

Elena Maroutsou

Obscene Orchards

Obscene/ Eloquent/ Voluptuous/ Erotic/ Carnal/ Lewd/ Sultry/ Lusty/ Lascivious/
Steamy/ Titillating/ Libidinous Indecent/ Wanton/ Racy/ Evocative/ Sweet/
Orchidaceous Orchids

CONSTANCE, MY MOTHER'S mother, existed. Her palms existed. Her hip bones existed. Her nipples existed. Her armpits existed. Her legs, which became entwined with those of Oliver Mellors, my grandfather, existed. They may also have got entangled with those of literature – in an effort by the latter to trip her up and lay her forever in its pages – yet they existed. 'She existed', I wanted to write on her tombstone, but isn't that what a tombstone means? A sign that you existed, my mother used to say, with her distinctly British sang-froid, which was quite the opposite of my grandmother, Lady Chatterley's fiery nature. A fire that I too had felt when, as a young child, she held me tightly in her arms and told me stories of crazy heroines, before she fell silent forever in the summer of 1971.

My grandfather, Lady Chatterley's infamous lover, took her life, in accordance with her wishes, before putting an end to his own. That's what they had agreed upon. When they were no longer able to make love in whatever manner they chose, with their bodies, their glances or their words, they would put a full stop at the end of the last page of their story, which was to continue for many more chapters, when D. H. Lawrence put the final full stop to his novel.

Their final wish was that they should be cremated and their ashes scattered in the forests surrounding the Rugby mansion, the celebrated setting in which their love played out.

Their last wish, of course, was not fulfilled, given that my mother was appointed her executor, by definition hostile to desire and an advocate of every law, written or unwritten. So, she buried her according to custom, she also buried my grandfather in a separate grave, just in case they might try to copulate underground. Her only concession to the myth: every month she left a bunch of wild flowers on the cold marble slab.

Melanie, my mother, existed too. Unlike the heavy legs of my grandmother, hers, pale and thin, never got ensnared in the paths of literature – they avoided them with the same melancholic obstinacy with which they avoided the paths of love. As a child of love, she hated, as one would expect, the person who gave birth to her. Or to put it another way: Like children born in wartime carry inside them a secret longing for peace? So did Melanie. Born in a whirlwind of passion, she longed for the order and the serenity that blossom only when passion abates, though her parents' passion never abated. All Melanie wanted was a home like that of her friends. A home where a mother cooks, the father reads his newspaper and the family eats together around the table, exchanging reassuring information about the weather, work, school, or say nothing at all. She didn't want ardent looks, heaving breasts, impatient fingers. Even though her parents didn't neglect her or deprive her of affection, she had the constant feeling that she was an intruder. The certainty that they would be better off alone, just the two of them. Without her.

In fact, in 1960, when, after decades of being banned, the novel came out that described in detail the birth and climax of the passion that made Constance abandon

her first husband for the gardener, Melanie's father, the feeling of being an intruder was joined by another more devious emotion: shame. Even though the writer changed the names, even though her mother was not called Constance in real life or her father Mellors, just the fact that she knew that it was her mother and father was enough. It was enough that it was the bodies of her parents being described in all their naked detail, even though she was a grown woman when the ban was lifted.

From an early age, my mother, the baby that gestated among the pages of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and was born into a humble flat in East London, took the following decision: her child would be born on the sterilized sheets of co-habitation based on common sense, common roots and ideas and civilized dialogue. And, because the man who met the above criteria left her after a few years without any apparent reason, she decided to live alone. Alone she decided, after a few months, to raise me – the product of the only act of rapture she ever allowed herself – the night she made an oath with her empty glass to never remarry.

And so I never knew my father, even though I looked like him. As I didn't look like my mother – who was blonde and blue-eyed while I was a curly-haired brunette – I must have looked like my father. She hasn't even kept a photo of him, and she says she's forgotten his name, which is why I, at the age of eight, called him Pen to myself. In other words, something you write with. Our ancient and modern Greek teacher at school said to me one day, "Lily, did you know that your mother's name in Greek means 'ink'? It was the same day that I decided to call my anonymous father Pen. I imagined them, my father the *quill* and my mother, the ink, composing a letter on the day of my conception. I never knew the recipient only that the text – definitely remarkable and inimitable – would be me.

Of course, I never disclosed these fantasies to my mother, given that their literary and fanciful nature would add yet another brick to the load of sadness and anger that she carried around daily. The strange thing is that she carried it long-sufferingly, with a kind of stubborn pride that as a child I found quite awe-inspiring. During adolescence I hoped for a reckless outburst on her part, an outburst of rage and tears. I imagined this scene ending with reciprocal confessions and hugs, through which the layers of ice on which I tried to keep my balance would melt – between mother and daughter.

Melanie, however, held on tightly to the tiller and did not let any wave, from without or within, throw us off balance. I don't know whether she was motivated by love or an almost desperate commitment to what she perceived as duty. I must admit though that she genuinely cared for me. Even more so, if one takes into consideration that at a time when everyone used physical violence as a means of disciplining children, my mother never once raised as much as a finger to me. This self-restraint makes me shudder with guilt and affection. After that, however, her stolid and restrained ways made me feel like an outsider. An outside that is well taken care of, but still an outsider.

Now that I think about it, it may have been inevitable: an intruder herself during her own childhood, as I was an outsider during mine. Such emotions are so deeply rooted that they are passed down from one generation to the next through the genes and blood. I wonder: will my daughter feel like that too? I'm almost certain that if I manage to have a child – I'm already thirty-seven – it will be a girl. My husband – we got married last summer – says: "Health is everything." I find his truisms so reassuring. As is his touch. It always takes a specific route, always the same, like someone afraid of getting lost in the forest. "You are my gardener," I tell him, but he

doesn't know what I'm referring to. He hasn't read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and I haven't mentioned anything about it. Not that I'm ashamed, like my mother. Quite the opposite. It's just that I don't want him to think that I'm using him to allow me to live something of my grandmother's myth. Yet, the similarities with Mellors the gardener are quite extraordinary. He also speaks with an accent - he was born in a small town north of Manchester - and there's something primitive about his manner and ways. We of course were not caught up in a vortex of passion. My husband Stephen's sensuality borders on childlike tenderness, on the one hand, and the constancy of a giant, on the other. At school the children call him the gentle giant - he's a primary school gymnast - and he grabs them and throws them up in the air, in the same way that he throws me into the air sometimes. We laugh a lot. That's our secret.

