‘Surely one of the most talented writers working in the thriller genre today. A story where nothing is what it seems – a thrilling hall of mirrors full of deeply disturbing twists. This book will haunt you’

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‘Catriona Ward has done it again. Elegantly horrifying, this tale of a family’s darker-than-dark past drives the knife in deep and isn’t afraid to twist. It’s a desert-dust nightmare with a scorpion’s sting, and I LOVED it’

EMMA STONEX, author of *THE LAMPLIGHTERS*

‘If you love toe-clenching horror, you will have the time of your life’

STYLIST

‘*Sundial* plumbs the psychological depths and traps of toxic relationships, expertly mixing suspense, shocks and menace. It’s a wild, twisted family gothic unlike any you’ve read before and one you won’t soon forget’

PAUL TREMBLAY, author of *A HEAD FULL OF GHOSTS*

‘Even better than *The Last House on Needless Street*. It was dark, and unsettling, and creepy and enthralling. Who even knew that the word “pale” was so sinister’

LISA HALL, author of *THE PARTY*

‘There’s dark and then there’s Catriona Ward dark. Ambitious, brutal and breathtakingly original, *Sundial* horrifies and impresses in equal measure’

TAMMY COHEN, author of *WHEN SHE WAS BAD*

‘As if we needed further evidence, *Sundial* confirms Catriona Ward as one of the brightest stars in horror fiction. As compelling and unique a voice for the twenty-first century as Shirley Jackson was for the twentieth. She’s brilliant’

CHRISTOPHER GOLDEN, author of *ROAD OF BONES*

'Catriona writes in such an evocative, lyrical and beautiful way, with a lightness of touch at the darkest moments. What a clever, interesting novel, which has so much to say about families, the shadow of the past and the power of storytelling to redeem. I absolutely loved it'

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KATE GRIFFIN, author of *KITTY PECK AND THE MUSIC HALL MURDERS*

'I absolutely adored it. *Sundial* is a book that will scorch the chambers of your heart with the ferocity and heat of a desert wind. It lingers long afterward, like the sting of a slap'

MATT WESOLOWSKI, author of *SIX STORIES*

'*Sundial* could only have sprung from the brilliant, twisty mind of Catriona Ward. I loved it. Unnerving and clever, disturbing and beautiful. I know I'll read it again and again – and I can't wait'

HOLLY WATT, author of *TO THE LIONS*

'Superb… another knockout. Evocative and lyrical, it's a heat-soaked gothic nightmare – and a true masterclass in storytelling'

KATIE LOWE, author of *THE FURIES*

'A mesmerising and extraordinary book. Chilling, fascinating and shocking'

ROZ WATKINS, author of *THE DEVIL'S DICE*

'Absolutely, stunningly, heartbreakingly wonderful. A wild beast of a book'

VIRGINIA FEITO, author of *MRS MARCH*

‘Catriona Ward has done it again. What happens when the evil in our souls destroys the good? When the ghosts we see are real? A unique and superbly written psychological horror from a talented writer at the top of her game’

ESSIE FOX, author of *SOMNAMBULIST*

‘A genius piece of storytelling. This is true horror, the horror of everyday life that we make ourselves blind to, horror that is brutal, truthful, terrifying’

ALMA KATSU, author of *THE HUNGER*

‘Catriona Ward is an absolute talent. She has written a novel so rich and beautifully layered about the lengths we go to when we are in a state of primitive fear. *Sundial* is spellbinding’

L.V. MATTHEWS, author of *THE PRANK*

‘Oh god this book. Dark and visceral and original. I loved it’

LOUISE BEECH, author of *I AM DUST*

‘Brilliant. It gradually becomes more disturbing and twisted as the layers are peeled back. Excellent and unnerving. I loved it’

GUY MORPUSS, author of *FIVE MINDS*

‘A truly visceral ride into the darkest of family gothic: disturbing, shocking, brutal and all too believable’

VICKY NEWHAM, author of *TURN A BLIND EYE*

‘I’m pretty sure my life will never be the same again. *Sundial* is a masterpiece’

J.M. HEWITT, author of *THE LIFE SHE WANTS*

Also by Catriona Ward and from Viper

The Last House on Needless Street

Sundial

CATRIONA WARD

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For Agnes Matilda Cavendish Gibbons
and Jackson Blair Miller,
who are the brightest, most shining
godchildren I could wish for.

Rob

It's the chickenpox that makes me sure – my husband is having another affair.

I find the first blister on Annie the morning of the Goodwins' party. She is in the bath and the window is a blue square of winter sky. The shadows of bare sycamore branches lie sharp across the white tile. Annie sits cross-legged in the tepid water. Her lips move, some secret song only for the plastic animals which bob around her. Annie won't bathe at a temperature warmer than blood. She doesn't like things too salty or sweet or sour, and her favourite stories are ones in which nothing happens. She is wary of extremes. I worry about her physically, my fragile second child, in a way I don't about Callie. Annie is small for nine and people often assume she is younger. Callie worries me in other ways.

The party is the Goodwins' January tradition. They call it their 'blues banishing bash'. They're a perky family who live next door on the left. Their two smart sons Sam and Nathan are near Callie's age; they have interesting friends as well as great taste in wine and food and art. It's the one occasion in the year our whole family looks forward to. We always have *the best time* at the Goodwins'.

Annie bends over and whispers to the rubber duck in her lap. The sight of her vulnerable spine, the dark paint-licks of hair clinging

to her neck – these things make my throat close up hot. I don't know what it's like for other people but love and nausea are often indistinguishable to me.

'Arms up,' I say. Annie obeys and as she does I see it: a red mark on her upper arm. I recognise it instantly. I put my hand on her forehead, on her back. Both are warm – too warm.

Annie scratches at the rash and I enclose her hand in mine. 'Stop,' I say gently. 'That will make it worse, my little beet.'

She makes a small sound of dismay. 'I'm not a beet,' she says.

'A cauliflower, then.'

'No!'

