

isabelle
of the Moon & Stars

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S. A. Jones was born in England and raised on a remote island in the Buccaneer Archipelago off the Kimberley Coast, Western Australia. She gained a PhD in history and now works as a novelist, regulatory analyst and commentator. Her work has been widely published, including in *The Age*, *Crikey*, *The Guardian*, *The Drum*, *Overland*, *Page Seventeen* and *Kill Your Darlings*. She has been shortlisted for the Fish International Short Story Prize and Memoir Prize, and was named one of Australia's 100 Women of Influence by the *Australian Financial Review* and Westpac in 2013. Jones's first novel, *Red Dress Walking*, was published in 2008 to considerable critical acclaim. She currently lives in Melbourne with her husband and daughter.

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For Jason, who makes all things possible

I

Perth

*Sire, the night is darker now
And the wind blows stronger
Fails my heart, I know not how,
I can go no longer.*

– ‘Good King Wenceslas’,
traditional Christmas carol

ONE

It is a Monday morning and the train is thick with lassitude. Wherever you look heads loll onto shoulders and eyes are glazed. Only a young woman in the middle carriage named Isabelle seems immune to the warm treacle atmosphere. She sits, straight-backed, intent on the scene scrolling by. It is high summer. The sky is candy-hard and cloudless with the roofs of the houses cut stark against it. The lines are so sharp you might slice your finger if you traced them on the window. She breathes in the lavender and fresh laundry scent of her home town in January and smiles.

The train stops at Mount Lawley and as the doors open heat rolls onto the carriage. The commuters move slowly, damp patches already spreading on their clothes. Without disentangling their sweaty palms a couple squeezes through the corridor to claim a small square of space. The man presses his back to the wall and folds the woman in his arms to keep her still against the jolt of the departure. As the train picks up speed he bends his head to whisper something in her ear and she smiles – a delighted, knowing smile.

Something has been said that is uniquely and intimately theirs, a filthy recollection or a silly endearment. The man's fingers strafe her dark hair, gently undoing the morning's work with the straightening iron. The woman rests her head on his chest, her lip gloss perilously close to his white shirt. Their senses are locked on one another so although the woman's gaze is on Isabelle she doesn't see her sitting there. He whispers something else and she closes her eyes as if to trap her delight.

Isabelle wonders what could have been said to create such bliss.

I love you.

You're beautiful.

You are the moon to me.

Isabelle has a fleeting memory of being the recipient of such words but she evicts Karl from her thoughts almost the instant he appears. She watches as the man's long, balletic fingers step delicately from his lover's mussed hair down her spine. He glances around the train and then slips his fingers beneath her waistband. Isabelle imagines the woman's marrow-tingle. She knows she should look away but the glow of their tenderness seems to include her somehow. Perhaps, she thinks, this is a sign.

The train lurches as it rounds a bend and the woman opens her eyes, sighted now, to find herself observed. Isabelle is too deep under the couple's spell to realise she has been caught.

'What are *you* looking at?' the woman demands.

The man snatches his hand from his girlfriend's underwear and rests it innocently on the railing. Conflict thrills the carriage. The gentleman sitting next to

Isabelle stops playing with his phone and holds it still in his lap, waiting. *Nothing* runs at Isabelle's throat but is beaten by what she really thinks.

'Love, I think. Is it love?'

The woman's cherry-frosted mouth falls open. Isabelle, too, is surprised at her words. The train wheels chug a chorus beneath them.

*whatwillhappennextwhatwillhappennextwhatwillhappen
nextwhatwillhappennext*

The man bends to his girlfriend's ear and whispers urgently, not a private endearment as before but an exhortation. She seems oblivious, continuing to stare at Isabelle.

'I hope it's love,' Isabelle says. *My God*, she thinks, *just shut up, Isabelle*. It is as if the boom gate between her mind and her mouth has seized and refuses to close.

'It's none of your goddamn business is what it is. What is wrong with you?'

I don't know.

The woman has transferred all her intensity to Isabelle. The exclusion riles her boyfriend.

'She's just a nutter. Leave it, come on.'

He pushes from the wall and grabs her hand. The other passengers bunch together to clear a path for them, but the woman hesitates. She is dying to say something unanswerable but cannot settle on the words. Finally, her boyfriend takes hold of her shoulders and steers her through the gap. The commuters close around them and they are gone. The man sitting next to Isabelle pockets his phone and moves to the space they vacated, careful that he and Isabelle have no eye contact.

