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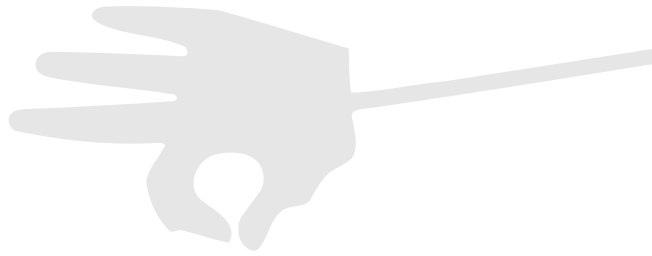
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ONE

I am in a car park in Leeds when I tell my husband I don't want to be married to him anymore. David isn't even in the car park with me. He's at home, looking after the kids, and I have only called him to remind him that he should write a note for Molly's class teacher. The other bit just sort of . . . slips out. This is a mistake, obviously. Even though I am, apparently, and to my immense surprise, the kind of person who tells her husband that she doesn't want to be married to him anymore, I really didn't think that I was the kind of person to say so in a car park, on a mobile phone. That particular self-assessment will now have to be revised, clearly. I can describe myself as the kind of person who doesn't forget names, for example, because



I have remembered names thousands of times and forgotten them only once or twice. But for the majority of people, marriage-ending conversations happen only once, if at all. If you choose to conduct yours on a mobile phone, in a Leeds car park, then you cannot really claim that it is unrepresentative, in the same way that Lee Harvey Oswald couldn't really claim that shooting presidents wasn't like him at all. Sometimes we have to be judged by our one-offs.

Later, in the hotel room, when I can't sleep—and that is some sort of consolation, because even though I have turned into the woman who ends marriages in a car park, at least I have the decency to toss and turn afterward—I retrace the conversation in my head, in as much detail as I can manage, trying to work out how we'd got from there (Molly's dental appointment) to here (imminent divorce) in three minutes. Ten, anyway. Which turns into an endless, three-in-the-morning brood about how we'd got from there (meeting at a college dance in 1976) to here (imminent divorce) in twenty-four years.

To tell you the truth, the second part of this self-reflection only takes so long because twenty-four years is a long time, and there are loads of bits that come unbidden into your head, little narrative details, that don't really have much to do with the story. If my thoughts about our marriage had been turned into a film, the critics would say that it was all padding, no plot, and that it could be summarized thus: two people meet, fall in love, have kids, start arguing, get fat and grumpy (him) and bored, desperate and grumpy (her), and split up. I wouldn't argue with the synopsis. We're nothing special.

The phone-call, though . . . I keep missing the link, the point where it turned from a relatively harmonious and genuinely banal chat about minor domestic arrangements into this cataclysmic, end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it moment. I can remember the beginning of it, almost word for word:

Me: "Hiya."

Him: "Hello. How's it going?"

Me: "Yeah, fine. Kids all right?"

Him: "Yeah. Molly's here watching TV, Tom's round at Jamie's."

Me: "I just phoned to say that you've got to write a note for Molly to take in to school tomorrow. About the dentist's."

See? See? It can't be done, you'd think, not from here. But you'd be wrong, because we did it. I'm almost sure that the first leap was made here, at this point; the way I remember it now, there was a pause, an ominous silence, at the other end of the line. And then I said something like, "What?", and he said, "Nothing." And I said "What?" again and he said "Nothing" again, except he clearly wasn't baffled or amused by my question, just tetchy, which means, does it not, that you have to plow on. So I plowed on.

"Come on."

"No."

"Come on."

"No. What you said."

"What did I say?"

"About just phoning to remind me about Molly's note."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It'd be nice if you just phoned for some other reason. You know, to say hello. To see how your husband and children are."

"Oh, David."



“What, ‘Oh David?’”

