

INTERPRETERS

Sue Eckstein

First published in 2011 by

Myriad Editions
59 Lansdowne Place
Brighton BN3 1FL

www.MyriadEditions.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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For Anna and Sebastian

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-9565599-6-8

Printed on FSC-accredited paper by
Cox & Wyman Limited, Reading, UK

relativelyspeaking

In the third part of our series about people whose ways of living have challenged our definition of the family, Marcus Howe talks to Susanna Thomas and Max Rosenthal.

SUSANNA THOMAS, 26, spent her early childhood in rural West Africa with her mother, anthropologist Dr Julia Rosenthal, before choosing to come back to England aged 11 to live with her uncle, Max Rosenthal. She now runs a batik business in London.

MAX ROSENTHAL, 53, is a Steiner school teacher and artist who has lived in communities in the West Country for nearly 30 years. During the past 20 years he has cared for over 35 foster children and young adults at risk.

Susanna Thomas:

THE FIRST time that I remember meeting my uncle Max, I was about four and we'd flown back to England so my mother could go to a conference. It was the middle of winter and freezing cold. I remember watching him out of the window, skipping with his pupils. I should have been out there but I was wearing a pair of really cosy blue pyjamas that Max had bought for me which I liked so much that I wouldn't take them off, and it was too cold outside for pyjamas. My mum was standing out there with him, bundled up in one of his old jackets, laughing. I remember looking at Max surrounded by all those children

and I just so wanted to be a part of it all.

In lots of ways, my first ten years living in Cameroon were quite idyllic. A mother who was always there for me. To whom I could tell absolutely anything. Who loved me more than anything or anyone in the world. And no school, no homework. I must have really hurt my mum

“ When my mother refused to let me go, I decided to starve myself to death. ”

when I told her I wanted to go back to England and live with Max, not just stay with him from time to time. She'd done everything she could to give me a fantastic childhood – the perfect childhood really – and all I wanted to do was get away from her. Not her exactly,

but that intense relationship where everything was always out in the open, where it always seemed there was nothing we didn't know about each other.

When my mother refused to let me go, I stopped eating. I decided to starve myself to death. I was only about ten or eleven but I was pretty stubborn and in the end she gave in. It's funny what children think

of as normal. I never thought my life in Africa with my mother was particularly unusual. Nor Max's various set-ups in Dorset. And for a long time I thought everyone's grandmother was like mine. She comes across as a very normal, rather reserved elderly lady. But what a traveller!

Continued overleaf >

Chapter One

I think I was about six when my mother tried to kill me, though I didn't know it at the time. It was probably somewhere around here – where the privet hedges give way to barriers of leylandii and high wrought-iron gates. I don't suppose it had anything to do with the hedges and gates, though they can't have helped. This place could induce a yearning for death in even the most optimistic.

To be fair to my mother, it wasn't me she wanted to kill. But she wasn't going to kill herself and leave my brother and me behind. I'm sure she would have succeeded at her attempt at oblivion, she was very good at whatever she did, except she hadn't anticipated my brother refusing to get in the car with her to fetch me from my friend Jackie's house. And she couldn't kill herself because she couldn't leave one of us behind. So here I am. Forty-five years later.

'So why *didn't* you get in the car?' I asked Max once. 'You were the good child. Obedient. You liked to please people. You must have known she was planning to do something terrible.'

'I can't remember anything much from that time, Julia. And anyway, what's the point in going over all that?'

'But you do remember you used to sleep in your cupboard,' I persisted. 'Curled up on the top shelf. With your little white blanket.'

'So?'

‘Well, do you think sleeping in cupboards is particularly normal behaviour for an eight-year-old?’

‘Who’s talking about normal? What was ever normal? The cupboard just felt like a nice, safe place to be. More people should try it.’

Did *I* guess what she was trying to do? I don’t think so. I remember her sitting in the kitchen with Jackie’s parents. I think she was crying. I remember that they shut the door and wouldn’t let us in. And that Jackie’s father drove in front of our car, very slowly, all the way home.

The next day when I came back from school my mother had gone.

I’m getting closer now. Finally there is something I recognise. A pair of mock-Tudor mansions set high above the road, their lush front gardens – planned to the last designer shrub and exotic tree – sweeping down to the pavement. In one of the gardens there is a massive pond. Koi carp can live for years. I wonder if they remember the time, perhaps about thirty-five years ago, when the owner of one of the houses hired a helicopter and flew over the next-door garden. Then, having circled above it a number of times until his neighbour came out to see what was going on, he aimed a hunting rifle at the neighbour’s head and shot him dead. That’s what happens around here if you annoy people by erecting concrete nymphs and dryads and spotlights and fairy-lights, thereby detracting from your neighbour’s ornamental pond.

Actually, it doesn’t. That was the only time anything remotely like that happened during my childhood, but, whenever I passed these houses after that, I’d keep a good lookout for low-flying aircraft. I think the whole event was considered a little vulgar – both the erecting of the classical antiquities in the first place and the assassination of the householder who was guilty of such bad taste. I see that whoever lives here now has removed the statuary. The fashion seems to be more for bamboo. Less irritating altogether.

