

THE FAVOURITE

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S.V. BERLIN

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For Anne

I



House

1

Monday

White Galoshes

She was in New York when it happened, on the way to a party, laughing and joking in the back seat of a cab. Now, in the grey light of an English morning, she followed her brother along the hospital corridor and wondered how she had got here. She could remember almost nothing of the last twelve hours – the message that flashed up on her phone, stark and to the point, the mad dash back to her apartment, the journey to the airport and the flight itself. And yet, there remained the simple fact of being here, which felt inexplicable and unexpected, and in that way had all the hallmarks of a dream.

As they continued through another pair of swing doors and down several flights of stairs, she listened to their shoes squeak on the linoleum like footstep sound effects. Ever since she was a small child she had mentally rehearsed for this event, but today those careful scenarios had vanished, the reality flat and unreal against its surroundings – the plain

red bricks of the hospital building and the ordinary tone of their voices – while that other voice, the constant observer developed through therapy and other American pastimes, the voice which analysed and commented, had today been utterly silenced.

‘They really do keep these places in the basement,’ she murmured to her brother as they descended the stairs. He looked tall and remote – and much older, of course, since the last time she had seen him. He acknowledged her with a slight, not unfriendly shrug, while his girlfriend – a timid-looking person who had scarcely uttered a word – continued to follow a few steps behind them. A minute or two earlier she had found herself trying to make small talk with Peter, the attendant who had met them at reception. Now she heard him clear his throat. ‘I know it’s a cliché,’ he said, ‘but she really does look very peaceful.’ This disclaimer was clever of him, she thought. He had taken the measure of his visitors, calculated perhaps that despite the circumstances they considered themselves cynical and knowing, above common displays of hysterics or emotional outpourings – and adjusted his words accordingly. They reached the bottom of the stairwell and entered a dim passageway. *Not long now*, she thought.

They arrived in a furnished waiting area, where Peter opened a side door. ‘We’re just in here,’ he said in a low voice, and ushered them through into some sort of anteroom. She saw a large interior window and beyond this another, smaller room, carpeted and softly lit, its walls swagged in a thick curtain material. In the very centre of this room was a bed, and on the bed was a person who was clearly fast asleep.

Her brother was the first to speak. ‘She looks asleep,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she said. It was true. You could see breath in the rise and fall of the sheet, even at this distance. A memory came to

her, like an object thrown up by a wave – of *King Lear*, how the king thought he saw Cordelia’s breath upon a mirror – and she turned away from the window and saw that Peter the attendant was waiting, with his discreet shop assistant’s air, a little behind and to one side of them.

‘Please,’ he said, motioning towards the little room, ‘take as long as you like.’

She glanced back through the window, at the figure on the bed.

‘I brushed her hair,’ he added nervously, ‘the way I thought she might have liked it.’

‘Thank you.’ She didn’t know what else to say, struck again by the immense tact and complexity of his words, and overcome by an almost unbearable feeling of gratitude for this person, whose voice was full of kindness and apology, who had – as the duty nurse had pointedly informed them – left his own family and come into work on a bank holiday for the benefit of someone else’s.

Peter gave her a wan smile and excused himself

‘Do you mind if I go in alone first?’ she said, turning to her brother. He shrugged.

‘I’m not going in, thanks,’ he said.

The room felt hushed and separate. And friendly, she decided – definitely friendly and warm, like a friend’s sitting room. She was relieved to be allowed to make her approach gently and from a distance, rather than having it sprung on her as she had always feared. She had always imagined that when the time came she would be met by an officious and indifferent man in white overalls and brought into somewhere clinical and cold. Their shoes would echo off steel and tile and she would be marched up to a metal trolley where he would whip the sheet off with a magician’s flourish and no warning. Slowly she neared the bed and noticed

that her mother's face was framed by a kind of white ruff or flouncy Elizabethan collar – a gesture that showed care and thoughtfulness. Edging closer, she stood motionless for several seconds, waiting. The room was silent. Her mother's head was turned slightly to one side, to the right, and her eyes were closed. *She looks exactly like herself*, she thought gratefully. If her features looked wispy and indistinct, incidental in some way, this lent her the careless look of a sleeping figure in a painting – a Pre-Raphaelite Ophelia, hair fanned out in the water. In a crack of her mother's lips there was a fleck of dried blood, and she had the urge to dab it off, as her mother would have done for her at one time, with a scrap of licked tissue that held the faint odour of lipstick.

She leant down and gently kissed her forehead. It was something she had never done before, and doing it now felt artificial and faintly dishonest. Her mother's skin was very cold – or rather she assumed it was, because, as she straightened up, the sensation, or the memory, seemed to vanish. She wondered how you were supposed to say goodbye. Were you to say it out loud, the way people did in films? Or were you to quietly think it to yourself? She murmured it under her breath, feeling foolish and fraudulent, the word inadequate and not enough. Last chance for everything, she thought: to see her mother's hands, which really were those of a pianist – the first part of 'Für Elise' anyway, and most of the difficult second part, long, tapering fingers moving rapidly across the keys. Effortless.

On top of the sheet someone had placed a blanket, as if to provide warmth. It was a pretty and thoughtful thing, brushed cotton like a baby's blanket and covered in tiny flowers – speedwells, perhaps, or daisies. Gingerly she took hold of one corner and lifted it and saw beneath the bars and wheels of a metal trolley. There was only the outline of

her mother's arms, bound to her sides by a cotton or linen winding sheet, the length of her body wrapped entirely. She drew the blanket back up, as for a moment the sheet's crisscrossing weave seemed to stand out in great detail, making her think briefly, guiltily, about thread count. There was one last thing, she decided, and she felt a frisson of wrongdoing. Her mother, of all people, would have had no objection to it. In fact her mother would have approved. *Would have*. Impossible words. She pushed them away and reached into her coat pocket. Her camera was an out-of-date contraption, the film having to be schlepped to the photo store to be developed every time. But it gave the taking of photos the satisfying surprise factor that was so rare these days. Leaning in close, she pressed down on the shutter. The click, normally imperceptible, felt jarring and irreverent in the little room as a fraction of a second later the flash illuminated her mother's face.

Out in the corridor her brother and his girlfriend were speaking in low voices. Once more, Peter seemed to appear from nowhere, a few steps behind her. She remembered another mystery she and her mother had speculated about, but for some reason, once the internet arrived, had never got round to looking up.

'I was wondering,' she asked Peter, 'what temperature you keep them at.'

She glanced across at her brother, who continued to stare ahead, unfazed – but she saw his girlfriend's head snap round. They had discussed the particular horror of mortuaries, she and her mother. They had wondered about what went on in them, and where. And this was their chance. Her chance.

'We keep the temperature at four degrees,' Peter replied, in a matter-of-fact way that did not surprise her.

'This place ...' she said. She felt the need to acknowledge the room behind them, its soft lighting and comforting fabrics – and Peter's kindness. 'It doesn't look how you'd expect.'

'Well, we try,' Peter answered with a far-off smile, as if recalling something lost and long ago. 'It's a difficult time. And I always think ... if it were *my* mother, one of *my* family ...' He cleared his throat. 'Well,' he said, 'it wouldn't do to see men walking about in white galoshes, would it?' He smiled more broadly at this, as if making a little joke. *White galoshes!* It was true, then. Of course it was – if not here, then somewhere the public never saw, in a room farther back, or one level down. But, as her brother stood up and frowned at his watch, she realised that there was no one to tell.

'It was kind of him, wasn't it?' she remarked to her brother as they all walked up the stairs.

'What was?'

'How he tried to make Mum's hair look nice and everything ...'

