life because it was the only thing of hers that I didn't have to hide from my father. He didn't know I could hear her so he couldn't take her away. He didn't know about the goblin either. I couldn't tell him anything and I knew, deep inside, that all he wanted was for me to disappear.

He used to love the stories my mother told. He was as captivated as I was when she'd suddenly look up from her supper, or her sewing, and ask us if we knew that the best Parisian milliners were the ones who persuaded spiders to spin coloured webs for their embroidery threads. Or that the reason Gustave Eiffel ended up with beautifully latticed girders for his great Tower, instead of the solid ones he'd asked for, was that no

one spoke the language of the Eiffelene trolls who'd mined the iron and made the great girders and brought them to Paris from Meurthe-et-Moselle. No one knew how to ask the trolls to stop work, so they hammered and struck at the iron until *they* thought their work was done.

We both knew that several days later she'd tell us a whole story about the milliners and their spiders, or about Gustave and the Eiffelene trolls and I know that my father looked forward to those stories just as much as I did. And I know that he loved my mother, the way he danced with her told me so; and I thought he loved me, but after she died he died too, inside. I realise now that the only way he could cope with her loss was by ignoring anyone or anything that reminded him of her, he could not tolerate them. But all I knew then was that he found me intolerable.

He painted my bitten nails with a pungent, brown liquid at night and pulled white mittens onto my hands and tied them with shiny white ribbons round my wrists. I only survived because I could hear my mother's voice. As long as I could hear her I wasn't alone.

I listened to her stories and I began to tell them to myself, on the way to school. And I often heard her say, 'Just,' (she said it with a soft 'j'), 'Just as long as you see the pictures, Eereece, the words will come.'

Even now, forty-three years later, I still hear my mother's voice, although hers is the only voice I hear now. She reminds me to follow the pictures when I tell a story. And it's always worked. As long as there are pictures in my head, the words come. Even when I see pictures that I've never seen before I know I must follow them.

For weeks now I've watched the pictures from my stories travel beneath my eyelids and, in the evenings, I've given them words while Dick cooks our supper. I've told the stories at my local storytelling club and I've told them to myself on my long

walks through Thetford Forest. But now I'm here at the festival and, despite all the pictures and all the words, I am very nervous.

I remind myself that six years ago, at The Abbey, or at Salem years before that, I'd never have dreamt I could do this. I reassure myself that I've come a long way, that I can do it, that I have come home.

* * *

There is a letter that I take with me everywhere. A letter whose words I know by heart.

This is what it says:

Mum
It's horrible what I've got to say but I've got to say it.
I can't come and see you ever again. Sorry. Vivie
PS: This is why.
Seeing you makes it all come back and then I'm completely useless. The only way I can cope is if I don't see you. Sorry.
Even when I came with Charles I wasn't much use, was I?
I don't know what to do for you, Mum, so I can't see you.
I don't know what else to say.
Except sorry.

Dick says I stab myself every time I read her letter. He says the wounds will never heal that way. But it's the only thing of Vivie's that I have, so I keep it.

I should throw it away, but I can't bear to.

It's her thirtieth birthday on Sunday but I haven't seen her for six years. I long to hug her. I long to hear her voice. I long to look at her.

Poor Vivie. She tried to mend me. She tried to make me well. She tried to care for me all by herself, but she was only a child.

She tried to keep people away from me as I had made her promise.

And now she is scarred. I know she is. I can feel it.

I've written to tell her that I know, now, why it all happened and that I know, now, what she tried to do and how impossible it was for her. I've said that I know that no one can mend anyone else, especially not a child, especially not a daughter.

But in the meantime I cannot plan to see her. I can only hope with all my heart that there will come a day when she wants to see me.

And that day will be a fine, fine day when it comes.

If it comes.

Vivie's story

Vivie was talking to herself in the shower. As the water flowed over her body she spoke slowly, as if she was learning lines.

