

'DISQUIET' NOVELLA AND SCREENPLAY: ADAPTATION AND
CREATIVE HYBRIDITY

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ABSTRACT

The major creative work of this thesis consists of ‘Disquiet’, the novella and the screenplay. It is a twice-told tale. In the exegesis I explore the writing practice of working between two narrative forms. To do this I begin by establishing that the traditional focus of adaptation studies has been book-to-film adaptation. Within this field the issue of ‘fidelity’ has been a dominant concern although it is hard to find any scholar who is actively arguing *for* fidelity. I look at types of adaptation and then outline some possible new directions for adaptation studies. I pay attention to two areas that adaptation studies have largely overlooked and which are pertinent to ‘Disquiet’: the screenplay and the novelisation. Having loosely situated ‘Disquiet’, the novella, within the experimental end of the novelisation continuum I then develop the concept of the creative hybrid. I revisit the assumption that where there are two creative works based on the same story then one work must have come into being before the other. I also query whether the term ‘adaptation’ is appropriate to describe the creative process for hybrids. I look at other modes of speaking about ‘adaptation’ proposed by recent scholars and venture some terms of my own. Turning to the case-studies I first make the case for why Graham Greene’s novella *The Third Man* – which was written *before* his screenplay for a film of the same name – does in fact sit on the continuum of novelisations and/or could be called a hybrid. The second case-study is Pier Paolo Pasolini’s so-called novel, *Theorem*. The third case-study is Ingmar Bergman’s hybrid text, *The Best Intentions*. I then address ‘Disquiet’ in both its forms, highlighting the writing practices I adopted. I conclude that ‘Disquiet’ does not readily fit within either book-to-film adaptation or novelisation. I suggest that acknowledgment of creative hybrids invites a deeper understanding of the practice of adaptation.

DECLARATION

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'DISQUIET' NOVELLA

They stood before the great gateway, all around an empty and open countryside, ugly countryside, flat mud-ploughed fields. On that morning the sky was balm, a pale and whitish blue. The woman was dressed in a tweed pencil skirt, a grey silk blouse and her dark hair was pulled back into a loose chignon, the way her mother once used to wear it. Her right arm was broken and she'd rested it in a silk-scarf sling which coordinated unobtrusively with her blouse. By her feet, a suitcase. The children – the boy was nine, the girl was six and carrying her favourite doll – were saddled with backpacks and they each guarded a small suitcase of their own. The woman stepped forward and went right up to the gate – iron-spiked, imposing – looking for the lock. Instead she found the surveillance system, a palmpad, and she rested her palm on this electronic pad for a long moment until she was defeated. Unfazed, she returned to collect her suitcase and, without a backward glance at the children, turned off the driveway onto the grassy verge.

After a while they decided to follow. First the boy, then the girl. They lumbered in single file alongside the stone wall that bordered the vast estate until the woman reached a spot which looked familiar; she had recognised an ancient oak over the bristling glass-topped wall. A sweet-smelling vine covered this section of the wall and, hooking the handle of her suitcase awkwardly over her cast, she trailed her left hand through the greenery, seeking out the stone behind it. Until she found – the door. She tore at the vine and when the children joined her they watched this motherly performance with the same impassive look on their faces that they usually had when they watched TV. But the boy soon came to help and eventually they uncovered the

small wooden entrance. She still had her key and – holding the slender precious thing in her left-hand mitt, the ‘sinister hand’ – she fitted it to the lock. At first she turned it in the wrong direction but then, click, they heard the tumbler fall. The door didn’t open, would not open: she tried, it stayed shut. She pressed her full bodyweight against it, leant into it with her shoulder, but it refused to budge. She stood there for a long while with her forehead resting against the door, as if by dint of will it somehow, if only, would melt away and allow them to pass.

The boy had a go. He planted himself on the ground and kicked at the door. He kicked and kicked, first a hard low kick and then a one-two kung-fu kick. He took a few steps back and, like a high-jumper, standing on the balls of his feet, gathering concentration, he readied for a run-up: he launched himself against the door. At the point of impact there came a dull thud. He did this again; he made himself brutal. And again. Over and over, uncomplaining. He picked himself up, wincing, and walked back to his starting position, lifted his heels, ran at the door. But the door was oak and he was boy; his shirt was torn and bloodied. He snuck a glance at the woman and with a slow blink she encouraged him to continue. In the end he forced an opening.

The woman was first through the breach, snagging and ripping her stockings. The boy helped his sister across and then, piece by piece, passed the luggage over. He took a quick look around to make sure no-one had been watching and closed the door behind him.

Once inside they dragged their suitcases through lawn that grew thick and soft. In the distance a squad of four men, gardeners in uniform, were scooping leaves out of a stone-sculpted fountain. As the trio drew close one of these gardeners, a longtimer, struggled to his feet and waved in greeting. The woman returned his wave but did not deviate from her course. They followed the long line of yews clipped into fantastic shapes, into top hats and ice-cream cones and barbells. Another gardener, riding on a mower, swerved to give them berth. They avoided the rose garden and instead cut into the pebbled allée which was lined with elms whose twigs had not yet sprouted their leaves, so that it was apparent a tree actually grew, that a twig had worked its way out of a branch, that an elm did not arrive in the world elm-shaped. The girl declined to leave the lawn, would not put a foot onto the allée, until her brother opened her suitcase and from it removed the tiny exoskeleton of a pram. She settled her doll into the pram and, reassured, proceeded on, managing to push the pram and pull her suitcase at one and the same time.

The stone stairs leading to the château were wide and shallow and worn like soap. The woman took hold of the doorknocker – it was a large bronze ring running through the nose of a great bronze bull – and weighed it in her hand. Knocked. They waited patiently, and their kind of patience was born more from exhaustion, from abandoning any expectation of easy gratification, than from gracious goodwill. She reached out to ruffle the boy's hair, to give them both some courage. Knock-knock. An old woman answered. She was wearing her perennial uniform, a black dress and white apron, and her hair, grey now, was curled in a tidy bun. They stared at one another without speaking and between them passed an understanding of the unsung miracle of the door – one moment a person wasn't there, and the next moment ... there. Peering

inside, the children spied the entrance hall; it was austere and immense, the wood-panelled walls were painted palest dove-grey. High ceilings lent it the authority of a church or a courthouse although this authority was undermined by brightly coloured helium balloons weighted down in vases and tied along the banisters of the grand central staircase.

'Hello Ida,' said the woman calmly. 'It's me.'

'Hello Olivia.'

'May I introduce the children?'

Each child gave a limp wave. Ida noted the boy's bloodied shoulder, his torn shirt and trousers, but held her tongue. She bent down and twinkled her fingers in greeting, ushered them inside.

Grandmother crowned the staircase. She was impeccably dressed in a matching bouclé jacket and skirt, a faultless string of pearls. A sceptral silver-topped walking-stick rested by her side. Though small and frail, the impression she gave was one of dignified resignation.

'Hello Mother.'

'Hello Olivia.'

The woman climbed the marble stairs, and when she reached her mother she took her soft scaly hand and kissed it. A formal gesture, not one of reconciliation. And her mother, in turn, made an assessment – the straggled hair, the torn stockings, the broken arm. Tactful, she determined not to pass comment.

'I needed to come home,' said the woman. There was a long silence. 'Well, meet the children.'

She waved them up the stairs.

‘This is Andrew, we call him Andy. Andy, this is your grandmother. Grand-mère. Grandmother.’

He said hello; she smiled.

‘And this is Lucy. Lucyloo.’

‘Hello Lucyloo,’ said Grandmother.

The girl was too shy to reply.

‘Will you be staying long?’

A pause. ‘Yes, I think so.’

‘So, the day of days,’ said Grandmother. She tapped one of the balloons with the end of her walking-stick. ‘Your brother will be home soon. They are pregnant, you know. In the hospital. We expect them any minute. Everything here is ready, just for the first six months or so – when it’s hardest. But, of course, there is plenty of room. Where would you like to sleep, Olivia?’

‘Wherever is convenient.’

‘Ida will see to it.’ She looked to Ida for confirmation. ‘Well, come now, are you tired? You must be tired. Such a long trip.’ And then she added, ‘*Was* it a long trip?’

‘Very long,’ replied the woman. ‘Wasn’t it, kids?’

The boy shrugged but the girl bobbed her head up and down without stopping.

Ida showed them upstairs to their rooms. In the past the children’s room had been used for visiting adult guests, for couples who no longer slept together; it was furnished with two large beds, each with a white satin-quilted bedhead. As soon as Ida had left the girl said, ‘It smells like old people.’ Overcome by an atomic

exhaustion – at long last – the woman sank down on an armchair in the corner of the room. The boy bumped on his mattress, gauging its spring. He fiddled with the bedside lamp, twisting the round brass knob beneath a fringed lampshade, but couldn't work out how to turn it on. He stood on the bed and examined the painting that hung above the bedhead – an eighteenth-century portrait of a black-haired, lunar-skinned woman resting a posy of violets in her lap. Violet, the household knew her as Violet. He ran his fingertips over Violet's breasts, feeling the surface of the paint, and used his fingernail to worry off a chip of the craquelure. When he succeeded he proudly held up his finger and showed his mother the chip. 'It's real.'

He jumped down and headed to the long narrow windows that overlooked the great expanse of lawn. He tried everything he could to open the windows but failed. He twisted himself into the floor-length silk curtains, twisted and twisted, disappeared. It must have been dark in there, so that he could hardly breathe, so that he listened to his heartbeat. After a while the girl – marooned with her doll on her own giant bed – grew frightened.

'Andy!'

He returned to the world.

Glancing at the woman, he walked over to his suitcase and unpacked his mobile telephone and its charger. Contraband. He got down on his knees and, following the cord of the bedside lamp, searched for a powerpoint. As she expected, he found that the prongs of the charger were mismatched and no amount of jamming could fit them into the socket. He sat back on his heels and absorbed the measurements of his confines: he looked deep into a corner as if the junction of two walls, the angle,

somehow pointed to a way out. The woman let him be: she hauled herself from the armchair and went next door to her room.

Her room – was never her room. It was another guest room, similarly furnished. She drew the curtains and loosened her hair, freed her arm from its sling. She undressed, dropping all her clothes in a pile on the floor. Crawled onto the bed. Lay belly down, face on the pillow. There was a loop in time; she was already dead. And then she must have sensed the children standing in the doorway for – with great effort, turning her head and opening one eye – she saw reflected in the mirror that, yes, the children had been spying, how long she could not be sure, but they had no doubt seen their mother lying on the bed, the white plain of her back covered in rotten yellowed bruises. ‘Andy?’ she said and the word sounded strangled, faint. ‘You two. Please, go and play outside.’

Not long after Ida was preparing food in the kitchen, an enormous kitchen with a walk-in fireplace, flagstone floor and a long wooden table as its centrepiece. She was working at the table while the twins, the teenage housemaids who had been with her for almost a year, were chopping vegetables on marble-topped benches ranged against the far wall. The children, dutifully in new clothes, stuck their heads around the corner. ‘Hello.’

‘Hello! Look at you,’ said Ida. ‘Who is wanting a biscuit?’ She only spoke crude English.

The girl held up her doll and stated flatly, ‘Her name is Pinky. We’re on the run.’

‘On the hop,’ the boy corrected his sister.

Ida feigned comprehension with an all-purpose smile, gave them each a biscuit. The girl started hopping in a circle.

The boy said, ‘We’re passing through. Don’t worry, we’ll be gone soon. Maybe tomorrow. Or the next day.’

The girl, finishing her hopping circle, announced, ‘I live in Australia.’

‘Australia. Far away. Lots of kangaroos.’

The boy ignored the kangaroo reference and asked, ‘Are you a servant?’

In the background the twins suppressed a laugh.

‘A housekeeper,’ replied Ida. ‘And I am here a very long time. I know this place inside outside and I know everything that happens here. Every. Thing. Everything.’

She fixed him with a stare she used to scare children. ‘The painting. Violet. I know.

The curtains. I know.’ She tapped her forehead. ‘Here, my third eye. Just here.’

She bent down and allowed the children to take turns touching her third eye – just as she had once, many years ago, bent down and allowed their mother the same privilege. In those bygone days the children of the house never doubted Ida’s mysterious powers, her affliction; brother and sister had both gone to inordinate lengths to conceal their wrongdoings, even in empty rooms.

‘I’ll always be watching,’ Ida said to the boy, and called to the twins for affirmation.

Yes, yes, they nodded in solemn agreement. After the children had gone one of the twins mistakenly slipped an egg yolk onto the bench and, without turning around, Ida clicked her tongue in admonishment.

A little later the children were playing alone by the lake. The boy was skimming stones across the water while the girl dug a hole in the sand, using the plastic hand of her doll as a spade. Weeping willows were married to their reflections. On the far side of the lake, a rippling dark forest, and rising beyond the forest, the mountain – impervious to roads, to tunnels, never to be upended. The woman had changed into a new dress and freshened her make-up, redone her hair. She didn't join the children but instead watched them from a stone bench that overlooked the lake. After a while the girl caught sight of her mother and jumped up, started waving. Ran toward her. 'Mummy!' she grabbed her around the neck. 'Mummy! Can we swim? Can we?' 'It's too cold,' replied the woman. 'The winter's still in the water.'

This scarcely bothered the girl though the boy hung his head and looked like he didn't believe her.

'Oliiiiiviiiiia! Oliiiiiviiiiia!'

Ida stood in the distance and waved her white apron over her head. 'Ollliiiiiviiiiiiiia!'

They hastened up the path.

'Olivia, come, hurry. Your brother is arriving,' said Ida.

The woman took hold of the girl's hand, Ida took the boy's. They had not gone far before he snatched the girl's doll and broke away, started sprinting.

Inside the house they were obliged to walk through the long parquet hallways at a stately pace: one of the house rules that never must be broken. Grandmother was waiting for them in the entrance hall. They gathered near the door and Ida cupped her hand to her ear. 'Listen.' They listened – they breathed, no-one made a sound. The girl pulled her 'listening face', a kind of grotesque where she clamped shut her eyes and clenched her jaw in a maniacal grin. This lasted about a minute.

‘Can you see?’ she whispered to Ida.

Yes, she nodded. ‘They’re coming.’

They heard – a car rasping on the pebbled allée, a car door open and close, footsteps, and – a knock, a knock, a knock. When Grandmother gave the signal, a discreet wave of the hand, Ida opened the door.

‘Marcus!’ She threw her arms around him. He was tall and had a permanently lowered head so that he always appeared as sheepish. With pale brown hair and blue-grey eyes he was closer in likeness to his late father than to his mother. His father's son. Usually he would have been thought of as handsome but here he was – haggard. Unshaven; grey pouches below his eyes. A cloth baby-bag in a teddy bear print was slung over his shoulder.

‘And Sophie!’ From the red blotches on her skin it was clear she had been crying. She was in her late thirties and though she was big-boned – solid and wide-hipped – she had somehow made herself very small, almost to the point of disappearing. She was carrying a bundle wrapped in a pale pink blanket close to her chest. On her wrist, the hospital’s plastic ID bracelet.

‘Olivia?’ Marcus asked quietly, but without a note of surprise, as if he could no longer be surprised, had lost this luxury.

‘Hello Marcus.’ A small gentle smile.

‘Hello.’ He seemed unsure of what to do then put an arm around Sophie’s shoulders, shepherded her through the double doors into the salon. The room was sparsely furnished with a few Louis XV pieces, the cabriole legs of the chairs ending in little deer feet. Dozens of antler trophies were collected on the walls. Even with this furniture the room felt empty – in the way an empty room can be made emptier by the addition of a single table. Sophie settled herself on the end of a chaise longue,

gingerly; after the birth there must have been stitches or perhaps a bruised coccyx. Grandmother sat opposite her, and Ida stood behind Grandmother, as was her place. Marcus rested a hand on Sophie's shoulder. 'We ... I am so sorry to tell you ...' He looked to the children and hesitated, went on. 'There has been an accident. The cord – as she was born the cord caught around her neck. There was nothing anyone could do. Our beautiful child, our Alice, has died. Did not live.'

After a long pause Grandmother made the sign of the cross. 'Marcus, Sophie,' she said. 'We are so sorry. I ... I ... Is ...?'

'The hospital told us ... Sophie wanted ... They said it would be best to bring Alice home.'

'Oh.' Grandmother rearranged her hands in her lap. 'The cord? But in the hospital? How ...?'

'It just happened,' he said. 'We don't know how. No-one did anything wrong.'

The woman said, 'I am deeply sorry for your loss.' She lowered her head and nodded to Sophie.

'How long will the, the ...?' Grandmother fumbled.

'A day or two.' He and Sophie exchanged glances. 'We'd like to get to know her before the funeral.'

At the word 'funeral' Sophie balked and shifted the bundle from one breast to the other.

The top of Ida's knuckles showed white. With a brisk flick of the wrist she caught the woman's attention and indicated that the children should immediately leave the room.

At morning tea-time Ida accompanied the woman to the rose garden; she had readied a tray, with tisane and an almond friand. The woman walked slowly, as if the broken arm had slightly altered her balance and her footfall was no longer automatic, was deliberate. The garden had been a favourite spot of hers as a girl. So many roses, roses trained to pillars and – when in bloom – cascading from wire umbrellas. Rugosa, Madame Alfred Carrière, Amiga Mia, Parkdirektor Riggers. There was a yellow-tipped rose named after her, the Olivia. Ida set the tray down on one of the wooden seats, the back of which was carved into the shape of fern fronds, and departed.

The woman warmed her hand on the tea-plunger. Then she lifted the object, very carefully, moved it through the air, this glass-and-silver invention, and slowly poured. She poured the tea right to the golden rim of the teacup. Her left-handedness slowed her down, and each gesture, normally habitual, unnoticed, careless, was now new to her, not entirely new, but was seen in a new light, or was seen as if she had – for the first time in her life – lifted from the root of her being, taken a step aside. And there was an element of wonder in her movements, that all along she'd had a left-hander inside. She set down the plunger and brought the teacup to her lips, steady, not spilling a drop. She savoured the tea and then at the same glacial pace settled the cup. She picked up the friand. Heard footsteps; Marcus had found her.

'Mother was right,' said the woman, not looking at her brother but staring into the garden. 'I married a brute.' There was a long pause and then she declared, simply, 'I am murdered.'

Marcus gave a slight nod of the head to indicate he had heard her. She returned the friand to the tray. He sat down beside her and handed her the teacup.

‘We tried so hard,’ he said, and he too stared ahead, over the roses. ‘There was ... another woman. There is ... another woman. A foreigner, a musician on scholarship. Very little money. She’ll have to go home one day – poor girl. Sophie doesn’t know. Maybe she does – she lets me be. I still love her. I just wanted to give her what she has always wanted. For two years she endured nightmares – drugs, hormones, side-effects, more drugs to counter those effects, operation operation operation. The things she did. Everything, everything, on a schedule. Nothing natural about it. No happy accident. And when the baby was conceived we both thought it was – a miracle. I held my breath for the first three months. Every day for three months and every day after that I still feared ...Only when we got to the hospital did I feel safe.’

The woman had finished her tea but held the cup suspended in mid-air as if this helped her to listen. He turned to her and gently removed the cup. ‘Out of my hands.’

He lay down on the bench and rested his head in her lap. For a long time she stroked the hair silvered at his temples. ‘Oh,’ she murmured. ‘Poor boy.’

In the entrance hall Grandmother was supervising the twins as they removed the balloons. One of the twins cringed each time she went to stick a balloon, leaning back as if the pop, the noise, could hurt her. After a while she summoned her courage and

let fly. The other twin was untying and popping those balloons secured to the staircase. Amused by her sister's antics she let her attention slip and in that moment one balloon escaped to the ceiling. Inhale – she covered her mouth in horror. Grandmother frowned. They watched the balloon bump along the ceiling and come to rest in a corner.

At lunchtime the twins were on their best behaviour. They had set the walnut dining table so that it was resplendent. The finest snow-white linen had been aired and ironed, and they had dusted off a grove of cut-crystal glasses. The silver cutlery was polished and shining. Grandmother reigned at the head of the table, and everyone else was there. Sophie, in a new dress and neatly made up, had brought along the bundle and was cradling it in the nook of her arm. She still wore her hospital ID bracelet as if at any minute something could go horribly wrong. A twin held the silver tureen and Ida ladled out asparagus soup. When all the bowls were full Grandmother said grace. 'Bless-this-food-to-our-use, and-us-to-thy-service, and-make-us-ever-mindful-of-the-needs-of-others. Amen.' Quickly, under her breath. And she alone had her eyes closed, the others not being concerned to feign participation.

They began to eat in silence. Straight-backed, elbows off the table. The boy was spreadeagled over his bowl, slurping the soup into his mouth. Mouthful after mouthful, as if he hadn't eaten in a long while. 'Andrew,' said Grandmother. She lifted her spoon and demonstrated how to use it correctly, how to make a shallow scoop toward the outer edge of the bowl, to bring the spoon to the mouth, not the mouth to the spoon. 'You see.' He tried to copy her, took tiny bird sips, and the girl tried too. But her concentration was broken when she noticed Sophie dipping her little

finger into the soup and bringing it to the bundle, trying to feed it. This mesmerised the girl; the others did their best to carry on as though nothing were wrong, the woman spooning her soup with her left hand, like a scientist taking an infinitesimal measure, and Grandmother sighing when at last Sophie wiped her finger on a serviette and reached for her glass of water.

The telephone rang. It was rare for the telephone to ring in the house, and as for an interruption during the lunch hours, it happened once or twice a year. Ida sent a twin to answer the call. The woman was snap-frozen by the persistent ringing, her spoon airborne, and she spilt some soup on the table. Marcus, too, was on edge, and looked ready to stand and answer the call himself. Only the boy's eyes were shining. As soon as the ringing stopped an unsteady peace descended and all resumed eating.

The boy checked his watch and said to his mother, 'At home it's four in the morning.'

The girl said, breezily, by-the-way, 'Andy, I can smell your vulva.'

Ha. 'I don't *have* a vulva.'

The girl, furious, turned to the woman for support in this battle. Just then the twin returned to the room and the moment she took up her position by the commode the telephone rang again. Brrrrrrrring: it had dominion. Off she went. The girl was tugging at her mother's sling, wanting her opinion, but the woman waited and waited and waited for the ringing to stop before she responded.

'He's right,' she said. 'Only girls have vulvas.' At this news the little one was downcast.

And the telephone rang again. One ring. And another. And one more ring. As if it were repeatedly being picked up and immediately put down again.

Marcus tried to strike up a conversation. ‘Andy, have you been down to the boathouse?’

‘No. There’s a boat?’ Interested, on the alert.

‘Not a boat-boat. But some old canoes. Mother, is that right? Are there still the canoes?’

‘I believe so.’

Again, the twin was restored to the room. This time Marcus did make to stand.

‘Excuse me,’ she said. ‘I could not understand the gentleman, my English is poor. I have requested him to not derange the lunch. To call later.’

Very slowly, the woman reached for her wineglass, as if there were a mountain range between her hand and the glass that could only be negotiated with utmost concentration.

Marcus sat down, relaxed. ‘Maybe I can take you out on the water?’

The boy nodded. Okay.

‘Can I come?’ asked the girl.

‘We’ll see,’ said Marcus.

‘Mummy, will you come?’

The woman shook her head. ‘I don’t swim.’

‘She means she can’t swim,’ said the boy, scornful. ‘She’s afraid of the water.’ He paused. ‘And escalators.’ Another pause. ‘And elevators.’ He held out two hands and mimed elevator doors closing on his nose, grinned. He looked to his mother and made a loop-the-loop loopy sign by his temple. But she drank her wine and did not chastise him.

Grandmother turned to Marcus. 'Remember Tahiti?' He did not reply. She turned to the boy. 'When your mother was about ... about Lucy's age, we all went to Tahiti. A special treat. The sand is black in Tahiti. And the men wear straw skirts. That's right. And the minute we saw the sea the child started screaming. Screaming. And screaming. As if the water, the sea, was the most terrifying thing in the world. Those little waves. One after the other. Well, I walked into the water with her – holding her up high, quite safe, perfectly safe – and she screamed and screamed. I'd never heard a child scream so long before. It was only the sea. Incredible.'

There was a thorough silence. The woman betrayed no reaction other than to keep her eyes trained on the centre of the table.

The telephone rang again. Grandmother snatched up her serviette.

The boy jumped to his feet. 'I'll get it!'

'Sit down.' His mother stood, said, 'May I be excused.'

She did not run along the hallway. She walked as if she had already walked a thousand miles and the hallway were the beginning of a further thousand miles before her. The telephone was crouched on a semicircular bureau in an alcove. A deer head had been mounted on the wall at eye level, giving the impression, at times, that the interlocutor was the deer himself speaking. She picked up the receiver and brought it to her ear. She listened for a few minutes, her features softening, losing form, and then – without speaking – she placed the receiver on the bureau, left it off the hook. She got down on her hands and knees, which was awkward with her cast, and fumbled around trying to unplug the cord. When she had done this she wriggled back out, and then had second thoughts, wriggled back under. She rested her weight on her

cast and reached back with her left hand and removed her shoe. With her high heel she pounded the plastic telephone connector, damaging it so that it no longer quite fitted the socket. Finished, she wriggled out again, got to her feet, straightened her skirt and returned the receiver to its cradle.

‘Ida.’ Grandmother indicated her glass was empty.

The girl was chit-chattering. ‘Because I can swim. I can swim. In my carnival I got a blue ribbon, which is first. It’s in my bedroom. For fifteen metres. That’s across the pool, not down the pool. You go across the pool. I beat Maxie and Beebee and ...’

