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**The new Elizabethans a novel-in-stories with critical afterword  
modifying motherhood in a new motherland : artistic approaches  
to communicating change in female and national identity during  
Elizabeth II's reign.**

Sarah Ivens Moffett  
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<https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/2994>

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THE NEW ELIZABETHANS

A Novel-in-Stories with Critical Afterword

MODIFYING MOTHERHOOD IN A NEW MOTHERLAND: ARTISTIC  
APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATING CHANGE IN FEMALE AND NATIONAL  
IDENTITY DURING ELIZABETH II'S REIGN

By

Sarah Ivens Moffett

B.A., University of Kent at Canterbury, 1996

M.A., University of Louisville, 2011

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in Humanities

Department of Comparative Humanities  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2018



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A Dissertation Approved on

April 16<sup>th</sup> 2018

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## ABSTRACT

### THE NEW ELIZABETHANS

A Novel-in-Stories with Critical Afterword

#### MODIFYING MOTHERHOOD IN A NEW MOTHERLAND: ARTISTIC APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATING CHANGE IN FEMALE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY DURING ELIZABETH II'S REIGN

Sarah Ivens Moffett

April 16<sup>th</sup> 2018

*The New Elizabethans* is a literary novel-in-stories about the dramatic changes in gender and national identity witnessed by British women during Elizabeth II's reign, a unified circle of ten finely observed stories outlining the desolation and confusion felt in this era that will be instantly, painfully evocative for anyone who has questioned who we are now – as individuals, as families, as a gender and as a nation.

Told in episodic tales, jumping between eras and voices, *The New Elizabethans* gives witty, compact and remorseful snapshots of British life from 1953, the year of the Queen's coronation, until today, the final chapter ending on the day of Prince Harry's wedding, from characters defined as Baby Boomers, Gen X-ers and Gen Y-ers, expats and immigrants, mothers and daughters. At the centre of the axis sits the Crown, observing wryly as her subjects' struggle with adultery, racism, infertility, depression and

the day to day struggle of working out how to be a mother in a changing world that has changing expectations of what a woman should look like, think and provide.

From the fall of the British Empire and the shockwaves across the Atlantic from Trump's election, to the minutiae of an outbreak of nits and a fight with a breastfeeding activist in a coffee shop, *The New Elizabethans* follows five generations of London women whose regrets, traumas and triumphs will offer comfort, perspective and an insight into the zeitgeist of the #metoo movement, the global obsession with *The Crown* and *Meghan Markle*, and the eternal question: can women have it all?

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## THE NEW ELIZABETHANS

A newspaper had been left on one of the cafe's tables. The obituary section lay open and someone had carefully circled three entries with thick, black ink. Next to one was a pair of jaunty exclamation marks, which expressed more delight than surprise, thought Cressida, who over time had resigned herself to her countrymen's open enjoyment at other people's despair. She'd grown-up ploughing through Dickens, who wrote of Parisian crones merrily knitting and gossiping as they watched helpless human beings clambering onto scaffolds and getting their heads sliced off in front of a roaring crowd. She couldn't believe it as a young girl, delving into the classics tucked up in bed after school and chores, eking out pages after lights off, droopy eyelids inches from the page following her flashlight's glares under the blankets. The cruelty we are capable of inflicting on those around us.

*'We had everything before us, we had nothing before us'*

Cressida, now 53-years-old and a little less surprised by life's brutality, pushed the well-read paper away and returned her hands under the table, where she sat in the far corner of the sunlit room, weaving her thin, dry fingers together until they formed an empty nest on her lap - the lap her children once fought over.



“Here’s your pot of tea, love. You sure I can’t persuade you to try a slice of cake? It’s a Victoria Sponge,” sang the woman who’d been racing around the café – which was still festooned with the Union Jack bunting from the Queen’s coronation a few days earlier - since it had opened at 6am. It was now 4.23pm. The waitress loomed over her with an arched eyebrow, waiting for an answer as she plonked down the chintzy hand-painted teapot. Cressida shuddered. Her grandmother had collected teapots just like it and if she behaved as a child, which she always did, she was allowed to climb up onto a chair and choose one to carefully take off the high shelf, dust and admire. Tea had never been poured from them. “Even if King George V himself popped by for a cuppa, I’d tell him to keep his grubby mitts off my posh china,” her grandmother snapped when Cressida’s mother once questioned the sanctity of the old woman’s ceramics. Her grandmother, a stout and proud lady who would never leave the house without her one good hat, which wasn’t very good at all, and a pair of gloves, wasn’t used to being questioned. In fact, she forbade it.

“I really couldn’t,” Cressida refused the offer with a curt smile and busied herself by placing a sugar cube, which had a tiny heart painted on it with red food dye, into a delicate teacup, then filling it with a long pour of Earl Grey. The heart dissolved with the first splash of warmth. Cressida sipped too quickly, scorching the tongue that had been stuck to the roof of her mouth since she’d woken up that morning, realizing today was the day. If they walked in now, the girls, if she could still call them that when they were both 27 years old and married, she’d be unable to speak. Even getting three words out to the woman serving her, a stranger who seemed nice enough if a bit pushy, was a trial. But tea would help. Tea was what the British Empire ran on, her grandmother always said.

“Suit yourself,” the proprietress pulled out the bill from her jam-stained apron and sat it next to the milk jug.

Snooty cow, Jean thought. But sadly by now she was used to rude customers who lacked the common decency to tag on a please or thank you, or to buy more than a cheap pot of tea in exchange for sitting in her establishment for hours, gormlessly watching the world go by as they sought shelter from a sudden downpour, or nursing one cup of cocoa as they worked their way, slowly, through *War and Peace*.

“You’re mad taking this on at your age, Jean” her husband Archie, a sensible man who had never dared be his own boss, had warned her two years ago when the bank had agreed to give them a loan, in his name, for her idea. She found the perfect spot on the high street, a slightly crooked Tudor building that was filled to the brim with cosy light from its creaking floorboards to its oak-beamed ceiling. There was a cavernous fireplace in the heart of the dining room, large enough to fit a small table and two chairs, which Jean knew would make a romantic spot for courting couples to hide from prying eyes. She could make good use of the kitchen, which had a huge oven to bake pies, pasties and cakes, and a long, practically new, Formica countertop she envisioned loading up with plated corned beef salads and cheese flans, creamed swedes and braised onions, ready for the queues of hungry patrons who’d soon make The William Morris Tearoom, est. 1951, their favourite destination.

“Running a café isn’t just about cooking food and chewing people’s ears off,” warned Archie. “Rationing makes it bloody hard to do anything exciting. The blokes up the pub go to blows over who gets an extra sausage. And people can be so fussy, they’ll annoy you.” She’d ignored him, as she always did, and eventually she could tell Archie

was pleased she had. He no longer had to ask Jean if she was alright with their children moving out and moving on because the tearoom became her third baby and kept her busy. The only female-run business on a bustling street of beer-bellied cobblers, butchers and greengrocers, it had taken her two years to turn a decent profit, and Jean could see how Archie glowed with pride whenever he walked through the door and heard the happy burr of his wife's satisfied regulars.

Cressida caught the impatient glare of the woman who'd brought her tea but couldn't bring herself to change her mind and say that, actually, she would take a slice of cake. She couldn't eat anything. Victoria Sponge. Victoria, and Vera, the reason she felt so nervous, the reason she was digging her brittle nails into the itchy wool of her shirt. Her mind kept jumping ferociously to the past, which she could remember in detail, yet she was struggling to recall her morning. She'd woken George up at 8am and led him into the kitchen for eggs and soldiers and a milky cup of sweet coffee, then got him dressed when he'd finished. Then while he sat at the table and drew airplanes and trains in primary colours, she'd bathed and deliberated over what to wear. Just before leaving, she'd applied her rouge with a dab of her ring finger to each cheek, pushed red lipstick around the track of her mouth, sprayed a little *Femme de Rochas* on her wrists and combed her neat, ash-grey bob, then answered the door to the next-door neighbour who said she could sit with George for a few hours. She remembered that much. Everything else – leaving the flat, the journey to the café, the words she'd planned to say as she walked to her meeting, escaped her.

There was a crisp tinkle of a bell as the heavy door to the café shook open. The din from the high street consumed the room for a few seconds until the slightly taller of

the two almost identical, striking women who had just walked in pushed it shut with a bang, and the peaceful clink of china and chatter resumed. And there they were. The girls. Her girls. Cressida stood up, pushing her fingertips into the wooden table to steady herself, a hotness climbing from her breast onto her neck.

“Mother?” Victoria walked straight up to Cressida’s table. You haven’t changed at all, Cressida thought, soaking in her youngest daughter’s sweet face, unable to speak. Victoria’s spirit was still there – the impatience, the excitement with which she carried herself. She’d always been like that, since she was 16 months old and taking her first stumbles around the back garden in the smocked white dress Cressida had made her, plucking daisies and proffering them to her three older brothers, who’d been more interested in fashioning guns out of sticks than flowers, but who accepted graciously.

“That’s her,” confirmed Vera, who always followed behind her sister, suspicious, waiting to understand the situation before jumping into it. “Shall we get this over and done with?” Whether Vera was talking to her sister, her mother, or both was unclear. Her eyes had turned to the world outside the window, to the bustle of the street, the purposeful steps of men getting to their night shift, women rushing to the school gates. Oh, how she envied them such routine moments. She’d dreaded this meeting almost as much as she’d longed for it.

Cressida sat down and her daughters joined her, their knees inches apart under the table. “I’m so pleased you agreed to meet me,” Cressida finally offered, after a long silence, too heavy with a sad anticipation to be politely shrouded with a pointless exchange of hellos and *how are yous*. “You both look very well. Beautiful.”

“We were worried we wouldn’t recognize you, but you haven’t changed from the image I carry around in my head,” said Victoria. “It is funny how time passes but nothing changes. Even faces.” She giggled nervously, as her mother took a deep breathe. Vera folded her arms across her chest. “Do you still think Vera and I look like twins? Despite her silly boy’s haircut?”

“It’s not silly,” Cressida quickly remarked. “That’s the style all the Hollywood stars are doing.” She turned to look at her elder daughter. “You look lovely, Vera.” Victoria giggled again, her ponytail swooshing freely, as Vera grimaced.

“Are we really talking about such things?” she asked her sister.

“No, no. We shouldn’t be,” Cressida agreed. “I’ve been hoping for this day since

—

“Since you left us?” Vera interjected.

“Yes.”

“We have too, mother,” Victoria quickly placated, glancing at her sister, “both of us.”

“You probably have questions,” Cressida asked. “I don’t know what your father told you, or what your grandmother might have said. And I don’t know if you read all my letters. But I will tell you anything you want to know. If I can. Not a day has gone by, since I left, that I haven’t prayed for you, and dreamed of you, and longed to see your faces —

“Why did you leave me then, mother,” asked Vera, with an anger that she could not remember ever being without.

“I didn’t have a –

“Why did you leave me then, mother,” she repeated.

“She didn’t just leave you, Vera, she left us – all of us,” Victoria said. “Let her speak.”

“But she didn’t. She sent for George. She wanted him. She couldn’t bear to be without George.”

“I wanted all of you but your father wouldn’t let me near you. Did you ever get my letters? Any of them?” Vera shifted in her seat. They hadn’t. “Your father wanted me to take George because he was a weight around his neck. He said he’d put him in an institution for cripples, way outside of London and forgotten about, if I didn’t take him. Poor, sweet George, in a place like that? You remember your brother, so gentle and happy, despite his poor lot in life. I wanted to be with you all, but George was all your father allowed me to have, after I’d been sent away.”

Despite her resolve, Cressida couldn’t help it and a tear slid down her painted cheek and sat on her upper lip. She couldn’t explain it all. The overwhelming sense of pressure she’d felt as a young mother, not much older than the age her girls were now. The heaviness that had crept on her, night after night, as she sat up caring for one sick or rebellious child after another, insane with exhaustion, her body on a relentless cycle of pregnancy and nursing, too often trapped in that claustrophobic two up two down house while her husband was away for months at a time. Even the happy occasions were trials.

The birthdays, when she'd wake up determined to do her best, to bake a cake, the one thing she felt she could do well, as they trampled over her, these children, and nagged her, demanding more. She'd sink onto the floor, in the mess, and think how nice it would be to stick her head in the oven, swig the gas and escape the clawing. Escape those little hands. The ten grabbing hands and jumping feet she'd grown inside her, clambering for a piece of her, taking chunks at a time.

In Cressida's moments of despair, she would grab her children tightly, whomever she could reach, gritting her teeth as she kissed them, squeezing the fury out of her fingers and into their soft limbs, distributing rough tickles instead of the slaps she wanted to hand out. For she loved them, she loved their mucky faces and their shrill voices, even when she hated what they'd turned her into. And she loved how much they loved her, even when she shouted or hid, wishing they'd disappear. They'd always find her within minutes, curled up in piles of laundry – there was always so much laundry – or in the empty bathtub, and laugh at funny mummy's games of hide and seek until they got stitches.

"It was the knives," Cressida said at last. "Your father got back from Argentina and thought I shouldn't be around knives, that I'd do something to myself. And I agreed because I didn't have the energy to fight. And he may have been right. There were moments I was petrified I'd do something to myself too, I was so tired, you see. I didn't think there was another way and I knew – I thought – you'd be fine with your father and grandmother, just for a little while, until I got better."

"Well, we weren't," said Vera, and Victoria reached for her hand, wrapping her fingers into her sister's palm.

“I’m so sorry,” Cressida offered.

“It’s too late for that now, don’t you think?” Vera stared hard into her mother’s face for the first time, wanting to break her, not realizing it was too late.

On the day Cressida left, the children were called to the supper table and told their mother was feeling unwell and needed a little break. Arthur was annoyed he hadn’t been invited on the holiday, thumping his fist so hard on the dinner table his cup of condensed milk, a treat saved for special days, spilled onto his school blazer, earning him a clip round the ear from his already wound-up father. Alfred asked if she’d be bringing them back gifts from her trip, because his mother knew he was on the market for a new yo-yo. George appeared to be nonplussed, tucking into a tinned sardine sandwich with gusto with one hand, stroking Vera’s hair with the other. Victoria erupted into a morbid wailing, kicking her father’s chair legs with her red patent shoes, while Vera repeatedly asked to know more; a request that was repeatedly ignored.

At 7pm that evening, while her children were getting into their stripy, flannel pyjamas and curling up together in the tiny box room they shared to scare each other with ghost stories, Cressida arrived at the mental hospital – the loony bin, as the neighbours called it - a maze of redbrick Victorian buildings with gothic turrets, separated by asphalted pathways and manicured lawns. It sat high on a hill in the Essex suburbs, overlooking the freedom and excitement of London, and had won countless awards in the five decades since it had officially been opened by The Empress of India herself, for its ground-breaking research into lunacy. It was one of the first facilities in Britain to use Electro Shock Therapy. Cressida was to be treated for mania, to which, the doctors were told, she had a hereditary disposition towards, which was precipitated by the birth of her



five children, and her condition was having such a detrimental effect she was unable to fulfil her roles of wife and mother. “Mad as a box of frogs and always has been,” concluded Cressida’s mother-in-law Mary, a callous woman who had never liked her, and liked her even less when she was drafted in to take care of her energetic grandchildren while her only son returned to his Royal Navy ship in South America, the threat of Hitler looming over Europe. “What kind of woman abandons her children?” Mary moaned in the street, all day long, cigarette in hand, to anyone who would listen, of which there were many. “She’s far too lazy for her own good.” Mary suspected this whole “nutty episode”, as she referred to it, was just an excuse to have some days off from “real life”. But her complaining only lasted a short while. Churchill declared Britain to be at war with Germany the following September, Mary died of a heart attack in the October, and the children were dispatched to a naval home for abandoned children, a stately home in the rambling gardens of Kent that had been re-purposed during the war effort, just in time for Christmas. They hung stockings to the foot of their new beds, hopeful that the grand surroundings they now found themselves in, combined with their tragic circumstances, would be reflected in the quality of presents Father Christmas would deliver. They hoped for dolls with blinky eyes and wooden train sets. They each got a tangerine, a handful of Brazil nuts and a paper hat.

“Every day I was away from you was torture,” Cressida explained, gripping her cup for support. “Your father told me I’d only be gone a fortnight, and I could return rested, and I’d be able to cope more. But once I was there, and diagnosed with hysteria, the doctors told your father I’d only improve with long-term treatment. I didn’t have a choice. I couldn’t get out. Your father was the one who got to make the decision.”

The ward which Cressida ended up living on for seven years was a high-ceilinged, bright space, with bees-waxed floors that squeaked underfoot if anyone moved too quickly, and 48 narrow beds, which were almost always filled with women with empty eyes, covered with thin mattresses and threadbare blankets, lined up under the wall with the large windows. It overlooked the hospital chapel. There was a nurse's station at one end of the ward, next to the door, where a stern matron constantly barked at the women, most of them young mothers like Cressida, and at the back, there was a room with an outside lock on it, for patients who needed seclusion from the others. Next to this was the bathroom, dominated by a great iron tub which, three times a week, was filled with ice cold water, a bar of soap chucked in, and the women would line up to be scrubbed, then pulled out, naked and shivering, swaddled tightly in an itchy towel and put in matching nightdresses. During the day, when she wasn't being observed and poked, Cressida worked in the laundry – bleaching, wringing and turning the mangle until her arm ached. The men worked in the kitchens. The women couldn't be trusted with the knives.

Jean appeared at the table, waving menus. "What can I get you, ladies?"

"Just tea, I think? Yes?" Victoria said, and Vera nodded solemnly.

Blimey, that lot are the life and soul of the party, Jean thought, as she made her way back to the kitchen, they may look the bee's knees but there's not an ounce of bounce in one of them. In her rare vulnerable moments, Jean could admit to herself that beautiful women increasingly made her uncomfortable. She'd found another black hair on her chin that morning. "It's the change," said her friend Babs, when she'd popped in for a sandwich at lunchtime and Jean had confessed. "If I didn't shave, a freak show would be charging a penny to see me at the end of Brighton Pier by now." Archie still found her irresistible,

despite her rounded tummy and softer thighs. “You’re my corker,” he told her everyday as she set off to work, imagining every other man in London looked at her the same way. The pedestal on which Archie had placed her throughout their marriage allowed her to keep her head held high. Like when, in 1964, an industrious family from Hong Kong would rent the space next to her tearoom and her customers would decide they preferred the more exotic taste of prawn chow mein to her traditional offerings, leaving her once bustling tea room empty, a fossil from another era that she and Archie didn’t know what to do with; or when offhand customers like these three women didn’t spend much but stayed for ever. Oh well, she chuckled to herself as she headed back to their table with a fresh pot, I may not look like Elizabeth Taylor, and I may have a beard by Christmas, but at least I have a personality.

“It must have been awful for you, mother. We can’t imagine,” said Victoria, thanking Jean for the tea with a quick smile. “And we thought about you every day, too, wondering what you were doing and when you were going to come home. It’s the fact you never did, even after Arthur and Alfred were killed, and then you sent for George –

“It devastated me,” Vera said, simply. “If my own mother didn’t want me, why would anyone else?”

“Maybe when you become mothers yourselves you’ll understand a bit more what it was like,” Cressida ventured. “I don’t think you can understand the overwhelming exhaustion and confusion a woman experiences until you do it yourself.”

Victoria reached over to her mother’s hand and pulled it across the table to rest on her belly. “I’ll know soon enough then,” her face erupting with a contagious joy. Cressida

gasped, as much from her daughter's touch as from the news. "I'll understand, mother."

And that next spring, despite Vera's angry protestations, Victoria would name her daughter Elizabeth Cressida Fox. Her Queen, her mother, her husband. "It just feels right," she told her sister.

"Enough," said Vera, bilious at the emotion. "What now? What do you want?"

"You know I've always wanted to see you. I've begged since they let me out. Your father didn't want me back, but I never stopped trying to get to you girls. Then you moved and I couldn't find you. George missed you so much at the start. And that's why I'm so pleased you finally agreed to see me today, for us and for George. I worry for his future. You know he can't look after himself? That's why your father insisted he needed his mother, despite not wanting me to see you two. I'm getting older and I worry that they'll shove him in a horrible home if something happens to me, that no one will love him."

"Before you ask, thinking you can throw your responsibilities on to other people again," interjected Vera, "you should know I'm moving to Africa next month, probably for good. And as you now know, Victoria is pregnant, and her life is down in Norfolk. These two events are the reason we thought we should have this meeting today. To clear the air, perhaps, and move on. We can't help with George."

"But he's your brother –

"And you were my mother." Vera stood up just as Jean approached with the bill. "I'll get this," she said, and pulled a note from her purse. "Are you coming, Victoria?"

Victoria got up and took a few steps around the table, leaning down to nuzzle her mother's cheek, nestling into her for the briefest of moments. Vera watched, stoic in her determination not to give either of them what they needed. Forgiveness. Warmth. Cressida's heart drowned as Victoria gave her one sweet kiss.

"I'm so sorry," Cressida said.

"And I'm so sorry, too, mother," Victoria whispered in her ear. "But I worry about Vera."

St. Mary's on the high street chimed 5pm. Cressida's girls walked away, waltzing awkwardly with a kind-faced man entering the tearoom, the bell above the door happily tinkling as if Cressida's world hadn't just ended again.

"You ready to shut up shop, princess? Archie called out to Jean, who was in the kitchen, planning the next day's menus in her head as she finished the last few bits of washing up. "Your carriage awaits!"

She normally kept him waiting a bit, knowing he wouldn't complain, but on this afternoon, she came straight out to greet him, filled with gratitude for his goodness and reliability after the tricky day she'd had. "Give me a minute," she said, rubbing his arm affectionately, before turning to Cressida, her last customer of the day. "Thanks for coming in."

Taking her cue to leave, Cressida stood up, putting the baby photos she'd brought to share with the girls back in her handbag, and carefully folding the white smocked dress she'd been carrying around with her like a talisman, hoping to one day see a grandchild in it, and leaving it on the table, smoothing out the soft cotton for one last time. Jean

would find it the next morning and, admiring the delicate smocking with awe, put it to one side for her first granddaughter, who would soon take up all her limited spare time. It was so beautiful, this discarded dress, the little girl wore it for her Christening.

Cressida stepped out onto the street, grateful for the air. Everyone had somewhere to be – a cinema date, a family dinner, a friend to meet for a quick glass of sherry.

Cressida took two buses, then walked ten minutes uphill, past lovingly-tended beds of sky blue forget-me-nots, her back brushed by the frontier of weeping willows that lined her climb, until she reached her dreary shoebox home. She thanked her neighbour and saw her out, then prepared George his favourite meal, mashed potato and tinned peas, and fed it to him slowly as he smiled at her, sat next to each other on the worn-out settee in the dusty living room. After dinner, she bathed him, put him in his stripy, flannel pyjamas and sang him to sleep, her 31-year-old baby boy, as she'd done every night since he'd been back with her. *Hush little baby, don't say a word.* She stroked his hair until he fell asleep, as mothers did every night, all over London. And in Norfolk. And in Africa. She fell asleep next to him, as she did every night, exhausted, reaching for his hand when he yelped out in the darkness, happy to be a mother to one of her children.

The following month, Vera would leave for a new life in Rhodesia with her ambitious husband and pretend to herself, for no one else out there would be interested, that her mother was irrelevant. A stillbirth, suffered alone two years later, would make her wonder how her mother had coped with being away from her children for all that time, when one second without the baby she had carried inside her for nine months filled her with such agonizing pain. This made her hate her mother even more.

Victoria stayed in touch with her sister, and her mother, by letter, sending very similar news from the North Norfolk coast to both women, occasionally including photos of bonny Elizabeth – who had Cressida’s mouth and Vera’s bossiness - or her warm-stoned house on the beach which had a light, salty sea breeze blowing around it in summer, and an abundance of rabbits and daffodils on the lawn in spring.

Four years later, when she heard of her mother’s death, Vera refused to travel back to England to go to the funeral or sort out her things. She had a daughter now, Tracey, who she couldn’t trust to be safe with a foreign nanny, and a husband, who she couldn’t trust to be safe with his secretary. Victoria posted Vera the obituary via first class mail, circling her mother’s entry in thick, black ink, tears drenching the page. When it arrived in her post-box three weeks later, Vera collapsed on her front step, where she sat, quavering, until her husband pulled her in and accused her of embarrassing herself. And him.

When George was in his forties and had been living in a care home for mentally handicapped adults for a good few years, a stern lady who looked like his mother started to visit him once a week, bringing him chocolate, and cakes on his birthday, and reading him Rudyard Kipling in the dayroom. She didn’t look like the kind of woman who wanted to make friendly conversation but one of the nurses gleaned that George’s visitor with the suspiciously put on posh accent was his younger sister. who’d just returned to England after a decade in Africa. Sometimes alone, sometimes with a little girl who looked constantly startled, she showed up every weekend, whatever the weather, until he passed away peacefully in his sleep one Saturday afternoon, when he was 63 years old,

Vera reaching for his hand as he ventured into darkness. This would have made their mother very happy.



## ELBOW GREASE

The house was the thing. It was splendid. It revealed itself regally to new subjects from around the curve of a gilded-rock road, throned slightly higher than its surroundings, overseeing sapphire rock pools and wild rabbles of mudflats. It had ruled since 1862, glorious, and resolute. Its walls changed from emerald to violet with the rising and falling sun but its position never altered, or flickered, which was a good and bad thing. It was stuck, stoic in its beauty, refusing to be scared by the encroaching housing estates building momentum behind it, cocky in its superiority over the plucky homes borrowing land on either side of it.

Since the time he'd moved here Ted was no longer Ted. Ted was *Ted from the House*. For 34 years, the breath-taking pile of red bricks, sash windows and working chimneys had been Ted's only identifier. Not husband, not father, not table tennis player or vegetarian – despite the latter two being thoroughly exotic in North Norfolk, even when all other sorts of peculiarities were deemed ordinary, especially now, in 1987. Nor was he *Ted the Historian* or *Ted the Regular at The Old Neptune*. He was simply *Ted from the House*, which was a good and bad thing. But none of that mattered today because everything had to change.

“Come in, young man! *Entre la maison*,” Ted beckons the slick and shiny pipsqueak he'd been waiting for all morning through the flame red door and onto the cool

tiles of his hallway. They'd met once before, at the man's office in Burnham Market, when after pottering about outside for weeks Ted had finally pushed his bones and fears past the display of pretty cottages and pound signs in the window to do the one thing that would make his wife happy. Ted had liked the young whippersnapper instantly. He knew he was the man for the job, youth and vitality being on his side. The instant fondness was mutual. The estate agent had been watching the elderly gentleman since he'd moved to the area six weeks previously, noticing how he helped lone mothers through heavy doors, despite his own obvious frailty, lifting pushchairs and shooing away the impatient. Gary noticed how men treated mothers, despite trying not to, especially women who seemed to be struggling on their own. "You've just got me today, Victoria ventured down to the Big Smoke ten days ago. Grandmother duties and a nagging sister awaited her. But no matter! Welcome to *Sea Lavenders*. Where would you like to begin?"

Gary hadn't been in a house like this before. For all the champagne hangovers and sharp suits decorating his twenties, his innards were humdrum and inglorious. Spam in a French baguette. A Scotch egg in a Harrods' hamper. Wealth, in the old-fashioned sense of country piles and knackered Barbours, made his skin itch. Clammy now, under the polyester sheen of his three-piece suit, he reminds himself this old man was not judging him. He just wanted him to sell his gaff. He didn't care that Gary's mum had told him bedtime stories about cleaning houses like these, sneaking off at night while her son slept, her knees red raw from the bleach and bending, or that Gary had broken out in such a sweat when he'd picked up a long-limbed woman from a house like this in Berkshire once that his hand had slipped off the door knocker. They'd snogged in a nightclub the

week before, his Estuary English drowned out by Duran Duran, and she'd agreed to a date. He'd carefully chosen a West London bistro that was good enough for her.

"Excuse me, but my soup is cold," he'd complained politely to their waiter half way through the starters. He and the long-limbed woman heard the sniggers from the surrounding diners.

"It's gazpacho, Gary," she'd said, looking over her shoulder, translucent skin flushed. "It's supposed to be cold." He'd only had Heinz tomato from a can before, heated on his mother's stove. A hurried main course and a refused desert later, the woman from the intimidating house in Berkshire told Gary firmly that a second date was off the cards.

But Gary had to get over his plebeian fear of the well-to-do if he wanted to sell grand, old houses like this, in this part of the world, which he very much did. A Porsche 928 S4 would not pay for itself. And he liked Norfolk. The air here was saltier than in London, which his mum said would blow away all his cobwebs.

"Lovely to see you again, Mr. Fox. What a beautiful home you have," Gary says, balancing his new black leather briefcase on his knee as he pulls out a notepad and oversized fountain pen. "Give me the tour, sir, and we can discuss the logistics afterwards."

"Excellent plan, Gary – isn't it? A cup of tea first, or no?"

"I'm fine, sir, thank you though. And yes, the name's Gary. Shall we begin?"

Ted had dressed smartly for this momentous occasion, pulling his knees into aubergine cords, working his elbows into a warm flannel shirt, which he'd ironed to the best of his ability the night before, and his feet cocooned in tartan slippers that had been a gift from his wife the previous Christmas. A handsome man even in his arthritic seventies, there was a warmth to his smile that made him instantly approachable. In return, Ted assumed everyone he met would be approachable too. Excited for a chinwag.

“Probably best to just get on with it. I’ve been dreading today to be honest,” admits Ted. “Nothing to do with you of course, young Gary, just the idea of leaving this place, and all its moods and whispers. I’m very downhearted.” Ted places his left hand, barnacled into twists, on his chest. “This will sound silly, perhaps, but I felt a bit teary this morning, stepping onto the front lawn to take my wakeup lungful of the North Sea, a habit these last few decades. I could feel change on the wind and change has never sat well with me. I suppose that’s why I chose history as a profession. I prefer looking backwards.” He takes a deep breath, tries to swallow his melancholy, clears his throat. “Well, on sunny days, if you look out across the front garden and past the sand dunes towards Blakeney Point, you can see seals sunbathing. If you wake early and stop to look down at your shoes as the sun is coming up, you can see frogs, nobly scrambling along the shingle driveway to the dewy reeds like they’re rushing for the bus. Nature at its most majestic.” Ted would miss such sights. “But let’s begin.”

The first room introduced to the estate agent, the library, is elegantly governed by a bay window, three gigantic glass panes framing the masterpiece outside. The green of the wetlands and the yellow of the sand dunes merge into a watercolour painting, blue sky smudges soaking into the edges. The front lawn itself, sneaking in at the bottom of

the painting, is just a well-mowed square of grass, bowing in defeat in front of the ancient causeways ahead of it.

“Do you read much, Gary?” Ted asks, walking over to one of the two rambunctious bookshelves hemming in the cast iron fireplace.

“I don’t get much time to read, Mr. Fox.”

“Make time, Gary. Books are the most incredible things, whatever your background, you can make yourself better with words, they give you answers! They give you comrades! Just ask Lawrence, ask Orwell.” Ted’s one fault, always – not just in his dotage – was a slight tone of condescension towards those he detected may not be great readers, which was sad, because he always, entirely, meant well when he talked about his enthusiasm for literature. His wife and daughter were horrified by it. His sister-in-law Vera, who had always seen Ted as an adversary for no discernible reason other than her sister had preferred him to her, called him a “silly, old snob.” This wasn’t fair because he wasn’t, but Vera never changed her mind about anything. At his funeral, she would offensively tut through her niece’s reading of an Auden poem, “If I Could Tell You”, a longstanding favourite of Ted’s.

Ted turns slowly and lowers his large frame into the plump upholstery sitting regally in a rectangular ray of sunshine adjacent to the book shelves. “I can’t tell you the number of nights I spent in here, when my daughter Elizabeth was just a baby.

Hemingway on one knee, Elizabeth on the other, both of them teaching me many lessons during this grand awakening, this new chapter of my life. She’d sleep, you know, Lizzie,

soundly like that, being read to – Waugh was another winner – while her mother got some rest.”

