I was six and just the two of us, my mother and I, took Booey for a walk along the beach where she and Dad grew up, the shore a mix of black rock and pale cold sand. It was always cold – even in summer we wore wool jumpers and our noses ran and became scorched with wiping on our sleeves. But this was November, and the wind made the dog walk close to us, her ears flat, her eyes squinted. I could see the top layer of sand skittering away, so that it looked like a giant bed sheet billowing.

We were looking for cowrie shells among the debris of the tideline. I had two digging into my palm, white like the throat of a herring gull. My mother had a keener eye and held six. I felt the pull of victory slackening.

Resting in a rock pool was a black suitcase, bulging at the sides. The zip had split and where the teeth no longer held together I saw two fingers tipped with red nails and one grey knuckle where a third finger should have been. The stump of the finger, like the miniature plaster ham I had from my dolls' house. The colour had been sucked from the knuckle by seawater, leaving just a cool grey and the white of the bone. It was the bone, I suppose, that made it so much like the tiny ham. I moved my arm to swat something away from my face and, as I did, flies rose from the suitcase in a cloud, thick and heavy.

Behind me, my mother – 'Another one!' she called. 'I've found another one!' – and then the smell, like a dead cat in the chimney in summer, a smell so tall and so broad that you can't see over or around it.

My mother walked up behind me. ‘What’s …’

I kept looking at the fingers and trying to understand, my mother pulling me by the arm. ‘Come away, come away,’ she said, and spitting over and over onto the sand, ‘don’t look, come away.’ But the more I looked the more I saw, and peeking through the gaps between the white fingers was an eye that seemed to look back at me, that seemed to know something about me and to ask a question and give an answer. In the memory, which is a child’s memory and unreliable, the eye blinks.

The Lamb

I

The small supermarket in Musselburgh is open until 10 p.m. and the staff look offended by me as I walk in at 9.35. I imagine how I must appear after eight hours in the car. I splashed my face with water in a service station near Durham and my hair has dried strangely. I am unkempt enough to present as a shoplifter.

I have parked towards the back of the supermarket by the cash machines, to remind myself to get some on the way out because the shops nearer the house prefer not to accept cards.

I spend a long time at the herbs. There's fresh ginger and the chillies and I wonder how I would go about making something with them. I put some lemon thyme in my trolley instead. Perhaps I will roast a chicken tomorrow. Or a couple of thighs. I'm not a good cook – I like thighs because when I forget them they don't dry out.

I always overdo it on the fruit – but it's hard not to feel excited. They have all different colours of plum from Kenya – yellow, orange, purple, red and black – and I put a carton of each in my trolley. That's thirty plums for me to eat in a week, which is only a little over four a day and feels like something I could accomplish. Two in the morning, two at night. If I were the kind of person who could preserve things,

I'd preserve a jar of each variety and just have them to look at. But they would grow a film of mould, like the time I made chilli olive oil and the bottle went black. I am missing some fundamental element of preservation. I suspect it's cleanliness. I move on, and though I try to think of something new and interesting to cook, by the time I get to the frozen aisle, I have spaghetti, tinned tomatoes and tinned clams. A box of eggs I will never use and some sliced brown bread and the herbs. None of it I want to eat tonight. But it is at least food that suggests a certain seriousness. I am the sort of woman who is here to work. Who is doing her family a favour, not the other way round. I am no longer the person who failed every day last June to get out of bed before midday. Who stopped going to work and seeing her friends and answering the phone, and had to be driven by her sister to the hospital when the breath stopped coming in and going out, and who could only make one long lowing noise. I did not spend seven days in a room with no edges, with a sign on the door that said *No Cutlery Whatsoever (including teaspoons!).*

The tannoy announces that the store will be closing in five minutes and it feels a message to me in particular.

There is a woman in the frozen aisle, which I am only in because it marks the completion of my shopping trip. She has no trolley or basket even; she's looking at the choc ices. She picks out a box of four expensive mint ones that have a woman's mouth large and rude on the front cracking through the chocolate.

She has an unlit cigarette in her mouth, ready to go, big curly hair that has been teased and sprayed and she's wearing pink lipstick. She smiles at me, and says, 'Late-night ice cream?' and I feel so flustered I go red and then I laugh too loudly

and just say, 'Plums.' She smiles back and turns to leave. I'll be hearing myself saying *plums* all night.

