
SWIMMING HOME

A NOVEL

Deborah Levy

with an Introduction by Tom McCarthy

B L O O M S B U R Y

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To Sadie and Leila, so dear, always

'Each morning in every family, men, women and children,
~~if they have nothing better to do, tell each other their dreams.~~

We are all at the mercy of the dream and we owe it to
ourselves to submit its power to the waking state.'

- *La Révolution surréaliste*, No. 1, December 1924

Entering the Whirlpool: Commerce, Politics, Marriage and Hearth

If, as a young aspirant writer in the early to mid 1990s, you raised your head and took a look around the British literary landscape, one figure stood out from all the others: Deborah Levy. Read two pages of her work, and it was instantly apparent that she was a writer as much at home within the fields of visual and conceptual art, philosophy and performance as within that of the printed word. She'd read her Lacan and Deleuze, her Barthes, Marguerite Duras, Gertrude Stein, and Ballard, not to mention Kafka and Robbe-Grillet – and was putting all these characters to work in new, exhilarating ways. Like the emotional and cerebral choreographies of Pina Bausch, her fiction seemed less concerned about the stories it narrated than about the interzone (to borrow Burroughs's term) it set up in which desire and speculation, fantasy and symbols circulated. Even commonplace objects took on eerie, intense dimensions, like Duchampian ready-mades or objects in dreams for Freud.

If the setting and plot of *Swimming Home* are borrowed, almost ironically, from the staid English middle-class-on-holiday novel, all similarities end there. The book's real drama plays out through blue sugar mice who scuttle from candy stalls into nightmares; or stones with holes in that turn into voyeuristic (or myopic) telescopes, then lethal weights, then, simply, holes. What holds this kaleidoscopic narrative together, even as it tears its characters apart, is – in classical Freudian fashion – desire: desire and its inseparable flip side, the death drive. This comes embodied – nakedly, almost primordially, floating in the water to which it will return – in the figure of Kitty Finch, half doomed and daddy-obsessed Sylvia Plath, half post-breakdown Edie Sedgwick out of *Ciao! Manhattan*, volatile, imploding around a swimming pool. Lured towards her, and the vortex or whirlpool she summons, mermaids at the side of, are the worlds of commerce, politics, marriage and hearth, and literature itself, as represented by two exotica traders, a war correspondent and a celebrated poet, all uneasily coupled. And, at the spectrum's far end, the teenage girl who will emerge as the novel's real protagonist, inheritor of its historical traumas.

Tom McCarthy
June 2011

July 1994

A Mountain Road. Midnight.

When Kitty Finch took her hand off the steering wheel and told him she loved him, he no longer knew if she was threatening him or having a conversation. Her silk dress was falling off her shoulders as she bent over the steering wheel. A rabbit ran across the road and the car swerved. He heard himself say, 'Why don't you pack a rucksack and see the poppy fields in Pakistan like you said you wanted to?'

'Yes,' she said.

He could smell petrol. Her hands swooped over the steering wheel like the seagulls they had counted from their room in the Hotel Negresco two hours ago.

She asked him to open his window so she could hear the insects calling to each other in the forest. He wound down the window and asked her, gently, to keep her eyes on the road.

'Yes,' she said again, her eyes now back on the road. And then she told him the nights were always 'soft' in the French Riviera. The days were hard and smelt of money.

He leaned his head out of the window and felt the cold mountain air sting his lips. Early humans had once lived in this forest that was now a road. They knew the past lived in rocks and trees and the present knew desire made them awkward, mad, mysterious, messed up.

To have been so intimate with Kitty Finch had been a pleasure, a pain, a shock, an experiment, but most of all it had been a mistake. He asked her again to please, please, please drive him safely home to his wife and daughter.

'Yes,' she said. 'Life is only worth living because we hope it will get better and we'll all get home safely.'

Wild Life

The swimming pool in the grounds of the tourist villa was more like a pond than the languid blue pools in holiday brochures. A pond in the shape of a rectangle, carved from stone by a family of Italian stonemasons living in Antibes. The body was floating near the deep end, where a line of pine trees kept the water cool in their shade.

‘Is it a bear?’ Joe Jacobs waved his hand vaguely in the direction of the water. He could feel the sun burning into the shirt his Hindu tailor had made for him from a roll of raw silk. His back was on fire. Even the roads were melting in the July heatwave.

His daughter, Nina Jacobs, fourteen years old, standing at the edge of the pool in her new cherry print bikini, glanced anxiously at her mother. Isabel Jacobs was unzipping her jeans as if she was about to dive in. At the same time she could see Mitchell and Laura, the two family friends sharing the villa with them for the summer, put down their mugs of tea and walk towards the stone steps that led to the shallow end. Laura, a slender giantess at six foot three, kicked off her sandals and waded in up to her knees. A battered yellow lilo knocked against the mossy sides, scattering the bees that were in various stages of dying in the water.

‘What do you think it is, Isabel?’

Nina could see from where she was standing that it was a woman swimming naked under the water. She was on her stomach, both arms stretched out like a starfish, her long hair floating like seaweed at the sides of her body.

‘Jozef thinks she’s a bear,’ Isabel Jacobs replied in her detached war-correspondent voice.

‘If it’s a bear I’m going to have to shoot it.’ Mitchell had recently purchased two antique Persian handguns at the flea market in Nice and shooting things was on his mind.

Yesterday they had all been discussing a newspaper article about a ninety-four-kilo bear that had walked down from the mountains in Los Angeles and taken a dip in a Hollywood actor’s pool. The bear was on heat, according to the Los Angeles Animal Services. The actor had called the authorities. The bear was shot with a tranquilliser gun and then released in the nearby mountains. Joe Jacobs had wondered out loud what it was like to be tranquillised and then have to stumble home. Did it ever get home? Did it get dizzy and forgetful and start to hallucinate? Perhaps the barbiturate inserted inside the dart, also known as ‘chemical capture’, had made the bear’s legs shake and jerk? Had the tranquilliser helped the bear cope with life’s stressful events, calming its agitated mind so that it no longer pleaded with the authorities to throw it small prey injected with barbiturate syrups? Joe had only stopped this riff when Mitchell stood on his toe. As far as Mitchell was concerned it was very, very hard to get the arsehole poet known to his readers as JHJ (Joe to every one else except his wife) to shut the fuck up.

