

ALSO BY MEGAN HUNTER

The End We Start From

The Harpy

MEGAN HUNTER

# Days of Light

PICADOR



First published 2025 by Picador  
an imprint of Pan Macmillan  
The Smithson, 6 Briset Street, London EC1M 5NR  
*EU representative:* Macmillan Publishers Ireland Ltd, 1st Floor,  
The Liffey Trust Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper,  
Dublin 1, D01 YC43  
Associated companies throughout the world  
[www.panmacmillan.com](http://www.panmacmillan.com)

ISBN 978-1-5290-1018-3

Copyright © Megan Hunter 2025

The right of Megan Hunter to be identified as the  
author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance  
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

The extract from xx on page xx is reproduced with permission of xx

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means  
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise)  
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Pan Macmillan does not have any control over, or any responsibility for,  
any author or third-party websites referred to in or on this book.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in Bembo MT Pro by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire  
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of  
trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out, or otherwise circulated without  
the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than  
that in which it is published and without a similar condition including  
this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Visit [www.picador.com](http://www.picador.com) to read more about all our books  
and to buy them. You will also find features, author interviews and  
news of any author events, and you can sign up for e-newsletters  
so that you're always first to hear about our new releases.

*For Rebecca Sollom*

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness  
comprehended it not.

*The Gospel of John 1:5*

What is all this juice and all this joy?

*Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Spring'*

# DAY ONE

Easter Sunday 1938

WHEN IVY LOOKED back, this was what she remembered.

+

Joseph was singing. Here was a rare thing her brother couldn't do: his voice was tuneless, rambling, reaching for a note as though for a high ledge on a mountain. But the fact remained: Joseph – their own plain, sensible Joseph – was singing. He lay in his bed in the next room, the painted walls sentinel around him, his window open, already wafting sweetness. He was opening his wide lips, feeling the vibration build in his stomach, rise into his chest. Here was music: in his throat, on his tongue, whistling through his teeth. Ivy held her own breath, to try to hear the song more clearly. It was a low, almost continuous sound, a bird on a summer night; an anonymous, homeless tone, the sound of yearning itself.

Ivy pictured Joseph in his set at Oxford, the two little rooms with their air of adolescent disarray, his girlfriend a shape at the edges. Their father, Gilbert, had given him a gramophone for his twenty-first birthday, and surely Joseph would dance his girl around the study, taking care not to bump into the clumsy armchairs, the solemn wooden desk.

Joseph was a good dancer; he would have his arm wrapped around her waist. Ivy could see the waist – its deep dip of invitation, its stretch into arm and shoulder – but above this was a blur. Joseph had never described this girl much beyond her name – *Frances* – and just once, after dinner and wine: *lovely*.

Over time, Ivy had filled this blur with figures: a girl leaning to pick up a penny, rising like a child who has stamped her gumboots into a puddle, with a loose, opening smile. Or: a more serious woman, wearing a beret at an angle, a cigarette tucked between her fingers, lips poised with experience. Sometimes, the figure was simple, even incestuous: herself, or her mother. Ivy did not berate herself for this; after all, after today, these figures would vanish for ever. Today, the real Frances would visit for Easter.

Through her open window Ivy could smell the goodness of the garden outside, the truth of another morning arriving. The birds made their expectant, nervous morning calls; even they knew about this day, Ivy felt. They sensed its particular quality, how even at Cressingdon – *the most secular house in England*, Mother had once called it – Easter meant something. It meant something to the trees, and to the greying statues of the garden, their subtle turns only children could see. When Ivy was six or seven she had watched the small nymph by the pond turn and wink at her. It was, perhaps, the single most significant moment of her childhood – magic proven, the shell of reality cracked. But when she



## DAYS OF LIGHT

tugged, hard, on her mother's skirts, Marina only said *of course, darling*, and moved away.

Ivy heard a noise from the kitchen below her; Anne would have been up for hours, taking the lamb from the larder, covering it with salt and herbs, hoping to disguise the way the air had already dried the meat a little. It would be a warm Easter, the newspapers said, using that word *unseasonable*, but wasn't Easter always sunny? Ivy closed her eyes, felt a threaded seam of past Easter Sundays: those when they had eaten in the drawing room, and in the garden room, and in the garden itself. An image of sunlight through a tablecloth: she must have sat under the table, as a child, been passed morsels of meat by Joseph or Angus, her head patted like a dog. The sunlight seemed thinner, in memory, a different colour even, more lemon, lighter than the dense peach that hung around her now. She turned on her back, lifted her nightdress over her head and breathed her own morning smell: she was like a farm, she often thought, so many parts working together to create the semblance of order, one shape moving through the world.

The singing had stopped, but there was another noise from Joseph's room now, a clunk and a creak, as though he had left his bed and then thought better of it, turned back against the cool gravity of the painted wall. Sometimes in the night she heard him snoring, a steady whinny that reminded her of a horse, the way breath came warm through their deep nostrils, their long, patient exhalations. She was usually

MEGAN HUNTER

up before Joseph, but she wondered now if he had woken even earlier than she had, enjoying the quiet of himself, the smell of the garden rising towards him.

But here; the singing began again. There was something unformed and tender in his voice, a tone she had not heard since his childhood, in his offerings of worms or mud pies, the sudden wail of his disagreement at the dinner table. She thought of his hair, as it used to be, the monkish circle of brown that often fell in his eyes. He was always bigger than Ivy, always two years ahead, but now she remembered him coltish, fawn-like; she remembered the soft skin of his arms, the tangle of his legs on the privy when he left the door open. And now: now he was in love, the prospect of love still more potent in the face of likely war, Joseph their *golden boy*, the only son.

