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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Swimmer

Written by Roma Tearne

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# *The Swimmer*

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Someone had placed the calves at the entrance to Unthank Farm. The farmer, arriving at his usual early hour, discovered them. All three, pushed up against a barrel of hay, with their throats slit, in the way animals were butchered by the Halal butcher in Ipswich. It was August, hot and with the promise of a golden month ahead. Shocked, the farmer called the vet, who in turn reported the matter to the police, but the calves were already dead. A small item in the local newspaper recorded the incident which otherwise went unnoticed.

Unthank Farm spreads out towards the edge of the city of Ipswich. It is the largest farm in the area. A few days later, a rambler out walking some thirty-two miles away on Dunwich Heath, came across a dog with its throat slit. The dog was a German shepherd and it lay on the edge of the road that runs in a straight line down to Dunwich beach. It was still alive. The rambler bent and examined it. The animal had a collar but no name disc. The nearest house was some distance away, its rooftop just visible. Assuming it must belong there, he picked up the feebly struggling animal and staggered back along the road. But the house, when he reached it, looked empty. It was large, built in red brick and with an abundance of Scotch pines and thick undergrowth in the small copse behind. There were no cars in the drive, no signs of activity, no radio playing. The man hesitated. The dog

was obviously cared for, its collar looked new, but the rambler was on his way to meet a group of other walkers and was already late. Placing the animal on the front doorstep, he rang the bell. There was a long pause. Then he rang the bell again, listening out for the sound of footsteps. Still nothing. Moving back, he was about to call out when he noticed one of the windows had been smashed. Clearly someone had broken in. The rambler peered through the jagged glass. He saw a room lined with bookcases and a few pieces of what looked like 1950s furniture. He saw some paintings on the walls but they were too far away and the room was too dark to make them out properly. He stepped back. The place was probably alarmed. It wouldn't do to be caught like a thief, he thought. Just at that moment the dog made a rattling noise in its throat. Blood gushed out. It struggled, moaning softly. Then it was still. The rambler saw that it had died. Suddenly he did not want to be in this place another second. He had a mobile phone deep in his rucksack, he would call the local police about the break-in and the dog. But first he would get the hell out of here, he thought, his feet crunching hastily on the gravel driveway.

Twenty minutes later the vet from Orford arrived with the police. He was the same one who had examined the calves at Unthank Farm. The marks on the dead dog were similar to those on the calves. A slit across the throat. It was also clear that the house had been broken into. But although the rooms had been ransacked, at first glance nothing appeared to have been taken. The police began the process of lifting fingerprints and contacting the owner, William Letsby. Letsby had left his dog alone in the house for only a few hours while visiting friends in the Ipswich area. When asked his occupation he told the police he worked for the Home Office. The officer, glancing at Letsby's ID, realised he was fairly high up in the Department of Immigration. He could also see that the man was very distressed about his dog and trying to hide this fact. Apologising, glad that nothing had been stolen, he left as soon as possible. He would be in touch, he said, in the event they caught any suspects. Meanwhile he was sorry about the dog.

Orford is a sleepy village of some beauty abutting the marshlands on one side and the estuary on the other. There are mighty tides that sweep in from the sea. Banks of sludge and silt laid down over the ages by all the marsh rivers lie unnoticed on the riverbed. The wading birds do nicely, as do the eels. Occasionally, when the tide is out and the water in the surrounding inlets appears to drop to almost nothing, you see them: eels, the length of bootlaces and the colour of green glass, twisting in the twilight.

Appearances can, however, be deceptive. People have been known to drown here. Two miles to the east, a matter of minutes by car, is Orford Ness, a one-time MoD establishment used for atomic weapons research. Now it is a benign and deserted haven for wild birds. Visitors in a small but steady stream come to visit it all year round, to walk, and observe the wildlife. This flat land with its extraordinary skies and matchstick forests is steeped in history. It is perfect country for painters, perfect crow country. But it is not a place with a high crime rate, and the vet was puzzled by the two incidents. Nothing like this had happened before. The police wondered if the animals had been the victims of a vixen. The vet knew this was not possible as the incisions looked to have been made with a knife. A local journalist filed copy about the Orford Ness animal killer but the editor did not print it for fear of causing panic amongst his readers. Besides, a circus had just moved into town and there were other, more interesting stories to print. And so the matter was dropped.

Then on the following Thursday two houses on the A1094 out of Aldeburgh were broken into and a large black retriever was found lying in a country lane. It too had been killed with a single cut to the throat. Nothing had been stolen from the houses and although a couple of windows had been broken no one had been seen entering or leaving. By now the circus was in full swing and the editor of the local paper did not run this story either.

The journalist who had filed the report was a married man, bored by the fact that nothing ever happened in Orford. The editor told him to stop complaining, forget the animal killer, and write a feature on the circus instead. But luck was on his side. While he was poking

around the caravans, there was a commotion. One of the performing monkeys had been found dead. Its throat had been slit. The journalist's eyes gleamed.

The day was marked by a warm breeze carrying the smell of ozone and fish, the sea was jewel-like and sparkling with the sun spilling over it. A small plane from RAF Mildenhall droned overhead, children played ball on the shingles. By nightfall the beach would be crowded with people returning from the circus, heading towards the fish-and-chip shop or the pub. But for now Eddie Sharp's matinee performance was about to begin. Minus one small monkey.

