

'Definitely one for fans of Liane Moriarty,
Jojo Moyes and David Nicholls'

IRISH WORLD

The
DAY
I LOST YOU

FIONNUALA KEARNEY

Fionnuala Kearney

The Day I Lost You: A heartfelt, emotion-packed, twist-filled read

Аннотация

‘Incredibly moving, it’s beautifully written and page-turning’ Susan Lewis
THE DAY I LOST YOU WAS THE DAY I DISCOVERED I NEVER REALLY KNEW YOU
When Jess’s daughter, Anna, is reported lost in an avalanche, everything changes. Jess’s first instinct is to protect Rose, Anna’s five-year-old daughter. But then she starts to uncover Anna’s other life - unearthing a secret that alters their whole world irrevocably . . .
THE DAY I LOST YOU WAS THE DAY YOU TORE OUR FAMILY APART
The perfect emotional and absorbing story for fans of Jojo Moyes and David Nicholls.

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FIONNUALA KEARNEY



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Dedication

*For the strongest women I know – my daughters,
Kate and Jane, and my mother, Mary.*

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PART ONE

Prologue

There are always before and after moments. Profound instants when, one second, life is a clear, high-pixel image and the next, it's grainy, less focused.

The day it happened, the seventh of December 2014, had been a normal day – nothing unusual about it. A band of low Arctic pressure produced the sort of cold that froze my fingers through gloves and numbed my toes through sheepskin-lined boots. The winter sky – a perfect, crisp blue – was marred only by wispy white plane trails latticing through it.

Theo and I were on the Irish coffee stall at the Christmas fair all afternoon – the most dreadful baristas, unable to produce a straight line of cream along the top of the coffee and a little too liberal with the alcohol. It was the season of goodwill. Fairy lights flashed: home-made crackers with loo-roll centres were snapped; high-pitched carols were sung; crumbling, puff-pastry mince pies were trodden into the polished parquet floor of the school hall, and the heady scent of festive cinnamon and cloves filled the air.

I remember it being a fun-filled afternoon.

When I got home, I flicked the kettle on and turned the thermostat up. I sat a while, my hands wrapped around a cup of black tea, staring into the garden in the fading light, my feet tucked up underneath me. Much as I loved her, days without Rose were precious. I had so little time to myself that merely

sitting, *being*, just the act of doing nothing was a joy. Right up until the moment the doorbell rang, it's the 'ordinary-ness' of that day that I recall.

When the door pinged, I still didn't stir – not until I heard Doug's voice through the letterbox. Then I leapt from my seat.

'Jess. It's Doug. Can you open the door?'

I made my way to the hall, heard him moving about in the porch; foot to foot. *Doug has not come to my door for a very long time.*

From my jacket pocket, my mobile phone trilled. Seeing his number, I realized he would have heard it ring too.

'Open the door, Jess. It's important.'

I answered the phone and hung up immediately.

'What do you want?' I spoke through the four solid panels.

'I need to speak to you. Please.' His voice seemed to break on the last word and I opened the latch.

Doug, my ex-husband, the man whom I apparently 'strangled with my love' was standing there, shivering.

'Can I come in?'

I looked over his shoulder, expecting to see Carol, his wife, there.

'What do you want, Doug?' I repeated.

'Can I come in?' he asked again.

And that was the moment. I made the mistake of looking in his eyes; the cobalt-blue eyes that Anna, our only child, had inherited from him. One generation later, Rose has those same

eyes too. That was the split moment – between what was, and what would be. His next words tapped a slow, rhythmic beat in my head; each one etching itself on my brain like a permanent tattoo. And something happens when the body is forced to hear unwanted tidings; life-changing, cruel words. Adrenaline charges to the extremities, willing the frame to stay standing, despite the urge to fold; willing the heart to keep beating, despite the urge to snap into hundreds of tiny fragments.

My knees buckled at right angles – my entire body felled. An instant sweat oozed from my pores, seeping through to my fingertips. Fear choked me, as I fell into Doug's arms, as his familiar scent washed over me. And, in an instant, the world, as I knew it, was different.

1. Jess

Ten Weeks Later – Friday, 13 February 2015

I wake to the taste of salt on my lips. My eyes take a moment to adjust to the early morning light; my mind takes a little longer to realize that I've been crying in my sleep. With a glance at the neon clock by my bedside, my damp lashes blink. It's useless – I won't fall asleep again.

My limbs stiff, I climb slowly out of bed before crossing the landing to check the room opposite. She's there, fast asleep. I resist the urge to touch her, to rest the back of my fingers on her forehead. It's a habit; a throwback, I think, to when she had pleurisy as a baby and we failed to spot the temperature early.

Her breathing is soft, regular and rhythmic as a slow beat on a metronome, her chest rising and falling under the duvet. She turns onto her stomach, faces away from me, one hand stretched in a curve above her head, the other falling over the side of the bed. I take her arm and tuck it in beside her.

Next along the landing is Anna's room. I grab a pillow from her bed and, clutching it tight to me, take the stairs down slowly. Soon, the coffee machine clucks, promising my morning nectar.

I fill Rose's lunch box. It's the last day of school before the half-term break and something tells me she'll wake early, excited at the fact that today means no lessons, lots of playtime fun, not to mention the holiday ... School closes early, so it's just a snack;

just one slice of bread, lightly buttered and sliced in two, a piece of ham inside. Crusts removed. She hates crusts. A satsuma – the easy-peeling sort – and a bottle of water.

I stop my hands moving; wonder, if I turn the television on, will it halt the onset of what I just feel in my bones is a bad day. Before I know it, my hand is on a nearby photo frame. I don't even look at it, instead raise my arm and hurl it across the room. It takes on a Frisbee-like flight, landing, where I must have hoped it would, on a sofa three metres away. I walk from the kitchen to the other side of the room that stretches across the back of my narrow house. There should be a dining table here. Instead, there's a leather armchair and a frayed, unloved, tatty two-seater that Anna and I rescued from a skip with great intentions of reupholstering it. Slumping down into it, I run the palm of my hand over its ancient fabric, feel its bobbly surface. I reach for the tossed frame, clutch it to my chest, before releasing it to my lap – image facing down.

I pick up the phone and dial a familiar number. 'Tell me not to smash the photos. Remind me I would really regret it.'

'Jess, it's six a.m.'

'I'm sorry. Tell me. Please.'

'Ok-ay.' Leah clears her throat and I imagine her sitting up in bed, Gus grunting an objection beside her. 'Leave the photos alone, do not break anything; you will regret it.'

'Right.' I clutch the silver frame tighter. I don't need to look. It was taken on a camping holiday in France the summer Anna

was fourteen, the summer she discovered boys.

Leah tries hard to stifle a yawn. 'I would've called you in another hour.'

'I know.'

'Happy Birthday, big sis. You going to be okay?'

I giggle, a small ironic sound. 'Sure I will. I'm sorry for waking you. Apologize to Gus. See you later.'

I hang up the phone, stroke the back of the picture frame. Today is my forty-eighth birthday. It is also her twenty-fifth birthday. Twenty-five years ago, she shot into this world with the speed of a firing gun. But for a midwife with advanced catching skills, she would have flown off the bed, hanging by the cord that still joined us.

'Happy Birthday, baby.' I talk aloud, but there's no one there.

'Nanny?' I turn quickly. Rose is walking towards me, her arms outstretched. She seems to move in slow motion and I remember to take it in; to commit this image of her sloping towards me to memory, her curls all awry and bouncing as she moves. I bend down to her as she reaches me and pull her up to my chest. She puts her arms around my neck, her fingers lacing through my own twisting locks. And I'm cast back to when she was a toddler and she had barely any hair yet. What she did have was downy-fine and corkscrew. She would find mine and pull it, gently unravelling the coil, fascinated by the spiral twists. I was captivated. She was not my child, but through the twists and turns of shared DNA, we had the same twisting, turning hair.

And now, here I am, my fingers laced through her mane, massaging her head in a way I know she loves.

‘I had a bad dream,’ she says, gripping me tighter.

Me too. I dreamt that your mummy had left us. Every night I dream your mummy has left us. Then I wake up and smell her pillow and tell myself it was just a dream.

‘Don’t worry, love.’ I kiss her hair. ‘It was just a dream.’

‘Who were you talking to?’

‘Nobody, I was just talking to myself.’

‘Daddy says people talk to themselves when they get old.’ She pulls away and peers directly into my eyes. ‘Are you old today, Nanny?’ Her mouth smiles, yet it’s her eyes, lined by long curving lashes, that seem to laugh. The wonder of that almost makes me gasp.

I tickle her under her arms. ‘Cheeky,’ I say. ‘Not that old. C’mon, let’s get you showered before breakfast.’ She squeals and runs up the stairs ahead of me, shouting that she has a card for me. At just five years old, she has no memory that today is her mother’s birthday too and, all in all, perhaps that’s a good thing.

At the school gate, I’m joined by Leah, who sidles up beside me. After I’ve held onto the child for an irrational length of time, I let go, and together we wave Rose into school.

Before she gets to the door, she runs back to me and whispers, ‘Love you, Nanny.’

‘To the stars and beyond.’ I blow her a kiss and she catches it in one hand, then tosses it back to me and I tap my heart. It’s

a thing we have; something we started when I first dropped her at 'big' school. It's something Anna and I used to do when she was little too.

She darts off, her friend Amy linking her arm at the door to their classroom.

It feels strange for me not to join her, but having managed to wrangle a rare day off by swapping shifts with Trish, the other teaching assistant for Year Six, I'm not hanging around in case someone changes their mind. My break for the half-term starts now. From the yard, Finn, Theo's son, gives me a small wave. He's tall for his age, his head hovering above his classmates, and I can tell he's wondering why I'm still on this side of the gate.

'You checking up on me?' I ask my sister, as my fingers curl a return wave to Finn and I walk back to my car.

'Yep.' Leah isn't known for subtlety.

'I'm all right.'

She shakes her head. 'Don't be ridiculous, none of us are all right. Here ...' She hands me a small package and a card and I put them straight into my bag. 'I know you won't celebrate your birthday ... her birthday,' she says. 'But nor should we forget the day.' She reaches for me and gives me a squeeze. It's not a hug. Leah doesn't do proper hugs. I take advantage anyway and close my eyes briefly.

'Sean is picking her up straight from school, right?' she says.

I nod. He came around last night to collect her bag after she'd gone to bed.

‘It’s only for ten days. She’ll have a wonderful time with her daddy and it’s good that his parents are on hand to help.’

I pull away. The thought of Sean, Rose’s father, playing Daddy with her on holiday in some all-inclusive resort in the Canaries doesn’t fill me with the joy everyone seems to expect. He doesn’t even really know her; doesn’t know that she likes mini-yogurts after dinner; doesn’t know that she wakes up three nights a week calling for her mummy; doesn’t know that she likes to choose her own clothes every day; doesn’t know that she needs cuddles at night to help her sleep. He knows none of this.

‘He doesn’t even know her.’ I say it aloud.

‘He’s trying. Even before Anna died—’

My head snaps around. ‘Don’t.’

‘I’m just trying to point out that you and Anna together were a force of nature. Let him be her father, Jess. Rose is going to need him too.’

I wrap my arms around myself.

‘Let’s go for breakfast,’ she says.

‘No.’ I will her to stop talking, wonder why she’s not already on her way to work.

‘I’m sorry.’ She knows what she’s done. ‘I shouldn’t have said that.’

‘You shouldn’t.’ No one. No one is allowed to say that Anna is dead. No one. I don’t care if it’s denial. I don’t care if the chances of her being alive are nonexistent. I have no body to bury.

Leah reaches out, wraps her arms around my neck. ‘I’m sorry,’

she repeats. 'Today of all days, that was insensitive.'

'I miss her so much,' I whisper softly, then bite my bottom lip so hard that I taste metal.

'I know,' she says, her squeeze lingering, her grip unusually tight on my sleeve. 'I'm here. I love you.'

I don't tell her that it's not enough.

'Breakfast?' she repeats.

'What in Christ's name am I going to do?' I ask on the way back to our cars.

Leah shrugs. 'Just keep breathing in and out.'

'That's it? That's your advice?'

'You don't—'

'I don't what? Tell me, Leah. What is it I'm not doing? You have no bloody clue.'

I walk away yelling behind me, 'I don't want breakfast. If you hurry you can catch the nine ten to Waterloo.'

'Jess, stop. Wait.'

I'm already in the car, strapping myself in. She doesn't get it. She has never had children, and it has left her remote, detached from real life. As the engine revs into life and her form disappears in the rear-view mirror, I justify leaving her there in my head, even though I know I shouldn't have. I curse myself. She's doing her best. We all are, but Leah doesn't know what unconditional love is. Leah doesn't know how the pain of a missing child takes over and has a heartbeat of its own.

I drive the short journey from the school to home, and when I

get there try to busy myself with housework. On the way upstairs, I pass by a pile of Anna's shoes in the hall. They're stacked on top of one another. There are heels and flats all lumped in together – a knee-length suede, high-heeled boot embraces a brown brogue. I don't touch them. I'm afraid if I touch them, even move them to her room, that she won't come home. So, I leave them there. I try to forget all the times I shouted at her to remove her pile of crap from the front door. That's what I called them, these things of Anna's – a pile of crap.

In Rose's room, I Hoover the floor, which is covered in glitter from the birthday card she made. I strip her bed, find a few pieces of Lego in the sheets, and toss them into a large box underneath. Her scent lingers on the bedding and, as I make my way downstairs to the washing machine, past Anna's mound of shoes, I inhale it.