We live just outside London, in Reading, in a small bright house, as bright as a house can be in this country. It's made of dark yellow brick, like all the houses in the neighborhood, and behind it is a small patio. My husband and I have turned the patio into a greenhouse. We grow an assortment of plants, cacti mostly, but I am very proud of the orchids. We've managed to get hold of quite a few varieties, all very striking. As I don't know their Latin names, I've given them my own names: "Torn Umbrella", "Antidote of Love", "Velvety Spider", "Mauve Fingers", "Holey Air Balloon", "I-stick-my-tongue-out-at you", "Kiss of Twin Snakes", "Shivers". Of course, there are others. The way I christen my orchids depends on where I see them. It is a spontaneous, almost automatic process. Then, I write the names in a notebook, even though I remember them by heart. I have never forgotten a name or called one by the wrong name. It's strange how one can draw pride from such small things. I derive it from this: neither my imagination nor my memory have ever let me down.

My mother believes that I give things names of my own not just to get close to them but to harness them. She is still very clear-headed and sound of judgment, despite being in her seventies. How can she be made to understand that getting close to something doesn't mean you have to harness it, quite the opposite, you give it freedom. I could tell her that the names I give them are not like harnesses but spurs. You dig your spurs into a horse so that it will start to trot. My mother, though, thinks it's all about being harnessed. Can she change now? When I visit her in her small flat in London, I always bring her an orchid. I don't tell her its name, though. She then goes and leaves it on her parents' grave.

It was her idea that we should get someone to help us in the greenhouse. She didn't see, she says, why we shouldn't make a little something out of the whole business. We could even supply flower shops and send flowers to exhibitions. Many people adore orchids. That's what she said. And, as usual, my husband had no objection. My husband rarely objects to plans that don't turn our daily lives completely upside down. "Why not?" he said. Instead of my looking after the greenhouse on my own, we could employ someone to help. We would see later whether we could actually make some money out of it, especially as my health didn't allow me to work now. I was also in education, a primary school teacher.

I worked at the same school as my husband. That's how we met. Some dizzy spells I'd been having in previous months – the cause of which was still unknown – compelled me to ask for a year's leave of absence without pay. It would have been unwise, both for me and the pupils, to continue working, given my 'condition' – that vague and rather menacing term we used, for lack of something more specific - and so I was given a long holiday.

When the man - or should I say, boy - who rang the bell one day, I had the feeling that I'd seen him before somewhere. His face seemed familiar, like that of someone you see every day on the bus or the cashier at the local supermarket. However, I saw no sign of recognition on his part. His look avoided me and his hand slipped away from mine as if he was in a hurry to put it back in his pocket. His name was Phil. He was from Nigeria. A colleague from school had recommended him. He had just finished Horticulture at college and was looking for a job.

In the beginning he would come every day to see how the plants were doing and gradually add new varieties, which he would advise on how to look after. After that, his visits would gradually lessen so that in the end he would come just once a week. On the day when he first appeared at the house, he had a small notebook and a metre. He measured the patio and then counted the orchids. He leaned over each one in the manner of a doctor on his hospital rounds, noting things down. He appeared to be deep in thought. On his next visit he started work.

He always arrived very early in the morning and went straight to the greenhouse. I had usually just got up and was walking around drinking a cup of tea. He never wanted anything else except water. He never said much. Most of the time, he just poked around in the soil, examining the roots of the plants. From the colour and the texture he was able to tell if they needed water or if they were being watered too much. I wasn't sure whether he was happy or not with what he saw, as his face, like an African mask, revealed nothing at all. Only his lower lip, which was rather full and dark, appeared to hang sometimes in an expression that might have conveyed disapproval, abstraction or lust.

It was the middle of July and the heat, because of the humidity, was beginning to get stifling. Phil wandered around among the plants naked from the waist up. His

ribs showed through his dark skin, like the ribs of an antelope I had once seen on TV. It ran and ran, I remember, before a lioness seized it in its jaws. Just before it breathed its last, its ribs rose and fell with each breath, while the look on its face seemed to indicate that it had surrendered to its fate. It was midday and Phil went on working, while the sweat ran down his forehead in round droplets. One of these dripped on to an orchid. It was “Slender Moment”, in my taxinomial jargon. He touched its petals and then turned to me.

“Orchids belong to the Orchidaceae family. They were called that because the two lower petals look like *orcheis* (*testicles*). Yet, I think that the other two, the ones we call sepals, look like the labia of the female vagina.”

As I hadn't heard his voice for two weeks, since the first time he entered the house and introduced himself, I was startled, as if all of a sudden a pet had started to talk. Or the antelope on television had begun to recite a poem. The particular poem seemed rather inappropriate, so I stood there speechless looking at him. Soon after that, I left the patio and went into the garden. My husband felt that the only inappropriate thing was that I likened Phil to a house pet or an antelope. “There's no difference between black people and white,” he said with his condescending wisdom and then smiled: “Is it possible, Miss Lily, that Phil has aroused in you some animal desire?”

The lack of any inkling of jealousy on my husband's part is typical and stems not so much from a lack of possessiveness as an innocent belief in the inertia of love. Having developed in two people, it tends to retain its strength and energy as long as – according to him- it is genuine. I, on the other hand, have no cast-iron theory about love. What I have asserted in the past has proved totally wrong. What I

have proclaimed in the past has left me with my tongue hanging out. That's why I watch my tongue, as it tends to get fired up more than my body.

Talking about my body, I've observed the following: my left breast has begun to get old. When I take off my blouse and my bra, the nipple remains crinkled for a bit, the skin around it creased, until it slowly resumes its former, relatively smooth state. I'm getting old, I think in front of the mirror, where one always thinks such things, but why the left nipple first? Maybe it got tired covering my heart? My husband doesn't have the courage to follow this line of thought and so give me a satisfactory answer. And when I say satisfactory, I mean both convincing and consoling. He just says: "I can't see that either breast has got old. If you ate a little more, it might get a little rounder," thus admitting in a way that decay has indeed set in and started to erode my body.

Phil scrutinizes my body. He thinks I don't notice because I've usually got my head stuck in a book, but I've caught glimpses of him looking at me on several occasions: when he stops watering for a bit or has brought in some new pots and stands up to stretch his back, he scans my body as if trying to read something on it written in tiny letters. I think maybe my husband is right: that by rights this young man should be arousing desire in me, an animal desire, as he playfully puts it, yet he arouses in me a mixture of pity and mistrust. I can't find the root of these feelings. I imagine, though, that they both have to do with the fact that he doesn't say much. After what he said last week about the similarity between the petals and testicles or the vaginal labia, I have hardly managed to get more than two or three words out of him. Of course, this sadness, combined with mistrust, could in another woman, or even in me in the past, very easily give rise to some form of desire. Now, however,

my heart is far too fortified against such a ruinous eventuality. My heart is far too fortified and my body far too vulnerable.

