An Empty Room

Talitha Stevenson

A Virago Book

Chapter one

Tom's hands were never still. There is a whole film reel of them in my mind. They picked his initials into wooden tables, they made wine glasses sing, struck matches one after the other, tore up beer mats, drummed on coffee tables, they even turned on each other until the skin was picked sore around the nails. At first I sympathised with those hands, they implied imagination, they were like me: full of love, disappointment, mania. But they wouldn't let anything alone. Nothing was sacred in the end, except the hands themselves. If I move my tongue to the right of my mouth I can feel they have smashed out one of my teeth.

I was once told by the family counsellor, a woman called Julia with red hair and a large mole on her right eyelid, that I have a problem engaging with a situation. Apparently, I have a tendency to 'intellectualise'.

'You hold yourself three feet above other people and you can't feel anything from up there – not pain or love either,' she said.

Well, I did feel love. I felt love which sent everyone else in the world home early and quietly switched out the lights. I felt love and now I've felt hate and violence. You could say I've been brought down to earth: you can't 'engage' more with a situation than being spread out on the floor, grit in your hair, splinters from the door frame under your fingernails and the taste of your own blood in your mouth. Slammed into the here and now, you'd have thought. I'd have thought . . . Funny though, how a smack in the face will get you thinking about destiny.

Pick a moment, any moment. Pretend each part contains the whole – because maybe it does. I could pick Tom's hands and the ice spinning in the glass, if I wanted to. I could tell Sarah was watching his hands too, because her parents were only away for the weekend and there was that pale carpet just underneath all that red drink. And Tom must have felt us watching him, but he was sure enough of his own stage presence to hold us for a while. After a bit, Sarah said:

'Tom? You haven't met Emily, have you?' and he looked up and smiled. It was a smile which only included me – a trick he later told me he had learnt from his father.

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I was only going to stay for about an hour – I am a year older than Sarah and that evening I felt too grown-up for parties like that; the muted TV screen, the smoky mouths, the hot, transparent seduction by the empty bathroom.

'I'm a bit stressed about how many people there are,' Sarah said. 'There are people doing lines on the drawing-room mirror, for fuck's sake. I'm not going to say anything – I mean, you know me – but it's not like there isn't anything valuable in this house. That's the thing.'

She looked down and studied her fingers, her rings. You could see she was pleased: it was 4 a.m., everyone was drunk and happy and they were still using the ashtrays. Tom held up his hands the way thieves do:

'Hey, don't look at me.' Obviously people usually did. 'I don't know half these people, anyway.'

Sarah took a cigarette out of the packet in his shirt pocket and he looked up at me:

'Were you two at school together, then?'

'Emily was in the year above, Tom. She's my older, more glamorous friend. She's been off sending postcards from Italy and Spain, lucky thing, while I've been fucking up my exams.'

'Oh, you'll get straight As,' I said.

'Who knows? Anything could happen.'

'Not to you.'

'Great, I sound really interesting.' Sarah was never going to be happy.

'I just meant you plan things too well.'

'Do I?'

'Fancy planning things for me, Sarah?'

'Oh Tom, I couldn't possibly – your chaos is so glamorous.'

Glamorous was her favourite word. She was a jealous person who made very sure her compliments were cheap.

Right away I thought Tom was beautiful looking. He is someone women don't take their eyes off. He has sandy brown hair which gets in his eyes; he has a wide mouth and a long stretch – all loose belt and brown stomach – which is the golden prelude to any opinion he gives. I thought he looked spoilt the moment I saw him. He looked like he had a mother who was always telling him he was going to be famous.

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After a while, the other people had gone and the door was closed – I can't really remember who closed it, maybe it was me. The music was echoing in from the other room and a thin tissue of smoke had gathered above the floor. Every now and then a shout of laughter would bloom through the wall or under the door and sometimes there was the faint sound of something breaking. Tom and I talked to each other for a while – about nothing, really: university, jobs, not really being able to picture it, and then he said something like:

'So, come here, then,' and kissed me – as if it was a conclusion to what we were saying. He kissed me very gently and when I looked back at him, at the fashionable clothes and the sharp, reckless posture, I thought it was not what I had expected.

