

‘Hedonistic, bacchanalian, lyrical in its language and subtle in its characterisations, with a hint of tannic Sally Rooney wit’ GQ, Most Anticipated Books of 2025

‘So smart, so sensual, so shocking. *Lush* is a novel that shatters the boundaries between desire and deception, power and pleasure, and taste and temptation. Dowden-Lord’s prose is tactile, electrifying and precise. It will leave readers raw’ Cecilia Rabess, author of *Everything’s Fine*

‘The clue is in the name. *Lush* is rich and seductive, with compellingly juicy characters and a generous glut of drama. The writing is gorgeously vivid and the plot brilliantly devised. Best read with a large glass of wine’ Chloë Ashby, author of *Wet Paint*

‘Strange, mischievous and dizzying. I love the way Dowden-Lord is interested in the economy of proximity and what that suggests – like whispers braided through a grapevine. With a style that is poised and confident, wasting no time in the slippery between’ Tice Cin, author of *Keeping the House*

‘What a pleasure to sink into this gorgeous, sensual debut. Never has a novel been more deserving of its title!’ Antonia Angress, author of *Sirens & Muses*

LUSH

ROCHELLE DOWDEN-LORD



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To those who want and want and want,
with varying degrees of success.

Part One

‘Woe [to] those rising early in the morning, they pursue strong drink! Linger in twilight, wine inflames them! And harp, and stringed instrument, tambourine, and pipe, and wine, have been their banquets, and they do not behold the work of YHWH, indeed, they have not seen the work of His hands.’

Isaiah 5:11–12



Terroir

HE WEEPS, BUT MAKES SURE to do so silently, stoically. Tao acquiesced, after all. He suffers, but agreed to the suffering, shook hands with it, and now uses that same hand to wipe the wet from his face. He feels the injustice of it, having strangers invade your home, at any time but particularly at summer's peak, when troublesome things are impossible to see clearly, transfigured into warming yellow by the season's kind face.

The idea to invite the sommeliers had been his husband's. At first, Tao only listened. His husband was typically the couple's ear, mouth closed and throat murmuring sweet sounds of assent. Tao listened to a man speak who, for the last forty years, must have offered shy of a hundred words a day, and the effect was like coloured ribbon pulled and pulled from the throat of a magician. He watched this man of squints and winks and pointed

silence wax lyrical about an idea he could not shake: a group of sommeliers, wine writers, wine *people*, at their home, while outside sunshine sweetened the grapes on his vines. The group would not be made up of the usual suspects, but the new and exciting. They would taste – is the idea – and taste and taste; he would hold his ear up to their palates, and at the end they would drink the wine together. He spoke so much that Tao stopped worrying about the supposed guests and instead began to chart the contents of his beloved's voice, as if he were a mute newly verbose: so, this is what it sounds like when he's pleading, this is the octave he reaches when unsure.

The wine: a bottle Tao thought would remain forever unopened, something like a prop, or an actor with a body double, something so rare and important that it cannot even stand for itself. If they're counting bottles, it's one of thousands in their home. There is wine under their feet and on their shelves – wine surrounds them in all its life stages – grapes outside on tender vines, empties in the recycling, young bottles bought in a rush for an everyday dinner: a portrait of a dynasty. *The wine* is so old that it should be called an artefact, an anachronism. If you see it, you wouldn't think to drink it, but to hide it away. Tao's husband thought about giving it to a museum at one point, but it felt too much like a waste, like turning a painting so it faces the wall (he said this to Tao as part of his pitch; it was a cruel metaphor for the man who saw brushes as extensions of his own hands). The bottle has been in his possession for decades. He claims to have

forgotten quite how it came to belong to him and gets away with evasion due to the easy scapegoat of age. But Tao's memory is clean: his other half's skin smooth with youth, eyes dark and playful, contradicting the sharp finality of his command (the only one he had ever given him until, weeks ago, when he gave its opposite): *never touch it*.