The woman slipped in and found her seat at the table. Despite inquiring glances from Marcus and the boy no questions were asked. She picked up her fork and placed it in the fingers of her right hand that were peeking out of her cast. She held the fork steady and with her left hand began to patiently cut away a slice of duck.

‘Mummy, I’m a good swimmer aren’t I?’ asked the girl.

The woman nodded.

The girl, now bored, used her knife to smear the potato mash over every inch of her plate. Lay down the knife. She stared at the bundle, was transfixed.

‘I want Pinky.’

‘After lunch, darling,’ her mother replied quickly.

Marcus checked on Sophie. Sophie, who had not said a thing the entire meal, who had not eaten, who had died every time her husband found words – ‘boat’, ‘canoe’ – sailing away from her on this ‘boat’, this ‘canoe’, so soon, leaving her with their baby. Sophie glared and clambered out of her seat, hurriedly left the room.

'I'm sorry, Mother,' said Marcus. 'It wasn't my idea, Sophie insisted. And, well, if I'd asked what would you have said?'

Grandmother gave this due consideration.

He continued. 'I have a favour to ask you. Olivia'.

After lunch it was arranged that the woman would be driven to the village; one of the gardeners offered to be the chauffeur. The children and Ida rode with her just as far as the great gateway, the girl squirmed on Ida's lap so as to save room. Goodbye, goodbye. The boy climbed up the iron filigree. They watched until the car disappeared from view.

'How far can you see?' asked the girl.

'Oh, very far,' said Ida.

'As far as Sydney?'

'Not that far, not across the ocean.'

Oh. They began the long walk back up the driveway.

The ugly countryside was momentarily interrupted by the small ugly village. At the Town Hall the woman sat in a waiting room with an elderly couple for whom waiting seemed to be an end in itself, so that if they weren't waiting in a waiting room they would have been waiting at home in the kitchen or in the bedroom. She noticed earlier visitors had stubbed their cigarettes out on the plastic plant beside her; the leaves were stippled with dark round holes. There were magazines on a small table, personal-

investment and travel magazines, a magazine which promised to tell all about the diet of an Olympic swimmer, but she chose to ignore them. After a while a young pregnant woman was shown out of the office. Josette remained at the door. 'Olivia?' These two had played together as children at the local school and in those times Josette had also been invited to the chateau. She was slightly older than the woman, and though she had been a bureaucrat for many years she had maintained – or had developed – the demeanour of a sincere and kindly nurse.

'Hello Josette.' Softly spoken in French, without trace of an accent.

Josette pulled out a seat for the woman, did not comment on the broken arm. She sat behind her desk and clasped her hands together, making a temple with her index fingers.

'I'm here to ask permission – the family would like permission to bury another body, at home, next to my father.'

'I heard the sad news. I'm very sorry. Please send my condolences to all concerned. I have already prepared the paperwork. There should be no problem.'

The finger-temple collapsed and she pushed some sheets of paper across the table. 'If you could sign here – and here.'

The woman parsed the paperwork, and when she was halfway down the second page she stopped and asked, 'One body?'

Josette tipped her head and looked to the woman for clarification.

'And Mother has not been well.'

There was a long pause before Josette said, 'Yes, I see, we can change this to ...' she crossed something out with her pen, 'two bodies.'

The woman signed the bottom of the page with her clumsy left hand and before handing it over studied her signature as if it were a child's attempt at forgery or, worse, a black-lettered joke, a feeble excretion.

'About the baby,' said Josette. 'I believe there would be a good case for negligence. A strong case. In a week or two come back, this should not be forgotten.'

'Thank you Josette, I will mention it to Marcus. And there's the other matter, the children.'

'Ah yes. Yes, yes, yes. Yes, I received your letter last month.' She reached for a manila folder in a staggered wire file of dozens of folders and opened it on her desk.

'Quite a surprise. Andrew? Lucy? Are you sure?'

'Yes.' She quickly opened her handbag and dug around inside, produced two passports.

Josette flicked through the passports and kept them on her side of the table. 'X-rays?'

The woman handed over an envelope. 'I had to fold them, please excuse the creases.'

'The blood and urine?'

Another small package was produced.

'Good,' said Josette. 'Today I will accept these. That's that. They will be residents in no time. Don't worry, I will personally make sure to see this through to the prefecture.'

'Thank you.'

'And school? And what about the school?'

'Les Quatre Vents.'

'The boarding school?'

'Yes. The arrangements are in place.'

Josette wrinkled her nose. 'I hear it is a good school. The headmistress, well, she is ...

But yes, it's a good school. Although for me, the local school is the best. And term begins when? In four weeks. Do they speak any French?'

'A little. I've been practising with them since they were born. They understand a lot, more than they can say. And the school is bilingual. They will learn.'

'They will learn. So, the marvellous capacities of children. Imagine if we could be children again. I would speak five languages. Mandarin. Even Hungarian. Though maybe I wouldn't feel the need to. Impossible to know. Sometimes I wish I'd never stopped somersaulting. Anyway, please, again – your signature.' She passed more papers across the table and the woman carefully inked her name.

'Thank you, Josette, thank you for everything. You've been very kind to me.'

'It is good to see you, Olivia.'

In the pharmacy she waited for Dr Steenbohm, a tiny elfin man, to finish serving a customer.

'Good afternoon, Dr Steenbohm.'

'Good afternoon. And what a pleasure – but at such a time ... My condolences to the family. How do you make You Know Who laugh?' She did not answer. 'You make plans. Believe me, I know it. No?' He sighed, continued. 'And your mother? How is she?'

'She is as well as can be expected.'

'These shocks are not good.'

The woman handed him some prescriptions. 'Will you fill these, please?'

He examined the scripts and rubbed his eye, an atavistic gesture of pharmacist's suspicion.

'I got them in Australia,' said the woman. 'When I have a chance I'll come back with a replacement script, something official.' She was very calm, very patient.

'These painkillers – yes. But the digitalis, this is highly restricted.' He flapped the script. 'This is for?'

'For me. To slow the heart. Tachycardia.' She fluttered the fingers of her right hand against her chest.

He hesitated and only when a bell tinkled to signal that he had a new customer did he move to the little storeroom behind him. He returned with two bottles of tablets.

'Be a good girl. Take care.'

'Thank you. Goodbye, Dr Steenbohm. It has been a pleasure.'

As soon as she was outside she shoved the bottles deep into her bag.

It had rained – a sun-shower – and the wet black macadam reflected the sky so that she seemed to be walking on a thin crust over vertiginous depths. A teenager on a scooter was bearing toward her and on instinct she moved to the left side of the pavement but her instinct was wrong and they nearly collided. There was a kebab shop not far from the pharmacy and she crossed in front of it before back-tracking and looking in through the window. A smooth large hunk of processed meat, skewered on a metal pole, was rotating slowly beside a grill, the fat dripping off the meat and collecting in a tray below. Because it was late in the afternoon the shop was empty; a lone attendant in a footballer's tracksuit was reading a newspaper behind the high counter. She went inside and read the chalkboard, perused the bains-marie. On talkback radio a man requested a love song.

'A merguez roll, please.'

'Yes, Madame.'

She took a seat at the only table in the place, squeezed in behind the door. The illuminated drinks refrigerator next to her threw a blue light. He brought her over her roll: two pizzles of red merguez in a pale white bun, some shredded lettuce.

'Thank you.'

She dripped mustard on the bun and picked it up in one hand, wrapping her fingers around it, trying to hold it together. She savoured each mouthful. She chewed slowly as if the flavour were unknown to her and she wanted to fix it permanently to her palate, leave a lasting impression. From time to time she put down the bun and with a paper napkin she daubed away the halo of grease and mustard around her mouth.

When she was finished she took her plastic plate back over to the counter.

'Thank you.'

'You're welcome.'

She found her wallet and paid with a note, not waiting for the change. After she had gone he looked down at the note and raised his eyebrows in surprise at its value.

She went into the bank. The ceiling was decorated with red and green streamers and little cards in the shape of Christmas baubles which read '6.5%'. She joined the long queue for the reception desk. The bank manager, who was sitting with a client in his glass-walled office, looked over and spied the woman. To the confusion of the client this meeting was immediately terminated and the manager hurried away. He approached the woman in the queue, smiling obsequiously and even bowing.

'Good afternoon.'

'Good afternoon.'

'My apologies, I wasn't expecting you quite so soon. The new assistant loves to make mistakes in my diary.'

'No, no, my apologies. There was a change in plans.'

'Well, I'm very pleased to see you. A pleasure.'

'Thank you.'

'Please,' he said, extending his arm – a monogram, cufflinks. 'Won't you come with me. Let's get your affairs in order.' He escorted her into his office.

At twilight the car pulled around behind the château. It was that time of day when the last of the light has been absorbed into the sky and darkness has begun to settle on all solid things below, turning the tops of the trees into iron filings drawn starward. Ida was in the kitchen while the twins were in the laundry. Sophie was on the lawn, lying on a picnic blanket with her bundle; she had been out there most of the afternoon.

When the woman left the car she caught sight of Sophie and watched as she tentatively lifted the bundle over her head and moved it through the air. With her arms still outstretched Sophie craned her neck and faced the woman, although at a distance and in the darkening neither could make out the other's expression. They stayed like this – one the beginning and one the end of a connection made manifest – until, as if she had only just been caught out staring, the woman turned on her heel and snapped the connection, walked away.

Marcus came into the kitchen holding a pink satin ballgown that had belonged to his mother and smelt of musky perfume and mothballs. Ida, confused, smoothing the flat of her apron, asked what he was doing. Before he could answer the woman entered and said, 'I remember that dress. I wanted to wear it to my sixteenth birthday party but

when I tried it on I couldn't do up the buttons. Even though I was one of the skinniest girls in class. I couldn't believe Mother had ever been able to fit it.'

Marcus said, 'I remember. And you wore a yellow dress instead. It made you look beautiful.'

'Thank you.' She continued, 'I've spoken with the Town Hall. Everything is in order. Please let me know how else I can be of help.'

'Thank you, Olivia.'

'The children?'

'Upstairs. Sleeping.'

When she had left, Marcus lay the dress on the kitchen table. He went to the drawers and found a pair of scissors, laid these side by side with the dress.

'Ida, there is something I need you to do. I'll help you. The baby – the doctors said ...'
His voice trailed off and then he blurted out, 'She has to sleep in the freezer.'

'The freezer?' Incredulous.

'The doctors said —'

'No.' Ida shook her head. 'No. I refuse.'

'To keep —'

'No. I refuse.'

'Because the —'

'No.'

'Doctor's orders.'

'No.'

'Ida, we have no choice.'

'No.'

He sighed and walked over to the upright silver freezer. He began removing the frozen food, stacking it neatly on one of the benches. She watched him. Did not help. When he had emptied the freezer of its contents he gathered up the dress and the scissors.

'And we have to make it – comfortable.'

He returned to the freezer and held out the dress, measured it against the door. When his back was turned Ida took a plate and dashed it to the floor.

The children's room was a pigsty: suitcases disembowelled, bedspreads kicked to the floor, Violet hung askew. The woman stood in the doorway and watched the children sleeping; they'd tossed off most of their clothes. The girl was splayed horizontally across her mattress, the boy had his feet pointed to the bedhead. Through the window: evening star. The girl rolled over in her sleep. Quietly shutting the door behind her and picking her way through the room, the woman carefully lay down beside the girl, making sure not to touch her. She curled onto her side and used her left upper arm as a pillow, closed her eyes. Opened them again. Let the lids fall. A moment later the boy did a sudden flip-flop, realigning himself so that he no longer faced in her direction.

They slept and their breathing was slow and steady. When the girl babbled something incoherent, sleepwalking, they slept through it. And in sleep they looked just the same as they had looked the last time they'd slept, in another country, under another roof, as if the sleeping state were one to be returned to – effortlessly transcending timelines

and territories – rather than encountered. Suddenly the woman jolted awake – perhaps she'd had a dream in which she was falling. The room was dark. She switched on the bedside lamp and checked her wristwatch: nearly three hours had passed. She sat on the edge of the bed and vigorously rubbed one eye as though she hoped to drag it down to her chin. She went over to the boy and gripped his shoulder, shook him awake. He was wild-eyed, startled, but even before his mother could say anything he had already taken stock, as if it were only the being ripped out of deep sleep that had shocked him and not any prospect that lay ahead – in this regard he was a veteran. 'It's okay,' said the woman. 'Time to get up. We can't sleep, it's bad for jetlag. Up you get. Get dressed.'

He got to his feet, uncomplaining.

The woman bent over the girl and stroked her hair. Gently began tapping on her cheek. 'Lucy ... Lucyloo.'

'I'm asleep,' said the girl, eyes closed. 'Sleeeeeeepy.'

The woman kept tapping at her cheek, her eyelids. 'If you sleep now you won't sleep all night. And we need dinner. I'm tired too – but we have to stay up a bit before we can sleep. Okay? Like I told you.'

The girl squeezed her eyes closed and blindly batted away her mother's hand.

'Where's Pinky?' said the woman. 'Here she is. Hello Pinky. See, Pinky's awake.'

The girl sat up and grabbed Pinky. The woman leant down and found a dress on the floor for the girl. 'Here you go darling, you'll look lovely.'

The children dressed, laced their shoes. The woman took hold of the doll and held it to her ear. 'What's that? One more dream. Alright Pinky.' She turned to the girl. 'Let's tuck Pinky in.'

They lay the doll on the pillow, pulled up the sheets.

'Sweet dreams,' said the woman. The girl gave her doll a kiss on the plastic dome of its forehead. 'Sweet dreams.'

In the hallway they stopped before an arrangement of flowers – pink roses, lilies, peonies – that sat on a marble table in the shape of a half-moon. The vase was made of cut crystal and was etched all around with a line an inch or so from the lip: the water-line. The girl tugged at her mother's skirt. The woman reached out her hand and pressed her thumbnail into a rose petal; it didn't leave a mark. She slipped a finger below the water-line and felt that the vase was empty.

The woman led the children to the kitchen. One of the twins was doing the last of the washing up; everything else had been cleared away. A bucket was stationed below the pipes of the sink. 'Oh! Hello!' she said in surprise. 'We thought you were ...' She fished for the English word but to no avail, made a pillow with her wet hands and brought it to her cheek.

'Sleeping,' said the woman.

'Yes. Everyone is eaten. Oh – please. Please sit down. One moment.'

She made her way to the fridge, the tall stainless steel fridge that stood as companion to the freezer, and hesitated before opening the door as if inside there lurked a razored jaw, a monster. She gathered the food very quickly. Shut tight the door. A deep breath escaped her. She returned to the sink and began to unwrap the roasted chicken from its topcoat of foil. The woman and the children slid onto the low bench at the table.

The girl struck a geyser of enthusiasm: 'I scream! You scream! We all scream for ice-cream!'

'Why not?' said the woman, rising. 'You've been such a good girl today.'

The twin looked at her in dismay. 'Madame!'

But it was too late. The woman crossed the room and opened the freezer door, just a fraction. Spied the pink satin. Slammed it shut. The boy, too, had seen something – out of the corner of his eye, something colourful – he couldn't be sure exactly what; maybe he saw something maybe he didn't, maybe something accounted for his mother's reaction or maybe it didn't.

'Uh-oh,' said the woman. 'No ice-cream. But what's this ...?' She opened the fridge and, using her shoulder as a wedge, rummaged around inside. 'What's in here ...? Hey presto ... chocolate cake.' She held the cake aloft. 'For after dinner.'

'Yabbayabba yum-yum!'

The boy said nothing.

Much relieved, the twin hurriedly brought over plates of cold roasted chicken, buttery leeks.

'Here for you,' she said to the children. 'Bon appétit.'

'Bon appétit,' they replied in automatic sing-song and then, surprised at themselves, offered shy smiles.

'Thank you,' said the woman. 'It's late, please don't let us keep you. But before you go – do you think Mother is awake?'

'Oh yes, certainly. She never ...' miming sleep with her hand-pillow. 'At the most she,' repeating the gesture, 'for two or three hours. Like Napoleon. Oh yes, at this hour she will be living.'

'Thank you. You've been a great help. Good night.'

'Good night.'

The woman looked down to her plate. They listened to the drips collecting in the bucket. The children waited for her to start to eat. 'Well,' she said. 'Go on.'

Up the stairs, along the hallway, turning right, turning right again, turning left until they reached a door. The woman buzzed the intercom, holding the button down a long time. They waited. She pressed again.

'Yes?' Grandmother's voice sounded scratchy and far-away, as though she were an astronaut or mountain guerrilla.

The woman leaned forward and spoke directly into the intercom. 'Mother, it's me.

With the children. To say good night.'

'Come in.' There was a buzz and a click.

They walked through a suite of three enormous rooms, low-lit, one room opening out onto the other via a pair of double doors. Each room was elegantly, if minimally, furnished. A pair of Qing dynasty glazed porcelain vases, kingfisher-blue. A silken Persian carpet. A giant plasma screen flat to one wall. And there were secret doors in the walls of the rooms, secret doors leading to secret servant passages, now spidered and empty.

'Errh.' The boy bent down to inspect what he had accidentally trodden on: a raw chicken wing. He used his fingers as pincers and held it up to show his mother. With his top teeth he made a rabbitty overbite and at the same time scrunched up his nose – 'Disgusting.' Half-eaten raw chicken wings were littered all over the floor. A Burmese cat on top of a footstool observed the intruders.

Grandmother was in the third room. She was propped up in her great bed which had a curved footboard inlaid with lozenges of tulip and rosewood in the shape of prancing deer. She'd removed her make-up and smothered her eyebrows in white cold-cream. Her white cotton nightdress had a high frilled collar which tied under the chin. At the end of the bed there was a small TV nestled in a walnut cabinet – switched on but with the volume turned down low.

'Come here Lucyloo,' said Grandmother, patting a spot on the bed. 'Andrew, come over here.' She picked up a cat, another Burmese who had been lying by her side, and brandished it high for their inspection. 'This is Hello.' She turned the cat toward her, cooed 'Hellooo. You're a such good cat. A lovely good cat. Hellloooo. Aren't you.' She rubbed the cat in her face; the woman watched with equanimity. 'Oh yes you are. Hellooooo.'

The boy said, 'Grandmother, can I stroke your pussy?' Victory. His mother shot him a dark look.

'Of course!' said Grandmother. "Here we go. Lovely and soft.' The children took turns stroking the cat between the ears.

'Helllooo! Helllooo!' said the girl, staring intently into its eyes like a hypnotist.

'Hellooooo!' She grinned, delighted by the cat, and took her mother's left hand, ferrying it over to the animal, a limp offering. After a moment the woman gently withdrew the hand.

'Good night Mother.'

'Good night,' said the children. They both gave Grandmother a peck on the cheek.

In their wake the TV came alive.

Behind a door: Sophie was in her room, sitting on the very edge of her bed. Not moving, as though there were nothing behind her and if she lay back she would only tumble through depthless space, over and over. She was half dressed, in her skirt and stockings, her high heels. And on top, wearing a sturdy white bra, the kind designed for breastfeeding. Wet stains pooled around her nipples. Marcus, in pyjamas, came to sit close beside her. He, too, sat very still, an audience member watching an invisible movie projected on the wall. After a while he reached across and tenderly brushed a loose strand of hair away from her face, tucked it behind her ear. She turned to him and, without saying anything but imploring, imploring this man her husband, she slowly placed his hand on her wet nipple. Then she reached her other hand around behind his neck and gently guided his head down to her warm breast. Fumbling, he unpopped the press studs on the flap of the bra. He took her nipple into his mouth and suckled. The house was quiet. The night worked night magic. Far away an owl called.

In the morning the boy's bed was empty. The girl was fast asleep, oblivious to the daylight. He wasn't in his mother's room, nor in the kitchen. Not in any room downstairs. He wasn't behind the curtains. Nor in any of the cupboards. In the garden the dew sparkled on the spiderwebs, countless fine spiderwebs in the grass and caught between the rosebushes, all to disappear by noon. He had disappeared. But not through the door in the wall, now boarded up from the inside. The birds were making busy. He was by the lake, in the boathouse, tinkering around. The air was cool and dank; there were mouldy canvases crumpled over unknown objects on the stone floor, nests of old rope and cord. Two canoes lay face-down on a slatted wooden platform,

boy's-chest-high. Both were made from bottle-green fibreglass although one had seen more use, was patched and peeled. With fingers spread wide the boy raked a pattern through the dust on the smooth hull of the unblemished canoe. He lifted one end and tried to look up inside it: a mouse ran out and he let the canoe fall. He tried again, jacking the end up as high as he could, and this time the canoe slid backwards – he struggled to hold it, gripped it by the rim, he struggled, he held it, he held it high, he tried, he struggled to hold it – it clattered to the ground. On reflex, he quickly looked over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching.

He knelt by the fallen hull and began to inspect it for damage. There was a voice outside, a man's voice, indistinct. He ran and hid behind the door, peered out through the crack, spied. Marcus was pacing to and fro on the thin fringe of grey sand that encircled the lake. Each time he came closer to the boathouse the boy could make out a word or two – 'my love', 'my darling', 'soon'. Walking away, Marcus nodded his head and then he held the phone far from his ear, let the lake listen. That morning the surface of the water was smooth, not uniformly smooth but made up of large patches of smoothness. After a minute or so he began to talk and pace once more. He stopped – his back to the boy – and expertly unzipped his cream linen trousers, hunched his shoulders and slightly bent his knees. The tip of his elbow jiggled up and down, up and down, until he suddenly straightened, lifted his heels. He talked a little longer then zipped up his trousers. Pocketed the phone. He shook out his arms and legs as if he were coming indoors after a sun-shower. Then he turned to face the boathouse – square on – so that it seemed he was staring straight at the boy. To the boy's consternation, Marcus decided to pay a visit.

'Oh – good morning.' Marcus was surprised to find the boy deep in concentration, tying knots in a rope.

'Hi,' said the boy, feigning disruption. There was a long pause in which neither wanted to risk giving themselves away and then the boy said quietly, 'I'm sorry about the baby.'

'Thank you.' His smile was almost apologetic. Something like sorrow passed between them and in that moment they were mountain and lake, ancient. 'Well,' said Marcus, finally summoning a jolly note. 'What have you got there?'

The boy showed him the little reef-knot.

'Not bad. And what about this pair of beauties,?' said Marcus, nodding to the canoes.

'What do you say – shall we go out later on the water?'

'Okay.'

'Okay, Okay, it's a deal then,' he said, rolling back his sleeves. 'Come on, let's carry this one out, you and me.' He squatted down on his heels and rubbed his palms together. 'You ready?'

Together they carried the fallen canoe lakeside, laid it to rest. A scurf on the sand showed that the lake had its own currents, was never entirely still.

'Phase one,' said Marcus. 'Mission accomplished.' He smiled.

'Is that your phone?' said the boy, pointing to the pocket.

'Yes, it's a phone. No, it's a car. A phone.'

'Can I please borrow it?'

Marcus thought a while before answering. 'To call Australia?' He paused. 'It doesn't work. No international service. My wife banned me because of the high bills. Too bad for us, hey.' He softly cuffed the boy on the jaw. 'Come on, let's go. Breakfast.'

It was unwelcome news, a rumour received by a soldier.

In the breakfast salon a vine had been allowed to creep up the wall and along the cornice. Plants spilled from ceramic pots on wooden tripods, from hanging cane baskets. A round table covered in a blue-and-white embroidered cloth had been set with breakfast things: a silver pot of coffee, the pot standing on skinny bird legs, clawed bird feet; croissants; jams; a pat of butter; a bowl of hard-boiled eggs. Some toast. Apples and oranges. Some milk, some sugar, the morning's plenitude. Laid everywhere: windowfuls of light. The girl sat at the table, and Pinky was there too, atop a pile of cushions in her own chair. The woman was slowly flipping the pages of a newspaper, just looking at each page as if it were a shopping catalogue or junk mail. Then she closed her eyes and ran her left hand over the type, as though seeking a hidden form of braille. At the sound of footsteps she stopped this experiment. The boys came in.

'Morning all,' said Marcus.

'Good morning,' chimed the woman and the girl in unison.

Marcus and the boy took up their seats and helped themselves to provisions. The woman shunted the newspaper across the table and Marcus briefly scanned the front page which was dominated by a gory photograph, the aftermath of a market explosion. He put it aside.

The girl held up her Bunnykins mug and said to her mother, 'This milk tastes like your arse.'

The woman blinked once or twice and replied, 'You don't know what my arse tastes like.'

'Yes, I do,' said the girl. 'I've smelt it.'

The woman sighed.

'You're disgusting,' said the boy. He took aim and pegged some apple across the table.

'Am not.'

'Are so.'

'Am not.'

'Are so.'

Marcus brought an end to this tiff by asking a general question. 'Has anyone seen Sophie?'

'Not yet,' said the woman.

'Well,' the girl spoke in the tone of a seasoned gossip, 'Ida says ... Ida says the dead baby is having a bath.' So there. She smirked triumphantly at the boy.

Marcus stood up and said in a low voice, 'May I be excused.'

The woman watched as the girl began to paint her lips with jam. When she raised her dirty hands like lion paws and made a roaring face the woman did not react. The girl didn't seem to care and returned to making a mess with her food. Suddenly she looked up and made the roaring face again, trying to catch her mother off-guard. It made no impression. The girl just shrugged and happily busied herself with her doll.

