

# one

FRIDAY MORNING BEGAN AS ENGLISH SUMMER MORNINGS often do, with a shy but rising sun and wisps of cloud that were blown away by breakfast. My father was visiting, so I should have known it was never going to be an ordinary day, despite its early promise. It was the first time that he was seeing my London home for himself, and I was no newcomer to the city. I was seventeen when I decided on art college, and with the utter resolution that it had to be London. I wanted to lose myself, and it seemed just the place in which to be lost. I can remember the day I left home twelve years ago, my father standing by the car in the station car park, one gnarled hand raised in farewell, the other already feeling in his pocket for his keys. Then the put-put of the exhaust as he passed me at the station entrance, how he didn't see me that time, for he was hunched over the steering wheel like someone who was already late. I watched him go, the only family I had.

Family. A word that has always sat so uneasily with me. For other people it may mean rambling dinners with elbows on tables and old jokes kneaded and pulled like baking dough.

Or dotty aunts and long-suffering uncles, awkwardly shaped shift dresses and craggy moustaches, the hard press of a well-meant hug. Or just a house on a street. Handprints pushed into soft cement. The knotted, fraying ropes of an old swing on an apple bough. But for me? None of that. It's a word that undoes me. Like the snagging of a thread on a jumper that runs, unravelling quickly, into the cup of your hands.

Since college I've lived on both sides of the river, in boxy flats and sprawling townhouses; on my own in a damp basement in Bloomsbury, with seven others in a dilapidated but once grand family house on the Camden fringes. These days, my home is a neat Victorian terrace in Mile End, with a straggle of garden and a displaced gnome. My flatmate Lily sings Frank Sinatra in the bath and has a jet-black bob, shiny like treacle. Our street is in the shadow of a clutch of tower blocks, and there's a long-abandoned Fiat three doors up, its back window cracked like a skating pond. I once saw a cat stretched out on the pavement, black and white and dead all over, an image I've never quite cleared from my head. Another time there was a flock of pigeons pecking at a roast chicken carcass as I stepped out of my front door. I hurried past pretending I hadn't seen, like a twitchy citizen turning a blind eye to a crime. But just five minutes on my bicycle and I can be stretched out in Victoria Park, on a raft of newspapers and books. I go to a café where if the sun's beaming the owner gives me a free cup of coffee and I sit beside her at a rickety table as she smokes cheap cigarettes in her blue apron. All in all I feel settled here. It's a place where I feel I can welcome my father, without more complicated feelings budging their way in.

He was always older than the other fathers, and he made me giggle when I was small, saying he had been born ancient, with

glasses sliding down his nose in his crib, knees already wrinkled. When other dads shouted and laughed, wore Levi's and made makeshift tarpaulin water slides on summer days, my father was in his study, shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow, lost in books. I would slip away and seek him out, guided by the soft closing of a door or the creak of a stair. He'd touch a finger to my cheek and call me his little Betty. I'd cling to the ridges of his cords.

At breakfast times I used to spread marmalade on his toast, and present it to him, flushed with care. He opened the new cereal boxes, wrestling with the plastic inner, shaking cornflakes into my bowl, stealing one for himself. He ironed my school dresses on a Sunday evening, and hung them carefully on rose-patterned hangers, with their backs still creased. And sometimes I would come home and find on the kitchen table, always in the same bottom corner, an offering. A storybook. A newly ruled notepad. A posy of three, sharp-pointed lead pencils. We would make tea and read nonsense poetry together, me going to bed dreaming of Quangle Wangles and a beautiful pea-green boat.

We'd got on famously, with all the appearance of happiness.

Nowadays, we have new terms. Simply this: there are some things we talk about, and some things we don't. As long as the boundaries are observed, all is well. It makes what could be a complicated relationship into a very simple one. This understanding of ours didn't evolve gently over time, instead it began with rushed descent, hurried by splashed tears and spilt promises, when I was sixteen years old. Ever since, we've been quietly complicit. And we get along just fine.

He's never been the sort to just pop to London, on a whim. Our infrequent visits are planned well in advance and I always go to see him in Devon. 'I'm not built for London, Beth,' he's always said, and I've found it a relief, that he's not one of those

enthusiastic parents who is forever making suggestions and proposing plans. Lily's mother permanently scours the paper for exhibitions and new plays, looking for excuses to come and visit. She comes every couple of months and Lily turns into a tourist then. The two of them tumble through the door with crammed bags from Harrods and the V&A. They catch taxis and go to the ballet. They eat at talked-about restaurants and sometimes invite me to join them for dessert. Lily's mother also attacks our domestic space with relish. She scrubs our sink so it looks like silver, and replaces our gnawed toothbrushes with pert bristled ones. She buys us giant packs of toilet rolls and tins of soup, as though we were remote hill folk that might one day be snowed in. I observe such events with interest. I wonder what it would be like, to have the lives of your parents so entangled with your own. Lily's mother's embraces extend to me as well, but somehow her inclusive acts make me feel lonelier than I ever did before. Before I realized I needed a new toothbrush, or a slice of Michelin-starred pavlova.