This vacation Ivy had looked for love on her brother. Not only looked: she *felt* for it, when she thought he might not notice, resting her hand casually on his scalp or forearm until he batted it away. She thought she might feel love in his skin, that it might give his hairy arms or bony knees some new softness, a feminine grace. She had wondered, even before he arrived, if he would smell different, if his voice would fall in a different tone. And now, here it was at last, the clear signal, not a sight or a touch but a sound, after all. He was singing.

+

## DAYS OF LIGHT

Her feet were bare: the grass on her skin was a blanket of kisses. This was the phrase she thought of, *blanket of kisses*, imagining each wet press of the lawn as a wide mouth opening on her heels, the soft pads beneath her toes. She had been trying to write poetry lately, had been trying to content herself with being unkissed, untouched, to imagine that nature itself was her lover, that the whole world – meaning nobody – could adore her. She sat down on the old swing in the little apple orchard, though she knew the damp seat would leave marks. She liked the feel of wood against her skin, the secret regard that was so much like the esteem she held for herself, in the bath, when no one was looking, the gentle approval she felt for her breasts, her thighs, the dip of her elbow. This wood held her, she felt. It knew her. She pushed herself off, her feet moving into the mud.

From here Ivy could see the whole house, its back turned towards her, something modest, almost shy, about the square hulking of each upper window. She knew only Joseph was up there now, still somehow in bed, an hour after she had heard him singing. Angus would be in the studio he shared with Marina, hidden behind the curve of the house, his brush in his mouth or his fingers. Easter would mean little to him, perhaps the least of them all; a slightly larger lunch, more people in the house to distract and unmoor him. He was to be a great painter, it was said. Perhaps he already was.

There would be Marina's sister, Genevieve, and her husband, Hector, both writers – she a novelist, he a sometime

playwright – down the road from their own country cottage. They would ask Angus about his art, and he would evade them, with a dip of his head, a slight pursing of the mouth. This had always amazed Ivy: how people would let Angus simply not answer a question, how he could create a bubble of silence and bounce it, casually, in the air above the table.

Gilbert would be here too, the father who was soft in body and sharp in mind, so ramshackle in his appearance that he had once been mistaken – in the British Library no less – for a tramp. Once, Ivy had asked Marina if they would ever divorce, and her mother had put her cup down – they were taking tea in the garden. She stared, her face fixed, as though her daughter had said something obscene. This despite the fact that Gilbert lived with Henrietta now, and before that Ursula, and Maud before her. But it was true, at least, that these women never came to Cressingdon. Gilbert was driving down with Bear, Marina had said – their old friend Rupert, named partly for his slight stoop, his way of walking as though about to pull the world into his arms. Ivy pictured the two of them in the car, like inverse images of manhood; Gilbert slack and pallid, Bear smooth and solid as bronze.

At breakfast, Marina had been eating; this was a good sign. Looking at her plate was like looking at the sky in the morning, a forecast of whether things would be fair and settled, or if a storm was coming, not yet visible on the horizon. Marina had eaten a piece of bread today, spread thickly

## DAYS OF LIGHT

with butter, a glaze of jam across it. This was the best that could be hoped for, even if she would never eat it all. One summer, she had all but given up food, retreated to the studio to paint for days at a time, only leaving to use the privy or sip water. Later, Angus told Ivy that her mother had eaten when they were all asleep: *water biscuits*, he said. *Pears*. For Marina, food and art were incompatible in some way, just as religion and art were, and even politics and art to a certain degree. The borders of art needed to be policed, it seemed, kept safe from intruders of the body and mind. When Marina ate – or put food on her plate – it meant she consented to be in the world, to join her family in life, at least for the day.

Now there was a movement at the middle upper window, so sudden it felt joyful, a brisk jolt of the curtains that seemed strong enough to tear them, and there was Joseph, not yet dressed, his wide pale chest a boyish version of Gilbert's. His head bent as he spotted Ivy on the swing, and the window opened – it opened! Ivy could feel the film of solitude broken, something livelier entering the morning at last.

*Ive! What're you doing?*

She shrugged on the swing, made a self-mocking grimace.

*Nothing!*

When was she ever doing anything? It seemed eons since she'd been at school, though it had barely been a year. Since then: a dozen careers considered, at least. Dancer, painter,

singer. When she was feeling more noble: nurse, adventurer. Spy.

Joseph burst from the kitchen doors, a shirt slung around his shoulders but not buttoned, a hunk of bread in his hand. Why was it, Ivy wondered, that his hands themselves seemed to have become bread, to have the exact texture and colour of what he held? She had noticed this before, how her brother merged with whatever surrounded him, an easeful camouflage. And there was something in the sheer sturdiness of his fingers – so round, with their stub nails – that made her think of dough, of shaping it with Anne on long dull afternoons, the kitchen windows blinded by rain.

The sun moved from behind a cloud, and Joseph positioned himself in the smoothest patch of grass beside her. His clothes would dampen, but she knew he wouldn't care. *They'll dry*, he would say with a shrug. Joseph trusted the processes of the earth – the inevitable turning of the world, the passage of the sun – in a way Ivy had never been able to. When they were small Ivy would have nightmares about the failure of reality – the sky falling down, the ocean grown large and dark as a shroud – and she would creep across the whining floorboards of the passage to Joseph's bedroom, to hug against his large, pulsing back. Mother had found them in the morning the last time this had happened; she proclaimed that Ivy was *far too old* for it. Ivy could still feel the cool of Marina's hands as she reached under the blankets to separate them, unpeeling one child from the other.

## DAYS OF LIGHT

*Happy Easter*, Joseph murmured now, his eyes closed, the dappled shadow of the trees tickling his lips, his eyelids. He was the first to say it to her, and he seemed to make the day what it was, in a way Anne's cooking or the calling birds could not. In the manner of siblings they were always children when they were together, could never fully step into their adult forms, rise to their true heights. Ivy wondered for a second if Joseph would hide chocolate eggs about the garden, as he used to. But then she remembered: he would have so much else to think about.

