

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Escape

Heleen van Royen

ESCAPE

Heleen van Royen

Translated by Jantien Black



BLACK SWAN

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Heleen van Royen is one of the most famous and infamous Dutch writers. Trained as a journalist, she worked for several newspapers, magazines and for radio where she met her husband Ton, a popular TV presenter. They have two children and now live in Portugal.

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For Ton

Stars are again like a teary ballad, and at nights
dogs tune their cloven violins.

I do not let sorrow come,

I do not let it near.

A thousand feet of snow over my heart.

Sirkka Turkka - The Dog Sings in his Sleep

Acting is not very hard.

The most important things
are to be able to laugh and cry.

If I have to cry, I think of my sex life.

And if I have to laugh,
well, I think of my sex life.

Glenda Jackson, actress

Not that it makes much difference, but my brother is dead. The earth is still rotating on its axis. My mother still believes in God. My father doesn't know yet.

Jimmy is lying on his bed, with a cooling system underneath him. The coffin arrives tomorrow – he will be buried. It is going to be exactly as he wished. I have written it all out, down to the last detail, and passed the instructions to the undertaker. He seemed surprised to be dealing with me; I explained that my parents are divorced and that my mother wasn't up to any of this. I found it hard to believe that he hadn't come across this kind of thing before.

My mother has thanked God because He took Jimmy before the doctor arrived. Jimmy had told the doctor he wanted an injection. He was nineteen, twenty next week, and so he was an adult. My mother was devastated. She said it should be God's decision, not Jimmy's. My brother told her it really wouldn't make the slightest difference to God if he came a bit sooner, He would understand.

My mother wasn't so sure. She changed her prayers, for the umpteenth time. At first she had begged and begged that Jimmy would be cured. When she realized this wasn't going to happen – my brother weighed a mere seven stone, could barely get to his feet, there was no hope – she asked God if He would free him from his misery once he reached twenty. I suspect my mother hoped it would be just that little bit more bearable to lose a twenty-year-old son. She may even have practised in front of the mirror.

'How old was your son?'

'Twenty.'

It's shorter than 'nineteen', which is an advantage, and it does make him sound older than he actually was.

When God failed to answer her prayer for the second time, and Jimmy made a phone call to the doctor, she prayed fervently that God would at least come and get Jimmy before the doctor could send him; his twentieth birthday no longer seemed so important.

This prayer was heard. He died last night. In his sleep. At least, that's the official report – that he died peacefully.

The weird thing was that my mother became all elated. 'You see?' she said to Kaitlin and me. 'You see now? That's the Lord. When the going really gets tough, He is there for us. Amen.'

I don't understand her. I don't feel He is there, and certainly not that He's there for us. If I were God, and could have answered any one of her three prayers, which in itself seems a reasonable number, I would have known which one to choose. I would have saved Jimmy's life. He wasn't a bad guy. He had done nothing to make me think: that boy deserves to die.

Part One

I leave

Chapter One

My husband is asleep and I am awake. Wide awake. I've got my eyes shut but I might as well open them, it makes no difference. I sit up and look to my side. My husband's mouth is slightly open: beads of sweat glisten on his forehead. I clench my right fist. My nails dig into the palm of my hand. He has no idea. No idea of how I lie next to him in this state, night after night. He doesn't know strange thoughts enter my mind from time to time. Secretly I hope he will open his eyes and take me tenderly in his arms; I have the courage to tell him everything, absolutely everything, and then he comforts me and says he understands. That it doesn't matter. That he feels the same sometimes. Then we could get some passion going and make love as if for the first time.

Nothing happens. Paul never notices anything. Paul is asleep. Paul is snoring. He is happy, I think. And he probably thinks I am happy too. I could burst his bubble with one carefully aimed swipe. It seems very tempting.

I whisper my thoughts: 'I feel like punching you in the face.'

Very hard, as hard as I possibly can. Wake him brutally with a sudden punch of the fist. How would he react? Would he leap out of bed, think I was a burglar? Attack me, and lash back? Or just stare at me in astonishment?

'Yeah, I'm sorry. I suddenly felt an urge to hit you. I thought our marriage could do with some fresh input.'

There are times when actions speak louder than words.

I take a deep breath and relax my fist. Not tonight. Tomorrow night perhaps. I sink back into the pillow. I must close my eyes, I must fall asleep. Everything is fine, I have no real worries. I must pull myself together. Everything will be fine again in the morning. Things seem better when it is light outside.

