

APPENDIX

Experience

By Tessa Hadley

(1) When my marriage fell apart one summer, I had to get out of the little flat in Kentish Town, where I had been first happy and then sad. I arranged to live for a few months in another woman's house; she agreed to let me stay there rent-free, because she was going to America and wanted someone to keep an eye on things. I didn't know Hana very well; she was a friend of a friend. I found her intimidating—she was tall and big-boned and gushing, with a high forehead and a curvaceous strong jaw, a mass of chestnut-colored curls. But I liked the idea of having her three-story red brick London town house all to myself.

(9) She was generous when we met to sort out arrangements, telling me to make myself at home, entertain my friends, use her iMac and her Wi-Fi, help myself to anything I needed in the kitchen, and sleep in her bed. ("The bed's wonderfully comfortable," she said.) A woman would come in twice a week to clean, and I didn't have to pay for that, either. We sat at the counter in Hana's kitchen, drinking coffee and eating baklava from a cardboard box—left over from a dinner party the night before, along with the remains of a salad, wilting in its dressing, glasses with dregs of red wine by the sink, the taint of cigarette smoke. Hana had just showered, and her damp hair was twisted in a clip on top of her head; her heated skin gave off the strong smell of her perfume or her shower gel. A crumb of baklava stuck to her mouth. I guessed that she was in her early forties: the flesh was puffy under her eyes and at the corners of her lips; she might have had work done on her nose. I was twenty-eight, and she made me feel inexperienced, although I had been married for six years. She wore a bright-yellow kimono embroidered with a dragon, and a heavy ivory bangle on her wrist. "I know," she said guiltily, grimacing and twisting it on her arm when she thought I was staring at it. "I shouldn't wear it; it's a sin. But it's an antique. I tell myself that these elephants would be long dead anyway."

(28) There were no curtains on the windows of that house, not even in the bedrooms. At first, I found this unbearable. I undressed for bed in the bathroom; I got into bed in the dark. But after a while I began to get

used to it. This was how Hana lived her life—flamboyantly on display, careless of who might be watching. I didn't flatter myself that anyone was watching me. Or if they were watching, they thought I was something I was not, so it didn't matter. They thought I was the owner of that house, with its big, bare rooms and wood floors and rugs and few, distinctive items of furniture: a retro armchair in tubular steel and black leather, a long glass-topped dining table, two antique mirrors framed with gilded cupids bearing rose garlands. I've never had that kind of money, or anything like it. I think Hana made her money by dealing in art—there were paintings on all the walls—though some of the phone calls that came for her seemed to be related to the film business.

(41) I moved in with the few boxes of things I'd salvaged from my marriage. What I'd really wanted was to walk out of the flat with nothing, shedding it all behind me as cleanly as a skin. The little collection of totems that I took with me everywhere—pebbles from a certain beach, a few framed photographs, my dead mother's empty perfume bottle—looked like rubbish when I spread them out in Hana's bedroom, so I hid them away again. I told myself that this house was a good place for me, temporarily: this nowhere where I was nobody.

(48) When the woman came in to clean, I went out and walked around on Primrose Hill or went to a museum, if it was raining—it rained a lot that summer. My husband had given me some money in exchange for my share of the things we'd bought together (fridge, television, sofa, bed), and I was trying to make it last as long as possible. Hana had told me to help myself to what was in the freezer, so I ate through the odds and ends of food she had in there, including things I'd never tasted before—veal saltimbocca, shrimp in teriyaki sauce, and jerk chicken. When the money runs out, I thought, I'll start looking for work.

(57) On rainy days, I wandered from room to room in that big house, cocooned by the rushing, persistent sound of the rain sluicing across the slate roof, overflowing in the gutters and downpipes. At midday, the light outside was blue, and the panes in the tall windows seemed liquefied; I switched on all the lamps. I made myself coffee and carried it with me to the window, so that the steam from my mug misted the glass; the television flickered and capered, but I couldn't distract myself from the rain's urgency, as if it were something happening.

