RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

My Policeman

Bethan Roberts

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About the Book

From the moment Marion first lays eyes on Tom – her best friend's big brother, broad, blond, blue-eyed – she is smitten. And when he comes home from National Service to be a policeman, Marion, a newly qualified teacher, is determined to win him. Unable to acknowledge the signs that something is amiss, she plunges into marriage, sure that her love is enough for both of them...

But Tom has another life, another equally overpowering claim on his affections. Patrick, a curator at the Brighton Museum, is also besotted with his policeman, and opens Tom's eyes to a world previously unknown to him. But in an age when those of 'minority status' were condemned by society and the law, it is safer for this policeman to marry his teacher. The two lovers must share him, until one of them breaks and three lives are destroyed.

Unfolding through the dual narratives of Marion and Patrick, both writing about the man at the centre of their lives, this beautifully-told, painful, tragic story is revealed. It is a tale of wasted years, misguided love and thwarted hope, of how at a time when the country was on the verge of change so much was still impossible. Bethan Roberts has produced an intense and exquisitely raw yet tender novel, which proves her to be one of our most exciting young writers.

About the Author

Bethan Roberts was born in Oxford and grew up in nearby Abingdon. Her first novel *The Pools* was published in 2007 and won a Jerwood/Arvon Young Writers' Award. Her second novel *The Good Plain Cook*, published in 2008, was serialized on BBC Radio 4's Book at Bedtime and was chosen as one of *Time Out*'s books of the year. She also writes short stories (in 2006 she was awarded the Olive Cook short story prize by the Society of Authors) and has had a play broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Bethan has worked as a television documentary researcher, writer and assistant producer, and has taught Creative Writing at Chichester University and Goldsmiths College, London. She lives in Brighton with her family.

ALSO BY BETHAN ROBERTS

The Pools
The Good Plain Cook

For all my Brighton friends, but most especially for Stuart

MY POLICEMAN

Bethan Roberts

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

I

Peacehaven, October 1999

I CONSIDERED STARTING with these words: *I no longer want to kill you* – because I really don't – but then decided you would think this far too melodramatic. You've always hated melodrama, and I don't want to upset you now, not in the state you're in, not at what may be the end of your life.

What I mean to do is this: write it all down, so I can get it right. This is a confession of sorts, and it's worth getting the details correct. When I am finished, I plan to read this account to you, Patrick, because you can't answer back any more. And I have been instructed to keep talking to you. Talking, the doctors say, is vital if you are to recover.

Your speech is almost destroyed, and even though you are here in my house, we communicate on paper. When I say on paper, I mean pointing at flashcards. You can't articulate the words but you can gesture towards your desires: *drink, lavatory, sandwich*. I know you want these things before your finger reaches the picture, but I let you point anyway, because it is better for you to be independent.

It's odd, isn't it, that I'm the one with pen and paper now, writing this – what shall we call it? It's hardly a journal, not of the type you once kept. Whatever it is, I'm the one writing, while you lie in your bed, watching my every move.

*

You've never liked this stretch of coast, calling it suburbia-on-sea, the place the old go to gaze at sunsets and wait for death. Wasn't this area – exposed, lonely, windswept, like

all the best British seaside settlements – known as Siberia in that terrible winter of ’63? It’s not quite that bleak here now, although it’s still as uniform; there’s even some comfort, I find, in its predictability. Here in Peacehaven, the streets are the same, over and over: modest bungalow, functional garden, oblique sea view.

I was very resistant to Tom’s plans to move here. Why would I, a lifelong Brighton resident, want to live on one floor, even if our bungalow was called a Swiss chalet by the estate agent? Why would I settle for the narrow aisles of the local Co-op, the old-fat stench of Joe’s Pizza and Kebab House, the four funeral parlours, a pet shop called Animal Magic and a dry-cleaner’s where the staff are, apparently, ‘London trained’? Why would I settle for such things after Brighton, where the cafés are always full, the shops sell more than you could possibly imagine, let alone need, and the pier is always bright, always open and often slightly menacing?

