I

Twice my life has turned on the step of a girl through a doorway; first when I was fifteen and my new, first-ever sister-in-law came walking into Wolf Hall. The May trees were holding blossom as thick and thorough as snowfall when Katherine crossed our threshold as the twenty-one-year-old bride of my twenty-one-year-old brother. Two days on the road, but she was as fresh as a daisy in her buttercup silk. Thirty miles from her home to ours: the furthest she'd ever ventured and, to me, unthinkably far. An heiress in her own right in a minor way, she came stepping up to be daughter-in-law of a knight and wife of the Seymour heir. When she dipped her head beneath the lintel and then looked up at us, the bones at her throat opened like fingers in a gesture of greeting, and although she buttoned her lips, modesty itself, her smile swept regardless into her honey-coloured eyes. My brother's hand was at – not quite in – the small of her back.

I didn't stand a chance: looking back over thirteen years, that's what I see. In the very first instant, I was won over, and of course I was: I was fifteen and had been nowhere and done nothing, whereas Katherine was twenty-one and yellow-silk-clad and just

married to the golden boy. Only a few years later, I'd be blaming myself for not having somehow *seen* . . . but seen *what*, really? What – really, honestly – was there to see, when she walked into Hall? She was just a girl, a lovely, light-stepping girl, smiling that smile of hers, and, back then, as giddy with goodwill as the rest of us.

A lifetime ago it might've been, that afternoon when we Seymours gathered to welcome Edward's May bride. We'd done our utmost, spending days cleaning and tidying the house, then taking the entire morning to dress, but as we stood there to receive the newly-weds, I fretted that our best still wasn't good enough. Edward was bringing home his bride and, quite possibly, we were letting him down. And if Katherine had expected us to be like her groom, she'd be disappointed, because, it occurred to me, we Seymours were nothing special: Edward, yes, but the rest of us were respectable and dependable and that was all we were. It was the first time I'd ever thought like that about my family; until then, for me, we just *were*. Now, thinking back, remembering us assembled there, I find myself marvelling at our innocent happiness, that it could ever have been possible.

So, there she was, Katherine, coming long-boned and loose-limbed towards us, and, in her wake, Edward: clever, cautious Edward. At twenty-one, he could've had several more years before being expected to marry but – typically decisive – he'd already chosen, and he'd chosen her, and of course he had: *just look at her*. I stood spellbound, drinking down the vision of her. She was at least as tall as him, and moved ahead of him with animal grace.

If I put myself in her shoes, coming across Hall towards us, the Seymour I find hardest to recognise is me. In no respect do I easily recognise my fifteen-year-old self, but least of all physically. Odd to think that back then I was a scrap of a thing; in those

days, I was quite often wearing my younger sister Elizabeth's hand-me-downs.

My new sister-in-law's first sight of me would have been obscured in part by Dottie, my nine-year-old sister, who was bobbing excitedly despite Elizabeth's jabbing at her back in a poor attempt to keep her in line. Dottie's delight was what Katherine saw first of us: her jiggling on the spot and her occasional Elizabeth-dealt lurch. I might have jiggled, too, I suppose, had I not been so ill at ease in my new kirtle. My mother had at last deemed me, at fifteen, to be of an age for a kirtle and gown; but Elizabeth, too, annoyingly – Elizabeth, a whole year younger than me! – just for my mother's convenience.

Beside Dottie was Margie, her junior by a year but, in contrast, admirably composed. Margie's eyes would have been trained on Katherine in naked appraisal: Margie's cool, grey, widely spaced eyes. No such circumspection from Antony – at seven, the baby of our family – who would've seen someone new to be subjected to his questions and challenges: How far can you hop? Would it be better to be blind or deaf? Behind me were my two older brothers: Harry and Thomas. Sandy-haired Harry's lack of physical resemblance to Edward must have struck Katherine but she'd have seen, too, how deeper ran the difference between them, Harry's being such an easy-going smile. Actually, Harry was raring to be off to Barbara's, thinking only of her and their own forthcoming nuptials. Thomas was just as keen to turn and go, but less cheerfully. He begrudged each and every success of Edward's, which, to him, was what Katherine was.

No wonder I was the one to fall so readily for Katherine. Look at me there: within our family, I was peculiarly alone, the eldest girl, my three older brothers so much more worldly than me but the children – Dottie, Margie, Antony – so much younger. True, Elizabeth was in the middle with me, but, being younger, she had

it easy, shouldering none of my responsibilities, and anyway we never got along, and still don't.

