RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Under the Mountain

Sophie Cooke

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About the Book

It is the blazing summer of 1981 and Catherine is laid low by childhood illness. Stuck inside her family's sprawling Victorian mansion at the foot of a Highland mountain, she can only look down into the garden and observe the goings-on upon the lawn.

Sam and Rosa, her elder teenage cousins, have come to spend the school holiday in this seemingly idyllic setting, and Catherine savours the brief visits Sam makes to her room. But when Rosa falls in love with Humberto, a young Spanish man camping in the grounds of the house, and Catherine witnesses a violent attack on Sam's beloved dog, the events of that summer take on a darker hue.

Under the Mountain is a fiercely intelligent and beautifully written novel about domestic politics and first loves, and in an unforgettable narrative that is both moving and haunting, Sophie Cooke powerfully exposes hidden inner lives and reveals the sometimes devastating consequences of love and the lies it can tell.

About the Author

Sophie Cooke's critically acclaimed first novel *The Glass House* was nominated for the Orange Prize and shortlisted for the Saltire First Book of the Year Award. Her short stories have been commissioned by BBC Radio 4. Having spent part of her childhood in the country house in which *Under the Mountain* is set, Sophie Cooke now lives in Berlin.

Also by Sophie Cooke

The Glass House

Under the Mountain

SOPHIE COOKE

arrow books

for Malcolm

who was there at the beginning
and differently at the end
which can be a beginning again.

Chapter One

CATHERINE PICKED A flake of sandstone from her thigh, flicked it sideways and shifted her buttocks on the step above the pavement. Her short skirt stayed stuck against the undersides of her thighs for a moment or two before falling down again, blue roses on viscose.

Thick cloud banks had rolled in from the west at six, sealing in the heat from the June noonday sun; in its windless state the tail-end of the day seemed to be coiling back on itself, a collapsing lung. As the hours pushed further into evening, so the evening pushed further into the city's stone, its porous bones, pressing out the humid afternoon that had soaked there with all its odours, its sweat and cola, to mix here on its skin now with the looser dust of lateness falling, the cooler time as should be. Streaks of the gone day were replaying, spooling past the proper hour of their dying, into the hours for dining, the eights and even nines now as Catherine sat waiting on the step of a once-fine house in the New Town, waiting for Rosa in the warm dusk, and rearranged her legs, and ran her hand across the step, the flaking sandstone that was gradually turning into beach again.

She leaned forwards, an elbow on her knee, cupping her jaw in the heel of her propped-up palm, its soft joint with her crease-lined wrist. Head turned sideways, hair knotting in the forking of fingers; gazing through the railings to next door's street stair that also clung above the plunging of a basement. The stone had worn down there, just as here, at

the edges of its steps, but someone had replaced it. New stone blocks shone pale and sharp-edged right where the lips of the steps must once have crumbled most.

A man walked up over the steps next door. There, she saw his brown brogues, and the hem of his hemp summer trousers. When she could hear that he was busy at the intercom, then she turned to look at the rest of him, the back of him, his white crumpled shirt, the way he curled and uncurled the fingers of his left hand into and out from his palm, while he spoke his name, waiting. His neck inclined forward, so that his lean sunburnt cheek fell into darkness. The slow drone of the buzzer admitting him. She turned back to the street and heard the door heave closed behind him, its final crash cutting short the starting sound of his feet on the stone stair.

She turned her attention to the windows of the new apartment block on the other side of the road, which was merely a resculpting of the Standard Life building, that brave office brick that had smashed its way into the Georgian street in the nineteen seventies. So sure of itself back then, but today's developers had wisely rubbed their fingers over the edges of its bluntness, swapped its concrete skin for stone, fitted natty balconies and a set of *brises-soleil* whose rows of lowered lashes cast shadows on the stairway glass and wall. There were security gates and secluded penthouse decks. The whole effect was one both of greater sophistication and of modesty, a slick elusiveness built in. Like a grown woman, the redesigned building attracted attention in order to deflect it. It was hard, very hard, to imagine the plain administrators who had toiled there once in nylon shirts, with filing cabinets and typewriters beneath fluorescent strip-lights.