That doesn't mean that I am totally impassive towards him. I sometimes feel an intense need to put my hand on his dark shoulder and say sorry. Don't ask me why. Other times I'd like to open out his palm and read the lines on it, in the same trancelike and slightly self-destructive frame of mind one stares at railway lines. A friend of mine said that another's silence is like the still waters of a lake. What we see when we look at them is merely our own reflection. Yet, I would like to see something at the bottom of the lake.

Anyway, one day when Phil was not working at our place, so I didn't have to be at home, I decided to go by school. Stephen was on leave, spending his time doing odd jobs for the people in the area, so I knew he wouldn't be there. Besides, I didn't go for that reason. I went hoping to find the colleague who had introduced Phil to us. As I had expected, I found her in the staffroom correcting papers. The exams were over and the teachers were doing office work.

I didn't know how to steer the conversation in the direction I wanted, but I was in luck.

"By the way, how are things going with Phil and the greenhouse? Are you happy with him?" she asked the moment she saw me.

"He's very good. All the flowers have really perked up. Now we have more orchids. He brought us some very rare seeds. I reckon soon we'll be supplying shops."

"I'm so glad I was able to help. He's turned out to be really useful for us too. Our orchard was in a terrible state. The trees had developed some rare disease.

Thanks to Phil, not only were the trees saved but they produced a lot of fruit. I was upset when we fired him.”

“Why did you fire him?”

“For no reason at all really. Barry, my husband, is pathologically jealous. He got the notion that he was looking at me in a strange way.”

“What do you mean ‘in a strange way’?”

“Sort of erotically. Just Barry imagining things.”

“But he wasn’t looking at you...?”

“I don’t know ... I think it was just the way he looked. Instead of speaking, he just looked. Maybe it’s his way of communicating. Who knows... Besides, he’s been through a lot.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure it’s true, but the person who introduced him to us told us that Phil’s father was killed in front of his eyes when he was only a child.”

“Who killed him?”

“To be honest with you, I didn’t quite understand... I think his father was mixed up in gun running. Maybe it had to do with a settling of scores. His mother, he says, became a prostitute so that she could bring him up and used to receive customers in their home. I didn’t want to find out any more.”

“Has he been here many years?”

“Not many. He finished school in South Africa. Things weren’t easy for him there, you see, because of his colour. In the end, he ran away with a group of Nigerians and came here to England. How he managed to survive is quite remarkable.”

“Indeed,” I said. “Remarkable.”

For some reason the word resonated oddly inside me.

The next day, Stephen told me that my mother had asked for me on the phone. She didn't sound well, he said. I tried many times throughout the day to get through to her, but she didn't pick up. So, I took the train and went to her place. During the forty-five minute journey, concerns for my mother were mingled almost involuntarily with the disturbing information about Phil. The heat, the noise of the train and the slight dizziness that I had been experiencing made me fall into a strange lethargy that took the form of brief but very vivid dreams. In one of them, Phil had placed an orchid in my hair. The orchid, however, started to go deeper and deeper, spreading its roots under the skin. As I was thrashing about in a state of anxiety, my mother came along with an enormous pair of scissors and in one go cut all my hair off. 'I've saved you,' she said, while some blood started to run down the back of my neck.

I ran up the stairs of the block of flats where Melanie lived two steps at a time – the lift was out of order – and rang the bell of the apartment. There was no one there. I opened the door with my key and went in. The truth is I hadn't been there for some time. We usually met in Hyde Park, her favourite spot. We walked for a bit, drank orange juice on a bench, exchanged news and then I went with her as far as the entrance to the block of flats. I thought the reason why she didn't want me to come up was her solitary self-sufficiency. At the same time, the idea that I might feel alien in a familiar place, the feeling that haunted me during my childhood, made me prefer these walks to home visits that would probably have been awkward for both of us.

Seeing the state of the small apartment, though, I felt a pang of conscience. In the sink, which used to shine, were piles of dirty plates and glasses that had been

there for days. The teapot was covered in grime. Her bed was not only unmade but covered in a jumble of letters and papers, bills mostly and some notices from banks concerning money she owed. I couldn't help wondering where she slept. Suddenly, I heard voices in the living room. I approached cautiously but it was just the television that had been left on. I collapsed exhausted on to the sofa. Neglect had spread like mould, taking over the whole place.

As I was trying to apply some order, the house phone rang. I heard a male voice on the other end.

"Hello. I'm ringing on behalf of Mrs. Melanie Mellors. Perhaps you know her? I found your number on the card in her bag."

"Yes, of course. She's my mother. What's the matter? Where are you calling from?"

"Don't worry. Your mother broke her leg falling down the stairs. A neighbour brought her to the hospital. Otherwise, she only has minor scratches. However, because of her age, she'll have to remain immobile for at least two weeks. I'll fill you on the rest when you get here."

The hospital was only a few stops away by the underground. I bought a few muffins with wild fruit in them, which I knew she likes, and I began to eat one on the train. A young man of mixed race about the same age as Phil was sitting opposite me. I noticed that he even looked like him. He was wearing a sports shirt and Bermuda shorts that hung baggily around his narrow thighs, so that you could see the elastic of his underpants. He was sitting with his legs open. His thighs were long and narrow but strong. I remembered *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In one of the chapters, Constance was thinking how important legs are, i.e, how it was possible to judge someone by

their legs. As far as I remember, she realized the importance of legs after she had made love to Mellors the gardener. What my grandmother really thought after making love to her future husband, only she knows. She may have found fingers important. Or chins. Or chests. Or the way he cried or chewed his food. My food all fell on my legs. What would my fictional grandmother have thought of that? I wondered: if I were the hero of a work of fiction, how would the writer describe the crumbs that fell onto my lap? How would he connect that scene with my mother's broken leg? I began to push the breadcrumbs gently towards my knees, in a kind of trance. After a little, I noticed that the young man had got up to get off the train. Inside his Bermudas I could make out an incipient erection. I also got off at the next station.

My mother seemed to be definitely in a good mood. "I'm fine," she said. "I can leave tomorrow." She left in two weeks, as the doctor had advised. While she was in hospital, whenever I went to visit her, we ended up having an argument. She wanted to continue to live as she did, which I thought was just not on. "There was a cockroach in the sink," I said. "The old sewers are to blame," she replied. The whole building was infested with cockroaches. "It's not just the cockroaches," I said. "Oh, yes, what other creatures did you see?" "Very funny, mother! Your sarcasm won't get you anywhere." "I don't want to go anywhere. I want to go home."

