

Chapter One

Sarah

Forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him

Sarah wondered, as she hung up the tea-towel, if her hands carried the faintest trace of the washing up gloves. Not how she would like to be perceived, she thought, forty-something and with an odour of damp rubber clinging to her fingertips. She was always mindful, as she examined a patient's eyes, that they were able to scrutinise her as closely as she could them. Each pore of the skin; the vagaries of the hairline; the crumpling around the mouth; the bruised grey beneath the eye; a residue of milk in the corner of the lip from a cappuccino grabbed on the walk to work. How quickly, she knew, the intimate can become pedestrian. How quickly one loses all self-consciousness, close to a man's face, a woman's face, an old face, a child's face; looking deep behind the pupil at the spider's web of capillaries; looking for cataracts, for signs of glaucoma, all the time the patient's breath repetitive on her cheek.

The eyes as the window of the soul, there was a notion that could be quickly disabused. Instead, eyes watery and red-rimmed from attempts to use contact lenses. Eyes that squinted, twitched, blinked short-sightedly at her charts. Sarah considered that her job had probably cured her of the inclination to look into someone's eyes as a gauge of personality, of veracity, of intent. No, eyes were too full of symptoms and contraindications for her; she looked elsewhere in the body for the clues that helped her

piece together her sense of others. Perhaps this was why, recently, she kept her eyes closed when she had sex with Michael; kept her eyes shut, and thereby circumvented looking into his.

Sarah hadn't been to a wedding for years. Relatively recently a rash of christenings, and then nothing. If she saw a bride on the way to the village church, or saw the groom and ushers smoking a hasty cigarette by the porch, she was increasingly inclined to wonder how on earth they summoned the will to do it at all. How, at that stage, could people be so blind to the self-discipline, the self-sacrifice, that marriage exacted? Could they not anticipate how hard it is; how inappropriate it was to be preoccupied with the height of floral table centres, or the rear view of a dress, or a piece of music chosen to accompany the procession, when instead they should be focused on how they would look at this person for thirty years and not scream?

She thought of a friend who had casually joked about her husband, adding that *this of course was before I started hating him*. And they both laughed, in a shared perception that she both did and did not hate him, and that such moments of intense resentment, of cold fury at being saddled with the same person, were entirely reasonable. So when she saw a bride, and thought of ribbon-tied boxes of sugared almonds given as bridal favours to guests, she thought it was probably all gloomily symbolic. The almonds, when left to discolour and age, smelt bitter like arsenic; from sugar to poison, that was how it could be.

Not that Sarah would have categorised her own marriage in that way; or at least mostly not in that way. She understood her marriage to be a compound of what once distinctly felt itself to be love in all its entirety, now bundled with the attrition of the familiar, the predictable, and the deadening of the years since. She saw their relationship meshed and wrapped by the sticky ties of children; a weft and weave that frequently availed itself of companionability and good humour, and the ability to share a concern about one of the children with an appropriate balance of maternal and paternal perspectives (mostly, *come on Sarah, I think you may be over-reacting.*)

Sometimes, she hoped that they were moving towards a state of grace that was mostly founded on gratitude for no disasters shared, and which would allow them to cherish each other in their life together after the children were grown, and would avail them the gift of warm silence and thankfulness. Not that any of this prevented her, occasionally, unexpectedly, looking at the children's orthodontist with an awakening of desire, with a sudden hot longing to be held and kissed by a different man; to slough off her existence as Michael's wife, and be able to place her hand on another man's face and kiss him wholeheartedly. Sarah understood this as an offshoot of the relentlessness of monogamy, but it did not make its occasional emergence any less disconcerting or wistful. Suddenly, in the middle of a street to see a man she found attractive and to understand he was not an adventure that would be hers. (Some women, she knew, did not feel any constraint, but Sarah was a keeper of promises, and would turn her eyes from a quick, connected, gaze. What this told her about herself she felt disinclined to pursue. Introspection, she had been bought up to believe, was a sword that could debilitate as much as clarify.)

As she looked at her face in the mirror and blended in her foundation, calling to the children to get their bags ready for school, and reminding them it was swimming today, Sarah saw that she indisputably looked her age; her skin seemed slightly separate from the flesh beneath, and there was something a little gaunt about her mouth. Each pregnancy, each birthday as if something slipped softly away until she was somewhere different. Not invisible, but somehow cloaked with a layer of fine dust; her previous, sensual, shimmering young self hidden beneath the sediment of wife, mother and housekeeper.

