



TAMAR COHEN

Sometimes a
wedding can
ruin a marriage

Someone Else's Wedding

About the Book

Mr & Mrs Max Irving request the company of:

Mrs Fran Friedman, mourning her empty nest, her lost baby, the galloping years, and a disastrous haircut.

Mr Saul Friedman, runner of marathons, avoider of conflicts and increasingly distant husband.

The two Misses Friedman, Pip and Katy, one pining over the man she can't have, the other trying to shake off the man she no longer wants.

At the marriage of their son **James Irving**, forbidden object of inappropriate and troubling desire.

For thirty-six hours of secrets and lies, painted-on-smiles and potential ruin. And drinks, plenty of drinks.

There's nothing like a wedding for stirring up the past. As Fran negotiates her way from Saturday morning to Sunday evening she is forced to confront things she's long thought buried, and to make decisions about the future that will have far-reaching consequences for them all.

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Also by Tammy Cohen

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Someone Else's Wedding

Tamar Cohen

For Sara and Simon

Saturday, 8 a.m.

EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR a reason. Can there be a stupider phrase in the English language?

Paper cuts, tissues in the washing machine, children with bizarre syndromes that age them prematurely, frozen computer screens, perfectly sound motorway lanes randomly closed to traffic, rained-off barbecues, split ends, tsunamis in far-flung places, parking fines, cold sores, lifeless babies born too early, their fingers and toes perfect, their eyes closed as if at any moment they might cough themselves awake.

As far as I can see, the universe is a great big dirty-laundry basket heaped with pointless occurrences.

‘Sometimes things happen for a reason,’ well-meaning people told me. And I’d smile and nod like you do when you’re pretending to agree with something profound, all the time feeling as if there was a great big stone inside me, in that empty place where my baby should have been, and they were kicking it around like a football.

Occasionally I wouldn’t smile and nod. I’d say something like ‘The dry rot in your downstairs loo? Or your senile mother always thinking you’re the woman from the Council? Is there a reason for these, too? Are they all part of some grander plan?’

Actually I didn’t say those things at all. But I definitely thought them.

Saul didn’t say that things happen for a reason. Or ‘Well, I did warn you ...’ Or any of the other things he might have said. Which is a shame in a way, because in the two years since I gave a final scream and Molly emerged perfect in

every way except the one that most matters, the words he didn't say (but must have thought) have grown between us like a phantom child, getting bigger, stronger, louder.

In obstetric terms, the words Saul didn't say have thrived.

Only when he's not here are they silent. Which is how, even before I open my eyes in this vast, unfamiliar hotel bed, I know I'm alone.

For a moment I luxuriate in my solitude, stretching out my legs and arms and pressing them into the mattress as if I might somehow grow organically into the sheet, weaving tissue and fibre and hair and silver-painted nail into the wheat-coloured cotton thread. When I finally open my eyes, I see that the space where Saul once was is neatly smoothed and patted, the duvet pulled taut over the pillow.

From my position on the left side of the mattress, I gaze across at his unoccupied domain. In theory the hotel room is neutral territory where we can do as we want, free from what Louise, our marital counsellor, calls 'the unhealthy power-struggle patterns of the long-term relationship', but still the idea of me venturing over the invisible middle line is unthinkable. Like crossing over to the Dark Side. I might say that at our next session. Phrases like 'the Dark Side' wind Saul up. 'I wish Fran would take this more seriously,' he'd say to Louise, his eyebrows raised in a 'see what I have to put up with' way.

Amazing to think it's just eight months since the first time we went to see Louise, arranged elbow to elbow on the sofa opposite her, united against this stranger prying into our lives; yet now we fight over her allegiance, each courting her approval, alert to signs of favouritism.

It makes me smile, remembering that first visit to her comfortable red-brick home in a quiet no-through road in one of the more affluent areas of south-west London. After what was mostly a fact-finding initial session, Saul turned to me as we walked away, his face light with relief.

'Thank God that's over. It wasn't as bad as I thought.'

I stopped then, incredulous.

‘You do know that was just the beginning, don’t you? You are aware it’s not a one-off?’

We laughed about it later – the dawning horror on his face.

Funny how quickly Louise has become the most important person in our lives. The last time we went to see her, just three days ago, we arrived twenty minutes early and took a walk in the small park in front of her house. We’d just had a light dinner together in the garden, something wholesome involving salmon and vine-grown tomatoes, and for once our conversation felt unforced. As we strolled across the freshly mown grass, Saul took my hand and I allowed my own fingers to curl around his. We didn’t speak much, I remember, but it was a lightweight sort of silence that settled easily over us like a fine mist, and I’d felt hopeful for the first time in weeks.

