

JONATHAN
KEMP
GHOSTING

myriad **m**[∞]

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For my parents

Each moment we pass through is made up of the past, the present and the future – three disparate temporalities all vying for attention; coexisting in their disunity. Over time we are contoured by these forces, much as a landscape is shaped by the elements. A sudden slippage can cause us to tumble, like Alice, into another world, because sometimes other worlds are closer than we think. We carry them within us, constantly.

DAY ONE

IT'S JUST AFTER nine am on a bright July morning when she first sees her dead husband.

She's stepping out of a newsagent's on Warwick Avenue when there he is, walking towards her through the sparse morning shoppers, like a figure from a nightmare in the garb of an angel. Handsome as the sun; shoulders broad as daylight.

Her first thought is, *You're losing it again, Grace.*

Dark and unsteady, she makes her way to the St Saviour Church, to sit among the voiceless dead and light a tremulous cigarette. Inhaling the first sweetsharp lungful, she lets the slow tears come. She feels – well, to be honest she feels as if she has just seen a ghost. And she looks as if she has, too. The face bloodless, the eyes dull as a seagull's, the lips slightly parted. All sound is muffled, slowed down, as if she's underwater.

A man walks by with two large huskies, one of which lopes over to her and sits by her side, as if sensing her sorrow and keeping her company. The man calls out, 'Ludwig!' but the dog does not move until he walks over and grabs its collar. He looks at Grace and nods a

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good morning before dragging the dog away. Finishing the cigarette, she immediately lights another, transfixed by a fear that makes her feel strangely alive.

Eventually, she gets up from the bench and leaves the churchyard; starts to make her way back to the boat, still dazed and unsure what to think. She hasn't given Pete a passing thought in years, though he still visits her in dreams which leave her aroused and unsettled the following day. That period of her life is ancient history.

When she arrives back on the narrowboat, Gordon is still out, so she sits up on deck, her mind in freefall. Gazing up at the cloudless sky as if it might hold some answers, she watches a plane slowly unzip the blue, wishing she were on it, going somewhere else; anywhere in the world but here.

It had been Gordon's idea to sell up and buy the boat once they'd retired. From years of holidaying on narrowboats they knew it was a lifestyle they both enjoyed, and she had loved the slow meander, stopping off whenever somewhere took their fancy. After a year of travelling they'd acquired a permanent mooring in Little Venice, and it hadn't taken long before the old life, the old friendships in Manchester, had slowly petered out. Now, painfully, she feels the pinch of her life, its very narrowness. There is no one to whom she can turn. Fear closes its cold hand around her: the fear of being taken back there, to lie and stare at those arrogant hospital walls.

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She can't shake the image of Pete from her mind. Memories drop like ripe fruit at her feet.

IT WASN'T EVEN him she'd fancied, at the time. It was his mate, Mike, she'd spotted first. Him she'd set her heart on.

They met at Blackpool Pleasure Beach. And just those two words were enough to make you want to go there. They even tasted good on the tongue when you said them: sugary-sweet, like a stick of rock. Grace and her best friend Ruth, on a day trip from Manchester, one Saturday in late May 1958. It was the first really warm and sunny day of the year, and they'd both just finished school for good, feeling ripe with the invincibility of youth, kidding themselves they knew it all; giddy with a new sense of freedom. Scared of the world and fascinated by it in equal measure. Boys were part of that fascination, and part of that fear. And it was sometimes hard to tell the difference.

They had only just arrived at the fairground, and were discussing which ride to go on first, when she spotted them: two RAF boys in blue serge, one with a black quiff glinting in the sun – like Elvis, she thought, with a swoon. He spotted them at about the same time and she saw him nudge his friend and say something. The boys walked over and introduced themselves. 'Elvis' was called Mike, and his mate with the dark blond quiff was Pete.

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'Are you from around here?' Pete said.

'We're from Manchester. Just here for the day. But we've been here loads of times before. What about you?'

'We're based over at Weeton. Just here for the day too. Fancy showing us around?'

'All right.'

Pete did most of the talking, cracking jokes, asking questions; focusing all his attention on Grace, who was trying her best to engage Mike, though he seemed content to leave the talking to Pete. Ruth just stood there, hardly saying a word. She was always tongue-tied around boys, which annoyed Grace as it left her to do all the work. As they approached the Tunnel of Love, Grace asked Mike where he was from, but before he could answer Pete said, 'Here. Let's go on,' pulling her towards one of the boats. Her heart sank. She looked over her shoulder to see Mike and Ruth walking towards the boat behind. Then she looked at Pete and thought to herself, *Well, he's not bad-looking, Grace, don't be so miserable.* Besides, Mike had been so monosyllabic she thought at least she'd have a laugh with this one, and not be bored like so many times before.