Downstairs, my phone vibrates a message from Theo. A firm friend since we worked together over ten years ago, he's someone I know I can trust with my mood today.

'Happy Birthday' seems all wrong. Costa at 12? X

I read his text and consider saying no. Theo's probably just on an hour's break from the surgery, and I should probably be more mindful of my state affecting another. But the thought of a long and lonely birthday stretching before me stops me doing the right thing.

It's exactly midday and he is there first, two coffees already in front of him, sitting in the booth to the rear of the café, our usual

perch for putting the world to rights. The scent of crushed, bitter coffee beans fills the air. It pokes a memory of the day Anna went missing, the day of the Christmas fair.

‘Before I sit down,’ I say. ‘One thing ...’

Theo’s eyebrows stretch.

‘I don’t want to talk about my birthday.’

The stretch reaches further, creasing his forehead.

‘Theo?’ I refuse to sit down until he agrees.

‘Okay.’ He pushes a coffee to the opposite side of the table from him and I slide into the booth. ‘So,’ he says. ‘How’re you coping with the fact that today is Anna’s birthday?’

My eyes close slowly.

‘What?’ he says. ‘You told me not to mention your birthday. You never said anything about not mentioning hers.’

I pretend he hasn’t spoken, take a sip of the coffee, make a face, then swap it. ‘Sugar,’ is all I say.

I want to talk but can’t. I want to cry, but only seem to be able to do it in my sleep. An empty but easy silence falls between us. It’s like that with us sometimes. We’ve been friends for such a long time that the quiet doesn’t scare us. Theo rubs his nose with the back of his hand.

‘It’s no easier,’ I finally speak. ‘I swear. Some days – it’s everything I can do to breathe.’ I’m reminded when I hear these words aloud how badly I behaved to Leah. ‘That line about time healing isn’t true,’ I tell Theo. ‘All lies. Time doesn’t heal.’

‘It will. Days like today will always be the worst.’

My head shakes. ‘Today’s bad. Yesterday was worse – the apprehension ... It’s like physical pain and it’s all over, every muscle, every nerve ending in my body.’ I grip the handle on the coffee mug so tightly that my knuckles whiten. ‘Before ... birthdays, sharing the day together, it was such a special thing, as if she always knew that *she* was the best birthday present I ever got.’

He sips his coffee, his silence letting me know he gets it, then deftly changes the subject.

‘Are you doing anything tonight?’

‘Dinner at Leah’s. Gus is cooking,’ I tell him. ‘But I’ll see how I feel. I’m not sure I’ll go.’

‘You look like you could do with a hug.’

My eyes dart around our local Costa. ‘No thanks, you’re all right. Granted you’re separated, but you’ve probably got half a dozen patients in here and you’re still a married man.’

‘Hmmm,’ he says.

‘What does “Hmmm” mean?’

‘Nothing. We’re here to talk about you. You want something to eat? You should eat. You’re all skin and bone.’

I refuse food. ‘How’s Finn doing?’ I have found it hard since Harriet walked out on their marriage to understand how she also walked away from their eleven-year-old son.

‘He seems all right. This is the first half-term where he gets parents sharing him. It’ll be strange. You spend more time with him during school hours than I do.’ His smile is half questioning,

but it's not something I'm prepared to get into – not today. Finn is not himself in school, seems attention seeking; but then again, that's probably only to be expected.

'Right. I should get back.' He taps his hands, palms down, on the edge of the table, then stands. 'You want that hug?' His eyes, the same colour as the casual khaki-coloured trousers he wears today, rest on mine.

We embrace. He holds me tight. I catch a whiff of his aftershave, and all I can think of is Anna. I close my eyes, pretend that this moment of closeness is with her; pretend that it's her scent – a floral, sweet one rather than a musky one – that I'm inhaling. I have to stop myself clinging to him.

'This time last year, remember the night?' he whispers.

I do remember. A crowd of us went out to celebrate my birthday and I ended up dancing on the table. It was a night for Sean to have Rose, and Anna had called to collect me in a cab after being out with her own friends. 'Taxi for drunk mother!' she had called into the pub.

'It's good to think of fun times,' he says.

Theo seems to know the exact picture I have flooding through my brain. He rests his hand on the top of my back and, for a brief second, I think he's going to say something profound, something that might make a difference – some insight into how I'm going to handle this all-consuming, exhausting, loss. Instead he says, 'It's shit, Jess. Nothing I say will make it better, but I will keep on trying.'

His remark's not profound but, somehow, it helps.

It's ten forty. I'm lying in bed on the night of my forty-eighth birthday. My mother has left two answerphone messages for me, neither of which I have felt able to respond to. My ex-husband sent me a text telling me he is thinking of me. My only sister is mad at me for walking away from her this morning and cancelling dinner tonight. My beloved granddaughter is in another country with her father and his parents. My friend's marriage is over and, though he still wants to help me, I'm not sure anyone can. It's Anna I want to hear from.

I snap a Valium from a pack Theo prescribed. Tonight, I need to sleep.

I'm floating on an airbed on a calm sea, rising and falling with the gentle ebb of the dark blue ocean – the colour of her eyes ... I recognize the beach from a holiday we'd taken years ago – Doug, me and Anna. She's there, on the sand, and she's waving to me. I'm so thrilled to see her that I slide from the airbed, begin to swim back to shore. All the while, she's laughing and waving, calling to me, 'Mama! I'm here!' And as I swim as fast as my limbs will allow, I'm crying, thinking, 'She's not missing, after all. Look! There she is, you can see her.'

I stop swimming, tread water for a moment, am frustrated as I don't seem to be nearing her. 'Mama!' she continues to call. 'Over here!' And then I see it, a huge sea of white behind her. It's moving quickly and I'm confused. How can a white wave be coming for her? I'm the one in the sea. When it swallows her whole, I feel

myself sinking underwater. As I fall, I tell myself she's still alive, but I know ... I know she would never have left Rose.

I wake, groggy. My face is wet.

I cannot cry, but every night I seem to swallow the sea and the salt water escapes through my eyes.

2. Anna

Raw Honey Blogspot 02/09/2013

I love to sing! Anyone who knows me knows it; whether I'm white-wired into my phone on a Tube full of strangers looking at me oddly, or doing my thing from the back row of the choir. I'm the one in the karaoke bar who doesn't need to look at a screen to know the words. I'm the one driving along singing at the top of my voice to the radio. I still use the hairbrush as a mic in the mirror. I know. Sad, but true.

My darling daughter (DD) has definitely inherited this need to sing from me. That and long legs. She's just exhausted me for the last forty minutes; insisting on wearing every hat in my collection (over forty last count) while she sashayed around my bedroom on those legs, singing to Katy Perry's 'Roar'. We did the chorus together and she does a good tiger roar, DD; seems to 'get' the story of the song; seems to want to tell the world that even at four years old, she's not going to take any shit from anyone. I love that in her.

Afterwards, we have quiet time. Ten minutes with her in her bed and a book of her choice, where I read fairy tales with hopelessly happy endings that I dare to believe in too. And when she wraps those tiny arms around my neck and whispers 'Goodnight, Mummy,' my heart melts.

Mama is right. There's nothing quite like it. That love that you

get from a child; where they look to you for everything, to fill their every need. It's brilliant. It fills me up. Her laugh, her smile, her giggle, her sunny nature. I am quite biased but she's quite perfect.

And she's like her dad: that enquiring mind, those inquisitive eyes, though they're the same colour as mine, they pucker at the edges just like his. Those eyes were the first thing I ever noticed about Him. That first look, that first day we were introduced, He seemed to stare right into me. I felt exposed, vulnerable. Then He smiled and let me know that whatever it was that He'd seen, there in my soul, that it was beautiful; that I was beautiful and that He could see it.

Comment: Crash-bambam

I've just had my first baby and know exactly what you mean about a mother's love. There's times I feel totally overwhelmed by it all!

Reply: Honey-girl

Just try to slow everything down and enjoy. It gets easier, I promise!

Comment: Idiotlove

Where'd you meet him, the soul-searcher guy? Know any more like him?! I'm such an idiot in love (note blog name) and have never, ever, felt a connection like that. That thing where you feel someone instantly *knows* you? You're really lucky.

Reply: Honey-girl

We're not together any more, but He was special ...

3. Theo

Theo Pope could recall the exact moment he knew his marriage was over. It was the night that Leah had phoned him with the news that Anna and a friend of hers were missing after an avalanche and two people from the ski party had already been confirmed dead. Harriet, his wife of twelve years, had been beside him, folding linen. Shock had registered on her face and she had made the right noises at the news, sympathetic sounds for Jess and her family. The pillowcases were folded into four, their creases pressed down with her palm; all the while, one eye had lingered on her BlackBerry. Theo had thought it odd; remote and detached from the unfolding tragedy.

Johnny Mathis was singing about a child being born on the television. The Christmas tree lights that Theo had been fixing on his lap had fallen to the floor, some twinkling as expected, some stubbornly refusing. He had gone to Jess's immediately, and when he got back after seeing her and her ex, Doug – both devastated beyond words, both readying to drive through the night to the tiny village in the Queyras area of the French Alps – he had heard Harriet on her phone. She was in the den at the back of the house, oblivious to the fact that he'd come home. He heard her whispered tone, her soft giggle. He imagined her on the other side of the door that he rested his forehead on. She would be sitting back, cross-legged, on the leather sofa. The phone would

be in her left hand and she would be playing with her hair with her right; her forefinger rolling some strands of straight auburn hair, round and round itself.

He had opened the oak-panelled door that Harriet had insisted on having two years earlier – a refurbishment plan in their home that he now knew was papering over the cracks. He hadn't gone in, just stood there under the lintel, and she had looked up, her face frozen.

'Enough,' he had said. 'No more of this. Go. Go be with him. I'm tired of all the subterfuge.'

And she had. Two days later. Two weeks before Christmas. She had gone. To be with him.

Ten weeks later, with February pelting biblical rain against the surgery windows, he gathered the papers he had been reading from his desk and slid them into his briefcase. The first patient of the Saturday morning surgery was due any moment, and he just had time to sit in his desk chair when a knock sounded on the door.

'Come in,' he said.

Jess's head peered around. 'No, I'm not the scheduled Sarah Talbot. Sorry – I persuaded Sam in reception to let me in first. Perks of being an ex-employee. I'll be quick, promise.'

He beckoned her in, stood and kissed both her cheeks.

'You're soaked,' he said.

'Just from the car to the building, it's fine.' She sighed aloud. 'I won't beat around the bush,' she said. 'I need more of those

tablets you gave me when ... you know. I can't sleep. And please, don't lecture me on how addictive they might be. I have bad dreams, Theo. The snow comes to get her and then the sea comes to get me and—'

'Slow down. Sit down, Jess.' He pointed to the chair next to his desk.

She sat. 'I was going to say something yesterday but ...'

He nodded as he pulled her records up on his screen. 'Jess, I'll give you a scrip for seven days. That's it. Make an appointment, come in and see me properly. If you don't want it to be me, see Jane instead?'

Jess nodded. 'I will.'

Theo looked at his friend: her eyes dark and tired; her hair, which yesterday had been tamed into a thick ponytail, a mass of unkempt wet waves today. He remembered she had refused food. 'Are you even eating?' he asked.

'When I feed Rose. I eat. Really.' She pointed at her wrist. 'Mrs Talbot's waiting. You'll be late for everyone this morning.'

'Yeah, well you knew that would happen when you sneaked in.' He printed the prescription and handed it to her. 'Come over tonight. Rose is away so you won't eat at all. Come and have some dinner. I forgot to tell you that I finally got some help at home – we have an au pair and she can cook! Her name is Bea.' He grinned.

'Be?' she asked.

'Bea, spelt B E A, short for Beatrice. Swedish. Blonde.'

Gorgeous.’

Jess frowned.

‘I’m kidding. She’s a Spanish brunette who makes a mean chicken casserole,’ he said.

‘Sorry.’ She folded the prescription and put it in her coat pocket. ‘I’m supposed to be at Leah’s. I bailed last night and Gus is determined to cook me a birthday meal.’ Her expression showed she’d rather miss it a second time. ‘I’m just not up for being nice to anyone. Not Leah and Gus, not you and Finn. The phone rings, I jump. I’m a wreck.’

As if on cue, Theo’s desk phone trilled.

‘That’ll be because Mrs Talbot’s getting irate.’ Jess leapt up. ‘I’d better go. Thanks, Theo.’

And then she was gone.

The rest of the morning was so busy, he scarcely had time to breathe. Though he only covered one in four Saturday morning surgeries, lately he had come to almost resent them, feeling that he should be doing fatherly things with his son at the weekend. Finn was probably glued to his laptop, when he should be doing something with him. Something fun. Instead, a morning filled with children and their typical school holiday colds had made his own sinuses tighten.

His eyes rested on the calendar on his desk. A present from Finn years ago, it was a wooden block where each date was displayed on a card. Above it, to the right, was a smaller card for the month and beside that, to the left, another card displaying

the whole of the current year. He placed the correct date in the front. Saturday, 14 February 2015. A quick calculation told him it was ten weeks since his wife had left. Ten weeks since Anna went missing. Seventy days during which both he and Jess were beginning to learn how to navigate new lives.

