Under Your Skin

Also by Sabine Durrant

For adults

Having It and Eating It
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For teenagers

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SABINE DURRANT

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First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Mulholland Books
An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 76239 6
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 76240 2
eBook ISBN 978 1 444 76241 9

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

For G. S.

Friday

I left the house earlier than usual this morning and, though it isn't exactly dark, it isn't yet light. The common is full of ghosts and shadows; the trees still iron-clad, unyielding figures to the early gauze of spring; the bushes and brambles along the railway line knotted and clumped: a mugger's paradise, though I try not to think about that.

I take my usual route – over the bridge and round the football pitches, churned into clods like a choppy sea. It's darkest where the path hits the corner, and there is an uncomfortable moment where you are hemmed in, rail cutting on one side, the adventure playground on the other. A blue anorak, sodden and draped, gives a creepily human form to a post and my pace quickens until the path channels across the open grass towards the main road. The headlamps of cars – commuters who need to be at work earlier than me, if such a thing were possible – rake the pavement. A shape comes towards me almost silently, another runner, a flash of headphone and Lycra, gone in an intake of breath, a whiff of warmth and sweat. You are never alone in London, even in the dead of night, even in the bone-cold chill of a pre-dawn March morning. There is always the possibility of someone watching, following, seeing what you're up to. I'm not sure I like it.

It helps to run. The pace, the rhythm, the sensation of regular movement in my limbs gives order to my thoughts. I didn't

sleep well last night. Even in the short snatches of unconsciousness I dreamt I was awake. In the end, I had to get up. I focus on my breath. In and out. In and out. I will run, try and sort things in my mind, and then once home, I will shower. Steve will be there to drive me to the studio at 7 a.m. Kiss goodbye to Millie – Marta will give her breakfast. (Try to like Marta more.) Will I see Philip? Probably not. Already now – what, 5.15 a.m.? – he is showering, shaving, shaking off Nobu and the Dorchester (I smelt the cigars when he stumbled in at 3 a.m.) elbowing into all that Lycra and pedalling off on his brand-new carbon bike for Mayfair, Tokyo, Bloomberg. We used to run together. (Matching running tops, his and hers Asics. Is it naff to say I loved that?) We haven't run together since last summer. With the city as it is, he says, he needs serious muscle feedback. He needs powerful resistance. Running, he says, doesn't come near *his* stress.

My breath is ragged. I can feel it, hot, in my chest. It's all wrong; I'm not doing it right. I'm hopeless; I'm a person who can't even run properly. I turn up the central path, past the heart-rending bench where someone ties a wreath ('MUM') at Christmas. It might help to filter out the trivia first. Philip's parents: want an answer about Sunday lunch. Millie's pretend birthday: beg Philip not to miss this one. (How could he have not turned up on Tuesday?) The weekend in Brighton . . . Something horrible happens in my stomach when I think about this. He says he's too busy. 'No biggie,' I said, but I didn't mean it. It's not even the kind of phrase I use. It was as if I was pretending to be someone younger, sassier: India, that girl at work with the orthodontically perfected smile, Stan Kennedy's protégée, pretty and clever enough to have her eye on my job. No biggie? Did Philip look at me oddly when I said that? Did I sound as if I was trying to be cool? *No biggie*. All this little stuff is big; that's the problem. What's trivial? What's

serious? Sunday lunch with Philip's parents, fancy undies in a suite in Brighton, a younger woman's pearly teeth, an eight-year-old blowing out her candles. It's what life is made of. It's all about love in the end.

Up to the bridge and over. It's busier out here now. Two other runners across the grass. A large dog nosing towards the pond. Three geese fly up, flapping, cackling. The sky is lifting – somewhere behind those lowering gunmetal clouds, a sun is rising, though even these blank trickles of light seem to flatten the common, leach it of contrast and colour. By the children's playground, a toddler's red shoe is stuck upside down on the grey railings. A wet, spotted ladybird hat hangs from a silvery branch. All these abandoned possessions, these bits of people left behind. Once, out running, I saw a pair of men's pants in the undergrowth. *How?* It's not like Clapham Common. It's Wandsworth. We're all Labradoodles and Rusty Racquets, not Cabinet ministers in compromising positions. No one *dogs* here.

At the café, I make a split-second decision and turn off – a quick jog around the bowling green. But when I reach the hut by the tennis courts, something draws me on into the wilderness of the wooded copse beyond. I don't usually run here. It's only a triangle of denser trees, tall and narrow, that edge the football pitch, but you're out of sight of the main drag. It feels too dodgy, too risky. Why do I do it? The gathering light? A desire to outrun the day? The manicure of the bowling green, and the sedateness of my pace? My hopeless failure to *sort*? I don't know. Afterwards, I might say it was a sudden yearning to feel fresh vegetation beneath my feet, to push the pathetic tame boundaries of the common, to be, for a few seconds, on my own.

I can't tell you.

I'm not scared – I'm running too fast maybe – but it's harder going than I expected. The ground is uneven, shifts

to trip you up. Tree limbs poke at eye level; tangles of grass lunge at ankle. And then, through a criss-cross of branches, I see it.

At first, I think of blow-up dolls. Or fish. Once, on holiday in the Isle of Wight, we came across a dead porpoise high up on the sands – unsettlingly pale and fleshy, a disturbing incongruity – and walking along the canal at Oxford years ago, when I was a student, I stumbled on a dead swan, stretched out across the embankment. It was shocking not so much because it was dead – though there was a sense of savagery in the wasted beauty, all that whiteness – but because it was just there, because no one had cleared it up, I suppose, before me.

I stop and push a little way into the undergrowth, pressing back the pale limbs of the silver birch saplings, to a place where dogs or foxes or a *person* has worn the foliage flat, to where the muddle of object is.

Then the full horror of what I can see hits and all I can think is, It's not a doll or a fish or a swan.

She is lying on her side, her bare white arms outstretched above her head, her back arched. Hair the colour of mahogany is yanked back away from her face, as though someone has pulled it. Her eyes are open, but they are glazed, as if covered in cling film. She has long, thick eyelashes – so long and thick they must be fake or extensions – a thin face, small teeth above a swollen tongue that is pushing out of her mouth against her bottom lip. She is wearing tight khaki-coloured trousers – Topshop perhaps – with pockets on the thighs and little zips on the ankles. Her feet are bare. Her toenails are polished, almost black. Her fingernails, in contrast, are ragged and torn. A triangle of black thong shows where her pink cap-sleeved T-shirt has ridden up at the back. Her flesh – her face, her neck, some of her chest – is bluish-white, but there are marks, blood and cuts and scratches, tiny dots and horizontal

dark lines and bruises, all over it. And her neck . . . I can't bear to look at her neck.

