

Summer of '76

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‘Little islands are all large prisons:
one cannot look at the sea
without wishing for the wings of a swallow.’

Sir Richard Francis Burton

JOANNA

Bembridge, Isle of Wight
New Year, 1971

PROLOGUE

*Met Office report for the Isle of Wight, 31 December 1970:
Minimum temperature 26°F/-3.3°C*

As 1970 gives way to '71, a hard frost settles across the ground, its icy fingers reaching out over town and farmland, cloaking houses and gardens from one end of the island to the other. Out on the gravelled driveway of the McKees' seafront home, white mist settles on the bare branches of the cherry tree, freezing the water of the ornamental bird bath, sending a frosty chill through the mirrored hallway as homeward-bound guests collect their coats and make their merry way.

Joanna understands how this night will play out; Marie explained it to her carefully at the start of the evening. When midnight has rolled by – when only the most steadfast revellers remain – it's the women who will pick the keys from the bowl. It couldn't be simpler. Up here, in John and Marie's candlelit living room, the last dozen guests gather on the sofas, champagne and anticipation shining in their eyes. Beyond the glass of the balcony doors, the moon reflects brightly over the clawing drag of high tide, the view clear and crisp from this warm bubble of New Year cheer, high above the icy shingle and shoreline below.

Thrilled, and yet anxious, Joanna draws up her stockinged feet, tucking them beneath her as she settles against the velvet cushions, leaning into Richard, linking her fingers with his.

He squeezes her hand, pushing away tendrils of tawny hair as he kisses her ear. Simon and Laura sit on the sofa opposite, a fist-sized gap between them. Laura is engaged in discussion with the older woman to her left, who extends a sinewy brown leg, turning it this way and that to illustrate some yoga position or other. Laura attempts to mimic the move, laughing freely at her own failings, as Simon runs forefinger and thumb across his upper lip in a self-soothing motion. Someone changes the record over, and the sounds of the room are softened by Bob Dylan's 'Lay Lady Lay'. Richard glances back at Joanna and smiles, a shared intimacy, before returning to chat with the guests to his other side. Joanna wants to make conversation too, to break down the tension that's rising behind her ribcage as the reality of the moment grows ever nearer. She wants this evening to happen more than anything, and yet her every instinct tells her she should be at home now, tucked up in her marital bed with Richard by her side, her son asleep in the room next door. Across the coffee table Simon is silent too, and, as she observes this, their eyes meet and linger and she recognises his shame. With a jolt she looks away, unable to return the steady gaze of one of her oldest friends, and, fleetingly, she considers her escape.

In that moment, their hosts breeze in, bringing with them the scent of pine needles and Paco Rabanne. White-haired John holds another bottle aloft, looking suddenly youthful and alert in the twinkling light of the Christmas tree; Marie bends to stoke the fire, mischievously running her hands over the seat of her trouser suit as she turns and smiles at the gathered friends.

'Are we ready?' she asks, her neat little palms coming together like a prayer.

When Marie conjures up the glass bowl, there's applause. She places it on the coffee table with a flourish, and firelight dances in the crystal-cut surface, casting shards of light-reflection over the balcony doors and out into the darkness of the night.

‘I think our new guests should go first, don’t you, John?’ Marie slips out of her sandals and pads across the room to lean on the sofa-back between Simon and Laura.

John eases the cork from the new bottle and circles the room to top up glasses. ‘Of course! Let the youngsters kick it off. So who’s to be first – Laura or Joanna?’

Joanna suppresses a gasp as Laura springs forward, unhesitant, to plunge her hand into the bowl of keys on the table before her. With her free hand she pushes back a lock of shiny black hair, boldly eyeing every male in the room before pulling out her chosen key with a challenging jangle.

A younger man at the end of the sofa raises his hand like a schoolboy, and amidst claps and murmurs of amusement Laura leads him from the room, directed along the corridor by Marie, who smiles after them like a proud parent.

‘So, Joanna?’ she says, gesturing at the bowl of keys as if it were nothing more than a plate of canapés.

Joanna feels the soft tread of the carpet beneath her feet as she lowers her legs from the sofa, and she turns to look at Richard. He nods, gently urging her forward, his fingertips tender in the small of her back. She can’t raise her eyes, can’t brazen it out like Laura. So instead she slips her hand into the tangle of keys and searches it out. Time slows as her fingers fumble around the contents of the bowl, trying to locate a particular key fob, panic flooding her veins when nothing feels familiar. At last she finds it, recognises the spongy texture of the little orb, and she wraps her fingers around it, pulls it from the bowl and raises it like a question mark.

LUKE

Sandown, Isle of Wight, 1976

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*Met Office report for the Isle of Wight, early May 1976:
Maximum temperature 75°F/24°C*

There's a taste of things to come in early May, when soaring temperatures create a mini-heatwave across the country. Standing in the sunlight of his front drive, Luke Wolff wipes his oily hands on the back of his patched-up jeans and stands back to admire his new scooter. It's a 1969 orange Vespa – a little rusty around the bodywork, but it's his, bought with his own money despite his mother's anxious complaints. In the quiet heat of afternoon, white sunlight spreads over the driveway and out across the small lawn at the front of the bungalow, reflecting brightly in the polished chrome of the scooter's headlamp. There's a breathless quality in the air, a comforting sense of being here alone on his front drive, while the rest of the neighbourhood is absent, working or at school.