Nina watched her mother dive into the murky green water and swim towards the woman. Saving the lives of bloated bodies floating in rivers was probably the sort of thing her mother did all the time. Apparently television ratings always went up when she was on the news. Her mother disappeared to Northern Ireland and Lebanon and Kuwait and then she came back as if she’d just nipped down the road to buy a pint of milk. Isabel Jacobs’ hand was about to clasp the ankle of whoever it was floating in the pool. A sudden violent splash made Nina run to her father, who grasped her sunburnt shoulder.

making her scream out loud. When a head emerged from the water, its mouth open and gasping for breath, for one panicked second she thought it was roaring like a bear.

A woman with dripping waist-length hair climbed out of the pool and ran to one of the plastic recliners. She looked like she might be in her early twenties, but it was hard to tell because she was frantically skipping from one chair to another, searching for her dress. It had fallen on to the paving stones but no one helped her because they were staring at her naked body. Nina felt light-headed in the fierce heat. The bittersweet smell of lavender drifted towards her, suffocating her as the sound of the woman's panting breath mingled with the drone of the bees in the wilting flowers. It occurred to her she might be sun-sick, because she felt as if she was going to faint. In a blur she could see the woman's breasts were surprisingly full and round for someone so thin. Her long thighs were joined to the jutting hinges of her hips like the legs of the dolls she used to bend and twist as a child. The only thing that seemed real about the woman was the triangle of golden pubic hair glinting in the sun. The sight of it made Nina fold her arms across her chest and hunch her back in an effort to make her own body disappear.

'Your dress is over there.' Joe Jacobs pointed to the pile of crumpled blue cotton lying under the recliner. They had all been staring at her for an embarrassingly long time. The woman grabbed it and deftly slipped the flimsy dress over her head.

'Thanks. I'm Kitty Finch by the way.'

What she actually said was I'm Kah Kah Kah and stammered on for ever until she got to Kitty Finch. Everyone couldn't wait for her to finish saying who she was.

Nina realised her mother was still in the pool. When she climbed up the stone steps, her wet swimming costume was covered in silver pine needles.

'I'm Isabel. My husband thought you were a bear.'

Joe Jacobs twisted his lips in an effort not to laugh.

'Of course I didn't think she was a bear.'

Kitty Finch's eyes were grey like the tinted windows of Mitchell's hire car, a Mercedes, parked on the gravel at the front of the villa.

'I hope you don't mind me using the pool. I've just arrived and it's sooo hot. There's been a mistake with the rental dates.'

'What sort of mistake?' Laura glared at the young woman as if she had just been handed a parking ticket.

'Well, I thought I was staying here from this Saturday for a fortnight. But the caretaker . . .'

'If you can call a lazy stoned bastard like Jurgen a caretaker.' Just mentioning Jurgen's name brought Mitchell out in a disgusted sweat.

'Yeah. Jurgen says I've got the dates all wrong and now I'm going to lose my deposit.'

Jurgen was a German hippy who was never exact about anything. He described himself as 'a natural man' and always had his nose buried in *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse.

Mitchell wagged his finger at her. 'There are worse things than losing your deposit. We were about to have you sedated and driven up to the mountains.'

Kitty Finch lifted up the sole of her left foot and slowly pulled out a thorn. Her grey eyes searched for Nina, who was still hiding behind her father. And then she smiled.

‘I like your bikini.’ Her front teeth were crooked, snarled into each other, and her hair was drying into copper-coloured curls. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Nina.’

‘Do you think I look like a bear, Nina?’ She clenched her right hand as if it was a paw and jabbed it at the cloudless blue sky. Her fingernails were painted dark green.

Nina shook her head and then swallowed her spit the wrong way and started to cough. Everyone sat down. Mitchell on the ugly blue chair because he was the fattest and it was the biggest, Laura on the pink wicker chair, Isabel and Joe on the two white plastic recliners. Nina perched on the edge of her father’s chair and fiddled with the five silver toe-rings Jurgen had given her that morning. They all had a place in the shade except Kitty Finch, who was crouching awkwardly on the burning paving stones.

‘You haven’t anywhere to sit. I’ll find you a chair.’ Isabel wrung the ends of her wet black hair. Drops of water glistened on her shoulders and then ran down her arm like a snake.

Kitty shook her head and blushed. ‘Oh, don’t bother. Pah pah please. I’m just waiting for Jurgen to come back with the name of a hotel for me and I’ll be off.’

‘Of course you must sit down.’

Laura, puzzled and uneasy, watched Isabel lug a heavy wooden chair covered in dust and cobwebs towards the pool. There were things in the way. A red bucket. A broken plant pot. Two canvas umbrellas wedged into lumps of concrete. No one helped her because they weren’t quite sure what she was doing. Isabel, who had somehow managed to pin up her wet hair with a clip in the shape of a lily, was actually placing the wooden chair between her recliner and her husband’s.

Kitty Finch glanced nervously at Isabel and then at Joe, as if she couldn’t work out if she was being offered the chair or being forced to sit in it. She wiped away the cobwebs with the skirt of her dress for much too long and then finally sat down. Laura folded her hands in her lap as if preparing to interview an applicant for a job.

‘Have you been here before?’

‘Yes. I’ve been coming here for years.’

‘Do you work?’ Mitchell spat an olive pip into a bowl.

‘I sort of work. I’m a botanist.’

Joe stroked the small shaving cut on his chin and smiled at her. ‘There are some nice peculiar words in your profession.’

His voice was surprisingly gentle, as if he intuited Kitty Finch was offended by the way Laura and Mitchell were interrogating her.

‘Yeah. Joe likes pe-cu-li-ar words cos he’s a poet.’ Mitchell said ‘peculiar’ as if imitating an aristocrat in a stupor.

Joe leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. ‘Ignore him, Kitty.’ He sounded as if he had been wounded in some inexplicable way. ‘Everything is pe-cu-li-ar to Mitchell. Strangely enough, that makes him feel superior.’

Mitchell stuffed five olives into his mouth one after the other and then spat out the pips in Joe’s direction as if they were little bullets from one of his minor guns.

‘So in the meantime – Joe leaned forward now – ‘perhaps you could tell us what you know about cotyledons?’

‘Right.’ Kitty’s right eye winked at Nina when she said ‘right’. ‘Cotyledons are the first leaves of a seedling.’ Her stammer seemed to have disappeared.

‘Correct. And now for my favourite word . . . how would you describe a leaf?’

‘Kitty,’ Laura said sternly, ‘there are lots of hotels, so you’d better go and find one.’

