

2019

A WEDDING IN APRIL. Most people wouldn't risk it, but there are discounts to be had, and Leah and Richard have been lucky: the weather's held off and the tents covering the tables and bar and the place where the band will play are unruffled by this still day. On the gravel drive outside the big house that's been rented for the reception, Juliet and I mill around among a hundred other guests, a mixture of friends and strangers, all bored and wanting to get through the photos so we can sit down to eat. We're at an age when weddings seem to happen every other weekend in summer, so even if an April wedding might be a change, the day still feels familiar in its rhythms: the ceremony, the drive to the reception, the photos, the speeches, the drinking, the food – pizzas or hog roast or cheese and biscuits, and cutting the cake – the band, the Airbnb at the end of the evening, drunk sex, a hangover the next morning, driving home to a takeaway in front of the TV.

On the regular occasions when Juliet and I arrive at these days, attending the weddings of friends and relations, enjoying some things, raising eyebrows at others, I often wonder how much she thinks about the day we'll get married, whenever that may be, if that day is going to come. The thought

always preoccupies me at these times, but we never seem to talk about it, not in any depth. We'll critique the wedding favours on a table, perhaps, or note the cheap wine, maybe say we'd never serve anything like that ourselves, but the conversation never goes any further. I suppose we've both known ever since we moved in together that marriage would be the next logical step. So perhaps we are poised on the rim of that next chapter in our lives, and trying to work out when to jump.

It's been on my mind for a while that I should make the next move, buy a ring. I only ever want to do it once, though, so I'm taking this thought slowly, letting it creep up on me, letting it grow. I might as well marry beautifully. So I've been saving money, a little here and a little there, and trying to work out how to do it right. It's not the easiest thing to do if you're a copywriter, saving for a wedding. Not if you're paying rent in the city, and your girlfriend likes date night, and date night is always a hundred quid of dinner and wine and a taxi back home, and I suppose I've let thoughts of money slow me down, an excuse to put off getting on with life. Because we never talk about the idea of getting married, I have no clear hints to work on as to what kind of ring I ought to be buying, either, or where I ought to kneel down and propose. So I've let that slow me down too. More reasons to let time drift by, just letting it happen to me, rather than me doing very much with it. We just go from one wedding to another, as if we're glimpsing our own future, hidden in shards among other people's days.

'She keeps looking at you,' Juliet says. I turn to her.

'Who?'

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‘The photographer. Look, she’s looking right at you – see?’

I turn and follow Juliet’s gaze in time to see the young woman, standing on a stepladder preparing to take a photograph of everyone, suddenly look away from me and up to the sky as if she’s worried about the weather or the light. I almost missed the moment, but as I watch the photographer stare fixedly into the blue, I can tell that Juliet is right. I turned, and the girl was looking right at me. She’s attractive, about the same age as us, dark-haired, slender. She looks like a yoga instructor, and hasn’t dressed up in wedding clothes. Instead of making her seem shabby, this somehow has the effect of making everyone around her in formal dresses or suits and ties look slightly ludicrous, as if they’re wearing their parents’ things. It always amazes me just how far into life the feeling persists that everyone you know is only really playing at being grown up. Here we are in our thirties, inheriting the earth maybe, and I still feel as if everyone I know is putting it on.

The girl on the stepladder doesn’t look like that, though. She seems at ease, set apart from the crowd, and not just because she’s standing above them. As I watch her, she looks back my way again, and smiles, then turns away to talk to one of the best men, who’s trying to organise us.

‘See?’ Juliet asks me.

‘I saw, yeah.’

‘Who is she?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Looks like you’ve pulled, then.’

I glance quickly at Juliet. Her neck is flushed, and I can see that she’s unhappy. The idea that, of all the young men at this wedding, I might be the one the beautiful photographer

fancies is patently ludicrous to me, but things like this make Juliet uncomfortable. I put my arm around her and kiss her on the cheek.

'I think it's more likely I've got something in my teeth,' I say.

