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Written by Julia Gregson

Published by Orion Books

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JASMINE NIGHTS

JULIA GREGSON



First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978 1 4091 0809 2
ISBN (Export Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 0810 8

Typeset at The Spartan Press Ltd,
Lymington, Hants

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that
are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood
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For Barry and Vicki

Acknowledgements

My thanks to all at Orion, especially my editor Kate Mills, and to Clare Alexander my gold standard agent.

I needed a lot of expert advice while writing this book and many people gave generously of their time and knowledge. Any mistakes are entirely mine.

I am hugely indebted to John Rodenbeck for his editing skills and fascinating emails on Egypt and the Middle East. To Tom Brosnahan and John Dyson for showing me around Turkey and sharing their knowledge of the country.

Sema Moritz and, Vanessa Dodd, Leda Glyptis and Virginia Danielson helped me greatly with information about singing Özgü Ötünç was my guide in Istanbul.

Anthony Rowell for his amusing and invaluable help. Historian, Dillip Sarkar, for his vast knowledge of aircraft, squadrons and Battle of Britain pilots.

For lending a precious family diary, my thanks to Sheila Must.

Grateful thanks to: Cordelia Slater, Brian Shakespeare, Jerome Kass, Pam Enderby; to Owen Sheers, Michael Haag, Peter Sommer, Ibrahim Abd Elmedguid; to Phyllis Chappell for her knowledge of the Bay area in Cardiff during the war and her book *A Tiger Bay Childhood*; to Tara Maginnis for make-up in the forties.

For reading early drafts and general hand holding, thanks to my sister Caroline, Delia, Sadie, Annie Powell, and all the shedettes and the entire Gregson clan.

If I've forgotten to thank anyone who helped in the early days my apologies.

Finally, there aren't words enough to thank Richard who has been my champion through thick and thin and my dearest travelling companion.

There are days we live
as if death were nowhere
in the background; from joy
to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.

'From Blossoms' by Li-Young Lee

Chapter 1

QUEEN VICTORIA HOSPITAL, EAST GRINSTEAD, 1942

It was only a song. That was what he thought when she'd put her hat on and gone, leaving the faint smell of fresh apples behind. Nothing but a song; a pretty girl.

But the very least he could say about the best thing to have happened to him in a long time was that she'd stopped him having the dreams.

In the first, he was at the end of a parachute with about three and a half miles between the soles of his feet and the Suffolk countryside. He was screaming because he couldn't land. He was rushing through the air, a light, insubstantial thing, like thistledown or a dead moth. The bright green grass, so familiar and so dear, swooped towards him, only to jerk away again. Sometimes a woman stood and gaped at him, waving as he floated down, and then was gone on a gust of wind.

In the second dream, he was in his Spitfire again. Jacko's aircraft was alongside him. At first it felt good up there in the cold, clear sunlight, but then, in a moment of nauseous panic, he felt his eyelids had been sewn together, and he could not see.

He told no one. He was one of the lucky ones – about to go home after four months here. There were plenty worse off than him in this place of dark corridors and stifled screams. Every day he heard the rumble of ambulances with new burns victims, picked up from shattered aircraft up and down the east coast.

The ward, an overspill from the hospital, was housed in a long, narrow hut with twenty beds on either side of it, and in the middle a pot-bellied stove, a table and a piano with two brass candlesticks arranged festively on top.

The ward smelled of soiled dressings, of bedpans, of dying and

living flesh: old men's smells, although most of the fighter pilots in here were in their early twenties. Stourton, at the end of the ward, who had been flying Hurricanes from North Weald, had been a blind man for two weeks now. His girlfriend came in every day to teach him Braille. Squeak Townsend, the red-faced boy in the next bed with the hearty, unconvincing laugh, was a fighter pilot who'd broken his spine when his parachute had failed, and who'd confessed to Dom a few days ago that he was too windy to ever want to fly again.

Dom knew he was lucky. He'd been flying a Spitfire at 20,000 feet over a patchwork of fields when his cockpit was transformed into a blowtorch by the explosion of the petrol tank that sat in front of his instrument panel. His hands and face were burned – typical fighter-pilot injuries, the surgeon said – and in the excruciating moments between the flames and the ground, he'd opened the plane's canopy, fumbled for the bright green tag that opened his parachute, swooned through space for what felt like an eternity, and finally landed, babbling and screaming, on top of a farmer's haystack on the Suffolk coast.

Last week, Dr Kilverton, the jaunty new plastic surgeon who now travelled from hospital to hospital, had come to the Queen Victoria and examined the burn on the right side of his face.

