

Always the Sun

Neil Cross

Chapter 1

Sam steered the dirty-white hire van to the nearside kerb and killed the engine.

It was the last week of June, two days before Jamie's thirteenth birthday. For a while, they sat motionless and silent, listening to the slow tick of the engine. Then they exchanged a guarded, excited glance and raced each other to get out first.

The driver's door was dented and obstinate; Sam forced it with his shoulder, but he was too late. Jamie was already waiting on the kerb. Sam ambled over to join him. He laid a hand on Jamie's shoulder and together they looked at their new house.

The house stared back at them, blank and imperturbable. Scudding summer clouds were reflected in its windows, and a mismatched father and son. Sam was sunburnt and brawny. A messy head of corn-blond hair. Broad face on beefy shoulders. Pale-blue eyes and a knobby cudgel of a nose, broken long before and never properly re-set. Jamie was skinny and feline, the subtle echo of his mother. Skin like amber. Long, unkempt chestnut hair that hung over his collar and obscured his eyes. Both wore blue jeans faded to white, washed-out T-shirts and scuffed Adidas.

The house on Balaarat Street was a detached, double-fronted Victorian building that presided in tired majesty over the corner of Magpie and Cobden Avenues. Sam had known it since he was a boy. Through the street-wandering years of childhood and early adolescence, he must have passed its chipped green gate and inviolable hedges many hundreds of times. He'd never caught sight of whoever lived there. Although it had not developed the unhappy reputation of most long-empty houses, and despite the lack of broken and boarded windows, he'd always assumed it to be uninhabited.

It was Jamie who'd chosen to live here. They'd come house-hunting three months before. Sam remembered a cold, squally April day. The estate agent's confected enthusiasm was depleted by the morning's visits to several other properties, each of them found in some way wanting. With a disconsolate air, he parked his Golf GTI on Balaarat Street.

In the back of the car, Jamie looked up at the house.

Using his copy of the *Sun* for an umbrella, the estate agent hurried to the front door. Huddled into their jackets, Sam and Jamie followed.

Junk mail was piled behind the front door. The hallway was bare and uncarpeted and their footfalls and voices echoed pleasingly. The sitting room was high-ceilinged and cavernous. The kitchen was shadowy, with translucent blinds hung, rotting, at the windows. The appliances were antiquated, in chocolate browns and mustard yellows, furry with grease and dust, broken at the hinges.

Jamie used the heel of his hand to wipe a porthole in the wet kitchen window, through which he briefly inspected the garden. Then he turned and stamped upstairs.

Sam waited in the kitchen with the estate agent, who placed his rain-dappled newspaper face-down on the grimy work-surface to read the sports pages. Sam listened to the empty-house sounds of doors opening and slamming shut. He waited a few minutes before following Jamie upstairs. The floors were bare, laid here and there with brittle old newspapers. Spent bulbs, burnt nicotine yellow, hung from frayed cords.

He found Jamie in the master bedroom. He was standing at the bay window, looking down on the quiet street below. Sam crossed his arms and leant against the cold, glossy wall, the colour of custard.

He said, 'Shall we check out the garden?'

'Seen it.'

Sam laid a hand on his shoulder.

'Come on, sunshine. Have a proper look.'

They turned and clumped heavily down the naked stairs, along the hallway and through to the kitchen, where the estate agent was by now making a call from a mobile phone so tiny that Sam wondered briefly if he was speaking to his empty palm, like a street-corner nutcase. By training, Sam was a psychiatric nurse. Sometimes he saw the symptoms of disorder wherever he looked.

The garden was broad and high-walled; a tangled, rain-sodden, knee-deep wilderness. At the far end stood a collapsed shed. In one corner leant an ancient, perilous-looking apple tree, its root-base embedded deep in ancient mulch.

'What do you think?' said Sam.

Jamie stooped and picked up a small nugget of damp, brittle masonry that lay on the weedy patio. He inspected it, crumbled it between his thumb and forefinger, then skipped it across the wild lawn like a pebble on a reedy pond.

He shrugged his shoulders.

'Dunno. It's *big*.'

'Which means?'

'It's all right.'

'Good all right? Or bad all right?'

'Depends.'

'On what?'

He wiped his fingers on his jeans.

'Do you like it?'