No one would talk to the journalist. His eager, wolfish face made the circus folk wary. The monkey was buried quickly before the flies and the stink took hold, and the unease was quietly papered over.

In the centre of town a book launch was under way. A bestselling crime novelist was discussing his latest novel before a small audience. The journalist poked his head through the door of the bookshop. The launch had been advertised as 'Fiction Noir' with a picture of a corpse on a red background on the poster. The shop was packed. Solving a crime was better than Sudoku. There's nothing here, thought the journalist, and he headed back to the office.

'Not enough for a story,' said the editor, shaking his head. 'Talk to the police, see what they think. They won't want you alarming anyone while the circus is here.'

The journalist was expecting this response. He had just been trying it on. The editor, who understood him all too well, eyed him speculatively.

'Take a break, John,' he said easily. 'Take your son to see the big top.'

John frowned. He didn't welcome advice about what to do with his kid, but he decided it mightn't be a bad idea to take another look at the circus that evening, when it was dark. Something was nagging at him; perhaps a return visit would clear his mind. And what could be more natural than taking his four-year-old son?

'It won't finish until after his bedtime,' his wife protested. 'And he'll be bad-tempered tomorrow.'

But the journalist insisted, and as it had been years since she had been to a circus, his wife agreed.

'I'll be back in a minute,' John announced when they were settled in their seats. His son was clutching a balloon, staring solemnly at the empty ring ahead.

Sawdust and bright lights, with a hint of tiger musk. John slipped out. The caravans' entrances were obscured from view. When he tried to push past the barrier, he was stopped. His press pass was useless against the wall of hostility he encountered. He slipped back into his seat just as the drum rolled.

'What are you up to?' his wife hissed.

John shook his head, placing a finger on his lips.

'Sshh!' he mumbled as the show began.

The applause was deafening. No one heard the scream. No one inside the tent, anyway. By the time the story was out, it was too late; the show was over, the trapeze artist had folded himself down to the ground, the sawdust was soiled with sweat and the tent had emptied. John Ashby, freelance journalist for the *Suffolk Echo,* heard nothing until the next morning when his editor informed him of the event.

A circus woman in her mid to late thirties had been attacked in her caravan. A kitchen knife had been held to her throat and the threat of rape whispered in her ear. She had not seen the man's face but his hands were dark-skinned. Later, she told the police that all her travel documents, including her British passport, had been stolen.

*Ria*

# 1

I REMEMBER IT WAS TOWARDS THE middle of August. Thursday the eighteenth, in fact. That I remember so clearly, so painfully still, tells me that I have never for one instant truly forgotten what happened. Great waves of tenderness sweep over me even now, and I am still able to feel within myself the faint, dreadful stirring of what so overwhelmingly and completely engulfed me then. That night the heat held me in a stranglehold. I remember swallowing it in huge gulps and sighs as I listened to the soft gasp of the river. A vast yearning, an unknown expectation was poised to grip me, so that some time later I thought my heart itself would burst. But first came the beginning.

Towards midnight on that evening I woke with a start to the crackle and dance of white static on the television screen. I think I must have fallen asleep with my fingers wrapped around the remote control. It was stiflingly hot, unusual for East Anglia. I remember I wiped small beads of perspiration from my face with the back of my hand, thinking how unlike Britain this was, to feel so hot. I must have been disorientated, confused rather than frightened. No, I wasn't frightened at all on this perfectly ordinary summer night. Car headlights swept up and down the length of the garden like giant eyelids lighting up parts of the river, dipping into wetland mud before vanishing. The summer renters from Italy had returned

after an evening out. I heard them slamming doors in a reckless way, laughing, happy.

'*Si, va bene,*' one of them said, faintly. '*Capisco, capisco!*' and then they went inside.

I switched off the television without moving from my chair and the surface of the night appeared once more as an undisturbed skin. Except for a small liquid sound, quickly suppressed. So small was it that I continued to sit, glasses in hand, straining my ears, still half asleep, only half listening. Then I padded across towards the open window where the air was filled with summer fragrance. And I heard the sound again quite distinctly. A splash, some movement, then . . . nothing. The river licking itself, perhaps. Fully awake now, I stood bandaged in the folds of the thin curtain, glad of the high hedge that screened the garden on one side from my neighbours. And I heard it again, that sound, soft and rhythmic, like oars, moving through water. It was coming from below, from the direction of the river. An animal perhaps, cooling off. From where I stood I caught a glimpse of the water. A horned moon cast a dim light over it. In the distance, not quite discernible, was the vast shingle waste of Orford Ness.

One of my tasks that August was to do something about the inlet from the river that lay at the end of the garden. Over time, slowly and due to lack of use, it had become a swamp of leaves and drowned insects. There was no one to swim in it any more; no children escaping from parents, no adolescents messing about in boats. Since I returned to the house it had become merely a thing of untidy beauty. Only Eric came past occasionally in his boat, looking for places to leave his eel-traps. Eric had farmed the land and fished these waters for as long as I could remember. He lived at Fruit Tree Farm. When my Uncle Clifford decided to split his farm and sell it because of ill health it was Eric who saved the land from developers by buying it at a decent price. It all happened long ago, when I was still at school and the house we call Eel House came to be mine.