(65) I had thought that I would forget about Hana once she was out of the house, but, moving around inside the shapes of her life, I found myself more powerfully impressed by her than I had been when she was present. The wardrobes full of her clothes stood in for her: velvet trousers and brocade jackets, an evening dress of pleated chiffon with a sequined bodice everything padded and sculpted, each outfit a performance in itself.

(71) There were attic rooms at the top of the house and one of these was locked. Hana had emptied out drawers and cupboards to make space for me, so I guessed that she had tidied everything personal away into this room. I came across the key accidentally, in a kitchen drawer beside some tea towels. Those attic rooms had the original door fittings and this was a long iron key, like something in a novel or a pantomime. At the time, I hardly registered seeing it. Then it began to weigh on my mind, and one afternoon, when I had nothing better to do, I took it upstairs to try it in the lock. I feel ashamed of this now, needless to say. I think I felt that because I was nobody my slipping inside Hana's privacy wouldn't count as a real intrusion. And she'd left the key lying around, hadn't she? Anyway, I only meant to take a quick look.

(82) The room was heaped surprisingly high with stuff, as if she'd been using it for storage for a long time. There were the clothes and shoes and bags filled with accessories and old makeup that I'd expected. There were also paintings—speculations that hadn't paid off, perhaps?—propped, sometimes two or three deep, against the walls, their faces turned away as if in disgrace. Two new mattresses were still in their polythene. Art objects—ceramics and ethnic souvenirs and bits of sculpted wood—were muddled on the floor with a food processor and china dinner plates, a steam cleaner, and a broken chandelier with tangled crystals. Suitcases were piled on top of hi-fi speakers and an old computer; a black wetsuit was flung dramatically in a corner over surfboards and camping gear. There were boxes filled with DVDs and those big glossy books—biographies and cookbooks—that people give as presents and no one reads. I stepped inside the room. The air was thick with the heat that had collected under the roof and loud with the noise of the rain running down the far side of the sloping ceiling. It was like stepping into a cave. I felt as if I'd found my way into the inner workings of the house, or of Hana.

(98) Boxes and plastic bags were crammed with papers: letters and postcards and notebooks, photographs, nothing in any kind of order—yellowing letters stuffed in with recent bank statements. I just poked around at first; I wasn't really reading anything. There were a lot of business papers, anyway, which didn't mean much to me, though the sums of money were startling. Even without touching the DVDs I could see that they were porn and the kind of hard-core horror films I couldn't watch: she had left the art films and rom-coms downstairs for me. I picked up a heart-shaped box covered in padded red satin. Inside, nestled under a wad of black tissue, were scraps of scarlet lace underwear, furry handcuffs, fishnets, and a vibrator, as bald and blatant as a medical appliance: I put the lid back on hastily. But this stuff was ordinary, wasn't it? Everybody did it. What was the matter with me that I didn't take it for granted, that my heart beat sickly, as if the little sex kit had somehow made a fool of me? Kneeling on the bare boards, I started reading my way through the contents of a plastic bag.

(113) One of the expensive leather-bound notebooks was a kind of diary. It began and broke off abruptly, without dates. Hana had become involved with a man named Julian. She wrote about him in a big, looping hand that filled up two ruled lines at a time, dotting her "I"s with circles, using a lot of asterisks and private. Everything was "amazing" or "terrible." "I knew this was going to happen," she wrote, "from the first moment he walked into the party that night." Julian told her that he couldn't get enough of her, that he was desperate for her, that he wanted her all over again as soon as he'd had her. They were at some dinner where they had to pretend not to know each other, ended up having sex in the bathroom. A line of dots, and then more exclamation marks. "He hurts me and frightens me, but it's the best sex ever." Along with the sex, there was some lengthy analysis of Julian's personality. The two of them were very alike, Hana thought. They "both had this ambition burning them up" and "a lot of imagination"; also they "needed to be free." But a few pages on she was "starting to see through him"—how moody he was, how he always had to be the center of attention. "Of course it's terrible about the children," she wrote. They'd had a blissful weekend away together and swum naked in the sea, f***d in the shower. "Now he's gone back to S and I feel like shit." Hana made scenes, crawled to him on her knees, begged him to stay. "J came round at three in the morning

and I let him in, couldn't help myself. Then X and you know what. Crazy with love all over again. He makes me so happy." These were the last words in the notebook.

