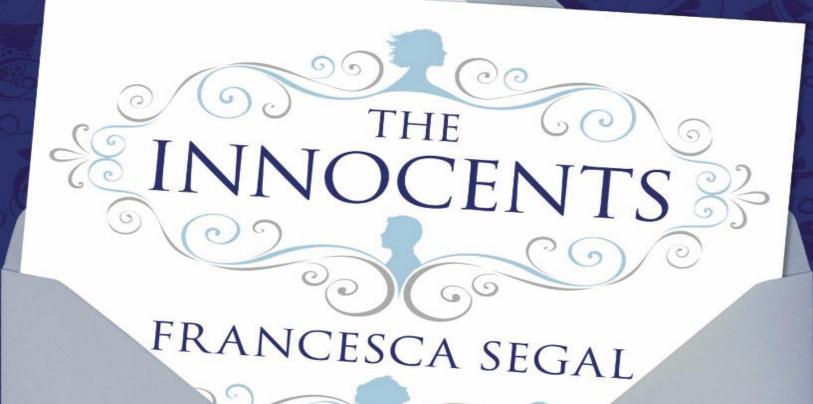
'Exuberant, sensitive, witty' SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE



'Full of real pleasures and unexpected wisdom' ESTHER FREUD

Contents

Cover
About the Book
About the Author
Dedication
Title Page
Epigraph

Part One

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Part Two

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One Chapter Twenty-Two Chapter Twenty-Three Chapter Twenty-Four Chapter Twenty-Five Chapter Twenty-Six Chapter Twenty-Seven Chapter Twenty-Eight Chapter Twenty-Nine Chapter Thirty Chapter Thirty

Part Three Chapter Thirty-Two

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About the Book

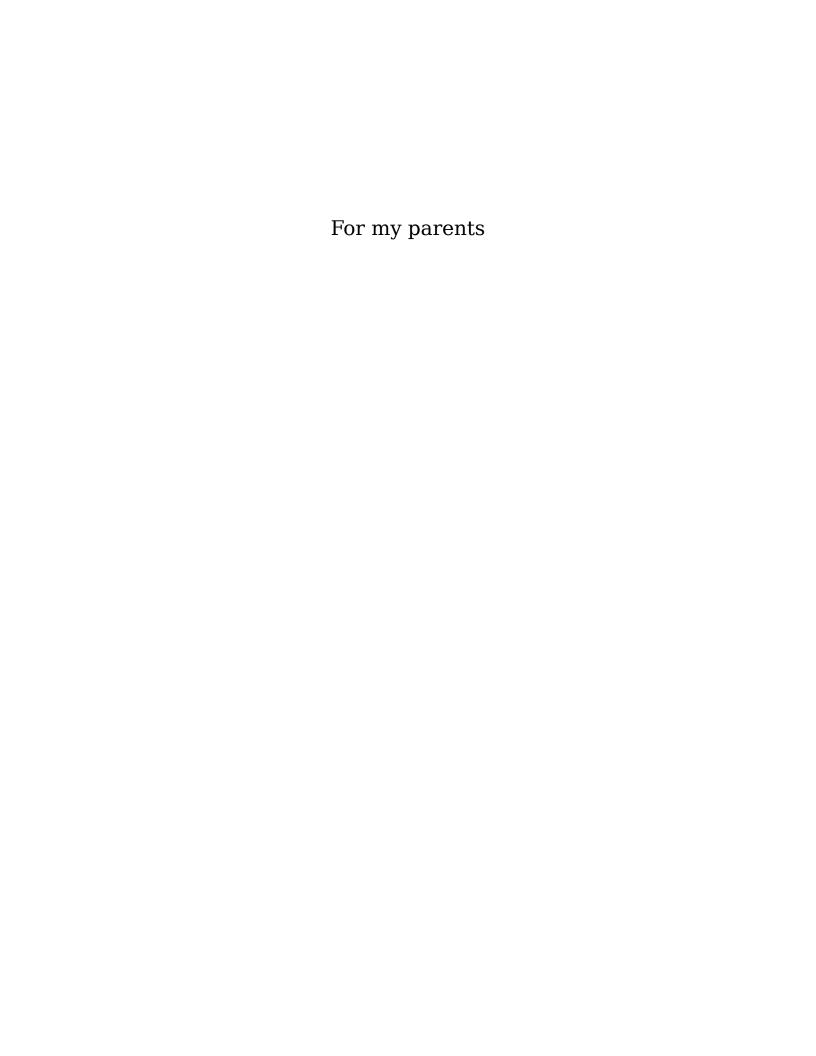
Adam has just proposed to his childhood sweetheart. Rachel is everything he has ever wanted – pretty, kind, thoughtful, safe and sure of her place in the world. Her family loves him, they share the same friends, in fact they are a perfect young couple set for a life of married bliss and comfort in north-west London.

