

"SO THRILLING AND TENSE AND WILDLY UNPREDICTABLE
IT SUCKED UP MY ENTIRE AFTERNOON. NOT TO BE MISSED!"
—TESS GERRITSEN

THE

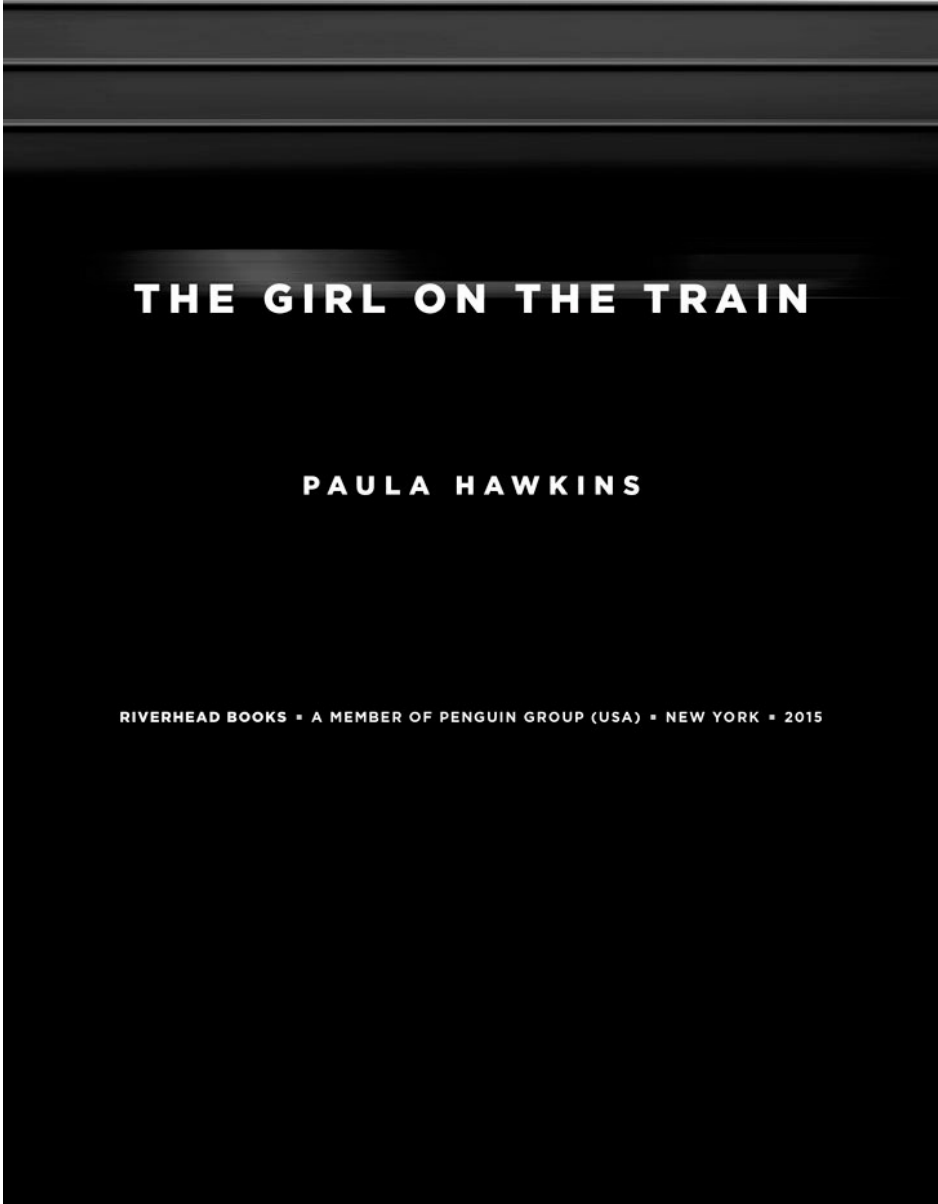
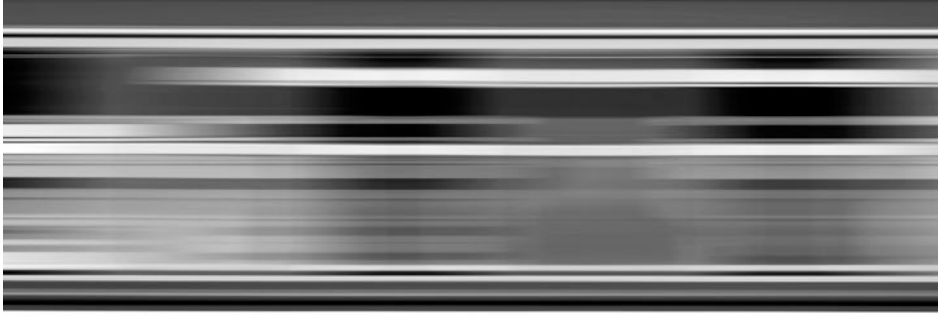
A NOVEL

