

RACHEL

Friday, 5 July 2013

Morning

THERE IS A PILE OF clothing on the side of the train tracks. Light-blue cloth – a shirt, perhaps – jumbled up with something dirty white. It's probably rubbish, part of a load fly-tipped into the scrubby little wood up the bank. It could have been left behind by the engineers who work this part of the track, they're here often enough. Or it could be something else. My mother used to tell me that I had an overactive imagination; Tom said that too. I can't help it, I catch sight of these discarded scraps, a dirty T-shirt or a lonesome shoe, and all I can think of is the other shoe, and the feet that fitted into them.

The train jolts and scrapes and screeches back into motion, the little pile of clothes disappears from view and we trundle on towards London, moving at a brisk jogger's pace. Someone in the seat behind me gives a sigh of helpless irritation; the 8.04 slow train from Ashbury to Euston can test the patience of the most seasoned commuter. The journey is supposed to take fifty-four minutes, but it rarely does: this section of the track is ancient, decrepit, beset with signalling problems and never-ending engineering works.

The train crawls along; it judders past warehouses and water towers, bridges and sheds, past modest Victorian houses, their backs turned squarely to the track.

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My head leaning against the carriage window, I watch these houses roll past me like a tracking shot in a film. I see them as others do not; even their owners probably don't see them from this perspective. Twice a day, I am offered a view into other lives, just for a moment. There's something comforting about the sight of strangers safe at home.

Someone's phone is ringing, an incongruously joyful and upbeat song. They're slow to answer, it jingles on and on around me. I can feel my fellow commuters shift in their seats, rustle their newspapers, tap at their computers. The train lurches and sways around the bend, slowing as it approaches a red signal. I try not to look up, I try to read the free newspaper I was handed on my way into the station, but the words blur in front of my eyes, nothing holds my interest. In my head I can still see that little pile of clothes lying at the edge of the track, abandoned.

Evening

The pre-mixed gin and tonic fizzes up over the lip of the can as I bring it to my mouth and sip. Tangy and cold, the taste of my first ever holiday with Tom, a fishing village on the Basque coast in 2005. In the mornings we'd swim the half-mile to the little island in the bay, make love on secret hidden beaches; in the afternoons we'd sit at a bar drinking strong, bitter gin and tonics, watching swarms of beach footballers playing chaotic 25-a-side games on the low-tide sands.

I take another sip, and another; the can's already half empty but it's OK, I have three more in the plastic bag at my feet. It's Friday, so I don't have to feel guilty about drinking on the train. TGIF. The fun starts here.

It's going to be a lovely weekend, that's what they're telling us. Beautiful sunshine, cloudless skies. In the old days we might have driven to Corly Wood with a picnic and the papers, spent all afternoon lying on a blanket in dappled sunlight, drinking wine.

We might have barbecued out back with friends, or gone to The Rose and sat in the beer garden, faces flushing with sun and alcohol as the afternoon went on, weaving home, arm in arm, falling asleep on the sofa.

Beautiful sunshine, cloudless skies, no one to play with, nothing to do. Living like this, the way I'm living at the moment, is harder in the summer when there is so much daylight, so little cover of darkness, when everyone is out and about, being flagrantly, aggressively happy. It's exhausting, and it makes you feel bad if you're not joining in.

The weekend stretches out ahead of me, forty-eight empty hours to fill. I lift the can to my mouth again, but there's not a drop left.

Monday, 8 July 2013

Morning

It's a relief to be back on the 8.04. It's not that I can't wait to get into London to start my week – I don't particularly want to be in London at all. I just want to lean back in the soft, sagging velour seat, feel the warmth of the sunshine streaming through the window, feel the carriage rock back and forth and back and forth, the comforting rhythm of wheels on tracks. I'd rather be here, looking out at the houses beside the track, than almost anywhere else.

There's a faulty signal on this line, about halfway through my journey. I assume it must be faulty, in any case, because it's almost always red; we stop there most days, sometimes just for a few seconds, sometimes for minutes on end. If I sit in carriage D, which I usually do, and the train stops at this signal, which it almost always does, I have a perfect view into my favourite track-side house: number fifteen.

Number fifteen is much like the other houses along this stretch of track: a Victorian semi, two storeys high, overlooking a narrow, well-tended garden which runs around twenty feet down towards

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some fencing, beyond which lie a few metres of no man's land before you get to the railway track. I know this house by heart. I know every brick, I know the colour of the curtains in the upstairs bedroom (beige, with a dark-blue print), I know that the paint is peeling off the bathroom window frame and that there are four tiles missing from a section of the roof over on the right-hand side.

I know that on warm summer evenings, the occupants of this house, Jason and Jess, sometimes climb out of the large sash window to sit on the makeshift terrace on top of the kitchen-extension roof. They are a perfect, golden couple. He is dark haired and well built, strong, protective, kind. He has a great laugh. She is one of those tiny bird-women, a beauty, pale-skinned with blonde hair cropped short. She has the bone structure to carry that kind of thing off, sharp cheekbones dappled with a sprinkling of freckles, a fine jaw.

While we're stuck at the red signal, I look for them. Jess is often out there in the mornings, especially in the summer, drinking her coffee. Sometimes, when I see her there, I feel as though she sees me too, I feel as though she looks right back at me, and I want to wave. I'm too self-conscious. I don't see Jason quite so much, he's away a lot with work. But even if they're not there, I think about what they might be up to. Maybe this morning they've both got the day off and she's lying in bed while he makes breakfast, or maybe they've gone for a run together, because that's the sort of thing they do. (Tom and I used to run together on Sundays, me going at slightly above my normal pace, him at about half his, just so we could run side by side.) Maybe Jess is upstairs in the spare room, painting, or maybe they're in the shower together, her hands pressed against the tiles, his hands on her hips.

Evening

Turning slightly towards the window, my back to the rest of the carriage, I open one of the little bottles of Chenin Blanc I

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purchased from the Whistlestop at Euston. It's not cold, but it'll do. I pour some into a plastic cup, screw the top back on and slip the bottle into my handbag. It's less acceptable to drink on the train on a Monday, unless you're drinking with company, which I am not.

There are familiar faces on these trains, people I see every week, going to and fro. I recognize them and they probably recognize me. I don't know whether they see me, though, for what I really am.

It's a glorious evening, warm but not too close, the sun starting its lazy descent, shadows lengthening and the light just beginning to burnish the trees with gold. The train is rattling along, we whip past Jason and Jess's place, they pass in a blur of evening sunshine. Sometimes, not often, I can see them from this side of the track. If there's no train going in the opposite direction, and if we're travelling slowly enough, I can sometimes catch a glimpse of them out on their terrace. If not – like today – I can imagine them. Jess will be sitting with her feet up on the table out on the terrace, a glass of wine in her hand, Jason standing behind her, his hands on her shoulders. I can imagine the feel of his hands, the weight of them, reassuring and protective. Sometimes I catch myself trying to remember the last time I had meaningful physical contact with another person, just a hug or a heartfelt squeeze of my hand, and my heart twitches.

Tuesday, 9 July 2013

Morning

The pile of clothes from last week is still there, and it looks dustier and more forlorn than it did a few days ago. I read somewhere that a train can rip the clothes right off you when it hits. It's not that unusual, death by train. Two to three hundred a year, they say, so at least one every couple of days. I'm not sure how many of

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those are accidental. I look carefully, as the train rolls slowly past, for blood on the clothes, but I can't see any.

The train stops at the signal as usual. I can see Jess standing on the patio in front of the French doors. She's wearing a bright print dress, her feet are bare. She's looking over her shoulder, back into the house; she's probably talking to Jason, who'll be making breakfast. I keep my eyes fixed on Jess, on her home, as the train starts to inch forward. I don't want to see the other houses; I particularly don't want to see the one four doors down, the one which used to be mine.

I lived at number twenty-three Blenheim Road for five years, blissfully happy and utterly wretched. I can't look at it now. That was my first home. Not my parents' place, not a flatshare with other students, *my* first home. I can't bear to look at it. Well, I can, I do, I want to, I don't want to, I try not to. Every day I tell myself not to look, and every day I look. I can't help myself, even though there is nothing I want to see there, even though anything I do see will hurt me. Even though I remember so clearly how it felt that time I looked up and noticed that the cream linen blind in the upstairs bedroom was gone, replaced by something in soft baby pink; even though I still remember the pain I felt when I saw Anna watering the rose bushes near the fence, her T-shirt stretched tight over her bulging belly, and I bit my lip so hard it bled.

I close my eyes tightly and count to ten, fifteen, twenty. There, it's gone now, nothing to see. We roll into Witney station and out again, the train starting to pick up pace as suburbia melts into grimy north London, terraced houses replaced by tagged bridges and empty buildings with broken windows. The closer we get to Euston the more anxious I feel; pressure builds, how will today be? There's a filthy, low-slung concrete building on the right-hand side of the track about five hundred metres before we get into Euston. On its side, someone has painted: LIFE IS NOT A PARAGRAPH. I think about the bundle of clothes on the side of

the track and I feel as though my throat is closing up. Life is not a paragraph and death is no parenthesis.

Evening

The train I take in the evening, the 17.56, is slightly slower than the morning one – it takes one hour and one minute, a full seven minutes longer than the morning train despite not stopping at any extra stations. I don't mind, because just as I'm in no great hurry to get into London in the morning, I'm in no hurry to get back to Ashbury in the evening either. Not just because it's Ashbury, although the place itself is bad enough, a 1960s new town, spreading like a tumour over the heart of Buckinghamshire. No better or worse than a dozen other towns like it, a centre filled with cafés and mobile-phone shops and branches of JD Sports, surrounded by a band of suburbia and beyond that the realm of the multiplex cinema and out-of-town Tesco. I live in a smart(ish), new(ish) block situated at the point where the commercial heart of the place starts to bleed into the residential outskirts, but it is not my home. My home is the Victorian semi on the tracks, the one I part-owned. In Ashbury I am not a homeowner, not even a tenant – I'm a lodger, occupant of the small second bedroom in Cathy's bland and inoffensive duplex, subject to her grace and favour.

Cathy and I were friends at university. Half-friends, really, we were never that close. She lived across the hall from me in my first year and we were doing the same course, so we were natural allies in those first few daunting weeks, before we met people with whom we had more in common. We didn't see much of each other after the first year and barely at all after college, except for the occasional wedding. But in my hour of need she happened to have a spare room going and it made sense. I was so sure that it would only be for a couple of months, six at the most, and I didn't know what else to do. I'd never lived by myself, I'd gone from parents to flatmates to Tom, I found the idea

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overwhelming, so I said yes. And that was nearly two years ago.

It's not *awful*. Cathy's a nice person, in a forceful sort of way. She makes you notice her niceness. Her niceness is writ large, it is her defining quality and she needs it acknowledged, often, daily almost, which can be tiring. But it's not so bad, I can think of worse traits in a flatmate. No, it's not Cathy, it's not even Ashbury that bothers me most about my new situation (I still think of it as new, although it's been two years). It's the loss of control. In Cathy's flat I always feel like a guest at the very outer limit of their welcome. I feel it in the kitchen, where we jostle for space when cooking our evening meals. I feel it when I sit beside her on the sofa, the remote control firmly within her grasp. The only space which feels like mine is my tiny bedroom, into which a double bed and a desk have been crammed, with barely enough space to walk between them. It's comfortable enough, but it isn't a place you want to *be*, so instead I linger in the living room or at the kitchen table, ill at ease and powerless. I have lost control over everything, even the places in my head.

Wednesday, 10 July 2013

Morning

The heat is building. It's barely half past eight and already the day is close, the air heavy with moisture. I could wish for a storm, but the sky is an insolent blank, pale, watery blue. I wipe away the sweat on my top lip. I wish I'd remembered to buy a bottle of water.

I can't see Jason and Jess this morning, and my sense of disappointment is acute. Silly, I know. I scrutinize the house, but there's nothing to see. The curtains are open downstairs but the French doors are closed, sunlight reflecting off the glass. The sash window upstairs is closed, too. Jason may be away working. He's a doctor, I think, probably for one of those overseas organizations. He's constantly on call, a bag packed on top of the wardrobe;

there's an earthquake in Iran or a tsunami in Asia and he drops everything, he grabs his bag and he's at Heathrow within a matter of hours, ready to fly out and save lives.

Jess, with her bold prints and her Converse trainers and her beauty, her attitude, works in the fashion industry. Or perhaps in the music business, or in advertising – she might be a stylist or a photographer. She's a good painter, too, plenty of artistic flair. I can see her now, in the spare room upstairs, music blaring, window open, a brush in her hand, an enormous canvas leaning against the wall. She'll be there until midnight; Jason knows not to bother her when she's working.

I can't really see her, of course. I don't know if she paints, or whether Jason has a great laugh, or whether Jess has beautiful cheekbones. I can't see her bone structure from here and I've never heard Jason's voice. I've never seen them up close, they didn't live at that house when I lived down the road. They moved in after I left two years ago, I don't know when exactly. I suppose I started noticing them about a year ago, and gradually, as the months went past, they became important to me.

I don't know their names either, so I had to name them myself. Jason, because he's handsome in a British film star kind of way, not a Depp or a Pitt, but a Firth, or a Jason Isaacs. And Jess just goes with Jason, and it goes with her. It fits her, pretty and carefree as she is. They're a match, they're a set. They're happy, I can tell. They're what I used to be, they're Tom and me, five years ago. They're what I lost, they're everything I want to be.

Evening

My shirt, uncomfortably tight, buttons straining across my chest, is pit stained, damp patches clammy beneath my arms. My eyes and throat itch. This evening I don't want the journey to stretch out; I long to get home, to undress and get into the shower, to be where no one can look at me.

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I look at the man in the seat opposite mine. He is about my age, early to mid-thirties, with dark hair, greying at the temples. Sallow skin. He's wearing a suit, but he's taken the jacket off and slung it on the seat next to him. He has a MacBook, paper thin, open in front of him. He's a slow typist. He's wearing a silver watch with a large face on his right wrist – it looks expensive, a Breitling maybe. He's chewing the inside of his cheek. Perhaps he's nervous. Or just thinking deeply. Writing an important email to a colleague at the office in New York, or a carefully worded break-up message to his girlfriend. He looks up suddenly and meets my eye; his glance travels over me, over the little bottle of wine on the table in front of me. He looks away. There's something about the set of his mouth which suggests distaste. He finds me distasteful.

I am not the girl I used to be. I am no longer desirable, I'm off-putting in some way. It's not just that I've put on weight, or that my face is puffy from the drinking and the lack of sleep; it's as if people can see the damage written all over me, they can see it in my face, the way I hold myself, the way I move.

One night last week, when I left my room to get myself a glass of water, I overheard Cathy talking to Damien, her boyfriend, in the living room. I stood in the hallway and listened. 'She's lonely,' Cathy was saying, 'I really worry about her. It doesn't help, her being alone all the time.' Then she said, 'Isn't there someone from work, maybe, or the rugby club?' and Damien said, 'For Rachel? Not being funny, Cath, but I'm not sure I know anyone that desperate.'

Thursday, 11 July 2013

Morning

I'm picking at the plaster on my forefinger. It's damp, it got wet when I was washing out my coffee mug this morning; it feels clammy, dirty, though it was clean on this morning. I don't want

to take it off because the cut is deep. Cathy was out when I got home, so I went to the off-licence and bought two bottles of wine. I drank the first one and then I thought I'd take advantage of the fact that she was out and cook myself a steak, make a red-onion relish, have it with a green salad. A good, healthy meal. I sliced through the top of my finger while chopping the onions. I must have gone to the bathroom to clean it up and gone to lie down for a while and just forgotten all about the kitchen, because I woke up around ten and I could hear Cathy and Damien talking and he was saying how disgusting it was that I would leave the place like that. Cathy came upstairs to see me, she knocked softly on my door and opened it a fraction. She cocked her head to one side and asked if I was OK. I apologized without being sure what I was apologizing for. She said it was all right, but would I mind cleaning up a bit? There was blood on the chopping board, the room smelled of raw meat, the steak was still sitting out on the counter top, turning grey. Damien didn't even say hello, he just shook his head when he saw me and went upstairs to Cathy's bedroom.

After they'd both gone to bed I remembered that I hadn't drunk the second bottle, so I opened that. I sat on the sofa and watched television with the sound turned down really low so they wouldn't hear it. I can't remember what I was watching, but at some point I must have felt lonely, or happy, or something, because I wanted to talk to someone. The need for contact must have been overwhelming and there was no one I could call except for Tom.

There's no one I want to talk to except for Tom. The call log on my phone says I rang four times: at 11.02, 11.12, 11.54, 12.09. Judging from the length of the calls, I left two messages. He may even have picked up, but I don't remember talking to him. I remember leaving the first message; I think I just asked him to call me. That may be what I said in both of them, which isn't too bad.

The train shudders to a standstill at the red signal and I look up. Jess is sitting on her patio, drinking a cup of coffee. She has her

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feet up against the table and her head back, sunning herself. Behind her, I think I can see a shadow, someone moving: Jason. I long to see him, to catch a glimpse of his handsome face. I want him to come outside, to stand behind her, the way he does, to kiss the top of her head.

He doesn't come out, and her head falls forward. There is something about the way she is moving today that seems different; she is heavier, weighed down. I will him to come out to her, but the train jolts and slogs forward and still there is no sign of him; she's alone. And now, without thinking, I find myself looking directly into my house, and I can't look away. The French doors are flung open, light streaming into the kitchen. I can't tell, I really can't, whether I'm seeing this or imagining it – is she there, at the sink, washing up? Is there a little girl sitting in one of those bouncy baby chairs, up there on the kitchen table?

I close my eyes and let the darkness grow and spread until it morphs from a feeling of sadness into something worse: a memory, a flashback. I didn't just ask him to call me back. I remember now, I was crying. I told him that I still loved him, that I always would. *Please, Tom, please, I need to talk to you. I miss you.* No no no no no no no.

I have to accept it, there's no point trying to push it away. I'm going to feel terrible all day, it's going to come in waves – stronger then weaker then stronger again – that twist in the pit of my stomach, the anguish of shame, the heat coming to my face, my eyes squeezed tight as though I could make it all disappear. And I'll be telling myself all day, it's not the worst thing, is it? It's not the worst thing I've ever done, it's not as if I fell over in public, or yelled at a stranger in the street. It's not as if I humiliated my husband at a summer barbecue by shouting abuse at the wife of one of his friends. It's not as if we got into a fight one night at home and I went for him with a golf club, taking a chunk out of the plaster in the hallway outside the bedroom. It's not like going back to work after a three-hour lunch and staggering through the

office, everyone looking, Martin Miles taking me to one side, *I think you should probably go home, Rachel*. I once read a book by a former alcoholic where she described giving oral sex to two different men, men she'd just met in a restaurant on a busy London high street. I read it and I thought, I'm not *that* bad. This is where the bar is set.

Evening

I have been thinking about Jess all day, unable to focus on anything but what I saw this morning. What was it that made me think that something was wrong? I couldn't possibly see her expression at that distance, but I felt when I was looking at her that she was alone. More than alone – lonely. Perhaps she was – perhaps he's away, gone to one of those hot countries he jets off to to save lives. And she misses him, and she worries, although she knows he has to go.

Of course she misses him, just as I do. He is kind and strong, everything a husband should be. And they are a partnership. I can see it, I know how they are. His strength, that protectiveness he radiates, it doesn't mean she's weak. She's strong in other ways; she makes intellectual leaps that leave him open-mouthed in admiration. She can cut to the nub of a problem, dissect and analyse it in the time it takes other people to say good morning. At parties, he often holds her hand, even though they've been together years. They respect each other, they don't put each other down.

I feel exhausted this evening. I am sober, stone cold. Some days I feel so bad that I have to drink; some days I feel so bad that I can't. Today, the thought of alcohol turns my stomach. But sobriety on the evening train is a challenge, particularly now, in this heat. A film of sweat covers every inch of my skin, the inside of my mouth prickles, my eyes itch, mascara rubbed into their corners.

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My phone buzzes in my handbag, making me jump. Two girls sitting across the carriage look at me and then at each other, with a sly exchange of smiles. I don't know what they think of me, but I know it isn't good. My heart is pounding in my chest as I reach for the phone. I know this will be nothing good either: it will be Cathy, perhaps, asking me ever so nicely to maybe give the booze a rest this evening? Or my mother, telling me that she'll be in London next week, she'll drop by the office, we can go for lunch. I look at the screen. It's Tom. I hesitate for just a second and then I answer it.

'Rachel?'

For the first five years I knew him, I was never Rachel, always Rach. Sometimes Shelley, because he knew I hated it and it made him laugh to watch me twitch with irritation and then giggle because I couldn't help but join in when he was laughing. 'Rachel, it's me.' His voice is leaden, he sounds worn out. 'Listen, you have to stop this, OK?' I don't say anything. The train is slowing and we are almost opposite the house, my old house. I want to say to him, *Come outside, go and stand on the lawn. Let me see you.* 'Please, Rachel, you can't call me like this all the time. You've got to sort yourself out.' There is a lump in my throat as hard as a pebble, smooth and obstinate. I cannot swallow. I cannot speak. 'Rachel? Are you there? I know things aren't good with you, and I'm sorry for you, I really am, but . . . I can't help you, and these constant calls are really upsetting Anna. OK? I can't help you any more. Go to AA or something. Please, Rachel. Go to an AA meeting after work today.'

I pull the filthy plaster off the end of my finger and look at the pale, wrinkled flesh beneath, dried blood caked at the edge of my fingernail. I press the thumbnail of my right hand into the centre of the cut and feel it open up, the pain sharp and hot. I catch my breath. Blood starts to ooze from the wound. The girls on the other side of the carriage are watching me, their faces blank.

MEGAN

One year earlier

Wednesday, 16 May 2012

Morning

I CAN HEAR THE TRAIN coming; I know its rhythm by heart. It picks up speed as it accelerates out of Northcote station and then, after rattling round the bend, it starts to slow down, from a rattle to a rumble, and then sometimes a screech of brakes as it stops at the signal a couple of hundred yards from the house. My coffee is cold on the table, but I'm too deliciously warm and lazy to bother getting up to make myself another cup.

Sometimes I don't even watch the trains go past, I just listen. Sitting here in the morning, eyes closed and the hot sun orange on my eyelids, I could be anywhere. I could be in the south of Spain, at the beach; I could be in Italy, the Cinque Terre, all those pretty coloured houses and the trains ferrying the tourists back and forth. I could be back in Holkham with the screech of gulls in my ears and salt on my tongue and a ghost train passing on the rusted track half a mile away.

The train isn't stopping today, it trundles slowly past. I can hear the wheels clacking over the points, I can almost feel it rocking. I can't see the faces of the passengers and I know they're just commuters heading to Euston to sit behind desks, but I can

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dream: of more exotic journeys, of adventures at the end of the line and beyond. In my head, I keep travelling back to Holkham; it's odd that I still think of it, on mornings like this, with such affection, such longing, but I do. The wind in the grass, the big slate sky over the dunes, the house infested with mice and falling down, full of candles and dirt and music. It's like a dream to me now.

I feel my heart beating just a little too fast.

I can hear his footfall on the stairs, he calls my name.

'You want another coffee, Megs?'

The spell is broken, I'm awake.

Evening

I'm cool from the breeze and warm from the two fingers of vodka in my Martini. I'm out on the terrace, waiting for Scott to come home. I'm going to persuade him to take me out to dinner at the Italian on Kingly Road. We haven't been out for bloody ages.

I haven't got much done today. I was supposed to sort out my application for the fabrics course at St Martins; I did start it, I was working downstairs in the kitchen when I heard a woman screaming, making a horrible noise, I thought someone was being murdered. I ran outside into the garden, but I couldn't see anything.

I could still hear her though, it was nasty, it went right through me, her voice really shrill and desperate. 'What are you doing? What are you doing with her? Give her to me, give her to me.' It seemed to go on and on, though it probably only lasted a few seconds.

I ran upstairs and climbed out on to the terrace and I could see, through the trees, two women down by the fence, a few gardens over. One of them was crying – maybe they both were – and there was a child bawling its head off too.

I thought about calling the police, but it all seemed to calm down then. The woman who'd been screaming ran into the house,

carrying the baby. The other one stayed out there. She ran up towards the house, she stumbled and got to her feet and then just sort of wandered round the garden in circles. Really weird. God knows what was going on. But it's the most excitement I've had in weeks.

My days feel empty now I don't have the gallery to go to any longer. I really miss it. I miss talking to the artists. I even miss dealing with all those tedious yummy mummies who used to drop by, Starbucks in hand, to gawk at the pictures, telling their friends that little Jessie did better pictures than that at nursery school.

Sometimes I feel like seeing if I can track down anybody from the old days, but then I think, what would I talk to them about now? They wouldn't even recognize Megan the happily married suburbanite. In any case, I can't risk looking backwards, it's always a bad idea. I'll wait until the summer is over, then I'll look for work. It seems like a shame to waste these long summer days. I'll find something, here or elsewhere, I know I will.

Tuesday, 14 August 2012

Morning

I find myself standing in front of my wardrobe, staring for the hundredth time at a rack of pretty clothes, the perfect wardrobe for the manager of a small but cutting-edge art gallery. Nothing in it says 'nanny'. God, even the word makes me want to gag. I put on jeans and a T-shirt, scrape my hair back. I don't even bother putting on any make-up. There's no point, is there, prettying myself up to spend all day with a baby?

I flounce downstairs, half spoiling for a fight. Scott's making coffee in the kitchen. He turns to me with a grin and my mood lifts instantly. I rearrange my pout to a smile. He hands me a coffee and kisses me.

There's no sense blaming him for this, it was my idea. I

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volunteered to do it, to become a childminder for the people down the road. At the time, I thought it might be fun. Completely insane, really, I must have been mad. Bored, mad, curious. I wanted to see. I think I got the idea after I heard her yelling out in the garden and I wanted to know what was going on. Not that I've asked, of course. You can't really, can you?

Scott encouraged me – he was over the moon when I suggested it. He thinks spending time around babies will make me broody. In fact, it's doing exactly the opposite; when I leave their house I run home, can't wait to strip my clothes off and get into the shower and wash the baby smell off me.

I long for my days at the gallery, prettied up, hair done, talking to adults about art or films or nothing at all. Nothing at all would be a step up from my conversations with Anna. God, she's dull! You get the feeling that she probably had something to say for herself once upon a time, but now everything is about the child: is she warm enough? Is she too warm? How much milk did she take? And she's always *there*, so most of the time I feel like a spare part. My job is to watch the child while Anna rests, to give her a break. A break from what, exactly? She's weirdly nervous, too. I'm constantly aware of her, hovering, twitching. She flinches every time a train passes, jumps when the phone rings. They're just so fragile, aren't they? she says, and I can't disagree with that.

I leave the house and walk, leaden-legged, the fifty yards along Blenheim Road to their house. No skip in my step. Today, she doesn't open the door, it's him, the husband. Tom, suited and booted, off to work. He looks handsome in his suit – not Scott handsome, he's smaller and paler, and his eyes are a little too close together when you see him up close – but he's not bad. He flashes me his wide, Tom Cruise smile, and then he's gone, and it's just me and her and the baby.

Thursday, 16 August 2012

Afternoon

I quit!

I feel so much better, as if anything is possible. I'm free!

I'm sitting on the terrace, waiting for the rain. The sky is black above me, swallows looping and diving, the air thick with moisture. Scott will be home in an hour or so and I'll have to tell him. He'll only be pissed off for a minute or two, I'll make it up to him. And I won't just be sitting around the house all day: I've been making plans. I could do a photography course, or set up a market stall, sell jewellery. I could learn to cook.

I had a teacher at school who told me once that I was a mistress of self-reinvention. I didn't know what he was on about at the time, I thought he was trying it on, but I've since come to like the idea. Runaway, lover, wife, waitress, gallery manager, nanny, and a few more in between. So who do I want to be tomorrow?

I didn't really mean to quit, the words just came out. We were sitting there, around the kitchen table, Anna with the baby on her lap, and Tom had popped back to pick something up, so he was there too, drinking a cup of coffee, and it just seemed ridiculous, there was absolutely no point in me being there. Worse than that, I felt uncomfortable, as if I was intruding.

'I've found another job,' I said, without really thinking about it. 'So I'm not going to be able to do this any longer.' Anna gave me a look – I don't think she believed me. She just said, 'Oh, that's a shame,' and I could tell she didn't mean it. She looked relieved. She didn't even ask me what the job was, which was a relief, because I hadn't thought up a convincing lie.

Tom looked mildly surprised. He said, 'We'll miss you,' but that's a lie, too.

The only person who'll really be disappointed is Scott, so I have to think of something to tell him. Maybe I'll tell him Tom was hitting on me. That'll put an end to it.

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Thursday, 20 September 2012

Morning

It's just after seven, it's chilly out here now, but it's so beautiful like this, all these strips of garden side by side, green and cold and waiting for fingers of sunshine to creep up from the tracks and make them all come alive. I've been up for hours; I can't sleep. I haven't slept in days. I hate this, hate insomnia more than anything, just lying there, brain going round, tick, tick, tick, tick. I itch all over. I want to shave my head.

I want to run. I want to take a road trip, in a convertible, with the top down. I want to drive to the coast – any coast. I want to walk on a beach. Me and my big brother were going to be road trippers. We had such plans, Ben and I. Well, they were Ben's plans mostly – he was such a dreamer. We were going to ride motorbikes from Paris to the Côte d'Azur, or all the way down the Pacific coast of the USA, from Seattle to Los Angeles; we were going to follow in Che Guevara's tracks from Buenos Aires to Caracas. Maybe if I'd done all that, I wouldn't have ended up here, not knowing what to do next. Or maybe, if I'd done all that, I'd have ended up exactly where I am and I would be perfectly contented. But I didn't do all that, of course, because Ben never got as far as Paris, he never even made it as far as Cambridge. He died on the A10, his skull crushed beneath the wheels of an articulated lorry.

I miss him every day. More than anyone, I think. He's the big hole in my life, in the middle of my soul. Or maybe he was just the beginning of it. I don't know. I don't even know whether all this is really about Ben, or whether it's about everything that happened after that, and everything that's happened since. All I know is, one minute I'm ticking along fine and life is sweet and I want for nothing, and the next, I can't wait to get away, I'm all over the place, slipping and sliding again.

So, I'm going to see a therapist! Which could be weird, but it could be a laugh, too. I've always thought that it might be fun to

be Catholic, to be able to go to the confessional and unburden yourself and have someone tell you that they forgive you, to take all the sin away, wipe the slate clean.

This is not quite the same thing, of course. I'm a bit nervous, but I haven't been able to get to sleep lately, and Scott's been on my case to go. I told him, I find it difficult enough talking to people I *know* about this stuff – I can barely even talk to you about it. He said, that's the point, you can say anything to strangers. But that isn't completely true. You can't just say *anything*. Poor Scott. He doesn't know the half of it. He loves me so much it makes me ache. I don't know how he does it. I would drive me mad.