As my mother bustled forward to greet her new daughter-in-law, I cringed to see her as Katherine might: bulky, flustered, frowzily dressed. We Seymours didn't stand on ceremony, had no airs and graces, which Katherine seemed to understand, responding fulsomely by clasping both of my mother's hands in her own. What a natural she was, this girl whom my brother had so cleverly and carefully chosen. How did my mother feel when Katherine's hands closed around her own? She herself had once been the bride to cross Wolf Hall's threshold – she'd been the one with the money and connections, though, and even several years, too, on her husband – and one day, in turn, this new daughter-in-law was to take her place as matriarch of the Seymour family.

And my father? Where was he? How odd that I can't locate him there in my mind's eye. In view of what later happened, it's as if he's taken cover. But he was never one to step forward if he could hang back, and he probably just stayed behind us, as gaunt and shadowed as my mother was flushed and dimply. For my parents, Katherine was the answer to all the prayers of their married life that their heir would marry well: her arrival was an end in itself. For me, I knew in my gut that her step across the threshold was the beginning of something, although at the time I couldn't have known it as anything but a change for the good.

If anyone was going to spoil the occasion, it would be Thomas and, duly, only a little later, at supper, he made his move. We'd endured a reading from Father James and some polite conversation about Katherine's parents' health when Thomas unwrapped his roll from its linen, asking, 'Anyone want this?' but by which time it was in the air on its way to his sister-in-law. She caught it before she knew: there it was in the palm of her raised hand, which stayed raised as she looked to the little ones for applause. Antony couldn't stop himself – 'Yeeesss!' – and a squeal escaped

Dottie despite her fingertips pressed to her lips. Katherine's own delayed exhalation was as exuberant as a laugh. I was still trying to take in what I'd seen; the Seymours didn't lob bread rolls, or indeed anything else, at guests. Not that Katherine was, strictly speaking, a guest.

'Thomas!' It was all my mother could do to utter his name, my father rushing to back her up, 'Thomas!', and then Margie having to have her say, 'Thomas!', which had my mother turning on her, 'Margery!' Down the table, Father James murmured an oath. Elizabeth was tutting louder than should have been physically possible, and sweet-natured Harry was rubbing his face as if to erase what he'd had to see.

And Thomas? Well, he affected a suitably sheepish look, but only just, the smirk still detectable. He'd had an instinct about Katherine and had taken a gamble which, in his view, paid off when she'd shown herself to be game. And if truth be told, I doubt anyone around that table was all that displeased to have seen it.

Anyone except Edward, that is, who, beside his new wife on the bench, had been perilously close to the trajectory of that roll. He looked levelly at Thomas and, although restrained, his tone was all the more deadly for it: 'Apologise.'

Thomas must have anticipated it, Edward being Edward in any case but now, too, being Katherine's knight in shining armour, yet, incredibly, he still managed to bridle: a jut of the chin and a slouch that was as close to a swagger as he could manage on a bench.

Katherine interjected, conciliatory, or tried to – 'Really, Edward, it's—' but he cut across her to demand of his brother: 'Apologise.' Directed at Thomas, that all too palpable disgust was actually, I sensed, for every one of us: for admiring his wife's catch and for being slow to take Thomas properly to task. And thus reprimanded, we were all subdued; Katherine, too, judging

from the bowing of her head and her surreptitious discarding of that briefly fêted roll, which lay friendless near the middle of the table. What else could she have done, though, but catch it? I wanted to whisper down the table to her, Not you, he's not angry with you. But, actually, he probably was. Thomas had thrown it and even though Katherine couldn't have done otherwise, she'd caught it, which, in Edward's eyes, made them partners in crime.

And worse, Thomas was now going to stand up to Edward, to pick a fight. If any of us had been hoping that Edward's getting married would improve Thomas's attitude to him, we were disappointed. I closed my eyes as if that would also close my ears, but then came the surprise: Thomas launching himself into his apology, disarmingly direct, faultlessly sincere, utterly charming, 'I'm really sorry, Katherine; that was unforgivable of me.'

Forgive him, though, she did – 'No, really' – and with a merry little laugh. So, then, incredibly, it was Edward, for making too much of it, who looked the fool.

Nevertheless, the evening recovered to end well, and I should have slept soundly that night in the knowledge that my brother had made a brilliant choice of bride. But I was quite unable to settle. In the bed that I shared with my three sisters, I lay awake for a long time because when my new sister-in-law had walked through our doorway, I'd had my eyes opened to something. Unwittingly, she'd as good as broken the news to me. I had been growing up believing that, one day, in some years' time, that would be me: the bride. In so much as I ever gave it any thought – scrap of a thing as, back then, I still was – that, I felt, was what would be happening. However unlikely a prospect it had seemed to me, there had always been a fair bit of time still ahead and somehow – I'd had faith – it would happen. There I would be, one day, grown up, and a wife.

