## JULIA

Although she had recently attained the age of thirty-five, Julia was determined that she would not panic. No, she would not panic. She would simply continue to water the tomatoes. They were in pots on her balcony, tangling their furry stems around the balustrade. She would continue to coax out their heavy green baubles, and try to keep these to their promises of redness. She would continue, too, to take her vitamin tablets each morning and to drink six glasses of water a day, to have her legs waxed and her hair cut every six weeks. She would continue sweltering in Bikram yoga class on Monday nights, trying to master the half-tortoise, and come to terms with farting in public, which her instructor said was important. She did not want him to think that she was anal — a danger she would know to have been averted when she no longer felt the impulse to clench her buttocks in order to keep the volume down.

And she would continue going to work, although this was no trouble at all. At the leather and pipe-smoke legal practice, she was one of the cleverest in a clever bunch, but less likely than any of the others to accessorise her cleverness with displays of ego. She conducted herself calmly (although she would never acquiesce) and even the senior partners sought her counsel. At work she was only thirty-five, and there was certainly no need to panic.

At thirty-five, Julia was well and truly old enough to know that nothing good came from panic, or haste, or recklessness. You could not even buy a good pair of shoes with them. To begin, now, to frequent bars or take tennis lessons would be only to guarantee disappointment. She had observed thirty-five-year-old friends doing precisely these things, and had served well-intended dinners to the human oddments with whom they were now trying to make a life. No. She had drawn the hopscotch squares of her pavement, and she would not put a foot beyond them, even if she was thirty-five. And so in her continuing way she went, on Saturday mornings, to sit in the warm café on her generally cold street. There, she continued to drink mocha that she continued to prefer weighted towards the chocolate rather than the coffee. And she read. Newspapers, or books of serious literary intent, while her hand-knitted scarf purred over the back of her chair.

## ERIN

It was too late now. And yet, only a fraction of a second before it had happened, it had been too early. Too early. Too late. Nothing in between. Not even the smallest of

windows that she might have picked if she had been especially alert. The edges of too early and too late had fused together and Erin had known herself to be once again excluded; sealed forever beyond and outside the world in which Bella moved with all the bright, swaying confidence of a flame atop a candle.

What had happened was that Bella had given Erin a rock. Bella had been barefoot and up to her knees in the topaz-coloured water of a mountainside lake, grimacing and giggling at the sensation of icy water on feet hot and blistered from three days of boots and constant walking. She had looked down between her pale, suppurating toes and seen something. With one hand capturing her long curly hair in a makeshift ponytail, she had bent down and reached into the lake. Then, yelping and holding her prize high in the air, she had run, splashing through the shallow water, to the shore where Erin lay on the pebbled beach.

Into Erin's hand she had pressed a small and improbable rock, dark red in colour and in the precise shape of a heart. Not a human heart, blobby and irregular, but a Valentine's heart of perfect symmetry; the kind of shape that might be stitched in scarlet satin, or cut out of shiny paper.

'A heart for a dear heart,' Bella said, as she gave Erin the rock. Then, flopping down on the pebbles and laying her grinning head in Erin's lap, she said: 'I do love you, you know.'

She said it like someone who had so much love to sprinkle around that she could afford to be careless with it, like someone dusting a cake with icing sugar and letting drifts of it fall onto the floor. It was a gesture that Erin ought to have been able to accept in the blithe and utterly Bella-like spirit in which it was given, but it only made her feel more a floor and less a cake. And she knew, the second the sweet, meaningless dust of those words settled over her, that it was too late. She thought of, and regretted, all those times — over coffee, tea, or cold creek water — that she had encouraged Bella to keep talking, confiding, about boyfriends past and present, and allowed the sound of Bella's voice to prevent her own silence from being heard. She felt for the weight of the stone in her hand and it was both heavy and light at once. It meant just too much, and not nearly enough. There was no way that she could tell her now.

On the final day of the trek, Erin walked behind Bella, no longer smiling at the amusing way she paddled with her hands through the air at her sides, but planning out the steps of their friendship's attrition. They would graduate in just a few weeks in any case, and it was commonplace, surely, for university friends to simply go their separate ways.

