

Part one wednesday



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I

Krystal Weedon had spent Monday and Tuesday nights on her friend Nikki's bedroom floor after an especially bad fight with her mother. This had started when Krystal arrived home from hanging out with her mates at the precinct and found Terri talking to Obbo on the doorstep. Everyone in the Fields knew Obbo, with his bland puffy face and his gap-toothed grin, his bottle-bottom glasses and his filthy old leather jacket.

'Jus' keep 'em 'ere fer us, Ter, fer a coupla days? Few quid in it for yeh?'

'Wha's she keepin'?' Krystal had demanded. Robbie scrambled out from between Terri's legs to cling tightly to Krystal's knees. Robbie did not like men coming to the house. He had good reason.

'Nuthin'. Compu'ers.'

'Don', Krystal had said to Terri.

She did not want her mother to have spare cash. She would not have put it past Obbo to cut out the middle step and pay her for the favour with a bag of smack.

'Don' take 'em.'

But Terri had said yes. All Krystal's life, her mother had said yes to everything and everyone: agreeing, accepting, forever acquiescing: yeah, all righ', go on then, 'ere yeh go, no problem.

Krystal had gone to hang out at the swings under a darkening sky with her friends. She felt strained and irritable. She could not seem to grasp the fact of Mr Fairbrother's death, but kept experiencing punches to the stomach that made her want to lash out at somebody. She was also unsettled and guilty about having stolen Tessa Wall's watch. But why had the silly bitch put it there in front of Krystal and closed her eyes? What did she expect?

Being with the others did not help. Jemma kept needling her about Fats Wall; finally Krystal exploded and lunged at her; Nikki and Leanne had to hold Krystal back. So Krystal stormed home, to find that Obbo's computers had arrived. Robbie was trying to climb the stacked boxes in the front room, while Terri sat there in dazed oblivion, her works lying out on the floor. As Krystal had feared, Obbo had paid Terri with a bag of heroin.

'You stupid fuckin' junkie bitch, they'll kick yer ou' the fuckin' clinic again!'

But heroin took Krystal's mother where she was beyond reach. Though she responded by calling Krystal a little bitch and a whore, it was with vacant detachment. Krystal slapped Terri across the face. Terri told her to fuck off and die.

'You fuckin' look after him fer a fuckin' change then, you useless fuckin' smackhead cow!' Krystal screamed. Robbie ran howling up the hall after her, but she slammed the front door on him.

Krystal liked Nikki's house better than any other. It was not as tidy as her Nana Cath's, but it was friendlier, comfortably loud and busy. Nikki had two brothers and a sister, so Krystal slept on a folded-up duvet between the

sisters' beds. The walls were covered with pictures cut out of magazines, arranged as a collage of desirable boys and beautiful girls. It had never occurred to Krystal to embellish her own bedroom walls.

But guilt was clawing at her insides; she kept remembering Robbie's terrified face as she slammed the door on him, so on Wednesday morning she came home. In any case, Nikki's family was not keen on her staying more than two nights in a row. Nikki had once told her, with characteristic forthrightness, that it was all right with her mum if it didn't happen too often, but that Krystal was to stop using them as a hostel, and especially to stop turning up past midnight.

Terri seemed as glad as she ever was to see Krystal back. She talked about the new social worker's visit, and Krystal wondered nervously what the stranger had thought of the house, which lately had sunk even further below its usual filthy tidemark. Krystal was especially worried that Kay had found Robbie at home when he ought to have been at nursery, because Terri's commitment to keeping Robbie in pre-school, which he had begun while with his foster mother, had been a key condition of his negotiated return to the family home the previous year. She was also furious that the social worker had caught Robbie wearing a nappy, after all the work Krystal had put in to persuade him to use the toilet.

'So whaddid she say?' Krystal demanded of Terri.

'Tole me she wuz gonna come back,' said Terri.

Krystal had a bad feeling about this. Their usual social worker seemed content to let the Weedon family get along without much interference. Vague and haphazard, often getting their names wrong, and confusing their circumstances with those of other clients, she turned up every two weeks with no apparent aim except to check that Robbie was still alive.

The new menace worsened Krystal's mood. When straight, Terri was cowed by her daughter's anger and let Krystal boss her around. Making the most of her temporary authority, Krystal ordered Terri to put on some proper clothes, forced Robbie back into clean pants, reminded him he couldn't piss in this kind, and marched him off to nursery. He bawled when she made to leave; at first she got ratty with him, but finally she crouched down and promised him that she would come back and pick him up at one, and he let her go.

Then Krystal truanted, even though Wednesday was the day she liked best at school, because she had both PE and guidance, and set to work to clean up the house a bit, sloshing pine-scented disinfectant over the kitchen, scraping all the old food and cigarette butts into bin liners. She hid the biscuit tin holding Terri's works, and heaved the remaining computers (three had already been collected) into the hall cupboard.

All the time she was chiselling food off the plates, Krystal's thoughts kept returning to the rowing team. She would have had training the following night, if Mr Fairbrother had still been alive. He usually gave her a lift both ways in the people-carrier, because she had no other means of getting over to the canal in Yarvil. His twin daughters, Niamh and Siobhan, and Sukhvinder Jawanda came in the car too. Krystal had no regular contact with

these three girls during school hours, but since becoming a team, they had always said 'all right?' when they passed each other in the corridors. Krystal had expected them to look down their noses at her, but they were OK once you got to know them. They laughed at her jokes. They had adopted some of her favourite phrases. She was, in some sense, the crew's leader.

Nobody in Krystal's family had ever owned a car. If she concentrated, she could smell the interior of the people-carrier, even over the stink of Terri's kitchen. She loved its warm, plasticky scent. She would never be in that car again. There had been trips on a hired mini-bus too, with Mr Fairbrother driving the whole team, and sometimes they had stayed overnight when they competed against far-flung schools. The team had sung Rihanna's 'Umbrella' in the back of the bus: it had become their lucky ritual, their theme tune, with Krystal doing Jay-Z's rap, solo, at the start. Mr Fairbrother had nearly pissed himself the first time he heard her do it:

Uh huh uh huh, Rihanna ...

Good girl gone bad -

Take three -

Action.

No clouds in my storms ...

Let it rain, I hydroplane into fame

Comin' down with the Dow Jones ...

Krystal had never understood the words.

Cubby Wall had sent round a letter to them all, saying that the team would not be meeting until they could find a new coach, but they would never find a new coach, so that was a pile of shit; they all knew that.

It had been Mr Fairbrother's team, his pet project. Krystal had taken a load of abuse from Nikki and the others for joining. Their sneering had hidden incredulity and, later on, admiration, because the team had won medals (Krystal kept hers in a box she had stolen from Nikki's house. Krystal was much given to sneaking things into her pockets that belonged to people she liked. This box was plastic and decorated with roses: a child's jewellery box, really. Tessa's watch was curled up inside it now).

