

# The Art of Losing

Rebecca Connell

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REBECCA CONNELL

*The Art of Losing*

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*Louise*  
2007

Until I was ten, my father told me a bedtime story every night. I suppose that in the early days the stories covered the usual ground, but after my mother died, they changed. His new stories were all about her. Sometimes he would attempt to disguise them a little, holding up a book as if he were reading from it, but I wasn't fooled. Other times he would simply sit at my bedside and pour out memories – his own, and those she had passed on to him. Often they made him cry, and I would comfort him.

I thought for many years that the stories were my father's way of keeping her alive for me; that he was anxious not only that I should not forget her, but that I should learn even more about her than I would have done if she had lived. Now I don't believe those were his motives at all. It was simply that there were no other stories he could tell. When she died, it closed off all other avenues, and for many years circling around these old memories was a compulsion and not a choice.

The last story he ever told me started off innocuously enough. Out at a party together, my parents had begun talking to a woman who claimed to be clairvoyant, and my father, instantly fascinated, asked her to read their future. The woman spun a pretty tale: two children, plenty of travelling, long and happy lives. My mother seemed to accept her words readily

enough, but when they left the party she exclaimed how ridiculous it had been. Still basking in the rosy glow of the predicted future, my father was a little hurt, and questioned her on how she could be so sure that everything the woman had foreseen would not come to pass. She stopped dead in the middle of the road to face him, and said, evenly and quietly, *Because I won't live past forty*. Irrational as they were, her words upset my father, and he demanded to know what she meant. She shrugged, and refused to elaborate. The next day, when he asked again, she claimed drunkenness and laughed the incident off, but in retrospect he believed that she was the one with the second sight – another attribute, albeit unwanted, to add to her extensive list.

When he finished this tale I was quiet, not knowing how or what I should reply. The point of the stories had always been that they were happy, but this one had left an unpleasant taste in my mouth and an eerie feeling sliding up and down my spine. My father was quiet, too, for a long while, staring down at the pink patterned coverlet. Although I can't remember his expression, I can guess at what it would have been: the familiar lost, uncomprehending blanket of despair that was his face's default setting after his wife's death. After what seemed like hours, he heaved himself to his feet and left the bedroom without a word. When the next night came I half dreaded the bedtime story, but there was none forthcoming. The explanation was that I was getting too old for such things. Even at that age I knew better. The truth was that I was too young for the stories he had left – the stories he really wanted to tell.



I exercise it rarely, this talent I have. Scurrying down darkening streets, shivering in my rain-slicked clothes, I allow my muscles to relax into a familiar rhythm. I'm a dancer remembering a

long-forgotten dance, a gymnast whose body instinctively recalls the twists and turns set aside many years ago. I haven't played this game since school. Back then, I used to skulk behind an admired teacher as he made his way from classroom to car park, always keeping a few steps behind. As he unlocked his car and drove off I would be there watching, only yards away, my breath still shallow from the excitement of the pursuit. He never noticed me. I have this talent for following.

The man I am following now is just as oblivious. He thinks he is alone, but ever since he left the lecture hall, I've been with him. Down the high street, I slide through the crowd like mercury. His heavy burgundy coat glints wetly ahead like a jewel. As I keep my eyes on that coat now, I can't help but compare it to my own. I want to be wrapped up in his coat, engulfed in its warmth. It would swamp me; he must be six foot two, a clear eight inches above me. It would smell of – what? Cigarettes: I saw him light up as he left the hall, cupping his hand to shield the tiny flame from the wind. I'm getting too close. I hang back as his pace slows, counting my steps in my head.

Abruptly he stops, as if hearing his name called. I shrink back into the recesses of a doorway as he puts a hand to the back of his neck. He's forgotten something, perhaps – a book, an umbrella, a scarf. No. He's simply forgotten himself – passed his destination. He hurries back up the road and ducks into a brightly coloured café, swinging the door shut behind him. I wait a few moments, then sidle up to the café, leaning back against its wet orange wall. Through the rainwater that streaks the window-glass, I watch. He's settled into a table near the window, rummaging in his bag to withdraw a newspaper, turning the pages with the enjoyment of a ritualised routine. A minute later, a waitress brings him a cup, and I see his lips move in silent thanks. I watch him for five, ten minutes. His black hair is heavily threaded with silver; closer than I've been

before, I can see fine lines exploding out across his face. I know that he must be fifty-five years old.