In the end, she came to live with us. For the time being, I said, until we can come up with a solution. She wasn't even aware that there was a problem. One of the good things about getting old, though, is that you can no longer fight for your rights. In the end, you have to give in. We emptied the small office beside the patio and put a bed in it and a small bedside cupboard we bought cheaply. I have to say that while I was fixing the room to receive her I felt both exhilaration and anxiety. I

very much wanted my mother to feel at home. In fact, I decided to go by her flat the first chance I had to pick up a few things that I knew she couldn't do without. Her pillow, for example. And her television, which she could never be parted from. Our television was in the room next to our bedroom, where we had moved the small desk. We hoped that it would soon become a child's bedroom.

A day before we brought mother from the hospital I woke up with a terrible headache and an intense feeling of lightheadedness similar to vertigo. Not only was I tired from all the preparations – I, who have never had an obsession with order and cleanliness, had set about making the place sparkle – but the heat, thirty-seven degrees in the shade, made it impossible for me to get out of bed. When the bell rang at nine sharp – he was more punctual than an Englishman – I didn't even have time to change or have breakfast, as I was in the habit of doing at that time. So, I opened the door in my nightie. I followed him to the patio to ask him if he wanted anything to drink – I just managed to grab the end of his shirt just as everything started spinning and I collapsed in a heap.

When I opened my eyes, I was still on the floor of the greenhouse, with Phil holding my legs up. To be exact, he had laid them on his lap and was massaging the soles of my feet. I felt the blood once again flow from my feet to my hip, my chest, my neck and my head, imbuing me with a nauseating feeling of warmth, while Phil had now bent my knees up to my chest. He held them there for a while, calling my name. It was strange hearing his voice so close to my ear, even though it sounded as if it was coming from miles away. I closed my eyes again like someone wishing to return to a dream, when I felt I couldn't catch my breath. Phil was gently pinching my left nipple. No, no, not the left nipple, I thought, not the one that's getting old, and,

overcome with shame, I started nodding my head from left to right. He then took his hand off my breast and gave me a sharp slap on the face. I opened my eyes.

“You’ve come round at last,” he said rather coldly. “I thought you were having some sort of fit.” “What fit?” I asked, as I got up from the floor. “I don’t know.” Hysteria, epilepsy...” I looked into his eyes. They were just like a still-water lake. I wondered whether there was a corpse floating in there. “Ah,” I said. “Thank you for helping me.” “Be careful,” he said and turned towards the orchids.

Installing my mother coincided with the first rain of the summer. Heavy clouds covered Reading from early morning, like dirty ungainly sheep. The storm broke around midday. My husband, who never missed a chance to extract some positive sign from the smallest thing, said: “Great, a change in the weather... It’ll get cooler, you’ll see.” I could see one storm after the other on the horizon. After my mother had entered her little room without saying a word, she didn’t come out for the rest of the day. She didn’t even eat her favourite food that I had prepared for her. “Maybe it’s no longer her favourite food,” said Stephen. It was one of the few times his naivety didn’t manage to pacify me. I was angry that my mother didn’t appreciate all the effort I had put into getting the house ready for her and she seemed determined to punish me for getting my way. Statements like “Give her time” or “Old people are set in their ways”, clichés uttered by so many people made me feel sick, as if you had put regurgitated food into my mouth.

For the next few days, my mother didn’t speak to me, while Phil, after the few sentences we had exchanged on the day I fainted, reverted to his uncommunicative self. As Stephen had started coming home from work almost every evening late, silence had begun to spread its tentacles unhindered into every room, threatening to stifle every voice within me. I wanted to talk to someone about this abuse of silence,

but it appears that I too had begun to lose my words, to turn into a mute orchid called “Sealed Lips”. In fact, as time went by, the more I regressed to those years when I felt an outsider in my own home. I don’t know how exactly it happened, but I became a child again.

My mother, erect and aloof, took my favourite doll, a Japanese girl with a porcelain face, and with one blow smashed it to pieces against the wall. I awoke from the nightmare crying. I was still crying when I opened the door to let Phil in. Surprise, surprise, he didn’t say a word. He just pulled me towards the patio as if he was about to punish me. We carried on through the plants, he in front, I behind. When we reached my favourite orchid – I had called it “A Wasp’s Double Sting” – he kissed me. He had his arms around my waist and I had put mine around his neck, as if we were dancing the blues. As long as that kiss lasted – I can’t be certain for how long – I had the same feeling I had the first time I saw him at my door. Not only did I feel that his tongue, his mouth, his taste were familiar to me, but that I had been away for a long time and was returning worn out and longing for that kiss.

I didn’t sleep all night. Just before dawn I went downstairs to the greenhouse to the corner where the kiss had taken place. I sat down cross-legged with my chin on both hands. I had never felt like that before. By the age of thirty, I had had quite a few affairs, all of which I referred to as insurmountable hurdles. It was perhaps the hurdle that made them feasible, as I was afraid to get too close to a man, even though it was something I craved. Stephen appeared, offering me his warm embrace, just at the moment when I had finally come to the conclusion that I was incapable of such close contact. I snuggled into it - I understand that now - as I would have snuggled into the embrace of the father I never knew. This kiss, though, was a lover’s kiss.

It was just getting light when Steve's voice woke me.

"What are you doing here, Sleeping Beauty? I think your mother's looking for you. She may have finally spoken."

"Really? You went by her room? Is she okay?"

"She's fine. She's sitting up on her pillows, has brushed her hair and has been calling you for a quarter of an hour or more."

"What does she want? Did she wake you up?"

"No. I was about to leave for work. It was six-thirty, silly. Why did you get out of bed?"

"I couldn't sleep. I didn't feel well."

"You should go and do those tests the doctor prescribed. With two sick women in the house, who's going to cook for me?" he said smiling and kissed me on the cheek before leaving.

I was at the train station and was waiting for the 10.00 to London. My mother wanted me to go to her flat to get her some papers that she desperately needed, her correspondence among other things – bills and things like that which appeared to be of great importance to her. I was about to get on the train when I heard someone calling me. I turned and saw Phil. He was wearing red trousers that made me think of the gardener Mellors. The kind of trousers, he said, that men should wear. In the book, of course, because in reality my grandfather was very conservative in what he wore. To be precise, he probably didn't care much – something that was no longer useful stopped being of any concern to him. I wondered if Phil would fulfil the requirements of such a figure of literature as Mellors. Up till then, I had always thought that my husband had quite a lot in common with the gardener: courage, simplicity, straightforwardness. What he lacked though was mystery, a dark past and

the seductiveness that permeated every movement made by Lady Chatterley's Lover and which I now found in my own lover – or to be precise - my prospective lover.

He was also going up to the London to visit the Horticultural library. The last orchid seed he had planted seemed to start rotting before it had bloomed properly. The roots were as soft as seaweed. We sat together on the train, he by the window, I next to the aisle. He looked out of the window throughout the journey, while I tried to concentrate on my book. I stole furtive glances at his red trousers.

