

Charlotte Mendelson

Almost English

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Prologue

Thursday, 29 December 1988

They do not know it, but the wolf is already at the gate.

Seven o'clock on a moonlit night at the end of December; a terrible time for a party, and the guests are about to arrive. After the complex agony of invitations, the expense, the whipping of cream, the residents of Flat Two, Westminster Court, are almost too tired to greet their visitors, yet there is so much still to be done. They have been up since five in a fury of efficiency, wiping the underside of ornaments, Hoovering beneath the many rugs, rolling pastry, slicing cucumbers: innumerable tasks if this evening is to be perfect, as it must be. And now, while Marina's grandmother and great-aunts rest on their beds, Marina and her mother stand in front of the wardrobe in Marina's little room, pretending not to panic.

'Can't I just wear my school jumper?' asks Marina. 'Lambswool's smart.'

'Maybe not enough, sweetheart,' says Laura, her mother. 'You know they hate . . . never mind. What about that green dress?'

'Grotesque,' says Marina.

‘Where’s your long skirt, then? Oh Lord. What does your grandmother say?’

‘I don’t *know*,’ says Marina, ominously wet-eyed. ‘I look repulsive in everything. I—’

‘*Dar-link*,’ says a voice from the doorway. It is Marina’s grandmother, not resting at all: Rozsi, eighty today and not a woman one disappoints. ‘*Vot-apity* you don’t want to look pretty. Look, I have this.’

Marina turns round and sees the blouse Rozsi is holding out to her: olive satin with a leaping gazelle motif. ‘I . . .’ she says. ‘I think—’

‘And Laura, *dar-link*,’ says Rozsi. ‘Tonight you also try.’

Laura’s mother-in-law is not easy to ignore. One does not become a major figure in the world of ladies’ underclothing if one is weak. Laura swallows. ‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Of course I will.’ She frowns at herself in the wardrobe mirror: her wet hair, her fair apologetic Midlands skin. Save me, she thinks, as the liver-spotted arm withdraws. ‘Marina, love. Your kilt?’

‘I could,’ says Marina doubtfully. She lowers her voice. ‘Mum, I . . . I wondered . . . can we talk?’

Usually, this would make Laura’s heart beat faster. However, she is less vigilant than usual, thinking of all that dill still to chop. ‘About what?’ she asks distractedly.

‘It’s complicated. I—’

‘*Dar-link*,’ they hear again from the doorway, ‘hurry. We have still to set out the *sair-viette*.’

‘Coming,’ says Laura. ‘Sweetheart,’ she whispers to her daughter, ‘we’ll talk later. I promise. OK?’

Part One

1

How the world loves a party, particularly one in honour of a great age attained. Some of the guests, being quite as old and impatient as their hostess, have arrived early, with enormous boxes of chocolates and expressions of defiance. Every time the intercom buzzes, Marina or her mother has to rush over to let them in. It would have been easier to have left the street doors open, but the residents of Westminster Court are security conscious, for reasons of their own. Here, in the barely respectable depths of Bayswater, some stranger tries to gain admittance once or twice a night. It is better to be sure, and so the doors are shut.

In any case, downstairs in Flat Two the noise is incredible. Everyone is eating, smoking, gossiping; they are not thinking about unwelcome visitors.

The guests who hurry in from the shabby street in the drizzle do not, at first sight, look as though they could possibly be the source of so much noise. If you had happened to come across them as they took their cold constitutionals in Hyde Park this afternoon, they would have seemed perfectly normal elderly Londoners, looking forward to a quiet night in with a cup of tea and a chop and the *Radio Times*.

At least, that is how they think they seem.

But come a little closer. 'Dar-link' is their usual form of

address. Are not their hand gestures a little more extravagant than those found in Surrey, their eyebrows more dramatic, their hair swept back like something from *Nosferatu*? They seem both more formal and more exuberant than you might expect, as if you had wandered into a theatre dressing room of the 1950s, not a cramped west London basement flat. Their bags contain poppy-seed pastries as long as your forearm; velvet-packed pralines, smuggled by fur-wrapped pensioners on the overnighter from Berne. Their perfume smells like the air in a hundred department stores. What are they speaking? Nothing you know, no rolled 'r's or recognizable sounds but either an entirely impenetrable language – *megmásíthatatlan, örökkévalóság* – or a distorted English, full of dactyls which dust familiar words – 'Pee-codilly' or 'vosh-ingmochine' or indeed 'Vest-minstaircourt' – with snow and fir and darkness.

Oh. Hungarian. Now it all makes sense.

So where is little Marina, granddaughter of the house? Is she sitting humbly at the feet of a dashing octogenarian? Is she having her hand kissed by a young accountant, being complimented on her embroidered apron? She was here a minute ago, beautifully dressed for the party: not perhaps in the height of fashion, but in the circumstances . . . Besides, she is always so polite, such a credit to her relatives. Very strange: where has she gone?

