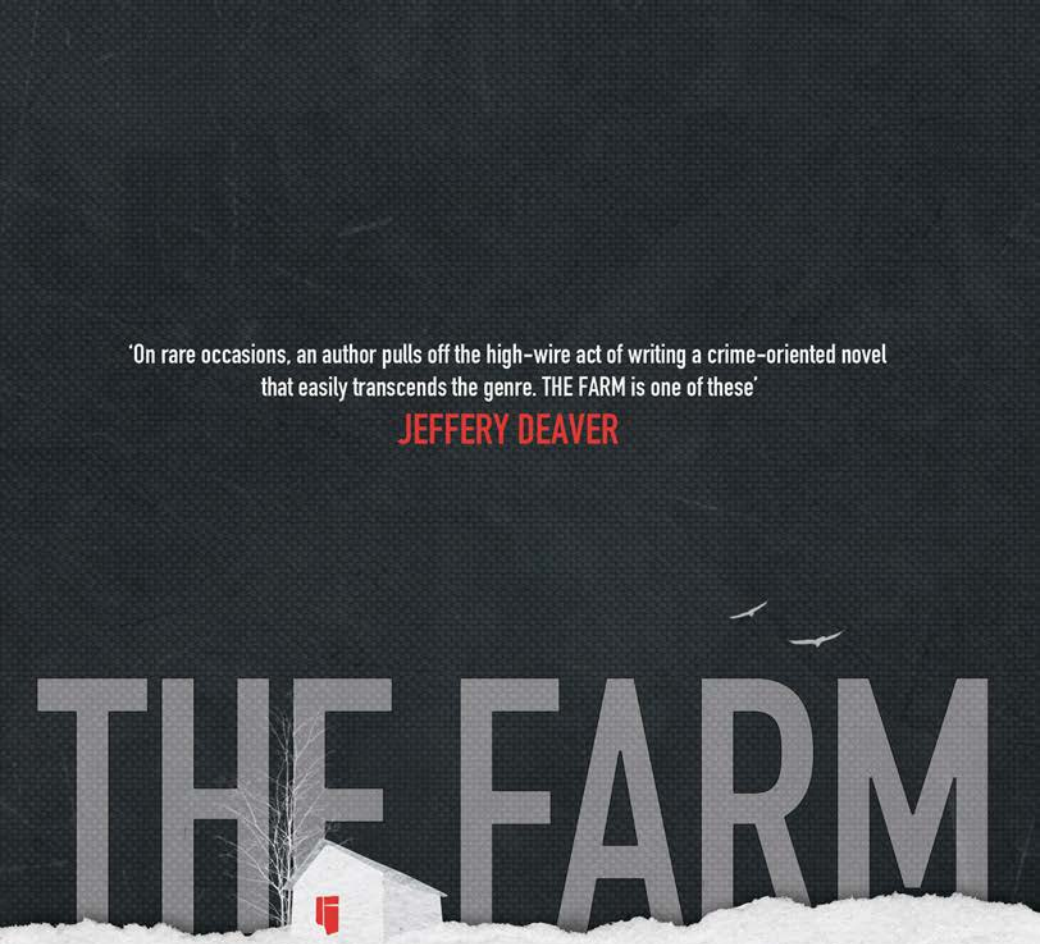
'On rare occasions, an author pulls off the high-wire act of writing a crime-oriented novel that easily transcends the genre. THE FARM is one of these'

JEFFERY DEAVER



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MULTIMILLION-COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF CHILD 44

THE FARM

Also by Tom Rob Smith

Child 44
The Secret Speech
Agent 6

THE FARM

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THE FARM

UNTIL THAT PHONE CALL it had been an ordinary day. Laden with groceries, I was walking home through Bermondsey, a neighbourhood of London, just south of the river. It was a stifling August evening and when the phone rang I considered ignoring it, keen to hurry home and shower. Curiosity got the better of me so I slowed, sliding the phone out of my pocket, pressing it against my ear – sweat pooling on the screen. It was my dad. He'd recently moved to Sweden and the call was unusual; he rarely used his mobile and it would've been expensive to call London. My dad was crying. I came to an abrupt stop, dropping the grocery bag. I'd never heard him cry before. My parents had always been careful not to argue or lose their temper in front of me. In our household there were no furious rows or tearful fights. I said:

'Dad?'