No. I thought it an awful idea, just as you would have done. But Tom was determined to retire to a quieter, smaller, supposedly safer place. I think, in part, he’d had more than enough of being reminded of his old beats, his old busyness. One thing a bungalow in Peacehaven does not do is remind you of the world’s busyness. So here we are, where no one is out on the street before nine thirty in the morning or after nine thirty at night, save a handful of teenagers who smoke outside the pizza place. Here we are in a two-bedroom bungalow (it is not a Swiss chalet, it is *not*), within easy reach of the bus stop and the Co-op, with a long lawn to look out on and a whirligig washing line and three outdoor buildings (shed, garage, greenhouse). The saving grace is the sea view, which is indeed oblique – it’s visible from the side bedroom window. I’ve given this bedroom to you, and have arranged your bed so you may see the glimpse of the sea as much as you like. I’ve given all this to you, Patrick, despite the fact that Tom and I

never before had our own view. From your Chichester Terrace flat, complete with Regency finishings, you enjoyed the sea every day. I remember the view from your flat very well, even though I rarely visited you: the Volk's railway, the Duke's Mound gardens, the breakwater with its crest of white on windy days, and of course the sea, always different, always the same. Up in our terraced house on Islingword Street, all Tom and I saw were our own reflections in the neighbours' windows. But still. I wasn't keen to leave that place.

So I suspect that when you arrived here from the hospital a week ago, when Tom lifted you from the car and into your chair, you saw exactly what I did: the brown regularity of the pebble-dash, the impossibly smooth plastic of the double-glazed door, the neat conifer hedge around the place, and all of it would have struck terror into your heart, just as it had in mine. And the name of the place: *The Pines*. So inappropriate, so unimaginative. A cool sweat probably oozed from your neck and your shirt suddenly felt uncomfortable. Tom wheeled you along the front path. You would have noticed that each slab was a perfectly even piece of pinkish-grey concrete. As I put the key in the lock and said, 'Welcome,' you wrung your wilted hands together and pulled your face into something like a smile.

Entering the beige-papered hallway, you would have smelled the bleach I'd used in preparation for your stay with us, and registered the scent of Walter, our collie-cross, lurking beneath it. You nodded slightly at the framed photograph of our wedding, Tom in that wonderful suit from Cobley's – paid for by you – and me in that stiff veil. We sat in the living room, Tom and I on the new brown velvet suite, bought with money from Tom's retirement package, and listened to the ticking music of the central heating. Walter panted at Tom's feet. Then Tom said, 'Marion will see you settled.' And I noticed the wince you gave at Tom's determination to leave, the way you

continued to stare at the net curtains as he strode towards the door saying, ‘Something I’ve got to see to.’

The dog followed him. You and I sat listening to Tom’s footsteps along the hallway, the rustle as he reached for his coat from the peg, the jangle as he checked in his pocket for his keys; we heard him gently command Walter to wait, and then there was only the sound of the suction of air as he pulled the double-glazed front door open and left the bungalow. When I finally looked at you, your hands, limp on your bony knees, were shaking. Did you think, then, that being in Tom’s home at last might not be all you’d hoped?

FORTY-EIGHT YEARS. THAT'S how far I have to go back, to when I first met Tom. And even that may not be far enough.

He was so contained back then. *Tom*. Even the name is solid, unpretentious, but not without the possibility of sensitivity. He wasn't a Bill, a Reg, a Les or a Tony. Did you ever call him Thomas? I know I wanted to. Sometimes there were moments when I wanted to rename him. *Tommy*. Perhaps that's what you called him, the beautiful young man with the big arms and the dark blond curls.