The letter he wrote almost twenty years ago is in my pocket. Its words are always with me. They run through my head when I talk, an almost-heard undercurrent bubbling just below consciousness. I tap them on an imaginary keyboard, my fingers digging privately into my palm. Close to my heart, I keep them folded up tightly in their faded paper everywhere I go. The name at the top of this letter is not mine, but I intend to borrow it for a while.

The lights in the café are so dizzily bright that when Lydia turns away they're still imprinted on the damp grey alleyway in front of her like the afterglow of a camera flash. She blinks, once, again, to jolt herself out of the cocoon he has wrapped her up in. It works. The cold returns and clamps her like a vice. Suddenly she's alone on the street with no idea where she is.



Lydia wakes without warning, dragged up sharply by the sudden dip of her elbow off the ledge. For a second she glances around bewildered, expecting to see the cool blue walls of the rented attic room encircling her. The dreamlike hour that has passed drips back into her mind: rising after too little sleep, riding down town to the faculty lecture hall in the November half-light, falling into her seat. When she arrived the hall was almost deserted. Now it's packed with students, huddled in little groups and chatting, their steady buzz of conversation punctuated by shrieks of laughter and groans of disbelief. A few are still snoozing, heads pillowed on the wooden ledges. Undisturbed, Lydia watches them all. The snatches of conversation she picks up are inane but compelling. She has never had this: the easy banter between friends, the talk of nights out unrestricted by parental guidelines or curfews.

She is leaning forward to listen more intently when she sees a boy sitting a few seats along the row, watching her. Dark hair swept over his face and stubble prickling his chin. Curious eyes that look hazel in the sunlit hall. He's looking at her insolently, half smiling, as if he's thinking, *I know what you're up to*. As she catches his eye, there's none of the embarrassed gaze-shifting she expects, only a slow deliberate wink. Flushing, she scowls at him and looks quickly away. A moment later she risks a swift glance back to check that he is properly subdued. He isn't. He's laughing, and when he catches her eye again he mouths something. She doesn't get it at first, and can't resist a puzzled frown. The boy leans farther towards her and mouths the phrase again, full lips moving soundlessly and exaggeratedly among the noise around them. *Forgive me*, they say.

She bites the bubble of laughter back into her throat as the lecturer walks down the aisle and takes the stage. He's wearing a long trench-coat, his black hair swept back into peaks, highlighting the silver strands running through it. As he strides to the podium the students fall silent, settling expectantly back in their seats. He takes a moment to survey the room, holding his audience, then starts to speak. Although she knows that she must have heard his voice many times as a child, she has been unable to recapture it in her head, and yet it has a familiar quality; deep, powerful and harsh.

'Sensibility,' he says. 'It's a word that has become downgraded over the centuries. Now, it aligns itself with sentimentality, and that carries a pejorative ring – mawkish, oversensitive, weak.' He spits out the words one by one. 'But sensibility was once the encapsulation of the finest feelings of which man was capable. An acute sensitivity to emotion, significance, mortality, all the things that still surround us in modern society but which are more often forced underground than brought out into the open. This was a different time, a time where a man crying at



the symbolism of a caged bird was accepted as part of the natural order of life. Such over-analysis, such keen awareness of pathos and significance in every living creature, be it man or fly, was actively celebrated – and satirised too, of course, as every great movement is—’

She is dragged away from his words by a muted commotion a little farther down the row. With horror she sees that the dark-haired boy is nudging his neighbour and passing a folded piece of paper, whispering in her ear and gesticulating. His friend puts up a show of resistance, rolling her eyes laughingly, but takes it and turns to her neighbour in turn. The paper makes its whispering way down the row until it reaches the girl sitting next to Lydia, who passes it on with a look of contempt. Lydia smiles at her apologetically – *we’re on the same side* – but the other girl turns away and makes a great show of listening to the lecture. Hurriedly, Lydia unfolds the paper and smooths it out on the ledge. The note is written in uneven capitals, like those a child might use. YOU LOOK VERY SERIOUS, it says. I’VE NEVER SEEN ANYONE PAY SO MUCH ATTENTION TO A LECTURE. OR ARE YOU JUST IGNORING ME?