'Your mother . . . She's not well.'

'Mum's sick?'

'It's so sad.'

'Sad because she's sick? Sick how? How's Mum sick?'

Dad was still crying. All I could do was dumbly wait until he said:

'She's been imagining things – terrible, terrible things.'

A reference to her imagination, rather than some physical ailment, was so strange and surprising that I crouched down, steadying myself with one hand on the warm cracked concrete pavement, observing a patch of red sauce leaking through the bottom of the dropped grocery bag. Eventually I asked:

'For how long?'

'The whole summer.'

Months and I hadn't known – I'd been here, in London, oblivious, my dad maintaining a tradition of concealment. Guessing my thoughts he added:

'I was sure I could help her. Maybe I waited too long, but the symptoms started gradually – anxiety and odd comments, we can all suffer from that. Then came the allegations. She claims she has proof, she talks about evidence and suspects, but it's nonsense and lies.'

Dad became louder, defiant, emphatic, no longer crying. He'd recovered his fluency. There was more to his voice than sadness.

'I was hoping it would pass, or that she just needed time to adjust to life in Sweden, on a farm. Except it got worse and worse. And now . . .'

My parents were from a generation that wouldn't go to the doctor unless it was an injury you could see with your eyes or feel with your fingers. To burden a stranger with the intimate details of their lives was unfathomable.

'Dad, tell me she's seen a doctor.'

'He says she's suffering from a psychotic episode. Daniel . . .'

Mum and Dad were the only people in the world who didn't shorten my name to Dan.

'Your mum's in hospital. She's been committed.'

I heard this final piece of news and opened my mouth to speak with no idea of what to say, perhaps just to exclaim, but in the end said nothing.

'Daniel?'

'Yes.'

'Did you hear?'

'I heard.'

*

A bashed-up car passed by, slowing to look at me but not stopping. I checked my watch. It was eight in the evening, and there was little chance of making a flight tonight – I'd fly early tomorrow. Instead of becoming emotional, I took it upon myself to be efficient. We spoke for a little while longer. After the upheaval of the first few minutes both of us were returning to type – controlled and measured. I said:

'I'll book a flight for the morning. Once that's done I'll call you back. Are you at the farm? Or the hospital?'

He was at the farm.

With the call finished I rummaged through the grocery bag, taking out every item, lining them up on the pavement until I found the cracked jar of tomato sauce, carefully removing it, the shards of glass held in place only by the label. I discarded it in a nearby bin, returning to my disassembled shopping, using tissues to mop up the excess sauce, and perhaps this seems unnecessary – fuck the bag, my mum's sick – but the cracked jar might have broken apart completely, tomato sauce spread over everything, and anyway, there was comfort in the humdrum simplicity of the task. I picked up the bag and at a faster pace completed my journey home, to the top floor of a former factory, now a set of apartments. I stood under a cold shower and considered crying – shouldn't I cry? I asked myself, as if it were the same as deciding whether to smoke a cigarette. Wasn't it my duty as a son? Crying should be instinctual. But before showing emotion I pause. In the eyes of strangers I'm guarded. In this case, it wasn't caution – it was disbelief. I couldn't attach an emotional response to a situation I didn't understand. I wouldn't cry. There were too many unanswered questions to cry.

*

After the shower I sat at my computer studying the emails sent by my mum over the past five months, wondering if there were hints that I'd missed. I hadn't seen my parents since they moved to Sweden in April. At their farewell to England party we'd toasted their peaceful retirement. All of the guests had stood outside their old home and waved fond goodbyes. I have no brothers or sisters, there are no uncles or aunts, when I speak about family I mean the three of us, Mum, Dad, me – a triangle, like a fragment of a constellation, three bright stars close together with a lot of empty space around us. The absence of relatives has never been discussed in detail. There have been hints – my parents went through difficult upbringings, estranged from their own parents, and I was sure that their vow never to argue in front of me originated from a powerful desire to provide a different kind of childhood to their own. The motivation wasn't British reserve. They never skimped on love, or happiness, those were expressed at every opportunity. If times were good they'd celebrate, if times weren't so good they'd be optimistic. That's why some people consider me sheltered – I've only seen the good times. The bad times were hidden. I was complicit in the arrangement. I didn't probe. That farewell party had been a good time, the crowd cheering as my mum and dad set off, embarking on a great adventure, my mum returning to the country she'd left when she was just sixteen years old.