I knew his sister from grammar school. During our second year there, she approached me in the corridor and said, 'I was thinking – you look all right – will you be my friend?' Up until that point, we'd each spent our time alone, baffled by the strange rituals of the school, the echoing spaces of the classrooms and the clipped voices of the other girls. I let Sylvie copy my homework, and she played me her records: Nat King Cole, Patti Page, Perry Como. Together, under our breath, we sang *Some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger* as we stood at the back of the queue for the vaulting horse, letting all the other girls go before us. Neither of us liked games. I enjoyed going to Sylvie's because Sylvie had *things*, and her mother let her wear her brittle blonde hair in a style too old for her years; I think she even helped her set the fringe in a kiss-curl. At the time, my hair, which was as red as it ever was, still hung in a thick plait down my back. If I lost my temper at home – I remember once shutting my brother Fred's head in the door with some force – my father would look at my

mother and say, ‘It’s the red in her,’ because the ginger strain was on my mother’s side. I think you once called me *the Red Peril*, didn’t you, Patrick? By that time, I’d come to like the colour, but I always felt it was a self-fulfilling prophecy, having red hair: people expected me to have a temper, and so, if I felt anger flaring up, I let it go. Not often, of course. But occasionally I slammed doors, threw crockery. Once I rammed the Hoover so hard into the skirting board that it cracked.

When I was first invited to Sylvie’s house in Patcham, she had a peach silk neckerchief and as soon as I saw it I wanted one too. Sylvie’s parents had a tall drinks cabinet in their living room, with glass doors painted with black stars. ‘It’s all on the never-never,’ Sylvie said, pushing her tongue into her cheek and showing me upstairs. She let me wear the neckerchief and she showed me her bottles of nail varnish. When she opened one, I smelled pear-drops. Sitting on her neat bed, I chose the dark purple polish to brush over Sylvie’s wide, bitten-down nails, and when I’d finished, I brought her hand up to my face and blew, gently. Then I brought her thumbnail to my mouth and ran my top lip over the smooth finish, to check it was dry.

‘What are you doing?’ She gave a spiky laugh.

I let her hand fall back into her lap. Her cat, Midnight, came in and brushed up against my legs.

‘Sorry,’ I said.

Midnight stretched and pressed herself along my ankles with greater urgency. I reached down to scratch her behind the ears, and whilst I was doubled over the cat, Sylvie’s bedroom door opened.

‘Get out,’ Sylvie said in a bored voice. I quickly straightened up, worried that she was speaking to me, but she was glaring over my shoulder towards the doorway. I twisted round and saw him standing there, and my hand came up to the silk at my neck.

‘Get out, Tom,’ Sylvie repeated, in a tone that suggested she was resigned to the roles they had to play out in this little drama.

He was leaning in the doorway with the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to the elbows, and I noticed the fine lines of muscle in his forearms. He couldn’t have been more than fifteen – barely a year older than me; but his shoulders were already wide and there was a dark hollow at the base of his neck. His chin had a scar on one side – just a small dent, like a fingerprint in plasticine – and he was wearing a sneer, which even then I knew he was doing deliberately, because he thought he should, because it made him look like a Ted; but the whole effect of this boy leaning on the door frame and looking at me with his blue eyes – small eyes, set deep – made me blush so hard that I reached down and plunged my fingers back into the dusty fur around Midnight’s ears and focused my eyes on the floor.

‘Tom! Get out!’ Sylvie’s voice was louder now, and the door slammed shut.

You can imagine, Patrick, that it was a few minutes before I could trust myself to remove my hand from the cat’s ears and look at Sylvie again.

After that, I did my best to remain firm friends with Sylvie. Sometimes I would take the bus out to Patcham and walk past her semi-detached house, looking up at her bright windows, telling myself I was hoping she would come out, when in fact my whole body was strung tight in anticipation of Tom’s appearance. Once, I sat on the wall around the corner from her house until it got dark and I could no longer feel my fingers or toes. I listened to the blackbirds singing for all they were worth, and smelled the dampness growing in the hedges around me, and then I caught the bus home.

My mother looked out of windows a lot. Whenever she was cooking, she’d lean on the stove and gaze out of the tiny

line of glass in our back door. She was always, it seemed to me, making gravy and staring out of the window. She'd stir the gravy for the longest time, scraping the bits of meat and gristly residue around the pan. It tasted of iron and was slightly lumpy, but Dad and my brothers covered their plates with it. There was so much gravy that they got it on their fingers and in their nails, and they would lick it off while Mum smoked, waiting for the washing-up.