Catherine Farrants was looking across at those apartments now, sitting with her hands clamped over the brim of the

topmost step that she sat upon, tight in, either side of her body. She watched as Venetian blinds descended in a room on the second floor, the serried slats clattering soundlessly down the spotless floor-to-ceiling glass.

The figure beyond was pulling at the cord, and letting go. Walking away, smoothing her Von Furstenberg dress. It took Catherine a full few seconds to work out what was wrong with the scene: that, having closed the blind, the woman ought to have been invisible. Instead, she was quite clearly lifting a glass of wine from an island unit in her open-plan living space. She was turning, speaking and making a motion with her hand. There was someone else in the room. A man, sliding in from the right, cutting across to the sofa end with a bottle of beer in hand. They think the blinds are closed, realised Catherine. The woman has pulled the cord the wrong way, and she doesn't know that the world can see in, because from her side, she can't see out.

Catherine turned her head and looked the other way down the street, towards the peeling mosque and the distant dome of the bus depot.

It will be better if you tell her, Bernadette had said this morning, a calm hand resting on the carnage in the foreign magazine. The faces of the dead had smiled out from cropped holiday snaps, fluttering in the breeze at the far left edge of the page, as if they might still be alive.

And Catherine hadn't thought about that business, or Sam, not in years, but sitting on the step here, it was all coming back. Maybe it was because she had been thinking of Humberto and Rosa, of how she was going to tell Rosa that he was one of them. Or why she must – when really, so easily, the facts in the newspaper could have been a matter of no personal importance. And of course the three of them had been quite entwined back then, Humberto, Rosa and

Sam, in that particular year when everyone was young and she especially. Maybe it was the summer heat, maybe it was the waiting, maybe it was the blood in the newspaper, or the thoughts of nylon shirts, a different time, maybe it was the thing she ought to tell although she didn’t want to, maybe it was all these things, but when the woman pulled her blinds the wrong way, there was no stopping Catherine’s recall. Her memory was tumbling backwards, snagging once as passing petrol fumes unfurled and hooked her nostrils.

Chapter Two

IT WAS A beautiful house, Catherine had noticed, when she'd last returned there – what, fourteen years ago, fifteen, must have been – passing with a brief boyfriend in a student car, her wrist in leather bracelets pointing ahead, her younger, louder voice saying, That's where I used to live, less from nostalgia than pride, owing to the size of it. On the road to Oban, a pile of girlish sweeties and the hash tin balanced on her thighs. And he of course had pulled into the drive, the gravel that was empty, and he had snooped around; she'd been stuck with this. With how rudely impressed he'd been. By its age, as much as scale – he kept remarking on how old it was, and how amazing, that her family had always lived here. It's only Victorian, she said. They were textile barons, she said, not the real thing, you know.

Lucky to be any kind, he had called, treading away from her across the lawn, but she wasn't really listening. She was looking up at the house, its blond sandstone blocks, the tower that soared square above the porch. The high windows under great gables in which the upstairs quarters lay – the corridors and cupboards, the billiard room, the pipistrelles, the smell of unslept beds, though surely that was different now – she was walking over the gravel, in spite of the sound it made, to the furthest edge of the drive, the lavender spikes, and new plants that she did not recognise, where now she stood gazing down the long frontage of the house. The dining room, thrust out upon this corner like a mullioned rosette, where for one summer she had slept; and then the fenestrated sweep of the

drawing room still serene behind its balustraded terrace, its windows catching the April light, reflecting darkly the treetops across the river and the distant mountain beyond. The kitchen, half-sunken, beneath the library, down there on the end where it belonged. Past it, among far-off shrubs, still stood the gate in the wall to the Farishes' garden next door.

On the architect's original plans the dining room and the library had been labelled the other way around, but old William Farrants did not want his reading to be disturbed by comings and goings of carriages and motor cars on the gravel, and also reasoned – kindly, considerately – that swapping the two would make it less far for the maid to carry the sandwiches that he always liked to take when reading even gentle works. He didn't notice that the servants then had to carry great tureens and stacks of plates all the way down the hall to the new dining room for breakfast, lunch and dinner, because this was not something that he personally asked them to do. Perhaps it didn't matter anyway, given that he was paying them, but details like this became stories that Catherine liked to tell.

