Dust

by Bidisha

photo by David Jacobs

Rosalind Ray had the indelible smile of a genie, a dry slablike face and a metallic red crop. For the last ten years she had been the headmistress of Blackdean Boys' Grammar School. Blackdean: leafy, family friendly, laudably mixed, represented by a manicured philanderer of an MP who produced soundbites with the precision, speed and force of a circus knife-thrower.

It was nine o'clock on a Thursday morning in the first week of September and Mrs Ray was awaiting the new art teacher, Ryan Arrowsmith. This Arrowsmith soon came shambling up, solid and fifty-something in linen trousers, leather work boots, a canvas jacket and an old but carefully ironed shirt. On his walk he'd had an intriguing snapshot of local life: a cluster of tawny bottomed mums outside the primary school, a few Croatian looking chaps and several wenches and their gigolo boyfriends strutting towards the technical college. Blackdean, Ryan decided happily, had *flavour*.

Mrs Ray loomed up the steps.

'There you are,' she said, shaking Ryan's hand firmly, dryly, neutrally. 'I was beginning to worry.'

Mrs Ray had worked in education in the prison system before coming to Blackdean and still carried a whiff of incarceration and enforced punctuality about her. She had been awarded an OBE for her prison work, an honour which she concealed from her colleagues. Competitive jealousy was rife in the small world of English grammar school heads and she had no patience for it. Mrs Ray was also an expert hill walker, French

speaker, hobbyist, breeder of dogs and leader of men – or rather, now, boys.

She proceeded along the walkway and Ryan followed, apologising. He'd been having some trouble with his van again, he explained.

The school campus was made up of the music, teaching, sports blocks and canteen on the right, the chapel on the left and the tennis courts and swimming pool around the corner. Behind the pool lay the playing fields, which were interrupted by clustered black trees growing so close together that they resembled conferring bureaucrats. The fields ran into a forest called Black North Wood.

'Have you got all your course plans and pens and pencils and whatnot?' said Mrs Ray.

'Yes. Yes, I have.' Ryan patted his cloth bag, which was printed with the curly logo of an Indian tea company.

'And where is it you've come from again? Remind me.'

'Ahm . . . my last post was at Crestwick. Very nice place. Friendly. Small.'

Mrs Ray had brought him to the chapel.

'Right,' she said, pushing the door open. 'I have to get back, but you're going to meet Ilora Sen –'

'Oh, *I* know that name. My son's got a book of her poems on the shelf.'

'Good, then you should make friends. Ilora's the head of pastoral studies here. She's back after a two year sabbatical. If you have any questions it's best to go to her before you come to me. In you go.'

Ryan found himself in a large, sparse office. Two gaunt wooden chairs stood against the wall like twin governesses. Sitting behind a presidential desk was Ilora Sen. She had dark hair, dark skin and a full mouth that ended in two distinct up-curving points.

'Hello,' she said warmly, shaking Ryan's hand. 'Please. Take a seat.'

Ryan smiled at Ilora and felt ancient, ugly, clumsy, fat, poor and pale. These days the scintillating gleam that had once enhanced his eye was the ghastly yellow of old ivory and his jokes came off as lewd inquiries. He'd turned into the kind of man at whom toddlers stared hostilely on the bus.

'So, this is where the school chaplain lives, is it?' he said.

Ilora grinned and shook her head.

'Not any more. It's now a common area for the students. This isn't a religious school. Come – I'll show you around. You sculpt, don't you? I'll take you to the art corridor.'

Ryan nodded.

'I do people's heads, in bronze. I was thinking I might put on a show, a local exhibition of my stuff.'

'You can use the art rooms whenever you like, provided no one else needs the space, and there's a studio at the end, but it's tiny . . . You're new to Blackdean, aren't you? Are you settling in?'

'We've got a nice flat on one of those Victorian blocks. The bricky ones,' he said enthusiastically. 'Me and my boy. He just came into the fifth year. He's sixteen. No, I lie, fifteen. Sixteen in December. I always give him one more than he's due. He walked up before me. Doesn't want to be seen with his senile old Pappy.'

'What's his name?'

'Cameron.'

'If you tell him to come by and see me for a chat . . .'

Ryan nodded, as he felt he ought. He didn't feel like a father figure, as such. He should be a sort of enigmatic, wizardly friend, hovering near and soundless, appearing through some innate

paternal intuition whenever he was required. Ryan himself had been adopted at the age of two. His new parents had kept him, washed him and fed him, taught him to read, disciplined him, combed his hair and done everything they were supposed to do.

'Where do *you* live, Ilora?'

'Down the road. I've lived in the same house all my life.'

Ilora looked out of the window and had a quick, interfolded memory of doing the same thing one morning three years ago. Three years ago she'd just turned twenty-nine. Her old family car, a red Honda, had been parked where her Polo was now. Ilora preferred to drive at night; she enjoyed seeing the darkness melt like black wax before the headlights as she cruised to the linoleum mosque of the superstore under a marbled ink-in-water moon.

When Ilora was growing up, Blackdean still resembled the village it had been before the wars. There was the old toy shop, The Curiosity Box, which sold wooden animals, Halloween costumes and Ouija boards. There was Mr Kyriakos, the tubby tailor. There was the tea shop and its Formica tables of old couples. They were all gone now, so long vanished that Ilora wondered if they had really been as charming as she remembered. Perhaps they were all full of provincial racists. These days Blackdean was served by a Boots, a Ronald Brown optician's and a Pizza Express, squeezed into centuries-old buildings with leaded upper windows, powdered white cheeks and brows of frilled slate. The other day she saw written on the wall next to the cashpoint, CUNT.

Ilora had been born at Regents Oak hospital on the Blackdean–Hernlow border. Her parents were both Indian and had come to England more than forty years ago. Her mother, Radha, was an academic; her father, Dwarek Banerjee (Sen was Radha's surname), was an adorable naïf in public and something else at home. Dwarek died of cancer when Ilora was seventeen. At the expensive and pleasingly diverse Tapestry Guild Girls' School in Hertfordshire Ilora was cool, funny and popular, just like every other girl at the school. She went to Oxford and the London Political Institute. Then she brought out a collection of poems, which was politely received. But it made no difference. Observing the identical chaps she thought of as the Tobys and the Tims being parachuted ahead of her, swiftly, subtly, silently, automatically, she pawed the ground and made a few private observations on the state of play in the real world. She set her face, let her anger flare and harden, then filed it down to a cold, neat edge.

Around six years ago Radha met Mrs Ray at a conference. Mrs Ray floated the idea of a general tutor, who could act as a mentor to students. Radha suggested her daughter. It was an interesting job. It paid well. And it was very close to home.

Ilora reversed the Polo into a driveway bordered by powdery, khaki coloured fruit trees. A tall Somalian lady passed in front of her, elegant and rhythmic as a waving reed, her headscarf a folded white wing. Two policemen sauntered self-consciously down the middle of the road, gauche as debutantes – a white policeman on a black horse and a black policeman on a white horse. Did they notice everything or nothing? It was impossible to tell.

Ilora's house was called Red Stables. Ivy lay knotted over the red bricks and roof; she had been warned that the vines would wrestle the place to the ground within the next thirty years. Ilora went in, took off her rings and watch, changed into her home clothes, ate dinner, watched some films, set the burglar alarm,

went upstairs and had a shower. In her bedroom she took a sleeping pill and lay down with the light on. Soon she was asleep, her face softened and chaste.