Later that morning they were all assembled in the summer pavilion, a small stone pavilion supported by nine Corinthian pillars and set on a low rise which gave upon

the lotus pond. They were sitting quietly in a circle, on cane chairs that the twins had earlier lugged over from the house. Grandmother was there, in her wheelchair, with Ida standing sentinel behind her. One chair was empty – they were waiting for Sophie. A bird, a swallow, flew through and settled under an eave. The girl started banging her ankles against her chair; the boy rubbed his eyebrows up and over his browbone. Marcus kept checking his watch. A paroxysm: he dug into his pocket as if an insect had bitten him. He removed his mobile phone and made sure to switch it off. Grandmother toyed with the pearls at her throat, then with the golden buttons of her navy jacket; Ida laid a soothing hand on her shoulder. A cool breeze rose and fell and the swallow slid away. The woman watched a beetle cross the floor with brute persistence. Marcus gripped both curved armrests of his chair and made as if to stand – but he thought better of it and sat back down. At last the girl, who had a view in the direction of the house, whispered, 'She's coming.' They all turned to watch as Sophie slowly made her way across the lawn. She was wearing a pale pink dress, silk that fell soft against the skin, and had pinned a flower behind her ear. Lopsided, she carried a white wickerwork bassinet in her hand. She had not removed the hospital ID bracelet.

'Sorry we're late. Thank you for waiting,' said Sophie, bright with bravado. She settled beside her husband and lowered the bassinet to the ground. Sat there. So. Marcus reached over and lightly touched her thigh, lifted out the bundle.

'Yes, thank you for being with us at this special time,' he said. He brought the bundle under his nose, inhaled deeply. 'This is our girl. Alice. She is loved. We will never forget her.'

His eyes glistened and he passed the bundle, the offering, to Grandmother. She clasped it to her chest, rocked back and forth. 'Dear Alice, dear sweet girl, granddaughter. My angel. Angel girl.'

The boy was sitting alongside Grandmother and as she made to pass him the bundle he turned to the woman for reprieve. Her eyes darkened, inclement. He held the bundle awkwardly, as if it were heavy or sharp, and said – looking to the ground – 'Dear Alice. Hello. I'm sorry I didn't get to know you and —'

The girl cried out, 'Pass the parcel! Pass the parcel! Pass —'

The woman gave her a hard slap on the face. There was quiet.

The boy passed the bundle to his mother. Her cast made it difficult and they nearly fumbled the exchange.

'Hello Alice,' said the woman, peeking under the blanket. 'Black-haired,' she thumbed the eyelids open and closed, 'very beautiful blue-eyed girl.' She looked up to the group and waited for assistance. Marcus came over to relieve her and he knelt before the girl, next in their circle. 'This is Alice. Alice, this is Lucy.'

One look, the horror glimpse, and – unbidden – the girl's face contorted into a fearful cry. She plunged herself into her mother's lap, squeezed her tight. And the boy held his breath and eventually the woman placed a hand between the girl's shoulderblades, let it rest.

Marcus stood up and gently returned the bundle to Sophie, saying, 'Our child.' She took it back, she took the child from him, from them, and she wiped her cheeks and found them wet and that she had been crying.

'Never. Never in my day. Never. Holy Mother. Never.'

Ida was at the kitchen bench, muttering as she chopped the leafy greens, chopped with a fury. She shook her head and like some sort of motor this made her chop even faster. 'Never in my day. Never.' The twins were working alongside her, trying to be invisible. Ida paused and then slammed down her knife. She went to the back door and opened it, stealing it away from a deliveryman who was clutching a huge arrangement of flowers. He withdrew his knocking fist in surprise. The flowers, mostly bright orange and purple birds-of-paradise, were garish and Ida accepted them without comment. One of the twins said, 'How pretty,' and Ida silenced her with a glare. She carried the flowers through the house to the entrance hall and set them on the white marble-topped side-table. She stood back to study the placement and saw that the table had become a tomb. No matter which angle she turned the arrangement, or where on the table she placed it, the flowers were funereal and ugly. Muttering, she gathered them up and headed, without pause, to Sophie's room. No-one was there. She deposited the flowers on a chest of drawers. Outside she spied Marcus and Sophie on a chequered picnic blanket, reclining on the lawn. She wiped her hands on her apron, walked away.

On the lawn: Marcus had a sheet of paper and as he nuzzled the phone to his ear he ticked a series of names off a list. Sophie was lying beside him, the bundle resting in the soft nook of her chest. Marcus made polite listening sounds – mmm, yes, thank you. Later he said, 'Very good, we'll see you tomorrow, the service begins at eleven. Yes, thank you. Most appreciated. Goodbye.'

He switched off the phone and secured it in his breast pocket. To Sophie he said, 'That's done.' They studied each other as though the next thing to say or do might be hinted, revealed. He stood up. This seemed to displease her and she reached out to grab onto the cuff of his trousers, would not let go. At last he relented and sat back down. Sophie held up the bundle and offered, 'See, she has your chin.'

'She does,' he agreed.

With a nod Sophie claimed this as a small victory.

After lunch Grandmother asked the woman to take her for a stroll. They went in the wheelchair to the Japanese garden, an enclave of reddish maples and azaleas all shades of pink, of knotweed and crêpe myrtle and magnolia, a colourful relief, the flower of the greater gardens. The criss-crossed rapiers of the cherry blossoms had not yet readied to bud. Grandmother remarked on a stand of bamboo, due to be thinned. They crossed an ornamental wooden bridge, arched over an ornamental pond, the woman pushing the chair so that there was no eye contact between them. On the far side of the bridge a stick caught in the wheel of the chair and held fast, jammed. The woman jolted the chair in an effort to dislodge the stick. She shook the chair, she shoved and jerked it to and fro – untold left-hand strength. Grandmother gripped the sides of the chair as if she were on a rollercoaster. Again the woman jerked the chair. She jerked it and shoved it and tipped it back so that the front wheels looked to be springing into the sky. After a while Grandmother, who had borne this without complaint, flailed one arm upward in order to rein in her daughter. 'Just a minute,' she said, breathless. The woman stopped immediately. Grandmother slowly levered

herself out of the chair and stepped aside. The woman crouched down and examined the wheel. She tugged at the stick, mangled in the spokes, tugged and tugged until she succeeded in pulling it free. Grandmother sat back down and they resumed their stroll.

The woman, staring ahead, said, 'Mother, there is something I must say, that I need to ask you. I don't expect, I can't expect your forgiveness, I don't need your forgiveness – it means nothing to me – but I ask that even if I am not remembered in your will that the children are, your grandchildren. Promise me you will look after them.'

Grandmother, also staring ahead, replied, 'They are already remembered. Your brother told me. I have always known.'

This came as news to the woman. Her left hand held the chair steady and they spoke no more.

In the late afternoon the children were playing in the boathouse. The boy was stashing provisions where he could, secreting away little clingwrapped parcels of food, slipping two plastic bottles of water beneath a crush of canvas. The girl, meanwhile, was plaiting and replaiting her doll's hair.

'Ummaaah' said the girl, drawing out the word with tattle-tale inflection. 'Ida can see.'

The boy carried on. 'Sometimes you're dumb,' he noted.

'Am not,' she said, though quietly, a disinterested defence.

They entertained themselves; they overlooked the hours. She plucked off the doll's head and pushed it down into the plastic funnel of neck so that the doll faced

backwards. In a similar fashion she began to reverse the limbs. She had succeeded in disarticulating the right leg when the boy came over and punched her on the arm.

'Come on,' he said. 'Come on.'

They went outside – nightfalling – he led her by the hand. In the distance the mountainside was peppered with points of light. They listened to the lap and lull of the lake. The upturned canoe lay just as he had left it; he flipped it over. He hopped inside and took up a position, ramrod straight like a ship's captain, and then gestured impatiently for the girl to step aboard. 'Go on, get in.' She did this graciously and they sat there for a long time, looking across the darkening water, this vast uncharted ocean, this high sea, this Loch Ness, until the boy, in the sudden way children end their games – without warning – jumped up and over the side. He helped his sister disembark and together they retreated through the garden.

The next morning the house was abuzz in preparation for the funeral.

Upstairs in the children's room the woman was doing her best to fix a thin slip of black satin ribbon in the girl's hair. The girl, clad in her pyjamas, waited patiently, even happily, as the woman tried to fashion a bow.

'Two rabbit ears,' instructed the girl. 'Wrapped on top of each other.' Each determined attempt was a failure but the woman persisted with no show of exasperation – if anything she seemed fascinated by the ingenuity of the knot, by the hair so soft, by this act of decoration. The boy watched his mother's left-handed endeavours and only when she had tried something like ten times did he step forward and say quietly, 'I'll do it.' He tied the bow deftly. The girl spun around and grinned.

'Very pretty,' said the woman in approval. 'Very pretty mississippi.'

The girl blushed and scuffed her toes against the floor in shy delight.

'I have a surprise,' said the woman. 'Come with me.'

The boy stiffened.

From her suitcase she pulled a black velvet dress with a white peter-pan collar. And for the boy – a black velvet suit and a blue-and-white chequered shirt. Cuffs and all. She helped the girl into the dress. But the boy was displeased: the sleeves of his jacket fell well short of his wrist, ridiculous.

The woman sat on the bed and handed a black silk scarf to the boy. He folded it in half, into a triangle. She held out her cast and he slipped it into the sling. She lowered her head so that he could secure the two silken ends. There was a kiss-curl at the snowy nape of her neck and with great care he stuck the tip of his little finger inside it. His mother was beautiful. 'Come on,' she said. He hurriedly fastened the sling and shuffled a few steps back. She rose to her full height and straightened her black fitted dress. 'Are we ready,' she said. 'Let's go then.'

The children refused to leave.

'How fast can you run?' said the woman, adopting a martial tone and pointing her finger at the boy.

'As fast as a leopard.' Glum.

'And how fast *are* you going to run?'

'As fast as a leopard.'

‘So – do it then.’

Downstairs, the drawing room that had once played host to soldiers at the end of the war was spruce and clean. The furniture, now liberated from dirty white drop-cloths, had been aired and shined and polished. There was a collection of ancient instruments hung on one wall and high above the ceiling was decorated with faded seascapes of places unknown. At the end of the room a long table had been laid with a row of gleaming silver domes. Ida moved down the buffet, lifting each dome, inhaling, carrying out a final inspection of the labours of the dawn. The twins walked two paces behind her, bunching their hands in their aprons. In skipped the girl – ‘Good morning, good morning’ – over to Ida, grabbing her by the waist and then pulling away, holding out the hem of her black velvet dress like a sail. Ida and the twins instantly made a great fuss over the girl and allowed her – only if she promised not to touch – to join in the inspection. Ta-da! Under the dome: a gelatinous pink mousse in the shape of a salmon. The boy sought refuge near the tall windows. The first of the chauffeured cars were drawing toward the château, as if the machines themselves knew the slow pace of mourning.

Marcus, in a sombre fine-wool suit, a tie, and clean-shaven, stood by the doorway, ready to greet the arrivals. They emerged from their cars, ancient men and women; the women were all in hats and some wore veils of black lace, black lace or rotten leaves. These were the blood relatives, the revolution refuseniks, death's attendants. They proceeded one by one up the stairs and when they crossed the threshold each nodded or blinked to Marcus by way of condolence. Marcus, in turn, nodded and said, 'Thank you,' said, 'Please, this way,' said, 'Good morning.' An elderly man in a three-

piece suit stopped to pat Marcus on the shoulder. With his ancient gummy mouth he tried to find an ancient word but the struggle was too much for him and he gaped and gaped until his wife tugged at his coat and led him away. Another man bowed deeply. A woman, shrunken to the size of a small child, crushed Marcus's hand. The guests drained through the long corridors and out of the house. For the occasion a path had been marked out with white-painted stones, leading across the lawn and turning up a small hill.

The family plot lay beneath an enormous white oak, a tree that in days of old would have held up the sky. The plot consisted of one headstone and, alongside, a small open grave that smelt of fresh-turned earth. An empty open-lidded walnut casket – tiny, trimmed in satin – rested at the foot of the grave. The woman and the children were waiting nearby, amid the assembled guests. A few of the guests snuck glances at the woman, and then to one another, but the woman did not seem to notice. The boy kept his head down so as to ward off any winks or other familiarities from the old folk. Two gardeners stood at a discreet distance, shovels in hand. At last Grandmother appeared at the bottom of the hill, one of the twins pushing her in the wheelchair. Behind Grandmother came the family priest, broad-shouldered though stooped, alert, his vigour tempered by an ebony walking-cane. Marcus and Sophie followed the priest. In her arms, Sophie nursed the bundle.

They huddled around the open grave. The priest stepped forward and raised his cane. 'Friends,' he said. 'Within the healing embrace of God's love we have gathered here to remember Alice and to entrust her into God's eternal care ...' He paused. Sophie frowned and sucked in her cheeks.

He continued. 'Knowing that God's good purpose for His people cannot be defeated by sin and death. We are all children of God, and in the faith that God has given to us we turn to God now, asking for His comfort and His grace to be upon us – and to dwell in a special way upon Alice and upon those who were —'

He was interrupted by a loud groan. Sophie turned from the grave and with the bundle still in her arms she bolted in the direction of the house; her gait was pained and awkward. When she reached the bottom of the hill Marcus ran after her. A whisper passed from guest to guest and Grandmother pressed her hand to her heart; she looked to be on the verge of fainting. The boy was delighted and grinned at his sister.

'Please bear with us at this difficult time,' announced the woman.

A breeze bent blades of grass in and out of shadow. Some leaves of the great oak let loose. In time the guests began to shift their weight from foot to foot, to cough and scratch and splutter. Like a flock of birds, they began their departure as if under the one directive.

'Goodbye,' said the woman, holding the fort at the top of the stairs. 'Goodbye, thank you for coming.'

A guest glared at the woman as if she were personally responsible for the scandal. Most hobbled away shaking their heads in commiseration. 'Thank you,' recited the woman. 'Goodbye, thank you for coming.'

One by one the cars defected. The priest was the last through the door. He stood face to face with the woman and tried to pin her with a look of deep sympathy.

'Thank you,' she said flatly. 'Thank you for coming.'

He bowed his head. By the time he was halfway down the stairs she had gone.

In the drawing room the splendid buffet was untouched. The woman was sitting on a small sofa, drinking white wine. An uncorked bottle of Montrachet rested between her knees. She looked up as Marcus entered the room.

'I love to be drunk,' she announced. 'I'm good at it.'

And as if to prove that this was true she bent down and set her cut-crystal goblet on the floor. With her left hand she raised the bottle and began to fill the goblet; she even drew the bottle up and down, stretching the wine. She filled it to the very lip without spilling a drop. Straightening up, she brought the goblet to her mouth and smiled ruefully as though she were a magician who knew her audience could only be pleased by her lesser tricks.

'Where's Sophie?' she asked.

'Sleeping,' said Marcus. 'With pills. And Alice.'

Oh.

'Please – please stay,' said the woman, ultra-lucid. 'I'm drunk. I see everything. I'm on the cusp of the present and the future – the cusp of a great thing, the cusp *is* the great thing. The world is unfolding before me. With me. Through me. I feel as if – I can see through things. I'm unreasonably happy. But the terrible thing – the terrible terrible thing – is that I am full of love. I'm full of an all-encompassing love for every single thing. I beg you, stay with me, have a drink, please – because I am so full of love and tenderness and forgiveness that I want ... all I want to do in the world is pick up the phone and call ... call him, my Murderer. So please, have a drink with your sister.'

Marcus found himself a goblet. He plucked one of the ancient wooden instruments off the wall, something like a small bulbous banjo, and tucked it under his arm.

Equipped, he grabbed hold of a dining chair and set it down opposite the woman.

They made a silent toast. Then he slid off the chair onto his knees and, still on his knees, shuffled over toward his sister. She bent down and he reached up: he gave her a kiss on the forehead. In his ear she whispered, 'The child's death – it was not your doing.' They were motionless for some time, felt the warmth of the other's breathing. Eventually he swivelled on his knees and returned to his place. He set the instrument on his lap and with his head low, a natural fit, he examined the strings, quickly lifting his eyes to signal a performance for her benefit. It was a tune she immediately recognised from their childhood. He played faster and faster – grinning, nimble, scurrying to keep up with the runaway jig. Listening, she grew radiant.

The girl had wandered into the garden; she was pushing her pram down a pathway lined with stone obelisks that were covered in a fine furry moss and she had the contented air of someone walking without need of destination. Because there was no one else around to dwarf her – and because the grandeur of the garden had a miniaturising effect on all who passed through it – the girl appeared to be full-grown. She sallied forth. The poplar trees threw thin afternoon shadows. Out of the corner of her eye she spied something on the lawn. She parked her pram at a safe distance and went to duly investigate. It was a rabbit. Dead for some days. There was a wound on the animal's back and this wound was infested with maggots. She bent over the animal as though to shield it from prying eyes and then examined the waxy maggots

at close range. She marvelled at how they curled whenever she would touch them. After a while she tired of the maggot game and abandoned the rabbit. She continued her long walk along the path until it occurred to her to stop, to unbuckle her doll. She held Pinky at arm's length and studied her closely. All of a sudden she opened her hands and let Pinky drop. Keeping her arms outstretched she stared down to the doll on the ground.

On her return to the house the girl ran into her brother as though attracted by a sibling valency. He enticed her into the drawing room where the woman lay unstrung on the sofa. Her dress had ridden up toward her hips, revealing a pattern of yellowed bruises on her thighs. Marcus was slumped nearby in his chair, lightly snoring. By his feet were two empty bottles of wine. The children tried to rouse their mother. The girl pulled at her hair and then began to batter her shoulders like a Swedish masseuse. The boy squatted down so that he was level with the woman; he observed her as she scrunched up her eyes and resisted the onslaught. Finally the girl gave up. As they were leaving the room the boy caught sight of the mobile phone in the breast pocket of Marcus's jacket. To the girl's amazement he inched it out, he pinched it. The rise and fall of snoring was constant. She was about to speak but the boy glared and made the gesture of zipping his lips, back and forth, back and forth; he jabbed his thumb over his shoulder.

Upstairs they hid beneath a piano covered in a white drop-cloth; the music room had been closed many years ago. Suddenly the phone began to vibrate. Startled, the boy

put it on the parquet floor and they watched it wriggle like a squib. The vibrations stopped for a few moments and then it began to rattle again. This time the boy picked up the phone and held it to his ear. He listened for a while and looked to his sister, making a sick-face by pretending to stick his finger down his throat. He pressed a button and ended the call.

'Who was it? Who was it?' demanded the girl.

He shrugged. 'A ka-ray-zee lay-dee.'

The phone began to vibrate again. The girl reached over to answer it but the boy slapped her hand away. When at last the call was exhausted the boy snatched up the phone and tried dialling a long number. He listened for a dial tone and frowned. He tried again, pressing each button with slow deliberation. And again. His face became dangerously plastic as though he were on the point of tears. The very moment he stopped dialling the phone vibrated once more. He crawled out from under the piano and went over to a cloth-covered chair; he buried the phone – still alive – below a cushion. Before they left the children couldn't resist thumping the piano keys, thwang bang, a sonata for four elbows.

They hurried through the garden until they chanced upon two gardeners clipping a yew into a topiary whose form had yet to be revealed.

'Bonjour!' called the girl.

The gardeners downed their tools, curious and delighted. 'Bonjour!'

'Bonjour,' said the boy as he reached them. 'Je voudrais téléphoner,' he dialled an invisible phone, 'Australie.'

The gardeners tilted their heads and smiled benignly as though they couldn't quite understand his accent.

'Appeler Australie,' insisted the boy. He made another call on the imaginary phone.

'Téléphoner?' asked a gardener.

'Oui oui. Australie.' He tried again. 'Aus-stray-lie.'

The gardener shrugged and shook his head. 'Désolé.'

'Téléphoner.' The boy would not budge.

The other gardener spoke up. 'Assistance?'

'Oui oui.' The boy grew excited. 'Oui, assistance.'

'Assistance. Il faut appeler 4567.'

'4567.'

'C'est ca.'

'Merci-beaucoup-vous-êtes-très-gentil.' By rote. Mission accomplished. Away.

Back in their hidey-hole the boy tried once more to make a call. He allowed his accomplice to press the buttons 4, 5, 6, 7.

'Bonjour assistance?' said the boy. To the girl he reported, 'Recorded message. On hold.'

They waited. She rolled her eyes around and around.

'Oui.' He nudged the eye-roller and gave her the thumbs up. 'Bonjour assistance.' He spoke slowly and clearly. 'Je voudrais téléphoner Australie.' There was a pause.

'Australie. Oui.' A little smile. He painstakingly wrote down a number on the notepad he had at the ready. 'Répétez lentement,' he said and checked over the figures.

'Merci-madame-vous-êtes-très-gentille.'

He dialled the number with that look of intense concentration often seen on children who are opening their birthday presents. Phone to ear, chin up. A frown – the

unwanted gift. He tried again, pressing the buttons with more force as if this would aid the connection. Service denied.

'You broke it,' said the girl.

'It was already busted.'

There was nothing else for him to do but carefully rebury the phone underneath the cushion.

When Marcus awoke the light was pinkening, so that it could have been dusk or dawn: penumbral. He had to check his watch to work out that night was falling. The woman was fast asleep on the sofa; near her mouth a little pool of drool had soaked into the cream silk upholstery. He stayed slumped in his chair as if his limbs had separated from his torso, only by a millimetre or two, so that he had to wait for fusion. At last – and all at once – he stood to his feet. Not wanting to disturb his sister he quietly took his leave but halfway across the room he froze and clasped a hand over his breast pocket, the way he would if he were having a heart attack. No phone. He patted down every pocket twice over. And a third time just to make sure. He lifted the cushions on his chair; he crawled around on the floor. For a long time he gripped the sides of his head, pressing his thumbs against his eyeballs.

Sophie did not wake when he stole into their room. She was curled on her side with a blood-stained pillow wedged between her thighs; the bundle lay beside her. Marcus began to rifle through his clothes, through the drawers. He worked methodically, in the practised manner of a spy who knows better than to make haste. Item by item he

emptied out the baby-bag. No luck. The only sound was the soft purl of Sophie's breathing. He sighed, and at the end of the prolonged audible sigh was fortified. With great care he gathered up the bundle. Just then Sophie struggled to right herself.

'Marcus?'

'Hey.'

'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I just want – I wanted – ' She stopped short, a sworn enemy of solace and reason.

'Me too.'

'I know.' Lowering her head.

He bowed down to kiss her cheek and then decamped to the kitchen.

Later that evening the woman and the children were sitting with Grandmother upstairs in her suite. Grandmother and the girl were squeezed together on a small sofa, the boy was on the floor, the woman had her own chair: they were eating dinner in front of the TV. A bluish light jittered over their faces. The boy was concentrating on the program; his mother was not looking at the screen but was steadily watching her son's reactions. After a while he seemed to feel her eyes on his back and shuddered violently. He turned and glared at her – 'Stop it!' Unrepentant, she switched her attention to the TV. Every few minutes there came a burst of canned laughter but no one watching laughed or even smiled. Grandmother forgot the program and observed the woman. It didn't take long for the woman to sense this and, turning to Grandmother, she conceded a small smile. They held one another's gaze and held and

held. In her mother's face the woman saw all her mothers, countless faces of her mother, each fractionally different, one face streaming forward out of the next in the ghostly way of early stop-motion photography. Ghostly, milky with light.

'I like your hair like that,' Grandmother said quietly. 'It suits you.' She spoke for the sake of speaking.

After a pause the woman replied, 'Thank you.' There was no trace of formality in her voice. At that moment she became both very young and very old. Comforted, and with gratitude, mother and daughter pretended to take interest in the hullabaloo onscreen.

During the night the girl started screaming. No crocodile tears, a real shrieking. The woman immediately awoke and sat up in her bed, listening. When the screaming did not abate she pulled on a dressing gown but found it too difficult to slip into with her cast and so wore it as a cape. She waited in the hallway outside the door to the children's room, the parquet cold beneath her feet. The girl's cries were growing increasingly ragged and breathless. The brass door handle was smooth and cool to the touch. At last a light came on under the door. The boy could be heard soothing his sister and soon the cries became sobs and swallowed gulps and then there was silence. Sophie came creeping down the hallway. The woman let her pass without comment.

In the kitchen the flowers from the funeral had been shoved head first into a garbage bin beside the walk-in fireplace. Those that didn't fit were piled against the bin as

though votive offerings. Sophie sat alone at one end of the long wooden table. No lights had been turned on, there was only the faint glow of the moon. At her swollen breast she nursed a suction pump attached to a plastic bottle. She listened to the quiet hum of the battery-operated pump, the tick of the freezer, the occasional skitterings of night roaches. Outside the million-million green and growing things were absorbing oxygen. From time to time she winced and rearranged herself. Her eyes filled with tears. The level of her milk rose slowly.

Ida wheeled Grandmother out to a commanding position in the middle of a lawn corridor which ran deep between two rows of steel-spun cypress. It was a day when the clouds were membrane-thin and very high, so high that it seemed the sky itself had recently expanded.

