

7.15 P.M.

Clare watched as the young woman passed her in the corridor. First-timer, definitely: excitement and panic were etched on her pale face as she made her way slowly down the hall, dragging the IV on its wheels beside her, legs bent and shoulders hunched, shuffling in girlish slippers bought for this special day. Her glance at Clare said, 'Help me. When will this be finished? When will he be here?' Probably came in half a centimetre dilated – when she'd fiddled with her TENS machine at home for a while, then called her mother and repacked the holdall with all the impossibly small, impossibly white sleep suits, scratch mittens and hats like egg-cosies.

The double doors behind the woman swung open and a big, dark man went to her, put one hand in hers, the other round her shoulder. He handled her gingerly. He was paler than she was. A Type X, Clare thought. They were copers, the strong ones. Type Ys barely made it through the epidurals without crying. They were a few decades too late – would have been happier pacing the corridor with a cigar behind each ear. Clare liked the Type Ys better.

Elliot was probably an X. Or maybe the hybrid: Y masquerading as X. They were okay unless things got scary. Who was she kidding? She had no idea which type he'd be. Not that it mattered. Not any more.

The girl moaned, leant forward. Clare answered his

imploring look. She never felt detached. Still, each story that played out, each life that started within these walls pulled her in. Still.

‘Okay, hold on, let’s give you a hand. What’s your name?’

‘Lynne.’

‘Okay, Lynne. We’ll get you back to your room. You probably need a bit of a rest. Who’s looking after you?’

A colleague appeared from behind the same double doors. ‘Sorry, Clare. Hang on, Lynne. We’ve got you. Got it from here, Clare. You’re off, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have a good night, then.’

‘Cheers.’

Tonight, thank God, she had a reason not to be at home, not to see Elliot. She’d probably be out again before he got back from college, and he’d be asleep by the time she made herself climb into bed beside him.

And that girl, Lynne, would be holding her baby in her arms.

7.20 P.M.

As usual Harriet climbed the stairs with a teetering pile of single socks, discarded sweaters, stray toys – the flotsam and jetsam of the day. Down was usually a mug or two, plastic cups found under beds, read newspapers and sticky plastic medicine spoons. Up, the aforementioned. Still, she supposed, with a fairly twisted smile, variety was the spice of life. Ha, ha. Domestic bliss reminded her of that silly film she’d seen once, *Groundhog Day*, where this guy was compelled to repeat the same day over and over again, never quite getting the girl because he couldn’t

change what happened. And slightly higher up the cultural scale, wasn't there that guy in mythology – Sissy something . . . Sisyphus, was it? – sentenced by the gods for some transgression to spend eternity pushing a boulder up a big hill only to watch it fall straight down again, and on, and on. At least pushing a big boulder up a hill would soon sort out these bat-wings she was developing beneath her upper arms, Harriet thought. Sweeping the flipping kitchen floor four times, loading and unloading the washing-machine three times, and answering forty-two questions about why there aren't any more dinosaurs, and if there were, how big their poos would be, wasn't doing much for hers.

Upstairs, all was quiet for the first time since six a.m. Harriet followed the sound of Tim's voice to their bedroom. He was sitting on the sofa under the window, having been allowed by his kidnappers to remove his shoes and jacket, and loosen his tie. The children, damp and clean from their bath, were huddled, one under each arm, listening to their story. Tim was reading slowly, ascribing to each character their own voice, occasionally making animated gestures. Harriet felt a twinge of habitual guilt. She usually chose the shortest story and speed-read it: her children might be forgiven for thinking that every character in literature had been raised in the middle-class south, for all the effort she made with her inflection. Still, it was easier, wasn't it? Coming in at the end of the day, when the snot and the pasta sauce and the tears had been wiped away, and the fight over the tooth-brushing, and the frantic shoving of toys into too-small cupboards had all been done. Easy to reward the

exuberant greeting with warmth and affection and a story-reading fit for Radio 4. The kids had spent their energy through the long day, and Harriet had absorbed it. Now the fight had gone out of them: they were passive, gentle. And she was catatonic.

Harriet hovered at the doorway, not wanting to go in and disturb the perfect tableau, the circle of love. Somehow, she didn't fit in to these moments. Instead, she deposited her bundle on the guest bed and went into the bathroom. Studiously ignoring the bubble scum around the bath, the toothpaste squeezed carelessly across the wash-basin tap, she poked ineffectually at her mad hair in the mirror and flicked some powder across her nose and chin. She hastily drew a line of lipstick on her upper lip, then rolled her lips together in concentration. (Not for her the liner-brush-blot prescribed by glossies she only saw every three months in the hairdresser's.)