And then, in the chill, spidery darkness, they kissed. She'd been kissed before but never had she felt this aroused. It seemed so right, his lips on hers, that by the time they'd come out the other side she was in love.

As they clunked through the wooden doors and out into the sunshine again, and the kissing ended, he said, 'Where'd you learn to kiss like that?'

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‘I was about to ask you the same thing,’ she said, feeling the rush of a blush as a devilish smirk sneaked stubbornly on to her face. He laughed, setting her off, and they cried with fits of giggles till their stomachs ached.

‘You might want to reapply your lipstick, sweetheart,’ he said, smoothing a hand through his hair.

She took a handkerchief from her handbag and gave it a lick before wiping the lipstick from around her mouth. Handing it to him, she said, ‘You’d best give *your* mouth a wipe, and all. You look like Coco the Clown.’ Opening her compact, she redrew the red on her lips.

As they climbed out of the boat, she wondered if Ruth and Mike had kissed, before deciding with a fickleness that surprised her that she didn’t care. Judging by the look on Ruth’s face – no hasty reapplying of lipstick there – they hadn’t. She looked bored. Pete lit two cigarettes and passed one to Grace. He suggested the Ferris wheel next, where they kissed some more. Every ride an opportunity to kiss. After several more, they went for a walk along the seafront. It was a hot, sunny day and the place was heaving with people, but, like in the song, they all disappeared from view. He told her he was the son of a rich farmer and she told him about visiting her uncle’s farm in Fleetwood with a cousin, Pauline. How she’d loved the newly hatched chicks, little fluffs of yellow small enough to hold in your hand.

He laughed and said, ‘I was only joking. He’s not a farmer; he’s an officer in the Royal Navy.’

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And she wondered why he'd lied, why he'd felt the need to lie, but brushed the thought aside and said, 'My Dad was in the Navy during the war; he's a fireman.'

'I only joined the RAF because it was either that or prison.'

'Prison?'

'Me and some mates got caught trying to blow up a sweet machine on the side of an off-licence.'

'Why would you do that?'

'Dunno – for a laugh? And we thought there might be money in it.'

'You bloody idiots!'

'I know!'

And it had all been so easy. No anxieties about not being pretty enough, or funny enough. Or too funny. She didn't worry that she was talking too much, or too little. With other boys she always felt awkward but with him she didn't. They talked about everything and nothing and laughed a great deal.

He said, 'I was conceived in peace, and born in war, on the very day it was declared.'

She said, 'Is that your excuse?'

Late afternoon they dropped into a pub on the seafront, and, while Mike and Pete went to the bar to order drinks, Grace and Ruth went to the Ladies.

'So how are you two getting on?' Grace said, checking herself in the mirror.

'He doesn't say much,' Ruth replied. 'And don't you think those luminous socks he's got on are a bit

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common? Mummy and Daddy would have a seizure!’

Ruth’s parents owned their own house, and acted – in the words of Grace’s father – as if their shit didn’t smell.

‘Who cares what they think?’ said Grace. ‘As long as you like him.’

Ruth gave a laugh and said, ‘I wish I could be as bold as you.’

‘Well, I’m having a great time.’

‘I noticed. Mike hasn’t even tried to kiss me yet.’ She forced a smile and ran her hands down her skirt.

‘I can’t get enough, I can’t,’ said Grace, trying not to sound as if she was bragging.

Returning to the boys, Grace said they’d have to be getting a train soon. They took one last walk along the emptying beach, one last kiss behind a beach hut. A sudden draught on her back announced he’d undone her dress, and she said, ‘You can just zip that back up as quickly as you unzipped it!’ The sun was setting and they soon realised they’d lost the others. Grace was supposed to be home by ten and it was nearly nine. They rushed to the train station, but there was no sign of Ruth, so she boarded the next train to Manchester. He asked for her address, promising to write.

She arrived home at half-past ten to a smack on the head from her irate father.

‘Well, you won’t be hearing from him again,’ he said when she mentioned Pete. ‘Them Raff boys are only out for what they can get.’

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'Take no notice, Grace,' her mother said.

And he was wrong. Pete did write, asking if she'd like to meet him in Manchester the following weekend.

FROM THE neighbouring boat a woman appears, wearing a brown velour tracksuit and white plimsolls, her hair snow-white and tightly permed. It's Pam – or Spam as Gordon calls her on account of her ruddy complexion.