*Are you looking forward to Frances coming?*

It was a stupid question, she knew, and she pushed herself off again on the swing to conceal her awkwardness, the branches of the apple tree creaking above her. She loved the way the air came to meet her, a soft wind, an invisible lifting.

*Hmm.* To her surprise, Joseph seemed to be considering this question. *Bit nervous about her meeting Mater if I'm honest – and the rest.*

It had always been something delicate, the question of how to explain their family to those outside it, whether to be proud or ashamed. *It's a new way of living*, Ivy had attempted to tell her classmates. When she was met with embarrassed silence, or, once, a kind of guffaw, she found herself returning to the old smudged terms: Mother lived with her *friend*, Angus, father had to live in London for work.

*I've told her – everything, Joseph said now. She's very understanding.*

Ivy leant back, let her hair touch the grass behind her, feeling gravity tip her body into the earth, only lightly held by the thin panel of the swing. She felt pained for Joseph, as though she was responsible for their parents' arrangements, the complicated offering he had to make to Frances, his first ever girlfriend. Or at least *the only one we know about*, as Marina had said, making Ivy imagine a murky late-night Oxford, Joseph as a shadowed figure in a panama hat, kissing women in doorways. The thought had made her smile; she knew Joseph would do no such thing. But could she herself be kissed in doorways? she wondered. There had only been two kisses in her life – she touched her lips now, as though for evidence, lifting one hand from the rope of the swing – and both had been appalling; wet messes that made her doubt not only kissing but life itself, the promises that had been made for it.

She gripped the ropes of the swing: they were starting to burn her hands, but it was not unpleasant. Was kissing – and all its expansions – not the height of experience, according to those who had lived? And what had it been, for Ivy? A cruel pressing of one body (one farm!) into another, a nightmarish sensation of attempted contact. Why, she had wondered, was this regarded as connection? A stranger's tongue against her own, his hand beginning to rummage in her blouse. *It meant nothing to her.* she had heard this phrase



## DAYS OF LIGHT

somewhere, and it was almost adequate. But the kisses had been more than nothing: they had been failures, and still more than this: they were proof that she was alone in some crucial way, that she could not be reached by touch. But her brother could be, it seemed. He had chosen someone, written about her in letters home since Michaelmas term, only brief ones to Ivy but such long essays to Marina, each with more flourishes than the last. Their mother had taken to reading them aloud with her morning coffee, her glasses perched on the very end of her nose.

*She's the daughter of a clergyman, Angus! Can you imagine?*

*Very holy-moly*, Angus had said, eyebrows raised, taking a large bite of toast. Ivy envied his detachment from Joseph's affairs; she would have loved to have felt indifferent to Joseph in any way, but most of all in this: her brother's success in *finding someone*, when she had been such a resolute failure. And perhaps this was what gave Angus his relaxed disposition: his sheer confidence, the arch of his shoulder blade so long and silent, so entirely itself and for himself. He was Marina's, people assumed, but he was so much more than this: he was his own.

Joseph threw the head of a daisy at her. He was sitting up now, she saw, crossing his legs like the Buddha statue in the studio, his stomach a soft lip at the edge of his waistband.

*Wake up, dreamy head! You're going to fall off that swing.*

The wood had begun to irritate her legs, even through the cotton of her nightdress. Ivy lifted herself from the

swing, feeling heavy, and lay down next to Joseph, her thighs soothed by the cool grass, dampness already spreading across her back. There would be grass stains, she realized, and Anne would scrub them, her face puce over the washtub. Ivy could not bring herself to feel guilt; she felt little of anything, lying like an animal on the earth. People had so many sophistications, but wasn't this the greatest pleasure of all? To be soothed by simple life: body, sun, her heart's sustaining rhythm within her.

*Looking forward to seeing Bear then?*

He had turned towards her, his smile the perfect line of her own embarrassment, the sun glancing lightly on his cheek; he had no problems, she saw, it was only she who was a tangle of feeling, who harboured these knots of shame. She let the feelings go, felt the contact of her heel against her brother's shin, hard.

*Ow! That's a bit much, Ive. I'm only joshing.*

*You promised.*

Her lower lip was jutting out, she knew. She wanted to cross her arms but knew it would look ridiculous, lying on her back. A warm tear began to roll down her cheek.

*Oh, Ive. Don't—*

Joseph was sitting up now, pushing his hair back with his hands, always a sign he was uncomfortable.

*I don't like him any more, I told you that.*

Her mouth had become small, her words staccato with childishness. She felt she was watching herself as though in a

## DAYS OF LIGHT

cinema. Was that girl – messy hair, damp nightdress – telling the truth? She thought of Bear, of the last time she saw him: an earlier, cooler spring day, a movement of his fair hair, the turn of his cheek. His narrowed look into the distance, as though searching for a rare bird. She tried to steady him in her mind, now, to find a single image, floating as though in water; he was a merman, now, shirtless. She could imagine his tail, the scales of it, the way it rose up and down as he swam. She smirked, despite herself.

*Well, good. He's a bit old for you – to say the least.*

It was true that Bear was a man, not mythical after all but of the same generation as her parents. What did Marina say on his last birthday? Forty-four, some neat symmetry. And then there was she: nineteen, and looking even younger, people often said. *A baby.*

Joseph turned a thick blade of grass over his fingers, lifted it to his mouth and lowered it again.

*He gave me his book, you know. Pretty saucy. Fancy it?*

Ivy shook her head, pursed her mouth dismissively, though she would have loved to see just one page. She put her hand to her eyes as the sun moved behind a rare cloud, the whole garden changing in an instant, cloaked in shadow. She was beginning to feel that Easter would not be the feast she had imagined, that the day was not as porous as it had seemed, just hours ago. The whole place did not know its particular joy after all. She longed to have a feeling that persisted for more than a week, for more than an hour, even.