At the end of the frozen aisle is a display of Mr Freeze's Jubbly orange ice lollies. When we were kids, Dad, in his best moods, when he wanted nothing more than to make Katherine and I laugh, would sing a song from the advert that was on TV when he was young, *lovely jubbly, lovely jubbly orange drink*. Why that was the thing that made us laugh the most is hard to pinpoint, but I think it had more to do with him wanting us to laugh, than the song itself. Even so, I am standing still because, like so many small things discovered every day, I am faced with never hearing that song in his voice again. I have forgotten the fucking chicken thighs and so I speed back to the meat fridge and all the nice chicken is gone, there's only the stuff that has had an awful life and tastes of fish. I put a tin of sardines in my trolley, put the herbs back on the shelf. Pre-sliced Swiss cheese, a bar of chocolate and some celery, just for show.

There is only one till left open, a small queue of us trying to project that shopping this late is not usual for us. I flick through a magazine. There's a moody image of a man thumbing his upper lip to show off either his cufflinks or his watch. He wrinkles his forehead in a way that is supposed to be sexy. And then opposite him, a pale stick of a girl with hair parted down the middle, lips painted into a red bow, a puppet at rest. She stares off into the distance, sad. She's there to be looked at by the man with the cufflinks and the wrinkled brow, but she is not there to look back.

My mother's voice in my head – *Why do all these women want to look like deer in the headlights? Why do all these men want to look like they laugh too loudly in public?*

I am glad that the time spent thinking about how other people will respond or not respond to my body and face has passed. I'm older than my mother somehow because at least she participated in her life at my age – she had a husband and children and then lost part of that and now lives as it seems she always meant to, alone and with her work. She's been working on poisonous fungi of France for nine months now. The only framed picture in my flat is one she gave me as a moving-in present three years ago, a fly agaric with a stag beetle meandering past it, for scale. It leans unhung in my bedroom. There is probably a house spider nestling behind it. My mother has found being alone a new beginning. Her house is tidy. She eats what she wants, when she wants: nothing for a day and then a dressed crab at eleven at night, or a bowl of frozen peas, uncooked, which she eats like peanuts for breakfast. I admire the singleness that she has embraced since Dad died. I think I could aspire to that, but without having to be widowed first.

Sometimes, though, it would be nice to fuck and to be fucked.

I look now and again online at single men and women, older than me, I always go older, not because I am looking for someone mature or experienced, but because the young have filters on their profiles to get rid of the elderly, which, at close to forty, I have become all of a sudden.

There have been a few matches: Steven from Harringay, fifty-six; Philip from Clapton, forty-nine; Isabella from Hampstead, sixty-two. And if they don't have filters, like Marco, Tooting, thirty-six, it is possibly because of some sort of fetish. My phone was low on memory, and so I deleted the app, I did it while my sister watched so that she could throw back her head and cluck in an exasperated way.

The woman at the till says 'Good evening', as if she is booking me in at a police station.

I am walking to my car with my small bag of food, when I see the woman with the ice creams is there, just outside the sliding doors. She is eating one and drumming her long fingernails on the packet with the other hand. My car is the only one in the car park. She must be waiting for someone to pick her up. I try not to catch her eye. 'Hey!' she calls. I smile but don't make eye contact – is she going to try to engage me in conversation again? Should I explain the plums?

'Hey!' she says again. 'Good to see you, hen! How are you?' She seems to think we know each other.

Perhaps she wants money. Suddenly I feel very alone in the car park – the security guard has started to put the shutters down, and I glance back at him but he's not looking.

'Um, sorry, I'm not sure I know you,' I say and start to walk quickly to the car – I won't get cash out tonight.

'Yes,' she hisses, trotting to keep up with me, 'but pretend that you do, there's a man hiding behind your car.' I stop and she bumps into me. I can't see anyone by the car from where we're standing, but the cash machines are lit brightly, which means everything around them is a deeper dark.

'I got you an ice cream,' she says, in the loud voice. She hands me one from her box. I take it automatically.

'What do we do? We should get the security guard.' As I whisper the light at the front of the supermarket goes out.

I still don't see anyone there, and have a sudden and bad feeling. Who goes shopping that late at night, no car, just to buy choc ices? It's not normal behaviour. Get to your car, I think, shake this woman off, give back her ice cream, which

is making the whole situation much more difficult to navigate, physically and mentally. I push the button to pop open my boot, and the woman says, 'It's been so long, I haven't seen ye since school – what've ye been up to?'

I open my mouth in confusion and as I fumble for an answer, remembering as I do that it doesn't matter, we didn't go to school together, a figure rises up out of the dark from the passenger side of my car, and all I can see is that his hand is in the pocket of his jacket and he is wearing dark clothes and is away from us quickly without running. I stand there watching him go, my heart beating in my throat. I have the terrible feeling that I might cry.

'Feckin creep,' she says, and opens another ice cream.

'Should we tell someone?' I say.

'Tell them what? There's a man being creepy? There are men being creepy all over the place, hen. Believe me.'