That night, though, as I tried and failed to sleep, I began to suspect that it wouldn't be happening for me as it had just happened

for her: a bride adored, family dazzled. I was nothing like her: by comparison I was plain and dull, but that wasn't news and didn't even particularly bother me, being just the way it was; the revelation was that it mattered. I'd been brought up believing that it was enough for me to be diligent and dependable. What was clear that night, though, was that if I weren't adorable and dazzling, then no one like Edward would ever be ushering me into his family home. And that, too, I realised on that night: I wanted someone like Edward, or as much like Edward as someone like me could expect. I'd glimpsed our newly-weds strolling after supper in the flower garden; she in front of him, walking backwards, laughing as she spoke, while he hung on her every word. No one – I knew it, I just knew it – was ever going to love me as he loved her, and, that night, I keenly felt the loss of it.

Lying there in that suffocating darkness, I wondered what, really, I'd been thinking. I *hadn't*, I realised, which was precisely the problem: I *hadn't* been thinking. I'd grown up taking my mother at her word that it was enough for me to be mild-mannered, hard-working and sensible: enough to enable a girl to marry well, or well enough for someone like me. But what I'd seen when Katherine had walked into Hall, and then when she'd caught that bread roll, was that she wasn't sensible in the least, and look who'd married *her*.

Panic gripped me: the best I could hope for, it seemed to me during that interminable darkness, was a several-times widower, a man prepared to settle for a good housekeeper and stepmother to his children. I saw my future that night and it looked to be a fate worse than death. A husband with gout, as I saw it, and a houseful of hard-done-by children. Worse, though – far worse – would be to fail to marry at all, because then there'd be no chance of babies of my own. No kidskin babies of my own; no hay-scented babies with hair that's a joke on them (*call that hair?*); no babies with bizarrely big chuckles and poorly aimed, splay-fingered, too-vigorous clapping.

I'd been old enough when Dottie, Margie and Antony had been born to be able to relish their babyhoods. I'd stood over the crib marvelling how sleep claimed them, how they lay abandoned to it, how it burned in them like a fever but then suddenly they'd open their eyes and they were free: *what's next?* I'd loved how they presided over a room, subjecting us to scrutiny as if they were king or queen, although Antony's shy delight in our company had had him act more like an honoured guest. Even at seven he lacked the newly found composure of his sisters: gloriously gangly, made of angles, he looked like a scribble. On the rare occasions when he seemed to be still, he was, if you looked closely, swaying or drumming his heels, the life in him close to the surface like a pulse in a tender spot. However vigilant I was – and it was me back then whose job it was to take care of him – his hair and nails were always too long and his clothes too small. His body was faintly preposterous on him, like sticky buds on his back.

Who knows how well our newcomer slept on the other side of my wall, that night, but I barely slept at all. It was a long night, for me, that first of Katherine's beneath our roof, when I faced the prospect that I might never be anything much to anyone nor sleep anywhere else. Quite possibly, I realised, I would be staying for ever at Wolf Hall, tolerated and trying my best to make myself useful while everyone around me either grew up and left or grew old and died. And if so, there would be no end of nights exactly like that one until I was carried from the bed to be lowered into the chapel floor. No end to it: the surreptitious settling of my room's floorboards in their particular, precisely executed steps, and, above, in the roof, scattered mouse-rattle. Beyond the shutters, there would always be the jeering of the sheep; and beyond the door, my father's dogs left to their own devices, the whispering of their nails on flagstones as they dared to nose around the unpeopled stairwell.

2

Such a bad night made the following morning's prayers a trial, and my attention kept drifting across chapel to my new sister-in-law in the idle hope of catching a glimpse of the mischief I'd seen in her eyes the day before. No luck: those eyes were closed, and her head bowed. She was the very picture of devotion, which put Edward to shame because for all his earnest efforts elsewhere, in chapel he could never quite hide an impatience. To one side of me, Elizabeth picked at a hangnail; to the other, Thomas yawned repeatedly, and his breath smelled of ale.

After prayers, Edward rode off with my father to Eaton on business, leaving his bride to look expectantly to her new mother-in-law: what could she do to help? My mother was thrown; she had failed to anticipate this; having focused on the wedding and Katherine's arrival at our house. She had looked no further ahead. She hadn't had a daughter-in-law before, didn't know what to do with one.

'Oh, Katherine . . . ' She played for time, cast around. 'It's a lovely day; why don't you . . . ' and she indicated the door, the garden beyond it.

Katherine made a show of being amused – the very idea! – and

shook her head as if what my mother had said was the obvious joke to be made before the pair of them could get down to the business of being women together in the house. Leaving them to it, I embarked on the stairs. My mother was already in her apron and it would be easiest for her to take her new daughter-in-law along with her to the kitchen, to assist Bax, our cook, but then I heard her saying, 'Why don't you lend Jane a hand?'