‘How are you both this evening?’ Louise smiled as we took our customary seats on the sofa in front of her. Louise has a lazy eye, so even while she’s looking at me I sometimes have the disconcerting impression that she’s actually addressing Saul.

‘Fine.’ I smiled back, still bathed in the glow of unexpected closeness.

Louise turned her good eye to Saul. ‘And you, Saul? How have you been feeling?’

Saul looked at her, and I saw a dark flush crawl out from the hollow of his collarbone, where it had been hiding all this time. ‘Actually, I’m angry,’ he said. ‘Really bloody angry.’

I roll on to my back, my head propped up on a multitude of over-stuffed pillows so that my neck feels bent at an unnatural angle. The hotel room is done out in what was described on the website as ‘neutrals’. For ‘neutrals’ read ‘beige’. Who knew there were so many shades of beige? Even the abstract prints on the walls are beige. I have woken up inside a giant surgical stocking.

Without warning, I'm reminded of the first hotel room I ever stayed in (although I suppose 'stayed' might be too grand a word for two hours on a drizzly Wednesday afternoon). I was sixteen years old and horribly naive. For the next few years I truly believed all hotels had greying net curtains and a thick plastic cover over the mattress so that every movement was accompanied by a loud crackling sound, and the smell of sex was a citrus air-freshener tree.

Why am I thinking of that now, after all these years?

My handbag – large and battered and stuffed with rubbish, old receipts and fluff-covered throat pastilles, a lightweight umbrella with a broken spindle, a couple of fraying tampons – squats on the dressing table in front of me and I deliberately don't look at it. Just knowing that the letter is tucked away inside gives me an uncomfortable, fluttery feeling. Instead I focus on Saul's nylon sports bag, which is open next to it. When I saw him loading it into the car boot yesterday evening, something popped inside me.

'Please tell me you're not,' I said. Pointless, when it was so obvious that he was. With the benefit of hindsight, I see I could have handled it better. *Make it about how you feel, not about what the other person has done*, Louise is forever saying. 'Your sports bag makes me feel superfluous,' I could have said. No, that's not the word. Lonely. 'Your sports bag makes me feel lonely.'

Saul didn't even look up. 'Course I am. The marathon's next weekend. It'd be suicide to interrupt my training schedule.'

Suicide? Not that he could ever be accused of being grandiose, my husband.

'So that means you'll be not-drinking, and stuffing yourself with carbs and protein. Even though it's a *wedding*?'

'What's the big deal, Fran? It's not as if I expect you to do the same.'

Since turning forty, Saul has run thirteen marathons and done six triathlons. My husband is a walking, talking sinew.

The first marathon he completed was, I'll admit, quite magical. The girls and I went early to secure a spot near the finishing line and spent hours craning our necks as the runners began to dribble in, the first hundred or so still taking easy strides, the rest in varying degrees of discomfort. I'll never forget that first glimpse of him, mouth stretched back in pain, legs visibly shaking, eyes scanning the crowd wildly. As he came near, we all jumped up and down, waving madly, and as soon as he saw us something switched in his face and, miraculously, he managed a smile. Incredibly, his whole body seemed to straighten and his eyes focused on the finish. When he staggered over the line, we were right there to meet him and he collapsed into my arms.

'I'm so proud of you,' I whispered. And I really was. It was one of the closest moments we've had in recent years. That evening I threw him a surprise party, with a cake in the shape of a running shoe that looked more like a submarine.

But with every marathon he does, more of the shine seems to go out of it. It's not the race itself, it's the endless preparation: the early nights, the special diet, the way the races eat into his holiday allowance – a day here, two days there, Paris, New York. His focus is all on that, and not on me or our life together.

No, that's not it, either. Really it's just us and the way we are with each other now, the petty resentments that bubble like blisters under the surface.

'I just thought we could relax together for once. Louise is always saying we need to get out of our usual environment and unwind.'

'Yes, but by "unwind", she doesn't mean drink, Fran. You're getting the two things confused. Anyway, I'll go for a run first thing in the morning while you're asleep. You won't even know I'm gone.'

But I do know he's gone. I know it from the lightness in the air and the way my muscles feel relaxed and my limbs

freely spread. I wonder where he'll run. This close to a marathon he often runs twenty miles in a morning, using a special gadget to tell him how far he's gone. The hotel is eleven miles from Bath. Arriving last night, we drove along mile upon mile of tree-canopied country roads, through quaint villages. I imagine Saul running there now, listening to Snow Patrol through his iPod headphones, a tall, lean rasher of a man in a black vest and shorts, and the running shoes he had custom-made at a special place in north London.