'It's his job, Isobel,' he said flatly. 'Anyway, she went to the hairdresser's on Friday.' A pause. 'She would have hated it brushed back like that.'

It was true that her mother always liked to prepare for her visits – everything perfect and polished and scrubbed – clean sheets on all the beds, grass freshly mown, the house aired and welcoming. Her hair was always an issue – *too fine, too flyaway* – so that whenever Isobel was coming her mother had it washed and set specially, proudly informing the hairdresser (so she imagined) that this was in preparation for her daughter who would be coming to see her all the way from New York. Today's visit was unplanned, booked last night at the last minute, the actual last plane out of the airport, the one you heard about in all the movies. As they went through the lobby and passed the white hospital clock,

she was astonished to see that only twelve minutes had passed since they arrived. She turned to comment on this to her brother, but he was walking quickly ahead, pushing his way through the revolving door, his girlfriend at his heels. The nurse at the main desk had not looked up this time, or even seemed to notice them.

‘So I was thinking,’ she said, and leaned forward slightly into the gap between the front seats. They had been driving for several minutes and the silence was beginning to weigh on her. It was like coming out of a movie with someone who had nothing to say. ‘*I was thinking...*’ she repeated, having received no obvious response, ‘that, if you like, I don’t mind taking Mum’s room? Then you guys can take the big bedroom in the front.’ In the circumstances the prospect of sleeping in her mother’s room was both comforting and discomfiting, but it would show good faith to offer up the larger room, which had been hers when they were children.

Her brother didn’t reply and she took this as tacit agreement. ‘Should we grab something to eat on the way back?’ she asked. She hadn’t eaten since dinner last night, and wasn’t the least bit hungry, but she felt the need to say something, to offer practical suggestions. She turned to her brother’s girlfriend. ‘What do you think?’ she asked. The girl stared back fearfully, like a small animal deciding whether to cross the motorway.

‘I think we’ll just drop you off, if that’s all right,’ her brother cut in.

Weren’t they going straight to the house?

‘Drop me off where?’ she said.

‘At Mu...’ Edward cleared his throat. ‘*At the house,*’ he said. ‘Unless there was somewhere else you’d like us to drop you?’

The question hung in the air. Clearly she had missed something, some errand or work commitment her brother had mentioned earlier – though surely his workplace, whatever it was, would be closed today? The last remnants of the town flowed past in a grey-brown smear of identical terraced houses. She heard the shift of the gears as the small car began the steep climb up on to the Downs.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘but I’m really confused. Where are you guys going to stay?’ Hadn’t their mother once let slip that her brother lived at least an hour from Danecroft Road, even without May Day traffic?

‘Rather sleep in my own bed to be honest,’ her brother replied. His tone suggested that the matter was settled. He murmured something to his girlfriend, who reached behind her seat for the white plastic carrier bag that had been handed to him at the hospital. It contained their mother’s belongings – her clothes and jewellery. He gestured, and she pushed it under her seat without looking at it. ‘We didn’t get much sleep last night,’ he said.

This sounded like a reproach. Did her brother think that she had somehow contrived to absent herself from the hospital and from their mother’s bedside? To be with someone during their final minutes and at the moment of their death was a precious thing, a privilege. Edward was lucky to have shared this time with their mother.

‘Your place is such a long drive, though, isn’t it?’ she said, determined not to take the bait.

‘We’ll make a start on the house first thing in the morning,’ her brother continued, ignoring the question. ‘There’s a lot to take care of. I expect there’s some food in the kitchen. Or we can let you out at the supermarket.’ The town’s only supermarket stood on the site of what had used to be its only cinema. Their mother had taken them to see their first ever

film there, *101 Dalmatians*. After the building was shuttered and demolished, she and her brother had spent a whole summer playing on the site – digging up fragments of old glass and pottery and lengths of twisted rusty iron from what, she learned later, were the ‘footings’ – the very foundations of the structure. She was amazed the place hadn’t fallen down. ‘Up to you,’ her brother prompted. But it wasn’t up to her at all, Isobel thought. He had made the decision for her in the hollow, yet supremely reasonable, policeman’s voice she didn’t recognise, as if threatening her with arrest or a misdemeanour fine. When had Edward turned into this stuffy, uptight person? How different he was from the young man she used to know, with his open face and earnest questions. Then again, he had seemed different the last time they met, hadn’t he? Then, too, the severity and unfairness of his words had shocked her. After that came his silence, and her unanswered letters, and the great span of years, until his text last night, more than nineteen years later. Aptly, his number had come up on her phone as ‘Unavailable’, and this lack of caller ID had provided an interval in which she had been able to dismiss the message, whose news was grim and unlikely and suspiciously unsigned – *Mum in hosp. Call if you like* – clearly a bad joke or a miscommunication. She had spoken to her mother earlier in the day, and she had been in good spirits, looking forward to doing a bit of spring cleaning, she said, about to make a start on the garden and tackle all the weeds. Then the second message arrived, signed this time with her brother’s name, and she had gone straight to the airport. His next was reassuring, oddly jovial and affectionate – *Yes, of course we’ll collect you! xo*. If there was one paltry shred of silver lining in this, Isobel remembered thinking as the cab lurched up Third Avenue and into the Queens Midtown Tunnel, it was that they might

now reconcile as their mother had always wanted. Until this moment she hadn't questioned the idea. She had taken it for granted that an event of this magnitude would unite them, that it would eclipse their estrangement completely, rendering it a petty and trivial thing. That it couldn't fail to. They would stay at Danecroft Road, enclosing themselves in the house for the last time, and get through it together as their mother would have wanted. Now, she watched her brother's face, austere and impassive in the driving mirror, and knew she'd been mistaken.

'Supermarket's fine,' she told him.

They drove on in silence, up towards the high road that crossed the Downs, past the greenish-silver tufts of grass, blown flat by the wind, and the familiar white dots of sheep scattered among patches of scraggly yellow gorse. Soon the lighthouse would flash by, still in its losing race with the sea. In a recent letter, she remembered, her mother had mentioned that money was being raised to repaint 'La Jolie Dame', as it was known in the area, and restore its smart red and white stripes. *They've moved it – again!!* her mother had written; they had set the structure farther back from the crumbling chalk edge of Beachy Head. She tried, and failed, to catch her brother's eye in the driving mirror. 'Anyone jumped off recently?' she said, as they passed the turn-off. The cliff was notorious. As bloodthirsty little children they had gobbled up news of each new suicide. 'Throwing themselves off it since the seventh century,' their mother had had no qualms in informing them. Though occasionally someone's dog went careening over the edge, and this had seemed to all three of them far more tragic.

'Not too bothered about that sort of thing to be honest,' her brother replied.

'Got it,' she said. She turned her attention back to the window and watched the river come into view, looping its

way back and forth across the marshy valley to meet the sea – in its own good time, as their mother liked to say. One more hill and they would be in sight of the first rooftops and chimneys of the small seaside town where they had grown up – and, after that, the inconceivably empty house at Danecroft Road with its fridge full of food their mother would never eat and the bed she would never sleep in and the rooms she would never walk through again.

Taking out her phone, she typed out a text. She and Martin had been best friends all through secondary school, losing touch only when she'd had to drop out, in the first year of sixth form. In recent years they had struck up a friendship again, and since last night Martin had messaged at least three times. Why didn't she stay with him and Sean? They were practically next door, he pointed out, just a few stops inland on the train. An hour ago she had thanked him again but said that she'd be more than fine staying at Danecroft Road with her brother. The car reached the top of the hill and the sea appeared and spangled for a moment, shifting and congealing into the distance as Martin's reply lit up her phone. *We're so pleased!! Your bed all made up in your room.* Isobel stared at the eleven words, filled for the second time that day with a stupid gratitude.