'*Boldog születésnapot!*' Happy birthday, cry the guests to Rozsi. '*Kezét csókolom,*' I kiss your hand. Some of them actually do it. There is also a great deal of cheek kissing: the very young led by the hand to pay homage to the elderly.

‘*Yoy, dar-link! I rare-member you ven you vere so high!*’

These people make the French look reserved, the English costive. And, at the centre of this kissing, cheek-pinching maelstrom are tonight’s hostesses, two of the generations resident in this little flat: three old women and an abandoned wife.

Marina, known tonight as ‘*Mor-inaka*’ or Maza, to rhyme with ‘*Pots-a*’, is in charge of coats. Furs and sheepskin and mackintoshes already fill the hall cupboards; the twin beds in her great-aunts’ room lie buried under a sea of headwear, although they are far from the Endless Steppe. Nevertheless, the piles of protective outer garments keep growing: berets and fedoras; gloves like warm leather claws.

The air stinks of tuberose, caraway and garlic: the universal scent of central European hospitality. But Marina is not hospitable. After only an hour her skin is tender with cheek pinchings; she has been matchmade, prodded and instructed beyond endurance, and the night is young. Soon they will come to find her, to admire the shape of her fingernails, the thickness of her lashes, their eyes peeling back her clothes, weighing her like fruit. This is not new. She has been brought up to accept the questions and kisses as if nothing could please her more, however much lava is boiling inside. The problem is that Marina has changed. She can bear their scrutiny no longer because her life is a disaster, and it is her fault. She betrayed them and escaped them, and now she wants to come back.

Be careful what you wish for.

This is one of the wise and inspiring precepts she has been gathering lately; she has forty-three so far, six in Latin, but they haven't helped at all. They did not save her from making the worst choice of her life: Combe Abbey. Boarding school. She had wanted to be different, to escape just for the sixth form, and now she is reaping what she sowed.

Five more terms to go.

She is sitting on the edge of the larger bed: that of Zsuzsi, the younger of her two resident great-aunts, the beautiful one, who has a silk pillow to avoid facial wrinkles. Zsuzsi would be disgusted at me, she thinks, wiping her nose and avoiding her own reflection in the three-way dressing-table mirror. Crying is ugly and so, to stop herself, she bites down on the beads inside her lower lip for the taste of courage: blood and iron. Flawed as she is, with an incorrect ratio of leg to torso and freckles everywhere, she must be courageous. Women of her family always are.

In the sitting-cum-dining-room, the party is reaching its climax. There is so much food: cold sour-cherry soup, chicken paprika, buttered noodles, stuffed cabbage, red cabbage, sweet-and-sour cucumber salad, cold *krumplisaláta*, made with gherkins and chives and hot *paprikás krumpli* with sausage. Somebody has tracked down the last carp, or pike, or perch, in London and jellied him – it looks like a him – with carrots. Although it is of dubious provenance – not from Lake Balaton but a pond near Weybridge – all agree that it is wonderful. Rozsi's sisters, virginal Ildi and beautiful Zsuzsi, beam like angels through the steam. *Schnitzel*; goose-

liver pâté; Polish salami; Ildi's famous *palacsinta* stuffed with ground walnuts and rum, with lemony curd cheese and raisins or, in the unlikely event of a vegetarian guest, with spinach and only the tiniest taste of bacon. Someone has even brought a large curled ox tongue, which looks exactly as one might fear. And, alone in the darkness of the kitchen, touched with pinky-yellow haze from the fanlight in the communal stairwell, this evening's culinary highlight is waiting: *íles flottantes*, known here as *madártej* or birds' milk, bosomy islands of caramelized egg white, half-subsiding into an inland sea of vanilla custard, suspended in a Czech lead-crystal bowl.

'*Von*-darefool,' say the guests: a rare comprehensible word in an opaque wall of conversation. They are comforted to know that Ildi, although eighty-two, is cooking the food they remember: still pressing dumplings through the *nokedli* machine, chopping veal bones, melting lard. They are a wonderful family, aren't they, all things considered? Admittedly not quite as they were but then, *dar*-link, who is? They are bringing Marina up terribly well, despite everything: so respectful, so polite, and now she is at that school for English aristocrats – well, who knows what might happen?

There are many cousins here, all with mad diminutives: Pubi or Gobbi or Lotsi. The wife of one of them has trapped Laura by the window, and is cross-examining her on behalf of them all. 'So,' the cousin's wife says. '*Dar*-link. Tell me *sum*-sing—'

Despite living at close quarters with elderly Hungarians for over a decade, observing their habits like a less successful

Jane Goodall; despite the fact that she was once married to Rozsi's son and has produced Rozsi's only granddaughter, Laura does not have a diminutive. One cannot catch Hungarianness; they welcomed her and Marina into their home, have kissed and nourished them endlessly, but Laura remains a puzzling pet.

