I know it's him.
But no one is listening.

HELLO, MY NAME IS MAY

ROSALIND STOPPS

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Hello, My Name is May

Аннотация

They wrote it on the wall above my bed. Hello, it said, my name is May. Please talk to me.May has been moved to a care home after her stroke. She can't communicate, all her words are kept inside. If she tries to point, her arms swing in wild directions, if she tries to talk, strange noises come out of her mouth.May is sharp, quick, and funny, but only her daughter Jenny sees this, and Jackie, a new friend at the home who cares enough to look and listen closely.When May discovers that someone very familiar, from long ago, is living in the room opposite hers she is haunted by scenes from her earlier life, when she was a prisoner of her husband's unpredictable rages. Bill, the man in the opposite room seems so much like her husband, though almost a lifetime has passed, and May's eyesight isn't what it was.As Bill charms his way through the nursing home, he focuses his romantic attention on Jackie, while all May can do is watch. She is determined to protect Jackie and keep herself safe, but what can she do in her vulnerable, silent state?

ROSALIND STOPPS has always wanted to tell the stories of the less heard. For many years she worked with children with disabilities and their families.

She has five grown up children, three grandchildren and an MA in creative writing from Lancaster University. Rosalind's short stories have been published in five anthologies and read at live literature events in London, Leeds, Hong Kong and New York. She lives in South East London with large numbers of humans and dogs.

When she is not writing fiction she is, mostly, reading it or working as a host at London's South Bank Arts Centre. *Hello, My Name is May* is her debut novel.

Hello, My Name is May

Rosalind Stopps

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For Dom and Tom, with love.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

September 2017

Lewisham

I could hear the words in my head but they wouldn't come out.

I'm fine, I wanted to say, you can leave me here, I'll be OK. It was the blood, that was all, I could smell blood, and I've always hated that. I wanted to explain to them. It makes me feel funny, but not funny ha ha, I would have said but they've got no sense of humour, young people. I didn't like the way the man was looking at me. I'm not just a stupid old woman, I tried to say. I may not have been speaking very clearly but there was no need for him to look at me like that. I tried to tell him, don't look at me like that,

young man. I wanted to say it in quite a stern way but my mouth was doing that thing again of not working properly, as though I was drunk or I'd had something nasty done at the dentist. All that came out was a slur of s's and some spit. I noticed he didn't like the spit much, ambulance man or no ambulance man, he didn't like that at all. I'd say he flinched, leaned back a bit, but he couldn't go far because he was kneeling next to me on the floor.

It made me laugh that, him kneeling, it's not a thing you see much. Reminds me of going to church when I was a kid, I tried to say, but the spitty thing was still going on. Try to relax, he said to me, try and calm down, deep breaths, we'll get you sorted. I gave up on talking, tried to roll my eyes instead but of course that made him call his colleague over, the young woman with the thick ankles. She was wearing a skirt and I was surprised at that. I'm sure they're allowed to wear trousers these days and if I was her I would have done. Cover up those ankles. I might have rolled my eyes again. They probably thought I was dying or something, because it was all rushing around after the eye rolling, no more of the calm down stuff, just lobbing me onto a stretcher like I was already gone and couldn't feel anything. At least I was wearing trousers, I thought, and it made me laugh. It felt like a laugh inside. I don't know what it looked like on the outside.

I might have gone to sleep for a moment or two after that. I'm surprised I was tired because I'd been doing nothing but lie around on the floor resting since I fell. I didn't know how long I had been there but it must have been quite a while. Someone told

me later I'd been there for two whole days and two nights. I'm not sure if that's right or if it's just another one of the things they say to old people to keep them in order. I'm still thinking about that one. I certainly remember watching the clock on the wall and thinking that it was going slowly, and that I might need to wind it up or put a new battery in it. I couldn't remember which. And I can remember hearing someone push something through the letterbox. It was probably only a flyer for some kind of pizza place or a nail parlour but I tried to shout. I thought it was just a fall, you see, I've got big feet, clown feet I've been told, plus I've always been rather clumsy so I thought I had just fallen over the coffee table. I was wedged in between the coffee table and the sofa and the smell of blood was horrible. Turned out I'd only bashed my head a bit, no stitches needed, but at the time it smelt like an abattoir and that's what I mainly remember.

Two days. I nodded like I agreed with them but two days, honest. I'm not sure about that. I'm going to ask some of the others when I can, I'm going to ask them how long they lay on the floor for if they had a stroke, and if just one of them says, two days, it will be obvious that it's something they say to everyone, the two days thing, a big old lie. I've caught them telling lies a couple of times so I won't be at all surprised.

I don't remember much about the ambulance journey. There's the smell, I remember that, the blood from the cut on my head, and another smell, a dirty smell that showed up in the ambulance. Maybe it was a smell from the person who had used

the ambulance before me. They needed to work on that, clean it up a bit better. I'm sure the smell couldn't have been coming from me. Who smelt it, dealt it, that's what they used to say in the shop I worked in when I was a student. It reminded me of the day one of the boys in packing brought a stink bomb in during stocktaking. It brought tears to our eyes, but none of us girls said a word, in case we got teased.

I didn't say anything in the ambulance. I just went to sleep and the next thing I knew, the young man who had been kneeling by me and the well-meaning woman with the thick ankles, they'd gone. It would have been nice if they had said goodbye or cheerio or something so that I'd known they were going. I'd got used to them being there and I felt lonely without them. They should have said something but they didn't, or they didn't do it loudly enough, so when I woke up there was a different woman. She had a badge on that said, 'hello, my name is Agnita'.

Hello yourself, can you not speak then, I wanted to say, have you got badges for other things you want to say? I imagined a person covered in badges, all of them saying useful things like, would you like a cup of tea, or, mine's a pint. Count me out, I thought, I'm not wearing any badges, they can't make me. And they didn't, but get this, what they did was even worse. They wrote it, on the wall above my bed. 'Hello,' it said, 'my name is May. Please talk to me.'

I couldn't believe it. Please talk to me, indeed. As if. I don't need anyone to talk to me, thank you very much and if I could

just untwist my mouth enough I'd tell them so in no uncertain terms. I haven't had anyone to talk to for a long time, no one except for my daughter, Jenny, and she's so quiet I can hardly hear her. Speak up, I always say, speak up or I'm going to read my book and ignore you. That makes her nervous, and I'm sorry about that but there's no point mollycoddling a grown child. No point at all.

I fantasised for a while about scrubbing the words off my wall. If I could just stand up for a moment I'd make sure there wasn't a trace of writing left. There wouldn't be any 'please talk to me' then, I can assure you.

They tell me I've got the sequence of events all wrong. They say that I went to the hospital first, had scans and saw doctors and that sort of malarkey, and that I only came to the nursing home later. I don't know why they say that. I've got no idea at all, so I don't argue, I just keep quiet and watch them all. It's not something I'd forget, is it, a whole trip to hospital and everything that goes with it?

Honestly dear, you've been unwell for longer than you think, said the one with the purple streak. (Hello, my name is Abi.)

I hate being called 'dear' and I don't trust any of them. It'll be a cost cutting thing. It's my guess that they just cut out the middle person and bring the old people straight to the nursing home, save money on hospital beds. They tell the poor old dears they've had some treatment but they don't remember and everyone is happy. That's the thing with me, you see, I'm quite clever underneath this

old lady exterior. That's what it feels like, an outfit I'm wearing. As if I woke up wearing a fancy dress costume complete with wrinkles and grey hair, and I can't take it off. Inside it's different. Inside me I'm about thirty, with occasional forays backward and forwards. I don't think the other old people are like that. I've watched them. It's real for them.

I didn't see any of the other old codgers that first day. As far as I remember I was on the floor in my front room, in the ambulance, and then this room. I'm not complaining. It's all very nice and everything, this room, clean and bright, but it smells of gravy at all times. It's like living in a gravy boat I wanted to say, one big gravy boat sailing away into the night, full of old people on their last trip. I'd like to be able to say that to Agnita, she's the one I'm supposed to go to if I have any 'issues'. She's not a nurse. Mentor friend, they call it but she hasn't got a badge that says that.

So that first day, she sat with me for a while, telling me this and that about St Barbara's, that's the name of this gravy boat. St Barbara is the patron saint of miners, firemen and prisoners, she said, so that's appropriate. I didn't listen to everything she said, but I liked the sound of her voice, all soft and lilty like a bedtime story. She told me that she came from a part of the West Indies that used to be Dutch, and that was why her accent was unusual, I remember that. I remember it mainly for the frustration I felt, wanting to let her know that I was a true Londoner, not racist like the other old people. They weren't proper Londoners, I could

tell at a glance. They seemed more like the sort of people who'd moved to London from Hull. A sea of bad perms, crimplene and right-wing nonsense. The most important people in my life have been people of colour, I wanted to say but all that came out was spit.

Come on now May, there's no need to be alarmed, she said, I'm a trained carer. Something like that anyway, but it wasn't fair, I wasn't alarmed. Well I was, but not by her, I don't know why people always think it's about them. Trained carer, I wanted to say, trained carer? An untrained toddler would have been able to see that I was actually alarmed by the fact that I couldn't talk. I couldn't join in with the conversation I hadn't asked for in the first place, and I didn't want to be having it anyway. I must have got a little upset after that. She looked offended, and that's bonkers. How could anyone be offended by an old woman who spits instead of talks?

She left me alone for a while, but she left the door open. I could see two rooms across the corridor. One had the door shut, and the other was open. I couldn't see who was in it but I could hear the television blaring so I knew it was occupied. And I could see people moving up and down the corridor with trolleys. Pill trolleys, cup of tea trolleys, book trolleys. This was clearly going to be a place where they didn't leave a person alone for five minutes. I wasn't sure what to think about that. I've been lonely in my life, I'll admit it, but I've learned to like my own company too.

I slept again then, and when I woke up I realised exactly what

was going on. I didn't have a voice, that was the long and the short of it, I was trapped until I could make myself understood. That was a difficult thing to come to terms with. No one could understand me and while there was a kind of freedom in that, it was not a freedom I wanted. I was set apart from the rest of the world, a separate kingdom with my own self as ruler and subject. I was going to have to make my own rules; work hard.

I'd heard a radio programme about someone famous who had had a stroke and then practised and practised and got themselves better and climbed Everest for charity or something. I should be able to get better a lot more quickly, I thought, because I didn't want to climb any mountains at all. I just wanted to go to the toilet unaided. I wanted to manage the whole process without swinging through the air on a hoist, or being helped by two carers while I lurched along with a three legged stick. I wanted my dignity, that's what I wanted the most.

I never thought that going to the loo would be such a big deal in my life, but in between toilet visits not a lot happens in here. There's TV, and meal times, and therapy of various sorts, but the other people are very dull. Mostly of the common or garden vegetable variety; no conversation to speak of. I need to practise my talking, that's what the speech and language therapist says, but it's hard to do that when I'm surrounded by people who are either busy working or busy dying.

There's one, I've never seen her, I guess she keeps to her own room, but every night at about seven o'clock she starts shouting

for her mother. If it was me in charge, I'd get someone to dress up as her mother and give her and the rest of us a bit of peace, but I don't think they've thought of that. I'm thinking about doing it myself, when I can get around a little better. I could just put my head round her door and say, there there, it's all OK dear, Mother's here. She might stop calling out, she might sleep better and then we'd all be happy.

There was a shouter on the ward where I had my Jenny. It wasn't her mum she was calling for, more like she was asking for divine intervention as far as I remember. God, please help me she kept calling. I'd had my baby by then, but I could still hear her, we all could, the new mums. There was one across from me, she kept muttering, God help her, whenever the shouting woman went quiet, and for some reason that made us all laugh. It was good to have a laugh together, made me feel like one of the gang. A conspiracy of women, that's what we were, that's what Helen called it and I didn't mind at all that Alain often missed visiting hours. He wasn't the only one, having babies was women's work back then. I'd read the books of course, I wanted it to be different for us but I knew how hard it was for him.

It will be different, Alain used to say, we won't be like all the others. I've got to make things right for all of us, we're a family now. He had interviews for jobs as far as I remember, it wasn't that he didn't want to come. The visiting hour was short, literally an hour, I think. I understood. When he did come though, oh, all the other mothers took to him. He'd go along the ward saying

hello to them, commenting on how pretty their babies were, that sort of thing. He always brought flowers, every day that he managed to come in, and he usually cried at the sight of little Jenny.

She's so perfect, he said, I'm sorry I just can't help it.