MEGAN HUNTER

But the world was constantly changing and moving, becoming itself. Joseph lay down again: he turned his face to her.

*You'll fall in love one day, Ivy, I promise. It's the most—*

He breathed out, just like his snoring, a gust of gentle patience.

*It's the most spectacular thing in the world.*

+

By late morning she was expected; expected to help, to be present, to be dressed in something that spoke of springtime, the bursting forth of new life. She chose her yellow linen smock, not quite smart enough but surely in keeping with the day, and a wide-brimmed straw hat that Joseph said made her look like a scarecrow. She felt a jumble of limbs in fabric, a person unformed, unable to present herself to the world. When she came downstairs Marina only narrowed her eyes briefly before nodding, as though in dismissal. Perhaps, Ivy thought, even Marina was trying to lift herself to the occasion: her whole family was coming to lunch. Her son was in love. It was Easter Day – flowers would be arranged. The sun would shine on them all. Today, just today, they would not speak of war, or government planning. They would not even speak of the war in Spain. There would be no grand conflict: they would trust the blueness of the sky, for once, the ripe greenness of the grass.

It was Ivy's job to pick the flowers; Marina had only to motion to the empty vases on the table in the drawing room,

## DAYS OF LIGHT

each setting laid and expectant, the tablecloth freshly washed. Ivy welcomed the chance to leave the house again, the tense, humid atmosphere created by cooking meat, the brief words of Anne and Marina as they made their preparations. She felt the mildness of the air mould itself to her as she moved through the garden, finding each small curve of her body, knowing it as no one else had.

The flowers were only clutches of daffodils, growing in nodding bunches in the tiny wood behind the orchard. Ivy crouched in her sandals, gripping stalk after stalk, feeling the break of their fluted throats in her fingers. She liked the smell they gave her hands: a yeasted, slightly metallic moisture. Sometimes she felt that she would have preferred to live as a flower, or a tree, to grow in increments, never be expected to move or create beyond her natural cycle. It was statements like this that made her teachers roll their eyes. *So dramatic*, they said of her. Or simply: *peculiar*. When she'd first arrived at the school they had expected her to be extraordinary, coming from the family she did, the daughter of artists – famous ones, at that. But when she displayed no outstanding talents, to their surprise, they seemed to hope only for ordinariness, for her to be just like the others. Girls with no talents should be good at sports, it seemed, or at least *jolly*, or *kind*, or some other helpful quality. Girls with no talents had no right to be philosophical, or morbid. They should not hope to be trees.

+

Inside, Ivy arranged the flowers in jugs on the long table in the garden room. She stood back in appreciation, as she had seen Marina do, taking in the room as though it were a stage set, the table's silverware winking, the walls glowing with warm light, each daffodil seeming held, forgiven. From the front of the house came the rumble of a car, clear and human as an approaching voice.

*They're here! Ivy, go and fetch Angus!*

Mother never wanted to greet guests alone; she liked to stand with Angus at the front of the house, like figures in an architect's model, never to present herself as solitary, even for a moment. But Angus would not take part in the fripperies of flower arranging and place setting. He would not lean over Anne's shoulder, as Mother did, and ask that she add lemon juice to the gravy, or extra herbs to the lamb. He could not take part in the atmosphere of waiting. Instead, he would stay in the studio until the last possible moment, just as Gilbert had stayed in his office before him. It was this, Ivy knew, that produced the desperation in Marina's voice, the sense that the sound had been stretched to its breaking point.

Ivy left by the outer doors, took the few steps in her bare feet to the entrance of the studio. The grass was warming now, only a memory of its morning dampness close to the soil. As she approached the door she heard music from the gramophone; a hushed concerto, a small team of violins. She could smell the studio already: a mix of turpentine and exertion, smoke and the faintest trace of lamb from the house,

## DAYS OF LIGHT

threaded through its art like a reminder of animal life, of the need to eat.

*Angus? They're here now – someone's here, anyway—*

Angus wore a painting shirt and old trousers, Ivy saw: he was not dressed for lunch. He stood, unmoving, in front of his canvas, his brush held in mid-air. How, Ivy wondered for the thousandth time, did he know how to be an artist? She did not understand how he pretended not to have heard her, or truly did not hear her, so immersed was he in the moment of creation. When she tried to paint, or write, she was constantly distracted, by anything at all: a fly, an interesting bird glimpsed from the window, a memory or thought, the slightest pang of hunger or fatigue or excitement. And yet here was Angus, not turning at all.

He raised his brush: Ivy had the exhilarating sense, for a moment, that she did not exist, or at least was invisible, that she could watch him as long as she wanted. He made a dabbing mark, his elbow moving only very slightly, its impression hidden from Ivy. She turned her head so she could see more clearly. A thin blue deepening into darker blue: a section of sky.

*Angus? Ivy?*

It was Mother's *guests* voice, audible even from inside the house, something unmistakably desperate coursing through its politeness. Angus looked up, a hand rising to his face.

*Oh, the blasted lunch.*

Perhaps, Ivy thought, he was speaking to himself. But as

he turned she realized he had known she was there; he had simply kept himself in his painting, just as he wanted to. His ability to do this had perhaps been present at his birth, Ivy thought, passed on by the focus of his military father. Even as an infant he was probably extraordinary. But she still felt it was possible that she might change, as a caterpillar becomes a moth, that she could wake up one morning and find herself a true artist, saved from distraction.

Angus's face, as he turned, was almost bashful, something boyish around his eyes and mouth.

*We'd better go in, hadn't we?*

Ivy nodded. She would have liked to sit on the chaise longue and watch him paint a little longer, she realized. She was not ready for the lunch, with its conversation formalized as a play, its shifting allegiances and moods. She felt – moving with Angus through the hush of the studio, out into the brightness of the garden – that only Frances could make the meal something new, could transform its stiffness into the free-flowing pleasure of a party. She thought of her flowers, as though each were a different Frances she had never met, each with a certain dimension of a woman, one bowing, the other lifting her head.