Harriet was now living in a flat close to her office in London, able to walk to the law firm where she'd worked for the last five years. Harriet was now making love to another man in another bed in another bedroom in that flat. Theo tried not to think about it, but when he did, that was the indelible image he saw. Her making love to someone else. Someone else hearing the way she would sigh quietly, then louder and louder until she finally let out a tiny whimper. He wondered if he hated Roland, her lover; if he hated Harriet, or if a tiny part of him was jealous of her freedom. Then he remembered Finn. Finn was now the most important thing, and with his mother only visiting his life these days, Finn was proving to be a challenge.

Theo pressed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, then lifted a gilt-framed photograph from his desk. One of the three of them skiing – but rather than think of his broken family unit, Anna came to mind. Where was she now? His stomach clenched as it always did when he thought of her. He couldn't help but picture her entombed in frozen snow. He said a silent prayer he remembered from childhood; he prayed to faceless saints whose names he had long forgotten. During the early days, after the accident, he had prayed that Anna had seen

that same documentary on television as him; the one that told you to spit at the snow's surface to see which way was up or down. It would show the way out. She hadn't come out, so his prayer, over time, had changed to one where he pleaded to the Gods to ensure that she hadn't felt a thing.

Anna. It was a moment before he realized he had said her name aloud.

He opened the drawer to his left, reached in and searched with his fingertips until he felt them rest on the envelope at the back. Lifting it out, he sat back in his chair, his right forefinger circling his name in her handwriting. It was striking and bold, like her, and slightly slanted to the left. The 'o' on the end had a little tail, like a comma, sticking out the top. Theo. Panic rose in his throat and he pushed the letter back inside the drawer, for another day. Some other day.

His patient rota finished, he'd had enough. Wrapping up against the outside elements, he lifted the briefcase. Checking inside one more time, he made sure he had the papers he needed to sign. Harriet had been efficient, her training managing to summarize their legal separation in a mere four pages.

Outside, a thin layer of ice had already formed on the windscreen. He shivered in his thick overcoat, opened his car door and slid his bag across to the passenger seat. Slipping his hands into fur-lined gloves, he gripped the icy steering wheel, started the engine and whacked the heat up high.

A five-minute drive had him parked in his driveway. The

house, the home, that Harriet and he had created was a modern, detached, four-bedroom ‘executive villa’, so called by the builder who had built it a decade earlier. It was one of ten sitting in a small, gated community. It was, according to Finn, or more specifically his classmates, ‘posh’.

The herringbone driveway that his car now sat on had been a later edition. The time he and Harriet had spent poring over catalogues, matching the shade of the block to the bricks of the house – ensuring it had been just perfect – all seemed such a ridiculous waste now. Looking through the living-room window, he saw the curtains weren’t drawn. Harriet had always insisted they were, hating to be on view to anyone in the street. Neither he nor Finn cared and the thought made him smile. The curtains, perfectly held back by their matching tiebacks, probably hadn’t been closed since she left. In contrast, a few minutes earlier when he had driven through the street Jess lived in, her drapes had been drawn tight. A hint of a light escaping through a tiny gap at the top was the only sign she was at home.

He wondered if behind those drawn curtains she had been crying, having been unable to since the accident. It was as though, if she cried again, she would have to face the worst. Without tears, there was hope ... As he turned the lock in the door, heard the sound of Finn’s laughter from the den, he realized the plain truth was that he would have sacrificed his marriage any day, rather than lose his child.

Bea’s casserole was perfect. She was out at the cinema with

her newly acquired boyfriend, so Theo and Finn ate alone at the kitchen table. His son was quiet, the laughter he had heard earlier spent during *The Simpsons* episode on television.

‘Did you go to The Wall today?’ Theo asked.

‘You know I did,’ Finn replied without looking up from his food.

The Wall, the local climbing club, was Finn’s only outlet for physical activity. It had taken a while to find a sport he was interested in. He hated football, found rugby too rough, thought tennis was ‘a lot of running around after a tiny ball’. Both Harriet and Theo had been relieved and thrilled when climbing was the one thing Finn had stuck at and seemed to love; the one thing that took him away from the solitude of playing Minecraft on his laptop and reading what Harriet had called his ‘nerdy computer books’. Theo worried. His son was quiet and liked his own company a bit too much for a boy his age.

‘How was it?’

‘Okay.’

‘You’re not very talkative.’

Finn shrugged.

‘Did your mum call you earlier?’

‘Yep.’

‘What do you think?’ Theo sat back in his chair and stared; willed his son to look at him.

‘I think I’d prefer not to.’

Theo sighed. ‘I know it’s tough, Finn, but your mum wants to

see you.’

‘She always comes here. Why do I have to go there?’

‘She’d like you to, just for one night?’

‘Will he be there?’ Finn finally raised his eyes and Theo held his gaze.

‘No, of course not. No, he won’t.’ He looked away.

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure.’ Theo stood and began to clear away the plates.

Minutes later he had already sent the text to his wife.

Finn worried about coming to you. Wants to know that Roland won't be there.

His phone pinged an almost immediate reply.

Theo, if you want to know if R will be there, just ask?! And no – he won't. Just me and Finn. All night.

He didn’t bother replying, just followed his son’s slow-moving body as he walked away. Another time Theo would have called him back to help clear the table. Another time, he would have asked him to adopt a less surly manner. But, he concluded, these were new and trying times.

4. Jess

I think, maybe, I'm losing my mind. Earlier today, I had another conversation with Anna while I was in the shower and she was sitting on the loo. She stayed a while and we talked about what we'd do to cover school holidays over Easter and the summer with Rose. There was no mention of a ski holiday with her work colleagues. In these pretend conversations with my daughter, the word 'skiing' is banned.

Now, I'm in the 'perennial plant' section at Hardacres, my local garden centre. My basket is laden with bulbs and seeds for the greenhouse and allotment at the back of my garden. Just beyond the anemone bulbs to my left, two women are talking about the article that appeared in this week's local paper; the one that took three inches of column space to let everyone else know there is still no news. I am rooted to the earth just like the iris in the pot I have in my hand. Whoever these women are, they have no clue how cruel it is for me to stand here, to endure their words; they aren't to know that my grip on reality is a little fragile today.

'But there's no body, that's the horror.' Woman number one.

'That's the worst, the very worst.' Second voice.

Number one again. 'Is there nothing new? Nothing at all? I mean, snow melts, doesn't it?'

Snow melts, doesn't it? A question I ask myself daily.

Number two. 'You'd think they'd have found her by now.'

You'd think.

'I read somewhere that there's still two bodies missing.'

I will myself to move. *There are still two people missing. Anna Powers and Lawrence Taylor, both twenty-five.*

'I don't know how that poor mother is still standing.'

Me neither.

I place the iris pot back with the others, lay the basket to one side and walk through one of the many tills without as much as a nasturtium seed on my being.

Leah has decreed that I need a puppy. That's what she does, my sister. She doesn't ask – she just does. I can't disguise the panic I feel when I see the tiny creature craning around my legs in her kitchen. Leah ignores my reticence.

'You didn't open the box yesterday, did you?' she asks.

I shake my head, embarrassed that I actually forgot to open my sister's gift. The pug has a pee at my ankle.

'It had the papers in it. The papers for Pug here. She's a thoroughbred.'

'You mean she's a pedigree.'

'That. See, you're a perfect dog owner already.'

I frown. 'I don't want a dog.'

'Too late. You're having her.'

'Jesus, Leah ...' I slump into a nearby chair. It's uncomfortable, all angular and pointy – like the kitchen, which is an *hommage* to black granite and stainless steel. Leah's home is so contemporary, it's almost futuristic – no hint of a tatty sofa

here. We're in a large open-plan space that spans the width of the back of her and Gus's home. It's zoned. Leah is a 'zoner'. To my far left is the kitchen; in the middle is the huge refectory dining table and Leah and I are in the 'chillax' area. One day I'll find a way to tell her that there is nothing either relaxing or chilling about these chairs.

'I know you mean well,' I say. 'But the last thing I need in my life is something that pees and shits everywhere.'

'You need something that needs you. She needs you.'

I'm aghast. Genuinely. I cannot believe that my only sister thinks that the hole I have in my life can be plugged by a pug. A dog for a daughter. I can't even speak.

She hands me a glass of wine. 'You need someone or something to give all that unconditional love you're always harping on about, because you sure as hell don't give any to me.'

'I have it all reserved for Rose.'

Leah makes a face. 'Save a little for Pug.'

'I'm not taking the dog,' I say as it lines itself up alongside my ankle again. I resist the urge to kick her gently with my foot.

Leah scoops down and picks Pug up in her hands, dumps her on my lap. A little bit of pee dribbles onto my light denim jeans. 'Her papers are in your name. It's done. Sue me.'

Two huge brown eyes look up at me from above a flat black nose. Her brow looks knitted with lines. I pick her up to throw her right back at Leah and Pug licks my hand.

'She likes you.' Leah sits opposite me, sips her own glass of

wine. ‘She needs you.’

‘She needs someone that’ll clean up after her.’

‘She chose you. From some sort of spiritual doggie place, she came and found you.’

Despite myself, I smile, stroke the dog’s back. ‘She looks like she’s frowning, or she’s about to cry.’

‘She is, she’s perfect for you.’

I laugh. ‘You’ll have to take her whenever I’m away.’

‘You never go anywhere.’

‘That could change.’ In my pretend world, Anna, Rose and I are going to see some of the warmer, snow-free parts of the world together.

‘It could. Gus and I will have Pug when you go away if you take Pug home tonight.’

I have no room in my life, pretend or otherwise, for a dog. But I still find myself nodding, thinking Rose will love her. ‘Okay,’ I tell her, and Pug seals the deal with a small, runny shit on my lap.

Gus has prepared the most fabulous birthday meal twenty-four hours later than originally planned. I apologize for cancelling the night before as I sit down, wearing a pair of Leah’s clean jeans, to a sharing platter of melted cheese and artisan bread dipped in sweet balsamic to start. An ex-chef, Gus now runs a successful recruitment consultancy for the catering industry from an office upstairs.

‘So,’ Gus says. ‘We’re going up to Windermere to see your parents tomorrow. Why don’t you come?’

‘Can’t,’ I dip a piece of garlic bread in the cheesy remnants. ‘I have a dog to mind. She’s too young to drive to the Lake District. She gets car-sick.’

‘You’re coming.’ Leah’s eyebrows are arched and her head is shaking. ‘Mum is insisting. You’re ignoring her calls. Please come. Life won’t be worth living if I arrive without you.’

‘Can’t. The drive’s too much for Pug.’

‘I collected Pug from a breeder in Portsmouth for you. She was fine all the way back in the car. Perfectly happy.’

‘You did? Portsmouth? When?’

‘I took your birthday off. Fully intended taking you with me for the day but you fucked off and left me at the school gate. So, I drove there on my own.’

Shit. My face winces an apology. ‘How long are you staying up there for?’

‘Leave at seven thirty tomorrow morning, four hours twenty up, lunch and a quick walk, then same back. Gus is driving. Portsmouth and back was enough to knacker me. Pug will love it.’

I nod, know when I’m beaten, begin to steel myself immediately for my mother’s food and sympathy, for my father’s fragile stares.

‘You have to let them care, Jess.’ Leah reads my mind. ‘They’re grieving too,’ she adds.

Gus is searing the steaks on a hot plate. He turns them over, making zigzag patterns on the flesh. To his right, he stirs a pot of home-made mushroom sauce. Even the sizzle and scent of such

lovely food don't whet my appetite but I will, for his sake, force myself to eat. Pug is asleep at my feet.

'How's Theo doing?' Leah is mashing potatoes with what looks like a half-pound of butter. Fine for her because she won't eat them. Not so good for my already screaming arteries.

'He's okay, busy ... Finn starts secondary school in September. Can you believe that?'

'Yes, but how is he? Theo. How is he doing?'

I know a loaded question when I hear one and turn to look at my sister.

'Why?' I arch my eyebrows at her and at the plate of food that Gus has just presented me with. It has the most enormous doorstep of a steak and a mountain of creamy, oozing, buttery mash. There is a serving dish laden with carrots, squash and swede, a celebration of orange vegetables, in the centre of the table.

'Enjoy, birthday girl!' he beams.

I smile my thanks.

'Why, Leah?' I repeat. 'You know something I don't?' I slice through the steak with the serrated knife.

'You know what chambers are like. The place is rife with rumours.'

There are times I forget that Leah, as a senior practice manager for a firm of barristers, moves in the same circles as Harriet. I feel immediate colour rush to my cheeks.

'Ahh,' she says, seeing my discomfort, 'so it's not rumour

then?

I sigh loudly. ‘What have you heard?’

‘That Harriet’s shagging her boss, Roland. That that’s why she left Theo.’

I frown, try to chew my food so I won’t have to confirm or deny anything. Leah’s delicate kick in my shins reminds me I won’t get away with that.

‘Ouch, do *not* kick me.’

‘Speak. Now.’ She points the sharp end of her knife at me.

‘Ladies, ladies ...’ Gus shakes his head. ‘Eat up!’ He looks in my direction. ‘Jess, you need to eat, you’re fading away. And Leah, stop gossiping.’

‘Yes, Leah. Stop gossiping.’ I play with the steak on my plate. ‘Thank you for this, Gus. I’m sorry again that I cancelled last night.’

Gus places his fork on his plate and squeezes my forearm with his hand. ‘Forget about it. I’ve told you – no harm done and you’re here now.’ My hand gives his a reassuring tap. He releases me and lifts his wine glass, tilts it in my direction and smiles. His silent toast to me is all that is needed.

‘Harriet?’ Leah persists as Gus turns his head fully to glare at her.