Shortly after their arrival at the remote farm, located in the very south of Sweden, my mum had written regularly. The emails described how wonderful their life on the farm was, the beauty of the countryside, the warmth of the local people. If there was a hint

of something wrong it was subtle, and one I'd misconstrued. Her emails dwindled in length as the weeks went on, the lines expressing wonder grew briefer. In my mind, I'd interpreted this as positive. My mum must have settled in and didn't have a moment to spare. Her last email to me flashed up:

Daniel!

Nothing else, just my name, an exclamation mark – my response had been to shoot back a quick-fire reply telling her that there'd been a glitch, her email hadn't come through and could she please resend, dismissing her one-word email as a mistake, never considering the possibility that this email might have been fired off in distress.

I worked through the entire chain of correspondence, unsettled by the notion that I'd been blind and troubled by the question of what else I might have overlooked. However, there were no telltale signs, no baffling flights of fancy; her writing style remained regular, using mostly English since, shamefully, I'd let slip much of the Swedish she'd taught me as a child. One email contained two large attachments – photographs. I must have looked at them before, but now my mind was blank. The first appeared onscreen – a bleak barn with a rusted steel roof, a grey sky, a tractor parked outside. Zooming in on the glass of the cabin I saw a partial reflection of the photographer – my mum – her face obscured by the flash so that it appeared as if her head had exploded into bright spikes of white light. The second showed my dad standing outside their farmhouse in conversation with a tall stranger. The photograph seemed to have been taken without my father's

knowledge. From a distance, it was more like a surveillance photograph than a family snap. Neither tallied with descriptions of great beauty, although, of course, I hadn't queried this anomaly, replying that I was excited to visit the farm myself. That was a lie. I wasn't looking forward to my visit and had already postponed it several times, moving it back from early summer to late summer to early autumn, offering vague half-truths in explanation.

The real reason for the delay was that I was scared. I hadn't told my parents that I lived with my partner and that we'd known each other for three years. The deceit dated back so far that I'd become convinced I couldn't unravel it without damaging my family. I dated girls at university, my parents cooked dinner for those girlfriends and expressed delight at my choices – the girls were beautiful, funny, and smart. But there was no quickening of my heart when they undressed, and during sex I exhibited a professional concentration on the task at hand, a belief that providing pleasure meant I wasn't gay. Not until I was living away from home did I accept the truth, telling my friends but excluding my mum and dad, not out of shame but well-intentioned cowardice. I was terrified of damaging the memory of my childhood. My parents had gone to extraordinary lengths to create a happy home, they'd made sacrifices, they'd taken a solemn vow of tranquillity, sworn to provide a sanctuary free from trauma, and they'd never slipped up, not once, and I loved them for it. Hearing the truth they'd be sure to conclude that they'd failed. They'd think upon all the lies that I must have told. They'd imagine me as lonely and tortured, bullied and ridiculed, when none of that was true. Adolescence had been easy for me. I'd transitioned from childhood to adulthood with a skip in my step –

my bright blond hair dulling only slightly, my bright blue eyes not dulling at all – and with good looks came unearned popularity. I floated through those years. Even my secret I'd worn lightly. It didn't make me sad. I just didn't think about it too deeply. In the end it came down to this: I couldn't stand the thought of my parents wondering if I'd ever doubted their love. It felt unfair to them. I could hear myself saying in a desperate voice, not believing my own words:

'It changes nothing!'

I was sure they'd embrace my partner, celebrate our relationship as they'd celebrated everything, but a trace of sadness would remain. The memory of a perfect childhood would die, and we'd mourn it as surely as we would the passing of a person we loved. So the real reason I'd postponed my visit to Sweden was because I'd promised my partner it would be the opportunity when I'd tell my parents the truth, when, finally, after all these years, I'd share with them my partner's name.

