
Opening Extract from...

Us

Written by David Nicholls

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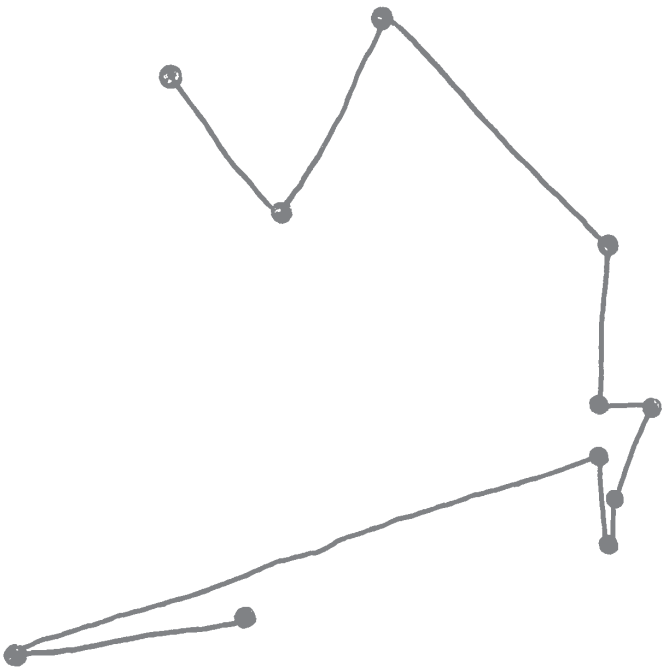
In memory of my father, Alan Fred Nicholls

Thou only hast taught me that I have a heart – thou only hast thrown a light deep downward and upward into my soul. Thou only hast revealed me to myself; for without thy aid my best knowledge of myself would have been merely to know my own shadow – to watch it flickering on the wall, and mistake its fantasies for my own real actions . . .

Now, dearest, dost thou understand what thou hast done for me? And is it not a somewhat fearful thought, that a few slight circumstances might have prevented us from meeting?

Nathaniel Hawthorne, a letter to Sophia Peabody
4 October 1840



BOOK ONE

the grand tour

part one

ENGLAND

—

The sweet habit of each other had begun to put lines around her mouth, lines that looked like quotation marks – as if everything she said had been said before.

Lorrie Moore, *Agnes of Iowa*

1. the burglars

Last summer, a short time before my son was due to leave home for college, my wife woke me in the middle of the night.

At first I thought she was shaking me because of burglars. Since moving to the country my wife had developed a tendency to jerk awake at every creak and groan and rustle. I'd try to reassure her. It's the radiators, I'd say; it's the joists contracting or expanding; it's foxes. Yes, foxes taking the laptop, she'd say, foxes taking the keys to the car, and we'd lie and listen some more. There was always the 'panic button' by the side of our bed, but I could never imagine pressing it in case the alarm disturbed someone – say, a burglar for instance.

I am not a particularly courageous man, not physically imposing, but on this particular night I noted the time – a little after four – sighed, yawned and went downstairs. I stepped over our useless dog, padded from room to room, checked windows and doors then climbed the stairs once more.

'Everything's fine,' I said. 'Probably just air in the water pipes.'

'What are you talking about?' said Connie, sitting up now.

'It's fine. No sign of burglars.'

'I didn't say anything about *burglars*. I said I think our marriage has run its course. Douglas, I think I want to leave you.'

I sat for a moment on the edge of our bed.

'Well at least it's not burglars,' I said, though neither of us smiled and we did not get back to sleep that night.

2. douglas timothy petersen

Our son Albie would be leaving the family home in October and all too soon afterwards so would my wife. The events seemed so closely linked that I couldn't help thinking that if Albie had flunked his exams and been obliged to retake, we might have had another good year of marriage.

But before I say any more about this and the other events that took place during that particular summer, I should tell you a little about myself and paint some sort of 'portrait in words'. It shouldn't take long. My name is Douglas Petersen and I am fifty-four years old. You see that intriguing final 'e' in the Petersen? I'm told it's the legacy of some Scandinavian heritage, some great-grandfather, though I have never been to and have no interesting stories to tell about Scandinavia. Traditionally, Scandinavians are a fair, handsome, hearty and uninhibited people and I am none of those things. I am English. My parents, both deceased now, raised me in Ipswich; my father a doctor, my mother a teacher of biology. 'Douglas' came from her nostalgic affection for Douglas Fairbanks, the Hollywood idol, so there's another red herring right there. Attempts have been made over the years to refer to me as 'Doug' or 'Dougie' or 'Doogie'. My sister, Karen, self-proclaimed possessor of the Petersen's sole 'big personality', calls me 'D', 'Big D', 'the D-ster' or 'Professor D' – which, she says, would be my name in prison – but none of these have stuck and I remain Douglas. My middle name, incidentally, is Timothy, but it's not a name that serves anyone particularly well. Douglas Timothy Petersen. I am, by training, a biochemist.