(135) I've never lived, I thought, as I knelt there, reading with my legs cramped underneath me, aware of the rain as if it were drumming on my skin. I've never lived: the words ran in my head. Life was garish and ruthless and exaggerated, and I'd never really had it—I was like one of those child brides in history whose marriage was annulled by the Pope because it wasn't consummated. Of course, mine had been consummated in the ordinary sense. But even when my husband told me that he wanted us to separate, even when he told me that he wasn't in love with me anymore, and that he'd better keep the flat because I wouldn't be able to afford the rent by myself, I hadn't ranted or thrown pans at him. (Hana had thrown a pan full of boiling pasta at Julian once. She'd missed, but the water had splashed his leg and scalded him, and then he'd hit her, and then they'd XXX: "I'm covered in bruises this morning and feel fantastic, though I know it's crazy.")

(148) My husband was intelligent and read a lot of books about history and politics; he worked as a policy officer for a borough-regeneration strategy. Whenever we quarreled he didn't raise his voice but explained why I was wrong, with a fixed, reasonable smile, tapping his foot under the table. We had once enjoyed visiting the Wren churches together, and we'd gone to evening classes to learn Greek, because there was an unspoiled Greek island that we visited whenever we could get away. When he asked me to move out, I didn't scream that I wouldn't be able to bear my life without him, because I knew that I probably could bear it. In the months before we separated, I noticed that he kept moving my toiletries off the shelf in the bathroom, on to the windowsill, as if they were already redundant. He and I had too much jirony to take our lives as earnestly as Hana took hers. Viewed coldly from outside, how silly Hana's affair was and how demeaning, with its hysteria and its banal props. But who wanted to view things coldly, from outside?

(162) And then one morning, when I was still in my pajamas because I didn't have anything to get dressed for, the door phone buzzed in the kitchen. I thought it might be a delivery for Hana—she was buying things in California and shipping them home.

(166) It was a man's voice, placatory and peremptory at once. "Hana? It's Julian. I have to pick up some stuff."

(168) "Hana's not at home," I said.

(169) He sounded taken aback but not disappointed. "Who are you, then?"

(170) "I'm living here."

(171) When I opened the door to Julian, he didn't look at all as I'd imagined Hana's lover. He must have been several inches shorter than she was, to begin with: wiry, with a neat pixie face, a high forehead under a receding hairline, and a taut smile. He had a child in tow, a boy of eight or nine, with the same sandy coloring and quizzically interrogating look—only the child seemed puny and lethargic, while Julian exuded a kind of restless satisfaction. He rose and fell while we talked, elastic on the balls of his feet in their youthful trainers. I explained that I was staying in Hana's house while she was away. Julian said that he was an old friend of Hana's and needed to pick up some gear he'd left with her, a tent and sleeping bags.

(181) "I'm taking the kids camping."

(182) I did remember seeing a tent in the attic, but, of course, I couldn't tell him that. The key to the attic was at that very moment weighing down my dressing-gown pocket. He asked if he could come in and hunt around for his stuff; I hesitated, then said it was O.K. I hadn't washed my hair for a week and I hadn't bothered to put my contacts in; I was wearing my glasses. I was too thin, because I wasn't eating enough, and my pink dressing gown was years old and gray from washing. I followed Julian around while he rummaged in the cupboard under the stairs, the utility room. The house was hot, because I'd had the central heating on for hours. Fuming to himself, he wondered what Hana had done with his things. He wasn't very interested in me.