But I have to do *something* and at least this feels like action. All those plans I had – photography courses and cookery classes – when it comes down to it, they feel a bit pointless, as if I'm playing at real life instead of actually living it. I need to find something that I *must* do, something undeniable. I can't do this, I can't just be a wife. I don't understand how anyone does it – there is literally nothing to do but wait. Wait for a man to come home and love you. Either that, or look around for something to distract you.

Evening

I've been kept waiting. The appointment was for half an hour ago, and I'm still here, sitting in the reception room flicking through *Vogue*, thinking about getting up and walking out. I know doctors' appointments run over, but therapists'? Films have always led me to believe that they kick you out the moment your fifty minutes are up. I suppose Hollywood isn't really talking about the kind of therapist you get referred to on the NHS.

I'm just about to go up to the receptionist and tell her that I've waited long enough, I'm leaving, when the doctor's office door swings open and this very tall, lanky man emerges, looking apologetic and holding out his hand to me.

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

'Mrs Hipwell, I am so sorry to have kept you waiting,' he says, and I just smile at him and tell him it's all right, and I feel, in this moment, that it will be all right, because I've only been in his company for a minute or two and already I feel soothed.

I think it's the voice. Soft and low. Slightly accented, which I was expecting, because his name is Dr Kamal Abdic. I guess he must be mid-thirties, although he looks very young with his incredible dark honey skin. He has hands I could imagine on me, long and delicate fingers, I can almost feel them on my body.

We don't talk about anything substantial, it's just the introductory session, the getting-to-know-you stuff; he asks me what the trouble is and I tell him about the panic attacks, the insomnia, the fact that I lie awake at night too frightened to fall asleep. He wants me to talk a bit more about that, but I'm not ready yet. He asks me whether I take drugs, drink alcohol. I tell him I have other vices these days, and I catch his eye and I think he knows what I mean. Then I feel as if I ought to be taking this a bit more seriously, so I tell him about the gallery closing and that I feel at a loose end all the time, my lack of direction, the fact that I spend too much time in my head. He doesn't talk much, just the occasional prompt, but I want to hear him speak, so as I'm leaving I ask him where he's from.

'Maidstone,' he says, 'in Kent. But I moved to Corly a few years back.' He knows that wasn't what I was asking; he gives me a wolfish smile.

Scott is waiting for me when I get home, he thrusts a drink into my hand, he wants to know all about it. I say it was OK. He asks me about the therapist: did I like him, did he seem nice? OK, I say again, because I don't want to sound too enthusiastic. He asks me whether we talked about Ben. Scott thinks everything is about Ben. He may be right. He may know me better than I think he does.

Tuesday, 25 September 2012

Morning

I woke early this morning, but I did sleep for a few hours, which is an improvement on last week. I felt almost refreshed when I got out of bed, so instead of sitting on the terrace I decided to go for a walk.

I've been shutting myself away, almost without realizing it. The only places I seem to go these days are to the shops, my pilates classes and the therapist. Occasionally to Tara's. The rest of the time, I'm at home. It's no wonder I get restless.

I walk out of the house, turn right and then left on to Kingly Road. Past the pub – the Rose. We used to go there all the time; I can't remember why we stopped. I never liked it all that much, too many couples just the right side of forty drinking too much and casting around for something better, wondering if they'd have the courage. Perhaps that's why we stopped going, because I didn't like it. Past the pub, past the shops. I don't want to go far, just a little circuit, to stretch my legs.

It's nice being out early, before the school run, before the commute gets going; the streets are empty and clean, the day full of possibility. I turn left again, I walk down to the little playground, the only rather poor excuse for green space we have. It's empty now, but in a few hours it will be swarming with toddlers, mothers and au pairs. Half the pilates girls will be here, head to toe in Sweaty Betty, competitively stretching, manicured hands wrapped around their Starbucks.

I carry on past the park and down towards Roseberry Avenue. If I turned right here I'd go up past my gallery – what was my gallery, now a vacant shop window – but I don't want to, because that still hurts a little. I tried so hard to make a success of it. Wrong place, wrong time – no call for art in suburbia, not in this economy. Instead, I turn right, past the Tesco Express, past the other pub, the one where people from the estate go, and back towards home. I

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can feel butterflies now, I'm starting to get nervous. I'm afraid of bumping into the Watsons, because it's always awkward when I see them; it's patently obvious that I don't have a new job, that I lied because I didn't want to carry on working for them.

Or rather, it's awkward when I see *her*. Tom just ignores me. But Anna seems to take things personally. She obviously thinks that my short-lived career as a nanny came to an end because of her or because of her child. It actually wasn't about *her child* at all, although the fact that the child never stops whinging did make her hard to love. It's all so much more complicated, but of course I can't explain that to her. Anyway. That's one of the reasons I've been shutting myself away, I suppose, because I don't want to see the Watsons. Part of me hopes they'll just move. I know she doesn't like being here: she hates that house, hates living among his ex-wife's things, hates the trains.

I stop at the corner and peer into the underpass. That smell of cold and damp always sends a little shiver down my spine, it's like turning over a rock to see what's underneath: moss and worms and earth. It reminds me of playing in the garden as a child, looking for frogs by the pond with Ben. I walk on. The street is clear – no sign of Tom or Anna – and the part of me that can't resist a bit of drama is actually quite disappointed.

Evening

Scott's just called to say he has to work late, which is not the news I wanted to hear. I'm feeling edgy, have been all day. Can't keep still. I need him to come home and calm me down, and now it's going to be hours before he gets here and my brain is going to keep racing round and round and round and I know I've got a sleepless night coming.

I can't just sit here, watching the trains, I'm too jittery, my heart-beat feels like a flutter in my chest, like a bird trying to get out of a cage. I slip my flip-flops on and go downstairs, out of the front

door and on to Blenheim Road. It's around seven thirty – a few stragglers on their way home from work. There's no one else around, though you can hear the cries of kids playing in their back gardens, taking advantage of the last of the summer sunshine, before they get called in for dinner.

I walk down the road, towards the station. I stop for a moment outside number twenty-three and think about ringing the doorbell. What would I say? Ran out of sugar? Just fancied a chat? Their blinds are half open but I can't see anyone inside.

I carry on, towards the corner, and without really thinking about it, I continue down into the underpass. I'm about halfway through when the train runs overhead, and it's glorious: it's like an earthquake, you can feel it right in the centre of your body, stirring up the blood. I look down and notice that there's something on the floor, a hair band, purple, stretched, well used. Dropped by a runner, probably, but something about it gives me the creeps and I want to get out of there quickly, back into the sunshine.

On the way back down the road, he passes me in his car, our eyes meet for just a second and he smiles at me.

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Friday, 12 July 2013

Morning

I AM EXHAUSTED, my head thick with sleep. When I drink, I hardly sleep at all. I pass out cold for an hour or two, then I wake, sick with fear, sick with myself. If I have a day when I don't drink, that night I fall into the heaviest of slumbers, a deep unconsciousness, and in the morning I cannot wake properly, I cannot shake sleep, it stays with me for hours, sometimes all day long.

There is just a handful of people in my carriage today, none in my immediate vicinity. There is no one watching me, so I lean my head against the window and close my eyes.

The screech of the train's brakes wakes me. We're at the signal. At this time of morning, at this time of year, the sun shines directly on to the back of the trackside houses, flooding them with light. I can almost feel it, the warmth of that morning sunshine on my face and arms as I sit at the breakfast table, Tom opposite me, my bare feet resting on top of his because they're always so much warmer than mine, my eyes cast down at the newspaper. I can feel him smiling at me, the blush spreading from my chest to my neck, the way it always did when he looked at me a certain way.

I blink hard and Tom's gone. We're still at the signal. I can see Jess in her garden, and behind her a man walking out of the

house. He's carrying something – a mug of coffee, perhaps – and I look at him and realize that it isn't Jason. This man is taller, slender, darker. He's a family friend; he's her brother or Jason's brother. He bends down, placing the mugs on the metal table on their patio. He's a cousin from Australia, staying for a couple of weeks; he's Jason's oldest friend, best man at their wedding. Jess walks towards him, she puts her hands around his waist and she kisses him, long and deep. The train moves.

I can't believe it. I snatch air into my lungs, I realize that I've been holding my breath. Why would she do that? Jason loves her, I can see it, they're happy. I can't believe she would do that to him, he doesn't deserve that. I feel a real sense of disappointment, I feel as though *I* have been cheated. A familiar ache fills my chest. I have felt this way before. On a larger scale, to a more intense degree, of course, but I remember the quality of the pain. You don't forget it.

I found out the way everyone seems to find out these days: an electronic slip. Sometimes it's a text or a voicemail message; in my case it was an email, the modern-day lipstick on the collar. It was an accident, really, I wasn't snooping. I wasn't supposed to go near Tom's computer, because he was worried I would delete something important by mistake, or click on something I shouldn't and let in a virus or a Trojan or something.

"Technology's not really your strong point, is it, Rach?" he said after the time I managed to delete all the contacts in his email address book by mistake. So I wasn't supposed to touch it. But I was actually doing a good thing, I was trying to make amends for being a bit miserable and difficult, I was planning a special fourth-anniversary getaway, a trip to remind us how we used to be. I wanted it to be a surprise, so I had to check his work schedule secretly, I had to look.

I wasn't snooping, I wasn't trying to catch him out or anything, I knew better than that. I didn't want to be one of those awful suspicious wives who go through their husband's pockets. Once, I

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answered his phone when he was in the shower and he got quite upset and accused me of not trusting him. I felt awful because he seemed so hurt.

I needed to look at his work schedule, and he'd left his laptop on, because he'd run out late for a meeting. It was the perfect opportunity, so I had a look at his calendar, noted down some dates. When I closed down the browser window with his calendar in it, there was his email account, logged in, laid bare. There was a message at the top from `aboyd@cinnamon.com`. I clicked. XXXXX. That was it, just a line of Xs. I thought it was spam at first, until I realized that they were kisses.

It was a reply to a message he'd sent a few hours before, just after seven, when I was still slumbering in our bed.

I fell asleep last night thinking of you, I was dreaming about
kissing your mouth, your breasts, the inside of your thighs. I woke
this morning with my head full of you, desperate to touch you.
Don't expect me to be sane, I can't be, not with you.

I read through his messages: there were dozens, hidden in a folder entitled 'Admin'. I discovered that her name was Anna Boyd, and that my husband was in love with her. He told her so, often. He told her that he'd never felt like this before, that he couldn't wait to be with her, that it wouldn't be long until they could be together.

I don't have words to describe what I felt that day, but now, sitting on the train, I am furious, nails digging into my palms, tears stinging my eyes. I feel a flash of intense anger. I feel as though something has been taken away from *me*. How could she? How could Jess do this? What is wrong with her? Look at the life they have, look how beautiful it is! I have never understood how people can blithely disregard the damage they do by following their hearts. Who was it said that following your heart is a good thing? It is pure egotism, a selfishness to conquer all. Hatred

floods me. If I saw that woman now, if I saw Jess, I would spit in her face. I would scratch her eyes out.

Evening

There's been a problem on the line. The 17.56 fast train to Stoke has been cancelled, so its passengers have invaded my train and it's standing room only in the carriage. I, fortunately, have a seat, but by the aisle, not next to the window, and there are bodies pressed against my shoulder, my knee, invading my space. I have an urge to push back, to get up and shove. The heat has been building all day, closing in on me, I feel as though I'm breathing through a mask. Every single window has been opened and yet, even while we're moving, the carriage feels airless, a locked metal box. I cannot get enough oxygen into my lungs. I feel sick. I can't stop replaying the scene in the coffee shop this morning, I can't stop feeling as though I'm still there, I can't stop seeing the looks on their faces.

I blame Jess. I was obsessing this morning about Jess and Jason, about what she'd done and how he would feel, about the confrontation they would have when he found out and when his world, like mine, was ripped apart. I was walking around in a daze, not concentrating on where I was going. Without thinking, I went into the coffee shop that everyone from Huntingdon Whiteley uses. I was through the door before I saw them, and by the time I did it was too late to turn back; they were looking at me, eyes widening for a fraction of a second before they remembered to fix smiles on their faces. Martin Miles with Sasha and Harriet, a triumvirate of awkwardness, beckoning, waving me over.

'Rachel!' Martin said, arms outstretched, pulling me into a hug. I wasn't expecting it, my hands were caught between us, fumbling against his body. Sasha and Harriet smiled, they gave me tentative air kisses, trying not to get too close. 'What are you doing here?'

For a long, long moment, I went blank. I looked at the floor, I

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could feel myself colouring and, realizing it was making it worse, I gave a false laugh and said, 'Interview. Interview.'

'Oh.' Martin failed to hide his surprise, while Sasha and Harriet nodded and smiled. 'Who's that with?'

I couldn't remember the name of a single public relations firm. Not one. I couldn't think of a property company either, let alone one which might realistically be hiring. I just stood there, rubbing my lower lip with my forefinger, shaking my head, and eventually Martin said, 'Top secret, is it? Some firms are weird like that, aren't they? Don't want you saying anything until the contracts are signed and it's all official.' It was bullshit and he knew it, he did it to save me and nobody bought it, but everyone pretended they did and nodded along. Harriet and Sasha were looking over my shoulder at the door, they were embarrassed for me, they wanted a way out.

'I'd better go and order my coffee,' I said. 'Don't want to be late.'

Martin put his hand on my forearm and said, 'It's great to see you, Rachel.' His pity was almost palpable. I'd never realized, not until the last year or two of my life, how shaming it is to be pitied.

The plan had been to go to Holborn Library on Theobalds Road, but I couldn't face it, so I went to Regent's Park instead. I walked to the very far end, next to the zoo. I sat down in the shade beneath a sycamore tree, thinking of the unfilled hours ahead, replaying the conversation in the coffee shop, remembering the look on Martin's face when he said goodbye to me.

I must have been there for less than half an hour when my mobile rang. It was Tom again, calling from the home phone. I tried to picture him, working at his laptop in our sunny kitchen, but the image was spoilt by encroachments from his new life. She would be there somewhere, in the background, making tea or feeding the little girl, her shadow falling over him. I let the call go to voicemail. I put the phone back into my bag and tried to ignore it. I didn't want to hear any more, not today; today was already awful enough and it was not yet ten thirty in the morning. I held

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out for about three minutes before I retrieved the phone and dialled into voicemail. I braced myself for the agony of hearing his voice – that voice which used to speak to me with laughter and light and now is used only to admonish or console or pity – but it wasn't him.

'Rachel, it's Anna.' I hung up.

I couldn't breathe and I couldn't stop my brain from racing or my skin from itching, so I got to my feet and walked to the corner shop on Titchfield Street and bought four gin and tonics in cans, then went back to my spot in the park. I opened the first one and drank it as fast as I could, and then opened the second. I turned my back to the path so that I couldn't see the runners and the mothers with buggies and the tourists, and if I couldn't see them, I could pretend like a child that they couldn't see me. I called my voicemail again.

'Rachel, it's Anna.' Long pause. 'I need to talk to you about the phone calls.' Another long pause – she's talking to me and doing something else, multi-tasking, the way busy wives and mothers do, tidying up, loading the washing machine. 'Look, I know you're having a tough time,' she says, as though she has nothing to do with my pain, 'but you can't call us at night all the time.' Her tone is clipped, irritable. 'It's bad enough that you wake us when you call, but you wake Evie, too, and that's just not acceptable. We're struggling to get her to sleep through at the moment.' *We're struggling to get her to sleep through.* We. Us. Our little family. With our problems and our routines. Fucking bitch. She's a cuckoo, laying her egg in my nest. She has taken everything from me. She has taken everything and now she calls me to tell me that my distress is inconvenient for her?

I finish the second can and make a start on the third. The blissful rush of alcohol hitting my bloodstream lasts only a few minutes and then I feel sick. I'm going too fast, even for me, I need to slow down; if I don't slow down something bad is going to happen. I'm going to do something I will regret. I'm going to call

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her back, I'm going to tell her I don't care about her and I don't care about her family and I don't care if her child never gets a good night's sleep for the rest of its life. I'm going to tell her that the line he used with her – *don't expect me to be sane* – he used it with me, too, when we were first together; he wrote it in a letter to me, declaring his undying passion. It's not even his line: he stole it from Henry Miller. Everything she has is secondhand. I want to know how that makes her feel. I want to call her back and ask her, what does it feel like, Anna, to live in my house, surrounded by the furniture I bought, to sleep in the bed that I shared with him for years, to feed your child at the kitchen table he fucked me on?

I still find it extraordinary that they chose to stay there, in that house, in *my* house. I couldn't believe it when he told me. I loved that house. I was the one who insisted we buy it, despite its location. I liked being down there on the tracks, I liked watching the trains go by, I enjoyed the sound of them, not the scream of an inter-city express but the old-fashioned trundling of ancient rolling stock. Tom told me, it won't always be like this, they'll eventually upgrade the line and then it will be fast trains screaming past, but I couldn't believe it would ever actually happen. I would have stayed there, I would have bought him out if I'd had the money. I didn't, though, and we couldn't find a buyer at a decent price when we divorced, so instead he said he'd buy me out and stay on until he got the right price for it. But he never found the right buyer, instead he moved her in, and she loved the house like I did, and they decided to stay. She must be very secure in herself, I suppose, in them, for it not to bother her, to walk where another woman has walked before. She obviously doesn't think of me as a threat. I think about Ted Hughes, moving Assia Wevill into the home he'd shared with Plath, of her wearing Sylvia's clothes, brushing her hair with the same brush. I want to ring Anna up and remind her that Assia ended up with her head in the oven, just like Sylvia did.

I must have fallen asleep, the gin and the hot sun lulling me. I

woke with a start, scrabbling around desperately for my handbag. It was still there. My skin was prickling, I was alive with ants, they were in my hair and on my neck and chest and I leaped to my feet, clawing them away. Two teenage boys, kicking a football back and forth twenty yards away, stopped to watch, bent double with laughter.

The train stops. We are almost opposite Jess and Jason's house, but I can't see across the carriage and the tracks, there are too many people in the way. I wonder whether they are there, whether he knows, whether he's left, or whether he's still living a life he's yet to discover is a lie.

Saturday, 13 July 2013

Morning

I know without looking at a clock that it is somewhere between seven forty-five and eight fifteen. I know, from the quality of the light, from the sounds of the street outside my window, from the sound of Cathy vacuuming the hallway right outside my room. Cathy gets up early to clean the house every Saturday, no matter what. It could be her birthday, it could be the morning of the Rapture – Cathy will get up early on Saturday to clean. She says it's cathartic, it sets her up for a good weekend, and because she cleans the house aerobically, it means she doesn't have to go to the gym.

It doesn't really bother me, this early-morning vacuuming, because I wouldn't be asleep anyway. I cannot sleep in the mornings; I cannot snooze peacefully until midday. I wake abruptly, my breath jagged and heart racing, my mouth stale, and I know immediately that's it. I'm awake. The more I want to be oblivious, the less I can be. Life and light will not let me be. I lie there, listening to the sound of Cathy's urgent, cheerful busyness, and I think about the clothes on the side of the railway

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line and about Jess kissing her lover in the morning sunshine.

The day stretches out in front of me, not a minute of it filled.

I could go to the farmers' market on the Broad; I could buy venison and pancetta and spend the day cooking.

I could sit on the sofa with a cup of tea and *Saturday Kitchen* on TV.

I could go to the gym.

I could rewrite my CV.

I could wait for Cathy to leave the house, go to the off-licence and buy two bottles of Sauvignon Blanc.

In another life, I woke early, too, the sound of the 8.04 rumbling past; I opened my eyes and listened to the rain against the window. I felt him behind me, sleepy, warm, hard. Afterwards, he went to get the papers and I made scrambled eggs, we sat in the kitchen drinking tea, we went to the pub for a late lunch, we fell asleep, tangled up together in front of the TV. I imagine it's different for him now, no lazy Saturday sex or scrambled eggs, instead a different sort of joy, a little girl tucked up between him and his wife, babbling away. She'll be just learning to talk now, all Dada and Mama and a secret language incomprehensible to anyone but a parent.

The pain is solid and heavy, it sits in the middle of my chest. I cannot wait for Cathy to leave the house.

Evening

I am going to see Jason.

I spent all day in my bedroom, waiting for Cathy to go out, so that I could have a drink. She didn't. She sat steadfast and unmoveable in the living room, 'just catching up on a bit of admin'. By late afternoon I couldn't stand the confinement or the boredom any longer, so I told her I was going out for a walk. I went to the Wheatsheaf, the big, anonymous pub just off the High Street, and I drank three large glasses of wine. I had two shots of

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Jack Daniel's. Then I walked to the station, bought a couple of cans of gin and tonic and got on to the train.

I am going to see Jason.

I'm not going to *visit* him, I'm not going to turn up at his house and knock on the door. Nothing like that. Nothing crazy. I just want to go past the house, roll by on the train. I've nothing else to do, and I don't feel like going home. I just want to see him. I want to see them.

This isn't a good idea. I know it's not a good idea.

But what harm can it do?

I'll go to Euston, I'll turn around, I'll come back. (I like trains, and what's wrong with that? Trains are wonderful.)

Before, when I was still myself, I used to dream of taking romantic train journeys with Tom. (The Bergen Line for our fifth anniversary, the Blue Train for his fortieth.)

Hang on, we're going to pass them now.

The light is bright, but I can't see all that well. (Vision doubling. Close one eye. Better.)

There they are! Is that him? They're standing on the terrace. Aren't they? Is that Jason? Is that Jess?

I want to be closer, I can't see. I want to be closer to them.

I'm not going to Euston. I'm going to get off at Witney. (I shouldn't get off at Witney, it's too dangerous, what if Tom or Anna sees me?)

I'm going to get off at Witney.

This is not a good idea.

This is a very bad idea.

There's a man on the opposite side of the train, sandy blond hair veering towards ginger. He's smiling at me. I want to say something to him, but the words keep evaporating, vanishing off my tongue before I have the chance to say them. I can taste them, but I can't tell if they are sweet or sour.

Is he smiling at me, or is he sneering? I can't tell.

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

Sunday, 14 July 2013

Morning

My heartbeat feels as though it is in the base of my throat, uncomfortable and loud. My mouth is dry, it hurts to swallow. I roll on to my side, my face turned to the window. The curtains are drawn, but what light there is hurts my eyes. I bring my hand up to my face; I press my fingers against my eyelids, trying to rub away the ache. My fingernails are filthy.

Something is wrong. For a second, I feel as though I'm falling, as though the bed has disappeared from beneath my body. Last night. Something happened. The breath comes sharply into my lungs and I sit up, too quickly, heart racing, head throbbing.

I wait for the memory to come. Sometimes it takes a while. Sometimes it's there in front of my eyes in seconds. Sometimes it doesn't come at all.

Something happened, something bad. There was an argument. Voices were raised. Fists? I don't know, I don't remember. I went to the pub, I got on to the train, I was at the station, I was on the street. Blenheim Road. I went to Blenheim Road.

It comes over me like a wave, black dread.

Something happened, I know it did. I can't picture it, but I can feel it. The inside of my mouth hurts, as though I've bitten my cheek, there's a metallic tang of blood on my tongue. I feel nauseated, dizzy. I run my hands through my hair, over my scalp. I flinch. There's a lump, painful and tender, on the right side of my head. My hair is matted with blood.

I stumbled, that's it. On the stairs, at Witney station. Did I hit my head? I remember being on the train, but after that there is a gulf of blackness, a void. I'm breathing deeply, trying to slow my heart rate, to quell the panic rising in my chest. Think. What did I do? I went to the pub, I got on the train. There was a man there – I remember now, reddish hair. He smiled at me. I think he talked to me, but I can't remember what he said. There's something more

to him, more to the memory of him, but I can't reach it, can't find it in the black.

I'm frightened, but I'm not sure what I'm afraid of, which just exacerbates the fear. I don't even know whether there's anything to be frightened of. I look around the room. My phone is not on the bedside table. My handbag is not on the floor, it's not hanging over the back of the chair where I usually leave it. I must have had it, though, because I'm in the house, which means I have my keys.

I get out of bed. I'm naked. I catch sight of myself in the full-length mirror on the wardrobe. My hands are trembling. Mascara is smeared over my cheekbones and I have a cut on my lower lip. There are bruises on my legs. I feel sick. I sit back down on the bed and put my head between my knees, waiting for the wave of nausea to pass. I get to my feet, grab my dressing gown and open the bedroom door just a crack. The flat is quiet. For some reason I am certain Cathy isn't here. Did she tell me that she was staying at Damien's? I feel as though she did, though I can't remember when. Before I went out? Or did I speak to her later? I walk as quietly as I can out into the hallway. I can see that Cathy's bedroom door is open. I peer into her room. Her bed is made. It's possible she has already got up and made it, but I don't think she stayed here last night, which is a source of some relief. If she isn't here, she didn't see or hear me come in last night, which means that she doesn't know how bad I was. This shouldn't matter, but it does: the sense of shame I feel about an incident is proportionate not just to the gravity of the situation, but also to the number of people who have witnessed it.

At the top of the stairs I feel dizzy again, and grip the banister tightly. It is one of my great fears (along with bleeding into my belly when my liver finally packs up) that I will fall down the stairs and break my neck. Thinking about this makes me feel ill again. I want to lie down, but I need to find my bag, check my phone. I at least need to know that I haven't lost my credit cards, I need to know who I called and when. My handbag has been

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

dumped in the hallway, just inside the front door. My jeans and underwear sit next to it in a crumpled pile; I can smell the urine from the bottom of the stairs. I grab my bag to look for my phone – it's in there, thank God, along with a bunch of scrunched-up twenties and a bloodstained Kleenex. The nausea comes over me again, stronger this time; I can taste the bile in the back of my throat and I run, but I don't make it to the bathroom, I vomit on the carpet halfway up the stairs.

I have to lie down. If I don't lie down, I'm going to pass out, I'm going to fall. I'll clean up later.

Upstairs, I plug in my phone and lie down on the bed. I raise my limbs, gently, gingerly, to inspect them. There are bruises on my legs, above the knees, standard drink-related stuff, the sort of bruises you get from walking into things. My upper arms bear more worrying marks, dark, oval impressions that look like fingerprints. This is not necessarily sinister, I have had them before, usually from when I've fallen and someone has helped me up. The crack on my head feels bad, but it could be from something as innocuous as getting into a car. I might have taken a taxi home.

I pick up my phone. There are two messages. The first is from Cathy, received just after five, asking where I've got to. She's going to Damien's for the night, she'll see me tomorrow. She hopes I'm not drinking on my own. The second is from Tom, received at ten fifteen. I almost drop the phone in fright as I hear his voice; he's shouting.

'Jesus Christ, Rachel, what the hell is wrong with you? I have had enough of this, all right? I've just spent the best part of an hour driving around looking for you. You've really frightened Anna, you know that? She thought you were going to . . . she thought . . . It's all I could do to get her not to ring the police. Leave us alone. Stop calling me, stop hanging around, just leave us alone. I don't want to speak to you. Do you understand me? I don't want to speak to you, I don't want to see you, I don't want you anywhere near my family. You can ruin your own life if you

RACHEL

want to, but you're not ruining mine. Not any more. I'm not going to protect you any longer, understand? Just stay away from us.'

I don't know what I've done. What did I do? Between five o'clock and ten fifteen, what was I doing? Why was Tom looking for me? What did I do to Anna? I pull the duvet over my head, I close my eyes tightly. I imagine myself going to the house, walking along the little pathway between their garden and the neighbour's garden, climbing over the fence. I think about sliding open the glass doors, stealthily creeping into the kitchen. Anna's sitting at the table. I grab her from behind, I wind my hand into her long blonde hair, I jerk her head backwards, I pull her to the floor and I smash her head against the cool blue tiles.

Evening

Someone is shouting. From the angle of the light streaming in through my bedroom window I can tell I have been sleeping a long time; it must be late afternoon, early evening. My head hurts. There's blood on my pillow. I can hear someone yelling downstairs.

'I do not believe this! For God's sake! Rachel! RACHEL!'

I fell asleep. Oh Jesus, and I didn't clear up the vomit on the stairs. And my clothes in the hallway. Oh God, oh God.

I pull on a pair of tracksuit bottoms and a T-shirt. Cathy is standing right outside my bedroom door when I open it. She looks horrified when she sees me.

'What on earth happened to you?' she says, then raises her hand. 'Actually, Rachel, I'm sorry, but I just don't want to know. I cannot have this in my house. I cannot have . . .' She tails off, but she's looking back down the hall, towards the stairs.

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'I'm so sorry, I was just really ill and I meant to clear it up . . .'

'You weren't ill, were you? You were drunk. You were hung-over. I'm sorry, Rachel. I just can't have this. I cannot live like this. You

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

have to go, OK? I'll give you four weeks to find somewhere else, but then you have to go.' She turns around and walks towards her bedroom. 'And for the love of God, will you clean up that mess?' She slams her bedroom door behind her.

After I've finished cleaning up, I go back to my room. Cathy's bedroom door is still closed, but I can feel her quiet rage radiating through it. I can't blame her. I'd be furious if I came home to piss-soaked knickers and a puddle of vomit on the stairs. I sit down on the bed and flip open my laptop, log into my email account and start to compose a note to my mother. I think, finally, the time has come. I have to ask her for help. If I moved home, I wouldn't be able to go on like this, I would have to change, I would have to get better. I can't think of the words, though, I can't think of a way to explain this to her. I can picture her face as she reads my plea for help, the sour disappointment, the exasperation. I can almost hear her sigh.

My phone beeps. There's a message on it, received hours ago. It's Tom again. I don't want to hear what he has to say, but I have to, I can't ignore him. My heartbeat quickens as I dial into my voicemail, bracing myself for the worst.

'Rachel, will you phone me back?' He doesn't sound so angry any longer and my heartbeat slows a little. 'I want to make sure you got home all right. You were in some state last night.' A long, heartfelt sigh. 'Look. I'm sorry that I yelled last night, that things got a bit . . . overheated. I do feel sorry for you, Rachel, I really do, but this has just got to stop.'

I play the message a second time, listening to the kindness in his voice and the tears come. It's a long time before I stop crying, before I'm able to compose a text message to him saying, I'm very sorry, I'm at home now. I can't say anything else because I don't know what exactly it is I'm sorry for. I don't know what I did to Anna, how I frightened her. I don't honestly care that much, but I do care about making Tom unhappy. After everything he's been through, he deserves to be happy. I will never

RACHEL

begrudge him happiness, I only wish it could be with me.

I lie down on the bed and crawl under the duvet. I want to know what happened; I wish I knew what I had to be sorry for. I try desperately to make sense of an elusive fragment of memory. I feel certain that I was in an argument, or that I witnessed an argument. Was that with Anna? My fingers go to the wound on my head, to the cut on my lip. I can almost see it, I can almost hear the words, but it shifts away from me again. I just can't get a handle on it. Every time I think I'm about to seize the moment, it drifts back into the shadow, just beyond my reach.