‘I have no idea if Harriet is shagging anyone,’ I reply.

‘If it’s true, I suppose that means they’re over?’

‘Let’s hope not.’ As I speak the words aloud, I’m not sure I mean them. In the many years I’ve known Theo, Harriet has

always been pleasant, always been polite, but she tolerates more than likes me. I've sat at her dinner table; we spent last Christmas together, all of us: me, Anna and Rose. She constantly says the 'right thing' to me, but more often than not it has a ring of insincerity to it – except maybe after Anna's accident. She did write me a lovely letter then. My face flushes guiltily as I tell myself off for thinking badly of her, and at the same time hand Pug her first illicit mouthful of steak.

It's 11.50 p.m. and I've texted Theo's mobile to let him know I'm standing outside his front door. Moments later he opens it, rubs sleep from his eyes.

'Jess? It's late ... Bloody hell, is that a dog in your hand?'

'It's ten to twelve. Happy Valentine's Day and yes, I'm carrying a dog. Say hi to Pug. Apparently I need a recipient for all my unconditional love.'

'Valentine's Day ... Really?' He scratches his head above his right ear, just along the line where his hair changes from black to grey, stifles a yawn. 'And there are always conditions in love,' he says.

'When did you become such a cynic?' I shiver. 'Aren't you going to ask me in?'

He holds the door open for me to pass under his arm. 'Go through. I'll put the kettle on,' he says.

I cross Harriet's threshold close to midnight. As I'm doing it, I know I wouldn't be if she were still here.

'I'm sorry for getting you up.' I look around the huge kitchen as

we listen to the beginning hum of the kettle. ‘Have you changed something in here? It looks different.’

‘Just a coat of paint. I did it last week.’

‘Looks good.’ I can imagine him, up a stepladder every evening, the news channel on full blast on the television, trying hard to keep busy. ‘There’s something I want to say.’

He’s dangling a couple of tea bags in two mugs, one in each hand. ‘Hmmm?’ he says.

‘I was at Leah’s earlier, finally got around to eating the birthday dinner Gus planned – anyway, she asked me about you and I realized that I’ve been too immersed in my own life to ...’ Pug is pacing Theo’s quarry tiles, picks a spot in the corner near the Aga and squats. I’m there immediately with some kitchen paper from a roll on the worktop. ‘Sorry.’

He hands me a cup of strong, black tea, just the way I like it.

‘Where was I? Oh, I was trying to say I don’t think I’ve been here for you.’

‘Jess, you had Anna to deal with. Have Anna to deal with. Harriet and I—’

I shake my head. ‘It’s not a competition. Friends help each other. I haven’t been around for you. That’s all I wanted to say, so, I’ll finish this cup of tea and be on my way with Pug.’

I stare at him over the rim of the mug. We have an unusual friendship; have done since that day he first came to the surgery as a visiting locum and drove into the back of my car. The memory of a much less self-assured, younger Theo comes to

mind. A memory of him being on duty in A&E the night a teenage Anna drank too much and needed her stomach pumped; a memory of a colleague's drunken laughter over our 'friendship' one Christmas. But that's what it was and always has been: a deep, loving friendship. He's what I would have in a girlfriend, except he's a guy. I'm what he would have in a guy-friend, what he has with his real guy-friends. It's simple, uncomplicated, and works for us.

And right now he looks tired. Dark shadows circle his green eyes, both of which follow the only sound in the room – Pug padding across the tiled floor, sniffing out new territory. Theo takes a seat at the circular kitchen table, kicks out a chair opposite him. 'Sit. You're here now, take your time. Let's talk.'

I plonk myself down on the chair, one eye on the roaming dog. 'You must miss her.' It's a statement more than a question and he shrugs.

'I miss the woman I thought I knew,' he says. 'I miss her being around; having someone to share things with. I miss her being here for Finn.'

'Doug left me when Anna was the same age. It's tough for them. All they want is their mum and dad together.'

'I knew the relationship had changed, but I thought it was just a phase and that we'd get back on track with time. I never thought ...' He hesitates. 'I suppose whatever I thought about her leaving me, I never thought she'd walk away from Finn. Yet it's the best thing she could have done for him – leave him here in his home,

at his school, with his father. Out of the whole scenario, that's both the best and shittiest thing she's done.' He laces his hands behind his neck. 'Anyway ...'

I bite my tongue. I haven't been able to understand her being able to leave Finn either, but the facts are it happens, and no one – not a soul – questioned Doug leaving Anna in the same manner. If I'm honest, part of me admires Harriet's strength to do it, and another part of me is beyond angry that she could willingly walk away from her child when I've probably had mine stolen from me.

'I'm going to see my parents tomorrow.' I change the subject, glancing at my watch. 'Today, later this morning.'

'You're ready to see them?' he asks, acknowledging the fact that I've managed to avoid visiting for more than ten weeks.

'Leah and Gus are going for the day tomorrow. It's a lot to do in one day, but they've talked me into going. They're right. Mum is constantly phoning, tries her best, and she already has her hands full looking after Dad.' I stop to draw breath. 'Look, I just really wanted to say thank you for being there for me and to let you know I'm here for you too.'

'Don't worry about me. You have enough on your mind.'

My eyes rest on old school drawings pinned to the notice board next to the fridge. Frayed and yellowing, Finn's earliest artwork, they're years old and they make me think of Rose and how much I've missed her. Since Anna's accident, I have had Rose to look after pretty much full time, apart from the days that Sean has had her for odd weekends. Having her fill my life

helps me avoid thinking. Thinking about Anna, wondering where she is; wondering if I will ever have the closure of burying her; wondering if someday she'll phone me from a bar in Brazil and explain that she's alive and kicking – that becoming a mother at nineteen was just too much for her and that she just had to get away.

'I should go,' I say. 'It's late, sorry for the midnight call.' I bend down and pick Pug up. Theo stands and we walk to the door together. 'Just tell me one thing.' I narrow my eyes under the hallway light. 'Are you all right?'

He laughs. 'I'm not sure what's brought this on, but I'm fine. Really.'

'Your wife of twelve years left you. I remember the hole that leaves. I'm sorry it took me a while to say that.' I attempt a weak smile, kiss his cheek. 'I choose to believe that Anna's alive and it keeps my lungs working. You have to find your way forward too.'

Theo says nothing, just nods and hugs me before I leave.

As soon as I get home, enter my own kitchen, the first thing I see is the red light of the answer machine. I place Pug on the tatty sofa at the far end of the room, go back to the car and retrieve all the puppy paraphernalia that Leah had also bought. There's a bed-like thing; I set it up in the warmest part of the room and transfer the dog to the centre of it. I press the red light and hear Doug's low voice.

'Jess, it's me. It's Saturday night. Can you give me a call when you get back, doesn't matter what time it is?'

My stomach churns as I dial his number.

‘It’s me.’

‘Hi, I tried your mobile earlier but your phone kept ringing out.’

‘I was at Leah’s – it’s an awful signal there.’ My mobile service provider seems to be the only one with no mast in earshot of Leah’s.

‘Anyway—’

Pug starts to howl.

‘Is that a dog?’ Doug asks.

‘It is. Say hi to Pug.’

‘Right.’

‘Leah’s idea, not mine.’ Pug’s sound rises to a steep crescendo.
‘It’s late, Doug.’

‘Yes. I—’

‘Oh, for crying out loud, Doug, spit it out,’ I say, instantly thinking of Anna. I had spent a whole month after the accident hoping she was spitting her way to safety. Some Discovery Channel thing I’d seen once upon a time ...

‘They’ve found a body,’ he replies. ‘It’s the boy, Lawrence.’

I say nothing. I can’t. His first words have made my stomach contract. His second sentence fills me with instant relief, then pain, and then Gus’s wonderful food threatens to reappear. Words will not form. Sounds will not sound.

‘Jess?’

‘I’m here.’ I force the syllables together.

‘I thought you should know. I was going to go over to France again but, I don’t know, Carol says there’s not much point, not if they’re sure.’

She’s right.

‘It’s so late. Maybe too late to digest this. Call me tomorrow?’ he says.

I look at the clock. It is tomorrow. ‘Do you sleep, Doug?’ Words I hadn’t expected to say, form themselves of their own accord.

‘Not really. Not well. Not any more,’ he replies.

‘Me neither. Thanks for letting me know. I’ll call you later.’

Just as I hang up the phone, Pug howls again. She crosses the room to my feet and I’d swear she’s crying.

Two hours later, the dog is still baying. I am sitting at my kitchen table with my head in my hands, cursing Leah. Anna and I seem to have a glass of vodka together, and as I pop another pill, I consider, just for a brief second, crushing one into Pug’s milk.

At 3.16, Pug is Valium-free and silent. I am talking to myself, aware in the blackness of the night that Anna is not really here and I am tonight, apart from this dog, very much alone.

5. Anna

Raw Honey Blogspot 10/10/2012

Once, Death thought he had me. I was there, firmly in his crosshairs. To this day, I think he came for me and just missed out. He's probably still swearing, muttering to himself, 'Nearly had her, that Anna Powers.' I was ten when it happened, in town one Saturday afternoon with my best friend (BF) C and her mum, who had stopped to talk to someone about ten metres behind us.

I heard the sound before I saw it; knew without looking that it was out of control. When I turned, there was a small car, an odd shade of mustard yellow, heading straight for us. I remember my eyes closed as I waited, just knowing it was going to hit me. In reality it can only have been a split second between the hearing, the seeing, and the breeze on my face as it skimmed right by me. I felt it, I really did. If it had been a movie moment, it would have been slowed right down for effect.

A forty-two-year-old man with an unknown heart condition died behind the wheel. If he hadn't managed to steer a route through the crowd, it doesn't bear thinking about what might have happened. There were mothers and fathers and prams and babies and shopkeepers and there was BF. And there was me.

'*Carpe diem.*' My dad taught me that expression afterwards. *Carpe diem.* He used to repeat it a lot. 'We have only today,' Mama still says. 'We should dance, learn, love and sing.'

I still can't stand the colour yellow – in clothes, flowers, anything – but I do really try to live in the moment. And I still think Death was probably quite pissed off at missing me that day.

Comment: Heartsandkisses152

You were lucky and what a gift it is to grow up with the ideal of living in the moment. I think the world would be a better place if we could all do it, all the time.

Reply: Honey-girl

You're right!

Comment: BlahBlahBlah1985

Carpe every single fucking diem!

Reply: Honey-girl

I like that 😊

6. Theo

He was up hours before anyone else, had mopped the kitchen floor and made a picnic of sorts before there was a sound from Finn's bedroom. Bea was, as always at the weekends, sleeping in. The food he had prepared was wrapped in foil and packed in a picnic box he'd found in the garage. A tall flask of coffee completed his efforts.

When Finn appeared, his laptop in his hand, Theo was standing on his head in the furthest corner of the kitchen.

'Morning, son.'

'You are so weird,' Finn said through a stretched yawn. He removed a bowl from a cupboard and shook a box of cornflakes at it, poured half a pint of milk over it and went to take a place on the sofa in the den watching television. 'Why do you even do that?' he asked, glancing back over his shoulder.

'Helps me think. Sometimes when things feel a bit upside down, it's good to look at them this way.'

'Yeah, right.'

'Don't get too comfortable. We're going out.' Theo lowered his legs and tucked them to his chest before rolling onto his knees.

Finn groaned. 'It's Sunday.'

'So it is. Lots of people are up and going to church. Lots of people are up walking their dogs. We're going to the beach.'

His son rolled his eyes, then peered at him over the top of his

raised bowl. ‘The beach. In February.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why? It’s freezing.’

‘Because we can. Now shift your butt up to the shower. We should go soon.’

‘I really don’t want to go to the beach, Dad.’

‘No, Finn, you *think* you don’t want to go to the beach. I can promise you when you get there, you’ll want to be there.’

‘You don’t need to do this, you know.’ Finn spoke with a mouthful of cornflakes.

‘Don’t speak when you’re eating.’

‘This father-son crap.’

‘Finn!’

‘Really, Dad? You say “crap” all the time ... I don’t get this sudden ... this sudden need to spend time together.’

Theo swallowed hard. ‘My wanting to spend time with you is hardly sudden. We always spend Sundays together. We used to —’

‘We used to do lots of things together when Mum was here, yes.’ Finn had walked away.

‘And what, we should stop that because she’s not?’ Theo stood at the door to the den and tried hard to keep his voice from rising.

‘Yes,’ his son nodded, and opened up his laptop to his world of Minecraft. ‘We should.’

Theo left the room, walked slowly upstairs to his bedroom. He pulled the bedclothes up, picked yesterday’s jeans off a nearby

tub chair and hung them in the wardrobe. Next to them, a jumper of Harriet's hung on a hanger. He tugged it towards him, lowered his face and inhaled her scent. It wasn't perfume, but the body lotion she wore, and it lingered in all her clothes. Coconut and spiced orange. He dropped the sleeve and grabbed his coat from another hanger. Downstairs he took a hat and gloves from the coat rack near the hall door. 'I'll be back in a bit,' he called into Finn and closed the front door behind him.

In between his and the next-door neighbour's house was a path. Just wide enough for two people, it led into public woodland. Theo breathed in, blew his breath out in circles. It *was* cold. A thin dusting of icing-sugar-like frost lay on the ground. The only sounds around on a quiet Sunday morning were those of his heart beating and his shoe soles crunching underfoot. He shoved his gloved hands deep inside his pockets and quickened his pace. This area of green, the walking space, the rural feel of it, in what was otherwise a suburban area, only a few miles from Guildford town centre, was why he and Harriet had settled here. He pulled his phone from his pocket, removed one glove and, without thinking about it, jabbed his wife's number with his thumb.