Mark came home that night to find me at the computer browsing flights to Sweden, and before I could say a word he smiled, presuming the lies were at an end. I was too slow to pre-empt his mistake and instead was forced to correct him, adopting my dad's euphemism:

'My mum's sick.'

It was painful watching Mark adjust, burying his disappointment. He was eleven years older than me, he'd just turned forty and it was his apartment, the spoils of being a successful corporate lawyer. I tried my best to play an equal role in the relationship, making a point of paying as much rent as I could afford. But in truth, I

couldn't afford much. I worked freelance as a designer for a company that converted roof space into gardens and was only paid when there was a commission. Struggling through the recession, we had no jobs lined up. What did Mark see in me? I suspected he craved the kind of calm home life in which I was expert. I didn't argue. I didn't row. Following in my parents' footsteps, I worked hard to make our home a refuge from the world. Mark had been married to a woman for ten years, ending in an acrimonious divorce. His ex-wife declared that he'd stolen the best years of her life and that she'd squandered her love on him, and now, in her mid-thirties, she'd be unable to find a real partner. Mark accepted the notion and the guilt sat heavily on him. I wasn't convinced it would ever go away. I'd seen photos of him in his twenties, full of bullish confidence, looking slick in expensive suits – he used to work out a lot in the gym, and his shoulders were broad, his arms thick. He'd go to strip clubs and plan lurid stag parties for his colleagues. He'd laugh loudly at jokes and slap people on the back. He didn't laugh like that any more. During the divorce his parents sided with his ex-wife. His father, in particular, was disgusted with Mark. They were no longer speaking. His mum sent us musical Christmas cards as if she wanted to say more but didn't quite know how. His dad never signed them. Part of me wondered whether Mark saw my parents as a second chance. Needless to say, he had every right to ask that they be part of his life. The only reason he accepted the delay was because after he'd taken so long to come out he felt unable to demand anything on the subject. On some level I must have exploited this fact. It took the pressure off me. It allowed me to nudge the truth back time and again.

*

Without any work on the horizon there was no problem flying to Sweden at such short notice. There was only the issue of how I could afford the ticket. It was out of the question that Mark should pay when I hadn't even told my parents his name. I emptied the last of my savings, extending my overdraft, and with my ticket booked, I phoned my dad with the details. The first available flight departed Heathrow at nine-thirty the next morning, arriving at Gothenburg in the south of Sweden at midday. He said no more than a few words, sounding moribund and defeated. Concerned with how he was coping alone on the isolated farm, I asked what he was doing. He replied:

'I'm tidying up. She went through every drawer, every cupboard.'

'What was she looking for?'

'I don't know. There's no logic to it. Daniel, she wrote on the walls.'

I asked what she wrote. He said:

'It doesn't matter.'

There was no chance I'd sleep that night. Memories of Mum played on a loop in my head, fixating on the time when we'd been together in Sweden, twenty years ago, alone on a small holiday island in the archipelago north of Gothenburg, sitting side by side on a rock, our feet in the sea. In the distance an ocean-bound cargo vessel navigated the deep waters, and we watched the wave created by the bow travel towards us, a crease in the otherwise flat sea, neither of us moving, taking each other's hands, waiting for the inevitable impact, the wave growing in size as it passed over shallow water until it smashed against the base of the

rock, soaking us to the skin. I'd picked the memory because that had been around the time Mum and I had been closest, when I couldn't imagine making an important decision without consulting her.

Next morning Mark insisted on driving me to Heathrow even though we both knew it would be faster on public transport. When the traffic was congested I didn't complain, or check my watch, aware of how much Mark wished that he was coming with me and how I'd made it impossible for him to be involved beyond this car journey. At the drop-off point he hugged me. To my surprise he was on the verge of crying – I could feel the stifled vibrations through his chest. I assured him there was no point in him showing me through to the departure gate, and we said goodbye outside.

Ticket and passport ready, I was about to check in when my phone rang:

'Daniel, she's not here!'

'Not where, Dad?'

'The hospital! They've discharged her. Yesterday I brought her in. She wouldn't have come in on her own. But she didn't protest, so it was a voluntary admission. Then, once I left – she convinced the doctors to discharge her.'