She puts the note to one side and tries to focus her attention back on the front of the stage, but she can’t concentrate, the lecturer’s words flowing over her in an incomprehensible torrent. Angrily, she snatches the paper up and writes quickly. *In case you hadn’t noticed, everyone is concentrating, except you. Only someone very presumptuous would assume that a complete stranger should be looking at him rather than listening to the lecture. P.S. Your handwriting is terrible. I’m surprised they even let you in.* She refolds the paper and passes it to the unamused girl next to her, who shoots Lydia a look of scorn and pushes it to her left without looking at it. It’s only five minutes before the paper boomerangs back. This time the girl lets out a long sigh and hands it to Lydia pointedly. She’s right; this has gone far

enough. Lydia determines to read the note and then crumple it into a ball and discard it, no matter what its contents.

WE USE COMPUTERS NOW, it reads. ANYWAY, THERE'S NO POINT ME CONCENTRATING. I HEAR ALL THIS AT HOME, THE LECTURER IS MY FATHER.

The last words hit her square in the chest. She looks back up at the figure at the lectern, tall and imposing, dressed in black. She can't connect this boy with him, or all she knows of him.

'The concept of an emotional journey is one we haven't lost,' the lecturer is saying now. 'But we've transfigured it into trite Hollywood movies, where a journey can be as simple as going from A to B with a ready-made message at the end of the rainbow. The ugly duckling transforms into a swan, and finds that in the end it's her inner beauty that has captured the high-school jock and that looks don't matter after all. Sterne's concept of a journey was very different. Here we learn more about the travelling than the arriving; false starts, irrelevant-seeming diversions, every emotion of the traveller dissected.' It seems to Lydia that his eyes are fixed on hers, blotting the rest of the hall out in a messy blur of light. 'Which is the more real? Which is the more true to life? Do we still understand the meaning of sensibility, or are our attempts at sensitivity, at love, little more than hollow flights of fancy?'

A sudden burst of nausea jolts her into action. She stumbles to her feet and pushes past the row of students, fighting her way towards the aisle. Heaving the oak door open, she lurches out into the cool dark hallway. She presses her head against the stone wall, so hard that she feels a jolt of pain pass through her. The sickness soon fades, but she knows she can't go back in there. She stands alone in the corridor, listening to the unmoved hum of the lecturer's voice behind the door, until a faint noise makes her swing round. The dark-haired boy is standing silhouetted at the end of the corridor, watching.

‘I thought I should follow you,’ he says simply, shuffling forward. ‘I felt bad. Was it something I said?’

‘No,’ she mutters. ‘I felt faint for a moment. I shouldn’t have left. It’s nothing.’

The boy moves closer. Up close he seems different, his initial cockiness replaced by a charming diffidence which makes it hard for her not to look at him. His eyes are fringed blackly with long lashes like a girl’s, but there’s something in the hard set of his jaw which she realises now does echo the lecturer’s granite-carved face. ‘Good,’ he says. ‘I thought it was me.’ He breaks off and throws her a small smile. ‘Presumptuous again,’ he says.

‘Sorry about that,’ she says, hurriedly. ‘I just couldn’t understand why you were looking at me.’

‘Really?’ The boy looks her full in the eyes for a second, holding the gaze until she breaks it. ‘I’m Adam,’ he continues, extending his hand so that she has no choice but to take it. ‘Just to get the introductions over with.’

‘Lydia,’ she says, and the name still feels strange on her tongue.

‘Pleased to meet you.’ Adam clears his throat. She knows this should be her opportunity to get away, to thank him for his concern and abandon the situation before it grows more complex, but she can’t seem to rouse herself. ‘What college are you at?’ he asks now, smiling again and leaning back against the wall.

‘Jesus,’ she says automatically without considering her answer. She’s picked a college she has never even seen, which she knows nothing about.

‘Really?’ Adam says eagerly. ‘I’m at Lincoln. I’m surprised I haven’t seen you on the street before, or in the Turl.’ With difficulty she remembers that this is a pub which must presumably be near by. She shrugs. ‘So what do you think of Sterne?’ he asks, gesturing back towards the lecture hall.

This is too much of a minefield. ‘Actually, I’m not doing English,’ she says. ‘I was just interested by the topic and thought I’d come along. I don’t know much about it. I’m doing—’ She pauses fractionally, trying to settle on a subject of which Adam might reasonably be expected to have little knowledge. ‘Geology.’

‘Wow,’ he says. ‘Interesting.’ She forces a smile in response. ‘So what are you doing tonight?’

‘I don’t know,’ she says feebly. His rapid questions and subject changes are starting to exhaust her. ‘I have some work to do.’