I was still living with Ant when Clifford died, still hoping I might have a child, still craving for love of sorts. We were in the middle of doing the rounds of the fertility clinics with dreary futility. First Ant

was tested, then I. There were months of endless temperature charts ahead of us before I was forced to acknowledge that no technology on earth could help an old uterus. I was told bluntly that the eggs would not stick, whatever that meant. I was thirty-eight and, it would appear, punished by inexplicable infertility. When it sunk in, when at last I said the word *barren* out loud to myself, staring into a mirror, I began to notice that infertility was on the increase in Britain. Everywhere I went, I met women who could not hold a fertilised egg. There we all were, girls with bodies that still looked young but had grown old internally.

'It's always been this way,' the doctor told me, when I protested. 'Women's reproductive rate slows down with age.'

So why hadn't I realised there was an epidemic of childlessness? The papers wrote about insecticides and too many chemicals in the soil. Women, they told us, were filling up with harmful poisons. It would take years to reverse the current trends. Teenage pregnancies are best, the papers urged, contrary to everything they had been saying for years. If only it were that simple.

Ant left me. He was desperate for a family. If I couldn't help him then he was sorry but he would be forced to go elsewhere. Who says men don't have biological clocks? His callousness was breathtaking. In the long, sleepless nights that followed I began to think of Eel House. Throughout what was left of that miserable year the memory of it shifted uneasily within me. Like a tennis ball passed over the net, a plan went backwards and forwards across my mind. Once, many years ago, I had been happy there and now it was as though a fragment from that time had begun working its way to the surface, dislodging the earlier hurt, buried for so long. Suddenly my homesickness could not be contained and I wanted to go back. I remembered East Anglia as a place of both love and betrayal, of far-away summers and family fictions. A place where my beloved father had walked with me in the matchstick woods, and the place where, after his death, I returned to briefly in despair. Eel House belonged to me now, it would be easy to go back. On an impulse I wrote to Eric, who replied with a single word.

'Come!'

So I turned back towards the east and my past, wanting to see again those wide watercolour skies and soft reed-grey marshes that blended so perfectly with the sea. Hopefully, looking for peace. I was forty-three years old; a poet whose work, even before Ant left me, dealt with emptiness; the colour of it, its smell.

The tug of the water being pushed aside grew louder. It wasn't an animal; there was too much control, too many regular pauses, as if something, or someone, was taking their time. The moon came out from behind a cigarette-paper cloud and I caught a glimpse of the row of wooden fence-posts rising up like the river's rotten teeth, and then some spray as an arm rose and fell and turned again in the water. My first thought was that I ought to warn whoever it was that this inlet was dirty and had been stagnant for a long time. Swimming in it would only churn the mud up. My second was that the door into the house was not locked. Whoever was down there could easily come in. I was alone, of course. Earlier that evening Miranda, my sister-in-law, had rung to say they were leaving London the following morning for their annual visit. In the morning, too, the cleaner would arrive, but now, at midnight, I was alone. With the darkness and the soft paddling of human limbs in the water below.

The movement stopped and then resumed, stroke by stroke, rhythmically. Silently, avoiding the furniture, the small occasional tables, the standard lamp, the foot stool, I moved across towards the French windows. I could get a better view from here. By now I was fully awake, breathless with suspense. Like a young girl, alert and taut, interested. Even my dress, caught in the moonlight, scrunched up and white, felt insubstantial, as though worn with the crumpled haste of youth. The moon was so good a liar, I remember thinking fleetingly, as I edged towards the window. Why was I so unafraid?

The man – no woman would have ventured into such filthy water – reached the end of his length and I saw a pair of hands rest against the grass before he heaved himself up on to the bank. I squinted, trying to catch sight of a face, concentrating hard, wishing I knew where my glasses were but not daring to move too much in case I was spotted.

The straw-coloured moon was just slipping behind a cloud as I saw with some surprise that he was bare to the waist. He had been swimming in his trousers. In the semi-darkness I could see he was young and as he turned and picked up the shirt that lay on the grass I saw he was very dark and somehow, I felt, even from this distance, foreign. He turned sharply as though he had heard me move, but it was in the wrong direction. I wish you could have seen me in that moment, unafraid and a little astonished by my own calm acceptance of an intruder on my property. An owl hooted and the man looked up at the sky, unhurried, as though he had all the time in the world, as if the garden itself belonged to him. What cheek, I thought in reluctant admiration, as I watched him button his shirt and search for his shoes. The moon disappeared completely and when it reappeared he was moving in long strides through the soft August night. A small, gloved wind stirred the trees. There was a noise downstairs, in the hall perhaps? I could hear my heart beating. What should I do if he was in the house? There was no telephone in my study. To get to the renters next door I would have to go through the front door and down the drive. My feet would crunch on the gravel. I would be heard. Again, the smallest of noises; I was certain it was coming from below. Suddenly I was rooted to the spot; belatedly, I was frightened.

After the business of the will and the house, after the years of animosity, my brother Jack and I were finally on speaking terms. During the years of our disagreement he had pestered me constantly to sell the house. Ostensibly the reason he had given was that I should not live in such isolation in this house.

'For God's sake, Ria, sell the bloody place,' he was always saying. 'What does a woman in your position want with a mausoleum like that?'

What he meant was, what did a woman of forty-three, an unloved spinster like me, want with a house that by rights should belong to a family like his. Eel House had not been left to him but to me. There had, however, been a clause in the will. If it were sold, he would have half the money from its sale. My brother Jack was a strange, restless man, frequently angry, sometimes a bully. We did not know what to

make of each other, so that, ignoring the sub-texts of our disagreements I had inadvertently ignored his warnings about safety. Only yesterday he had told me I needed new locks on the doors and windows.

