

One

At my father's funeral, after everything, I lit a great big fire in his honour, built from stacked apple crates and broken furniture and pieces of a fallen-down tree. It towered over the scrubby piece of land I call the bonfire garden, and blazed, too far gone to fight, against the fading afternoon. On the lawn below me, my family gulped for air like landed fish. They clawed at their own faces like Edward Munch's *Screamers*, like meth-heads. His mourners poured from the house, designer-clad and howling, lit up like spectres by the flames.

My stepfather, Lowell Baxter, ageing pin-up boy, one-time TV star and current no-hoper, stood swaying, dazed and hollow-eyed, a man woken up in the wrong place after a long sleep. Hannah, my mother, crumpled on to the wet grass like a just-born foal in all her credit-card

finery, her gorgeous face collapsing in a slow puncture. She clutched at her own clothes, sobbing violently, but she didn't bother getting to her feet. I doubt she could remember how, she was so weighted down with debt.

I could have filmed them, preserved their agonies for repeat viewings, but I didn't. I did what my best and only friend Thurston always told me. I savoured the moment because the moment was more than enough. I stood back and watched them suffer, feeding fistfuls of paper to the flames.

I wondered if they'd ever speak to me again. I've always longed for Hannah and Lowell to stop talking.

They didn't behave that way when it was my father in the furnace. Neither of them was sorry to see him go. Before the fire, there was a service for him at the crematorium. Ernest Toby Jones, one of a queue of waiting dead. Lowell worked the room in a tight suit and Hannah wore big black sunglasses to hide her lack of tears, and shiny black high heels with red soles, same colour as her lipstick. High-impact accessories are my mother's answer to big occasions, in place of actual feelings.

I couldn't stand the thought of Ernest lying in that box with the lid closed, all dark and lonely and gone.

None of it made sense to me. I couldn't keep up. But like water putting out a lit match, the rest of the world closed over the fact of his absence, and ran on. His hearse moved through everyday traffic. Cars behind him on the road tested their patience on his slow and stately journey to the grave. Only one old man, walking with a stick, stopped as the coffin navigated a roundabout and met my eye, and bowed his head politely to the dead. Inside, Ernest's thin crowd spread itself out across the pews and tried to fill up the room. God knows who most of them were. They wore their duller clothes and tuned their voices to the frequencies of sadness and loss. I sat on my own. I didn't want anything to do with them. The chapel's technicolour carpets looked like off-cuts from *The Shining*, from a shut-down Las Vegas casino. I wanted to meet the person responsible and find out if they were joking, or colour-blind, or just a fan of Stanley Kubrick films. I wanted to tell Thurston about them because he would get it and because on that day of all days I could have done with him there. And then I realised the carpets were chosen perfectly, because they took my mind off the elephant in the room, the rubbed-raw stump of what was missing, the lack of my father, the lack of Ernest, who was never ever coming back.