(193) The boy traipsed after us, complaining that he was bored. He wanted to watch TV, but Julian said that he watched too much of it and made him unpack some paper and pens from his backpack, then settled him down to draw at the kitchen table. I got the impression that the boy

had been to Hana's house before. Julian was one of those parents whose attention to their children is inventive and forceful, inspiring—but I guessed that it might also be intermittent, abruptly withdrawn at any time, without explanation or with too much explanation. The child wasn't likable: his white face was theatrically reproachful; he whined and never once smiled or thanked anyone for anything. Julian told me upstairs that the situation at home was tough. He was leaving his wife and moving out. The important thing was to make sure that the kids knew it didn't affect his love for them. That's why he was taking them camping.

(206) "The weather's not very good for camping," I said.

(207) He insisted that that was half the fun.

(208) When I mentioned the locked attic at the top of the house, he bounded up to rattle the door handle, frustrated that he couldn't get in.

(210) "She didn't tell you where she keeps the key?"

(211) It would have been easy for me to produce it at this point, to explain that I'd noticed it in the tea-towel drawer, but for some reason I liked feeling its weight against my leg, holding something back from him. Finally, he decided to call Hana on her mobile. "She's still got her old number?" He glanced at the clock to work out the time difference. I imagined Hana dishevelled and stale, roused from her sleep in Los Angeles.

(217) "Hello, Hana," he said. "It's Julian. Yes, I know what time it is."

(218) Walking away from me, he addressed himself with a fixed, strained smile into the phone. "Don't even start," he said in a subdued voice, intimately cruel and not meant for me to hear. "Don't even get started, Hana. I don't want to get started on all that all over again. I just want my camping gear."

(222) After further urgent sotto-voce exchanges, he covered the mouthpiece with his hand, gesturing to me. "She says to try in the knife-and-fork drawer."

(224) "You've looked there," I said.

(225) “Fuck, Hana. I’m taking my kids on a fucking holiday.”

(226) I went again into the kitchen, opening and closing a couple of drawers.

(227) “Here it is,” I said then. “Look, I’ve found it.”

(228) I went back into the room where he was telephoning, holding out the key on the palm of my hand. Julian didn’t bother to explain to Hana, just cut off the call, snatched the key, and went running upstairs again to the attic, where he quickly found what he was looking for. I heard him humping stuff on to the landing, and the chink of metal tent poles in a bag. The boy was still absorbed in his drawing. When they’d gone, I noticed that he’d left it behind on the table: most of the page was blank, but a procession of tiny people was drawn neatly and precisely along the bottom—men, women, and children, weaving their way among tall clumps of grass and jagged rocks.

(237) I thought I’d never see Julian again, but that afternoon he called me on Hana’s landline.

(239) “Listen,” he said. “What’s your name? Listen, Laura. I told you I was moving out from home. Well, I need a place to store some boxes and it occurred to me that I could leave them at Hana’s. She’s got that attic for storage, so they won’t be in your way—you won’t even know they’re there. It’s just for the interim, while I find a place.”

(244) He said that Hana didn’t mind, but I didn’t really believe he had asked her.

(245) “It’ll all be gone, anyway, before she gets back from the States.”

(246) “I suppose I don’t see why not,” I said.

(247) So he arranged to bring his boxes over around six. Something about his jubilant efficiency made me suspect that he was outmaneuvering his wife, whisking his possessions out from under her nose before she could lay claim to anything. “I’ll see you at six, Laura,” he said.

(251) “Trust me, at this point it’s the only way we can boost your numbers on likability.”