Tom and I had been seeing each other for a few weeks when we realised our parents had known each other. Tom's father had finally left his mother just three months before, but when they had first got married, they lived in my parents' house. My parents were actually the same age as his – they had been at university together – but at twenty-five, when most young couples were still renting, Mum had inherited enough money to buy a house in Holland Park. Tom's parents had rented the big room in the basement, which was now a second sitting room.

'I can't believe you're still living there,' Tom said. 'The same walls for like twenty-three years. God, I never want to get like that.' He shivered and handed me a cigarette. Tom was stupid about a lot of things. He had been to six different schools and lived in three different countries before he was sixteen. He spoke three languages, but until he turned thirteen, he was not fluent in any one of them – even English. I could not imagine what that would be like. He still searched for the right word in one or the other of his languages, found it didn't translate. It made him seem lost – that and the slight, untraceable accent, the magazine unreality of his good looks.

His father had made a lot of money as a screenwriter and, following his dream of renovating a huge, noble old wreck, they had moved from beautiful place to beautiful place, each one falling short of the dream. Tom's childhood had been spent watching Romance tripped up and laughed at by Plumbing and Damp and Sewage. And he told the stories well – made his family sound like fanatics on the quest for the Holy Grail. He rolled his eyes and I wondered if there was something sophisticated about him – or if he had just picked it up from a film.

'You're not going to believe this,' he said, 'but my mum just bought the place opposite. We're neighbours.' He laughed, but I knew he wasn't joking. I suppose I didn't think Tom had much imagination, then. They were doing the place up, he told me, it would be ready in a few months.

We had been seeing each other nearly every day and he had started saying he loved me after we had sex (did I realise he had never said that before? Did I?) which always makes me feel lonely. I looked at him looking at me and wondered if I would ever feel like that about anyone. I thought we should probably see less of each other

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and I didn't feel sure I wanted him living over the road. I always pick watchers. Something in me attracts men you can picture back-lit and broad-shouldered in doorways, facing betrayal.

The house opposite ours had had a sign outside it for nearly a year and I noticed now it wasn't there. The people who lived there before, a Lebanese couple, had huge plans for it and had knocked walls through and gutted it. For a while there were always builders there working and the wife had put friendly 'sorry' notes through the letterbox about all the drilling. The husband used to sit on the doorstep with the builder talking over the plans which they weighed down on the ground in front of them with pieces of brick. Sometimes the wife would crouch behind and rest her arms on his shoulders. From my bedroom window, I thought it looked exciting to be married.

And then suddenly they left – no one knew why, but it must have been something terrible. I cried about all their plans. The house sat there naked and hungry looking, as if it had had a fantastic meal described to it, until Tom's mother came along and bought it. Perhaps she recognised the atmosphere there after giving up on so many places herself.

When I told my mother she looked really worried; her face folded up into its defining expression and she said 'Andrea and Tony?' to make absolutely sure. Then she said, 'Well, we'd better have them for dinner' – as if there was no choice. This is the way my mother approaches life. I said:

'They're not together any more, actually,' and she put down the tea towel and looked out of the window. After a while she said:

'Doesn't surprise me. He's an odd man.'

'Odd' in my mother's lexicon means anyone who doesn't believe in God. She can handle different gods, but she can't understand no God – she doesn't know where to start with someone who lives only for the here and now. I watched her taking the things from the dishwasher and putting them into their places in the cupboard and I loved her and felt sorry for her.

My family is the kind that has books instead of tables, books instead of door-stops, books instead of footrests, drinks mats, intimacy. Instead of speaking to us, Dad quotes foreign literature. You know he's feeling potent if he's speaking in Italian poetry. None of us know the languages. It's comic, really – Dad sitting there at the table, eyes misted over, making big sounds which don't mean anything, while my sister and my mother and I wait to finish what's on our plates. My mother has never commented, and you'd have thought she just didn't notice, but a while ago, when some of her friends asked her to do an evening class with them, she said she just didn't think she was bright enough to learn French. Dad quoted something pertinent from Dante.

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You only hear my younger sister's voice when she is on the telephone. Sometimes she says sad, little things to me, though. A while ago she said:

'Can we have a serious talk?' I said yes and we closed my door.

'I'm pretty sure I stink,' she said. Her toes were all bent back in the carpet.