Her great-grandfather seemed to her to have been a blithely ignorant creature, although perhaps he was only ignorant of the future, and besides, she herself, standing there aged twenty in the spring of nineteen ninety-two, could not have foreseen a future where people once more vied to serve the very rich; to source, concierge and manage; to massage and advise. She thought her generation of anti-fashion and irony, its proud snubbing of materialism, was here to stay; had no idea back then that culture is only the face society puts on things and changes with the tautness of the purse-skin.

Catherine had stood fidgeting with her lapiz earring. The ancient sinews of wisteria still twisted above the terrace,

though the laburnum was gone; and now Kyle was clambering over the balustrade: she watched him shade his eyes as he peered in close to the drawing room glass. They've got a fucking zebra skin rug, he called.

She had scuffed her trainer in the gravel, ignoring him. She was looking at the house, and feeling that it must be much more than six years since she had lived here. She was wishing that they hadn't stopped, were somewhere on the road ahead instead, slowing through Killin; but now that they had stopped here, she couldn't help but gaze on the collected turrets and soft grey-lichened sills through Kyle's eyes, and see that it was all hugely handsome. This appreciation of the house's aesthetic value upset her greatly. She thought she would have loved Falls anyway, but its beauty meant that anyone else would, too. The beauty of it denied the uniqueness of her affection. Its architectural perfection prevented intimacy, for there was nothing in it to forgive.

She strode back towards the car, past the old dining room, whose walls, she saw, glancing sideways, were now lined with books after all. Hunkering down in the passenger seat, Catherine had begun to skin up, and by the time her boyfriend returned, was a third of the way down the reefer.

So these were the things she had thought of when she visited the house last. Its great beauty, which irritated her and pushed her away. How she would never proudly point it out again to friends. How much less she liked her boyfriend for being so easily won by it. How her period was three days late, but then again, often had been. How strangely her best friend Parker had been behaving lately.

She did not think of Sam at all, although perhaps, somewhere in the shady allotments of her mind, swayed some remembrance of Lori's fate. Because she frowned, and poked a fingertip into her belly-button as she inhaled,

and was doubly, triply, glad when they pulled out of the gateway and were gone.

Why did you move? asked her boyfriend.

We couldn’t afford to keep it, answered Catherine, which was the truth. The roof was about to fall in, she said, tapping the ash out of the open window. Do you want a Refresher? she asked him.

Chapter Three

SLOWLY CATHERINE IN two thousand and eight was blinking her eyes as a blue car passed her on the street. She remembered her last visit in the sound of an engine as it slowed, changing gears; the scent of petrol fumes and dirty candy on the air.

The old summer at Falls, drawing her towards it, pulled her swiftly through its in-between time. Her last sighting of the place passed in the lowering and the raising of her eyelids: a whole landscape, torn past the window of a speeding train. When her lashes lifted again, she was entirely gone. She was looking at a chunk of city street – blank farmland built over with terraced townhouses, ripped down and replaced with offices, remoulded into flats – and she was flying backwards, down, into a time when everything had seemed to be a field, a building site. Back before recent remodellings, the pasting on of an air of ease, of varied pleasures, the layered dissemblings. Back before the coolly pragmatic righteous anger of the preceding demolition, its sensible right-angled second beginning. She was looking at a chunk of city street, but it wasn’t now, at all, and she was elsewhere.

Chapter Four

IT WASN'T A bad illness, not one big one, but a pile-up of quotidian childish sickenings, each ramming into the bumper of the one in front: whooping cough, chickenpox, measles straight and German, that knocked her all summer long, nine years old on a scrolled couch in the erstwhile dining room of Falls House.

Catherine lay in sweats or shivers, or the tiredness between, on a white towelling sheet, stretched over protective woollen underblankets, stretched over the tattered grey damask daybed. Her mother had fitted it with several over-layers, too: a thin cotton sheet, a yellow cellular cot blanket, another in white, and a stained once-blue quilt. It won't matter if you're sick on it, her older sister had observed, in a kindly tone, on the inauguration of the sick-room.