Half a minute later I am sitting up again. I am not a wimp, dammit! I want action. Always brooding and worrying, but never actually doing anything. I am letting life pass me by without ever achieving anything, or becoming somebody.

I clench my right fist again. I screw up my eyes, pull my elbow back, as if I'm drawing a bow to fire an arrow, I wait for a couple of seconds and all of a sudden, as if someone else has taken control, my fist flies forward and collides with my husband's temple.

His head jolts, he gasps for breath. For a moment I think he is going to sit up, but no, he is not. He turns over, away from me, and lets his breath escape with a snore.

All that time his eyes remain closed. He just goes on sleeping. Even when he is smashed on the head by his own wife he can't be bothered to wake up.

What am I supposed to do? Hit him again, harder? With a heavy object perhaps? There is a vase with dried flowers on the window sill.

No, that wouldn't work. You might hit somebody by accident, in a dream, a nightmare perhaps; you may temporarily have been in a state of semi-consciousness. But a shattered vase in the marital bed at three forty-five in the morning, while your husband is growing a bump the size of a football on his forehead: that's harder to explain. You could argue that the vase had long ago lost its appeal to you. The chance that he would believe you is slim, although it wouldn't be a lie. I went off that vase ages ago. And the dried flowers.

My daughter bought it for me, a gift set for Mother's Day from the Argos catalogue. Of all the presents that a woman receives in the course of a lifetime, Mother's Day gifts are the most repulsive. As if the world wants to make the point to you that you don't need anything beautiful any more: after all, you are the mother. That hand-knitted scarf might come into fashion, you never know. That necklace made of plain clay beads suits your neckline. Try it on, Mum, do you like it? I went to so much trouble making it, I'll varnish the beads another time, so that they look nice and shiny.

Anyone who lies awake at night with an inner urge to smash an earthenware Mother's Day gift against their husband's head has some thinking to do.

There must be a reason.

I know it. Deep inside, and for months now, possibly even years, I have known exactly what is wrong: I am unhappy. Maybe that's too big a claim. Unhappiness is a strong emotion, which I don't really seem to have. There are graphs with sharp peaks and troughs and, in between, straight lines. I am the straight line. Always on the straight and narrow. Neither up one minute, nor down the next.

I have a husband, two children, and we have our own house; each year we decorate the Christmas tree; I am in good health and so are they, our lives are good: we have everything. And yet I couldn't care less. Sometimes I look at my family from a distance and wait, in vain, to be moved, which is apparently what's supposed to happen when you watch your own family. Why don't I feel anything any more? It is as if I am behind a panel of frosted glass. When the children were tiny I was constantly overwhelmed by my loving feelings. They were so dependent, like little pets, I loved them to bits - ten, twenty times a day I was ready to cry.

My tears have dried up. I must love them, enjoy them. Before you know it, they will have grown up. I must try

harder, think of a way. I can't go on like this, every day and every night. I am slowly going mad. Soon I'll hate them, like I am already beginning to hate Paul. Not passionately, but even so. If he knew he'd be shocked.

Chapter Two

I have just come up with a thought: I am a train. One of those model trains you used to see in the windows of toyshops, going round and round the same track, always stopping at the same station. That is what I do now. I rush from home to school, from school to the office, from the office to the supermarket, and from the supermarket, if I can, to Mum's, because otherwise she'll just be on her own. In between, the children need to be taken to, or collected from riding and swimming lessons, helped with unsaddling the horse, getting dried and dressed, and then home again. That's my life in all its glory.

And as if all this isn't exciting enough, there is still the housekeeping. A household is a complex and elusive situation, which got going at some stage, but has spiralled out of control into something never-ending. At a certain point, if you have the misfortune to reach a ripe old age, the household shrinks again, but that coincides with the deterioration of your faculties and your growing inability to cope with things.

It could take my grandmother up to two weeks to buy a stamp, and then she would spend the next three weeks wondering if she had got the right one. I used to think that was ridiculous but now I understand her better than ever. For some time now, the housekeeping has been making me anxious. It's because of my husband.

Paul has recently managed to reorganize his job so that he can work from home three days a week. He loves it - I am less enthusiastic. He watches me like a hawk and

comments on everything. According to him I can't get anything right: I am too sloppy, too careless, and I just let everything get into a mess. So he drew up 'The Complete Maintenance Plan for the De Groot Household'.

