

## I.

*Highgate, London, November 1985*

This morning I found a black and white photograph of my father at the back of the bureau drawer. He didn't look like a liar. My mother, Ute, had removed the other pictures of him from the albums she kept on the bottom shelf of the bookcase, and shuffled around all the remaining family and baby snapshots to fill in the gaps. The framed picture of their wedding, which used to sit on the mantelpiece, had gone too.

On the back of the photograph, Ute had written 'James und seine Busenfreunde mit Oliver, 1976' in her steady handwriting. It was the last picture that had been taken of my father. He looked shockingly young and healthy, his face as smooth and white as a river pebble. He would have been twenty-six, nine years older than I am today.

As I peered closer, I saw that the picture included not only my father and his friends, but also Ute and a blurred smudge which must have been me. We were in the sitting room, where I was standing. Now, the grand piano is at the other end, beside the steel-framed doors which lead to the glass-house and through to the garden. In the photograph, the piano stood in front of the three large windows overlooking the drive. They were open, their curtains frozen mid-billow

in a summer breeze. Seeing my father in our old life made me dizzy, as though the parquet were tipping under my bare feet, and I had to sit down.

After a few moments I went to the piano, and for the first time since I had come home I touched it, running my fingers without resistance across the polished surface. It was much smaller than I remembered, and showed patches of a lighter shade where the sun had bleached it over many years. And I thought that maybe it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Knowing that the sun had shone, and the piano must have been played, and people had lived and breathed whilst I had been gone, helped steady me.

I looked at the picture in my hand. At the piano my father leaned forward, his left arm stretched out languidly whilst his right hand tinkered with the keys. I was surprised to see him sitting there. I have no recollection of him ever sitting at the piano or playing it, although of course it was my father who taught me to play. No, the piano was always Ute's instrument.

'The writer, he holds his pen and the words flow; I touch the keyboard and out my music comes,' she says with her hard German vowels.

On that day, at that tiny moment in time, my father sat uncharacteristically relaxed and handsome in his long-haired, thin-faced way, whilst Ute, wearing an ankle-length skirt and a white blouse with leg-of-mutton sleeves, was striding out of shot, as if she could smell the dinner burning. She held my hand and her face was turned away from the camera, but something in the way she carried herself made her look displeased, irritated to be caught with the rest of us. Ute was always well built – big-boned and muscular –

though in the last nine years she's become fat, her face wider than in my memory, and her fingers so puffed, her wedding ring is locked in position. On the telephone, she tells her friends that her weight gain has been due to the agony she lived with for so many years; that she ate her way through it. But late at night, when I can't sleep, and creep downstairs in the dark, I have seen her eating in the kitchen, her face illuminated by the fridge's interior light. Looking at the photograph, I realized it was the only one I'd ever seen with the three of us in it together.

Today, two months after I'd come back home, Ute had been confident enough to leave me alone for half an hour before breakfast whilst she took Oskar to a Cub Scout meeting. And so, with one ear listening for the sound of the front door opening and Ute returning, I rummaged through the other drawers in the bureau. Already it was easy to cast aside pens, notepaper, unwritten luggage labels, catalogues for labour-saving household devices, and key rings of European buildings – the Eiffel Tower jostling against Buckingham Palace. In the bottom drawer, I found the magnifying glass. I kneeled on the rug, a different one from that in the photograph – when was it changed? – and held the glass over my father, but was disappointed to discover that enlarging him didn't show me anything new. His fingers were uncrossed; the corner of his mouth was not turned up; there was no secret tattoo I had missed.

One by one, from left to right, I focused on the five men in front of him. Three of them were squashed together on the leather sofa, whilst another sat back on the sofa's arm, his hands behind his head. These men wore scruffy beards and their hair long; none of them smiled. They looked so

similar they could have been brothers, but I knew they were not. Confident, relaxed, mature; like born-again Christians, they said to the camera, 'We have seen the future and disaster is coming; but we are the saved.' They were members of the North London Retreaters. Every month they met at our house, arguing and discussing strategies for surviving the end of the world.

The fifth man, Oliver Hannington, I recognized instantly although I hadn't seen him either for many years. The camera had caught him sprawling across an armchair, his legs in flared trousers, dangling over one side. Smoke curled through his yellow hair from a cigarette he held in the hand that propped up his head. Like my father, this man was clean-shaven, but he smiled in a way that suggested he thought everything was ridiculous; as though he wanted posterity to know he wasn't really interested in the group's plans for self-sufficiency and stockpiling. He could have been a spy who had infiltrated them, or an undercover journalist producing news stories which would one day expose them all, or a writer, going home after meetings and working all the mad characters into a comic novel. Even now, his strong-jawed self-confidence seemed exotic and foreign; American.

But then I realized there must have been someone else in the room – the photographer. I stood where the person holding the camera must have stood, and with a corner of the photograph between my lips, I positioned my hands and fingers to form a square frame. The angle was all wrong; he or she must have been much taller than me. I put the magnifying glass back in the drawer, then surprised myself by sitting on the piano stool. I raised the key lid, transfixed by the neat white row of keys, like polished teeth, and put my

right hand over them – so smooth and cool – where my father’s had been. I leaned to the left, stretched my arm out across the top and something moved inside me, a nervous fluttering, low down in my stomach. I stared at the photograph, still in my hand. The face of my father stared back, even then so innocent he *must* have been guilty. I went again to the bureau, took the scissors from the pen pot and snipped around my father’s face so he became a light grey mole on the tip of my finger. Careful not to drop him and lose him under the furniture, to be vacuumed up by Ute’s cleaner, and with my eyes fixed on his head, I reached up under my dress with the scissors and chopped through the silky fabric in the middle of my bra. The two cups which had irritated and scratched fell apart and my body was freed, like it always had been. I tucked my father under my right breast so that the warm skin held him in place. I knew if he stayed there, everything would be all right and I would be allowed to remember.