'To begin, Sophie,' said Grandmother, 'I have known you – for how long? Eight years. The day you were married to my son I was so proud, so happy, so proud. Your parents, bless them, if they could have been there I know they would have been proud too. And now – now I am very fond of you. It is a wonderful thing, to be married, to be welcomed into a new family. I was not born to this place. Ha – no, this,' she made a sweeping gesture, 'all this came to me by marriage. I married Maurice when I was just out of school – that young, yes. He was on vacation in New York and somehow my cousin made the introduction. I adored him. My husband ... We had the children. First, Marcus. And then I was pregnant for a second time. For five months and ... I lost it. What do they say – miscarried? As if it were as simple as misplacing. No, it

was terrible. I know this – terrible.' She lowered her head. Looked up. 'A year later, we had Olivia. Our daughter. Our family. We were happy, Maurice and I. Ups and downs – yes, of course. He “chased skirt”. I never said anything but I knew, there were signs: oh, long lunches, the usual. Once a friend even told me they'd seen him tête-à-tête in our favourite restaurant with ... And there was an abortion.' The sign of the cross. 'Poor girl. But we weren't making love so how could I blame him? I let him run. There were the children to think of. And I loved him. For forty-two years I loved him and then one day, one afternoon, on a spring day not unlike today, he died. Dropped dead. Out of the blue. The heart. We buried him – over there.' She craned her neck and waved in the direction of the great oak. 'A week later my daughter left me. With no warning. First one, then the other – just like that. Well, it's true she fell in love with a pig. A pig. I'd tried everything to stop her but, of course – stone ears. Then one day: gone. It was as if she ... vanished. I didn't hear from her for twelve years. Nothing. Not ... nothing. And today she is home. Your child is with God. You have samples: there will be another. You must talk to your husband. You must bury this baby. In a short time no-one will speak of it. That is good. Things are not diminished by being left alone.'

When she had finished her speech Grandmother folded her hands in her lap, one over the other like a pair of gloves. Then the hands flew up as her audience suddenly departed.

Another day a light rain dimpled the lake. Marcus and the boy were nestled in the canoe, paddling in concert. The boy gazed across the water and asked, 'What's over there?'

'Over where?'

He pointed to the forest. 'There.'

'Forest. Miles and miles of forest. Hansel and Gretel forest. Sorry,' Marcus corrected himself, 'death-combat forest or whatever you prefer to call it. Full of wild boars. And then, the mountain. The village. Villages, I suppose.'

The boy just nodded. They continued to paddle, not bothered by the rain.

A short time later Marcus ventured, 'Andy, you haven't seen my phone have you?'

'What phone?'

'I lost it last week.' He faked a light-hearted sigh. 'Oh well. I'm sure it will just ... turn up. Has this happened to you?' He placed his paddle across the canoe and turned to face the boy. 'Sometimes I just ... lose things, they vanish. And then a few days later – voilà – they show up right there, under my nose. Strange. But what a relief.' He leant forward so that they were eye to eye. 'It's important to me to find that phone. A special friend of mine can only reach me on that number.' He sat back and resumed paddling. One stroke, two stroke.

Over his shoulder he added, 'You know, I'm always very grateful when things show up. Very grateful.'

Days later an elaborate piece of garden furniture, a rattan throne, had been planted in the lawn corridor. The back of the throne was curved and high so that whoever sat in

it was less mighty than the throne itself. The sun was at its peak, pinpointing every shadow. The priest solemnly approached the throne and after he had made himself comfortable he sat for a while without speaking. He raised the fingers of one hand.

'What God has given us, he can also take away,' he said, making a graceful arc with the hand. 'He is the beauty of childhood; He is the fullness of years. He knows that our love for Alice was not in vain.' He nodded his head. 'Blessed is He for the gift He gave us in her. We know that, in everything, He works for the good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose. We must give thanks to Him – not for taking our Alice from us – but for granting her a place with all the saints ...'

There came a low hissing sound which gave him pause. He continued, 'We must bury Alice so that we can entrust her to God's eternal care.'

The guttural hissing grew louder and louder.

Discomfited, the priest raised his voice. 'So that she will live for ever in the joy and peace of His presence.'

Suddenly Sophie leapt to her feet and began attacking him. As she battered him with her fists he struggled to keep speaking.

'The Prophet Isaiah speaks of the time which is to come!' he shouted. 'Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days! Or an old man who does not live out his years!! He who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth!! A youth!!!

And he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed!! Accursed!!'

She beat him to the ground.

The following morning Marcus took a load of his dirty shirts down to the laundry. It was a large room, almost a bunker, where solid metal troughs, hundreds of years old, ran alongside the very latest machines, the sort said to operate at the press of a button. The twins were packing away the gauzy muslin wraps, the baby-booties, all the small soft garments now redundant. One twin held up a little white jumpsuit and – she couldn't help herself – wiggled its weightless arm, space-walked it over to the cardboard box. Jumped it inside. And after that, each time they came across a jumpsuit the twins would make it animate. Marcus watched this pantomime from the doorway; he didn't try to stop them. And only when they accidentally caught a glimpse of him did he raise his voice, say, 'That's enough,' and he didn't say this out of a belated sense of propriety, or in anger, but rather in an attempt to stave off an apology. Alone, he finished the job with reverence.

The woman and the children, accompanied by Sophie and her bundle, were having an outdoor lunch below the great oak. Their picnic blanket was not far from the new little grave which had been covered with a square of bright green artificial grass. Neat heaps of dirt, some sprouting weeds, bordered this plastic grass. The woman was spooning a second helping of grated celeriac onto the side of the girl's china plate. There were no annoying flies; a pair of butterflies staggered overhead, conjoined at the abdomen. Ida stood nearby, ready to be summoned should the need arise. The boy was wandering around with an imaginary pistol in hand and when his mother called him over – 'Eat something' – he waved this pistol carelessly over each member of the picnic before training it on himself, pulling the trigger and blowing out his brains so that instead of simply sitting down he collapsed in a heap. It was such fun that he was resurrected and did it again: put the pistol to his temple and pulled the trigger, fell

down. His sister and mother studiously ignored him. After a while he was resurrected once more. Sophie tired of the miracles and checked on her bundle in the white wicker bassinet; she lifted it out and brought it to her chest. The boy stared fixedly at Sophie until she looked down and noticed a little clump of fine dark hair sticking to her cream cashmere jumper. It didn't seem to bother her, this moulting, and she brushed off the hair as easily as she would breadcrumbs. The boy turned away and from the corner of his eye he caught sight of a deer which had wandered out from the line of trees, a fawn with spindle legs and oversized ears, a spotted coat and striped little tail. The first thing he did was lunge across and grab the girl, shove his hand over her mouth. He twisted her head in the direction of the newcomer. 'See, shh, be quiet.' When he felt her limp obeisance he released his grip and they all watched the fawn take uncertain steps on the thick soft lawn. For some unknown reason the animal turned to face them. The gaze held and held and in that gaze was wonder.

A strange thing happened: the bundle made a loud drawn-out squeak.

The fawn started and ambled away.

Sophie was fussing around; the others were appalled by the foul smell. The children held their noses.

This time it was Josette who lowered herself onto the rattan throne on the lawn, sitting straight and choosing not to use the backrest. She had come from the village and was wearing blue jeans and a cotton shirt, gold hoop earrings. Everything about her manner was clear and direct without being officious.

'Forgive me for intruding at this juncture,' she said. 'But as the representative of the State I must tell you that sufficient days have passed and you must now bury the baby or return the body to the morgue. These are the regulations.' She paused. 'The body is decomposing. The smell – the smell is a sign. Return the corpse to the earth. The skin will blister and fall away, the organs will bloat. Liquefy. Leak. Even the little ones leak. Millions of microbes inside the body will feast from within. And there may be coffin flies. It doesn't take long to be worn down to the bone. The bones, they will outlast you. And one day they too will – crumble. Everything will be transformed: this is what happens. The earth is thriving. All you can do now is be gentle with yourself. The child's life is – done. The child is no longer suffering. She will remain in your thoughts. I do not believe in any soul, God is not the mystery, but I say – open your heart to those around you. Do not miss this chance. That's all.' She clasped her hands together. 'I hope we have reached an understanding.'

One afternoon Marcus and the woman sat side by side in the summer pavilion; they were on the floor, backs straight against the wall, knees braced chinward. They had come here to seek respite from a burst of heavy rain but the rain had long since subsided. With the end of a twig the woman traced an invisible pattern into the stone. 'Every night I beg her to bury the baby,' said Marcus. 'And she always says it's not the right time. That's what she says, "Not yet, it's not the right time."' The woman gave this some consideration. 'I'm sorry,' she said softly. They looked into the garden. She added, 'Do you like the children? Are you fond of them?' 'They're wonderful,' he replied.

'Would you ...' She made her pattern more intricate. Then she set down the twig and turned to face him. Her eyes were bright. 'Would you, and Sophie, like to ... would you like to have them?'

'Have them?'

She stared at him. 'You could have them. Be their guardians.' Her voice came wholly from her chest, unexpectedly, the way it once did, only once, when she was a schoolgirl singing in a choir: unstoppable.

He recoiled a fraction. 'No, no, we couldn't,' he said, not meeting her gaze. Shook his head. 'No, Olivia, it's too great a gift. No, we couldn't accept.'

She studied him closely; he kept his eyes on the alps of his knees. She waited for a question or a word of comfort but neither was forthcoming. Eventually she turned away and looked once more into the garden, out beyond the lotus pond. Everything held steady there.

They continued to sit side by side in a hopeless silence.

'My murder,' she said. 'I volunteered and that is what is unbearable.'

The rain picked up, pelted the lawn. Her brother touched her shoulder to indicate he had heard her.

At night the boy readied his escape. He had a small torch clenched between his teeth and was hard at work expertly organising provisions. His sister lay dead to the world. The contents to be packed were laid out on his bed: clothes, some small packages wrapped in foil, Marcus's phone. A kitchen knife. When he had finished his own pack he turned to the girl's. He heard a noise and froze – but it was only a mouse or a moth

and the moment of danger was fleeting. Soon both packs were safely stashed behind the silk curtains that fell to the floor. He climbed onto his bed and touched Violet's breasts; he stood on tiptoes and gave the portrait a long fond kiss goodbye.

The woman made her own preparations. In the bathroom she stood naked before a mirror lit by a band of showgirl lightbulbs. Using her left hand she painstakingly tidied her eyebrows with the aid of a pair of tweezers. There was a glass ledge below the mirror which held a blue velvet make-up case and her bottle of heart-stopper, the digitalis. More than once she had trouble gripping the fine hairs, nipping the skin, and it took multiple attempts to pluck out each solitary hair. Not a muscle twitched though her eyes began to smart with tears. A rash of little red bumps formed under her eyebrows.

She studied the tip of her chin and plucked out two errant whiskers. She tilted back her head and searched for hairs growing in her nostrils. A hair sprouting from her right nipple came away.

She rubbed her face with a rose-scented moisturiser. She massaged the right side of her neck where the cast weighed heavy.

She sat on the edge of the bath and passed a soapy wet flannel over her calves. With a disposable razor she shaved her legs in long upward strokes, overlapping the strokes so as not to miss a hair. Despite her care she nicked herself on the right heel and her blood showed red and bright. She opened her legs and attended to her wiry bikini line. Hoisting the cast above her head she worked in the downy nook of her right

underarm; it was hard going and she had to rest from time to time. The left underarm proved more difficult. At first she stretched her elbow up to the ceiling and tried to scoop down inside the nook with her left hand. When this didn't work she shifted the razor to the fingertips of her right hand and with great patience manoeuvred the razor-head from there.

After she had rinsed out the flannel she used it to wipe the soapy residue from her smooth soft skin. She looked at her fresh-shaven legs, the leg-bags, as if keenly aware of the minute difference between 'her' and 'there'. Back before the mirror she found that her reflection had remained faithful; she tested this by slowly pressing her lips together and seemed satisfied when the familiar stranger did the same.

The next morning Sophie was up early and walking in the garden, the bundle cradled in her arms. Her progress was slow, almost cautious; at each step she pressed down her heel and then unrolled the length of her foot in a wavelike movement that would not, could not, provoke any seismic shift. Behind her trailed a set of near-perfect footprints broken in the dew. A solitary blackbird sang out to confirm all existence and waited until there came an answering song.

The children were also awake, down by the water. Both were wearing their backpacks, the full load. The boy had rolled his jeans up over his knees and was standing at the lake's edge, sliding the canoe into the shallows. When he had it stable

and buoyant he told his sister to climb inside. This she did, momentarily handing Pinky over for protection.

'Ida will know,' she said.

'Will not.' A gentle rebuff.

'Will so.' Said quietly. Head down, reclaiming her doll.

He scrambled into the canoe, catching his foot on the side and nearly stumbling headfirst over the prow. But he settled onto his captain's bench and, digging the paddle into the soft lake bed, he managed to turn the canoe so that they faced the forest, the mountain. This boy in a canoe on a lake before a forest below a mountain. Now begin the journey. He took a deep breath; he struck out. Splash, that paddle dragged through the water.

On land, standing behind a bank of blue hydrangeas, Sophie watched them go.

Goodbye, goodbye: all the children go. When he had well and truly left the shore, the boy turned around for one last look over his shoulder, the gesture that marks the moment when leaving becomes arriving. He saw Sophie and she, likewise, saw him. After a moment she gave a little wave. Quickly he turned back toward the mountain. She watched the children go.

It was hard work, wielding the paddle. Steering was no easy business; the canoe tacked like a sailboat. Wobbled. A blister had already broken out on his palm.

'Andy?' said the girl, in her quietest voice.

He heard her but did not respond. He concentrated on paddling. One stroke, then the next. One stroke after the other. He fixed his eyes on his destination. At last he

seemed to find a rhythm, left stroke, right stroke, and soon they were making a beeline toward the distant forest.

'Andy?' repeated the girl. He didn't answer: eyes on the prize, no time for distraction.

She tried again, louder this time. 'Andy?'

'What!'

Undertone. 'My feet are wet.'

Turning, he saw her feet resting in water. Somewhere, somehow, the canoe had sprung a leak. A leak. The boy did not panic; the canoe was taking on water; the boy remained calm. He would need to bail. To plug the leak. So he rustled under his bench and found a skeet of sorts, a small plastic bucket used to hold fish, and he leant over and started to empty out the lake. The girl lifted her feet, hugging her knees to her chest. Stay still. The lake sought its level. He bailed faster and faster. The girl wanted to help and so doing she accidentally knocked the paddle overboard. No, too late, it was out of his reach.

He waved his arms over his head, a wild semaphore. He called for help. The girl sat very still, was silent. Sophie was watching. He waved his arms again. He shouted. He could see her; she could see him. She did not move: Sophie was not coming to their aid. Now the world was undone.

And the world began again. This new boy seemed much like his predecessor – resolute and uncomplaining. So he bailed.

The woman approached the lake, taking her morning stroll. When she saw the listing canoe she began to run, to speed toward the shore, rushing blindly past the bank of hydrangeas, past Sophie, unseen though not hidden, right to the water's edge, the very precipice. Halt.

A small and puzzled frown crossed her brow. O. Her skin goose-pimpled, even her pupils dilated. Then, very slowly, as if working against a magnetic force, she lifted one foot and let fall her shoe. Let fall the other. She unpicked the knot of her sling. She shed her dress. Stepping forward, she incrementally immersed herself in the icy water, the lake close like a glove. Vile baptism.

She could hardly swim. Her cast was heavy and disabling. She stuck her head above the water and scabbled like a dog. She kept going; she scabbled and pawed and went under and came back up, she scabbled and pawed. O it was icy cold. There were bottomless deeps beneath her. The canoe was taking on water; there were the children; she did not panic.

She pushed a clump of hair away from her mouth. Swallowed the lake, spat it out. She kept going. Distance played its favourite trick, egged her on.

A sharp pain in her right shoulder caused her to wince. It became difficult to breathe – how relentless, the breath. At last she had to stop. She turned onto her back, arms and legs outstretched, and opened her chest to the sky. The water filled her ears; her tiny earbones vibrated with the tripped-up thud of her heart. At that moment she was acutely alive. When her breath had settled she rolled over and resumed her swim.

She kept going. For hours, or was it for days? Time – there was no time, never had been – what a joke. She swam over the mountain. When the villagers saw her, this woman, scrabbling and pawing at the stony ground, filthy and near naked, with long strips of weed in her hair, her hands and knees bloodied, wearing a strange thick plaster on one arm, they gathered their children into their skirts and made them watch. See! The expression on the village children's faces was one of horrified wonder.

The canoe went under. When it happened, it happened quickly. The boy struggled to keep his sister afloat. The doll was lost. Neither child cried or even made a sound – as if a sound, a pip-squeak, could irrevocably tip the balance, send them down.

The woman scrabbled and pawed at the water. And though she scrabbled and pawed she wore on her face a small serene smile: O she was radiant.

With her left hand she reached out to stabilise the girl, the three of them treading water. The boy she instructed in a kind and firm but breathless voice, 'Take off your pack.'

After a moment's delay – he hesitated, she nodded in reassurance – he released the girl into his mother's care and laboured out of his backpack. Then between them they helped the girl.

'Now,' said the woman tenderly. 'Take her back.'

Once more he showed a look of doubt and when she repeated herself, again with great tenderness, he pursed his mouth and blinked rapidly. 'It's okay,' she said. 'Go on.' He told the girl to lie on her back, which she did without protest, and slipped his arm under her neck in order to support her head. The girl played dead. He started to tow

her and had not gone far before he looked back over his shoulder. His mother was treading water; she lifted her hand and waved him toward the shore.

She did not begin the return journey. Instead she jellyfished: she took a great gulp of air and, belling her back and letting her arms fall loose, submerging her face in the water, she hung suspended. Each time she could no longer hold her breath she let out a stream of bubbles before briefly lifting her head, taking another great gulp and then returning to the water. She floated. She appeared – she was – a simple life-form, with no mind other than mind-through-body, a nerve net, and with each new breath, each new shocking breath, she was reborn; it would take an aeon for her to be human. The lake let her be.

When the boy reached the shore he saw to it that his sister was safe. She sat very quietly on the sand, though she couldn't stop her teeth from chattering. He stood beside her, heaving and gasping; he had his hands on his hips and there were little shadows in the hollows beneath his bony shoulderblades. As soon as he had modulated his breath he re-entered the water.

In the middle of the lake he waited for the woman to resurface. He made small shallow circles in the water to better help him stay in place. It seemed she could hold her breath for ever. At last she came up for air. There he was: her boy. They weren't far from one another, a metre or so, and there was a long silence until the boy said – or implored – 'Please. Come on.'

She closed her eyes, turned onto her side. He towed her in. More than once he dunked his heavy load. On the sand she crouched on all fours and pitched and gagged. The boy lay flat on his back looking up at the sky; the girl, shivering, watched over him. Soon after the commotion the lake was distilled; it disdained secrets, held nothing.

When she had recovered the woman bunched her belongings to her chest and proceeded toward the house with small measured steps. The children followed at a distance, hand in hand, knobbled by the cold. She stopped when she caught sight of Sophie: Sophie, who had not moved an inch from her observation post, who had not relinquished her bundle. At first the woman glanced at her with a kind of weary solidarity, a war widow's glance, but sensing a defiance, some sort of refusal, the woman almost did a double take; she stared at Sophie for a long time. Sophie stood unrepentant. The children joined their mother, dragged her away.

Ida and the twins were busy fixing breakfast in the kitchen. One twin was watching over the pop-up toaster, the other was ladling boiled eggs out of a saucepan. Ida was rummaging around in the pantry looking for a replacement pot of raspberry jam.

When the sodden bedraggled trio appeared in the doorway the twins were quick to rush to their assistance. Ida, leaving the pantry, gasped and grew pale.

'We had an accident,' said the woman.

Ida got on her knees before the girl. 'There, there, my little one. My darling.'

The girl gave her the bare and crestfallen look of the betrayed. 'Pinky's gone.'

'No, my darling, no no,' said Ida. 'Come here, come here little one.' She hugged her close.

Marcus entered the fray. He cast an anxious glance around the room.

'She's by the lake,' said the woman coldly.

He hurriedly excused himself, departed.

That night the woman put the children to bed. First she tucked in the boy as best she could with one hand, kissed him on the forehead. The girl she tucked in too. They lay perfectly still and straight. She made sure they both had a glass of water beside their beds. Standing by the light switch she said, 'Goodnight, darlings. Ni-night.' It was dark, they listened to her footsteps. As soon as it was safe the boy reached over and switched on his lamp. The girl pushed back her sheets and changed beds, squirmed in beside him. Stay close. The lamp went off and it was dark again.

The woman stood by the window, the curtains were open and she beheld a small herd of deer that had gathered on the lawn, fearlessly close to the château; the deer were standing and staring, their eyes glinted, reflecting the light from her room. A berserk star caught her attention: it might have been a plane.

At first light the sky turned a deep orange, a smoky grey, a tallow white, and then grey once more until – annealed – the day broke powdery blue. A long dark scratch against the sky turned to cloudbank. The woman was bent low pulling the artificial grass off the small grave beside the headstone. She was dressed in a pearl-grey tweed suit, stockings and heels. Her broken arm was hidden in a blue silk sling. And she had

fixed her hair, a loose chignon, and had gone to the trouble of putting on make-up. To her left was the tiny walnut casket that she had dragged over from the house. First she removed the square of grass, kicking it into a heap; then she manoeuvred the casket as close as she could to the earthen maw. She worked methodically, not with stealth but with blatant purpose.

On the way back to the house she made a detour via the rose garden. Without thought for the look of the plants she took her scissors to the blooms. One by one the roses fell to the ground and when she had a sufficient number, fifteen or so, she pocketed the scissors and collected the stems with her left hand, thorns and all.

She marched into the kitchen, ignoring Ida, ignoring the twins, and dumped the roses on the wooden table. She headed hellbent toward the freezer and – stunned – they did not try to stop her. The freezer, the top compartment lined in pink satin, was empty save for a little lace-trimmed pillow. Slightly disconcerted, she turned to leave but on afterthought turned back to double-check its silver pair, the refrigerator. Every shelf was crammed with food. No matter; she slammed the door shut and, brushing past the twins – 'Excuse me' – strode away.

'Get up! Wake up!' She broke into the children's room. 'Lucy! Andrew!' she yelled.

'Get dressed! Hurry! Get up!'

The children scrambled to attention. She threw open the left curtain. On hands and knees she rooted through the clothes heaped carelessly on the floor until she found the outfits they had worn at the funeral, the suit and the black velvet dress, and she tossed

these, garment by garment, onto the girl's bed. After swapping glances with one another the children hurried to unbutton their pyjamas.

She buzzed insistently on the intercom outside Grandmother's suite. Five times. Six times. One uninterrupted demand until the door could be heard to click. Stormed through the rooms, called out, 'Wake up! Get dressed! Hurry!'

Grandmother had pulled up the bedsheet to a level just below her eyes, timorous. The woman ripped it away. She grabbed Grandmother's shoulder, skin and bone, and gave her a strong shake. 'Get ready!'

Ida rushed in and with a placatory gesture – gently cupping the woman's elbow – she insinuated herself between Grandmother and assailant. The woman released her grip and waited hand on hip as Grandmother clambered out of bed. Ida helped her to her feet and while Grandmother wasn't looking, searching for her slippers under the bed, she nodded to the woman in tacit approval.

Marcus, all bleary-eyed and wearing a clumsily tied dressing gown, slumbered down the hallway. He lifted his shoulders in an open-palmed shrug that said, What's going on?

'Sophie is ready,' said the woman.

'She's ready? Now?'

'Yes. Now.' Curt.

Without losing momentum she sidestepped around him and marched toward his room.

After a moment he followed.

The room was empty: no Sophie. Nowhere, not there. She opened the door of a neighbouring room. A draught of air set an intricate kiddy-mobile turning and tinkling. Here was a nursery, with a wooden cot and a rocking-horse, a large doll's house. The walls and ceiling were painted fingernail-pink and sprinkled with silver stars. No Sophie.

And the next room – she gripped the door handle like she would grip at the rung of a ladder, then wrenched it down. No Sophie. The full length of the hallway: door open, door closed, door open, door closed, door open ... unstoppable. Every room was empty.

She scuttled down the central staircase, weightless, her left hand lightly passing over the banister. Looking straight ahead, the exact breadth and depth of each stair an engrained bodily knowledge. In the entrance hall she hesitated a moment and then turned sharp left into the drawing room, yanking open the door. Empty, all the furniture shrouded. She went over to the windows and banged behind the curtains, sniffed and sniffed. Nothing there. Halfway across the room she stopped and scratched furiously in the small space between her skin and her cast. Then she turned on her heels, marched back to the entrance hall and crossed into the salon whose walls were spiked with antlers. Sophie was wearing her coffee-silk nightgown and was sitting peaceably on a chaise longue. The white wicker bassinet rested within arm's reach on a low table. She did not seem surprised by the intrusion, not in the slightest; the impression she gave was that nothing whatsoever was amiss. Without pause the woman walked over to the table until she and Sophie were equidistant from the

bassinet. There they held one another's gaze. Very slowly the woman leant forward, reaching out her left hand toward the bassinet, and Sophie mirrored this movement, reaching at the same pace – but not grabbing, not snatching – until their fingertips were almost touching. And the woman, unwavering, settled her hand onto the wicker bands, closed her fist. It was heavy, the bassinet. She carried it away.

Once more they encircled the open grave. The woman was there, the bassinet by her feet; the children were dressed in their finest. Grandmother sat very straight in her wheelchair, tended by Ida and the twins. Two solemn gardeners were armed with shovels. Sophie, still in her nightgown, was at the head of the grave and Marcus stood beside her.