I won't be sick, Catherine told her, from under a wrinkled brow. I don't feel sick at all.

You might be, Bernie persisted, and brought a sick bowl. Just in case, she said, encouragingly.

The purpose of the several layers was ostensibly to keep Catherine at a comfortable temperature, easily controlled by peeling off or pulling on according to the fluctuations of her skin, the breeze from the window. In reality, the most useful function of the elaborate bedding options was in giving Catherine something to do; in allowing her to believe that once she had folded back the second cot blanket, then she would be quite at ease, or once she had got the quilt so

that it was not pressing down on her feet in that irritating way. Having performed these alterations, she could lie back and gauge whether or not the new configuration of blankets was in fact an improvement on the last. And if it wasn't, she could rearrange it. That was the thing: to be the one who arranged one's own discomfort, that was the comforting thing.

Through May and June she lay inside the room, cupped southerly to the great house's breast. She would be better, she kept telling herself, by the time that Sam and Rosa came. She imagined herself racing ahead of Sam through various parts of the garden, running in a particularly splendid way so that her adored older cousin would again look at her, out of breath, bent over with his hands on his knees, smile up through sweated forelock and say, You're a great runner, Catherine.

Catherine wasn't better at all by the time that Sam and Rosa came – and Aunt Ellie, she came too, of course, although Catherine always forgot to count her because everything always happened just as it would have done if she hadn't been there. They said hello, put their heads round the door, but she hardly even saw them, her fever was so high.

She watched them all outside, in the garden, and they seemed like shapes instead of sister, father, mother, cousins (aunt). She was so emptied of herself by the illness that it had become impossible to imagine other people. The most she could manage was to see them. Their voices, likewise emptied of sense, fell on her ears in sounds that water or birds might make as well, mingled with the distant roar of the river in the gorge, the clattering of petals in the vase upon the floor. Now and then shrieked the fighter jets that sometimes practised overhead, but not today, today they had been quiet, or rather, screaming somewhere else.

Catherine curled and stretched across the mattress, her whole body shrinking into a ball and re-expanding before shrinking back, and rolling, like the whole of her were one tormented stomach muscle, but, as she had so sagely predicted, the sickness never came. She kicked the whole lot of her bedding to the floor – whether in crossness or offering – and fitfully shivered now that she was so exposed.

Eventually she twisted upwards, slung her legs out and pressed the bare soles of her feet down against the smooth sun-warmed parquet floor, tried to stand. She managed this, and was standing now, close to the kicked-off sheet. All she had to do was stoop and collect its edge. But the brooches of her kneecaps had her pinned now, the needles of their fastenings lanced her stringy shinbones all hot and snapping, and she knew, she just knew, that if she took one more step, if she stooped, if she moved at all, then her knees would scatter past her ankles and end up on the floor. And then what would hold her legs up? If she moved, if she moved one inch from here, she would quite definitely fall apart.

Something like Mummy was in here, talking now, lifting her up and putting her back, and asking if she would like the sheet, and how about the yellow blanket, should we have that halfway and then folded back? All Catherine had to do was nod, and be tucked in, and have her dirty water glass taken away sideways. Everything was sideways when you were ill. And lie there now in the silence, and rest under the coolness of the sheet, with the breeze from the window lapping at her cheeks.

She could hear them picnicking outside.

Mine and Rosa’s names is foreign, Bernie was saying. So’s Mummy’s. Natasha is a Russian name. But Sam isn’t foreign.

Catherine closed her eyes. It was too much effort to comprehend the sense of what Bernadette was saying, but she recognised the sound of Sam’s name as something comforting. She pulled the sheet up over her face so that its cotton completely shaded her, and laboriously breathed her way towards sleep.

Chapter Five

‘NOR IS DADDY,’ said Bernadette. ‘*George*,’ she gravely intoned, looking at a bowl of broad beans before turning to her mother. ‘Why do only females have foreign names?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps they’re booty,’ said Natasha Farrants. ‘Ladies get tossed between ships, while men must fly the flags on the masts. Pass me the mayonnaise, please.’

