

The Other Side of the Stars

Clemency Burton-Hill

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Extract

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1

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This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture . . .

Rumi

. . . Why then
Have to be human – and, avoiding destiny,
Yearn for destiny?

Rilke

PROLOGUE

As she steps out of the airport terminal she can see that the world has turned white, and this makes her gasp. It is beautiful, and beauty is not what she is expecting. Giant snowclouds are beginning their weighty drift earthwards, icing like cakes the cars and taxis that hum along the kerb, surprising with their damp flakes the arriving travellers, who scurry even more urgently into the building, and delighting the little ones who now strain eagerly to break free of their mothers' hands and play. At the sight of the children, she wraps her coat tighter around her body and holds her face to the sky. The brightness is dazzling. She closes her eyes and feels icy snowflakes settle on her nose, and wonders if she might be dreaming. Where is she? Why has she come here? Noises are echoing oddly in her head: words are floating, the disjointed sounds of surrounding conversation merging with the shrieks from the kids in the snow and the distant Tannoy announcements inside and the screeches of brakes as a bus pulls up in front of the terminal to offload more bustling people. She hears what she supposes is the sound of

someone laughing. A baby crying. Another car horn. She opens her eyes and watches the great expanse of white nothing above her dissolve into further blankness as the snow begins to fall more heavily.

‘Excuse me,’ somebody is saying – how many moments later? The words sound close, but she does not move. She remains staring at the sky, the stray flakes that nestle at the edges of her eyes glinting like frozen tears. And again: ‘Excuse me!’ This time it is more intrusive, somehow, urgent. ‘Aren’t you . . . ?’

She drops her head down from the sky and shuffles away from her unwelcome interrogator towards a blue taxi that has just pulled up to the rank. The shouts she can hear as she opens the door seem to blur into all the other peculiar, underwatery sounds around her. She does not even realise they are directed at her.

‘Madam, there’s a queue,’ the driver begins to say. But as he glances at his rear-view mirror, and sees the face of the passenger who is now seated on the cracked navy leather, he falls silent. Immediately he cranks the machine into gear and pulls away from the airport, before any of the angry people in the snow-sodden line can tug her out again.

‘Where can I take you, madam?’ he asks, his voice a little tremulous as he swings the car into the lane that will direct them towards the city. The woman is silent, staring out of the window. The driver watches her face in the mirror. He should keep his eyes on the road in this weather, he knows, but it is only for a moment, and he can’t help it. He asks his question again. This time, he calls the woman by her name. She turns her head, slowly, and stares at him, her green eyes muddy with confusion. And then, suddenly, her eyes begin to focus. Now she knows where she is, and she knows what she has to say.

‘Just drive, please,’ she asks politely, her voice sounding distant to her ears, as if it might not be her own. Is it her own? Is she

really here, in this taxi, in this city? Why is she here? But she knows.

‘Of course, madam. Where would you like me to go?’

‘Where?’

‘Where?’

She hesitates for a moment. And then, in a half-whisper, she says the word: ‘Anywhere.’

As soon as she sees the street, she knows she is in the right place. ‘I would like to walk from here,’ she tells the driver quickly. ‘Stop, please.’

He glances at her reflection in surprise, but obediently pulls the car over and dashes round to open his passenger’s door. The street is so empty. He sees she has no luggage with her. She seems to have nothing at all. The snow is whipping up more ferociously now, and he feels a faint ripple of concern as the woman eases herself gracefully out of his cab into the blizzard. He smiles nervously at her, though; he cannot help it. And the smile she gives him in response suddenly dissolves his worries. He feels like the luckiest man in the world, just to be standing on this street with her. He watches as the woman pulls off one of her grey leather gloves, and then, with a little cry of shock, drops it in the snow. Her hand flies to her mouth and he automatically bends down to retrieve the glove.

‘Please,’ she is saying, her lovely voice a croak. ‘It’s just, I don’t seem to have any money. I don’t seem to have any things . . .’

The taxi driver smiles again and hands her back the glove. The leather, he will remember afterwards, is unthinkable soft, just as he imagines her hands must be. ‘Then it is my pleasure, madam.’ He gives a gallant little bow, believing this to be the right gesture in such unlikely circumstances. ‘My honour and pleasure. But are you sure you will be all right here? You haven’t far to go?’