I haven't screamed. I haven't made any sound at all. Isn't that odd? But I'm suddenly aware of my own breathing; it sounds like sobs, or retches. I'm sort of panting. There are lots of things I don't expect – the Topshop thought, for example. Why do I care where she bought her trousers, or whether her eyelashes are fake? The details I notice, that I list, come at once, in a flood. I don't process them, and when I do, I put them in words in my head. I'm ordering them. I'm thinking about telling other people. I'm already thinking about later.

My hand is at my mouth and for a moment I think I am going to be sick. Bile has risen at the back of my throat, but I force it down and stagger out through the undergrowth to the path. I fumble for my phone, zipped in that thing round my neck, and it takes me several tries to unlock it. I keep pressing the buttons too fast. My fingers are too big; they are shaking so hard I almost drop it even as I get through.

The voice at the other end is calm and quiet, so quiet I find myself repeating, 'Can you hear me? Can you hear me?'

She says she can and I stumble out the details. I can't remember the name of the road – the one that comes closest to this bit of the common, really near where I live, one of the roads parallel to mine, with the same big, solid houses, a road I know well – but I say, 'Trinity Road, the prison, the Toast Rack. You know those roads in a grid? The café there. Common Ground. Just beyond. In that triangular bit of woodland.' She must have it up on a satnav screen or something, because she seems to know more than I do. She asks if I am OK, whether I feel in danger. She tells me to wait where I am.

When the connection is cut, I suddenly don't feel OK, not at all. I don't know what to do with myself. I run back

towards the tennis courts so I can see them coming, so I can show them where to go. No one is in sight – just the cars moving steadily backwards and forwards on Trinity Road across the cricket pitch, the distant roofs of Wandsworth Prison, the light changing above the big houses on that road whose name – Dorlcote – I now remember. A creak from the tennis hut; darkness behind the windows of the little cabin on the bowling green where years ago a skanky black and white cat used to live, though it's long dead now. I'm the other side of the railway line from where I was earlier – a kilometre or two of running, but just a few metres of track. The banks on both sides are steep, but there are bushes and trees that drop their wet leaves in autumn and hold up the trains, shadows and dark corners where you could crouch. Children have made camps in the shrubbery just by me, hollows to hide in. A rustle – it could be a fox, or a squirrel, or just a bird, but for the first time I feel fear. I think someone is here, that I am being watched.

I find myself darting back and forth along the path, heading towards the road, changing my mind and skitting back again. I'm what a rat might look like in laboratory conditions of stress. I'm out of sight of the girl and suddenly I have a feeling that she is gone, that someone has taken her, or that she was never there in the first place, and I'm running back down the path, tripping, stumbling, my arms out to save my face from the reaching twigs and branches, and I'm pushing through the hawthorn and gorse and silver birch – I don't care about the scratches – until I reach that awful place. And I know even before I get there that she hasn't gone, that she is lying there, in that terrible contorted position, her eyes glazed, and she is still dead.

It's quiet for a moment. Birdsong, that's all. A train squeals. It's daylight, properly daylight. Green tips blunt the ends of

branches near me. They must be buds. I'm going to be late for work – I'll have to go straight to the studio, put my face on in the car – but I mustn't think about that now. I crouch down, sit on the damp grass, and it's just her and me. She looks so vulnerable. I notice a sharp, stale smell of hospital corridors or swimming-pool changing rooms. I try not to look at her eyes. Tiny pixellated spots cover her eyelids, up to thin plucked brows. I touch her hair. It feels dead, but then hair is, isn't it? Something about her top – cap-sleeved, buttons down the front – nags at me. It's pulled tight under one armpit and her bra is showing. The strap, a loose string of black lace, is dangling out at the front; it must have unpinged from its fastening. I don't know why I do this. I do it almost without thinking. Something stirs inside and I take the loose string of black lace and slot its hook into the loop on the cup of the bra. My knuckles graze the fabric. It's a cold, clammy surface. I can hear a noise, and I realise it's coming from me. It's the lullaby I used to sing to Millie when she needed calming. Even then I never quite knew the right words: 'Rockin', rollin', ridin' . . . all the way to sleepy town, many miles away . . .' The notes are getting stuck in my throat. They sound like moans.

It feels like forever, but it is only a few minutes before a siren sounds. I knew something was going to happen from the moment I left the house. I had a feeling: a sinking, slightly cloying sensation in the pit of my stomach – an eerie premonition, if you like. Does that sound unconvincing, too far-fetched? Mea culpa if so.

Two of them come. A woman in uniform – she recognises me; I can tell from a quick flush in her cheeks and the glance she gives her colleague, slightly widening her eyes as if to say, 'It's her – you know, her off the telly.' If the man knows

who I am, he's not going to show it. He's in his own clothes – jeans and a polo shirt – a sign of his importance in the police hierarchy. I've watched enough *Morse* to know that. He introduces himself, running the fingers of one hand through slightly greasy, thick dark hair. He's DI Perivale and, 'This here is PC Morrow.'

We're at the tennis hut. I ran back when the siren stopped, when the blue light spun through the trees. I shake their hands, because the desire for physical contact is suddenly very strong. I can't think about crying; I'm not the one who's dead. PC Morrow, who is aged about twelve, holds my arm as we walk. She is small and freckly, with mid-brown hair pulled back in a ponytail; she is almost pretty, though her eyes are quite close together, and one of her front teeth is badly capped. She tells me she was just going off her shift when the call came in. 'Already had my mind set on a bacon sarnie. Ketchup. Bit of brown sauce.' She's putting me at my ease. DI Perivale doesn't care about that. He's stalking ahead – shoulders hunched, his jeans hung low at the back. He puts each foot in the ground like a skier places a ski pole, determined, as if to give balance.

I don't have to tell them where she is. It's obvious. When we get close, DI Perivale tells me to wait on the path – or rather he shows me to wait by putting out his arm like a barrier.

'CID. He's just come on,' PC Morrow whispers apologetically. 'We've called for the dogs. The soccer team will be along in a sec – eight minutes if they're on a blue light, that's my guess.'

'The soccer team?' I ask, thinking of the football pitch only a few feet away.

'SOCO – Scene of Crime Officers. They'll seal off the area, and they'll do a fingertip search for evidence.'