‘I’m going clubbing,’ Adam volunteers. He names a place that she remembers passing a few nights back, and moving quickly away from as a gaggle of drunken students lurched out of its doors and started loudly heckling her. ‘I might see you there?’

She nods. She wants to get away now. This isn’t why she’s here, and she doesn’t want this boy to complicate things. She starts to edge away down the corridor.

‘I’ll see you,’ she says vaguely.

‘OK.’ He makes no attempt to follow her, and for a second she is perversely disappointed. She’s almost at the door when he calls her back. She turns expectantly. He’s smiling again, hands in his pockets, still lounging against the wall. Just as in the lecture hall, his lips move silently, exaggeratedly. *I was looking at you, they say, because I think you look amazing.* The unspoken words ring in her head. She turns and pushes her way outside, sharp winter air suddenly knocking the breath from her and making her light headed. Without knowing why, she breaks into a run.

When she is back in her bedroom it is still before eleven o’clock. She falls asleep again in the blink of an eye, and dreams of things that leave her lost and lonely when she wakes again and finds nothing but silence, silence and solitude and memo-

ries of people and places and things that feel so, so long ago that they seem to have happened to someone else – someone else entirely.



There are too many people in the club. After over an hour's wait in the queue, Lydia hands her rain-sodden coat over to the cloakroom, then heads for the dance-floor. She pushes her way into the centre of the crowd, letting the rhythm of the dancing carry her along, closing her eyes as music thumps and screeches above her. She wants to get a drink, but the bar seems so far away that she's not sure she'll ever reach it. Gasping for breath, she elbows a path through the mass of dancers, following the twisting gaps and breaks between groups as if she is tracing the tangles of a densely knotted necklace. When she eventually reaches the edge of the bar she grabs it tightly, looking back at what she has come from. Neon lit, heads bob in the air like beads of rain trembling on a washing line. She can't see the expressions on their faces, features blurred out in bursts of flashing red and green light. The music is changing now. Frenetic beats give way to slower, grittier rhythms, and the heads respond to it, bowing and swooping gravely back and forth.

She turns to the barman and motions him towards her. 'Water,' she shouts, but he seems not to hear her. She tries to shout louder, but her voice cracks and dries up. Instead she points at random at one of the bottles behind the bar. The barman nods and pours her a small glass of liquid that could be any colour, rippling over chunks of ice. She hands him a five-pound note and waits for change that never comes, taking a sip of the drink. It's vodka, pure and strong, hitting the back of her throat like fire. As she takes another gulp, she catches sight of herself in the long row of mirrors behind the bar. A

strobe light sweeps across and dyes her dark brown hair a dazzling white blonde, and for a second she looks like someone else and what she sees makes her turn quickly away.

Ever since she reached the club she's been looking for Adam, somewhere in the back of her mind, but it's only now that she sees him. He's standing on a raised podium, a vantage point from which he is scanning the dance-floor. His dark hair curls around the collar of a bright white T-shirt, bare arms folded in front of him. He's not looking at her, but he's looking for someone, that much is clear. Before she can think about it, she leaves the bar and runs up the steps, weaving her way round the room. It takes her only a minute, but by the time she reaches him, he's not alone. Another boy and two girls have joined him and all four are laughing together: they've found him before he found them. The boy has white-blond hair cropped to the curve of his scalp, wiry shoulders under a black T-shirt. His arm is slung around one of the girls, a Latin-looking brunette in a short skirt and knee-high boots, rocking from foot to foot to the rhythm of the music. The other girl is closest to Adam. Lydia watches as she snakes her arm around his neck, having to raise herself on tiptoes to reach him. The girl is petite and blonde, hair feathered in a funky crop around her face, her black dress highlighting the paleness of her skin. She's snuggling in closer to Adam, hugging him to her; it's hard to tell whether the gesture is that of a lover or a friend.

At that moment he sees her. For a second his eyes look through her blankly. Then something snaps into focus. He breaks away from the group and walks towards her, his face serious.

'Lydia,' he says.

'Thought I'd pop by,' she says, and only then does he smile.

He takes her arm, and leads her back to the three waiting figures. Now that she's up close, she sees that the blonde girl is

very beautiful; huge slanting eyes balanced on angular cheekbones, subtly pouting lips slashed with red. She beams and holds out her hand, but Lydia sees a swift head-to-toe glance of appraisal, sizing her up.