Clemency Burton-Hill

The air is freezing and the snow now blankets the street around them. He feels another twinge of worry about leaving this woman alone in the storm. Surely she does not belong out here. Can he not, perhaps, put her back in his cab and take her somewhere else?

But she is shaking her head.

'I haven't far to go,' she assures him.

She watches the driver get back into his cab and listens to the splutter of the engine as it starts up in the cold. Her heart starts to beat faster, and she feels her throat constrict, and now she almost calls out to him to wait, *wait!*, she has made a mistake, such a terrible mistake! She is not supposed to be here at all, here, in this blank, empty theatre! But as the car chugs slowly down the street, her mouth remains closed. She does not move. Standing perfectly still, on her white, white stage, with the snowflakes now whirling ever more frantically around her, the woman is suffused with calm. She knows why she is here. She knows what she has to do. I haven't far to go. Not far.

Just to the other side of the stars.

Her eyes trail the taxi until it has turned the corner of the street and she is alone on her white stage once more. She closes her eyes. She takes a deep breath.

And then she begins to walk.

Part One

ONE

Through the slats of the shutters in their bedroom, Lara could hear Alex outside, whistling as he prepared food and drinks for the party. She smiled to herself and walked over to the window, leaning her elbows on the wide ledge. The late afternoon sun was hovering lazily over the rooftops of West London, and the wooden deck on their new flat, which they had been redecorating for the past month, was pink in its glow. Even the housing estate on the other side of the square looked rather lovely in this light, and Lara was momentarily dazzled by the flare from one of its windows as the sun hit the glass. Beyond the faint bass emanating from the council flats and the music coming from the speakers in her own living room, she could hear the comforting hum of traffic from the surrounding streets and the drifting laughter of Portobello Market stragglers somewhere down the road. It was the first of July. Lara breathed in the balmy air and felt relieved that, after a June of seemingly relentless slate-grey skies, summer had finally arrived. She called down to Alex, who looked up

from the ingredients he was chopping for Pimm's and waved his beer bottle at her.

'You coming to help me, Lady Latner?' He grinned. 'It's nearly six. What are you doing up there?'

She laughed. 'Sorry. Getting dressed. I'll be right down.'

'There's a very cold beer and a kiss waiting for you when you get here.' He brandished a half-chopped cucumber. 'And this. So hurry up.'

After pulling on a pair of jeans and a suitably summery top, Lara paused at her dressing-table and glanced at her reflection in the mirror. The antique piece of furniture, a relic from a dressing room in a famous old Parisian theatre, had once belonged to her mother, Eve. Gilt-edged and lined with bulbs that no longer worked, its rose-glass mirror was spotted with age but still contained, for Lara, the magic of a million once-reflected images. Looking into it, she could sometimes see herself as a small child, watching her actress mother make herself up – for a performance, a dinner, a party. Eve would sweep Lara onto her knee and dab powder on her nose, or a drop of Chanel No. 5 on her tiny wrists. She'd brush Lara's hair and kiss her ears, singing made-up songs to her in French as a filterless cigarette smouldered in the ashtray and cast them both in the romantic, smoky light of one of her films. At other times, Eve would sit with a script in her lap, reciting lines to herself, as her daughter crouched in the corner of the bedroom, apparently transfixed by the reflection of her mother in the mirror. Sometimes, Lara remembered, her father, Oliver, a British diplomat, would appear in another corner of the bedroom. He, too, would watch Eve for a moment, before clearing his throat and saying, 'Darling, you shouldn't smoke in front of the children.'

Now, all these years later, Lara saw only her twenty-six-year-old self. But somewhere, she knew, the ghost of Eve was still there, held for ever in its flecked old surface. Leaning forward

and narrowing her eyes at her own reflection, Lara drew a coat of mascara over her lashes and pressed a touch of that same Chanel scent into her neck. She pulled her dark hair into a messy knot, then selected a pair of earrings, grabbed her cigarettes and headed outside to join Alex at the cocktail table.

As promised, Cassie and Liz, Lara's former flatmates, were the first to turn up. Having deposited a bottle of wine, with a quick hello, into Alex's hands, Cassie threw her arms around Lara. 'I don't know why we're celebrating the fact that you've left us!' she exclaimed. 'We miss you!'

'It's true,' Liz said warmly, next in line for a hug. 'It's not the same without you.'