But on to the scene comes Ellie, Rachel's younger, sexier but vulnerable and mysterious cousin from New York. Despite his contentment, Adam finds himself uncontrollably drawn to Ellie – her beauty is overwhelming, her history is compelling, and she comes to represent all that is missing from his life: excitement, curiosity, freedom. And so his struggle begins – should he turn towards a new life of adventure and discovery, risking all that he holds dear, or stay true to love, responsibility and the ties of his community, giving up the possibility of any alternative?

The Innocents is an age-old tale of love, temptation, confusion, commitment and coming to terms with the choices we've made, that – in a wry, humorous, affectionate voice – tells the story of one young man's pre-wedding panic as he grapples with the conflicts between responsibility and passion, security and freedom, tradition and independence. Francesca Segal's triumphant debut invites us in to a close-knit community, where a universal drama unfolds, with assurance and grace.

About the Author

The daughter of a novelist and an editor, Francesca Segal was born in London in 1980. Brought up in the UK and America, she studied at Oxford and Harvard universities before becoming a journalist and critic. Her work has appeared in *Granta*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *FT Magazine* and the *JC*, amongst others. For three years she wrote the Debut Fiction Column in the *Observer* and she was, until recently, a Features Writer at *Tatler*.



The Innocents

FRANCESCA SEGAL

Chatto & Windus LONDON In the rotation of crops there was a recognised season for wild oats; but they were not to be sown more than once.

- Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence

PART ONE

ONE

ADAM HAD, FOR the occasion, bought a new suit. He had wavered between dandyish black, chalk-striped and double-breasted, and a more traditional two-button jacket in deep navy wool. After some consideration he had chosen the navy. It seemed a more appropriate suit for a man who was newly engaged.

And now he was in the suit and in synagogue, considering the stained-glass windows that painted a dappled light, pale rose and paler sapphire, on to the painted faces in the women's gallery. There were three of these windows – a red-flamed golden candelabra for Chanukah; a rainbow in a cobalt sky with white leaded doves swooping beneath its arch, and a third pane in which acid-green palm trees framed the two rounded silvery tablets of the Decalogue, an orange and lemon sunburst above them. Beneath this one sat Rachel Gilbert between her mother and her grandmother, looking intently at the pulpit. Adam, in turn, lowered his eyes from the windows and looked intently at Rachel.

They had been together since they were sixteen - twelve years last summer. For twelve years she had been his girlfriend and now, for a week, she had been his fiancée. And it all felt different. He could never have anticipated the shift, profound and inarticulable, that had taken place when he had seen the ring over which he had agonised winking on Rachel's slender finger. It was more than possession, more than union, more than love. It was

absolute confidence. It was certainty, and a promise of certainty always.

Beside him Jasper Cohen stirred suddenly, shifting his bulk beneath the folds of his white prayer shawl. 'Rachel's cousin's here.' He nudged Adam in the ribs with a heavy elbow and nodded towards the balcony where the Gilbert women were ranged, coiffed and contemplative, in a mahogany pew. Rachel's mother Jaffa Gilbert sat closest to the rabbi, her cropped and hennaed hair hidden beneath a green hat, red-framed glasses on a red plastic chain resting on the broad velvet shelf of her bosom. Beside her sat Rachel herself demure in high-necked charcoal silk, looking down at her hands, her face half obscured by a sheet of tumbling dark hair. Rachel's grandmother Ziva Schneider was on her other side, peering at the text in her lap with a grimace of either concentration or scepticism. And then the cousin, Ellie Schneider.

'So?'

'You didn't tell me she was back from New York.'

'I didn't know you cared.'

'If there's going to be a half-naked model in *shul* then I care.' Jasper leaned over Adam, straining to see. 'God, she's tall. You'd need a stepladder to get up there.'

'Six foot.'

'Too tall for me. You could handle her.' Jasper flipped over a few pages of his prayer book without looking at them. 'When are we going to get hold of that porn film she was in?'

'Art house,' Adam hissed. Long inured to Jasper's indiscretion, he was nonetheless alarmed by it on this occasion. Whatever other rumours might be circulating about her, he did not want the congregation thinking his fiancée's cousin was a porn star.

Jasper snorted, loudly. Jasper did everything loudly. He was not secure enough to believe that anyone would pay him attention unless he made himself unavoidable.

'Arse house, maybe. I've seen clips on YouTube, mate, it's porn. We've got to order it.'

'No.'

'No it's not porn or no we shouldn't order it? Gideon said that they censored half an hour from the final version but you can still get it uncut in the States.'

'Gideon didn't say that, I said that. Rachel was upset about it.'