'Beautiful.' Kilverton's bloodshot eye had peered through a microscope at the point where the new skin graft taken from Dom's buttock had been patchworked over his burns. 'That'll take about six or seven weeks to heal; then you should be fully operational. Good skin,' he added. 'Mediterranean?'

'My mother,' Dom explained through clenched teeth. Kilverton was peeling off old skin at the time, probing the graft. 'French.'

'Your father?'

Dom wanted him to shut up. It was easier to go inside the pain and not do the cocktail-party stuff.

'British.'

'Where did you learn to fly? Tilt your head this way, please.' The snub nose loomed towards him.

'Cambridge. The University Air Squadron.'

'Ah, my father was there too; sounded like jolly good fun.'

'Yes.'

Kilverton talked some more about corpuscles and muscle tone and youth still being on his side; he'd repeated how lucky Dom

was. 'Soon have your old face and your old smile back,' as if a smile was a plastered-on thing.

While he was listening, Dom had that nightmare sensation again of floating above himself, of seeing kind faces below and not being able to reach them. Since the accident, a new person had taken up residence inside the old face, and the old smile. A put-together self who smoked and ate, who joked and was still capable of cynical wisecracks, but who felt essentially dead. Last week, encouraged by the doctors to take his first spin on his motorbike, he'd sat on a grass verge outside the Mucky Duck, on what was supposed to be a red-letter day, and looked at his hand around the beer glass as if it belonged to someone else.

During his first weeks in hospital, now a blur of drips and ambulance rides and acid baths, his sole aim in life had been to not let the side down by blubbing or screaming. Blind at first, he'd managed to quip, 'Are you pretty?' to the nurse who'd sat with him in the ambulance that took him away from the smouldering haystack.

Later, in the wards, he made a bargain with himself: he would not deny the physical pain, which was constant, searing, and so bad at times it was almost funny, but emotionally he would own up to nothing. If anyone asked him how he was, he was fine.

It was only in the relative quiet of the night, in the lucid moments when he emerged from the morphine haze, that he thought about the nature of pain. What was it for? How was one to deal with it? Why had he been saved and the others were gone?

And only months later, when his hands had sufficiently healed, had he started to write in the diary his mother had sent him. Reams of stuff about Jacko and Cowbridge, both killed that day. A letter to Jacko's fiancée, Jill, not sent. Letters to his own parents, ditto, warning them that when he was better, he was determined to fly again.

And then the girl.

When she walked into the ward that night, what struck him most was how young she looked: young and spirited and hopeful. From his bed, he drank in every detail of her.

She was wearing a red polka-dot dress, nipped in at the waist, and a black hat with an absurd little veil that was too old for her and made her look a little like a four-year-old who had raided her mother's dressing-up box. She couldn't have been more than twenty-two.

He saw a roll of glossy dark hair under her hat. Generous lips, large brown eyes.

She stood next to the piano, close to the trolley that held dressings and rolled bandages. Half imp, half angel. She was smiling as if this was where she wanted to be. A real professional, he thought, trying to keep a cynical distance. A pro.

She explained in her lightly accented voice – Welsh? Italian? Hard to say – that her name was Saba Tarcan, and that she was a last-minute replacement for a torch singer called Janice Sophia. She hoped they wouldn't be disappointed, and then threw a bold look in Dom's direction – or so he imagined – as if to say *you won't be*.

A fat man in khaki uniform, her accompanist, sat down heavily at the piano, began to play. She listened, swaying slightly; a look of calm settled on her face as she sang about deep purple nights, and flickering stars, and a girl breathing a boy's name whilst she sighed.

He'd tried every trick in his book to keep her at arm's length, but the song came out of the darkness like a wild thing, and her voice was so husky, so sad, and it had been such a long time since he'd desired a woman that the relief was overwhelming. *Through the mist of a memory you wander back to me*. So much to conceal now: his fear of being ugly, his shame that he was alive with the others gone. And then he'd felt a wild desire to laugh, for 'Deep Purple' was perhaps not the most tactful of songs to sing: many of the men in the ward had purple faces, Gentian violet being the thing they painted over the burns victims, after they'd been bathed in tannic acid.

Halfway through the song, she'd looked startled, as if realising her mistake, but she'd kept on singing, and said nothing by way of apology at the end of it. He approved of that: the last thing any of them needed was sympathy and special songs.

When she'd finished, Dom saw that beads of perspiration had formed on her upper lip and rings of sweat around the arms of her dress. The ward was kept stiflingly hot.

