



THE  
LAST LIST  
OF  
MABEL  
BEAUMONT



Laura Pearson

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BEAUMONT**

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LAURA PEARSON

B

Boldwød

*For Mum and Dad. Thanks for everything.*

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# 1

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I've been standing by this kettle, making tea for Arthur and me, for sixty-two years. Two different houses, god knows how many different kettles, but always me, always him, always a morning cup of tea. He's at the kitchen table, pen in hand, tackling the crossword. He's opened a window and I can hear birds chirruping in the garden. A blackbird, I think, and a robin. A whole conversation going on that means nothing to me. When I sit down, Arthur will fold the paper over and put his pen down and say 'Well', and we'll talk about what we're going to do with the day. A walk or a job or nothing much. In our working years, it was only the weekends we had to make these decisions, but now it's every day, stretching out ahead, hour stacked on hour.

I drop in the teabags, the milk already in my cup but only added to his at the very end of the process. Half a sugar for him. Used to be two, then one. He would say, 'Why deprive yourself, at this age?' But I got it down, all the same. Olly's sniffing around my feet, looking for crumbs I might have dropped. I reach down to pat his head but he dodges out of the way, goes back to Arthur, like always. He smells like the river, and I make a mental note to give him a bath soon. There's bread in the toaster and butter and jam on the side, waiting. And there's something I want to say, something I've been wanting to say now for decades, about this life we've built, but the words are stuck. They're always stuck.

I take the mugs over to the table, noticing how the steam rises and then drags itself in the direction I walk.

'Well,' Arthur says, folding the paper. 'Any plans for today?'

I shake my head, and the toast pops up with a quiet clatter.

‘I’m going to that funeral,’ he says. ‘Tommy Waites.’

There’s always a funeral when you get to our age. Arthur used to cut Tommy’s hair, when he had the barber’s shop, and they drank together at the conservative club sometimes. He’s been to funerals with less of a connection than that. I never know whether he’s going to pay his respects or just because it’s an outing of sorts. Finger sandwiches and slightly stale crisps, a couple of whiskeys for the road.

‘You go,’ I say. ‘I barely knew him.’

‘I’m sure Moira would be glad to see you.’

‘You see, I wouldn’t have been able to tell you his wife’s name. So I’m quite sure my presence wouldn’t make a difference to her one way or the other.’

His shoulders rise just a fraction and I know he’s annoyed. I’m an expert in his body language, as I’m sure he is in mine. You don’t live side by side, alone, for more than six decades without learning a thing or two.

‘So what will you do, while I’m gone?’

I could read, or do some knitting, or look through old photographs. I could just sit and think, go back over my memories, have a rake through my life. Our lives. But Arthur doesn’t approve of that kind of thing, thinks it’s maudlin. Always look forward, that’s his motto. Or one of them. Me, I’m more about looking back, especially now there’s so much back and so little forward left. What’s wrong with spending your last few years in quiet contemplation? It’s too late to change the world, isn’t it? That’s the trouble between us; I’m winding down and he’s still trying to go full throttle.

‘I need to sort out that kitchen drawer that’s sticking,’ I say.

‘Oh yes, that’s been driving me round the bend.’

I don’t say that it wouldn’t have got stuck in the first place if he didn’t keep putting things in it when it’s clearly full. Takeaway menus we’ll never use and buttons and rolls of sticky tape and who knows what else. I’ll throw 80 per cent of it away, and he’ll be pleased and won’t notice any of the things he was hoarding have disappeared, which goes to show he didn’t need them in the first place.

When he comes down in his funeral suit, he holds his arms out in front of him for me to do his cufflinks.

‘Bill’s old cufflinks, these,’ he says, as he always does.

I nod, don’t say that after sixty-odd years, they feel more like his to me than Bill’s, despite the initials. WM. William Mansfield.



He's had that suit more than thirty years, and the trousers are a bit too tight. He smells like soap and water. Just clean. Just him.

'You're sure I can't change your mind?' he asks.

I look at him, right in the eye, and wonder when I last did that. You spend so much time talking from different rooms, or one of you on the sofa and one in the doorway. When do you ever stand inches apart like this, and really focus on each other? He's still got a full head of hair, though it's thinning, and it's still got a touch of sandy colouring mixed in with the white. His eyes are as blue as they were on our wedding day, when I looked into them at the altar, still hoping for a reason to back out. He's put weight on, of course. He's not that compact, muscular man I first knew. He's got jowls and a belly. It suits him, age. Because he's got a magical smile, always has, and when he flashes that, you don't really see anything else.

'I don't fancy it,' I say.

He nods. And I know he's thinking that I never fancy much any more. That I've mostly given up on life. And it's true. It's funny. When you're choosing who to spend your life with, you don't think about how you'll both feel in your eighties. Whether one of you will be ready to sit and wait for the end while the other one's keen to cram in as much living as possible. But even when we were younger, this difference raged between us. Him, always thinking he could make a difference, me knowing I'm just one person in a wide world, and it doesn't much matter what I do.

'Well, I'll see you later, then.'

'I'll do a sausage casserole,' I say, and we both know it's an olive branch.

'Right you are.'

I follow him to the door and wait for him to speak, knowing he won't go until things are patched up between us.

'I won't be too long,' he says, putting his arms around me. I feel the scratch of his stubble on my cheek and hope he'll pull away.

And then he's gone. I take sausages – paired and neatly wrapped in clingfilm – out of the freezer and put them on the side to defrost. Next, I tackle the drawer, being ruthless. If I don't know what it is or it's not been used for months, it goes in the bin. It only takes half an hour, and then I'm about to get my book out but Olly keeps going over to the door and looking mournful, and I know he'd reach up and put his lead on himself if he could.

'Come on then, boy,' I say, and I get us both ready for a walk.

It's one of those bright, cold October days. Dry, at least, but I know my

hands will be stiff and cold as stone by the time I get home. We go to the end of the lane and then towards the centre of town. I've lived here in this small Surrey town my entire life, walked this route so often I'm sometimes surprised my footsteps aren't imprinted on the tarmac. Olly doesn't care, as long as there are things to sniff, other dogs to growl at and somewhere he can relieve himself. Which he's doing now. I wait for him to finish and then reach down with a bag and for a horrible minute I think I'm not going to be able to get up again, but then something clicks and I'm upright. I look at Olly, who's eager to get going again. How long until we can't look after him? When Arthur talked me into getting him three years ago (after writing a very well-considered pros and cons list) I said he might well outlive us both and Arthur shook his head at me as if he simply didn't understand why I'd bring that up.

'Sometimes you talk as if we're already dead,' he said.

I've always remembered that.

We go on, Olly and me. Past that new fancy bakery that smells of icing sugar and ginger and the hairdressers where Arthur's barber shop used to be. Past the little supermarket with its sliding doors that open even if you're just walking by, as if they're part of a plan to lure people in, and the Carpenters, which is probably where the wake's being held. Cigarette butts litter the pavement. I pull my wool coat a bit tighter around me and hurry along, hoping Arthur won't see me through the window and come out.

It's changed a bit, Broughton, over the years. It's always had everything I need, though, with the occasional trip to Overbury for clothes or furniture. London is less than an hour away, but I've only ever been about once a year. Broughton is mostly enough. The shops thin out and I cross the road, take the little path up to the church. I walk among the gravestones until I find them; my family.

There's Bill, who went first, though he shouldn't have. Full of life one day and gone the next, one of those hidden heart conditions you hear about and never expect your brother to fall victim to. Then Mother, ten years later. She never got over his death, and though she officially died of cancer, it was quite clear to me that she gave up and started dying very slowly the day she heard her boy was gone. And then Dad, less than a year after her. Stroke. All over in a minute. Does it count as being orphaned if it happens when you're in your thirties? Arthur's mother treated me like one of her own but I was always aware of the fact that if I lost him, I'd be alone in the world.

I don't think Arthur's ever really understood that. He was one of nine and he's always had siblings and cousins all over the place. All our lives, wherever we talked about going on our holidays, he'd have a cousin there, and they'd meet up for a drink or dinner and they'd always have that same Beaumont look. Sandy hair and freckles. My parents were both only children so we were a unit of four. Now whittled down to one.

There are leaves all over the stones, in reds and oranges. I can't see Mother's dates, or Dad's full name. But it's so pretty, this autumn scene, that it doesn't matter. I know those things anyway, don't I? And I've never really seen the point of sweeping leaves. Nature won't be outdone.

I look over my shoulder to check there's no one around before I speak.

'It's Mabel, just passing with Olly. There was something in the paper yesterday about people's collections and I thought of you, Bill, and those stamps of yours. I showed it to Arthur and he chuckled, said he used to slip them out of your folder and hide them sometimes, for a joke, and you'd get all het up and sulk for days. What would you collect now, I wonder? If you were still here and you'd stuck with the stamps, you'd have thousands by now. I've kept them for you, up in the loft. Lord knows why. I suppose they'll get thrown out when Arthur and I go, like everything else.'

Tears spring to my eyes and take me by surprise. I always have a quiet word with them when I come by here, and I don't usually get emotional. Perhaps I'm coming down with something, or need a good night's sleep. These days, I tend to turn like a chicken on a spit for hours before I can settle down.

I head home and wait for Arthur to return. It's funny, I don't mind him going out, don't mind my own company, but I like him coming back, too. I like hearing his stories. The house feels different when he's not in it, as if all our furniture and belongings settle and wait, like a breath held. It's nearly four when I hear the scrape of his key in the lock. He's opened his shirt collar and loosened his tie, and he's had a few to drink, by the look of him.

'Was it all right?' I ask.

'It was. He had a good life, Tommy. Lots of people there to see him off. Do you think there'll be many there for us, when it's our turn?'

He sits on the sofa and Olly comes running in to be fussed.

'Hello, Dog,' Arthur says.

Olly's always liked him the most. I watch Arthur reach down to scratch behind his ears, the way both of their faces relax. I think about what he asked.

For him, surely some of those family members will come, drifting in from all corners of the country. And there's all his old clients, and the men he drinks with, those who are left. For me, I'm not so sure.

'What's got you thinking about that?' I ask, but it's a stupid question, because the answer is obvious.

'Tommy and Moira had four children, and they were all there with their husbands and wives, and then their children. Just got me thinking, that's all.'

There's nothing I can say. It's too late to go back and change anything.

'Tea?' he asks, getting up and disappearing from the room.

'Yes, please.'

And all the rest of the day, I know we're both thinking about the children we didn't have.

‘There’s a market on in Overbury,’ Arthur says, tapping the teaspoon against the edge of the mug before bringing the drinks to the kitchen table.

‘What sort of market?’

‘Food, I think. Fancy a run out?’

I could say no. I want to. But he’s trying to involve me and it isn’t fair to knock him back over and over. The last ten years of our marriage have been like that, in a way. Him offering something up, me batting it back. It wasn’t always this way, and that’s the trouble. We both remember when we were partners in crime.

‘Sounds good,’ I say.

He tries to pretend he isn’t surprised. Tucks into his bran flakes.

The first problem is finding somewhere to park. For years neither of us could drive, and then Arthur learned when he was in his fifties because he likes a challenge. He passed first time, after a steady six months of lessons, but he’s never had much confidence. He drives with his worried face permanently plastered on.

‘What about over there?’ I suggest, as we circle the car park for the second time. The low winter sun is making it hard to see. ‘I think there’s a...’

‘There’s a Mini in it,’ he says, his jaw tight.

‘We could go back, if you prefer.’

It’s a fine line I’m walking. I want him to know he doesn’t have to suffer this stress for me, but I don’t want him to think I’m looking for excuses to cut the outing short. He doesn’t say anything. A young couple walk back to their car, hand in hand, and he waits, the indicator clicking. When we get out of

the car, I think about taking his hand. How long is it since we walked through the streets like that, declaring our union? We certainly did it in the early years, but I don't remember when it stopped. Was there a day when he reached for my hand and I pulled away? Or dropped his hand to adjust my handbag on my shoulder, and then never picked it up again? Though we're walking side by side, shoulder to shoulder, it seems too big a gulf to cross now. Too huge a gesture.

There are market stalls up and down the length of the high street, smells competing for space. Candy floss, and spicy meat, and fresh bread. A buzz of chatter and the occasional shout of a stallholder.

'Get your fresh pastries here!'

'All bowls of fruit or veg one pound fifty. We've got pineapples, we've got mangoes, we've got cherries...'

'Fresh fish caught this morning!'

I nudge Arthur. 'Remember the fishmonger and the shrimps at Morecambe Bay?'

It's an invitation to visit the past with me, and I hope he'll take it. I hope he'll remember the better times.

His face cracks wide open and he laughs. 'That man was wasted up there, with that voice.'

We are silent for a moment, memories spooling between us. There are so many, and perhaps we can live off them.

'Shall we pick up a pie for dinner? And there isn't much fruit in the bowl.'

Arthur pulls a crumpled piece of paper out of his jacket pocket. Of course he's made a list.

We choose apples and oranges, and then he points to what I think is a mango, raises his eyebrows.

'Go on, then,' I say.

Where does he get it from, this eternal zest for trying new things? I admired it when I first knew him, when he was just Bill's friend who was interested in everything.

At the pie stand, we weigh up beef and onion against chicken and ham, and then I hear a voice calling his name.

'Arthur Beaumont, is that you?'

We turn, and it's a woman of about our age. She looks like she might once have been pretty, but it's hard to tell with the wrinkles crowding out her

features. When she smiles, her teeth look too white. She puts one arm on Arthur's and goes up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek, then she does the same to me and she smells of roses and soap.

'Joan Jenkins,' he says. 'Well, I never.'

She shakes her head and laughs. 'I haven't heard that name in a while. It's been Joan Garnett since 1959.'

I can't place her, but the name seems familiar.

'So you two got married, then?' She tips her head in my direction and then Arthur's.

'We did indeed,' he says, turning to me with a proud smile. 'Sixty-two years.'

She shakes her head. 'Well, shows what I know. I thought you weren't suited.'

Arthur laughs and they carry on chatting, but I zone out and just hear that line about us not being suited over and over on a loop. Next thing I know, she's waving a hand and walking away and Arthur's back to looking at the pies.

'Who was she?' I ask. 'I mean, should I remember her?'

'She was just always around, in the old days. At the dances. Dot knew her a bit, I think.'

It's a long time since I've heard him say Dot's name. It startles me. But the moment is over in a flash. Still, for a few seconds I was back there, sitting at the side of the hall next to Dot, whispering about what the other girls were wearing and whose arms people might spend the evening in. I could hear the band, feel the sweat creeping from under my arms. And every time I saw a couple kissing in a darkened corner, I wanted it to be me. I wanted to know what it felt like, to lose yourself like that in another person, or to try to.

'She had a bit of a thing for me, I think,' Arthur says as we move away from the stall with our chosen pie in a paper bag.

I stop walking. 'Dot?'

Arthur chuckles. 'No! Joan. Sounds like she married John Garnett in the end, though. Did you hear her say she lost him last year?'

I shake my head. I didn't hear anything after her saying she didn't think we were suited.

'Fancy, she's been living here in Overbury all these years and we've never run into her before today.'

I might have run into her before. I might have stood next to her at bus

stops and in butchers' queues and at the bank, and I wouldn't have known her. But I know what he means. Sometimes it feels like the world is unimaginably big, and other times it feels like you could hold it in your hand.

Back at home, we drink tea and Olly curls up with Arthur on the sofa, and I see that Arthur's going to nod off. It's the fresh air. I watch them from my armchair in the window as his mouth drops open slightly. I feel a rush of affection for this man I've spent my life with. I could have chosen so much worse. He's kind, reliable, and that love of life he has, that's probably kept us both afloat a few times. Because there have been tough years. There will always be tough years in a marriage this long. It's guaranteed. The best you can hope is you have someone who cares enough to weather them with you.

But I can't help thinking. What if he'd married Joan Jenkins? He said himself she had a thing for him, and it seemed likely from the way she was looking at him this morning, all these years later. Joan, who thought we weren't matched, and who was right in a lot of ways. Joan, who might have loved him the way I never could. Might have given him the children he longed for. Might have been a comfort and a fellow adventurer in his later years, rather than someone always holding him back. Might have been, simply, a better choice.

When he asked me to be his wife, standing on the street corner on the way back from the first dance I went to after Bill's death, the light fading and his eyes wide with fear, I didn't think about what would happen to him if I said no. But perhaps I should have done. Because what I saw as breaking his heart might really have been setting him free, setting him on the path to find the girl who was right for him. Whether that was Joan Jenkins or someone he hadn't met yet. When I said yes, and I was screaming no inside, I thought I was doing the best I could for him. But now I'm not so sure.

He wakes after half an hour and shakes his head in that funny way he always does, as if to get rid of the last remnants of sleep.

'I'd better take this one out for a walk, hadn't I? Come on then, Dog.'

He doesn't ask if I want to come along. He knows one outing a day is more than enough for me. I get my book out and step into someone else's life for an hour, someone young and rich and full of energy. I've always loved that about reading. Being able to experience a different time or place, but mostly getting a chance to experience being a different person altogether. One who's braver, who knows what she wants and reaches for it without apology, or one who doesn't have regrets. How different would my life have



been if I'd been a different sort of person?

Then he's back, clutching at his chest, the colour gone from his face.

'Arthur?' I'm up and out of my chair. 'What is it? Should I call the doctor?'

'No, no,' he says, 'let me get my breath.'

I steer him to the sofa and he sits. I'm panicked, unsure what to do. This is one of the reasons I would have made a terrible mother. I don't know what to do when the unexpected happens.

'Are you all right?' I ask, when a couple of minutes have passed.

Olly is sitting at Arthur's feet, watchful, his lead still on.

'I just came over a bit funny, that's all. Indigestion, maybe. I'm all right now, Mabel. I'm all right.'

I fuss over him. Give him the newspaper to read while I cook the dinner, put the softest blanket over his knees. When you're young, and one of you is ill, you know it's likely nothing serious. But at this age, every symptom wields the power to terrify. We've talked, over the years, about how we'd like to go. Just like most people, I suppose. Quickly, if at all possible. With our dignity and our minds intact. But you don't get to choose, do you?

I've always thought I'd be first. I'm not sure why. He'd get on fine without me, after a while. I know he'd be heartbroken, but he'd get past it. He's not bad in the kitchen and he's got plenty of friends who'd rally round. But me, without him? I'm not sure I'd know how to go on. I think I'd just forget to eat lunch, or get out of bed, without him to rally me.

'Do you want this pie?' I ask. 'Or do you not feel like eating?'

I've warmed it through and boiled some carrots and green beans, and the smell wafting from the kitchen is thick and meaty.

He appears in the door of the back room. 'Just a small slice for me, please.'

It isn't like him. He's the kind to pile his plate high if it's something he likes, and there's nothing he likes more than pie. We don't say much while we eat. We've passed so many meals together, like this, sometimes with the radio on low, sometimes in silence. But tonight the quiet hangs heavy, and I'm looking forward to going up to bed, to putting the day to rest and starting again tomorrow.

I find him in the garden just before seven, sitting on the bench. I sit next to him, follow his gaze.

'Nice one tonight,' he says.

There's just a hint of pink, making the clouds look like candy floss. We watch in silence as the sun inches lower and lower.

When we are in bed, he reaches a hand across the space between us for the first time in a long time. Rests it on my thigh.

'Seeing Joan today, it made me think,' he says.

Here it is. The different path his life could have taken, the different wife. Will he actually say it?

'Oh yes?'

'Those were good days, when Bill was still alive and Dot was here and the four of us would go dancing together. I'm glad we had those.'

There are tears in my eyes. My brother, Bill, and my best friend, Dot. When it was all laughter and joking and a whole lifetime ahead and we didn't care if we made mistakes or took the wrong path, because there was an eternity to straighten it all out. And then we learned that there wasn't an eternity, at least not for Bill, and we all broke in our different ways. Dot disappeared, Arthur was in a hurry to settle down, and I went along with it.

'Good days,' I say into the darkness, but I think he's already asleep.

### 3

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I know the second I wake that he's gone. He's lying on his back, looking just as peaceful as usual, but something in the air has shifted. I know that if I reach out and touch him, he'll be cold. So I don't do it, not at first. I prop myself up with pillows and I talk to him, like I would on any other morning. I tell him that I slept quite well and I hope he did, too. I even go downstairs and make a cup of tea.

'Arthur,' I say, my voice a bit strangled. 'I really should have called the doctor when you had those chest pains yesterday. I could see you weren't yourself. But you didn't make a fuss, did you? You never made a fuss. It wasn't your way.'

My words are met with silence, of course.

'Did you know? And if you knew, how long for? Just yesterday, or have you known for a while? Have you felt things caving in? I wish you'd said something.'

I examine that, turn it around, put it under an internal microscope. Do I wish that? What would I have done differently if he'd told me he thought he was going to die? Would I have kissed him, or held him, or thanked him for the years he gave me? Would I have been less snappy, more patient? I'll never know.

When I touch him, and know for sure, I'll have to make a telephone call, and the world will come crashing in. So, I'll hold it off another half an hour. Me and Arthur, me drinking a cup of tea with him in bed. Our last one. It's been just the two of us for so many years. People don't talk much about marriages without children, about the intensity of them. No one else in the

house to act as a buffer, to force you to come together after an argument. There was a time when it seemed everyone I knew was having children, and then I lost them all to that life. It's not for the faint-hearted, parenting. Years and years of care and attention. And there was Arthur and me, still just us. Always just us.

When Bill died, it was the exact opposite of this. Mum found him, cold in his bed one Sunday morning at the age of twenty-five. She screamed and screamed. And then I went up the stairs to find out what was wrong, thinking the cat had brought a mouse in or something. She was standing there, in his bedroom, and when I looked at him, I saw that there was nothing there, in his face, and I screamed too. It was violent, a wrench. The way the death of someone young should be, I suppose. But Arthur has had his life, long and mostly happy. He always said he counted himself lucky, to live in a safe country and have a roof over his head. He didn't begrudge me the things I didn't give him. The children he never got to meet. Or if he did, he kept quiet about it.

'Eighty-nine. It's a good age. And you were still you, right up to the end, weren't you? No forgetting or confusion or pain. That's as much as you can hope for, I think.'

I wonder, for a moment, whether he's watching me. Whether he's looking down, laughing at me talking to his empty shell of a body. Whether he's with Bill, or his parents, or mine. And that's what jolts me into action. I finish my tea and I force myself to put my warm hand on his cold one. It's a shock even though I know what to expect. It doesn't feel like him.

The first time he held my hand, we were dancing. Bill and Dot had taken to the floor and Arthur had looked at me a little shyly and tilted his head to ask, and I'd nodded, stepped towards him. We were clumsy together, no grace. But I remember the warmth of his hand, and the size of it, how my hand almost got lost in it, how he smelled clean and like comfort, and I remember feeling safe and protected. Now, in this bed we've shared for years, he is not himself. He is gone. His body, which carried him for almost nine decades, is useless and empty.

'Oh, Arthur,' I say, my voice catching.

And then I go downstairs and telephone the doctor, because I don't know what else to do, who else to call. The receptionist says she'll sort out the forms and send a doctor to certify the death, and tells me that once that's done I should call a funeral director to ask them to move the body, and I

thank her, but then once I've put the telephone down I find that I'm sobbing, great gulping sobs that keep coming and coming, like waves. Because now it's really true, and they will come and take him away, and what will I do then? Who will I be, without him?

The doctor's visit is quick and sombre. It's a doctor I've never seen. They're always changing. When he leaves, he says how sorry he is and I nod an acknowledgement, not sure my voice will hold. Then I fetch the iPad to look up funeral homes in Broughton. There are two, and I call the first one. The man I speak to has a kind voice, and he says they can come for him in an hour's time. Is that enough? I don't know what to say because I want him gone and I want him here at the same time. I can't bear the thought of that body that isn't him being upstairs in the bed for any longer than necessary, but I'm not ready to be someone who lives alone. A widow. I sigh and say an hour is fine, and then I go back upstairs to tell him.

'Someone's coming to get you, Arthur,' I say, sitting on the edge of the bed and touching his hand again. I didn't touch him enough. He said that, sometimes, in the early years. That I wasn't very affectionate. But we're all different, aren't we? And it isn't always easy to change. He hasn't said it for a long time.

I catch a slightly stale smell and go to open a window wide. The wind catches the curtain and drags the edge of it outside. I don't pull it back in.

I look at the cold cup of tea I made for him on the bedside table. Couldn't bring myself to just make the one. I think of all the tea we've drunk, how he'd always say that I made the perfect cup, just how he liked it, though I never did anything special. He was grateful, appreciative. Not just about that but about anything I did for him. About me agreeing to be his, I think.

A memory creeps in. I watch it like a film playing behind my eyelids. We were in our thirties, and he still looked hopeful and fresh. We were in the kitchen of our first house, cooking together. Him chopping leeks and onions with a sharp knife, me peeling potatoes. The radio was on, playing one love song after another. A breeze snaked through the open window. He put his knife down and washed his hands before wiping his eyes.

'Onions got you?' I asked.

He nodded. Came over to stand behind me, circled my waist with his hands. And then his hot breath was on my neck and he was kissing me, trying to turn my body to face his. Did it just come over him, this sudden lust? I let him turn me, let him kiss my lips and my neck. He reached for the front of

my dress, started undoing the buttons.

‘Not here,’ I said, clumsily trying to do them back up.

He was faster than me, more nimble. ‘Here,’ he said, and his voice was urgent, and I almost laughed.

His hands were everywhere, roaming, and all I could think about was the potatoes, lying there behind me, half peeled. Arthur pressed his erection against me and groaned, low in my ear. I wanted him to stop, but I didn’t say, not at first. ‘I Want to Hold Your Hand’ came on, and it was the first time I’d heard the Beatles, and it felt like a change was coming. Or does it just feel that way now, looking back? I almost tumble out of the memory, then, but not quite. Arthur lifted me and carried me through to the front room where he laid me on the sofa before yanking the curtains closed.

I was naked before I found my voice. ‘Stop,’ I said.

He pulled back, looked at me with eyes that were glazed. ‘What is it?’

I felt silly, cold. I reached for my dress on the floor and covered myself with it.

‘I just... I’m not in the mood,’ I said.

He kept looking at me, as if he was trying to work something out, and then he pulled his trousers up and disappeared upstairs without a word. When he came down, I was dressed and back in the kitchen, the potatoes peeled and chopped. I hoped he wouldn’t bring it up.

‘You can’t just push me away all the time,’ he said.

‘No,’ I agreed.

He was right, I couldn’t. And yet.

‘I love you, Mabel. You’re my wife. I want to make love to you.’

‘I know. I...’

What? What is there to say?

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

I looked at him, and there was a muscle twitching near his jaw. For one awful second, I thought he might hit me, and then I came back to myself and remembered that he was Arthur, and he would never.

I think about the words I’ve wanted to say to him every day we’ve spent together. Perhaps his death has dislodged them, but no. They’re still stuck. I would say them to him now, if I could. It would be better than nothing.

‘I love you,’ I say.

It’s a funny kind of truth. I didn’t love him, at first, but I grew to. Not passionate love, not the kind of love people talk about dying for, more a love

built brick by brick. A love made of appreciation, and shared grief, and kindness. He was a good man. Such a good man.

When the doorbell goes, it feels too soon. I tell him where I'm going, that I'll be back but I'll have them with me, and they're going to take him. I know he isn't there but I can't help giving him a running commentary, all the same. I speak to him as if he's a child. As I would have spoken to a child.

'I'm here, Arthur,' I tell him. 'Don't forget.'

Two men, both in their thirties, I'd say. They introduce themselves as Steve and Mark. One tall and slim, one short and stocky, like a comedy double act. They are polite, respectful. They tell me how sorry they are. This is their job, and they do it well. But I can't imagine why anyone would choose it. How it would come up on anyone's list of desired occupations. Perhaps it doesn't. Perhaps it's more the kind of job you find yourself in, that you fall into.

I busy myself, making them tea though they tell me not to worry. I find some Hobnobs in the cupboard. When they are ready to take him, they ask if I'd like to say goodbye, and stay downstairs to drink the tea to give me a bit of privacy.

Climbing the stairs feels like a gargantuan effort, but I haul myself up. Go back into the room. Will I ever walk in here without thinking of his body lying here? Will I ever just think of it as our bedroom – or my bedroom – again? I don't want to move house, but I don't want to be haunted by this memory either.

'It's time,' I say. 'They're going to take care of you. You'd like them. They're smartly dressed and clean shaven.'

It all feels too quick, after the slow eking out of the years we've lived together. To be saying goodbye, like this, when just yesterday we were shopping for fruit. In the kitchen, in the fruit bowl, there's a mango that will never be eaten. I will let it sit there, and rot, and then I'll throw it away. Will we have buried him, by then? Will I be coping? I lean down, kiss his forehead.

'They were good days,' I whisper, echoing our last conversation. 'So many good days.'

I go back down and tell them I'm ready, and I stay at the back of the house, in the kitchen, while they carry him out. One of them has taken a Hobnob and there are a few crumbs on the side, so I get a cloth and wipe it down. There are things to do, and they leave me with a little folder with

various forms and leaflets in it, but I can't think about that yet. I can only think two things, two separate thoughts, one and then the other, then back to the first.

I should never have married him.

I am on my own.



It is quiet after they've gone, and I don't know what to do with myself. I feel jumpy, unable to sit down. Is that adrenaline? I open his drawers, look at his underpants and socks, neatly paired. See him standing here, right where I am, choosing socks from the drawer and resting his right hand on the chest while he pulls on the left one, before switching over. How is it possible that I'll never see him do that again?

I'm still in my nightdress and slippers, and I'm tempted to slip back beneath the covers but part of me is frightened of getting into the bed where he died. I don't believe in curses or ghosts or anything of that nature, but the thought of lying where he died makes me shiver, so I go through to the spare room, the room we made nice for the guests who never really came after it was clear there would be no nursery. But no. That isn't right either. I take a deep breath and return to our bedroom, stand at the end of the bed. Shortly after we got married, we had a conversation about the 'what's mine is yours' part of the vows. Arthur said he wanted us to share everything, that he didn't want us to have anything that was just his or mine. I said that was silly, that there were always going to be things we each had, and when he asked me for an example, I said sides of the bed.

'Let's swap,' he said.

'What?'

'Every few weeks, or months, we'll swap which side we sleep on.'

We did it, too. Every six months, we turned the mattress over, because it's something my mother had always done, and Arthur would take my book and my night cream from the bedside table and swap them with his bits and

pieces. I wonder whether I'll always sleep on the same side, now that he died on the other one. I get into bed, and fall into a sleep so deep that coming up out of it a few hours later feels like a kind of rebirth. I didn't dream of him. That sleep was a black hole, and that's a comfort.

It's when I go back downstairs that I spot it. A scrap of paper on the floor next to the dining table. I reach to pick it up, and seeing Arthur's handwriting is a jolt. The paper is torn from the spiral notepad we kept on the go for his endless lists, and on the top line, in pencil, he's written 'Find D'. Is it new, this note? Arthur's final list. I almost laugh. Then I pull out a chair and sit down. Find D. What does it mean?

Find D. It could be a note for me, or something he was writing for himself. Is D a person, or a thing? And if it's a thing, why the capital letter?

Olly's getting under my feet, almost tripping me up, so I take hold of his face between my hands. He doesn't like it, tries to shake me off.

'It's about Arthur,' I say, and he tilts his head to one side. 'He's gone, for good. I'm sorry. I know how you loved him.'

There's no knowing what he understands, but he slinks away from me and into the corner of the room. Curls up there, like he needs to be alone. Today might be the first day we've had him that he won't get a walk. Arthur would go out in all weathers, even if he wasn't feeling good.

'He relies on us,' he said once. 'We're all he's got.'

And now, he only has me. The one he was never all that keen on.

I'm standing by the kettle, waiting for the low roar of its boil, when I think of Dot. Could he have meant Find Dot? And if he did, why did he leave me guessing by not writing her whole name? Or was he interrupted while writing? I run through the people we know for other names starting with D, but there are none. Find D. I repeat it in my head, over and over, as if with enough repetition the meaning will emerge like the sun from behind a cloud.

He mentioned Dot, at the market and then again last night, for the first time in years. Reminisced about the days we spent together, as a four. Could she have been on his mind? Could he have known he was dying, and wanted to suggest that I find my friend after he'd gone? Was he giving me permission? Although really, why did I need it?

In my mind, I sometimes get muddled about Dot leaving. I think it was just after Bill's death, but the reality was that there was almost a year in between. I lost most of it to grief, but she was there, visiting the house, checking in on me and on Mother. Mother saw her as a daughter, so

convinced was she that Dot and Bill would have married. Sometimes she brought flowers. Tulips, or carnations. Mother would stand at the kitchen counter, cutting off the ends and arranging them in a vase, saying how thoughtful Dot was, how much she appreciated her.

It was actually in the run up to my wedding that she disappeared. I hadn't asked her to be my bridesmaid yet, but it probably went unsaid. Was it hard for her to see me getting ready to be married when we'd all thought she would be first? Or was it more than that? Did she have a reason for not wanting the wedding to go ahead?

I used to meet her on the corner of Halfpenny Street and we'd walk to work at the typing pool together, and then one Wednesday, she wasn't there. It happened sometimes, if one of us caught a cold or came down with a tummy bug, so I went on ahead, thought nothing of it. But when I got to work, there was a new girl in Dot's place, and there were whispers that she wasn't coming back. I thought it was ridiculous, just a rumour. Dot would be tucked up in bed with a bowl of warming chicken soup on a tray, her nose red and her throat sore.

By the end of my shift, I was tired and hungry. But I called in on the way home to put my mind at rest. To find out whether she'd be up to coming in tomorrow, whether I should wait on the corner like always. But her mother answered the door, and said she was gone.

'Gone?' I asked. 'Gone where?'

'London.'

Dot's mother, Irene, was a small, wiry woman but you didn't cross her. She'd been known to go into the Carpenters and drag her husband out by his hair. She stood in the doorway with a firm look on her face, and she didn't ask me in.

'But she would have told me,' I said.

Irene shrugged, and it felt unkind.

'It was last minute,' she said. 'I've got a sister there, and she asked if Dot wanted to go and stay.'

'So it's a holiday?'

'No, it's not a holiday. She's going to make a life there. Find a job. She's always liked the city.'

Dot and I had walked across fields together, picked flowers for our hair. Was she a city girl? There had been something, I had to admit, some sort of yearning I caught sometimes in her eyes when she thought I wasn't looking,

but I'd always thought that was about love. About Bill. Was it about being in the wrong place, in a life that felt too small, that didn't fit her properly?

A week or so later, I called again, asked for an address so I could write. Irene huffed and puffed but she gave me the address, and that night I wrote a long letter, telling Dot everything she'd missed. How Elsie Jacks at work had been sacked for sneaking off to smoke in the toilets, how my cousin Margaret was having a baby and I was hoping to have a week off work to help her out in the early days, how Mother was starting to do a little better, was starting to hum and whistle as she moved about the house again for the first time since Bill. I didn't say I missed her, but that message surely hummed beneath the words, between the lines. I put a stamp on it and posted it off the following morning, and I never heard back.

I didn't give up, though. I wrote another three or four. And it was weeks before I stopped checking the post in the mornings, sure there would be something for me. Should I have been clearer, about the gaping hole she left in my life? Would it have made a difference? I talked to Arthur about looking for her, back then when it seemed possible to think of getting on a train and seeking her out, but he was always dead against it. Said it was her decision to go and to not reply to my letters, and we should leave her be. It always made me wonder whether he had something to hide, something Dot had taken away with her that he didn't want bringing back. And now, when it's too late, is he really encouraging me to do it? Is he admitting he was wrong?

I move about the house, unable to settle. Olly seems equally discombobulated, but we don't comfort each other, because we never have. We give one another space, instead. My head is full of Arthur and Dot and Bill, and being young, and a time that felt like it was golden. No, that's not right. It didn't feel like it was golden when we were in it, did it? That's a tint I've cast on it since, now I know so much more about life and pain and drudgery. I've added the gold shimmer, but how much of it is about youth and freedom, and how much about having those people close to me? It's impossible to know.

It's like my brain has got caught and is stuttering, so I go to the back room and sit at the table and look again at the note. Find D.

'Tell me what you mean, Arthur,' I say. 'This isn't enough.'

In the back room, I open the bottom drawer in the sideboard, the one only he used. Inside, there's a mess of boxes and papers. A watch his dad gave him. Cufflinks. A box of handkerchiefs he must have got for Christmas one

year. What am I looking for? Anything. A clue. It seems unlikely I'll find it here. I fold the piece of paper and slip it into the pocket of my dressing gown so I can sneak a look at it whenever I want to. Try to forget about it. Know I won't. Find D. It repeats in my brain like a mantra.

For a week, or thereabouts, I don't get dressed. It's a rebellion of sorts. Arthur had to be feeling like he was at death's door to spend a day in bed. When we retired, I remember him saying that it would be easy to slip into bad habits. He meant me; there was no slipping for him.

So I stay in bed. Sometimes I cry, both for the loss of him and for the loss of all those years. For the life I didn't live. All the lives I didn't live. We only get to choose one, after all. Sometimes I read. Sometimes I just stare at the wall, or at the empty space in the bed beside me. And all the time, in the back of my mind, on repeat: Find D. If it was some kind of last request, I want to honour it.

Several hours after they took him away, I stripped the bed. And it was only when it was all in the machine, spinning, that I wished I had left it for a while, his particular scent trapped in those sheets. I have to make do with the wardrobe, those carefully hung shirts and jackets. When I get cold in my nightdress, I pull one of his woolly jumpers on, and my slippers. I must look a sight. But there's no one to see me. I hear post dropping through the door at about eleven every morning, but otherwise it's quiet.

There's Olly, of course. I let him out in the garden to do his business and have a run around. For the first couple of days, he sits by the door and whines, but then it seems like he accepts that I'm not going to take him out, and he gives up. He's grieving too, of course. He keeps going to the end of the sofa where Arthur used to sit. Does he understand? I talk to him, tell him over and over that Arthur's gone, and he looks at me with those mournful eyes. When I try to pet him, he pulls away.

You hear about couples who've been together for a long time dying within days or weeks of one another. Is that what I'm hoping for? I'm not eating much, not looking after myself. We're out of milk, so I'm drinking my tea black, and the bread has mould on the edges. When I feel particularly hungry, I boil an egg. And I shake dried food into Olly's bowl for him to fuss over and ignore.

It won't end well, this. It can't. The telephone's been ringing and it's probably the funeral parlour. They're storing Arthur's body and it's time I started to get things moving with arrangements. But I'm not sure I can face it. There will be so many decisions, about music and readings and prayers, and that's just the service. I'll need to choose burial or cremation, pick a coffin or an urn. I can barely decide whether to watch television or read, can't rouse myself to go to the supermarket for the essentials. I'm not in the right frame of mind to make big decisions. How do other people do this? The answer, of course, is that there are more of them, and they discuss it, spread the load between them. Between the spouse and the children and the siblings and the grandchildren. How sad for him, that there's only me to do this.

And then, on the eighth or possibly ninth day, I wake up with a thought clanging in my head like an alarm: Enough. Enough wallowing. I'm not ready to die like this, to give up completely. If Arthur is watching, he would hate this. It would make him worry. So I get up and dressed, and I strip the bed for washing. It's a start. I have to have a sit down, afterwards. But that's all right. Slow and steady. I sit at the dining table with a cup of tea and my notepad and pen, and I make a list.

'Can you see me, Arthur? Making a list?' I say it out loud into the empty room. I can almost hear him chuckle.

- 1. Get in touch with friends and family*
- 2. Contact the funeral parlour*
- 3. Go to the supermarket*
- 4. Clean the house*
- 5. Find D*

Arthur was always trying to get me to write lists. He liked the order and purpose of them. But I used to prefer carrying what I needed to remember in my head. Perhaps I'm becoming more like him, now he's gone. Taking the best bits of him.

But this list is daunting, when I look at it like that. Only five things, but all of them hard in their own way. And one I can't even attempt until I know what it means. We used to clean the house together, him with the vacuum and me with the duster. I'll have to take it bit by bit, one room at a time. It's clear that the first thing to do is make some telephone calls, so I get the address book and go through it. So many names crossed out. People who've died or who we've lost touch with. I land on his sister, Mary, and dial her number before I can change my mind.

'Mary, it's Mabel,' I say, when she picks up. 'Arthur's wife.'

Saying his name aloud is a shock. It sounds the same and that feels all wrong.

'Mabel, how are you?'

'Not so good, I'm afraid. Bad news. Arthur's passed away.'

How many calls like this have we taken, over the years? Arthur was often the one to answer the telephone, and I'd know from his tone when it was one of these, and I'd try to work out who from the things he said.

'Oh, Mabel, I'm sorry.'

They weren't close, Arthur and Mary. She lives up in the North East and I'm sure she'll come for the funeral, but we haven't seen much of them over the years. Like everyone else, they were busy with children and then grandchildren. Her and Arthur were the only two left of nine siblings. Just Mary, now. She asks me to give her the details of the funeral when I have them and I realise that this round of calls will lead to a second one. And it's not until after I've hung up that I notice my voice held. I did the first one, which is always the hardest, and I didn't collapse or break down or say anything I shouldn't have said. So I take a breath, pick the receiver up again, and dial his cousin Frank. And I go on like that all morning, until I've spoken to everyone I can think of. I feel exhausted, but also a bit lighter.

The man who answers the telephone at the funeral parlour sounds relieved that I've finally got in touch.

'We've been calling and calling,' he says.

It's as if he thinks I've done some kind of moonlight flit.

'Yes, well. I've been... adjusting.'

He gives a bit of a grunt. 'Mrs Beaumont, is there anyone else who can help you with all this? I understand you and Mr Beaumont didn't have children, but are there any other relatives who are local, or good friends?'

There's no one, really. And it makes me question whether we got



something wrong somewhere along the way.

‘Just me,’ I say, and I make sure my voice is clear and strong.

‘All right. Perhaps you could come into our office on the High Street to talk through everything?’

I look at the front door, which hasn’t been opened for over a week. Since they took him, in fact. There’s a small pile of post that I haven’t got the energy to sort through just yet. Can I open that door, and walk into town, the way I used to? I think I can.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘I could come in tomorrow.’

After the call, I go through my memory for any conversation about funerals or death Arthur and I ever had. I make notes. It’s surprisingly helpful. I remember that he wanted ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’, because it reminded him of being a child and life feeling simple. I remember that he wanted to be buried, because his parents are in the graveyard in town and he wanted to lie next to them. And I know that he’d want a do, with food and a bar and the opportunity for people to chat and mix. I’ll call in at the Carpenters when I go to town tomorrow, and I’ll do a food shop at the same time. It feels like a plan, and it feels manageable, just about.

I call for Olly, and he wanders over to me. When he sees the lead in my hand, he looks hopeful. And when I open the door, he starts to get really excited, pulling me along faster than I can walk for the first few yards. It’s odd, being out in the world again. There are too many things to look at, too many smells. I feel like Olly, wanting to stop and sniff things. *I am a widow*, I think. *My name is Mabel and I am widowed*. I try it on and it doesn’t quite fit, but I’m stuck with it anyway so I might as well get used to it.

I feel like I’m emerging into the light. Blinking. Everyone I see is in groups of two or three. They are laughing and touching one another and look like they have never been alone in their lives. Couples and parents with children and groups of friends.

‘We really put all our eggs in one basket, Arthur, didn’t we? And I’m not sure it was the right one.’

I get a funny look from a teenage boy on an electric scooter and realise I’ve spoken out loud. So I reach down, give Olly a bit of a fuss, pretend I was talking to him. I’m not thinking too much about where I’m going and before I know it, I’m at the church. We came here every Sunday when I was a child, always dressed in our best. I remember feeling itchy and uncomfortable, my hair pulled into tight pigtails and scratchy tights underneath my stiff dress.

The vicar was a family friend; he'd come round for tea and biscuits sometimes, on a Saturday afternoon.

And Arthur and I were married here, of course, not by that same vicar, who was retired by then, but by his successor. I have no idea who the vicar is now. Haven't stepped through that stone archway for many years. Today, it feels right. I tie Olly's lead to a railing and tell him I won't be long, and then I step into the cool, calm building, find a pew to sit down on.

I close my eyes and the next thing I know, there's someone beside me. A man of about fifty, with a sizeable paunch and kind eyes. I'm startled at first but he puts a calming hand on my arm.

'Are you here to speak quietly with God, or would you like some companionship?'

That pulls me up short. Did I come in here to speak to God? Or just for the peace of the place?

'I was married here,' I say.

He nods, as if he knows.

'It was spring of 1961, showers on and off all day. But in between, brilliant sunshine. There was a wonderful rainbow.'

'A bit like marriage, then,' he says.

And he's right, but I've never thought of it like that.

'He's gone, now,' I say.

'Your husband?'

'Yes. Arthur.'

'Not Arthur Beaumont?'

I turn in my seat. 'Yes, that's right.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that. And you must be Mabel. He spoke of you so fondly.'

I don't know what to say because I thought I knew everything about Arthur and his routines, but I didn't know that he came here, that he knew this man.

'Did he come to church often?'

'Oh yes, at least once a week. Never for a service, though. He'd just come in when he was out walking the dog and sit here in quiet contemplation, much like you were doing until I interrupted you.'

I remember Arthur saying that God wasn't in churches, that that wasn't where you found him. God was in the flowers and the snow, the tiny robins in the garden and those tigers we'd see prowling around on David Attenborough

documentaries.

‘I didn’t know,’ I say. And then, I screw up my courage and ask something else. ‘Did he ever mention a woman called Dot?’

He frowns, and I realise it sounds like I think he was having an affair.

‘She was an old friend,’ I say. ‘Of mine and his. I found a note he wrote and I’m trying to work out what it means.’

‘I don’t remember him ever saying anything about a Dot,’ he says, his brow furrowed in concentration. ‘Unless, was she the one who was going to marry his friend Bill?’

‘Yes,’ I say, and the volume of my voice startles him. ‘Yes. Bill was my brother. Dot was my friend.’

‘He spoke of the four of you, how happy you all were.’

‘Anything else?’

He shakes his head. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘No, it’s... it’s all right.’

He puts one hand up to his head and rubs at his thinning hair. ‘People are such mysteries,’ he says. ‘You really never know someone wholly.’

And here I was, thinking I did.

I've been worried about arriving on my own, about doing it on my own. So much so that I've forgotten to prepare for the enormity of it, the emotions. It hits me so hard as we approach the church in the funeral car that I'm surprised I make it out without falling. My legs are like marshmallows. I must be frighteningly pale because a tall man rushes over and puts a solid arm around me and I think it's one of Arthur's cousins but I'm not sure which one because they all look the same. He smells a bit like Arthur, too, like coffee and shaving foam, and I know, then, that this will be one of the hardest days. Of course it will. Up there with us finding Bill, with the losses of Mother and Dad, and Dot. So many people I loved have gone. My little corner of the world is emptying out. I have to wonder why I'm still here.

'Are you all right, Mabel?' the cousin asks, and I cast around for his name but there's nothing.

'Yes, I think so.'

The vicar comes out, then, and makes a beeline for me. Steers me inside and to the front row.

'This is where Arthur's beloved should be. Is there anything you need to tell me, Mabel, before we start? Have you decided whether or not you'd like to speak?'

'I will,' I say. And I catch myself, turning to the side for Arthur's approval. Old habits.

Throughout the service, I feel like there's a moth caught in my ears, flapping wildly. I don't hear a word. So when it's time for me to go up, someone in the row behind has to touch my shoulder, and then the moth falls

silent as I walk up to the lectern and all I can hear is the click clack of my low heels.