'Ow are yer, luv?' she says in broad, salty Scouse.

Grace isn't at all sure she could translate her thoughts and emotions into words, so she simply says, 'Not bad, how about you?'

'I'm OK, just running late. You look peaky.'

'I'm a bit tired. Didn't sleep well.'

'Oh, dear,' Pam says. 'Anything wrong?'

'No.'

'Well, take it easy, put your feet up. Anyway, gorra crack on. I'm late for the hairdresser's. Let's have coffee soon!' Pam throws a quick wave before dashing off.

Grace goes inside and starts making lunch, deciding that seeing Pete like that must have been some kind of hallucination. Just someone who looked like him; an uncanny resemblance, nothing more. Right after he died she would see his face everywhere, momentarily staring back from the body of a stranger. It was the same with Hannah, too: as if your need to see them alive was so strong that you temporarily possessed the power to transform other people into the desired object.

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But why now? She has no feelings at all for him now. She doesn't even hate him any more.

Throughout lunch, she says nothing to Gordon about what she's seen. She can imagine his reaction if she told him. He'd probably have her locked up again. The truth is, she loved Pete more, despite everything, and she knows Gordon knows this. He's always been jealous: mentioning Pete's name would not be a smart move, let alone confessing she's seen his ghost. So she says nothing. Not much is said at all, in fact, as they eat, and she's grateful for that, even if it also saddens her that after all these years together it seems they may have finally run out of words. Their separate routines keep them apart most days, and their time together now is encrusted with small talk, or silence.

After washing the dishes, she sets off to spend the afternoon on the allotment, starting to feel a little bit lighter, a little bit brighter, enjoying the sun on her face; able, finally, to put it all out of her mind. But then there he is again, Pete's ghost, or double, or whatever it is, stepping off a bus on Blomfield Road. Once again the sight of him stops her dead in her tracks, rips her heart from its moorings, untethering her reason. As she watches him cross the road she feels the heavy drag of something awakening within her, some unruly thing that has been shackled for years in a dank, unvisited cell of her memory.

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She walks over to the bus stop and sits, trying to blink away the blind vision of him. Right down to the particular shade of his dirty blond hair, it is Pete. All the reasoning she had used to explain away the first sighting disintegrates in the light of this second. A quick vertigo takes hold. *It can't be real. He can't be real.* And yet it has such a disturbing reality that she no longer knows what reality is. Unsure whether to laugh or cry, she does neither. She wants to run over and fling her arms around him; she also wants to run a million miles in the opposite direction. If it isn't a ghost, what is it? Who is he? Is she really losing her mind again? Dear God, not that. All the ghosts in the world before that.

Bandaged in sunlight, she stands up and makes her way to the allotment, and as she works the soil, all through the planting and the weeding and the digging, thoughts keep circling inside her skull like searchlights looking for something approaching meaning, something resembling sense. She tugs at the corners of unfolded memories. Fragments in silt, seeds pushing out blind roots. All afternoon she loses herself in the shadows of her shadowed life, digging up the past in thick, cool handfuls.

ON THEIR FIRST DATE, the weekend after Blackpool, he had turned up with a dark mark on his neck. He'd said it was oil, but when she rubbed it, it wasn't oil; it was a lovebite, an accusatory bloom of purple and yellow. 'The

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lads did it – to make you jealous,’ he said, explaining how a few of them had held him down while one bit his neck. Unsure whether or not to believe him, she had sulked for a while, smarting from the jealousy, then shaken off the discomfort of it, not wanting to spoil their time together.

He would always walk her home and her parents were soon charmed by him, impressed by his father’s MBE in a way that slightly embarrassed her. Even her cold father warmed to him eventually. And in the ten minutes of privacy once her parents went to bed – before her dad would begin banging on the bedroom floor for Pete to go – she was never left in any doubt that he adored her.

After six months of insisting Pete stay at the YMCA on the weekends he visited, her parents finally allowed him to sleep in the spare room; and as soon as her father’s snoring began rattling the darkness he’d sneak across the landing and into her bed, and her heart would not be still. While she cherished the feel of his body against hers, fear kept her from doing any more than kissing. She knew good girls waited, propriety hindering desire.

The summer before she’d met Pete, she had gone camping one Saturday night on Saddleworth Moors with a boy called Ian. Told her parents she was staying at Ruth’s. And that night, as they’d lain kissing in the dark, he had placed her hand on his erection and said, ‘Look what you do to me.’