They were always kissing, Mum and Dad. In the scullery, him with his hand gripped tight on the back of her neck, her with her arm around his middle, pulling him closer. It was difficult, at the time, to work out how they fitted together, they were so tightly locked. It was ordinary to me, though, seeing them like that and I'd just sit at the kitchen table, put my *Picturegoer* annual on the ribbed tablecloth, prop my chin in my hand and wait for them to finish. The strange thing is, although there was all that kissing, there never seemed to be much conversation. They'd talk through us: *You'll have to ask your father about that*. Or: *What does your mother say?* At the table it would be Fred, Harry and me, and Dad reading the *Gazette* and Mum standing by the window, smoking. I don't think she ever sat at the table to eat with us, except on Sundays when Dad's father, Grandpa Taylor, would come too. He called Dad 'boy' and would feed his yellowing Westie, crouched beneath his chair, most of his dinner. So it was never long before Mum was standing and smoking again, clearing away the plates and crashing the crocks in the scullery. She'd station me at the drainer to dry, fastening a pinny round my waist, one of hers that was too long for me and had to be rolled over at the top, and I'd try to lean on the sink like her. Sometimes when she wasn't there I'd gaze through the window and try to imagine what my mother thought about as she looked out on our shed with the slanting roof, Dad's patch of straggly Brussels sprouts, and the small square of sky above the neighbours' houses.

In the summer holidays Sylvie and I often went to Black Rock Lido. I always wanted to save my money and sit on the beach, but Sylvie insisted that the Lido was where we should be. This was partly because the Lido was where Sylvie could flirt with boys. All through school, she was seldom without some admirer, whereas I didn't seem to attract anyone's interest. I never relished the thought of spending another afternoon watching my friend being ogled, but with its sparkling windows, glaring white concrete and striped deckchairs, the lido was too pretty to resist, and so more often than not we paid our ninepences and pushed through the turnstiles to the poolside.

I remember one afternoon with particular clarity. We were both about seventeen. Sylvie had a lime-green two-piece, and I had a red swimsuit that was too small for me. I kept having to yank up the straps and pull down the legs. By this time, Sylvie had rather impressive breasts and a neat waistline; I still seemed to be a long rectangular shape with a bit of extra padding around the sides. I'd had my hair cut into a bob by then, which I was pleased with, but I was too tall. My father told me not to stoop, but he also made a point of telling me to always choose flat shoes. 'No man wants to look up a woman's nose,' he'd say. 'Isn't that right, Phyllis?' And Mum would smile and say nothing. At school they kept insisting that with my height I should be good at netball, but I was dreadful. I'd just stand at the side, pretending to be waiting for a pass. The pass never came, and I'd gaze over the fence at the boys playing rugby. Their voices were so different to ours – deep and woody, and with that confidence of boys who know what the next step in life will be. Oxford. Cambridge. The bar. The school next door was private, you see, like yours was, and the boys there seemed so much more handsome than the ones I knew. They wore well-cut jackets and walked with their hands in their pockets and their long fringes falling over their faces, whereas the boys I knew (and these were

few) sort of charged towards you, looking straight ahead. No mystery to them. All up-front. Not that I ever talked to any of those boys with the fringes. You went to one of those schools, but you were never like that, were you, Patrick? Like me, you never fitted in. I understood that from the start.

It was not quite hot enough for bathing outside – a freshening wind was coming from the sea – but the sun was bright. Sylvie and I lay flat on our towels. I kept my skirt on over my costume, whilst Sylvie arranged her things in a neat row next to me: comb, compact, cardigan. She sat up and squinted, taking in the crowds on the sun-drenched terrace. Sylvie's mouth always seemed to be pulled in an upside-down smile, and her front teeth followed the downward line of her top lip, as if they'd been chiselled especially into shape. I closed my eyes. Pinkish shapes moved around on the insides of my eyelids as Sylvie sighed and cleared her throat. I knew she wanted to talk to me, to point out who else was at the pool, who was doing what with whom and which boys she knew, but all I wanted was some warmth on my face and to get that far-away feeling that comes when you lie in the afternoon sun.

Eventually I was almost there. The blood seemed to have thickened behind my eyes and all my limbs had gone to rubber. The slap of feet and the crack of boys hitting the water from the diving board did nothing to rouse me, and although I could feel the sun burning my shoulders I remained flat on the concrete, breathing in the chalky smell of the wet floor and the occasional waft of cold chlorine from a passer-by.

