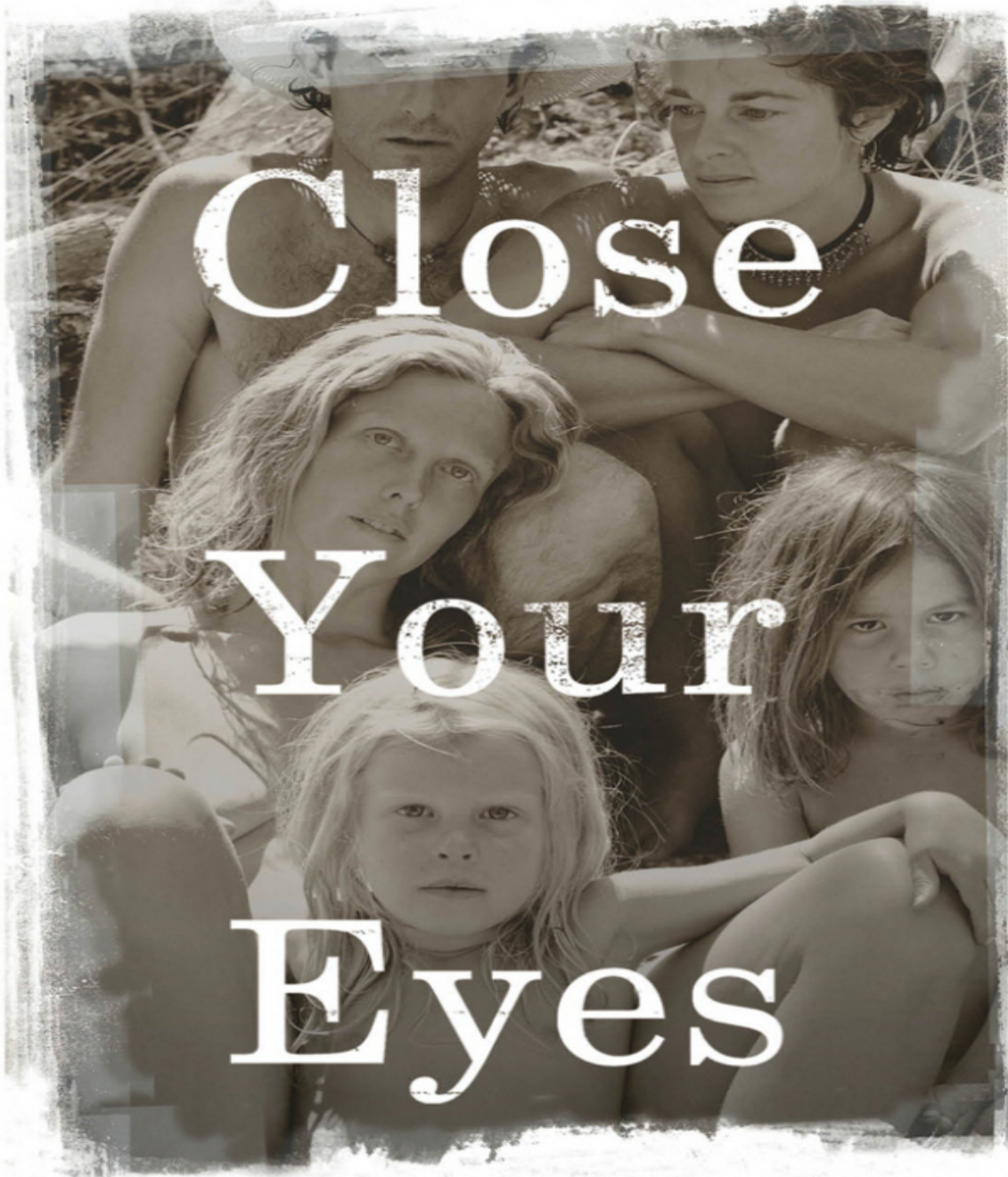


# EWAN MORRISON



*'Close Your Eyes* is an astonishing novel. It manages to be both clear-eyed and harsh, compassionate and just. It takes us right to the heart of the turbulent social changes that defined our last quarter century and it is a revealing, honest, searing novel about mothers and children, about what it means to be part of a family. The story, the writing, the moral intelligence: all of it is a knock out.'