(253) When I put the phone down, I was frightened and excited, as if I had an assignation with a lover. This was preposterous, of course, and I knew it—I hadn't even liked the man and wasn't the least bit attracted to him. Also, he was only coming to drop off some boxes. Yet I hurried upstairs, burdened by the need to get ready for his arrival, as if it were momentous. It was only half past four—I had plenty of time. I washed my hair in the shower, with Hana's special revitalizing shampoo, and then I put on the thick toweling bathrobe that still smelled of her perfume. It was big on me, and I felt as if I were a little girl playing in my mother's clothes. Putting in my contacts, I studied my reflection, layering on foundation and then eye shadow, mascara, lipstick; ordinarily, I didn't bother with any of this. The face that emerged in the mirror was recognizably mine—a wary small oval spoiled by a thin nose—but replete with new knowledge. Then I browsed through the blouses in Hana's wardrobe, looking for something to wear over my jeans; I chose a gauzy, sultry maroon top splotched with black flowers, cinched at the waist with a belt I'd found discarded in the attic—Middle Eastern, dark-pink embroidery, sewn with dangling silver coins. I wore a necklace of the silver coins, too. I pinned up my hair and sprayed on Hana's perfume.

(280) When I was ready, I poured myself a glass of white wine from a bottle I'd put in the fridge. I had been careful with alcohol while I was living in Hana's house: I was afraid of getting drunk by myself every night. But this evening the first sips were delicious—a high green note like a bell at the front of my mind. I stood at an upstairs window watching the leaves blowing down from the trees onto the wet black tarmac. After a while, Julian was late, and I'd finished the glass of wine. Just as I'd decided with relief that he wasn't coming after all, he turned up in a white camper van, parking where there was a space across the road. He rang the bell and I buzzed him in, then went down to the front door, where several boxes were already stacked on the doorstep; Julian was across the road, unpacking more boxes from the van. When he saw me, he shouted to ask whether I had a parking permit he could use. I fetched the visitors' permits from where Hana had left them. There were a lot more boxes than he had suggested on the phone—and not only boxes but other stuff: bedding and an Anglepoise lamp and a couple of racing bikes.

(295) He explained that he was late because things had been more complicated than he'd anticipated. "Where's that key? I'll just pop these up in the attic, then I'll clear out of your way. They'll honestly only be here for a week or two."

(298) "Are you leaving your wife to be with Hana?" I asked.

(299) He barked with disbelieving laughter.

(300) "You're kidding. Who gave you that idea? Don't tell me she did."

(301) "No one. I just wondered."

(302) "No fear of that," he said. "Hana's not really my type."

(303) I gave him the key and waited in the kitchen while he ran up and down the stairs, taking them two at a time, carrying up his stuff; he was muscular, as if he went to the gym or took regular exercise. I could hear that he had to move things around in the attic to get it all inside. By the time he came looking for me to return the key, he was breathing hard, and there were dark patches of sweat on his T-shirt. He picked up the jacket he'd slung over the back of a chair.

(310) "Would you like a glass of wine?" I asked, as I had planned.

(311) "Better not, I'm driving."

(312) "Cup of tea?"

(313) I think he was surprised that I persisted. Noticing something, he took a step toward me, reaching for my necklace of coins and fingering it. "I remember this. Isn't it Hana's?"

(316) "She gave it to me," I lied.

(317) For the first time then, I saw him take me in: distinctly, as if an image of me flickered across his expression and was swallowed inside. He held on for a moment to the necklace connecting us, then let it drop so that it struck me on the breastbone. I wondered if he recognized the blouse, too.

(321) "Well, why not?" he said. "A glass of wine."

(322) We sat at the counter where Hana and I had sat to make arrangements. Julian glowed with the satisfaction of having accomplished his preemptive strike against his wife. With the boxes stowed, there was time now to focus the strong beam of his attention on me. I felt its heat and knew that he was seeing at last how different I looked.

(327) “So, Laura. What are you doing here in Hana-land?”