“That was the first thing I asked. ‘How are the kids?’ ”

“Yeah. OK. ‘How are the kids?’ Not, you know, ‘How are you?’ ”

You don’t get conversations like this when things are going well. It is not difficult to imagine that in other, better relationships, a phone call that began in this way would not and could not lead to talk of divorce. In better relationships you could sail right through the dentist part and move on to other topics—your day’s work, or plans for the evening, or even, in a spectacularly functional marriage, something that has taken place in the world outside your home, a coughing fit on the Today Programme, say—just as ordinary, just as forgettable, but topics that form the substance and perhaps even the sustenance of an ordinary, forgettable, loving relationship. David and I, however . . . this is not our situation, not anymore. Phone calls like ours only happen when you’ve spent several years hurting and being hurt, until every word you utter or hear becomes coded and loaded, as complicated and full of subtext as a bleak and brilliant play. In fact, when I was lying awake in the hotel room trying to piece it all together, I was even struck by how clever we had been to invent our code: it takes years of miserable ingenuity to get to this place.

“I’m sorry.”

“Do you care how I am?”

“To be honest, David, I don’t need to ask how you are. I can hear how you are. Healthy enough to look after two children while simultaneously sniping at me. And very, very aggrieved, for reasons that remain obscure to me at this point. Although I’m sure you’ll enlighten me.”

“What makes you think I’m aggrieved?”

“Ha! You’re the definition of aggrieved. Permanently.”

“Bollocks.”

“David, you make your living from being aggrieved.”

This is true, partly. David’s only steady income derives from a newspaper column he contributes to our local paper. The column is illustrated by a photograph of him snarling at the camera, and is subtitled “The Angriest Man in Holloway.” The last one I could bear to read was a diatribe against old people who traveled on buses: Why did they never have their money ready? Why wouldn’t they use the seats set aside for them at the front of the bus? Why did they insist on standing up ten minutes before their stop, thus obliging them to fall over frequently in an alarming and undignified fashion? You get the picture, anyway.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, possibly because you never bother to fucking read me—”

“Where’s Molly?”

“Watching TV in the other room. Fuck fuck fuck. Shit.”

“Very mature.”

“—Possibly because you never bother to fucking read me, my column is ironic.”

I laughed ironically.

“Well, please excuse the inhabitants of 32 Webster Road if the irony is lost on us. We wake up with the angriest man in Holloway every day of our lives.”

“What’s the point of all this?”

Maybe in the film of our marriage, written by a scriptwriter on the lookout for brief and elegant ways of turning dull, superficial arguments into something more meaningful, this would have been the moment: you know, “That’s a good question. . . . Where are we going? . . . What are we doing? . . .



Something something something . . . It's over." OK, it needs a little work, but it would do the trick. As David and I are not Tom and Nicole, however, we are blind to these neat little metaphorical moments.

"I don't know what the point of all this is. You got cross about me not asking how you were."

"Yeah."

"How are you?"

"Fuck off."

I sighed, right into the mouthpiece of the phone, so that he could hear what I was doing; I had to move the mobile away from my ear and toward my mouth, which robbed the moment of its spontaneity, but I know through experience that my mobile isn't good on nonverbal nuance.

"Jesus Christ! What was that?"

"It was a sigh."

"Sounds like you're on top of a mountain."

We said nothing for a while. He was in a North London kitchen saying nothing, and I was in a car park in Leeds saying nothing, and I was suddenly and sickeningly struck by how well I knew this silence, the shape and the feel of it, all of its spiky little corners. (And of course it's not really silence at all. You can hear the expletive-ridden chatter of your own anger, the blood that pounds in your ears, and on this occasion, the sound of a Fiat Uno reversing into a parking space next to yours.) The truth is, there was no link between domestic inquiry and the decision to divorce. That's why I can't find it. I think what happened was, I just launched in.

"I'm so tired of this, David."

"Of what?"

“This. Rowing all the time. The silences. The bad atmosphere. All this . . . poison.”

“Oh. That.” Delivered as if the venom had somehow dripped into our marriage through a leaking roof, and he’d been meaning to fix it. “Yeah, well. Too late now.”

I took a deep breath, for my benefit rather than his, so the phone stayed on my ear this time. “Maybe not.”

“What does that mean?”

“Do you really want to live the rest of your life like this?”

“No, of course not. Are you suggesting an alternative?”

“Yes, I suppose I am.”

“Would you care to tell me what it is?”

“You know what it is.”

“Of course I do. But I want you to be the first one to mention it.”

And by this stage I really didn’t care.

“Do you want a divorce?”

“I want it on record that it wasn’t me who said it.”