‘Skull and crossbones?’ Bernie enquired.

‘That’s a different sort of man.’

Rosa looked up from her orange Tupperware plate piled with salad. ‘Are you a feminist, Aunt Tash?’

‘Women’s Lib? Lord no. I’m far too busy.’

‘What’s women’s lip?’ asked Bernadette, but Rosa was already asking,

‘What about Boadicea?’

‘I imagine she was too busy for it too,’ said Natasha.

‘What’s women’s lip? What’s Boda’s ear?’

‘Boadicea was a warrior queen,’ said Rosa. ‘She led a tribe against the Roman army.’

‘Britons’ Lib, really,’ said Natasha.

‘That’s the way you get things, though, isn’t it?’ Rosa persisted. ‘By fighting for something else. Uncle George says that process is the most important thing. He says the trick is to slip the ends into the means, and that’s the way to get things done.’

Still half a child inside, thought Natasha. Her niece might be sixteen, but she was still enough of a child to enter into everything entirely, to treat every notion as if it might very well be real. A child’s respect for internal logic

over external proofs, because not yet thinking everything had been seen, she would listen to all tales from the still-broad *terra incognita*, countenance all possible creatures and towns, customs and sounds. And not having been there yet herself, could test these only by the sense they made. Rosa would agree to believe anything as long as it made sense inside.

'Yes, well,' said Natasha. It was a long time since she had wondered about the actual meaning of her husband's ideas. These days, she merely cared about the outside shape of them within their shared life. Repercussions, reverb, concerned her more than tunes. When George had stumbled down from his library the other evening and grabbed her in the kitchen, with his scraps of paper and his Ancient Hebrew script, she had only been glad to feel his hand around her wrist.

'Look,' he had said, beginning to draw symbols on the page. 'The Ancient Hebrew letter A, *Al*. It's a pictograph for an ox's head. Associated meanings – leadership, strength, yoke, pillar. B,' he had breathed, quickly scratching a shape like a squared spiral. '*Beyt*. A pictograph for the layout of their tents. Associated meanings – home, family, inside. The *letters* have meanings. Isn't it amazing?' Natasha had only been aware that he had taken his hand away from her and was entirely absorbed now in the piece of paper, leaning his arm upon the table where she had been about to roll pastry. He was not even glancing round. He seemed to simply assume she was still there and it did not occur to Natasha, who never took anything for granted herself, that this might be an act of trust rather than indifference. 'You put them together to create the meaning of the word. *Ab* – the strength of the home – meaning father. But still also meaning the tentpole itself.' He had laughed. 'Both, do you see, a literal meaning and a conceptual meaning too, each word a joining-point between two worlds.'

Natasha had looked at him, and the way he had co-opted the tabletop, and the way he still had not turned around to see whether she was there and whether she cared or not about the joining-points on his piece of paper when the joining-points that mattered to her, the joining-points of his hands and eyes, had been taken away from her, when the strength of her home was preventing her from flouring the Formica and rolling out the pastry that waited in the bowl.

'Was Boda's Ear a princess before she was a queen?' Bernie asked, sitting with her head wedged in the crook of her mother's shoulder.

'I don't think they really had princesses then,' said Natasha. 'I imagine she was just somebody who wasn't the queen yet.'

'Do you think Lady Di rides a motorbike? I'm going to write and ask her.'

'I think feminism's great,' said Sam, who Natasha had not even realised was paying them any attention, sat apart and staring down the short lawn to the tall fence, the rabbit wire, and through it to the rapids of the fast-flowing river. His knees drawn up, and that dark brown hound of his resting its nose on his foot. The dog Julab closed its eyes as she looked at it. It was as if it had felt Natasha's gaze and spurned her: utterly loyal and obedient to Sam, utterly disregarding everyone else. Which was the way things should be, thought Natasha, between dogs and their masters, but still, she found it a little unnerving here in the grounds of her own house. It seemed offensive to George, somehow. Everyone ought to cede to their hostess, on the tacit understanding that she ceded to the host behind closed doors: this was how things were gently done. How could she deliver her guests' respect up to her husband, if they did not first deliver it to her? But really – it was only her nephew's dog. It was only a dog lying in the sunshine with its eyes closed, resting at its master's feet. And Sam

was only eighteen: still a child also, really. It was summer, wasn't it, and the sky was very bright.