'Theo, everything okay?'

He did love her voice; it was one of the first things he had fallen in love with. She was softly spoken, her expression gentle, a voice that wrapped you up in a blanket. It was something he had seen her use powerfully when in work, lulling her opposition

into a false sense of security.

He put his glove back on, stopped walking, and held the phone to his ear.

‘Everything’s fine,’ he said.

‘You sound out of breath.’

‘Just out for a walk. Look, I called because ... I have these papers.’ Theo looked skywards towards the slate-grey cloud cover through the canopy of trees. ‘I know you’re not coming back, Harriet. I think I just want to hear you say it.’

There was a silence which made Theo wonder if she was alone.

‘I’m not planning on coming back, Theo.’

His eyes blinked closed. He lowered his neck into his coat, shivered. ‘Right.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Me too. I didn’t fight for you.’ He listened to the sound of clothes rustling, imagined her getting out of bed, moving to another room in her new flat. ‘Separation documents. That’s what they are. They’re not divorce papers and I need to know if I should be moving on with my life. I’m in limbo. We’re in limbo here.’

‘It’s a separation, like we agreed.’

‘I know, but it’s not really, is it? You’re not coming back. It’s the first stage in the process.’

‘Are you all right, Theo?’ Harriet’s voice was edged with concern.

‘I will be,’ he replied honestly. ‘I just wish ...’

‘No, no you don’t.’ She sighed loudly. ‘It’s hard, but you don’t wish – you don’t wish this was different. You don’t wish I was coming back. We are broken.’

The wind was high. He wiped his left eye, which had begun to water, with the back of his hand.

‘It’s the truth, Theo,’ she continued.

Theo bent down on his hunkers, clutched his knees with his free hand. The words of her last sentence entered his brain, rolled around like a spin cycle in a washing machine. Faced with them, he couldn’t deny them. ‘Would you mind coming and taking the rest of your clothes?’ he asked. ‘That body lotion of yours hangs around.’

She was silent.

‘Harriet?’ He stood up again, stretched tall. ‘You there?’

‘I’m here. I’m sorry, I could take them when I pick Finn up Friday?’

‘No. Don’t do that. Finn going to yours for the first time with a boot full of your clothes wouldn’t be a good idea.’

‘You’re right. Sorry.’

Theo turned back towards the house. ‘Stop apologizing, Harriet. If we really are both to move on, we have to find the best way forward for him. I’m not sure we’ve figured that out yet.’

‘No, but it’ll come. We have to stick together where he’s concerned.’

He nodded to a dog walker coming towards him.

‘Are you in the woods?’ Harriet asked.

‘Yeah.’

‘I miss them.’

Theo laughed. ‘I’m trying not to resent that remark.’

‘I miss you too. Of course I do. I’m not in love with you any more, Theo, but I will always love you.’

He felt sure he’d heard that line before – some movie or television drama; perhaps a song.

‘I miss my son. I miss seeing Finn.’ Harriet’s voice faltered. ‘Every day I have to convince myself that leaving him with you was the right thing if I had to go.’

‘I think ...’ Theo ignored her underlying question. The last thing he needed was for her to fight him for Finn. ‘I think I just needed to know you’re sure. Because you need to be, Harriet. Once these papers go back, once I put them in the post ...’

‘I’m sure. I struggle with it, but I’m sure.’

Theo reached the path, stood aside to let the figure he could see coming in his direction pass.

‘Okay, then.’ With those two words, he felt his wife slip away; he felt her slip into the arms of another man he barely knew. He felt himself loosen his grip and let go. ‘We’ll see you Friday, Harriet. Take care of yourself.’

Theo hung up the phone and stood still, the person on the pathway now only twenty feet from him.

‘I thought you’d be in here,’ Finn said.

‘And what if I hadn’t been? Did you tell Bea where you’d gone?’

They both walked towards the house.

‘Of course I did. Besides, I knew you’d be in here. This is where you always sulk.’

Theo faced his son. ‘I do *not* sulk.’

‘You do. A little bit. The beach is a good idea on one condition.’

Theo raised his eyebrows, not much in the mood for more conditions being placed on his life. ‘And what’s that?’ he asked anyway.

‘We ditch the ham sandwiches and have fish and chips instead.’ Finn shivered on cue. ‘It’s too cold for sandwiches.’

‘We’ll take them and have them in the car on the way down or back. We’ll have fish and chips when we’re there.’

Finn smiled. ‘I’m ready to go. Are you?’

An hour and a half later, they were both sitting on the highest dune at the furthest end of the stretch of strand at West Wittering. The light was dull, the sun trying to break through the abundant clouds above them. An Atlantic wind whipped around them but Theo didn’t care. The chips were hot, the fish was fresh and crispy, and his son was huddled next to him, munching.

‘You can just see the Isle of Wight, see the outline?’ Theo pointed and Finn nodded. ‘Do you remember the time we all camped there one summer? Your mum got drunk as a skunk!’

Finn nodded again.

‘I know you miss her. You’re bound to miss her. I ... I just want you to know that I know.’

Theo noticed the chips couldn't go into his son's mouth quickly enough, as if Finn didn't trust himself to reply. He pulled the blanket he had brought around Finn's shoulders. 'Thank you,' he said. 'Thanks for doing this today.' More nodding. 'I used to come here a lot as a boy, before my father died.' He followed his son's gaze, looked out to the grey surf.

'Why do people have to die, Dad?'

It was such an unexpected remark that Theo said nothing, allowed the question to linger.

'Anna's dead, isn't she?' Finn added.

Theo thought some more before replying. 'More than likely, but until a body is found ...'

'No one could survive seventy days buried under snow, not even if they were in a hole of some sort.' Finn had counted the days.

'The human instinct is to survive against all odds.' Theo picked up a chip and placed it in his mouth. It was already cool.

'You're a doctor. What do you think?'

When Finn stared up at him from his huddled stance, Theo saw fear and confusion and remembered what it was like to be young and afraid. He felt bad for not recognizing that two epic events had happened within such a close space of time. Harriet is his mother. And she had left him. Anna had been his beloved babysitter for years. And she was probably dead.

He hugged his son close. 'I think we don't know until we know. We have to have hope.' Theo felt Finn's body hold back tears.

He held him as tight as he could without making him want to pull away. In the distance, the Isle of Wight had disappeared into black clouds. ‘However awful things might seem, we have to have hope.’

Finn’s lower lip trembled. ‘Did you like her, Dad? Anna?’ His voice caught on her name.

‘Of course.’ Theo angled himself to try and catch his son’s expression. ‘What a strange thing to say. Now ...’ He loosened his grip on his son and gathered the rubbish into the plastic bag he had brought. ‘You put this lot into that bin over there, then I’ll race you to the car.’

Finn grabbed his arm. ‘Dad?’

‘Yes?’

‘Mum ... She’s not coming back, is she? Like, never.’

Theo drew the cold air through his nose slowly, and exhaled it even slower. ‘No, Finn. I don’t think she is.’

‘See, I do hope. I keep hoping that Mum will come home. I keep hoping that Anna’s alive but ...’

Theo paused before speaking again. ‘I know you do.’ He took one of his hands and squeezed it hard. ‘But we’re here. Alive and kicking. And your mum may be living somewhere else now, but she loves you very much and you can see as much of her as you want, any time. Any place. We will both make sure of that.’

Theo let the statement rest with his son for a few minutes, then turned and play-punched him. ‘So, what about that race?’

As Finn walked towards the bin ten feet away, Theo sprinted

down the dune. 'But you have to give me a head start!' he yelled back through the wind as he slowed down and backed himself slowly up the beach. When he saw Finn running towards him, his hands waving dramatically, he turned around and ran again. The wind lashed his cheeks, made his eyes water. *It is good to be alive*, he thought, as he filled his grateful lungs with the sea air and ran, aware of his son's laughter just over his shoulder, gaining on him, getting ready to overtake. He slowed and watched Finn pass. His son seemed to be running in slow motion, his limbs all angled, his hair, salt sprayed and stuck to his head, his head glancing back occasionally, his arms pumping like train pistons. *'Did you like her, Dad? Anna?'*

At the car, Theo panted loudly, leaned his body forward, his hands on his waist. 'Not easy to run with all these layers,' he protested.

'You're just old,' Finn grinned.

'I'm forty-five!' Theo panted the words as he opened the car.

Inside, Finn rubbed his face warm with the palms of his hands. 'That was good, Dad,' he said. 'But next time let's wait for some better weather.'

'Nah.' Theo reversed the car away from the café, down towards the barriers that allowed paying visitors entrance to the beach to park. 'The crowds come with the sun. We practically had the whole place to ourselves.'

Finn unravelled his white earphones for the journey home. 'It was good, Dad,' he repeated. 'Some father-son-together crap.'

Theo frowned at his son's language, but decided against a rebuke which, wired into his phone, Finn wouldn't have heard anyway. He eased the car through the narrow barrier as Finn drummed his fingers to the music already pulsing in his ears and ignored the question repeating in his own.

'Did you like her, Dad? Anna?'

7. Jess

When we reach Windermere, I try not to react when I see my mother's hair.

'Darling,' she says, 'you came. I'm so glad you came. Your dad will be thrilled to see you. Oh, thank you,' she says as she hugs me tight. I breathe in her scent, relax in her arms, close my eyes and ignore the fact that she has gone from being an ash blonde to a piccalilli yellow. She pats her head, as if she knows what I'm thinking. 'I haven't been able to get out, dear, found this colour in a cupboard, thought I'd better try and get rid of the greys before you arrived.'

Great. It's my fault she's yellow.

'And who's this?' She looks down to the other end of the lead I'm holding.

'Pug.'

'Is that it?'

'Yes.'

'Is Pug a boy or girl?'

'Girl.'

Mum sighs with relief. 'Good, they piss less. I have enough trouble dealing with your father.'

Leah laughs out loud, comes in for Mum's second hug of the day. 'How is he, Mum?'

'Leah, love. Good to see you too. Go on through, he's in the

back, looking forward to seeing you all. Hi Gus. I have lunch ready. Hope you're all starving.'

Leah's eyes roll at me as Gus embraces my mother too. She points to my mother's hair behind her back and mouths the words 'What the hell?' at me, then leads the way with Gus, who hits his head on one of her empty hanging baskets. Mum pulls me back.

'Have you heard from Rose?' she asks, her expression grave.

'Just a text from Sean to say they've got there safely.'

'Oh.' She looks disappointed on my behalf, then strokes my hair. 'How are you?'

Straight away I don't resent the question that I normally rail against. Instead, I feel some strange primal comfort. The touch of a mother. 'Not so good.' I shrug. 'Yesterday was hard.'

She squeezes my hand, caresses the edge of my little finger. I miss my mother's touch. And I miss touching my daughter ...

Dad is sitting in his usual perch, staring out over the lake from the back of the house. There's a huge expanse of windows that they both put in in the Seventies, way before they were trendy, and the view from this part of the house is spectacular. Today there are too many sailing boats to count. Some glide across the shimmering water like a knife through butter. Others, not quite catching the wind, move more slowly. Dad's eyes seem fixed on a small, slow one near the edge of the lake, close to the end of the back garden.

Leah and Gus are already with him. She has her hands wrapped around one of his, is chatting animatedly to him

with Gus beside her, prompting stories with witty asides. Dad responds to neither of them but he keeps his eyes fixed on Leah's face. She's good at this, pretending that nothing is wrong; pretending that the contracted body of the man in the chair is still Dad, though both of us mourn in private. Both of us hate how the stroke has affected him; how much that tiny part of him that died in his brain, the most minuscule area of shaded capillaries on a CT scan, has really altered him. I lean in and kiss his cheek. I haven't told him yet. Mum has asked me not to, certain that if he knew – if he had any understanding of what's happened to Anna – it would kill him. He'd keel over and die. Anna is his only grandchild.

I focus on the shelf next to us. It's white melamine; one of a row of three put up by Dad years ago. I remember Mum fussing when he used the drill to put the brackets in the wall, sure he'd puncture a gas pipe or electrocute himself. The shelves are still in place, perfectly stable and horizontal, while my dad sits curved in a chair. I reach out and touch a Dinky car, one of the many he has collected over the years. It's not in a box like most of the others on display. It is from the *Thunderbirds* range, Lady Penelope's pink car. Anna used to love it and it's one of the ones he allowed her to play with when she was little.

Mum is pottering, hovering. It's making me antsy. At seventy-two, she's ten years younger than Dad and moves at a speed that belies her age. I have no idea how she cares for my father the way she does: her energy is boundless; her love for him so huge that

nothing is too much.

‘Can I help, Mum?’ I call out after her as she heads to the kitchen to bring another foil-covered vegetable dish to the table.

‘No, love. Talk to your dad. He’s been so looking forward to seeing you.’

Leah looks at me. Neither of us asks the obvious question. Neither of us would, but how can she know what Dad is thinking when he rarely speaks nowadays?

He moves in the chair. Pug has taken up residence by his feet, lying on the green carpet that must be thirty years old and looks like AstroTurf. Dad’s blanket, a loose lilac-coloured, stitched crochet one I recognize from my childhood, slips forward. I catch it and pull it up on his knees. I notice his fringe is long enough to push to one side and he’s wearing odd socks. Mum is by my side with a bowl of roast potatoes in her hand. ‘Talk to him! Honestly! He’s not daft, you know.’