He began with the electrical appliances: the coffee maker, vacuum cleaner, washing machine, tumble-dryer, dishwasher, fridge, freezer, the lawnmower, the computer, the deep fryer, and the iron. The fact that I use all these machines is not enough for my husband: I should also be looking after them. Paul got the manuals out - he had kept them all - and wrote down how to keep each appliance in perfect condition.

I tend to forget that maintenance needs to be done all the time, sometimes daily, for some things weekly, monthly or annually. The coffee maker and iron need to be descaled, the tumble-dryer and washing machine need to have the fluff removed - there are special drain points for this, which you have to unscrew so that you can remove the gunge. Nowadays the washing machine even comes with a digital program which you are supposed to adjust one way or another. The freezer has to be defrosted at regular intervals, the fridge should be washed out once a week, the lawnmower needs to be oiled and have its blade sharpened, you should never use the fat in your deep fryer more than ten times, the vacuum cleaner has a filter that you have to shake out, the bag absolutely must be changed when it is full, and you mustn't forget to update the computer, both hardware and software.

Computers require more maintenance than any other machine. They drive you mad: it is a miracle when they work and when they don't, you spend days trying to find the problem, and then sorting it out. Networks collapse without warning, Internet connections go down, and firewalls are so effective that they block everything, whether it is coming in or going out.

When my husband had done the bit about the electrical appliances, he moved on to the next heading, 'General Housekeeping'. This covers how often to change the bedding, when to turn the mattress, how to clean windows and polish the floorboards. Then there is 'Administration', which deals with bills, renewing the insurance policies, claiming on the health insurance, doing your tax, and checking preliminary tax bills. 'Transport' takes care of the car. Julia, he had written, try for once not to forget this year, you don't want to find yourself stuck on the side of the road again. You have to take your car to the garage every time it has done ten thousand miles, it needs an MOT, and don't forget to check the tyre pressures regularly, that saves petrol. The bicycles also need to be serviced, the front and rear lights of the kids' bikes are usually not working. This can be *lethal*. The last word was in italics and underlined. 'Garden': the lawn needs to be cut and aerated, we have a special rake for that, the grass also needs compost, and has to be weeded. PS: When are we going to get rid of that rubbish from the pond?

We used to have a pond but I had it filled in. We had eighteen goldfish, which we never saw because the water was always murky. Trying to keep pond water clear could take you a lifetime - you can even get a degree in it now, people who have attempted it have ended up in mental institutions. Whenever another mental-health-act detainee manages to escape, I think: I bet that man used to have a pond he couldn't keep clean. Ponds can destroy you, people who live in flats have no idea how hard it is, ponds should be banned. The pond industry is vast - pumps, filters, additives - and worth millions. You can have your pond water tested at the garden centre, try and explain that to a dehydrated wretch in some far-off refugee camp. In our country they encourage you to buy additives, one kind for summer and another one for winter, costing hundreds of euros, which you dilute and then sprinkle over the water,

producing a pond that will stay cloudy, even when pure desperation has driven you to install hideous filters and pumps. And then, when your neighbour's two-year-old son drowns in your murky pool one day and you send up a pale blue teddy-shaped balloon at his funeral, you finally know you have had enough, believe me.

Paul has written it all out and drawn up a schedule and I have put a name after each entry. We had to distribute the chores fairly; the children got some too. I showed Paul my plan. He said Isabel was too small to replace the fat in the deep fryer, and that he had a full-time job and really couldn't manage more than servicing the bikes and the things he had listed under 'Garden'.

'So will the rest have to be done by me?' I asked, waving the wodge of A4 sheets.

'It's not like you're overworking yourself,' he said. 'We've got a cleaner.'

Then we argued. We have been arguing a lot lately. We even argue about money, something that wasn't an issue before. It's because of the euro. Paul was dead against the introduction of the euro and still can't accept it now it is here. He gets terribly wound up about rising prices and is worried they are going to ruin us in the end.

Sometimes he'll suddenly want to go and do the shopping on Saturdays. Then he is off to Lidl or Aldi and brings back bags full of obscure brands of Coke, cheese, sausages and chocolate spread, which the children won't eat. Last Christmas we bought a Senseo coffee maker. Paul thinks the pods are expensive so he only allows me to use it once a day. The rest of the time I am to make normal coffee. Not with Douwe Egberts but with Aldi coffee. Of course I secretly drink Senseo and flush the used pods down the loo.

