Opening Extract from...

The Two of Us

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For Chris and Dorothy, my parents.
For everything.

Prologue

People ask: *How long have you been together? How did you meet?*

You're sitting at a table, fizzing with the defiant ostentation of new love (is that what it is? Is it love already?), laughing too loud and kissing more enthusiastically than is *de rigueur* in a quiet country pub, and someone will say, *Put her down! Get a room! You make a lovely couple*, or some variation on the theme.

You're surreptitiously nibbling your new girlfriend's earlobe when a voice says, *They serve crisps at the bar, you know. If you're hungry.* You turn and apologize to the large middle-aged lady at the adjacent table. She laughs goodnaturedly, then shuffles her chair sideways so she is now sitting at your table. And here it comes . . .

So, she says, *How did you two lovebirds meet?*

In the last week, we must have been questioned about the particulars of our romance on half a dozen separate occasions. On other nights and afternoons we have told increasingly pale shades of the truth: *We work together*; *Blind date; I cut his hair; Book club.* But now, emboldened by wine and routine, Ivy leans forward and says in a conspiratorial voice: *It's awful; I'm best friends with his wife. But . . .* she places her hand on top of mine . . . *you're a woman of the world, you know what it's like. When you* have *to have something?*

The woman – ruddy-faced and emanating a warm aroma of cheese and onion – she nods, says, *Aye, well, yes, you have a nice . . . you know . . . night*, and shuffles back to her own table.

Because the truth is, the truth is too long a story to tell a stranger in a country pub when all you want to do is finish your drink and get upstairs to your room. And anyway, *how* we met is academic – you don't ask how the rain began, you simply appreciate the rainbow.

People talk about chemistry, and perhaps it was – something molecular, something transmitted, something genetic. Whatever the mechanism, there was something about Ivy that immediately made me want to *not* sleep with her. And what higher compliment can a scoundrel pay a lady? Not that it matters, but at the time I was going through a phase where I wasn't looking for any kind of

commitment beyond those to personal hygiene and discretion. I had broken up with my girlfriend six months earlier, I was young, I was free, I was . . . well, let's just say I was being generous with my affections. Then along came Ivy with her handsome, uncontrived beauty, trailing pheromones, nonchalance and easy humour.

Not that any of that matters. What matters is that we met. And what matters most is what happens next.

Chapter 1

It's the last week in August and my sunburn prickles as Ivy steers the car into the street I grew up in, towards the house I came home to the day I was born.

When the radio is on Ivy sings; when it's off she whistles, and she whistles badly. I almost recognize the tune, but can't quite grasp it. The left side of her face is scarred from a childhood accident – the lines are white now, but the grooves and misalignments are stark – and when she whistles the scars pinch and deepen. Whether this affects her whistling or not, I don't know, but if her singing is any indication, she's simply tone deaf and entirely oblivious of the fact. We've been together less than three weeks so it's a little too early to be drawing up a list of 'things I like most about my new girlfriend' but if I were so inclined, Ivy's careless tuneless whistling would be up there in the

top eleven. And whilst we're on the subject of sequencing, it's also a bit premature for *meet the family*. But here we are, about one minute from lift-off.

'Brace yourself,' I say.

Ivy turns to me: 'Hnn?'

'The family,' I say. 'They're a bit . . . you know.'

'Don't worry,' she says. 'I've done this before. Loads of times, hundreds of times.' And she smiles to herself.

'Funny. Anyway, it's not you I'm worried about.'

We round a corner and Dad's house comes into view.

I've never paid attention to the way my childhood home looks; it's been there as long as I've been alive and I scrutinize it no more than I do my feet – probably less. But today, with Ivy beside me, I'm aware of its ordinariness, banality, of everything it isn't. Victorian houses – like the one I live in in London – age improves them, bestows character and integrity; but houses like this, built in the sixties and seventies, they age like old factory workers made ugly with time and effort and smoke and disappointment. Maybe it's not my sunburn prickling; perhaps it's my inner snob. I look at Ivy and she glances back, raises her eyebrows as she pulls up in front of number 9 Rose Park.

And forget the house, wait till she gets a load of the family.