Christos Tsiolkas, author of *The Slap*

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## About the Book

In 1981 a mother abandoned her child and drove into the night, never to return. Her disappearance was reported in the press as a fatal road accident. Her body was never found.

Thirty years later, Rowan has a child of her own. Afflicted by post-natal depression, she is convinced that she'll hurt her daughter unless she unpicks the mystery of her past, buried deep within a commune in the remote highlands of Scotland. Leaving her young family and life in London, she returns to her childhood home to find a failed utopia shrouded in secrecy. And there, with a looming cult leader, among the rites and rituals, the sacraments and ceremonies, is a single postcard dated a week after her mother's death. As she draws ever closer to the truth about her mother, she fears she might lose even herself.

*Close Your Eyes* is a powerful novel, exploring the eternal bonds of maternal love. Evoking the spirit of the 60s and 70s in its gentle, lyrical passion, it tells the secret history of a revolutionary social experiment, and, with unflinching honesty, depicts the impacts, both good and bad, that it had on its children.

## About the Author

Ewan Morrison is the author of two collections of stories, *The Last Book You Read* and *Tales From the Mall*, and the novels *Swung*, *Distance* and *Ménage*. He lives in Glasgow.

Also by Ewan Morrison

*Swung*  
*Distance*  
*Ménage*

For Edna, David and Glenna

# **CLOSE YOUR EYES**

EWAN MORRISON



JONATHAN CAPE  
LONDON

Can ye no hush yer weepin'?  
A' the wee lambs are sleepin'  
Birdies are nestlin', nestlin' the gither  
Dream Angus is hirplin' oer the heather

Dreams to sell, fine dreams to sell  
Angus is here wi' dreams to sell  
Hush my wee bairnie an' sleep without fear  
Dream Angus has brought you a dream my dear

Hear the curlew cryin' o  
An' the echoes dyin' o  
Even the birdies and the beasties are sleepin'  
But my bonny bairn is weepin' weepin'

Dreams to sell, fine dreams to sell  
Angus is here wi' dreams to sell  
Hush my wee bairnie an' sleep without fear  
Dream Angus has brought you a dream my dear

'Dream Angus'  
Traditional Scottish folk lullaby, 1850



**home**

THE MOMENT BEFORE you lose someone, the last moment you had together, people always say, is an image, this image that stays with you for ever. But it was a song. Or rather, her singing along to a tape as we drove through a blizzard. *The Long and Winding Road*. Driving through the night with the spiralling snow in her headlights. *The Fool on the Hill*. Maybe it was, I'm not sure, that last night with her. *A Day in the Life*. Me mesmerised by the tunnel of white, pulling us in, and her voice lulling me to sleep. *Let It Be*.

It might not even have been that album, I don't know for sure, maybe it's just the word beetle - singing along to the Beatles in the VW Beetle. I used to like that, me beside her in the front seat heading south. Two or three in the morning, although the time was always only what she told me it was because I didn't have a watch and she had never taught me how to read the time because in the commune the days were measured in light and dark and not hours, these inventions of men. And night looks pretty much the same, whether it's eleven or four and you are ten or twelve and it's always south, through the Highlands, although you could never see them, the high lands, not at night. And my first dad's cups and plates and sculptures he'd made himself, from the clay dug from the fields, fired in the oven Angus'd built himself, filling the back seats, packed in old boxes. Driving south to Edinburgh or Glasgow. Always south, through the night because we had to be there early, because it was too far for a kid to travel without sleeping, I guess. She was going to sell Angus's ceramics, the ones she helped him make that she let me paint flowers on. A wasted trip like all the others. Craft fairs and no one ever bought a

thing, or maybe just an ashtray, out of politeness or embarrassment or pity, because ashtrays were the cheapest. She never sang on the way back home.

