THE REHEARSAL

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for Johnny

ONE

Thursday

'I can't do it,' is what she says. 'I simply can't admit students without prior musical training. My teaching methods, Mrs Henderson, are rather more specific than I think you understand.'

A jazzy pulse begins, just drums and double bass. She swirls her spoon and taps it once.

'The clarinet is tadpole to the sax, can you see that? The clarinet is a black and silver sperm, and if you love this sperm very much it will one day grow into a saxophone.'

She leans forward across the desk. 'Mrs Henderson. At present your daughter is simply too young. Let me put it this way: a film of soured breast milk clutches at your daughter like a shroud.'

Mrs Henderson is looking down, so the saxophone teacher says rather sharply, 'Do you hear me, with your mouth like a thin scarlet thread and your deflated bosom and your stale mustard blouse?'

Mrs Henderson nods imperceptibly. She stops fingering the sleeves of her blouse.

'I require of all my students,' the saxophone teacher continues, 'that they are downy and pubescent, pimpled with sullen mistrust, and boiling away with private fury and ardour and uncertainty and gloom. I require that they wait in the corridor for ten minutes at least before each lesson, tenderly nursing their injustices, picking miserably at their own unworthiness as one might finger a scab or caress a scar. If I am to teach your daughter, you darling hopeless and inadequate mother, she must be moody and bewildered and awkward and dissatisfied and wrong. When she realises that her body is a secret, a dark and yawning secret of which she becomes more and more ashamed, come back to me. You must understand me on this point. I cannot teach children.'

Kiss-kiss-kiss goes the snare drum over the silence.

'But she wants to learn the saxophone,' says Mrs Henderson at last, sounding ashamed and sulky at the same time. 'She doesn't want to learn the clarinet.'

'I suggest you try the music department at her school,' the saxophone teacher says.

Mrs Henderson sits there for a moment and scowls. Then she crosses her other leg and remembers that she was going to ask a question.

'Do you remember the name and face of every pupil you have ever taught?'

The saxophone teacher seems pleased to be asked.

'I remember one face,' she says. 'Not one individual student, but the impression left by them all, inverted like a photographic negative and stamped into my memory like an acid hole. I'd recommend Henry Soothill for clarinet,' she adds, reaching for a card. 'He's very good. He plays for the symphony orchestra.'

'All right,' says Mrs Henderson sullenly, and she takes the card.

That was at four. At five there is another knock. The saxophone teacher opens the door.

'Mrs Winter,' she says. 'You've come about your daughter. Come in and we'll discuss carving her into half-hour slices to feed me week by week.'

She holds the door wide so Mrs Winter can scuttle in. It's the same woman as before, just with a different costume—Winter not Henderson. Some other things are different too, because the woman is a professional and she has thought about the role for a long time. Mrs Winter smiles with only half her mouth, for example. Mrs Winter keeps nodding a few seconds too long. Mrs Winter inhales quietly through her teeth when she is thinking.

They both politely pretend not to notice that it is the same woman as before.

'To start off with,' says the saxophone teacher as she hands her a mug of black-leaf tea, 'I don't allow parents to sit in on private lessons. I know it's a bit of an old-fashioned policy—the reason is partly that the students are never at their best in that sort of environment. They become flushed and hot, and they laugh too easily and their posture changes, folding up tight like the lips of a blossom. Partly also, I think, the reason I like to keep things very private is that these little half-hour slices are *my* chance to watch, and I don't want to share.'

'I'm not that sort of mother anyway,' says Mrs Winter. She is looking around her. The studio is on the attic level, and the view is all sparrows and slate. The brick wall behind the piano is chalky, the bricks peeling white as if diseased.

'Let me tell you about the saxophone,' says the saxophone teacher. There is an alto saxophone on a stand next to the piano. She holds it up like a torch. 'The saxophone is a wind instrument, which means it is fuelled by your breath. I think

it's interesting that the word for "breath" in Latin is where we get our word "spirit". People once had the idea that your breath and your soul were the same thing, that to be alive means, merely, to be filled with breath. When you breathe into this instrument, darling, you're not just giving it life—you're giving it *your* life.'