‘Thank you for coming today,’ I start, and my voice squeaks. I stop, clear my throat. ‘Arthur would have loved to see you all.’ I almost go, then, thinking about the way his face would have broken out into a big grin at the sight of everyone gathered here, and how sad and pointless it is that they’re here now, after he’s gone, and we’ll all say nice things about him, but wouldn’t it have been better if we’d said them to his face? Why do we wait until people are dead to talk about how we felt? The vicar walks over and touches my hand with his slightly damp one, and it grounds me. He leans in, whispers, ‘Remember you don’t have to do this.’

I nod. I know he means well, but I do have to do this. It’s probably the last important thing I’ll do. I can pull it together. I can. I blink away tears and give the inside of my arm a sharp pinch. I haven’t written anything down. Wasn’t even sure I knew what I was going to say. But now I do.

‘We’ve all got our own memories, and I’m sure you’ll tell me some stories later that I haven’t heard. So here’s one for all of you, from me. Sixty-four years ago, on a cold and calm March day, we said goodbye to my brother Bill, right here in this church. I don’t think anyone here knew Bill, but he was twenty-five, and he was a wonderful brother and man, and his death was unexpected and sudden and cruel. That day, I didn’t know how I was going to get through. But Arthur, who was my brother’s best friend, stood beside me in the pew and put a steady hand on my arm, and somehow that helped me to carry on breathing. And afterwards, when we were standing by his grave and watching him being lowered into the ground, Arthur took hold of my hand and didn’t let it go until it was all over.

‘I was drowning in grief, and he saved me. For the next few months, he called into the house to ask after me and my parents, and he asked me to go to dances, though it was a long time before I could face that. He took me to the cinema and let me cry silently in the darkness, always with that steady hand on my arm. And it felt like I blinked and it was winter. I’d lost months to that grieving, only leaving the house to go to work. And one day in November I told Arthur I was feeling a bit brighter, a bit more able to cope, and he said he was pleased. The following day, he took me to a dance and he asked me to marry him, and I knew I wouldn’t find a kinder or more generous man to spend my life with.

‘And I was right. I had that steady hand guide me through all sorts of

heartaches and happiness over the years. I'm very grateful for that.'

I come to a stop, and find that I don't have any more words, so I give a little nod and step down, go back to the pew. Then the moth is back, even while we're singing 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', and I sing quietly, hoping I'm not out of time.

\* \* \*

At the wake, I don't know where to stand or what to do with my hands. I go to the bar and ask for an orange juice, though I don't really want it, just for something to do and hold.

'That was a beautiful tribute to him,' one of the cousins says, coming to stand with me.

I nod. 'Thank you. It was what he deserved.'

'He was a good man. One of the best. And he adored you.'

I don't know what to say so I take a sip of my slightly warm orange juice. Why is it so hard to hear that someone was devoted to you? Lots of people have said it. The vicar, family members, even people I don't recognise. They say how kindly he spoke of me and how his eyes lit up when he did, and I don't know where to put myself. I knew how he felt, of course I did, but it's hard to hear it from all directions, especially with him gone. Because I've never really been sure what it was about me that he admired so much. I always felt like this awkward girl with the jutting chin and slightly too-small eyes. Once, after doing my hair, Mother said she wasn't sure I was 'the marrying kind'. That stuck with me.

A woman comes over to join us and I see it's Arthur's sister, Mary. She puts a hand on my arm and it's so like Arthur's touch that I feel tears coming. Does she see? Is that why she removes it again?

'When we were growing up,' she says, with no introduction, 'there was never enough time for all of us. Nine children, you know. And seven of them boys.' She rolls her eyes. 'It was a madhouse, total chaos. And yet, Arthur always sensed when there was something wrong with one of us, and was there, as a comfort. So it didn't surprise me at all to hear that's how he was as a husband. You were a lucky woman.'

I excuse myself, then, and go to the ladies'. I can't stop repeating those last words. Was I a lucky woman? And why the past tense? Because he is

gone? I run through various women I've known over the years, try to put myself next to them and assess who was the luckier. Deidre Maycomb with her six daughters and her husband who could never seem to keep his hands off her. Ethel Smith, who always looked a bit like she'd been drinking, with the job at the Post Office and no family to speak of. Anne McKay, left by her husband when their son was just a tiny little thing. And what of Dot Brightmore? I don't know what became of her, do I?

It strikes me that luck is a relative thing, that it's not something you can pin down and be sure of. That it can be something you have and then lose. Or the other way around. But I know what Mary was trying to say. She loved him. She thought the best of him, of course she did. I touch up my lipstick and go back out there, ready for more. Or at least looking like I am.

At Bill's funeral, Dot and I had got drunk on sherry, and by four in the afternoon we were painfully, deliciously sad. We sat apart from everyone else, telling our stories, picking through for one the other might not know.

'Do you know,' she said, 'the only real argument Bill and I ever had was about you?'

I didn't.

'We'd fallen out at work and I was telling him about it. I wasn't cross with you, just a bit frustrated, and he could hear it in my words. He said he wasn't the person to come to with unkind thoughts about his sister.'

I can hear him saying that, but I'm surprised, all the same.

'What did you say?'

'I told him not to be so silly. That we both loved you and that's what was so perfect about it.'

I wanted to ask, 'Perfect about what?' but I didn't dare, because we'd drunk too much and I knew anything that was said that day might be regretted the next.

I get a shock when I think I see Arthur standing with his elbows resting on the bar, his back to me. There's a lock of hair out of place and I want to reach up and smooth it down, but of course I can't, because it isn't him. He turns, and it's one of the cousins, of course. But it winds me. I will never reach up to smooth down his hair. I will never straighten his tie. He will never fold the paper over and say 'Well' and make a plan for the day with me. How do I go on?

When I was in my early forties, I lost my job at the typing pool where I'd worked for more than twenty years. For a couple of weeks, I walked around

in a bit of a daze, not knowing what to do. And then one evening we were eating corned beef hash and Arthur said, 'Mabel, do you know what you need? A bit of purpose.' He was right. The next day I was down at the job centre and I had started doing basic secretarial work for the doctor's office by the end of that week. And I hear him say it now. 'What you need, Mabel, is a bit of purpose.' But where can I find it?

I slip away without saying goodbye to anyone, because if I start, I'll have to go round everyone, and it will take half an hour. Olly will be waiting, and besides, I'm shattered. It's chilly, and there's a bitter wind. Perhaps I should have got one of the cousins to run me home. With each click clack of my shoes on the tarmac, I repeat in my head 'pur-pose, pur-pose'. By the time I'm home, my hands numb with cold and struggling to slot the key into the lock, I know what I need to do. I need to find Dot. And it almost doesn't matter whether that's what Arthur meant, whether that's what he would have finished writing, given the chance, because there's a tiny part of me that has wanted to do this forever. I'm not doing it for him. I'm doing it for me.

That afternoon, I go outside in the garden and watch the sunset for the first time since he died. I can see my breath, and there are lots of clouds. I try to make out familiar shapes in them, but there's nothing. The sun slips down, lower and lower. I imagine him next to me, what he would say.

'That's the sun gone to bed, then, Mabel. Shall we go inside?'



I never thought something significant would happen to me in the condiments section of the local supermarket. But that's where I am, just reaching for a jar of piccalilli, when a voice inside whispers for me to take it. Not to put it in my basket with the bread and the bananas, but to put it in my handbag. To steal it. And it's Dot's voice, like a call across the years. Light as air, full of mischief. We used to get up to all sorts. Push and prod at things, at rules and shoulds and musts, just to see what might happen. She was the ringleader, but I was happy to be led. Glad of the excitement, after all those years of being told what to do and, more often, what not to, at school and at home.

Arthur was the kind who'd make up a rule if there wasn't one in place already. Who'd draw a line just so he'd know where not to step. People used to say he would have made a good copper. I don't know about that. He couldn't even watch a crime drama if there was a bit of blood. But I knew what they meant. Upholding the law, and all that. Over the years, I suppose I became more like him in that respect. Couldn't face the disapproval he'd show me if I did something slightly outside the rules. But he's gone, now. And who's going to notice one jar of piccalilli missing? Who's going to suspect an old lady like me? I hold it for a minute, pretend I'm reading the label. It's all a blur without my glasses but no one needs to know that.

And it's just as I'm slipping it inside my bag that I see her. She's come around the end of the aisle and she's looking at me. She's seen. Can't be more than about sixteen, skinny and angular, her hair cut short like a boy's, wearing that green fleece uniform. A name tag that reads 'Erin'. I've seen her before on the checkout, scanning products and looking like she'd rather be

anywhere else. Her look now is more curiosity than outrage. I meet her eye and she doesn't look away, and I'm the first to break eye contact. I can't take it out again now, can I? I'm hot, feel sweat prickling under my arms.

There'll be a scene. A burly security guard with his hands on me, turning me around and asking me to step into an office. And then that weaselly manager who's always lurking about. Kevin Chieveley. I can't bear it. She walks towards me, still meeting my eyes. She smells of citrus fruit and something else. Buttered toast.

'You can't prove anything,' I say.

She looks amused.

'What do you want?' I ask.

'Me? I don't want anything. I was looking for something.'

'For what?'

'Piccalilli.'

I almost laugh. In another life, one in which I'm not an old woman and she's not such a young girl, I could see us being friends. Is she going to let me get away with this?

'I want to put it back,' I say. 'I don't know why I did it.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she says, and then she turns and disappears around the corner.

My heart is going like the clappers. I look around, but there's no one else, and I take it out of my bag and put it back on the shelf. Is that it? Is it over? I spend longer than I need to walking up and down the aisles, because I don't quite believe she isn't going to pounce or reappear with her boss. But she doesn't. When I get to the checkout, it's her, and she smiles a bit stiffly at me.

'Good day?'

'Pardon?' I ask.

'Are you having a good day? You don't have to answer. I'm just supposed to ask. Small talk, you know.'

'Oh. Well, yes, I suppose so. I mean, no, not really. I've recently lost my husband.'

I'm offering it up as an excuse. Will she take it? She pushes the items I've chosen past the scanner, one by one. I could imagine being hypnotised by it. There's a tattoo of a swallow on the inside of her wrist.

'I'm sorry,' she says. 'Do you need help with packing?'

'No, I...'

I pull out the folded bags I carry in my shopping trolley, and

she nods.

She doesn't say anything else until I'm getting ready to go, and even then, she speaks so quietly I almost don't hear her. 'I'm finishing my shift in ten minutes, if you want to talk.'

I'm so surprised I just look at her for a minute. She's a teenager but there's something in her eyes that suggests she knows more about living than you'd expect.

'Or not,' she says. 'It's fine either way.'

What could she and I have in common, when she's so near the start of her life and I'm so near the end of mine? What could we possibly find to talk about?

'I need to get back,' I say.

It's a lie. There's no one at home to care whether I get back in ten minutes or ten hours. She shrugs, like it's nothing to her, and she must think it's nothing to me, too, the way I reacted. But all the way home, I replay her words. To talk. To listen. I don't know when someone last offered me that.

At home, Olly wants feeding. I open a pouch of the food he likes the most, fill his water bowl. Arthur used to give him all sorts but I'm trying to get him to like me more by offering his favourites. It's not working. He still sits at the far end of the sofa, looking at me in my armchair like he'd rather I wasn't there. I bend down to pat his head and he looks up from his bowl, his eyes doleful.

'What is it, boy?'

I've started talking to him more, since it's just been me. He puts his head on one side, the way people do when you tell them something sad, then goes back to eating. He hasn't growled for a couple of days, though, and that's something.

It must be the thought of Dot in the supermarket that has me standing on a chair in the spare bedroom pulling the photograph albums out. If I fell, if I ended up on the floor with a broken leg, how would anyone know I was there? Olly might bark a bit, once he was hungry. It's a sobering thought that I could die here, alone, with no one to find me.

There they are, tucked away at the back, two albums in pretend leather, one blue and one red. Tissue paper crinkling inside. I don't look at them until I'm sat in my armchair by the window, and when I open the first one I catch my breath. There she is. Dot.

It's an image of me and her, Bill and Arthur, all of us looking a bit

formal. Mother took it, if I remember correctly. It was one of the first dances we went to as a four and she suggested getting a photograph ‘for posterity’. Perhaps she thought that was going to be the night, that Bill was going to come home saying he’d proposed to Dot. She and I had dresses that pinched in at the waist and had full skirts. The photograph is in black and white, of course, but I remember that mine was pale blue and hers a lemon yellow. It was a little tight, that dress, and I never had much to eat before putting it on. I could have asked Mother to let it out a bit but I preferred to pretend I was that bit slimmer than I was.

Dot used to come over after her tea and we’d put on our dresses and do our hair. Mother used to say she’d never heard so much giggling. Then Arthur would knock on the front door and Mother would let him in and call us down. Bill would appear from his room, full of smiles for Dot, and we’d all head off together. Dot and I would link arms and the men would walk behind us. The getting ready and those walks were my favourite part of the evening sometimes. Almost always, really. Once we were in the dance hall, it was often a bit loud and I was never all that good at dancing, but when we were on the way, walking down the hill, the whole town spread out like a blanket, it felt like the world was there for the taking, as if we could pluck it like an apple from a tree.

The photograph doesn’t give much of a sense of her. She looks a bit stiff, like she wishes it wasn’t being taken. We weren’t used to having our photograph taken, not like youngsters now, always posing. I hold it up to the light, try to make out that sparkle she always had, but it isn’t there. Mother didn’t capture it. Or the camera didn’t. I look at myself, next. In some ways it’s hard to believe I was ever so young, and in others that’s how I think I still look now, until I catch my reflection in a mirror unexpectedly. My dark hair is swept up, my skin clear. My chin juts out a bit but it’s not the disaster I always thought it was, back then. Bill just looks like Bill, the way he always did. No apologies or discomfort. People talk now about being comfortable in your own skin, and that’s what Bill was. His hair was slicked back with Brylcreem, his gaze steady, his shirt a little crumpled. I can picture Mother leaning forward to brush the creases out as best she could before holding up the camera. So handsome. And Arthur, next to Bill, his eyes smiling. You can’t make out the reddish tint to his hair or the fact that he was slightly heavier, slightly more solid than Bill. His eyes aren’t focused on the camera – he’s looking slightly off to the side, in Dot’s direction.

We all look young and beautiful, and that's the truth of it. And now, Bill's been gone for decades and Arthur for just a few weeks, and I can't help but wonder about Dot. Whether it's just me left, or whether she's still walking the Earth too, somewhere.

I hear her voice again, little more than a whisper. *Find me.*

I can't remember the last time the doorbell rang, so it makes me jump. I push my feet into my woolly slippers and shuffle out into the hall. When I open the door, there's a woman standing there, beaming at me. She's about fifty. A good age, lots of life behind you but lots still ahead. She has bottle-blond hair cut in a bob and her clothes don't fit right.

'Who are you?' I ask.

She throws her head back and laughs. She's the sort of woman who laughs with her whole body. But she's got sad eyes, too.

'I'm Julie,' she says. 'Your new carer. Can I come in?'

Carer indeed. I tell her there must be some mistake, but she's insistent. I can hardly let her in when she's a complete stranger, can I? She shows me her lanyard thingy but anyone could knock up one of those. We seem to be in a sort of stalemate, until she offers to telephone her boss. Once she's got hold of him, she passes her mobile telephone over to me.

'Hello,' I say, 'this is Mabel Beaumont and I have a woman at my door claiming to be my new carer but I did not arrange for this.'

'Ah, didn't you receive a call from us?'

'I did not.'

'Your husband got in touch...'

'My husband is dead,' I tell him.

'Yes, I thought he would be. Let me explain, Mrs Beaumont.'

'I think you'd better.'

'You see, your husband contacted us a while ago to set up a care package for after he'd... gone. He would call every couple of months with an update

on his health, and we haven't heard from him for a while so we thought the time had perhaps come. But there should have been a phone call first. I can see how this would come as a bit of a shock. I apologise.'

Arthur. A care package. So he knew, or at least suspected, that he didn't have long. And he didn't say a word. I put a hand to my throat and Julie looks a bit panicked and steps forward with her arms out, presumably in case I collapse, but I just wave her inside. She's clearly not a threat. I won't leave her shivering while I sort this out.

'I don't need this. And we can't afford it,' I say.

'Ah, he did say you might have a few thoughts about it, but I can assure you he's paid upfront for the first three months.'

The first three months. Up to the end of February, pretty much. I think of him, coming up with this idea, fine-tuning the details and making the arrangements, and I feel as if my heart's grown, suddenly, and it's blocking my windpipe, and I can't breathe. Why didn't he say? All those nights we lay side by side, neither of us good sleepers in the past few years. There were so many opportunities to tell me.

'Is that everything?' he asks. 'It's just, I have a few things to be getting on with. If you have any other questions, I'm sure Julie can help.'

I look at Julie. We're still in the hallway and she's got a puffy sort of coat on. She won't be able to get past me until I step back.

'Thank you,' I say, and I pass the telephone back to her, then turn and walk into the front room.

'I'm sorry this is a shock, and I'm sorry you've lost your husband, but let's make the best of it, eh?'

'How often are you coming?'

I expect her to say once a week. Twice, perhaps.

'Every day, for a couple of hours.'

'Every day! That'll be costing a fortune!' What I don't say is that I don't know whether I like her, yet.

She shrugs. 'Did Arthur deal with the finances, Mabel? Perhaps he's had money set aside for this for a long time, just in case. And I have to say, as someone whose husband's just walked out on her for a younger model, I think you got pretty lucky with yours.'

What a thing to say. She knows nothing about my marriage. And she never will. That will explain the sad eyes, though, I suppose. There's a floral scent in the room that wasn't there before, which I suppose must be her

perfume. It's nice, light.

'Will it always be you?' I ask.

She does that laugh again, puts a hand on the sofa for support. 'Oh Mabel, you're classic, you are. Yes, it's always going to be me. I think we're going to get along just fine, don't you?'

I don't. But I don't say so. We sit down, me in my armchair by the window and her on the sofa with Olly. She reaches across to pet him and I think about warning her, but he does it for me, pulling away and letting out a soft little growl.

'Who's this bundle of fur, then?'

'That's Olly. He doesn't really like... most people.'

'Not even you?'

'Not even me. He liked Arthur.'

'I see. Right then, let's talk through what I can do for you. Do you need any help with washing and dressing?'

I shudder at the thought. Arthur once said he'd rather be dead than rely on someone for help with intimate tasks. And he got his way, didn't he?

'No.'

'Okay, how about with sorting out and taking any medication?'

'No.'

'Making meals? Putting a wash on? Doing a bit of a dust and Hoover round?'

'No.'

'Company?'

'Company?'

'Yes, company. Having a chat, sharing a cuppa or a sandwich.'

'Arthur and I always shared a teacake at eleven o'clock.'

I don't know why I'm telling her.

'Well,' she says, 'perhaps you and I could do something similar. Or if you want to keep that as a special thing for just the two of you, we could make up our own tradition.'

'Like what?'

'Like... maybe we could have a hot chocolate and a biscuit? Something decadent like that? Or I could make us some scones to have with butter and jam? It's up to you, Mabel. But we can do whatever you like to make life a little brighter, a little easier. And we can change it around as we go, too. If you find you do want help with some of the other things I mentioned, after



all, we can do that.'

I can see why she's in this job. There's something soothing about her voice. But she can't go around eating scones and jam with everyone she looks after, can she?

'Are you any good with computers?' I ask. 'I'm not useless like some old people. Arthur always said we had to keep up. He bought an iPad when they first came out and we both used it. It's just, I'd like to look for someone I've lost touch with, and I don't know how to go about it.'

Julie sits back, thinking. 'You know, I always used to say to my Martin that this job was like ten jobs rolled into one. Healthcare assistant, cleaner, chef, you name it. But personal investigator is a new one on me. Is it an old flame?'

I snort. 'No! An old friend. Dot. She moved away unexpectedly after my brother died. She was expected to marry him, you see. And then he passed, and she scarpered.'

Julie's looking at me, transfixed. 'I'm so sorry.'

'What do you mean?'

'About your brother. I'm so sorry your brother died.'

'Oh. Yes, well. It was a long time ago now.'

'Would you like to talk about him?'

Other than at Arthur's funeral, I haven't talked about Bill for years. Decades. Arthur rarely brought him up and after our parents died, there was no one else who really knew him. I didn't think it mattered, after so long, but her offer brings him to mind, his cheeky, handsome face and the way he'd put an arm around me if he could see I was nervous about something.

'No, thank you,' I say, but it's a lie.

Julie nods. 'All right. Listen, I don't want to get off on the wrong foot with you, Mabel. I'd like to help you, if I can. So you just tell me if I say anything you don't like. I'm sure you will.'

I will.

'I'll put the kettle on,' she says. 'I find that's always a good place to start.'

When she comes back in she's got the cups and saucers we had as a wedding present. She must have rooted around a bit for them. I always liked them but Arthur preferred a mug and that's what we ended up using, day to day. And she's found some biscuits. Custard creams. She puts mine down on the windowsill.

‘I like a cup and saucer,’ she says. ‘I always used to say to my Martin, what if the Queen dropped in? It would be nice to be ready for her.’

‘He left you, you said?’

She looks shocked at that, but she hides it again quickly.

‘He did.’

‘Recently?’

‘Two weeks.’

‘I lost Arthur a month ago.’

‘The difference is, I’m sure your Arthur would have stayed, if he could.’

She’s right about that.

‘What’s he like? Your husband?’

She blows her fringe out of her eyes and looks straight at me. There’s something about her nose. It’s a bit pointy and it makes her look like she might be snooty, though I can see she’s not. ‘He’s just your average man, I suppose. He was the first one to pay me a bit of attention, and the next thing I knew, everyone was talking about marriage. But he does make me laugh. Did. Anyway, it’s not over till the fat lady sings, and do you hear me singing?’

She’s joking, I know, but she’s not fat. If I knew her better, I’d tell her so. She could just do with some trousers in a bigger size, and she’d look fine.

‘You’re hoping to get him back, are you?’

‘I am, Mabel. It won’t work out with this new one, will it? She’s turned his head, that’s what it is. But I can’t see her putting up with his nonsense for long, and then he’ll come crawling back, and I’ll make him promise to take me somewhere really special, to make up for it, and that will be that. By the time I’m your age, God willing, it will all be a distant memory. It’ll be “Remember that time when?” Do you know what I mean?’

I want to say that she should forget about him. He doesn’t sound worth the effort. But you can’t tell people how to live their lives. Or you can, but it doesn’t work. I know that better than most. So I just nod.

‘Now then,’ she says, ‘tell me about this friend of yours we’re going to go looking for. Do you know for sure she’s still alive?’

The thought of Dot being dead almost makes me laugh. Because I’ve never known anyone quite so alive. But then, I might have said something like that about Bill, once.

‘I haven’t seen her for sixty-two years. I don’t know anything, other than her name. And she might have married, of course.’

Of course she would have married. Someone like Dot doesn't go through life on their own.

'Well, that sounds like it's going to be quite a task, then, doesn't it? But we've got time. I'll have a bit of a think about how we might go about it, and then we'll make a start, all right? Now, could I make you something for your tea? Chop some vegetables or something? Put a wash on? I don't feel like I'm doing my job just sitting here chatting.'

I don't like the thought of her rooting around in my washing basket, so I ask her to peel and chop some potatoes and carrots. From the front room, I can hear her singing in the kitchen, one of those big ballads. She's surprisingly tuneful. It makes me realise how quiet the house has been. Arthur was always whistling or humming or talking, and although we were often in different rooms, it's a small house and I knew he was there. It's nice, I think, to have a bit of company. Perhaps it's what I needed, and he knew that before I did. It can be like that, after a lifetime together. I always knew when he was coming down with a cold, or when he'd put on a bit of weight. And I always knew when he had a lover.

That young girl's words – 'if you want to talk' – have been going through my mind for days, now. So when I see her, it feels a bit strange, like when you dream about someone and then they appear. She's on the bench nearest the graves, which is a bit of a problem because I like to stand there by the fence and have a chat with my family, and I can't do that if there's anyone else around. I'd feel like a fool. Will she remember me, from the other day? I pull my coat tighter around me. She isn't wearing one and the sight of her makes me shiver. I approach the fence, lean slightly against it, and Olly sits down. When I turn, she's looking at me.

'Hi,' she says.

'Hello.'

She's got her feet up on the edge of the bench, her knees pulled into her chest, her arms wrapped around her. Like she's trying to make herself smaller.

'Can I sit down?' I ask.

She nods. There's plenty of room for two, but it always feels strangely intimate, sharing a bench with a stranger. I sit right at the other end from her. Some dogs are good icebreakers in situations like this, but not mine. He lies down at my feet and proceeds to fall asleep.

'I wanted to thank you,' I say. 'For the other day, for not saying anything. I don't usually do that kind of thing. It's not a habit. It was a strange impulse, and I gave in to it, and I don't know why.'

She shrugs. 'I'd never report someone for stealing food.'

I think about that. 'Why not?'

‘Well, because it’s not like they’re stealing something decadent or luxurious, is it? Or something expensive. If someone is stealing food, chances are they need food, and that’s none of my business, and I’m not about to try to make things harder for them.’

It’s a compassionate response, and clearly one she’s thought through. I’m a bit shocked, because all I know of teenagers is what you see in the papers about them feeling entitled and being selfish. I’ve been naïve, making an assumption based on what the press wants me to believe. Arthur always used to say, ‘Use your eyes and your ears, make your own judgement.’ And he was right.

‘Do you get a lot of it? Shoplifting?’

‘Now and again, not that much. Not usually piccalilli.’

I dip my head, and shame floods me. It’s not even something I like, particularly. Arthur liked it. It was a Christmas staple. I’m not quite out of the habit of stocking up on his favourites as well as mine. In some cases, I’ve forgotten who it was that liked things in the first place. But I’ve been thinking a lot about what happened, about why I did it, and I think I have some kind of an idea.

‘When you’re young and you’re a woman,’ I say, ‘everyone’s interested in you. In what you look like and what you’ve got to say. And then there’s a point in your life, around fifty or so, when it all stops and you become invisible. And it’s stupid, really, because by then you have much more interesting things to contribute to the conversation, but no one wants to hear them. I’ve come to terms with it, it happened to me a long time ago, but since my husband died, some days I don’t speak to anyone, and I feel like no one can see me, and I think I wanted to test that.’

She stares at me, and I think I’ve gone too far. ‘Huh,’ she says. ‘Invisible.’

We sit, both facing forwards, but I steal odd glances at her. She isn’t the most beautiful girl, but she’s golden in that way that only the very young are. The trouble is, they don’t know it. And you can’t tell them. All her life, a part of her will be trying to recapture the way she is right now.

‘It’s Erin, isn’t it?’ I remember the name badge.

‘It is.’

‘Mabel,’ I say.

And she does something strange, then. She reaches out a small hand and we shake, like businessmen, like allies, like partners. Her hand is small and

very cold. We are quiet, and I notice the birdsong all around.

She gestures to the war memorial beyond the graves. 'Do you remember it?'

'The war? Just about. Bits and pieces.'

'They brought us here from primary school once. We had to walk in pairs, holding hands. I got in trouble for talking too much. My teacher said it was disrespectful to the dead. But I couldn't connect this stone monument to people fighting, and dying. I was ten years old. It didn't make any sense.'

I understand what she's saying. If you didn't live through it, and you're a child, it must all seem so alien.

'My father fought. He came back, but everyone said he was never quite the same. There were a lot of casualties like that, that didn't necessarily involve bullets or being buried overseas.'

She looks at me hard, not embarrassed. How did she learn that? To face difficult things head on? She is so young.

'I'm sorry,' she says.

'Do you still have both of your parents?'

She nods.

'You should think yourself lucky.'

She shakes her head, slowly.

'You don't agree?'

'It's just... I mean, I'm glad my dad hasn't had to fight in a war, of course I am, but my parents and I don't exactly see eye to eye about a few things.'

'What kind of things?'

'Well, about me liking girls for a start.'

I'm not sure what she means at first. Liking girls? And then when it hits me, my face flushes. I'm not used to talking about this kind of thing, about people's preferences. Because sex is lurking under the surface of those conversations, and sex was such a secret when I was her age that my mother never once alluded to it, other than to tell me there might be some pain on my wedding night.

'I see.'

'My mum's religious, says it isn't God's way. And I mean, I haven't actually told her, about me, but I've listened to the things she's said over the years and...' She mimes a shudder.

I don't say anything, don't know what to say.

‘Well,’ she says, ‘I have to get to work.’

I smile at her, but I don’t know what she makes of it. She walks away, pulling headphones out of her bright red rucksack and putting them on. It’s a different world, the one she’s growing up in. The one she’ll inherit. She’s got options I didn’t even know to want. An education, a career. And it should be easier, shouldn’t it, but I’m not sure it is. Perhaps there’s no easy way through that transition to adulthood, no matter when you live it.

‘Hello Dad, hello Mother, hello Bill,’ I say, standing and going over to the fence.

Olly sniffs around a bit, nosing cigarette ends out of the way.

‘I thought I’d be lonely without Arthur but he’s set up this carer to come in for me every day. Julie, her name is. I might get her to walk up here with me sometime, because I’m not feeling so steady on my feet, and the last thing I need is to fall over and break my hip. That happened to my friend Enid and she never got out of her chair again. It’s a fool’s game, getting old. You missed all that, didn’t you? Not one of you made it past sixty-six, and I’ve got twenty years on that. I wake up in the morning these days and I have to do an assessment of my whole body, try to work out what hurts and how much and whether it was hurting the day before. And then it takes me ten minutes to get up and going.

‘I think Olly’s pretty fed up with me. I’m not taking proper care of him. It’s too much for me, really. I think I’ll need to see if someone can take him off my hands...’

Olly is sitting by my feet, good as gold, and he lets out a little whimper at that point, as if he understands.

‘Remember Dot?’ I ask, changing the subject. ‘Of course you do. I’m going to try to find her. I know, I know, she could be long gone. But I think I need to chance it. It’s something I should have done years ago. Anyway, I’d better get this one home and fed. I’ll be back soon.’

I take a step back and a memory flashes up. Bill, up in a tree, wobbling the branch he was sitting on to scare me. Waving. Was Arthur with him? Probably. They were thick as thieves for years. And yes, if I look again, beyond Bill, I can see him there, laughing and twisting side to side to keep his balance. I’ll go across the graveyard to his plot, let him know I’m thinking about him.

It takes me a few minutes to find it. The headstone hasn’t gone up yet.

‘I found the note you left,’ I say. ‘The list. I think you want me to find

Dot. That's what I'm going to try to do, anyway. I'm not sure why you'd want that, but maybe it will become clear as I'm doing it. I don't know. I wish you'd stayed around long enough to tell me, Arthur. I wish you'd stayed.'

I know I'll break down if I stay any longer, so I blow him a kiss and turn away, walk home without looking back. As I walk, I indulge myself in a memory. Arthur and me, somewhere in our sixties, sitting on our bench watching the sun set on a bitter, winter day like this one. Must have been a weekend. We had mugs of tea by our feet, and the steam was mingling with the puffs of air that came out when we spoke.

'Christmas is coming,' he said. 'Anything you'd like?'

There were things I wanted. But nothing I could reveal to him.

'I don't need anything.'

'It's not a case of need, is it, when it comes to Christmas? We could go to Overbury, choose you some new earrings or a dress.'

'What about you?' I asked.

He paused for a little while, and in the space, I listed in my head the things I knew he wanted, or had wanted. A son, a daughter. A wife who didn't shrink away from his touch.

'I wouldn't mind a new radio for the shed,' he said.

Since he'd retired, he'd started spending a fair bit of time out there, fixing things. The neighbours had found out about it, somehow, and people often brought him things to glue and mend. He seemed to enjoy it.

'A radio,' I repeated.

And I wondered, was marriage always like this, with so many truths hidden beneath the conversation you were having? So much hiding, and pretending.

I'm almost home when I hear a shriek and look up to see a beautiful young woman with a buggy standing in front of me, her hands covering her mouth. I notice her nails, navy blue and perfectly shaped. She looks like she's stepped out of an advert, all flawless skin and designer handbag.

'What is it?' I ask. 'Is everything all right?'

'Your dog!' she says.

I look down at Olly, who looks back up at me, and we're each as bemused as the other.

'This is Olly,' I say, not sure what else to do.

'Olly!' She crouches down, her loose, blonde curls swinging. 'Ha! Olly



the Collie?’

‘My late husband’s little joke. Oh, but I’d be careful, he’s a bit...’

But it’s too late, because she’s tickling him under the chin, which he has never once allowed me to do, and he’s tilting his head back to let her. It’s as if he likes her. The little traitor.

‘He’s gorgeous,’ she says, standing up again. ‘I’m Kirsty.’

‘Mabel.’

‘Hi, Mabel. And this...’ She points to the buggy, and I see that there’s a sleeping baby inside. ‘This is Dotty.’

‘Oh, I...’

She looks at me with concern. ‘Are you all right, Mabel?’

‘Perfectly, it’s just...’

‘What?’

‘I have a friend, I mean, I had a friend with that name. Well, Dot. Dorothy.’

‘Oh, that’s nice!’ She claps her hands together. ‘Unless, oh, you said “had”, didn’t you? I’m so sorry you lost your friend.’

‘No, it’s, I mean, I did lose her, but she didn’t die, at least not that I know of. And I’m going to find her again.’

I stop and realise she must think I’m a madwoman, telling her half my life story in the middle of the street like this. But her expression is kind. ‘I’d better get going again, she tends to wake up if I stop, which isn’t ideal. But it was so nice to meet you, Mabel. And you, Olly. I hope you find your friend.’

She reaches down again and strokes his back and he seems delighted. And then she’s gone.

‘What was all that about?’ I ask him, once she’s out of earshot.

When I get in, Arthur’s standing against the bookshelf in the front room. I put a hand to my chest, blink rapidly, but he’s there, really there.

‘Arthur?’

He doesn’t reply, just leans. And then a moment later, he’s gone, and I can’t be sure he was ever there at all.

There was this segment I saw on *Top of the Morning*, about people who have a tendency to tell you the intimate details of their lives within minutes of meeting you. Oversharers, they're called. Michael Silver was on, looking all serious like they were talking about cancer, his hand on his chin, and he was talking to a psychologist who'd written a book about this phenomenon, why people are much more likely to overshare now than in the past. The psychologist was a woman in her forties, with round glasses and a frumpy suit. Half my age, and all these qualifications. It makes my head hurt just thinking about it. Anyway, Michael Silver said he'd known a few oversharers and told this story about a friend of his second wife's who came round to dinner and talked endlessly about her hysterectomy and her history of depression, and a colleague he once had who liked to go into great detail about his bedroom antics. Michael Silver put his hands up in the air and mimed quotation marks when he said 'bedroom antics'. It's a daytime show, after all.

It sounded to me like neither of those people had anything on Julie. By the end of the first week, I knew all about this Martin she'd been married to for over twenty years and how he just decided one day he wasn't happy and that was that. And he swore blind there was no one else and a week later she ran into him in the supermarket – buying muesli, of all things, when he was a Crunchy Nuts man through and through – and followed him to that new estate near Overbury and saw him go into a house and straight into the arms of a tall redhead called Estelle.

I asked how she knew the redhead was called Estelle, and she said, 'Well,

that's another story.' And then she launched into it before I could say whether I wanted to hear it or not. She followed this woman, then, to the community centre in Overbury, and went in after her with no idea what she was volunteering herself for, and it was a ballroom dancing class. Heard the teacher calling her Estelle. When Estelle saw her boyfriend's ex-wife walk in, she had a sudden bout of queasiness and had to leave. She hasn't been back since.

'But that's how I met Patty,' Julie says today.

She always picks up where she left off, like she's been on pause since her last visit.

'At the dancing class?'

'Yes, she's the teacher.'

'What sort of a name is Patty? Sounds American.'

'She is American.'

'Well.'

'Well what?'

I don't know what to say to that, because 'well' is something I fall back on when I don't know what else to say. I give her a little shrug. Thankfully, she moves on. She's easy that way. Doesn't pick you up on things you get wrong or keep asking what you meant.

'So what's she got that you haven't? This Estelle?'

Julie looks wistful for a minute. 'She's a decade younger and a couple of stone lighter, for a start.'

This obsession with youth, it's always riled me. A woman Julie's age, she's seen things, done things. She knows what she wants and has something to say.

'I think he's a fool,' I say, and she thanks me and covers my hand with hers, which feels a bit too intimate, so I pull away. She's growing on me, though, I have to say. That first day, I didn't think we'd last the week.

'I've thought of something I need help with,' I say.

'Oh yes?' She seems pleased.

'The bed,' I say. 'It's a king, you see. And Arthur and I used to strip it and make it back up together, every Thursday. It's a bit much, on my own.'

'Consider it done,' she says, and disappears upstairs.

When she comes back, she goes over to the wall by the door, and I see she's looking at our photos. It was Arthur who would get them framed and get a hammer and nails out. Me and him on our wedding day, on that trip to

Anglesey, about to board the ferry at Dover. It seemed a bit narcissistic to me, to put up all those photos of ourselves, but Arthur used to say who else would we put up photos of, and he had a point.

‘He was a handsome man, your Arthur,’ she says.

I’m not sure whether she expects me to answer. I always knew he was good-looking. Women looked at him, and then at me, as if trying to decide whether they were happy with the pairing. As if it had anything to do with them. Quite often, he’d get a smile and I’d get a scowl, because they didn’t know why he’d picked me, I suppose. He didn’t notice. He wasn’t vain. And to him, it was all so simple. I was his friend’s little sister, and he made his mind up the very first time he met me, he told me once.

He was nineteen and I was sixteen, and Bill brought him round for his tea. It was pork chops, he said, and there was mashed potato and cabbage and gravy. I don’t have any memory of this particular day. It felt to me like he was always there, practically an extension of Bill, but I didn’t say that when he brought it up. I pretended it was significant for me, too. He said, ‘You scraped that plate clean, and then had a pear for afters, and I remember thinking to myself, I like a girl who has a good appetite.’

It wasn’t very romantic, liking me because I ate a lot, but like I say, it was simple for him. He met me, and he knew. I was the one.

‘Do you believe in the one?’ I ask Julie.

‘All that soulmates stuff?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know, Mabel. I thought Martin was my one and only but what does that mean for me now? That it’s all over, finished? And where does that Estelle fit in? And besides, if there was one man on this whole Earth who was made for me, wouldn’t it be a bit of a coincidence if he happened to live in the same town as me? If I met him at the butcher’s?’

‘Is that how you met?’ I think of sausages and sides of beef, blood on cleavers and stained aprons.

‘In the queue,’ she says, blowing her fringe out of her eyes. ‘He was picking up a lamb shoulder for his mum for Easter Sunday.’

‘And what were you doing?’

‘I was buying ham for my dad’s sandwiches.’

‘And that was that?’ I ask.

‘I mean, not quite. We chatted a bit, but he didn’t ask for my number or anything. It would have been a bit forward, wouldn’t it? But then I saw him

again, at the butcher's, a few weeks later, and that time he asked if he could take me for a drink. Years after, once we were married, he told me that he'd asked the butcher about me and been told I often came in on a Tuesday after work. He'd hung around outside for three Tuesdays by the time I showed up.'

She sounds quite proud of that, and I nearly say it's hardly dozens of roses and surprise trips to Paris, but I don't.

'And did you always know?' I ask, instead.

'Well, I'm not sure. People talk about knowing, but I'm not sure you ever really do.'

She's wrong, but I don't say so.

'It was more like he took me on a few dates, and I introduced him to my family, and they seemed to like him well enough. And after a year or so, he suggested moving in together, and we did, and a few months after that, once we knew we could live with each other, he asked me to marry him.'

'Down on one knee?'

'No, but he bought a ring.' She breaks off, looks at her finger, and then presumably remembers that she doesn't wear it now. 'He did well.'

Are women's expectations typically this low? A few dates and a ring? She hasn't said anything about passion or undying love. She hasn't said anything about feeling dizzy and sick and like she couldn't possibly live without him.

'Did you ever feel sick?' I ask.

'Sick? What do you mean?'

'With the emotion of it all. The, you know, the love?'

'No, I never felt sick. Did you, Mabel?'

'Yes,' I say. 'Sick and terrified, like I was standing on the edge of a fifty-storey building, preparing to jump.'

I can feel it now, if I close my eyes. She looks at me, sort of amused. Like she didn't think I had it in me.

'He must have been quite a man. Cup of tea, Mabel? Or do you fancy a walk at all?'

I look out of the window. It's grey, but dry. Olly, who was fast asleep, pops his head up at the word 'walk'.

'Let's go for a walk,' I say.

While I'm in the toilet, she gets Olly ready with his lead, puts her coat on, and gets my coat and gloves out of the hallway cupboard. Arthur used to do that. Little, thoughtful things that added up to a whole lot. I come out and

she's standing in the hallway looking a bit lost, a faraway look in her eyes, and I think about how she's helped me and how I wish I could take some of her sadness away.

It's cold and a bit blustery, and I almost wish I'd stayed indoors, asked Julie to put the gas fire on. She links her arm through mine and it feels a bit familiar, but when I look down at our arms she pulls me in a bit closer.

'I can't have you falling on me,' she says. 'There'd be so much paperwork to fill out.'

And that strikes me as funny, and I'm laughing and that sets her off, and for a minute or two we have to stop, just on the corner of my street, both laughing like we'll never stop, like Dot and I used to on an almost daily basis back when I didn't know how lucky I was to have a friend like that. A man walks past with a hoity toity little dog that growls at Olly, and Olly silences it with one sharp bark. The man gives us a funny look, like it's unthinkable for two women to be out walking and laughing in the middle of a Thursday afternoon, and I don't care. How much time have I wasted, over the years, caring about the thoughts of people I don't know and never will?

'Do you need anything from the shop?' she asks, once we've gathered ourselves. 'We could head that way if you do?'

I was planning to do a piece of fish for my tea, it was down on the list for this evening, but when I actually stop to think about what I want, it isn't that. Arthur used to say he couldn't be doing with choosing on a Sunday what he wanted to eat the following Wednesday, but I liked planning the meals for the week and doing one shop. It was all right for him to say that; he wasn't the one organising it all and making sure nothing went to waste. But now, it's just me, and I see that I don't have to eat that piece of fish that's in the fridge, that I could have it tomorrow, if I wanted. That I could buy one of those ready meals, a pasta dish or even a curry.

'Yes,' I say. 'Let's go to the shop and I'll choose something for my tea.'

'Righty-ho.'

It's a little thing, but it feels big.

We're at the tills when it happens. I chose Erin's queue on purpose. I'm not sure why but I'm somehow drawn to her. It's as if I sense she's in danger, or something, and I want to be nearby. Silly, I know. What would I do, if she really was? What help would I be? She looks grumpy and I remember Arthur saying something to her once. One of those things that men say to women. 'Give us a smile,' or 'Cheer up, love,' or something like that. I didn't think anything of it at the time. But now I think, why should she smile to suit other people? When we get to the front of the queue – with Julie in the middle of a story about Martin and a fancy-dress party and being mistaken for a pizza delivery man – Erin looks up and recognises me and her face breaks into a smile, and it's like the sun coming out.

'Hello, Erin,' I say.

Julie stops talking and looks from Erin to me. 'Friend of yours?'

I say, 'Something like that,' and Julie shrugs and goes to the bagging end to sort out my chicken tikka masala and naan bread.

Erin's just told me what I owe when her manager sidles up behind her and says he'd like a word when she's finished with her customer. He looks up at me when he says the word 'customer' and his expression is the exact one you'd have if you'd just found dog mess on your shoe after walking it all around your house. Kevin Chieveley, his name is, and he doesn't know it but I used to work with his mother, Alice. I remember her leaving to have him, her stomach hard and round as a basketball, and how we gathered around with cake and a big card we'd all signed, and a bag of cardigans Sheila had knitted. She swore she'd be back in a few months but she never returned, had

three boys in quick succession and then got a job washing hair and sweeping up at Hair Boutique. We got together every now and again, some of the typing pool girls and Alice, and she always had one or more of those boys hanging around her neck or off the hem of her dress. And now here he is, all shifty, wearing his meagre authority like it's a fine suit.

'Hold on,' I say to Julie, who's got my bag and is heading for the door.

'What is it? Is there a problem with your card?'

'No,' I say, handing Erin a ten-pound note. 'I just want to see what Mr Chieveley here has to say to Erin.'

'That's none of your concern,' he says, clearly a bit wrong-footed by the fact that I know his name.

'I'd like to hear, all the same,' I say.

Erin looks from me to him, a wry smile on her face. She knows as well as I do that he's not about to be openly rude to me or try to eject me from the supermarket. There's a queue building up and all eyes are on him.

He clears his throat. 'Well, you were five minutes late for your shift this morning, Erin,' he says.

Erin nods. He seems to want a response from her even though he hasn't asked her a question.

'And it's not acceptable,' he goes on. 'I can't run this place with people starting at *about* nine or *sometime around* midday. If anything, you should be here a good five minutes before your start time so you can put your things in your locker and be at your post in plenty of time to get going.'

'It won't happen again,' Erin says.

'Well, make sure it doesn't.'

'Is that all?' I ask.

He squints at me, as if trying to work out who I am.

'Can I ask what your connection to Erin is, madam?'

'You can. She's a...' What is she?

'We're friends,' Erin says.

'Yes,' I say. 'That's right. We're friends.'

'Well,' he says, brushing his hands against one another and turning to walk away. 'Perhaps you could conduct your personal relationships outside of work in the future.'

When he's gone, Erin thanks me.

'Was that really about the lateness?' I ask.

'No. He saw me and Hannah.' She gestures to a girl of a similar age on



the next checkout over. 'He saw us kissing, in the car park. We're seeing each other. He doesn't like it.'

'Whatever has it got to do with him?'

She shrugs. 'Nothing. It's just, men like him, they think we're all here for their entertainment, don't they? And they don't like it if we're not interested in them. In men, I mean. They feel like it's some kind of personal attack.'

I shake my head. 'He couldn't get the hang of potty training.'

'What?' Erin shakes her head slightly as if she's not sure she's heard me correctly.

'I knew his mother. And he used to shit in his pants until he was almost five.'

She laughs and covers her mouth, and her eyes are sparkling. I lift my hand in a wave and turn to go.

'What was all that about?' Julie asks.

'I don't like bullies,' I say.

And then we're outside and she's untying Olly from the post where we left him, and we're heading home.

\* \* \*

'I've got half an hour before my next client,' Julie calls from the kitchen, where she's making tea.

I look up at the cuckoo clock on the wall. Her two hours with me ended half an hour ago. Just as I'm looking at it, the cuckoo pops out and makes me jump. I remember Arthur coming home with that monstrosity after a solo shopping trip some thirty years ago. How has it lasted this long? We argued about it for weeks, him saying he'd always wanted one since he was a boy and me saying I found them ridiculous, and then one morning I came down for breakfast and it was on the wall. I could take it down now, I realise. There's nothing and no one to stop me.

'Here,' Julie says, putting a mug of tea down on the windowsill next to my armchair.

She's made one for herself, too, and she settles on the sofa.

'You were due to finish at four,' I say.

'I know, but my next lady lives nearer here than my house so it didn't really make sense to go home in between. I mean, as long as you don't mind.'

I watch her carefully, but if she's lying, I can't tell. I don't know her well enough yet. I want to say that I don't want her to give me special treatment, that I don't want her pity. But I can't think of a way to put it.

'I don't need you,' I say.

She looks a bit affronted. 'Who said you needed me, Mabel?'

'No one. But I don't. I don't want you to think you have to look after me just because I've got no one else.'

'The thought never crossed my mind,' she says.

That time I can tell she's lying. She looks off to the left. I saw something about that on a documentary about lie detector tests. Gotcha, I think. So that means she wasn't lying before, then, about her reason for staying on.

'Do you mind me asking why you didn't have any children, Mabel?'

'Do you mind me asking why *you* didn't?'

She takes a sharp breath. Is it too late for her? You hear all kinds of stories these days, don't you? Twins at fifty, all sorts. Once I hit my mid-thirties, people assumed I was past it, but it's not so simple now. Maybe she still holds out some hope. Although with her husband gone, it's not looking good.