Removing it from his pyjamas, she had touched its soft, firm texture, the give and slide of the foreskin. Its

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difference from her own body was both startling and compelling. In the dark her sense of touch became acute, and when she tried to picture it there came unbidden the memory of her naked father. That Sunday morning when she'd run into her parents' room to tell them the dog had been sick on the kitchen floor, forgetting momentarily that she was forbidden from entering. At the time – she was no more than six – she had had no idea what they were doing, only the immediate terror of an apparent violence: her mother crying out and him on top of her, grunting and sweating. She stood there speechless a while before her mother spotted her. 'Get out, Grace!' she'd said, pulling a sheet over herself. 'Frank, get her out!' And so he climbed off and strode towards her and she bolted downstairs, the slam of their bedroom door ringing in her ears and the tears running down her face, and the shock of what she'd seen between his legs indelible. But thinking of her father naked while touching Ian had only served to kill her arousal. She'd pushed the vision out of her mind. When he'd guided her hand into action she'd felt uneasy, and ashamed. Yet also powerful as never before. And when he came it was like a secret, or a lesson: the sticky mystery of men.

AMONGST THE cabbages, amongst the cauliflowers, these voices of the dead invade her thoughts, chirruping like birds on the branches of her memory. She finds herself holding up a fistful of wormdark earth and smelling it,

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inhaling its mulchy odour, locked to the spot. She throws it away in quick disgust and stands up; pulls off her gloves and grabs her bag.

She heads to Parliament Hill to watch the city melt into a pool at her feet. The endless sky up here always makes her feel small enough for nothing to matter. Nobody knows what she lacks. Thoughts lift from their slumber on the bed of her mind. A laughing crocodile of blue-uniformed schoolgirls swallows her up, oblivious to the grief swelling inside her: enough to fill the whole world. The heath grass sparkles. She closes her eyes and faces the sun, watching the light dance through her eyelids in movements of yellow and red. She can feel the wind rush through her as if she isn't there.

Making her way back to the boat, she concentrates on the things she can see around her: here, a blue-framed window; here, three boys kicking a ball; there, pieces of dismantled furniture – a desk? – leaning against a wall, and there, taped to it, a sheet of white paper, three words scratched in blue ink: *Please take me*. By these means she stops herself from dropping into the pit that has appeared inside her head. And, to top it all, she saw one solitary, sorrowful magpie as she was leaving the allotment, and though not normally superstitious she keeps her eyes peeled for another all the way home, but in vain.

Gordon is up on deck, cleaning the windows, when she arrives back. She says a quick hello and goes inside to lie on the bed. She can hear his irritating whistle. It isn't even a full whistle, which might not be that bad;

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it's more, she thinks, a kind of half-whistle; this little piping sound like the kettle's hiss before its full-throated warble. She places a pillow over her head. *They say that if you think you're going mad you can't really be going mad, don't they? Whereas the mad have no idea they're mad – that's what makes them mad.* She, at least, has some idea that there is madness in these thoughts. She knows this is different from before – from the other great unravelling which led to that chattering ward full of damaged women. Now, each moment is lucid and present. She feels shaken, awoken, alert to these fragments of her past pressing into her, or out of her, like some kind of reckoning.

She imagines saying to Gordon, 'I've just seen your nemesis,' and bursts out laughing. But laughing to herself, with her head under a pillow, only makes her feel madder than ever. *Maybe I should just let myself get locked away. Best place for me right now. Away from the world for a while. Lock me up, and throw away the bloody key.* Her thoughts stagger like drunkards between an uncertain present and a past she doesn't want to revisit.

ON HER SEVENTEENTH birthday, just over a year after Blackpool, during a walk in Wythenshawe Park, Pete had said, 'I hope one day we'll get married, Grace.' And she had smiled and said yes, she hoped so too. And of course she was over the moon for she loved the bones

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of him, hardly able to believe her luck. She was lost to a romance that seemed real enough, and the future appeared filled with such sun-drenched certainty that she had no reason to believe she would be anything but happy. No reason at all.

The following weekend he drove her to Portsmouth to meet his parents, and, as they pulled up outside that big white house with its long gravel drive and immaculate front lawn, it struck Grace that his parents would think he was marrying down.

It was a bit like meeting royalty, or movie stars. From what he'd told her about his father, Edward, she had expected a more ill-tempered man, but she found herself quite charmed by this older version of Pete: same height and build, same big green eyes; same sense of humour. He cracked a joke about expecting her to be wearing a shawl and clogs like something from Lowry. Yet despite their similarity (or perhaps because of it) she sensed a tension between the two men. They behaved like boxers sizing one another up before the first punch was thrown. She noticed how Edward put Pete down all the time, and as the weekend progressed she liked her future father-in-law less and less.