Tim appeared in the doorway, carrying a slumped sleepy Chloe. 'Say, "Night-night, Mummy."' Thumb firmly plugged in, Chloe waved her plastic beaker of warm milk vaguely in Harriet's direction.

'Night-night, sleep tight, darling.' Harriet smiled.

Behind Tim, Josh asked, 'Are you going out, Mummy?'

'Yes, I am, sweetheart. Daddy's going to look after you. I'll be home again later, though.'

'Come and tuck me in when you get back? Even if it's really late? D'you promise you will?'

'Course I do, poppet. Give us a kiss before I go, though.'

Harriet walked with her son down the landing and watched him climb into his low bunk.

'Daddy's coming back, Mum. Don't switch that light off.'

He promised he'd read me another chapter of *Harry Potter* when Chloe was in bed.'

'Did he now? Two stories, indeed. Is Daddy trying to make me look bad?'

Her tone was light.

Suddenly Tim was behind her. 'Couldn't if I tried.' He kissed her cheek as he passed her in the doorway. 'Now, remind me where we got to, Josh.'

And they were quickly lost again in their reading. Tim looked up from the pages as he heard her turn, and winked goodnight at her.

Harriet's tread on the stairs was heavy. It's all so bloody perfect, she thought. Except that I really don't think I love him any more. If I ever did.

7.25 P.M.

The mass of feeling sat just beneath Nicole's ribcage, as if her lungs had been folded into thirds at the base of her throat. It was a potent and complex emotional cocktail, part rage, part hurt, part frustration, part humiliation, and, still, part suffocating love. Over the years the quantities of each had changed, but the result was the same. Almost overwhelming, drunken feeling.

She'd gone through the whole day in the closed-off state she had perfected. She had put it into the room in her mind with the padlock on it and not gone near it: to open it, and luxuriate in the feelings, would make functioning impossible. In that closed-off state, she was a dervish of control and efficiency. Dry-cleaning and shoe repairs got dropped off; casseroles with interesting herbs were put in the Aga's slow oven; constructive play happened with the

children; concise instructions were given to Cecile, the au pair.

And she looked great. Hair, makeup, figure, clothes: all as good as they always had been. Other women might tear out their hair at moments of crisis, but Nicole blow-dried hers into perfect waves. Only her heartbeat gave her away: like in that Edgar Allan Poe story, she was sure everyone she met, smiling benignly, must hear it, louder and louder, trying to get out.

She put the platter of crostini on the hall table and looked into the mirror. Downstairs it was quiet. One floor up Will, George and Martha were sound asleep, exhausted by swimming and soft-play. From the top floor, where Cecile slept, Nicole could hear the soft beat of garage music being played behind a closed door, punctuated by excited French conversation. She must be on the phone (you don't say) to another member of the au-pair Mafia, squealing about last night's adventures or plotting tomorrow's. These days, au pairs stayed in and babysat, then went out after you came home – 'Oh, no, Mrs Thomas, it no start, you know, really, until midnight.' They could stay out until four, smoke forty cigarettes, sleep for two hours and still make animal shapes with Cheerios to persuade reluctant breakfasters to eat, smiling, at seven a.m. It sometimes made Nicole feel 105 years old. Nicole liked Cecile, though. She was easy to have around, didn't need everything explained. And Nicole was pretty sure she was knowingly impervious to Gavin's manifest charms, which, just now, suited her perfectly.

She stiffened as she heard his car outside, waited for the key in the lock. What to say? She had rehearsed all the

different angles in the shower earlier, played out the fantasy of reacting as other women would. Although she knew that, when she saw him, she would be as she always was. How odd that this was a habit now, that this was a part of their life together. She had never thought it would be like this. That *she* would be like this.

God, he was beautiful. Those enormous, shining eyes: how could they not give away the secrets?

He smiled, then registered the tray of food, and that Nicole was in her coat and scarf. 'Hello, darling. Sorry to be a bit late. It's been a bitch of a day. What's this, then? Where are you off to?' He leant in to kiss her.

Nicole swerved, left him pursing at air. 'I'll be at Susan's, darling.' She spat the last word, sarcasm heavy in the air. And that was the very best she could do. That, and a defiant slam of the door. Quickly. She didn't want him to see the food shaking on the plate in time with her arms.