Tao considers what may make this involuntary lack of peace somewhat comfortable. To control, at least, the things he can. His childhood was charmed but he has memories of his mother forcing open his tiny, tight fist to steal back toys for his brother. He thinks of belongings recently multiplied: bedding, glassware, towels. Objects that no longer only represent his remarkable taste, but that he suspects will mark an unbearable time in his life that he had foreseen and veiled in beauty. A luxury I-told-you-so. He knows how many bedrooms are in his own house but counts them aloud regardless; opens the doors and tallies the beds with a finger, like a camp leader checking for mischief. Briefly, he considered safety measures for children: soft rounded corners stuck over sharp edges, short gates atop precarious staircases, baby monitors in each guest's room in case they were troubled in the night. Tao chuckles in remembrance, shakes his head so tears that were tentative are shaken loose. He considers that for a few days he'll be edged out of understanding. Not left completely behind (he's fluent in four languages, and the language of wine is pieces of many intermixed with learned snobbery

and a touch of alcohol dependency), but disregarded as someone who drinks to drink, and yes, to taste, but not to comprehend. He imagines the tinkling of glass, how irksome it'll become when it's constant and intermingled with the arrogant laughter of people who think they know better and do know better but about this alone. Vignettes of terror flash across his mind: glass smashing and splintering and leaving tiny invisible weapons all over his safe space. His sheets stinking of wine. His sofas, carpets, blankets. Spillage growing liquid roots in fabric; even the bare skin of these strangers will be fragrant with the legacy of their cause. People will spit in his house. He'd almost forgotten, distracted by the myriad other issues with this kind of company. People will spit intentionally and precisely, taking sips in order to spit them out, the spitting premeditated and repeated over and over again, until they know enough about the wine to tell everything about it and to never forget. It's the perfect thought to start him crying again. He watches himself in the mirror of their en suite, an approximate circle framed in mango wood. The terror seems to multiply when he looks at his innocent reflection: wine glasses swinging around the axis of a tilting wrist, circulations wider and lazier with every sip, threatening to crash over onto his gorgeous carpets, smeared on his walls and doors like lamb's blood.

But there's good to come from every discomfort, isn't there? That's something that's said, often out of necessity. Tao wouldn't call himself an optimist but he wouldn't call himself a pessimist either, and he wouldn't have called

himself a misanthrope until he imagined the people in his house. He's a man who can go both ways with things. He's a man who can change and not scorn the change. There have been days where he's stepped back from his canvas after hours of thinking red, red, red, only to find the painting is a wash of unencumbered blue; there have been times where he's been painting for so long his fingers have become stiff and thick with colour, yet when he's stepped away and dipped his brushes into water, he has turned back to find the canvas seems as blank as it had been when he'd begun.

The tears run their course and he can see clearly now: yes, it will be different with a house full, and yes, he'd rather it was the two of them, particularly at this time of their lives, but if nothing else, won't it give them fodder for years, like a devastating storm that doesn't kill you? It would only be for a little while; the best part of, but not fully a week. The despair dissipates. He thinks less of the interlopers and more of himself as the voyeur, these subjects readily available to him, their backdrop materials he bartered for himself, chosen for how they speak in colour, how soft or smooth or dappled their skins. He has finished crying now, and walks purposefully to find his husband. Fleeting, he wonders if they have time to dig a pool. He's always so loved to paint bodies in water.

There's a woman outside, sitting on the makeshift seat of a floral suitcase, tapping away at her phone. Tao sees her

from the window by the hallway upstairs. Her braids are as long and thin as wheat, but near black, and she wraps them between two fingers by her waist, rolling her hair up and down thoughtlessly. He knows it's today but is surprised that it's now, is shocked that what he's been waiting for has begun to occur. He taps on the window and the young woman whips around, flinching at the noise, before looking up and locking eyes with him, using her hand as a visor to block the sun and see him better. He waves at this miniature, though he could just as easily move to meet her, and she does the same, standing now and looking at him expectantly as if he might open the window, let down a rope.



Que Syrah, Syrah

THIS WOULD BE TERRIFYING FOR HER, if she didn't often wake up and find herself unable to move for a minute or two. It's surprising how still you can be when you don't have a say in the matter. If she screams in this room (if you take legend as fact) she might shatter the glass, have bottles pinging like fireworks. This room is at least familiar – its vegetal smell, its purposeful dimness – and she tells herself what she always tells herself: that it will end, and she will forget all about it. And if she doesn't forget it, at least it will end. She closes her eyes and paces back and forth, knowing there's no risk of collision. She knows this space, knows that it's five strides turn, five strides turn, and even without contact the glass tinkles, like small hands applauding her aptitude.