'Mum convinced them? You said the doctors diagnosed her as psychotic.'

My dad didn't reply. I pressed the point:

'The staff didn't discuss her release with you?'

His voice dropped in volume:

'She must have asked them not to speak to me.'

'Why would she do that?'

'I'm one of the people she's making allegations against.'

He hastily added:

'None of what she claims is real.'

It was my turn to be silent. I wanted to ask about the allegations but couldn't bring myself to. I sat on my luggage, head in hands, ushering the queue to move around me.

'Does she have a phone?'

'She smashed hers a few weeks ago. She doesn't trust them.'

I hesitated over the image of my frugal mother irrationally smashing a phone. My dad was describing the actions of a person I didn't recognise.

'Money?'

'Probably a little – she carries around a leather satchel. She never lets it out of her sight.'

'What's in it?'

'All kinds of junk she believes to be important. She calls it evidence.'

'How did she leave the hospital?'

'The hospital won't even tell me that. She could be anywhere!'

Feeling panic for the first time, I said:

'You and Mum have joint accounts. You can phone the bank and ask about recent transactions. Track her through the card.'

I could tell from the silence that Dad had never phoned the bank before: he'd always left money matters to my mum. In their joint business she'd balanced the books, paid the bills, and submitted the yearly tax accounts, gifted with an aptitude for numbers and the focus required to spend hours piecing together receipts and expenses.

I could picture her old-fashioned ledger, in the days before spreadsheets. She'd press so hard on it with a pen that the numbers were like Braille.

'Dad, check with the bank and call me straight back.'

While waiting I stepped out of the line and exited the terminal building, pacing among the congregation of smokers, struggling with the thought of Mum lost in Sweden. My phone rang again. I was surprised that my dad had managed his task so quickly, except it wasn't Dad:

'Daniel, listen to me carefully—'

It was my mum.

'I'm on a payphone and don't have much credit. I'm sure your father has spoken to you. Everything that man has told you is a lie. I'm not mad. I don't need a doctor. I need the police. I'm about to board a flight to London. Meet me at Heathrow, Terminal . . .'

She paused for the first time to check her ticket information. Seizing the opportunity, all I could manage was a pitiful '. . . Mum!'

'Daniel, don't talk, I have very little time. The plane comes in at Terminal One. I'll be landing in two hours. If your father calls, remember—'

The phone cut off.

I tried calling the payphone back in the hope that my mum would pick up, but there was no answer. As I was about to try again, my dad rang. Without any preamble he began to speak, sounding like he was reading from notes:

'At seven-twenty this morning she spent four hundred pounds at

Gothenburg airport. The vendor was Scandinavian Airlines. She's in time for the first flight to Heathrow. She's on her way to you! Daniel?'

'Yes.'

Why didn't I tell him that Mum had just called and that I already knew she was on her way? Did I believe her? She'd sounded commanding and authoritative. I'd expected a stream of consciousness, not clear facts and compact sentences. I was confused. It felt aggressive and confrontational to repeat her assertions that my dad was a liar. I stuttered a reply:

'I'll meet her here. When are you flying over?'

'I'm not.'

'You're staying in Sweden?'

'If she thinks I'm in Sweden she'll relax. She's got it into her head that I'm pursuing her. Staying here will buy you some time. You need to convince her to get help. I can't help her. She won't let me. Take her to the doctor's. You have a better chance if she's not worrying about me.'

I couldn't follow his reasoning.

'I'll call you when she arrives. Let's work out a plan then.'

I ended the conversation with my thoughts pinched between interpretations. If my mum was suffering from a psychotic episode, why had the doctors discharged her? Even if they couldn't detain her on a legal technicality they should've notified my dad, yet they'd refused, treating him as a hostile force, aiding her escape not from hospital but from him. To other people she must seem okay. The airline staff had sold her a ticket, security had allowed her through airport screening – no one had stopped her. I started to wonder what she'd written on the walls, unable to shake the

image that Mum had emailed me, showing Dad in conversation with a stranger.

Daniel!

In my head it began to sound like a cry for help.