'You don't.'

'It's a terrible smell,' she said. 'It's like when the rabbit died.' Ellie frightens herself – so I gave her my bottle of perfume. She smokes joints in her room and she's right not to worry, because my parents would never notice. Noticing is a complicated act, I have found out.

My parents don't notice anything. They never have. My mother didn't notice that my dad was having an affair. The woman was the wife of a Polish colleague of his from the university. Dad used to have me on Sunday mornings when Mum did Holy Communion classes. We always went to see Irena.

'I thought you might like to go and see Tomasz,' Dad used to say. He would be holding my coat, checking himself in the hall mirror. He would smell of sweet aftershave. I used to nod.

Tomasz was Irena's son. He was allergic to wheat and cheese and nuts. His eyes watered. We were the same age. We always had hot chocolate and every time she gave it to us, Irena would say: 'I'm a terrible mother – honestly, what this stuff does to your teeth, apart from anything else.' And Dad would tell her not to worry so much, that she was always worrying about everything. Tomasz and I would drink the hot chocolate quickly – sometimes I would burn my throat on mine, taking little sips that made the back of my mouth go numb after a while.

When they wanted to start their private talk, Dad would say why didn't we go and play together. They would shut the door behind us.

Tomasz and I used to sit in the hall outside the kitchen. It was a dark hall with a high window at one end. There were bookshelves all the way along the wall with titles in funny letters. (Irena's husband was a professor of Russian literature, so they must have been Russian letters.) The whole house smelt of chicken soup. The carpet was deep green with hundreds and hundreds of brown swirls. I thought I would count them all up one day.

I remember once we were sitting in the hall and it sounded like all the tea things had fallen on the floor. Tomasz looked at me with his watery eyes and we heard Irena make this odd crying sound like someone had hurt her. We just sat there. Tomasz wouldn't touch my toys and I wouldn't touch his. If I did, by accident, I had to scrape the skin where it had touched until it had gone red.

It always felt like there was no one watching, nobody to say what was right or wrong.

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The night Tom and his family were coming for dinner, I sat on my parents' bed watching my mother get ready. Tom's cousin and his wife had moved in with them – they needed a place at the moment and they could see Tom's mother through the first patch of being without her husband. The four of them were coming that night.

'I just hope no one's vegetarian,' my mother said. 'I've got so old Andrea won't recognise me.'

'Why are you so nervous, Mum?'

'I'm not, darling. I think I might be getting a cold.'

When the doorbell rang, I answered. It was strange to see Tom being the son. He looked shorter and younger, standing beside his mother on the doorstep. She was fatter than I expected. I had expected tall, thin, long arms, angular, modern jewellery. She was wearing a long, Indian-looking skirt and a shawl. Hippyish – in a kind of reliving her youth way, I thought. She kissed me hello and said:

'Oh, you tiny thing! You're so tiny I could snap you in half!' She hugged me very hard.

'Simon's just parking the car,' Tom said. 'I'm afraid Rachel couldn't make it because she's feeling shit – so it's just the three of us.'

My mother came up behind and Tom's mother put her arms out. My mother looked embarrassed – she's one of those people who always goes the wrong way, bangs noses, gets people full on the lips. Her dad had a notorious right hook and she is at her best a foot away from people. I watched her move forward, lift her arms and go through with it, saying: 'Andrea, really good to see you again.'

'Jane, Jane,' Andrea sighed. 'Well, we're both a lot older – but that's the one thing we knew would happen.' She laughed and pushed her hair behind her shoulders as if she was rolling up her sleeves.

We were settling down in the sitting room with my father handing out glasses of wine when the doorbell rang.

'Those fucking refugees again,' my dad said, slamming down the bottle of wine.

'No, John, it's my nephew Simon. I'll get it.' Andrea walked out to the door and opened it as if it was her own – I watched my mother's tight face. We listened to them in the hall, kissing each other hello as if they hadn't seen each other for a long time. Tom leant right back in his chair and stuck his legs out, crossed on the carpet.

Andrea walked in behind him with her hand on his shoulder.

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'So, this is Simon,' she said. My father was staring at him. I looked at my mother and saw her eyes move over to check Dad's face. Simon smiled and put his hand out to Mum and then to Dad.

