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Living  
With  
It

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*For my parents*  
*Not your sort of book,*  
*and you don't have to read it*



Ip dip do  
Cat's got the flu  
Dog's got the measles  
So out goes you

*Traditional playground rhyme*



# WEEK ONE



## *Isobel, Saturday*

‘I thought you knew?’

The way Sally said it made it clear there was something I ought to know, something that everyone else knew and presumed I must also be aware of. And she looked around the room and lowered her voice, not wanting to be heard before delivering those four words in a questioning tone, making me feel anxious about whatever it was I was supposed to have knowledge of but didn't. Not just then.

There ought to be a word for being in a state of unknowingness: for waking up in the morning and going about your life, thinking everything is quite normal, when something has already happened which will change everything.

I read once about a woman from New York who was staying at a spa in some exotic location, destressing or detoxing or one of those things New Yorkers do, when 9/11 happened – and this woman missed it. She'd signed the ‘no external interruptions’ box in the spa's list of requirements for her stay. Her suite was in a block without television, radio or wi-fi. No newspapers were delivered to her door. So it was only twenty-four hours after the event, on September 12th, when she walked across the complex to the treatment rooms and one of the other guests heard her say ‘I've got an appointment for an Indian head massage’ in her unmistakable accent and cried, ‘Oh, my God! Are you from New York? I'm so sorry. It's just so terrible...’ that she was alerted to the fact that the world she lived in had changed.

Blissfully unaware was how I was this morning, but the words are not the right ones. They don't come close enough to describing just how free I was, without knowing the thing that Sally would tell me a few hours later in the day.

We were all in upbeat mode.

It was what Vincent would call a 'pink' morning, with his strange synaesthetic tendency to ascribe colours to moods.

I was surprised when he first did it.

'I don't like Wednesdays,' he said over breakfast one morning. 'They're yellow.'

He was busy seeing things in the remains of his cornflakes, another Vinnie peculiarity. 'There's a Fiat 500 driving across the desert,' he'll say, adjusting some minor detail of the image visible only to him with his spoon, pushing milk-soaked flakes about slightly, as if to sharpen up the picture. Or, 'there's a deer drinking from a stream,' and sometimes 'a butterfly flapping its wings'. He's like an ancient astronomer, picking out hunter's belts from random stars. He sees things clearly that the rest of us must also try to see. 'Oh, yes!' I'll admire the soggy orange mush as if the butterfly wings are equally visible to me.

The colours thing felt slightly different.

'What do you mean, they're yellow, Vincent?' I asked him.

But his answer was not illuminating. 'They just are. Thursdays are a bit brown and Fridays are purple.' He carried on eating his toast before adding, 'Like Gabby.'

'Like Gabs?'

'Yes. She's purple, Daddy is silver, Harvey is green and you're sort of wood-coloured.' He pointed to a shelf.

'Beige?' I was insulted. If Eric was silver, why couldn't I be gold? I'm his mother, I should be gold.

But I was intrigued by the way my youngest son's mind works. And this morning it was on sparkling form.

'Why are you making that face, Vincent?'

I was putting lipstick on, using the hall mirror, before we left, and I could see him reflected behind me, his cheeks bulging in a peculiar way.

He disappeared into the living room without saying anything and re-emerged carrying a piece of paper.

‘I AM TRYING TO BREAK THE WORLD RECORD FOR HAVING A MOUTHFUL OF WATER,’ it read. ‘I’VE HAD IT SINCE I CLEANED MY TEETH. PS DON’T MAKE ME LAUGH...’

It made *me* laugh – a heartfelt, happy, ‘full of the joys of family life’ laugh.

Eric laughed too, when I told him and showed him the note, before tucking it in the pocket of my cardigan, where I would later discover this reminder of that moment, before I knew, before any of us knew.

‘Will Ben and Maggie be there?’ Gabriella asked as we found seats on the train.

‘Can we move up a bit, Gabs?’ I nudged Vinnie forward and nodded towards an empty peanut packet, left lying on the table.

Harvey has a nut allergy. I don’t think it’s as severe as the ones you hear about, when people can die simply from breathing in the dust from a discarded packet, but I don’t want to take risks. He hasn’t had a reaction for a long time, and that makes those around him forget that he has one and behave as if it’s gone away. Sometimes I feel that I’m the only one watching out for him. If even his fifteen-year-old sister, who is caring and sensible and really looks out for her younger brothers, nearly sits him down in front of a peanut packet, how can I trust anyone he spends time with to make sure he avoids contact with them? It’s a constant anxiety, when he’s at school or with friends.

‘Sorry, Mum.’ Gabs moved on up the carriage, casting around for five seats. ‘Here?’