Saul will be in the mood for sex when he gets back, it occurs to me now. All that adrenaline charging around his system, looking for release. The illicitness of an anonymous hotel room, the whiff of borrowed romance. Maybe I'll get up before he comes back. Pip is in the room opposite. I can knock on her door, sit myself down in the armchair and we can chat the way we used to when she was still living at home. Maybe Katy will wander in from her own room next door. My daughters can show me what they've brought to wear to the wedding – knowing Katy, she'll have at least five potential outfits.

I look at my phone on the bedside table. Eight fifteen. The girls won't thank me for waking them up this early. I suppose I could always go downstairs to the hotel lounge, and see if any of the other guests are around. But we don't know many people at this wedding. And what if Jamie is there? My stomach lurches at the thought of him – a flash of green-flecked eyes, and soft blond hairs on a lightly tanned forearm – and I know I won't go down.

So I'm still here when Saul returns. 'I was asleep,' I tell him, opening the door a crack and heading back to bed.

'Sorry, darling. Fantastic run. Eighteen miles. Bit hilly, but breathtakings cenery.'

He unclips his iPod from the waistband of his shorts and places it carefully back in a pocket of his sports bag. His

curly salt-and-pepper hair is plastered to his skull and I can see the sweat patches on the back of his vest.

‘It’s going to be a scorcher today,’ he calls from the ensuite. I hear the shower running, the sound of honest, healthy physical exertion being washed away. It makes me feel dissolute by contrast, and flabby around the edges. Now the electric toothbrush whirs into life. Saul has always been proud of his teeth, flossing religiously and using a special brand of whitening toothpaste that costs twice as much as any other kind. He reappears in the doorway, a white towel wrapped around his waist, hair still dripping. He’s in good shape, my husband. His torso is narrow but well-defined, whorls of black hair forming a neat T-shape over his chest and abdomen.

I close my eyes, feigning sleep. Over the last two years, I reckon I’ve feigned more sleep than I’ve actually had. I wonder if all marriages are like that.

Now Saul is back in bed, moving towards me. He crosses the line into my territory and I tense. Louise has been trying to get me to talk about my ambivalence about having sex with my husband. ‘Is it about fear, I wonder?’ she asks, leaning forward in her chair, as she does whenever we discuss anything intimate. ‘Are you scared about what you’re giving up?’

But it’s not about fear. It’s about anger. I’m not scared, I’m furious.

It’s not about what I’m giving up, it’s about what he’s taking.

Saul has his hand on my hip. There’s a strict order about sex, as far as Saul is concerned, just as there’s a strict order about running and a strict order about work. Saul is Head of Product Development at Premstock, the UK’s third-largest stationery company. He’s been in that job for six years and with the company for eleven. They love him there. He’s what is known as A Safe Pair of Hands. I’ve met most of the staff over the years at one event or another. At one

Christmas lunch, Saul's secretary got drunk and did an impression of his routine when he arrives at work in the mornings.

'First he fills up a plastic water bottle from the cooler in reception, then he hangs his jacket on the back of his office door, then he puts the bottle down on the desk, sits down and does this,' she'd said, closing her eyes and pressing two fingers to her temples while taking a long inhalation. 'And then he does *this*.' Suddenly her eyes popped wide open and a slightly deranged smile sprang, fully formed, to her face. 'And *voilà* – the day begins.'

Saul had laughed louder than anyone but I'd found it quite disturbing – this external verification of Saul as a creature of habit.

We've never exactly been swinging-from-the-chandelier types, but when we first got together, sex was at least varied. On the top, on the bottom, on the knees and rotate (so to speak). I sound like a rotisserie chicken! The main thing was, sex was good-natured. We were rooting for each other, like repertoire actors wanting to bring out the best in each other's performances. Then the girls were born, just eighteen months apart, and we got into the habit of sex by numbers. Do this, do that – the quickest route to orgasm and sleep. But still, sex was pleasant, it was something we did to relax.

Now Saul and I have all the time in the world for sex, but still we stick doggedly to the templates of twenty years ago, as if scared to deviate from what we know, as if deviation would be ... well, deviant.

While Saul's hand traces its well-worn route around my body – I'm surprised I don't have indentations in my flesh by now, like a muddy footpath trodden into the grass by constant use – I close my eyes, placing my hands where years of experience of my husband's body has taught me produces the fastest results. He moans softly. With my eyes

still shut, I relax into the familiar, pleasurable rhythm – until suddenly I feel his mouth on mine, tongue probing to get in.

Immediately my hands stop their stroking and I freeze, turning my head to one side so his mouth falls slack and wet on my cheek.

‘I don’t mind the sex,’ I once tried to explain to Louise. ‘It’s the kissing I find so difficult.’

She’d nodded, her shiny, conker-coloured hair shimmering in the lamp-light. ‘You’re frightened of intimacy,’ she told me. ‘It’s very common, I’m afraid. Particularly where resentment has been allowed to build up.’