She knew it was going to happen before they were even in sight of the cellar. He acts differently, exaggeratedly,

as if an identical twin were trying to impersonate him. When he laughs, he laughs more loudly; he smiles, and four more teeth are on show. He pretends it's an accident, as if locking a door behind a woman's back is the same as leaving the house unlocked. There's only so long he can leave her in the wine cellar, the space she occupies the most during her shifts after the restaurant floor itself: she has a job to do, after all.

'Hurry the fuck up,' he says impatiently when he finally lets her out, as if it was her choice to be in there. 'They're waiting.'

Harry, the prematurely bald and so perpetually flat-capped restaurant manager, who calls her *sommelière*, neither her name nor her title, but a reminder of her tits. She holds the bottle she descended for in one hand and tries her best to seem unbothered. He thinks that one day she'll crack, and she also thinks that one day she'll crack, but that day is not today. She climbs up the precarious staircase, ignoring his eyes on her chest, taking her time even, as if she would do nothing differently if he were not here, though she aches to smash the bottle (a Verdicchio, the liquid in the green bottle sweet and shy, the bottle thin and high-chested, like holding a bird in your palm) across his face. When she walks past, they graze each other's arms.

Avery would live in the restaurant if she could. The space feels like immediate and temporary wealth, like a holiday or a university loan, its impermanence not making it any less sweet. She stands in the room and feels

as if she's inherited something, and when she leaves each night, the feeling leaves with her. The mirrors, the tables, the pillars, make it labyrinthine; easy to get lost in and easy to remain in. You can see yourself in everything. The cutlery, the marble, the dangling splendour of wives, the ceiling. Look up or down and it's a version of you: in some things it's exactly yourself, in others, a distorted cousin. The pillar in front of her is a perfect likeness, and she looks at herself. She scrutinises her clear, dark skin, a pool at night; her full lips dressed in deep red and lined darker, so the boundary of her mouth is impossible to ignore. Her long hair that took eight hours to braid by a woman who could have been a relative and definitely knew her relatives, small as south London can be, her voice at her ear for all of that time, pulling and slicking and telling her that too late is sooner than she can imagine and giving her suspicious compliments and titbits of gossip, conversation passing through the hair in her hands as she spoke about the misfortunes of people Avery didn't know, though she knew the names: wayward Junior, trifling Keisha, sweet Jeannie last weekend laid to rest.

The ceiling is special. Mirrored in such a way that in some places you're twinned and in others tripled. So high that she has to throw her head all the way back to see herself, like the wrong way to stop a nosebleed. You get the rush and the fact of yourself in one, and it's as dizzying as personhood deserves.

It's the laughter that brings her back to them. The Verdicchio was for a different table, with patrons who trusted

her, and now her hands are empty. The city boys aren't close to ordering food, so there is no pairing to help them with, and when she asks them what they like, the leader of the pack fingers the hem of her burgundy dress. Something this colour. And she thinks black until she realises red, and when she turns to leave she feels a tug of resistance. Not a pull, or a yank, but a reluctance of give. She turns back and smiles, and he lets her go. On her return she pours them the wine they colour-matched to her body as she was taught, with the bottle on top of the palm, so she could relax her hand and it would not fall immediately but roll and crash. She tells them what they're drinking, imbues the facts with magic, laughs at their attempt at jokes, cued by their own premature laughter, then leaves. When you sell, you rob someone by giving them something. And that's why it's an art. Because it isn't quite what you expect. Here's another one: wine stays with you, but only once it's gone. When you hold a full glass in your hand you can see it and smell it, taste it a little through smelling and hear it a little, lapping against the glass. You have it, but that doesn't mean you have conquered it. You drink it, and when it's gone you can see it clearly, a loved one dead and finally understood. When asking for a second bottle, some of the men replace punctuation with movement: a comma, the curve of her arse in his hand; a full stop, a light slap; a semi-colon, a smirk. By the time they finish speaking she feels bruised. They make it clear what they want, but again they don't say what they want to drink, so she leaves and guesses while feeling

the phantoms against her. Once, she invited an old girlfriend to the restaurant, and something similar happened; though perhaps it was a knee instead of a hand (Avery considers these abstract body parts with the detachment of a surgeon). Her girlfriend asked her why she didn't flinch, why her body seemed to relax, even, though she insisted that the contact was unwelcome. Why didn't you do these things, instead of nothing? Shout, swear, scream, back away, walk up so close that you're eye to eye, so close he'd have to be the one to move? It's difficult to explain. In those moments she feels like an animal eerily still. It doesn't necessarily feel like inaction, keeping her mouth shut, her hands to herself. It feels like quietly holding a knife. Feeling canines against the flat of your tongue.