They must have been lying in wait because before Ivy has a chance to kill the engine, my father, sister, brother-in-law and twin nieces pour out of the front door. I wave, grin, mouth 'Hiya' through the windscreen, but no one is looking in my direction. They line up in the middle of the road, faces lit with excitement as Dad opens Ivy's door as if she's some kind of dignitary. The twins, Imogen and Rosalind, are only ten years old, so I can forgive them dancing impatiently on the spot and jostling to get a better look at my girlfriend (it does feel good to say: *girlfriend*), but my sister and Dad have a combined age of almost one hundred and they're behaving like imbeciles. And then it comes to me what Ivy was whistling: 'It Must Be Love'. She climbs out of the car and straight into a bear hug from my dad. I grimace an apology as he lifts her off her feet and Ivy either winks or winces in return – but with her face squashed against my old man's neck, it's hard to tell which.

As I slip unnoticed from the car, it occurs to me that I may have misidentified Ivy's whistling. The more I think about it, the more I am convinced it was 'House of Fun' or possibly even 'Embarrassment'. Whatever it was, it's definitely Madness.

By the time the welcoming party gets off the road and into the house, I've hauled the bags out of the boot and

upstairs, taken a pee, boiled a kettle and made a pot of tea.

'Tea's in the pot,' I say as everyone troops into the kitchen.

'Have we got any wine?' asks Maria.

'I assume *champagne* will be okay?' says Dad, opening the fridge with an excruciating flourish.

'Wow,' says Ivy.

'Well,' says Dad, 'special occasion, isn't it. Get the glasses, son.' And he steers Ivy into the living room.

Maria hangs back to help me rinse the dust from five champagne glasses. 'Seems nice,' she says, smirking.

'She is. No Hermione?' I say, heading off the inevitable (*what does she see in you?*) sarcasm from my big sister.

Maria wasn't quite sixteen when she gave birth to my eldest niece. Mum had been dead less than a year, and baby Herms played a big part in our collective healing. For the first six years of her life (until Maria met and married Hector) I was, I suppose, more like a father than an uncle to Hermione. And more than a decade later, I continue to think of her more as a daughter than a niece.

'Hot date,' Maria says.

'You're kidding! What's he like?'

Maria shrugs. 'Better than the last shit-bag.'

'That's not hard. I was hoping she'd be here.'

'You're no match for new love,' Maria says.

'Some might beg to differ,' I say. 'Come on, let's save Ivy from Dad.'

When we get through to the living room, Dad has already got the family albums out. This is the first time I have ever brought a girl – let alone a woman – home, and I guess everyone has been waiting too long to do all the things you do in these situations. So I sip my champagne and take my humiliation like a man as they laugh at my hair, clothes and bare backside through the ages. My girlfriend of nineteen days tilts her glass in my direction, smiles a coy smile and winks.

Both Ivy and I work in film production (commercials in my case, everything you can think of in hers), which means we are essentially freelance. For our first four days together we didn't leave Ivy's flat. Nothing was explicitly said, but we seemed to arrive at a psychic agreement not to venture outdoors until it became unavoidable. Because we understood (and understood that each other understood) that after the bubble bursts there's no returning to the intimate stupid collusion of the First Days. When provisions ran low we drank our coffee black, picked mould from the last of the bread and ate toast with holes. We dined on eggs and biscuits, aubergine and mayonnaise sandwiches and pasta in chicken-soup sauce. Ivy read while I watched American

detective shows on her crappy portable TV; we played Monopoly, Scrabble and Snap, and got drunk on wine then vodka and finally a bottle of semi-crystallized booze of unknown origin. We resisted anything more practical than ordering pizza, instinctively knowing that delivery men fit the romantic script only if they drive mopeds and not supermarket lorries. The pin came in the form of a job, with Ivy booked to work on a pop promo all day Friday. On her way to the shoot she dropped me – and a bagful of her clothes – at my flat, and we kissed goodbye with the kind of fervour normally reserved for airports. Work took up most of the following week, but we spent every night together, sometimes meeting in a restaurant, other times in bed. On our second Saturday we packed my Fiat 126 and drove with no specific agenda or destination, spending nights in the New Forest, Cotswolds, Yorkshire Dales and Peak District. We walked, ate, drove, drank and missed breakfast every morning. Yesterday I realized we were less than a two-hour drive from my dad's house and I was in too good a mood not to visit. Ivy and I must have driven more than five hundred miles in the last week – singing to the radio, Ivy feeding me M&Ms from the passenger seat, me feeding her Skittles when we switched – but there was something different on the drive here today. I can even identify the point at which the atmosphere changed.

