I

Kate, says Faye, ‘is a mezzosoprano. For which I am grateful, actually.’

There is opera playing, and it seems to Tamsin ‘ to occupy Faye’s apartment as if it were part of the décor, the rich voice echoing the timber of the furniture, rippling over near-white carpet as soft as the fleece of a newborn lamb.

‘I suspect sopranos are flightier, altogether more given to tantrums and putting on airs and graces. I don’t see how it can possibly be good for your equilibrium, spending all that time in the upper registers. Also, sopranos are invariably blonde.’

Tamsin smiles. It is the morning of her first day and already she thinks that she will like Faye. She does not,however, think that she will like Kate. Tamsin suspects her to be the sort of daughter who will leave it until the very end. Then she will jet in, all European couture and big sunglasses, just in time to perform a day or two of lower-register histrionics and take the starring role at the funeral. Most likely, she will be the type to treat her mother’s nurses like so many hired hands, dispatching them to the kitchen for more tea, or to the bathroom for more tissues. Kate, Tamsin can already tell, will be the sort of woman to make her feel, keenly, the girlishness of her plain brown ponytail.

It hardly matters, since it is more or less everywhere now, where it began. But when Tamsin undresses Faye for her sponge bath, the origin is clear. Beneath the bodice of her nightgown Faye’s chest, without its breasts, is as profoundly nude as an unfeathered baby bird. Tamsin sponges over the buckled scarring, gently, apologising to the skin for the indignities it has already suffered.

‘They were rather nice, you know. I didn’t know that, of course, when I had them,’ Faye says as Tamsin buttons up the front of a clean gown. ‘Still, at least I passed on their likeness to Kate.’

Tamsin draws up a vial of morphia and stretches out the bone and fine hide of Faye’s arm. A brisk slap to the arm’s crook and the needle slips unnoticed into the still-stinging skin.

‘That barely hurt at all,’ Faye says and Tamsin cannot prevent the corners of her mouth from turning up, just a little.

‘There is a bit of an art to it,’ she admits.

In the afternoon Faye sleeps, opera turned down low. Her bed is in the front room now, along with all of her paintings. The rest of the apartment has a ransacked look, picture hooks hanging bare on cream walls marked by faint rectangles of absence. Cluttered together on two large windowless walls, the paintings make a jigsaw puzzle gallery, just inches between their frames. When Tamsin looks closely, she finds that she knows them already. Almost. She knows their shapes and colours, but not their precise configurations. She looks until she understands that they are painters’ other works; the equivalent, perhaps, of photographs taken a few moments before or after the perfect shot. Tamsin stands for a long time before a melon-breasted, tangle-limbed nude who reclines by a window filled with the ultramarine of Sydney Harbour, and decides that Faye has taste, as well as money.

She thinks that she will like this job. As always, she doesn’t know how long it will last, but it is better paid than most. If she is disciplined about setting some of her wages aside, perhaps it will not be so much of a struggle next time to make it through the weeks or months before someone else begins in earnest to die, and can afford the luxury of doing it in their own home. She had tried not to look pleasantly surprised when Faye’s nephew, who had interviewed her for the job, named his price. Impressed by her references, he had brought her into this room to meet Faye, and she remembers now how all the while that they talked his eyes caressed the walls.

At the end of the day Tamsin leaves Faye in the care of the night nurse and rides home on her bike. There is a quicker way but Tamsin does not take it. Even here, out on the far edge of the arcing route she follows, she can feel the pull of the place she is avoiding. It has become a gaping hole in the outskirts of her city, a swirling plughole of orange bricks, which threatens to suck in first the neighbouring buildings, then the architecture of the surrounding blocks, then the suburbs in concentric rings until the spiralling devastation reaches out as far as the small weatherboard house where Tamsin lives, not happily anymore, with Michael.

II

‘Kate,’ says Faye, ‘has true auburn hair. The sort of hair I would rather have liked for myself, I confess.’

Tamsin can imagine this true auburn hair — long, loosely curling, sweeping back from Kate’s dramatic face. She pictures Kate with the square, capacious jaw of a diva and a chin perpetually upthrust. In her publicity photos she would wear deep green velvet, a portrait neckline gesturing down to the healthy flesh of her breasts.