'I really,' she says. 'I mean I can't—'

'*Vot* are you doing?'

'Sorry?'

'*Pro*-fession-allyspeaking. You know I am once *mus-e-um* director? *Vair-y* big museum in Czecho,' the cousin's wife says complacently, bracelets clanking on her loose-skinned arm. 'But you? You are not still reception girl for *von*-dare-fool doctor?'

'Oh – the surgery? Yes, yes I am.'

The cousin's wife shakes her aged head. She is wearing Capri pants, or what Rozsi would call 'a little *troo-sair*', and a blouse and waistcoat; perfect, if alarming, lipstick; huge glamorous glasses and a bronze puff of hair. Compared to the others, she is dressed casually; it is almost a slight.

'And,' the cousin's wife continues, offering Laura a pink Balkan *Sobranie*, 'you are lonely, yes?'

'No!' says Laura, stepping back.

'Fortunate, to live with the others, but lonely. So. I know.' They both look down at Laura's pointless wedding ring.

'Not at—'

'Of course now little *Mor-inaka* is at *vot*-you-say board school—'

'Boarding school, yes, bu—'

‘The evenings, the weekend. *Vot* are you doing with so much time? You are learning a language? Instrument?’

‘Er . . .’

‘Do not tell me,’ stage-whispers the cousin’s wife, ‘you are having *boy*-friend?’

‘Me? No, not . . . not at all!’

‘Because of course without *Pay*-tare . . . vell.’

Laura has been expecting this all evening. Given the number of Hungarians present, their rampaging curiosity and lack of embarrassment, she knew it would come. Poor Rozsi; they can hardly ask her. The disappearance of Peter, Rozsi’s younger son, and his abandonment of Laura his wife and Marina his child, is not for general discussion. Laura, however, is fair game.

‘You hear from him again?’

‘Peter? No, gosh, never. Not since, you know, that first time, there was a, a card he sent to—’

‘Yes, yes, of course I see this. You do not know where he is, all these years – *tair*-ible. You cry and cry, don’t tell me, *dar*-link,’ she says, thumping her fragile-looking breastbone; she has, Laura is certain, been happily married to the cousin for many decades.

The questions keep coming. At least her inquisitor is, as she reminds herself ceaselessly, so affectionate; they all are. When Laura visits her quiet father in Kestonbridge, the Cumbrian village to which, after her quiet mother’s death, he quietly retired to a bungalow, people who have known them for twenty years are still hard pressed to greet her. Here, they embrace her like a daughter, albeit a disappointing one.

Warmth, she tells herself once again, is not to be sniffed at. Since taking them into Westminster Court after Peter walked out, Rozsi has refused to let them consider leaving, even after Ildi was mugged on an Acton bus and moved in, and then widowed Zsuzsi followed. They share their food with her. It is like being raised by wolves.

The problem is that they think they know her. They do not realize that, however sweetly Laura smiles, however demurely she answers, there is somewhere she would prefer to be, something she would rather be doing. And someone, of course, which nobody else must know.

They never will. The idea that, after over a decade of chaste abandonment, Rozsi's shy daughter-in-law might have, well, needs, has not crossed their minds. However, there are no secrets here, particularly from one so observant as Marina.

Could Marina conceivably have guessed?

Please, God, not yet. Still, Laura worries. With so many inquisitors stuffed into this little flat, no corner where secrets hide, or are hidden, is safe.

'*Nev-airmind*,' the cousin's wife is saying cheerfully, putting her bony hand through Laura's arm and frog-marching her back into the throng. 'One day when you are old *vom-an* like me you understand. Men leave. Children leave. All that is left is death.'

With a roar from the crowd, Rozsi stands.

To the casual Englishman, were one present, she might appear as other grandmothers: reading glasses on a chain, worn wedding ring. Do not be deceived. Rozsi is unusually

clever and fearless even by her compatriots' standards. Her younger son Peter, Laura's former husband, used to call her Attila, with reason. Laura, whose references are more prosaic, thinks of her as Boudicca dressed as Miss Marple. She has a white bun and black eyebrows, her cheeks are soft and age-spotted, but consider the cheekbones underneath; you think she forgives easily? Think again.

Her cake, as is correct and traditional, is not a birthday cake at all, but simply her favourite, a rum and walnut *diós torta*, made by her devoted elder sister Ildi last night. Rozsi, remember to blow the candles out, for luck.

Haaapy Birsday to you . . .