In the horizontal light of the early evening, they emerged from the bush to find Derek and his car waiting to collect them. Bella let the weight of her pack fall to the ground

and flew towards him, arms outstretched like the wings of a plane.

‘Do I stink?’ she asked, raising her arms high. ‘Do I pong? Do I really, really reek?’

He sniffed one of her armpits deeply and crossed his eyes before pulling her close, one hand travelling, habitually it seemed to Erin, down to squeeze her backside.

Erin had no doubt that Derek loved Bella. But it was likely that he loved her for all the obvious reasons and not for the way she always nursed her teacup tenderly in two hands, as if she were scared she might crush its delicate painted blooms. Not for the way she signed off her emails with the nom de plume Tintinnabula, or for the fact that she could fold six different animals in sticky-note origami. Not because she could sing ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’ in Latin, or because she was childishly afraid of thunderstorms. It was likely that he loved her because she was lovely, and not because she was perfect.

A very quick word from Rosie Little:

Mica, mica, parva stella

Miror quaenam sis tam bella

Super terra parva pendes

Alba velut gemma splendes

Mica, mica, parva stella

Miror quaenam sis tam bella

(just in case you were wondering…)

JULIA

On a night when Julia was alone on her couch and had continued to watch television well beyond the point at which her interest had expired, she saw a science program about falling in love. On the screen, faceless young bodies in blue denim writhed in a crowded nightclub while a plummy English voice spoke, rather too excitedly, of physiological cause and effect, of hormones and synapses. As if she needed reminding. As if she needed anyone rubbing it in that there was a prosaic explanation for everything. Now even the mysteries of attraction could be reduced to the cellular level, to the manipulative strategising of ambitious DNA. She punched the off button on the remote control and sat for a moment with the lingering echo of the television’s high-pitched drone in her ears.

ERIN

Erin graduated and moved to a new and larger city. She began what she hoped would be a long and distinguished diplomatic career in a bottom-rung job that still paid well enough for her to afford the rent on a beautiful apartment and a small fraction of its jacaranda umbrella-ed garden. A new life spread out before her like a bolt of beautiful green cloth, and she knew that she held the scissors in her own hand. But into this new life she had brought a stowaway.

Erin could not bring herself to throw the rock away, but neither did she want to confirm its significance by deliberately giving it a place. To set it on the shelf of one of her apartment's art deco nooks, or even to tuck it away inside a jewellery box with her prefect's badge, would be to name it as something to be treasured, remembered or regretted. So she compromised by putting it in the bottom drawer of the bathroom cabinet with a packet of cotton balls, some after-sun moisturiser and an exquisite but ultimately useless cloisonné manicure set which had caught her eye at a trash and treasure stall and had never been opened since. But a few months later she rediscovered the rock in the heat of a sunburn, and so she relocated it to the bottom of the peg basket, where it stayed until a thunderstorm blew the basket off the line and scattered bright plastic pegs all over the lawn and left only the little heart resting in the plastic weave of the basket as if caught in a net. And so it went, this solo game of hide-and-not-seek, until one of Erin's workmates — a sparkly, newly married woman called Nikki, who had different-coloured hair each week and a pinprick stud above the flare of one nostril — invited her home for dinner.

Nikki and her husband were in love. They flitted around each other like a pair of gorgeous rainforest birds, performing well-rehearsed stories of courtship and travel, finishing each other's sentences on precisely the right notes. Erin was, for a time, too absorbed in her hosts' antics and in the gleaming, primary brightness of the many blown-glass artefacts in their ultra-modern home to notice that the dinner table was set for four. It was a fact that she registered only when the doorbell rang and Nikki jumped up from the table to answer it, irrepressible excitement showing on her face.

His name was Tom. And he was good-looking and clever and charming. He was well dressed and well informed, with faultless politics and neat brown hands that roundly shaped the air as he emphasised soundly made points. Over dinner, he and Erin talked book and film, and discovered a mutual dislike of right-wing newspaper columnists and shared passions for cooking and rock-climbing. So engaged was Erin in conversation with him that she was even able to ignore Nikki and her husband winking at each other over the top of electric-blue wineglasses.