This time she enters and leaves the cellar freely. It's a three-figure wine, but the men will be oblivious to the cost, or pretend to be. A ten-year-old Côte-Rôtie with a cracked black pepper quality – a perfect accompaniment to steak, the meal she assumes the men will order eventually. She knows she should uncork it tableside as she did for the previous bottle; that it'll pop, and they'll cheer at the yield and hope it won't be the only one. But she feels different back of house; like a worse, more powerful person, willing to do things she wouldn't do when watched, not even when alone, but only when escaped. It happens immediately: if she holds a glass by the stem on the restaurant floor, the moment she steps into a staff-only area her palm moves to the bowl, even though she knows better. She likes to feel it heating up, knowing it's

being ruined in a way ever so slight. It's the difference between being held by the hand and being held by a wrist.

She takes out the corkscrew she keeps on her person – not so she can always offer to open a bottle with the keenness of a gentleman with a cigarette lighter, but for its threatening edge – and cuts around the lip in a single, smooth rotation, then punctures and excavates the cork and takes a sip of the wine, holding the jammy fullness in her mouth before swallowing. She checks the ullage and fills up the space with saliva tinged pink, and with a palm to keep it closed, shakes the bottle, then climbs out of the cellar with a clear conscience. When the men see her, they cheer. After their meal (wagyu so rare a documentary filmmaker would whisper beside it so as not to scare it off) they offer her tips, both money and whispers, promises to treat her better than she could imagine. They ask her to accompany them to a house party in Battersea, then proceed to explain to her where Battersea is, as if the gentrified areas of London were erased from her mind the moment she stopped being able to afford to live there. It is one in the morning. She shakes the group off and they leave laughing and stumbling, the final patrons. She looks at the ruin of their table as a new waitress she's spoken to a handful of times begins to clear it with the haste of someone who wishes that they were already unconscious. Two of the glasses are half full of the Syrah and Avery tuts at the sight.

'Do you want it?' the girl asks.

'Absolutely not,' Avery says. 'It's probably half backwash by now. They don't know how good that wine is.'

‘More money than sense,’ the waitress says lazily, pouring the remnants of one glass into a large tub of miscellaneous liquids.

‘They’re monsters,’ Avery says.

The waitress looks at her, slowing slightly, and Avery gives her a smile.

She checks in with Harry the way she always does, closing his door with one hand behind her back so he can’t tell it’s kept ajar. Before it’s falsely closed, she hears him say, ‘You can’t go.’ In his hand is a letter. The paper could once have been white, or else it looks old intentionally, and even from here she can see the words backwards through it, dark and slanted, uniform, like a computer imitation of handwriting. On the desk is the envelope, a broken red wax seal at its centre. She feels warm suddenly. She wants to run over to the desk and snatch the letter out of his hand, as if there’s something intimate written on it. Something she’s always hoped for but never been certain of.

‘It’s for me,’ she says, the inflection of her voice remembering the shape of a question at the eleventh hour. ‘What is it?’

He flicks it across his desk. It almost falls off but doesn’t.

‘Well,’ he says, in a faux-jovial tone, ‘it doesn’t matter because you don’t have the leave. But if you must know ... it’s an invitation, Cinderelly. An invitation to the ball.’

‘What if I go?’ she asks, looking at the letter. The paper doesn’t flutter, it holds itself still.

Avery shields her eyes and looks up at the man behind the window. He's not who she was expecting; he's of the right age, but a different race, with a face that would be called kindly if he weren't frowning at her. The taxi dropped her off about fifteen minutes ago, and she's been sitting on her suitcase since, replying to the messages that have been coming in now her phone's off airplane mode.

She drags her suitcase over the summer-hardened earth, and up the stone steps to the forest-green double doors of the house. They're open when she reaches it, the man from the window standing there with his hand early out to her.