Ilora's parents had arrived from West Bengal and progressed to college lecturing jobs in London, in the years before the polytechnics and the universities merged. Both, when they arrived, observed the historic watchtower of native disdain. Ilora remembered the insults she'd witnessed directed at her parents when she was growing up: sugar-coated shrapnel delivered openly, calmly, with that legendary smiling rudeness. More than twenty years later she could still find herself turning the shards over in her mind. There was a book in that, she thought, if she was willing to dip a pen in her anger and write it.

Ilora's parents made themselves forget the sting of those scenes during their upward flight, which ended many years later in Radha becoming famous – within a certain circle – as her university's first Indian, feminist, political theory don. There was even a small annexe in the faculty library named after her. Radha had married Dwarek by arrangement but his stated intentions to complete his doctorate, conduct research projects and travel the world came to nothing. He found his place as a basic skills tutor in a semi-legit tutorial college in Hammersmith.

Two years and two months ago, Radha Sen delivered a guest lecture at Cambridge. Later, there was a candlelit dinner at which the discussion was as polished and sharp as the silverware. Driving away afterwards, Radha's red Honda was struck head-on by a student who was several times over the drink-drive limit and speeding the wrong way down the street. Both were killed instantly. A road safety camera recorded it all, its lens glinting like a watch face.

Ilora was about to make her modelling debut. Ryan Arrowsmith had come to see her, thanked her for helping him during the first week of term and asked if she'd pose for his local exhibition. She'd given a flattered Twenties cocktail laugh, a ribbon of miniature bells loose in the air. Ryan was an easy type – easy to understand, easy to disdain, easy to rebuff – the kind of older man who smelled of tobacco and body soap, who thought he could 'get around' women by flirting with them, who had an over-keen overweening manner, bright hungry eyes and a mouth full of winking words. That was what she'd thought of Ryan Arrowsmith when she first met him, and she hadn't thought anything of him since.

Ryan was in the studio at the end of the art corridor. The floor was protected by plastic sheets on which stood a bucket of water, a wooden stool, a block of clay covered in wetted rags and a revolving, flat-topped stand. On the stand was a rough oval of wire mesh. There was a large metal sink in the corner and a kettle, some chipped mugs and an assortment of biscuit tins on the worktop.

'*Here* she is! Entrez, entrez, s'il vous plaît,' Ryan sang when he saw her. 'Cuppa cha?'

'You seem very at home,' Ilora remarked, sitting down.

'It's cosy, isn't it? It's my little hidey-hole.'

Ilora peered out through the fire exit doors. The studio was high over the campus and the chapel sat in one corner of the view. A shadow passed over the fields and the school grew still and silent. Rain started to fall with a rustling sound, a multitude of guilty souls whispering their secrets in confession.

'Thanks for inviting me.'

'Oh, no need to thank me,' he said, laughing. 'I'm the one who gets to look at a pretty face all day. The show's going to

focus on local characters of note. It'll be at the library in the spring. The Nelson Mandela library.'

'Yeah, they renamed it last year. Not sure why, they don't have a single non-white staff member.'

The librarian was a deeply menopausal Conservative Party fundraiser type with a frosted hairdo, thought Ryan. She'd told him that the library usually invited people to exhibit, not the other way around, but Ryan eventually charmed her into showing him the exhibition facilities: a trestle table and a blue felt screen with three panels.

He gave Ilora his favourite mug – white and gold, with a picture commemorating the marriage of Charles and Diana – and shuffled the stand forward. He dunked his hands in the water and began to thumb fat nuggets of clay off the block, pressing them into the mesh.

'You can shut your eyes if you want. This is just to get the size and shape of the skull right. Tiny little heads like yours only need three or four sessions.'

He liked the way the clay responded to him. First it was dull and heavy, then he wet it and it spread in a thin opaque sheet, chilly and shiny around his hand. Steadily it warmed up, dried and tightened. The fine edge of it near his wrist began to flake off, cashmere dust.

'How're you enjoying Blackdean?' Ilora asked.

'Not bad. Not bad at all.'

He and Cameron had been living in Blackdean for over a month. This was their second move in four years and, as ever, they'd landed on their feet. Ryan had one afternoon and one middle-of-the-day off per week. In his spare hours he chatted with the girls in the secretaries' office or wandered along the High Street to buy cream horns from Martins Bakery.

'And how's your son settling in?'

'Oh, well, you know. He's a bit of a Norman No-mates, sorry to say.'

'Has he ever been bullied?'

'Not that I know of.'

'He's not cutting classes is he?'

'No,' said Ryan shortly.

Suddenly he was tired of the topic of Cameron and the interest it held for Ilora, who was clearly bringing all her professional acumen to bear on it. He picked up a curved metal ruler and callipers and lurked inches from her face, measuring her features. His shirt was hanging down and she balefully registered his chest with its mist of pale hair and draped breasts.

'You're such a nice colour,' Ryan murmured. 'Amber. Not pink like me. When I catch the sun I look as though I've been boiled in a pan.'

'Same here. I burn in a couple of minutes.'

'So, what are you?' he queried. 'English and –?'

'Ah, no. Indian on both sides.'

'Really?' Ryan was fascinated. 'Are you sure? You've got quite a Hawaiian look. What are they, the Hawaiians? Is it Polynesian?'

He continued whimsically in this vein for some time and made anthropological enquiries pertaining to the language, belief system, occult fertility rites, arranged/forced marriages, tribal stoning, honour killings, folk customs and spiritual icons of her people. But, truth be told, her parents had not believed in anything. She did not believe in anything. And here she was, with proof that there was nothing – for had there been, given how much Radha loved her, there would have been some sign and some consolation. Radha's death had taught her nothing, except

that what she thought she knew about life was no more than so much lumber waiting to be demolished. She was stunned by it as by a blow to the head, backing away with her arms out, seeing stars and wearing a silly smile of puzzled disbelief. She schooled her students in all the virtues but withheld the harshest lesson: that brute chance could flex and strike at any moment, breaking their soul, violating their world, destroying their beliefs. She sat in her office and felt her heart clench with fear whenever someone knocked on the door, in case it was an ashen faced boy who'd just discovered the Law of Chance for himself.

Classes in the next studio came and went. Following some surface coyness, Ryan told her that after school in Devon he'd gone into the building trade, starting as a labourer and working his way up to foreman. He'd stopped when he had enough money to concentrate on sculpting full time. This coincided with his marriage to Cameron's mother, who happened to be pregnant and well-off. He went to a non-name art college and made most of his sculpting money through bullying acquaintances into having their children's heads and feet done. He was fifty-seven.

By half past twelve she could feel him tiring as he straightened up ever more laboriously after wetting his hands. The rain stopped, receding with the deliberate elegance of a queen drawing her skirts off the ground. Ryan cracked his knuckles.

'We're just about done, I think. You're a good sitter.'

'Thanks. I'd be interested to see how it turns out.' Ilora got up and stretched. 'I need a walk after that.'

'Going to wend your way to the enchanted forest?' said Ryan. From his studio he had watched her a few times, going around the side of the chapel to enter Black North Wood.

In the evenings Blackdean carried a scorched flavour which reminded Ilora of night-time Calcutta, a taste of dry smoke, dust and distance. That city often returned to her through the senses, early images as swift and vivid as a flash fire: gatherings, faces, family stories sprung clear from nowhere. She would recall the torn sky and flooded streets stirring restlessly after a monsoon shower, the speckled ridges of a gecko relaxing on the veranda wall or the marble floors of her maternal grandmother's house cooling her feet. She had spent every summer there until she was thirteen, reading American bonkbusters in the top floor room, protected from the sun by orange painted shutters and green iron grilles. She remembered the chemical odour of the midge-repelling tapers, the pert yellow smell of peaking mangoes, the pale laps of the mosquito net and the light red liquor of expensive tea. She no longer knew anyone in India, her grandparents were all dead. The Calcutta house had been sold when it was clear that the children were not going to return. Her father's family home had been split into three large apartments for his remaining siblings after his death.