'Well, I miss you too.' Lara laughed, motioning them into the flat. 'But I'm not exactly far away.' The trio, who had happily found themselves sharing a corridor as nervous freshers at university, had been renting a flat in Shepherd's Bush for the past two years. Lara and Alex's new place, just north of Ladbroke Grove, was no more than a fifteen-minute bus ride away.

'I know, but it's still not the same as having you right there,' Cassie protested. 'I have to keep reminding myself that you've gone. I keep expecting you to appear in the kitchen in your pyjamas ...' She stopped as they reached the living room. 'Bloody hell, La, this is amazing.'

'Wow,' Liz agreed. 'It's *gorgeous*. And it was such a dump before.'

Lara beamed. 'Good. I'm glad you like it.'

'Are you kidding? I *love* it.' Cassie walked over to the french windows that led out onto the deck. 'Especially what you've done with this outside bit.'

'I know – isn't it great? That's what we're most proud of.' Lara pulled a face. 'God. Listen to me. I've turned into a middle-aged housewife already. "We're so proud of this", "You

must look at what we did with the bathroom”, blah, blah. I never saw myself as DIY-girl. It’s been quite a revelation.’ She chuckled, relishing the irony. ‘But, you know, you really *should* see the bathroom.’

The doorbell rang and Alex walked back into the living room, barbecue tongs in hand. ‘Drinks, ladies? How d’you like the new gaff, then? Not too shabby?’

‘Yeah, I’ll say,’ Liz laughed. ‘Your middle-aged housewife of a girlfriend has just been showing us around. The bathroom next, was it, La?’

‘You’ll see that later,’ Alex remonstrated. ‘Drinks. Much more important. Outside.’ He kissed the back of Lara’s head. ‘I’ll get the door.’

The guests were soon flowing as readily as the drinks, and by eight the place was packed. As more and more people arrived the hip-hop from the estate opposite got steadily louder and Lara, loving the carnival atmosphere on the square, wondered if this might be some territorial attempt to battle it out with the tunes being spun on the deck by her younger brother Lucas and his two mates. She allowed herself the vaguest flicker of concern about the noise, then promptly dismissed it. It was the first proper day of summer! And the rest of the building was empty tonight anyway. Since moving in six weeks ago, Alex and Lara had discovered that the inhabitants of the ground-floor flat, a publisher and his wife, went off to the country every weekend and never seemed to return until Monday morning. The hedge-fund manager who occupied the first floor was on holiday for two weeks. And the good will of their neighbours on the second floor, an investment banker from Sydney called Sam and his girlfriend Heidi, had been secured last weekend when Lara and Alex had popped downstairs to introduce themselves properly. Offering a bottle of Australian red they’d picked up in Oddbins down the road, Lara had

mentioned they were hoping to throw a housewarming party the following Sunday night – it had to be Sunday, she explained, because she was acting in a play called *Night Games* in the West End and Sunday was her only night off – to which they were, of course, warmly invited. Sam and Heidi had seemed very keen, and Alex had joked later that they were probably a bit starstruck by their upstairs neighbour: Lara was currently gracing the nation's TV screens again as the star of *The Chronicles of Mary*, a popular twenty-something series now in its third season on Channel 4. Lara, who was still amazed (and embarrassed) when anyone even recognised her from the TV, had rubbished that idea and decided instead that they were just being friendly.

Nevertheless, she noticed now that Heidi did seem a little flustered, as a group of the *Mary* cast suddenly arrived on the deck bearing champagne and drawing inevitable attention to themselves. Out of the corner of her eye, as she poured drinks and handed round paper plates, Lara spotted Heidi frantically trying to take pictures on her phone of Charlie Fox – Lara's co-star and the show's resident heart-throb – and gushing about how much she loved the programme. Amused, but mildly concerned about how this might affect neighbourly relations, Lara was relieved when Alex, still holding court at the barbecue, told her that it turned out Sam worked at the same investment bank as their friend Joe and was clearly quite happy talking credit crunch and derivatives over beers with him.

'They work at the same bank?' Lara asked, nicking a sausage off the grill and dipping it into the bowl of ketchup that was balanced on the edge of the table. 'Small world.'

'More to the point, someone who actually knows what Joe *does* all day.' Alex chuckled, deftly flipping a beefburger. 'That must be a nice change for him.' He put his free arm around

Lara's waist and leant over to kiss her. 'Good party, monkey,' he said.