The best time of all had been when they'd beaten those snotty little bitches from St Anne's; that day had been the very best of Krystal's life. The headmistress had called the team up in front of the whole school at the next assembly (Krystal had been a bit mortified: Nikki and Leanne had been laughing at her) but then everyone had applauded them ... it had meant something, that Winterdown had hammered St Anne's.

But it was all finished, all over, the trips in the car and the rowing and the talking to the local newspaper. She had liked the idea of being in the newspaper again. Mr Fairbrother had said he was going to be there with her when it happened. Just the two of them.

'What will they wanna talk to me about, like?'

'Your life. They're interested in your life.'

Like a celebrity. Krystal had no money for magazines, but she saw them in Nikki's house and at the doctor's, if she took Robbie. This would have been even better than being in the paper with the team. She had burst with excitement at the prospect, but somehow she had managed to keep her mouth shut and had not even boasted about it to Nikki or Leanne. She had wanted to surprise them. It was as well she had not said anything. She would never be in the paper again.

There was a hollowness in Krystal's stomach. She tried not to think any more about Mr Fairbrother as she moved around the house, cleaning inexpertly but doggedly, while her mother sat in the kitchen, smoking and staring out of the back window.

Shortly before midday, a woman pulled up outside the house in an old blue Vauxhall. Krystal caught sight of her from Robbie's bedroom window. The visitor had very short dark hair and was wearing black trousers, a beaded, ethnic sort of necklace, and carrying a large tote bag over her shoulder that seemed to be full of files.

Krystal ran downstairs.

'I think it's 'er,' she called to Terri, who was in the kitchen. 'The social.'

The woman knocked and Krystal opened the door.

'Hello, I'm Kay; I'm covering for Mattie? You must be Krystal.'

'Yeah,' said Krystal, not bothering to return Kay's smile. She showed her into the sitting room and saw her take in its new, ramshackle tidiness: the

emptied ashtray, and most of the stuff that had been lying around was crammed onto the broken shelves. The carpet was still filthy, because the Hoover did not work, and the towel and the zinc ointment were lying on the floor, with one of Robbie's matchbox cars perched on top of the plastic tub. Krystal had tried to distract Robbie with the car while she scraped his bottom clean.

'Robbie's at nursery,' Krystal told Kay. 'I've took 'im. I've put 'im back in pants. She keeps puttin' 'im back in pull-ups. I've told 'er not to. I put cream on his bum. It'll be all right, it's on'y nappy rash.'

Kay smiled at her again. Krystal peered around the doorway and shouted, 'Mum!'

Terri joined them from the kitchen. She was wearing a dirty old sweatshirt and jeans, and looked better for being more covered up.

'Hello, Terri,' said Kay.

'All righ'?' said Terri, taking a deep drag from her cigarette.

'Siddown,' Krystal instructed her mother, who obeyed, curling up in the same chair as before. 'D'yer wanna cup of tea or summat?' Krystal asked Kay.

'That'd be great,' said Kay, sitting down and opening her folder. 'Thanks.'

Krystal hurried out of the room. She was listening carefully, trying to make out what Kay was saying to her mother.

'You probably weren't expecting to see me again this soon, Terri,' she heard Kay say (she had a strange accent: it sounded like a London one, like the posh new bitch at school half the boys had stiffies for), 'but I was quite concerned about Robbie yesterday. He's back at nursery today, Krystal says?'

'Yeah,' said Terri. 'She took 'im. She come back this morning.'

'She's come back? Where has she been?'

'I jus' bin at a - jus' slep' over at a friend's,' said Krystal, hurrying back to the sitting room to speak for herself.

'Yeah, bu' she come back this morning,' said Terri.

Krystal went back to the kettle. It made such a racket as it came to the boil that she could not make out any of what her mother and the social worker were saying to each other. She sloshed milk into the mugs with the teabags, trying to be as quick as possible, then carried the three red-hot mugs through to the sitting room in time to hear Kay say, '... spoke to Mrs Harper at the nursery yesterday - '

'Tha' bitch,' said Terri.

'There y'are,' Krystal told Kay, setting the teas on the floor and turning one of the mugs so that its handle faced her.

'Thanks very much,' Kay said. 'Terri, Mrs Harper told me that Robbie has been absent a lot over the last three months. He hasn't had a full week for a while, has he?'

'Wha'?' said Terri. 'No, 'e ain'. Yeah, 'e 'as. 'E only jus' mist yesterday. An' when 'e had his sore throat.'

'When was that?'

'Wha'?' Monf 'go ... monf'na 'alf ... 'bout.'

Krystal sat down on the arm of her mother's chair. She glared down at Kay from her position of height, energetically chewing gum, her arms folded like her mother's. Kay had a thick open folder on her lap. Krystal hated folders. All the stuff they wrote about you, and kept, and used against you afterwards.

'I takes Robbie to the nurs'ry,' she said. 'On my way to school.'

'Well, according to Mrs Harper, Robbie's attendance has fallen off quite a bit,' said Kay, looking down the notes she had made of her conversation with the nursery manager. 'The thing is, Terri, you did commit to keeping Robbie in pre-school when he was returned to you last year.'

'I ain' fuckin' - ' Terri began.

'No, shurrup, righ'?' Krystal said loudly to her mother. She addressed Kay. 'He were ill, righ', his tonsils were all up, I got 'im antibiotics off the doctor.'

'And when was that?'

'Tha' was 'bout free weeks - anyway, righ' - '

'When I was here yesterday,' Kay said, addressing Robbie's mother again (Krystal was chewing vigorously, her arms making a double barrier around

her ribs), 'you seemed to be finding it very difficult to respond to Robbie's needs, Terri.'

Krystal glanced down at her mother. Her spreading thigh was twice as thick as Terri's.

'I di'n' - I never ...' Terri changed her mind. 'E's fine.'

A suspicion darkened Krystal's mind like the shadow of some circling vulture.

'Terri, you'd used when I arrived yesterday, hadn't you?'

'No, I fuckin' hadn'! Tha's a fuckin' - you're fuckin' - I ain' used, all righ'?'

A weight was pressing on Krystal's lungs and her ears were ringing. Obbo must have given her mother, not a single bag, but a bundle. The social worker had seen her blasted. Terri would test positive at Bellchapel next time, and they would chuck her out again ...

(... and without methadone, they would return again to that nightmare place where Terri became feral, when she would again start opening her broken-toothed mouth for strangers' dicks, so she could feed her veins. And Robbie would be taken away again, and this time he might not come back. In a little red plastic heart hanging from the key-ring in Krystal's pocket was a picture of Robbie, aged one. Krystal's real heart had started pounding the way it did when she rowed full stretch, pulling, pulling through the water, her muscles singing, watching the other crew slide backwards ...)

'You fuckin',' she shouted, but nobody heard her, because Terri was still bawling at Kay, who sat with her mug held in her hands, looking unmoved.

'I ain' fuckin' used, you ain' go' no proof - '

'You fuckin' stupid,' said Krystal, louder.