Inwardly, I reeled: this shouldn't be falling to me; and today of all days, after the night I'd had, I didn't feel like doing my mother any favours. I hadn't had a sister-in-law before: I had no idea how much of 'a hand' I should expect from her, nor from which tasks I should shield her. Crucially, I had no idea what to say to her. Twenty-one to my fifteen, and such a natural by comparison with clueless me; she was a daunting prospect.

And worse: what came first every day was the dirty work. My first job of the day was to clean and tidy our room – mine and my sisters' – which, I recalled in a fluster, had been left in considerable disarray. No one had as much as emptied the pot. I'd woken late and listless, and, anyway, we hadn't been expecting a visitor to our room, had we. Not only did I not want my perfect new sister-in-law to see our squalor, but there was also my shameful ineptitude with my sisters. I was supposed to supervise them – they were supposed to help me – but I was pitifully useless in the face of Elizabeth's truculence, Dottie's distractedness, Margie's sense of superiority, and the sad truth was that I tended to give up on them, let them get away with it and do most of the work myself. It was quicker that way, and easier, more peaceful.

Katherine couldn't be deflected, though, and up those stairs she came. But that morning, up in our room, she more than proved her worth, toiling efficiently alongside me and enthusing the girls so that everything was put straight in no time. The pot was emptied by Elizabeth, wonder of wonders, who further excelled herself by vigorously sweeping the floor and even going so far as

to shake the carpet from the window. The rest of us contented ourselves with less heroic tasks: replenishing the water jugs, spreading the bedding for airing, sorting the laundry and carrying some of it outside to Lil and Moll, who were taking advantage of the good weather to do some washing.

When Katherine drew me aside at the door and whispered, 'Which one's which?' I paused to consider how to pitch the answer. My mother would've gone for a tactful, respectful, 'Moll's the more experienced,' something Moll never let us forget, which Elizabeth would've translated as 'old' although actually Moll was nowhere near as old as my mother (older than Lil, though, who was, by comparison, a girl, the pair of them being opposites in every way). I'd once heard Thomas describe Moll as 'girthly', and for the briefest moment I was tempted before opting for something less offensive but as indisputable: 'Moll's the one doing all the talking.'

Katherine herself didn't talk much while she worked, humming tunelessly instead, which should have been irritating but, surprisingly, was cheering. Whenever she did speak up, it was to express what seemed to be genuine pleasure in the various aspects and simple contents of our room: the view from the window, the embroidered coverlet on our bed, the little walnut stool in the corner, even the pungency of the flea-repelling wormwood scattered under our bed. She herself was a breath of fresh air: that was how I felt about her that first morning. Her company made light work of the drudgery, and, really, how better to endear herself to me? Me, of all of the Seymours. I'd had no sense before then of having been biding my time at Wolf Hall, but that morning, whenever I glimpsed her across my room, I'd think, What took you so long?

When we'd worked our way through the house – sweeping and shaking carpets and curtains, wiping and polishing, collecting and replacing candle-stubs – we ended up in the long gallery,

along which she skipped with arms outstretched as if to brush her fingertips along the panelling at either side in celebration of the length and breadth of it. Exhilarating though it was to watch her take off across those floorboards, I knew even by then that she didn't have to skip into a room to light it up. She went into any room looking for the pleasures it could offer her, simple though they might well be, which for me was an eye-opener, because I'd only ever gone into rooms looking for what needed to be done. It didn't occur to me then that such *joie de vivre* might bring its own dangers.

When the house was in order, Elizabeth took Margie to help her set the places for dinner and got rid of Dottie by sending her to pick posies for the tables (that old trick), so Katherine and I returned to the laundry pile for a proper sifting because, if the weather were to hold, Lil and Moll might progress to bleaching and we should give them enough to keep them busy. And that was when we had our first proper conversation, just the two of us. Setting to the task, I mentioned that the girls' laundry was my job while my mother did my father's and the boys', but then worried I'd said too much because perhaps Katherine would want to be the one, now, responsible for Edward's; after all, he was no longer one of the boys, but her husband. How to backtrack, though, I worried, without drawing attention to the prospect of his underclothes in her hands, her intimate scrutiny of them for blemishes and unravellings? Luckily for me, she didn't seem to have heard; she was still considering the girls' laundry.

'I had it easy,' she said, frowning at the pile, 'with there only being the two of us, my sister and me.'

It was unimaginable to me, so small a family.

'I'm the younger,' she told me, although of course I already knew it, but there was a twinkle to the way she said it, as if to suggest that, in being the younger, she'd been getting away with something. 'The naughty one.'

That I doubted; she was merely having fun: Edward would never have married someone who was 'naughty'.

