

*L u c k y*

You always look like Caesar in the bath. Vast and powerful, your shoulders hugged by the enamel rolled top. They are brown and speckled like a hen's egg. I look at you from my end, water up to my chin, and wonder at you. You are the most beautiful man I have ever seen, I think, but that's not what I tell you. Instead I say, 'Let's have a game of cards.' You hesitate and I try not to look too eager, but if I were a child I would have my fingers crossed and my eyes shut. I wait for you to agree, for in my heart I know you will, despite the fact that the bath is hot as I like it: hot enough to dissolve the day, but too hot for you, steam rising, making you sweat.

You rise from the bath, your body like rain. The water level drops to below my breasts. I want to tell you to forget the cards but I don't. Instead, I hug my knees to my



chest and watch you, resigned as you get the wooden tray, the crumpled playing cards and some matchsticks for keeping score. The bath is empty without you. It is too large for one person, turn-of-the-century French, standing on lion's feet and steeply sloping at both ends. I jam my thighs against the sides to keep myself from slipping underwater while you count the cards into four suits, checking that there are still thirteen of each, despite the fact that the baby used the two of diamonds as a teething aid this morning. You fit the old tray with its brass handles over the bath and lower yourself back in. I lodge my feet against your knees and we dry our hands on the flannel in preparation for the game.

I love you more than I have ever loved anyone in my life. That's what I want to say, but instead I tell you that it is your turn to be dealer. These days, I have a terror of letting you see how much I need you. Superstition makes me feel it would be foolhardy to declare my hand. Besides, it has been one of those days. Earlier, when I awoke poisoned by a dream and alone, I studied our wedding photograph. Looking at it didn't make me spit fire (as occasionally it does) nor sigh with happiness (as often it does). Instead, when I saw the picture, framed in antique silver, our faces creased and mouths roaring with laughter, I just felt an unutterable sadness.

You deal. We are playing Putrida; like all the best card games a matter of luck as much as acumen, betting with matchsticks on how many tricks we will win in each hand, moving from one card each to ten, then ten without

trumps and then back down to a single card. It's not the winning of tricks that gets the points, but being correct. I am usually too keen to win points and lose sight of reality, whereas you are better at coolly assessing your hand and predicting with accuracy. We are at eight cards each on the way up and for once, I am winning. You look at your cards. 'Terrible,' you moan, 'I've had nothing but rotten hands.'

'I think I'll go for the lot,' I smugly declare, lining up eight matchsticks. Then while you waver over your unpromising cards, still muttering about your bad luck, I say: 'Well, you know how it goes: "Lucky in cards, unlucky in love." You can't have everything.' I want you to exclaim the truth of this. I want *you* to say it. I want you to throw down your cards, dump the tray overboard and take me into your arms. I want the water to slosh over the sides and the playing cards to rise and fall on the waves like little rafts as you cover me with your streaming body and tell me that I am right, that you are ferociously lucky in love. But you don't. 'I'll go for one trick then,' is what you say.

We hear the baby stir in the next room, sleepy puppy whimper. 'Oh no, don't you dare,' you hiss. 'Please don't wake up.' You have been alone with the baby today. He woke before six. How many times, I wonder, have you regretted your boast about being good in the mornings? I have always told you how disabled I feel, how it seems that the cables in my arms have been cut, my hands limp and my mind resigned to its inability to fire my useless body. So,



this morning (like most mornings, in fact), when the baby called the day into action, it was you, the self-professed lark to my owl, who got up and brought him into our bed. While you gave him his bottle, I tried to make myself invisible by curling into the pillows with the sheet pulled over my head. 'Please don't let him do that, I'm so tired,' I moaned as the baby yanked at a handful of my hair, a snake of evidence that betrayed my presence under the sheets. Meanly, I suspected that you were watching him, amused, rather than oblivious to his urgent tugs. I emerged from the protective coverings and our baby flopped on to my face, using my chin and his wet mouth to make 'mwa mwa' sounds, like a Red Indian, and you laughed with him as I tried to be tender but all the time longed for you both to go away.

You left the curtains open and I could see the darkening sky closing in and the starkness of the distant oak. The world outside was changing fast, the birdsong ceased and I could hear the clouds rumbling. Something scratched and fluttered in the eaves as I lay on the smooth white sheets and turned my face back into the pillow. Soon after that the violence erupted. I brought my arm back until my shoulder hurt and struck you with all my might. I hit you hard on the head, I slapped your face until the palms of my hands were red and stinging, and still I went on. I pummelled your chest with my fists. Again and again I hit you. Motionless, you accepted the blows, like you always do, leaving me feeling foolish and humiliated. I could see people in the shadows, tutting their disapproval of my

behaviour, feeling sorry for you. But much as I always want to, I can never stop once I have started. Then I ran sobbing from the room and threw myself on to an unmade bed. I awoke, salty-mouthed and ashamed.