'Um, look, thanks so much, I'm sorry, I didn't know what was going on.'

'Hey, no drama,' she says.

'Here's your ice cream back,' I say.

'Ha!' she says. 'You keep it, hen – I got two more right here.' She bites into the new one and the chocolate cracks loudly. 'So, take care,' she says and turns to walk down the pathway towards the main road.

'Wait. What if he comes back?' I say. 'Can I give you a lift somewhere?' It is unlike me to offer a lift at any time of day, let alone in the dark, to a complete stranger, but it is out of my mouth before I can stop it.

The woman turns round, smiles.

'You know what? That'd be great.'

Inside the car, I wonder what I am doing.

'You mind?' she asks, gesturing to her ice cream.

'Not at all.'

We drive out of the car park and up the hill. 'I always have to have ice cream when I'm stoned, you know.'

She directs me, and tells me where she is from, and I forget immediately what she says.

'It's pretty shitty,' she says, 'but then I'm from a pretty shitty part of it.'

I nod. I can't think of a single question. There are no street lamps as we head towards the coast, and my high beams haven't worked in years. I expect to see something slinking after us, its eyes lit red in the headlights. She seems completely unaffected by the incident in the car park. I feel as homesick as an eleven-year-old.

'What do you do?' she asks.

'Freelance stuff.' I try to make cleaning out my great-aunt and grandmother's house sound like a job. 'Archival stuff, mostly. I'm just up for the weekends, about to start a new project.' I clear my throat for a long time.

'Cool!' she says. 'Art?'

'Yes. And other stuff.'

I have said stuff too many times.

'That's cool. I like art, me.'

There is a long, long silence.

'How did you get into that?'

'I did my degree in history of art,' which is almost true, I did the first year anyway, and it was so long ago that any influence it might have had on the direction my life has gone in feels only tangential. 'My mother's a botanical artist, so that sort of thing is in the family.' Except that it's not really. I almost tell her my father has just died, to try and gain some ground, as though it happened that morning and actually it's incredible that I'm buggering on, but no one accepts that now

that two years have passed. *It's time to move on*, they may not say it but you see it on their faces.

'Like, plants and that?'

'Yes, well, fungi really.'

'Oh aye,' she says. And then the silence is back.

I realise too late that I should ask what she does; the silence has ended that strand of conversation. A light rain begins to fall.

'I'm Maggie. Not short for anything. Just Maggie,' she says.

'Viv. For Viviane.'

'I've never met a Viviane before,' she says like it genuinely surprises her. I feel the need to elaborate.

'My mother said she liked the name because it sounds sharp.'

'Ha!' she says. 'My mother thought Maggie sounded like a fluffy chick.'

I have nowhere to go, nothing to say. I wish I could stop bringing up my mother.

On the coastal road, by the golf course, she tells me to stop.

'I walk from here. Nice stroll under the stars.'

'Are you sure?'

She puts out her hand and we shake like we've completed some kind of business.

'See y'around, hen.' There are no other cars on the road, and I watch her disappear down the slope towards the beach, her gait loose and comfortable like she walks to music. Somewhere, out in the darkness, I can hear waves breaking against the Bass Rock though I cannot see it.

II

At the butcher's Ruth bought stewing steak. She planned to make a pie. She'd been able to smell all day the meat pudding Betty had left for them – popular, it seemed, in Scotland, it had appeared insidiously on her dinner table at least four times in the five weeks since they'd arrived. It made the spirits sink in the same way that fish pie had back home. The thought of it sitting in its steamer turned Ruth's stomach. She would make a basic steak pie with potatoes and runner beans. One of the few supper recipes that she kept in the back of her appointments diary. Perhaps she would also make a Victoria sponge for the boys. Would they like that, or would it seem like a bribe?

It was, she decided, possible to think too much about this sort of thing.

The day was bright with the remnants of late summer, too cold not to wear a hat, but the sun warmed her back so much that she felt rather damp by the time she had walked the length of the high street, and so she stood a while on the concrete steps of the outdoor pool, watching the swimmers, their limbs glowing white under the water. One woman moved so slowly there seemed barely any momentum. She ducked her floral-capped head under the water and came up, spraying wet breath. Other swimmers more dedicated to movement

swam around her. *She is enjoying being weightless*, thought Ruth. *She doesn't care about going forward.* A baby gull stood hunched on the top step watching the swimmers too. It cried and paddled its feet in disgust. Ruth looked at it. 'They do it for fun,' she told it, and it angled its head to give her the benefit of one marble-black eye.