The joke's not very good, but she smiles nonetheless and pushes me away from her. 'Either that or your flies are undone.'

Then the best man is shouting for our attention, so we turn back to face forwards, ready to be captured for ever as part of this group who were here on this day. Whatever becomes of us all, this happened, we had this much in common, all of us here. My eyes are drawn again to the beautiful young woman on the stepladder, and once again she is looking at me. Some men might be used to this kind of attention. Some might be comfortable with the idea they're attractive to other people. I'm not one of those people, and can't help wondering as we smile and throw hats and plastic cups into the air what the explanation for that look might be. I'm surrounded by beautiful people. It's not going to be that. How could it be?

When the big group photo has been taken, the bride and groom and their families and whoever else wander off with the photographer to be captured in smaller groups down by the river, and Juliet and I drift away from the drive and the front of the house to scrutinise the seating plan and find our way over to our table.

'Was it just that she caught *you* looking at *her*?' Juliet asks.

'Sorry?'

'She's very attractive. Perhaps you were looking at her, and she noticed.'

'Seriously?' Juliet looks at me, and there's an atmosphere

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between us now, as unfair as that seems. 'I'm here with you at our friends' wedding. I'm not eyeing up the barmaids, I'm not eyeing up the photographer. Don't worry. It's all right.'

Juliet shrugs and looks away. 'I'd understand, is all I was going to say,' she says. 'Looking isn't buying.'

We find our table and sit down together, saying very little till some of our friends find us and sit down on either side. The thought of the photographer has fixed in my mind. I can only half concentrate on the conversations going on around me, because I'm wondering whether I could have seen her before somewhere, wondering why she was looking at me, and whether there'll be a moment this evening when we have an opportunity to meet and speak. It doesn't seem to me that this would be disloyal. Isn't it natural to be interested in someone who shows an interest in you? Isn't it natural to wonder what they're thinking? Under the table I reach out and take Juliet's hand, and she lets me hold it for a moment, then takes it away, and smiles at me, briefly resting the same hand on my arm just below my shoulder.

'Too hot,' she says. And I smile, but I know she's unhappy, because it isn't hot under the tents at all. It's neither my fault nor Juliet's, not really, but something strange has happened and I know we're not going to feel close to each other today. Whenever she encounters things that make her uncomfortable, Juliet's reaction is always to withdraw. I don't know whether I'm the same; perhaps I am. It means our unhappiness always makes us feel alone when it comes, because we're careful to hide it, not to share it with each other.

We all eat together, and then there are some awful speeches, actually quite memorably awful speeches because the groom

has appointed four best men, all of whom perform a forfeit in the course of the hour they spend talking to us, which involves downing shots and the singing of songs. Then music starts up, and the guests dance while the tables are cleared and the cake is brought out to be cut. That being done, we all eat the cut cake, then start to get bored till the drink kicks in and a band begins playing and the evening flows more quickly after that.

After half an hour of dancing, once we've worked up a sweat, Juliet and I walk away from the party, down to the bottom of the grounds, past the swimming pool and the tennis court and the little walled garden, till we come to the lake that marks the edge of the park; beyond it, there are cattle cropping the grass in the next field. There's a pontoon jutting out from the side of the lake into the water, and tied to the end of the pontoon is a rowing boat no one's thought to store away while the wedding's going on. It seems to me that the presence of this boat might become dangerous as the night goes on, if anyone finds it once they've had a few drinks. Then I feel disappointed at myself for responding to the boat in that way; why think of the dangers when I could dream instead of launching out on this water?