Mrs Winter nods vigorously. She keeps nodding a few seconds too long.

'I ask my students,' the saxophone teacher says, 'is your life a gift worth giving? Your normal, vanilla-flavoured life, your two-minute noodles after school, your television until ten, your candles on the dresser and facewash on the sink?' She smiles and shakes her head. 'Of course it isn't, and the reason for that is that they simply haven't suffered enough to be worth listening to.'

She smiles kindly at Mrs Winter, sitting with her yellow knees together and clutching her tea in both hands.

'I'm looking forward to teaching your daughter,' she says. 'She seemed so wonderfully impressionable.'

'That's what we think,' says Mrs Winter quickly.

The saxophone teacher observes her for a moment, and then says, 'Let's go back to that moment just before you have to refill your lungs, when the saxophone's full of your breath and you've got none left in your own body: the moment when the sax is more alive than you are.

'You and I, Mrs Winter, know what it feels like to hold a life in our hands. I don't mean ordinary responsibility, like babysitting or watching the stove or waiting for the lights when you cross the road—I mean somebody's life like a china vase in your hand—' she holds her saxophone aloft, her palm underneath the bell '—and if you wanted to, you could just . . . let go.'

Thursday

On the corridor wall is a framed black-and-white photograph which shows a man retreating up a short flight of stairs, hunched and overcoated, his chin down and his collar up and the laces on his boots coming untied. You can't see his face or his hands, just the back of his overcoat and half a sole and a grey sock sliver and the top of his head. On to the wall beside the staircase the man casts a bent accordion shadow. If you look closer at the shadow you will see that he is playing a saxophone as he ascends the stairs, but his body is hunched over the instrument and his elbows are close in to the sides of his body so no part of the sax is visible from behind. The shadow peels off to one side like an enemy, forking the image in two and betraying the saxophone that is hidden under his coat. The shadow-saxophone looks a little like a hookah pipe, dark and wispy and distorted on the brick wall and curving into his chin and into his dark and wispy shadow-hands like smoke.

The girls who sit in this corridor before their music lessons regard this photograph while they wait.

Friday

Isolde falters after the first six bars.

'I haven't practised,' she says at once. 'I have got an excuse, though. Do you want to hear it?'

The saxophone teacher looks at her and sips her black-leaf tea. Excuses are almost her favourite part.

Isolde takes a moment to smooth her kilt and prepare. She draws a breath.

'I was watching TV last night,' she says, 'and Dad comes in with his face all serious and his fingers sort of picking at

his tie like it's strangling him, and eventually he just takes it off and lays it to one side—'

She unhooks her saxophone from her neckstrap and places it upon a chair, miming loosening the neckstrap as if it has been very tight.

'—and says sit down, even though I'm already sitting down, and then rubs his hands together really hard.'

She rubs her hands together really hard.

'He says, your mother thinks that I shouldn't tell you this just yet, but your sister has been abused by one of the teachers at school.' She darts a look at the saxophone teacher now, quickly, and then looks away. 'And then he says "sexually", just to clarify, in case I thought the teacher had yelled at her at a traffic light or something.'

The overhead lights have dimmed and she is lit only by a pale flicking blue, a frosty sparkle like the on–off glow of a TV screen. The saxophone teacher is thrust into shadow so half her face is iron grey and the other half is pale and glinting.

'So he starts talking in this weird tight little voice about this Mr Saladin or whatever, and how he teaches senior jazz band and orchestra and senior jazz ensemble, all on Wednesday morning one after the other. I won't have him till sixth form, and that's if I even want to take jazz band, because it clashes with netball so I'll have to make a choice.