*Let It Be.* I know it must seem funny that she was still listening to this stuff from '68 in '81. We were, but it was our music. Both sides of the double album meant you were at Inverness. She used to just flip the tape over when it was done and play it again. I never made it much past twice without dozing off. *Octopus's Garden* was my favourite but she said Ringo was a sell-out. She liked John best, John Lennon. He was shot dead in New York, she told me, by someone who thought he was the real John Lennon and that the real one was an impostor and a sell-out. She said we would never sell out. *All You Need Is Love.*

Her long black hair in the dark and not being able to see her properly. She was this profile, always, in that last year, lit by what was oncoming, driving on into the dark. It went all the way down her back, her hair was so long she could sit on it. It covered her body when she was naked and she liked that, to be naked. She looked like a fairy and an elf and a witch, like in the books she showed me. Galadriel from *Lord of the Rings* and the Wicked Witch of the North. Her cheekbones, her neck bones, her pelvis, a woman of bones and eyes that grew bigger and darker the skinnier she got and she said it was the vegan diet, but in that last year I never saw her eat a thing. Everyone told her she was a beauty, cats and chicks, mostly cats. We used to say words like that, these words for guys. I'd wake beside them sometimes, after our drives. All of them long-haired, like her, naked and smiling and singing. Everyone used to sing all the time.

Her hands on the steering wheel. They never seemed to fit her body. Strong, from throwing pots, digging, planting, building. Like a man's hands, like Pete's, my second dad. She said I shouldn't call him Dad. Everyone we lived with were our brothers and sisters, she said. Mummy. Mumma.

She preferred me calling her Jenna. She only let me call her Mum when the others weren't around, like in the car. But I remember turning to her and whispering the word to the side of her face because she was singing and couldn't hear me and looking at the road and couldn't see me. Mum. And her sensing my eyes and talking without turning. She could always tell when I was watching her, when I was trying to say something and not saying it.

'Shh. It's a long drive,' she would say, always. 'Listen to the music, close your eyes.'

No, it couldn't have been her last night. If it was it wouldn't have been the Beatles. She'd stopped singing by then and Lennon's death, she said, was really a murder, the FBI, the CIA, like JFK, like Malcolm X. All these people whose names were just letters to me who lived in a place called the USA.

They told me she died in the second or third week. September 1981. Between the twelfth and the nineteenth. Her car skidded off the road, over a cliff, at this place called the Struie, the border between Caithness and Sutherland, fifty miles from anywhere, a natural border where the flatlands turned to mountains. It was a steep decline, trucks went over the edge all the time, and an unpopulated area, and her car had been under the water maybe a week, which was why it took them so long to find it, but not her. The waves, they said, the currents. The car doors burst open on the impact, my grandfather said, a two-hundred-foot drop. She must have been thrown out when it hit. It was the gradient. They should have built a bridge.

She drove me to my first father's house then she headed south and skidded in the snow. This is the story I was told and that I've told myself for years. But snow in September? It might just be a whole bunch of other times I've put together, years apart. Or maybe there was no snow but there was singing, she was singing again, just for that one

night, because she knew it would be our last. Because she wanted me to go to sleep, for everything to be OK again. I don't know why I'm trying to put these things together now, nearly twenty-seven, twenty-eight years later. It's something to do with this thing that happens to me. The first time maybe I can seem to recall it happening was in her car. Like the snowflakes were singing and it was cold outside but my toes were warm. And her voice was warm but her face cold. Things not matching up. Out of sync. My senses and thoughts belonging to two different people. The way I feel most times now. Usually when something is about to go wrong.

\*

Open your eyes. See, everything is as it should be. The plastic elephant, the roundabout, slide, climbing frame, rubberised concrete. Think about that. It stops them hurting themselves when they come down too fast. Try to stay awake. Focus. Look at the people. The mother over there in retro hippie gear putting a baby on a baby swing. Hippie gear in 2009. Things come around, let it go. Don't judge, you're going to be fine. Boy or girl? Girl, not in pink but still you can tell. How old? Three months. Must be. A little girl three months old. Voices.

'That's what they do in Germany.'

'Really? I heard something like it in Sweden.'

They are talking beside you. Joan and Lisa. Your neighbourhood friends. Their children are beautiful. *Other mothers can be your closest allies during this challenging time.* Try to stop staring at the mother pushing her child backwards and forwards on the swing, pulling faces, trying to get her baby to laugh. *Your child should be at least six months before being allowed to play on swings and slides and even then the head must be supported.* The baby's head flops backwards and forwards with each push, hands

barely gripping the plastic security bar. Can only be three months – *Your baby can sit upright only with support*. No, you're not going to get up from the bench and tell the stupid fucking idiot that until six months the infant brain is floating in protective fluid and that sudden movements can — You can't. Can't move. You are so tired and your eyes are closing again. Stop it. Focus on their voices. Lisa, Joan.