We stopped at a small village for a snack and a walk around the shops; Ivy went to Boots for 'toothpaste and stuff' while I paid a visit to the local Co-op. We met back at the car, Ivy with a bagful of toiletries, me with a bagful of ingredients and clinking bottles. And from that point forward something was . . . off. Nothing glaringly obvious, but Ivy was definitely more subdued. She sang with less gusto, didn't play I spy, didn't squeeze my knee with the absent-minded affection I have come to crave. Maybe she was apprehensive about meeting the family. And, witnessing the current inquisition, who could blame her?

Dad wants to know where Ivy's parents live, what their names are, do they go to church; Hector asks if make-up artists earn a lot of money, does she have an accountant, does she have a website, has she ever met Madonna; the twins want to know does she have any sisters, any brothers, any pets, does she prefer cats or dogs, would she rather be a mermaid, a fairy or a princess; Maria wants to know where Ivy bought her cufflinks, where she has her hair cut, has she always worn it long, what does she see in me?

'Make yourself useful,' Maria says, waving an empty glass in the air.

I throw my head back and sigh. 'I just sat down.'

'You've been sitting down for three hours,' Dad says. 'Go on, stretch your legs.'

I make a big show of hauling myself to my feet and out of the room, huffing and muttering under my breath. It's not that I begrudge my family another drink or an audience with my girlfriend, but the truth is I know very little about the woman I'm very much in love with and I'm as eager for answers as the rest of my family. I know she prefers cider to beer, her favourite pie is chicken and leek, and she snores when she drinks too much; I know her hair smells of coconuts, and her breath smells like hell in the morning; I know she fell through a glass coffee table when she was eight years old and her favourite sweets are Skittles. But there is so much I don't know – her favourite Beatle; the name of her first pet, boyfriend or record; I don't even know her middle name, for God's sake. And for some reason, I'm particularly interested in where she stands (so to speak) on fairies versus mermaids.

When I return with a bottle of wine everyone (Dad and Hector included) are listening with rapt attention as Ivy describes the best way to shape the tip of an eyeliner pencil.

'What time we eating?' asks Maria.

'I'm starved,' says Hector.

'What we having?' ask the twins.

Everyone turns to me, and I shuffle again from the room, grumbling about slavery, presumption and ingratitude.

I've chopped four chicken breasts, three onions, two chillies, six red peppers, half a bulb of garlic, and eaten at least a third of a smoked chorizo when Dad walks into the kitchen.

'Need any help?'

'I'm nearly done,' I tell him.

'So,' Dad says from the fridge doorway, 'this is unexpected.'

'I'll say.'

'Here,' he says, placing a glass of wine beside the chopping board.

'Cheers.' I take a sip, and then nod in the direction of the living room. 'And?'

'You could have done worse,' he says, smiling.

'Oh, I have,' I say. 'Christ, have I.'

Dad rolls his eyes with resigned, long-suffering affection. He teaches RE in the school I went to almost twenty years ago, and attends Mass anywhere between two and five times a week – he's the next worst thing to a priest.

'Sorry,' I say.

'Do it again and I'll pray for you.'

We're elbow to elbow around the small dining table, but it's a cosy, intimate squash as we cycle through the old anecdotes and make our way through several bottles of

wine. I've been separated from Ivy, who is now flanked by Dad and my sister. And whilst I would rather have Ivy at my side than across the table, it does give me the opportunity to observe her as she entertains and indulges my family – laughing at their jokes, listening to their stories and jumping firmly aboard the let's-take-the-piss-out-of-William bandwagon. And my family are giddy with doting affection, competing for Ivy's attention, attempting to trump each other's gags, boasts and revelations. I extend my leg beneath the table and run it up the inside of what I assume is Ivy's shin. Maria flinches, striking the underside of the table with her knee and making the cutlery jump.

'What the hell are you playing at!'

'Cramp,' I say, and Maria looks at me like I've come unhinged.

'What are you up to?' Ivy says.

'Nothing. Stretching.'

Ivy narrows her eyes at me. 'Were you . . .' she turns to Maria' . . . was he playing . . . *footsy*?'

Reflexively I glance in my dad's direction, but he is apparently fascinated by the pattern on his plate.

'What's footsy?' asks Imogen, the elder of the twins by twenty minutes and always the most inquisitive.

'Never you mind,' says Maria.

'Something naughty boys do,' says Ivy, earning a chuckle from the twins.

'I was stretching!'

'Stretching credibility,' Ivy says, and Hector all but claps at this display of Wildean wit.