She made it sound like plaque.

We’d talked a little bit then about when it started, this aversion. It was right around when I read those emails and texts between my husband and his old university girlfriend in Edinburgh. As usual, the subject had sent Saul into an orgy of self-recrimination.

‘You feel guilty, Saul?’ Louise asked.

‘Of course I feel guilty. I’ve felt guilty every day.’

I’ve never doubted that Saul feels guilty. Even while it was still going on, Saul’s guilt practically moved into the house with us – though at the time I didn’t know that’s what it was, just that there was something else lodging with us, something I hadn’t invited in.

And after it all came out, Saul was almost paralysed by it. Watching television, I’d be aware of his eyes boring into me as he sat, stricken, in the armchair opposite.

‘I’m sorry,’ he’d say when I finally looked up. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Saul’s guilt was such a constant presence, it ought to have been paying rent!

‘Why won’t you kiss me?’ Saul murmurs now into my ear. But my hands are moving again, and soon his breath comes in gasps and he doesn’t speak at all.

Afterwards, he is cheerful. Pleased with himself and me and the world in general.

I feel a twinge of guilt at how little it takes to make him happy.

‘It’s really very beautiful around here,’ he says, walking to the window and holding open the curtain to look outside. ‘You know, we should think about moving somewhere like this. Maybe not quite so far out of London, but it’s silly to stay in the city now we’re not tied to schools any more. We could get something smaller. Cosier. It’s not as if we need the space any more.’

I get into the shower and run the water as hot as I can make it, tipping my face up so it pours over my cheeks and neck. The screen door opens and Saul steps in beside me.

‘You know, you are beautiful,’ he murmurs.

For a split second we lean against each other under the running water. I imagine relaxing into him, allowing us to comfort each other as we used to.

‘We’ll miss breakfast,’ I say, stepping out and wrapping a towel tightly around me, like a bandage. ‘I’m starving.’

I can hear Saul singing to himself as I sit down at the dressing table to dry my hair, which takes a shockingly short amount of time, following yesterday’s disastrous haircut.

I’d gone in clutching a photo of Cate Blanchett.

‘Could you do something like that?’ I asked Becki, who has been cutting my hair consistently badly for the past seven years.

She peered at the photo and then at me and then back at the photo again.

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ she said doubtfully. ‘The thing is though, I’m not being funny but she has very good hair.’

As Becki started cutting, I felt the first twinges of alarm.

‘Make sure you leave the back long enough to still see hair behind my ears,’ I said. ‘Otherwise the balance is wrong for my face.’

After she’d finished we both surveyed the result in silence.

‘I did say I wanted to be able to see hair behind my ears.’

‘Yeah, but, not being funny, you haven’t got the right jawline for that.’

Of course, I still paid her, and tipped her, while vowing never to go back. I felt like a mug, remembering all the other times I’d made the same vow, only to waver at the last minute. ‘Better the devil you know ...’ I told Saul when he asked why I kept going back.

‘Did you know the Japanese have a word for when you look worse after a haircut?’ he’d said brightly, then backtracked madly when he saw my face. ‘Not that you look worse, darling. You look lovely. You always look lovely.’

Now I gaze flatly at my new haircut in the hotel-room mirror. Becki insisted on ‘running a few highlights through’ to disguise the few strands of grey that have sprung up almost overnight, like a Banksy mural. So now my usual dull brown is streaked with deep red and burnt orange.

‘Crikey,’ Katy said last night when we met them in the hotel bar. ‘Who needs the Olympic Flame?’

Pip was more complimentary. ‘It’s taken years off you,’ she said, giving me a hug.

But the woman who looks back at me from the mirror is someone I don’t recognize – a stranger with a stranger’s hair.

I put on the clothes from last night – tight, slim-fitting jeans with silver flip-flops and a white top. Then I fetch my make-up bag and begin painting myself a face.

‘Darling, we’re only going down to breakfast,’ says Saul, standing behind me, his hands, with their surprisingly broad fingers, gripping my shoulders. ‘You really don’t need all that stuff on yet.’

I shrug and carry on, applying tinted moisturizer, under-eye concealer, eyeshadow, kohl, mascara, while Saul stands by the door, tapping his foot with impatience.

There’s a tightness in my stomach, as if someone has threaded a drawstring through and is pulling on it hard.

Yes, it's only breakfast, but there'll be new people to meet and make small talk to, about how lucky we've been with the weather and the arrangements for the day. And then there'll be Lynn and Max, and Pip and Katy, of course.

And Jamie. My heart bursts with his name.

But Jamie is getting married.

Saturday, 9 a.m.

THE HOTEL LOUNGE is vast and modern, with cream leather seating and dark wood tables. Lynn and Max are at the far end, at a table with five people we don't know. A quick glance around reveals no one else I recognize. I am at once relieved and deflated.