Motherhood had knocked Victoria for six. She often felt undone by the simplest tasks, surviving by cutting every corner she could while keeping her daughter alive. Fastening a row of pearl buttons on Lizzie’s dresses, only to have to undo them all hours later for bath time, seemed overwhelming and Ted often found a purple-cheeked and runny-nosed Elizabeth roaming the back garden, back bare to the North Sea wind, Liberty smock escaping her shoulders, while his wife napped upstairs. Victoria loved her family and did her best, she just hadn’t expected it to burden her every thought quite so much. And losing her mother just before Lizzie’s fourth birthday had set her back another couple of years, Ted believed.

“We’d sit right in the bay on this old chair, can you believe it – the very same one,” Ted continues. “While the Saxon moon would eat up the window with its glare, Lizzie’s toasty scents and the sea air would mingle in my chest. My arm could go dead and I wouldn’t care.”

Victoria had decided early on that Elizabeth would be their only baby so Ted had to look at her sweet face and register every smooth surface and wisp of fair hair, soak in the pink lines, before he forgot what it meant to him. He knew however much Lizzie needed him then, they’d come a day when he’d be replaced by some younger man, promising her the world and taking her away from him and *Sea Lavenders*. He hated this man already. He hated a man who may not have even been born yet because he knew one day he would be more important to Lizzie than her old dad. Time would prove him right to be worried.

“You’re not a father yet, Gary, I bet? A young lad like you,” Ted says. “Probably not even married yet?”

“No, sir –

“Please, Ted is fine! We’re all modern men here.”

“No, Ted. Haven’t met the right woman yet. I don’t think!”

“No rush, Gary. I didn’t marry Victoria until I was 28, I became a father at 30. This was ancient for Norfolk in the 1950s. Teachers at her school thought I was the grandfather. But my age never mattered to Lizzie. And you have plenty of time.”

“I’m only 26 so my mother hasn’t given up all hope. She wants to be a nana before she turns 50 though, she tells me, so I’ve got three years. I think as much as a grandchild she fancies a daughter in law to make up for the girl she never had. I’m her only child so the pressure is on.”

“Well, watch out Norfolk ladies!” Ted laughs, “Gary is a man on a mission! Am I allowed to still say that?” The older gent giggles, so the younger follows suit. “Pick wisely though, lad. And wriggle around in each other’s company for a bit before you get hitched or – God forbid - start a family. Make sure you can be kind to each other. Don’t be with someone because you’re scared of the alternative. If you’re in a relationship because you don’t want to be lonely, you’re going to have a miserable time.”

Ted pushes himself off the chair and picks up a black and white photo that had been positioned pride of place in a silver frame on a weathered chestnut coffee table. Gary thinks he recognizes the place captured in the shot. The sand dunes at Holkham? A

cacophony of smiling faces on a beach, hugged by a striped windbreaker on one side, blown by a briny air on the other. Three girls of a similar age, with the same colouring, one Ted's double but with uncontrollable curls, all in that awkward phase before womanhood turns them charming. "Our niece, Tracey," Ted says, pointing at the smallest girl who was waving a crustacean at the camera. "A timid creature in London, but down here, with us and away from her mother, she became a wild thing. In the best way possible." A younger Ted, beaming with what looked like pride, and a more youthful version of the woman Gary had spotted accompanying him on visits to town, Ted waiting patiently on the green with a newspaper while she dashed in and out of shops, delivering paper bags of asparagus and crab meat and new potatoes to his ankles, stood behind the girls. They looked ridiculously happy in the photo, Gary thinks. Carefree in a way he and his mother never looked on their snatched annual one-week holiday to Margate or Bognor Regis. Money bought that look. And Ted's class bought the expectation of money. Those girls didn't know how bloody lucky they were.

Ted catches the melancholy look on Gary's face and, misinterpreting it as a longing for family life, quickly places the photo back on the table. "I'll be honest with you, lad, I used to think children stirred into a marriage like cement, making it firm and unmovable, solid - like the walls of this house. But having my own, I realized there was never a time more likely for a crack to form, to insidiously stain a fondness, a passion. It's the change in hierarchy you see, the reordering, the sudden slipping from pole position to back of the line."

The old man had fought tooth and nail for Victoria to look at him in those early days. He'd begged for her attention, to halt the swell of resentment. The young mother



must have been utterly irritated but he got lucky. She returned to him. She became his wife again. Some men weren't so fortunate.

Elizabeth was completely unaware that her mother had used her as a shield against the physical and emotional presence of her father for the first few years of her life; that if it hadn't been for Ted's utter devotion to Victoria, and his determined heroics in their marriage at this point, that she would have had a very different childhood. One of fights, anger, smashed teacups and strange men visiting while her father was at the university. Her father refused to let her mother disappear into herself, hidden from him. He adored her and acquired a remarkable set of tools, he was not only a kind-hearted man but an intelligent one. He forgave her, coddled her and rebuilt her love for him without becoming a wimp. *A man can look so foolish clutching a bouquet of flowers as he walks away from a woman.* His father would say this absentmindedly over the years, to Ted and his two elder brothers. This was Ted's lesson in how other men – and women - viewed the emasculated or cuckolded. Not with sympathy, but with contempt.

*This is odd. Unprofessional?* Gary thinks, pulling out a tape measure and making a show of jotting down lengths and heights and angles. "I'm talking too much aren't I?" says Ted. "Forgive me, the wife's been gone for an age and I've been cooped up here, desperate for conversation."

"You're fine, Ted," Gary says.

"That's kind of you, but don't worry. I understand. We become invisible, we old folk, our stories diminished to soundbites to save air time for the young, which is just as it should be. But it does make getting old a rather solitary pursuit. Good preparation for

the grave, perhaps.” He beckons the younger man to follow him into the next room. “But you came to see the house not hear my lonely ramblings. And here we have, the dining room.” Ted says this with a theatrical flourish that can’t disguise the tremble in his voice.

This room is bleaker than the library, painted a deep red and with little light seeping in from the stained-glass window - “it came from an old church back in Victoria’s neck of the woods, destroyed during the War, she needed to give it a good home” - that faced the back garden, another bare square of lawn. Gary shivers. The room had clearly known a woman’s touch but it had faded now, wrinkled and darkened like a walnut, dry and tough, heavy velvet drapes frayed around their edges. The oval dining table, and chandelier hanging over it, gave the room the air of a funeral parlour’s waiting room, the candelabra on the piano makes it worse, a caricature of gothic horror. The room interacted awkwardly with the hallway and the library, sulking like the ugly duckling of the family, left out, depressed by its lack of lightness and full of anger.

“We don’t use this room much anymore. Well, ever,” Ted says. “But you should have seen it when the girls were young, at Christmas. It was a sight to behold. Feasts displayed and gulped down, always a new song hurtling out of the piano, a sing-along for all, decanters of port consumed in a way I’m not sure you young folk could handle anymore.”

Ted had made a concerted effort to make Christmas as magical for Victoria as possible. When she’d told him about the sparse festive seasons she’d spent as a child in a naval home during the war, saggy stockings and bombs at bedtime, his heart broke. His life was unchanged, as a student slipping just under the age of conscription at the start of the war, V.E. Day conveniently falling on the same day as his 21st birthday, except for

the exciting addition of exotic, older women who found English fumblers attractive. The war had made him a man without fighting. Sequined ladies in tanned stockings, he remembered one in particular, her starched golden ringlets reflecting the lights of the Christmas trees as she stroked his smooth cheek and told him about her homeland. His parents were expected to throw numerous festive cocktail parties and celebrations for local dignitaries and foreign workers so Decembers were an excess of sugar mice and frivolity, atrocities blacked out with sherry. His little sister would watch from the servant's stairs, face squeezed between the oak bannisters, nodding to the cook who would have a refrigerator full of leftovers for her to dive into the next morning, while Ted. Because his two older brothers were at war, would be expected to hand out treats to the illustrious guests, a fresh-faced host. Fruit trifles, smoked salmon and spicy mince pies. Ted's family cook was uninhibited by the rationing and austerity during the war, especially at this time of year. It was only on falling in love with Victoria that Christmas became a time of giving rather than receiving. He had only ever wanted to make that woman happy. And he wasn't about to stop now.

Ted turns away from the past and looks through the stained glass out onto the garden. "The land is too much for us now," he says. "Victoria was always the green-fingered one. She can't bear to look out the windows anymore. 'Everything is so empty' she'd say of the flower beds. They were once her piece de resistance. I tried to convince her we could stay here until the end if we got a man in a couple of times a week to help, but that wasn't a solution for her. That would be a further torment. 'An embarrassment,' she said. 'Euthanasia.'"

Turning 70 had been hard on Victoria. She no longer looked in the mirror and was surprised to see an old lady looking back. At 70, her interior had caught up with her exterior. Her skin had mottled and browned, hair thinned to rockweed. Aches and pains stopped the routines that had carved her weeks up into the satisfying portions for her life. “This place is still my utopia but to Victoria it’s a gigantic relic forcing her to face what her life can no longer be,” Ted says. “I’m protecting her from how I really feel of course. Sharing my feelings with her wouldn’t be useful to either of us. She always felt guilty for leaving London, leaving her sister, so I suppose a move back will absolve her of that. She can close out her life – our life – feeling that she did the right thing. And, therefore, I can too.”

As Ted is leading Gary into the kitchen, the phone in the hallway rings. “Excuse me Gary, I should get this. Look around, open cupboards, turn on the taps, do whatever it is you need to do to get me to my wife!” While Gary takes in the matronly Aga nestled between worn-out oak cabinets, ducking under suspended pots and pans to get to the butler sink, Ted makes his way to the reverberating shrillness.

“Mum’s just told me about what’s going on today. I can’t believe you’re really doing this,” Elizabeth whines, obnoxious behaviour for a woman approaching her fortieth birthday. “You love *Sea Lavenders*. So do I.” News of the sale had not gone well, despite his daughter being excited at the prospect of permanent, trustworthy babysitters on hand for her daughter Suzie. She’d thought her parents wealthy enough to keep on the house as a sort of family holiday home. But her father’s position as the third son with a stalled academic salary had left life rather tight, their savings sunk into roof repairs, legal fees

and Elizabeth's education. A flat in London, even a tiny one in an unpolished area, would take everything.

"Darling, I know, but it must be done. We want to be near you and Suzie, and Vera of course."

"Christ!"

"Your mother has missed you all, even her sister, and London of course. She's made the best of it but she's not a country bumpkin kind of woman. You know that. As much as we tried to force it."

"But what about you, Dad?"

"You mean what about you!" Ted laughs.

"Well, yes, what about me? I love *Sea Lavenders*. It's everything to me, despite it all, and I wanted Suzie to have the same memories."

"I'm afraid you're going to have to just understand, Lizzie. This isn't your home anymore, it's just a house you grew up in." This was the cruellest thing he'd ever said to her and Ted didn't believe it for a second. If Ted was *Sea Lavenders*, Elizabeth was its child. The saliferous air surrounding the house filled her lungs, the wetlands plumped her skin. It was the only place she felt safe, still. "I have to go. The estate agent is here, pacing around the kitchen. I must get back to him before he finds the skeletons in our closets."

"We only have one, Dad, and that's not in any closet. There's no one this side of The Fens that doesn't know about it. And it's not a skeleton. It's a soul," Elizabeth says.

“Give Suzie a kiss from me.”

“Mum’s promised her you’ll be in London for her 13<sup>th</sup> birthday party.”

“Well, that would be lovely. Speak soon, darling.” As Ted turns, he sees her, running across the lawn, barefoot, curls flying like a kite behind her, dancing towards the golden youth waiting for her on the behind the dunes.

The men hike up the curved staircase and emerge at the master bedroom. Stopping at the window, they gaze out across the knotted salt marshes and murky spits, over the years for Ted and into possibility for Gary. In the distance, ruddy boats full of fisherman drag their dinners towards shore. Amongst the rock pools, little fingers pull at mussels, whelks and cockles, little feet jump at the anxious scuttling of a hermit crab, desperately searching for a new home before the tide washes him away. “It looks like all the work goes on outside these walls,” Ted laughs. “But that really isn’t the case.” Silence rests between them, the men shushed by the lilac swirls and dank clouds, the nooks and lagoons and causeways.

“An American from a place called Galveston, Texas, said her hometown would remind me of here,” Ted says. “Then she described how the air stank of ruin and the water percolated with oil and I thought how does she not see what I see?” He shook his head. “Her grandfather was a shrimper who’d spend weeks at sea, returning to shore with full baskets, then pockets stuffed with dollars. He’d tell his wife to perform her matrimonial duty, then he’d zip his fly and go to the local bar to spend all their money before heading back to sea. His wife had to work three jobs to keep a roof over their heads. And you know what this girl from Texas told me? She said her mother, aunt and

uncle had never got over being abandoned by their mother, never forgiven her for locking them in the house with bread and milk while she went to scour stinking fish factories.”

“Men get away with murder,” Gary says.

“But not all of us want to,” replies Ted. “I’d love to blame it on the fact they were American, but it’s not even that.”

“It’s just the way we’ve been taught to think about mothers. About women.”

“Hush! People will call us feminists,” Ted jokes, reaching out to give Gary a light punch on the arm. “The landlord at the *Neptune* won’t serve me if he finds out.”

“You wouldn’t want that,” Gary agrees. “Let’s see the other bedrooms. There are four more, right?” Ted nods and restarts the tour. “And an attic, you said.”

The other bedrooms all have the same air of dilapidated sweetness that hovered above Ted and Victoria’s queen size bed. Primrose eiderdowns, redundant scatter cushions, Toile de Jouey wallpaper and delicate lace curtains long since faded by years of glorious sunsets. Carpets softened by years of trampling, stain-free thanks to a mud room off the front hall, rising scents of talc and lilac toilet water.

“Will the soft furnishings be staying? The curtains? The light fixtures?” asks Gary.

“Gosh, yes – all of it. Victoria wants it all gone.” Gary scribbles something in his notepad. “This was never her, this flowery collection of mismatched fabrics. I think she just thought this was how a country woman should decorate her home. But she’s lost that middle-class pretence now. She’s told me the new flat is going to be spray-painted and

filled with flat-packed, white furniture. And instead of a garden she wants a balcony, just big enough for us to savour our Cinzano on each evening. She's slimming back down into London life and I'm just glad I've made the cull. You go ahead to the attic, you have to be a bit more sure-footed than me to get up there. I'll meet you downstairs in the kitchen."

The attic, clearly once used as a bedroom like the other upstairs rooms, had vanished from the modern glare even more, a girl's room covered in brick-sized white teeth gleaming from the faces of swaggering young men a generation before Gary. The idols with hair-sprayed quiffs looked too polished to be in this mausoleum, ignored in the shadows. Dust slept on surfaces, the air smelt stale. A doll stared at Gary through the plastic of an unopened box. He'd seen enough and made a rapid descent to meet Ted.

"It's a big space up there," Gary says, entering the kitchen. "Your daughter's room?"

"Not Lizzie's, no. The attic was where I kept my skeleton, when she'd do me the honour of coming to stay," Ted says. "Of course, you're new, you missed the scandal. The American showing up here thirty years ago, a girl only fifteen years younger than me with blonde waves, a Southern drawl and a letter from her mother. My past riding into town to collect its dues like a revengeful cowboy. My daughter, Annabel Lee the Texan, expecting more from an Aristocratic Englishman than a dusty loft to sleep in and a horrified young wife. She'd heard about my parents' estate, the parties, not about the third in line gets nothing rule. Winner takes all."

"Mr. Fox, Ted, please, I didn't mean to pry –



“No, Gary, no – I’m amazed the gossips haven’t filled you in all ready. If they haven’t bothered they must have you down as the non-meddling type and that makes me like you even more. The locals had a field day when it all happened of course. A cute American showing up from nowhere with my nose, oversharing her story over shop counters. She talked about the house, about her mother, about her difficult stepmother, though God bless Victoria she did her best, funnelling the surprise into the attic, making it into a home from home, insisting I save a little bit year-round to fly her to us for the holidays if she wanted to come, Lizzie a babe in arms when we first found out.”

“Accidents happen and a lot of men would have denied her, sent her packing. You did the right thing, Ted. There is no scandal in what you’ve just told me. And you dealt with the situation kindly.”

“Ah, but that was just the first scandal. The second one came the next summer, when we allowed Annabel more freedom. She would run off every evening to meet the local kids on the beach, I can still picture it now. And it seemed she had the same penchant for silly young English boys her mother did. And we got a letter that Christmas. Fifteen and pregnant. I was a grandfather at 31. When the child, another girl, was thirteen Annabel brought her to visit us - Lizzie, our niece Tracey and she fell into a friendship like sisters, similar ages, all sharp elbows and knock knees. Annabel took that photo of us on the beach you saw in the library. She was behind the lens, my discarded daughter, looking at her child with her arm wrapped around Lizzie, the daughter I had wanted and cared for. I can’t imagine how that made her feel, what feelings the camera hid from us. But I’ve felt guilty every day since.”

“It’s terribly sad, but not your fault.”

“Annabel was called a bastard in the street, women wouldn’t allow their children to play with her, to be sullied by the fatherless runt.”

“No one would blink at this today, Ted. I know they were different times back then, harder. Things have even improved since I was a child.”

“You are right, time has moved on and my granddaughter had an easier time of it, despite the blank space on her birth certificate. I tried to make it up to Annabel, to mend all that had been broken in childhood. But I don’t think I ever did.”

“I’m so sorry, sir.”

“It’s all been and gone, it’s old news now, even for the local gossips,” Ted says. “Though of course, at the time, this lot here loved it. An American sex scandal is so much dishier than one of our own, and across two generations too! The intrigue! The drama! It was like living on the set of *Dallas* or *Dynasty*. I ignored it, the smirking, sank into my books and daughters, but it was hard for Victoria, being talked about. She yearned for the anonymity of London. These walls became a prison, the garden her escape.”

“Are you still close?”

“To my granddaughter? Not really. She’s in Texas, 5,000 miles away. I’m awkward on the phone, she’s not a letter writer. My daughter died a few years ago, ovarian cancer. I did go and visit her once over there, just before she died. We talked about her family tree, now rooted to mine. I saw her mother too, the woman I’d met all those years ago at my parents’ Christmas party. She was still beautiful. And I was sure that on that night Annabel Lee was conceived my fifteen-year-old self would have thought all the problems that followed would be worth it. It was a night to remember.”

“We all need one of those,” Gary says.

“Or a dozen if we’re lucky,” Ted replies.

“Indeed!”

Gary places his notepad and pen back in his briefcase and snaps the lock shut. He’d seen the house, he had the measurements of the man, he’d jotted down the floorplan and traced Ted’s steps. It would sell, a beautiful place like this, in no time. It was a hot market. Old properties were having a moment. Thatcher said every man’s home should be his castle and *Sea Lavenders* practically passed as a castle. It was a thing of beauty.

The pair shake hands on the front step. “Thanks for coming Gary, it was lovely talking to you.”

“You too. I’ll ring you later today with the number I think we should put it on the market for.”

“Excellent,” Ted says, finally letting go of Gary’s hand. It was hard to release things these days, not knowing how much of anything was left. The sand in his hourglass was sinking to a murky bottom, there was no pretending otherwise. “I know you’ll do a wonderful job for us.” The estate agent turns to walk to his car, a Ford Fiesta with incongruously large silver wheels that he would replace within a year for something less showy. “And is the exorcism included in your agent’s fee, or do I have to pay extra for that?” Ted calls out across the gravel.

“Oh, the ghosts?” Gary smiles. He’d think of Ted often over the course of his long life, conjuring up the old man’s devotion to his family whenever his own felt

depleted, especially during colicky nights with his firstborn, or when his privately-educated wife would yell at him that their marriage had been a mistake, that he wasn't good enough for her and everyone knew it, before sliding onto his chest, a soggy mess of gratitude and apologies. "You get to take the ghosts with you. They're for you to keep."

## LADIES-IN-WAITING

Dirty London clouds sauntered past the small window opposite Vera's bed as threads of smoke filled her stark, white room. Upright from the waist, the birthday girl, who had been on bed rest and in adult diapers for months now, struggled to catch her breath then surrendered her paper-thin body to the starchy sheets. The gathering of drab faces wound down the reluctant, slow clapping that had accompanied the inefficient huffing, puffing and spots of saliva it had taken to snuff out the flames on Vera's cake. The waxy red slide of the stout, overused candles, that would soon be plucked, gathered and chucked into a drawer in the staff kitchen, gathering dust until the next birthday, formed crimson pools on the cake's neon icing.

The disinterested party guests didn't hold out much hope for a gastronomic delight but they were starting to fade. They'd been on their feet, most of them, since the shifts swapped at 6am, and sugar was sugar. They needed the energy. It was now 4pm and the peak of visiting hours when they had to pretend to give a shit, and giving a shit took a fair dose of glucose. They wanted to hide in the recreation room, shouting answers to *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* while flicking through Facebook, stealing biscuits from their charges, who dozed and dribbled, not caring about a few missing snacks. Their charges didn't seem to care about anything anymore, and of course the staff never stopped to ask them if this was true. Instead of burgled biscuits though, the care workers

were forced into small talk with the anxious relatives who stopped by for a few minutes a day, or week, or year, in a bid to feel better about plonking their ageing parent in a facility that had, only a few years beforehand, been shut down by the government for unacceptable health and safety standards and an infamous case of neglect. One old man, named Stan, had been dead for more than 24 hours, the *Daily Mail* had screamed on its front page, before anyone realized.

*Shameful! Our OAPs didn't fight Hitler for this! What has become of Britain?*

Stan's son Graham didn't mind, although he pretended to. He filed a claim – and won! He saw it as compensation for the father who had ignored him as a child and questioned his choices as an adult. A year later, the bankrupted care facility, or retirement village as it was now rebranded, had been sold and given a fresh lick of paint and a new set of guidelines. And it was once again jam-packed, thanks to the generation of baby boomers who'd rather be cruising with their golfing buddies than caring for ageing mothers who wet the bed, threw tantrums and kept them up at night. "It's a great facility," they'd congratulate each other over the din of lounge singers in gaudy sequins as they sailed the high seas, their confidence fuelled by the open bar and carefully-orchestrated spirit of adventure they'd paid through the nose for. "Mum loves it. They play bingo every afternoon." Their mothers, who never slept soundly again after their children were born, were dealt with.

"Sorry we only got three candles Miss Vera but if we'd put all eighty on the smoke alarms would have gone off," said Doreen, the only energetic one of the care workers. "And as much as I'd like to be ambushed by firemen, I can't be arsed with the paperwork!"

Despite only being a decade younger than most of the inmates, Doreen had the countenance of a woman half her age, all big smiles, quick steps and a Caribbean radiance she'd managed to hang on to since leaving Jamaica when she was 21, believing her British passport would secure her a good job with a good wage in her Commonwealth's capital. She hadn't anticipated 'No Blacks or Irish' pinned to for rent signs. But it was the Sixties and she had her faith. She made friends with the similarly outcast nurses from Belfast and met an enthusiastic man from Grenada. He had also come over to work for the National Health Service, and had asked her to dance in the London drizzle on their first date, a bold and romantic move for a man who had been excitedly intimidated by her prettiness and optimism from afar for over a year. Before Doreen knew it, England was home, especially after she gave birth to two loud, robust daughters, who she named Lily and Daisy, and bought a house in the suburbs, an hour north of London, which had a substantial garden she filled, over the years, with perky roses, bluebells and petunias, and expired hamsters, gerbils and rabbits. Every Sunday, she'd stir up her mum's goat curry recipe and leave it bubbling on the stove to eat straight after church, then dance to The Supremes while she washed up, her happy family snoozing after the feast in the room next door. Now a widow at 66, Doreen never questioned her children's desire to trap her in a facility like the one she worked in. They wouldn't. They still regarded her dance moves, funny anecdotes and motherly concern as a vital part of their lives.

"What did you wish for as you blew out your candles, ay Vera?"

"Death," the 80-year old's deadpan reply didn't shock the care workers or disturb Doreen's jolliness. They were used to her. "A quick death, in my sleep. '*Grim Reaper*,

*how lovely to see you', I'll say, take me away to wherever you fancy.'* Heaven or hell.

Wherever I'm going can't be as bad as here, right?" she mutters before returning her lips to their usual sphincter tight hole. In her youth, Vera had had an enticing beauty – sparkling eyes that jumped around a room looking for fun, full lips which she'd pout unknowingly that gave her a childlike lightness, and a freshness to her skin as if she was perennially caught up in a love affair that left her breathless. The darting eyes remained but they stare with suspicion rather than interest, and stretched between her hollowed-out cheeks was the small, pinched mouth, poised to gobble down bitter lemons and bile with relish. Some of the nurses refused to deal with her and the other residents would mysteriously go blind or deaf when she was wheeled into the canteen on the rare occasions she could leave her room. A contrary battle axe, who liked to hold court on the horrors which kept her awake, including the Internet, the French, microwaves and the dumbing down of the BBC. That powder-puff of sweetness that usually coated grandmothers had not manifested itself in Vera.

"C'mon girl, we ain't that bad," Doreen said. "We do our best."

"Not here, you silly woman," barked the newly-anointed octogenarian, who hated the modern disregard of good manners above everything else. "I mean in general. This world we make for ourselves, then populate with mistakes and disappointments, never feeling settled or content. It's too exhausting. Too embarrassing. I want to hand it all back. The end!"

"You are too grouchy for a birthday girl," Doreen shook her head, cutting the cake into thick, messy wedges and dividing it up between her dreary colleagues before pushing a paper plate decorated with balloons and confetti in an obnoxiously jaunty



manner that did not fit the occasion, towards Vera. The assembled staff make a run for the door, gobbling down their slabs of saccharine, forkless, in an undignified frenzy.

“But you lot will insist on bloody force feeding me!”

“Alright, Vera girl, many happy returns. I’m getting on with my rounds. I’ll get someone to bring you a cup of tea in a minute, okay?” Doreen stepped backwards through Vera’s door. “And eat the cake. It’s your birthday.”

Vera stared at the sticky monstrosity in front of her. That wasn’t cake. That was glop. Cake was what her mother used to make her. Eggs, butter, sugar, milk and flour, stirred carefully with love. In her many lonely moments, she thought back to those days of her childhood. Her mother, a floral apron tied securely around her trim waist, mousy hair netted as if it was an unruly animal that needed to be tamed, laughing as she grilled her plethora of children about their adventures and dreams, ready to burst at any minute with pride and sneaky tickles. Then she’d ask for a little space while she carefully positioned the baking tin, full to the brim with smooth batter, on the middle rung of the oven and sit next to it on the floor, amongst the remnants of egg shell and baking powder dust, swinging down the door and popping her head into the heat every few minutes to check the colour and rise. Eventually a dreamy sweet scent would call the children in from the garden, where they’d be dispatched, come rain or shine, to run off steam before teatime, and tiny paws would be slapped away softly as their mother tried to ease chocolate or whipped cream onto the surface, and delicately plop chunks of chocolate or slices of strawberry on top into a pretty display of family celebration. They’d try to wait, Vera’s three older brothers Alfred, Arthur and George and sister Victoria, but they were always giddy with uncontainable excitement. Victoria, Vera’s twin in all but age, having

been born exactly 11 months after her (“and we’re not even Irish,” her mother had cried, exhausted at the thought of having more nappies to rinse, soak, bleach, twist and dry) was always the first in, unable to resist the promise of her mother’s nourishment coating her taste buds. Every birthday, she’d sneak a pudgy finger into the coating, and then the other children would copy, Vera always the last, and the whole thing would become a messy, joyous free-for-all. Until her mother stopped baking birthday cakes. Until her mother stopped protecting them from the world.

“Mum, I’m so sorry I’m late,” Tracey raced into the room, transforming it from a blank box into a triumph of flung scarves, coats, bags and Chanel No. 5. “The traffic is terrible. Why they always decide to dig up the high street on a Saturday I’ll never know. No one could move. Anyway, these are for you.” She banged a plastic pot of lilacs on to the bedside cabinet, the force of which hurls dried clumps of earth down onto her mother’s skeletal frame. “And these.” A box of Cadbury’s chocolates.

“Everyone’s thinking of my teeth today, I can tell. Cake. Chocolates.”

“Oh mum, you’ve always loved chocolate. I can still hear the panicked rustling as you’d hide your stash when I walked in your room as a child. And your teeth sit in a glass all night, so I don’t think you need to worry about them anymore.” Her comment is met with a glare that could freeze Death Valley.

“Please, Tracey, if you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” Silence.

“Oh, these are from Joanne.” Tracey, grateful for something to do, begins to dig through a plastic carrier bag, pulling out a box of Hershey Kisses. “They’re from America.”

Joanne had always been scared of her grandmother. As a child she'd taken up gymnastics, which was not easy for someone who was rather hefty and scared of heights, squeezing herself into white Lycra and bouncing off beams, just to get out of weekend visits. She couldn't be here today either, for the party. In her early thirties now, she was no longer cartwheeling her way to freedom, but had grown, as her friends called it, "some balls" and had moved to New York City, where she would spend hours telling her blank-faced therapist about her utter dislike of her grandma, a woman she saw as a tyrant, a bully and the reason for her mother's deep-seated insecurity and draining desire to feel loved. Joanne had carefully removed herself from the line of abuse, keeping Vera and her nastiness, and her mother's neediness, at 5,000-mile arm's length.

"Well, that's cruel," Vera grimaced, swatting the confectionary away. "I want to die but not by American *candy*. I had enough of that shit during the war." The box crashes on to the linoleum floor.

Startled, Tracey springs up from her chair. Reluctant to give her mother an excuse to criticize her nerves, she swiftly turns her fright into a faux-affectionate move, planting a kiss on her mother's cool forehead. "And don't we know it! Happy birthday, Mum!" In an awkward movement her lips land on the lavender concreteness of her mother's never-changing hairdo. Her nostrils fill with the smell of her mother's hair spray, a scent that will stay with her when she battles her way home through the traffic that evening, and the next day when she's nervously cooking a Sunday roast for her inconsistent golf club friends, and the following year, when she finds herself heading towards the familiar gold packaging in her local chemist, twisting off the lid, and spraying it into the air, letting the

familiar density stick to her like glue. This behaviour would shock her. She hadn't even liked her mother. "Ooh, good, they got you cake! Is it yummy?"

"Birthdays are funny things," said Vera, unbothered whether her statement would be challenged by her jittery, bleach blonde child or not. They weren't people who chatted. They had nothing in common. No one ever knew they were mother and daughter. Tracey had never been beautiful or arresting like her mother, merely 'passable', according to Vera, or someone who 'scrubbed up well,' according to Joanne's father, her ex-husband. "Your first one, in Africa, the heat was overwhelming, even in the shade. Your father was away, so I sang alone, I didn't want the servants to join in, caterwauling in their ghastly accents, and I remember thinking how pointless it all was – such a production, a sing-song, a cake which was a bloody pain for the cook to bake because we had to import everything to make it taste proper - for a one-year old who wouldn't remember it." Tracey was decidedly ignoring her, looking at her phone.

"Elizabeth is bringing Victoria to see you. They'll be here in about half an hour. She just texted." Tracey is relieved. Her mother's only surviving sibling felt grateful to be alive and that informed her ability to be pleasant and still make friends at 79. She also insisted, when her own health allowed her, in sharing the load Tracey had been carrying since she could remember. Vera.

Having a baby had been a last-ditch attempt to force happiness into a marriage that had none, a fact that had been shared with her since childhood. The attempt had failed, she knew that too. When Michael and Vera had shipped their life to Zimbabwe – or Rhodesia, as Vera still insisted in calling it - in 1953, from their dingy council flat in the East End to a fan-filled bungalow surrounded by Baobab trees and other British

expats, trying to make something of themselves while taking from others, they hadn't realized how stifling it would be. Tracey was supposed to breathe fresh air into their marriage and give Vera something to do. A baby, she had thought, would provide entertainment *and* force Michael to notice her again. He'd barely looked at her since they'd left Southampton. He blamed work, but she knew it was just the eventual way of things – that a marriage built on bruised hearts rarely flourished. The husbands disappeared into longer office hours, dinners with bigwigs and gin cocktails with understanding girls who didn't demand answers; the wives disappeared into motherhood and anxiety. So a baby it was.