“Why are you always so silent?” I asked him.

“To listen better,” he replied.

“What is it you want to hear better?”

“Your story,” he said.

“You really want to hear my story?”

“Yes, really, very much.”

I told him about my grandmother and grandfather and how they had eloped and had a child, my mother, and how they had been turned into a novel. Lady Chatterley's Lover.

“I know it,” he said.

“You do?”

“That book. I read it when I was sixteen.”

“And what did you think of it?”

“Too good to be true.”

“What do you mean?”

“Passion seldom brings happiness.”

“That's right. Seldom. But it does happen.”

“Did your grandparents continue to love each other to the end?”

“Exactly. To the end.”

“They would not have wanted to blemish their reputation.”

This sounded strange coming from his lips. I would have imagined them coming from the thin lips of a philologist, not from the ample lips of a black gardener, but I immediately reprimanded myself. After all, what did I know about him?

“What about your parents?” I asked, remembering the weird things my colleague from school had told me.

“What about my parents?” he asked, looking me straight in the eye.

“Did they love each other?”

He lowered his eyes and looked the other way. With one knee he touched mine. I didn't move away. Our knees stayed like that until we got off at Paddington station.

He insisted on going with me to my mother's house. He could go later to the university. I asked him which orchid had the problem. “The one with the black petals,” he said. “It's very rare.” I told him that I had named it “Depth of Purity”. He told me that it was the most apt name he had ever heard. “For an orchid?” I asked. “For everything,” he replied.

As soon as we entered my mother's flat, we smelt something putrid. The smell was coming from the kitchen. Phil opened the oven and we were both nearly knocked over by the stench. It seems that on the day my mother fell she was cooking chicken. Now it was just an oozing mass, crawling with maggots. Phil put it in a rubbish bag along with the pan and left it out on the kitchen balcony. “We don't have much time,” he said, and he again took me by the hand. We went to my mother's room and began to look through the papers strewn on the bed. “We don't even have time for that,” he said and swept the papers on to the floor.

He laid me fully clothed on my mother's bed. I was wearing a dress with braces that buttoned up crisscross at the back. It was narrow and when he pushed the braces down the buttons came off. He looked at my heaving breast, white under my brown arms.

"Your breasts are like peaches. Like white-skinned peaches," he said. Peaches, I thought, that have begun to shrivel.

"Why did you pinch my nipple when I fainted?" I asked.

"To bring you round," he said, grabbing my wrists and holding them on my hip so that I couldn't move. "You came round, didn't you?" he asked me as he undid his trousers. I didn't know how to reply and turned my head the other way. "You came round, didn't you?" he continued and brought my head back to face his. My vagina was narrow and dry and I felt that he was tearing me. When he was fully inside me, I remained quite still. He was holding my wrists above my head. We stayed like that for some time looking at each other like two animals about to go at each other. Then, this inaction became unbearable and my hip began to contract in almost uncontrollable spasms under him. My body was shaking as if trying to throw off his weight, which had become unbearably erotic. "You came round, didn't you?" he insisted, to which my body began to respond like the persistent beat of a drum.

My stomach shuddered, making his begin to drum on to mine, upping the tempo. At the same time, I felt my vagina trying to suck in not only a man's penis but the whole man.

Just before he came, Phil whispered into my ear: "You are my favourite peach."

I was alone in the flat trying to impose some order. Some of the papers my mother wanted I found, but not all. I went about searching every drawer and cupboard in the house. As I was searching, a horrible suspicion entered my head. Had Phil said “You are my favourite peach” or “You are my favourite bitch”? Maybe he was just a black guy who liked to fuck his white ‘lady’, just as Mellors used to call Constance? When I had taken him to the door and seen him with those red triumphant trousers, I was overwhelmed me with shame. Suddenly, he seemed alien to me. I watched him go down the stairs holding the bag with the decomposed chicken and ran for a bit after him. “Kiss me”, I said. I wanted him to kiss me to dispel the momentary feeling of alienation that followed the act of lovemaking. He squeezed me in his arms and once again we were two children without a father.

Now, rummaging absent-mindedly through my mother’s things and at the same time racking my memory to own up to whether it was a p or a b, whether I had had a romantic fling or a perverse passion, my hand happened on an envelope marked “Confidential”. I recognized my mother’s writing. She had written those letters with red ink most likely hoping to deter some curious person from reading the contents. As I opened the envelope, my anxiety about having intercourse with Phil rather than subside increased, as if the forbidden envelope and the forbidden act were in some mysterious way connected, making my hands shake as I read the contents. ‘Act of Adoption’ was the title of the document, with the date of my first birthday on it. This document declared that I had been legally adopted from the child-care home where my biological mother had left me. It also stated that Melanie Mellors was aware of the health problem of the infant, who had in fact been christened Annabel. In the envelope were the christening papers as well as the medical report. Of course, they had to do with me. Annabel.

I was lying on the bed, deathly pale, according to the man pacing nervously up and down the room.

“But I told Phil to go with you there and back! Why did he let you come back alone? You could easily have fainted on the train!”

“You told Phil to go with me?”

“I didn’t tell him. I begged him... He told me that you fainted in the patio. I didn’t want the same to happen on the train.”

“There was no need. And don’t beg him to do anything again.”

“Why? Didn’t he behave himself with you? Did he insult you?”

“Not at all. It’s just that I’m not all that intimate with him. He makes me feel awkward.”

“The truth is he is rather taciturn, but he’s not a bad fellow. I trust people who’ve had a hard time of it.”

“Why do you say that? What’s he been through?”

“They say his mother left home when he was still a little boy. Rumour has it that she probably ran off with a white man.”

“We have no idea what is hidden in someone’s past,” I said and then declared that I wanted to go to sleep.

I slept for forty-eight hours.

The medical reports contained in the envelope mentioned some sort of damage to one of the valves of my heart. My mother explained that it was easier for a single

mother to adopt a child with a health problem. As a rule, they gave infants to married couples, who preferred healthy children, as young as possible. So, those that were left, older children or with learning difficulties or with a serious health problem were usually given to women, like my mother, who didn't have a husband. When I asked her why I hadn't at least been informed of my heart problem, she told me that after an operation when I was two years old, the doctors told her that in all likelihood my problem wouldn't recur. It was advisable, they told her, that she should take care when bringing me up and to make sure I didn't experience any intense emotion. Under no circumstances should she hit or scold me a lot. Take care, they said, and all would be well.

My mother admitted all this without the slightest guilt or fear. Her clenched lips only showed anger, because she now had to explain something that she considered personal. "As far as you were concerned, there was no difference," she said, "Whether I was your real mother or not made no difference to the way I brought you up. I looked after you, I cared for you, I brought you up." Why don't you leave me alone then, I wanted to add, but I didn't dare. When will you take me home? That was her only concern. When you come round. Now, mummy, I'm going to look after you.