So it came as a surprise when my father telephoned three days ago to say that he was coming to see me this very weekend. Would I be around on Friday? Would I be free? he'd asked. This was new territory, and he entered it with a sideways glance and a fretful edge. As chance would have it, I had the day off. I work in a gallery and so I often have to do weekends, but that week I was gifted a rare Friday and Saturday of freedom. I'd had visions of a lazy breakfast at the pavilion in the park, a bicycle ride along the canal path, an afternoon in a sunny beer garden with friends who never worked weekends but still celebrated them no less rampantly. 'Of course I'm free, Dad,' I'd said, affecting an easy tone, 'come any time.' I'd offered to meet his train at Paddington and he'd laughed vigorously, saying that he

wasn't decrepit yet. I stole in and asked him then, 'is everything okay?' And he said of course it is. Then he added, 'I just want to see you.' And it sounded simple enough at the time; unexpected, but just about believable. After I'd hung up the phone, I couldn't help feeling a queer mix of elation and worry. I decided to temper both through avoidance. I lost myself in recipe books. Instead of spending the next three days imagining all the possible scenarios that might have provoked his visit, I baked, I cooked, and I dusted, feeling more daughterly than I had in a long time.

An impromptu spirit was clearly in the air, for Lily announced she was going sailing for the weekend, with her new boyfriend, Sam. I pictured her windblown and salty, laughing at the breeze. I was disappointed that she wouldn't be at home. My father would have enjoyed meeting her, and I'd have appreciated the way she'd have taken the conversation and steered it along in an effortless way.

'Will that chap Jonathan be with you?' he'd asked on the telephone, and I'd had to remind him that Johnny and I had broken up six months ago. He easily forgot things like that, and for my part I downplayed them, if I played them at all. Johnny had taught geography carelessly at a Lambeth comprehensive, he had a dishevelled beard and laughing eyes. We spent nearly two years together, and in that time I'm not sure I ever got to describe myself as his girlfriend, something I somehow never minded. One day he told me he was leaving to travel South America and asked me if I wanted to go with him. I thought about it, as he talked of crashing waterfalls and jungles so deep and thick that they were black as night by day. But in the end I turned him down more easily than I'd thought was possible. We made love that night for the last time, Johnny collapsing on to my chest afterwards, me closing my eyes and folding an arm

about him, as if he were the one that needed comforting. As if I was the one leaving. And on the last morning, he took my chin between his finger and thumb, and looked into my eyes. 'If only you'd let me really know you,' he said. Then, with more assurance, 'I think I got closer than anyone, Beth. I think I knew you better than you think.' I'd closed my eyes, and when I opened them again I could see that I wasn't to be his puzzle any more. He was as good as gone.

In trying to decide what to do with my father while he was with me, I thought straight away of the gallery. It's just off Brick Lane and I love the space I work in. The vast, glass panes let the best of the sunlight in, and inside there's an organic feel, lending the impression that you've fallen into a sun-filled glade in an otherwise dark and tangled wood. When I was a student, I always believed that art was there to show people something new, not something old, and this has stayed with me. For the last week, though, we'd been running an exhibition comprising the work of three landscape artists. Their gentle, pastoral subjects were not our usual fare, but Luca, the owner, had one day woken up with a yearning for something 'kinder' he'd said, that 'harked back to altogether simpler times'. I could imagine my father enjoying the work, peering close to the canvas to admire a swell of hillside, or a blooming tree in the middle of a pancake-flat field. He'd see something of Devon in the pictures, and feel at home perhaps. And I would be pleased to show him my place of work at last. He'd never seen it, and I'm sure he imagined it was all dismembered mannequins and incoherent spray paint, the kind of thing he saw now and again in the supplements of Sunday papers.

For the evening I'd bought some films from one of the stalls along Roman Road, old black and whites with stuttering

soundtracks and footsteps in the dark. Settling down in front of the television was one of the things we'd always done together, conversing aimlessly and gratefully about whatever we were watching. And for our supper I'd made a huge pan of chili, and bought tortillas from a Mexican shop in the Bethnal Green backstreets. He hadn't said if he was staying, but I'd folded towels and fresh sheets in anticipation. I'd cleared up the junk mail that carpeted the communal hallway, and put a bunch of tulips on the table in the kitchen.

There's a sad kind of poetry in the unsuspecting. For every catastrophe that befalls us there was a time before when we were quite oblivious. Little did we know how happy we were then. If only we could learn to celebrate the ordinary days; the ones that begin unremarkably, and continue in unnoteworthy fashion. Days like yesterday, and the day before, when the irksome things were slight and passing; the fuzzy edges of an early-morning headache, the spilling of a little coffee as I stirred in the sugar, the sudden recollection that I had biscuits baking in the oven and their sweet smell had turned a touch acrid. These are the days to prize. The days on which to pause, to give thanks. And in doing so to acknowledge that we're ready, we're poised. If the skies were to fall, we'd have a chance of catching them.

My father arrived just after midday. I heard the idling of an engine outside and spied his taxi from the window. I ran downstairs, skidding on the landing in my socks, reaching the door just before he rang the bell.

'Dad!'

He moved to kiss me, but had bags in both hands so we bumped each other clumsily. I reached to take some of his load but he shook his head.

‘No, you go on, I’m all right. Where are we going, up these stairs?’

I looked at him with new fascination, the way we always do when we see people out of their natural habitats. I was almost surprised to see clothes that I recognized, his camel-coloured coat that was too warm for the weather, his blue cotton shirt that was frayed at the collar but remained a favourite. In the living room I stood back from him, shy almost, and watched as he set down his bags. A navy holdall, a hessian carrier with a turtle on it, the kind that have replaced plastic bags in smarter supermarkets, and a string bag that appeared to be filled with newspaper packages.