“Fine.”

“You not me.”

“Me not you. Come on, David. I’m trying to talk about a sad, grown-up thing, and you still want to score points.”

“So I can tell everyone you asked for a divorce. Out of the blue.”

“Oh, it’s completely out of the blue, isn’t it? I mean, there’s been no sign of this, has there, because we’ve been so blissfully happy. And is that what you’re interested in doing? Telling everyone? Is that the point of it, for you?”

“I’m getting straight on the phone as soon as we’ve finished. I want to spin my version before you can spin your version.”



“OK, well I’ll just stay on the phone, then.”

And then, sick of myself and him and everything else that went with either of us, I did the opposite, and hung up. Which is how come I have ended up tossing and turning in a Leeds hotel room trying to retrace my conversational steps, occasionally swearing with the frustration of not being able to sleep, turning the light and the TV on and off, and generally making my lover’s life a misery. Oh, I suppose he should go into the film synopsis somewhere. They got married, he got fat and grumpy, she got desperate and grumpy, she took a lover.

Listen: I’m not a bad person. I’m a doctor. One of the reasons I wanted to become a doctor was that I thought it would be a good—as in Good, rather than exciting or well-paid or glamorous—thing to do. I liked how it sounded: “I want to be a doctor,” “I’m training to be a doctor,” “I’m a GP in a small North London practice.” I thought it made me seem just right—professional, kind of brainy, not too flashy, respectable, mature, caring. You think doctors don’t care about how things look, because they’re doctors? Of course we do. Anyway. I’m a good person, a doctor, and I’m lying in a hotel bed with a man I don’t really know very well called Stephen, and I’ve just asked my husband for a divorce.

Stephen, not surprisingly, is awake.

“You all right?” he asks me.

I can’t look at him. A couple of hours ago his hands were all over me, and I wanted them there, too, but now I don’t want him in the bed, in the room, in Leeds.

“Bit restless.” I get out of bed and start to get dressed. “I’m going out for a walk.”

It’s my hotel room, so I take the keycard with me, but even as I’m putting it in my bag I realize I’m not coming back. I want

to be at home, rowing and crying and feeling guilty about the mess we're about to make of our children's lives. The Health Authority is paying for the room. Stephen will have to take care of the minibar, though.

I drive for a couple of hours and then stop at a service station for a cup of tea and a doughnut. If this was a film, something would happen on the drive home, something that illustrated and illuminated the significance of the journey. I'd meet someone, or decide to become a different person, or get involved in a crime and maybe be abducted by the criminal, a nineteen-year-old with a drug habit and limited education who turns out to be both more intelligent and, indeed, more caring than me—ironically, seeing as I'm a doctor and he's an armed robber. And he'd learn something, although God knows what, from me and I'd learn something from him and then we'd continue alone on our journeys through life, subtly but profoundly modified by our brief time together. But this isn't a film, as I've said before, so I eat my doughnut, drink my tea, and get back in the car. (Why do I keep going on about films? I've only been to the cinema twice in the last couple of years, and both of the films I saw starred animated insects. For all I know, most adult films currently on general release are about women who drive uneventfully from Leeds to North London, stopping for tea and doughnuts on the M1.) The journey only takes me three hours, including doughnuts. I'm home by six, home to a sleeping house which, I now notice, is beginning to give off a sour smell of defeat.

No one wakes up until quarter to eight, so I doze on the sofa. I'm happy to be back in the house, despite mobile phone calls



and lovers; I'm happy to feel the warmth of my oblivious children seeping down through the creaking floorboards. I don't want to go to the marital bed, not tonight, or this morning, or whatever it is now—not because of Stephen, but because I have not yet decided whether I'll ever sleep with David again. What would be the point? But then, what is the point anyway, divorce or no divorce? It's so strange, all that—I've had countless conversations with or about people who are "sleeping in separate bedrooms," as if sleeping in the same bed is all there is to staying married, but however bad things get, sharing a bed has never been problematic; it's the rest of life that horrifies. There have been times recently, since the beginning of our troubles, when the sight of David awake, active, conscious, walking and talking has made me want to retch, so acute is my loathing of him; at night, though, it's a different story. We still make love, in a halfhearted, functional way, but it's not the sex: it's more that we've worked out sleeping in the last twenty-odd years, and how to do it together. I've developed contours for his elbows and knees and bum, and nobody else quite fits into me in quite the same way, especially not Stephen, who despite being leaner and taller and all sorts of things that you think might recommend him to a woman looking for a bed partner, seems to have all sorts of body parts in all the wrong places; there were times last night when I began to wonder gloomily whether David is the only person in the world with whom I will ever be comfortable, whether the reason our marriage and maybe countless marriages have survived thus far is that there is some perfect weight/height differential that no one has ever researched properly, and if one or other partner is a fraction of a millimeter wrong either way then the relationship will never take. And it's not just that, either. When David's