When the carriage empties at East Perth there is an exclusion zone around Isabelle. She pauses on the platform, searching for her phone in her handbag while the crowd rushes over the drawbridge to the ugly government building opposite. Seagulls straying from the river circle overhead as Isabelle takes deep breaths of the scented air. She brings up Evan's number to tell him what just happened, then thinks better of it. She avoids telling him things that make him worry and these days, where she is concerned, that covers just about everything.

Feeling rattled after the confrontation, she sits down on one of the metal benches to collect herself. Overhead the gulls are gathering in a tight spiral. Round and round they fly without breaking formation. In their symmetry and precision they seem to intend something, some portent.

Great, she thinks, now I'm bird divining. What next?

She waits until the shakiness passes then walks over the bridge to the building where Jack will be.

Isabelle and Jack fuss about with pens and forms and cups of coffee until neither is able to delay the purpose of their meeting any longer. Jack's eyes stray to the management texts he keeps within reach. Reassured, he opens the folder in front of him and takes a deep, resolute breath.

'So, Isabelle. Resident data analyst and all-round stats whiz, let's start your appraisal with a general overview. P3 has been operational now for what, four months? How have you found the new strategy has changed your work life?'

‘To be honest, I haven’t found it’s made that much difference to what I do.’

‘To the actual task no, probably not, but to the general work environment, the culture. Your vision of what work is and could be.’ Jack sweeps the air as if to reveal the abundant corporate glory before him. He has hands so large that if he splayed them from the thumbs they would almost circle Isabelle’s waist.

‘Well, I think the strategy is...sound.’

‘It should be. It’s completely best practice and we workshopped it for months before we rolled it out.’

Isabelle thinks furiously for something positive she can volunteer. She cannot afford to lose this job. ‘Focusing on people, performance and planning...the whole P3 strategy. I think it’s...those principles seem...appropriate.’

Jack smiles and ticks the first of the boxes on the form.

‘Now, can you read out to me the goals you set last year and your KPIs?’

Isabelle reads from the paper in front of her, careful to keep her voice upbeat and even. ‘Continue to develop statistical analysis skills through targeted training and development.’ She looks up. ‘I did an online tutorial on the new version of the database.’

‘Good, good,’ Jack says as he takes notes. ‘What else?’

She reads, ‘Add value through extending networks and advocating for the department.’

‘Still completely relevant for P3. How did you reach that target?’

‘I went to the alumni sundowner at UWA.’ As always happens when she lies, red gridlines map the

sharp curve from her temples to her cheeks. *But it's not entirely untrue*, she thinks. *I only pulled out when I heard Karl was going.*

'That's great, Isabelle. You can't underestimate the power of those connections. Got to work at maintaining them. Anything else?'

'Pursue further stretch and development through short-term acting opportunities at higher levels.'

'And how did you go there?'

'Applied for two roles. Unsuccessful in both of them.' *As you know*, she thinks. *You were my referee.*

Jack scribbles a note and turns the page. He runs his index finger down a column and Isabelle's stomach plummets. She has come to think of it as the column of shame.

'Your sick leave and personal leave have ratcheted up, Isabelle.'

'I know.'

'Does this have anything to do with, you know...?' He drops his voice to a whisper, '*...the incident?*'

Isabelle nods, pushing back against the memory. The tick of the clock becomes suddenly, insistently audible. Jack considers the heading on the form. *Health and Wellbeing*. He taps his pen lid on the desk, his habit when he is nervous. Three short taps to one circle. He is clearly afraid they are about to stray into murky uterine territory, something bloody and womanish. Isabelle wouldn't tell him anyway. She hates the words 'depression' and 'anxiety.' They are blank, nothing words that pretend 'the incident' can be corralled into neat and comprehensible English. Those words convey

nothing of the horror of it, nothing of her heroism in standing up to it. To her it is The Black Place. Jack writes 'n/a' on the form.

'Moving on to how you've been living the values. I know it's hard, but if you had to pick just one value that you think you really embody, which would it be?'

Isabelle, unable to resist, says, 'Work-life balance.' *I'm definitely telling Evan that, she thinks. He'll piss himself.*

Jack gives his peculiar half-smile, the one where the right part of his mouth curves into his cheek revealing his dimple but the left slopes downwards as if he cannot quite commit to the one expression. 'Is that a joke, Isabelle?'

'Look, Jack, I know you don't like to be the bad guy so I'll save you the trouble. I'm not a star performer. I wish I was for your sake as well as my own. You put yourself out there to give me an opportunity and I let you down. I'm sorrier about that than you will ever know.'