'Good party,' she agreed, grinning at him through her sausage before dancing off to welcome the latest arrivals.

It *was* a good party. Evening dissolved into night and a few brave London stars came out and still nobody showed signs of slowing down. At one point Lara, feeling a bit drunk and not a little overwhelmed by all the snatched half-conversations and exclaimed hellos and quickly downed cocktails demanded by her role as hostess, escaped upstairs for a quiet cigarette. Returning to her favourite spot by the window, she surveyed the scene on the deck below. The sky, emptied of its sun, had faded to a dusky pinkish-blue but the air remained warm. Still holding the late afternoon's balmy perfume, it was infused now with other scents – her cigarette, forgotten bits of food that were still grilling slowly on the dying embers of the barbecue, the marijuana smoke which curled upwards from two distinct centres: her brother's crowd in one corner and the *Mary* actors in another. Lara leant her head against the window and marvelled for a moment at the music Lucas was mixing. It was a trademark Lucas sound, some kind of deep-funk, soul-infused hip-hop concoction, overlaid with the evocative strains of Nina Simone; it suited the almost melancholy beauty of this first summer evening perfectly.

Focusing on her little brother, busy at the turntables with his DJ face on, Lara felt a pang. They'd had a brief chat when he arrived – he had admired the flat, lingering over a framed monochrome photograph of their mother playing Cleopatra at the National Theatre, which Lara had hung over the fireplace. She'd mentioned that their father had emailed to say he was coming back to London for a memorial service soon, and said she hoped they could all get together when he was in town. Lucas had said something like 'Yeah, cool, whatever,' but had

been characteristically laconic when she'd asked how he was doing. He'd been working in a record shop in Soho for most of the summer – they'd bumped into each other on Shaftesbury Avenue a couple of weeks ago on her way into the theatre. That was when she'd had the idea of asking him to DJ at the party. He had told her then that he was staying in Oliver's pied-à-terre in Pimlico, coaching cricket at the weekends and trying to save up for a trip to a Moroccan music festival.

That much she had learnt. But when was the last time she had had a proper conversation with him? she wondered. Lucas had just finished his second year at university, coasting through his social-anthropology degree like he'd coasted through his school days; no care for anything much except making music and playing football. Lara did try to visit him in Bristol as much as possible, taking him out for Sunday lunch at one of the nicer local pubs and transferring him money every now and again: he knew she would never tell their father. They made small-talk easily enough, could drink a few pints together or go and see a film without awkwardness, but Lara always found herself stepping onto the train home with a leaden realisation that the great chasm of the unsaid between them had just widened. After their mother's fatal accident in Paris ten years ago, Lara's relationship with her brother had necessarily been wrenched from the sisterly to the maternal. But she had been only sixteen herself, equally paralysed by grief and disbelief, and it had faltered, perhaps inevitably. Although some had questioned the wisdom of Oliver Latner dispatching his newly motherless children back to their respective boarding schools in England while he returned to the embassy in Beirut to pick up the pieces, Lara had been inwardly grateful for his approach. Father and brother were a walking, breathing, inescapable reminder of her loss; and she'd found it easier, or rather, less difficult to get through the shock of her mother's death by shutting down, focusing on her

A levels and distancing herself from the two people who might have any real understanding of what she was going through.

Still, tonight Lara felt something sharp, regretful, bite into her when she looked down at her brother. She knew so little about Lucas these days. She wasn't even sure if he had a girlfriend, although there always seemed to be a clutch of impossibly beautiful girls buzzing around him and his entourage – like the creature here tonight, a long-legged blonde who never seemed to take her eyes off him. Over the years, Lara knew, Lucas had cultivated two versions of himself. There was the one on the outside that most people saw – a tall, good-looking boy with distant sea-blue eyes and mean skills on the decks – and then there was the real, inner one; the one who sat very still and watched the world going on around him in bemused, peaceful silence. Lara had always prided herself on having access to the real Luc, the inner Luc, but somewhere along the way, she now saw with a shock, she had lost that sisterly privilege. And, knowing what her brother was like, it would not be easily won back either.