At the post office was a letter from Alice. Ruth bought a postcard of the pool and the Pavilion with the steep side of the Law looking unfriendly behind it. When she'd first seen it, the severity of its incline had felt unnatural, and the whalebones on top seemed signifiers of some kind of awful paganism. But as she had become used to it, she thought more about the people who carried the bones up there, and what a feeling, in the end, of triumph they must've felt each day, seeing them up there glinting in the daylight. In the postcard, however, the Law was badly served and lumpen in black and white, the whalebones on top of the hill barely visible; despite this, she liked the idea of being able to place a cross on the window she was sitting beside as she wrote it. They recognised her at the Pavilion by now, and the serving girl nodded hello and escorted her to a table which had a view of the pool. She watched for the floating woman, but she was gone, or, perhaps, sunk. There was still the unmistakable glance here and there of ladies wondering about her. It wouldn't be long, she knew, before she would have to make allies, or else risk appearing aloof. But she had always been slow to warm up, and she viewed befriending Betty the housemaid as the more urgent task, as Peter had several dozen complaints about her cooking, which would have to be handled in a delicate way.

Alice's stationery was tasteful and curated. A pattern of willow on the lining of the envelope, white crisp writing paper with an ornate watermark. Letters from Alice were small parcels

to be unwrapped and to keep and look at for years to come. Surreptitiously, after she'd given her order – a pot of tea in a silver teapot and a finger of shortbread – she sniffed the envelope. It could have been Alice's expensive hand cream, but it could just as easily have been that she had perfumed the letter with the coral-and-brass atomiser that sat on her desk. Ruth pictured her wearing a gossamer robe and heels while she wrote. The content, however, did not live up to the packaging.

Darling Puss,

Such bad luck, dear old Ludwig is dead, probably rat poison, though of course he was ancient and, poor thing, almost completely blind last I saw him. Spoke to Father at the weekend, who is beside *himself. They didn't want to bother you with the news, Mother thinks you're dealing with 'enough death in your marriage at the moment', at which I roll my eyes on your behalf. I knew you'd want to know.*

Father wants a grave marker, but they are at loggerheads about what to put on the stone – Mother is for 'Albert', Father stamps his foot and shouts that the war is over, and that he shall bury his friend under his proper name. Mother fears vandals, though I'm not sure how many of those live in Much Hadham. Antony of course would have whisked the body away for burial at sea.

Anyway, so sorry to be the bearer of sad news, Puss, do hope you keep well in all other ways.

Mark and my 5th anniversary this weekend – can you even conceive of it? Wish you could be here, have a 'wee dram' for us.

London is hell.

All my love,

Alice

Ruth refolded the letter and carefully housed it back in its envelope. She pressed it flat on the white linen tablecloth and weighed it down with the salt cellar. Out of the window she looked past the pool and the harbour, and there in the dark water she noted the floral swimming cap again, bobbing out in the open sea this time. Or perhaps it was just a sun-pinked buoy. On clear days like these the Bass Rock looked close enough to swim around, though she had received a humourless lecture from more than one local for exclaiming this in public. She drank her tea without milk and slipped the shortbread into her pocket so as not to draw attention to herself as a wastrel. She counted out money, leaving extra to make up for going without saying goodbye and thank you; she tied her red handkerchief over her hair as she went, the clouds outside threatening spit. She couldn't bring herself to get back into her overcoat. The gentle skit of the harbour boats and their sails connecting with their masts was louder than it had been earlier – the wind had picked up. The cries of seagulls were incessant.

On the way home, she stopped at the bridleway that veered off through the trees and towards the beach. Underneath the trees it was dark, and the wind didn't penetrate there. A pinprick of light – a dove – landed in the topmost branch of a fir, and the whole tree swayed like the dove was made of lead. Ruth left the stewing steak and her coat hanging over on the fence and walked towards the dove, feeling her heart throb, not out of fear but as if it were being pulled towards the blackness of the trees, out of her chest. Butterflies, white and blue and black, that should have been long dead coasted the still air. 'Tell me something,' she said to them or to the dove or to the trees – she wasn't sure – 'tell me what to do next.' Silence. 'Tell me *something* at least. One tiny thing.'

But the dove didn't even cock his head to look at her and the trees were just trees. She wondered if she had gone mad again, and started when she saw, curled in the bracken, a sleeping fox. Or perhaps it was dead. The earth around it was scuffed and disturbed, but no blood about him. His fur grey, not orange like the foxes at hunts or in pictures. Not dead; she caught the rise and fall of its little ribs.

