

THE DAYS THAT followed were a static ordeal of waiting for the phone to ring, relieved by increasingly good therefore increasingly bad sex with Walker. Around the fourth or fifth time we did it I stopped kidding myself I wasn't playing with fire. Our understanding was immediate and shocking, mutual intuition that skipped chunks of language without surprise and said, loud and clear: Danger. Ten years ago we would have congratulated ourselves. Now we kept our mouths shut and our eyes averted. Not just because we were older and sufficiently mangled, but because we knew that in our case cause for congratulation was cause for retreat. There was no avoiding it during sex, however, when our eyes met in moments of letting it be what it was: something far more than was good for us. This isn't safe, is it? No, it isn't. Don't stop. Oh God don't stop.

Postcoitally the Hollywood every American carries insinuated its norms, repeatedly suggested the afterglow scene where I doodled on his chest and asked the history of each of his scars, or told him some endearingly embarrassing story from my girlhood. We ignored it. Silence stopped us slipping into the lousy script, but exposed us to the ominous thrill of how little we needed to say. And despite our efforts prosaic epiphanies ambushed us. Once, getting back into my jeans, I got my foot caught and lost my balance. I didn't fall over, but went through a Chaplinesque sideways hopping routine, which he watched, smiling and saying: Easy there, tiger . . . *easy*, which made me laugh for the first time since before Alaska, and which opened another terrible flower of sympathy between us. At some point I'd realised he was shy of saying my name. He called me Miss D, if he had to call me anything. Then once, without thinking, he said, quietly, "Talulla?" when I was lying on him and the room was dark and he wasn't sure if I'd fallen asleep. The smart thing would have been for me to pretend I *was* asleep—but instead I found myself up on one elbow, kissing his mouth, all femalely tender and lit up by him unguard-

edly saying my name, unguardedly, that was the thing, it was such a frail brave thing to be unguarded with someone . . . telling myself the whole time, don't do this . . . don't do this . . . for God's sake don't do this you *idiot* . . . and feeling the gap between him and his previous self widening, as if it were a planet he was drifting away from into vast and utterly unknown space. Me.

We carried on not-talking about any of it. Talking about it could only lead to how stupid we'd been to start and how stupid we'd be not to stop. I imagined my mother watching the delicious mess I was making of things. She would have approved, since she was always for life and life was at its best a delicious mess; she would have approved but cut short the honeymoon period of shirking the facts: He's not a werewolf, Talulla. Which means either make him one or dump him. Otherwise the delicious mess becomes a car wreck. The question of whether I *could* Turn a person was, naturally, refreshed, but no less bedevilled by common sense: Who in his right mind would thank me for doing it? You couldn't start a love affair with a more selfish act. A love affair? Hardly, by the measure of mine and Jake's—but there was potential around us like a massing storm. Superficially we had the strangers-in-a-strange-land myth to draw on, bodies that fit together in expert cooperation, the aphrodisiacal nearness of death and the mesmerising profane turn-on of *not being the same species*, but beneath all that was my liberating moral bankruptcy and his fall towards someone who (he thought, wrongly) could cut him off from his past once and for all by turning him into Something Else. *That* was the potential: part of him *wanted* to be Turned.

There were moments when I knew he was on the verge of telling me what had happened to him. He rolled right to the edge of it . . . then back, every time. Until at last one night in the small hours (he was never at the hotel for longer than two or three hours at a time) when we were lying side by side after sex we'd forced on fractionally too long, and I was thinking there couldn't be more than ten minutes before Zoë woke up for a feed, something shifted or broke in the immediate atmosphere between us, and I knew before he spoke what was coming.

"It's quite something," he said—then stalled.

Hollywood wouldn't give up. On offer was the scene where the woman

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maternally cradled the man and silently absorbed his horror story and afterwards told him it was all right. I always found such scenes aesthetically sickly. I always ended up thinking less of the guy after he'd unburdened himself. I was very close to saying: Don't bother. Whatever it is I don't give a shit.

"It's quite something," he repeated, "that it can't be anything other than minor to you."