7.30 P.M.

The ring was pretty well perfect. Big enough, but not flashy – some you saw were so obvious that the wearer might as well have taped a facsimile of her fiancé's black AmEx card across her left hand. A modern setting, but not so trendy it would be the avocado bathroom suite of jewellery in ten years' time (presuming, against all the odds, that you were still wearing it). It was even the right stone for her – a ruby – and just about what she would have chosen for herself, if she'd been asked. Which would have been something of a shock, since the proposal had come more or less out of the blue. And pretty embarrassing, Polly figured, to peer

into windows falling in love with the five-thousand-pound ring, wondering if *he* was looking at the five-hundred-pound one.

But, did the choice of the right ring make its giver the right man? Was it a sign? Or just down to good observation – even basic good taste? Could he have asked someone? Cressida? Suze? She thought it unlikely. That wasn't Jack's style. She bloody well hoped they would have warned her if they'd known it was coming. Although probably not. That wasn't really on. It looked pretty on her finger. She flexed her hand once more, moving the gem in and out of the light, then sniggered at her reflection in the dressing-table mirror and slipped it off. She pushed it between the folds of velvet, snapped the box shut and slid it back into her knicker drawer, hidden between party-pants and period-pants.

She opened her wardrobe, vaguely looking for a sloppy sweater she thought she might have shoved in there. Ah, my schizophrenic wardrobe: right side neat and tidy – 'paralegal chic', she called it – with knee-length sombre suits and court shoes, just as the partners of Smith, March and May liked them; the left was a Tracey Emin installation.

What kind of bride might she make? She'd always fancied red and plunging. Then again, you could wear that to any old Christmas party, while the white lace and butter-wouldn't-melt look wasn't one you could get away with very often. If they did it when it was cold, how about white lace underneath, and one of those fabulous velvet capes – in red, or maybe a deep forest green? Ooh, and beaded shoes.

Oh, for God's sake, Polly – Pollyanna, more like – aren't you a bit bloody old for this daydreaming? And shouldn't

you be just a bit bloody wiser by now? One ring and one proposal, and you're sixteen again.

'Mum?'

Polly grabbed the moth-eaten jumper and pulled it over her head as she went out on to the landing.

'Mum? Is this for me?' It was Daniel, fresh from football practice, five foot ten of sweaty, spotty, starving fifteen-year-old, now foraging.

'Yes, love, microwave it – two minutes on high. And there's Christmas cake and mince-pies for after.'

Polly put her head round the door of the sitting room. Her daughter Cressida, arms hugging her knees, head against a cushion, was apparently transfixed by *EastEnders*.

'Cress, love, I'm at Susan's – do you remember? Shouldn't be late, though.'

'Okay.'

Charming, Polly thought. That girl is getting surly. What the hell am I doing, playing Brides upstairs with these two lumps down here to remind me who I am, where I've been, and what I'm bad at?

What to say? What to answer? Yes? No? Would he settle for a 'Maybe'?

7.35 P.M.

Five minutes later Cressida sat in the bathroom with her eyes screwed tight shut and made bargains with God. She didn't believe in God, but what the hell? She would, if only He would make it be negative.

How in hell had she got herself into this bloody mess?

If there was one thing Cressida hated it was stereotyping and clichés. And here she was – twenty years old, loving

her course, and sure to get her pick of places to do her degree, which would open all kinds of doors, to a career she would love, people who would be fascinating, and freedom – about to become the most tired cliché in the book, like some effing Catherine Cookson heroine, caught and covered in shame. This couldn't happen. It just couldn't.

Ninety-nine per cent accurate in one minute. She reread the instructions. The marketing-speak was so carefully worded, aimed at both extremes of people taking the test: some wanted to see that blue line more than anything in the world; others would give their kidney for an empty window. She tried to imagine wanting a positive result, but it was too hard. Everything, and she meant everything, would have to be completely different. *She* would have to be different: a much, much older Cressida, with her two-foot-long hair cut into a sensible bob, her fashionable jeans swapped for grown-up clothes, the cigarettes and vodka a distant memory, with a CV that didn't stop after A levels. And there had to be a husband. On that point, at least, Cressida was weirdly old-fashioned. Now, none of the above was anywhere near happening. Particularly the cigarettes and vodka, she thought, remembering New Year's Day, when she had awoken unsure whether it was the pain in her head or the one in her throat that was going to kill her, but hoping that whichever it was would do it quickly. If there was a baby it was bound to have two heads or something. Christ.