When Jurgen finally made his way through the gate, his silver dreadlocks tied back in a ponytail, he told them every hotel in the village was full until Thursday.

‘Then you must stay until Thursday.’ Isabel said this vaguely, as if she didn’t quite believe it. ‘I think there’s a spare room at the back of the house.’

Kitty frowned and leaned back in her new chair.

‘Well, yeah. Thanks. Is that OK with everyone else? Please say if you mind.’

It seemed to Nina that she was asking them to mind. Kitty Finch was blushing and clenching her teeth at the same time. Nina felt her own heart racing. It had gone hysterical, thumping in her chest. She glanced at Laura and saw she was actually wringing her hands. Laura was about to say she did mind. She and Mitchell had shut their shop in Euston for the entire summer, knowing the windows that had been smashed by thieves and drug addicts at least three times that year would be smashed again when their holiday was over. They had come to the Alpes-Maritimes to escape from the futility of mending broken glass. She found herself struggling for words. The young woman was a window waiting to be climbed through. A window that she guessed was a little broken anyway. She couldn’t be sure of this, but it seemed to her that Joe Jacobs had already wedged his foot into the crack and his wife had helped him. She cleared her throat and was about to speak her mind, but what was on her mind was so unutterable the hippy caretaker got there first.

‘So, Kitty Ket, shall I carry your valises to your room?’

Everyone looked to where Jurgen was pointing with his nicotine-stained finger. Two blue canvas bags lay to the right of the French doors of the villa.

‘Thanks, Jurgen.’ Kitty dismissed him as if he was her personal valet.

He bent down and picked up the bags.

‘What are the weeds?’ He lifted up a tangle of flowering plants that had been stuffed into the second blue bag.

‘Oh, I found those in the churchyard next to Claude’s café.’

Jurgen looked impressed.

‘You’ll have to call them the Kitty Ket plant. It is a historical fact. Plant hunters often named the plants they found after themselves.’

‘Yeah.’ She stared past him into Joe Jacobs’ dark eyes as if to say, ‘Jurgen’s special name for me is Kitty Ket.’

Isabel walked to the edge of the pool and dived in. As she swam low under the water, her arms stretched out in front of her head, she saw her watch lying on the bottom of the pool. She flipped over and scooped it up from the green tiles. When she surfaced she saw the old English woman who lived next door waving from her balcony. She waved back and then realised Madeleine Sheridan was waving to Mitchell, who was calling out her name.

‘Madel-eeene!’

It was the fat man who liked guns calling up to her. Madeleine Sheridan lifted up her arthritic arm and waved with two limp fingers from her straw chair. Her body had become a sum of flawed parts. At medical school she had learned she had twenty-seven bones in each hand, eight in the wrist alone, five in the palm. Her fingers were rich in nerve endings but now even moving two fingers was an effort.

She wanted to remind Jurgen, whom she could see carrying Kitty Finch’s bags into the villa, that it was her birthday in six days’ time, but she was reluctant to appear so begging of his company in front of the English tourists. Perhaps she was dead already and had been watching the drama of the young woman’s arrival from the Other Side? Four months ago, in March, when Kitty Finch was staying alone at the tourist villa (apparently to study mountain plants), she had informed Madeleine Sheridan that a breeze would help her tomatoes grow stronger stems and offered to thin the leaves for her. This she proceeded to do, but she was whispering to herself all the while, pah pah pah, kah kah kah, consonants that made hard sounds on her lips. Madeleine Sheridan, who believed human beings had to suffer real hardships before they agreed to lose their minds, told her in a steely voice to stop making that noise. To stop it. To stop it right now. Today was Saturday and the noise had come back to France to haunt her. It had even been offered a room in the villa.

*

‘Madel-eeene, I’m cooking beef tonight. Why don’t you join us for supper?’

She could just make out the pink dome of Mitchell’s balding head as she squinted at him in the sun. Madeleine Sheridan, who was quite partial to beef and often lonely in the evenings, wondered if she had it in herself to decline Mitchell’s invitation. She thought she did. When couples offer shelter or a meal to strays and loners, they do not really take them in. They play with them. Perform for them. And when they are done they tell their stranded guest in all sorts of sly ways she is now required to leave. Couples were always keen to return to the task of trying to destroy their lifelong partners while pretending to have their best interests at heart. A single guest was a mere distraction from this task.

‘Madel-eeene.’

Mitchell seemed more anxious than usual. Yesterday he told her he had spotted Keith Richards drinking Pepsi in Villefranche-sur-Mer and was desperate to ask for his autograph. In the end he didn’t because, in his own words, ‘The arsehole poet was with me and threatened to headbutt me if I wasn’t being normal.’

Mitchell with his flabby, prawn-pink arms amused her when he gloomily observed that Joe Jacobs was not the sort of poet who gazed at the moon and had no muscle tone. He could probably lift his wardrobe with his teeth. Especially if it had a beautiful woman inside it. When the English tourists arrived two weeks ago, Joe Jacobs (JHJ on his books but she’d never heard of him) knocked on her door to borrow some salt. He was wearing a winter suit on the hottest day of the year and when she pointed this out, he told her it was his sister’s birthday and he always wore a suit to show his respect.

This bemused her, because her own birthday was much on her mind. His suit seemed more appropriate for a funeral but he was so charming and attentive she asked him if he would like to try the Andalucian almond soup she had made earlier. When he muttered, ‘How kind, my dear,’ she poured a generous amount into one of her favourite ceramic bowls and invited him to drink it on her balcony. Something terrible happened. He took a sip and felt something tangle with his teeth, only

discover it was her hair. A small clump of silver hair had somehow found its way into the bowl. He was mortified beyond her comprehension, even though she apologised, unable to fathom how it had got there. His hands were actually shaking and he pushed the bowl away with such force the soup splashed all over his ridiculous pinstriped suit, its jacket lined with dandyish pink silk. She thought a poet might have done better than that. He could have said, 'Your soup was like drinking a cloud.'

'Madel-eeene.'