He loved to sit and look at her while she was sleeping. It worried him when she cried. I got into the habit of telling Jenny to be quiet, and if I'm honest, I never really stopped until she was grown up. I've had a lot of time to think about that in here, and as soon as I can get the words out properly I'm going to tell her. I'm sorry, I'm going to say, I don't know whether it's my fault that you're so quiet now, but if it is, I'm sorry, and I think you should spend the rest of your life shouting, just to make up for it.

She's been to see me quite a few times in here. It's nice to see her but the last thing she needs is me getting all sloppy over her, so I've tried to keep myself to myself. It's the spit. Any attempt at talking and it's there, splishing and splashing out of my mouth like one of those water slide things they have in outdoor swimming pools. I thought of that when Jenny was here the other day. She used to love going down the water slide on holiday and I wanted to remind her of that and explain why I was spitting at the same time but of course it all came out in a wet jumble and she had no idea what I was trying to say.

Do you want a drink, she said, or the toilet, it's OK Mum, I'll call the nurse.

They're bloody not nurses I wanted to say but it came out as

a growl and then she pressed the buzzer and I was being swung through the air to the toilet like I was a sack of old bones, which I suppose I am. The swimming pool, I wanted to say, remember the water slide and how many times you went down it? You were so tired you'd often fall asleep eating your dinner on that holiday. Mush mush mush spit dribble slobber, that's what comes out. All anyone can guess is drink or toilet, that's the only things that I'm supposed to care about now. Like one of those dolls Jenny used to have, where you poured the water in the mouth and put a nappy on the other end so it could come out. That doll always creeped me out and now I know why, it was my fate, waiting for me.

Don't try to talk Mum, it's OK, Jenny says and I try so hard not to cry that I knock the water out of her hand as she offers me a drink.

Now now, May, one of the carers says, there's no need for that, your daughter has come to visit you, let's be nice. It's not fair, I think, it's not fair and if at that moment I could have blown the place up I would have, daughter or no daughter. I've never liked things that aren't fair.

When I was at school there was a fashion for biros with more than one colour, and you clicked a button to change the colour of your writing. I didn't have one, so when Carol Eliot's got lost, it was me everyone thought had taken it. I didn't, I didn't, I said, but the teacher still insisted on searching my bag based on 'information received'. It wasn't there of course, but some of the girls believed it anyway, and for months they held their pens to

their chests when I walked past.

I stopped trying to remind Jenny of the water slide, I stopped trying to tell her I was sorry, I turned my face to the wall and waited for her to go home. I was very sad when she had gone.

I've got to get out of here. September is usually my favourite month. There's a feeling of new year, new possibilities, but no fireworks. Sunshine. I think I was reading in the garden only last week or the week before, when I was still at home and everything was different. I think I was, only I've got into a muddle over dates. I'm sure I was at home with all my body parts working when the children went back to school, I heard them walk past my window and then there's a blank part and now they tell me it's the twenty-second of September. The thing is, as you get older, you don't look at the date every day like you do when you are at work. You take things a bit more slowly, you wind down a little. It doesn't mean I've been ill for nearly three weeks just because I wasn't noticing the date, and I'd tell them that in no uncertain terms if I could.

Something a little different this evening. Just after the tea trolley and before the pill trolley, they came round shutting all the room doors. I thought it was just mine at first, and that maybe I was in trouble, or Jenny had complained about me or something, and they were teaching me a lesson. But I listened hard, I've always had good hearing, and I heard them shutting all the doors, up and down the corridor. We were banged up. A lockdown. I knew the words because I've always liked the prison shows on

TV. I listened, and I could hear them roll a trolley down, I could hear those trolley wheels. I'm quick, and I realised what it was. It was creepy. The death stretcher, that's what it was, the last journey, the only way out of here. Poor old bugger whoever you are, I thought. I wondered for a moment whether I should show respect by bowing my head or something.

They opened the doors a few minutes later. I think it was only a few minutes. I tried to make my eyes as questioning as possible but same old, same old, Kelly just asked me if I'd like a drink or a wee. I jumped (figuratively) at the chance of a bit of a hoist and a nose, so I made a particularly enthusiastic sound in the appropriate place. It sounded a little like, yeeeeuuugggsshshshsh.

They always use the hoist when they're busy. It's quicker. It can take me half the day to get across the room otherwise, even with two carers helping me.

Come along now, May, Kelly says.

She has that voice on that means, I'm busy and you're a nuisance. If I had a way of having a tantrum I'd have one. I'd sweep all the tissues and the polo mints and the orange squash right off that tray, and lob the sticky toffee pudding left over from dinner right at Kelly's hair. She's got this complicated hairstyle, all winding plaits and Princess Leia and it would look just the thing with a handful of custard and sponge on the top. It's the assumption, that's what I don't like, the assumption that whatever I do, I'm doing it as part of a plan to disrupt their lives as much as possible, ruin their busyness. I know it's only a short time since I

went to the toilet last, and that when I got there I couldn't make much impact anyway, hardly a trickle. But it's my right to go to the toilet whenever I want to, I know that much.

So Kelly and Lee-An strap me into the hoist and lift me up, swing swing, into the air and across the room. Talking all the way about hair extensions. I've got used to carers talking to each other as if I wasn't there. It's restful sometimes, listening to chatter about wallpaper and children, dinners waiting to be eaten and holidays planned. I don't mind, most of the time, but I'm sad this time what with death rolling past my door so recently. I'm lonely, I'm not sure what hair extensions even are, and I miss Jenny. She might be nearly forty and as quiet as a mouse, but she's my only family and I can't help thinking that it would have been nice if she could have stayed a little longer. I'm on my own, after all. She has a long journey to get home and she doesn't drive, that's true and I should remember that but I'm upset.

I can't have a proper tantrum but I manage a side swipe to the left that knocks the half-drunk mug of tea to the floor as they swing me round. You'd think it was some kind of chemical, the way they carry on, something from a Batman film that could burn through floors, walls and bones. She looks at me, Kelly, not a look that anyone would want to receive, especially from the person who is operating the hoist that gets you to the toilet. I look away, settle down a bit into the sling, so that she can see there isn't going to be any more drama.

Something catches my eye. The room across the corridor,

not the one with the open door and the booming television, but the other one. The one that's usually closed and silent. There's someone in there, a man I think. It's difficult to tell once you get old. The person is tall, because I can see the back of his head over the top of the chair he is sitting in. There's something familiar about the tilt of his head as he faces the TV. As if he's breathing it in, listening hard. I can hear a man's voice and the hollow sound of questions being asked. I'm not sure until I hear the music, dum diddy dum, all threatening and serious, but I'm right, it's *Mastermind*.

Alain used to love that show. He was good, too, he often got more right than the contestants. *Mastermind*. I haven't thought about that show in ages.

CHAPTER TWO

September 1977

Hull

'May,' called Alain as he opened the front door, 'May, do you want the good news or the really, really good news? Don't worry about the lovebirds,' he said as May looked towards the top of the house, 'they're out, I saw them in town. And we won't have to worry about them for much longer, I promise. We'll have our own place soon, our very own with no housemates to worry about.'

May smiled. She hadn't minded living with the student couple at first, in fact she had liked having other people around, but as the baby's birth got nearer, May felt a nesting instinct. She wanted to be on her own with Alain and her bump, thinking about baby

things and preparing. She didn't want to make conversation or worry about how she looked. In fact, she didn't want to think about the world outside of her bubble at all.

'Go on then,' she said. 'I could use some good news, anything you like, bring it on.'

She washed her hands and moved away from the stove.

'That smells great,' Alain said. 'Let me guess, tomato mince?'

May blushed.

'I'm going to learn some new recipes,' she said. 'I'm working on it.'

Cooking did not come naturally to May, but she had bought some old recipe books at a jumble sale and she was trying. Her mother had gone for the easy stuff, baked beans, fish fingers, frozen peas, and that had always been good enough for May until now. Now she had a husband and a baby on the way, and she wanted to do it well.

Alain put both arms around her and lifted her slightly off her feet.

'No need,' he said, 'men can cook too, you know. I'm going to cook every night when this little one is born.' He dropped to his knees and kissed May's pregnant stomach.

'Hello, little tiny,' he said in a quiet voice. 'Any chance of some kicking for your old dad?'

'He's been quiet today,' said May, 'probably waiting for you to come home.'

'He?' said Alain. 'He? Isn't that a bit sexist? If she's a she, she'll

be listening and she'll think we want a boy.' He stood and kissed May on the side of her neck. 'I'm happy with anything,' he said, 'boy, girl, alien, I'm just so happy that he, she, or it, is there.'

May was happier than she had been for ages, possibly forever. It had all been so quick, meeting Alain, marrying him and getting pregnant, only not in that order, and sometimes she still had to pinch herself to make sure it was real.

'So, the good news things in order. First, it's *Mastermind* on TV tonight and we can watch it together, score sheets and everything. I read in the *Radio Times* that one of the contestants is going to answer questions on the poems of T.S. Eliot for their special subject. I bet we know all of the answers between us.'

May smiled. It still seemed amazing that Alain liked the same sort of things that she did, and that he understood her so well, so intimately. May and her mother used to watch *Mastermind* together, especially when she was ill.

'Did I tell you,' May asked, 'about the last time Mum and I watched *Mastermind*?'

'You did,' said Alain, 'but I'd love to hear it again.'

'Really?' said May. She was worried that she was boring him. It still seemed inexplicable to her that someone like Alain would look at her twice, let alone marry her. He was six years her junior for a start, handsome, funny and clever. He knew about politics and poetry and he could play the guitar and sing like Paul Simon. Everyone who met him loved him. Her mum would have loved him too, she was sure of that.

'Really,' said Alain. 'Come on, you sit down and I'll take over the cooking. I'll tell you my other piece of news later – it's worth the wait.'

'No,' said May, 'no, go on, I want to hear it now, right now.'

She put the memory of her mother out of her head. Sorry, Mum, she thought. I'm not ignoring you, but I'm moving on. It's OK, she could imagine her poor old mum saying back, smiling even though she'd been dismissed, go on, you have a good time.

'Are you OK, merry May?' Alain said. 'It must be so difficult for you, I'm sorry if I forget that sometimes. I read an article the other day about grieving, and it said that it's even more difficult to grieve when you're pregnant, because everything is invested in the future, all your hopes and dreams, but that's hard when the loss is still there to make you sad. I think that's what it meant, anyway.'

Fancy that, May thought, reading articles for her sake, how lovely. Alain lit a cigarette. May decided not to mention again how much she hated the smoke now that she was pregnant.

'So, here's my good news. I've got a job! I've got a job, just when we were starting to panic, a real job with real money and everything. And a flat! We won't have to live with Love's Young Dream upstairs any more, it'll be just us: me, you and Jiminy Cricket in there.' Alain patted May gently on her bump, and looked at her. She could tell he was keen to see her reaction.

'Al,' May said, 'Al, I can't believe it. Where? Teaching? How come there's a flat? I don't understand.'

'OK, OK, well, I haven't only been applying for teaching jobs. There's nothing around now, term has started and there are loads of good teachers without jobs, we both know that. I didn't want to tell you, because I wasn't sure if it would come to anything and I didn't want to get your hopes up. But my dear May, my merry May, I got out my special skill, my superpower, and it's going to save us.'

May wondered for a split second whether Alain had been drinking. She didn't know what he was talking about. They were both teachers, newly qualified, in fact they'd met in college only nine months ago. He'd never mentioned applying for other jobs or having a special skill and May realised again how little they knew about each other, how quickly everything had happened.

'You don't know,' said Alain, clapping his hand to his head in a pantomime gesture. 'Perhaps I never told you about my superpower. You're going to be so surprised.'

Alain rubbed his hands together. May waited.

'I can speak Welsh, that's my hidden talent, my special thing. I can't believe I didn't tell you before, but I guess I didn't?'

'Really?' said May. 'Proper Welsh? But you come from Sevenoaks, we went to see your nan there.'

May was surprised. Surely it would have come up before, a whole language? She wanted to believe him, but it seemed so strange. They had talked about languages, and swapped stories of German and French exchange visits, and he had never mentioned this hidden talent.

'So the lady isn't buying it. Have I ever lied to you? So disbelieving for one so young. Well, maybe not so young, but…'

May felt unreasonably upset. She hated any mention of her age, absolutely hated it, and now she felt stupid as well. Of course it was true that he spoke Welsh, why would he lie to her?