They'd always been dead careful – not that preventing pregnancy had been top of her list of priorities. She had been born in the eighties, after all – the Aids decade. He was even the first – how tragic was that? A virgin at twenty.

Truthfully, though, her virginity hadn't weighed heavily on her, like it seemed to do on her mates. Several had apparently viewed their birthdays as deadlines: sixteen, do your GCSEs; seventeen, get a provisional driving licence; eighteen, vote; any of the above, commence sex life with nearest non-repulsive male. Not that Cressida was one of those Jesus freaks, taking the pledge until marriage. She sometimes thought she just hadn't fancied anyone enough. Or maybe she hadn't felt secure enough with any of the boys she'd gone out with. Doubtless a counsellor would blame Dad: her trust in men had taken a battering when he had left Mum. Which was clearly bollocks, since they had pretty much left each other. Cressida didn't have a lot of patience with bleeding-heart divorce kids. She loved both her parents a lot – and a lot more apart. Dad was happy with Tina. Mum was happy on her own, maybe about to be a whole lot happier with Jack. 'Worse things happen at sea,' as Gran would say. Cressida didn't have any fears about the damage life had done to her heart. Look how it had soared when she met him! And she had been really glad that she hadn't been so close to anyone before – it had felt like a gift she had had for him, and she had been so thrilled, that first time, lying beside him afterwards, that it had been him, that nothing could ever change how it was. Which wasn't to say it had been perfect, just that she was glad. Until now. Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no. It was a yes.

7.45 P.M.

Susan leant against the doorframe in satisfaction and exhaustion. Order had been restored in the living room – again. My God, Christmas makes a mess, she thought. You go completely crazy for the six weeks beforehand, shopping

like a woman possessed and writing endless indecipherable lists. You treat the final trip to Sainsbury's like a military operation, complete with life-or-death missions – to get to the last fresh cranberries before the enemy in the twinset, to pile one more box of luxury crackers into the heaving trolley. You clean every surface in the house as though heart-bypass surgery was about to be performed on it, then fill them with sacred homemade angels and candlesticks. You religiously follow *Good Housekeeping's* 'Tips for the Most Relaxed Christmas EVER!', which actually almost kills you, but at least means that at 10.30 p.m. on Christmas Eve you can sit down with a glass of (homemade, what else) eggnog and be the queen of all you survey. Three days later it's all over, leaving you with leftover turkey, untouched Christmas cake and so much mess you feel as if you've been occupied by a hostile army. But, oh, those three days: they were the best in Susan's year. Roger and she, Alex and Ed, and her mum, Alice. Just the five of them.

That was how Susan liked her house best. Her beautiful, good boys asleep in their familiar rooms, Airfix models and school sports trophies unchanged. Young, fun girlfriends, who made them happy, asleep next door. Alice tucked beneath her own crochet blankets in the old nursery beside Susan's room. And Roger beside her – snoring gently, these days. Why did some women complain that snoring drove them insane? She liked the rhythmic purr, marking time through the night.

Susan put away the Dyson in the hall cupboard and took the last box of Christmas decorations to the upstairs landing – she would get Roger to do a loft trip after evening surgery.

Alice appeared at the top of the stairs. She had seemed tired this year, Susan had noticed. Bit off her food, too, although her pleasure at being with her gorgeous grandsons had seemed undiminished. Still, she was glad she'd persuaded her mother to stay on for a couple of weeks into the New Year. 'Let me wait on you,' Susan had joked. Alice was in her seventies now and it was nice to have her there.

'All right, Mum?'

'Fine, love. I didn't sleep, just listened to a play on the radio and rested my eyes a while.'

Susan smiled. Ah, yes, the eye-resting of the elderly. Just like children, they could never admit to being tired.

She glanced at the carriage clock on the sitting-room mantelshelf. They'd all be here in twenty minutes or so. She'd meant to get to some of those invoices in her office but they would have to wait. The run-up to Christmas was always busy in the workshop – people desperately wanted their curtains and soft furnishings finished in time for Christmas and Susan, with her own passion for the festivities, bent over backwards to make everyone else's domestic dreams come true. Consequently, January was quiet, all billing and banking, no fun.