Mitchell couldn't even say her name properly. Possibly because he had such a ridiculous name for himself. The prospect of having to live with Kitty Finch had obviously got him into a panic and she wasn't surprised. She squeezed her eyes into slits, enjoying the view of her ugly bare feet. It was such a pleasure not to wear socks and shoes. Even after fifteen years living in France, wrenched as she was from her country of birth and her first language, it was the pleasure of naked feet she was most grateful for. She could live without a slice of Mitchell's succulent beef. And she would be insanely brave to risk an evening in the company of Kitty Finch, who was pretending not to have seen her. Right now she was scooping pine cones out of the pool with Nina Jacobs as if her life depended on it. There was no way Madeleine Sheridan, six days away from turning eighty, would perform like a dignified old woman at the dinner table in the tourist villa. The same table Jurgen had bought at the flea market and polished with beeswax and paraffin. What's more, he had polished it in his underpants because of the heatwave. She had had to avert her eyes at the sight of him sweating in what she delicately called his 'undergarments'.

An eagle was hovering in the sky. It had seen the mice that ran through the uncut grass in the orchard.

She called down her excuses to Mitchell, but he seemed not to have heard her. He was watching Joe Jacobs disappear inside the villa to find a hat. Kitty Finch was apparently going to take the English poet for a walk and show him some flowers. Madeleine Sheridan couldn't be sure of this, but she thought the mad girl with her halo of red hair shining in the sun might be smiling at her.

To use the language of a war correspondent, which was, she knew, what Isabel Jacobs happened to be, she would have to say that Kitty Finch was smiling at her with hostile intent.

The Botany Lesson

There were signs everywhere saying the orchard was private property, but Kitty insisted she knew the farmer and no one was going to set the dogs on them. For the last twenty minutes she had been pointing out trees that, in her view, 'were not doing too well'.

'Do you only notice trees that suffer?' Joe Jacobs shaded his eyes with his hands, which were covered in mosquito bites, and stared into her bright grey eyes.

'Yes, I suppose I do.'

He was convinced he could hear an animal growling in the grass and told her it sounded like a dog.

'Don't worry about the dogs. The farmer owns 2,000 olive trees in the Grasse area. He's too busy to set his dogs on us.'

'Well, I suppose that many olive trees would keep him busy,' Joe mumbled.

His black hair now fading into silver curls fell in a mess around his ears and the battered straw hat kept slipping off his head. Kitty had to run behind him to pick it up.

'Oh, 2,000 . . . that's not a lot of trees . . . not at all.'

She stooped down to peer at wild flowers growing between the long white grasses that came up to her knees.

‘These are *Bellis perennis*.’ She scooped up what looked like daisy petals and stuffed them in her mouth. ‘Plants are always from some sort of family.’

She buried her face in the flowers she was clutching and named them for him in Latin. He was impressed by the tender way she held the plants in her fingers and spoke about them with ease and intimacy, as if indeed they were a family with various problems and unusual qualities. And then she told him what she wanted most in life was to see the poppy fields in Pakistan.

‘Actually,’ she confessed nervously, ‘I’ve written a poem about that.’

Joe stopped walking. So that was why she was here.

Young women who followed him about and wanted him to read their poetry, and he was not convinced she was one of them, always started by telling him they’d written a poem about something extraordinary. They walked side by side, flattening a path through the long grass. He waited for her to speak, to make her request, to say how influenced by his books she was, to explain how she’d managed to track him down, and then she would ask would he mind, did he have time, would he be so kind as please, please read her small effort inspired by himself.

‘So you’ve read all my books and now you’ve followed me to France,’ he said sharply.

A new wave of blush crashed over her cheeks and long neck.

‘Yes. Rita Dwight, who owns the villa, is a friend of my mother. Rita told me you had booked for the whole summer. She lets me stay in her house for free off-season. I couldn’t stay because YOH hah hah hah hah hogged it.’

‘But it’s not off-season, Kitty. July is what they call the high season, isn’t it?’

She had a north London accent. Her front teeth were crooked. When she wasn’t stammering and blushing she looked like she’d been sculpted from wax in a dark workshop in Venice. If she was a botanist she obviously did not spend much time outside. Whoever had made her was clever. She could swim and cry and blush and say things like ‘hogged it’.

‘Let’s sit in the shade.’

He pointed to a large tree surrounded by small rocks. A plump brown pigeon perched comically on a thin branch that looked like it was about to snap under its weight.

‘All right. That’s a haaaah hazelnut tree by the way.’

He charged ahead before she finished her sentence and sat down, leaning his back against the tree trunk. When she seemed reluctant to join him he patted the space next to him, brushing away the twigs and leaves until she sat down by his side, smoothing her faded blue cotton dress over her knees. He could not so much hear her heart as feel it beating under her thin dress.

‘When I write poems I always think you can hear them.’

A bell tinkled in the distance. It sounded like a goat grazing somewhere in the orchard, moving around in the long grass.

‘Why are you shaking?’ He could smell chlorine in her hair.

‘Yeah. I’ve stopped taking my pills so my hands are a bit shaky.’

Kitty moved a little nearer him. He wasn’t too sure what to make of this until he saw she was avoiding a line of red ants crawling under her calves.

‘Why do you take pills?’

‘Oh, I’ve decided not to for a while. You know . . . it’s quite a relief to feel miserable again. I don’t feel anything when I take my pills.’

She slapped at the ants crawling over her ankles.

‘I wrote about that too . . . it’s called “Picking Roses on Seroxat”.’

Joe fumbled for a scrap of green silk in his pocket and blew his nose. ‘What’s Seroxat?’

‘You know what it is.’

His nose was buried in the silk handkerchief.

‘Tell me anyway,’ he snuffled.

‘Seroxat is a really strong antidepressant. I’ve been on it for years.’

Kitty stared at the sky smashing against the mountains. He found himself reaching for her cold shaking hand and held it tight in his lap. She was right to be indignant at his question. Claspng her hand was a silent acknowledgement that he knew she had read him because he had told his readers about his teenage years on medication. When he was fifteen he had very lightly grazed his left wrist with a razor blade. Nothing serious. Just an experiment. The blade was cool and sharp. His wrist was warm and soft. They were not supposed to be paired together but it was a teenage game of Snap. He had snapped. The doctor, an old Hungarian man with hair in his ears, had not agreed this pairing was an everyday error. He had asked questions. Biography is what the Hungarian doctor wanted.

Names and places and dates. The names of his mother, his father, his sister. The languages they spoke and how old was he when he last saw them? Joe Jacobs had replied by fainting in the consulting room and so his teenage years had been tranquillised into a one-season pharmaceutical mist. Or as he had suggested in his most famous poem, now translated into twenty-three languages: a bad fairy made a deal with me, ‘give me your history and I will give you something to take it away’.

When he turned to look at her face, now drained of its blush, her cheeks were wet.