Stephen, however, was more worried about my health. He was worried that with all this emotion my heart would burst out of my chest. The left. The aging peach. I wasn't particularly worried about anything. Now that the silence had been broken, voices came to me as if through cotton wool. In fact, it was as if the cotton wool didn't just cover my ears but my whole body. And the only person who could part the cotton wool was not there. Phil wasn't going to come that week. He had phoned Steve to tell him that he was sick. In his place, until he got better, he would send a

girl. When I saw her at the door – white, red-haired, with heavy breasts and freckles on her cleavage – I wondered if she were his girlfriend.

Katy, who introduced herself as Phil's cousin, wasn't in the least like him. Flamboyant, frolicsome, good-humored and talkative, flitted among the flowers like a butterfly. Even after we had sorted out her identity, her presence continued to be ominous. Of course, after sorting out my identity, everything seemed somewhat ominous. I even lost faith in my husband, even though I realized – at least in my case – that it was his trust that should have been impaired. Inside me, an earthquake had taken place. And in an earthquake you are not the one who decides what will be displaced and where to. My whole world had been turned upside down. Lies. Not all of it. It would all be turned upside down later.

Sitting in a large armchair, a lemonade in my hand, I watched Katy caring for the orchids. I felt like a mother whose children are being looked after by someone else. I wanted things to return to the way they were, but the size of the greenhouse made it no longer possible for me to look after them alone. My orchids had grown up without me. Katy was full of praise. "Now you have your mother to look after," she said kindheartedly. At the thought that Phil had already told her about me, something warmed inside me. "Is he a little better?" I found the courage to ask and she then, as if I had pressed a button, began to provide me with as much information about Phil as I could have possibly wanted. In fifteen minutes I found out more about Phil than he would have told me in five years. Besides, in fifteen years he would be my age, when my left breast would have withered even more.

Katy transplanted one orchid after the other, making careful observations about the soil, compressing the roots with her long fingers, smelling the moisture in the pot. At that moment she was transplanting 'Defenceless Nest', as I called it,

when she began talking about Phil. His father was white, Scottish in origin, from Katy's side of the family. He had met his wife in Nigeria, where she worked as a secretary in the British ambassador's office. After a brain hemorrhage he could no longer work and started to take drugs. It wasn't long before he was pimping his wife. Phil was only eight at the time. After four years his father died of an overdose.

"I hope Katy didn't drive you crazy with her chitchat..." Phil said to me. His cousin let it out that they had shared the same apartment. I asked her for the address so that I could supposedly send a pot as a present, with orchids. Now I was sitting awkwardly in an uncomfortable chair in the middle of the room, which would have been spacious if it wasn't cluttered with books.

"She told me some things about you," I admitted.

Besides, she might have told him herself.

"You never told me how much you like literature," I said, trying to change the conversation.

"I think I've only read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*."

"I doubt it. You just want to hang on to that air of mystery around you. Who is your favourite writer then?"

"I don't know. I really like Edgar Allan Poe. I used to read him in my teens."

I remembered the poem with Annabel Lee.

"You know, I was christened Annabel?"

"Who? When?"

"My mother. My biological mother. Before giving me up for adoption."

"How long have you known this?"

"Since the day you went inside me."

He bent his head. He remained like that for a while and then looked me in the eye.

“Are you full of hatred?”

“For whom?”

“For anyone. For your mother, let’s say. One of your two mothers.”

“No. I feel dizzy. As if I was falling from a high place at great speed.”

“Because you lost your sparkle?”

“What sparkle? What do you mean?”

“Lady Chatterley’s Lover. You were the real grandchild of a real lady who became the heroine of a novel. In a sort of a way you too were fictional.”

“Of course it’s not about that. Why be sarcastic?”

“I am sarcastic because you’re being insincere. Your fine upbringing won’t let you admit everything that you feel about your mother now. It won’t even let the idea enter your head that you might feel anger, betrayal, abandonment.”

“And how do you know how I feel?”

“I know because I entered you and saw you.”

“You saw nothing.”

“I saw something.”

“What?”

“Something that you don’t want to see.”

“Doesn’t it have a name?”

“No. It’s black and it doesn’t have a name.”

“Impossible. I give names to everything.”

“Yes, but first it must come out of the depths in which it’s hidden.”

“And how will that happen?” I asked.

“There are many ways. I would recommend poetry.”

“Which poetry?”

“You’ll see.”

“You’ll read poetry to me?”

“No. You’ll read poetry to me. Take this book,” he said and grabbed one with green binding.

He gave it to me. It was the complete works of Philip Larkin. I didn’t used to read poetry. For me literature was confined to novels.

“Come here,” he said and made me sit on his lap. While I leafed through the book he kissed my neck.

“Even your neck smells of peach,” he said.

My doubts were dispelled. So, he had said ‘peach’. The other day, at my mother’s house, he had called me ‘peach’. I kissed his hair. It was so curly that my kiss remained on the surface like a dewdrop. He raised my dress, slowly took down one of my stockings as far as the ankle and then put his palm on my knee.

“Even your knee is round like a peach.”

Then he caressed my shin from my knee up. When he reached my panties, he parted them. He put his finger inside. “Peach juice,” he said. Then without taking me off his lap, he entered me.

“Page one hundred and forty-two.”

“What’s that?” I sighed.

He again placed the book in my hands.

“Page one hundred and forty-two. Read it.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

If he had told me to get down on all fours and bark like a dog, I would have been less embarrassed.

“I can’t now.”

“Come on, darling Lily,” he said and took me by the waist and began lifting me up and down on him.

I read the first verse.

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had

And add some extra, just for you.

It was as if they had cut me in two. One half was a mouth and the other half a vagina. Nothing else existed. As I recited one verse after the other, my mind, focused on the mouth, had left the vagina by itself, surrendered to the foreign body that was going in and out, surrendered to the feeling of that body, to that nauseating pleasure. I continued to recite one verse after the other. One would imagine that in that state of rapture I wouldn’t understand what I was saying, yet the meaning of the poetry pervaded me, penetrated me just as the man’s organ did - rhythmically, decisively, aiming at the middle of my stomach, the depth of my existence.

But they were fucked up in their turn

By fools in old-style hats and coats,

Who half the time were sappy-stern

And half at one another’s throats.

Not only had they split me in two, but as the scene in which my insides were being despoiled by that cruel, dark and incisive poem, a third part of myself, which deserted my body and watched what was happening from above, rose to the

surface. It was a lucid piece of consciousness, which, mute, was aware not only of what was happening to me but also to Phil, to that body nestled inside and around me, what was happening to both of us, in that room full of books scattered here and there, in that city full of bodies scattered here and there, gasping to burrow once more into the crack from which they were once dragged, covered in blood writhing in the alien light.