'Hello. I was just about to knock, I wasn't trying to lurk.'

They shake hands and she laughs at her own awkwardness.

'I'm Avery,' she says.

'Tao. The husband.'

His accent is difficult to pin down: British laced with a francophone aspect, cut with an inflection she can't decipher. It makes him seem mysterious to Avery; a man who has made his own country, with its own flag and customs and rules. He leads her into the desert-coloured house. She starts to remove her shoes, but Tao protests.

'There are mice.'

Against her instincts she walks in deeper, the dirt on the soles of her New Balances marking the floor.

'You have a lovely home,' she says.

They pass a plush green bench as the scintilla-tiled

hallway opens to a wealth of space. In the near distance is a staircase flanked by another staircase, differing dusty runners on each, twins who wish to set themselves apart. Every wall has its own face, some painted one colour and others hung with intricate wallpaper – patterns, but also scenes as if from old paintings ripped into strips, a pale shoulder, naked breasts. There is too much in the house and everything is lovely. A feast of non-complementary delights. It feels almost as though she could look at the flowers on one wall and pluck one for a buttonhole.

‘I like it very much,’ Avery says.

She sneezes suddenly and Tao balks.

‘Are you sick?’

‘It must be dust or something. Not to say your house isn’t clean! I just mean I’m not sick.’

‘I don’t want him to catch anything,’ Tao points a finger at her, but smiles. ‘Don’t be sick.’ They walk further into the house. ‘I wanted everything I love in my home. Every colour and texture and fabric.’ He looks at her, good humour replacing the momentary distrust. ‘But only one man.’

Before the kettle finishes boiling, Tao has asked to paint her.

‘You’re a painter? I wish I could paint. It seems like a cool thing to be able to do.’

Tao smiles.

‘I mean,’ she corrects, ‘it’s a very sophisticated talent.’

‘I haven’t done a portrait of somebody new in a long while. You have a face for paint.’

Avery laughs. 'What does that mean? That I don't have a face for photos?'

'Why would it mean that? Think of a photo. It's a copy, a plagiarised fact. There's nothing different between the photo and the thing other than the fact you have captured it and can move it around. Make it small or large, keep it forever. But there's little that's interesting about a photo; the medium is limited, it can't tell you anything new, unless it's very old and the subject has gone, but even then, it's not new knowledge but lost knowledge. And now think of a painting: dynamic, unexpected, malleable, curious. With a painting you can agree or disagree, see it or not. You can point to a painting and say "that's not me", even if the painter disagrees. When I say you have a face for paint it means I don't see you as an obvious person. It means there are things to discuss.'

And then he looks at her, not in the way that men usually look at her, but the way her mother used to look at her after her siblings had drawn on her, as if there were telling things in permanent marker across her skin. As though he's learning something.

'I think we could have a conversation,' he says, after a pause shorter than it feels.

'About what?'

'About who you are, and about who you are really.'

Avery smiles, first without and then with teeth. She laughs.

'I like talking to you,' she says.

As Tao pours them tea, there is a concurrent knock and voice sounding from the front door. Avery's ear flinches: a man's voice, boarding-school posh. Her own voice sounds comfortably middle class, the consequence of going to a 'good' school, full of children whose parents were richer than her parents, voices more clipped than the voices she heard at home.

'Hello?' the voice says. 'Oh, sorry. It's open, but I'm not sure if anyone's in? Shall I wait here?'

Avery can't remember the last time she asked so many questions in such a short amount of time. They wait to see what he'll do next. Eventually they hear shoes inside, footsteps heavy and slow. The man turns the corner into the kitchen where they sit. He's a white man in his early thirties, tall, wearing round glasses he may or may not need, and a billowing blue shirt with a holiday's worth of buttons freed. There's a pen behind his ear, the short blue sort you never buy but steal from official institutions. His hair is blond and the perfect length, the length that men lament, not realising that a woman can look at it and already feel it in her hands.

'I'm sorry,' the man says, 'th-the door was open.'

He's a man whose discomfort makes him seem giddy, jittering, moving without obvious need, as if there are ghosts about to talk to as well as the living. His luggage is elsewhere, and he crosses his empty arms, holding his elbows as if his limbs were something loose, something awkward to keep hold of. In one of his hands he clings on to a bottle plugged shut with a thumb.