GIRL

ON THE

TRAIN

PAULA HAWKINS



THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

PAULA HAWKINS

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Version_1

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Acknowledgments

FOR KATE

• • •

She's buried beneath a silver birch tree, down towards the old train tracks, her grave marked with a cairn. Not more than a little pile of stones, really. I didn't want to draw attention to her resting place, but I couldn't leave her without remembrance. She'll sleep peacefully there, no one to disturb her, no sounds but birdsong and the rumble of passing trains.

• • •

One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl . . . Three for a girl. I'm stuck on three, I just can't get any further. My head is thick with sounds, my mouth thick with blood. Three for a girl. I can hear the magpies—they're laughing, mocking me, a raucous cackling. A tiding. Bad tidings. I can see them now, black against the sun. Not the birds, something else. Someone's coming. Someone is speaking to me. *Now look. Now look what you made me do.*

RACHEL

• • •

FRIDAY, JULY 5, 2013

MORNING

There is a pile of clothing on the side of the train tracks. Light-blue cloth—a shirt, perhaps—jumbled up with something dirty white. It's probably rubbish, part of a load dumped into the scrubby little wood up the bank. It could have been left behind by the engineers who work this part of the track, they're here often enough. Or it could be something else. My mother used to tell me that I had an overactive imagination; Tom said that, too. I can't help it, I catch sight of these discarded scraps, a dirty T-shirt or a lonesome shoe, and all I can think of is the other shoe and the feet that fitted into them.

The train jolts and scrapes and screeches back into motion, the little pile of clothes disappears from view and we trundle on towards London, moving at a brisk jogger's pace. Someone in the seat behind me gives a sigh of helpless irritation; the 8:04 slow train from Ashbury to Euston can test the patience of the most seasoned commuter. The journey is supposed to take fifty-four minutes, but it rarely does: this section of the track is ancient, decrepit, beset with signalling problems and never-ending engineering works.

The train crawls along; it judders past warehouses and water towers, bridges and sheds, past modest Victorian houses, their backs turned squarely to the track.

My head leaning against the carriage window, I watch these houses roll past me like a tracking shot in a film. I see them as others do not; even their owners probably don't see them from this perspective. Twice a day, I am offered a view into other lives, just for a moment. There's something comforting about the sight of strangers safe at home.

Someone's phone is ringing, an incongruously joyful and upbeat song. They're slow to answer, it jingles on and on around me. I can feel my fellow commuters shift in their seats, rustle their newspapers, tap at their

computers. The train lurches and sways around the bend, slowing as it approaches a red signal. I try not to look up, I try to read the free newspaper I was handed on my way into the station, but the words blur in front of my eyes, nothing holds my interest. In my head I can still see that little pile of clothes lying at the edge of the track, abandoned.

EVENING

The premixed gin and tonic fizzes up over the lip of the can as I bring it to my mouth and sip. Tangy and cold, the taste of my first-ever holiday with Tom, a fishing village on the Basque coast in 2005. In the mornings we'd swim the half mile to the little island in the bay, make love on secret hidden beaches; in the afternoons we'd sit at a bar drinking strong, bitter gin and tonics, watching swarms of beach footballers playing chaotic twenty-five-a-side games on the low-tide sands.

I take another sip, and another; the can's already half empty, but it's OK, I have three more in the plastic bag at my feet. It's Friday, so I don't have to feel guilty about drinking on the train. TGIF. The fun starts here.