‘Are you staying the night?’ I asked.

‘I wasn’t sure,’ he said. Then added, ‘But I could of course, if you wanted me to. Oh, you’re looking at this lot. It’s vegetables mainly, from the garden. I thought you’d like them.’

He started going through the string bag, drawing out bundles of radishes and a plump lettuce.

‘I got up early this morning to get them,’ he said. ‘There’s some new potatoes here too.’

The vegetable patch was another of our common grounds. When I was small I’d helped him sow and dig, my knees pointed and muddy, my hands swallowed by a giant pair of cotton gardening gloves. As I’d grown older, and my visits home had been more sporadic, he’d made it his duty to appraise me of developments in the garden. Whether it was frosty grass splintering underfoot or slippery mud, a slither of moon in the sky or full sun, we’d always walk down to the bottom of the garden, soon after my arrival home.

With my arms now loaded, I went through to the kitchen.

‘You can stay if you want,’ I said. ‘I mean, you’ve come all



this way. And you've never been before. And, well, it'd be nice, wouldn't it?'

'My ticket's a flexible one,' he said. 'I can go back on any train.'

I knew how meticulous he was, and that all possible trains between now and tomorrow afternoon would be noted down in his minute and precise handwriting, on a piece of paper, folded in his pocket. He'd have asterisked the slow trains, the ones that trundled through Wiltshire or stopped in Bristol. But his apparent flexibility was novel, and I approved of it. I was beginning to relax, believing in the spontaneity of his visit, after all.

I called back through to the living room, 'Do you want to go to the gallery? We've an exhibition on that I think you'd like, and you'll get to meet the people I work with too. Then we could have some lunch somewhere, and then come back here in the evening for dinner. But it's up to you. I mean, we can do anything, really.'

'Oh, I don't mind, Beth. It's just nice seeing you,' he said. 'Is there a cup of tea going?'

I walked back into the living room, carrying a plate of biscuits. 'Kettle's on. Look, I baked, maple and walnut cookies. They're a bit burnt at the edges, but . . .'

He was picking up the hessian bag with the turtle on it, and he jumped when I came into the room. He set it back down.

'Beth . . .'

I'd heard him say my name like this before. Countless times, each of them years and years ago.

'What?'

'Before anything else, there's something I need to give you. Perhaps you want to sit down.'

His voice hit the low notes, with a tremor at the last.

‘What is it?’ I said, and was surprised at how calmly the words came out.

He turned back to the bag, and picked it up again. It seemed to take a considerable effort, as though it was immensely heavy. His fingers tightened on the handle, and I thought then how claw-like his hand looked, the skin tight over the giant knuckles, the sharp thumb. His face had turned grey, his eyes swam with apology. And I knew then that there was a reason for him coming to London so suddenly, after all. It wasn’t just to see me, or just because he’d wanted to. We weren’t those sort of people, those happy and spontaneous types who did that kind of thing. I wish he’d kept me fooled for longer. We could have prolonged the spell that way, even if its hold was thin as mist.

‘Something came in the post for you,’ he said, ‘and I thought I’d better bring it straight away.’

He held out the bag to me. I stared at the cartoon green turtle printed on its side, with its round eyes and stumpy feet. The words ‘a friend for life’ were stamped beneath it. I looked back at my father.

‘What is it?’ I said.

‘I don’t know, Beth. I haven’t opened it.’

He looked pained as he spoke, and I felt a sudden flare of anger. A heat in my chest, that flickered then settled. I pulled at the string of my necklace with its tangle of charms, my fingers twisting the silver chain. I met his eye, and he blinked first. He shrugged. ‘I just thought it might be important,’ he said, quietly.

I set the bag on the floor and knelt down beside it, reaching inside. I drew out a parcel wrapped in brown paper, book-heavy. I turned it over, and saw a smeared postmark and a

clutch of foreign stamps. *Magyarország*. Hungary. A place that once, a very long time ago, said *summer* to me. The handwriting was faintly familiar, spiky and picturesque, every word a mountain range a mile high. It was addressed to Erzsébet Lowe.

*Erzsébet Lowe*. Two words, a name, one that meant jagged baby teeth, the last of which was swallowed in sleep. Sandals that left a tread of flower patterns in the dust. A fringe hanging on the tilt. Eyes wide like saucers, pushing through fronds in the hidden wood. And later, sharp elbows and long legs, a sunburnt chest and kisses by a dark pool. Tears that stung and rattling breath. A shattered mirror and a sudden escape. Unless I stopped them, the fragments of my Hungarian summers would come skittering back; first as paper pieces, blowing in the wind, and then a maelstrom.

I had to be resolute. Erzsébet Lowe no longer existed. She was a figment, a fading trace of breath on a pane, a pattern of tea leaves, swirled and disappeared. Long lost, long gone.

I glanced up at my father. He was staring down at me, his hands loose by his sides. His face was wrung of all colour and creases streaked his cheeks.

‘Why did you bring it?’ I said, dropping the parcel back into the bag, snapping upwards. ‘Why did you think I’d want it?’

‘I’m sorry, Beth, but I thought it had to be important. Not the kind of thing to just forward in the post.’