Sunday

A Simple Fool

Leaving the pub, Edward was momentarily flummoxed about what to do next. It was a good twenty minutes' walk back to Danecroft Road, but hanging about for a minicab

would take even longer. If he wanted to get to the house before his mother and Jules left in the ambulance he'd have to leg it.

As it turned out, he managed this not too badly. He had weaved with a spastic half-trot on his dodgy knees through the packs of whooping, binge-drinking teenagers, up on to the high street and into the twitten, to limp out, finally, on to Danecroft Road just in time to see the ambulance pull away.

'Bugger,' he said, stopping to catch his breath and pat himself down for the car keys. Was this what he got for claiming a few hours to himself? For having the gall to slink off to the pub for once? Earlier, when Jules had offered to stay at the house and help his mother finish the weeding, he had experienced a rare burst of optimism. Who would have guessed, he had thought happily, on his leisurely saunter down, feeling pleasantly full after an early lunch, that after all this time his mother and his girlfriend were finally warming to one another?

The ambulance was disappearing up towards the main road and, as he patted himself down again, Edward tried not to count how many times he'd instructed his mother not to use the stepladder in the garden. The bottom rung was dangerously loose, and the ladder would undoubtedly have had a hand in the fall or whatever mishap his mother had managed to bring on herself. 'This is why we have to keep an eye on her,' he had informed Jules recently: not because Mary was Grandma Buggins – some wobbly old dear who threatened to keel over for no reason – but because she was obstinate and refused to take his advice. She had declined his offer of a trip to the unfeasibly cavernous and depressing Home 'n' Wear to buy a new ladder, claiming the old one simply wanted repairing, and that *furthermore* – according to her – this was a simple task she could *manage perfectly*

well myself, thanks all the same. Edward sighed. Duct tape, he thought, locating the keys in a trouser pocket he could have sworn he'd already searched at least twice – *that* would be the culprit. His mother's make-do-and-mend attitude was admirable, but still an infuriating holdover from World War Two. Not that he'd thought, when Jules had rung just now, to ask precisely what happened and whether the stepladder was involved and whether his mother had sprained a wrist or twisted an ankle or whatever – there'd been no time for all that palaver – but knowing his mother it wasn't hard to guess.

By an unusual piece of luck he'd found a parking space yesterday right outside the house, so now, with some crafty manoeuvring round traffic, he managed to catch the ambulance up and get himself wedged in right behind it. It was frowned upon, speeding along in the wake of an ambulance – *a bit of a sneaky*, his mother would say. No doubt she'd tell him off about it later. And normally he would agree with her, but it wasn't as if he were some oik late for a football match; he only wanted to save his mother and his girlfriend the stress of arriving at the hospital alone, not to mention dealing with all the bumf they handed you – more and more of it these days. Farther along the main road a line of cars had pulled over to make way, and, as they hurtled past, Edward glimpsed two pedestrians hovering uncertainly at a zebra crossing. How fast they were going, he thought, astonished to see the last of the houses vanish, replaced by the soft green blur of the Downs, driving like the clappers towards the hospital in the larger town further along the coast – a bit over the top, really, for a sprained ankle or bruised hip, but he wasn't complaining. With the road clear ahead, the ambulance accelerated, and as the car's speedometer edged past seventy-five miles per hour Edward

fixed his focus on the Christmas-tree flash of the ambulance lights and tried to ignore the guilty exhilaration of driving drunk, and way over the speed limit.

By the time they reached the town and Edward found himself in a hair-raising slalom along its busy main road, the thrill was already wearing off and he found himself pondering other things, such as what they might all have been doing now if his mother hadn't been so careless. It had become a tradition of sorts for him and Jules to spend at least one night at Danecroft Road each week. *Caregiver Weekend*, his mother labelled it, the joke being that she was fit as a flea and hardly in her dotage. At this time of year they both looked forward to the growing daylight hours and being able to potter in the garden until late – his mother with her secateurs, daintily snipping the dead-heads off the early geraniums, while Edward pulled on his heavy-duty gloves to yank up great patches of brambles, propelling them on to the grass behind him with the speed and efficiency of a human combine harvester – or so he liked to think of it. 'It's peaceful, I suppose,' he had explained to Jules, who Edward could tell thought it looked anything but. Gardening, Edward decided, as he joined the ambulance in a wide racing turn and barrelled down a side street, was one of life's great pleasures. Not the only one: this evening, before he and Jules made the journey back home, they had planned to go out for a well-earned Chinese. Although he was just as happy to eat dinner on his lap in front of the TV as he had when he was a child. He still enjoyed the familiar ritual of taking his plate into the front room to sprawl out on his grubby orange beanbag and hearing his mother say, 'Oh, Edward, let me give it a wash!' She'd been saying the same thing for twenty years, and for twenty years he'd been saying no, and by now the exchange had taken on the

predictability of an amateur comedy skit – but it made his mother laugh. Later on, a bit drowsy after dinner, he often found his attention drifting from the television to the photos arranged on top of it – a faded yellow world of long-dead pets and waterlogged camping holidays, of windy days at the beach and cheese and pickle sandwiches gritted with sand. Recently, he had begun to notice that in many of the pictures his mother was not that much older than Edward was now, while their few relatives – people he remembered as biblically ancient and decrepit – now appeared as fresh-faced as policemen.

By the time he parked the car and had fiddled about with the Pay and Display and located Jules in the hospital's busy reception area, pale-faced and anxious, his mother had been whisked away into the bowels of the hospital. 'I doubt they'll keep us hanging about for too long,' he told Jules, who shook her head tearfully; he was touched by how distraught she looked on his mother's behalf. The duty nurse appeared to say they were doing tests – X-rays, he supposed – and they were sent to wait in a room with a low, saggy sofa and boxes of children's toys. *Pain in your arm?* offered a nearby poster. *Slurred speech? Call 999.* After about thirty minutes he'd had enough of looking at it and stood up to stretch his legs, but found the straight line of his pacing interrupted by a grey, floppy-eared rabbit. 'For fuck's sake,' he said to Jules, flinging the toy into a nearby box, 'what sort of parents don't teach their children to clear up after themselves?' It was intolerable, he said, being kept hanging about like this for the sake of a broken wrist.

As time dragged on and no one came, it occurred to Edward that perhaps he was being rather selfish. His mother would be frustrated herself – not to mention injured and in pain. She would be well aware that he and Jules were

out here waiting, and be mortified about all the trouble she was causing. First thing tomorrow they'd take her over to Home 'n' Wear, he told Jules, and replace that ladder once and for all. Then he had an idea. 'Has she got her mobile with her?' He could have kicked himself for not thinking of this before.

'I don't know,' replied Jules uncertainly. 'I don't think so ...'

He tried the number just in case. It rang and rang before he remembered that hospitals made you turn your phone off in certain areas.

'She hates this place,' Edward said, letting himself half perch on the arm of the sofa. He didn't trust his knees to propel him back up if he sank into the sofa's depths again. *God's waiting room*. This was the name people gave to the town and its hospital. He looked at his watch. Ten o'clock. He couldn't stop his mother fretting about the inconvenience – *on your one night out, too*, she would apologise. Once they saw her he would brush this off in no time with a joke, Edward decided, and later they would have a good laugh about the whole thing.