'Glass, bottles, cans and newspapers all separately.'

'We should do that here, definitely. Don't you think, Emma?'

Silence. What? Who? They must be waiting for you to talk.

'Sorry,' you say. 'I was just . . .'

'Like they do in Germany. Don't you think it would be good here?'

Something about recycling. Your mother never bought anything plastic and had a compost heap thirty years before they became fashionable. You can still smell it, your fear of the rats. Wake up. They want an opinion. You used to have one on everything. It was your job. Don't think about your job. Don't let the stupid designer hippie upset you, pushing her child too hard on the swing. Jesus, hasn't she read the manuals? *Sudden movements such as swinging or shaking can produce haemorrhaging or frontal lobe damage*. Maybe not a mother – a nanny then. Student nanny. Just a job to her, this is why you said to Josh you'd never have a nanny. Stop staring. Lisa and Joan are waiting for you to speak. Speak then. Show them you still can. 'Yes,' you say. 'No, I mean . . .'

The shriek tears through you. *You will be able to discern the sound of your own child's screams above those of others from a distance of a hundred yards*. Little Sasa, in her carrycot at your feet, crying again. Like she does every time you are about to open your mouth to try to speak. Every time you close your eyes to sleep. Like she knows.

'Shh, Sasa, shh.'

She wants your breast. You can feel your milk weeping into the breast pads but she is too old now and must learn. *Six to eight months is the ideal time for weaning your baby off the breast. You can retard your child's development by prolonging breastfeeding.* Josh has moved on to another manual. Your breast pads are soaking. It's natural they say, in his. Your child cries – you feed. But it has gone on for too long. She sucks so hard. You are so tired but shouldn't be. His manual says different things so he knows better. *The Best Start in Life* it's called. Your mother would have dismissed it as capitalist propaganda. You've read it three times, compared it to your own, tried to bury the contradictions. Page after page then again and again. It's what you do to try to get to sleep. Memorise the methods for being a good mother. When that doesn't work you put your headphones on in bed beside him and listen to your relaxation CD. It never wakes him, the hiss from your headphones. You have four of these CDs from the Self-Help section in Waterstone's and they all start with the words 'Close your eyes'.

No sleep again last night. You have to learn again. How to do this thing that normal people do.

'Shh, Sasa, shh.'

'Three times a week she comes now.'

'God, that's fantastic, mine never does. What's your dad think about it?'

'Just bloody glad to get her out of the house, I think.'

Something else they're laughing about now. This is what happens. One of you tries to speak, a baby cries, you change the subject. You can't keep up. Sasa resents it all because she has no words. The screaming in your spine; breasts, swelling like a bruise; the wet patch growing on your blouse. You can tell they're looking at you with that look. Lisa, Joan. Pity. Because you can't cope and they can. Grannies. They're talking about Joan's mother. You can't talk about your mother. They've stopped asking because

the few things you told them seemed to scare them. You need to have friends like this, everyone needs friends. You love your friends.

Sasa, stop screaming, please.

She won't stop till she gets what she wants. Eight months. *Your baby needs less sleep and may be awake for eleven hours every day. She may wake three or four times in the night.* She's struggling with the straps now, trying to get out, but this is her sleep time. Week two of Sleep Therapy and she is only allowed one daytime nap. *Has tremendous belief in her own abilities and is increasingly frustrated when she finds she can't achieve her goals.*

'Shh, sleepyhead. Close your eyes. Please, Sasa, please.'

Both their babies are dozing in their carrycots. Hands out to their sides. Little angels. Lisa and Joan are good mothers. Joan is your godmother. If you could sleep you would like to wake up as Lisa or Joan.

'Baby Sasa, shh, Mummy loves you.'

But you *are* a good mother. You are doing so well together. *Take time out to appreciate your progress.* She is being tried on solids now. Mashed banana and apple, liquidised pork and chicken soup. She must learn that she's not part of you. She must learn how to eat, sleep, she must stop screaming and reaching for your breasts. She must just stop.