Sam crossed his beefy arms and nodded his head twice.

'Yeah,' he said. 'It's good.'

'Am I allowed to choose my room?'

'I don't see why not.'

'What if I want the big one?'

Sam scratched the back of his neck.

'If that's the room you want.'

'And you're going to get it done up? Decorated and that?'

'Of course.'

'Decorated how?'

'I don't know. Decorated. You know - done up. We'll get someone in.'

'Can I do my room how I want to?'

'Well, that depends on how you want to do it.'

'Could I have PS2?'

'What, generally - or for the room?'

'Both.'

'We can talk about that.'

Jamie chewed at his downy upper lip and crossed his arms, upon which there seemed to hang no muscle. He brushed the hair from his eyes and scrutinized the garden. There was a rash of small pimples across his forehead. He scuffed his Adidas across the damp surface of the loam where it met the weather-damaged patio.

'All right then. If I can have the big room.'

In that moment Sam missed his wife more acutely than he would have believed possible. It felt like homesickness. He disguised it by pinching at the knotty bridge of his nose and resting his palm on the crown of his son's head. He closed his eyes and tried to remember her scent, the warm softness of her belly, the musky incense of her throat and underarms.

Sometimes he was able to forget what she had become. Instead he recalled the woman who married him, the woman inside whom his son had budded, a secret efflorescence, a polyp unfolding from nothing, reaching for the sun.

Their London flat had already found a buyer, a property developer who was happy to ignore its poor decorative order, paying cash at fifteen thousand pounds less than market value. Even that figure was a great deal more than Sam and Justine had paid for the property, sixteen years earlier, and Sam was able to return to his home town and buy a house outright, using the equity alone. He left Justine's life insurance payout untouched.

To go house-hunting, he and Jamie had driven from London in a hired car. They camped at Mel's for a week. Into the spare room, Mel had jammed an elderly, steel-sprung camp-bed and a tatty futon. Upon these Sam and Jamie had laid out their sleeping bags. It was a squeeze, but that only added to the sense of adventure. It was like camping, without the unhappy imperative of being outside.

Since he was a tiny child, Jamie had been scared of cows. In return, cows seemed abnormally attracted to him. They would cross any field to procure his company. They would slowly gather round, nuzzling at him as if he were an object of singular curiosity.

At Mel's, Jamie and Sam woke early. There followed extravagant arm-stretching, grunts of discomfort and smacking of sleep-gummy mouths. In T-shirt and boxer shorts, Sam plodded downstairs to make a cup of tea, which they drank in companionable, masculine silence. When the mugs were empty, Sam told Jamie to take a shower.

When Jamie emerged from the bathroom two minutes later, barely wet, Sam was waiting for him on the landing.

'Now try again,' he said.

Jamie rolled his eyes and turned back to the shower.

This time, he was gone so long that Sam began to worry. He stomped from the bedroom and pounded on the door, shouting that he needed to piss.

There was a pause: the rustle of a shower curtain being pulled back. Bare feet slapping on wet tiles. Clutching a towel to his waist, Jamie answered the door. His hair was in wet, shampooed spikes. There was no fat on him. His avian bones and musculature were tight-packed in olive skin. His taut, paler belly bulged slightly above the towel. Sam was overcome by tenderness. He wondered if Jamie had been using the sound of the shower to disguise his sobbing. Sam still did that, sometimes.

Jamie loped back to the still-running shower. Sam stood before the lavatory and forced out a meagre trickle. He glanced at Jamie from the corner of his eye. He was massaging his soapy hair. Foamy white rivulets ran between his scrawny shoulder-blades.

Sam went downstairs again, this time to make them breakfast.

By now, Mel was up. She had bed hair and was smoking a cigarette at the kitchen table. She wore a silky, ivory-white dressing-gown and oversized, fluffy bedroom slippers.

Sam rummaged in the kitchen cupboards. Eventually he found the frying pan. Its base was blackened and its handle, melted in places like volcanic glass, had come loose. He spent a few moments tightening the greasy screw with the round tip of a bread knife.

Mel yawned into the back of her hand. She was tall and slim and caustic and languid, with a Roman nose that, earlier in life, had caused her much misery. She drew on the cigarette in a manner that suggested another age and a different class.

'Do you know where you'll be looking?'