'I've got something to tell you,' she said, as she squeezed shampoo into her hand. 'I've been meaning to tell you …' but she stopped. She knew it wouldn't work if she began like that because Charles, with his incurable optimism, would smile expectantly and then she'd never be able to tell him the bad news.

So she started again. She soaped her hair and she said, 'I've done a terrible thing. Well, no, not terrible, exactly, but you're not … you won't like it.' That sounded better. Then he'd sit down and drum his fingers on the kitchen table. He'd look worried and she'd sit beside him and tell him what she'd done.

Vivie let the water rinse the soap from her hair and said, 'I'm sorry, Charles, but I just couldn't go through with it. I got rid – ' but as she stretched up to push her hair back a sharp stabbing pain made her stagger and bend forwards. She pressed her hands into her groin and the water pushed her long hair forwards over her face. Blood ran down the inside of her thigh.

When the pain eased Vivie stood and let the water pour over her face. She wanted the water to hide her tears. There wasn't anyone in the bathroom to see her tears, but Vivie felt as if she was being harshly judged for them, so she hid them.

The judgements, as Vivie called them, had all been harsh recently. On the bus on the way back from the hospital a sudden spitefully disapproving judgement had so shocked Vivie that she'd got off the bus and gone straight to the nearest pub. It

had taken several glasses of wine to stop the judgement's insistence that she should not have got rid of the little body that had been growing so innocently inside hers.

Vivie yanked the towel roughly across her back and tried to get rid of a persistent image of Charles kissing her and opening a bottle of champagne. If she'd kept the baby he would have done that, and he'd have danced his funny little tap dance. He would have hummed his tuneless hum and whistled. He'd have rung everyone he knew and then he'd have said, 'Are you very, very happy, my darling?' over and over again.

Vivie scratched her cheek as she angrily pushed her tears away.

She'd been shocked by her reaction to her pregnancy. She'd felt nothing but an overwhelming despair and the thought of Charles's kindness to her, his patience and his desire to please her made her feel even worse. She knew she didn't deserve him. And she knew she should have told him about the baby.

She tossed her hair back without bothering to finish drying it, threw on the clothes that she'd dropped onto the floor of their bedroom the night before, wedged a thick wad of lavatory paper between her thighs and hurried from the house, slamming the door.

She was going to be extremely late for work.

Matthew's story

The car is about to overheat, I've forgotten to bring any water and there's a siren wailing somewhere and a haze above the cars in the traffic jam in front of me. I'm staring at the architectural mess that is St Thomas's and I'm thinking I might just melt the way the tarmac's melting.

I'm willing the traffic to move not only because I'm going to be late for Dad, but because all this hanging about is giving me time to think about things I've been trying not to think about, viz. Vivie. I've been trying to put her out of my mind since I saw her on Monday. It was a stupid idea to go to the Prom. I wish I hadn't. I wasn't even planning to go after Julia cancelled, but I couldn't concentrate at work.

I stared at the models of the coloured drums we'd dreamed up for the student residences at UeL, imagining them on site, built, occupied, functioning just as we'd planned, overlooking Albert Dock and shimmering with reflected light from the water. I paced the office thinking about the contractors and the schedule and wishing we'd heard whether our bid had been successful. But I couldn't do any useful work and I couldn't stop going over all the work we'd done, even though at that stage in a bid there's nothing practical to be done, so in the end I went to the Prom to distract myself.

If I'd thought about the Prom programme I suppose I might have thought about Vivie because she's always loved that concerto. But I hadn't seen her for years and so when I did see her, on the other side of the arena, it was a shock. I saw her black cap first, and then her hair. The cap was pushed back on her head with the peak flipped up the way she's always worn it, and it struck me that the angle of the peak to her face was

precisely the same (one hundred and twenty degrees) as the angle between the inverted rooves and the walls of the UeL residence buildings.

I looked around the Albert Hall for Charles, but I couldn't see him and I realised I didn't want to see him. I tried to cross the arena in the interval but by the time I'd stumbled over several bags and excused my way through knots of people, Vivie had disappeared.