'To the pictures last night and Vietnamese at that new place.'

'And she what, she sleeps in the spare room or what?'

'On the sofa bed, she prefers it. Better for her back, she says.'

Joan's mother, yes. Try to tell Joan that it's wonderful that her mother is there to help, that it's fantastic that she's getting out now, really having a romantic and engaging life again with her hubby, Ray, now that her mother is baby-sitting so much and really that must be the meaning of family, three generations together.



Sasa's screams drown out your words. Fucking hell. *Look down at your baby and feel love for her. Look at her little face.* She doesn't look like you at all. Your mother's eyes, his chin. When he tells you it's all OK, you want to stab him in the fucking eye.

They are not talking now because of Sasa. Lisa and Joan. They sleep, their babies; they are asleep right now. They play, they laugh, at regular times. One nap in the day and then right through the night. These incredible mothers. They are so strong. You love them. You love your child. You love your husband and your lovely big house. You are not going to end up like your mother.

It's no good. Sasa has woken up the other two, Tom and Sophie, and now they're all crying. Focus. Think positive. Look at Lisa and Joan picking their kids up. Don't look at the nanny and the swing. The stupid idiot. Can't anyone see? Pushing her kid like that, she's going to kill the baby. Sasa's screams getting louder. Someone has to do something. These idiots you call friends, look at them inanely chatting while the slave-labour nanny tries to kill the kid. Run up and take the baby off the swing.

You are on your feet, but the pain shoots through your pelvis. You must remember to rise slowly. Pelvic floor muscles torn in labour. Emergency Caesarean. Another step. Sasa shrieking. You turn and Joan and Lisa are staring at you. What are you doing? Did they really think you were walking away, just walking away from your own child.

Show what a good mother you are. Take your index finger, bend it and give Sasa the knuckle to suck on. Josh doesn't believe in dummies. Turn your kid into a dummy, he says. She is biting so hard, but it's OK. She's not doing it deliberately. She would never want to hurt her mother.

It happening again, though, isn't it? The pain in your knuckle as she bites, and you're staring at a perfectly happy private play park in the nicest part of Islington. Look up and out. Lisa and Joan and the nanny and the laughing

kids on the swings and remind yourself that this is what you wanted. You planned this child. You love her. The pain shoots through your knuckle to your back to your breasts. You could pick her up, put her on the swings, push her hard. Higher. Harder. She could make you do it. Or walk. Leave her here, like your mother left you. You want to cry, but your breasts are all that weep. *Talk to your child. Your gentle voice will reassure her.*

‘Please, baby, please, Mummy loves you. Please, for fuck’s sake, shut the fuck up!’

\*

The 21st of September 1981 was the date of the story in the *Dornoch Times*. WOMAN DIES IN ROAD ACCIDENT. Not ‘local woman’ because they hated the hippies from Ithaca and weren’t going to mention that place in their paper. The accident happened the week before, it could have been longer. It was only a weekly publication and the place was on the border so it wasn’t really local news. That was what they said when I called them. They didn’t have an online archive but the local library had all the papers going back to the forties. Four hundred miles away. A two-day drive.

Sorry. I get distracted. If that was her last night, if I was eleven, then there was no snow, and her hair would have been shaved off too and no pots in the back. Just books and flyers and pamphlets; CND and Gandhi and passive resistance. She’d smashed all the pots by then. And if she was singing then it would only have been because she was angry with me and it was better than talking and I didn’t want to talk either and she wouldn’t answer my questions, like where the hell are we going anyway, you stupid cow. She used to say music had power, like this weapon for good in the world. But her singing that night, it was maybe a way to shut me up. She blamed me for everything.

I'm sure she was singing though. If it wasn't the Beatles then it was maybe one of her old folk songs. *Dream Angus?* My first dad was called Angus. *Dream Angus is here with dreams to sell.* She told me he'd sold out too, when he left the commune in '78. It was Angus she left me with that night.