‘This is Isobel,’ Adam shouts into her ear. The girl nods and smiles again, saying something that Lydia doesn’t catch. ‘And this is Jack and Carla,’ he continues, lumping them together with a wave of his hand. They are clearly a couple, the girl’s hand now snaking into the boy’s pocket to retrieve his wallet as he rolls his eyes and wriggles away.

‘Hi,’ she says, laughing and snatching the wallet. ‘I was just about to go and get us some more drinks, d’you want anything?’

Lydia hesitates; she’s not sure of the etiquette. They’ve barely been introduced, after all. ‘I could give you some money—’ she starts, but Carla dismisses her words with a flamboyant wave of the hand. ‘Well, thanks,’ she says. ‘Vodka and lemonade, then.’

Carla disappears into the crowd, hips swaying confidently as she goes. Lydia sees Jack watching her out of the corner of his eye. ‘Hello,’ she says. ‘I know Adam from lectures. He said he was going to come down here tonight, so I thought—’ All too late she realises this sounds as if she has come deliberately in search of Adam, a fact she has barely acknowledged even to herself. Her cheeks flame up and she covers her embarrassment with a cough.

Jack’s eyes flare briefly and wickedly. ‘No worries.’ Drawled, flattened vowels lend his voice a dry edge. He’s only averagely good looking, but she can tell that his confident bearing would raise him a few notches on the scale with many women. He lights a cigarette now, narrowing his eyes above the smoke, and draws sharply on it. ‘You known Adam for long, then?’

Adam cuts into the conversation, saving her. ‘Ooh, a while,’ he says teasingly.

‘Yeah?’ Jack says. They both laugh. Lydia looks from one to the other, not seeing the joke. By the looks of it, it’s equally lost on Isobel, who looks briefly irritated before resting a hand on Adam’s arm and leaning in farther towards her.

‘So tell us about yourself,’ she shouts invitingly above the music. Lydia smiles and shrugs. ‘You know,’ Isobel continues, ‘name, college, what you’re reading, where you’re from, all that?’

Lydia fields questions until Carla returns with the drinks and Isobel is mercifully distracted. They find a small table on the far side of the club, but squeezing all five of them on to the narrow bench is a struggle, and Lydia finds herself pressed up tightly against Adam. At such close range, she can smell the tart citrus tang of his aftershave, and something deeper beneath, a mix of alcohol and cigarettes and sweat that makes her feel dizzy. His bare arm brushes her own, and all the hairs on her arm prickle in response. There’s no way he can know, but for a second he looks at her in a way that makes her look hurriedly away. They barely exchange a word for the next hour. Banter flows back and forth between the two boys with practised ease, and Lydia gradually finds herself chipping in with the odd jibe along with the other girls. She’s having fun, she realises with a shock as she tips back her fourth vodka. Laughter makes her hiccup on the last mouthful, and her eyes water and smart. Adam slaps her on the back, letting his hand rest there for a few moments longer than necessary, and she smiles her thanks.

‘All right?’ he asks, leaning in. She nods. ‘Do you live in?’ he half breathes, half shouts. It seems like a non sequitur, and an incomprehensible one at that. Her mind gropes around the strange unfinished sentence. ‘Do you live in college?’ he clarifies, seeing her lost face. ‘Or out?’

‘Oh!’ she exclaims. ‘No, I live out.’

‘Whereabouts?’ he asks intently, leaning in farther.



‘Beechwood Road,’ she says. The truth slips out easily; she’s sick of the lies she has been telling all evening and it feels like a small relief.

‘Really?’ Adam says, his seriousness replaced by an amused smile. ‘Which number? My mate Rob lives up there.’

‘Nineteen,’ she says. Again, it’s the truth, but she feels uncertain about divulging it. Adam merely nods, draining his drink.

‘How are you getting back?’ he asks casually.

‘I don’t know. I’ll get a taxi, I suppose,’ she says. She hasn’t thought this far ahead, but a glance at her watch reveals that it’s almost 2 a.m. It doesn’t seem to be the answer that Adam wants or expects; an irritated shadow passes over his face and he shrugs. Lydia is about to rephrase her answer into something more non-committal when there is a commotion at the other end of the table. Isobel is clambering up from her seat and standing on the table-top, spiky black heels sliding and gaining purchase on its shiny surface. She starts to dance, swaying seductively back and forth to the rhythm of the music, her short black dress snaking up and down her body and revealing tautly honed thighs. Her eyes are half closed, her red lips parted. Jack and Carla whoop in delight, whistling and slamming their hands down on the table-top. Before long a little crowd of men has collected around the table, encouraging Isobel on her self-appointed podium. She pouts her lips laughingly at them as she continues to dance.