‘She was a wonderful Cenerentola, when she was younger. She does Rosina well, too,

but it’s Orfeo that she’s known for.’

‘Orfeo?’

‘As in Orpheus. Pants role. The soprano plays Euridice.’

‘Tragic ending, I assume.’

‘Actually Gluck has Amor, the god of love, take pity on Orfeo and bring Euridice back to life in the final act.’

‘That was generous of him.’

‘I suspect he felt it was only fair to finish with a big chorus and some swooning,’ she says. And then she giggles. ‘I must bear that in mind myself.’

Faye’s giggle is one of the things Tamsin likes most about her. It is a delighted, girlish giggle, and far from being at odds with her old woman’s face, it gives purpose to every crease. When Faye giggles, Tamsin does too. She has never known anyone to approach death so cheerfully, as if it were just a thing she had never got around to doing before.

By the end of her first week with Faye, Tamsin is riding home by a still-longer route, widening her circle of avoidance. It leads her through a suburb she has never before had reason to visit, down a short street with cafés and shops full of inessential and expensive things. Women whom she suspects are doctors’ wives return to glossy cars with armloads of flowers.

She stands by the window of a small boutique, guilty and furtive. She looks in and sees, browsing through racks of tiny clothes, women whose peculiarly shaped bodies show that they have nothing to hide. Tamsin thinks of the babies inside them, plump as broad beans, securely attached to their vines. If these women looked at her, Tamsin wonders, would they know? Could they tell? Is there a mark? Does it show? She waits until the shop is empty of customers before she enters. She buys a hat, in the very smallest size. It is white. She does not know enough to choose something pink or blue.

Wits about her, Tamsin rides through fumy, traffic-thick streets. She thinks of her house, which will already be occupied by Michael; his university books open on the kitchen table, his cooking in the pot. She takes a detour and cycles twice around a lake whose still surface reflects the darkening sky.

III

‘Kate,’ says Faye, ‘married well. She took my advice on that matter. I told her to look not for an adversary, but for a rock.’

Tamsin supposes that when Kate does appear, it will be with this husband-of-Gibraltar in obedient tow. She makes a mental note to check whether or not his jumper is the same colour as his wife's ensemble of suitcases.

'And I told her that it would be best if he were tone deaf, too. That way he could only ever admire her, and never be tempted to criticise.'

Tamsin doesn't know whether Faye's advice to her daughter on the subject of husbands was the result of Faye having herself married an adversary or a rock, someone who was tone deaf or someone who had a tendency to criticise. She would like to know, but it is not her way to ask questions of her patients. In part this is because she is a nurse whose task it is to bring ease, not to prod at what might turn out to be invisible bruises. But it is also because she finds it less interesting to engage in the anxious, hasty excavation of inquiry than to wait and see which fragments of a life — here at life's end — are the ones her patients consider important enough to share.

At the end of her first month, Tamsin knows only that Faye's husband was a surgeon. Called Keith. She does not yet know how long ago, or from what, he died. But she does think it makes sense that Faye was a doctor's wife. She has the well-preserved look of a woman with the twin luxuries of money and time. Tamsin has leafed through the petite and pristine outfits hanging in Faye's wardrobe, and slipped her hand up inside a sheath of drycleaner's plastic to touch the as-new red velvet of a hooded opera cape. She has seen, nesting in the compartments of a complex timber grid beneath the hanging clothes, a large (but not obscenely large) number of shoes. Their soles are only lightly scratched, and the silks, satins, leathers and suedes of their uppers are creased only as much as would indicate careful wear. The same might be said of Faye's complexion.

Tamsin is chastened by Faye's personal habits. It is rare for her to drink anything other than water with a squeeze of lemon juice. She eats delicately, too: small plates of fig and passionfruit drizzled with just a little honey and plain yoghurt, undressed salads of rocket, pecan and pear. She tells Tamsin that she never cooks; she only buys fresh food that will look pleasing on a plate. This is what she tells Tamsin, and then she reminds herself, with a giggle, that she must consign this sentence to the past tense.