'We tried for years,' she says, and the sadness drips from her voice and I wish I hadn't asked.

'Years?' It's just a word, just something to say.

'Years. I got pregnant three times, in all. The first time, we got to the twelve-week scan, all excited, holding hands, only to be told there was no heartbeat. Then nothing for a year or so, and just when I'd stopped expecting it, another late period. I couldn't believe it when I did the test. Martin was worried, though. I thought it wouldn't happen twice, but he was more cautious. And then a few weeks later, I started bleeding. I went to hospital, begged them to do something, but they said there was nothing they could do. That if you're going to miscarry, you're going to miscarry. I remember the smell of disinfectant in the room when the doctor said that, and the lack of sympathy. They sent me home. And I sat on the toilet for hours, cramps coming and going, until it was over.'

She shifts a bit on the sofa, as if she's physically uncomfortable telling the story. Olly's lying next to her, and she absentmindedly leans in to stroke him, but he pulls away.

'Martin said we should stop trying, that it was too painful. He was worried about what it was doing to my body and to both of our hearts, too.'

But I was desperate for a child. And all my friends were having them, of course. Falling pregnant by accident, having twins, all that. We nearly split up over it. He said I was obsessed. And I was, I think, for a while. That third time was a good five years after the first, and as soon as I got the positive test, I told Martin I was giving up work. That I was going to lie in bed until the baby came. He said I was mad, that we couldn't afford it, and we couldn't, really. But we didn't need to because six weeks in, more bleeding.'

I'm staring at her, mouth hanging open, probably. It's horrendous. But women have these stories, don't they? So many women. They carry them around. They carry on.

'He put his foot down, then. Flatly refused to try again. Said enough was enough. I was all ready to go down the IVF route, but he said not with him. That if I wanted a baby that much, I could do it with someone else. Well, of course that wasn't what I wanted, was it? I wanted a baby that was mine and his, had daydreamed for years about whose nose it might have, whose chin. He had the snip without telling me. Said he'd done it for both of us.'

She looks at me, and I expect to see tears in her eyes, but they are dry. Perhaps she's cried them all. And I think that the sadness I always notice in her isn't just about Martin leaving. It's about this, too. The family she wanted and never had.

'So that's why I didn't have children,' she says.

'I'm sorry.' It's such a meagre thing to say.

'That's all right,' she says.

It's clear that it isn't. But she's gone. She's miles away.

'I didn't want to,' I say. 'Arthur did. Stalemate. I shouldn't have married him, without letting him know.'

Julie shrugs. 'You can't blame yourself for that. He should have asked before he went down the aisle, if it was so important to him. I wish I'd asked Martin how hard he'd try, if it came to it. Whether he'd give up if it didn't fall in our laps. But I didn't ask, and here we are.'

We are quiet, and I sip my tea. The air in the room is heavy with the weight of our regrets.

'I wonder whether your friend Dot had any,' she says.

I try to imagine Dot with children but it's impossible. She's a girl, giggly and full of mischief. She isn't a mother. And yet, I know the chances are slim. Women like me, like Julie, who end up childfree – we're the minority. The outcasts.

When Julie goes, I put the fire on and stretch out my legs, going back over what she told me. All that heartache. All that pain. She hides it fairly well, most of the time. I wonder whether I do, too. In bed that night, I close my eyes and play a scene I haven't lingered on for a long time. Arthur and me, lying next to each other in our first house. On our sides, facing one another. The window open and cars rushing by outside. It was summer, and we just had a sheet on, no blanket. Arthur reached across and pulled me a bit closer.

'I just thought we would,' Arthur said. 'Once we were married. It's what people do, isn't it?'

He's right, it is. But how strange it is, that creating new people is just a thing people do, with barely a thought.

'I don't want to,' I said.

'You've been lonely, since Dot left. You've never made another friend like her. Aren't you ready for things to change? To leave your job and be at home? We can manage it on my salary, if we're careful.'

It's like he didn't hear what I said. Not that I wasn't ready, or that I wasn't sure, but that I didn't want to. I turned my body away from him.

'Mabel, talk to me.'

'You don't listen,' I said.

'Tell me why.'

'There is no why,' I said, turning back so I could see his eyes as I told him. 'It's just not something I want.'

Would it have been different, with someone else? Someone I loved more, loved properly? Maybe. Or maybe not.

‘I want to do something I’ve never done before.’ It’s the first thing I say to Julie when she arrives.

She doesn’t know the courage it takes. Doesn’t know how out of character it is, because she doesn’t know me. That’s what allows me to do it, I think. If I’d said that sentence to Arthur, he would have fallen out of his seat in shock. But Julie doesn’t bat an eyelid.

‘Good morning to you, too, Mabel. Right then. Something you’ve never done before. Okay, let me think.’

She’s been buzzing about the place for half an hour before she brings me a mug of tea – too much milk, and definitely added after the water, though I’ve told her my preference – and says it. ‘I could take you to that ballroom dancing class I sometimes go to.’

‘I’ve done ballroom dancing,’ I say.

And as I say it, I’m back there in my head. At those dances with Arthur and Bill and Dot, watching Bill and Dot glide gracefully across the floor, my heart thumping as I felt Arthur’s eyes on me, knowing he was going to ask.

‘But have you done a class?’ she asks, persistent.

‘No.’

‘Well then.’

The way she says it, it’s already settled. And it could be worse.

‘Patty will be delighted to have a new face there.’

‘I’ll call her Patricia,’ I say.

‘I don’t know whether that’s her name.’

‘It’s bound to be.’

She looks like she has reservations about offering to take me. But she won't go back on it; I know that much about her. She's got a feather duster in her hand and she goes over the room while we're talking, though I haven't asked her to.

'What about this friend of yours?' she asks.

I snap my head around to her. 'Dot? Have you thought of a way to find her?'

'Well, I've been thinking about how we might try. What's her full name?'

'Dorothy Brightmore. That was her maiden name, anyway.'

'Yes, of course. An unusual name, at least. That might help.'

'Will it?'

'Well, it's definitely better than Smith or Jones.'

I see what she means. She's taking this seriously, and I appreciate it. There's a smell of ammonia and I see she's spraying the windows.

'You don't have to clean,' I say.

She stops what she's doing and turns, cloth in hand. Laughs heartily. 'Well, I have to do something, don't I?'

I hope she doesn't leave smears.

'Have you heard of Facebook?' she asks.

I roll my eyes. Has anyone not heard of Facebook? 'I'm eighty-six, I'm not dead.'

She laughs. 'We could start there.' She takes out her telephone and sits down on the end of the sofa closest to my armchair. 'Let's see, Dorothy Brightmore.'

I look over her shoulder. There are three results, and none of them have proper photos. Two have that blue and white silhouette you have before you upload one, and one has a cartoon dog. I watch Julie click into each one in turn. The first is in America, and she turns to look at me. I shake my head, and she swiftly dismisses it. The second is in Scotland, and she's listed a school in Edinburgh. I shake my head. And the third, with the cartoon dog photo, doesn't list a location. Julie scrolls through the profile a bit until she comes to a photo of a man and a woman of around fifty, arm in arm. I study it.

'No,' I say.

'I know that's not her – wrong age – but it could be a picture of her daughter or something.'

'True. Keep going down.'

There are a few more photos, always the same woman.

‘No. Try Dot,’ I say. ‘Try Dot Brightmore.’

She does, and there are no results. Then she opens up Twitter.

‘I don’t use this,’ she says.

I watch her fiddle around a bit, but the end result is the same.

‘I can’t imagine her being on Twitter,’ I say.

‘Can you imagine her being anywhere?’

It’s a strange question, but I take it at face value. How do I imagine Dot now? Can I see her as an old woman, her beautiful face lined and her hair grey? Do I see her stooped and sagging? No. The truth is, I just see the girl she was. My brain won’t age her. And where do I imagine her? London, because that’s where she went initially? I know that people move, that she could be anywhere, but London’s the place to start, surely?

‘London,’ I say. ‘I feel like she’s in London.’

It’s Julie’s turn to roll her eyes. ‘Great. Needle in haystack comes to mind.’

‘Tell me more about this dancing class,’ I say.

\* \* \*

Patricia looks happy, as predicted, when Julie and I walk in. She’s quite a bit older than Julie, edging towards seventy, I bet. And she’s beautiful. Sleek grey hair cut in a sharp bob, enormous blue eyes and legs up to her armpits. There are only a handful of people, plus Julie and me. I go up to the front.

‘Patricia,’ I say. ‘I’m Mabel. I’m not too steady on my feet but I’d like to give this a good go.’

‘Call me Patty,’ she says. Her voice is a drawl.

‘I won’t, if it’s all the same to you.’

She looks taken aback, but she recovers herself quickly. ‘Mabel, it’s lovely to have you. Right, everyone. It’s nice to have enough people to say everyone! Let’s get warmed up.’

She has us rolling our shoulders and going up and down on the balls of our feet. Tells me to take things steady, to just stop and watch if there’s anything I don’t feel up to doing. And it feels strange because since she put the music on, the years have dropped away, and I feel like a girl again. I can imagine being spun across this room, my feet light and quick.

When she pairs us up, I'm with Julie. It's strange to be so close to her, touching. We're the same sort of height so when I look forward I'm looking directly into her eyes, and it's oddly intimate.

'I'll try my best not to step on your toes,' she whispers.

'I'll do the same,' I say. 'It's a long time since I danced.'

But then she puts the music on, and it's 'Unforgettable', that voice as deep and smooth as plain chocolate, and we're doing it, listening to Patricia's instructions, moving a little awkwardly and quite slowly, but moving all the same. As one. It's like magic. The years, gone. This hall, this music. It's like a time machine.

When the song ends, Julie looks concerned. 'What is it?'

I put a hand to my cheek and feel the tears. 'Oh,' I say. 'It's nothing. I'm fine.'

The hour goes in a flash. At one point, I dance with Patricia to 'Que Sera Sera' and something about her expertise and her strong grip gives me the confidence to dance the way I used to, or as close as I can get on these old legs. When it's over, I feel both energised and exhausted. From the movement and the emotion. I thank Patricia and she tells me to come back any time, says it's been a real pleasure.

'Coffee?' she asks.

Julie looks at me. 'Would you like to go for a coffee, or would you like to get home?'

I'm surprised to find I don't want the evening to end. 'Coffee,' I say. 'Or, rather, tea.'

Patricia laughs. 'You can drink whatever you like, Mabel.'

\* \* \*

Julie insists on paying for the drinks and Patricia and I find a table. I'm hoping she won't go for one with high stools, so I'm relieved when she opts for a low table with big, squashy armchairs. The whole place smells of freshly brewed coffee, and there are framed abstract prints on the walls. Arthur would have said it was trying too hard, and I probably would have agreed with him. He liked an old-fashioned café with checked tablecloths. But I look around, taking it all in, and I decide I like it.

'So, tell me about yourself,' Patricia says, smiling.



I've always disliked that question. What is there to say? I glance over at the counter, but Julie's still queuing.

'I'm eighty-six,' I say. 'Recently widowed...'

'Oh, I'm so sorry.'

'It's all right, we had a good run.'

She nods, and I realise she expects me to go on. But what does she want to know?

'Do you live in Broughton?' she asks.

'Yes.'

'Have you always?'

'Yes.'

People didn't move about the way they do now, when I was younger. You stayed put unless you had a good reason to go elsewhere. A job, or a person, I suppose. That way, you had the people who loved you around if you needed them.

'Why did you come here, from America?' I ask.

She looks surprised at the question. 'I have to say, people often ask me when, but they rarely ask me why. Let's see, I was working as a model and I got to travel all over the world and I fell in love with London. There was something magical about the place.'

'A model, you say?'

'Yes. I did all sorts. Some advertising campaigns, some catwalk.'

'You are tall, I suppose.'

She laughs, and it's unexpected and surprisingly joyful, like the room is suddenly full of bubbles.

Julie arrives with a tray and unloads the drinks. Coffee for them, tea for me. And three slices of Victoria sponge.

'I didn't ask for cake,' I say.

'I thought I'd treat us,' she says.

It's a long time since I had cake and when I take a bite I'm flooded with memories of birthdays and silly hats.

'Have you told Patty about our mission?' Julie asks, once she's settled.

'Mission?'

'To find your friend? She might have some ideas.'

'Oh,' I say. I feel a bit hot and uncomfortable. I'm not sure I'm ready to talk about Dot to anyone else.

Julie doesn't notice, and ploughs on. 'Mabel had this best friend, when

she was younger, but she hasn't seen her since they were in their twenties. We're going to try to find her.'

'Oh boy,' Patricia says. 'That sounds like a challenge.'

'I thought it was common in America to believe us Brits all know each other,' I say.

Patricia laughs again. More bubbles. 'Only the ones who haven't been here.'

There is a beat of silence, and I take another mouthful of cake, close my eyes briefly to appreciate it.

'When you knew her, all those years ago, where did she live? Around here, I mean,' Patricia asks.

'Manor Lane, number forty-two.'

'Have you been there?'

I'm not sure what she's getting at. 'You think she might have been there all this time?'

'No, of course not, but someone there might know something about where she went. Worth a try, surely, since it doesn't involve going very far.'

I want to say that the house has probably changed hands many times since Dot's family left it. And besides, the rest of the family didn't leave along with her, so it's not like the next owner would have a forwarding address for her specifically.

'That's a brilliant idea,' Julie says. 'Why didn't we think of that, Mabel? I don't know. Good job we've got Patty on board.'

I think about that phrase later, 'on board'. Is this a group project now? How many more will join in? And will any of it help? When I'm drifting off to sleep, I let go of the worry about it all, the questions about whether or not I'm doing the right thing. I let myself remember the dancing, the way it felt to be moving around that big space with songs I hadn't heard for years playing at volume. And I remember the cake, the lightness of the sponge, the richness of the icing. So when Arthur is there beside me, suddenly, I smile at him.

'It's been a good day,' I say.

He doesn't say anything.

'Why are you here, Arthur? Have you got something to tell me, or to show me?'

He smiles the way he always did when he had a secret and he wasn't quite ready to give it up. Playful. It makes him look young. And it infuriates me. I reach across to give him a gentle push, but the bed is empty.

I was a bit taken aback when Julie and Patricia said they'd both come with me to Dot's old house to see if we could find anything out. But then, I know Julie's floundering without Martin and Patricia lives on her own, so maybe they haven't got anything better to do. A thought comes to mind. Perhaps while they're helping me, I could help them. I get out the list I made, think again about how happy this would make Arthur.

- ~~1. Get in touch with friends and family~~
- ~~2. Contact the funeral parlour~~
- ~~3. Go to the supermarket~~
- ~~4. Clean the house~~
5. Find D

Items one to four are crossed off, now, but I add two new items to the end.

6. Help Julie get her husband back
7. Find out why Patricia is alone

So when they turn up on the doorstep, I get right to it.

'Have you always lived on your own, Patricia?'

She opens her mouth and I know she's going to ask me to call her Patty, but then she closes it again.

'No,' she says. 'Until recently, my daughter and granddaughters lived

with me.'

She is wearing a navy dress with a bold floral pattern and brown leather ankle boots. Could I wear something like that? I would always have said no, but it looks great on her. I remind myself that she used to be an actual model. Turn my attention to what she just said. There's a story there.

'Ah, and where have they moved to?'

'Up near Manchester. My daughter, Sarah, met someone online and they've decided to make a go of it.'

I can hear in her voice that this is hard. She doesn't approve.

'And how old are the little ones?'

'Six and four.'

Julie's looking from me to Patricia and back again. This is all news to her, it seems.

'You must miss them,' I say.

'Oh, I do. Terribly.'

So there it is. She's lonely too. All three of us, on our own. Julie goes over to Patricia and puts an arm around her, and it looks a bit awkward because Patricia towers over Julie, but they make it work. Patricia pulls a tissue from her trouser pocket and blows her nose. I should say sorry, I suppose, for upsetting her, but it was in a good cause. I can't help her if I don't know what the problem is, can I?

'Shall we go, then?' I say instead.

I haven't walked past Dot's old house much, over the years. At first it was a conscious thing, and then it wasn't, but it's a bit out of the way, not on one of the routes Arthur and I used to take again and again around the village. From my house, you have to go towards the centre of town but then veer off just before you get there, and then there's a maze of little streets and Manor Lane is one of them. When we get to the bit where you turn off, I find my feet are just taking me there, as if I'm back in the time when I made this journey so often, as if the decades have fallen away. I go second left and then third right, and Julie is sure we're getting lost, but I know we're not. And then we're on Manor Lane, and I'm going past the houses on her street until I get to forty-two and stand in front of it, looking.

It's smaller. I mean, it isn't, of course, but I always thought of it as quite imposing and it's just an ordinary family house. Victorian semi. I look at the window that Dot's brother once broke with a cricket ball. The door's changed colour. Once black, now a bright blue.

‘This the one?’ Patricia asks.

It strikes me as a silly question so I don’t bother to answer it.

‘Mabel?’ Julie asks, touching my elbow.

‘What?’

‘Is this Dot’s old house?’

‘Well, of course it is. Why do you think I’m staring at it?’

She does that raucous laugh of hers and just then, the front door opens and a smartly dressed middle-aged man looks a bit surprised to find three women standing looking at his house.

‘Can I help you?’ he asks, pulling the door closed behind him.

‘My friend used to live here,’ I say. ‘In the forties and fifties. Her name was Dot Brightmore.’

He shifts from one foot to the other, taps his car keys on his wrist. Waits for me to go on.

‘I don’t suppose you know anything about her, or her family?’

‘Sorry, we’ve only been here two years.’ He looks down, then back at us. ‘The wife and me,’ he adds, though it doesn’t make any difference to anything.

‘Thanks anyway,’ I say.

He lifts a hand in a wave and is about to get in his Audi when he stops and calls out. ‘I’ve just remembered. When we came to look at it, the previous owner told us she’d done some research into the house’s history. Maybe she’d know something. My wife’s inside, if you want to knock.’

He gets in his car and starts the engine, not waiting around to see how we react.

‘That’s something,’ Julie says. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘Could be,’ I say.

Julie rings the bell, and a slight, nervous-looking woman of around Julie’s age comes to the door. She looks taken aback to see us, and I realise we must look a ragtag bunch. Not who you might expect to find on your doorstep on a Thursday morning.

‘Can I help you?’ she asks.

‘We just spoke to your husband,’ Julie says, taking charge. ‘My friend Mabel here is looking for someone she knew many years ago, who used to live in this house. Your husband said you might be able to put us in touch with the previous owner, who’d done some research.’

The woman doesn’t invite us in. She fetches a tatty telephone book and

leafs through it on the doorstep, and then, when she finds what she's looking for, she pauses before sharing it.

'I'm not sure I should give her details over without checking with her,' she says.

'Perhaps you could phone her right now, and ask if it's okay?' Julie says.

She likes that idea. Leaves the door open and us on the doorstep while she gets her mobile telephone.

'Hello, yes, Trisha? This is Angela Mortimer, who bought the house on Manor Lane from you?'

She explains the situation, nods a couple of times.

Julie holds up a hand, asking permission to speak, and when it's not granted, she speaks anyway. 'Maybe we could just talk to her now, on your phone, rather than you giving us her number?'

Angela looks slightly affronted, but she hands the telephone over, her eyes never leaving us. Does she think this is some elaborate ruse to steal her mobile telephone?

'Hi, this is Julie Reynolds. Yes, yes, no I never lived there. It's my friend Mabel, no, she never lived there either, it was her friend... Dot, or Dorothy, Brightmore? I know, great name. You haven't come across her? Well, how far back has your research taken you? Oh, I see. Yes. Well, it was worth a try, I suppose. Can I leave my number with you, in case you think of anything else that might be helpful to us? And yes, of course, I'm sure Mabel would be happy to tell you what she knows about them. Okay great, thanks. So it's Julie Reynolds...' She rattles off her number, then says thank you and goodbye.

She hands the telephone back to Angela, thanks her too. And then we're back where we started, at the end of the drive, looking at the house I once spent so much time in.

'She didn't get further back than about thirty years. Four or five owners, it sounded like,' Julie says.

We're walking back to my house, and it feels like the wind is more biting than it was on the way. There's a smell of smoke in the air, hanging around after the weekend's bonfires. Olly was terrified of the fireworks, always is. I had to have him in bed with me.

'Why was she researching the house?' Patricia asks. 'Isn't it more usual to research your own family?'

'No idea,' Julie says. 'Maybe she's done her family and still had time on

her hands.'

I like the idea of it, but I don't say anything. Knowing a bit about all the people you've shared a space with. The people who've bathed in your bath and cooked in your kitchen. I'm not surprised that Patricia doesn't understand. None of the houses in America have any history, do they? Not old enough.

When we're back at mine and Julie's made us all a cup of tea, I ask the question that's been on my mind ever since we walked away from the house.

'What now?'

Julie and Patricia look thoughtful. Julie's the first one to speak.

'You said it was her mother who told you she'd left. Did she say where in London?'

And that's when it hits me. I wrote her letters. I had her address. Maybe I still have it, somewhere. I tell them, and Julie looks pleased as punch.

'Do you remember it?' she asks.

'Not off the top of my head. But I would have written it down.'

'And would you still have it, do you think?'

Almost certainly. I'm a thrower-away of things, but Arthur was a hoarder. Especially of paperwork. Notepads and address books, there's no way he would have let anything like that go. Thank goodness.

'Yes,' I say. 'Somewhere.'

'Well, I guess we dig it out,' Julie says. 'And then we go there.'

'To London?' It's years since I've been to the capital. Sometimes, Arthur and I would go in to see a show or to have a walk around the busy streets, but not for a long time.

'To London,' Julie confirms.

It's then that Olly goes to the door, whinging.

'Has he been for a walk today, Mabel?' Patricia asks.

He hasn't. The truth is, I'm struggling to keep up with the walking he needs, and I know what that means, but I'm still not quite ready to face it.

'Not yet. I didn't want to take him to Dot's, in case we were invited in, and I'm not really up to more than one trip out a day.'

'I'll take him,' she says, and grabs his lead from where it's hanging by the door. She turns to me. 'I mean, if that's okay with you, Mabel?'

There's something a bit strange about the way she says my name. Slightly too much emphasis on the second syllable. But I don't say anything.

'He's not a fan of people,' I say.

She laughs her frothy laugh, as if I've told a joke, and she must take that as a yes because she's out the door before I can say anything else.

\* \* \*

I must have a bit of a nap, and when I wake there's a delicious smell wafting through from the kitchen. Julie appears, wearing oven gloves, her face flushed.

'What are you up to in there?' I ask.

'I thought I'd do you a fish pie for your dinner.'

I haven't had fish pie for years. Arthur didn't like it, didn't like any kind of fish other than the sort that's battered. And it's a faff to make for one. Julie's done it, though.

'I hope you haven't gone to too much trouble for me.'

'No trouble, Mabel.'

'You know,' Patricia says, coming back through the door as if we were just this minute in the middle of a conversation, 'if the walking's getting too much for you, I could have a word with my neighbour, Kirsty. She's always out and about with her baby and she was only telling me the other day that she grew up with dogs and misses having one. I'm sure she wouldn't mind taking Olly on the odd walk. I'd be happy to as well, of course.'

'Did you remember to take poo bags?' I ask.

'I did.'

She doesn't say anything else about walking Olly and it's not long before they say they have to go.

'That pie will be ready in twenty minutes,' Julie says. 'It will do you three or four portions, I think. You could put on some peas to go with it. I saw some in the freezer.'

It's as if she thinks I've never made myself a meal before. And why has she been rooting around in the freezer?

'I'm perfectly capable of making my own dinner,' I say.

'I know you are, but sometimes it's nice not to have to. I'll be back tomorrow and we can start looking for that address, okay?'

I know I should thank her, thank both of them, but I feel a bit overcome with emotion and I don't want them to see that.

'Watch the door, it's sticking a bit,' I say, instead. 'Maybe you could look



at that for me, too.'

Patricia said ten o'clock and it's dead on when the doorbell goes. She's standing on the doorstep with that young woman I ran into on the street once, the one who loved Olly. The perfect one. What did Patricia say her neighbour's name was? Kirsty?

'Hello!' the young woman says. 'I'm Kirsty, and we've met before, haven't we?'

Patricia looks surprised. She was all ready to do the introductions.

'Come in,' I say to them both. 'Where's the baby?'

Kirsty laughs. 'Oh, at home with Daddy for once. I feel strange without the buggy to lean on, almost like I've forgotten how to walk. Do you have children, Mabel?'

It's such an innocent question, but such a barbed one, too. All my life, I've hated it. Because when the answer is yes, people can follow it up with questions about names and ages, about how many and whether they're boys or girls. But if the answer is no, it leads to an awkward silence no matter who's doing the asking. I've gone through phases over the years. Saying no but... as if that might change in the future, though I knew it wouldn't. Saying I was still mulling it over, and then, once it was clearly too late, that I'd never quite been able to make up my mind. Because society doesn't like women who have made up their mind and who don't want children, does it? That's something I learned pretty quickly.

We are standing in the narrow hallway, awkward.

'Come through,' I say. 'And no, no children.'

'Oh,' Kirsty says, and her flawless skin goes a bit pink and I know she

wishes she had the baby with her as a distraction.

Luckily, Olly ambles in.

‘Olly!’ she calls, like he’s a friend she last saw in 1976. Which is probably before she was born, come to think of it. She crouches down and he does a little hop skip towards her and I’m astonished, just like last time, at his reaction to her.

‘Do you want a cup of tea?’ I ask, and then Patricia insists on making it, so I just stand there watching this stranger bonding with my usually standoffish dog. There’s something about her I can’t put my finger on. Cut-glass accent, clothes that look like they’ve been made for her. Today, she’s in slim black trousers to the ankle and a sea-green jumper you can just tell cost more than my entire wardrobe. She’s got money, that’s obvious. Patricia has, too, but she’s American and that throws me off.

‘Patty said the walking was getting to be too much,’ Kirsty says, standing up. ‘I’d be happy to swing by and pick him up any time you like. Dotty only sleeps in the buggy so I’m always walking the streets.’ She laughs, and it sounds slightly hysterical. Sleep-deprived, I imagine.

I glance towards the kitchen, where Patricia is humming and the kettle is boiling.

‘Can you take him?’ I ask. ‘For good, I mean?’

She looks a bit panicked, and it’s only then that I realise how composed she usually looks. She’s slightly too knowing to be in her twenties, I think, but she can’t be far into her thirties. What was I like at her age? It feels too far back to remember, and yet, those days with Dot, which are further back still, are fresh and clear in my mind.

‘Take him? Adopt him, you mean?’

‘He was my husband’s. He doesn’t even like me, and I’m finding it all too much. And you just seem to have this natural way with him. And besides, Patricia said...’

‘What did I say?’ Patricia asks, coming through with a tray.

‘That I’m looking for a dog, apparently,’ Kirsty says.

I can’t quite tell whether she’s annoyed, can’t work out the relationship between them. How close they are, how long they’ve known one another.

‘Let me take him for a few walks first,’ Kirsty says. ‘We can get to know one another. See how we get on.’

It’s not what I’d hoped for. I’d hoped she would take him today, now. It would have been painful but quick, like ripping off the metaphorical plaster.

This way I'll be dwelling on it for weeks. But it's not as if I have anyone else offering to take him, so I'm not really in a position to argue.

'Fine,' I say. 'Whatever you think.'

We sit down to drink our tea and Olly trots straight over to her, lets her make a fuss of him, and I can see her falling in love with him right in front of me. She'll take him, I'm sure she will. It's just a matter of when.

'Mabel's looking for an old friend,' Patricia says into the silence I hadn't noticed, given that I'm so accustomed to it.

This again. I feel like it's turning into some kind of community outreach project.

'Oh yes?' Kirsty asks, sipping at her tea.

'Dot, isn't it?'

Patricia knows it's Dot. She's trying to engage me in the conversation.

'That's right,' I say.

'Oh, you mentioned your friend Dot that time we met on the street. How long is it since you saw her?' Kirsty asks. She has her hand curled around her coffee mug and I notice her rings flashing. Nothing on her wedding finger, though.

I think back. 'Sixty-two years.'

'Wow, and what's made you want to look for her now?'

'Well, my husband died...'

'I'm so sorry to hear that.'

Everyone is sorry. I've got used to batting it away now. It's just a barrier to conversation.

'It's all right, Kirsty. He was eighty-nine, so it was hardly shocking.'

'Still, hard to adjust to, I'd imagine. Especially if you haven't had children, and it's been just the two of you. How long were you married?'

'Sixty-two years.'

She looks at me a little strangely, and I suppose it's because I've given the same answer to her last two questions.

'That's a hell of a long time,' Patricia interrupts.

'Yes. Anyway, he died and it made me think about her, and the fun we used to have, before I was with him. There's no one else in my life, now, no family, no husband, no real friends to speak of. So why not now, I suppose.'

There is quiet, and I sense that they're feeling sorry for me. It has that effect, when you tell people you don't have anyone. But it's the truth.

'So you last saw her in, what, the 1960s?' Kirsty asks.

‘That’s right. A few weeks before my wedding in 1961.’

‘What did she look like?’

Julie and Patricia haven’t asked this. Presumably because they think she won’t, now, look anything like she did then. But it’s nice to reminisce.

‘She had blonde hair, curled.’

‘Like me,’ Kirsty says.

It’s true that she has blonde curls, but her hair is nothing like Dot’s was. Hers is straight at the roots and then wavy, the way all the young girls seem to have their hair done now, whereas Dot had big bouncing curls that you got from rollers, except hers were natural. I get an image of her, standing at the bus shelter holding a red lipstick in one hand and a powder compact in the other, her mouth in a pout. Our dads didn’t like us wearing makeup so we used to improvise on the way, Bill and Arthur standing around smoking, telling us we didn’t need it anyway.

‘Hold on,’ I say. ‘I’ve got a photo.’

I haven’t put the photo albums away; they’re still on the dining table. I fetch the one with the picture of the four of us and pass it to them.

‘This is her?’ Kirsty asks, pointing.

‘Yes.’

‘Wow, she’s so beautiful. And this, Mabel, is this other girl you?’ She flicks her eyes back and forth from the photograph to me, as if she can hardly believe it.

‘That’s right.’

‘Oh Mabel, what a lovely photo. Is one of these men your husband?’

I point to Arthur, and then say that Bill was my brother. And I must warn them with my eyes not to ask what happened to him, that or perhaps they remember I said I had nobody left, because they say nothing. Kirsty takes the photo out of the plastic and I want to tell her to be careful with it, but I can see that she is, and when she turns it over, there’s writing on the back that I don’t remember seeing before.

‘Bill, Dot, Mabel and Arthur, June 1957,’ she reads aloud.

I get up and gesture for her to pass it over to me. It’s Mother’s handwriting, and seeing it again is like seeing a ghost. She had a peculiar way of curling her Ls. I’d know it anywhere. And then I feel I catch her scent in the air, roses and cream and cut grass. It must be the perfume one of them is wearing.

‘I’d better get going,’ Kirsty says, finishing off her drink. ‘Ben’s off to a

stag do in London in a couple of hours. Shall I take Olly for a quick walk now, Mabel? I've got half an hour.'

I say that would be great, and Patricia says she'll go with her, that she doesn't get enough exercise since her granddaughters moved out and she doesn't have to chase them around the park any more. And it's not until they've gone and I'm back in my armchair that I realise I wasn't ready for them to go. That I wanted them to stay a bit longer.

Arthur used to tease me about how I was with guests. How I never invited any, and how I was desperate to get rid of anyone he asked round. He was one for a committee, Arthur, loved being part of a team. Neighbourhood Watch, Bowls Club, all that. And he loved to host, too. But he said I was always hovering, waiting for people to go, practically shooing them out the door with my feather duster. And it's true that I didn't like having a load of near-strangers traipsing in and out, not wiping their feet properly and putting their greasy hands all over the arms of my sofa.

So what's different now, with Patricia and Kirsty? And Julie, come to think of it. Sometimes she says it's time for her to get going and I can't believe it, it only feels like twenty minutes since she came, and I want to ask her to stay for another cup of tea, but I know it's a job for her and she has some other old person's house to get to.

I just sit, looking out of the window, until I see them coming back. As they round the corner, the wind whips Kirsty's hair and it covers her face and then she's passing Olly's lead to Patricia and trying to push it out of the way and they're both laughing, and I feel almost a part of it. The doorbell goes a minute or so later and I take my time getting up. Don't want them to think I've been waiting for them, that I've got nothing better to do.

'How was he?' I ask.

'Oh, he was a darling,' Kirsty says, passing the lead to me across the threshold. 'Shall I come for him tomorrow? Would ten o'clock be all right?'

I'm slow to get going in the mornings. Sometimes I'm not up and ready by ten, but I don't want to say that. I know what these young mums are like. She's probably had her breakfast and done a couple of loads of washing by that time.

'That's fine,' I say.

She's turning to go, Patricia on her heels, when I say her name again.

'What is it, Mabel? Have I forgotten something?'

'Thank you,' I say.

‘Oh, it’s nothing.’ She makes a gesture with her hand, a sort of swipe.

‘It’s not,’ I say, surprising myself. ‘It’s not nothing. And I want you to know I appreciate it.’

She comes forward, then, and gives me a quick hug. She smells of spring fields, and her hair is soft against the skin of my neck. And then she’s gone, waving and blowing kisses to Olly, calling that she’ll see us tomorrow. And it feels nice, knowing she’ll be back. It feels like her youth and energy have unleashed something in the house, and perhaps in me, too.

‘I don’t think anyone meets in real life these days,’ Kirsty says.

‘How on earth do they meet then?’ I ask.

‘Apps. Online dating.’ She waves her telephone at me.

Julie comes in with a tray of tea and slices of the carrot cake Patricia baked. They’re all here, in my front room, and I can’t quite believe it. It’s become a fairly regular occurrence. Julie comes every day, of course, and Kirsty comes to pick up Olly and drop him off, and often stays for a cup of tea and a chat, and Patricia often calls round with a cake or to ask if I want any shopping doing. When they all coincide like this, I’d have thought I’d find it overwhelming, but I don’t.

Julie’s been saying that she wants to meet someone to show her ex what he’s missing, and Kirsty has pounced on it.

‘Let’s get you set up,’ Kirsty says, taking Julie’s telephone out of her hand. ‘Mind if I go through your photos?’

Julie shakes her head, but she looks a bit unsure. I want to say something, to say any man on any of those app things would be lucky to go on a date with her, but I’m not sure how to word it.

‘Have you done it? Online dating?’ Julie turns to Patricia.

‘No, but then I’ve barely done any dating.’ She laughs but it’s hollow. ‘That’s how my daughter Sarah met her new guy, of course. Speaking of which, she phoned this morning and it sounds like the honeymoon period is over.’

‘Oh, how so?’ Julie asks.

‘Well, this Geoff’s never lived with a partner before...’



‘And he’s in his forties? That’s a definite red flag,’ Kirsty says.

I don’t know what a red flag is but I can guess, so I just keep listening. I’m learning all sorts.

‘And he doesn’t have kids,’ Patricia goes on, ‘and so I think he’s just finding it all a bit... much, you know. The girls are tireless, believe me. It’s non-stop. Plus, there’s an ex sniffing round...’

‘No!’ Julie says.

‘He swears it’s all over with her but I think Sarah is a bit worried.’

‘I think they’ll be back with you before you know it,’ Julie says, giving Patricia’s arm a pat, and I see that Patricia looks hopeful at that.

‘Got it!’ Kirsty says. ‘This would make a great profile photo.’ She waves the telephone at each of us in turn. ‘Wouldn’t it? Mind if I just crop this other woman out?’

‘No.’ Julie snatches the telephone out of Kirsty’s hand and her voice is sharper than I’ve ever heard it.

We all turn to her and she doesn’t know where to look.

‘I’m not ready for this,’ she says, slipping her telephone in the pocket of her jeans. ‘Another time, maybe.’

And then she leaves the room, goes into the kitchen where I hear her banging about, getting a chopping board out, then a tap running. Making lunch.

Kirsty looks sheepish. ‘I didn’t mean to upset her.’

‘I’m sure it’s not you,’ Patricia says. ‘She’ll be all right.’

‘She wants her husband back,’ I say. ‘That’s what it is. She’s not really interested in finding someone new.’

It’s too quiet so I reach for the remote and put the television on. It’s *Top of the Morning* and that Michael Silver’s talking to a glossy woman about winter coats. There are models who sashay in and out, looking moody. I think of my long, belted coat in pea green and wonder whether it’s time for an upgrade. It’s seen me through two winters, or is it three? Arthur helped me choose it in Marks and Spencer in Overbury, asking me to do a twirl in the changing room so he could see it from all angles. He was good with shopping, for a man. Happy to wait and hold the bags and tell me how things looked. When he didn’t like something, he wouldn’t say anything negative. He’d say it didn’t show me off to my full potential.

‘Do you mind?’ Patricia asks, taking the remote control from my hand and turning the television off. ‘I can’t bear that show.’

Can't bear *Top of the Morning*? It's a staple in this house. But before I can react, Julie's back in the front room doorway.

'I'm sorry I stormed out like that,' she says. 'I do want to do the profile, for the online dating. But can I choose the photo?'

'Of course,' Kirsty says, holding her hands up as if in surrender. 'It's all up to you.'

That feeling comes back, of Kirsty not being quite who she seems. Of having something hidden away from view. But then, don't we all?

'Where are you from, Kirsty?' I ask.

She looks surprised by the change of subject, but doesn't stall. 'I grew up near Cheltenham.'

'And are your family still there? Do you and Ben and Dotty go up to visit them much?'

She shifts uncomfortably and Patricia flashes me a quick warning look that I pretend not to notice.

'We're not really... close,' she says.

'Here,' Julie says, handing her telephone to Kirsty. 'This one.'

'That's lovely,' Kirsty says, smiling. Her teeth are perfect. 'Right, let's do this.'

Half an hour later Julie's all set up and we're passing around her telephone to say yes or no to a seemingly endless list of middle-aged men. It's quite fun but part of me wants to ask Kirsty whether she's planning to take Olly for a walk today. He's in the corner of the room, lying on the carpet because there's no seat spare, and he looks up hopefully every now and again before resting his head back on his paws. At one point, Julie laughs so loudly at one man's profile information, about fishing for both fish and ladies, that Olly gets up and trudges through to the back room.

What would Arthur make of all this? He probably wouldn't know what to think, would he? All those years of barely socialising with anyone but him, and now, mere weeks after he passed, a houseful of women. Online dating. Jokes about fishing. Camaraderie. It's all so unexpected. And sometimes it's too much.

'I'm feeling a bit tired,' I say.

They all turn to me as one.

'Gosh,' Kirsty says, 'we've rather taken over, haven't we? It's about time I took Olly out. Dotty won't nap forever.'

I'd forgotten about the buggy, pushed into the back room so Dotty could

get a bit of peace.

‘It’s time I was getting on, too,’ Patricia says. ‘Things to do.’

She’s always vague about what it is she does, and I suspect it’s not much, when you take away the playgroup she helps at and the dancing lessons once a week. I make a mental note to talk to her more about Sarah next time. She’d be much happier with her family surrounding her again. Maybe that’s something I can help with.

‘And,’ Julie says, looking at her watch, ‘I was due to leave ten minutes ago. I lost track of time. Is there anything you need, Mabel, before I go? I’ve made you a sandwich and it’s on a plate in the kitchen covered with clingfilm.’

‘I’m fine,’ I say.

And just like that, they’re all bustling out the door. Kirsty negotiating the buggy and Patricia holding the dog lead for her until they’ve got outside. I watch them through the window from my armchair. Julie’s got the car but she doesn’t get in it straight away. They gather around it, Kirsty pushing the buggy gently back and forth, presumably to stop Dotty from waking. Still talking, still looking at profiles on Julie’s telephone, laughing. And inexplicably, given that I just suggested they all go, I wish they were back in here and I was a part of it.

They look a bit of an unusual bunch. Kirsty a young mum, thirty-two I think she said, well-spoken and always immaculate and for some reason the only human my dog seems to want to tolerate right now. Julie nearing fifty, bold and just a little brash but with a world of insecurity behind the front she puts up. And then Patricia, who announced the other day that she was seventy and I couldn’t believe it, what with those legs up to her armpits and that elegant way she has of walking. Must be all the dancing.

I don’t know much about women’s friendship groups, but I know they’re usually dictated by age. There’s something refreshing about this lot, how all that’s been thrown to the wind, and it just works.

I must drift off to sleep because next thing I know there’s a knock on the door and I feel startled and a bit cold and there’s a stale taste in my mouth. I get up slowly and make my way to the door, and it’s Kirsty, bringing Olly back.

She hands the lead over with a smile, but it’s not bright like it usually is.

‘Everything all right?’ I ask.

Would she come in, if I asked her? Would she stay for another cup of tea

and tell me what's troubling her? But no, I can see Dotty's awake and she looks like she's on the verge of crying.

'You asked about my family, before,' she says. 'Ben's never met them. We don't see them. They haven't met Dotty.'

It's a lot to take in, and I wasn't expecting it. I think of Patricia, missing her granddaughters like mad, and these people living near Cheltenham who either don't know they have a grandchild or know but haven't met her. She's a lovely little thing, Dotty. Once, when they came over, she sat on Patricia's lap for a good twenty minutes tapping a couple of blocks together. She's got thick, dark hair, which must come from his side, but her eyes are all Kirsty.

'Why?' I ask.

She shrugs. 'Ben doesn't get it. He wants us to get married but I couldn't do that without involving them and I'm just not ready for them to meet.'

Perhaps it's Ben, I think. Perhaps he doesn't meet their expectations and she knows it.

'Anyway, I've been thinking about it while we were out walking and I thought I should answer your question.' She turns to go.

'Wait, Kirsty.' I want to ask her whether she's happy, because surely that's what it should all come back to, but I look into her watery eyes and can't find the words. What is it with me and not being able to say what I mean? 'I'll see you tomorrow,' I say, eventually.

She nods hurriedly, and then she's gone, pushing the buggy back down the path and onto the street.

And all afternoon and evening, I think of her. Fancy being so beautiful and having money and a baby and all that, and still not being happy. Because even though I didn't ask her, it's clear that she isn't, deep down. I'll ask Patricia about the partner. Ben. It's bound to be about him. And Patricia's next door so she might have heard something. Arguments, that sort of thing. I hope to god it's nothing more serious than that. That he doesn't hit her. You don't always know. There was a woman in the typing pool – Sheila – who confided in me and Dot once, pulled back her sleeves to show us her bruises. Dot was furious, insisting she leave him and saying we would do whatever it took to help her. I remember the rage in her eyes even now. Could Kirsty be going through something like that? I pull out my list.

~~1. Get in touch with friends and family~~

~~2. Contact the funeral parlour~~

- ~~3. Go to the supermarket~~
- ~~4. Clean the house~~
5. Find D
6. Help Julie get her husband back
7. Find out why Patricia is alone

I amend the seventh item to read 'Help Patricia get her daughter back' and tag an eighth thing on the end.

- ~~1. Get in touch with friends and family~~
- ~~2. Contact the funeral parlour~~
- ~~3. Go to the supermarket~~
- ~~4. Clean the house~~
5. Find D
6. Help Julie get her husband back
7. Help Patricia get her daughter back
8. Make sure Kirsty is safe

In one way, it feels like I'm not getting anywhere. But in another, it feels like I'm moving forward more rapidly than I have for years.

I've been looking for Dot's address. A drawer here, a box there. Julie offered to help, but I didn't really want her searching through all my personal things, so I said I'd rather do it myself.

'Don't be upending every cupboard in the house,' she said. 'Or it will feel impossible to put it all right again.'

She's right, so I've taken it slow and steady. I've found all sorts. The cinema ticket from when Arthur and I went to see *Rock Around the Clock* and bopped in the aisles. All the letters and cards Arthur sent me over the years – always signed off the same way. 'Here's to forever.' It's been like living in the past. No, that's not quite right, because in between I've been doing other things. So it's been like living in a more vibrant present than I'm used to while dipping a toe in the past. Today, I'm tackling a box that's been under mine and Arthur's bed for as long as I can remember. I asked Julie to pull it out and bring it downstairs for me before she left yesterday, and I have a good three hours before she's due here again.

I make a cup of tea, get settled in my armchair with the box at my feet, and open the cardboard flaps. The first thing I pull out is a notebook that seems vaguely familiar. It's the size of a paperback book, with a black leather cover. I flick through, and the handwriting makes me catch my breath. It's Bill's. I close it again, not quite ready to see. Why do we have this? And then I remember Mother telling Arthur to have a look around Bill's room to see if there was anything he wanted. He must have pocketed this small book, as a reminder. I open it up again, and just the shape of those letters brings him back. The way he laughed when I tried to tease him, the way he would eat

anything you put in front of him and still ask for more. Even the smell of him, Brylcreem and talc. There's nothing significant inside the book, I don't think. Just scribbled notes and ideas. Lists. It's probably the closest he came to keeping a diary, but he didn't fill it with secrets or thoughts from the dark corners of his heart. I'm about to put it to one side when I do a last flick through the pages and catch sight of some different handwriting. Arthur's.

It's some scribbled notes, back and forth, between the two of them.

*I'm going to ask Dot to marry me. What do you think she'll say, Arthur?*

*You're a lucky man, Bill. She'll say yes, I'm sure of it.*

*What about you, and Mabel?*

*Do you think I stand a chance? You know her best.*

*She can be hard to read, but I'd say so. There's no one else.*

There's no one else. How sure he was. And how wrong. How long before Bill died did they write this? It can't have been long, but there's no date. They had it all planned out. We made a great little foursome, and they wanted to keep it going. I don't blame them; I did too. How different would things have been if we hadn't lost Bill? Would we have stayed in that group, married and stuck together our whole lives? Would they have had children? And would we? And then I look back at Arthur's first words. 'You're a lucky man.' And it makes me feel a bit like a consolation prize.

I close the little book and rest it on the arm of my chair, not quite ready to put it away again, after so many years hidden away under the bed. And when I reach into the box again, I pull out another little book, one that's so familiar but that I couldn't have described if you'd asked me to. It's my address book, the one Bill bought me for my eighteenth birthday. Pink and white roses on the cover. I flick through, and under B, there it is. Dot Brightmore, and an address in Hammersmith, west London. Now I see it written down, I feel I can remember writing it on a plain white envelope and slipping the letter inside.

I think of the trips I've made to London over the years. Seeing the sights with Arthur. The occasional theatre outing. I've never been to this area, know nothing about it. I can't begin to try to picture her there. Will we really go there, like Julie said? As simple as that?

When weeks had passed and she hadn't responded to my letters, I had talked to Arthur about the possibility of going there to see her.

'Just turning up?' he'd asked.

'Why not?'

'Well, because she left without saying goodbye, without coming to our wedding, and now she hasn't replied to the letters you've sent her, so I'd say she's giving us a pretty clear message, wouldn't you?'

I'd thought about that long and hard. Did she not want us any more? Or was it just too painful to see us get married and start our lives together when her fairy tale had fallen apart with Bill's death? Did she need a fresh start, a clean break? Had she forgotten what we'd all meant to one another? Or was it our wedding in particular that was a problem for her? In the end, I didn't go, and I stopped talking about her so much. When she came up in conversation, it was usually in conjunction with Bill, with the four of us, and it was as if she stopped being her own entity altogether.

And now, more than sixty years later, am I going to go there with these women I've met who seem so fearless? I know I won't find her there, that nobody really stays put for that long in London, or really anywhere, but we might find a clue, something to lead us closer to her. Am I ready for that? Have I forgiven her, for disappearing?

By the time Julie bustles in, singing an Abba song, I've made my mind up.

'I've found it,' I tell her.

'Dot's London address?'

'Yes.' I hold up the address book as if it's some kind of proof.

She squeals. I can't get over how invested in this she seems. What does it matter to her? Is it just human curiosity? It seems like more than that.