Some time later yet another white-coated lackey arrived, clipboard in hand, to interrogate Edward about his mother's recent medical history. Any complaints? Dizzy spells? He went over it all again as patiently as he could. Look, one of your colleagues took all this information down two hours ago, he told the man. Nosebleeds? Anything like that? Come on, Edward said, I went through that at the main desk – don't you lot talk to each other? I told you, headaches, blood pressure, *no* and *no* – but I'm not a bloody doctor, am I? In fact, could we please *speak* to the consultant? Edward looked pointedly up and down the empty corridor. They appeared to be the only ones in the hospital. The real doctors

would be all off playing golf for the long weekend. He was starting to lose his patience. Look, he said, trying again, why can't you just ask my mother for this information? The man looked away for a moment with an odd expression Edward couldn't quite place – embarrassment or confusion – and quickly down at his notes. Agency contractor, Edward decided – paid sod-all, piss-poor training, and ashamed of his own incompetence. Why can't you get all this off the computer? Edward asked him. My mother's information should be in there. System's down, replied the man. *Of course it is*, Edward thought. Well, in the meantime we'd at least like to see her, he said. The man eyed him warily. If it's not *too* much bother for you, obviously, he added, with maybe a bit too much of an edge. He was aware of Jules at his side, and her growing discomfort. Look, he said, I'm sure it's not your fault, but it's late and we'd like to get her home. The man nodded and scurried off. *The fucking nerve of it*, he told Jules.

Someone must have got the message, because shortly afterwards a real nurse appeared. They followed the efficient squeak-squeak of her sensible shoes down the corridor and through a darkened ward of sleeping, coughing people, and he was pleased to see that they seemed to be heading for a separate, more private-looking room at the far end where light spilled out dimly from under the door. 'Doctors,' he muttered to Jules, 'they think they're gods in white coats,' but at least his mother had some privacy. The nurse showed them in and he was surprised to see that the bed nearest them was empty, stripped so very thoroughly, it was as if its occupant had upped and died in some particularly messy and inconvenient manner. This brought to mind an excellent if spectacularly tasteless joke about haemorrhagic fever, although he knew better than to share it with the nurse,

who was, if possible, even more humourless and po-faced than the one they'd dealt with when they first came in. He'd save the joke for his mother instead. Her bed was discreetly curtained off, though whether through carelessness or a cost-cutting lack of fabric there was a large gap where you could almost – but not quite – see inside. As he went over the nurse called out something after him, but he was not in the mood to hear her excuses. He would poke his head through the curtains in some vaguely comical way, Edward decided, all the better to defuse his mother's stream of apologies.

Was this a joke? The person in the bed looked ill in such a blatantly grotesque way that Edward wanted to laugh. *Too much slap*, as his mother would say. Adding to the Hallowe'en effect was something stuck in the person's mouth, an object that resembled a pair of plastic novelty shop lips from a Christmas cracker. Freshers' Week prank, Edward thought, and the unwitting nurse had walked them right into it. Except Freshers' Week wasn't for months, was it? He turned to the nurse to demand an explanation, but she spoke over him. I do understand, she said. I know it's terribly distressing for you, she went on in a vaguely rehearsed way, but it's to keep your mother's airway open. What was she talking about? The nurse gestured towards the bed like the Ghost of Christmas Past. Her blood pressure, it's falling rapidly, I'm afraid, she said, ninety to fifty in the last twenty minutes. He followed her gaze and, for the first time, took in properly the pitiful figure in the bed. His mind reeled, weightless like a lift dropping. *No*, he told her, there's been some mistake. He watched her take a step away from him, as if trying to back out of the room, and part of him found this hysterically funny – a scene from a *Carry on Nurse* or *Carry On Dying*. Her eyes skittered away for a second, but he'd caught it – a micro-expression – what was

it? Shame? Embarrassment? Confusion? They were standing right under the overhead light and he could see now that she was young, the skin on her face acne-scarred, artlessly blotched over with some thick, orangey powder which had sunk into the pores. *In the middle of a long and thankless shift*, Edward thought, *and too tired to know what she's doing*. They stared at each other. I'm afraid there simply isn't any more we can do at this point, Mr Vernon, except to make your mother comfortable. There has been some mistake, he insisted. My mother fell, it was a fall. Was she not hearing him? He was surprised to hear his own voice, pitched too high, querulous and pleading like a child or an old man. The nurse stared back at him, blank and implacable. My mother, she had a fall, Edward repeated, swept back for a moment to his schooldays, his French verbs. She had a fall. She fell. Past imperfect, past perfect. The air around him felt fuzzy, the few colours in the room too vivid, and he thought he might be sick. His hands were sweating, and he went to wipe them on his trousers but they were quite dry. Somewhere outside the room, a steady hammering noise started up. *A bit late for workmen*, he thought, and realised that the sound was his own heartbeat, the blood pounding through his ears. He tried again, sounding each word for her. Maybe she was hard of hearing, Edward thought, or from overseas, though he had not detected an accent. A simple fall, he repeated, which if she *was* from overseas, Edward realised, might sound to her like *a simple fool*. But for the first time, the nurse appeared to waver. Mr Vernon? she said. Haven't they spoken with you? Who? Spoken to who? he started. We've been kept waiting a very long time. They stared at each other for a long second. I'm so sorry, I thought you had been made aware. Who ... he began again, but the thought was lost. There was a sharp pain behind his eyes and his

vision felt thick and blurry. I'm sorry, he said, I just want to know what's going on. And what your treatment plan is, he added, in case she thought he was stupid. Treatment plan? Mr Vernon, as I tried to explain ...

Did she have to speak so quickly? Edward thought. She was pouring words into his ears all at once in a clattering handful of Scrabble letters. He had been trying to sort them into some semblance of order, but he couldn't keep up. Haemorrhage...catastrophic bleed ... her words went on, farther away now, and it occurred to him that she might have been saying them for some while, because they had the cadence of a chant. *A stroke*, he thought. *Am I having a stroke?* If not, why else would this have come into his head? Could his speech be slurring? This would explain why she couldn't grasp what he was saying. Wasn't there a video somewhere, on the internet, of a woman who had a stroke? She tried to dial for an ambulance but couldn't understand the numbers on the phone. This would account for the misunderstanding, the cognitive impairment, he thought. It was Edward who was ill, not his mother. And yet – there was something, in what the nurse said, a word or a sentence that had given him the sense of being within reach of something significant. If only he could pin it down and decipher the meaning. He could feel it, the existence of it, through the clamour and confusion in his head, and beyond that some part of his brain trying to get at it, scrabbling away furiously without him.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'could you repeat that last part?'

'I was trying to tell you that your mother had a fall, Mr Vernon, caused by a brain haemorrhage, but that she is not in any pain.'

Now she was confusing his mother's fall with his stroke, Edward thought. They were descending into parody. Where

was the man from *Candid Camera*? Surely he was going to leap out from behind the curtains – or indeed his mother herself would appear, arm in a sling, laughing heartily – it would be just like her. *Lost the plot*, Edward thought. *Lost the fucking plot somewhere, silly old git.*

‘No,’ he said. ‘No, I don’t think...’

The nurse appeared to gather herself and regard him evenly, as if weighing up whether to take a different line of enquiry or try a different tack. He noticed for the first time the name on her coat: *Park*, the name appearing to zoom into focus with great clarity because it was preceded by the word ‘Dr’. *Doctor Park*, not *Nurse Park*.

‘I am so *very* sorry, Mr Vernon,’ she said, taking a step towards him. ‘I truly thought they had spoken with you first.’ Very gently she placed her hand on his arm, and it was this, this quiet gesture, that made him understand, finally, that her manner was not that of an overworked amateur but the professional deliverer of bad news. ‘Mr Vernon, I’m so sorry,’ she repeated, as the insistent ringing and the muffled jet-engine roar in his ears was joined by another sound, like the menacing woop-woop of a ground proximity klaxon, a warning of terror rising up from beneath. For a fraction of a second he felt it, the sheer terror, and himself balanced precariously on the nose-down edge of it, and knew that he had a choice, as with an almost physical effort he wrenched his mind up, and out, and felt himself gliding into an immense calm. ‘I understand,’ he said, and he saw that the doctor believed him. He felt in his pocket and found the car keys and held them out to Jules, who was standing immobile, half in and half out of the door, staring at the bed with a dumbstruck expression. ‘I said can you please wait for me outside, Jules?’ he repeated, rattling the keys at her.