I keep my feet to myself for the remainder of the meal. And I come within a forkful of making it through to coffee without further incident.

We're eating dessert (the room is silent for a rare moment as everyone savours their cheesecake) when Dad announces: 'By the ways, William, I'll take your old room tonight, you and Ivy can use my bed.'

It's probably less than the five thousand years it feels like, but there is definitely a long awkward pause where my father's words – in particular the word 'use' – hang above the table. Ivy, fork still held between her lips, looks at my dad, smiles, hum-mumbles the twin syllables of *Thank you*. Or maybe it's *Blimey*.

Maria glances across at Ivy and smirks. Hector looks at me and winces. I look at my cheesecake and feel my cheeks flush.

On the drive down I had wondered about the sleeping arrangements. Dad's as Catholic as guilt and the only double bed in the house is his, which had me resigned to spending my first night sleeping alone since Ivy and I got

together. On the one hand it would be a shame; on the other it was bound to happen sooner or later and, to be perfectly honest, I'm exhausted. Plus, it would avoid any embarrassing conversations with my father.

'Changed the sheets,' says Dad. And when I make the mistake of making eye contact, the silly bastard winks. It's not a lascivious wink by any means; if I had to guess, I'd say it was self-congratulatory at being so modern and god-damned organized. But a wink is a wink and, if I had to put a flag in the ground, that would be the moment my sex life died.

The awkwardness as we undress for bed is tangible; I stumble removing my jeans, embarrassed by my pale, dangling nakedness; and Ivy, for the first time in our time together, climbs into bed wearing pants and a T-shirt. I was in all likelihood conceived in this bed, and whilst I have no desire for anything more risqué than a kiss on the lips, I am a little affronted by Ivy's assumption that the games are over. Also, I've drunk a bottle and a half of wine, so my mouth comments before my brain has a chance to edit.

'You're shy all of a sudden,' I say, slurring the s's slightly.

'I'm tired,' says Ivy. 'If that's okay?'

If that's okay?

Maybe I've drunk more than I realize, because I hear

myself saying: 'Fine. Whatever.' And the weight of the two words pulls at the corners of my mouth.

And while nothing gets thrown, neither ornaments nor accusations, this is the closest thing we've had to an argument and there is no affection in the room when I turn out the light and climb into my dad's bed.

I locate Ivy's head with my hands and it's turned away from me. 'G'night,' I say, kissing her hair.

Ivy sighs. 'Night,' she says, and she says it very very quietly.

We kiss in the morning, but it's lost something during the night – urgency, electricity, promise . . . something. It doesn't help that I have a pig of a hangover, although Ivy seems to have escaped any ill effects.

She spends a long time in the en suite shower, emerging from the steaming room dry, dressed and with her hair turbaned in a towel. And this sudden absence of casual nakedness, it jars. Besides the scars on the left side of her face, throat and neck, Ivy has scars on her belly, hip, right forearm, right thigh and right breast. And still she will pad about the flat naked or nearly so; feeding the fish, making coffee, eating her Bran Flakes. We must have spent half of our waking time together without a stitch on. So, yeah, when she steps out of the bathroom in jeans, shirt and a cardigan, it jars.

In the time it takes me to step in and out of the shower, Ivy is gone. I find her downstairs, talking to Dad, who has inelegantly heaped three cartons of juice, every box of cereal and every jar and tub of spreadable substance he owns on the kitchen table. He is now trying to make tea and butter toast at the same time and is making a woeful mess of both.

'Are you sure I can't do something?' Ivy asks.

'All under control,' Dad says, putting the lid on the teapot after two attempts. 'Now, how'd you take your tea— damn! You said coffee, didn't you?'

'Tea's fine.'

And instead of just leaving the tea to brew, Dad pours the pot down the sink.

'Scatterbrain,' he says, palming his forehead. 'No, you said coffee, you get coffee. Instant okay?'

Ivy is a confirmed coffee snob and I know she would rather drink nothing than drink instant, so when she tells Dad, 'Instant's perfect,' I feel a fresh pang of affection for her.

As Dad begins refilling the kettle, the kitchen smoke alarm starts emitting a jagged high-pitched beep, and my nagging headache mutates instantly into a snarling monster with very sharp teeth. Black smoke is issuing from the toaster and Dad stands frozen, looking from the toaster to

the alarm, trying to decide which one to tackle first. Still clutching the kettle, Dad snatches up a mop from beside the fridge and whacks the smoke alarm three times until it falls to the floor in two separate pieces, one of which is somehow still beeping (albeit less enthusiastically). He stamps on it once and it dies. The toaster pops.