I shift in my chair. It’s easy to pretend my father is not a shadow of his former self when I don’t visit. It’s less easy to start a conversation with him right now. I take his hand. ‘How are you, Dad?’ I ask. ‘How are you really?’ I make my eyes move from the plaid shirt he wears to his eyes. Gus, always a little uncomfortable with the changes in Dad, leaves Leah and me to it and follows Mum, insisting on helping her in the kitchen.

Dad’s face angles a little towards me. Today his speech is not good. He makes sounds, struggles with the formation of words, but I know what he’s saying. ‘The girl.’

I lean in to him, rest my head on his shoulder. ‘Yes, Dad, I’m the girl.’

Leah laughs and sticks her tongue out at me. ‘Always the favourite,’ she mutters before she stands and follows Gus.

Dad repeats the sounds and I catch the question in it this time. I wonder if he’s asking about Rose. Or if he’s asking about Anna

...

‘No, darling.’ Mum is on it like a hawk on a vole. ‘No, Anna’s not here today.’

My lips tremble. I catch my mother’s eye as she shakes her head at me. ‘No.’ I squeeze Dad’s hand. ‘Not today.’

My father nods and his eyes veer back to the boats. I sit back, still holding his hand, am cast back to the many times I sat here on his knee watching the same scene. It was an idyllic childhood, both Leah and I lucky enough to grow up in this beautiful place. And Anna loves it here. Right now as I look at the green space between the house and the water, I can almost hear her laughter; see her running as her granddad chases her. He taught her so much; taking her out on the water in a tiny dinghy, so small it made my heart skip a beat when they both left shore. It was my father who taught Anna to sail. It was my father who took us all on what was Anna’s first snow holiday. It was my father who taught her to ski.

I stand up, pass the table, filled with enough food to feed an army. My mother has used a white tablecloth; has place settings in her best bone-handled cutlery, linen napkins with tiny

embroidered daisies. A pitcher full of home-made lemonade sits in the centre and I pray that she also has something stronger as well as I head to the loo.

In the cloakroom, an apple-scented diffuser does its job so well, I almost gag. My heartbeat is rapid and I have a sudden and overwhelming urge to leave; just open the front door and go. Anna is telling me to calm down, but I'm talking back to her telling her that I'm okay, I'll just sneak out for a bit and take Pug for a walk.

There is a gentle knock on the door and I grip the edge of the sink. 'Coming,' I say.

My mother opens the door anyway, shuts it behind her. 'Food's ready, darling. Who were you talking to?'

'Myself.'

She hugs me again. 'I do that all the time.'

'I pretend she's here. I pretend she's here and talk to her,' I whisper to her lined neck, to her soft piccalilli curls.

'I know ... Don't knock it if it helps. C'mon.' She rubs my arms up and down with her hands. 'Let's eat, we're all famished.' She goes to leave.

'Sometimes,' I tell her, 'it feels like I'm losing my mind. I just need to see her one more time. Just once – to tell her how loved she is and if she has to go, then, I ...' I shake my head. Our eyes meet and my mother's fill. I smudge her tears away with my thumb.

'I talk out loud to your father all the time,' she says. 'And I

imagine him talking back to me the way he used to, not in the broken sentences he can manage now. I imagine him and me arguing during *Question Time*. Jess, he's here physically, but I lost a big part of him in the first stroke. We both understand loss, you and I.'

'God, Mum.' I pull her back to me. 'Am I ever going to be able to feel again?'

'You will. Because you have to. You have Rose.'

'I'm sorry I've been staying away. Everything. Anna, Dad, it's all so hard. I feel like an exhausted ninety-year-old.'

'You're still a young woman, Jess.'

I attempt a laugh. 'Not that young any more.'

'You have a life to lead. Don't waste it; don't wither on the vine. Anna would never forgive you. Your beautiful girl would hate that.' Her tears have traced thin parallel lines down her cheeks. She reaches forward, pulls some toilet paper from the roll and wipes her face.

'I can't cry,' I say. 'Not properly; not since the day I heard the news.'

She shrugs. 'I do enough of that for two,' she says, straightening out her clothes.

'I blame Dad.' I blurt it out.

The look of horror on her face says it all.

'He took us on that first snow holiday. He made her love it.'

'Oh, Jess ...' She takes my hand.

'I know it's wrong. I know it.'

‘Is that why you don’t come up?’ she asks simply.

I raise my hand to my mouth, exhale loudly through spread fingers. It comes out in uneven, ragged breaths. The question doesn’t need an answer so she pulls me from the room. As we walk, I focus on the love I have for my mother and the love I know Anna has for me. I close my eyes and will her home, as Mum and I walk arm in arm to the dining table, and together, all five of us eat roast beef with seven different vegetables.

Leah’s quiet on the way home. Pug is asleep in the carrier by my side.

‘How do you think your mum and dad were?’ Gus asks.

My eyes flit to Leah’s who turns around to face me. ‘What did you think?’ she says.

‘You first.’

‘Mum’s going to kill herself running around after him, way before *he* goes.’

‘I don’t know. He seems ... He just seems to have disappeared inside himself. He seems lost.’ I pause a moment before finishing. ‘I didn’t like the look of him.’

‘They did tell us that things would worsen over time, the risk of tinier strokes happening regularly.’

I suppress a sigh; stare out of the window; try not to think of the man I’ve just left as my once vibrant, athletic father; try not to think of the once glamorous woman who takes care of his every need now having piccalilli hair.

‘Do you agree we need to get Mum some help?’ Leah asks.

‘You tried, didn’t you?’ Gus says. ‘Last time you and I were here, you said it to her. She said she didn’t want any strangers in the house, that it would upset your dad.’

‘That was then,’ Leah said. ‘I think it’s probably time. She can’t keep doing what she’s doing. Can she?’ She turns around again to look at me.

‘Mum will do what Mum wants. If she says no strangers, then that means no strangers.’

Leah tuts. ‘She needs help,’ she repeated. ‘The GP has recommended him for a care package. All we have to do is put the wheels in motion and, even then, it could take time.’

‘Look, you’ve tried. Let me talk to her?’

‘Tell her we’ll find someone who looks like Daniel Craig,’ Leah says, removing her laptop from her bag and putting her glasses on.

I smile, despite myself. My mother has a thing for Daniel Craig, though I’m certain care workers who look like him are probably quite rare.

Gus grins at me in the rear-view mirror. Leah has snapped into work mode. There’ll be no talking to her now until we arrive home. Her work is her life. I remember when Anna became pregnant with Rose, together they had cried. Leah with a rare frustration; sadness that since she had willingly decided never to have children with Gus, already a father, it brought it home that she would never have ‘her own’ child. Anna because she, having slept with Sean only once, found herself with an unplanned and

very inconvenient pregnancy.

By the time Gus drops me and Pug off, my watch says seven forty and I feel like it's much later. I am planning a cup of tea, an hour of recorded *Downton Abbey*, a chat with Anna and then sleep – lots of it. With Rose away still with Sean, I take any opportunity to sleep longer and later. There's a pile of mail lying on the hallway floor. I open the cupboard under the stairs and, anything with Anna's name on it, I throw into the black refuse sack full of her post. The only thing bearing my name that I choose to open is a small brown padded package with my address in Doug's handwriting. Pug is yapping to escape the travel carrier as I rip it open. Inside, there's an item in a clear plastic bag, the sort I use for Rose's school lunch. A yellow Post-it is attached.

'You said you wanted this when we got it back. The police sent it through this week. I charged it but Anna has a lock on it and I haven't been able to open it with any code that I thought she'd use ... Let me know you get it okay? Doug'.

I let Pug out and she immediately wants out in the back garden for a wee. Opening the door, I look at it through the plastic cover. Anna's phone.

Just as I'm staring at it, as Pug runs back in and I shut the back door, the front doorbell rings. I head towards it, removing the bag, feeling her phone in my palm. It's as if I've been plugged into her once again.

When I open the door, I'm startled by the shape of a man in my porch.

‘Mrs Powers?’ He approaches, a shy hand outstretched. He’s dark blond, with tanned skin, blue eyes and trimmed facial hair. I don’t correct the title he uses for me and he retrieves his hand when he senses my reticence.

‘My name’s Max. I’m a friend of Anna’s.’

Hearing her name aloud makes me catch my breath. Hearing him say ‘I’m a friend’ makes me hold it. He is saying ‘I am’, not ‘I was’. Whoever this guy is, I decide immediately that I like him.

‘Come in,’ I say, kicking Pug’s travel carrier to one side. ‘We haven’t met before, Max, have we?’ I know he’s not one of Anna’s local friends. ‘How far have you come?’

‘Hertfordshire,’ he says. ‘And no, we’ve never met.’

Max. I’m racking my brain to try and remember him. ‘Do you work with her?’

He stares at me a moment as I roll Anna’s phone over and over in my hand.

‘I did,’ he says. ‘We worked together.’

Past tense. ‘Were you ... were you?’

We’re standing in the hallway. I point him to the back of the house, to the kitchen-diner that would fit in my parents’ larder. ‘Were you ...?’ I try again. My heart thumps a rapid clip-clop beat in my ribcage. My lips are dry.

‘I was on the ski-trip,’ he says, meeting my eyes.

8. Anna

Raw Honey Blogspot 15/10/2014

Mama's just been *screaming* at me to 'move my shit from the front door'. It's her standard rant and I'll do it – I'll move them but can't promise the pile of shoes won't build again. I'm a messy cow. One moment Mama tells me I get it from my father, and the next she's shouting, telling me that laziness is not genetic.

She's mad! She's the best mother in the world and I adore her, *but*, she's a tough act to follow; sees things in a very black-and-white way, whereas I seem to live in grey. In my world, nothing is crystal clear and I don't believe in spending too much time figuring shit out. She'd say that if my world is muddy, it's because of choices I've made. And (tough act to follow?) she's right, of course.

But there's still something about mothers and daughters – sounds crappy happy – but it *is* a special bond. Mama and I have it and I have it with DD. It's there and nothing can ever break it. (Keep telling yourself that, Honey.)

When I was little, before Dad left, I remember Mama and Dad as if they were one, inseparable. If I have a memory, they're both there: rock pooling in France on a camping holiday, peering up at me from the audience at the nativity play. He left when I was twelve and apparently I should be damaged by that but, honestly? How bad can it have been when all I can remember is good stuff.

At least, that's how I recall it, but maybe, maybe when we look back, we just make people seem better than they actually were?

Anyway, suddenly, there was just the two of us, Mama and me. Sure, she's had lovers over the years, but she never introduced any to me. She kept our home a sanctuary and I loved that. If Dad had to be gone, then I loved growing up with just her and me.

But I don't seem to have inherited her selfless gene. I don't seem to have inherited the tidy gene and I certainly have no ability to see things clearly! Perhaps I *am* more like my father (though he has always said that leaving Mama was absolutely the right thing to do for him. Crystal. Clear. *Carpe diem* and all that). What I do have is a nagging conscience. It pokes me more often than friends on Facebook but I force myself to ignore it (and then, afterwards, worry I'll go to hell in a rusty wheelbarrow).

Comment: Solarbomb

You said your dad left when you were twelve. Were you really not angry at him?

Reply: Honey-girl

I remember being upset. I remember knowing everything would be different, but no, strangely, I don't think I was angry. I still saw a lot of him, and Mama and I, we worked well together. I missed him but ... it was okay. I think I was meant to feel different, devastated, but I didn't. I still had a mother and father who adored me and somehow we worked it out.

Comment: Anonymous

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9. Theo

He wasn't imagining it, the woman was flirting with him. He tried to remember her name – Jane, Janet; something beginning with a 'J'. She offered him a slim hand. Long tapered fingers with short but manicured nails grasped his in a firm handshake. 'Jacqueline,' she said. 'You'd forgotten, hadn't you?' She smiled, though Theo had to look down to Finn's height to see it. She was tiny next to his own six-four frame. But that handshake had been strong and, as she stood next to Finn, all kitted out in Lycra and cleats, there was something very self-assured about her.

'No, of course I hadn't forgotten,' he said.

'Yes, he did. He forgot.' Finn snorted. 'Dad forgets everyone's name.'

'Jacqueline,' she repeated. 'Think French. Think you have to make it sound French even though I'm not. That will give you something to hook onto if you forget again.'

'Sorry,' he said. 'I definitely won't forget again. French.' He nodded.

'And talking of hooks, let's get you set up, young man.' Jacqueline play-punched Finn. 'We're doing timed races to the top tonight.'

'I'll be in the gym.' Theo jerked his head towards the next-door building.

'Great, enjoy,' Jacqueline said, before steering Finn towards

the wall.

Forty minutes later he was rowing hard. He stretched his long body forward on the machine, straightened his arms, then angled them at the elbows, pulling his body weight forward. The digital monitor at eye level told him he had already rowed 3.9 kilometres, which meant just over one more to go. He closed his eyes and, as his body moved, he thought of the woman next door with his son. He thought of her small, rounded body, nothing like Harriet's, who was tall and lean and angular. He thought of the breasts he had tried to avoid looking at. He thought of the way the suspension belt had wrapped around her thighs. *Shit*. He rowed harder, ignoring the sudden image of a naked Jacqueline as it imprinted itself in his brain.

When the alarm sounded and Theo slowed down, he opened his eyes to find Eddie, his gym buddy and a friend since school, staring at him, a wide smile on his face.

'Share, now,' he said. 'I want some of whatever you were thinking about.'