Radha had died in July during the summer holidays. Ilora inherited Red Stables, funded a yearly undergraduate essay prize at her old college and a scholarship at the London Political Institute, bought the Polo, made some repairs to the house and organized the cremation. Friends, ex-students, colleagues and disciples came from all over the world. The ashes went back to India with Radha's best school friend. Ilora had intended to spend July and August helping Radha edit a collection of articles, but all the contributors withdrew, not wanting to burden her. Three days after the cremation she received a letter from the Cambridge student's family extending their sympathies and reminding her of their own loss. She wrote back immediately on the reverse and

told them in elegant terms that while their son's death may have been an accident, her mother's was murder. Their son had chosen to drink and assumed that the universe would make provision for him because he was a maverick, a boy genius destined for greatness. He paid for his mistake, he deserved to die and his family should suffer because it was surely they who'd brought him up to hold himself in such high esteem. She remembered writing the letter in her study, the window open, ingots of sunshine crowding the road outside. She had felt very alive at that moment, certain that she was writing the truth.

That September she returned to the school ready for the new year, but addressed the students in such an offhand, biting tone that they became afraid of her. She boiled with guilt over the letter, imagining the moment that it reached the grieving family. At the same time she salivated after revenge, but how or against what, she couldn't say. She could feel madness knocking on her door and loading her up. He wore a moulded plastic mask and carried a joker's rattle. She had violent, conscious fantasies about going for a run and murdering someone, then killing herself, in which she would savour the smallest details. She had never believed in God but now it felt as though she believed in the devil and that he believed in her. She began to watch the horizon with a kind of dark rapture, waiting, waiting.

Mrs Ray, who had been watching for some weeks, paid one of her visits and with humiliating gentleness told her to go home and rest. Ilora followed her advice for the next two years. Once inside Red Stables she watched time slow down, stop and then begin to run backwards. She began at last to dream about Radha and the dreams were terrible in their banality. When all her rage-dramas were exhausted she found that they'd been worthless after all, mere surface noise. The precise details of her life before Radha's death had crumbled into an amethyst dust. What remained was a loose and floating fragrance, a veil of brightness. It was stupid to say that her mother had been a clever woman, a strong woman, a good role model. Radha had been everything, and so much a part of Ilora herself that mere words dissolved before it.

Still, after two years she realized that even in loss there was such a thing as sheer boredom and that boredom itself was dangerous. At first she tried to demean its effects, as though death was an unwanted guest standing awkwardly in the corner of the room. Then she realised that she herself was this guest, the changed eerie person who had returned to live in the world, with different eyes and a different heart. Mrs Ray phoned a few times to invite her back to the school. Ilora returned, looked upon to guide, to reveal, but feeling feebler than the puniest of her students, suspicious of the world, hideously clear-eyed and yet certain of nothing.

It was a yellow and black city night and the school was hosting its annual preliminary parents' evening for the parents of all new boys, the first years and the upper-sixth students who were considering applying to university. Ilora doled out revision tips, handed over prospectuses, made overtures and confirmed or denied parental diagnoses of their sons' genius.

Ryan came up to her table during the break. He was purple in the face and either so drunk or so exhausted that his eyes were sliding from side to side like abacus beads.

'Ah, good evening Ms Sen,' he oozed. 'Would you like to meet my *issue*? Cameron! Cam? . . . Cam! C'mere!'

Ilora looked past his shoulder. Walking towards them was a beautiful boy, the palest most beautiful-looking youth Ilora had

ever seen. He was tall and long-boned with wavy dark blond longish hair and a widow's peak. He had a wide face with a pointed chin, a small mouth, the lips so dark they looked burnt, and deep-set eyes with straight sable brows and long, tangled, silver lashes.

'Nice to meet you, Cameron. I'm Ilora Sen. I'm the head of pastoral studies here. You can call me Ms Sen or you can call me Ilora, whichever you prefer.'

'But you can't call her *Miss* Sen, only Ms,' added Ryan, 'otherwise she'll smack you on the botty.'

'Take a seat,' said Ilora. 'Unless you have to be somewhere.'

'Tell her about Oxford,' Ryan told him. 'Ask her advice.'

'I will.'

'You never get the full information when you ask questions. You care too much about "bothering" people.'

'You have similar voices, you two,' Ilora noted, looking from one to the other.

'Cameron sings like a bird,' said Ryan.

'Yeah, maybe a bird like a duck, or a turkey,' Cameron quipped.

'See how we're all getting on?' said Ryan, laughing uproariously.

Ilora gazed into his sloppy face and he peered back closely, his bright eyes containing nothing except her reflection.

'Have you eaten any tea?' Ryan asked Cameron. 'He never eats lunch,' he said to Ilora.

'In my old school in Crestwick the staff canteen and the student canteen were in the same room, on opposite sides,' Cameron began, 'and –'

'I used to embarrass him in front of all his friends! Especially one *special* friend,' Ryan roared. 'Oh my God,' he added, yawning wetly, 'what a moon, what a night.'

He wandered away.

'I'm sorry to start with a telling-off but you really should have come and seen me by now. I'm supposed to have a chat with every new student,' said Ilora to Cameron. 'I'm in the old chapel. There's space to work there too . . . Your dad said you wanted to talk about Oxford. D'you want to apply? It's not until the year after next, so I think you might be jumping the gun a bit, but I can call my old tutor and ask if she'd talk to you. I'm sure she would. Tell me, the last school you were at, what was it like academically?'

'It was okay.'

'It must be hard, having to make a break in the middle of your GCSEs. Was it your preference or your dad's, to move?'

'Him. His.'

'And your first few weeks have gone okay?'

'Yes. Thank you.'

'And you like your classmates?'

'Yeah.'

'So it's all absolutely perfect, and you can handle just about everything in the world, all by yourself?'

'Y– no!' He laughed and she was amused to notice that she was pleased by it. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mrs Ray watching them thoughtfully from the stage.

Ilora dismissed Cameron when she saw Ryan coming back to her table. Cameron and his father glanced at each other as their paths crossed, but didn't speak.

'So, that was the fruit of my loins,' said Ryan. 'The product of my bodily lust.'

'Where's he going now?'

‘To splash around the pool. I told him to sign in with my staff ID.’

‘Ryan! That is amazingly unsafe. And against the rules. What if he has an accident?’

‘Nah, he swims like a fish. You can go in and haul him out if you like.’

‘No fear.’ She laughed.

It was nearly ten o’clock by the time all the parents had gone. Ilora decided to pick up a book she’d left in her office. She set off along the side of the humanities block, dangling her car keys in her hand. The chapel shone at the end of the walkway and she could hear the hum of the main road like a gramophone needle on dusty vinyl. Ilora wondered what it was about autumn that made the heart ache. It had an uncatchable, remembering scent and gave the strangest intimation, the long-gone beloved walking over her grave.