Lydia is smiling, caught up in the moment, until she looks at Adam. He’s staring up at Isobel, watching the black silk slithering over her body, the blonde hair forming a soft static halo around her as she shakes her head. The look on his face is rapt and lustful, and his gaze doesn’t break until the song finishes and Isobel slips off the table to a chorus of cheers and wolf whistles. She crosses to behind where Adam and Lydia are sitting, puts her hands lightly on Adam’s shoulders. He leans back,

looking up at her, and she puts her mouth to his ear and speaks clearly, loud enough for Lydia to hear.

‘Let’s fuck.’ The word jolts Lydia rigid and she stares down at the table-top, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. She doesn’t hear Adam’s reply, but she feels him shift away from her and get to his feet. When she next dares to look they have both gone. Abruptly she stands.

‘Stay,’ Jack calls over to her. ‘They’ll be five minutes, ten tops.’ She can’t bring herself to return his laugh or to say goodbye, pushing past the morass of people around them, heading for the cloakroom. The crumpled ticket is tucked inside her bra and as she fishes it out she feels her skin is burning hot and trembling. It’s cold in the cloakroom queue, but she can feel the sweat dripping off her. She snatches her coat back and wraps herself up in it, stumbling out of the club into the drizzling rain. It seems she walks for hours before she sees the bright beam of a taxi blinking ahead. She runs for it and slips into the back seat. The driver is talking to her, but she can’t make sense of his words. She can barely focus on the streets ahead as they zip through them, and when the cab pulls up in Beechwood Road she thrusts her last ten-pound note at the driver and slams the door without waiting for her change.

The noise wakes her hours later, a sharp, brittle sound like gravel hitting the windowpane. Head swimming, she sits up in bed and listens. A few moments later it comes again, stronger now. She hears him calling faintly below. ‘*Lydia.*’ A minute’s pregnant silence, then a frustrated noise, halfway between a sigh and a shout. Finally something else grazing the windowpane before dropping down; a softer sound this time. She is out of bed now, shivering by the window, hand poised to draw the curtain back, but something stops her. She waits until she hears the footsteps crunching away and dying into silence before she peeks outside.

The street lamps that flank the house are still gleaming, illuminating the pavement. She sees the flowers scattered below the window. Long-stemmed roses, blood red, abandoned where they have fallen. Before she knows it she's running softly down the stairs in her thin T-shirt, pushing the door open, hurrying with bare feet over stone. She gathers the roses in her arms, their thorns grazing her fingers. Takes a deep breath, shakily inhales. In a moment she'll turn back inside, but for that instant, she's frozen in time, crouching motionless on the cold pavement, her head bowed as if in prayer.



Lydia waits at the orange café for five afternoons before the lecturer returns. Over those five days she's done little else. The waitresses recognise her now, and when the jangling door announces her arrival on the sixth day they both look up and smile. She orders her customary coffee, settles into her corner seat and opens up the same book that she has been bringing to the café all week. She's read through it twice already, but has taken in so little that she might as well be coming to it with fresh eyes. Her mind is elsewhere. She hasn't seen Adam since the night in the club, although a couple of times Sandra, her landlady, has reported a visitor searching for her while she has been out. He's an unwanted distraction, but nevertheless she can't stop thinking about him: his wicked dark eyes, the hair softly curling around his collar. Anyone else would put it down to lust, but she finds it hard to do even this. It isn't something she has ever experienced, and as a result it's hard for her to classify.

The sharp clatter of the bell raises her head. It's automatic by now, the hungry searching glance, constantly disappointed by a procession of scarf-wrapped students and nondescript families. This time she has to blink to make sure the lecturer is real.

His outline shines against the bright winter sun and gives him the air of a mirage. He looks tired, distracted, and his clothes don't match, an old-looking red jumper slung like an afterthought under his black suit. He stands in the doorway for a moment as if announcing his arrival. There are two seats he could choose: one directly opposite Lydia, the other tucked away in the far corner of the café. He looks back and forth between them. She sees a mental coin being tossed in the instant before he turns towards her and settles into the seat, so close that she feels herself trembling. He takes a rolled newspaper out of his pocket, smooths it carefully out on to the table and scans the page blankly. So far he hasn't glanced at her, but she knows it's only a matter of time before he realises he's being watched. Sure enough, it is little more than a minute before awareness ripples the surface of his face. His head swings sharply towards her, and suddenly he's staring straight into her eyes.