'Ah, there you are,' says Max, getting to his feet and pumping Saul's hand vigorously.

Lynn half stands so I can plant a dry peck some inches from her cheek, but Max sweeps me into a bear hug.

'Fran and Saul, everyone,' he announces as we sit down. 'I like your hair, Fran. It's very gamine.'

'Very gammon? That's not very nice - I'd take umbrage if I were you, Mum,' says Katy, coming up behind.

She and Pip have clearly just got out of bed, but their skin glows and their eyes are bright in their fresh, make-up-free faces. They are effortlessly lovely, with my blue eyes, only bigger and purer, and Saul's dark curls. I wonder if all mothers end up feeling like drag versions of their own daughters.

Now that the girls are here, there is a lot of moving about of seats and adding of tables. I'm glad of the distraction.

'Why don't we have champagne?' I say, suddenly inspired. 'A champagne breakfast. It is a wedding, after all.'

'Darling,' protests Saul, 'it's only half nine.'

I smile to show I was joking. But I wasn't.

We are introduced to the two other couples, whose names I instantly forget, and an elderly woman called Christine. The couples look to be in their mid fifties, like Lynn and Max. I wonder if they are academics as well. They have that same

vaguely cerebral air, and each has a pair of reading glasses either folded up next to their plate or tucked into a cleavage or the top pocket of a shirt, like the latest fashion accessory.

‘It’s lovely to meet you all,’ I tell them, making a point of pressing each of their hands. ‘Now we won’t feel like such Billy No Mates.’

There are smiles then, and a perceptible warming.

‘You’re looking wonderful, Lynn,’ says Saul, and I notice that she, too, has done something different to her hair. It seems to have hardened around her head like a helmet. She shoots him a grateful smile and her usually stern features soften.

‘Mustn’t let the side down,’ she says.

‘Just so long as you don’t outshine the Mother of the Bride,’ says one of the other women, raising her eyebrows meaningfully. ‘Having met her in her so-called casual clothes, I can’t wait to see her when she’s dressed up. The mind boggles!’

‘Lucy and her mother were at ours for a barbecue last week,’ Lynn explains to Saul and me, before leaning back towards the original speaker and saying, ‘Don’t worry. As Mother of the Groom, I know my place in the pecking order.’

‘Speaking of order, tell us how things are going to pan out today.’ Pip’s voice cuts in, steering the conversation away from the direction it was going, and I feel a rush of gratitude towards her.

While Lynn explains the itinerary for the day, Max and Saul discuss routes and driving times.

‘I’m thinking of getting a hybrid,’ Max announces, and for a thrilling moment I imagine he is talking about some wildly exotic cross-breed pet, before I realize – *of course* – they’re still discussing cars.

‘Where’s Jammy?’ Katy asks suddenly.

Jammy! The nickname, so easily tossed out, shouldn’t shock me, but it does. I’m always forgetting how much the girls see of Jamie now they’ve all moved away from home

and are living and working independently in London. They've forged new relationships between themselves that I have no control over. It should make me happy. It *does* make me happy, but anxious, too. So much happening just beyond my reach.

'He'll be down in a minute,' says Max. 'Sleeping off last night's excesses, I expect.'

'You must be so proud,' says the woman who made the Mother-of-the Bride comment.

Lynn shoots me a glance, then immediately looks away again.

'We are,' she says. 'Very proud.'

'Rosie's a bit put out, I think,' says Max. 'She's always been so possessive of her brother. I think she worries about losing him. I told her he's not that easy to mislay. Not like an old chequebook or something.'

'Do chequebooks even exist any more?' wonders one of the Maybe Academics. 'I thought they'd been phased out.'

Lynn ignores the interruption.

'Well, things are bound to be different from now on, for all of us,' she says, quickly adding, 'Not worse – just different.'

'Where is Rosie?' I ask. 'I didn't see her last night.'

'She was out with Jamie and Liam,' says Lynn. 'Liam is Jamie's best man. Jamie said he was sorry to miss you, by the way.'

I feel my face burning.

Now Katy is pouting. She wants to know why she and Pip weren't invited to go out with Jamie and the others.

'I think they wanted to do something quiet,' says Max.

'Just family,' adds Lynn.

The waiter comes round for our orders. I'm not hungry but I order a croissant anyway and then, on impulse, a Bucks Fizz.

Saul is sitting to my left and I'm aware of his disapproval lodging itself between us like a bolster cushion. I'm grateful when Katy says, 'What a good idea. Make that two.' You can

never tell with Katy which way she's going to go. She could just as easily have raised her eyebrows at Saul in that conspiratorial way those two have.