The screen updated; Mum's plane had landed. The automatic doors opened and I hurried to the front of the barriers, checking the baggage tags. Soon the Gothenburg passengers began to trickle through. First were the executives searching for the laminated plastic sign with their name, followed by couples, then families with bulky luggage piled high. There was no sign of my mum, even though she was a brisk walker and I couldn't imagine that she'd checked luggage into the hold. An elderly man slowly passed by me, surely one of the last passengers from Gothenburg. I gave serious consideration to phoning my dad, explaining that something had gone wrong. Then the giant doors hissed open and my mum stepped through.

Her eyes were turned downwards, as though following a trail of breadcrumbs. There was a beat-up leather satchel over her shoulder, packed full and straining at the strap. I'd never seen it before: it wasn't the kind of thing my mum would normally have bought. Her clothes, like the satchel, showed signs of distress. There were scuffs on her shoes. Her trousers were crumpled around the knees. A button was missing from her shirt. My mum had a tendency to overdress – smart for restaurants, smart for the theatre, smart for work even though there was no need. She and

my dad had owned a garden centre in north London, set on a slip of T-shaped land between grand white stucco houses, bought in the early 1970s when land in London was cheap. While my dad wore torn jeans, clumpy boots and baggy jumpers, smoking roll-up cigarettes, my mum selected starched white shirts, wool trousers in the winter, and cotton trousers in the summer. Customers would remark on her immaculate office attire, wondering how she kept so pristine because she'd carry out as much of the physical labour as my dad. She'd laugh when they asked and shrug innocently as if to say, 'I have no idea!' But it was calculated. There were always spare changes of clothes in the back room. She'd tell me that, as the face of the business, it was important to keep up appearances.

I allowed my mum to pass by, curious as to whether she'd see me. She was notably thinner than when we'd said goodbye in April, unhealthily so. Her trousers were loose, reminding me of clothes on a wooden puppet, hanging without shape. She seemed to have no natural curves, a hasty line drawing rather than the real person. Her short blonde hair looked wet, brushed back, slick and smooth, not with wax or gel but water. She must have stopped off at a washroom after leaving the plane, making an effort to fix her appearance to be sure a hair wasn't out of place. Normally youthful in appearance, her face had aged over the past few months. Like her clothes, her skin carried marks of distress. There were dark spots on her cheeks. The lines under her eyes had grown more pronounced. In contrast her watery blue eyes seemed brighter than ever. As I moved around the barrier, instinct stopped me from touching her, a concern that she might scream.

'Mum.'

She looked up, frightened, but seeing that it was me – her son – she smiled triumphantly:

'Daniel.'

She uttered my name in the same way as when I'd made her proud – a quiet, intense happiness. As we hugged she rested her face against the side of my chest. Pulling back, she took hold of my hands and I surreptitiously examined her fingers with the edge of my thumb. Her skin was rough. Her nails were jagged and not cared for. She whispered:

'It's over. I'm safe.'

I quickly established that her mind was sharp as she immediately noticed my luggage:

'What's that for?'

'Dad called me last night to tell me you were in the hospital—'

She cut me short:

'Don't call it a hospital. It was an asylum. He drove me to the madhouse. He said this is where I belong, in rooms next to people howling like animals. Then he phoned you and told you the same thing. Your mum's mad. Isn't that right?'

I was slow to respond, finding it difficult to adjust to her confrontational anger:

'I was about to fly to Sweden when you called.'

'Then you believed him?'

'Why wouldn't I?'

'He was relying on that.'

'Tell me what's going on.'

'Not here. Not with these people. We have to do it properly,

from the beginning. It must be done right. Please, no questions? Not yet.'

There was a formality in the way she spoke, an excessive politeness, overarticulating each syllable and clipping each point of punctuation. I agreed:

'No questions.'

She squeezed my hand appreciatively, softening her voice:

'Take me home.'

She didn't own a house in England any more. She'd sold it and relocated to a farm in Sweden, a farm intended to be her last and happiest home. I could only assume she meant my apartment, Mark's apartment, a man she'd never even heard about.