In the kitchen, she had laid places for Roger and Alice. Their supper was already made and covered neatly with cling film. It sat beside the oven, with a yellow Post-it note detailing the oven temperature and cooking time. She was looking forward to the reading group tonight. It would make a nice change. Her most recent experiments in organised social activities had proved unsuccessful: keep fit, with the ridiculously taut Teresa at the leisure centre, had done

little for her ample figure, still less for her bad back; French for Beginners at the local college had sent her to Paris on her wedding anniversary with unwarranted confidence and false bravado, but any self-belief had been despatched by the snotty sales assistants and waiters.

Yes, it would be a good night, and she deserved a bit of something for herself.

7.50 P.M.

The silence in the house was stifling. Elliot dropped his keys noisily on the kitchen table and flicked absentmindedly through the day's post. Flyers, mostly, a gas bill . . . 'Clare? Hello? I'm back . . .' He knew his wife was at home – her shift at the hospital had ended an hour before and her Metro was parked outside.

No answer. So, clearly today had been a bad day. Sad friendliness was a good day, indifference marked an average one. But when she ignored him, then became hostile, she'd had a bad one. Elliot scanned the room for evidence of today's trigger – there always was one. He looked back at the post: a card from neighbours on holiday at a family resort . . . No – of course. An invoice from Mr Thompson, Harley Street. The end of the latest quest. Another dead end.

He climbed the stairs with a heavy tread, steeling himself to see his wife.

'Hi.' As she heard him walk up the stairs she pushed the bathroom door closed against him – he caught a glimpse of her bare shoulder before he was barred. She had become like this gradually. Of course, she had been shy when they were first together, but they had been only fourteen, and

even had there been the opportunity to see each other naked (which there certainly hadn't) it had all been so new, so timid. He always thought they'd been dead lucky. Together since the fourth year, all through O levels, A levels, her nursing degree, his teacher training. All their mates had played the field and suffered the heartbreak, humiliation and high drama of adolescence, but it had been different for Clare and Elliot. They had been at the core of a gang of lively teenagers, the fixed point on the compass.

It wasn't supposed to have turned into this, a sterile, empty, childless marriage. For five years they had been trying. It had been fun to start with, extra sexy to be making love with a baby in mind; he had felt fantastic lying there afterwards, with his hand across Clare's belly, wondering if they had started something – someone. He'd had her all to himself for years and he was ready to share her; they were both excited. It hadn't taken long for her to fall pregnant the first time. And then, a few weeks further along, there had been the messy, miserable miscarriage. But that was okay, everyone said. 'Of course you're sad, but it happens to so many people – really, you'll be fine next time.' They were young; they cried together for the baby that would have been born in time for Christmas, and they moved on. Miles and miles on, until the couple they had been then was unrecognisable to both of them. Sixty months, five miscarriages (maybe more), dozens of tests, a seemingly endless procession of doctors, obstetricians, specialists. A calendar full of dates that celebrated nothing except what neither of them could forget.

Sometimes Elliot thought that Clare hated him nearly as

much as she hated herself. And maybe more than she had ever loved him.

Clare came out of the bathroom, tightly wrapped in her terry dressing-gown although it was only seven o'clock. She smiled weakly at Elliot and he reached for her. A touch that he had learnt to make non-sexual, unthreatening. How he hated that: if his fingers brushed her breast or rested on the curve of her buttocks, she shrugged them off as if they were red hot, as if he were a rapist. Now she let him touch her, but there was no response.

They hadn't kissed since before Christmas – not a proper kiss. Christmas was always the worst time: the unbirthday of the first unbaby. It was a time for family. This year Clare hadn't even wrapped the impersonal shirt and tie she had bought him; she had cooked salmon for Christmas lunch. Elliot's prettily wrapped and beribboned jewellery box had sat by the fire like a reproach. When she'd opened it, he hadn't been convinced she'd even seen the bracelet. She hadn't worn it.

But still he tried. 'Hard day, love?'

'It wasn't too bad, actually. Four women delivered, only one had to go up for a Caesar. Three girls, one boy. Hannah, Victoria, Liam and an undecided. One bloody annoying girl who had hers on Monday ringing every five minutes for someone to pick up the baby. And that supercilious resident's on holiday.'