'Maybe we could, you know, catch up for a drink sometime,' Tom said after dinner, when their hosts were in the kitchen, carolling to each other as they cleared away

dishes. Erin had just plucked off the back of her chair the winter-weight coat that she had brought with her in case she felt like walking home on this late-autumn night.

‘You know, a drink?’ he prompted, smiling and miming the elbow bend.

One of these days, she would work out what to say in these situations. One of these days, she would be ready. Prepared. A response that was at once witty, warm and inoffensive would spring instantly to mind. But this was not yet that day, so Erin got the equivalent of a paper jam in her mouth. She stood across the table from him, stalled, no part of her functioning properly.

‘After work one night, maybe,’ he continued. ‘Or a coffee on a Sunday morning, if you’d prefer.’

Perhaps she could say, with a charming smile: Sorry, it’s a chromosome thing. No. That would be all wrong. Or: So sorry, but I like girls. How twee. Maybe: We could have a drink. As friends. Lame, lame, lame.

‘No? It’s okay. You can just say no.’ His smile was still in place, but losing sincerity around the edges.

‘It’s not that …Oh, God …It’s not that I don’t like …It’s not you …Oh look, I have to go.’

In the kitchen Erin smacked hasty thanks onto one cheek of each lovebird and then hurried out the door, shutting herself into the dark of the late-night street. She tugged on her bulky bouclé coat, and felt in its pockets for a tissue to mop up the mortification that was beginning to leak from her eyes and drip from her nose. But her pockets were empty of everything except a little red rock, just the brush of which against her fingers was enough to remind her of a whole birthday cake full of swaying candle-flames, and of a heart breakingly delicate dusting of icing sugar on a floor.

Tears streaming now, nose running, Erin decided that the whole ocean would be her wishing well, even though she knew that it was only just deep enough to accommodate all the enormous and contradictory wishes (to forget, to remember, to change herself to fit the world, to have the world change to fit her) that were summed up in the shape of that little stone. She walked past her house and all the way to the edge of the city, where she found the tide high and lapping against its concrete retainer. She took the rock out of her pocket and threw it as far as she could out into the grey and weedy waters.

CHRISTINE

Christine wondered how long it would take for this little phase of hers to pass. At least, she assumed that it was a phase, because for a long time — up until about a

month ago — she had been quite indifferent to him. Hopefully, she would soon return to that state and be able to look back on this little episode like something in black and white, drained of its intensity. As it was, however, she spent her days struggling to push her thoughts of him to the back of her mind, only to have them spring back into the foreground at the slightest provocation. She did not think that it could get very much worse, and she hoped this meant that it was almost over.

One of the reasons it was so confusing was that he started it. He was the one who invited her for coffee at the bakery around the corner from work. The time she went there with him was the first time she'd been, although she'd heard of the place, and knew that a lot of the younger ones went there in their lunchbreaks. And indeed, on that day, other people from work were there, clustered in telling little groups of two and three. It seemed a place where alliances were made, confirmed and announced, and where gossip could prove as warm and yeasty as the bread dough itself. 'Did you see Luke there with Christine?' she could imagine them saying. 'She's got to have fifteen years on him.' But he had been willing to be seen there with her. It had been his idea for God's sake. That was what made it so strange.

She had not — well, she didn't think she had — leapt upon him with the appetite of a woman starved of sex and attention for the best part of a decade. She had been friendly. Open. Forthcoming. Perhaps mildly flirtatious, but only to the point of conducting herself in the slightly arch manner that she remembered being effective with men. And he had been friendly, open, forthcoming and possibly mildly flirtatious, too. Or she thought he had. But just the very next day, he had appeared discomfited, alarmed almost, by her repeat performance of friendliness.

Time had passed, but nothing had become clearer. She was simply unable to get him into focus. On some days he seemed alarmingly close, like one's own nose in a magnifying mirror, and on others he seemed to retract into the distance, right out to a place where she had to squint to see that he was actually there. And so, she was confused.

JULIA

In the evenings, Julia walked along the waterfront. Walking and yoga were the only forms of exercise that she could bear and she was trusting that they would be enough to ward off the dire consequences that were said to await women living sedentary, office-bound lives. She walked by the edge of the esplanade's retaining wall when the tide was high, and when the tide was low she stepped down onto the beach, towing her long shadow over its detritus and sand. She was on nodding terms with an elderly, tweed-capped gentleman who stood patiently, at the weed-line on low tide evenings, holding a plastic bag while his black labrador tucked its bum into a defecatory curtsey.