I indicate left at the end of the road and head south. I am aware that I am driving very, very slowly. The person in the car behind me keeps edging out, flashing his headlights, trying to overtake, but I can’t seem to go any faster. The more familiar the streets and houses, the shops and churches become, the more I want to stop and go back. I pull up abruptly outside a church hall. The driver sounds his horn and passes me, screaming, ‘Cunt!’ as he does so. A group of pensioners look up in surprise. I’m a little surprised too.

Strangely, it was here, outside the church hall where I came to Brownies on Monday evenings, that I first heard the C-word from the boys hovering around outside, waiting for the infinitely more alluring Guides to arrive. When I was about eight, probably. And *rape*. A word that Caroline Statham – fellow Brownie and fount of all essential knowledge, particularly pertaining to the facts of life – told me meant having wire coat hangers stuck up your bottom. Something that would inevitably happen to you if you ever ventured off the open common land opposite her house and into the gorse bushes that harboured gangs of crouching, wire-wielding deviants. It was years before I learned the real meaning of the word, but it kept us out of the undergrowth.

I get out of the car and follow the elderly women into the church hall. I breathe in the familiar smell of damp wood, sweaty plimsolls and disinfectant. I wonder if the plaster of Paris toadstool is still in the cupboard next to the upright piano. Do eight-year-olds still dance around such things? I can’t imagine it, somehow. Like those yellow scarves you had to spread out on the floor to fold in a particularly complicated way, it’ll have been replaced with something altogether more practical. Some sort of fibreglass homage to world peace and multicultural harmony. Is that something else Susanna holds against me: a Brownie-free childhood? I wonder if Brown Owl remembered a Brownie with long fair plaits, very skinny legs and sticking-out teeth. An enthusiastic member

of the Little People – a Sixer, no less. There’s only one thing I remember about Brown Owl, apart from her tightly permed grey hair and fat calves – how she humiliated me in front of the whole pack when I listed the foods one might find on a well-stocked English breakfast table.

‘Don’t be ridiculous! No one eats *cheese* for breakfast!’ she shrilled, her grey curls quivering with indignation. ‘Tawny Owl! Did you see what Julia Rosenthal put on her breakfast list? Cheese! I *ask* you!’ And, with that, my coveted Homemaker badge was left to languish in the box in the toadstool cupboard.

Brown Owl must be long dead so I should forgive her. But I don’t. Nor, for that matter, Miss Pearson, the nursery school teacher I had when I was four, who made everyone on my table look at the way I held my knife and fork, and then told me to behave like a big girl and eat properly. Even now I can’t do that thing where you mash bits of food on to the back of your fork. And I rarely eat peas. At least not in public.

‘Can I help you?’ one of the women asks. ‘Are you interested in signing up for our Friday Crafts Club? We’re always on the lookout for a bit of young blood. You’d be most welcome to join us.’

‘Thanks,’ I say. ‘But I was just passing and wanted to see what this place looked like. I used to come here to Brownies. *Years* ago. In about 1967.’

‘Well, I never! You’ll know Margaret, then. Margaret! You’ll never guess! One of your old Brownies is here to see you.’

And there she is – over by the piano. Brown Owl. Not dead at all. Taking a plastic bag of brightly coloured knitting wool out of the toadstool cupboard.

As I leave and head back to the car, I hear someone say, ‘Well, she was here a minute ago, Margaret. How very strange.’

It’s funny, the things you don’t forgive. It’s not the big things like your father drinking a bottle of whisky a night and

walking into doors, or your best friend getting off with Nigel Blenkinsop in the fourth year at the St Peter’s School Disco when she knew perfectly well that you really fancied him and had done for months. Or your daughter telling the whole world that the person she loved most as she was growing up was not you; that it was a kind of life entirely different from the one you had created for her that she’d craved.

It’s the little things. Like being made to unpick the zip your mother had helped you to sew in for your handwork homework. I cried then. The only time I ever cried at school. I cried out of humiliation, not grief; because my mother had sewn it in for me beautifully, ‘but not the way we do it here’.

Or maybe it wasn’t humiliation. Maybe, I think now as I sit in the car outside the church hall, it was failure that made me cry. Failure to protect my mother from a hostile world which didn’t recognise that she tried her best. Because she did. Whatever she did, she did as well as she possibly could, including being a mother. I wonder how many hundreds of miles she must have driven over the years, taking us to swimming lessons, skating lessons, music lessons – anything we wanted to do, she found a class, a teacher, a way of getting us there, a way of persuading my father to pay. Anything we became interested in, she bought us books or equipment for and never commented when we gave things up. When Max left his violin on the train, she drove to every station on the line to see if it had been handed in – which it hadn’t. And then she somehow managed to buy him a new one.

Of course, at the time, I didn’t appreciate any of that. I think that what I wanted more than any of those activities was an evening at home, all of us together, watching one of those old black and white films on TV or something, my parents sitting side by side on the sofa, looking happy. But that never happened. Not once.

My mother expressed her love for my brother and me in actions, definitely not in words and rarely in gestures, and so

we seldom sat still. I remember – it must have been around the time of the moon landing – asking my mother what would happen if Max and I went to live on the moon – how would she visit us? This was a quite a worry for us, as we knew how much she hated heights and flying. And she said she'd visit us *wherever* we went to live, even if it was on the moon. And we knew she meant it and we knew then how much she loved us. I don't think I've ever felt more loved than at that moment.