(328) Disguised, I was able to perform a part: I could hear myself sounding carefree and flirtatious. I explained that I hardly knew Hana and was staying in her house because, like him, I was escaping my marriage.

(331) He raised his glass. “To marriage, and all those who abandon ship.”

(332) “To abandoning ship,” I said.

(333) He asked me about my husband, and I exaggerated how dull he was; I made it sound as if I were the one who’d fallen out of love. Julian had a lot of ideas about relationships and their natural sell-by dates (that was his phrase). “If the thing’s dead,” he said, “then the kindest thing to do is walk away from it. You’re only prolonging the agony otherwise.”

(338) I thought he might be the sort of man who heard himself expounding his own ideas inside his head even when he was alone—reasonably, persuasively. Meanwhile, I began to feel peculiar as I drank my way through my second glass of wine. I remembered that I hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast; then, when I tried to step down from the high stool at the counter, my foot tangled in the crossbar and I staggered and almost fell. Julian was immediately proficient, practical. Supporting me, he steered me to an armchair.

(346) “What’s the matter? Are you going to throw up? What have you taken?”

(347) I explained that I hadn’t taken anything. And then I told him the whole story—how I’d run out of money and hadn’t begun looking for a job yet, and how over the weeks I’d eaten everything in Hana’s freezer and now it was empty.

(348)“You’re actually fainting from hunger?”

(349) “I’m definitely going shopping tomorrow. It was just silly, having that second glass of wine.”

(351) Something about my situation touched him and made him laugh—I think he rather liked imagining me as a starving waif. He rummaged through the kitchen cupboards looking for something I could eat, but I’d gone through those cupboards weeks before. Then he stood frowning, as if I were a puzzle, half intriguing and half bothersome. “Well, Laura. It looks as if I might owe you a supper. I suppose you did me a favor. I’ll drive up to the deli. What do you like?”

(358) “Oh, anything,” I said, trying to remember the freezer. “Chicken Maryland, chicken Kiev, shrimp in teriyaki sauce . . .”

(360)“Not that frozen shit Hana eats. I’m going to cook real food.”

(361)I saw that his seduction, if it came, would be like this—not heartfelt and hesitant but brisk and with an element of firm corrective. I was ready to submit to it. He tucked a rug over me before he left, put a glass of water within reach, and tested my forehead competently with his palm.

(365)While he was out, the telephone rang and I answered it from the armchair.

(366)“So what happened?” Hana said. “Did he find his bloody tent?”

(367)“Who? Oh, Julian. Yes, it was in the attic.”

(368)“What kind of mood was he in? Did he say anything about me?”

(369)“Not really,” I said. “Who is he?”

(370)“He’s a bit of a nightmare, actually. He and I had a thing going at some point. Luckily, I bailed out pretty quickly.”

(372)“What does he do?”

(373)“Oh, some sort of Web design. He talks up the charity work, but it’s mostly corporate.”?

(375)I told her then that he was cooking me supper. For a bruised, long moment, she was soundless at the other end of the line. “He’s still there? Julian’s there in the house?”

(378)“He’s just taken the van up to the deli, to buy what he needs.”

(379)“He’s cooking you supper? I thought he came for his tent?”

(380)“He came back another time.”

(381)I didn’t mention the boxes.

(382)“I can’t get my head around this. Do you two know each other?”

(383)“It’s just a friendly thing, because I helped him with the key. I was hungry, so he offered to cook.”

(384)Hana took this in. “I see,” she said in a voice so remote that it reminded me how far away Los Angeles actually was. “It’s weird, because he used to make such an issue out of being home for mealtimes with his kids.”

(387)I didn’t try to explain that he was leaving his wife.

(388)“Oh, well,” she said. “Enjoy, I hope he makes you something nice.”