I ask her what sort of evidence and she says, 'Anything –

footprints, the weapon, fibres, blood, hair, paint, glass. It's amazing what they pick up. So we can't have you contaminating the scene.'

'I hope I haven't already contaminated it,' I say.

She gazes into the undergrowth and tuts, wonderingly, 'You really would think people would pick up after themselves.'

For a bizarre moment, I think she means the body and I half laugh in shock, but then with her chin she gestures to a scrunched-up McDonald's bag, spilling squashed polystyrene and bits of lettuce.

'Do you think that might be evidence?' I say, studying it.

'More like bloody litter. Not to mention what all that fat and salt does to their arteries. Kids probably.'

'Kids,' I repeat, thinking, Who else has been out here?

DI Perivale is still with the girl. He isn't touching her; he is just crouched down, looking, and then he's on his phone. He calls something out to PC Morrow – sounds like a stream of numbers – and she makes a call herself. Tiredness sways into my neck and head. When she hangs up, I ask if I can go, but she says she has to take down a few details first.

I explain about being needed at work and she nods and replies, 'I. Can. Understand. That,' drawing out the words, distinguishing between the pace of my life and the priorities of hers. Then she confers with DI Perivale, and then the two of us walk back to the café to find a bench. She says, 'You look a bit different. I'm not being funny or anything, but you look younger than you do on the telly.'

I laugh. 'It's the hair. Big hair. Big, red, daytime-telly hair. It's quite fine hair really, but for the show it's got so much lacquer in it's like a helmet.'

'Do you have a hairdresser to do it?' she says, and when I nod, 'What, every day?'

'It's very surreal, this,' I say, 'talking normally when . . .'

'I know. Your first body is always a bit of a shock. Someone said to me there are two smells a police officer gets an instinct for in the first year. One: dope. The other: death.'

'There *was* a smell . . .' I say.

She wrinkles her nose. 'Like an old people's home – sour.'

'Something else,' I say.

As she gets out her notebook, she lists, in the manner of someone cataloguing books they have recently enjoyed, the dead bodies she has seen in two years on the beat – a suicide (hanging), a traffic accident and a couple of heart attacks.

'A suicide?' I say.

'Yes, golly,' she says. 'You get a lot of them in this job.' She tells me how women and men do it differently, overdoses and slit wrists, hangings and shootings. And I know I could stop to think about this, but it is all too much. I want to get home now, have a quick gulp of coffee if I have time, drink it in the car if not. I'm aware, guiltily, of being irritated by her chattiness. Maybe she's not being kind, putting me at my ease; maybe she's just *like* this. So I interrupt and start telling her what happened ('Ooh, slow down,' she says): how I had been running and I don't know what led me down that path, but something had, and how at first I had thought the pale, elongated shape was a swan or a porpoise . . . She writes down what I say. She asks if I saw anything, or anybody, and I mention the runners, the dog by the pond. No one else, no.

'Anything else out of the ordinary?'

'Just . . . the girl.'

She is reading back what she has written and I make the decision to ask her about the dotting on the girl's face. 'Little spots,' I say, 'the sort of rash you look out for when you have a baby, the kind that might not go when you press it with a glass.'

'Ah, that one I know,' she says, putting down her notebook. 'Petechiae – sign of asphyxiation.'

'And she had these marks round her neck – like she had been cut with a cheese wire – but also bruises, abrasions, like fingerprints. Do you think her neck was cut, or she was strangled?'

'We'll have to wait for the pathologist on that one,' she says. 'I'm no expert, but finger marks in a case like this often don't belong to the assailant but the victim. You know, when they're fighting to get the ligature off?'

I shiver involuntarily, and then do it again because it makes me feel better. A grey hoodie is knotted round my waist. I unknot it and put it on over my T-shirt. I can feel my shock settling, becoming something more normal, *explainable*.

PC Morrow says, 'Can I have your autograph?' and I turn, instinctively smiling, hand obligingly raised, before I realise she just wants me to put my name to my statement.

When I look up, DI Perivale is trudging back down the path, and I can hear new sirens in the distance, coming up the Wandsworth one-way system, getting louder. Dogs and SOCO, people with cameras and things – what, sticks? – to prod through grass, to find evidence, fibres, paint, glass, to find out who did this.

It's a peculiar feeling, and I don't know if you'll understand, but it's like letting go. It's no longer my body. It belongs to them now.

Snarled in traffic from Stockwell to Waterloo, incrementally delayed, forty-five minutes telescoping into ninety, I miss the morning production meeting, which puts me on the back foot all day. If – as a person who has found a dead body – I'm not already on it.

Stan Kennedy, my co-host, is in the green room when I walk past, chatting up a couple of the guests – a midwife who has won the Pampers Award for Excellence, here to talk about

childbirth in relation to a new sitcom, and a poor woman about my age whose teenage child killed himself a year ago after a period of Facebook bullying. Snuffling about under the table for dropped Danish-pastry crumbs is a lurcher, who, Dawn the assistant producer tells me, has 'stolen the nation's hearts' as the result of a YouTube clip in which he plays football with a chicken. Life, death and a dog, it's all in a day's work here on *Mornin' All.*

If Stan sees me, he doesn't look up. Life would be easier if he and I got on. He is laughing loudly as I head for make-up, the throaty trademark guffaw that makes him so natural and likeable, in which his whole being seems concentrated on the person before him. Even the bereaved mother will be charmed, smiling down at her feet, smoothing invisible creases from her skirt. He does it to everyone, except me. It's war by omission. My friend Clara, who has met him a couple of times, says it's the jaggedness of his eye teeth that make him so attractive – the sharpness of his canines offset the girlishness of his features. His lower lip is much thicker than his upper lip – as if he's been punched. Clara, the minx, says it makes you want to bite it.

I can still hear it, his affable fags-and-booze bellow echoing off the walls, when I get down the corridor to my room. Something about his laughter always makes me feel left out. Annie is waiting, edgy at my lateness, tubes lined up, BaByliss Big Hair Rotating Styler at the ready. I come in on an apology; I hate making her job more difficult than it already is. I don't know if she's been told why I'm late or not – from the car, I gave the producer a rundown of what had happened and she might have passed the message on.

'You look like death,' she says when I sit down. Not, then.