While Julia walked, she played in her mind the short film festival of a feel-good future.

Usually, she screened the film about the charming all-rounder of a husband who comes home from rock-climbing practice just in time to baste the Sunday roast; and then she would follow it up with the one about the downy-scalped infant nestling at her milk-full breast. After this, she would return home feeling relaxed and uncoiled (suspecting, though, that the term ‘displacement activity’ might come up in any scientific assessment of her pleasure).

A few nights after the television program on the science of lust, Julia walked, ducking her head against the wind and watching her boots sink into the soft sand. Just ahead of her a wave receded, its curving edge drawing back like a lace curtain against the sand. And there, amid plain brown pebbles and half-crushed shells, was a small heart-shaped stone. Julia was not even the type to see animals in the clouds, let alone omens in the intertidal zone. She knew that it was just a rock whose shape was the result of various random geological events and a substantial amount of wave action. And yet, she picked it up and gloved its dark redness into the pocket of her coat. When she got home, she took it out and placed it on the table beside her bed.

CHRISTINE

It wasn’t the fact that she was so much older than him that prevented Christine from settling the matter out in the open. Thankfully there was another, related issue that she could hold up in front of the age one, successfully obscuring it. And that was that she was in a position of authority. Not specifically over him, but it was a fine line. And there had been lately on the news a particularly troubling example of an abuse of authority. A pretty, young female teacher had found herself in court after becoming sexually involved with a number of her seventeen-year-old male students. Of course, once it was revealed that the number of complainants was seven, the media swiftly dubbed her ‘Snow White’. (The headline, incidentally, was SEVEN LITTLE MEN FOR FILTHY SNOW.)

There was one part of Christine which thought the seventeen-year-olds probably enjoyed it and that Snow White was no more than a silly, irresponsible girl who’d had unprecedented access to young, stiff cocks. But as soon as she made a simple transposition of gender, she saw how dodgy this perception became. She tried to imagine herself saying, if the teacher had been a young man, ‘Look, the girls probably enjoyed it.’ She did not even want to contemplate a reversal of her subsequent point about unprecedented access. But what if the equation concerning Luke and her were reversed?

She thought on this, viewing every moment of contact through an inverted lens. She saw her eager friendliness, and his alarmed withdrawal on the day after they had been out for coffee. And suddenly she was revealed to herself as the owner of the uninvited hand pinching the ripe young bottom, as the desperate groper who was pitied and derided behind the closed door of the tearoom. Not only that, but the one whose

advances he felt compelled to tolerate because of her seniority, her authority. Oh my God, she realised, I'm the classic old perv. The thought disgusted and unnerved her. And so for weeks she evaded him, giving him a wide berth in the corridors, replying curtly to his queries and even pretending not to notice him standing in the lift. And then, once he had stepped out of the lift, she would feel foolish, and wonder how a highly paid professional, respected in her field, had inadvertently re-enrolled in the sexual politics of high school.

JULIA

One morning, in the hours just before she woke, Julia found the film about the roast-basting husband playing in her dreams. It must have been set a few years before the one about the downy-scalped infant, because once the roast was basted and safely in the oven, the husband took off his apron and took her to bed. He was handsome, this husband, but just slightly lopsidedly so. He had the pectoral muscles of a rock-climber and light brown hair that jutted out in small, endearing tufts. As the credits were rolling, Julia woke up, convinced that she had just had an orgasm in her sleep, and reached over to take the vitamin tablets laid out on the table beside her bed.

Being good at delaying gratification, Julia always took the largest capsule first, followed by the two smaller, easier-to-swallow ones. On this day, the largest capsule caught just a little more painfully than usual at the back of her throat, but it was not until she looked over and saw her usual trio of vitamin tablets still resting by the base of her beside lamp that she realised that what she had swallowed was not a vitamin tablet, but the red heart-shaped rock.

Because of her belief that there was nothing to be gained from panic or haste, Julia did not act immediately. She decided that unless something symptomatic happened in the meantime, she would not go to see her GP before the following morning. Twenty-four hours seemed to her a nice sensible stretch of time. By then, the crisis may simply have, well, passed.