For a second she thinks she sees a glimmer of recognition; something in her features calling up a memory so obscure and unidentifiable that it slips away almost instantly. In that instant his mouth has fallen slightly open, poised to identify her, but his lips abruptly close. A frown of incomprehension settles on his face. He's not a young man any more. He must be less used than he once was to students making eyes at him; perhaps he suspects an ulterior motive. She has thought about this moment many times, and with a shock she realises that she still hasn't decided which way to jump. Lydia the earnest scholar, keen to engage him in academic conversation. Lydia the breezy, talk-to-anyone novice student, looking for a friend and mentor. Lydia-Lolita, amateur seductress aiming at the depths of his vanity. As the options whir through her mind each seems more unthinkable than the last, but to her surprise the decision has been made for her. Her eyes are filling with tears.

He looks concerned, but she sees a faint irritation sifting beneath. 'Are you all right?' he asks in a low voice, glancing around as if he fears the waitresses will accuse him of attacking her. She doesn't reply, bowing her head as the tears start to fall. 'Come now,' he says, an edge of panic to his voice. 'This is ... this is unnecessary, surely.'

What did she expect? A paragon of sensitivity? She battles a wild urge to laugh, sniffing instead and wiping an arm over her eyes. 'I'm sorry,' she whispers.

He clears his throat, scratching the back of his neck with long fingers. 'Is there anything I can get you?' he asks, looking around again. 'Another drink, or a cake or something? If you like cake.' She shakes her head. 'Well, then,' he says. He can make a polite excuse and leave, or he can ask the question he so clearly wants to avoid. 'Would you like to talk about it?' he asks. To his credit, not much of his obvious reluctance comes through in his voice, and for a second she almost warms towards him.

'I wouldn't know where to start,' she says, shrugging and smiling shakily. 'It's just ... the sadness of things.'

He doesn't know how to respond to this. He inclines his head, perhaps respectfully. 'Life can be very hard,' he says eventually. To her shock she hears a raw edge of pain scraping his voice. He is frowning down at his paper, momentarily lost to her. She takes a moment to study him – the profile set into something close to cruelty, the strong Roman nose, lips hardened into a thin line. The sun pours a sharp radiance across his face, casting him in light. She knows what he is thinking of, and it makes her want to seize his hands roughly across the table and shout, *You see? You see what you have done?*

'I should go,' she says instead, not moving. He looks up at her again, nodding.

'Well, I hope you feel better soon,' he says. 'Take care, ah—' He pauses expectantly, waiting for her to fill in her name.

‘Lydia,’ she says, and watches him closely. This time the emotion spills across his face and he can’t hold it back. She knows her reaction is crucial. She frowns as if puzzled. ‘What’s the matter? Are you all right?’ she asks. He looks at her again, more intently this time.

‘It’s an unusual name,’ he says. ‘These days.’

‘Is it?’ she replies lightly. ‘My mum always says it was my dad who chose it.’

‘Does she,’ he mumbles, retreating back into himself. Her words have dismissed any lurking suspicion that has pricked him. She can see he wants to be alone with his thoughts. As she moves towards the door she looks back and sees him fending these thoughts off, his shoulders hunched against them, his back rigid. She feels a surge of anger so great that she wants to hit something, so hard that she draws blood, but she simply turns and leaves, closing the door quietly behind her.



Back in my room I study my face in the mirror for traces of my mother. I’ve done this a thousand times but I never tire of it. When you lose someone, you take any small comfort that you can get, and it warms me to see any echo of a resemblance. We did not look alike, not really, but when I look closely I can see the line of her jaw beneath mine, the tinge of her eerily green eyes making its impression on my own. She’s there inside me somewhere, but I don’t want her there. I want her here, so badly I can taste it, the acid tang of need sickeningly fresh and surprising every time. The face in the mirror is blurring before me and suddenly it doesn’t look like either of us. It doesn’t look like anyone I know. I blink the tears away. I whisper my own name to myself, wanting to hear it as she used to say it. Louise. It’s not the same, never the same.

I step back from the mirror, addressing myself in my head. You thought that this would be enough – to see him, to satisfy your curiosity. You were wrong. Nothing you can do will bring her back, but you have the right to know. This man murdered your mother. You need to understand why.