'A rutabaga?'

'No, Mom!' But she stops scratching. She is a docile child.

I find that I am scratching my own arm in sympathy. I sometimes confuse my children's bodies with my own.

I put Annie to bed and go to the bathroom cabinet. Here are the crowded shelves of a busy family with two children. I push aside old cough syrup, disposable razors, nail scissors, Irving's diabetes medicine, my birth control pills, a water pick we never use, painkillers, a broken powder compact. I must clean this out when I have a minute. At the very back I find what I'm looking for: a full bottle of calamine, neck all crusted up but still good. I bought it a few months ago for Callie's eczema.

Annie's temperature is 101.5 and her eyes are even more unfocused than usual. I should have caught this earlier, I really should. The stinging reflux of guilt washes over me. She scratches at her arm.

'No, sweetie,' I say. I get her mittens from the dresser, fetch duct tape from Irving's toolbox and fasten the mittens to her pyjama-top sleeves. I give her Tylenol and cover her in calamine.

'Rob,' Irving calls up the stairs. His voice is rough with morning.

'Oatmeal's ready.' He clears his throat, coughs. 'And coffee,' he adds.

I sit by Annie and let the exhaustion take me for a moment. I always find my younger daughter's presence soothing and conducive to thought. We have been on this merry-go-round for so long, Irving and I.

I make a decision tree in my head. Then I go downstairs to break the news.

Callie is talking high and feverish in the kitchen. 'And they caught him,' she says, 'because of the gas station surveillance footage. That's where he bought the cement.'

'Where did you hear that, sweetie?' Irving says with an edge in his voice. I almost feel sorry for him. Callie likes to talk about murder at breakfast. 'What have you been reading?'

'Just stuff,' says Callie. 'Just around. The woman was acquitted. It's difficult to prove. They had injected him with air, just air! It causes a pulmonary em-bol-ism. Emblamism? No, embolism.'

I join Irving at the coffee maker. 'Annie has chickenpox,' I say quietly. 'I don't understand how it's possible. When was she exposed? And she's vaccinated.'

'It's not a hundred per cent effective.' Irving's eyes are sunk deep in dark pouches, gleaming like secrets. Last night was a bad one.

'Trust us to be in the unlucky per cent,' I say.

He smiles tightly and spoons oatmeal into Callie's bowl. Cartoon deer run around the inner rim, just above the mealy grounds. He adds four slices of strawberry and begins to pour on that sickly syrup Callie likes. I place a warning hand on his shoulder. *Not too much.* Callie's body seems to refuse to tell her when she's full. If she is not gently checked, she will eat until she is in agony, until she throws up. I can't handle two sick children today.

Irving shrugs me off like a horse flicking away a fly and keeps

pouring syrup. Irving loves sweet things but cannot have them. He stuffs his daughter with the food he longs to eat. But he's not the one who stays up with her at night.

Callie sits at the table, watching us. She saw me trying to stop him pouring her too much syrup, I know she did. Unease bubbles up. I can never tell what Callie is thinking.

'Poor Annie,' she says, nibbling a nail. 'Sad face.' A recent habit of hers, talking like those little pictures you get in a text message. I find it alternately enraging and amusing.

Irving puts the oatmeal down in front of Callie. She is large for her age, golden-skinned, with a broad angular face and fervent green eyes. When she speaks it is pinched and effortful, as if she's being squeezed like an accordion.

'Mom can look after Annie,' Callie says. 'Dad, me and you will go to the Goodwins' on our own.' She scoops up oatmeal with her finger and puts it in her mouth, eyes on me. 'Party hat, wine glass.' Irving and Callie have a little club, all their own.

Irving looks at me, one eyebrow raised. It's the look he gave me in the bar, the first time we met. It used to make my heart beat fast and splashy. The intimacy of it. His silent question, to which only I have the answer.

'Use a spoon, please,' I say to Callie. 'No, sorry, hon. We all have to stay home. You can carry the chickenpox on your clothing. There will be lots of little kids at the party and we don't want to risk making them sick.'

'Rob,' says Irving. 'Let her go.'

Irving wants to put on his party self, be the handsome science professor, raise his eyebrow at people who haven't seen it a hundred times. Most of all he wants to be in a crowd with her, eyes meeting at a distance as they talk to other people, hands leaving moist prints on their wine glasses, the longing between them stretching across the room like fine gold wire. I've seen it before and will again, no doubt.

'I want to see Nathan and Sam,' Callie says.

'You can see them any time,' I say. 'They're next door.'

'Not if I break my ribs,' Callie says. 'Not if I get hepatitis. Not if I drink bleach and die.'

'Callie, please. There will be babies, pregnant women, old people there. Maybe unvaccinated children. Do you want to be responsible for them getting sick? I mean it. We're staying home. I know how fast these things spread – if even one of my fourth graders gets flu, they're all sick within the week.'

Callie's scream starts low in her abdomen, like the growl of a big cat. Then it rises like a launched rocket, ear-shattering. It is so loud I feel it like a punch, see it in the air like stars. Irving bends over her, speaks in her ear. Callie screams higher and higher. I meet Irving's eyes. I allow the corner of my mouth to turn up, the merest fraction. *Contradict me again,* I think at him. *I dare you. Tell Callie that you and she can go to the party.*

He lowers his gaze and strokes Callie's shoulder, murmuring about pancakes. Her screaming stops. It gives way to little giggles. She and Irving stare at me. The same little smile plays about both their mouths. They have the same lips. And it sets me off, even though I know it shouldn't.

'That's it!' I shout. 'You go and clean your room. Change your sheets. Maybe that will get rid of the weird smell in there.'

Callie covers her mouth and laughs into her palm. Irving gets up and starts doing dishes, like it's nothing to do with him. I stare at the back of his head, the red place where the barber went too close, and I wish I could throw something, like he does. But I've got no power here.

I take Callie's abandoned bowl of oatmeal and carry it upstairs. I put it on Annie's rash in cooling handfuls. She puts her hot little cheek against my hand, and that helps some.