He taps his pen again. On impulse Isabelle reaches across Jack's desk and picks up his photograph frame. All the staff were given one of these frames by a former minister at Christmas. Isabelle's contains a photo of the Charles Bridge in Prague, the snow collecting in the outstretched hands of the statues. Jack's photo is of him and his wife Kate. Jack stands under the shade of a tree, a cricket bat in one hand, his other arm around Kate. She is a slender, dainty woman reaching easily to Jack's shoulder. Their smiling faces are dappled in the shadow print of the leaves. Isabelle pictures the scene: a mild

spring day, a family cricket match, an esky somewhere out of the frame, and a bunch of cousins and friends taking their turn at fielding and turning the sausages on the barbecue.

‘How long have you been married?’

‘Twenty-two years.’

‘She’s lovely, your wife.’

‘Yes, she is.’

Jack bends forward and takes the frame from Isabelle’s hand. She catches the distinctive watermelon and cinnamon scent he wears.

‘Let’s talk about how your work contributes to the strategic vision.’

Isabelle begins to feel slightly panicked as nothing plausible comes to her.

‘I’ll pose the question another way. If you weren’t here doing your job, how would it limit everyone else’s capacity to do their work?’

‘I give my reports to you.’

‘Yes. So what do you think they do for me? How do they help me to do my work?’

‘I would think you could answer that better than me.’

‘Take a guess.’

‘My reports track volumes for various government services. Calls in, calls out, number of customers coming into the centres for different services, that sort of thing. So I would say that helps you, um, plan.’

‘Exactly!’ Jack ticks a box on the form with a mighty flourish. ‘Your data helps me predict required resources and where to target them for alignment with our results profile. *Planning and performance*. Two of the elements of

P3. You see, you've hit on exactly how you contribute to the strategic vision.'

For an instant Isabelle feels contemptuous of him. He really believes this stuff. But who is she to begrudge other people their certainties? She would take them, and gladly, if she could.

'Now, what are your goals for the next twelve months?'

'To stare down fear and to live.' The boom gate between her mind and her mouth has failed her again. The words sound hopelessly jejune.

'To stare down fear?' Jack repeats the words carefully, patting them down for signs of sarcasm. 'Well that's... ambitious. I have to say no one's ever offered that in their performance appraisal before.' Tap, tap, tap, circle. 'If you're going to be courageous, perhaps we should make you the new ministerial aide.'

'Perhaps you should.'

Jack laughs, confident now that Isabelle is making a joke. That position is reserved for *performers*. 'Can we say something like "Improve strategic value through more sophisticated use of data"?''

'If you like.'

'It's not if *I* like, Isabelle. You really need to own this plan.' He balls his fingers into fists to emphasise the point.

Isabelle sighs. 'How about "Contributes to the vision through fearless appraisal of realities"?''

'Could we say "Supports the vision through evidence-based decision-making"? It's basically the same thing, just more —'

‘Corporate.’

‘More aligned to language the rest of the organisation will understand.’

‘Whatever. I mean, yes. Absolutely. Sounds good.’

Jack summarises Isabelle’s performance in a couple of inane sentences, signs the form and hands it to Isabelle, who signs it too, both of them relieved to have that unpleasant task behind them for another year.

‘Thanks, Isabelle.’

Jack extends his hand across the desk and Isabelle takes it. His hand encloses hers completely, warm and sure. She thinks of the couple on the train. The way the man had held his girlfriend still against the rollick and jolt of the carriage. How long is it since she was sheltered like that? A sudden yearning constricts her throat and pricks at the back of her eyeballs. Unconsciously, she tightens her grip on Jack’s hand. He gives her his half-smile, running his thumb along her soft, white skin. The consciousness of prolonged physical contact explodes in both at the same moment. They drop their hands as if from a great height and step backwards from one another. There is a brief pause before they dive for their pens, folders and coffee mugs and go bustling about their day.

TWO

Evan leaps into the water, sinks to the bottom in a net of bubbles then star-jumps to the surface. He looks like a keen but graceless substitute for a synchronised swimming troupe. Isabelle's entry is less dramatic. She drops in neatly from a sitting position so the pool swallows her with barely a ripple. She sits, frog-like, under the surface while her anticipation builds. Evan pushes off from the wall first. Isabelle gives him a lead of several metres then sets off after him. Where Evan is a furious windmill of splash and churn, Isabelle's stroke is clean and precise. As they approach the far end, Isabelle decelerates to stay clear of Evan's thrashing limbs as he throws himself into reverse. Isabelle tucks into a neat tumble, shoots through the confused vortex of swirling water and dancing sunlight, and pursues him.