'Don't worry – everyone thinks it,' he said.

'It's extraordinary,' Dad said. He looked almost frightened. I watched Mum glance curiously at Andrea and then she turned her face down at her hands. Simon smiled at me.

'I'm the spitting image of my Uncle Tony – Tom's Dad. People always say it.' He shrugged. Andrea laughed and rubbed Simon's arm. She seemed very proud of him.

'It is amazing, isn't it?'

'Christ, it's as if he'd just gone out for a minute, not twenty years – or whatever it is.'

'It's twenty years, John,' Andrea said.

There was a pause and then my mother laughed the way she does when Dad makes rude jokes in front of Mrs Benton, from the church.

'Oh honestly,' she said, 'poor Simon. Look at all of us. Do sit down and have a drink.'

He smiled and took a big handful of the crisps, which we had all left untouched on the table. I liked the way he had laughed off his big drum roll without seeming embarrassed or secretly proud. Andrea winked at him and he smiled back, indulgently, shaking his head.

Dad and Andrea started a conversation about the book Dad is writing at the moment. I could hear Simon telling my mother about his wife, about her being a costume designer; I heard the words 'incredible things out of nothing' and I could tell he was saying how wonderful she was. 'What a wonderful thing to do,' I heard my mother say. 'She must be wonderful.' Tom was pulling a loose thread out of the cushion beside him and I watched him wind it around his thumb. Every so often he would laugh along with Andrea at something my father was saying, but I didn't think he was listening.

'Well, I do hope she feels better soon,' my mother said, 'poor thing.' The note of gloom in her voice caught Dad's attention and he broke off his story – he loves a disaster.

'Who's that?' he called across. 'What's the matter?'

She spoke slowly, enunciating carefully, the way people do with the very old or the very young,

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'It's Rachel, darling – Simon's wife? Very sad. She couldn't come tonight because she's got a mi-graine.' She often speaks this way to him and he plays up for her in return like a toddler or a bitter old man.

'Horrible,' Dad said. He screwed his face up.

'Oh, no please don't worry,' Simon told him. He sat forward in his seat. 'I'm sure she'll be fine by tomorrow.' He looked uncomfortable – nervous for a second, and I wondered if there was nothing wrong with her at all and they'd just had a row. My mother changed the subject.

Our sitting room is a big, sunny room. We don't use it often, so the carpet always has the marks of the Hoover across it. The window at one end looks out on to the main road and it's peaceful in there at night with the cars rushing by in waves, saying 'Ssshh' through the double-glazing. Just then the whole room was full of sun. There was a wide patch of light on the carpet almost too bright to look at, except if your eyes moved on the leaf shadows from the tree outside the window. If you watched the leaves, it was like a magic sea.

'So, what do you do, Emily?' Simon asked me. He looked comfortable again, at ease leaning back against the cushions. This time I took his appearance in. He was elegant, sandy haired, long-limbed. His pale shirt was very bright against his tan and his smile was clean and unaffected. I said I was going to start university soon. He looked surprised.

'Really? I thought – I just assumed you were older than that. What subject?' I told him history. 'Same as me.' He smiled at me and then we both laughed. I don't know why we laughed – we were just laughing. I saw Tom look over.

When I remember that moment now, it seems to have been thrown in so casually. But that's the way things seem to happen to me – the past hinged to the future on a laugh.

'What kind of trees are they down this road?' Simon asked my mother. He turned and looked out of the big window.

'Lime, I think. It's awful, I probably haven't looked at them in years.'

The three of us stared hard out of the window as if that street was the most amazing thing we had ever seen. My mother and I are no good at small talk – she would rather be far away, and I would rather be much closer.

'Very important to have trees if you live in London,' Simon said. 'I said that to Andrea as soon as I saw the place.' He took out a packet of cigarettes. 'Is it all right to smoke in here?'

'Yes, of course. I'll get you an ashtray.'

'Don't worry, I'll get it,' I said.

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The health in the tanned face, the crisp shirt, the arm draped over the edge of the sofa – it all suggested he was on good terms with the world. I thought my thin, tense figure must show me up. I wanted to get away for a moment and brush my hair. I went downstairs to the kitchen and leant my hands on the cool sideboard. After a minute or two I heard footsteps on the stairs.