asleep, I can turn him back into the person I still love: I can impose my idea of what David should be, used to be, onto his sleeping form, and the seven hours I spend with that David just about gets me through the next day with the other David.

So. I doze on the sofa, and then Tom comes down in his pajamas, puts the TV on, gets a bowl of cereal together, sits down on an armchair, and watches cartoons. He doesn't look at me, doesn't say anything.

"Good morning," I say cheerily.

"Hi."

"How are you?"

"All right."

"How was school yesterday?"

But he's gone now; the curtains have been drawn over the two-minute window of conversational opportunity that my son offers in the morning. I get up off the sofa and put the kettle on. Molly's next down, already dressed in her school clothes. She stares at me.

"You said you were going away."

"I came back. Missed you too much."

"We didn't miss you. Did we, Tom?"

No answer from Tom. These, apparently, are my choices: naked aggression from my daughter, silent indifference from my son. Except, of course, this is pure self-pity, and they are neither aggressive nor indifferent, simply children, and they haven't suddenly developed an adult's intuition overnight, even over this particular night.

Last, but not least, comes David, in his customary T-shirt and boxer shorts. He goes to put the kettle on, looks momentarily confused when he realizes that it is on already, and only then casts a bleary eye over the household to see if he can find



any explanation for this unexpected kettle activity. He finds it sprawled on the sofa.

“What are you doing here?”

“I just came to check up on your parenting skills when I’m not around. I’m impressed. You’re last up, the kids get their own breakfast, the telly’s on . . .”

I’m being unfair, of course, because this is how life works whether I’m here or not, but there’s no point in waiting for his assault: I’m a firm believer in preemptive retaliation.

“So,” he says. “This two-day course finished a day early. What, you all talked crap at twice the normal speed?”

“I wasn’t in the mood.”

“No, I can imagine. What sort of mood are you in?”

“Shall we talk later? When the kids have gone to school?”

“Oh, yeah, right. Later.” This last word is spat out, with profound but actually mystifying bitterness—as if I were famous for doing things “later,” as if every single problem we have is caused by my obsession with putting things off. I laugh at him, which does little to ease tensions.

“What?”

“What’s wrong with suggesting that we talk about things later?”

“Pathetic,” he says, but offers no clue as to why. Of course, it’s tempting to do things his way and talk about my desire for a divorce in front of our two children, but one of us has to think like an adult, if only temporarily, so I shake my head and pick up my bag. I want to go upstairs and sleep.

“Have a good day, kids.”

David stares at me. “Where are you going?”

“I’m whacked.”

“I thought that one of the problems with our division of

labor is that you couldn't ever drop the kids off at school. I thought you were being denied a basic maternal right."

I have to be at the surgery before the kids leave in the mornings, so I am spared the school run. And even though I am grateful for this, my gratitude has not prevented me from bemoaning my lot whenever we have arguments about who doesn't do what. And David, needless to say, knows that I have no genuine desire to take the kids to school, which is why he is taking such delight in reminding me of my previous complaints now. David, like me, is highly skilled in the art of marital warfare, and for a moment I can step outside myself and admire his vicious quick-wittedness. Well played, David.

"I've been up half the night."

"Never mind. They'd love it."

Bastard.