In the main though, life was good. Michael was a partner in a small solicitors' practice, and specialised in asylum seekers. She had lost count of the dinner parties they had been to where guests recounted tales of people clinging to the underside of the Eurostar train, such was their eagerness to be the recipients of social services and the National Health. Sarah could only think of the times she had gone to Michael's office and seen men with wary eyes and silent wives, smelling of food cooked in over-crowded kitchens and wearing donated clothes and a crushed, bemused air at where their dignity and humanity had been filed in the process. She was always conscious that for someone who looked into people's eyes for a living, she could rarely bring herself to look into theirs. And so she sat at dinner parties while Michael solidly, predictably, refused to engage with other guests' prejudices, and thought of how people's perceptions of a promised land were frequently misplaced, and that her own existence frequently seemed a planet away (was it possible that only last week she had written a letter on behalf of the Council of the

Protection of Rural England, supporting their view about a local bridleway?) and that she was proud of Michael because how to be good troubled her too, and it assuaged her that he so manifoldly was. (*Is worrying about the preservation of the green belt a contribution, or a luxury?* she had asked Michael one night last week in bed, and he had smoothed her hair from her forehead and said *you should worry less about how you fit in.*) In the circumstances, it seemed remarkable that he should be so little troubled himself.

Sarah shooed the children into the car and sent Jack back into the hallway for his swimming kit, and remembered another dinner party where they met an architect who was married to a younger, second wife called Candida. *How*, Sarah wondered, *could her parents have named her that?* She could not dispel from the woman's cheekbones, from her long limbs and her cropped dark hair, an aura that was bubbling, yeasty, malodorous. And when the architect said, *Unless your first wife or husband is a terrible person, I mean capable of real wrong-doing, I would always recommend staying with them because the alternative is so disruptive and painful for everyone involved*, Sarah watched as Candida's fork stopped halfway to her mouth, as if she might speak then decided not, and Sarah wondered what barrage of chaos lay beneath his words and her silence, and looked across the table at Michael in a small moment of gratitude.

Sarah kissed the children and deposited them in the lane that led to school, and resolved (not for the first time) that she should really think less about what made other people tick. It was not remotely selfless, or altruistic, she understood that; more like doing a jigsaw

puzzle, where she was continually intrigued at how others were composed. (At school, a new mother last term who had introduced herself as Cordelia; *Goodness*, Sarah had responded, *isn't that something to live up to? Not at all*, Cordelia had responded, *I love it and I am always the only one*. Sarah had driven all the way to work wondering why she would have considered the name Cordelia such a blow; another expectation to fulfil, when there were so many she felt lay unachieved.)

The architect's comment had sustained her, though, through the period of half a term of school when Michael had been so busy she had hardly seen him, and when she felt like a single parent anyway. When he came home he was terse and irritable with her, and she viewed him as a marginally unfair schoolteacher, whom she could never do anything but disappoint.

She was always intrigued by the point at which these remote standoffs dissolved into more amicable terrain (this time when he had gone into the garden and picked her a handful of purple lilac and wrapped it in a twist of silver foil, and given it to her as she sat at the kitchen table reading the Sunday paper. She had felt awkwardly moved that he had gone outside with scissors, and a length of foil, and done this for her in a way that was unostentatious and thoughtful and made her feel real affection for him as she kissed him thank you.)

Mostly, Sarah told herself, their marriage was good (now, as she sat stationary in the traffic because of the roadworks.) If anyone had asked her to describe him, she would

have struggled beyond words like conscientious and decent and kind, although she remembered how the curve of his smile, in the early years, had made her stomach jump, and how she had loved to place her hand on the small of his back and feel his spine beneath her palm. Their relationship, she saw clearly, was upholstered by the wadding of their experience shared; each child-birth where he had sat and held her hand, reading her clues from the crossword she liked to do, rubbing her feet with lavender oil and not reacting when she told him, *Oh fuck you, it's fine for you in the spectator seats*. She still knew the things she liked to watch him do; the way he wrapped presents with a neat fold on the cut side of the paper, the way he peeled oranges, and tied knots, the way he could pack suitcases into the car without wasting an inch of space. Balanced against these were the rage she felt for the way he tossed coffee grains into the sink and left them to discolour the enamel, even though she repeatedly asked him to stop; the way he left apple cores in the sidepocket of her car to rot and stink; the way he expected sex as a ritual, a habit, rather than as an extension of warmth of feeling, or as an expression of anything other than his need to ejaculate.

In this way, Sarah understood marriage to be a series of checks and balances, amounting to something that was broadly good, occasionally gratifying, and sometimes only tolerable, but which occasionally made her feel that she had a load strapped to her back which was bending each of her vertebrae until she was so twisted out of shape she could not stand up straight. On these occasions, it was what she felt for their children that made her feel she would always be able to fill her lungs to capacity.

Sarah was aware too that she had spent almost as much of her life with Michael as without him. They had met while at university and married not long after, so the person she could summon up who was not his wife was so young, so unformed, so implacably confident in the face of life, it was hard even to connect with the memory of her.

