

Isabel

December 2001–July 2002

EDWARD FLEW BACK, AT last, on Christmas Eve. I heard the taxi outside the house and knew what was expected. I should extract myself from the carpet and greet him in the hallway. My mouth should taste of mint, not rot. I should have unpacked the Christmas decorations from the Library. He would suffer elegant dishevelment, but not this. A T-shirt ringed with sweat, tracksuit bottoms imprinted with the logo of my former employer. The heating in the house was stifling, to accommodate my preference for sleeping on the floor.

I heard him at the bottom of the stairs, calling my name. Cheery, at first, as if we were children playing hide-and-seek. 'I'm here,' I said, but my voice was disused. I could not hear it myself. Into Edward's call there came a specific hell. He moved frantically from room to room. I heard the shatter of something falling to the kitchen floor. And he was here, now, at the bedroom door. He would have seen only my socks, sticking from behind the bed, decorated, mortifyingly, with snowflakes. There was no time for dignity. 'I thought—' he said, and although he couldn't say it, I knew. He was not wrong. I had thought of little else. He came to me then and lay down beside me, as if I had some physical ailment that meant I couldn't be moved, and he held me to his chest. He blinked tears from his eyes and put his head to mine.

'For how long?' he said.

'All the time.'

'Your job, though.'

'I don't have a job anymore.'

I could see the calculations happening behind his face, the miserable sum of oddities and inconsistencies he had hoped to ignore.

'We will make it better,' he said. 'We will make it.'

'I'm so sorry,' I said.

'I love you,' he said. 'I shouldn't have gone.'

'But you've been gone ever since,' I said. He did not deny it, only pulled me closer and said: I will not leave you again. It wasn't true, no; but it was nice to hear it, that morning, all the same.

Edward's promotion took effect in January. In April, we left London for five months. He was told several times that this was career suicide, but with me, at least, he had the grace to avoid the jokes.

We found a villa in southern France. The house was tall and thin with green shutters. A block of stables was crumbling across the yard. The horses had been dead sixty years, the owners said, but nobody had thought to take the bridles from the wall. In their place was the washing machine I used for our clothes, a cupboard full of board games, a set for boules. Each morning, three wild boars would cross the garden, sometimes running at terrific speed, sometimes snuffling along through the grass. There was moss in the tiles of the pool.

There was no access to the internet. Each fortnight, Edward flew back to London for four nights. In his suitcase he carried his single good suit and an ever-rotating mass of bundles, submissions, fractious contracts, each annotated in his small, meticulous writing with the only pen he would deign to use.

'Don't you find it frightening?' I asked. 'Being in the house alone?'

'Not really. Alone – what's the worst that could happen?'

The Death of Us

When he reappeared, he was dishevelled and quiet and slept for a day.

In May, it rained. I sat beneath the olive trees and read books Edward had picked up at the airport. Each morning, I ran to the canal and turned in the same direction, ran eight kilometres to the same shady hamlet, returned the same way I had come. On Sundays, I bought the same cheese from the same market, the same wine, the same gnarled tomatoes.

The only mirror in the house was a ghoulish antique, which we agreed would claim our youth and beauty. I saw myself only in Edward's face. He would appear at the bottom of the stairs, still slow with sleep, and smile to find me there, up, cutting peaches, stepping from my trainers. There were moments when he looked at me as he used to, as if we shared delicious secrets and he trusted I would not share them. He had started once more to tease me for my oddities, my slow breakfasts and cheerfully incompetent French. He was no longer afraid of breaking me.

One night, I found him in the pool. June. The evenings were long and slow. The crickets had started to sing. He watched me coming across the grass, his arms on the concrete and his chin resting on top of them. I wore nothing. I had been on the bed, just out of the shower, reading an Anaïs Nin he had collected from the house. I had spent half an hour there, reading and touching myself, before going outside. I sat on the side of the pool, the concrete still warm from the day, and opened my legs. I had waited as long as I could before I came to him. I knew how wet I would be. He looked at my cunt and then at my face, and he did it with the condescension I wanted, the old arrogance, as if this was just how he would expect to find me. I did not think about our months of abstinence, that he must have been entirely surprised. I lay back on the hot stone and he spread my legs further and waited a moment, his hands on my thighs, his mouth as close as it could be without touching. 'This?' he said. 'This is OK?' You were not there. All of

Abigail Dean

this time, I had been so sure you would be, standing in the corner of my fantasies with your daft mask and your penis in your hand. 'Yes,' I said. And, smiling, 'Please.' He set his tongue against me. It was possible, in moments like this, to believe you would leave us for good.

We have been trying to find each other, Edward and I, ever since you visited us, and I believe that summer was the closest we came.