'Nancy was always such a goody-goody,' and this accusation of hers was voiced just as pleasantly. At that, though, I was a little uneasy, because I could be said to be a 'goody-goody' in our household. Had I been said to be a goody-goody? Had Edward said it to her? He probably hadn't actually said 'goody-goody', because surely the same could be said of him.

'Except she never really was,' Katherine cheerfully contradicted herself, 'because no one ever really is, are they? What she was good at was never getting caught.' And this was said admiringly before she glanced at the door and lowered her voice to admit, 'It was always me who was still – you know – making the face when my father turned around. There was Nancy, all butter-wouldn't-melt . . . and then there was me . . . '

She said it as if I'd sympathise, as if I'd spent my own childhood making faces behind my own father's back, whereas I didn't recall ever having done such a thing and probably wouldn't even have known what face to make. Not that he'd have minded, probably, if I had, and that was if he'd even noticed, which he almost certainly wouldn't have. But then again, who knew what I'd have been like if I'd had a sister like her? If she'd have been at Wolf Hall to egg me on, I felt, perhaps I would indeed have done it. She'd had her sister to encourage her, even if that sister did then leave her in the lurch; whereas Elizabeth had never lowered herself so much as to catch my eye.

'I was never quick enough,' she lamented merrily, 'or I just didn't think or something – oh, I don't know, I don't know – but whenever my father turned around, it was always just me who was making that face.'

And her laugh came as her smile had done the day before, escaping from her, running away with her, and this time it snatched up my own and took it with it as I imagined her at eight

years old, gawky and spindly, haplessly overstepping the mark, her own silliness having gone on for a moment too long, leaving her cruelly uncovered and having to hope for mercy. At eight, I recalled, Edward had had to step up to be the eldest son, when John – a year older – had died. So, Edward would have been serious-minded even at eight, or especially at eight. But then we Seymours in general were a stoic lot. My new sister-in-law, though, seemed utterly unlike that, and my heart opened to her.

'Nancy's clever,' Katherine was saying, approvingly but ruefully, the implication being that in this, they differed. Again, I was sure she was merely making fun of herself. 'She can read and write really well, whereas me: oh, it makes no sense to me, I'm useless – it just dances around in front of my eyes.' Eyes which she now flicked skywards in exasperation. 'I "don't concentrate".' The precise annunciation made clear she was quoting. 'But . . . ' She shrugged jauntily: Who cares?

Then, as an afterthought, 'Did you have a tutor?'

'Father James.' I resisted adding 'for all the good it did me'. I'd liked to have said that words danced in front of my eyes, but, sadly, nothing so lively; they lay on the page and I crawled my way through them. Edward had gone to university at Oxford but the rest of us had learned whatever we'd managed to learn from Father James.

Katherine sighed, which I took to mean that although Father James's tuition might not have been much, nor much fun, it was more than she'd had. Well, perhaps if not bookish, I decided, then my brother would have chosen for a wife someone who was naturally astute. Thinking back, what amazes me is that I assumed Edward would be as sensible as in other spheres of his life when it came to matters of the heart.

3

Strange, too, that I didn't recognise Edward's ambitiousness for what it was. Then again, how could I have? I'd never come across ambition, not really. My father took his duties very seriously, but that's not the same. And Thomas? Well, back then, Thomas was a fledgling; but, anyway, the nature of his aspirations – for material gain, personal advantage – has always been quite distinct from Edward's. As is everyone's at court, it seems to me, with the possible exception of Cromwell's. Cromwell and Edward: perhaps, then, Edward's is a new kind of ambition, and perhaps I couldn't have recognised it back at Wolf Hall, even if I'd known to look. Come to think of it, perhaps he didn't, at that stage, even quite recognise it himself. In retrospect, it's clear that his new wife didn't.

What I did know was that he was hardworking and exceptionally able, and by the time I was fifteen I'd picked up enough from eavesdropping to know he was keen to improve the lives of our tenants and all the men and women on whom my father had to pass judgement in his capacity as a Justice of the Peace. Edward has always been able to see clearly where there are changes that can be made; he has an instinct for what can and

can't be done. And if anything can be done, he's almost certainly the one to do it, the one with the capabilities and the resolve. That's Edward's particular gift, I think: not only to know what can and can't be done, but to know exactly what he's capable and incapable of. It's that practical bent that makes him lethal.

Perhaps we aren't so dissimilar after all.

If I was oblivious to how ambitious he was, I did realise that he was quite unlike everyone else at home. He wasn't often around during my childhood, what with his years in Oxford and then his assisting my father in the running of family business; and then, around the time that he married, he began to be away at court, with the help of our distant cousin Francis Bryan, whenever occasion could be found. All of which meant that whenever he came back to us, he was invigoratingly different from everyone else. None of my father's dithering, Harry's loping and mooching, Thomas's swagger; none of my father's vagueness, Harry's undisguised lack of interest, Thomas's verbal sparring. And because being home was a novelty for him, he was able to be interested in us, to give measured responses even to Antony's various madnesses and Elizabeth's endless gripes.