*

I text Hannah Goodwin. *Sorry! We have a case of chickenpox. Safest to stay home. Sad face*. I delete the last in irritation. Callie's habit is catching. *Have fun, come over for drinks on the deck next week. R.*

I read it over carefully and replace *R* with *Rob x*. That's better. That looks normal.

'This will be fun,' I tell Irving and Callie. 'We'll have a family day. Movies, games, Chinese food …'

Each of us has strong objections to the others' movie choices. Following the path of least resistance we end up putting on something no one wants to watch, about a man followed round by a giant rabbit which might or might not be only in his mind. Irving sits between me and Callie, an arm around each. I check on Annie every half hour. We hear the music start next door just after 11 a.m. The laughter begins, high, excited conversation which soon builds to a feverish pitch. Once or twice there comes the sound of breaking glass. Irving turns up the volume but the movie is so stupid it can't hold anyone's attention.

'I'll go to the store for oatmeal and calamine,' he says. I know what that means; I can see it in the tiny, repeated tensing of his jaw. He'll go to the store and on the way home it will be natural to stop by the party for a drink. Just one, of course; at least that's how it will start. I feel so angry that it's difficult to see. Little black spots drift over my vision.

I say, 'We already have oatmeal and calamine.'

'You might be infectious like Mom said,' Callie says, seriously. 'You might make a little kid sick.' I feel a rare rush of love and gratitude towards her, even though I suspect it's just because she doesn't want to be left alone with me.

Beside me I feel Irving's mood narrow to a point. No one speaks. On screen, the imaginary rabbit follows the man. Next door, jazz plays through shouts of joy.

Eventually I say, 'Enough,' and turn the movie off. This is family life, in my experience. Always trying to do things like the families in magazines or on TV, followed by the abrupt plummet of failure.

I'm not really a TV person. The first time I saw an action movie I nearly died of excitement, or at least that's how it felt. These days I don't understand why anyone bothers to watch soap operas or go to movies. I don't even read or watch the news. Living is enough. It is so intense and painful.

It took months of pleading and blackmail to wear Irving down each time, but I won the battle to finish college, to get a teaching job and after Annie, to go back to work. Irving is very big on traditional values. The only thing that swung it for me was that there was an opening at the kids' school, which meant I could be in the same building as them all day. That and the fact that we needed the money. Irving's father lost a lot in the big crash.

I love my job. At school I am known as the child whisperer. The name is a joke but it's also a fact that with my students, I am magical. The withdrawn children blossom shyly under my care. The hyperactive, the manic, become calm and docile in my presence. A fourth grader known in the staff room as the terrapin, because of her tendency to bite when she is bored, writes me passionate book reports on Maya Angelou. I have no such powers at home.

I love my house, too, a boxy Cape Cod set on a rational eighth of an acre of green, sloping lawn. It's the woman who gives the house its energy, its style – isn't that what people say? Two live oaks stand on either side of the door. The back yard has a pine deck shaded by the tall maples that line the alley. I built the deck over the course of three weekends, following a design I found in a library book. It really wasn't difficult. I ordered the lumber and then I put it together like a puzzle. (One rare way in which Callie and I are alike – we both get

most of our knowledge of life from library books.) Anyway, it's lovely to sit out there at sunset or on a hot day, with the maples leaning over all green. I feel like I'm sitting in the treetops. It's so easy to sweep clean, too. The neighbourhood association never has to tell us to cut our grass or keep our two flowerbeds mulched, or sweep the limestone path that curves up to the white front porch. I keep it all in order. I love the yard, for its simplicity, its containment. It's so different to where I grew up – hot dead sand and rock stretching on in every direction. Stare at all that space, day after day, and it begins to feel like a trap.

I feel safe here, among the neat rows of family homes. There is the odd gesture towards individuality – this yard has a birdbath or even a small pool. That clapboard is painted a daring shade of pink. Stained-glass windows, different styles of knockers, different kinds of stone for paving the path – these are the greatest extremes to which choice can go. But they are meaningful. They're the marks people put on the world.

I said I felt safe here. Maybe what I meant was that my children are safe. Those two things don't always go together. Maybe at some point everyone has to choose between one and the other. It's better to be part of a unit – 'The Cussens' – than individuals. You get noticed less, that way.

Irving goes into his study and shuts the door. Callie gets out her drawing pencils. She never has a problem entertaining herself, and I never have to nag her about schoolwork. There are startling, unexpected patches of relief in her personality. She sits at the rolltop desk in the living room, bent very close to the page. The pencil makes its drowsy sounds. She starts to hum tunelessly. It's annoying, and I want to tell her to put on her glasses, but I thrust down both these impulses. I learned tactics early on. I pick my battles.

*

By 1 p.m. Annie's rash has spread. Her mittened hands are clutched under her chin; dark hair lies across her cheek, fluttering with her breath. I check the tape on the mittens, which is secure, and move the hair away from her mouth.

'Too bright,' she murmurs, so I draw the curtains, plunging the room into vague silver dark.

'Do you want the star lit?' I whisper.

'Yes,' she whispers back without opening her eyes. I go to the windowsill and turn on her nightlight. The lamp is the shape of a star and it glows luminous in the dim room; the softest pink, the colour of candy floss, or the depths of a pale peony, the colour little girls dream in. I always feel that Annie is safer when the lamp is lit. I know that doesn't make any sense.

When I look up, Irving is standing in the doorway. I hadn't heard him approach. He has always had the ability to stand perfectly still, as though no breath moves in him. It's unnerving in a living thing.

'How is she?'

'She's sleeping.'

'Don't take your stuff out on the children, Rob,' he says. 'Callie really wants to go to the party. Let her. You can't keep her home because of Annie.'

Annie stirs, opens one eye. 'Water,' she says in a small voice.

'Sure, sweetheart. Mommy will get it. Out of my way,' I say to him through rigid lips as I pass. 'You did this.'