Rozsi looks, all agree, very well. Tonight, in her good dark red dress with gilt buttons, she could not be beautiful; she is too severe for that. But striking, handsome even, like a relatively glamorous Russian spy. Why should Rozsi care about beauty: the smartest of the sisters, a career woman for all these years? And isn't her life at eighty something to marvel at? Despite everything – that terrible business with her poor late husband and then *Pay-tare* disappearing – to be working still is remarkable. Wonderful. Look at them now, see how Marinaka loves her grandmother; Rozsi will never be lonely. Isn't that something else to be grateful for?

Haaapy Birsday to you . . .

The cameras flash at Rozsi and, to be truthful, a little more often at her younger sister Zsuzsi, the beautiful one, with her lovely skin and her good teeth and her cigaretty laugh. Those

who knew the famous Károlyi girls, Kitti-Ildi-Rozsi-Franci-Zsuzsi, back in Pálaszlany over fifty years ago, claim that people would stop on the street to gaze as Zsuzsi passed by. Men were known to have killed themselves for her, and marriage, then early widowhood, have not reduced her powers. Several of her suitors are here tonight, tall white-haired handsome 'boys' in beautiful suits: rich Bíró Eddie, globe-trotting André, Tibor with his duelling scar, still patiently waiting for her to choose after all these years.

*Haaapy Birsday dar-link Ro-ji,
Haaapy Birsday to you.*

Rozsi, of course, widowed almost as young as her sister and more unjustly, has no such suitors. She lifts the knife. She smiles.

2

‘*Ven* you think the doctor arrives?’

Laura turns slowly. Ildi, the elder of her aunts-in-law, unmarried at eighty-two, still going to evening classes, cooking for fifty without apparent panic, is looking concerned. Of course Dr and Mrs Sudgeon are invited; all the elderly Hungarians and Czechs go to his surgery. It is worryingly easy to imagine distinguished Dr Alistair Sudgeon sitting on their hard-wearing green leather sofa, making conversation. Rozsi will be so proud.

‘Hmm,’ says Laura, a little too loudly. ‘Well.’

Careful, says the voice of sense in her ear. Laura, however, has never mastered being careful. She was not careful when, as a hopeful would-be teacher, twenty-six and astonishingly clueless, she was impregnated by the handsome and utterly spoiled Peter Farkas behind a sweet-chestnut tree in Kensington Gardens. She was not careful for the next three years, tending baby Marina and fighting the cold in their rented flats while he pretended to paint, and borrowed from his overstretched parents and then left them entirely in the lurch.

And, well over a decade later, sharing her mother-in-law’s two-and-a-half-bedroom flat with three pensioners and a sixteen-year-old, sleeping at night on their uncomfortable sofa with her clothes in the sideboard, she may be beyond carefulness entirely. Which perhaps explains why she has

pledged her loins to the last person she should have chosen: Alistair Sudgeon, her very married employer.

Marina is in the kitchen, washing up cakey cutlery. It is hot in here, and she is wearing a black wool polo-neck, with a huge locket of Zsuzsi's, a kilt, black fifty-denier velvet-look tights and Edwardian ankle boots. She knows – she thinks she knows – how bad she looks, so why does she keep expecting someone's handsome grandson to turn up and fall in love?

Because, she tells herself, punishing her ugly cuticles with the washing-up brush, you always think that the next moment is when your life is going to change, and maybe it never will.

This is a recent realization, which she is struggling to accept. Before the sixth form, clothes were tricky but it hardly mattered: her Ealing Girls' friends were as scruffy as her, as styleless. It was their collective ignorance, she is coming to understand, which doomed her. While elsewhere girls were developing taste and fashion sense, crimping their hair and experimenting with coloured eyeliner, learning what would suit them, she and Katie and Katy and Ursula barely noticed what each other was wearing. Other things were more important, such as memorizing the titles of all Shakespeare's plays.

Then she came to Combe and discovered she had fallen irretrievably behind.

How did this happen? First of all, she never knows what you ought to like. Red, for example, the colour of her duvet

cover at Combe and her favourite jumper, is common, and she hadn't known.

Second, what if she dares to try something new but looks stupid, without realizing? She has a terror of this. That, and having food on her teeth.

Third, she is naturally unappetizing.

The truth, which her family do not acknowledge, is that some people can look all right, while others can't. If you're pretty, it's fine to check your reflection in a mirror, or wear mascara. But what if you're not? It'll look like you think you are all right, that you can improve your appearance by smoothing your fringe, but you still have glasses, and spotty upper arms, and hideous knees, and eyebrows like a boy's. Some people are beyond improvement and, when they try, they look like fools. This Marina will not be.