'Hey?' Tom said.

'Hey. Just getting an ashtray for Simon.' I took my hands off that lovely cool marble and turned around.

'I know what you're doing – I was there.'

I started looking around in one of our cupboards. My mother piles the cups one on top of the other in tall, crazy stacks and I am always frightened of knocking them on to the floor – I picture it every time I open the door.

Tom was watching. He came up behind me and put his arms around my waist the way he liked to. He kissed my neck. I could feel the heat of him coming through his shirt.

'This'll do, won't it?' I said. I tilted my head like I was thinking hard, looking at the little blue bowl in my hand. 'Hey, Tom – I can't turn round with you like this.' He didn't move and I gave a nervous laugh. My T-shirt had twisted round tight against his arm.

'Tom? Come on, let's get back up there.' I pulled his fingers apart and ducked underneath his arm. I wished he hadn't followed me.

'The loo through there?' he said. I nodded. Then I listened to the floorboards creaking above us – my mother taking the crisps around. I imagined Dad's hand going blindly for the bowl; his face, his whole body turned away from her, into his conversation. He sends her these little messages and I always thought she got each one. I suppose it's something I wish I didn't notice.

Tom smiled and pulled me towards him by my belt buckle. He always knew when he could do whatever he wanted. That was our kind of intimacy, I suppose – seeing weakness, knowing how to become indispensable to it. We cured loneliness with sex, dimly aware the problem only became greater and greater, the resentment more intense. His mouth ran across my cheek and down my neck and I closed my eyes, missed a beat. I felt the heat come into my face. My hand was inside his shirt. I felt the smooth muscles in his stomach. Then Tom moved back a little.

'See you up there, then,' he said. He kissed me and then he let go of me, smiling with one side of his mouth.

I picked up the little bowl and walked up the stairs. I felt full of the longing he always brought out in me and I wished it was the middle of the night and we were

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drunk, dizzy, stumbling into a side street together. My face looked flushed in the hall mirror, my hair looked tangled. Oh, so what, I thought. I went back in.

Before we all went down to eat, Mum laid the table in the kitchen. It was lovely to walk down seeing the knives and forks shining on the white cloth and to smell the pastry and onions cooking. Andrea's heels clacked around the stone floor, she ran her fingers over things.

'My God, this brings back so much,' she said. 'It's different now, of course, but you don't forget the shape of a room, the feel of it, do you?' She made a gasping sound, widened her eyes. 'Wait a minute, though, isn't that our bedroom through there?'

'Yes it's a – it's a little sitting room now,' my mother said. She was walking through quickly, switching lights on so Andrea could see. They went through. The room felt quiet without Andrea – but more peaceful. There are some people who carry a whole fairground of emotions with them wherever they go.

Simon looked at my father, smiling –

'Such a shame you all lost touch.'

Dad smiled. He tore the foil off the red wine, unwinding it in a practised curl.

'Ah well, Tony and Andrea were always destined for more exciting things, Simon. Jane and I would never have kept up.'

Dad likes to tread this line between insult and injury – he likes to watch the nerves on other people's faces. But Simon responded simply,

'Oh, no, they're not like that. They don't drop people.'

Dad came over with the bottle and handed Simon a new glass. There was a kind of amused respect on his face as he filled it.

'Well, things drift – people drift as you get older. You'll find that,' he said.

'Maybe. I hope not.'

I could see Simon did not much like my father.

When they came back in, Andrea sat down heavily at the table.

'Twenty-six,' she said. 'That's how old we were, would you believe it? I can't believe I was twenty-six – ever. I went from baby to old lady like that –' she snapped her fingers and laughed a bit wildly. Her nails were bright pink. 'Oh poor decrepit me. But really – twenty-six.' She shook her head. I like people who laugh at what they say and then say it again more seriously. Andrea pulled her shawl off and then

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swung it around herself again so that the tassels spun out and slapped down against her back. Simon handed her a glass of wine. He was attentive to her and she took obvious – almost flirtatious – pleasure in it.

'What were we like at twenty-six, darling?' Dad said.

My mother was laying out melon and prosciutto for everyone. She had arranged it prettily with the meat in little curls. She put a plate in front of me.