After a few laps they stop and stretch, splaying their palms on the tiles and turning at right angles to the wall to lengthen their muscles. Isabelle watches the droplets cut through the sharp indents of Evan's bare, coffee-coloured torso. The cross tattooed on his shoulder contracts and expands with the stretch. It doesn't occur to her to wonder if Evan scrutinises her when they

repeat the stretch in the opposite direction. *Evan*, she thinks, *isn't like that*. They duck under the lane rope into the sprint lane.

'How much of a start do you want?'

Evan ponders, pressing his goggles until the rubber sucks at his eye sockets. 'Two metres.'

'Two metres? You're feeling awfully confident today.'

'Damn straight. I've been working out. Getting stronger.' He flexes his biceps in proof, oblivious to the admiring glances of the women in the adjoining lanes. 'Your days of aquatic dominion are over.'

'Ooh, them's fightin' words.'

Isabelle disciplines herself to give him precisely two metres then dives in after him. Midway up the lap Evan's toes are centimetres from her fingers. He senses her at his heels and kicks even more ferociously. The white water bounces off her forehead. Fearing a boot to the face she slows at the turn, gulps air, then zeroes in. She scoops the water behind her with every stroke, making it look effortless. She loves this, loves racing. To feel her heart thrashing from exertion, not fear. Loves the way she can command her limbs, heart and lungs to get her to the wall first. With fifteen metres to go Isabelle ducks to the side of the lane and keeps her head down. She touches just ahead of Evan. He doesn't pretend otherwise when they stop, both breathing hard.

'Did you give me two metres?' he asks, gasping.

'Of course I did.'

'Damn it.' He playfully hits the wall with his palm, chest heaving as he vacuums air. 'You're so fast. I

thought I could,' gasp, 'hold you off today. Have to work,' breath, 'more on my kick. Get some more power behind it.' He rinses his goggles then straps them back to his head. 'The swim club here has a special training session on kick style. I might go.'

Isabelle shakes the water from her ear. 'You really need to get a puppy. Or a girlfriend. If anyone would have you.'

'I'll have you know there's a huge demand for Christian male virgins.'

'As altar boys the world over will testify.'

He smiles. 'Good one.'

Isabelle had wondered, long ago, if Evan's self-imposed chastity was a result of childhood trauma at the hands of a priest. 'No,' he had assured her, 'just garden-variety biblical literalness.'

They sprint several times more, Evan losing each time, before changing lanes and cruising into a leisurely breaststroke. Soon, the endorphins and the black-line hypnosis produce their strange alchemy, parting the water into an Isabelle-shaped space. This is the transformation she has been waiting for. She slips and turns through the bubbles without effort, almost without the consciousness that she is doing it. Her mind empties, but it is not a panicked emptiness. It is a serene, open-vista emptiness that only the water can bring her.

When Isabelle permits herself the indulgence of nostalgia, this is what she most often returns to: that heady day when she spearheaded the high-school relay team to victory at the all-schools carnival. Her

team-mates hoisted her onto their shoulders and carried her around the platform. Never mind that she slipped and fell hard on her ankle, making it sprout like an eggplant the next day. There was great conviviality between the team for weeks after that. Passing each other in the corridors at school they would spontaneously erupt into high fives and rousing victory chants, Isabelle wincing as she came down on her sprained ankle. She had felt part of some vital energy. Connected. The way she had felt with Karl, but that is something she never voluntarily recalls.

After an hour Evan signals that he's had enough. Reluctantly, Isabelle follows him to the stairs. With each step into air she feels less adapted, less suited. It is six thirty but there is no sign of the approaching evening. The aquatic centre is thriving. In one of the shallower pools an instructor corrects technique as children half-bellyflop, half-dive into the water. A whistle calls time on a game of water polo in the deep pool. Bare-chested dads with towels around their waists turn sausages on the hot plates in the picnic area.

'Smells good,' says Evan. 'Smells like summer.'

'Mmmm,' says Isabelle, but she turns her head away. She cannot stand the smell of smoke.

Isabelle and Evan thread through the crowd and clamber into the spa. Warm, frothy water erupts around them. Isabelle sits hard against one of the jets so it pounds the muscles in her shoulders and neck.