MEGAN

Tuesday, 2 October 2012

Morning

IT'S GOING TO RAIN soon, I can feel it coming. My teeth are chattering in my head, the tips of my fingers are white with a tinge of blue. I'm not going inside. I like it out here, it's cathartic, cleansing, like an ice bath. Scott will come and haul me inside soon anyway, he'll wrap me in blankets, like a child.

I had a panic attack on the way home last night. There was a motorbike, revving its engine over and over and over, and a red car driving slowly past, like a kerb crawler, and two women with buggies blocking my path. I couldn't get past them on the pavement, so I went into the street and was almost hit by a car coming in the opposite direction, which I hadn't even seen. The driver leaned on the horn and yelled something at me. I couldn't catch my breath, my heart was racing, I felt that lurch in my stomach, like when you've taken a pill and you're just about to come up, that punch of adrenaline that makes you feel sick and excited and scared all at once.

I ran home and through the house and down to the tracks, then I sat down there, waiting for the train to come, to rattle through me and take away the other noises. I waited for Scott to come and calm me down, but he wasn't at home. I tried to climb over the fence, I wanted to sit on the other side for a while, where

no one else goes. I cut my hand, so I went inside, and then Scott came back and asked me what had happened. I said I was doing the washing-up and dropped a glass. He didn't believe me, he got very upset.

I got up in the night, left Scott sleeping and sneaked down to the terrace. I dialled his number and listened to his voice when he picked up, at first soft with sleep, and then louder, wary, worried, exasperated. I hung up and waited to see if he'd call back. I hadn't disguised my number, so I thought he might. He didn't, so I called again, and again, and again. I got voicemail then, bland and businesslike, promising to call me back at his earliest convenience. I thought about calling the practice, bringing forward my next appointment, but I don't think even their automated system works in the middle of the night, so I went back to bed. I didn't sleep at all.

I might go to Corly Wood this morning to take some photographs; it'll be misty and dark and atmospheric in there, I should be able to get some good stuff. I was thinking about maybe making little cards, seeing if I could sell them in the gift shop on Kingly Road. Scott keeps saying that I don't need to worry about working, that I should just rest. Like an invalid! The last thing I need is rest. I need to find something to fill my days. I know what's going to happen if I don't.

Evening

Dr Abdic – Kamal, as I have been invited to call him – suggested in this afternoon's session that I start keeping a diary. I almost said, I can't do that, I can't trust my husband not to read it. I didn't, because that would feel horribly disloyal to Scott. But it's true. I could never write down the things I actually feel or think or do. Case in point: when I came home this evening, my laptop was warm. He knows how to delete browser histories and whatever, he

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

can cover his tracks perfectly well, but I know that I turned the computer off before I left. He's been reading my emails again.

I don't really mind, there's nothing to read in there. (A lot of spam emails from recruitment companies and Jenny from pilates asking me if I want to join her Thursday-night supper club, where she and her friends take turns cooking each other dinner. I'd rather die.) I don't mind, because it reassures him that there's nothing going on, that I'm not up to anything. And that's good for me – it's good for us – even if it isn't true. And I can't really be angry with him, because he has good reason to be suspicious. I've given him cause in the past and probably will again. I am not a model wife. I can't be. No matter how much I love him, it won't be enough.

Saturday, 13 October 2012

Morning

I slept for five hours last night, which is longer than I have done in ages, and the weird thing is, I was so wired when I got home yesterday evening I thought I'd be bouncing off the walls for hours. I told myself that I wouldn't do it again, not after last time, but then I saw him and I wanted him and I thought, why not? I don't see why I should have to restrict myself, lots of people don't. Men don't. I don't want to hurt anybody, but you have to be true to yourself, don't you? That's all I'm doing, being true to my real self, the self nobody knows – not Scott, not Kamal, no one.

After my pilates class last night I asked Tara if she wanted to go to the cinema with me one night next week, then if she'd cover for me.

'If he calls, can you just say I'm with you, that I'm in the loo and I'll ring him straight back? Then you call me, and I call him, and it's all cool.'

She smiled and shrugged and said, 'All right,' she didn't even ask

where I was going or who with. She really wants to be my friend.

I met him at the Swan in Corly, he'd got us a room. We have to be careful, we can't get caught. It would be bad for him, life-wrecking. It would be a disaster for me, too. I don't even want to think about what Scott would do.

He wanted me to talk afterwards, about what happened when I was young, living in Norwich. I'd hinted at it before, but last night he wanted the details. I told him things, but not the truth. I lied, made stuff up, told him all the sordid things he wanted to hear. It was fun. I don't feel bad about lying, I doubt whether he believed most of it anyway. I'm pretty sure he lies, too.

He lay on the bed, watching me as I got dressed. He said, 'This can't happen again, Megan. You know it can't. We can't keep doing this.' And he was right, I know we can't. We shouldn't, we ought not to, but we will. It won't be the last time. He won't say no to me. I was thinking about it on the way home, and that's the thing I like most about it, having power over someone. That's the intoxicating thing.

Evening

I'm in the kitchen, opening a bottle of wine, when Scott comes up behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders and squeezes and says, 'How did it go, with the therapist?' I tell him it was fine, that we're making progress. He's used now to not getting any details out of me. Then: 'Did you have fun with Tara last night?'

I can't tell, because my back's to him, whether he's really asking or whether he suspects something. I can't detect anything in his voice.

'She's really nice,' I say. 'You and she'd get on. We're going to the cinema next week, actually. Maybe I should bring her round for something to eat after?'

'Am I not invited to the cinema?' he asks.

'You're very welcome,' I say, and I turn to him and kiss him on

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

the mouth, 'but she wants to see that thing with Sandra Bullock, so . . .'

'Say no more! Bring her round for dinner afterwards, then,' he says, his hands pressing gently on my lower back.

I pour the wine and we go outside. We sit side by side on the edge of the patio, our toes in the grass.

'Is she married?' he asks me.

'Tara? No. Single.'

'No boyfriend?'

'Don't think so.'

'Girlfriend?' he asks, eyebrow raised, and I laugh. 'How old is she then?'

'I don't know,' I say. 'Around forty.'

'Oh. And she's all alone. That's a bit sad.'

'Mmm. I think she might be lonely.'

'They always go for you, the lonely ones, don't they? They make a beeline straight for you.'

'Do they?'

'She doesn't have kids, then?' he asks, and I don't know if I'm imagining it, but the second the subject of children comes up, I can hear an edge in his voice and I can feel the argument coming and I just don't want it, can't deal with it, so I get to my feet and I tell him to bring the wine glasses, because we're going to the bedroom.

He follows me and I take off my clothes as I'm going up the stairs, and when we get there, when he pushes me down on the bed, I'm not even thinking about him, but it doesn't matter because he doesn't know that. I'm good enough to make him believe that it's all about him.

RACHEL

Monday, 15 July 2013

Morning

CATHY CALLED ME BACK just as I was leaving the flat this morning and gave me a stiff little hug. I thought she was going to tell me that she wasn't kicking me out after all, but instead she slipped a type-written note into my hand, giving me formal notice of my eviction, including a departure date. She couldn't meet my eye. I felt sorry for her, I honestly did, though not quite as sorry as for myself. She gave me a sad smile and said, 'I hate to do this to you, Rachel, I honestly do.' The whole thing felt very awkward. We were standing in the hallway, which, despite my best efforts with the bleach, still smelled a bit of sick. I felt like crying, but I didn't want to make her feel worse than she already did, so I just smiled cheerily and said, 'Not at all, it's honestly no problem,' as though she'd just asked me to do her a small favour.

On the train, the tears come, and I don't care if people are watching me; for all they know, my dog might have been run over. I might have been diagnosed with a terminal illness. I might be a barren, divorced, soon-to-be-homeless alcoholic.

It's ridiculous, when I think about it. How did I find myself here? I wonder where it started, my decline; I wonder at what point I could have halted it. Where did I take the wrong turn? Not when I met Tom, who saved me from grief, after Dad died.

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

Not when we married, carefree, drenched in bliss, on an oddly wintry May day seven years ago. I was happy, solvent, successful. Not when we moved into number twenty-three, a roomier, lovelier house than I'd imagined I'd live in at the tender age of twenty-six. I remember those first days so clearly, walking around, shoeless, feeling the warmth of wooden floorboards underfoot, relishing the space, the emptiness of all those rooms waiting to be filled. Tom and I, making plans: what we'd plant in the garden, what we'd hang on the walls, what colour to paint the spare room – already, even then, in my head, the baby's room.

Maybe it was then. Maybe that was the moment when things started to go wrong, the moment when I imagined us no longer a couple, but a family; and after that, once I had that picture in my head, just the two of us could never be enough. Was it then that Tom started to look at me differently, his disappointment mirroring my own? After all he gave up for me, for the two of us to be together, I let him think that he wasn't enough.

I let the tears flow as far as Northcote, then I pull myself together, wipe my eyes and start writing a list of things to do today on the back of Cathy's eviction letter:

Holborn Library

Email Mum

Email Martin, reference???

Find out about AA meetings – central London/Ashbury

Tell Cathy about job?

When the train stops at the signal, I look up and see Jason standing on the terrace, looking down at the track. I feel as though he's looking right at me, and I get the oddest sensation – I feel as though he's looked at me like that before; I feel as though he's really seen me. I imagine him smiling at me, and for some reason I feel afraid.

He turns away and the train moves on.

Evening

I'm sitting in A&E at University College Hospital. I was knocked down by a taxi while crossing Gray's Inn Road. I was sober as a judge, I'd just like to point out, although I was in a bit of a state, distracted, panicky almost. I'm having an inch-long cut above my right eye stitched up by an extremely handsome junior doctor who is disappointingly brusque and businesslike. When he's finished stitching, he notices the bump on my head.

'It's not new,' I tell him.

'It looks pretty new,' he says.

'Well, not new today.'

'Been in the wars, have we?'

'I bumped it, getting into a car.'

He examines my head for a good few seconds and then says, 'Is that so?' He stands back and looks me in the eye. 'It doesn't look like it. It looks more like someone's hit you with something,' he says, and I go cold. I have a memory of ducking down to avoid a blow, raising my hands. Is that a real memory? The doctor approaches again and peers more closely at the wound. 'Something sharp, serrated maybe . . .'

'No,' I say. 'It was a car. I bumped it getting into a car.' I'm trying to convince myself as much as him.

'OK.' He smiles at me then and steps back again, crouching down a little so that our eyes are level. 'Are you all right . . .' he consults his notes, 'Rachel?'

'Yes.'

He looks at me for a long time; he doesn't believe me. He's concerned. Perhaps he thinks I'm a battered wife. 'Right. I'm going to clean this up for you, because it looks a bit nasty. Is there someone I can call for you? Your husband?'

'I'm divorced,' I tell him.

'Someone else then?' He doesn't care that I'm divorced.

'My friend, please, she'll be worried about me.' I give him Cathy's name and number. Cathy won't be worried at all – I'm

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not even late home yet – but I’m hoping that the news that I’ve been hit by a taxi might make her take pity on me and forgive me for what happened yesterday. She’ll probably think the reason I got knocked down is because I was drunk. I wonder if I can ask the doctor to do a blood test or something, so that I can provide her with proof of my sobriety. I smile up at him, but he isn’t looking at me, he’s making notes. It’s a ridiculous idea anyway.

It was my fault, the taxi driver wasn’t to blame. I stepped right out – ran right out, actually – in front of the cab. I don’t know where I thought I was running to. I wasn’t thinking at all, I suppose, at least not about myself. I was thinking about Jess. Who isn’t Jess, she’s Megan Hipwell, and she’s missing.

I’d been in the library on Theobalds Road. I’d just emailed my mother (I didn’t tell her anything of significance, it was a sort of test-the-waters email, to gauge how maternal she’s feeling towards me at the moment) via my Yahoo account. On Yahoo’s front page there are news stories, tailored to your postcode or whatever – God only knows how they know my postcode, but they do. And there was a picture of her, Jess, *my* Jess, the perfect blonde, next to a headline which read CONCERN FOR MISSING WITNEY WOMAN.

At first I wasn’t sure. It looked like her, she looked exactly the way she looks in my head, but I doubted myself. Then I read the story and I saw the street name and I knew.

Buckinghamshire Police are becoming increasingly concerned for the welfare of a missing twenty-nine-year-old woman, Megan Hipwell, of Blenheim Road, Witney. Ms Hipwell was last seen by her husband, Scott Hipwell, on Saturday night when she left the couple’s home to visit a friend at around seven o’clock. Her disappearance is ‘completely out of character’, Mr Hipwell said. Ms Hipwell was wearing jeans and a red T-shirt. She is five foot four, slim, with blonde hair and blue eyes. Anyone with information

RACHEL

regarding Ms Hipwell is requested to contact Buckinghamshire Police.

She's missing. Jess is missing. Megan is missing. Since Saturday. I googled her – the story appeared in the *Witney Argus*, but with no further details. I thought about seeing Jason – Scott – this morning, standing on the terrace, looking at me, smiling at me. I grabbed my bag and got to my feet and ran out of the library, into the road, right into the path of a black cab.

'Rachel? Rachel?' The good-looking doctor is trying to get my attention. 'Your friend is here to pick you up.'

MEGAN

Thursday, 10 January 2013

Morning

SOMETIMES, I DON'T want to go anywhere, I think I'll be happy if I never have to set foot outside the house again. I don't even miss working. I just want to remain safe and warm in my haven with Scott, undisturbed.

It helps that it's dark and cold and the weather is filthy. It helps that it hasn't stopped raining for weeks – freezing, driving, bitter rain accompanied by gales howling through the trees, so loud they drown out the sound of the train. I can't hear it on the tracks, enticing me, tempting me to journey elsewhere.

Today, I don't want to go anywhere, I don't want to run away, I don't even want to go down the road. I want to stay here, holed up with my husband, watching TV and eating ice cream, after calling him to come home from work early so we can have sex in the middle of the afternoon.

I will have to go out later, of course, because it's my day for Kamal. I've been talking to him lately about Scott, about all the things I've done wrong, my failure as a wife. Kamal says I have to find a way of making myself happy, I have to stop looking for happiness elsewhere. It's true, I do, I know I do, and then I'm in the moment and I just think, fuck it, life's too short.

I think about that time when we went on a family holiday to

Santa Margherita in the Easter school holidays. I'd just turned fifteen and I met this guy on the beach, much older than I was – thirties, probably, possibly even early forties – and he invited me to go sailing the next day. Ben was with me and he was invited too, but – ever the protective big brother – he said we shouldn't go because he didn't trust the guy, he thought he was a sleazy creep. Which, of course, he was. But I was furious, because when were we ever going to get the chance to sail around the Ligurian Sea on some bloke's private yacht? Ben told me we'd have lots of opportunities like that, that our lives would be full of adventure. In the end we didn't go, and that summer Ben lost control of his motor-bike on the A10, and he and I never got to go sailing.

I miss the way we were when we were together, Ben and I. We were fearless.

I've told Kamal all about Ben, but we're getting closer to the other stuff now, the truth, the whole truth – what happened with Mac, the before, the after. It's safe with Kamal, he can't ever tell anyone because of patient confidentiality.

But even if he could tell someone, I don't think he would. I trust him, I really do. It's funny, but the thing that's been holding me back from telling him everything is not the fear of what he'd do with it, it's not the fear of judgement, it's Scott. It feels like I'm betraying Scott if I tell Kamal something I can't tell him. When you think about all the other stuff I've done, the other betrayals, this should be peanuts, but it isn't. Somehow this feels worse, because this is real life, this is the heart of me, and I don't share it with him.

I'm still holding back, because obviously I can't say everything I'm feeling. I know that's the point of therapy, but I just can't. I have to keep things vague, jumble up all the men, the lovers and the exes, but I tell myself that's OK, because it doesn't matter who they are. It matters how they make me feel. Stifled, restless, hungry. Why can't I just get what I want? Why can't they give it to me?

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

Well, sometimes they do. Sometimes all I need is Scott. If I can just learn how to hold on to this feeling, this one I'm having now – if I could just discover how to focus on this happiness, enjoy the moment, not wonder about where the next high is coming from – then everything will be all right.

Evening

I have to focus, when I'm with Kamal. It's difficult not to let my mind wander, when he looks at me with those leonine eyes, when he folds his hands together on his lap, long legs crossed at the knee. It's hard not to think of the things we could do together.

I have to focus. We've been talking about what happened after Ben's funeral, after I ran off. I was in Ipswich for a while; not long. I met Mac there, the first time. He was working in a pub or something. He picked me up on his way home. He felt sorry for me.

'He didn't even want . . . you know.' I start laughing. 'We got back to his flat and I asked for the money, and he looked at me like I was mad. I told him I was old enough, but he didn't believe me. And he waited, he did, until my sixteenth birthday. He'd moved, by then, to this old house near Holkham. An old stone cottage at the end of a lane leading nowhere, with a bit of land around it, about half a mile from the beach. There was an old railway track running along one side of the property. At night I'd lie awake – I was always buzzing then, we were smoking a lot – and I used to imagine I could hear the trains, I used to be so sure I'd get up and go outside and look for the lights.'

Kamal shifts in his chair, he nods, slowly. He doesn't say anything. This means I'm to go on, I'm to keep talking.

'I was actually really happy there, with Mac. I lived with him for . . . God, it was about three years, I think, in the end. I was . . . nineteen when I left. Yeah. Nineteen.'

'Why did you leave, if you were happy there?' he asks me. We're

there now, we got there quicker than I thought we would. I haven't had time to go through it all, to build up to it. I can't do it. It's too soon.

'Mac left me. He broke my heart,' I say, which is the truth, but also a lie. I'm not ready to tell the whole truth yet.

Scott isn't home when I get back, so I get my laptop out and google him, for the first time ever. For the first time in a decade, I look for Mac. I can't find him, though. There are hundreds of Craig McKenzies in the world, and none of them seems to be mine.

Friday, 8 February 2013

Morning

I'm walking in the woods. I've been out since before it got light, it's barely dawn now, deathly quiet except for the occasional outburst of chatter from the magpies in the trees above my head. I can feel them watching me, beady-eyed, calculating. A tiding of magpies. One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl, four for a boy, five for silver, six for gold, seven for a secret never to be told.

I've got a few of those.

Scott is away, on a course somewhere in Sussex. He left yesterday morning and he's not back until tonight. I can do whatever I want.

Before he left, I told Scott I was going to the cinema with Tara after my session. I told him my phone would be off, and I spoke to her, too. I warned her that he might ring, that he might check up on me. She asked me, this time, what I was up to. I just winked and smiled and she laughed. I think she might be lonely, that her life could do with a bit of intrigue.

In my session with Kamal, we were talking about Scott, about the thing with the laptop. It happened about a week ago. I'd been looking for Mac – I'd done several searches, I just wanted to find out where he was, what he was up to. There are pictures of almost

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everyone on the internet these days, and I wanted to see his face. I couldn't find him. I went to bed early that night. Scott stayed up watching TV, and I'd forgotten to delete my browser history. Stupid mistake – it's usually the last thing I do before I shut down my computer, no matter what I've been looking at. I know Scott has ways of finding what I've been up to anyway, being the techie he is, but it takes a lot longer, so most of the time he doesn't bother.

In any case, I forgot. And the next day, we got into a fight. One of the bruising ones. He wanted to know who Craig was, how long I'd been seeing him, where we met, what he did for me that Scott didn't do. Stupidly, I told Scott that he was a friend from my past, which only made it worse. Kamal asked me if I was afraid of Scott, and I got really pissed off.

'He's my husband,' I snapped. 'Of course I'm not afraid of him.'

Kamal looked quite shocked. I actually shocked myself. I hadn't anticipated the force of my anger, the depth of my protectiveness towards Scott. It was a surprise to me, too.

'There are many women who are frightened of their husbands, I'm afraid, Megan.' I tried to say something, but he held up his hand to silence me. 'The behaviour you're describing – reading your emails, going through your internet browser history – you describe all this as though it is commonplace, as though it is normal. It isn't, Megan. It isn't normal to invade someone's privacy to that degree. It's what is often seen as a form of emotional abuse.'

I laughed then, because it sounded so melodramatic. 'It isn't abuse,' I told him. 'Not if you don't mind. And I don't. I don't mind.'

He smiled at me then, a rather sad smile. 'Don't you think you should?' he asked.

I shrugged. 'Perhaps I should, but the fact is, I don't. He's jealous, he's possessive. That's the way he is. It doesn't stop me loving him, and some battles aren't worth fighting. I'm

careful – usually. I cover my tracks, so it isn't usually an issue.'

He gave a little shake of the head, almost imperceptible.

'I didn't think you were here to judge me,' I said.

When the session ended, I asked him if he wanted to have a drink with me. He said no, he couldn't, it wouldn't be appropriate. So I followed him home. He lives in a flat just down the road from the practice. I knocked on his door, and when he opened it, I asked, 'Is this appropriate?' I slipped my hand around the back of his neck, stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the mouth.

'Megan,' he said, voice like velvet. 'Don't. I can't do this. Don't.'

It was exquisite, that push and pull, desire and restraint. I didn't want to let the feeling go, I wanted so badly to be able to hold on to it.

I got up in the early hours of the morning, head spinning, full of stories. I couldn't just lie there, awake, alone, my mind ticking over all those opportunities which I could take or leave, so I got up and got dressed and started walking. Found myself here. I've been walking around and playing things back in my head – he said, she said, temptation, release; if only I could settle on something, choose to stick, not twist. What if the thing I'm looking for can never be found? What if it just isn't possible?

The air is cold in my lungs, the tips of my fingers are turning blue. Part of me just wants to lie down here, among the leaves, let the cold take me. I can't. It's time to go.

It's almost nine by the time I get back to Blenheim Road and as I turn the corner I see her, coming towards me, pushing the buggy in front of her. The child, for once, is silent. She looks at me and nods and gives me one of those weak smiles, which I don't return. Usually, I would pretend to be nice, but this morning I feel real, like myself. I feel high, almost like I'm tripping, and I couldn't fake nice if I tried.

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Afternoon

I fell asleep in the afternoon. I woke feverish, panicky. Guilty. I do feel guilty. Just not guilty enough.

I thought about him leaving in the middle of the night, telling me, once again, that this was the last time, the very last time, we can't do this again. He was getting dressed, pulling on his jeans. I was lying on the bed and I laughed, because that's what he said last time, and the time before, and the time before that. He shot me a look. I don't know how to describe it, it wasn't anger, exactly, not contempt – it was a warning.

I feel uneasy. I walk around the house; I can't settle, I feel as though someone else has been here while I was sleeping. There's nothing out of place, but the house feels different, as though things have been touched, subtly shifted out of place, and as I walk around I feel as though there's someone else here, always just out of my line of sight. I check the French doors to the garden three times, but they're locked. I can't wait for Scott to get home. I need him.

RACHEL

Tuesday, 16 July 2013

Morning

I'M ON THE 8.04, but I'm not going into London. I'm going to Witney instead. I'm hoping that being there will jog my memory, that I'll get to the station and I'll see everything clearly, I'll know. I don't hold out much hope, but there is nothing else I can do. I can't call Tom. I'm too ashamed, and in any case, he's made it clear. He wants nothing more to do with me.

Megan is still missing; she's been gone more than sixty hours now and the story is becoming national news. It was on the BBC website and MailOnline this morning; there were a few snippets mentioning it on other sites, too.

I printed out both the BBC and *Mail* stories; I have them with me. From them I have gleaned the following:

Megan and Scott argued on Saturday evening. A neighbour reported hearing raised voices. Scott admitted that they argued, and said that he believed his wife had gone to spend the night with a friend, Tara Epstein, who lives in Corly.

Megan never got to Tara's house. Tara says the last time she saw Megan was on Friday afternoon at their pilates class. (I knew Megan would do pilates.) According to Ms Epstein, 'She seemed fine, normal. She was in a good mood, she was talking about doing something special for her thirtieth birthday next month.'

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Megan was seen by one witness walking towards Witney train station at around seven fifteen on Saturday evening.

Megan has no family in the area. Both her parents are deceased.

Megan is unemployed. She used to run a small art gallery in Witney, but it closed down in April last year. (I knew Megan would be arty.)

Scott is a self-employed IT consultant. (I can't bloody believe Scott is an IT consultant.)

Megan and Scott have been married for three years; they have been living in the house on Blenheim Road since January 2012.

According to the *Daily Mail*, their house is worth £400,000.

Reading this, I know that things look bad for Scott. Not just because of the argument, either; it's just the way things are: when something bad happens to a woman, the police look at the husband or the boyfriend first. However, in this case, the police don't have all the facts. They're only looking at the husband, presumably because they don't know about the boyfriend.

It could be that I am the only person who knows that the boyfriend exists.

I scabble around in my bag for a scrap of paper. On the back of a card slip for two bottles of wine, I write down a list of most likely possible explanations for the disappearance of Megan Hipwell:

1. She has run off with her boyfriend, who from here on in I will refer to as B.
2. B has harmed her.
3. Scott has harmed her.
4. She has simply left her husband and gone to live elsewhere.
5. Someone other than B or Scott has harmed her.

I think the first possibility is most likely, and four is a strong contender, too, because Megan is an independent, wilful woman, I'm sure of it. And if she were having an affair, she might need to

get away to clear her head, mightn't she? Five does not seem especially likely, since murder by a stranger isn't all that common.

The bump on my head is throbbing, and I can't stop thinking about the argument I saw, or imagined, or dreamed about, on Saturday night. As we pass Megan and Scott's house, I look up. I can hear the blood pulsing in my head. I feel excited. I feel afraid. The windows of number fifteen, reflecting morning sunshine, look like sightless eyes.

Evening

I'm just settling into my seat when my phone rings. It's Cathy. I let it go to voicemail.

She leaves a message: 'Hi Rachel, just phoning to make sure you're OK.' She's worried about me, because of the thing with the taxi. 'I just wanted to say that I'm sorry, you know, about the other day, what I said about moving out. I shouldn't have. I overreacted. You can stay as long as you want to.' There's a long pause and then she says, 'Give me a ring, OK? And come straight home, Rach, don't go to the pub.'

I don't intend to. I wanted a drink at lunchtime; I was desperate for one after what happened in Witney this morning. I didn't have one though, because I had to keep a clear head. It's been a long time since I've had anything worth keeping a clear head for.

It was so strange, this morning, my trip to Witney. I felt as though I hadn't been there in ages, although of course it's only been a few days. It may as well have been a completely different place, though, a different station in a different town. I was a different person to the one who went there on Saturday night. Today I was stiff and sober, hyper-aware of the noise and the light and fear of discovery.

I was trespassing. That's what it felt like this morning, because it's their territory now, it's Tom and Anna's and Scott and Megan's. I'm the outsider, I don't belong there, and yet everything is so familiar to me. Down the concrete steps at the station, right past

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the newspaper kiosk into Roseberry Avenue, half a block to the end of the T-junction, to the right the archway leading to a dank pedestrian underpass beneath the track, and to the left Blenheim Road, narrow and tree-lined, flanked with its handsome Victorian terraces. It feels like coming home: not just any home but a childhood home, a place left behind a lifetime ago; it's the familiarity of walking up stairs and knowing exactly which one is going to creak.

The familiarity isn't just in my head, it's in my bones; it's muscle memory. This morning, as I walked past the blackened tunnel mouth, the entrance to the underpass, my pace quickened. I didn't have to think about it because I always walk a little faster on that section. Every night, coming home, especially in winter, I used to pick up the pace, glancing quickly to the right, just to make sure. There was never anyone there – not on any of those nights and not today – and yet I stopped dead as I looked into the darkness this morning, because I could suddenly see myself. I could see myself a few metres in, slumped against the wall, my head in my hands, and both head and hands smeared with blood.

My heart thudding in my chest, I stood there, morning commuters stepping around me as they continued on their way to the station, one or two turning to look at me as they passed, as I stood stock still. I didn't know – don't know – if it was real. Why would I have gone into the underpass? What reason would I have had to go down there, where it's dark and damp and stinks of piss?

I turned around and headed back to the station. I didn't want to be there any longer; I didn't want to go to Scott and Megan's front door. I wanted to get away from there. Something bad happened there, I know it did.

I paid for my ticket and walked quickly up the station steps to the other side of the platform, and as I did it came to me again in a flash: not the underpass this time, but the steps; stumbling on the steps and a man taking my arm, helping me up. The man from the train, with the reddish hair. I could see him, a vague picture but no dialogue. I could remember laughing – at myself, or at

something he said. He was nice to me, I'm sure of it. Almost sure. Something bad happened, but I don't think it had anything to do with him.

I got on the train and went into London. I went to the library and sat at a computer terminal, looking for stories about Megan. There was a short piece on the *Telegraph* website which said that 'a man in his thirties is helping police with their enquiries'. Scott, presumably. I can't believe he would have hurt her. I *know* that he wouldn't. I've seen them together; I know what they're like together. They gave a Crimestoppers number too, which you can ring if you have information. I'm going to call it on the way home, from a pay phone. I'm going to tell them about B, about what I saw.

My phone rings just as we're getting into Ashbury. It's Cathy again. Poor girl, she really is worried about me.

'Rach? Are you on the train? Are you on your way home?' She sounds anxious.

'Yes, I'm on my way,' I tell her. 'I'll be fifteen minutes.'

'The police are here, Rachel,' she says, and my entire body goes cold. 'They want to talk to you.'

Wednesday, 17 July 2013

Morning

Megan is still missing, and I have lied – repeatedly – to the police.

I was in a panic by the time I got back to the flat last night. I tried to convince myself that they'd come to see me about my accident with the taxi, but that didn't make sense. I'd spoken to police at the scene – it was clearly my fault. It had to be something to do with Saturday night. I must have done something. I must have committed some terrible act and blacked it out.

I know it sounds unlikely. What could I have done? Gone to Blenheim Road, attacked Megan Hipwell, disposed of her body somewhere and then forgotten all about it? It sounds ridiculous.

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It is ridiculous. But I know something happened on Saturday. I knew it when I looked into that dark tunnel under the railway line, my blood turning to ice water in my veins.

Blackouts happen, and it isn't just a matter of being a bit hazy about getting home from the club or forgetting what it was that was so funny when you were chatting in the pub. It's different. Total black; hours lost, never to be retrieved.

Tom bought me a book about it. Not very romantic, but he was tired of listening to me tell him how sorry I was in the morning when I didn't even know what I was sorry for. I think he wanted me to see the damage I was doing, the kind of things I might be capable of. It was written by a doctor, but I've no idea whether it was accurate: the author claimed that blacking out wasn't simply a matter of forgetting what had happened, but having no memories to forget in the first place. His theory was that you get into a state where your brain no longer makes short-term memories. And while you're there, in deepest black, you don't behave as you usually would, because you're simply reacting to the very last thing that you *think* happened, because – since you aren't making memories – you might not actually know what the last thing that happened really was. He had anecdotes, too, cautionary tales for the blacked-out drinker: there was a guy in New Jersey who got drunk at a fourth of July party. Afterwards, he got into his car, drove several miles in the wrong direction on the motorway and ploughed into a van carrying seven people. The van burst into flames and six people died. The drunk guy was fine. They always are. He had no memory of getting into his car.