Seeing all the fathers in the hall had made Ilora think about her own father, something she usually never did. Dwarek Banerjee was a sadist. That was the sum of his personality, his manner, his object and his sole delight. She recalled his habit of faking a coughing fit or a stomach upset on the nights before she had a big test or outing so that her sleep was disturbed, the way he ‘accidentally’ blundered in whenever she’d invited friends over, coincided his days off with her own when he knew she wanted to work alone, waited for her on the landing whenever she came out of the bathroom, looked through her discarded rubbish, copied down her bank details and visited her friends’ roads to see where they lived, called to her repeatedly in a vilely soft voice (replying ‘Nothing’ with a begging look when she finally responded), following her around the house so that he was never more than fifteen feet away from her, whispering her name slavishly, soft-eyed, with that horrible smile. He would come home from work every day and ask her eight or ten times in a row if she wanted him to make her a cup of tea, or if there was anything he could do for her – his face burnished with delight as she answered in greater agony every time. If she didn’t answer he would stand at the door and lay his eyes entreatingly on her until she did, and then he would ask again. He would play the child’s game of repeating everything she said, with a nod and that sick smile, as if he was merely fixing the information in his memory. He had excellent hearing, but pretended to be deaf so that she had to call him several times if the phone rang for him. Sometimes he would pretend to have lost something in his room and begin crashing around, pretending to cry and knocking things off the shelves in his search. He would run up and down the stairs pretending to look for it, hammering his weight on each step, then pretend to have found it and pant and pretend again to cry with relief. Each episode would take several hours and was conducted when Ilora had an essay to write or an exam to prepare for.

He had done far worse things to Radha in the early days of their marriage. He was a stalker and a wife beater. She couldn’t leave because, if she had, he would have hunted her down and killed her. So she had to ‘manage’ him instead, and look over her shoulder, and smile in company. And all that time the ladies at his workplace thought he was adorable and charming and voted for him to be the office Father Christmas every December. Ilora remembered Dwarek’s disgusting smile and his black, filmy, expressionless eyes. She remembered the nurses at the hospital, fluttering around him and being rude to Radha, whom they took to be a stupid, cold, uptight Asian wife.

When Dwarek died she realized that she’d been waiting for something, a last-minute reprieve whereby some crusading angel

of karma would rev up to his bedside and crash judgement onto him. Nothing happened. The ease of his death was another of his victories – and she felt the injustice of it, that no matter what they did in the world, he and Radha had wound up in the same place. It was a regret of hers that Dwarek's cancer had not been more painful. Ilora gave her inheritance to a domestic violence charity. But still there was a coiling hatred that she carried with her and wanted to pour onto his face like acid.

As she came to the corner of the campus she saw Cameron Arrowsmith leaning against the wall of the chapel with his eyes closed. The moonless sky breathed an icy black and the white stone of the building gave off its own strong light in which he appeared in clear almost monochrome detail. His hair was wet and smoothed back behind his ears. His entire body, heavy and elastic from his swim, seemed to beat languidly in the dark.

Ilora stopped short at the edge of the gravel and cast her eyes spontaneously up and down his gleaming form. She looked at his tight white forearms and pictured briefly, with an athlete's eye, the lean muscles packed heavy as sand under his clothes, the long sculpted legs and narrow waist. How lovely it must be, she thought, to stand sinlessly, emptily at the beginning of one's life, bent only on enjoyment.

Cameron gave a start and opened his eyes. They stared at each other blankly for a few seconds.

'Hi, Cameron. Sorry to startle you. I was just collecting something.'

'No, sorry –' he said, mortified.

'Don't worry. I know you were swimming. Just be careful. Are you waiting for your dad?'

'Yeah. He said he'd pick me up. He – er – he might have gone over the road.'

'Over the road? Oh! To the Golden Lion. I see. I see. You don't go with him sometimes, I hope?'

'No.' Cameron scowled. 'I *hate* people who drink.'

They stood for some moments without saying anything. In the napped suede-like shadows, Cameron's face was moulded white with deep sockets, cheekbones that were high like hers, but wide – a Michelangelo face. Behind the chapel the playing fields were a silent, jet infinity. It occurred to Ilora belatedly that it wasn't necessary for her to keep Cameron company and that it was somehow wrong of them to be standing around in the forecourt at all. It was also for some reason worse for them to be silent than to be talking.

'Are you a strong swimmer?' she asked. 'I'm afraid of water, it makes me claustrophobic. When I was at school I was always the one who got stranded in the deep end and had to be fished out with a pole. But it's good. It's good to be active,' she ended blandly. 'Do you want to wait by the main reception? We can keep the light on for you.'

'No, it's okay.'

'Does Ryan have a mobile you could call?'

'No, I mean yes, but it's fine, he's always late . . . you don't have to chaperone me.'

'*Chaperone* you? I wasn't intending to. Unless there's any place in particular you'd like to go?'

Just then Ryan's white van tottered around the corner of the sports block. When he caught sight of them he began grinning and beckoning. He rolled down the driver's window.

'Come for a drink?'

'I can't, I've got to get my book,' said Ilora, leaning into the chapel doorway.

‘You can meet me there, I’m just going to dump this one at home’ – Ryan pointed at Cameron – ‘then we’re good for the night.’

‘No, really. You go. I’ve got some stuff to finish up,’ she said. It was the fourth or fifth time Ryan had pressed her to go for a drink with him.

As she drove out that night she overtook a police van, its tribal logo as fresh as war paint. It was passing the gates with creeping caution and the sound it made was an admonishing *Shhhhh . . .* Ilora hated the police with a feral, instinctive hatred, remembering the officer-boy who’d called when Radha had died: scripted solicitude tossed over a ditch of impatient disrespect.

At the superstore she drifted around, put some essentials into her basket and sampled a miniature sausage in the deli section. At the checkout she was served by a smiling woman with wide features and soft, cocoa skin. The woman was Gujarati and Ilora was Bengali – different looks, different generations, different colours, different languages, different regions, different classes – but here in England they could smile like comrades.

The following morning Ilora was waiting for her next modelling session in the art studio. Ryan walked in clutching a box of new pencils. He extricated himself groggily from his jacket. Whistling through his nose, he used a pencil to get some wax out of his ear. He disposed of the wax by wiping it on his leg. His face was bloated, his eyes floppy and bloodless as tinned lychees. He put the pencils into his bag with a shameless smile.

‘Hello, dear. My head hurts,’ he said at length.

‘That’s what happens when you drink too much tea.’

‘Tea. Yes! A very dangerous infusion. A very – perilous *unguent*.’ He laughed painfully.

Ryan took the cloths off the sculpture. He’d been working on it alone. His style was heavily textured, nail-scoops of clay laid upon one another like scales. It looked dreadful, thought Ilora, and nothing like her.

‘Not long now at all,’ said Ryan.

‘And after this you put it in a kiln.’

‘Yeah, but that’s not the end of it. The final article’s in bronze, not clay.’

‘So . . .’

‘This is the positive. I’ve got to make the negative. You put the clay head in the kiln, then you make a mould of it with this stuff’ – he dug in his bag and came up with a scrap of a stiff blue rubbery substance – ‘then you pour the bronze into the mould. *Then* you get the sculpture. Usually when you say you make heads in bronze people think you get a big chunk and then chip away with a hammer, but you can only do that with stone or marble. Or wood, I suppose.’

‘How did you learn how to do that?’ she asked, impressed. She speculated whether her disapproval of him was perhaps something more prosaic, like jealousy.

‘Through being a builder, more than anything. I know more about materials than those bloody Royal College of Art charlatans.’

‘That’s hard work.’

‘It’s *heavy* work,’ said Ryan. ‘I’m thinking of renting this garage by the estates. That’s where I’ll make your mould.’

‘How’s the show coming together?’

‘It’s good, it’s good. There’s this girl who was in the *Young Musician* quarter-finals on telly. They did a thing on her in the papers. She lives by the way. But, you know, the library woman’s

being very difficult. Very unsympathetic. One of those women, nothing's ever enough for them.'