Sam went to the fridge. He inspected the sell-by date on a box of eggs.

'I only bought them Tuesday,' said Mel.

Sam put down the eggs and hunted round until he located a pint of milk and a humble chunk of butter bandaged in silvered, papery rags.

'Dunno really,' he said. 'The Merrydown Estate's still nice.'

'It's lovely round there,' said Mel. 'They've got a brand new whatsit. High Street. Nice shops.'

Merrydown was the name of the private estate that bordered the council estate where Mel lived. She'd moved in twenty years ago, shortly before she and Unka Frank were married. The house had been too big for her since he left.

'We'd be close to you,' said Sam.

Mel scratched at her bed hair and yawned like a lion. It was still early and she had never been good at mornings. All around, the house was the same mess it had been since the day she moved in, an excited eighteen year old.

'Will you send Jamie to Churchill? Or go private?'

Sam cracked four eggs into a plastic measuring jug. He added pepper, salt and a drop of milk and beat the mixture with a fork. His back to his sister, he shrugged.

He said: 'I don't see what's wrong with Churchill.'

'It's a bit rough.'

He turned to face her and laughed, a touch incredulous.

'We went there,' he said. 'We did all right.'

She sipped at her milky coffee.

'It's different now.'

'Mel,' said Sam. He laughed. He didn't want to be patronizing. 'Jamie and I are living in *Hackney*. Compared to that, Churchill Comprehensive will be like Disneyland.' He saw her expression and softened. 'Look,' he said, 'he's grown up in London. It's a rough place. This doesn't even feel like a city to him. He thinks it's the countryside.'

'And he's told you this, has he?'

He poured the beaten-egg mixture into the delicately sizzling frying pan.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Well, not in so many words.'

'In how many words, exactly?'

'I don't know. He thinks it'll be like a permanent holiday. And he's looking forward to having you near. He thinks it'll be like TV. Dropping in on his aunt on the way home from school. Do you want eggs?'

'Please.'

'How do you want them?'

She looked at him along her nose.

'Do them a bit firm. I hate it when you do eggs like snot.'

The toaster popped. He hurried to butter three rounds of toast before stirring at the bubbling eggs with a plastic spatula.

Jamie came downstairs, barefoot in clean orange T-shirt and dirty blue jeans. He smelt of shower gel. He'd combed his wet hair from his face. He kissed Mel on the cheek.

She said, 'Your dad's doing bogey eggs for breakfast.'

'Gross,' said Jamie. 'Can I have Crunchy Nut Cornflakes?'

'No,' said Sam. He tipped the frying pan in order that Mel and Jamie could see inside, and prodded the mixture with a fork.

'See?' he said. 'Nice and firm.'

'Is there any bacon?'

'Not that I'd actually eat.'

'God,' said Mel. 'Is that still *in* there?'

She went to the fridge and looked inside.

When breakfast was done, Sam left the washing-up soaking in hot water. He knew it would be there when they got back. He and Jamie met the estate agent at 9.30 a.m. They saw four houses in the Merrydown Estate before arriving at Balaarat Street.

Jamie had never had a garden, nor access to any park that Sam and Justine considered safe in the absence of direct adult supervision. Although he professed no interest in the wilderness at the back of Balaarat Street, at the rope-swing that hung from a high bough of the inclined apple tree, and although it was raining, Sam could see the light in his eyes - a late, welcome glimpse of his diminishing childhood.

Jamie buried his hands in the pockets of his Levi's and sauntered inside, just as the estate agent was slipping the tiny phone back in his trouser pocket.

In a few hours the deal was done. Later, Sam whistled over the washing-up.

It took nearly four months. There were contracts to be exchanged and renovations to be completed. Sam employed Mel to liaise with the contractors and to act as point of contact with the site manager. He knew well how fearsome she could be, and it was a successful stratagem: disregarding a few details, the work was completed only five weeks behind schedule.

But the wait was dead time, like waiting in a foreign airport for a delayed flight home.

They were ready to move long before there was anywhere to go. Months before, Sam began to pack their essential belongings into boxes and crates. Everything else he got rid of: clothes, video cassettes, broken and tarnished items of Justine's jewellery, odd earrings, half-empty perfume bottles that didn't smell of her any more; postcards, letters, her wedding dress and shoes.