He turns a furious back on me and goes to the bathroom to take his diabetes pills. It will take him a couple minutes to find his meds. I moved them to the back of the bathroom cabinet, hid them behind an old tub of Vaseline. A petty gesture but that's the kind of thing that's available to me, these days.

*

The fights always start differently and they always end the same, with us arguing like snakes, hissing as I load the dishwasher or fold laundry and he grades papers, his pen stabbing the air, both wary of our children sleeping above. We have been doing it for years. Eventually we fall into bed exhausted, weakened by the venom that consumes us.

Last night it started with our electric toothbrushes, which were out of power. Both were connected to their chargers but someone threw the switch that controls the bathroom wall sockets, so they went flat. Callie has a bad habit of playing with switches.

It began with the toothbrushes but it wasn't long until we started on Katherine the lab technician. Irving works late hours. This doesn't bother me. The lab technician works late too. Katie, as he calls her, wears a perfume called Sentient. I know this because it is all over his suits. His closet reeks of it.

I hissed with clenched fists, throat closed up so tight that the words squeezed out like bile, eyes burning.

Irving started pointing. He never touches me – he points instead. His stabbing finger trembled an inch from my face, jabbing in time with his words. 'You wanted this,' he said. 'It's all you wanted when we met. Now you've got it all you can do is whine.'

The mess of adult life, where you've both dug in so deep, where blame is a tapestry so tightly woven that it cannot ever be unpicked.

I am trying to read when I hear Annie crying upstairs. 'No,' she sobs. 'No, no!' I open her door. She and Callie are struggling over something, wrestling it back and forth. It is the pink star lamp. Annie's head is thrown back, her mouth a black *o* of sorrow. Callie is as expressionless as ever, but her lower lip is caught between her teeth. 'Give it to me,' she says in her tight voice. 'Or someone will die.'

'I hate you, Callie,' Annie says. 'God hates you.' She lunges with a mittened fist.

I thrust them apart. Somehow the pink lamp is still intact. I take it from Callie's damp grasping hands, stow it safely out of reach on the windowsill. Goodness knows why Callie wants it.

'Mom,' says Callie, 'don't let her keep it!'

'She's being mean to me!'

'For goodness' sake,' I shout. 'Both of you! Be quiet. Read a book!'

Irving sits at the kitchen island with his feet up on a chair. I repress a leap of irritation. He knows I hate that – dirty feet on my nice chairs.

I love my kitchen most of all. I agonised over the wood for the island and I never forget to oil it on Sundays. I designed the pattern of the floor tiles, the spirals of soft blue-grey glazed terracotta. I built the overhead rack myself, like I did the deck. Carpentry's not too difficult if you take your time. I hung the copper-bottom pans just so, in order of ascending size.

There's a bowl of something mealy in the centre of the island. Pride of place. 'What's that?' I go to the cupboards to hunt for aspirin. Not for Annie, for me.

'I'm making a spotted dick,' Irving says. He doesn't cook but he takes pride in his cakes and puddings, starchy tasteless English things you have to steam. He thinks they're classy. 'Hey, Rob,' he says. 'Taste and tell me if it needs more currants.'

There's nothing I want less, but once more I pick my battles and get a spoon, thinking of Annie and Callie with sorrow. They used to be such good friends and play together all the time. I would chalk it up to Callie reaching a difficult age, but every age has been difficult for Callie.

I dip a spoon in the bowl before I see what's actually there. I scream, I can't help it, even though I know that's exactly what he wants.

He's laughing, bent over and breathless. 'Your face!'

'That's horrible.' My voice shakes. 'What a horrible thing to do to someone.'

'I have to warm them,' he says patiently. 'I'm going fishing with John tomorrow.' I can smell the maggots now, the acid, the ammonia rot of them. Irving keeps these big blocks of bait in the refrigerator in the garage. I should have known there would be retribution for me denying him his party. In the bowl, the warming maggots stir little blunt heads. Their bodies are red as blood.

I believe that everyone has one story that explains them completely. This is mine.

Callie was two, a difficult toddler, late to speak and full of silent fury. Even then, a grim scowl covered her face at all times – except when she looked at her father. Then a timid smile crept over her features and I saw that she really was just a baby.

She was also an escapologist. She could open doors, cupboards, drawers, manipulate handles and locks that should have defied her tiny hands.

Irving was due home from a conference that afternoon. Callie had been up all night. She never, ever slept when her father was away. I was exhausted; the air was thick and fuzzy like I felt. I put her in her highchair to go to the bathroom. I was gone for, I swear, no more than thirty seconds. When I came back into the room she was half out of the chair, half in the sink, one tiny arm plunged shoulder-deep down the garbage disposal. Her eyes were intent, her small hand strained towards the switch on the wall.

I ran and seized her to me tightly. 'Never, never do that again,' I shouted. She looked up at me in wonder, and then opened her mouth wide. She began to scream, a needle in my head.

It was hours before I finally got her down in her crib. The world

seemed to tremble around me like Jell-O. I sank onto the couch and was asleep in a moment.

I woke to his hand on my head. Irving was looking down at me, dark eyes still.

'Callie's been a nightmare,' I said.

'I'm fine, thank you,' he said, acid. 'The conference was great.'

'I didn't know it would be like this. I don't think she likes me.' I heard my whiny tone and a part of me hated myself.

'She's just a child. Try and have some perspective.' There was an unfamiliar cadence to his sentences. My heart sank. *Another one*. During the honeymoon period of Irving's crush on a woman he will fall into her speech patterns.

I sat up and leaned in as if to kiss him. There was whiskey on his breath. 'Was there even a conference?' I asked, surprised by my own directness.

He took a pinch of my hair between forefinger and thumb and pulled until my eyes watered. 'Go check on your daughter,' he said. 'Christ.' He let go of my hair and brushed his hands off, as if ridding them of something unpleasant.