'Oh May, I didn't mean to upset you, I was just joshing, come here.' Alain sat down at the kitchen table and pulled May on to his knee.

She wished that she wasn't so emotional, so girly, so weak. She hadn't been like this before she got pregnant, she was sure she had been tougher. Why couldn't she just ask him why he had hidden it from her?

'Oh lovely girl,' Alain said, followed by something in a lilting language that May presumed must be Welsh. 'See, I can still do it! I was at university in Wales, you know that, a little college in Lampeter, and Welsh was on offer to all the students there. There weren't many English students, in fact hardly any, I don't know quite how I ended up there but I did and I took the Welsh option and I loved it. And now I've got a job from it and it's such a good start for us. It's with the Welsh Film Board. I bet you never even knew there was such a thing, did you? Go on, admit it. But there is, and I'm going to be one of their translators. They have a small team, you see, who translate the major new releases into Welsh. They either oversee the dubbing process, or they write subtitles. It's a dream of a job and that's not even the best bit.'

Alain turned to May. She could see the excitement shining in

his eyes.

'What is the best bit?' May asked. It must be a pregnancy thing, she thought, some altered reality thing that made her feel as though she was playing along, as if none of it was true.

'I'm glad you asked that,' Alain said, 'very glad indeed. It's as though you could read my mind, thank you, missus, lady with the lump, you're a picture of beauty even when you're stirring the mince. I'll tell you, seeing as you asked so very nicely. There's a flat with it, that's the best thing. Look, I've got all the details here.'

Alain reached into the bag by his side and pulled out a sheaf of papers and photographs. May stood up, conscious of how heavy she must feel on his lap. He handed her the papers and May gasped. The pictures were amazing. May could see a large house with a long driveway set amongst trees. She had been so worried about where they would live when the baby was born. The panic she felt had increased with every week of her pregnancy, until it was there all the time like a malevolent parrot attached to her shoulder. May felt the weight of it lessen.

'That's it, merry May, that's the Welsh Film Board house. And our flat is inside, imagine! There's a Land Rover that everyone can use to get to the end of the driveway, and from there it's only a few minutes into Bangor, it will be such a great place for the baby to grow up, May, imagine.'

Wales. May had spent a seaside holiday in Wales once, in a caravan. She had always wanted to go back. Just the word

conjured up pictures of sunny beaches and picturesque hills. Compared to Hull, it sounded like paradise. She looked again at the trees and the big, friendly-looking house.

'Will it matter,' she said, 'that I don't speak Welsh? I mean, if everyone else does.' May trailed off, painfully aware of how boring she must sound. She wasn't good at languages, Alain knew that.

'I'll learn, of course,' she said, trying to sound more together, less pathetic, 'I'll pick it up, I'm sure.'

'Oh darling, you will, you will, and we can bring the baby up to be bilingual, maybe call her Myfanwy or Glendower.'

That's going a bit far, thought May, I'm not sure about that at all. She would have liked to say something about the names they had already chosen, but Alain was so excited and really, he was right, it was a great opportunity. A flat in a big house, with trees and grounds and space for the baby, no housemates. May could hardly eat for excitement. It was going to be OK.

Later that evening, after *Mastermind*, May snuggled up to Alain on the rickety sofa. He was knitting, following a pattern he'd made himself.

'I love you because you knit, do you know that?' she said. It was true. May adored the fact that he knitted, loved the way his mouth pursed as he was tackling a difficult part of a pattern. The little creatures Alain had knitted for the baby marched across the mantelpiece in a line. There was Pooh, Christopher Robin, Eeyore, Tigger, four hedgehogs and a family of dogs with

sticking up ears.

'The baby will love them, and I love them,' she said. 'Tell me a story.'

'Ah, well, Eeyore, there, he loves babies. Not to eat, you understand, he loves to wash them and feed them and generally look after them. It's his thing, his private passion.'

'Like speaking Welsh,' May said.

'Yes,' said Alain, 'exactly like that. Only more difficult to follow through, because at least a person can speak Welsh in their head, or to a wall or a dog. But looking after babies, well, you need a baby for that. Eeyore tried to get his hands on one, but no one would trust him. "You're too damn miserable," they said, "it'll rub off on the baby." One of his friends, I think it was Tigger, bought him a doll, a little woolly baby he could practise on. Do you think that worked?'

'No,' said May, 'I think Eeyore would have wanted the real thing.'

'Spot on,' said Alain. 'You couldn't pull the wool over Eeyore's eyes, if you'll pardon the pun. He was so sad. All the creatures with babies kept away from him; they still saw him on adult occasions, obviously, nights out, that kind of thing, but at home he was alone, and he longed for a baby and a family of his own.'

'Didn't he want a wife as well?' said May.

'I'm not sure about that,' Alain said. 'I think he thought he wasn't good enough, wasn't worthy of a wife. He had terrible depression, you see, and I think he thought that only the love of

a baby would cure it. Hang on, I've got to concentrate here, this bit is fiddly. It's the tail.'

'Let me see,' said May. 'Oh look, it's a tiny Eeyore, I didn't realise, it's so sweet, is it his baby?'

'It is,' said Alain. 'I thought I'd give him what he wants.'

I'm happy, May thought, he's a sweet man. It's normal to have little niggles.

'Do you think it will always be good?' May said. 'I mean us, our relationship, will we always be happy like this?'

She stretched out and patted Alain's head.

'No,' Alain said and for a moment May's stomach clenched, 'it'll be better, I promise, even better than this. We're never going to need anyone else.'

May wondered for a moment about friends. Surely we'll need other people sometimes, she thought, friends with babies, that sort of thing.

'Just us, merry May,' Alain said.

CHAPTER THREE

October 2017

Lewisham

The door across the corridor has been closed for days. Whoever he is, he likes his privacy, that's clear, although sometimes I get this prickly feeling. In the back of my neck, as if I'm being watched. I look out when I can but there's nothing much to see from my room except passing ghouls leaning on sticks or walking frames or being pushed like babies. There are

trolleys, of course, and if I could talk I'd try some conversation openers about them. Trolley dolly, I could say, or, have you got any gin on there? I used to know a whole song about hostess trolleys but I can't get it out, even when I try really hard, one word at a time. I wouldn't mind how it sounded if I could just say something. I read about someone once, had a stroke and when they started speaking again, they had a Russian accent. I'd even be happy with a Hull one.

It was an odd place, Hull. Always an ill wind blowing. An east wind off the sea. I'm glad I've ended up here. The Thames, that's my idea of a river, you can keep the Humber. Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner, I try to sing when they bring the lunch. It's a small token of identity but that Kelly, I really do not like her, she holds my good hand down where I'm trying to make it conduct the imaginary band, and stuffs a spoonful of soup in my mouth. I hate soup. Food is food and drink is drink and let's not get the two things mixed up, that's what I say. What I used to say.

Jenny understands me sometimes. She's the only one who does, and she doesn't seem to mind about the spit thing. She leans in close, listens hard and then answers me. I've never been so glad to see her as I am these days. She comes most evenings, after work. She's a teacher, my Jenny, like I was. It must be genetic, I tell her, only that always makes her frown and I think it's because she doesn't like being compared to me. I can't blame her.

We're doing an autumn display for the assembly hall, she said last night, leaves hanging from coloured hoops and some big

firework paintings.

She used to love fireworks when she was little, my Jenny. All the kiddies did. The smell of burning and the excitement, choosing all the little fireworks one by one and imagining what they would be like on the night. All fakery, all up in smoke but she liked it.

Bonfire? I tried to say, then just, fire?

I'm sure she understood. I'm sure she knew that I was asking to go to see some fireworks, in my chair. I saw the shadow pass across her face and I read what was behind it. Please don't ask me to do more than I can do, it said. I wished I could say more, maybe beg her to take me. She would probably have given in in the end, she's weak like that, but I wasn't going to get carried away. Not for a stupid firework display, with its oohs and aahs and heads pointed at the sky till the necks hurt. I'm glad when Jenny goes home.

Hull Fair was always on in October. It probably still is. Such a big thing, loads of streets shut off and all the children bundled into their coats for the first time that year and eating candy floss. I went with Alain. We didn't have many dates before I got pregnant but for a little while afterwards we had some lovely ones. He used to say he was carrying the courtship into the marriage, or some such nonsense. I ate burnt cinder toffee, I remember the taste even now. I'd been sick a lot in the pregnancy, and I couldn't keep much down at all, but that toffee, it tasted like something magic. Angel food, as long as angels don't have teeth. He won

me a Womble, Alain did, throwing darts at a target. He always had good aim, Alain, and I was as pleased as a child with it. I hadn't ever done anything like that before, been to the fair with a boy. A man. I was as giddy as a girl.

I was older than Alain, but much less experienced. I'd spent most of my teens and twenties being the kind of girl that was asked along by other girls as a last resort. The kind of girl who went home on her own at the end of every evening out, unless one of her friends was extremely unlucky. A fat girl, if I am completely honest. A fat jolly girl with loads of pals and three similar navy blue dresses, worn in rotation. I see the fat girls now and they wear anything they like, bright pink leggings, crop tops, miniskirts, shorts. I don't know what I think about that, but I do know it wasn't a thing that could have been done in the early seventies. Fat girls bought their clothes from the fuller figure range at Arding and Hobbs, Clapham Junction, or Binns in Hull. There were Peter Pan collars and ruches and tucks that were supposed to hide the fat, only they didn't.

I did have a boyfriend once. Brendan. He was a bit like me, awkward and tubby so everyone thought it was the best match, the cutest thing but he got handsome, almost overnight. That's how I remember it, one moment he was like me, waistband straining and T-shirt too tight, and the next he was slim and tanned and could take his pick. He chose Cherry, picked her right away and I didn't blame him at all. It made sense to me.

I stopped being a fat girl in 1976. Summer 1976 to be exact,

when I started my teacher training year and everyone was singing 'Dancing Queen'. It wasn't my sort of music, but I used to put it on the record player every morning anyway, and I'd dance along to get my metabolism going. I was still doing it when I met Alain that Christmas, only I never told him. I was as slim as all the other young women by then, and I could see in the mirror that I was looking OK, but I couldn't believe he chose me. He could have had anyone.

I've put the song into my head now, like a fool. I try drumming it out with my good hand on the tray over my bed, that always used to get rid of it. I'm hoping to send the blasted song packing but instead I've knocked over the cold soup that was sitting on my tray. It's splashed all over the floor, the bed and even up the wall a little.

Kelly comes in. What have we got here, she says, what's this? She pulls the bed covers back more roughly than she needs to and I don't have time to make sure I'm decent underneath. What would happen if we all threw things we didn't like, huh? Who would do the cleaning up then? I didn't, I try to say, it was just that Abba song, that was all, I needed a drum roll but my hand wouldn't do it.

We don't need all that slobbering now do we she says, if you can't speak properly best say nothing.

By the time she's cleaned me up and settled me back into my chair we've used up at least half an hour. Even better, the head honcho, or shift supervisor or whatever they're called, she comes

in and has a bit of a go at Kelly.

Why are you doing that on your own, she says, you should have called for help.

I didn't want to take anyone away from their own jobs, Kelly says, but head honcho sees right through that.

It's not your decision, she says, it's policy and that's what we do here. She has a sniff in her tone that you could hear from across the river. But she's good with the patients, or inmates, or whatever it is we are. It's all, are you OK Mrs Beecham and I try to say, Ms, but she takes it as a yes.

Splendid, she says, splendid, shall I get the girls to bring you some more soup? I shake my head at that one, don't even try to speak.

Fair enough, she says, let Kelly here know if you want anything else, won't you.

She isn't keen on that at all, Kelly, but she doesn't dare to be rough any more. She has a killer look when she puts the blanket round my knees, but it only makes me laugh. I've seen worse than that, I want to tell her, I don't scare so easily, not these days. You could probably get an axe murderer in here wielding his weapon and I wouldn't flinch. The old me, the fat sad little me that I was in my young life, she was scared of everything. Everything.

Jenny comes later, after school like she usually does.

I hear there was a problem, Mum, she says, a problem with the soup.

Soup, I try to say.

For a moment I've forgotten and I have no idea what she's talking about.

I forget where I am and think of soup, trickling down the walls, hot soup tipped over my head. Trying to wash the pieces out of my hair later.

No, I try to say, no no.

It's OK Mum, it doesn't matter, Jenny says and I'm back in the room, remembering the drum roll and the spilled soup. It's such a relief to know that no one threw it at me, I'm not in danger, it's all OK. I start to cry.