'Dad's looking at me with this scared expression like I'm going to do something insane or really emotional and he won't know how to deal with it. So I go, How do you know? And he goes—'

She crouches down beside the chair, speaking earnestly and spreading her hands wide—

'Honey, from what I understand of it, he started off real slow, just resting his hand really lightly on her shoulder sometimes, like *that*.'

Isolde reaches out and touches her fingertips to the upper

end of the saxophone, which is lying on its side upon the chair. As her fingers touch the instrument a steady pulse begins, like a heartbeat. The teacher is sitting very still.

'And then sometimes when no one was watching he would lean close and breathe into her hair—'

She puts her cheek against the instrument and breathes down its length—

'—like that, really tentative and shy, because he doesn't know if she wants it yet and he doesn't want to get done. But she's friendly because she kind of likes him and she thinks she has a crush on him, and soon his hand is going down, down—'

Her hand snakes down the saxophone and trails around the edge of the bell—

'—down, and she sort of starts to respond, and she smiles at him in lessons sometimes and it makes his heart race, and when they're alone, in the music cupboard or after school or when they go places in his car, which they do sometimes, when they're alone he calls her my gypsy girl—he says it over and over, my gypsy girl, he says—and she wishes she had something to say back, something she could whisper into his hair, something really special, something nobody's ever said before.'

The backing music ceases. Isolde looks at her teacher and says, 'She can't think of anything.'

The lights come up again, as normal. Isolde scowls and flops down on to an armchair. 'But anyway,' she says angrily, 'she's run out of time, it's too late, because her friends have started to notice the way she is sometimes, the way she puts her chin down and to the side like she's flirting, and that's how it all starts to come undone, crashing down on itself like a castle of cards.'

'I see why you haven't had time to practise,' says the saxophone teacher.

'Even this morning,' Isolde says, 'I went to play some

scales or whatever before school, but when I started playing she was all like, Can't you at least be *sensitive*? and ran out of the room with this fake sob noise which I knew was fake because if she was really crying she wouldn't have run off, she would have wanted me to see.' Isolde digs the heel of her kilt pin into her knee. 'They're treating her like a fucking artefact.'

'Is that so unusual?' the sax teacher asks.

Isolde shoots her a vicious look. 'It's *sick*,' she says. 'It's sick like when kids dress up their pets like real people, with clothes and wigs and stuff, and then make them walk on their back legs and take photos. It's just like that, but worse because you can see how much she's enjoying it.'

'I'm sure your sister is not enjoying it,' the saxophone teacher says.

'Dad said it would probably be years and years before Mr Saladin gets properly convicted and goes to jail,' Isolde says. 'All the papers will say child abuse, but there won't be a child any more, she'll be an adult by then, just like him. It'll be like someone destroyed the scene of the crime on purpose, and built something clean and shiny in its place.'

'Isolde,' the saxophone teacher says, firmly this time, 'I'm sure they are scared only because they know the sin is still there. They know it snuck up inside her and stuck fast, wedging itself into a place nobody knows about and will never find. They know that *his* sin was just an action, a foolish deadly fumble in the bright dusty lunchtime light, but hers—her sin is a condition, a sickness lodged somewhere deep inside for now and for always.'

'My dad doesn't believe in sin,' Isolde says. 'We're atheists.'

'It pays to be open minded,' says the saxophone teacher.

'*I'll* tell you why they're so scared,' Isolde says. 'They're scared because now she knows everything they know. They're scared because now they've got no secrets left.'

The saxophone teacher gets up suddenly and goes to the window. There is a long pause before Isolde speaks again.

'Dad just goes, I don't know how it happened, honey. What's important is that now we know about it, it won't happen any more.'

Wednesday

'So they called off jazz band this morning,' Bridget says. 'They go, Mr Saladin can't come in this afternoon. He's helping with an investigation.'

She sucks her reed noisily.