‘Is that his wine?’ Avery asks.

The man looks at it as if it appeared by magic.

‘Yes. Yes, I thought it would be good to become au fait with it. I’ve had it before, of course, but ...’

He looks at her, the bottle, his thumb in it.

‘Would you like a tippie?’

His pulled thumb makes a sound like a plug pulled from a bathtub. He sits where Tao, suddenly missing, sat, on the opposite side of the bench to Avery, and hands her the bottle. She takes it and scrutinises the opening.

‘I’ll sky it,’ she says.

‘You’ll do what?’

She holds the bottle aloft, above her open mouth, and pours a steady stream of wine into it.

‘I’m Cosmo,’ he says as she drinks, as though he’s saying something objectionable, as opposed to the inoffensive truth of his name.

‘I know,’ she swallows. ‘I’ve heard of you – you’re head of wine at Three Leaves, right?’

She swallowed in haste to answer him, but it only hits her now: tobacco and smoked meat.

‘You’ve heard of me?’ His face shadows.

‘Sure.’ She reads the bottle. ‘Must be nice to work somewhere most people know. My parents would love that.’

‘I don’t think it would make a difference to my parents where I worked.’ He shuffles and the bench protests. ‘What have you heard?’

‘What?’

‘About me. You said you’d heard of me.’

‘I don’t really roll in sommelier circles. I mean, I have the friends I studied with, but apart from that I’m a bit of a lone wolf. Even so, when someone becomes the youngest head of wine for a two-Michelin-starred restaurant, the news tends to filter down even to the regular somms.’ Her tongue works around the inside of her mouth like a victory lap. ‘This wine is incredible.’

‘I know,’ he laughs.

‘I thought it was going to taste like your backwash,’ she admits, and he laughs again.

‘I’m glad it doesn’t.’

‘I’m Avery.’

‘A pleasure to meet you. Can I ask you a question?’

She nods.

‘Are you surprised I’m here?’ He takes the bottle back from her gingerly, as if it were hers now, and if she snatched it back, she’d be right to do so.

‘No, why would I be? You’re exactly the type of person I’d expect to be here.’

He looks down at the bottle in his hand. Avery finds it curious; a man like him being so shy. She wants to hold his face with both hands, as if he didn’t have a neck to hold it up with himself.

‘Had you heard of it before?’ she asks. ‘The wine we’re going to be drinking?’

He shakes his head, then corrects and nods.

‘Rumours.’

She nods, satisfied.

‘I hear that your restaurant is mainly bubbles and testicles in coin-sized portions.’

Cosmo chuckles, puts the bottle down. He wrings his hands on the wooden tabletop. On his pinkie is a signet ring, gold and heavy.

‘But the wine list is spectacular,’ she continues. ‘So no, I’m not surprised at all. I’m more surprised *I’m* here. If I show you something, you can’t laugh.’ She pulls out her phone and goes to hand it to him, before noticing something on the screen.

‘Are you all right?’ Cosmo asks.

‘It’s just Santander, bothering me.’

She taps a few times and then gives it over. It’s her Instagram, a popular account. He nods, and raises his eyebrows at the follower count, a little too late, the flash of recognition already noticed. He scrolls through images of her being beautiful, drinking or about to drink or looking fondly at a glass, a bottle, a carafe, a carefully but carelessly spilt puddle of wine. Her image, over and over again, thin and pretty (exotic but acceptable) and doing nothing, looking down the lens at you or perhaps at the person behind the camera, someone who she looks like she might fuck as soon as she finishes her drink, and in the meantime if you like what you see you can buy the same bottle with a 15 per cent discount, her name as the code. Wearing wisps of expensive dresses whose structural integrity depends on utter stillness. He taps one image: she’s naked in a free-standing bathtub filled with bubbles, holding a full glass of red, looking content and sexed. Caption: *Fully Dressed*.

Affiliate link, #ad, #womeninwine. 8,000 likes.

‘This is why I was invited. I work in a restaurant now ... or I did, but ... I only got that job because it’s in my contract to promote us once a month on social media. It’s a bit of a robbery if I’m honest, but it’s what I want. I’m good at wine.’ She takes the bottle again, drinks, gives it back. ‘It’s not the kind of career you’d think belongs to white people, not like colonising or banking or musical theatre,’ she grins, ‘but it’s trickier than I thought it would be, if I’m being honest.’