When she sang 'I'm in the Mood for Love', Curtis, ignorant bastard, called out: 'Well, you know where to look, my lovely.'

Dom frowned. *Saba Tarcan*: he said the name to himself.

'Two more songs,' said Staff Nurse Morrison, tapping her watch. 'And then it's night-night time.'

And he was relieved – it was too much. Like eating a ten-course meal after starving for a year.

But Saba Tarcan paid no attention to the big fat nurse, and this he approved of too. She took off her hat and laid it on the piano, as if to say *I shall stay until I've finished*. She pushed back a tendril of hair from her flushed cheek, talked briefly to the pianist, and took Dom to the edge of what was bearable as she began to sing 'They Didn't Believe Me'. The song Annabel had loved, singing it softly to him as they walked one night hand in hand beside the Cam, in the days when he felt he had everything: flying, Cambridge, her, other girls too. As the tears dashed through the purple dye, he turned his head away, furious and ashamed.

Annabel was considered a catch: a tall, pale, ethereal girl with long, curly fair hair, a sweet smile, and clever parents: her father a High Court judge, her mother a don. She'd come to see him religiously at first, forehead gleaming in the stifling ward, reading to him with nervous glances around her at some of the other freaks.

'I can't do this, Dom, I'm not strong enough,' she'd said after two weeks. 'It's not you.' She'd swallowed.

'I'm starting to dread it.' She'd glanced at the boy in the bed beside him. The side of his face, grafted with his own skin to his chest, looked like a badly made elephant's trunk.

'So sorry,' she'd whispered softly, shortly before she left. Her round blue eyes had filled with tears. 'Can we stay friends?'

Not the first woman to have bolted out of this terrifying ward, not the last. 'Amazing how potent cheap music is': the kind of thing he might have said once to excuse the tears. His Noël Coward imitation had been rather admired at Cambridge. It wasn't even Annabel so much; it was everything lost, even the foolishly innocent things – perhaps particularly them.

His set, the self-proclaimed 'it' boys of their year, had spent days spragged out on sofas, smoking and drinking cheap sherry, elaborately bored and showing off wildly about Charlie Parker, or Pound, or Eliot – anything that amused them. How young they seemed, even at this distance. The first heady days away from home, the steady stream of good-looking undergraduate girls smuggled into their rooms, and they'd had their pick. He'd tried to be fair to Annabel, telling her after her tearful confession that he perfectly understood, didn't blame her in the slightest, in truth he'd always

had the guilty sense that his ardour did not equal hers, that she was not, as people said, 'the one'. There'd been so many other girls around, and Cambridge felt like a time when the sun would never stop shining.

Smetheren, whose famously untidy room was opposite his on the quad, had been killed two months ago. Clancy, one of his best friends, also a flying fanatic and among the cleverest men he'd ever met, shot down over France a month before his twenty-second birthday. And Jacko, of course. All changed within a year, and the boy he'd been could never have imagined himself like this: in bed at 8.30 in his PJs, desperately trying not to cry in front of a pretty girl. It was nothing but notes. He bit the inside of his lip to gain control: notes and a few minor chords, some well-chosen words. Only a song.

A clink of bottles, a rumble of wheels. The night medicines were coming round on a trolley. They were stoking up the boiler in the middle of the room, dimming the lights.

'Last one,' she said.

She was wearing her ridiculous little veiled hat again. The pianist had put away his music, so she sang 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' unaccompanied, her voice strong and clear, her expression intent and focused.

And then she'd walked around the beds to say good night.

Good night to Williams, who had both legs in traction, and to poor blind Billy at the end of the ward, and to Farthingale, who was off to theatre tomorrow to have his eyelids sewn back on again. She didn't seem to mind them, or was that part of the training?

When she got to Dom, Curtis, the bloody idiot, called out: 'Go on, love! Give him a night-night kiss.' He'd turned his head away, but she'd leaned towards him, so close he could see the mound of her stomach under the red and white dress. He felt the tickle of her hair. She smelt young and fresh, like apples.

When she kissed his cheek, he'd said to protect himself, 'You wouldn't kiss that if you knew where it came from,' and she'd leaned down again and whispered in his ear, 'How do you know that, you silly bugger?'

He'd stayed awake for the next hour thinking about her, his heart in a sort of delighted suspension. Before he went to sleep, he imagined her on the back of his motorbike. It was a summer's day.