The problem is, we are in each other's way too much. I am never on my own any more. Before Paul changed his work arrangements I would occasionally have the house all to myself for a morning, say, or an afternoon. I used to love

those peaceful hours. I could do whatever I liked. Not that I got up to anything special, I would lie in the bath and fantasize about being married to Tom Cruise, or I would finally get round to reading the paper. I was free to do these things without anyone watching me, or hassling me with questions.

That is the other thing: it drives me bonkers that everybody always comes to me with their questions. Most questions begin with, 'Mummy, can I . . .' (go on the PlayStation, watch TV, have a biscuit?) Followed by, 'Mummy, where's my . . .' (gym kit, fountain pen, hairbrush?) Day after day I get asked, 'What are we eating tonight?' and Paul's speciality, 'Why is there no toilet paper?'

Nobody seems to realize that I am a person, a woman, not a national information centre.

Nobody thinks I can manage anything more than keeping the bathroom supplied with enough toilet paper. When you are newly in love, you don't have a clue. You want to get married, have a beautiful dress and a big do, you think you are going to live a long and happy life, you enter into it blindly. But there is one thing they have neglected to tell you: a marriage usually results in a family, and a family generally ensures the end of your marriage.

Paul thought I was exaggerating. His maintenance plan was clear; it was simply a matter of getting on with it. As if that happens by itself. Nothing happens by itself, absolutely nothing, that is why I am lying awake now. I have too much on my mind, too many things to get on with, the aerator is going rusty, my mother, my sister Kaitlin, my kids, they all need maintenance. If you want to keep up with everything, you have no time to descale your marriage, let alone your own blocked drains.

Chapter Three

Thursday morning, ten o'clock. I am at the office and I want to scream. I work at an estate agent's, the family business. My father took over the firm from my grandfather who set it up. It was always assumed that sooner or later my brother would step into my father's shoes. But that is not how it worked out. Jimmy's death provided a convenient excuse, but if he had been alive he would never have gone into Dad's business for anything in the world. He and my father were like chalk and cheese. It is different for me, I am more resilient and besides, I have never done anything else, so I don't know any better. From the day I left school my father has been my boss.

The moment has come for the old man to retire. He keeps on churning out the same old sales talk with the same old smile. His clients have noticed it, I have noticed it – the only person who seems oblivious to it all is Dad himself. Meanwhile his rivals are overtaking him left, right, and centre. I should know, or rather I can find out, because that is my job: I do the bookkeeping. Last year he sold an average of twelve properties a month, this year it has dropped to eight. At the height of his career he would shift twenty a month, but then that was when Juliana, the Queen Mother, was still on the throne. Those days are long gone.

He was so big-headed then. The spitting image of the boys who are now in the fast lane, poaching his business. I ought to feel sorry for him and I have tried; honestly, I have tried to find something approximating to warmth inside myself but it simply isn't there. As I look at Dad sitting at

his perspex desk, I see the decline that awaits me and Paul, and the only thing it makes me want to do is give a hollow laugh. At the tailor-made suits that no longer fit him, and his hair that has been dyed far too dark a colour. In my thoughts I march into his office, at least once a day, to give him an earful: 'Just admit it, Dad. Admit that you've lost the battle. Throw in the towel. You were once a respected businessman, you were successful - that's not bad, is it? Some people fail in every aspect of their lives. Do you ever think about that?'

Sometimes I am determined just to speak my mind. To say once and for all how I feel, no matter who I am talking to. I imagine visiting everyone I know, and telling them exactly what I think. It could be cathartic but I worry I wouldn't know when to stop, that I would end up lonely and hoarse, perhaps in an empty cell lined with polystyrene.

'Dad?'

He moves a pile of papers and looks up.

'Do you still have Jimmy's car?'

'Why?'

'Just asking. I was wondering if I could borrow it sometime. Do you still have it?'

'It's at home, in my garage. Engine still starts, amazing if you think about it. That's Toyota for you - indestructible. I let my cleaning lady use it once or twice before she got a car of her own. What do you need it for?'

'Nothing. Just want to drive it for a day, you don't mind do you?'

'As far as I'm concerned you can,' he says, shrugging his shoulders. 'Just be careful your mother doesn't find out.'

Chapter Four

'I'm going,' I say to my husband. It's Thursday night, half past six, we've just finished eating. The children have already gone upstairs. Jim is playing on his PlayStation and Isabel is preparing a talk for school. The table hasn't been cleared yet.