‘In the car?’

‘Whatever you like. I’ll meet you outside.’

He knew he was being unreasonable, but there was nothing else for it: he needed to be alone. He needed to clear his head.

He had been studying her face for some clue, some betrayal of consciousness. Her features appeared to be sinking, spreading and melting into the pillow, so rapidly that he wondered if it was a hallucination. Her eyes were shut tightly, as if concentrating on some difficult puzzle, and Edward wondered if this reflected some conscious effort, or merely his own wishful thinking. Her breaths had become laboured, with long periods, up to fifteen seconds at a time, when she appeared to stop breathing altogether and Edward would think, *this is it*, and push the button for a nurse – only for the breaths to start up again, with a ragged, choking rasp. It wasn’t like the moment you got in films – though God knew he couldn’t imagine what he would say and what sort of conversation you were supposed to have if you got one. The sound was like listening to someone being strangled. He shut his eyes and tried to imagine that she was dreaming – sprinting up flights of Penrose Stairs, trying to find the way out. Ascending and descending. Going nowhere forever. Closing his eyes made the sound louder, swelling the space around them, curtains blown outwards, furniture sent flying across the room like a nuclear blast in slow motion. He opened his eyes and took hold of the chair and moved it closer to the bed, wincing at the rude scrape of its legs on the floor. *If you don’t have anything nice to say, come sit next to me*, his mother liked to quote. The doctor had suggested he say his goodbyes, and Edward had a sense of being affronted by this, because it was the stuff of soap operas and cheap fiction, self-dramatising and mawkish. An idea came to him,

some inane thing people said, that *hearing was the last thing to go*. Was it true? What must it be like, trapped inside your own body, unable to communicate, only to hear the people closest to you filing solemnly into the room to say goodbye? And if you were past hearing, Edward reasoned, what, then, was the point? There was nothing to say. Instead he needed a gesture – one that was infinitely human and kind, ambiguous and – crucially – not final-seeming. They had never been a touchy-feely sort of family, but Edward hoped he could lay his hand on his mother’s cheek without it seeming unusual if by some perverse quirk of neurochemistry she had an awareness of what was happening to her. Mentally he tried to absorb the planes and details of her face, to remember her as she was just hours ago, and commit that – not *this* – to memory. *Goodbye*, he thought stupidly, and didn’t believe it for a second. As he extended his hand towards her cheek he was surprised to see his whole arm trembling. And then his fingers made contact with her skin and he recoiled, unable to help himself, drawing back his hand as if it had touched a flame.

He found himself outside, doubled over outside the hospital’s main entrance, hands on knees, retching. In his head was a memory of running through the darkened ward, back past the sleeping coughing people, along empty corridors. How had he even found his way out? Some post-detonation whine was singing in his ears, and as he waited for it to die down a taxi pulled up in slow motion and disgorged a well-dressed couple arguing in a guttural foreign language. He watched their shoes as they edged past him. The man glanced down at Edward and said something in a low, disapproving voice – Farsi or Arabic. There was fear, Edward thought, in the coldness of her skin, and the fear was still down there, he could feel it, in the deepest corner of

the brain where his amygdala remained on high alert, like a monkey that shrieked from a high tree, long after the leopard had passed. His neocortex had control now, he told himself, and gradually, through the noise in his head, he was able to discern it, calmly unscrolling its long litany of excuses and self-serving, subjunctive-tense bromides: *She didn't know if you were there or not. She wouldn't have wanted you to go through that, would she? Wouldn't she have wanted you to remember her as she was?* – weak, wheedling thoughts that disgusted him. What his mother *would have wanted*, Edward thought, was to not die. *Catastrophic*, the doctor said – like an earthquake or flood. He pictured the intricate structures of the brain, containing within them seventy-five years of memories – her hopes for her children, her plans for the future, the mundane considerations about what to wear or what to eat for breakfast – being pulverised under a tide of blood and swelling tissue as he crouched here uselessly heaving up puddles of beer.

Jules was waiting, Edward remembered, but just now he couldn't think where he'd parked the car. His mind felt like an immense blank, half buried under a thick layer of white noise. Next to the entrance he spied a bench and he went over to sit for a moment to collect his thoughts. A nurse and a frail, eighty-something woman leaning on a walking frame crept past him, and out of nowhere the memory came to him of a man he'd sat next to once on the night bus in London. He'd been a student at the time, and the man – Edward had assumed – was suffering from a bad cold, hunched protectively over a white plastic carrier bag, sniffing at odd moments. He had wondered what such an elderly person was doing on the bus at 3am, a lonely figure among the groups of raucous students. And then Edward had happened to make out the word printed on the bag in

stark black capitals – BELONGINGS – and with a horrible lurch of comprehension he'd realised that the man was crying. Embarrassed, he had got off at the next stop and walked the rest of the way home. Would it be possible to decline his own bag when it was offered? Like the gift bags they foisted on you at charity dos, it would be full of things you never wanted – and in this case, Edward thought, would rather do without. It would mean losing the bracelet his mother always wore, engraved DNR in bright red letters. It had not been needed after all. She had sent off for it in the post after that American case that was in all the papers, the brain-dead girl whose parents were 'too hysterical with religion to pull the plug out', as his mother had noted at the time. She had been so proud and pleased when the bracelet arrived, showing it off and turning her wrist this way and that. On her it really did look like an expensive piece of arty jewellery, rather than an item from a catalogue that cost £19.99 plus £3 postage. The bracelet was not some morbid indulgence on his mother's part, but practical and a matter of pride and independence. She had that uniquely English fear of being a nuisance, of being *a burden* – to her children, especially.

Of course, his mother's anxieties had been completely wasted on his sister. Isobel had happily upped sticks and run off to New York years ago without a moment's thought for anyone. *Bloody Isobel*. At least *he* had been here when it counted. He would have to find her now, Edward supposed: call the long, overcomplicated American number he had never looked at, least of all dialled, but which was buried somewhere in his phone, and only then because his mother had begged him to take it years before. 'Just for emergencies, Edward,' she had assured him, understanding that he would never use it otherwise. And he never had – he was proud of

that. He took out his mobile and scrolled through the short list of names, and found the number under *Mum – Emergency Contacts*. He punched in a short text message, and set off to find Jules and the car.

Sunday

Wishes

‘It’s not your problem she picked the wrong time to have her brain haemorrhage, is it?’ the voice was saying. Julie shivered, swapped the phone to her other ear and ran a hand under the front seat for a second time – searching for a scarf, an old jumper, anything to fend off the chill in the freezing car. It had been a mistake, she thought, calling Lorraine – but she’d been so frantic with worry and, after the scene in the hospital with Mary, ready to be sick with it all. She’d had to tell someone, and as usual that someone was her sister, Lorraine.

‘Asking for it if you ask me,’ Lorraine observed tartly. ‘Didn’t they say it was an accident waiting to happen? Well, *didn’t they?*’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ Julie replied. The doctor hadn’t put it quite that way.

‘Problem solved, then! You’ve got nothing to worry about,’ said Lorraine. ‘So, what are you going to do about her house?’