But when Julia visited her GP the following morning, the matronly Indian doctor was cross with her.

'You should have come in straightaway,' she scolded with a pointed finger.

'I didn't think it could be too serious. It went down easily enough.'

'The oesophagus is insensible after a certain point,' the GP said, and Julia felt that this was a criticism being levelled at her in her entirety and not only her swallowing apparatus.

Julia was sent for an X-ray, which revealed the rock to be settled on the floor of her stomach. The next day she presented herself at the hospital where she was shown an endoscope loaded up with fibre-optic cabling and a small claw of the hopeful type you might see in an arcade game.

‘I’m sorry,’ the doctor told her, after the procedure. ‘It’s passed on from your stomach. We’ll have to go at it from the other direction.’

After two days of emptying her body of solid matter and taking her nourishment from transparent things like consommé and jelly, Julia presented herself at the hospital again. She waited, a sheet over her undressed lower half, for another doctor and another probe.

‘I’m sorry,’ the doctor told her when she woke from a light anaesthetic with a slightly stretched-feeling sphincter. ‘Too high for us, I’m afraid.’

‘Oh for God’s sake. What now?’

The doctor squiggled a mouth, a stomach and a bowel onto his drug company desk pad.

‘Your little friend is most likely at the ileocaecal junction,’ he said, making emphatic circles with his ballpoint. ‘The obvious risk is that it will block movement through your bowel altogether. But the other risk is that it will push through and do some damage to the tissue on the way. You could even end up with a bowel perforation and, trust me, you don’t want to go there. You’ve heard the term peritonitis? Rather common on death certificates early last century.’

Perforation. Julia thought of the dotted line above a payment slip: tear here.

‘I’m in court tomorrow,’ she said, aware of both her petulant tone and its misplacement. ‘It’s not a case I can pass over.’

‘Well, we can’t take the risk of waiting until Monday, so I’d be pushing to get you to the surgeon by Friday at the latest. That’s the fourteenth.’

Thought Julia: Well, Happy Valentine’s Day to me.

CHRISTINE

Christine’s predecessor had liked the fact that it was called a theatre. It hadn’t mattered to him that the curtains were green instead of black. He’d had a handful of nurses to serve as both audience and supporting cast and he’d played it like a comedy, turning up the symphonies on Classic FM and conducting the orchestras with

mischievous inflections of his bootbrush-bristle eyebrows. Christine preferred to concentrate in silence and she knew that the nurses found her conscientiously dull by comparison.

In theatre this particular Friday, the scout to the scrubbed nurse was Sister Luke Boyles. Christine was physically aware of his proximity as she stood at the operating table making her opening incision.

‘This is the one with the rock?’ he asked.

No one can say she doesn’t swallow, she thought. And then she flushed: Oh God, I belong on the Benny Hill Show.

She hooked out a segment of ropey bowel and felt along it for the obstruction. Then she made a small slice down the length of tubular tissue and squeezed a small hard lump out into her hand. Fingering away a light coating of greeny-yellow bile, she found a little heart lying blood red in her palm. She fancied that she saw it pulse.

‘Got ’im,’ said Luke. ‘Good darts, doctor.’

Christine looked up and tried to identify his expression judging by the rectangle of face between his mop hat and surgical mask. It was impossible to be certain, but she had a strong feeling that there was a wolfish grin going on behind the pleated gauze. She flushed again, hotter and brighter this time, as he closed one eye in a slow, deliberate wink.

For just a heartbeat, she considered flicking the stone to him across the torso of her anaethetised patient, and watching him catch it in a swift, latex grip. ‘Happy Valentine’s Day,’ she would say flippantly. Ironically. Just a bit of medical humour. The intent of which could be easily denied.

Then she remembered the image of an old man’s unwelcome fingers on a young woman’s firm-fleshed tush. And thought of Snow White in her prison cell, who would remember only with her own searching fingers the pleasures of her seven young playmates. She gestured briskly to Luke to pass her the specimen jar that sat, its yellow lid already removed, on the instrument table. And very deliberately, she did not meet his eye as the rock hit the bottom of it with a small, disappointed tink.