Appearance. My wife, when we first met and felt compelled to talk constantly about each other's faces and personalities and what we *loved* about each other and all of that routine, once told me that I had a 'perfectly fine face' and, seeing my

disappointment, quickly added that I had 'really kind eyes', whatever that meant. And it's true, I have a perfectly fine face, eyes that may well be 'kind' but are also the brownest of browns, a reasonable-sized nose and the kind of smile that causes photographs to be thrown away. What can I add? Once, at a dinner party, the conversation turned to 'who would play you in the film of your life?' There was a lot of fun and laughter as comparisons were made to various film stars and television personalities. Connie, my wife, was likened to an obscure European actress, and while she protested – 'she's far too glamorous and beautiful', etc. – I could tell that she was flattered. The game continued, but when it came to my turn a silence fell. Guests sipped their wine and tapped their chins. We all became aware of the background music. It seemed that I resembled no famous or distinctive person in the entire history of the world – meaning, I suppose, that I was either unique or the exact opposite. 'Who wants cheese?' said the host, and we moved quickly on to the relative merits of Corsica versus Sardinia, or something or other.

Anyway. I am fifty-four years old – did I say that? – and have one son, Albie, nicknamed 'Egg', to whom I am devoted but who sometimes regards me with a pure and concentrated disdain, filling me with so much sadness and regret that I can barely speak.

So it's a small family, somewhat meagre, and I think we each of us feel sometimes that it is a little too small, and each wish there was someone else there to absorb some of the blows. Connie and I also had a daughter, Jane, but she died soon after she was born.

3. the parabola

There is, I believe, a received notion that, up to a certain point, men get better-looking with age. If so, then I'm beginning my descent of that particular parabola. 'Moisturise!' Connie used to say when we first met, but I was no more likely to do this

than tattoo my neck and consequently I now have the complexion of Jabba the Hutt. I've looked foolish in a T-shirt for some years now but, health-wise, I try to keep in shape. I eat carefully to avoid the fate of my father, who died of a heart attack earlier than seemed right. His heart 'basically exploded' said the doctor – with inappropriate relish, I felt – and consequently I jog sporadically and self-consciously, unsure of what to do with my hands. Put them behind my back, perhaps. I used to enjoy playing badminton with Connie, though she had a tendency to giggle and fool about, finding the game 'a bit silly'. It's a common prejudice. Badminton lacks the young-executive swagger of squash or the romance of tennis, but it remains the world's most popular racket sport and its best practitioners are world-class athletes with killer instincts. 'A shuttlecock can travel at up to 220 miles an hour,' I'd tell Connie, as she stood doubled over at the net. 'Stop. Laughing!' 'But it's got *feathers*,' she'd say, 'and I feel embarrassed, swatting at this thing with feathers. It's like we're trying to kill this finch,' and then she'd laugh again.

What else? For my fiftieth birthday Connie bought me a beautiful racing bike that I sometimes ride along the leafy lanes, noting nature's symphony and imagining what a collision with an HGV would do to my body. For my fifty-first, it was running gear, for my fifty-second, an ear- and nasal-hair trimmer, an object that continues both to appal and fascinate me, snickering away deep in my skull like a tiny lawnmower. The subtext of all these gifts was the same: do not stay still, try not to grow old, don't take anything for granted.

Nevertheless, there's no denying it; I am now middle-aged. I sit to put on socks, make a noise when I stand and have developed an unnerving awareness of my prostate gland, like a walnut clenched between my buttocks. I had always been led to believe that ageing was a slow and gradual process, the creep of a glacier. Now I realise that it happens in a rush, like snow falling off a roof.

By contrast, my wife at fifty-two years old seems to me just

as attractive as the day I first met her. If I were to say this out loud, she would say, 'Douglas, that's just a line. No one prefers wrinkles, no one prefers grey.' To which I'd reply, 'But none of this is a surprise. I've been expecting to watch you grow older ever since we met. Why should it trouble me? It's the face itself that I love, not that face at twenty-eight or thirty-four or forty-three. It's *that* face.'

Perhaps she would have liked to hear this but I had never got around to saying it out loud. I had always presumed there would be time and now, sitting on the edge of the bed at four a.m., no longer listening out for burglars, it seemed that it might be too late.

'How long have you—?'

'A while now.'

'So when will you—?'

'I don't know. Not any time soon, not until after Albie's left home. After the summer. Autumn, the new year?'

Finally: 'Can I ask why?'

4. b.c. and a.c.