Then something cool and wet fell on my cheek and I opened my eyes. At first all I could see was the white glare of the sky. I blinked, and a shape revealed itself, outlined in vivid pink. I blinked again and heard Sylvie's voice, petulant but pleased – 'What are *you* doing here?' – and I knew who it was.

Sitting up, I tried to gather myself together, shading my eyes and hastily wiping sweat from my top lip.

There he was, with the sun behind him, smirking at Sylvie.

‘You’re dripping on us!’ she said, brushing at imaginary droplets on her shoulders.

Of course, I’d seen and admired Tom at Sylvie’s house many times, but this was the first time I’d seen quite so much of his body. I tried to look away, Patrick. I tried not to stare at the bead of water crawling its way from his throat to his navel, at the wet strands of hair at the nape of his neck. But you know how hard it is to look away when you see something you want. So I focused on his shins: on the glistening blond hairs that covered his skin; I adjusted the straps of my one-piece, and Sylvie asked again, with an overly dramatic sigh: ‘What do you want, Tom?’

He looked at the two of us – both bone-dry and sun-blotched. ‘Haven’t you been in?’

‘Marion doesn’t swim,’ announced Sylvie.

‘Why not?’ he asked, looking at me.

I could have lied, I suppose. But even then I had a terrible dread of being found out. In the end, people always found you out. And when they did, it would be worse than if you’d simply told the truth in the first place.

My mouth had dried, but I managed to say, ‘Never learned.’

‘Tom’s in the sea-swimming club,’ said Sylvie, with what sounded almost like pride.

I’d never had the urge to get wet. The sea was always there, a constant noise and movement on the edge of town. But that didn’t mean I had to join it, did it? Until that moment, not being able to swim hadn’t seemed the least bit important. But now I knew that I would have to do it.

‘I’d love to learn,’ I said, trying to smile.

‘Tom’ll teach you, won’t you, Tom?’ said Sylvie, looking him in the eye, challenging him to refuse.

Tom gave a shiver, then snatched Sylvie's towel and wrapped it about his waist.

'I could,' he said. Rubbing roughly at his hair, trying to dry it with one hand, he turned to Sylvie. 'Lend us a bob.'

'Where's Roy?' asked Sylvie.

This was the first I'd heard of Roy, but Sylvie was obviously interested, judging by the way she dropped the question of swimming lessons and instead craned her neck to see past her brother.

'Diving,' said Tom. 'Lend us a bob.'

'What are you doing after?'

'None of your business.'

Sylvie opened her compact and studied herself for a moment before saying, in a low voice, 'I bet you're going to the Spotted Dog.'

At this, Tom stepped forward and made a playful swipe for his sister, but she ducked to avoid his hand. His towel fell to the floor and again I averted my eyes.

I wondered what was so bad about going to the Spotted Dog, but, not wanting to appear ignorant, I kept my mouth shut.

Sylvie let a small silence pass before she murmured, 'You're going there. I know it.' Then she grabbed the corner of the towel, jumped up, and began to twist it into a rope. Tom lunged for her, but she was too quick. The end of the towel landed across his chest with a crack, leaving a red line. At the time, I fancied I saw the line pulsing, but I'm not sure of that now. Still, you can picture it: our beautiful boy beaten by his little sister, marked by her soft cotton towel.

A flash of anger passed across his face, and I bristled; it was getting cooler now; a shadow was creeping over the sunbathers. Tom looked to the ground and swallowed. Sylvie hovered, unsure of her brother's next move. With a sudden grab, he had the towel back; she was ducking and laughing as he flicked the thing madly about, occasionally

slapping her with its end – at which she'd let out a high-pitched squeal – but mostly missing. He was gentle now, you see, I knew it even then; he was padding about and being deliberately clumsy, teasing his sister with the idea of his greater strength and accuracy, with the idea that he *might* strike her hard.

'I've got a bob,' I said, feeling for change in my cardigan pocket. It was all I had left, but I held it out to him.