I'd already spoken to Mark while waiting for Mum's plane to land. He was alarmed at the turn of events, particularly with the fact that there would no longer be any doctors supervising. I'd be on my own. I told him that I'd phone to keep him updated. I'd also promised to phone my dad, but there was no opportunity to make that call with my mum by my side. I didn't dare leave her alone and feared that reporting openly back to my dad could make me appear partisan, something I couldn't risk; she might begin to mistrust me or, worse, she might run away, an idea that would never have occurred to me if my dad hadn't mentioned it. The prospect terrified me. I slipped my hand into my pocket, silencing my phone.

Mum remained close by my side as I bought train tickets to the centre of town. I found myself checking on her frequently, smiling in an attempt to veil the fact that she was under careful

observation. At intervals she'd hold my hand, something she'd not done since I was a child. My strategy was to behave as neutrally as possible, making no assumptions, ready to hear her story fairly. As it happens I didn't have any history of siding with my mum or my dad simply because they'd never given me a conflict where I'd needed to pick sides. On balance I was closer to my mum only because she'd been more involved in the everyday details of my life. My dad had always been content to defer to her judgment.

Boarding the train, my mum selected seats at the rear of the carriage, nestling against the window. Her seat, I realised, had the best vantage point. No one could sneak up on her. She placed the satchel on her lap, holding it tight – as if she were the courier of a vitally important package. I asked:

'Is that all you have?'

She solemnly tapped the top of the bag:

'This is the evidence that proves I'm not mad. Evidence of crimes that are being covered up.'

These words were so removed from ordinary life that they sounded odd to my ear. However, they were spoken in earnest. I asked:

'Can I look?'

'Not here.'

She raised a finger to her lips, signalling that this was not a topic we should talk about in a public place. The gesture itself was peculiar and unnecessary. Even though we'd spent over thirty minutes together, I couldn't decide on her state of mind. I'd expected to know immediately. She was different, physically and in

terms of her character. It was impossible to be sure whether the changes were a result of a real experience, or whether that experience had taken place entirely in her mind. Much depended on what she produced from that satchel – much depended on her evidence.

As we arrived at Paddington station, ready to disembark, Mum gripped my arm, possessed by a vivid and sudden fear:

'Promise that you'll listen to everything I say with an open mind. All I ask for is an open mind. Promise me you'll do that, that's why I've come to you. Promise me!'

I put my hand on top of hers. She was trembling, terrified that I might not be on her side.

'I promise.'

In the back of a cab, our hands knitted together like eloping lovers, I caught the smell of her breath. It was a subtle odour – metallic. I thought of grated steel, if there is such a smell. I saw that her lips were edged with a thin blue line as if touched by extreme cold. My mum followed my thoughts, opening her mouth and sticking out her tongue for examination. The tip was black, the colour of octopus ink. She said:

'Poison.'

Before I could query the astounding claim, she shook her head and pointed at the cab driver, reminding me of her desire for discretion. I wondered what tests the doctors in Sweden had carried out, what poisons had been discovered, if any. Most importantly, I wondered who my mum suspected of poisoning her.

*

The cab pulled up outside my apartment building only a few hundred metres from the spot where I'd abandoned my groceries last night. My mum had never visited before, held back by my protest that it was embarrassing to share a flat with other people and have my parents come round. I don't know why they'd accepted such a feeble lie or how I'd had the stomach to voice it. For the time being, I'd play along with the story I'd created for myself, not wishing to sidetrack my mum with revelations of my own. I guided her inside the apartment, belatedly realising that anyone paying attention would notice that only one bedroom was in use. The second bedroom was set up as a study. As I unlocked the front door I hurried ahead. My mum always removed her shoes upon entering a home, which would give me enough time to close the doors to the bedroom and study. I returned:

'I wanted to see if anyone else was home. But it's fine, we're alone.'

My mum was pleased. However, outside the two closed doors she paused. She wanted to check for herself. I put my arm around her, guiding her upstairs, and said:

'I promise, it's just you and me.'

Standing in the open-plan kitchen and living room, the heart of Mark's apartment, my mum was fascinated with her first look at my home. Mark had always described his taste as minimalist, relying on the view over the city to provide character. When I'd moved in there was barely any furniture. Far from stylish, the apartment had felt empty and sad. Mark had slept there, eaten there, but not lived. Bit by bit I'd made suggestions. His possessions didn't need to be hidden. Boxes could be unpacked. I watched my mum trace my line of influence with remarkable accuracy. She

picked a book off the shelves, one she'd given me as a gift. I blurted out:

'I don't own this place.'