For the question, and the ultimate answer, to make sense, some context might be necessary. Instinctively, I feel my life could be divided into two distinct parts – Before Connie and After Connie, and before I turn in detail to what happened that summer, it might be useful to give an account of how we met. This is a love story, after all. Certainly love comes into it.

5. the other 'l' word

'Lonely' is a troubling word and not one to be tossed around lightly. It makes people uncomfortable, summoning up as it does

all kinds of harsher adjectives, like 'sad' or 'strange'. I have always been well liked, I think, always well regarded and respected, but having few enemies is not the same as having many friends, and there was no denying that I was, if not 'lonely', more solitary than I'd hoped to be at that time.

For most people, their twenties represent some kind of high-water mark of gregariousness, as they embark on adventures in the real world, find a career, lead active and exciting social lives, fall in love, splash around in sex and drugs. I was aware of this going on around me. I knew about the nightclubs and the gallery openings, the gigs and the demonstrations; I noted the hangovers, the same clothes worn to work on consecutive days, the kisses on the tube and the tears in the canteen, but I observed it all as if through reinforced glass. I'm thinking specifically of the late eighties, which, for all their hardship and turmoil, seemed like a rather exciting time. Walls were coming down, both literally and figuratively; the political faces were changing. I hesitate to call it a revolution or portray it as some new dawn – there were wars in Europe and the Middle East, riots and economic turmoil – but there was at least a sense of unpredictability, a sense of change. I remember reading a great deal about a Second Summer of Love in the colour supplements. Too young for the First, I was completing my PhD – on Protein-RNA interactions and protein folding during translation – throughout the Second. 'The only acid in *this* house,' I was fond of saying around the lab, 'is deoxyribonucleic acid' – a joke that never quite got the acclaim it deserved.

Still, as the decade drew to a close things were clearly happening, albeit elsewhere and to other people, and I quietly wondered if a change was due in my life, too, and how I might bring that about.

6. drosophila melanogaster

The Berlin Wall was still standing when I moved to Balham. Approaching thirty, I was a doctor of biochemistry living in a small, semi-furnished, heavily mortgaged flat off the High Road, consumed by work and negative equity. I spent weekdays and much of the weekends studying the common fruit fly, Drosophila melanogaster, for my first post-doc, specifically using mutagens in classical forward genetic screens. Those were exciting times in Drosophila studies, developing the tools to read and manipulate the genomes of organisms and, professionally if not personally, this was something of a golden period for me.

I rarely encounter a fruit fly now, outside of a bowl of fruit. These days I work in the private, commercial sector – 'the evil corporation', my son calls it – as Head of Research and Development, a rather grand title but one that means I no longer experience the freedom and excitement of fundamental science. These days my position is organisational, strategical, words like that. We fund university research in order to make the most of academic expertise, innovation and enthusiasm, but everything must be 'translational' now; there must be some practical application. I enjoy the work, am good at it and I still visit labs, but now I am employed to co-ordinate and manage younger people who do the work that I used to do. I am not some corporate monster; I am good at my job and it has brought success and security. But it doesn't thrill me like it used to.

Because it *was* thrilling, to be working all those hours with a small group of committed, impassioned people. Science seemed exhilarating to me then, inspiring and essential. Twenty years on, those experiments on fruit flies would lead to medical innovations that we could never have imagined, but at the time we

were motivated by pure curiosity, almost by a sense of play. It was just terrific *fun*, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that I loved my subject.

That's not to say there wasn't a great deal of mundane graft involved, too; computers were temperamental and rudimentary, barely more than unwieldy calculators and considerably less powerful than the phone in my pocket now, and data input was exhausting and laborious. And while the common fruit fly has a great deal in its favour as an experimental organism – fecundity, a short breeding cycle, distinctive morphology – it has little in the way of personality. We kept one as a pet in our lab's insectory, in its own special jar with a tiny rug and doll's house furniture, replacing it at the end of each life cycle. Though it's tricky to sex a fruit fly, we called him/her Bruce. Allow this to stand as the archetypal example of Biochemist Humour.

Such small diversions were necessary because anaesthetising a population of Drosophila, then examining them one by one with a fine brush and a microscope, looking for tiny changes in eye pigmentation or wing shape, is frankly mind-numbing. It's a little like embarking on an immense jigsaw. To begin with you think 'this will be fun' and you put on the radio and make a pot of tea, before realising that there are far too many pieces, nearly all of them sky.

Consequently I was far too tired to go to my sister's party on that Friday night. And not just tired, I was wary too, for a number of good reasons.