(389) Julian brought back muesli and fruit and poppy-seed cake, as well as the ingredients for supper. Cutting a chunk of bread, he told me to eat that to start with, and to drink plenty of water. There was a lot of sizzling and show and split-second timing as he cooked, and even a high leap of naked flame when he burned off the alcohol from his sauce. He complained that it was characteristic for Hana’s kitchen to be full of expensive equipment although she lived on takeaway; he told me that he ate only organic food, that he cycled fifty miles every weekend, and that he’d designed and built himself a loft studio in the house he was leaving, but didn’t begrudge the loss of it, because he was always moving on and looking forward.

(399)“At high noon I’m takin’ her to the zoo. How’s one-thirty?”

(400)I’d never have picked Julian out as a sensuous type if I hadn’t read Hana’s diary; he seemed too busy and prosaic, without the abstracted

dreamy edges I'd always imagined in people who gave themselves over to their erotic lives. And yet, because of the secret things I knew about him, I was fixated on him the whole time I watched him cook, and then afterward, while we sat opposite each other eating at the little table he pulled up to my armchair. I told myself that, if he left without anything happening, then I had lost my chance and I would die. I wasn't melting or longing for him to touch me or anything like that; the desire wasn't in my body but wedged in my mind, persistent and burrowing. I didn't even like Julian much. But liking people and even loving them seemed to me now like ways of keeping yourself safe, and I didn't want to be safe. I wanted to cross the threshold and be initiated into real life. My innocence was a sign of something maimed or unfinished in me.

(413) The food was delicious—couscous with a sauce made from peppers and pine nuts and mushrooms and pancetta. It would be good for me, Julian said, because it wasn't too rich. He told me to eat slowly, and he finished first, wiping his mouth and sitting back in his chair to observe me.

(417) "It's great to watch someone enjoying their food," he said.

(418) "Better than the chicken Kiev."

(419) "I should say so."

(420) I was uncomfortable under his scrutiny but gave myself up to it, hoping that I wasn't dropping couscous everywhere.

(422) "I can't quite make you out, Laura," he said. "I'm curious about you. You were as hostile as a little fox when I came for the tent this morning."

(424) "I'm not really a morning person."

(425) "Yet this evening I got the feeling you wanted me to stay—and not only because you were in need of a square meal."

(427) I bent my hot face over my wineglass. "I've been spending a lot of time alone."

(429)“Solitude’s like a drug,” he said. “You use it. You can’t let it use you.”

(430) (Really? I heard my husband querying in my mind—contemptuously, witheringly. Is it actually anything like a drug? I don’t think so.)

(431) Julian leaned forward and put his hand on my jeans above my knee, spreading his fingers and bearing down with an unambiguous pressure. Then I felt all the bodily part of desire kick into life, all right—the melting and the thrumming and the longing. So this is how it begins, I thought: the passage over into the other place. Very carefully, readying myself, I put my glass down on the table. But just at that moment the phone rang and he pulled his hand away.

(438)It was Hana again. “Is Julian still there?” she asked urgently, secretively.

(439)“He is,” I said.

(440)I took the phone and walked away with my back to him, into the next room.

(441)“Well, listen. I’ve been calling around a few friends. You should be careful. Apparently, he’s splitting up with Suzanne. So watch out for him. Julian’s A snake. He’ll take advantage of you because you’re vulnerable. I know he will. I should think he’s sniffing out somewhere to sleep for a few days.”

(445)“I’m not vulnerable,” I said. “Don’t worry about me.”

(446)She was exasperated by my tone. “I’m pretty miffed, actually, by the idea of him making himself at home in my house while I’m away. You’d understand if you knew the half of what’s gone on.”

(449)“I’m sorry. I thought he was a friend of yours. But don’t worry, anyway—we’ve almost finished supper.”

(451)“And then he’s going?”

(452)I said I could hardly push him out into the street the moment we'd cleared our plates. "I owe him a coffee, at least."

(454)"He doesn't drink coffee," she said gloomily.

(455)She rang off, and I returned to the kitchen. Julian was standing with his back to the window, hands in his pockets, wearing the jacket he'd taken off to cook. I knew at once that something had changed during my absence.