Mum I'll tell them, Jenny says, I'll tell them you don't like it, don't worry, it's OK.

She looks worried but I can't stop crying.

I don't like it here, it's all wrong. No one can understand me and I can feel the prickly feeling again, that tingle as though I'm being watched. I think it's the man in the room across the corridor, I'm sure it is. I can't tell Jenny, it would upset her but I'm sure I can see him out of the corner of my eye. He probably just sits there, watching, I wouldn't be surprised.

Can I come home with you, I want to say to Jenny, I don't like it here.

I can't get anything out now except stupid crying, but I'm sure she understands me. She looks away.

Please, I try to say, and I hate myself for doing it. I know she can't look after me, not with the toilet in her house being upstairs and anyway there's her ex-husband, she shares the house with

him, I can't go there. I know all of that but I don't seem to be able to stop myself.

Let's go for a little walk, she says, let's get out of this room and take in the sights. I'm on the back foot, pardon the pun, I can't really say no. I'm sitting in my special chair that pushes me up and out at the flick of a control button, then it's touch and go getting to the wheelchair. She's a strong one though, my Jenny, and I make the transfer without too much folderol.

Round the Cape of Good Hope? she says and it makes me laugh a little, out of politeness.

She's right, it is good to get out of the room. It crowds in on me, that place, squashes me down until I can't get my breath. I used to feel like that in the little flat in Pimlico when Jenny was a baby, but I'd forgotten it until recently. He's got his door shut, the man across the way, maybe he shut it when he saw me coming. She pushes me down the corridors past closed doors or worse, open doors with glimpses of old people's lives in them. Televisions blaring, little stick legs on beds or dangling from chairs.

They're not like people, I try to say, they're an alien race of stick people. Sick sticks.

Ssh Mum, she says. I know she'd find it funny if I could just explain it to her, I'd love to see a twinkle in her eye.

Come to the dining room, she says, just take a look, it's really pretty with flowers and fairy lights and everything. There will be a tree at Christmas, I bet it's a big one, she says as if the sole aim

of my life so far was to get to a dining room with a big Christmas tree. I don't bother to answer. To be honest, the struggle isn't worth it, even for Jenny. My words are on the ration, that's the thing, and to be used sparingly like eye drops.

Come on, she says, cheer up, I hate to see you like this, you're usually such a happy person.

I am? I think, really? I try to show her what I'm thinking by raising my eyebrows. I think it works on one side of my face. Jenny bursts out laughing.

Oh Mum, she says and she bends down to hug me in my chair. It doesn't feel right. I'm supposed to be bigger than her, that's how it goes with kids. Anything else is like dogs walking on their hind legs, or elephants playing cards. I try to tell her that but I think the only word she catches is elephant. She looks worried.

We sit there for a while, at one of the round tables in the dining room. Neither of us knows what to say to the other. She's right, they have made an effort to make it look pretty. Soft lighting, big windows looking out on to the grass, more like an upmarket old-fashioned hotel than a nursing home.

Who's paying for this? I want to say. Jenny has no idea what I'm talking about, so I make the sign for cash, rubbing my thumb against my fingers on my good hand. I don't want it to come out of her inheritance, that's what I want to tell her so I make a gesture to take in all the fancy lighting and the soft carpet that most of the residents can't walk on anyway.

Pish, she says, don't think about it, everything is fine.

How are you going to get away from that stupid oik of an ex-husband if I don't help you? I want to say. I make the gesture of a walking stick, and a little wobble. I put my finger over my lip and under my nose like a moustache.

Ah, Jenny says, you're talking about the walking stick again.

Yes I am I try to say, my movements getting a tad frantic. It's a walking stick I own, you see, it's in my wardrobe, it was definitely used by Charlie Chaplin and it should be worth something. I got it at an auction.

Hush now, she says, don't worry, I know where it is, the stick. Let's do a jigsaw.

I can tell that she's a really good teacher. The kind of teacher who is loved by the children, but never promoted. Different from me, softer and kinder. I hate jigsaws, always have, but for once I think I ought to do something to please her rather than myself. And it's calming, it really is. Looking at pieces, seeing whether they fit in, for a moment there's no room for any of the ghosts who usually patrol my head. The jigsaw picture is of sweets and chocolates from the sixties and seventies, and my mouth is watering like a burst pipe in seconds. Opal Fruits and Bar Noir, KitKats with the real silver paper, Butter Snap and Aztec. All jostling for position on the table in front of us. It's like it used to be, just the two of us only this time I'm the infant and Jenny gets to be the adult.

I've made a will, I try to say. I thinks she gets the word, will. I lodged it with Cate who lives next door but one, I want to say,

you know, the woman with the black car and the brown dog. I notice that even in the words I don't say I've been reduced to describing things by their colours. Cate, I could have tried, the woman whose husband died of oesophageal cancer two years ago last summer. As if I will ever attempt the word oesophageal again.

Don't talk about wills, Mum, Jenny says, talk about Crunchies instead and she holds up the missing piece of Crunchie wrapper like a trophy. We both laugh and she reminds me that on a Friday we always used to have a Crunchie bar to celebrate the weekend. I'm struck by remorse and I can't explain why. Was that enough, I want to ask, is that a happy enough memory to keep you going?

The fun goes out of the jigsaw for a moment and I try to sulk quietly. I have surrounded myself with the mundane, I think, and you are the unfortunate byproduct. I refuse to comment on the piece of Cadbury's fudge she holds up. She's hurt, I can tell she's hurt, and I didn't mean to upset her.

Only joking, I try to say.

I attempt to fit a piece of Galaxy bar into the jigsaw but my arm does that trick again of being out of control and swinging and the whole thing tumbles to the floor. All the pieces, upside down, all the progress we'd made, gone.

Sorry, I say, arm. I can't see how anyone could understand, it's just a shout.

That's OK, she says, you couldn't help it, it's only a jigsaw, don't worry.

But I liked it I think, I liked it and before I know where I am I'm sobbing like a baby again, crying as if my last hope had just died.

It's OK, it's OK, Jenny says, we can do it again, and she hugs me and I don't like it but I've made so much fuss now that even I can see I will just have to bloody well put up with it. Just a jigsaw, just a jigsaw, she says in my ear, and I remember a time when I said similar things to her, it's just a woolly rabbit, it'll be OK, never mind.

I push her away. No point making a drama out of a crisis, that's what I'd say if I could. I've always had a thing about clichés, tried not to use them too much but these days they speak for me. Least said soonest mended, that one works, too.

I try to rub my eye with my good hand and it's then that I see him. Like rubbing a lamp to make a genie appear, my eye rub has produced a man over in a shadowy corner that I hadn't noticed before. I think he's the man who has been watching me, I'm not sure. From the room across the corridor. There's something familiar about the tilt of his head.

Is everything OK? he asks, anything I can do?

Jenny replies to him civilly and they exchange a few words about the weather and the flower decorations, that kind of thing, and all the time there's something playing at the back of my mind. I know that voice, I think, I know that person with his head tilted just so, as if he has a list of questions in his pocket to ask the world.

Mum, you're shaking, says Jenny, let's get you back to bed. Did you see that nice man I was talking to? He seemed really friendly, don't you be flirting with him now.

I try to pull myself together. This is important, I think, this is no time to go to pieces. Think, May, think. It's like an egg and spoon race in my brain when I try to think in a straight line. A slippery egg and spoon race through mud, with a gigantic egg and a tiny spoon. The harder I run at it, the more it slips off. What was it about the man? Why did he seem so familiar?

Before we're even halfway along the corridor to my room I've forgotten the exact shape of the tilt of his head, and the way he looked at me doesn't feel so bad. I'm an old woman, you see, and I've started thinking about toasted cheese sandwiches and chocolate instead. I can't even keep the thread of my unease. It's still there, in the background. It's like one of those tiny figures in the distance in a painting by that chap, is it Lowry, I try to say his name to Jenny. I can see it, I know it's there, but I can't actually make out the shape. She doesn't understand me this time, I can see that.

She stops pushing me along the corridor and she bends down close and says, what's that Mum? Say it again. I catch sight of the lines around her eyes, close up they seem very prominent. Did I do that, I wonder. I put my hand up to try to stroke them away, it's an instinct but I can't control my arm at the best of times and this is the worst of times so I knock Jenny and she's bending anyway so I catch her off guard and she falls.

I'm so so sorry, I try to say, I was only, I just wanted to, I'm sorry.

It's OK Mum, she says, but I can hear she's fighting tears.

I wouldn't ever want to hurt you, I try but the egg has slipped off the spoon and into my mouth somehow and the words sound even more like rubbish than usual, even to me. Like the chorus of a bad pop song, over and over again with no meaning.

I have a sudden memory of Jenny learning to speak. She was such an earnest little thing. She tried so hard, as if someone had set her homework and she was going to be tested on it the next day. We had the TV on and it was Saturday afternoon, I remember. The presenter was reading the football scores. Liverpool one, Manchester United two, he said and every damn score he announced, she copied, with the exact same inflection in her voice and concentrating so hard on getting the shape of her mouth right. These days I would have videoed her I suppose, stuck it on Facebook for everyone to admire. Back then I just watched and marvelled and thought, I'm going to make sure things are OK for this child, I am going to keep her safe. Look at her now. Lined and lonely on the floor.

OK, I say, and my voice is suddenly clearer than it was by far. Go, I say. It's as near as I can get. What I want to say is, it's OK, you don't have to visit me here any more. Go off, travel the world, have a baby, rob a bank. Have some fun. I can't say it, only go, but I can see that she has understood anyway.

Mum, she says, getting up and brushing herself down, don't

be daft, I'm alright, you didn't mean to, everything's fine.

I'm too tired now or I'd tell her that everything isn't fine, and that something today has made me think of danger, I'm not sure what it is, and that she would be better off away from whatever it is that I'm too knackered to remember.

Go, I whisper again as we get back into my room.

She rings the bell for the carers to help me get into bed, it's too late for sitting in the chair now. I need to lie down and the tiredness is like a massive weight on my head. Go away, I don't want to see you any more, I think. She understands that one, and there are tears in her eyes.

I'm saying it for you, I think, I've always tried to do what's best for you, I'm not going to stop now.

I could come back tomorrow, she says, let you know how 5B managed their poems about autumn.

I want that more than anything, but there's danger somewhere and I can't remember where but there's something about a tilt of the head and a smiling face that terrifies me and the least I can do is keep her away.

I'm tired, I try to say as the night duty carer helps me into the hoist, and I am, I'm tired, she must see that. Stay away, I think, let me rest, bloody Crunchie bars.

Don't worry, the carer says. I think it's Mary, the nice Irish one. Don't worry, she says, she doesn't mean it like it sounds, it's the brain injury talking. Why don't you just stay at home for a day or two so that you can catch a rest as well? That way, when

you come back everything will be like shiny new again. She'll be pleased as punch to see you.

I keep my head hanging down, don't look up or she might see I'm crying.

What was it, I remember thinking just before I went to sleep, what was the danger? Tilt of the head, that's the echo back, tilt of the head, rhyming with dead.

CHAPTER FOUR

October 1977

Hull

May looked at her reflection in the department store window and smiled. She didn't have a long mirror at home, and she couldn't help being surprised every time she saw how big she was. She had worked hard to stay slim, and in that time her life had changed beyond recognition. Husband, baby, a whole life that had been waiting for her. She hoped she hadn't jinxed things by getting fat, even though it was for a good cause, even though she was pregnant. May didn't know any other pregnant women, so she wasn't sure whether she was unusually big, but she thought she might be. She was the kind of huge that made perfect strangers at bus stops smile at her, or feel entitled to stroke her pregnant stomach as if it belonged to them. May felt like a massive insect full of eggs. It was difficult to believe that there was only one baby in there.

'Looking good,' May heard someone say. She realised that the woman was speaking to her. She turned from her reflection.

'Oh gosh, yes, I'm sorry, just can't quite get over myself, you know?'

The other woman laughed and May noticed that she was pregnant too, but smaller.

'You too,' May said, 'welcome to the club!'

'Literally,' said the other woman.

She looked younger than May, taller and with a more graceful bump.

'I like your bump,' May said. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. No offence meant.'

'None taken,' the woman said. 'In fact I think from now on I will only allow comments on my bump from women, and specifically, women who are more pregnant than me. It's a good rule.'

May laughed. It must be lovely, she thought, to be as confident as that, to be able to make jokes with complete strangers.