I've thought about divorce before, of course. Who hasn't? I had fantasies about being a divorcée, even before I was married. In my fantasy I was a good, great, single professional mother, who had fantastic relations with her ex—joint attendance at parents' evenings, wistful evenings going through old photograph albums, that sort of thing—and a series of flings with bohemian younger or older men (see Kris Kristofferson, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, my favorite film when I was seventeen). I can recall having this fantasy the night before I married David, which I suppose should have told me something but didn't. I think I was troubled by the lack of quirks and kinks in my autobiography: I grew up in leafy suburbia (Richmond), my parents were and still are happily married, I was a prefect at school, I passed my exams, I went to college, I got a good job, I met a nice man, I got engaged to him. The only



room I could see for the kind of sophisticated metropolitan variation I craved was postmarriage, so that was where I concentrated my mental energy.

I even had a fantasy about the moment of separation. David and I are looking through travel brochures; he wants to go to New York, I want to go on safari in Africa, and—this being the umpteenth hilarious you-say-tomayto-I-say-tomato conversation in a row—we look at each other and laugh affectionately, and hug, and agree to part. He goes upstairs, packs his bags, and moves out, maybe to a flat next door. Later that same day, we have supper together with our new partners, whom we have somehow managed to meet during the afternoon, and everyone gets along famously and teases each other affectionately.

But I can see now just how fantastical this fantasy is; I am already beginning to suspect that the wistful evenings with the photograph albums might not work out. It is far more likely, in fact, that the photographs will be snipped down the middle—indeed, knowing David, they already have been, last night, just after our phone call. It's kind of obvious, when you think about it: if you hate each other so much that you can't bear to live in the same house, then it's unlikely you'll want to go on camping holidays together afterward. The trouble with my fantasy was that it skipped straight from the happy wedding to the happy separation; but of course in between weddings and separations, unhappy things happen.

I get in the car, drop the kids off, go home. David's already in his office with the door closed. Today isn't a column day, so he's probably either writing a company brochure, for which he gets paid heaps, or writing his novel, for which he gets paid nothing. He spends more time on the novel than he does on

the brochures, which is only a source of tension when things are bad between us; when we're getting on I want to support him, look after him, help him realize his full potential. When we're not, I want to tear his stupid novel into pieces and force him to get a proper job. I read a bit of the book a while ago and hated it. It's called *The Green Keepers*, and it's a satire about Britain's post-Diana touchy-feely culture. The last part I read was all about how the staff of Green Keepers, this company that sells banana elbow cream and Brie foot lotion and lots of other amusingly useless cosmetics, all require bereavement counseling when the donkey they have adopted dies.

OK, so I am not in any way qualified to be a literary critic, not least because I don't read books anymore. I used to, back in the days when I was a different, happier, more engaged human being, but now I fall asleep every night holding a copy of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, the opening chapter of which I still haven't finished, after six months of trying. (This is not the author's fault, incidentally, and I am sure the book is every bit as good as my friend Becca told me it is when she lent it to me. It's the fault of my eyelids.) Even so, even though I no longer have any idea of what constitutes passable literature, I know that *The Green Keepers* is terrible: facetious, unkind, full of itself. Rather like David, or the David that has emerged over the last few years.

The day after I finished reading it, I saw a woman whose baby was stillborn; she'd had to go through labor knowing that she would produce a dead child. Of course, I recommended bereavement counseling; and of course, I thought of David and his sneering book; and of course, I took a bitter pleasure in telling him when I got home that the reason we could rely on our mortgage being paid every month was that I earned



money by recommending the very thing that he finds contemptible. That was another good evening.

When David's office door is closed it means he cannot be disturbed, even if his wife has asked him for a divorce. (Or at least, that's what I'm presuming—it's not that we have made provision for precisely that eventuality.) I make myself another cup of tea, pick up the *Guardian* from the kitchen table, and go back to bed.

I can only find one story in the paper that I want to read: a married woman is in trouble for giving a man she didn't know a blow job in the club class section of an airplane. The married man is in trouble, too, but it's the woman I'm interested in. Am I like that? Not outside in the world I'm not, but in my head I am. I've lost all my bearings somehow, and it scares me. I know Stephen, of course I know Stephen, but when you have been married for twenty years, any sexual contact with anyone else seems wanton, random, almost bestial. Meeting a man at a Community Health forum, going out for a drink with him, going out for another drink with him, going out for dinner with him, going out for another drink with him and kissing him afterward, and, eventually, arranging to sleep with him in Leeds after a conference . . . That's my equivalent of stripping down to my bra and pants in front of a plane full of passengers and performing a sex act, as they say in the papers, on a complete stranger. I fall asleep surrounded by pieces of the *Guardian* and have dreams that are sexual but not erotic in any way whatsoever, dreams full of people doing things to other people, like some artist's vision of hell.