“It's dead,” the midwife said, lacking the gentleness of a woman who had experienced something similar, or had been taught British compassion, Vera had often thought since that day. A stillborn. The blue body had been pulled out of Vera with the cord wrapped three times around its neck, knotted in one place. There was no cry, no gasp for air. Through the curtains she'd heard the other mothers pant, and then cry as their baby bellowed hellos. She could smell cigar smoke from the ward, new fathers congratulating each other for continuing the family name. But there was just silence in her cubicle - Michael wasn't there - and the stench of blood, for the longest time. Eventually, as she was cleaned up by two young porters, chatting away to each other in a language she didn't understand, she was vaguely aware of the squeak of a wheel, and a gurney with a small box on it being brought alongside her bed to take away the body.

“I never got to sing happy birthday to your brother. I never held him. My breasts swelled and I wanted to feed him, but there was no baby.” Vera clutched her deflated chest, her dry eyes wincing at the light shooting in from the small window at the foot of

her bed. “If they’d let me see him, or dress him, just once, I think that would have been a kind thing for them to do. It would have stopped the nightmares. But that isn’t how they did things back then. He was rubbish. He didn’t even get a grave, not that I’d be able to see it now I’m back here anyway.”

“Maybe that’s a blessing mum,” Tracey reminded her, which she tried to do every time her mother’s sadness whipped her back to that airless day when her splintered heart was removed for good. “You hear of people feeling terrible guilt if they don’t keep headstones polished, surrounded by fresh flowers. And the person’s not even there anyway.”

“I can take the hint, don’t worry. Get me cremated and chuck me into the Thames for all I care,” Vera snapped.

Africa hadn’t worked. Tracey, who arrived a year later, hadn’t worked. Michael stayed to make his fortune and a second family, and then a third, each new bride a little more pliable than Vera and therefore, he deemed, utterly deserving of the grossly ostentatious diamond ring bestowed on her from the land Michael’s company had mined and got rich from. His original family returned to London – Vera with a fake posh accent, which she’d acquired during the nine years of tedious cocktail hours with the judgmental wives of Michael’s bosses, and Tracey, now seven years old, with a deep-rooted lack of self-confidence she would never be able to shift. They returned to a different England. Shorter skirts, louder voices, looser morals. They took over a bookstore and lived in the flat above it, a tiny brick building recently pieced back together after the Blitz, those eleven weeks of bombing which had cost Vera two brothers. At night, Tracey would run from unfamiliar shadows in her bedroom to seek refuge with her mother. “I don’t like it

here,” she’d stutter, imagining ghosts in new corners, scared of the creeks which echoed around her damp city, so different from the Africa she knew. Her mother would always dismiss her.

“Don’t be ridiculous, child! It’s not the dead men who hurt you, it’s the live buggers who do!” and Tracey would be told to get back to bed before there were consequences.

Tracey went to the local school, where the teacher’s failed to find anything special about her, apart from a remarkable inability to spell, which decades later, when she was having issues with Joanne, she realized was dyslexia. She wasn’t just stupid. Mother and daughter lived in that eerie shoebox, tormenting and punishing each other, until Tracey met Steve at Charlie Chan’s nightclub when she was 18-years old. Tracey had never replaced the baby Vera had lost.

“Stop pulling that ghastly face,” Vera said, “and go and chase my cup of tea. It was supposed to be here ten minutes ago.” That ghastly face was Michael’s face, a cruel trick of DNA that allowed Vera to hate her daughter for the bad choice she herself had made in procreating with a horrible man. As a child, Tracey would try to say she couldn’t help how she looked, and be met with three sharp thwacks to the back of the legs for her impertinence.

Today, instead of putting up a fight she ran for the refuge of the staff kitchen, where her tired, sad eyes would be greeted with sympathy from everyone who knew whose daughter she was. Back then, there were no kind eyes to meet hers, apart from during her summer escape to Aunt Victoria’s, who loved but knew her sister. “She

doesn't mean to hurt you," she'd soothe, when Tracey would unleash the latest episode on her Aunt and gaping-mouthed cousin, Elizabeth. "She's just had such a horrid time of it," Victoria would say defensively. "She was wildly unmothered at a time she needed our mother the most. And she's raising you alone, with no help from your father, financial or otherwise."

Slumped onto the bleached counters in the tiny cupboard that passed as a kitchen because it had a toaster in it, waiting for the kettle to boil, Tracey could feel herself sinking into the usual state she felt around her mother: an utter exhaustion that they'd never been able to get along, that everything had to be a fight. She couldn't cry over it anymore, it was all too expected. And that made it worse, maybe a good cry would help. She sighed heavily as the hot water clicked.

"I would say it's not that bad," said Doreen, who'd appeared by Tracey's side and was giving her defeated shoulders a squeeze, "but, cherry pie, I know it can't be easy. She's a one-off your mother. Am I allowed to say that?"

"Ha! Please, that's one of the nicest words I've ever heard used to describe her," Tracey smiled, wiping her cheeks with a sleeve. "A one-off? My friends used to say she was like Mrs. Danvers - without the warmth or sense of humour." The women chuckled conspiratorially for a few seconds, a short burst of comradeship that allowed Tracey to rebuild herself.

Her mother's drink prepared, Tracey dawdled back into the bright, white room, making a concerted effort not to spill any of the scorching liquid into the saucer. Her mother did not approve of sloppiness. "Here's your tea," she carefully placed the cup



down on the bedside cabinet. “And Doreen said to say ‘eat the cake.’ Do you want me to cut it up for you?”

“That stupid woman is obsessed.”

“She’s actually just being kind.”

“How would you know? You swan in every now and again to make yourself feel better. You don’t actually know how they treat me!”

“Oh, just eat the bloody birthday cake, mother. It might be your last one.”

“Here’s hoping!” For her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, Tracey assembled what little family Vera still had left for a party, “more to admire her new patio furniture than to celebrate her own mother’s birthday,” she’d complained to Victoria as her daughter was waving guests goodbye on her driveway. On her 40<sup>th</sup>, when she’d stayed in bed all day, blaming the migraines that had plagued her since she’d returned from Africa, refusing to even open her daughter’s gift – a painting of a Baobab tree similar to the one Tracey remembered sitting under as a toddler, as one of the turnstile nannies read Rudyard Kipling aloud to her. Her 13<sup>th</sup> was the worst. It was the first birthday without her mother. Without a cake.

A bleep interrupted the silence. “Elizabeth’s turned back. The traffic on the high street was at a standstill. They couldn’t move and they need to get back to pick up Stella from a friend’s. They’ll come tomorrow.”

“Fine. She always did suit herself.” This wasn’t true.

“I should probably set off as well,” Tracey started to pick up her belongings, looping her scarf around her neck and pulling it tight, and reaching into her cashmere

camel coat to find comfort in the under-curated tangle of keys in her pocket. “I’ll see you soon, yes? Maybe next time, we can Facetime Jo in New York.”

She stood for a minute, to take in her mother’s face. Those features that had hardened over the years, immovable hooks of stone and sadness, ever more forceful in their fury as her body diminished into a sack of crumbling bones and prescription pills. If only she’d said something, she’d often think of that moment, reflecting on it when she herself had shrunk into a caricature of cancer and was knowingly living her last birthday aged 60, every day hanging on a landmark, and Joanne – all sun-kissed and finally self-aware, having lived in LA for a decade – would fly in to celebrate it with her in such an emotionally mature, spiritual way she must have felt like a heroine in her own movie. All Tracey managed that afternoon was, “Alright, bye. Happy birthday.”

The new owners of the care facility had no intention of making more Spanish homeowners on their watch. Stan had died so scandalously his son Graham had got a pay-out large enough to buy a villa in Alicante. Graham and his partner Hasz toasted his departed dad that first evening of their new life in Spain with an entire jug of Sangria. “Mucho gracias padre, you finally did something useful, you miserable git,” he sang to the Mediterranean Sea, his lobster red face looking even more painfully charred, if that were possible, at sunset. Scared and determined to avoid similar lawsuits, the current owners instructed their staff to perform morbid marches around the facility with increasing regularity, just to check everyone was still breathing. Minutes after Tracey had left, Vera finally decided to eat the cake. She hadn’t noticed one of the wax puddles was encrusted into the icing. She’d choked. Doreen, finding her just when she’d started to turn blue and silent, except for a few thick gasps, pulled her from the bed, and in a

ferocious hug from behind had dispelled the melted candle in a slimy explosion on to the floor. Vera, whose face was smeared with fluorescent icing, was shaking uncontrollably as she was returned to her bed, a doctor called.

“Today must be your lucky day,” Doreen said, holding the old woman’s hands, and for once she didn’t have to hear some superior retort. All she heard was the low sob of a fragile old woman.

Vera kept going for a few more months after her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, her heart pounding angrily enough for her to continue her assault on the people and the country that disappointed her so greatly until the very last minute. Tracey got the phone call early one morning. She’d gone.

“Sorry for your loss,” Doreen said, sincerely.

But it wasn’t a loss, Tracey had never really had her. Too many other people had got there first. And all she could think about, in those first minutes of being an orphan, was how lucky the staff at the care facility must feel – relieved they no longer had to deal with that rude, cantankerous relic who stank of hairspray and spat out food. And how Vera had finally got the escape she’d dreamed of, across the miles and years, in a nondescript room, on a nondescript day, a few streets away from the house where her mother had pushed her out into the world.

## LITTLE DICTATORS

At 6.59am she decides that today will be calmer. She would be calmer. She didn't want to shout like a fishwife every morning. They made her. And her shouting did not have the desired affect anyway. It seemed the viler she got, the more they joked. The more villainous her facial expressions, furious in their grimaces and threats, the more they clung to her tired feet in giddy worship, beseeching her for attention and eye contact. Up against a ticking clock, they would lick her screams with sticky blue tongues and pat them dry with a rub of their cheek, not fall into line and behave. But today will be different. It is 6.59am, she'll have to wake them up at 7am if they are to stay on track. She breathes in the sixty seconds of peace and quiet, then breathes them out. In, out. In, out. Today would be calmer. She would be calmer.

"Mum, can I tell you something?" Harry shouts from the hallway. Harry, the eldest child. Six years old. He suffered from verbal diarrhoea and had a penchant for older boys who left him out and made him cry. "It's an emergency." Everything with Harry was an emergency.

"What now?"

“Lily, don’t forget I’m out tonight.” Will shouts from the en-suite bathroom. Will, the husband. 42 years old. He suffered from a quick temper and had a penchant for careful financial planning, healthy eating and political correctness.

“Shush, I can’t hear Harry.”

“Don’t speak to me like that,” Will snaps, flouncing into the bedroom, hitting her with the same pout Harry would make when demands for second helpings were refused. “I did tell you.”

“I know, you told me. Whatever. I don’t care,” Lily says. And she really doesn’t. She’d long given up the dream that Will, returning at his usual time of around 6.30pm, would be of any use during the bedtime routine, or that the kids would want him to help anyway. The boys acted like Will was an outsider, an unwanted suitor, distracting their beloved woman from her most important role: being their mother. She saw how their disinterest broke Will’s heart. He tried to be a good dad and he was a good provider, but the boys couldn’t help but pick up on his unease and frustrations. Lily pretended not to enjoy their ferocious bias towards her but she did, especially on days when a sly aside from Will made her feel like shit. Her little dictators made her feel exhausted and bruised, but loved. “Fucking Stockholm Syndrome,” is how Lily described the parenting of young boys to friends who had yet to engage in procreation.

Evenings were actually easier with Will out of the way. Dinner could be a low-key scramble for low maintenance carbs and some sort of vitamin. Pasta with frozen peas mixed into the shop-bought marinara sauce, the kind of dish her clean eating husband would admonish her for. “You’ll give them scurvy,” he’d say, knowing nothing about the

ailment except it was somehow fresh produce related and seemed to affect wild boys at sea. On nights she had warning Will would be out late, Lily would treat herself to a big slice of Red Velvet cake instead of dinner. She'd buy it in the morning and think about it all day long. It gave her day purpose. A sweet, satisfying purpose. Once the ordeal of bedtime was over – the demands for water, snacks, stories or loo visits quietened - she'd sit in the heady silence and enjoy every bite. "Have fun," she tells Will, making a mental note to stop at the baker's after drop-off.

"Mum! Mum! Mum!" Harry races in, launching himself at her as if she were an assault course to be confronted with force and determination. Her body was a climbing frame, a scaffold, a tree trunk, a pillowy trampoline. Not one of her miniature housemates ever considered she might have nerve endings. Lily, the lady with no sense or feeling. Even Will seemed to view her these days as just a reliable machine, a robot with car keys and reusable shopping bags. She didn't feel like his partner, his equal, his temptation. They embarked on their irregular sex sessions with little expectations other than itching a scratch and not becoming one of *those* couples. The people who didn't have sex anymore. The people other people thought were weird and should probably get divorced.

Lily peels her weary body out of Harry's fervent fingers and drags herself to a standing position. How is she already exhausted? She feels like she'd already done a full day's work and it is only, what, 7.01am. "What is it Harry? Why the screaming?"

"It's my nuts. They hurt."

"Did one of your brothers kick you? Hurt you there?"

“No,” Harry replies, pulling down his pyjama bottoms and shaking his chestnut brown bottom at her, laughing.

“They don’t look hurt,” Will comments. “Leave your mother alone, I’m trying to talk to her. Go and get your brothers up.” Harry runs off. *Nuts nuts nuts* echoes down the hallway.

“Someone’s learnt a new word,” Lily laughs. “I think the best thing we can do is not react.”

“Not react? You *overreact* to everything when it comes to the children.” Will knew he was in constant competition with his own three sons for his wife’s attention and that he would lose 99% of the time. Even on a rare date, she would turn any topic or comment around to their sons. He missed the days when it was just the two of them and a conversation was more than an exchange of lunch orders, to do lists and suitable punishments. He missed *his* Lily, the Lily he devoured, the person he’d chosen to share his life with. Since becoming a mother she’d made him feel like just another chore, another bundle of testosterone to handle. “You make yourself a punching bag for those three. A servant.” As if on cue, six fists and thumping feet gallop into the room, demanding toast and hugs and emergency Lego reconstruction.

“For those three? You mean you four!” she mutters over the tattle-tailing and rambunctious whining, just loud enough to start a fight. She wants him to hear her, to care enough to growl.

“Look, I have to get to work. I don’t know what your problem is but you’re becoming a really mean, old cow.” She hadn’t changed that much, from what she could

see in the bedroom mirror that leaned on the wall opposite their bed. It was still her, just a little less taut, less sparkly. Her golden-brown skin, once the thing Will loved most about her, especially the contrast he saw when he held it against his body's own pale, freckled surface, looked yellowish now. "Sallow," he remarked, shortly before her fortieth birthday, suggesting in a rare fit of largesse that she treat herself to a facial, "to see if the dullness can be exfoliated off."

Will leaves, without saying goodbye, to her or the kids. The boys don't notice, and wouldn't have cared. She notices. She wedges her feet into sheepskin slippers and scratches her head, feeling itchy and confused that her marriage was now this stale. Will used to run back up the stairs just to give her a kiss. But that was six years ago. Before children.

"Come on, you lot, breakfast," she ushers the boys downstairs towards the kitchen. *Nuts, nuts, nuts. Big nuts. Blue nuts. Nincompoop nuts.* Their anatomically incorrect chorus is stopped by cereal and warm milk, guzzled and dribbled, then wiped away by Lily with one hand, while sandwiches are filled, cut and boxed with the other.

Back upstairs, Lily unevenly brushes fifty-three tiny, rooted teeth, avoiding the one wobbly tooth which hangs from a thread, taunting the Tooth Fairy, and then her own, a bit better. She scrubs all four faces with a flannel in an unintentionally brutal manner, and as the boys dry their cheeks on her nightdress she coats hers in a moisturizer which promises the world. The window for combing hair has passed. They all look like they've slept in a bush. In the boys' bedroom, racing cars are taken away, clothes are hoisted onto appropriate limbs, and fights are broken up. "Arms in, arms in, keep still, point toes, stop smacking me, it needs to be zipped!"



Downstairs again, the biggest challenge of the morning gets underway: fitting six feet into the correct six shoes. Lily's passion for uniform dressing, which looks so cute in inaudible family photos, makes the morning jumble even more haphazard. Velcro tight, shoes on at last, amid arms like airplane propellers, thrusting fists towards Lily's cheekbones. Weather check next: rain, all day. Ah, the damp squib of an English summer's day. Anoraks on, zipped, only two fingers caught this morning, and only one tantrum. Three umbrellas are handed out. "If you keep hitting your brothers, I'll take them away. I'll take them away. Right, no umbrellas. You can all get wet!" Three umbrellas are taken away.

Harry, the crowing eldest, moves to the front door, uncharacteristically smart under his anorak in grey shorts, white shirt and red tie, lording over his brothers, who look far more bedraggled in hand-me-downs that have never seen an iron. Lily's voice, which had found a volume and urgency she'd never had to use pre-children, took on its deep mummy-means-business tone. "Get to the car, now!" she screams, unlocking the car with a click, as she tosses bags, lunches and blankets onto the front step. Her daily instructions, so loud she felt everyone on the street probably heard her and – petrified – obediently ran to their cars, mostly fell on deaf ears in her own house. Typically, she would have to physically drag them into car seats, snapping at straps, fighting off stray kicks and bites. Sam, the youngest at two, was quite the Rottweiler.

"Get in now, we're late! We're late!"

"You always say that, mum."

"Because we always are, Harry."

It was this chaos that misty-eyed, crinkled women in supermarkets would tell her she would miss one day. She doubted that. She spent most of this time thinking, or sometimes, under extreme pressure, shouting “for fuck’s sake”. Luckily, having recently discovered Roald Dahl, they assumed their mother was suddenly worried about the neighbourhood fox, who loved to unpack everyone’s dustbins at night looking for snacks. They now screamed with urgency on his behalf in any trying situation. “For fox’s sake, Jack’s weed himself” was a favourite. Especially in public.

Enjoy the silence. These are her twelve seconds. Stop swearing. Stop shouting. Stop focusing on the exhaustion and burbling anger. The twelve seconds (Lily had timed it) between slamming the back door shut and opening the driver’s one was blissful. Such peace. The mob were strapped in and not going anywhere. She couldn’t hear the bickering and whining. The slam of aluminium gifting a brief respite from the din of motherhood. She often thought she should bugger off back inside the house at this point, drink some yearned-for coffee, or finally get to the loo for her first pee of the day. But she never would. She’d take the twelve seconds, then open her car door.

School gate terrorism is violently active in Lily’s upwardly mobile corner of London. The children torment each other with birthday party invitation withdrawals while the parents who deliver them – who are still, in this time of equality and sassy slogans boasting of feminine empowerment, 95% mothers – form two sides. Lily is firmly friended by the frazzled stay at home sect, all honest bedraggled frustration at their decreased place in the adult world despite grasping every childfree minute to fight for freelance work, money and self-respect. “I’ve got a tip,” yells one of her cohort across a sea of bobbing bows and fishtail plaits as Lily throws Harry towards his teacher, wrestles

Jack away from an angry-sounding terrier and pulls Sam out of a muddy puddle. “I did it yesterday, its genius. Chuck some carpet cleaner down your loos and flush just before Will gets home. The house will smell of pine. He’ll think you’ve been cleaning all day, and deserving of that girl’s night out we’ve been promising ourselves.” How fucking depressing, Lily thought, trying to smile. This smart, wonderful woman reduced to fake freshening tricks to escape that loaded question all homemakers dread: and what have you done all day?

In contrast to these women are the put-together ones. These racehorses appear to have an otherworldly level of control, but Lily isn’t convinced. Underneath the chic business suit or the perfectly coordinated yoga outfit, Lily imagines a blood system awash with anti-depressants, uppers and downers. “They have to be heavily medicated, right? No amount of money or meditation can make motherhood look that neat,” she’d tell her allies, whose self-worth she saw shrivelling up with each morning encounter with a glossy mane, small bottom, or organic lunch bag. She’d seen these perfect mums up close. Her sister Daisy looked great from a distance and appeared to be in control but it you shook her she’d rattle –and she’d only birthed one child, a studious girl named Poppy who sat still a lot, not three mini nutters like Lily had pushed out. Daisy’s work in the city meant she seemed to suck up most of their mother Doreen’s spare time, a cause of never-ending resentment between the formerly close siblings. “But I work, sis,” Daisy would say, each time Lily would bring up the lopsided split in their mother’s support. “I chose to keep my career going and I need mum’s help to do that.” *And pills and Pinot Grigio*, Lily would add under her breath during each one of these heated exchanges. Her sister

could make her feel better and worse about herself all at the same time, a remarkable feat only ever achieved by incredibly close family members.

“Having it all is a bullshit concept,” Lily would tell herself and her comrades. “At least we’re acknowledging how rubbish life is at the moment. Those together mums are keeping it all in, letting it fester.” Some friends would feel better after one of Lily’s pep talks, while others would start to consider Lily, with her brusque, confident approach to life’s difficulties, as another sort of rival in the angst-ridden world of modern mothering.

Lily’s no-nonsense aplomb had been handed down to her by her mother, a woman of infinite energy, honesty and kindness, especially when it came to her two daughters. Doreen’s confidence had been a mark of rebellion against her own mother, who willed her daughter to fail, as she felt she had failed, at life. Doreen had fled Jamaica, her mother and her mother’s milk pan, for London in 1958. The distaste for dark skin she experienced in the bright lights of the West End were mere shadows, they didn’t startle her or expose anything she felt she should be ashamed of. In England she was considered lesser, but not grotesque. In England she was considered the other, but didn’t feel rejected by her own. As the Sixties swung into action, the Caribbean community in London mingled and fortified, bringing colourful music and food to ancient, foggy corners. She met and married a kind man from Grenada and only returned to her mother and her motherland every three years, when savings allowed it and guilt forced it. In her mother’s home, the house Doreen had grown up in, she’d sit at a small table in the bright kitchen, under the watchful, sun-damaged gaze of Elizabeth II, for hours, listening to her mother’s complaints and criticisms. Her mother’s omnipresent milk pan sat lopsided on the stove a few feet away, dimpled from the whacks Doreen’s skull had received during her

childhood. She sat, like this, for seven days in a row every three years, until her mother died choking on a chicken bone in 1977. After the funeral, Doreen never returned to the island. She'd never taken her daughters to see the brash waves of her curacao ocean, so different from the ghostly grey flow of the Thames. She was sicker of her homeland than homesick for it, and her mother was to blame. After the births of Lily and Daisy, she'd willingly sunk into the soggy landmass of England. It was her United Kingdom. It was her daughters'. She'd tick the British box on doctor's forms and passport applications with pride. "You're such a Tory, mum," her girls would laugh at her, when she started getting The Daily Mail delivered and drinking gin and tonics instead of her usual rum. Her Caribbean began and ended with the traditional goat curry she'd season and stir for her family every Sunday in the tiny, neat commuter belt kitchen that sat at the back of the house they moved to when the girls were still toddlers, an hour north of London.

Doreen had made a large vat of goat curry for Lily and Will's garden engagement party. She'd seen Will's dad, a mountainous man built of rice pudding flesh, chuck his serving into a rose bush after being told by Lily that, no, it was not chicken *or* beef. He's really missing out, Doreen thought, puzzled how every Englishman of her generation had an inability to elegantly assimilate with other cultures, despite centuries of seafaring and flag sharing. Despite the Commonwealth. Lily's more modern friends from university tried to give the goat curry a go, daring to place small samplings upon mounds of safe rice, but even their liberal, welcoming attitudes to immigrants couldn't get them to complement the family dish. When she was clearing up after the party had finished, Doreen found most of her curry pushed under slices of cucumber.

Like Doreen, Will entered into a daring parental rebellion of his own, just closer to home. His act of defiance was to marry Lily. While they were dating, he had loved her coppery curves, her otherness, and the shock on his father's face when he'd brought her home. She was the first black woman he'd ever slept with. He was her fourth white man. He was smitten. His father was not. During a sustained attack that lasted from their first meeting until their wedding day, his father told him to dump Lily, while his mother, squashed by her husband's blubbing disgust, determinedly averted her gaze. Once, when he was a boy and they were talking about love, she'd told him to "marry carefully" with a sad look in her eye that Will had never forgotten. "Just because you can do something, it doesn't mean you should," she'd added all these years later, when her beloved Will had visited to tell them about his plan to propose to Lily. "It is acceptable to marry almost anyone these days, but that doesn't make it a good thing."

The friction with his parents made Will fall even more deeply in love. Lily became his crusade, his statement of political correctness. Once the ring had been presented on bended knee, and accepted, jubilantly by Lily and her family, who had grown fond of Will, his mother tried to get on board. "I really don't see colour, despite what Will might have told you" she told Lily, when she'd joined her, Doreen and Daisy on an afternoon shopping for bridesmaid dresses. She didn't catch the horrified glances only minutes later when she described the chocolate gown Lily chose for her sister as a "lovely Nigger brown." No, she didn't see colour, she'd tell her friends, who admitted, at home with their husbands, how glad they were this horrid situation had not happened to them, that their own children had made such good matches. And then she saw colour as a beautiful thing, when the three rambunctious, golden, beautiful boys who followed Lily

and Will's vows were born. They were fiercely adored by their grandmother, and viewed as perfect, in every single way, which they were not.

*Beep.* Nits. Nits? What the fuck?

Two minutes after dropping the youngest two at playschool, a text comes through. Nits had been found. The school nurse had checked a hundred scalps. Harry was a walking, assaulting party of head lice. He needed to be picked up and fumigated.

Back at the school, Harry looks thrilled. "I'm full of bugs, how cool is that?" Great, Lily thinks, thanking the nurse and rushing back to her illegally parked car. First stop: chemist, for a selection of astringent, hair-sweeping spells. How much? Oh, fucking hell! Then, back to playschool for Jack and Sam, who sit silently for once as she pins them into their car seats, enthralled with Harry's tales of dangerous beasts that poop on heads and eat earwax, hoping they had some too. They did, Lily discovers twenty minutes later, after clamping each boy between her thighs and scraping their scalp with a metal comb. All three of them infested. She needed her mother.

Doreen appears an hour later, running out of the old people's home where she worked to help Lily in her moment of need, as she always did. "They're done," Lily says, opening the door, soaked from the waist down, and relieved to see her mother. "Can you watch them while I bag up their soft toys and strip their beds, please?"

"What about you?"

"What do you mean, me?"

Her mother leads her into the bathroom, puts the toilet seat down, plonks her daughter on top of it and starts digging around in her curls. “Lord Jesus, them ugly, eh? Fighters too, I just squashed one hard and he just bounced off and ran up my arm.”

Oh shit, Lily begins to cry. “Come on, no tears needed. You’re just tired,” says Doreen, locating the lice shampoo and picking up the fine-spiked comb. Lily kneels beside the tub and lets her mother look after her, scrubbing and rinsing her hair in the gently firm way she did when she was a child. It’s almost a treat. Almost. “I feel gross,” Lily shouts over the stream of hot water dousing her hair. “I don’t think I’ll ever feel itch-free again.” Her mother laughs at her daughter’s drama. Lily wouldn’t have coped with the Banana Spiders she grew up with. Wrapping Lily’s hair into a towel turban, she kisses her cheek. “You’re good, my girl! Halleluiah!” She was lice-free but as she had predicted, Lily would feel itchy, on and off, and certainly every time she heard the word nits, until her children were in their twenties.

Midday already. In the panic, packed lunch had been left at school, so as Doreen remakes sandwiches, pours juice, and bribes the boys to eat using five pence coins, Lily decontaminates the house. After three hours of bagging, boil washing and high heat drying, they are no longer under threat from a plague of mites.

At 3pm, all three boys are napping, a move that Lily would pay for at bedtime, and Doreen rushes out the door to pick up her granddaughter, urging her eldest daughter to look after herself, to get some rest. But Lily couldn’t rest. Her nerves were jangled. She had achieved nothing that day, except piles of wet laundry and cupboards now bursting with bin liners full of cuddly dinosaurs. The project she’d hoped to pitch for that day was out of reach. She’d missed the deadline. *Oh well, they needed me*, she thought,



tenderly regarding the three soft brown heads emerging from a blanket on the carpet in front of the television, neat and still, identical and smooth, her eggs in a carton.

After Harry and before Jack, Lily had returned to work. She craved adult company and cleanliness. She wanted to go to the toilet on her own and drink coffee while it was hot. But part of her job meant travelling, and soon she was back on trains and planes, marching from bland ballroom to indistinguishable hotel bedroom to muted office block. And she couldn't shake the feeling she'd forgotten something. She felt out of sorts. She missed the visceral neediness of her baby. This surprised her. Sleeping with her boss in a beige hotel bedroom in Manchester had also surprised her. But a year and a half after Harry's arrival, she needed to feel like more than a mother who lacked devotion or a businesswoman who lacked ambition. Will's reaction to her misdemeanour, to which she'd confessed immediately on her return, surprised her too. He fell to the floor and cried, said he couldn't live without her. "A woman needs to be made love to," she told him dogmatically, sensing she had the upper hand, Athena rising from the rubble of guilt and nappies. "I'm too young to live a life without passion." At this point in their marriage, between sons one and two, their marriage was sexless. Too often at this point, with their child asleep, freshly showered and pyjamas omitted, she'd push herself towards Will in the darkness but be rebuked at every turn. Back turned, he informed her that he was stressed, depressed, had a headache, had a football game to get up early for in the morning. He made her feel like a sex pest, and that he had to lock his body away from her and her unwanted advances. Her boss had made her feel interesting and her body responded. But it couldn't happen again. She needed to be with Will more than she needed to feel her breasts cupped tenderly by a charming bachelor who smelt good. It

wouldn't happen again. All three of them knew that. Will promised to make love to her more often, and she decided to resign. She handed in her notice the next morning, it was graciously accepted by her boss, and Will had half-hearted sex with her that night. Then along came Jack. Will was thrilled. While Lily was nursing, she wouldn't pester him for a passion he rarely felt excited to give. Sam, who followed very quickly after Jack, would give him an even longer reprieve.

At 5pm the boys wake up, hungry and angry little soldiers looking for a battle, just as Lily is remaking clean, bug-free beds and waiting for the oven to buzz. Fifteen long minutes later, fourteen fish fingers, hundreds of garden peas, three scoops of hummus and three cups of milk are brought forth to feed the troops. The food that doesn't end up on the floor or down their clothes will squash the revolt, Lily hopes. She chucks them into a shallow bubble bath as she scoffs hummus straight off their plates with her fingers, realizing with remorse she never made it to the bakery for cake.

By 7pm-ish, her three children are transformed into fragrant cherubs, warm and soft in well-washed pyjamas, hair still fluffy from the acidic rubbing of the lice shampoo. Rolling onto her and over her as she allows them one bedtime story each, she feels lucky. She always does at this point, when the day is winding down. "Right, get some sleep," she tucks each into their beds, kissing and sniffing their heads, praying that's the last she hears from them all night. "I love you."

"Today was fun mum," Harry announces as Lily switches off the light. "I got the day off school *and* the bugs didn't eat my nuts."

“No, they didn’t, did they?” Lily agrees, shaking her head at the low level of conversation that was now her life. “Thank heavens for small mercies. Now please shut up and close your eyes. All of you.” She closes the door, heads to the kitchen, stacks the dishwasher, wipes the surfaces, picks up the dirty clothes from the floor, turns off the television, retrieves stray peas from under the table, takes a new loaf of bread out of the freezer ready for tomorrow’s sandwiches, cleans the sink, adds items to the shopping list, then vacuums her way across the ground floor, repacking school bags and leaving them by the front door, before finally depositing the dirty clothes in the washing machine and setting it to start a cycle in the early hours of the morning, so the fresh washing would be ready to dry on the horse straight after drop-off.

Will returns just after 9pm, in a good mood. His ego had been bolstered by some new clients telling him what an asset he is to his company, that he’s the reason they came on board, and he’d sneaked in a workout (plus sauna and Jacuzzi) at his swanky gym before coming home. Lily was in bed, trying to read a new Helen Simpson story but actually being sucked into the blinking hullabaloo on her phone.