7. the matchmaker

I was wary of my sister's cooking, which invariably consisted of a tubular pasta and economy cheese, charred black on the surface, with either tinned tuna or lardy mince lurking beneath the molten crust. I was wary because parties, and dinner parties in particular,

had always seemed to be a pitiless form of gladiatorial combat, with laurel garlands bestowed to the most witty, successful and attractive, and the corpses of the defeated lying bleeding on the painted floorboards. The pressure to be one's best self in such circumstances I found paralysing, and still do, yet my sister insisted on forcing me into the arena again and again.

'You can't stay at home for the rest of your life, D.'

'I don't stay at home, I'm hardly here . . .'

'Sat in that misery hole, all by yourself.'

'It's not a . . . I'm perfectly happy by myself, Karen.'

'You're not happy! You're not! How can you be happy, D? You're not happy! You are not!'

And it was true that there was not a great deal of glee before that February night, little cause for fireworks or the punching of air. I liked my colleagues, they liked me, but for the most part, I would say goodbye to Security Steve on a Saturday afternoon then not speak until my lips parted with an audible pop on the Monday morning as I greeted him hello. 'Good weekend, Douglas?' he'd ask. 'Oh, quiet, Steve, very quiet.' Still, there was pleasure and satisfaction in my work, a pub quiz once a month, the pint with my colleagues on a Friday night, and if I did occasionally suspect something was missing, well – didn't everyone?

Not my sister. In her mid-twenties Karen was promiscuous in her friendships and ran with what my parents referred to as 'an arty crowd': would-be actors, playwrights and poets, musicians, dancers, glamorous young people pursuing impractical careers, staying up late then meeting for long and emotional cups of tea during all hours of the working day. For my sister, life was one long group hug and it seemed to amuse her in some obscure way to parade me in front of her younger friends. She liked to say that I had skipped youth and leapt straight into middle age, that I had been forty-three in my mother's womb, and it was true, I suppose, that I'd never got the hang of being young. In which case why was she so desperate for me to come along?

'Because there'll be *girls* there—'

'Girls? Girls . . . Yes, I've heard talk of those.'

'One girl in particular—'

'I do know girls, Karen. I have met and spoken to girls.'

'Not like this one. Trust me.'

I sighed. For whatever reason, 'fixing me up with a girlfriend' had become something of an obsession for Karen, and she pursued it with a beguiling mixture of condescension and coercion.

'Do you want to be alone forever? Do you? Hm? Do you?'

'I have no intention of being alone forever.'

'So where are you going to meet someone, D? In your wardrobe? Under the sofa? Are you going to grow them in the lab?'

'I really don't want to have this conversation any more.'

'I'm only saying it because I *love* you!' Love was Karen's alibi for all kinds of aggravating behaviour. 'I'm laying a place for you at the table so if you don't come, the whole evening's ruined!' And with that, she hung up the phone.

8. tuna pasta bake

So that evening, in a tiny flat in Tooting, I was pushed by the shoulders into the tiny kitchen where sixteen people sat crammed around a flimsy trestle table designed for pasting wallpaper, one of my sister's notorious pasta bakes smouldering in its centre like a meteorite, smelling of toasted cat food.

'Everyone! This is my lovely brother, Douglas. Be nice to him, he's shy!' My sister liked nothing more than pointing at shy people and bellowing SHY! Hello, hi, hey there Douglas, said my competitors and I contorted myself onto a tiny folding chair between a handsome, hairy man in black tights and a striped vest, and an extremely attractive woman.

'I'm Connie,' she said.

'Pleased to meet you, Connie,' I said, scalpel sharp, and that was how I met my wife.

We sat in silence for a while. I contemplated asking if she'd pass the pasta but then I'd be obliged to eat it, so instead . . .

'What do you do, Connie?'

'Good question,' she said, though it was not. 'I suppose I'm an artist. That's what I studied, anyway, but it always sounds a bit pretentious . . .'

'Not at all,' I replied, and thought, *oh God, an artist*. If she'd said 'cellular biologist' there'd have been no stopping me, but I rarely encountered such people and certainly never at my sister's house. An *artist*. I didn't hate art, not by any means, but I dislike knowing nothing about it.

'So – watercolours or oils?'

She laughed. 'It's a little more complicated than that.'

'Hey, I'm a kind of artist too!' said the handsome man to my left, shouldering his way in. 'A *trapeze* artist!'

I didn't speak much after this. Jake, the fleecy man in vest and tights, was a circus performer who loved both his work and himself, and how could I possibly compete with a man who defied the laws of gravity for a living? Instead I sat quietly and watched her from the corner of my eye, making the following observations:

9. seven things about her

1. She had very good hair. Well cut, clean, shiny, an almost artificial black, points brushed forward over her ears ('Points' – is that right?) designed to frame her wonderful face. Describing hairstyles is not my forte, I lack the vocabulary, but there was something of the fifties film star to it, what my mother would call 'a do', yet it was modish and contemporary too. 'Modish' – listen to me! Anyway, I smelt the shampoo

and her scent as I sat down, not because I snuffled around in the nape of her neck like a badger, I knew better than that, but because the table was really very small.