Back when I was fifteen and he was twenty-one, I'd have simply said that my eldest brother was wonderful: it was as simple as that, for me. Not that I'd have said it to his face, but, then, I didn't say much at all to him, didn't dare, was hopelessly shy of him. Good job, too, because he'd have failed to appreciate it, partly on principle – hero-worship being unhealthy – but also because he would, I think, have been genuinely perplexed. Judging from the habitual worried frown and the diligence with which he undertook his various duties, I suspect he considered himself barely to measure up as the eldest Seymour son.

I didn't care what he'd read in books at Oxford, nor was I properly conscious, then, of how unusual were his ideas about the lives of ordinary people. Books and new ideas, no: it was his

worldliness that impressed me, his having been places and seen things. Not that he bragged, as Thomas did: Thomas only had to go to horrid old Salisbury for the day for us to suffer months of hearing how amazing it was.

Not from Edward himself but from my mother did I know that at thirteen he'd waded from a run-aground ship to the French shore behind our king's bedraggled eighteen-year-old sister. Edward was one of three pages at her marriage to the old French king and he saw her laughing as she held her soaked gown up around her knees because she guessed (correctly) that the marriage – the king – wouldn't last long and she'd soon be free.

Then, a year before he himself had married, he'd accompanied my father to join the hundreds of knights and nobles welcoming the Spanish Emperor to England. He had stayed at inns in Canterbury, Sittingbourne and Greenwich before riding into London behind the silk- and ermine-clad Archbishop Wolsey and his hundreds of servants liveried in crimson velvet. There in London he had watched pageants, and at Greenwich, jousts. All this he'd done. When he arrived back home, we crowded around him in the parlour and he opened his hand to reveal, in his palm, something pebble-sized and dun-coloured.

'What's that?' asked Elizabeth, curl-nosed.

'An acorn,' he'd said, unperturbed by the less than rapturous reception. 'Or, rather, it isn't: it's a piece of wood that's been turned to make an acorn, and there were two-and-a-half thousand of them. Two-and-a-half thousand, that's what Mr Gibson said, and for just five minutes on stage.'

Did he think that good or bad? I couldn't tell.

'Who's Mr Gibson?' Margie, keen as ever to establish the facts.

The gentleman, Edward said, who was in charge of all the court entertainments. So, Edward knew such a man; he'd actually conversed with him. But he told us so little of life at court, whether because he didn't want to turn our heads or because he

was unimpressed, I still don't know. Perhaps both. He didn't tell us about the woodland scene to which that acorn had belonged: the wood-turned and fabric-sewn hawthorns, oaks, maples, hazels and ferns; the papier-mâché beasts and birds; the centrepiece, a castle holding a silk-flower-garlanded, crowd-pleasing maiden. It was my father who described all that for us, just as he described the joust, of which that scene was merely one of many interludes. It was from my father that we learned of the king and queen's gold-canopied stand and the king's newly minted silver armour, and the hundreds of horses, grooms and footmen, players and heralds dressed in white velvet and gold damask. I can see, now, how odd it must've been for Edward, back in those days, having seen all that he'd seen, to have to come home to us: we Seymours with our clothes darned and handed down, our food plain and predictable, our horses tired and our opinions – if we had them, and if we expressed them – poorly informed.

Yet he was still a country boy at heart, because he'd gone ahead and married a local girl. He could have waited to marry until he fell for a girl at court, which was probably what my parents expected and what Francis Bryan, his mentor, had hoped. At twenty-one, Edward had yet to make his way. Well, he'd be making his way with a wife already at his side, I thought at the time, and how could Katherine fail to be an asset? On that first day of hers at Wolf Hall, sitting across that laundry pile from her, I pondered how it might have happened between the two of them.

Our families went way back but were separated by two days' ride. Katherine had visited us once, I'd been told, when she was nine; I'd been three and had no memory of it. Ten years later, our father and Edward had made the journey to her Horton home on business, and then Edward had found reason to go again, alone, and again and again. I imagined Katherine's goody-goody sister had been too busy at virginals practice to entertain him, so

Katherine had been the one to sit with him, in the company of her father, enquiring about his journey and, perhaps, the family to whom he'd be returning. She might have told him something of life on the Horton estate, which he'd have drunk down because he was an interested listener, his serious-mindedness never taking him away from the world but deeper into it.