'I'm Helen,' the woman said. 'Pleased to meet someone else who might be as bonkers as I am. Do you ever wonder why you're doing this?' Helen pointed to her pregnant stomach.

May laughed. 'Only about every five minutes,' she said. 'I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm happy and all that but…' May's voice tailed off as she wondered if she had spoken out of turn. She looked down towards where her big feet would be if she could see through her stomach. Typical, she thought. I've been longing to talk to someone else who's pregnant, and when I do I mess it up. No one likes a moaner.

'Hey,' said Helen, 'maybe we should stick together. Safety in numbers and all that. I know how you feel. I think it's normal, in fact I'm sure it is, I read it in a book!'

May felt as though she wanted to cry. Pregnancy hormones, she thought.

'Have you got much ready for your little one?' May asked. 'Only it's difficult to know how much we're going to need, isn't it? Some books say twenty babygros, others say twelve.'

Helen threw back her head and laughed.

'Twenty!' she said. 'I reckon these books are funded by the babygro industry. Mine will be wearing nighties anyway, I've made them myself.'

'Oh, me too,' said May and the two women smiled at each other. May thought how lovely Helen was. She was dark skinned, possibly Asian, with long black curly hair. Even pregnant, she shone out as something rare in the litter-flying grime of Hull city centre. Beautiful, like a lizard from a beach landscape or a fire in the distance. May blushed at her silliness for thinking such things.

'You really do suit being pregnant,' May said.

Helen laughed. 'Well I'm never going to be pregnant again,' she said, 'so maybe I should have a photograph taken. I haven't got any pictures, and I can promise you, this little one is going to have absolutely no brothers or sisters.'

'A dog?' said May. 'I was thinking, for mine, maybe a dog might be company for her.'

‘For her?’ said Helen, raising her eyebrows. ‘So you think you know the sex then? Have you done that wedding ring test, where you loop the ring on a hair from your head and dangle it over your belly to see which way it swings?’

‘I have not,’ said May, ‘and if you’re asking me that, I know you’re not the rational woman I thought you were a moment ago. Sometimes I think she’s a girl and I say her, sometimes a boy. Today she’s Amelia or Rose.’

They both laughed, and May felt an unfamiliar warmth, a sense of camaraderie.

‘I’d ask if you want to come for a cup of coffee, in Binns,’ Helen said, ‘but coffee is out of my budget right now.’

May was happy that the hike in coffee prices had not just affected her. She had been so lonely recently, she had started to believe that everyone else was still swilling coffee like they used to, and that she was the only one who had had to give it up.

‘Tea it is then,’ said May.

May was excited. She hadn’t realised how much she needed someone to talk to, and Helen was the best company May had met in a long time. The only company.

‘I should tell you,’ Helen said as they sat down in the department store cafe, ‘I’m a lone mum, I’m on my own with this one, a single mother, I think that’s what the papers say.’

May wondered for a brief moment what that would be like.

‘You’re brave,’ she said, ‘I don’t know how I’d manage without Alain.’

'I guess you're one of the lucky ones,' Helen said. 'A good man and a straightforward life, well done you.'

Helen sounded as if she meant it, as if she really was pleased for May. May felt embarrassed at her good fortune.

'Maybe I can help,' May said. 'You know, when your little one is born. Many hands make light work and all that stuff.'

Anything, she thought, I'll do anything to have a friend.

'Ha,' said Helen, 'tell me that again when you've had that baby. Have you ever looked after a baby?'

'I babysat for the vicar's little boy when I was a teenager,' May said. As soon as she had said it, she realised how silly she sounded. As if looking after someone else's child for a few hours would be any kind of preparation. And vicar – how prim did that make her sound?

'I mean…' she said and both women exploded with laughter.

'I'll know where to come for advice if this lump of a baby has any spiritual queries,' Helen said, 'seeing as you might have a direct line.'

'Oh my goodness,' said May, 'I'm not, I mean I don't know why I said that, but please don't think I'm some kind of religious nutcase.'

'Just because you said the word "vicar?"' Helen said. 'Don't worry, I think I'll let you off.'

May liked Helen more and more. Humour, she thought, she'd been missing that recently. And closeness to another woman. She wondered if it would be rude to ask Helen about her baby's dad.

What must it be like, she wondered as she stirred her tea, how did she manage the loneliness?

'I feel like we've been friends for a while,' Helen said. 'Isn't that weird?'

'No,' said May, 'it isn't weird, I feel it too. Maybe meeting when you're very pregnant is like meeting in wartime or something.'

May hoped that she didn't sound too ridiculous. Why had she thought of wartime? She was pregnant and happy, wasn't she?

'Exactly,' said Helen. 'When the bombs and the babies start flying, it's time for us women to stick together.'

There was an awkward silence as May tried to think what to say next. She didn't want to scare Helen away by being too needy, and she wasn't quite sure why it was all so important.

'We're moving soon,' May said, 'to Bangor. My husband has a job there.'

'Bangor?' said Helen. 'It's lovely there, I went for a university interview, gorgeous. You don't sound too happy about it though, surely you're not going to pine for the mean streets of Hull?'

May laughed. She couldn't trust herself to speak for a moment. She had no idea, none at all, why she felt so low. It must be a pregnancy thing, she thought. It was ridiculous to be so pleased to talk to someone else, ridiculous.

'We went there last week,' May said, 'and stayed in a nice hotel and everything. I didn't get to see the flat because I didn't feel well, but Alain did and he said it's lovely. Huge grounds and

everything, it goes with the job.'

Helen stirred her cold tea.

'Sounds lovely,' she said. 'Maybe me and Baby Lump here will be able to come to stay.'

'Oh yes,' said May, 'that would be amazing.'

May noticed that Helen seemed less bouncy.

'Are you OK?' she said.

'Yes, sorry, I'm fine,' said Helen, 'only I feel lonely, that's all, and hearing about your plans, I'm just worried. What if I can't do this on my own?'

May realised how thoughtless she had been. Typical May, she thought, thinking about yourself instead of other people.

'I'm so sorry,' she said, 'I haven't even asked about you. Is he involved, your baby's dad? Is he going to help you?'

Helen looked around as though she might find an answer written on the wall, or out of the window. May wished she could kick herself for being so thoughtless.

'That's a story for another day,' Helen said. 'Don't worry about me, I'm fine, I've got a politics degree and it would take more than a tiny baby and a stupid man to stop me. I'm going to be a writer. I've been on my own for about a month now and it's just fabulous. Honestly, I'm hard up but there's the dole, and the landlord at the local pub gives me the odd shift, cash in hand. No one tells me what to watch on TV, or what to eat. I never have to worry about anyone else, May. Imagine that.'

May found that she couldn't imagine that, not quite. It didn't

seem possible.

May thought about that later, when she was back home. Neither of the women had telephones, so she and Helen had exchanged addresses but May wasn't at all sure whether they would be able to meet again. Binns cafe, they had said, they would both try to get to Binns cafe on Friday mornings if they could.

'It'll be fine for me,' Helen had said. 'Fire, flood and pestilence permitting, I'll be here.' It was May who might have the difficulty, but she couldn't explain that to herself, let alone Helen. Still, even if they never met again, May thought that it had been wonderful to talk to another woman.

May put on the dress Alain liked and spent the afternoon cooking. A celebration meal, she thought, a Bangor special. She pushed Helen to the back of her mind, thinking that she would ponder it over later, when she was in bed. May didn't know where Alain was, but he'd talked a lot recently about going for interviews at schools, just to get the lie of the land. He hated it when May asked lots of questions, so she had no idea why he would go for interviews when he already had a job. May guessed he wanted to have a backup plan, in case anything went wrong. He was always so careful. He wanted everything to be definite, and who could blame him? If the Welsh Film Board would just contact them, to confirm starting dates and so on, May was sure Alain would feel much more secure.

May could tell from the slam of the door as Alain came in that

things had not gone to plan.

'Hi, darling,' May called. 'How did it go? Would you like a cuppa?'

'No thanks,' he said. 'Not in the mood.'

May wondered if it was something she had done. She checked the mugs on the mug tree but they were OK, all pointing in the same direction. Alain was so tidy, he could get really upset when she just threw them on any old way. May pushed her hair back with her arm. Alain did not seem his usual self at all. He picked up his knitting from the table, shook his head and put it down again.

'Leave the cooking, May, turn it off. We need to talk.'

'But I…' May said. But I've been cooking for an hour, she wanted to say, it's a meal you like, and I haven't been eating recently, I was looking forward to it too. It will be horrible heated up later.

She looked at Alain's face. I'm so selfish, she thought, fancy thinking about myself and my fat stomach when he is so worried.

'OK,' she said, 'let's go upstairs to the living room. The students are in but they're up in their attic, with their music. It's more comfortable upstairs and I've been standing for a while.'

'No,' said Alain. 'I'd like to talk down here. I'm fed up with wondering whether they're listening to me every time I say anything.'

'OK,' said May. She felt wrong-footed somehow, as if she had been caught out.

'While we're talking about stuff that annoys us,' said Alain, 'maybe we should talk food.'

Are we, thought May, is that what we're doing? Where did this come from? May didn't want Alain to know how upset she was, it would make her seem so childish.

'OK, fire away,' she said, trying to sound amused.

'I don't want to be rude,' Alain said, 'but could we eat something that isn't from the bloody Paupers Cookbook? If I eat another recipe made with cheap cuts of meat and tinned soup I think I'll be sick, honestly.'

May tried to smile. She should have known, she thought, she really should have known that her cooking was completely disgusting. She was trying to cook on the cheap, that was the thing, and May wasn't sure that Alain realised how hard up they were.

'I'm sorry,' she said, trying to keep her voice steady. 'Seems reasonable to me. I'll try some other stuff.'

'I think it's better if I take over, don't you? Leave you more time for whatever it is you do in the daytime.'

May felt stung.

'Al,' she said, 'Al, don't be like this, I'm sorry about the surplus of mince, honest I am, but you're not going to have time to cook when you're working.'

'And that's another thing,' Alain said, 'the job, it didn't work out.'

'The Welsh Film Board?' said May. 'Oh Al, I'm so sorry, you

must be upset.' She moved towards Alain, instinctively wanting to comfort him, reassure him that she still cared about him. Alain stepped back, held his arms out as if to ward May off.

'No need to get maudlin,' Alain said, 'no point talking about it, these things happen. They lost their funding, that's all there is to it. I'm back in the market for a teaching job and that's that. I'm sure one will come up.'

But what about the flat, May wanted to say, what about the money I paid for the hotel when we went to Bangor? They said they were going to refund it; will they still do that? And if not, how will we cope? She didn't say anything. It wasn't the right time. Alain's face was set, he looked hard, like a person she hardly knew.

'We'll be OK, Al,' she said. 'We have each other, and the baby.'

It was the best she could come up with, but as soon as May had said it she knew it was the wrong thing. Alain looked at her in a way that made her shiver. She put her hands on her stomach as if she needed to protect the baby.

'Really?' Al said. 'You're sure of that, are you?'

May concentrated hard on trying not to cry. It's just those pregnancy hormones making things seem worse, she thought, it's all fine, just a little setback, that's all. Everyone has moods. Count to ten, don't say anything, keep your breathing even.

May could feel the tension in the room uncoil. It's getting better, she told herself, see, it was just a blip. Alain smiled and reached out to touch her arm.

'Hey,' he said, 'don't look so worried, it's all OK, something else will come along. I didn't mean to upset you.'

May felt as though the world had righted itself again, as though a comet that had been hurtling towards her, hurtling towards them, had changed course at the last moment. Perhaps it was all in my imagination, she thought, I'm ridiculous.

The students who shared their house came downstairs that evening. Alain usually liked to stay as far away from them as he could, but that evening he went out of his way to play the host. He cooked scrambled eggs for all of them and they sat together in the dining room.

'Isn't this lovely?' Alain said, beaming round the table. 'We should do this more often.' He balanced the plates up his arms like a waiter and brought them to the table.

'Ta da,' he said. 'Look at that, I've still got it.' Alain did a little twirl and sang, 'I did it my way.'

May caught a look between the two students. They obviously found him funny. May felt protective of him, annoyed with them for being so immature. They didn't like him, that much was obvious, and he had tried so hard, it wasn't fair. What did they know? They were both practically still teenagers. Both with long hair parted in the middle, and both hardly able to keep their hands off each other for long enough to eat the meal Alain had prepared. May felt so angry with them that she forgot how much she hated scrambled eggs, forgot how the gloopiness usually made her heave. Alain must have forgotten that too, she thought,

hardly surprising when he had so much to think about.