Each night Tamsin sleeps next to Michael in a bed beneath which is a suitcase. Because Michael has no curiosity, Tamsin has no need to lock it, even though it now contains things that she does not want him to see. On nights when he studies late at the library, she unpacks its contents onto the bed. She lays out the small white singlets, the small white hats, mittens and socks. And then she puts them away again.

Most nights Michael gets into bed beside her and kisses her, with intent. And she kisses him back, without. And he takes up his book from the bedside table without asking why, or why not. She wishes that he would ask, because she has the answer ready. It is right there, just behind her bottom teeth, where she could oh-so-easily flick it up and onto her tongue. It's tainted, she would say, if only he would ask. Tarnished. She would give him words to conjure the metallic sheen of her spilled blood under bright lights.

IV

'Where is Kate?'

As time passes, this is the question Tamsin begins to carry with her up and down the aisles of supermarkets, stir into her pasta sauce, and squeeze onto her toothbrush late at night. It is the question that flares on the day that Faye's femur crumbles like plaster of Paris beneath the weight of her pelvis, the very last day of her life that she is able to stand on her feet. It steadily burns as weeks pass and Tamsin measures Faye's decline against the black-lined fractions of the syringes she draws up and plunges into needle-bruised skin. It will not be long now. And the telephone does not ring.

'You don't have any photos on display,' Tamsin observes one day.

'I like my pictures to be made of paint.'

'You must at least have some pictures of Kate.'

'I brought her into the world. Her face is the one I am least in danger of forgetting.'

It is one of the worst things for Tamsin: that the face she never saw is unrecoverable. Resentment snakes through her, a drug in her veins. It is general, indiscriminate. Kate may have been the only one ever to have curled up inside Faye's body, but she, Tamsin, will be the one to share the final intimacies of her life. She will give the needles that dull the pain, place the pillows that cushion the hollows of her body, wipe the shit from her shrivelled arse. She will be the true daughter at the end.

V

'Where is Kate?' is the question Tamsin wants to ask Faye. She asks Michael instead, and his answers turn into a game.

'Perhaps she's a suburban drunk with nine grotty kids and she smokes fag butts from ashtrays at shopping centres.'

'Perhaps she's taken a vow of silence in a Mongolian yurt.'

‘Perhaps she lives in a trailer park in Texas with a Mormon polygamist and his six other wives.’

‘Perhaps she’s not Kate anymore, but Kevin.’

A Word from Rosie Little on:

Nominative Determinism

We’ve all heard jokes like the one about the Greek skydiver, Con Descending, but the creepy regularity with which people’s names match their vocations or characteristics is no laughing matter to me. I am certain that the entire responsibility for my failure to grow beyond five feet can be sheeted home to my unfortunate family name. Just how its six letters have managed to entirely counter the effects of fresh genes injected into the Little family pool over successive generations I don’t know, but I do know that the quip ‘Little by name, little by nature’ wore out its welcome with me well before I attained the long-coveted height at which I could graduate from the booster seat in the back of my mother’s car.

The naming game began with Adam, apparently, who got to decide how to refer to all the bits and pieces God left lying around for him in the garden. Later on, explorers seemed to get quite a kick out of naming things too. But these days, unless you’re a botanist and can find a particularly obscure orchid, or you’re an astronomer with a telescope powerful enough to track down a new star, the only things you’re likely to get to name are your pets and your kids. So, if you feel the desire come upon you to fling names around like a seventeenth-century sea captain, you’ll need to have a particularly large family, or buy yourself a substantial aquarium and stock it with a great many fish.

What’s in a name? A Rosie by any other might smell as sweet, but would I have grown into precisely the same girl if my parents had called me Persephone? It’s such a gamble. Do you give your child a fanciful name in the hope that it will give them a head start in marking themselves out from the flock? Or do you take the opposite approach and give them a plain name, upon which they might write whichever personality they choose? I think I’d lean towards supplying a child with a distinctive brand, but I know that it can go horribly wrong. It certainly did for one babe whose birth notice I read recently. Perhaps her parents envisaged her growing up to unlock the complex ciphers of cyberspace, but I suspect it’s more likely that she’ll spend her life trying work out why on earth her parents called her ‘Decoda’.

But then, it doesn’t necessarily follow that a person with a good, sensible name will be a good, sensible person. Even if it is a no-nonsense, easy-to-spell, no tricks name like Kate.

