

Seeing Anyone

Tom Vowler

TODAY STRETCHES OUT before me like some vast desert I don't want to cross. The drive north to her house feels slow, somehow uphill, as if the car is subject to the earth's curvature. Choosing what to listen to is impossible: there is no music for this, so the last hundred miles pass in silence.

And then suddenly I'm there, pulling into an unfamiliar driveway, in front of a cottage I'd pictured differently, with a garden we'd once dreamt of together. I turn the engine off, exhale deeply and now that it's too late, ask myself if I should have come. Then she's standing there, smiling, as if I pop round each day. I pick up the envelope of photographs and the thirsty tiger lilies and step out.

'Hey, you,' Sarah says.

'Hey.'

We hug clumsily. I wait for the musk of Chanel to hit me, but it doesn't.

'You look well,' I say. 'Must be the country air.'

'You, too. Come on, come in.'

Following her inside, I'm unable to resist a glance at a finger on her left hand, which I see is bare.

Some of the furniture is familiar. A radio offers benign jazz that's barely audible. Smells compete for my attention: pungent ash from a recent fire, vinegary pickles and chutney waft in from the kitchen, and the thick sweet scent of the oak beams, strewn throughout, the grain full of secrets and memories.

'Here, let me put those in some water.'

'Wasn't sure what to bring...'

'They're beautiful. She's in the garden, under the tree. Coffee?'