'Are you going to the gym?' Paul asks. He collects the dirty plates and puts them by the sink.

'No, I'm going. Going away, for a while.'

'How do you mean?' Paul sits down again. He leaves the dishwasher open. Paul's idea of clearing up is to open the dishwasher and stack the dirty plates by the sink. Once everything is on the worktop he disappears, assuming the rest will take care of itself.

'What do you mean by going away?' asks Paul.

'I'll be going abroad soon.'

I study his face closely. It isn't true actually, I am making it up as I go along, but I am enjoying watching his reaction. When I lie awake at night it is the only thought that can soothe me back to sleep. I can always leave. I've got the money, I can take Jimmy's car and disappear if I want to.

He draws his head back, giving himself a double chin. 'Abroad? Why didn't you tell me before? Has your father finally got his eye on something, does he want you to go with him?'

'It's got nothing to do with the business.'

Paul frowns.

I decide to finish the game I've started. 'You really don't get it, do you?' I stand up and slam the door of the

dishwasher shut. 'Your wife, your spouse, your Julia, doesn't give a fuck any more.'

'Can you just calm down, please?' asks Paul.

I move my face right up to his. 'No, I can't. That's my problem. I can't any more, and I don't want to either. I'm fed up, I can't face it any more. Do you understand?'

I can hear how shrill my voice sounds. I am a better actress than I thought. It frightens me.

'Just calm down for a moment and sit down,' he says. 'And tell me exactly what it is that you don't give a fuck about any more.'

'I don't want to sit down.' I pace up and down, hands on hips. I've got to keep going, this is a good experiment. I wonder how it is going to end.

Paul sighs. 'Don't sit down then. I just want to talk to you. This is completely unexpected.'

'But that's exactly what I want, darling. You may think this is some kind of hormonal outburst, but let me tell you, it's not. I am going away.' Oh my God, that just came out without thinking. That sounded good.

'Abroad, you said?'

'Precisely.' If you're going to go away, you go abroad. Even if you go no further than Germany or, if you like, Belgium, but you've got to cross a border, otherwise you might as well not bother.

'May I ask why?'

'You may.' I sit down opposite him.

We sit in silence. He hasn't picked up on anything, he hasn't even cottoned onto the fact that I am pulling his leg. Let's see who can keep this up the longest.

'Why?' Paul asks finally. 'Is there someone else?'

I leap up immediately, knocking my chair to the kitchen floor. 'God, why do you always have to be so simple? Is there someone else? No Paul, I'm not fucking someone else. Maybe if I was, you'd have noticed, but I'm seriously beginning to doubt that now.'

The sitting-room door opens. Isabel emerges in her bunny slippers. Our eldest. Good timing, well cast, fitting in perfectly with the rest of the picture.

She looks at the chair, then at me and her father. 'What's going on? Why are you making so much noise?'

'Mummy and I are just talking a few things through. Mummy has a problem at work,' Paul says quickly.

My fantasy is interrupted. 'The child is eleven, for heaven's sake, do you really think she doesn't see what is going on?'

I put the chair back. 'Mummy and Daddy are having an argument, Isabel. It happens.'

Paul gives me a vicious look. 'Shall we leave the children out of this? You go on up, sweetie, get changed, then you can hop right into bed in a moment.'

Isabel looks at her watch. 'It's a quarter past seven, Dad, way too early for bed.'

'Of course it is,' I agree with her. 'You carry on with your schoolwork for a bit longer, Mummy and Daddy will carry on arguing and if the noise bothers you, put on some music.'

Isabel shrugs her shoulders and leaves.

'Shut the door!' I shout after her. She comes back and obeys my order, Paul's jaw dropping.

'See how easy that was? Communication. Just simple, honest communication. It's dead easy. People should do it more often.'

At last he gets up, exasperated. 'What the hell's wrong with you? If you . . .' He's about to raise his voice but pulls himself together. 'If you want to rant like an idiot you can do it some other time. Not in the presence of my children.'

My children, he said. Biologically speaking, I have entrusted my egg cells to the right man. Paul is the perfect father. He will never abandon his offspring, he is very protective of them. OK, a bit too much so sometimes, but so what?