I waited where I'd seen her. She didn't come back so I decided it couldn't have been her, just someone who looked a lot like her, but Vivie's hair is Vivie's hair. I've never seen hair like it on anyone else, except her father, so I stayed where I thought she'd been standing and I waited. I couldn't help wanting to know how she was and at the same time I didn't want to know. I felt the old excitement and the old foreboding while I stared upwards, redesigning the Albert Hall's fantastically ugly flying-saucer baffles, and then Vivie said 'Hello,' as if we'd seen each other just the day before.

The traffic's moving, at last. It was an accident, right outside St Thomas's Hospital. Now I'm moving and there's a breeze, but my shirt's sticking to me and I'm going to have to stop for water for the MG and for me. I'll phone Dad when I'm out of London and the roads are clear. He surely won't be worrying yet.

Vivie kept her eyes closed all the way through the concerto. She swayed slightly as she listened, lost in the music, and it was all I could do to stop myself putting my hand on the curve of her waist. It's ridiculous, it's embarrassing and it's hopeless. But it persists.

It was hot in the Hall and her hair was sticking to her forehead under her cap. She was wearing that cap the day she asked me the question that I flunked. I used to tell myself that if I got

a second chance I would answer her differently, but life's not like that. You don't get second chances.

It was a dry day in April and my father kept saying he'd never known such a dry spring. He was busy watering his garden and Iris's garden, walking backwards and forwards under the arch in the beech hedge. Vivie and I were sitting on the flagstones below Iris's kitchen window between the stone urns that Dad had planted with lavender for Iris.

Iris was in The Abbey and Charles was in Iris's cottage somewhere. Vivie and I sat with our backs against the kitchen wall and she was smoking, as usual. Despite the drought it wasn't warm and I was just about to suggest we went back inside when Vivie asked me if I would give her away. Until that moment I had no idea she was getting married and I couldn't think of a thing to say.

I stared at the neat lines on the newly clipped beech hedge that divides Dad's garden from Iris's, and I thought how much lighter her garden was now that Dad had cut her laurel back. I stared up at the white clouds scudding across the wide expanse of blue, but I didn't look at Vivie, nor did I answer her question. When I finally did find the courage to look at her, she was blowing smoke down between her knees and pulling at the skin on her thumb. She bit the skin and she said, without looking at me, 'Well, will you, Matthew?'

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Dad standing under the arch in the beech hedge. He took a step into Iris's garden and then stopped, turned and went back into his garden. I heard the squeak as he turned off the tap and the sound of running water ceased. I said to Vivie, softly in the sudden silence, 'Your father's supposed to give you away. Why don't you ask him?'

She looked up, said, 'No,' and stared at me through her large grey eyes. She pushed the black cap back on her head and said, 'Even if I knew where he was he's so unreliable he'd probably forget. Anyway, I'd like it to be you.'

She smiled then, and the long dimple made that crease in her cheek. We'd both started to whisper.

I said, 'You could ask my father.'

She said, 'I could, but I'd like it to be you, Matthew.' She screwed up her eyelids against the cigarette smoke. She said, 'We'd both like it to be you.' I stared at Iris's laburnum tree in the middle of the lawn, its long green buds were hanging down, it was just about to bloom.

I said, 'I can't.' I felt sick.

She said, 'Why not?'

I said, 'I can't give you away, Vivie, that's all.'

She ground her cigarette into a flagstone and it left a black mark. She leaned towards me and she said, 'Matthew, why can't you?'

I wanted to put my arms round her. I wanted to pull her to me and kiss her where the freckles gather by her lip but I didn't move, didn't answer her, stopped looking at her. It was she who jumped up, grabbed my wrists and pulled. She is slight and I was sure I'd be able to resist, but she braced herself and her striped scarf fell down between her arms and swayed as she strained to make me stand. She succeeded because she managed to pull me far enough forwards so that either I had to sprawl onto my knees or get up. I got up and she inclined her head away from Iris's cottage. We walked across the lawn, ducking under the laburnum tree, until we stood by the wooden fence at the end of Iris's garden beneath the beeches that were showing the tips of their furled green leaves.