May looked up from her plate and saw that the male student, Steve, was mimicking Alain's expansive hand gestures. Ruth, the young woman, convulsed with laughter and covered her mouth with her hand to keep her food in. May looked at Alain and saw that this time there was no doubt that Alain had seen it. He looked crestfallen and May's heart went out to him.

'I'm feeling tired, Al,' she said. 'It's been lovely, eating together, but maybe Steve and Ruth have got work they need to be getting on with. We don't want to keep them.'

'Ah, May is feeling tired,' Alain said. 'So we must all do as she says, eh, you two?'

He winked at the students. They shuffled awkwardly, hilarity forgotten. They were clearly almost as embarrassed as May.

'I only meant…' she said before tailing off.

'And there you have it, ladies and gentlemen,' Alain said. 'She only meant, and we her humble slaves can do nothing but obey.'

He lit a cigarette, picked up May's hand and kissed it.

'Your servant, ma'am,' he said, bending his knee to the floor with a dramatic flourish.

Alain laughed as though he had made a great joke and the students stood up. May stood still, trying to resolve what had just happened. Was he mocking her? Surely not, surely that was her being insensitive again, not getting it. He meant well, he loved her.

'Let us do the washing up before we go,' Ruth said. 'Come on,

Steve, roll your sleeves up.'

'No need, no need at all, it was our pleasure, wasn't it, May?' Alain said.

May nodded, not trusting herself to speak. The students went upstairs, but later, when May came down to get some water, she bumped into Ruth on the stairs. Ruth had a strange expression on her face and for a moment, May couldn't place it. She was back in bed and lying down before she realised what it was. Pity. She had seen the same expression on the faces of her mother's friends at the funeral. Poor May, they had said to each other, thinking that she wasn't listening. Poor May.

CHAPTER FIVE

November 2017

Lewisham

It's not quite as bad here as I thought it would be.

Don't get me wrong, it's not a holiday camp, not even a rubbish one like the place in Filey I took Jenny to once, but it's not Holloway Prison either. I've been getting out of my room more, that's what's made the difference. Socialising with the other residents, they call it. Like in prison. I can't actually talk to them, of course, they wouldn't understand me. We're in a different kind of prison here, I'd tell them if I could, imprisoned by our own bodies. They've ganged up on us, our bodies, and got their own back for all those years of abuse. That strikes me as very funny and I decide to practise saying it, in case I get a chance. Timing, that's the key, if you're going to make a joke you have to make it

at the exact right time to get them laughing. I might have enjoyed being a comedian, only my life wasn't very funny and anyway I didn't think of it till recently. It's a bit late now.

We had a meeting the other day, all the residents in the dining hall. What a sorry looking lot. Missing legs, arms that wouldn't move, bent spines, heads that couldn't look up. If you scrapped us all for body parts you'd be hard put to make one decent whole one. Anyway, one of the carers, ('call me Siobhan', if you please. I would if I knew how to say it, I want to say), one of the carers says, we want to hear from you guys.

Guys, I thought, aren't we mostly gals? I don't understand why the young ones aren't protesting more about that. In my day it was 'man'. Everyone said 'man', as if it meant woman as well, and we all said, don't call me man, I'm a woman.

She said, guys, we need to hear from you about what you want to do, recreation wise. Cocaine, I tried to say, that's a recreational drug, but they can't understand me, even on a good day, so I can say anything I damn well please.

Knitting, one of them said, a knitting circle. That's not much good for me, one of the old men said, last time I looked I had a pair, and he looked down at his lap. As if real men couldn't knit. I get a picture then, little knitted animals lined up and it makes me feel tearful. How dare he say that. I can't believe this is the level of ignorance I have to live with, I thought, me, me who could recite the opening chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* if only my mouth would work properly. Knitting, I'd say if I could,

I'd like to learn to knit. I was always too clumsy, back then. Two left fists and neither of them fit for purpose, that's what Alain said the time he tried to teach me.

What about something that suits everyone, Siobhan says, what about bingo? She gets a bit of a cheer for that one, but there are groans as well and I'm happy to groan along with the best of them. Ooh, she says, that's controversial, I like a bit of controversy. Bingo it is.

What about a letter writing circle for Amnesty International, I think, and I'd say it if I could. I wish I'd done more of that sort of thing in my life, made a difference for someone. I feel like I understand more about being locked up now that I'm in here. I wish someone would write a letter asking for my release. Free the Lewisham One, that's what I'd write on my wall if I could.

What about dancing, one of the young carers says, I've seen this research that says it's good for, good for. She tails off, as if we're going to be surprised at her calling us old people or people with brain injuries or whatever thing she was going to say. As if we didn't know what we were.

One of the old chaps gets up. He's tiny and neatly dressed. He goes to the front, bows and starts twirling round, bending and swaying as if he's at a Saturday night shindig. He stops after a while, he's coughing too much to go on. He's not bad actually, quite a sense of rhythm and we all clap when he's finished and he bows. You can see that Siobhan is getting a little bit cross.

Dancing, she says, well I'll put that on my list.

Pub quiz says someone else, a woman on the next table to me. That's a bloody good idea, I think, that could be fun. It's nearly Christmas, says someone else, let's have a card making workshop. Let's not and say we did, I think but Siobhan, she loves that idea. She actually claps so I guess it's going to happen pretty soon. I suppose it will be worth sticking some glittery trees on some folded paper so that I can get out of that damned room. I can send a card to Jenny, maybe cheer her up a little.

I'm thinking that the meeting is over, that someone will come and wheel me back, when one of the really old ones speaks up. Singing, she says, we could have a sing-song. She points at the piano over in the corner of the dining room. I hadn't noticed it until then. Nearly everyone likes that suggestion. They're all chatting away and I can hear a snatch or two of a tune. Everyone wants to say what their favourite is. Of course, most of them are much older than me. The Beatles, I want to say, Billie Holliday, Eric Clapton, Elvis Costello, what about some decent jazz. Leila, I think and the old riff plays in my head as if I have headphones. Da da dee dee da da da, la la la la la. 'May You Never', I want to say, my theme tune. But no one can understand me, so I keep quiet and listen to the sad old voices warbling about bluebirds and Dover or Tipperary. Surely we're too young for that, I think, even the oldest of us?

My my, Siobhan says, that's got you all going, I can see that you would all love a sing-song. Only thing is, we need to find some songs you can all sing, ones we all have in common.

Good luck with that, I'm thinking, but then this old one pipes up from the back. She's got a loud voice, not usual in here where everyone is aquiver and speaking like they're worried they might interrupt someone from dying. She sounds like a head teacher or a politician. What have we all got in common, she says, what's a thing that we all learned at our mother's knee? You have to be careful with that kind of language in a place like this, I'd like to tell her, a mention of the word 'mother' and the word 'knee' in one sentence and they'll all go stark staring bonkers. They do too, there's a dabbing of tissues at the corners of eyes, a sniffing and a sighing and a shuffling.

I don't know, says Siobhan, and she's speaking for me too for once. What have we got in common, she asks.

Nursery rhymes, says the loud old one, we all know our nursery rhymes and they're very relaxing. I don't know who for, I'd shout if I could. I wouldn't care who heard, who got upset. It's the worst idea I ever heard. I can't think of any way to convey quite what a bad idea I think it is. Bloody nursery rhymes? As if we weren't infantilised enough already, grown women and men – you wouldn't believe it if you hadn't seen it with your own two eyes. I'm expecting everyone to think like I do, to be horrified and shouting and telling the loud voiced one what she could do with her idea. I want them to rise up, to get some dignity in here but they're nodding. They're a bunch of those nodding head dogs from the back windows of cars, nod nod nod. What a good idea, I hear one of them say, and some old woman on my table starts

humming baa baa black sheep. I try to arrange my hand so I can give her the finger but she doesn't notice. I look up and catch the eye of a woman on the next table. She's grinning, and she mimes a little clap, so I try a bow but it may have looked more like a lurch.

I've noticed the woman on the next table before, and to be honest, I've been thinking that she looks like the most interesting one in here. It's her hair, that's the thing. She stands out in a sea of shampoo and set lookalikes. They're all grey and white and tidy and short. I'm not knocking it, I am too but she's different, this woman. She's old, maybe around my age, maybe even older, it's hard to tell, but she's got dreadlocks that reach halfway down her back. She's pretty too, pretty for an old one, and I wonder how on earth she's ended up here. I'd say she had a look of my lovely Helen, same confidence in her own skin. There's a spirited look I remember Helen having, that's the other similarity. A let the world go hang itself look, a don't bother me with your nonsense look. I can see it now on the woman at the next table. They're both their own person, that's the thing. Some days I still miss Helen. I smile over at the woman on the next table. I hope she comes over, I think, she's not in a wheelchair, she must be able to walk. I hope she comes over at the end when it's mingling time.

There's a bit more talk about knitting and playing cards but I've lost interest now. I'm thinking about the way she looked at me and smiled, as if we were the only two people in here who would understand what nonsense it all was. I try to look interested

in it all, just in case she's watching me. I try not to look at her but I can't help sneaking a peek from time to time, I'm only human. She tilts her head in a way that makes me think of someone else but I can't remember who.

Just at the end, when it's all being wrapped up and the carers have come forward to disperse us, take us to our various perches and give us a cup of something and a biscuit, they bring in another old chap. He's in a wheelchair and he's a bit slumped so I don't recognise him at first but when I look again I realise that it's the old man from the room across the corridor from mine. He's changed. He looks like his head won't stay up but there's still something about him, I don't know what, that gives me the absolute creeps. I've got a feeling that I'd like to go over there and slap him, which surprises me because I'm not often the slapping kind. Especially someone who looks so poorly. Bill couldn't come to the meeting, his carer says, Bill's been having his physio, what did we miss. She says it in that sarky way, you can tell she's only saying it to get attention from the other staff. There's a clucking of ladies, the ambulant ones, and one of them even gets up and goes to fiddle with Bill's blanket.

I don't like the look of him, that's the only way I can say it. Something wrong, something amiss, and I was enjoying myself, he's one of those people who spoils things, I can tell that. I take my eyes off him, the poorly spoiler man, and look back at my new nearly friend on the next table. She looks at me, looks over at him and makes an, aww face, a shorthand face for, oh, look at

him poor fellow. I make the face back, or a version of it anyway. One side of my face still doesn't move, so I'm surprised that she can interpret it but she does, and when the meeting breaks up she comes over to me, not him.

Hallo, hallo, she says, I haven't seen you around much in here.

I point in the direction of my room, to show her I mainly stayed there until recently and, strange as it sounds, I think she can understand me.

I don't blame you, she says, this lot would drive you to drink.

We both laugh as if she had said something much funnier.

Nursery rhymes, would you believe it, she says, and I want to jump out of my chair. It's so exciting, having a conversation with someone new. If I could manage a word or two I'd be over the moon.

She doesn't seem to notice, she just trundles on as if it's absolutely normal, talking to someone who jerks and points and doesn't say anything recognisable. I suppose it is in here. I can tell she's educated. She's got a lovely way with words.

I'm sure they're not trying to diminish us, she says that, and something about no malice aforethought. I could listen to her all day but I don't want her to think I'm one of those vegetables, not like the others. I work and work on my tongue and the shapes, that's what the speech and language therapist told me, concentrate on the shapes before you open your mouth, feel what you're going to say. I miss the last things she's saying to me because I'm trying so hard and then it comes out, pops out like

my mouth has turned into one of those guns that shoots little pieces of cork.

Proust, I say, and I make a pantomime of reading and point to myself to show her that I've read Proust, I'm not like the others. I can see that she is nearly as surprised as I am.

Well done, she says, that's more than I have.

I'm relieved at that, because it's a lie, I actually never read Proust so I'm pleased that she won't be trying to talk to me about the plot. It's the kind of thing I would like to have done, that's all. I used to say it when I was young as well, and it's got me quite a lot of admiration, as well as dropping me into some sticky situations. I tune back in to what she's saying.

Poor chap, I hear her say, and she's talking about the chap in the wheelchair who just came in.

He was walking about only last week, she says, he's had a nasty bout of pneumonia.

I bet he's faking, I want to say. It's lucky I can't. What kind of a heartless bitch would she think I am? Only I mean it, his kind, they lie and they cheat and they are crammed full of fakery. I can tell from his eyes. He's looking over at us now and she's preening a bit, my new friend. It would be fun, like being at a Saturday night dance with a mate, if it wasn't him she was preening for. He looks bad, that's all I know. He looks like the smell that hits you when you open a packet of chicken that's way past its sell by date, sour and familiar.