I got up off the couch, but I didn't go up to Callie. I was filled with something fierce and effervescent, ready to spill over. 'I can't do this any more,' I said, surprised to hear how reasonable I sounded. 'I'm leaving. We don't have to be married, Irving!' It felt like a revelation, like a bolt of light. But when I saw what was in his face, I ran.

After a beat of surprise Irving came after me. I ran through the house, doorframes slipping in my grasp. As I went a terrible thing happened. My body remembered this – running, fear, danger panting close behind. It came up suddenly, memory, and took me by the throat. I have to believe that's why I did what I did next. I opened the front door. The afternoon air was the breath of freedom. But I didn't run. I waited until Irving came up behind, then I stepped out onto the porch and slammed the door behind me, right on his

reaching hand. I actually heard the crunch, followed by his cry of pain. I turned away. I thought, *No one can make me do this any more.*

I went across the front yard, which was bare dirt right down to the street; we hadn't had time to do anything with it. *What will I do?* I thought. I didn't have a job, or friends.

Something sat at the bottom of the earthy slope, on the curb. I thought it was a cushion or a footstool dumped there for freecycling. It happens sometimes, even in a nice neighbourhood like ours. But it was Callie, squatting almost in the road in her grey sleepsuit with pink elephants on.

I ran to her, my body made of fear.

She looked up at me with her big eyes, still swollen with crying. 'Pale,' she said. She was stroking a brown, dry weed, which had sprung up between the gaps in the concrete. It had a little husk of a flower on the end. I sat down next to her, suddenly exhausted. 'Sorry, honey,' I said. 'I'm sorry.' I knew then I wouldn't leave. It wasn't her fault, any of it.

I picked her up. For once she didn't fight me, but laid her head on my shoulder. We went slowly back to the house. I put Callie back in her crib. 'I'm going to make you a garden,' I told her, and kissed her head. Maybe she wouldn't let me love her, but I could still take care of her.

Irving's hand was badly bruised but not broken so I put ice on it and we sat at the crooked Formica kitchen island, both silent and exhausted in the lee of the fight. *I should do something with this room*, I thought. It was very bare and cheaply finished; the linoleum was cracked underfoot and the faucet leaked badly. I pictured it hung with good copper-bottomed pans, pots of herbs on the sill, maybe even a spice rack.

'No more late nights,' I said to Irving. I didn't mean late nights, I meant no more coming home in the mornings, speaking in other women's voices. 'Deal?'

He looked at me, measuring. 'You don't get to ask for favours,' he said, nodding at his bruised hand.

I had to try to make it right somehow – make it tolerable between us. I put my hand hesitantly on top of his good one.

'Callie learned a new word.' I told him the story, laughing and crying a little bit too. He smiled and I almost sagged with relief at being forgiven. And a fierce spike of pride – she said it to me, not him. Then I saw what we had to do.

'Let's have another one,' I said. 'A baby.'

'Yes,' he said. I almost wept at being back in the warmth of his approval. And if there were two of them, maybe he'd let me have some of their love.

I have wondered since why he agreed. His father hadn't lost everything yet. I think Irving was hoping for a boy. He thought the old man might be more generous if we had his grandson. As for me, heaven help me, I wanted one all my own. Callie has always belonged to Irving. You're supposed to have less selfish reasons for wanting a child.

I got my wish. When Annie was born, I felt it right away – a warm beam washed over me when she opened her deep blue eyes. She was an easy child from the first, and she was mine. She and I fit together, part of each other in a way that Callie and I have never managed.

It didn't work completely. The children have pushed Irving further and further from the centre. He doesn't relish the edge of the spotlight. And there was no boy for Irving's father to write cheques for. But I hold on, because this way I can give my children two parents to take care of them, a house filled with light and flowers, a scented garden with grass to walk on. Even when Irving's late nights start up again, as they always do, I hold on.

It's for them, but it's for me too. Sundial, Falcon, Mia, the stuff with Jack – all of it set me aside from others and I still have that

burning need to blend in. I long to disappear into the unremarkable mess of women with families and houses in the suburbs and teaching jobs and small ambition. As for Callie, she's my daughter and I love her. I will never, ever let her know that sometimes I don't like her. How hard I have to work sometimes, to love her.

So, that's the person I am. Now, anyway. There are other, older stories, but they are about a Rob who is years dead and gone. I walled her up, sealed her off in the dark. Maybe she starved and died down there. A hopeful child, buried beneath the desert sand. Maybe that's a good thing. There's no place for her in this family.

It occurred to me much later how strange a word it was, for a two year old: *pale*. I have puzzled over it.

The doorbell cuts through my reverie, high and harsh. I'm on the couch in the living room. A notebook lies open in my lap. I was supposed to be making notes for next week's lesson on Mark Twain (oh, the terrible things we teach our children) but I see that I've been writing Arrowood instead. Callie is drawing in the corner. How long have we been sitting here like this? Dissociation, June the therapist calls it. I call it a welcome break. The doorbell rings again.

'Are you going to answer that?' Callie, acid. She doesn't look up from the page.

I get up, flustered. The notebook drops to the floor; I pick it up quickly and put it in my pocket. As I hurry towards the hall I hear the creak of the mail slot. Those hinges need oil. Someone calls through, 'Hello?'

My insides curl up like baby mice but I put a smile on, even though she can't see me yet. People can hear it in your voice if you don't smile.

'Hannah,' I call back, 'how's the party?'

Hannah Goodwin's eyes are two blue moons fringed with auburn

lashes. When she sees me they narrow at the edges. I'm not the only one doing fake smiles today.

I stop a couple of feet away from the front door. 'I won't come any closer,' I say. 'Better safe than sorry.' I realise that I'm still in my robe. With everything going on this morning I haven't had time to dress.

She says, 'How are you feeling?'

'Oh, I'm well,' I say. 'It's only Annie who has it, but we thought better safe than sorry.'

'Poor Annie! We're really missing you all. Listen, there was something lying in the middle of your path when I came up. Dead. A gopher, I think. A cat must have got it. I put it in the trash but it left such a mess behind. Maybe get Irving to turn the hosepipe on it later, huh, princess?' It's a joke we share, calling one another fond names in old-fashioned accents, like forties movie stars.