She remembered riding pillion on a motorbike around an island in Greece, and the wheel catching in a pot-holed road, she and her then boyfriend spilling off onto the verge, her ankle torn and bleeding from the still-spinning back wheel. She had looked at her foot, before the pain had started to bite, before she began picking the small bits of grit that clung to the edges like clams, and wondered how this could possibly have happened. There, in full view of the plate of turquoise sea, the cicadas singing in the long grass, a frugal lunch of rolls and taramasalata and olives in her rucksack. Sarah realised retrospectively that, aged twenty, one simply did not expect things to turn out badly. Between herself and her friends was somehow an assumption that life was benevolent and they were lucky; so they walked through underpasses late at night and lived in flats in run-down areas, and never for a moment considered that it wouldn't be all right.

She realised, simply, that they were not wired for the possibility of disaster. Was it childbirth, she wondered later, which made women cross a divide between the assumption that everything was benign, to a state of constant reckoning with life; fearful that tragedy and awfulness might lash out at any moment? The loving of something so infinitely vulnerable as a baby, it was that, Sarah had decided, that did for most women. One only had to stand over the cot of a new born infant, hypnotically watching the rise

and fall of each breath, afraid to leave the room lest five minutes later the tiny rib cage might not rise - *just at the moment she stepped into the shower* – so that one leaned over the cot making pacts with God or the universe, in order to leave the room and for the draw-in of oxygen to continue.

Most of all, in their early days, Sarah decided that Michael made her feel safe. She felt she could trust him, that he would always tell her the truth, and that in his personality, what might have evolved as intensity had manifested itself as meticulous attention to detail, and she was comfortable with the knowledge that this exonerated her from the same.

Sarah could make mud pies and decorate them with flowers for the children in the knowledge that the tax disc would never be out of date on the car, and that when they left to go on holiday – perhaps to drive all the way down to Italy – he would have appropriately colour-coded folders with the relevant sections of the map, and before the harmonisation of the euro, each national currency contained in the same folder as the section of the map. (Her mother, Lydia, who had loved a series of emotionally indulgent actors, had said, *God, darling, how can you bear it*, and Sarah had laughed and said, *It's probably the contrast to my childhood that accounts for its appeal.*)

With hindsight she wondered whether that was why her mother had been so unmaternal. Lydia had always been so busy nurturing men who would storm through the door and

worry about their art, or, more frequently, the line of their teeth or the timbre of their voice.

Why, Sarah had asked her mother when she was sixteen, do you always fall for men who make a living pretending to be someone else and being applauded for it? Isn't that, clearly, a recipe for a lack of honesty?

It's the drama, her mother replied, I'm addicted to the intensity of it all.

Even now, in her seventies, Lydia could still be relied on to waft in to see the children, wrapped in an enormous magenta scarf, wearing eyeshadow as green as a pea, and tell them stories of old shows on seaside piers, while they sat and listened, mouths half-open in concentration, and Sarah found she could forgive her all of it because at least she had not aged into monochrome conformity, as she suspected she herself might do.

Michael's mother was so very different from her own, it had been easy to love her too; for her dependability, her kindness, her emotional sanity in contrast to Lydia's. Michael's lack of curiosity about his adoption had always intrigued her. When he told her, it was not announced as some great revelation, as something which might have a bearing on anything at all. Instead he told her as if saying that he had been unable to book a table at a restaurant. She could picture it still, on a picnic by the river, after she had made a joke about hoping their children would not inherit her mother's taste for the fantastic.

The next time Sarah saw Sheila, she wondered who his birth mother might have been, and how she might have been different; at the same time seeing Michael and Sheila

together and recognising that her calm hands had somehow infused his. Her own appetite for drama, however, provoked her to ask him: *As a child, weren't you always weaving stories about being a tragically given-up child? Didn't you stand at bus stops and imagine your mother had just gone by in a blue car? No, he had replied, as far as I was concerned, as far as I am concerned, I was holding my mother's hand at the bus stop.*

Yet when Sarah gave birth to her first child it was all the more remarkable (she could still summon up Rory, new and bloody in her arms, his mouth a perfect bud, his dark eyes searching beyond him, his fingers clasped around one of hers.) The streaks of her blood, his blood, the white chalky vernix, all of it seemed to reinforce how much each of her children belonged to her: belonged to her in a way that was knotted into her bones, her muscles, her organs, into each breath of hers that had oxygenated them during their nine months in her womb.