She is uniquely cursed in other ways. She is shy; clumsy; short; fatherless; scared of cats, and the dark, and the future. She is going to be a doctor but knows she isn't up to it, and if she doesn't get into Cambridge her life will be over. And, unbeknownst to anyone at Combe, she lives with old people in a little bit of darkest Hungary, like a maiden in a fairy story. Or a troll.

These things are too shameful to be spoken of. She keeps them in her rotten heart. On reflection, it occurs to her now, maybe her heart is the problem. For, although technically quite innocent, Marina has a very adult love. A world away, in Dorset, the boy she longs for – Simon Flowers, senior music scholar, day boy, bound for Cambridge this very October – is attending polite little family gatherings, packing his

physics notes for the new term, writing essays with the clarity of the pure of heart. Nobody knows of her passion. There are so many reasons to keep her love secret: not least that it is against the school rules. And she will be teased about it, which is insupportable. And her family do not approve of boyfriends until she is at Cambridge, '*meen-eemoom*'. And he is an active member of the Christian Union.

Yet although Simon Flowers is in the year above, she knows him well, by observation. He may even have feelings for her. He has smiled at her in Chapel, for example, which is quite unheard of for an Upper, particularly one so glamorous, so talented. Admittedly, they have not technically spoken but she has stared unwaveringly at him to convey her devotion; he can't not know how she feels. It is deafening. She thinks about him every few minutes, planning for their passionately intellectual future. She feels physical pain at the thought of their being asunder. And so she has become increasingly sure that the life-changing moment of union will happen; it has to. Thought beams should make a difference. If you want to see someone enough, they should come.

But what if he doesn't? Nothing, not even the many tragedies of her youth, has pained her as much as the mere sight of his sensitive hands, his leather briefcase, his wire-rimmed glasses. Without him her life will be ashes; besides, she will be unable to care for another. First love can never be repeated. She has read Turgenev. She knows.

'Quickly,' whispers Great-aunt Ildi. 'Where is nice ashtray for Mrs Dobos?'

Mrs Dobos, her grandmother's employer, raises her prima ballerina's head and stares at Marina, as if assessing stock. She is on the most comfortable chair; they dusted behind the radiators in case she looks.

'Here it is,' says Marina, with a lovely smile. 'All washed up specially.'

'Marinaka *dar-link*,' says Mrs Dobos. 'You still do not tell me about Combe-Abbey. You are liking it, as I say you will. You are happy there. I can tell: you eat well. Your bust grows.'

'I—'

'Of course you are happy. It is *von-darefool* school. *Von-darefooloppoortoonity*.'

'Yes,' says Marina. 'I am very very lucky. Thank you, Mrs Dobos, for recommending it.'

Once Laura was reasonably intelligent. She had thoughts like: what should we do about Europe? She cared about starving children, about the decline of native woodland. As it turns out, all that concern was varnish. She is merely a collection of needs which are unfortunately not going to be met: to free herself from Dr Alistair Sudgeon, her ageing paramour; to carry her daughter's pure childhood scent around with her in a sniffable capsule, if not Marina in person, like a papoose; to slice through the knot of guilt and duty and financial embarrassment which tightens daily and find somewhere else to live: an independent adult woman with her daughter.

Until September, only four months ago, she could cope with all of this. It was so good for Marina to be brought up

with the in-laws, with their culture and their love and all that food; it hardly seemed to matter that she, Laura, wasn't even related to them. When she compared Westminster Court with the bungalow in Kestonbridge, or an unaffordable studio flat beyond the M25, she knew that they were lucky.

Then Marina went away to school and none of the treats Laura had promised herself, cinema matinées, visits to friends in Bath and Bristol, had happened. She did not want them after all; she just wanted Marina back.

Her entanglement with Alistair Sudgeon is not helping. Any minute now he will appear on the doorstep with Mitzi, his wife, with whom Laura seems to be becoming obsessed.

Mitzi Sudgeon is a legend: her energy, her terrible fecund power. Unlike Laura, who has reached her forty-second year with no more to her name than a teenager, houseless, carless, husbandless, Mitzi excels. In addition to four children she has produced hundreds, probably thousands, of pastel drawings: dancing gypsies, merry vagabonds, babes in arms. Her jam is perfect, or as close to perfection as can be achieved without the legendary Nemtudom plums of Tarpa, near the River Tisza, of which Laura has frequently heard. She makes curtains and marital bedspreads. She bakes relentlessly. She organizes pensioners' aerobics sessions at Alistair's surgery.

She is, moreover, an actual Hungarian. In 1956, while the eight-year-old Laura, daughter of two irredeemably English postal workers who called each other 'Mother' and 'Father' and aimed only not to be noticed, was failing to learn to skip in a Birmingham playground, plucky Mitzi,

only three years older, was stowing herself away on a tannery barge and preparing to meet her future.