It's going to be a lovely weekend, that's what they're telling us. Beautiful sunshine, cloudless skies. In the old days we might have driven to Corly Wood with a picnic and the papers, spent all afternoon lying on a blanket in dappled sunlight, drinking wine. We might have barbecued out back with friends, or gone to the Rose and sat in the beer garden, faces flushing with sun and alcohol as the afternoon went on, weaving home, arm in arm, falling asleep on the sofa.

Beautiful sunshine, cloudless skies, no one to play with, nothing to do. Living like this, the way I'm living at the moment, is harder in the summer when there is so much daylight, so little cover of darkness, when everyone is out and about, being flagrantly, aggressively happy. It's exhausting, and it makes you feel bad if you're not joining in.

The weekend stretches out ahead of me, forty-eight empty hours to fill. I lift the can to my mouth again, but there's not a drop left.

MONDAY, JULY 8, 2013

MORNING

It's a relief to be back on the 8:04. It's not that I can't wait to get into London to start my week—I don't particularly want to be in London at all.

I just want to lean back in the soft, sagging velour seat, feel the warmth of the sunshine streaming through the window, feel the carriage rock back and forth and back and forth, the comforting rhythm of wheels on tracks. I'd rather be here, looking out at the houses beside the track, than almost anywhere else.

There's a faulty signal on this line, about halfway through my journey. I assume it must be faulty, in any case, because it's almost always red; we stop there most days, sometimes just for a few seconds, sometimes for minutes on end. If I sit in carriage D, which I usually do, and the train stops at this signal, which it almost always does, I have a perfect view into my favourite trackside house: number fifteen.

Number fifteen is much like the other houses along this stretch of track: a Victorian semi, two storeys high, overlooking a narrow, well-tended garden that runs around twenty feet down towards some fencing, beyond which lie a few metres of no-man's-land before you get to the railway track. I know this house by heart. I know every brick, I know the colour of the curtains in the upstairs bedroom (beige, with a dark-blue print), I know that the paint is peeling off the bathroom window frame and that there are four tiles missing from a section of the roof over on the right-hand side.

I know that on warm summer evenings, the occupants of this house, Jason and Jess, sometimes climb out of the large sash window to sit on the makeshift terrace on top of the kitchen-extension roof. They are a perfect, golden couple. He is dark-haired and well built, strong, protective, kind. He has a great laugh. She is one of those tiny bird-women, a beauty, pale-skinned with blond hair cropped short. She has the bone structure to carry that kind of thing off, sharp cheekbones dappled with a sprinkling of freckles, a fine jaw.

While we're stuck at the red signal, I look for them. Jess is often out there in the mornings, especially in the summer, drinking her coffee. Sometimes, when I see her there, I feel as though she sees me, too, I feel as though she looks right back at me, and I want to wave. I'm too self-conscious. I don't see Jason quite so much, he's away a lot with work. But even if they're not there, I think about what they might be up to. Maybe this morning they've both got the day off and she's lying in bed while he makes breakfast, or maybe they've gone for a run together, because that's the sort of thing they do. (Tom and I used to run together on Sundays, me going at slightly above my normal pace, him at about half his, just so we could run side by side.) Maybe Jess is upstairs in the spare room, painting, or maybe they're in the shower together, her hands pressed against the tiles, his hands on her hips.

EVENING

Turning slightly towards the window, my back to the rest of the carriage, I open one of the little bottles of Chenin Blanc I purchased from the Whistlestop at Euston. It's not cold, but it'll do. I pour some into a plastic cup, screw the top back on and slip the bottle into my handbag. It's less acceptable to drink on the train on a Monday, unless you're drinking with company, which I am not.

There are familiar faces on these trains, people I see every week, going to and fro. I recognize them and they probably recognize me. I don't know whether they see me, though, for what I really am.

It's a glorious evening, warm but not too close, the sun starting its lazy descent, shadows lengthening and the light just beginning to burnish the trees with gold. The train is rattling along, we whip past Jason and Jess's place, they pass in a blur of evening sunshine. Sometimes, not often, I can see them from this side of the track. If there's no train going in the opposite direction, and if we're travelling slowly enough, I can sometimes catch a glimpse of them out on their terrace. If not—like today—I can imagine them. Jess will be sitting with her feet up on the table out on the terrace, a glass of wine in her hand, Jason standing behind her, his hands on her shoulders. I can imagine the feel of his hands, the weight of them, reassuring and protective. Sometimes I catch myself trying to remember the last time I had meaningful physical contact with another person, just a hug or a heartfelt squeeze of my hand, and my heart twitches.