Sometimes I don't have this dream for three or four months and I think everything is resolved and that my anger has at last subsided, to be replaced by mature acceptance. But this morning, there I was again, alone with my shame, left with the fading image of you slumped in a chair and the incontinence of my anger.

It was that list of yours that did it. The folded scrap of paper in the back of your address book where I should never have found it. All those girls. All those *young* girls. All those girls whose names had never been spoken but who lay indexed in blue biro, some with surnames, some in capital letters, fluttering before my eyes like butterflies over the paper. That's why I insisted we get a new bed. I imagined their juices soaked into the mattress. Late at night they haunt me still, leaving their dirty fingerprints all over you while you sleep.

I awoke again much later. You brought the drowsy baby, floppy now in his grubby Babygro, and some fizzy orange Vitamin C for me. I felt better after that. The baby sucked himself to sleep on a bottle of warm milk and I built a barricade of pillows and cushions around him as he lay, open-mouthed like a choirboy, in the middle of our big bed.

Downstairs, the Sunday newspapers lay strewn on the table. Two houseflies feasted on a plastic bowl of drying



paste, the remains of the baby's breakfast. His water beaker had a congealing crust of cereal around its spout. Your spent teabags as appealing as soiled mattresses seeped into a chalky puddle of spilt baby milk by the kettle.

'Look at this, Mummy,' said our older boy, holding a block of Lego, still in his pyjamas, which, like his mouth, were stained with chocolate. 'It's a going-under-water-going-to-space-going-underground car.'

'Ouch!' I stepped on a piece of scattered Lego with my bare feet. 'I bet you haven't eaten any proper breakfast. And why aren't you dressed?' I snapped.

And then to you, 'He really shouldn't be eating chocolate for breakfast, you know.'

You sighed to the ceiling. 'The baby has been a monster this morning. He whinged when I fed him. I changed his nappy. He whinged some more. I gave him water, he whinged, I gave him milk, he whinged. He just refused to stop and now I've got a headache.'

My love, I have had the most marvellous sleep and I thank my lucky stars that I have someone like you who will let me drift, undisturbed, for a whole morning in bed. What have I done to deserve you, who so sweetly takes care of the children down here while I inhabit my childless dreams upstairs? I would love to be able to say that, I really would.

But that is not what happens. 'I think he just wants a bit of your attention,' is what I state pointedly while stacking the scattered newspapers and their litter of inserts into a tidy heap.

*Vogue* magazine arrived this morning with the Sunday papers. On the cover is an actress with startling sea-green eyes and parted coral lips. Her breasts are plumply spilling over a mother-of-pearl sequinned dress with spaghetti straps. I hate her. She reminds me of my mother's warning while I was still breastfeeding the baby: 'You must eat more of these,' she advised, emptying smooth, ripe avocados from a brown paper bag into the fruit bowl. 'Or they'll end up like this - you can take it from me,' she added, staring at my chest and crumpling the empty bag in her hand and then opening it to show me. I had a couple of weeks on a diet of avocado sandwiches, avocado vinaigrette, avocado and orange salad and bowls of guacamole, but soon forgot.

While I was upstairs, dressing our boy and trying to express an interest in his Lego inventions, you took the magazine and seated yourself in the overstuffed kitchen chair and started flicking through the pages.

'That's my magazine and I haven't even looked at it yet.' You can have no idea how irritated I was to find you there. 'I was just coming down to read it.' I tried to smile as I said this, but what I meant was that I couldn't bear for you to look at all those childlessly perfect models in their tiny dresses and clingy little satin tops with their bared midriffs. It frightens me. You handed over the magazine, sighing,

'God, I just want ten minutes to myself.'

'Well, excuse me,' I said spitefully. 'I just wasn't aware that reading about the wonders of new liposome-enriched face creams and the importance of Herve Leger's spring collection was so crucial to you.'



I would like to be able to tell you how jealously I guard you. It would explain so much that must puzzle you. Like my bad-tempered response to certain films, or girls in red suede hot-pants. You see, I would like to protect you from images more perfect, more alluring and more sexy than my own. And they are everywhere, these girls. They read the news and forecast the weather. Hell, these days they're even on *Blue Peter*, bouncing around with sticky-back plastic and designer cleavages. Sometimes I think I would like you to go blind.