'I can't believe you beat me. I thought I had you today.'

'Why this sudden burst of confidence?'

Evan plays a drum roll on the surface of the water. 'I was promoted today. Da da da da da da da!'

'What? You haven't applied for a new job. Or did I vague out somewhere?'

'Nope. Didn't apply. Wasn't looking. Got tapped on the shoulder.'

'Wow,' she says limply. 'Well done.'

'Please, you know I hate it when you gush.'

She shakes herself. 'Hey, I'm sorry. That came out all wrong. Sorry, I'm just – I had my performance appraisal today and I'm not exactly employee of the year so I'm just feeling a bit, um, inadequate, I guess.'

'Oh, Belle,' Evan's face crinkles with concern.

'Hey, it's fine. It's not about me. I'm just being selfish.' Isabelle plays her own imaginary drum on the water and forces down her dejection. 'C'mon, I want to hear all about it. What's the job?'

'You sure you want to talk about this now? It's really no drama if we left it for another time.'

'No. I must have details. What are you going to be doing?'

'From Monday you'll be looking at the new manager, strategy. Level seven.'

'God, that's great. Sorry.' But this time she is apologising for taking the Lord's name in vain.

'That's all right.'

'Are you excited?'

'A bit nervous, actually.'

'How did all of this come about?'

Evan shrugs. 'All I can think of is that at last my brown-nosing has paid dividends.'

‘You’re being modest. I’ve worked with you, remember? I know how smart you are. What are you going to do with all that extra cash?’

‘Cocaine. Hookers. Papal absolution.’

‘Hah!’

‘Seriously, though, I’d like to do something special. To celebrate.’

‘Absolutely. We must.’

‘How about dinner on Saturday night? Can you come?’

‘Oh, let me check my calendar,’ she pretends to consult a diary. ‘If I just move that and postpone that... Of *course* I can come. I’ll be there with bells on.’ This time Isabelle manages to inject some real enthusiasm into her voice. She loves Evan and knows that when her feelings of failure stop biting so hard she will feel triumphant for him. She is so determined to make up for her desultory congratulations that when Saturday comes she splurges on a bottle of expensive champagne and wraps up the gift she has been saving for his birthday, a DVD called *Soccer’s Greatest Kicks*. She dresses with care, putting on her blue ‘special occasion’ dress and high heels. She is applying mascara when she is interrupted by a knock at the door.

‘Hi, Mrs Graham. What’s up?’

Isabelle unlocks her flywire door and ushers her elderly neighbour into her flat.

‘Hello, dear. I’m so sorry to bother you but I’ve got a bit of a problem.’

‘You’re not bothering me at all. What can I do for you? Would you like to sit down?’

‘Thank you, no. I can’t stay. It’s just...well...I’ve managed to knock over some of my pots. You know those large blue ones? They’ve landed on the reticulation and I think I might have blocked the circuit.’ Mrs Graham runs her liver-spotted hands over each other as if she is washing them. ‘I tried to right them, but with my arthritis...’ She holds up her tree-root hands in evidence.

‘Oh look, no dramas at all. Just let me change my shoes and I’ll be right there.’

‘So sorry, dear. You’re obviously getting ready to go out. You look lovely, by the way.’

‘Oh, thank you. But I’ve got plenty of time.’

Isabelle changes out of her heels and into thongs, and together the two women make slow, careful progress down the stairwell, Isabelle supporting Mrs Graham by her papery elbow. Mrs Graham’s small square of garden is delightful. Isabelle often pauses there after swimming to chat to her and marvel afresh at how beautiful she has made her unpromising few metres of courtyard. Hanging baskets fringe the awning around her flat, spilling over with white and purple flowers. In the spring they hum with the low drone of bee life. Her concrete slabs are scrubbed clean and run through with dark-green moss, putting Isabelle in mind of a giant game of noughts-and-crosses. In place of a fence Mrs Graham has installed a row of hefty azure pots frothing with flowers, four of which are now upturned. One has shattered. Isabelle wonders how a woman as frail as Mrs Graham managed to push them over.

‘My poor plants. They’re quite ruined.’

Isabelle bends down to take a closer look. The heavy pots are crushing the spongy green network of hose that feeds the ground-floor gardens. Isabelle hitches up her dress then pulls the pot into a standing position. Its white rose springs upwards, seemingly unhurt.

‘I think this plant’s going to be all right.’