When I wake up, David's in the kitchen making himself a sandwich.

“Hello,” he says, and gestures at the bread board with the knife. “Want one?” Something about the easy domesticity of the offer makes me want to cry. Divorce means never having a sandwich made for you—not by your ex-husband, anyway. (Is that really true, or just sentimental claptrap? Is it really impossible to imagine a situation where, sometime in the future, David might offer to put a piece of cheese between two pieces of bread for me? I look at David and decide that, yes, it is impossible. If David and I divorce he will be angry for the rest of his life—not because he loves me but because that is who and how he is. It is just about possible to imagine a situation in which he would not run me over if I was crossing the street—Molly is tired, say, and I’m having to carry her—but hard to think of a situation where he might offer to perform a simple act of kindness.)

“No, thanks.”

“Sure?”

“Sure.”

“Suit yourself.”

That’s more like it. A slight note of pique has crept in from somewhere, as if his strenuous attempts to make love not war have been met with continued belligerence.

“Do you want to talk?”

He shrugs. “Yeah. What about?”

“Well. About yesterday. What I said on the phone.”

“What did you say on the phone?”

“I said I wanted a divorce.”

“Did you? Gosh. That’s not very friendly, is it? Not a very nice thing for a wife to say to her husband.”

“Please don’t do this.”

“What do you want me to do?”



“Talk properly.”

“OK. You want a divorce. I don’t. Which means that unless you can prove that I’ve been cruel or neglectful or what have you, or that I’ve been shagging someone else, you have to move out and then after five years of living somewhere else you can have one. I’d get going if I were you. Five years is a long time. You don’t want to put it off.”

I hadn’t thought about any of this, of course. Somehow I’d got it into my head that me saying the words would be enough, that the mere expression of the desire would be proof enough that my marriage wasn’t working.

“What about if I . . . you know.”

“No, I don’t know.”

I’m not ready for any of this. It just seems to be coming out of its own accord.

“Adultery.”

“You? Miss Goody Two-shoes?” He laughs. “First off, you’ve got to find someone who wants to adulter you. Then you’ve got to stop being Katie Carr GP, mother of two, and adulter him back. And even then it wouldn’t matter, ‘cos I still wouldn’t divorce you. So.”

I’m torn between relief—I’ve stepped back from the brink, the confession of no return—and outrage. He doesn’t think I’ve got the guts to do what I did last night! Worse than that, he doesn’t think anyone would want to do it with me anyway! The relief wins out, of course. My cowardice is more powerful than his insult.

“So you’re just going to ignore what I said yesterday.”

“Yeah. Basically. Load of rubbish.”

“Are you happy?”

“Oh, Jesus Christ.”

There is a certain group of people who will respond to one of the most basic and pertinent of questions with a mild and impatient blasphemy; David is a devoted member of this group. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I said what I said yesterday because I wasn’t happy. And I don’t think you are either.”

“‘Course I’m not bloody happy. Idiotic question.”

“Why not?”

“For all the usual bloody reasons.”

“Which are?”

“My stupid wife just asked me for a divorce, for a start.”

“The purpose of my question was to help you toward an understanding of why your stupid wife asked you for a divorce.”

“What, you want a divorce because I’m not happy?”

“That’s part of it.”

“How very magnanimous of you.”

“I’m not being magnanimous. I hate living with someone who’s so unhappy.”

“Tough.”

“No. Not tough. I can do something about it. I cannot live with someone who’s so unhappy. You’re driving me up the wall.”

“Do what the fuck you like.”

And off he goes, with his sandwich, back to his satirical novel.