“Hello gorgeous,” he smiles, deliberately catching her eye before disappearing into the wardrobe to change. “Did you have a good day?”

“Not really, thanks.” Lily answers. She can’t be bothered to go through it all now. He wouldn’t offer anything useful anyway, just wind her up with glib comments about how lucky she was to not have any real worries. “Anyway, you?”

“Great, great.” He puts down his phone on the bedside table and jumps onto the bed.

“What’s going on?” Lily asks, mock-suspiciously, “Is tonight my lucky night?”

“It is actually. I’m feeling good.” He leans in, his face warm and bristly. He is still very handsome, for his age, Lily thinks as she closes her eyes.

“Oh my God, have you been eating garlic? You stink!” he pulls away, retching.

“No! Wait, yes – I had some hummus, from the boys’ plates, at tea time. But I’ve brushed my teeth since then.”

“It hasn’t worked, it’s putting me off.” He sits up, pausing with concern on his face. “We can still do this but I won’t be able to kiss you.” Statement of intent made, their bodies move together again, the warmth – despite the words – feels nice. Will peels off his shorts then unbuttons her pyjama top, and wriggles her out of the bottoms. Lily lets out a deep sigh.

“Seriously, please don’t breathe in my direction. Actually, turn around.” He twists her body on to its side, moving her arms so they meet at her thighs, unable to touch him. She wants to be angry, resist, but she also wants him to finish what he’s started. For someone who seemed to be as disinterested in sex as he was, he was always surprisingly efficient in getting her hot and bothered. And for the next few minutes, facing the wall, she forgets about hummus and head lice and he seems to forget about her halitosis.

“I’m surprised I was able to do it. Your breath was foul,” Will says, standing up to take a shower as Lily digs for her pyjamas amongst the sheets at the foot of the bed. “Please stop doing that.”

“Stop doing what? Eating hummus?”

“Yes. That was really unpleasant,” Will replies. “Anyway, let’s get some sleep. You may not have anything going on tomorrow but I’ve got an important lunch I have to be on top form for, and my personal trainer is putting me on a new legs program after work.”

Lily doesn’t react. The boys have sucked all the fiery emotion from her. As she buttons up her pyjamas and sinks under the duvet, she simply hopes the boys will stay in their own room until her alarm goes off at 6.59am, when it would all start over again. She’d made her bed, in one of the spare few seconds she’d had that afternoon. And now she was going to lie in it.

## SOMETHING BORROWED

From: Rory Page

Subject: Hello!

To: Joanne Jones

Today at 5.28 AM

Hi Joanne

Long time, no speak. How are you? I got your email address from that old, fool Tim. My sexy life as an accountant is bringing me to New York next week, staying over the weekend, and I'd love to catch up. I've never been, can you believe it? Would be great to be given the guided tour by an adopted local. And fun to see you and reminisce about our Uni days, too.

Let me know, Rory

\*

From: Joanne Jones

Subject: re: Hello!

To: Rory Page

Today at 5.45 PM

Rory!

Lovely to hear from you and – of course! – I'll show you around.

I'm in the city next weekend so call me when you land and we can sort something out. My number is 212-903-4432. Which hotel are you staying in?

Jo

\*

From: Rory Page

Subject: re: re: Hello!

To: Joanne Jones

Today at 1.01 AM

The Royalton. Heard it's cool and central. Excited to see you.

What's it been? Ten years?

R x

\*

From: Joanne Jones

Subject: re: re: re: Hello!

To: Rory Page

Today at 1.04 AM

About that. Crazy, right? I'm looking forward to catching up, too.

See you next week.

Jo x

\*

Loneliness is a threat, a promise and a validation of all she lacks. Despite the human contact offered to a woman at her level of professional success - a hard-bodied personal trainer and a court filled with jesters and sycophants - Joanne is very aware she often has no one to talk to from the time she leaves her corner office overlooking the Empire State Building late on a Friday night, until Monday morning, when she emerges from the choking grind of the L train and bumps into a colleague who feels lucky to have stumbled upon an opportunity to make career-enhancing small talk with a fervent self-belief that Joanne had never witnessed in London. On her Sunday run of chores, the rusty catch of her voice, thanking the woman at the dry cleaners or the barista at a coffee shop, would remind her she hadn't had a conversation for hours, occasionally days, and that her weekends were too often about the tick tock of a clock. She'd consume whole series of *Sex and The City* in one sitting while the living, breathing metropolis shook with groaning lust outside her window. She'd spoon, lick and gorge pints of Dulce de Leche



while the insomniacs in her condo building sunk cocaine and threw each other against the walls.

In a decade's time, Joanne's behavior will be exalted as *self-care*, the necessary process of putting one's own mental health and wellbeing before the pointless requirements placed on us by society to be extroverted and busy, but at this point, she would simply be considered sad. Lonely. A loner. A deep sleeper in the city that never sleeps. The millions who filled the blocks and spaces around her could never have imagined this insular, hermitical life for her. Work was so glamorous and hectic, and she had worn a mask out in public for so long, it was not difficult for her to swat away intrusive questions about her weekend by name dropping a couple of overpriced brunch spots. She considered it weak to moan, so she rarely did, except to her therapist and close members of her family, who were more often than not the reason for her moaning in the first place. Her friends were situational rather than real, especially now her situation was at the top of a clawing, flesh-eating heap of tabloid journalists.

"We're becoming emotionally incontinent as a people," Joanne complained to her therapist during her usual Tuesday session, the night before she received Rory's emails. The latest issue of the weekly magazine has been sent to press hours before, and she had the evening earmarked to unleash everything personal that came up during the weekend's ruminations before returning her attention to the lives of the rich and famous. "Turning on the waterworks in a flash, the constant weeping. Its not dignified. Even men are soggy now."

"You sound very old-fashioned. And almost masculine," her therapist says. "We have talked about your Victorian shutting off of emotions, your disregard for the power

of sharing before. You could benefit from talking to people, other than me, who you pay. You could benefit from being more honest with others about how you feel.”

“Most people I know are too busy with their own narcissism.”

“That is not true and I dare you to dissuade yourself of this stock answer.”

“People so want to believe they’re special they get swallowed up in emotion and drama, and they invariably end up in disastrous situations. Is it worth the risk? An ex-colleague’s mum just ran away to Gambia to get engaged to a toy boy who found her on Facebook. She’s seventy-years-old. She learned how to use the internet, got a makeover, and that was it. Gone. To the first man who looked her way. She’s filed for divorce from her husband of forty-seven years, cleared out their bank account and buggered off. All because, apparently, her husband ‘didn’t look at her how he used to.’ Silly woman.”

“Marriage is dreary. Loneliness is distressing.”

“And you just have to get over it, not make a fool of yourself.”

“Loosen up. Live a little,” her therapist says.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to make suggestions?”

“It’s not a suggestion, it’s a survival technique,” he replies.

\*

When she was 21, Joanne and Rory had shared a kiss as they escalated towards the rainy streets of Holborn from the depths of the London Underground. “Did you feel that?” she asked, wondering if she had imagined the bolt of electricity that had buzzed

from her lips, where they'd met his, forcefully filling her chest, making her knees rock violently forward, pushing her into him, or whether he had felt it too.

"I did," he answered her, truthfully, green eyes enjoying her adoration, and ducking down to kiss her again. But he was not in love with her. She was not good enough for him. They both knew it, even though he had been bumming around since they'd finished university, working as a waiter and smoking weed, living in his parents' attic in Surrey, while she had taken her first-class degree and got a highly sought after job as an editorial assistant at a glossy monthly magazine, renting a sweet little house in Greenwich with some other new girls at the publication.

She hadn't believed one could actually swoon with lust before that moment, but she had, and as he pulled her by the hand and led her out into the Friday night crowds searching for a drink, she assumed their expectations from each other must now change. That no one would turn their back on such physical connection. Electricity, for God's sake, an actual electric shock.

She'd heard that he had married a woman named Belle during a chance meeting with a mutual University friend on Waterloo Bridge two years after they had split up for good. The same Belle she'd found a photograph of, under an ashtray and a pile of books on his bedside table at his grungy student house in their third year, when he'd returned from the summer holidays apologizing that he'd been too busy to see her more than once. The same Belle his rugby friends had teased him about at the pub – she took your virginity, mate, you wouldn't have been able to find hers – while he blushed and joined in the banter, catching Joanne's eye nervously then having sex with her as an unspoken way of apology, back at her terraced, more fragrant student house, after the landlord called

last orders. The same Belle, her name brought up from nowhere in their conversations, who he'd mentioned bumping into a few times at his local pub when they'd finished their studies and were back in their parents' comfortable corner of the home counties. It was that Belle. Blonde, long-limbed and confident. The woman she always knew would win.

\*

Infidelity isn't something to be taken playfully and tossed around a marriage like a plastic frisbee. It is a hand grenade. If you throw it in, eventually one of you will have to run. Usually the one who lobbed it, throwing it, screaming, heart racing, knowing everything has to change now before the victim even has time to look up, ask questions, leap out of the way. Throwing explosives into a marriage is a bold move, an arrogant one, forcing you to dash to the side of your life and watch as death lands on a person you once loved. The spouse would be nearest to the decimated bomb of course, but friends, in-laws, neighbors could be caught up to. Children, if there are any, they suffer the worst burns, and for decades after, too, even when the smoke has cleared and they are now lobbing their own ammunition at people they hoped to always care about. An affair was not good for anyone. Don't Rock the boat. Keep calm. Carry on. This is not the Falklands. We don't need all that drama for a fleeting feeling of victory, for a historic sense of emotional fulfillment brought to us from a sheep-shearing outpost. This is what Joanne had always believed. But Joanne decided she'd have sex with Rory about seven minutes into their meeting at the Royalton's bar, when he pulled her towards him and said quietly, "it really is so lovely to see you again, you haven't changed," and lightly kissed her cheek, just near enough to the point where her left ear met her extended neck for it to

send familiar sensations down her entire body, and told her that his work would bring him to New York every couple of weeks for the next year or two.

The following morning, as she jumped up the subway steps and through Bryant Park, hoping her reminiscing wouldn't be interrupted by a chatty colleague, her Blackberry buzzed in her hand. A text, from him. They'd decided to switch communication from work email to private phone number three margaritas and a long French kiss into the evening.

*You were amazing. You are amazing. How did I ever let you go?*

\*

No one ever thinks about the mistress and her feelings when they hear about an affair, at least not with sympathy or gentleness. "He's treating you like a side salad, you deserve to be a main course," Joanne's heavily pregnant cousin Suzie had said to her when she confessed what had made her go AWOL over the previous few months.

"And that cliché comes at me from Dr. Phil?"

"He's basically taking you off the market but refusing to buy," Suzie continues, ignoring her. "You could be missing the love of your life, wasting opportunities to meet someone who could truly love you and would want to build a future with you. This is a grubby distraction. It'll end badly – for you, more than him, I guarantee."

"I know that's what it would look like to an outsider –

"Oh, but I suppose your situation is different. Should I feel sorry for him? I suppose his wife is a psycho who won't have sex with him? She's probably not interested

in him anymore, just the children? Maybe she's let herself go? Probably not the woman he married, eh?" This anger wasn't just directed at Joanne, but Suzie's own husband, Miles, who was proving to be an untrustworthy, whining disappointment to everyone who knew him well, especially his hormonal wife. But Joanne was too caught up in her own guilt and drama to think of anyone else's domestic frustrations. She could only focus on Rory and Belle and herself.

"They sleep in separate bedrooms."

"Of course they do. You fool."

"He thinks she might be playing around, too. She's joined a gym. Having more girls' nights' out. There's just really nothing there anymore."

"Yet he won't leave her."

"He will, I'm sure. When the kids are a bit older. They're still really young."

"How sweet of you to think of them!"

"Look, I don't expect you to condone this, I wouldn't have done. But I'm happy for the first time in years. I feel supported. I feel attractive. For the first time in my adult life I'm not lonely. My therapist said I needed to be more open to emotions, to think about myself and my needs."

"Dress it up all you like, Jo," says Suzie, her voice thick with disgust. "I just couldn't do that to another woman. It's probably best if you don't tell me anymore about it, especially at the moment. What's going on at work?"

Joanne wasn't after approval, or sympathy, she just didn't want to be lonely anymore. Not that she had thought about any of this too deeply up to this point, four months into the affair, when everything was still hot and clandestine, unencumbered by talk of unloading dishwashers and having to make time for each other's annoying friends and serious talks about the future. Suzie was naive about this sort of thing. She'd always been insufferably Pollyanna-ish and asexual, even when she was a teenager and hopeful boys with floppy fringes would snake around her on skateboards, boys whose beauty made Joanne blush. She could try and explain how she felt to Suzie but it wouldn't work. Telling Suzie that the affair had come as a shock to both of them, that Rory was a good guy and great father to his two girls – a feminist – and had just wanted to talk to someone that wouldn't judge him, and she needed the same, surrounded by the cockroaches of Manhattan, and they connected because of their shared history, and he made her feel young again, and valuable, and not so fucking depressed every minute of every fucking day, but saying these things wouldn't ignite approval, or sympathy in her cousin. To every married woman, she was the whore. But she had loved Rory first. He had electrocuted her at Holborn station. Belle was his sloppy seconds.

“She must know,” her cousin, who could never let anything go unsaid, blurted out, just before hanging up, when they'd concluded their falsely jolly exchange of family and work news and were preparing their goodbyes. “You won't get away with it. I'd know. Women know.”

\*

She'd been expecting it: the handwritten letter from the wife, postmarked 31<sup>st</sup> December, more powerful than an email. More disturbing. She knows where I live. I

know how she curls her letters, how her name looks in ink, her taste in stationary. Joanne sniffs the paper but smells nothing. Any calculated spray of a sensual scent would have faded as it rocked across the Atlantic. Joanne had been sleeping with Belle's husband for one year and two weeks now. Their affair had slowed down slightly over the previous few months, Rory's work patterns changing to incorporate more meetings in South East Asia and less time near her, and Joanne's focus switching from being an attendant lover to daydreaming about giving him his longed-for son and heir, a boy made from their eternal love for each other, and being a fun, friendly stepmother to his two daughters, but it limped on. Rory felt stifled and turned off by Joanne's talk of the future and more children, but she was excellent at making him feel invincible, irresistible. Powerful. She was good to have on the backburner, so he kept her around, as a confidence booster. And Belle had found out.

*Joanne,*

*When I was in my twenties I used to think how, if I ever found myself faced with the choice, I'd rather be the mistress than the wife during an extramarital affair. The role of mistress seemed so much sexier, desirable. Naughty. The wife always seemed so vulnerable, almost foolish. A nag. But getting to know you, while reading the texts and emails you've been sending to my husband over the last year, has quite changed my mind. You're so out of control! I'd feel sorry for you if you weren't going out of your way to shit on my relationship, and the relationship your boyfriend has with his children.*

*I was aware of you when Rory and I first got together, he muttered something about a girl he had been seeing at university that he wasn't that into when we got together during the summer holidays before our final year started. I was at Cambridge,*



*which made Rory nervous and excited in equal measure. He painted his relationship with you as very one-sided. Were you a bit too keen? Desperate? Whatever it was, it didn't thrill him, did it? He never even introduced you to his parents, did he? Took you home? His mother has absolutely no recollection of ever hearing a Joanne Jones mentioned, and Rory has always been a mummy's boy and always told her everything. And now you've popped up again!*

*I need to ask you a question. I would ask to meet you in person, but seeing as we live 5,000 miles apart and I haven't got any plans to visit America coming up, a letter will have to do. I trust that someone as obsessed with my husband as you are won't be able to resist correspondence from - an insight into the mind of - the woman Rory chose to marry and build a life with - children, pets, a lovely home, lots of mind-blowing sex (whatever he may have told you, we do it all the time, and it has only improved since he got the vasectomy three years ago. You knew about that little operation, yes?) Anyway, I know you will read this letter. Probably countless times.*

*To my question: Will you please leave us alone now? Enough. He's bored of you. Even I'm bored of you now and I haven't even met you. If you're thinking of yourself as some sort of crowbar, levering Rory out from an unhappy marriage, you're not. You're a mild distraction, a cure for jet lag, homesickness, a little tickle for his middle-aged, faltering ego at best. And who would want to marry a crowbar, anyway? There is no way Rory would ever go for the poverty of a post-divorce lifestyle so we will never split up. He has expensive taste. That's why he chose me. Please back off as elegantly as your heavy cork wedges allow you to.*

*I have a talent for forgiveness. You aren't his first affair. You might not be his last. But Rory and I will recover, we always do.*

*Belle*

\*

When spring started to break through the gnawing grey of a Brooklyn winter, Joanne could finally face looking back into her wasted year. The Christmas Day she'd spent alone, eating Chinese out of boxes balanced on her duvet, turning down offers of festivities to be free to take his call whenever he could sneak away from the chaos of present unwrapping and toy building at his home to wish her a Merry Christmas. She saw piles of unused plane tickets and corridors of empty hotel rooms, forsaken at the last minute because work had kept him in London or Singapore, or he'd said Belle was acting weirdly, or he'd been too upset to leave a feverish daughter. Rory hadn't contacted her for two months now and she once again spent whole weekends not talking to anyone except the assistants at her local grocery, then worked all week pretending to breathe and smile to limit the gossip of her colleagues who gathered around her like a smack of jellyfish, picking over her singledom, slippery tentacles poking at her sadness. New York was just a ghost town filled with flashbacks of happy people kissing on the pebbles of the Meatpacking District, fragments of conversations whispered on the Gansevoort's smoking patio, torn baguettes and bagged-up champagne on blankets in Central Park, pinging past neon-shiny tourists towards 24-hour diners in Chelsea. Rory was the only man she had ever loved and suspected she ever would. New York was dead to her now. He'd killed it. She had to leave. She thought about killing herself, but she didn't have the energy. It would be less hassle to move to Los Angeles.

“I did tell you the wife would find out,” Suzie said, when Joanne rang to tell her the affair was over as she walked through grey sludge to the office for the first time in the new year, declaring with frosty breathe that she’d given Rory back to Belle. This time Suzie’s voice was soft and filled with affection. They hadn’t spoken for months, despite Suzie’s pleading attempts to communicate, and Joanne’s guilt that she’d abandoned her post-partum cousin when she probably needed her support the most. “I’m sorry. How are you?”

“I’m moving to Los Angeles.”

Suzie snorted. “Well, up until a year ago, I’d have said that is the most ridiculous, foolish thing you’ve ever told me you were doing, but, well, since –

“I know.”

“Now, I’ll just say, when can I come and visit? London is bloody brutal at the moment. Miles is acting like a total dick and the baby is sucking me dry. I need some sunshine and sleep. I can help you find a new man. We can get dressed up and go out and prowl the streets of Hollywood together looking for eligible bachelors while Miles learns what it is to be a parent at home.”

“Wow, motherhood is good for you. You’ve changed,” Joanne laughs for the first time in months, wedging her mask onto her swollen face as she prepared to face her colleagues.

“As have you,” Suzie says. “I hope.”

Soon after, Joanne swaps her New York life on a late spring day for a world of permanent summer. She'd often wake far too early in her small, neat Venice apartment, blinded by the new West Coast light. On these mornings, she'd walk five minutes to the shore and watch the surfers fly across waves and tumble onto the sand, sometimes for hours. When she was feeling strong, if thoughts of Rory floated into her mind, she'd drown them quickly, before they could knock her too brutally. She could be amazingly efficient at this. Too efficient her New York shrink would have said. Now and again, she even fooled herself that she could be loved and feel love again, or that she could be happy on her own again. But at times her heart felt submerged and murky, unable to float, and she'd weep and weep and weep for the boy she'd held on to for dear life. The agony of losing him flooded her veins, her lungs, as her unkempt hair, dark at the roots and bleached with salt at the ends, a halo slipped, got caught in a net of tears. Washed up under her regular palm tree, crumpled coffee cup in one hand, she'd think how London and New York were better positioned for misery and regret, that LA's constant sunshine made her heartbreak farcical. She missed the Thames. She even missed the Hudson. But most of all she missed his face and her bliss, and she knew, on these exhausting mornings looking out onto the shiny, clean ocean as he sailed into her consciousness for these brief, few seconds, unsinkable, that she always would. Because they were electric.

## THE EGGSHELL CARPET

The resentment with which Suzie viewed her husband was all-consuming. If he dared to glance at his phone, or pick up a newspaper or, God forbid, if his arse ever touched a couch when she was doing housework or dealing with the baby, the eyeball rolling would start, swiftly followed by barked instructions.

“You lazy bastard. Don’t you think I’d like to read a bloody newspaper? I haven’t read a fucking book in a year,” she’d yell, while the child, who was invariably in her arms, a clingy limpet when it came to her mother, would continue snivelling.

“What do you want me to do?” he’d ask robotically every time she kicked off, his jaw locked, his eyes as black as the coffee they had both been forced to mainline since Stella’s arrival.

“Help, Miles!” she’d bite, fury erupting from her contorted mouth, child gripping onto the grubby fleece pyjamas that had become her uniform, their colours faded and worn out. “Just help! I shouldn’t have to ask. This isn’t the fucking 1950s.” She wasn’t asking, she was shouting hysterically, but he knew better than to point that out. Last time he had she’d called his mother, half ventilating with dramatic sobs, and he’d had to endure an ear-bashing from her too.

Miles was well-trained in the art of taking her shit now. She'd try to start a fight most evenings and every weekend. Home wasn't a sanctuary. It didn't even feel like a home anymore, just a house he slept in. He'd long ago stopped imagining that weekends away from the cubicle dullness of his office – the politics, the stress, and the vile canteen lunches – would mean freedom to be himself and relax. Or to have fun. When he'd asked Suzie to marry him six years ago, she had been fun. And he'd always loved kids, so he imagined having a child thrown into the mix would only make life more fun. He'd been wrong. His stomach now cramped in constant knots of fear, waiting for his wife's next pounce.

Suzie had changed the minute she lost the first baby, two years into their marriage. She'd become jealous and odd, crying in supermarkets and refusing to socialize with anyone who was pregnant or had young children. This was limiting. Most of their closest friends were in their mid-30s and coupled up, so Miles often went to gatherings without her, for a couple of hours respite from her gloom. He'd explain away her absence by muttering a few words – work, headache, hangover. His friends would hand him a beer, then gossip as soon as he was out of earshot. There were clearly problems in his marriage. The women blamed Miles and his insensitivity. The men thanked their lucky stars they weren't attached to a high-maintenance banshee like Suzie.

After two years of strictly regimented sex on specific days in specific ways and lots of pissing on sticks Suzie was pregnant for the second time, but the heavy coat of grief she'd worn since she lost the first baby still hung around her shoulders. The entire nine months were filled with nightmares and urgent calls to the doctor. She couldn't feel movement. There was a spot of blood. Her ankles were swollen. Nothing was wrong and

Stella arrived, pink and squealing, on her due date. Perfect. Warm and solid. Presented to Miles looking like a little glow-worm, he'd thought, wrapped tightly from top to toe, while Suzie was being stitched up. He'd held Stella first. He'd fallen in love instantly, but this bundle had wedged something new, something foreign, between him and Suzie that they would never be able to get shake off.

This first year of Stella's life had been awful. It didn't help that the baby refused to sleep and was constantly hungry. Suzie, an academic who was trained to over-research everything, knew that breast was best so martyred herself by enduring those dark, lost hours alone. She'd slump, in the tiny room that used to be her office, her books now boxed up and out of the way in the loft, exhausted and not seeing an end to it, a baggy shirt pulled up over one grotesquely swollen tit, then the other. Every night, as moonlight shone in stripes through the wooden blinds and onto the suckling piglet with her husband's nose, Miles snored in the bedroom next door, oblivious to these nocturnal trials. "Fucking hog," she'd mutter into her daughter's cradle cap. "Useless twat."

They'd met on a rare, hot English summer's day when Suzie was in a rare, good mood. A paper she'd laboured over for a couple of months, *The Return to the Motherland: How women represent home and the impossible dream of a safe haven in Greek literature*, had been approved for a panel on Homer at a humanities conference in Louisville, Kentucky. This was a big deal for her career and standing at the university, and she'd been awarded funding. She'd decided, on that happy, hot summer's day, to make a road trip out of it. She'd have a week of networking and driving, discovering new places and new people, tacking on a weekend in New York City at the end to catch up

with a second cousin, Joanne, who had moved to the States to write for a magazine and slut around Manhattan.

Miles had noticed her immediately, smiling on the packed commuter train as it pulled out of Paddington, despite wearing a long-sleeved Breton top and skin-tight jeans in the intolerable heat. Feeling confident, himself boosted by a recent promotion to marketing director at his advertising agency at the impressive age of 29, and just home from a week of successful flirting and pulling in Ibiza, he decided to make a move. She was unusually friendly and receptive – for her, not that Miles knew that then. She instantly adored the fact he was confident – the academics she surrounded herself with generally shuffled around her awkwardly – and clever enough to realize that it probably wasn't the book she was pretending to read, the rather heavy Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, that was making her grin. He disembarked at Reading station with her number tucked into the pocket of his unbuttoned at the neck, pale pink shirt and a date for that Saturday night in his diary.

At this point, he could not have suspected that this lively, chatty woman had had a history of depressive episodes since her early teens, and a melancholia that had erupted during the final year of her PhD three years earlier, when stress – and the discovery that her great-grandmother had been locked up in a mental institute and sterilized, her grandmother abandoned – had led to an intense period of isolation, contemplation, drinking vodka out of plastic pint glasses and sawing at her still-scarred arms with purple tweezers.

\*



“I’m pregnant,” Suzie announced on a Monday morning as they passed in the kitchen, two days after Stella’s first birthday. Their toddler sat, quietly for once, in front of Nutella on toast and a Peppa Pig cartoon. Sugar and television, two things Suzie had sworn she’d never rely on before she became a mother. “I’ve been feeling shit for a couple of weeks and now I know why.”

Miles, who had been eagerly racing towards the front door, stopped abruptly. The space between them, across the granite island they’d had installed a few years earlier when they still believed they’d be that couple who hosted impromptu, informal soirees with friends, felt huge and thick. Miles knew the expected thing to do would be to rush towards his wife, hold her belly, which contained his child, and kiss her. He’d done this with the first baby, and he’d done this when he’d found out she was carrying Stella. But today he just stood there, leather satchel in one hand, car keys in the other, regretting the quick, nostalgic shag they’d had the day she’d got back from visiting her cousin, Joanne, who had just moved to Los Angeles. She’d been sun-kissed and relaxed, almost back to the Suzie he’d first dated, after four nights of sleep, and he could sense she wanted to reward him for allowing her this slither of childfree indulgence. It had to have been then. That was the only time they’d done it in a year. Since the C-section had left her a body distorted by pouches and puffiness she’d rejected all of his physical advances. He stared at her face for a clue as to what he was supposed to say.

“And you’re happy?” he asked, tentatively.

“Ecstatic, darling. Of course,” she lied. “And you?”

“Of course,” he lied. Before they were married, they’d snuggle in front of numerous pub log fires and choose names for multiple children. They agreed they wanted four. “I’ve got to get going. Early meeting. I’ll call you at lunchtime.” He wouldn’t.

As he was pulling away from the house, his phone lit up. His mother.

“Susie told me the news last night. A baby is just what you two need to sort yourselves out. Just don’t muck it up. Try for once in your life to be a grown-up. An adult, Miles. You’re not being asked to do more than is expected of any modern man. Pull your weight.”

He stared at the long road ahead, the grey pavements and grey clouds that would lead him to his grey office. Oxford, with its honey domes and caramel cobbles, was only five miles from their stained-glass front door, but his company appreciated cheap rent over inspiring architecture and had rented 12,000 square foot of carpet tile in an eyesore of an industrial estate towards Gloucester.

“Are you listening, darling?” His mother, Surrey’s very white version of Oprah Winfrey, was something of a ringleader amongst her suburban set of entitled middle-aged, middle-class navel gazers in Jigsaw cardigans, and spouted anti-male rhetoric whenever she could. At her book club, at her meditation school, while supping expensive lattes. All paid for by Miles’ dad, the worn-down Derek. “Suzie will really need you now.” Miles decided in that moment, as he flipped on the windscreen wipers so he could see through the sudden downpour, to ask the 28-year-old in his department, who’d been flirtatiously catching his eye over the last few months, out for a drink that evening. He

just needed a gin and tonic and a conversation with no judgement or yelling; just something to remind him his life wasn't awful. No sex. It wasn't the sex he missed.

It turned out this brunette lifeline, Guinevere, was newly-married and also feeling trapped. The panic attacks had started seven months ago on her honeymoon in Mauritius. "I pressed my burning forehead against the Italian marble tiles of the ridiculously large bathroom and dare myself to scream," she said. She never did. She just panted. She felt herself floating away, imagining herself as a tiny island on a big, dying planet, unable to anchor herself to anything, losing control. And she'd keep panting. "But I need to do a year," she told him, as if talking about a prison term, through fast slugs of Pinot Noir at the wine bar near the office where all the work-related dalliances seemed to take place, "so my parents don't flip out about how much they spent on my wedding. They need to save face, just for a bit longer."

They had sex that night in their office's disabled loo. She had condoms in her handbag, a fact that would make him feel dirty when he looked back on that night a decade later. Those condoms, so quickly sprung from her Radley purse before they'd even kissed, made him feel less special and more like an interchangeable done deal, looking back. At the time he was just grateful that the gin and tonic and conversation had led to something he did, in fact, miss.

Guinevere wasn't too demanding to begin with, even allowing him to cancel their regular Tuesday night screw to go home and comfort Suzie when she miscarried their child two months later, at 13 weeks and two days, on their chestnut dining room floor. She even asked how her rival was the following morning when Miles arrived, red-eyed

and jittery, at the office. She didn't think to ask how he was; everyone knew these losses were all about the mother – even mistresses.

Neither Suzie nor Miles were very upset at losing a child this time. This was a piece of cake compared with the first miscarriage. Susie secretly thought the foetus had taken one for the team, disposing of itself to give her the freedom to dispose of her useless and unfaithful – she suspected – husband. Miles secretly thought this meant they were both borderline sociopaths who didn't deserve to be parents.

But that night, although tears weren't shed, they still needed to be near each other, to mourn this quietly violent ending. They sat down next to each other in their bedroom, on the plush beige carpet. Leaning against the oak dresser Suzie's mother had donated when they first set up house, fully clothed, Suzie's skirt damp with blood, they grieved for the honesty and youthfulness and spontaneity they'd extracted from each other.

"We nearly became who we wanted to be," Suzie said. "I did love you, you know?"

"I know." He took her hand. "And we made Stella. We'll always have Stella."

Miles moved back into his childhood bedroom the next night. His mother admonished him while serving his favourite meal – Shepherd's Pie. He asked for a second helping while his father busied himself loading the dishwasher. His appetite had returned. He'd done the right thing.

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Eight years after the divorce, Suzie would find herself happy again, her confidence returned through a fulfilling work life and a handful of good, decent women

who she could count on, paid for and otherwise. The fog she had often lost herself to in the past quickly dispersed now she had a routine she could control. Her books were out of the loft, dusted and re-read on the decadent Sunday afternoons when Miles took Stella out for the day. She realized on one of these occasions, in the bath with *Effi Briest* slightly soggy in her hands, that she was happy. This shocked her, and made her even happier.

Stella was also content and doing well at school. Her mother-in-law had warned Suzie the divorce would be the death knell to good exam results but she was wrong, as she so often was. Suzie had gone one step further than helicopter parenting and had decided to be Stella's best friend. "A child needs a mother, not a partner in crime," her mother Elizabeth would regularly warn her, outraged that from Stella's seventh birthday onwards the duo had weekly pedicures and cappuccino dates. "She needs to know who is in charge, not how to look pretty. I thought I raised a feminist." Elizabeth's view of liberated women was stuck in the 1970s. She wanted an army of bare-breasted, fresh-faced fighters, not traitors in lipstick. Miles' mother, always looking for a reason to get one over on Elizabeth, who she saw as a threat, jealous of the modest fame she garnered as a writer of "not even very good" poems, advised Suzie to ignore her. For her first Christmas as a divorcee, she treated her ex-daughter-in-law and her granddaughter to a spa weekend, complete with makeovers. That same Christmas she'd given Miles a brushed steel handheld mirror "to take a good, hard look" at himself in. He saw a heavier jowl, dark circles under his eyes and the shadows of defeat but that didn't surprise him.