There was another man, in New York this time, who left a bar, drove to the house he'd grown up in, stabbed its occupants to death, took off all his clothes, got back into his car, drove home and went to bed. He got up the next morning feeling terrible, wondering where his clothes were and how he'd got home, but it wasn't until the police came to get him that he discovered he had brutally slain two people for no apparent reason whatsoever.

So, it sounds ridiculous, but it's not impossible, and by the time I got home last night I had convinced myself that I was in some way involved in Megan's disappearance.

The police officers were sitting on the sofa in the living room, a forty-something man in plain clothes and a younger one in uniform with acne on his neck. Cathy was standing next to the window, wringing her hands. She looked terrified. The policemen got up. The plain-clothes one, very tall and slightly stooped, shook my hand and introduced himself as Detective Inspector Gaskill. He told me the PC's name as well, but I don't remember it. I wasn't concentrating. I was barely breathing.

'What's this about?' I barked at them. 'Has something happened? Is it my mother? Is it Tom?'

'Everyone's all right, Ms Watson, we just need to talk to you about what you did on Saturday evening,' Gaskill said. It's the sort of thing they say on television; it didn't seem real. They want to know what I did on Saturday evening. What the fuck did I do on Saturday evening?

'I need to sit down,' I said, and the detective motioned for me to take his place on the sofa, next to Neck Acne. Cathy was shifting from one foot to another, chewing on her lower lip. She looked frantic.

'Are you all right, Ms Watson?' Gaskill asked me. He motioned to the cut above my eye.

'I was knocked down by a taxi,' I said. 'Yesterday afternoon, in London. I went to the hospital. You can check.'

'OK,' he said, with a slight shake of his head. 'So. Saturday evening?'

'I went to Witney,' I said, trying to keep the waver out of my voice.

'To do what?'

Neck Acne had a notebook out, pencil raised.

'I wanted to see my husband,' I said.

'Oh, Rachel,' Cathy said.

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The detective ignored her. 'Your husband?' he said. 'You mean your ex-husband? Tom Watson?' Yes, I still bear his name. It was just more convenient. I didn't have to change my credit cards, email address, get a new passport, things like that.

'That's right. I wanted to see him, but then I decided that it wasn't a good idea, so I came home.'

'What time was this?' Gaskill's voice was even, his face completely blank. His lips barely moved when he spoke. I could hear the scratch of Neck Acne's pencil on paper, I could hear the blood pounding in my ears.

'It was . . . um . . . I think it was around six thirty. I mean, I think I got the train at around six o'clock.'

'And you came home . . . ?'

'Maybe seven thirty?' I glanced up and caught Cathy's eye and I could see from the look on her face that she knew I was lying. 'Maybe a bit later than that. Maybe it was closer to eight. Yes, actually, I remember now – I think I got home just after eight.' I could feel the colour rising to my cheeks; if this man didn't know I was lying then he didn't deserve to be on the police force.

The detective turned around, grabbed one of the chairs pushed under the table in the corner and pulled it towards him in a swift, almost violent movement. He placed it directly opposite me, a couple of feet away. He sat down, his hands on his knees, head cocked to one side. 'OK,' he said. 'So you left at around six, meaning you'd be in Witney by six thirty. And you were back here around eight, which means you must have left Witney at around seven thirty. Does that sound about right?'

'Yes, that seems right,' I said, that wobble back in my voice, betraying me. In a second or two he was going to ask me what I'd been doing for an hour, and I had no answer to give him.

'And you didn't actually go to see your ex-husband. So what did you do during that hour in Witney?'

'I walked around for a bit.'

He waited, to see if I was going to elaborate. I thought about

telling him I went to a pub, but that would be stupid – that’s verifiable. He’d ask me which pub, he’d ask me whether I’d spoken to anyone. As I was thinking about what I should tell him, I realized that I hadn’t actually thought to ask him to explain *why* he wanted to know where I was on Saturday evening, and that in itself must have seemed odd. That must have made me look guilty of something.

‘Did you speak to anyone?’ he asked me, reading my mind. ‘Go into any shops, bars . . . ?’

‘I spoke to a man in the station!’ I blurted this out loudly, triumphantly almost, as though it meant something. ‘Why do you need to know this? What is going on?’

Detective Inspector Gaskill leaned back in the chair. ‘You may have heard that a woman from Witney – a woman who lives on Blenheim Road, just a few doors along from your ex-husband – is missing. We have been going door to door, asking people if they remember seeing her that night, or if they remember seeing or hearing anything unusual. And during the course of our enquiries, your name came up.’ He fell silent for a bit, letting this sink in. ‘You were seen on Blenheim Road that evening, around the time that Ms Hipwell, the missing woman, left her home. Mrs Anna Watson told us that she saw you in the street, near Ms Hipwell’s home, not very far from her own property. She said that you were acting strangely, and that she was worried. So worried, in fact, that she considered calling the police.’

My heart was fluttering like a trapped bird. I couldn’t speak, because all I could see at that moment was myself, slouched in the underpass, blood on my hands. *Blood on my hands*. Mine, surely? It had to be mine. I looked up at Gaskill, saw his eyes on mine and knew that I had to say something quickly to stop him reading my mind. ‘I didn’t do anything,’ I said. ‘I didn’t. I just . . . I just wanted to see my husband . . .’

‘Your *ex*-husband,’ Gaskill corrected me again. He pulled a photograph out of his jacket pocket and showed it to me. It was

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a picture of Megan. 'Did you see this woman on Saturday night?' he asked. I stared at it for a long time. It felt so surreal having her presented to me like that, the perfect blonde I'd watched, whose life I'd constructed and deconstructed in my head. It was a close-up head shot, a professional job. Her features were a little heavier than I'd imagined, not quite so fine as those of the Jess in my head. 'Ms Watson? Did you see her?'

I didn't know if I'd seen her. I honestly didn't know. I still don't.

'I don't think so,' I said.

'You don't think so? So you might have seen her?'

'I . . . I'm not sure.'

'Had you been drinking on Saturday evening?' he asked. 'Before you went to Witney, had you been drinking?'

The heat came rushing back to my face. 'Yes,' I said.

'Mrs Watson – Anna Watson – said that she thought you were drunk when she saw you outside her home. Were you drunk?'

'No,' I said, keeping my eyes firmly on the detective so that I didn't catch Cathy's eye. 'I'd had a couple of drinks in the afternoon, but I wasn't drunk.'

Gaskill sighed. He seemed disappointed in me. He glanced over at Neck Acne, then back at me. Slowly, deliberately, he got to his feet and pushed the chair back to its position under the table. 'If you remember anything about Saturday night, anything that might be helpful to us, would you please call me?' he said, handing me a business card.

As Gaskill nodded sombrely at Cathy, preparing to leave, I slumped back into the sofa. I could feel my heart rate starting to slow, and then it raced again as I heard him ask me, 'You work in public relations, is that correct? Huntingdon Whitely?'

'That's right,' I said. 'Huntingdon Whitely.'

He is going to check, and he is going to know I lied. I can't let him find out for himself, I have to tell him.

So that's what I'm going to do this morning. I'm going to go round to the police station to come clean. I'm going to tell him

everything: that I lost my job months ago, that I was very drunk on Saturday night and I have no idea what time I came home. I'm going to say what I should have said last night: that he's looking in the wrong direction. I'm going to tell him that I believe Megan Hipwell was having an affair.

Evening

The police think I'm a rubbernecker. They think I'm a stalker, a nut-case, mentally unstable. I should never have gone to the police station. I've made my own situation worse and I don't think I've helped Scott, which was the reason I went there in the first place. He needs my help, because it's obvious the police will suspect that he's done something to her, and I know it isn't true, because I know him. I really feel that, crazy as it sounds. I've seen the way he is with her. He couldn't hurt her.

OK, so helping Scott was not my sole reason for going to the police. There was the matter of the lie, which needed sorting out. The lie about me working for Huntingdon Whitely.

It took me ages to get up the courage to go into the station. I was on the verge of turning back and going home a dozen times, but eventually I went in. I asked the desk sergeant if I could speak to Detective Inspector Gaskill, and he showed me to a stuffy waiting room, where I sat for over an hour until someone came to get me. By that time I was sweating and trembling like a woman on her way to the scaffold. I was shown into another room, smaller and stuffier still, windowless and airless. I was left there alone for a further ten minutes before Gaskill and a woman, also in plain clothes, turned up. Gaskill greeted me politely; he didn't seem surprised to see me. He introduced his companion as Detective Sergeant Riley. She is younger than I am, tall, slim, dark-haired, pretty in a sharp-featured, vulpine sort of way. She did not return my smile.

We all sat down and nobody said anything; they just looked at me expectantly.

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'I remembered the man,' I said. 'I told you there was a man at the station. I can describe him.' Riley raised her eyebrows ever so slightly and shifted in her seat. 'He was about medium height, medium build, reddish hair. I slipped on the steps and he caught my arm.' Gaskill leaned forward, his elbows on the table, hands clasped together in front of his mouth. 'He was wearing . . . I think he was wearing a blue shirt.'

This is not actually true. I do remember a man, and I'm pretty sure he had reddish hair, and I think that he smiled at me, or smirked at me, when I was on the train. I think that he got off at Witney, and I think he might have spoken to me. It's possible I might have slipped on the steps. I have a memory of it, but I can't tell whether the memory belongs to Saturday night, or to another time. There have been many slips, on many staircases. I have no idea what he was wearing.

The detectives were not impressed with my tale. Riley gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head. Gaskill unclasped his hands and spread them out, palms upwards, in front of him. 'OK. Is that really what you came here to tell me, Ms Watson?' he asked. There was no anger in his tone, he sounded almost encouraging. I wished that Riley would go away. I could talk to him; I could trust him.

'I don't work for Huntingdon Whitely any longer,' I said.

'Oh.' He leaned back in his seat, looking more interested.

'I left three months ago. My flatmate – well, she's my landlady really – I haven't told her. I'm trying to find another job. I didn't want her to know because I thought she would worry about the rent. I have some money. I can pay my rent, but . . . Anyway, I lied to you yesterday about my job and I apologize for that.'

Riley leaned forward and gave me an insincere smile. 'I see. You no longer work for Huntingdon Whitely. You don't work for anyone, is that right? You're unemployed?' I nodded. 'OK. So . . . you're not signing on, nothing like that?'

'No.'

'And . . . your flatmate, she hasn't noticed that you don't go to work every day?'

'I do. I mean, I don't go to the office, but I go into London, the way I used to, at the same time and everything, so that she . . . So that she won't know.' Riley glanced at Gaskill; he kept his eyes on my face, the hint of a frown between his eyes. 'It sounds odd, I know . . .' I said and I tailed off then, because it doesn't just sound odd, it sounds insane when you say it out loud.

'Right. So, you pretend to go to work every day?' Riley asked me, her brow knitted too, as though she were concerned about me. As though she thought I was completely deranged. I didn't speak or nod or do anything, I kept silent. 'Can I ask why you left your job, Ms Watson?'

There was no point in lying. If they hadn't intended to check out my employment record before this conversation, they bloody well would now. 'I was fired,' I said.

'You were dismissed,' Riley said, a note of satisfaction in her voice. It was obviously the answer she'd anticipated. 'Why was that?'

I gave a little sigh and appealed to Gaskill. 'Is this really important? Does it matter why I left my job?'

Gaskill didn't say anything, he was consulting some notes that Riley had pushed in front of him, but he did give the slightest shake of his head. Riley changed tack.

'Ms Watson, I wanted to ask you about Saturday night.' I glanced at Gaskill – *we've already had this conversation* – but he wasn't looking at me. 'All right,' I said. I kept raising my hand to my scalp, worrying at my injury. I couldn't stop myself.

'Tell me why you went to Blenheim Road on Saturday night. Why did you want to speak to your ex-husband?'

'I don't really think that's any of your business,' I said, and then, quickly, before she had time to say anything else, 'Would it be possible to have a glass of water?'

Gaskill got to his feet and left the room, which wasn't really the

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outcome I was hoping for. Riley didn't say a word; she just kept looking at me, the trace of a smile still on her lips. I couldn't hold her gaze, I looked at the table, I let my eyes wander around the room. I knew this was a tactic: she was remaining silent so that I would become so uncomfortable that I had to say something, even if I didn't really want to. 'I had some things I needed to discuss with him,' I said. 'Private matters.' I sounded pompous and ridiculous.

Riley sighed. I bit my lip, determined not to speak until Gaskill came back into the room. The moment he returned, placing a glass of cloudy water in front of me, Riley spoke.

'Private matters?' she prompted.

'That's right.'

Riley and Gaskill exchanged a look, I wasn't sure if it was irritation or amusement. I could taste the sweat on my upper lip. I took a sip of water; it tasted stale. Gaskill shuffled the papers in front of him and then pushed them aside, as though he was done with them, or as though whatever was in them didn't interest him all that much.

'Ms Watson, your . . . er . . . your ex-husband's current wife, Mrs Anna Watson, has raised concerns about you. She told us that you have been bothering her, bothering her husband, that you have come to the house uninvited, that on one occasion . . .' Gaskill glanced back at his notes, but Riley interrupted.

'On one occasion you broke into Mr and Mrs Watson's home and took their child, their newborn baby.'

A black hole opened up in the centre of the room and swallowed me. 'That is not true!' I said. 'I didn't *take* . . . It didn't happen like that, that's wrong. I didn't . . . I didn't take her.'

I got very upset then, I started to shake and cry, I said I wanted to leave. Riley pushed her chair back and got to her feet, shrugged at Gaskill and left the room. Gaskill handed me a Kleenex.

'You can leave any time you like, Ms Watson. You came here to talk to us.' He smiled at me then, an apologetic sort of smile. I

liked him in that moment, I wanted to take his hand and squeeze it, but I didn't, because that would have been weird. 'I think you have more to tell me,' he said, and I liked him even more for saying *tell me* rather than *tell us*.

'Perhaps,' he said, getting to his feet and ushering me towards the door, 'you would like to take a break, stretch your legs, get yourself something to eat. Then when you're ready, come back, and you can tell me everything.'

I was planning to just forget the whole thing and go home. I was walking back towards the train station, ready to turn my back on everything. Then I thought about the train journey, about going backwards and forwards on that line, past the house – Megan and Scott's house – every day. What if they never found her? I was going to wonder forever – and I understand that this is not very likely, but even so – whether my saying something might have helped her. What if Scott was accused of harming her just because they never knew about B? What if she was at B's house right now, tied up in the basement, hurt and bleeding, or buried in the garden?

I did as Gaskill said, I bought a ham-and-cheese sandwich and a bottle of water from a corner shop and took it to Witney's only park, a rather sorry little patch of land surrounded by 1930s houses and given over almost entirely to an asphalted playground. I sat on a bench at the edge of this space, watching mothers and childminders scolding their charges for eating sand out of the pit. I used to dream of this, a few years back. I dreamed of coming here – not to eat ham-and-cheese sandwiches in between police interviews, obviously – I dreamed of coming here with my own baby. I thought about the buggy I would buy, all the time I would spend in Trotters and at the Early Learning Centre sizing up adorable outfits and educational toys. I thought about how I would sit here, bouncing my own bundle of joy on my lap.

It didn't happen. No doctor has been able to explain to me why I can't get pregnant. I'm young enough, fit enough, I wasn't

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drinking heavily when we were trying. My husband's sperm was active and plentiful. It just didn't happen. I didn't suffer the agony of miscarriage, I just didn't get pregnant. We did one round of IVF, which was all we could afford. It was, as everyone had warned us it would be, unpleasant and unsuccessful. Nobody warned me it would break us. But it did. Or rather, it broke me, and then I broke us.

The thing about being barren is that you're not allowed to get away from it. Not when you're in your thirties. My friends were having children, friends of friends were having children, pregnancy and birth and first birthday parties were everywhere. I was asked about it, all the time. My mother, our friends, colleagues at work. When was it going to be my turn? At some point our childlessness became an acceptable topic of Sunday-lunch conversation, not just between Tom and me, but more generally. What we were trying, what we should be doing, do you really think you should be having a second glass of wine? I was still young, there was still plenty of time, but failure cloaked me like a mantle, it overwhelmed me, dragged me under and I gave up hope. At the time, I resented the fact that it was always seen as my fault, that I was the one letting the side down. But as the speed with which he managed to impregnate Anna demonstrates, there was never any problem with Tom's virility. I was wrong to suggest that we should share the blame; it was all down to me.

Lara, my best friend since university, had two children in two years: a boy first and then a girl. I didn't like them. I didn't want to hear anything about them. I didn't want to be near them. Lara stopped speaking to me after a while. There was a girl at work who told me – casually, as though she were talking about an appendectomy or a wisdom-tooth extraction – that she'd recently had an abortion, a medical one, and it was so much less traumatic than the surgical one she'd had when she was at university. I couldn't speak to her after that, I could barely look at her. Things became awkward in the office; people noticed.

Tom didn't feel the way I did. It wasn't his failure, for starters,

and in any case, he didn't *need* a child like I did. He wanted to be a dad, he really did – I'm sure he daydreamed about kicking a football around in the garden with his son, or carrying his daughter on his shoulders in the park. But he thought our lives could be great without children, too. We're happy, he used to say to me, why can't we just go on being happy? He became frustrated with me. He never understood that it's possible to miss what you've never had, to mourn for it.

I felt isolated in my misery. I became lonely, so I drank a bit, and then a bit more, and then I became lonelier, because no one likes being around a drunk. I lost and I drank and I drank and I lost. I liked my job, but I didn't have a glittering career, and even if I had, let's be honest: women are still only really valued for two things – their looks and their role as mothers. I'm not beautiful, and I can't have kids, so what does that make me? Worthless.

I can't blame all this for my drinking – I can't blame my parents or my childhood, an abusive uncle or some terrible tragedy. It's my fault. I was a drinker anyway – I've always liked to drink. But I did become sadder, and sadness gets boring after a while, for the sad person and for everyone around them. And then I went from being a drinker to being a drunk, and there's nothing more boring than that.

I'm better now, about the children thing; I've got better since I've been on my own. I've had to. I've read books and articles, I've realized that I must come to terms with it. There are strategies, there is hope. If I straightened myself out and sobered up, there's a possibility that I could adopt. And I'm not thirty-four yet – it isn't over. I am better than I was a few years ago, when I used to abandon my trolley and leave the supermarket if the place was packed with mums and kids; I wouldn't have been able to come to a park like this, to sit near the playground and watch chubby toddlers rolling down the slide. There were times, at my lowest, when the hunger was at its worst, when I thought I was going to lose my mind.

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Maybe I did, for a while. The day they asked me about it at the police station, I might have been mad then. Something Tom once said tipped me over, sent me sliding. Something he wrote, rather: I read it on Facebook that morning. It wasn't a shock – I knew she was having a baby, he'd told me, and I'd seen her, seen that pink blind in the nursery window. So I knew what was coming. But I thought of the baby as *her* baby. Until the day I saw the picture of him, holding his newborn girl, looking down at her and smiling, and beneath he'd written: 'So this is what all the fuss is about! Never knew love like this! Happiest day of my life!' I thought about him writing that – knowing that I would see it, that I would read those words and they would kill me, and writing it anyway. He didn't care. Parents don't care about anything but their children. They are the centre of the universe; they are all that really counts. Nobody else is important, no one else's suffering or joy matters, none of it is real.

I was angry. I was distraught. Maybe I was vengeful. Maybe I thought I'd show them that my distress was real. I don't know. I did a stupid thing.

I went back to the police station after a couple of hours. I asked if I could speak to Gaskill alone, but he said that he wanted Riley to be present. I liked him a little less after that.

'I didn't break into their home,' I said. 'I did go there, I wanted to speak to Tom. No one answered the doorbell . . .'

'So how did you get in?' Riley asked me.

'The door was open.'

'The front door was open?'

I sighed. 'No, of course not. The sliding door at the back, the one leading into the garden.'

'And how did you get into the back garden?'

'I went over the fence, I knew the way in . . .'

'So you climbed over the fence to gain access to your ex-husband's house?'

'Yes. We used to . . . There was always a spare key at the back.'

We had a place we hid it, in case one of us lost our keys or forgot them or something. But I wasn't breaking in – I didn't. I just wanted to talk to Tom. I thought maybe . . . the bell wasn't working or something.'

'This was the middle of the day, during the week, wasn't it? Why did you think your ex-husband would be at home? Had you called to find out?' Riley asked.

'Jesus! Will you just let me speak?' I shouted, and she shook her head and gave me that smile again, as if she knew me, as if she could read me. 'I went over the fence,' I said, trying to control the volume of my voice, 'and knocked on the glass doors, which were partly open. There was no answer. I stuck my head inside and called Tom's name. Again, no answer, but I could hear a baby crying. I went inside and saw that Anna—'

'Mrs Watson?'

'Yes. Mrs Watson was on the sofa, sleeping. The baby was in the carrycot and was crying – screaming, actually, red in the face – she'd obviously been crying for a while.' As I said those words it struck me that I should have told them that I could hear the baby crying from the street and that's why I went round to the back of the house. That would have made me sound less like a maniac.

'So the baby's screaming and her mother's right there, and she doesn't wake?' Riley asks me.

'Yes.' Her elbows are on the table, her hands in front of her mouth so I can't read her expression fully, but I know she thinks I'm lying. 'I picked her up to comfort her. That's all. I picked her up to quieten her.'

'That's not all, though, is it, because when Anna woke up you weren't there, were you? You were down by the fence, by the train tracks.'

'She didn't stop crying right away,' I said. 'I was bouncing her up and down and she was still grizzling, so I walked outside with her.'

'Down to the train tracks?'

'Into the garden.'

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'Did you intend to harm the Watsons' child?'

I leaped to my feet then. Melodramatic, I know, but I wanted to make them see – make Gaskill see – what an outrageous suggestion that was. 'I don't have to listen to this! I came here to tell you about the man! I came here to help you! And now . . . what exactly are you accusing me of? What are you accusing me of?'

Gaskill remained impassive, unimpressed. He motioned at me to sit down again. 'Ms Watson, the other . . . er, Mrs Watson – Anna – mentioned you to us during the course of our enquiries about Megan Hipwell. She said that you had behaved erratically, in an unstable manner, in the past. She mentioned this incident with the child. She said that you have harassed both her and her husband, that you continue to call the house repeatedly.' He looked down at his notes for a moment. 'Almost nightly, in fact. That you refuse to accept that your marriage is over . . .'

'That is simply not true!' I insisted, and it wasn't – yes, I called Tom from time to time, but not every night, it was a total exaggeration. But I was getting the feeling that Gaskill wasn't on my side after all, and I was starting to feel tearful again.

'Why haven't you changed your name?' Riley asked me.

'Excuse me?'

'You still use your ex-husband's name. Why is that? If a man left me for another woman, I think I'd want to get rid of that name. I certainly wouldn't want to share my name with my replacement . . .'

'Well, maybe I'm not that petty.' I *am* that petty. I hate that she's Anna Watson.

'Right. And the ring – the one on a chain around your neck. Is that your wedding band?'

'No,' I lied. 'It's a . . . it was my grandmother's.'

'Is that right? OK. Well, I have to say that, to me, your behaviour suggests that – as Mrs Watson has implied – you are unwilling to move on, that you refuse to accept that your ex has a new family.'

'I don't see—'

‘What this has to do with Megan Hipwell?’ Riley finished my sentence. ‘Well. The night Megan went missing, we have reports that you – an unstable woman who had been drinking heavily – were seen on the street where she lives. Bearing in mind that there are some physical similarities between Megan and Mrs Watson—’

‘They don’t look anything like each other!’ I was outraged at the suggestion. Jess is nothing like Anna. Megan is nothing like Anna.

‘They’re both blonde, slim, petite, pale-skinned . . .’

‘So I attacked Megan Hipwell thinking she was Anna? That’s the most stupid thing I’ve ever heard,’ I said. But that lump on my head was throbbing again and everything from Saturday night was still deepest black.

‘Did you know that Anna Watson knows Megan Hipwell?’ Gaskill asked me, and I felt my jaw drop.

‘I . . . what? No. No, they don’t know each other.’

Riley smiled for a moment, then straightened her face. ‘Yes they do. Megan did some childminding for the Watsons . . .’ she glanced down at her notes, ‘back in August and September last year.’ I don’t know what to say. I can’t imagine it: Megan in my home, with *her*, with her baby.

‘The cut on your lip, is that from when you got knocked down the other day?’ Gaskill asked me.

‘Yes. I bit it when I fell, I think.’

‘Where was it, this accident?’

‘It was in London, Theobalds Road. Near Holborn.’

‘And what were you doing there?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Why were you in central London?’

I shrugged. ‘I already told you,’ I said coldly. ‘My flatmate doesn’t know that I’ve lost my job. So I go into London, as usual, and I go to libraries, to job hunt, to work on my CV.’

Riley shook her head, in disbelief perhaps, or wonder. How does anyone get to that point?

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I pushed my chair back, readying myself to leave. I'd had enough of being talked down to, being made to look like a fool, like a mad woman. Time to play the trump card. 'I don't really know why we're talking about this,' I said. 'I would have thought that you would have better things to do, like investigating Megan Hipwell's disappearance, for example. I take it you've spoken to her lover?' Neither of them said anything, they just stared at me. They weren't expecting that. They didn't know about him. 'Perhaps you didn't know. Megan Hipwell was having an affair,' I said, and I started to walk to the door. Gaskill stopped me; he moved quietly and surprisingly quickly, and before I could put my hand on the door handle he was standing in front of me.

'I thought you didn't know Megan Hipwell?' he asked me.

'I don't,' I said, trying to get past him.

'Sit down,' he said, blocking my path.

I told them then about what I'd seen from the train, about how I often saw Megan sitting out on her terrace, sunbathing in the evenings or having coffee in the mornings. I told them about how last week I saw her with someone who clearly wasn't her husband, how I'd seen them kissing on the lawn.

'When was this?' Gaskill snapped. He seemed annoyed with me, perhaps because I should have told them this straight away, instead of wasting all day talking about myself.

'Friday. It was Friday morning.'

'So the day before she went missing, you saw her with another man?' Riley asked me, with a sigh of exasperation. She closed the file in front of her. Gaskill leaned back in his seat, studying my face. She clearly thought I was making it up; he wasn't so sure.

'Can you describe him?' Gaskill asked.

'Tall, dark—'

'Handsome?' Riley interrupted.

I puffed my cheeks out. 'Taller than Scott Hipwell. I know, because I've seen them together – Jess and – sorry, Megan and Scott Hipwell – and this man was different. Slighter,

thinner, darker skinned. Possibly an Asian man,' I said.

'You could determine his ethnic group from the train?' Riley said. 'Impressive. Who is Jess, by the way?'

'I'm sorry?'

'You mentioned Jess a moment ago.'

I could feel my face flushing again. I shook my head, 'No, I didn't,' I said.

Gaskill got to his feet and held out his hand for me to shake. 'I think that's enough.' I shook his hand, ignored Riley and turned to go. 'Don't go anywhere near Blenheim Road, Ms Watson,' Gaskill said. 'Don't contact your ex-husband unless it's important, and don't go anywhere near Anna Watson or her child.'

On the train on the way home, as I dissect all the ways that today went wrong, I'm surprised by the fact that I don't feel as awful as I might do. Thinking about it, I know why that is: I didn't have a drink last night, and I have no desire to have one now. I am interested, for the first time in ages, in something other than my own misery. I have purpose. Or at least, I have a distraction.

Thursday, 18 July 2013

Morning

I bought three newspapers before getting on to the train this morning: Megan has been missing for four days and five nights and the story is getting plenty of coverage. The *Daily Mail*, predictably, has managed to find pictures of Megan in her bikini, but they've also done the most detailed profile I've seen of her so far.

Born Megan Mills in Rochester in 1983, she moved with her parents to King's Lynn in Norfolk when she was ten. She was a bright child, very outgoing, a talented artist and singer. A quote from a school friend says she was 'a good laugh, very pretty and quite wild'. Her wildness seems to have been exacerbated by the

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death of her brother, Ben, to whom she was very close. He was killed in a motorcycle accident when he was nineteen and she fifteen. She ran away from home three days after his funeral. She was arrested twice – once for theft and once for soliciting. Her relationship with her parents, the *Mail* informs me, broke down completely. Both her parents died a few years ago, without ever being reconciled with their daughter. (Reading this, I feel desperately sad for Megan. I realize that perhaps, after all, she isn't so different from me. She's isolated and lonely too.)

When she was sixteen, she moved in with a boyfriend who had a house near the village of Holkham in north Norfolk. The school friend says, 'He was an older guy, a musician or something. He was into drugs. We didn't see Megan much after they got together.' The boyfriend's name is not given, so presumably they haven't found him. He might not even exist. The school friend might be making this stuff up just to get her name into the papers.

They skip forward several years after that: suddenly Megan is twenty-four, living in London, working as a waitress in a north London restaurant. There she meets Scott Hipwell, an independent IT contractor who is friendly with the restaurant manager, and the two of them hit it off. After an 'intense courtship', Megan and Scott marry, when she is twenty-six and he is thirty.

There are a few other quotes, including one from Tara Epstein, the friend with whom Megan was supposed to stay on the night she disappeared. She says that Megan is 'a lovely, carefree girl' and that she seemed 'very happy'. 'Scott would not have hurt her,' Tara says. 'He loves her very much.' There isn't a thing Tara says that isn't a cliché. The quote that interests me is from one of the artists who exhibited their work in the gallery Megan used to manage, one Rajesh Gujral, who says that Megan is 'a wonderful woman, sharp, funny and beautiful, an intensely private person with a warm heart'. Sounds to me like Rajesh has got a crush. The only other quote comes from a man called David Clark, 'a former

colleague' of Scott's, who says, 'Megs and Scott are a great couple. They're very happy together, very much in love.'

There are some news pieces about the investigation, too, but the statements from the police amount to less than nothing: they have spoken to 'a number of witnesses', they are 'pursuing several lines of enquiry'. The only interesting comment comes from Detective Inspector Gaskill, who confirms that two men are helping the police with their enquiries. I'm pretty sure that means they're both suspects. One will be Scott. Could the other be B? Could B be Rajesh?

I've been so engrossed in the newspapers that I haven't been paying my usual attention to the journey; it seems as though I've only just sat down when the train grinds to its customary halt opposite the red signal. There are people in Scott's garden – there are two uniformed police just outside the back door. My head swims. Have they found something? Have they found her? Is there a body buried in the garden or shoved under the floorboards? I can't stop thinking of the clothes on the side of the railway line, which is stupid, because I saw those there before Megan went missing. And in any case, if harm has been done to her, it wasn't by Scott, it can't have been. He's madly in love with her, everyone says so. The light is bad today, the weather's turned, the sky leaden, threatening. I can't see into the house, I can't see what's going on. I feel quite desperate. I cannot stand being on the outside – for better or worse, I am a part of this now. I need to know what's going on.