I try to strike up a conversation with the elderly woman, Christine, who seems to be some kind of relative of Lynn's. She has a mobile phone in her hand and is jabbing at the keyboard with unsteady fingers, a frown furrowing her already creased face.

'Do you need any help with that? These new smartphones can be terribly confusing, can't they?'

Christine looks up, amused. Her eyes are surprisingly beautiful, the blue of a swimming pool shimmering under a Mediterranean sun, and the smile that ripples gently across her skin is so warm that I can't help smiling back. Sometimes it unnerves me to look into an older person's face and get a glimpse of the beauty they once had, marooned there amidst the wreckage, but Christine's allure belongs to the here and now, to the folds around her eyes and the soft powderiness of her skin and the marshmallow-white hair held back by two large tortoiseshell combs.

'Don't worry, dear. It's all under control. I'm just blogging.'

'Blogging?'

'I promised my followers a live update from the wedding. I need to keep the numbers up or I'll lose my ad revenue.'

I try to disguise my surprise. 'I've never really understood how that works.'

Christine waves a hand in front of her face in a dismissive gesture. 'There's no mystery. It's just like the newsletters I used to write at Christmas, except now I do it every week instead of every year. You know, there's nothing new under the sun, my dear.'

All of a sudden, a murmur goes up from the people opposite, facing the door. Without thinking, I turn and - wham! - my heart slams straight into my ribcage. I turn back immediately, but I know he saw me look. There's a

rushing in my ears and I try to concentrate on my breathing to calm myself.

Rosie comes around first, kissing everyone on the cheek, making a particular fuss of Pip and Katy. She looks tiny next to them, her shiny blonde bob coming only to Pip's shoulder.

'Oh my *God!*' she squeals, grabbing Katy by the arm and peering at her wrist. 'I absolutely *love* your tat.'

Tat?

Saul and I exchange mystified glances, and Katy looks embarrassed. Now that her sleeve is pushed up, I can see she has a delicate tattoo near her wrist. A sea horse, it looks like. My baby has marked herself for life. I'm shocked at how much it bothers me.

'You know you've just consigned yourself to a lifetime of long sleeves at job interviews?'

Saul is trying to joke, but I know that as soon as he gets a chance he'll Google 'septicaemia' and other unpleasant infections our younger daughter may have contracted. But Katy's tattoo is forgotten as a figure looms beside me. Jamie, who has been busying himself down the other end of the table, patting shoulders and shaking hands, has now reached us. I steel myself before looking into his face, pulling my stomach muscles in so they form a rigid core at the heart of me, a frame to keep me upright while the rest of me crumples around it.

'Hello, Fran,' he says, and I turn around.

His eyes are watermelon green flecked with hazel and amber, and fringed with thick, sooty lashes. I'd forgotten how he looks at me as if he's reading me. I'd forgotten the perfect teardrop shape between his nose and upper lip. I'd forgotten the way the centre of me dissolves when I'm with him. I give him an awkward hug.

Now he is shaking hands with Saul, and Saul covers both their hands with his free hand to emphasize his sincerity, fixing his gaze directly on Jamie's. There's often a self-consciousness about the way Saul behaves in company, a

staginess, as if an inner monologue might be saying, *And here I am setting people at ease, or, Now here I am joshing with my daughters.* In a way it's endearing, this need to make a good impression, like catching someone moving their lips while reading a book and realizing how hard they are concentrating on something that ought to come naturally.

More seats are brought over, more places shifted around. Rosie has squeezed herself in between Pip and Katy and is complaining about the monumentalness of her hangover.

'I feel fine,' says Jamie, sitting at the top end next to Lynn. 'You're such a lightweight.'

'I should hope you *do* feel fine,' says Lynn, mock sternly. 'It is your wedding day, after all.'

'I can't wait to meet Lucy,' says Saul. 'It's rather sweet that she's so traditional about staying somewhere else the night before the wedding.'

'I'm not sure Lucy would appreciate being called sweet,' says Rosie. 'She's quite touchy about things like that. She prefers to see herself as edgy.'

'Rosie.' Lynn's voice is low with warning.

'What? It wasn't a criticism.'

My Bucks Fizz has arrived and suddenly I wish I hadn't ordered it. I take a sip and then worry that the juice will have left an orange mark like egg yolk around my mouth. I dab my lips with the corner of my napkin, hoping no one is watching.

'Are you excited about today – or shitting yourself?' Katy asks Jamie. My younger daughter believes in telling it like it is.

'I'm ready – bring it on!' says Jamie. Then he smiles. 'Not really. I'm shitting myself.'

'You'll be fine,' says Lynn, and she lays her helmet head on Jamie's arm, just for a fraction of a second.