They were sitting on a grass verge outside a country inn. They were teasing each other, they were laughing. She was wearing a blue dress, and the sky was just a sky again, not something you fell from screaming.

Chapter 2

ST BRIAVELS, GLOUCESTERSHIRE

My dear Saba Tarcan: his first attempt at a fan letter, written from the Rockfield Convalescent home in Wiltshire, was lobbed into the waste-paper basket. It was far too formal and avuncular for that mocking little face. Her address he'd cajoled from one of the nurses who organised the entertainments and who'd promised once the letter was written to forward it to 'the relevant party'.

Dear Saba, I would like to tell you how splendidly I thought you sang the other night when I heard you at Queen Victoria's. Oh, worse! That sounded like some port-winey old stage-door Johnny. Oh fuck it! Damn! He hurled it in the basket. He'd waited six weeks before writing to her, to make sure he was fit to be seen and thinking that once he was home again and not a patient, the old confidence would return and the letter would flow mellifluously from his pen, but if anything, he felt even more bewildered by what he was trying to say, which made him angry – a girl had never made him feel like that before. A poem ran through his mind – one he'd thought about in connection with her.

'Thank you, whatever comes.' And then she turned
And, as the ray of sun on hanging flowers
Fades when the wind hath lifted them aside,
Went swiftly from me. Nay, whatever comes
One hour was sunlit and the most high gods
May not make boast of any better thing
Than to have watched that hour as it passed.

He'd copied it into his diary in hospital, certain he wouldn't send that either. Poetry made people suspicious when they didn't know

you, and frankly, bollocks to the one-hour-being-lovely idea; he wanted to hear her sing again, nothing else.

'Coffee, Dom darling?' His mother's voice wafting from the kitchen; she sounded more French when she was nervous.

'I'm in the sitting room.' He glanced discreetly at his watch. Blast! He'd hoped to finish the letter first. 'Come and have it with me,' he said, trying with every ounce of his being not to sound like a person raging with frustration.

His mother was hovering. He'd felt her there all morning, trying to be unobtrusive. Thin as a wisp, elegant in her old tweed suit, in she bounded now with the tray, sat down on the edge of the piano stool and poured the coffee. 'Thank you, Misou,' he said, using his childhood name for her.

He took her hand. 'It's all right,' he wished she would stop looking so worried. 'Nothing hurts now. Look, hold it properly.' A surge of anger as he felt her tentative squeeze.

She bobbed her head shyly, not sure what to say. She'd been so proud of him once. Now his injuries seemed to have brought with them a feeling of shared shame – there was too much to say and to conceal.

During his months in hospital, he'd fantasised about being exactly where he was today, on this sofa, in this house in St Briavels, a tiny village on the borders of Wales and Gloucestershire. Sitting on the train that took him from Chepstow to Brockweir, he'd been determined to give his mother at least a few days of happiness to make up for the months of misery and worry she'd endured. No talk about flying again; no talk about friends, and maybe, in a couple of days' time over a glass of wine, an upbeat account of Annabel's departure.

A taxi had met him at the station. As they crossed a River Wye sparkling in the spring sunshine, a line of swans, stately and proud, were queening it across the water, and on the far side of the river a herd of Welsh ponies grazed, one with a sparrow sitting on its rump.

He asked the taxi driver to stop for a while. He said he wanted to look at the view, but in fact he was having difficulty breathing. The choking feeling, now familiar, came sudden as an animal leaping from the dark, and made his heart pound and the palms of his hands grow clammy. It would pass. He stubbed out his cigarette,

and sat breathing as evenly as he could, trying to concentrate on only good things.

'Lovely,' he said at last when it was over. 'Beautiful sight.'

'Perfect morning to come home, sir,' said the driver, his eyes firmly ahead. 'Ready to move off?'

'Yep. Ready.'

As the car rose up the steep hill, he concentrated fiercely on the field of black Welsh cattle on his right, the scattered cottages bright with primroses and crocuses. He was going home.

A long rutted track led to the farm; from it he saw the Severn estuary gleaming like a conch shell in the distance, and when Woodlees Farm came into view, his eyes filled with helpless tears. This was the charming whitewashed house his parents had moved to twenty-five years ago, when his father had first become a surgeon. Low-ceilinged, undistinguished, apart from large south-facing windows, it stood on its own in the middle of windswept fields. The small wood behind it was where he'd played cowboys and Indians with his sister Freya when he was a boy. They'd raced their ponies here too, dashing along muddy tracks and over make-shift jumps. He'd been born behind the third window to the right upstairs.