At least I have a plan. First, I need to find out if there's any way that I can be made to remember what happened on Saturday night. When I get to the library, I plan to do some research and find out whether hypnotherapy could make me remember; whether it is in fact possible to recover that lost time. Second – and I reckon this is important, because I don't think the police believed me when I told them about Megan's lover – I need to get in touch with Scott Hipwell. I need to tell him. He deserves to know.

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

Evening

The train is full of rain-soaked people, steam rising off their clothes and condensing on the windows. The fug of body odour, perfume and laundry soap hangs oppressively above bowed, damp heads. The clouds that menaced this morning did so all day, growing heavier and blacker until they burst, monsoon-like, this evening, just as office workers stepped outside and the rush hour began in earnest, leaving the roads gridlocked and tube station entrances choked with people opening and closing umbrellas.

I don't have an umbrella and am soaked through; I feel as though someone has thrown a bucket of water over me. My cotton trousers cling to my thighs and my faded blue shirt has become embarrassingly transparent. I ran all the way from the library to the tube station with my handbag clutched against my chest to hide what I could. For some reason I found this funny – there is something ridiculous about being caught in the rain – and I was laughing so hard by the time I got to the top of Gray's Inn Road I could barely breathe. I can't remember the last time I laughed like that.

I'm not laughing now. As soon as I got myself a seat, I checked the latest on Megan's case on my phone, and it's the news I've been dreading. 'A thirty-five-year-old man is being questioned under caution at Witney police station regarding the disappearance of Megan Hipwell, missing from her home since Saturday evening.' That's Scott, I'm sure of it. I can only hope that he read my email before they picked him up, because questioning under caution is serious – it means they think he did it. Although, of course, *it* is yet to be defined. *It* may not have happened at all. Megan might be fine. Every now and again it does strike me that she's alive and well and sitting on a hotel balcony with a view of the sea, her feet up on the railings, a cold drink at her elbow.

The thought of her there both thrills and disappoints me, and then I feel sick for feeling disappointed. I don't wish her ill, no matter how angry I was with her for cheating on Scott, for

RACHEL

shattering my illusions about my perfect couple. No, it's because I feel like I'm part of this mystery, I'm connected. I am no longer just a girl on the train, going back and forth without point or purpose. I want Megan to turn up safe and sound. I do. Just not quite yet.

I sent Scott an email this morning. His address was easy to find – I googled him and found www.shipwellconsulting.co.uk, the site where he advertises 'a range of consultancy, cloud and web-based services for business and non-profit organizations'. I knew it was him, because his business address is also his home address.

I sent a short message to the contact given on the site:

Dear Scott,

My name is Rachel Watson. You don't know me. I would like to talk to you about your wife. I do not have any information on her whereabouts, I don't know what has happened to her. But I believe I have information that could help you.

You may not want to talk to me, I would understand that, but if you do, email me on this address.

Yours sincerely,

Rachel

I don't know if he would have contacted me anyway – I doubt that I would, if I were in his shoes. Like the police, he'd probably just think I was a nutter, some weirdo who's read about the case in the newspaper. Now I'll never know – if he's been arrested, he may never get a chance to see the message. If he's been arrested, the only people who see it may be the police, which won't be good news for me. But I had to try.

And now I feel desperate, thwarted. I can't see through the mob of people in the carriage across to their side of the tracks – my side – and even if I could, with the rain still pouring down I wouldn't be able to see beyond the railway fence. I wonder whether

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evidence is being washed away, whether right at this moment vital clues are disappearing for ever: smears of blood, footprints, DNA-loaded cigarette butts. I want a drink so badly I can almost taste the wine on my tongue. I can imagine exactly what it will feel like for the alcohol to hit my bloodstream and make my head rush.

I want a drink and I don't want one, because if I don't have a drink today then it'll be three days, and I can't remember the last time I stayed off for three days in a row. There's a taste of something else in my mouth, too, an old stubbornness. There was a time when I had willpower, when I could run 10k before breakfast and subsist for weeks on 1,300 calories a day. It was one of the things Tom loved about me, he said: my stubbornness, my strength. I remember an argument, right at the end, when things were about as bad as they could be; he lost his temper with me. 'What happened to you, Rachel?' he asked me. 'When did you become so weak?'

I don't know. I don't know where that strength went, I don't remember losing it. I think that over time it got chipped away, bit by bit, by life, by the living of it.

The train comes to an abrupt halt, brakes screeching alarmingly, at the signal on the London side of Witney. The carriage is filled with murmured apologies as standing passengers stumble, bumping into each other, stepping on each other's feet. I look up and find myself looking right into the eyes of the man from Saturday night – the ginger one, the one who helped me up. He's staring right at me, his startlingly blue eyes locked on mine, and I get such a fright I drop my phone. I retrieve it from the floor and look up again, tentatively this time, not directly at him. I scan the carriage, I wipe the steamy window with my elbow and stare out, and then eventually I look back over at him and he smiles at me, his head cocked a little to one side.

I can feel my face burning. I don't know how to react to his smile, because I don't know what it means. Is it *Oh, hello, I remem-*

ber you from the other night, or is it Ah, it's that pissed girl who fell down the stairs and talked shit at me the other night, or is it something else? I don't know, but thinking about it now, I believe I have a snatch of soundtrack to go with the picture of me slipping on the steps: him saying, 'You all right, love?' I turn away and look out of the window again. I can feel his eyes on me; I just want to hide, to disappear. The train judders off and in seconds we're pulling into Witney station and people start jostling each other for position, folding newspapers and packing away Kindles and iPads as they prepare to disembark. I look up again and am flooded with relief – he's turned away from me, he's getting off the train.

It strikes me then that I'm being an idiot. I should get up and follow him, talk to him. He can tell me what happened, or what didn't happen; he might be able to fill in some of the blanks at least. I get to my feet. I hesitate – I know it's already too late, the doors are about to close, I'm in the middle of the carriage, I won't be able to push my way through the crowd in time. The doors beep and close. Still standing, I turn and look out of the window as the train pulls away. He's standing on the edge of the platform in the rain, the man from Saturday night, watching me as I go past.

The closer I get to home the more irritated with myself I feel. I'm almost tempted to change trains at Northcote, go back to Witney and look for him. A ridiculous idea, obviously, and stupidly risky given that Gaskill warned me to stay away from the area only yesterday. But I'm feeling dispirited about ever recalling what happened on Saturday. A few hours of (admittedly hardly exhaustive) internet research this afternoon confirmed what I suspected: hypnosis is not generally useful in retrieving hours lost to blackout because, as my previous reading suggested, we do not make memories during blackout. There is nothing to remember. It is, will always be, a black hole in my timeline.

MEGAN

Thursday, 7 March 2013

Afternoon

THE ROOM IS DARK, the air close, sweet with the smell of us. We're at the Swan again, in the room under the eaves. It's different, though, because he's still here, watching me.

'Where do you want to go?' he asks me.

'A house on the beach on the Costa de la Luz,' I tell him.

He smiles. 'What will we do?'

I laugh. 'You mean apart from this?'

His fingers are tracing slowly over my belly. 'Apart from this.'

'We'll open a café, show art, learn to surf.'

He kisses me on the tip of my hipbone. 'What about Thailand?' he says.

I wrinkle my nose. 'Too many gap-year kids. Sicily,' I say. 'The Egadi islands. We'll open a beach bar, go fishing . . .'

He laughs again and then moves his body up over mine and kisses me. 'Irresistible,' he mumbles. 'You're irresistible.'

I want to laugh, I want to say it out loud: *See? I win! I told you it wasn't the last time, it's never the last time.* I bite my lip and close my eyes. I was right, I knew I was, but it won't do me any good to say it. I enjoy my victory silently; I take pleasure in it almost as much as in his touch.

Afterwards, he talks to me in a way he hasn't done before.

Usually I'm the one doing all the talking, but this time he opens up. He talks about feeling empty, about the family he left behind, about the woman before me and the one before that, the one who wrecked his head and left him hollow. I don't believe in soul-mates, but there's an understanding between us which I just haven't felt before, or at least, not for a long time. It comes from shared experience, from knowing how it feels to be broken.

Hollowness: that I understand. I'm starting to believe that there isn't anything you can do to fix it. That's what I've taken from the therapy sessions: the holes in your life are permanent. You have to grow around them, like tree roots around concrete; you mould yourself through the gaps. All these things I know, but I don't say them out loud, not now.

'When will we go?' I ask him, but he doesn't answer me, and I fall asleep, and he's gone when I wake up.

Friday, 8 March 2013

Morning

Scott brings me coffee on the terrace.

'You slept last night,' he says, bending down to kiss my head. He's standing behind me, hands on my shoulders, warm and solid. I lean my head back against his body, close my eyes and listen to the train rumbling along the track until it stops just in front of the house. When we first moved here, Scott used to wave at the passengers, which always made me laugh. His grip tightens a little on my shoulders; he leans forward and kisses my neck.

'You slept,' he says again. 'You must be feeling better.'

'I am,' I say.

'Do you think it's worked, then?' he asks. 'The therapy?'

'Do I think I'm fixed, do you mean?'

'Not fixed,' he says, and I can hear the hurt in his voice. 'I didn't mean . . .'

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'I know.' I lift my hand to his and squeeze. 'I was only joking. I think it's a process. It's not simple, you know? I don't know if there will be a time when I can say that it's worked. That I'm better.'

There's a silence, and he grips just a little harder. 'So you want to keep going?' he asks, and I tell him I do.

There was a time when I thought he could be everything, he could be enough. I thought that for years. I loved him completely. I still do. But I don't want this any longer. The only time I feel like me is on those secret, febrile afternoons like yesterday, when I come alive in all that heat and half-light. Who's to say that once I run, I'll find that isn't enough? Who's to say I won't end up feeling exactly the way I do right now – not safe, but stifled? Maybe I'll want to run again, and again, and eventually I'll end up back by those old tracks, because there's nowhere left to go. Maybe. Maybe not. You have to take the risk, don't you?

I go downstairs to say goodbye as he's heading off to work. He slips his arms around my waist and kisses the top of my head.

'Love you, Megs,' he murmurs, and I feel horrible then, like the worst person in the world. I can't wait for him to shut the door because I know I'm going to cry.

RACHEL

Friday, 19 July 2013

Morning

The 8.04 is almost deserted. The windows are open and the air is cool after yesterday's storm. Megan has been missing for around 133 hours, and I feel better than I have in months. When I looked at myself in the mirror this morning, I could see the difference in my face: my skin is clearer, my eyes brighter. I feel lighter. I'm sure I haven't actually lost an ounce, but I don't feel encumbered. I feel like myself – the myself I used to be.

There's been no word from Scott. I scoured the internet and there was no news of an arrest, either, so I imagine he just ignored my email. I'm disappointed, but I suppose it was to be expected. Gaskill rang this morning, just as I was leaving the house. He asked me whether I would be able to come by the station today. I was terrified for a moment, but then I heard him say in his quiet, mild tone that he just wanted me to look at a couple of pictures. I asked him whether Scott Hipwell had been arrested.

'No one has been arrested, Ms Watson,' he said.

'But the man, the one who's under caution . . . ?'

'I'm not at liberty to say.'

His manner of speaking is so calming, so reassuring, it makes me like him again.

I spent yesterday evening sitting on the sofa in jogging bottoms

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and a T-shirt, making lists of things to do, possible strategies. For example, I could hang around Witney station at rush hour, wait until I see the red-haired man from Saturday night again. I could invite him for a drink and see where it leads, whether he saw anything, what he knows about that night. The danger is that I might see Anna or Tom, they would report me and I would get into trouble (more trouble) with the police. The other danger is that I might make myself vulnerable. I still have the trace of an argument in my head – I may have physical evidence of it on my scalp and lip. What if this is the man who hurt me? The fact that he smiled and waved doesn't mean anything, he could be a psychopath for all I know. But I can't see him as a psychopath. I can't explain it, but I warm to him.

I could contact Scott again. But I need to give him a reason to talk to me, and I'm worried that whatever I say will make me look like a mad woman. He might even think I had something to do with Megan's disappearance, he could report me to the police. I could end up in real trouble.

I could try hypnosis. I'm pretty sure it won't help me remember anything, but I'm curious about it anyway. It can't hurt, can it?

I was still sitting there making notes and going over the news stories I'd printed out when Cathy came home. She'd been to the cinema with Damien. She was obviously pleasantly surprised to find me sober, but she was wary, too, because we haven't really spoken since the police came round on Tuesday. I told her that I hadn't had a drink for three days, and she gave me a hug.

'I'm so glad you're getting yourself back to normal!' she chirruped, as though she knows what my baseline is.

'That thing with the police,' I said, 'it was a misunderstanding. There's no problem with me and Tom, and I don't know anything about that missing girl. You don't have to worry about it.' She gave me another hug and made us both a cup of tea. I thought about taking advantage of the goodwill I'd engendered and telling her about the job situation, but I didn't want to spoil her evening.

She was still in a good mood with me this morning. She hugged me again as I was getting ready to leave the house.

'I'm so pleased for you, Rach,' she said. 'Getting yourself sorted. You've had me worried.' Then she told me that she was going to spend the weekend at Damien's, and the first thing I thought was that I'm going to get home tonight and have a drink without anyone judging me.

Evening

The bitter tang of quinine, that's what I love about a cold gin and tonic. Tonic water should be by Schweppes and it should come out of a glass bottle, not a plastic one. These pre-mixed things aren't right at all, but needs must. I know I shouldn't be doing this, but I've been building up to it all day. It's not just the anticipation of solitude though, it's the excitement, the adrenaline. I'm buzzing, my skin is tingling. I've had a good day.

I spent an hour alone with Detective Inspector Gaskill this morning. I was taken in to see him straight away when I arrived at the station. We sat in his office, not in the interview room this time. He offered me coffee and when I accepted I was surprised to find that he got up and made it for me himself. He had a kettle and some Nescafé on top of a fridge in the corner of the office. He apologized for not having sugar.

I liked being in his company. I liked watching his hands move – he isn't expressive, but he moves things around a lot. I hadn't noticed this before because in the interview room there wasn't much for him to move around. Here in his office he constantly altered the position of his coffee mug, his stapler, a jar of pens, he shuffled papers into neater piles. He has large hands and long fingers with neatly manicured nails. No rings.

It felt different this morning. I didn't feel like a suspect, someone he was trying to catch out. I felt useful. I felt most useful when he took one of his folders and laid it in front of me, showing me

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a series of photographs. Scott Hipwell, three men I'd never seen before, and then B.

I wasn't sure at first. I stared at the picture, trying to conjure up the image of the man I saw with her that day, his head bent as he stooped to embrace her.

'That's him,' I said. 'I think that's him.'

'You're not sure?'

'I think that's him.'

He withdrew the picture and scrutinized it himself for a moment. 'You saw them kissing, that's what you said? Last Friday, was it? A week ago?'

'Yes, that's right. Friday morning. They were outside, in the garden.'

'And there's no way you could have misinterpreted what you saw? It wasn't a hug, say, or a . . . a platonic kind of kiss?'

'No, it wasn't. It was a proper kiss. It was . . . romantic.'

I thought I saw his lips flicker then, as though he were about to smile.

'Who is he?' I asked Gaskill. 'Is he . . . Do you think she's with him?' He didn't reply, just shook his head a little. 'Is this . . . Have I helped? Have I been helpful at all?'

'Yes, Ms Watson. You've been helpful. Thank you for coming in.'

We shook hands and for a second he placed his left hand on my right shoulder lightly, and I wanted to turn and kiss it. It's been a while since anyone touched me with anything approaching tenderness. Well, apart from Cathy.

Gaskill ushered me out of the door and into the main, open-plan part of the office. There were perhaps a dozen police officers in there. One or two shot me sideways glances, there might have been a flicker of interest or disdain, I couldn't be sure. We walked through the office and into the corridor and then I saw him walking towards me, with Riley at his side: Scott Hipwell. He was coming through the main entrance. His head was down but I knew right away that it was him. He looked up and nodded an

acknowledgement to Gaskill, then he glanced at me. For just a second our eyes met and I could swear that he recognized me. I thought of that morning when I saw him on the terrace, when he was looking down at the track, when I could feel him looking at me. We passed each other in the corridor. He was so close to me I could have touched him – he was beautiful in the flesh, hollowed out and coiled like a spring, nervous energy radiating off him. As I got to the main hallway I turned to look at him, sure I could feel his eyes on me, but when I looked back it was Riley who was watching me.

I took the train into London and went to the library. I read every article I could find about the case, but learned nothing more. I looked for hypnotherapists in Ashbury, but didn't take it any further – it's expensive and it's unclear whether it actually helps with memory recovery. But reading the stories of those who claimed that they had recovered memories through hypnotherapy, I realized that I was more afraid of success than failure. I'm afraid not just of what I might learn about that Saturday night, but so much more. I'm not sure I could bear to relive the stupid, awful things I've done, to hear the words I said in spite, to remember the look on Tom's face as I said them. I'm too afraid to venture into that darkness.

I thought about sending Scott another email, but there's really no need. The morning's meeting with Detective Inspector Gaskill proved to me that the police are taking me seriously. I have no further role to play, I have to accept that now. And I can feel at least that I may have helped, because I cannot believe it could be a coincidence that Megan disappeared the day after I saw her with that man.

With a joyful click, *fizz*, I open the second can of G&T and realize, with a rush, that I haven't thought about Tom all day. Until now, anyway. I've been thinking about Scott, about Gaskill, about B, about the man on the train. Tom has been relegated to fifth place. I sip my drink and feel that at last I have something to celebrate. I know that I'm going to be better, that I'm going to be happy. It won't be long.

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

Saturday, 20 July 2013

Morning

I never learn. I wake with a crushing sensation of wrongness, of shame, and I know immediately that I've done something stupid. I go through my awful, achingly familiar ritual of trying to remember exactly what I did. I sent an email. That's what it was.

At some point last night, Tom got promoted back up the list of men I think about, and I sent him an email. My laptop is on the floor next to my bed; it sits there, a squat, accusatory presence. I step over it as I get up to go to the bathroom. I drink water directly from the tap, giving myself a cursory glance in the mirror.

I don't look well. Still, three days off isn't bad, and I'll start again today. I stand in the shower for ages, gradually reducing the water temperature, making it cooler and cooler until it's properly cold. You can't step directly into a cold stream of water, it's too shocking, too brutal, but if you get there gradually, you hardly notice it; it's like boiling a frog in reverse. The cool water soothes my skin; it dulls the burning pain of the cuts on my head and above my eye.

I take my laptop downstairs and make a cup of tea. There's a chance, a faint one, that I wrote an email to Tom and didn't send it. I take a deep breath and open my Gmail account. I'm relieved to see I have no messages. But when I click on the Sent folder, there it is: I have written to him, he just hasn't replied. Yet. The email was sent just after eleven last night; I'd been drinking for a good few hours by then. That adrenaline and booze buzz I had earlier on would have been long gone. I click on the message.

Could you please tell your wife to stop lying to the police about me? Pretty low, don't you think, trying to get me into trouble? Telling police I'm obsessed with her and her ugly brat? She needs to get over herself. Tell her to leave me the fuck alone.

I close my eyes and snap the laptop shut. I am cringing, literally, my entire body folding into itself. I want to be smaller; I want to disappear. I'm frightened, too, because if Tom decides to show this to the police, I could be in real trouble. If Anna is collecting evidence that I am vindictive and obsessive, this could be a key piece in her dossier. And why did I mention the little girl? What sort of person does that? What sort of person thinks like that? I don't bear her any ill will – I couldn't think badly of a child, any child, and especially not Tom's child. I don't understand myself; I don't understand the person I've become. God, he must hate me. *I hate me* – that version of me anyway, the version who wrote that email last night. She doesn't even feel like me, because I am not like that. I am not hateful.

Am I? I try not to think of the worst days, but the memories crowd into my head at times like this. Another fight, towards the end: waking, post-party, post-blackout, Tom telling me how I'd been the night before, embarrassing him again, insulting the wife of a colleague of his, shouting at her for flirting with my husband. 'I don't want to go anywhere with you any more,' he told me. 'You ask me why I never invite friends round, why I don't like going to the pub with you any more. You honestly want to know why? It's because of you. Because I'm ashamed of you.'

I pick up my handbag and my keys. I'm going to the Londis down the road. I don't care that it's not yet nine o'clock in the morning, I'm frightened and I don't want to have to think. If I take some painkillers and have a drink now, I can put myself out, I can sleep all day. I'll face it later. I get to the front door, my hand poised above the handle, then I stop. I could apologize. If I apologize right now, I might be able to salvage something. I might be able to persuade him not to show the message to Anna or to the police. It wouldn't be the first time he'd protected me from her.

That day last summer, when I went to Tom and Anna's, it didn't happen exactly the way I told the police it had. I didn't ring the doorbell, for starters. I wasn't sure what I wanted – I'm still not

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

sure what I intended. I did go down the pathway and over the fence. It was quiet, I couldn't hear anything. I went up to the sliding doors and looked in. It's true that Anna was sleeping on the sofa. I didn't call out, to her or to Tom. I didn't want to wake her. The baby wasn't crying, she was fast asleep in her carrycot, at her mother's side. I picked her up and took her outside, as quickly as I could. I remember running with her towards the fence, the baby starting to wake and to grizzle a little. I don't know what I thought I was doing. I wasn't going to hurt her. I got to the fence, holding her tightly against my chest. She was crying properly now, starting to scream. I was bouncing her and shushing her and then I heard another noise, a train coming, and I turned my back to the fence and I saw her – Anna – hurtling towards me, her mouth open like a gaping wound, her lips moving, but I couldn't hear what she was saying.

She took the child from me and I tried to run away, but I tripped and fell. She was standing over me, screaming at me, she told me to stay put or she'd call the police. She rang Tom and he came home and sat with her in the living room. She was crying hysterically, she still wanted to phone the police, she wanted to have me arrested for kidnapping. Tom calmed her down, he begged her to let it go, to let me go. He saved me from her. Afterwards he drove me home, and when he dropped me off he took my hand. I thought it was a gesture of kindness, of reassurance, but he squeezed tighter and tighter and tighter until I cried out, and his face was red when he told me that he would kill me if I ever did anything to harm his daughter.

I don't know what I intended to do that day. I still don't. At the door, I hesitate, my fingers grasped around the handle. I bite down hard on my lip. I know that if I start drinking now, I will feel better for an hour or two and worse for six or seven. I let go of the handle and walk back into the living room, and I open my laptop again. I have to apologize, I have to beg forgiveness. I log back into my email account and see that I have one new message. It isn't from Tom. It's from Scott Hipwell.

RACHEL

Dear Rachel,

Thank you for contacting me. I don't remember Megan mentioning you to me, but she had a lot of gallery regulars – I'm not very good with names. I would like to talk to you about what you know. Please telephone me on 07583 123657 as soon as possible.

Regards,

Scott Hipwell.

For an instant, I imagine that he's sent the email to the wrong address. This message is intended for someone else. It's just the briefest of moments, and then I remember. I remember. Sitting on the sofa, halfway through the second bottle, I realized that I didn't want my part to be over. I wanted to be at the heart of it.

So I wrote to him.

I scroll down from his email to mine.

Dear Scott,

Sorry for contacting you again, but I feel it's important that we talk. I'm not sure if Megan ever mentioned me to you – I'm a friend from the gallery – I used to live in Witney. I think I have information that would interest you. Please email me back on this address.

Rachel Watson.

I can feel the heat come to my face, my stomach a pit of acid. Yesterday – sensible, clear-headed, right-thinking – I decided I must accept that my part in this story was over. But my better angels lost again, defeated by drink, by the person I am when I drink. Drunk Rachel sees no consequences, she is either excessively expansive and optimistic or wrapped up in hate. She has no past, no future. She exists purely in the moment. Drunk Rachel – wanting to be part of the story, needing a way to persuade Scott to talk to her – she lied. *I* lied.

I want to drag knives over my skin, just so that I can feel

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something other than shame, but I'm not even brave enough to do that. I start writing to Tom, writing and deleting, writing and deleting, trying to find ways to ask forgiveness for the things I said last night. If I had to write down every transgression for which I should apologize to Tom, I could fill a book.

Evening

A week ago, almost exactly a week ago, Megan Hipwell walked out of number fifteen, Blenheim Road and disappeared. No one has seen her since. Neither her phone nor her bank cards have been used since Saturday either. When I read that in a news story earlier today, I started to cry. I am ashamed now of the secret thoughts I had. Megan is not a mystery to be solved, she is not a figure who wanders into the tracking shot at the beginning of a film, beautiful, ethereal, insubstantial. She is not a cipher. She is real.

I am on the train, and I'm going to her home. I'm going to meet her husband.

I had to phone him. The damage was done. I couldn't just ignore the email – he would tell the police. Wouldn't he? I would, in his position, if a stranger contacted me, claiming to have information, and then disappeared. He might have called the police already; they might be waiting for me when I get there.

Sitting here, in my usual seat, though not on my usual day, I feel as though I am driving off a cliff. It felt the same this morning when I dialled his number, like falling through the dark, not knowing when you're going to hit the ground. He spoke to me in a low voice, as though there were someone else in the room, someone he didn't want to overhear.

'Can we talk in person?' he asked.

'I . . . no. I don't think so . . .'

'Please?'

I hesitated just for a moment, and then I agreed.

'Could you come to the house? Not now, my . . . there are

people here. This evening?’ He gave me the address, which I pretended to note down.

‘Thank you for contacting me,’ he said, and he hung up.

I knew as I was agreeing that it wasn’t a good idea. What I know about Scott, from the papers, is almost nothing. What I know from my own observations, I don’t *really* know. I don’t know anything about Scott. I know things about Jason – who, I have to keep reminding myself, doesn’t exist. All I know for sure – for absolutely certain – is that Scott’s wife has been missing for a week. I know that he is probably a suspect. And I know, because I saw that kiss, that he has a motive to kill her. Of course, he might not know that he has a motive, but . . . Oh, I’ve tied myself up in knots thinking about it, but how could I pass up the opportunity to approach that house, the one I’ve observed a hundred times from the trackside, from the street? To walk up to his front door, to go inside, to sit in his kitchen, on his terrace, where they sat, where I watched them?

It was too tempting. Now I sit on the train, my arms wrapped around myself, hands jammed against my sides to stop them from trembling, like an excited child caught up in an adventure. I was so glad to have a purpose that I stopped thinking about the reality. I stopped thinking about Megan.

I’m thinking about her now. I have to convince Scott that I knew her – a little, not a lot. That way, he’ll believe me when I tell him that I saw her with another man. If I admit to lying right away, he’ll never trust me. So I try to imagine what it would have been like to drop by the gallery, chat with her over a coffee. Does she drink coffee? We would talk about art, perhaps, or yoga, or our husbands. I don’t know anything about art, I’ve never done yoga. I don’t have a husband. And she betrayed hers.

I think of the things her real friends said about her: *wonderful, funny, beautiful, warm-hearted. Loved.* She made a mistake. It happens. We are none of us perfect.

ANNA

Saturday, 20 July 2013

Morning

EVIE WAKES JUST before six. I get out of bed, slip into the nursery and pick her up. I feed her and take her back to bed with me.

When I wake again, Tom's not at my side, but I can hear his footfalls on the stairs. He's singing, low and tuneless, *Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you* . . . I hadn't even thought about it earlier, I'd completely forgotten; I didn't think of anything but fetching my little girl and getting back to bed. Now I'm giggling before I'm even properly awake. I open my eyes and Evie's smiling too, and when I look up, Tom's standing at the foot of the bed, holding a tray. He's wearing my Orla Kiely apron and nothing else.

'Breakfast in bed, birthday girl,' he says. He places the tray at the end of the bed and scoots round to kiss me.

I open my presents. I have a pretty silver bracelet with onyx inlay from Evie, and a black silk teddy and matching knickers from Tom, and I can't stop smiling. He climbs back into bed and we lie with Evie between us. She has her fingers curled tightly around his forefinger and I have hold of her perfect pink foot, and I feel as though fireworks are going off in my chest. It's impossible, this much love.

A while later, when Evie gets bored of lying there, I get her up and we go downstairs and leave Tom to snooze. He deserves it. I

potter round, tidying up a bit. I drink my coffee outside on the patio, watching the half-empty trains rattle past, and think about lunch. It's hot – too hot for a roast, but I'll do one anyway, because Tom loves roast beef, and we can have ice cream afterwards to cool us down. I just need to pop out to get that Merlot he likes, so I get Evie ready, strap her in the buggy and we stroll down to the shops.

Everyone told me I was insane to agree to move into Tom's house. But then everyone thought I was insane to get involved with a married man, let alone a married man whose wife was highly unstable, and I've proved them wrong on that one. No matter how much trouble she causes, Tom and Evie are worth it. But they were right about the house. On days like today, with the sun shining, when you walk down our little street – tree-lined and tidy, not quite a cul-de-sac, but with the same sense of community – it could be perfect. Its pavements are busy with mothers just like me, with dogs on leads and toddlers on scooters. It could be ideal. It could be, if you weren't able to hear the screeching brakes of the trains. It could be, so long as you didn't turn around and look back down towards number fifteen.

When I get back, Tom is sitting at the dining-room table looking at something on the computer. He's wearing shorts but no shirt; I can see the muscles moving under his skin when he moves. It still gives me butterflies to look at him. I say hello, but he's in a world of his own and when I run my fingertips over his shoulder he jumps. The laptop snaps shut.

'Hey,' he says, getting to his feet. He's smiling but he looks tired, worried. He takes Evie from me without looking me in the eye.

'What?' I ask. 'What is it?'

'Nothing,' he says, and he turns away towards the window, bouncing Evie on his hip.

'Tom, what?'

'It's nothing.' He turns back and gives me a look and I know what he's going to say before he says it. 'Rachel. Another email.' He shakes his head and he looks so wounded, so upset,

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

and I hate it, I can't bear it. Sometimes I want to kill that woman.

'What's she said?'

He just shakes his head again. 'It doesn't matter. It's just . . . the usual. Bullshit.'

'I'm sorry,' I say, and I don't ask what bullshit exactly, because I know he won't want to tell me. He hates upsetting me with this stuff.

'It's OK. It's nothing. Just the usual pissed nonsense.'

'God, is she ever going to go away? Is she ever going to just let us be happy?'

He comes over to me and, with our daughter between us, kisses me. 'We *are* happy,' he says. 'We are.'

Evening

We *are* happy. We had lunch and lay out on the lawn, and then when it got too hot we came inside and ate ice cream while Tom watched the Grand Prix. Evie and I made playdough, and she ate quite a bit of that, too. I think about what's going on down the road and I think about how lucky I am, how I got everything that I wanted. When I look at Tom, I thank God that he found me, too, that I was there to rescue him from that woman. She'd have driven him mad in the end, I really think that – she'd have ground him down, she'd have made him into something he's not.