It occurs to me that the situation Juliet and I find ourselves in gives us the opportunity to be one of three kinds of people. We could worry about the boat, and fret, go and find the people who live in the house, and tell them they ought to store it away; that would make us responsible, rational, grown-up, absolutely divorced from the kids we used to be. Or we could do nothing, which I suspect is what most people would do, just take in the pontoon and the boat at the end of it, perhaps

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even walk out to get a closer look down into the water for a moment, but then step back and walk away, leaving the boat lying silent in the water. Or, there is a third thing. Perhaps the most irresponsible thing. Perhaps the least sensible or adult or logical. Which would be to get into the boat and cast off and row round the little lake for a short while. Thinking these options through, it seems to me that this is the choice you'd make if you still wanted to be young; if you still wanted as much of life as you could get, all it could offer you; if you still thought the reason you were here was to seek adventure. I turn to Juliet, her face only half visible in the dark now we've walked away from the lights of the party. It's early still, the moon is not yet up.

'Shall we go out on the water?' I ask.

She laughs. 'Why?'

'Might be fun. They've left the boat out.'

'Not because they want people to use it.'

'No one could possibly see us out here, though; we'd be fine.'

'That's not the point, though, is it?'

'Come on. It'll be like Bridget Jones.'

'No it won't, it's dangerous. Let's go back, come on.'

'Just quickly, come on.'

'Ed, I don't want to. Let's go back,' she says. I shrug, admit defeat. But I don't want to go back with her just yet. This thought snags in me slightly. I wonder what it means. It's not the first time this idea has come to me in the last few months.

It occurs to me as we stand there by the lake in the dark, a moment that ought to mean something, that ought to be happy, a secret we ought to feel like we're sharing, that some

kind of link seems to have unthreaded between us. I look at the woman I've been living with for six years and realise that sometime in the past year I stopped feeling like we were really together. And I realise I've known this for a while now. I just haven't quite acknowledged the feeling. I think of the way we've been falling asleep the last few months; both of us have started turning our backs to each other. I'd noticed it, been aware of it. I hadn't drawn any inference from it till this moment. But I've been waking up at the edge of the bed for some time now, and I realise suddenly that it has to mean something. We used to hold each other in different shapes. Now, unless there's sex, we sleep alone on different sides of our shared mattress. And what does that mean? Can you find your way back from that? I don't know exactly what we've stopped sharing. Unless it's love. Whatever love might be. I wonder whether it's something to do with weddings; we're not so young, after all, and things aren't so new between us. Was there a tide we missed a while back, when we should have done more than just live together? Should it have been the two of us in front of everyone, or is that a stupid thought? I look at Juliet and can't tell what's missing. But I think she knows it's not there, too. At least that's something we're sharing.

'I'll follow you in a minute,' I tell her.

'Why?'

'Don't worry. I'll catch you up.'

'What's your problem?'

'Nothing. I'll just catch you up in a minute, all right? I just want to stay out here in the quiet for a while.' She shrugs, and I can see that I've annoyed her. We're not in the same key

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today, somehow. I can see now that I made a mistake ever thinking she'd want to get in the boat with me. Juliet's life runs on train tracks, and isn't easily diverted; surprises don't delight her, she doesn't like trying new things, she likes comfort and security, as I suppose most people do. As I suppose I do, mostly. But something about the lake has caught my attention, some deep silence.

'Suit yourself.' Juliet walks away from me and goes off to dance with our friends, and I'm alone in the dark. I turn back to the pontoon and walk along it to the end. The night sky reflects off the still surface of the water. I watch it rippling gently under me. I have stopped being happy somewhere along the way. When did that happen? And what am I going to do about it?

I get into the boat and the ripples of its movement spread to the edge of the water. The oars are stored in the bottom of the boat. I take them out and fix them in the rowlocks before untying the rope attaching the boat to the pontoon and taking an oar in each hand. Leaning forwards to reach for the first stroke, I launch myself through a new element out into the night. The idea comes to me that it might be as easy as this to leave my old life and go looking for a new one. Letting go of one's unhappiness might be as simple as pushing away from a lakeside pontoon. Cutting through new water till you reach another world.