The guests show no sign of leaving. There is still more cake to be eaten: a symphony in chocolate and cream; there are Sobranies still to smoke, black *kavitchka* to drink, marzipan fruits to nibble, families to be discussed. They are all dreadful gigglers; Ildi, whispering to Zsuzsi in the corner, has tears of laughter running down her pink cheeks. And the food keeps coming. Rozsi's oldest friend, Pelzer Fanni, has brought a toddler-sized box of her favourite chocolates from Austria, *Mozartkugeln*, decorated with his silly girlish face.

'Von-darefool,' say the shoals of interchangeable cousins. Laura smiles and nods until her cheeks ache with insincerity. She fears them all: protective, touchy, there is so much they insist on knowing, and Laura is no match for them, least of all tonight.

What if, when Alistair arrives, whose desire, or at least the thought of whose desire, so excites her, she starts glowing through her clothes? One of the in-laws will surely notice; not Ildi, too sweet and innocent for suspicion, but what about Zsuzsi, with her instinct for sex? Rozsi, whose thoughts are unreadable, like a polar bear's? My jig, she thinks, is up.

She needs somewhere to think. It will have to be the bathroom, although it will be considered a dereliction of hostessly duty. Shyly she begins to kiss her way towards the kitchen, slashing through the alien corn and, whatever her lips say, her mind is thinking: please. Please. Please.

But what is she asking for? Love, peace, privacy? Or the

opposite of peace: something that will change everything, for better or for worse?

Marina is going back to school in under a week, and another evening has been wasted. Laura has barely seen, let alone talked to her, or grabbed her and sniffed her hair, howled like a lunatic, held on. She wants to lie face down on the cold tiles and weep. But she cannot, so she tells herself to buck up, blows her nose, and washes her face like the mildly disappointed marmalade-making Women's Institute member she could so easily have been.

Water is dripping off her nose. She looks like a different species from her daughter, as if a Labrador had produced a salmon. If Alistair talks to Marina, will she talk back?

It happens all the time: people think she is just another nervous teenager, easily melted, and Laura winces to see how their teasing always turns her child to stiffness like a small strict scientist, how quickly she is offended and embarrassed, her flammable pride. Is it normal to be simultaneously so self-conscious and so prickly? Since starting at Combe it has been worse, for reasons Marina will not discuss. Show them what you really are, Laura wills her, watching her daughter's monosyllabic answers. With her big worried eyebrows and dark thick plait, she has the air of a small Russian poet about to kill herself for love.

Oh, darling, thinks her mother. One day someone will see you. Just, please, not yet.

When the intercom buzzes, Marina knows. This, you see, is how love feels: a heightened awareness, almost psychic, that

the beloved is here. Like a magnet seeking metal, a stranded alien found by the mother ship, she is propelled towards him, dodging aged Hungarians with their walking sticks and their determination to pinch her youthful flesh. It is not surprising that she has sensed his approach. In a sandstorm or an avalanche she could probably detect him. Her body would thrum like an antenna, if that is what they do.

How she thrums. Given the strength of her devotion to Simon Flowers, how could it not be him? He must have relented. He has come for her.

'Hello?' someone says into the intercom box. No one answers, which is a sort of sign. Her heart is banging, and organs do not lie. She has willed him here: a hot metallic beam of longing, pulling him all the way from the house he shares with his parents and two little sisters at 29 Mill Road, Stourpaine, Blandford St Mary, Dorset, DT11 2JP, into her arms.

'I'll go,' she says, although everyone is looking. Electric blood booms beneath her skin. Could she have wished him into existence? Until now, fetching the *Evening Standard* for her great-aunt Zsuzsi, or going to the National Portrait Gallery to catch up on the Tudors, or watching the people on the up escalator as she goes down, with her better profile carefully turned their way, she has been certain that in the next minute, or the next, or next, her fortune will change. All it would take was one large aristocratic family or kindly professor. They would recognize her unusual sensitivity, her hitherto unsuspected beauty, and they would welcome her.

This holiday, in the era of Simon Flowers, it has been

different. He must come to London, after all, to visit elderly relatives, or buy madrigals. Every time she leaves the flat she is merely a surface, ready to be seen by him.

Now, at last, he will see. Her life will change tonight. She bangs her elbow on the door handle but hardly notices. The air in the basement corridor is pure oxygen. She flies over the sparkling night-blue linoleum, bypassing the lift, in whose coffin of walnut veneer and leatherette she has dreamed of kissing his chapped lips and now, after her time in the wilderness, can dream again. She will look upon his dear scholarly face and he will rescue her, transform Combe, relieve her of her virginity, set her off towards the glorious adulthood which awaits her. So what if boarding school is not what she had hoped? If the boys are scary and the girls are aliens and they call the townspeople of Combe and Melcombe peasants? She runs up the stairs and bursts into the entrance hall, the strip lighting blazing benedictions upon young love.