It's hard to hate someone whom you know would literally go beyond the ends of the earth for you without feeling like a traitor. And that's what I felt like all those times during my teenage years that I hated her – a traitor, a deserter. And then I hated her even more for making me feel like that. I wanted pure untainted hatred – the kind of straightforward, uncomplicated, cold hatred that most of my friends felt for their mothers – without the devastating guilt.

We went to Sunday School here too, Max and I. I remember, on our first day, Max carefully spelling out our surname to the elderly man in rather tight trousers who introduced himself as 'Mr-T-in-charge-of-under-sevens'.

'Are you sure that's right?' asked Mr T, squinting down at what he'd written in the register.

'Yes, R-O-S-E-N –'

'No, sorry, don't worry. I've got it,' he interrupted, flustered. I thought it was probably his trousers that were making him feel a bit uncomfortable. 'Go through to Miss Everett's class, Max. You're going to be making simply gorgeous collages of the Garden of Eden today, I believe. We've just had a new consignment of pipe-cleaners that'll be perfect for the serpents. And the crêpe paper! All the colours of the rainbow, and more besides. And you come with me, little Miss R. It's finger-painting for us. Joseph's coat is going to be the talk of the town. Danny La Rue will be spitting with envy.'

I didn't know who this Danny person was, but I felt rather sorry for him nevertheless.

I wonder why we went to Sunday School. I once found our baptism certificates while rummaging through a drawer in my father's study, but I don't remember either of my parents ever expressing an opinion about religion. I suppose we must have wanted to go, even though, for about a year, I used to cry until I was allowed to go into Max's class, where I'd sit very close to him, cross-legged, my fingers creeping towards his leg until I felt his warm, comforting skin. He never minded, but I got the impression that Mr T was rather hurt by my refusal to remain in his class of happy under-sevens.

Despite my accumulation of all the gospels for good attendance, God lost His appeal when Miss Everett gave us some sweet william seeds and a yoghurt pot ready-filled with potting compost.

'That's right, children, press the seeds right into the earth and then cover the top of the pot with the see-through plastic and put an elastic band round it. Max – help your sister, can you? There's compost going absolutely everywhere. There! That's lovely. Good boy, Max. Now all you have to do, children, is watch and see how God will make the seeds grow from the earth. *For it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand*, isn't it, children?'

By the next day, there was no sign whatsoever of God's greatness so I threw the pot away and embraced atheism, to which, apart from a brief flurry of religious fervour in my early teens, I have held ever since. I don't know if my brother believed in God then. I don't think he did, even though his patience resulted in an irritatingly impressive crop of deep red and purple flowers. And I don't know if he does now – though now he seems to be quite comfortable with all the tree-hugging and saint-veneration that goes on at his Steiner school in deepest Dorset.

I sit in the car and watch a parking attendant as he walks slowly up and down the road, checking out his reflection in the shop

windows, adjusting his cap and tie, looking at his watch. I glance at the clock on the dashboard. My appointment isn't until four-thirty. I woke up before dawn this morning with Susanna's words dancing round and round in my head and a wisp of a dream of her and Max playing strange, dissonant sounds in front of a huge orchestra of faceless musicians. I got out of bed and went and sat in the garden watching the sky lighten, then got dressed, packed my bag and set off. And now I've mistimed my day so badly that I have several hours to kill and nowhere to go.

'Look, it's no big deal,' Max said on the phone the day the piece came out.

'Not for you, perhaps,' I said. 'It is for me. A massive great deal.'

'It hardly says anything about you.'

'Well, maybe that's the point.'

'What's the point?'

'That it hardly says anything about me.'

'But it's not about you. It's about Susanna and me.'

'Well, that makes it *so* much better.'

'Come on, Julia. It's called *Relatively Speaking*. It's not called *Mothers and Daughters Speak to the Nation about their Relationship with Each Other*. The journalist was looking for unusual families – stories about people choosing different ways of living.'

'Susanna could've chosen *me*. I chose a different way of living, didn't I? All those years we lived in Africa. Just her and me?'

'But she didn't. Maybe because she didn't feel she had to. Because you brought her up to be her own person, who makes her own decisions without worrying about what anyone else thinks of them. She didn't need to agonise about upsetting you, because she knows how strong you are. That's a good thing, isn't it? You can't have it both ways. Though that's never stopped you from trying.'

'But what do you think it looks like? That Susanna's most significant influence is her *uncle*. Not her mother.'

'That's not true, and, even if it was, what's so bad about that?'

'You'd know if you'd had children.'

'I have had children,' said Max quietly. 'Lots of them.'