The outside walls of the house loomed peacefully sun-baked, as strong and firm as ever behind the nearby flowerbeds, and she decided not to think of the way that when the rain came she had to run to and fro in the hall indoors with buckets and pots to catch the drips beneath the leaking skylight; decided to ignore the fact that it would again be autumn soon, and that the leaking would be worse, as it was every year, a little bit worse than the last. Not to think of the way that the wine set aside by previous generations was slowly shrinking lower against the cellar walls.

She looked at the red poppies that bloomed in a hot scatter against the puffs of pale blue catmint, and the brilliant creamy lilies with their long throats and kissed-out lips, the stately suck-and-spit of their faultless trumpets. Beneath them, soft rabbits' ears of stachys overlapped the border, tumbled luxuriantly on the edges of the lawn. A dandelion clock drifted slowly past. Everything was so ripely coloured and so perfectly clear in the garden around her, and her daughter was so warm and heavy and real against her body, and the house was standing so solidly and close, that she felt foolish for thinking that her husband in any way really required her shoring up of him. In a world such as this, he surely could not subside or crumble. Not that Natasha feared a breakdown: George wasn't the type to shatter so much as somehow slide and recombine. He did it with words all the time: slid sideways; appeared in one corner and then suddenly was in the other, opposite the place you'd thought. Used his words like mirrors so much that perhaps it was not surprising she sometimes found it hard to trust his flesh. Sometimes, when she was with him, she had the feeling that she was in a dream. There was that same unsureness as to what might happen next. With George you often felt that he might, at any moment, turn

into a cat. Which was just a madness on her part, not his, but all the same explained the way she turned her back on his eyes sometimes and busied herself with inconsequential clothes pegs.

She was reaching a hand up to her throat now, fingering her necklace, a wreath of fine gold threads that George had bought her when Bernadette was born – not yet Bernadette then, but a small pink crumpled shock that slept. The necklace had seemed like a promise of good things to come: a miraculous abundance to match her own bodily gift, the great achievement of her womb in creating something where nothing had been. She wasn't to know that George had sold the remaining first editions from the library – *Treasure Island*, Hume's *Enquiries*, and all the Walter Scotts – in order to pay for it. She had enjoyed supposing, rather, that good fortune was befalling New Albion Press. Bernadette had been a honeymoon baby, born before the year of their March wedding was even out; Natasha did not, at that time, entirely understand the way the coins were stacked. It had not, for a long time, occurred to her that George's material confidence could be grounded on nothing of real substance but merely expectation, old security, a sense of due.

She wrinkled her nose as a fleeting memory buzzed against her bones: Ruaridh's face, flushed, having drunk too much wine as usual. Staggering in the kitchen, with an unpleasant laugh. 'George, you bloody ponce. All your fucking fanciness. You can't smell the shit for the flowers that grow in it.'

Had Ellie been there too? Natasha didn't think so, although it was always hard to recall because in truth Natasha had scarcely been aware of Ellie as a separate entity until after Ruaridh's death. If she had been there, then she would have faded away to the drawing room at the first sign of the disturbance, because that was what Ellie always did, and afterwards would smile brightly with

nervous eyelashes and draw your attention to something small and silly – a bird flying past the window, some embroidered motto on your own cushion.

Natasha brushed her fingers briskly across the skin of her forearm, as if she were being bothered by an insect. That was how it felt. The irritating memory, its legs and wings: the ugliness of her brother's face – whom she greatly wished to remember only in the finest of lights, now that he was gone – and the perpetual irritatingness of Ellie, to whom she wanted to be kind; and then the interruption of her thoughts by the whole thing, the rudeness of it, the *bothering*. Inside it, the sharper sting of the preceding scene, which she had no desire to suffer again, again. If only memory were a bee, and not a wasp. She dusted her arm quite hard and blinked.