She said, 'Matthew, what is it? Tell me why you can't.' She flung her striped scarf back over her shoulder and fumbled in her pocket for her cigarettes but the gusting wind blew out the matches as she struck them. When she struck the last one I cupped my hands round hers and our foreheads touched.

I said, 'Vivie …'

She said, 'Yes?'

I said, 'I can't. I mean I didn't know you were … I mean …'

Charles shouted 'Vivienne!' and cut me off. We jumped apart and I swung round to see him striding across the flagstones holding up a bottle of wine. His walk was brisk and business-like and his footsteps thudded across the lawn.

'Vivienne, my darling,' he called out, 'I think the Pouilly-Fumé's the one to go for.'

I glanced back at Vivie who was looking straight at me. Smoke drifted up from the side of her mouth just where the freckles gather, and she picked and bit at the side of her thumb.

I couldn't say, 'Don't marry him, Vivie. For God's sake don't marry him. Marry me.' I just couldn't say it. She would have thought me mad.

I stared at the small brown triangle that makes a section in her left iris. It suddenly looked like a splinter and I wondered, ludicrously, if it hurt her. I wanted to take it out. And then Charles was standing between us, beaming, and holding three glasses out to me, upside down, their stems threaded between his broad fingers. I took the glasses and Charles poured the wine.

He said, 'Settled then, my darling?' but when Vivie didn't answer, he looked at me.

I said, 'Er … yes. Yes. All settled.'

He said, 'Good. So glad,' and beamed at us again. 'We were both hoping you'd agree, weren't we, my darling? It'll make young Vivienne here very, very happy.'

Vivie took her glass and Charles said, 'To us, then. All three.'

I remember thinking that the wine was too cold, and wondering where Dad had got to, and staring at Charles and thinking, wildly, that a man with so little hair couldn't possibly marry a woman with so much.

Charles handed me the bottle and cupped his large hand round Vivie's elbow. I watched them walking back towards

Iris's cottage; I had the impression that he was walking for both of them.

They stopped under Iris's laburnum tree and Charles said, over his shoulder, 'Getting a bit chilly out here, isn't it? Come on in, old chap.'

Vivie held her glass out in front of her, stiffly. Charles raised his glass to me and when they reached the kitchen door he kissed Vivie on the cheek. I stared up at the wide blue dome of the sky. I heard a blackbird sing and I heard my father whistle a reply from his garden. I turned and stared out across Jepson's field and then I heard Dad calling to me.

'Come and be my eyes for me, would you Matthew?' he said. 'I can't see the damned threads.'

When I walked into Dad's garden he handed me a hose connector. I studied it, glad to have something to look at, glad not to have to look at him.

Dad said, 'There's nothing wrong with it, it's new. But I don't know what I've done with my specs … Matthew?'

I said, 'Yup ... right ...' and bent over the tap beside him to have a look.

But as I was fixing the connector to the tap Charles burst through the hedge announcing loudly to Dad that he and Vivie were getting married. That I had agreed to give Vivie away. Dad straightened up and said that was splendid news, and I had to go back into Iris's kitchen to celebrate with them. I had no choice.

Vivie was studying something on the dresser in the corner. She looked up and said, 'Listen to this … this is wonderful,' but she sounded as if she was about to cry. She said, 'It says here …' she held up a CD, her eyes shining, her lips pressed tightly together, but she didn't say anything else.

Charles said, 'That's your favourite concerto, isn't it, my darling? They used it in that film … what's it called?'

He looked at Dad.

Dad said, 'Brief Encounter.'

As soon as I could I went back to London, and I never did give Vivie away.

How could I?

Dad did it. I didn't even go to the wedding.