If I were to get out of the car and walk past the row of shops where the parking attendant is still lingering, I'd pass the church where the gap-toothed vicar used to smile down at the Brownies and Cubs on church parade and hand out daffodils for us to take home on Mothering Sunday. I'd get to the privet hedges where Max and I used to pick food for our stick insects as we dawdled home for Sunday lunch. Amazingly, there's still a farm here, its entrance at the far end of the shopping parade. We came here on a Sunday School outing once and were made to sing hymns in the fields. The farm labourers stood leaning on their rakes and pitchforks, smiling in a slightly embarrassed way as we sang 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', Mr-T-in-charge-of-under-sevens' joyful contralto carrying in the autumn breeze. I feel my ears reddening just thinking about it. I should put some money in the parking meter. I should walk through those fields again now. Walk fast for a couple of hours until I feel better. But I don't get out of the car. I fumble in the glove compartment for one of the compilation cassettes that Susanna made me, years ago. *Happy Birthday, Mum*, it says on the label in her teenage handwriting. *I love you. Hope you love this*. There is a little heart above the *i*. I push the cassette into the player, then pull away from the church and set off towards our old house.

I

(LONG SILENCE)

So?

So what?

Shall we begin?

Begin where?

Anywhere you like.

Is that all you're going to say?

For now.

And is that supposed to be helpful?

I hope so.

I don't know where to begin.

You'll know. Just take your time.

You would say that. Time is money. Isn't that the expression?

Just take your time.

(SILENCE)

I don't know where to begin. You'll have to give me some kind of clue. Some idea. Or is that against the rules?

There aren't those sorts of rules.

That's what you say.

Well, what about beginning with a memory? Your earliest memory, perhaps.

What are you expecting? Me floating about in the womb? The swish of warm amniotic fluid? The reassuring sound of my mother's heartbeat? The feeling of utter calm before the storm of birth? Isn't that the kind of thing you people are interested in? Or some kind of strange recurring dream in which I kill my mother and sleep with my father?

I don't think we need be that ambitious.

Do you think this is funny?

Not at all. Do you?

Do I look as though I think it's funny?

No. You look rather sad. Are you sad?

No more than usual.

So. Let's start again, shall we?

If you like.

*No, if **you** like. You can lie down if you'd prefer to.*

No, thank you. Sitting is fine.

Right, then.

I've told you. I don't know where to begin – what you want to hear.

I want to hear what you want to tell me.

I don't want to tell you anything.

I don't think that's really the case. Is it?

(LONG SILENCE)

What is your earliest memory?

I don't know.

There's no hurry.

Look, this is all a mistake. I've made a stupid mistake. Let's just stop now. Turn that thing off. Go on. Press the off switch.

Are you sure you want me to?

I don't know. No. Just leave it.

All right.

(LONG SILENCE)

Leaving Holland. That was probably it. My first real memory. Will that do?

Go on.

It was 1932. May 1932. If you're interested in those kinds of details. Are you?

Go on.

I was five years old and it felt like a great adventure, going on a long train journey with my mother. Is that the kind of thing?

Go on. You're doing really well.

I'd really rather you didn't patronise me.

I'm not. I'm sorry if I gave you that impression.

Have you any idea how hard this is for me?

I think I have some understanding. I hope I do.

This isn't something I'm used to.

Not all that many people are.

I don't mean paying to see someone. I mean talking. About myself. About my life. I'm finding it incredibly difficult. Talking. It isn't something I do.

I know. It'll be hard. Just start and see what happens. See where your memories take you. Tell me about that journey. With your mother.

It's really not that interesting.

It doesn't have to be.

So you're bored already?

That's not what I said. Tell me about that journey.

I don't think I'd been outside Amsterdam before. Yes, maybe once, to the seaside. And once or twice to my grandparents – my mother's parents – on the border.

Yes...

Yes what?

Nothing. I'm listening. Go on.

I remember I'd fallen asleep on the train with my head in my mother's lap and when I woke up there was a deep mark on my cheek – here – where the clip of her suspender had dug into me.

(SILENCE)

Are you sure that this is the kind of thing you want to hear?

It's not what I want to hear. It's what you want to tell me.

I don't want to tell you anything.

But you came to see me. I'm right in thinking that no one forced you to come? There was no coercion?

No one even knows I'm here. No one will ever know I've been here. But it doesn't mean I want to tell you anything.

In your own time.

I can't remember where I was.

Waking up on the train. With your mother.

Well, then, when we arrived in Berlin – the train was early – my mother told me to wait by the bags and went off to look for a porter. So I sat down on the biggest suitcase. I remember wondering why we'd brought so much luggage when we'd be going back to Amsterdam in the morning. I could still feel the mark on my cheek – like a little cave. I remember thinking it was like a little bear-cave. But you don't need to read anything particularly Freudian into that.

I wasn't going to.

And a man in a uniform with a whistle round his neck came up and asked me something but I couldn't understand what he was saying. It wasn't Dutch, though, I was sure. So I shrugged my shoulders and smiled and he went away.

(LONG SILENCE)

And then what happened?

I just sat there on the suitcase and after a little while I noticed a tall man waiting under the station clock. He looked terribly smart. He was wearing one of those hats – a trilby, you call them, don't you? – and a long, dark brown coat. I remember it very clearly. That lovely cashmere coat. He had his arm around a young woman's shoulders.

Mmm.

What?

Go on.