'You know it's something really serious,' she says, 'when they cross between not enough information and too much. Normally, see, they would have just gone, Listen up, you lot, jazz band's cancelled, you've got three minutes to get your shit together, get out and enjoy the sunshine for once, come on, I said move.'

This girl is good at voices. She actually wanted to be Isolde, because Isolde has a better part, but this girl is pale and stringy and rumpled and always looks slightly alarmed, which are qualities that don't quite fit Isolde, and so she plays Bridget instead. In truth it is her longing to be an Isolde that most characterises her as a Bridget: Bridget is always wanting to be somebody else.

'Or,' she says, 'they would have gone the other way, and told us more than we needed to know, but deliberately, so we knew it was a privilege. They would have done the wide-eyed solemn holy thing that goes, Come on everyone, we need your full attention, this is really important. Mr Saladin's had to rush off because one of his family has fallen ill. Okay, now this could be really serious and it's really important you guys give him the space and consideration he needs if and when he comes back to class.'

This is a theory that Bridget has been thinking about for some time, and she gleams with the pleasure of it. She screws down her reed and blows an experimental honk.

'Helping with an investigation,' she says contemptuously, returning to readjust the mouthpiece. 'And they all came in together to say it, all in a pack or whatever, breathing together, quick breaths in and out, with their eyes back and forth sideways, and the principal at the front to break the wind, like the chief goose at the front of the V.'

'Geese usually rotate, I think,' the saxophone teacher says absently. 'I gather it's quite hard work breaking wind.' She is rifling through a stack of sheet music. The bookcase behind her is stuffed with old manuscripts and bleeding stray leaves on to the floor.

The saxophone teacher would never interrupt Isolde in such a dismissive fashion: that was one of Bridget's reasons for wanting the role. Bridget remembers all over again that she is pale and stringy and rumpled and thoroughly secondary, and then flushes with a new determination to reclaim the scene.

'So they shuffle in,' she says, 'in their V formation or whatever, this grey polyester army all trying really hard not to look at anybody in particular, especially not the big gaping hole next to first alto which is where Victoria usually sits.'

Bridget says 'Victoria' with emphasis and evident satisfaction. She looks at the saxophone teacher for effect, but the saxophone teacher is busy shuffling papers with her big veined hands and doesn't flicker.

'The doors to the practice rooms have little windows of reinforced glass so you can see in,' Bridget says, trying harder this time. Her voice gets louder the harder she tries. 'But Mr Saladin pasted the booking sheet over his, so all you can see is the timetable and little slivers of white light all around the edge if the light's on inside. When Victoria had her woodwind tutorial all the slivers would go out.'

'Found it!' says the saxophone teacher, and she holds up a handful of sheet music. '"The Old Castle" from *Pictures at an Exhibition*. I think you'll find this interesting, Bridget. We can talk about why the saxophone never really caught on as an orchestral instrument.'

The saxophone teacher sometimes feels disgusted with herself for baiting Bridget in this way. 'It's just that she tries so desperately hard,' she said once to Bridget's mother. 'That's what makes it so easy. If it wasn't so obvious that she was trying, I might be tempted to respect her a little more.'

Bridget's mother nodded and nodded, and said, 'Yes, we find that's often the trouble.'

Now the saxophone teacher just looks at Bridget, standing there all stringy and rumpled and trying so desperately hard, and raises her eyebrows.

Bridget reddens with frustration and deliberately skips all the possible lines about Mussorgsky and *Pictures at an Exhibition* and Ravel and why the saxophone never really caught on as an orchestral instrument. She skips all that and goes straight for a line she likes.

'They treat it like a dosage,' she says, even louder this time. 'It's like a vaccination where they give you a little slice of a disease so your body can get a defence ready for the real thing. They're frightened because it's a disease they haven't tried on us before, and so they're trying to vaccinate us without telling us what the disease really is. They want to inject us very secretly, without us noticing. It won't work.'

They are really looking at each other now. The saxophone teacher takes a moment to align the pile of papers with the edge of the rug before she says, 'Why won't it work, Bridget?'