'I ain' fuckin' used, tha's a fuckin' lie,' screamed Terri; an animal snared in a net, thrashing around, tangling herself tighter. 'I never fuckin' did, right', I never - '

'They'll kick you out the fuckin' clinic again, you stupid fuckin' bitch!'

'Don' you dare fuckin' talk ter me like tha!'

'All right,' said Kay loudly over the din, putting her mug back on the floor and standing up, scared at what she had unleashed; then she shouted 'Terri!' in real alarm, as Terri hoisted herself up in the chair to half crouch on its other arm, facing her daughter; like two gargoyles they were almost nose to nose, screaming.

'Krystal!' cried Kay, as Krystal raised her fist.

Krystal flung herself violently off the chair, away from her mother. She was surprised to feel warm liquid flowing down her cheeks, and thought confusedly of blood, but it was tears, only tears, clear and shining on her fingertips when she wiped them away.

'All right,' said Kay, unnerved. 'Let's calm down, please.'

'You fuckin' calm down,' Krystal said. Shaking, she wiped her face with her forearm, then marched back over to her mother's chair. Terri flinched, but Krystal merely snatched up the cigarette packet, slid out the last cigarette

and a lighter, and lit up. Puffing on the cigarette, she walked away from her mother to the window and turned her back, trying to press away more tears before they fell.

'OK,' said Kay, still standing, 'if we can talk about this calmly - '

'Oh, fuck off,' said Terri dully.

'This is about Robbie,' Kay said. She was still on her feet, scared to relax.

'That's what I'm here for. To make sure that Robbie is all right.'

'So 'e missed fuckin' nursery,' said Krystal, from the window. 'Tha's norra fuckin' crime.'

'... norra fuckin' crime,' agreed Terri, in a dim echo.

'This isn't only about nursery,' said Kay. 'Robbie was uncomfortable and sore when I saw him yesterday. He's much too old to be wearing a nappy.'

'I took 'im outta the fuckin' nappy, 'e's in pants now, I toldja!' said Krystal furiously.

'I'm sorry, Terri,' said Kay, 'but you weren't in any fit condition to have sole charge of a small child.'

'I never - '

'You can keep telling me you haven't used,' Kay said; and Krystal heard something real and human in Kay's voice for the first time: exasperation, irritation. 'But you're going to be tested at the clinic. We both know you're

going to test positive. They're saying it's your last chance, that they'll throw you out again.'

Terri wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

'Look, I can see neither of you wants to lose Robbie - '

'Don' fuckin' take him away, then!' shouted Krystal.

'It's not as simple as that,' said Kay. She sat down again and lifted the heavy folder back onto her lap from the floor where it had fallen. 'When Robbie came back to you last year, Terri, you were off the heroin. You made a big commitment to staying clean and going through the programme, and you agreed to certain other things, like keeping Robbie in nursery - '

'Yeh, an' I took 'im - '

' - for a bit,' said Kay. 'For a bit you did, but, Terri, a token effort isn't enough. After what I found when I called here yesterday, and after talking to your key drug worker and to Mrs Harper, I'm afraid I think we need to have another look at how things are working.'

'What's that mean?' said Krystal. 'Another fuckin' case review, is it? Why'djer need one, though? Why'djer need one? He's all righ', I'm lookin' after - fuckin' shurru!' she screamed at Terri, who was trying to shout along from her chair. 'She ain' - I'm lookin' after 'im, all righ'?' she bellowed at Kay, pink in the face, her heavily kohled eyes brimming with tears of anger, jabbing a finger at her own chest.

Krystal had visited Robbie regularly at his foster parents during the month he had been away from them. He had clung to her, wanted her to stay for tea, cried when she left. It had been like having half your guts cut out of you and held hostage. Krystal had wanted Robbie to go to Nana Cath's, the way she had gone all those times in her childhood, whenever Terri had fallen apart. But Nana Cath was old and frail now, and she had no time for Robbie.

'I understand that you love your brother and that you're doing your best for him, Krystal,' Kay said, 'but you're not Robbie's legal - '

'Why ain' I? I'm his fuckin' sister, ain' I?'

'All right,' said Kay firmly. 'Terri, I think we need to face facts here.

Bellchapel will definitely throw you off the programme if you turn up, claim you haven't used and then test positive. Your drug worker made that perfectly clear to me on the phone.'

Shrunken in the armchair, a strange hybrid of old lady and child with her missing teeth, Terri's gaze was vacant and inconsolable.

'I think the only way you can possibly avoid being thrown out,' Kay went on, 'is to admit, up front, that you've used, take responsibility for the lapse and show your commitment to turning over a new leaf.'

Terri simply stared. Lying was the only way Terri knew to meet her many accusers. Yeah, all right, go on, then, give it 'ere, and then, No, I never, no I ain', I never fuckin' did ...

'Was there any particular reason you used heroin this week, when you're already on a big dose of methadone?' Kay asked.

'Yeah,' said Krystal. 'Yeah, because Obbo turned up, an' she never fuckin' says no to 'im!'

'Shurrup,' said Terri, but without heat. She seemed to be trying to take in what Kay had said to her: this bizarre, dangerous advice about telling the truth.

'Obbo,' repeated Kay. 'Who's Obbo?'

'Fuckin' tosser,' said Krystal.

'Your dealer?' asked Kay.

'Shurrup,' Terri advised Krystal again.

'Why didn' yeh jus' tell 'im fuckin' no?' Krystal shouted at her mother.

'All right,' said Kay, again. 'Terri, I'm going to call your drug worker back. I'm going to try and persuade her that I think there would be a benefit to the family from your staying on the programme.'

'Will yeh?' asked Krystal, astonished. She had been thinking of Kay as a huge bitch, a bigger bitch even than that foster mother, with her spotless kitchen and the way she had of speaking kindly to Krystal, which made Krystal feel like a piece of shit.

'Yes,' said Kay, 'I will. But, Terri, as far as we're concerned, I mean the Child Protection team, this is serious. We are going to have to monitor Robbie's home situation closely. We need to see a change, Terri.'

'All right', yeah,' said Terri; agreeing as she agreed to everything, to everyone.

But Krystal said, 'You will, yeah. She will. I'll help 'er. She will.'

II

Shirley Mollison spent Wednesdays at South West General in Yarvil. Here, she and a dozen fellow volunteers performed non-medical jobs, such as pushing the library trolley around the beds, looking after patients' flowers and making trips to the shop in the lobby for those who were bed-ridden and without visitors. Shirley's favourite activity was going from bed to bed, taking orders for meals. Once, carrying her clipboard and wearing her laminated pass, she had been mistaken by a passing doctor for a hospital administrator.

The idea of volunteering had come to Shirley during her longest ever conversation with Julia Fawley, during one of the wonderful Christmas parties at Sweetlove House. Here, she had learned that Julia was involved in fund-raising for the paediatric wing of the local hospital.

'What we really need is a royal visit,' Julia had said, her eyes straying to the door over Shirley's shoulder. 'I'm going to get Aubrey to have a quiet word with Norman Bailey. Excuse me, I must say hello to Lawrence ...'