2. Connie listened. For my sister and her friends, 'conversation' really meant taking it in turns to speak, but Connie listened intently to our trapeze artist, her hand on her cheek, her little finger resting in the corner of her mouth. Self-contained, calm, she had a quality of quiet intelligence. The expression she wore was intent but not entirely uncritical or unamused, so that it was impossible to discern if she found something impressive or ridiculous, an attitude that she has maintained throughout the entire course of our marriage.
3. Though I thought her lovely, she was not the most attractive woman at the table. It is traditional, I know, when describing these first encounters with loved ones to suggest that they emitted some special glow; 'her face lit up the room' or 'I could not look away'. In truth, I could and did look away and would say that, in conventional terms at least, she was perhaps the third most beautiful woman in the room. My sister, with her much vaunted 'big personality', liked to surround herself with extremely 'cool' people, but coolness and kindness rarely go together and the fact that these people were often truly appalling, cruel, pretentious or idiotic was, to my sister, a small price to pay for their reflected glamour. So while there were many attractive people there that night, I was very happy to be sitting next to Connie, even if she did not at first sight effervesce, incandesce, luminesce, etc.
4. She had a very appealing voice – low, dry, a little husky, with a noticeable London accent. She has lost this over the years, but in those days there was definitely a slight swallowing of the consonants. Usually this would be an indicator of social background, but not in my sister's circle. One of her cock-erney friends spoke as if he ran a whelk stall despite his father

being the Bishop of Bath and Wells. In Connie's case, she asked sincere, intelligent questions, which nevertheless had an undertow of irony and amusement. 'Are the clowns as funny in real life as they are on stage?' – that kind of thing. Her voice had the instinctive cadence of a comedian and she had the gift of being funny without smiling, which I've always envied. On the rare occasions that I tell a joke in public, I grimace like a frightened chimpanzee, but Connie was, is, deadpan. 'So,' she asked, her face a mask, 'when you're flying through the air towards your partner, are you ever tempted, at the very, very last moment, to do this –' and here she raised her thumb to her nose and wiggled her remaining fingers, and I thought this was just terrific.

5. She drank a great deal, refilling her glass before it was empty as if worried the wine might run out. The drink had no discernible effect except perhaps a certain intensity in conversation, as if it required concentration. Connie's drinking seemed quite light-hearted, with a kind of drink-you-under-the-table swagger to it. She seemed like fun.
6. She was extremely stylish. Not expensively or ostentatiously dressed but there was something *right* about her. The fashion of the day placed great emphasis on 'bagginess', giving the impression that the guests around the table were toddlers wearing their parents' T-shirts. Connie, in contrast, was neat and stylish in old clothes (which I have since learnt to call 'vintage') that were tailored and snug and emphasised her – I'm sorry, I apologise, but there really is no way around this – her 'curves'. She was smart, original, both ahead of the crowd and as old-fashioned as a character in a black-and-white film. In contrast, the impression I set out to create, looking back, was no impression at all. My wardrobe at that time ran the gamut from taupe to grey, all the colours of the lichen world, and it's a safe bet that chinos were involved. Anyway, the camouflage worked, because . . .

7. This woman on my right had absolutely no interest in me whatsoever.

10. the daring young man on the flying trapeze

And why should she? Jake the trapeze artist was a man who stared death in the face, while most nights I stared television in the face. And this wasn't just any circus, it was *punk* circus, part of the new wave of circus, where chainsaws were juggled and oil drums were set on fire then beaten incessantly. Circus was now sexy; dancing elephants had been replaced by nude contortionists, ultra-violence and, explained Jake, 'a kind of anarchic, post-apocalyptic *Mad Max* aesthetic'.

'You mean the clowns don't drive those cars where the wheels fall off?' asked Connie, her face a stone.

'No! Fuck that, man! These cars *explode*! We're on Clapham Common next week – I'll get you both tickets, you can come along.'

'Oh, we're not together,' she said, a little too quickly. 'We've just met.'

'Ah!' nodded Jake, as if to say 'that makes sense'. There was a momentary pause and to fill the gap, I asked:

'Tell me, do you find, as a trapeze artist, that it's hard to get decent car insurance?'

The percentage varies, but some of the things I say make no sense to me at all. Perhaps I'd meant it as a joke. Perhaps I'd hoped to emulate Connie's laconic tone through raised eyebrow and wry smile. If so, that hadn't come across, because Connie was not laughing but pouring more wine.