'Let's have a look. Hmm, I'll bring the Tube map up in a bit and plan the route. When would you like to go?'

I'm thrown. I knew she'd suggest going there, but I was thinking about it as something we'd do at some point in the future, and now she's asking me when, and I don't know what to say.

'Next week?' she asks. 'I could take a day off.'

'Perhaps,' I say. 'Let me think about it.'

She laughs. 'You've had sixty-odd years, Mabel. Let's not waste any more!'

And it's ridiculous, I know, but I'm not sure I'm ready.



When Kirsty turns up for Olly, Julie opens the door to her and the first thing she mentions is the address.

‘Have you looked at it on Google Streetview?’ Kirsty asks.

I don’t know what that is, but once Kirsty’s got Dotty out of the buggy she gets her telephone out and taps in the address Julie shows her and before I know it she’s holding up the screen to me and I’m looking at a row of shops.

‘Must be a flat above a shop,’ she says.

I think hard, try to remember whether Dot’s mum said anything about this sister of hers and where she lived, or whether Dot ever mentioned her aunt and uncle who lived in London, but there’s nothing. Is my memory failing me, or is it just that there are so many years, so many trivial conversations and ordinary days piled up now that it’s impossible to store them all?

‘Are you going?’ Kirsty asks.

‘That’s the plan, although Mabel’s stalling a bit,’ Julie says, touching my shoulder affectionately to show she means no harm. ‘Cup of tea, Kirsty?’

‘Oh, yes please, if you’re making one.’

When Julie’s back in the kitchen, whistling as the kettle comes to the boil, Kirsty turns to me. She’s on the sofa, dressed in an immaculate navy-blue jumpsuit. Dotty’s on her lap, and their eyes are serious.

‘What’s holding you back? I thought you wanted to find Dot?’

‘Do you think we really might? Find her, I mean?’

‘Well, I think we’ve got a good chance, if she’s still...’

‘Alive?’

‘Yes. So if you don’t want to, or you’re not sure, maybe we should stop, or at least pause.’

‘I do want to,’ I say. ‘It’s just been such a long time, and I don’t know why she left, or whether she was angry with me for something.’

Kirsty studies me. She cups Dotty’s feet in her palms. There’s something so natural about the two of them together, the way Kirsty knows what her daughter needs and the way Dotty feels secure in her mother’s arms. Is that the way it is for all mothers? I want to tell her I’ve noticed it, but I don’t know whether it would mean anything, coming from someone who isn’t a mother.

‘How did you know you wanted to have a baby?’ I ask.

She’s a bit thrown by the change of topic but she recovers well. ‘I’m not sure, really. I’d reached my thirties and I’d always thought I would do it, and then I met Ben and he seemed ready, and it just all fell into place, really.’

‘And are you glad you did it?’

She smiles, covers Dotty’s ears. ‘Most of the time.’

And I find that I’m smiling, too. When I lost friends of mine, friends my age, to motherhood, I was bitter about it. It seemed unfair that they were all following a path I didn’t want to go down, and I was left on my own with Arthur, who wanted to go down it too. But now that it’s all so many years behind me, I’m finding there’s a joy in being around a mother and her child. In seeing how they operate together, how they love.

‘I’ve always imagined Dot without children, like me. What if I find her, and she’s nothing like what I’ve always thought?’

Kirsty gives that some thought, doesn’t rush into an answer, and I appreciate that. Julie comes in with the tea, and then she’s gone again, saying something about tidying the kitchen, though it was fairly clean when I made my breakfast. It’s quiet in the front room, both of us sipping our tea, Kirsty making sure to keep hers away from Dotty’s grasp. It goes on so long I think she must have forgotten what I asked.

‘I think no one is really who you think they are, even if they’ve been in your life the whole time,’ she says, eventually.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, I think we all have secrets, and things we’re ashamed of, and things we exaggerate because they show us in a better light. What if Dot had children, or six husbands, or ran away with the circus? So what? She’ll still be Dot.’

She will, I think. However she looks and whatever she’s done with her life, she’ll still be Dot. And I’ll still want to hear all about it, and see whether her eyes still dance when she’s telling a joke, or whether the years have knocked some of the life out of her.

‘Julie,’ I call.

‘Yes, Mabel?’ She appears in the doorway so quickly I wonder whether she’s been listening in.

‘I think we should go next week, like you said. If you have the time.’

‘Absolutely,’ she says. ‘That’s great news.’

‘Right then,’ Kirsty says, standing and lifting Dotty into the air until she chuckles. ‘Let’s go for a walk, shall we, little miss?’

Olly comes trotting through from the back room, and Kirsty reaches for his lead.

If Julie notices that I've made an effort, she doesn't make a big thing of it, and I'm grateful. I've been awake since five, going over the way the day might play out. I've tried three different outfits on, settling on a skirt and blouse I bought for a wedding a few years back, teamed with a bright yellow cardigan. I know it doesn't really matter what I wear, that today isn't going to be the day that we find her, but there's something pushing against my chest from the inside and I just knew I wanted to look my best.

'I like that cardigan,' Julie says. 'Lovely shade.'

I give her a smile but it's half-hearted.

'Have you changed your mind?' she asks.

'No.' I'm clear on this. If I back out, I'll never do it. 'What time is Patricia getting here?'

Julie shakes her arm until her watch slips out from under her coat. 'Any minute now.'

'Well then, come in. I was just sorting out my handbag.'

It's not until Patricia's arrived and Julie's driven the three of us to the station that she brings up her date. 'Last night,' she says. 'Bloody awful, it was. He looked so normal in his photos.'

'What was wrong with him?' Patricia asks.

'He was a lunatic. Claimed he couldn't be tied down, that he was dating lots of women and if I couldn't handle that, he wasn't the man for me.'

We're on the platform, on a bench.

'Sounds like you're well out of that,' Patricia says. 'How did you leave it?'

‘I walked out,’ Julie says. ‘And he ran after me, tried to get me to pay him back for the drink he’d bought me!’

They both burst out laughing and I try a smile, but my heart’s not in it.

‘Are you all right, Mabel?’ Julie asks when she’s got her breath back.

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘You’re just a bit quiet, that’s all.’

‘Well, it’s a long time since I went anywhere further than Overbury.’

‘Big day,’ Patricia says.

She must think I’m mad. She uprooted her life and moved to a different continent, and here I am worrying about going on a forty-five-minute train journey. I watch the pigeons pecking at crumbs on the platform edge, the way they fight and push at one another. The way they go for what they want, no questions asked.

‘Tell me the route again,’ I say.

Julie takes her telephone out of her pocket and consults it. ‘We get into Waterloo, then we take the Jubilee Line to Green Park, then the Piccadilly Line to Hammersmith. The address is a ten-minute walk from there, so we’ll see how we’re feeling at that stage, and if we want to, we can get a taxi.’

It’s kind of her to pretend it’s about how all of us are feeling and not just whether I’m too tired for the walk. The train pulls in, and Julie stands and offers me her arm. Once we’re on board and we’ve found a table to sit around, she fixes me with one of her serious looks.

‘We can turn around and go home at any point,’ she says.

Patricia nods her agreement.

‘It’s all up to you, Mabel. Just keep us informed. This is your day. We’re just along for the ride.’

I feel tears prick at my eyes. Because they know I’m scared and they’re offering me a way out. It would be so easy to take it. But I won’t. I look out of the window at the edge of our town rushing past and I feel something pressing against my chest wall. It’s hope, I realise. It’s anticipation.

I don’t say much on the train journey. Julie and Patricia talk some more about Julie’s date and the man from Patricia’s dance class who always stops at the end to chat but hasn’t got the nerve up to ask her out yet. I just look out of the window, letting the chatter wash over me, and immerse myself in memories of other train journeys. After our wedding, we had a few days in Christchurch, and Arthur didn’t let go of my hand the entire time we were on the train. It was as if he couldn’t believe he’d got me and was frightened to

let me go. I wanted to read my book, but it seemed rude when he was content for us to spend the entire journey gazing into one another's eyes. I remember feeling in my gut that I'd done the wrong thing, but excusing myself because of how happy he seemed. As if his happiness would cancel out my misgivings.

Waterloo's mayhem, like it always was. Years ago, I would have just plunged into the crowds. But not now. We wait until almost everyone's got off the train so we don't have to fight to walk along the platform and through the ticket barriers. The station smells like sweat and cooked meat and the noise is deafening. Julie does a great job of ushering us to where we need to be without rushing me. If I was trying to do this on my own, which I never would, I'd have got lost a dozen times just trying to find the right tube line. Down underground, waiting for a train, I'm hot in my big coat, but I don't want to go to the trouble of taking it off. A train screeches into position and I'm relieved to see it's fairly empty. We manage to get seats, three in a row.

'Do you come to London very much?' I ask them.

'When I first moved over from the States, I lived and worked in London, but then I had Sarah and moved out,' Patricia says.

'What sort of work did you do?' Julie asks.

'I was a model.'

'Hold that thought,' Julie says, one finger in the air. 'Time to change.'

We make the change, me just following their lead because the signs and the noise are confusing me.

'A model,' Julie says, once we're sat down again.

I didn't realise Julie didn't know this. It does make perfect sense, her having been a model. At seventy, Patricia still has incredible cheekbones and those long, long legs. She blushes and nods.

'Are we talking Littlewoods catalogue or catwalk shows?' Julie asks.

'A bit of everything, really. But a lot of shows, for a while.'

Julie's told me that Patricia lives in one of the biggest houses on that new estate, and I could tell she was curious about where she'd got the money from, having been a single mum for most of her life. Now it's starting to make sense.

'Did you meet a lot of celebrities?' Julie asks.

Patricia rolls her eyes. 'Tons. Most of them were awful.'

'And then you gave it all up, to have Sarah?'

Patricia looks away, above the heads of the people opposite at the map,

and she pretends she's checking our route, how many stops we have to go, but I can see she's gathering herself.

'I met someone, started seeing him, and found out I was having Sarah. But then it turned out he didn't want to know. And he was married.'

'What a bastard,' Julie says. 'These men, they're all the same. Your Arthur excluded, Mabel.'

Patricia shrugs. 'I wanted to have her, wanted to be a mum. So I took the money I'd made and set us up in Broughton, started a new life.'

It's brave, I think. She's brave. Going it alone with no family around her.

'Did you think about going home?' I ask. 'To America, I mean.'

'I did, but I wasn't all that close to my parents, and they didn't approve of me moving here in the first place. I didn't want to go home, pregnant and asking for help. I didn't want to give them that opportunity to say they were right all along.'

Is that stubborn, I wonder, or stupid? Either way, she's still brave.

'So who was he, the father?' Julie asks. 'Was he famous?'

Patty goes a bit red and doesn't answer, so it's clear that he was. But then I forget all about it because we're at our stop, at Hammersmith, and it's me who notices this time, and Patricia takes my arm and laughs and says we might have ended up at Heathrow if it had been left up to her, what with her getting lost in the past, and then we're out in the fresh air, on the street, and we've done it, this journey I've been fearing.

'Now,' Julie says, finding us a bench to sit on while we make our plan. 'How are you feeling, Mabel? Remember we've got the journey home to do, too. I don't want you to do too much.'

I feel fine. I feel alive and excited and scared, too, but not tired. I think of my armchair, of Olly wandering the rooms of our little house on his own, of how easy it would have been to stay there and not do this. Of how pleased I am, that I did. Still, I'd hate to overdo it and curse myself. 'Let's get a taxi,' I say. 'I'll pay.'

I took cash out at the supermarket yesterday especially for this. Erin had seen me counting out the notes and asked whether I was off to a casino.

'Nonsense,' Patricia says.

And I think about her modelling, strutting down a catwalk, having lots of money now because she was beautiful and tall. It's a funny old world.

Julie hails a cab and we get in, give the driver the address. He nods, says nothing, and we're there in a matter of minutes, back out on the street, after a

brief argument over who was paying, which I managed to win.

We stand on the street, looking at the building. It's a shop, like Kirsty said. There's a row of them. A newsagent, a betting shop, a charity shop. And the one with the address written in my old book is a cake shop, with big buns and pastries in the window. I look up to the flat above, and the frontage is pebble-dashed and there are two small windows with white paint flaking off them. Was she here, Dot? Did she stand here, and go through that door and up some hidden stairs? Did she work in the shop? And was it even a cake shop, then?

'Are we going in?' Julie asks, and I realise I've gone off into my own world, there on the street. People are bustling past. And Julie is holding my arm, and her voice is gentle, and I feel lucky to have her.

'Yes,' I say. 'Of course we're going in. We didn't come all this way just to stand on the street outside, did we?'

A little bell sounds when we go through the door and a man behind the counter looks up from his telephone. The shop is otherwise empty. He's in his thirties, this man, and he looks like he might have Mediterranean heritage. Spanish, possibly.

'What can I get you?' he asks, and his voice is all London.

'Oh, we're not here for cake,' Patricia says, and then Julie says, 'Speak for yourself,' and we all laugh, but the man doesn't.

'Is there still a flat above this shop?' Patricia asks.

'Who's asking?'

'Well, I am. My friend Mabel, here, is trying to track down a very old friend. And we believe she used to live in the flat upstairs from 1961.'

He looks at us, no expression.

'So we wondered,' Patricia goes on, 'whether you know anything about previous owners.'

The bell rings again and we all turn to see a pretty young woman coming into the shop.

'What can I get you?' the man asks.

'Hold on, you were in the middle of talking to us!' Julie says.

'Lady, this is a shop, and this,' he gestures at the young woman, whose face goes pink, 'is a customer. Customers come first.'

Even Julie doesn't have anything to say to that.

The woman's doing a cake run for her office and spends ages choosing different doughnuts and eclairs, and it makes me smile because she's so slim

she looks like she's never eaten a cake in her life. I go over to the wall, lean back against it. It smells sweet in here, like icing sugar. I remember Dot and me making a cake once, for her mother's birthday, the fine mist of icing sugar that hung in the air, that we tried to catch on our tongues.

'Do you need to sit down?' Julie asks. She looks concerned, her brow furrowed.

'You look older when you do that,' I say.

She laughs.

'That's better. I'm fine, just needed to lean for a minute.'

When the woman is gone, Julie steps up to the counter. 'Well? Can you help us at all?'

'Look, lady, I took this place over three years ago. It was a cake shop then. Before that, I haven't got a clue. I wasn't even born in 1961. Hell, my mother wasn't even born in 1961!'

'And the flat?' Julie asks. I admire her persistence.

'Flat comes with the shop. I live up there. It's a bit of a shithole, to be honest. Might not have been back then, of course.'

'Thank you,' Julie says. 'Shall we choose a cake, ladies?'

There's a slight wobble to her voice and I see that it's come to mean something to her, this search. That it's become important. I opt for a custard slice and Julie and Patricia have jam doughnuts, and we find a park with a bench nearby to eat them.

'Shame,' Patricia says. 'And he wasn't exactly helpful, was he?'

'It's such a long time,' I say. 'It's so many years. A lifetime, almost.'

'Maybe we should have just phoned, rather than coming all this way,' Julie says.

Telephone. Why didn't I think of that?

'I just had this idea,' she goes on, 'that she might still be here. Not running the shop, but tucked away upstairs, with maybe a daughter or granddaughter behind the counter. Stupid, I suppose.'

But it doesn't sound stupid to me. It doesn't sound stupid at all. I think a tiny part of me had imagined the same.



On the train home, I decide to bring up something I've been mulling over. 'Do you think Kirsty's happy?' I ask.

I may not have been tired earlier, but I am now. I feel like I could curl up and sleep here, on this grubby, carpeted seat, with the crumpled up crisp packets and squashed drinks bottles kicked into corners, the windows smudgy and flecked with dirt. The atmosphere is different on this journey home, because of the hope being sucked out of us, I suppose.

'Happy?' Patricia asks. 'What do you mean?'

'This Ben of hers, is he good to her? I just get this sense from her that something isn't right.'

Patricia sits back, thinks about it.

'Do you know, I've never met him properly. They're just next door but he's always working. I've heard him, in the garden, and I've seen him getting into his flashy car and zooming off, but we've never been introduced. I've never felt worried about her, though. And I spend a fair bit of time with her.'

Perhaps that's not it, the relationship thing. What else could it be? I remember what she said to me when we were talking about Dot, about everybody having their secrets and not being quite who you think they are. It's a puzzle, but I'm determined to piece it together.

Julie's on her telephone, scrolling through potential men for her next date.

'What about this one?' she asks, turning the telephone around.

The photo is of a middle-aged man, his hair greying, his face lined. There's no sparkle about him, nothing special.

'No,' I say. 'Not him.'

‘You seem very sure,’ Julie says, and she sounds a bit offended. ‘Do you know him or something?’

‘No, I just don’t think he’s right, that’s all. I think you’d be better off finding out when that husband of yours is going out with his friends and then getting dolled up and accidentally on purpose running into him. He’ll see how good you look and how well you’re getting on without him and hey presto, he’ll be back.’

She studies me. ‘Really? That’s what you really think I should do?’

‘Well, you’re miserable without him, aren’t you? And I know he did the dirty on you but so many men do.’

There is silence for a minute or two, all of us mulling this over.

‘Arthur was no exception,’ I add. ‘I meant to say, earlier, when you were talking about men and their cheating.’

‘Arthur cheated on you?’ Julie asks. She sounds personally affronted.

‘Three times,’ I say. ‘Three affairs, I mean. Elsie Maybrook in 1966, Sheila Turner in 1975 and Annie James in 1988.’

It’s funny how their names have stuck. And the years, too. That first time, with Elsie, we’d been married seven years and I wasn’t surprised. If anything, I was surprised he hadn’t done it sooner. I’d turned away from him in bed so many times. Still, when I found out, when Helen from work took me to one side and told me she’d seen them together, that they’d been laughing, their lips close and their hands touching, I felt sick. I’d pushed him to it, and I’d expected it, but that confirmation made it take on a different sheen. When I confronted him, he cried. Said that he was sorry, that he loved me, that he didn’t love her. Just me. And I couldn’t blame him, could I, because I knew he was telling the truth and I hadn’t done what I’d promised when we walked down the aisle, hadn’t taken his love and given him mine in return.

‘And you knew? You knew their names and everything?’ Julie sounds totally astonished.

‘Let’s just say he wasn’t a master of subtlety,’ I say.

It’s true. He left clues for me to find, stayed out late with no excuses. All three times, he wanted me to catch him. Wanted me to confront him, so he could confront me about the loneliness he felt in our marriage. And then I think of that conversation we had, after the last time. The closest we ever came to telling one another the truth. When he said he was just trying to get me to react, to show that I loved him. That he was trying to make me jealous.

‘Well, I never would have thought it of him,’ Julie says.

And it makes me smile because she never once met him. I've talked about him a fair bit, though. I suppose it's like me and her Martin. I feel I know him, too.

'I'm so sorry, Mabel,' Julie says. 'Men are bastards.'

A man sitting across the carriage from us looks up, and Julie holds his gaze until he turns away.

'One of those things,' I say, wondering whether I'll ever feel able to tell them the full story. The one I've never told anyone. Not even him. Not even myself.

We're quiet, and I know all three of us are looking back at our own pasts. The men who've been part of all that has led us here.

'Were you in love with Sarah's father?' I ask.

Patricia looks at me. 'It was such a whirlwind thing. He made me feel like I was the only woman in the world. You know the kind of thing. Flowers arriving daily, a trip to Venice for our second date.'

Julie's mouth is hanging open. 'We don't know the kind of thing at all, do we, Mabel?'

Patricia laughs, and I am surprised anew by her beauty. I also note that she didn't answer the original question.

'I've never been to Venice,' I say.

'Oh,' Patricia says, 'it's beautiful. And if you're there with someone you love, well, it's pretty damn near perfect.'

'So you did love him?' Julie asks.

'Oh yes, I loved him.'

Her eyes have changed, and I know she's back there, reliving it. And then it's like she snaps back into focus, and she's with us again.

Julie makes a sudden movement, clutching Patty's arm. 'Was he a Beatle, Patty?'

She laughs. We all do. 'No, Julie. I'm not quite that old.'

After a beat of silence, she speaks again. 'When I found out I was pregnant, I was so happy. I thought it was just the start of things for him and me, that we'd be a family. I was so young and naïve. It turned out he already had a family. A wife and two kids he'd never thought to mention.'

Julie shakes her head. I wonder whether she's thinking about her own situation, casting Patricia in the role of Estelle. Seeing that it's not always the other woman who's the villain of the piece.

'So you raised her alone?' Julie asks.

‘I did.’

‘It’s no wonder you miss her so much,’ Julie says. ‘If it was just the two of you, for all those years.’

‘Yes, all her childhood it was just the two of us. She lived at home right up until she met Mark when she was in her late twenties. And then she came back, after she had the girls and Mark walked out on them. I wasn’t sure, at first, about having little ones around all the time again, but it was wonderful. They keep you young, children, don’t they?’

Julie and I must both look a little blank, because she laughs.

‘Of course, I forget sometimes that neither of you have had them. It’s such a huge disruption, having kids in the house, but it’s like nothing else. It’s all stories and dancing, painting and running about. Nothing’s out of bounds.’

For a minute or two, I try to picture it. The way it would have been for us, Arthur and me. He wouldn’t have had those affairs, I don’t think. Perhaps it would have made me a bit... what? Lighter? More playful? I see myself, young again, with a baby in my arms. The house in disarray, toys everywhere. Then a little older, with a little girl holding my hand at the side of the road. But it’s make-believe. It’s not something I ever had, or even wanted. Going over how it might have changed things is a pointless exercise.

‘How are they getting on?’ Julie asks. Her voice is steady but there’s a catch in it, and I wonder whether she’s been delving into her own memories, seeing how things might have been in different circumstances.

‘I’m not sure,’ Patricia replies. ‘The other day, she sounded quite stressed. Said that Geoff was finding it hard to adjust to having them there. And it’s awful but, after we’d hung up, I found myself hoping that it might all go wrong, because then they’d come back.’

It’s a big admission and we let it settle. I look out of the window as we whizz through a station too fast to read the sign. I don’t know what to say to reassure her that I understand. That I, too, have hoped for awful things to happen to bring me what I want most.

Patricia gets her telephone out and finds pictures of her granddaughters to show us. They’re angelic looking, with shiny dark hair and dimples. Matching yellow sundresses.

‘That was last May. We took them to Greece.’

There’s another one, on the beach. Both girls dressed in stripy swimming costumes, the younger one wielding a bucket and spade while the older one

does a cartwheel in the background. I can feel the energy coming off them, even from this still image caught on a mobile telephone screen. I can almost hear the laughter.

It seems clear to me that these girls belong with Patricia. Not instead of their mother, of course, but as well as. She transforms when she speaks of them, and I can see more clearly the young woman she once was. The model. Confident and happy.

‘Perhaps they will come back,’ I say, and she lifts her eyes to meet mine. ‘Perhaps they’ll miss you too much to stay away.’

She looks hopeful for a moment, then changes the subject. ‘Anyway, what’s the plan with Dot? What’s the next step?’

I think again of that shop, that shabby-looking flat. It would sound silly to say so, but I feel like Dot was too big to be contained in a place like that. I can’t see how she would fit there for long.

‘She could be anywhere,’ I say.

It’s the truth. Even if she’s stayed in London all these years, she is one of almost nine million there. And if she didn’t, she could have moved anywhere, even overseas. She could be on a beach in Greece, in the background of family holiday photographs like the ones Patricia just showed us, or living quietly in rural France, or loudly in an apartment somewhere like New York or Chicago. She could be dead. What if we spent weeks or months looking and discovered she was dead? Would that be worse than not knowing?

At school, once, in Geography, we did a project in pairs. We had to choose a city we’d like to live in, anywhere in the world, and research it and present our findings to the class. Dot and I worked together, but we spent most of the time arguing over the choice of city. I wanted to go for somewhere in England and she was looking at places that were much more far-flung.

‘It’s not realistic,’ I said. ‘You’re never going to live in Nashville or Hong Kong.’

Dot shrugged, her eyes flashing as if I’d insulted her. ‘Why not?’

In the end, we wrote about Manchester.

Julie and Patricia look at one another and I see something pass between them. Perhaps they’ve discussed this, in the background. Said that if I show signs of wanting to give up, they should support that. Perhaps they haven’t believed, all along, that finding her is possible.

‘I don’t know where to look,’ I say, and I feel a tear tracking down my

cheek.

Julie reaches across and rubs my knee. 'We don't always have to know what the next step is. Sometimes we have to wait a bit for inspiration to strike. Don't lose hope.'

Hope. I'm sure Julie hasn't lost hope of getting her marriage back on track. And Patricia hasn't lost hope of her daughter returning to her. So perhaps she's right. Perhaps I need to wait a while, keep believing, and see what happens.

While I'm waiting for something to happen, I decide to poke my nose in where it's not wanted, as Arthur would have said. It's something I never would have done a few months ago, but the more I engage with the world, the more I find to be interested in and curious about. I start with Erin. I go into the supermarket and ask when she's due a break, and she says she's got ten minutes in half an hour, and if I don't mind hanging around she'll meet me on the bench opposite. I take Olly and we wait. I've brought a flask of tea. I could stay all day, if the bench wasn't quite so uncomfortable. I watch the people walking past, all of them caught up in conversation, or with headphones on or looking at their telephones. Every time someone opens the door of the café behind me, I get a waft of the smell of coffee.

Then a couple of men come to a stop right by the bench, and I hear one of them calling the other one Martin. I look across without being obvious about it. I'm invisible to these men, I know that. He's about the right age. Could I see him with Julie? Possibly.

'Come on, Mart,' the other man is saying, 'it's been ages since we had a few beers.'

'I know, I know, but I'm trying to stay in Estelle's good books...'

Estelle! That's definitely the name of the woman he left her for.

'Tell her I'm having a crisis. On Friday. Friday seems like a good day for a crisis. Tell her you're the only one who can help me. And then meet me at the Carpenters at eight, okay?'

He's walking away, confident. Martin holds a hand up in a wave.

'Hi Mabel.' It's Erin, dashing across the road between cars.

I make a mental note of the time and date that Martin will be in the pub, and then smile at Erin.

She takes a seat beside me, hands me a rustling brown paper bag. ‘Croissant,’ she says, ‘if you want one. It’s from yesterday. They put them in the staff room for a bit before throwing them away.’

‘I thought they’d go to food banks,’ I say.

Erin rolls her eyes. ‘Hannah and I are always on at Kev about that. But he says it’s dangerous. If they’re out of date and someone gets ill and it’s traced back to our shop, blah blah blah. Meanwhile he doesn’t mind his staff having them.’

‘Well, thank you,’ I say, opening the bag as if it’s a present.

I can’t remember when I last had a croissant, and I close my eyes and take a bite. It’s a tiny bit dry but still buttery and flaky and almost perfect.

‘What did you want to talk to me about?’ Erin asks, bringing me back to Broughton, to the bench, to the matter in hand. ‘Sorry to rush you, it’s just, I have ten minutes and you know what my boss is like about lateness.’

‘Right,’ I say. ‘I’ve been thinking about what you told me, about your parents. It isn’t right, someone having to hide who they are. Not now, in this day and age.’

She shifts a little uncomfortably. ‘You mean about me being gay?’

I nod. ‘Yes, that. It was unheard of when I was growing up, but now it’s everywhere, as far as I can see. Pride marches, all those people just celebrating being in love, being free. And here you are, right in the middle of all that, feeling like you can’t be yourself with your family. It’s just not right.’

‘But what can I do?’

I’ve thought about this long and hard, and I believe that what I’m about to tell her is true. I hope against hope that it is.

‘Be entirely honest with them,’ I say. ‘Don’t just allude to it or talk about other people you know. Tell them it’s you, and this is who you are. They love you, Erin, they must. And they will accept it. It’s one thing to have an issue with a concept but it’s different taking issue with someone you love.’

I push away the voice inside that asks what happens if they don’t. But she asks anyway, like I knew she would.

‘What if they don’t?’

‘I just can’t believe they won’t,’ I tell her. ‘I just have to believe that they won’t.’ I finish the croissant and fold the bag up into a small square.



She nods, her expression serious. 'I do believe they love me. But religion's a powerful thing, you know?'

'The fundamental basis of Christianity is loving people,' I say. 'Helping people. Being kind. Just think, Erin, you could do this and it could all be all right and then what? You'd be completely free.'

She looks away and I want to ask what she's thinking, but though we've come a long way from being strangers in a short time, I don't feel we're quite there yet.

'I have to get back,' she says. 'Thank you for the advice.'

'Thank you for the croissant,' I say.

And I watch her rush back across the road, between cars, not waiting for the lights to change. There's so much I want to tell her. Not to waste a second of that precious youth. To hold her family close while she has them. To go after love like it's a war and she's losing. But what would I have said, if someone had told me those things when I was her age? I try to picture it, me walking around town aimlessly with Dot, some old woman coming up to us to impart her wisdom. We would have laughed and walked away, thought nothing more of it. Because the young think they know it all already, don't they? They don't know how they'll feel later. How lonely and wistful. That's the trick of it.

\* \* \*

A few hours later, I'm back home and Julie bustles in with her usual cheery hellos. Olly lifts his head, realises it's not Kirsty come to take him for a walk, and goes back to sleep.

'I was thinking,' I say, 'it's been a long time since I had a night out.'

How true that is. For years, I was out every Friday and Saturday night. At the pictures or a couple of drinks in the pub on a Friday, dancing on Saturday. It shaped my working week. We spent Monday to Wednesday gossiping about the events of the previous weekend and Thursday and Friday planning for the coming one.

Julie's in the doorway, and she looks different. New haircut. It's all sleek and shiny.

'Out?' she asks.

'Yes, dinner or just drinks. I don't know. I thought maybe we could go

somewhere. Ask the others too, maybe. I like your hair, by the way.'

She puts a hand to it. 'Oh, thanks. Kirsty found a picture in a magazine for me to take in. I'm so pleased with it.'

'Good. So what about Friday?'

'This Friday?'

'Yes, why not? Unless you're busy painting your nails or reorganising your fridge or something.'

She laughs, throws her head back. 'Cheeky. All right then, let's do it. I'll send Patty and Kirsty a message.'

'Kirsty will be here in a bit.' Olly's head pops up again at the sound of me saying her name. 'So no need to message her. What will you wear, do you think?'

Julie sits down on the arm of the sofa, pulls out her telephone. 'What will I wear? I don't know, Mabel, does it matter?'

'Well, it's nice to look your best, isn't it? Maybe you could go shopping for something new. See what Kirsty thinks.'

'Patty's free,' she says. 'Right, what needs doing?'

Most days I think up something or other for her to do, but I know the washing basket's empty and she changed my bed yesterday. I could ask her to put the Hoover round but she's not a cleaner and I'd rather just sit and have a chat with her.

'I'd love a cup of tea,' I say. 'Make one for yourself, too.'

'I think sometimes you forget I'm here to work,' she says, disappearing into the kitchen.

I want to say that I never forget that. That I'm starting to like her more than anyone I've spent time with in years and I'm painfully aware that she's paid to be here.

There's a buzzing noise, and I try to work out what it is. 'Is that your telephone, Julie?' I call.

'No, not mine. Maybe it's yours? Hold on, I'll have a look.'

I often forget I've got a mobile telephone. I keep it in the back room, in a drawer in the sideboard, and Julie puts it on charge for me every few days. She rushes in now with it in her hands.

'For me?' I ask.

'Well, we won't know unless you answer it, will we?'

I look at the screen blankly, and she reaches out and slides her finger across the screen, then gestures for me to put it to my ear.

‘Hello? Mabel Beaumont speaking.’

‘Hello Mabel, this is Trisha Smith, I spoke with your friend Julie recently about the house your friend used to live in?’

‘Oh yes,’ I say. ‘Hello. Have you found something out?’

‘I just thought I’d mention that I’ve been in touch with an elderly gentleman in Broughton who has an interest in local history and I thought he might be useful to you. He lives on Upper Street.’

And suddenly I know the name she’s going to say before she says it. Reg Bishop.

‘Reg Bishop, his name is.’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘Yes, Reg Bishop.’

‘Oh, do you know him?’

‘No. Well, a little. From years back. I’ll get in touch.’

‘Would you like his number? He said he was happy for me to pass it on.’

Did she mention my name? Is he expecting to hear from me?

‘Yes please.’

Julie rushes in with my spiral notepad and a biro, and I write down the number Trisha reads out, and then I thank her and hang up.

‘Well?’ Julie asks, bringing our drinks in. ‘She called me this morning and I gave her your number because I thought it might be exciting for you to hear it from her directly.’

‘I know him,’ I say. ‘Knew him, I mean.’

‘This Reg Bishop?’

‘Yes.’

So strange, to have not said or heard a name for decades, and then for it to be repeated over and over, on the telephone, in your house, by your own voice.

‘Was he a friend of yours?’ she asks.

I know she’s just being friendly and interested, but it feels like she’s prodding me with a stick.

‘Not really,’ I say. And then I look out of the window and sip my tea, determined not to say another word on the matter.

It’s not until hours after she’s gone, after I’ve had my tea and have got the television on for a bit of company, that I turn and see Arthur sitting on the sofa.

‘Reg Bishop,’ I say aloud. ‘Remember him?’

Arthur doesn’t speak. He can’t, I realise. He isn’t there. And yet, I can see

him.

‘Used to call himself Reggie, didn’t he? Thought of himself as a bit of a ladies’ man. Bill liked him, but I don’t think you ever did. Even before what he said at Bill’s funeral.’

Is that sadness I can see, marring his features? I don’t think the name Reg Bishop has ever been spoken aloud in this house before today.

‘I’m going to talk to him,’ I say. ‘But it’s just about finding Dot, nothing else. I don’t want you to worry.’

I’ve turned away while I speak and when I look back over my shoulder, the sofa’s empty. What did I expect? Olly gets up and sniffs around, and I wonder for a second whether he can sense something, or whether he’s just been disturbed by me talking to myself. He comes to me and I think perhaps he’ll finally let me give him a bit of fuss, but when I reach to scratch him underneath his chin – his favourite spot, according to Arthur – he backs away.

I stare at the page on the notebook where I wrote his name and telephone number. Could he possibly know anything about Dot, about where she went? I doubt it, but I’ve been waiting for something to happen, and perhaps this is it.

‘First round’s on me,’ Kirsty says, rushing off to the bar before anyone can protest. She hasn’t even asked us what we want.

The Carpenters is busy and loud. I can almost hear Arthur asking *What did you expect?* Although I think he’d be so shocked by this turn of events – me out for drinks on a Friday night with three new friends – that I actually can’t predict what he’d say. I almost called it off when they came to collect me, almost told them to go on without me. They all look so glamorous and though I spent a long time choosing my outfit, I know I look frumpy and old beside them. Kirsty must have realised I was wobbling because she asked if I had any lipstick and painted my lips bright red, and it didn’t make me look younger but it gave me the confidence to go, somehow. And it was strange, while she was standing there, inches from my face, concentrating, the minty scent of her breath reaching my nostrils, with Julie and Patricia chatting in the background, I felt so happy to be a part of something. But now we’re here and I can’t see any tables free and I’m wondering again if this was a good idea.

We used to come here, Dot and Bill and Arthur and me. It wasn’t called The Carpenters then. It was The Boot. You wouldn’t know it was the same place. Dot and I would have a gin and tonic and make it last all evening, and the men would have two or three pints. Dot wasn’t a big fan of it, spending the evening like that. She said it felt like we were waiting to go somewhere and do something, rather than the pub being the main event. She loved dancing, that was what it was. Loved moving, chatting, walking. She found standing around in a pub boring. I look around, as if there’s a chance I’ll see

her, over there by the slot machine where there used to be a jukebox, choosing something by Elvis or Buddy Holly, grabbing hold of someone's wrists and starting to dance in the middle of the pub.

Julie marches off and then waves Patricia and me over, and she's found a little tucked away table and I'm relieved but I just hope we won't miss Martin altogether. I thought about letting Patricia or Kirsty in on the secret, but I think it will be more authentic if I'm the only one who knows. I'm good at keeping a straight face, at not letting on. I've been doing it all my life.

Kirsty arrives carrying a tray with four fancy cocktail glasses. The drinks are clear and decorated with olives. It's a long time since I've had anything other than a sherry but I decide one or two won't hurt.

'What is it?' Patricia asks.

'Gin martini,' Kirsty says, sliding the tray onto the table and unloading the glasses. 'You can't go wrong with a classic.'

'Well, cheers,' Julie says, lifting her glass. 'To friendship.'

'To friendship,' we repeat.

It makes me think about what friendship is. About Dot, about Arthur, about these women around the table with me now. It can be all kinds of things. It can save your life.

'It smells funny in here,' I say.

'Like what?' Julie asks.

I try to put my finger on it. 'Sweat and urine, mostly. Pubs just used to smell of smoke, which was bad enough, but I think this is worse.'

'Oh my god,' Julie says.

She's seen him. Her face has paled but she's looking great. That sharp new haircut and an animal-print dress Kirsty helped her choose that really shows off her curves. A slash of bright lipstick. She's a new woman. Not that there was anything wrong with the old version, but men can be so visual and stupid.

Kirsty and Patricia have swivelled around on their chairs, but of course they don't know him, so all they see is a crowd.

'It's Martin,' Julie says.

'Martin? Your Martin? Is he with her?' Kirsty asks. She makes the word 'her' sound like the worst kind of insult.

'No, he's with his mate, Jamie. Oh my god, what are the chances?'

I turn, then, and have a proper look at him. He's not bad-looking. He's just very ordinary.

‘I’m going over there,’ Julie says. ‘I can’t spend all night hiding, can I? Better to pre-empt it.’

None of us says anything, and she gets up and goes. I’m impressed with how decisive she is.

We watch them in silence, trying to be discreet. He’s clearly surprised to see her, but he gives her a hug that seems warm.

‘What do you think?’ Kirsty asks. ‘Good news or bad news?’

‘She wants him back,’ I say. ‘She’s always mooning about. And you can’t get back with someone without seeing them, can you?’

Kirsty narrows her eyes at me, as if she thinks I might have had something to do with this but she can’t quite work out what, and I just smile politely and ask if she’s ready for another drink.

By the time we have our second drinks in our hands, Julie’s back. She’s flushed and a bit giddy, as if she’s already had one too many.

‘So?’ Kirsty asks, and we put our heads in close for her to fill us in, as if he would stand a chance of hearing our conversation at the other end of a busy pub.

‘He didn’t mention her,’ Julie says. ‘But then he wouldn’t, I suppose. He offered to buy me a drink. It was all very amicable.’

‘And there’s been no talk of selling the house yet, or anything like that, has there?’ I ask.

Julie looks a bit shocked. ‘No. God, I’d hate to leave that house.’

‘Well, hopefully you won’t have to.’

‘What do you mean? Do you think...?’ She’s unable to say it, this thing she most hopes for.

‘I think you’ll be back together by Christmas,’ I say.

Patricia does a quick shake of her head, but I pretend I don’t see it. And Julie looks a bit unsure, a bit lost. I push her drink towards her and she smiles gratefully.

Time to turn my attention to Kirsty. I’m still not sure what’s happening with her but I think it’s got to be to do with the family she doesn’t see.

‘Do you have any brothers or sisters?’ I ask her.

She looks a bit shifty. ‘A sister,’ she says.

‘Oh, that’s nice, I always wanted a sister,’ I say. It’s not true. I was more than happy with Bill. ‘Do you see her much?’

‘No.’

I think she’ll go on but she doesn’t.

‘I always wanted a sister, too,’ Patricia says, and I know she found the silence awkward and had to fill it. ‘I’m an only child. What about you, Julie?’

I’m not expecting it but when I turn to Julie I see a world of pain in her eyes. She opens her mouth to speak but no words come out. Patricia is next to her, so she scoots her chair over a bit and puts an arm around Julie’s shoulder.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘I wouldn’t have asked if I’d known it was a hard topic.’

Julie waves a hand. ‘It’s okay. But I can’t talk about it.’

It’s quiet, so I speak into the silence.

‘I think you know I had a brother, Bill. He died young. Sudden. Unexplained heart condition. Funny really, that he had something wrong with his heart and it broke all of ours.’

Kirsty covers my hand with hers, and I want to ask her how she can have a sister she doesn’t bother with. Here I am, still mourning my brother after sixty-odd years, and Patricia, with no siblings. And who knows what Julie’s story is, but it’s clearly upsetting.

‘You should try again,’ I say to Kirsty. ‘What if something happened to her, your sister? You might never forgive yourself.’

‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ she says.

‘And I can’t,’ Julie adds.

‘So let’s change the subject,’ Patricia says. ‘What’s the latest on Dot, Mabel?’

By nine o’clock, I’m shattered, and Patricia must notice because she says she’s ready to go and asks if I’d like to come with her. Julie’s had four cocktails and has spent the evening flitting between our table and Martin’s, and I’m feeling pretty pleased with myself.

‘Yes, I’m ready,’ I say, and then I turn to Kirsty and Julie. ‘You two stay longer, if you want to.’

They shake their heads.

‘I’ll be up at the crack of dawn with Dotty,’ Kirsty says, standing. She yawns, as if on cue, and covers her mouth like she’s terribly embarrassed.

‘I’m just going to say goodnight to Martin,’ Julie says. ‘I’ll meet you outside.’

We stand in the cold, our coats pulled tight around us. Our breath coming out in little puffs like smoke.

‘I’ve had a lovely time,’ Kirsty says.



When I look at her, the light from above the pub door is illuminating her face, and she looks close to tears.

‘I used to go out all the time, but since Dotty, it’s hard. I don’t get much time to myself and my friends are all in London and I haven’t found it easy to meet people here. So thank you, for inviting me.’

Patricia roots in her bag and produces a small pack of tissues. ‘Those early years are hard.’

What can I say to that? I know nothing of the early years of motherhood. Just then, Julie topples out of the door with Martin in tow, and I beam.

‘All right, ladies?’ he says. ‘Shall we get you all home?’

He summons a taxi and we all get into it, and Julie tells the driver to go to each of our houses in turn. When Kirsty and Patricia are getting out, Julie calls after them.

‘Was it Rod Stewart, Patty?’

She turns, smiling. ‘Not my type.’

‘Gotcha.’

\* \* \*

I can’t sleep for hours. It must be the excitement of doing something different, being out. When I got in, Olly looked at me in disgust, like he was a parent disappointed at his child for staying out too late, and I couldn’t help but laugh. It was strange, laughing out loud in an empty house. I came straight up to bed but it’s gone midnight now and I’m still wide awake. I go back downstairs, find my list and a biro.

- ~~1. Get in touch with friends and family~~
- ~~2. Contact the funeral parlour~~
- ~~3. Go to the supermarket~~
- ~~4. Clean the house~~
5. Find D
6. Help Julie get her husband back
7. Help Patricia get her daughter back
- ~~8. Make sure Kirsty is safe~~

Number five is still ongoing, but number six looks like it might be well

underway. I daren't cross it off just yet, though. I cross out number eight and change it.

- ~~1. Get in touch with friends and family~~
- ~~2. Contact the funeral parlour~~
- ~~3. Go to the supermarket~~
- ~~4. Clean the house~~
5. Find D
6. Help Julie get her husband back
7. Help Patricia get her daughter back
8. ~~Make sure Kirsty is safe~~ Reunite Kirsty with her family

It's a lot to do. I close the notebook, put it down on my bedside table. And I lie there until gone two, scheming.

Julie's not coming until one, so I'm up early and ready as I'll ever be to visit Reg Bishop. I've seen him, over the years, around town. Never to speak to, but I knew he was still around. He's aged just as I would have expected. Carrying too much weight around his tummy, like most old men. For years he had a ridiculous comb-over but he seems to have given that up and come to terms with baldness. His house is not far from where Dot used to live, and I go past the end of her road on my way. What would she make of this?

It's bitterly cold with a freezing wind, and people have started putting their Christmas lights up. How many more Christmases will I see? Can't be more than a handful, at best. And that's probably not a bad thing, given I'll be spending any future ones alone.

I'm lost in my thoughts and almost miss Reg's house. It's a bungalow on a little cul-de-sac. Rendering that was probably once white but is looking decidedly grey. A few shrubs out the front. I take a deep breath and knock on the door, and he opens it so quickly I don't have time to ready myself.

'Mabel Mansfield,' he says.

'Oh,' I say. 'Beaumont.'

'Beaumont, of course.' Is that a sneer that flits across his features?

'I came to see you because I'm looking for a friend, and I was told you're interested in local history and might have an idea about how I could find her.'

He nods, smiles. 'You'd better come in.'

Inside, it's unbearably hot. Heating blasting out and gas fire on in the living room he ushers me into.

'Cup of tea?' he asks.

I tell him how I take it and he disappears. That must be his seat – slippers beside it and a book on the arm of the chair. I sit on the armchair opposite, after taking off my coat and cardigan.

‘You’ve made yourself at home!’ he says, making me jump. He gestures to the clothes I’ve removed and put on the arm of the chair.

‘I was a little warm,’ I say.

‘So this friend,’ he says, picking up my coat and giving it a shake before taking it into the hallway, presumably to hang up. There’s something a bit off about the way he says ‘friend’, but it’s not enough to take issue with. ‘It wouldn’t be Dot Brightmore, would it?’

I don’t look at him. ‘That’s right.’

‘I thought as much. So you lost track of her, over the years?’

‘She left town, just before Arthur and I got married. I never heard from her again.’

He lets out a whistle. ‘So that’s, what, got to be more than sixty years?’

‘Sixty-two,’ I say, still not making eye contact.

‘So why now?’

I don’t know how to answer this and I don’t feel I should have to, either. So I don’t.

‘I’ve been to her old family home, just around the corner, here. And I’ve been to an address I had for her in London, but no joy. I’m just looking for advice, or anything you might know about the family.’

He holds a finger up as if telling me to wait and goes back to the kitchen. I want to get up and walk out, hate feeling like this, like I have to acquiesce to him. I wish I’d said no to a cup of tea now. I feel all hot and itchy and like I don’t want to be inside my skin. To calm myself down, I stand and have a look around the room. There’s something strange about it but I can’t put my finger on it. It’s not the television in the corner or the wobbly-looking bookshelf. Not the oil painting of a poppy field above the sofa, or the sofa itself, old and sagging as it is.

‘I was friendly with your brother, Bill,’ he says, putting the mugs down on the coffee table without coasters. They’re too full, and mine sloshes over the top and down the side but he doesn’t make any move to clean it up. I don’t like hearing Bill’s name in his mouth, or the fact that he tagged Bill’s name on after ‘your brother’, as if I might have forgotten it.

‘I remember,’ I say.

‘I’m sure there’s a lot you remember.’

‘Look,’ I say, finding the courage to meet his gaze, ‘do you think you can help me, or not?’

He’s a bit taken aback. No doubt because the twenty-two-year-old me would never have stood up to him, but it’s not her he’s sitting in his living room with, pretending to be civil. It’s me, older and braver. I know how precious time is, now, know I don’t have a lot of it to waste. Know for sure I don’t want to spend any more of it than necessary sitting in this stuffy room with this bitter old man. And that’s when I realise what it is, about the room. There are no photographs. No wedding portrait, no kids, no grandchildren. No knick-knacks, either. It could be anyone’s living room. It could be a set.

‘I’ll see what I can do, what I can find out,’ he says. ‘Here, write your name and telephone number down for me, maybe your address, too.’

‘Thank you,’ I say, standing up and gathering my things. I do as he says, listing my contact details. My tea is still half full but I can’t stomach it.

On the doorstep, I ask him one last thing. ‘Did you ever marry?’

He looks down at the carpet. ‘No, I... well, I suppose I never met the right woman.’

I nod, and he looks up, meets my gaze.

‘Well,’ I say. ‘Goodbye, then.’

All the way home, I’m grateful for the fresh air, despite the cold and the biting wind. I let myself in at home and Olly comes over to me and growls. He’s angry that I went out without him.