+

The lamb was overcooked. It was eaten apologetically, with masses of gravy, knives and forks scraping back and forth on the best plates. Mother had changed the positions of the



## DAYS OF LIGHT

jugs, Ivy saw, moving each one a little to the left or right. Ivy resisted the urge to reach out – to place her arms over all of the guests – and move them back. They had arrived almost simultaneously, the two cars carrying Gilbert and Bear, Genevieve and Hector; Ivy could picture Gilbert's stately Wolseley standing sentry beside Genevieve's sleek convertible in the drive. Marina was in the midst of them when Ivy and Angus came in from the studio, her arms raised as though she was drowning.

*Angus! Our guests!*

*Anne? The wine?*

She hated having company; this was the truth of it. Ivy had seen how exhausted she was after dinners and parties, dried and weak, as though every drop of moisture had been taken from her. But still she invited them; still she smiled and turned and hugged and kissed. Ivy had learnt how to do this from her mother; she had been just as convincing, raising her voice to a high song of welcome, opening her arms as though her body was not her own, as though anyone could touch it. And they did touch her, Aunt Genevieve pulling her close for one of those strangely intimate kisses, her breath warm and spiced, Ivy's lips touching her papery cheek, Uncle Hector's hand carefully on her shoulder. But it was only Bear who wrapped a hand around her waist, a hand that Ivy found herself noticing despite herself, its tanned fingers covered in hair. What did it feel like, she wondered, to have such a hand? To place it on the leg of your trousers,

as Bear did after he touched her, and then to move it through your hair? Bear had the hair of a matinee idol, Mother always said. It fell in exactly the right place. Watching him, Ivy felt how much easier it would be to be a man, to place yourself exactly as you intended, for your body and mind to be one entity, controlled by the same force. She shifted on her chair, chewing the same piece of lamb over and over, her teeth failing her. She lifted her napkin to her mouth. Across the table, Bear ate with the speed and relish of a person starved, the meat no obstacle, gravy dripping from his fork. Even Joseph eyed him across the table, as he took his own steady mouthfuls, his eyes full of a question. From one head of the table, Marina kept the conversation afloat.

*Did you see the notice for Angus's show? I know he's far too modest to mention it but I—*

From the other end, Angus smiled but said nothing: he added salt to his food.

*Absolutely splendid,* Genevieve said. *Not that we would have had any doubts—*

*Only a small gallery,* Marina said. *But such a dear little room . . .*

There was no reply to this for a few seconds; Ivy felt the danger in these moments, the exposure of something sulphurous threatening to seep through the cracks of the afternoon. It was Joseph who closed the gap, who knew to speak before the silence gathered to its full meaning.

*Magnificent, wasn't it.* He said this looking at his lunch, but

## DAYS OF LIGHT

with such simple finality that the whole room seemed to relax. Joseph was bright, but uncomplicated: that was the family understanding. The rest of them could only look to him, as they looked to the sun, close their eyes to his blessing. The fact that he could still play this role, even today, seemed to speak still more to its truthfulness, to his strength among them.

Next to Joseph, a blank plate shone, as though it had never been sullied by food or soap, as though it had been made just today, as a work of art instead of a utensil, its virgin white the brightest thing in the room. It made a good substitute for Frances, Ivy thought, this person she had never met, who had begun to appear as a clear, knowing lightness in her mind. The absence had been barely remarked upon so far, Marina perhaps sensing that Joseph would not permit fussing over its details.

*She must have missed the train—*

He had said this once, and then a few minutes later:

*The trains are abysmal on Sundays. And a holiday no less!*

She had insisted that she would walk from the station, Joseph had told them only yesterday, and these words – *she insists on walking* – had filled Ivy with a mysterious joy, a sense that life was wider than she imagined it, filled with greater promise than she had dared to hope for. At this moment, Frances had legs to walk with, hair that streamed as she crossed the field, *insisting* on it. Knowing it was what she wanted.

But there had been no knock at the door: there was no scented young woman sitting next to Joseph, carefully cutting at the tough meat. Every utterance seemed designed to move around this absence, to avoid its edges.

*Bear, the book is finished now, yes?*

This from Genevieve, herself the author of several novels, a writer who seemed to Ivy to write much as a silkworm makes silk: as an expression of her nature. Ivy knew her aunt could not understand Bear's tortured process, his piles of incomplete books, unfollowed ideas and – even worse – the books finished and left for dead. Genevieve's own creation was not without complication, but it was always achieved, resolved. Ivy felt the beginnings of sympathy for Bear, together with a flaring of irritation at Genevieve. What, exactly, was she asking?

But it was Joseph, once again, who redeemed them, only a trace of weariness audible under his enthusiasm.

*Fantastic stuff, Bear, really. I haven't quite finished but—*

Was this all that was required, after all? Simple words of confidence? *Fantastic. Magnificent.* What would happen, Ivy wondered, if she attempted the same thing? She would be laughed at, she suspected. Or if not laughed at, then tolerated. There was no chance of her holding together the lunch as Joseph did, placing his knife and fork carefully on his plate. It was only Joseph, it seemed that day, who knew how to live. Angus and Marina could paint, and Genevieve and Bear and Gilbert and Hector could write, but none of them could live, and Ivy could do nothing, and still she could not live. She

## DAYS OF LIGHT

thought of slipping under the table, as she had as a child. Would this be tolerated? Would they not all be relieved, in a sense, to have a child in the family again? She had felt, when they were younger, the way that childhood itself rescued her family from its contradictions, its tensions, the rampant perusal of art above all else. When there was a child present, people could not behave however they wished. There was a person to be fed, and read to, and influenced. There was to be a continuation of life, and not only of art.