His mother-in-law had started this process while Justine was still alive. Diane was ash-blond, clipped, efficient. She suggested they gather those clothes her daughter would euphemistically 'not be needing', and take them to a charity shop. Sam agreed. He insisted only that the charity shop should not be in Hackney. He didn't want to come across strangers dressed in his wife's clothes. He and Diane stuffed the clothing into garden sacks, which Sam loaded into the back of Diane's estate car. She drove the stuff home to Bath.

The same day, Sam packed their wedding and holiday photographs into a number of boxes and sealed them with tape. In blue marker pen, he wrote: *S&J wed, etc, B-bados 92, Turkey 89, Devon 90, mil. eve 00.*

He stared down at the boxes. Their marriage, codified.

The degenerative brain disorder that killed Justine was called 'fatal familial insomnia'. It was a vanishingly rare condition caused by the action of prions, the enigmatic rogue proteins that also caused scrapie in sheep and bovine spongiform encephalopathy in cattle. Justine withdrew from them bit by bit, minute by minute until, near the end, it was impossible not to wish what remained of her more speedily gone.

The first sign had been difficulty in sleeping. But Justine was an art teacher in the local College of Further Education, which was underfunded and understaffed. She was stressed. They didn't think much of it.

Within a few weeks, the ability to sleep - but not the longing for it - had deserted her. Her GP assured her that all chronic insomniacs slept far more than they imagined, and she prescribed pills. The pills didn't work. Later, different doctors ran tests. Working shifts in a controlled environment, they observed the passage of forty-eight entirely sleepless hours. By now, Justine was debilitated and bewildered. She so very badly wanted to sleep.

Before the condition was diagnosed, Justine's sanity left her. She was awake until being awake drove her insane.

Even when she became deranged, being awake gnawed at her bones, confining her eventually to a wheelchair. She could no longer distinguish between dream-states and waking reality. She passed randomly from one to the other. There came a time when she no longer knew her mother, her husband or her only son. During those final months she was shrunken and grotesque and sometimes violently maniacal, curled like a cricket and shrieking at chimeras and imaginary colours.

In the early days, Sam tried to take care of her. He took leave of absence to become her full-time nurse. Even when he unmistakably became unable to cope, he refused offers of Local Authority assistance. Instead, he relied on Diane. At first, she merely visited them often. But as the disease progressed, Diane moved in with them. She and Sam took it in turns to sleep. Diane slept on her own linen in the marital bed, while Sam was consigned to a sleeping bag on the floor of Jamie's room.

In the evenings, when their waking moments intersected, Sam and Diane prepared a meal and sat together, watching television while Justine gibbered and dribbled and shrieked in her wheelchair. Weekday mornings, they prepared Jamie for school and tried hard to pretend this was normal life. On Friday afternoons, Diane took sole responsibility for Justine. Sam spent those few hours in a curious blank. He sat in empty cinemas and watched films whose plot he was unable to follow.

Privately, each of them dreamt of an ultimate flicker of clarity. Justine would fall silent. An expression of saintly peace would settle her wracked features. She would whisper: *Sam, or Mum, or Jamie: I love you.*

But no such moment came, and the disease that devoured Justine eventually vanquished Sam and Diane too. One day, Jamie came home from school to find his mother gone. Diane and Sam had worked hard to prepare a speech for him. Sam would tell him that Mummy was in hospital, where properly trained nurses would look after her, keeping her safe and comfortable. And although she was very, very ill, she was still his mum and she loved him very much. He could visit her any time he wanted.

Jamie took one long, acute look at his exhausted, baggy-eyed father and grandmother. Then he dumped his schoolbag in the middle of the floor and went to make himself a crisp sandwich.

Diane stayed another week. She and Sam went through Justine's effects with an efficiency that resembled malice.

The evening that Diane returned to Bath, Jamie cooked the supper. He'd learnt in Food Science how to do lasagne. It took a long time and the result was nearly inedible, but Sam ate three portions, nevertheless, and a green-leaf salad whose dressing Jamie made himself, adding vinegar to olive oil and flourishing the bottle like a cocktail shaker.

Jamie never saw his mother again. Soon after entering the hospice, Justine contracted the viral pneumonia from which she did not recover.

Sam didn't have to break the news. On his way home from school, Jamie saw Diane's Volvo parked outside the flat and guessed. From politeness, he hugged Diane and assured her that yes, he would be a brave boy.