'I suppose you're waiting for me to sort it out,' he had said.

Bitterness from childhood flashed between us. I was weary of it. I had offered him every access to the house. I told him that he could use it at any time and that I would share everything with him. It was not as if he were poor; he had been left our London home by our mother. All I had was Eel House and the small amount of dwindling savings from my days as a university lecturer. Nonetheless, Jack wanted me to sell up and split the money. But for once I stood up to him. Our mother was no longer there to take his side. Miranda had always, to her credit, stayed neutral, so I told him firmly I would never sell the house. It was the beginning of a feud that was to last for years, until Ant left and Miranda, feeling sorry for me, rang up.

The truth was I hadn't cared; either about his never-ending resentment, or my own safety. These days I was past caring about anything much, except perhaps for the fact that I had not completed a poem in nearly two years. Everything had dried up inside me.

Now, belatedly, fear stirred within me and I hesitated; tomorrow morning might be too late. Of course, I didn't think this. When you are frightened all your mind has time for is the fear itself, and by now I admit I *was* frightened. It took some effort for me to open the door and head for the landing. I held an open penknife in my hand. It was laughable. Everything creaked. All those boards that were usually silent moved with me as I crept downstairs. Several times I froze, straining my ears. The moon was still behind the clouds; there was no light on the marshes. I was convinced someone was in the kitchen. What I needed was to get as far as the hall in order to find the telephone. The phones being portable, none were ever where they should be. Too late to be thinking about this, now.

Slowly I inched my way along the hall, barefoot, skimpily dressed, clutching that ridiculous penknife. What if he was a rapist? Don't be stupid, Ria, I told myself, you're too old to interest a rapist! I tried not to think about the incident that had occurred a few days ago in

Aldeburgh when a woman had been held at knife-point. The woman had been a circus hand, but still, the police had urged people in the area to lock their doors. I reached the telephone just as the church clock struck the quarter. The only number I could ring at this hour was the police, but I was reluctant to do so. This was a small community; word would get out. People knew my brother Jack. He was bound to hear of it. He would tell me triumphantly, finally, I was losing my nerve! I would play into his hands at last, and the insidious process of ousting me from the house and putting it up for sale would begin. I hesitated. I swear the only reason I didn't punch in the number was the thought of Jack's smug face and in that moment, while I stood uncertainly, without warning, the outside light flickered on. I flattened myself against the wall and held my breath. There was the unmistakable sound of gravel and then, footsteps, fading away. I don't know how long I stood there, rooted to the spot, but eventually the light switched off again. The moon reappeared showing its damaged side, barely above dream level. I blinked and found the switch in the hall.

Nothing, there was nothing. An unmistakable sense of disappointment flooded over me. The penknife was still in my hand. I closed it, turned the key in the back door, (yes, it *was* unlatched) and pulled down the blinds. Then, getting myself a drink of water from the jug in the fridge, I went upstairs and fell into an exhausted sleep, not realising I was still clutching the telephone.

The following day was Friday and I awoke late. Sarah the cleaner had let herself in and was just finishing downstairs.

'You're tired,' she said when she saw me emerge. 'Late night?'

'Yes.'

I went over to make some tea. My weekly organic box was on the work surface. There were the last of the broad beans, field mushrooms and asparagus. There was no fruit. I had asked for cherries, some raspberries, but there was nothing. Not even apples. Sarah was vacuuming the stairs. I could hear her banging the nozzle against the banisters with more vigour than seemed necessary. I knew she had stolen the fruit. Every time she came she stole something, however small. It was a token of . . . I'm not sure what. Some suppressed rage.

I knew she didn't like me. Once I had confronted her with some CDs I'd found in her bag and she had pretended to be dumbfounded.

'I've no idea how they got there,' she had said.

As if it was my fault. I know she stole money, too, but I had no way of proving it. Since it wasn't possible to get another cleaner to come this far out of town, I continued to keep her on, but I didn't leave anything of value lying around. I was on the point of looking in her bag for the missing fruit when she walked back into the kitchen and glared at me. Sighing, I picked up the paper and went into the dining room. Jack, Miranda and their children would have left London by now. I could hear Sarah going back upstairs to put clean sheets on all the beds. Then she would wash the kitchen floor and then, thank goodness, she would leave. It was almost ten. I sipped my tea and suddenly, without any warning, I remembered the swimmer. My God! How could I have forgotten him?

Solitude creates a peculiar inner life. Unbroken silence, frightening to begin with, soon becomes a way of life. At mealtimes there is only the clatter of one set of crockery, the crunch of your own teeth on food, the sound of yourself swallowing. When Ant was no longer there to bounce my thoughts off those things that had been suppressed for years began to turn endlessly in my head. There was no one to shout, Stop, stop, you're going crazy. If you are unloved, as I was, husbandless, childless, you develop a way of thinking and being that is haphazard. Life pares down, sex becomes something other people engage in, like dancing. However much you longed for it, all you had was yourself. This was how I was at forty-three. Years before, when Jack first brought Miranda home (Ant had not yet made his brief appearance in my life) I could tell he thought of me as a born spinster.

'My sister is frigid,' I imagined him saying, making her giggle.