‘Isn’t everything?’ he asks sincerely.

Avery cocks her head at him.

‘To degrees,’ she says.

‘Yes,’ he says hurriedly, ‘always to degrees.’

The day is mainly waiting. Waiting for the others to arrive, waiting for Tao to come back. Waiting for familiarity to set in so that discomfort wanes. Avery finds a patch of grass outside and spreads a blanket on top of it. She positions a couple of pillows, opens a small woven basket to liberate a wine glass and bottle, a cluster of red grapes, some cheese and bread (borrowed from the fridge), and arranges it for a picture, just her long dark legs in frame. She then takes out a book and lies back to read, using the slight volume as a shield from the sun.

Cosmo approaches her from the house, squinting. He kneels beside her, knees on the dirt, on the border of the blanket. She stops reading, looks at him.

‘Having a picnic?’ he asks.

‘I’ve only been here for a minute and I’m already sick of it,’ Avery admits, taking a sip of her prop wine. ‘There are ants everywhere. I don’t know how people do this.’

‘What are you reading?’

‘Poetry,’ she says. ‘I don’t really like it but ... I like the idea of being someone who reads poetry.’ She smiles at him. ‘I hear she’s the best.’

Without asking, Cosmo takes the book from her. He flicks through the pages, swaying slightly on his knees.

‘Mary Oliver,’ he says. ‘Good choice.’ He hands the book back to her; she rests it flat on her stomach and looks at him, using her hand for shade instead. “‘The soft animal,’” he says. ‘What a line.’

‘You can sit on the blanket,’ Avery says, her hand unfurled on the edge.

Cosmo doesn’t respond.

‘I don’t think that’s right.’ He looks at Avery with a sudden urgency that makes her return her hand to her body. ‘What if the soft animal of my body has loved enough? A soft animal is still an animal, after all.’

Avery looks at him as he takes her glass of wine and drinks from it. He pours a hearty glass and drinks from it again then hands it to her. She takes a sip.

‘Sit on the blanket,’ she repeats.

Cosmo shuffles forward, his knees now on the fabric but not the rest of him. The way he came to the door. The way he comes to a conversation. He looks at her, then looks at the sun.

‘There are ants on your trousers,’ she says.

He looks down at himself, watching the insects scale his unstable legs as if they were a condemned building. He cups his hands against his thighs, houses many of the little creatures in his palms, across his wrists and veiny forearms. Stands and walks back to the house, preoccupied with his hands.

‘They’re only ants,’ he says, without turning around.

It was cool in the morning, but it’s hotter now. Tao is elsewhere in a part of the house they haven’t yet been invited into. Cosmo looked at her little when he first arrived, and though they talk more and learn more about each other – the classic questions put forward when you have little else to offer and their answers: Kennington and Battersea (but raised in Surrey); Warwick and Harrow, followed by Oxford; Burgundy and Carracedo, but for every day, Malbec; and whisky, Scotch, because it feels wrong otherwise – now he looks at her even less, as if he doesn’t like what he sees, or as if he expects her to use against him the meagre details of his life. Eventually it feels easier not to speak, so they look out of the window; Avery with the lip of a cup against her own, Cosmo tapping his long fingers against the table. The view stretches out into at least a mile of land, the picnic abandoned hours earlier by the front steps. Beyond, the grapes grow in their nutrient-rich soil.

The group completes itself within two hours. A roaring

engine punctures the near silence. Avery and Cosmo stand by the front door, watching the arrival of the slick black convertible. The woman brakes abruptly close to the house and puts a foot out directly onto the lowermost step, blocking the route for others, though there's no one to complain. Cosmo runs down the steps to help her with the luggage and Avery follows along somewhat unsteadily, stifling the urge to hide the hollow evidence of the empty bottle behind her back. The woman is slender, in her early forties, with a shock of dark brown hair that reaches her waist, and a nose as strong as her lips are full. As she walks up the steps to meet them, the pair try to right themselves in the presence of this sober woman, bumping into one another at telling intervals like clumsy flies.

'Bonjour.'

'Bonjour,' they reply.

Maëlys frowns at them.

'Vous êtes français?' she asks them doubtfully.