These details were delivered in a deadpan voice, with no eye contact. As if I give a damn about all that, Elliot thought. She's hiding in the details of the day. God forbid we should talk about anything real. Aloud he said, 'Speaking of holidays, Midge and Paul's postcard makes me wonder if we should think about it. It's a while since the

Dordogne.’ That had been the holiday from hell – he’d booked it as a surprise, got the dates wrong: one of the black days had fallen right in the middle of the first week. Mind you, it was getting pretty hard to find a fortnight that didn’t have a black day in it somewhere.

Clare turned to him and he saw, for the first time, that her eyes were red. ‘Maybe.’

‘We might be able to get a deal over Easter at a ski resort – Austria, maybe. We’ve been talking about doing that for years.’

They had never skied. In the first years they hadn’t had the money, more recently Clare had been worried about a fall, pregnant, unpregnant . . . she had climbed into her own invisible Petri dish.

‘Oh, that’s right,’ she snapped. ‘We can’t have a baby so let’s hit the slopes instead. Next best thing, really, a great holiday.’ She didn’t look at him as she furiously removed clothes from her drawers. She put on her knickers with her back to him, her dressing-gown on so he couldn’t see her. Punishment.

‘Well, perhaps I’ll pick up a brochure or two in town. Check that Internet site with the last-minute deals.’ Elliot’s new tactic. To pretend that her responses were civil, interested. As though by carrying on regardless he could get her to give up this vendetta against him. And because Clare didn’t have the energy to rail against him, today, at least, she was letting him carry on. In both their heads a tiny part of their brains insisted on imagining a holiday like the ones they used to have. They’d always been cheap packages to grottyish Mediterranean resorts, but they had been filled with laughter and love. Elliot and Clare, nut

brown from afternoons under the sun, tired from making love all morning – always in the morning, when the brightness made the intimacy all the greater, when sex was open-eyed, as they gauged each other's responses and desires. Clare and Elliot, giggling from remembrances of tipsy evenings in the town, watching people not so lucky, not so in love, not so happy as they were. The memories played like 8mm film, then spun off, back to reality. They hadn't had a holiday like that for four years. They never would again.

'I'm out tonight – it's on the calendar. There's pasta in the cupboard, and some leftover Bolognese from the weekend in the freezer. Just defrost it in the microwave,' she said.

'Oh, yeah – it's that reading-group thing, isn't it? Did you read the book?'

'Of course. There wouldn't be much point in going if I hadn't, would there?'

'Is it any good?'

Clare looked up, considering both the question and Elliot's interest. The book had been good, brilliant, and she had read it in three nights, absorbed by the made-up lives of the pretend people. But Elliot's face, the handsome face that she had looked at for more than half of her life, gazed at her with only partial interest. He was so earnestly, so desperately trying to share with her, to keep the peace, to say the right thing. And she felt guilty, and irritated, and so, so hopeless.

It was like there were huge piles of rubble lying in the no man's land between them, the wreckage of previous battles, and she didn't have the energy to climb over them

and wave her white flag. She was waving it, same as he was, but from the floor of a trench where he couldn't see it.

'It was okay,' she said finally, 'but I probably didn't understand it properly. I don't even know why I'm going. The others probably all went to university, probably all took notes. I bet I feel stupid. Probably won't go again.'

'You're not stupid, Clare. You'll be fine. Who else'll be there?'

'You don't know them. It's at this woman Harriet's house – Mum made her curtains – up on the hill. Friend of hers, Nicole, will be there, Susan, few others maybe.'

'Ah, go on, it'll be fun. A bunch of women and a couple of bottles of wine – I bet you don't even talk about the book. Good old gossip, more like.'

It'd been Clare's mum, Mary, who had asked Susan to include Clare. She'd thought it might help – about as much as a plaster would heal a gaping wound, Elliot thought, but he had given up offering opinions. For years, Mary and he had met for coffee once a week or so, first because they were worried about Clare, looking for ways to help, but now, Elliot knew, Mary was frightened for them both, Clare and himself. It had been Mary, articulating her fears for their marriage, who had made him think that maybe they couldn't survive this. These days, Elliot was sure that Mary met him as much as anything to make sure he was still there – as if over a skinny latte and an English breakfast tea her will and strength could keep them together, make Elliot stay for just six more days, a week at a time. So that, slowly, Mary herself had become part of the disease and not a part of the cure. She was helping to suffocate him.

Elliot pulled himself up off the bed. Wherever Clare was

going, the relief of her absence would hit when the door closed behind her. He would put on the stereo, something loud and mindless, pour a big drink. And phone someone who made him feel good about himself.

‘Whatever. Have a good time, Clare.’