Dad smiles at Ivy like a lunatic. 'Needed a new one anyway,' he says.

I pick up the fragments of smoke detector as Dad retrieves the charred toast and proceeds to scrape the burnt slices over the sink.

'Dig in,' says Dad, brandishing a blackened knife at the stacked boxes of cereal in a manner that suggests he won't be happy until we've eaten all of it. And so we eat a breakfast of burnt toast, powdery muesli and instant coffee, while Dad picks up where he left off last night, questioning Ivy and humiliating me.

Mercifully, Ivy has work tomorrow – a two-day shoot for a German car manufacturer – and we're on the road before ten o'clock and before Dad can inflict any further damage to the domestic appliances or my relationship with Ivy. He insists on making us a packed lunch and sends us on our way with enough brown bananas, soft pears and thick, Clingfilm-wrapped cheese sandwiches to keep us going for a week. There's a significant possibility that I'm

still over the limit, so Ivy drives and I press my head against the cool glass of the passenger-side window in an attempt to take some of the heat out of my hangover.

The Fiat came courtesy of my best friend, El; he gave it to me when he became too severely affected by Huntington's disease to drive. One bumper sticker invites fellow road users to honk if they're horny, whilst the other ('bummer sticker', El calls it) declares: 'I'm so gay I can't even drive straight'. And so, as we proceed south on the M6, we are honked and hooted and air-horned by car after car after van after eighteen-wheeled juggernaut. It was kind of amusing last week. Today, less so.

'I wonder if they think I'm a woman,' I say as a Ford Galaxy passes us, parping its horn, three gleeful children waving from the rear window.

'Why would they think that?' says Ivy, not smiling.

'You know . . . the bumper stickers.' Ivy frowns. 'Well, you're obviously not a man.' I wait for a smile of acknowledgement; don't get one. 'So presumably, if we're a gay couple, I'm a woman.' I rub my hand over my shorn auburn hair. 'The manly one.'

'Maybe they think we're just friends,' says Ivy.

I spend the next several miles fretting over whether or not I have offended Ivy. Maybe some of her best friends are lesbians. Or an aunty. She's never mentioned it and the

subject didn't come up during last night's interrogation, but anything is possible.

A new song starts on the radio: 'Could It Be Magic'.

'So who's your favourite Beatle?' I ask.

Ivy flicks her eyes in my direction. 'You do know this is Take That?'

To be honest, I thought it was Boyzone, but I nod anyway. 'Of course.'

Ivy says nothing.

'Well?' I venture.

'What?'

There's an impatient sharpness to Ivy's response, and now I'm certain she's being pissy. Probably because I was being insensitive or something last night.

'The Beatles,' I say brightly, deciding that rather than apologizing for (and, therefore, reminding Ivy of) last night's behaviour, the best policy is to gloss over all this silliness with a bright coat of chirpy good humour. 'John, Paul, Ringo or the other one,' I say.

'The other one,' says my beloved.

'Mick or Keef?' I persist.

'Didn't we do twenty questions last night?'

'Yes, we did. Well, you lot did; I was cooking. Thing is, it made me realize how much we still don't know about each other. That's all.'

Ivy pulls into the outside lane to overtake a convoy of cars that are doing around three miles an hour under the speed limit. It's hard going on the Fiat, and it rattles as we creep past several cars and vans slowly enough that I could reach through my window and shake hands with every one of the drivers. We pull back into the middle lane and I start breathing again.

'Sorry about last night,' I say, abandoning my policy of dumb ignorance.

'It's fine. They're lovely.'

'I meant me . . . I'm sorry about me.'

'It's fine.'

And I wait for thirty seconds, but Ivy doesn't say I'm lovely too.

And of course I'm in no hurry to know Ivy's favourite Take That song; and I don't *really* care what GCSEs she sat, or what her first cat was called. But there are other details – trivial, too, in their own way – that it feels almost negligent not to know.

'I don't even know when your birthday is.'

'October twenty-ninth,' she says.

There's a beat of silence. Ivy glances sideways, holds my gaze for a second, cocks an eyebrow incrementally. Something resembling a smile tugs the corner of her mouth. 'I'll be forty-one,' she says, turning her attention back to the road.

Eight cars, two vans and two wagons pass us before I formulate a response.