The word *important* smacked of cold formality, brown envelopes with ‘not a circular’ stamped, and civic meetings where pie-hatted do-gooders stood up to protest. It was a cold and static word.

‘None of it’s *important*,’ I said. ‘You should have just binned it.’

I saw it then as it might have happened. The parcel taken to

a post office and pushed under the glass, a heavyset woman in a creased blouse licking the stamps and slapping them haphazardly. Tossed into a sack, as the sender, a dark shadow, turned to leave. A package, bound with worn string, crossing the continent in a jet plane's hold, to sit propped in the porch in Harkham, a snail leaving a sticky trail behind it. Then the final leg, a train to London, my father sitting in the back of a taxicab as it rumbled through East London streets, the weight of the thing in his lap. His hands closed around it, protective, fearful.

This was how the past travelled towards the present. Such was its journey.

I stood up, wiping my hands on my dress as though it was dusty.

'So you came here to give me this?' I said. 'Why couldn't you have told me that was why you were coming? I'd have said don't bother. I don't want it. Whatever it is, I don't want it.'

'I didn't think it was just a parcel,' he said. 'It's been such a long time since anything with that postmark came to the house, Beth. I just thought I should come . . .'

'But you never come, Dad. You've never seen this place, not once. I don't mind about that. It's how it is, it's fine. But, honestly, of all the wasted trips. Please take it, just take it away with you. I don't want it.'

'I didn't want to upset you. I really didn't. It was rash of me to come.'

'It wasn't rash, it was normal. For other people, it would have been normal. But not for us, Dad. I should have known that there'd be a reason behind you coming. But *this*? Why couldn't you just say? Why couldn't you have told me what was going on? Instead of pretending you were just swinging by on a social visit, with a bag of radishes, for God's sake.'

'I didn't know how to tell you, Beth. I knew what it would mean to you.'

'Dad, why is it that after all these years, we still get it wrong? Nothing's changed, not one thing.'

'Would you rather I went?' he said.

'What, home?'

'Yes.'

I considered it, and felt an old familiar feeling turning in my stomach. Guilt and sorrow, mixed.

'Well, you only came to give me this, and now it's given. But, I mean, you *could* stay. We could just pretend that everything's okay. That you didn't lie about why you were coming. That you didn't just give me something that is completely irrelevant but is now going to be stuck in my head for, oh I don't know, forever. We could do that, yes.'

My voice was extraordinarily high-pitched, as though I was a stringed instrument tightened beyond all reason. I clapped my hands to my mouth to stop myself talking.

He took the bag from my hand. I saw the tiredness in his face then, the lines about his eyes like cracks in plaster. He picked up his holdall. I imagined it contained his neatly folded pyjamas, a change of shirt, a pair of balled woollen socks. Things that he'd need in case he'd stayed the night after all. What had he thought? That after the parcel I'd want the comfort of his presence? That we'd walk in the park and look at paintings and eat chili and watch films then say goodnight on the landing, and all would be well?

We stared at one another. He opened his mouth to say something then hesitated. He closed it. The time to speak, to make things different, had been and gone and neither of us had taken it.

‘Do you want a cab to the station, then?’ I said, already reaching for the telephone.

‘If that’s best, Beth. I’m sorry.’

I hesitated. ‘It came out all wrong before, but we could pretend. We’re good at it, aren’t we? Pretending? We could still have a nice day.’

He shook his head, and I didn’t know if it was in disagreement or a deeper, broader, altogether older sense of despair. I shrugged, and slowly but deliberately I began to dial.

The taxi came quickly, far more quickly than I expected. On a Friday lunchtime I thought we’d have had at least twenty minutes, but the doorbell was ringing inside of five. I saw him downstairs. On the pavement he hugged me, and for just a moment I hung on to him, but then he was stepping away and reaching for the taxi door. He’d be thinking of the running metre, the impatient driver, the car waiting to pass on the opposite side of the road. My father was a man who bowed easily to such influences, cracking and bending like a bean stem.

‘Goodbye, Dad,’ I said.

He climbed inside and I closed the door, slamming it louder than I had meant to. I tapped the glass and waved. Then I stood watching as the cab drove off, saw the shape of his head in the back window, already disappearing. He would be back in Devon by mid-afternoon, just as the sun was pouring through the crooked boughs of the apple tree on the back lawn. It would be as though he had never come at all.

I looked quickly up at the small strip of London sky and blinked fast, an old trick, to catch the tears before they started. I went to push my hair back from my face with both hands but found I was holding the turtle bag. I couldn’t remember it being proffered and I couldn’t remember taking it. But that was

my father. Wily, in a beaten sort of way, like a fox dodging hounds.

‘Oh Dad,’ I said. ‘Why can’t we ever just talk to each other?’

I couldn’t even imagine his reply.

I trailed back inside, slamming the front door behind me. The flat was shining, with all its freshly vacuumed carpets and scrubbed surfaces. The tulips beamed at me from the table. I took the plate of biscuits and threw them in the bin, one hitting the edge and scattering into crumbs at my feet. Then I stood and looked at the hessian bag, where I’d dumped it in the corner of the kitchen. I sank down to the floor, and watched it. As though just by looking, I could turn it into something else entirely.