'Well either way, Columbia kicked her out for doing it so there's got to be something worth seeing.'

'Shh,' said Adam finally, frowning. He was not the only one, he noticed. Whispered conversation among the men in the back pews was in general permissible, encouraged even, if the content was engaging enough for the surrounding eavesdroppers. Football, in particular, was a much beloved topic. Services on the High Holidays were long; it was understood that one had to pass the time. But sustained discussions about porn during Kol Nidre - the beginning of Yom Kippur and a significant, spiritual incantation - was pushing lenience to its limit. The congregation were fasting until sunset tomorrow night; in the meantime they were meant to be atoning. Adam too had seen clips of Ellie Schneider's acting debut on the Internet; in one she was delivering a breathy and hypnotically rhythmic monologue to the camera, wearing only a stained Columbia University T-shirt while the rest of her was exposed and exploited by a menacing co-star. Synagogue was not a place in which he felt comfortable recalling it. Around them the *Al Chet* prayer continued. For the sin we have committed before you by improper thoughts. For the sin we have committed before you through speech. Pardon us, forgive us, atone for us.

Adam rejected the memory with some effort and instead focused on the women's gallery, hoping to catch Rachel's attention. She looked down at him and widened her eyes. From her expression he could see that she had a great deal

to say and was desperate to say it - her cousin was embarrassing her; she could not believe that Ellie was in shul at all, let alone that the girl had come to Kol Nidre exposing skin from clavicle to navel, wearing a tuxedo jacket with nothing beneath it and black trousers trousers! - that clung and shimmered as if she'd been dipped in crude oil. Adam needed little more than a glance understand Rachel's signalling, for the contractions of her lips and the arching of her dark brows were a language long mastered. He knew their vocabulary, and every expression of her lovely face. He did not see the appeal of unpredictable women. Rachel never surprised him and he considered it a testament to their intimacy that he could predict her reactions with complete confidence. Life, he knew, provided enough of the unexpected. Adam had perspective. A steady and loyal co-pilot was more important than whatever passing frisson might come with more spontaneous spirits. He smiled at her.

Outside the synagogue Adam waited for Rachel and her family. For late September it was warm, tenacious leaves still green and living on the oaks that stood like looming sentries along the edge of the empty car park. Tonight, people were leaving slowly, taking their time to fold prayer shawls, gather coats, greet friends. The fast decreed that there would be no supper; nothing at all, in fact, until the same time tomorrow evening when they would all be leaving synagogue once again, but at a more urgent pace. Tonight they would have to be sated with spiritual – or at least social – sustenance. Men and women were now reunited after the service and families reassembled, lingering on the steps and drifting out past Adam, calling goodbyes to one another into the hazy autumn darkness.

'Hi. Here again.'

The voice was American, low and close behind his shoulder. He turned to find Ellie Schneider winding a long

grey scarf around her neck, an unlit cigarette already in one hand.

Until now Adam had had a clear image of Rachel's cousin in his mind assembled from magazines and the Internet – limbs of satin; champagne blonde hair; high cheekbones and high, pointed breasts. He knew about her other life beyond the page, of course. In reality the girl was a mess. But in photographs her pale skin was as smooth as poured cream, and the bright green eyes, Disney wide, evoked a fresh-faced innocence entirely at odds with the darkness he knew was behind them. And so the darkness was easy to ignore. She was related to his girlfriend and he had taken a proprietary interest.

For years, in his head, he had been establishing a relationship with Rachel's younger cousin - close, vaguely paternal, faintly flirtatious but always within the bounds of what was appropriate among old friends. She would confide in him about her antics and he would be fond and exasperated and offer her sage, avuncular advice. When he and Rachel married she would treat their home like her own and would turn to them for refuge, would stay with them (visits during which she might sometimes be glimpsed in her underwear - though, in Adam's defence, this was not usually the focal point of the daydream). They would help her turn around her troubled life. In the pub with Jasper and the boys, he discussed her New York life in a confident, possessive manner. Ellie's seedy glamour, such a contrast to her conventional cousin, nonetheless gave Rachel a certain edge. No one else had so notorious or so alluring a relative. The girls had been close in childhood and in the solitude of his own thoughts, Adam had appropriated this closeness. He was a friend and confidant. Now, he was forced to confront the reality that she was almost a perfect stranger.