When she returned to the fence, the meat and her overcoat were gone. She felt foolish. The walk home was cold, the brightness of the afternoon had given way to the usual damp wind, and Ruth wrapped her arms around herself and walked as close to a run as she could. Her home was not yet a natural one – she still found as she rounded the corner of the golf course and looked up at the house that it didn't quite sit with her correctly as *home*. It felt like something belonging to a grand relative. It was too big, which she'd pointed out to Peter when they first saw it, it was too big for a couple and two children at boarding school. And the space – the servants' quarters were the same size if not larger than Peter's cottage in Dummer. And the empty ballroom – with the unplayed piano – as big as the flat in Kensington she had rented before Peter came along. She'd meant to get the piano tuned, but there was no one in North Berwick who could do it, the man who used to service it had died, Betty had said, and so they'd really have to look to Edinburgh to find a new one. She'd blushed rather, after saying, 'Well, who does everyone else use to tune their pianos?' Betty had looked at her and she was aware, as she had been hundreds of times, how easily it could have been another woman standing there, doing the things she was doing. She wished she could say, 'Just tell me how *she* would do it and I'll do it like her.'

She came in the back door, so that she wouldn't be seen without her coat, and had to squeeze past the old retriever Booey who lay like a draught excluder against the door. She patted him in apology and walked briskly to the tallboy and turned out the pockets of her skirt for keys and change purse. Even through her gloves her fingers were solid ice, and she touched them for a moment to her face to warm them up. In the mirror she noted how the skin of her cheeks reddened from the cold and the salt wind, and her hair, once she unwrapped it from the scarf, had gone out of shape and no longer complemented her long face. In fact she looked horsey and ruddy. She stabbed at her hair a little and applied a small amount of lipstick that she kept in the drawer of the tallboy along with her cigarettes. She looked no better, though perhaps she looked a touch more purposeful.

Peter and the boys were having late-afternoon tea in the kitchen. On the counter, a large Victoria sponge made the day before by Betty. She'd known, of course – Betty always made sure to tell Ruth what was available for the children – it just had slipped her mind. She would bake some apples then – hardly the height of sophistication. Ugly to look at, but she felt the need to contribute in some small way to the evening meal, even if it was only to prolong it after the wretched meat pudding.

'Darling,' Peter said, kissing her cheek, 'how was your morning?'

'Fine,' she said, leaving the letter from Alice in its envelope on the counter. 'Though the butcher was closed, I'm afraid – we'll have to eat what Betty's left us.'

'How perfectly ghastly. Will you have some cake with us?' he asked. 'It seems the one real talent Betty has, we ought to make the most of it.'

'Oh, stop it, darling – we're just not yet used to Scottish food. They have different traditions up here,' she said, pouring herself a glass of water to quell the thought of dinner.

'You would say that – you're afraid of her.' Peter made a face at the boys. Michael laughed, but Christopher had recently become too mature to. She smoothed down her jumper over the waistband of her skirt. She felt a little sick.

'You know perfectly well that's absolute tripe and so I shall ignore you.' She addressed the boys: 'And how was your day?'

Michael with his mouth full: 'We saw a shark.'

Ruth flicked her eyes to Peter's.

'He's quite right. It's washed up on Milsey Bay – poor creature must've got stuck when the tide went out.'

'It was dead,' said Michael.

'Big, was it?' Ruth poured another glass of water, the first being rather too tepid and not having the calming effect on her stomach she had hoped for.

'Very,' said Peter.

'We asked a fisherman what kind of shark it was and he said a basking shark.' It was the most Christopher had spoken to her since the move. She smiled.

'Did it have great big teeth?'

'No,' said Christopher, 'because it's not that kind of a shark.' Peter raised his eyebrows slightly over the boy's head and Ruth sat down next to him.

'Perhaps I will have a small piece of cake after all,' she said. 'And maybe sometime tomorrow you boys might show me where this shark is – it sounds absolutely disgusting.'

'There was a seagull eating its eye,' volunteered Michael.

With the boys long in bed, Ruth climbed the staircase to the top of the house and quietly opened the door to their room.

It would be Michael's first term boarding – he ought to have started in the previous year, but the raw chest had kept him at home. Christopher had been boarding these past two years, since the wedding. Things were calmer now, by the sea. Like the wind swept certain moods and memories away with it, so one could be feeling rather black and then find oneself stood at the line of foam left by the waves and wonder what the blackness had been about. She just needed to become an ounce more settled, get stuck into a project. Maybe the painting. There was the lightest sense of movement in the boys' room. She could see by moonlight the seal-like bumps of the sleeping children. The window was open a crack, a breeze moving through delousing them of their bad dreams. She shut the door again quietly and stood outside their room listening for a moment. Just the whisper of song came from the room, unfamiliar to her, and then gone. A trick of the golf course, it brought sounds unfiltered by trees from far away. Ruth left the landing and walked down the outer strip of the staircase, so as not to make a noise – the staircase did creak terribly if one was careless – and joined Peter in the drawing room for a nightcap.

