

Monday

YES, SHE SAID, I can hear you. It started with a phone call – her mother, saying: He’s not come back – one knows – long. Her voice vanished and returned, the line bad.

Where are you? Stella asked, loudly. The reception dropped out, picked up again.

Five days ago now, her mother replied. Has he made contact with you?

Contact? What, like some kind of alien life form? Stella said.

I’ve notified the police, said her mother, told them where you’re staying.

I might not be here long, you know. Funds were running low, she’d have to find work soon or move on.

You need to talk to them. Please. They have his records. If you don’t . . . I’m just warning you, so that when you do talk, you don’t tell them.

What, don't tell them what?

She was standing beside a window of frosted glass. Through this everything was green and the green was moving: it was the trees in the garden and she could hear the wind. While she watched, the green pulsed towards her. It was bright, then dark, depending on the sun. Frances? she said to her mother. Frances? But the line broke up again, and she ended the call.

She had been travelling for a long time, and for one reason or another had ended up there, by a dank river in a flat country. She had moved about so much of late that there were times during the day when she was unsure of where she was, the narrow streets of one city too much like those of another.

Indoors, she felt similar disorientation: after the phone call she walked downstairs and lifted her arm to take a glass from the kitchen cupboard, only the cupboard was not there, where she expected it to be. Instead she turned on the tap, put her mouth to the stream of cold water. She tasted silt.

Just then there came a knock at the door. She twisted the tap off, wiped her cheek. The front tips of her hair were now wet and she tucked these behind her ears as she turned the key in the lock and let the door swing inwards.

One summer, a long time ago, her father said to her, You know that I will always be at the centre of everything you write. She laughed at him and dropped her cigarette on the ground, putting it out with the heel of her shoe. He was waiting, he

said, for her to write something about him. You know what, she told him, blowing smoke out over his head, I'll write about you when you're dead, and with that her father began to cry.

One summer afternoon, a long time ago, her father said to her, You know, don't you, that I am at the core of everything you will ever write. She was very young, and had not actually written anything other than juvenilia, some of which he'd read. But he knew her intentions and approved of them. It was a hot day, there'd been no rain, the garden was very dry. She stared at the browning grass. Why would you be? she said.

Because of all the pain I've caused, the terrible, terrible things I've done, he replied. She gave a small snort of laughter: And I should be eternally in your debt, she scoffed. You know what? You should write something yourself.

He took a drag on his cigarette, lifted his chin and blew the smoke out in one long, slow stream. She said she was thinking about starting work on a novel. He nodded in approval. Then he said, When will you write a book about me?

She replied without hesitating, When you are dead.

One summer, a summer that felt to have occurred a long time ago, although perhaps did not, her father sat crying while the sky clouded over and her gaze drifted across the street to where an upstairs window stood open. Rain started to fall and the white curtain at the open window puffed in and out. She

plaited and re-plaited her hair like she did when she was a nervous child, waiting for her father to cease weeping.

In the morning air she could smell the river. A police officer stood on the doorstep, holding out his badge. Miss Gilman? he asked.

Ms, she replied, her arm barring the entrance. Behind him she could see smoke from the allotments drifting through the trees.

If you don't mind, I have some questions for you, he said.