‘Kirsty will be here later,’ I say, and I check he’s got plenty of food and drink in his trays.

In the half hour before Julie’s due, I make myself a sandwich and watch the end of *Top of the Morning*, listen to that Michael Silver going on about catering for a crowd at Christmas. I wish that was a problem I had. But then, perhaps it could be freeing, spending Christmas alone. No presents, no pressure. Just a day like any other, but with a few treats here and there. I’m still mulling it over when Julie arrives. She’s got that spring in her step she’s had ever since our night out.

‘How’s that husband of yours?’ I ask.

She smiles a bit dreamily. Looks like a teenager. ‘Do you know? I think we might work things out.’

The day after our drinks, she told me that he came back with her, spent the night. And since then, they’ve been out a couple of times. He’s told her it was never serious with that Estelle.

‘You can forgive him, then, for the cheating?’

Julie sits down on the arm of the sofa. ‘It’ll take time, of course. But I think so. I think it was some kind of midlife crisis.’

She’s talking about it like it’s already in the past, like they’re already back together. Good.

‘You forgave your Arthur, didn’t you? Three times, was it? I have to say, I’ll be absolutely clear that this is a one-time only thing. I don’t think I could forgive it again.’

What do I say? That I didn’t really blame Arthur for seeking love elsewhere, when he wasn’t getting any from me? It would lead to so many questions. I just smile and nod, and soon she’s up and buzzing about, getting things done.

‘Julie,’ I say, next time she comes into the room. ‘Can you think of a way I can get hold of Kirsty’s telephone for a few minutes when she comes to take Olly out?’

She frowns. ‘Why would you want to do that?’

‘It’s her birthday next week. I thought we could organise a little party for her as a surprise. I want to get the numbers of some of the friends she’s mentioned to me.’

Julie’s eyes light up. ‘Great idea! We’ll need the phone and the password, though. Let me think.’

When the knock comes, Julie hasn’t come back to me with anything, so I think it will have to wait until another day. But I’ve just opened the door when Julie appears behind me.

‘Hi Kirsty, any chance I could borrow your phone for a few minutes? I’ve run out of data and the Wi-Fi here’s a bit iffy, and I promised Mabel I’d do some work with her on the Dot search. You don’t need it while you’re out walking, do you?’

Kirsty doesn’t seem suspicious. She hands it over while Olly runs at her legs, desperate for his walk.

‘See you in a bit,’ she calls over her shoulder as she pushes the buggy down the path. ‘Password is 6082.’

Julie rubs her hands together. ‘Well, that was easy. So what are the names of these friends, then?’

‘Leave it with me,’ I say. ‘Weren’t you going to empty the bins?’

She looks a bit disappointed but goes off to the kitchen all the same. I tap in the password Kirsty told us and manage to find my way to her list of

contacts after a bit of trial and error. There's a number listed under 'Home' but it's our local area code so it's probably the house she shares with Ben rather than her parents' house. Ah, here it is. Mum. I scribble the number down on the spiral notebook. It will have to be a text message, I think. If I call her, she'll wonder why an old woman is organising her daughter's birthday party. I go to the sideboard and open the top drawer, pull out the telephone I rarely use. Go into messages. It takes me ages to type the message but I get there in the end.

Hello, this is a friend of Kirsty's. I'm putting together a party for her birthday next week and we'd love you to come.

I send it before I can change my mind. I'll think about where we can have the party later. There isn't really enough room here. Patricia's would be ideal. I haven't been but Julie says it's enormous, and it's right next door to Kirsty's house so handy for getting her there. When my telephone beeps, it makes me jump.

Hello, thanks for the invite. Are you sure she wants us there?

My stomach churns a bit at that. I don't know how long it is since they saw each other, whether they're properly estranged or just not the kind of family who live in each other's pockets. Julie puts her head in, then, brings me a cup of tea, sits down.

'Have you got what you need?' she asks, jerking her head in the direction of Kirsty's telephone.

'Yes, all sorted. Do you think Patricia would mind if we had the party at hers?'

She shrugs. 'I suppose we can only ask.'

I look at her properly for the first time since she arrived. She's got a bit of sparkle since Martin's been back on the scene, but behind it, she's still sad. I'd thought this new development would have erased that. Maybe it's just that he's not fully committed yet. He's not back. I'll wait until he is and see how she looks then.

When Kirsty returns, she asks if she can come in for a bit. She leaves the buggy on the doorstep and lifts Dotty out of it, and I take Olly off her hands.

Julie goes off to make more tea.

‘What is it?’ I ask.

She looks so serious I think for a second she’s going to tell me something awful. I think about the message I sent to her mum, wonder if it’s had some knock-on effect. But no, it can’t have done. She hasn’t had her telephone with her.

‘I’ve loved walking Olly these past few weeks,’ she says.

Ah, so she’s going to say she can’t do it any longer. It’s not the end of the world. I want to stop her from looking like she’s about to cry.

‘It’s fine,’ I say.

‘What is?’

‘If you can’t do it any more.’

‘Oh, it’s not that. I was going to say I’d love to take him, if you’re still looking for that. I’ve fallen in love with him. And I’ve talked to Ben. But I can only imagine how hard it must be to give him up.’

She has Dotty on her lap, facing her, and while she speaks, she is playing. Holding a finger up for Dotty to grab, then pulling it away. Doing little claps for Dotty to copy. Does she know she’s doing this, or is it completely automatic? Even in the middle of a conversation, she is mothering. It’s astonishing to me.

‘He’ll be better off with you,’ I say, surprised to hear my voice wobbling. ‘He’ll love being part of a family. Just... could you give me a couple of days, to get used to it?’

She makes a face at Dotty, crossing her eyes and sticking her tongue out, and the baby laughs, and then Kirsty pulls her in for a tight cuddle.

‘Of course,’ she says to me. ‘Take as long as you need.’

It’s not until she and Julie have both gone that I go back to my telephone, to Kirsty’s mum’s message. I stare at it.

Hello, thanks for the invite. Are you sure she wants us there?

I hate lying, always have. But this is for the greater good, isn’t it? Families belong together. Kirsty might be surprised at first, but she’ll thank me in the end. I’m sure of it. I type a response.

Of course. Still sorting out the details but it will be next Tuesday



afternoon. Hope you're free.

The reply comes within a minute.

We'll be there.

I wonder who 'we' is. Both parents, presumably. Maybe the sister Kirsty mentioned, too? I picture them hugging, exclaiming over Dotty, seeing what a good job Kirsty is making of motherhood. And I think, I may not have long left but at least I'm doing some good. Righting some wrongs. After all those years of thinking nothing I could do would make a difference. Would Arthur be proud of me? I'd like to think he would.

When Patricia and Julie are in the kitchen chatting one afternoon, I spot Patricia's phone lying on the arm of the sofa and when I touch it, there's no password. On a whim, I reach for it, listening out for signs of either of them coming in here, and go to her contacts. Find Sarah. I jot down the number and put the telephone back where I found it, my heart thudding. What am I doing?

'Martin's coming for Christmas,' Julie says, bustling in.

It's as if she couldn't wait another second. I turn a few pages of my notebook to hide the numbers I've just scribbled down.

'That sounds like good progress,' Patricia says.

'Is it just the two of you?' I ask.

'Yes, like always. I'm hoping he'll come over the night before so we can wake up together, but we haven't sorted out the details yet.'

I see, suddenly, the potential for her to get hurt again. It's been a little while now and he hasn't moved back in, or even mentioned it, as far as I know. What if he's stringing them both along?

'Why is he messing about?' I ask. 'Why doesn't he just move back in?'

Julie looks a bit hurt. 'It's not as simple as that, is it? We need to build the trust up again, take things slowly. We're dating. He says it's a bit like when we first met. Exciting. No arguments about whose turn it is to take the bin out.' She elbows Patricia gently. 'The answer is always his, by the way. Anyway, let's get on with the party stuff. Did you hear back from the friends you invited?'

She looks at me, expectant.

‘No,’ I say. ‘I think it will just be us.’

I get a churning feeling in my stomach every time I think about being at the party and Kirsty’s family turning up. I wish I could share the load with Julie and Patricia, get their perspective on it. But I’m worried they’d say I’ve gone too far. I’m worried they’d be right.

‘Oh, that’s a shame,’ Julie says. ‘Well, we’ll make sure it’s a lovely afternoon, won’t we?’

‘Yes, and I’ve asked some of the other mums at the playgroup,’ Patricia says.

Patricia offered her house as a venue the minute we mentioned the party, so we didn’t even have to ask her. When she asks for my notebook so she can make a list, my heart rate increases a bit. But she won’t start turning pages, I’m sure. I hand it over and she writes ‘Kirsty’s party’ in small, neat letters and underlines it twice. We talk about food and decorations. Patricia’s going to make a cake. I’m only half-listening to some of it. I’m thinking about what Patricia said, about Geoff’s ex hanging around, about how much Patricia misses those little girls. When Julie goes upstairs to change my bedsheets and Patricia takes the mugs through to the kitchen to wash up, I quickly type out a message.

Are you sure you can trust Geoff? I’d keep a close eye on him if I were you. From a well-wisher.

I send it, breath held. I know – I hope, even – this message could send the relationship into a downward spiral it will never recover from. But I don’t know Geoff. I know Patricia, and I know how much she loves her daughter and granddaughters. How much she wants them back.

‘Was that Reg Bishop any help, in the end?’ Julie says, coming back into the room. ‘What is it with you and that phone, Mabel? I didn’t see you use it once for the first few weeks I was here, and now you seem to be attached to it like a teenager.’

I put it beside me on the sofa, but I can’t help stealing glances at it every couple of minutes, trying to see whether there’s been a reply.

‘Reg Bishop was just the same as he always was. Smug and self-satisfied.’

‘Tell us how you really feel, Mabel,’ she says, laughing. ‘So what’s next, do you think?’

I say the words that I've been thinking for weeks. Ever since we started this, really. The ones I hoped never to say. The ones I'm sure she's thought about, too.

'Death records?' I suggest.

There's a silence, and Julie looks a bit sheepish.

'I actually looked into that, when we started this, and I don't think we have enough information. We don't know what her last name was, do we? I mean, assuming it didn't stay as Brightmore her whole life.'

'What if it did?' I ask.

She comes and sits down next to me, and Patricia sits on her other side.

'Can we use your iPad?' Julie asks.

I agree, and she goes to fetch it. 'Here, I'll show you.'

She goes to a website called Finding Family and logs in, and I think about the fact that she's been doing this at home, in her own time. It's humbling. I watch her type in the name, Dorothy Brightmore, select 'deceased' and do a search on the whole of the United Kingdom. There are four pages of results. Four pages of people called Dorothy Brightmore. It's astonishing to me that there was ever more than one. I prompt her to put Dot's year of birth in, and it comes down to one page. Still, there's a list. We can rule out the ones who died as children. And what are we left with? She might have died in 2002, in Lancashire, or in 2015, in Nottinghamshire, or in 1975, in Essex. That brings me up short. I never thought about her dying young. She would have been in her mid-forties then. But someone with that name died there, at that age, and it might have been her. If it wasn't, it was someone else's loved one.

'She could be any of these, or none,' I say.

Julie nods. 'And I don't know how we find out,' she says.

I don't either.

Patricia pipes up, then. 'Is there anyone else who knew her when she lived around here?'

I think about that. There's Reg Bishop, of course. Who else? I close my eyes and go back to those dance halls, that typing pool, those pubs, those tearooms. I see faces, and some of them have names attached, and some of them don't. I'll need to keep thinking, keep reaching back across the years.

'I'm not sure. I'll have a think.'

Patricia nods, and it's quiet, and I know no one wants to say that we're stuck, so I turn the conversation back to the party, and soon they're talking about music and food and I retreat a little, not physically, but in my mind.

Slip back to the past and have a wander around. There has to be someone, doesn't there? And then for the first time, I think about how it might have been if I'd had the courage to start this while Arthur was still alive. If he'd agreed to go along with it. He was always good at puzzles. Crosswords and sudoku. Jigsaws. How would he have approached it? What questions would he have asked?

'Well,' Patricia says, 'I'd better get going. Dance class tonight. Are either of you coming?'

Julie looks at me. 'Fancy it, Mabel? I could drive us.'

It would be so easy to say no. In the past, I would have done. And it's almost a reflex. But I fight against it, because I've found that when I do, good things sometimes happen. And I've found, too, that sometimes I genuinely enjoy doing something other than sitting at home.

'Yes,' I say. 'Yes. Why not?'

I persuade Julie to stay and have her tea with me. There's no point in her going home for an hour or two and then coming back to pick me up. And she's got no plans with Martin. She makes us cheese and tomato toasties with salad and we eat them sitting in the front room, laughing when the hot cheese oozes out of the sides.

When we're in the car on the way to the class, I see Erin out of my window. She's walking in our direction, looking glum.

'Can you pull over?' I ask Julie.

She frowns, looks in the rear-view mirror. Pulls into the curb. I press the button to make my window go down.

'Hello, Erin,' I call. 'Where are you off to?'

She jumps a bit. Then bends down and sees me. 'Just finished work. No plans. What about you?'

'We're on our way to a dance class in Overbury. Would you like to come?'

I'm not sure what it is that makes me ask her. It might be that she's always on her own when I see her, that I have this idea of her being lonely. She considers it, her head tilted slightly to one side.

'All right,' she says, and she opens the back door and clambers in.

'Are you sure you don't mind?' She directs this question at Julie.

'I don't mind at all, love. I'm Julie.'

'Erin.'

'It's nice to meet you. Any friend of Mabel's and all that.'

She pulls back out and we're on our way. Simple as that. Why did I always make things so hard? Saying no. Never asking anyone anything in case they misinterpreted it. Sometimes, people say yes and things just work and it feels easy and good.

Patricia welcomes Erin like she's known her for years. At the class, she pairs her with me.

'What do I do?' Erin asks.

We're facing one another, and I'm looking up at her because she's taller than me, or perhaps it's just that she still stands straight and tall while I'm stooped, and I put my hands out to show her the hold.

'Patricia will tell us what we need to do, but I find sometimes it helps to just let the music guide me.'

She looks unsure. 'I've never done anything like this before.'

She dips her head, and then Patricia's voice is calling out instructions and we're dancing, or something like it. We're clumsy together, stepping on each other's toes and turning in opposite directions when we're supposed to be moving as one. She can't stop laughing, and I find myself smiling too. I look down at our feet, mine in black leather flats and hers in scuffed white trainers. The skin of her hand feels impossibly smooth against mine. Everything I have behind me this girl has ahead. The thought of it makes me feel giddy.

When the music stops, Erin continues to laugh. There are tears on her cheeks.

'Are you quite all right?' I whisper.

It takes her a while to compose herself enough to speak. 'I'm so glad I came.'

And then the music starts again and Patricia's looking at us a bit like we're naughty schoolchildren so I don't get a chance to ask her why until the end of the class.

'It's Hannah,' she says, when I do.

'Hannah?'

'The girl I like at work. We've been seeing each other but while I thought it was serious, she thought it was fine to sleep with some guy from her school at the same time. We had a huge row and I was on my way home to lie on my bed listening to angry music when I saw you.'

There's mirth in her expression but I can see in her eyes that she's hurt. 'I'm sorry,' I say.

'Sorry? But you turned my whole day around, bringing me here.'

‘About Hannah, I mean. You deserve better.’

She nods. ‘I do.’

I’m glad she knows. I didn’t, at her age. I decide bringing up talking to her family again would be a bit much, on top of the heartache. I’ll keep my eye on her. I’ll add it to the list when I get home.

- ~~1. Get in touch with friends and family~~
- ~~2. Contact the funeral parlour~~
- ~~3. Go to the supermarket~~
- ~~4. Clean the house~~
5. Find D
6. Help Julie get her husband back
7. Help Patricia get her daughter back
8. ~~Make sure Kirsty is safe~~ Reunite Kirsty with her family
9. Keep an eye on Erin

Mid December is a terrible time to have a birthday. I should know. Kirsty shares hers with Arthur, though I haven't mentioned that to the others. I wouldn't want them to be fussing over me, checking I'm all right, when it's her day.

And I am all right. If I didn't have them, if I wasn't spending today at Kirsty's party, I would probably be moping around a bit. Thinking about his past birthdays. He wasn't a big fan of material things, didn't collect anything or really have hobbies that required particular clothes or equipment. We tended to have a day out to celebrate. A pub lunch and a wander around a different town. That was the sort of thing he liked. Pottering. Finding a market or a nicely kept park with pretty flowerbeds or a river to walk alongside. Of course, it was always cold and often wet, the days at their shortest, but he said he liked the way the Christmas lights looked as it went dark in the late afternoon, and he said there was no one he would rather spend his birthday with than me. He was quite romantic, sometimes, especially if he'd had a drink or two with his ploughman's.

'You're miles away,' Julie says. 'What are you thinking about?'

We're on Patricia's doorstep, Julie's car loaded with food, wrapped presents in our hands.

'Nothing,' I say. 'Just that Patricia must have a good weedkiller for these paths. I must ask her what she uses.'

Inside, it looks like a party shop exploded. Patricia's made something she's calling a balloon arch and there's a tasteful happy birthday banner hanging above the windows in the living room. Everything's in



complementing pastel colours.

‘I’m making a playlist,’ she says, and she looks the closest to flustered I’ve ever seen her. ‘Tell me all your favourite party songs and I’ll add them.’

‘Before everyone gets here,’ Julie says, ‘I’ve got something to tell you.’

Patricia and I actually lean in.

‘It’s Martin, he’s moving back in.’ She looks from Patricia to me and back again, to gauge our reactions.

‘That’s wonderful!’ Patricia says, pulling Julie to her for a hug.

I’m pleased, too, but I don’t know how to tell her. ‘I hope you’ll set some ground rules,’ I say, and then I wish I could take it back, because that wasn’t what I meant to say at all.

‘Oh Mabel, I know you’re just worried about me getting hurt, but could you just be happy for me this once?’

She doesn’t wait for me to answer. She goes out to start bringing the food in and I station myself in the kitchen to make everyone a cup of tea. When I’m sure they’re both occupied, I slip my telephone out of my handbag and have another look at the last message I received from Kirsty’s mum.

Looking forward to the party. We’ll be there by three.

I check my watch. It’s quarter to two, and Kirsty will be here soon. Patricia’s invited her over for a piece of cake, since her birthday’s fallen on a weekday and Ben is at work. There’s no turning back now. The churning in my stomach has increased – I couldn’t even face my breakfast this morning – but it won’t be long, now, until I can pat myself on the back for a job well done.

The doorbell goes a few times. It’s all mums from the playgroup Kirsty goes to, and soon the house is full of young women and their babies. The whole place takes on the scent of baby lotion and milk. And then we all shuffle into the living room and go quiet while Patricia lets Kirsty in. She stands in the doorway with Dotty on her hip and one hand covering her mouth as we shout ‘Surprise!’ I’ve never been to one of these before. Plenty of parties, but no surprise ones. There’s a genuine thrill to those moments of anticipation, and then to seeing the person’s reaction. Kirsty’s crying now, and Patricia’s taken Dotty, who’s got her hands over her ears because she doesn’t like loud noises. Kirsty’s hugging everyone, and Patricia’s put the music on, but quietly, and I keep checking my watch because I know I won’t

settle until the final surprise has been revealed.

‘Mabel!’ Kirsty shrieks, throwing her arms around me. ‘You’re all so secretive! Thank you so much, you’re too good to me.’

‘You’re welcome,’ I say, my voice a bit croaky. ‘It’s nothing, really.’

She gives my arm a gentle nudge. ‘It is not nothing! No one has ever done anything like this for me.’

Not even your family? I want to say. And then it crashes in; the thought I’ve been trying to keep out. What if they’re awful people? What if there’s a good reason why she doesn’t see them? What if this was a terrible mistake? But it’s too late. I’ve set the wheels in motion. And now all I can do is watch it play out in front of me.

I sit down on the sofa and keep my eyes on Kirsty. She’s having a glass of prosecco, chatting, moving from group to group. Patricia’s looking after Dotty so she can enjoy herself unencumbered. When it’s almost three o’clock, I feel like I’ve got a lead stone in my stomach, and I hear Arthur’s voice. *What have you done, Mabel?* But then the doorbell goes and Julie leaves the room to get it and when she returns, she’s got Kirsty’s parents in tow and a puzzled look on her face.

They’re not what I imagined, these people. They look out of place in Patricia’s house. The man is tall, thin, and stooped, the woman short and plump, like they’re a cartoon couple, each the opposite of the other. You can tell by the uncomfortable way they’re standing that they’ve made an effort with their clothes, but nothing they’re wearing is really working. She’s clutching a present, I see. A small box, probably jewellery. I move my eyes from them to Kirsty. I want to clock her reaction when she sees them. And then Julie says her name, loud enough to be heard over the music, and she looks up and her face falls spectacularly, and she’s on her feet, going over to where they’re standing in the doorway.

I follow them out of the room on the pretence of needing a glass of water. Kirsty’s ushering them into the kitchen, and I stand back, in the hallway, listening in.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asks, her voice screechy, as if it’s taking everything she has to keep it under control.

‘Your friend invited us,’ her mum says. Her voice and the way she’s hanging her head show her disappointment. ‘She said you knew about it.’

‘Do I look like someone who knew about it?’

‘I’ve brought you something,’ her mum says, and there is silence. I

imagine her handing over the box, Kirsty opening it.

I'm just starting to wonder whether her dad speaks at all when he finally does. 'Kirsty, you have to understand. We've barely seen you for years and out of the blue we get this message asking us to come here. We thought you'd maybe changed your mind, about wanting to see us.'

'I don't know who sent that message,' Kirsty says.

I step into the room. It hasn't gone as I imagined, this reunion, but I'm not going to shy away from taking responsibility.

'I sent it,' I say.

Kirsty looks over at me, shock in her eyes. 'You, Mabel? But why?'

They're all looking at me, this family that somehow doesn't quite fit together. I can just about see the resemblance between Kirsty and her mum, in profile.

'I thought it was what you wanted,' I say, stumbling over my words.

'Why? If I wanted this, I would have asked them here myself, wouldn't I?'

She's got a point. 'I thought perhaps there'd been an argument and you were all too stubborn to make the first move. Families belong together. I was just trying to give you a nudge in the right direction.'

And then two things happen. First, Patricia sweeps into the room with Dotty in her arms. If she notices the tension, she ignores it.

'I think this one needs a feed, Kirsty,' she says, handing Dotty over.

Kirsty's mum's hand flies to her mouth. 'So this is...? You've had...? This is our granddaughter?'

Patricia looks from face to face. Kirsty's, her parents', mine. She can't quite piece it together, and no wonder.

'This is Dotty,' Kirsty says, and there are tears in her voice. 'Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go and feed her.'

She leaves the room, and I think Patricia's about to follow her out, so I reach for her arm and still her. I can't be left to face it all alone.

'You're Kirsty's parents?' Patricia asks. 'Can I get you a drink?'

'A cup of tea would be lovely,' Kirsty's mum says, and her dad nods his agreement. 'Two sugars, both of us, and milk. By the way, I'm Sandy and this is Tony.'

I can still hear the music from the living room but there's no party atmosphere in the kitchen, where Sandy, Tony, Patricia and I are sitting around the table, cups of tea in front of us and our faces grim. Patricia's taken

the news of my involvement in all this in her stride, and she's playing a sort of moderator role, trying to get to the bottom of things.

'I knew you weren't close,' she says, 'but I never asked why. You don't, do you? People's lives are complicated.'

'It's me,' Tony says. 'I'm her stepdad, and she's never accepted me. Or my daughter, Lou.'

I remember Kirsty saying she had a sister.

Patricia grimaces. 'It just doesn't sound like her, to turn her back on her family like that. It doesn't sound like the Kirsty we know, does it, Mabel?'

A thought crowds in: how well do we know her, really?

'I thought maybe there'd been a falling out over Ben,' I say. 'That you and him didn't get on, or something like that.'

'We've never met him,' Sandy says. 'We've never been to their house. Didn't even know there was a baby.'

She collapses in tears and I watch as Patricia reaches a hand out and covers Sandy's hand with her own. She's so good like that, offering comfort to anyone and everyone. Is it an American thing? I'm not sure I could.

Then the second thing happens. Julie's in the kitchen doorway, giving us all a bit of a funny look, no doubt wondering who Sandy and Tony are and why we've all left the party.

'There are some people here for you, Patty,' she says.

Patricia looks at me as if she's asking whether I know anything about this. I don't know whether she thinks I can just conjure people up out of thin air. But there's a smile playing at the corner of Julie's lips, so I'm guessing it's someone Patricia will be pleased to see.

She goes out into the hallway, and then I hear a shriek and the thud of bodies slamming into one another. I get up to follow her, and see that she has a small girl attached to each leg, and a middle-aged woman in her arms. Ah, I think. Sarah.

'I'm sorry I didn't call,' Sarah's saying, 'I didn't realise you'd be so... busy. I've left him, Mum. Can we come back?'

I'm standing on Kirsty's doorstep with Olly at my side, hoping she'll be glad to see him even if I'm still in her bad books. When she comes to the door, I see that she looks tired. It's no wonder, of course, with a young baby, but I've never noticed it before. And that's when I realise she's not wearing makeup, and it's the first time I've seen her like this, and she looks just as beautiful, but vulnerable, too.

'What do you want, Mabel?' she asks.

I notice her look down at Olly and then force herself to look back up at me. She doesn't want to soften.

'I've come to say I'm sorry.'

Arthur used to say I was the worst person when it came to apologising. In the early years of our marriage, it caused a few arguments, but once he'd accepted that's just how I was, he used to be able to laugh it off. He had his shortcomings, too, after all. Once, I accidentally put his best white shirt in a dark wash and it came out looking grey. Money was tight, then, so we couldn't afford to just replace it. We stood at either side of the kitchen, him clutching it tight, me thinking it would be a pig to iron when he'd finished screwing it up with his fists.

'Why can't you just admit you did something wrong and say sorry?' he asked.

'It was a mistake! Anyone can make a mistake!'

'Yes, but if I made a mistake and it affected you, I would apologise.'

I never did. Why was I so stubborn, then? My instinct with this was to wait for it all to blow over, but Julie made it pretty clear she thought I owed

Kirsty an apology, and when I really thought about it, the idea wasn't quite so abhorrent as it used to be.

'Why did you do it?' Kirsty asks.

She hasn't asked me to go in and I'm cold on the doorstep, the wind bitter.

'I thought I knew best. I thought that whatever was keeping you apart was probably trivial and that you just needed a push in the right direction.'

She shakes her head. 'I was doing okay,' she says. 'I was doing all right without them.'

There's pain in her eyes, the kind I'm more used to seeing in Julie's. What would Julie do? She wouldn't shy away from the difficult stuff. She'd talk it through, until it was sorted, or closer to being sorted.

'Do you want to talk about it?' I ask.

She sighs, and I know she wants to tell me to sod off but she can't quite bring herself to do it.

'Come in,' she says.

'Olly too?'

'Yes, Olly too.'

We go in and I slip my shoes off. She has this bright, airy hallway that you could fit my front room in. There's framed art on the walls, which look like they've been freshly painted this morning. There's just a hint of grey to them, and it makes me think again of Arthur's shirt. If it happened now, I'd probably be doing him a favour. Everything's grey these days.

'Dotty's having a nap,' she says. 'Come through.' I follow her into an enormous room that's part kitchen, part dining room and part living room. There's a sofa at one end, and that's where she leads me.

It's funny, years ago people would boast about how many rooms their house had and now it seems people like to have as few walls and doors as possible. How do you ever heat a space like this?

'Does it get cold in here?' I ask.

'No. Underfloor heating.'

Well, I never. I sit down and Olly settles at my feet and when Kirsty sits beside me, she leans across and gives him a bit of a fuss, and that's when I know she's not going to hold a grudge.

'I thought I'd bring him to you,' I say. 'If you're ready to take him.'

'Oh, thank you.' Her eyes fill with tears.

She really loves him. I do, too, I suppose, but he'll be better off here. A

child to play with and two adults to take him on walks. And it's not as if I won't see him.

'I'll come and visit him now and again, if that's all right.'

'Of course it's all right.'

I could go, leave it on a positive note like that. But if I did, we'd have to go back to this business with her family another time. It's not just going to go away.

'Do you want to talk about what happened with your family?' I ask.

She thinks about that.

'Families are so complicated, don't you think?' she asks.

Mine wasn't, not really. Not when all four of us were alive. After Bill died, things were never the same, never right, but up until then, it was plain sailing. Or is that just how I remember it now, all these years later?

'They can be, I suppose.'

She shifts around a bit, like she's getting herself settled.

'I adored my dad,' she says. 'Like, totally idolised him. He was always chasing me around the house on all fours or helping me climb trees or something. Very physical. And then suddenly he didn't do any of that any more, and he often spent the morning in bed. Stopped working. And nobody told me he was ill, and I know they were trying to protect me but it just meant I thought he didn't want to spend time with me any more. And when he died, it came as such a shock to me. It was months before I fully understood that he wasn't coming back. When Mum met Tony, it just felt way too soon, to me. It was less than a year after he died. I wasn't ready, and she kept asking if I'd like to call him Dad and it felt like the worst kind of betrayal.'

'How old were you?' I ask.

'Seven, when he died. Probably eight when Tony came on the scene. And he had this daughter, Lou, who was a couple of years older than me. His wife had died, too, so they were both single parents. I can understand, now, that they took comfort from each other, but at the time, I was so angry. It felt like Mum was choosing him over me, and over Dad. Plus he wasn't very nice to me, never wanted to get involved with anything I was doing. I've just... never really been able to forgive them for it.'

'So once you were grown up, you cut them out of your life?'

'There was never a conscious decision to do that. But while Lou lived with them until she was in her early twenties, I went to university and never moved back. I'd see them now and again, but Tony and I just don't see eye to

eye on a lot of things and every time I'd see them, it was like Mum had moved slightly more towards his way of thinking. We just didn't seem to have much in common. When I met Ben and we decided to start a family, I wanted it to be a fresh start, and not to drag my existing family problems into it. Me and Mum and Tony and Lou never felt like a family, to me. It just didn't work.'

I think of my marriage, then. Is that how she would have seen us, too? Just not working? Maybe I'm wrong about all this, and what Kirsty did is actually the braver thing, the more honourable thing? Maybe it's sometimes better to cut ties.

There's a cry and it makes me jump, and I see Kirsty reach for a white plastic device on the floor beside the sofa.

'Monitor,' she says, holding it up. 'I'll go and get her.'

While she's gone, I get up to stretch my legs. The kitchen's got an industrial look to it, with lots of stainless steel that you'd think would be terrible for fingerprints but there's not a single mark on it. I wonder whether Kirsty spends hours cleaning or whether they have someone come in to do that for them. Arthur suggested we do that, once we retired. He thought we could stretch to it. But I said having a cleaner wasn't for people like us. What would we do, when she was there? I felt like she'd judge me. I'm not above cleaning my own toilet.

Kirsty reappears. She's holding a sleepy-looking Dotty, who has creases on her reddened skin.

'Hello, Dotty,' I say, taking one of her fingers and doing an approximation of a handshake with it.

She pulls away, nestles into Kirsty's neck.

'She's still half asleep,' Kirsty says.

I think about what I know of Kirsty, the way I've seen her mother Dotty. If I'd found out all of this about her family first, I would perhaps have thought her uncaring, but I can't, because I've seen the way the love oozes out of her when she is with her daughter. Is it possible that some families just aren't right together? Could it be that way for Erin? I wonder whether she's had that talk with her parents yet, whether they've accepted her.

'I should go,' I say.

'Thanks for listening,' she says. 'And thank you for Olly. Shall I give you a bit of space to say goodbye?'

I nod, and she disappears with Dotty into another part of the house. I go



over to the sofa where we were sitting. Olly's climbed up and curled in a ball. I sit beside him, lean in. Soft snores. It's good to know he feels so at home here already. I put a hand on his back and he shifts slightly in his sleep, so I try a stroke of his head, but then he opens his eyes and gives me a warning look. It's a look I'm so familiar with, but today it makes me feel heavy and sad.

'You're going to live here now,' I say to him. 'Kirsty's going to look after you, and you'll have Dotty to play with. Be gentle, all right?'

I don't say I'll miss him. Or that I love him. He'll know, won't he? I get up and go to the door, slip my feet into my shoes.

'I'm going,' I call out to Kirsty, and for the first time I realise she'll have no reason to come round now. Will I only see her in passing, on the street or in the supermarket, from now on?

'Just doing Dotty's nappy, are you okay to let yourself out?' she calls from whichever room she's in.

'Fine.'

'I'll take good care of him, Mabel.'

I know it's true, and I'm glad she doesn't come out into the hallway because I'm a mess. I call a goodbye, my voice on the edge of breaking. He's just a dog, I repeat to myself. Just a dog. But it's as if he's the last link to Arthur. And he's been with me, these past few months. We've been through it together. It's funny, though, I would never have said I felt that close to him. But now I've cut that tie, sent him off to live a better life, and I wonder what it will mean for mine.

With Olly gone, I find I'm often waiting for Julie to arrive. The fact that Arthur anticipated my need for company like this surprises me anew every time I think of it. If the shoe had been on the other foot, it wouldn't have struck me as my job to look after him from beyond the grave. But when Arthur decided to look after me on the day of Bill's funeral, he took it seriously. It was a lifelong promise, for him. Longer than life, even.

I still see him in the house. Standing in the kitchen, leaning back against the counter with his arms folded across his chest as if he's about to ask me what I fancy for tea. Lying next to me in bed, silent and still, but not like he was on the day I found him. More like he was on every day that preceded that. Quietly there. Sitting on the sofa, his trousers hitched up and his white socks showing. It's as if he's waiting. And sometimes I don't see him but think I can smell him, as if he's just walked through the room. Is he wanting to see that I follow his instructions: Find D? I won't know, I suppose, until I track Dot down. If he keeps appearing then, what will it mean? That that wasn't what Find D meant after all? Or that he'll always be here, like this? Or that it's just my old brain playing tricks? It's not a frightening thing, coming up against him in these small rooms we shared for so many years. It's comforting, actually. It's like a slow goodbye.

I hear Julie's key scrape in the lock and prepare myself for the energy she brings.

'Morning, Mabel,' she calls from the hallway.

There's something different in her tone, though I think she's trying to sound like normal. I wait for her to pop her head around the door, and when

she does, she looks a bit tired and deflated.

‘Has he left you again?’ I ask.

I’m not sure why I say it. I’m aiming for light humour but I see straight away I’ve missed the mark.

‘Why would you ask that?’

‘You just don’t look like yourself, that’s all.’

She stands there unwinding her scarf, removing her gloves, finger by finger. ‘It’s bitter out there,’ she says.

I’ve no intention of verifying that until much later. It’s tempting to spend these short days inside by the gas fire, now I don’t have Olly to think about, but I do feel better for having a walk in the afternoons.

‘So,’ I say, ‘is there something? You look tired.’

She laughs, but it’s not her usual raucous laugh, the one that makes people turn to look at her in the street. It’s a constrained laugh, and that is somehow more worrying than tears would be.

‘I didn’t have a good night, that’s all.’

‘So things are okay with Martin?’

She pauses for a moment before answering. ‘Things are fine.’

I don’t believe her, but I won’t press her right now. The truth is, nothing’s really been fine since Kirsty’s birthday party. I thought I’d cracked it – Julie with Martin back at home, Patricia with Sarah and her grandchildren. Clearly reuniting Kirsty with her family hadn’t gone to plan, but overall I’d been pretty proud of myself. Not bad for an eighty-six-year-old, I’d thought, engineering that little lot. It had given me hope of getting to the bottom of Dot’s whereabouts. And I’d heard Arthur’s voice in my head, then, saying that it was never too late and that everyone could make a difference. Something he’d said a lot, and that I’d always ignored.

But getting Julie’s marriage back on track hasn’t had the effect on her that I expected. Of course, I didn’t know her before. But where I’d thought she would seem carefree and happy, she still looks like someone weighed down with lead.

And Patricia’s disappeared, pretty much, which I suppose isn’t much of a surprise. She’s gone back to the busy life she had before, helping look after her granddaughters. Park trips and swimming and endless games of hide and seek. She hasn’t got much time for us, where before she had oceans of it. How silly of me, to overlook that.

And Kirsty. Well, she doesn’t need to call in here, now Olly lives with

her, and she hasn't. The fact that we've talked things over – my reasons for inviting her parents, her reason for leaving them behind – doesn't mean we've found common ground, or a resolution.

When Julie brings me a cup of tea, I find myself asking a question I hadn't expected to. 'Shall we go to Patricia's dance class tonight?'

She pulls a face. 'Can't. I've promised Martin we can get a curry and watch a film.'

I nod, trying not to show I'm disappointed. Because I've been foolish, haven't I? It was when these women were alone, like me, that they had time to spend doing things with me. And now things are different, and they don't have the time they did before. I tried to make them happy and I've done myself out of their friendship in the process. There's only one thing for it, as far as I can see. I'll have to throw myself back into the search for Dot, because then I'll have something of my own to concentrate on. I'll have something that's taking up my time and energy. I'll be the one to say I can't, because I'm busy. If anyone asks, that is.

After Julie's gone and I'm trying to get into a book I'm not particularly enjoying, Reg Bishop calls. I'm still not used to my mobile telephone ringing and it makes me jump, and then I find it and look at the screen and see his name, and I don't want to answer but I know I have to.

'Mabel,' he says. 'It's Reg Bishop.'

Even his voice irritates me, and I want to say I know who it is because he saw me putting his number into my telephone, but I don't.

'Hello, Reg.'

'I'm calling with regards to the little challenge you set me.'

I wish he'd just get on with it, but I see he's going to make me play his little game, so I do. 'Oh yes?'

'Yes. I've had a poke around and I think I've found someone who might be useful to you. Her name is Catherine Emmett, née Milton, and she used to live next door to the Brightmores here in Broughton and says she kept in touch with the family for many years.'

It takes me a minute or so to place her, but then I do. Little Cathy Milton. Three years younger than us and always trying to join in with our games. I remember her with a skipping rope and a runny nose, her pink dress grass stained.

'Is she still in Broughton?' I ask.

'Overbury.'

‘Could you give me her telephone number, or her address?’

He pauses. ‘I thought I could take you round there. Are you free tomorrow morning?’

Why is he involving himself like this? Is it some kind of power trip for him, or does he just have nothing better to do with his time? I need to stay on his good side, since he’s the only person who’s had any useful information so far, and going with him will at least save me getting the bus. So as much as it’s not what I want, I agree.

I decide to go for my walk, clear my head. I’ll get the last bit of daylight. I wrap myself up as if I’m going on an Arctic mission, but when I get outside I realise it’s milder than I expected. The wind must have dropped since this morning. It’s just grey and a bit damp.

I’m passing the little playground near the graveyard when I hear my name. When I turn, there’s Patricia, pushing one of her granddaughters on a swing while the other one sits on one end of the seesaw, trying to push up off the ground. I go over to the green metal fence.

‘Long time no see,’ she says, cheerily. ‘It’s been so crazy ever since these two descended.’

She looks tired, and I hope her daughter isn’t taking advantage of her good nature.

‘You mustn’t do too much,’ I say.

She looks puzzled. ‘Oh, you know me. I like keeping busy. And my girls certainly keep me busy, don’t you?’

The littlest one, the one on the swing, breaks into a grin as Patricia grabs the swing, holds it for a few seconds and then lets it go again.

‘Nanny’s happy, but Mummy’s sad.’

I’m not sure, at first, who said that, but then I see that the other girl has got off the seesaw and ambled over.

‘Why is Mummy sad?’ I ask.

‘Because of Geoff. He calls her every day to say sorry.’

I look from the girl’s solemn face to Patricia’s flushed one.

‘I’m not entirely sure what went on between them,’ Patricia says, looking at me. ‘They’re on the phone now. That’s why we came out for a bit of fresh air.’

‘And because I needed to show you that I can do the monkey bars,’ the older girl says.

She goes over to the climbing frame, clambers up some steps and then

she's hanging from a set of shiny metal bars, swinging from one to the next with ease, her stripy leggings bright against the lifeless day. One of her shoes falls off and her sister, still on the swing, starts laughing uncontrollably, and the older girl drops down and hops around a bit before picking the shoe up and hopping over to the bench to put it back on. All the time, Patricia is beaming, and I try to put myself in her shoes. A grandmother. Full of love for these small, irrepressible people, proud of their achievements and delighted to spend time with them. I can see it, of course I can. I'm not heartless, not a monster. I only hoped she might still have some time for me.

'Would you like to come for a cup of tea one afternoon?' I ask. 'Perhaps when Julie's there?'

'Yes, I'd like that,' she says, but she doesn't suggest a day and I feel like it wouldn't be right to push, so I say goodbye and walk away, and when I'm almost out of earshot I hear her laugh and even though I know it's probably a result of something one of the girls has said or done, I can't help but feel like maybe she's laughing at me. Old, and alone, and thinking we were friends.

The final stretch before home is like walking into the sunset and it hits me that I haven't gone outside to see it for weeks. And that realisation makes me feel removed from Arthur. He rarely missed one, liked to see the colours in the sky and say goodbye to the day. It was something we did together, when we could. He'd take hold of my hand and we'd watch it in silence.

Once, a couple of years ago in spring, when we'd seen the most spectacular display of pinks and reds and it had seemed ridiculous that there were people inside their houses, not watching, he'd said this: 'I wouldn't choose any other life, Mabel. You and me, and Olly, and the sunset. That's me content.'

It's later, after I've eaten my tea, when I remember another one, a sunset that looked like someone had painted it. Dot and Bill were walking ahead, on the way to the dance hall, and I saw him reach for her hand. Arthur was beside me, mostly quiet. And then he spoke.

'Who could ever be fed up of a world like this one?'

I turned to look at him, and a few strands of hair got caught in my lipstick, obscuring my view. He gestured at the sky, swept his arm from side to side.

'That view,' he said. 'I could look at it forever.'

I thought it was romantic. I put it in the mental list I was keeping, of reasons to be with Arthur Beaumont, if he asked me. And something came

over me, something that was almost certainly affection but felt more like love.

‘Let’s,’ I said. It was quiet, but he heard it.

I'm ready half an hour before Reg is due to come, and by the time he knocks his sharp rat-a-tat on the door, I've packed and unpacked my handbag three times. I've got everything I need. All the usual things like my purse and keys, plus my spiral notebook and pen in case Cathy has information I need to write down. I open the door with my coat on and buttoned up, hoping that will make it clear I'm not inviting him to come inside.

'Ah, Mabel, you're all ready. Shall we, then?'

He holds out an arm and gestures to the shiny red Honda parked on the street. It's one of those cars with ideas above its station, high up so it's hard to get into and space in the back for lots of kids or sports equipment or suitcases. What's Reg Bishop doing with a car like that? I don't need his arm to guide me the ten or so steps to the car, so I don't take it.

'Where does she live?' I ask when we're both seated, seatbelt clicked into place. The car smells of synthetic air freshener, and I spot one of those tree things hanging from the rear-view mirror. Like his house, Reg's car is unbearably warm, and I immediately wish I'd carried my coat rather than putting it on.

'You know those old terraced houses behind the Red Lion?' he asks. 'She's in one of them.'

'On her own, or...'

'Widowed,' he says.

I can't imagine Cathy Milton as an adult, let alone one old enough to be widowed. It's funny, how you age and watch those around you aging, but if you come across someone you haven't seen for decades, you struggle to



imagine them having done the same.

It only takes us ten minutes or so to get to Overbury but I'm desperate to get out of the stuffy car, and it almost kills me to stay quiet through Reg's three attempts to do a parallel park outside her house.

Cathy Milton is expecting us. I see her curtain twitch while the parking business is going on, and she opens the door before we've even had a chance to knock.

'Catherine!' Reg Bishop greets her like they're old friends, rushing up the path to kiss her on both cheeks. She looks a little alarmed and I warm to her immediately.

'Hello, Cathy,' I say.

She wrinkles her nose a tiny bit. 'I go by Catherine these days.'

As she ushers us inside and asks what we'd like to drink, I try to see the child I knew in this old woman's face, and it is there, just about. But I wouldn't have known her, if I'd met her on the street. Is it the same with me? Have I come so far from who I was that I'm barely recognisable? Cathy's home is warm and welcoming, cluttered with photos and bits and pieces that look like they're souvenirs from holidays or things young children might have made. Probably grandchildren. It smells faintly of baking, as if she whipped up a batch of scones after breakfast. If she did, she doesn't offer us one. There's a Christmas tree in the corner of the room and it's full of mismatched, homemade decorations.

'You have a lovely home here,' Reg says, taking the mug she indicates from the tray she brings in with one hand and helping himself to a biscuit with the other.

'Thank you, we've been here for over thirty years.'

I spot the 'we' and I'm sure Reg does too, but neither of us says anything. For a short while, there's no sound in the room besides the sipping of tea. Or slurping, in Reg's case.

'So,' I say, keen to get things moving in the right direction. 'I believe Reg has told you I'm hoping to find Dot Brightmore, and he says you stayed in touch with the family for a long time.'

Cathy nods. 'I did, yes. And it's Dot Black.'

I feel a jolt of something. This is new information, and she seems sure of it, too.

'Dot got married?' I ask stupidly.

'She did. In 1962. To a Thomas Black.'

‘And you’re sure about that?’

She looks a bit affronted. ‘I was at the wedding.’

I want to ask her to tell me all about it, what Dot’s dress and flowers were like, where it was held and, most importantly, about her groom – this Thomas Black. Whether he was kind, and good, and worthy of her. But I can’t see Reg being keen to sit through that.

‘Was she living in London, then, do you know?’

Cathy sits back and puts a finger to the side of her lips. Thinking.

‘The wedding was near here. Trenton. But I think they were living in London, yes.’

Dot got married in Trenton, five miles from here, and I didn’t know about it. Didn’t get an invitation. It’s so much to take in.

‘Do you know whether she’s still alive?’ I ask.

Because at the heart of it, that’s what I need to know. Is this entire search, which I’ve put so much into, and which has brought me joy and companionship and disappointment, in vain? Are we looking for a woman who’s been buried or cremated? I wince at the thought. And that’s when I realise that I don’t hold a grudge against her for not replying to my letters, or for not inviting me to her wedding. She would have had her reasons. I knew Dot. Really knew her. She wasn’t the type to just turn away from a friendship without looking back.

Cathy shakes her head. ‘I don’t, I’m afraid. You see, it was my mother and her mother who were close. Always in and out of each other’s houses, they were. After Dot left, the Brightmores lived in that house for another twenty years. But then they retired, Dot’s parents, and they went to live near the sea. Somewhere in Hampshire. His lifelong dream, apparently. They got a boat. And still, our mothers kept in touch. My parents went down there to see them a handful of times, and they came back for visits, too. I used to always hear about what Dot and her brother Charles were up to. But then my mother took ill and died, quite quickly, and I think I heard that Dot’s mother died fairly soon after that. The men didn’t keep up with one another – they don’t, do they? So that was that.’

I look across at Reg, who’s looking a bit affronted at the suggestion that men don’t keep in touch with old friends, and then back to Cathy.

‘When was that?’ I ask. ‘When did your mother die?’

‘In 1998,’ she says, with no hesitation.

‘So Dot was alive and well up to that point, as far as you know?’

‘Oh yes. She didn’t stay in London, mind, not after her and Thomas had children. They moved out to somewhere in Hampshire to be near her parents. Portsmouth, maybe.’

I want to shake her, to ask her to think and be sure. After all those dead ends, I’m finally getting somewhere. But I’m dependent on Cathy Milton to progress. Who would have thought, all those years ago, when Dot and I were playing with our dolls and Cathy was whining and asking to join in, that we would be in this position now? There’s something else to process, too. She said they had children.

‘How many children did she have?’ I ask.

‘Two. Both boys. John and William, I think they were called.’

‘And is there anything else you can tell me? Anything that might help me find her?’