Jamie didn't go to the funeral. That was the worst argument he and Sam ever had, except only Sam was arguing. Jamie's detachment bordered on the autistic. He looked at his ranting, weeping father with gentle but utter lack of comprehension, as if Sam might be rehearsing a play in Latin. He sat there and absorbed without recoil everything Sam pitched at him, including threats of violence. When Sam's ire was exhausted, Jamie returned his attention to the GameBoy.

Sam recalled the infuriating, circular trilling of the game's melody. He thought the meaningless sound might drive him insane. Jamie's lack of response was dreamlike and claustrophobic.

Sam walked out of the flat, slamming the door behind him.

It was late winter, and he didn't stop to pick up his jacket. The air was cold and filthy, a particulate miasma. He wanted to punch someone, but the hordes of Hackney flowed by, without anyone meeting his eye. He went into a brightly-lit corner shop and bought a pack of Marlboro Lights. He bitterly enjoyed the absurdity that, after everything, it should take an argument with a child to drive him back to cigarettes.

Shivering in his shirtsleeves, he sat on a much-vandalized municipal park bench. He watched the traffic and the buses and the people. He chain-smoked half the pack of Marlboro, then walked home.

He found Jamie on the sofa, watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The GameBoy was discarded on the cushion alongside him. Neither he nor Sam mentioned the argument, and Jamie got his way: on the morning of the funeral, he was collected by Diane's neighbours, who'd driven all the way especially, and taken for a day out.

Sam barely knew the neighbours. They'd been guests at the wedding, and over the years they'd exchanged pleasantries at various Christmas parties and midsummer barbecues. But they'd known Justine since she was four years old and Sam was touched by the quiet modesty of their desire to help.

They had mapped a full day's itinerary. Jamie would not be allowed an instant in which to become bored or reflective. Sam watched from the window as they drove him away. He could see him, tiny and regally serene, perched on the back seat of the Astra estate.

Sam didn't know how to get through the day without him.

He barely remembered the funeral. At the wake, he was officiously anxious for everybody's comfort. For the first time since Jamie's christening, he hugged Diane. She hugged him back, and that was the moment when he thought he might break, crazing into pieces like a cheap vase. He allowed Justine's sister to sob on his shoulder. He said 'There, there.' He smiled tightly at her husband, whom he knew to have had a number of extra-marital affairs, and whom he very much disliked.

By the time Jamie came home, everybody had gone. Sam was alone among the paper plates and uneaten sausage rolls. He was lying on the sofa. The new shoes had worn his black socks translucent at the heel.

Jamie was wearing his Walkman. Sam could hear the rapid, tinny sibilance of sequenced hi-hats. Jamie stomped through to the kitchen and began opening and closing cupboards. He returned with a plate of chocolate HobNobs and a can of Dr Pepper.

He swept Sam's feet from the sofa and sat.

He looked at the TV.

He said, 'Are you watching this?'

Sam wiped his eyes.

'Not really.'

Jamie flicked over to Sky 1. They watched *The Simpsons*. Terrified and exhilarated, Homer sailed over Springfield canyon on Bart's skateboard. He almost made it to the other side. But he fell at the last, as Homer always did.

'Can I watch *Die Hard 2*?'

Sam sat up. Jamie was shaking his shoulder. He had fallen asleep. He wiped his lips. Ran a hand through his tangled hair.

'Of course you can. Go on.'

At the end, they both cheered.

A week after the funeral, Sam woke to find Jamie asleep on the floor at the foot of his bed.

He knew he should return him to his own room. Instead, he lifted Jamie and laid him in the bed, on Justine's side. The presence of his sleeping, delicate son filled him with a tenderness that blunted the jagged edge of his grief. Sometimes Jamie whimpered in his sleep and thrashed his limbs. Twice he wet the bed: Sam was woken by a warm jet of urine on his lower back and thighs. Jamie, still sleeping, turned his back and curled foetally at the cool, dry edge of the mattress. Sam chuckled, quietly and fondly, and never mentioned it.