‘Why are you crying?’

‘I’m OK.’ Her voice was matter of fact.

‘I’m pleased to save money and not spend it on a hotel, but I didn’t expect your wife to offer me the spare room.’

Three black flies settled on his forehead, but he did not let go of her hand to flick them away. He passed her the scrap of silk he kept as a handkerchief.

‘Mop yourself up.’

‘I don’t want your handkerchief.’ She threw the scrap of silk back into his lap. ‘And I hate it when people say mop yourself up. Like I’m a dirty floor.’

He couldn’t be sure of it, but he thought that was a line from one of his poems too. Not quite as it was written but near enough. He noticed a scratch running across her left ankle and she told him it was where his wife had grabbed her foot in the pool.

The goat was getting nearer. Every time it moved the bell rang. When it was still the bell stopped. It made him feel uneasy. He brushed a small green cricket off his shoulder and placed it in her open palm.

‘I think you’ve written something you’d like me to read. Is that right?’

‘Yes. It’s just one poem.’ Again her voice was matter of fact. She set the cricket free, watching

jump into the grass and disappear. 'It's a conversation with you, really.'

Joe picked up a twig that had fallen from the tree. The brown pigeon above his head was chancing its luck. There were stronger branches it could move to but it refused to budge. He told her he would read her poem that evening and waited for her to thank him.

He waited. For her thank-yous. For his time. For his attention. For his generosity. For defending her against Mitchell. For his company and for his words, the poetry that had made her more or less stalk him on a family holiday. Her thank-yous did not arrive.

'By the way' – he stared at her pale shins covered in crushed ants – 'the fact I know that you are on medication and all that . . . is confidential.'

She shrugged. 'Well, actually, Jurgen and Dr Sheridan and everyone in the village know already. And I've stopped taking it anyway.'

'Is Madeleine Sheridan a doctor?'

'Yeah.' She clenched her toes. 'She's got friends at the hospital in Grasse, so you'd better pretend to be happy and have a grip.'

He laughed and then to make him laugh some more, so he would appear to be happy and to have a grip, she advised him that nothing, NOTHING AT ALL, was confidential when it was told to Jurgen. 'Like all indiscreet people, he puts his hand on his heart and assures his confidant that his lips are sealed. Jurgen's lips are never sealed, because they always have a giant split between them.'

Joe Jacobs knew he should ask her more questions. Like his journalist wife. The why the how the when the who and all the other words he was supposed to ask to make life more coherent. But she had given him a little information. On the way to the orchard she told him she had given up her job clearing leaves and cutting grass in Victoria Park in Hackney. A gang of boys had pulled a knife on her because when she was on medication it made her legs twitch so she was easy prey.

They heard the bell again.

'What is it?' Kitty stood up and peered into the long grass.

Joe could see the vertebrae of her spine under her dress. When he dropped his hat once again, she picked it up and dusted it with the tips of her green fingernails, holding it out to him.

'Oh!'

Kitty shouted 'Oh' because at that moment the long grass moved and they saw flashes of pink and silver glinting through the blades. Something was making its way towards them. The grass seemed to open and Nina stood in front of them, barefoot in her cherry-print bikini. On her toes were Jurgen's gift of the five silver rings from India with little bells attached to them.

'I came to find you.' She gazed at her father, who seemed to be holding Kitty's Finch's hand. 'Mum's gone to Nice. She said she had to take her shoes to get mended.'

Kitty looked at the watch on her thin wrist.

'But the cobblers are shut in Nice now.'

Three growling dogs sprang out of the grass and circled them. When the farmer appeared and told the sweating English poet that he was trespassing on his land, the beautiful English girl ripped the scarf off the hat she was wearing and passed it to the frowning poet.

'Mop yourself up,' she said, and told the farmer in French to call the dogs off them.

When they got back to the villa, Joe walked through the cypress trees to the garden, where he had seen

up a table and chair to write in the shade. For the last two weeks he had referred to it as his study and it was understood he must not be disturbed, even when he fell asleep on the chair. Through the gaps in the branches of the cypress trees he saw Laura sitting on the faded wicker chair by the pool. Mitchell was carrying a bowl of strawberries towards her.

He glanced drowsily at Laura and Mitchell eating their strawberries in the sunshine and found himself about to fall asleep. It was an odd sensation, 'to find himself about to fall into sleep. As if he could find himself anywhere at any time. Best to make the anywhere a good place to be, then, a place without anguish or impending threat; sitting at a table under the shade of an old tree with his family taking photographs in a gondola moving across the canals of Venice; watching a film in an empty cinema with a can of lager between his knees. In a car on a mountain road at midnight after making love to Kitty Finch.

A Mountain Road. Midnight.

It was getting dark and she told him the brakes on the hire car were fucked, she couldn't see a thing, she couldn't even see her hands.

Her silk dress was falling off her shoulders as she bent over the steering wheel. A rabbit ran across the road and the car swerved. He told her to keep her eyes on the road, to just do that, and while he was speaking she was kissing him and driving at the same time. And then she asked him to open the window so she could hear the insects calling to each other in the forest. He wound down the window and told her, again, to keep her eyes on the road. He leaned his head out of the window and felt the cold mountain air sting his lips. Early humans had once lived in this mountain forest. They knew the past lived in rocks and trees and they knew desire made them awkward, mad, mysterious, messed up.

'Yes,' Kitty Finch said, her eyes now back on the road. 'I know what you're thinking. Life is only worth living because we hope it will get better and we'll all get home safely. But you tried and you did not get home safely. You did not get home at all. That is why I am here, Jozef. I have come to France to save you from your thoughts.'

Imitations of Life

Isabel Jacobs was not sure why she had lied about taking her shoes to be mended. It was just one more thing she was not sure of. After Kitty Finch's arrival all she could do to get through the day was to imitate someone she used to be, but who that was, who she used to be, no longer seemed to be a person worth imitating. The world had become increasingly mysterious. And so had she. She was not sure what she felt about anything any more, or how she felt it, or why she had offered a stranger the spare room. By the time she had driven down the mountains, found change for the toll, got lost in Venice and tried to turn back in the traffic that choked the coast road to Nice, enraged drivers jerked their hands at her, pressed their horns, rolled down their windows and shouted at her. In the back seats of their cars groomed little dogs stared at her mockingly, as if not knowing where you were going in a one-way system was something they despised too.