I know this much: the old hurts never go. In fact they’re the things that shape us, they’re the things we look to, when we turn out roughshod and messy at the edges. I don’t know how long I sat staring at the bag, but my legs stiffened and my neck creaked and I knew I had to leave the house. In a fit of unmeditated wistfulness for the day that might have been, I found myself treading the path that my father and I would have taken. I caught a bus to Bethnal Green. The high road was mellow enough, at that time of day. It wasn’t Sunday morning, when the place was rammed with grey-eyed street traders, peddling toothpaste and broken records. When clusters of girls giggled into their palms and old East End boys trod the pavements, getting squashed okra on their shoes. Nor was it night-time, dark hours where fried chicken smoked the air, boys with rolling gait owned the streets, and squeaking microphones gave away karaoke spots, stages hogged by big bellies and bigger hair. The afternoon was simply sunny, and there was the

crackle of people going about their business, with calm and uncomplicated steps.

As I walked, I stared down at my feet in their flip-flops, my toes already greying from the urban grime. An image suddenly came to me of my father back in his luscious Devon garden, a sweet breeze sending ripples through the beanstalks. He'd have his sleeves rolled to the elbow and would be digging, furiously. He always dug, in times of strife. But I realized I was speeding time, he'd more likely still be stuffed into a railway carriage, fidgeting with his moustache as noisy children scattered toys on the table across from him, and people chattered into their telephones. *My father.* Thinking about him – his regret, his discomfort, his anxiety – stopped me thinking about the other thing. The invading parcel, and all the things it brought with it. Its matted strings of cobwebs. Its smell of the past.

I got to the gallery in twenty minutes and walked straight in, the door clanging like an old-fashioned grocer's.

'Hi,' I said. Then, 'It's lovely and cool in here.'

'Hey, Beth! Where's your dad?'

Kelly had only been with us for three months. She was from Wisconsin, twenty years old, and was impossibly chirpy all of the time. She had a halo of blonde curls and today she wore a red silk scarf knotted at her neck, looking like a busty pin-up from an old calendar.

'Long story,' I said, in what I hoped was an easy dismissal. I knew Kelly hadn't quite figured me out yet, for I struggled to match her easy charm and endless stream of confidences. 'He couldn't make it in the end,' I added.

I dropped my shoulder bag by the counter, and with my hands in my pockets walked over to the walls. Kelly made as if to join me, but was fortunately diverted by the clanging of the



door and the arrival of two hipster Japanese tourists, with elaborate hair and a fistful of guidebooks. She rushed to welcome them, and I moved quietly off.

Why *had* I come here? To somehow remind myself that I had a place and I had purpose? But turning up at work on your day off just raised questions, even in the guileless. I turned my attention to the pictures, my fingers curled tightly in my jean pockets. I'd been at the opening a week ago, helping to pour wine and offering fussy canapés. And I'd spent the best part of the week surrounded by the paintings, as their keeper, their chaperone. I imparted the details of their background to those who were curious; moving from picture to picture, with nods and feathery fingers, pointing out the brilliance of the sky, the rhythms of the water, the many textures of bark. But it was only on that afternoon, as Kelly rattled on spiritedly with our visitors and I drifted further and further away from them, that I began to really look at the pictures, and demand something else of them. It was as though I wanted to know that somewhere, away from frame or lens or eager eye, the places they showed continued to exist. That their origins could be found, if finding was what someone wanted to do.

In that moment, I thought of another artist. Zoltán Károly. You could plot his paintings with a pin on a map, for he had always painted the world he lived in, just as he saw it. I hadn't thought about his paintings for a very long time. Like everything else they had been forgotten. I hadn't thought about the landscape that inspired them either, nor the place he called home: *Villa Serena*. The name tripped from my tongue with such ease, its rolling consonants and impossible prettiness, but it had a sting in its tail. A bitter twist that belied its picturesque sound. *Zoltán Károly*. I thought then of the way he signed his pictures,

the spiky letters of his name in the bottom corner of the canvas. Suddenly I knew that it was his writing on the parcel from Hungary. And as soon as I allowed it this smidgen of recognition, all my attempts to forget the day's intrusion fell away. I felt the fast-rushing avalanche of memory, I heard its roar, and while I could flee from it, I knew that in the end it would catch me up. That no matter how hard I fought to keep my head, its force would be too strong and I'd succumb, falling into its startling white depths.

I pushed past the tourists and Kelly, and hurried into the back office. In the bathroom I stared hard at myself in the small pane of mirror we had propped above the sink. My breath came in rapid gasps. I appeared as no more than a mussed outline, any woman's figure marked by edges only, and it was then that I knew that I was crying, the tears falling unchecked down my cheeks.

Zoltán had written to me, after all these years. And of all the thoughts that scrambled on top of one another, the one that persisted, the one that rose above all others, was this: why him? Why him and not her?