Things at the Nelson Mandela library had deteriorated after the optimistic start. His calls were going unreturned and his physical presence seemed to induce a sighing, an eye-rolling, a lumbering heaviness in the librarian. Still, Ryan was pleased that even the spotty young security guard from the technical college next door knew his face. His local fame was growing.

'Cameron liked meeting you. He said you were very nice to him about his university plans,' he told Ilora.

'I *was* nice.'

Ryan wet his hands and began sliding them over the sculpture.

'Well, he was very chuffed . . . You shouldn't take that Oxford-Cambridge thing of his too seriously, by the way. He only wants to go because *you* went there. You're one of his idols.'

'You *what*?'

'You're one of his idols. You fascinate him,' Ryan teased.

'Well, that is not possible because he would have been about . . . twelve when I wrote those stupid poems,' Ilora said hotly.

'Yeah, that's about right. Twelve, thirteen. They did you at school.'

Ryan gripped the clay and pressed it all over. He was sweating, with a hint of Beaujolais.

'And what's a teenage boy doing reading that kind of thing anyway?' asked Ilora, blushing.

'He's probably a queer.'

'Jesus, do people still *say* that?'

'They say it more than ever, Ilora, where've you been all these years? "Gay" is a well-known playground insult.'

'Cameron's very intense, isn't he?'

'You mean highly strung!' Ryan cleaned his teeth with his tongue, looking at her intently all the while. 'Listen. I'm not going to speak against my own son –'

'Of course not. I wasn't trying –'

'But I'll give you one little word of warning. Cameron's a tease. I don't like to say it, but there it is.'

'A *tease*?'

'Yup.'

'Why, what's he done?'

'Oh, you know. He fixates on his teachers. He follows the teachers. He wants a grown-up woman to pay him some attention.'

'Is that what happened at Crestwick?'

'Yes,' said Ryan softly.

'He harassed a teacher?'

'He certainly did, Ilora. He did. He's a harasser.'

He was smiling at her. The story of Cameron's Oedipal tendency seemed so minuscule – and she was so far from blaming anyone who wished to marry their mother and kill their father – that it made her view the boy with more rather than less pity.

'Well. You did the right thing by telling me, Ryan. I'll keep an eye on him.'

The sitting continued until twelve-forty. When Ilora had gone, Ryan sat down and rested his head on the table. There was obviously an industrial-sized franking machine several floors down that was sending shockwaves through the building. He and Cameron had got the van home last night after a few false starts and a tangle with a post box on the High Street. Cameron had been quiet, taking the fried onion omelette Ryan made for dinner

into his room to eat alone – and wank in front of his computer, no doubt. Poor Cameron, thought Ryan. What a sissy.

They were halfway through the first half of term. Ilora had spent the morning writing university references, three hundred and fifty words of purring innuendo. She listened to the rain clacking over the roof, innumerable knitting needles purling out of sync.

She remembered Cameron Arrowsmith's interest in Oxford. She'd read his essays, which were fine, and decided to contact his old school in Crestwick. If she could bring in a favourable reference she might get in touch with her old tutor and pass it on. She phoned Crestwick and spoke to the head of the middle school. She couldn't help feeling that the woman had been expecting her call and that there was something assumed between them, which etiquette wouldn't permit them to say aloud. It was the way the woman said, 'Oh, yes. The son of Ryan Arrowsmith,' a flat clang, to which Ilora couldn't help but respond with her own leaden and recognizing, 'Yes.'

Just after the lunch bell went the phone rang. It was a well-spoken woman, speedy and nervous.

'Oh – hello, I'm sorry, I called the general number and they put me through to you, I'm trying to clarify some details about an exhibition by . . . Ryan Arrowsmith?' A folding of paper in the background.

'Ah, yes, he's one of the art teachers here.'

'Oh, he is!' said the woman with a rush of relief. 'Well, oh good, that answers one of my questions, so thank you for that –'

'Are you by any chance the mother of the young musician of the year?'

'Yes. Yes.' The woman was growing more reassured by the second. 'Only a finalist, not the overall winner, but still . . . Anyway, it's just that we got these letters on your school notepaper and we were very intrigued, but, you know, when a person you don't know sends your daughter a letter . . . but we were very flattered, and what can I say? We'd very much like to take part! I understand the sittings won't be taking place at the school. No, they're in Mr Arrowsmith's own studio, aren't they? Let me see . . . he's given a number for us to call. I think it's for a mobile. Is that . . .' She read out a phone number. 'I hope you don't mind me going over the details. I didn't want to be the overprotective mother, but you hear such awful stories.'

When they'd both hung up, Ilora put her work away and went to Black North Wood to think. The place was pervaded by a cool, almost metallic lime green light in which the stream clattered like a harpsichord. The clean air singed her lungs, a pleasant singe like a quality cigar. Soon she was fast inside the honeycomb of the forest. It was high autumn now and the trees shimmered like ruby chandeliers. She thought about Ryan's lively voice and his babyish, soapy smell, the Crestwick woman's voice, the mother of the young musician – the fear of the mother of the young musician. Ryan and Cameron were lucky; they were surrounded by a great discretion, innumerable protective layers of pillowy euphemism.

Plain stone benches were set every fifty yards along the banks of the river. When she came upon Cameron Arrowsmith sitting reading on one she forgot to use her teacher voice and said carelessly, 'Oh, hello, what're you doing here? You're not bunking are you?'

Cameron looked confused. He was swamped by his boxy school duffel coat, his pale ribbons of hair splashing onto his shoulders.

'It's free period.'

'Oh, right,' Ilora faltered. 'Sorry. Didn't mean to accuse you.'

'I can go inside . . .'

'No need! Carry on.'

Out of politeness she made herself ask if he was reading anything interesting. He held up the book: Marianne Brightman's *The Shoreline*.

'God, when I was a romantic teenager I memorised every single word of this thing. Can I have a look?' She took it out of his hand lightly. '*Marianne Brightman was born on the south coast of England in 1926. This, her debut collection, was produced in 1969, three years before her death from MS. She is survived by her daughter, the film director Natasha Brightman*.'

Marianne Brightman has been dead for more than forty years, she thought, and still they read her. She was never going to make it. She saw that now. She sat down at a respectable distance from Cameron.

'It's a shame. Marianne Brightman only had three years to enjoy her success. She probably died not knowing *The Shoreline* was going to become a classic. And she died very young,' said Ilora.

Cameron gazed at the book in her hands.

'Where are your rings from?'

'They were presents. My mum had them made for me. That's a ruby and that's a pearl . . . I like Brightman's work. I like that poem, "The Ballad of Rain Grey". I like romantic things.'

'So do I – but you're not allowed to say that, if you're a boy.'

'God forbid,' she replied, letting her own laughter spiral up.

'I was going to come and see you today,' he said. 'I was going to make an appointment.'

'Oh?'

'I've got some essays with me. You said you wanted to see some examples of my work?'

'Ah! Right. Hand 'em over.'

He reached forward and got them out of his bag. He was so beautiful, thought Ilora, that it hurt to look at him. She took the folder and looked at his handwriting, curvaceous blue, not the boys' usual unravelling thread. Three years ago, she thought, she would have been flattered by him. But three years ago he would have been twelve, and three years ago she had already been celibate for seven years.

'How's it going? How are your classes? Have you joined any clubs?'

'No, not yet.'

'You could do something for the drama club. Or swimming? They could use someone like you, I'm sure.' They grinned at each other. 'It'd help with your university application,' she added.

'Can I ask – is Oxford nice?'