TUESDAY, JULY 9, 2013

MORNING

The pile of clothes from last week is still there, and it looks dustier and more forlorn than it did a few days ago. I read somewhere that a train can rip the clothes right off you when it hits. It's not that unusual, death by train. Two to three hundred a year, they say, so at least one every couple of days. I'm not sure how many of those are accidental. I look carefully, as the train rolls slowly past, for blood on the clothes, but I can't see any.

The train stops at the signal as usual. I can see Jess standing on the patio in front of the French doors. She's wearing a bright print dress, her feet are bare. She's looking over her shoulder, back into the house; she's probably talking to Jason, who'll be making breakfast. I keep my eyes fixed on Jess, on her home, as the train starts to inch forward. I don't want to see the

other houses; I particularly don't want to see the one four doors down, the one that used to be mine.

I lived at number twenty-three Blenheim Road for five years, blissfully happy and utterly wretched. I can't look at it now. That was my first home. Not my parents' place, not a flatshare with other students, *my* first home. I can't bear to look at it. Well, I can, I do, I want to, I don't want to, I try not to. Every day I tell myself not to look, and every day I look. I can't help myself, even though there is nothing I want to see there, even though anything I do see will hurt me. Even though I remember so clearly how it felt that time I looked up and noticed that the cream linen blind in the upstairs bedroom was gone, replaced by something in soft baby pink; even though I still remember the pain I felt when I saw Anna watering the rosebushes near the fence, her T-shirt stretched tight over her bulging belly, and I bit my lip so hard, it bled.

I close my eyes tightly and count to ten, fifteen, twenty. There, it's gone now, nothing to see. We roll into Witney station and out again, the train starting to pick up pace as suburbia melts into grimy North London, terraced houses replaced by tagged bridges and empty buildings with broken windows. The closer we get to Euston, the more anxious I feel; pressure builds; how will today be? There's a filthy, low-slung concrete building on the right-hand side of the track about five hundred metres before we get into Euston. On its side, someone has painted: *LIFE IS NOT A PARAGRAPH*. I think about the bundle of clothes on the side of the track and I feel as though my throat is closing up. Life is not a paragraph, and death is no parenthesis.

EVENING

The train I take in the evening, the 5:56, is slightly slower than the morning one—it takes one hour and one minute, a full seven minutes longer than the morning train despite not stopping at any extra stations. I don't mind, because just as I'm in no great hurry to get into London in the morning, I'm in no hurry to get back to Ashbury in the evening, either. Not just because it's Ashbury, although the place itself is bad enough, a 1960s new town, spreading like a tumour over the heart of Buckinghamshire. No better or worse than a dozen other towns like it, a centre filled with cafés and mobile-phone shops and branches of JD Sports, surrounded by a band of suburbia and beyond that the realm of the multiplex cinema and out-of-town Tesco. I live in a smart(ish), new(ish) block situated at the point where the commercial heart of the place starts to bleed into the residential

outskirts, but it is not my home. My home is the Victorian semi on the tracks, the one I part-owned. In Ashbury I am not a homeowner, not even a tenant—I'm a lodger, occupant of the small second bedroom in Cathy's bland and inoffensive duplex, subject to her grace and favour.

Cathy and I were friends at university. Half friends, really, we were never that close. She lived across the hall from me in my first year, and we were both doing the same course, so we were natural allies in those first few daunting weeks, before we met people with whom we had more in common. We didn't see much of each other after the first year and barely at all after college, except for the occasional wedding. But in my hour of need she happened to have a spare room going and it made sense. I was so sure that it would only be for a couple of months, six at the most, and I didn't know what else to do. I'd never lived by myself, I'd gone from parents to flatmates to Tom, I found the idea overwhelming, so I said yes. And that was nearly two years ago.