Tom stopped flicking the towel. He was breathing hard. Sylvie rubbed at her neck where the towel had hit. 'Bully,' she muttered.

He held out his palm, and I placed my coin in it, letting my fingertips brush his warm skin.

'Thanks,' he said, and he smiled. Then he looked at Sylvie. 'You all right?'

Sylvie shrugged.

When he'd turned his back, she stuck out her tongue.

On the way home, I smelled my hand, breathing in the metallic scent. The tang of my money would be on Tom's fingers now, too.

Just before Tom left for his National Service, he gave me a glimmer of hope that I clung to until his return, and, if I'm honest, even beyond that.

It was December and I'd gone to Sylvie's for tea. You'll understand that Sylvie rarely came to my house, because she had her own bedroom, a portable record-player and bottles of Vimto, whereas I shared a room with Harry and the only thing to drink was tea. But at Sylvie's we had sliced ham, soft white bread, tomatoes and salad cream, followed by tinned mandarins and evaporated milk. Sylvie's father owned a shop on the front that sold saucy postcards, rock dummies, out-of-date packets of jellied fruits, and dolls made from shells with dried seaweed for collars. It was called Happy News because it also sold newspapers, magazines and copies of the racier titles wrapped in

cellophane. Sylvie told me that her father sold five copies of the *Kama Sutra* every week, and that figure trebled over the summer. At the time, I'd only a dim idea that the *Kama Sutra* was, for reasons unknown to me, a forbidden book; but I'd pretended to be impressed, opening my eyes wide and mouthing 'Really?' as Sylvie nodded, triumphant.

We ate in the front room, and Sylvie's mother's budgerigar provided a constant background tweep. There were plastic chairs with steel legs and a wipe-clean dining table with no cloth. Sylvie's mother was wearing an orangey shade of lipstick, and from where I was sitting I could smell the lavender cleaning fluid on her hands. She was extremely overweight, which was strange, because all I ever saw her eat were salad leaves and cucumber slices, and all I ever saw her drink was black coffee. Despite this apparent self-denial, her features seemed lost somewhere in the swollen flesh of her face, and her bosom was enormous and always propped up on display, like an oversized, well-whipped meringue in a baker's window. When I knew I shouldn't spend any more time looking at Tom, who was sitting next to his mother, I would fix my eyes on Mrs Burgess's cushiony cleavage. I knew I shouldn't really look there, either, but it was better than being caught with my eyes wandering all over her son. I was convinced I could feel the heat rising from him; his naked forearm rested on the table, and it seemed to me that his flesh was warming the entire room. And I could smell him (I wasn't just imagining this, Patrick): he smelled – do you remember? – he smelled of hair oil, of course – Vitalis, it would have been then – and of pine-scented talc, which I later learned he dashed liberally beneath his arms every morning before pulling on his shirt. At that time, as you'll recall, men like Tom's father did not approve of talc. It's different now, of course. When I go to the Co-op in Peacehaven and pass all the young boys, their hair so closely resembling Tom's as it once was – slicked with oil

and teased into impossible shapes – I'm overwhelmed by the fabricated scent of their perfume. They smell like new furniture, those boys. But Tom didn't smell like that. He smelled exciting, because, back then, men who covered their own sweat with talc were rather suspect, which was very interesting to me. And you got the best of both worlds, you see: the fresh odour of the talc, but if you were close enough, the warm, muddy smell of skin beneath.

When we'd finished our sandwiches, Mrs Burgess brought through the tinned peaches on pink dishes. We ate in silence. Then Tom wiped the sweet juice from his lips and announced, 'I went down the conscription office today. To volunteer. That way I get to choose what I do.' He pushed his dish away and looked his father in the face. 'I start next week.'

After giving a brief nod, Mr Burgess stood up and held out his hand. Tom also stood, and clasped his father's fingers. I wondered if they'd ever shaken hands before. It didn't look like something they did often. There was a firm shake and then they both glanced around the room as if wondering what to do next.

'He always has to outdo me,' Sylvie hissed in my ear.

'What'll you be doing?' asked Mr Burgess, still standing, blinking at his son.

Tom cleared his throat. 'Catering Corps.'