'Thanks,' I say.

'You OK?' Her eyes hold concern. 'You and I are due a big cocktail and a catch-up, Rob.' A screech of jazz trombone from next door punctuates her words. 'Let's make a date to go away for a weekend sometime. The boys never stop talking about that Memorial Day we had in the desert …'

I allow myself a little inward smirk. We had them to stay once at Sundial, and Hannah can't stop angling for another invitation. The Goodwins have a timeshare in Florida. That's the kind of thing Nick Goodwin likes, but Hannah has more refined ideas. She would much prefer to tell her yoga class about the desert. *So spiritual, the Mojave. You can really connect with yourself there.*

'Rob?'

'Sorry,' I say. 'I spaced out there.'

'Do you need anything? I can run out to the store …'

'You're an angel,' I say. 'We're OK. I had a grocery delivery yesterday so we're stocked up.'

Hannah's eyes crinkle again. 'Well, you have my number – just say the word. Sam had it last month, it was a nightmare.'

'I remember.' Last month, twenty-two days ago to be exact, the Goodwins came back from Australia. The following day Sam Goodwin went down with chickenpox. So we haven't seen Hannah for a while. *I* haven't, anyway.

'I brought a little treat for you all. I'll just leave it on the step. You're a doll!'

'You're a treasure,' I say.

'Call me later.'

Hannah and I usually speak once or twice a week in the evenings. I doubt we'd be friends if not for the fact we live next door, and our children are similar ages. We're very different. But there is something bonding about the grinding exhaustion of parenthood, the constant teetering between laughter and tears, about that weary love for your children, planted so deep it is everything you are. Hannah and I have grown close. I like her. She's the kind of person I imagined having as a friend when I was young, before I understood what friends were.

When we're on the porch swing and she looks at me in that wry sideways glance and the night is warm and the kids are asleep, I can almost believe that this is all of who I am; Rob the teacher who lives in the suburbs with my handsome sciencey professor husband, who has at last found a good woman friend who understands me.

I don't know if she deserves those mean thoughts I had about her. She seemed to love it out at Sundial. The place has a grip. Many people feel it, few understand it. That's a good thing.

When I'm sure she's gone I open the door cautiously. Party streamers flutter in the tree in the Goodwins' front yard. From the back, the party is building to the roar of a good drunk. The cold air is faintly laced with cigar smoke.

On the step at my feet is a lemon meringue pie. Beyond it, half way down the path, is a slick viscous patch left by the gopher's body. I feel like I can smell the dead flesh where it lies in the trash.

It took me months to find black limestone for the path at a price we could afford. I love its texture, the rough way it holds the warmth of the sun and gives it back to your bare feet. I had the landscaper lay it, not straight, but running in a soft curve up to the front door. In the summer it is hemmed by rosemary bushes, thyme, lavender and blue sage, punctuated by odd stabs of red lobelia. I took a lot of trouble with the colours.

Now when I look at my beautiful path all I see is death and shining blood.

I feel someone standing behind me. I don't need to look to know it's Callie. She has a sixth sense for sugar. I bend and take the pie off the step. 'Not 'til tonight, after dinner,' I say, closing the door.

'Dad just went out the back,' she says.

Of course he did. It's too much suddenly. I sit with a thump, back against the front door. Hot tears worm their way down my face. Soon I am gasping for breath. My nose is plugged as if with concrete. My face is swollen and tight as a plastic doll's. Still the tears come.

'Mom?'

Oh god, Callie. I've got to get it together. I try to steady my breathing, to make this a little less scary for her. Although – I don't know if Callie does get scared. Not like other people. Strange, the thoughts that arise while you're sprawled in your hallway like a baby deer, weeping in front of your preteen daughter.

'Don't cry, Mom,' Callie says. 'Wait – uh, just a sec.' She gets up and I hear rummaging from the kitchen. My head feels very heavy in my hands.

'Here.' Something hovers into view. I stare at it for a moment. A forkful of lemon meringue pie. A noise comes from my throat; high,

loud and brief. It's an unnerving sound, even to my own ears. Callie doesn't flinch. She looks at me, steady. 'It will help,' she says.

So I take it. The lemon clings to my tongue, tart, the meringue melts in a sugary fountain in my mouth. It does help, a little. 'Thanks,' I say. I am half laughing because it's so touching, her giving me pie to cheer me up, but part of me wants to cry all over again, because this is what comfort means in my daughter's poor emotional vocabulary – egg white and lemon curd and sugar made by her father's … well, never mind that.

'I'm OK now. Thank you so much, sweetheart.' I take another mouthful of lemon meringue to reassure her.

Callie looks at me with her head tipped to one side for a moment, then she nods in satisfaction. I can almost see the tick appear by my name, taking me off her list of things to do. I'm fixed, she no longer has to worry about me. She goes back to her drawing. The humming resumes.

I keep eating. It's good pie.

I have had my suspicions about Hannah and Irving for a while; there were signs. On a couple of nights I was pulled from the soft depths of sleep by the gentle click of the back door. The long showers he took, the exhaustion. The wine on his breath in the middle of the day. And he seemed happy, which I knew had to come from something outside our marriage.

When I saw the chickenpox blister on Annie's arm it felt like tumblers falling into place on an old-fashioned safe, or a golf ball drifting gently across a green, to fall perfectly into the hole. I just knew. No one went between our house and the Goodwins' while Sam was sick. Or no one was supposed to, anyway. I guess they couldn't help themselves. Did he take Annie over there with him, while he was supposed to be watching her? It doesn't matter exactly how it

happened. My husband infected my little girl. For that I can never forgive him. I think of gopher guts spilling out on the hot cement.