Lara watched as Lucas removed his headphones and accepted a bottle of Becks and a spliff from one of his friends, a black guy with dreadlocks who took over as DJ. Taking a drag from the joint between his teeth, Lucas hoisted himself up onto the wall and positioned his battered *djembe* drum between his knees. And then something remarkable happened. Despite people's absorption in their own conversations, despite all the general party chatter and the surrounding urban drone, it seemed to Lara that there was a collective gasp as her brother began drumming over the track his friend was playing. For a moment, everyone fell silent in appreciation. Lucas had started drumming as a kid when they lived in Lebanon, then taken it more seriously when the family had been posted to Kinshasa, then Dakar. He'd learnt properly on the streets of Mali and Senegal in his gap year and had clearly honed his talent at clubs and parties in

Bristol over the past couple of years. He was amazing. Lara felt a swell of pride and would almost have joined in the whoops of delight from her guests, had she had not wanted to remain up here, invisible to the party, for just a little longer.

As Lucas played, Lara cast her eye over the collection of her and Alex's friends below and felt any latent regret about her brother melt away in a surge of happiness and drumbeats. I love these people, she thought, the loosening effect of all those cocktails gilding everyone in a warm glow. Lots were mutual friends of theirs from university – so many of them now lawyers and bankers and management consultants that it was good to see them dressed down and letting rip on a Sunday night. But there were others she and Alex had picked up here and there too – at her drama school, his law school, on random holidays. It was good to have so many of them in one place; and especially this place, she reflected, feeling again a sense of incredulity that these bricks, this mortar, were really theirs to call 'home'.

The flat had cost a fortune, even despite the credit crunch, but after four years of renting post-university, Lara had decided it was worth it. Following a stretch of almost constant employment, and a few fat residuals cheques for *Mary*, the series that had given her a big break following her post-grad year at drama school, this was certainly the moment she could afford it. She and Alex had never officially cohabited during their six years together, but this spring, with the leases up for renewal on both their rental places, had also seemed the right time for that. They had been joking about being together for ever since about a month into their relationship, so taking the plunge and getting a place together hadn't seemed like that big a deal.

What had become a big deal, however, was *where* they were going to buy, with Alex, native northerner and latterly dedicated resident of Camden Town, declaring that 'no fucking way' was he

going to live ‘in a half-million-quid cupboard among the posh twats in Notting Hill’; and Lara, with her secret predilection for organic groceries and nice cocktail bars, beginning to despair. For three months they’d slogged around London, failing to find a flat they both loved but eventually agreeing on a place in Angel, mostly out of frustration. Lawyers were instructed, surveys were carried out, the whole excruciating process had shunted along until, at the very point of exchanging contracts, they were gazumped.

‘The bastard!’ Alex had exclaimed, lightly, on hearing the news. They were sitting in the pub down the road from his flat, drowning their sorrows.

‘You know, Al,’ Lara had said tentatively, ‘we *can* afford to match the other offer . . .’

He’d looked up at her and touched her cheek affectionately. ‘Let’s forget about it, princess. As you might say, it clearly wasn’t *meant to be*.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Sure, baby. Forget about it. We’ll go back to the estate fuckers tomorrow and we’ll find somewhere better. You’ll see, it’ll all work out for the best.’ He held up his pint glass. ‘Cheers, you.’

And then, just the following Saturday, Lara had been woken up by the plummy tones of Barnaby-from-Foxtons, whom she had in desperation called upon to help her look for somewhere ‘at least in North Kensington’. Something had *just* come on the market, the very obliging Barnaby had explained urgently to her through her sleep fug; it needed ‘a bit of attention’, he conceded, but was in the right area and an ‘absolute bargain’, having belonged to an old lady who had recently died and whose bickering sons, aware of the current pitch of the London market, were keen to get rid of it as soon as possible.

Within minutes, Lara had pushed a mildly grumbling Alex out of bed. ‘It’s a two-bed split top-floor flat, with a terrace, on St Charles Square,’ she’d told him on the way, anticipation

catching in her throat. 'Number twenty-nine, I think he said. You know where I mean? Just up from Ladbroke Grove tube.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Alex had joked. 'But it's still in W10, my posh little love.'

Once inside the property, though, Lara – heart beating frantically for she adored it even in its dilapidation and despite the hideous fifties furnishings – had raised her eyes to meet Alex's and found him smiling at her. She had laughed out loud. With its lofty position above the square, near enough to the chic dim sum restaurants and the French candle emporia but closer in spirit to the grotty pubs and vegetal grunge of Portobello Market, it had retained enough of the area's historic character and charm to seduce even the wary northerner.

