

KATIE KITAMURA is based in New York. She has written for numerous publications, including *The New York Times*, *Wired* and the *Guardian*. She was a finalist for the New York Public Library's Young Lions Fiction Award for her debut novel, *The Longshot*, and again for her second novel *Gone to the Forest*, which was a book of the year in the *Financial Times*, the *New Yorker* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

'Consider Katie Kitamura a literary heavyweight in the making.' *Vogue*

'Gripping ... the precision of Kitamura's prose is nothing short of extraordinary. She writes with a piercing clarity picking apart the detail of her characters' emotions and actions with the meticulousness of a forensic expert analysing a crime scene, or a medical examiner conducting an autopsy ... There's so much to admire here; such delight to be taken in the composition of these clauses, the way in which they allow one to visualise the pace of the underlying thought processes. Not to mention the fact that Kitamura's astonishing decision to elucidate instincts and impulses—not least to first describe, then identify—is inspired ... She fearlessly strips back façades and plunges depths, as a result of which *A Separation* is a beautifully written powerhouse of a novel that defies all expectations.' Lucy Scholes, *Independent*

'A slow burn of a novel that gathers its great force and intensity through careful observation and a refusal to accept old, shop-worn narratives of love and loss.' Jenny Offill

'*A Separation* opens up fissures of ambiguity in emotional experiences too often misunderstood as monolithic—grief, desire, estrangement—and plumbs these crevices for all their complexities. It has both urgency and afterglow: I read it quickly, but didn't stop thinking about it for a long time once I was done.' Leslie Jamison

‘Profound and gripping. I had that rare sense of feeling like I was in a creation specifically made out of words, that couldn’t have been made out of any other substance. Kitamura combines the calm complexity of Joseph Conrad with the pacing and reveal of Patricia Highsmith.’ Rivka Galchen

‘Electrifying ... I read it in one breathless sitting.’ Alex Preston, *Guardian* 2017 fiction picks

‘Kitamura’s novels do new things with form I hadn’t thought possible ... *A Separation* will win awards and it’s about time.’ Nikesh Shukla

‘Beautifully written’ Leaf Arbuthnot, *Sunday Times*

‘Kitamura is a writer with a visionary, visual imagination ... In *A Separation*, [she] has made consciousness her territory. The book is all mind, and an observant, taut, astringent mind it is.’ *New Yorker*

‘Kitamura’s prose gallops, combining Elena Ferrante-style intricacies with the tensions of a top-notch whodunit.’ *Elle*

‘Accomplished ... a coolly unsettling work’ *New York Times Book Review*

‘Kitamura weaves a novel of quiet power, mostly due to a narrative voice that is so subtly commanding—so effortlessly self-aware and perceptive, teeming with dry yet empathetic humor—that it’s a challenge not to follow her journey in a single sitting.’ *Harper’s Bazaar*

‘Prepare to feel, well, everything—this is a raw look at an emotionally charged life event.’ *Marie Claire*

**A
SEPARATION**

Katie Kitamura



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It began with a telephone call from Isabella. She wanted to know where Christopher was, and I was put in the awkward position of having to tell her that I didn't know. To her this must have sounded incredible. I didn't tell her that Christopher and I had separated six months earlier, and that I hadn't spoken to her son in nearly a month.

She found my inability to inform her of Christopher's whereabouts incomprehensible, and her response was withering but not entirely surprised, which somehow made matters worse. I felt both humiliated and uncomfortable, two sensations that have always characterized my relationship with Isabella and Mark. This despite Christopher often telling me I had precisely the same effect on them, that I should try not to be so reserved, it was too easily interpreted as a form of arrogance.

Didn't I know, he asked, that some people found me a snob? I didn't. Our marriage was formed by the things Christopher knew and the things I did not. This was not

simply a question of intellect, although in that respect Christopher again had the advantage, he was without doubt a clever man. It was a question of things withheld, information that he had, and that I did not. In short, it was a question of infidelities—betrayal always puts one partner in the position of knowing, and leaves the other in the dark.

Although betrayal was not even, not necessarily, the primary reason for the failure of our marriage. It happened slowly, even once we had agreed to separate, there were practicalities, it was no small thing, dismantling the edifice of a marriage. The prospect was so daunting that I began wondering whether one or the other of us was having second thoughts, if there was hesitation buried deep within the bureaucracy, secreted in the piles of paper and online forms that we were so keen to avoid.