A sex life was non-existent for Suzie since her divorce. She hadn't done it since Miles had got her pregnant the last time, the day she'd returned from Los Angeles. But

she'd been to an Ann Summers party the previous summer and bought a vibrator. She'd told the party host Jessica, the rather brash but fun mother of Stella's best friend, who was being asphyxiated at the time by a feathery boa festooned with metallic penises, she'd never use it but felt she had to "join in the spirit of the occasion". This turned out to be a lie. She hadn't stopped using it, especially on Sunday afternoons when Stella was with her father. She was even thinking of submitting an article to a feminist journal on *How the Rabbit Should Replace Man*. Jessica, who had become a friend, despite them having little in common except an overwhelming love for their daughters and sex toys, was now trying to persuade her to buy an upgrade. A super-turbo, glow-in-the-dark version with four speeds, or something. "It even puts the bins out without being asked," Jessica chuckled inappropriately during an end of term dance recital one evening. Suzie whispered that it sounded awful, while making a mental note to buy it online that night.

Eight years after the divorce, Miles would find himself in the same position, unchanged, just older and more exhausted, being barked at by a different tired new wife if he tried to read a newspaper or, God forbid, turned on *Match of the Day* while she cared for their young baby, a boy named Arthur. Guinevere was discombobulated, mentally and physically, confused about what she had become. Miles, once again, didn't know what to do and his second wife wouldn't tell him what she needed. Glimmers of information about Miles' new predicament reached Suzie via Stella's innocent reporting and, depending on what time of the month it was, she'd rock back and forth between pity and glee about her ex-husband's situation.

Nine years later, Miles wasn't shocked to find himself receiving more divorce papers, posted to his parents' address. He thought it would be a fitting finale to this

episode of his life to fill in the blank spaces in the wine bar near his office where Guinevere had first seduced him. After signing his name and sealing the envelope, he thought about all the women in his life who he'd let down, including his mother, who still despaired of him. When he'd sunk his third and final pint of bitter, he closed his eyes and imagined his younger self curling up on his old, single bed he'd be returning to that night, looking up into the shiny, hopeful faces of Paul Gascoigne and Gary Linekar, three lions on their shirts and the world at their feet, and waiting for his mum to call him down to dinner. Shepherd's Pie and three veg. He felt better. He still had that at least. Even when she despaired of him, she still cooked.

Sixteen years later, and onto his third child with his third wife, and possibly his third divorce, Miles wondered if he made these women depressed or whether growing up in a house filled with self-help books and his mother's confused notions of women's lib had subconsciously drawn him to women who would refuse to be satisfied by him. He never asked his mother what she thought. And he never asked his wives.

His eldest daughter, Stella, would tell him he'd put her off men for life when she came to stay with him after her first term at Edinburgh University, holding hands with a woman called Shabnam who looked painfully encumbered, thought Miles, by a trio of gum piercings and a serpent tattoo that wrapped around her neck and hissed at him from her clavicle. But Stella was kind enough not to say this in front of his latest wife. Or his mother.

## THE MATCHSTICK GIRL

I'm four-years-old and have had to start talking to my dad behind a pane of glass, and life is pretty shit, although I'm not aware of it at this time, and people around me assume it will never get much better, that I'll drown in the scum of my familial circumstances as much as my lawbreaking father, although I'm not aware of this at the time, either. Our house is quieter and we eat less meat and watch less football so I am enjoying the changes. My mum is still there for me every morning, yanking my hair into smooth plaits and wiping away misplaced Weetabix from my face with a firm wipe of a frigid flannel. It is 1979 and we're in England, in the South where the working-class are getting full of themselves, clicking their fingers and expecting money, attention and property, delivering demands in pushy Estuary soundbites on increasingly proletarian news programs. But prisoners stand outside families, communities and society, and time, and so do their wives and daughters. "She's an old soul in a young body," a chalky-cuffed nursery school teacher tells my mum kindly, when she arrives at pick-up and once again finds me alone, staring out of a window, while the other children play families, hoisting imaginary cakes out of plastic ovens and laughing, "but she's fine. Nothing to worry about." My DNA is considered something to worry about. My constant search for solitude is not. Not at four-years-old, anyway.



By the time I'm six-years-old, I am painfully self-aware that I have been given the role of *girl least likely to (fill in the blank)* because I'm different, too nervous to raise my hand in class even if I know an answer, too shy to ask someone to play during break, head bowed as I make my way along the free school lunch line with the other unfortunates. I'm the girl without a dad around, just a mum whose face is permanently ruddy with tears as she shuffles me, her blushing three-foot tall predictor of gloom, through the days and weeks and months. As she works three jobs to feed us, I spend too much time in the company of older female relatives who teach me how having low expectations for life can be the soundest route to self-preservation. At six-years-old, I am an aged cynic, always expecting the worst.

"I think it's going to rain."

"I don't believe Father Christmas is real."

"Sticks and stones *and* words hurt me, I don't know why you're telling me they won't."

"I'm going to puke."

"That ginger woman on the television has a mean face."

I don't want to be the girl least likely but I haven't learnt the art of reinvention at this point. As we get older, we learn to pretend we're more confident and happy than we really are with the help of alcohol, therapy, makeup, denial or, in my case, by running away and having minimal contact with the people who knew me before I decided to become someone else. But in 1981 I am a child, pasty and scared, believing I will always feel lesser and nervous.

Shortly before I turn nine, my father is released early for good behavior. My mother and I drive to pick him up, my lap warm from the paper-wrapped beef pie, mash and eel liquor, his favorite, that we'd stopped to get him on the way. Our car stinks of vinegar for weeks afterwards. He doesn't say thank you, or kiss my mum hello, but he passes me chunks of salty pastry crust over his left shoulder and talks excitedly about his ambitious plans and I forgive him for everything.

I'm twelve-years-old going on ninety when, after three years of freedom, which proves just enough time for him to garner me an impressive collection of embezzled Care Bears and to get caught shagging a barmaid in the bed my mother had inherited from her grandma, my father sits once again on remand, a second sentence hanging over us all. By the time his case comes to trial, my mother has legally distanced herself from him with an uncontested divorce, but her only child's undeniable genetics to a thief (his first crime) and a murderer (his second) confines her to a small world of depression and guilt for the rest of her life.

I should probably note that my father isn't a *murderer* murderer, he'd just hit a guy a bit too hard after a business deal had gone wrong, and the man had landed awkwardly, then sort of rolled off the balcony they'd been arguing on. "If he'd only handed over the money as he'd promised, he'd still be annoying his wife today, teaching his children dirty words and smoking roll-ups in the house," my father would say during the irregular hours we'd spend together at Her Majesty's Pleasure, "So fuck him. He's in heaven with John Lennon. I got the worst side of the bargain being stuck in here." He'd say this, but I never believed him. He'd grown up with The Krays, Ronnie had been a paperboy for my paternal grandmother when she ran a newsagent's in Walthamstow, and

my father swaggered into the visitor's hall of HM Prison Wormwood Scrubs, past pedophiles, rapists and tax dodgers, hair scraped into a three-inch greasy quaff like an English Elvis, smooth, straight cigarette balanced behind his left ear, like he was the third twin. The cock of the walk.

In my early thirties I pay a fortune to a man in a Manhattan office filled with stress balls, leather couches and back issues of *Time* to forget the prison years. But I still remember:

- Standing frozen in grey playgrounds, being shouted at to run laps, surrounded by children who were so much freer than me, quick to laugh and tease, make a mess;
- Knuckles filled with love and hate, thick ink filling bruised crevices; clanging chains and jangling keys, slamming echoes and long periods of silence. Later my cousin would tell me I'd imagined it all, I'd watched too many prison movies;
- My mother screaming at me not to pull that face, "you look like your father, stop it", before rushing at me with sobs and apologies, pulling us to the floor, her crying and retching, me trying to distort my face so it never happened again;
- My father proudly handing me a jewelry box he'd made. It was terrible, really shit, and realizing in that moment that adults weren't as good as they thought they were. A shoebox covered in matchsticks, he'd spent weeks making it in his crafts class. *Joanne* awkwardly glued onto pink felt in straight, wooden lines. He'd have been better saving them to light his Benson & Hedges. I lug

it home in a plastic bag and use it to store my stinky sticker collection under my bed.

- My mother confessing, to a friend with a lopsided head and lopsided breasts, that she'd love to have given me more time to get to know Gary, her new boyfriend, but she was lonely and had to think about herself for once. "I've slipped off the table plan of life," I hear her say through the slit of a door, "he's my way back on it." I don't recall talk of love. I recall talk of dinner party invitations;
- Sitting on my upper bunk telling my sleuth of Care Bears that the adults were too busy for me now, locked up or newlywed, but I'd be alright on my own. I'd work out a way to grow up. With the black and white decision-making ability only available to children, I decided to be emotionally independent from then on;
- A social worker shaking her head as she tells my mother "once I told him if he signed it, he wouldn't have to pay child maintenance, that he'd be off the hook for the rest of his life, even when he gets out, he practically begged me for the pen". My adoption story.

We all suffer with nostalgia, I am not special, but it is generally considered to be an old person's disease, and not life threatening. Mine has made me ill before I should even have had a past to look back on. The key elements of warmth and freedom, a comfort within skin - next to skin – were painfully missing. I can't remember a time that I didn't envy my peers and their agility to bounce from adventure to adventure with optimism and the expectation of pleasure.

The last time I see him, my dad hands me a letter. “You might want to read this one day, when you’ve grown up,” he says, passing me an envelope with *Joanne* written on it in crude, stiff lines, one final Care Bear shoved into my grasp, as the bell rings and he struts out of my life and back to his cell. I clutch the letter in my pocket as my grandmother and I make our way under London, strap-hanging our way through manmade tubes and screeching bends, buried beneath the graves of Kensal Green Cemetery and the high heels of Kensington boutiques, lower than the thwacks heard at Lord’s Cricket Ground and the caged monkeys’ calls at London Zoo, pinned down by Camden Market fruit stalls and the weight of Tottenham Marshes. We slide into daylight at Leyton and I present the letter to my mother as I walk through the front door.

“I never want to read it,” I tell her with no explanation of what it is, “I hate him.” I dart to my bedroom and cry behind the locked door until my pale blue cotton duvet sticks to my cheeks with snot and tears.

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“You take life too fucking seriously,” a slim, accusatory finger jabs me sharply in the ribs. It’s my first week at University. Kate and I are Freshers, next-door neighbors in the brutalist 1960s building they call dorms, sipping on Snakebite Black and self-consciously swaying to The Charlatans at a party in a sticky-floored common room. We naively assume we had now embarked on adulthood. Every one of us in the room is determinedly choosing to ignore the fact we are only playing at grown-ups, enabled by the supportive Labour government, in my case, or rich parents, in Kate’s. Hard graft only takes place in the college canteen, where minimum wage workers promise our mummies they’ll give us three warm meals a day, and in the repetitive wringing motions of the

campus laundry workers who boil out the cheap cider sweat from our grey bed sheets.

Inflammatory observations are par for the course at this point of my life. We all want to be thought of as upfront, willfully confrontational, and political and in this we lose all sense of good manners.

“I just choose to think,” I reply, eyeing the room for anyone less mouthy to whom I could attach myself.

In high school, a girl in my class brought lighter fluid to school and set fire to a bin in the girl’s toilets. She was expelled by the headmistress but declared a hero by my peers, who cheered whenever they spotted her waiting for the bus to transport her to her new, rougher school, the one in town that accepted rebels. She could have killed someone, ruined a mother’s life, but my peers scribbled her name on the walls of the charred lavatories as if she was Joan of Arc, fighting for something, standing up for us. I was incapable of exalting her, to me she was childish, dangerous and irresponsible.

“Your problem is you’re confusing enjoying life with being shallow,” Kate continues. She is a bombastic know-it-all from the Home Counties, decorated with expensive strips of peroxide that snake down to her waist over mountainous breasts, somewhat shrouded in oversized rugby shirts that only added to the comforting appeal she was hoping to lure the boys in with. This, her Harlequins jersey told the young men at college, was the kind of girl who’d still allow you to watch the match on Saturday. She’d probably even drive you to the pub and get a round in. All the girls I encountered like Kate – confident toffs with braying voices - had a solid, older, floppy-haired and adoring brother or two in the wings, parents with high expectations offering cash incentives, a detached home and a private education. She is afforded a life of little deep thought or

consequence. My budget is so tight I choose to roll toilet paper into makeshift sanitary towels rather than buy Tampax. “I can have a laugh and still discuss why Marxist theory is so fucked up,” Kate shouts over the music.

“You’re wrong,” I reply, putting down my sweaty pint glass softly on the trestle table bar and picking up my engraved Zippo lighter. *For most of history, anonymous was a woman.* “I’m going to bed. Goodnight.”

Kate was incorrect about this and about so many other things we discussed during our unlikely friendship which spanned from that first week of college through to our third year of working life, when she got engaged to a commodities trader from Clapham and disappeared into creepy cronydom. Once she and Giles got engaged, I never saw her again, apart from at her wedding, my attendance at which felt uncomfortable for both of us, little more than a nod to the fact the bride did have a life separate to the groom at some point.

I had never confused the ability to enjoy oneself with a low IQ. I did not frown on those who had fun in life, I regarded them with jealousy and wonder. Instead of getting a good degree I would have loved to have been one of those girls who drank too much and flashed her bra at lacrosse players every Wednesday at the Student Union nightclub, abandoning Thursday lectures for rounds of hot buttered toast on stiff sheets pulled from the corners of waterproof mattresses, with boys from their wish lists who would drive them to the campus clinic for the morning after pill. I learnt a lot from Kate on that front, I noticed the point when women abandoned previous concerns and gave in to men’s charms, the minute when the wildness kicked in and the power they got from the attention made them ferocious. I learnt from Kate, and the other vacantly confident girls I

fell in with through her, that style really was as important – or more so - as substance and that everyone was too focused on themselves to be paying close attention to anyone else anyway, and by the time I had left university in 1996 and started working at a monthly magazine on the Southbank, my hair was highlighted and blow-dried and my awkwardness disguised with faux arrogance. I fostered a gloss through which feelings were impenetrable and appearances were everything, measured by a dalliance with a man I felt was too good for me. Rory. A floppy-haired son of a Tory MP who'd only known a father with titled landowners and poets as friends, not mates who wrangled dog fights. A veneer of materialistic, superficial traits calcified onto the brittle bones of my past, my father's criminal record and Rory's rejection of my heart bandaged up with VIP art gallery opening invitations and receipts from the bar at the Hotel Byblos. I chose, as a way of survival, not to think. I was incredibly successful at this throughout my twenties.

\*

“You can tell everything you need to know about the class of an English woman from her legs,” my first editor once said during a cover meeting. I never forgot it, her perched on her desk, delicate ankles crossed, me pulling a cheap skirt over dimpled thighs and feeling incongruously common as we discussed Lady Di's post-divorce diet. My legs – pins, as my dad called them – had been filled with porridge and poured into cement boots since I was a child, hefty lengths of sausage meat mottled with fat and blood vessels. Not fat, but large – working legs, now dolled up with fake tan and expensive razors, streaked and nicked, sturdy. Very common, giving away so much without taking a step. Upper class women had thin blades that didn't change in circumference from ankle to hip, smooth and lightly bronzed, usually, slipped into a



Manola Blahnik at one end, and an Agent Provocateur knicker frill at the other. These legs had never walked into a KFC, or a council flat. They spent weekends marching through friends' country estates, and weekdays scissoring across the shiny floors of Peter Jones and Mr. Chow. Upper class knees were polished and smooth like the joins of an antique mahogany table. Upper class ankles were slim enough to clasp finger to thumb, free of a cheap razor's slice or the nervous itch of hives. If I was anything like my father, which I would always deny, I'd have snapped my editor's irritating legs in two, followed by every other set of limbs taunting me in the meeting. But I wasn't anything like my father so as it was, I spent most of my twenties running after these people, thighs rubbing together, friction rash reddening, as they demanded their pound of flesh from me on newsroom floors, dampening my sense of inequality and clumsiness with white wine spritzers and Epsom salt baths at the end of each day. I had my mother's legs, my grandmother's legs. When I turned 29-years-old, I decided I was going to use them to scarper.

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"You can't run away from your past or your class," my mother used to say during our irregular transatlantic calls, a depressing and ineffectual nag to try to get her daughter to come home. She wanted me back in London, though neither of us knew why. We weren't those mother and daughter types who drifted around malls together at weekends, or used the other as a sounding board before any decision was made during multiple daily phone calls. "Your varicose veins give you away."

We meet in Dublin for a long weekend a few months after I move to New York and am earning decent money for the first time. We do what is expected of us on our first

full day in the city: swig a pint at the Guinness factory, stare at the Book of Kells at Trinity College, photograph the statue of Oscar Wilde in Merrion Square Park. We also do a brilliant job of not talking honestly to each other because we want to pretend we can get along. We avoid any discussion of the past or the future and focus solely on the tourist attraction directly ahead of us, like one of the blinkered horses pulling carriages of snapping Japanese along St. Stephen's Green. On our second day we take a guided tour of Kilmainham Gaol, shepherded by a tattooed and passionate local past 18<sup>th</sup> Century gallows and iron railings, swept along with a shoal of flapping Americans in shiny Kelly-Green anoraks.

"That kid," my mother complains back at the hotel as we thaw out for the evening. "harping on about how badly the English treated the Irish prisoners. The English in English prisons were treated the same. Times were harsh back then. As if only the Irish can be martyrs!"

"They were treated brutally by the British, mum, just because they wanted their country back."

"Saint Patrick was English, you know?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"They worship him, silly." She gives me a cold, hard stare.

"We treated the Irish terribly. We took their country, their money, their freedom."

“Oh, grow up, Joanne. *We* didn’t. *We!* *We!* You know what we were doing in London while they were doing this over here, all this stuff I’m being made to feel guilty about?”

“Probably something terribly Bob Cratchity?”

“We, our family, we were scrambling around for scraps, dothing our caps to posh idiots, boiling in hot kitchens and dying in childbirth. The English didn’t do the stuff we’re blamed for. A tiny handful of entitled, spoilt English men did the stuff we’re blamed for.” I grab my glass and move towards the television, but she isn’t done and follows me, a fire lit in her belly. “I’m fed up with being told to feel guilty for being English. We didn’t do any of this. We were just as put-upon as everyone else.” I am desperately grateful, tired from all the walking, that we’d decided on a sandwich in our hotel room rather than a meal downstairs in the busy restaurant. Even if she is right, I am too modern to admit it. I rinse down my political correctness with too much wine as she continues, and then a fizzing Alka-Seltzer in the morning.

“Remind me to never take you to a former colony for a relaxing weekend break again, you annoying cow” I whisper as I climb onto the pullout sofa bed, then turn off the lamp.

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Class today is less about bloodline and more about having value. You can be forgiven a cockney accent if you bring something to the table - a wild talent, an infamous story, Coke stash, bundles of fresh banknotes – but to be working class and dull is a death knell, still. A personality has to be cultivated. White trash, pale rubbish, is fine if its

coated with a golden gleam. My dad could get a song or a play written about him in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. There was a thirst for his type, national treasures in stripes, old-fashioned naughty boys who got rid of other naughty boys but never forgot their mum on Mother's Day. His type of villain was so much more charming than those dark-skinned bearded men who blew themselves up or landed in England's prisons now. I put on a show, too, and could pretend to be more interesting than I actually was in short bursts by recounting stories of my meetings with the rich and famous. But my boring mum, so clumsily trying to curl her vowels and refine her tastes, was so easy to sneer at that even I did it.

I was brainwashed into thinking my father was the most interesting member of my family, much more interesting than me or my mother. Then my grandmother died when I was 35-years-old, and five years later my mother dies on the eve of my 41<sup>st</sup> birthday. The father-shaped hole I'd spent my life trying to fix fills up with woodchips and becomes irrelevant. As a deluge of emotions drown my cheeks, I cancel my celebrations with friends, book an overnight flight to Heathrow for the following day, and unsure what to do next, when your mother has just died and you're miles from family in the blinding sun, I drive myself to Anaheim. I'd been to Disneyland once before, when I'd first moved to Los Angeles and had chirpy out-of-towners in for the weekend, and admired the order and cleanliness, the acceptance of the fake and power of pretense. I needed all those things.

Too drained to queue for anything desirable, I sneak into the perennially unpopular Hall of Presidents show. The statesmen wait for their turn to speak, to justify their place in their era, to remind us of what had gone before and what they'd left behind,

but I see our faces, the women in my family lined up by generation, marked with matching frown lines forged between brows, burning resentments flushing our cheeks, each one of us slightly taller, slightly fuller in the hips than the one who went before, beckoning judgement and rebukes from those who come next with a stiff, outstretched arm.

“It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus so nobly advanced,” says my great-grandmother, draped in a dark tailcoat, waving her large hands as she addresses the audience, while my grandmother and mother nod in her direction from their spots on the stage. “These dead shall not have died in vain.”

I listened as they presented their stories of miniscule triumphs and acts of bravery, as they wrestled to speak of private moments of heartache and disappointment. There were no artful brags or pub anecdotes, and I was ashamed that I hadn’t been interested in them before, in the tales I’d heard for all these years and been keen to dismiss as moaning or gossip. I hadn’t fought harder, been stronger, felt happier, when my predecessors had been through so much worse, and now they were dead, just waxworks in a museum.

I was the last woman standing at the far right of the stage. My womanly shape imprinted onto a black man’s history. “Every child wakes up in a land of unlimited possibility,” I hear myself say, looking smart in a sharp suit and red tie. I was the last to speak. There would be no one after me. Our hardy, thick thighs could rest now. I would not have a daughter. I was soon to be forty-one-years-old and my branches were bare and brittle. The spotlights click off and the animatronics fall silent. The auditorium is dark and I decide I don’t want to feel guilty and apologetic about everything all the time. It

was so boringly, bloody British. I'd moved to America to escape it. I don't realize I'm sobbing and shaking, quite loudly, until a man wearing a badge telling me *hi, I'm from Alabama* kneads me softly on the arm.

"Ma'am, the next show is about to start. Can I help you to the exit?" The room is empty. JFK winks at me from the corner. "I have to let the next visitors in now."

"Oh gosh, I'm so sorry. I'm really sorry," I stumble my words and grab my bag from the floor, then shuffle crab-like down the empty row towards the exit sign. "I am so very, very sorry."

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I heard about my father's death from a police report the summer I turned thirty, a few months after our trip to Ireland. A detective friend of my cousins offered to take a look to see if he was still reoffending in his dotage. But no. He'd been released in 2004 and died shortly afterwards. The report didn't say how he died. It was just good for the Metropolitan Police to know he wouldn't be causing any more trouble. He was no longer a person of interest. "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news," my cousin had said over the phone. I assured her everything about my father had always been bad news, as she knew, so this was nothing. If anything, it was a relief. "I buried him a long time ago," I lied.

In a phone call, I asked my mother for the letter he'd handed me the last time I saw him.

"You said you didn't ever want to read it," she said, exasperated. She was in the middle of cooking Beef Bourguignon for people from her golf club and was feeling overwhelmed. "I burnt it."

“What do you mean? That was my letter.”

“You said you never wanted to read it. We all moved on. I didn’t think you still thought about him. Gary’s the only dad you’ve ever really had. I didn’t want you to upset him with it, opening one of your can of worms, so I got him to chuck it on the fire when we were packing up for the move. I waited a long time to see if you would change your mind. You didn’t. And now, you want it? Of course, you do! You’re not going to make me feel bad about this, Joanne.” My mother was in remission but still delicate, we all knew she had to be handled carefully.

“Did you at least read it?”

“Of course not.”

“So, you can’t even tell me what it said?”

“Do you really imagine that bastard had anything worth saying?” She never swore so I knew she felt awful about what she’d done.

“Probably not, mum.”

“We can imagine the gibberish.” I see my mother, back in her fancy kitchen, pulling a burnt joint from the oven and splashing the carcass back to life with red wine.

“The usual old egocentric rubbish, probably inappropriate to write to a twelve-year-old.”

There would have been nothing of note in the letter, I knew that, but I wanted something of him. I needed one last nauseating reminder of his arrogance, a macho declaration of ownership over me after handing me over so gleefully to save a few quid, a memory from my childhood that I had erased. I wanted to force grief. “Unresolved

tension can kill a person,” my new expensive therapist in Los Angeles would say repeatedly, insuring I signed up for more foraging sessions. But the letter was gone. The letter was gone so I fixated on the jewelry box made of matchsticks. My mother swore she’d seen it somewhere in the loft when she and Gary had done a big Spring clean last year and promised to look for it, moaning when Gary did locate it and I insisted she post it to me. “The queues at the Post Office are shocking, it’ll take a whole morning – and cost a flipping fortune,” she complained.

“You burnt my letter,” I said, and the jewelry box arrived two weeks later.

The jewelry box is as bad as I remembered it. Matchsticks and dust trapped to a shoebox in thick dollops of glue, my name in capitals made from flammable wood strips and punctuated with pink phosphorus, stuck to fuzzy felt. As I lift the lid, the mingled scents of bubblegum and popcorn bombard me, well-thumbed books of stickers, curling at the corners, feel soft and familiar in my finger. I flick and scratch and sniff, my hands busy and small, bitten nails trapping fragrance under the ridges. Buried beneath the hundreds of stickers is a folded piece of paper with an envelope wedged into it. Gary’s handwriting.

*I thought you might want this one day x*

Inside the envelope is a letter, written as crudely as the letters made of matchsticks on my jewelry box.

YOULL ALWAYS BE YOUR DADDYS LITTLE GIRL

No, I fucking won’t be. No fucking way. From the kitchen, I grab the firelighter purchased as part of an unused fondue set, lick the flame to the note, and chuck it into the



toilet. I hold the flame to the jewelry box, but it won't ignite. I pour vodka on it, it still won't light. Piece of shit, piece of shit, piece of shit. You've always been shit. I've always known you were shit. I am nothing like you. I place the sticker books and Gary's note back in the box, kick it across the room so that it slides under my bed, and my legs collapse beneath me.

## THE DOLDRUMS

“Well, this is a mistake,” says Elizabeth.

Suzie had suggested they take themselves for a cappuccino at the coffee shop around the corner from her house, that it would be Stella’s naptime and they’d be able to sit quietly and enjoy a chat as she snoozed in her stroller. Fingers crossed, it would be a bit of a treat, she’d told her mother. Instead, in driving rain and high winds, Stella had spent their five-minute walk to the café raging against all desperate calls for calm, biting and yelling, threatening to break free from her pushchair and run towards the road. She did not at all resemble a child on the verge of nodding off peacefully. The unpredictable winds of whining lashed at her mother and grandmother until all that was left was wrung-out despair. And now, having somehow made it to their destination, the agitated trio had to squeeze into the clammy local chain, seemingly a safe harbor for every stay-at-home mother in gentrified East London.

“This place is like a torture chamber,” Elizabeth continues. “I truly don’t understand this obsession your generation has with paying too much for a lukewarm cup of froth in a sweaty hellhole like this when you could just have a cup of tea at home. Peace and quiet instead of ghastly children. I’d pay for that!”

“Ghastly children! Like your own granddaughter, you mean mum?”

“Especially my own granddaughter this afternoon! Children should be seen and not heard. Actually, better than that, they shouldn’t be taken to places like this, turning cafes into creches and being taught the whole world revolves around them. Not their fault, of course. The blame rests entirely on the parents. But we’re here now. Let’s get it over with.”

They fight their way past the battalion of strollers forming a barricade at the entrance, over the assault course of spiky umbrellas and slippery, discarded Wellington boots, to the one empty table at the back, next to the constantly flapping door to the kitchen. More people than usual have washed up into the garishly-lit high street cafe because of the sudden downpour and the usual scent of cinnamon has made way for an aroma of wet Labrador, sour and foul. Screaming children, hair stuck in soggy wedges to their flaming cheeks, and their damp, despondent mothers and childminders cram onto each table, cake pops and custard creams gobbled into moaning mouths, rows of milk teeth masticating in unison, sugarcoating the gloom.

“We’re not good with extreme weather, us Brits,” Suzie says, peeling off her damp anorak and hooking it out to dry on the back of her chair, then addressing Suzie’s soaked trousers with a stack of paper napkins and wedging her into a booster seat next to her grandmother. “It makes us all agitated. We do much better under the steady, light drizzle we’re used to. It suits our national nature, the constant gloom that means we never do anything rash, or get overexcited. Too much rain, or sun, turns us feral. We forget how to behave.”

“Please stop rambling and get me a drink,” Elizabeth says, finally free of the multitude of buttons and buckles on her designer Macintosh and sitting down. “And something sweet to nibble on. I feel a bit light-headed.”

They’d spent the morning visiting Elizabeth’s elderly widowed mother, Victoria, at her dementia care home in a town where London and Essex mingled into an oak, concrete suburbia. They’d considered bringing her out with them this afternoon, but pushing a wheelchair and a stroller was too much for the two women to deal with, they’d concluded. There were Stella’s possible shenanigans to consider, said Elizabeth, and the grim weather forecast, said Suzie. Their decision had left them both feeling guilty. They’d chosen to push the woman who’d done so much for both of them to the sidelines of their daily life merely because of logistics. But not guilty enough to change their minds.

“Of course,” Suzie makes her way to the counter, standing in a bulging queue, polite Polish workers taking orders in broken English and darting around hurriedly in front of her, serving up lattes and toasted brie, tomato and basil paninis.

Victoria wouldn’t mind being left behind. She wouldn’t have remembered the excursion the next day, anyway, and her daughter and granddaughter felt justified in their reasons. Suzie was constantly on the verge of being ill with stress, her daughter stripping her of the self-care her jumpy nerves required to function routinely, like sleep, exercise, solitude and professional fulfillment. And Elizabeth wasn’t as energetic as she used to be, as she hurtled towards 60, not that she would have admitted it to her daughter. The doubly demanding role of caretaker for a generation up and babysitter for two

generations down was an exhausting proposition, mentally, more than anything, because in terms of real hard graft, she did little of either. But she felt a terrible burden being part of this chain of nurturing, when elder relatives refused to die at a suitable age to allow women like her, in their fifties and sixties, to focus on grandchildren and enjoying their own golden years. These elderly parents were working their pension-age children into the ground. She couldn't share these feelings of frustration though, as a first-generation woman's libber she had to pretend she was having her cake and eating it. She met girlfriends and talked with them about being in their prime, their post-menopausal years chunky, plump and meaty, instead of thin, dry and brittle. Elizabeth and her friends pointedly refused to fold up their personalities and box them away to make way for the drama of their children, like their mothers and grandmothers had. They still had stories to tell, not just to listen to. They still had places to go, people to see. India, she'd decided with her three closest friends. They'd take a tour of India together, no men allowed, a rule aimed at the half of the group who still had husbands, of which Elizabeth was one, and they'd buy jewel-colored saris and ride elephants and drink lassi. Suzie could keep an eye on her grandmother for two weeks without anything going wrong. The care home did everything anyway.

Elizabeth sat at the table in silence, her eyes flickering between her daughter, now third in line for cake and strikingly attractive despite, or perhaps because of, her melancholic deportment, she decided, and her granddaughter, who perched, uncharacteristically well-behaved for the moment, waiting for her cookie, sweet but wielding far too much control over family life for someone so small. Things had changed so much in one generation of motherhood. Women's expectations had changed so much.