It's not *awful*. Cathy's a nice person, in a forceful sort of way. She makes you notice her niceness. Her niceness is writ large, it is her defining quality and she needs it acknowledged, often, daily almost, which can be tiring. But it's not so bad, I can think of worse traits in a flatmate. No, it's not Cathy, it's not even Ashbury that bothers me most about my new situation (I still think of it as new, although it's been two years). It's the loss of control. In Cathy's flat I always feel like a guest at the very outer limit of her welcome. I feel it in the kitchen, where we jostle for space when cooking our evening meals. I feel it when I sit beside her on the sofa, the remote control firmly within her grasp. The only space that feels like mine is my tiny bedroom, into which a double bed and a desk have been crammed, with barely enough space to walk between them. It's comfortable enough, but it isn't a place you want to *be*, so instead I linger in the living room or at the kitchen table, ill at ease and powerless. I have lost control over everything, even the places in my head.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 10, 2013

MORNING

The heat is building. It's barely half past eight and already the day is close, the air heavy with moisture. I could wish for a storm, but the sky is an insolent blank, pale, watery blue. I wipe away the sweat on my top lip. I wish I'd remembered to buy a bottle of water.

I can't see Jason and Jess this morning, and my sense of disappointment is acute. Silly, I know. I scrutinize the house, but there's nothing to see. The curtains are open downstairs but the French doors are closed, sunlight reflecting off the glass. The sash window upstairs is closed, too. Jason may be away working. He's a doctor, I think, probably for one of those overseas organizations. He's constantly on call, a bag packed on top of the wardrobe; there's an earthquake in Iran or a tsunami in Asia and he drops everything, he grabs his bag and he's at Heathrow within a matter of hours, ready to fly out and save lives.

Jess, with her bold prints and her Converse trainers and her beauty, her attitude, works in the fashion industry. Or perhaps in the music business, or in advertising—she might be a stylist or a photographer. She's a good painter, too, plenty of artistic flair. I can see her now, in the spare room upstairs, music blaring, window open, a brush in her hand, an enormous canvas leaning against the wall. She'll be there until midnight; Jason knows not to bother her when she's working.

I can't really see her, of course. I don't know if she paints, or whether Jason has a great laugh, or whether Jess has beautiful cheekbones. I can't see her bone structure from here and I've never heard Jason's voice. I've never seen them up close, they didn't live at that house when I lived down the road. They moved in after I left two years ago, I don't know when exactly. I suppose I started noticing them about a year ago, and gradually, as the months went past, they became important to me.

I don't know their names, either, so I had to name them myself. Jason, because he's handsome in a British film star kind of way, not a Depp or a Pitt, but a Firth, or a Jason Isaacs. And Jess just goes with Jason, and it goes with her. It fits her, pretty and carefree as she is. They're a match, they're a set. They're happy, I can tell. They're what I used to be, they're Tom and me five years ago. They're what I lost, they're everything I want to be.

EVENING

My shirt, uncomfortably tight, buttons straining across my chest, is pit-stained, damp patches clammy beneath my arms. My eyes and throat itch. This evening I don't want the journey to stretch out; I long to get home, to undress and get into the shower, to be where no one can look at me.

I look at the man in the seat opposite mine. He is about my age, early to midthirties, with dark hair, greying at the temples. Sallow skin. He's wearing a suit, but he's taken the jacket off and slung it on the seat next to

him. He has a MacBook, paper-thin, open in front of him. He's a slow typist. He's wearing a silver watch with a large face on his right wrist—it looks expensive, a Breitling maybe. He's chewing the inside of his cheek. Perhaps he's nervous. Or just thinking deeply. Writing an important email to a colleague at the office in New York, or a carefully worded break-up message to his girlfriend. He looks up suddenly and meets my eye; his glance travels over me, over the little bottle of wine on the table in front of me. He looks away. There's something about the set of his mouth that suggests distaste. He finds me distasteful.

I am not the girl I used to be. I am no longer desirable, I'm off-putting in some way. It's not just that I've put on weight, or that my face is puffy from the drinking and the lack of sleep; it's as if people can see the damage written all over me, can see it in my face, the way I hold myself, the way I move.

One night last week, when I left my room to get myself a glass of water, I overheard Cathy talking to Damien, her boyfriend, in the living room. I stood in the hallway and listened. "She's lonely," Cathy was saying. "I really worry about her. It doesn't help, her being alone all the time." Then she said, "Isn't there someone from work, maybe, or the rugby club?" and Damien said, "For Rachel? Not being funny, Cath, but I'm not sure I know anyone that desperate."