Theo lifted a small towel from the front of the machine and wiped his face. 'Wasn't thinking anything in particular.' His breath came in short pants.

'Liar. You're talking to someone who knows you.'

Standing slowly, he reset the machine to start again and headed to the men's showers in Phil's Gym.

'What's up with you anyway?' Eddie asked as he followed. 'You've had a face like a slapped bum since you arrived.'

‘I’m not sure, if I’m honest.’ Theo was surprised at his frank reply. He looked back at Eddie. ‘I have an incredible urge to go out and get completely shitfaced.’

Theo could almost hear the whirring in Eddie’s brain, trying to work out if there was any way he would get away with joining him; what excuse he could give his wife.

‘Stop, Ed. Jules would have you sliced and diced. Both of us have to get up for work in the morning and I have to go home with Finn.’ He rested his hand on his friend’s arm. ‘Another time ...’

When he stood under the pressured hot water, in the shower stall next to Eddie, he called in to him. ‘Stop thinking about it,’ he said, before switching the control to cold, gasping out loud with the shock.

‘What if I tell her you’re having a bad night and need my company?’ Eddie yelled. ‘The au pair, what’s-her-name-again, can look after Finn?’

Theo laughed. ‘I’m going home, Ed. We’ll do it soon.’

He listened to Ed groan. ‘Honestly, you wave it at me, like waving a lollipop at a child, then take it away. Seriously. Not. Fair.’

Theo left Eddie drying his hair, slung his gym bag over his shoulder and exited through a series of doors and corridors to the climbing centre where Finn was already waiting.

‘You’re late.’ His son pointed to his digital watch.

‘By one minute.’

‘Late is late,’ he said, stepping into side by Theo. Looking up

at the night sky – clear and star-laden, he added, ‘I don’t reckon aliens are ever late.’

‘Right.’

‘Think about it,’ Finn said. ‘More than likely they’re a highly evolved species. More than likely they’ve sorted out the annoying things in humans. Like being late.’

‘Right,’ Theo repeated. ‘Spag bol or chicken tonight?’

‘I’m not hungry.’

‘Tough.’ Theo pointed the remote at his four-year-old Volvo. ‘Get in. Decide on the way home. You’re eating supper.’ Theo had seen too many young people – and not just girls – through the surgery with either the start of, or a fully developed, eating disorder. It was his natural instinct to want to make his son eat. He bit his lip. ‘You really not hungry?’

Finn didn’t reply.

‘You understand you have to eat to give you energy to do things like your climbing ... You need to eat the calories in order to have them to spend.’

‘So you tell me all the time.’

Theo took in Finn’s profile as he stared through the windscreen putting his seatbelt on.

‘What *would* you like?’ he asked.

‘Just some tea and toast,’ Finn shrugged.

‘Tea and toast it is.’ He was in no mood for a spat.

In his son’s room, Theo picked two books up from the floor and placed them on his bedside table. The top one was a young

person's guide to computer technology, his last year's fixation. The second, a thick tome on the whole question of whether we're alone in the universe. The laptop, closed on his bedside table, would, Theo knew, be open up to Minecraft, his digital obsession and something he often played with his school friends online.

Theo leaned over Finn's sleeping form, smoothed his son's fringe away from his forehead, bent down and kissed his head. He noted the determined line of his chin, even in sleep. He got that from him. Next, the colour of that forelock he had just touched. That was exactly the same shade as his mother's. He also smelled the faint hue of tobacco from it.

You will be all right, he told himself, as he imagined Finn outside some shopping mall, hanging out with boys Theo didn't recognize, pursing his lips as he pulled on a cigarette. Or, worse, having the audacity to hang out of his rear bedroom window teaching himself to inhale. *You will be able to do this*.

In bed, he lay awake for a very long time. Whatever way he tried to settle, he couldn't. On his right side, he had stared at Harriet's pile of pillows for at least an hour, until he finally tossed them onto the floor. He moved his own two pillows and himself into the centre of the bed, then got up and rearranged the whole thing as it had been. He didn't want Finn to see that; to see parts of his mother vanishing from the house, from his bed.

From his left side he thought of sex; it was three months since he'd had sex. Harriet and his sex life had been brilliant; so brilliant that even when he'd known there was something wrong,

he had convinced himself it didn't matter. He sighed loudly, thumped his pillow and turned over again, stared at the narrow strip of light under the door from the landing. Beyond the door was his study, then Finn's room and, further along, Bea's room. He thought of her, twenty-three years old, almost the same age as Anna. He squeezed his eyes shut so hard that he was wide awake and any hope of sleep was gone.

His watch said 01:35 when he threw back the duvet, removed a dressing gown from a hook on the back of the door and moved silently to his study. There, he switched on the light and removed a book from one of the shelves. He settled himself into the reading chair; a recliner that Harriet had bought for him years ago. The book lay open on his lap. His reading glasses lay on top of the book. She was everywhere. The life that was; the one they had together, was everywhere – in the pillows, in the chair, all around. He should move, he thought, before dismissing the idea as a bad one for Finn's sake. This was his son's home – he just needed to get a grip.

Downstairs, he boiled the kettle and made himself a coffee, paced the floors of every room before settling in the front living room. He stood on a dining chair and unhooked each curtain slowly, allowing each one to curl into two separate piles on the floor flanking the window. He got down and stood back. That was better. There was, he told himself, as he attempted to fold the piles into something the charity shop would accept, no point at all to them.

Next he climbed the stairs and, after retrieving a suitcase from under the bed, began to pack Harriet's clothes. He had no idea of what order she would like them in, what way she would have done it, but they had to go. If anything at all was to be gained by a sleepless night, by the conversation he'd had with her yesterday rolling over and over in his head like a worn-out loop, he had to move on from that day in December. And removing her scent from their bedroom seemed like the best start. It only served as a reminder of his failure, of their failure. He slipped her shirts from their hangers one by one, placed them in the case. He removed her jumpers, already folded, put them on top. Trousers were laid, one crease only, the way Harriet liked them. He filled the suitcase quickly, moved his clothes into the empty space, took his aftershave from the *en suite* and sprayed it all over the inside.

As quietly as he could, memories of many Christmas Eves in his head, he went to the landing and pulled down the loft stairs. From the top of the stairs he removed a large holdall he and Harriet had used on their skiing holidays. He pushed the full suitcase back under the bed, made sure there was enough room for the holdall on the other side – Harriet's side. Within an hour he had removed all of his wife's clothes from the wardrobes they shared, from the drawers she used. He placed his hand on the empty hangers, moved them left to right along the hanging rail, spaced them out to try and hide the stripped reality.

At 03:12, he climbed into bed, knowing he had an early practice meeting at the surgery five hours later. He was exhausted

as he pulled the duvet over himself one more time. His head throbbed; a steady pulsing beat. He swallowed two paracetamol, then fell into a restless sleep, where one moment he was skiing with Anna and a holdall full of Harriet's clothes, and the next, a nameless Frenchwoman's head was smiling at him from Harriet's pillow.

Five minutes before he needed to leave the next morning, Theo sat fully dressed on his son's desk chair. He watched as Finn rubbed the sleep from his eyes and growled like a bear as his hand swiped his phone alarm off.

'Morning, son,' Theo said.

'Dad! You scared me!' Finn sat up straight, shielding his eyes with an angled arm as Theo switched on his bedside light.

'There's been more rain overnight; looks cold and wet out there,' Theo said, before taking a seat again. 'I have an early meeting so Bea will take you to school. Wrap up warm.'

Finn slumped back on his pillow. 'Right.'

'Finn, I'd like you to sit up, please.'

Something in his tone seemed to make Finn listen. He straightened up, his back against the wooden headboard, his slim pillow bunched behind him. 'What?' he asked.

'Just wanted a word,' Theo replied as he reached across to Finn's bedside table and lifted his laptop. Finn's eyes widened. 'What?' he repeated, not before Theo had already noticed something very close to panic in his eyes.

'I want to show you something.' Theo spoke as his fingers

moved on the keyboard. He kept the laptop on his knee, turned it around to face the screen at Finn. ‘See that?’

His son leaned forward. ‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘That is something I deal with regularly. That is a smoke-damaged lung. It belongs to a thirty-three-year-old woman with lung cancer.’

Finn was so silent, Theo could hear his breathing. ‘And listen, hear that? That’s you breathing slightly anxiously because you don’t know what to say. That’s your still-healthy lung breathing in and out, doing its job.’ He stood up and passed the laptop back to Finn, placed it on his long limbs stretched out under the duvet. ‘And that, Finn, is your laptop. Unless you want me to take it off you, along with your phone and climbing lessons, you will agree not to smoke again. You are eleven years old. Do you understand me?’

Finn’s expression was one of shock.

Theo walked towards the door. ‘I know things aren’t easy right now. I know you’re probably feeling very confused, but you talk to me, you hear?’ He turned around to a silent son hugging his laptop. ‘And Finn? I mean it about the smoking.’

‘I—’

‘Don’t.’ He raised a hand. ‘Don’t even attempt to lie to me.’

‘I was just going to point out that I am, in fact, almost twelve.’

Theo chomped on a cheek, wondered when exactly his son had become a smartass. ‘Yes, and if you want to make it to your birthday, you’ll chuck that packet of cigarettes in your third

drawer before I get home from work this evening.’

Theo closed the door behind him; tried to ignore the image he had of Finn sticking his tongue out or doing whatever foul gesture it was that ‘almost twelve’-year-olds did to their father when they were pissed off at the world. He checked his wrist and sighed. He was going to be late.

10. Jess

Watching *Downton Abbey* fades in importance as I listen to Max apologize for calling so late on a Sunday. I study him as he speaks. He's tall, with tight cut hair and brooding, heavy-lidded eyes. On the third finger of his left hand there is the faint tan line of a thick wedding band. He reminds me of someone; an old college tutor of Anna's whose name I've forgotten. As he shifts uncomfortably on our tatty sofa, I wonder what possessed Anna and me to bring it home. Even if we had ever got around to reupholstering it, as planned, it really is too big for one and too small for two.

He's taking in the room, eyes scanning left and right. They linger on a large black-and-white canvas photo of Anna and Rose that I have on the wall. Pug, delighted at new blood, is pushing a tennis ball along the floor, hoping that Max will take the hint and play with her.

'How's Anna's little girl?' Max asks.

'She's doing well. Considering. She's a happy child.'

'That's good. Does she miss her, I mean obviously ... can you tell if she does?'

I'm surprised at his bluntness. There's something refreshingly honest about it and, rather than disarming me, I'm drawn to him.

'There's times – she asks me about Mummy being with the angels.' I raise a palm in the air. 'Not my doing. I never told her

that. It was something her father told her way too soon. A couple of weeks after ... It was much too soon ... Anyway, she's away on holiday with him at the moment.'

I stop talking, not sure why I'm rambling about Sean's belief in the afterlife.

'I suppose you're wondering why I'm here.' Max suddenly seems nervous, pulling on his shirtsleeve every few seconds.

'You don't need a reason. You're a friend of Anna's.'

'I've always thought you must have a million questions, about that day.'

'Did you see what happened?' I watch as his Adam's apple reacts to my question.

'Yes.' He pulls himself together. 'A group of us were sitting across the valley, looking through the binoculars to see if we could spot them. They had gone up top, all of them off-piste.'

'Go on,' I urge him. He's looking at me as if he's not sure I'm ready to hear. He's probably right but I press him anyway.

'We heard it first. We hadn't heard the boom, that sound you hear when it's a controlled one. When the snow came, it was as if the whole of the mountaintop just slid downwards.'

I feel an ache in my chest that seems to have started in the centre of my heart and is sending gripping, clawing pains outwards. My hand automatically rests there. Pug is circling my left foot, looking up at me. She whimpers softly.

'I was watching her ski,' Max continues. 'She was a great skier, beautiful to watch. That day she was dressed in an all-in-one red

suit.’

The one I bought for her last Christmas. I searched high and low, contacted every ski store in the land until I found the one she’d circled in a magazine. On Christmas morning, she had whooped with the delight of a two-year-old getting their first doll. That was our last Christmas together, the three of us. We—

‘One minute I could see her, then snow, so much of it, and I saw her go. She tried to out-ski it, but I saw her disappear ...’

His eyes fill quietly and immediately I envy him. I envy him the ability to cry when I’m left with this constant, searing pain in my heart. He wipes the tears away with his sleeve, looks across the room at me. I avoid his eyes and, afraid that he will judge me some sort of cruel, unfeeling woman, tell him, ‘I haven’t been able to cry. Not since ... Not at all. It’s bizarre really, I could cry at *Bambi* beforehand and now, now ...’ I stand. ‘It’s like my tear ducts are permanently blocked.’

‘I can’t stop,’ he says. ‘I was the one who asked her to come on that holiday with us.’

‘You feel guilty.’

He nods aggressively.

I want to tell him that he should, that it’s not my job to assuage his guilt, and that if he had kept his mouth shut that Anna would still be here with me and Rose. Instead, I tap his shoulder reassuringly as I walk across the room to the fridge. I imagine Anna trying to out-ski it. She would have tried. She would have tried hard because my daughter would have wanted to live. Every

sinew in her body would have stretched to the max. I pour a large vodka from a bottle, hold it up in his direction. ‘I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten my manners. Would you like a drink?’

‘No, thank you.’ He shakes his head, angles it. ‘Is that her phone?’

I sit down, place my drink on the table beside me. ‘Yes, it is. The police had it, they’ve just sent it to Anna’s father. I can’t help feeling it has been sitting in some evidence locker, ignored all this time. I actually thought she had it on her.’ My voice drifts.