Carefully, Natasha noticed another dandelion clock blowing gently past her. Went back to holding her necklace, pressing the precious bundle of tarnished threads between her fingers. She must get the clasp mended, she reminded herself. Lately it had been feeling as if it were about to break – too loose, where it joined. It was pulling out of the hasp. She would take it to the jewellers in Stirling next month. The Gills would have left by then; there would be enough slack in her budget to pay a small bill, if she spread it over two weeks and postponed her next tub of Atrixo handcream. Which was her only remaining cosmetic indulgence, but really, oatmeal worked almost as well, didn't it, to condition the skin.

Where had Ellie got to? Natasha was determined not to be irritated by her at all this afternoon. She wanted to start being kind right away.

'Of course women are equal to men,' said Sam.

And what were you supposed to make of that, Natasha wondered. And why, she wordlessly frowned, was her sister-in-law taking so long.

'Look at mother,' he said.

She was already turning her neck, looking for his mother quite literally, when he said this, so that she seemed a little absurd and had to stop and pretend to be admiring the far azalea instead, beyond the drained pond. But where was she? She'd only gone to fetch an egg slicer.

'Yes,' said Rosa. 'I think Mum's done a very good job of bringing us up since Dad died.'

What a strange pale shade of tangerine that azalea blossom was. How strange it was that once the pond had had water in it. It had been drained when the children were born, for safety's sake, and now they were older, everyone had got used to using its nice stone bottom and sheltered walls for barbecues, so that somehow there never seemed much point in refilling it; yet bulrushes still grew around its edge. Natasha knew it had had water in it once, but she couldn't begin to picture it. How strange that although she could remember the fact of it, she couldn't imagine it at all.

How strange it was that Ruaridh should have gone and left so many strange things behind him. Things in her own garden that could take her by surprise. And the strange sudden fragility of her past, a childhood or a rearing, a bringing up, as Rosa had phrased it just then, that had seemed so solid when her brother had been here to have witnessed it with her and turned out surer.

The surest of them both, broken and gone. No sliding in Ruaridh: he had never been one for tricks and transmutations. He was all or nothing. Shattered and gone. Leaving the changedness of her same garden. Leaving her own brittle arches of built-up basis, unbuttressed. The childish assumptions on which she had stacked herself seemed small and random now – not certain at all. An adult moss of pragmatism and age might still helpfully cloud the bricks, make them seem a unity and not a cobbled chance, but she had seen her brother's grander structure crumble. He had gone, leaving her past, alone, to sustain itself or fall.

Leaving also these two strange children of his. And the thread between her fingers.

‘Mummy,’ said Bernie. ‘You’re hurting me.’

Her daughter’s hair.

Ellie was walking towards them on the path that ran along the front of the house, lugging a picnic flask, smiling in that funny brave apologetic way she always had.

‘I found some peaches,’ she gasped, planting the flask beside the rug. ‘I’ve made some iced tea.’

Natasha’s sister-in-law always paused at the end of her sentences, like a pony, wanting to be coached over the next jump. She was smoothing her long dress down around her thighs, folding it in like a tulip and sinking to the ground. Breathing out with a small sigh that asked to be happy, as if to say, where are the words that I’m waiting for. Where is my hay.

Despite her best intentions, Natasha could not oblige. She was too maddened by Ellie’s unauthorised commandeering of the peaches: as if, in finding them in Natasha’s kitchen, she had somehow procured them all by herself. She had no idea, really none, of what it was to worry about where one’s money was coming from.

George, of course, carried on as he had always done. Everything had turned out all right for such a long time that he thought his wife’s concern absurd, and faintly offensive, and would get cross and say that it was like worrying whether or not the oaks would have acorns next autumn.

He seemed to have forgotten that his grandfather’s grandfather was a navvy, born on a scrubbed kitchen table in a dank little two-room but-and-ben not twenty miles from here; seemed so sure that the intervening period of prosperity had safeguarded the family from a return to that state of affairs for ever that in fact he never gave it a