The car crunched up the drive between the avenue of lime trees his mother, a passionate gardener, had planted in the days when she was a homesick girl missing her family in Provence. Sparkling with rain, glorious and green, unsullied by the dust of summer, they appeared like a vision. He'd grown to hate the severely clipped privet hedges surrounding the hospital lawns. Beyond the trees, new grass, new lambs in the field, a whole earth in its adolescence.

His mother ran down the drive when she heard the taxi. She stood under the lime trees and took his face in both her hands. 'My darling Dom,' she said. 'As good as new.'

As they walked back to the house arm in arm, dogs swirled around their legs and an old pony in the field craned nosily over the gate. She'd said, 'How was it at Rockfield?' All she knew about it was that this was the place the burns boys were sent to, to shoehorn them back into 'real life'.

'Surprisingly jolly,' he said. He told her about the lovely house near Cheltenham, loaned by some county lady, about the barrels of beer, the pretty nurses, the non-stop parties, the complaints from the neighbours, who said they'd expected convalescents, not

larrikins. Hearing his mother's polite, anxious laugh, he'd fought the temptation to hang his head like a guilty boy; early that morning he'd been 10,000 feet above the Bristol Channel, zooming over the grazing sheep, the little patchwork fields, the schools, the church steeples, the whole sleeping world, and it had been bloody marvellous. Tiny Danielson, one of his last remaining friends from the squadron, had wangled a Tiger Moth kept in a hangar near Gloucester. Dom's hands had shaken as he'd buckled on the leather flying helmet for the first time in months, his heart thumping as he carefully taxied down the runway with its scattering of Nissen huts on either side, and then, as he'd lifted off into the clear blue yonder, he'd heard himself shout with joy.

Wonderful! Wonderful! Wonderful! He was flying again! He was flying again! In hospital, the idea that he might have to go back to a desk job had made him sweat with terror. He'd worried that he'd be windy, that his hands wouldn't be strong enough now, but he'd had no trouble with the controls, and the little aircraft felt as whippy as a sailing craft under his fingers. The air was stingingly cold, there was a bit of cumulus cloud to the left, and he felt suddenly as if a jumble of mismatched pieces inside him had come together again.

Hearing his shout of pleasure, Tiny had echoed it, and a few minutes later clapped him on the shoulder.

'Down now, I think, old chap – we don't want to get court-martialled.'

A noisy breakfast followed – toast, baked beans, brick-coloured tea – shared with Tiny and a pilot wearing a uniform so new that it still had the creases in it. Nobody asked him any questions about the hospital; no one made a fuss – economy of emotion was the unspoken rule here. In the mess, there was even a 'shooting a line' book that fined you for any morbid or self-congratulatory talk. And that was good, too. Four of his closest friends were dead now, five missing presumed dead, one captured behind enemy lines. He was five months shy of his twenty-third birthday.

'You'll notice a few changes.' His mother, light-footed and giddy with happiness, had almost danced up the drive. 'We've been planting carrots and onions where the roses were. You know, "dig for victory" and all zat. Oh, there's so much to show you.'

She took him straight up the stairs so he could put his suitcase in his old room. The bed looked inviting with its fresh linen sheets

and plumped pillows. A bunch of lavender lay on the bedside table. He gazed briefly at the schoolboy photographs of him that she'd framed. The scholarship boy at Winchester, flannelled and smirking in his first cricket XI; and there a muddied oaf, legs planted, squinting at the camera, Jacko sitting beside him beaming. Jacko, who he'd persuaded to join up, who he'd teased for being windy, who he'd last seen clawing at his mask in a cauldron of flame, screaming as the plane spiralled down like a pointless piece of paper and disappeared into the sea.

He must go up to London and talk to Jilly, Jacko's fiancée, about him soon. He dreaded it; he needed it.

His mother touched his arm.

'Come downstairs,' she said quickly. 'Plenty of time to unpack later.'

A whiff of formaldehyde as they passed his father's study on the way down. On the leather desk, the same gruesome plastic model of a stomach and intestines that Dom had once terrified his sister with, by holding it up at her bedroom door, a green torch shining behind it; the same medical books arranged in alphabetical order.

'He'll be home after supper.' His mother's smile wavered for a second. 'He's been operating day and night.'

'Things any better?' slipped out. He'd meant to ask it casually over a drink later.

'Not really,' she said softly. 'He's never home – he works harder now if anything.'

In the tiled hall, near the front door, he glanced at his face in the mirror. His dark hair had grown again; his face looked pretty much the same.