There’s a note of pleading in my voice, because it feels like I’ve learned so much, and in a way, I have. I know that Dot got married, what her married name was, and that she had two children. I know she moved out of London and that she was alive twenty-five years ago. But does any of that bring me closer to finding her now? I’m not sure whether it does or not.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t think so,’ she says.

But she offers me her telephone number, and I take it, and give her mine.

‘We weren’t always kind to you, when we were children,’ I say.

She dips her head, as if it hasn’t occurred to her.

‘Thank you for your help,’ I say.

I stand, and she stands, and then we both look over at Reg, who’s finishing off his tea. He makes an indecipherable grumbling noise and then he gets up and we go to leave.

At the door, Cathy has a question for me. ‘Why are you looking for her, now, after all these years? I know how close the two of you were but I assumed you’d had a big falling out when you weren’t at the wedding.’

It’s a difficult one to answer. I take my time, put my shoes back on.

‘I don’t know why she went,’ I say, ‘or why she didn’t stay in touch. And now, I probably don’t have all that long, and I’d like to get to the bottom of it, if I can.’

Cathy nods.

‘She was my best friend,’ I add. And I’m not sure why.

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Yes. I remember. And I know she was lost, after your brother died...’

‘We all were.’ Still are, I want to add.

‘You can never really know anyone fully, can you?’ she asks.

It reminds me of what the vicar said about Arthur, in those days after his death, and I didn’t know how to answer it then, but I think perhaps I do now.

‘No,’ I say. ‘No, you can’t.’

‘Well, I’ll be in touch if I think of anything,’ she says.

Back in Reg’s shiny car, he turns to me. ‘One step closer.’

And then he reaches across and puts his left hand on my right knee, his sausage fingers giving it a squeeze, and I’m so shocked I’m slow to react and he’s taken it away before I can insist that he does just that.

I don’t speak a single word on the drive back to my house, and when he pulls up outside, I’ve got the door open before he’s put the handbrake on.

‘Slow down, Mabel! Look, I know it’s disappointing that Catherine couldn’t lead you straight to Dot, couldn’t confirm whether she’s... still with us, but I really think she helped, don’t you?’

But I’m out of the car and walking up the path to my front door. He gets out too, and I’m fiddling with my key when I hear his door slam shut.

‘Mabel, have I done something to upset you?’

I turn around and he’s right behind me. ‘Don’t ever put your hand on me again.’

He laughs and holds both hands up. ‘Come on, it’s hardly as if I was making a pass at you. We’re a bit old for all that, aren’t we? It was nothing, Mabel. Just reassurance.’

‘We’re not friends, Reg. We were never friends, and it’s no different now, just because we’re old. I don’t need you to drive me places and I certainly don’t need you to touch me.’

As I say those last words, I see Julie rounding the corner.

‘What’s happening, Mabel? Are you all right?’

Reg starts to back away, but Julie has to come past him and she gives him a sharp look.

‘You try to do someone a favour...’ he says.

‘I want you to go,’ I say.

‘You heard her,’ Julie says.

So he goes. And once he’s pulled away, Julie puts her arms around me and it’s only then I realise I’m feeling a bit shaky.

‘What did he do to you?’ Julie whispers it into my hair, and I feel so safe like that, with her, and it’s all I can do not to start weeping.

'It's nothing,' I say.

'It didn't sound like nothing to me. Come on, let's get you inside and get the kettle on.'

And it's just what I need. I let her lead me into my home and get me settled. And then she sits and listens while I tell her all about my dealings with Reg Bishop, both recent and in the past.

When I wake up on Christmas morning, Arthur's lying next to me.

'Happy Christmas, Arthur,' I say, just like I have for the past sixty-two years.

I desperately need to empty my bladder, but I know when I do, he'll go, so I hold on as long as I can. Think about other Christmases.

'Do you remember the year we were short on cash and decided not to give each other presents?' I ask aloud. 'You'd gone out at the last minute on Christmas Eve and bought me some Quality Street, said you couldn't bear to give me nothing at all, and I was so cross with you because I'd stuck to the rule we'd made together and ended up looking like the mean one. We didn't really speak for half the day, but it was forgotten by dinnertime and then we shared the chocolates on the sofa in front of a James Bond film.'

It's no good, I have to go. When I return, the bed is empty, just as I knew it would be.

I go downstairs and make a pot of tea, tell myself it's just like any other day. Because it is, isn't it? It's just a date. Julie helped me put the artificial tree up a week or so ago. I wasn't going to bother but she asked if I had one and I admitted I did. She went up in the loft for it. That was always Arthur's job. We used to get a real one, years ago, because there's nothing quite like the smell of them, but when Arthur suggested getting 'one of those fake things' a few years back, I went along with it. Yesterday, when Julie was leaving, after she'd checked three or four times that I'd be all right today without her calling in, she put a big gift bag under the tree and said I wasn't to look in it until this morning. So I take my tea through to the front room and

bring the bag over to my armchair.

There are three presents inside, all wrapped nicely with bows and ribbons and things. Neatly labelled. One from Julie, one from Kirsty, one from Patricia. I pushed cards through their letterboxes but I didn't think about presents and now I feel awful. Perhaps they took pity on me, what with it being my first Christmas on my own. I open Patricia's first, and it's a beautiful blue cardigan, the softest wool I've ever felt, and when I check the label, I gasp out loud because it's cashmere. I hold it up to my cheek. This would have cost a fortune. I know she's got money, but why would she spend it on me? I'm a bit taken aback, and I finish my tea before opening the others. Kirsty's is a calendar and matching diary with a dog that looks just like Olly on the cover. So thoughtful. And Julie's, well, at first I'm not sure what it is. It's a necklace, that much is obvious. But there are small silver discs with letters stamped on them and I can't work out what they spell. M-A-B-D. I'll have to ask her next time she's here. I'll have to ask her to put it on for me, too. The clasp is a bit fiddly.

I'm a little overwhelmed, sitting there with the torn wrapping around me. I felt like these women were slipping away, but perhaps it's just a period of adjustment. These gifts show that they still care.

I've bought myself a selection of tiny Danish pastries for breakfast, because I've been hankering after another croissant since Erin brought me one, so I set up a plate and get myself an orange juice, and I sit at the dining table and savour every bite. But after they've all gone, I feel a bit desperate. It feels like there are too many hours stretching ahead and nothing to fill them. I've got so used to having Julie here for a couple of hours each day – she often calls in at the weekend, too, so I rarely have a full day on my own, and if I do I make sure I get out and go to the shops and at least see some people. But nothing's open, of course. I feel a panic start to rise in me and give myself a stern talking to. I put the television on, something I never usually do this early, and try to lose myself in a kids' film.

Next thing I know, there's a knock at the door. I check my watch. Quarter past eleven. I must have dozed off. Who would be here, now, on Christmas Day? I get up, rub my back and make my way to the front door, all the time wondering who could possibly be standing on the other side of it. If it's Julie, breaking up her cosy Christmas with Martin to check on me, I'll be cross with her. But it's not. It's Erin. And she looks small, and her face is streaked with tears.

‘I’m so sorry to turn up on Christmas Day,’ she says.

‘It’s all right, it doesn’t matter,’ I say. ‘Do you want to come in?’

She nods and steps inside, slips her shoes off. Looks even smaller, then. I lead her into the front room. She’s never been here before, and for a second I can’t work out how she knew where I lived, but then I remember the evening we went to Patricia’s dancing class, Julie dropping me off first and Erin waving from the car.

‘Can I get you something?’ I ask, remembering my manners. ‘A tea or coffee?’

‘Just water, please,’ she says. ‘I can get it, if you point me in the right direction.’

‘I’ll do it,’ I say. ‘You sit down.’

I bring her water and find some biscuits in a cupboard. It doesn’t feel very festive, but I haven’t got anything else, really.

‘Has something happened?’ I ask, once she’s settled.

She sips at her water, her eyes big. ‘I couldn’t stay there,’ she says, her voice catching. She reaches for a biscuit, and I wonder what I’m going to feed her if she ends up staying here all day.

‘My sister’s boyfriend was over. They’ve got a baby together and they were joking about if he turned out to be gay, and my mum was so horrified. I just couldn’t be there.’

I shake my head. How can they not see, these people, what they’re doing to her? How can they be so blind?

‘Did you say anything? Do they know why you left?’

‘I just said I was going out for some fresh air, but I’m not going back.’

I must look a bit panicked, because she speaks again.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll find somewhere to go, I just, I didn’t know who I could call on Christmas Day and I was wandering around, and then I spotted your house and I thought perhaps you wouldn’t mind.’

‘I don’t,’ I say. ‘I don’t mind.’

I don’t tell her that she’s brightened up my day no end, that I was wondering how I was going to get through it without any company. Because my saving grace is her disaster. She’s hurt and she needs comfort.

‘You can stay here,’ I say. ‘There’s a spare room. It’s nothing fancy, but it’s somewhere you can come, anytime you can’t be at home.’

She looks up at me through thick, wet lashes. ‘Thank you.’

‘The only thing is, I don’t know what I can feed you. Today, I mean,



while the shops are closed. Julie bought me one of those roast dinners for one. I don't have much else in.'

She waves a hand. 'Don't worry about me.'

When she goes to the bathroom to wash her face, I think about what I can do to take her mind off her hurt. I consult with Arthur, silently. What would he have said, or done, if a teenager had turned up on the doorstep on Christmas Day? I almost laugh. There's just no way it would have happened. In strange and mysterious ways, my life has opened up since his death. I never could have expected it.

We can't sit in front of the television all day. And that's when I think of it. A game. Arthur and I went through phases. We'd go months playing Scrabble every day, then we'd get fed up with it and put it away. And a couple of weeks later, Arthur would suggest a game of cribbage or bridge, and we'd be onto that for a while. I open the sideboard and look inside. Backgammon, Scrabble, a couple of packs of cards, and three or four thousand-piece jigsaws.

'What are you doing?' Erin asks.

I hadn't heard her on the stairs and she makes me jump.

'I thought maybe we could play a game. Take your mind off things.'

I'm bending over to look, but she crouches down, like it's nothing. I remember when my body moved easily like that. When nothing was too difficult, physically. When my heart was open and uncracked.

'Scrabble?' she suggests. 'I haven't played for years.'

We set it up on the dining table, and Erin roots through the kitchen cupboards and manages to find some hot chocolate. Lord knows how long it's been there, but I don't think things like that really go off, so she makes us both one, and it feels cosy. Less like two people thrown together on the one day of the year you're really supposed to be with family, and more like something planned.

'What are we like?' I ask. 'I don't have any family and you, well...'

'I can't spend a full day with mine.'

'Yes.'

It's a sorry state of affairs, my family all in the graveyard and me missing them terribly, and hers alive and well and causing her great pain.

I watch her looking at her tiles, rearranging them. A little hesitantly, she reaches out, plays the word 'brother'. A seven-letter word, on her first go. I'll never recover from it. But it doesn't matter, because there's a smile playing at

the corners of her lips, and it's the first one I've seen today.

'What are your plans?' I ask her, laying out my own letters. I use the 'r' of 'brother' to make 'reads'. 'Longer-term, I mean, after your A levels.'

'University,' she says.

What might my life have been like, if going to university had been as normal when I was her age as it is now? What would I have studied, and what would I have done with the qualification? At school, I was always good at history. Could remember dates and facts, and enjoyed seeing how different parts of the past slotted together, what impacted what, like a line of dominos. I try to imagine myself in a classroom, or a library or museum, or leading tourists around a place of interest. I might have been good at one or other of those things, but I'll never know. Erin has everything open to her, doors flung wide. I'm a little envious, but I try to push that to one side.

'Art is the only thing I've ever been good at.'

'Seems to me that you're pretty good at Scrabble,' I say, as she lays down the word 'ankle' with the 'k' on a triple letter tile.

She giggles. 'I want to work at a gallery, curating. I mean, eventually.'

'Not making your own art?'

'It just seems like too big a dream. It's so hard to make it.'

I sit back, take a sip of my hot chocolate, watching her all the while. She's looking at her letters, concentrating, a little hunched. I wish she could see what I can see. A young woman who could take on anything, and win. Who could do whatever she chooses. She's right at the start, and nothing is closed off.

'I'd advise against limiting your dreams at this early stage,' I say. 'There'll be plenty of time for that later on. Now, you should be aiming for the biggest thing you can think of.'

She looks up at me and for a minute neither of us says anything.

'Love,' she says, a hairline crack in her voice. 'That's the biggest dream. Then art.'

I nod, because I understand. I do. All those career paths I didn't and couldn't have taken, none of them would have led me anywhere as wonderful as love.

'Go for both,' I say. 'Always both. Then later, if you have to, you can start making compromises or choosing between them. But right now, reach for everything.'

She's really looking at me, and I don't know but I hope it's a

conversation that will stay with her, that she'll think of long after I've gone, when she's built herself a life and it's more or less what she wanted. I hope she won't settle for less than she deserves.

We've finished Scrabble, with Erin having beaten me by over one hundred points, and I'm starting to feel a little hungry when I see Kirsty walking down the street with Olly. I knock on the window and wave, and she waves back. A few seconds later, there's a knock on the door.

'I'll get it,' Erin offers.

I hear them making their introductions in the hallway.

'I had to get out of the house,' Kirsty says, coming into the front room. 'Hello Mabel, happy Christmas, I hope you got my gift?'

The energy in the room has changed with her arrival, and I look beyond her for Olly, waiting to see if he'll greet me. He doesn't. Just sniffs around a bit, as if he's trying to remember why he knows this house.

'I did, thank you. I don't know how you found a dog that looks so much like Olly.'

Kirsty laughs, doubles over, her perfect hair falling forward.

'Mabel, that is Olly! We had a little photoshoot, didn't we, Oliver? And then I had his photos put on all sorts – mugs, calendars, a tea towel. Ben was delighted.' She stoops, picks up Olly's front paws and gives him a sort of awkward cuddle. He's made her happy, I think. And her him. His fur looks almost shiny with health.

I reach for the diary and calendar she bought me, flick through. And sure enough, there are photos of Olly against different backgrounds and wearing silly outfits. For October, there's a ghost Olly. For June, a sunflower.

'This is one of the nicest presents I've ever had,' I say.

And Kirsty laughs again, puts a hand over mine.

‘So what happened at home?’ I ask.

Kirsty rolls her eyes. ‘Ben’s family,’ she says, then turns to Erin to clarify. ‘That’s my other half. They’re all there, both his brothers and their tedious girlfriends. One’s a vegan and the other one doesn’t like roast potatoes, so it was all “Would you mind doing some mash, Kirsty?” and “Have you got any kind of milk substitute, Kirsty?” Ben and his dad were busy getting drunk and his mum was overstimulating Dotty, refusing to let me put her down for a nap, while I was in the kitchen running around like a headless chicken – or turkey, maybe – and then Ben’s brother came in and said what did we have for dessert that didn’t involve cream and I’d just had enough.’

‘What did you do?’ Erin asks.

‘I just left. If I’d stayed, I would have put cream in all of their shoes or cut the arms off their coats or something. The turkey was done and I just told Ben to serve it, said I was taking Olly out and I wasn’t hungry and not to expect me back any time soon.’

There’s silence for a minute, and then she starts laughing, and I look up and see Erin’s laughing too, and I let go of something inside me and join in. It feels good, feels freeing.

‘I abandoned my family Christmas, too,’ Erin says.

And it’s kind of her, it’s an offering.

‘Why?’ Kirsty asks.

‘Homophobia,’ Erin says, simply, and the laughter is gone from the room as quickly as it came.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ Kirsty says. ‘And you’re...’

‘Gay. Yes.’

‘Shit.’

‘Luckily, Mabel took me in with open arms and a Scrabble board.’

‘Oh, I’m rubbish at Scrabble. Have you eaten?’

‘No,’ I say. ‘I have a roast dinner for one and not much else in the fridge. And the shops are closed,’ I add, unnecessarily.

Kirsty wrinkles her nose and then her face lights up.

‘I’ll go back to mine,’ she says. ‘They always have a post-lunch walk and there was enough there to feed about fifty. I’ll bring it here.’

So that’s how we come to be sitting around my dining table, the three of us, with turkey and roast potatoes and stuffing and all the trimmings. She’s even brought us a couple of bottles of prosecco, and a Christmas pudding for

afters.

‘I was dreading this day,’ I say, lifting my glass.

‘Me too,’ Kirsty says.

‘And me,’ Erin says.

‘Why do we do it to ourselves? All that stress and worry, over one day?’

‘It’s so stupid,’ Kirsty says. ‘I spent all morning in the kitchen, didn’t see my daughter at all, and it’s her first Christmas.’

She looks a bit tearful at that, and I know she’ll go home soon, make it up with Ben and put her baby to bed. But that’s all right. That’s what she should do. And in the meantime, she’s here, and she’s turned my day around.

‘At least you’re getting to enjoy the food you cooked,’ Erin says. ‘Which is incredible, by the way.’

Kirsty reddens a little. ‘This, just here, not this morning, this is the best Christmas I’ve had in ages,’ she says.

And I hope Arthur isn’t looking down on me right now, because I agree with her.

When the telephone rings, I go into the front room to answer it.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello, Mabel, it’s Julie. Happy Christmas.’

‘Oh, happy Christmas, Julie.’

‘I just wanted to check in on you, make sure you’re all right on your...’

She breaks off, and I know she’s heard the raucous laughter in the background.

‘Have you got the TV on, Mabel?’

‘No, it’s... I’ve got some visitors.’

‘Who?’

‘Erin, my friend from the supermarket who came to Patricia’s class that time, and Kirsty.’

‘I’m coming over,’ she says, and hangs up.

The others laugh when I relay the conversation to them.

‘Is she coming over because she’s cross with us or because she doesn’t want to miss out?’ Kirsty asks.

I shrug. I suspect the latter. Though I’m hoping that doesn’t mean that her Christmas with Martin hasn’t gone well. She’s on the doorstep ten minutes later.

‘Martin’s asleep on the sofa, and I’d worked my way through most of a tub of Celebrations. It sounded like there was much more fun to be had over

here,' she says, going through to the front room where Erin and Kirsty are giggling about something to do with shoes that I lost track of a good ten minutes ago. She's huffy, Julie. Like we've deliberately left her out.

'Olly's back,' Julie says, reaching down to stroke him. He growls.

'No, he's not back, he's just visiting, with Kirsty,' I say. 'Sit down. Do you want a glass of prosecco?'

'Prosecco, is it? Are you allowed to mix alcohol with your medication?'

'It's Christmas Day,' I say. 'And I've only had one. These two have had a bit more than that, as you can probably see.'

Kirsty's grinning, more relaxed and happy than I've ever seen her. And the worry that surrounded Erin when she arrived has disappeared, at least temporarily. Now I just need to get Julie to calm down. I go to the kitchen and she follows.

'Is something wrong?' I ask.

She sighs, deep and loud. 'It's Martin. I wanted today to be really special but it's like we've slipped straight back into our old roles. Which basically means me doing all the cooking and clearing up and him snoring on the sofa. I thought we'd have learned something, from being apart. But instead we're just pretending he never left me for someone else and going back to our old ways. And I've realised, while he's been gone, that I wasn't that happy with them.'

I pour her a drink and pass it to her, watching the tiny bubbles make their way to the top of the glass and then burst.

'You have to tell him,' I say.

I'm a fine one to talk, all those years I wanted to tell Arthur how I really felt. All those years with the words stuck in my throat. And now, him dead, and me still not being totally honest.

'I don't know what to say.'

'Tell him what you just told me. Tell him the truth.'

She nods, looks glum.

'You're not going to do that, are you?'

'I'm scared to,' she says. 'I'm scared he'll just leave again, if I make it too much like hard work.'

I don't know what to say to that. We go back through to the front room and I sit in my armchair and Julie squeezes onto the sofa with Kirsty and Erin. I get out the box with her present inside and turn to her.

'Thank you for this, but I'm not sure what it says.'

Julie takes it from me. Holds out the letters one at a time. 'M for Mabel, A for Arthur, B for Bill, D for Dot.'

Of course. How could I not see it? I take it back and look at it. 'Thank you, that's wonderful.'

She comes behind me and helps me put it on. And then her mobile telephone rings and she looks at the screen and says it's Patricia.

'Happy Christmas, Patty. Oh, okay. Yes, of course. The thing is, I'm at Mabel's. Kirsty's here too, and Erin. Long story. Do you want to come?' She looks at me for approval and I nod, though I'm starting to feel a bit exhausted by it. I think back to this morning, when I wasn't sure how I was going to manage the whole day on my own, and remember to be thankful for all this company. 'Yes, all right, Patty, we'll see you in a few minutes.'

We all turn to look at her, waiting for her to fill us in before Patricia arrives.

'Huge row with her daughter,' she says, using her hands to demonstrate exactly how big a row she's talking about. 'About this Geoff character. Sarah thinks Patty had something to do with them breaking up, or something.'

I think about the text message I sent, think about my mobile telephone, shut away in a drawer. No one would think to look at it, would they? Julie gets up to open the door when Patricia arrives, and Erin and Kirsty both slide to the floor, as if by mutual agreement, so she has somewhere to sit down.

'We could bring a couple of chairs in from the back room,' I say, but Erin says she's fine on the floor, and Kirsty seems happy enough.

'Well,' I say, 'this isn't the day I expected at all.'

'Tell us about your happiest Christmas,' Julie says, her eyes a bit glazed. Has the prosecco softened her up already?

I search back through my memories, through the years Arthur and I spent alone, and the ones we spent with our parents, earlier on. There are some that stand out, like the year it snowed on Christmas Day and Arthur and I walked around the town as the snow fell and all the lights twinkled and we felt like we were in a fairy tale, or the one when he said he'd take care of the dinner and forgot to turn the oven on, so we ended up eating a plate of vegetables and then had turkey sandwiches for days afterwards. But I reach back further, to my adolescence, my childhood.

'I was eight or nine,' I say. 'My dad had just come back from the war. I barely knew him but I could see how happy Mother was to have him back. She'd managed to scrape enough food together for a Christmas dinner,



somehow or other, and Bill bought me a copy of *Little Women*. I felt like the luckiest girl in the world. My family, back together. It was like magic.'

I'm back there for a few moments, and when I return to the present, I realise they're all silent.

'We don't know we're born, do we?' Julie asks.

I shake my head. It isn't that. Every generation has their own struggles, their own hardships. We didn't have much back then, materially speaking, but there was a lot less to worry about, too. The world wasn't complicated the way it is now. But I don't have the words for all this, so I don't say anything.

It's only about an hour that we're all there together like that. Soon enough, Martin's messaging Julie to find out where she's got to.

'Probably hungry again,' she says, rolling her eyes. But she gets herself ready to go all the same.

'I should face the music, too,' Kirsty says, getting up from the floor and stretching.

'And me.' Patricia hasn't said much about the argument, but I know she'll be devastated that something has ruined her Christmas with those girls, and I know I'm at least partially responsible for that. I thought once they were back, everything would work itself out, but perhaps that was naïve.

It's just Erin and me left, and we start another game of Scrabble, but neither of our hearts are in it, and before we've finished I tell her I need to go to bed.

She packs the game away neatly, asks if I'm sure it's all right for her to stay.

'I'd be offended if you didn't, at this stage,' I say.

We go upstairs and I get her a towel from the airing cupboard and a new toothbrush from under the sink.

'I don't suppose you want one of my nighties, do you?'

'I'll sleep in my underwear. Decide what I'm going to do tomorrow.'

She comes towards me and puts her arms around me, tight, and I'm not expecting it, so it takes my breath.

'Thank you, Mabel,' she says.

And then she pulls away and goes into the spare room, leaving me standing on the landing, still warm from the heat of her body.

A few days later, Julie's on my sofa, scrolling on her telephone. 'Why did she have to marry someone called Black?' she asks. 'There are hundreds of Dorothy Blacks. What did you say her husband was called?'

'Thomas,' I say.

She doesn't even bother to check. We both know there'll be pages and pages of results for Thomas Black.

'And their children?'

I think back to the conversation I had with Cathy. For a minute, I think I might need to get my spiral notebook, but then I remember.

'John and William.'

It's only then that I realise. William. Bill. Did she name her son after her first love? And if she did, did her husband know? I feel tears prick at my eyes at the thought of Bill living on like that, in a way. If it was a tribute, it was a beautiful one.

'What is it?' Julie asks.

'Nothing. I was just... remembering something.'

I make up a couple of jobs for Julie to do, and when she's upstairs I settle in my armchair and try to picture Dot at the heart of a family. Perhaps cooking while her two boys played outside, or else helping them with their homework, or watching her husband teach one of them to kick a ball. Can I see it? I can, I think. The more I try, the more I can.

I wonder what Arthur and I were doing the day she was walking down the aisle. Whether it was a day that we went for a walk or out for lunch, or a day spent pottering in the garden. A small, silly part of me feels like I should have

known. That wherever I was and whatever I was doing when she was saying 'I do', I should have felt it. But that's ridiculous, and I won't give the thought space to grow.

'Do you think we should give up?' I ask.

Julie looks over at me as if I've suggested something utterly ludicrous, like learning to water ski or jumping out of an aeroplane. 'Give up? No, Mabel. We're not giving up.'

'But you said there were hundreds of Dorothy Blacks.'

'Yes, I did. And that means it's not going to be easy, but it doesn't mean we give up. A lot of things aren't easy, Mabel. You're surely old enough to know that.'

I am. In my experience, very little is easy. But some days, I think about what it might be like if I'd never started this. If I just concentrated on these new friendships that have sprung up, the new lease of life these women have given me, instead of seeking out the woman who brought me to life back then. Things change, over the years, and it's possible that Dot isn't the woman I knew, now. Can't I just delight in these women I have around me, right now? Why isn't that enough?

*You know why*, I tell myself.

A door opens upstairs and Julie puts a hand on her heart. 'Is someone here?'

'Yes, Erin's here.'

'Oh. Does she... live here now?'

I don't know how to answer that. Erin appears, in fleecy checked pyjamas, and waves good morning to us both before going to the kitchen to make tea.

'She's staying here,' I say. 'I'm not sure how long for.'

'And do her family know where she is?'

'They do,' Erin says, poking her head around the door. 'Can I get either of you a cup of tea or coffee?'

'Tea please,' I say. 'And Julie will have one too. She's ready for a break.'

'I've only been here twenty minutes!'

'Still.'

Julie does this kind of whisper talking to me in the front room while Erin makes the drinks.

'I just want to be sure she's not taking advantage of you, that's all.'

'She isn't,' I say. I don't raise my voice but I'm firm, all the same.

‘I mean, you haven’t known her for very long.’

‘I haven’t known you for very long either.’

She doesn’t know what to say to that, and then Erin appears again with the drinks.

‘Look,’ she says, putting one mug down on the windowsill for me and the other on the coffee table for Julie. She’s got the strength just right, like she always does. ‘I know you’re concerned about Mabel, that you’re being a good friend to her. I haven’t moved in. I just needed to be away from my parents for a while and Mabel was kind enough to offer me a room. I won’t be staying much longer.’

Hearing it is like a punch. It’s only been a few days but I’ve got so used to having someone in the house again. She’s a late riser, so we don’t have breakfast together, but she often brings me a cup of tea and has a chat. She tells me about what she’s been doing at school, about her plans for university. Sometimes she draws me, just sitting in my armchair watching the world outside. And even when she’s up in her room, listening to music or messing about on her telephone, it’s just reassuring to know there’s someone here. I haven’t admitted it to myself, but I’ve been hoping she’ll stay.

‘You’re planning to go home?’ I ask, trying to keep my voice level.

‘I’ve got to, haven’t I?’ she asks.

No, I think. You don’t have to live with those people who don’t love you for who you are. You can stay here, with me, and I will. But I can’t say that out loud. Like Julie says, I haven’t known her very long.

‘How have they reacted to your leaving?’ Julie asks.

Erin shrugs. ‘I don’t think they get it. They think I’m hormonal and overly dramatic. They never look at themselves and wonder whether they’re doing anything wrong.’

‘That’s people for you,’ I say, and Julie and Erin both turn to me. ‘I mean, people are so bad at recognising flaws in themselves, in general, aren’t they?’

‘Maybe so,’ Erin says.

We sit quietly for a minute.

‘Any big plans for New Year’s Eve?’ Julie asks.

I wait for Erin to respond. I’ve been wanting to ask her this, because I’d quite like to spend the evening with her, and I wanted to give her some money and ask her to get a few fireworks for us. I’ve always liked the drama of them, the spectacle, but Olly was terrified, so it’s been a few years since I saw any up close. But I’m sure she’ll have other plans.

‘I think a few of us from school are going to the Carpenters,’ Erin says. She doesn’t sound very enthused.

‘What about you?’ I ask her. ‘Plans with Martin?’

She pulls a face. ‘He’s seeing his mate, Jamie. Says it’s been booked in for months.’

Does she believe this? Is there a part of her that thinks maybe he’s seeing that woman, that Estelle, and this whole Jamie story is just a cover up? I don’t want to suggest it, because if she trusts him, that’s fair enough.

‘So you’ll be on your own?’ I ask.

‘Oh, yes, but it’s never been a big favourite of mine, New Year. I’ll probably be tucked up in bed with a cup of cocoa by ten thirty.’

I want to ask her to come here, but I feel foolish, suddenly. Have I made these friendships into more than they are? Am I at risk of being that pushy old lady who won’t leave them alone? I stay quiet, think of her and me in our separate houses, both spending the last evening of the year alone, and it seems a shame. A silence settles, a comfortable one.

‘Well, I’d better get dressed,’ Erin says, after a while. She clears the mugs, takes them through to the kitchen.

‘You don’t have to worry about her,’ I say to Julie, once Erin’s padded upstairs. ‘I mean, about me. She’s a sweet girl. She’s just a bit lost, that’s all.’

‘It’s kind of you to take her in,’ Julie says. ‘Just make sure you’re looking out for yourself as well as her, that’s all I ask.’

And then she gets up and busies herself again, and I’m left with my thoughts. Would this situation with Erin have come about if Arthur was still alive? I can’t picture it, her coming here to stay with both of us. But then, I can’t imagine having met her back then, either. I remember that first meeting, me sneaking that jar of piccalilli into my bag, the lack of judgement in her eyes when I looked up and saw that she was watching me. The old Mabel would never have done that. So who exactly is this new Mabel? A woman who steals, who makes friends with teenagers, who interferes in the lives of her new friends in a bid to make them happy? Is she someone I’m proud to be? Not quite. But she’s on the way, I think. She’s getting closer.

There’s a sharp rap on the door and Julie calls out that she’ll get it, so I don’t get up from my chair.

‘Come in,’ I hear her saying. ‘Are you all right? No, you were right to look for me here. What’s happened?’

They come into the room and I know it’s Patricia without even looking

round, because I can smell that perfume she wears, like sunshine and beaches. She's in tears.

'She's so angry,' she says. 'She's convinced I did something.'

'Did what?' Julie asks.

They must be talking about Sarah.

'She got this text, warning her that Geoff had some other woman. That's what made her come back here. But now they've been talking and he swears it's not true, and she says she doesn't want to believe I'd do this but she can't think of anyone else who would have a motive. A motive! Like she's investigating a crime.'

'But that's ridiculous,' Julie says. 'You'd never do anything like that.'

'That's just it,' Patricia says. 'I was desperate to have them back. I didn't do it, but perhaps I *would* have done something like it, if I'd thought of it.'

'That's not the point. You didn't do it, and she's accusing you of it, and she needs setting straight. Do you want me to talk to her?' Julie asks.

I imagine Julie wading in, and I know I can't allow that to happen.

'I sent that message,' I say.

They both turn to look at me, and it's as if they've forgotten I'm even there.

'You, Mabel?' Patricia asks. 'But why on earth would you do something like that?'

I look down at the carpet, because I can't stand the expression on Julie's face. Deep disappointment. Disbelief.

'I wanted you to be happy,' I say, a little hesitant. 'I wanted to help. You've helped me so much, both of you, and I wanted to do something in return.'

'But surely you must have seen that this would backfire, that it would all come out,' Patricia says, and her voice has softened.

Did I see that? Or did I not think beyond the part where Sarah would believe Geoff was a cheat and come home?

'I'm surprised, Mabel,' Julie says. 'First Kirsty's parents, and now this. What have you done to interfere in my life?'

She's joking, but I think that if I'm admitting to things, I might as well go the whole hog. 'Well, I knew Martin was going to be in the Carpenters that night we went out,' I say.

I look up at her and her face is pure shock. She didn't think I had it in me, didn't think I could make these things happen. And I don't blame her,

because I didn't either.

'How?' she asks.

'I saw him on the street, overheard him arranging a night out. But that doesn't really matter, does it? I've fiddled with everything and made it all worse.' I wonder whether they've heard the hairline crack in my voice.

'Not in my case,' Julie says.

I'm not sure about that. Her reunion with Martin hasn't been quite the success I first thought it was. For one thing, Martin doesn't seem to be contrite, and for another, there's still a lot of sadness in Julie's face.

'Do you think I can fix this?' I ask, looking at Patricia.

She smiles, and I know that she's already halfway to forgiving me. She's that kind of person.

'I think you can try,' she says.

‘So that’s what happened. And I’m ashamed about it, now. I’m sorry.’

I’m getting a lot of practise with this apologising lark. Arthur would find it hilarious.

Sarah looks at me, her gaze steady. We’re in Patricia’s kitchen and Patricia’s with the little girls in the living room, the television on. All three of them, Sarah and both of her daughters, have Patricia’s height and her big, blue eyes, but it looks different on all of them. Sarah stoops a bit, like someone who always wished she was shorter. Sasha, the elder girl, looks like a wild thing, and Iris, the little one, just looks like she’s always a bit surprised.

‘You were playing with people’s lives,’ she says.

Funny, she has a slight American twang despite never having lived there. That’s the imprint of her mother on her life, I think.

‘I know. It’s just, you and Geoff, you weren’t real people to me. I was just thinking about Patricia, and what would be best for her. I know I got it wrong.’

She looks perplexed. ‘But why did you think us being back here would be best for Mum? I know she missed us but I always got the impression she was delighted to have her house back.’

‘No,’ I say. I shake my head. I’m sure on this one. ‘No, she was lonely.’

And it strikes me, then, that there are other cures for loneliness than reinstating the person or people who were there before. I was lonely without Arthur, and Patricia was lonely without Sarah and her daughters, but it doesn’t mean we need those people back. It’s impossible, in my case. And



inadvisable in hers, I've learned. There are routes out of loneliness. We can help each other find them. And then my mind lands on Julie. She was lonely, too. Was getting back together with Martin the right thing? I'm not as sure as I was.

'We'll visit more,' Sarah says. 'And call. I'll get the girls to send video messages.'

'She'll like that. So you're definitely going back?'

She nods. 'I have to give it a chance. Geoff's a good man. Mum never had someone and I don't want to make the same mistake.'

Is it always a mistake to go through life without a partner? I think about me and Arthur, about Bill and Dot, about Julie and Martin, about Erin and Hannah. And then I stop thinking, and just accept that this is what's right for her, right now. Patricia's heart will be broken again, and it will be my fault. I will have to own up to that, and do everything I can to help her heal.

I say goodbye and go to the front door. Sarah follows me. 'Goodbye, Patricia,' I call out.

'Why do you call her Patricia?' Sarah asks. 'No one calls her that.'

It's true. Patricia comes out into the hallway.

'Are you all right, Mabel?' she asks.

She's a kind woman. I'm the one in the wrong here. It's undisputable. But she is worried about me, all the same. 'Yes,' I say. 'Are you?'

She looks at her daughter and I think I see her lip wobble a tiny bit. 'I will be.'

Sarah reaches out and puts an arm around her mother, and it's clear there's a bond there that might be stretched by distance but which won't be broken. It's for life, family. It's forever.

'Thank you, Sarah,' I say. 'For listening. And thank you, Patty, for giving me a chance to explain.'

She looks surprised that I've used her shortened name, but she doesn't say anything.

'I'll see you soon, Mabel.'

'You will, I'm sure.'

On the walk home, I go a bit out of my way, telling myself I need a couple of bits from the shop. I could just message Erin, ask her to bring something home with her, but I don't feel like going home yet, and that's the honest truth. I'm starting to enjoy being out and about, with all that entails. Running into people, chatting. I go to the graveyard. There's no one around,

so I sit on the bench.

‘You wouldn’t believe what’s going on,’ I say. It’s Arthur’s grave I’ve come to first today. ‘I’ve made a friend, Erin, and she’s living in our spare room. She’s seventeen. She’s bright and funny and a bit lost, and she’s made such a difference to me. Well, her and Julie, the carer you sent, and a couple of others too. I didn’t realise how closed off I was, how isolated we were, until you were gone and I was on my own.’ I pause for a minute before saying the next bit. ‘I know I dragged you down, sometimes. And I’m sorry for that. Oh, and I know how to apologise now. Better late than never, eh?’

It’s when I’m talking to Arthur, these days, that I appreciate the changes in me. I’m a different person. And he’ll always be the same. I was so sure it was too late to change, but I was wrong. It’s only too late when you’re dead and buried. The Mabel I am now is more like the Mabel he met than the one he was married to all those years. Before Bill died, before Dot left, when I was so much more carefree.

Once, we went to the pictures, the four of us. Bill and Arthur wanted to see this Western that had just come out, and Dot and I didn’t argue because there was nothing else we were particularly keen to see. Dot was in a mischievous mood, said she didn’t fancy sitting still in the dark all evening when she’d been stuck at work all day, but the tickets had been bought by then, and none of us had money to waste, so we went. Working out who was going to sit where was always a delicate operation, and I remember that night Dot darted in beside Arthur and Bill was stuck on the other side of me, annoyed. It was raining, and we’d rushed to get inside, shaking off our umbrellas while standing in the doorway. When we’d sat down, I turned to look at Dot, and she had raindrops in her eyelashes. She blinked them away and grinned at me, leaned in close to whisper something about a party we should have gone to instead.

‘Emily, from work, she was having people over,’ she said.

‘But she didn’t invite us.’

Dot shrugged, as if such a thing didn’t matter one bit, and whispered that if the film was boring, we should sneak out at the interval and go to Emily’s house.

I didn’t watch the film. I’d missed the beginning and I couldn’t pick up the thread, and I didn’t particularly want to. There was a train robbery, a gunfight on horseback, and it was boring. I was thinking about Emily’s party, about being there instead of being here, because Dot’s hot breath in my ear

had wakened something in me. I wanted to dance.

In the interval, Dot and I went to the ladies' to reapply our lipstick.

'I'm so bored,' she said, leaning back against the washbasins. 'We could go. Couldn't we?'

I wanted to, but I felt a sense of duty, of obligation. We had said yes to coming, had let Bill and Arthur pay for our tickets. And I was tied to both men, I realised, whereas Dot was only tied, if she was tied at all, to Bill.

'Do you love him?' I asked. 'Bill?'

I had asked this a handful of times, and Dot had never given me a straightforward answer.

'What's that got to do with it?' she asked. 'Come on, Mabel, let's do something exciting for once.'

'What sort of party is it?' I asked.

We were looking at each other in the mirrors rather than directly, which felt strange, like I wasn't standing next to her, our arms almost touching. She pressed powder onto her forehead and rolled her eyes.

'It's a party, Mabel. You know what a party is. Drinks, dancing, general merriment.'

'But we're not dressed for it.'

I had a long list of excuses and Dot knew it.

'Well, I'm going,' she said.

My mouth dropped open. 'Now? Really?'

'Really,' she said.

When we left the toilets, there was no one congregated in the entryway. Bill and Arthur must have been back in their seats.

'Tell them I had a stomach ache, or something,' Dot said.

I looked at her. I didn't want to go back to watch the second half of a film I wasn't following. I wanted to go out with her, into the night, towards adventure. But could I do it?

'I'm coming too,' I said.

Had she always known I would? Her pull was strong. She reached out a hand and I took it, and we pushed through the heavy doors, giggling. There would be explanations and apologies to make, I knew. Bill would be waiting up for me when I got home, his face like dark clouds. But that was later, and for now, Dot and I were going to a party, doing something we shouldn't, being wild and free in that way that you can when you're young.

I don't remember much about the party, only that Dot drank too much

wine and was sick on the way home, and that Emily was surprised to see us but ushered us inside regardless, and that we did a lot of laughing and talking and it was more fun than seeing the film. Arthur and Bill were both in our kitchen when I let myself in, my ears ringing from the music and my steps light. They'd been worried, they'd left the cinema when we hadn't returned and had spent a long time looking for us. The sheen of the night disappeared in an instant.

'It was silly of us,' I said.

Bill looked furious but Arthur had half a smile. And I knew, then, that this adventurous streak Dot brought out in me was part of what he liked about me. He didn't know then, and neither did I, that it would disappear when she did, and he would spend his life married to a woman who played it safe.

'We should have had more adventures, and that's the truth,' I say.

And I imagine Arthur sitting on the bench beside me, nodding his agreement. I get up, go over to where my family lie.

'I'm inching closer to finding her. Dot.'

Why did I save this for them, keep it from Arthur? Do I fear his disapproval, even now?

'It's harder than I imagined, though. I can't fathom a person like Dot being lost. She was so big, wasn't she? Such a big personality. I just assumed she'd be easy to find. I think I thought, all these years, that if and when I decided to look for her, it would be simple.'

Later, I'm in bed, starting to drift off, then wide awake again in an instant. Remembering Bill's face that night, his fury at mine and Dot's betrayal. All these years, I've thought of him being angry with me, but what about Dot? If he couldn't put up with her disappearing or getting up to mischief, he wasn't the right man for her. If he'd lived, and they'd got married, it surely wouldn't have worked. I've somehow never considered this, so I play around with it, repeating it aloud in the empty room.

'It wouldn't have worked.'

It changes everything.

‘If it’s not working...’ I say.

I don’t know how to finish the sentence, so I leave it hanging there. It’s obvious what I mean.

‘It will,’ Julie says. ‘It has to.’

She looks harried. Older. I remember the times she’s laughed with me and Patricia – Patty. The way her whole body would join in. I haven’t seen much of that lately.

‘Kirsty’s coming round in a bit,’ I say, because I feel the other subject is dead and buried and I don’t know how to revive it. ‘She said she’d bring Olly for a visit.’

‘Oh, that’s nice. Give me a shout when she gets here and I’ll put the kettle on for you both.’

‘You can join us,’ I say.

We still do this battle, this tug of war, her wanting to be usefully occupied every minute she’s here and me wanting her to take the weight off and chat to me. The boundaries are blurred, because she’s a friend, now, I’m certain of that, but she’s also paid to be here. Or is she? I try to work out how long it’s been. She came in November, because I remember working out that the three months Arthur had paid for would take us up to the end of February. Still a few weeks to go.

‘Well, let me get your bed stripped off and in the wash first,’ she says.

And I don’t say anything, just let her, because I do love getting into a clean bed. Arthur used to say bed change day was his favourite day of the week. He used to make this sound when he got in, a sort of satisfied sigh, and

the only other time he made it was when he bit into a strawberry. Funny, the things you know and remember about a person after the years have piled up. I can hear that sound now, and at the same time I know I'll never hear it again. Once, he suggested we change the bed twice a week, but I soon knocked that on the head. It was me doing all the washing and drying, after all. But we did agree on the fact that there's nothing quite like pushing your toes down into fresh new sheets.

Kirsty arrives with Dotty and Olly soon after Julie's gone off upstairs, and suddenly the house is alive, almost chaotic.

'I need to change her, do you mind?' she asks.

I can hardly say no, can I?

'I could go in the back room,' she offers. 'Olly, look, it's Mabel!'

She tries to cajole him but there's no getting away from the fact that he looks at me the way he always did, like a slight annoyance, like someone you're forced to put up with. He's much happier since he moved in with her, and that's the truth. She pretends he has his moments, but any time I've called in, he's been there, looking up at her, tail wagging. He even seems to like the baby.

'Should I? Go through to the back room, I mean?'

'No, no. You can do it here.'

Dotty is wailing, her face puce. And I'm struck by a memory of one of the typing pool girls bringing in her newborn and us all crowding round on our tea break to have a look. He'd kicked one of his socks off and Dot picked it up off the floor, held it up to show me the size of it, and then grabbed hold of his toes and pretended she was going to nibble them. The mother looked a bit startled but the baby laughed and laughed. And then as quickly as the laughter started, it was finished, and his face darkened and he started to howl.

'Hungry?' Dot asked, trying to be helpful.

'That or the other end needs attention,' the mother said. 'It's always one or the other.'

It was just a throwaway comment but I came back to it every time Arthur brought up the subject of children. I couldn't think of anything worse than this tiny being that needed me, that always needed to be fed or else cleaned up. Dotty's shown me another side to it, because most of the time I've been around her, she's been delightful. Playing, watching us talk, babbling away to herself.

But this, now, this noise is something else. I wring my hands,

uncomfortable. Should I offer to help? Surely Kirsty has this under control. She's whipped out this black package, unfolded it and pulled a nappy, wipes and a little bag out of various zipped pockets. Now she lays it on the floor, and I see it's a miniature changing mat. What will they think of next? She lays Dotty down, cradling her head, and starts the process. When the stench hits me, I struggle not to let it show. It's horrendous, that's what it is. I make my excuses and go to the kitchen to get the tea started. Stand with my hands on my hips, taking deep gulping breaths.

No, I wasn't cut out for it. Motherhood. Doesn't change the fact that Arthur would have been a world-class father, though. Still, I'm not sure what impact one good and one terrible parent would have on a child, especially with the terrible one being the mother. But I know, now, that Dot did it. Two boys. I slot that knowledge into the daydreams I have of her, in the years since she left. Dot changing nappies, walking to and from school, making endless meals and running baths and getting up in the night to scare away monsters and bad dreams. I don't know her, I think. She's someone entirely different from the person I knew all those years ago, and so am I. But that doesn't have to be a bad thing, does it?

'What are you doing back here?'

It's Julie. I didn't hear her approaching.

'I was just going to put the kettle on,' I say, picking it up and taking it over to the sink.

'Let me,' she says, taking it from me.

I do let her, because I find it a bit heavy, now, when it's full.

'What have you done to upset Dotty?' she asks, smiling.

'Me? I haven't done anything!'

'I was joking, Mabel.'

'She's having a change,' I say. 'She was, she'd... soiled herself.'

'That's babies for you,' she says.

I wonder what she knows of babies, whether she's been around them much. Or whether she's as clueless as me about the whole thing.

When we go back to the front room, Dotty's dressed again and the little bag is neatly tied. The smell lingers.

'Would you watch her while I take this outside and wash my hands?' Kirsty asks, holding the bag up.

Her voice is a bit different, I think. The edges softened, like her original accent – the one her parents have – is creeping back in. Just a little.

‘Course,’ Julie says.

She goes over and sits on the floor by Dotty, who’s on all fours, rocking.

‘Can she crawl now?’ I ask, a bit scared she’ll get away from us when we’re supposed to be looking after her.

‘Not yet. She’s trying. Chances are she’ll go backwards before she gets it right.’

Backwards. How does she know something like that?

When Kirsty comes back in, she picks up her mug of tea and takes a long slug.

‘That’s perfect,’ she says. ‘I made three cups this morning and didn’t drink any of them.’

Julie laughs, but I feel sorry for her. If there’s no time to drink a cup of tea, what else is Kirsty missing out on? And how does she remember who she is in the middle of it all?

‘I’ve started going to a mums’ yoga class, did I tell you?’

We shake our heads.

‘Tuesday evenings. Ben gets home from work and I shoot out of the door to get to the community centre in time. I always get there all stressed, my heart hammering, and think I’m probably doing myself more harm than good. But it’s nice to meet other mums.’

She looks at us and realises what she’s said, puts a hand to her mouth. ‘It’s not that there’s anything wrong with people who aren’t mums,’ she says.

Julie bats the air with a hand. ‘We understand. You need to be around other women your age, and especially other mums.’

‘How do you know so much about babies?’ I ask.