When Sheila and Henry came to visit her in the hospital (Sheila smoothing the corners of the sheet and then reaching forward to kiss them both) Sheila took the baby so tenderly in her arms, with such real pleasure in her smile, but Sarah could not help herself from thinking that her mother-in-law had no genetic connection, no corporeal connection with this baby at all. (Was that part of the process of birthing, she now wondered in retrospect, that ones perspective became so relentlessly physical, biological. At the moment she handed Rory to Sheila it was with the same anxiety as if to a stranger who might not care for him at all.)

When Grace was born and turned yellow with jaundice (her blood tussling with the traces of her mother's blood in her system) it was just another sign, Sarah felt, of how intrinsically physical the knot of motherhood was.

Yet, when she stopped feeling wary of Sheila holding Rory, she felt a small pang of pity (her breasts leaking and throbbing as she sat there) that this moment had never been Sheila's; her birthed, crumpled baby held precious in her arm.

Later, when Rory was about six months old, Sarah looked back on her feelings with a small sense of shame. She watched Sheila feed him pureed vegetable, carefully wiping his chin with the spoon. She watched her sing to him old songs and lullabies, and clap her hands for him, praise him, and cradle him in her competent arms. Sarah pictured it, later, when her children all adored their grandmother, as if Sheila had knitted blood corpuscles and bone tissue out of thin air. In loving them and caring for them, she had biologically meshed them to her.

When Rory's attempt at saying grandma became Fanma (and Grace and Jack followed suit), it seemed so appropriate to Sarah that they had named her for themselves. She felt badly, in retrospect, about asking Michael whether he had wondered about his birth mother driving past in a blue car. Yet, when she kissed her sleeping children in their beds on a summer night, their warmth on her lips and the scent of their skin inhaled deep into her lungs, she felt again the impact that they were born of her body.

It had all seemed so fixed, so complete, so smooth and steady, until now as Sarah parked the car and began to walk past the supermarket to work with the small hot thought of Harry like a vein throbbing insistent beneath her skin. Harry. First of all, how ridiculous that she should now feel this for Harry. Harry who had been Michael's best friend since university days; Harry whose younger face smiled out of their wedding photos. Harry, who suddenly seemed to incite such a longing in her, such a desire to reach out and touch him, that last Sunday when he, Kate and the children came to lunch, Sarah had got up from the table to get something from the larder and had stood with her palms and her forehead against the cool wall and told herself not to look at him, to banish the flush from her cheeks and instead to ask if anybody wanted some cranberry, and check if Jack had been able to cut his meat properly. *Are you ok?* Michael had asked her when she sat down (typical, that he should have noticed her red face.) *Yes*, she had replied, fanning herself with her hand, *I think perhaps I drank the wine too quickly*, aware that she and Harry were employing all their energy not to look at each other, and that their not looking was requiring every ounce of her emotional self.

Ridiculous, also, that this was not some new passion, a new face met in the round of her existence. Once in Spain, she had watched an old olive press operated by a donkey trudging in slow, meticulous circles; with each orbit completed, a resonant creak of the press. It was indulgent, she knew, to see a metaphor in it, rather than a historical solution to extract oil from an olive, but the tread of her life was familiar and she had not met someone new – at a hockey match while she waited half-frozen for the children, or at the

juice bar after yoga, or at the Italian class she attended four sessions of last spring.

Instead, it was Harry, Harry in a process that was insidious, velvety, so that even now, as she pushed open the door of the practice and greeted Helena the receptionist, she was aware of a small persistent softness at the base of her throat, and the want of him like a liquid warmth beneath her skin.

Beginnings always made Sarah feel comfortable. She felt that if one could trace things back to their origin, and place a finger right where they started, the ability to do this made eventual understanding possible. But with Harry, how to do this with Harry? Had it been brewing for years, contrary to this feeling of being ambushed, catapulted into somewhere with a landscape that she had not thought to see again in her life. (Again, her mother's voice in her head: *God, Sarah, why are you so indelibly middle-aged?*)

The answer was one she could not expect her mother to understand; her mother who had borne one child before she was twenty and then carried herself as if it had never happened to her body, or her life, at all. Sarah saw herself as a mother first and everything else afterwards, and even though she was confident Michael desired her and that he did not look at her body with critical eyes, she felt it visibly to bear the marks of multiple births. (How did her breasts suddenly become so old, the skin resembling the film of milk on top of a cup of coffee?) As for other men, until now, she had never thought much beyond kissing the orthodontist, and all of her escapist fantasies were most definitely clothed and most definitely fantasy.