Hard to think of her giggling now, but in the early days, I used to be able to tell simply by the way Miranda looked at me, she was thinking, Oh yes, frigid. Definitely! I was not frigid. Someone had to suggest sex before they could call you frigid. There was no one to do that then or now.

In some sense life closed down for me after the shock of my father's

death. Until then, I've been told I was a chatty, friendly child. Happy, too, I believe. Now and then glimpses of that girlhood flit across my dreams; sunlight on an otherwise shadowed life, insubstantial like light, vanishing as I wake. The woman I am today is still possessed by that invisible child.

Last night's appearance of the swimmer had the quality of those dreams. I remembered a mosaic I had once seen in the archaeological museum in Naples. That too had been of a swimmer. Thin arms, rising slightly, slim hips, head poised as he bent to retrieve his clothes. What nonsense the night throws up, I thought. In the daylight it was unimaginable that I had been frightened. Stirring myself, I decided to tidy the garden before Jack arrived.

'I'm off then,' Sarah said, coming in, making me jump.

She stared at me, her face resentful as she waited for her pay.

What the hell was she angry about? I'm the one whose fruit had been stolen. I hesitated.

'Sarah,' I said, handing over her money, 'I'm afraid . . . I'm sorry, but I'm not going to need any cleaning for a while. The house is going to be full for a month. It's a bit pointless trying to tidy up.'

She had a bullish look. She wasn't going to make it easy for me.

'I'll tell you what, I'll contact you after the summer, shall I?'

'Are you giving me the sack?' she asked.

'No, no, Sarah . . .'

God! The woman made my flesh creep.

'I'm just suggesting we have a bit of a break.'

'You'll lose me,' she said threateningly.

'Yes, I see that.'

'I'm not going to wait around. There are others who'll want me.'

I looked at her helplessly.

'I'll take a chance,' I said.

I should have sacked her months ago.

'Please yourself then,' she said.

And she left, taking my fruit and who knows what else with her.

It was eleven by now. Jack would be here by four. The house smelt of the eucalyptus polish that Sarah insisted on using. Sunlight

poured in through the kitchen window. Relieved to be rid of her, I went upstairs.

In the shower I thought once more of the swimmer. Warm water flowed over me. I felt a spurt of energy, the first in months, and the stirring of a possible poem. The emptiness I carried around within me receded slightly. I felt moulded in wetness and light. When I was younger, during that awkward adolescent stage, Uncle Clifford used to say I had the look of Kate in the novel *The Go-Between*. What he meant was, I think, I looked a bit like the actress who played the part of Kate in the film version. I can't remember her name but she had blue eyes (as I do), and fair, wavy hair, like mine. Why am I saying this? What difference can it possibly make, except perhaps to present the picture of what I once was, what I might have been, had the circumstances been right? Tall and willowy, Ant had said, in our moments of passion. With a sensuous mouth. For some reason I thought of this now.

It is important that I describe the fabric of that day and the days that followed. After I dressed, I went outside into the garden and picked some white Japanese anemones. The sky was cloudless. That summer, the heat had built up in layers, slowly, beautifully, like daily washes of transparent colour, hinting at how it would be remembered in years to come. The greengages were luminescent in the light, heavy with juice, golden like the sun. I walked towards the place where my swimmer had stood, beside the willow, just where the bank sloped into the water. Dragonflies skimmed the surface of the water, iridescent beetles looking like prehistoric creatures moved along the riverbank. I stared. I'm not sure what I had expected. There was no trace of any presence. The air buzzed with invisible activity. Some of the long grass looked slightly flattened, although that was probably my imagination. I walked back towards the house thinking, I ought to cut it today.

By lunchtime the garden was beginning to look better. I had cut the lawn closest to the house. Perhaps Jack's children could be persuaded to help me with the furthest bits where neglect had cultivated weeds. The fish I ordered from the local fishmonger arrived and I made some soup. Then I took my lunch out on to the terrace

where the sun lay trapped in its own bubble of heat. From here I could see the inlet glistening and snaking towards the river. And in the distance, if I squinted, I could make out the barbed-wire fence and the tomb-like structure that was all that was left of the military base of Orford Ness. The best view of it was from my first-floor study window, where I would often gaze mesmerised at its melancholy, desert-like bleakness. The sun retreated momentarily behind the Scotch pines, sending sharp pinpoints of lights on to the trellis of roses. I sat finishing off the wine from last night and once again I felt the beginnings of a poem bubble up. I must relax, I decided, closing my eyes. I must not get too anxious, or think of the disruption of the impending visit. Perhaps, I thought hopefully, they would go to the sea every day, leaving me free to work for a few hours. Although the sea was within striking distance, hardly two miles away, there was no view of it from the house. It might just as well not have existed. Eel House had no connection with it. Out of sight, out of mind. Even our gardens had a lushness not usually associated with the coast.

The afternoon moved slowly on. Guiltily, I wanted their car to break down, or the children to fall ill. I resisted an urge to drive out towards the fens and not return, to walk with the wind in my face and the reeds rustling beside the water's edge. But the soup was almost ready and I had a loaf of bread in the oven. At three I glanced at my watch; they would be here in three-quarters of an hour. Going back out into the garden I cut handfuls of flowers; roses and some tendrils of honeysuckle. Then I filled a vase and went into the sitting room. It was a room I rarely used, except when I had visitors. Because of this the door was nearly always closed and as I approached from the kitchen with my huge jug of flowers, I registered, though with no special significance, that it was now ajar. I placed the jug on the top of the small Bechstein piano I had inherited. As I did so, a piece of sheet music drifted to the floor. I picked it up, stuffing it back into the seat of the piano stool. Then I plumped up the cushions and hurried out, for a car had driven up towards the front door. Jack, Miranda and the children had arrived early.