I wish I had time to confess. She's lovely to talk to: I'm always telling her that, trying to make her feel better about

her job. Although, actually, I am probably just trying to make *myself* feel better about her job. I don't deserve all this looking after. It's not the right time, though. It's almost 10 a.m. There isn't *enough* time. It wouldn't be fair on her. Annie, her own hair short, her own face make-up free, is too tense to chatter, and I've already put my head through a crimson Diane von Furstenberg and am pulling my face down for Bobbi Brown, holding open my lips for Sangria or Old Hollywood, closing my eyes for Wheat and Sable, Toast and Taupe. She might be right, though. Maybe I do look like death – violet patches under my eyes, the lids crêping more every day. My hair isn't as thick as it was; the Titian is fading into – what, salmon? I think about Mother's hair, so bright, so rudely vibrant when I was a child and yet by the end a sort of dirty orangey-pink. The dead girl's hair was red too. It can't have been natural. It must have been dyed. Is it mad to say she looked familiar?

'There –' Annie says, standing back, 'you look more human.'

'You're brilliant,' I say, though actually I'm the one who's brilliant – all that shimmering pigment, all those light-reflecting micro-particles. I'll look decent enough out there. No one will be able to see the tiny muscle that's twitching in my eye. It's not me, though, this look, this big hair. To be honest – which I would never be to Annie – I think in the magnifying mirror I look like a tranny. Women turn into men when they get older, men into women. I can't remember who told me that. Ageing is a bugger. Still, as Clara says, the alternative's worse.

Could I have taken today off? Was it enough? Even when my mother was sick I hardly missed a show. There were nights when I didn't go to bed; I just dealt with the horrors of her illness and hammered back down the M4 in the early hours. I stood in front of the cameras smiling, the whiff of vomit on my fingers. Do a lot of women feel this? That it's only luck that has

got us where we are. One slip, one lapse, and we're out. But this morning, perhaps I shouldn't have come in. When you get close to tragedy, sometimes, at first, it can be hard to see it. We had a couple on the show once who had been packing up at the end of a skiing holiday when their toddler was killed by a snowplough, suffocated by the displacement of snow. One unbearable detail: after they had taken the body of their tiny child to hospital, they drove across the Alps and made the same ferry crossing they had already booked. You can't even begin to compare my experience with theirs, I know, but I suppose what I mean is, people do odd things under stress.

Annie wants my fingers – scarlet nails to match the scarlet carnations in the vase on the coffee table in the studio. She has her instructions. These details matter. If she notices the shaking in my hands, she doesn't say. I press my palms into the towel on the dressing table, feel the tremors up my arm.

The red nails. The red flowers. The long-sleeved red dress. I think about blood and death, bloodless death – those marks across the girl's neck. I wave my red-tipped hands at Annie. 'Am I not too red?'

'Jolly,' Annie says. 'Uplifting on a grey old March morning like this. You look as lovely as always. Cheer us all up. God knows we need it.'

I never intended to become a daytime television presenter. I *slunk* into it. I was a researcher and a reporter and then the offer came up and Philip was keen and I said yes before I thought of saying no. It's a funny old job. It's not acting and it's not journalism. You can't really imagine it being high on anyone's list of ambitions. No one respects a daytime television presenter. We're shorthand for 'vacuous', even further down the food chain than our colleagues on news – 'Cute faces and cute bottoms and nothing else in between', to quote

Kate Adie. 'When Mr Blair starts to bomb Baghdad,' Richard Ingrams said, 'we shall be informed of the fact by a smiling bimbo with a perfect set of teeth.'

When I see contemporaries from Oxford, serious players in publishing and academia, or bump into any of those bods I trained with on the BBC Trainee Scheme – now producers on *Panorama* or behind the scenes in policy – I am hardened to affront. 'How's the world of rudely bent bananas?' shouted some bloke across the floor at the National Television Awards the other night. I was a researcher with him on *Newsnight*. God knows what he does now, but he seemed to be wearing the same shirt. I smiled and said, 'Pull down your trousers and I'll let you know.' Everyone else on his table laughed.

I feel shifty remembering it. It wasn't funny. They only laughed because I am (a bit) famous, a household name. Their chortles were worse than his jibe, really, in terms of that. Thing is, I know daytime TV is associated with the long-term unemployed, and the terminally depressed, and only marginally preferable to silence as an accompaniment to the ironing. 'Household' is the right adjective here. But I also know there is a lot to be said for what I do and that not everybody could do it. It's not about a set of perfect teeth, or the ins and outs of EU vegetable regulations; it's about speaking to the viewer directly – not all of them, just one at a time, the common touch. We're real life in your living room, Stan and me, and there is a skill to that, an art even.

Despite everything, I'm on the sofa today before him. Annie says he likes to get there first so he can josh about my tardiness, 'my busy, juggled life', as he calls it. I've told her it's all just joking, light-hearted banter, feeding into the faux-rude repartee between us that makes the show the hit it is; he doesn't 'mean' a word of it. But behind the smiles, the claps on the shoulder, I fear he does, that it is a tiny little element in

the one-upmanship, his campaign to replace me. He doesn't know for sure that I earn more than him, but he can't bear the doubt.

I'm having my microphone fitted – Hal, the floor manager, is clipping it underneath the dress to my balconette, nestling it in my cleavage – and I'm thinking of the girl and her bra, that it must have been a style they call 'multiway', one you can adjust to strapless, or cross-over, or a halter, or it wouldn't have come undone at the front. I'm thinking about this, and it seems too intimate, so I'm trying not to think about it, when Stan saunters in, chatting to Terri, the producer.

He sees me and holds up his hands in mock surprise. 'Miss Marple. Solving a murder, helping the police with their enquiries and still at work on time. Or do we find Miss Marple as a role model a little ageing?' He twiddles an invisible moustache and adopts a Belgian accent. 'Perhaps Hercule Poirot?'

I wonder if he planned to come in after me all along. It is always good to be standing up to put someone down. In this context, the context in which my life has been taken out of the ordinary and the domestic, perhaps it's important to him to look busier and jollier and more in control and more alive than me.

'Not solving a murder, Stan the Man,' I grin. I'd never let Terri see me crack. She's tough and has no time for slackers, but as long as I stay dignified, she'll stand up for me. I know he's not going to ask me questions; this is the only chance I've got. 'Just finding one.'

When he plonks himself down, the cushions beneath me swell with displaced air.

'Remind me never to run with you,' he says, to the room in general.