When I've done a circuit of the lake and tied the boat up again, I head back to the party, and skirt round the edge of the festivities, a little downcast, because somehow I feel as if I've done something wrong, though I don't know quite what. In the back of my mind the thought is keening faintly that when

I got back on to the pontoon after rowing, I stepped into a different world. Something intangible about this place is different – or rather, it could be if I chose it to be so. A band playing at a wedding always sounds to me like the saddest thing in the world. The noise of our lives passing. Or perhaps it's just that I never learned the trick of having fun, and moments like this remind me there are aspects of life I miss entirely.

I collapse on a sofa someone has put out in one of the dining tents furthest from the marquee where the band is playing and the guests are dancing. It must have been put there for the elderly to get away from all the noise, but for now everyone more advanced in years is dancing with their kids. That's where she comes and finds me, the photographer, the girl who kept looking at me earlier.

Through the open side of the tent I watch her approaching across the lawn, cutting through the guests, her eyes fixed on me all the time as she approaches. I watch her figure in the clothes she is wearing, wide linen trousers, silk shirt, her dark hair flowing down over her shoulders. She is wearing sandals and her feet are wet. She sits down on the sofa, then turns away from me, looking instead across the lawn at the band and the dancers visible through the marquee's open sides. I turn as well, following her gaze, looking out across the night.

'Hi.'

'Hello.'

'My name's Ed.'

She smiles at me. 'I'm Amy.'

'I thought I caught your eye earlier.'

'You did.'

'Do you know them?' I point to Richard and Leah, the bride and groom, who are dancing together to the band's cover of 'Teenage Dirtbag'.

'No, I'm just a wedding photographer. They found me online. I've got to know them since, but I don't *know* them.'

We watch the dancing for a moment before she speaks again. 'Do you like Laurie Lee?'

'Sorry?' Her question is so unexpected that for a moment I don't know who she means.

'Laurie Lee. Have you read him? *Cider with Rosie*.'

'Oh. Yes, I have. Yes, I do.'

'I want to tell you a story about him.'

I can't quite work out what's going on. It's impossibly surreal to me, that this girl wants to talk to me, but only about poets.

'Go on.'

She smiles, and leans towards me, so that she's looking past, lips close to my ear as she speaks. The words become secrets only for me, and I feel the heat of her breath on my cheek as she tells her story while Chinese lanterns are lit on the lawn before us and released into the clear night air.

'Not all of the stories about Laurie Lee are beautiful,' she says, 'because he liked women a *lot*, so a lot of stories about him have a very similar narrative. Benny Hill stories, if you know what I mean. But as well as chasing girls, Laurie Lee also liked to take his violin into pubs and play to people. And one night, in the crowd where he was playing, he noticed a very beautiful young woman. A girl really, no more than

about eighteen. She was standing at the back of the audience gathered round him, and didn't seem to know anyone else there, and she looked at him very intently all the time he played. Of course, he wanted to play it cool, like he hadn't noticed. I quite like that about Laurie Lee; he still played the game that women might want to go to bed with him well into his seventies. So he kept going with the tunes, and then when the barman called time, he saw the girl who'd been watching him turn and walk out of the pub. And suddenly he was seized by this fierce feeling that he had to speak to her, and she was leaving before he'd had the chance. So he called after her. "Have we met before somewhere?" he asked. And she smiled. "We have," she said. "I'm your daughter."

Amy shifts and crosses her legs, angling her body away from me as she leans back against the arm of the sofa, and I want to ask her why she's telling me this story, but I don't speak because I'm afraid that if I interrupt her she'll stop talking and the spell will be broken. She looks at me and carries on. 'Laurie Lee, you see, had had a daughter with the wife of another man years earlier. He'd known her while she was small, but then when she was five or six, he stopped talking to her mother and they lost touch. This was her. Her mother had never mentioned who her father really was, but she'd seen Laurie Lee on the TV one day and thought, "That man's my father." Apparently, people sometimes just know. I don't know why. Maybe she'd already heard stories, and knew her mum had known Laurie Lee, and something about him made sense to her. So she went to see him play the violin one evening. And they knew each other for the rest of his life. Can you imagine that? Wouldn't that be the strangest life? I don't

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think I'd ever get used to it. I thought of that story when I saw you today.'