Vivie's story

Vivie sat on the bus and every time she looked at her watch it seemed that another ten minutes had flown by, but the bus still did not move. The driver said he had no idea what the problem was and, as people began to get off the bus, Vivie thought about getting the train from Clapham Junction, but she didn't. She stayed on the bus because she couldn't face taking the underground from Waterloo. She felt dizzy just looking down escalator shafts; she knew she'd have to fight for breath so far below the street. So she sat on the bus, alone, and felt herself judged for a coward. Of course there was enough oxygen on the underground, how did everyone else manage? But Vivie couldn't remember a time when the thought of the underground hadn't panicked her. She got off the bus to smoke a cigarette but she stood close by, with one hand resting on the side of the bus so that the driver couldn't leave without her, and as she smoked she tried to shut out the words in her head, the words that insisted she should tell Charles the truth about the baby.

A couple of seagulls screeched overhead and they reminded Vivie, cruelly, of the day Charles had told her he loved her. No one had ever said, 'I love you,' to her before and she'd felt as if she might explode with happiness. She'd hugged herself tightly to keep it all inside.

Charles had said, 'It might be too soon to say this, Vivienne, but I think I have fallen in love with you.'

She had gasped, and bitten the side of her hand.

'I love you, Vivienne,' he'd said and she'd been unable to stop smiling. She felt like a child who has been repeatedly told that she could not have the white dress she longed for, the dress she'd

set her heart on; only to find it on her pillow when she went up to bed.

Charles had taken her to Lowestoft to prove to her that what happened in her nightmare couldn't happen. She'd been impatient to know what he was going to show her, but he would not be rushed. They'd eaten prawns that tasted of the sea and drunk cold wine that tasted of gooseberries, and she'd been filled with expectation. But he just kept saying that he'd looked it all up, talked to the people who knew, found out everything he needed to know and all she had to do was trust him. He knew what he was doing, he said. And, when he went to collect the permit that would allow them to walk along the docks, she'd watched the seagulls wheel and listened to them cry and found herself wondering if she and Charles would make love that night because, until then, they had not. Until then they'd danced an uneasy dance, kissing each other goodbye awkwardly, hugging each other and finding that their arms collided and Vivie had wondered if he even liked her. But as they walked along the docks and he'd talked about the boat he wished he'd never sold, she caught him looking at her in a way that excited her and made her think that he might become her man. She longed for a man to call 'her man'.

She'd been wearing her favourite black cap that day, and she'd pulled it down over her ears to keep them warm. They'd walked for what seemed like miles along empty, concrete docks. There were no boats at all and it was a cold, grey day. The seagulls wheeled and screeched and, as they walked through a large empty hangar on a damp concrete floor that smelled strongly of fish, their footsteps echoed. Charles told her that the hangar was where the fish were auctioned, but Vivie barely heard him because it wasn't the fish that interested her. All she cared about was what he was planning to show her, what he was taking such a long time to tell her. She was like a child the night before Christmas. She was thrilled that there was a

surprise to come, but frightened that it might disappoint her when, at last, it came.

They'd walked out of the hangar back into the cold grey day, and Charles had pointed and said, 'Over there, I think.' He'd squeezed Vivie's arm and held her elbow in that way that made it impossible for her to walk anywhere except where he walked, and then she'd seen a lone fisherman mending a large net, and two or three painted wooden fishing boats bobbing against a dock. She'd seen a cluster of triangular black flags on tall poles flapping in the wind, and she'd seen a row of nets spread out to dry along the dock. Her heartbeat quickened and she broke free from Charles and began to run.

She ran down the dock and asked the fisherman which nets were for which fish? What were they made of? How often did they need mending? How much fish did they hold? But she asked all those questions so that the only one she really wanted to know the answer to wouldn't seem so strange. When she finally asked the fisherman what the smallest possible space that the smallest possible net could fit into was, her heart was hammering in her chest.

Charles had her cap in his hand when he caught up with her. In her excitement Vivie hadn't even noticed that it had blown off. She held onto Charles's arm and nodded at the fisherman to continue. She crammed her cap back onto her head and listened as the fisherman said that the orange net he was mending was for trawling for deep fish and that the green nets laid out on the dock to dry – which were made, Vivie saw, from fine plastic threads – were for soles. He pronounced it 'sools'. He told them the strength of the nets and what catches they held and what they were made of, and then he looked up and asked what that last question was again. And Charles, squeezing Vivie's arm proprietorially, asked whether there was any kind of net, any kind at all, that a man could fit into his pocket.