The woman transferred the bundle from the bassinet to the casket. Afterwards there was a long pause until Marcus assumed the lead and, kneeling down, lay a rose beside the corpse. At his encouragement Sophie did the same. Grandmother was next, Ida wheeled her forward. The girl took a deep breath and quickly had her turn, followed by the woman. And the boy was last. He balled his hand over the head of the rose so that only the stem was protruding. They waited. The girl, helpful, pointed her finger over and over toward the ground. His mother nodded at him as if to say, Continue. Eventually he obeyed. Arching up he saw that Sophie had also broken out of their circle and was now staring at him. She tried to touch his shoulder but he shrugged her off. Her fledgling smile was sad and tender and asked of him forgiveness. The boy was mountain and lake. Marcus drew her back.

The gardeners lowered the casket into the grave. They set about with their shovels, scattering dirt on wood. Ida gave a loud sigh of relief.

In the garden the clipped topiaries, the long rows of cypress, the rose beds, the lotus, the elms, the poplars, the great oak, each nipped blade of grass – all were animate, transforming sunlight, and the woman, breathing in, breathing out, sensed this, felt this silent and constant becoming, was a part of it, and this burgeoning feeling, gentle and immanent, so long dormant, spilled from behind her sternum and into her throat, it filled the space behind her mouth, behind her nose until – practised – she did not so much cut it off or snuff it out as simply let it pass. All things can be refused. The next moment she turned toward her son. *My child*. He was ancient and implacable, a boy most beautiful. But no boy is mountain and lake and knowing this – knowing that mountain is rock and lake is water, that even rock sheds fine grains and water shapeshifts, knowing it impossible to be rock or water, and knowing the disappointments she had visited upon herself – she made a wish for him. *Hold, hold*.

'DISQUIET' SCREENPLAY

EXT. GATEWAY/WALL - DAY

Here stands the great gateway: sculpted in iron, spiked and imposing.

Pulling back we see a trio: a woman flanked by two children. OLIVIA, mid-to-late 30's, is elegantly dressed. Her clothes, while classic, have a discreet near-future finish. She wears her hair in a loose chignon. The boy, ANDREW, is age 9; the girl, LUCY, is age 6 and carrying her favourite doll. Each has a suitcase upright on wheels by their feet; the two children are also saddled with backpacks.

They are alone in the empty and open countryside. Ugly countryside, flat mud-ploughed fields.

Olivia walks right up to the gateway, and inspects the security system, an electronic palm-pad: it defeats her.

Implacable, she returns to collect her suitcase; her right arm is broken, resting in a silk-scarf sling.

Without acknowledging the children she collects her suitcase and turns off the pebbled driveway onto the grassy verge.

The children watch her go, they are silent.

After a while they follow suit. First the boy, then the girl.

With calmness and fortitude the trio lumber in single-file alongside the bristling glass-topped stone wall that borders the vast estate.

The woman never looks back.

At one stage the boy pauses so that the girl can catch up some distance.

They walk until all three round a corner, disappear from view.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE/WALL - DAY

Close on the stone wall- it begins to green with a flowering vine.

Olivia trails her manicured left-hand through the vine.

At first her touch is light but as she progresses the hand delves more deeply into the vine, seeking out the wall behind.

Olivia stops her search and looks up at an ancient oak visible over the top of the wall.

This is the spot.

She releases her suitcase (which has been awkwardly hooked around her cast).

The children arrive and impassively observe as she begins to rip away the vine. Tears and rips.

Without invitation, the boy comes to her aid and she makes room for him but does not give any sign of thanks.

A locked wooden door is revealed.

Olivia pulls an old key from her pocket.

She tries the lock: first she turns it in the wrong direction. After a jiggle or two - click, the tumbler falls.

She butts at the door with her shoulder but it won't budge. Even though it is unlocked it is stuck.

She tries again - to no avail.

And again. She rests her forehead against the door as if by dint of will it will open.

She steps away and looks to the children.

With tacit permission the boy runs forward and leaps at the door. No luck.

He plants himself on the ground levels a kick at the door. Stuck.

He throws a high kick.

He does a one-two kung-fu kick.

He takes a few steps back and standing on the balls of his feet he prepares for another run at the door. He throws himself violently against it. But the door will not open.

He tries again: the slow walk back, the run-up, he smashes his body against the door. Thud. He is stoic when in pain.

Olivia winces almost imperceptibly but does not restrain him as he harms himself. The girl, silent, clutches her doll to her chest.

Again, with unflagging determination, the boy hurls himself at the door.

And again.

And again.

Crash! He slides down the closed door onto the ground. Failure.

As he stands and heads back for another run-up, he sneaks a glance at his mother; she blinks both eyes, dips her head - silently encouraging him to continue.

And again. A violent bodysmash. This time he forces an opening.

Olivia and the girl approach the door. First, Olivia climbs through the breach, snagging and ripping her stockings.

The boy helps his sister across.

Then he collects the luggage and passes each piece through to Olivia, one by one.

Finished, he takes a quick look around to make sure no-one has been watching and then hops through himself.

The door closes.

EXT. GARDEN - DAY

Olivia leads the children through a wonderland. The lawn is thick and soft. These formal gardens are renowned for their exquisite artifice.

In the distance FOUR GARDENERS, in worn uniforms, are scooping leaves out of a stone-sculpted fountain.

As the trio approaches GARDENER 1, an old man, scrutinises Olivia and then raises a hand in greeting; he allows her to pass without question.

She returns his wave but does not deviate from her course.

They continue their walk through the grounds, following a long line of topiaries.

Exhausted, the girl lags behind.

ANDREW

Come on.

She quickens her pace.

GARDENER 2, on a ride-on mower, veers close so as to inspect these intruders but when he sees Olivia then he, too, waves in acknowledgment.

EXT. GARDEN - ALLEE/CHATEAU - DAY

The trio have reached a long allée lined with trees whose branches vault like buttresses toward the sky. Olivia proceeds, as does the boy, but the girl stops.

The woman and the boy go some distance before the boy realises the girl is isn't accompanying them.

He stands his suitcase and runs back. She whispers something in his ear.

Grudgingly, he opens her suitcase and takes out the exoskeleton of a toy pram. Opens it.

ANDREW

There. OK?

She nods.

He turns back up the driveway.

The girl fussily settles the doll.

LUCY

(to doll)

Good girl, there you go. That's better, isn't it.

Only then, reassured, does she set off, managing to push the pram and pull her suitcase at one and the same time.

EXT. CHATEAU STEPS - ENTRANCE HALL - DAY

Olivia and the children stand at the top of stone steps which are wide and shallow and worn like soap. Before she knocks on the door Olivia takes the elaborately sculpted bronze knocker in her left-hand and feels it left.

She knocks.

She waits.

She knocks again. She ruffles the boy's head for some courage and he seems surprised by this gesture.

IDA, the housekeeper, appears in the doorway. She is in her 60's and is wearing a black dress, white apron and her grey hair is curled in a tidy bun. Her face - initially excited - falls flat when she sees who it is. She quickly masks her disappointment with a smile.

OLIVIA

(calmly)

Hello Ida. It's me.

IDA

Olivia??

OLIVIA

May I introduce the children.

The children limply smile hello, give a little wave.

Ida notes the boy's bloodied shoulder but holds her tongue.

IDA
Come in, come in.

INT. ENTRANCE HALL - DAY

Ida ushers Olivia and the children into the chateau. The entrance hall is immense, with the palest dove-grey walls, and is sparsely decorated. Incongruously, there are dozens of brightly coloured helium balloons weighted down in vases and tied to the bannisters of a grand central staircase.

GRANDMOTHER, late 60's/early 70's, crowns the staircase. She is impeccably dressed in a matching skirt and jacket, a faultless string of pearls. Though frail, she emanates a dignified resignation. A Burmese cat nuzzles at her feet. She descends the steps one at a time with aid of a silver-topped walking stick.

She hides her surprise, pauses and gives a small smile.

OLIVIA
Hello Mother.

GRANDMOTHER
Hello Olivia.

Olivia quickly climbs the marble stairs.

Olivia takes Grandmother's scaly hand and kisses it. A formal gesture not one of reconciliation.

Grandmother studies her but makes no comment on the broken arm or ripped stockings.

OLIVIA
I needed to come home (long pause).
Well, meet the children.

She waves the children up the stairs.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
This is Andrew. We call him Andy.
Andy, this is your grandmother.
Grand-mere. Grandmother.

ANDREW
Hello.

OLIVIA
And this is Lucy. Lucyloo.

GRANDMOTHER
Hello Lucyloo.

Lucy is too shy to speak.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)
Will you be staying long?

OLIVIA
(Pause)
Yes, I think so.

GRANDMOTHER
So, the day of days. Your brother
will be home soon.

She taps one of the welcoming balloons with her walking stick.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

They are pregnant, you know. In the hospital. We expect them any minute. Everything here is ready - just for the first six months or so. When it's hardest. But of course there is plenty of room. Where would you like to sleep, Olivia?

OLIVIA
Wherever is convenient.

GRANDMOTHER
Ida will see to it.

She looks to Ida for confirmation. Ida nods.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)
Come now, are you tired? You must be very tired. Such a long trip.
(Pause) *Was it a long trip?*

OLIVIA
Very long. (She asks the children)
Wasn't it, kids?

Andrew shrugs but Lucy bobs her head up and down without stopping.

INT. CHILDREN'S ROOM - DAY

Ida shows Olivia and the children into a room for visiting adult guests: there are two large beds with quilted headboards.

Ida leaves.

Exhausted, Olivia sinks into an armchair in the corner of the room.

LUCY

It smells like old people.

Andrew bumps on his mattress.

He fiddles with the bedside light, twisting the brass knob under the fringed lampshade, but he can't work out how to turn it on.

He stands on his bed and examines a painting on the wall, an eighteenth century portrait of woman. He runs his hands over her breasts, feels the surface of the paint.

With his fingernail he worries off a chip of the craquelure. Shows his mother.

ANDREW

It's real.

He jumps down and goes to peek behind the floor-length silk curtains.

He tries everything he possibly can to open the windows but fails. They are locked in.

He twists himself into the curtains and disappears. Long pause.

Lucy, marooned with her doll on her own giant bed, becomes frightened.

LUCY

Andeeeee!

He slowly untwists, returns to the world.

Glancing at the woman, he removes a mobile phone from his suitcase and, following a cord from the lamp, he endeavours to recharge the battery but is disappointed to discover no amount of jamming will match the prongs to the socket.

He sits back on his heels, stumped. Now he is trapped: what can he do?

Olivia hauls herself out the armchair, goes to her own room.

INT. OLIVIA'S ROOM - DAY

In her room Olivia sheds her clothes, drops them on the floor. She frees her arm from the sling, lets down her hair. Crawls onto her bed in her underwear. Lies belly-down, face in the pillow.

The white plain of her back is covered in purple and yellow bruises. A lingering study of her body.

Sensing the children's presence, she turns her head and opens one eye:

OLIVIA

Andy? You two, please, go - go away
- go and play outside.

Andrew has been spying through a half-open door. His sister is by his side.

He pushes his sister, they leave.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

The country-kitchen is enormous, with a large walk-in fireplace, flagstone floor and a huge wooden table as centrepiece. Ida is preparing lunch. She is aided by identical TWINS, 20 years old, the housemaids, who are working at benches along the far wall.

The children peer in the door.

ANDREW

Hello.

IDA

(broken English)

Hello you two. Look at you. Who is
wanting a biscuit?

She bustles to get them a biscuit.

Lucy holds up her doll.

LUCY

Her name is Pinky. We're on the
run.

ANDREW

On the hop.

Ida feigns comprehension. Lucy starts hopping in a circle.

ANDREW (CONT'D)
 We're passing through. Don't worry,
 we'll be gone soon. Maybe tomorrow.
 Or the next day.

She finishes her hopping circle:

LUCY
 I live in Australia.

IDA
 My goodness, that's a long way
 away. Lots of kangaroos.

ANDREW
 (ignoring the kangaroo reference)
 Are you a servant?

In the background the twins suppress a laugh.

IDA
 Housekeeper. And I am here a very
 long time. I know this place inside
 outside and I know everything that
 is happens here. Every-thing. (She
 fixes him with a stare). The
 curtains, I know. The painting, I
 know. Here (she touches her
 forehead) - my third eye. Just
 here.

She bends down and the children take turns to touch her third
 eye.

IDA (CONT'D)
 I'll always be watching.

She turns to the twins for confirmation.

IDA (CONT'D)
 N'est-ce pas?

The Twins both nod in solemn agreement.

Andrew is impressed. The children turn to leave.

ANDREW
 Bye.

LUCY
 Bye!

Ida and the twins resume their work.

Behind Ida's back one of twins mistakenly slips an egg yolk onto the bench and without turning around Ida clicks her tongue in admonishment, just as if she really did have eyes in the back of her head.

EXT. LAKESIDE - DAY

This is the lake. On the far side of the lake, the rippling edge of a dark forest. Ancient snow-capped mountains. Andrew is skipping stones. Lucy is digging a hole in the sand, using the plastic hand of her doll as a spade.

Olivia walks over to join them. She is freshly made-up and is wearing a new elegant outfit, high heels: she is perfectly groomed. Her arm is once again in the sling.

LUCY
(jumping on Olivia)
Mummy! Mummy! Can we swim?

OLIVIA
The winter is still in the water.
It's too cold.

Lucy accepts this. Andrew doesn't believe her.

IDA (O.C.)
(calling)
OLIIIIIVVIIIIIIAAA!
OLLIIIVVIIIIIIAAA!

CUT TO:

In the distance, on a garden path, Ida is waving an apron above her head.

CUT TO:

Olivia takes Lucy by the hand and they turn back through the garden.

They have not gone far before Andy snatches Pinky and sprints up the path.

INT. CHATEAU CORRIDORS - DAY

Olivia, Andrew, Lucy and Ida walk through the long corridors of the chateau.

Although they are in a hurry they are obliged by decorum to maintain a stately pace.

Still, they can't help a quick-step.

INT. ENTRANCE HALL - DAY

Grandmother is waiting in the entrance hall and is joined by Olivia, Andrew, Lucy and Ida. They gather behind the front door.

Ida cups her hand to her ear, signalling 'listen'.

They strain to hear. We see their different 'listening faces': Lucy clamps shut her eyes and clenches her jaw in a maniacal grin.

Only Olivia is nonplussed. A pin can be heard to drop.

LUCY
(whispers to Ida)
Can you see?

Ida nods.

IDA
They're coming.

The sound of a car rasping on the pebbled driveway.

The sound of footsteps.

The sound of the knocker.

Grandmother nods permission for Ida to open the door.

MARCUS, mid 40's, has arrived. He is handsome and elegantly dressed - but haggard. Unshaven. He has a cloth baby-bag in a teddy-bear print slung over one shoulder.

Ida, eager and exuberant, ushers him inside.

IDA
Marcus!

Ida looks back to the threshold. SOPHIE, late 30's/early 40's, is equally elegant and haggard. She is carrying a bundle wrapped in a soft baby-blanket close to her chest. On her wrist, the hospital ID plastic bracelet. From the red blotches on her skin it is clear she has been crying.

IDA
And Sophie!

Grandmother and Ida swap glances of grave concern: something is wrong.

MARCUS
(catching sight of Olivia)
Olivia?

OLIVIA
 (giving a quiet smile)
 Hello Marcus.

MARCUS
 (numb)
 Hello.

He shepherds Sophie through a a pair of French double-doors into a formal sitting room off the entrance hall.

The others follow.

INT. SITTING ROOM - DAY

The sitting room is spacious and minimally furnished: a refined emptiness. It is not lavish, not opulent. The furniture is of the Louis VX period: the chairs have curved cabriole legs ending in little deer feet. There is a collection of deer antler trophies on the walls.

Sophie settles herself gingerly on a chaise-longue. After the birth there must have been stitches or perhaps a bruised coccyx.

Marcus is close by her side, one hand resting protectively on her shoulder. Grandmother regally takes a seat opposite Sophie. Ida, Olivia and the children cluster, standing, around Grandmother.

MARCUS
 We - I am so sorry to tell you (he looks to the children and hesitates) - there has been an accident. The cord - as she was born the cord caught around her neck. There was nothing anyone could do. Our beautiful girl, our Alice, has died. Did not live.

There is a long pause. Ida (who is appalled) and Grandmother both make the sign of the cross. Andy fixates on the bundle. Olivia studies Marcus.

GRANDMOTHER
 Marcus, Sophie. We are so sorry.
 I, I....Is....?

She looks to the bundle.

MARCUS
 The hospital told us - Sophie wanted - they said it would be best to bring Alice home -

GRANDMOTHER
The cord? But how -

MARCUS
It just happened. We don't know
how. No-one did anything wrong.

OLIVIA
I am deeply sorry for your loss.
Sophie.

GRANDMOTHER
How long will you and the - the -

MARCUS
A day or two.

He looks to confirm with Sophie.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
We'd like to get to know her before
the funeral.

Sophie balks at the word 'funeral' and shifts the bundle from one breast to the other.

With a brisk flick of the wrist Ida catches Olivia's attention and indicates that the children should immediately leave the room.

EXT. ROSE GARDEN - DAY

Ida carries a tea-tray into the Rose Garden. Olivia is sitting on a wooden bench, the back of which is carved into the shape of fern fronds: roses everywhere, roses trained to pillars and cascading from wire umbrellas.

OLIVIA
Thank you.

Ida turns back.

Olivia lifts the tea-pot and slowly pours the tea with her left-hand, not spilling a drop. She savours the tea. Then she carefully puts down the cup and picks up a little cake.

Marcus approaches from another direction, takes a seat. They acknowledge each other's presence with a gentle smile. A pause.

OLIVIA
(looking over the lawn)
Mother was right. I married a
brute. (Pause followed by a simple
declaration). I am murdered.

Marcus gives a slight nod of the head to indicate he has heard. She puts down her cake.

Marcus picks up the cup and hands it to her.

MARCUS

(also looking over the lawn)

We tried so hard. There was - another woman. There is - another woman. A foreigner, a musician on scholarship. Very little money. She'll have to go home one day - poor girl. Sophie doesn't know. Maybe she does - she lets me be. I still love her. I just wanted to give her what she has always wanted. For two years she endured horrors - drugs, hormones, side-effects, counter-drugs, operation operation operation. The things she did. Everything - everything - on a schedule. Nothing natural about it. No happy accident. And when the baby was conceived we both thought it was - a miracle. I held my breath for the first three months. Every day for three months and every day after that I still feared..... Only when we got to the hospital did I feel safe.

He turns to her.

Her cup is suspended in mid-air as if this helps her to listen; he takes it from her.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Out-of-my-hands.

Marcus lies down and rests his head in Olivia's lap. She strokes his hair. Long pause.

OLIVIA

Poor boy.

INT. ENTRANCE HALL - DAY

Grandmother is supervising the twins as they remove the helium balloons from the entrance hall.

Each time Twin 1 pops a balloon she cringes and leans back as if the noise could hurt her. After a while she summons her courage and lets fly at a vase of balloons.

Twin 2 is untying balloons from the bannisters, popping them one by one - pop, pop, pop, pop - as she draws them down.

Amused by sister's antics Twin 2 lets her attention slip and in this moment one balloon escapes.

It bumps along the ceiling.

Oh - they cover their mouths in horror.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

The oval walnut table is set for lunch and is resplendent with finest white linen and cut-crystal glasses. Ida is serving the food from a buffet and the Twins are doing the table service. Grandmother is at the head of the table. Sophie cradles her bundle. Marcus, Olivia, Andrew and Lucy are also at the table.

Soup is ladled from a silver tureen. Once the food is served Grandmother is the only person to close her eyes and say grace: everyone else keeps their eyes wide open and does not feign participation.

GRANDMOTHER

(quickly under her breath)

Bless-this-food-to-our-use, and-us-
to-thy-service, and-make-us-ever-
mindful-of-the-needs-of-others.
Amen.

They begin to eat in silence. The adults sit with straight backs, elbows off the table. Andrew is spread-eagled over his bowl and slurps his soup hungrily.

GRANDMOTHER

Andrew.

Andrew stops eating and looks to Grandmother. She demonstrates how to correctly use the soup spoon, how to correctly lay it on the plate mid-meal.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)

You see...

He copies her.

Lucy also tries to follow the demonstration but stops because she can't take her eyes off the baby.

Sophie is dipping her little finger in the soup and bringing it to the bundle, as if feeding the dead baby. Everyone does their best to carry on 'as if all were normal'.

Finished, Sophie she wipes her finger with a serviette, reaches for a glass of water.

Olivia negotiates the cutlery, eating awkwardly with her left hand.

A telephone rings in the distance. Ring, ring, ring, ring.

Ida leaves to answer the phone. They all pause and listen to the rings. Olivia is snap-frozen with her spoon mid-air; Marcus is on edge. Only the boy looks excited, hopeful. When the ringing stops everyone resumes eating.

ANDREW
 (checking his watch,
 turning to Olivia)
 At home it's four in the morning.

LUCY
 (from out of the blue,
 breezily, to Andrew)
 I can smell your vulva.

Andrew is shocked and bemused. Olivia does not share his mirth.

ANDREW
 I don't *have* a vulva.

Lucy, furious, looks to her mother for support in this battle.

Just then Ida returns to the dining room and as she does the telephone rings again. Brrrrring: it has dominion.

Sighing, Ida leaves once more to answer it. Again, Olivia and Marcus are both on edge. Someone is calling who shouldn't be calling: but who?

Lucy tugs at her mother's sleeve, wanting Olivia's opinion. Olivia waits for the telephone to stop ringing before she responds.

OLIVIA
 He's right. Only girls have vulvas.

Lucy is downcast. There is an awkward silence.

The sound of one telephone ring. And another. As if the phone were repeatedly being picked up and immediately put down again.

MARCUS
 Andy, have you been down to the
 boathouse.

ANDREW
 No, there's a boat??

MARCUS

Not a boat-boat. But some old
canoes. Mother, is that right? Are
there still the canoes?

GRANDMOTHER

I believe so.

Ida returns to the dining room. Olivia eyes her expectantly;
Marcus makes to stand.

IDA

(addressing Olivia)

Excuse me. I could not understand
the gentleman, my English is poor.
I have requested him to not derange
the lunch. To call later.

Olivia very slowly reaches for her wine glass. Marcus sits
down, relaxes.

MARCUS

(to Andrew)

Maybe I can take you out on the
water?

Andrew nods. OK.

LUCY

Can I come?

MARCUS

We'll see.

LUCY

(to Olivia)

Mummy, will you come?

OLIVIA

(shaking her head)

I don't swim.

ANDREW

(scornful)

She means she can't swim. She's
afraid of the water. (Pause) And
escalators. (Pause). And elevators.

He holds out two hands and mimes doors closing on his nose
then grins.

He teases Olivia by making a loop-the-loop loopy sign by his
temple.

She takes a sip of her drink but does not chastise him.

GRANDMOTHER
 (to Marcus)
 Remember Tahiti?

Marcus does not reply.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)
 (to Andrew))
 When your mother was about - about
 Lucy's age - we all went to Tahiti.
 A special treat. The sand is black
 in Tahiti. And the men wear straw
 skirts. That's right. And the
 minute we saw the sea the child
 started screaming. Screaming. And
 screaming. As if the water, the
 sea, was the most terrifying thing
 in the world. Those little waves.
 One after the other. Well, I walked
 into the water with her - holding
 her up high, quite safe, perfectly
 safe - and she screamed and
 screamed. I'd never heard a child
 scream so long before. It was only
 the sea. Incredible.

Olivia betrays no reaction. She will not be riled.

Again: the sound of the telephone ring.

Grandmother snatches up her serviette.

Andrew quickly stands.

ANDREW
 I'll get it.

OLIVIA
 Sit down.

She herself slowly rises.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
 May I be excused.

INT. CHATEAU CORRIDOR/ALCOVE - DAY

The continuing sound of the persistent infernal telephone
 ring.

Olivia is walking briskly down the corridor. She'd like to
 run but must maintain decorum.

She reaches an alcove where there is a telephone crouched on
 a bureau. A stag head is mounted on the wall at eye-level.

She picks up the phone and listens just for a moment, then lays the receiver on the bureau, so that it is off the hook.

She gets down on her hands and knees, which is difficult and awkward with her cast, and unplugs the phone.

She wriggles back out from under the bureau but on second thoughts returns.

She removes her shoe and with her high heel she pounds the connector, damaging it so that it no longer quite fits the socket.

Finished, she wriggles back out, straightens her clothes and returns the receiver to its cradle.

INT. DINING ROOM - DAY

Back in the dining room Lucy is chit-chattering.

LUCY

Because I can swim. I can swim. In my carnival I got a blue ribbon, which is first. It's in my bedroom. For 15 metres. That's across the pool, not down the pool. You go across the pool. I beat Susie and Sally and Helen and -

Grandmother indicates her glass is empty.

GRANDMOTHER

Ida.

Olivia slips into the room and takes her place at the table. Despite inquiring glances from Marcus and Andrew no questions are asked. She eats a mouthful of her food.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Mum, I'm a good swimmer aren't I?

Olivia nods. Lucy is bored and smears potato mash over every inch of her plate. Then she turns her attention to Sophie and her bundle: stares.

LUCY (CONT'D)

I want Pinky.

OLIVIA

After lunch, darling.

Marcus checks on Sophie. She is simmering with fury. She clambers out of her chair and glares at him.

SOPHIE
 (to Marcus)
 Canoe? Canoes?? How can you even -
 speak?

She hurriedly leaves the room, taking the baby with her.

MARCUS
 (ashamed and then looking
 up)
 I'm sorry, mother. It wasn't my
 idea, Sophie insisted. And, well,
 if I'd asked what would you have
 said?

Grandmother nods in understanding. Pause.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

I have a favour to ask you. Olivia.

