The door closes behind the family, softly, as if the fingers of the person on the other side have lingered on the handle. Then Camila is alone, on her knees among the shards of the shattered vase. A bare patch in the dust up on the mantel’s leaden-grey marble hints at the vessel’s usual position: given pride of place, with its sloping shoulders and its pinched waist. A heart, a glass-blower’s heart. Now, some small splinter of glass hunkers under Camila’s right shin, threatening to break the skin, as she leans forward to pluck the fragments, one by one, from the reluctant fibres of the rug.

The largest piece is as big as the palm of Camila’s hand. It curls up there like a sharp-edged bowl. Blown glass with a swirling bolt of blue; it reminds her of a fresco in the Basilica back home, the many-towered cathedral that dominates the far bank of the Ebro from her mother’s tiny flat. Something of the blooming skirts of Goya’s Queen of Martyrs, captured here in vitreous, bubbled transparency. She thinks back to times when she gazed up at the dome’s fresco as a child: sliding along the cathedral’s smooth pews with her head tipped back, while her father ran soft cloths over gilt angels, and mopped marble floors around the sandaled feet of the day’s last tourists. And then, when what was left of her small clan gathered under the dome for the first *Dia de los Muertos* after her father’s death, she remembers wondering who would dust the angels now.

There was no question in Joanne’s mind as to who smashed the vase, and why. She called Camila – screamed for her – from the front room. Camila had to leave the children alone at the kitchen table. Not that they were concerned: they barely looked up, busily fashioning a rocket from the badly-rinsed contents of the recycling bin.

Tiptoeing amongst the fragments in stockinged feet, Joanne had already reached fever pitch by the time Camila came through the door. It was a fight about much more than the vase, of course, but that alone could have done it. Camila has no idea how she provoked it, but distrust has festered between them from the start. Since the day Camila arrived, Joanne has winced if the girl so much as looked at her work, her shoulders hunching as if judgment has fallen before Camila has had a chance to say a word.

Ironically, Joanne’s artistry is the one thing she admires about the older woman, most of all the blown glasswork which emerges like crystalline mysteries from the iron-roofed workshop at the end of the lawn. Left alone, Camila has often run her fingertips over ripple-edged vases and bowls, and over those strange, interconnecting forms – purple, bleeding into green, bleeding into blue – brittle sea creatures worn smooth and stranded on the piano’s lid.

Joanne was just drawing breath – the eye of the storm – when they heard a squeal; the screech of the table’s feet across the slate tiles, and the muffled thuds of two sets of footsteps up the few stairs from the kitchen.

‘She broke it…’

‘It was mine. He took it…’

‘I had it first…’

‘No…’

Camila’s arm shot out without thinking, a barrier across the entrance, preventing the children from straying onto the broken glass. Owen began to squirm at once, never content to be contained. Beca’s shoulders were shuddering with tears. Camila bent to squeeze them still, and the little girl nuzzled into her neck. Joanne was frozen, mutely pained, the field of glass between her and hers.

‘David.’ Joanne broke her silence to yell for her husband. Her eyes didn’t leave Camila’s. Upstairs, there was the squeak of boards from one side of the ceiling to the other, as David made his way to the landing and down.

It didn’t start like this. Should never have turned out like this. The day Camila arrived, the whole family piled up to Stansted to meet the plane. Owen’s orange jump-jet t-shirt was the first thing Camila saw when she walked into the Arrivals hall, dazed after a bumpy landing and the glass of cheap Tempranillo the businessman beside her had insisted she join him in, before rubbing his fat fingers up her thigh.

The children loved Camila from the moment they met her. They mobbed her, giggling at the brightly foiled frutas de Aragón she unwrapped for them, tiny paws pulling at the short lace skirt she was already regretting, as the reality of a British summer’s day took hold. David was solicitous: kissing her on both cheeks, snatching up her bag, refusing to take the trolley further. Joanne rolled her eyes, asked about the journey, patted Camila on the arm – stiff, but not yet unfriendly. Camila thought of her mother’s enveloping arms, and reminded herself that six months would pass quickly.

It was not just that skirt, of course – it became apparent quickly that few of her clothes were suitable. Joanne urged her to go shopping, at her expense; to buy more. (To cover up.) There is no shortage of money. Whatever David does in that glass-fronted box in the city, it pays for this comfortable Victorian villa. For the fridge with its doors that opened like an embrace. For the sleek car on the pavement outside, which is treated to waxes and steam-cleans as if it were some pampered pet. And for her, Camila, of course; David has paid her well. She has sent home €400 each month, leaving tear stains on the letters her mother has sent in reply. But despite Joanne’s fluttered notes and hints when she first arrived, Camila has found herself hardening to the weather. Donning tough soled boots under floating dresses as a sole concession to autumn’s approach. Even folding that lace skirt over at the waist so that the lower half of her thighs, still deep copper from a summer spent waitressing in a Tarragona beach café, were bare to the breeze.