Elizabeth and her friends watched their daughters closely, copying their style in a bid to cling on to their own attractiveness and questioning them about their sex lives to try to understand the nuances of their favorite television dramas, things their own mothers would never have done, and zigzagging between feelings of envy, that everything they fought for was just taken for granted – the pill, maternity leave, custody of children – and expected and easier, while feeling sorry for them. To do it all - to give everything and everyone your all - was now the norm and anything less than public perfection was distrusted. Elizabeth tended more towards jealousy than charity towards her own daughter, the last taboo. Suzie, she felt, should be more grateful for the financial help she had given her since her divorce from Stella's father two years ago, but her daughter struggled to show her appreciation, and was extremely self-centered. Mother's Day, as an example, was normally some rubbish drawing of Stella's, a half hour drop-in and a box of chocolates. Suzie had made Mother's Day all about her and Stella now. Elizabeth felt slighted.

“Don't look now but there's a woman over there, by the loos, breastfeeding a teenager,” Suzie says, returning to their cramped spot with Stella's cookie, two half empty cups of coffee resting on wet saucers, and a sloshed upon slice of carrot cake. “Well, not a teenager, but the child must be at least Stella's age. Three? Four? Five? I'm not judging, I'm just saying.”

Elizabeth couldn't help but look obviously. She was fascinated by the modern woman's ability to whip out a breast in the most public of places. This is what her generation had wanted for the women who followed them, she had to remind herself,

freedom and confidence, but she'd been relieved that Suzie, without any prompting from her, had chosen to cover herself with a "modesty cloak", as she'd christened it, while nursing Stella. It limited their amount of random eye-to-nipple encounters. She had bottle-fed Suzie, as was the norm in the Seventies, and not regretted it for a second. Her breasts were the only part of her body that she still liked.

"I do get it, breast is best, obviously, but why the show? Why do we all need to get to know your breasts intimately?" Suzie says. "She's not a small girl. If I was her I'd be worried one was going to end up in my latte. They're flying all over the place."

"Suzie, I'm shocked. Don't be so unkind," Elizabeth says, allowing herself a furtive glance, eyes widening at the great expanse of mottled flesh and pulsating blue vein, highlighted under the café's harsh lighting. The not-so-little boy is standing next to his mother, kneading and molding her breasts between his fingers like Play-Doh, popping one nipple in for a suckle then spitting it out for the other. A girl appears at his side in a Tinkerbell costume and he quickly drops his mother's breasts, which slump without his support, the left substantially more swollen than the other, a glistening bead of milk balancing on its areola. Uncovered, dangling beneath the slack hemline of a pulled-up, well-worn t shirt, his mother is oblivious to the effect they are having on the women at the table across the room, laughing with a group of friends as she snaps biscuits in half and pops them into her mouth. "The one thing I've learnt is there are no rules on how best to parent. We should all learn to be less judgmental," says Elizabeth.

"You what," Suzie splutters. "Are you actually being serious right now? You tell me off about how I'm raising Stella on a daily basis, and she's still virtually a toddler."

“Ah, but she’s not though, is she darling. She’s four, nearly five. Far too old to be behaving how she does.” As if on cue, Stella grabs a handful of cake and launches it at her mother’s face.

“No sweetheart, no cake for mummy, thank you though.”

“The child needs to be disciplined. You’re not her friend, you’re her mother. Big difference.”

“She’s been through a lot, with the divorce, being forced to spend time with her dad and whatever trollop he’s got on hand that weekend. I’m just trying to give her a happy and stable life when she’s with me.”

“You’re making excuses.”

“I’m being *kind*.”

“You’re making a rod for your own back. She’s already out of control, running the roost. Imagine what she’ll be like as a teenager. Just you wait!” Elizabeth picks up her cup and returns her eyes to the semi-naked woman by the toilets, whose easily distracted child is now back at her bosom. “Ouch, I’m sure he’s chewing them, and a child that size will definitely have a full set of teeth. Poor woman.”

“Mum, please stop looking, she’ll catch you.”

“Let her! I feel bad for her – for you all! You all need to be realistic about this harmful way of parenting you’ve all bought in to, letting your children use you as punch



bags, taxi drivers, bed companions and lame excuses for whatever bad behavior they display. That little Rottweiler is literally eating his mother alive.”

“Shush, for god’s sake. With your bra-burning history you should be over there offering her a peace sign and a slice of Black Forest Gateau, not loudly judging her son’s latch.”

“We didn’t go through all that so you lot could sit around like uncouth lumps being clawed at by wild animals with your bits hanging out.”

“You lot?”

“Yes, you lot! The way *you lot* are going it’s only a matter of time before one of you decides they’d like to give birth in public, in a coffee shop like this for example, and we’ll all just be expected to ignore it – or applaud it - and drink our tepid, overpriced dishwater without raising an eyebrow or daring to complain about health and safety.”

Suzie chuckles, “I quite like the idea of that. I love a good birth.”

“Is there such a thing?”

“Of course! Jessica, my new mum friend from Stella’s playschool, she told me she had an orgasm when she gave birth.”

“That’s ludicrous.”

“That’s what she said.”

“Well, there was nothing pleasurable about giving birth to you. I ripped from ear to ear.”

“Oh, do tell me that story again.”

“The doctors didn’t know you were going to be so –

“Gosh, mum, I’m joking. You’ve told me a million times and I am very, very sorry that I ruined your vagina like that. It’s not too late to give it a facelift, you know, if you still use it.”

“You’re supposed to be an intelligent woman, Suzie. What has happened to you?”

“A designer vagina, mum. Rejuvenated nether regions, look like you’re a 21-year-old virgin again. Down there.” Suzie hadn’t had sex for over two years and had no interest in doing so ever again. An unfaithful husband, two miscarriages, a nocturnal child and a fear of repeated rejection had quashed any sensual feelings her body may have once housed. “Maybe I could get you and Dad one as a joint Christmas present?”

Both women snorted, a hereditary trait that neither of them had been able to shift. “Can you imagine your Dad’s face?”

“I don’t want to, but yes!”

Elizabeth’s vagina was still an object of deep affection for her husband Hugo, four decades into their marriage. He’d heard men say that watching their wives give birth had been like watching their favorite pub burn down, that the place they would go to for a

relaxing evening of fun had been destroyed forever, but he felt quite the opposite. He told Elizabeth how magnificent he still found her body whenever she shirked from his attention in those revised years of lovemaking after childbirth. Elizabeth had booked Hugo a prostitute once, for his fortieth birthday, outsourcing her physicality to a sinewy woman who called herself Echo, at a mock Tudor hotel in the countryside, a safe distance from their home. He'd reluctantly gone to meet her, drunk and sad, embarrassed. She'd looked like an Irene, not an Echo, he'd later told his wife, before telling her how Echo had stripped off her dress and stockings, and that she wasn't wearing underwear, then she'd unzipped him. He told her how he'd managed to get hard when Echo took him into her mouth, but only by closing his eyes and imagining he was with Elizabeth. Echo's cockney dirty talk had shattered his domestic fantasy though, and he couldn't do anything with his softening erection. After a couple of minutes, the prostitute had given up and gone to run a bath. She enjoyed hotel toiletries she'd shouted at Hugo over the noise from the gushing taps, which made Elizabeth feel sorry for her, while he adjusted his trousers – he'd never got undressed - and left, leaving the envelope his wife had given him on the uncrumpled bed. Elizabeth knew he was telling the truth, about the lack of penetration, when she'd dug out his underwear that evening and studied them, sniffing them for evidence of another woman. She scolded him for wasting her money as they turned their bedside lamps out that evening and it was never mentioned again. Instead, they fell into a steady, unspoken routine. Sex every other Friday night, asterisked on the kitchen calendar next to aerobics classes and Spanish club meetings. This wasn't romantic, or wild, or frequent enough for Hugo, but it kept them connected and, Elizabeth believed to this day, saved their marriage. She often dreaded those Friday nights, she would have preferred a

BBC period costume drama and an early night, but it was never as bad as she imagined once she got going.

“Suzie?”

“Tom!”

“How are you darling?” Tom was the father of Stella’s classmate, Noah, and someone Suzie actually liked. The few men she encountered at the school gates were freer of judgement than the women, and becoming a single mum had made Suzie extra sensitive to being judged.

“Good, thanks. Tom, this is my mother – Elizabeth. Elizabeth, Tom, the father of Stella’s friend, Noah. You’ve probably heard her talk about him.”

“Oh, you’re Tom. Hello!” Elizabeth couldn’t hide the excitement.

“Lovely to meet you, Elizabeth. I love your coat.”

“Oh, this old thing.”

“Don’t believe that for a second, Tom, she’s thrilled you noticed it. Cost her a bloody fortune. How are you? Where’s Noah? Stella would have loved to have seen him.”

“He’s with Greg today. He’s been a bit poorly so Greg stayed home with him. I’m sure his boss is furious. Neither of us get the allowances for looking after Noah that a straight dad would, we’re sure.”

“A straight dad wouldn’t ask for allowances. He’d have the woman to do it all.”

“Touché,” Tom grimaces. “That’s not true anymore, I’m sure.”

“It bloody well is,” Elizabeth barks. “Stella’s dad always put his career before everything else, even his daughter. And now he can barely cope with committing to a Saturday, between his job and gallivanting. Meanwhile she,” she points at Suzie, “doesn’t have a career anymore.”

“Neither did you, when I was young.”

“But I wasn’t expected to. You are.”

“Mum!”

“It’s true,” Elizabeth says. “So, Tom, straight women and gay men have a lot in common – having to deal with rubbish men and professional setbacks.”

“Ignore her, she’s just being annoyingly vocal.”

“And that what mums are for,” Tom smiles. “Anyway, I’m heading out into this ghastly weather again. I only popped in for a quick coffee, I didn’t realize it would be like a zoo in here.” He jerks his head to the left, “and there’s only so much boob I can take.” All three stare at the lactating woman, whose child is once again clamped to her chest.

“It’s been ten minutes now. He’s not feeding, he’s using her as a chew toy,” says Elizabeth from behind a cupped palm.

“And on that charming note,” Tom ruffles Stella’s ratty curls, her head bowed, hypnotized by the phone her mother has handed her as a silencer, and blows the older women a kiss. “Nice to meet you, Elizabeth.”

They watch him leave. “Well isn’t he lovely,” says Elizabeth, “and so charming. So good looking. How old do you think he is?”

“I don’t think, I know. He’s 44.”

“Wow, he’s living proof that not having to deal with a nagging wife is great for your skin. You modern women drain your men. Expecting them to be your best friend and cheerleader, on top of breadwinner and everything else. My generation function much better, splitting our marriages into pink jobs and blue jobs, being realistic about what the other can provide. Your Miles looks much older than him, and he’s a decade younger.”

“He’s not my Miles. But yes, I agree Tom looks great and Miles looks wretched. Not that my nagging has anything to do with it. More like his guilty heart and drinking problem.”

“Talking of guilt, Connie is having a terrible time at the moment,” Elizabeth says. “You know her son and daughter-in-law couldn’t get pregnant so adopted that little boy, Joseph. Well, the awful daughter-in-law, Nicola, she couldn’t cope with him. He has learning disabilities, prone to fits, and Nicola kept saying she was going to leave Matt if he didn’t do something. Takeover 100%. Connie was there every day, helping, paying for therapists.” Connie was one of her mother’s best friends and a staunch believer in

presenting a unified picture of family life to the outside world. Elizabeth was the only one outside the family allowed to see the cracks. “Nothing helped, so she’s only sent the child back. Got rid of him. A few days ago. It’s broken the family. Connie says she can’t look Nicola in the eye. Connie loved that little boy, but she’s got no legal rights. He’s gone. Back into foster care.”

“Mum, that’s terrible. I didn’t even know you could do that!”

“I know. Connie doesn’t think their marriage can survive it. Couples collapse under much less. And to be married to someone so selfish! Matt’s saying he’s going to stand by her but, well, we’ll see. He’s told Connie he couldn’t cope with losing his wife and his child, but how could you stay married to someone like that?”

“Well, hang on, we don’t know, really, do we? What really happens in families. In homes. We’ve been lucky in our family. Really.”

“Apart from my grandmother trying to kill herself!” Elizabeth and Suzie both indulgently interpreted this ancestral pain as their own personal trauma, embracing it in maudlin times when they felt the world should be more sympathetic to them, despite never knowing the despair that could drive a mother of five young children to stick her head in an oven on her youngest’s birthday. Their ownership of Cressida’s story was horrendously selfish, they knew in lucid moments, which unfortunately never struck them at the same time to allow a fruitful family healing session, and very unhealthy.

“Well, no, actually, let’s use her as an example. My poor great-grandmother. In those days, she didn’t know what to do and neither did society, so her husband and doctor

locked her up and dismantled our family. No one called it post-natal depression then but that's what it was. She was at the end of her tether. Struggling, exhausted, depressed, unable to see a time she could feel normal again. This may have happened to Connie's daughter-in-law."

"She didn't give birth to Joseph, it couldn't have been that. They got him when he was two."

"You don't have to have given birth to a child to be its mother, mum."

"Try telling that to Nicola," Elizabeth says with a shudder.

Across the café, dried off toddlers are being eked back into waterproofs, a break in the rain leading to a mass exodus onto the puddled high street. The baristas thank their patrons then shout orders in their foreign tongue as plates and cups are swooped on and taken away. Suzie's phone battery has died and Stella is stirring from her calm and peaceful state, in need of petting. She maneuvers her way onto her mother's lap, wriggling into familiar crooks and bends. "I'd do anything not to be followed around by the whining, I'd do anything to be able to read, sit still, not stay up at night worrying about her future, but the cuddles make it all worth it," Suzie says, kissing her daughter's warm head. "Do you miss this, mum? Having a little one?"

"Children grow up," Elizabeth says. "And you have to let them grow away from you or you've failed as a mother. It's best if you behave graciously, calmly, as they leave, telling them 'come back if you need me' and dealing with the loss on your own time. It's like us, watching our Empire grow up and go its own way. It's sad but we knew the day



would come. Especially the Queen. I'm sure it hurts her, I'm sure she feels insurmountable pain that she couldn't keep her family together – guilt, grief most certainly – but what good would fighting it do? You, you're my Hong Kong. You don't need me anymore, though you sometimes pretend you do, and the Commonwealth doesn't need us, except for a few laughs on nostalgic evenings, a few lessons in history, a few family traditions. Stella could be your Scotland. Now that really will hurt. But, yes, I do miss our cuddles."

Suzie leans over and pulls her mother towards her. After a quick glance around her to make sure they weren't attracting attention, Elizabeth's stiff reluctance slips into the warmth. Three generations wrapped and ageless. Their failings, those gone and those yet to happen, don't exist. For a moment Suzie is not resentful that her mother isn't the hands-on grandma some of her friends can rely on. For a moment Elizabeth is not envious of her daughter's youth and possibility. For a moment Stella is quiet, enjoying the snug cocoon the bodies of her matriarchs have formed around her.

"You're doing very well, Suzie," Elizabeth whispers over Stella's head to her daughter, kissing her cheek. "I'm very proud of you."

"You shouldn't be," Suzie replies. "And I wish we'd brought grandma here with us today."

"Excuse me." The three heads look up to see the breastfeeding woman standing over them, boy hanging at her side, mother and child wearing matching green anoraks, zipped up over their chests, she breathing heavily. "I couldn't leave without saying

something. I've noticed you both, giving me dirty looks the whole time you've been in here, and I just wanted to say, you should be ashamed of yourself, and with your daughter, I presume, too. What are you teaching her? That women should be embarrassed of their bodies? That breasts are purely for men to ogle not to feed children?" Her voice is loud, stormy. Suzie sense she and her mother have surpassed the breasts as the two most stared at – judged – things in the room.

"I'm sorry, no, we weren't –

"We all saw you, my friends and I, saw you snooty cows, judging, whispering, well, you should be ashamed of yourselves. How would your daughter feel, knowing you were harassing a new mum and her baby?"

"He's hardly a baby!" Elizabeth squeals.

"Mum, shut up."

"Eddie!" squeals Stella, who has spotted the little boy, trapped between his mother's thighs. "Hello Eddie!"

"Are you two friends?" says Suzie.

"He's in my class," says Stella, jumping off Suzie's lap to give Eddie a hug. Great, thinks Suzie. Perfect.

"It looks like we're going to be stuck with each other then," says the disgruntled mother. "Luckily for my son, your daughter is clearly more mature than you. I'll just say

this. We're all in this together. Mothers of all types, just trying to do our best.

Acceptance. Tolerance. Kindness. I won't be made to feel embarrassed, but you should be."

"I'm sorry, we really weren't, but I'm sorry if we made you feel bad," Suzie says, mortified. "I breastfed myself, for 13 months."

"Well then you should know better. Think about that next time you throw snide glances, okay." Impassioned by his mother's raised voice, Eddie launches himself on Suzie, grabbing her hand and taking a bite out of it.

"Ouch!" Suzie shakes him off. Eddie hisses. Stella starts crying and returns to her mother's lap.

"Eddie, my lamb," the mother soothes. "I know you are expressing your frustration at this woman, but we need to use words, not violence, sweetheart, okay? We need to protest her oppression peacefully."

"Jesus Christ," Elizabeth exclaims. "What clap trap! You should be teaching him to say sorry."

"See how much you've upset him?" The mother ignores Elizabeth, Eddie continues hissing at Suzie. "He won't be able to sleep tonight."

"I'm sorry," Suzie says to the mother. "I'm sorry, Eddie," she says, looking to the boy. "Maybe we can have a playdate soon and really get to know each other."

“No thanks.” The woman, turns abruptly, dragging a still snarling Eddie behind her out of the café.

Suzie is shaking, flushed, tightly clutching her bloodied finger in a napkin, unaccustomed to harsh interactions with anyone other than her family, which didn’t really count. Where had that all come from? The venom. She’d be shaken by this encounter for years.

“What a horrible character. Characters! Mother and child,” Elizabeth says, quite invigorated by the whole debacle, thinking it fodder for her next book club moan about these irritating girls, who expected society to curtail to every politically correct fad or whim, demanding it all then moaning that they’re overwhelmed or being judged on their choices. “What a horrible afternoon, in fact. I knew it was a mistake to come here.” Their afternoon in a coffee shop hadn’t been a bit of a treat at all. For once, Elizabeth and Suzie could agree on something.

They make their way out into the bright grey light of early evening, the downpour a mere patter against the steamed-up cafe window now. “Thank you for trying to think of something nice for us to do together, us girls, even if that nasty cow rained on our parade and spoilt it. I appreciate the thought,” says Elizabeth, pulling up the collar of her designer coat up to her cheekbones then taking control of the battered, crumb-filled stroller. “And I appreciate you, darling. Despite your bizarrely French lack of a back bone.”

## AN OCCASIONAL ORDEAL

This is an annual pilgrimage for Suzie, her trip to the least spiritual place on earth. For some reason she has still not been able to work out her cousin Joanne has chosen to make Los Angeles home, and Joanne is the last chunk of family history Suzie has left. Every time she lands at LAX, Suzie is disturbed that her brilliant cousin's identity is now anchored 5,437 miles from London, to a box overlooking the polluted canals of a copycat Venice, a place filled with people of no discernible talent yet egos the size of Continental Europe. Actor-model-writer-kidults, bleeding their besotted parents back home in the wide-eyed flyover states dry, WhatsApping their mommas that fame and fortune is imminent but the dollars need to keep coming, that Chiclet veneers are all that stand between them and a dream role. It is weird her cousin prefers LA, with its identikit noses and breasts, it's smog and its insincerity, to home, Suzie thinks, every time she hurtles past the Disneyland thrill seekers and Hollywood dreamers to the airport exit. It is so not the happiest place on earth. The climate is faultless. The city is defective.

"Here, here, Suzie! Hello!" Joanne, illegally parked in a no pick-up zone, dressed in diamante-studded Ugg boots, pastel pink tracksuit bottoms and a t shirt with *NASTY* emblazoned across her chest is standing waving to her from next to her convertible Volkswagen Beetle.

“You look absolutely ridiculous, cuz,” Suzie shouts over the sirens and honking taxis, shaking her head as she chucks her suitcase on the backseat and reaches for her cousin. “But I need a hug.” Joanne was the one relative, apart from her 12-year-old daughter Stella, she could still talk to honestly. “Woman, you’re 43 years old. This,” she scans her left hand across Joanne’s body, before resting it on the fastidiously graffitied baseball cap sitting slightly askew atop her cousin’s head, “has to stop.”

“Darling!” laughs Joanne.

“Darling!” Suzie grabs her into a firm hug.

“Oh, it’s so good to see you. How’s my sweet Stella?” asks Joanne.

“She’s not so sweet. I think the word I’m supposed to use is spirited. Now get moving before we get arrested by the traffic police. We have three whole days to catch up, we don’t have to do it here.”

They climb into the car and Joanne jerks away from the kerb, squeezing her excitement into her cousin’s left palm, heading towards the In-N-Out Burger where local kids go to watch planes take off and land. Bruce Springsteen is rasping his *New York City Serenade* through the speakers as they slither on to Lincoln Boulevard. Joanne had lived in Brooklyn for five years until her move West the year her cousin pushed out Stella and everything changed. Joanne had worked out by then that if she was going to dwell in the belly of an angry, concrete animal, she may as well be in London – it smelt better and the history made her heart pound - but going back could be interpreted as failure so instead she decided to move to Los Angeles. Suzie had visited every year since, handing Stella off to her dad so they could have a few days respite from each other.

“Right. Home, shower, chill and unpack,” Joanne asks, turning to her passenger as she pulls off her hat, her skin looking shiny and stiff in the bright September sun, “or the usual?”

“Ahem! Botox?” Suzie says, peering at her cousin’s face closely. “What the actual –

“Suzie!” Joanne shrieks.

“Thank goodness I’m here. You need an intervention. Just because everyone else in this place is self-plasticated up to their eyeballs, it doesn’t mean you have to join in.”

“Self-plasticated? I thought you were supposed to be the well-read one.”

“You know what I mean. My brain is fried from the flight. Ten hours stuck between a woman with trichotillomania and a man in full on midlife crisis mode does that to a girl.”

“Gawd. Poor you. But don’t say that about my forehead. I think I look great. As does my plastic surgeon. And my therapist. Come on, home first, or the usual?”

“Oh, definitely the usual.”

The usual is too many margaritas and a rapid-fire question and answer catch-up at Baja Cantina, a Mexican restaurant two minutes’ walk from Joanne’s apartment in a bashful enclave of normalcy in this sound stage of a city, frequented by hungry barefoot surfers fresh in from the Pacific and public-school teachers who appreciated refillable baskets of chips and salsa. The margaritas are good. Strong. Salty. Citrusy. Too easy to

drink. Suzie always feels like she's on holiday the second her lips touch the rim of the glass.

The cousins swing by Joanne's apartment to dump the car and Suzie's suitcase, then march straight to a sweet spot on the patio under brightly-coloured flags and overgrown cacti.

"Cheers," they say in unison when the fishbowls of frozen tequila arrive five minutes later.

"I really need this," Suzie says. "The cocktail and the break. I've been feeling pretty terrible."

"I know, sweetheart," says Joanne, rubbing her cousin's back. "How is lovely Jessica?"

"Not good. It's just such a shock. I feel like I could constantly puke. She's only a couple of years older than us. Her mother died from breast cancer quite young as well, I know, but you sort of assume things have moved on. Better drugs, earlier detection. But no. It's a matter of months, and then Ruby will be a motherless teenager. I'll do what I can obviously. Stella wants her to move in with us, but I'm not sure Ruby's dad would be up for that."

"Or you?"

"Oh, I really wouldn't mind. She's at our house most of the time anyway, hiding from her mother's deterioration. Both girls have decided not to eat anymore so the supermarket bills wouldn't go up. But I don't know if I'd be the best person to help Ruby



through her grief. Jessica was always such a life force, a really super friend, and I'm struggling with it all, especially so soon after losing grandma."

"I bet, sweetheart. I miss Auntie Victoria too. The world feels harsher without her here. The final cord to all things charming and decent cut. I don't think any of us appreciated what it would feel like without her watching over us, our backbone, persuading us to be dignified even when we felt anything but. Is your mum coping okay?"

"Oh, you can imagine. Really making the whole thing about her. Not giving two hoots that Stella and I are feeling rotten. Dad is a saint, taking care of all the logistics and pandering to her every tantrum, while dealing with his own health issues. She's regressing to toddlerdom in a way that I didn't know grown women could."

"Don't be too hard on her," Joanne says. "When my mum died I did the same naval-gazing theatrics. I thought I was going mad for a bit."

"Well, you didn't have good, old dependable Hugo around to do everything for you."

"True, I did have to pull it together if I wanted to get her buried, get her house sold, but losing a parent, at whatever age, in whatever circumstances, is life changing, and maybe that's why your mum has regressed."

"She'd being an energy vampire."

"She's working out what her world is without her mum in it. A mum – a good mum – is a barrier, a champion, the only person who puts your needs above their own. I

didn't even really like my mum, I chose to put an ocean between us, but still some nights I can't sleep for missing her. I even miss the calls she'd make, always at the most inconvenient times, to tell me your news, or to tell me that there had been another terrorist attack but she was safe, or to ask me what I wanted for Christmas when we both knew she'd buy me new pyjamas from Marks & Spencer's."

"It's funny the things you miss."

"Mum's funeral certainly cured my matrophobia."

"I bet."

"God, we're maudlin. Is this what happens when you get older and life kicks you in the teeth a few too many times?" says Joanne.

Her mother had warned her about the downward, depressing slope of human existence two decades ago, when Joanne was moaning about the amount of time and money she was spending going to weddings. Tracey said these momentous occasions were just the first hurdles we had to leap as adults. The happiest hurdles, she'd called them. Next would be Christenings, where you'd wave goodbye to a best mate into a decade of school runs, chicken pox and new friends. Then you'd get a letter or a call, years later, babies grown into spotty despots, and you'd be allowed to console them after a visit to a divorce lawyer. You'd pick up the friendship again over lasagna, sitting, ignored, older women in Italian trattorias. Then suddenly you'd find yourself staring at the casket of that hopeful bride, whose wedding you'd moaned about attending, and you'd give anything to go back and watch her throw her bouquet again.

“Mum used to tell me that if I stopped to think too much about the path towards old age and the heartbreak and farewells it led us to, we’d be too petrified to move. We’d be frozen. Boots full of cement. Dead already.” Joanne used to think her mother was just being her usual glass half empty, nervous self. Today she felt grateful for the warning.

“I think we all feel it, once we’re in our forties,” says Suzie. “When we realize with a slap round the face that our potential is fizzling out, that we have no chance of ever walking into a room again and being the most beautiful, exciting person in it, that there is no going back and starting again because we wouldn’t know how to begin. This is it. That was more.”

“Fuck me, I’m depressed. Waiter,” Joanne calls over for two more margaritas. “Turning forty-three was the gamechanger for me. The one they scare you about, turning forty, was fine. I got a party. Friends welcomed me to their club with pep talks about autonomy and bravery. My skin didn’t look like a fucking cabbage patch. Forty-three though, no party. No positive affirmations. Just hairy nipples and immense anger. But it’s not just me. The whole city is in a funk. We’re all depressed. I went to my doctor this week, about my hormonal migraines, and she said she’s never been so busy. Back to back appointments to treat depression and anxiety.”

“Well, these are depressing, anxious times. The whole world is still in shock that he won.” The waiter brings the drinks and they chink their fresh glasses morosely.

“She’s getting people in from both sides of the aisle though. We feel sad and angry, they feel guilty and confused. Xanax and denial, apparently they are the only cures

for our 21<sup>st</sup> century predicament,” says Joanne. “I’m just grateful I haven’t got a kid during these crazy times. I don’t know what I’d tell them.”

There had been a baby in Joanne’s life once, a girl, she always felt although no one had confirmed it, aborted at 14 weeks when Joanne was 35. The father-to-be, a rebound lover she thought could fix a broken heart, told her the foetus was like a tumour that would grow and destroy them, like cancer, and if she didn’t get rid of it, he’d kill himself. She aborted it, shaking so violently as she was wheeled into the operating theatre she had to be strapped to the gurney until the anaesthetist arrived and put her under. He ended their relationship by text the day after the surgery, as she bled alone in her spotless apartment, miles from any living relative. She’d still see him now, occasionally, on the boardwalk, skateboarding with the little boy who looked like him, a woman taking photos of them as they grinned in matching helmets and kneepads. The man and Joanne ignored each other, acting invisible. Their intimacy now just dust on the ocean breeze. There was nothing to say, the glimpse into the life she never had with him was just an occasional ordeal she had to go through. But she’d never forgotten her due date, or how old the child would have been, and sometimes Joanne would find herself parked in front of the local elementary school – now she looked for Third Graders – where she’d sit in her car and cry as the kids rushed out and into the arms of their mothers. She was convinced an abortion had been the right choice though. It would be awful to have a baby adopted and never stop searching for your own face in a crowd. Sometimes, at night, Joanne’s arms ached for the child she never held.

“I do believe it’s a luxury to be childless in this climate,” Suzie says.

“What do you mean?” Suzie didn’t know about the abortion. She’d had two miscarriages and Joanne didn’t want to upset either of them even more over her decision to end a pregnancy.

“It’s expected of us. Even now. In a way, to not have a child is a selfish act. You get to focus on yourself, your career, your experiences, travel. Sleep! You don’t have to carry this burden for the future. You don’t have to walk around living on the verge of a constant panic attack. As a mother, you have to get used to your heart beating outside of your body, with an irrational mind of its own, jumping into people’s cars and racing away from you.”

“There’s an over-population crisis. Unwanted children are being abandoned and abused left, right and centre. To not have a child is the least selfish thing we can do for the planet and for society, if it’s not 100% wanted. And I do care about the future, just not for a little tribe built in my mirror image. I care about it for all of us. That’s why I’m so fucking miserable.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry. The tequila has gone to my head and I’m jetlagged and talking rubbish. And I’m jealous. You’re on fire, loaded, respected, writing stuff that matters, that people actually want to read. I’m an adjunct at a local college, writing articles that get ignored.”

“And yet my imposter syndrome rages,” says Joanne. “Who knew that would never go away?”

“Every modern woman.” says Suzie. “I’m fading. Can we call it a night?”

“Of course.” They pay the bill and walk back to Joanne’s apartment. “Sleep till whenever you want,” she says, switching on the lamp in the tiny guest room that has to also work as her office and kissing her cousin good night, knowing she’d hear her fumbling around at 4am for orange juice. Visitors from the England could never sleep past 4am, however exhausted they were when they arrived. “It’s so lovely to have you here. Tomorrow, I was thinking the Getty Villa. It can be busy on Saturdays but with your jet lag on our side we can get there as soon as it opens. Have breakfast there.”

“Perfect,” says Suzie. “Love you.” Joanne pulls the door shut and heads to her bedroom, soothed by having family only a wall away.

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It’s not Tuscany but it’s enough in the cultural wasteland of Malibu, a simulacrum of Ancient Rome above the Pacific Coast Highway, imposing dignity on a landscape otherwise dictated to by garish Tiki bars and ostentatiously ugly white beach homes. The cousins walk the Gods and Goddesses Gallery, as they’ve done countless times before, clutching coffee and a guidebook. Joanne has dressed quietly for the day, Suzie is relieved to see. Suzie has been awake for six hours and has already forgotten there’s anything other than bright blue sky and perfect teeth.

“Her bow is still missing,” Suzie says, as they stop in front of Diana, the huntress. “I wonder if that bothers her.” The bronze is reaching one hand over her head for an imaginary arrow, while the other arm reaches forward, the mythical representation of spinsterhood beckoning towards the fortysomething single cousins. “It would bother me.”

“We always stop here,” Joanne says. “You always say that.”

“Because nothing changes. Especially in a Roman museum. And I prayed to her when I was pregnant with Stella, asking that my baby would be born healthy.”

“That’s so bloody you, praying to an ancient goddess. What’s wrong with Jesus?”

“What’s wrong with Jesus? You’re so bloody American! I suppose you believe in God now?”

“Yes,” Joanne replies, “when all your friends are in AA you get pulled in that direction.”

“Have you started going to church?”

“Every once in awhile, but I wouldn’t call myself a Christian.”

“What would you call yourself?”

“Festive at Christmas.” They both laugh, attracting dirty looks from surrounding art lovers and security guards.