'Because we noticed,' says Bridget, breathing hard through her nose. 'We were watching.'

Julia's feet are always scuffing, and she has a scab around her mouth.

'They called an assembly for the whole form this morning,' she says, 'and the counsellor was there, all puffed up like he'd never felt so important in his life.'

She talks over her shoulder while she unpacks her case. The saxophone teacher is sitting in a slice of cold sun by the window, watching the gulls wheel and shit. The clouds are low.

'They started talking in these special quiet honey voices like we'd break if they spoke too loud. They go, You're all aware of the rumours that have been circulating this past week. It's important that we talk through some things together so we can all be sure of where we're at.'

Julia turns on her heel, fits her sax to her neckstrap, and stands there for a moment with her hands on her hips. The sax is slung across her body like a weapon.

'The counsellor is a retard,' she says definitively. 'Me and Katrina went once in third form because Alice Franklin had sex in a movie theatre and we were scared she'd become a skank and ruin her life by having kids by accident. We told him all about it and how scared we were, and Katrina even cried. He just sat there and blinked and he kept nodding and nodding, but really slowly like he was programmed at a quarter speed, and then when we'd run out of things to say and Katrina had stopped crying he opened his drawer and got a piece of paper and drew three circles inside each other, and wrote *You* and then *Your Family* and then *Your Friends*, and he said, That's the way it is, isn't it? And then he said we could keep the piece of paper if we wanted.'

Julia gives a mirthless snort and opens her plastic music folder.

'What happened to Alice Franklin?' asks the saxophone teacher.

'Oh, we found out later she was lying,' Julia says.

'She didn't have sex in a movie theatre.'

'No.'

Julia takes a moment to adjust the spidery legs of the music stand.

'Why would she lie to you?' the saxophone teacher asks politely.

Julia makes a sweeping gesture with her hand. 'She was probably just *bored*,' she says. In her mouth the word is noble and magnificent.

'I see,' says the saxophone teacher.

'So anyway they go, Maybe we could start the ball rolling by asking if anyone's got something they want to get off their chest? And one of the girls started crying right then, before anything had even happened for real, and the counsellor just about wet his pants with joy, and he goes, Nothing anybody says this morning will go further than this room, or some shit. So this girl starts saying something lame, and her friend reaches over and holds her hand or something sick like that, and then everyone starts sharing and saying things about trust and betrayal and confidence and feeling all confused and scared . . . and it's going to be one fuck of a long morning.'

Julia darts a glance over toward the saxophone teacher to see if the word has any effect, but the saxophone teacher just gives her a wintry smile and waits. Bridget would have baulked and fluttered and turned scarlet and wondered about it for a long time afterwards, but Julia doesn't. She just smirks and takes unnecessary care in clipping the slippery pages to the edge of the music stand.

'So after a while,' Julia says, 'the counsellor goes, What is harassment, girls?, looking at us all eager and encouraging like when teachers are torn between really wanting you to get the right answer but also really wanting you to be wrong

so they can have the pleasure of telling you themselves. Then he goes, speaking softly and solemnly like he's revealing something nobody else knows, Harassment doesn't have to be touching, my darlings. Harassment can also be watching. Harassment can be if someone watches you in a way that you don't like.

'So I put up my hand and I go, Does it become harassment because of what they watch? Or because of what they imagine while they're watching? They all looked at me and I went really red, and the counsellor touched his fingertips together and gave me this long look like, I know what you're doing, you're trying to sabotage the trust thing we've got going here, and I'm going to answer your question because I have to, but I'm not going to give you the answer you want.'

The saxophone teacher stands up finally and picks up her own saxophone as if to say 'enough'. But Julia is already saying it, thrust on by a strange sort of red-cheeked momentum.

'*I* imagine things when I watch people,' is what Julia says.