‘But I need a table,’ Harvey rejected her choice. ‘I need to finish the cake.’

About five minutes before he left, Harvey had decided he would make Anton an origami birthday cake. It was an ambitious project. One that required several sheets of paper, more than five minutes and a flat surface.

‘You sit there, then,’ his older sister said, nodding towards a spare seat by a table. The other three were already taken. I’d thought it would be nice if we could all sit together for the twenty-minute journey along the coast from Hove to Lancing, but Harvey took the vacant seat, keen to get on with his creation.

It was rare that we all did things together these days and I was surprised Gabriella had opted to come. She prefers to spend time with her friends, and the fiftieth birthday of the husband of one of my old university friends would usually make her run a mile. But she had been keen to come with us to Anton’s.

‘I’d like to see everyone again,’ she’d said, when I’d mentioned the invite.

By ‘everyone’ she’d meant the group of friends we’d been with for ten days in France, during the summer: Yasmin, who had been a fellow student of mine, and her husband, Anton; Sally and Paddy, who also went to the same university and who own the house in Gascony where we stayed at the beginning of August; and Ben and his wife Maggie. I’d lived in the same halls of residence as Ben. I met him on my first day and later I would meet Eric, Ben’s oldest friend, through him.

Initially Gabriella hadn’t been keen to come on holiday, but we weren’t going to leave her at home despite her protests of ‘everyone else’s parents let them’ and ‘but there won’t be anyone my age there’.

Anton and Yasmin’s son, Conrad, is just over a year older than Gabs. When she was born, we were all still living in London and I’d hoped Yasmin and I might spend time together. Apart from Sally, who had got pregnant in the midst of her finals, none of my close friends had children yet. But I’d found Conrad slightly disconcerting. I wasn’t sure why at first. He

never looked at me or smiled, and he took no interest in Gabs, or in anything really.

When Gabs was just over a year old, Conrad's slight strangeness got a label. He was autistic. It was a terrible blow to Anton and Yasmin, who were by then expecting their second child, Mira.

'There's a poem,' Yasmin once said to me, 'called "Welcome to Holland"', about raising a child with a disability. It likens it to thinking you'd booked a holiday in Italy and finding out you're going to Holland instead.'

I'd understood what she meant. She still had a child, whom she loved very much, but he was not the child she had envisaged, and the journey with him through life was going to be very different from the one she and Anton had anticipated. And so was our friendship. Conrad and Gabs never became the close childhood friends I had once thought they might. When Yasmin and her family moved to the south coast, several years after we had moved to Brighton, it was so that Conrad could go to a local special school. By that time my kids had their own lives, and I had mine too, albeit one tightly bound up with the children. We did meet up, but only occasionally. It was always difficult. Conrad was always difficult. Gabs and he did not communicate. Harvey and Vincent were scared of him.

The holiday in France was the first time we had all spent any length of time together, and effectively Gabs was right: she was on her own. But she had suddenly seemed to grow up and had got on well with all the adults, especially Maggie, whom none of us really knows that well.

'Will Ben and Maggie be there?' she asked again, as we settled on the train.

'And Iris,' Vincent said, opening the can of Coke Eric had bought him and spraying it across the seat.

Iris is Ben and Maggie's baby daughter. Gabs had got on well with her too. She's always been good with younger children. I suppose it comes from being the eldest.

‘I’m sure they will,’ I said, with a confidence that turned out to be entirely misplaced. ‘Vinnie, be careful.’

I thought they would be there because it was Anton’s fiftieth and it was rare for them to have a party. Socialising has never been easy because of Conrad.

I thought they would be there because we all left France in the summer saying, ‘See you again at Anton’s fiftieth!’

I thought this too because, even though Ben hadn’t responded to my text asking if they were all going, I presumed he was just busy.

Ben and Maggie had been home again by the time Iris went down with measles. I knew how scary it must have been because it was scary for me too, seeing Gabs so ill. And I knew that Iris could only have caught the virus from Gabs while we were away. But it was over now. They were both fine. Their immune systems were probably stronger for it.

And anyway, our friendships, mine and Ben’s and Ben’s and Eric’s, go back so far that I imagined that any bad feeling there had been at the time was in the past.

I am wrong.

Vincent is out playing football in the garden with a couple of other kids, watched by a small group of adults. It’s early November, but the temperature is mild. I am not sure where Harvey has got to and Gabriella is hovering at the edge of the living room, looking as if she wished she hadn’t come. Again, there’s no one here her age. I know she wanted to chat to Maggie and see Iris too. Gabs seems to get on better with Maggie than I do. I think it’s because they are both musical and also, when we were away, Maggie must have been grateful that Gabs was willing to spend hours entertaining the baby.