'Yes of course.' *They'll love you. You're just their type.* 'But it's not very cosmopolitan. It could do with a bit more of that.'

It had been a shock, when she became an adult, to be reminded that she was not English after all. At Oxford the lecturers were unworldly, the town was small and the students were cold. They appeared to have been recruited from minor villages which contained no non-whites, Jewish people, homosexuals or women. Ilora couldn't find her way into 'Oxford society' at large.

'I can't join any clubs. We might not be here for long,' said Cameron.

‘What makes you say that? Why would you be leaving? Even if you did, it’s not going to be within the year, is it?’ she replied, puzzled.

Cameron stared at the river, clenching his jaw. She could feel him thinking: tell the truth and make my family life seem sordid and pity-worthy; lie and maintain a sleek, outward cleanliness. That was a hard game, she had played it herself many times.

‘Is he bugging you? My father.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Not at all.’

Her stomach rumbled and she put her hand over it. Their eyes met. Ilora immediately dropped her gaze. They watched the leaf-laden river, expanding forward, slinking back.

‘D’you ever read *Valentine* back to yourself?’ *Valentine* was her first and only collection.

‘No, never. It feels like such a long time ago – a past life.’

‘Was it about anyone in particular?’

‘No, I wish,’ she said without thinking.

It was very quiet in the forest.

‘My dad says you’re an old soul.’

‘Oh, what else does your father say?’ she shot back.

She turned to him and looked at his pale face, his dark precise eyes and lips. Her own eyes glowed like silver coins. Dazzled, he returned her look. There was a growing silence, thickness, clarity and heat. Ilora felt a surge of physical strength, a premonition of what could happen next and a terrible fear of what she was capable of. Then she thought of Ryan doing exactly the same thing and a long horror drew out slowly like a sword and shone, soundless.

‘Cameron?’

‘Yes,’ he breathed.

‘What happened at Crestwick? What has your father done? Has he – is he – is he – I just want to know –’

‘Chop-chop, people, time to get back,’ said a loud voice. It was Mrs Ray. She was standing solidly on the path, looking from Ilora to Cameron and back to Ilora. ‘Off you go, Cameron. Have a grand day, Ms Sen.’

Mrs Ray watched until they were both, separately, out of her sight, then continued on her power walk, chin down, elbows out. She needed a ramble every day, otherwise her knees creaked. Mrs Ray was a country woman. She’d grown up in a village that seemed benignly floral at eleven in the morning, but was riven by drug problems, gang problems and worse. Her mother was a psychiatric nurse and her father taught languages at the local school. At the age of thirteen a school friend of hers was gang raped at a party and the local police did nothing except take her home, tell her off and tell her mother off for letting her out. She had seen young men, some of them her playmates or neighbours, going into prison for petty crimes of stupidity and boredom and coming out brutalized, bitter and angry. Encouraged by her parents, gifted at school, thick-skinned enough to take it, there was no doubt what she wanted to do, and do it she did.

Her last prison job was at Holloway. Mrs Ray left the prison service when she could feel herself growing sarcastic and unsurprised. She hated cynicism, hated seeing it in herself and her generation of colleagues. It was time to retire gently into another full-time job with a high profile and lots of responsibility: Blackdean Grammar. The students at Blackdean were polite, well brought up, massively entitled and rightly optimistic about their future. Mrs Ray envied their ignorance of how the other four-fifths of society lived. It would serve them well as they pursued their

ambitions; their certainty would not be troubled by reality. As she continued at the school, she, too, ceased to be troubled. She was a good headmistress because she was disinterested, pragmatic and wise, a good egg; and she brought this quality of distant care to Ilora, whom she liked with impersonal warmth because she was a bright young woman and the daughter of Radha, her friend.

It was one of the last modelling sessions.

'Ryan?'

'Oh, this sounds serious. Is it about the pencils?'

'What pencils? Oh, forget about that, everyone fiddles the stationery cupboard,' said Ilora. 'I was just wondering why you left Crestwick. You never talk about it.'

'They told me I was spending too much time on my own work,' he said easily. 'I wanted to do this exhibition –'

'Of?'

'Local life. Like this one. And I roped some of my students into sitting for me –'

'At your house?'

'No, the school let me use their studio. They had decent equipment as well. Beautiful kiln. And there was a financial aspect, as always. That's what you have to do when you're trying to get to the heart of something: follow the money. The school gave me a fair bit of leeway with materials and what-have-you, but I was so keen to get on I ran up quite a big bill,' he said.

'You stepped down in the face of a financial scandal?'

'I had to!' He worked her sculpture with light presses. 'The whole thing went a bit sour, and you know how people like to take sides, even your own students. You'd think they'd have better things to do, but no, they all want to put in their ten quid's worth. Not a tuppence, no. A full tenner. That was my rate for them to sit for me after school.'

'Ryan, I got a phone call from the mother of the young musician.'

'Oh?' Ryan had stopped working.

'A very nice lady.'

'Why did she call you?'

'Just to check the details. Make sure it's nothing dodgy. She mentioned that you'd invited her daughter along to your studio.'

Ryan said nothing.

'So she wanted to verify who you were before she sends her sixteen-year-old kid to a garage in the middle of nowhere,' Ilora went on.

'Well, I hope you told her I was nice. If I lose this one, my show's up shit creek!' Before she could say anything else he laughed and cleared his throat. 'Ilora, love, I wanted to ask, Cameron's not bothering you, is he?'

'No, why? He doesn't bother me at all.'

'I can have a word with him if you want.'

'No need.'

'He likes you.'

'Oh, I like him.'

'*I* like you.'

'Yes, I know, I like you, too,' said Ilora simply, subtly afraid.

Ryan frowned as he resumed work, remembering other models and other rooms. Crestwick was an old English hamlet ruled by a network of dried up matrons who watched everyone with gimlet-eyed judgement. What happened there? Nothing. There had been an interesting girl with tumbledown hair, whose parents owned the local gallery-slash-teashop. Her name was Gemma. She was funny and loud, a saucy slattern, a bit of a

tease. With her twin brother, she'd befriended Cameron. Ryan had invited her to sit for him and she did, because she was a daring girl. He'd put on the fan heater and they mixed up sachets of white hot chocolate that she'd brought from her parents' gourmet larder, sometimes with a little drop of something else for him. Many of her friends also sat for him. Occasionally the sittings turned into impromptu parties, when he would turn the radio up, lean back to watch them and feel a private river of delight coursing through him.

During the Christmas holidays a platinum coldness fell on Crestwick. Ryan and Cameron saw Gemma and her brother and their parents several times to talk about the exhibition. Cameron was happy for the first time in years, going to the girl's house as often as he could and letting her parents cook for him.

Ryan ran his hands over the clay. It was almost dry. He liked its warm, grabbing tightness. He watched Ilora for a few seconds. She was dozing as she sat. What had happened in Crestwick? The exhibition was scheduled for April and the sittings continued into the spring term. The girl was preparing for her exams and became busier, sometimes so busy that she missed their appointments altogether and he had to go around looking for her or slip a note in her locker. She and Cameron must have had an argument because she stopped coming to the flat and the phone didn't ring. Ryan was worried that Cameron might harm himself in a moment of silliness. He was very concerned about that.