But Ivy did not go under the table. She had felt there, every few minutes, the nudge of Bear's foot against her own, never with quite enough firmness or consistency to rule out accidental contact. Whenever she looked up, his face was fixed in its polite tilting, his food long finished, his chin resting informally on his hand. *Too handsome for his own good*, Marina had described him, and Ivy wondered what this could possibly mean. Perhaps, she thought, he seduced too many people, or was seduced, or perhaps – this seemed more likely – he allowed his handsomeness to interfere with his novels, so that life obstructed his art. If he were uglier, perhaps he would be more widely published.

By the time Anne came in with the pudding, the lunch already felt like a failure. They all knew it, the room seemed heavy with it, and Anne seemed to lower the treacle tart with a feeling of gradual resignation. As a child, Ivy would have believed in the transformative power of Anne's treacle tart, in a situation like this, would have felt that it could in

some way replace Frances herself, the sweetness and pastry almost love in the mouth. But now she knew that food did not have that power, was too fleeting to be reality itself. With her last bite, she felt Bear's foot again: unmistakable this time, a longer press, and when she lifted her eyes he was smiling, as though he knew something she did not.

+

After lunch the party retired to a shady table in the garden for coffee, Angus twirling his spoon in his cup, his gaze flicking up every few minutes to the glass doors of the studio. Soon, Ivy knew, he would slide from the group as though it was nothing, stroll towards his paintings as though he could not feel Marina's gaze on his back, her twitching endurance of company, her own swallowed desire to paint.

In the quiet, the cups quivered: their colours were unchanged by the silence. They had been the same cups since Ivy was born, since her mother was born: at their edges, tiny chips from other occasions in the garden, careless moments, sudden laughter. Marina poured the coffee, but it seemed cold as soon as it left the pot.

Bear had taken a deckchair, the only one of them who looked relaxed, his legs sloping into the grass, a linen hat propped low on his face. Joseph, Ivy saw, was biting his nails. Here were the nerves beneath the solidity, the last glimpses of the little boy who used to cry over dying stars during Gilbert's summer talks on astronomy, asking why they could

## DAYS OF LIGHT

not last for ever. She remembered the way his face had looked then: beseeching, as though their father could change the facts of the universe.

As Angus's gaze moved to the studio, Ivy saw her brother's eyes drawn again and again to the gate, which at any moment could move, open, restore the day at last. But it remained closed. The coffee was drunk. Hector and Marina had begun to discuss Chamberlain's latest speech.

Ivy had known so many other family days to end in disarray, the furniture of their relations upended, the very ceilings themselves seeming dulled and fragile, liable to collapse. There had been the day – almost mythical now, a symbol of itself – when Gilbert left, and somehow a dinner was called to mark it. It was not clear whose idea this was, or what possible good it could do. But pork was roasted in apples. There was a good Bordeaux. And Ivy had felt herself melting: dipping into the carpet, slowly lessening until she feared there would be nothing left of her. She remembered Gilbert's face that day, saw how little of that pallid fear remained, now that he was loved and fed elsewhere.

Now, her father sat above his coffee, not speaking much, but gazing into his son's face with a gentle, mottled sympathy. He had been looking forward to meeting Frances, Ivy knew; he loved women. Or: he appreciated them. He viewed and absorbed them. He lived at their margins, and was shaded by their colours. He understood something about them, Ivy felt, some sloping softness, a graduated path

of understanding. And yet Ivy did not feel that he had ever known her, had ever even had a single sharp breath of understanding his own daughter.

Perhaps, she considered, this was because she was not a woman, as other women were. Ivy had the sense, as a child, that her soul itself was not quite womanly. But Gilbert had surely not seen this. He did not know how she had dreamt, as a child of eight or nine, of sailing around the world, boyishly, in a sloop or a sunfish, her face bared to the wind and waves. Or of her thousand other imaginations, few of them feminine. But the fact remained: he could only face her as a girl, not a woman. A girl was something Gilbert – having just a brother, attending school with only boys – did not know, could not even begin to learn, it seemed. Ivy lifted her cup to her mouth, drank her coffee cold.

+

It was in a moment of nothing: this is how all things begin. The dark wood of the chair creaked, the swing bowed empty in the breeze. Somewhere, a bird turned in the sky. Another called to it. Was this not every moment of Easter Sunday, filled with a greeting that was barely itself? And yet this was the moment: the gathering moan of the gate, the sun behind a cloud and in the next moment shining, the gate open now, and a figure there, definitely there: a woman in green, so that at first Ivy saw nothing but face, and hands, and hair. Frances.



## DAYS OF LIGHT

When Joseph stood his chair fell back: this was perfect. It was the sound they had all been waiting for, more than this: expecting, even praying for, if they had been the types to pray. It was the afternoon breaking, gloriously, loosing form after all, fragmenting into joy. Into her.

+

Ivy did not know how Frances did it: ate with them all staring, so that she took in not only food but gaze after gaze, so many eyes and expressions, Gilbert's furrowed brow, Genevieve's flashing enthusiasm. But she did eat: she ate every part of Anne's meal, never getting gravy around her mouth as Ivy did, or gulping water, but swallowing a single mouthful followed by a delicate sip. It had seemed polite, to gather around the dining table again, to re-enact the meal, in some small way, with Frances now instated. She made eating look as though it could be a civilized thing to do in public, a new, dignified act. It seemed that Joseph had found someone else who could live, who understood humanity not as some happenstance or mistake but a full, bold flowering of existence.

It had been the trains, she had reassured them all, an explanation that needed no prolongment, though Gilbert had been the one to ask for details, which she gave seamlessly between bites, Joseph nodding in agreement as though he too had been there.

*We simply stopped in a field! For at least an hour. The guard said there was a cow on the line.*

They had all laughed, but Ivy saw that Joseph only smiled, his eyes shining. He was, perhaps, imagining Frances in the sun-filled carriage, her suitcase on the rack above her, her legs crossed neatly, steam still billowing past the windows. He could be thinking, as Ivy herself did, of how she looked out of the window, imagining the unseen house, the unseen family, the whole unspent day spread before her.