EXT. GATEWAY - DAY

Departing the estate, a luxury car nears the great gateway. CHAUFFEUR at the wheel. Olivia sits in the back, along with Ida and the children. Lucy is squirelled on Ida's lap.

At the gateway Ida and the children hop out.

They wait for the electronic gates to open. The car passes through. The gates close.

LUCY
 How far can you see?

IDA
 Oh, very far.

LUCY
 As far as Sydney?

IDA
 Not that far, not across the ocean.

Ida and Lucy, hand-in-hand, begin the long walk back to the house.

Andrew climbs up the iron filigree, trapped inside. He watches the car disappear down the driveway.

EXT. SMALL VILLAGE - LOCAL TOWN HALL - DAY

The car slows to a halt before the local Town Hall.

Olivia is deposited.

This is not a picturesque village. A Quick-ee Mart, a bank, a pharmacy, a doner-kebab joint.

INT. LOCAL TOWN HALL - WAITING ROOM/OFFICE - DAY

Olivia is sitting in a drab waiting room outside an office in the Town Hall. A pot plant is stippled with cigarette burns. Two ancient PENSIONERS wait eternally.

The office door opens. JOSETTE, mid-late 30's, is a bureaucrat but has the demeanor of a sincere and kindly nurse. She sees out a young PREGNANT CLIENT.

JOSETTE
(holding open the door)
Olivia?

OLIVIA
(with humility)
Hello Josette.

JOSETTE
(in French-accented
English)
A long time...

Olivia nods. Josette indicates Olivia should take a seat in the office. She is welcoming and concerned but does not comment on the broken arm.

OLIVIA
I'm here to ask permission - the family would like permission to bury another body, at home, next to my father.

JOSETTE
I heard the sad news. I'm very sorry. Please send my condolences to all concerned. I have already prepared the paperwork. There should be no problem.

Josette pushes some paper across the table.

JOSETTE (CONT'D)
If you sign here - and here.

Olivia examines the paperwork.

OLIVIA
One body?

Josette is perplexed.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
And Mother has not been well.

JOSETTE
(after consideration)
Yes, I see. We can change this to -
(she amends the paperwork then and
there) - two bodies.

Olivia signs clumsily with her left hand.

JOSETTE
About the baby, I believe there
would be a good case for
negligence. A strong case. In a
week or two, this should not be
neglected.

OLIVIA
Thank you Josette, I will mention
it to Marcus. And there's the other
matter. The children.

JOSETTE
Ah, yes. Yes, yes. I received your
letter last month.

Josette pulls a dossier in a manila folder from a drawer and
opens it on her desk.

JOSETTE (CONT'D)
Quite a surprise. Andrew? Lucy? Are
you sure?

OLIVIA
Yes. (She reaches into a bag). Here
are their passports.

Josette flicks through the passports.

JOSETTE
OK, good- I'll need to keep these.
Not for long. And - X-rays?

Olivia hands over a large envelope.

OLIVIA
Sorry, I had to fold them, please
excuse the creases.

JOSETTE
Blood and urine - as we'd
discussed?

Olivia hands over two small packages.

JOSETTE

Thank you. Today I will accept these. That's that. They will be residents in no time. I'll make sure to see this through to the Prefecture. And school?

OLIVIA

Les Quatre Vents.

JOSETTE

The boarding school?

OLIVIA

Yes. The arrangements are already in place.

JOSETTE

(long pause)

I hear it's a good school. The headmistress, well, she is (wrinkles her nose). But yes, it's a good school. Although for me, the local school is best. And term begins when? In four weeks. Do they speak any French?

OLIVIA

A little. I have been speaking to them since they were born. They understand a lot. And the school is bilingual. They will learn.

JOSETTE

They will learn. Ah, the marvellous capacities of children. Imagine if we could be children again. I would learn even *more* languages. Mandarin. Even Hungarian. Be quadrilingual. Though maybe I wouldn't feel the need to. Impossible to know. Sometimes I wish I'd never stopped somersaulting. Anyway, please - again, your signature.

She passes more papers to Olivia: Olivia signs each one - clumsy with her left-hand.

OLIVIA

Thank you, Josette.

JOSETTE

It's good to see you, Olivia.

INT. PHARMACY - DAY

Note: This scene in French.

Olivia is at the pharmacist STEENBOHM's counter. He is an old man, tiny and elfin.

OLIVIA

Good afternoon, Dr Steenbohm.

STEENBOHM

Good afternoon. What a pleasure, but at such a time. My condolences to the family. How do you make You-Know-Who laugh? You make plans...believe me, I know it. Ah... And your mother?

OLIVIA

She is as well as can be expected.

STEENBOHM

These shocks are not good.

Olivia hands him some prescriptions.

OLIVIA

Will you fill these please.

Steenbohm examines the prescriptions and is reluctant to continue.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

I got them in Australia. When I have a chance I'll come back with a replacement script, an official one.

Olivia waits patiently.

STEENBOHM

These painkillers - yes, OK. But this, the digitalis - this is highly restricted -this is for?

OLIVIA

For me. To slow the heart. Tachycardia. I need it.

She flutters the fingers of her right-hand against her chest.

Steenbohm hesitates - is stuck - and only when a bell tinkles and a new CUSTOMER enters does he retrieve two bottles of pills from under the counter.

STEENBOHM

Be a good girl. Take care.

OLIVIA

Thank you. Goodbye Dr Steenbohm.

He shakes his head in concern before turning to the new customer.

At the door Olivia shoves the bottles deep into her bag.

EXT. SMALL VILLAGE STREET - DONER KEBAB JOINT - DAY

Note: this scene in French.

Olivia walks past the kebab joint. A TEENAGER on a scooter bears towards her and on instinct she moves to the left side of the pavement but her instinct is wrong and they nearly collide.

Then she backtracks and enters the joint. A SHOP OWNER, Arabic male, 50's, in a footballer's tracksuit, is scraping meat off a large fat-dripping doner kebab.

On talk-back radio a man requests a love-song.

SHOP OWNER

(respectfully, gravely)

What'll it be?

OLIVIA

One merguez please.

SHOP OWNER

No problem.

Olivia takes a seat. The illuminated drinks refrigerator throws a blue light. The shop owner assembles the greasy merguez roll. He hands it to her in silence.

She eats the roll, holding it in her left hand, dripping mustard, savouring it as if it were a last meal before execution.

Finished, she dabs away the halo of grease and mustard around her mouth.

She returns her plastic plate to the counter.

OLIVIA

Thank you.

SHOP OWNER

You're welcome.

She pays with a large note and leaves without waiting for the change.

The shop owner raise his brows in surprise at the value of the note.

INT. LOCAL BANK/MANAGER OFFICE - DAY

Note: this scene in French.

Olivia enters the local bank. Cardboard baubles reading 8% hang from the ceiling. The BANK MANAGER rises from a desk, abandoning a BANK CLIENT, and comes over to greet her with an obsequious smile. He even bows.

BANK MANAGER
Good afternoon.

OLIVIA
Good afternoon.

BANK MANAGER
My apologies, I wasn't expecting you quite so soon.

OLIVIA
No, no, my apologies - there was a change in plans.

BANK MANAGER
Well, I'm very pleased to see you. A pleasure.

OLIVIA
Thank you.

BANK MANAGER
Come...let's get your affairs in order.

He escorts her into his private office.

EXT. BACK OF CHATEAU - LAWN - LATE DAY

At twilight the car parks at the rear service entrance of the chateau. Olivia emerges.

She spies Sophie nearby on the lawn, lying on a picnic blanket with her bundle.

Olivia watches as Sophie tentatively moves the bundle through the air, as if she can make the baby fly.

Sophie turns and locks eyes with Olivia.

Olivia, spotted, quickly moves on.

INT. KITCHEN - LATE DAY

Olivia enters the kitchen from the rear door just as Marcus enters from the hallway, holding an old-fashioned pink satin ballgown. Ida stops working.

IDA

But Marcus, what are you -

OLIVIA

I remember that dress. I wanted to wear it to my sixteenth birthday party but when I tried it on I couldn't do the buttons. Even though I was one of the skinniest girls in class. I couldn't believe mother had ever been able to fit it.

MARCUS

I remember. And you wore a yellow dress instead. It made you look beautiful.

OLIVIA

Thank you...(a shared gentle smile). I've spoken with the Town Hall. Everything is in order. Please let me know how else I can be of help.

MARCUS

Thank you, Olivia.

OLIVIA

The children?

IDA

(irritated)
Upstairs, sleeping.

Olivia leaves. As soon as she is gone Marcus lays the dress on the kitchen table. He finds a pair of scissors in a drawer.

MARCUS

Ida, there is something I need you to do. I'll help you. The baby - the doctors said....She has to sleep in the freezer.

IDA

The freezer??

MARCUS

The doctors said -

IDA
No. I refuse.

MARCUS
To keep -

IDA
No. I refuse.

MARCUS
Because the -

IDA
No.

MARCUS
Doctors' orders.

IDA
No.

MARCUS
Ida, it isn't easy - not for anyone
- but we have no choice.

IDA
No.

He walks over to the silver freezer. He removes the food, stacking it neatly on the bench. Ida refuses to help.

Finished, he gathers the dress and scissors.

MARCUS
And we have to make it -
comfortable.

He measures the dress against the freezer door.

As soon as his back is turned Ida takes a plate and deliberately dashes it to the floor.

INT. CHILDREN'S ROOM - DUSK

The darkened children's room is a pigsty: suitcases disembowelled, bedspreads kicked to the floor, Violet hung askew. Lucy is splayed horizontally across her bed, asleep. Andrew is asleep with his feet pointed to the bedhead.

Olivia peeks through the door to observe the children.

She curls up on Lucy's bed - taking care not to touch her. Olivia, too, closes her eyes. She uses her left arm as a pillow.

Shortly after she closes her eyes Andrew opens his. He suddenly flip-flops so he no longer faces her direction.

Close on his sleeping face.

INT. CHILDREN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Later that night Olivia and the children are asleep in the room.

Olivia jolts awake. She switches on the bedside light and checks her wrist-watch.

She goes over the boy and grips his shoulder, shakes him awake.

OLIVIA
It's OK. Time to get up. We can't sleep, it's bad for jet lag. Up you get, get dressed.

Andrew gets to his feet, uncomplaining.

Olivia begins to tap persistently on Lucy's eyelids. Tap, tap, tap.

OLIVIA
(coos)
Lucy...Lucyloo...

Lucy squeezes her eyes shut.

LUCY
I'm asleep. Sleeeeeeepy.

OLIVIA
If you sleep now you won't sleep all night. And we need dinner. I'm tired too - but we have to stay up a bit before we can sleep. OK? Like I told you.

Lucy blindly bats away her mother's hand.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
Where's Pinky? Pinky's awake.

Lucy sits up and grabs Pinky out of Olivia's hand. Protects her doll.

Olivia finds a dress for Lucy on the floor. The children dress, lace their shoes.

OLIVIA
There you go, you look lovely.

Olivia takes Pinky and holds her to her ear.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
 What's that? One more dream? OK
 Pinky. Let's tuck Pinky in.

Mother and daughter tuck Pinky into bed.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
 Sweet dreams.

LUCY
 (kissing Pinky)
 Sweet dreams.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - NIGHT

Olivia and the children are creeping down the dimly-lit corridor. Along the way there is a large arrangement of flowers on a half-moon marble table. A mirror hangs above the table.

Olivia stops. She examines the flowers. Lucy tugs at her mother's skirt in an effort to hurry her up.

Olivia presses a fingernail hard into a petal but it leaves no mark. She slips a finger into the cut-crystal vase but discovers there is no water: the flowers are artificial.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Twin 1 is washing-up in the kitchen; everything else has been cleared away. A bucket is stationed below the pipes of the sink, catching drops of water.

Olivia and the children disturb her peace.

TWIN 1
 Oh! Hello. We thought you
 were....(she pillows her cheek on
 her hands miming sleep).

OLIVIA
 Sleeping.

TWIN 1
 Yes. Everyone is eaten. Oh -
 please. Please sit down. One
 moment.

She goes to the fridge but is clearly uncomfortable. She snatches out the food as if inside lurked a monster which could bite her hand off. She returns to a work-bench and begins to unwrap a roasted chicken from its topcoat of foil.

OLIVIA
 Thank you. Sit down kids.

The children slide onto the long bench at the table.

LUCY
I scream! You scream! We all scream
for ice-cream!

OLIVIA
Why not? You've been such a good
girl today.

Olivia goes over to fridge but the twin looks at her in horror and tries to stop her.

TWIN 1
Madame!

It is too late. Olivia opens the freezer door and looks inside (we catch a glimpse of the pink satin and a fluffy-toy). She immediately shuts the door.

OLIVIA
Uh-oh, no ice-cream - but what's in
here? (She opens the fridge). Hey
presto - chocolate cake!

LUCY
Yabbayabba yumyum!

OLIVIA
For after dinner.

The twin, relieved, brings over the plates of food.

TWIN 1
(to the children)
Here for you. Bon appetit.

ANDREW AND LUCY
(in singsong unison)
Bon appetit.

A small shy smile is exchanged between Twin 1, Lucy and Andrew over this shared language.

OLIVIA
Thank you. It's late, please don't
let us keep you. But before you go,
do you think Mother is awake?

TWIN 1
Oh yes, certainly. She never...(she
mimes sleeps). At most she ..(mimes
sleep)... for two or three hours.
Like Napoleon. Oh yes, at this hour
she will be living.

OLIVIA
Well, thank you. You've been a
great help. Good night.

Olivia looks to her plate: zero appetite. They listen to the
drips collecting in the bucket.

The children wait for her to start to eat.

OLIVIA
Well - go on.

INT. HALLWAY - OUTSIDE GRANDMOTHER'S SUITE - NIGHT

Olivia and the children walk down a corridor until they reach
Grandmother's locked door.

Olivia presses an intercom. A long buzz. They wait.

She presses again. Another long buzz.

GRANDMOTHER (O.C.)
Yes?

OLIVIA
(into the intercom)
Mother, it's me. With the
children. To say good night.

GRANDMOTHER (O.C.)
Come in.

The door buzzes open and they enter.

CUT TO

They walk through a suite of 3 elegant but sparsely furnished
and low-lit rooms, one leading to the other via glass-
panelled double-doors. A pair of Ming dynasty porcelain
vases; a silken Persian carpet; a giant plasma screen flat to
one wall.

Andrew treads on something.

ANDREW
Errgh.

Upon examination it is a half-eaten raw chicken wing. He
picks it up to show his mother.

ANDREW (CONT'D)
Disgusting.

Raw chicken wings are littered all over the parquet floor.

A Burmese cat observes the intruders.

Grandmother is in the third room, resting in her bed. She is wearing a white cotton night dress with a high frilled collar; her eyebrows are covered in white cold-cream. Another Burmese cat is in the bed. A TV inside an antique wooden cabinet is at the end of the bed, switched on but with the volume turned down low.

GRANDMOTHER
 (tapping her bed)
 Come here Lucyloo. Andrew. Come here. This is Hello.

Grandmother holds the cat up for their inspection.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)
 (cooing to the cat)
 Such a good cat. Such a lovely lovely good cat. Hellooo. Aren't you.

She fusses over the cat and Olivia watches with equanimity.

GRANDMOTHER (CONT'D)
 Oh yes you are. Heellooo.

ANDREW
 (knowingly naughty but keeping a straight face)
 Grandmother, can I stroke your pussy?

Olivia shoots him a dark look.

GRANDMOTHER
 Of course! Here you go, lovely and soft.

Grandmother holds out the cat and the children take turns stroking it between the eyes. Lucy stares intently into its eyes like a hypnotist.

LUCY
 Hellooo! Hellooo!

Lucy takes Olivia's limp hand and ferries it toward the cat, but Olivia doesn't want to stroke the animal and withdraws her hand.

OLIVIA
 Good night, mother.

LUCY AND ANDREW
 Good night. Good night.

The children kiss Grandmother on the cheek. Olivia declines.

They leave. In their wake the TV comes alive.

INT. MARCUS AND SOPHIE'S ROOM - NIGHT

Sophie, bereft, is sitting on the very edge of her bed. She is half-dressed in her skirt and stockings, high heels. She is wearing a breast-feeding bra with wet stains pooling around the nipples.

Marcus in pyjamas comes to sit beside her; he tenderly brushes a loose strand of her hair behind her ear, gently touches her face.

MARCUS

Hey.

She looks at him imploringly and then takes his hand and puts it against her wet nipple. With her other hand behind his neck she gently guides him down to the breast.

SOPHIE

(whisper)

Please.

She pops open the bra and he takes her nipple into his mouth, suckles.

Far away an owl calls.

EXT. GARDEN - EARLY MORNING

Early morning dew sparkles on the spider-webs caught between the rose-bushes, caught in the grass. Andrew is exploring the garden in the early hours of the morning.

He comes across the old Gardener 1 who is busy boarding up the wooden door in the wall. An escape route - blocked.

The Gardener catches sight of Andrew and stops his work, calls the boy over with a wave of hand. Reluctant, Andrew joins him.

GARDENER 1

Bonjour.

ANDREW

Bonjour.

GARDENER 1

(in broken English/French)

A game - Roche.

He makes a fist.

ANDREW

Rock.

The Gardener makes the scissors hand-sign.

GARDENER 1

Ciseaux.

ANDREW

Scissors.

The Gardener makes the paper hand-sign.

GARDENER 1

Et papier.

ANDREW

Paper.

GARDENER 1

OK.

They begin the game.

GARDENER 1 (CONT'D)

Un, deux..trois.

The Gardener makes rock; Andrew makes scissors. The Gardener wins.

GARDENER 1

Roche!

They play again. Un, deux, trois...this time Andrew makes rock and the Gardener makes paper - the Gardener wins.

They play again. Un, deux, trois...

As they go to show their hand-signs Andrew makes the sound of an explosion. He opens his hand like a wide star.

ANDREW

Phhwwwssshhh. Supernova!

The Gardner has made the rock sign - but is obliterated by the supernova.

Andrew wins. He gives a delighted boyish grin.

INT. CHILDREN'S ROOM - EARLY MORNING

Back in the children's room sunlight streams onto Andrew's empty bed.

Lucy rolls over in her own bed, wakes up.

She sees the empty bed and this dismays her.

LUCY

Andy?

Nothing. She pulls Pinky close for comfort.

INT./EXT. BOATHOUSE/LAKESIDE- MORNING

Later that morning Andrew has found the boathouse and is tinkering around. Nests of old rope and cord. He studies two canoes lying face-down on a slatted wooden platform: one is new, one is patched and peeled. With his fingers he rakes a pattern through the dust on the smooth hull of the unblemished canoe.

He tries to lift this hull but is defeated: a mouse runs out and startles him.

To his alarm the canoe slides off the bench - he struggles to hold it - he struggles and struggles to hold it - but it clutters onto the ground. On reflex he looks over his shoulder to check if he's been busted.

He inspects the canoe for damage.

Then he hears the sound of a voice outside and goes to the door to spy. Peers through the door jamb.

Marcus is pacing to and fro on the thin fringe of grey sand that encircles the lake.

Each time he comes closer to the boathouse the boy can make a word or two:

MARCUS
(in French)
My love I've told you that won't
work...but no...

Walks away. Walks back.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Very soon, my darling, soon.

Walks away. Marcus holds the phone away from his ear, lets the lake listen.

He turns his back to the boy and unzips his cream linen trousers, begins to masturbate. His elbow jigs up and down.

Andrew is spying, fascinated.

When Marcus finishes he pockets the phone and turns toward the boathouse. He shakes himself as if coming indoors after a rainshower.

From his position behind the door it seems to Andrew that Marcus is staring directly at him.

Panicked, Andrew moves away from the door, stops spying.

INT. BOATHOUSE - MORNING

Marcus enters the boathouse and is surprised to find Andrew deep in concentration, tying knots in a rope.

MARCUS
Oh - good morning.

ANDREW
(feigning disruption)
Oh hi. (Pause) I'm sorry about the baby.

MARCUS
Thank you. (Long pause). Well, what have you got there?

The boy shows him the little reef-knot.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Not bad. And what about this pair of beauties. What do you say - shall we go out later on the water?

ANDREW
OK.

MARCUS
OK, OK , it's a deal then. Come on, let's carry this one out. You and me. Ready?

Marcus rolls up his sleeves and together they carry the fallen hull lake-side.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
Phase One. Mission accomplished.

ANDREW
Is that your phone?

MARCUS
Yes, it's a phone. No, it's a car. A phone.

ANDREW
May I please borrow it?

MARCUS
(after consideration)
To call Australia? (Pause) It doesn't work. No international service, my wife banned me because of the high bills.

Unwelcome news. Marcus lightly cuffs the boy.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
It's not that bad. Come on.
Breakfast.

INT. BREAKFAST ROOM - MORNING

Olivia and Lucy are in a glorious pot-plant filled breakfast room. On the table there is a silver pot of steaming coffee, the pot standing on skinny bird legs; croissants; jams. A basket of hardboiled eggs. Windowfuls of light. Pinky the doll is propped up on her own seat at the table.

Olivia is slowly flipping through the pages of a newspaper - as if it were junk mail.

Marcus and Andrew enter.

MARCUS
Morning all.

OLIVIA AND LUCY
(in unison)
Good morning.

They smile at this singsong moment.

Olivia resumes flipping through the newspaper. Then she closes her eyes and runs her left-hand over the type as if seeking a hidden braille. Nothing. Disappointed, she shunts it across to Marcus.

He briefly scans a picture of a gory explosion on the front page before putting it aside.

Lucy holds up her bunnykins mug to Olivia.

LUCY
This milk tastes like your arse,
Mum.

OLIVIA
You don't know what my arse tastes
like.

LUCY
Yes, I do. I've smelt it.

ANDREW
(to Lucy)
You're disgusting.

LUCY
Am not.

ANDREW
Are so.

LUCY
Am not.

ANDREW
Are so.

LUCY
You know you love it.

MARCUS
(bringing an end to this
tiff)
Have you seen Sophie? And Alice?

OLIVIA
Not yet.

LUCY
(tone of a seasoned gossip)
Well. Ida says - Ida says the dead
baby is having a bath.

Lucy smirks at her brother.

MARCUS
May I be excused.

Olivia watches Lucy intent on her breakfast-mess, oblivious to her faux pas. Lucy smears jam around her mouth; she raises her dirty hands like paws and makes a roaring-lion face at Olivia. But this makes no impression on Olivia.

Lucy doesn't care and immediately returns to her mess-making.

Shortly after she makes another lion-face, hoping to catch her mother off-guard.

Again, Olivia is not responsive.

The girl busies herself with her doll.

EXT. GARDEN - STONE PAVILION - DAY

They are assembled in the Summer Pavilion. A circle of rattan chairs: one chair is empty. Grandmother is in her wheelchair with Ida standing behind her. Andrew is repeatedly rubbing his eyebrows up and over his browbone. Olivia. Lucy - who is impatiently swinging her ankles.

And Marcus: he checks his watch.

In a sudden fit he checks his phone to make sure it is switched off. After a moment he makes to get up but sits down again.

They all continue their long wait. Grandmother toys with the pearls at her throat, the buttons of her jacket. Ida lays a soothing hand on her shoulder.

At last Sophie approaches with a wickerwork bassinet in hand. Gives a little wave.

LUCY
She's coming.

Sophie is wearing a fresh change of clothes and has a flower in her hair. She sits down, awkwardly, placing the bassinet by her feet.

SOPHIE
(bravado)
Sorry we're late. Thank you for waiting.

MARCUS
Yes, thank you for being with us at this special time.

Sophie lifts the bundle out of the bassinet. Marcus gently takes the bundled baby and holds her close. He deeply inhales the smell of the top of her head. We don't see the features of the dead baby.

MARCUS
This is our girl. Alice. She is loved. We will never forget her.

His eyes glisten. He passes the bundle to Grandmother.

GRANDMOTHER
Dear Alice, dear sweet girl, granddaughter. My angel. Angel girl.

Grandmother passes the bundle to Andrew. He quickly looks to Olivia as if to say - can I get out of this? No luck.

ANDREW
Dear Alice. Hello. I'm sorry I didn't get to know you.

LUCY
(calls)
Pass-the-parcel! Pass-the -

Olivia smacks her hand and Lucy bites her lip, falls silent: she knows better than to cry.

Andrew passes the bundle to Olivia. This is a difficult balancing act because of her cast. The bundle almost slips to the ground.

OLIVIA

Hello Alice. Black-haired. (She opens and closes the eyes). Blue-eyed beautiful girl.

Marcus gets up and helps take the baby from Olivia. He kneels before Lucy who is next in line.

MARCUS

This is Alice. Alice this is Lucy.

Lucy takes one look at the baby and is horrified. She buries herself in Olivia's lap. Olivia's hand is suspended above the girl's back.

The boy is on edge: he makes a protective step toward his sister but his mother glares at him. He holds his breath: what will she do?

Eventually Olivia places her hand between the girls' shoulder-blades, gently pats, soothes her.

Marcus returns the baby to Sophie.

MARCUS

Our child.

Sophie is sitting upright: she is stoic, shedding silent tears.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Note: this scene in French.

Ida is furiously chopping food on a board at the table. Chopping. Banging around. Shaking her head, muttering to herself in disbelief at the sacrilege of having a dead baby in the house.

IDA

Never in my day. Never. Holy Mother. Never.

She suddenly stops her chopping, lays down her knife and goes to the rear service door.

Opens it: we see a surprised COURIER, his fist is bunched as if he were just about to knock. He clutches a huge arrangement of garish funerary flowers.

IDA

(abrupt)
Merci.