'When are you going to have this kitchen refitted?' were my

brother's first words as he walked in. 'I can't understand how you can live like this.'

I took a deep breath.

'Very easily,' I said. 'It's a nice kitchen. It's got character!'

Jack snorted. He placed two boxes full of groceries on the table.

'We didn't think you'd have anything civilised in your larder, so we've brought a contribution,' he said.

I raised an eyebrow and Miranda frowned.

'Jack!' she mumbled.

I thought she might kick him. The children came rushing in, full of some talk of a grass snake. They looked around the kitchen as though I was invisible.

'I'm starving,' Zach said.

'Hello, you two!'

I was determined to keep all irony out of my voice.

'For goodness' sake,' Miranda said, 'at least give Aunty Ria a kiss.'

She was already sounding harassed; probably she and Jack had been quarrelling on the way here.

'We should have stopped off for something to eat,' Jack said. 'I told you she'd have nothing.'

'Welcome to Eel House,' I said.

Two weeks seemed like a long time.

Later we had supper on the terrace overlooking the water. There had been some talk of driving into Snape or even Aldeburgh, but in the end I cooked a mushroom risotto followed by sea bass and fennel. Needless to say, they ate the lot. Afterwards, Jack pushed his plate away and looked speculatively at me. My heart sank as he helped himself to more wine.

'Well? Have you had any more thoughts on the house?'

I groaned inwardly. I had thought the subject had been dropped.

'Look, Jack,' I said, 'we've been round this so many times. I don't care if this is a good time to sell, I don't care if the kitchen is antiquated, I don't care about the money. Please, let's not start it all up again. I'm simply not going to sell.'

There was a small silence.

'So you want me to service your boiler,' my brother said.

'No, I don't. That isn't what I said!'

He looked at me. Perfectly calm, indolent, ready for another argument, loving it. Yes, I thought, here we go. It was what he used to do when we were growing up and he'd return from boarding school wanting something that belonged to me. Later, he used to get money out of me in this way, slowly, draining away my savings, wearing me down, weakening my resolve. Well, he wasn't going to do that any more. Love might never have existed between us for all the show there was of it now. We were children from the same womb, fathered by the same man, but separated by a shared past.

'It will probably blow up and kill you,' he said.

I stared into the distance of the darkening garden, my face tightening. His nastiness always took me by surprise.

'Sell the house, Ria,' he said again, softly.

In the twilight I could see his teeth as he spoke. They were small and even, and very white. The children were watching us, fascinated.

'Who would like some raspberry tart and cream?' I asked.

'Yes, please,' Sophie, my niece, cried. 'Can we have it while we watch television?'

'You should cut the grass by the river,' Zach said. 'It's not a good idea to allow it to grow so long. Anyone trying to get out of the water in a hurry might have trouble.'

'Why would you want to get out in a hurry?' Sophie asked.

'Because of the current, stupid!'

'Stupid yourself.'

'Zach,' Miranda said.

'If you're planning on swimming,' I said, 'perhaps you could clear it for me?'

'Nah!' he said.

I wanted to say that a bit of exercise might help him lose some weight. But I'm not his mother. As far as I could see, all they appeared to do in their spare time was watch endless television and play computer games. But this, too, wasn't my business.

'Why don't you fence the river off?' Miranda asked, slicing up the tart. 'After all, you don't swim in it, do you?'

I shrugged. I could have told her that I liked having the river at the bottom of my land. I liked the way it moved, as though it were a sleek animal, lean in high summer, flushed and heavy in spring and autumn, cold and uninviting in winter. If I fenced it off, I would not see the extraordinary birdlife that lived around it, nor would I be able to wave to Eric on his trips upstream, on warm, moist nights, his low battery light encircled by moths as he hunted for pebble-black eels. I could have told her this, but I didn't.

'You'd get a flat in London for half the price of this place,' my brother reminded me.

Still I said nothing. He wanted a share of the money to fund his political activities.

'Why are you such a loser?' he asked. 'Think what you could make – enough to buy two houses.'

'Jack!' Miranda protested. 'I'm sorry,' she said, turning to me.

'Look,' I said, as pleasantly as I could, 'shall we stop baiting Ria for the duration of this holiday? I'm just not selling, Jack. Get this into your head. I'm not interested in the monetary value of this house, nor am I interested in funding your fascist politics, okay? Now, who wants coffee and who wants tea?'

Jack laughed. How the hell was I going to get through the fortnight? Miranda was looking at me with something like kindness. Lately I had begun to feel a great deal of sympathy for my sister-in-law. There have been moments, when she was pregnant with the children, for example, when we'd come close to seeing eye to eye.

I went back into the kitchen to fill the kettle.

'We're thinking of going to Cromer,' Miranda announced, coming in after me with the pile of dirty plates. 'Just for a few days – give the kids a bit of beach. Fancy coming with us?'

I held my breath. *When* were they thinking of going? We cleared the kitchen together.

'You need a holiday, too, Ria,' she said after a while. 'You work far too much. In that way you're like Jack.'

I laughed without humour and filled the dishwasher, scraping bits of food off the plates. I would not cry.