The pitch of the party has definitely changed; it is quieter, tenser, as if an adulterer is in their midst. They may be sensing imminent excitement: a storming out, tears, insults. When Laura was growing up, public displays of emotion would lead to lifelong polite ostracism. Her in-laws, however, can take drama in their stride.

Or maybe they are waiting for the Sudgeons, she thinks, as the telephone begins to ring.

Because of the noise, Laura hurries into the great-aunts' room to grab the phone between their beds.

'Hello?'

There is only silence.

Her mouth is dry. 'Hello?' she says again and then, softly, probably inaudibly, she whispers into the yellowing plastic: 'Is that you?'

Silence.

'Who is it?' calls her mother-in-law through the doorway. '*Viszontlátásra, dar-link* – hurry, Mrs Volf goes now.'

'I . . . I think a wrong number,' she shouts back, and the line goes dead.

Simon Flowers is not here. Nobody is. Marina leans back against the front door, trying not to be seen by the people waiting at the bus stop, and is rinsed by a cold wave of self-disgust.

Heartache spreads across her chest, telling her that she will never love again. Simon Flowers is the only boy at Combe she can imagine even liking. He has qualities the others lack: intelligence. Fineness. Beauty, even, if one is sensitive enough to see it. She would give him everything. She would even, it seems, risk letting him into the flat.

Unbeknownst to him, this was to have been a significant, almost ceremonial, moment. For Marina, most things are. She has powers, although she is not sure how they work. Perhaps a suspicion had always been there, an awareness that all that stands between her relatives and their gradual decline into poverty, starvation, diseases missed by neglectful doctors who laugh at their accents, is six years at medical school and lifelong vigilance. However, she had only been away at school a few weeks when she realized that everything she fears stems,

via an osmotic process in which she is the conduit, from Combe. Combe is not her family's salvation but their nemesis, she can see that now. Everyone there is so healthy. Everyone at home is weak and flimsy, and growing more so, while she is away from them.

Perhaps, without the homesickness, she would have felt less oppressed by responsibility. Instead, as term, slowly, passed, her sadness did not retreat. She missed her elderly relatives' wrinkly elbows, the soft cords of their necks; whenever she saw a pensioner at a bus stop she would try to carry their bags. What if, as she increasingly feared, she was actually killing them long distance?

One freezing November evening, passing the ruins of Combe Abbey on her tremulous way into dinner, she saw a stone which seemed to be glinting significantly, and made a vow. Under the gas-style light of the new old-fashioned street lamps, she accepted the task of protecting her relatives from pain, sorrow and death. I alone, she swore, will do it, whatever it involves. Decontamination. Quarantine. And, obviously, ensuring that no one from Combe ever crossed the threshold.

The only exception was to be Simon Flowers: a boy of whom even her family would approve. So great was her love that she had decided he was worth the risk. But he is not here. The damage has been done by thought alone and—

'Hey,' says someone in the bus-stop queue.

'Hello?' She squints into the darkness, hoping that Simon Flowers's slender frame will materialize but, in his

place, stands someone vaguely familiar: a paleish, slabby, mouse-haired boy. Her face starts to heat like a kettle element, tainting the air around her.

‘Come on,’ he says. ‘You know. School.’

‘No, I don’t,’ she says, although she does recognize him now, a younger boy from Combe, a Fiver, not even in her house: Guy somebody. Rain is beading on his hair, she notes, still observant despite the shipwreck of her hopes and dreams. ‘What are you doing here?’

The downpour increases, as if a dial had been turned. He surveys the dry cleaner’s, who have picked this moment to load clothes rails into their van. ‘I know, weird, isn’t it,’ he says. ‘Went to buy a compact disc on Queensway.’

‘Really?’

‘And then I’m meeting my mother in Holland Park, but I lost my cab money. They said the bus went from the corner. You don’t live *here*, do you?’

Marina is not good at being insulted. She goes stiff; if anyone teases her she is frozen for days.

‘Anyway,’ he says, not even noticing.

She wants to turn away but he could say foul things now about her at Combe. Also, he does not seem to be mocking her. ‘Good, good luck then.’

‘Thanks.’

She is about to go inside. But she hesitates, as she always does, and in those few seconds the door to Westminster Court is slowly pulled open. The Combe boy looks round. Marina turns. There, silhouetted by the strip lighting like an avenger, stands an old woman in a floor-length emerald

cocktail kaftan, with a cigarette, an ornamental hair clip and big round gilt clip-on earrings: her great-aunt, Zsuzsi.

‘I come to find you,’ says Zsuzsi. ‘Everyone asks, you miss the— who is this?’