She had white-blond curls – just like the ones I'd always wanted. My hair was dead straight whatever my mother did to it. I watched him and he looked up at the clock and said something to the woman. I can see it now, how he tipped her face up towards his – his hand under her chin like this – and kissed her on the lips and off she walked and I thought – how can anyone walk so elegantly in such high heels? And then he looked at me, this man in the hat and the beautiful coat – I don't think he'd seen me until that moment – and then he looked up again at the station clock. And suddenly there was my mother coming towards us with a porter pushing a trolley, and the man in the trilby looked at her and then nodded in my direction and said – I remember it so clearly – '*So! Hier ist der kleine Käse-Kopf.*' Do you speak German?

I don't, I'm afraid.

That's what he said: '*Hier ist der kleine Käse-Kopf.*' And he said it with a sort of smile so that for months – for months – I thought he had said something very nice about me.

What had he said?

It means 'little cheese head'. What? What's the matter?

Nothing. You laughed.

Did I? I can't think why.

Carry on.

My mother said, 'Shake hands with your father.' And I thought – what father? I don't have a father.

Did you think he was dead?

I don't think I'd ever given it a moment's thought. I was perfectly happy with my mother. I really don't think I ever wondered if I even had a father.

You never wondered if you had a father?

No. Is that so very terrible?

Not at all. Carry on.

It seems that, one day, he just wrote and sent for us. And so we went.

And why do you think he sent for you?

I haven't got a clue. I asked my mother – much later, of course – but she didn't seem to know any more than me. Or at least she didn't want to discuss it.

Where had they met?

Is that important?

I just wondered.

In Amsterdam. So my mother told me. When he was working there for some German engineering company and she was teaching in a school nearby.

And they married?

They did.

And then what happened?

He went back to Germany shortly before I was born and had nothing more to do with us.

Why was that?

I've no idea.

Did your mother never discuss it? Later on?

I don't think so.

Did he support you?

He might have sent my mother money, but I don't know if he did. I never found out why he changed his mind and sent for us. Maybe he was fed up with living on his own. A wife was probably cheaper than a housekeeper. Maybe he didn't want a Dutch child – a Dutch wife was bad enough – so he wanted me to grow up German. I don't know. And so there I was in Berlin – a cheese head.

And how did you feel? About suddenly coming to Berlin?

Feel? I don't know. But I was sure everything would be all right in the end. I was sure that my mother would take me home again very soon once we'd spent a day or two with this man she called my father.

Chapter Two

Eynsford Park Estate is a tribute to the architectural glory of the 1960s, whose designers favoured the style of building most small children will produce if prevailed upon to draw a house. All that is missing are the sun's rays and the little black 'm's flying joyfully in the sky. When we moved here from a hospital flat in Bloomsbury the cement was still drying; the white paint on the timber cladding still gleamed; the newly seeded grass was only just beginning to clothe the bald verges. Our house, in Tenterden Close, was one of eight built round a circular green. For my mother it was like living in a Sartre play – only one way in and no way out. For us – for Max and me – it was heaven.

The first thing I notice as I drive into the cul-de-sac are the trees. On the green are three mature silver birches. For a moment I wonder how and when they got there. Then I realise that they are the saplings that used to serve us so well as rounders posts, as home in our games of 'It', as poles to grab on to and swing round and round until, too dizzy to stand up, we would collapse, shrieking with laughter, on to the grass. The trees are only a couple of years younger than I am. They have aged rather better.

I pull up outside number four, eject the cassette and switch off the engine. I sit in the car and look at the back door which, as with all the identical houses round the green, is at the side of the house. And I see the six-year-old me going up to it. In her school uniform – grey skirt, white shirt, maroon cardigan,

grey and maroon striped tie, grey felt hat. She tries to open the door but it is locked. It is never locked. She knocks. After a while the door is opened by the woman who cleans for us once a week.

It's odd – I haven't thought about that woman for decades. Mrs Prior. That was her name. I remember asking her why she never went to the toilet. I couldn't understand why my question – couched in genuine admiration for her mighty bladder – should have caused so much offence. I don't think she liked us much. In my memory, she and Brown Owl have merged into one – grey curls, fat calves and a general air of disapproval.

The six-year-old me goes into the house and shuts the door. Mrs Prior looks at me. 'Your mother's not here,' she says. She sounds irritated and anxious all at once.

'Where is she, then?'

'She's gone away for a rest.'

'When's she coming back?'

'I don't know – you'll have to ask your father when he gets home from work.'

'Will she be back tomorrow?'

'I *very* much doubt it.'

'When, then?'

'I've told you, I don't know. I was just rung up and asked to come along to be here when you and Max got home from school. I don't know who it was I spoke to, I'm sure. It wasn't your mother. And it's not as though I haven't got anything else I should be doing today. It's my afternoon for the Nunns at number one. I don't suppose they're best pleased. I'll be off as soon as your father's home. So wash your hands and sit down and have a biscuit and a glass of squash. And then get on with your spellings or numbers or something quiet. Max'll be home from his swimming lesson shortly.'

Mrs Prior was talking rubbish, I was sure of that. I knew my mother hadn't gone away for a rest. Why should she need

a rest? She wasn't tired at all. She was always racing around. I knew exactly what had happened.