She signs the paperwork, he leaves.

TWINS
What pretty flowers!

IDA
Tssk!

Ida clicks her tongue in admonishment and scowls as she leaves the room.

INT. ENTRANCE HALL - DAY

Ida sets the flowers on a white marble table in the entrance. She steps back to study the arrangement.

IDA
How ugly. Ugly.

No matter which way she tries to place the flowers they stick out like a sore thumb.

She carries them away.

INT. MARCUS AND SOPHIE'S ROOM - DAY

Ida marches into Marcus and Sophie's room and dumps the flowers on top of a dresser.

Through the window she spies Marcus and Sophie on a chequered picnic blanket, reclining on the lawn.

EXT. GARDEN - LAWN - DAY

Marcus and Sophie are reclining on a picnic blanket. Marcus is speaking on the phone, he has a sheet of paper and is ticking things off a list.

Sophie is perched on her elbows with the bundle resting in the soft nook of her chest.

Marcus is politely listening to someone speaking at the other end of the phone.

MARCUS
(into the phone)
Yes, thank you. (Pause). Thank you.
(Another listening pause). Very good, very good. We'll see you tomorrow, the service is at eleven.
Yes, thank you.

He switches off the phone and secures it in his jacket pocket.

MARCUS (CONT'D)
 (to Sophie)
 That's done.

They study each other. Neither can think of what to say. He stands up to go.

SOPHIE
 Don't.

He goes. Sophie frowns and grabs the cuff of his trousers: she wants him to suffer as she does.

He stays.

SOPHIE
 See, she has your chin.

MARCUS
 She does.

With a nod Sophie claims this as small victory.

EXT. JAPANESE GARDEN - DAY

Olivia is pushing Grandmother in her wheelchair, on a stroll through the sublime Japanese Garden. Reddish maples, azaleas all shades of pink, cherry blossom, gingko bilboa. There is no eye contact between the two.

Grandmother points to a stand of bamboo.

GRANDMOTHER
 Next month - they'll be thinned
 next month.

They cross an ornamental bridge over an ornamental pond.

A stick catches in the spokes of a wheel and it jams. Grandmother is jolted.

Olivia, exasperated, shoves and jerks the chair violently, trying to dislodge the stick; this is not easy with her left-hand. Grandmother grips the sides of the chair and hangs on for dear life. This shoving and jerking goes on for some time.

Grandmother flails an arm upward to rein in her daughter.

GRANDMOTHER
 (breathless)
 Just a minute.

Olivia stops. Grandmother slowly levers herself up.

Olivia examines the wheel and removes the mangled stick.
Grandmother sits back down. They resume their stroll.

OLIVIA
(staring ahead)
Mother, there is something I must
say, that I need to ask you. I
don't expect, I can't expect your
forgiveness, I don't need your
forgiveness - it means nothing to
me - but I ask that even if I am
not remembered in your will that
the children are. Your
grandchildren. Promise you will
look after them.

GRANDMOTHER
(also staring ahead)
They are already remembered. Your
brother told me. I have always
known.

This comes as news to Olivia. They carry on in silence.

INT. BOATHOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

The children are alone in the boathouse. Andrew is stashing
provisions - foil packets of food - into a nest of ropes.
Lucy is plaiting Pinky's hair.

LUCY
Ummah. Ida can see.

ANDREW
Sometimes you're dumb.

LUCY
(quietly)
Am not.

ANDREW
Are so.

LUCY
(still quiet)
Am not.

ANDREW
Are so.

LUCY
(still quiet)
Am not.

ANDREW

Are so.

LUCY

(still quiet)

Am not.

ANDREW

Arsehole.

Ummah: *rude*. They both smile at this. Lucy continues to play with Pinky. She rips off her head and pushes into the plastic funnel of neck so that the doll faces backwards. She starts to reverse the other limbs.

ANDREW

Come on. Come on.

They go outside.

EXT. LAKESIDE - DUSK

Andrew leads Lucy by the hand to the upturned hull. He turns it over and sits inside, ramrod straight, looking out over the dark water.

ANDREW

Go on, hop in. Hop in.

Lucy climbs in.

They sit for a long moment until - in the sudden way children end their games - Andrew jumps up and over the side.

He helps his sister disembark.

ANDREW

Don't worry, we'll be home soon.

INT. CHILDREN'S ROOM - MORNING

Olivia is dressed; the children are in their pyjamas. Olivia is trying to fix a black satin ribbon in Lucy's hair but the action is too difficult with her left hand.

LUCY

Two rabbit ears, wrapped on top of each other.

Olivia tries and fails again. Andrew watches.

ANDREW

(quietly)

I'll do it.

He fixes the ribbon.

OLIVIA
Very pretty. Very pretty
Mississippi.

Lucy beams and scuffs her toes against the floor in shy delight.

OLIVIA
I have a surprise. Come with me.

The boy stiffens. She leaves: in the doorway she waves at them to follow.

INT. OLIVIA'S ROOM - DAY

In her room Olivia rummages around in her suitcase and pulls out a black velvet dress with a white peter-pan collar. She gives this to Lucy.

She rummages around some more and pulls out a black velveteen suit and a shirt for Andrew. Ta-da - like pulling a rabbit out of a hat. The children are confused.

OLIVIA
Go on, get dressed.

Olivia helps Lucy into the dress. Lucy loves it. But Andrew is displeased. His trousers fit but the jacket sleeves are way too short and look ridiculous.

OLIVIA
Fine.

She sits on the edge of her bed and holds out her silk scarf to Andrew. She waits patiently while he fashions the sling around her neck.

There is a kiss-girl at the snowy nape of her neck. He sticks his little finger inside it. His mother is beautiful.

OLIVIA
Are we ready?

She rises to her full height, straightens her fitted dress.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
Let's go then.

The children refuse to move.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
(a martial tone)
How fast can you run?

ANDREW
 (glum)
 As fast as a leopard.

OLIVIA
 How fast are you going to run?

ANDREW
 (still glum)
 As fast as a leopard.

OLIVIA
 So - do it then.

The boy scowls, yeah-yeah, leaves.

INT. DRAWING ROOM - MORNING

The household is abuzz in preparation for the funeral. In a grand drawing room the twins are carrying silver-covered plates to a buffet table.

A collection of ancient instruments hangs on one wall.

Ida is inspecting each dish. The twins are apprehensive, hoping for her approval.

Dish after dish is thoroughly inspected.

See: gelatinous mousse in the shape of a salmon.

Lucy skips into the room, over to Ida. She shows off her new dress by holding the hem out like a sail. Andrews accompanies her.

LUCY
 Good morning!

IDA
 Good morning! Pretty girl! Pretty dress!

TWINS
 Good morning.

Lucy joins the inspection.

Andrew seeks refuge near the tall windows: gazes outside over the driveway.

EXT. CIRCULAR DRIVEWAY - DAY

Chauffeured cars are slowly pulling into the circular driveway and the gardeners are acting as parking attendants.

One car,
 two cars,
 three cars.

EXT. CHATEAU - STEPS - DAY

Marcus - in a sombre fine wool suit - is welcoming GUESTS and directing them inside. The guests are well-to-do and ancient; establishment friends of the family, here on aristocratic duty. All are formally dressed in black; the women wear hats and black lace veils.

They file by, a long procession of elderly faces, nodding in greeting.

MARCUS

Please.

A guest files past, nodding respectfully in commiseration.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Please. Come through.

A new guest files past and respectfully nods.

Hello.

A new guest files past and respectfully nods.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Please, this way.

A new guest files past and respectfully nods.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Good morning.

One ELDERLY MAN stops to pat Marcus on the shoulder and tries to form a word with his ancient gummy mouth but cannot find the appropriate term of condolence. He gapes and gapes until his wife tugs at his coat, leads him away.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Hello. Please come through.

An ELDERLY WOMAN shrunken to the size of a child files past and crushes his hand. He winces in pain. It is a while before he can shake her off.

We follow this guest as she hobbles along and we see that Twin 2 is stationed further down the hallway, directing traffic onward through the house.

EXT. GARDEN - LAWN -DAY

The old guests are picking their way slowly along a path marked with white stones.

The path leads up a slight hill.

EXT. GARDEN - BURIAL GROUND - DAY

A great oak tree stands sentinel over the burial ground. The guests are assembled, along with Olivia, Andrew and Lucy. There is a headstone marking one grave and, alongside, an empty open-lidded baby casket is near an earthen hole.

Two gardeners stand at a discreet distance, shovels in hand.

Some of the guests are talking quietly amongst themselves.

An old man repeatedly tries to wink at Andrew but Andrew ignores him.

Grandmother arrives in her wheelchair, pushed by Twin 1. The kindly and alert old PRIEST follows, then Marcus and Sophie. Sophie is holding the bundled baby.

Everyone gathers around the grave.

PRIEST

Friends, within the healing
embrace of God's love we have
gathered here to remember Alice and
to entrust her into God's eternal
care....

We see Sophie is growing increasingly mortified.

PRIEST (CONT'D)

...knowing that God's good purpose
for his people cannot be defeated
by sin and death. We are all
children of God, and in the faith
that God has given to us, we turn
to God now asking for his comfort
and his grace to be upon us - and
to dwell in a special way upon
Alice and upon those who were ...

Sophie groans loudly and turns. With the baby in her arms she bolts in the direction of the house. Her gait is clumsy, pained. She flees the funeral.

A stunned silence. The priest has stopped talking.

Marcus runs after Sophie.

A scandalised whisper passes from guest to guest.

Andrew is amazed and sneaks a grin at Lucy.

Grandmother is on the point of fainting.

OLIVIA
(calmly)
Please bear with us at this
difficult time.

The guests wait awkwardly. Grandmother places her hand on her heart.

The guests grow increasingly uncomfortable, they shuffle on their feet, some cough, until at last - all at once - they begin to walk slowly back down the path.

EXT. CHATEAU - STEPS/ENTRANCE HALL - DAY

Olivia is holding fort at the top of the stairs. She thanks the guests, one by one.

OLIVIA
Thank you

Another guest leaves, head shaking in commiseration.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
Good bye. Thank you.

Another guest leaves.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
Thank you so much. Good bye.

Another guest - an old woman - leaves. She glares at Olivia as if Olivia were responsible for the scandal.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
Good bye. Thank you for coming.

Another guest leaves.

OLIVIA
Thank you. Thank you.

The guests hobbles down the stairs.

OLIVIA
Good bye, thank you for coming.

The Priest is the last to leave. On his way out he tries to fix her with a look of great sympathy.

OLIVIA
 (flatly)
 Thank you. Good bye.

Olivia doesn't wait to see him off; instead she turns back into the entrance hall.

Grandmother is lying in wait.

GRANDMOTHER
 Why have we always had bad luck?

Olivia cannot find an answer, walks on.

EXT. CHATEAU - DRIVEWAY - DAY

Cars are pulling out of the driveway.

One after the other.

INT. DRAWING ROOM - AFTERNOON

In the drawing room the splendid buffet is untouched. Olivia is sitting on a sofa drinking wine, the bottle by her side. Marcus enters.

OLIVIA
 I love to be drunk - I'm good at it.

Precariously, with her left hand, she fills her glass to the very lip. Stretching it as if she were a sommelier. Not a drop is spilled.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)
 Where's Sophie?

MARCUS
 Sleeping. With pills. And Alice.

OLIVIA
 (ultra-lucid)
 Please, please stay. I'm drunk. I see everything. I'm on the cusp of the present and the future and the world is unfolding before me. With me. I feel as if - I can see through things. I am Unreasonably Happy. But the terrible thing - the terrible thing - is that I am full of love. I'm a full of an all-encompassing love for every single thing.

(MORE)

OLIVIA (cont'd)

I beg you, stay with me, have a drink, please - because I am so full of love and tenderness and forgiveness that I want - I desperately want - all I want to do in the world is pick up the phone and call - call him - my Murderer. So please, have a drink with your sister.

Marcus goes to the buffet and pours himself a drink. He removes one of the ancient musical instruments, something like a small bulbous banjo, from the display on the wall.

Olivia manages to unpick the knot of her sling.

Marcus sits down opposite Olivia and rests the instrument against the chair. Then he slides off the chair, onto his knees, and still on his knees he slides over to Olivia so as to give her a kiss on the forehead. Just before he does so she says:

OLIVIA

(sotto voce)

My husband, my murder. I volunteered and that's what is unbearable.

Marcus gives her the kiss.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

But you - the child's death - it wasn't your doing.

He kisses her once more, slides back to his seat.

They slowly raise a glass to one another.

Marcus takes up the instrument and picks out a silly tune from childhood days.

He performs it for her benefit, faster and faster, a runaway jig.

Listening, Olivia grows radiant.

EXT. GARDEN - AFTERNOON

Lucy is pushing Pinky in the doll's pram along a long straight pathway that recedes into distance. Past stone obelisks covered in fine furry moss.

She comes upon a dead rabbit. She parks her pram at a safe distance then goes to investigate.

She huddles over the rabbit and quickly looks over her shoulder as if to make sure no-one is watching. There is a wound on the animal's back infested with maggots. She gingerly touches a maggot and watches it curl up in response.

She tires of the maggot game and keeps walking. After a while she stops and unbuckles Pinky and holds her up at arm's length.

She studies the doll face-to-face and then - suddenly - she very deliberately drops Pinky.

She stares at Pinky sprawled on the ground.

INT. DRAWING ROOM - AFTERNOON

Later that afternoon Olivia and Marcus have crashed out, drunk, asleep, in the drawing room. Olivia lays unstrung on the sofa, her dress riding around her hips and revealing yellow bruises on her thighs.

Marcus is snoring.

Andrew and Lucy enter. They try to rouse their mother. Lucy tugs at her hair and then batters her shoulder like a Swedish masseuse.

Andrew is squatting next to Olivia's face - watching as she closes her eyes tightly and resists this onslaught, pretending to sleep.

Finally Lucy gives up.

Andrew spies the phone in the breast-pocket of Marcus' jacket and he inches it from the pocket with calm daring.

Lucy is about to comment but Andrew signals frantically, zipping his lips back and forth. He jabs his thumb over his shoulder.

She understands and immediately goes up on tip-toes and begins an exaggerated creep out of the room.

INT. MUSIC ROOM - AFTERNOON

The children are squirreled away under a cloth-covered piano: the Music Room had been closed years ago. The stolen phone rings on vibrate. Andrew, startled, puts on the phone on the parquet and they watch it wriggle like a squib.

It stops for a second and then rings again.

Finally Andrew picks it up and listens for a while. He makes a sick-face and hangs up.

LUCY
Who was it? Who was it?

ANDREW
(shrugs)
A Ka-rayzee Lay-dee

The phone rings again.

Lucy goes to pick it up but Andrew prevents her.

Once it stops and he snatches it up and tries dialing a number. Frustrated, he tries another number. And again - pressing with more force as if this will aid the connection.

The phone starts to ring again as soon as the line is free.

Andrew clammers out from under the piano and hides the ringing phone under a cushion. All the furniture in this room is covered with white dust-cloth.

Before they leave the children can't resist thumping the piano keys. Thwang bang, a sonata for four elbows.

EXT. GARDEN - AFTERNOON

The children approach two gardeners who are transforming a shrub into a cork-screw topiary: skilled magical work.

They are wearing headsets - ear-muffs - to protect their ears from the sound of their electric buzz-saws. Focussed on the job, they don't see the children.

The children watch the transformation. Lucy steps forward, toward the buzz-saws, and taps one of the gardeners on the back.

LUCY
Bonjour!

The gardeners switch off their tools and remove their headsets.

GARDENERS
(both delighted)
Bonjour!

ANDREW
Bonjour. Je voudrais telephoner (he
dials an imaginary phone) -
Australie.

The gardeners don't understand his accent and are perplexed. Again Andrew pretends to dial.

ANDREW (CONT'D)
Pour appeler Australia?

GARDENER 1
Telephoner?

ANDREW
Oui Oui. Australie.

GARDENER 1
(shrugging with open
palms)
Desolee.

ANDREW
(insistent)
Telephoner.

GARDENER 2
Assistance?

ANDREW
Oui, Oui. Assistance.

GARDENER 2
Assistance, c'est 4567.

ANDREW
4567.

GARDENER 2
Oui, c'est ca.

ANDREW
(by rote)
Merci-beaucoup-vous-etes-tres-
gentil.

INT. DRAWING ROOM - DUSK

Marcus emerges from his drunken slumber in the drawing room. The sky is pinkening so he has to check his watch to work out the time of day. He realises he has misplaced the phone and searches for it: he feels down every pocket -twice over.

He pulls out the chair cushion.

He kneels down and looks under the seat.

This is bad: he holds his head in his hands, presses his thumbs against his eyeballs.

INT. MUSIC ROOM - AFTERNOON

Andrew has retrieved the phone and is once more hiding in the shrouded music room with his willing accomplice, Lucy.

He dials 4567.

ANDREW
 (into phone)
 Bonjour assistance?

He is put on hold.

ANDREW (CONT'D)
 (to Lucy)
 Recorded message.

A pause.

ANDREW (CONT'D)
 (into phone)
 Oui, bonjour assistance (Thumbs up
 sign to Lucy). Je voudrais
 téléphoner Australie. Australie.
 Oui. (He grins at Lucy).

Andrew takes down a number on a piece of paper that he has at the ready.

ANDREW (CONT'D)
 Repetez lentement s'il vous plait.
 Merci-madame-vous-etes-tres-
 gentile.

He dials the number but it doesn't work.

He tries again. Lucy rolls her eyes around and around and around.

Another try. Frustrated, on the point of tears.

ANDREW
 No service.

LUCY
 You broke it.

ANDREW
 It was already busted.

He goes to hide the phone. He lifts a white drop-sheet off a bureau and reveals a display of precious porcelain figurines.

He deliberately cracks the head off one of the female figurines and replaces the headless figurine in situ.

Then he hides the phone among the figurines, lowers the drop-sheet. Leaves.

INT. MARCUS AND SOPHIE'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Sophie is asleep in their bedroom, a blood-stained pillow is wedged between her legs. The bundle is beside her.

Marcus steals in and rifles through drawers, through his clothes. Looking for his phone.

He empties out the baby-bag.

We see Sophie groggily wake-up - watch Marcus - then when he turns she pretends to be asleep.

He sits on the edge of the bed: he's in trouble.

Now Sophie sits up.

SOPHIE

Marcus?

MARCUS

(caught unawares)

Hey.

SOPHIE

I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.

MARCUS

It's OK. Darling, we have to do this, we have to ...let her go.

SOPHIE

Why?...So you can hurry back to your girlfriend?

MARCUS

Don't say that, it's not true.

SOPHIE

What's not true?

MARCUS

I love you -

SOPHIE

Because I couldn't bear it.

MARCUS

And I will never leave you. You're my family.

SOPHIE

I just wanted - she's all I want - our child, a family.

MARCUS

I know.

SOPHIE

I'm not ready. Not yet. A little longer, please.

MARCUS

Alright, OK. Everything's going to be OK.

Marcus gives her a kiss on the forehead.

He gently gathers up the bundle and leaves the room.

INT. GRANDMOTHER'S SUITE - FIRST ROOM - NIGHT

Grandmother is on a sofa in her suite, Lucy is squashed next to her, Andrew is on the floor, Olivia is in her own chair: they all have their dinner on a tray and are focusing on the flickering light of the plasma screen.

The sound of canned laughter. No-one watching is laughing or even smiling.

As Andrew is watching TV Olivia is in turn steadily and fondly watching his reactions. He senses her eyes on his back and he violently shudders, turns and frowns at her.

ANDY

Stop it!

Olivia turns back toward the TV.

Grandmother, meanwhile, now turns to steadily watch Olivia. Olivia senses this and turns to her. They each concede a shy, gentle smile.

GRANDMOTHER

I like your hair like that. It suits you.

OLIVIA

(pause)

Thank you.

Grandmother's face, compassionate, is transmitted to the camera: one face streaming forward out of the next, ghostly stop-motion photography in the way of the early chronographers who captured successive images of one person in a single image. Ghostly, milky with light.

INT. OLIVIA'S ROOM/CORRIDOR - NIGHT

The sound of Lucy screaming.

Olivia awakes, sits up in bed, listens. The screams don't abate.

She goes out of the room and into the hallway, where she stands just outside the door to the children's room.

INT. SOPHIE AND MARCUS' ROOM/ CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Sophie carefully opens the door to her room, creeps out down the corridor. Empty-handed.

Turning a corner she sees Olivia up ahead, waiting outside the children's room. The sound of Lucy screaming.

Sophie creeps past.

They acknowledge each with a glance.

INT. CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Olivia listens to Lucy's distress, she waits.

A light comes on under the door. She waits.

She rests her hand on the door handle but still does not go to her daughter's aid.

The light under the door goes off. Quiet.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

In the kitchen the flowers from the funeral have been shoved headfirst in the bin. Those that don't fit are piled against the bin as though votive offerings.

Sophie is sitting at the end of the long table, facing the refrigerator. Only one light on; near darkness. She is forlornly expressing milk into a pump.

The hum of the battery-operated pump. The skittering of night roaches. The occasional tick of the refrigerator.

From time to time she winces and rearranges herself.

Her eyes fill with tears; the level of her milk rises slowly.

EXT. GARDEN - DAY

Ida wheels Grandmother in her chair into a commanding position on the lawn. Behind, two rows of dark cypress recede into the distance. She addresses the camera (but is speaking to an unseen Sophie).

GRANDMOTHER

To begin, Sophie, I have known you-
for how long? Eight years. The day
you were married to my son I was so
proud, so happy, so proud. Your
parents, bless them, if they could
have been there I know they would
have been proud too.

(MORE)

GRANDMOTHER (cont'd)

And now - now I am very fond of you. It is a wonderful thing, to be married, to be welcomed into a new family. I was not born to this place. Ha - No, this (she gestures) all this came to me by marriage. I married Maurice when I was just out of school - that young, yes. He was on vacation in New York[London] and somehow my cousin made the introduction. I adored him. My husband...We had the children. First, Marcus. And then I was pregnant for a second time. For six months and - I lost it. What do they say - miscarried? As if it were as simple as misplacing. No, it was terrible. I know this - terrible. But a year later - we had Olivia. Our daughter. Our family. We were happy. Maurice and I. Ups and downs - yes, of course. He 'chased skirt'. I never said anything but I knew, there were signs - oh long lunches, the usual. Once a friend even told me they'd seen him tete a tete in our favourite restaurant with....And there was an abortion (she makes the sign of the cross) - Poor Girl. But we weren't making love so how could I blame him? I let him run. There were the children to think of. And I loved him. For forty two years I loved him and then one day - one afternoon - he died. Dropped dead. Out of the blue. The heart. We buried him - over there. A week later my daughter left. With no warning. First one, then the other - just like that. Well, it's true she fell in love with a pig. A pig. So ridiculous. I'd tried everything to stop her but, of course - stone ears. Then one day - gone. It was as if she - vanished. I didn't hear from her for 12 years. Nothing. Not... nothing. And today she is home. Your child is with God. You have samples: there will be another. You must talk to your husband. You must bury this baby. In a short time no-one will speak of it. That is good. Things are not diminished by being left alone.

Grandmother folds one hand over the other now that she is satisfied that her speech is finished.

Then she appears taken aback, her hands fly up, as if her audience has suddenly departed.

INT. ORANGERIE - GARDEN - DAY

Old Gardener 1 is putting away his tools in the Orangerie, once a special glasshouse but now reduced to a messy toolshed.

Olivia interrupts him.

OLIVIA
(in French)
Am I disturbing you?

GARDENER 1
Not at all, Madame.

OLIVIA
I need your help.

He nods, ready to oblige.

EXT. GATEWAY - DAY

A luxury car slowly passes out through the great gateway. Gardener 1 is at the wheel; Olivia - behind dark windows - is inside.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Josette and Olivia are sitting across the desk in Josette's office.

JOSETTE
So - how can I help you?

OLIVIA
I've come for the passports.

JOSETTE
The passports? Of course - my apologies, I didn't realise there was a rush.

She finds the passports in her top drawer and hands them over.

JOSETTE (CONT'D)
How's the arm holding up?

OLIVIA
Quite well.

JOSETTE
Must be difficult to manage.

Olivia demures.

JOSETTE (CONT'D)
I once met a man with no arms. He
loved to read. I asked him how he
turned the pages. He used the tip
of his tongue.

Olivia nods. She fumbles in her handbag. Pushes forward some
papers.

OLIVIA
Can you keep this for me?

JOSETTE
(disguising her surprise)
What is it?

OLIVIA
My will. A copy of my will.

JOSETTE
I'm a public servant, not a lawyer.

OLIVIA
I know.

She is insistent.

JOSETTE
A copy? Not the original.

OLIVIA
Yes. Please, for safekeeping. For
the children's dossier.

JOSETTE
(Long pause)
Olivia - how are you holding up?

Olivia is momentarily taken aback by the direct question,
then regains perfect composure.

OLIVIA
Very well, thank you.

Josette nods kindly. She hesitates and then holds out her
hand, accepts the papers. Studies them.

JOSETTE
Marcus and Sophie as guardians. Are
you sure?

OLIVIA

Yes.

EXT. GATEWAY - DAY

Olivia is in the backseat of the car - waiting for the gateway to open as they return to the estate.

She leans forward to speak to the driver, Gardener 1.

OLIVIA

(in French)

I'll walk.

GARDENER 1

Yes, Madame. Perhaps you might like to visit the Rose Garden. Yesterday your roses bloomed, the yellow ones we call the Olivias.

OLIVIA

Thank you.