She parked opposite the beach called Opéra Plage and walked towards the pink dome of the Hotel Negresco, which she recognised from the map stapled on to the 'fact sheet' that came with the villa. The fact sheet was full of information about the Hotel Negresco, the oldest and grandest belle époque hotel on the Promenade des Anglais. Apparently it was built in 1912 by Henri Negresco, a Hungarian immigrant who designed it to attract to Nice 'the very top of the upper crust'.

A breeze was blowing across the two lanes of traffic that separated her from the crowded beaches. This blast of dirty city life felt better, far better than the clean sharp mountain air that only seemed to make sorrow sharper too. Here in Nice, France's fifth biggest city, she could disappear into the crowd of holidaymakers as if she had nothing on her mind except to complain about the cost of hiring a sun lounger on the Riviera.

A woman with a helmet of permed, hennaed hair stopped her to ask if she knew the way to Rue François Aune. The lenses of her big sunglasses were smeared with what looked like dried milk. She spoke in English with an accent that Isabel thought might be Russian. The woman pointed a finger laden with rings at a mechanic in oily navy overalls lying under a motorbike, as if to suggest Isabel ask him for directions on her behalf. For a moment she couldn't work out why this was demanded of her, but then she realised the woman was blind and could hear the mechanic revving his bike nearby.

When Isabel knelt down on the pavement and showed him the scrap of paper the woman had pushed into her hand, he jerked his thumb at the apartment block across the road. The blind woman was standing in the street she was looking for. 'You are here.' Isabel took her arm and led her through the gate towards the affluent mansion block, every window framed with newly painted green shutters. Three sprinklers watered the palm trees planted in neat lines in the communal gardens.

'But I want the port, Madame. I am looking for Dr Ortega.'

The blind Russian woman sounded indignant, as if she had been taken to the wrong place against her will. Isabel gazed at the names of residents carved on to brass plaques by the door and read them out loud: 'Perez, Orsi, Bergel, Dr Ortega.' There was his name. This was where he lived, even though the woman disagreed.

She pressed the bell for Dr Ortega and ignored the Russian woman, who was now fumbling urgently in her crocodile-skin handbag for what turned out to be a grubby portable dictionary.

The voice that came out of the polished brass speaker of the door entry system was a soft Spanish voice asking her, in French, to say who she was.

'My name is Isabel. Your visitor is waiting for you downstairs.'

A police siren drowned her out and she had to start again.

'Did you say your name is Isabel?' It was a simple enough question but it made her anxious, as she was indeed pretending to be someone she was not.

The entry system made a whining sound and she pushed open the glass door framed in heavy dark wood that led into the marble foyer. The Russian woman in her stained dark glasses did not want to move and instead kept repeating her request to be taken to the port.

'Are you still there, Isabel?'

Why did the doctor not walk down the stairs and collect the blind woman himself?

'Could you come down and get your patient?' She heard him laugh.

'*Señora, soy doctor en filosofía.* She is not my patient. She is my student.'

He was laughing again. The dark rumbling laugh of a smoker. She heard his voice through the holes in the speaker and moved closer to it.

'My student wants the port because she wishes to go back to St Petersburg. She does not want to arrive for her Spanish lesson and therefore does not believe she is here. *Ella no quiere estar aquí.*'

He was playful and flirtatious, a man who had time to speak in riddles from the safety of the door entry system. She wished she could be more like him and fool around and play with whatever the doctor

brought in. What had led her to where she was now? Where was she now? As usual she was running away from Jozef. This thought made her eyes sting with tears she resented. No, not again, not Jozef not again. She turned away and left the Russian woman groping the banisters of the marble stairway still insisting she was in the wrong place and the port was her final destination.

The sky had darkened and she could smell the sea somewhere close. Seagulls screeched above her head. The sweet yeasty smell of the *boulangerie* across the road wafted over the parked cars. Families were returning from the beach carrying plastic balls and chairs and colourful towels. The *boulangerie* was suddenly full of teenage boys buying slices of pizza. Across the road the mechanic was revving his motorbike triumphantly. She was not ready to go home and start imitating someone she used to be. Instead she walked for what seemed like an hour along the Promenade des Anglais and stopped at one of the restaurants set up on the beach near the airport.

The planes taking off flew low over the black sea. A party of students was drinking beer on the slopes of the pebbles. They were opinionated, flirtatious, shouting at each other, enjoying a summer night on the city beach. Things were starting in their lives. New jobs. New ideas. New friendships. New love affairs. She was in the middle of her life, she was nearly fifty years old and had witnessed countless massacres and conflicts in the work that pressed her up close to the suffering world. She had not been posted to cover the genocide in Rwanda, as two of her shattered colleagues had been. They had told her it was impossible to believe the scale of the human demolition, their own eyes dazed by what they took in the dazed eyes of the orphans. Starved dogs had become accustomed to eating human flesh. They had seen dogs roam the fields with bits of people between their teeth. Yet even without witnessing first-hand the terrors of Rwanda, she had gone too far into the unhappiness of the world to start all over again. If she could choose to unlearn everything that was supposed to have made her wise, she would start all over again. Ignorant and hopeful, she would marry all over again and have a child all over again and drink beer with her handsome young husband on this city beach at night. They would be enchanted beginners all over again, kissing under the bright stars. That was the best thing to be in life.

A large extended family of women and their children sat at three tables pushed together. They all had the same wiry brown hair and high cheekbones and they were eating elaborate swirls of ice cream piled into pint-sized glasses. The waiter lit the sparklers he had stuck into the chantilly and they oohed and aahed and clapped their hands. She was cold in her halter-neck dress, too naked for this time of night. The women feeding their children with long silver teaspoons glanced curiously at the silent brooding woman with bare shoulders. Like the waiter, they seemed offended by her solitude. She had to tell him twice she was not expecting anyone to join her. When he slammed her espresso on the empty table set for two, most of it spilled into the saucer.

She watched the waves crash on the pebbles. The ocean folding into itself the plastic bags left on the beach that day. While she tried to make what was left of her coffee last long enough to earn her place at a table set for two, the thoughts she tried to push away kept returning like the waves on the stones.