It was a late night, in the end. I stayed at the gallery in the back room, pretending to get on with some forgotten and urgent paperwork. By the time Kelly had closed up, all I knew was that I didn't want to be alone. I went with her to meet some of her friends, guys and girls I didn't know and they were each as merry and easy as her. We hopped from bar to bar, throwing down cocktails with abandon. Through a mouthful of crunching ice and a strawberry-stained smile, Kelly asked me again what had happened to my father. I said that something had come up and he simply 'couldn't get away'. For a moment it made

him sound like a time-stretched businessman, and I balanced a moment on this idea. I pictured myself friendly with his secretary, being sent tickets to fancy events in the mail. Us both being quite different people, really. Then I remembered the wilting vegetables and the hessian bag with the turtle, the look of anguish that marked his face as I'd said, *we're good at it, aren't we? Pretending?*

By midnight I'd had enough of everything and everyone. I said quick goodbyes and slipped away. I eschewed taxicabs and night buses, favouring the echo of my feet on the pavement, the even stares of urban foxes and the throbbing bass of passing cars as metronome for my pace. It took me forty minutes to walk home and if Lily had been there she would doubtless have admonished me for my lack of caution. But I was returning to a house that was empty yet pulsing with a presence that was stronger than any single person. So I'd taken the long way home.

Certain lights always seem eerie to a wandering imagination. When I walked into my living room, I stopped uncertainly in the half-light and seemed to float outside of myself. Across the street an upstairs window showed as a yellow rectangle, framing two people tangled in a kiss. I snapped the blinds shut and went to curl up on the sofa, drawing my legs up underneath me. Going to sleep was out of the question, and so I sat reflecting, becoming the night, my surface made of the dazzle of a kiss, the bars of light that sifted through a hastily pulled blind.

I must have fallen asleep because much later I awoke, crick-necked and dry-mouthed, and the dawn light of a new morning was warm on my face. The fingers of my left hand were leaden and prickling. I had dreamt of nothing. Literally. Vast empty spaces from which everything was missing. I should

have been relieved, having feared scrabbling, confused ramblings, but instead it felt like a portent. Hollowed, I stretched and yawned.

I got up and went through to the kitchen, barefooted, my clothes crinkled. The early sun lit the kitchen so it was soft and pale and not quite there. I opened the window and a chirruping chorus of birds, invisible but riotous, greeted the rise of the day. I ran my hands through my hair, finding knots where I had shifted restlessly in the night. As I rubbed my eyes, yesterday's make-up smeared my hands, leaving dusky smudges on my fingers. I felt in sudden need of cleansing, rushing water and toothpaste, sweet-smelling soap and puffs of talcum powder.

I filled the kettle, set out my coffee pot and went through to the bathroom. The water of the shower ran cold at first and I emitted a breathy scream, but I bared my teeth and clenched my fists with a savage staying power. Afterwards I groped for a towel, and wrapped myself in it.

In the hallway, my feet left dim prints on the wooden boards, like a beach wanderer. I rubbed the ends of my hair dry as I walked into my bedroom to get dressed. Not quite dry, I pulled on a vest and my old denim shorts, frayed cotton skimming my thighs. Needing strong coffee, suddenly and sharply, I went into the kitchen.

Since I had woken up, first stretching in that bright and restless dawn, my every movement had been consciously avoiding my father's aborted visit, and the package that sat in the corner, watchful, waiting. I needed a plan for the day and I needed it fast. Perhaps I could dig out my camera and walk the waterways like a hobbyist. There was a pub where I could drink a cider sitting on the grass at the water's edge, daisies pressing my palms. All I had to do to escape was get out of the house,

and walk quickly. My camera clunking reassuringly against my side, holster-like.

But before that there was coffee. I sat at the table with my back to the open window. I crossed my legs, rested my chin in my hands and my elbows on the table. The shopping bag was on the floor just beside the door. I twitched, then stood up, and poured my drink. I wrapped my hands around the mug and breathed its scent, eyeing the bag again, over the rising steam. It was quiet in the kitchen, the birds outside sang with less of their early exuberance, the traffic murmured, the inhabitants of my street rolled in their beds and hit their snooze buttons. The clock on the wall said half past seven.

I balanced on my tightrope, and thought of other people, and what they were doing. I tried to locate and place myself, rooted in the order of things. So I began. Lily would be with her boyfriend, waking to damp canvas and the rubbery scent of an airbed. Kelly and her friends from the night before would be rolling in their beds still, their mouths slack from sleep, the woolly edges of their hangovers not yet formed. Johnny? He would be wrapped in the arms of another girl no doubt, her hair spilling across his burly chest. My father? The old interloper. I couldn't help including him. He always was an early riser, so perhaps he'd be creaking about the house, watching his morning egg boiling on the stove, a thin plume of white spilling from its cracked shell. He would maybe tut, and press his knuckles hard against the sideboard. And then the others. The ones I never thought about, much less spoke about. The thought of them being anywhere, doing anything, was inconceivable. For hadn't I erased them? Didn't they cease to exist? I saw her then, as she might be. *Marika*. Stood at the window in the early morning haze of an Esztergom morning. Her dark hair pulled back in a

girlish ribbon, a red enamel mug of coffee, tar-black and sweetened with sugar, held in her hand. She'd be pushing seventy, but later she'd still ride a bicycle along the rutted track, stopping to buy pastries made with crumpled apricots from the baker's on the square. Cat-calling to the neighbours. Laughing, without effort. Smiling, without care. *Marika*. How could she still be real? Didn't forgetting allow you to lose a person, once and for all?

I made a sudden decision. I set down my coffee, got up, and approached the bag. I reached into it and took out the parcel. I placed it on the table, and looked at it. Its bright stamps jumped, the handwriting, bold and spiky, seeming to climb up from the paper like the detail of an elaborate pop-up book. I watched it as though it was an unpredictable and living thing, with my muscles tensed, ready to move if it flew at me. Except it had to be dead, a dried husk, like a bug on its back, its legs taut and folded. For it had blown in from the past, cobwebs dragging, dust choking, with its old string and creased paper.