Friday

Isolde is waiting outside in the hall. She can hear the faint rumble of the saxophone teacher's voice through the wall as the 3:30 lesson draws to a close. Here in the deserted hallway Isolde takes moment to enjoy the backstage silence before she is cued to knock and enter. She inhales and with her tongue she tastes the calm and careless privacy of a person utterly unobserved.

Normally she would be flooded with pre-tutorial dread, leafing through her sheet music, practising in mime, her eyes following the music on her lap and her splayed hands moving on the empty air. But today she is not thinking about her lesson. She is sitting still and with all her mind trying to

preserve and capture a private swollen feeling in the deep well of her chest.

It is like a little pocket of air has rushed into her mouth and sent a little shiver down her back and tugged at the empty half-basin of her pelvic bone. She feels a prolonged and dislocated swoop in her belly and a yank of emptiness in her ribcage, and suddenly she is much too hot. Isolde feels this way sometimes when she is in the bath, or when she watches people kiss on television, or in bed when she runs her fingertips down the soft curve of her belly and imagines that her hand is not her own. Most often the feeling descends inexplicably—at a bus stop, perhaps, or in the lunch line, or waiting for a bell to ring.

She thinks, Did I feel this when I saw my sister for the first time as a sexual thing? After Dad touched my head and said, This is going to be hard time, these next few weeks, and then left me to watch TV, and after a while Victoria came in and sat down and looked over at me, and then she said, Fantastic, so now everyone knows. And we sat and watched the tail end of some C-grade thriller on the Thursday night special, except I couldn't concentrate and all I could think was, How? How were you able to turn your head and look hard at him and crane up and kiss his mouth? How were you not paralysed with fear and indecision? How did you know that he would receive you, gather you up and press hard against you and even give out a little strangled moan like a cry, like a cry in the back of his throat?

Here in the hallway Isolde is thinking, Did I feel this feeling then, that night? Did I feel this jangled swoop of dread and longing, this elevator-dive, this strange suspended prelude to a sneeze?

Later maybe she will identify the feeling as some abstracted form of arousal, an irregular toll that plucks at her body now and again, like an untouched string vibrating in harmonic sympathy with a piano nearby. Later she might conclude

that the feeling is a little like a hunger-stab, not the gnawing ever-present lust of real hunger, just a stab that strikes like a warning—here and gone. But by then, that time in years to come when she has come to know her body's tides and tolls and can say, *This is frustration* and *This is lust* and *This is longing, a nostalgic sexual longing that draws me back to a time before*, by then everything will be classified, everything will have a name and a shape, and the modest compass of her desires will be circumscribed by the limits of what she has known, what she has experienced, what she has felt. So far Isolde has experienced nothing and so this feeling does not mean *I must have sex tonight* or *I am still full from last night, still brimming.* It does not mean *Who must I be in love with, to feel this pull?* or *Again I am wanting the thing I cannot have*. It is not yet a feeling that points her in a direction. It is just the feeling of a vacuum, a void waiting to be filled.

You can't tell any of this from Isolde's face: she is just sitting in the grey half-light, her hands in her lap, looking at the wall.

Monday

'I am never quite sure,' the saxophone teacher says, 'what is truly meant when the mothers say, I want my daughter to experience what was denied to me.

'In my experience the most forceful and aggressive mothers are always the least inspired, the most unmusical of souls, all of them profoundly unsuccessful women who wear their daughter's image on their breast like a medal, like a bright deflection from their own unshining selves. When these mothers say, I want her to fully experience everything that was denied to me, what they rightly mean is, I want her to fully *appreciate* everything that was denied to me. What they rightly mean is, The paucity of my life will only be thrown

into relief if my daughter has everything. On its own, my life is ordinary and worthless and nothing. But if my daughter is rich in experience and rich in opportunity, then people will come to pity me: the smallness of my life and my options will not be *incapacity*; it will be *sacrifice*. I will be pitied more, and respected more, if I raise a daughter who is everything that I am not.'