And so it was entirely reasonable of Isabella to call me and ask what had become of Christopher. I've left three messages, she said, his mobile goes directly to voice mail, and the last time I rang it was a foreign ringtone—

She pronounced the word *foreign* with a familiar blend of suspicion, mystification (she could not imagine any reason why her only son would wish to remove himself from her vicinity) and pique. The words returned to me then, phrases spoken over the course of the marriage: you're foreign, you've always been a little foreign, she's very nice but different to us, we don't feel as if we know you (and then, finally, what she would surely say if Christopher told her that it was over be-

tween us), it's for the best, darling, in the end she was never really one of us.

—therefore, I would like to know, where exactly is my son?

Immediately, my head began to throb. It had been a month since I had spoken to Christopher. Our last conversation had been on the telephone. Christopher had said that although we were clearly not going to be reconciled, he did not want to begin the process—he used that word, indicative of some continuous and ongoing thing, rather than a decisive and singular act and of course he was right, divorce was more organic, somehow more contingent than it initially appeared—of telling people.

Could we keep it between us? I had hesitated, it wasn't that I disagreed with the sentiment—the decision was still new at that point, and I imagined Christopher felt much as I did, that we had not yet figured out how to tell the story of our separation. But I disliked the air of complicity, which felt incongruous and without purpose. Regardless, I said yes. Christopher, hearing the hesitation in my voice, asked me to promise. Promise that you won't tell anyone, at least for the time being, not until we speak again. Irritated, I agreed, and then hung up.

That was the last time we spoke. Now, when I insisted that I did not know where Christopher was, Isabella gave a short laugh before saying, Don't be ridiculous. I spoke to Christopher three weeks ago and he told me the two of you

were going to Greece. I've had such difficulty getting hold of him, and given that you are clearly here in England, I can only assume that he has gone to Greece without you.

I was too confused to respond. I could not understand why Christopher would have told her that we were going to Greece together, I had not even known that he was leaving the country. She continued, He's been working very hard, I know he's there on research, and—

She lowered her voice in a way that I found difficult to decipher, it might have been genuine hesitation or its mere facsimile, she was not above such manipulations.

—I'm worried about him.

This declaration was not immediately persuasive to me, and I did not take her concern with much seriousness. Isabella believed her relationship with Christopher to be better than it was, a natural mistake for a mother to make, but one that on occasion led to outlandish behavior on her part. Once, this situation might have elicited in me a feeling of triumph—that this woman should turn to me for help in a matter concerning her son might have meant something as little as a year ago, as little as six months ago.

Now, I listened mostly with trepidation as she continued. He hasn't been himself, I called to ask if the two of you—the *two of you* again, it was clear she knew nothing, that Christopher had not confided in her—might like to come and stay in the country, get some fresh air. That's when Christopher told me that you were going to Greece, that you had a trans-

lation to finish and that he was going to do research. But now—and she gave a brief sigh of exasperation—I find that you are in London and he is not answering his phone.

I don't know where Christopher is.

There was a slight pause before she continued.

In any case you must go and join him at once. You know how powerful my intuition is, I know something is wrong, it's not like him not to return my calls.

There were outcomes to Isabella's telephone call that are extraordinary to me, even now. One is that I obeyed this woman and went to Greece, a place I had no desire to visit, for a purpose that was not in the least bit evident to me. True, Christopher had lied to Isabella when he said that we were going to Greece together. If he did not want to tell his mother about the separation, it would have been easy enough to come up with some excuse to explain why he was traveling alone—that I had to go to a conference, that I was spending time with a girlfriend who had three children and was therefore always in need of both help and company.

Or he could have told her half the truth, the start of it at least, that we were taking time off—from what, or where, she might have asked. But he had not done any of this, perhaps because it was easier to lie or maybe because it was easier to let his mother make whatever assumptions she wished to make—although misapprehensions, after the fact, were especially difficult for Isabella. I realized then that we needed to formalize the state of affairs between us. I had al-

ready decided to ask Christopher for a divorce, I would simply go to Greece and do the deed in person.

I supposed it would be my last dutiful act as her daughter-in-law. An hour later, Isabella called to tell me which hotel Christopher was staying at—I wondered how she had obtained this information—and the record locator for a ticket she had booked in my name, departing the next day. Beneath the unnecessary flourishes of character and the sheen of idle elegance, she was a supremely capable woman, one reason why she had been a formidable adversary, someone I had reason to fear. But that was all over, and soon, there would be no battleground between us.