The further Justine's death receded, the harder it grew to mention it. In those strange days, Sam and Jamie wandered like spectres within decreasing boundaries. London lost all meaning. The edges of their territory drew together like a drawstring purse, until it was defined by a few Hackney streets and convenience stores. The flat was no longer the place where they'd once been happy. It was simply a place where terrible things had happened, long ago and to other people. It had a dusty, museum feel. It became dirty as well as disordered. They stopped washing up. They ate off paper plates. The curtains were seldom opened. There were mice, and a urinous cockroach stink in the kitchen. At night, wrapped tight in a greying white duvet, Sam imagined the skittering of tiny claws. He dreamt of a tangled rat-king hidden among the decaying mementoes of their dear, dead days.

Early in March, Diane arrived to visit them. Pointedly, she opened all the windows, letting in the winter cold. Sam remembered that he'd not washed the sheets for many weeks, not even after Jamie had pissed on them. He supposed they smelt like a zoo, two helpless mooncalves locked away with the windows and curtains forever drawn on the world. Sometimes Sam forgot how old Jamie was. Sometimes he seemed as flawless and innocent as a toddler; at others, as clumsy, angular and raw-boned as an adolescent.

He told Diane that he'd resigned his job.

Her mouth pursed, lipstick-bled at the edges.

She said, 'It's too late to fall to pieces now, Sam. You got through the hard part. Now look at you. Has Jamie been going to school?'

'Of course.'

'Have you been doing the laundry?'

'Yes.'

'How often?'

'Diane, I don't know. But I've been doing it.'

She wrinkled her nose. Once, it might have been endearing, even sexy.

'Sam,' she said, 'I'm sorry to say it. But you smell, darling.'

Surreptitiously, he sniffed at his armpits. He smelt sour and yellow, vaguely feline. He ran his hands through his hair.

He said, 'Oh Christ, Diane. Please.'

'Don't *please* me,' she said. 'You're not a student. You have responsibilities to that child.'

'Di, he's fine.'

'Living in *this*?'

He looked around him.

'Who makes his breakfast?' she said.

'He's nearly a *teenager*, for Christ's sake. He needs some independence.'

'He's a child, and he needs supervision. Do you make his breakfast?'

'He made his own this morning.'

'What did he have?'

'I don't know. Cereal. Eggs or something.'

'And do you have fresh milk and eggs? A loaf of *bread*?'

He closed his eyes, massaged his forehead.

'Yeah,' he said vaguely. 'We went - I did the shopping. A few days ago.'

She crossed her arms.

'Gather your things.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Throw some clothes in a suitcase. And some of Jamie's. You're coming back to spend some time with me.'

'I can't. He's got *school*.'

'It's practically half-term. A few days off won't hurt him.' She looked eloquently around herself. 'Quite the contrary.'

By the time Jamie came home, his shirt untucked and one lace trailing, Diane had cleaned the kitchen and the bathroom and made inroads into the sitting room. According to her instruction, Sam had shifted as many of the boxes and crates as possible into Jamie's room.

'Hello, Grandma,' said Jamie.

'Hello, darling.' In rubber gloves and pinafore, she gave him a quick hug.

'All right, Dad?'

'All right, mate.'

Jamie dumped his weight on to the sofa and dug the GameBoy from his bag.

Sam looked at him. His blazer was too small. The shirt was yellowish, missing a couple of buttons. His trousers were nearly through at the knees and one of his trainers was split along the insole. His hair needed cutting.

Sam lit a cigarette.

'We're going to spend a few days at Grandma's,' he said.

Jamie looked up. 'Cool,' he said, without inflection, and returned to his game.

Diane's house, white and well-appointed, backed on to farmland.

Sam woke to the sound of sheep and cattle. He was in a clean room, in crisp bedding. It had been Justine's childhood bedroom, the room they stayed in when they came to visit. They'd had sex there, on the single bed, many times before Jamie was born. He endured a desolate erection at the memory.

It was a guest bedroom now. He lay for a while, enjoying the spring sunshine through the curtains. His skin was still faintly scented with last night's shower. Just inside the bedroom door was a plastic laundry basket, full of freshly washed and pressed clothing. Diane had probably been up since before dawn.

He pulled on a fragrant, white dressing-gown and padded downstairs. In the big, bright kitchen, Jamie sat in football shorts and T-shirt, reading the comic section of the previous week's *Sunday Times*. Diane was in the garden, hanging out more washing. Sam looked without embarrassment at his underwear swinging on the line.