'Actually,' Miranda continued, lowering her voice, 'I'm a little worried about him.'

I was surprised. My brother's marriage had always seemed to me to be run along the lines of a business. Nothing emotional was ever aired. What was she worried about?

'He's getting far too involved in politics. We're spending vast amounts of money and I'm worried. You know how stubborn he is. I was wondering if you might talk to him.'

'Me! You must be joking!'

'Yes, I know . . .' her voice trailed off.

If Miranda was appealing to me, then things must be desperate.

'I just want him to take it easy. There are a couple of people who have joined who are . . . well, a bit extremist, you know what I mean? We've had a few odd-looking types visiting. Anyway,' she glanced around quickly, 'what d'you think about Cromer?'

'Ria, I need to use the Internet,' Jack announced, walking in with the empty wine bottle.

He poured himself a whisky.

'I presume you did get it installed after last year's fiasco? Let's forget Cromer, Miranda. I'm thinking of hiring a boat for a few days.'

The sound of the television drifted out through the open window, mingling with raised voices and the odd thump. The children were fighting.

'Oh God!' Miranda cried, wiping her hands, 'I'd better go and see what they're up to.'

'Yes.'

A kind of hollow despair enveloped me. In just a few hours my house had been stripped of its privacy. Alone in the kitchen I poured myself another drink and walked outside, moving swiftly towards the wild part of the garden. Beyond the river, and before you reached Orford Ness, were the matchstick woods. They were hidden now by fingers of dusk. The air was much cooler here and the trees were outlined sharply against a darkening sky. Nothing stirred. I heard the faint sound of traffic from the road beyond the trees, but that was all. The renters next door seemed to have disappeared too and silence

enveloped me. I breathed slowly, feeling the tightness in my chest slowly easing.

Every summer of my childhood had been spent in this house. It had belonged to Uncle Clifford, our father's brother, and his wife Elsa. By the time he was six, Jack was allowed to come with me. Our parents put us on the train at Liverpool Street and Uncle Clifford met us at the other end. There followed a month of blissful neglect when we roamed the fields and helped on the farm. I was meant to look after Jack. I remember how once we had got lost in some field before finally finding our way back to Eric's farm. I had been scared, but as the eldest it had been my responsibility to get us home. Peggy, Eric's wife, had given us two fresh eggs each when we reached her kitchen. We had carried them triumphantly back to Eel House. It was the beginning of a ritual that marked all our summers after that. Towards the end of August, before the weather broke and we returned home, our parents would join us. I was delighted, knowing that at last I could have my father all to myself. Even in those days Jack was a bit of a mother's boy, less interested in the outdoor life. As soon as Mum arrived he stopped trailing around with me and the pair of them would go to the cinema and afterwards to tea in Aldeburgh, or on a long drive to visit friends. Mum was always buying him toys, which he broke almost instantly, whereupon she would promise him more treats. Dad disapproved hugely of such spoiling, but Jack was a precocious, rather bright child, so I suppose he got away with it. Meanwhile, Dad and I would go rambling in the matchstick woods, looking for fossils. We would pack a picnic and leave in the morning, returning at dusk when the light fell differently and the woods took on an air of enchantment. On other days we two would go out in the boat with Eric. Eric was Dad's great friend. Dad and Uncle Clifford and Eric had all grown up together. They used to call themselves the Three Musketeers. 'One for all and all for one,' they used to laugh. After our fishing trips we would return with eels for supper. Later, Jack and I would play board games with my parents and Clifford and Elsa, laughing and cheating, ganging up against each other; Dad, Jack and Uncle Clifford against Mum and me and Aunt Elsa.

Where had all that easy affection gone? I sipped my wine. Once, I had believed that the farm and the fields, and Eric's eels, would last for ever. Sighing, I closed my eyes and the poem that had been fermenting in me all day turned restlessly. It was getting late. High above the land a harvest moon moved silently while all the stars appeared like germinating seeds in the wide East Anglian sky. As I went back to the house I could hear the television. Clearly no one was tired.

'Oh, there you are,' Jack observed. 'I wondered where you'd got to.'

He sounded subdued. He and Miranda had pulled two chairs out on to the old flagstones and had opened a new bottle of wine.

'I hope you don't mind, Ria,' Miranda said, 'but we opened one of your whites.'

'Where are the children?' I asked.

'Playing some computer game. They can't stand being out because of the bugs.'

You've brought them up to be townie wimps, I thought, but I didn't say it. I was more alarmed by the fact they were using my computer.

'It's okay,' Miranda said quickly, seeing my face. 'They're using my laptop.'

Thank God, I thought. The poem inside me had begun calling, insistently.

'What happened about your boat idea?'

'Oh yes, I forgot. We've got one! Tuesday, for a week. Come, if you like. We're going to sail across the Broads from Wroxham.'

He was looking at me intently.

'Thanks,' I mumbled. 'But I have a poem in my head that I'll have to attend to.'

I laughed nervously. Jack seemed to accept my excuse.

'At least you're working again!'

A momentary benign feeling descended on us.

'We'll leave about midday,' Miranda said. She sounded a little upset. 'If that's okay? We'll leave some of our stuff here, travel light, be back in a couple of days.'

It was a quarter to ten.

'I'm knackered,' Jack said at last. He yawned. 'One thing I must say, the beds are wonderful here, even though the plumbing is antiquated.'