The saxophone teacher runs her tongue over her teeth. She says, 'The successful mothers—musical women, sporting women, literate women, content and brimful women, women who were denied nothing, women whose parents paid for lessons when they were girls—the successful mothers are the least forceful, always. They do not need to oversee, or wield, or pick a fight on their daughter's behalf. They are complete in themselves. They are complete, and so they demand completeness in everyone else. They can stand back and see their daughters as something set apart, as something whole and therefore untouchable.'

The saxophone teacher goes to the window to let down the blinds. It is almost dusk.

Tuesday

Mrs Tyke waits in the corridor for ten minutes before the saxophone teacher opens the door.

'I just wanted to touch base, really,' she says once they are inside, 'in light of this dreadful scandal up at the school. I'm thinking of the girls.'

'I understand,' the saxophone teacher says, pouring out two mugs of tea. One of the mugs has a picture of a saxophonist on a desert island and the words 'Sax on the Beach'. The other mug is white and says 'Let's Talk About Sax'. The saxophone teacher returns the jug to its cradle and carefully selects a teaspoon.

'Mrs Tyke,' she says, 'you would very much like, I think, to sew your children's hands to your waist-band, just to keep them with you always, their little legs swaying when you hurry and trailing on the asphalt when you stroll. If you turned on your heel very fast your children would fan out around you like a sunburst pleated skirt. You would be a goddess in a corset and a bustle, your children radiating out from you like so many graceful little spokes.'

'I'm thinking of the girls, that's all,' says Mrs Tyke. She holds out both hands to receive her mug of black-leaf tea. The saxophone teacher lets the silence creep until Mrs Tyke bursts out, 'I'm just worried about some of the *ideas* she's bringing home. They're ideas she didn't have before. They stick in the side of her mouth like a walnut, and when she talks I can see glimpses of these ideas—just a flash every so often when she opens her mouth wide—but it's enough to make me very nervous. It's like she's tasting them, or poking them around her mouth with her tongue. They're ideas she didn't have before.'

She blinks dolefully at the saxophone teacher, then shrugs in a helpless fashion and ducks her head to sip her tea.

'Can I tell you what I think the problem is?' says the saxophone teacher in a special quiet honey voice. 'I think you feel a little bit as if that horrible man up at the school, that vile and disgusting man, has left a big fat fingerprint on your glasses, and it doesn't matter what you're looking at, all you see is his fingers.'

She stands up to pace.

'I know you wanted your daughter to find out about it all the ordinary way. You wanted her to find out behind the bike sheds, or underneath the bleachers on the rugby field, or in Social Studies, the facts written on the whiteboard with a felt-tipped pen. You wanted her to sneak glances at magazines and at movies she wasn't allowed to see. You wanted her to start off with some sort of blind sticky grope in her mate's

front room on a Saturday night while her friends are outside being sick into flowerpots. That might happen more than once. It might become a phase. But you'd be prepared for it.'

As Mrs Tyke watches the saxophone teacher she lets something steal across her face, not something as crude and bold as realisation or awakening, but something which registers only as a slackening of her features, a tiny release. It's such a good performance the saxophone teacher almost forgets she's acting.

'You wanted her to finally get a boyfriend in sixth form maybe, some prancing, empty sort of boy you didn't really like, and you wanted to catch her with him eventually, coming home early because you had a funny feeling, and seeing them on the couch, or on the floor, or in her bedroom among her teddy bears and her frilly pink cushions that she doesn't really like but she'll never throw away.

'I respect these things that you wanted for your daughter,' the saxophone teacher says. 'I imagine they must be the things that every good mother wants. It's a terrible thing that this venomous little man should have stolen your daughter's innocence so slyly, without ever having laid a finger on her, shoving his dirty little secrets down her throat like candy from a brown paper bag.

'But what you need to understand, my darling,' she whispers, 'is that this little taste your daughter has had is a taste of what could be. She's swallowed it. It's inside her now.'