There are thirteen of us here in the surgery altogether, five GPs and then all the other staff that make the center work—a manager, and nurses, and receptionists both full- and part-time. I get on well with just about everyone, but my special friend is Becca, one of the other GPs. Becca and I lunch together when we can, and once a month we go out for a drink



and a pizza, and she knows more about me than anyone else in the place. We're very different, Becca and I. She's cheerfully cynical about our work and why we do it, and sees no difference between working in medicine and, say, advertising, and she thinks my moral self-satisfaction is hilarious. If we're not talking about work, though, then usually we talk about her. Oh, she always asks me about Tom and Molly and David, and I can usually provide some example of David's rudeness that amuses her, but there just seems to be more to say about her life, somehow. She sees things and does things, and her love life is sufficiently chaotic to provide narratives with time-consuming twists and turns in them. She's five years younger than me, and single since a drawn-out and painful breakup with her university sweetheart a couple of years back. Tonight she's agonizing about some guy she's seen three times in the last month: she doesn't think it's going anywhere, she's not sure whether they connect, although they connect in bed . . . Usually, I feel old but interested when she talks about this sort of thing—flattered to be confided in, thrilled vicariously by all the breakups and comings-together and flirtations, even vaguely envious of the acute loneliness Becca endures at periodic intervals, when there's nothing going on. It all seems indicative of the crackle of life, electrical activity in chambers of the heart that I closed off a long time ago. But tonight, I feel bored. Who cares? See him or don't see him, it doesn't make any difference to me. What are the stakes, after all? Now I, on the other hand, a married woman with a lover . . .

“Well, if you're not sure, why do you need to make a decision? Why don't you just rub along for a while?” I can hear the boredom in my voice, but she doesn't detect it. I don't get bored when I see Becca. That's not the arrangement.

“I don’t know. I mean, if I’m with him, I can’t be with anyone else. I do with-him things instead of single things. We’re going to the Screen on the Green tomorrow night to see some Chinese film. I mean, that’s fine if you’re sure about someone. That’s what you do, isn’t it? But if you’re not sure, then it’s just dead time. I mean, who am I going to meet in the Screen on the Green? In the dark? When you can’t talk?”

I suddenly have a very deep yearning to go and see a Chinese film at the Screen on the Green—the more Chinese it is, in fact, the better I would like it. That is another chamber of my heart that shows no electrical activity—the chamber that used to flicker into life when I saw a film that moved me, or read a book that inspired me, or listened to music that made me want to cry. I closed that chamber myself, for all the usual reasons. And now I seem to have made a pact with some philistine devil: if I don’t attempt to reopen it, I will be allowed just enough energy and optimism to get through a working day without wanting to hang myself.

“Sorry. This must all sound so silly to you. It sounds silly to me. If I’d known that I’d be the sort of woman who was going to end up sitting with married friends and moaning about my single status I would have shot myself. Really. I’ll stop. Right now. I’ll never mention it again.” She takes a parodic deep breath, and then continues before she has exhaled.

“But he might be OK, mightn’t he? I mean, how would I know? That’s the trouble. I’m in such a tearing hurry that I haven’t got the time to decide whether they’re nice or not. It’s like shopping on Christmas Eve.”

“I’m having an affair.”

Becca smiles distractedly and, after a brief pause, continues.



“You bung everything in a basket. And then after Christmas you . . .”

She doesn't finish the sentence, presumably because she has begun to see that her analogy isn't going anywhere, and that dating and men are nothing like Christmas shopping and baskets.

“Did you hear what I said?”

She smiles again. “No. Not really.” I have become a ghost, the comically impotent, unthreatening sort that you find in children's books and old TV programs. However much I shout, Becca will never hear me.

“Your brother's single, isn't he?”

“My brother's a semi-employed depressive.”

“Is that a genetic thing? Or just circumstance? Because if it's genetic . . . It would be a risk. Not for a while, though. I mean, you don't get so many depressed kids, do you? It's a late-onset thing. And I'm so old already that I won't be around when they become depressed adults. So. Maybe it's worth thinking about. If he's game, I am.”

“I'll pass it on. I think he would like children, yes.”

“Good. Excellent.”

“You know the thing you didn't hear?”

“No.”

“When I said, ‘Did you hear what I said,’ and you said, ‘No.’”

“No.”

“Right.”

“He's my age, isn't he? More or less?”

And we talk about my brother and his depression and his lack of ambition until Becca has lost all interest in the idea of bearing his children.