Then one night he says, ‘Perhaps it’s not Kate that’s the dark horse. Perhaps it’s Faye. Maybe she murdered Kate and buried her beneath the hydrangeas.’

His stupidity wakes every sleeping thing inside of her and in an instant Tamsin can hear the thrumming and drumming of a thousand demons’ tiny veined wings in her chest. Within three moves the conversation is a fight and soon he is saying it again: ‘It wasn’t the right time, love. We talked about this. My degree. Financially, we —’

And she is getting shriller as she moves through her lines: ‘Financially we killed our child so we could afford a nice house for our child to live in. We killed our baby so one day we could send it to a private school, so it could wear nice clothes. How does any of this make sense to you?’

He doesn’t pull the punchline: ‘Tam, it was a decision we made together.’

And she hates him, hates him, for saying it. Most of all because it is true. She hates him all the way up the stairs to the bedroom, and for all of the time it takes to get out of her clothes and get into the shower. She wants to wash from her mind the orange-bricked building and its lay-back chair and its plughole swirling with her own red cells. Standing in the hot fall she feels an invisible cat kneading at her abdomen. Since the termination her periods have been clotty and painful. Now blood begins to fall from between her legs in heavy splotches. It is claret, then pink, as the diluting water swirls it towards the plughole.

After a while Michael opens the shower door, his look concerned, gentle. It makes her want to stretch her wet arms around him and pull him, clothes and all, into the shower with her. She wishes the droplets were her tears, and that he would stand in them until he was drenched. Then she sees him see the blood and she sees him think a thought he is too well-schooled to say out loud. But he doesn’t have to say it. The damage is done. In place of concern there is relief — twofold. His mouth tightens into a tiny patronising smile, and she wishes her hands were of the type that could flick out a set of long sharp claws with which to scratch his face. She slams the shower door, catching his fingers, and when she sees through the beaded glass how he clutches them in pain, she is glad.

VI

‘Where is Kate?’ Tamsin finally asks Faye, on a day when her bitterness is so strong that she cannot help but make everyone else taste it too.

She asks her question with a careful measure of spite, her eyes on the face of her fob watch and her fingertips pressed firmly into the old woman’s wrist. She expects to feel the pulse leap in concert with her own. But it does not.

‘She’s in the liquor cabinet.’

Tamsin flushes, hot with guilt. She has been cruel. And not only that, she has been cruel to an old woman whose mind — her sharp and beautiful mind — is following her body into decay. Tamsin has nursed more than one person through and beyond this point, but she had not thought that it would happen to Faye.

‘In the liquor cabinet? I see.’

‘That mollifying tone does not become you, you know.’

Tamsin looks away from the watch face, losing count, to find Faye’s eyes as clear as ever.

‘And that crazy old biddy one doesn’t do much for you. You frightened me.’

‘The anger goes, darling. I can promise you that much. It is the most volatile part, and it soon burns itself off.’

Tamsin flinches as if slapped. She had not known it could be seen from the outside.

‘And then,’ says Faye, ‘there is only the sadness.’

VII

‘Kate,’ says Faye, ‘really is in the liquor cabinet, you know.’

And on this day, which feels like one of the very last they will spend together, Tamsin is almost ready to believe her.

‘You can take her out if you want to. I haven’t taken her out for years.’

‘So you have got a photo of her?’

‘Go on. At the back.’

‘Why wouldn’t you show me before?’

‘Behind the port.’

The ownership of a liquor cabinet is, to Tamsin — whose meagre supply of cheap booze sits in the corner of her kitchen cupboard — an index of elegance. A woman who owns a liquor cabinet is surely one who can coil her hair into a chignon and tong out

lemon wedges with a demeanour as cool as the ice in her silver bucket. Tamsin imagines a young Faye, shaped like a Vogue paper pattern sketch, handing out drinks at a party.

The cabinet's rosewood doors open in her hands like those of an expensive car, smooth and substantial. Inside is the cut crystal of several decanters fitted with orbed stoppers. There is ruby port, sapphire gin, and something poisonously emerald. Tamsin removes the stopper and puts her nose to the neck.