THURSDAY, JULY 11, 2013

MORNING

I'm picking at the plaster on my forefinger. It's damp, it got wet when I was washing out my coffee mug this morning; it feels clammy, dirty, though it was clean on this morning. I don't want to take it off because the cut is deep. Cathy was out when I got home, so I went to the off-licence and bought two bottles of wine. I drank the first one and then I thought I'd take advantage of the fact that she was out and cook myself a steak, make a red-onion relish, have it with a green salad. A good, healthy meal. I sliced through the top of my finger while chopping the onions. I must have gone to the bathroom to clean it up and gone to lie down for a while and just forgotten all about it, because I woke up around ten and I could hear Cathy and Damien talking and he was saying how disgusting it was that I would leave the kitchen like that. Cathy came upstairs to see me, she knocked softly on my door and opened it a fraction. She cocked her head

to one side and asked if I was OK. I apologized without being sure what I was apologizing for. She said it was all right, but would I mind cleaning up a bit? There was blood on the chopping board, the room smelled of raw meat, the steak was still sitting out on the countertop, turning grey. Damien didn't even say hello, he just shook his head when he saw me and went upstairs to Cathy's bedroom.

After they'd both gone to bed I remembered that I hadn't drunk the second bottle, so I opened that. I sat on the sofa and watched television with the sound turned down really low so they wouldn't hear it. I can't remember what I was watching, but at some point I must have felt lonely, or happy, or something, because I wanted to talk to someone. The need for contact must have been overwhelming, and there was no one I could call except for Tom.

There's no one I want to talk to except for Tom. The call log on my phone says I rang four times: at 11:02, 11:12, 11:54, 12:09. Judging from the length of the calls, I left two messages. He may even have picked up, but I don't remember talking to him. I remember leaving the first message; I think I just asked him to call me. That may be what I said in both of them, which isn't too bad.

The train shudders to a standstill at the red signal and I look up. Jess is sitting on her patio, drinking a cup of coffee. She has her feet up against the table and her head back, sunning herself. Behind her, I think I can see a shadow, someone moving: Jason. I long to see him, to catch a glimpse of his handsome face. I want him to come outside, to stand behind her the way he does, to kiss the top of her head.

He doesn't come out, and her head falls forward. There is something about the way she is moving today that seems different; she is heavier, weighed down. I will him to come out to her, but the train jolts and slogs forward and still there is no sign of him; she's alone. And now, without thinking, I find myself looking directly into my house, and I can't look away. The French doors are flung open, light streaming into the kitchen. I can't tell, I really can't, whether I'm seeing this or imagining it—is she there, at the sink, washing up? Is there a little girl sitting in one of those bouncy baby chairs up there on the kitchen table?

I close my eyes and let the darkness grow and spread until it morphs from a feeling of sadness into something worse: a memory, a flashback. I didn't just ask him to call me back. I remember now, I was crying. I told him that I still loved him, that I always would. *Please, Tom, please, I need to talk to you. I miss you.* No no no no no no no.

I have to accept it, there's no point trying to push it away. I'm going to

feel terrible all day, it's going to come in waves—stronger then weaker then stronger again—that twist in the pit of my stomach, the anguish of shame, the heat coming to my face, my eyes squeezed tight as though I could make it all disappear. And I'll be telling myself all day, it's not the worst thing, is it? It's not the worst thing I've ever done, it's not as if I fell over in public, or yelled at a stranger in the street. It's not as if I humiliated my husband at a summer barbecue by shouting abuse at the wife of one of his friends. It's not as if we got into a fight one night at home and I went for him with a golf club, taking a chunk out of the plaster in the hallway outside the bedroom. It's not like going back to work after a three-hour lunch and staggering through the office, everyone looking, Martin Miles taking me to one side, *I think you should probably go home, Rachel*. I once read a book by a former alcoholic where she described giving oral sex to two different men, men she'd just met in a restaurant on a busy London high street. I read it and I thought, I'm not *that* bad. This is where the bar is set.

EVENING

I have been thinking about Jess all day, unable to focus on anything but what I saw this morning. What was it that made me think that something was wrong? I couldn't possibly see her expression at that distance, but I felt when I was looking at her that she was alone. More than alone—lonely. Perhaps she was—perhaps he's away, gone to one of those hot countries he jets off to to save lives. And she misses him, and she worries, although she knows he has to go.