The private image he'd constructed was now superimposed, ill-fitting, on to the girl who stood before

him. Her eyes were the same extraordinary green, bright and clear and fixed on him with an expression of idle curiosity, but beneath the thick lashes were rings of grey and plum and lavender, as if she'd slept many nights in old make-up or perhaps simply never slept. Around her, the exposed heads of the community's departing women were sleek and blow-dried, neat as a pin in order to stand before God's judgement and each other's, but Ellie's hair was in a loose ponytail of over-bleached straw-blonde, and looked unbrushed. Her heavy, pouting lips were chapped. Beneath the gaping collar of her jacket, her gaunt frame seemed as flat-chested as a little boy and when she turned away for a moment, tugging her hair out from under her scarf, her profile revealed a deep shadow beneath a cheekbone that protruded like sharp flint. He hid his surprise and looked instead at the cigarette, hoping to convey to her that lighting it on Yom Kippur - while still in the grounds of the synagogue - would be flagrantly, extravagantly offensive. He did not want Rachel's parents to be embarrassed further.

'Where again?' he asked. Despite his inventions, he had not expected her to remember him.

'I met you here once, a long time ago. Jaffa brought me with her to pick up Rachel from Israel Tour. I was desperate to come, I'd missed her so much. I was playing on the climbing frame when the buses got in. Just there.' She nodded towards the other end of the car park and his eyes followed hers to the smooth, empty tarmac where years ago had stood a curved rack of low monkey bars and a shallow plastic slide. 'I worshipped her and I was just insanely jealous that summer. I just thought – anyway. You and Rachel got off the coach together, you were carrying her bag. I remember, it was the first time I'd noticed a boy doing that. And then she brought you over and introduced you to Jaffa and Lawrence. So I met you.'

'You were very little then.'

'Ten.'

'Good memory.'

She shrugged. 'You all seemed happy. That's rare enough to make an impression.'

At that moment Rachel's parents appeared behind her and he lost the chance to reply, though Ellie's comment had bothered him. He knew a lot of happy people here. He remembered the day that Ellie described as clearly as she did, not for the stern blonde ten-year-old who'd shaken his hand with the formality of a politician, but for Rachel - he had first met her on that youth group trip to Israel, and as their coach of sunburned teenagers had drawn into the car park he had asked her to be his girlfriend. And - he knew it seemed anachronistic, or simply unfashionable - but from the moment she'd smiled back, bashful and willing, he'd known that they would get married. She'd had such certainty, such a placid conviction in the essential goodness of the world and what it promised her. To Adam, raised by a mother who prepared with steely determination for the worst to happen immediately if not sooner, Rachel's unwavering, no-nonsense optimism had been an elixir. He hadn't known that he was allowed to expect a calm, happy life until Rachel had shown him that she anticipated nothing else. Her belief was such that there seemed no doubt she would have it; whoever shared that life with her would share that calm and happiness.

He'd loved her since that glorious month of freedom in Israel. The boys had pierced their ears, kneeling on blankets for Arab jewellery traders to shoot ill-advised gold studs through their lobes; Rachel and her friends had sat cross-legged on adjacent rugs while Ethiopian girls worked slim braids into their hair, the plaits then wrapped in bright cotton so that one or two worms of green and red stuck out stiffly from each ponytail. Their teenage rebellions that summer had been innocent and conventional and brief – the earrings had been removed at Heathrow; there had only

ever been kissing and maybe, for a precocious couple, one hand in a bra. And Adam and Rachel had done neither of those things but instead had begun tentatively, in the final few days, to sit together on the bus. They were all happy then - Ellie was right. But they were happy now, too.

'Good, good, you found each other.'

Rachel's father Lawrence clapped Adam amiably on the back and then, overcome by emotion at the thought of the engagement as he had been intermittently all week, gripped him by the shoulders and held him at arm's length for a loving appraisal. He then enfolded him in a bear hug. Adam and Lawrence were the same height - six foot two but Adam was broad-shouldered while Lawrence was thin and always slightly stooping, as if to avoid intimidating anyone with this impressively un-Jewish height. Yet still his bear hugs felt enveloping. The warmth of Lawrence's alone was enveloping. Proud to be presence particularly among Ashkenazi men who tend to halt at around five nine, Adam had nonetheless been content to stop growing where he did. It would have felt wrong to stand taller than Lawrence.

Jaffa, small and wide where her husband was tall and slim, was frowning at Ellie's cigarette. 'Ellie, you can wait for that, no? Show respect.' She had removed the green hat to expose short hair home-dyed a deep wine purple, streaked with lighter aubergine shades where it had begun to fade with washing. It was a colour much favoured, for reasons Adam had never fathomed, by Israeli women of a certain age.

Ziva Schneider joined them in time to hear this remonstrance. 'You think,' she asked her daughter, 'that God finds it more respectful if she smokes on Kol Nidre around the corner?'