'The boys were very happy today,' he said, looking up from the drinks cabinet. He handed her a brandy, poured himself a whisky. 'I think they're beginning to get the point of the place – I told you, all they needed was some good sea air.' He took a drink from his glass, and heaved a loud sigh of contentment. 'It's done us all the world of good.'

'Yes, you're right.' She smiled, raised her glass to him and drank. The summer holidays had seemed like an eternity when they'd first arrived, plenty of time to get settled, to all get used to this next part of their lives together. But still nothing felt settled.

'I'm certain that boarding will be fruitful for Michael – he's got a little too much of me in him sometimes, I'm afraid.' Peter smiled back over his drink.

'How do you mean?'

'I caught him going through the pockets of one of your coats this morning.'

'What was he looking for?'

'Money, I imagine. Now that we live somewhere with a sweet shop in walking distance. I once took a pound note out of Father's money clip. I got found out because I tried to get a quarter of bullseyes from our grocer's and he couldn't break it, and he told my mother when she was next in.' Peter laughed one loud bark. 'I got the thrashing of my young life.'

'You didn't hurt Michael?'

'He received a gentle cuff around the head and a stern bollocking. I haven't really the stomach for anything else these days. Saw a boy shot in Greece for stealing grapes – rather puts things into perspective.' He let out a small and unconvincing laugh. 'But he'll need to stop all that when he's boarding. For now, though, a good idea to lock away your valuables.'

Ruth wondered whether Michael would have made it out with just a gentle cuff from Peter if he had behaved in the same way before the war. It had shaped men so entirely. Or else melted them away.

She wished one of them had a birthday out of term time so that she would have a reason to arrange a picnic. A picnic for no good reason felt like an oversell. It would be bad parenting. She had seen a picture of Elspeth on a picnic blanket with the boys, Michael just a bulb-headed baby, Christopher with those same black eyes like an otter's. Three creatures on a blanket, in love.

'I saw a letter from Alice on the counter – all well in London?'

'Oh yes, quite well. It'll be the anniversary party this weekend.'

Peter looked up. 'I expect you'll be feeling rather beastly not going?'

'Oh. No. Not really. The idea of all those people, and Mother and Father, and all that noise. It's never appealed very much. Anyway, it's not even their actual anniversary.' Since they had celebrated their real anniversary with a month and a half in Kenya, and since Alice was not willing to miss the opportunity to throw a party, they had quite boldly taken to telling everyone it was their anniversary when it was not. It was at times a little irritating, Alice's confidence that everyone would play along. And yet they did, Ruth had received not even one aggravated phone call from her mother.

'Quite – couldn't imagine a worse time – all those opinions flying around and the chaps making off-colour jokes.' Peter was referring to a party Alice had thrown for them when they became engaged where someone had brought along a carton of marijuana cigarettes.

'Yes. Very pleased to have an out.' She wondered for a moment if that might be true, and thought it might be. It was sometimes a little hard to tell. There was a hard kernel of something inside that felt wretched.

'Yes, all is quite, quite well. Though Ludwig has died.' The moment it came out of her mouth she felt a tiresome constriction of her throat.

'The dog?'

'Yes.'

'Mmm. Old?'

'Yes. Also, rat poison.'

Peter moved behind her and put his hand on the back of her neck. 'It's been a rather bad day for the animal kingdom,' he said.

'Well,' she said, finding she was holding back tears, 'he was only a dog.'

'Quite. Though I'm only a man. A shark is only a shark.' He went to stand at the bay window though it was dark outside and there was nothing to see. Through the glass could be heard the waves breaking on the beach. She rested her hand on her stomach, and hoped the tide would not take the shark away before Christopher and Michael had a chance to show it to her.

The next morning, before the rest of the household awoke, Ruth stood at the back door and surveyed the garden. She didn't like to smoke in front of the children, or even Peter. It felt like something left over from another part of her life, leaning on the balcony at Kensington, dropping ash on the shoppers below.

Weeds were starting to grow in the damp spaces between the bricks of the garden path. The air was a different beast today, you felt the lick of it cold on your bare arms the moment you were out of the sun. There had been a phone call to Alice late the previous evening, to congratulate on the false anniversary. Wood, you were supposed to give for five years. Peter and she were only up to cotton. Both flimsy materials when you looked at it. Alice had spent the phone call happily recalling her and Mark's wedding day, which had passed in quite a different tone for Ruth, everyone dutifully taking their turn in speaking to her, as the maid of honour. She had relived it that night in bed, while Peter slept.