Irving knows the game is up. I saw it in his eyes, earlier, when I told him about Annie's chickenpox. I look at the pie where it sits beside me on the floor, craters gouged out of it, fork standing upright in the layers of lemon curd, meringue and pastry. I wonder if they arranged it between them; her distracting me at the front door while he slipped out the back. So they could meet and go – where? Into that clutch of undergrowth on the next block, the one that's always full of brown snakes in the summer? Do they drive somewhere?

I've noticed that Nick Goodwin never looks at Irving or says his name. It's always *sport*, or *big guy* or *pal* – friendly-sounding, but it's how you'd address a child. His gaze is always focused somewhere over Irving's shoulder. Nick knows, though he may not be conscious of it yet.

I don't think he'll be able to ignore it much longer. Is Nick the type to live in denial, or the kind to force a confrontation? Denial, I guess. He's a realtor, they're pretty good at adjusting reality. I go the third way: I burn with rage inside while presenting a smooth exterior. Not recommended.

What I can't stop thinking is: *I like Hannah.* I like her way more than I like Irving, some days. The loss of our friendship feels like physical pain. A dull ache. Period pain, maybe. I want to say to her, *Pick me, you don't know what he's really like.* I can't seem to feel anything appropriate, even about my husband's affair.

Annie eats the pie delicately with her fingers. She will often follow Callie's lead, but with twice the intensity. Callie refused a fork a couple of times, and now Annie won't use cutlery at all. 'Sweetheart,' I say, and then I leave it. Let her do what she wants.

'Are you and Daddy fighting?' she asks.

'Why do you ask me that?' The guilt is a squeeze on my heart.

'When you look at each other you go all black and fuzzy.'

Kids understand so much. It can be terrifying, sometimes. 'Well, it's healthy for grownups to fight,' I say. 'To get out what's on the inside, so they can be friends again.'

'Are you and Daddy friends?' Her eyes are as big as a bush-baby's.

'Your father and I are best friends. Like you and Maria.'

Annie plays with a fragment of meringue between her fingers. 'Maria doesn't like me any more,' she says. Her lips purse in an unnervingly adult expression of sorrow. 'She's mean to me at school. We don't eat lunch together. It makes me so sad. It makes me want to *die*.'

'Don't say that, honey.' I take her in my arms.

I am dismayed. Maria is a beautiful little girl with satin-sleek dark hair. She looks like a doll and she always speaks in complete sentences. 'Please, Mrs Cussen, I have finished my cake.' She and Annie always played gravely and quietly together. I thought she was the perfect friend for my daughter.

'I think Maria's having a hard time at the moment,' I say. 'You know it's just her and her mom right now. Her mommy and daddy are getting a divorce.' I can't help but feel a grim little thrill of pride. No matter how bad things get, Irving and I haven't put the kids through that. We have clung onto that much. I am ashamed at the spurt of malice I feel towards little Maria, who has wounded my daughter's gentle soul. I hold Annie and breathe the scent of her hair.

The jet of water leaps off the paving stones, loosening the blackened dried guts. If I waited for Irving to come home to clean this up there would be gopher all over the path until goodness knows when. What makes this a man's job, anyway? The blood, the smell? Anyone

who has been through childbirth has seen worse. It's funny how you forget so much about labour – the pain and sound of splitting flesh. It's self-defence. The body's kindly editing, to protect the mind.

I get this taste in my mouth sometimes when I'm afraid or angry – like days-old soda, sickly sweet. It comes to me in dreams, even. It's here now and I want to spit, but of course I can't, anyone might see.

It's not the first dead animal I've come across. Hannah said a cat must have killed the gopher, but people around here keep their cats indoors. I think a predator is passing through the neighbourhood. A coyote or a fox, maybe. A badger or a racoon, perhaps. I've heard they all kill for pleasure. Whatever it is seems to be using my black limestone as a dinner table. I often find these tell-tale smears on the path. In other parts of the neighbourhood I come across the corpses – eviscerated, spread-eagled across stoops and sidewalks and porches. Loops of intestine gleaming in the early sun. Small paws curled up in death, half-closed eyes showing a crescent of blue sclera. So very dead. It's terrible when everything around you seems like a metaphor for your life.

I am waiting by the back door in the tall January shadows when Irving comes in.

'Rob,' he says when he sees me. He is more than a little drunk. 'Just been out to the grocery store.' He swings the bag at his side.

'Did you get everything you needed?'

He smiles at my tone. 'I did,' he says.

'Good. Go inside.'

I flick the deadbolt on the back door behind him. 'No more grocery shopping,' I say. 'I've got your keys. You go out again, you stay out.'

'Are you crazy?' he asks slowly. I keep my nerve.

'Better go find Callie, she was asking for you.'

He stops, a hunch of embarrassment on him. I know that look. He needs something. Asking me for anything sticks in his craw. 'I couldn't see my medicine earlier,' he says. 'You know I need to take it at the same time each day. Have you …?'

'I hid it behind the big tub of Vaseline in the bathroom cabinet,' I say. 'Hope you find it.'

He comes from behind, is on me before I realise. His forearm snakes around, rests lightly against my throat, not restraining me, flesh barely kissing flesh, like a promise. His other hand blocks out the light. For a second I think he's going to cover my eyes, like children do when they sneak up behind. Then I'm afraid he'll slide his fingers into the socket, take my eyeball between forefinger and thumb and gently pull it out. I gasp and bat at his hands. The scream in my throat comes out as a muffled rasp. But Irving's cupped hand just hovers before my face. He breathes into my ear, filling it with the stink of liquor.

'Hope I find it too,' he says. He doesn't touch me, hasn't done since that day, but he likes to come close.

Callie was nine and Annie six. Irving and I were having the mother of all fights. It had already lasted days. We hissed at each other whenever we thought the girls couldn't hear. At night when the kids were in bed we yelled and sobbed and threw things. We woke them up sometimes; Annie would cry. She got back to sleep easily; she was too young to really understand. Callie has always been quick. I know she understood. But Callie never cried and she never said anything.