This was another concern, the idea of going back to Danecroft Road tonight – she couldn’t face it, though her toothbrush, her pyjamas and all her toiletries were still sitting in her overnight bag in Mary’s spare bedroom. ‘I expect

Edward will just drive us back to ours,' she told Lorraine hopefully, though this wasn't certain at all. In fact, ever since the ambulance had appeared outside Mary's house earlier, everything had felt decidedly *uncertain*.

'No, I mean will he sell it or what?' Lorraine persisted. 'Must be worth a packet, in that neighbourhood.'

'Lorraine, could we not talk about it just now?' Julie whispered. At any minute she expected to see Edward's face appear at the window. Of course, Mary's house *was* in a very nice area, with the park just down the road, and all the shops right there on the doorstep – but it would be highly inappropriate to discuss all of that now – *a bit premature*, would be Edward's phrase.

'*Whatever*,' said Lorraine with a loud huffing noise. 'As per usual I was only thinking of you, and as *per* usual you have to be weird about it.' Her sister returned to her latest marital saga – her husband, Declan, and the woman she suspected him of having an affair with. This afternoon Lorraine had confronted the woman in Burger Tree. At home afterwards there had been threats of divorce – though it was unclear who had made them, and Julie was careful not to ask. 'A slag, *basically*,' Lorraine was continuing. 'It's no secret that she puts herself about. Trowels it on as well. Face full of make-up. Did I say that?'

'You did mention it, yes,' Julie replied. As it happened, Julie knew her – the *home-wrecker* – or knew her by sight, because she worked behind the counter at Julie and Edward's local post office. She spoke nicely, and was known for being good with the older people – patient if they were a bit slow counting out their money, always ready with a kind word or a helping hand. You didn't have to be a man, either, to notice that she was very pretty, but in a natural way – which for some reason made it difficult to imagine

her carrying on with someone's husband. And certainly not with Declan, who had married Lorraine right after they left school and had three children with her and who treated her like gold. Not that she could say any of this to Lorraine, Julie thought, squinting through the dark windscreen. Her sister wasn't shy with her opinions, and she wasn't one to mince words – but, as even their own mother admitted, woe betide anyone who tried to tell *Lorraine* anything. With its slammed doors and dramatic twists and turns, her sister's life was like something on TV. Her problems sounded so much bigger and more important than Julie's own, which according to Lorraine were *pretty pathetic seeing as you don't have kids to worry about*.

Today was an exception, though – surely, her own predicament happening now and yet to reach its conclusion, like something live and important on the news, while Lorraine's story was not that different from all her other stories. Still, in a peculiar sort of way this did make them quite soothing, the familiar words and phrases, the way they never varied, how they lulled you into a feeling of calm. Maybe this was why their grandmother liked church...

'...*listening?*' said Lorraine.

'Yes, sorry, I'm here!' Julie answered quickly. She must have drifted off for a second. Mindful of brain cancer, she swapped the phone back to her other ear and was just in time to catch Lorraine say, '...like I said, *vile. Vile and disgusting* and I'm not having it...' knowing that shortly afterwards her sister would pause and say, *I ask you, what's she bloody got that I haven't?* and that Julie was not expected to supply an answer.

She leant forward and wiped the heel of her hand across the windscreen. Earlier, instructed to climb into the back of the ambulance behind Mary's stretcher, she had had no

time to fetch her coat or her glasses. For the last half-hour she had been anxiously scanning the same anonymous, intermittent blur of people moving in and out of the hospital's main entrance. Lorraine's opinion – *What's your problem?* – was that if Julie was so concerned she should go back in, or get closer by parking in a disabled space. But she didn't dare, and it didn't seem right either. Edward had been very *definite* about waiting outside, and he would have his reasons. It was hurtful, though, being sent away and excluded at a time when Edward should need her the most. And yes – as Lorraine suggested – Julie supposed part of her *was* relieved, not having to sit there watching it all play out. But the doctors had led them to believe it would all be over very soon, so that now, the longer Edward was in there, the more she feared that this wasn't the case at all. Had Mary, by some terrible miracle, woken up? The idea had been going round and round in her head. *I doubt she'll be saying anything*, Lorraine had offered, nastily. *Though she is his bloody mother, so it'd be a bit funny if he left before she did – ha ha!* This idea – the more obvious explanation – had given her hope. Lorraine could be a bit sharp if you got her in the wrong mood, but her sister was always so *certain* about things – and then there was the *way* she spoke about them – with such confidence, as if what Lorraine decreed couldn't possibly be otherwise. She watched a nurse and an elderly woman on a walking frame pick their way across the car park, and then there was a pause on her sister's end and the unmistakable click of the cigarette lighter. She decided to take a chance.

'I know I'm being silly,' she said, 'and worrying too much, but you did say it would be a bit funny if Edward didn't stay with Mary, didn't you?' She waited, hoping this wouldn't be dismissed as a question they had already settled.

'I didn't say that,' said Lorraine croakily, through what sounded like a great lungful of smoke.

'Sorry?'

'I *didn't say that*,' her sister repeated. 'I didn't say it was *funny*. Why would I say something like that?' This was the other Lorraine, the one who changed sides without warning or misunderstood things that to Julie seemed obvious. *Boom, click – done!* Lorraine was fond of saying, snapping her fingers, when some niggling problem was dispensed with.

'I meant funny as in *strange*, not comical,' Julie explained.

'Why?'

'Pardon?'

'Why?'

'Why what?'

'*Why* do you think it's funny?'

This was the other problem: her sister's tendency to say one thing, and then, a week or a day or even a few minutes later, to swear up and down that she hadn't said any such thing, or insist that she had said the complete opposite.

'But I don't think it's funny ...' Julie began, beginning to feel slightly light-headed.

'You just *said* you thought it was *funny*. There's nothing *funny* about being in hospital, Julie, I can assure you of that. What's *really* funny, if you ask me, is that you're always moaning on and on and on about his mother not liking you and how confused you are, when maybe you should take a look in the mirror and ask yourself *why*.'

How did this always happen? Julie thought. 'I was just agreeing with you. About Edward,' she said. 'And Mary.' She was starting to feel a bit deranged. Lorraine had got them completely off the point, while Julie was feeling so flustered that she couldn't for the life of her remember what that was in the first place. On the other end of the phone Lorraine was

silent. 'I expect he just wants to be there for when ... for when Mary ...' She couldn't think of the appropriate word. 'For when she *passes*,' she said. *There*, she thought, *I've gone and answered my own question*. This wasn't what she'd wanted at all.

'*Dies*, you mean?' Lorraine said in a bored voice. 'Sounds to me like she's circling the drain.' This was a phrase from *Smash-up Saturdays*, a reality show about ambulance drivers in Glasgow that Lorraine and their father followed obsessively, and it conjured up unpleasant images.

As Lorraine returned to the subject of Declan, Julie looked for something to distract herself with and remembered the book sitting in the glove box. She'd come across it last week in the staff-room wastepaper basket, its spine broken and pages splayed open like the victim of an unspeakable sex crime. Feeling sorry for it, she had fished it out, brushed off the crumbs and bits of ash, and put it in her bag for later. Looking back, this might have been a mistake, because, as she traced the book's textured cover with her fingers, a horrible thought occurred to her.

'*Lorraine*,' she whispered, before she could stop herself, 'I just thought of something ...'

'I can't get a word in edgeways with you tonight, can I?' snapped Lorraine. Julie had an image of her sister sitting in the kitchen with her feet up on a stool, examining her nails and glancing impatiently at the clock on the microwave. She felt a sickening sense of urgency, as if a stopwatch was running, counting down the seconds, faster and faster, to the exact moment when her sister's patience ran out.