‘I gave it to them,’ he says. ‘She’d asked me to look after it while she skied.’ He shrugs awkwardly. ‘After the accident, I gave it to them, knew they’d be trying to ping it to try and ...’ He’s struggling to find a way to say ‘locate her’.

I pick it up again and it’s moments before I realize I’m pressing the diamanté phone cover, my fingertips forced against the ridges, leaving red, circular marks. Her phone. I’ve phoned it, left so many messages for her. I’ve made sure her account remains open, just in case somewhere, on some parallel plane, it might be possible for her to hear my voice, to know she’s loved and missed.

‘Why?’ I ask him suddenly.

‘Sorry?’

‘Why did she give you her phone?’

‘I don’t know. Just before she left, she literally tossed it through the air at me, said, “Look after that for me, will you?” Then she was gone. The signal *was* dire out on the slopes.’

I'm unable to reply. I try to quell the pointed feeling I can sense in my jaw at the word 'gone'.

'She was always on it, constantly thumbing away. I assumed it was texting all the time. I mean, some of it was, but she told me shortly before the accident that she just used it to think into.'

I swallow some alcohol, feel the burn, then say, 'I'm not sure what you mean?'

'I'm not sure either; it's just what she said.' He shrugs, hesitates a moment. 'You know, I think one of the reasons I came here is to tell you that she was happy. On the trip? She'd been a little distracted just beforehand, probably just work stuff, but as soon as we got there, she told me it was as if the mountain air had cleared her head. She was happy.'

'She was?'

'Yes. The snow was great. On that last day, the fresh fall of powder had us all excited.' He hesitates. 'The group weren't supposed to leave for another thirty minutes and had they waited ... I'd injured my foot the day before; the hire boots, they were biting. I didn't go with them that morning.'

'Anna's a fresh-powder fiend. She'd have been itching to get going.'

He nods and I can tell from his expression he's probably regretting the visit. What to say to the mother of the woman you possibly had feelings for; who left to go skiing with friends and never returned while you rested your leg nearby. And had she just left at the allotted time, not got overexcited by fresh-powder

fall, they'd probably all be in the pub next to the office, mulling over their shared Dropbox of photos, downing beers. What to say? I can't help him.

He stands. 'I should probably go. I'm glad you've got the phone. There'll be pictures.'

I look at my glass, just one mouthful gone. 'I'll drop you at the station.'

'No,' he says. 'Please. Stay. I don't want to put you out. Here, take this.' He presses a business card into my hand, one with a handwritten personal email address. 'If there's ever anything you want to ask, I don't know, anything ... just call?'

Outside, I can hear the wind has risen. From the front room, the chimney hoots an owl-like sound. The rain, which had trickled twenty minutes earlier, now slaps against the kitchen window.

I crumple the card into my pocket. 'I'll drop you at the station. It's starting to blow a gale out there.'

He doesn't argue. Before I leave, I plug Anna's phone in to charge.

'Stay, Pug. I'll be back in a few minutes.'

Pug trails behind us and I can hear her cry through the closed front door.

Vodka has a way of sliding down the throat. It's like a pleasant burning sensation as it flames its way to my hungry gut. I have waited for the phone to half-charge before entering the four-digit code that I know will open it. *Incorrect PIN*. I try her birthday,

my birthday – all incorrect. I frown at it, baffled, sure that it had always been Rose’s birthday.

I’m almost ready to throw it in temper when there’s another ring at the front door which makes me jump. Pug jerks in her sleep but doesn’t wake and I automatically look at my watch – 9:08. It’s late. I pad through the hall, as quietly as possible, and peer through the peephole, then open it so quickly that I almost hit myself in the face.

‘Nanny!’ she cries and leaps into my arms.

Sean has no choice but to let go of her hand.

‘What? Hello, gorgeous girl!’ I hug her so tight, I feel and hear her gasp.

Sean remains on the porch. ‘She wanted to come home,’ he says simply.

Rose jumps down, takes my hand and is looking back to her father. ‘Come in, Daddy. Nanny will make you a cup of tea.’

He bends down, opens his arms for a hug. ‘No, love, I won’t stay. We talked about this, remember? I explained that if you came home I still had to go back. Your grandma and granddad are waiting for me.’

She nods, releases my hand and goes to hug him. ‘Okay,’ she says.

I tell her to bring her rucksack up to her room and she obliges, practically skipping up the stairs as Sean slides her small suitcase over the threshold.

‘What happened?’ I ask, when I think she’s out of earshot.

‘She just never settled.’ He shrugs. ‘As soon as she got there, she was crying to come back. She was crying for Anna, crying for ... home.’

I sigh. I have never told her Anna is dead because as far as I’m concerned she’s not. I have just nodded along with her father-inspired talk of angels.

‘And I guess she thinks of this as her home,’ he says.

I bristle. ‘This is her home, Sean. She has lived here all her life, almost all of it here with her mother.’

‘And you,’ he says, and I can’t help but think I hear a trace of resentment.

‘And me.’

‘Now’s not the time,’ he seems to hold his breath for a moment, ‘but we do need to talk about ongoing arrangements.’

My blood freezes. ‘Arrangements?’

‘As I said, now’s not the time.’ His breath hits the cold air outside in vapours.

I glance up the stairs. ‘Now’s perfect, Sean.’

‘I’m not happy with Rose living here full time.’ His hands are parked in both of his low-slung pockets. I immediately think back to Anna’s accident and how I leaned on him a lot more than usual for childcare. He, in turn, leaned on his parents.

Pulling the door closed between him and the stairs, I leave a gap wide enough to see and speak through. Somehow the best words that can come out seem to find themselves spoken. ‘Rose seems to be quite happy. Isn’t that what matters? In the

circumstances.’

‘She does. I see that, but I’m her father and I need to do what’s best for her in the long run.’

I have only met his mother once. A small, rotund woman who likes to eat cream éclairs is the physical image I remember. I also remember him parroting every word she said when we were together that one afternoon. I question now: are these his words or hers?

‘I see,’ I say. But I don’t. Rose is coming downstairs behind me, jumping on each step as if to make her presence known.

‘We’ll talk when I get home,’ Sean says. ‘I’m heading back there tomorrow, want to try and get the rest of the holiday with Mum and Dad.’

I open the door wider again so that Rose can hug him goodbye and I’m reminded of the night of the news. Doug here on the same doorstep. The moment I heard about the accident, the primal reaction I had. Having said goodbye, Rose disappears into the kitchen and I stare at Sean, aware of the gushing sound of that fight-or-flight adrenalin in my veins once more.

‘Rose-lives-here-with-me.’ The words are punctuated, staccato.

‘Na-na!’ Rose runs into the hall, Pug jumping around her legs excitedly. ‘We got a dog!’

‘We have, darling. Why don’t you take her into the kitchen to play?’

‘Jess,’ Sean says from my doorway. ‘Anna’s been gone almost

three months. I'm moving to Blackpool in June and I'm taking Rose with me.'

His parents live in Lytham St Annes. I picture the scene. Grandma Éclair, a woman Anna couldn't stand, taking over from Nanny Jess. Memories of long-gone rows I had with Anna about the father of her child surface. I am, I fear, about to be punished for never really liking him.

'Over my dead body.' I hiss the words and shut the door. With my back against the panels, I see Rose standing there, looking at me, her eyes wide and frozen in her tiny face. I hold out my arms and she runs into them. Silently, I promise her I will never let her go. Never.

11. Anna

Raw Honey Blogspot 13/06/2013

Earlier today I was stopped in the street and asked if I'd take part in a television interview where they were wondering what it's like to live and date in London. I told them, sure, I'm happy to be asked what it's like to live and date in London.

So, with no prep whatsoever, this gorgeous young interviewer called Faye waved a big mic at me and said, 'So, here we have X, who we've just met. X, tell us, what's it like living and dating in London?'

So I did. I told her. I told her and her viewing public that it's shit. That it's impossible to meet someone in London. I'm a young, healthy, heterosexual woman and any man I'm ever interested in is either gay, living with someone, deeply involved with someone or married. There are no single worthy men. I've tried dating the allegedly worthy younger men and, trust me, they're only interested in a quick fuck or they're dull. And older men are gay or married.

After she laughed nervously, she asked me if I'm interested in meeting a life-mate going forward and if I'd consider online dating?

So, with no prep whatsoever, I laughed in Faye's face and told her that I'd already tried online dating, which just confirmed for me that any interesting men are gay or married. Take Marcus,

for example, I told her. We dated a few times before I found out he was already hitched. To be fair he did tell me, but, as I said, only after we went out a few times, so I said ‘Goodbye Marcus’. Then Leo. Leo was definitely not sure which way he bent and I told him I’d rather not be an experiment, thanks very much. Or of course, I told the lovely Faye, there’s always Tinder. I asked her if she’s tried the swiping phenomenon. Tinder, I told her, has the most expressive text language. There’s no foreplay; someone might just say, ‘You know you want to – just tug on my bone’, or how about ‘Wanna sit on my face?’, my most recent offering. I deliberately look into camera, tell them that dating in today’s world, and let’s not blame London, is a hoot. Great fun.

Faye finished up gaping at me like a salmon struggling upstream. Her cameraman, thankfully, had stopped filming way before I stopped talking.

Then I told her that monogamy is an outdated idea anyway.

When I got to work I cried like a baby.

It’s been over for a very long time now and still, I miss Him. I try to avoid seeing Him at all costs because it’s HARD. It is really hard.

Here are the things I just miss:

His feather touch.

His voice. (He can’t sing but He has the loveliest speaking voice.)

The sex. (With Him, He only has to touch me and I almost come. He’s ruined me for any other man. No one comes close.

Forgive the pun, dear readers ...)

His jokes. (They're awful; so old school, but they make me laugh.)

Those lazy bed days. (There were never enough, but when we managed to snatch one together, usually in a small hotel on the river near Marlow – well, neither of us ever wanted to leave.)

His calls. (He would call me most days; fill me in on his day, ask me about mine.)

His hugs.

His kiss.

And the things I don't miss:

The fact that I could never just 'be' with Him in public.

The fact that He has a lovely wife.

The fact that I had to lie to people I love.

The fact that we could probably *never* be together. Not really. Not in a 'Hey, babe, I'm home, I've had a tough day, let's just cuddle up on our sofa?' kind of way. We could never have that.

And, see, *that's* really what I want.

Comment: Hieroglyphic 24

What a load of tosh! I'm single, living in London, heterosexual and interesting. Want my number?

Reply: Honey-girl

Hmm. No. You're all right.

Comment: Anonymous

He's married?

Reply: Honey-girl

Afraid so ...

12. Theo

‘Charles Everard is insisting on seeing you. He’s refused to let the carers in and won’t accept anybody else. Will you have time to slip by and see him after morning surgery?’ Sarah, Theo’s PA, spoke through his open door and above the sounds of the busy waiting room opposite.

Theo looked at his watch, just as his mobile phone rang, his home number showing up on the display. He nodded agreement at Sarah, gestured to her to close the door behind her and answered his phone.

‘Bea, everything okay?’ It was, he realized, the first time she had ever called him, and coming so soon after his discussion with Finn, his heart was in his mouth.

‘Everything good, Theo. You wish I do shop for you?’ Bea’s English, though certainly better than his Spanish, sometimes left him feeling like he was playing charades.

‘Food,’ she continued. ‘You wish I get big food?’

She was offering to do the weekly food shop. He rubbed his eyes with his forefinger and thumb and sighed. The cupboards were indeed bare. He just didn’t seem to have the time to do everything he always did and add in the things Harriet used to do too. Everything food-related had been her domain. Since she had left, quick meals had been the order of the day, except on those rare occasions when he’d had time to buy fresh food, in

which case Bea would always cook.

Her doing the food shopping made perfect sense. She had use of the car, the one Harriet hadn't taken to London with her. Why not? Promising that he would drop some money off to her at lunchtime, he hung up the phone, trying not to think about how even buying food looked different since Harriet left.

Thirty minutes later he was driving to seventy-year-old Charles Everard's house. Once a well-known artist, the man had lost his wife to cancer nine months earlier. Since then, he had been depressed, telling Theo that the light had gone out in his life. A recurring, chronic leg ulcer meant he had also been housebound for weeks, which didn't help.

After the third knock on the door, Mr Everard answered. 'Thanks for coming, Doc,' he said, allowing Theo to pass by him along a narrow hallway lined with stacks of old magazines.

'Bad day, Charles?' he asked.

'All bad days,' his patient muttered in between bouts of spluttering.

'That sounds rough; we'd better have a look at that chest.' Theo watched as Charles took a seat in the only free chair in his living room, the sofa obscured by books and canvases and scattered painting-related paraphernalia. The television was on; a documentary about monkeys had been muted and Theo was momentarily distracted by primates scurrying across the screen. When he turned to face Charles, the man already had his shirt rolled up, exposing his skinny frame.

‘Can’t seem to shift this cough.’

Theo listened through his stethoscope, heard the rattle immediately. ‘Think you’ll need a course of antibiotics to shift it, Charles. I have a few to start you off, but Elaine will have a prescription filled for you.’

Charles wrinkled his nose. ‘Don’t want no women in here.’

‘Elaine is a friend and colleague, Charles. I trust her. She’s the only one who can get here every day and you have to let her in to dress that leg. No more of this ignoring her. She’s here to help take care of you.’

‘How’s your boy?’ Charles asked as he rolled his shirt down his shrinking middle.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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