She was a kind of ghost in her London home. When she returned to it from various war zones and found that in her absence the shoe polish or light bulbs had been put in a different place, somewhere similar but not quite where they were before, she learned that she too had a transient place in the family home. To do the things she had chosen to do in the world, she risked forfeiting her place as wife and mother, a bewildering place haunted by all that had been imagined for her if she chose to stay in it. She had attempted to be someone she didn't really understand. A powerful but fragile female.

character. If she knew that to be forceful was not the same as being powerful and to be gentle was not the same as being fragile, she did not know how to use this knowledge in her own life or what it added up to, or even how it made sitting alone at a table laid for two on a Saturday night feel better. When she arrived in London from Africa or Ireland or Kuwait it was Laura who sometimes offered her a bed in the storeroom above their shop in Euston. It was a kind of convalescence. She lay on it in the daytime and Laura brought her cups of tea when the shop was quiet. They had nothing in common except they had known each other for a long time. The time that had passed between them counted for something. They did not have to explain anything or be polite or fill in the gaps in conversation.

She invited Laura to share the villa with them for the summer and was surprised at how quickly her friend accepted. Laura and Mitchell usually needed more notice to shut up the shop and get their affairs in order.

The sparklers were spluttering to an end in the ice creams. One of the mothers suddenly shouted at her five-year-old son, who had dropped his glass on the floor. It was a cry of incandescent rage. Isabel could see she was exhausted. The woman had become fierce, neither unhappy nor happy. She was not on her hands and knees, wiping the ice cream on the floor with the napkins the clan were holding out to her. She felt the disapproval of the women staring at her as she sat alone, but she was grateful for them. She would bring Nina to this restaurant and buy her daughter an ice cream with a sparkler in it. The women had planned something lovely for their children, something she would imitate.

Walls That Open and Close

Nina watched Kitty Finch press the palms of her hands against the walls of the spare bedroom as if she was testing how solid they were. It was a small room looking over the back of the villa, the yellow curtains drawn tight across the only window. It made the room hot and dark, but Kitty said she liked that way. Upstairs in the kitchen they could hear Mitchell singing an Abba song out of tune. Kitty told Nina she was checking the walls because the foundations of the villa were shaky. Three years ago a gang of cowboy builders from Menton had been paid to patch the whole house together. There were cracks everywhere but they had been hastily covered up with the wrong sort of plaster.

Nina couldn't get over how much Kitty knew about everything. What was the right sort of plaster then? Did Kitty Finch work in the construction industry? How did she manage to tuck all her hair in under a hard hat?

It was as if Kitty had read her thoughts, because she said, 'Yeah, well, the right sort of plaster has limestone in it,' and then she knelt down on the floor and examined the plants she had collected in the churchyard earlier that morning.

Her green fingernails stroked the triangular leaves and clusters of white flowers that, she insisted, wrinkling her nose, smelt of mice. She was collecting the seeds from the plants because she wanted to study them and Nina could help her if she wanted to.

'What sort of plant is it?'

'It's called *Conium maculatum*. It comes from the same family as fennel, parsnips and carrot. I was really surprised to see it growing by the church. The leaves look like parsley, don't they?' Nina didn't really know.

'This is hemlock. Your father knew that, of course. In the old days children used to make whistles from the stems and it sometimes poisoned them. But the Greeks thought it cured tumours.'

Kitty seemed to have a lot to do. After she'd hung up her summer dresses in the wardrobe and

lined up a few tattered well-thumbed books on the shelf, she ran upstairs to look at the pool again even though it was now dark outside.

When she came back she explained that the pool now had underwater lighting. 'It didn't last year.'

She took a brown A4 envelope out of the blue canvas bag and studied it. 'This,' she said, waving at Nina, 'is the poem your father has promised to read tonight.' She chewed at her top lip. 'He said I put it on the table outside his bedroom. Will you come with me?'

Nina led Kitty Finch to the room where her parents slept. Their bedroom was the largest in the villa, with an even larger bathroom attached to it. It had gold taps and a power shower and a button to turn the bath into a jacuzzi. She pointed to a small table pushed against the wall outside the bedroom. A bowl stood in the centre of the table, a muddle of swimming goggles, dried flowers, oil, felt-tips, postcards and keys.

'Oh, those are the keys to the pump room.' Kitty sounded excited. 'The pump room stores all the machinery that makes the swimming pool work. I'll put the envelope under the bowl.'

She frowned at the brown envelope and kept taking deep breaths, shaking her curls as if something was caught in her hair.

'Actually, I think I'll slip it under the door. That way he'll trip over it and have to read it immediately.'

Nina was about to tell her that it wasn't his bedroom, her mother slept there too, but she stopped herself because Kitty Finch was saying weird things.

'You have to take a chance, don't you? It's like crossing a road with your eyes shut . . . you don't know what's going to happen next.' And then she threw back her head and laughed. 'Remind me to drive you to Nice tomorrow for the best ice cream you'll ever taste in your life.'

Standing next to Kitty Finch was like being near a cork that had just popped out of a bottle. The first pop when gasses seem to escape and everything is sprinkled for one second with something intoxicating.

Mitchell was calling them for supper.

Manners

'My wife is having her shoes mended in Nice,' Joe Jacobs announced theatrically to everyone at the dinner table.

His tone suggested he was merely giving information and required no reply from the audience assembled for dinner. They concurred. It was not mentioned.

Mitchell, always the self-appointed chef, had spent the afternoon roasting the hunk of beef Joe had insisted on paying for in the market that morning. He sliced it gleefully, pink blood oozing from its centre.

'None for me, thank you,' Kitty said politely.

'Oh, just a morsel.' A thin slice of bloody meat dropped from his fork and landed on her plate.

'Morsel is Mitchell's favourite word.' Joe picked up his napkin and tucked it into his shirt collar.

Laura poured the wine. She was wearing an ornate African necklace, a thick band of plaited gold fastened with seven pearls around her neck.

'You look like a bride,' Kitty said admiringly.

‘Strangely enough,’ Laura replied, ‘this actually is a bridal necklace from our shop. It’s from Kenya.’

Kitty’s eyes were watering from the horseradish, which she spooned into her mouth as if it was sugar. ‘So what do you and Mitchell sell at your “Cash and Carry”?’

‘“Emporium”,’ Laura corrected her. ‘We sell primitive Persian, Turkish and Hindu weapons. And expensive African jewellery.’

‘We are small-time arms dealers,’ Mitchell said effusively. ‘And in between we sell furniture made from ostriches.’

Joe rolled a slice of meat with his fingers and dipped it into the bowl of horseradish. ‘Furniture made from ostriches and horseradish is made from horses,’ he chanted.

Nina flung down her knife. ‘Shut the fuck up.’

