

‘There won’t be anyone to educate or diagnose. There won’t be anyone to police, or collect rubbish from, let alone to drive all those infernal internal combustion engines along all their brand new roads. What,’ said Sebastian, accepting more whisky, ‘will our children say if we don’t protect them?’

‘It makes you feel impotent, doesn’t it?’

Sebastian, who’d just taken a large mouthful of whisky, almost choked.

Joan poured him a glass of water and, when he’d recovered, he muttered that he wasn’t used to whisky.

She said, ‘It’s so very frustrating. And, like you, I find it hard to maintain scientific detachment in the face of apparent indifference. But it is essential, Sebastian, for the sake of future generations.’

He was pacing Joan’s office, but he sat down, suddenly.

‘You’ve gone pale,’ she said. ‘Put your head down.’

She refilled his water glass as the words *impotent* and *future generations* filled his mind. He said, without looking up, ‘Things aren’t going to plan.’

Joan, clearly thinking he was still talking about the government’s failure to legislate, said, ‘What matters, and you know this as well as I do, is how we react. We’ll continue our work. We’ll continue our research. We’ll continue to advise and to warn. And one of these fine days attitudes, and governments, will change.’

Perhaps it was the whisky, but Sebastian said, ‘I was, selfishly, talking about my own plans. Stella’s and mine.’

Joan waited.

‘We’re trying to conceive but it’s proving difficult.’ He’d definitely had too much to drink. ‘But if we can’t persuade the government to legislate to curb carbon emissions there’s no point in having a child.’

‘Oh my,’ said Joan.

‘My antinatalist days are long gone. Obviously. I want to give Stella a child. We want to have a child. But the cruel irony is we’re not making a child.’

‘How long?’

‘Three years. Since we married.’ He looked up.

Joan, who was by then sitting beside him, said, ‘It’s too soon to give up. Have you talked to a consultant?’

‘She said there’s no reason we shouldn’t conceive.’

He wondered how many more lies he’d tell before he left for home.