The *Mornin' All* studio takes up the entire fifth floor of a tower on the South Bank. Out of the window behind me is a

view of London and the Thames – as magnificent, as picture perfect as an artificial backdrop. Our section, with its mock-up 'warehouse-style' wall, its swirly carpet, its nestle of lounge, is in the middle of the studio. The lighting is rigged. We're a glossy, brightly lit spot of loveliness, a ray of sunshine, but I'm sitting here and all I can think is how ugly Stan is. The music is playing, they're running the intro, and he's wise-cracking away across the room – to the lighting and the sound guys, to the researchers, to pretty India in her corner, waiting for her Twitter and email and Facebook slot. He's an uncouth rugby player on tour: 'What do necrophiliacs call morticians? Pimps . . . What's the difference between paedophilia and necrophilia? Eighty years.' He's trying to unnerve me. I'm wondering if his words aren't slightly slurred.

Then we are on air. I say my good mornings, give my own spiel, and he turns to the camera, engages it with his eyes, stares into the viewer's soul, like he is the only one who understands. In my greeting, tuned to the voice in my earpiece, I said there would be a Muppet in the kitchen, and I bigged up our 'Best-dressed MP' competition. I promised Sally Bercow's 'Pick of the Papers', made reference to the nation's canine sweetheart and the prize-winning midwife. But they've given the Facebook mother to Stan. His expression is sombre, the corners of his mouth turning down, when he announces the sadness to come later in the show. 'A year ago,' he says simply, 'Maggie Leonard's fourteen-year-old son, Saul, lost his life as a result of Internet bullying.' He gives me a look heavy with shared sorrow. I nod sympathetically, allow a doleful half-smile. We're in this together, him and me. He rubs his hand across his jaw; I alone can hear the rasp of skin on bristle.

'A raw day,' Stan concludes.

A few weeks ago, when a Cabinet minister was caught lying

on *Question Time*, we invited a psychologist into the studio to talk about body language and the art of mendacity. Children, she said, often cover their mouths after telling fibs; grown-ups touch their chins with their hands or fiddle with their cuffs – an unconscious desire to cross their arms.

I work hard on my body language during today's show, because I feel as if I am lying all the way through. I don't care about any of it. Today, the trivialities feel particularly shallow and vapid. I'm late with my prompt for India, have to apologise on air, make a 'pratfall' face for the viewer. 'No biggie,' India says in return. I coo over the lurcher – Billy, he's called – tease Stan, wish I had checked the burglar alarm before I left home, told Marta not to walk across the common, but to drive the long way round to school. I hadn't been thinking straight. There are precautions that have to be taken.

During the interview with Maggie Leonard, I sit with my head on one side. We know what vocabulary is permissible this side of midday and what isn't. We say 'passed on', 'lost his life', 'no longer with us', 'left you'. It's insane, the efforts we go to to stop ourselves saying the word 'dead'.

In the car on the way home, I lie my face against the window. It's a relief to let my guard down. I think about that poor girl. The car stops and starts, jerks and accelerates. I bash my chin, knock my forehead. My neck has come loose. Steve, my driver, is chatting away about last night's darts and the roadworks at Elephant and Castle. 'Fed up with this weather,' he says. 'It's not cold; it's not wet; it's not hot. It's just nothing, isn't it? This year March is just a load of nothing.'

Shopfronts, corrugated iron, roundabouts, Tube entrances, building works – cranes and drills and graffitied awnings, it's all still there. Horrible things happen to good people. Coaches crash and children die. Women are raped and mutilated in

the Congo – there was a programme about it the other night. Friends tell you about tragedies – a young husband's unexpected heart attack, the brave six-year-old with leukaemia. And they touch your life, these terrible happenings. You wish they weren't real, and your heart lurches in the dead of night, but then they slant away, like stones on a windscreen, and after a bit, for your sins, you don't even notice the tiny shattered dent in the corner. You carry on with your own little existence, worried about your own little problems – an uncaring husband, an overbearing colleague. But this, this death, has knocked everything sideways. It is too close. No one is safe. It's a world in which people kill other people. Death isn't just slow, stretched over months, years, like my mother's. It can happen in an instant, outside of you. In a few seconds. A rope round the neck, a tug; it's all it takes. Thinking this, I feel dizzy, as if I'm about to fall.

The car vibrates at the lights. My perfect life. What is it next to this? Nothing. I think not of the girl's death but her birth. Her mother. Her parents. Schooldays. Summer holidays. Jobs. Family. Friends. *Boyfriend*. Have they been told? Have the police found out who she is? *Was*. Did she like her life, or did she long for it to be different? I've started shivering, even though it's warm back here.

The BBC News app on my iPhone has no mention. No little arrow or tag of 'New'. Nothing 'Breaking'. Is this news? I don't know. A torso bobbing to the surface at Limehouse, that bin bag of limbs found floating in the Regent's Canal, they were news. But whole bodies, maybe they are different. Perhaps whole bodies are just ordinary. Perhaps whole bodies are found, in patches of common ground, in other suburbs – Bexleyheath, Southall Green, Crouch End – every day. What's normal? What's not? I have no perspective.

The traffic cranks to a stop. A skip lorry, ratcheting into the

junction from the Walworth Road, is blocking everything in all directions. Horns screech. Exhaust fumes bloom.

'Driven by morons, skips,' Steve says. 'No respect. They're all the same. Ex-cons, I reckon. The way they take speed bumps down my road – make a sound like a bomb going off. They have to be doing it on purpose. They need anger management,' he says. Then, losing sympathy, 'Should be strung up.'

Congestion eases. We slide unfettered down Kennington Park Road, the tarmac smooth beneath the wheels, and Steve, who had opened his window to release an angry elbow, is talking into the wind now, whistling past his ears, past Oval Tube and St Mark's Church, whisking up his words. I haven't got long. He will glide the glass closed at Clapham Common, when he has calmed down. I must ask him about his wife – she had her gynae appointment today – find out if his daughter, Sammy, got her interview. I'll do it in a bit, when the window's shut. Now's a good moment – if I ring Clara now, she will be in the staffroom, as peaceful as her life gets.

Clara says, 'Hello, Gaby Mortimer,' reading my name off her Nokia screen as she always does.

Behind her voice, I can hear clattering, like a slow train on a track, or a canteen worker clearing trays.

'You there?' she says.

I clear my throat and say, 'Hello, Clara Macdonald.'

She says, 'God. Friday. Couldn't come soon enough as far as I'm concerned. Just want to get home, run a hot bath, sort out the kids – Nick's cooking – and put my feet up in front of *Mad Men*. I've got a mountain of lesson-planning, but I won't feel guilty, because Sky Plus is getting so full I need to clear the list or it'll start deleting itself, or is that just a myth? Anyway, if I watch a bit of telly, it'll be like tidying up.'