Shirley was left standing there beside the grand piano, saying, 'Oh, of course, of course,' to thin air. She had no idea who Norman Bailey was, but she felt quite light-headed. The very next day, without even telling Howard what she was up to, she telephoned South West General and asked about volunteer work. Ascertaining that nothing was required but a blameless character, a sound mind and strong legs, she had demanded an application form.

Volunteer work had opened a whole new, glorious world to Shirley. This was the dream that Julia Fawley had inadvertently handed her beside the grand piano: that of herself, standing with her hands clasped demurely in front of her, her laminated pass around her neck, while the Queen moved slowly down a line of beaming helpers. She saw herself dropping a perfect curtsy; the Queen's attention caught, she stopped to chat; she congratulated Shirley on generously giving her free time ... a flash and a photograph, and the newspapers next day ... 'the Queen chats to hospital volunteer Mrs Shirley Mollison ...' Sometimes, when Shirley really concentrated on this imaginary scene, an almost holy feeling came over her.

Volunteering at the hospital had given Shirley a glittering new weapon with which to whittle down Maureen's pretensions. When Ken's widow had been transformed, Cinderella-like, from shop-girl to business partner, she had taken on airs that Shirley (though enduring it all with a pussy-cat smile) found infuriating. But Shirley had retaken the higher ground; she worked, not for profit but out of the goodness of her heart. It was classy to volunteer; it was what women did who had no need of extra cash; women like herself and

Julia Fawley. What was more, the hospital gave Shirley access to a vast mine of gossip to drown out Maureen's tedious prattling about the new cafe.

This morning, Shirley stated her preference for ward twenty-eight in a firm voice to the volunteer supervisor, and was duly sent off to the oncology department. She had made her only friend among the nursing staff on ward twenty-eight; some of the young nurses could be curt and patronizing to the volunteers, but Ruth Price, who had recently returned to nursing after a break of sixteen years, had been charming from the first. They were both, as Shirley put it, Pagford women, which made a bond.

(Though, as it happened, Shirley was not Pagford-born. She and her younger sister had grown up with their mother in a cramped and untidy flat in Yarvil. Shirley's mother had drunk a lot; she had never divorced the girls' father, whom they did not see. Local men had all seemed to know Shirley's mother's name, and smirked when they said it ... but that was a long time ago, and Shirley took the view that the past disintegrated if you never mentioned it. She refused to remember.)

Shirley and Ruth greeted each other with delight, but it was a busy morning and there was no time for anything but the most rudimentary exchange about Barry Fairbrother's sudden death. They agreed to meet for lunch at half-past twelve, and Shirley strode off to fetch the library trolley.

She was in a wonderful mood. She could see the future as clearly as if it had already happened. Howard, Miles and Aubrey Fawley were going to unite to cut the Fields adrift for ever, and this would be the occasion for a celebratory dinner at Sweetlove House ...

Shirley found the place dazzling: the enormous garden with its sundial, its topiary hedges and its ponds; the wide panelled hallway; the silver-framed photograph on the grand piano, showing the owner sharing a joke with the Princess Royal. She detected no condescension whatsoever in the Fawleys' attitude towards her or her husband; but then there were so many distracting scents competing for her attention whenever she came within the Fawleys' orbit. She could just imagine the five of them sitting down to a private dinner in one of those delicious little side rooms, Howard sitting next to Julia, she on Aubrey's right hand, and Miles in between them. (In Shirley's fantasy, Samantha was unavoidably detained elsewhere.)

Shirley and Ruth found each other by the yoghurts at half-past twelve. The clattering hospital canteen was not yet as crowded as it would be by one, and the nurse and the volunteer found, without too much difficulty, a sticky, crumb-strewn table for two against the wall.

'How's Simon? How are the boys?' asked Shirley, when Ruth had wiped down the table, and they had decanted the contents of their trays and sat facing each other, ready for chat.

'Si's fine, thanks, fine. Bringing home our new computer today. The boys can't wait; you can imagine.'

This was quite untrue. Andrew and Paul both possessed cheap laptops; the PC sat in the corner of the tiny sitting room and neither boy touched it, preferring to do nothing that took them within the vicinity of their father. Ruth often spoke of her sons to Shirley as though they were much younger than they were: portable, tractable, easily amused. Perhaps she sought to

make herself younger, to emphasize the age difference between herself and Shirley - which stood at nearly two decades - to make them even more like mother and daughter. Ruth's mother had died ten years previously; she missed having an older woman in her life, and Shirley's relationship with her own daughter was, she had hinted to Ruth, not all it could have been.

'Miles and I have always been very close. Patricia, though, she was always rather a difficult character. She's up in London now.'

Ruth longed to probe, but a quality that she and Shirley shared and admired in each other was a genteel reticence; a pride in presenting an unruffled surface to the world. Ruth laid her piqued curiosity aside, therefore, though not without a private hope that she would find out, in due course, what made Patricia so difficult.

Shirley and Ruth's instant liking for each other had been rooted in their mutual recognition that the other was a woman like herself, a woman whose deepest pride lay in having captured and retained the affection of her husband. Like Freemasons, they shared a fundamental code, and were therefore secure in each other's company in a way that they were not with other women. Their complicity was still more enjoyable for being spiced by a sense of superiority, because each secretly pitied the other for her choice of husband. To Ruth, Howard was physically grotesque, and she was puzzled to understand how her friend, who retained a plump yet delicate prettiness, could ever have agreed to marry him. To Shirley, who could not remember ever setting eyes on Simon, who had never heard him mentioned in connection with the higher workings of Pagford, and who understood Ruth to

lack even a rudimentary social life, Ruth's husband sounded a reclusive inadequate.

'So I saw Miles and Samantha bringing Barry in,' Ruth said, launching into the main subject without preamble. She had much less conversational finesse than Shirley, finding it difficult to disguise her greed for Pagford gossip, of which she was deprived, stuck high on the hill above town, isolated by Simon's unsociability. 'Did they actually see it happen?'

'Oh yes,' said Shirley. 'They were having dinner at the golf club. Sunday night, you know; the girls were back at school, and Sam prefers eating out, she's not much of a cook ...'

Bit by bit, over their shared coffee breaks, Ruth had learned some of the inside story of Miles and Samantha's marriage. Shirley had told her how her son had been obliged to marry Samantha, because Samantha had fallen pregnant with Lexie.

'They've made the best of it,' Shirley sighed, brightly brave. 'Miles did the right thing; I wouldn't have had it any other way. The girls are lovely. It's a pity Miles didn't have a son; he would have been wonderful with a boy. But Sam didn't want a third.'