“Thank fuck for that,” Suzie says. “I thought you’d really taken your 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday hard and become one of those weird evangelicals, giving your soul to Christ in a frenzy of hand waving and cash donations. I was about to have you sectioned. That shit wouldn’t fly back home.”

“Don’t worry. I’m just looking at everything I’ve got to make my life as calm and rich as possible. All angles, all sides. I need help and I don’t care where I get it from. That’s what I mean about tools. Diana should have her bow and arrow. I should have weapons at my disposal, too.”

“So, come on, then, we haven’t talked about the hunt yet. Your love life. Anyone worth catching on the scene?” asks Suzie. Joanne had never married and had never stopped looking for a man to love her, too often mistaking availability for suitability. Romance invariably failed to bloom.

“There is one man. Todd. But I’m not sure. He has teenage children and is looking for a stepmother for them as much as a lover because their mother is away every weekend running marathons and he can’t cope. He’s needy. It’s not attractive. He used to be his college mascot, dressing up as a bull every Saturday in Texas, and it’s left him rather angry. You can tell it’s still the highlight of his life, and the hangover from that is that he’s sort of hyper masculine and full of himself, shouting and being loud in restaurants, but very insecure at the same time.”

“You’re not selling him to me.”

“I’m not sure I’m trying to. And he’s a porn addict,” Joanne continues. “Nothing seedy, very vanilla, but constant. He got caught watching it in the toilets at work last week, which luckily his boss thought was hilarious. That’s not normal, is it?”

“How would I know?”

“I thought you were into all that stuff?”

“Afternoons alone with a vibrator doth not me a sexpert make. I am the last person to ask about the seedier habits of modern man.” Suzie hadn’t had sex, or even a date, for a decade. She didn’t miss the messiness.



“Ha! Well, I’m not sure I can be bothered really. It would be nice to find someone to be with, but I look around and I don’t see much. I mean, do you know any truly happy couples? I don’t.”

“My mum and dad are sort of happy, still, somehow, thanks to my dad. My grandma and grandad were too, I think.”

“You just don’t know enough. They’ve protected you, as parents should. Even my mum tried to hide what an evil bastard my dad was from me. I bet your parents had moments – months - where they couldn’t stand each other, or one of them met someone else, or they’d have rather been alone. Our generation is perhaps the first where to be divorced isn’t just expected fifty percent of the time, but celebrated. We’ve all signed up to the cult of self-actualization. I feel relief every time a girlfriend says she’s finally got the courage to leave. I know when you left Miles I didn’t doubt for a second you were doing the right thing, that you and Stella would be better off without his whining.”

“And philandering.”

“And that.”

The women make their way out into the gardens, stopping occasionally to admire the craftsmanship of the artists who captured the power of the heroes and heroines thousands of years ago. Reaching the end of the walkway, they stop to look down the hill, across sun-burnished grass to the glinting Pacific.

“How strange that these statues made it here. To L.A.” says Suzie. “Imagine what the artists would have said if you’d told them back then that in 2,000 years’ time their work would still be admired and observed, but in a country not even invented yet, in a

civilisation where people zoomed in in fast cars, posing next to them without reading about what they were looking at, buying replicas in the gift shop because it would make them look intelligent. They could never have imagined such a place and time. They would never have believed they could end up here.”

“They could join my club,” says Joanne. “I wouldn’t have believed it either.”

“You couldn’t come back to England now, even if you wanted to,” Suzie says. “You’re too American, too used to the sun and drive-thrus and big roads. We’re smaller, cramped. We don’t have space to grow, in England, we just have to revamp old corners, reutilize the space, recycle the past to make the present more palatable. We excavate skeletons from car parks and pardon the past without changing a whole lot. You’re all shiny and new since you came here. I mean, just look at your forehead.”

“I do miss England,” says Joanne, whacking her cousin on the arm. “but less and less. I miss the people I knew as a kid, the friends I played with in the street, doing Ouija boards and learning dance routines, but I’d probably hate them if I met them now. I miss our summer holidays in Norfolk, sharing a room and talking about boys and not knowing what the future held while our mums and grans drank too much gin in the kitchen, but I know if we went back, just me and you, we’d be disappointed, that we’d only see who was missing, what was paved over. When a cold front blows in to L.A., I crave my mum’s Sunday roast’s, but I know if I ate one now I’d feel bloated and greasy, and have to spend a few hours at a gym. It’s the romantic fantasy of home I miss. But those places and people aren’t there anymore, so neither is my England.”

“If anyone was England it was Vera.,” says Suzie. “Your gran had a remarkable way of being the best and worst of us all at the same time. Stoic, strong but bloody embarrassing. Superior yet down to earth. They don’t make them like that anymore.”

“Thank God!” says Joanne. “Let’s go grab lunch in Topanga. I think this is enough high culture for the day. And as we’ve just decided I’m a proper Angeleno now my tabloid brain might explode if you throw any more of your professor stuff at me.”

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“Come on, admit it. You love it here. Despite the bimbos.” On Suzie’s last afternoon in L.A. the cousins are lying on daybeds by the swimming pool at The Hollywood Roosevelt, watching twentysomethings, possibly teenagers, drift past on rainbow unicorns in full faces of makeup. Matching breasts float atop the David Hockney designed pool like buoys, bouncy and distracting in sequinned bikini tops. Tunes from the adjacent Tropicana bar are ironically Eighties. The kids are conspicuously declaring Rick Astley’s genius, to the cousins’ shared horror.

“Well, this is better than my average soggy Sunday on Wanstead High Street, I will admit” says Suzie. “But it’s not London, is it? I mean, the people for one thing. Why does everything have to be so loud, so dramatic? I love the weather. I love being with you. But I couldn’t live here. It’s weird you’ve chosen to settle here.”

With her grandmother and mother dead, England should be more appealing to Joanne. They were the reason she’d run away after all, taking a job at a magazine and escaping to New York at the age of 29. She was constantly confused by her reluctance to return to her favourite place on earth, London. To be sick of your home and yet homesick

for it at the same time was an unsettling way to live a life, and Joanne knew, in her heart, fate had decided she'd never belong anywhere. But she put on a show. She acted like Los Angeles was a proper place.

“I don't think it's a choice anymore,” says Joanne. “I've just had to accept England will never be home again. And I grieve that, don't think I don't. London bears witness to my life. I can't order a demolition of my memories. I just have to learn to live in the moment, if I want to live at all.”

“I know people over here pay therapists and life coaches a fortune to get them to do that, to live in the moment, to do all that *carpe sodding diem* stuff,” says Suzie. “But I don't believe it for a second, that people can actually switch off their deeply embedded processes and past, and be all *kum bay ya* every minute of the day, seeking happiness in every breakfast.”

“What's the alternative though?” says Joanne. “Staying harnessed to family customs and national borders? Doing things how they've always been done even though they no longer work for anyone. If they ever did.”

“Well, that's better than chucking it all away for something that may end up being worse!”

“But at least I'm living, growing, improving,” says Joanne.

“The American Dream, I suppose?” Suzie snorts.

“No. That's bullshit. But I am free of lots of traps and conclusions, I dumped expectations in the Atlantic and built me from scratch. I rebelled, I broke patterns, I've

been fucking lonely a lot of the time, but I'm not my mother's daughter continuing a life of servitude on an island of Hooray Henrys and hooligans. I'm not a stereotype, or a bundle of expectations."

"You are," says Suzie. "You just swapped one load for another."

The cousins pretend to return their attention to their reading material, a crisp *Vanity Fair* for Joanne and a dog-eared *The Remains of the Day* for Suzie. They don't like to argue, through every trip brings a clash like this. Joanne, indignant despite her guilt that she left England with good reason, remembering how good it feels to have her own space away from the imposition of questions and judgements from a person who is invested in her, and Suzie desperate to get back to normality but knowing she'd miss her cousin, and the climate, the minute she walked through passport control at Heathrow.

"What time do I need to get you to the airport?"

"About 8pm, my flight is at ten." Suzie shades her eyes and looks at her cousin.

"Thanks for coming to see me," Joanne reaches across the jumble of empty glasses and sunscreen bottles on the table between them and find Suzie's hand.

"I promised you I would, every year, when you told me you were leaving, remember? I said whatever was happening in my life, or yours, I'd find a way to come and check in on you over here. I used to say until you came home, but now I understand this is your home. And I may look at what you have and think that it is not a real life, but I do understand now it is real to you."

"Too real sometimes."

“Bloody reality, finding us wherever we are, even in Hollywood.”

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A pink crescent moon casts a warm glow over LAX as the cousins pull in to passenger set-down that evening. Suzie will be returned to her mother and her daughter in London by morning. She pulls out her suitcase from the back seat. The cousins embrace on the sidewalk.

“Don’t be too sad about the decisions you’ve made,” says Suzie. “England is becoming like a Little America anyway, all prom photos and eyebrow salons and pulled pork. You shouldn’t feel like you’re missing out. You just got to our future before we did. You were brave.”

“I feel like I’m being erased,” says Joanne, the usual airport goodbye tears falling heavier than usual.

“We all do,” says Suzie. “Every time we lose someone or something important to us. But you’ve made a strong choice. I’m buried in the trenches of our mothers’ mothers’ city, while you are all these miles away, free, looking at palm trees and dolphins. I’m stuck looking at oak trees and grumpy squirrels.”

“It’s not a place we miss, but a time, isn’t it” says Joanne. “That’s what I have to tell myself.”

“It’s both,” says Suzie, “and on that fucking miserable note I’m going to say goodbye.”

## HAPPY EVER AFTER

I don't remember a time when I didn't hate my mother. When I was a child and it was just me, her and her pre-fucked up colon, after dad had gone, I hated her purely. I'd sneak into her bedroom for clues of her corruption, coating myself in her perfume, Opium, until I choked, then tying her cheap, viscose scarves tightly around my neck. I'd sit at her vanity and stare at my cleft chin, my father's, my small teeth, my father's, and my dark blue eyes, also my father's and wondered if that meant all her traits were hidden, inside me, waiting for a moment to leak out and take over. Her brusqueness, her lack of generosity, her fear of anything and anyone outside of our four walls.

As a teen, I would go down her drawers looking for evidence of her heart, for evidence that I was like her but that there was hope. Once I found a book. *How to Make Love to the Same Person for the Rest of Your Life – And Still Love it*. I gagged. My mother wasn't a physical, warm, affectionate human. She was an ashtray. A demon. A puff of smoke. A bully. My mother was the reason I wet the bed until I was fifteen, wriggling away from the warmth to find a dry spot each night, walking through the school gates and catching a whiff of wee that made my heart race each morning. "Don't tell me anything I don't want to hear," she said when I wanted to talk about being touched by a friend's father. Her silence imprisoned me, not the way he'd pinched my nipples and told me to be grateful. My mother's slammed door isolated me from

happiness, not his thick, jabbing fingers. But since the cancer's arrival, in a phone call and a bark into my ear, the hatred I felt towards her had been sullied with something else.

The rushed wedding was a parting gift, my mother's last chance to humiliate me. She'd always enjoyed humiliating me. A wedding, in a sudden steamy downpour, my white dress turning brown at the hem as I dragged it through decaying petals and clumps of another bride's confetti. The low moans of my mother's gruff relatives, ferociously wafting their orders of services, complaining the tiny Norman church was too stuffy for a summer wedding. Watered-down Pimm's decorated with limp mint sprigs, lubricating my friends just enough for them to openly gawp at her outfit choice: a red sequined matador jacket with a matching silk pencil skirt, split up to the top of her thigh, American Tan tights wrinkling round her ankles.

When the diagnosis had come through, four weeks before her death, I knew there was nothing for it but to move my wedding forward. A wedding without the mother of the bride would be too intrusive on the emotions of everyone, even those who didn't know her. If we'd stuck to the October date dug into the expensively embossed invitations, I'd have had to have buried my mother first, leaving the 98 carefully arranged guests in the awkward position of not knowing when to bring her death up, if to bring her death up, or worse, making those common-sense-abandoning statements about her not really being dead. *I saw a butterfly circle your head and come rest on my bible as you said "I do" and I just knew it was your mum.* That kind of thing. Which any sane person knows is ridiculous.

Pauline would not be a bible-thumping butterfly. Or a prowling black cat on a path leading up to the church. Nor a red robin, tweeting merrily from a depleted branch in



the graveyard. Pauline, even before the colon cancer had ravaged her innards and turned her into a depressed tyrant, was not a person who felt at one with nature and she certainly didn't have a spiritual side. She was a sour statue of lard and acid who loathed everything except her cigarettes. "Pass me smokes," she barked repeatedly at me. "Hurry up, you useless lump." Pauline preferred clogged, thick inner tubes and crudely painted fingernails tapping at hot ash to gardenias and sunbeams. She'd feel right at home in hell.

Pauline loathed fresh air and refused to entertain the idea of day trips to the coast or countryside, preferring to sit stationary, a crumpled packet of twenty resting next to her on the arm of her well-worn chair, as her beloved television spewed schadenfreude at her from eight feet away. She claimed leaving the concrete blocks of the East End gave her asthma. My cheeks still burned with shame at the memory of her shouting at the lady next door when she offered me the chance of a respite from the grey asphalt. "I wondered if your daughter would like to accompany Caroline and me on a visit to the botanical gardens in Kew?" she'd asked, sweeping her heavily highlighted fringe across her forehead. It looked like an eagle's wing, feathered and tawny, ready for flight. "There is an exhibition about 19<sup>th</sup> century agricultural trends that's getting rave reviews."

"If you like the smell of cow shit so much, stick your head up your arse," my mother replied, "my Jessica isn't going anywhere." The nice neighbour tottered off, swaying with shock in her navy blue pumps, and never offered to take me out again. "She's a sodding artist who thinks she can tart up the Roman Road with her pussy bow blouses," my mother told my father as he prepared tea for the three of us as she blackened her lungs that evening, "I don't trust her." She wasn't an artist, she was in advertising, but

my mother misread the baggy cricket jumpers. And I didn't visit a farm until I was seventeen.

My childhood was a production line of refusals, robotically churned out from our red brick terraced home, the middle of three houses. Caroline's posh mum lived on one side, she'd inherited the house from an unfamiliar aunt and decided Caroline should be exposed to "real people", and two elderly sisters who never married or had children on the other. Our triumvirate of bay windows and tiled front paths sat resolute and proud despite being dwarfed by bold blocks of social housing on either side. We'd stayed when everyone else had fled, motorwayed out to the shiny new city of Milton Keynes, perfectly planned and full of slippery roundabouts, or followed the District Line east to Essex and an Americanized suburbia where gardens were measured by the inch, fenced off from community spirit, and Cockney gave way to Estuary English. The new dream was of a mock Tudor mansion with two cars on the driveway.

The summer I didn't go to Kew Gardens was the summer Lady Di married Prince Charles. By the time the big day finally arrived, my bedroom walls were covered in pencilled outlines of glass slippers, sapphire rings, horse-drawn carriages and cheering crowds, an art exhibition of my excitement, a nation's renewed joy. Exhausted, because I'd found it quite impossible to sleep the night before, I stood mesmerized inches from the television to catch the first sight of my future queen arriving at St. Paul's.

"None of these people would give two hoots about a commoner like you," my mother said, puffing smog and spluttering coughs in my direction as I waited and waited.

“Remember to listen,” my father said, placing a finger to his lips as Diana emerged from her carriage, her crumpled train unfolding and unfolding to a great length, before leading her tottering father towards her prince. “Listen out for the bells. If you hear them, some of the magic from this fairytale will fly to you.” We lived exactly 3.7 miles, as the crow flies, north east of the cathedral, which wasn’t too far at all, “very doable, in fact” he said. I have never tried harder for anything in my life.

A few miles away, Diana fluffed her vows and turned a deep shade of red. The Queen remained stoic. Waves of affectionate laughter echoed through empty ancient streets.

“Useless!” my mother shouted at the television.

“A breath of fresh air,” my father countered, as always, since the day they met, naively trying to dampen Pauline’s furious anger how he’d tried to dampen his own mother’s, failing with both women. Diana had just turned twenty. I had just turned ten. We were both virgins at that point.

Then the chimes rang out, the whole of London cheered and bright July sunshine flooded in dusty strobes through the open sash window, onto my face, particles of skin and pollen and my mother’s coughed up smoke shining and swirling like fairy dust.

“Daddy!” I shouted.

“Princess Jess,” he laughed, “what superb listening! Very professional, very regal.” He picked up the Union Jack tea towel he’d bought at Walthamstow Market and knotted it around my neck to make a makeshift cloak, then swiftly folded the front page of *The Sun* four times and placed it atop my head as a paper crown, pulling me into his

bowling ball belly for a congratulatory hug. “Your life will be full of happiness and wonder, Your Royal Highness,” he bowed as deeply as he could.

“Stand up, lard arse. The last thing I need today is for you to have a heart attack. They’d be no one to drive the ambulance, they’re all pissed somewhere in a pub garden.” My father had always been overweight. I thought it made him look cuddly. My mother said it made her feel sick. “He couldn’t believe his luck that I married him,” she’d told me when I’d come across their wedding photos. “Look at the state of him.” My mother was clearly once beautiful; my father looked the same: red cheeks, short limbs, three chins.

My courtly, kind father was dead four months later. He decided that jumping off the roof of our house into the golden pile of leaves he’d spent the weekend raking was preferable to another moment of living. I don’t think I blamed him, even then. And I was certainly grateful he’d made the leap a few minutes after I’d left for school so I didn’t have to see the splat. The 16-year-old newspaper boy had found him, which put an end to the carefree youth he had been forging for himself until then. After he saw my father, Humpty Dumpty broken into pieces, he was plagued by nervous overreactions and flashbacks. The body and its seductive promises, just revealing itself to him, was quite ruined, becoming something too fragile to casually take pleasure in.

“It’s a shame dad didn’t have the chance to read the paper before he jumped,” I told my headmistress the next day at school, when I was called to her office to talk to a concerned visitor who was wearing an earnest expression, denim dungarees and parrot earrings the size of chandeliers. “He’d have been so happy Diana was pregnant. News of the baby could have saved him.” The headmistress and the woman from social service

looked at me with four big, sad eyes. They'd heard my dad landed so awkwardly his glasses remained balanced on the tip of his nose but the back of his brain had fallen out, extinguishing the flame-colored leaves with deep scarlet waves.

Pauline's parting gift to me was a letter, which she forced into my hand the day after my wedding, the day she was moved into the brutalist hospice next to the derelict hospital where she'd been born 47 years beforehand. "Read it when I'm gone, I can't be bothered to answer questions. I want to watch this" she'd wheezed at me, before returning her eyes to the tiny television on wheels. Diana was dead. A car crash in Paris. "I never liked her," she said, as a nurse sidled a catheter into her urethra and the last ounces of piss and vinegar dripped out into a plastic bag. "But you wouldn't wish this on those two boys. No child deserves this." And they were her last words. *No child deserves this.*

The moaning stopped, Pauline was a corpse. I read her letter while the nurses disconnected the body from lines and tubes and alarms, as flowers and cuddly toys started to pile up outside Kensington Palace. The Queen remained stoic in Scotland. As tears were shed - not mine - Pauline's black scrawl, her ashy scent staining the paper, crept into my chest.

*Jessica,*

*You should know I never wanted you. It was all your dad's idea and he promised he'd do everything. Then the coward went and fucking left me, leaving me to deal with you. So don't think of me as a bad mother. I was nineteen when I had you, I was never supposed to be a mother. I was supposed to be a travel agent. I was*

*supposed to be slim. Being your mum royally screwed me over. I pissed my knickers every time I laughed after I gave birth to you. You made me stop laughing.*

*I want to be cremated. There might be enough money to cover it in the NatWest account but probably not. I don't know what cremations run to these days.*

*Mum.*

I stood up as the body was wheeled away to a giant freezer in the basement by a determined man from Barbados, Pauline staring up at the ceiling, wrinkled slate eyes non-judgmental for once. She could never say goodbye without some biting remark, I half expected one now. *Chubster. You deserve everything you get. Idiot. You're the reason your fat father killed himself.* Never again, I reminded myself. Never again. I was 26 years old and the abuse was over. I celebrated by walking out to the square of slick grass behind the hospice parking lot, taking my trainers and socks off and crunching my toes through the dewy blades into the soil beneath it, then heading home for my first angst-free fuck with my new husband. "That was so good, Princess" he said, nuzzling into my neck for a few seconds before falling back into the new pillows we'd acquired from our wedding gift registry. There was no longer three of us in this marriage.

But my mother wouldn't leave that easily. She kept dragging me back, day after day, to the house built of ash, to the diving board roof and dead leaf landing mat, to the neighbour with the freedom fringe on one side, and the spinsters with their bags of hard boiled sweets on the other. The detritus of life that had been and gone – best friends, back gardens, strict teachers, fudged kisses – took over my old home, transforming it into a

museum. I queued to enter, then wandered through, touching the glass that protected the invaluable until a tight grip landed on my shoulder and pushed me onwards. Exiting through the gift shop, I'd reach up to feel for the paper crown atop my head, gagging as the fumes of my mother's cloying perfume filled my nostrils.

Why, with a daughter growing in my belly, did I dream of the mother I hated and not the father who would have loved his grandchild? A pregnant orphan, I'd crawl on scratched purple knees over vinyl fluff and Barbie stilettos, skipping beats and jumping from word to word. I needed my mother to sort me out. "Get out of your fucking head, Jessica" she'd have screamed at me. "Stop bloody moping." And I'd have stood up and stripped off the memories, ripped and tatty, and pretended I was normal. Put on a show. Worn a mask. To pretend I could cope was of utmost importance. My mother had taught me that, not by example, but by embarrassment. I'd been an actress since I could remember. But my mother was dead. She hadn't told me off since the last day of August, seven months ago.

My daughter is born but the dreams continue, until the day I die, as it turns out, prematurely, friends who'd become family looking after my daughter in the corridor, my mother showing up from nowhere and sitting on my bed in the hospice, telling me how pointless it had all been, before returning her eyes to the wedding. Lady Di's baby boy, the Queen's favourite grandson, a man now, marrying a mixed race American with ambition in her belly and an ex-husband in Los Angeles. The television is positioned at the end of my deathbed how it had been at my mother's, the day she and Diana died. We do have something in common. That was one of my last conscious thoughts. My dad would have really enjoyed another royal wedding, that was another.

“Will I always be living in the past, wandering around that house, homesick” I had murmured to the husband who was lying beside me, stoically, firm and present, for the five years following our daughter’s birth, until our life together becomes an exhibition of its own, a showcase of used condoms, quickly paid phone bills, of new underwear and empty Chardonnay bottles. A shameful retrospective of my need for affection and reassurance.

“Shush, princess,” he’d would whisper kindly, until he finally gave up on me, humiliated, and angry. “You’ll wake the baby. Get some sleep. We have the future to look forward to now. You’re safe.”



## CRITICAL AFTERWORD

### Introduction

*The New Elizabethans* is a literary novel-in-stories about the dramatic changes in female and national identity experienced by British women during Elizabeth II's reign. A unified circle of ten finely observed stories outlining the desolation, empowerment and confusion felt in this era that will be instantly, painfully evocative for anyone who has questioned who we are now – as individuals, as families, as a gender and as a nation. Told in episodic tales, jumping between eras and voices, *The New Elizabethans* gives witty, compact and remorseful snapshots of British life from 1953 to the current day. The first story takes place the week of the Queen's archaic and formal coronation and the final story takes place in the present, concluding the collection on the day Prince Harry marries his divorced, mixed-race, American fiancée. The 65 years spanning these two key constitutional events have been ambushed with questions about gender, class and national identity, questions raised by characters defined as Baby Boomers, Gen X-ers and Gen Y-ers, expats and immigrants, mothers and daughters. From the fall of the British Empire to the shockwaves across the Atlantic from Trump's election, and the minutiae of an outbreak of nits to a fight between a first wave feminist and a breastfeeding activist in a coffee shop, *The New Elizabethans* follows five generations of London women whose regrets, traumas and triumphs will offer, I hope, comfort, solidarity and perspective to the reader. At the center of the axis, sits the Crown. Symbolically, and occasionally

practically, as her subjects struggle with adultery, racism, infertility, self-worth and depression, the reader witnesses the sovereign also looking to define a new role for the monarchy in a country with new expectations of what a woman – and England - should look like, think like and provide for the people who need her.

As a fictional work *The New Elizabethans* explores how gender identity and national identity has changed in the United Kingdom between 1953 and 2018, and in this critical afterword, I will discuss these themes and comment on how such changes – and the choices they bring – have been interpreted by contemporary writers, musicians, filmmakers and artists, referencing specific work that influenced my work or led me to ruminate on related questions in ways I hadn't thought about. As the novel is set during Queen Elizabeth II's reign, giving a clear historical framework to the reader, I will also reference academic research and social commentary from the British media to explain some of the developments during her reign. During this time, Britain has been struggling to come to terms with its new, reduced place in the world while British women have been offered increased opportunities and equality, through social, geographical, political and economic change. The contrast between an English woman's life in the 1950s to today is dramatic and significant and, I believe, worthy of thorough creative and critical exploration. The creative and academic work created about women's rights and the role of mothers during this period is broad and diverse, so I have narrowed my creative and critical study to focus at the point where the significance of motherhood and motherland meet and is reviewed with a nostalgia for the past, looking specifically at how memories of a time and place from the past can affect gender and national identity, and whether they function as a help or a hindrance when looking forward to the future.

### **How the idea was developed**

I found writing this dissertation personally and professionally cathartic, interesting and enlightening, and I am very proud of the novel-in-stories that has emerged from it. *The New Elizabethans* is inspired and aided by the knowledge I've built throughout my M.A., PhD. and writing career to date, and it is also profoundly inspired by my personal circumstances as an English ex-patriot and as a mother. My coursework during my M.A. in English and as a doctoral student in Humanities has afforded me the invaluable time and resources to investigate and plow my family's private history, and to use it to create and share work through creative writing workshops, and Trauma Narrative and Public History classes. These academic opportunities developed my skills as a storyteller and introduced me to comparative and interdisciplinary approaches to this era and my chosen themes, and to artists whose work informs me on the historical and cultural context of my chosen subjects.

How a woman's identity is created through motherhood became the personal focus of my M.A. in English, after taking two inspirational classes, one focusing on 19<sup>th</sup> Century Women's Voices and another looking at Trauma Narrative, working with texts by Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Doris Lessing amongst others. Their writing gave me an introduction to important literary work created by women on the subject of motherhood or lack of motherhood, while I was going through two years of infertility issues and feared I would never become a mother. Taking Professor Griner's creative writing workshop during this period allowed me to express my personal fears in a creative way, and the memoir I worked on in his class about my struggle to conceive eventually became my M.A. culminating project, excerpts of which I

later adapted for publication in the U.S. and U.K editions of *Marie Claire*, and *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail* newspapers in the U.K.

In the first year of my PhD program, mandatory courses allowed me to develop a proficiency in critical theory related to postcolonial studies, which I then focused more sharply on the subjects of identity, motherhood, homeland and exile. During my first term, when I took a class in Home and Homeland in the Global Age, my focus shifted from a mother's identity to the role a person's country of birth can have on their sense of self. While taking this class, I was going through the process of becoming a dual British and American citizen and Scotland was taking the vote on whether or not to remain part of the United Kingdom. I could explore these personal affronts to my notions of rootedness, belonging and nationality with the help of the texts introduced by the professor, including Tuan's *Space and Place*, deCerteau's *Practice of Everyday Life*, Bachelard's 'House and Universe' and excerpts from Rybczyski's *Home*. Over the term, through reading, discussion and research, I investigated notions of home and homeland as underexplored tropes in literature and the arts, especially in our increasingly mobile, global age, and started to think about how I could introduce these themes into my creative work.

These two topics, motherhood and motherland, came together as an idea for me during the second term of my PhD, studying Homeric poems as part of the requisite course Historical Perspectives on Art & Culture I. It struck me when Odysseus states 'Nothing is sweeter than your own country and your own parents' (Book 9, 37-38) how entwined a mother's love and mother country is with the idea of comfort and belonging. Tragically for Odysseus, after his ten year long epic journey of return, his mother is dead,

his motherland is altered and the happiness he dreams of with his mother-surrogate Penelope cannot be long lived, despite her keen adaptation to the role of unswerving, steadfast mother of all Ithaca. He is changed. Penelope is changed. His motherland is changed. And he is destined to head out again, unable to set down his anchor and rest, safe and sound as he did with his mother as a child. He can never go to his true home, his mother's body, again. Neither can Achilles, of course, in the Illiad. Patroclus is consistently discussed by scholars as the mighty fighter's greatest love and ally, but it is his mother he turns to in moments of crisis. When Briseis is taken from him he withdraws from his friends and in tears, 'He prayed over and over to his beloved mother' (Book 1, 366). Thetis is there for him immediately, as the Greek ideal of a mother always would be, comforting and soothing him:

And settling herself beside her weeping child  
She stroked him with her hand and talked to him:  
"Why are the crying, son? What's wrong?  
Don't keep it inside. Tell me so we'll both know." (Book 1, 374-377)

As she laments his woes with him, she reminds Achilles, and the reader, that she 'bore' (434) him and she 'nursed' (435) him, pushing forefront the images of connectedness and growth a mother alone can offer her child. I focused on these ideas as we continued on to the Middle Ages and read Christine De Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Lays of Marie de France*. The overwhelming sense of nostalgia for childhood or better days in the face of tormented parenting and exile in these ancient texts highlighted to me the perennial importance of changing motherhood and changing motherlands in the arts.

These central topics were very much in the forefront of my mind in my second year when I constructed an arts education program for Sarabande Writing Labs to teach creative writing workshops to women who had lost pregnancies or children and wanted to express their pain and loss in a helpful, artistic way. Over the four-month period during which we met, my aim, as the workshop facilitator, was to teach in a way that nurtured confidence, enthusiasm and excellence, created opportunities for positive, experiential learning in a supportive and respectful environment and promoted diverse female voices linked by ‘home’ (Kentucky) through community readings. Sarabande Books asked me to edit the work created into an anthology, which became *Mother, Other: Words by Women on Bereavement*. Also, during this term, I took Professor Kelland’s Documentary Film and Collective History class. The final exam was to make a documentary and I decided, inspired by the women I had met, to make a short film called Scriptotherapy: Saved by Our Stories, interviewing a psychologist, a trauma narrative scholar and women who had lost children about the benefits women find in sharing grief and building a voice as a collective whole when bereaved. Teaching this workshop, editing the anthology and filming this documentary allowed me a visceral insight into the emotions of mothering, and non-mothering, on a modern female psyche, and also highlighted my desire to explore, creatively and critically, modern British motherhood as it works as an identifier and institution.

Crucially, during this term, I also took Professor Stansel’s fiction workshop, focusing on the short story, and realised that this genre should be the method I used for the creative part of my dissertation, rather than creative non-fiction, which had been my initial plan. Finding incredibly moving, clever and inspiring stories around

motherhood and home amongst the collections of Elizabeth Strout, Justin Torres and Jennifer Egan, I fell in love with the high-wire act of short story writing. I saw how it could be a place for experimentation for a writer and a relevant form to bring the enduring themes I was focused on to a new generation of readers with very different reading habits and attention spans, especially as I knew my aim was to cover a 65-year period with flashes of depth and detail which could feel protracted in a conventional novel format. A short story I discovered, in this class, was like a shot of bourbon or an ice-cold plunge pool – taut, tight and essential, distilling generations of shocks and emotions into moments, and years into sentences. I spent the last half of 2016 widening my knowledge of this style, reading collections of short stories by contemporary female authors, then writing reviews of them published in *The Rumpus*, *Literary Mama* and *Appalachian Journal*, and indulging in classic, female contemporary short story writers like Helen Simpson, Alice Munro, Antonia Nelson and Joy Williams.

Undoubtedly, my work and interest in the key themes of my dissertation have been influenced by personal events I've experienced during my studies, including losing multiple pregnancies, losing my grandmother, eventually becoming a mother, and becoming a U.S. citizen, encountering the doubt, guilt and freedom that being an immigrant brings. These recent events allow a very privileged personal perspective as an academic and a writer, and drive a strong impetus to comment on key aspects of these subjects, during this era. Below I will discuss the three key themes in my creative work, and place them in their historical and cultural context. The three themes are motherhood in England from 1953 to today, national identity in England from 1953 to today, and nostalgia for home and homeland.