Just hearing her voice is cheering. We've been friends since

school and for me, Clara Macdonald is about as bloody close to perfect as you can get.

'What's up?' she continues, reading my silence. 'Who's upset you? Is it Philip? Is he still being a plonker? Or is it that handsome twat at work?'

'Both,' I say, half laughing. 'The plonker's being a plonker, and the twat's being a twat, but also . . .'

I've been wondering how to say it, what order to put the words in, whether to begin with 'You will never believe what happened to me today' in an upbeat, imparting-of-*top*-gossip sort of way, or whether to be earnest: 'Listen, it will be on the news soon and I wanted you to hear it from me first.' I still don't know. Neither seems right. The first, too blatantly callous. The second, well, there's that tone, isn't there, that slips into people's voices when they are telling you awful things? A bit what my favourite aunt would have called 'churchy', a bit marbles-in-the-mouth self-righteous. It is a killer. And I know, too, that Clara will be tear-prickingly sympathetic about my trauma, and I don't deserve that. It isn't fair. Not at all.

I visualise Clara standing in the staffroom, with her colleagues bustling around her, a reading bag, Daunt Books, slung across her shoulder, her Oyster – quick pat to check – padding out her back pocket. She may already have her coat on – her tweed thing from Primark ('Primarni', she calls it), her stripy scarf nestling at her neck. I imagine the door about to open, a splash of thronging corridor, some nice fellow teacher offering a lift to the Tube.

Steve has wound up the window. I change my mind. I will speak to her later, when she is not in a hurry. I am probably over-reacting anyway. As upbeat as I can manage, I say, 'Just checking in before the weekend.'

She sounds blithe, not a care in the world. 'Before all hell breaks loose,' she says.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆

Marta is in the kitchen, not eating, but sitting stolidly at the table fingering through *Grazia*. She never seems to eat. It's unnerving. Last summer, everything happened in such a hurry – Robin, our old nanny, was pregnant; my mother was dying. I didn't take as much care as I should have done. Perhaps I didn't ask the right questions. I panic-bought a nanny. Now she worries me. I don't blame her for not eating my food – I'm not exactly Michel Roux. But I wonder when she does eat, and what, and whether somehow it should be my responsibility. She's only twenty-four. Perhaps she is homesick, or has an eating disorder of some kind that I should know about. I imagine her in secret filling up on Twixes and Monster Munch and cheese and onion crisps.

Millie is at gym club, being dropped back. Marta has finished the laundry. Square piles of folded jumpers and T-shirts – including my running gear from earlier, washed and pressed – await redistribution. Kitchen surfaces, pale polished granite, stretch uncluttered; the floor gleams. Click open a shiny cupboard and the boxes of cereal, the pots of jam will be neatly lined up. That's the other thing: her cleanliness. When she first arrived, her one request was special cleaning gloves – latex, like a second skin. I know I should be grateful. Philip is in his element – at last, surroundings that match his brain. But it makes me uncomfortable. I wish she wouldn't clean, or tidy at all. Robin, who came from New Zealand and lived with us for seven years until she got pregnant and married her East Anglian farmer last summer – the audacity of the girl! – was unbelievably messy and that felt to me just fine. She was part of the family. We all – or she and I – mucked in together. Marta is different. Marta feels like an employee and I know this is a high-class sort of problem, and I know I should probably get over myself, but I'd like it if she felt like a friend.

Quietly I make some tea – a lemon and ginger infusion,

good for the nerves – and sit down on the bench. Marta looks up, resigned. She's thinking I'm about to make a stab at conversation. She's dreading it. But I have to tell her what happened. I don't want to alarm her, I say, but she needs to be cautious. She should make sure the doors and windows are locked. She is not to walk across the common, not with Millie, not alone. She should be on her guard. We don't know who is out there, I say, searching for a spark, *alarm* even, anything but this impassivity.

She stares at me from behind two drapes of black hair. When I have finished, she looks away, bites at a piece of skin at the corner of a nail and then picks at it with her thumb. She tells me she is always careful when she is looking after Millie and is always sure to put on the burglar alarm. It's probably my imagination, but she sounds defensive, as if I have made up the whole story just to get at her. I must have said it all wrong.

I stare at the magazine open in front of her. It's a photo spread of Pippa Middleton, and Marta has doodled on the page in Biro, though they are not really doodles, more like score marks. She seems to have scratched out Pippa Middleton's face.

I ask her how her course is going – she is learning English at a language school in Tooting. I mention some bar I've heard about where young people go that 'sounds quite jolly'. I can't believe I've just said that. *Quite jolly?* Bloody hell. No wonder she hates me. When the doorbell rings, I flee, just to shut myself up.

A tall, dark-haired man in baggy jeans and a dirty-green waxed jacket is standing there, slightly bent over, his back to me. He is looking closely at a leaf on a branch of the olive tree nearest to the path. A millisecond later than necessary, he turns and says, 'Press your own oil, do you?'

It's DI Perivale.

'Only dug in a month ago,' I say, 'the olive trees. We had the whole garden done, back and front, a complete redesign. A company called Muddy Wellies. So I don't yet know. There are only three trees, though, so even with a hot summer, probably not.'

He steps forward, puts his hands out as if measuring distance. 'Nice gaff. Big for just the three of you.'

To cover my surprise that he knows anything about me at all (*the three of you*), I lean back and survey the repointed red brickwork, the three floors of window, the elegantly tapered Victorian gable, the thick entwined ropes of newly planted wisteria, as if seeing my house for the first time, as if somebody else lived in it.

'My colleague,' he adds casually, 'tells me the one next door went for five million.'

I flush. He's just making conversation, but I feel uneasy. I don't know why he'd say that. We stand there, looking at the house, looking at each other, and I'm not sure what to think. And then he says something I've been dreading, because I was hoping my part was done. I was thinking it might be over.

'Have you got a minute?'

Marta has disappeared, slipped away out of the kitchen when I was at the front door. She must have escaped upstairs, though I didn't hear her go. The ironing has gone and so has my unfinished mug of herbal tea. She must have put it in the dishwasher; she is tidying me away too.

I tell DI Perivale to sit down, but he doesn't. He stands. I fill the kettle from the tap, for something to do, and I can hear the faint noises of his shoes, the little creaks in the leather, as they shift their weight. He is wearing brown brogues, the ones with perforated holes on the toecaps that you associate with Jermyn Street, posh cobblers who whittle things by hand.