Ruth treasured up every veiled criticism Shirley made of her daughter-in-law. She had taken an immediate dislike to Samantha years before, when she had accompanied four-year-old Andrew to the nursery class at St Thomas's, and there met Samantha and her daughter Lexie. With her loud laugh, and her boundless cleavage, and a fine line in risqué jokes for the schoolyard

mothers, Samantha had struck Ruth as dangerously predatory. For years, Ruth had watched scornfully as Samantha stuck out her massive chest while talking to Vikram Jawanda at parents' evenings, and steered Simon around the edge of classrooms to avoid having to talk to her.

Shirley was still recounting the second-hand tale of Barry's final journey, giving all possible weight to Miles' quick thinking in calling the ambulance, to his support of Mary Fairbrother, to his insistence on remaining with her at the hospital until the Walls arrived. Ruth listened attentively, though with a slight impatience; Shirley was much more entertaining when she was enumerating the inadequacies of Samantha than when extolling the virtues of Miles. What was more, Ruth was bursting with something thrilling that she wished to tell Shirley.

'So there's an empty seat on the Parish Council,' Ruth said, the moment that Shirley reached the point in the story where Miles and Samantha ceded the stage to Colin and Tessa Wall.

'We call it a casual vacancy,' said Shirley kindly.

Ruth took a deep breath.

'Simon,' she said, excited at the mere telling of it, 'is thinking of standing!'

Shirley smiled automatically, raised her eyebrows in polite surprise, and took a sip of tea to hide her face. Ruth was completely unaware that she had said anything to discompose her friend. She had assumed that Shirley would be delighted to think of their husbands sitting on the Parish Council together, and had a vague notion that Shirley might be helpful in bringing this about.

'He told me last night,' Ruth went on, importantly. 'He's been thinking about it for a while.'

Certain other things that Simon had said, about the possibility of taking over bribes from Grays to keep them on as council contractors, Ruth had pushed out of her mind, as she pushed out all of Simon's little dodges, his petty criminalities.

'I had no idea Simon was interested in getting involved in local government,' said Shirley, her tone light and pleasant.

'Oh yes,' said Ruth, who had had no idea either, 'he's very keen.'

'Has he been talking to Dr Jawanda?' asked Shirley, sipping her tea again.

'Did she suggest standing to him?'

Ruth was thrown by this, and her genuine puzzlement showed.

'No, I ... Simon hasn't been to the doctor in ages. I mean, he's very healthy.'

Shirley smiled. If he was acting alone, without the support of the Jawanda faction, then the threat posed by Simon was surely negligible. She even pitied Ruth, who was in for a nasty surprise. She, Shirley, who knew everybody who counted in Pagford, would have been hard-pressed to recognize Ruth's husband if he came into the delicatessen: who on earth did poor Ruth think would vote for him? On the other hand, Shirley knew that there was one question that Howard and Aubrey would want her to ask as a matter of routine.

'Simon's always lived in Pagford, hasn't he?'

'No, he was born in the Fields,' said Ruth.

'Ah,' said Shirley.

She peeled back the foil lid of her yoghurt, picked up her spoon and took a thoughtful mouthful. The fact that Simon was likely to have a pro-Fields bias was, whatever his electoral prospects, worth knowing.

'Will it be on the website, how you put your name forward?' Ruth asked, still hoping for a late gush of helpfulness and enthusiasm.

'Oh yes,' said Shirley vaguely. 'I expect so.'

III

Andrew, Fats and twenty-seven others spent the last period on Wednesday afternoon in what Fats called 'spazmatics'. This was the second-from-bottom maths set, taken by the department's most incompetent teacher: a blotchy-faced young woman fresh from teacher training, who was incapable of keeping good order, and who often seemed to be on the verge of tears. Fats, who had set himself on a course of determined underachievement over the previous year, had been demoted to spazmatics from the top set. Andrew, who had struggled with numbers all his life, lived in fear that he would be relegated to the very bottom set, along with Krystal Weedon and her cousin, Dane Tully.

Andrew and Fats sat at the back of the room together. Occasionally, when he had tired of entertaining the class or whipping it into further disruption, Fats would show Andrew how to do a sum. The level of noise was deafening. Miss

Harvey shouted over the top of them all, begging for quiet. Worksheets were defaced by obscenities; people got up constantly to visit each other's desks, scraping their chair legs across the floor; small missiles flew across the room whenever Miss Harvey looked away. Sometimes Fats made excuses to walk up and down the room, imitating Cubby's bouncy up-and-down stiff-armed walk. Fats' humour was at its broadest here; in English, where he and Andrew were both in the top set, he did not bother to use Cubby for material.

Sukhvinder Jawanda was sitting directly in front of Andrew. Long ago, in primary school, Andrew, Fats and the other boys had pulled Sukhvinder's long, blue-black plait; it was the easiest thing to catch hold of when playing tag, and it had once presented an irresistible temptation when dangling, like now, down her back, hidden from the teacher. But Andrew no longer had any desire to tug it, nor to touch any part of Sukhvinder; she was one of the few girls over whom his eyes glided without the slightest interest. Since Fats had pointed it out, he had noticed the soft dark down on her upper lip.

Sukhvinder's older sister, Jaswant, had a lithe curvy figure, a tiny waist and a face that, prior to the advent of Gaia, had seemed beautiful to Andrew, with its high cheekbones, smooth golden skin and almond-shaped liquid-brown eyes. Naturally, Jaswant had always been completely beyond his reach: two years older and the cleverest girl in the sixth form, with an aura of being aware, to the last hard-on, of her own attractions.

Sukhvinder was the only person in the room who was making absolutely no noise. With her back hunched and her head bent low over her work, she appeared to be cocooned in concentration. She had pulled the left sleeve of

her jumper down so that it completely covered her hand, enclosing the cuff to make a woolly fist. Her total stillness was almost ostentatious.

'The great hermaphrodite sits quiet and still,' murmured Fats, his eyes fixed on the back of Sukhvinder's head. 'Moustachioed, yet large-mammared, scientists remain baffled by the contradictions of the hairy man-woman.'

Andrew sniggered, yet he was not entirely at his ease. He would have enjoyed himself more if he knew that Sukhvinder could not hear what Fats was saying. The last time that he had been over at Fats' house, Fats had shown him the messages he was sending regularly to Sukhvinder's Facebook page. He had been scouring the internet for information and pictures about hirsutism, and was sending a quotation or an image a day.

It was sort of funny, but it made Andrew uncomfortable. Strictly speaking, Sukhvinder was not asking for it: she seemed a very easy target. Andrew liked it best when Fats directed his savage tongue towards figures of authority, the pretentious or the self-satisfied.

'Separated from its bearded, bra-wearing herd,' said Fats, 'it sits, lost in thought, wondering whether it would suit a goatee.'

Andrew laughed, then felt guilty, but Fats lost interest, and turned his attention to transforming every zero on his worksheet into a puckered anus. Andrew reverted to trying to guess where the decimal point should go, and contemplating the prospect of the school bus home, and Gaia. It was always much more difficult to find a seat where he might keep her in his eye-line on the school-to-home trip, because she was frequently boxed in before he got

there, or too far away. Their shared amusement in Monday morning's assembly had led nowhere. She had not made eye contact with him on the bus either morning since, nor in any other way demonstrated that she knew he existed. In the four weeks of his infatuation, Andrew had never actually spoken to Gaia. He attempted to formulate opening lines while the din of spazmatics crashed around him. 'That was funny, Monday, in assembly ...'