At the last verse of the poem, Phil lifted me up, turned me round and made me bend down on the bed. He stayed standing, our legs slightly apart, the only point of contact being our coupled genitals. He placed the book on the bed in front of my eyes and showed me the last verse.

Man hands on misery to man.

It deepens like a coastal shelf.

Get out as early as you can,

And don't have any kids yourself.

I had only just time to read the last verse as Phil was moving uncontrollably in the final spasms of the orgasm. If, as he said, he wanted me to unearth his buried anger with that poem, he had succeeded. I felt overwhelmed with anger, not for my mother, but for him. He couldn't see how alike we were. He couldn't see that we were pieces of the same broken toy that some hand had managed to put back together. If his aim was to part us with Larkin's words and divide us irrevocably in two, I felt that the poem was the glue that joined us together forever.

“You would make me very happy if you found a way to patch things up with your mother,” Stephen said, stroking my hair. It was Sunday morning and we were still lying in bed.

“If I found a way to patch things up with my mother or if I found my mother?”

“What nonsense? She’s your mother. There is no other. The other wrote herself off as your mother.”

“What if she was forced to? What if she had no choice?”

“Where on earth are all these questions coming from? There is always an element of need and an element of choice in everything. No doubt your biological mother’s decision came partly out of need and partly out of choice. As was the case with the mother who brought you up. Melanie chose to bring you up even though you were a sick baby.”

“She had no option but to take a sick baby because she chose to live alone.”

“Are you sure she made a choice? And, besides, we could go on asking these questions ad infinitum. You are where you are now and your mother is where she is and you have the choice to make it up with her. She can’t do that.”

“The fracture in her leg is better.”

“But not the fracture inside her.”

He was right. As always Stephen was right. I was in a position to take the initiative. So, I took a tray with a cup of milk and a muffin, one of those that she is fond of, and took it to her room. She was sitting on her bed with her hair tied up in a bun. She had already made her bed and she had laid the tray with yesterday’s food on the table opposite. She hadn’t touched it.

I placed the new tray on the bedside cupboard and went to sit down beside her.

“You’re not hungry?” I asked.

“Not particularly,” she said.

“But you’re taking medication.”

She turned and looked at me.

“I never forced you to eat.”

“Didn’t I eat as a child?”

“Crumbs. Like a sparrow.”

“And you got angry?”

“I was constantly afraid that you’d get sick and die.”

I took her hand. Her skin was so dry it looked as if it might tear.

“Why did you change my name? Didn’t you like Annabel?”

“I wanted to make you mine. That’s why I gave you a name of my own. One that I thought up. Like you give names to your orchids.”

“And why did you choose the name Lily?”

“Because I thought it suited you. Because you became mine without a father, like the virgin Maria who smelt the Lily.”

I took her dry hand and kissed it. Without withdrawing hers, she reached out with the other and took a muffin.

“Delicious. Is it with wild fruit?” she asked.

“Yes, mummy,” I said and helped her to get up and walk around the house for a bit.

By the beginning of September my mother’s leg had got better. And she seemed in a better mood too, as I had decided not to ask any more questions about my adoption. I pretended nothing had happened. Yet, something had happened. I was no longer

the same person. I noticed it one day when I went by the school to say hello to the pupils and tell them that I'd soon be back. Surrounded by a flock of children, I fainted in the yard. This time, Stephen, more worried than ever, took me to hospital himself, where he insisted I had a series of tests. I was sure that they wouldn't show anything, but they did: I was pregnant.

I persuaded Stephen not to tell my mother until a few months had passed and we were sure that everything was all right. Anyway, she was going to leave any day and I didn't want her to change her plans. There may no longer have been any of the friction there had been between us but we were left feeling tired, which was apparent to both of us. It was time she went back to London. As the doctors had recommended that I should avoid too much traveling, Stephen decided to go with her to her flat on Saturday morning, the day Phil came to tend to the greenhouse.

I had sat down cross-legged in a corner of the patio, in the spot where he had first kissed me, and watched him tending one of my beloved orchids, Imitation of Passion. It was distinctive because of the deep red of the two petals that hung down like tongues. The other two were pure white. It was as if the deep red was sticking its tongue out at the white or the white had suddenly started to bleed. It was the first chilly day of autumn, but inside the patio it was still warm. Outside the glass I could see footprints in the dry yellowing leaves. Stephen and my mother had just left the garden and I watched them get into the car. Steve helped her bend and put her bad leg into the car. I saw the door close but heard no sound. It was not just the glass that separated us.

"I'm pregnant," I said to Phil, who was bending in front of me. I thought he hadn't heard because I saw no reaction. After a few minutes silence, I repeated: "Phil, I'm pregnant."

“Congratulations...” he said without moving. I went and stood in front of him. I took the orchid he was tending and picked it. I threw it on to his knees.

“It’s yours,” I said.

“What? The orchid?”

“No. My daughter.”

“How do you know it’s a girl?”

“Just as I know it’s yours. I just know.”

“You should know then that there’s no ‘just’ about it.”

“It’s, because I love you.”

He took the plucked orchid from my hands.

“Do you still love me even though I’m not Lady Chatterley’s grandchild’s lover?”

“I love you even though you are being cruel.”

“Why?”

“Because I know that inside you’re tender, gentle.”

“How do you know that?”

“As you said yourself: I have entered you. And now a piece of you has entered me.”

Phil took me by the hand and sat me down opposite him.

“And what do you plan to do with that piece? You’re going to let it destroy all the other pieces?”

“What do you mean?”

“To put it bluntly: are you prepared to ruin the life you have?”

“I’m prepared to give it up, not ruin it.”

“And begin it all over again with me? Is that what you want?”

“If you do too, yes.”

Phil got up and began to walk round the patio.

“And what will become of this?”

“The greenhouse?”

“Yes. What will become of the flowers?”

“I don’t know. I suppose someone else will look after them.”

“But these are yours,” he said picking an orchid. It was Regression. In the middle of each petal there were broken lines like those of a pedestrian crossing.

“You can’t not leave something behind,” I said.

He continued to walk among the orchids picking some and holding them in his hand like someone playing nervously with a bunch of keys. It’s ironic, I thought, as one of them was Gate Wide Open. It was mauve and the petals and sepals gaped like an open wound.

He brought the picked orchids and placed them in my feet.

“I want to see you naked,” he said.

“It’s dangerous for us to make love,” I said.

“It was from the beginning. Now I just want to see you naked.”

I undressed. For the first time I didn’t feel shame.