Tom's taken Evie upstairs to give her a bath. I can hear her squealing with delight from here and I'm smiling again – the smile has barely fallen from my lips all day. I do the washing-up, tidy up the living room, think about dinner. Something light. It's funny, because a few years ago I would have hated the idea of staying in and cooking on my birthday, but now it's perfect, it's the way it should be. Just the three of us.

I pick up Evie's toys, scattered around the living-room floor, and return them to their trunk. I'm looking forward to putting her down early tonight, to slipping into that teddy Tom bought me. It

ANNA

won't be dark for hours yet, but I light the candles on the mantelpiece and open the second bottle of Merlot to let it breathe. I'm just leaning over the sofa to pull the curtains shut when I see a woman, her head bent to her chest, scuttling along the pavement on the opposite side of the street. She doesn't look up, but it's her, I'm sure of it. I lean further forward, my heart hammering in my chest, trying to get a better look, but the angle's wrong and I can't see her now.

I turn, ready to bolt out of the front door to chase her down the street, but Tom's standing there in the doorway, Evie wrapped in a towel in his arms.

'Are you OK?' he asks. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' I say, stuffing my hands into my pockets so that he can't see them shaking. 'Nothing's wrong. Nothing at all.'

RACHEL

Sunday, 21 July 2013

Morning

I WAKE WITH MY head full of him. It doesn't seem real, none of it does. My skin prickles. I would dearly love to have a drink, but I can't. I need to keep a clear head. For Megan. For Scott.

I made an effort yesterday. I washed my hair and put some make-up on. I wore the only jeans I still fit into, with a cotton print blouse and sandals with a low heel. I looked OK. I kept telling myself that it was ridiculous to care about my appearance, because the last thing Scott was going to be thinking about was what I looked like, but I couldn't help myself. It was the first time I was ever going to be around him, it mattered to me. Much more than it should.

I took the train, leaving Ashbury around six thirty, and I was in Witney just after seven. I took that walk along Roseberry Avenue, past the underpass. I didn't look this time, couldn't bear to. I hurried past number twenty-three, Tom and Anna's place, chin to chest and sunglasses on, praying they wouldn't see me. It was quiet, no one around, a couple of cars driving carefully down the centre of the road between ranks of parked vehicles. It's a sleepy little street, tidy and affluent, with lots of young families; they're all having their dinner around seven o'clock, or sitting on the sofa, mum and dad with the little ones squeezed between them, watching *X-Factor*.

RACHEL

From number twenty-three to number fifteen can't be more than fifty or sixty paces, but that journey stretched out, it seemed to take an age; my legs were leaden, my footing unsteady, as though I were drunk, as though I might just slip off the pavement.

Scott opened the door almost before I'd finished knocking, my trembling hand still raised as he appeared in the doorway, looming ahead of me, filling the space.

'Rachel?' he asked, looking down at me, unsmiling. I nodded. He offered his hand and I took it. He gestured for me to enter the house, but for a moment I didn't move. I was afraid of him. Up close he is physically intimidating, tall and broad-shouldered, his arms and chest well defined. His hands are huge. It crossed my mind that he could crush me – my neck, my ribcage – without much effort.

I moved past him into the hallway, my arm brushing against his as I did, and felt a flush rising to my face. He smelled of old sweat, and his dark hair was matted against his head as though he hadn't showered in a while.

It was in the living room that the *déjà vu* hit me, so strong it was almost frightening. I recognized the fireplace flanked by alcoves on the far wall, the way the light streamed in from the street through slanted blinds; I knew that when I turned to my left there would be glass and green and beyond that the railway line. I turned and there was the kitchen table, the French doors behind it and the lush patch of lawn. I knew this house. I felt dizzy, I wanted to sit down; I thought about that black hole last Saturday night, all those lost hours.

It didn't mean anything, of course. I know that house, but not because I've been there. I know it because it's exactly the same as number twenty-three: a hallway leads to the stairs, and on the right-hand side is the living room, knocked through into the kitchen. The patio and the garden are familiar to me because I've seen them from the train. I didn't go upstairs, but I know that if I had, there would have been a landing with a large sash window

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on it, and that if you climbed through that window you would find yourself on the makeshift roof terrace. I know that there will be two bedrooms, the master with two large windows looking out on to the street and a smaller room at the back, overlooking the garden. Just because I know that house inside and out does not mean that I've been there before.

Still, I was trembling when Scott showed me into the kitchen. He offered me a cup of tea. I sat down at the kitchen table while he boiled the kettle, dropped a teabag into a mug and slopped boiling water over the counter, muttering to himself under his breath. There was a sharp smell of antiseptic in the room, but Scott himself was a mess, a sweat patch on the back of his T-shirt, his jeans hanging loose on his hips as though they were too big for him. I wondered when was the last time he had eaten.

He placed the mug of tea in front of me and sat on the opposite side of the kitchen table, his hands folded in front of him. The silence stretched out, filling the space between us, the whole room; it rang in my ears, and I felt hot and uncomfortable, my mind suddenly blank. I didn't know what I was doing there. Why on earth had I come? In the distance, I heard a low rumbling – the train was coming. It felt comforting, that old sound.

'You're a friend of Megan's?' he said at last.

Hearing her name from his lips brought a lump to my throat. I stared down at the table, my hands wrapped tightly around the mug.

'Yes,' I said. 'I know her . . . a little. From the gallery.'

He looked at me, waiting, expectant. I could see the muscle flex in his jaw as he clenched his teeth. I searched for words that wouldn't come. I should have prepared better.

'Have you had any news?' I asked. His gaze held mine and for a second I felt afraid. I'd said the wrong thing; it was none of my business whether there was any news. He would be angry, he'd ask me to leave.

'No,' he said. 'What was it that you wanted to tell me?'

The train rolled slowly past and I looked out towards the tracks. I felt dizzy, as though I were having an out-of-body experience, as though I were looking out at myself.

'You said in your email that you wanted to tell me something about Megan.' The pitch of his voice raised a little.

I took a deep breath. I felt awful. I was acutely aware that what I was about to say was going to make everything worse, was going to hurt him.

'I saw her with someone,' I said. I just blurted it out, blunt and loud with no build-up, no context.

He stared at me. 'When? You saw her on Saturday night? Have you told the police?'

'No, it was Friday morning,' I said, and his shoulders slumped.

'But . . . she was fine on Friday. Why is that important?' That pulse in his jaw went again, he was becoming angry. 'You saw her with . . . you saw her with who? With a man?'

'Yes, I—'

'What did he look like?' He got to his feet, his body blocking the light. 'Have you told the police?' he asked again.

'I did, but I'm not sure they took me very seriously,' I said.

'Why?'

'I just . . . I don't know . . . I thought you should know.'

He leaned forward, his hands on the table, clenched into fists.

'What are you saying? You saw her where? What was she doing?'

Another deep breath. 'She was . . . out on your lawn,' I said. 'Just there.' I pointed out to the garden. 'She . . . I saw her from the train.' The look of incredulity on his face was unmistakable. 'I take the train into London from Ashbury every day. I go right past here. I saw her, she was with someone. And it . . . it wasn't you.'

'How do you know? . . . Friday morning? Friday – the day before she went missing?'

'Yes.'

'I wasn't here,' he said. 'I was away. I was at a conference in Birmingham, I got back on Friday evening.' Spots of colour

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appeared high on his cheeks, his scepticism giving way to something else. 'So you saw her, on the lawn, with someone? And . . .'

'She kissed him,' I said. I had to get it out eventually. I had to tell him. 'They were kissing.'

He straightened up, his hands, still balled into fists, hanging at his sides. The spots of colour on his cheeks grew darker, angrier.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I'm so sorry. I know this is a terrible thing to hear . . .'

He held up his hand, waved me away. Contemptuous. He wasn't interested in my sympathy.

I know how that feels. Sitting there, I remembered with almost perfect clarity how it felt when I sat in my own kitchen, five doors down, while Lara, my former best friend, sat opposite me, her fat toddler squirming on her lap. I remember her telling me how sorry she was that my marriage was over, I remember losing my temper at her platitudes. She knew nothing of my pain. I told her to piss off and she told me not to speak like that in front of her child. I haven't seen her since.

'What did he look like, this man you saw her with?' Scott asked. He was standing with his back to me, looking out on to the lawn.

'He was tall – taller than you, maybe. Dark-skinned. I think he might have been Asian. Indian – something like that.'

'And they were kissing, out here in the garden?'

'Yes.'

He gave a long sigh. 'Jesus, I need a drink.' He turned to face me. 'Would you like a beer?'

I did, I wanted a drink desperately, but I said no. I watched as he fetched himself a bottle from the fridge, opened it, took a long slug. I could almost feel the cold liquid sliding down my throat as I watched him; my hand ached for want of a glass. Scott leaned against the counter, his head bent almost to his chest.

I felt wretched then. I wasn't helping, I had just made him feel worse, increased his pain. I was intruding on his grief, it was

wrong. I should never have gone to see him. I should never have lied. Obviously, I should never have lied.

I was just getting to my feet when he spoke. 'It could . . . I don't know. It might be a good thing, mightn't it? It could mean that she's all right. She's just . . .' He gave a hollow little laugh. 'She's just run off with someone.' He brushed a tear from his cheek with the back of his hand and my heart screwed up into a tight little ball. 'But the thing is, I can't believe she wouldn't call.' He looked at me as though I held the answers, as though I would know. 'Surely she would call me, wouldn't she? She would know how panicked . . . how desperate I would be. She's not vindictive like that, is she?'

He was talking to me like someone he could trust – like Megan's friend – and I knew that it was wrong, but it felt good. He took another swig of his beer and turned towards the garden. I followed his gaze to a little pile of stones against the fence, a rockery long since started and never finished. He raised the bottle halfway to his lips again, and then he stopped. He turned to face me.

'You saw Megan from the train?' he asked. 'So you were . . . just looking out of the window and there she was, a woman you happen to know?' The atmosphere in the room had changed. He wasn't sure any more, whether I was an ally, whether I was to be trusted. Doubt passed over his face like a shadow.

'Yes, I . . . I know where she lives,' I said, and I regretted the words the moment they came out of my mouth. 'Where *you* live, I mean. I've been here before. A long time ago. So sometimes I'd look out for her when I went past.' He was staring at me; I could feel the heat rising to my face. 'She was often out there.'

He placed his empty bottle down on the counter, took a couple of steps towards me and sat down in the seat nearest to me, at the table.

'So you knew Megan well then? I mean, well enough to come round to the house?'

I could feel the blood pulsing in my neck, sweat at the base of

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my spine, the sickening rush of adrenaline. I shouldn't have said that, shouldn't have complicated the lie.

'It was just one time, but I . . . I know where the house is because I used to live nearby.' He raised his eyebrows at me. 'Down the road. Number twenty-three.'

He nodded slowly. 'Watson,' he said. 'So you're, what, Tom's ex-wife?'

'Yes. I moved out a couple of years ago.'

'But you still visited Megan's gallery?'

'Sometimes.'

'And when you saw her, what did you . . . Did she talk about personal things, about me?' His voice was husky. 'About anyone else?'

I shook my head. 'No, no. It was usually just . . . passing the time, you know.' There was a long silence. The heat in the room seemed to build suddenly, the smell of antiseptic rising from every surface. I felt faint. To my right there was a side table adorned with photographs in frames. Megan smiled out at me, cheerfully accusing.

'I should go now,' I said. 'I've taken up enough of your time.' I started to get up, but he reached an arm out and placed his hand on my wrist, his eyes never leaving my face.

'Don't go just yet,' he said softly. I didn't stand up, but I withdrew my hand from beneath his; it felt uncomfortably as though I were being restrained. 'This man,' he said. 'This man you saw her with – do you think you'd recognize him again? If you saw him?'

I couldn't say that I already *had* identified the man to the police. My whole rationale for approaching him had been that the police hadn't taken my story seriously. If I admitted the truth, the trust would be gone. So I lied again.

'I'm not sure,' I said. 'But I think I might.' I waited a moment, and then I went on. 'In the newspapers, there was a quote from a friend of Megan's. His name was Rajesh. I was wondering if—'

Scott was already shaking his head. 'Rajesh Gujral? I can't see it.'

He's one of the artists who used to exhibit at the gallery. He's a nice enough guy, but . . . He's married, he's got kids.' As if that meant something. 'Wait a second,' he said, getting to his feet. 'I think there might be a picture of him somewhere.'

He disappeared upstairs. I felt my shoulders drop and realized that I'd been sitting rigid with tension since I arrived. I looked over at the photographs again: Megan in a sundress on a beach; a close-up of her face, her eyes a startling blue. Just Megan. No pictures of the two of them together.

Scott reappeared, holding a pamphlet which he presented to me. It was a leaflet, advertising a show at the gallery. He turned it over. 'There,' he said, 'that's Rajesh.'

The man was standing next to a colourful abstract painting: he was older, bearded, short, stocky. It wasn't the man I had seen, the man I had identified to the police. 'It's not him,' I said. Scott stood at my side, staring down at the pamphlet, before abruptly turning and marching out of the room and up the stairs again. A few moments later, he came back with a laptop and sat down at the kitchen table.

'I think . . .' he said, opening the machine and turning it on, 'I think I might . . .' He fell silent and I watched him, his face a picture of concentration, the muscle in his jaw locked. 'Megan was seeing a therapist,' he told me. 'His name is . . . Abdic. Kamal Abdic. He's not Asian, he's from Serbia, or Bosnia, somewhere like that. He's dark-skinned though. He could pass for Indian from a distance.' He tapped away at the computer. 'There's a website, I think. I'm sure there is. I think there's a picture . . .'

He spun the laptop round so that I could see the screen. I leaned forward to get a closer look. 'That's him,' I said. 'That's definitely him.'

Scott snapped the laptop shut. For a long time, he didn't say anything. He sat with his elbows on the table, his forehead resting on his fingertips, his arms trembling.

'She was having anxiety attacks,' he said at last. 'Trouble

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sleeping, things like that. It started last year some time. I don't remember when exactly.' He talked without looking at me, as though he were talking to himself, as though he'd forgotten I was there at all. 'I was the one who suggested she talk to someone. I was the one who encouraged her to go, because I didn't seem to be able to help her.' His voice cracked a little then. 'I couldn't help her. And she told me that she'd had similar problems in the past and that eventually they'd go away, but I made her . . . I *persuaded* her to go to the doctor. That guy was recommended to her.' He gave a little cough to clear his throat. 'The therapy seemed to be helping. She was happier.' He gave a short, sad laugh. 'Now I know why.'

I reached out my hand to give him a pat on the arm, a gesture of comfort. Abruptly, he drew away and got to his feet. 'You should go,' he said brusquely. 'My mother will be here soon – she won't leave me alone for more than an hour or two.' At the door, just as I was leaving, he caught hold of my arm.

'Have I seen you somewhere before?' he asked.

For a moment, I thought about saying, *You might have done. You might have seen me at the police station, or here on the street. I was here on Saturday night.* I shook my head. 'No, I don't think so.'

I walked away towards the train station as quickly as I could. About halfway along the street, I turned to look back. He was still standing there in the doorway, watching me.

Evening

I've been checking my email obsessively, but I've heard nothing from Tom. How much better life must have been for jealous drunks before emails and texts and mobile phones, before all this electronica and the traces it leaves.

There was almost nothing in the papers about Megan today. They're moving on already, the front pages devoted to the political crisis in Turkey, the four-year-old girl mauled by dogs in

Wigan, the England football team's humiliating loss to Montenegro. Megan is being forgotten, and she's only been gone a week.

Cathy invited me out to lunch. She was at a loose end because Damien has gone to visit his mother in Birmingham. She wasn't invited. They've been seeing each other for almost two years now, and she still hasn't met his mother. We went to Giraffe on the High Street, a place I loathe. Seated in the centre of a room heaving with shrieking under-fives, Cathy quizzed me about what I'd been up to. She was curious about where I was last night.

'Have you met someone?' she asked me, her eyes alight with hope. It was quite touching really.

I almost said yes, because it was the truth, but lying was easier. I told her I'd been to an AA meeting in Witney.

'Oh,' she said, embarrassed, dipping her eyes to her limp Greek salad. 'I thought you'd maybe had a little slip. On Friday.'

'Yes. It won't be plain sailing, Cathy,' I said, and I felt awful, because I think she really cares whether I get sober or not. 'But I'm doing my best.'

'If you need me to, you know, come with you . . .'

'Not at this stage,' I said. 'But thank you.'

'Well, maybe we could do something else together, like go to the gym?' she asked.

I laughed, but when I realized she was being serious I said I'd think about it.

She's just left – Damien rang to say he was back from his mother's, so she's gone round to his place. I thought about saying something to her – why do you go running to him whenever he calls? But I'm really not in a great position to give relationship advice – or any advice, come to that – and in any case I feel like a drink. (I've been thinking about it ever since we sat down in Giraffe and the spotty waiter asked if we'd like a glass of wine and Cathy said 'No, thank you' very firmly.) So I wave her off and feel the little anticipatory tingle run over my skin and I push away the

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good thoughts (*Don't do this, you're doing really well*). I'm just putting my shoes on to go to the off-licence and my phone rings. Tom. It'll be Tom. I grab the phone from my bag and look at the screen and my heart bangs like a drum.

'Hi.' There is silence, so I ask, 'Is everything OK?'

After a little pause Scott says, 'Yeah, fine. I'm OK. I just called to say thank you, for yesterday. For taking the time to let me know.'

'Oh, that's all right. You didn't need—'

'Am I disturbing you?'

'No. It's fine.' There is silence on the end of the line, so I say again, 'It's fine. Have you . . . has something happened? Did you speak to the police?'

'The family liaison officer was here this afternoon,' he says. My heart rate quickens. 'Detective Sergeant Riley. I mentioned Kamal Abdic to her. Told her that he might be worth speaking to.'

'You said . . . you told her that you'd spoken to me?' My mouth is completely dry.

'No, I didn't. I thought perhaps . . . I don't know. I thought it would be better if I came up with the name myself. I said . . . it's a lie, I know, but I said that I'd been racking my brains to think of anything significant, and that I thought it might be worth speaking to her therapist. I said that I'd had some concerns about their relationship in the past.'

I can breathe again. 'What did she say?' I ask him.

'She said they had already spoken to him, but that they would do again. She asked me lots of questions about why I hadn't mentioned him before. She's . . . I don't know. I don't trust her. She's supposed to be on my side, but all the time I feel like she's snooping, like she's trying to trip me up.'

I'm stupidly pleased that he doesn't like her either; another thing we have in common, another thread to bind us.

'I just wanted to say thank you, anyway. For coming forward. It was actually . . . it sounds odd, but it was good to talk to someone

. . . someone I'm not close to. I felt as though I could think more rationally. After you left, I kept thinking about the first time Megan went to see him – Abdic – about the way she was when she came back. There was something about her, a lightness.' He exhales loudly. 'I don't know. Maybe I'm imagining it.'

I have the same feeling I did yesterday – that he's no longer really talking to me, he's just talking. I've become a sounding board, and I'm glad of it. I'm glad to be of use to him.

'I've spent the whole day going through Megan's things again,' he says. 'I've already searched our room, the whole house, half a dozen times, looking for something, anything that would give me an indication as to where she could be. Something from him, perhaps. But there's nothing. No emails, no letters, nothing. I thought about trying to contact him, but the practice is closed today and I can't find a mobile number.'

'Is that a good idea, do you think?' I ask. 'I mean, do you not think you should just leave him to the police?' I don't want to say it out loud, but we must both be thinking it: he's dangerous. Or at least, he could be dangerous.

'I don't know, I just don't know.' There's a desperate edge to his voice that's painful to hear, but I have no comfort to offer. I can hear his breathing on the other end of the line; it sounds short, quickened, as though he's afraid. I want to ask him if he has someone there with him, but I can't: it would sound wrong, forward.

'I saw your ex today,' he says, and I can feel the hairs on my arms stand up.

'Oh?'

'Yes, I went out for the papers and saw him in the street. He asked me if I was all right, whether there was any news.'

'Oh,' I repeat, because it's all I can say, words won't form. I don't want him to speak to Tom. Tom knows that I don't know Megan Hipwell. Tom knows that I was on Blenheim Road the night she disappeared.

'I didn't mention you. I didn't . . . you know. I wasn't sure if I

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should have mentioned that I'd met you.'

'No, I don't think you should have. I don't know. It might be awkward.'

'All right,' he says.

After that, there's a long silence. I'm waiting for my heartbeat to slow. I think he's going to ring off, but then he says, 'Did she really never talk about me?'

'Of course . . . of course she did,' I say. 'I mean, we didn't talk all that often, but—'

'But you came to the house. Megan hardly ever invites people round. She's really private, protective of her own space.'

I'm searching for a reason. I wish I had never told him I'd been to the house.

'I just came round to borrow a book.'

'Really?' He doesn't believe me. She's not a reader. I think of the house – there were no books on the shelves there. 'What sort of things did she say? About me?'

'Well, she was very happy,' I say. 'With you, I mean. Your relationship.' As I'm saying this I realize how odd it sounds, but I can't be specific, and so I try to save myself. 'To be honest with you, I was having a really hard time in my marriage, so I think it was a kind of compare and contrast thing. She lit up when she spoke about you.' What an awful cliché.

'Did she?' He doesn't seem to notice, there's a note of wistfulness in his voice. 'That's so good to hear.' He pauses, and I can hear his breathing, quick and shallow, on the other end of the line. 'We had . . . we had a terrible argument,' he says. 'The night she left. I hate the idea that she was angry with me when . . .' he tails off.

'I'm sure she wasn't angry with you for long,' I say. 'Couples fight. Couples fight all the time.'

'But this was bad, it was terrible, and I can't . . . I feel like I can't tell anyone, because if I did they would look at me like I was guilty.'

There's a different quality to his voice now: haunted, saturated with guilt.

'I don't remember how it started,' he says, and immediately I don't believe him, but then I think about all the arguments I've forgotten, and I bite my tongue. 'It got very heated. I was very . . . I was unkind to her. I was a bastard. A complete bastard. She was upset. She went upstairs and put some things in a bag. I don't know what exactly, but I noticed later that her toothbrush was gone, so I knew she wasn't planning on coming home. I assumed . . . I thought she must have gone to Tara's for the night. That happened once before. Just one time. It wasn't like this happened all the time.

'I didn't even go after her,' he says, and it hits me yet again that he's not really talking to me, he's confessing. He's on one side of the confessional and I'm on the other, faceless, unseen. 'I just let her go.'

'That was on Saturday night?'

'Yes. That was the last time I saw her.'

There was a witness who saw her – or saw 'a woman fitting her description' – walking towards Witney station at around quarter past seven, I know that from the newspaper reports. That was the final sighting. No one remembered seeing her on the platform, or on the train. There is no CCTV at Witney, and she wasn't picked up on the CCTV at Corly, although the reports said that this didn't prove she wasn't there, because there are 'significant blindspots' at that station.

'What time was it when you tried to contact her?' I ask him. Another long silence.

'I . . . I went to the pub. The Rose, you know, just around the corner, on Kingly Road? I needed to cool down, to get things straight in my head. I had a couple of pints, then I went back home. That was just before ten. I think I was hoping that she'd have had time to calm down and that she'd be back. But she wasn't.'

'So it was around ten o'clock when you tried to call her?'

'No.' His voice is little more than a whisper now. 'I didn't. I

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drank a couple more beers at home, I watched some TV. Then I went to bed.'

I think about all the arguments I had with Tom, all the terrible things I said after I'd had too much, all the storming out into the street, shouting at him, telling him I never wanted to see him again. He always rang me, he always talked me down, coaxed me home.

'I just imagined she'd be sitting in Tara's kitchen, you know, talking about what a shit I am. So I left it.'

He left it. It sounds callous and uncaring, and I'm not surprised he hasn't told this story to anyone else. I am surprised that he's telling anyone at all. This is not the Scott I imagined, the Scott I knew, the one who stood behind Megan on the terrace, his big hands on her bony shoulders, ready to protect her from anything.

I'm ready to hang up the phone, but Scott keeps talking. 'I woke up early. There were no messages on my phone. I didn't panic - I assumed she was with Tara and that she was still angry with me. I rang her then and got her voicemail, but I still didn't panic. I thought she was probably still asleep, or just ignoring me. I couldn't find Tara's number, but I had her address - it was on a business card on Megan's desk. So I got up and I drove round there.'

I wonder, if he wasn't worried, why he felt he needed to go round to Tara's house, but I don't interrupt. I let him talk.

'I got to Tara's place a little after nine. It took her a while to come to the door, but when she did, she looked really surprised to see me. It was obvious that I was the last person she expected to see on her doorstep at that time of the morning, and that's when I knew . . . That's when I knew that Megan wasn't there. And I started to think . . . I started . . .' The words catch and I feel wretched for doubting him.

'She told me the last time she'd seen Megan was at their pilates class on Friday night. That's when I started to panic.'

After I hang up the phone, I think about how, if you didn't

know him, if you hadn't seen how he was with her, as I have, a lot of what he'd said would not ring quite true.

Monday, 22 July 2013

Morning

I feel quite befuddled. I slept soundly but dreamily and this morning I am struggling to wake up properly. The hot weather has returned and the carriage is stifling today, despite being only half full. I was late getting up this morning and didn't have time to pick up a newspaper or to check the news on the internet before I left the house, so I am trying to get the BBC site on my phone, but for some reason it is taking forever to load. At Northcote a man with an iPad gets on and takes the seat next to me. He has no problems at all getting the news up, he goes straight to the *Daily Telegraph* site and there it is, in big, bold letters, the third story: MAN ARRESTED IN CONNECTION WITH MEGAN HIPWELL DISAPPEARANCE.

I get such a fright that I forget myself and lean right over to get a better look. He looks up at me, affronted, almost startled.

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'I know her. The missing woman. I know her.'

'Oh, how awful,' he says. He's a middle-aged man, well spoken and well dressed. 'Would you like to read the story?'

'Please. I can't get anything to come up on my phone.'

He smiles kindly and hands me the tablet. I touch the headline and the story comes up.

A man in his thirties has been arrested in connection with the disappearance of Megan Hipwell, twenty-nine, the Witney woman who has been missing since Saturday 13 July. Police were not able to confirm whether the man arrested is Megan Hipwell's husband, Scott Hipwell, who was questioned under caution on Friday. In a statement this morning a police spokesman said: 'We can confirm

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that we have arrested a man in connection with Megan's disappearance. He has not yet been charged with an offence. The search for Megan continues, and we are searching an address which we believe may be a crime scene.

We are passing the house now; for once, the train has not stopped at the signal. I whip my head around, but I'm too late. It's gone. My hands are trembling as I hand the iPad back to its owner. He shakes his head sadly. 'I'm very sorry,' he says.

'She isn't dead,' I say. My voice is a croak and even I don't believe me. Tears are stinging the back of my eyes. I was in his house. I was there. I sat across the table from him, I looked into his eyes, I felt something. I think about those huge hands and about how, if he could crush me, he could destroy her – tiny, fragile Megan.

The brakes screech as we approach Witney station and I leap to my feet.

'I have to go,' I tell the man next to me, who looks a little surprised but nods sagely.

'Good luck,' he says.

I run along the platform and down the stairs. I'm going against the flow of people, and am almost at the bottom of the stairs when I stumble and a man says, 'Watch it!' I don't glance up at him because I'm looking at the edge of the concrete step, the second to last one. There's a smear of blood on it. I wonder how long it's been there. Could it be a week old? Could it be my blood? Hers? Is her blood in the house, I wonder, is that why they've arrested him? I try to picture the kitchen, the living room. The smell: very clean, antiseptic. Was that bleach? I don't know, I can't remember now, all I can remember clearly is the sweat on his back and the beer on his breath.

I run past the underpass, stumbling at the corner of Blenheim Road. I'm holding my breath as I hurry along the pavement, head down, too afraid to look up, but when I do there's nothing to see.

RACHEL

There are no vans parked outside Scott's house, no police cars. Could they have finished searching the house already? If they had found something they would still be there, surely; it must take hours, going over everything, processing the evidence. I quicken my pace. When I get to his house I stop, take a deep breath. The curtains are drawn, upstairs and down. The curtains in the neighbour's window twitch. I'm being watched. I step into the doorway, my hand raised. I shouldn't be here. I don't know what I'm doing here. I just wanted to see. I wanted to *know*. I'm caught, for a moment, between going against my every instinct and knocking on that door, and turning away. I turn to leave, and it's at that moment that the door opens.

Before I have time to move, his hand shoots out, he grabs my forearm and pulls me towards him. His mouth is a grim line, his eyes wild. He is desperate. Flooded with dread and adrenaline, I see darkness coming. I open my mouth to cry out, but I'm too late, he yanks me into the house and slams the door behind me.

MEGAN

Thursday, 21 March 2013

Morning

I DON'T LOSE. He should know this about me. I don't lose games like this.

The screen on my phone is blank. Stubbornly, insolently blank. No text messages, no missed calls. Every time I look at it, it feels like I've been slapped, and I get angrier and angrier. What happened to me in that hotel room? What was I thinking? That we made a connection, that there was something real between us? He has no intention of going anywhere with me. But I believed him for a second – more than a second – and that's what really pisses me off. I was ridiculous, credulous. He was laughing at me, all along.

If he thinks I'm going to sit around crying over him, he's got another thing coming. I can live without him, I can do without him just fine – but I don't like to lose. It's not like me. None of this is like me. I don't get rejected. I'm the one who walks away.

I'm driving myself insane, I can't help it. I can't stop going back to that afternoon at the hotel and going over and over what he said, the way he made me feel.

Bastard.

If he thinks I will just disappear, go quietly, he's mistaken. If he doesn't pick up soon, I'm going to stop calling his mobile and call him at home. I'm not just going to be ignored.

At breakfast, Scott asks me to cancel my therapy session. I don't say anything. I pretend I haven't heard him.

'Dave's asked us round to dinner,' he says. 'We haven't been over there for ages. Can you rearrange your session?'

His tone is light, as though this is a casual request, but I can feel him watching me, his eyes on my face. We're on the edge of an argument and I have to be careful.

'I can't, Scott, it's too late,' I say. 'Why don't you ask Dave and Karen to come here on Saturday instead?' Just the thought of entertaining Dave and Karen at the weekend is wearing, but I'm going to have to compromise.

'It's not too late,' he says, putting his coffee cup down on the table in front of me. He rests his hand on my shoulder for just a moment, says, 'Cancel it, OK?' and walks out of the room.

The second the front door closes, I pick up the coffee cup and hurl it against the wall.

Evening

I could tell myself that it's not really a rejection. I could try to persuade myself that he's just trying to do the right thing, morally and professionally. But I know that isn't true. Or at least, it's not the whole truth, because if you want someone badly enough, morals (and certainly professionalism) don't come into it. You'll do anything to have them. He just doesn't want me badly enough.