'No, because I don't tell 'em,' said Jake with a rebellious swagger, which was all very anarchic but good luck with any future claims, big guy. Having steered the conversation to insurance premiums, I now dolloped out the tuna pasta bake, scalding

the back of Connie's hands with fatty strands of molten Cheddar, hot as lava, and as she peeled them off Jake returned to his monologue, stretching across me for more booze. To the extent that I'd ever thought about trapeze artists, I'd always pictured slick, broad Burt Lancaster types, smooth and brilliantined and leotarded. Jake was a wild man, covered in luxuriant body hair the colour of a basketball but still undeniably handsome, strong-featured, a Celtic tattoo encircling his bicep, a tangle of wild red hair gathered into a bun with a greasy scrunchie. When he spoke – and he spoke a great deal – his eyes blazed at Connie, passing straight through me, and I was forced to accept that I was watching a blatant seduction. At a loss, I reached for the rudimentary salad. Doused liberally with malt vinegar and cooking oil, it was my sister's rare culinary gift to make lettuce taste like a bag of chips.

'That moment when you're in mid-air,' said Jake, stretching for the ceiling, 'when you're falling but almost flying, there's nothing like that. You try to hold onto it, but it's . . . transient. It's like trying to hold on to an orgasm. Do you know that feeling?'

'Know it?' deadpanned Connie. 'I'm doing it right now.'

This made me bark with laughter, which in turn attracted a scowl from Jake, and quickly I offered the acrid salad bowl. 'Iceberg lettuce, anyone? Iceberg lettuce?'

11. chemicals

The tuna pasta bake was forced down like so much hot clay and Jake's monologue continued well into 'afters', an ironic sherry trifle topped with enough canned cream, Smarties and Jelly Tots to bring about the onset of type 2 diabetes. Connie and Jake were leaning across me now, pheromones misting the air between them, the erotic force field pushing my chair further and further

away from the trestle table until I was practically in the hallway with the bicycles and the piles of *Yellow Pages*. At some point, Connie must have noticed this, because she turned to me and asked:

'So, Daniel, what do you do?'

Daniel seemed close enough. 'Well, I'm a scientist.'

'Yes, your sister told me. She says you have a PhD. What field?'

'Biochemistry, but at the moment I'm studying Drosophila, the fruit fly.'

'Go on.'

'Go on?'

'Tell me more,' she said. 'Unless it's top secret.'

'No, it's just people don't usually ask for more. Well, how can I . . . okay, we're using chemical agents to induce genetic mutation . . .'

Jake groaned audibly and I felt something brush my cheek as he reached for the wine. For some people, the word 'scientist' suggests either a wild-eyed lunatic or the white-coated lackey of some fanatical organisation, an extra in a Bond film. Clearly this was the way Jake felt.

'*Mutation*?' said Jake, indignantly. 'Why would you mutate a fruit fly? Poor bastard, why not leave it be?'

'Well, there's nothing inherently unnatural about mutation. It's just another word for evolu—'

'I think it's wrong to tamper with nature.' He addressed the table now. 'Pesticides, fungicides, I think they're evil.'

As a hypothesis, this seemed unlikely. 'I'm not sure a chemical compound can be evil in itself. It can be used irresponsibly or foolishly, and sadly that has sometimes been the—'

'My mate, she's got an allotment in Stoke Newington; it's totally organic and her food is beautiful, absolutely beautiful . . .'

'I'm sure. But I don't think they have plagues of locusts in Stoke Newington, or annual drought, or a lack of soil nutrients—'

'Carrots should taste of carrots,' he shouted, a mystifying non sequitur.

'I'm sorry, I don't quite—'

'Chemicals. It's all these chemicals!'

Another non sequitur. 'But . . . everything's a chemical. The carrot itself is made of chemicals, this salad is chemical. This one in particular. You, Jake, you're made up of chemicals.'

Jake looked affronted. 'No I'm not!' he said, and Connie laughed.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'but you are. You're six major elements, 65 per cent oxygen, 18 per cent carbon, 10 per cent—'

'It's because people try to grow strawberries in the desert. If we all ate local produce, naturally grown without all these chemicals—'

'That sounds wonderful, but if your soil lacks essential nutrients, if your family's starving because of aphids or fungus, then you might be grateful for some of those evil chemicals.' I'm not sure what else I said. I was passionate about my work, felt that it was beneficial and worthwhile, and as well as idealism, jealousy might also have played a part. I'd drunk a little too much and after a long evening of being alternately patronised and ignored, I had not warmed to my rival, who was of the school that thought the solution to disease and hunger lay in longer and better rock concerts.

'There's easily enough food to feed the world, it's just all in the wrong hands.'