He put the kettle on, made himself a cup of tea and Diane an instant coffee, the way she liked it: half-water, half-milk, cooked in the microwave.

She came in and wished him a brisk, busy good morning. The microwave pinged before he could answer; he took out the hot mug and handed it to her. She thanked him graciously and offered him a biscuit. He said no thank you.

'Diane,' he said, 'I've had an idea. Tell me what you think.'

She set the coffee down and crossed her arms.

'Go ahead.'

'I'm thinking of leaving London.'

He waited for a response.

'What do you think?' he said.

'I think it's an excellent idea. Where will you go?'

'Home.'

She knew he didn't mean Bath, and he was surprised to see that, on some level, this hurt her. She masked it well. She took a small, scalding sip from the coffee.

'It'll do you both the world of good,' she said.

After buying the house on Balaarat Street, Sam and Jamie returned to Hackney. Sam carried a single, borrowed suitcase full of clean clothing. Neither of them was pleased to be back in London. They found it difficult to believe they'd become accustomed to negotiating teetering piles of dusty boxes in the half-lit hallway. The disorganization in the living room had become intolerable, boxes piled on crates piled on more boxes. As the leaving day approached, there was no tug of nostalgia. Moving would be like leaving prison; like drawing a breath of clean, country air.

A few days before they left for their new house in a new town, Sam phoned out for Chinese food. They watched a video and ate Chicken Chow Mein. Shadowy henges of cardboard loomed behind them and in the edges of their vision; seemed to lean into their conversation.

Sam offered to throw Jamie a leaving party.

Jamie lowered his head and shovelled Chow Mein into his mouth.

'Nah,' he said.

'Why not? Don't you want to say goodbye to everyone?'

'Done it.'

'What? All of them?'

'Pretty much.'

'When?'

Another shrug. Another mouthful of Chow Mein.

'You know.'

'What? Even Danny?'

'Danny's in California. With his dad. Disneyworld or something.'

Jamie made a face.

'Oh,' said Sam. 'Right. What about that Nicola?'

There was a long silence.

'Don't be *stupid*,' said Jamie.

'Who's being stupid? I thought you were friends.'

'No way. I hate her.'

'You didn't used to hate her.'

'*Dad*. Grow up.'

Sam hid his smile with a forkful of Chow Mein.

They loaded the hire van on a scorched, suffocating London morning. Jamie insisted on shifting a number of boxes that were too heavy for him, accepting no offer of assistance. He tugged and levered them precariously downstairs, one corner at a time, bracing himself against the wall. He dragged them down the communal hallway.

By the time Sam nosed the van into the London traffic, Jamie's eyes were heavy and drooping. He was asleep when they reached the North Circular. At the lights, Sam fiddled with the radio, tuning from Radio 1 to Radio 4.

He'd never driven a high-sided van before. He wasn't comfortable taking it on the motorway, particularly since its bodywork bore the disheartening dents and scars of previous collisions. Instead, he took an indirect route of B-roads and dual carriageways, which extended their journey by a third. They arrived at the house on Balaarat Street late in the afternoon. By now, Jamie was awake and eating a bag of wine gums, three at a time. Sam parked carefully. He didn't want to prang any of his new neighbours' cars. He noticed that a yellow mini-skip was still standing on the corner with Magpie Avenue. He clicked his tongue against his palate, irritably.

After racing each other from the van, they saw that Mel was waiting for them. She sat on the concrete doorstep, smoking a cigarette and reading a *Daily Mirror*, three of whose corners she'd weighed down with a disposable lighter, a pack of Silk Cut and a small pebble. The fourth corner flapped occasionally, like a dying bird. Mel looked up, shielded her eyes with her hand. She smiled and waved.

Sam thought of a photograph, as if this moment were already a memory of lost times.

He rolled his head on tired shoulders, then he jingled the van keys in his palm and walked through the green gate. It was no longer rusty, but it still squeaked. He made a mental note to buy some WD40. The front lawn had yet to be laid; the turned black earth was laced with glistening slug-trails.

Mel stood to greet him. They hugged. Sensitive to the fact that Jamie might not wish to be embraced by his auntie in public, Mel batted the crown of his head twice with the rolled-up newspaper, then whacked him on the bony arse with it.