Still, I noted that she evidently didn't trust me—I was not the kind of wife who could be relied upon to locate her husband, not without a ticket in hand and a hotel address. Perhaps it was in response to this patent distrust that I kept my promise to Christopher, the second surprising outcome of Isabella's call. I did not tell his mother that we were separated, and had been for some time, the one piece of information that would have excused me from going to Greece altogether.

No mother would ask her daughter-in-law to go to Greece in order to ask her son for a divorce. I could have stayed in London and gone about my business. But I did not tell her, and I did not stay in London. If Isabella knew that she had purchased a plane ticket in order for me to ask her son for a divorce, I suppose she would have killed me, actually slain me then and there. Such a thing was not impossible. She was,

as I have said, a supremely capable woman. Or perhaps she would have said had she known it was so easy to separate us, to dissolve the terms of our marriage, she would have bought me the ticket long ago. Before she hung up, she advised me to pack a bathing suit. She had been told the hotel had a very nice pool.

I n Athens, the city was heavy with traffic and there was some kind of transportation strike. The village where Christopher was staying was a five-hour drive from the capital, at the southernmost tip of the country's mainland. A car was waiting at the airport: Isabella had thought of everything. I fell asleep during the journey, which began with the traffic, then segued into a series of bleak and anonymous motorways. I was tired. I looked out the window but could not read any of the signs.

I awoke to a hard and repetitive noise. It was black outside, night had fallen while I was asleep. The sound vibrated through the vehicle—*thwack thwack thwack*—then stopped. The car was moving slowly down a narrow single-lane road. I leaned forward and asked the driver if we were stopping, if we had very far to go. We are here, he said. We have already arrived. The thwacking began again.

Strays, the driver added. Outside, dark shapes moved alongside the car, the tails of the dogs hitting its shell. The driver beeped his horn in an effort to frighten the animals

away—they were so close it seemed as if the car might strike them at any moment, despite our decelerated speed—but they were not deterred, they remained close to the vehicle as we moved down the road toward a large stone villa. The driver continued beeping his horn as he rolled down the window and shouted at the strays.

Up ahead, a porter opened the gates to the property. As the car moved forward through the gates, the dogs fell behind. When I turned to look through the rear window, they stood in a ring before the gates, their eyes as yellow as the beams from the taillights. The hotel was at the far end of a small bay and I heard the sound of water as soon as I stepped out of the car. I carried my purse and a small overnight bag, the porter asked if I had any luggage and I said I had none, I had packed for a night, at worst for a weekend, although I did not phrase it in that way.

The driver said something about a return journey; I took his card and said I would call him, perhaps tomorrow. He nodded, and I asked if he would now return to Athens, it was already very late. He shrugged and got back into the car.

Inside, the lobby was empty. I checked the time—it was nearly eleven. Isabella had not booked me a room, I was a woman joining her husband, there should have been no need. I asked for a single room for the night. The man behind the desk said there were plenty of rooms available, he announced with surprising candor that the hotel was nearly empty. It was the end of September, the season was over. Unfortu-

nately, the sea was now too cold for swimming, he added, but the hotel swimming pool was heated to a very comfortable temperature.

I waited until he had finished taking my details and handed me the key before I asked about Christopher.

Would you like me to call his room?

His expression was alert but his hands remained still behind the desk, he did not move to pick up the phone, it was after all very late.

No, I shook my head. I'll try him in the morning.

The man nodded sympathetically. His eyes had become more watchful, perhaps he saw many relationships in similar disarray, or perhaps he thought nothing of it and had a naturally sympathetic face, a trait that was no doubt useful in his occupation. He did not say anything further about the matter. I took the key and he told me about breakfast and insisted on taking my bag as he ushered me to the elevator. Thank you, I said. Did I want a wake-up call? A newspaper in the morning? It can wait, I told him. All of it can wait.

When I woke, sunlight had flooded the room. I reached for my phone, there were no messages and it was already nine. Breakfast would be ending soon, I would need to hurry if I wanted to eat. Still, I stood in the shower longer than was necessary. Until that moment—standing in the hotel room shower, the water blurring my vision as it

streamed into my eyes—I had not stopped to consider or imagine how Christopher would feel, what he would think, when he saw me, or was confronted by me, in the hotel. I imagined his first thought would be simple enough, he would assume that I wanted him back.