And now with Harry, this territory that was so disconcerting, so astonishing. The feeling of standing on ground with a momentum of its own; a torrent of slick, gleaming earth that might slide beneath her feet, taking her somewhere that was very far from the neatness of her life. And in spite of its relentlessness, she knew this neatness mattered to her; a notion of accrued integrity, of time invested in fidelity. On her pillow at night she had told herself, *This must stop*, as if her feelings could be put firmly away like groceries unpacked, and then in her dreams there would be Harry again, and she would wake in the morning with the sense of him dewy on her skin. Easy, too, if she could regard it as an unrequited crush, a small, ridiculous fantasy that would blow itself out like a cloud in a squally sky, but since the day in the meadow, and the prospect of choice he gave her, the choice of how most definitely not to be faithful, she had moved from the olive treadmill to the wet slick of earth, and she could not reach out her hand and find something to steady herself.

All of it, until the meadow, had been composed of such small moments, such small incidents, she understood that too. A series of deft, slightly awkward nudgings, which seemed to have placed their bodies, their awareness, in this hot-throated place. The first (at least she thought it was; was this the beginning she needed to define?) was two months ago, when through a mix-up they had both turned up early to collect the boys from football. There was a soft rain falling from a grey smudged sky which made them retreat to a café opposite the pitch, the boys continuing to play with their hair plastered to their foreheads. At a table in the window they could just about see the game, and Harry

had leant forward and rubbed a patch through the steamed up pane and she could see Rory, misty-edged, near the goal.

The table had a cloth which was red and chequered, and as they talked, (she was laughing at something he had said) she was suddenly aware of her hands on the table, awkwardly rearranging the milk jug and the sugar bowl, in small, self-conscious movements, which reflected, perhaps, that she could not remember the last time she had sat at a table for two with a man who was not Michael. But mostly she was aware of his hands across the table from hers. (Did Kate still see, she thought, how beautiful his hands were; the shape of his fingers, the contours of his knuckles, the white half moons on his nail beds, the blond hair at his wrist.) *Unfair question*, she thought, in the knowledge that she knew Michael was handsome but that she knew this in a way that was objective, long absorbed. It was not something she would have *felt*, felt so that she wanted to reach out and touch him, in the way that Harry's hands, on the red tablecloth, made her feel now. She knew, therefore, she should not judge Kate for not having her breath taken away by Harry's hands on the cloth.

She placed her own hands on her lap, and watched through the steamed up window as the final whistle blew. How could it have escaped her attention that they talked so easily, and with so many similar words to describe what they said? Sarah was mindful of the fact that she had never known him single. When she met Michael, Harry and Kate were already together. Kate's father had died months earlier, and it was evident, the first time she met them, that Harry had become the central passion of her life. *Harry and Kate*, she had

truly never thought of them as anything separate from that; as she looked across the table at a forty-two year old man, and realised that she had always enjoyed his blue, blue eyes. (How odd, how strange, she thought on the way home, half-listening to Rory's account of the football match; suddenly to see somebody as if for the first time; to connote a real affinity that had been there for years.) There, through the years, there had always been Harry, an awareness that all the times the four of them were together, she and Harry had been talking and laughing.

Then, in a small hotel that they had all stayed at recently for a friend's birthday party, Kate had asked to borrow her hairdryer. Sarah went upstairs to their room and knocked on the door. Harry said come in, and told her Kate had just gone down to the beach with the children, and he said *look at this cherry tree right outside the window* and she walked to the window and looked at the coronet of blossom and Harry stood behind her, but a little along the sill, and she felt very aware of the back of her neck and felt her skin turn warm (impossible that she should be blushing) and was suddenly aware that it would seem the most natural thing in the world to turn and kiss him, all the time the blossom vivid against her eyes. Instead, she said *yes it is beautiful*, and pressed the hairdryer into his hands (not even trusting herself to look at those, they would be her undoing), left the room, quickly and clumsily, stood at the top of the stairs, her hand on the banister, and told her heart to stop pounding.

Later, on the beach, she watched him throw a frisbee to the boys as Michael lay dozing beside her. She was aware of the arc of the frisbee, the smooth stones beneath her feet,

and the salt in the air and it made her breath catch in her throat. Harry turned and smiled at her, and came and sat down beside her on the shingle, and she wondered why she was so acutely aware of each of his limbs in relation to her own.

In the late afternoon, they all walked along a coastal path, and their steps had fallen in beside each other, and he had said something which made her laugh and she was aware of the yellow gorse by her side, and the white, loose, pebbles beneath her feet, and the blue sky and a gull wheeling overhead, laughing with a spontaneity and a sudden sense of liberation that made her feel giddy with the sea air swimming in her lungs. Jack had looked back down the path and said, *Look, Mummy can't stop laughing* and she felt so awash with happiness and so alive and she looked ahead at Michael to anchor herself in the real, in the now, and reached down and picked up a pebble and put it deep into her pocket and clasped her fingers around it and told herself that she must not feel this way.