She linked an arm through Sam's. With the other, she reached out and pushed open the front door.

She said, 'Welcome home.'

The house smelt of sawdust and varnish: new smells. The floorboards had been stripped and sealed, the walls painted. The banister had been replaced and the stairs repaired. Mel walked to the kitchen: the same, echoing footfalls, full of potential: a space waiting to be filled. She put the kettle on to boil, brought along from her own kitchen that morning.

The kitchen was newly fitted pearwood and porcelain, brushed aluminium and slate. There was a breakfast bar, faced with four high stools. Looking at it, Sam was saddened to think of the remnants of their previous life, still packed in the van: their cheap, tarnished cutlery, the tea stains, the dried yolk set fast between misaligned tines.

'Well,' said Mel. 'What do you think?'

He was surprised to find that Mel's pride for a job well done touched him. He gave her another hug, longer this time. She smelt of grapefruit soap and hair conditioner and washing powder and cigarettes: unchanging and comforting.

She disengaged from the hug.

'Cheer up,' she said, and nodded stealthily in Jamie's direction.

Jamie was opening and closing empty cupboards. With the pointy tip of his tongue, he tasted the trace of sawdust that adhered to the whorl of fingerprint. He opened the fridge and looked inside. It was empty and spotless. He put his head in and said, 'Hello hello hello.'

Mel dropped tea bags into three mugs, topped them up with boiling water. Jamie joined them. He perched side-saddle on one of the bar-stools.

'What do you think?' said Sam.

'Cool. Can I see my room?'

'You can do what you like. It's your house.'

Jamie vaulted off the stool and thundered upstairs.

Mel scooped the tea bags from the mugs; squeezed them with her thumb, dropped them on the granite worktop. Broke the seal on a warm carton of milk.

'You don't think it's over the top?' said Sam.

She handed him the cup of tea.

'There's no sugar,' she said. 'What do you mean?'

'You know,' he said. 'Is it all too much, just for the two of us?'

'Don't be stupid. Anyway, it won't be just the two of you for ever.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'Right.'

Jamie came crashing down the stairs and back into the kitchen. Sam handed him a mug of tea. Jamie took it in two hands and went stomping in the direction of the living room. He paused in the doorway; noticed the door was missing a handle.

He said, 'Do we have to unpack today?'

'Afraid so.'

'But I'm knackered.'

'Me too, sunshine.'

'Is Frank going to help?'

'We'll see,' said Mel. 'He promised to try.'

Frank was Mel's ex-husband.

Sam reached into his trouser pocket. He fished out a crumpled ten-pound note and a number of pound coins, balled them and threw it to Jamie. 'Here,' he said. 'Run down the chippy. The one down the Merrydown shops.'

'That's miles.'

'It's five minutes. And it's nicer. I'll have cod and chips large if they've got it. Mel?'

'Jumbo sausage.'

'Get Mel a saveloy. And get whatever you want. Get a bottle of Coke too.'

'What about Frank?'

'Pasty and chips,' said Mel. 'I expect.'

'Can I keep the change?'

'If there is any.'

'Cheers, Dad.'

He ran off down the corridor.

Sam called after him, 'Do your laces up!'

But Jamie didn't hear. Or if he did, he ignored him.

'And watch the road!'

Jamie returned unlaced and undamaged. They ate their chips on the floor of the living room, watching motes of dust describe slow, incandescent spirals in shafts of late-afternoon sunlight. They waited for Unka Frank. But Unka Frank didn't show, and he didn't phone. So, as the sun grew low in the sky, Jamie, Mel and Sam unloaded the hire van. There wasn't much to unpack. Most of their bulkier furniture, including the beds, Sam had sold for a pittance to a 'house-clearance specialist' a cadaverous creature in whose company he would not have chosen to spend one second more than entirely necessary.

That night, they slept in sleeping bags on the smooth, wood-fragrant floors of their respective bedrooms. Sam was awakened by the early sun bursting through the curtainless window. Excited, he rose almost immediately. He crept through to Jamie's room. It was already a mess.

Sam stood behind a pile of boxes, looking at his sleeping son. In yesterday's T-shirt and pants, Jamie lay on his back. He was starfished across his sleeping bag, his bare heels touching the floor. He'd flung a thin forearm across his eyes, warding off the morning.