One spring morning Ryan went to the school and found them all waiting for him: the head mistress, the deputy, a counsellor, the head of the middle school and someone from the police, a friendly man, not in uniform, thank Christ. That would have been mortifying. The girl had said that one afternoon during a sitting Ryan had taken off his shirt, and he had, but not like that. It got very stuffy in the studio. He remembered the click of the buttons when he threw the shirt on the table, and her sudden sharp turn. Gemma had left for a class soon after that anyway. She said he was phoning her in the evenings, and he was, with some minor but necessary queries. She had printed out his emails. She said he had offered her money to take off her clothes – and he had, for another sculpture, a classical torso. She said he'd drunk in front of her and offered her a drink, too – this he admitted with an embarrassed 'Oopsy, yes, I know that's bad.' Another time, when they were finishing up, the girl said that he'd cupped her face and kissed her on the mouth – and he had, in a fatherly way. He could remember her muffled scream of surprise – *Mmmmf?* – as his lips closed over hers; then he'd kissed her dryly, held her face for another few seconds and gazed into her eyes. She hadn't said no and she hadn't said yes.

Ilora's head jerked up and she wiped her mouth.

'Ugh! God, sorry,' she said. 'What time is it?'

'Three-fifteen, you're fine, go back to sleep,' he hushed.

Hearing the sweetness of his own voice, he remembered how many times he had used it with the girl, sugar in his throat. The policeman had said that the girl wasn't going to 'do' anything and he'd felt very, very relieved. He wasn't angry at all. He'd love to sit down with her and find out just how she was. But he never saw her again and neither did Cameron. During Easter half-term he looked into other jobs. His interview at Blackdean happened in May. He and Cameron kept a low profile until August, when they left.

That was the story of Ryan and Crestwick.

It was the night of the winter concert. The light in Mrs Ray's office was very unforgiving. In it, Ilora's face looked haunted and foxy. Mrs Ray eyed her over the top of a large photograph of her wedding to Mr Ray. The photograph was a shield against excessive intimacy or feelings of equality from guests. On the subject of Mr Ray it was generally assumed that he was a lesser variety of being compared to his wife: physically small where she was large, frail where she was strong, uncertain where she was zealous and bland where she was vivid. In fact, Mrs Ray's marital happiness was the big secret of her life. Mr Ray – Robert, never Rob or Robbie, even to his wife, who called him Dear Heart in private moments – was a scientist specialising in the effects of urban sprawl on bird migration. He was mild, intelligent, funny, well-read, fair and strong. They lived together in the Rectory in Hernlow, with Mrs Ray's yellow Porsche parked outside and Mr Ray's 1989 Volvo, a matt brown oblong, hidden behind. The two had known each other since they were three; they came from the same street of the same village and had always been together. Their conjugal might was not dented by Mr Ray's battle (and triumph) against throat cancer, which was treated by the saints at Gospel Oak oncology department, the same place Ilora's father had been treated. The Rays had two children: Rhiannon, who was away working with the UN, and Rory, who lectured in modern history at Durham. Mrs Ray had once been asked, by Radha Sen, the secret of a happy marriage. *Blind luck*, she had said.

'So, here we are, Ilora. The orchestra is playing as we speak. I wanted to meet with you before we break for half-term. How are you?'

'I'm good, Mrs Ray. Roz.'

'How's work?'

'It's good, it's good, it's great, thanks.'

'I remember we had a very fine atmosphere when you were here last.'

'I remember that, too.'

'You should have stayed in touch with your old friends. A lot of people asked about you.'

'And yet none of them says anything . . . Not that I want them to.'

Mrs Ray patted Ilora's hand and Ilora realised with shame that she had been too caught up in herself, these weeks, to see that Mrs Ray was an old friend, an ally.

'God, Roz, everything's so different now, it's all different.'

'I know.'

'I always thought that if my mum died, I'd die.'

'Well, that's the tragedy, isn't it? They go and you stay.'

'Then you're left with *this*.'

'You shouldn't think like that, Ilora, it doesn't help. Have you had any counselling about Radha?'

Ilora shuddered and put her hand to her throat.

'Don't say my mother's name, it hurts too much. I know she was your friend but I'm sorry, I can't hear it.'

'In two years, in more than two years, you haven't spoken to anyone at all?'

'I haven't had the chance. First I was too frantic to see straight. Then I felt too low. I've been having terrible nightmares – about my father, oddly enough. I used to have them once every four days or so, then they went away. Now they're back. It's always the same dream. I hit my father once. Did I ever tell you that?'

'No. No you didn't.'

‘I punched him in the back,’ said Ilora dreamily, remembering the oily, clinging quality of his skin against her knuckles. She was strong, but so was he – they had the same build.

‘It doesn’t help, does it?’ said Mrs Ray.

‘No, I felt worse. But I feel better now. Feels good being around people.’

‘And how do you feel, being around Cameron Arrowsmith?’

Something shot Ilora in the chest, sending her hand flying to grip her heart.

‘*What*?’

‘Cameron Arrowsmith.’

‘What d’you mean?’ she said with a breathless laugh.

‘You know exactly what I mean.’

‘No! No! . . . God, no . . . I have absolutely zero interest in anything to do with that.’ She raised her voice, ‘I would *never* . . .’ she trailed off, blushing and shaking her head.

‘I saw you at parents’ evening. And then I think about how you were behaving the other day, by the river. When I came upon you, all unawares.’

‘And how did “we” behave?’ asked Ilora sourly.

‘*You were both enthralled*,’ said Mrs Ray, and the hairs on Ilora’s neck and arms rose, and all her spine turned to ice.

‘You like him,’ said Mrs Ray, ‘and he likes you. But Cameron is a very disturbed young man. And you’re vulnerable yourself, whether you like me saying that or not. You must stay away from him and that is that.’

‘I know,’ Ilora gulped, trembling, ‘I won’t, I won’t, I wouldn’t . . . I’m not going to see that boy again.’

‘I think that’s very wise.’

‘I’m sorry, Roz,’ said Ilora. She felt ashamed that this woman, herself a grieving friend, had witnessed her being so weak. She had demeaned herself.

‘That’s all right.’

They looked at each other, dry-eyed.

‘There’s something else, Roz. Mrs Ray. It’s about Ryan Arrowsmith.’

‘Ah!’

Ilora told Mrs Ray about her unease.

‘Well, that explains a strange phone call I got from the library,’ said Mrs Ray eventually.

‘Yes, everyone’s been busy on the telephone.’ Ilora scowled. ‘Now what are we going to do? And what’s he been doing at the library?’

‘Harassing the women employees. When I heard that, I did a bit of phoning around. Someone at Crestwick said they’d already spoken to you.’

‘They have.’

‘He’s a groomer,’ said Mrs Ray. ‘And a statutory rapist. Or a coercer, if you want to be delicate. Or a sleazebag, if you want to be very forgiving indeed.’

‘He’s a dirty old goat,’ said Ilora. ‘He’s a mucky little letch.’

‘He’s a filthy fiddler,’ said Mrs Ray, cracking a smile.

‘He’s a dirty bugger,’ Ilora joined in.

They giggled guiltily together.

‘How old is the *Young Musician* girl?’

‘Sixteen,’ Ilora uttered. Mrs Ray looked thoughtful. ‘You seem very unsurprised by all this, Roz.’

‘I’ve seen much worse than Ryan Arrowsmith.’

‘What are we going to do?’

‘I’ve already told the police. They know who he is. They’ve been tracing his movements over a number of years. But it’s hard to build up a case. He won’t be returning after half-term.’

‘What’s going to happen to him?’

‘Karma. Karma is going to happen.’ Mrs Ray laughed blackly.

‘What’s going to happen to . . . to Cameron?’

‘I can’t answer that, Ilora, and you shouldn’t think about it. Forget about him.’

Ilora was standing at the far corner of the fields, looking into the slavering blackness of the river. It was the last moment of the last night. In the assembly hall the concert was in its final throes.