‘Are Ben and Maggie not here yet?’ I say to Sally, watching Gabriella sitting, bored, on the other side of the room.

‘I don’t think they’re coming,’ she says. She sounds strained, but I think nothing of it.

‘Oh. I thought they’d be here,’ I say.

Sally’s look tells me there’s a reason they are not here and she feels put on the spot because I don’t know and she’s going to have to be the one to tell me.

Or maybe I read too much into the way she looks at me.

‘Don’t you know?’ she asks.

‘Know what?’ I say, my ‘pink’ mood starting to evaporate.

‘I thought they’d have told you,’ Sally says, and she’s looking around now, perhaps for a means of escape.

‘Told me what?’ If there is such a thing as premonition, I feel it then: that whatever she says next is going to be bad.

‘This isn’t really the place.’ Sally is looking away, at Anton, who is circulating with a bottle. She won’t catch my eye.

‘Sally?’ I force her to.

We’ve known each other over twenty years.

We’ve always been completely at ease in each other’s company.

What is it she’s not telling me?

‘It’s Iris.’ She lowers her voice and this time looks straight at me. ‘She was very ill after the holiday.’

I knew this. ‘But she’s better.’ I’d spoken to Ben since and he’d reassured me that Iris was fine.

‘Yes, better.’ Sally takes a sip from her glass. Then another. ‘But...’

‘But what?’

‘I thought you knew?’ Sally says. ‘She’s deaf now. Completely deaf in both ears.’

I’ve only drunk half a glass of champagne but the room starts to swim before me.

‘You’d better sit down,’ Sally is saying, and again, ‘I’m sorry, I really thought you knew.’

‘I think I need to go to the bathroom,’ I hear myself saying, and then Yasmin is there too.

‘Are you OK, Bel?’

‘She didn’t know,’ Sally says to her. ‘I thought she would know.’

‘What’s up, Bel?’ Eric has found me – has honed in on my distress from where he was standing, just outside in the garden.

‘I’m just not feeling very well.’ I look at Sally, willing her not to tell him, not yet.

‘Oh, love.’ Eric is concerned. ‘I hope you’re not coming down with something. Anton said Maggie’s not well either.’

Eric does not seem to catch Sally and Yasmin exchanging glances. I do.

‘I feel a bit sick.’ I stand up and head towards the bathroom.

‘Shall I come with you?’ Eric asks, and I try to smile.

‘No, I’ll be fine, I’m sure.’

He looks worried, but Yasmin steps in. ‘I’ll take her. I think we’ve got some anti-nausea stuff in the medicine cabinet.’

We pass Conrad’s room as we walk across the landing to the bathroom. He’s sitting on his bed making the strange moaning noise he makes, the way some people hum under their breath. He hates large gatherings. They make him stressed, anxious and angry.

I pause to look in and see that Harvey is in the room with him, kneeling on the floor, using a large book on Conrad’s bed as a table, on which he is folding his origami.

I’m not entirely surprised he ended up here. The origami began on holiday. I bought a kit, as I wanted the boys to spend time doing something other than playing on their iPods. Harvey took to it immediately – unsurprisingly, as he loves making things – and Conrad developed a fascination with watching him and a fondness for the miniature paper creations that resulted.

But I am surprised that Harvey sought sanctuary in Conrad’s room. Conrad is not the sort of child whose company you’d seek out, or with whom you’d be likely to find sanctuary.

I walk past.

Yasmin is ahead of me now, opening the door to the bathroom. I push past her in a sudden hurry, sit down on the

edge of the bath and take a deep breath. Yasmin stands by the washbasin.

‘I suppose everyone thinks it’s my fault?’ I say.

I want Yasmin to say something comforting, but she remains quiet. Or rather she looks away, and says nothing, which is not quite the same as remaining quiet. It’s more like not saying what she actually thinks.

And that speaks volumes.

So, I answer my question myself. Of course they are blaming me. How can everyone *not* be blaming me?

‘Are you feeling a bit better now?’ Yasmin says, looking at me again.

‘Not really,’ I tell her. ‘But I’ll be fine. I just need a minute.’

‘OK.’ Yasmin moves to leave.

Of course she wants to get back to the party. I know that. She’s the host. But at the same time I feel there’s something else, something she isn’t quite saying. I put my hand into my pocket, searching for a tissue because I think I might start to cry, but instead my hand finds Vinnie’s note. Was it only a few hours ago that we were full of the joys of family life?

I start to cry.

I know that if Ben has not told me himself then he must be angry with me. And I’m beginning to feel sorry for myself, because I know people are going to judge me.