I try to work out what she means.

'Why? Do I remind you of your father, or Laurie Lee?'

She smiles and says nothing to that, simply leaning further back into the sofa, comfortable now, relaxed.

'I'm talking too much,' she says.

'You're not.'

She smiles at this, as if she doesn't believe me. 'There was a point,' she says. 'But I've started on the wrong foot.'

'No, you haven't,' I say. 'What were you meaning to tell me?'

'You sure you want to hear?'

'Absolutely. Go on.'

She takes a breath, searches the night sky above her for the thread of the thought she's been unspooling. Then seems to find it again, and continues, this time looking up and not at me, as if the whole experience is suddenly painful, as if she's trying not to cry.

'Reunions don't always go as well as that, though,' she says. 'When I met my birth father, it was very different. I assumed it would be a good thing to do. But not many people will give up a child for adoption if they're in a good place. I went and saw him when I was eighteen, as soon as I was allowed to, basically. I thought it would help me understand who I was. My adoptive parents had told me all along that I had once been another couple's child, and that always nagged at me while I was growing up. I always thought it must mean there were things about myself I wouldn't be able to understand until I knew the whole story. I think that really affected me, growing up. I did all kinds of things I regret. It was an excuse,

really. I told myself that justified pretty much whatever I wanted to do. It was stupid. I fucked up my A levels and it meant I didn't go to university. So when I turned eighteen, I thought it would be good to snap out of that. It would be good for this not to be a mystery any more, so that I could make whatever decision I needed to make about who I really was, and get on with whatever my life was going to be. So I got access to my birth certificate. I already knew my birth mother had died while she was having me, and that was basically why I'd been given away. But my birth father was still around, so I wrote to him, and he wrote back. My adoptive parents, my real parents, knew all about it; they were supportive. Cautious, of course, but they understood it was something I needed to do. So I went. He lived in a horrible little town by the sea, in this empty little flat in a council building, and he had no possessions, really, a couple of kitchen chairs and an old armchair and a fridge. He let me in and I wanted to recognise him like Laurie Lee's daughter recognised her father, but it wasn't like that. He was just a man I felt sorry for when I saw him. I didn't feel much connection at all. He was quite a tall man, and furtive, very distant; he didn't like making eye contact with me. When he saw me, he just cried. He just burst into tears.'

As I watch her, I see the memory of the day take over, see the tears start in her eyes. "'My God,'" he said. "My God, you look just like her." And I guessed he meant my mum. I didn't know what to say. I almost felt like I should apologise, because the way I looked had upset him.'

She pauses for a moment, breathing deeply.

I guess this must feel like someone walking on her grave.

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The shiver of glimpsing the life she didn't have, the different person she might have been if she had been brought up by her birth parents. And how would that have changed them? What different lives would they have lived then? The possibilities become too many to take in at once. And the ghost lives that pass before your eyes in these moments are like very beautiful, very sad music. I find myself thinking of my own father, the last times we spent together before he died, and how keenly I wished things had been different then. I guess this young woman must be feeling something similar. Keenly aware of the lives she hadn't lived. She steels herself, goes on.

'I'd never thought of that before, you see. Because of course no one ever said I looked like my adoptive parents. So I'd never thought before about the way I walked round all the time actually looking like someone else. I still can't get my head round that, not really. My father invited me in and I sat down on one of the chairs. He put the kettle on, and apologised for the bareness of the house; he'd just been let out of prison and he was getting his life back together again, he said. He made me tea, and sat down in the other chair, and apologised for crying when he saw me, but he didn't even have a photo of my mum any more so it had come as a shock to see her again. That was the way he said it, "see her again". I was wondering all of a sudden whether he'd actually bought the chairs so that he could have me over, something about the way he sat down in them, something about the way they were positioned in the middle of the room with nothing to lean on, no table, not so much as a windowsill or anything, made me feel like they'd been specially set there, and he wasn't used to them. I felt so sorry for him then. This man was trying his