The fisherman frowned. His face was weather-beaten and

his thick hair was white. He wore a navy-blue cable-knit sweater under black waterproofs and there was a gap where one of his front teeth should have been. His eyes were blue, his rubber boots were yellow and after a considerable time he said, 'Only were the pocket the same size of the man … and I'm never seen that.'

Vivie buried her face in Charles's jacket because she didn't want the fisherman to see her sudden tears. She heard Charles ask the fisherman if the net for the soles, the finest one – the one that, she'd said later, looked as if it had been woven by a spider – was the smallest net, and she heard the fisherman say that it was. But he said that even that one was thirty feet long, and could not ever in the world fit into a man's pocket, 'Even,' he said, 'were there a man with time enough on his hands to try.'

They thanked the fisherman and as they walked back along the dock Vivie'd told Charles that he was the best friend she'd ever had, and he'd suggested a nice, hot cup of tea. When they were sitting in a hotel on the seafront he suggested a shot of whisky in their tea, and the whisky-tea turned into supper and then, halfway through supper Charles had told Vivie that he loved her and her heart had felt as if it might explode.

She hadn't told Charles that she loved him, the words somehow wouldn't form, but she'd said that she'd known something extra-ordinary, something wonderful was going to happen that day and now it had; and he'd smiled and ordered champagne and they'd drunk to themselves and to love and they'd spent the night together in the hotel in Lowestoft. And, in the morning, Vivie'd told Charles that she loved the way he'd taken so much trouble to show her that her nightmare wasn't possible. She'd said she loved the way he made her feel safe. She'd said he was her rock, her anchor and her breakwater.

The sound of an engine startled Vivie. She looked up and saw that

the bus was about to move off. She ground her cigarette into the pavement and climbed back on board the bus and, as it lurched forwards, she heard the seagulls screeching and she remembered that Charles had told her, that day in Lowestoft, that seagulls fly inland when it's rough out at sea. And as she sat on the bus she thought about what she'd known for some time, what her pregnancy had forced her to face: she knew now that she had never loved Charles.

What she'd felt that night in Lowestoft had been an ecstatic gratitude that someone – it could, almost, have been anyone – loved her. Even in the first year of their marriage she had been surprised that what she'd thought of as her love for Charles had faded so fast, but she'd kept telling herself that she did love him.

Now her pregnancy had confronted her, vividly, with the fact that on that night in Lowestoft she had fallen in love with *being* loved, but not with the man who'd told her he loved her.

Matthew's story

The MG's going like a dream and I'm making up for lost time, I'm not going to be late after all. But just as I left London there was an unexpected smattering of rain so I put the hood up for a bit and the sound of the rain on the canvas set me thinking about Vivie, again, dammit.

When the concerto was over the prommers roared and clapped and stamped their approval but Vivie stayed silent and still and it wasn't until the Hall was quiet again, for an encore, that I realised she was crying. I didn't say anything because Vivie – like me – has always hated anyone knowing she's crying, but when the applause broke out after the encore she turned and smiled and ran her finger under her nose. I searched for a handkerchief. I don't know why because I never have a handkerchief on me. And then I held out my arm and offered her my rolled-up shirtsleeve. She made a choking sound, somewhere between a laugh and a sob, unrolled my sleeve and pressed it under her eyes. The pianist took several bows and Vivie turned away from me to applaud him. When she turned back, she stood on tiptoe and spoke straight into my ear.

She said, 'Shut your eyes.'

I felt her warm breath on my ear and her lips rubbing against it.

I said, 'Why?'

She said, 'Just bloody shut your eyes.'

'Okay.'

'Well? What can you hear?'

'Clapping … whistling … stamping. People shouting "Encore!"'