Jaffa pursed her lips in irritated silence, as her mother knew full well that it was not God's judgement that

concerned her. She wanted to stand exultant in the car park as the crowds flooded from the synagogue, graciously accepting congratulations on the triumph of her daughter's engagement to Adam. She wanted to soak up *naches* like a sponge. Such a large assembly would not come together again until Rosh Hashanah the following year - this Yom Kippur she wanted to fire her news at huge clusters of rival mothers. She adored Adam, God only knew, but there had been other engagements recently, newer couples walking down the aisle; the names of girls younger than her daughter featured on the announcements pages of the Jewish Chronicle. There had been some concern that Adam would leave it 'too long'. But now it had happened, and Rachel would not yet be thirty at the wedding if they planned it quickly. Today of all days, Jaffa Gilbert did not want to concern herself with her niece's rebellion. She turned her considerable back to both Ziva and Ellie and caught Adam's face between plump hands.

'Ah, Adam, Adam. Rachel says she'll be just a little while, *bubele*, she is talking to Brooke Goodman about something. You are breaking the fast with us tomorrow, yes?'

Adam nodded, his face still between Jaffa's palms through the first few motions. An assortment of rings - heavy silver and bright moulded plastic - scratched gently against his cheeks.

'I'll wait for Rachel, please go ahead.'

'I am going nowhere, I have a cab,' said Ziva, sitting down neatly on a low brick wall. 'I am an old lady, I will not walk back and no injunction says I must. I am eighty-eight. I am infirm. *Pikuach nefesh*. This morning I already call Addison Lee, and Ellie will come with me.'

'Infirm? Eze meshugas? At lo chola, Ima!'

'Sha shtil,' said Ziva, waving away Jaffa dismissively. At that moment a black Volkswagen drew up at the kerb and Ziva hopped lightly to her feet, disappearing into it before Jaffa could intervene. Ellie folded herself into the front seat and the car departed. Adam watched her go with curiosity.

'Eze meshugas?' Jaffa asked again, this time to herself, pouting and drawing her face further back into her chins. She made no further comment but the force with which she crossed her arms over her immense, velvet-clad breasts was sufficiently expressive. The engagement cast their family into the spotlight this Yom Kippur – absolute propriety was required beneath its glare. A look of anxiety crossed Lawrence's mild face as they departed, Jaffa muttering an outraged monologue in rapid Hebrew to her partially comprehending but entirely supportive husband. Lawrence was a straightforward man. He lived, exclusively and devotedly, for his wife and daughter. He would be happy again only when Jaffa's equilibrium was restored.

Adam sat down on the wall that Ziva and Ellie had just vacated, nodding greetings to the many familiar faces among the congregation. Mostly, these were the occupants of the crowded outer stratum of his world; people with whom his life had intersected at an earlier stage and who now resurfaced often enough for him to know a little of their lives, though he did nothing to seek out either the information or the subjects of it. Such was the way in Jewish north-west London - no one ever disappeared. Instead his contemporaries circled in its gravity, returning from college to rent houses in Hendon, or buy first flats in West Hampstead, held in orbit by the hot sun of the community. And during brief periods away - a year seconded to a law firm in Shanghai, for example, or a residency at an Edinburgh hospital - their parents were still in place and in contact, so that everyone's coordinates remained logged. It had only been at university that he had understood just how unusual it was that he could list the whereabouts of all of his nursery school classmates. He could say if they were married or fat or employed by the civil service. He knew, for the most part, their sexual histories. Unless from a very small village, his fellow students found it incomprehensible. Even in a small village, in fact, when people leave there is little expectation of return.

But tonight, on the eve of Yom Kippur, everyone was here - Hayley Pearl, who was Jasper's girlfriend's sister; Dan Kirsch, who had been in Adam and Jasper's Scout pack and had twice been on tennis camp with Rachel; Ari Rosenbaum, whose brother had married a girl who'd gone out with Dan Kirsch. Adam smiled at each of them as they passed, but his eyes always returned to the steps of the synagogue, waiting to catch sight of his future wife.

TWO

'SHE MUST.'

'What, do it on purpose?'

'Yes, of course. You can't go to *shul* with your tits hanging out and not realise.'

'Adam, that's my cousin! And please don't use that word.' Rachel swatted at his forearm and then immediately patted it, somewhat anxiously, as if to undo the simulated violence of her rebuke. It made her unhappy to disapprove of him. 'Maybe in New York people are just less conservative at synagogue.'

'It's New York, Pumpkin, it's not the moon. How different can it be?'

'Well then I don't know. Everything about her's different from me.'

'That's true,' Adam said. 'Thank goodness.'

They were parking outside Ziva's house in Islington; as he turned to reverse into a space he squeezed her shoulder fondly. She was right, of course. Absolutely everything about her was different from her younger cousin. Ellie seemed restless and too worldly. Rachel liked what she knew and was content for everything to remain precisely as it was, though it would be unfair to say she was ignorant. That there were worlds and lives beyond theirs had not escaped her, but she was certain enough of her own place to be resolutely incurious about the knowledge that those worlds might offer. At sixteen, Adam had been able to see in her eyes the home she would make for him at fifty. Rachel knew who she was.