I reached over and pulled it towards me, turning it over in my hands, feeling its weight. Then I unlaced the string so it shrugged off at all four corners. I picked at the sticky tape with my nails, and ripped the edges. I placed my palms flat on its surface, and waited a moment, before folding the paper back. As I did so, I fancied I caught a waft of old scent, thick like woodsmoke. The taste in my mouth had a metallic ring to it, and I realized I was biting hard on my lip, a thin smudge of blood on my finger as I touched it. Annoyed with myself, at my tense muscles and overactive imagination, I tore open the rest of the wrapping without ceremony, letting it drop purposely and carelessly to the floor. Inside was a further wrapped parcel, and an envelope with *Erzsébet* written in the same jagged hand.

I made myself open it casually, with indifference, the paper fudging and ripping messily. It was a letter, on thick parchment paper, cream-coloured and written on one side only.

Just as I had guessed, it was from Zoltán, Marika's partner. The man she met just weeks after my father and I had returned to England without her, all those years ago. His was a name she rolled about her tongue as she introduced herself, tasting the newness of it, the freedom of it. *Zoltán*. A painter. She told me she fell first for his robust and pulsing landscapes, then quickly afterwards for him. It must have seemed, to nine-year-old me, as if she never spared the details. As though she told me everything there was to know, the whole gritty truth of it, drawing my hands towards her and filling them with jewels of her own making.

In the letter, Zoltán had tamed his painterly scrawl to write carefully and precisely. It would have been a long time since he'd spoken any English, and he'd have needed a dictionary, because Zoltán always seemed as though he never knew any sad words.

I began to read.

*Dearest Erzsébet,*

*It has been such a long time since we heard from you. I am so very sorry that it is with such news that I now write. Marika passed away. It was a heart attack, sudden and fast. On 10th July, a Saturday, a day of such unbearable heat that we swam early at the forest pool and slept in the afternoon with the shutters closed. She died in the cool of late evening, as I laid the table for supper and she fetched a bottle of wine. Until that moment, it was a day like all of our days. Like the ones you will remember,*

*fondly I hope. I have scattered her ashes on the land she loved, at the tree with arms like a man, you know the one, with the fields running until the horizon. She loved you for always, Erzsi. You must know that. And Erzsi, you are welcome here, as you always were and always will be. I wait to greet you.*

*(Old) Zoltán Károly*

I didn't realize I was holding my breath until a wordless sound climbed in my throat and fought to escape. My chest tightened to a gasp.

I had imagined the moment of her death before. Sometimes with the prickle of fantasy, mostly with the emptiness of dread. The first time I was just a child and afraid of my own thoughts. But my intentions were honourable. I missed her, and I wanted to mourn with a respectable and honest grief. I imagined picking spring flowers and laying them at a grave, a single tear on my cheek. Later, years later, as I walked between high-rises, I saw falling axes and silver pistols, with a sudden drop and scream. But always the same full stop. These were the fantasies. Death would happen one day of course, but not that day, not that year, just some time in the dim and distant future. The same future that lasted forever.

It was impossible to believe that she was really gone. Leaving a creased sheet and a thick-stemmed wine glass smudged with ruby kisses. A pair of sandals, their insides rubbed black and shining, askew in the hallway. Funny, that the things that came to mind were motionless objects, left behind. When nothing about her was static. You only have one life, she'd said to me once, breathily, her eyes flashing. But it wasn't true. She had had several.



A heart attack. Perhaps it was poetic justice? That uncertain heart, that mad and dashing thing that caught in her chest and sent her in all directions and only sometimes the right one. She was always too much. Her head didn't come into it, only ever her great and feeble heart. And so finally her body had had enough, and turned in upon itself. She would have spontaneously combusted, the licking flames about her feet leaving a black hole in the carpet. A noisy death, of colour and light and then . . . nothing.

Marika. My mother.

Time passed, and I realized I had been sitting quite still, hunched at the table with the letter in my hands. I clapped my hands to my cheeks to rub some life into them, and then I saw the other parcel. I had quite forgotten it. I took it carefully in my hands and turned it, running my fingers over its surface. Then I tore it open. Inside was a book, cloth-bound with a hard cover. Someone had painted bright white flowers all over it, crowding its edges, and I recognized them, even by the quick and stylized strokes. *Hajnalka*. A Hungarian word that in English meant morning glory. They looked like spinning tops, ablaze with light and movement. On the first page a title had been written, against sky-blue paint. *The Book of Summers*. Just four words on a page, the edges of each letter splayed with an artful brush stroke. Despite the whimsical penmanship and the soft new-washed blue, the words spoke clearly of ownership. A definite time and a certain place.

I put my hands together in a sort of temple, and dipped my head. I wasn't praying but I was wishing, with my lips pressed to my fingers. *Please*, I said, *please can this not matter?* But I knew already that it would. And that it always would.