The two men stared at one another and Sylvie let out a giggle.

Mr Burgess suddenly sat down.

'This is news, isn't it? Shall we have a drink, Jack?' Mrs Burgess's voice was high, and I thought I heard a little crack in it as she pushed back her chair. 'We need a drink, don't we? For news like this.' As she stood, she knocked the remains of her black coffee over the table. It spread across the white plastic and dripped on to the rug below.

'Clumsy cow,' muttered Mr Burgess.

Sylvie let out another giggle.

Tom, who seemed to have been standing in a trance, his arm still slightly outstretched where he'd shaken his father's hand, moved towards his mother. 'I'll get a cloth,' he said, touching her shoulder.

After Tom had left the room, Mrs Burgess looked around the table, taking in each of our faces. 'Whatever will we do now?' she said. Her voice was so quiet that I wondered if anyone else had heard her speak. Certainly no one responded for a few moments. But then Mr Burgess sighed and said, 'Catering Corps isn't exactly the Somme, Beryl.'

Mrs Burgess gave a sob and followed her son out of the room.

Tom's father said nothing. The budgie tweeped and tweeped as we waited for Tom's return. I could hear him talking in a hushed voice in the kitchen, and I imagined his mother weeping in his arms, devastated, as I was, that he was leaving.

Sylvie kicked my chair, but instead of looking at her, I fixed Mr Burgess with a stare and said, 'Even soldiers have to eat, though, don't they?' I kept my voice steady and neutral. Later on, this was what I did when a child answered me back in class, or when Tom told me it was your turn, Patrick, at the weekend. 'I'm sure Tom will make a good chef.'

Mr Burgess gave a tight laugh before pushing back his chair and hollering towards the kitchen door: 'For God's sake, where's that drink?'

Tom came back in, holding two beer bottles. His father snatched one, held it up to Tom's face and said, 'Well done for upsetting your mother.' Then he left the room, but instead of going into the kitchen and comforting Mrs Burgess, as I thought he might, I heard the front door slam.

'Did you hear what Marion said?' squawked Sylvie, snatching the other bottle from Tom and rolling it between her hands.

'That's mine,' said Tom, grabbing it back from her.

‘Marion said you’ll make a good chef.’

With a deft flick of his wrist, Tom released the air from the bottle and tossed the metal cap and the opener aside. He took a glass from the top of the sideboard and carefully poured himself half a pint of thick brown ale. ‘Well,’ he said, holding the drink before his face and inspecting it before taking a couple of gulps, ‘she’s right.’ He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked directly at me. ‘I’m glad there’s someone with some sense in this house,’ he said, with a broad smile. ‘Wasn’t I going to teach you to swim?’

That night, I wrote in my hard-backed black notebook: *His smile is like a harvest moon. Mysterious. Full of promises*. I was very pleased with those words, I remember. And every evening after that, I would fill my notebook with my longing for Tom. *Dear Tom*, I wrote. Or sometimes *Dearest Tom*, or even *Darling Tom*; but I didn’t allow myself that indulgence too often; mostly, the pleasure of seeing his name appear in characters wrought by my hand was enough. Back then I was easy to please. Because when you’re in love with someone for the first time, their name is enough. Just seeing my hand form Tom’s name was enough. Almost.

I would describe the day’s events in ludicrous detail, complete with azure eyes and crimson skies. I don’t think I ever wrote about his body, although it was obviously this that impressed me the most; I expect I wrote about the nobility of his nose (which is actually rather flat and squashed-looking) and the deep bass of his voice. So you see, Patrick, I was typical. So typical.

For almost three years, I wrote out all my longing for Tom, and I looked forward to the day when he would come home and teach me to swim.

Does this infatuation seem faintly ludicrous to you, Patrick? Perhaps not. I suspect that you know about desire, about the way it grows when it’s denied, better than

anyone. Every time Tom was home on leave I seemed to miss him, and I wonder now if I did this deliberately. Was waiting for his return, forgoing the sight of the real Tom, and instead writing about him in my notebook, a way of loving him more?