My mother had told me and Max that lying was a terrible, unforgivable thing. I couldn't remember who had lied to whom or what about, but it must have been something quite major. There were things called white lies, she had told us, which were all right sometimes, but lying – proper lying – was always wrong. Lying destroyed people's lives, she had said, looking as if she was about to cry. It destroyed whole countries. We couldn't quite see how lying could do *that* much damage but we hadn't said anything. It was best not to when she was in that kind of a mood. But some time in the weeks leading up to her disappearance she had lied to my grandmother. I had listened to the phone call, sitting halfway up the stairs in my dark blue brushed-nylon nightie, and I knew, as I heard her tell her mother-in-law that Max and I would not be able to go and stay with her in Oxford after all as we were both ill and weren't up to travelling by train, and then elaborate wildly on the story, that something terrible was happening. We weren't ill at all. It was a complete lie. And not even a white one. If anyone wasn't feeling well, it was *her*, not us. We had tried not to stare at her when she had come home from the dentist some weeks earlier, her face bloated and mottled, her mouth a mess of pulpy red and nothingness where once her teeth had been. She'd had to keep wiping away the blood-flecked spit that trickled from her swollen mouth. She still couldn't speak very well, her 's's were funny. But now she had smart new plastic teeth and, though for some reason she wouldn't speak to our father, wouldn't eat with us and seemed generally angry about everything, she wasn't really any more ill than we were. And we were fine.

After she put the phone down, she had gone into her bedroom, sat down on the floor, and started to cry. I crept on to her lap and put my arms around her but she didn't stop. She didn't even put her arms around me. Max brought

her a cup of tea with four sugars in, even though we weren't really allowed to use the kettle, but she left it to get cold. She just sat there crying for hours and hours. We'd seen her cry before, but only once or twice, and nothing like this. We put ourselves to bed and lay shivering in the dark. We heard our father come home, and eventually go upstairs and into the bedroom – and then the screaming started. Some time, in the middle of the night, I woke up. My mother was still crying and shouting at my father. If he was still in the room, he wasn't saying anything.

I got out of bed and went into Max's room. The bed was empty. I opened the cupboard door.

'Listen,' I said. 'Listen to what she's saying.'

But Max slept on, his white blanket pulled up around his ears.

So yes, that day, when I came home to an empty house, I knew exactly what had happened. My mother had lied and then she'd gone mad – that was why she had been so strange when she came to pick me up from Jackie's house – and then she had been put away somewhere. In a way, I was relieved.

'Were you glad?' I asked Max years later in Dorset. We were standing in a field behind the Steiner school at which he had been teaching for the past three years. The fuchsia hedges, barely visible through the freezing fog, were stiff with frost. I had forgotten what English winters could be like, and my whole body rebelled against the biting cold.

'Glad?' he asked.

'When Mum went away. That first time.'

He didn't answer. I turned to look at him. He was gazing over at a group of children bundled up in layers of colourful jumpers, stripy tights, bobble hats and woolly mittens who were playing skipping games, their breath rising in gusts of smoke and merging with the white sky.

*Windmill, windmill going round and round
Along came the farmer with grain to grind.*

He was smiling – a smile suffused with such serenity that I wanted to push him to the frozen ground and hit him very hard.

‘Is it compulsory to wear hand-knitted rainbow jumpers at a Steiner school?’ I asked viciously. ‘And Peruvian hats with ear flaps?’

‘Sorry?’ he replied, not taking his eyes off the children.

‘And do you have to be called Griffin or Ocean or... or... Gaia? What if you’re called Kevin or Penelope or something? What if your father’s a tax accountant or a civil servant, or a bus conductor, and not a bloody biodynamic beekeeper or a llama-breeder or... or a fucking *shaman*? What if you feel uncomfortable cultivating your dreadlocks and your organic dope? If it’s not really *you*? What if you want to grow *dablias*?’

‘Why are you so angry?’ he asked quietly, turning to look at me.

‘Why aren’t you?’ I shouted, my voice hoarse with cold and fury.

The small skippers stopped their game. They looked over at us, curious to see what would happen next. Max squeezed my arm then walked up to the children. He hugged the smallest one then crouched down and said something to them that I couldn’t hear. After a few seconds the children regrouped and two of them began turning the rope.

‘Higher!’ Max shouted.

The two rope-turners grasped the end of the rope with both hands, their faces screwed up with effort and concentration, and the rope soared high above them.

Max leaped forward and, as the rope touched the ground, he jumped. He did star jumps, tuck jumps; he hopped first on one foot and then the other. His long blond curls danced around his head. The children laughed and yelled out words of encouragement. I watched Max’s face. And what I saw was joy. Sheer joy.

‘Come on!’ he called to me, holding out his arms. But I shook my head and walked away so that the children wouldn’t see me cry.

‘I didn’t know you could skip,’ I said later, as we sat by the fire in the little cottage he shared with another teacher and a couple of ancient lurchers he had inherited from a neighbour who had died a couple of years ago. ‘You’re quite good.’ The wood was damp and spat on to the stone hearth. We watched the marooned embers glow and die. The dogs whimpered and kicked in their sleep as they dreamed of rabbits and wide open spaces.

‘Thanks.’

‘I’m sorry I shouted. Very un-Steiner.’

‘It’s OK.’

‘I just wanted you to tell me that you know what I’m talking about. You were *there*, Max. In your previous incarnation as a quite normal person who didn’t wear fingerless gloves and who occasionally brushed his hair.’