'Sukhvinder, are you all right?'

Miss Harvey, who had bent down over Sukhvinder's work to mark it, was gawping into the girl's face. Andrew watched Sukhvinder nod and draw in her hands, obscuring her face, still hunched up over her work.

'Wallah!' stage-whispered Kevin Cooper, from two rows in front. 'Wallah! Peanut!'

He was trying to draw their attention to what they already knew: that Sukhvinder, judging by the gentle quivering of her shoulders, was crying, and that Miss Harvey was making hopeless, harried attempts to find out what was wrong. The class, detecting a further lapse in their teacher's vigilance, raged louder than ever.

'Peanut! Wallah!'

Andrew could never decide whether Kevin Cooper irritated intentionally or accidentally, but he had an infallible knack for grating on people. The nickname 'Peanut' was a very old one, which had clung to Andrew in primary school; he had always hated it. Fats had forced the name out of fashion by never using it; Fats had always been the final arbiter in such matters. Cooper

was even getting Fats' name wrong: 'Wallah' had enjoyed only a brief popularity, last year.

'Peanut! Wallah!'

'Fuck off, Cooper, you glans-headed moron,' said Fats under his breath. Cooper was hanging over the back of his seat, staring at Sukhvinder, who had curled over, her face almost touching the desk, while Miss Harvey crouched beside her, her hands fluttering comically, forbidden to touch her, and unable to elicit any explanation for her distress. A few more people had noticed this unusual disturbance and were staring; but at the front of the room, several boys continued to rampage, oblivious to everything but their own amusement. One of them seized the wood-backed board rubber from Miss Harvey's vacated desk. He threw it.

The rubber soared right across the room and crashed into the clock on the back wall, which plummeted to the ground and shattered: shards of plastic and metal innards flew everywhere, and several girls, including Miss Harvey, shrieked in shock.

The door of the classroom flew open and bounced, with a bang, off the wall. The class fell quiet. Cubby was standing there, flushed and furious.

'What is going on in this room? What is all this noise?'

Miss Harvey shot up like a jack-in-a-box beside Sukhvinder's desk, looking guilty and frightened.

'Miss Harvey! Your class is making an almighty racket. What's going on?'

Miss Harvey seemed struck dumb. Kevin Cooper hung over the back of his chair, grinning, looking from Miss Harvey to Cubby to Fats and back again.

Fats spoke.

'Well, to be perfectly frank, Father, we've been running rings around this poor woman.'

Laughter exploded. Miss Harvey's neck was disfigured by a rising maroon rash. Fats balanced himself nonchalantly on the rear legs of his chair, his face perfectly straight, looking at Cubby with challenging detachment.

'That's enough,' said Cubby. 'If I hear any more noise like that from this class, I'll put the whole lot of you in detention. Do you understand? All of you.'

He shut the door on their laughter.

'You heard the deputy headmaster!' cried Miss Harvey, scurrying to the front of the room. 'Be quiet! I want quiet! You - Andrew - and you, Stuart - you can clear up that mess! Pick up all those bits of clock!'

They set up a routine cry of injustice at this, supported shrilly by a couple of the girls. The actual perpetrators of the destruction, of whom everybody knew Miss Harvey was afraid, sat smirking at their desks. As there were only five minutes remaining until the end of the school day, Andrew and Fats set about stringing out the clearing up until they would be able to abandon it unfinished. While Fats garnered further laughs by bouncing hither and

thither, stiff-armed, doing the Cubby walk, Sukhvinder wiped her eyes surreptitiously with her wool-covered hand and sank back into obscurity.

When the bell rang, Miss Harvey made no attempt to control or contain the thunderous clamour or rush for the door. Andrew and Fats kicked various bits of clock under the cupboards at the back of the room, and swung their school bags over their shoulders again.

'Wallah! Wallah!' called Kevin Cooper, hurrying to catch up with Andrew and Fats as they headed down the corridor. 'Do you call Cubby " Father" at home? Seriously? Do you?'

He thought he had something on Fats; he thought he had got him.

'You're a dickhead, Cooper,' said Fats wearily, and Andrew laughed.

IV

'Dr Jawanda's running about fifteen minutes late,' the receptionist told Tessa.

'Oh, that's fine,' said Tessa. 'I'm in no hurry.'

It was early evening, and the waiting-room windows made patches of clear royal blue against the walls. There were only two other people there: a misshapen, wheezing old woman wearing carpet slippers, and a young mother who was reading a magazine while her toddler rummaged in the toy box in the corner. Tessa took a battered old Heat magazine from the table in the middle, sat down and flicked through the pages, looking at the pictures. The delay gave her more time to think about what she was going to say to Parminder.

They had spoken, briefly, on the telephone this morning. Tessa had been full of contrition that she had not called at once to let Parminder know about Barry. Parminder had said it was fine, for Tessa not to be silly, that she was not upset at all; but Tessa, with her lengthy experience of the thin-skinned and fragile, could tell that Parminder, beneath her prickly carapace, was wounded. She had tried to explain that she had been utterly exhausted the last couple of days, and that she had had to deal with Mary, Colin, Fats, Krystal Weedon; that she had felt overwhelmed, lost and incapable of thinking of more than the immediate problems that had been thrown at her. But Parminder had cut her off in the middle of her rambling excuses and said calmly that she would see her later at the surgery.

Dr Crawford emerged, white-haired and bearlike, from his room, gave Tessa a cheery wave, and said, 'Maisie Lawford?' The young mother had some difficulty in persuading her daughter to abandon the old toy telephone on wheels that the latter had found in the toy box. While being pulled gently by the hand after Dr Crawford, the little girl gazed longingly over her shoulder at the telephone, whose secrets she would never now discover.

When the door closed on them, Tessa realized that she was smiling fatuously, and hastily rearranged her own features. She was going to become one of those awful old ladies who cooed indiscriminately over small children and frightened them. She would have loved a chubby little blonde daughter to go with her skinny, dark boy. How awful it was, thought Tessa, remembering Fats the toddler, the way tiny ghosts of your living children haunted your heart; they could never know, and would hate it if they did, how their growing was a constant bereavement.

Parminder's door opened; Tessa looked up.

'Mrs Weedon,' said Parminder. Her eyes met Tessa's, and she gave a smile that was no smile at all, but a mere tightening of the mouth. The little old lady in carpet slippers got up with difficulty and hobbled away around the partition wall after Parminder. Tessa heard Parminder's surgery door snap shut.