He took off his coat and laid it on the ground.

“Lie down,” he said.

I lay down with my arms and legs together. For the first time I noticed that the palms of my hands reached halfway down my thighs. I wondered if I had got my long limbs from my mother or my father. I would never know.

He caressed my tummy.

“Your tummy is a big peach that has a small one inside,” he said and laid an orchid on my tummy button. It was Button of Youth.

“Am I too old for you?” I dared ask.

“I’m too old for anyone,” he said and placed two orchids – First Love and Last Love – one on each nipple.

“I’m so old that I could die any minute,” he said and began to deck my vagina with orchids “Die,” I said “and I’ll give birth to you all over again.”

He had managed to put three orchids among my pubic hairs, but I couldn’t sit up to see which ones they were. I hoped they didn’t have a name. I wanted us to christen them together.

“Now you are my Lady Jane,” he said.

“Which Lady Jane?”

“Surely you remember in Lady Chatterley’s Lover? Lady Jane and John Thomas. That’s what Constance and Mellors called their genital organs. They had kind of decked them in flowers too.”

“You know perfectly well that I can’t claim any connection with those characters now.”

“You can claim any connection you like with whatever character you want.”

“Decked up like this in flowers, who else could I be?”

“You could be Ophelia. The Lady with the Camelias.”

“I don’t know... They came to a sticky end.”

“You can choose the end.”

“Great, so I choose to meet you this evening at the station. We’ll leave on the first train to London. And from there we’ll see where we’ll go.”

Phil began to remove the orchids from my body one by one. He held them in his palm like a bridegroom about to give a bouquet to his bride. Then he opened his fingers and let them drop idly to the floor. I was still naked and I had begun to feel cold. I got up and wrapped my hands around my neck.

“Come on,” I said.

“I can go with you,” he said. “But I can’t be a father.”

“That’s a pity because you already are. Your child is inside me,” I said.

He put his hands in my hair and began to comb it with his fingers.

“I can’t prolong the pain and sorrow,” he said calmly and solemnly.

“What do you mean?”

I didn’t understand what he was trying to tell me. I watched him slowly sink into his silence as if into cement. His body began to get stiff in my arms. Behind him I saw the clouds through the glass passing by with controlled apprehension like pupils arriving on the first day of school. Suddenly my mother’s face appeared among them. Had she come back? I tried to hide my nakedness behind Phil. I hid my head on his neck.

“I killed my father,” he said.

I heard the words leaving his mouth and scattering like frightened naked girls in the room. I looked again. My mother’s face was no longer there.

“He had taught me how to do the injections. At first, he prepared his fix and heated it up with a spoon. Later, I did that too. I prepared the fix that finished him off.”

I was sure that she had seen us. She had come back for some reason and had seen us. It wouldn’t be long before Steve found out. Of course, it was possible

that she mightn't tell him. What difference did it make? That evening, that very evening, I'd be gone. We would be gone.

"I buried him myself. Myself and three others carried him and put him in the ground. I wanted to put 'You fucked your son's life' on his gravestone, but I was sorry for my mother who was crying. I didn't understand why she was crying. I won't even understand my daughter when she cries. I'll probably fuck up her life too. And I don't want to fuck anybody's life up."

I picked up my clothes and ran to my room to get dressed. They could return any minute. I had to confront them. I was ready.

"Go home and get ready," I told Phil. "Take whatever money you have, clothes and your papers. We'll meet at nine at the station."

My mother existed. Her toes existed. Her ribs, her hair, her shoulders existed. Her back, the nape of her neck, her palms existed, even if I never touched them. She may have been beautiful, was in the habit of having a siesta and going for a walk in the rain. I'll never know. My mother existed for everyone else except me. Melanie was my mother, who had a stroke today and has been taken to hospital in a critical state. Steve called me from a phone booth and told me he'll take care of everything. Under no circumstances should I go there. I tried to detect in his voice any inkling of anger. Surprise even. Something that might indicate whether my mother had told him about me and Phil. I didn't detect anything. I'm sure that even if it had been he behind the glass he wouldn't have done anything to endanger my life in my frail condition. Maybe Melanie kept the secret to herself. Maybe she buried it so quickly and so deeply that she had had a stroke. Fortunately, Steve was with her. I was with my suitcase. I had packed it the night before. The moment Phil closed the door

behind him, I began to feel dizzy. My heart began to race and I felt a weight low down in my stomach. When I went to the toilet I saw coffee-coloured patches in my knickers. I called my doctor at once and he told me not to worry. It was probably just a slight detachment, which is quite common in the early stages of pregnancy. He advised me to spend the rest of the day in bed and to take it easy for a week. When the phone rang, I hoped it was Phil. I was hoping that he had rung to tell me that he wasn't coming after all and not to bother going to the station. It was Stephen. "Mother is in a critical condition," he said. Just that. Mother. Not my, not your, not our. Mother.

It was five in the afternoon when I found the courage to ring Phil. "I won't be coming," I said, and at the end of the line just silence. It couldn't be otherwise. I was silly and arrogant to imagine that the choice was mine. So the baby had chosen in the end. She chose that I should stay where I was. She chose the security and peace of a home. She chose Stephen.

The outer doorbell rang. I went down to open. "Who is it?" I asked. There was no answer. It was Phil's silence. I recognized it from its tone, its intensity, its smell. I didn't open. We remained like that for a little, the door between us. Then I turned and went towards the stairs. I turned my head just for an instant and I saw him standing outside the glass of the conservatory. It must have been raining because he was drenched. His hair, his cheeks, his lips were soaked. He had placed the palms of his hands against the glass and was saying something. I went into the patio. I couldn't hear, but I could see his lips mouthing the same phrase over and over. I think he was saying, "I love you, bitch" or "I love you, peach." Again I wasn't sure. I climbed the stairs and went into the bathroom. Luckily, I had no more coffee-coloured patches. I caressed my tummy. I trusted that baby. She would do much better than me, the

bitch... Now I was certain. He had called me a bitch. His face seemed more angry than pathetic. His ribs were going in and out as if he was out of breath. I remembered the ribs of the antelope in the jaws of the lioness, that image that had come to my mind the first time we met. Maybe he was out of breath, I thought. Maybe he ran all the way here. He can't have been crying. He was wet from the rain and was cursing me. I'm certain that the first time we made love he had called me a bitch. The obscenity of the memory made me want to vomit. No. Disgust. If Melanie died, we would be two lovers who killed their parents. He his father, me my mother. How could we have brought up a child together? I imagine it coming out of the womb, white, unsullied by past and history, unencumbered by sins and murders. And if it was black – I've thought of that too – then I know that she chose to live without me, without my husband ever knowing the truth, I'll take her to the children's home. I have faith in that baby.