When Frances finished, Genevieve begged tiredness: she had a long day tomorrow, she said, while Hector stood by her side in mute agreement. Ivy pictured the *long day*: five hours of writing followed by a brisk walk in the fields, perhaps a nap before a restorative supper. *Very long indeed*, Marina said predictably when her sister had gone, lifting her eyes to the ceiling.

After they were waved goodbye it did not seem possible to go back into the garden, to more coffee, the meandering drift of conversation. These things were over, they all seemed to know, perhaps for ever, with the arrival of late afternoon, of Frances herself. Neither did Angus go to the studio. Instead, he conjured a bottle of brandy, and the crystal glasses Marina kept on the highest shelf. In the drawing room, Bear put on the gramophone: a slow saxophone crept along each piece of furniture, each rise and fall of the room beginning to burn with the touch of the music.

With a single sip of brandy, Ivy felt the evening being born. Here was Frances, in her brother's arms, their touch cautious but full of intention, his head thrown back,

## DAYS OF LIGHT

laughing, as they danced. She had never seen Joseph like this: his being flooding his face, his skin so porous that every light of personality poured from it, fell like a visible mark on Frances, her own smile shy but complete, wholly itself.

At first, Ivy sat at the edge, as Marina and Gilbert did, the sofa soft with defeat, the small dance floor of the drawing-room rug lit from a single bulb overhead. Angus and Bear danced side by side, hips shifting, graceful as young boys. Angus reached a hand for Marina and she lifted herself slowly, stiff with reluctance before relaxing into her own shape, her pale hands circled around Angus's waist. Ivy looked away, watched Frances's every movement instead: her fingers on Joseph's shirt, feet moving from side to side, her dress swaying over them, a naturalness in her form like Bear's, as though she was exactly as she supposed herself to be.

Next to Ivy, Gilbert turned with a shrug.

*The last ones standing – or sitting, I suppose.*

He laughed at his own joke, rearranged his legs. He gestured to the rug, the people lifting and falling in the half-light.

*We could?*

Ivy would have said yes. She had never danced with her father. But Joseph was reaching for her: he was saying her name. Ivy stood with an apologetic smile, the colours of Angus and Marina glinting past as she began to dance, letting music flow along her bloodstream: an easeful piano, a low clarinet. She moved, lifting her arms above her head: these

were not the gestures they had been taught in school, those timid positions of toe and elbow. This was free dancing, Joseph and Frances and her dancing apart, alone and together, Ivy lost in the day as it became evening, a freshness coming to her from the open windows, the grass gathering moisture to itself. Joseph took her arms for a moment and they danced together, Ivy proud to have such a radiant brother, his face alive with happiness.

She had always enjoyed dancing, and now – in a single swoop of feeling – she wondered if it could be her mode of life, if she could dance herself around the world, under spotlights. What a way to live: to dance through it, such focus in the body, and to be watched: she saw that Bear was sitting now, at a distance from Gilbert on the sofa, his gaze on her.

Ivy felt much as she had, only a few years ago, turning cartwheels over the lawn, her family blurring, that quick necessity of her bones; were they not created for this? But here was the edge of the sofa and here the softness of the rug under her bare feet. Here: a stumble, of a sort, and she was on Bear's lap, his hands on her, catching her, it could be said. This was the most she had been touched all day; the most she had ever been touched, perhaps, by another person. And so: she existed, after all. She was here. And not only this: the whole room was in Bear's hands, in their touch as they moved now, just slightly, as though to hold her in place. Everyone was looking, she knew, at this and only this. For now, and now – one second, two – Easter Day was hers.

## DAYS OF LIGHT

The music stopped. It was Marina by the gramophone, her eyes dark and wet. Then her voice, distant and high, as though it came from outside her.

*That's enough now, don't you think? We must think of supper. And we haven't shown our guest her room!*

A beat of silence: the group moved towards the change. Ivy stood up, Bear's hands, loose, falling from her like water.

Yes! Ivy felt snapped to attention, a flush building across her entire body.

Marina smiled, her lips a tight band around her face. She lowered her voice.

*Where is Anne?*

Marina turned to leave, gesturing for Ivy to follow. Frances nodded at Joseph, as though to a partner at a formal dance. Gilbert and Bear, in their places at the ends of the sofa, stared at the floor. Angus was nowhere to be seen.

*Take Frances to her room, please, Ivy? Her suitcase is in the hallway.*

+

The house became unknown to Ivy in this young woman's presence, containing new shadows, unexpected turns as she led her up the stairs. Frances had been given the front guest room, the best they had. Two windows to the garden, solid furniture, an air of patient waiting, as though it had missed everything that happened downstairs, had only traces of lamb scent, a sense of an evening passed, lost for ever. There

was something embarrassing about standing in this room with Frances, the space somehow too small for two, though it was a large, wide room, the bed in a floral quilt between them.

Ivy saw a flash of limbs and clothing: Joseph and Frances in another bed, as perhaps they had been, their arms around each other, the world turning over with their touch. Ivy made herself stiff, polite, pointing out the bureau and jug on the night stand, describing the way to the water closet at the end of the hallway. But Frances seemed perfectly at ease, placing her red suitcase on the chest of drawers, looking at each painting on the wall with care.

*And where's your room?*

*Oh, it's just – we'll pass it – I can show you, if you like—*

As soon as Ivy said this she remembered that it was not tidy, that there might be undergarments in a pile on the floor, that her bed could be in disarray. Perhaps Anne— but she had been so busy, cooking and cleaning, not dancing with them of course but boiling water, washing plates and cups in the sink. For every step down the creaking corridor Ivy crossed her fingers, and when the door opened to smooth bedcovers she felt gratitude bloom across her. She would kiss Anne later, she vowed. She would rub her shoulders.