I ignored Scott's calls all afternoon, I turned up to my session late, and walked straight into his office without a word to the receptionist. He was sitting at his desk, writing something. He glanced up at me when I walked in, didn't smile, then looked back down at his papers. I stood in front of his desk, waiting for him to look at me. It felt like forever before he did.

'Are you OK?' he asked eventually. He smiled at me then. 'You're late.'

The breath was catching in my throat, I couldn't speak. I walked

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around the desk and leaned against it, my leg brushing against his thigh. He drew back a little.

'Megan,' he said, 'are you all right?'

I shook my head. I put my hand out to him, and he took it.

'Megan,' he said again, shaking his head.

I didn't say anything.

'You can't . . . You should sit down,' he said. 'Let's talk.'

I shook my head.

'Megan.'

Every time he said my name he made it worse.

He got to his feet and circled the desk, walking away from me. He stood in the middle of the room.

'Come on,' he said, his voice businesslike – brusque, even. 'Sit down.'

I followed him into the middle of the room, put one hand on his waist, the other against his chest. He held me by my wrists and moved away from me.

'Don't, Megan. You can't . . . we can't . . .' He turned away.

'Kamal,' I said, my voice catching. I hated the sound of it. 'Please.'

'This . . . here. It's not appropriate. It's normal, believe me, but . . .'

I told him then that I wanted to be with him.

'It's transference, Megan,' he said. 'It happens from time to time. It happens to me, too. I really should have introduced this topic last time. I'm sorry.'

I wanted to scream then. He made it sound so banal, so bloodless, so common.

'Are you telling me you feel nothing?' I asked him. 'You're saying I'm imagining all this?'

He shook his head. 'You have to understand, Megan, I shouldn't have let things get this far.'

I moved closer to him, put my hands on his hips and turned him around. He took hold of my arms again, his long fingers

locked around my wrists. 'I could lose my job,' he said, and then I really lost my temper.

I pulled away, angry, violently. He tried to hold me, but he couldn't. I was yelling at him, telling him I didn't give a shit about his *job*. He was trying to quieten me – worried, I assume, about what the receptionist thought, what the other patients thought. He grabbed hold of my shoulders, his thumbs digging into the flesh at the top of my arms, and told me to calm down, to stop behaving like a child. He shook me, hard; I thought for a moment he was going to slap my face.

I kissed him on the mouth, I bit his lower lip as hard as I could; I could taste his blood in my mouth. He pushed me away.

I plotted revenge on my way home. I was thinking of all the things I could do to him. I could get him fired, or worse. I won't though, because I like him too much. I don't want to hurt him. I'm not even that upset about the rejection any more. What bothers me most is that I haven't got to the end of my story, and I can't start over with someone else, it's too hard.

I don't want to go home now, because I don't know how I'm going to be able to explain the bruises on my arms.

RACHEL

Monday, 22 July 2013

Evening

AND NOW I WAIT. It's agonizing, the not knowing, the slowness with which everything is bound to move. But there's nothing more to do.

I was right, this morning, when I felt that dread. I just didn't know what I had to be afraid of.

Not Scott. When he pulled me inside he must have seen the terror in my eyes, because almost immediately he let go of me. Wild-eyed and dishevelled, he seemed to shrink back from the light, and closed the door behind us. 'What are you doing here? There are photographers, journalists everywhere. I can't have people coming to the door. Hanging around. They'll say things . . . They'll try – they'll try anything, to get pictures, to get . . .'

'There's no one out there,' I said, though to be honest I hadn't really looked. There might have been people sitting in cars, waiting for something to happen.

'What are you doing here?' he demanded again.

'I heard . . . it was on the news. I just wanted . . . is it him? Have they arrested him?'

He nodded. 'Yes, early this morning. The family liaison person was here. She came to tell me. But she couldn't . . . they won't tell me why. They must have found something, but they won't tell me

what. It's not her, though. I know that they haven't found her.'

He sits down on the stairs and wraps his arms around himself. His whole body is trembling.

'I can't stand it. I can't stand waiting for the phone to ring. When the phone rings, what will it be? Will it be the worst news? Will it be . . .' He tails off, then looks up as though he's seeing me for the first time. 'Why did you come?'

'I wanted . . . I thought you wouldn't want to be alone.'

He looked at me as though I was insane. 'I'm not alone,' he said. He got up and pushed past me into the living room. For a moment, I just stood there. I didn't know whether to follow him or to leave, but then he called out, 'Do you want a coffee?'

There was a woman outside on the lawn, smoking. Tall, with salt and pepper hair, she was smartly dressed in black trousers and white blouse done up to the throat. She was pacing up and down the patio, but as soon as she caught sight of me, she stopped, flicked her cigarette on to the paving stones and crushed it beneath her toe.

'Police?' she asked me doubtfully, as she entered the kitchen.

'No, I'm—'

'This is Rachel Watson, Mum,' Scott said. 'The woman who contacted me about Abdic.'

She nodded slowly, as though Scott's explanation didn't really help her; she took me in, her gaze sweeping rapidly over me from head to toe and back again. 'Oh.'

'I just, er . . .' I didn't have a justifiable reason for being there. I couldn't say, could I, *I just wanted to know. I wanted to see.*

'Well, Scott is very grateful to you for coming forward. We're obviously waiting now to find out what exactly is going on.' She stepped towards me, took me by the elbow and turned me gently towards the front door. I glanced at Scott, but he wasn't looking at me; his gaze was fixed somewhere out of the window, across the tracks.

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

'Thank you for stopping by, Mrs Watson. We really are very grateful to you.'

I found myself on the doorstep, the front door closed firmly behind me, and when I looked up I saw them: Tom, pushing a buggy, and Anna at his side. They stopped dead when they saw me. Anna raised her hand to her mouth and swooped down to grab her child. The lioness protecting her cub. I wanted to laugh at her, to tell her, I'm not here for you, I couldn't be less interested in your daughter.

I'm cast out. Scott's mother made that clear. I'm cast out and I'm disappointed, but it shouldn't matter, because they have Kamal Abdic. They've got him, and I helped. I did something right. They've got him, and it can't be long now before they find Megan and bring her home.

ANNA

Monday, 22 July 2013

Morning

TOM WOKE ME UP early with a kiss and a cheeky grin. He has a late meeting this morning, so he suggested we take Evie around the corner for breakfast. It's a place where we used to meet when we first started seeing each other. We'd sit in the window – she was at work in London so there was no danger of her walking past and noticing us. But there was that thrill, even so – perhaps she'd come home early for some reason: perhaps she'd be feeling ill, or have forgotten some vital papers. I dreamed of it. I willed her to come along one day, to see him with me, to know in an instant that he was no longer hers. It's hard to believe now that there was once a time when I wanted her to appear.

Since Megan went missing I've avoided walking this way whenever possible – it gives me the creeps passing that house – but to get to the café it's the only route. Tom walks a little way ahead of me, pushing the buggy; he's singing something to Evie, making her laugh. I love it when we're out like this, the three of us. I can see the way people look at us; I can see them thinking, *What a beautiful family*. It makes me proud – prouder than I've ever been of anything in my life.

So I'm sailing along in my bubble of happiness, and we're almost at number fifteen when the door opens. For a moment I think I'm hallucinating, because *she* walks out. Rachel. She comes

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out of the front door and stands there for a second, sees us and stops dead. It's horrible. She gives us the strangest smile, a grimace almost, and I can't help myself, I lunge forward and grab Evie out of her buggy, startling her in the process. She starts to cry.

Rachel walks quickly away from us, towards the station.

Tom calls after her, 'Rachel! What are you doing here? Rachel!' But she keeps going, faster and faster until she's almost running, and the two of us just stand there, then Tom turns to me and with one glance at the expression on my face says, 'Come on. Let's just go home.'

Evening

We found out when we got home that they've arrested someone in connection with Megan Hipwell's disappearance. Some guy I'd never heard of, a therapist she'd been seeing. It was a relief, I suppose, because I'd been imagining all sorts of awful things.

'I told you it wouldn't be a stranger,' Tom said. 'It never is, is it? In any case, we don't even know what's happened. She's probably fine. She's probably run off with someone.'

'So why have they arrested that man then?'

He shrugged. He was distracted, pulling on his jacket, straightening his tie, getting ready to go and meet the day's last client.

'What are we going to do?' I asked him.

'Do?' He looked at me blankly.

'About her. Rachel. Why was she here? Why was she at the Hipwells' house? Do you think . . . do you think she was trying to get into our garden - you know, going through the neighbours' gardens?'

Tom gave a grim laugh. 'I doubt it. Come on, this is Rachel we're talking about. She wouldn't be able to haul her fat arse over all those fences. I've no idea what she was doing there. Maybe she was pissed, went to the wrong door?'

'In other words, she meant to come round here?'

He shook his head. 'I don't know. Look, don't worry about it, OK? Keep the doors locked. I'll give her a ring and find out what she's up to.'

'I think we should call the police.'

'And say what? She hasn't actually done anything—'

'She hasn't done anything *lately* – unless you count the fact that she was here the night Megan Hipwell disappeared,' I said. 'We should have told the police about her ages ago.'

'Anna, come on.' He slipped his arms around my waist. 'I hardly think Rachel has anything to do with Megan Hipwell going missing. But I'll talk to her, OK?'

'But you said after last time—'

'I know,' he said softly. 'I know what I said.' He kissed me, slipped his hand into the waistband of my jeans. 'Let's not get the police involved unless we really need to.'

I think we do need to. I can't stop thinking about that smile she gave us, that sneer. It was almost triumphant. We need to get away from here. We need to get away from *her*.

RACHEL

Tuesday, 23 July 2013

Morning

IT TAKES ME A while to realize what I'm feeling when I wake. There's a rush of elation, tempered with something else: a nameless dread. I know we're close to finding the truth. I just can't help feeling that the truth is going to be terrible.

I sit up in bed and grab my laptop, turn it on and wait impatiently for it to boot up, then log on to the internet. The whole process seems interminable. I can hear Cathy moving around the house, washing up her breakfast things, running upstairs to brush her teeth. She hovers for a few moments outside my door. I imagine her knuckles raised, ready to rap. She thinks better of it and runs back down the stairs.

The BBC news page comes up. The headline is about benefit cuts, the second story about yet another 1970s television star accused of sexual indiscretions. Nothing about Megan; nothing about Kamal. I'm disappointed. I know that the police have twenty-four hours to charge a suspect, and they've had that now. In some circumstances, they can hold someone for an extra twelve hours, though.

I know all this because I spent yesterday doing my research. After I was shown out of Scott's house, I came back here, turned on the television and spent most of the day watching the news, reading articles online. Waiting.

By midday, the police had named their suspect. On the news, they talked about 'evidence discovered at Dr Abdic's home and in his car', but they didn't say what. Blood, perhaps? Her phone, as yet undiscovered? Clothes, a bag, her toothbrush? They kept showing pictures of Kamal, close-ups of his dark, handsome face. The picture they use isn't a mugshot, it's a candid shot: he's on holiday somewhere, not quite smiling, but almost. He looks too soft, too beautiful to be a killer, but appearances can be deceptive – they say Ted Bundy looked like Cary Grant.

I waited all day for more news, for the charges to be made public: kidnap, assault, or worse. I waited to hear where she is, where he's been keeping her. They showed pictures of Blenheim Road, the station, Scott's front door. Commentators mused on the likely implications of the fact that neither Megan's phone nor her bank cards had been used for more than a week.

Tom called more than once. I didn't pick up. I know what he wants. He wants to ask why I was at Scott Hipwell's house yesterday morning. Let him wonder. It has nothing to do with him. Not everything is about him. I imagine he's calling at her behest in any case. I don't owe her any explanations.

I waited and waited, and still no charge: instead, we heard more about Kamal, the trusted mental-health professional who listened to Megan's secrets and troubles, who gained her trust and then abused it, who seduced her and then, who knows what?

I learned that he is a Muslim, a Bosniak, a survivor of the Balkans conflict who came to Britain as a fifteen-year-old refugee. No stranger to violence, he lost his father and two older brothers at Srebrenica. He has a conviction for domestic violence. The more I heard about Kamal, the more I knew that I was right: I was right to speak to the police about him, I was right to contact Scott.

I get up and pull my dressing gown around me, hurry downstairs and flick on the TV. I have no intention of going anywhere today. If Cathy comes home unexpectedly, I can tell her I'm ill. I

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make myself a cup of coffee and sit down in front of the television, and I wait.

Evening

I got bored around three o'clock. I got bored with hearing about benefits and seventies TV paedophiles, I got frustrated with hearing nothing about Megan, nothing about Kamal, so I went to the off-licence and bought two bottles of white wine.

I'm almost at the bottom of the first bottle when it happens. There's something else on the news now, shaky camera footage taken from a half-built (or half-destroyed) building, explosions in the distance. Syria, or Egypt, maybe Sudan? I've got the sound down, I'm not really paying attention. Then I see it: the ticker running across the bottom of the screen tells me that the government is facing a challenge to legal-aid cuts and that Fernando Torres will be out for up to four weeks with a hamstring strain and that the suspect in the Megan Hipwell disappearance has been released without charge.

I put my glass down and grab the remote, clicking the volume button up, up, up. This can't be right. The war report continues, it goes on and on, my blood pressure rising with it, but eventually it ends and they go back to the studio and the newsreader says:

'Kamal Abdic, the man arrested yesterday in connection with the disappearance of Megan Hipwell, has been released without charge. Abdic, who was Mrs Hipwell's therapist, was detained yesterday, but was released this morning because police say there is insufficient evidence to charge him.'

I don't hear what she says after that. I just sit there, my eyes blurring over, a wash of noise in my ears, thinking, *they had him. They had him and they let him go.*

Upstairs, later. I've had too much to drink, I can't see the computer screen properly, everything doubles, trebles. I can read if I hold my hand over one eye. It gives me a headache. Cathy is

home, she called out to me and I told her I was in bed, unwell. She knows that I'm drinking.

My belly is awash with alcohol. I feel sick. I can't think straight. Shouldn't have started drinking so early. Shouldn't have started drinking at all. I phoned Scott's number an hour ago, again a few minutes ago. Shouldn't have done that either. I just want to know, what lies has Kamal told them? What lies have they been fool enough to believe? The police have messed the whole thing up. Idiots. That Riley woman, her fault. I'm sure of it.

The newspapers haven't helped. There was no domestic violence conviction, they're saying now. That was a mistake. They're making *him* look like the victim.

Don't want to drink any more. I know that I should pour the rest down the sink, because otherwise it'll be there in the morning and I'll get up and drink it straight away, and once I've started I'll want to go on. I should pour it down the sink, but I know I'm not going to. Something to look forward to in the morning.

It's dark, and I can hear someone calling her name. A voice, low at first, but then louder. Angry, desperate, calling Megan's name. It's Scott – he's unhappy with her. He calls her again and again. It's a dream, I think. I keep trying to grasp at it, to hold on to it, but the harder I struggle, the fainter and the further away it gets.

Wednesday, 24 July 2013

Morning

I'm woken by a soft tapping at the door. Rain batters against the windows; it's after eight but still seems dark outside. Cathy pushes the door gently open and peers into the room.

'Rachel? Are you all right?' She catches sight of the bottle next to my bed and her shoulders sag. 'Oh, Rachel.' She comes across to my bed and picks up the bottle. I'm too embarrassed to say anything. 'Are you not going into work?' she asks me. 'Did you go yesterday?'

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She doesn't wait for me to answer, just turns to go, calling back as she does, 'You'll end up getting yourself sacked if you carry on like this.'

I should just say it now, she's already angry with me. I should go after her and tell her: I was sacked months ago for turning up blind drunk after a three-hour lunch with a client during which I managed to be so rude and unprofessional that I cost the firm his business. When I close my eyes, I can still remember the tail end of that lunch, the look on the waitress's face as she handed me my jacket, weaving into the office, people turning to look. Martin Miles taking me to one side. *I think it's best if you go home now, Rachel.*

There is a crack of thunder, a flash of light. I jolt upright. What was it I thought of last night? I check my little black book, but I haven't written anything down since midday yesterday: notes about Kamal – age, ethnicity, conviction for domestic violence. I pick up a pen and cross out that last point.

Downstairs, I make myself a cup of coffee and turn on the TV. The police held a press conference last night, they're showing clips from it on Sky News. Detective Inspector Gaskill's up there, looking pale and gaunt and chastened. Hangdog. He never mentions Kamal's name, just says that a suspect had been detained and questioned, but has been released without charge and that the investigation is ongoing. The cameras pan away from him to Scott, sitting hunched and uncomfortable, blinking in the light of the cameras, his face a twist of anguish. It hurts my heart to see him. He speaks softly, his eyes cast down. He says that he has not given up hope, that no matter what the police say, he still clings to the idea that Megan will come home.

The words come out hollow, they ring false, but without looking into his eyes, I can't tell why. I can't tell whether he doesn't really believe she's coming home because all the faith he once possessed has been ripped away by the events of the past few days, or because he really *knows* that she's never coming home.

It comes to me, just then: the memory of calling his number

yesterday. Once, twice? I run upstairs to get my phone, and find it tangled up in the bedclothes. I have three missed calls: one from Tom and two from Scott. No messages. The call from Tom was last night, as was the first call from Scott, but later, just before midnight. The second call from him was this morning, a few minutes ago.

My heart lifts a little. This is good news. Despite his mother's actions, despite their clear implications (*Thank you very much for your help, now get lost*), Scott still wants to talk to me. He needs me. I'm momentarily flooded with affection for Cathy, filled with gratitude to her for pouring the rest of the wine away. I have to keep a clear head, for Scott. He needs me thinking straight.

I take a shower, get dressed and make another cup of coffee, and then I sit down in the living room, little black book at my side, and I call Scott.

'You should have told me,' he says as soon as he picks up, 'what you are.' His tone is flat, cold. My stomach is a small, hard ball. He knows. 'Detective Sergeant Riley spoke to me, after they let him go. He denied having an affair with her. And the witness who suggested that there was something going on was unreliable, she said. An alcoholic. Possibly mentally unstable. She didn't tell me the witness's name, but I take it she was talking about you?'

'But . . . no,' I say. 'No. I'm not . . . I hadn't been drinking when I saw them. It was eight thirty in the morning.' Like that means anything. 'And they found evidence, it said so on the news. They found—'

'Insufficient evidence.'

The phone goes dead.

Friday, 26 July 2013

Morning

I am no longer travelling to my imaginary office. I have given up the pretence. I can barely be bothered to get out of bed. I think I

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last brushed my teeth on Wednesday. I am still feigning illness, although I'm pretty sure I'm fooling no one.

I can't face getting up, getting dressed, getting on to the train, going into London, wandering the streets. It's hard enough when the sun is shining, it's impossible in this rain. Today is the third day of cold, driving, relentless downpour.

I'm having trouble sleeping, and it's not just the drinking now, it's the nightmares. I'm trapped somewhere, and I know that someone's coming, and there's a way out, I know there is, I know that I saw it before, only I can't find my way back to it, and when he does get me, I can't scream. I try – I suck the air into my lungs and I force it out – but there's no sound, just a rasping, like a dying person fighting for air.

Sometimes, in my nightmares, I find myself in the underpass by Blenheim Road, the way back is blocked and I cannot go further because there is something there, someone waiting, and I wake in pure terror.

They're never going to find her. Every day, every hour that passes I become more certain. She will be one of those names, hers will be one of those stories: lost, missing, body never found. And Scott will not have justice, or peace. He will never have a body to grieve over; he will never know what happened to her. There will be no closure, no resolution. I lie awake thinking about it and I ache. There can be no greater agony, nothing can be more painful than the not knowing, which will never end.

I have written to him. I admitted my problem, then I lied again, saying that I had it under control, that I was seeking help. I told him that I am not mentally unstable. I no longer know whether that's true or not. I told him that I was very clear about what I saw, and that I hadn't been drinking when I saw it. That, at least, is true. He hasn't replied. I didn't expect him to. I am cut off from him, shut out. The things I want to say to him, I can never say. I can't write them down, they don't sound right. I want him to know how sorry I am that it wasn't enough to point them in Kamal's

direction, to say, *look, there he is*. I should have seen something. That Saturday night, I should have had my eyes open.

Evening

I am soaked through, freezing cold, the ends of my fingers blanched and wrinkled, my head throbbing from a hangover that kicked in at about half past five. Which is about right, considering I started drinking before midday. I went out to get another bottle, but I was thwarted by the ATM, which gave me the much-anticipated riposte: *There are insufficient funds in your account*.

After that, I started walking. I walked aimlessly for over an hour, through the driving rain. The pedestrianized centre of Ashbury was mine alone. I decided, somewhere along that walk, that I have to do something. I have to make amends for being insufficient.

Now, sodden and almost sober, I'm going to call Tom. I don't want to know what I did, what I said, that Saturday night, but I have to find out. It might jog something. For some reason, I am certain that there is something I'm missing, something vital. Perhaps this is just more self-deception, yet another attempt to prove to myself that I'm not worthless. But perhaps it's real.

'I've been trying to get hold of you since Monday,' Tom says when he answers the phone. 'I called your office,' he adds, and he lets that sink in.

I'm on the back foot already, embarrassed, ashamed. 'I need to talk to you,' I say, 'about Saturday night. That Saturday night.'

'What are you talking about? *I* need to talk to *you* about Monday, Rachel. What the hell were you doing at Scott Hipwell's house?'

'That's not important, Tom—'

'Yes it bloody is. What were you doing there? You do realize, don't you, that he could be . . . I mean, we don't know, do we? He could have done something to her. Couldn't he? To his wife.'

'He hasn't done anything to his wife,' I say confidently. 'It isn't him.'

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'How the hell would you know? Rachel, what is going on?'

'I just . . . You have to believe me. That isn't why I called you. I needed to talk to you about that Saturday. About the message you left me. You were so angry. You said I'd scared Anna.'

'Well, you had. She saw you stumbling down the street, you shouted abuse at her. She was really freaked out, after what happened last time. With Evie.'

'Did she . . . did she do something?'

'Do something?'

'To me?'

'What?'

'I had a cut, Tom. On my head. I was bleeding.'

'Are you accusing Anna of hurting you?' He's yelling now, he's furious. 'Seriously, Rachel. That is enough! I have persuaded Anna – on more than one occasion – not to go to the police about you, but if you carry on like this – harassing us, making up stories—'

'I'm not accusing her of anything, Tom. I'm just trying to figure things out. I don't—'

'You don't remember! Of course not. Rachel doesn't remember.' He sighs wearily. 'Look. Anna saw you – you were drunk and abusive. She came home to tell me, she was upset, so I went out to look for you. You were in the street. I think you might have fallen. You were very upset. You'd cut your hand.'

'I hadn't—'

'Well, you had blood on your hand then. I don't know how it got there. I told you I'd take you home, but you wouldn't listen. You were out of control, you were making no sense. You walked off and I went to get the car, but when I came back, you'd gone. I drove up past the station but I couldn't see you. I drove around a bit more – Anna was very worried that you were hanging around somewhere, that you'd come back, that you'd try to get into the house. I was worried you'd fall, or get yourself into trouble . . . I drove all the way to Ashbury. I rang the bell, but you weren't at home. I called you a couple of times. I left a message.'

RACHEL

And yes, I was angry. I was really pissed off by that point.'

'I'm sorry, Tom,' I say. 'I'm really sorry.'

'I know,' he says. 'You're always sorry.'

'You said that I shouted at Anna,' I say, cringing at the thought of it. 'What did I say to her?'

'I don't know,' he snaps. 'Would you like me to go and get her? Perhaps you'd like to have a chat with her about it?'

'Tom . . .'

'Well, honestly – what does it matter now?'

'Did you see Megan Hipwell that night?'

'No.' He sounds concerned now. 'Why? Did you? You didn't do something, did you?'

'No, of course I didn't.'

He's silent for a moment. 'Well, why are you asking about this then? Rachel, if you know something . . .'

'I don't know anything,' I say. 'I didn't see anything.'

'Why were you at the Hipwells' house on Monday? Please tell me – so that I can put Anna's mind at ease. She's worried.'

'I had something to tell him. Something I thought might be useful.'

'You didn't see her, but you had something useful to tell him?'

I hesitate for a moment. I'm not sure how much I should tell him, whether I should keep this just for Scott. 'It's about Megan,' I say. 'She was having an affair.'

'Wait – did you know her?'

'Just a little,' I say.

'How?'

'From her gallery.'

'Oh,' he says. 'So who's the guy?'

'Her therapist,' I tell him. 'Kamal Abdic. I saw them together.'

'Really? The guy they arrested? I thought they'd let him go.'

'They have. And it's my fault, because I'm an unreliable witness.'

Tom laughs. It's soft, friendly, he isn't mocking me. 'Rachel, come on. You did the right thing, coming forward. I'm sure it's not

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just about you.' In the background, I can hear the prattle of the child, and Tom says something away from the phone, something I can't hear. 'I should go,' he says. I can imagine him putting down the phone, picking up his little girl, giving her a kiss, embracing his wife. The dagger in my heart twists, round and round and round.

Monday, 29 July 2013

Morning

It's 8.07 and I'm on the train. Back to the imaginary office. Cathy was with Damien all weekend, and when I saw her last night, I didn't give her a chance to berate me. I started apologizing for my behaviour straight away, said I'd been feeling really down, but that I was pulling myself together, turning over a new leaf. She accepted, or pretended to accept, my apologies. She gave me a hug. Niceness writ large.

Megan has dropped out of the news almost completely. There was a comment piece in the *Sunday Times* about police incompetence which referred briefly to the case, an unnamed source at the Crown Prosecution Service citing it as 'one of a number of cases in which the police have made a hasty arrest on the basis of flimsy or flawed evidence'.

We're coming to the signal. I feel the familiar rattle and jolt, the train slows and I look up, because I have to, because I cannot bear not to, but there is never anything to see any longer. The doors are closed and the curtains drawn. There is nothing to see but rain, sheets of it, and muddy water pooling at the bottom of the garden.

On a whim, I get off the train at Witney. Tom couldn't help me, but perhaps the other man could – the red-haired man. I wait for the disembarking passengers to disappear down the steps and then I sit on the only covered bench on the platform. I might get lucky. I might see him getting on to the train. I could follow him,

I could talk to him. It's the only thing I have left, my last roll of the dice. If this doesn't work, I have to let it go. I just have to let it go.

Half an hour goes by. Every time I hear footsteps on the steps, my heart rate goes up. Every time I hear the clacking of high heels, I am seized with trepidation. If Anna sees me here, I could be in trouble. Tom warned me. He's persuaded her not to get the police involved, but if I carry on . . .

Quarter past nine. Unless he starts work very late, I've missed him. It's raining harder now, and I can't face another aimless day in London. The only money I have is a tenner I borrowed from Cathy, and I need to make that last until I've summoned up the courage to ask my mother for a loan. I walk down the steps, intending to cross underneath to the opposite platform and go back to Ashbury, when suddenly I spot Scott hurrying out of the newsagent opposite the station entrance, his coat pulled up around his face.

I run after him and catch him at the corner, right opposite the underpass. I grab his arm and he wheels round, startled.

'Please,' I say, 'can I talk to you?'

'Jesus Christ,' he snarls at me. 'What the fuck do you want?'

I back away from him, holding my hands up. 'I'm sorry,' I say. 'I'm sorry. I just wanted to apologize, to explain . . .'

The downpour has become a deluge. We are the only people on the street, both of us soaked to the skin. Scott starts to laugh. He throws his hands up in the air and roars with laughter. 'Come to the house,' he says. 'We're going to drown out here.'

Scott goes upstairs to fetch me a towel while the kettle boils. The house is less tidy than it was a week ago, the disinfectant smell displaced by something earthier. A pile of newspapers sits in the corner of the living room; there are dirty mugs on the coffee table and the mantelpiece.

Scott appears at my side, proffering the towel. 'It's a tip, I know. My mother was driving me insane, cleaning, tidying up after me

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all the time. We had a bit of a row. She hasn't been round for a few days.' His mobile phone starts to ring, he glances at it, puts it back in his pocket. 'Speak of the Devil. She never bloody stops.'

I follow him into the kitchen.

'I'm so sorry about what happened,' I say.

He shrugs. 'I know. And it's not your fault anyway. I mean, it might've helped if you weren't . . .'

'If I wasn't a drunk?'

His back is turned, he's pouring the coffee.

'Well, yes. But they didn't actually have enough to charge him with anything anyway.' He hands me the mug and we sit down at the table. I notice that one of the photograph frames on the sideboard has been turned face-down. Scott is still talking. 'They found things – hair, skin cells – in his house, but he doesn't deny that she went there. Well, he did deny it at first, then he admitted that she had been there.'

'Why did he lie?'

'Exactly. He admitted that she'd been to the house twice, just to talk. He won't say what about – there's the whole confidentiality thing. The hair and the skin cells were found downstairs. Nothing up in the bedroom. He swears blind they weren't having an affair. But he's a liar, so . . .'

He passes his hand over his eyes. His face looks as though it is sinking into itself, his shoulders sag. He looks shrunken. 'There was a trace of blood on his car.'

'Oh my God.'

'Yeah. Matches her blood type. They don't know if they can get any DNA because it's such a small sample. It could be nothing, that's what they keep saying. How could it be nothing, that her blood's on his car?' He shakes his head. 'You were right. The more I hear about this guy, the more I'm sure.' He looks at me, right at me, for the first time since we got here. 'He was fucking her, and she wanted to end it, so he . . . he did something. That's it. I'm sure of it.'

He's lost all hope, and I don't blame him. It's been more than

two weeks and she hasn't turned on her phone, hasn't used a credit card, hasn't withdrawn money from an ATM. No one has seen her. She is gone.

'He told the police that she might have run away,' Scott says.

'Dr Abdic did?'

Scott nods. 'He told the police that she was unhappy with me and she might have run off.'

'He's trying to shift suspicion, get them to think that you did something.'

'I know that. But they seem to buy everything that bastard says. That Riley woman, I can tell when she talks about him. She likes him. The poor, downtrodden refugee.' He hangs his head, wretched. 'Maybe he's right. We did have that awful fight. But I can't believe . . . She wasn't unhappy with me. She wasn't. She wasn't.' When he says it the third time, I wonder whether he's trying to convince himself. 'But if she was having an affair, she must have been unhappy, mustn't she?'

'Not necessarily,' I say. 'Perhaps it was one of those – what do they call it? – transference things. That's the word they use, isn't it? When a patient develops feelings – or thinks they develop feelings – for a therapist. Only the therapist is supposed to resist them, to point out that the feelings aren't real.'

His eyes are on my face, but I feel as though he isn't really listening to what I'm saying.

'What happened?' he asks. 'With you. You left your husband. Was there someone else?'

I shake my head. 'Other way round. Anna happened.'

'Sorry.' He pauses.