During the speeches her brother's name had been used like punctuation. Ludwig had cavorted in the roses, ignoring the guests and getting on with his own business. He had taken to eating the snapdragons, which passed through him nearly whole so that he left colourful little deposits upon the lawn, upsetting Nanny monstrously. It would have been bliss to take Ludwig and leave through the front gate, to walk down to the pond and unlock her feet, to lie smoking and speaking to Antony in her head. Instead, Ruth had worked her face up into a smile and aimed it at the family doctor with the clouded eye, who said loudly, 'And don't you look handsome!' so that she noticed a sideways glance and a blush from the young woman who stood next to him.

'Kind of you to say,' she'd said, and excused herself and found a spot not too far from Alice and Mark, who was showing people how he might fit his two hands around his wife's waist. Alice's dark hair curled so serenely at her temples that it looked painted there. She leaned towards Ruth. 'Darling girl, if you can get to my bedroom, find my cigarettes in the top dresser drawer and we'll steal away for a moment. I'm absolutely trounced.'

But on entering the house, Ruth was given a tray of curried eggs by Nanny and ordered to distribute them among the guests.

'We've paid help for that,' said Ruth, wherein Nanny had fixed her with a shiny black eye.

Now that Alice was married and Antony was no more, she had thought, as she walked the garden path with her tray, moving among the guests not waiting long enough for any one of them to see what she was offering, let alone pick one up, Ruth would have to start buying her own cigarettes – and for that she would need her own money. These were the

hateful little thoughts she found herself thinking since Antony's death; they took her unawares, and made her bite the inside of her cheeks with shame. It was more than that, she knew, she just could not put a name to it.

Ludwig's bark sounded and for a second there was a dip in the welter of conversation on the lawn, while all eyes turned to the dachshund, who pointed his long nose at a wagtail peering down from the top of the white fence. 'Oh, Albert!' said Ruth's mother loudly.

Ludwig performed a small dance at the base of the fence, his ears turning themselves pink-way out. The clamour rose again and Ruth looked at the wagtail. 'Hello, Antony,' she said to it, and then wondered what had gone wrong to produce that kind of nonsense, that her dead brother had come to the wedding reception disguised as a small bird. Aunt Josephine had been stood not too far away, and had given her a look of great compassion, Ruth had thought, but later it turned out that Aunt Josephine had reported it back to her mother and, combined with her behaviour later that year, it had been used to install Ruth for a fortnight in the sanatorium in Deal, which had been humiliating and alarming, and where she had learned a thing or two about pretending.

They couldn't see the shark yet, but they could smell it.

'They used to catch whales on this beach,' Christopher was telling her, 'and then, they'd turn them into perfume. The fisherman told me.'

The smell of the dead shark made this seem unlikely, but the interest in the boy's face was too great for Ruth to wonder about it aloud.

Michael lagged behind, dragging a stick along the beach. He'd done so all the way from where they had left the golf

course, half a mile or so behind, so that they were followed by a long black snake.

'Do sharks and whales interest you much, Christopher?'

The boy considered it a while.

'I've never really given them much of a thought. But now I've seen one and now we live here, and they live just there . . . I didn't know they were so big. It's funny there are so many big things right under the water that we can't see.'

'I suppose so,' said Ruth.

First the smell and then the noise – the sound of gulls calling each other to the feast. They rounded the corner towards Milsey Bay. Three golfers stood at the clifftop, one with a box camera, looking down and talking more than she'd been led to believe golfers talked. The excitement was not enough to get the golfers down off the cliff – they waved their clubs, speculating confidently about the manner in which such a revolting spectacle had come about.

As they crossed over the dune and reached the peak, the bay became visible, with the Bass Rock looming behind it. On clear days with a low tide it appeared so close that it might have beached itself on the sand, as if it were unmoored and went where it pleased. She did not much like the rock; Fidra and Craigleith she saw as charming additions, punctuation in the grey North Sea, but something about the Bass Rock was so misshapen, like the head of a dreadfully handicapped child. She often found herself drifting if she stared at it for too long, unable to look away, like the captivation she felt sometimes looking at her own face in the mirror, as if to look closely would be to understand it.

The shark was under a blanket of seagulls and the birds lifted all at once, crying out when Michael ran at them waving his

stick and shouting 'Yah! Yah!' as though urging on a horse. The shark an enormous black crescent, gunmetal against the sand. A huge cumbersome trunk, desperately heavy upon the earth. Its gills loose and intimately fleshy. Behind the shark stood a white-haired man wearing a long coat that matched in colour the shark's skin, and a clerical collar. His hair was wild, parted at the side by the wind; he smiled broadly, showing widely spaced teeth, his hands clasped behind his back. Once the birds had cleared, the four of them stood around the dead shark in silence. The golfers on the clifftop had disappeared just like the birds, and there was only the rush of wind between them.