'Who's going to prise those two away from the laptop?' Miranda asked.

'Moan, moan.'

'Oh, shut up, Jack. You're the one who's been complaining.'

Again the tension was back. We were doing what we always did. Taking small bites out of each other, never addressing anything with honesty. I wanted to scream.

'I'd like my study back so I'll tell them, if you like.'

I put on a fake smile.

'You're not going to work, are you?' Miranda asked, amazed.

'Of course she is. Can't you see she's dying to get rid of us? Go on, Ria, go back to your masterpiece!'

'Well, I haven't actually done anything today.'

If I wasn't careful there *would* be a fight. Jack must have thought the same thing because he rose and took his chair in.

'I'm off,' he said. 'What time's breakfast?'

My study was a tip. Somehow they had managed to knock over a glass and scatter the cushions. There were books on the floor and paper from the printer was everywhere. My good intentions evaporated completely. Furious, I closed the door. Then I cleared the mess and turned the television off. I no longer felt like working, but I didn't feel like going to bed either. Upstairs, on the third floor, in the room above my study, the children made thumping sounds as though they were fighting. Taking up the book I had been reading I settled down on the sofa. The poem that had peeped out had taken fright and vanished. I could hear Miranda's voice followed by Sophie screaming. Then Jack joined in and there was a stampede towards the guest bathroom. Miranda began calling me. Oh God! I thought guiltily. I sat pretending not to hear, feeling trapped. To think I had ever wanted children! Towards midnight things quietened down. The floorboards stopped creaking, the house was settling at last. I sighed and switched off the light. Was it safe to go to my bedroom?

People have said to me that at least I have a brother, at least I have

a nephew and niece. Long ago, soon after Sophie had been born, I had volunteered to look after her while Jack took an exhausted Miranda out. It had been a sort of peace-offering on my part. Sophie had been only a few weeks old and I had not long heard I would never have a child of my own. That evening, after they had left, I picked Sophie out of her cot and held her against my cotton T-shirt. Then I put her mouth against me. I had wanted someone to suck my breast. I went into the bathroom with her and locked the door, naked to the waist. I wanted to feel what it was like to nurse her. I wanted to feel the tug and demand of another life. But after a moment I heard a noise and Sophie began to cry. Scared, in case Jack and Miranda had returned, I rushed out. I blushed, recalling the long-forgotten incident. Loneliness expands wherever crowds gather, Eric used to say. Thinking of him, I wished I could have gone over there tonight, but it was too late now.

Closing my book, I went across to the open window. Immediately the scent of late honeysuckle and jasmine came wafting towards me. Somewhere in the depths of the garden a nightjar called. Just after Ant left me, taking all hope I had of love, I had heard a nightingale pour its fluid notes across this garden. I had stood on this very spot, mesmerised by it, wondering for a confused moment who the singer was. I have never heard a nightingale sing since.

A slight breeze moved the muslin and the trees rustled. It had become so muggy that there would probably be a storm soon. I yawned, slowly. If I turned in now, I would wake refreshed. Next Tuesday, when they left, I'd be able to have a clear day to work. The poem would, I hoped, return once peace was restored. Turning, I reached out to close the window in case of rain later, my eyes scanning the garden idly. I froze. There was my swimmer! Good God, I thought, astonished, for there he stood, bold as brass, bare-chested at the water's edge. What a nerve he had, trespassing in someone else's garden, *again*. As I watched, to my amazement, he moved towards the honeysuckle and bent to smell it. He was towelling his hair with his T-shirt; I could see the whiteness of the cloth against the dark garden. Then he pulled it over his head. I shrunk back further into the room, but he wasn't looking in the direction of the house. I saw him edge towards the water and stare

beyond it. Something had obviously caught his attention for he stood perfectly still, looking in the direction of the woods. Almost instantly I heard the nightjar again. An owl flew past and my swimmer jumped. I could have told him the garden was full of nightlife and that over by the trees there were a family of owls, but I did not make a sound.

He turned his head as if he had read my thoughts, but he was still looking in the wrong direction. Then, bending down, he did up first one shoe and then the other with casual indifference and a second later he vanished from view, going presumably around the side of the house. I continued to stare out of the window, unable to move, straining my ears. There was a slight pause and unmistakably, I heard a door open. Could any burglar be this reckless? I hesitated. Damn, I thought, belatedly, the back door was unlocked, again. What if I went downstairs and confronted him? He had looked quite young. Not that it mattered if he was carrying a knife. But would you swim first, before you committed a crime? By now I had moved to the landing and I heard once again an unmistakable creaking of floorboards. There followed another silence. I waited. My study door was shut. I opened it a fraction of an inch, on the verge of going out when I heard a soft step. I was struck with paralysis. He was definitely in the house. I shivered. Something thrilling and fearful passed over me. Holding the empty bottle of wine in my hand I crept downstairs at the same moment as the outside light came on. Instantly I hurried down the stairs and into the kitchen just as the timer plunged the garden back into darkness. In a flash I had switched on the kitchen light. I gasped, there was no one there.

All this had taken only a few minutes, but any thoughts of sleep had vanished. Locking the back door, I checked the windows. Then I filled the kettle and was about to put some tea into the pot when I noticed the lid of the bread bin was slightly open. I closed it, changed my mind and opening it again peered in. It was empty. There had been a freshly baked loaf inside. I knew this because I had baked it myself only this morning.