Of course she misses him, just as I do. He is kind and strong, everything a husband should be. And they are a partnership. I can see it, I know how they are. His strength, that protectiveness he radiates, it doesn't mean she's weak. She's strong in other ways; she makes intellectual leaps that leave him openmouthed in admiration. She can cut to the nub of a problem, dissect and analyse it in the time it takes other people to say good morning. At parties, he often holds her hand, even though they've been together years. They respect each other, they don't put each other down.

I feel exhausted this evening. I am sober, stone-cold. Some days I feel so bad that I have to drink; some days I feel so bad that I can't. Today, the thought of alcohol turns my stomach. But sobriety on the evening train is a challenge, particularly now, in this heat. A film of sweat covers every inch of my skin, the inside of my mouth prickles, my eyes itch, mascara rubbed into their corners.

My phone buzzes in my handbag, making me jump. Two girls sitting across the carriage look at me and then at each other, with a sly exchange of smiles. I don't know what they think of me, but I know it isn't good. My heart is pounding in my chest as I reach for the phone. I know this will be nothing good, either: it will be Cathy, perhaps, asking me ever so nicely to maybe give the booze a rest this evening? Or my mother, telling me that she'll be in London next week, she'll drop by the office, we can go for lunch. I look at the screen. It's Tom. I hesitate for just a second and then I answer it.

"Rachel?"

For the first five years I knew him, I was never Rachel, always Rach. Sometimes Shelley, because he knew I hated it and it made him laugh to watch me twitch with irritation and then giggle because I couldn't help but join in when he was laughing. "Rachel, it's me." His voice is leaden, he sounds worn out. "Listen, you have to stop this, OK?" I don't say anything. The train is slowing, and we are almost opposite the house, my old house. I want to say to him, *Come outside, go and stand on the lawn. Let me see you.* "Please, Rachel, you can't call me like this all the time. You've got to sort yourself out." There is a lump in my throat as hard as a pebble, smooth and obstinate. I cannot swallow. I cannot speak. "Rachel? Are you there? I know things aren't good with you, and I'm sorry for you, I really am, but . . . I can't help you, and these constant calls are really upsetting Anna. OK? I can't help you anymore. Go to AA or something. Please, Rachel. Go to an AA meeting after work today."

I pull the filthy plaster off the end of my finger and look at the pale, wrinkled flesh beneath, dried blood caked at the edge of my fingernail. I press the thumbnail of my right hand into the centre of the cut and feel it open up, the pain sharp and hot. I catch my breath. Blood starts to ooze from the wound. The girls on the other side of the carriage are watching me, their faces blank.

MEGAN

• • •

One year earlier

WEDNESDAY, MAY 16, 2012

MORNING

I can hear the train coming; I know its rhythm by heart. It picks up speed as it accelerates out of Northcote station and then, after rattling round the bend, it starts to slow down, from a rattle to a rumble, and then sometimes a screech of brakes as it stops at the signal a couple hundred yards from the house. My coffee is cold on the table, but I'm too deliciously warm and lazy to bother getting up to make myself another cup.

Sometimes I don't even watch the trains go past, I just listen. Sitting here in the morning, eyes closed and the hot sun orange on my eyelids, I could be anywhere. I could be in the south of Spain, at the beach; I could be in Italy, the Cinque Terre, all those pretty coloured houses and the trains ferrying the tourists back and forth. I could be back in Holkham, with the screech of gulls in my ears and salt on my tongue and a ghost train passing on the rusted track half a mile away.

The train isn't stopping today, it trundles slowly past. I can hear the wheels clacking over the points, can almost feel it rocking. I can't see the faces of the passengers and I know they're just commuters heading to Euston to sit behind desks, but I can dream: of more exotic journeys, of adventures at the end of the line and beyond. In my head, I keep travelling back to Holkham; it's odd that I still think of it, on mornings like this, with such affection, such longing, but I do. The wind in the grass, the big slate sky over the dunes, the house infested with mice and falling down, full of candles and dirt and music. It's like a dream to me now.

I feel my heart beating just a little too fast.

I can hear his footfall on the stairs, he calls my name.