Just these flashes. I would fall asleep in her car and she would lift me out and carry me, holding my whole weight, through the cold, covering me from the rain and singing to me. Her mouth against my head, little kisses and her breath in my ear. The sound of the saliva on her lips. The feel of her chest filling and emptying against mine. The rhythm of her walk and song. And I would wake up in places, strange and alien, and I'd be scared at first because she wasn't there but then I'd hear her voice as she cooked the breakfast I could smell in some kitchen I couldn't see and I would open my eyes on the face of the man or woman I'd woken next to and knew it wasn't scary but OK because I could still hear her singing.

She wasn't there that morning when I woke at Angus's place in Thorster. Or was it Tulloch? Sorry, I get everything mixed up.

I do remember, though, on that last night – snowflakes or *Dream Angus* or not – really having to fight sleep. The rhythm of the car and her voice. Because it was all so perfect and I knew if I fell asleep she would stop singing and if I could just stay awake there would be more and her face and her voice and the road, they would all come together and stay together and everything would make sense.

*Hush me my dearie. Don't sleep by yoursell.*

'Yoursell' was an old Scottish word for yourself. But I can't remember the words. Maybe 'and sleep by yoursell'. 'Hush me my dearie.' It doesn't make sense. Why tell a kid to sleep by themselves? I don't know, because I closed my eyes, like she said I should. And those other fragments,

possibly imagined. Being carried by her, through the wet and the night. These things maybe from other times. She must have laid me on his bed and said goodbye. I can only pretend to remember any of this. She was going off, alone, to start a new life or to die or to be killed. The government were chasing us. I don't know. I have too many versions of the story.

\*

7.02. It's best not to deny it. His energy exhausts you. Admit it, then let it go. Think of the good things he's done today. He's fed Sasa, played with her on the floor, he's bathing her now, chatting away with her. *Every day activities like bath-time can be stimulating learning experiences for your baby.* He is a good father, the best. You can hear her laughter all the way through here in the kitchen. He doesn't coo-chee-coo her; his manuals say it's better for child development to talk to them like they're adults already.

'Clever girl. Go on, take the sponge. You can wash yourself. Have you got it? Go on, hold it, squeeze. That's it. Clever girl.'

He's worried that her hand-eye coordination is not as good as Jobe's or Arturo's. That she is a bit behind. You have told him so many times that girls develop these things later but have an earlier grasp of words, names. Her first word was Dah. The manual says this is not a reflection of the child's preference for one parent over another. D is easier to pronounce than M. That's all. She has no name for you.

Admit it. You could scream when he is with her and you just have to sit and wait. She came from you. Your body. Is you. You need space from her, you demand it of him, she drives you crazy, but still, every second she is away, you feel alone, more alone than before, and you had her so as

not to feel alone again. You don't, you can't, resent your husband for being with her. Even though he keeps her up late and she wakes early, grumpy from not having slept enough. Face it, the fact. You are still there, aren't you? In those first hours. Crying at the wonder of her. Holding her to you. Weeping over her tiny fingers clutching yours, her mouth reaching for your breast. You would love to live there for ever, wouldn't you? Born again with your newborn. It pains you, this separation, as she grows and passes from the body of the mother to the language of the father, as the manuals say is necessary. When you are separated every joint and muscle aches. The lungs, the heart, they race. It's hormones, the books say, but it's more, you know this. You had her to stop the panic. You must never tell your daughter of your mother's anxiety attacks. Nights you sit silent watching her breathing in sleep. Worrying that she'll stop if you leave the room. Face it. You are finding it hard to sleep in your bed with him, because you need to feel her at your breast, her fast little breaths, her tiny lungs, breathing in your scent as you smell her head and cling to her, not too tight, just right, trying to pull her back into you again. The way her mouth always finds your nipple and that moment of aching. That gratification and the pain all at once when she is feeding, like you were once told sex should be. You slept better when you were with her every night. Now that you are separated, in bed with your husband, you can't.

7.08. He told you, you should take the weight off your feet, take a nap. He is such a generous, caring man. But you can't. You've told him this. Do what you always do. Keep busy. Sterilise the changing area, get the nappy ready and the wipes. Make a list of things to get from the twenty-four-hour Sainsbury's. Take the Aveda Vacuum Breast Pump and disassemble it. The handle, the bottle, the plastic breast pad, the suction valve. Rinse your old milk from it and place it inside the matching Aveda Prima Steam

Sterilising Unit and put in half a cup of water. You are there now in the kitchen. It takes twelve minutes to sterilise the pump. Your baby manual tells you you don't have to do this any more, Sasa's antibodies are strong enough to deal with hostile germs. Josh insists it's better to be safe than sorry. Your mother, it was told, breastfed you for three years. You must stop thinking about her.