I opened it at random, and saw a picture of myself. My face was pushed close to the camera, one hand shielding the sun from my eyes, and a burst of it, bright like a burning star, above my shoulder. I must have been wearing some kind of hat, meshed straw maybe, for my face was dappled with split shadow. And I was laughing, my brown nose wrinkled, my eyes shining. I was fourteen. I know I was fourteen because there was a tiny scratch on my chin and I remembered the cat that did it. A wild cat that I'd found skulking at the edge of the track, picking over dried melon skins, with a skinny ribcage and tottering legs like a drunken ballerina. I'd scooped her up fearlessly, laughing as she spat and scratched. I'd nuzzled her head until she softened. She'd followed me everywhere that summer, a piebald shadow, twining and tripping at my legs. I'd fattened her up on pieces of ham and chicken from my own plate, smoky sausages smuggled from the hot coals. I'd called her Cica, which was Hungarian for kitten. It sounded so pretty, *tseet-soh*, like a tiny oriental empress or the song of a lark.

I realized then that I'd tried so hard to forget the big things that all the little things had gone too. Cica. My small shadow.

I turned the page, and the next, flicking quickly through the rest of the book. There was an order to it, a structure. Each section was dated, beginning with 1991, written in the same painted looping hand, all the way through to 1997. Not a summer missed, for seven years. There were no footnotes to any of the pictures, no neat handwritten annotations, just page after page of photographs. Different settings, but always the same place I knew: faded green hills, banks of dark forest, a green glade pool, endless cornfields, a run of lawn and a big house made of red wood and pale stone. And different times: first

delicate light, the full heat of high noon, flat-baked afternoons, thundery evenings, black nights pricked with fireflies.

So this was how I came to see myself again, in quick-flicking snatches. Ten years old, sunburnt and uncertain, but grinning with a sort of triumph. Eleven, twelve, thirteen, standing in tall grasses with the sun in my eyes, in a yellow bathing suit at the edge of a forest, slumped in a hammock, with one bare foot swinging. Fourteen, fifteen, posing with a badminton racket like a Wimbledon champion, holding up a giant sweetcorn, with butter on my chin, lounging on blankets, my skin baked brown and freckles on my shoulders. And sixteen, when my hair was at its longest, sweeping the cups of my bikini, and my fringe falling languidly into my eyes.

Marika, Zoltán, even Tamás, who I've never allowed myself to think about, the people of those Hungarian summers were there too. Not as the shadowy, shrinking outlines I had made of them, but seen red-cheeked and flame-haired, laughing and kissing and holding and always pictured with me. Marika's face taunted from the page, with her hair so like my own, the brave hook of nose, the smiling, smiling mouth.

Had it been like that? For a time, perhaps. But left unwatched, the camera could lie after all. Proffering a fractional moment caught in time, with no sense of the before or after, nor all the things that made it so. A false imprint that cheated memory.

The book was not signed and there was no note slipped inside its pages, but Marika's fingerprints were all over it. Only she could make everything look just the way she wanted it to, drawing veils and wafting smoke. Perhaps the book could have been put together naturally, year by year, for her to take down and look at by the fire, on freezing winter nights when the snow

banked outside the windows. And Zoltán had simply come across it and wanted me to have it, hoping it would stir some feeling that might remain in me still. But it seemed unlikely. Instead, I saw it as artifice, designed to dredge sentiment from me with a petty trick of the light. To prompt me to sigh, ah, these were still the days, and they mattered after all. Typical, that Marika should needle this from me, wanting the last laugh, even in death.

The first tears of old grief, of new grief too, rose and pushed at my eyes. I began to weep angrily. I slumped on the table, *The Book of Summers* cradled in my arms.

To think that these precious terrible things, carried by my poor father, little knowing what he was doing, could so easily have gone unopened. I'd pushed them to a corner and tried to carry on as though I'd never seen them. Brushing questions under the corner of a rug, and treading on it, to be sure.

Now, I know this: some would say a photograph disserves memory, coating it in rigidity, like an icy blast from a Snow Queen's wand. The mind cannot see past the fixed expressions and frozen poses, and so the rest fades. But what if everything, this 'rest', has been locked away, and the sighting of a single image proves the turn of the key. Surely that lid would fly open, at the slightest touch? A Pandora's box of delights and dismays, spilling out and upward.

Every family has its stories, but I can't help feeling that us Lowes have more than most. Tight-lipped and yearning, we kept them from one another. We must have thought that we were each alone. But now I know that we were bonded after all, for each of us had lost what we loved, leaving only memory. Memory that seemed, paradoxically, to be too much, and never enough. Today, I could tell any number of these stories, but I

won't. For, selfishly, there is only one that really matters to me. It is not my father's loss, nor is it my mother's. It is mine, and I possess it wholly. Knowing that in doing so, it possesses me.

I thought of the pictures in the gallery, and the Villa Serena landscape I knew so well. In Zoltán's hands it was conjured in a vivid palette, but nothing was as bright as its reality. Simply, it was a place suffused in colour and light. The place that Marika, my mother, shared with me. A place where once I ran through wheat fields, blood-red poppies catching at my legs. Where I dived into a lake as big as a kingdom, my belly sweeping the bottom, my hands turning dark stones in the muddied sand. And where I lay beside her on a faded sweep of lawn, our elbows crooked at right angles behind our heads, swallowed whole by the blue sky. Hungary, the land of my dreams, my hidden place. And my eyes, my lips, the very tip of my chin would proclaim that I loved Marika still. I always had, I never hadn't.