'Crème de menthe? Yuck. Honestly Faye. And here I was thinking you had perfect taste.'

'At the back, at the back.'

And at the back, behind the port, Tamsin sees Kate.

Kate is small. Much smaller than Tamsin would have expected. Hers is a thick glass jar with the word Fowlers pressed into the metal of its lid. Inside she floats, her delicate infant skin faintly rippled by the liquid preservative. Away from her belly twists a length of purplish flex, an umbilical cord to nowhere.

'Oh, Faye.'

'Born too early, you see. Much too early. There was nothing that could be done.'

Tamsin touches a fingertip to the glass, as if she might trace the sculpted curves of the baby's tiny lips, or the sparse pale hairs of her eyebrows.

'I'd wanted her so much, I couldn't bear to leave the hospital without her. Keith arranged it for me, knew who to speak to. When I brought her home, I didn't know where to put her. The liquor cabinet seemed somehow …ironic. When happiness is no longer possible, you see, one might as well try to keep oneself amused.'

Tamsin is gentle, but when she lifts the jar she cannot prevent the foetus from bobbing stiffly in her formalin bath, knees and elbows fending glass.

'Let me see her.'

Tamsin cradles Kate in her arms for a moment before handing her to her mother, propped on the pillows of her bed. Faye takes her tenderly and when her tears fall, they touch glass, dissolving into its thickness.

VIII

‘Kate,’ Tamsin thinks.

It is the first thing she thinks on the day she arrives to find the apartment’s front door, its windows and the rear of an ambulance left gapingly, indecently, open. It could almost be Faye’s frail corpse so carelessly exposed. Tamsin ditches her bike on the street and rushes, wanting desperately to draw a nightgown down over the whole, horrible scene.

The night nurse is on the patio, smoking and looking out over the river, her long ribbed cardigan tightly twisted around her torso. Faye’s nephew is there too, but he cannot settle to sitting or standing or leaning. His movements crisscross the near-white carpet but avoid the men in blue coveralls who have clipboards and kind faces. They have already moved Faye out of her own bed and onto the hard and narrow mattress of the ambulance trolley.

Tamsin touches the now slightly yellowed skin of her face, smoothes the soft lilac of her hair. The nephew watches as if Tamsin were television.

‘She liked you.’

‘I liked her.’

‘Thank you. For making her comfortable.’

Tamsin lifts Faye’s bird-bone hand and touches the back of it to her cheek. She lays it down again and nods to the ambulance officer who clicks off the brakes and begins to wheel the trolley towards the door.

‘She wanted you to have something,’ the nephew tells Tamsin. ‘She said you could choose.’

Tamsin wonders if he knows how obviously his eyes flicker to the smallest of the paintings, the ones he is not sure she knows are the most valuable of all. So easily could she claim one, just a small one, and all in the guise of being too modest to pick a larger canvas.

‘Anything. She did say anything.’

Tamsin sees how he must fight himself to say this, and by what a narrow margin his better self wins.

‘Could I have one of the decanters, from the liquor cabinet?’

‘A decanter? Good God, you can have the lot.’

IX

‘Kate,’ Tamsin answers the woman making expert tucks in tissue paper on the counter.

‘Short for Katherine?’

‘No. Just Kate.’

‘How lovely to hear a nice plain name. Almost unusual nowadays, isn’t it? And how old?”

‘Twelve …yes, twelve months.’

‘Oh you do have to think, don’t you? Goes so quickly. Before you know it, they’re asking for the car keys.’

Twelve months. Can it really have been so long? Tamsin has not the usual milestones — sitting, crawling, standing, walking — to help her keep track.

‘Twelve months,’ the woman says, clucking her tongue. ‘Oh, they’re gorgeous at that age, aren’t they? Well, I’m sure your little Kate will look adorable in these.’

They are shoes, this time, of the softest pink leather. Tamsin checks her watch. Now that Michael is working again, there is no need to rush. There is plenty of time yet, before he gets home, to add to her accumulation of secrets in the suitcase beneath the bed. In the street she sits at an outdoor café table and watches the movements of doctors’ wives and flowers and glossy cars. Into the boutique from which she has just come, go women with loose shirts over growing bellies. But Tamsin does not envy them. Not anymore.