I take a large gulp of my Bucks Fizz. Such tiny glasses they put this stuff in. Two sips and you've practically finished the

lot.

I get up to go to the loo. All the way across the room, my legs feel stiff, my walk laboured, as I imagine his eyes watching me.

'Stupid,' I tell my reflection in the greenish overhead glare of the Ladies'. My hair looks crazily multicoloured, as if a child has crayoned it in.

In the cubicle I sit down and put my head in my hands. I'm being ridiculous, I know. Emotions lurching all over the place. Could I be menopausal already? Peri-menopausal? It's not impossible, even at my age.

The beeping of my phone in my bag jolts me out of my musings. A text. As soon as I see his name on the screen, everything inside me freezes. 'Can I see you?' I stare at the message as if its four words might conceal some deeper meaning. My heart is exploding. He wants to see me. But he is getting married. Perched on the seat of the toilet, I lurch queasily between excitement and guilt. Calling up the reply box, I type 'When?' My finger hovers, trembling, over the Send icon. I think about my daughters sitting outside. I think about Saul and how his brown eyes will track my progress back across the room.

I erase the message angrily and click my phone off, hurrying out of the toilets before I have time to change my mind.

As I sit back down, Saul takes my hand and squeezes it under the table. 'All right, darling?'

'Of course. Why wouldn't I be?'

'Have you known Lynn and Max long?' asks the man opposite, one of those heavy types with prematurely white hair and a florid complexion that makes him look curiously infantile.

'Oh, we go back donkey's years,' I say. 'We lost touch for a while – it happens sometimes, doesn't it? – but we're back in each other's lives now. The wonders of Facebook and all that!'

‘They’re a lovely couple,’ he says. ‘Wonderful family.’

He’s an oncologist, he tells us, specializing in paediatric cancers. There’s a mobile phone sitting on the table next to him. Every few seconds it vibrates, convulsing alarmingly and rattling the plate of Danish pastries in front of him.

‘I raised nearly a grand last year for childhood leukaemia by trekking Hadrian’s Wall,’ Saul announces.

The man smiles politely. To his credit, his smile stays gamely in place even after he asks Saul what he does for a living.

Saul sells paper and pens.

When we first met, he was midway through an architecture degree, on work placement in an office near the bistro where I was temping at the time. He brought his drawings in once to show me. He’s colour blind and said he needed me to tell him whether the browns he’d used were actually purple, but I could tell he wanted me to see his work, in that way you do at the start of something, when you want to be fully known. His drawings were beautiful, so delicate, and there was such pride in his face as he looked from the drawings to me and back again, waiting for my reaction. He always said he didn’t mind giving it up when Pip was conceived not long after – the product of a surfeit of desire coupled with an empty box of condoms – but I never saw that look again.

Now Saul gets up every morning and drives to the station and catches the same train, sitting in the same carriage because he knows exactly which one aligns with the exit for the Tube.

Louise, our relationship counsellor, asked me once if I felt compromised by my marriage.

‘It’s not ... how I’d envisaged things,’ I said.

Saul had grown incensed by that. By the things he felt I wasn’t saying.

‘You think it’s easy?’ He’d appealed directly to Louise, as if I wasn’t even there, sitting on the other end of the sofa in

Louise's perfectly pleasant, muted consulting room. 'You think it's easy living with someone who is constitutionally disappointed?'

'That's why you had an affair, I suppose?' I flung at him, knowing it would stop him in his tracks.

'It wasn't an affair. How many times do I have to say it? We never met.'

'There are many different types of affair, Saul,' Louise reminded him.

The oncologist turns his attention to me, and I brace myself, knowing what's coming.

'And what do you do, Fiona?'

'It's Fran, actually,' I say. 'Well, I used to be an SEN support worker in a primary school, until quite recently.' What I mean, but can't bring myself to say, is *until Molly*. 'That's working with schoolchildren with special educational needs.'

It sounds so dry when I say it, so worthy. Impossible to convey the unique frustration of working with a child who can't or won't grasp something – or the elation when he finally does. Impossible to explain how sometimes Sue, the SEN coordinator, and I would only just hold it together till we made it to the staffroom door, before collapsing with laughter at something one of the children had said or done.

'Fran's having a bit of a sabbatical at the moment,' Saul tells him now. He's making it sound jolly, like a holiday, although he's often tried to cajole me back to work.

'You could get something full time, now the girls have left home,' he keeps telling me. 'Something more challenging. Or go back to the school. You liked it there.'

I did like it there, and Sue and the others still regularly ask when I'm coming back. I don't tell them I wish I knew when I was coming back. I say I'll return when the time feels right. But it never does. The truth is, the job was stressful – all those children, all those problems – and after nine years I

was feeling burnt out and relieved to be giving it up to go on maternity leave.