The man broke the quiet by raising his hand and calling in a strong accent that was perhaps Welsh, 'You must be the Mrs Hamilton from the big house?'

'Yes,' she called back. She did not feel like circumnavigating the shark to reach the other side. 'Ruth Hamilton. These are my –' she tried not to pause but it felt so much a test of them all that she struggled for the correct word – 'boys. Christopher and Michael.' The boys looked up at the man, unsmiling. The man walked to the shark's snout, which was lapped by waves. He waited until there was a break and quickly darted around it, to come to their side. Close up he was not as old as she had first thought, and though he was not excessively tall, he was broad-shouldered and stood with his feet planted far apart, as though he might take a giant leap in seven-league boots.

'Reverend Jon Brown,' he said, extending his hand. She shook it, and then he had a good look at the boys, shaking their hands and making sounds of approval while they looked over his shoulder at the shark.

'Good, good,' he said, 'not many children around here, need a bit of invigoration in these parts. Bit of hijinks and japery. Will they be starting at Fort Augustus in the new term?'

'They'll be boarding at Fort Gregory.'

'Ah! I give the sermon there regularly. Splendid – they'll get on just fine. Splendid, splendid. How long have you been ensconced?'

'Five weeks now.'

'I've been meaning to drop by and introduce myself – I'm an old friend of your Betty, you see, me and her go way back.'

'I'll remember you to her.'

'Yes, do.' He licked his lips and showed his teeth, which were on the grey side of white. 'I haven't seen you at the Sunday service yet?' It was of course what all of this had been leading up to. He smiled warmly but did not allow her the comfort of glancing away. He moved his fists to his hips and looked like a buccaneer.

Ruth willed herself not to flush.

'With the move and everything, we've been so busy. Perhaps we'll come next week.'

'Good,' he said and moved his gaze to Christopher. 'I was thinking of doing my sermon centred around this shark. You like sharks, my boy?'

Christopher nodded, looked again over Reverend Jon Brown's shoulder. Michael turned and ran down to the shoreline, began a new task of drawing with his stick all the way round the animal.

'Something about these great big powerful monsters, ending up eaten by small white birds,' he said, 'there's something there. That's why I came down to see it for myself – inspiration, you know.' He looked back at Ruth.

'Of course,' Ruth said, because a response was called for.

'Anyhow, it's a delight to meet you all, and I'll come by sometime soon and meet Mr Hamilton. I'll be in touch with Betty, will I, to find a time that suits you all?'

Peter would not enjoy the visit. There was too much to explain, it was all too intimate. 'Of course,' she said again and he tipped a pretend cap at her, nodded to Christopher who nodded back.

'Must be off – I've got a cream tea owing to myself,' and then he started up the dune towards town. Michael had stopped his line drawing and poked in the shark's mouth with a look of horror and delight.

'Michael,' she called.

'It stinks!' he said, joyful. She walked down to him.

'Please don't do that – what if you get some of it on yourself? Do you want to be the one who explains that to Betty?' Slowly the seagulls began to return, as though only the Reverend Jon Brown had any power over them. One had planted itself on the shark's tail and began a particularly invasive exploration of what might have been its private regions.

'Shall we go somewhere less revolting, do you think? How about a crumpet in town? Or we could find a scone – Reverend Brown has put me in the mood for one.' Standing there with bile rising and the fish stench clogging her nose, she imagined nothing so unpleasant as cramming down a scone and its cream, but the returning gulls had started to give her a creeping feeling. She looked to Christopher for a response and found he was staring off in the direction Reverend Jon Brown had gone in, and he seemed like a boy lost at sea or among the stars.

III

'They've a girl in the pig house. They mean to burn her.'

The Widow Clements has come banging at the door in her nightdress, a thin line of red across her cheekbone. My father does not wake in the disturbance – the drink has done for him. Cook puts a shawl around the woman's shoulders and pushes her to sit, stokes the fire up again, but the woman is tearful and wrings her hands.

'Get himself, boy,' says Cook.

Father lies face down on his bed, his nightshirt has flapped up over his rear end. The sight of his buttocks is almost enough to send me straight out of the room again, great grey boulders with a dark and haired crack, a diseased bear. The room smells strongly of wine and some other dirt I do not like to name, and my father snores in snaps and shudders. I prod him rough between the shoulder blades and he stirs and turns over.

'Father, wake up.' He opens one eye and then goes back under.

'The Widow Clements is hurt. She says there's a witch to burn.' At the widow's name both eyes open. He blinks, trying to make sense of what he sees. A sob comes from the fireside in the next room. He blinks again and sits up, runs a hand over his face as if trying to pull the skin off.