Julie turns to me. ‘Me?’

‘Yes. It’s just, I know you didn’t have any but you seem to know a lot.’

‘Oh, you know, my friends had them, and I have a niece.’

This is news. I remember how she’s shied away from talking about siblings before.

‘A niece? How old?’

She looks wistful, and also like she wishes she could bite the words back. Or just that word, perhaps. Just ‘niece’.

‘Twenty. She’s away at university now, but I spent a lot of time with her when she was little.’

I store this away with the other things I know about her. Now isn’t the time to delve. Julie obviously agrees, because she neatly changes the subject.



‘How are things with your parents, Kirsty? Have you seen them since...?’

She doesn’t need to say ‘since the party’. We all remember what happened there.

‘We’ve talked on the phone a couple of times,’ Kirsty says. ‘We’re trying to find common ground.’

That’s an improvement from the last time I talked to her. I wonder whether Julie’s noticed, about the change to her way of speaking. I’ll ask her later, when we’re alone.

‘Ben wants us to get married,’ she says. ‘And I’ve always put him off, because I wasn’t ready for them to meet. I’m still not, in a way. But I’m getting there. I’ve said maybe next year.’

Julie makes a noise that’s a kind of squeal. ‘Imagine Dotty, toddling around. She could be a flower girl, or a ring bearer.’

Kirsty smiles widely. ‘I’d have to find a role for Olly, too. Anyway, I’d better go. Get this one fed before yoga later. I’ve made a friend there, Estelle – she’s pregnant with her first and she has about a thousand questions for me every week, about everything from labour to sleep routines.’

She stops talking, seeing the way Julie’s face has fallen. I heard it too, that name. It’s not one you hear often.

‘What?’ Kirsty asks.

‘Did you say Estelle?’ Julie asks, and there’s a cool undertone to her voice.

‘Yes. Gorgeous name, isn’t it?’

‘Is she tall, with red hair?’

‘Yes! Do you know her?’

‘No, but my husband does.’

Kirsty puts a hand to her mouth, then, realising.

‘It doesn’t mean...’ I start to say.

‘I’ll find out what it means,’ Julie says, and she’s putting her shoes on and going out of the door, and it’s the fastest I’ve ever seen her move.

‘Shit,’ Kirsty says, when she’s gone. ‘I didn’t mean to...’

‘Of course you didn’t,’ I say. ‘How could you know? And besides, we don’t know for sure.’

‘It doesn’t look good though, does it?’

She’s right, it doesn’t. I see her out, Olly slipping out from my hand when I try to give him a gentle pat on the head. And when I go back inside, it feels strange, the quiet, after the bustle. I put the television on to distract myself

from wondering what's happening in Julie's house right now. I hope we're wrong. But I have a feeling we're not.

‘The house just feels so empty.’

Patty looks bereft, and I know it’s down to me. That’s why I suggested Julie and I come here to try to cheer her up a bit. I baked scones, and Julie bought jam and clotted cream, and we’re eating them in the conservatory. And it should be lovely, but it’s all a bit flat.

‘Dare I ask how things are with Martin?’ Patty asks. ‘I saw Kirsty yesterday, she told me about Estelle’s pregnancy.’

I asked that same question this morning, and Julie winced then, just like she is now.

‘He claims he didn’t know about the pregnancy,’ Julie says. ‘When he moved back in, I mean. He said it was over between them, that it had just been a fling.’

‘And now?’

‘She told him a couple of weeks ago. Said she was going to have the baby with or without him, and he’s been trying to decide what to do. And how to tell me.’

The pain is etched on her face, and I imagine she’s barely slept. There’s a beat of silence, then another. Then something beeps in the kitchen, the washing machine or the dishwasher, and it snaps us back into focus.

‘What are you going to do?’ Patty asks.

‘I’m going to tell him to do the right thing. To go back to her, be a family. I know that’s what he wants, deep down. He’s just a coward.’

How painful this must be, not only to lose him to another woman, but to lose him to someone who is capable of giving him the thing that she wasn’t.

I'm proud of her for the decision she's made, though. It seems to me that he's best placed there, if she's having his baby and there are still feelings there. I got it wrong. I got it so wrong. For Julie, engineering that meeting in the pub. For Patty, bringing Sarah home under false pretences. And for Kirsty, forcing a reunion with her parents. I couldn't have got it more wrong if I'd tried.

'We'll be there, you know,' Patty says.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I just mean you don't have to go through it alone, not like last time. You can call on us, and we'll help.'

'Thank you,' Julie says, but she doesn't seem comforted.

I can see Patty wants to say something else, and we wait.

'Sarah didn't have a father, and I think it's honourable of you to give this baby the chance of having one.'

'I don't know about honourable,' Julie says. 'It just feels like the right thing to do. I mean, it might not work out between them, they didn't exactly have a solid basis for starting a family, but they should at least try, shouldn't they?'

Patty and I nod, and Julie reaches for a second scone. Good. I was waiting for someone else to.

'On the subject of Sarah's father, or lack of one,' Julie says. 'I was thinking... Noel Edmonds?'

Patty laughs. 'No. Absolutely not.'

'Chris Tarrant?'

'Julie, have you been googling male celebrities of a certain age?'

'Might have been.'

'Let's talk about something else,' Patty says, then. 'Let's talk about Dot. Has anyone had any bright ideas for the search?'

I'm so touched that they're still on this journey with me, that they still care about finding my friend, despite what they're both facing. I've told them about the visit to Cathy Milton, but Julie suggests we go over it again, everything that was said, in case there's anything we've missed. So I tell them again that Dot's married name was Black, that her husband was called Thomas and their children were John and William. All common names, especially when paired with a common surname.

'And of course her parents would still be Brightmore, but they would be...' Patty starts.

'Dead,' I say. 'I mean, we know for sure her mother is, and her father

would be well over a hundred if he was still alive.'

We sit there in silence, all thinking, and then Julie puts a finger in the air. 'You said something about a brother!' I don't join the dots at first. 'Dot had a brother?' she asks.

'Yes, she did. Charles.'

And then it all clicks.

'Charles is younger than us, so he might well still be around. And he'd still be a Brightmore.'

Julie gets out her telephone and logs into the website she was using to search. Patty and I just watch her as she taps away. I feel like we're close to something.

'Two,' Julie says, looking up at us with bright eyes. 'Two Charles Brightmore of the right sort of age. One here in Surrey, one in Scotland. Makes sense to start with the one in Surrey, I guess?'

I nod. For a minute, I think she's going to have an address or a telephone number, but she explains that it just tells her there's one here. We still have to find him.

'I could try Facebook,' she says.

There's one result for the name, and it doesn't have a profile picture, just the shadow silhouette. But Julie goes onto his profile and scrolls through, holding her telephone out so I can see it, too. There isn't much on there, just birthday greetings and links to articles he's shared. But then she stops scrolling, because there's a photo he posted three years ago, an elderly man and woman. Is it him? I stare, knowing that Julie's expecting me to confirm it or say no, it's someone else. I look at the woman. I don't know her. But I wouldn't, would I, if she was his wife? So I look at him, at the high slope of his forehead and the length of his face. At his conker-brown eyes and his strong nose. I have a memory of Charles putting his head around Dot's bedroom door, saying tea was on the table and his mum wanted to know whether I had a home to go to, then dashing off before either of us could catch him.

'It's him,' I say.

I feel breathless, because this is the closest we've come. Julie sends a friend request, and we wait. She laughs, and there are nerves in it.

'It could be a bit of a wait,' she says. 'It doesn't look like he's an avid user. It could be days.'

We relax a bit after she says that, because it's true. It's unlikely that we'll

know anything right now, today. But it's possible. We start, slowly, to chat about other things, but I notice that Julie keeps sneaking looks at her telephone.

When I go home, I ask her to let me know if she hears anything.

'Of course,' she says. 'I've got a good feeling about this, Mabel.'

And I have, too. I walk home feeling light and carefree. A couple of times, I find I've started to whistle. So when I get home to the smell of burnt toast and find Erin sitting at the dining table with a grim look on her face, it takes a minute for me to be dragged back down.

'Are you all right?' I ask her.

Usually, if I go anywhere, I return to find her in the kitchen, music coming from her telephone. Or shut away upstairs, music leaking under the door. I've become quite accustomed to it. But today, there's silence, and that expression, like she isn't sure whether to be angry or burst into tears.

'I think I should go home,' she says.

It stings. It's silly, I know, but I'd thought this was a semi-permanent arrangement. I'd started to imagine the university holidays, when she'd return and tell me all about what she'd been learning and doing.

'Why?' I ask. 'Are you not happy here?'

'I am. But I just don't think I can avoid them forever. I didn't tell them I was leaving, not properly. I just stormed out. And then I snuck back to get my stuff when no one was at home and sent them a text saying where they could get hold of me in an emergency. It's not fair to them, is it?'

I want to say that what isn't fair is her being made to feel like she doesn't belong in her own home. Her feeling that who she loves makes her less of a daughter or a sister.

'It's up to you,' I say, and I try to keep my voice neutral but I know a bit of disappointment has slid in.

'I think it's the right thing to do. I'll message them, ask when they're all free, and then I'll go back and properly talk to them about all of it, including about me and Hannah. And as long as they're all right about it, I'll move back.'

'What if they're not?'

'Not what?'

'Not all right about it?'

She looks despairing. 'I'm not sure.'

'Well,' I say. 'I hope it doesn't come to it, but you know you're welcome

here.'

'Thanks,' she says. Her expression changes, lifts. 'If you'd told me this would happen, that day we first met, you know, with the piccalilli, I would have said you were mad. It's funny, sometimes, how things work out, isn't it?'

It is. What was she to me, then? A surly-looking teenage girl who did me the favour of not telling her manager I'd slipped something in my bag. And now? I like to listen to her pottering about the place after I've gone to bed, or watch her expression when she's on the telephone to one of her friends. It's partly about having the company, having someone to share the house with again, but it's more than that. It's like having a second chance, to be young.

'Funny,' I agree, and then I get up and go into the kitchen, put the kettle on.

It's just for something to do. It's just so she doesn't see how derailed I am at the thought of her leaving.

'Hey,' she calls out.

'Hey what?'

'We should have a special evening. Chinese takeaway, a good film, or music, whatever you prefer. We should mark the occasion.'

If she'd never been here, what would I be doing this evening? Nodding off in front of the television? Combing back over old memories, wishing things had been different? Trying to get myself into a new novel? But she is here, and she wants to celebrate this time we've had together, and it doesn't matter that I'm sad, because I owe this to her. She's saved me from myself.

'I've never eaten Chinese food,' I say, gathering myself and going back into the room where she's still sitting at the dining table.

'Never?'

'No.'

'No egg fried rice?'

'No.'

'No sweet and sour chicken?'

'That sounds awful.'

She's already fiddling with her telephone. 'Leave it to me. I'll order a feast. You should try everything. You won't regret it.'

Those are the words that stay with me, even after we've eaten until we're completely stuffed, and discovered that I do, in fact, like Chinese food, after we've played classic songs from my youth and danced stiffly around the front

room, the way we did in Patty's class.

You should try everything.

You won't regret it.

It's so different from the way I've lived my life. But I'm starting to think it's right.



I wake from a fitful sleep with my heart thudding and my brain trying to grasp something before it slips away. That day, that last day with Arthur, at the market. Pies, fruit. What was it? And then it hits me. Joan Jenkins. Or, what was it she said her married name was? Joan Gardner, Joan Garner? Joan Garnett. That's it. When we were talking about her afterwards, Arthur said she knew Dot, didn't he? I'm certain he did. I could go back to Overbury, try to find her, see if they stayed in touch.

Just over an hour later, I'm waiting for the bus. It's one of those bitterly cold February days, and I'm wrapped up with a hat and scarf and gloves and still I have to keep my head down to protect my face from the wind. It's market day again, so I'm just going to retrace our steps and hope for the best. I've gone back over the conversation she and Arthur had a hundred times, trying to remember whether she said anything specific about where she lived, but there's nothing. I tuned out, didn't I? I had no idea that it would come to be important. When the bus pulls up, it splashes puddle water on my tights, and I'm almost ready to call it a day and go home, but I think of Dot, how she used to try to turn situations on their head by dancing in the rain or being overly nice to someone awful, and I grit my teeth and get on.

If I'd told Julie I was doing this, she'd have offered to come along. I thought about it. But there's something quite nice about only me knowing, for now. I imagine telling her I've cracked it, that I've got an address or a telephone number for Dot. She would grab me by the wrists and dance me around the front room. And then what? I haven't dared to think beyond this bit, to think about going there, to where Dot lives, or talking to her on the

telephone. What if she doesn't want to see me? What if those years we spent together weren't as important to her as they were to me, and I'm just one of a long list of people she's no longer in touch with? What if she turns me away, closes the door, slams down the telephone? Because sixty-two years is a long time, by anyone's reckoning. Both of us have lived a whole life in those years, and we might not fit together the way we once did.

It's a risk, a gamble. But isn't everything? Isn't marriage, and career, and friendship? Isn't love? Isn't getting on a bus, on a sharply cold late winter day, to look for a woman who might have known a girl who was once your best friend?

'Overbury town centre,' the driver calls, and I gather up my bag and get up, careful not to trip. A fall at this stage, when no one knows where I am, would be a disaster.

'Thank you,' I say, stepping off.

He pulls away, splashing my tights again.

The streets are crowded. Were they this crowded last time? Funny how things seemed different when I had Arthur at my side, his arm threaded through mine if I needed it. Now, I'm frightened. Of being knocked or having my bag taken or tripping. But I'm more frightened of dying without finding Dot, I realise, so I press on.

There's an aroma of sugar coming from a van selling hot doughnuts and candy floss, and it takes me back to the time we went to the fair. Mum was dead against it, said there'd be all sorts there and it wasn't safe, but Bill talked her round. He always knew what to say to make her change her mind.

Girls at work had been saying the man who took your money for the waltzer and started them going was nice looking. Said that if he liked the look of you, he'd reach out when your carriage came past and spin it a little faster. But rides made me sick, always had. So I stood at the side and watched Bill and Dot and Arthur clamber into the carriage, Bill and Dot's knees touching. He was nice looking, the waltzer man. He watched me watching them, and asked if I was spoken for, and I didn't know what the answer was.

'Seems to me like those two are a couple,' he said, pointing to Bill and Dot. Dot was shrieking but there was more joy in it than fear. 'So that other fella, is he your man?'

Was he my man? It wasn't clear, not at that stage. It was a delicate balance. My brother and his best friend, me and mine. I could see how Bill felt about Dot, any fool could, but I wasn't sure whether it was reciprocated.

‘No,’ I said, still unsure whether that was correct.

‘In that case, can I take you for a drink sometime?’

I felt the blood rise up in my face. Looked at him from under my lashes, this strong man with eyes like an ocean and jet-black hair like Elvis that everyone was talking about. Did he ask someone different every night? Perhaps, but it didn’t matter, not really. He’d chosen me.

The ride stopped and I watched the three of them step out, giddy and clutching at one another, the way Dot and I sometimes did when we’d been drinking.

‘Well?’ the man asked me, as they came towards me.

‘Well what?’ Arthur asked.

I saw them size each other up, saw that, in Arthur’s eyes, I was already his.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Sorry.’

And I walked away with them, happy to be part of something, part of a group.

‘What was all that about?’ Arthur asked, taking my arm and pulling me into him.

‘It was nothing,’ I said.

But later, when we were walking home, Dot sulked, and I couldn’t work out why. Could it have been to do with me and Arthur, and the way our group was shifting?

That was just one of a series of choices I made that led me here. To Overbury market, to the man selling pies. He is a big man, jolly-looking, his face round with fat lips.

‘What can I get you, my love?’

There are people all around us, not so much a queue as a general buzz, and I know he won’t give me much of his time. Know I have to get it right, what I say, make it as concise and specific as possible.

‘I was here a few months ago, with my husband, and we ran into a woman called Joan Garnett, and now I need to find her, and I wondered whether she’s a regular customer?’

‘Could be,’ he says. ‘But I don’t take names.’

He laughs. He isn’t laughing at me, but it feels a little like he is. I take a step backwards, colliding with someone who tells me to watch it. I am ready to flee.

‘I’m sorry,’ the man says, ‘just messing around. What does she look like,

this Joan of yours?’

‘She’s about my age,’ I say. ‘A bit taller than me, a bit plumper. Curly white hair. Very white teeth.’

I think about the fact that older women are invisible. He won’t remember her, I think. But he puts a finger up, as if he has something.

‘I think I might know the one you mean. Partial to my steak and kidney, if it’s the woman I’m thinking of. She’s here most weeks.’

‘You don’t happen to know where she lives?’

It’s so unlikely, and even if he does know, he shouldn’t tell me.

‘No idea, but she usually comes by here around lunchtime.’

‘I’ll wait,’ I say.

He looks at his watch. It’s a little after ten. ‘Suit yourself. I could take a message for her, if that’s easier?’

How would I express it, in a note? I shake my head, but he’s already talking to the next customer, and I back away, wander around, always looking.

A couple of times, I see a white head in the distance, or bent over looking at something on a stall, and my breath catches, but it’s never her. I ask a couple of people, always the older ones, whether they know her name, but they shake their heads. Do they really not know her, or are they simply protecting her from this stranger who’s on the lookout? I could be anyone. I could have a score to settle.

I buy some things I haven’t had since Arthur died: camembert, blueberries, sourdough bread. Arthur used to tease me for being conservative about food, used to say you can’t live off ham sandwiches and conference pears, but he was wrong about that. You can live off so little, can avoid variety and texture. It just makes for a boring life. I don’t want to do it any more.

When it’s coming up for twelve, I go back to the pies. The man is serving someone, but he sees me and shakes his head, presumably to let me know I haven’t missed her. I hang around, choosing a small pork pie to take home and queuing up to pay. The cold is getting to me, now. I feel like it’s crept inside my bones and spread out. I give in, go back to the bus stop. I’ll try again next week, come a bit later, now I know what to expect.

\* \* \*

I'm still cold when Julie turns up, though I've got the gas fire on full.

'Nothing from Charles,' she says.

'Maybe he hasn't seen it yet.'

'Maybe.' She gestures with her head towards my hat and gloves, which are drying on the radiator. 'Have you been out?'

I fill her in. She offers to come with me next week, as I knew she would.

'Exciting to have two irons in the fire, isn't it?' she asks, rubbing her hands together.

'It's still a long shot,' I say.

Because it is. Even if I find Joan, what are the chances that she's stayed in touch with Dot all these years? I hear Arthur's voice, saying she knew Dot 'a bit'. What does that mean?

'Have a little faith,' Julie says.

And I'm amazed she still does, to be honest. Martin's in the process of moving out again. And yet, she's nothing like she was when I first knew her, when he'd just gone for the first time. She's stronger, more capable. Still sad, but she's been sad through it all, beneath the surface.

'Heard anything from Erin?' she asks. 'She served me when I went in for teabags and cheese this morning, but there was a queue so we didn't chat.'

I haven't seen Erin since she left, and I'm trying to be understanding about that. She'll have a lot on, settling back in. No news is good news, I think. If it had gone badly, she'd have been back here, I'm sure. But it hurts to think that she doesn't need me any more, so she's disappeared from my life. It hurts to think of myself as a stopgap more than a friend.

'Nothing,' I say.

'That's sad, after all you did for her.'

And though it's exactly what I've been thinking, I'm not ready to hear her criticised, so I make excuses for her.

'It's a whirlwind, being seventeen,' I say.

I hope I'm right, hope she is too busy revising for her A levels and going to parties and meeting girls to think of me. I hope she isn't miserable, and on her own, and feeling like she outstayed her welcome.

'It is that. Do you remember it, Mabel? All the emotions. God, I don't miss being young.'

I do. I remember it, but unlike Julie, I do miss it. The way my body moved however and wherever I wanted it to, the way I felt like there was more life ahead than behind, the way people noticed me. Would I do it all

again? I would, but I'd do it differently. Go back to those years with Dot and take it from there.

One week on, and it's a different day entirely. The kind of February day where you can feel a whisper of spring on the breeze. Not here yet, but on its way. And I have Julie with me this time, which makes me feel bolder.

'I'm back on the dating apps,' she says.

She's trying to put a brave face on, and I want to tell her she doesn't have to.

'He's gone?' I ask.

I turn to look at her in the bus seat next to me and she does a stiff little nod. 'Gone.'

'Do you wish he'd never come back?' I'm looking for forgiveness, I suppose. But the answer is obvious, isn't it? Surely it would have been better if he'd stayed away.

'No,' she says, surprising me. 'Because I would have always wondered. But this way, he came back and it wasn't right, so now I can move on.'

Moving on. It's a thing people talk about these days. Next person, next love. I don't know where they find the strength for it, the courage.

'When I met you,' I say, 'I could see that you were sad, and I thought it was all about Martin, but it's not, is it? There's something else, too.'

She doesn't answer at first, and when I look at her there are tears on her cheeks. I unzip my bag, rifle through for a tissue. It's a bit dogeared, but clean. I pass it to her, and she takes it but just holds it in her hand, as though she's not quite sure what it is, what it's for.

'It's not that I don't want to talk about it,' she says, eventually. 'I just don't think I can.'

One day, she'll be ready. And I hope I'll be there. I wonder whether Martin recognised it, whether he knew. Whether he did what he could to fix it. Or whether he just thought it was part of her, unfixable. I reach across and put my hand over hers, and we sit like that for the rest of the journey.

'You again,' the pie man says. There's a smile in his voice. 'You must really want to find this Joan person.'

'I do,' I say.

And it's just then that I see her. Quarter to twelve on a Tuesday morning, walking towards the pie stall with purpose. She spots me and puts her hand up in a wave. She has no idea, I think, that she might be the key to this mystery I've been puzzling over for months.

'Hello, Mabel. No Arthur today?'

I'm thrown, so caught up with Dot. But of course, the last time I saw her, I was with Arthur. She couldn't know that he's gone.

'Arthur passed away,' I say. 'A few months ago, now.'

Her face drains of colour and she puts a hand on my arm, and I think I can just about feel the warmth of that human touch through the layers of my blouse and cardigan and coat.

'I'm so sorry to hear that. He was a lovely, lovely man.'

'Did you love him?' I ask.

Julie gives me a sharp look. I've gone so far off plan, but in this moment, it's something I really want to know.

'Love him? Heavens, no. Whatever made you think that? My John was the only one for me.'

I think back over what Arthur said that day. That he thought Joan had had a thing for him, and that he thought she knew Dot a bit. If he was wrong about one, he could easily have been wrong about the other, too.

'Just something he said,' I say. 'It doesn't matter.'

Julie pokes me sharply in the ribs and I realise I haven't addressed the matter in hand.

'I've been looking for you,' I say.

'For me?'

'Yes, I, well, I'm looking for someone, for a friend, and I wondered whether you might be able to help.'

Julie cuts in. 'I'll tell you what. Shall we all go for a coffee and talk about this a bit more?'

Joan smiles. 'That would be lovely.'



We find a café nearby, the sort with red and white checked tablecloths. A bit old-fashioned, but I suppose we are, too. Julie goes off to queue for two lattes and a pot of tea and I hope fleetingly that she'll bring over some cake. She usually does. Joan and I head to a table in the window, well away from anyone else.

'So who is it you're looking for?' Joan asks, once we're settled.

She's got her back to the window and I'm facing her, so behind her there are swarms of people hurrying past. It makes me think about the futility of this search. There are so many people, even in a town like Overbury. But I found Joan, didn't I? And we found Dot's brother, not that he's replied to Julie's Facebook message. I can't lose hope completely, because if I do, what will I have left?

'Dot,' I say. 'Dot Brightmore. Do you remember her?'

'Oh yes,' she says. 'The two of you were joined at the hip. I'm surprised you lost touch. John and I went to her wedding a couple of years after she left Broughton, and then we exchanged Christmas cards for many years, but it dropped off.'

'So you're not in touch with her now?' I ask, thinking that she might at least have a fairly recent address, from the sounds of things.

'Mabel, I'm so sorry to tell you this, but I heard Dot died a couple of years ago.'

Died. Dot died. It's hard to put the words together, even though I realise I've been half expecting them this whole time.

'Oh,' she says, seeing my reaction. 'This is awful. And so soon after you losing Arthur. I really am so sorry to be the one to tell you.'

Julie's arrived with a tray and she puts it down gently. She's heard what Joan's saying and she looks as distraught as I feel.

'Gone?' she asks, to confirm.

'Gone,' I say.

'Oh, Mabel, I'm so sorry.'

And it is there, in that café in Overbury, in front of Julie and Joan Garnett, that I finally come undone. That I break apart. Because the death of the person you spent your whole life with is one thing, but the death of the person you didn't? Sometimes, that's the real tragedy.

I am aware of Julie holding me, rocking me back and forth, and I know that a member of staff comes over and asks if she can help, if she can do anything, but Julie shakes her head and pulls me closer.

Why did I wait until now to do this, when I wanted to know how and where Dot was every day of my life? I keep going back to Arthur, but he didn't stop me, not really. I knew he didn't want me to do it, but it's not as if he put his foot down. He wouldn't have stood in my way, I don't think. It was cowardice. It was not knowing what she'd say when I found her. It was thinking I didn't mean as much to her as she did to me, and not knowing what I would do with that information. It was foolish. Because here I am now, an old woman, a widow, and what have I got to show for my life? A marriage that was long and contained love but no passion, an old friendship that I lost and some new friendships that mean a great deal. Is it enough? If I don't have long left, have I done and said enough?

When I've managed to pull myself together a bit, I see that Joan looks horrified at my outburst. She's sipping at her latte, looking around like she's desperate to escape.

'What was it?' I ask.

'What was what?'

'How did she die?'

'Oh, cancer, I think.'

Cancer. So ordinary. So mundane. So unlike Dot.

'Do you know whether there's a place I could go, to visit her? A gravestone, perhaps?'

She shakes her head. 'She was living in Portsmouth, on her own, at the end. That's all I know.'

'Had she lost her husband?'

'What? Oh, no, that didn't last. They split up when their boys were still young. She was on her own for a long time.'

She finishes her coffee and it's clear that she wants to get away. She pulls a notebook from her bag and scribbles down her telephone number for me.

'I'm so sorry,' she says. 'Awful to be the bearer of bad news. I just... I didn't realise you'd be quite so upset. I'd better go. But here's my number. You know, for if you ever want to talk.'

And she shuffles out.

Julie and I don't say anything for a time. We don't need to. She knows how I feel, and her disappointment is palpable, too. When she does speak, it's to say this.

'I was so hoping I would get to meet the wonderful Dot Brightmore.'

In my quiet moments, I've entertained a couple of fantasies. Sitting alone

with Dot, going over old times and memories, filling each other in on what we've missed of the other's life. And introducing Dot to Julie and Patricia, Kirsty and Erin, these women who have brought so much joy and colour to my life since I lost Arthur. But it's too late.

'Let's go home,' I say, draining my cup.

Julie nods and takes the tray back up to the counter, gets the untouched cake put in a box for us to take home, and we walk to the bus stop in silence.

Back at my house, Julie asks if I'd like her to come inside. She's done more than the two hours she's paid to do for me today already, but I know she doesn't count that as work, know she'd happily come in and spend another two hours doing bits and pieces to help me. But I want to be alone, so I shake my head, tell her that I'll see her tomorrow.

'You know where I am, if you need me,' she says. 'I don't like to think of you, sad and on your own.'

I almost say that I don't like to think of her like that either, but I don't.

'Julie,' I say, as she's walking away. I've been meaning to bring this up for days, and I only seem to be able to manage it when she's not looking at me.

But of course, she turns. 'Yes, Mabel?'

'It's been three months, since you first came here. It's time for me to manage on my own.'

'Is that what you want?'

It isn't a case of wanting, it's a case of needing to. I don't have the money to keep paying her.

'Because if you'll have me, I'd still like to come, Mabel. It will just be a bit more sporadic, because I'll have to fit it in around my other jobs.'

'Thank you,' I say. 'I'd like that. I'd like that very much.'

I let myself in, go through to the front room, and for the first time in a long time, Arthur's there. Standing by the fireplace. I know, by now, that he won't speak, that he's not really here, but it's a bit comforting, all the same.

'Dot's dead,' I say, and saying it aloud like that, the grief crashes over me again.

All that wasted time.

'You, and Dot, and my whole family. My turn next, I suppose.'

I realise that I wouldn't mind one bit if I died in my sleep tonight, and it's a shock, because I haven't felt like that for a while now. Not since I started this search, since I met these women.

Is that a flicker of something on his face? Sadness, empathy, jealousy? In the early days, he felt threatened by the closeness I had with Dot. The years we'd spent together that pre-dated him. I thought he might try to edge her out, and I was ready to fight back against that. Wasn't ready for her to disappear into thin air, though, was I? I stare at him, trying to make out his expression, but it's blank. I'm just projecting my expectations onto him. This vision, this isn't Arthur. This isn't the husband who stood by me through six decades of good and bad days, it's just something my brain has conjured up, because it still isn't ready to admit he's no longer here. That he'll never again take hold of my hand and ask what I'm thinking and do his very best to come up with a solution to my problems.

'I will never say goodbye,' I say. 'I will never get to ask her what made her go, and why she didn't keep in touch, and whether she missed me the way I missed her.'

I go to get a cup of tea, and when I return, he's no longer there. That's when I start to weep again. It's self-indulgent and I don't care. The price of living a long life, I think, is the sheer weight of the losses you have to suffer. You carry each loved one you lose, and they stack up, and it becomes unbearable. I tick them off in my mind. Brother, father, mother, husband, and my friend, my love.

‘I loved her,’ I say. Quiet, tentative. Still, after all this time, unsure. Not unsure about the words, and what they mean, but about saying them out loud.

‘I know you did,’ Julie says. ‘I know, Mabel.’

But she doesn’t.

She’s been so gentle with me since that awful day in Overbury, making me tea and sorting out my washing and food and medication. Is she worried that I’ll forget to take it? Or worried that I’ll stash it, and take too much? It’s something I’ve entertained, the idea of suicide, though never too seriously. If I didn’t have her, and the others, it might be different.

Now, she stands behind my armchair and gives my shoulders a rub. ‘It was such a shock for you, wasn’t it? You’d lost Arthur, and then you hoped – we all hoped – that you’d have this great reunion with your friend, and now we have to adjust to the fact that that isn’t going to happen. It’s really hard.’

I want to ask her what washing powder she uses, because her scent has become so familiar and comforting, and I’d like to start using it so it feels like she’s here, but I don’t know whether that sounds odd.

‘Do the others know?’ I ask.

I can’t face telling each of them, the way I had to telephone everyone after Arthur’s death.

‘Yes, they know,’ Julie says. ‘They’re sorry too.’

I’m grateful that she’s taken care of that for me, without me having to ask her.

When she leaves, calling out that she’s put a shepherd’s pie in the fridge for my tea, I wait a little while and then I get my coat and shoes on. It’s

harder to make myself go out, now I don't have Olly, but there's something I need to do. Something I should have done a long time ago. Maybe sixty-two years ago.

Some years, in March or April, there's a day when you walk outside after months of wind and rain, and it's spring. It's like that today, though we're barely into March. I raise my face to the sky and let the sun touch me, and it feels like the forgiveness of someone you love. I take it slow and steady, get to the end of my road, turn left up the lane that leads to the town centre. And then I'm in sight of it, the church and the graveyard, and I feel all shaken up inside because I've visited for decades but never said the one thing I should have. And today is the day I'm going to change that. The tree that hangs over my family's gravestones is starting to bud with blossom. Another spring, another fresh start. There are daffodils all around, too, moving gently with the breeze.

First daffodil of the year, Arthur would say 'spring has sprung' and once they were in the supermarket, he'd buy me a bunch every week and put them in the window by my armchair. I'll miss that, this year. Perhaps I'll buy a bunch for myself. Is that frivolous? But no, they only cost about a pound and that's a small price for the way they make me feel. There's something about the smell of them and that bright, bright yellow that always makes me so hopeful. They're all around the church grounds, the daffodils. The Brownies plant them every year. I've seen them, with their long plaits and muddy fingers. I wonder what my family would make of it, these children making their resting place that bit brighter.

'Hello,' I say. 'It's me, it's Mabel. I'm here. I've come to tell you something.'

I laugh nervously, but there's a rattle to it. It's a laugh that's knocking on the door of a cough. Cancer? You question everything, at this age. Could this be how it started, for Dot?

'I found out about Dot, about her being gone. Is she there with you, Bill?'

At twenty-two, I spent every spare moment with Dot and Bill and Arthur. If I close my eyes, I can smell Dot's perfume. Like a summer meadow. That day when we went walking, just after Bill died, when all we could do was cry, and we needed to be out of the house, because Mother kept talking about how Bill would have proposed to Dot, and although we all knew that was true, it was just too desperate to think about an engagement that was never going to happen because the man in question was dead at twenty-five.

We went out of town, into the hills where we stood less chance of running into anyone. I needed to be out there with all that space and air, and her. There was nothing to say, so we were quiet, just walking, putting more and more distance between ourselves and our homes. After a couple of hours, we sat down under an enormous oak tree for a breather, and Dot lit a cigarette and when I tried to light mine, I saw that my hands were shaking. Clumsy with grief, I suppose. Dot reached across and lit it and the heat of the flame was like a call back to Earth and I wondered where I was, where I'd been, before that call. I waited for Dot to move away, and she didn't.

There's a sparrow on the fence a few feet away. I tilt my head, look at it. Its eyes glassy and small. Then it's gone, and I've fallen, or have I just dropped? I'm on my knees, anyway, my tights laddered, no doubt. And I'm crying, too, great sobs ebbing and flowing, like waves.

'I got it wrong. I got it all wrong. When Arthur said we should get married, it just seemed like the most obvious thing to do. But that didn't mean it was the right choice, did it? I knew in my bones it wasn't, and yet, you held my hand, Mother, and said it was lovely to have something to look forward to, after Bill, and who was I to take that away?'

Dot, that cigarette, that closeness. She leaned closer still, and the cigarette was forgotten, and all I wanted to do was touch her soft skin. She kissed my cheek, and it felt like a test. She was waiting to see if I would pull away, if I would be shocked, horrified. But I was burning. I felt dizzy and a bit drunk, and like I'd just been born. Her lips, so close to mine. She curled her hand around my waist and I thought I would die, there and then, from wanting her. And then her lips were on mine and she tasted of honey and smoke, milk and that particular rain you get in April. And I knew with a clarity that shocked me I didn't want to live a single day, a single minute, without her. I wanted to hand her my body and my heart and ask her to carry them, to keep them safe. But she was pulling away, just as I was reaching forward. Hungry, so hungry.

And then her hands were pushing me, her head was dipped, and I saw what she'd seen. A man, out walking. I couldn't smile at him when he wished us a good afternoon. I no longer lived in the same world he occupied. When he was gone, surely we would return to it. To that raging bliss. She looked at me, her eyes full of questions, and I tried to answer them all with mine. Yes, yes, always.

'Do you know who that was?' she asked.

'No.' I'd barely glanced at him.

‘Reg Bishop,’ she said. ‘Bill knows him. Do you think he saw?’

I didn’t know, didn’t care, really. ‘No,’ I said. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘We should go back,’ she said. ‘There’s so much to do.’

Back. To the house my brother haunted. To our friendship. To a time before we’d touched fire and survived.

‘Dot,’ I said.

It was a plea, and she knew it. But she pretended it was something else.

‘Yes?’

I could have asked her a hundred things. To stay, to kiss me again, to be my everything for all time, but she was pretending that we hadn’t just set our lives on fire, and I was hurt.

‘We’ll go back,’ I said, and I set off without looking at her. Walked ahead of her all the way back to the house, where Mother was making bread and the kitchen was full of yeast and flour and tears. The window open to let the sunshine in and the grief out.

When Dot said she had to get home, I followed her to the door, my mouth full of questions. Did you love him? Would you have married him? And what am I, to you? I didn’t let them out. Couldn’t.

The next day, when I called round, her mother said she wasn’t well, couldn’t see me. The next time I saw her was at the funeral. Her the grieving widow, though she wasn’t. Me the grieving sister. We stood side by side and we did not touch. She wore a simple black dress, her blonde hair pulled back off her face, her lips bare. We had giggled at times, over thoughts of being brides, but we had never imagined this. Standing in the weak spring sun while damp shovelfuls of earth thumped onto a coffin containing a man we loved.

All day long, I willed her to look at me, to give me some sort of sign. To let me know whether what had happened on that hillside under that oak tree was about the madness of grief, or something else. But she kept moving, always off to talk to someone or get another drink. She avoided me so studiously. And that was an answer in itself, I suppose.



At the wake, at our house, the drinks flowed. I felt light-headed and sore with sadness. The sandwiches Mother and I had made that morning went mostly untouched, their edges hardening. But the empty bottles piled up, clinking. After hours of avoidance, Dot took me by the hand and led me outside.

‘I can’t breathe in there,’ she said.

I didn’t know how to be around her any more, after years of natural friendship. Had we broken something? But no, it felt like mending. Like transcending. I couldn’t look at her, not at her face. I fixed my eyes on her right arm.

‘The other day,’ she said, ‘I don’t know what happened. I...’

I didn’t let her finish, since I was certain she was about to minimise it. I gathered my courage, every last drop of it, and leaned in to kiss her lips. But she pulled away, as I thought she might, and we both turned, feeling eyes on us, and saw Reg Bishop standing a couple of metres away, lighting a cigarette. He raised one eyebrow.

‘Ladies,’ he said.

That single word, a threat. We went inside without speaking, and for the rest of the afternoon the tension pulsed from Dot, and I was forced to accept that she cared more than I did about what people thought.

There were only a few people left when Reg made his move. He was sloppy drunk and draping his arm around every woman there, and I froze when he approached Dot and me and came in between us, flinging an arm around each of our shoulders.

‘These two,’ he said, ‘have quite the friendship, don’t they?’

The stragglers carried on with their own conversations, but I saw Arthur look up and over to where we were standing.

‘In fact, it seems to me like they might be more than just friends. Twice, now, these past few days, I’ve caught them in rather compromising positions.’

‘How dare you?’ Arthur asked, stepping forward. ‘This is a wake, in case you’d forgotten. And Dot and Mabel are grieving, comforting one another. Don’t you dare imply there’s something seedy going on.’

Reg guffawed and looked at me, then at Dot, then finally at Arthur.

‘I know you’ve got a soft spot for this one,’ he said, squeezing my shoulder, ‘but sometimes you need to see what’s in front of your face.’

I shook him off, walked over to where Arthur was standing, a few feet away. A couple of other people had turned to look, by then, sensing an argument brewing.

‘Can you ask him to leave?’ I asked Arthur, quietly.

‘I’ll tell him,’ he said.

I watched Arthur showing Reg to the door. If you hadn’t heard any of what had passed, you wouldn’t have known there was any ill-feeling between them. When he returned, he adjusted his tie and cleared his throat, and I nodded my thanks, and the matter was closed.

In the months that followed, Dot pulled away from me. Slowly, so slowly I knew I’d look like I was being needy if I mentioned it to anyone. But I saw what she was doing. That day had changed everything, and the easiest thing to do was to pretend it had never happened. I cried myself to sleep for months, never really knowing whether it was him or her that I was crying for.

And then I woke up a little, from my grief, and Arthur saw that small crack opening, and filled it with love. Asked me to marry him. There was no one else, was there? Or at least, no other conceivable option. I said yes. When I told her, I genuinely thought she’d see that I was clinging to that time, when the four of us were together, in the only way I knew. Doing the only thing I could. But she left, instead.

I am still on the ground, the soft earth pliant beneath my knees, the solid gravestones in front of me, reminding me that some things don’t change.

‘That’s it,’ I say, pushing myself up, slowly, slowly. ‘That’s the truth of it.’

If I’d found a way to tell any of them, would they have understood? I take them one by one, considering. Dad was a big fan of Arthur’s, and he liked

things to be steady and predictable, to go the way he expected. No, he wouldn't have understood this. Mother? Well, her heart was already broken, so perhaps one more crack wouldn't have mattered too much? Or perhaps it would. Perhaps it would have been the thing to tip her over. And Bill. My darling Bill. It's possible that Bill would have understood how I loved her, because he loved her the same way. I imagine him taking hold of both of my hands, and telling me that only one of us could win. That it could only go one way. And he would have been right.

It was a different time. When love was sometimes treated as a crime.

I know I shouldn't, but I reach out and pick a daffodil, hold it up to the light and take in its simple beauty. I will take it home and put it in a jam jar, and remember.

When people saw Bill and Dot and Arthur and me, they saw two pairs, two couples. And they were almost right. It's just that the pieces didn't go exactly where they thought. It wasn't their fault. It was the only way they knew to put the pieces together. I was the foolish one for going along with it, just because Arthur and I were the only two left. Arthur loved me. Bill and I both loved Dot. And who did Dot love?

I walk away, round to Arthur's grave. Do I need to tell him, too? Yes. For completeness. Because this is what I've always wanted to tell him, the words that have always been stuck. And now he's dead, and she's dead, and my tongue is finally loosened, my throat clear.

'Arthur,' I say, 'it's Mabel.'

My voice is quiet but it's steady, and I'm proud of that. I'm about to tell him the most important thing I never said. The fact of it should really have killed our marriage before it ever started, but I think, perhaps, the holding inside of it allowed us to survive. As a couple, I mean. I couldn't have her, but I had him. And that was something. Those six decades we had, they were real. With Dot, I had one kiss and more love than I knew what to do with and an aching want that's never gone away, not for a single minute. But with Arthur, I had a life.

The afternoon is almost over. Tonight, after eating, I'll go outside and watch the sun set. Pretend he's beside me once more.

'Thank you, for loving me,' I say. 'I'm so sorry I couldn't give you as much as you gave me. It wasn't in me. But I hope you knew that you deserved it. When you fell in love with me, my heart was already taken. I've always thought I should have said that, but perhaps it's all right that I didn't.'

Because we had some happy times, didn't we? We had more good years than bad. Did you know, that I loved Dot? Not as a friend. As a person. As a lover. Did you believe what Reg Bishop said that day? Sometimes I thought you knew. I'd catch you looking at me with a certain sadness in your eyes and it was as if you were thinking that you never stood a chance. And sometimes I was sure that you didn't know, that you would never have entered into a life with me if you had. I'm sorry, Arthur. For the wife I never was, never could be. But I'm not sorry I loved her. I'll never be sorry for that.'

I step backwards, and it's then that I sense someone behind me. I turn, and there she is. Erin. There are tears running down her face, and she has a small, pull-along suitcase with her, and I want to gather her up and find out what's wrong.

'I'm sorry,' she says, 'I didn't mean to listen in, it's just, I was looking for you, and you weren't at home, and Julie and the others didn't know where you were, and this was the only other place I could think to look, and...'

I hold up both hands, and she stops speaking abruptly. But it's like a waterfall being dammed up. I can almost see the pressure building, the words piling up inside.

'Go on,' I say, realising that this is what she needs. The permission and the space to speak.

'I talked to them,' she says. 'My parents, and my sister. I told them I'm gay, and I really thought it would be okay, that they'd be able to see that there are all these other things they love about me, and that would help them accept the thing they find difficult, but I was wrong. Jade and Dad, they don't care much one way or the other, they'd be all right, in time, but not Mum. She thinks it's evil. She actually used that word, evil. She thinks we'll all go to hell. She really believes that. Anyway, now it's all out there and she can barely look at me. So I wanted to find you, to ask if I could come back, just until I've got something else sorted out, and when I got here, you were talking and I didn't want to interrupt.'

She stops, like she's run out of air, or words, or both.

'Now you know,' I say.

'Are you angry with me?'

I'm incredulous. Why would I be angry with her?

'No,' I say. 'I'm relieved. Saves me telling you separately. It's taken a bit out of me, this.'

'I bet it has,' she says. 'Eighty-six years is a long time to keep a secret.'

‘Too long. Far too long.’

She comes up next to me and hooks an arm through mine.

‘Could I come back? Just for a little while?’

I feel a rush of joy at the thought of the return to those days, when I’d wake and know there was someone else in the house, even if she was still fast asleep. When I’d go to sleep to the sound of her pottering about, music on. Having someone to eat meals with, a reason – beyond my own needs – to cook.

‘You can come back for as long as you like,’ I say.

She tilts her head until it’s resting on my shoulder, and we stand there, looking at Arthur’s grave.

‘Was he a good man?’ she asks.

‘One of the best.’

‘You just... didn’t love him. Couldn’t.’

‘Oh, I loved him. There are so many different kinds of love. I couldn’t love him the way he loved me, but that doesn’t mean there wasn’t love there, between us.’

‘Like friendship?’ she asks.

And I realise I had it all upside down, all along. Loving my friend with the passion of romantic love, and my husband like a friend.

‘Like friendship,’ I say. ‘Like the best kind of friendship.’

When I’m ready, I pull at her arm gently, and we start walking. Going home. We don’t say much, and I’m glad to have her with me but glad, too, that she’s offering me this space to think. You can’t live in the past, I tell myself, but you can visit. And you can bring bits of it into the present, when you need them. All this time, I’ve thought of every year since Dot left as wasted, but perhaps it isn’t as bleak as all that. There have been pockets of happiness, there has been laughter and a certain kind of love. Raging bliss isn’t the only thing that’s real.

‘Oh,’ says Julie. ‘Erin’s back?’

We’re in the front room, and there are noises coming from upstairs. A hairdryer and a female vocalist singing about going back in time and not losing everything.

‘She is,’ I say.

‘And is that... a permanent thing?’

I challenge her with a look. I know she worries about me, about it being too much for me to have someone staying here, but it really isn’t like that. Erin doesn’t make things harder for me, she makes them easier.

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘I hope so.’

For a moment, we look at one another, and then she goes into the hallway.

‘Erin!’ she calls up the stairs. ‘I’m putting the kettle on. Do you want tea?’

Five minutes later, we’re all sitting together, Erin’s feet up on the coffee table, holes in both of her stripey socks. She has a bowl of fruit on her lap and she offers it to Julie and me.

‘Mango?’

I remember the mango Arthur bought at the market the day before he died. How I let it shrivel and rot. And then I reach forward and take a piece, and it’s delicious, cold and sweet. Why have I shied away from things all my life, and what else have I been missing out on?

‘So, what, they just won’t accept that you’re gay?’ Julie asks.

Erin nods. ‘It’s a religion thing. Mum thinks it’s evil.’

Every time she says that word, I shudder.

‘And you can’t see it being resolved?’

Erin opens her mouth to speak, but I hold up a hand, because I have something to say. ‘How could it be resolved, if her mother thinks she is evil?’

‘She didn’t say her mum thinks *she’s* evil, she said her mum thinks homosexuality is evil,’ Julie says.

‘But she is homosexual. And that’s not something she’s chosen, it’s just who she is. So if homosexuality is evil, she is evil.’

Julie’s eyes are wide. ‘I never thought of it like that.’

The doorbell rings and Erin and Julie both rise to answer it.

‘It’s Hannah,’ Erin says, then turns to Julie. ‘My girlfriend, or, the girl I’m seeing. Whatever. A girl. For me.’

When she returns, Hannah is with her. I’ve met her once or twice. She’s got beautiful blonde curls, a wide mouth and a compact, athletic body, and it doesn’t surprise me one bit that Erin is infatuated with her. My instinct tells me she’s not the one, not good enough, but I don’t know whether that’s just me being protective. They seem to have put that business with Hannah seeing someone else behind them. It’s none of my concern. They’ll make it, or they won’t, but at least they won’t not make it because they’re too scared to be open about who they are.

‘Shall I make another cup?’ Julie asks. ‘The kettle’s just boiled.’

Erin shakes her head. ‘We’ll go up to my room.’

And they disappear, their feet heavy on the stairs. Julie waits a full minute before she says anything, and in that time, music comes on. It’s not overly loud but you can hear it through the ceiling.