Their exteriors were equally at odds. Rachel was polished and pink with health, her dark hair sleek, her nails neat and Chanel-varnished. Ellie had looked slightly worn, he'd thought outside the synagogue, though she was only twenty-two; he'd noted the bitten nails and the angry red skin around them, had seen the shadows beneath her eyes. It had been months since Ellie had officially been expelled from the Creative Writing programme at Columbia University – if she had sleepless nights, it wasn't because she was studying.

An evening rain had begun, light and silent, insistent enough to pixelate the world through the windscreen until it blurred. Adam jumped out to open Rachel's door, holding his jacket aloft to shield her hair from the drizzle. Since the engagement he had found himself taking a particular pride in these small gestures of gallantry. She looked different to him now, no longer simply his girlfriend but the woman to whom he had promised his future. He felt the weight of his responsibilities towards her, long unspoken, now confirmed. A twenty-eight-year-old matriarch to future generations of Newmans.

He studied her now as she picked her way up the dark path to Ziva's front door, his jacket covering her head and held tightly beneath her chin like a wimple. Entirely unlike Ellie's long bones and sharp angles, Rachel was rounded and soft and had the same pneumatic breasts as her mother, cartoonishly large on her small frame and always strapped and scaffolded as high as she could cantilever them. These breasts had afforded her hours of backache and embarrassment, and afforded Adam just as many hours of pleasure. It was true that unless she was careful to emphasise her waist she could look a little dumpy. Loose clothes gave the misleading impression that her body thrust out equally far in all directions, a barrel all the way down to her bottom. But naked, they were magnificent. They had ripened into their current proportions only in the

years after he and Rachel had got together – he could never have imagined that the size-eight floral bikini he'd admired from afar in Israel could have held such potential. But by the time she eventually undressed for him they were there, the first breasts he had ever touched. Even now he could imagine no better. Ellie looked like a boy when compared to her cousin. As he rang the doorbell he wondered, briefly, what get-up she'd be in this evening.

Ziva was alone, she informed them, but she had just made coffee and they were to help themselves to a little something. Many decades in London had not diminished a robust Austrian accent, and a faintly foreign grammar often shaped her speech despite a vocabulary – in what was her fifth language after German, Yiddish, French and Hebrew – wider than that of most native English speakers. Austria to Mandate Palestine; Israel to London – from Ziva to Jaffa to Rachel encompassed three generations, three accents, one typical Jewish family. When Adam and Rachel had children they would be the first born in the same country as their mother for nearly a century.

It had taken several visits before Adam had noticed that there were provisions in every room. As usual Ziva had set out a bowl of whipped cream on the coffee tray, though Adam had never seen anyone make use of it. Cut crystal bowls on paper doilies held sugared almonds; a long boat of dark coconut wood set permanent sail on the coffee table and was heaped with small dry chocolates sealed in individual sachets, of the type that came alongside aeroplane coffees. In a jar painted with green pears lived jellied fruits. Raisins gathered dust in a Waterford sugar bowl next to the telephone and on the dining-room sideboard, beside a tub of pistachios, were decanters filled with caustic plum and cherry brandies. Adam remembered the afternoon when Rachel had told him that her grandmother never fasted on Yom Kippur; instead it was

the one day of the year when she baked, badly but doggedly, until stars pricked the sky and the fast was over. He remembered his sixteen-year-old outrage at the disrespect of it all – his sense of pious disapproval. And he remembered his shame years later when Ziva herself had explained with quiet dignity, 'I have fasted enough days in my lifetime.'

They now assembled in her sitting room, Ziva and Rachel perched on an enormous reproduction Chippendale sofa, mahogany-footed and upholstered in stripes of wine and mustard; Adam sat across from them on a black leather Bauhaus daybed entirely at odds with all the rest of the furniture, whose chrome legs had worn small tracks in the Persian rug beneath it.

Ziva reached for her saucer with difficulty but as Adam sat forward to hand it to her she dismissed him with a frown, exhaling through her teeth and trying again. Her granddaughters knew by now that Ziva would accept assistance only if she had first issued an order – unsolicited offers were grave insults and met with disdain. It was nothing, just a little stiffness when she had sat still too long, she insisted, and the cure was to move. Adam nonetheless found it extremely unsettling when he was not allowed to help.

'You think when I am alone I never pick up a teacup? I only sit?' Saucer in hand, she sat back in the deep sofa with satisfaction and looked from one to the other. 'So. Now you will tell me how you have been.'