'Britanniques, mais moi je parle français,' Avery confesses, then to Cosmo, *'Tu parles français?'*

He nods.

'We're a v-very smart bunch,' he smiles weakly.

'Maëlys,' she says, and they say their names in return.

As if to save the tipsy pair, another car pulls up, a big, equally black jeep-type, with windows so dark the newly formed trio subconsciously lean forward. The two vehicles obscure the view. The second car stops but no one gets out. Avery imagines the car suddenly speeding away, the whole thing remaining a curious, unanswered mystery.

After several minutes, a man clambers out. Avery, Cosmo and Maëlys must be several metres above him, but it's clear to see that he's gigantic, the tallest man they'll ever share a house with certainly, and wide besides. When his feet touch the ground, the car rocks then rights, and he looks up at them and waves.

'Oh my God,' Avery whispers. 'I know who that is.'

When the man smiles, they see all his expensive teeth. The kind of teeth that children draw, one horizontal line across and the rest down vertically. Water couldn't pass through if he bit down. Veneers. Too white, too large, too perfect. The man isn't entirely white himself, Avery clocks, and it makes the teeth all the whiter. He seems to beam at the bottom of those steps, bronze and bright and wondrous, like the splendid return of a mirror pointed at the sun. He holds his arms out as if they might all run to him.

'Hey, gang!' the man bellows, as the driver pulls his luggage out of the car.

'Oh my God,' Cosmo whispers. 'It can't be, can it?'

The driver brings the bags to the foot of the steps and the man grabs the driver in a strong, fleeting bear hug, then holds their hands tightly together as he says something curiously sincere to him. When they pull away finally, the driver overcorrects and stumbles backwards and money spills from his hand. Together they scramble to pick up the debris of currency.

'What's happening here?' Avery says.

'Is that American money?' Cosmo says.

Maëlys lights a cigarette.

The driver leaves with his tip hanging out of his pocket and the large man is left with his luggage crowded around him like a flock of children.

‘Hey, everybody,’ he bellows again, as he lifts all the pieces of luggage at once, starting the journey up the steps. He makes it about one step every five seconds with two suitcases and three travel bags in his arms.

‘I can’t believe this,’ Cosmo says.

‘Is he even a somm?’

‘I’m not,’ Maëlys shrugs, and Avery and Cosmo look at her, wounded.

‘You aren’t?’ he says.

‘No, I’m a food writer.’

‘And wine ... right?’

‘*Oui.*’ She looks at Cosmo with a squint. ‘Food and drink.’

He relaxes infinitesimally.

‘Do you know who he is?’ Avery asks Maëlys.

Maëlys nods. ‘American wine millionaire. And you post pictures, no?’

Avery opens her mouth to speak but the man reaches them. He pants in pantomime, masking a truer strain.

‘I’m Sonny. Like the weather right now, isn’t that nice? Sunny, sunny, sunny. What are your names, then? Wow, look at you? Huh?’ He takes a few seconds to look at each of them from right to left with delight in his eyes: Cosmo, the closest to him with his melted expression of distrust; Avery beside him, arms crossed with an amused smile on

her face; stone-faced Maëlys next to her, looking at him as if she were looking at a painting, at something she only has to look at and not speak to. 'You look like a band or something. You look great. I feel like a loser looking at you.' He hugs them all, in the opposite order to which he regarded them. 'Are we drinking already? One of these bags is just booze. I know we're going to get along already; I can feel it in the air. France! Are you all French? Say something to me, go on! You can say anything, I won't understand it.'

Tao appears at the door. 'Come in,' he says.

As they enter, Tao and Maëlys kiss on both cheeks, call each other by name without prior introduction. Sonny goes in for a hug, which Tao accepts hesitantly, and introduces himself as the Master's husband.

'Woah,' Sonny almost shouts, 'I didn't realise you were a part of the community, that's great!'

'If you say so,' Tao says.

The group reach a small dining room, in the middle a table not much smaller than the room itself, surrounded by six chairs that you can pull out far enough to sit, maybe far enough to lean back, but not to fall. The chairs are high-backed with plush pillows on the seats. Old, or restored to look old, heavy and expensive. There are large windows on one side, the three other walls a sumptuous red. Tao ushers them in, tells them to sit, shuts the door behind him and once again he's gone. It must be two or