Lucky bastard.

Selfish bastard. He could at least have answered Jilly's letter.

Lucky first of all to have been wearing the protective gloves all of them were supposed to put on when they flew, and he so often hadn't, preferring the feel of the joystick in his fingers. Lucky to have been picked up quickly by an ambulance crew and not burned to a crisp strapped into his cockpit. Luckiest of all to have been treated by Kilverton. Kilverton, who looked, with his stumpy hands and squat body, like a butcher, was a plastic surgeon of genius.

He owed his life to this man. He'd gone to him with his face and hands black and smelling of cooked meat – what they now

called airman's burns, because they were so common. The determined and unsentimental Kilverton, a visiting surgeon, had placed him in a saline bath and later taken him into theatre, where he'd meticulously jigsawed tiny strips of skin taken from Dom's buttock to the burns on the side of his face. All you could see now was a row of pinpricks about an inch long and two inches above his left ear. His thick black hair had already covered them.

Last week Kilverton had called Dom into his chaotic consulting room and boasted freely about him to two awestruck young doctors.

'Look at this young man.' He turned on the Anglepoise lamp on his desk so they could all get a better look at him. Dom felt the gentleness of those fat fingers, the confidence they gave you. One of the other chaps in the ward had said it was like getting 'a pep pill up your arse'.

'I defy you to even know he's been burned – no keloid scars, the skin tone around the eyes is good.'

'So why was he so lucky?' one of the doctors asked, his own young skin green with fatigue under the lamp. They'd had five new serious cases in the day before, a bomber crew who'd bought it off the French coast.

'A combination of factors.' Kilverton's eyes swam over his half-glasses. 'A Mediterranean skin helps – all that olive oil. His mother's French, his father's English.'

Dom had smiled. 'A perfect mongrel.'

'The rest,' Kilverton continued, 'is pure chance. Some men just burn better than others.'

Dom had gone cold at this.

Thompson had died in East Grinstead, after being treated with tannic acid, a form of treatment Kilverton had said was barbaric and had fought to ban. Collins, poor bastard, burned alive in his cockpit on his first training run. He was nineteen years old.

The same flames, the surgeon had continued in his flat, almost expressionless voice, the same exposure to skin- and tissue-destroying heat, and yet some men became monsters, although he did not use that word; he'd said 'severely disabled' or some other slightly more tactful thing. Having the right skin was, he said, a freak of nature, like being double-jointed or having a cast-iron stomach.

To illustrate his point, he'd lifted a pot of dusty geraniums from the windowsill.

'It's like taking cuttings from this: some thrive, some die, and the bugger of it is we don't yet know exactly why. As for you . . .' he looked directly at Dom again, 'you can go home now. I'll see you in six weeks' time.'

Dom had pretended to be both interested and grateful, and of course he was, but sometimes at night he sweated at the thought of this luckiness. Why had he lived and others died? Privately, it obsessed him.

'Can I fly again?' It was all he wanted now. 'Can you sign me off?'

'I'll see you in six weeks.' Kilverton switched off his light. He was shrugging on his ancient mackintosh, standing near the door waiting to leap into another emergency.

'I want to fly again.' The obsession had grown and grown during the period of his convalescence.

'Look, lad.' Kilverton had glared at him from the door. 'Your father's a surgeon, isn't he? Why not give him and your poor bloody mother a break and let somebody else do the flying for a while? I'll see you in six weeks' time.'

'My hands are strong. I'm fit. Four weeks.'

'Bloody steamroller.' Kilverton hadn't bothered to look up. 'It'll be six months if you don't shut up.'

His mother always did three things at once: right now she was in the kitchen up the flagstone hallway, making bread to go with a special lunch she'd prepared for him. Its warm, yeasty smell filled the room. She was roasting lamb in the Aga. She'd darted into the room to ask if he'd like a whisky and soda before lunch, and now she was standing beside the gramophone wearing what he thought of as her musical face, as she lowered the needle.

Tender and evanescent as bubbles, the notes of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 9 floated out and his throat contracted. Home again: music, roast lamb, the faint tang of mint from the kitchen, his mother humming and clattering pans. The cedar parquet floors smelling faintly of lavender where he and Freya had been occasionally allowed to ride their tricycles. The rug in front of the fireplace where they sat to dry their hair on Sunday nights.

He stretched his legs out and put his arms behind his head, and looked at the pictures his mother had hung above the fireplace.

There was a reproduction of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, a Gwen John self-portrait.