The thing that had happened to him, he meant. The thing he'd wrought himself around.

"Why don't you just give me the facts?" I said.

Pause. Both of us were momentarily aware of the hotel's sad essence as a thing always passed through, always left. Then the tension fell out of his shoulders, fell out of all of him, as suddenly as if it had dropped through a trapdoor.

"I killed my father when I was seven," he said. "He was a cop. I shot him with his own gun. He was smashing my mother's face into the television. Those are the facts."

If you'd asked me what I'd thought he was going to say I couldn't have predicted it, precisely, but every word and image had the quality of a dream I was remembering now in a rush, vivid and inevitable: the little boy struggling to lift the weapon; the low-ceilinged room; the woman's forlorn knees and the man's mouth down-curved like the tragedy mask's, like De Niro's, in fact, which was who I pictured his dad looking like. I could see the moment fixing the boy like a pin in a butterfly. I could see the assassin and the smile and the levity and the sex and the skin-shedding like speeded-up film of something growing out of it. There was a weariness in being able to see this, a deflation that came with understanding. I thought: All insight makes us sad. It reminds us of the perfection we used to think was our original state.

"Did you mean to kill him?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. I meant to make him stop. Anyway, he died. My mother dialled 911 but he was dead before they got there. I'd shot him in the heart, it turned out."

"What happened to your mother afterwards?"

"She went off the rails. We had two years of moving from place to

place. I'd thought now he was gone she'd be okay, but she wasn't. She'd never been okay. She died of an overdose three weeks before my tenth birthday."

I could imagine the story that followed. Child Protection Services. Foster care. Institutions. Too much experience, accelerated exposure, all the wrong shapes. At first I didn't feel anything. Then when I thought of him saying, Easy there, tiger . . . *easy*, and how pure a relief it had been to me to laugh for a moment, I felt sorry for him. But almost immediately and seemingly involuntarily jerked myself out of it.

"It's minor to you," he said. "It can't not be."

"Minor" was hardly the word, but I knew what he meant. He was used to being the biggest deformity in the room. Now he wasn't. It was a relief and a loss. Part of him resented it. Again the visibility of all this made me feel tired. Trying to find something to say was trying to escape from a chamber with lots of open doors, each one of which slammed shut the second I got to it.

"You know how it is for me," I said, eventually. I'd surprised myself. The way out was simply to state the truth, neutrally. He did know how it was for me. Me, the woman whose high point to date was getting fucked by her werewolf lover snout-deep in their victim's guts and whose low was watching indifferently as strangers kidnapped her son. The woman with a dozen-plus murders under her belt and ghosts yammering in her blood. You shot your dad in the heart? Impressive. My last beau killed and ate his wife and child. You know, I run with a tough crowd. Ask Delilah Snow.

"Yeah," he said, quietly, as if I'd said it aloud. "I know."

That was all. The exchange had left us both sad, as both of us had known it would. Someone with an early flight pulled a wheelee case down the carpeted hall. A belated surge of pity for Walker rose in me, so that for a few seconds I was balanced between the desire to turn to him and touch him in animal sympathy, and the knowledge that it wouldn't, in the long run, help.

At which point an odd thing happened. I thought of how my dad used to sometimes take my mom's hand and make her press it on his face because he loved the feel and smell of her palm and because he was one

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of those men who was always ultimately looking to dissolve himself into a woman. And how my mom just accepted it. Why wouldn't her palm on his face make him feel better? That image, of my mom carrying on a conversation with me while my dad took her hand and placed it over his face, tipped the balance (and reminded me with a sudden inner temperature drop of the other balance that tipped); I turned to Walker and kissed him.