Raspberries, he's doing that thing he does. You can hear them. He must have her out of the bath, wrapped in her towel, lifting her up and blowing kisses on her tummy, fart noises. She giggles and screeches every time. Then there's the silence, then he does it again. If he doesn't stop now, she'll laugh herself into hiccups. She'll be too excited to go down tonight. *Typical signs of overstimulation include a high level of activity, a disrupted sleep pattern, irritability and unpredictable levels of concentration.* Fucking idiot. He gets her excited and who has to deal with it? He comes in, out of nowhere, he calls it work, he has no idea what work is, after you've been with her all day, no naps, he gets her excited, he's not the one that gets woken three times a night. His stupid smiling face when he gets her laughing.

You love your husband. He is everything a woman could want. Educated, sensitive, a good listener, principal breadwinner, but respects and encourages your career. He does all the cooking. He designed the kitchen and bought all the Le Creuset pots. He massages your shoulders and pelvis in bed at night with lavender-scented Body Shop oil. You chose him, did your research. *Loving the New Man. Children for Beginners.* You read from the manuals together. *The Working Family, Planning Life Together.* Remind yourself that you are making progress. You are *Partners in Progress* like the new advert at work says. Don't think about work. You must stop checking your emails. You must reply soon and tell them you need a little more time. You did maternity leave, then sickness leave, you are running out of leaves.

7.28. Nine minutes to go till the sterilising steamer is finished. You swear it was nine minutes last time you looked. Keep busy. There's his copy of the *Guardian* on the kitchen table but you know it will only upset you. Afghanistan and your mother and the peace camp at Faslane. The caffeine in a cup of tea might keep you up. You can't have a glass of wine because it passes into her milk. His copy of *The Best Start in Life* is on the table with his paperwork. You could reread the chapter on Sleep Therapy again, but you know it by heart. You're going to try it again tonight, together. Attempt number ten, not picking her up when she wakes, but sitting with her through her screams till she falls asleep. *The New Home Doctor* is on the table too. Don't pick it up. You know what happens when you do.

It started with colic, months ago. You read that it was a natural non-life-threatening condition that would pass, and kept on going, turning the pages in bed, so quietly, so as not to wake him. You knew it was wrong but couldn't help yourself. Past C to D to Dementia to Depression to Endocrinal Spasmosis to Fibroids to Gastroenteritis to Hepatitis B, through J, K, L, M, N, O to Post-Natal Depression. He says it can't be. That it would have happened just after Sasa was born. Unless it's some hormone change that's come about since you started reducing her feeds. 'We,' he says. You haven't got to 'W' yet. 'Double you.' Last week, in secret, you went from P to S. Sleep Deprivation.

*After 72 hours of broken sleep, sleeping less than three hours at any one time, you may lose your sense of time and space. Perception starts to fail and things may seem out of sync. Sleep deprivation has also been used in reconditioning, also known as neural reprogramming or brainwashing.*

Suicidal Thoughts was on the next page. You told yourself you wouldn't read it. Your mother did not commit suicide.

Page 237. *In an effort to suppress evaluative awareness and shut down her emotions, the suicide narrows her mental focus. The resulting state is a kind of numbness characterised by rigid and concrete thinking, focus on the here and now. It is clear that many victims have no concrete plan for killing themselves. Many road accidents may in fact be suicidal acts on impulse.*

You will not read it again tonight as he sleeps. You will not think about her postcard, hidden in the glove compartment of the car, that proves it's all a lie. The postmark date, two weeks after they told you she was dead. The postcard you found at Grandpa's house.

Out of the corner of your eye, through the kitchen doorway, his big dark form is carrying her tiny white towel body into the bedroom. The giggling is still going on. Focus. Seven minutes till the steamer is done. Two minutes for it to cool down, one to reassemble the pump then fifteen to express your milk. Five to decant it into the vacuum-sealed plastic sachets that go inside the sterilised bottles. Then it will be 7.35. Sasa's story time.