He stood up and stared at them, as if by examining the pictures he could see her more clearly. How cleverly she'd arranged them – not too rigidly formal, but with a plan that pleased the eye.

She did everything well: cooking, dressing, gardening, entertaining and stitching. The sofa he sat on was covered, too covered for real comfort, in her tapestry cushions. He picked one up now, marvelling at the thousands and thousands of tiny, painstaking stitches that had measured out her afternoons, pinning unicorns and stilled butterflies to her canvas.

While the Mozart swept majestically on, he heard the faint pinpricks of a spring shower against the window. His mother had once dreamed of being a professional musician; as a child, Dom had loved lying in his bed with Liszt's Polonaises drifting up to his room like smoke, or the brisk rat-tat-tat of her little hands swashbuckling through her own rendition of the Ninth. But now her piano sat like some grand but disregarded relative in the corner of the room, almost entirely covered by family photographs. The gorgeous Steinway that had once been her life, that had almost bankrupted her father.

Dom's own father had put an end to it. Not intentionally, maybe. Two months after he'd married his clever young bride, he'd developed tinnitus and couldn't stand, so he said, any extra noises in his head. And then the children – Freya first, and two years later Dom – her husband's determined move up the career ladder, and lastly, in the cold winter of 1929, she'd developed chilblains and stopped for good. No more Saint-Saëns, or Scott Joplin to make guests laugh; no more duets even, for she had taught Dom as a little boy, and told him he would be very good if he stuck at it. What had once been a source of delight became a source of shame, a character flaw. Even as a child he was aware how it clouded her eyes when people turned to her and said: 'Didn't you once play the piano rather well?'

Dom examined silver-framed Freya, on the front of the piano. Freya – of the laughing eyes and the same thick black hair – was in the WAAF now, in London, working at Fighter Command, loving her life 'whizzing things around on maps', as she put it.

There he was, a ghost from another life, striking a jokey pose in a swimsuit on the beach at Salcombe. His cousins Jack and Peter,

both in the army now, had their arms around him. They'd swum that night, and cooked sausages on the beach, and stayed out until the moon was a toenail in the sky. The beach was now littered with old bits of scrap metal, barbed wire and sandbags, the rusted hulks of guns. In another photo, his mother's favourite, he sat on the wing of the little Tiger Moth he'd learned to fly in, self-conscious in his first pilot's uniform, almost too young to shave.

The year he and Jacko had started to fly had been full of thousands of excitements: first set of flying clothes; Threadnall, their first instructor, roaring abuse: 'Don't pull back the control column like a barmaid pulling a pint, lad'; first solo flight; even the drama of writing your first will out when you were twenty-one years old. There was nothing the earth could offer him as exciting as this.

That first flight was when he'd cut the apron strings, and all the other ropes of convention and duty that bound him here, and thought to himself, *Free at last*, shockingly and shamefully free as he soared above the earth, terrified and elated, over churches and towns, schools and fields. *Free at last!*

As the music dropped slowly like beads of light in the room, bringing him to the edge of tears, he thought about Saba Tarcan again: her daft little hat, the curve of her belly in the red satin dress, her husky voice.

He did not believe in love at first sight. Not ever, not now. At Cambridge, where he'd broken more than his fair share of hearts and where, even at this distance, he now thought of himself as being a tiresome little shit, he'd had a whole spiel that he could produce about what a ridiculous concept it was. His reaction to Saba Tarcan felt more complex – he'd admired the way she'd carried herself in that noisy ward, neither apologising, nor simpering, nor asking for their approval. He remembered every detail: the fighter boys lying in a row, stripped of their toys and their dignity, some tricked up like elephants with their skin grafts, and the girl with only her songs, taking them beyond the world where you could define or set limits on things, or be in simple human terms a winner or a loser. What power that was.

'I've brought you some cheese straws.' His mother appeared with a tray. 'I saved up our cheese ration for them.'

'Misou, sit.' He patted the sofa beside him. 'Let's have a drink.'

She poured herself a small Dubonnet and soda, her lunchtime tipple, a beer for him.

'Well, how nice this is.' She crossed her impeccable legs at the ankle. 'Oh golly! Look at that.' A small piece of thread that had come loose on one of her cushions. She snapped it off between her small teeth.

'Misou, stop fussing and drink up. I think you and I should get roaring drunk together one night.'

She laughed politely; it would take her a while to thaw out. Him too – he felt brittle, dreamlike again.

'Have another.' She passed him the cheese straws. 'But don't spoil your appetite. Sorry.' The plate bumped his hand. 'Did that hurt?'