She gets out of the car. He drives ahead.

EXT. LAKE - DAY

Marcus and Andrew are paddling in a canoe in the middle of the lake. They aren't speaking. Andrew gazes at the far side of the lake.

ANDREW

What's over there?

MARCUS

Over where?

Andy points to the forest.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

Forest. Miles of forest. Hansel and Gretel forest. Sorry - deathcombat forest or whatever you prefer to call it. And then, the village.

Andy registers this.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

(a little while later)

Andy, you haven't seen my phone have you?

ANDREW

What phone.

Marcus turns to face the boy eye-to-eye.

MARCUS

I lost it last week. Oh well. I'm sure it will just - turn up. Has this happened to you? Sometimes I just - lose things, they vanish. And then a few days later - voila - they turn up right there, under my nose. Strange. But what a relief. It's very important to me to find that phone. A special friend of mine only has that number and needs to speak with me.

He turns back and resumes paddling. Then looks back over his shoulder.

MARCUS (CONT'D)

You know, I'm always grateful when things show up. Very grateful.

They paddle.

EXT. GARDEN - DAY

There is a rattan throne on the lawn in the same spot Grandmother gave her speech. The Priest approaches the throne, sits himself down. Again, he speaks straight to camera as if Sophie is sitting opposite him, his audience.

He makes a graceful arc with the fingers of one hand.

PRIEST

What God has given us he can also take away. He is the beauty of childhood; he is the fullness of years. He knows that our love for Alice was not in vain. Blessed is he for the gift he gave us in her. We know that in everything he works for the good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. We must give thanks to Him - no for taking our Alice from us - but for granting her a place with all the saints....

There comes a low hissing sound which gives him pause.

PRIEST (CONT'D)

We must bury Alice so that we can entrust her to God's eternal care.

The guttural hissing grows louder and the Priest is discomfited but continues.

PRIEST (CONT'D)

So that she will live forever in
the joy and peace of his presence.

Sophie rises into the frame and attacks the Priest, batters him, he struggles to keep speaking. He is under attack and raises his voice.

PRIEST

The Prophet Isaiah speaks of the
time which is to come! Never again
will there be in it an infant who
lives but a few days! Or an old man
who does not live out his years!!
He who dies at a hundred will be
thought a mere youth!! A Youth!!!
He who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed!!

INT. PASSAGE/ LAUNDRY ROOM - DAY

Marcus walks along a narrow servant passage, with an armful of shirts that need washing.

Up ahead he hears the twins at work in the laundry. The sound of water draining. A squeal as if someone has been splashed with water. He begins to sneak quietly to the laundry entrance.

Baskets of white unwashed sheets are piled on the floor; garments hang from a rack for air-drying. The Twins are at a table, two cardboard boxes before them: they are packing away the no-longer-needed baby supplies.

Twin 1 folds up a series of gauzy muslin wraps.

Twin 2 secures knitted booties together.

At the door, Marcus secretly watches, saddened.

Twin 1 picks up a baby jumpsuit. She holds it out by the arms: it is so 'life-like' she can't help but wiggle its weightless sarm and space-walk it over to Twin 2's box. Jump it inside.

Twin 2 also comes across a baby jumpsuit in her pile of supplies. She makes it animate.

Marcus doesn't immediately put a stop to the pantomime.

Only when Twin 1 accidentally catches a glimpse of him - busted - does he say:

MARCUS

That's enough.

TWIN 2

Oh, excusez-moi.

He dumps his laundry in basket. Waves the twins aside.

MARCUS

Don't worry - Go, go.

Alone, he finishes the task with reverence.

EXT - GARDEN - BURIAL GROUND - DAY

Olivia, Andrew, Lucy, Sophie and the bundle are having a picnic under the great oak. Ida stands at a discreet distance, ready to be summoned should the need arise. We can see the headstone, and next to it, a large square of artificial plastic grass is covering the baby's grave. Neat heaps of dirt are lying next to the artificial grass.

Olivia is spooning food onto Lucy's plate.

OLIVIA

(calling to the boy)

Eat something.

Andrew wanders over wielding an imaginary pistol. First he trains this over the members of the picnic but they studiously ignore him.

Then he trains the pistol to his temple and clicks the trigger, blows out his brains and drops down dead.

After a while he resurrects himself.

He does it again: pistol to temple, trigger, drops down dead. Again, after a while, he is resurrected.

Sophie lifts the baby from the bassinet and brings it to her chest; she is wearing a white blouse and some of the baby's dark hair sticks to it, moulting.

Andrew stares hard at Sophie. She notices his stare and sees the hair on her chest - which she hurriedly picks off.

Andrew looks away in disgust and he spies a deer: a baby deer with spindle legs has wandered out from behind the trees!

He grabs Lucy and puts a finger over her mouth, hushing her before she can scare off the animal.

The children are delighted; Olivia smiles.

They watch the deer for a long time - it holds our gaze - until a strange thing happens: the dead baby squeaks.

SOPHIE
(shocked)

Oh!

As they all turn their heads in the direction of the baby the deer startles and ambles off.

Sophie is fussing around the baby.

The others are appalled by the foul smell. The children hold their noses.

EXT. GARDEN - LAWN - DAY

Josette takes up the rattan throne in the garden, sitting straight and choosing not to use the backrest. She wears blue jeans and a cotton shirt, gold hoop earrings. Her manner is clear and direct without being officious. Again we are sitting opposite her, her audience.

JOSETTE

Forgive me for intruding at such a time but I have made this special trip to give you a final warning. As the representative of the State I must tell you that sufficient days have passed and you must now bury the baby or return the body to the morgue. These are the regulations. The body is decomposing. The gas, the smell - the smell is a sign. Return the corpse to the earth. The skin will blister and fall away, the organs will bloat. Liquefy. Leak. Even the little ones leak. Millions of microbes inside the body will feast from within. And there may be coffin flies. It doesn't take long to be worn down to the bone. The bones, they will outlast you. And one day they too will - crumble. Everything will be transformed: this is what happens. All you can do now is be gentle with yourself. The child's life is - done. The child is no longer suffering. She will remain in your thoughts. I do not believe in any soul - God is not the mystery - but I say - open your heart to those around you. Do not miss this chance. That's all. I hope we have reached an understanding.

EXT. GARDEN - STONE PAVILION - DAY

Marcus and Olivia are sitting close together on the ground, leaning against a wall in the Pavilion, their knees bunched. It's raining.

Olivia is tracing a pattern on the ground with the end of a twig.

MARCUS

Every night I beg her to bury the baby. And she always says it's not the right time. That's what she says - Not yet, it's not the right time.

OLIVIA

I'm sorry.

They look into the garden. Long pause.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

Do you like the children? Are you fond of them?

MARCUS

They're wonderful.

OLIVIA

Would you -

She moves to face him and speaking with courage and great directness she continues.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

Would you - and Sophie - like to - would you like to have them?

MARCUS

Have them?

OLIVIA

You could have them. Be their guardians.

MARCUS

(recoiling)

No, no, we couldn't, no, it's too great a gift. No, we couldn't accept.

Olivia studies him; he keeps his eyes on the alps of his knees.

She waits for a word of comfort but it does not come. They sit side by side in a hopeless silence.

Eventually Olivia turns away. She looks out over the garden.

OLIVIA
You'd grow to like them.

Pause. No comfort. Marcus bumps her shoulder to indicate he has heard her.

INT. OLIVIA'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

In the bathroom mirror we see Olivia - with a towel wrapped around her chest - painstakingly tidying her eyebrows with the aid of tweezers. She is using her awkward left-hand. More than once she has trouble gripping the fine hair with the tweezers and it takes multiple attempts to pull out a solitary hair.

Her eyes glisten.

The bottle of heart-stopper is in plain view on a ledge below the mirror. A band of show-girl light bulbs.

She studies her chin and succeeds in plucking one or two stray whiskers.

Satisfied her chin is clear, she peeks under her towel and plucks away a nipple hair.

INT. CHILDREN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Andrew in the children's room and by torchlight he is efficiently, expertly packing his backpack. Lucy is sound asleep.

The contents to go inside are laid out on his bed: clothes, some small foil packages; Marcus's phone. A plastic bottle of water.

A sharp kitchen knife.

He hears a noise - freezes - but it's nothing, the moment of danger is fleeting.

INT. OLIVIA'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

She shaves under her right arm.

Then she hoists up her left elbow and tries to scoop the razorhead under her left arm using her left hand.

When this doesn't work she holds the razor in the fingertips of her right hand and - very patient - gives this a go.

INT. CHILDREN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Andrew begins to pack Lucy's backpack with some of her clothes.

Finished, he stashes the two backpacks behind the floor-length curtains.

He climbs onto his bed and gives the woman in the portrait a long fond kiss goodbye.

INT. OLIVIA'S BATHROOM - NIGHT

Olivia is shaving her legs - the razor passes in smooth overlapping strokes through a soapy foam on her calf. Foot propped on the edge of the bath. A delicate operation at the Achilles heel.

The sound of a light knock on the door.

OLIVIA

What?

Andrew is behind the bathroom door.

ANDREW

It's me.

Olivia stops her shaving. Secures her towel to cover her chest. Opens the door a fraction.

OLIVIA

Well, what?

ANDREW

Nothing. Good-bye.

OLIVIA

(brusque)

Goodnight.

He doesn't move. She softens:

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

'Night, chicken-pie.

ANDREW

Bye.

He leaves. She turns back into the bathroom. Walking past the mirror she reaches forward and turns the bottle of heart-stopper around three times. Then she resumes her shaving.

EXT. GARDEN - LAWN - EARLY MORNING

Come morning Sophie is holding the bundle, walking slowly through the garden. Behind her trails a set of footprints broken in the dew.

The sound of one bird calling. She stops walking: listens.

Pause. The sound of another bird replying. She resumes walking.

EXT. LAKE - EARLY MORNING

Andrew and Lucy are down by the lake. Both are wearing their backpacks.

Andrew has his jeans rolled up and is pulling the canoe to the water's edge.

He looks to Lucy, holds the canoe stable. She climbs in. He passes over Pinky.

LUCY
Ida will know.

ANDREW
(gentle rebuff)
Will not.

LUCY
(quietly)
Will so.

Andrew manages to hop into the canoe, in the front seat.

He takes a deep breath and pushes the paddle into the lake-bed; they set off across the lake in the direction of the forest.

EXT. LAKESIDE - EARLY MORNING

Sophie is standing behind a tree, lakeside, in a secretive, almost hidden position, and she is watching the children's every move.

EXT. LAKE/LAKESIDE - EARLY MORNING

Andrew turns back and catches a glimpse of Sophie. After a while she gives a little wave.

She watches them go.

It's hard work and Andy, who wields the paddle, is concentrating, determined.

LUCY
(quietly)
Andy?

He hears her but doesn't respond. He continues to paddle hard. The canoe wobbles, tacks like a sail-boat.

EXT. GARDEN - EARLY MORNING

Olivia is walking down to the lake on her morning stroll.

EXT. LAKE - EARLY MORNING

The children are in the middle of the lake, far from the shore.

LUCY
Andy? (Pause - louder) Andy?

He doesn't turn around.

ANDREW
What?

LUCY
My feet are wet.

We see her feet are resting in water that is seeping into the canoe. Andrew is quick to check what is going on. When he sees the situation he realises they are in serious trouble. He remains calm. He begins to bail with a small plastic bucket that he finds under his seat.

The lake seeks its level. He bails.

Lucy tries to help. A paddle is knocked overboard.

EXT. GARDEN - EARLY MORNING

Olivia is continuing her stroll.

She pauses to watch a butterfly.

EXT. LAKE/LAKESIDE - EARLY MORNING

Andrew is in serious trouble. He faces the shore and waves for help. He calls out.

ANDREW
Hey! Hey! Help! Help!

Sophie continues to watch.

She does not move. She refuses to relinquish her bundle. This is her terrible omission: she does not go to the children's aid.

Andrew continues to wave for help.

It takes a long time for him to realise that she isn't coming to their aid. A profound betrayal. He drops his arms in disbelief.

LUCY

Andy?

Resolute, he gets back to bailing.

EXT. LAKE - EARLY MORNING

Olivia comes into view lakeside on the lawn. She sees what is happening and runs toward the lake as fast as she can (she hasn't noticed Sophie).

At the water's edge she stops as if she has reached a precipice. An animal fear.

Slowly, she unpicks her sling and, slowly, as if working against gravity, she shucks off her shoes.

Then she undresses, down to her underwear. She takes a step forward and gradually, incrementally immerses herself in the icy lake. Vile baptism. The cold takes her breath away.

She can hardly swim; she dog-paddles with her head out of the water, scrabbles and paws.

The cast is heavy and disabling. She abandons any attempt at composure. All restraint is ruptured; all control breaks down. A fundamental loss of dignity: she is piteous, pathetic.

The long journey of her swim. She is determined to reach the children.

She is swimming toward the camera, the camera is tantalisingly close, but it is endlessly pulling away. Distance eggs her on.

EXT. LAKE - EARLY MORNING

Andrew valiantly bails out the canoe. The lake seeks its level.

Lucy holds her doll and is on the point of tears.

EXT. LAKE - EARLY MORNING

Olivia keeps dog-paddling, scrabbling in the water. How long can she keep this up? Physically, she reaches a limit.

She must rest: she turns and floats on her back, arms and legs akimbo, a starfish. She catches her breath until she can find the strength to continue.

She keeps swimming. She swims on and on.

Again, she must rest: she is forced to stop, to 'jellyfish' face down in order to conserve energy before continuing. She swims beyond exhaustion, into a strange kind of exhilaration. Radiance.

EXT. LAKE - EARLY MORNING

The canoe suddenly subsides, taking the children by surprise.

Andrew grabs Lucy. The doll is lost - but neither child makes a noise.

He struggles to keep Lucy afloat. They are weighted down with their backpacks.

ANDREW

Don't worry. It's OK.

At last, Olivia reaches them.

She tenderly smiles at Andrew.

She holds out her free hand and stabilises Lucy.

OLIVIA

(to Andrew)

Take off your pack.

Andrew lets go of Lucy and struggles out of his pack - he succeeds.

Between them he and Olivia keep Lucy afloat. They are all doing their utmost to remain calm.

Once his pack is off Andrew sets about unsaddling Lucy.

OLIVIA

(tenderly)

Now take her back.

Andrew delays - reluctant to leave her - but she nods at him to continue.

OLIVIA
It's OK. Go on.

Andrew assumes the lifesaving position and begins to tow Lucy back.

EXT. LAKE - EARLY MORNING

Olivia jellyfishes.

She bells her back and floats, coming up now and then for a breath. She floats.

EXT. LAKE - EARLY MORNING

We see the children making their way to the shore.

EXT. LAKE - EARLY MORNING

Olivia is not making the return journey: she jellyfishes.

EXT. LAKESIDE - EARLY MORNING

Andrew tows Lucy into shallow water. They scabble ashore. Lucy collapses onto the sand.

Andrew bends over, resting his hands on his knees. Catching his breath.

He looks out to his mother in the middle of lake: ragged breath.

A brave boy, he goes back into the water.

EXT. LAKE - EARLY MORNING

Olivia sees Andrew swimming toward her. She jellyfishes.

The next time she comes up for a breath Andrew is there.

Long pause. She doesn't make to move.

ANDREW
Please. Come on.

She consents.

He helps her back. They flounder in the lifesaving position.

More than once he dunks his heavy load.

EXT - LAKESIDE- EARLY MORNING

Back on shore Olivia crouches on all fours and heaves and spits and gags.

The boy lies on his back gasping for breath. The girl attentively watches over him, shivering with cold.

Eventually, the three of them start off back toward the house. Olivia gathers her belongings to her chest, leads the way. The children, hand-in-hand, are knobbled by the cold.

EXT. LAKESIDE - EARLY MORNING

Olivia nears Sophie - still frozen at her secret observation post - noticing her for the first time. She smiles at Sophie with a kind of weary solidarity.

Sophie fails to return the smile. Now Olivia comprehends Sophie's omission. Sophie is unrepentant.

The children join their mother, keeping their eyes downcast and refusing to look at Sophie.

They drag Olivia away.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Ida and the twins are fixing breakfast. Olivia, Lucy and Andrew, all dripping wet, enter the kitchen.

OLIVIA
We had an accident.

Ida picks up Lucy and holds her, cuddles her close.

IDA
There, there my little one.

LUCY
(crestfallen)
Pinky's gone.

IDA
I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Oh, there, there.

Marcus comes in, he sees something has happened. But where's Sophie? He looks around the room.

OLIVIA
(coldly)
She's by the lake.

Marcus rushes out to look for Sophie and the baby.

INT. CHILDREN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Olivia tucks the children into their beds. She calmly kisses them both on the forehead before turning out the light.

OLIVIA
Goodnight darlings. Ni-night.

The sound of her footsteps walking away.

When she is gone Andrew turns the bedside light back on. Lucy wriggles into Andrew's bed.

The light goes out.

INT/EXT. OLIVIA'S ROOM - GARDEN - NIGHT

Olivia is looking out of her window.

Behold: a small herd of deer has gathered on the lawn, fearlessly close to the house.

The deer stand and stare, eyes glinting.

EXT. GARDEN - BURIAL GROUND - MORNING

At first light Olivia is pulling the artificial grass off the open grave with her left-hand. She is wearing an elegant dress, stockings, low heels. Her hair is in the loose chignon and she has gone to the trouble of wearing make-up. She is methodical, unstoppable.

The satin-trimmed baby casket is by her feet, open-lidded and empty, and with great effort she manoeuvres this casket so that it sits beside the hole in the ground.

She dusts off her hand, satisfied with the job well done.

EXT. ROSE GARDEN - MORNING

With scissors Olivia is snipping off her namesake yellow roses, quickly, brutally, having little care for the look of the plant.

They drop to the ground and then she collects them with her left hand.

Thorns and all.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Olivia marches into the kitchen, straight past Ida and the twins, and dumps the roses on the table.

She heads hellbent for the freezer.

They are stunned: no-one makes a move to stop her.

She opens the freezer. It is lined with pink satin but is empty except for a lace-trimmed pillow.

Slightly disconcerted she turns to leave but on afterthought she also checks the refrigerator: crammed with food.

Betraying no emotion, Olivia strides out.

INT. CHILDREN'S ROOM - MORNING.

Olivia bursts through the door of the children's room.

OLIVIA

Get up, kids! Wake up! Lucy! Andy!
Get dressed! Hurry! Quickly!

The children scramble to attention.

LUCY

(annoyed)
Oh-la-la-la-la-la.

No response. Olivia throws open the left curtain.

On her hands and knees she roots through the clothes piled carelessly on the floor and finds the suit and dress that the children wore at the funeral. She tosses these garments one by one onto the bed. Then she leaves the room.

The children hurriedly start to dress. What's going on??

INT. HALLWAY - GRANDMOTHER'S SUITE - MORNING

Olivia is insistently buzzing on the intercom to Grandmother's suite.

Buzzz. Buzzz. Buzzz. Buzzzzzzzzzzzz.

The door clicks open. She marches through to the bedroom, calls out:

OLIVIA

Wake up! Get dressed! Hurry.!

Grandmother is in bed with the bedsheet pulled up under her eyes, timorous.

Olivia rips away the bedsheet and gives Grandmother a strong shake.

Grandmother creakily clambers out of bed.

Ida rushes into the room and insinuates herself between Grandmother and her assailant. Ida helps Grandmother get dressed.

When Grandmother is searching for her shoes under the bed Ida nods to Olivia in tacit approval.

INT. HALLWAY - MORNING

Marcus, sleepy-eyed, is wearing a clumsily tied dressing gown. Olivia crosses him in the hallway. He gestures as if to say 'what's going on?'

OLIVIA
Sophie is ready.

MARCUS
She's ready?? Now??

OLIVIA
(curt)
Yes, now.

She brushes past him and marches down the hallway toward his room. After a moment he follows.

INT. MARCUS AND SOPHIE'S ROOM/NURSERY - MORNING.

Olivia bursts into Marcus and Sophie's room but discovers it is empty.

She tries the room next door. A draught of air sets a kiddy-mobile tinkling.

To her consternation this room is revealed as a fully-equipped nursery whose powder-blue walls are painted with stars. There is a cot, a rocking-horse, a dolls-house.

But no Sophie.

INT. DOORWAY - MORNING

Olivia throws open a door. By the look on her face we can tell the room is empty.

JUMP CUT TO:

INT. DOORWAY - MORNING

Again, Olivia throws open a door. By the look on her face we can tell the room is empty. She is relentless.

JUMP CUT TO:

INT. DOORWAY - MORNING

And again, Olivia throws open a door. By the look on her face we can tell the room is empty.

JUMP CUT TO:

INT. DOORWAY - MORNING

And once more, Olivia throws open a door. By the look on her face we can tell the room is empty.

JUMP CUT TO:

INT. ENTRANCE HALL - STAIRCASE- MORNING

Olivia scurries down the stairs, weightless.

INT. DRAWING ROOM - MORNING

Olivia strides through the French doors into the drawing room.

And again - another empty room. Shrouded furniture. Sophie cannot be found.

Olivia sniffs the air. She walks over to the long silk curtains to make sure no-one is hiding behind them.

Nothing. She turns on her heels.

JUMP CUT TO:

INT. ENTRANCE HALL/SITTING ROOM- MORNING

Olivia crosses to the other side of the entrance hall. She throws open the double-doors.

This time Sophie is sitting peaceably in the sitting room whose walls bristle with antlers, wearing her silken nightgown. The white-wicker bassinet holding the bundle is on a low table before Sophie, within arm's reach.

Sophie is not surprised by the intrusion. She looks up as if nothing has ever been amiss.

Olivia walks steadily over toward the bassinet until she is equidistant from it with Sophie. They hold one another's gaze.

Slowly, slowly, Olivia reaches forward to pick up the bassinet - keeping her eyes on Sophie.

Sophie also reaches slowly for the bassinet. They are locked in silent brinkmanship.

Eventually Sophie deliberately stops short of Olivia's hand.

Sophie is very still; she allows Olivia to pick up the bassinet.

SOPHIE

Take her.

EXT. GARDEN - BURIAL GROUND - DAY

They are all gathered around the open little grave: Olivia with the bundle in the bassinet; Lucy; Andrew; Grandmother in her wheelchair overseen by Ida; the twins; and two gardeners with shovels. Sophie is at the head of the grave in her nightgown. Marcus is by her side. Everyone holds a rose.

Olivia gently takes the bundle out of the bassinet and places it in the casket.

Marcus lays his rose beside the bundle.

At his encouragement, Sophie steps forward and also puts a rose in the casket.

Grandmother is wheeled forward and lightly places a rose in the casket. A quick sign of the cross.

Olivia, accompanied by Lucy, steps toward the casket and they both lay down a flower. Lucy drops her rose as quickly as possible: yuk. They return to their place.

Andrew has balled his hand over the head of the rose so that only the stem is protruding.

Now it is his turn: they wait. He doesn't move. Lucy points repeatedly to the casket. His mother nods at him: continue.

At last he steps toward the casket and bends down, deposits the rose.

Arching up, he sees that Sophie is staring at him. She reaches out to touch his shoulder but he shrugs her off. Her fledgling smile is sad and tender and asks of him forgiveness.

SOPHIE

I'm sorry.

He refuses the apology; he fixes her with a strong steady gaze.

Sophie's face crumples, a stifled sob: this is her moment of deep shame. Marcus draws her back, puts an arm around her shoulder.

The gardeners lower the casket into the ground and begin to shovel in the dirt. Sophie watches the dirt fall.

Ida breathes a loud sigh of relief.

Olivia is not watching this process. Instead, her eyes rest on Andrew who at this moment is watching the burial and is ancient and implacable.

All around the green and growing garden emanates faint light: a gentle inner shimmering. A phenomenon that rises then passes.

Andrew takes Lucy by the hand.

ANDREW

Come on.

He leads his sister away.

Olivia watches them go.

Suddenly animated she calls out:

OLIVIA

Andy!

He stops, his back still turned to her. Hesitates. Then he looks over his shoulder.

ANDREW

What?

She breaks out of the funeral circle and hurries toward him. When she reaches the children she gives the boy a heartfelt kiss on the forehead.

OLIVIA

Hey.

He isn't sure what to make of this. She ruffles his hair, she plays with him, rubs his arms, kisses his cheeks.

OLIVIA

Hey? Hey? Hey?

She is half-crying, half-laughing. She desperately wants him to see that she loves him. She is gently and playfully pummeling/tipping him with her hand, under the chin, on the arm, trying to get a response. Feint, pummel, cuff. He keeps still.

OLIVIA

Hey? Hey?

She gives Lucy a kiss too, and a hug. A little pummel.

She gets down on her knees.

OLIVIA

Hey? My darlings. Hey? Hey?

Another feint-pummel for the boy. Now he can't help but boyishly smile at her - gently pummels back. Smiles. Her child. They trade pummels.

Lucy gives her a gentle knock too. Joins in the game.

OLIVIA

Hey? You too, hey?

Olivia is laughing-crying with gratitude and relief. Heart-bursting. The worst has passed.

She falls sideways during the pummeling play.

Oh, Olivia catches her breath, she needs to stop the game.

OLIVIA

OK. OK.

They stop. She stands up, brushes herself off. Lucy helps.

Andrew glances back to the funeral, then looks away to the direction they are headed.

ANDREW

(shy)

How fast can you run?

Oh, his question catches her by surprise. Touched, trying to not cry, with a valiant smile, she replies:

OLIVIA

Fast as a leopard.

END