‘Cameron.’ She didn’t turn around. ‘You followed me.’

‘Do you want me to go away?’

‘No. Just tell me what you want.’

‘I don’t know,’ he said after a while.

‘I didn’t think so. And what are you doing here generally? At school?’

‘I’m supposed to be taking care of the props for one of the drama skits.’

‘And now you’ve left them all by themselves.’

She turned towards him grudgingly. ‘Is there anyone you know coming to the concert? Friends, or family?’

‘. . . No.’

‘I suppose, at times like these, you miss your mother.’

‘. . . No.’ His voice got stronger. ‘No, never. Never. My mother died when I was eleven. She drank too much. And they were both these, ugh’ – he shuddered – ‘they took drugs. But he’s not an addict. He’s not even really an alcoholic. He has too much ego to do real damage to himself. Two days after I found my mother I tried to kill myself by taking some pills. It was stupid, it didn’t work and it tasted foul. Then we moved and my father got in debt, and after that we went to Crestwick. Now we’re here. And that, Ms Sen,’ he jeered, ‘that is a little bit of what you’ve wanted to know all term, in all your curiosity.’

She stared at him, absorbing him, his unhappiness and his hate. For the first time she saw him in a dry, clear light, aside from his youth, aside from his beauty, aside from her own disgusting lust and failure and desperation. Now he was telling her his story, now it was too late. They would come for Ryan tonight.

‘I’m so sorry, Cameron, I’m so, so, very sorry.’

‘Yes, it all makes sense now, doesn’t it?’ said Cameron, his voice harsh.

They turned together and began to walk silently with slow cadence along the lip of the forest.

‘It’s four years since your mother died,’ said Ilora eventually.

‘It’s two years since yours died.’

She sank back in dismay. ‘How do you know about that?’

‘I saw her obituary in the paper. I only noticed it because it said you were her daughter at the bottom. And she looks like you. I mean, you look like her.’

‘I don’t actually. You haven’t seen my father, I look exactly like him . . . Only two years. A hundred weekends. They say it takes seven years to recover from a bereavement.’

‘Then I should be feeling more than half recovered by now,’ said Cameron.

‘And do you?’

‘How can I answer that?’ he asked despairingly. ‘My mum wasn’t really “there” even when she was alive. I don’t have good memories of her. She was very fragile.’ He gulped. ‘She cut

herself. When she found out my father cheated on her. Don't tell anyone that.'

'I won't. I have good memories of my mother. Only good memories, in fact. But they don't make me feel better,' said Ilora.

'You're still lucky.'

'I realise that. I realised it when she was alive. At least she knew how much I loved her. I don't have *that* regret . . . You don't love your father, do you? You hate him. And he hates you. Let me guess, you look like your mother.'

A couple of paces on, Cameron nodded silently.

'Is he still involved with that world? Drugs, and –'

'No, he only drinks now.'

'My father had a lot in common with yours. He was this awful, creepy, sleazy guy, and he was such a good actor, everyone who met him thought he was so nice – they thought he was this sweet Asian dad guy . . . Don't you tell anyone that.'

'I never would.'

'Ryan told me you harassed a woman teacher at your old school. Is that true?'

'No. He groomed the students. He did it, not me. He did it. One of them was my best friend.'

She nodded, thinking it through.

'Of course. He can't do it to a stranger because he's too much of a coward, he needs a connection, or an excuse. It has to be a colleague or a friend of a friend. That's what grooming is.'

'She thought we were in on it together.'

'Yes, he uses you, he's jealous of your beauty. I'm sure he's jealous.'

'He always gets away with it, even when he gets caught. It never seems to stick. He's never *punished* for it.'

'Maybe he will be, one day.'

They followed a narrow footpath and stopped beside a slender silver birch. From here the chapel looked like a trinket wrapped in voile. Cameron was much taller than Ilora, but she felt radiantly strong. He raised his hands and smoothed back his hair, which shone like metal. Ilora lifted her head and watched him, not bothering to hide it.

'You're not shy,' she stated. 'Even though you're shaking.' Long moments passed. 'I liked you the moment I saw you . . . Tell me, Cameron, what are we doing here? What do you want? I want to know.'

They breathed in each other's scent, gazing at each other.

'We can't – we can't –' said Cameron.

'No, we must never do that,' whispered Ilora. *We mustn't behave like our filthy fathers.*

She made herself turn away. In a parallel dimension, she thought slyly, in another life . . .

'Ilora.'

'Ilora . . .' she repeated. 'Why is it so nice to hear one's name spoken aloud?'

'Depends on who's speaking.'

'Yeah, you can tell exactly what a person thinks of you from the way they say your name. I think we should stop talking now. In case we say anything we regret.'

'I won't regret it.'

Ilora threw back her head and laughed at the shattered onyx sky, exquisitely crunched and sharp. Here it all was.

'Why are you laughing?' he asked timidly.

'Nothing! I like you.'

They had come to a stop again. Around them the frost-spangled fields were soft and boundless.

'Aren't you cold? You're not wearing your coat,' said Ilora.

‘No . . . I’m not cold.’

‘I have to get back to the concert.’

‘Your voice is so nice, Ilora.’

‘So is yours . . . I have to get back.’

Unwillingly they backed away from each other. Ilora waved in dismissal, one fall of her palm as though casting a spell. She turned and began to walk towards the tennis courts and the sports block. Her body and soul ached. She kept her head down, didn’t look back and walked straight into Ryan, who was dressed in a black anorak. He caught her and gave her a hearty squeeze that she stumbled away from. She gagged and gaped at him. He seemed to bear down on her in silence, putting out both hands as if he wanted to cup her face. She stared into his eyes and felt the warmth and smell of his hands approach. A rod of fear broke through her. He murmured something and, invaded by darkness, she lurched away.

‘I saw you coming out – thought you were having a wee walkabout,’ he said, ‘and I said to myself, I’ll go and keep her company. I was going to jump out at you but I’m too fat to do things like that.’

Ilora overtook him without a word, moving past the chapel, along the side of the humanities block, towards the assembly hall. She was going home now. She wouldn’t return to the school. She had told Mrs Ray. Ryan followed her.

‘Do I look debonair?’

‘No, you look like a clown in a horror film.’

‘We’ve had such a good time over the last few weeks. Even though they’ve cancelled the exhibition.’

‘Ha! Oh, why, Ryan?’ she said with sarcasm and hatred.

‘Financial constraints. You know how it goes,’ he replied, looking her straight in the eye. ‘But you can keep your head. Your sculpture. I’ll make a copy for you. You can keep your hats on it. Where are you going? Ilora!’

Driving out in the blackness, Ilora passed the students who’d been performing at the concert as they came back to the music block to drop off their scores. They looked like child ghosts in her headlights. If only there was a way of keeping them young for ever. They would all trade their innocence, not for knowledge, not for happiness, not for freedom but for their opposites, something ambiguous and purgatorial, a fleet departing light that they’d spend their lives glimpsing and reaching for.

Bidisha is a writer, broadcaster and critic. At the age of 16, she was signed by Harper Collins and subsequently published her first novel, *Seahorses* (1997), at 18. Her second novel, the thriller *Too Fast to Live* was published three years later. Her third book the bestselling travel memoir *Venetian Masters* came out in 2008. She currently writes for the Financial Times, Mslexia, The Observer, New Statesman and The List and The Guardian and presents for the BBC. She has judged the Orange Prize, the Bristol Short Story Prize, the Polari Prize and the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. ‘Dust’ was first published in the Tindal Street anthology *Too Asian, Not Asian Enough* (2011). It marks her return to writing fiction after an absence of 11 years.