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I dreamed of Lorcan nightly now, with all dreaming's shifts and superimpositions of identity, but always the same structure: desperation, obstacles, loss. In a recurring nightmare I was back in the house at Park Slope. I could hear him in one of the upstairs rooms. The place was busy with relatives preparing a meal, my dad drunkenly superintending, my mom talking on the phone. The atmosphere was warm and lazy, and it took a while for me to shift from calm curiosity (where is he, exactly?) to edgy self-ridicule (don't be silly, he's right there upstairs!) to slightly unhinged irritation (where *is* he, God dammit?) to full panic (oh, God, please . . .) as I went from room to room without finding him, until in the last room I opened the closet door to find not a closet but a sheer drop into black, roiling water that stretched away as far as the eye could see.

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I wasn't supposed to leave the hotel (aside from Walker's injunction to lay low there was Cloquet's default paranoia) but by the sixth day I couldn't stand it anymore. The rooms were suffocating me. A strangling pressure came up out of the carpets.

At least that's what I told Cloquet. The truth was *someone walked over my grave* wouldn't leave me alone. Hadn't left me alone since Hammer-smith. It was with me now like a continuous sound. It grew in the suite's deeper silences, crept into what little sleep I got, whispered and sometimes blared out when I climaxed. *Wulf*, normally entering her quietest time of the month (ten days since her last appearance, eighteen till her next), remained raw-eyed and awake, ghost ears pricked, ghost snout

baffled. It was no good. There would be no peace. Whatever it was it was out there and I was sick of not knowing. I said nothing about it to Walker, who would have tried to stop me.

Cloquet looked in on me just as I was pulling on the white-blond wig. The suite's windows, overlooking Hyde Park, showed high bright clouds and the trees with their remaining leaves shivering. Cold, softly threshing air I wanted to feel on my hands and face and neck.

"You're going out," he said. He was annoyed by the liaison with Walker, yes, but more because he thought he'd done irreparable damage to my trust in him. I hadn't told him about *someone walked over my grave*, either. It wouldn't have helped. He was tightly enough wound as it was. "I just came to see . . . I just came to see if you needed anything."

He just came for a little company, he meant. The last few days had pared our relationship down to its functional bones. It suddenly occurred to me how gentle he was with Zoë whenever he had to handle her, and I felt a great tenderness towards him.

"Come here," I said. I was sitting on a pink velvet stool at the maple dresser. He crossed the room and quite naturally knelt and put his head on my knees. I ran my fingers through his hair and received, in his muscular surrender, how much he'd been starved of physical contact. There was an ache around his body. Unloved, uncaressed, the flesh developed a wrong microclimate that made it more unlovable, more uncaressable. I let myself imagine there would come a time when, my son restored to me and God in His heaven and all right with the world, I could *order* Cloquet to take some comfort in the arms of a woman, whether his libido was dead or not.

"You're exhausted," I said. "Do you know that?"

He didn't answer. The medic Walker had brought to check Cloquet's shoulder had pronounced it infection-free and healing, but it was still a visible drain, a force that gnawed his energy and made him clumsy.

"I'm going to go for a walk with the baby," I told him. "Why don't you take a nap?"

"I can't sleep."

"Just try. Have a brandy and put a movie on and take your shoes off and lie down on the bed. Just do that. Just rest." I spoke calmly, run-

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ning my fingers through his hair, thinking of the scar on his foot from where his mother had burned him with the poker. Again I felt the unjustifiable nature of our relationship. And again the obscure entitlement. *Wulf* knows its dues, and will have them. "Listen to me," I said. "I know you wanted to protect me. You think I don't trust you? You're the *only* person I trust. Don't you know that?"

He couldn't answer. Tenderness upset him, having been so long absent from his life. When it appeared now it was like the return of a glamorous unreliable parent who'd abandoned him umpteen times before. He knew it wouldn't last.

And it didn't. With gentle insinuation from my knees and hands I let him know it was time for him to get up. His shoulder pained him when he did.

"How long will you be gone?" he asked, quietly.

"I don't know. No more than a couple of hours. I'll call you if it's going to be more."

I added Zoë's last layers, hatted and mittened her, stuffed a couple of diapers in the pocket of her carrier, then snapped her into place against my breasts. "This is what Dolly Parton must feel like the whole time," I said, straightening my spine against the weight. "I'm going to end up a hunchback lugging this critter around."