'It's so lovely, Granny,' Rachel said. 'Everyone's been so lovely since we got engaged. All these people we barely know keep congratulating us, everyone seems to know already. We went to that party at Ethan and Brooke Goodman's house the other night and there must have been about a hundred people there, and it felt like every single one of them asked us over for dinner.'

'It is a pleasure to invite a new couple. There are not so many good things in life that people want to miss them. *Ach*, I forgot. Will you get the Sacher torte? It's on the table in the kitchen. And plates.'

'Oh, no thank you.' Rachel placed a protective hand over her stomach.

'Shh. Not for you, for Adam. You, I know, will probably not eat again until the wedding. But I would also like a little something.'

Rachel blushed at this, prompting Adam to realise, as he retrieved the torte, how many slices of cake he had seen her refuse since their engagement. He was amused by the uncharacteristic development and intrigued to know the outcome; the many, many diets that she'd begun over the years had never yet resulted in her losing any weight. But he sensed that this one might be different.

'And the wedding will be when?' Ziva asked.

'We were thinking of next August,' Rachel said, looking across at Adam as she said this because, she knew, he had not been thinking of next August - he wanted to get married this December. But Rachel and her mother insisted that it took many months to plan a wedding, and it was hard to care about anything as much as Jaffa Gilbert, perpetually fervent, seemed to care about everything. Even without Jaffa's interference he would have capitulated to Rachel, he suspected, for these days he could refuse her nothing. She had never seemed so sweetly beautiful to him, and there was a new shyness in her dark eyes that stopped his heart. He looked up sometimes to see her regarding him with a mixture of strange fear and hope, and despite their many years together there was a freshness between them that came, he felt, from the sheer immensity of the vista on which they looked out together. Compared to the long lives that lay ahead, they had barely met. He felt very young at the thought of it yet this, he knew, was the true start of adult life. He smiled back, despite her rebellion.

'I will by August be dead. *Danke*,' Ziva added, accepting a plate from Adam.

'Granny!'

'But it could be true. Why so long?'

'Hear, hear,' said Adam, gratified to have found an ally.

'Weddings take ages. We need to find a hotel, I need a dress, there's flowers ...'

'So we'll get married on a weeknight at synagogue and Ziva will throw the reception for us here, won't you?'

'I will do no such thing because my daughter will not allow it. You will have a whole hotel *geschichte*. But why not sooner?'

'The weather will be bad before then.'

'But I believe most hotels these days have roofs. A miraculous invention.'

'It's going to be in August, Granny, and God willing you'll be there.'

'Ha. God. For someone who does not exist He has caused me a great deal of trouble.'

Rachel, who chattered to God almost as often as to her mother, was opening her mouth to protest when Ziva continued, 'Anyway, Rachele, tell me about the Goodmans' party.'

'You said,' said Rachel, still faintly petulant, 'that you didn't want to go to it because it would be "a production".'

'Very true, I did, and it was no doubt a production. But it is a production about which, if you will oblige me, I would like very much to hear. He is a nice man, Ethan Goodman, he has in private done very considerate things. I do not know why it is that he persists in throwing for every Tom, Dick and Harry these parties.'

'They're for charity,' Adam offered.

'They are for social advantage and showing off,' countered Ziva.

The Goodmans were something of an enigma. No one seemed to know how Ethan Goodman had made his money;

even those who were also in finance were unable to account for it with any satisfaction. He and his wife Brooke had appeared from California rich and had since got richer after starting several private investment funds in Mayfair. Most of north-west London took no interest in the mechanics of their apparently unstoppable acquisition - of greater relevance was their immediate and unreserved involvement in the synagogue community, that they had been elected to boards and councils, had opened the ballroom of their Bishops Avenue mansion to organisation or event that needed a large venue, and were professionally philanthropic. The Goodman Charitable Foundation was in the small print of every charity letterhead that Adam had ever seen. Brooke Goodman, a gym-honed blonde in her late forties whom Adam's mother admired as much for her triceps as for her generosity, once wrote a personal cheque for a million pounds when the appeal video at a rather low-key fundraising supper for Barnardo's made her cry, and Ethan had been seen paying two hundred thousand pounds in an Alzheimer's charity auction for a painting that he himself had donated. The Goodman ABS Fund was reported to be that rare thing - a safe, low-risk portfolio that had delivered consistently high returns. Ethan Goodman now managed the assets of a few close friends and they had been, it was reported, greatly rewarded for their trust in him.

The doorbell rang. Adam rose to answer it.

'That is Ashish - will you give him please a pound,' Ziva called after him. Rachel's grandmother could not cook. Instead she took two buses to Golders Green every afternoon to eat lunch at the Jewish Care Survivors' group and, on the rare occasions when Jaffa hadn't cooked and delivered a roast chicken and a side of salmon for the week, subsisted entirely on takeaways.