The last two years, by contrast, have been full of nothing. A vast football stadium full of nothing. I don't tell Saul that though. Saul likes to imagine my newly freed-up domestic life as a mosaic of yoga classes and white-wine lunches and edifying trips to the library to hear local writers reading from their new novels. He doesn't know about the times I put on an aerobics CD and lie on the sofa watching *Cash in the Attic* with the sound down, or when I scroll through my phone, looking for someone to call. I have 219 contacts in my phone. No shortage of people I could ring to change a meeting from eleven to twelve, or arrange a dental appointment or an insurance valuation. There are people I could call to wax my bikini line or insert a speculum into my cervix. But no one I could phone on a rainy Wednesday afternoon and simply say, 'I'm lonely.'

Saul would see loneliness as a preventable failing – like astigmatism or oily skin. He'd see it as something to be fixed. And in a way he'd be right. I could go back to work. But I don't, and Saul doesn't understand what stops me. Nor does he understand how life can open up like a chasm on a midweek afternoon, time stretched tightly across the top like clingfilm. Or how it's possible to spend a whole morning looking in the mirror, pulling back the skin of your face over your cheekbones, trying to recapture something lost. But even though Saul doesn't understand, in front of these strangers he seems compelled to fight my corner.

'I think Fran would enjoy setting up her own business,' he tells the oncologist. 'It's never too late.'

When Saul says that about business, I feel a stab of guilt about the letter in the handbag by my feet. An offer of a year's contract in an international school in southern Spain, not far from where my brother and his family now live.

'You lucky cow!' Sue exclaimed when I told her about it last week. 'But will Saul be able to get the time off?'

‘Saul doesn’t know. I’d be going alone.’

Her mouth fell open then with shock. ‘But you have to tell him.’

‘I will – when I’m sure. I haven’t decided yet.’

I shoo away the memory of Sue’s stricken, doubting eyes and try to focus on Pip, who has also weighed in to the conversation.

‘Mum’s got loads of experience that’d be a great asset in business.’

‘If you use the phrase “transferable skills” I might actually have to kill you,’ I tell her.

The oncologist smiles and glances at his vibrating phone. I wonder what it must be like to be so in demand.

If Molly had survived, there wouldn’t be this question mark over my future – although Saul might say it’s the question mark over my future that led to Molly in the first place.

‘But you’re forty-three,’ he pointed out, when I first mooted the idea of another baby. As if any woman over forty needs reminding how old she is. As if I might have mistaken myself for someone ten years younger, labouring happily under the illusion of having my life spread out in front of me like a market stall, heaped with promise.

I couldn’t explain to him how I felt, that sense of things shutting down around me and inside me.

‘If you had a new job, a new challenge, you wouldn’t think about having a baby,’ said Saul.

I was incensed.

‘You think I want a baby because I’m fed up with work?’

‘So explain it, then. Explain why, twenty years after celebrating the end of the nappy years, you suddenly want to do it all again. The sleepless nights, the endless paraphernalia. No impromptu trips to the cinema or weekends away. Explain that.’

Of course, I couldn’t. And, of course, he was right in a way. A baby would give a ready-made structure to the next two

decades. The future would no longer be a holding pattern, but a neatly mapped-out progression of years, from winter afternoons in the park, breath emerging in white clouds, to school cake sales, to teenage taxi service.

But that wasn't it. Or rather, that wasn't just it. Nor, contrary to what Louise believes, was my need to have another baby somehow linked to that earlier episode, Saul's 'moment of madness', as he grew to call it. Of course, I was angry with him for a long time. I'm still angry with him now – for the intimacies he shared with the architect in Edinburgh and the things he told her that weren't his to tell (the colour of our duvet cover, the way our dishwasher backs up from time to time – the domestic details that make up a home, a family, a marriage).

But there was more to it than that. In the years since first Pip, then Katy, left home, I'd felt myself increasingly unmoored from real life. It was as if the girls were the ropes tying me to the world. Without them, I blew this way and that like a discarded paper bag. Saul didn't know that I felt as if at any moment I could be swept away. A baby wasn't just a way to fill time. A baby would tether me back to my life.

'Sometimes I think Fran loves the girls too much,' Saul once said to Louise, and I remember feeling as if he'd taken a giant sack of potatoes and slammed it into my chest. Instantly I'd turned to Louise for vindication and was astonished when, instead of challenging Saul, she looked at me, head cocked to the side. 'Maybe what Saul means, Fran, is that you love your daughters so much there's nothing left for him?'

'What does Lucy do?' Saul has turned away from me, so he is facing Jamie head-on.

Under the table I grip my hands tightly together, pressing my fingernails into my palms.

'She works for the same TV company as Jamie,' Max butts in proudly. 'On the production side. Real high-flyer,