Momentum, she had decided, was the most dangerous thing. Most things, she was aware, gathered a momentum of their own; good things and bad, small splinters of spite which could crystallise into active dislike, and now this, an awakening of feelings which each day seemed to swell into something more, like a bulb or a shoot sucking in water and light and bursting forth into something huge and juicy and luscious, like an enormous plant which she had to part with her hands to take even a step. Coupled with this was an emergent sensation that it was not her feeling alone. There was something in the way Harry held her gaze, something in the way his eyes sought out hers that made her feel the

same transformation was happening within him. Desire, sinuous and thrumming, stringing itself between them.

And then, the meadow. One morning last week, Kate had phoned and said she was unable to get away from school early. Harry had taken the car to be serviced and was stuck at the garage, could she go and fetch him? There was a small blade of treachery, a flicker of guilt in her assent, but undeniably an eagerness to drive to the garage and have an excuse to be alone with him.

When Sarah got to the garage, Harry was standing out on the forecourt, and as Sarah stepped out of the car, she saw him begin to hold out his arms and then drop them to his sides. (It is instinctive, she thought, this feeling that our bodies should behave as lovers' do.) She walked towards him and he said the car was nearly ready, and suggested they drive to a meadow nearby and go for a walk. Sarah said *yes, that would be lovely*, the *yes* singeing her lips as she said it, in the knowledge she was stepping onto earth that was gleaming, slick with desire. As Sarah got back in the car she knew that Michael did not deserve this, because he had never doubted her, and yet as she reached for the ignition, she looked at Harry's hand, the length of his fingers, the shape of his knuckles, and it was all she could do not to fold her body over him and take them into her mouth, kiss each finger softly, her hair falling into his lap. So she thought of the children, of what she had put into the boys' packed lunches. She thought of the paraphernalia of work, eye charts, magnifying lens, glaucoma tests, and tried to clutter up her mind with the flotsam and jetsam of each of her days; a trolley with a skewed wheel to push round the supermarket;

an authorisation form to sign for a school trip; one of Michael's suits that needed to be taken to the dry cleaners; anything to stop her kissing his wrist.

And now, a week later, she could still not think of any of it with equanimity. Her memory of it pulsed hot and silken, making her want to bite her lip.

Down by the river, the meadow grass long and fluid, the cow parsley stirring, and a cuckoo calling through the lightly leafed aspen trees. A morning in May, the sunlight clear, and the greenness of everything so bold, so surprising, so vivid to the eye after the bleak simplicity of winter, and the ground warm to the touch, and a breeze softly teasing her skin, and the cuckoo's call again through the trees and nobody else there, and she could not bear to look at his mouth, at his hands. The space between them palpable, buzzing, as if their bodies were throwing two magnetic fields and she sat on the edge of a low ruined wall, the stone pressing into her flesh, all the time threading and plaiting a long piece of grass, the green sap staining the creases in her index finger - creases from washing up, peeling carrots, smoothing beds, unloading shopping, marks on her hand from a life so disconnected from that moment, that moment when desire was heavy and palpable in her mouth, when her lips felt bee-stung, her breasts stirring beneath her shirt (still surprising that they should have been summoned so; her body responding to an old call, an old pattern once known) and when more than anything she would liked to turn to him and say hold me, touch me, kiss my mouth.

How odd, how long-forgotten, that the body could dissolve into atoms, each one jangling, vibrant, so unbelievably alive; the heart stomping in the cavern of the chest, the blood into the veins such a flood, such a rush. And all the time, the grass in her hand, her fingers plaiting and weaving and her eyes behind her sunglasses, and for the first time in years, her body, her self, there, as if naked on the grass like a clean-sculpted bone. Beside it the drapes of motherhood, of wifhood; the infinite softenings and kindnesses and steeliness that came from loving children, the complex bundling of the everyday; of working, of shopping, of cooking, of buying birthday presents and school uniform. Instead, it was as if she might have given him her sex in the palm of her hand; held it to him, her body pressed against the wall. Her hands, patient and measured for so many years, tearing at his shirt, at his fly, kissing his neck with infinite tenderness. And all the time, the cuckoo, and the sound of the river, and the skin-warmth of the spring sunshine, and the memory of a novel read long ago, when she was twenty and invincible and wholly selfish, of the river carrying a woman and her cousin's fiancé away, and thinking how easy it would be to surrender to all of this, to yield to this moment, to allow her honey-sticky limbs to do as they would; to think only of herself, of what she wanted to do; to disregard consequences, loyalties, promises long ago made, now, at that moment, on that morning in May.

Harry pushed his hair from his forehead and said, *I can't explain how, how this has happened, but I want you, after all this time I'm consumed by you, I can't think of anything else...* and put his head into his hands and Sarah stepped backwards, because more than anything she wanted to step into his arms, but knew that outside of this there

were Michael and Kate and six children and that this meadow, this moment, could not contain all the debris and fall-out from all of those lives. So she had placed her finger to his lips so that he could not say anymore; could not sow her longing with words that made it rise up of its own accord, and they got back into her car and drove back to the garage, and the car felt so hot, so unbelievably hot, and Sarah could hardly make her eyes focus on the road before her.