'What? I don't know,' she said. 'We're the same people, I suppose. Aren't we? I really don't remember thinking very differently then.'

'Oh, Jane – you must believe in a lot of different things now, though,' Andrea said. 'I mean, you've had children; you've lost your parents. Think of all the things you didn't understand then. I sometimes think getting older is about every year of your life understanding another terrible thing people do. You start out thinking "I will never do a job I don't like, the way some idiots do" and then gradually, gradually, you begin to understand divorce, alcoholism, violence – even murder. You can put yourself in a lot of unexpected places by the end of it.'

'No. I've always known what I believe in – I've known my whole life.'

I also like people who do not laugh at what they say. I watched my mother as she walked over to the oven and checked the timer. There was a tension between her and Andrea which seemed to have been summed up in their exchange. They were summing themselves up for each other the way people do who haven't met for a long time.

'Wow, you're a lucky man, John – if you've still got the girl you married,' Andrea said. She laughed, 'Seriously.'

'Aren't I?' my dad said. But Andrea was not really listening,

'God, I'm completely different – and look what's happened to me.' She waved her naked ring finger, the skin still paler where the ring had been for all those years. 'The problem with my formula is for every inch you gain of understanding, you lose two of idealism. You end up having more time for the face on the "Have-you-seen-this-man" poster than you do for your own husband.'

She looked from Mum to Dad and then back to Mum again, smiling. I wondered if this dinner had been a good idea.

'But sometimes people both change the same way, don't they? It doesn't have to end in – that.' Simon looked at Andrea's ring hand as if she shouldn't have brought it out in front of people. She smiled at him and squeezed his arm.

'Oh, of course it doesn't, Simon. Some people are too good and loving for life to be hard on them.' There was an innocence in his face which she responded to, which we

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all responded to. Andrea looked relieved to drop her hard, bright manner and watch him, sentimentally.

'Seriously, though,' he said. 'I mean, I used to say, "You only know you were in love in retrospect." How bleak can you get? You only know you were in love when you've had time to rewrite it, time to edit the script – and for God's sake don't call the girl and find she isn't in character. All that crap. And then I met Rachel and there was that whole thing with her going into hospital –' he looked up and waved the details off with his hand, 'and I knew love wasn't about retrospect or predictions or any kind of thinking at all. I just sat by her bed.'

'Oh, Simon,' Andrea said.

'You just have to put the other person before yourself, don't you? Isn't that what you have to do? I mean, I'm twenty-six – exactly the same age as you and Uncle Tony were when you lived in that room – I don't want to think the same thing is going to happen to me.'

I dug my nails into my hand.

'I really don't think it has to,' I said. Sometimes, by chance, you see your very own mixture of hope and fear on a stranger's face. It feels like a miracle of intimacy – as if it was built outside of time, independently of the details of two different lives. He looked at me and smiled as if I was his old friend. His smile was a cool hand and I felt my face relax.

'Exactly,' he said – as if it was proof enough that I agreed with him. I could feel his eyes rest on me.

Andrea laughed.

'You're not going to begrudge me my new start, I hope – you two puritans?'

Her voice seemed to shock Simon out of his thoughts. He looked at her with real tenderness on his face.

'Andrea, I'm going to make that place fantastic for you – wait and see.'

When they left, Tom said he was going to stay for a while; he told them he would get a cab home later. My parents said good night and went up to bed.

'You can't stay the night,' I told him. 'My mother would go mad.'

'She's sweet,' he said.

'I'm glad you like her.'

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'Yeah – she's a proper mother. Look, I won't stay long, let's just have a coffee.'

I made the coffee and he sat at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette and finishing the wine.

'Thank you,' he said, when I put the cup down in front of him. It felt very late, even though we were usually together long past that time. I suppose it was because we were sober.

'D'you get on with Andrea?' I asked him.

'She's my mother.'

'You're quite different, that's all. What about your Dad?'

'Dad's amazing. I just don't get to see him that much.'

He did not seem to want to talk. He sat at the table, holding the cup in his crazy hands, all the nails bitten right down. His beautiful face was completely passive, as if he was all on his own. You are on your own with me, I thought – I felt useless to him. I watched him drink his coffee. The dishwasher was loud in the background.

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