(458)"Was that Hana looking after you?" he said, amused.

(459)"I don't need looking after."

(460)"Couldn't you cheerfully strangle her sometimes?"

(461)"You don't have to hurry away," I said. "Won't you stay for some tea? Is this because Hana called?"

(463)Julian was suffused with regret, positively rosy with his own sheer decency in turning me down. "You're feeling better now, aren't you?"

(465)"Don't go," I cried.

(466) I seized him by the sleeves of his jacket, so that there could be no mistake about what I was offering; up close, I was submerged in his heat and the dense miasma of his smells, frying and sweat, intoxicating in the madness of the moment. Kindly, patiently, he disengaged himself. "It's got nothing to do with Hana," he said. "I have to be somewhere else. Somebody will be wondering where I am. Don't forget we're going camping in the morning."

(472) I pressed the front door shut behind him and then, for a long moment, while I rested my fingertips with finality on the cherry-red paint inside, I didn't know whether I was going to die or not. I waited there, head bowed, for the wave to break over me—this was it, the whole humiliation. I was so exposed that I might as well have been skinned and turned inside out. Then my eyes fastened on two protruding screws, one on each side of the interior of Hana's letter box: in their functional ugliness they were reassuring. I lifted my head and looked on tiptoe through the security peephole. Julian was gone; shooting the bolt across,

I was alone. My thoughts wheeled around and down and then struck bottom: not, to my surprise, on despair but on something else after all—hard, bleak, gray, satisfactory freedom. Letting go of the strain of yearning was a relief, like stretched elastic retracting. When I walked into the kitchen, I saw that Julian had left a fifty-pound note tucked under the pepper pot. Working tenderly and cautiously around my self-esteem, as if it were convalescent, I cleared up—stacked most of the dishes and pans in the machine, rinsed a few delicate things, wiped down the surfaces and the cooker and the table, put the leftover food in the fridge.

(489) I thought that I might watch a film—one of the art films that Hana had left downstairs for me. In the bedroom, I changed back into my pajamas and dressing gown, and on impulse hunted out my box of souvenirs—the perfume bottle, a few postcards, the pebbles. I had picked up these pebbles from a favorite beach I visited with my parents when I was a teen-ager: a fierce sea in a rocky cleft at the bottom of a steep descent through gorse bushes. One of them fitted snugly in my hand, and I hung on to it all the way through Pasolini's "Theorem," which I had seen before and which meant a lot to me. Washed smooth, the pebble was reddish brown, speckled with blue and cream like a bird's egg, consoling.

(499) Julian must have taken the attic key with him, because the next day I couldn't find it anywhere. Hana was annoyed when she got back from L.A. and had to get a locksmith in to open the door; she didn't mention finding Julian's stuff stowed away in there, so I assumed he'd collected it sometime when I was out—he must have had a front-door key left over from the days of their affair. I had begun to be out most of the time, because the very next day after our supper I started looking for a job—and then I found one, working as a receptionist for a publisher of medical and scientific journals. Eventually, I found a room, too, in a shared house with some old friends. The funny thing was that after my evening with Julian I knew I came across as older and more experienced. People seemed to take me more seriously—as if I'd been initiated into something after all, although nothing had happened. I don't think Hana ever believed that nothing had happened. She came to see me at my new place one evening, looking striking in a belted mac, with dark-red lipstick and a beret pinned on her hair at a dramatic angle.

(514)“I need to know about Julian,” she said.

(515)In good faith, I wanted to be guileless, transparent to her. I confessed about his storing the boxes and taking them away again—though I couldn’t bring myself to mention reading her diary.

(518)“And that’s all?”

(519) I tried to clear my face, but something must have showed there, which she couldn’t penetrate. She kept her eyes on me, and her watchfulness had respect and even fear in it, as if I were the one with secrets.