'Let me tell you something about your children, Paul de Groot, I pity them. I think you're a hysterical father. You're overanxious, you've lost all sense of reality. Those absurd Smart-lights Jim has to wear when he wants to play outside make him look ridiculous. He looks like a walking Christmas tree with all those flashing lights on his sleeves. And that fluorescent safety jacket - the only thing missing is a helmet. Oh no, I forgot, he's already got one. When he goes out cycling he's the only one who has to wear a helmet, poor kid. You know what the nice thing about cycling is? That feeling of the wind blowing through your hair.'

'I think we've had this conversation before.'

'Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm an irresponsible, crazy mother. If it wasn't for you, they would have had I don't know how many accidents by now, but their short lives would have been more fun.'

Paul's voice drops an octave. 'I could never forgive myself if anything happened to Isabel or Jim. That's all. You know that, and I don't think it's fair that you're bringing it up now.'

'They've got to be allowed to live, Paul. When you're around you're constantly interfering. You still wipe Jim's bum, you tie his laces, you cycle to school with them, you take them to all their clubs at weekends, and then you stay to watch. They're eleven and six. Jim's almost seven, you've got to let go a bit, you can't protect them for ever.' I get up. 'Do you want coffee?' Paul nods absent-mindedly.

Once we are sitting opposite one another again, he rubs his eyes. Good, he is getting tired and confused. I can go on with my experiment. I change my tone.

'Paul,' I say softly. I stretch my arm out towards him and gently stroke his hand. 'I don't want to argue with you. It's just that I need to go away. I love you, and I love the children, you know that. But there are times, at work too,

when I feel crowded by it all. That's when I feel an urge to get out.'

His expression softens. 'Do you think it might be to do with . . . you know who? You visited his grave this week.'

Jimmy. Always Jimmy, every day, week, month, and year. He never goes away. Every year Jimmy dies on 13 July. Every summer, on 21 July, he fails to grow any older. Of course the thought has crossed my mind, I just don't want to abuse it; we can all think of some childhood experience or other to explain our problems. It's not right, it's too cheap, too easy.

Paul says my life has been tainted by grief, though I rarely speak about it and he only vaguely knows the story. In the early years of our marriage he thought that with his great love for me he would be able to alleviate the pain. Later he hoped the arrival of the children would bring me out of the shadows. He has never said it in so many words, but he must have noticed nothing has changed.

'It might be,' I say. 'Anything is possible. But what difference does it make? It's not about the past, it's about now.'

'Where do you want to go?' Paul asks. 'Perhaps you could rent a house on Crete. Where we went two years ago, remember, with that beautiful little beach?' He smiles. 'I'd go like a shot if I were you. Then you could get away from it all.'

Paul loved Crete. I wish I could say the same. All I remember is dragging two whining kids around in the sweltering heat. The mosquitoes. The begging for ice creams. Paul's never-ending inspections. 'Are the children wearing their life jackets? Have you put enough sun cream on them? Did you check if the coffee maker was switched off? Did you put the passports in the safe?'

Paul is prepared to let me go. Let's see how far I can go. In theory of course; this is still purely hypothetical.

'You still haven't quite understood what I'm saying. I'm not talking about a week. I want to go away. I'm going away. I don't know how long for yet, or where to, even. I just know I'm going on a long journey.'

That's how it goes in my dreams. I pack a suitcase and walk out. Just like that. Get a packet of cigarettes on the way. Mama was a rolling stone.

'Why?' He sounds slightly bewildered. 'There must be a reason? You can't really mean it. You can't just leave - abandon the children and me? That's what this means, isn't it?'

I nod slowly. Now that he puts it like this, if I really think about it, I begin to feel something. A glimpse into the future. A flicker of pain, nostalgia, perhaps even homesickness. I can't place it, I don't even know if it is good or bad.

Paul stays in control. It is an aspect of his character I both admire and loathe. 'When do you leave?' he asks abruptly.

So it is that simple. You drop a bombshell and you are coldly asked: when do you leave?

This is the moment I should tell him it was only a game. That I just wanted to test the ground. Of course I didn't mean it, I really have no plans to leave. 'As soon as possible,' I hear myself say.

'Have you packed yet?'

'No.'

'Have you thought how you're going to break it to the children?'

That is the part I always skip in my fantasy. I leave a note on the kitchen table and creep out in the night, without anyone noticing. By the time they wake up I am long gone. 'Can't we do that together? Maybe we could think of a reason why I'm leaving.'

'You want to lie to our children and you expect me to play along?' asks Paul.