Fishing out change from his pocket Adam opened the door, expecting to receive a warm plastic bag of foil-

wrapped naan bread. Instead Ellie Schneider's hand was in his extended one and she was stepping over the threshold in vertiginous, thigh-high boots that she immediately began to remove, using Adam for balance. A minute black dog scampered in after her and emitted a rasping yap.

'Ellie.'

'Hey, cousin.'

A car beeped twice and she released him, turning to wave. Over her shoulder Adam saw a very old Morris Minor pulling away from the kerb, patches of rust visible on its lurid orange paintwork. The convertible roof was down, exposing the back of a head, bright Scandinavian blond, belonging to the man driving. The hand raised in farewell wore a thick gold wedding ring.

Adam watched the car disappearing around the corner and turned back to Ellie who said only, 'A friend. We've been shopping.'

Nothing followed this. Instead she sat down at the bottom of the stairs and began to massage her toes, exhaling with pleasure. The dog, two bulging eyes deep-set in a mop of long, silky fur, began to yelp and wheel around in circles. Its jerking hysteria reminded Adam of the whining mechanical hare at the dog races.

'Rocky, Rocky! Shh, baby. God, I shouldn't have worn those.'

'For many reasons.' Adam agreed, looking in disapproval at the long columns of black suede on the floor that had clung to her legs until moments ago. Thigh-high, all that set them apart from the classic arsenal of a streetwalker were their heels – playful stacks of knotted, polished driftwood. But as soon as the words were out he regretted them. He was six years older than she after all, not sixty, and what she wore wasn't his business. It wasn't as if it was Rachel.

She looked up at him and said nothing, her eyes huge and expressionless, a clear, pale green. She was hunched over, one foot in each hand. Without the boots to distract him, he noticed that the sweater she was wearing was enormous and shapeless, faded black cashmere that hid her body, and her thumbs protruded from symmetrical holes in the woollen cuffs. Her socks were now visible and were blue and ankle-high, and printed with smiling white rabbits. He felt he'd been unkind.

'So, we're going to be cousins,' he said, softening his voice.

'Yup. Mazel. Welcome to the family.'

'Thank you.'

'Although you're more a part of it than I am, probably. I think my aunt has been planning this wedding for about five years.'

Adam smiled. 'More like ten, I reckon.'

Ellie pulled her jumper down over her bare knees and drew her hands back into her sleeves. Rocky leapt up into the hammock of sweater across her lap. 'Weren't you worried about settling down so young?'

'No, I was just pleased to have it sorted.' And then realising this sounded unromantic he added, 'Rach is perfect.'

'Everything here's perfect,' said Ellie, making it sound like an affliction.

'Are you not happy to be back?'

'Just ... culture shock. I'd forgotten what it was like here. It's a little overwhelming. Everyone's happy and the houses are beautiful and everyone's friends with everyone, and you grow up sweet and pretty and contented and settle down with a sweet pretty boy.' She looked at Adam. 'Perfect.'

'Nothing can really be perfect, there's no such thing.'

'No? Except Rachel, you just said.'

He was annoyed that she'd made him contradict himself. 'Settling and settling down aren't the same thing.'

'I said settling down. You said settling.'

'OK,' he said, stiffly. The intimation of compromise touched a nerve, as it was a fear of precisely this that had made him vacillate for so long over his proposal. Compromise was right, of course. But they had met so young, and in weaker moments he had worried that his lack of experience meant he ought not to trust his own judgement. Not until the end of university had he begun to realise that he'd grown up to be an attractive man; by then it had been too late for him to deploy this advantage to any real purpose. There was no answer; it had taken effort to set aside such nonsense until the certainty of their engagement had rendered speculation pointless.

'OK.' She rested her chin gently on the dog's silky head, but did not look away from Adam. Antagonism hung between them. Eventually she said, 'God, I'm tired.'

He relented. 'Shopping will do that to you. Going with Rachel is like an extreme sport, I'm always tempted to pack a Kendal Mint Cake.'

'Sweet that you go with her.' She closed her eyes.

'Are you all right?' She looked very pale; he crouched down to face her.

She nodded. She opened her eyes and he quickly stood up again hurriedly, feeling awkward.

'Just tired. I'm not a very accomplished sleeper.'

'Always or recently?'

She shrugged. 'Not sure. Just kind of a thing of mine. I can't remember the last time I slept a whole night, or easily. Sometimes it feels like never but I suppose that's not possible.'

'No. But the feeling of never must be horrible. Exhausting. Or isolating.' He stopped. He wasn't quite sure what else to say.

'Both exhausting and isolating, in fact. Exactly.'

'So now do you not sleep at all?' he asked, curious. 'What do you do all night?'

'Interesting question. What would you do?'