One evening when Callie was watching TV in the living room I went into the kitchen and he was waiting for me behind the door, still as a post. I started to whisper something hurtful, to let out some of the stored-up bile. Irving reached out and pinched the bridge of my nose so hard I heard the cartilage squeak. Pain rushed through in

a fiery flood. I opened my mouth to scream. But I remembered Callie in the next room and thought, *I mustn't*, so I stopped my throat. I stood there, eyes watering, screaming in silence. There was very little blood but for a couple of days after my nose was swollen and tender as a ripe plum. Annie kept reaching for it, saying *boo boo*.

The following afternoon was a Saturday. We were setting off for bowling with the Goodwins as usual. It was Hannah and Nick's turn to drink so Irving and I took two cars, room enough for both families. I started to get into the jeep with Annie. Callie watched from the step, waiting for Irving to finish whatever he was doing indoors. Whenever we leave the house at the last minute, Irving finds something he has to do: unload the dishwasher, hang a picture, make a call. It's an exercise of power, making me wait, anxiety rocketing higher and higher as we grow later and later for whatever it is we have planned. Also I think he needs the adrenaline of urgency to do anything at all.

Annie always rode with me, Callie with Irving; it was the natural configuration. But now I stopped and called Callie to me.

By the time Irving came out I had both girls settled in the jeep, Annie in the child seat, and Callie belted into the back. 'Bye, Irving,' I said, and backed out of the drive. His face had horror in it. He thought I was taking his daughters. *Good*, I thought. *See how it feels?*

'Why aren't I riding with Dad?' Callie asked.

'I wanted some Callie time,' I said.

The SUV followed us closely all the way to the bowling alley. I could see him in the rear-view mirror, hunched over the steering wheel. His eyes were pinpricks of rage. Around him, the Goodwins were laughing.

The bowling alley was loud with the happy clamour of a family Saturday. I waited until the Goodwins were all busy putting on their shoes. Then I said into Irving's ear, 'Don't you ever touch me again, ever.' He nodded once, face blank. I realised in amazement that I had won.

After we got home and the kids were in bed, I lay listening to Irving's sounds from the bathroom. I never use the en suite. I don't understand them. Why would you defecate so close to where you sleep? I want at least two doors between those activities. It's one of the reasons I love suburbia so much. It barely acknowledges that we have bodies.

When Irving came out I sat up. I wished I hadn't gotten into bed, I didn't like looking up at him.

He smiled, rueful, and raised an eyebrow at me. I smiled back, relieved. 'I'm going to wait,' he said. 'For when this fighting is over, and we're happy again. We'll go to French restaurants like we used to. We'll fall back in love. So deeply in love that it burns us to be apart. Then, one day – maybe we'll be having breakfast, maybe we'll be watching a movie. Something normal. But you'll look over at me to make a joke, ask a question, and I'll be gone. Then you'll look for Callie, and she'll be gone too. I'm going to leave you when you least expect it, and I'm taking her with me.' He loomed over me and planted a kiss on my forehead, light as a dry leaf. 'I'm smarter than you,' he said. 'I've got endurance. I can wait long enough to make it really hurt.' He picked up his glass of water from beside the night table and hurled it at the wall. The sound was like the world opening. Glass flew like diamonds. Irving smiled. Then he got into bed and a moment later he was asleep.

I lay awake beside him, watching the water drip down the ochre bedroom walls. I had chosen that paint colour to be soothing. Like a Tuscan villa under the evening sun, I thought.

Irving kept his promise – he has not touched me in anger since that day. He takes it out on glasses, dishes. Every day I wonder, will it be today? My head shattering against the wall, instead of a plate, or a glass.

*

Annie won't touch the soup I made, or the orange, or the sandwich. So, what the hell, I give her a cookie left over from Christmas. It's a violent pink colour, frosting and all. Annie shouldn't have any more sugar after that lemon meringue pie, I know, but to hell with it. She eats hungrily, then goes to sleep.

Now for some Rob time.

I go to my study, which is just off the living room. Before I start anything I always sit down in my chair and take several deep breaths. *Be where you are. You can't write with chickenpox and adultery and worry about your eldest daughter all whirling round in your brain.* I write longhand; it's the only way I can think.

I started writing the Arrowood School series a couple of years ago, at night, while Irving was working late. It was a chef at a restaurant in Escondido, that time. She must have been good; he gained a lot of weight that year. It's about a fancy boarding school on the New England coast. I must have read *Summer Term at Bingley Hall* a hundred times when I was a teenager. Books sink their hooks deep into your mind at that age. When I first decided to become a teacher I had a secret hope that the school would feel like Bingley Hall. It only took one seminar of teacher certification to put paid to any such misconceptions. Maybe there are Bingley Halls in the world – in England, maybe – but I haven't seen them. Maybe they existed once and now they're all gone. Maybe it's a good thing they only live in our imagination now.

But thoughts are free, as they say. This one's told from the point of view of the sporty girl. She has secrets. I think I'll make her a thief in this one. There's a scandal in each of the Arrowood books. They're a very troubled set of teens.

It's a good distraction. More than that, really. A place to go. There are four Arrowood stories, now. I suppose they're long enough to be called novels. I've never shown them to anyone. Why would I? They are a private thing.

I write in pencil because the last thing I do right at the end when I finish each one is go back through and change all the character names. I use the names of people I know while I'm writing. My family, mainly. Book after book, Rob, Irving, Callie, Annie, Jack, Mia and Falcon betray each other and make friends and whisper secrets. They walk the halls of Arrowood, arm in arm, carrying their books to class and quarrelling over who's going to take who to the Spring Formal with the neighbouring boys' school.

None of these things happened of course, but it's an act of remembrance, nonetheless. Call it therapy if you like.

Eventually the party next door winds down. The music stops and the talking dies. Car doors slam and someone falls over, I think. I hear the sick smack of flesh on concrete. I shake my head in irritation. They'll wake the kids up. Plus, the head girl was about to do something particularly dastardly and now I've lost the thread.

I take my deep breaths and pick up the pencil again. Everything clicks off. It's wonderful, like vanishing.