Six minutes. Watching the steam leak out from the steamer. Pick up *Toddler Taming*. Get with the plan. Good, yes. Page 182. *Some babies like a steady background noise such as a washing machine. If all else fails, most babies will drop off to sleep in the car.* If all else fails. She'll wake at two then at four and she'll be too angry to go back to sleep. Tonight will be the same. You will have to do what you always have to. Wrap her up warm, put her in the carrycot, carry her to the Subaru and drive her round the block. Round and round till she stops screaming then falls asleep. Then round two more times, just to make sure, then carry her back to her cot. Little Sasa. Little Ailsa. Named after an island in Scotland because he has this romantic thing about your Scottishness. Your years in Ithaca you've simplified to some witty dismissive anecdotes. You never told him that it



still exists, that its name throws you into panic, that the postcard tells you she is still alive.

Four minutes. What year is this? Two thousand and eight, nine.

It's happening again. 'Ten Green Bottles' he's singing to her. *And if one green bottle should accidentally fall.* You are staring at the steamer, the Alessi bottle opener, the Sabatier knives, the Guzzini cutlery. It's as if the kitchen is singing. Like the picture from one channel and the sound from another. He does crash noises when a bottle falls. Stare at his half-empty Chardonnay bottle on top of the fridge and try to stop thinking about smashing it. You haven't had a glass of wine in over a year. He doesn't know about your drinking and how you gave it up for him. About hash and speed and LSD. N is for neurosis. *Neurotics try to build utopias based on denial - one thing goes wrong then they regress and destroy all they have built.* You should have told him more. *Communicate with your partner about your past and your fears.* It's too late now.

'Rowan, the steamer!'

Who is this voice who talks to you all the time? This woman who calls you Rowan? Emma is your name now.

Thirty, forty seconds then the steamer clicks off. Take off the lid, don't scald your fingers, then take the pieces out. The suction cup is at the front, it's made of a soft plastic that simulates the touch of a baby's mouth and has nodules that stimulate the breast when you depress the vacuum pump lever.

You have assembled it and placed it on your breast and depressed the suction handle. But it's not working. So sore. Breasts aching, full to bursting, but nothing coming out. Her gums have damaged your nipples. You worry that they might bleed again. You don't want to see blood in the milk, or pus. *The sound of your baby crying or the sight of her face may help in starting the lactating process. Focus on her face.* Go over to the big bookshelf by his PC and take

Sasa's photo down. Sit with it in front of you. Focus on her pretty face, her little blonde curls, so like his, and the dark eyes that run in the family on your mother's side. Start pumping. Yes, that's right.

Something seems to snap, burst, a sharp pain, then the milk shoots out, thin at first, yellowish, then getting thicker. Never white like cow's milk. More like sperm. It took so long to conceive her. Nine months and so many false starts. You bought a manual for that too. Idiot self-help addict. The self must be annihilated, your mother said.

Count the pumps. Focus away the pain. Eight, nine, ten. His voice singing from next door. Now it's one man went to mow. 7.41. Does he really think he can teach her how to count? For fuck's sake. Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. Went to mow a meadow. Two men, one man and his dog.

He doesn't know how it feels, pumping yourself into a plastic container. Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four. It's happening again. Your milk spraying and three men, two men, one man and his dog. The sight of your child's face in a photograph. Spot, a bottle of pop, an old tin can for a frying pan. Words and pictures mixing up. Sasa's farm animals on the floor, pigs in pink, cows in brown. We have become as plastic as the products we consume, your mother said. Went to mow a meadow.

'She's down.'

You look up and he's smiling at you in the kitchen doorway. Very proud of himself. His pinstripe shirt wet where she's splashed him in the bath or maybe it's sick. He's so tall, so good-looking, so much younger than you. He could have been a model, he looks like Clark Kent or a Calvin Klein advert.

'Went out like a light,' he says.

'Wow,' you say. 'How d'you do it, Superdad?'

But he really is. He has a way with her. He takes a seat beside you and watches you expressing, smiling to himself. *Tell your partner when you are uncomfortable. He must*