Max held out his still-gloved hands in a gesture of conciliation. ‘I *do* know what you’re talking about,’ he said gently.

And I, as usual, felt ashamed. He was always the peacemaker, the good guy, the one who thought the best of everyone, even when all the evidence was there to suggest it would be very much wiser not to. He was the one who would hitch-hike through Europe and end up paying for the driver’s petrol. The one who would invite total strangers into his house with no fear of being macheted to death in his sleep. Who could never pass a beggar without giving them whatever he had on him. I remember, when he was about ten, he gave the remains of his Mars bar to a gypsy girl in Dublin. He didn’t notice the expression of scorn on her face, and I didn’t have the heart to mention it. Max never judged, never criticised. Not like me. Once, when we were walking to school together, and for a reason I can no longer remember, I

screamed at him to shut up and drop dead. ‘Look around, and say that again,’ he said, calmly and a little sadly, nodding up at the top of a garden fence. There, caught in some raspberry netting and hanging lifeless from one spindly foot, was a thrush. It stared at me, its eye opaque and sunken. I kept quiet for a while after that.

During the period that I most adored Max, I’d follow him wherever he went. He never objected when I insisted on accompanying him on his ‘Bob-a-Job’ missions round the estate. I somehow doubt that the Scout Association still encourages little boys in shorts to go into complete strangers’ houses and offer to do anything for them for five pence. It’s a shame, in a way. While Max polished the neighbours’ silver golfing trophies, weeded their flowerbeds or cleaned their shoes, I would sit drinking Ribena and eating squashed-fly biscuits off brightly coloured melamine plates, chattering about my rabbit or my current favourite book or TV programme to the housewives in their housecoats or floral pinnies.

‘And I wanted you to tell me that I’m doing it better. With Susanna,’ I said, hoping that his housemate Francesca – who didn’t seem able to take her eyes off Max whenever they were together (something Max denied vehemently when I pointed it out to him) – would stay in the kitchen a little longer, perfecting the meal that it was her turn to cook. ‘No, I don’t mean better. That sounds awful. Unfair. I don’t really know what I mean.’

‘You’re doing fine. Susanna’s a lovely child. Extraordinarily lovely, in fact. You know that.’

‘And now you’re supposed to say, “And you’re a great mother.”’

‘You don’t need me to tell you that.’

‘But I’d like you to.’

‘You’re doing absolutely fine. Though of course she’ll have inherited most of her finer points from her Uncle Max.’

‘Oh, yeah!’

‘Or her father.’

‘You don’t know anything about him.’

‘No, but I’d like to. As you know. And you do realise that Susanna is going to want to know, sooner or later?’

‘She might not.’

‘Oh, Julia,’ Max laughed as he walked over to the deep armchair in the corner of the room where Susanna was sleeping. He felt her forehead and stroked her blonde hair off her face. He pulled the blankets up to her chin. Then he came back to the fire and hugged me. His hair smelt of woodsmoke and winter sky. ‘You’re crazy.’

‘Hey,’ I said, looking over his shoulder at the mantelpiece. ‘A postcard. Where’s she gone this time?’

He walked across the room and picked up the card. ‘Haven’t you had one from here?’ he asked, turning it over.

‘It probably arrived after I left for England. If it arrived at all. I only seem to get about one in three things through the post.’

‘Orvieto.’

‘Spain.’

‘Italy, actually.’

‘I knew that.’

‘Of course you did.’

‘I *did*.’

‘Here, shove up.’ Max sat down next to me, then stretched out and lay with his head in my lap, his bare feet dangling over the end of the sofa. ‘Tell me a story,’ he said, shutting his eyes. He put on his best BBC documentary-maker voice. ‘*Tell me about your time in Africa*. Ouch! No pinching. Go on. Tell me something.’

And so I described the reddish-brown scrub, the vast baobab trees, the women in their bright batik wrappers and head-dresses harvesting chilli peppers. I told him about the gaggles of little girls in faded cotton dresses and worn flip-

flops, who would run into our compound on their way home from school to play with Susanna, picking her up and tying her to their backs or bringing her toys made of plastic bottles or old Coke cans when she grew too big for them to carry around. I told him about the hours I spent in the villages, watching, listening, recording, writing.

‘Supper’s ready, Max.’ Francesca stood in the doorway.

Max rolled off the sofa, stood up and stretched. Francesca gave me a sad half-smile as she led the way to the table.

‘This smells great, Frannie,’ said Max. ‘I’ll miss your cooking when I move. You should come too. There’s a lot to be said for communal living. Really. Ask my sister. That’s what she’s studying.’

‘Don’t,’ I warned Francesca, who looked as though she was about to cry as she busied herself serving up a steaming vegetable stew and home-baked bread. ‘I can’t think of anything worse, myself. But Max swears by it. He thinks it’s the way forward and we should all do it.’

A car horn sounds behind me. I look in the mirror and see a woman in a white Volvo estate gesturing towards the house. I am blocking her drive. I start the engine and edge forward a couple of yards. She parks outside the double garage and gets out of the car. She is dressed in her gym kit and is carrying a bottle of water. I watch her as she walks up to the front door and lets herself in. I see her pick up the post from the floor of the glass porch. She pauses for a moment to look at me, then goes inside.