'Yes, but that's not the fault of science! That's politics, economics! Science isn't responsible for drought or famine or disease, but those things are happening and that's where scientific research comes in. It's our responsibility to—'

'To give us more DDT? More Thalidomide?' This last blow seemed to please Jake hugely, and he broadcast a handsome grin to his audience, delighted that the misfortunes of others had provided him with a valuable debating point. Those were terrible

tragedies, but I didn't remember them being specifically my fault, or my colleagues' – all of them responsible, humane, decent people, all ethically and socially aware. Besides, those instances were anomalies compared to all the extraordinary developments science had given us, and I had a very clear mental image of myself high, high in the shadows of the big top, sawing madly at a rope with a penknife.

'What would happen,' I wondered aloud, 'if you fell from your trapeze, God forbid, and broke your legs and a massive infection set in? Because what I'd love to do, in those circumstances, Jake, what I'd love to do is stand by your bedside with the antibiotics and analgesics just out of reach and say, I know you're in agony but I can't give you these, I'm afraid, because, you know, these are chemicals, created by scientists and I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to amputate both your legs. Without anaesthetic!'

12. silence

I wondered if perhaps I had overplayed my hand. In hoping to sound impassioned I had come across as unhinged. There had been malice in what I'd said, and no one likes malice at a dinner party, not open malice, and certainly not my sister, who was glaring at me with custard dripping from her serving spoon.

'Well, Douglas, let's hope it doesn't come to that,' she said weakly. 'More trifle?'

More distressingly, I was not acquitting myself well in front of Connie. Even though we'd spoken only briefly, I liked this woman very much and wanted to create a good impression. With some trepidation, I glanced to my right, where she remained with her chin in the palm of her hand, her face entirely impassive and unreadable and, to my mind, even lovelier than before

as she took her hand from her face, placed it on my arm and smiled.

'I'm so sorry, Douglas, I think I called you Daniel earlier.'

And that – well, *that* was like a light coming on.

13. apocalypse

I think our marriage has run its course, she said. *I think I want to leave you.*

But I'm aware of having gone off on a tangent and wallowing in happier times. Perhaps I'm casting too rosy a glow. I'm aware that couples tend to embellish 'how we met' folklore with all kinds of detail and significance. We shape and sentimentalise these first encounters into creation myths to reassure ourselves and our offspring that it was somehow 'meant to be', and with that in mind perhaps it's best to pause there for the moment, and return to where we came in – specifically the night, a quarter-century later, when the same intelligent, amusing, attractive woman woke me to say that she thought she might be happier, that her future might be fuller, richer, that all things considered she might feel more 'alive' if she were no longer near me.

'I try to imagine it, us alone here every evening without Albie. Because he's maddening, I know, but he's the reason why we're here, still together . . .'

Was he the reason? The only reason?

'. . . and I'm terrified by the idea of him leaving home, Douglas. I'm terrified by the thought of that . . . *hole*.'

What was the hole? Was I the hole?

'Why should there be a hole? There won't be a hole.'

'Just the two of us, rattling around in this house . . .'

'We won't rattle around! We'll do things. We'll be busy, we'll work, we'll do things together – we'll, we'll fill the hole.'

'I need a new start, some kind of change of scene.'

'You want to move house? We'll move house.'

'It's not about the house. It's the idea of you and me in each other's pockets forever more. It's like . . . a Beckett play.'

I'd not seen a Beckett play, but presumed this was a bad thing. 'Is it really so . . . horrific to you, Connie, the thought of you and I being alone together? Because I thought we had a good marriage . . .'

'We did, we do. I've been very happy with you, Douglas, very, but the future—'

'Then why would you want to throw that away?'

'I just feel that as a unit, as husband and wife, we did it. We did our best, we can move on, our work is done.'

'It was never work for me.'

'Well, sometimes it was for me. Sometimes it felt like work. Now that Albie's leaving, I want to feel this is the beginning of something new, not the beginning of the end.'

The beginning of the end. Was she still talking about me? She made me sound like some kind of apocalypse.

The conversation went on for some time, Connie elated at all this truth-telling, me reeling from it, incoherent, struggling to take it in. How long had she felt like this? Was she really so unhappy, so jaded? I understood her need to 'rediscover herself', but why couldn't she rediscover herself with me around? Because, she said, she felt our work was done.

Our work was done. We had raised a son and he was . . . well, he was healthy. He seemed happy occasionally, when he thought no one was looking. He was popular at school and he had a certain charm, apparently. He was infuriating, of course, and always seemed to be more Connie's son than mine; they'd always been closer, he'd always been on 'her team'. Despite owing his existence to me, I suspected my son felt that his mother could have done better. Even so, was he really the sole purpose and product, the sole work, of twenty years of marriage?