Why else would a woman follow her estranged husband to another country, other than to bring an end to their separation? It was an extravagant gesture, and extravagant gestures between a man and a woman are generally understood to be romantic, even in the context of a failed marriage. I would appear before him and he would—would he be filled with apprehension, would his heart sink, would he wonder what it was that I wanted? Would he feel caught, would he worry that there had been a disaster, that something had happened to his mother, he should have returned her phone calls?

Or would he be filled with hope, would he think that after all a reconciliation was in the cards (was this hope at the root of the promise he had extracted from me, and was it even a shared hope then, after all I had agreed to it), and would he then be disappointed, even more affronted than he might otherwise have been, by my petition for a divorce, which I nonetheless intended to make? I felt at once mortified for him and for myself, above all for the situation. I assumed—I had no prior experience to go on—that asking for a divorce was always discomfiting, but I could not believe it was always this awkward, the setting and the circumstances so ambiguous.

Downstairs, the lobby was empty. Breakfast was served

on a terrace overlooking the sea. There was no sign of Christopher, the restaurant was also deserted. Below, the village was without shadow and so quiet as to be motionless, a collection of small buildings lined along a stone embankment. A large cliff formed one side of the bay, it was bare and without vegetation and cast a bright white light onto the water, the vista from the terrace was therefore both tranquil and dramatic. At the base of the cliff there were remnants of what looked like charred brush and grass, as if there had recently been a fire.

I drank my coffee. When he set down the cup, the waiter had informed me that the hotel was the only place where I would get my cappuccino, my latte, everywhere else it was Greek coffee or Nescafé. The setting here was romantic—Christopher liked luxurious accommodation, and luxury and romance were virtually synonyms for a certain class of people—and therefore made me uneasy. I imagined Christopher here, alone among a resort full of couples, it was the kind of hotel that was booked for honeymoons, for anniversaries. I felt another twinge of embarrassment, I wondered what he had been up to, the place was an absurdity.

I stopped the waiter when he brought my toast.

It's very quiet. Am I the last to come down for breakfast?

The hotel is empty. It is the off-season.

But there must be other guests.

The fires, he said, shrugging. They have discouraged people.

I don't know about the fires.

There have been wildfires all over the country. Fires all summer. The hills between here and Athens are black. If you go outside the village, up to the hills, you will see, the earth is still hot from the fire. It was in the newspapers. All around the world. There were photographers—he mimed the click of a camera—all summer.

He tucked the tray under his arm and continued. They shot photographs for a fashion magazine here, at the hotel. The fire had spread to the cliff, you can still see the black—look. He gestured to the black-scarred surface of the rock. They put the models by the pool and the fire behind them and the sea—he sucked in his breath—it was very dramatic.

I nodded. He drifted away when I didn't say anything further. Unbidden, the image of Christopher in the midst of this photo shoot rose up. It was implausible, he stood between the models and the makeup artists and the stylist with a wry expression, as if he could not possibly begin to explain what he was doing in this circus. He looked even more like a stranger. I gazed around the terrace uneasily. It was nearing ten, evidently I had missed him at breakfast, he must have eaten early, perhaps he had already left the hotel for the day.

I rose and went into the lobby. The man who had checked me in the night before had been replaced by a young woman with heavy features, she wore her hair scraped back in a manner that did not suit her, the style was too severe for her soft, full face. I asked her if Christopher had been down that

morning. She frowned, I sensed that she did not want to tell me. I asked if she could call his room. She kept her eyes on my face as she dialed the number, I listened to the pulse of the bell, beneath her professional hairline, her expression was openly sullen.

She hung up.

He's not in his room. Would you like to leave a message?
I need to speak with him urgently.

Who are you?

The question was blunt, almost hostile.

I'm his wife.

She looked startled, at once I understood—Christopher was a careless flirt, he did it without thinking, as a reflex, the way people said *hello, thank you, you're welcome*, the way a man held open a door for a woman. He was too liberal in this regard, he risked spreading his charm thin. Once you perceived the patches where it had worn through, it was hard to see the charm—hard to see the man himself, if you were in any way wary of charisma—entirely whole again. But most people did not stay in his orbit long enough for this to happen, most people were like this young girl, I could see that she was protective of him, still in his thrall.

Him, Him, as if he belonged to her. I stepped back from the counter.

Please tell him that his wife is looking for him.

She nodded.

As soon as he returns. It's important.