I'd lied for years, readily and easily, but today the lies were painful, like running on a twisted ankle. My mum took my hand and said:

'Show me the garden.'

Mark had hired the company I work for to design and plant a roof garden. He claimed he'd intended to do it, but it was a favour to me, a form of patronage. My parents had always been quietly baffled by my choice of profession, believing I'd do something different from them. They'd both left school at sixteen, while I'd attended university, only to end up doing the same job they'd done all their lives, more or less, except rubber-stamped by a degree and starting out with twenty thousand pounds of debt. But I'd spent my whole childhood around plants and flowers; I'd inherited my parents' gift for growing, and the work, when it trickled through, made me happy. Sitting on the roof, looking out over London, among those plants, it was easy to forget anything was wrong. I wanted to stay like this forever, basking in the sun, clinging onto the silence. However, I noticed my mum wasn't interested in the garden; she was assessing the layout of the roof, the fire exits, identifying escape routes. She checked her watch, a great impatience sweeping over her:

'We don't have much time.'

Before hearing her version of events I offered food. My mum politely declined, wanting to press on:

'There's so much I need to tell you.'

I insisted. One incontestable truth was that she'd lost weight. Unable to find out when she'd last eaten – my mum was evasive on the subject – I set about blending a drink of bananas, strawberries and local honey. She stood, studying the process:

'You trust me, don't you?'

Her instincts were extreme caution and heightened suspicion, only allowing me to use fruit that she'd examined. To prove the blended fruit was safe I tasted it before handing her the glass. She took the smallest possible sip. She met my glance, understanding that it had become a test of her state of mind. Her attitude changed and she began to take hasty long gulps. Finished with the drink, she declared:

'I need the bathroom.'

I was worried she was going to make herself sick, but I could hardly insist upon going with her.

'It's downstairs.'

She left the kitchen, clasping the satchel that never left her side.

I took out my phone to find thirty or more missed calls from my dad. I dialled him, whispering:

'Dad, she's here, she's safe. I can't speak—'

He interrupted:

'Wait! Listen to me!'

It was a risk speaking to him like this, and I was anxious about being caught. I turned, intending to move towards the top of the stairs so that I might hear when my mum was returning. But she was already there, at the edge of the room, watching me. She couldn't have been to the bathroom so quickly. She must have lied, setting a

test of her own, to see how I'd make use of the time. If it was a test I'd failed. She was staring at me in a way that I'd never seen before. I was no longer her son but a threat – an enemy.

I was caught between the two of them. My mum said:

'That's him, isn't it?'

The formality was gone – she was accusatory and aggressive. My dad heard her voice in the background:

'Is she there?'

I couldn't move, paralysed by indecision, the phone against my ear – my eyes on my mum. My dad said:

'Daniel, she can become violent.'

Hearing my dad say this, I shook my head – no, I didn't believe it. My mum had never hurt anyone in her life. Dad was mistaken. Or he was lying. My mum stepped forward, pointing at the phone:

'Say another word to him and I'll walk out.'

With my dad's voice still audible, I cut him off.

As though I were surrendering a weapon, I offered the handset to my mum. My voice faltered as I pleaded my defence:

'I promised to ring Dad when you arrived. Just to let him know you were safe. Just like I promised to listen to you. Please, Mum, let's sit down together. You wanted to tell me your story. I want to listen.'

'The doctors examined me. Did he tell you that? They examined me, heard my story, and they let me go. The professionals believed me. They didn't believe him.'

She stepped towards me, offering her bag – her evidence. Granted a second chance, I met her in the middle of the room, taking hold of the cracked leather. It required an act of willpower

for my mum to let go. I was surprised by how heavy the bag was. As I placed the satchel on the dining table my dad rang again, his image appearing on the screen. Mum saw his face:

'You can answer the phone. Or open the bag.'

Ignoring the phone, I placed one hand on the top of the satchel, pressing down in order to release the buckle, the leather creaking as I lifted the flap and looked inside.

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