‘I’m worried she’s taking advantage,’ Julie says. I smile, and it riles her. ‘It’s not funny! You’re an old woman, Mabel, and she is a young girl. She’s taking over your house, with her music and her girlfriend.’

‘She’s doing no such thing.’

She purses her lips, and for a minute we’re at stalemate.

‘Do you know why I care so much about Erin?’

‘Yes, because you’re lonely and you want to be helpful.’

‘Both those things are true, but they’re not why.’

‘Why, then?’

‘Because she’s me.’

Julie furrows her brow. ‘She’s you?’

I nod.

‘If I said Dot was my Hannah, would that clear things up at all?’

I wait, and when she claps a hand to her mouth, I have to stop myself from laughing.

‘You, and Dot?’ she asks. ‘You were in love?’

‘Well, I was,’ I say. ‘I don’t really know about her. She left before we got to the bottom of that. And then I married Arthur, and that was that.’

She is quiet. I close my eyes for a moment, and when I open them, she’s gazing at me intently.

‘But all those years, you were married. So, were you, are you, bisexual?’

There are so many names and labels now. It’s a good thing, people can choose how they identify and find people like them, but it makes me laugh, too. In our day, there was just right and wrong. Normal and queer. And very few admitted to being the latter.

‘No,’ I say. ‘I didn’t love Arthur like that. Dot was the only one, for me.’

‘I didn’t know,’ she says, a little helplessly. ‘I didn’t guess, even when you told me about Reg Bishop and what he said at the funeral.’

‘You couldn’t have. No one did. But yesterday, I went up to the churchyard and I told them.’

‘Told who, Mabel?’

‘Arthur, and my parents, and Bill, my brother. I finally told them, and it was like coming out from under a great weight.’

She looks at me like she’s worried I’ve gone mad. Like perhaps I’ve forgotten that all those people I listed are dead.

‘I know it’s not the same as doing it when they were still alive, but it’s better than nothing. It’s still something.’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Of course it is.’

There’s a clattering noise and then Erin and Hannah appear again. Hannah’s hair is a little more unruly than it was when she went upstairs, and they keep reaching for one another’s hands, both of them grinning. And I feel a sudden stab of jealousy, because I recognise that dazed, fuzzy look. It’s the look I saw in the mirror after Dot and I kissed. It’s lust and wonder and confusion and elation and pleasure so sharp it could be pain. And they have a whole lifetime of it ahead, while I only felt it once.

‘We’re going out,’ Erin says. ‘Just for an hour or so. Do you need anything?’

She is considerate, and I will point to that if Julie has any more of her worries about this setup.



‘No. Have fun,’ I say.

I wonder whether Erin has told Hannah about me. Whether she lay upstairs, her head on Hannah’s chest, hot and frenzied from kissing, and said ‘You’ll never guess what.’ I don’t mind if she did, if she has. I don’t mind, now, who knows. All my life, it’s been above me, looming, threatening, and all I ever had to do to diminish its power was to say it aloud.

‘So Dot was the love of your life?’ Julie asks, when they’ve gone.

I consider this. She was, of course she was. But Arthur was too. It was such a different love, one like fire and the other like cool stone, steady and dependable. I don’t know what would have happened if Dot and I had tried to make a life together. It would have involved so much deception, so much secrecy. I don’t know whether we would have been able to withstand that. And, despite what happened that day on that walk, I don’t know how she felt, either. Whether that kiss was a moment of madness rather than a moment of truth. Can the love of your life be someone you didn’t really get to love at all?

‘I thought she might be. I was hoping I might get to find out.’

‘That’s why you waited until after Arthur was gone to look for her,’ she says. ‘Out of respect?’

‘I didn’t think to do it earlier, truthfully. Didn’t consider it as an option. It was him who suggested it, in the end, with that note he left. I think once I married Arthur, I convinced myself that that was that. I’d made my choice.’

Julie nods. ‘And his death freed you of that, in a way.’

It’s not a question, so I don’t answer, but if it was, I would say this. His death opened me up, loosened me, made me look at things a little differently, made me see more clearly. Arthur was sixty-two years of love and protection, and his death was a letting go.

She goes off to do some washing and make my lunch, leaves me to my thoughts. I close my eyes, not to doze off, but to remember better. Dot and me, up in my bedroom.

‘You said you had something to tell me,’ she said.

‘I do.’ And I wanted to tell her but I didn’t, at the same time.

‘Well, spit it out, then.’ She was standing behind me, plaiting my hair. She tapped me gently on the shoulder with the brush.

‘Arthur’s asked me to marry him,’ I said.

I couldn’t see her face, and she couldn’t see mine. We reacted to the telling of this privately.

‘I think we both knew that was coming,’ she said, after a pause that felt momentous. ‘What did you say?’

It was my turn to pause. I put a hand up behind me and placed it on hers, on the brush handle, and she stopped what she was doing and came round to sit on the bed, facing me.

‘I said yes,’ I said.

Did I see a flash of pain, of jealousy? There, and then gone. She raised her eyebrows and her expression was questioning.

‘Are you sure?’ she asked.

‘No,’ I said, in a small, quiet voice.

And then I started to justify it, the decision, though she hadn’t asked me to. ‘He’s been so good to me since Bill died, so patient. I like how reliable he is, how solid. I feel like he’ll look after me. And we get on, don’t we? He makes me laugh and he’s kind. And he’s always keen to have adventures. I feel like he’ll push me to do things I wouldn’t do otherwise.’

Dot was silent. She looked up at me and smiled, but her eyes were sad. ‘It sounds like you’re trying to talk me, or maybe yourself, into believing it’s the right thing to do.’

‘That isn’t fair.’

‘Isn’t it?’

I looked down at the sheets, because I knew that if I looked up at her at that moment, if our eyes met, something momentous might happen. And I wanted it to, but I was terrified, too, and the terror won out.

‘Being with him, and you, and Bill, those were the happiest times of my life. I feel like I can keep hold of that, if I marry him. If I don’t, and he goes off and marries someone else, and I wait around to meet someone who never knew my brother, I feel like I’ll be letting go of those memories.’

I dared to look up, and she was shaking her head.

‘That’s not how memories work. You’ll always have that, those memories of us all together. But that’s over, now, isn’t it? It was over the moment we lost Bill. And it feels like maybe you’re trying to cling onto him by marrying his best friend.’

Was that what I was doing?

‘I understand, I think. You don’t want to fully let go of him. I don’t, either. And you want all the conventional things. Marriage, children. Arthur is offering all of that to you.’

She was wrong, and I wanted to scream it. I didn’t want those things. I

wanted her, but since that day we'd kissed she'd given me no indication that she felt the same way. I felt like I'd given her every chance. We'd been alone countless times. Like right then. She'd had every opportunity to lean across and close the distance between us and kiss me again. And so had I, and neither of us had taken it. Was it fear on her part, as it was on mine, or was it a lack of inclination? I wasn't brave enough to ask.

If I could go back there, do that day again, differently, would I be brave enough to risk it all? I don't know, but I do know that my life could have taken a wildly different course if I had.

'Mabel?'

I look up and Julie is standing behind the sofa, telling me she's about to go.

'You were miles away,' she says. 'Is there anything else you need before I head off?'

I shake my head. Because the things I need aren't material, and no one can give them to me. A second chance. A rewinding of time. The girl I was, and the girl she was, and the hidden love that may have existed between us.

There's a knocking at the door that sounds like someone trying to raise the dead.

'All right,' I call out. 'I'm coming.'

When I get the door open, after faffing about a bit with the chain, I see Julie on the doorstep, breathless and excited.

'I thought you were coming at two today,' I say.

'I was, I am, I just... had to talk to you about something. Can I come in?'

I step back and she comes inside. She's beaming, happier than I've ever seen her. What could possibly have happened between yesterday afternoon and now to provoke this kind of elation? Because that's the word for how she looks. Elated.

'You'd better sit down, Mabel,' she says. 'And I'd better, too. I'm all antsy. Can't stay still.'

She perches on the edge of the sofa and I go to my armchair, keen to find out what this is all about.

'I had a message this morning, on Facebook,' she says.

I nod, encouraging her to go on.

'It was from Charles.'

Dot's brother. In all the excitement of looking for Joan, and then the heartbreak of her telling us Dot had passed away, I forgot all about that lead. That message. And now, Julie has been in touch with Dot's closest living relative, and I imagine she's here to fill in some gaps for me, let me know about corners of Dot's life that I wasn't privy to.

'Go on,' I say.

‘I just need some water,’ she says, leaping up and disappearing into the kitchen. ‘Do you want anything, Mabel?’

‘I’d love a tea,’ I say.

While she’s making it, I try to guess at what she might be here to tell me. Something about Dot’s sexuality, perhaps? I’ve wondered about that, since finding out that her marriage didn’t last long and she didn’t marry again. But if Julie is about to say that, how will I feel? Will it be better to know that she could have felt the same way as I did, or worse? I let my mind wander a bit further. What about if she left me something, like a letter? And Charles, or whoever was in charge of sorting out the will wasn’t able to get it to me, but now they’ve found this connection, via Julie? It’s a slim chance, but the idea of words written by Dot lifts me a little. I can picture her handwriting, its loops and curves. I start to think about what she might have had to say.

‘Here,’ Julie says, placing my mug of tea on the windowsill for me. ‘Mmm, lovely daffs, don’t they smell wonderful?’

They do, but now that I’ve gone so far down the track of imagining Dot left me something – some kind of explanation, perhaps, or a declaration of love, even the friendly kind – I need to know Julie’s news immediately.

‘Please tell me,’ I say.

‘I’m trying to! It’s Dot, Mabel. Joan was wrong.’

Joan was wrong. About what? And then it hits me. Could she really mean that?

‘Dot’s alive, Mabel!’

‘No,’ I say. ‘No.’

My hands are trembling, and Julie’s face falls. And it’s not that I don’t want what she’s saying to be true, it’s that I’ve accepted the opposite, and I don’t think I can do it again, if this turns out to be a mistake.

‘Mabel,’ Julie says, coming over to me and taking both my hands in hers. ‘You’re so cold. It’s the shock, I expect. I promise you it’s true. Charles confirmed it. She’s living in Portsmouth. He remembered you the second I mentioned you, said he was sure Dot would be delighted to hear from you. He gave me her phone number, Mabel.’

She goes back to where she was sitting and roots in her handbag, then pulls out a slip of paper and passes it to me. On it, she’s written Dot’s name and a phone number. And I can’t believe it. That Dot’s alive, that she’s living less than two hours away, that this series of eleven numbers on this piece of tatty paper is a connection from me to her, if only I dare to use it. I don’t

realise I'm crying until Julie hands me a tissue, and then I can't stop. All the emotion of the past few months is coming out, now, and there's nothing I can do about it.

'Has something happened?'

I look up, and Erin's in the room. She's wearing leggings and a baggy T-shirt and her hair and face still bear the marks of recent sleep. She's on Easter holidays, and it's her last big chance to study before her exams, but as far as I can tell, there's not much work going on. It's all sleeping, and Hannah, and shifts at the supermarket to raise a bit of money for university. And I've never been a mother, thought I didn't know the first thing about nurturing or guiding, but I keep wanting to tell her that there's no use saving the money if she's not also putting the work in to make sure she actually gets to go in the first place.

Julie looks to me for permission, and I nod.

'I had a message from Dot's brother. She's alive and well.'

Erin's mouth hangs open. 'So that Joan, she was just...'

'Wrong,' I say. 'Mixed up, or confused.'

'Charles did say that Dot's ex-husband died a few years back,' Julie says. 'So maybe that's where the confusion came from.'

'I can't believe I just accepted what she said. But she seemed so sure.'

Erin comes over to me and leans her skinny frame over my armchair until she's hugging me. It's a little awkward, but comforting all the same.

'I'm so happy for you,' she says, pulling away. 'So what next?'

I look from her to Julie. 'I suppose I'll telephone her, and then, if she's happy to meet, perhaps we'll go there?'

'Road trip!' Erin says, laughing.

I want to capture the essence of that moment. When I haven't spoken to Dot yet, haven't had the opportunity to be let down, or pushed away, or told that what I felt was really nothing in the grand scheme of a life. We're all just so excited about the prospect of the woman I loved – love – still being in the world, of there still being a chance to connect with her. And I'm so grateful. To Charles, for answering that message. And to Julie and Erin, for caring so much about this quest, which has no bearing on their lives whatsoever.

'I'd better go,' Julie says, getting up and brushing down her trousers. I notice that she's wearing odd socks, and a long T-shirt that has tiny holes at the collar and the slogan 'Shh, I'm Sleeping' on the front. She notices me noticing, and laughs.

‘I was still in bed when I got the message. Just threw on some trousers and came straight over. But I’ll see you later, Mabel, and we’ll talk about it all more then. Okay?’ She looks to Erin. ‘Are you around this morning? It’s a big shock, I just want to be sure she’s all right.’

‘Absolutely,’ Erin says. ‘No plans beyond making and eating toast. I’ll be right here, Mabel.’

‘I’m fine,’ I say, swiping a hand through the air as if to dismiss any concerns.

But I’m not fine, not really. I’m in disarray. I’m undone.

I hear the click of the front door as Julie leaves, and then Erin goes off to get her toast, humming a tune that’s almost familiar. Must be one of those songs she plays over and over. I stand up and walk to the door of the front room. I can see into the kitchen from there. She’s still humming, and she dances from the toaster to the drawer where we keep the knives to the fridge for butter and jam. She is so alive, so present. And I realise I was wrong when I told Julie that Erin was me. She’s much more Dot.

The idea comes to me in a flash. I’ll put her in my will. Leave her the house. That way, she’ll never have to go back to her family, who want to crush and stifle her. She’ll be able to be here, fully herself. Or to sell the place and put the money towards something more to her taste. I can see her in one of those modern, airy flats, all light and floorboards. She turns, then, and sees me looking at her.

‘What?’ she asks. Her voice is gentle, kind.

‘Nothing.’

‘Can I get you anything, Mabel?’

‘No,’ I say. ‘Nothing.’

When she brings in her plate of toast and a big glass of orange squash, I am sitting down again, looking at Dot’s telephone number.

‘Is it scary?’ she asks. ‘Calling her? Taking that step?’

I nod. Because there’s no point pretending it’s not. Reconnecting with someone – or trying to – after so many years have gone by is never going to be easy. But when you parted on uncertain terms and there are strong feelings involved and you don’t know quite where you stand, or stood, it’s something else.

‘Do you want me to do it?’ she asks.

I laugh. She is fearless, now, this girl who was so worried about telling her family who she is. She would do this for me, I know, but it wouldn’t be

right. How would I react, if some young girl telephoned me, purporting to be a friend of Dot's? We're much too old to need a go-between.

'I'll do it,' I say. 'I'm just trying to work out what I'm going to say.'

She is quiet, the crunch of toast the only sound in the room for a minute or two. I look at the daffodils, watch a woman go by the window with her two children, one holding each hand, a weary look on her face.

When I say I'm ready, Erin nods and gets up to leave the room. I don't have to ask her for privacy, and I'm grateful for that. I hear her on the stairs, and I get my mobile telephone from the drawer and enter the numbers, ever so carefully. It wouldn't do to make a misstep now, to connect to the wrong person. It feels so important, somehow, that I get this right.

There is ringing, one ring, two, three. Then it stops, but there's no voice at first. Just a bit of scrabbling around. Then I hear it. Her.

'Hello?'

I feel a lump start to form in the back of my throat and I think for a minute I'm not going to be able to get the words out.

'Dot,' I say, my voice a croak. 'Hello, Dot. It's Mabel. Mabel Beaumont.'

She is quiet for so long that I think something must have happened to the line, or that she's cut me off. I take the telephone away from my ear and look at it, but it's still connected, the seconds timing the call still ticking past.

'Mabel,' she says, clear as a bell. 'Our Charles said I might be hearing from you. It's been a while.'

A while. I close my eyes and see the years flash past me. My wedding, my parents' deaths, house moves. Day after day after day at work in various typing pools and offices, holidays in Wales and Cornwall and, once or twice, France. Day trips and walks in the woods and sitting in this room with Arthur, our books on our laps and mugs of tea steaming on the coffee table.

'It has,' I say. 'I've been looking for you.'

'What, for all these years?'

She is teasing, like she always did, and I splutter a laugh.

'No, no, not for years. For a few months. Since Arthur died.'

There's a sharp intake of breath. 'You and Arthur, you were together all this time, until a few months ago?'

I nod, before remembering she can't see me. 'That's right,' I say.

'Well, now you've found me, Mabel. Shall we see each other in the flesh?'

It's then that I think hearing her voice would have been enough, if that's



all that was on offer. The sweet cadence of it, the lilt. The fun that's caught in between the words, the promise of mischief. But that's not all, because she's talking about meeting up, and I want that more than anything.

'Let's,' I say. 'Just name the day, Dot. I'll come to you.'

We all go in the end. Erin wanted to come but doesn't have a car, so Julie offered to drive, but then two days ago her car broke down in the middle of a roundabout in Overbury and needs new brake pads. Julie said she was just pleased she didn't go through the windscreen when the brakes failed her, which we all agreed was a blessing. So then we talked to Patty, and she said she felt like she wanted to be a part of it, since she'd been with us on the trip to London, but that she'd never fit us all in her Fiat 500. That's when Kirsty stepped in. She drives a huge people carrier thing, more van than car, and it's that we're all strapped into, excited chatter buzzing.

I'm not part of it. I feel sick. I've got Dotty in her car seat next to me and Kirsty keeps making cooing noises any time she seems like she's about to cry. I offer her a finger at one point, and she takes it, grabs it tight. It gets a bit uncomfortable after a while, the way my wrist is bent, but I daren't pull it back in case it sets her off. I'm terrified of Kirsty changing her mind, deciding it's too much. So I wriggle my finger around a bit, get settled.

Erin's in the passenger seat, and I can hear her telling Kirsty about these tickets she's buying for her and Hannah to see Fleetwood Mac, and I idly wonder if it's the Fleetwood Mac I've heard of or something different altogether. Kirsty's making excited squealing sounds but breaking off every so often to listen to the satellite navigation system. Julie's on my other side, but she's got her neck craned and is talking to Patty, on her own in the back row, about Harry, the man from her dancing class who Patty's recently started going out with. Or seeing, or whatever it is you say.

We've been driving for about twenty minutes when an almighty stench

arises from somewhere.

‘What in god’s name is that?’ I ask, pulling my finger from Dotty to hold my nose.

She starts screaming, then.

‘I think she needs a change, Kirsty love,’ Julie says.

There are services up ahead so Kirsty pulls off and we park and I pace around a bit while Julie helps Kirsty get the baby sorted.

‘How are you feeling?’ It’s Patty, and her face is a picture of concern.

I stop walking. I know there’s no colour in my face. Kirsty put a bit of makeup on me for this, but I suspect if I looked in a mirror now, I’d see a clown staring back at me. What will Dot think?

‘What if none of it was as important to her as it was to me?’ I ask.

Patty reaches across and takes hold of both of my hands. ‘If that’s the case, we’ll deal with it. But remember, you’re the one who got married.’

They all know the full story, now. I think about what she’s saying. It’s true. I got married. Dot might have thought that meant I saw what happened between us as a mistake. God, what if she’s gone through her life thinking that?

‘I couldn’t see another way,’ I say.

‘I know,’ Patty says. ‘I know.’

She doesn’t let go of my hands, and we stand there like that until Julie calls out that we’re ready to hit the road again.

‘Have you ever been in love?’ I ask, as we walk back over to the car.

Patty sighs. ‘Only with Sarah’s dad.’

We’re in earshot of the others now and Julie gives Patty a nudge as she climbs in past her.

‘Are you ready to tell us who he is yet?’

‘I think I know,’ I say.

They all turn to me.

‘Do you?’ Patty asks. ‘Go for it.’

I nod. ‘It’s Michael Silver, isn’t it?’

There’s a collective gasp and it frightens Dotty, who starts to wail. I give her my finger to hold again.

‘How did you know?’ Patty asks.

Julie looks like she’s about to explode. ‘Michael bloody Silver! I thought he was one of the good guys.’

‘I’ve seen the way you react when he’s on television,’ I say. ‘And he’s

the right sort of age, plus Sarah has those gorgeous blue eyes. I just put it together.'

'That's my big secret,' Patty says. 'I fell in love with Michael Silver, and he was married, and didn't want to have anything to do with our child.'

Her voice doesn't shake, but a look crosses her face, and I think that you probably never get over something like that.

'And he's never once met her?' Julie checks, shaking her head.

'Never once.'

We're quiet after that. What is there to say? I spend the next few miles watching the fields and trees rush by outside the window, thinking that there are worse things than not getting to spend your life with the person you love because of circumstances and society. What Patty suffered is worse. Indifference. Is that what I could be faced with today? But no, I play back our telephone call in my head, as I've done over and over, mostly in the early hours of the morning. If she was indifferent, she would have said she wasn't interested in seeing me, wouldn't she? Her tone was playful, fun. She sounded happy to hear from me.

It seems like hardly any time has passed when Kirsty pulls up on an ordinary residential street and says, 'I think this is it.'

It's unbelievable, how close she's been. I peer out of the window at Dot's house. It looks like it was built in the 1930s, and the lawn at the front is small and neat.

'Do you want to go alone?' Julie asks. 'Or do you want one of us to come with you?'

I know she wants me to take her. She's been on every step of this journey with me, but I need to do this by myself. There will be time, after, for introductions, I hope. There will be time for me to show her this gaggle of women who I love like family.

'On my own, if you don't mind,' I say.

She nods, clearly disappointed. And I want to thank her, but there'll be time for that later, too. I get out of the car, slide the door shut, walk up the path and stand on the doorstep. This piece of wood is all that separates us. I look at my watch. Dot said eleven and it's five to. What is she doing, inside? Rushing about, making sure things are ready? Frozen, in a chair? Or standing on the other side of this door, her heart beating wildly, the way it did the day we kissed?

I knock, take a step back. When I turn to the car, Kirsty gives me a little

wave, and I imagine them all in there, picking over the Michael Silver news. I could go back there and join in. It would be so easy. But just as I'm thinking it, there's a sound. A chain being pulled back, a door opening. And there she is. Dot Brightmore. A smile on her face so wide, and her eyes full of sparkle. She looks entirely different, and just the same. And I love her. God, I love her. I want to reach out and pull her into my arms and tell her that I was wrong, and I was stupid, and I'm here, now, and I know we're old women and I'm five minutes early but I hope it's not too late.

'Mabel,' she says. 'It's really you.'

We stand there, stuck, and then she turns and leads me inside. Her house is like a treasure box. All mismatched furniture and photos and shiny things. I just know she has chosen everything here herself, because she loved it, not caring what went with what or what other people would think. In the living room, she gestures for me to sit down and I choose a hot-pink armchair. She sits down on the edge of a floral chaise longue, and we start to talk.

For half an hour, we swap life stories. She tells me about her sons and grandchildren, and I notice the way her face changes when she says their names, as if those simple words are bursting with the essence of them and the joy they've brought her. If we had found a way to be together, she wouldn't have had this, I remind myself. We talk about jobs we've done, where we've travelled. Not far, in my case. She has been to places I can't imagine – Morocco, Brazil, Canada. She was always the bold one. But when I hold my life up for her to see, I'm not ashamed of it. It's been small but special, in its way. Isn't everyone's?

'I'm sorry you lost Arthur,' she says.

She looks at me, slow and steady. And that's what takes us back to the 1950s, to that awful and wonderful time.

'My friends,' I say.

'What?'

'I really want to keep talking, but some friends brought me here, and they're sitting outside in the car, and I feel like I shouldn't make them wait too long. One of them has a baby, and...'

Dot laughs. 'Well, you should bring them in,' she says.

I want it to just be me and her, but it isn't practical. I needed these women to hold my hand on this trip, so inviting them in is the least I can do. I open the front door and wave them over with my arm, and I watch, Dot standing behind and to the side of me, as they get out of the car.

Kirsty, stretching and yawning.

‘So beautiful!’ Dot says.

Julie, laughing uproariously at something someone has said, her whole body shaking.

‘She looks like fun,’ Dot says.

Patty, stepping out neatly with Dotty’s car seat in the crook of her elbow.

‘You don’t see elegance like that very often,’ Dot says.

And Erin, bounding out of the front seat and up the path, like an excited puppy.

‘Ah, youth,’ Dot says.

I introduce them all, and Dot lets out a little cry when I tell her that she almost shares a name with Dotty, who is, at that moment, crawling around her hallway in search of something inappropriate to put in her mouth.

‘Welcome,’ Dot says. ‘What a pleasure. Shall I put the kettle on?’

On the way back, I feel calmer, more able to join in with the chatter.

‘She’s just how I imagined,’ Kirsty says, clapping her hands together and then quickly putting them back on the steering wheel after Erin lurches across to grab it.

‘Is she?’ Julie asks. ‘I don’t know what I expected, really. But what about you, Mabel? What was it like, seeing her again after all these years?’

How to answer that? It was like a miracle, like finding a four-leaf clover or seeing an eclipse. And at the same time it was like nothing much, like being with your best friend. Comfortable, and easy.

‘It felt a bit like time travel,’ I say.

‘Did you get to the bottom of things, before we came in?’ Erin asks. ‘Why she left and how she felt and all of that?’

I shake my head. ‘No, that will have to wait for another day.’

There is going to be another day, though. I was a little scared to ask, having been the one to track her down. I thought that if she wanted to get together again, she would say. And luckily, she did. She’s coming to see me, in a week. Staying for a few days. We left it open-ended. The thought of her in my house makes my throat catch and my heart thud.

We are jubilant all the way home. We have succeeded. And though I feel like I have a lot to live for, if I died now, I’d be quite content. But with highs come lows. I’ve learned that. So after they drop me off at my house and I let myself in, I feel as flat as a pancake. Erin’s gone off to do a shift at the supermarket. Alone doesn’t always mean lonely, but sometimes it does. I’m agitated, knowing that Dot is out there, that she’s practically nearby, and I’m

here, on my own, where I've been for so long.

I go over to the sideboard, pull out my spiral notebook, and flick through until I find the list I made. I haven't consulted it for a long time.

- ~~1. Get in touch with friends and family~~
- ~~2. Contact the funeral parlour~~
- ~~3. Go to the supermarket~~
- ~~4. Clean the house~~
5. Find D
6. Help Julie get her husband back
7. Help Patricia get her daughter back
- ~~8. Make sure Kirsty is safe Reunite Kirsty with her family~~
9. Keep an eye on Erin

I get a biro and put a tick by every item, laughing at how I got some of it so wrong. I tap number nine, thinking. And then I get the iPad and search for local solicitors. Ten minutes later, I've got an appointment to discuss my will. So what now? I make a cup of tea and sit on the edge of my armchair, drinking it while it's still too hot, thinking about what you do when you've finished your to-do list.

I'm surprised when I hear a knock at the door. I peer out of the window and see that it's Julie. She's got an expression I can't quite gauge. Part worry, part sadness. She sees me looking and smiles, gestures to the door. She only lets herself in when I'm expecting her.

'I didn't think I'd see you again today,' I say.

'No, I know. I went home and I couldn't settle to anything. Can I take you somewhere that's important to me?'

I open my mouth to say something like, 'As long as it's not too far,' and then I shut it again. Think.

'Yes,' I say.

Because I'm still here, still alive, and I want to do things. Look at what I've already done, what I've changed. And I have no idea what might be next. We get in her car and the sun is shining in our eyes. She puts on sunglasses and I close my eyes, wondering where we'll be when I open them. We don't travel far. When I hear the click of the handbrake going on, I look, and we're by the church. She doesn't say anything, just leads me up into the grounds, past where my family are buried and over to a corner not far from Arthur.



She stops in front of a black marble headstone, and I read it.

Samantha Willis  
9 June 1970 – 11 June 2022  
Daughter, mother, sister, wife and friend  
Your desire to have the last word was extreme

I smile at the final line, then put a hand to my mouth. I look at Julie, and she is standing with her hands behind her back and her head bowed. I wait.

‘My big sister,’ she says, after a couple of long minutes have passed.

I do a quick calculation. This woman, Julie’s sister, died two days after her fifty-second birthday. Last year. She died last year.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say.

It’s such a tiny thing, that apology. And yet I remember people saying it after Arthur – the postman, the vicar, the dog groomer – and it being a small comfort. So I say it anyway.

‘When we met, I was grieving, and I had no idea that you were too.’

She shrugs. ‘I think we’re all grieving for something. Our childhoods or a relationship or a dream.’

It’s true, and yet it’s not the kind of thing I’d expect her to say. I wait for her to follow it up with a joke, but she doesn’t.

‘What was she like?’ I ask.

She smiles, and I’m glad I asked. Don’t people always want to talk about the people they loved? Don’t they always want those people to live on through shared stories and memories?

‘She was infuriating, and kind, and funny,’ she says.

If I had to reduce Arthur to three words like that, which would I choose? Reliable, I think. Patient. Good. I say them again, silently. Reliable, patient, good. I couldn’t really have asked for more than that.

‘Would you mind if we sat down?’ I ask, gesturing to a bench a few yards away.

‘No, of course.’

We sit, our eyes still on her sister’s headstone.

‘Some days, it’s a struggle to get out of bed,’ she admits.

I nod, knowing how she feels. ‘I got it all wrong. I could see that you carried this sadness around, but I thought it was about your marriage breakdown. It was never about that, was it?’

‘I mean, that didn’t help, certainly.’

‘But he’s not the love of your life, I think?’

Julie is quiet. When she speaks again, the words are slow to come.

‘She was. Sam. There are different kinds of love, aren’t there? Patty’s big love is her daughter, mine was my sister, yours is Dot. I’m not sure about Kirsty or Erin yet. Maybe they’re too young to know. Martin was just, I don’t know, along for the ride, I suppose. It was always me and her, ride or die.’

All the times she listened to me talk about losing my brother, when her heart was broken in the same place.

‘Thank you,’ I say, ‘for bringing me here. For telling me about her.’

She puts a hand on mine and we sit there in the bright sunshine for a while, living both in the present and in our memories.

And then she takes me home, drops me off and refuses my offer to come inside. I sit in my armchair with a pot of tea and a plate of custard creams and let myself drift backwards, to a day trip we took. Me and Dot, Bill and Arthur. A picnic blanket and a cloud-free sky. Bill’s Ford Anglia with the dodgy windscreen wiper. The two men in the front and us in the back. They talked about cricket and a film they wanted to see while Dot and I exchanged gossip about the women we worked with. I can see her laughing, bent over double, reaching her hand out and waving it around to tell me to stop, but I can’t remember what I said to cause it. We drove out into the hills and found a secluded spot, and Dot pinned the corners of the tartan blanket down with the picnic basket and three shoes (for some reason, one each of mine, hers and Bill’s). There was a lot of hopping about. Bill challenged Arthur to eat a boiled egg in under thirty seconds, and he did it. Dot ate all the cheese sandwiches. Arthur made a joke about marrying Dot because she’d made his favourite cake, and even though I knew it was silly, I felt a little hurt. When we’d finished eating, Dot said she needed to stretch her legs, and Bill stood up.

‘You stay here,’ she said. ‘Mabel, will you come with me for a bit of a stroll?’

I stood and brushed the crumbs off my skirt, and the men watched us go.

‘Do you think we’ll have many more summers like this one?’ Dot asked me.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, I’m just having such a nice time and I feel worried that something will change.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like one of them will ask one of us to marry them, and it won’t be the same.’

I wasn’t expecting that. ‘Arthur’s not thinking along those lines, I’m pretty sure. And with you and Bill, I wouldn’t be surprised at all but I don’t think it will necessarily change anything.’

‘Don’t you?’ She stopped walking, so I did, too. And we looked at one another.

‘What would it change?’ I asked.

She shook her head. Reached across the small gap between us and picked up my hand. ‘Us. This. Our friendship.’

‘It won’t,’ I said. ‘I won’t let it.’

What did I know? It was the last summer the four of us had, and everything didn’t so much change as implode entirely. But looking back at that day, at that walk, I wonder now what she was getting at. What she was trying to tell me.

When we got back to the blanket, Bill and Arthur were both lying down, side by side, and Arthur was snoring softly. Bill had his arms behind his head, and he flashed us a smile.

‘What time do you want to go back?’ he asked.

I thought about our house, the typing pool, the little things that made up my days. There was never much time for big skies and thoughts that tumbled from one thing to another, unhindered.

‘Never,’ I said.

Bill laughed, and held up a hand for Dot to take. When she did, he pulled her down so she was sitting almost in his lap.

‘I could live here,’ Dot agreed.

‘With me?’ Bill asked.

She looked at him so long I felt like I shouldn’t be watching, and then she turned to look at me, and caught the creeping blush on my cheeks but didn’t acknowledge it.

‘Yes,’ she said.

If they’d been alone, he would have kissed her. Had they kissed, at that point? I feel sure they must have done. But things still felt innocent, and open. Like there were a number of possibilities. Like things could turn this way or that.

When Arthur woke, he asked what he’d missed and we told him nothing.

But it wasn't quite true, I don't think. It felt like something had shifted, infinitesimally, between the four of us. The truth was, and always had been, that he was the one I could have done without, the one I cared about the least. How strange that he was the one I spent my life with, in the end.

On the journey home, we broke down. Something to do with the battery. Luckily, Bill was able to get us off the road and out of harm's way before the car rolled to a stop and refused to start again. We had to wait for over an hour, all of us sulky and ready to be home. The sun had caught the skin on my shoulders and it felt tight and sore. We got out of the car and sat on the bank, waiting for the mechanic Bill had called from the emergency telephone on the side of the road. Dot tried to make us laugh, but we weren't in the mood. It had been a glorious day, and now it was spoiled, and no one really seemed to know quite why. I made a daisy chain and wrapped it around Dot's wrist, and she said something that I've never forgotten.

'Oh Mabel, flowers make me feel hopeless. They just remind me that everything dies.'

‘The girls have got a new tablet,’ Patty says. ‘They’re allowed to video call me whenever they like. I’m sure the novelty will wear off but I’m getting five or six calls a day at the minute.’

We’re at her house, in the conservatory, and she’s pouring the tea.

‘Any plans to visit?’ I ask.

‘They’ve asked if I’d like to spend the summer there,’ she says. ‘Help out with childcare over the holidays, you know.’

‘What did you say?’ Julie asks.

We all wait for her to answer. I know how she loves and misses those girls, but I would hate to see her taken advantage of.

‘I said no,’ she says, surprising me. ‘I’ve got my life down here. I’ve got you.’ She gestures to each of us in turn. ‘And I’ve got Harry.’

Kirsty gives a little cheer. ‘Harry!’

‘I can’t believe you finally gave him a chance,’ Julie says, laughing.

Harry has been going to Patty’s dance class for five years, and even I could see that he dotes on her.

‘Why did you?’ Kirsty asks.

We all look at Patty and she clasps her hands together. ‘Because of Mabel,’ she says.

I wasn’t expecting that.

‘Mabel could have lost herself in grief after Arthur died, but she changed her life instead. That’s true bravery.’ She looks at me. ‘You taught me that I needed to let Sarah go and start living my own life.’

‘Did I?’

‘Yes, you did. You showed me that it’s never too late.’

Julie nods. ‘And you helped me start to talk about Samantha.’

Julie has told all of us about her sister, now. And I think it’s lifted her, the telling. She shares stories and memories and the sadness in her eyes is still there, but it’s diminished. We all have something that’s broken us, I suppose. Nobody gets away unscathed.

‘Do you think it’s serious, with Harry?’ I ask.

Patty dips her head and I notice again how beautiful she is. I wish I could see her modelling, the way she looked when she was in her teens and twenties. But perhaps she’s at her most beautiful now, with all this life behind her, all this wisdom.

‘I think it might be,’ she says.

Julie is sitting next to her and she wraps an arm around Patty and gives her a squeeze. I wonder whether she’s thinking about Martin, about how she lost him twice.

‘Any plans to start dating?’ Patty asks her, and I realise our thoughts must have travelled similar paths.

‘Not really,’ Julie says. ‘There’s no rush, is there? For the first time in my life, I don’t feel like I need to be with someone. I feel like I’m all right on my own, for now. And if someone comes along in a year or two, that’s fine.’

‘There are benefits to living alone,’ Patty says.

She’s right about that. After Arthur died, it was somewhat freeing to be the only person I had to think about when it came to things like eating and watching television. To have a bed to myself, to not have to talk if I didn’t feel like it. But then Erin moved in and I enjoyed her company so much I didn’t care about any of the other things. In a few months, she’ll leave for university, all being well, and I’ll get to experience the pleasures of living alone again, until she returns in the holidays. Best of both worlds, I think.

Kirsty’s been quiet. She’s sitting on the floor, leaning back against an armchair, giving Dotty a bottle. She’s listening to everything but saying very little. I watch Dotty for a minute, the way her eyelids keep drooping and flicking back open as she fights sleep.

‘I hated living alone,’ she says. ‘I love the buzz and chaos of family life.’

‘When did you live alone?’ I ask. ‘Before Ben?’

‘Yes, after university I did various flat-shares with friends and then I managed to buy my own place and it was tiny, only big enough for me, but I was so proud to have it. So I moved in all my things and painted the walls

and put pictures up, but it never felt like home because there was no one else there. When I met Ben, I started staying at his place three or four nights a week and then we moved in together pretty quickly.'

I want to ask whether anything has happened with her family but, at the same time, I don't want to push her. Julie has no such qualms, though.

'Any plans to see your parents again?'

'Yes, actually. I was going to say, that's what Mabel's bravery inspired me to do. Ben and I are going there for the weekend in a couple of weeks.'

'Are you nervous about it?' Patty asks.

'Not really. I've been talking to them on the phone – both of them – and I think I got it wrong, about Tony. I think he's a nice guy, and he makes Mum happy. I just wasn't ready for her to move on so quickly. And Ben's delighted, because he thought it was him I was ashamed of, and I had no idea. So I'm just going to take him home, let him get to know my family, and then we can finally get married.'

Dotty is fast asleep now, and Kirsty stands up carefully and takes her to the hallway to lay her down in her buggy.

'That's great,' Patty says, when she returns. 'So that's a full house, Mabel.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean we've all found the courage to change something, to be honest about something, because of you.'

I don't know what to say.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Erin and I are making beans on toast.

'Sometimes,' Erin says, 'you can't beat beans on toast.'

And I agree. I'm buttering the toast and she's stirring the beans, and I remember all the times Arthur and I stood in this kitchen together, him doing one job and me doing another. I remember how he was always up for doing something, always joining things and offering his help and making small changes. And how I often thought those things were pointless, and that one person couldn't do much to change the way things were. But now Patty has found a way to be happy without that happiness being tied to her daughter, and Julie has started the grieving process for her sister, and Kirsty is learning

to let the people she loves get to know one another. And Dot is back in my life. And it's all because I decided to take a chance, to finally do something after all those years of saying no.

Erin is standing by the fridge. 'Shall I grate some cheese to go on top?' she asks.

'Why not?'

I put the kettle on to boil, and when it starts its whistle, I take two mugs out of the cupboard, hold one up to Erin. She nods. She's like me, never says no to a cup of tea. She's learned how to make it just the way I like it. The way Arthur did.

At the table, eating our meal, Erin asks about Dot.

'Will I be in the way, when she's here? You two have so much to talk about.'

'We do, but it will be fine.'

'Just say the word, if you want me to give you some space. I can always go to my room, or out.'

I like that she calls it her room. I hope she always will. I realise this is probably as good a time as any to bring up the thing I've been mulling over.

'Erin,' I say.

She looks up, suddenly serious. She looks like she thinks I'm about to tell her I'm dying. 'What is it?'

'I just want you to know you'll always have a home here. University holidays, after graduation, whenever.'

She lowers her head and when she lifts it again, I see that there are tears in her eyes.

'I didn't mean to upset you,' I say. 'It's just, I don't want you to think you might have to go back there, to your family. Because you won't.'

Does she see what I'm saying? It's all signed and sealed. This house is hers, when I go. But is it too much, to actually spell that out, right now, over beans on toast? I don't want her to think she has to show me endless gratitude. As far as I'm concerned, it just makes sense. I have this house, and I won't need it for much longer, but she will.

'Thank you,' she says.

And it's impossible to know whether she fully understands. Whether it will come as a shock when I die and she gets the call to tell her she's a homeowner. I'm happy to leave it like that, for now.

'Do you have plans with Hannah tonight?'



‘No,’ she says, frowning a little.

‘Trouble?’

‘No, nothing like that. It’s just that her parents are cracking down on her, saying she needs to get serious about her exams. And I do too, I suppose. So I’ll be shutting myself up in my room and trying to get all my dates in order for History.’

I nod. Think of us, our evening ahead. Me downstairs, her upstairs.

‘I’d be very happy to help. To test you, or something,’ I say. ‘I mean, I don’t know the things you know, but if you have books I can refer to...’

I trail off, but she’s grinning. ‘Would you?’

‘Of course.’

She crams the last piece of toast into her mouth and then disappears upstairs, returning with her arms loaded with heavy textbooks. And I don’t feel daunted by it, this offer I made, on a whim. I might learn something. And that’s a privilege, at my age. To change something, or learn something. To keep growing.

The morning Dot's due to arrive, I can't keep still. She said she'd be here at midday, and I wake at five, my heart heavy in my chest, as if it has too much love to hold. I go downstairs and put the kettle on, and something catches my eye through the window. A flash of green, poking out from behind one of my pots. I open the back door and go out there in my slippers. It's a bone toy that Olly used to play with. I'll drop it round to Kirsty's next time I'm nearby.

Time drags. I wait for Erin to wake, and when she does, I offer her porridge and toast. She laughs as I make pot after pot of tea. Then she announces that she's going to the library and I want to ask her to stay and help take my mind off the waiting, but I know I can't. I've turned Dot's visit into this seismic event, which I've been building up to my whole life, but it might, in fact, be as small and simple as two old friends catching up after many years apart.

As I wash up the breakfast dishes, standing where I stood when I saw that flash of green earlier this morning, I remember something. Just a small snippet of conversation from that last day Arthur and I had together.

'Do you know where Olly's bone is?' he asked.

'That green thing he carries around? I haven't seen it.'

'I'll have a look for it tomorrow. He seems a bit lost without it.'

That was the extent of it. But am I imagining it, or did he reach across for my spiral notebook after he said that, as if he was going to make a note of it?

*Find D*

And did I see him start to write something, and then ask if he wanted a cup of tea? He looked up, put the pen down, said he would get it. I finish the note for him, in my head.

### *Find Dog's bone*

Did I push that memory aside, bury it somehow, because I wanted the note to mean something else? Because I needed it to? It doesn't matter now. He is gone, and I will never know. And if a scribbled, unfinished note about a dog toy was what it took for me to do the thing I've always wanted and needed to do, that's fine with me. Life doesn't always take the expected, straight path. I know that now.

I go to make yet another cup of tea, and Arthur's in the kitchen, leaning back against the counter. I look at him, really take him in, and I know, somehow, that this is the last time. That when Dot comes inside this house, he'll really be gone.

'Goodbye, Arthur,' I say. 'Sleep well.'

And I blink, and he's gone.

At half past eleven, I force myself to stop flitting about and sit in my armchair. Erin brought home fresh daffodils after her shift yesterday, and they're just beginning to open. I find myself going back over how Dot and I met. We were eleven, both new to grammar school, pushed together when the teacher, Mr Dennis, asked us to get into pairs and she looked over at me and raised her eyebrows in a question. We were learning about the lead up to the Second World War, and it didn't quite feel like history, back then.

'How do you think Hitler persuaded people to vote for him?' I read aloud from the sheet we'd been given.

Dot ignored me. Looked around, checking where the teacher was. What was she going to do?

'Do you dare me to go out and run to the end of the corridor and back without him noticing?' She jerked her head in the direction of our teacher.

I was bewildered. Why would she want to do that? 'No,' I said.

She shrugged, pulled the sheet of paper towards her. 'Let's do this, then.'

And I knew, in that second, that this girl was nothing like me. Saw, for the first time, how very different people could be. And how intoxicating. That was the only thing I learned that day.

There's a knock at the door, loud and confident, and I get up and take a

deep breath before going out into the hall. She is standing on my doorstep, here in Broughton, where I found and then lost her. And to an outsider, it would just look like one old woman visiting another. Nothing special or earth-shattering. But from here, from inside my heart, it's a tiny miracle to be standing across from her.

'You're here,' I say, and then wish I could take it back and say something less silly.

'I'm here,' she says. 'Can I come in?'

There is so much to tell her. So much to ask. But where do you start? With tea, I decide. I've bought some fancy biscuits and I put them on a plate while the kettle boils. I've left her in the front room, and I picture her in there, looking around and making silent judgements about the life I've lived. My hands are shaking when I reach into the fridge for the milk. I tell myself to stop, to calm down. I don't know what's going to come of any of this, and I mustn't build it up too much. It might be nothing.

But it isn't. It isn't nothing. To have found her, and to have her here, in the home I shared for many years with a man we once knew.

'Can I help?' she asks, appearing in the kitchen doorway. 'It's a lovely home you've got, Mabel.'

I hand her a mug and follow her through to the front room. I watch her looking at things, peering in close at a photograph of me and Arthur on our wedding day, picking up a shell I keep on the bookcase that I found, once, on a beach in Cornwall. She is really here. Her blonde hair is grey, now, and the curls have gone. It's cut short, not unlike Erin's. I think Erin calls hers a pixie cut. She's heavier, too, her body more rounded and feminine.

'I missed your wedding,' she says.

'And I missed yours.'

She snorts. 'If you'd come to mine, you might have told me I was doing the wrong thing. That it wouldn't last more than a few years.'

I don't say anything, and I know we're both thinking about my marriage, about whether or not it was the right thing. Whether or not it was what you might call a success.

'Dear Arthur,' she says. 'He was a good man.'

I nod.

'Were you happy together?'

It's such a big question. And I hope I'll get the chance, in the coming days or weeks, to answer it fully. For now, I hesitate.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘I mean, good days and bad. But mostly good.’

‘And no children,’ she says.

‘No. No children.’

*Ask me, I think. Ask me why, or whether I wished he was you. You were always the bold one, Dot, and I need you to be bold for both of us, now.*

It’s as if she hears my thoughts, because she looks at me, really fixes me with her eyes, and I see that they haven’t changed. They still contain glitter and sparkle and the promise of mischief.

‘When you kissed me, that day, after Bill died...’

‘Yes?’ I can barely breathe.

‘Did you... did you mean it? Because I was so sure you did, and then there was something on the day of the funeral when I couldn’t think straight, but then never again, and when you said you were going to marry Arthur, I thought perhaps I’d imagined the whole thing. I didn’t imagine it, did I?’

I stand still, taking her in. There is fear in her voice, and sadness. Could it have all been different? And would I have wanted it to be?

‘Is that why you left?’ I ask. ‘Is that why you didn’t stay in touch?’

She bows her head. ‘You’d made your choice. I couldn’t stay to watch it play out.’

‘You didn’t imagine it,’ I say.

‘All these years,’ she says, taking my mug from me and putting them both down on the coffee table. ‘A whole lifetime, and we could have...’

I don’t need her to finish her sentence. It’s too painful. We could have been together, could have experienced more of that raging bliss, could have let our passion and desire carry us through the years. Could have broken our families’ hearts, could have been discovered, and punished by the law. Could have walked that fine line between pleasure and pain, between love and loss. And there would have been no Arthur, for me. And her sons and grandchildren would not exist. It isn’t possible, to erase the lives we’ve lived. We only have today, and whatever future we’re granted.

‘We’ll have a second life,’ I say. ‘Starting now.’

She nods, and I see that she understands everything I’m asking her to honour. ‘A second life,’ she says.

And when she touches my hand, it feels like fire.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Laura Pearson** is the author of issues-based women's fiction. She founded The Bookload on Facebook and has had several pieces published in *the Guardian* and *the Telegraph*. *The Last List of Mabel Beaumont* is her first title with Boldwood.

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