'Do you live nearby?' I ask.

'Battersea.' He has his back to me. 'The other side of Clapham Junction.'

'On the up,' I say, and then hate myself for it.

'Nice picture. Your daughter do it?'

I'm flustered. Of course he only had to Google – I did 'A Life in the Day' in the *Sunday Times* just the other week – but it is unnerving when people you've never met know things about you. That's what I tried to explain to the constable I spoke to last summer when all those odd stalker-y things started happening. (You're no one in show business until you've been stalked.)

'Craigie Aitchison,' I say, moving to stand next to him. The picture is of a dog against a simple background, Play-Doh-blue sky and jelly-green grass. There is one tree, a dark tapered streak, like the head of a paintbrush. Deceptively simple, of course: there is something isolated and meditative about the dog. I think you are supposed to think about Christ. 'It's a Bedlington terrier,' I say.

'A *Bedlington* terrier, not just any old terrier. And another olive tree. Obviously a bit of a theme around here.'

'I think it's a cypress. You know, death and all that. My husband bought it years ago, but when Aitchison died, prices rocketed. Quite a clever buy.'

'Quite a clever buy,' he repeats, as if he has never heard anything so stupid in his life.

The note I am hoping for next is playful. I probably just sound prickly. 'There are four hanging at the Tate. Elton John has one.'

He shrugs. He is younger than I thought he was. I had imagined him in his fifties, but he's about my age, I think – early forties. His mannerisms, the stoop, intended perhaps to hide his height, the droop to his jowls, which he accentuates

by pulling on the side of his mouth, as if removing crumbs, make him seem older. No grey in that brown hair – Philip's temples are sprinkled with silver. There are hollows below this man's cheekbones, an elongated chisel: more weight on him and he would almost be attractive. With his long hair, his bone structure, he is like a dandy gone wrong.

Thinking, *enough of this*, I say, 'Right, tea. Builders' OK, or do you fancy something more left wing?' I could shoot myself.

'As it comes,' he says.

He has sat down at the table at last, having shrugged off his Barbour and hung it neatly on the back of his chair, and is looking out at the back garden now – at our lovely green lawn and landscaping, the raised beds, the trampoline, the clever 'tree house' contraption that runs on struts along the back wall, behind the row of hornbeams. Philip decided we had to have the garden redone when we dug out the basement: the builders made such a mess.

Something out there in the shrubs, thrashing in the March wind, seems to engage his interest. Maybe that's what happens when you are a policeman: your eyes hook on some small detail; you never know what is important, what isn't.

'Did you touch the body?'

I almost drop his cup of tea. I am carrying it to the table and it slops on that delicate triangle of skin between thumb and index finger.

'Ow.'

I run my hand under the tap, watch the water spool over my skin. For a moment my brain focuses on this, the water and my skin. And then all I can think about is the woman's hair, the lank, stringy texture of it.

'Her body,' I say. 'No, I didn't touch her *body*.'

When I turn round, he is looking at me.

'Did you know the woman?'

'No.' I take a deep breath, shake my hand dry. The moment has passed. 'As I told your PC, I've never seen her before. Have you found out who she is?'

'Not as yet. No.'

I sit down opposite him, on the bench that runs down one side of the table, with my back to the garden. He has launched into his interview now – small talk over. He asks me to run through what happened. He doesn't write any notes. It is obviously just an informal chat, but as I talk, every gesture feels self-conscious, on display. There is a code in conversation: the person listening is supposed to look at the person talking; the person talking is allowed to look away. DI Perivale doesn't look at me at all, though – I'm the one who's watching him – until the moment I pause and then his eyes swivel back, skewer into mine. It's disconcerting. When I tip my head, gather my hair into a ponytail, twist it round to make it stay like that, it feels unnatural, like someone pretending to be relaxed. Same when I burrow my hands up the sleeves of my jumper. Best to try and stay still: it's what we tell guests on the show. Sit on your hands if you need to. Heat suffuses my neck. When I have finished my narrative – the identical story PC Morrow wrote down earlier – I tell DI Perivale he is making me feel guilty and defensive. I've got the same shoulder-hunched sensation you get when you walk through security or past bouncers at the doors of expensive shops.

'Do that often, do you?'

'What?'

'Walk through doors of expensive shops?'

I give his arm a frisky slap. It's not a comfortable moment. His skin, below the short sleeves of his polo, is pale with dark, spidery hairs. He looks down at my hand, at my crimson nails. 'All Shook Up,' I say, taking it back. 'Opi. I had to have it on for work.'

He gives a half-smile.

'You'd better drink your tea,' I say. 'I'm sorry I can't really help you more. I wish I had seen something, anything. I'm sorry it's been a bit of a wasted journey. That poor woman, though.'

'No journey is ever wasted for me.'

He is perhaps one of those men who feels less inadequate when making other people feel small. He reminds me of my boss on *Panorama*, when I was a trainee – Colin Sinclair, with his big black leathers and his little red Suzuki 125. 'You might say that; I couldn't possibly comment,' he would venture at any observation even remotely controversial. Or when my train was late: 'I believe you; millions wouldn't.' His brain was lost unless he could find a little worn groove to slot into, until he found a preconceived idea to latch on to. And this policeman seems to be doing the same. And a body out there . . . if it is still out there.

'Is she still there?' I ask. 'In the middle of the common. Or have you moved her? I've no idea what happens in these situations.' I tap the table, touching wood. 'Luckily.'

He rubs his face. 'We've taken the body away. She's with post-mortem.'

'Did you, they, SOCO find anything? Anything at all that might tell you what happened? Was it a mugging, do you think? Or a rape? A random killing? Is there some maniac out there we should all know about? Sorry to ask these questions, but it would be nice . . . to know.' To my surprise, I think I might be about to cry.

'We need to wait,' he says, not unkindly. 'We'll know more later. My motto: ABC. Assume nothing. Believe no one. Check everything. I will be in touch. I promise.'

'I suppose auto-asphyxiation is out of the question?'

'Even assuming nothing,' he says, 'I think we can rule out auto-asphyxiation.'

'It's funny how no one had ever even heard of it before Michael Hutchence and now it's the first thing we all think of. "Oh. Auto-asphyxiation," we all say, people of the world now, unshockable, but it's still such a weird thought, to find strangulation sexually exciting.' I'm gabbling, being facetious, a habit when I'm nervous. He's just staring at me, half bored, half interested, as you might stare at a brightly striped fish in an aquarium. 'You don't know who she is? No mobile phone . . . or wallet?'