Then perhaps, one late afternoon, the pair of them ventured into the garden, stopping only at the edge in the haze of dusk and beyond the earshot of anyone at a window. Precisely calibrated; what they could get away with. Just a little too far from the house and a little too late in the day. Nothing spoken of it, but nevertheless the pair of them complicit. That might have been all it was, but it would have been enough; it might have been the start. That's what I dreamt up for them, when I was fifteen, and I suspect I wasn't far wrong; I suspect there was never anything very complicated about it.

And why should there have been? That's what we Seymours would have thought, at the time. Why not follow one's heart in matters of the heart? It all looked set to be perfect. How ideal his bride seemed, that first evening, as she settled to her embroidery in the parlour, stitching steadily and absorbed by the rhythm of it. I was stitching, too, whereas my mother was one for cards at the end of the day, turning determined and devious, pitting herself against Elizabeth, who was, of course, more than a match for her. Dottie and Margie were playing shovelboard, which, although they played noisily, was preferable to Dottie's plodding practice on the virginals. Antony was learning chess under Thomas's tutelage, so that evening, like many others during that spring and summer, was punctuated by exclamations of dismay at moves good or bad or puzzling. Harry was over at Barbara's. Edward was looking through paperwork, briefly, with my father, whose long eyelids were creeping longer, and then played his lute, head cocked as if listening for an element not easily discernible.

Father James muscled in among the dogs at the fireside, ostensibly reading but actually dozing.

It was an evening like any other for us, that first evening of Katherine's, except that we younger Seymours, who still embroidered solely in black, had rarely seen the likes of the vivid silks in our sister-in-law's folded wallet. I glimpsed a creamy quince, a dusky raspberry, a blaring cornflower blue, and the zingy sweet green of wild garlic.

Margie raised it: 'Where d'you get those?'

'London.'

'London?' Dottie was round-eyed. 'You went to London?'

'My father's steward did.'

Margie frowned, sceptical. 'And he knows how to buy silks?'

Katherine widened her eyes, amused. 'I had him well trained.'

Our own steward would never have gone off into shops to buy us any silks – not that any of us had ever dared ask.

Margie put it to no one in particular, 'Which is your favourite colour?' and suddenly we were all up for the challenge of choosing but frozen in the face of it, afraid to commit. Well, all of us except Elizabeth. 'The green,' she said, unbothered, as if it should get up and thank her for having chosen it.

My mother nodded at the slip in Katherine's lap. 'That's a lovely piece of work, Katherine.' The colours shone in the fireglow, in shapes that formed buds and petals, fruits and vines.

She shrugged off the compliment. 'It's for an altar cloth.'

Piled on top of her sewing box were more slips: a pair of stocky, golden little bodies, one with a fuller head of hair than the other, and a cheerfully red-baubled tree.

She said, 'You're welcome to have it for chapel here, or perhaps it could go to St Mary's.' Our local church in Great Bedwyn.

'Oh—' my mother was concerned, anxious to do the right thing. It would be improper to expropriate it, was what she would've been thinking, wrong to assume that it would come to

us rather than the church at Horton just because its maker had. 'I'm sure we can send it down to Horton when it's done.'

Katherine merely looked bemused. 'But this is where I am now.'

It took only until the second evening for us to get a glimpse of Katherine's own true colours. The evening started well enough: she had Margie learning to make thread buttons for a new shirt for Edward ('That's nice tight work, Margie'), and Dottie embarked upon a tidying-up, if in name only, of her sewing box. My mother and I were working on our own stitching, and Elizabeth, having none of it, was playing cards with Antony. Freed from tutoring Antony in chess, Thomas could indulge in some moody strumming of his lute, to which my father – eyes closed after a wide-travelled day – was listening, or half-listening, or perhaps just appearing to listen. Harry had taken the visiting warrener to the henhouse to ask his opinion of a new, supposedly fox-proof fence, while Edward was absorbed in a ledger, having moved a stool beneath one of the windows to make use of what remained of the natural light. And so there we were, the Seymour family at home of a late spring evening and Katherine might always have been one of us.

It was Father James who, inadvertently, caused the debacle. He began snoring, but we Seymours were so accustomed to it as barely to notice. A couple of exasperated glances were exchanged at the first few vigorous snorts, but otherwise we simply knuckled down, as always, to endure it. When he'd started up, my mother had been quick, I'd noticed, with an apologetic smile for her new daughter-in-law, or perhaps more of a wince, to make clear that this was, unfortunately, nothing unusual and to be tolerated, as if Father James were simply one of the dogs among whom he lounged at the fireside. Only Elizabeth had begged to differ, tutting extravagantly and rolling

her eyes: How embarrassing. The children were too busy to notice, and, anyway, to them, I suppose, all adults were eccentric or distasteful. Katherine had given my mother a smile in kind, keen to be obliging.