Not long afterwards, back in Barnaby's bottle-green office, Lara was pledging away her considerable chunk of the capital required, Alex was adding his own, more modest, contribution, surveys were being arranged, and bingo: two weeks later they had themselves a mortgage. Much as Alex teased Lara about her funny little superstitions, her faith in the random interventions of fate in everyday life, she would never be able to shake the feeling that this flat was somehow destined to be theirs. Of all the many houses she had lived in across the world, she had never felt so happy anywhere.

Lara watched her boyfriend on the terrace now as he darted between clusters of people, refilling drinks, laughing, making everyone feel at ease, as was his way. She saw him shake hands with arriving boys, kiss departing girls goodbye, segue effortlessly into the ends or beginnings of conversations. Spreading joy, that was what Alex did. It was what he had always done.

She'd had a sense of it the very first time she'd met him, at a party in her second year at university. Alex had been standing by a makeshift drinks table chatting to a girl, holding a bottle

of Tesco value cola in one hand while he sloshed vodka into the girl's glass with the other. Lara had waited patiently by the table – ostensibly for the vodka, but actually quite content just to watch, unobserved, the tall boy with the floppy dark hair and animated brown eyes. He'd suddenly turned and caught her eye; she'd motioned at the vodka. 'Oh, sorry, didn't mean to be hogging it all night,' he'd chuckled, in his broad northern accent, cracking her the most enormous grin. 'I'm Alex, by the way.' The other girl seemed to have disappeared – although in reality she was probably still standing there, daggers in her eyes, clutching her vodka and coke – and for the rest of the party, Alex and Lara had never left each other's side.

He was a history finalist, he told her, a politics-obsessed footballer from a small town just outside Manchester, heading to law school in London next year. She was reading French and Italian, she explained, 'basically cheating' her way through her degree because she was half French and could already, thanks to being the daughter of a diplomat, speak lots of languages. 'I've seen you somewhere before, haven't I?' he'd said, at which point she'd blushed and, being a few vodkas down, admitted that she'd probably remember if that had been the case. But he'd insisted, and finally remembered: of course! The theatre! He'd seen her in that 'legendary' production of *Romeo and Juliet* last year; the one that had acquired a sort of mythical status across the university because it had been so good, critics from London had come up to review it. As if reflecting the connection he had just made, a shadow crossed Alex's lovely, open face and he seemed to be looking into Lara's eyes with a new understanding. Wasn't she the girl with the famous mother, the dead mother, the French actress? But he hadn't said anything about that. He'd simply gone, 'Yeah, well, I suppose you were okay in that play, weren't you?' with a twinkle in his eye. She'd laughed.

They'd talked all night, and continued to talk as the party

gradually dwindled to a close. Emerging from the noisy, smoke-filled rooms to discover a university town tranquil and peaceful under the stars, they'd kept walking, talking and walking, vodka-happy, love-drunk, until pausing at the river. The sun had nudged its way out of the darkness, then, and dawn light had flooded the bank of grass where they were sat, huddled together for warmth. Alex had taken Lara's face in his hands and kissed her. 'Well I never,' his eyes had said, laughing. 'Who'd have thought?'

And that had been that, really. Alex had become Lara's rock: her best friend, her protector, the first person she had dared to trust after four post-Eve years of wondering if everybody she loved would one day desert her. 'Thank you for the sunshine in my head,' she used to say to him, wishing there were somehow words that could convey just how much she loved him; just how grateful she was for the peace he'd restored to her soul.

As if sensing Lara's green eyes on him again, Alex looked up at their window, spotted her sitting on her favourite seat, and winked. Lara felt a rush of affection, a familiar surge of warmth and security – and then caught her breath as a spasm of dread suddenly gripped her insides. The happy scene below her was starting to blur and buckle, and her head spun with the sensation that she might be watching it all – her boyfriend, her friends, brother, her flat, her life – from a great distance; as if she were no longer part of it. Lara shut her eyes and, to her astonishment, felt tears sear the backs of her eyelids. Turning away from the window she took a deep breath and pulled the shutters tightly closed. *What the hell was that?* she wondered at her reflection, furiously stubbing her cigarette in the ashtray on the dressing-table. Her face in the mirror wondered back, impassive. Lara closed the bedroom door and went slowly downstairs to rejoin the party, trying to banish Nina Simone and her heart-wrenching melody from her head.