*These are beautiful, Ivy.*

Frances was peering at some paintings Ivy had done a year ago, perhaps more, on thick card tacked to the walls: flowers

## DAYS OF LIGHT

folded in on themselves, something melancholy, almost deathly, in the hang of their necks.

*Oh, those are nothing—*

Ivy knew her paintings were skilled enough, but they would never hang in museums, as Marina's and Angus's would. They would not be looked at again in even five years, except by Anne when she came to clean.

*No, they're really good—*

Ivy felt uncomfortable, as though partly undressed. She had begun to understand what made her paintings so fleeting, destined for the tide of detritus that swept the world. They were nothing new, and newness is what made creativity, she thought, or perhaps in some cases it could be a heightening of what already existed, a stretching of it—

Frances was looking at her. The two of them smiled at each other, for a moment, the sky lilac at the open window, the call of a bird sounding from deep in the garden. The room stood around them: it widened as it watched them.

+

Anne was making cocoa, the milk's steam marking the final end of brandy, and music: the day would end roundly, after all, two siblings and their mother by the fire, only Frances to make the night differ from any other Easter Sunday. Would Ivy not wake up tomorrow, and face a day like any other? She had a whole life to figure out, and nothing but the expanse of days; there were decisions to be made, Marina

never ceased to remind her. What would she be? Or would she only be herself, as she was now: daughter of Marina and Gilbert, sister of Joseph? She could live only in relation to others, in the stillness of the garden, in the heavy breath of her bedroom. One by one, her days would pass, and she would live in them. Perhaps this was enough?

Gilbert and Bear had left hours before: Gilbert brisk, seemingly pleased to be getting into his car and motoring away. He had slung his work bag on his shoulder and kissed Ivy once on each cheek. Next to Gilbert, Bear was noticeably languid, his every gesture prolonged: his kiss to Ivy was singular, almost nonchalant. They had waved the car away, and for a second Ivy had thought of being a stowaway, of how it would feel to be lying against the deep smell of Gilbert's leather seats, feeling the countryside disappear behind her.

Afterwards, they sat at the kitchen table: Joseph and Frances with their chairs pulled close to one another, Ivy opposite them, Marina facing the stove as Anne poured powder into milk, stirred the mixture with a wooden spoon. Marina did not mind watching Anne at work, but it had always given Ivy a sense of abstract irritation, made her unable to stay still. As a child she would insist on *helping*, standing on a chair with a wooden spoon while Anne invented things for her to do, tipping a little sauce into a pan that was not on the heat, chopping soft fruit with a blunt knife.



## DAYS OF LIGHT

Joseph was telling stories from university: he was bright-eyed with brandy, restless, his leg jogging under the table.

*And that was when Mivv brought a cow's head into the JCR!  
Dripping with blood, all over the floor—*

As she sipped the cocoa, Ivy began to feel sleep creeping at the edges of her thoughts, but she did not panic. She would sleep, and she would wake again. *And Frances would still be here.* A whole day could not hold everything, after all. One needed to fall into rest, and rise again, to understand anything.

*How about it, Ivy?*

Joseph was looking at her; they all were. Joseph had a new intensity in his expression, a look that reminded her of days when he would dare her to climb to the roof, or run bare-foot through a patch of thistles. Marina's face, in contrast, had dulled, her own fatigue, perhaps, her dread at another portion of the evening unforeseen. And Frances was smiling, always smiling, looking at Joseph with such clear happiness, her mouth very slightly open, her hands curled around her cup of cocoa. At university, Joseph had written to Marina, he and Frances campaigned together – for the republicans in the Spanish Civil War, against all forms of fascism – and Ivy could imagine Frances following him to any cause he believed in. Whatever it was that Joseph was proposing, Ivy wanted to say yes, if only for her.

*A swim then? The three of us? I know Mater won't manage it,  
not at this time of year—*

Marina pulled herself to her full height, but said nothing.

It was a tradition, of sorts, for Ivy and Joseph to go for the first swim of the year together, usually much later: in June or even July.

*But – won't the water be too cold?*

Ivy was trying to imagine it: wearing a bathing costume, when she had already pulled a jersey over her linen dress.

*People swim in the Isis when it's frozen!*

Joseph lifted his arm from around Frances's shoulders, his gestures rushed, powered by impatience. There was no question of refusal, when Joseph was like this, his energy surging around the room, like a bee looking for escape. Marina shifted in her chair.

*You go with Ivy, Joseph – let Frances keep me company here?*

Disappointment passed through Joseph's features, but Marina was already reaching – a slight stretch – her slender fingers patting Frances's arm.

*We haven't had much of a chance to talk, have we, dear?*

*But Frances hasn't even seen the river, Mother—*

Marina did not counter this; it would have been rude, somehow. And so the decision seemed to fall, as the whole day had, on Frances. Ivy and Joseph watched her: Ivy knew their eagerness was similar – people were always remarking on the matching set of their mouths, the persuasive intensity of their shared eyebrows. And there was a moment – Ivy felt it, like a breeze passing through the room – when Frances considered coming with them. For years Ivy would think of what it would have been like, had she been there. She could

DAYS OF LIGHT

feel the textures of that alternative night almost as clearly as the one that rolled out, that rolled away from her, faster and faster, as though there was no other choice to be made.

*I'll stay with Marina, you two go—*

Perhaps Frances did not like swimming in cold water, did not want to venture out into a strange wood, when she had already come to a house where she knew only Joseph, endured overcooked food, stranger after stranger staring at her, appraising her. Joseph shook his head a little, as though to adjust.

*Righto, you ready then, Ive?*

He could not refuse his own request any more than she could. They would swim; it was Easter Sunday. They had not gone to church but would do this: lower themselves into water, immerse themselves in it, their own kind of baptism.