She read the captions to a series of photographs showing a footballer's wife in all the different outfits she had worn over the previous five days. Studying the young woman's long thin legs, Tessa wondered how different her life would have been if she had had legs like that. She could not help but suspect that it would have been almost entirely different. Tessa's legs were thick, shapeless and short; she would have hidden them perpetually in boots, only it was difficult to find many that would zip up over her calves. She remembered telling a sturdy little girl in guidance that looks did not matter, that personality was much more important. What rubbish we tell children, thought Tessa, turning the page of her magazine.

An out-of-sight door opened with a bang. Somebody was shouting in a cracked voice.

'You're makin' me bloody worse. This in't right. I've come to you for help. It's your job - it's your - '

Tessa and the receptionist locked eyes, then turned towards the sound of the shouting. Tessa heard Parminder's voice, its Brummie accent still discernible after all these years in Pagford.

'Mrs Weedon, you're still smoking, which affects the dose I have to prescribe you. If you'd give up your cigarettes - smokers metabolize Theophylline more quickly, so the cigarettes are not only worsening your emphysema, but actually affecting the ability of the drug to - '

'Don' you shout at me! I've 'ad enough of you! I'll report you! You've gave me the wrong fuckin' pills! I wanna see someone else! I wanna see Dr Crawford!'

The old lady appeared around the wall, wobbling, wheezing, her face scarlet.

'She'll be the death of me, that Paki cow! Don' you go near 'er!' she shouted at Tessa. 'She'll fuckin' kill yer with her drugs, the Paki bitch!'

She tottered towards the exit, spindle-shanked, unsteady on her slippers feet, her breath rattling, swearing as loudly as her beleaguered lungs would permit. The door swung shut behind her. The receptionist exchanged another look with Tessa. They heard Parminder's surgery door close again.

It was five minutes before Parminder reappeared. The receptionist stared ostentatiously at her screen.

'Mrs Wall,' said Parminder, with another tight non-smile.

'What was that about?' Tessa asked, when she had taken a seat at the end of Parminder's desk.

'Mrs Weedon's new pills are upsetting her stomach,' said Parminder calmly.

'So we're doing your bloods today, aren't we?'

'Yes,' said Tessa, both intimidated and hurt by Parminder's cold professional demeanour. 'How are you doing, Minda?'

'Me?' said Parminder. 'I'm fine. Why?'

'Well ... Barry ... I know what he meant to you and what you meant to him.'

Tears welled in Parminder's eyes and she tried to blink them away, but too late; Tessa had seen them.

'Minda,' she said, laying her plump hand on Parminder's thin one, but Parminder whipped it away as if Tessa had stung her; then, betrayed by her own reflex, she began to cry in earnest, unable to hide in the tiny room, though she had turned her back as nearly as she could in her swivel chair.

'I felt sick when I realized I hadn't phoned you,' Tessa said, over Parminder's furious attempts to quell her own sobs. 'I wanted to curl up and die. I meant to call,' she lied, 'but we hadn't slept, we spent almost the whole night at the hospital, then we had to go straight out to work. Colin broke down at assembly when he announced it, then he caused a bloody awful scene with Krystal Weedon in front of everyone. And then Stuart decided to play truant. And Mary's falling apart ... but I'm so sorry, Minda, I should've called.'

'... iculous,' said Parminder thickly, her face hidden behind a tissue she had pulled out from her sleeve. '... Mary ... most important ...'

'You would have been one of the very first people Barry called,' said Tessa sadly, and, to her horror, she burst into tears too.

'Minda, I'm so sorry,' she sobbed, 'but I was having to deal with Colin and all the rest of them.'

'Don't be silly,' said Parminder, gulping as she dabbed at her thin face.

'We're being silly.'

No, we're not. Oh, let go for once, Parminder ...

But the doctor squared her thin shoulders, blew her nose and sat up straight again.

'Did Vikram tell you?' asked Tessa timidly, tweaking a handful of tissues from the box on Parminder's desk.

'No,' said Parminder. 'Howard Mollison. In the deli.'

'Oh God, Minda, I'm so sorry.'

'Don't be silly. It's fine.'

Crying had made Parminder feel slightly better; friendlier towards Tessa, who was wiping her own plain, kind face. This was a relief, for now that Barry was gone, Tessa was Parminder's only real friend in Pagford. (She always said 'in Pagford' to herself, pretending that somewhere beyond the little town she had a hundred loyal friends. She never quite admitted to herself that these consisted only of the memories of her gang of school mates back in Birmingham, from whom the tide of life had long since separated her; and the medical colleagues with whom she had studied and trained, who still sent Christmas cards, but who never came to see her, and whom she never visited.)

'How's Colin?'

Tessa moaned.

'Oh, Minda ... Oh God. He says he's going to run for Barry's seat on the Parish Council.'

The pronounced vertical furrow between Parminder's thick, dark brows deepened.

'Can you imagine Colin running for election?' Tessa asked, her sodden tissues crumpled tightly in her fist. 'Coping with the likes of Aubrey Fawley and Howard Mollison? Trying to fill Barry's shoes, telling himself he's got to win the battle for Barry - all the responsibility - '

'Colin copes with a lot of responsibility at work,' said Parminder.

'Barely,' said Tessa, without thinking. She felt instantly disloyal and started to cry again. It was so strange; she had entered the surgery thinking that she would offer comfort to Parminder, but instead here she was, pouring out her own troubles instead. 'You know what Colin's like, he takes everything to heart so much, he takes everything so personally ...'

'He copes very well, you know, all things considered,' said Parminder.

'Oh, I know he does,' said Tessa wearily. The fight seemed to go out of her. 'I know.'

Colin was almost the only person towards whom stern, self-contained Parminder showed ready compassion. In return, Colin would never hear a

word against her; he was her dogged champion in Pagford; 'An excellent GP', he would snap at anyone who dared to criticize her in his hearing. 'Best I've ever had.' Parminder did not have many defenders; she was unpopular with the Pagford old guard, having a reputation for being grudging with antibiotics and repeat prescriptions.

'If Howard Mollison gets his way, there won't be an election at all,' said Parminder.

'What d'you mean?'

'He's sent round an email. It came in half an hour ago.'

Parminder turned to her computer monitor, typed in a password, and brought up her inbox. She angled the monitor so that Tessa could read Howard's message. The first paragraph expressed regret at Barry's death. The next suggested that, in view of the fact that a year of Barry's term had already expired, co-opting a replacement might be preferable to going through the onerous process of a full election.

'He's lined someone up already,' said Parminder. 'He's trying to crowbar in some crony before anyone can stop him. I wouldn't be surprised if it was Miles.'

'Oh, surely not,' said Tessa instantly. 'Miles was at the hospital with Barry ... no, he was very upset by it - '

'You're so damn naive, Tessa,' said Parminder, and Tessa was shocked by the savagery in her friend's voice. 'You don't understand what Howard

Mollison's like. He's a vile man, vile. You didn't hear him when he found out that Barry had written to the paper about the Fields. You don't know what he's trying to do with the methadone clinic. You wait. You'll see.'

Her hand was trembling so much that it took her a few attempts to close down Mollison's email.