Later that evening, before Michael got home, when the children were playing outside and Sarah was chopping onions for pasta sauce, the phone rang and it was Harry. He said, *I'm sorry, if what I said..* his words broken and unfinished and she said *it hasn't.. I wanted to know that.* He did not reply and she said no more, but they stayed on the phone just listening to each other breathe and Sarah was unsure whether her lungs wanted to gasp for air, or not breathe at all; as if the tiniest influx of breath might crack her whole chest. To listen to him breathe – was that a gift that was possible, allowable? – and when she turned back to the onions, she realised she was crying, and recognised that this was what true heartache was: the knowledge of affinity, of passion, curtailed by obligation and duty; the realisation that heartache was not something experienced at sixteen, crying prostrate on the bedroom floor because a boy had ended it all. No, that was not heartache at all. Instead, it was this: her heart throbbing in the expanse of her chest, and all the time patiently, quietly chopping onions, pouring tomatoes from a can and swilling it out for the recycling bin, and answering Grace when she ran in and asked how long supper would be and telling her she could play for another half an hour.

Now, tonight, a week later, the memory of the meadow still tangled in her skin, the drive back to the garage when they hardly spoke but when she wanted to tell Harry all the things she would like to do to him, with him, and the knowledge of how easy it would have been to stop the car and place her hand inside his white shirt, run her other hand through his hair and kiss him softly, climb from the driving seat and straddle his lap and take him inside her. Instead, she had driven him quietly to the garage, her body humming and drenched, her mouth dry with longing. They looked at each other but did not speak as he got out of the car, and at her feet lay the long stem of discarded grass, and she drove back to the house with the windows all down, and wondered how she would ever think of this with peace.

Now, sitting on Jack's bed, holding his hand as he fell asleep, his hair soft on the pillow, his pirate pyjamas blue like the sea, she could hear Grace in her bedroom practising her cello and Rory in his room chanting Latin verbs for his homework, and she thought that these were the sounds that should be anchors, guy ropes; these were the rhythms that both sustained her and tied her to this house. In Harry's house, she knew, the same bedtime rituals would be happening. A flute instead of a cello, pyjamas that were not blue; but Kate would be sitting by a bedside, or checking teeth were clean, and perhaps Harry would be bringing upstairs a glass of water, or loading the dishwasher, or pulling the plug out of the bath. All of it, in both houses, had a sanctity she could see as if it lay on the bed beside her; and she felt at that moment that anything else was inconceivable, impossible. Whatever she felt for Harry could not fracture all of this. Later, Michael would come home and she would grill some fish for supper, and mix salad in a bowl they had bought

on holiday in Italy, and they would sit at the table and use the pepper grinder Sheila had bought them years ago and each moment would affirm that this was her life. This was her life, and to jeopardise it should be unthinkable.

Folding the children's towels onto the rail in the bathroom, she told herself it would probably only be a short affair. An affair, perhaps, that would be jewelled with passion and fulfilment, with moments that she could dwell on when she was old and all thought of sex gone. An affair that would consist of sex overflowing from cars, on grass pressed into her spine. Sex, however, that would make her unable to look at Michael or at Kate; sex that would eat hungrily, lustily, into the fabric of all of their lives. An affair that would surely, probably, peter into nothing; a residual embarrassment, a memory of transgression shared and which made all interaction between their families awkward. (A summer barbecue, when they stood on opposite sides of the fire, handing each other a drink, fastidiously careful not to touch at all.)

No, affairs, Sarah knew, seldom ended cleanly or simply, with a civilised, neat step back into the way things were before. She had learnt from her mother, from tirades in rooms below her at night as a child, that love or passion, when it leaves, seldom departs in an even-handed way. And if they were discovered (and now, thinking this, she could scarcely swallow her fish as Michael talked to her about a case he had struggled with today) how bloody that would be, how impossible to extricate themselves from their web of treacheries and betrayals. It could never be fixed; she knew that with the calm

resoluteness with which she had gently told Jack this evening that his remote controlled helicopter was truly broken; it had crashed into the fence and would not fly again.