The Combe boy’s eyes open very wide. Is it her eyeshadow or her golden hair or the accent? Marina barely hears it but she knows it is there. People often ask Rozsi how long she’s been in London, as if she’s a tourist, and are visibly shocked when she says, ‘Forty years.’

Rozsi would be bad enough; Zsuzsi is a disaster. Now that Marina has started at Combe, she needs her elderly relatives to be less conspicuous. There are already rumours that she is a Kraut.

‘Actually,’ she says, ‘I was just com—’

But Combe boys are polite to adults. He leaves the bus queue and holds out his hand. ‘Guy Viney,’ he says. ‘I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize you lived here. I’m one of your, ah, daughter’s—’

‘Daughter?’ says Zsuzsi, beaming delightedly. ‘*Von-dare-fool*. Such a nice boy. One of Marina’s school friends? So—’ They have been asking and asking her to bring people home. They are obsessed with Combe. They do not realize.

‘Well,’ says Marina, ‘we don’t really know each other. He’s only a—’

‘He wait for bus?’ says Zsuzsi, looking as if she is about to offer him a cigarette. ‘No!’

‘It’s fine,’ says Marina, as Guy Viney wipes his face with his sleeve.

‘Not-at-all,’ Zsuzsi says. ‘Don’t be a silly. We do not let him go like that, a boy from the boarding school. *Tair*-ible. He is wet. He is hungry. He is—’

‘Zsuzsi,’ says Marina, ‘really. I don’t . . . we don’t . . .’

Her great-aunt takes Guy Viney’s arm. ‘A friend of Marina’s,’ she breathes, as if naming a rare and precious element.

‘He’s not my—’

‘Shh. Young man, I take you inside.’

Marina follows them, with difficulty, into the tiny lift. He takes a lungful of stairwell bleach and overheating and she visualizes the exchange of gases in his alveoli: Farkas air going in, contamination out. He will endanger them and she, Marina, is the point on which it all hinges, like the twist in a loop of DNA. He isn’t even very tall and his hair is nothing like a Merchant Ivory hero’s. Above the clanking gears he answers questions while Marina stares at his red right ear, thinking of what he will see when he enters Flat Two: the plate clock from Trieste; embroidered folk items; glazed pot holders; Zsuzsi’s *Royalty* magazines, the numerous dictionaries and the cupboard fridge on legs.

‘I . . .’ she begins. Zsuzsi expects politeness, but this is an emergency. The lift is stopping. Could she just drop to the floor? ‘Actually—’

He pulls open the grille. Marina hesitates, her hand on the walnut veneer. Zsuzsi gives her a little push. ‘Hurry now young boy,’ she says. ‘We eat cake.’

And it is too late. Everyone turns as they enter the Farkas flat, smiling at him, then at her, as if—

Oh, my God. They can’t think that.

They put him on the sofa. They bring him an extra-large slice of what Zsuzsi unnecessarily informs him is boyfriend cake, and coffee, which he nervously declines, and so thrilled are they by everything he says, and so eager to spot signs of love in Marina, that she cannot stand it. She sees him being made to talk to hundreds of relatives. She squirms, she blushes. She starts to sweat. He catches her eye, this infant, this Fiver, this destroyer, and he smiles.

It is the day after, New Year's Eve eve, and they have been clearing up since breakfast. There is only just room in the kitchen for two people; it is five feet wide, maybe nine feet long, so careful choreography is needed. Poor Marina, who cannot pass a door frame without crashing into it, continually hurts herself. What, wonders her mother, has she done to herself now? Is this why she is being so difficult?

The problem is that Marina could be bleeding dramatically and would not admit it. Although her face shows every emotion, pride closes her up. She has been this way since babyhood, refusing to admit to pain, or distress, or even ignorance, as if she thinks it is dishonourable. It's like having a little Hapsburg, thinks Laura vaguely, somewhat out of her depth.

'Sweetheart,' she says, when Marina bangs her hip on the oven for the second time, 'are you really all right? What is it?'

'Nothing,' says Marina, looking offended.

It cannot be normal for a teenager to be so reserved. What if living with the world's most formal pensioners has somehow over-matured her? Was it something to do with

that rather lumpen boy at the party, with whom Marina was so set-faced, so gloweringly wooden that any (dear God) thought of romance on his part must have stuttered and died? Or could it be that bloody school, with its petty rules, its cheese-paring insistence on charging for every tiny 'extra', its complacency? She keeps catching herself cursing it, then remembers that Combe was Marina's choice, her ardent wish, and Marina will never admit that she was wrong.

'But—'

They eye each other over the knife drawer. Mothers are supposed to know their child instinctively: not Laura. One of her many greatest fears is that Marina might want her, need her even, and she, Laura, will fail to realize: 'If only she'd told me,' she will say afterwards. 'If only I had known.'