best, he'd done what he could to be hospitable, and it was just crap, it wasn't nice at all, even though he'd tried. And I hadn't been gracious about it, I hadn't said anything about his flat being nice and clean or tried to make it OK between us. When it was very clean, actually; he must have hoovered and scrubbed all morning getting it ready for me to come round. And then I realised that this had been a terrible idea. I'm normally very careful about letting people into my life. Because once something's happened between two people, and it doesn't have to be a big thing – it could just be a coffee or a talk on a sofa in the middle of the night, or it could just be that you take the photos at their wedding – but once that's happened you have a kind of secret together. You've shared something no two other people have ever shared in exactly the same way. And that can last a whole life, it can bind you. But it was too late to back out of it by then. So I talked to him. I asked him about his life. And it was clear he'd been destroyed by the death of my mother. He gave me up for adoption. He had a job but he lost it, and then he assaulted a police officer one Saturday night – I got the impression he'd become quite a violent drunk – and was put away for a couple of years because of that. Then he'd come out of prison and got on with his life for a while, and actually things had been a bit better, he'd cut down the drink and the drugs and stayed in the one job, doing shelves at a branch of Tesco's, and he had an OK flat, better than the one we were sitting in now, he said. But then it went wrong again somehow. He beat someone up and went back to prison for another few years. I listened to him talking and it was just awful. I couldn't believe this was my dad.'

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'I'm so sorry,' I say.

She shrugs and smiles. 'Yeah. It was hard. I envy Laurie Lee and his daughter.'

'Do you still keep in touch?'

'I do, yeah. I don't go and see him so much. But he's doing all right. Actually, he's doing better.'

'That's good.'

'I think it helped him to meet me, somehow. He'd never regretted giving me up for adoption, he said. Because it meant I'd had a better life, whereas he was sure he couldn't have offered me anything. But when he met me, I think that connected him with a part of his own life he'd lost when I left.'

'Did the same happen for you?'

'That's the sad thing. Absolutely not. I didn't learn anything about myself. Except that he said everyone had loved my mum, and she'd been very striking. That was nice, I suppose. And I realised what a complete idiot I'd been for the last few years, telling myself I could do anything I liked or as little as I liked, because I didn't really know who I was, so nothing really counted. That was always bollocks, it was always an excuse. Meeting him didn't make anything clearer. It actually made things stranger, I think.'

'Why stranger?'

'Just thinking of the other person I might have been. And having to confront how fortunate I'd been. And wondering where that other me was, and not being quite able to shake the thought that she existed in another ghost life somewhere else.'

'And can I ask you a question?'

'Go on.'

'Why are you telling me all this? I don't mean to sound rude. It's interesting. I'm interested. But I get the feeling there's a connection I haven't worked out yet.'

'Oh yeah,' she laughs, and her smile strikes me like an electric charge. 'Yeah, I should tell you about that.'

'I think you're about to say we've met before somewhere.'

'That's right. Can you remember where?'

'Not at all. I think I'd remember you if we'd met. I'm worried you might have the wrong person.'

She laughs then.

'I haven't,' she says. 'It just so happens that I looked you up not all that long ago. Just going down memory lane, you know? And I was looking at the photo list for this wedding yesterday and your name caught my eye and I thought it would be the weirdest coincidence if it was actually you. So I looked you up again last night, actually, then I saw you today and I knew it was you.'

'How do you know me, then?'

'Well, unless I've got this really wrong, I think you saved me from drowning when I was six years old.'

Memory rushes in. I look in amazement at her. I haven't thought of that day in a very long time. It comes back to me now like a dream after waking.

'That was you?'

'It was. I was thinking about it a couple of years ago. And I knew your name, because there was a little article about it in the local paper – do you remember?'

'I do. I've got the cutting somewhere.'

'So have I. I found it in a folder one day and I thought, "I