'Cool,' I say. As if, instead of her age, Ivy has just nonchalantly disclosed some impressive talent or skill: *I used to play guitar in a heavy metal band, I ran the marathon in 2:58, I can assemble an AK47 blindfolded*. 'Cool.'

But this information has thrown me (not that it would take a great deal to upset my precarious equilibrium this morning) and neither of us says another word for the next thirty miles or so.

Ivy will be forty-one on her next birthday, making her over nine years older than me. When she was my age, I was twenty-two. When she was twenty-two, I was thirteen. And, moving in the opposite direction, when I'm the age she is now, Ivy will be fifty – and cut that cake any way you like, that's old. I don't want to think about how old Ivy will be when I turn fifty – fifty is a good age for men: a time of distinguished grey highlights, and not so much wrinkles as lines of hard-won wisdom. How old Ivy will be when I hit my half-century gives me the heebie-crawling-jeebies. She doesn't look old; her body is firm and her skin, where it's not crisscrossed with scars, is smooth. I am fighting a strong urge, now, to turn and inspect the corners of her eyes for nascent crow's-feet. Things will even out, I imagine, when I turn eighty. Also,

women tend to live longer than men, so Ivy being almost a decade older than me improves the chances of us dying together, holding hands on the sofa in front of a slowly fading log fire in our retirement cottage on the coast. So there's that.

We stop at the services for a pee, and Ivy takes so long to pay her visit that I begin to worry she has either been abducted or simply taken a lift from a handsome stranger. When she does get back to the car she looks, if anything, more dejected than she has all morning. I've bought her a massive bag of Skittles, which I now present with a chimp-like grin, but Ivy says she's feeling lousy and asks will I drive. She makes an improvised pillow from a folded jumper, reclines her seat as far as it will go – which isn't far – and closes her eyes. And so we put more miles behind us, cars and motorbikes and vans honking their horns and pulling goon faces from the windows as they tear past.

Where did it all go wrong? is the question I keep coming back to. Surely our little spat last night, if it even qualifies as a spat, can't be responsible for Ivy's sudden withdrawal. We have just spent the most romantic, loved-up, slightly sickeningly blissed-out three weeks of my life together. We have not left each other's side, we started calling each other 'babe' without feeling completely silly about it, we made love every day, we made toast in the nude. And now . . .

just nothing. The paranoid snob inside wonders can it be the peeling paint on Dad's front door, the Formica kitchen units, the loose loo seat; but I know it's not. And if it is, then Ivy isn't the person I thought she was. Maybe she feels awkward about her age. Maybe I simply annoy the hell out of her and she's only just realized it. Maybe she looked at my dad buffooning around the kitchen and saw the future me. Or maybe she is simply premenstrual – and I'm so desperate to know what's bugging her, I'm sorely tempted to ask. But I suspect the question would be unlikely to reverse Ivy's current funk.

By the time we cross the M25 and re-enter London's gravity, I've eaten the entire bag of Skittles and I feel sick. And without any prompting, like she hasn't been sleeping at all but simply sitting still with her eyes closed, Ivy straightens in her seat and cricks her neck from side to side.

'Morning,' I say, more brightly than I feel.

'Hey,' says Ivy. She smiles, but there isn't much behind it.

'Your place or mine?' I say, but I already know I'm not going to like the answer.

Ivy has work tomorrow, she tells me, she's tired, she needs to do laundry, take a bath, feed her goldfish, etc.

Her flat is opposite the fourth lamppost on the left,

down a tree-lined street in Wimbledon. We had our first kiss right here, in this car, beside this lamppost. But whatever *frisson* crackled about us then, it's been replaced with a glutinous awkwardness. I get out of the car and remove Ivy's bags from the boot. She takes her suitcase, declining my offer of help, and we stand clumsily on the pavement, Ivy not inviting me in, and me not asking. A wave of indignation surges through me, sweeping away the introspection and doubt, and leaving in its wake annoyance, disappointment and scraps of broken ego.

'Right then,' I say. 'Suppose I'll be off.'

Ivy puts her suitcase down, gives me a silent hug and kisses the side of my neck. She holds it for a count of seconds, for about as long as you'd hold a final goodbye. She puts a hand to my cheek, smiles with her mouth but not with her eyes, says: 'I had a nice time. Thank you.'

'Sure,' I tell her. 'Enjoy your bath.'

We kiss once more, Ivy turns to cross the road and I'm gone before she gets her key in the door.