'I know it sounds a bit funny – *strange*, I mean – but what about *Pathways to Possible*?'

There had been nothing out of the ordinary in not wanting to traipse over to Mary's this weekend, and, if once or twice

Julie had wished desperately that she didn't have to, this wasn't unusual either. The only difference, she had realised only a moment ago, was that this time, after all these years, her wish had come true – and it had done so in the worst way possible. Not only had her wish *literally* come true, Julie thought, it had come true within days of reading *Pathways to Possible*. Lorraine had mocked the book and its ideas. Yes, Julie had admitted at the time, her sister wasn't wrong, it did *sound* a bit like 'the sort of rubbish only hippies and nutters believe'. But once you read it for yourself it did make a funny sort of sense – she couldn't say why exactly. She had tried to put across the book's basic idea: that thoughts were made out of energy which rippled out into the universe as *intentions* which themselves *manifested* as actual *reality*. It sounded ridiculous. 'Too fucking complicated for me,' had been Lorraine's verdict. Julie couldn't blame her for that.

'Pathways to *what?*' said Lorraine.

'That book I told you about,' she replied. 'It's all about having positive thoughts, but what about the negative ones...?' She paused to let the word *negative*, and its implications for Mary's accident, sink in. The book had been very clear about what could happen if you sent negative thoughts out into the universe. Not that she had wished Mary harm, she continued. Not real harm anyway. But what if your negative thoughts really did affect your choices and what you did – or what you didn't do? And, if so, had they been *manifested* this afternoon? On the other hand, would it really have made a difference? Both Lorraine and the doctors had agreed it was an accident waiting to happen. Hadn't they?

'What's your point?' said Lorraine through a clatter of what sounded like taking dinner plates out of the dishwasher. 'You're just making excuses. Either way it's going to look

like your fault.' And then the noise stopped and to Julie's astonishment Lorraine simply continued on where she left off, with her Declan story.

She held the phone a few inches away from her ear and let the voice recede to a faint chirrup. Lorraine was right, of course, and now she felt twice as bad as she had five minutes ago. Somehow, in the space of a few hours, Julie's whole life – her future with Edward – had become hinged on Mary. Then again, Julie thought, maybe it always had been. On television people were always waking up just long enough to point out the guilty party and have them handcuffed and marched off to prison before falling away again. In her mind's eye she saw Edward leaning over Mary's bed while Mary whispered weakly and urgently into his ear. If she had ever dreamed of life being more exciting – and she certainly hadn't – she was now faced with what Lorraine would call a real *situation*.

'...listening?' said a tinny, distant voice. Quickly she pressed the phone back up to her ear.

'Lorraine? Sorry, I couldn't hear you for a sec.'

'I said,' Lorraine hollered into the phone, '*she's the kind of woman who keeps a spare pair of knickers in her handbag!*' It was hard to know what to say in response. 'Well?' demanded Lorraine. Were they still talking about the woman from the post office? Or had Lorraine moved on to someone else? She tried to think. 'You *weren't* bloody listening, were you?'

'Lorraine, I'm sorry ... I'm just so worried ... please, don't be like that ...'

'DON'T TELL ME HOW TO BE! You know what your trouble is? You're *selfish!* You think it's *all about you.*'

'I don't think that. You know I don't. *Please ...*'

'I'm tired. I have to go to bed,' Lorraine announced abruptly.

Not five minutes later Edward appeared, striding out of the darkness towards the car. 'They said they'll ring,' he said uninformatively as he did up his seatbelt. He drove them back home in silence. She didn't dare ask what had happened in the hospital. Then, about halfway back, somewhere on the dark coast road, Edward's mobile buzzed softly and he pulled over. 'Okay. Thank you,' he told the person on the other end. 'I appreciate that. Yes, I shall. First thing. Goodnight.'

She looked across at him questioningly.

'Have to call the duty nurse in the morning,' he told her. And, as if in an afterthought, 'Lot to do this week.'

She glanced at his face, trying to gauge his feelings, and understood then that Mary had gone. It was over.

'I'm so sorry, Edward ...' She tried to take his hand.

'Thanks, Jules.' He gave her hand a brief squeeze and let it go. They set off again, as almost immediately, next to her, the phone purred again – just once, for a text message.

'Jesus, who is it now?' sighed Edward. 'It's after midnight.'

Edward refused to use a smartphone, or text while driving. Julie picked it up. *Poss to collect me 2moro?* said the message.

'Who is it?' said Edward.

'I don't know. It's says it's ...' She squinted at the tiny letters – she was hopeless without her glasses – and then she held it a bit farther away and nearly screamed. 'Mum?' she managed to squeak, as a recent episode from *Smash-up Saturdays* flashed through her mind, about a man who woke up in the mortuary in a body bag. 'It says Mum ...'

'Oh,' said Edward nonchalantly. 'That'll be bloody Isobel again.'

Isobel? For the second time in the space of a minute, relief flooded through her. 'Your sister ...?' Edward hadn't mentioned that his sister would be in touch, though it was

only natural that she would be, thought Julie, at a time like this. Edward kept his eyes on the road ahead and didn't respond. 'Is she coming here tomorrow?' she asked.

'Unfortunately,' Edward replied. 'Look, I'm driving, can you take care of it?' He nodded impatiently towards the phone in her hand. 'Text her back or whatever.'

In all their years together this was the first time Edward had mentioned his sister. The only reason she even knew he had a sister was through Mary – although Mary had been oddly evasive. With Mary gone, and Isobel on her way, Julie realised, she would finally meet Edward's only other family member. She felt herself quite looking forward to it. Not only that, Julie thought, but by asking her to reply to Isobel's message Edward was trusting her with something important. She took a moment to think about what to say, to carefully compose the right words. *Yes, of course we'll collect you!* she typed. Then for good measure she added an *xo*.

It was only after they arrived back at the flat and were on the settee going over the arrangements for the next day that she realised her mistake. When Isobel had asked to be collected, Julie had assumed she meant the local train station.

'Hang on, you told her *what?*' said Edward. 'You do realise she's arriving at the airport?' She opened her mouth to speak, but Edward hadn't finished. 'Great, bloody marvellous, cheers, thanks a lot, Jules!' He slammed his mug down on the coffee table with such force that she thought the glass would crack. Did he think she'd texted Isobel the wrong thing on purpose? She'd never seen him like this.

'Gatwick isn't too far, is it?' she offered hopefully.

'*Heathrow,*' said Edward. '*West fucking London.* Look –' he thrust his phone at her – it's here in the message.'

She stared hopelessly at it. *LHR arr. 0932 hrs.* It said nothing about an airport – at least, thought Julie, not in

words a normal person would understand. Should she have been paying more attention?

‘I really am sorry,’ she repeated. ‘I should have thought, especially with her living in New York and everything.’

Edward shot her a look, and she felt herself reddening. *Another wrong step.* Of course it was Mary from whom she’d picked up this precious snippet of information. He paused, then continued, ‘*Look*, I really don’t care where she bloody lives. The point is, she expects to be picked up in a few hours and chauffeur-driven through bank holiday traffic because she’s too high and mighty to take a bloody train like anyone else – *end of.*’ He paused to rub at something, a speck of grease perhaps, on the side of his mug. She frequently saw him inspecting items that she’d already washed up, running a finger over the edge of a plate or the prongs of a fork, or scrutinising the cuffs of a freshly laundered shirt. Meanwhile, she was in everyone’s bad books this evening – Edward’s, Lorraine’s, and most of all Mary’s, Julie remembered, if Mary but knew it – which, as Lorraine had pointed out rather harshly earlier, Mary *certainly wouldn’t*. She watched Edward drain his mug in one gulp and was struck again by how handsome he was. He had already refused her offer of an omelette, but still she wished there were something she could do to put it all right. At that moment he leant over and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. ‘I’m sorry, Jules,’ he said. ‘I’m being unfair. You weren’t to know. It’s her fault, not yours.’