You win the next hand and the one after that too, despite the fact that you can barely see in this light. I want the lights low as a single candle when we share the bath, and not just because the water reflects them and sends a dappling of light swirls and shadows on to the ceiling above us. I tell you the light show is more beautiful like this but I don't mention that I feel overexposed when they are bright. You squint at your cards and then at me, your eyes the same permanent inky blue as our baby's.

'Isn't it strange how luck changes depending on your state of mind?' I say.

'It's not luck, it's your perception of luck,' you say, and you are right. Sometimes, when I'm down, I feel that even the playing cards are conspiring against me.

Your face is theatrical: part Marlon Brando but with touches of a Jack Nicholson-when-young wickedness. I don't like Marlon Brando or Jack Nicholson but I find you magnificent. You don't know this because I have never told you. I could tell you now but instead I pass you the

flannel and say, 'You should wipe your forehead, it's getting really sweaty,' and when you have wiped the beads from your brow, 'How many tricks do you bid? Come on, do, it's your turn.'

'We have to hurry up now, I want to finish my crossword tonight.' I am turning into my mother in more ways than one. The crossword nags at me every Sunday. I have to finish it and my ambition is to win the gold-plated fountain pen prize. It's not the pen that matters so much as being able to tell people how I got it. After all, anyone can be beautiful but it takes brains to win the Sunday crossword. I love the way you try to help me with clues although you refuse to learn the cryptic crossworder's codes ('No, no,' I say. 'Can't you see? It says "sliding around"; everyone knows that that means it's an anagram'). Another thing you don't know is how helpful you often are despite this handicap, because I never tell you when you get one right, which sometimes you do.

Earlier, while we were still shouldering my unspoken resentments and the baby was in his wheeled walker, cruising around the kitchen, destroying the contents of the cupboards like a hooligan space invader, I took over the kitchen chair with the damned crossword while you cooked. That's another thing I wonder. Do you ever regret telling me that I need never cook again? Are you shocked that I have taken you at your word all these years? I don't think I could manage my egg-fried rice now, not even if I tried. You have no idea how grateful I am that you are the one who works like a short-order chef around the clock.



There's plain spaghetti with just the right amount of cheese and cream for our son, tender baby carrots with mashed potatoes and moulied chicken breast for our baby, creamy wild mushroom risotto or tuna carpaccio with truffle oil for our friends, the full roast on Sundays, and then for me – the most finicky of the lot – steak with mushroom sauce, lemon chicken just how my mother makes it, duck breasts with fresh fruit sauces and, when all else fails, hot chocolate and walnut toast spread with my favourite Pavé D'Affinois. Do you know, I think that I would starve to death without you now.

'It says "Dental trouble, question mark. Use salt repeatedly" and it's six letters,' I said, half to myself. You stopped slicing onions and celery for your stock and looked straight ahead, thinking hard, with the twin fleshy cushions of your bottom lip sticking out like a child's, like our child's.

Our son burst into the room. 'Daddy, what's for supper?' he asked.

You were looking straight at him. 'Saliva,' you replied.

'Ugh,' he grimaced.

'No,' I said, still ignoring our boy, and then smiling at him with the onslaught of inspiration. 'It's tartar.'

'I've never had tartar, do I like it?' he asked.

'Don't you see? It's salt repeatedly, that means two sailors, and tartar is dental trouble.'

Our boy was looking worried. 'Do you think I could just have tinned spaghetti with sausages?' he said, and for the first time of the day, we laughed together.

It always takes something silly like that to break the tension. And here we are now, in the bath, on equal pegging and just a few hands left to play. There is an unspoken prize to be won, to be presented, with the lights off, later still in bed. Win or lose you will make the tea and roll the joint that we will smoke as soon as this game is over and we are propped against our pillows watching something mind-numbing on the television. You deal the cards. I can't believe my luck. I get the ace, King, Queen and Jack of hearts, and hearts are trumps. You flick your fingers on the surface of the water, which makes a satisfyingly loud 'chlock'. The warm water laps against my shoulders, the light ripples dance above us. There is nowhere else I would rather be. There is no one else I would rather be with. I lie back and look at you through my soggy fan of trumps and manage to tell you for the first time today: 'Do you know,' I say, 'I'm lucky. I'm really so very lucky.'