'You'll see,' she repeated. 'All right, we'd better get on, Laura needs to go in a minute. I'll check your blood pressure first.'

Parminder was doing Tessa a favour, seeing her late like this, after school. The practice nurse, who lived in Yarvil, was going to drop off Tessa's blood sample to the hospital lab on her way home. Feeling nervous and oddly vulnerable, Tessa rolled up the sleeve of the old green cardigan. The doctor wound the Velcro cuff around her upper arm. At close quarters, Parminder's strong resemblance to her second daughter was revealed, for their different builds (Parminder being wiry, and Sukhvinder buxom) became indiscernible, and the similarity of their facial features emerged: the hawkish nose, the wide mouth with its full lower lip, and the large, round, dark eyes. The cuff tightened painfully around Tessa's flabby upper arm, while Parminder watched the gauge.

'One sixty-five over eighty-eight,' said Parminder, frowning. 'That's high, Tessa; too high.'

Deft and skilful in all her movements, she stripped the wrapping from a sterile syringe, straightened out Tessa's pale, mole-strewn arm and slid the needle into the crook.

'I'm taking Stuart into Yarvil tomorrow night,' Tessa said, looking up at the ceiling. 'To get him a suit for the funeral. I can't stand the scene there'll be, if he tries to go in jeans. Colin'll go berserk.'

She was trying to divert her own thoughts from the dark, mysterious liquid flowing up into the little plastic tube. She was afraid that it would betray her; that she had not been as good as she should have been; that all the chocolate bars and muffins she had eaten would show up as traitorous glucose.

Then she thought bitterly that it would be much easier to resist chocolate if her life were less stressful. Given that she spent nearly all her time trying to help other people, it was hard to see muffins as so very naughty. As she watched Parminder labelling vials of her blood, she found herself hoping, though her husband and friend might think it heresy, that Howard Mollison would triumph, and prevent an election happening at all.

V

Simon Price left the printworks on the stroke of five every day without fail. He had put in his hours, and that was that; home was waiting, clean and cool, high on the hill, a world away from the perpetual clank and whirr of the Yarvil plant. To linger in the factory after clocking-off time (though now a manager, Simon had never ceased to think in the terms of his apprenticeship) would constitute a fatal admission that your home life was lacking or, worse, that you were trying to brown-nose senior management.

Today, though, Simon needed to make a detour before going home. He met up with the gum-chewing forklift driver in the car park, and together they drove through the darkening streets, with the boy giving directions, into the Fields, actually passing the house in which Simon had grown up. He had not been past the place for years; his mother was dead, and he had not seen his father since he was fourteen and did not know where he was. It unsettled and depressed Simon to see his old home with one window boarded over and the grass ankle-deep. His late mother had been house proud.

The youth told Simon to park at the end of Foley Road, then got out, leaving Simon behind, and headed towards a house of particularly squalid appearance. From what Simon could see by the light of the nearest streetlamp, it seemed to have a pile of filth heaped beneath a downstairs window. It was only now that Simon asked himself how sensible it had been to come and pick up the stolen computer in his own car. These days, surely, they would have CCTV on the estate, to keep an eye on all the little thugs and hoodies. He glanced around, but he could not see any cameras; nobody seemed to be looking at him except a fat woman who was openly staring through one of the small, square institutional-looking windows. Simon scowled at her, but she continued to watch him as she smoked her cigarette, so he screened his face with his hand, glaring through the windscreen.

His passenger was already emerging from the house, straddling a little as he walked back towards the car, carrying the boxed computer. Behind him, in the doorway of the house he had left, Simon saw an adolescent girl with a small boy at her feet, who stepped out of sight as he watched, dragging the child with her.

Simon turned the key in the ignition, revving the engine as the gum-chewer came nearer.

'Careful,' said Simon, leaning across to unlock the passenger door. 'Just put it down here.'

The boy set the box down on the still-warm passenger seat. Simon had intended to open it and check that it was what he had paid for, but a growing sense of his own imprudence overrode the desire. He contented himself with giving the box a shove: it was too heavy to move easily; he wanted to get going.

'You all right if I leave you here?' he called loudly to the boy, as if he was already speeding away from him in the car.

'Can you give us a lift up to the Crannock Hotel?'

'Sorry, mate, I'm going the other way,' said Simon. 'Cheers.'

Simon accelerated. In his rear-view mirror he saw the boy standing there, looking outraged; saw his lips form the words 'fuck you!' But Simon didn't care. If he cleared out quickly, he might avoid his number plate being captured on one of those grainy black and white films they played back on the news.

He reached the bypass ten minutes later, but even after he had left Yarvil behind, quitted the dual carriageway and driven up the hill towards the ruined abbey, he was ruffled and tense, and experienced none of the satisfaction that was usually his when he crested the peak in the evenings

and caught the first glimpse of his own house, far across the hollow where Pagford lay, a tiny white handkerchief on the opposite hillside.

Though she had been home barely ten minutes, Ruth already had dinner on and was laying the table when Simon carried the computer inside; they kept early hours in Hilltop House, as was Simon's preference. Ruth's exclamations of excitement at the sight of the box irritated her husband. She did not understand what he had been through; she never understood that there were risks involved in getting stuff cheap. For her part, Ruth sensed at once that Simon was in one of the tightly wound moods that often presaged an explosion, and coped the only way she knew how: by jabbering brightly about her day, in the hope that the mood would dissolve once he had food inside him, and as long as nothing else happened to irritate him.

Promptly at six o'clock, by which time Simon had unboxed the computer and discovered that there was no instruction manual, the family sat down to eat.

Andrew could tell that his mother was on edge, because she was making random conversation with a familiar, artificially cheery note in her voice. She seemed to think, despite years of contrary experience, that if she made the atmosphere polite enough, his father would not dare shatter it. Andrew helped himself to shepherd's pie (made by Ruth, and defrosted on work nights) and avoided eye contact with Simon. He had more interesting things to think about than his parents. Gaia Bawden had said 'hi' to him when he had come face to face with her outside the biology lab; said it automatically and casually, but had not looked at him once all lesson.

Andrew wished he knew more about girls; he had never got to know one well enough to fathom how their minds worked. The yawning gap in his knowledge had not mattered much until Gaia had walked onto the school bus for the first time, and provoked in him a laser-sharp interest focused on her as an individual; a quite different feeling to the wide and impersonal fascination that had been intensifying in him over several years, concerned with the sprouting of breasts and the appearance of bra straps through white school shirts, and his slightly squeamish interest in what menstruation actually entailed.

Fats had girl cousins who sometimes came to visit. Once, going into the Walls' bathroom right after the prettiest of them had used it, Andrew had found a transparent Lil-Lets wrapper lying beside the bathroom bin. This actual, physical evidence that a girl in his vicinity was having a period there and then was, to thirteen-year-old Andrew, akin to the sighting of a rare comet. He had had enough sense not to tell Fats what he had seen or found or how exciting a discovery it had been. Instead he had picked up the wrapper between his fingernails, dropped it quickly