'No.' He took two cheese straws quickly. 'Nothing hurts now. These are delicious.'

She filled the small silence that followed by saying: 'I've been meaning to ask you, do you have any pills you should be taking, any special med—'

'Mother,' he said firmly. 'I'm all right now. It wasn't an illness. I'm as fit as a fiddle – in fact, I'd like to go for a spin on Pa's motorbike after lunch.'

'I don't think he'd mind – that sounds fun. He doesn't use it now.' He felt her flinch, but he would have to start breaking her in gently. 'It's in the stable. There should be enough petrol,' she added bravely.

'For a short spin, anyway.'

'So nothing hurts now?'

'No.' It was no good, he simply couldn't talk about it to her – not now, maybe never – this wrecking ball in the middle of his life that had come within a hair's breadth of taking pretty much everything: his youth, his friends, his career, his face.

'Well, all I can say,' she shot a darting look in his direction, 'is that you look marvellous, darling.'

Which didn't sit well with him either. His mother had always cared too much about how people looked. The reproach in her voice when she pointed out a nose that was too long or somebody who had a big stomach seemed to indicate that its owner was either careless or stupid. or both. Some of the boys in the ward had been so badly burned they were scarcely recognisable, but they were still human beings underneath it.

'Do I?' Impossible to keep the note of bitterness out of his voice. 'Well, all's well that ends well.'

And now he had hurt her and felt sorry. She'd moved to the other end of the sofa, he felt her bunched up and ready to fly.

'That music was wonderful,' he said. 'Thank you for putting it on. All we heard in hospital was a crackly wireless and a few concerts.'

'Any good?'

'Not bad, one or two of them.' *A singer?* He imagined her saying it, and then, with her sharp professional face on, *Was she any good?*

'I was thinking in hospital,' he said, 'that I'd like to play the piano again.'

'Are you sure?' She looked at him suspiciously, as if he might be mocking her.

'Yes.'

She took his hand in hers. 'Do you remember last time?' She was looking pleased. 'Such sweet little hands.' She waggled her own elegant fingers in a flash of diamonds. 'Like chipolatas. First Chopsticks,' she mimed his agricultural delivery, 'then Chopin. You know, you could have been very, very good,' she said, 'if you'd stuck at it.'

'Yes, yes,' he said. It was an old argument between them. 'I did Walter Gieseking a great good turn when I gave up.'

'And what about you nearly amputating these *sweet little hands*?' he teased. They'd had a corker of a row one day, when he'd been racing through 'Für Elise' as loudly as he could, loving the racket he was making. She'd ticked him off for not playing with more light and shade, and he'd roared: 'I'M A LOUD-PLAYING BOY AND I LIKE THINGS FAST.' And she – oh, how quick and ferocious her temper was in those days – had brought the lid down so sharply she'd missed his fingers by a whisper and blackened the edge of the nail on his little finger.

She covered her face with her hands. 'Why was I so angry?'

Because, he wanted to say, it mattered to you; because some things affected you beyond reason.

'I don't know,' he said gently, seeing her furious face again, under the lamplight, stabbing at her tapestry.

'Listen, you loud-talking boy,' she said. She stood up and walked towards the kitchen. 'Lunch is ready. Let's eat.'

'Yes, Mis, let's eat.' It seemed the safest thing to do.

*

When they faced each other over the kitchen table, there didn't seem quite enough of them to fill the room, but at least she hadn't asked him yet about Annabel, a relief, for she would be upset – she'd approved of Annabel's clothes, her thinness, her clever parents – and then she'd be fiercely indignant at anyone foolish enough to reject her son. He'd rehearsed a light-hearted account of the episode, in truth, he was almost relieved now that Annabel had gone: one less person to worry about when he flew again.

Misou poured him a glass of wine and filled a plate with the roast lamb mixed in with delicious home-grown onions and carrots and herbs. He ate ravenously, aware of her watching him and relaxing in his pleasure.

Over coffee he said, 'That was the best grub I've had for months, Ma, and by the way, I really would like to play the piano again.'

And then she shocked him by saying: 'You want to fly, don't you? That's what you really want to do.' She gave him a searching look; he could not tell whether she was pleading with him or simply asking for information.

He put his cup down. 'Don't you think we should talk about this later?' he asked gently.

She got up suddenly and went to the sink.

'Yes,' she said. 'Later.'

She ran the tap fiercely; he saw her drying-up cloth move towards her eyes. 'Not now,' she said several seconds later.

'I don't think I could stand it.'