My name's Jackie, she says, bunching some strands of her

dreadlocks up on top of her head and looping them so that they stay there. What room number are you, Miss Proust Reader?

I hold up three fingers on my left hand, twice.

Thirty-three, she says, quick as a flash.

I mime a little clap. I'm still worrying about the stupid Proust thing. I try to be more normal.

May, I try to say, pointing at my chest. I don't think she understands because she leans over to read the label on my wheelchair.

May, she says, lovely name.

I want to tell her I was born on the day the war ended.

Bye-bye, she says, is it OK if I pop round later? I'm getting tired, all this excitement, I need to go for a lie down.

She does look tired, too, bone tired. It happened quite suddenly. One minute she's chatting away as if she shouldn't really be in a place like this, the next she's like one of those wind up record players when it's wound down. Speaking more and more slowly. It's excruciating to watch.

I make a shooing motion to show her that I want her to go back to her room. She looks old, suddenly, maybe even older than me.

Thank you, she says, as if I've given her something. Thank you, Miss Room 33 Proust lover.

I feel sorry for the stupidity of my lie. It's not like I haven't read other books, I could easily have talked about them instead if I wanted to show off. Or I could have asked her something about herself, that would have been even better. If she gives me

another chance, I think, I'll act like the perfect friend. I'll act like someone that anyone would be proud to know.

Everyone is dispersing now, there's a carer helping Jackie, offering an arm, and Agnita comes over to me.

Time to go, she says, shall I escort Madame to her room?

She's smiling but I know she thinks I'm stuck up. It's a thing people have always thought about me, Alain pointed it out first, only it's worse now that I can't talk. It makes everything I do more important than it needs to be, as though I'm always showing off. I try to think of a jokey way to show her I'm nice underneath. I don't know why, but my filters seem to have rusted over so instead of sifting through what I might do and choosing, I do the first thing that comes into my head. I make a cap doffing movement with my good hand. Agnita doesn't look amused.

I'm sure there's no need for that, she says, I'm trying my best.

So am I, I think, so am I, only I don't get to go home afterwards like you do. Maybe it's not so good to fraternise, I think, maybe I was right first time, better to stay in my room and refuse to speak to anyone. Safer.

So she wheels me off, turning the chair round first so I'm facing the correct door. I hate it when they do that, suddenly turn you round without warning. It's like being on one of those rides at the funfair, the ones that spin you round and round.

Oi, I say. It comes out well, so I can't help being pleased, even though I hadn't intended to say anything.

Oh, Agnita says, pardon me m'lady, I'm sure I didn't mean

any disrespect.

She doffs an imaginary cap too, in an exaggerated way. I can see her in the big mirror that hangs over the door. She doesn't do it for me because she doesn't realise that I can see her, that's how I know it's not a joke. She does it for the other staff and I can see quite a few of them giggling away as if it's the funniest thing.

I'm embarrassed and sorry for myself. It's a horrible feeling, being laughed at, and it doesn't help to know that it's quite justified. I'll keep myself to myself from now on, I think, speak to no one and then no one has anything to poke fun at. Probably Jackie won't want to be my friend anyway. I slump a little in my chair. It's been a tiring morning, a mixed bag, and I just want to be back in my room.

Most of the others have left the dining room now. I'm still here because Agnita has stopped to talk to Sammy, one of the other carers. Sammy is pushing the poorly man, the one from the room opposite and they're so engrossed in their conversation, Sammy and Agnita, that our chairs end up next to each other. Me and the poorly man, side by side like we are in a ski lift or commuting on the 7.19 train from the suburbs. I've still got my head down. I've had enough socialising for one day, and I think the best form of defence is to keep on slumping, talk to no one. He smells a bit funny. He smells of old man.

Hello, he says and it makes me jump.

He's covered in blankets and nearly as slumped as I am. I wasn't expecting him to talk. His voice is croaky, like he doesn't

use it much and it needs oiling.

I try to look as uninterested as I can. There's something about him, I'm not sure what. Something that upsets me.

I think I'm in the room opposite you, he says in his rusty voice, we're neighbours. I've been unwell but I'm getting better and I hope we can be friends.

It's familiar to me, that voice, I almost recognise it. Best to keep quiet, I think, best not to say anything at all. There's danger in him, I can smell it and I can hear it and I can see it. He might look like a poor old chap with his blankets and his white hands clasped on top of the blankets like a baby but I know something else about him, I'm not sure what yet but I know something, that's for sure.

Drop by for a cuppa, he says, I don't get many visitors.

I bet you don't, I think. It's so hard not being able to say anything, and I feel so odd and there's something wrong and before I've thought it through I lean over the side of my wheelchair and mime spitting on the floor.

I suddenly realise Agnita is watching. There's a shocked silence and then she says, May, that's not kind, poor Bill, why don't you say sorry to him?

She's got a nasty streak, this one, Agnita says to the other carer, the one she was chatting to.

I know, says the other one, as if I couldn't hear anything.

You want to watch her arm as well, someone says, she's got a powerful left hook.

That's not me, I think, I don't recognise myself, that's not fair, I'm not like that. It's cruel, I can't even defend myself. I hate being talked about as if I'm not here, and I hate unfairness and people being mean, and I start crying even though I don't want to.

Oh, now we've got the crybaby act says Agnita, I think it's Bill that should be crying, not you.

We normally get on OK, Agnita and I, she's one of the nicer ones and this is too harsh, too unfair. I can feel the tears plopping down my face like a child and I wonder how long it would take me to die if I stopped eating anything at all. It's then that he speaks, this Bill character, this poor old man who everyone seems to adore.

It's OK, honestly, he says, leave her alone, she doesn't mean it. Look we're still pals, everything is fine. And he puts his pale old wrinkly old arm over towards me as if to shake hands.

Isn't that sweet, Agnita says but I look up at him and because of the position of our wheelchairs, no one else can see him and he's grinning, it's not a good grin, it's a grin that says hahaha got you now and I think I know that grin. I just need to concentrate, remember where from.

CHAPTER SIX

November 1977

Hull

May couldn't imagine life before the weekly meetings with Helen. Helen understood her, accepted her for who she was.

'I'm so glad to see you,' May said on the third visit to the

department store cafe. 'I feel stronger now that I have you to talk to, less stupid. It's because you're in the same boat, or a similar boat or something, you know what I'm talking about. That's it, I think; either that or the fact that you never pick me up on the stupid things I say.'

'May,' said Helen, 'where's all this talk of stupid coming from? You're not stupid at all, and it's a horrible word. I think you're strong, and clever.'

'Yes, and maybe that waiter over there is Lord Lucan,' May said.

'I suppose he does have a bit of a look about him,' Helen said.

Both women laughed uneasily.

'A look of what?' May said. 'A look that he could have murdered his nanny, tried to murder his wife? Is it that easy to see?'

Helen stared into her tea.

'Aren't most men capable of it, if they're pushed, I mean?' she said.

'No!' May said. 'Certainly not my Alain, anyway. Do you know, he can't even bear to hurt wasps, he collects them in a glass or a jar and puts them outside, he doesn't like killing anything at all.'

Helen didn't say anything, and May could see there was something wrong.

'Never mind Lord Lucan,' she said, 'there's something wrong, I can see it, and I'm here if you want to talk.'

May felt like the most useless friend ever. She had hoped that she could talk to Helen today about the terrible business with the Welsh Film Board, but she could see that Helen had her own demons, and she should have realised that more quickly. Alain's right, May thought, I'm rubbish at empathising. I have Alain at home, and Helen hasn't got anyone, and I'm still putting myself first.

'It's probably nothing,' Helen said, 'and I hope it's OK for me to go on about it, but I'm worried. I think Frank has been hanging around. My ex, daddy dearest. I haven't actually seen him, but, oh, I don't know, it could be my hormonal brain playing tricks on me, I'm not sure. Only there seem to be little clues all the time, tiny things. So small that I'm never sure if I'm just imagining them. Flyers in the hallway of my flats, for a pizza place we went to together. But thousands of flyers, and yes, they could have been dumped, before you say it. But it's a coincidence, you have to admit. And there's also the flat itself.'

'What?' said May. 'Has he got into the flat? Surely not, Helen, oh no. How? What do you mean?'

'It's honestly probably nothing,' Helen said, 'and I'll scare both of us if I keep going on about it.'

'Don't worry about me,' said May, 'I'm not the one who has to live with it. It's you I'm worried about. And, for the record, I've always been a scaredy cat, my mum used to say I was frightened of my own shadow. You're much braver than me, honestly.'

May shifted in her chair. The truth was, the idea of her brave,

strong friend Helen being terrified was terrifying all by itself, whatever the reason.

'It would be great to talk it through,' said Helen, 'because the thing is, I might be wrong, it might be my imagination playing tricks on me, I don't know. All I know is, I've got a strong feeling, a really strong feeling, that Frank has been in the flat. More than a head feeling, it's a sort of gut feeling. Sometimes I think he leaves these stupid clues. One dead flower in the middle of the table, the book I've been reading moved from the side of my bed and put back on the bookcase, or once, in the fridge. That kind of silly stuff.'

'But that could be something you've done and then forgotten, you know, pregnancy amnesia, that kind of thing. I left my purse on my pillow a couple of days ago, then went out to buy milk.'

'I thought that too,' said Helen, 'right up until the dead flower. That was yesterday. It was a red rose. May, you either have roses in your home or you don't, and I didn't, there was nowhere it could have come from.'

'How could he get in?' May asked. 'And are you sure, about the rose, that you hadn't had some and forgotten to throw them away or something?'

'I didn't have a rose in the place, I'm sure of it. And I've been thinking about how he could have got in, when he'd given me back his key. In fact I've been thinking about little else. I've got a vague memory of getting a new one cut for him, months ago when I was first pregnant. He'd lost his. Now I'm thinking, either

that was a big fat lie and he never really lost it, or maybe he's found it again. Either way, it doesn't really matter, I'm in trouble.'

'Oh Helen, that's terrible, I'm so sorry. You could come to mine, only…'

'Hey,' said Helen, 'that's fine, I didn't mean that, I hadn't even thought of it. You're living in a shared house with a baby due any day, I didn't mean that. I could still be wrong, anyway.'

'Where will you go, if he turns up again?'

'I'll go to that hostel for battered wives, the one in the town centre. I went there the other day and spoke to someone. I'll be fine, don't worry. Let's talk about something else, this is creeping me out. What's new for you?'

'Ha,' said May, 'there's only one story in my particular town.'

'Let me guess, does it begin with Welsh and end with Board?'

May laughed despite her anxiety.

'How do you do that?' she said. 'How do you make me laugh even when I'm worried? It's a gift. You should market it.'

'I could be a comedian,' Helen said. 'Can women be comedians?'

'They bloody well ought to be. OK, I'll tell you what happened, at the risk of ruining the moment. The police called round last week, and apparently it's a crime, writing a cheque when you know you have no money in the bank. It's called, obtaining pecuniary advantage by deceptive means.'

May shuddered as she remembered it. There had been two policemen, just like in the movies, and they both seemed

impossibly huge. One of them had been kinder than the other. He seemed embarrassed that they had to go through the whole sorry process, charging her, arranging an appointment for her to come to the station, all that. The other one seemed to revel in it.

'Have you got a husband?' he asked. 'Only if my missus was out running up bills she couldn't pay when she was up the duff I'd have something to say.'

He's out, May had thought. He's out like he always is when I need him, and what's more I'm glad he's out because I couldn't cope with him being here. They didn't stay long, the policemen, just long enough to make May feel as though the whole house had been contaminated.

'I guess that little one in there,' the smug policeman said, pointing to May's stomach, 'that little sprog will put an end to your shenanigans. Either that or you'll train him to pick pockets.'

They both found this hilarious, but May felt angry enough to break walls with her bare hands. She wished that she could explain to Helen how odd her life had become.

'But the Welsh Film Board,' Helen said. 'Did you show them the letter that said they would reimburse you if you stayed in any hotel in Bangor? Surely that changes things?'

'I'm afraid not. I can't find it. I've looked everywhere. I was sure I put it in my tray on my dressing table. I'm quite organised about stuff like that, you have to be if you live in a shared house. Alain says I probably threw it away, you know, in a forgetful pregnancy moment, but I didn't, I'm sure of it.'