During Tom's absence I did have some thoughts about getting myself a career. I remember I had an interview with Miss Monkton, the Deputy Head, towards the end of my time at the grammar, when I was about to sit my exams, and she asked me what my plans for the future were. They were quite keen on girls having plans for the future, although I knew, even then, this was all a pipe-dream that only stood up inside the walls of the school. Outside, plans fell apart, especially for girls. Miss Monkton had rather wild hair, for those days: a mass of tight curls, specked with silver. I felt sure she smoked, because her skin was the colour of well-brewed tea and her lips, which frequently curled into an ironic smile, had that dry tightness about them. In Miss Monkton's office, I announced that I would like to become a teacher. It was the only thing I could think of at the time; it sounded better than saying I'd like to become a secretary, but it didn't seem completely absurd, unlike, say, becoming a novelist or an actress, both of which I'd privately imagined myself being.

I don't think I've admitted that to anyone before.

Anyway, Miss Monkton twisted her pen so the cap clicked and said, 'And what's made you reach this conclusion?'

I thought about it. I couldn't very well say, *I don't know what else I could do*. Or, *It doesn't look like I'll be getting hitched, does it?*

'I like school, miss.' As I spoke the words, I realised they were true. I liked the regular bells, the cleaned blackboards, the dusty desks full of secrets, the long corridors crammed with girls, the turpentine reek of the art

class, the sound of the library catalogue spinning through my fingers. And I suddenly imagined myself at the front of a classroom, in a smart tweed skirt and a neat chignon, winning the respect and affection of my pupils with my firm but fair methods. I had no conception, then, of how bossy I would become, or how teaching would change my life. You often called me bossy, and you were right; teaching drills it into you. It's you or them, you see. You have to make a stand. I learned that early on.

Miss Monkton gave one of her curled smiles. 'It's rather different,' she said, 'from the other side of the desk.' She paused, put her pen down and turned to the window so she was no longer facing me. 'I don't want to dampen your ambitions, Taylor. But teaching requires enormous dedication and considerable backbone. It's not that you're not a decent student. But I would have thought something office-based would be more your line. Something a little quieter, perhaps?'

I stared at the trail of milk on top of her cooling cup of tea. Apart from that cup, her desk was completely empty.

'What, for example,' she continued, turning back towards me with a quick look at the clock above the door, 'do your parents think of the idea? Are they prepared to support you through this venture?'

I hadn't mentioned any of this to Mum and Dad. They could hardly believe I'd got in to the grammar in the first place; at the news, my father had complained about the cost of the uniform, and my mother had sat on the sofa, put her head in her hands and cried. I'd been pleased at first, assuming she was moved to tears by her pride in my achievement, but when she wouldn't stop I'd asked her what was wrong and she'd said, 'It'll all be different now. This will take you away from us.' And then, most nights, they complained that I spent too long studying in my bedroom, rather than talking to them.

I looked at Miss Monkton. ‘They’re right behind me,’ I announced.

WHEN I LOOK over the fields to the sea, on these autumn days when the grass moves in the wind and the waves sound like excited breath, I remember that I once felt intense and secret things, just like you, Patrick. I hope you will understand that, and I hope you can forgive it.

Spring 1957. Having finished his National Service, Tom was still away, training to become a policeman. I often thought with excitement of him joining the force. It seemed such a brave, *grown-up* thing to do. I didn't know anyone else who'd do such a thing. At home, the police were rather suspect – not the enemy, exactly, but an unknown quantity. I knew that as a policeman Tom would have a different life to our parents, one that was more daring, more powerful.

I was attending teacher training college in Chichester but still saw Sylvie quite a bit, even though she was becoming more involved with Roy. Once she asked me to go with her to the roller rink, but when I got there she turned up with Roy and another boy called Tony, who worked with Roy at the garage. Tony didn't seem to be able to speak much. Not to me, anyway. Occasionally he'd shout a comment to Roy as we skated round, but Roy didn't always look back. That was because his eyes were caught up with Sylvie's. It was like they couldn't look anywhere else, not even where they were going. Tony didn't hold my arm as we skated round, and I managed to get ahead of him several times. As I skated I thought of the smile Tom had given me the day he'd announced he was joining the