## **Theme One: Motherhood in England from 1953 to today**

How have expectations of British mothers changed from the 1950s to today? Has a woman's identity in modern Britain been lost, found, strengthened or weakened in her new position of choice regarding motherhood during Elizabeth II's reign? What do British women now expect of and for themselves? These are the questions I asked myself while writing my collection, a work which, I hope, makes worthwhile observations about the perennial, feminist discussion of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century: can women really 'have it all' – a sense of self and a child, and if the answer is yes, are we sure we want it?

In the opening story, *The New Elizabethans*, the first mother we encounter, Cressida, suffers from the then unrecognised condition of post-natal depression in the 1940s and is sent away to a mental institute, losing access to her children and divorced by her husband. In *The Doldrums*, her struggle is compared to a woman six decades later who may also have been unable to cope raising a child, and although she is criticised by Cressida's granddaughter and great-granddaughter, who hear her story second hand, she is not viewed as being mad for finding motherhood impossible. She is allowed to admit she finds motherhood exhausting and terrifying and she is allowed to get rid of the child while her husband stands by her. The woman can 'unmother' to save herself without being shunned by society, though she will still be judged by it. Two currently-running London theatre productions, Matilda the Musical, adapted from the Roald Dahl novel in which the eponymous heroine is mentally abused by her parents and eventually given up for adoption, and The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time, in which the mother, unable to cope with her autistic son, leaves home for a carefree life with a



younger, childfree lover, specifically ask its audiences to think about the moral decision of choosing freedom over motherhood, with the mothers in each play, depressed at having lost their identity, abandon their children to create a life they can thrive in. Matilda's mother, a professional dancer, is played as a pantomime villain in Dahl's 1988 book and Danny DeVito's 1996 film adaptation, but by the time the audience meets Tim Minchin's 2010 version, she is more of a sympathetic creature, presented as an antidote to the overbearing, smug, helicopter parents who think their children are perfect who proliferate the rest of the play, highlighting the identity crisis and rejection facing women who wish to be viewed as more than mothers, as this dialogue highlights:

MALE DOCTOR

A baby, Mrs. Wormwood, a child, the most precious gift the natural world can bestow upon us, has been handed to you (to) bring you love and magic and happiness and wonder.

MRS. WORMWOOD

This is the worst day of my life. My undercarriage doesn't feel quite normal. My skin looks just revolting in this foul fluorescent light, and this gown is nothing like the semi-formal, semi-Spanish gown I should be wearing in the semi-finals tonight. I should be dancing the tarantella not dressed in hospital cotton, with a smarting front bottom, and this horrible, smelly ball of fat.

As Adrienne Rich states in her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, the mother is most people's first interaction with love, warmth and nourishment and the literal and symbolic significance given to this role can become a trap or a taboo if a woman fails to complete the role as is expected of her, leading to social and psychological problems for mother and child. If the birth mother fails to fulfil her expected duties she is not only failing her child, but society and her country. "Under the institution of motherhood, the mother is the first to blame," Rich says. "Women are made

taboo to women,” (255) when everyone could benefit more from understanding and openness. Rich writes about “The Guilt of Everymother” (223), a term in which she recognises that every mother feels “overwhelming, unacceptable anger at her children” (224) for disrupting her purpose – physically or mentally – and that “we need to understand this double vision (of mothering) or we will never understand ourselves, they can carry their own guilt and self-hatred to their own daughter’s lives.” Ideally, Rich writes, awoken to the patriarchal prejudices placed on mothers to act as a self-sacrificing vessel to nurture a nation’s next generation, women should redefine themselves, becoming “comrades, cocreators and conspirators”, and support each other separately from male expectations of the role. This she believes would not only benefit the mothers and her children, but society. “We need a strong line of love from mother to daughter, woman to woman, across the generations” (246). In Matilda the Musical and The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time, the problem of a failed femininity – rejection of one’s child – is balanced by the portrayal of teachers who take on the role of what Rich called “counter-mothers” (247), raising the idea of a new femininity that does not revolve around biology and male expectation of a traditional mother, or the belief that to be a good mother means to carry, birth and breastfeed one’s own child, but the idea that to be a good mother means to be mentally prepared, capable and willing to care for and coach a child. A woman should not feel guilty, as my character Cressida did her entire life, for failing at a role placed on her by men, who had not, at that point in history, ever tried to fulfil it. I find it interesting that since men have started to be more involved in raising their children (the Office of National Statistics stated that in 2013, 227,000 British men were taking on the role of main caregiver), a noticeably growing trend since 1993, there

has been more public dialogue and support for mothers suffering from post-natal depression and child-related anxiety.

Women do not always choose to become unmothered though, and my work also looks at the effects infertility, miscarriage, stillbirths and abortion have on the female identity and how discussion of these tragedies has changed during the 65 years I'm focusing on. In 1954, in Africa, the character of Vera experiences a stillbirth alone, surrounded by foreigners she can't communicate with, her husband absent and she is never allowed to grieve or see the dead child. Fifty years later, Suzie miscarries a second child and unashamedly sits in her own blood, her husband with her, discussing her body and her grief, but her marriage breaks down, in part, due to this struggle. Suzie's cousin Joanne is persuaded to have an abortion a few years later, the child's father calling the foetus a cancerous growth, and aware of judgement, she doesn't share her decision or her grief with anyone. Abortion and a woman's right to choose is the main subject of Mike Leigh's film Vera Drake, set in 1950's London, the titular character performing backstreet abortions for women unable to have a child. "If you can't feed them, you can't love them," Vera tells another woman, when discussing her illegal work (abortion was outlawed in the U.K. under the Offences Against a Person Act of 1861 until 1967, when the Abortion Act legalised the procedure by registered practitioners, to be paid for by the National Health Service), while a client, a mother of seven already, declared "I can't handle another, it will kill me." I found it interesting that the male characters in this film, many of whom had fought in the Second World War, openly shared their post-traumatic stress issues, asking each other in pubs "what kind of war did you have?" and having abuse and alcoholism excused as a coping mechanism, meanwhile women's grief and

trauma regarding motherhood, childbirth and abortions was kept hidden, minimised and criminalised. Post 1967, there was a dramatic increase in legal abortions and a sharp decline in sepsis and death, caused by unregulated treatments, and according to a 2004 survey in *The Times*, 75% of U.K. citizens firmly believe abortion should be free and legal, and yet still the stigma of this choice continues. In a later film Secrets and Lies, set in 1990's London, Leigh's main character Cynthia, still feeling the social and psychological effects of giving away a child for adoption in her teens, urges her daughter to do anything she can not to get pregnant, "get the coil fitted" while falling out with her snooty sister-in-law for being too "selfish" to give her brother a child, showing her confusion, and society's invention, around who could and should become a mother. The film ends with Morris, Cynthia's brother, breaking down, shouting at his sister and wife "secrets and lies, we're all in pain. Why can't we share our pain?" and the women, realising how their judgement of each other as women has damaged them both, cry in each other's arms.

Child loss or being unmothered – however it happens - is perhaps the last taboo, the failed motherhood that we are still unable to discuss successfully, the mother persuaded to feel perhaps she did something wrong that she should feel guilty about. As Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, "the (female) body is always under siege", like a country waiting to be colonized, "suffering destruction by the very terms of history," and never is this felt more than during pregnancy, childbirth, or after the loss of a child. In the *British Journal of Midwifery*, Ewa Nordlund's 2012 essay "When a Baby Dies: Motherhood, Psychosocial Care and Negative Affect" studies the damage felt by women whose loss is not dealt with

sufficiently. Even in these modern times, if healthcare professionals didn't validate the birth of a stillborn child, or seemed callous to the mother's loss, guilt and depression could be imprinted onto the bereft mother. Nordlund's studies show that new thinking about child loss – skin on skin time with a deceased child, being allowed to keep the blanket the child was wrapped in – has invaluable mental health benefits. Would Vera have been a better mother to Tracey if she'd benefited from this new research and thinking? I thought about this a great deal as I constructed her character.

In the 2007 essay "Motherhood. Choice and the British Media", the authors state that motherhood is still "a contested area," and despite the rapidly changing attitudes, traditions and laws encountered by British women since the 1950s, "women's choices are open to scrutiny and judgement, deemed selfish or selfless," by the culturally persuasive media. As a questionable modern heroine of later twentieth and early twenty-first century literature and film, Bridget Jones's frequently writes in her diary how she feels her choices as a single, working woman are reduced into a series of judgements placed upon her by "smug marrieds" and her mother, who taunts her with the "tick tock, tick tock" of her biological clock, implying even women of her generation have one main purpose. But aren't they - we - expected to have careers, too? As Lily Allen sings in her 2008 hit, which she wrote after suffering a miscarriage and spending three months in a psychiatric clinic due to depression, "The Fear":

Life's about film stars and less about mothers  
It's all about fast cars and cussing each other

I don't know what's right and what's real anymore  
I don't know how I'm meant to feel anymore  
When do you think it will all become clear  
'Cause I'm being taken over by the fear

Both the fictitious Bridget and the lyricist Lily are confused about their roles. In her 1993 work *May Dodge, My Nana*, a photography and letter collection displayed at the Tate Modern, Tracey Emin shares her own evaluation of her role, compared to what her beloved grandmother had expected for her. In a handwritten note by the artist, directly addressing her nana, she accepts her new femininity:

May Dodge - My Nan  
She's 92 I call her Plum/  
She calls me/  
Pudding - /  
She made me the most beautiful/  
baby clothes – white crocheted/  
she made them for me a few/  
years ago – She said at the time/  
“I’ve made them for you now/  
because – by the time you have a/  
baby – I’ll be making clothes/  
for angels./  
Dear Nanny I’m not afraid anymore - /  
Life’s fantastic – who’d have thought/  
I could make angels - /  
for you - /  
They’re waiting/ XXX

Emin is enjoying the freedom being unmothered brings, while her contemporary Jenny Saville’s self-portrait reveals the constant love and hate of motherhood, a calm baby and an angry toddler squirming on the artist’s lap, pulling at her, three bodies embraced and intertwined, naked. *The Mothers*, painted in 2011, was a visual inspiration for the

confused mindset of the character of Lily in ‘Little Dictators.’ She describes her body as “a climbing frame, a scaffold, a tree trunk, a pillowy trampoline” but that while the four males she shares a house with refuse to show her sensitivity or respect, she adores them and would do anything for them. This is the struggle of motherhood. It is not whether we can have it all, it is how we can cope with the love and hate, adoration and anger, it provokes in us. No amount of positive political and legal changes during the last 65 years, including the birth control pill being introduced and provided free on the National Health Service for all women in 1967 (the same year the Abortion Act is put in place), The Equal Pay Act of 1970, The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1973 and The Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, or the mainstream acceptance of these new choices, can solve this very raw, core dilemma at the root of British motherhood: how should motherhood, or lack of it, make us feel?

Running parallel to the theme of the changing face of native motherhood is the question of how immigrant notions of motherhood and the mothering identity change when a woman moves to Britain – or out of Britain – in the same era, and if the move from their motherland to a new country has positive or negative consequences. How do women handle their role as purveyors of culture and tradition in a new motherland? How do they express their new agency and power away from the social constructs of their motherland? How do they handle the isolation, depression, confusion and invisibility mothering outside of the *village* gives them, whether they are moving to the United Kingdom or out of it? The physical, racial and emotional effects exile and immigration have on the role of motherhood are aspects of identity I have explored through the character of Jamaican immigrant Doreen and her daughter Lily, a first generation Black

Briton, in ‘Ladies-in-Waiting’ and ‘Little Dictators’, and I benefited from research by diasporic academics, their work allowing me an insight into the cultural and historical context of these immigrant women’s new lives. Erica Beatson’s essay “Engaging Empowered Mothering: Black Caribbean Diasporic (M)othering Under Patriarchal Motherhood”, addresses the struggle immigrant women face as they try to forge two new roles for themselves simultaneously as a mother and as a Briton, which informed my stories greatly, explaining the idea that “resistance to the nation-state” gives a “potential for empowered mothering” away from traditional expectations of what a good mother has to look like, think or be. As an immigrant, the woman has placed herself outside of stereotypes from her motherland *and* the new land in which she is to mother, and both the woman and child will benefit when “maternal authority and agency are engaged in the process of mothering.” With this new freedom brings traumatic hardships, of course. Immigrant women are isolated from their immediate family and close knitted community, there is an absence of collective thought on traditions and values important in their own childhood, there is an internal and national pressure to transpose a culture and identity onto their children, who may not want or understand it as first-generation Britons, and of course there is racism, encountered by most Black Caribbean immigrants to the United Kingdom, I imagine. Yet all of these negatives allow the immigrant mother “the opportunity to agentically engage mothering practices on their own terms. As a result, diaspora involves a process of being and becoming,” writes Beatson. I believe this osmosis could allow immigrant mothers to Briton to fight more forcefully for what they want from their role, what they need for their children, than the native women who are not forced to address change and choices quite so dramatically. The immigrant gets to



pick and choose from two mothering methods and find her own route amongst them. Beatson's piece was instrumental in my construction of Doreen, who is ridiculed by her children for reading *The Daily Mail* and drinking gin and tonics like a stereotypical English housewife, yet insists on cooking goat curry for her guests. And while she devotes her life to the support of her two British-born daughters, she never takes them to meet her own mother in Jamaica, refusing to continue the line of abuse and disfunction she felt they shared. As soon as her daughters are born on British soil, England becomes home. Becoming a mother gave Doreen a motherland again.

After the funeral, Doreen never returned to the island. She'd never taken her daughters to see the brash waves of her curacao ocean, so different from the ghostly grey flow of the Thames. She was sicker of her homeland than homesick for it, and her mother was to blame. After the births of Lily and Daisy, she'd willingly sunk into the soggy landmass of England. It was her United Kingdom. It was her daughters'.

I felt it was important to include an immigrant mother in my collection because of the symbolic emphasis placed historically on women to reproduce a nation, and the repercussions of leaving one's motherland on the woman and her children, and the mass immigration from the Commonwealth that occurred during Elizabeth II's stewardship. In Bouguereau's 1883 painting *The Motherland* the power of politics of a mother's role in the 19<sup>th</sup> century psyche is undeniable, the mother offering everything to the future wellbeing of her offspring. A breast to nourish, a stable lap from which to climb, while the woman is blank and interchangeable, miserable. She is irrelevant, the activity is with her children, and as Abhik Roy writes in his essay *Role of Women in Nationalist Movements*, "Since nationalism is generally constructed from a masculine perspective, women's roles are often limited to supporting nation-building efforts through

symbolic, moral and biological reproduction... women reproduce the nation physically and symbolically while men defend and protect the nation.” Leaving behind patriarchal stereotypes and being forced to forge her own, Doreen is allowed to mother how she wants. As Louise Ryan describes in her paper "Family Matters: (e)migration, Familial Networks and Irish Women in Britain," “women describe their migration in relation to narratives of escape and rational economic decision-making,” even though they were mostly confined to domestic roles such as maids, cooks and childminders in their new country, which are stereotypically female roles similar to those they would have had in their native country. Rudolph and Schalte’s “Race as Cultural Construction, Race as Social Reality: Mothering for Contradictions and Ambiguities” concludes that because race is “culturally constructed”, and motherhood is a “cultural phenomena” an immigrant mother, like Doreen, should be empowered to teach her children consciously about the social realities they face, better placed than someone who perhaps stays in their native country, returning to the point made by Beatson that immigrant motherhood is traumatic yet empowering. Doreen digs her own roots, watches her own flowers – her daughters, Lily and Daisy – grow, on her terms. “It is clear from our research,” Rudolph and Schalte conclude, “that race is anything but natural, stable, or unproblematic, and that teaching our children about race and racism is a fundamental and complex part of motherhood.” This understanding has also informed the conversations between Joanne and her mother Tracey in “The Matchstick Girl” when they discuss Anglo-Irish relations, and prompted many thoughts surrounding my own relationship with my English national identity and how that affected my own role as a mother, raising my children outside of the United Kingdom.

## **Theme Two: English national identity from 1953 to today**

Between the 1950s and today, there has been huge cultural and social change in Britain, an influx of the other, an English diaspora to the suburbs, the Americanization of English society, an increase in choices and a loss, I would argue, of values which were once held dear as the bedrock of what it is meant to be to be British. While less – internationally – is expected of Britain, which has always been, let's face it, just a tiny island bobbing around in the channel excluded from the huddle of continental Europe, more is expected – domestically - of British woman. How have these adaptations to English life affected English women socially, politically, economically, geographically and – most crucially to my work – emotionally?

Mike Leigh and Willy Russell are two seminal British filmmakers who have produced thought provoking work on the theme of English national identity for the last four decades. Neither men are typical 20<sup>th</sup> century English writer types; they are working class, and first or second-generation immigrants, raised by mothers and grandmothers and self-admittedly inspired and influenced by these familial female voices. Both men are still alive and producing work today, continuing their preoccupation with kitchen sink realism in contemporary British family life, focusing very much on the trap of domesticity and restrictions motherhood, or lack of it, places on a woman's social value in modern Britain. But whereas in David Lean's 1945 movie about similar themes, Brief Encounter, the moral lens of a pre-Elizabeth Britain leaves the audience with the overwhelming sensation of a woman being trapped and without choice or agency, in Russell's two films Shirley Valentine and Educating Rita , made four decades later, we find two female protagonists with options. Initially overwhelmed by the battle between

flight and stagnation, they ultimately choose what is right for them, free from the rules of polite society. To find meaning in their life, both women need to escape (their country, their social class) and find a rootedness for themselves. They are both driven to change by alternative expectations of what their role should be, which I feel is directly related to the social and political changes around them during the time the films were written, in the 1980s. Margaret Thatcher's reign, the economic boom, sweeping meritocracy and the ability for the working class to buy and make their own homes could have sparked the ideas of female transformation we see in the two productions, and the frustration with the past that pushes them to reject the status quo of English wife and baby-maker. As Rita, a young woman stuck in an unhappy marriage and dead-end job who returns to university and meets a different class of people, says in the film, she deserves "a better song to sing." Shirley, the 42-year-old housewife who talks to her kitchen walls, escapes the drudgery of Northern England for the sunshine of Greece. "I've fallen in love with the idea of living," she says directly to the camera, explaining why she can never return to her husband or her homeland. As a Jewish immigrant in 1950s England, Mike Leigh admits that his creative work has always been inspired by the tension and duality of being an outsider in England, of belonging nowhere and everywhere, and about the generational quirks and changes families continue or cull. In Career Girls, and Secrets and Lies Leigh focuses on the drama and friction between mothers and daughters, growing up in London during the 1990s, and the inherited sense of roots and identity passed from woman to woman, which can help or harm and are not easily escapable. Leigh's characters are less successful than Russell's in creating a new brand of British female identity for themselves, but they have a self-awareness around their predicament. Director Sally

Potter's film adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* was particularly powerful on the future of English women and their ability, in this new Elizabethan age, to take control of their identity, the movie ending in 1992, as Orlando watches her daughter making a video, in control of her image and full of self-expression, and the narrator concludes "ever since she let go of the past, she found her life was beginning." This line became an illuminator of my whole novel-in-stores, and I'd think of it in relation to each of my female characters and whether they had let go of the past, or been unable to, and how that had affected their futures, their relationships, their deaths. For a similar reason, I am moved by Stuart Pearson Wright's portrait of J. K. Rowling, which shows the author in a room of her own, seated with a serious expression, looking forward, her private and public persona allowed to be seen. Three eggs on the table in front of her represent her three children and her role as a mother, the table itself represents the desk where she writes her world-changing stories. As a modern British woman, she can be both, Pearson Wright understands. The blue sky seen from the window behind her alludes, I want to believe, to her freedom and limitless ability for creativity. This is no longer the Britain of the 1950s, when women could have brilliant ideas but society would not allow them to see them through without a man's help, as we read in 'The New Elizabethans':

"You're mad taking this on at your age, Jean" her husband Archie, a sensible man who had never dared be his own boss, had warned her two years ago when the bank had agreed to give them a loan, in his name, for her idea.

These new choices and changes could be startling for women from previous generations though, those who straddle rapidly changing times and their very different

expectations of English womanhood. As Tim Lott writes of his mother, who killed herself during a bout of depression, in his 1996 memoir:

Depression is about anger, it is about anxiety, it is about character and heredity. But it is also about something that is in its way quite unique. It is the illness of identity, it is the illness of those who do not know where they fit, who lose faith in the myths they have so painstakingly created for themselves. Thus, in the current confused, self-hating England, it is spreading like a violent, dimly understood virus. They're all the same thing: attempts to avoid disappearance, or nothingness, or chaos. (265)

As a race, if we indeed are one, for all of our newly won freedoms and opportunities and the superficial levelling of the class system, we may be struggling with what has been lost alongside celebrating what we have gained. While researching music with a nationalist theme for my dissertation I was amused by the difference between Dame Vera Lynn's confidence in her 1945 song "There'll Always Be an England" in comparison to Kirsty MacColl's gloomy "A New England", which was written for her by Billy Bragg in 1985. Lynn's song is full of reassurance and pride:

While worlds may change and go awry  
There'll always be an England  
While there's a country lane  
Wherever there's a cottage small  
Beside a field of grain  
There'll always be an England  
While there's a busy street  
Wherever there's a turning wheel  
A million marching feet  
Red, white and blue  
What does it mean to you?  
Surely, you're proud  
Shout it loud  
Britons awake!

MacColl's song is apologetic and depressing:

I loved you then as I love you still  
Tho I put you on a pedestal,  
They put you on the pill  
I don't feel bad about letting you go  
I just feel sad about letting you know

I don't want to change the world  
I'm not looking for a new England  
I'm just looking for another girl  
I don't want to change the world  
I'm not looking for a new England  
I'm just looking for another girl

By 2011, PJ Harvey is over self-doubt, confusion and refuses to be depressed about the new England she lives in. She's realistic and disgusted:

The West's asleep.  
Let England shake, weighted down with silent dead.  
I fear our blood won't rise again.  
Won't rise again

England's dancing days are done.  
Another day, Bobby, for you to come, home  
And tell me, indifference has won won won.

In their essay "Stop being so English: Suburban Modernity and National Identity in the Twentieth Century," David Gilbert and Rebecca Presons argue that this unrest in national identity comes from the Americanization of Englishness that started in the 1960s with the drive for leaving cities for a new, shiny, easier world in suburbia. Critics saw this ditching of traditional English life of a choice between country or city for an imported "fake middle" as un-English, they write, "suburbia and suburbanites were seen as symptomatic of a nation that was losing its sense of destiny, and was turning in on itself." Of course, a view on suburbia was informed by class. For my grandparents and

parents, raised poor working class in the semi-slums of the East End, a swift move out to the green lands of Essex in the 1980s meant they were doing well, building security and space for their families, living *The American Dream* with an estuary accent. “In many ways,” Gilbert and Presons write, “the rise of Thatcherism did feel like a lower-middle-class revolution, with privet hedges for barricades.” This shift in where and how an English man – or woman – lived would be viewed very differently if you were middle or upper class, feeling affronted by this plebian push for equality, coarse accents demanding their piece of pie after centuries of being starved. For these upper and middle class Englishmen, to dismiss this move with a sneer that it was all too American is an easy insult. Part of the English person’s genetic makeup, I have realized personally since moving to the United States, is to look upon our young American cousins with disdain, mostly in an attempt to disguise our jealousy at the American talent for brash self-promotion and indulgence, even if it is imagined, and our despair that we are no longer a superpower. This conflict between old England and new America is a symptom of our changing national identity that I have tried to get across throughout my stories.

### **Theme Three: Nostalgia for Home and Homeland**

What connects all of the women I create in my short stories is their strong reaction to what went before. My fictitious women are divided, either filled with a longing for the past, or reborn by their rejection of it. Whether they long for their life, marriage, body as it was before motherhood, or their country before the changes that mass immigration from the Commonwealth brings, I have used nostalgia as a way to ask questions of the reader and of myself, and to use nostalgia as an evaluative lens with which the reader can



assess how our lives have changed over the last 65 years, and whether those changes have been beneficial or not. Nostalgia, I feel, can be a tool for self-medication, reducing loneliness and building an identity structure, or a weapon used against opportunity and freedom, a harness. By considering the impact of memory and the emotions of reminiscence and applying those thoughts and feelings to my fictional work, my intention was for the reader to come away from the book thinking about their own space in time and place in comparison to their mother or grandmother, or even compared to where they thought they would be when they were younger. In trying to create a fictional world where pining and remorse flood the page without becoming miserable or saccharine I was deeply influenced by the fiction of a number of British male novelists, in particular Julian Barnes' *The Sense of an Ending*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*, and the British-based writer W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*. I cannot say why I found the truest, deepest ideas about nostalgia experienced in England exclusively through male voices and regret not having found a female novelist from the era I'm writing about to include as an inspiration, especially since the four books listed did not discuss the role of motherhood on gender identity, the four protagonists being male, three of them childless. Perhaps it was the lack of my own gender in current fiction on nostalgia that allowed me to really dig into the subject on my own terms, or perhaps it was just that these four writers wrote so beautifully on the specific topic of English national identity they were impossible not to be moved and inspired by. As Ishiguro wrote in notes to the Harry Ransom Center Archives, his work is fundamentally a struggle to understand "the idea of a mythical version of England and Englishness created by nostalgia" which is something I wanted my female characters to

play with, especially in the current day, seen most evidently in the conversations between Joanne and Suzie in ‘An Occasional Ordeal’:

“I don’t think it’s a choice anymore,” says Joanne. “I’ve just had to accept England will never be home again. And I grieve that, don’t think I don’t. London bears witness to my life. I can’t order a demolition of my memories. I just have to learn to live in the moment, if I want to live at all.”

“I know people over here pay therapists and life coaches a fortune to get them to do that, to live in the moment, to do all that carpe sodding diem stuff,” says Suzie. “But I don’t believe it for a second, that people can actually switch off their deeply embedded processes and past, and be all kum bay ya every minute of the day, seeking happiness in every breakfast.”

“What’s the alternative though?” says Joanne. “Staying harnessed to family customs and national borders? Doing things how they’ve always been done even though they no longer work for anyone. If they ever did.”

“Well, that’s better than chucking it all away for something that may end up being worse!”

In McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach*, which begins in 1962, the protagonists Florence and Ted, a young married couple, are looking wide-eyed into a bright new future. “In the grand view of things, these peaceful, prosperous times England was experiencing now are rare, and within them his and Florence’s joy was exceptional, even unique.” (15) They weren’t nostalgic for the past, or clinging to an old England, they were desperate for the future to start. “Edward and Florence’s shared sense that one day soon the country would

be transformed for the better, that youthful energies were pushing to escape... the pipe smokers downstairs in their silver-buttoned blazers... they could have no claim on the future. Time, gentleman, please!” (30) Following these two young lovers on their journey into adulthood and old age across the Queen’s reign, from hopeful and free of nostalgia for national identity, into their seventies, when looking back on their changing lives and a changing England is all they have, Ted living in a dream of a young Florence – and the motherland of his youth - preserving “her as she was in his memories” (202) is incredibly poignant and inspired me to focus, in my fiction, on how each change of circumstance – personal, like losing a child or moving country, or public, like a changing prime minister or a new law – has repercussions that last with a person, and a country, forever.

To understand how and why nostalgia can emotionally influence a person so deeply, in a positive or negative way, I devoured Boym’s “Nostalgia and Its Discontents 1” with its discussion of reflective nostalgia (good, the passing on of valuable traditions and positive links to community) versus restorative nostalgia (bad, “Make America Great Again”), how the idea of not going home can be a “tragedy and enabling force”, as I have discussed earlier in this afterword in relation to immigrant mothers to Britain, and her observation –which has informed two of my character’s relationships to their motherland (Doreen and Joanne) – that “contemporary nostalgia is to be homesick and sick of home, occasionally at the same time.” Joanne, in ‘An Occasional Ordeal’ tells her cousin Suzie that leaving England made her feel as if she was being “erased” from history, yet Suzie comforts her that everyone feels the same – because it is not just a place we long to go back to, but a time, which is always impossible. Suzie actually congratulates her cousin

for escaping the trappings of her motherland and freeing herself from national stereotypes and expectations:

“Don’t be too sad about the decisions you’ve made,” says Suzie. “England is becoming like a Little America anyway, all prom photos and eyebrow salons and pulled pork. You shouldn’t feel like you’re missing out. You just got to our future before we did. You were brave.”

It should be noted the theme of nostalgia in *The New Elizabethans* was also influenced by Bachelard’s “House and Universe”, and his discussion in the essay about how “the mother image and the house image are united,” reinforcing my notion that a nostalgia for the past indicates a longing for a motherland – a homeland – and the maternal figure – the home, the mother. His writings on how one learns to read a house or to read a room, lodged, as it would be, with memories of the past, which leads to psychological trauma or escape, were particularly useful to me when I was writing ‘Elbow Grease’, as Ted’s character explained his and his daughter’s attachment for his home, *Sea Lavenders*, to his gauche realtor, and ‘Happy Ever After’, and the smoky East London terraced house that taunts Jessica until her death. Other key texts I studied to inform my fictional discussions on a nostalgic longing for time and place are Rybcynski’s “Home: A Short History of an Idea”, two texts by Tuan (“Rootedness Versus Sense of Place” and “Time and Place”) and DeCerteau’s “Walking in the City,” all of which investigate intellectually how a place and time lock themselves to a person’s memories, becoming an invisible force to wrestle with for the span of a lifetime, or throughout a nation’s history.

## **Conclusion**

My hopes for *The New Elizabethans* is to offer a place marker on an era, a remembrance of a time and place for women growing up and growing old alongside Elizabeth II. In this way, my work is already nostalgic. I'm already looking back alongside my characters, standing on the precipice of a new England. The Queen is 92-years-old this April, her death announcement ready and waiting, prepared behind palace walls. The United Kingdom is not only facing the challenges of Brexit but the possibility of a political civil war as Scotland questions the benefits of independence and Wales and Northern Ireland look on with interest. Most importantly, perhaps, our national character is changing. We're becoming Americanised, self-interested, vulnerable, honest. My husband and I say on a weekly basis, when thinking of our grandparents, who were all evacuated into the arms of strangers or fighting overseas during World War II, "they don't make them like that anymore," and we feel weak and selfish and disappointing to those who came before us. Personally, I miss home every day, stuck in the humidity of Texas, raising my two children without my mother, without the small, insignificant things that built my identity and sense of belonging – Marmite on toast, Big Ben's chimes at the start of the BBC's Six O'clock News, rescuing hedgehogs on Guy Fawkes' Night - and feeling guilty that I cannot replicate this for my American-born children. We're all living with our memories, flittering through our thoughts like ghosts, some friendly, some harrowing. I find it comforting to know that wherever my motherland or myself go next, whatever we see or experience, or miss or regret, these spirits from the past lurk in our shadows, whispering opinions on what is right or wrong, placing an arm around our shoulders as we face the future. As I conclude in 'Elbow Grease':

“And is the exorcism included in your agent’s fee, or do I have to pay extra for that?” Ted calls out across the gravel.

“Oh, the ghosts?” Gary smiles. He’d think of Ted often over the course of his long life, conjuring up the old man’s devotion to his family whenever his own felt depleted, especially during colicky nights with his firstborn, or when his privately-educated wife would yell at him that their marriage had been a mistake, that he wasn’t good enough for her and everyone knew it, before sliding onto his chest, a soggy mess of gratitude and apologies. “You get to take the ghosts with you. They’re for you to keep.”

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### PUBLICATIONS

Edited Volumes

*Mother, Other: Words by Women on Bereavement*. Louisville: Sarabande Books, 2016.

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## INVITED PRESENTATIONS

“The Return to the Motherland: How Women Represent Home and the Impossible Dream of a Safe Haven in Greek Art and Literature.” *Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community and Involvement Conference*, July 6-9, 2017. National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland.

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