From the start, she and David were thrown together. He likes to be home to bathe the children each night, and Camila, unsure whether it was her place to do so, got into the habit of kneeling by his side. Only rarely did Joanne displace her. Joanne’s working hours were erratic, so that the children would sometimes go days without seeing their mother, and Camila found herself offering cuddles and kisses in compensation. Joanne blamed the tyranny of the glass. When using moulds, she preferred to cast at night, she said, free from distractions. And the concentration required for free-form sculpting left her exhausted and vague, wandering through the kitchen in her heavy overalls, calipers or a length of blowpipe still clasped in one grey kevlar mitt.

Joanne would often miss dinner, leaving Camila and David to eat alone, and then perch later on a stool with a sandwich, answering David’s enthusiastic questions – technical queries, about melting points, crimping and annealing, desperate attempts to break the ice – in short, staccato bursts. She is thin, Joanne, painfully so, and on the rare occasions she leaves her long, pale neck unwrapped in scarves, her clavicles protrude like the wing bones of a bird. Camila has never seen them touch each other. Sometimes David reaches a hand towards his wife, but she always skids away under it, as a silk cloth slips over glass.

From time to time in these past months, Joanne has gone away. For a weekend, usually. Some weeks ago, she stayed away for five days. There was no warning, though David spoke of a conference as if it had been long planned. In Joanne’s absence, Camila grew bolder, stretching and then breaking the strict rules by which Joanne imposed herself on the household. Camila let the children dress themselves, mixing colours and patterns as they chose, swapping Beca’s bland t-shirts and skirts for bright dresses with ruffles and bows, which she found in the midweek market in town. She allowed the children to stay up late, and when David returned from work, delayed by the train, he found them dancing in the formal front room, bouncing on the sofas’ plump cushions, their faces flushed and high. He ushered them out, gesturing towards the glassware, but he laughed as he chased them up the stairs.

On those evenings, Camila began to cook food from home: spiced *longaniza* sausages, with fried eggs and *migas*, and almojábanas pastries flavoured with sugar and anise. When David opened a bottle of wine with dinner, she accepted a second glass. On the night before Joanne’s return, he opened a second bottle.

Camila pulls a final fragment of glass from the matting now. It is cold down here on the floor, as if a void beneath the carpet is sucking the heat from the room. She folds her arms under her small breasts and sits back on her heels. Tiny slivers still glitter amongst the rug’s fibres, but they will have to wait for the hoover’s indifferent grasp.

She didn’t know – why should she? – that this vase was Joanne’s favourite. That it was the first vessel David’s wife blew unaided. That the wrap of blue that curled through the heart was drawn from a cobalt cane Joanne chose for her mother’s eyes. But he knew. And it was not Camila who left the door to the front room unlocked, the heart-shaped vase lifted down from its place on the mantelpiece to a side table, where it stood no chance against Beca’s exploring fingers and Owen’s aeroplane arms. She saw his face when he came in – reluctant, but he was ready to take the blame. David had stoked this fire.

But Camila didn’t let him. Instead, she nodded at Joanne’s accusations, let the outburst envelop her, impressed by the heat that had risen up in this brittle woman. David, beside her, visibly diminished as his wife spoke; he was weak and insubstantial now. Camila watched him shift his weight from one foot to the other, his fingers fidgeting along the undulations of the radiator behind his back.

And when Joanne finished at last, shoulders slumping with the effort of the invective but still defiant, Camila knelt at her employer’s feet. She plucked the first of the fragments, lining them up on a folded newspaper beside her knees, while the family shuffled out around her. Beca slipped free to reach for her, but it was David who pulled the little girl back, shepherding her into the hall. Through the closed door now, there are fragments of a conversation: Camila hears ‘flight’, and ‘morning’. ‘That girl’, and ‘mistake’. A taxi being booked for an early hour.

Camila picks up the largest shard again, with its drape of spun cobalt inside. She wraps it in a tissue, the blue even more vivid against the white. Sharp edges subdued, Camila tucks it into the pocket of her skirt. By sunset tomorrow she will be back on the banks of the Ebro, back in the arms of her mother. But she will take with her something from the glass-blower’s heart.