Mitchell grimaced. ‘Girls of your age shouldn’t use such ugly words.’

Her father nodded as if he entirely agreed. Nina stared at him furiously as he polished his spoon with the end of the tablecloth. She knew her father had a lot of time for what Mitchell called ‘ugly words’. When she told him, as she regularly did, that she was sick of wearing totally sad shoes to school with the wrong colour tights, her father the poet corrected her choice of words: ‘Next time say totally sad *fucking* crap shoes. It will give your case more emphasis.’

‘Ugly words are for ugly thoughts.’ Mitchell briskly tapped the side of his bald head and then licked a smear of horseradish off his thumb. ‘I never would have sworn in front of my father when I was your age.’

Joe shot his daughter a look. ‘Yes, my child. Please don’t swear like that and offend the fuckers at this table. Especially Mitchell. He’s dangerous. He’s got weapons. Swords and ivory revolvers.’

‘Ac-tu-ally’ – Mitchell wagged his finger – ‘what I really need is a mousetrap, because there are rodents in this kitchen.’

He glanced at Kitty Finch when he said ‘rodents’.

Kitty dropped her slice of beef on the floor and leaned towards Nina. ‘Horseradish is not made out of horses. It’s related to the mustard family. It’s a root and your father probably eats so much of it because it’s good for his rheumatism.’

Joe raised his thick eyebrows. ‘Whaat? I haven’t got rheumatism!’

‘You probably have,’ Kitty replied. ‘You’re a bit stiff when you walk.’

‘That’s because he’s old enough to be your father,’ Laura smiled nastily. She was still puzzled why Isabel had been so insistent that a young woman, who swam naked and obviously wanted her middle-aged husband’s attention should stay with them. Her friend was supposed to be the betrayed partner in their marriage. Hurt by his infidelities. Burdened by his past. Betrayed and lied to.

‘Laura congratulates herself on seeing through people and talking straight,’ Joe declared to the table. He squeezed the tip of his nose between his finger and thumb, a secret code between himself and his daughter, of what he wasn’t sure, perhaps of enduring love despite his flaws and foolishness and their mutual irritations with each other.

Kitty smiled nervously at Laura. ‘Thank you all so much for letting me stay.’

Nina watched her nibble on a slice of cucumber and then push it to the side of her plate.

‘You should thank Isabel,’ Laura corrected her. ‘She is very kind-hearted.’

‘I wouldn’t say Isabel is kind, would you, Nina?’

Joe rolled another slice of bloody beef and pushed it into his mouth.

This was the cue for Nina to say something critical about her mother to please her father something like, 'My mother doesn't know me at all.' In fact she was tempted to say, 'My mother doesn't know I know my father will sleep with Kitty Finch. She doesn't even know I know what anorexic means.'

Instead she said, 'Kitty thinks walls can open and close.'

When Mitchell whirled his left forefinger in circles around his ear as if to say, crazeee she crazeee, Joe reached over and violently slapped down Mitchell's teasing pink finger with his tight brown fist.

'It's rude to be so normal, Mitchell. Even you must have been a child once. Even you might have thought there were monsters lurking under your bed. Now that you are such an impeccably normal adult you probably take a discreet look under the bed and tell yourself, well, maybe the monster is invisible!'

Mitchell rolled his eyes and stared at the ceiling as if pleading with it for help and advice. 'Has anyone ever actually told you how up yourself you are?'

The telephone was ringing. A fax was sliding and grinding its way on to the plastic tray next to the villa's fact file. Nina stood up and walked over to pick it up. She glanced at it and brought it to her father.

'It's for you. About your reading in Poland.'

'Thank you.' He kissed her hand with his wine-stained lips and told her to read the fax out loud to him.

LUNCH ON ARRIVAL.

TWO MENUS. White borscht with boiled egg and sausage. Traditional hunter's stew with mash potatoes. Soft drink.

OR

Traditional Polish cucumber soup. Cabbage leaves stuffed with meat and mash potatoes. Soft drink.

KINDLY FAX YOUR CHOICE.

Laura coughed. 'You were born in Poland, weren't you, Joe?'

Nina watched her father shake his head vaguely.

'I don't remember.'

Mitchell raised his eyebrows in what he imagined was disbelief. 'You got to be a bit forgetful now to remember where you were born. You're Jewish, aren't you, sir?'

Joe looked startled. Nina wondered if it was because her father had been called sir. Kitty was frowning too. She sat up straighter in her chair and addressed the table as if she was Joe's biographer.

'Of course he was born in Poland. It's on all his book jackets. Jozef Nowogrodzki was born in western Poland in 1937. He arrived in Whitechapel, east London, when he was five years old.'

'Right.' Mitchell looked confused again. 'So how come you're Joe Jacobs, then?'

Kitty once again took charge. She might as well have pinged her wine glass three times to create

an expectant silence. ‘The teachers at his boarding school changed his name so they could spell it.’

The spoon Joe had been polishing all through supper was now silver and shiny. When he held it up as if to inspect his hard work, Nina could see Kitty’s distorted reflection floating on the back of it.

‘Boarding school? Where were your parents, then?’

Mitchell noticed that Laura was squirming in her chair. Whatever it was he was supposed to know about Joe had totally gone from his mind. Laura had told him of course, but it hadn’t sunk in. He was relieved Kitty Finch did not take it upon herself to answer his question and sort of wished he hadn’t gone there.

‘Well, you’re more or less English, then, aren’t you, Joe?’

Joe nodded. ‘Yes, I am. I’m nearly as English as you are.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t go along all the way with that, Joe,’ Mitchell asserted in the tone of a convivial customs official, ‘but, as I always say to Laura, it’s what we feel inside that counts.’

‘You’re right,’ Joe agreed.

Mitchell thought he was on to something because Joe was being polite for a change.

‘So what do you feel inside, Joe?’

Joe peered at the spoon in his hand as if it was a jewel or a small triumph over cloudy cutlery.

‘I’ve got an FFF inside.’

‘What’s that, sir?’

‘A fucking funny feeling.’

Mitchell, who was now drunk, slapped him on the back to confirm their new solidarity.

‘I’ll second that, Jozef whatever your surname is. I’ve got an FFF right here.’ He tapped his head. ‘I’ve got three of those.’

Laura shuffled her long feet under the table and announced she had made a trifle for pudding. It was a recipe she had taken from Delia Smith’s *Complete Cookery Course* and she hoped the custard had set and the cream hadn’t curdled.

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