'No.' He gives an almost theatrically heavy sigh. Perhaps he is not so insufferable. 'At the moment, we know nothing.'

I feel suddenly very sad. 'I suppose you're used to this sort of thing.'

'Not really.'

'Well, I'm sure you will do a good job,' I say inadequately.

'There's nothing else at all you can remember?'

A memory washes over me, the shock of a cold wave. 'An odd smell. Almost . . . it sounds stupid, but almost like bleach.'

He nods. 'I noticed that. The pathologist will confirm.'

'And her eyes? I meant to ask? Like they were covered in wax?' For some reason, my sentences have started going up, like Millie's when she has watched too much *iCarly*.

'Conjunctiva. Nothing to do with how she died, more about when. It happens when the pressure drops behind the eyes – the eyeballs soften. It gives them a thin, cloudy, filmy appearance.'

'The light goes out.'

'Indeed.'

I look at my watch. Millie will be dropped back any minute, and I wouldn't mind him gone before she gets here. I need to think about what to tell her, how to tell it. And I must ring Philip. It's terrible that I haven't. During my mother's final illness, I was on the phone to him every day. It's peculiar,

disturbing, that I haven't spoken to him yet – another sign, if I needed one, of the distance between us. I get to my feet and collect the DI's mug, rolling up my sleeves as an indication I am about to wash up. I see him looking at my arms. I follow his eyes. My inner forearms are scratched and grazed, seed pearls of dried blood at the crease, and my bracelet's gone, the bracelet Philip gave me for my birthday. I must have dropped it. That isn't what the policeman is interested in, though. I give my wrists a rub.

'Undergrowth,' I say. 'When I was pushing through. I didn't even notice. Good thing I was wearing a long-sleeved dress for the show or viewers would have been sending me literature on self-harm. Be nice to me,' I add, in an American accent (why?): 'I am literally scarred by the experience.'

Luckily, he doesn't seem to hear. He is putting his jacket back on. It is greasy around the cuffs and at the hem where his fingers have held on to tug at the zip.

'I just need to take a DNA swab for elimination purposes,' he says, 'and I tell you what would be really helpful: the trainers you were wearing this morning. For the tread.'

'Of course.'

He rummages in his inside pocket for a plastic bag and cotton bud and, in a sudden, almost hilariously humiliating sequence, I have opened my mouth, emitting a little haze of lemon and ginger, and he has stabbed the cotton bud in and pulled it out and plopped it and sealed it in his little bag and placed that back in his pocket. I leave the kitchen in a hurry and run upstairs. I pound the stairs more noisily than I need to. I let out a laugh. He had that plastic bag there, waiting. I think of boys I knew in the past, in my Yeovil teenage years, and the ever-ready foil-creased Durex in their back pockets. In the bedroom, I make a silent scream at my own face in the dressing-table mirror, just to release some tension. I grab

the trainers from the cupboard and run back down. When I pass Marta's room on the half-landing, I hear music behind the door – a thumping electronic sound, too much bass for my liking.

DI Perivale is in the room that opens to the right of the front door – he has just wandered in there by himself, as if he owned the place. It is two rooms knocked through, a pale, creamy, sumptuous display of a room, glass coffee tables and sink-in-able sofas and puffed-up cushions; a room, of course, we never use, and DI Perivale is standing by one of the fireplaces, looking at the framed photographs.

He picks one up. I know what it is from here. It is of Philip and me on our wedding day. I am laughing into the camera, and Philip has one arm round my waist, pulling me to him. Philip, wild dark hair, wide-eyed, ridiculously boyish, is in a baggy charity-shop suit. I'm wearing a wrinkly white dress – in that clingy polyester that was the edge of cool back then; it shrunk up when you washed it; you had to pull it into shape with the iron. In the awkward sideways pose you strike when you think you have to squeeze to fit into shot, I look as if I am about to topple down the steps of Chelsea Town Hall. I remember thinking, I can't believe he's chosen me! He's married me! We had a party in the pub, and the rest of the weekend we spent in our flat with no clothes on, because we were newly-weds, newly-*mets* – we'd known each other six months – and those were the days when we couldn't get enough of each other.

DI Perivale holds the photograph out to me and to my surprise I have to resist the temptation to snatch it, dash it from his hands. I make some comment about how young we look, but he has an odd expression on his face, as if there is something I am not getting.

'Is it just me?' he says.

'Is what just you?'

He shakes his head, getting rid of a thought. 'Sorry. Nothing. It's just . . .'

I take the photo and pretend to study it, and then I put it back on the mantelpiece. It makes me feel sad, this picture. I take a while lining it up so it is symmetrical with a picture of Millie doing gym.

'So,' he says, 'I expect you will be hearing from us.'

'Really?' I say. 'Oh, victim support. Of course.'

'Victim support?'

'We had a visit from an officer concerned about my mental health when my mobile phone was nicked out of my handbag during a trip to Cineworld. She was really quite persistent. So I imagine you're offered counselling when you find a dead body. Or maybe I'm wrong about that.'

'I suppose the real victim of this crime isn't in a perfect position to receive counselling in this particular case, however persistent.' It's a reproof, and he is probably right, but I do wonder whether he realises how awful it is to be an ordinary person and find a body.

'A lot of alliteration in that sentence,' I say.

'Plosives. A "p" is a plosive.'

We study each other as if neither of us is quite sure about the other any more.

'Anyway, I don't need counselling. I'm stronger than I look,' I say.

He is still standing by the mantelpiece and in this moment he seems to make up his mind. I can hear doors slamming in the street outside, the high-pitched squeals of exuberant girls. I've left it too late. I didn't get him out in time.

'I'm just struck,' he says, 'by the physical similarities between you – or at any rate the woman in this photograph – and the girl out there.'

He gestures to the window with his chin and I know he doesn't mean my daughter, who is already clattering up the steps.

'Just because we've both got red hair,' I say, flicking my own over my shoulder to hide how unsettled I feel. 'She looked much younger than me. And . . . and shorter.'

He is zipping up his jacket, pulling on that greasy spot of fabric at the bottom, and has stuffed his hands in the pockets. As he crosses the room, I notice the soles of his brogues leave the shape of themselves in the nap of the cream rug.

At the front door, he says an odd thing: '"Unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles." William Shakespeare.'

'Poetry now. You're not just a pretty face.'

'What I mean is, be careful. That's all. Be careful.'