‘I could text her back if you like?’ she said.

‘No, leave it,’ said Edward. ‘Spilt milk. Anyway, no point in setting her off.’ He yawned and looked at his watch. ‘S’too late, she’ll be at JFK by now.’

That must be the airport in New York, Julie thought – she was a quick learner – and wondered what Edward meant

by 'setting her off'. She tried to picture what Isobel would be like in person. Was she like Edward? Or would she be more like Mary...? Best *focus on the positive*, she decided, as *Pathways to Possible* advised. 'Are you sure I can't make you something to eat?' she asked, feeling quite on edge from hunger herself – but you could hardly gobble down toast when someone had just lost their mother, could you?

'No – thanks, though.' He smiled wearily. If Isobel was more like Edward, she thought, why did Edward never see her? And why did he seem to hate her so much? *What had his sister done?*

Edward called to the cat and it emerged from under the armchair and came scampering over to him. 'I think I'll just get some kip here if it's all right with you,' he said. 'If I'm not up, give me a shout about six.' He swung his legs up on to the settee, made a space for the cat behind his knees and, before she could object, put one of her best cushions under his head and rolled away from her.

She couldn't recall a single night they had spent apart. But then, she had heard grief did funny things to people. For a minute or two she remained where she was, squeezed next to the cat on the edge of the settee, listening to Edward's breathing. Once she was sure he was asleep she got up and made the rounds of the flat's doors and windows to check they were properly locked and closed. Edward was strict about security, and this checking of everything was normally his job. As she double-locked the front door she tried not to let her imagination get the better of her – the intruders lurking outside, or the ones at this very moment locked inside the flat with them, men in masks who had crept in earlier while she and Edward were at the hospital and were now lying quietly in wait in the wardrobe or under the bed. Why did she think these terrible things? *Always project a*

positive mindset, for negatives are opportunities in disguise, waiting to be transformed into positives. She tried to keep the book's advice in mind as she brushed her teeth with a spare toothbrush and examined her face in the mirror. '*Visualise and project positive thoughts,*' she whispered to her reflection, though none came to mind, and she soon found her thoughts returning to Mary – Mary, flat on her back in the garden, feet splayed out, a handful of wilting flower petals in one hand ... Mary, propped up in the hospital bed like a hideous rag doll ... *Not* thinking about something, Julie realised, going to fetch a clean pair of pyjamas from the airing cupboard, was so much harder than she had imagined. There were *all the words of loving supportiveness* offered by the closest people in your life, and imagining these *as a warm bath* – but this was even more of a challenge. She really would need to devote a lot of practice and a lot of *self-work* – as the book put it – if she had any hope of discovering her own *soul path*, let alone constructing the *internal emotional cathedral* that was crucial – so the book said – to a healthy relationship. She felt exhausted just thinking about it all and instead she imagined Isobel, sitting on a plane high up in the clouds surrounded by strangers. Was it really so much, Julie wondered, for her to ask her own brother to collect her from the airport? She was still annoyed with herself for the whole mix-up with the phone and Isobel's message. Lorraine would say she had been too busy thinking about herself. And yet, when she thought about how many weekends she had sacrificed cooped up at Danecroft Road with Mary, this did feel a little bit unfair. For years, Julie had sat politely on the sidelines as Mary and Edward discussed geranium cuttings and politics and obscure foreign countries and a thousand other subjects that she herself had little interest in. And where had it had got her? *Nowhere*, Julie realised, as she set the alarm clock

for 5.45am. Mary had simply kept up that disconcerting manner of bland, artificial friendliness, like someone in a washing powder advert. Sometimes, if Julie attempted to contribute to the conversation, she would catch Mary glancing across at Edward with an expression of puzzlement. *Who is this person?* it seemed to say. *And why do you keep bringing her into my home?* Edward never remarked on this or even seemed to notice, leaving Julie to wonder if she was imagining it. Was Mary the only one who deserved Edward's loyalty and devotion? He was protective towards his mother – Julie understood that; it was only normal when a woman lived alone without a husband, wasn't it? Although Mary herself appeared unaware of her predicament. In her way Edward's mother was one of the most self-contained and confident people Julie had ever met. Did this mean that Mary was in denial as well? It was Lorraine's view that Mary was 'a bitter saddo who failed with men and doesn't want anyone else to have one either'. Edward's mother, Lorraine had suggested, was the reason Edward was so cagey about marriage and had still not proposed to Julie, a full eight years and ten months after they started going out. Was this true? And, if so, what would happen now that Mary was gone?

She got into bed and pulled the duvet up and lay with her arms relaxed by her sides, palms facing upwards. She would practise *positive projections* and *calming breaths* exactly as *Pathways to Possible* described them, and wake up tomorrow feeling much better – more *positive* – about everything. She took one deep breath – in, and slowly out – and then another, but even as she did so she could already feel her mind wandering. It wasn't easy to *shout yes to happiness*, Julie thought, when your bed was freezing cold and your boyfriend was curled up in the other room with the cat. Wide awake, she got up again, intending to retrieve

Pathways to Possible from its hiding place in her knicker drawer. And then she remembered that the settee was right under the window. When it was chilly outside, as it was tonight, a nasty draught blew in under the windowsill where the landlord had still not repaired the rotting frame. What Edward needed was a hot-water bottle.

Going out into the corridor, she passed the door to the lounge, and stopped. An unfamiliar noise was coming from the other side of the door, the sound so faint, and so unlikely, that she stood completely still for several seconds to make sure it wasn't just the wind. There it was again – a low, intermittent whimper. The sound gave her an uneasy feeling that she couldn't quite place. Maybe this was a positive sign – proof that Edward was vulnerable and needed her. He had made some derogatory remarks about *Pathways to Possible* last week, but the book promised that, if you followed its instructions, anyone in your life *could, and would, change*, whether they wanted to or not. For now, she would visualise and send out a positive thought on Edward's behalf. Alone in the dark hallway, she did feel a bit silly – but overcome too by that strange-yet-familiar feeling, an odd pressure or weight in her stomach she had felt conscious of earlier. She considered what a positive thought might look like – would it be grey and black, like newspaper print? Or warm and pink, like a baby? Carefully she formed an image in her mind, a tiny pink parcel with tissue-paper wings. How funny, Julie thought: she could almost see it, a butterfly emerging from her body to cross the space between herself and the next room, squeezing itself under the door and fluttering over to land comfortingly on Edward's shoulder.

In the kitchen she ran the tap and settled herself at the kitchen table to wait for the kettle to boil. She had opened her book to a chapter called *Productive Grieving – 10 Top Tips for*

Moving On Effectively, but she couldn't seem to concentrate on the words. She thought about Edward and their future together. Edward was the one truly *positive* thing in her life, the best thing that had ever happened to her. If Julie had to sacrifice another few days stuck at Danecroft Road to sort out Mary's belongings and sell her house, she was happy to support him. Mary, after all, would not be there. There would be no more wasted weekends, no more having to watch TV programmes she had no interest in, and no more walking on eggshells. Now, with Mary gone, there was no one standing in the way of their happy future together. *Pathways to Possible* didn't believe in accidents, and it certainly didn't believe in luck – but after eight years and ten months, with her clothes nestled in the wardrobe next to Edward's, with their toothbrushes sitting side by side, with next morning's coffee measured out into the coffee maker and the question of whether they would drink it peacefully together already decided, Julie could hardly believe hers.