If not an affair, she wondered (passing Michael the salad), what if it could truly be love? A love in the second part of her life which was golden, blooming? A love she had chosen as a woman, not as a girl; for a man whom she would love for himself, not mostly as the father of her children. Then she thought of the architect, of Candida, at a long ago dinner table. Golden, she knew, would not describe the aftermath. And she thought of a friend who had married again, and who had told her (in a way that was not cynical or bitter, but in a voice that carried with it the truth of knowledge painfully gained) that most times a second marriage metamorphosed into the first, selfishness re-emerging as the frisson evaporated from watching the new partner sleep. (Now, with a start, she heard Michael say *you're miles away; what's bothering you?*)

And where did that leave her, Sarah thought (now loading the dishwasher, Michael turning on the news, the dog curling up in its basket beside him.) Did that leave her with the knowledge that love could not be sustained; that all love became porous through the tyranny of the everyday, nibbled at the edges until it could not be held up to the light?

Perhaps, she wondered, for some there existed a kindred spirit, a person without whom life would be unlived, but mostly, was the best to be hoped for compatibility, affection; a shared harness worn without chafing or recrimination through the years? Did that mean, then, that she did not believe in the possibility of vibrant love sustained, and if so, how

bleak a perception was this of how it could be? And where did that place Harry, when she felt all these things, other than confirm her instinct that she must not become his lover?

In the face of it all, she thought, perhaps the only certain love was what she felt for each of her children; love that was palpable, still thuddingly felt in her chest.

Yet one day, she knew, the children would be grown. Then, they would love her not in the way that they did now, when each day was a web of enmeshed interaction. From the days when as toddlers she had felt they saw her body as an extension of their own; clambering over her, squirreling into her, pushing their faces into the side of her neck. It had all been – and with Jack still was – so physical, so visceral: the smell of their hair on a warm spring day, the scrubbing of their feet in the bath after a summer day spent barefoot, their small, warm bodies creeping into her bed at night, curling up in the turn of her arm, their heads on her shoulder.

She remembered the days when she used to collect them from nursery, how they would spring into her arms and wrap their legs around her back. She remembered how they used to cry if she left them not yet asleep with a babysitter and coming back from a dinner party and taking Grace, wailing and teething, into her arms. In those days, just holding them was a panacea for most of their woes. They had cried because they simply wanted to be cuddled, or because they had fallen and grazed their knee. The day would come

when she would not be able to solve what troubled them; when simply sitting by their beds would not dissolve their anxiety away.

They were growing up so quickly, and soon, she knew, she would not be enough. They would ask to borrow her car keys, and be keen to drive lickety-split away. She would stand across from them in a room, and tell them she understood what they were saying and they would think, dispassionately, *That is not what I meant at all*. They would find her sleeping and think *How did you get to be so old*, and perhaps look at her one day and feel responsibility, not love. *I have become cynical*, she thought, and placed her head in her hands and wept.

The next day, she stood in the kitchen after the children had gone to school. There was a knock at the door and she opened it to find Harry. *I just had to hear you say no*, he said, *I just had to look at you and hear you say no*. For a moment, the only thing she could think of was to step forward and say yes, but instead she stood with her palm flat to the door, her gaze somewhere beyond him, to the place where she knew the lie of the land and its relentless exactness, and how it was sustained by commitment and truth. The place where her children and her husband had expectations, assumptions of her; the place where she had deposited each coin of loyalty, of fidelity, over the years; the place where she and Kate stood as friends through years of mutual support; the place where she had stood long ago and made her promise to Michael.

Sarah knew this was not like a random, connected gaze in a street, a flirtatious dalliance that could be forgotten as such. This was a huge shifting of the plates of her life, this renouncing of what was possible, and this snuffing-out of her passionate self. She reached forward and touched his hand, in a gesture that was gentle, remorseful, and said to him, 'We should not, we can not, I won't', and stepped back inside the door. And as he walked down the drive, she looked at him with longing and felt her spine stiffen with what she could only think of as honour; honour and duty and obligation and promises long-held, and fidelity and integrity, and a refusal to set herself loose. She thought of it all, and felt it crystallise around her; her marriage, her feelings for Michael, her understanding of what her children needed from her. It clicked into place like a fine lacquered shell, something she would carry for the rest of her days, and she turned to go upstairs and get ready for work.

The phone rang when she was halfway up the stairs. She paused and decided not to leave it to the answering machine. When she picked up the receiver it was Michael, his voice affectionate and warm.

'Hi sweetheart' he said. 'My case has just collapsed – how about I come and meet you for lunch before you start work? We could go for pad-thai; I think you owe me from when Jack and I beat you and Grace *at Cluedo*.

Sarah laughed and said, 'How can you remember a debt so old? From my recollection it wouldn't amount to pad-thai, you'll be lucky if you get a sandwich.'

Michael said 'I'll see you at 12.30', and put down the phone.

Sarah went upstairs again and stood before her wardrobe and picked out her new jacket, put on her lipstick, combed through her hair with her fingers, gathered up her keys and handbag and went to meet her husband.

Her husband whom she knew she loved and whom she had, quietly, certainly, chosen again.