Not too many snores later, though, she made her own small sound. She'd pricked her finger, I assumed, glancing up from my own work, but finding that she was focused on the cloth in her lap, not reeling as she would have done from a needle-prick. The needle was suspended: she'd halted mid-stitch. Father James snuffled loudly again and a gasp escaped Katherine even as she drew in on herself to quell it, which was when I realised with a mixture of horror and delight that she was laughing: she was laughing at our priest. No one else seemed to have noticed the lapse, perhaps because we were so well practised of an evening at closing our ears. There they were, all around me, the Seymours at play as usual, or as much at play as they ever were. Edward, Thomas and the little girls were absorbed in their various activities. Elizabeth was peering at her cards and cursing under her breath, making a drama of the hand she'd been dealt, and, wisely, Antony was scrutinising her for any evidence of cheating. A slackening of my father's features suggested he'd fallen asleep. Anyway, Katherine's indiscretion, against Father James's protracted nasal calamity, had been no louder than a sniff.

A second glance around showed me that I was wrong: her helplessness hadn't entirely escaped notice because my mother was repeating that smile but with emphasis, to indicate that she understood, that she was being understanding. I knew rather better than to trust to that, but poor Katherine rose to it, her long, supple backbone unfolding her so that she was looking – respectfully and gratefully – into my mother's eyes. Unfortunately, such an unguarded stance rendered her vulnerable and, in the same instant, Father James emitted a particularly bestial grunt, which had her felled, doubling over, fingertips of both hands pressed

hard to her lips to suppress a moan. And somehow, this time, I was swept along with her, a sensation both mortifying and delicious, so that there we were, the two of us, laughing despite ourselves, laughing into that silent room.

If I dared look up, my mother's disappointment, I knew, I just knew, would be staring me in the face, but for once I couldn't take the prospect of it seriously, could only think of it as a kind of mask, a doleful, pitiful mask. It wasn't Father James who was funny, I felt, or not really, not our poor old, tired Father James; it was us, we Seymours, because how absurd and incredible that we had ever sat around primly pretending not to hear him.

I couldn't hear him again, I knew; I simply couldn't bear to hear a single snore more. But I'd have to, and very soon. Nor should I catch a glimpse of Katherine, but there was no avoiding her because there she was, in the corner of my eye, shoulders comically quaking. I closed my eyes but heard her fractured, unsuccessfully held breath and then my own breath needed stilling because if any air got into me, any at all, I'd burst. I was on the brink of disaster; I had to be unseeing, unhearing, unbreathing, and the strain of it had icy sweat springing at the roots of my hair. Even though I resolved with every fibre of my being to hear nothing more from Father James, I knew that a snore was on its way, up close, and there'd be nowhere for me to hide. And Katherine, with her bowed head and narrowed shoulders: meekly though she sat there, obliging though she was trying to be, there was no disguising her thrill at her own glaring failure.

Misguidedly, she tried to mitigate it: 'Sorry, I'm sorry,' barely articulating it, rushing it out on a breath before that breath could become a laugh, but this desperate apology only served to alert everyone and then the worst was happening, in that everyone had turned to her. Only my mother spared her, smiling down over her needlework, contriving to look untroubled and giving us all the lead to follow: we were to look away, we were to leave her in

peace. But the girls gawped, and Antony hooted a laugh despite not quite knowing why. My father opened his eyes to give his daughter-in-law a fond but surprised smile. Thomas flicked her a glance as if merely to confirm something he'd known all along. And as for Edward: I didn't have to see his face to know that he'd have mustered a puzzled half-smile while he attempted to fathom what was going on, belatedly aware that his wife was indisposed and that he should probably be coming to her assistance.

Edward's attention was enough to prompt another unspooling of Katherine's spine, and, sitting tall – an impressive transformation – she now looked ahead, looked carefully nowhere. Particularly not, I sensed, at me, an omission that I found exhilarating. Her face was flushed, not blotchy as I knew mine would be, as if she'd been indulging in pleasurable physical activity, and a tendril of hair was loose from her hood. Her intentions were admirable, but as soon as Father James snored again she was beyond herself; me, too, along with her. Her whimpered apology was quite fabulously insincere, testing my mother's patience and unsettling Edward, and she looked to me, her eyes luminous with tears of laughter.

'Air,' she pleaded, and together we scrambled to the door, her shoving me aside to be first through it, then clattered through Hall into the courtyard where we could at last give full vent.

'Their faces!' she shrieked, astounded and jubilant, 'Their faces!'

Those Seymour-quiet faces, she meant: their polite concern. Well, for fifteen long years I'd been one of them, I'd suffered being one of them, but then there I was, outside with my new sister-in-law, my saviour, under the milk moon, drinking down that sparkling evening air and noisier even than the swifts.