Mrs Graham pushes her spectacles to the bridge of her nose and peers at the rose. Her gnarled fingers tenderly brush the leaves. Isabelle hauls the three undamaged pots upright. Mrs Graham hovers behind her, her worry crackling through the still, dry air.

‘Is the reticulation all right? Does it look damaged?’

Isabelle bends lower and pokes at the hose. That is when she notices the running-shoe imprints in the flowerbed. A quick, fiery rage takes hold of her. If the offender were within reach she would earth her knee in their kidneys for their casual vandalism.

‘Can you turn this on manually, Mrs Graham? That’s probably the only way we’ll know if it’s leaking.’

‘No. The system is automatic. The body corporate sends someone out to program the watering time twice a year. It won’t be on now until five tomorrow morning.’

Isabelle hears the bird-wing flutter of anxiety in Mrs Graham’s voice and fears she will spend the evening in a tight, fretful ball counting down to the daylight. ‘I tell you what,’ she says, standing upright and brushing the dirt from her hands, ‘I’ll pop round tomorrow morning and see how the land’s lying. If it’s damaged I’ll get Jim to have a look at it. It’s probably just a matter of replacing a small piece of piping. The strata company won’t need to know a thing.’ Jim is Isabelle’s neighbour but one.

‘Do you think he’d mind? Only, you see I can’t really, I don’t have the means...for a tradesman.’

‘Don’t worry about that. He’s a nice guy. He’s always helping me get back in when I lock myself out of my bathroom. He’d be happy to help. He might appreciate a cutting from one of your plants, though.’

‘Oh, well if you think so.’ Mrs Graham pauses for a moment. ‘Isabelle, perhaps you might like to take a seat and I could bring you a ginger beer. I make my own.’ Her voice is carefully uninflected, all vestige of question snuffed out so as not to suffer a refusal. Isabelle would like to stay and make what amends she can for the trespasser’s cruelty but time is starting to run short.

‘Could I take a raincheck on that, Mrs Graham? I’d love to try your ginger beer. Perhaps I could drop round one afternoon this week after work. Would that be all right?’

‘Of course, Isabelle. I’ll look forward to it. I forgot it’s Saturday night. It must be a whirl for you.’

Isabelle laughs. ‘Oh yes, the gentlemen callers are beating a path to my door, as you can see.’ She sweeps her hand before the vacant stairwell.

‘So who is he, dear? Butcher, baker, candlestick maker?’

‘He’s a humble servant of the public, like me.’

‘And is he coming to pick you up?’

‘He is, actually.’

She nods approvingly. ‘Good. He sounds like a gentleman.’

‘You know, that’s the perfect word to describe Evan.’

‘Is this the young chap I see around here from time to time?’

‘If you mean the tall, dark-haired guy with the ridiculous cheekbones, then yes.’

‘That’s him. Quite the dish. Well done, Isabelle.’

Isabelle laughs. ‘No, it’s not like that. We’re friends. Very good friends.’

‘He hasn’t declared himself yet?’

‘Evan doesn’t...declare.’

‘He’s gay?’

Isabelle is rather surprised that Mrs Graham should be au fait with such a term. ‘No. Just Catholic.’

Mrs Graham’s eyes open wide. ‘He’s a *priest*?’

Isabelle laughs again. ‘No, no, nothing like that. He just doesn’t...You know...’

‘Enjoy earthly delights?’

‘Precisely.’

‘Foolish boy.’ Mrs Graham shakes her head. ‘He’ll regret it when he’s my age. Could you wait one moment?’

Mrs Graham goes into her flat and returns holding a pair of bronze secateurs and a plastic cup half-filled with water. She cuts a red flower trailing from a hanging basket and places it in the cup.

‘Put this behind your ear when you go out tonight. The colour will be lovely on you.’

‘Thank you. And we’re on for ginger beer later in the week, yeah?’

‘Absolutely.’

Back in her flat Isabelle puts the red flower to her nose and inhales. It smells of watermelon and cinnamon and there, suddenly, is that heat in her underwear again. She returns the flower to the cup and retreats, deliberating. She circles the flower warily. From the expression on

her face you might suspect it of pumping noxious gas into her flat.

Over the past year she has welded the shattered fragments of her life back together with routine, force of will and punishing physical exercise. It's an ordered place from which to withstand the incursions of The Black Place.

But sometimes...

Isabelle thinks of the couple on the train, their tenderness. The way the gulls had circled overhead.

She picks the flower up again, gently wipes the water away from the stem and tucks it behind her ear.