'I believe you,' said Helen. 'So what happened next?'

'Well I told them about the letter, obviously I did, but they just laughed and said a crime was a crime was a crime and that I had to have an official caution. Helen, it was terrible, I had to go to the police station for it and everyone was looking at me.'

'Did you go on your own?'

May nodded.

'You're bonkers, I would have come with you. And Alain, why wasn't he there?'

May flushed. 'He really doesn't cope well with the police,' she said. 'Honestly, I can see the way you're looking at me but it's true, he's quite sensitive.'

Helen snorted. 'And you?' she said. 'Aren't you a bit sensitive too? Did you even tell him, May?'

May hadn't told him, but she could see now how stupid that seemed.

'I'm going to,' she said, 'I'm definitely going to but I've got to wait for the right moment.'

My life has turned into a series of 'waiting for the right moments', she thought.

'Alain is quite, erm, stressed at the moment. He's finding it hard, all this waiting for the baby and not having a job that he thought he had and all that.'

May had thought that Helen might dismiss her worries but she seemed to understand straight away. She looked at May, really looked at her, and May squirmed, unable to meet Helen's eyes.

'Hey, it's not your fault. I know what you're going through, honestly.'

But mine isn't a complete baddy like yours, May thought. Mine can knit, mine can sing, mine can talk about poetry.

'I'm not saying Alain is as bad as Frank, not at all,' Helen said, as if she could read May's thoughts, 'but I can see that you're not at ease, May, that's the thing. You're not comfortable, or relaxed, and I'm still old-fashioned enough to think that those are things women ought to be, when they're, what's the common term for our condition?'

'Up the duff,' May said, thinking of the policeman, and the speckles of white foam at the corners of his mouth.

'Let's drink to that,' Helen said and they clinked their teacups.

May wanted to change tack, talk about Helen's problems. She felt that she had monopolised the conversation and she wanted to make absolutely sure that her friend was safe, but a sudden fierce cramping pain made her unable to think about anything else. This can't be it, May thought, not here in Binns cafe with my friend. It felt like a stomach cramp, as though she had eaten something bad.

'Helen,' she said, 'I think there's something wrong. My stomach. It really hurts.'

Helen put her hand on May's.

'Do you think you might be having a baby?' she asked, and as May looked up she saw the twinkle in her friend's eye.

No, May thought, no, this isn't how I planned it. I've got no

idea where Alain is.

'I can't start without Alain,' she said.

Helen laughed. 'Did anyone ever explain to you that giving birth is not like having a meal in a restaurant? You can't book it for a convenient time. Hang on here and I'll go to the phone box across the road in the station and ring the hospital, nothing will happen for a while, trust me, I've read every book there is. I'll come with you, if you'd like.'

May thought that she would like that very much. It would have been lovely to have Helen by her side, gentle and encouraging. Another pain bit into her and May wondered what on earth she was thinking. Alain had longed for this moment, prepared for it, read about it, and had a phone installed in the flat with the last of the money her mother had left her. The phone. That was what she needed to do.

'Please can you go to the phone box and ring the hospital *and* Alain?' May said. 'Tell him to meet me there? You could say we just met. Don't get me wrong, I'd love it if you could be there. Women's lib and all that. But blimey, Helen, he's even read the book. He's desperate to be there. Ow,' she broke off as the pain crunched through her. 'It hurts, I've always been a coward. Take no notice, don't let me scare you.'

May gave Helen a slip of paper with the phone number on it. Helen squeezed May's hand and took off for the phone box, leaving May sitting at the table. The contraction tapered off and May put her hand on her bump, surprised at how hard and solid

it felt, and how fast things seemed to be going. All the books had talked about gentle contractions at the beginning, time to get in tune with your body, easing your way into labour and things like that. This was more like a sudden onset thunderstorm. May didn't feel ready.

She was crying when Helen returned.

'I'm not sure I'm ready for this right now,' May said. 'Sorry, sorry, did you get through to Alain?'

Helen gave May a tissue and patted her hand.

'I did, and there's nothing to apologise for, nothing to worry about, my friend. We can talk about everything later,' Helen said. 'You make notes and tell me how it goes. You've got a job to do now, and you'll be fine, I promise. I'll be thinking of you.'

I'm not like you, May was thinking, even as her body screeched into gear, flexing muscles she hadn't known she had, I'm not on my own, I'm so lucky. Alain isn't like Frank, he's just having a difficult time. My situation isn't as bad, I'm not like you. I'm not a battered wife or anything, I've read articles about them and my Alain is an angel.

'It's all fine,' she said, hoping that Helen would understand. 'Alain will be here any minute, I know he will. He's an amazing man, so funny, so clever. He's a sensitive man. He knits. Oh,' May put her head on the table, trying to remember the breathing she had learned from her book, 'oh, this bloody hurts.'

'Maybe it would help if you stop worrying about Alain. Just concentrate, woman, you can do it.'

When May tried to put the events that followed in order later, she wasn't sure what went where. There was an ambulance, and a stretcher, and a solicitous manager offering free teas for a month, and Helen giggling at that.

'You're quite safe,' May remembered Helen saying, 'she's not going to be battering down the doors begging for a cuppa for a while, I think she's going to be busy, don't you?'

The manager blushed. 'A year,' he said, 'a year, I meant a year, have free teas for a year, and have a lovely day.'

Even May managed to laugh at that as the ambulance men wheeled her out of the restaurant and into the lift. She was sure that she could walk but they wouldn't let her. Nowhere in the books had it said that things would go this quickly. May wished that she could meet the authors of the books and punch them.

May didn't see Helen go. One minute she was there, the next she had gone, taking her comfortable, calming presence with her. May felt very alone.

It seemed ages before Alain came. May lay in the hard hospital bed and watched the clock on the wall move from afternoon to evening. The pain became a part of her, an extra limb, and she became so used to it that she forgot from time to time why it was happening.

When Alain arrived, May was surprised to find that she felt fairly indifferent, too busy with her body to be thrilled. He bent to kiss her and she registered a smell of the outside, of life beyond the walls of this small room. A combination of fried food,

unwashed skin and traffic fumes, and she wondered if he always smelled like that.

'Hey,' he said, 'darling, I'm sorry it took me so long to get here. There was traffic, and this old woman had dropped her shopping and I had to help her pick it up, there was no one else around, I'm sorry.'

May felt as though the pain had washed her clean, cleared her mind. She wondered which part, if any, of what Alain had just said was true.

'Does it hurt much?' Alain said, holding her hand and rubbing it.

Stupid question of the century, May thought.

'Not now you're here,' she said. She wondered if he would be able to tell that she didn't mean it.

'My brave darling,' he said. May thought that he sounded just as insincere as she did, as though they were both reciting lines from different scripts. She pulled her hand back and decided to be more honest. Maybe then they'd feel more like a team.

'You should try it,' she said. 'Lie down on the floor and get someone to drive across your stomach with a steam roller, like they use to lay roads. Make sure they keep doing it, every few minutes. Should be a doddle.'

Alain smiled and rubbed her hand some more. May forced herself to smile. Stop the bloody hand rubbing, she thought, and resolved to tell Helen later how annoying she had found it. It would make her laugh. She could see from the way that Alain

looked at her that he was expecting her to spare him by being quiet and stoic, and she knew that she had to try. It was important to get this right, she could remember that even though she was no longer sure why. She hadn't expected it to hurt so much. At the antenatal class they had told her to practise breathing while she twisted the flesh on her thigh and May was good at that, she could twist until her thigh was bruised, but this was way, way worse than a bruised thigh.

May had chosen to give birth in a small cottage hospital. She had wanted an experience that was as natural as possible, minimum intervention like in the books, and she tried to remember that, concentrate on it, make it happen even though she was frightened.

'Keep going, honey,' Alain said, 'you're doing so well.'

Am I? May thought. Am I really? Do I have any choice?

'I'm glad you're here,' May said, 'I really am. Just us and our baby.'

She winced as another pain tore through her. Maybe it would hurt less if she could stop thinking so much, go with the flow.

'You're so brave, my darling,' said Alain.

He loves me, May thought, he loves me and I'm having a baby. It's OK, everything is OK. I can do this, come on, baby.

He held her hand again and bent towards her.

He sang the song they had listened to as they first made love, and May felt stronger for hearing it. So what if they had some little problems, she thought, he was here with her when it

mattered. Another pain began, harsher this time, and May clung to Alain.

'No one said it would be like this,' she said. 'Why is it hurting so much? Do you think there's something wrong?'

'Here,' said Alain, 'let me put this cold cloth on your head. I'll tell you a story, if you like, about the animals in the Hundred Acre Wood. They all have babies too, you know, how do you think Piglet got born?'

May tried to relax, to go with the pains and listen to Alain's voice, so calm and familiar. She couldn't concentrate on the content of what he was saying, and he obviously knew that, because once or twice she realised that he was repeating himself. It didn't matter, what was important was his tone, so soothing. He stopped whenever the pain got too bad, and pressed the cold flannel to her head. If she had been truthful, she didn't much like that, the feeling of wetness seemed a little too much to cope with, but May didn't say. She was grateful that he was there, by her side at this special time.

'Anything you're worried about, just tell me,' he said, 'we can be completely open with each other now. This is the time of our lives, May.'

The time of your life, maybe, May thought. You'd feel differently if you were being squeezed to death from the inside out by an alien creature. Another rogue thought to tell Helen. She waited until the next big pain was gone before speaking again.

'Really?' she said. 'Do you mean that? Only I never

understood, about the Welsh Film Board, and why they didn't pay the money they promised, for the hotel.' May shouted the last word as another pain threatened to swallow her whole. There. She'd said it. Maybe it was the injection the midwife had given her, some kind of truth drug along with the pethidine.

'Hotels, money, what on earth are you talking about?' Alain said. 'Have you gone crazy? Do you want me to call someone?'

'No,' she said. 'It's the drugs, ignore me.' Not the time, she said to herself, not the time, not the time. It's all OK.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

May started to cry.

'Come on now, no need for waterworks,' the midwife said when she came in to check her progress. 'We're getting there, we're rolling along nicely. Bun's in the oven, almost cooked.' She laughed at her own joke. May held her hand out for a tissue and Alain handed it to her.

'I think it's just hard for her,' Alain said. 'We're new to all this.'

'Bless you,' the midwife said, 'what an understanding man you've got there, Mum. Don't you worry now, it'll all be over soon and you won't remember anything, you'll probably be back here next year having another one, you'll like this one so much.'

She went off, chuckling again at her own joke. May stared at Alain.

'Did she really say that?' she said. 'Tell me we're not doing this again next year.'

Alain laughed, and the sound was comforting. 'It's not that I

don't want a football team of babies,' he said, 'not at all. But it isn't me who has to go through all this pain, darling, so I'm am hereby and forthwith handing any decisions about future members of our family to you.'

May would have liked to laugh but everything hurt too much. She couldn't believe that she had been fussing over money, hotel bills, all that stuff. What on earth did it matter when she had this helpful, kind, loving man by her side? The pain was terrible and getting worse, and she couldn't deal with it on her own.

'I've been rubbish recently,' Alain said. 'I want to be better to you, and to the baby, honestly I do. I don't blame you for asking about the job, I'm just so ashamed that it didn't work out, that I couldn't provide for you. I've been feeling so odd, I can't explain it. I'm going to try harder, I promise I am.'

'It's OK,' said May. Her voice seemed to come from a long way away.

She raised her arms above her head and hung on to the bars of her bed head. It helped for a few seconds.

'May,' said Alain. For the first time, he sounded worried. 'May, are you alright? Shall I get the midwife back in?'

Alain started to cry. May watched, but found it difficult to connect now that she had arrived at a place where terrible, excruciating physical pain had suddenly become completely normal. She steeled herself and, with an enormous effort, reached out and took his hand. For a while it was just the two of them, concentrating and working together. May pushed all of

her other concerns to the back of her mind.

'I couldn't do this without you,' she said.

We're a team, she thought, together. Only once she thought she saw boredom in his face, but the next time she looked it was gone. May thought she might have imagined it.

'Come on now, darling,' he said as the pains got closer and closer together, 'you can do this.'

May realised that the midwife had come back in to the room.

'Is everyone alright?' she asked. 'Let's have a look at you now. Goodness me you've moved on a fair bit, and hardly any noise at all. You're a quiet one I must say.'

May felt grateful for the praise. See, she wanted to say, see, I'm doing this OK after all.

'I think she's amazing,' Alain said, 'I'd be terrified.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.