His mother, Iris, was just as he'd described: immaculately dressed and groomed, with a warm but not fully sincere way about her. When she complimented Grace on the dress she was wearing, she marvelled to hear that she'd made it herself, going to such enthusiastic lengths with her praise that Grace felt embarrassed.

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She couldn't imagine getting close to either of them, which, as things turned out, proved to be the case. After Pete's death she would take the children to see them once a year (always without Gordon, the very idea of whom they couldn't entertain). But they remained strangers, and after Hannah's funeral she never saw them again, and hadn't even gone to their funerals.

They'd been engaged for just three weeks when Pete received a two-year posting to Aden. They had wanted to marry straight away so she could go with him, but her father had said they were too young and insisted they wait. If they still felt the same way about each other in two years then they could marry. She was furious with the decision, pleading with her mother to talk him round. They were, after all, the same age her parents had been. It wasn't fair.

It felt like some kind of endurance test, those two years apart. Never before had she experienced such lovesick absence of another: this pining, this ache. Bursting into tears whenever 'Only the Lonely' came on the radio. Their only contact was letters. He would write often – sometimes three letters a day – and she reread them as if they were texts requiring close study, trying to get near to him through his handwritten words on paper. He wrote long, detailed accounts of his days, and sent photographs she cherished.

And she would reply to each letter, eking out the slim co-ordinates of her own routines: the typing job, the boredom of home life... always ending with a

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declaration of love and a reiteration of how much she missed him.

One thing she left out of the letters was the affair she nearly had with a married man, about a year into their separation. His name was Denis Middleton, and he was one of the senior clerks at Refuge Assurance on Oxford Street. He was thirty-six, with black hair smudged white at the temples. He would single her out to do all his typing, sometimes asking her to stay late to finish an urgent letter, and pretty soon small gifts – a pair of stockings, or a lipstick – started to appear in her desk drawer. One night he asked if she'd like to go with him to see a film, and she said yes, she would. Rang her parents to say she was meeting Ruth after work. It felt illicit and she didn't exactly dislike it. After the film, they went for a drink, and he told her about his wife being involved in a car accident and left paralysed. 'I don't want you to think I'm an adulterer, I have Margaret's full consent,' he said.

She told him about Pete, showed him the engagement ring. 'I'm not exactly in a position to judge, now, am I?' she said.

He never once tried to kiss her, but after a couple of months of regular trips to the cinema or a restaurant he had asked if she would like to go away with him for a weekend to Harrogate. She wasn't entirely shocked, and was more than a little flattered, but, feeling out of her depth, she'd said no. After that, he didn't ask her out again; some other girl started doing his typing and the gifts stopped.

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Thinking of it now, she feels a wave of regret, wishing she'd been more adventurous, trying to imagine a different outcome. Knowing it's futile. It doesn't matter; none of it matters now.

ALTHOUGH PETE'S parents had wanted them to marry in their church and make it a grand affair, offering to help out with the expense, they opted for a small one in her local church, St Martin's in Wythenshawe. On his side there had only been his parents and a couple of his uniformed friends, including Mike, who was best man, and who was still courting Ruth, the maid of honour. In addition to Grace's parents were their siblings, her father's brother and his wife, and her mother's six sisters with their husbands and children. The seven sisters gathered like a flock of strange birds, clucking over childhood grievances every time they got together. For bridesmaids she had three cousins, with whom she still keeps in touch, albeit intermittently.

The day comes back in all its blue August sunshine: the white of the roses in her bouquet; the lucky black cat mascot Ruth had given her; the horseshoe-shaped confetti in Pete's hair. His laughter chimes in her head like bells, the lightness of the day returning to lift her mood with its recollections of a joy long gone sour. Back then, for one glorious fraction of time, she had had no reason to be anything but happy. She'd found a man as charming as a prince and could finally leave home.

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She'd come to hate living with her parents. It felt like a prolonged childhood, a place she'd outgrown. And she wanted sex. She wanted, desperately, to let her body grow; was curious and hungry to learn. Adulthood so far had been nothing but impatience and restraint. And the wedding night had been a revelation. She hadn't anticipated how much pleasure her body was capable of. For her, it made their love all the more complete. The proximity, the intimacy, the realm of the senses.

Yet, as she began the task of living with Pete, even though it was three years since they'd met, it soon became apparent she didn't really know him at all. Being away from him had made her long for him and love him all the more – but it had also kept his faults well hidden.