

Flying Crooked.

It was nothing really, just a cough: the kind which might lead a doctor to enquire *productive?* as though anticipating that, one day, the humble cough might surprise him and prove itself to serve some greater purpose.

‘You ought to get that checked,’ Gus had said. It was a Sunday, hot and dry, and the smell from the cauliflowers had the sulphurous taint of rot. ‘Bastard beasties.’ He rammed the digging-fork into the loam and dropped to his haunches, insinuating his fingers into the tightly clenched leaves, and opening them out to expose the vivid green onslaught of a caterpillar infestation. On inspection the cabbages were the same, their outer leaves brown and crimped as ancient elephant ears, the inner ones laced like snowflakes.

‘Not again,’ she said her tone mirroring his mood rather than any deep-seated disappointment of her own. ‘Do you remember last year’s broccoli?’

‘Remember?’ That meal will be forever seared into my brain. Those buggers must have been heat resistant.’ And, whilst at the time Bec had been equally disgusted when, last summer, three caterpillars had crawled determinedly from the steaming vegetables of their Sunday lunch, with hindsight she had come to regard the event as a kind of minor miracle - a resurrection of sorts, performed, right there, on the stage of their kitchen table - although Gus had continued to see it solely as an argument for the use of pesticides.

‘What type are they?’ she asked now, picking up a caterpillar between finger and thumb and examining its struggling body. Something about its wrinkled persistence and its bright translucency put her in mind of the time they had experimented with coloured condoms.

‘Cabbage whites,’ Gus growled. ‘Bloody pests.’

‘Will they be pretty when they emerge?’

‘Pretty?’ He stared at her bemused, ‘Bec, the crop’s ruined!’

The three she rescued she kept in an old plastic fish tank she’d found stored in the garage, which had once housed a hamster but had for the past year acted as mausoleum to the translucent remains of a house spider. She chose the smallest – ones which had recently hatched from the pimply rash of yellow eggs glued to the underside of the leaves - and added a chunk of foliage on

which they could feed. Each day saw progress. Their appetite was voracious and, as they moved across the leaves, scissoring the flesh with their mandibles, their bodies seemed to visibly swell. Occasionally, when she was emptying out the mass of gravelly waste that accumulated at the bottom of the tank, she came across their cast-off skins which, at night when she was lying next to Gus his muscles tight and hot from digging, she described as *mere shadows of their former selves*, in the dreamy, sing-song voice which she knew turned him on. She was undergoing tests. The GP - baffled by her cough's persistent nature, and, after a course of antibiotics failed to make an impact - had referred her to the hospital to be someone else's problem. The specialist had shown her a diagram of the chest - the lungs for all the world like a cleaved cabbage, the spine reminiscent of its toughened white stem - and pointed to where the tapering twigs of the bronchial tree terminated in a magnified cluster of nodules, *the Alveoli*, he'd said, *like bunches of grapes*. By contrast Bec's own lung was mildly disappointing, an early-stage cocoon with some woolly stuff inside, as though on her journey to the hospital she had inadvertently inhaled a cloud. This, the specialist said, was her problem.

That night she moved the caterpillars up into the bedroom, placing them on the bedside cabinet where moonlight lit the tank, highlighting the bristles which ran along their bodies. They had begun to act strangely, stretching themselves upwards as if in search of higher ground, waving like sea swept kelp. She worried that they might be unhappy, that the tank or the food she was providing was insufficient for their caterpillar needs. She wanted to ask Gus, who knew about such things, but he'd withdrawn into himself so that even when she pressed herself against him -for warmth, for comfort - he was cold and unresponsive. In the morning the caterpillars had changed, two had made their way up to the highest corners of the tank whilst one had fastened itself to the side. They no longer had legs or a head but had become almost dragonesque: plated and ridged, with two tiny black horns protruding mid body, presumably to deter predators. This, she assumed, was stage three, the stage she herself was at, a stage from which, according to the specialist, there could be no return.

For ten days nothing further happened and unlike the caterpillars, which had seemed bold and shameless shedding their skins like strip-joint hussies, the chrysalis was a secretive thing. Each morning, when she rose, Bec would look

for signs of change, holding the tank to the light to illuminate each pupa although unable to see inside. She was left to imagine what might be taking place, what new ingredients were being added to the soup and what changes a body was capable of inflicting upon itself. She saw little of Gus who spent his days at work, his evenings in the garden: the brassicas, he said, were beyond help but the carrots and peas still held the promise of a healthy crop. On the nights they made love it was at her instigation, cunning in her desire for him, relentless in her need for affirmation. Sometimes she woke breathless, a sense of having lifted from the bed, woozy and light-headed, something frail but urgent beating in her chest; on those nights she would cling to Gus not for comfort but for ballast.

The blood was a surprise, she hadn't expected blood, or at least the reddish coloured liquid – just a drop - which must have trickled from the case when the chrysalis split. What remained, still attached to the side, was a papery shell: a tiny Chinese lantern, delicate and pale. There were three empty cases but no butterflies. Bec opened the window and called for Gus to come, he was standing by the fence, looking out across the field to where it lifted to the embankment of the motorway; she watched as his shoulders rose and fell with the faint pulse of the distant traffic, noticing where the sun had licked his neck leaving its dark red kiss. When he came to the bedroom, she showed him the tank and the empty pupas. The tank was covered with a tightly fitting white lid, griddled with ventilation holes. carefully, Gus removed this and laid it upside down upon the bed. Clustered in the middle were three white butterflies, as pale and darkly flecked as honesty pods, trembling slightly. She moved, as if to touch them, but he caught her hand, 'Leave them, Bec,' he said. 'They've been through quite a change; you have to give them time to adapt. They won't be ready yet.' He picked up the lid and placed it gently on the sill beside the open window. 'Let's leave them for a while.' He took her hand and led her down the stairs.

They stood beside the bed of ruined cabbages overlooked by sunflowers and dazzled by the glare of late-crop rapeseed in the neighbouring field. Gus rested his chin upon Bec's head and slowly curled his arms around her body, tight as a cocoon. Calmed by his breathing, Bec kept her gaze on the bedroom window and waited.