I know what he's going to ask, so before he can, I say, 'It started before. While we were still married. The drinking. That's what you wanted to know, isn't it?'

He nods again.

'We were trying for a baby,' I say, and my voice catches. Still,

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after all this time, every time I talk about it the tears come to my eyes. 'Sorry.'

'It's all right.' He gets to his feet, goes over to the sink and pours me a glass of water. He puts it on the table in front of me.

I clear my throat, try to be as matter-of-fact as possible. 'We were trying for a baby and it didn't happen. I became very depressed, and I started to drink. I was extremely difficult to live with and Tom sought solace elsewhere. And she was all too happy to provide it.'

'I'm really sorry, that's awful. I know . . . I wanted to have a child. Megan kept saying she wasn't ready yet.' Now it's his turn to wipe the tears away. 'It's one of the things . . . we argued about it sometimes.'

'Was that what you were arguing about the day she left?'

He sighs, pushing his chair back and getting to his feet. 'No,' he says, turning away from me. 'It was something else.'

Evening

Cathy is waiting for me when I get home. She's standing in the kitchen, aggressively drinking a glass of water.

'Good day at the office?' she asks, pursing her lips. She knows.

'Cathy . . .'

'Damien had a meeting near Euston today. On his way out, he bumped into Martin Miles. They know each other a little, remember, from Damien's days at Laing Fund Management. Martin used to do the PR for them.'

'Cathy . . .'

She held her hand up, took another gulp of water. 'You haven't worked there in *months!* In months! Do you know how idiotic I feel? What an idiot Damien felt? Please, *please* tell me that you have another job that you just haven't told me about. Please tell me that you haven't been pretending to go to work. That you haven't been lying to me – day in, day out – all this time.'

'I didn't know how to tell you . . .'

'You didn't know how to tell me? How about: *Cathy, I got fired*

because I was drunk at work? How about that?’ I flinch and her face softens. ‘I’m sorry, but honestly, Rachel.’ She really is too nice. ‘What have you been doing? Where do you go? What do you do all day?’

‘I walk. Go to the library. Sometimes—’

‘You go to the pub?’

‘Sometimes. But—’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ She approaches me, placing her hands on my shoulders. ‘You should have told me.’

‘I was ashamed,’ I say, and I start to cry. It’s awful, cringe-worthy, but I start to weep. I sob and sob, and poor Cathy holds me, strokes my hair, tells me I’ll be all right, that everything will be all right. I feel wretched. I hate myself almost more than I ever have.

Later, sitting on the sofa with Cathy, drinking tea, she tells me how it’s going to be. I’m going to stop drinking, I’m going to get my CV in order, I’m going to contact Martin Miles and beg for a reference. I’m going to stop wasting money going backwards and forwards to London on pointless train journeys.

‘Honestly, Rachel, I don’t understand how you could have kept this up for so long.’

I shrug. ‘In the morning, I take the 8.04, and in the evening, I come back on the 17.56. That’s my train. It’s the one I take. That’s the way it is.’

Thursday, 1 August 2013

Morning

There’s something covering my face, I can’t breathe, I’m suffocating. When I surface into wakefulness, I’m gasping for air and my chest hurts. I sit up, eyes wide, and see something moving in the corner of the room, a dense centre of blackness which keeps growing, and I almost cry out – and then I’m properly awake and there’s nothing there, but I *am* sitting up in bed and my cheeks are wet with tears.

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It's almost dawn, the light outside is just beginning to tinge grey, and the rain of the last several days is still battering against the window. I won't go back to sleep, not with my heart hammering in my chest so much it hurts.

I think, though I can't be sure, that there's some wine downstairs. I don't remember finishing the second bottle. It'll be warm, because I can't leave it in the fridge; if I do, Cathy pours it away. She so badly wants me to get better, but so far, things are not going according to her plan. There's a little cupboard in the hallway where the gas meter is. If there was any wine left, I'll have stashed it in there.

I creep out on to the landing and tiptoe down the stairs in the half light. I flip the little cupboard open and lift out the bottle: it's disappointingly light, not much more than a glassful in there. But better than nothing. I pour it into a mug (just in case Cathy comes down – I can pretend it's tea) and put the bottle in the bin (making sure to conceal it under a milk carton and a crisp packet). In the living room, I flick on the TV, mute it straight away and sit down on the sofa.

I'm flicking through channels – it's all children's TV and infomercials until with a flash of recognition I'm looking at Corly Wood, which is just down the road from here: you can see it from the train. Corly Wood in pouring rain, the fields between the tree line and train tracks submerged.

I don't know why it takes me so long to realize what's going on. For ten seconds, fifteen, twenty, I'm looking at cars and blue and white tape and a white tent in the background, and my breath is coming shorter and shorter until I'm holding it and not breathing at all.

It's her. She's been in the wood all along, just along the railway track from here. I've been past those fields every day, morning and evening, travelling by, oblivious.

In the wood. I imagine a grave dug beneath scrubby bushes, hastily covered up. I imagine worse things, impossible things – her

body hanging from a rope, somewhere deep in the forest where nobody goes.

It might not even be her. It might be something else. I know it isn't something else.

There's a reporter on screen now, dark hair slick against his skull. I turn up the volume and listen to him tell me what I already know, what I can feel – that it wasn't me who couldn't breathe, it was Megan.

'That's right,' he's saying, talking to someone in the studio, his hand pressed to his ear. 'The police have now confirmed that the body of a young woman has been found submerged in flood water in a field at the bottom of Corly Wood, which is less than five miles from the home of Megan Hipwell. Mrs Hipwell, as you know, went missing in early July – the thirteenth of July, in fact – and has not been seen since. Police are saying that the body, which was discovered by dog walkers out early this morning, has yet to be formally identified; however, they do believe that this is Megan that they've found. Mrs Hipwell's husband has been informed.'

He stops speaking for a while. The news anchor is asking him a question, but I can't hear it because the blood is roaring in my ears. I bring the mug up to my lips and drink every last drop.

The reporter is talking again. 'Yes, Kay, that's right. It would appear that the body was buried here in the woods, possibly for some time, and that it has been uncovered by the heavy rains that we've had recently.'

It's worse, so much worse than I imagined. I can see her now, her ruined face in the mud, pale arms exposed, reaching up, rising up as though she were clawing her way out of the grave. I taste hot liquid, bile and bitter wine, in my mouth, and I run upstairs to be sick.

Evening

I stayed in bed most of the day. I tried to get things straight in my head. I tried to piece together, from the memories and the

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flashbacks and the dreams, what happened on Saturday night. In an attempt to make sense of it, to see it clearly, I wrote it all down. The scratching of my pen on paper felt like someone whispering to me; it put me on edge, I kept feeling as though there was someone else in the flat, just on the other side of the door, and I couldn't stop imagining her.

I was almost too afraid to open the bedroom door, but when I did, there was no one there, of course. I went downstairs and turned on the television again. The same pictures were still there: the woods in the rain, police cars driving along a muddy track, that horrible white tent, all of it a grey blur, and then suddenly Megan, smiling at the camera, still beautiful, untouched. Then it's Scott, head down, fending off photographers as he tries to get through his own front door, Riley at his side. Then it's Kamal's office. No sign of him, though.

I didn't want to hear the soundtrack, but I had to turn the volume up, anything to stop the silence ringing in my ears. The police say that the woman, still not formally identified, has been dead for some time, possibly several weeks. They say the cause of death has yet to be established. They say that there is no evidence of a sexual motive for the killing.

That strikes me as a stupid thing to say. I know what they mean – they mean they don't think she was raped, which is a blessing, of course, but that doesn't mean there wasn't a sexual motive. It seems to me that Kamal wanted her and he couldn't have her, that she must have tried to end it and he couldn't stand it. That's a sexual motive, isn't it?

I can't bear to watch the news any longer, so I go back upstairs and crawl under my duvet. I empty out my handbag, looking through my notes scribbled on bits of paper, all the scraps of information I've gleaned, the memories shifting like shadows, and I wonder, why am I doing this? What purpose does it serve?

MEGAN

Thursday, 13 June 2013

Morning

I CAN'T SLEEP in this heat. Invisible bugs crawl over my skin, I have a rash on my chest, I can't get comfortable. And Scott seems to radiate warmth; lying next to him is like lying next to a fire. I can't get far enough away from him, and find myself clinging to the edge of the bed, sheets thrown back. It's intolerable. I thought about going to lie down on the futon in the spare room, but he hates to wake and find me gone, it always leads to a row about something. Alternative uses for the spare room, usually, or who I was thinking about while I was lying there alone. Sometimes I want to scream at him, *Just let me go. Let me go. Let me breathe.* So I can't sleep, and I'm angry. I feel as though we're having a fight already, even though the fight's only in my imagination.

And in my head, thoughts go round and round and round.

I feel like I'm suffocating.

When did this house become so bloody small? When did my life become so boring? Is this really what I wanted? I can't remember. All I know is that a few months ago I was feeling better, and now I can't think and I can't sleep and I can't draw and the urge to run is becoming overwhelming. At night when I lie awake I can hear it, quiet but unrelenting, undeniable: a whisper in my head, *Slip away.* When I close my eyes, my head is filled with

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images of past and future lives, the things I dreamed I wanted, the things I had and threw away. I can't get comfortable, because every way I turn I run into dead ends: the closed gallery, the houses on this road, the stifling attentions of the tedious pilates women, the track at the end of the garden with its trains, always taking someone else to somewhere else, reminding me over and over and over, a dozen times a day, that I'm staying put.

I feel as though I'm going mad.

And yet just a few months ago, I was feeling better, I was getting better. I was fine. I was sleeping. I didn't live in fear of the nightmares. I could breathe. Yes, I still wanted to run away. Sometimes. But not every day.

Talking to Kamal helped me, there's no denying that. I liked it. I liked him. He made me happier. And now all that feels so unfinished – I never got to the crux of it. That's my fault, of course, because I behaved stupidly, like a child, because I didn't like feeling rejected. I need to learn to lose a little better. I'm embarrassed now, ashamed. My face goes hot at the thought of it. I don't want that to be his final impression of me. I want him to see me again, to see me better. And I do feel that if I went to him, he would help. He's like that.

I need to get to the end of the story. I need to tell someone, just once. Say the words out loud. If it doesn't come out of me, it'll eat me up. The hole inside me, the one they left, it'll just get bigger and bigger until it consumes me.

I'm going to have to swallow my pride and my shame and go to him. He's going to have to listen. I'll make him.

Evening

Scott thinks I'm at the cinema with Tara. I've been outside Kamal's flat for fifteen minutes, psyching myself up to knock on the door. I'm so afraid of the way he's going to look at me, after last time. I have to show him that I'm sorry, so I've dressed the part: plain and

simple, jeans and T-shirt, hardly any make-up. This is not about seduction, he has to see that.

I can feel my heart starting to race as I step up to his front door and press the bell. No one comes. The lights are on, but no one comes. Perhaps he has seen me outside, lurking; perhaps he's upstairs, just hoping that if he ignores me I'll go away. I won't. He doesn't know how determined I can be. Once I've made my mind up, I'm a force to be reckoned with.

I ring again, and then a third time, and finally I hear footsteps on the stairs and the door opens. He's wearing tracksuit bottoms and a white T-shirt. He's barefoot, wet-haired, his face flushed.

'Megan.' Surprised, but not angry, which is a good start. 'Are you all right? Is everything all right?'

'I'm sorry,' I say, and he steps back to let me in. I feel a rush of gratitude so strong it feels almost like love.

He shows me into the kitchen. It's a mess: washing-up piled on the counter and in the sink, empty takeaway cartons spilling out of the bin. I wonder if he's depressed. I stand in the doorway; he leans against the counter opposite me, his arms folded across his chest.

'What can I do for you?' he asks. His face is arranged into a perfectly neutral expression, his therapist's face. It makes me want to pinch him, just to make him smile.

'I have to tell you—' I start, and then I stop because I can't just plunge straight into it, I need a preamble. So I change tack. 'I wanted to apologize,' I say, 'for what happened. Last time.'

'That's OK,' he says. 'Don't worry about that. If you need to talk to someone, I can refer you to someone else, but I can't—'

'Please, Kamal.'

'Megan, I can't counsel you any longer.'

'I know. I know that. But I can't start over with someone else. I can't. We got so far. We were so close. I just have to tell you. Just once. And then I'll be gone, I promise. I won't ever bother you again.'

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He cocks his head to one side. He doesn't believe me, I can tell. He thinks that if he lets me back in now, he'll never be rid of me.

'Hear me out, please. This isn't going to go on for ever, I just need someone to listen.'

'Your husband?' he asks and I shake my head.

'I can't – I can't tell him. Not after all this time. He wouldn't . . . He wouldn't be able to see me as me any longer. I'd be someone else to him. He wouldn't know how to forgive me. Please, Kamal. If I don't spit out the poison, I feel like I'll never sleep. As a friend, not a therapist, please listen.'

His shoulders drop a little as he turns away, and I think it's over. My heart sinks. Then he opens a cupboard and pulls out two tumblers.

'As a friend, then. Would you like some wine?'

He shows me into the living room. Dimly lit by standard lamps, it has the same air of domestic neglect as the kitchen. We sit down on opposite sides of a glass table piled high with papers, magazines and takeaway menus. My hands are locked around my glass. I take a sip. It's red but cold, dusty. I swallow, take another sip. He's waiting for me to start, but it's hard, harder than I thought it was going to be. I've kept this secret for so long – a decade, more than a third of my life. It's not that easy, letting go of it. I just know that I have to start talking. If I don't do it now, I might never have the courage to say the words out loud, I might lose them altogether, they might stick in my throat and choke me in my sleep.

'After I left Ipswich, I moved in with Mac, into his cottage outside Holkham at the end of the lane. I told you that, didn't I? It was very isolated, a couple of miles to the nearest neighbour, a couple more to the nearest shops. At the beginning, we had lots of parties, there were always a few people crashed out in the living room or sleeping in the hammock outside in the summer. But we got tired of that, and Mac fell out with everyone eventually, so

people stopped coming, and it was the two of us. Days used to go by and we wouldn't see anyone. We'd do our grocery shopping at the petrol station. It's odd, thinking back on it, but I needed it then, after everything – after Ipswich and all those men, all the things I did. I liked it, just Mac and me and the old railway tracks and the grass and the dunes and the restless grey sea.'

Kamal tilts his head to one side, gives me half a smile. I feel my insides flip. 'It sounds nice. But do you think you are romanticizing? "The restless grey sea"?''

'Never mind that,' I say, waving him away. 'And no, in any case. Have you been to north Norfolk? It's not the Adriatic. It is restless, and relentlessly grey.'

He holds his hands up, smiling. 'OK.'

I feel instantly better, the tension leaching out of my neck and shoulders. I take another sip of the wine; it tastes less bitter now.

'I was happy with Mac. I know it doesn't sound like the sort of place I'd like, the sort of life I'd like, but then, after Ben's death and everything that came after, it was. Mac saved me. He took me in, he loved me, he kept me safe. And he wasn't boring. And to be perfectly honest, we were taking a lot of drugs, and it's difficult to get bored when you're off your face all the time. I was happy. I was really happy.'

Kamal nods. 'I understand, although I'm not sure that sounds like a very real kind of happiness,' he says. 'Not the sort of happiness that can endure, that can sustain you.'

I laugh. 'I was seventeen. I was with a man who excited me, who adored me. I'd got away from my parents, away from the house where everything, *everything* reminded me of my dead brother. I didn't need it to endure, or sustain. I just needed it for right then.'

'So what happened?'

It seems as though the room gets darker then. Here we are, at the thing I never say.

'I got pregnant.'

He nods, waiting for me to go on. Part of me wants him to stop

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me, to ask more questions, but he doesn't, he just waits. It gets darker still.

'It was too late when I realized to . . . to get rid of it. Of her. It's what I would have done, had I not been so stupid, so *oblivious*. The truth is that she wasn't wanted, by either of us.'

Kamal gets to his feet, goes to the kitchen and comes back with a sheet of kitchen roll for me to wipe my eyes. He hands it to me and sits down. It's a while before I go on. Kamal sits, just as he used to in our sessions, his eyes on mine, his hands folded in his lap, patient, immobile. It must take the most incredible self-control, that stillness, that passivity; it must be exhausting.

My legs are trembling, my knee jerking as though on a puppeteer's string. I get to my feet to stop it. I walk to the kitchen door and back again, scratching the palms of my hands.

'We were both so stupid,' I tell him. 'We didn't really even acknowledge what was happening, we just carried on. I didn't go to see a doctor, I didn't eat the right things or take supplements, I didn't do any of the things you're supposed to. We just carried on living our lives. We didn't even acknowledge that anything had changed. I got fatter and slower and more tired, we both got irritable and fought all the time, but nothing really changed until she came.'

He lets me cry. While I do so, he moves to the chair nearest mine and sits down at my side so that his knees are almost touching my thigh. He leans forward. He doesn't touch me, but our bodies are close, I can smell his scent, clean in this dirty room, sharp and astringent.

My voice is a whisper, it doesn't feel right to say these words out loud. 'I had her at home,' I say. 'It was stupid, but I had this thing about hospitals at the time, because the last time I'd been in one was when Ben was killed. Plus I hadn't been for any of the scans. I'd been smoking, drinking a bit, I couldn't face the lectures. I couldn't face any of it. I think . . . right up until the end, it just didn't seem like it was real, like it was actually going to happen.'

'Mac had this friend who was a nurse, or who'd done some nursing training or something. She came round, and it was OK. It wasn't so bad. I mean, it was horrible, of course, painful and frightening, but . . . then there she was. She was very small. I don't remember exactly what her weight was. That's terrible, isn't it?' Kamal doesn't say anything, he doesn't move. 'She was lovely. She had dark eyes and blonde hair. She didn't cry a lot, she slept well, right from the very beginning. She was good. She was a good girl.' I have to stop there for a moment. 'I expected everything to be so hard, but it wasn't.'

It's darker still, I'm sure of it, but I look up and Kamal is there, his eyes on mine, his expression soft. He's listening. He wants me to tell him. My mouth is dry, so I take another sip of wine. It hurts to swallow. 'We called her Elizabeth. Libby.' It feels so strange, saying her name out loud after such a long time. 'Libby,' I say again, enjoying the feel of her name in my mouth. I want to say it over and over. Kamal reaches out at last and takes my hand in his, his thumb against my wrist, on my pulse.

'One day we had a fight, Mac and I. I don't remember what it was about. We did that every now and again – little arguments that blew up into big ones, nothing physical, nothing bad like that, but we'd scream at each other and I'd threaten to leave, or he'd just walk out and I wouldn't see him for a couple of days.

'It was the first time it had happened since she was born – the first time he'd just gone off and left me. She was just a few months old. The roof was leaking. I remember that: the sound of water dripping into buckets in the kitchen. It was freezing cold, the wind driving off the sea; it had been raining for days. I lit a fire in the living room, but it kept going out. I was so tired. I was drinking just to warm up, but it wasn't working, so I decided to get into the bath. I took Libby in with me, put her on my chest, her head just under my chin.'

The room gets darker and darker until I'm there again, lying in the water, her body pressing against mine, a candle flickering just

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behind my head. I can hear it guttering, smell the wax, feel the chill of the air around my neck and shoulders. I'm heavy, my body sinking into the warmth. I'm exhausted. And then suddenly the candle is out and I'm cold. Really cold, my teeth chattering in my head, my whole body shaking. The house feels like it's shaking too, the wind screaming, tearing at the slates on the roof.

'I fell asleep,' I say, and then I can't say any more, because I can feel her again, no longer on my chest, her body wedged between my arm and the edge of the tub, her face in the water. We were both so cold.

For a moment, neither of us move. I can hardly bear to look at him, but when I do, he doesn't recoil from me. He doesn't say a word. He puts his arm around my shoulder and pulls me to him, my face against his chest. I breathe him in and I wait to feel different, to feel lighter, to feel better or worse now that there is another living soul who knows. I feel relieved, I think, because I know from his reaction that I have done the right thing. He isn't angry with me, he doesn't think I'm a monster. I am safe here, completely safe with him.

I don't know how long I stay there in his arms, but when I come back to myself, my phone is ringing. I don't answer it, but a moment later it beeps to alert me that there's a text. It's from Scott. *Where are you?* And seconds after that, the phone starts ringing again. This time it's Tara. Disentangling myself from Kamal's embrace, I answer.

'Megan, I don't know what you're up to, but you need to call Scott. He's rung here four times. I told him you'd nipped out to the office to get some wine, but I don't think he believed me. He says you're not picking up your phone.' She sounds pissed off, and I know I should appease her, but I don't have the energy.

'OK,' I say. 'Thanks. I'll ring him now.'

'Megan—' she says, but I end the call before I can hear another word.

MEGAN

It's after ten. I've been here for more than two hours. I turn off my phone and turn to face Kamal.

'I don't want to go home,' I say.

He nods, but he doesn't invite me to stay. Instead he says, 'You can come back, if you like. Another time.'

I step forward, closing the gap between our bodies, stand on tiptoe and kiss his lips. He doesn't pull away from me.

RACHEL

Saturday, 3 August 2013

Morning

I DREAMED LAST night that I was in the woods, walking by myself. It was dusk, or dawn, I'm not quite sure, but there was someone else there with me. I couldn't see them, I just knew they were there, gaining on me. I didn't want to be seen, I wanted to run away, but I couldn't, my limbs were too heavy, and when I tried to cry out I made no sound at all.

When I wake, white light slips through the slats on the blind. The rain is finally gone, its work done. The room is warm; it smells terrible, rank and sour – I've barely left it since Thursday. Outside, I can hear the vacuum purr and whine. Cathy is cleaning. She'll be going out later; when she does I can venture out. I'm not sure what I will do, I can't seem to right myself. One more day of drinking, perhaps, and then I'll get myself straight tomorrow.

My phone buzzes briefly, telling me its battery is dying. I pick it up to plug it into the charger and I notice that I have two missed calls from last night. I dial into voicemail. I have one message.

'Rachel, hi. It's Mum. Listen, I'm coming down to London tomorrow. Saturday. I've got a spot of shopping to do. Could we meet up for a coffee or something? Darling, it's not a good time for you to come and stay now. There's . . . well, I've got a new

friend, and you know how it is in the early stages.' She titters. 'Anyway, I'm very happy to give you a loan to tide you over for a couple of weeks. We'll talk about it tomorrow. OK, darling. Bye.'

I'm going to have to be straight with her, tell her exactly how bad things are. That is not a conversation I want to have stone-cold sober. I haul myself out of bed: I can go down to the shops now and just have a couple of glasses before I go out. Take the edge off. I look at my phone again, check the missed calls. Only one is from my mother – the other is from Scott. At quarter to one in the morning. I sit there, with the phone in my hand, debating whether to call him back. Not now, too early. Perhaps later? After one glass, though, not two.

I plug the phone in to charge, pull the blind up and open the window, then go to the bathroom and run a cold shower. I scrub my skin and wash my hair and try to quieten the voice in my head which tells me it's an odd thing to do, less than forty-eight hours after your wife's body has been discovered, to ring another woman in the middle of the night.

Evening

The earth is still drying out, but the sun is almost breaking through thick white cloud. I bought myself one of those little bottles of wine – just one. I shouldn't, but lunch with my mother would test the willpower of a lifelong teetotaler. Still, she's promised to transfer £300 into my bank account, so it wasn't a complete waste of time.

I didn't admit how bad things were. I didn't tell her I've been out of work for months, or that I was fired (she thinks her money is tiding me over until my redundancy payment arrives). I didn't tell her how bad things had got on the drinking front, and she didn't notice. Cathy did. When I saw her on my way out this morning, she gave me a look and said, 'Oh for God's sake. Already?' I have no idea how she does that, but she always knows. Even if I've only had half a glass, she takes one look at me and she knows.

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

'I can tell from your eyes,' she says, but when I check myself in the mirror I look exactly the same. Her patience is running out, her sympathy too. I have to stop. Only not today. I can't today. It's too hard today.

I should have been prepared for it, should have expected it, but somehow I didn't. I got on to the train and she was everywhere, her face beaming from every newspaper: beautiful, blonde, happy Megan, looking right into the camera, right at me.

Someone has left behind their copy of *The Times*, so I read their report. The formal identification came last night, the post-mortem is today. A police spokesman is quoted saying that 'Mrs Hipwell's cause of death may be difficult to establish because her body has been outside for some time, and has been submerged for several days, at least.' It's horrible to think about, with her picture right in front of me. What she looked like then, what she looks like now.

There's a brief mention of Kamal, his arrest and release, and a statement from DI Gaskill, saying that they are 'pursuing a number of leads', which I imagine means they are clueless. I close the newspaper and put it on the floor at my feet. I can't bear to look at her any longer. I don't want to read those hopeless, empty words.

I lean my head against the window. Soon we'll pass number twenty-three. I glance over, just for a moment, but we're too far away on this side of the track to really see anything. I keep thinking about the day I saw Kamal, about the way he kissed her, about how angry I was and how I wanted to confront her. What would have happened if I had done? What would have happened if I'd gone round then, banged on the door and asked her what the hell she thought she was up to? Would she still be out there, on her terrace?

I close my eyes. At Northcote, someone gets on and sits down in the seat next to me. I don't open my eyes to look, but it strikes me as odd, because the train is half empty. The hairs are standing

up on the back of my neck. I can smell aftershave under cigarette smoke and I know that I've smelled that scent before.

'Hello.'

I look round and recognize the man with the red hair, the one from the station, from *that* Saturday. He's smiling at me, offering his hand to shake. I'm so surprised that I take it. His palm feels hard and calloused.

'You remember me?'

'Yes,' I say, shaking my head as I'm saying it. 'Yes, a few weeks ago, at the station.'

He's nodding and smiling. 'I was a bit wasted,' he says, then laughs. 'Think you were, too, weren't you, love?'

He's younger than I'd realized, maybe late twenties. He has a nice face, not good looking, just nice. Open, a wide smile. His accent's cockney, or Estuary, something like that. He's looking at me as though he knows something about me, as though he's teasing me, as though we have an in joke. We don't. I look away from him. I ought to say something, ask him, *What did you see?*

'You doing OK?' he asks.

'Yes, I'm fine.' I'm looking out of the window again, but I can feel his eyes on me and I have the oddest urge to turn towards him, to smell the smoke on his clothes and his breath. I like the smell of cigarette smoke. Tom smoked when we first met. I used to have the odd one with him, when we were out drinking or after sex. It's erotic to me, that smell; it reminds me of being happy. I graze my teeth over my lower lip, wondering for a moment what he would do if I turned to face him and kissed his mouth. I feel his body move. He's leaning forward, bending down, he picks up the newspaper at my feet.

'Awful, innit? Poor girl. It's weird, 'cos we were there that night. It was that night, wasn't it? That she went missing.'

It's like he's read my mind, and it stuns me. I whip round to look at him. I want to see the expression in his eyes. 'I'm sorry?'

'That night when I met you on the train. That was the night that

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

girl went missing, the one they just found. And they're saying the last time anyone saw her was outside the station. I keep thinking, you know, that I might've seen her. Don't remember, though. I was wasted.' He shrugs. 'You don't remember anything, do you?'

It's strange, the way I feel when he says this. I can't remember ever feeling like this before. I can't reply because my mind has gone somewhere else entirely, and it's not the words he's saying, it's the aftershave. Under the smoke, that scent – fresh, lemony, aromatic – evokes a memory of sitting on the train next to him, just like I am now, only we're going the other way and someone is laughing really loudly. He's got his hand on my arm, he's asking if I want to go for a drink, but suddenly something is wrong. I feel frightened, confused. Someone is trying to hit me. I can see the fist coming and I duck down, my hands up to protect my head. I'm not on the train any longer, I'm in the street. I can hear laughter again, or shouting. I'm on the steps, I'm on the pavement, it's so confusing, my heart is racing. I don't want to be anywhere near this man. I want to get away from him.

I scramble to my feet, saying 'Excuse me' loudly so the other people in the carriage will hear, but there's hardly anyone in here and no one looks around. The man looks up at me, surprised, and moves his legs to one side to let me past.

'Sorry, love,' he says. 'Didn't mean to upset you.'

I walk away from him as fast as I can, but the train jolts and sways and I almost lose my balance. I grab on to a seat back to stop myself from falling. People are staring at me. I hurry through to the next carriage and all the way through to the one after that; I just keep going until I get to the end of the train. I feel breathless and afraid. I can't explain it, I can't remember what happened, but I can feel it, the fear and confusion. I sit down, facing in the direction I have just come from so that I'll be able to see him if he comes after me.

Pressing my palms into my eye sockets, I concentrate. I'm trying to get it back, to see what I just saw. I curse myself for drinking. If

RACHEL

only my head was straight . . . but there it is. It's dark, and there's a man walking away from me. A woman walking away from me? A woman, wearing a blue dress. It's Anna.

Blood is throbbing in my head, my heart pounding. I don't know whether what I'm seeing, feeling, is real or not, imagination or memory. I squeeze my eyes tightly shut and try to feel it again, to see it again, but it's gone.

ANNA

Saturday, 3 August 2013

Evening

Tom is meeting some of his army buddies for a drink and Evie's down for her nap. I'm sitting in the kitchen, doors and windows closed despite the heat. The rain of the past week has stopped at last; now it's stiflingly close.

I'm bored. I can't think of anything to do. I fancy going shopping, spending a bit of money on myself, but it's hopeless with Evie. She gets irritable and I get stressed. So I'm just hanging round the house. I can't watch television or look at a newspaper. I don't want to read about it, I don't want to see Megan's face, I don't want to think about it.

How can I not think about it when we're here, just four doors away?

I rang around to see if anyone was up for a playdate, but everyone's got plans. I even called my sister, but of course you've got to book her at least a week in advance. In any case, she said she was too hungover to spend time with Evie. I felt a horrible pang of envy then, a longing for Saturdays spent lying on the sofa with the newspapers and a hazy memory of leaving the club the night before.

Stupid, really, because what I've got now is a million times better, and I made sacrifices to secure it. Now I just need to

protect it. So here I sit in my sweltering house, trying not to think about Megan. I try not to think about *her* and I jump every time I hear a noise, I flinch when a shadow passes the window. It's intolerable.

What I can't stop thinking about is the fact that Rachel was here the night Megan went missing, stumbling around, totally pissed, and then she just *disappeared*. Tom looked for her for ages, but he couldn't find her. I can't stop wondering what she was doing.

There is no connection between Rachel and Megan Hipwell. I spoke to the police officer, Detective Sergeant Riley, about it after we saw Rachel at the Hipwells' house, and she said it was nothing to worry about. 'She's a rubbernecker,' she said. 'Lonely, a bit desperate. She just wants to be involved in something.'

She's probably right. But then I think about her coming into my house and taking my child, I remember the terror I felt when I saw her with Evie down by the fence. I think about that horrible, chilling little smile she gave me when I saw her outside the Hipwells' house. Detective Sergeant Riley doesn't know just how dangerous Rachel can be.