II

And so there I was in Berlin – ‘the cheese head’ as he used to call me, when he called me anything at all. And I didn’t understand a word anyone was saying. Not one word. I simply couldn’t believe it, the first time he hit me.

(SILENCE)

He hit you?

No one had ever hit me before. Or even shouted or said anything unkind. I remember that I’d only been in Berlin for about a week. And he pointed to some envelopes that were lying on the hall table and told me to do something with them. I picked them up but I couldn’t understand what he was saying. So I asked him to repeat what he’d said – he could understand Dutch perfectly well. But he just walked over to me and hit me on the back of my head. And I dropped the envelopes and he hit me again. ‘I forbid you to speak Dutch in my house,’ he said. That was the first and last thing he ever said to me in Dutch. And so I had to learn German pretty quickly. You learn everything pretty quickly if the alternative is the back of your father’s hand.

Did your father hit you often?

And you learn *everything* pretty quickly if all the children at your school jeer when you sit on the boys’ side of the classroom because you don’t understand what the teacher

is saying when she tells you to sit on the girls' side. And if they all make fun of your accent and if they all hate you – the teacher and the pupils and the shopkeepers – because you're from Holland and they hate the Dutch.

Did your father hit you often?

He'd summon me into his study. It was always kept locked when he was out. No one was ever allowed in there except by special invitation. He had lovely things in there that he collected on all his business trips. Persian carpets. Swiss clocks. Venetian glass vases. Japanese lacquered boxes. Lovely things. And he'd say something like, 'I saw you today outside school with your hands in your pockets,' and then bang! Or 'I heard you whistling – no girl should ever whistle. You're not a market woman,' and then bang! And boy, could he hit hard! He kept a special comb in his study and it was one of my jobs to make sure all the fringes on his Turkish carpet were combed absolutely straight. And he'd call me in and say, 'Look at this – do you call this straight?' – and then bang!

How was he with your mother?

Every morning, he would announce what he wanted for supper and then hand my mother the exact amount of money. He'd literally count it out into the palm of her hand. When he came home from work, he'd go and sit in his study and ring a bell. At which point my mother would carry in his supper tray. I used to dream of putting poison in his wine or ground glass in his sauerkraut. Then he would change and go out for the evening. Berlin was full of cabarets and nightclubs in those days. You'll know that – you've seen the films. You've read those books.

Isherwood. Yes.

He must have had a lovely time, don't you think? Occasionally I'd catch sight of him with one of his girlfriends in a restaurant

or café on my way home from school at lunchtime. They were always very glamorous, his women, with their bright red lipstick and smart tailored jackets. Well, he was pretty popular with women. Handsome, clever, well-off, charming...

Charming?

Very charming. (SILENCE) We had a furnace in the cellar. And he'd come into my bedroom and look around and say, 'Where did you get that ridiculous toy?' or 'Who gave you that stupid book?' or 'What's that thing you're sewing when you could be doing something useful?' And then I'd have to go down to the cellar with him and he'd open the lid of the furnace and I had to drop the toy, or book, or collection of silk butterflies or whatever else it was, into the flames. And he'd smile as he watched. And if I ever cried, he'd hit me very hard. Here, on the back of my head. Once – it was one of the very few times my grandparents visited from Holland – I remember my grandfather gave me the most beautiful wooden ark. He had made it himself out of old cigar boxes. And in the animals went. Two by two. (SILENCE) I opened my hand like this and in they went. Two by two. And then my father took the ark and he put it on the cellar floor and he made me stamp on it until there was nothing left but a pile of splinters. And in they all went.

(LONG SILENCE)

And your mother?

(SILENCE)

Sorry?

Tell me about her.

I told you – she was the kindest person there was.

Did he hit her too?

Sometimes. When the mood took him. When his supper was late, or one of his mistresses had stood him up.

(SILENCE)

Tell me about her.

Who?

Your mother.

Everyone loved my mother. Except my father, I suppose. Even my father's mistresses liked her. It wasn't just that they felt sorry for her; they really liked her as a person. Once – my God, I haven't thought about this for years. Once, one of them – one of the mistresses – came to our house when my father was at work. I must have been about eleven, I suppose. The woman had a little white dog. One of those fluffy, yappy things. I'd seen her eating with my father in town. They always sat at a window table. She used to put the dog on her lap and feed it bits of meat from her plate. My father must have hated that! I didn't know how my mother would react to this woman coming in to her house – I think she could somehow tolerate all the infidelity and philandering so long as it wasn't shoved right under her nose. They came into the living room and sat down. I was sitting behind one of the armchairs in a corner sewing a badge on to my uniform – so they didn't see that I was in the room. At the time I didn't really understand what they were saying. Something about pregnancy and money. I remember the little white dog came round the back of the armchair and started licking my knees. I had to pinch my nose to stop myself giggling and giving myself away. At first my mother sounded shocked and even angry, and then, as the woman continued to talk, she started laughing. Much later I realised what was going on – the woman was suggesting she pretend to be pregnant to extract the money for an abortion from my father. She was pretty

sure he'd do anything to stop his life being inconvenienced in any way. She was offering to share the proceeds with my mother. Fifty-fifty. I don't know if they ever went through with their plan, but I like to think they did.