'I thought . . . it had never crossed my mind . . . I'd always imagined . . .' Exhausted, I was having some trouble expressing myself. 'I'd always been under the impression that we were together because we wanted to be together, and because we were happy most of the time. I'd thought that we loved each other. I'd thought . . . clearly I was mistaken, but I was looking forward to us growing old together. Me and you, growing old and dying together.'

Connie turned to me, her head on the pillow, and said, 'Douglas, why would anyone in their right mind look forward to *that*?'

14. the axe

It was light outside now, a bright Tuesday in June. Soon we would rise wearily and shower and brush our teeth standing at the sink together, the cataclysm put on hold while we faced the banalities of the day. We'd eat breakfast, shout farewell to Albie, listen to the shuffle and groan that passed for his goodbye. We would hug briefly on the gravel drive—

'I'm not packing any suitcases yet, Douglas. We'll talk more.'

'Okay. We'll talk more.'

—then I would drive off to the office and Connie would head off to the train station and the 0822 to London where she worked three days a week. I would say hello to colleagues and laugh at their jokes, respond to emails, eat a light lunch of salmon and watercress with visiting professors, listen to reports of their progress, nod and nod and all the time:

I think our marriage has run its course. I think I want to leave you.

It was like trying to go about my business with an axe embedded in my skull.

15. holiday

I managed it, of course, because a public display of despair would have been unprofessional. It wasn't until the final meeting of the day that my demeanour started to falter. I was fidgeting, perspiring, worrying at the keys in my pocket, and before the minutes of the meeting had even been approved I was standing and excusing myself, grabbing my phone, mumbling excuses and hurrying, stumbling towards the door, taking my chair some of the way with me.

Our offices and labs are built around a square laughably called The Piazza, ingeniously designed to receive no sunlight whatsoever. Hostile concrete benches sit on a scrappy lawn which is swampy and saturated in the winter, parched and dusty in the summer, and I paced back and forth across this desolate space in full view of my colleagues, one hand masking my mouth.

'We'll have to cancel the Grand Tour.'

Connie sighed. 'Let's see.'

'We can't go travelling around Europe with this hanging over us. Where's the pleasure in that?'

'I think we should still do it. For Albie's sake.'

'Well, as long as Albie's happy!'

'Douglas. Let's talk about it when I get back from work. I must go now.' Connie works in the education department of a large and famous London museum, liaising on outreach programmes to schools, collaborating with artists on devised work and other duties that I don't quite understand, and I suddenly imagined her in hushed conversation with various colleagues, Roger or Alan or Chris, dapper little Chris with his waistcoat and his little spectacles. *I finally told him, Chris. How did he take it? Not too well. Darling, you did the right thing. At last you can escape The Hole . . .*

'Connie, is there someone else?'

'Oh, Douglas . . .'

'Is that what this is all about? Are you leaving me for someone else?'

She sounded weary. 'We'll talk when we get home. Not in front of Albie, though.'

'You have to tell me now, Connie!'

'It's not to do with anyone else.'

'Is it Chris?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Little Chris, waistcoat Chris!'

She laughed, and I wondered: how is it possible for her to laugh when I have this axe protruding from my skull?

'Douglas, you've met Chris. I'm not insane. There's no one else, certainly not Chris. This is entirely about you and me.'

I wasn't sure whether this made it better or worse.

16. pompeii

The fact was I loved my wife to a degree that I found impossible to express, and so rarely did. While I didn't dwell on the notion, I had presumed that we would end our lives together. Of course, this is a largely futile desire because, disasters notwithstanding, someone has to go first. There's a famous artefact at Pompeii – we intended to see it on the Grand Tour we had planned for the summer – of two lovers embracing, 'spooning' I think is the term, their bodies nested like quotation marks as the boiling, poisonous cloud rolled down the slopes of Vesuvius and smothered them in hot ash. Not mummies or fossils as some people think, but a three-dimensional mould of the void left as they decayed. Of course there's no way of knowing that the two figures were husband and wife; they could have been brother and sister, father and daughter, they might have been adulterers.

But to my mind the image suggests only marriage; comfort, intimacy, shelter from the sulphurous storm. Not a very cheery advertisement for married life, but not a bad symbol either. The end was gruesome but at least they were together.

But volcanoes are a rarity in our part of Berkshire. If one of us had to go first, I had hoped in all sincerity that it would be me. I'm aware that this sounds morbid, but it seemed to be the right way round, the sensible way, because, well, my wife had brought me everything I had ever wanted, everything good and worthwhile, and we had been through so much together. To contemplate a life without her; I found it inconceivable. Literally so. I was not able to conceive of it.

And so I decided that it could not be allowed to happen.