Luke gives the vinyl seat a final polish with his new chamois and pulls his T-shirt over his head, flinging it on the doorstep and absently wiping a smudge of oil across his sweaty brow. As he starts to clear up his gear, the familiar pop-pop-sputter of Martin's scooter bounces along the avenue, growing louder as he draws up on the path beyond the open metal gate. Luke watches as his friend turns into the drive and heel-steps towards the house, looking as if he's riding a kiddie bike, with his pale bony knees bent up too

high. He's six foot five and thin as a rake. He really shouldn't be wearing shorts with those legs. It's not a cool look.

Martin unclips his helmet and untangles himself from the seat like a grasshopper. Tucking the helmet under his arm, he steps around Luke's new scooter, rubbing his chin with his large hand, his shoulder-length hair hanging sweaty and dull where the helmet has pressed it against his head.

'Like it?' Luke asks, automatically stepping back on to the doorstep to bring himself closer to Martin's level. 'I've been working on it all morning. You know, checking the oil, polishing the chrome and all that. Took her along the seafront earlier on. She goes like a dream.'

A slow smile passes over Martin's face and he runs his fingers around the globe of the front lamp. 'Very nice.' His hand rests there for a moment, while his pale green eyes travel over the bodywork for a second look. He nods appreciatively and turns back to his own bike to unstrap a stack of LPs held together in a plastic carrier bag.

Luke picks up his T-shirt and pushes open the front door. In contrast to the bright glare of outdoors, the cool, narrow hallway renders him momentarily blind as he makes his way through to his bedroom, where he pours them both a glass of lukewarm lemonade. Luke eases himself up on to the window ledge, resting his feet on his desk as he studies the sleeve of one of Martin's LPs, running his finger along the curling white smoke trail of David Bowie's cigarette. Sunshine pours in through the open window, heating his back and filling the room with the honeysuckle scent of the front garden.

'Man, I *love* this album. This is officially my favourite record of the year. I'll get it myself when I've got a bit of spare cash again. I put just about everything I'd saved into getting that scooter.'

Martin is lying on Luke's single bed, air-drumming, his feet hooked through the bars of the headboard and his head hanging over the edge of the divan. His hair dangles like dull tassels.

Luke turns the album cover over to scrutinise the playlist on the back.

““Young Americans” is the best track. No contest.’

‘Agreed.’ Martin hits a final air-cymbal and swings his long legs up and off the bed, rucking up the yellow candlewick bedspread as he brings his feet to the floor. He picks up a dusty book from the bedside cabinet and starts to thumb through the pages, not really looking at the words. ‘Any good?’ he asks, holding it up.

‘Dunno. I can’t seem to concentrate on reading at the moment. I was meant to be revising today, but it’s too hot.’ Luke rests his chin on the album cover. ‘So, whaddya know?’

‘Not much,’ says Martin. ‘It’s all work, work, work at our place. The only time I get a break is when I’m revising. But we’ve got swallows nesting in the eaves of the workshop. I’m surprised they’re there at all, with all the noise we make, but still, they’re there. I think they like the long grasses in the garden; plenty of insects for them, I suppose.’

‘Have they laid eggs?’

‘Think so. I’m keeping a close eye.’ Martin gazes past Luke, out through the open window. ‘You know, the Egyptians thought swallows were the souls of the dead.’

Luke drops off the desk and starts thumbing through his album collection. ‘Maybe that’s my grandad you’ve got in your eaves.’

‘Or my mum,’ Martin replies, his eyes vacant. ‘Imagine that. If your soul really was separate from your body? So even when your body stops working, your soul could fly.’

‘Deep, man.’ Luke smirks, pulling out another record and stretching across to pass it to Martin. Martin looks up and takes the album from him, flipping it over without interest.

‘It would be good, though, wouldn’t it? To fly?’

Luke looks at his strange friend, trying to see him as others do. He’s been around him so long now that he just sees *Martin*, not the giant they all see, broken-nosed and lantern-

jawed. Even his hands are giant, like long, elegant shovels. 'Tell you what would be good, mate. A girlfriend. It's been bloody ages since I went out with anyone. Surely we'll get to meet some nice girls this summer.' He picks up a pencil and lobs it at Martin's lap.

Martin's eyes zone back in and he gives a slow nod. 'But you'll meet loads of new people at college, won't you? Don't know what chance I've got, stuck in this place.'

A static image of Martin at the workbench seeps into Luke's mind, like an ageless photograph, trapped in time. 'You'll be fine, mate,' he says.

Martin links his fingers, cracking his knuckles loudly. 'I'm starving. D'you think your mum'll let us have something to eat?'

'Yeah. Come on, then.' Gesturing for Martin to get off the bed, Luke straightens up his covers before lifting the needle off the record and lowering the perspex lid.

As they reach the kitchen, Dad calls out from the living room, 'Is that you, Luke? Get me a beer from the fridge, will you?'

'What did your last slave die of?' Luke shouts back.

'Nothing! She's in the kitchen!'

Luke groans as Dad's laughter trails away, and the lads enter the light-filled kitchen, where they find Mum and Kitty making dough babies on the floury table, poking in eyes and bellybuttons with the end of a paintbrush.

'Mart-eeee!' Kitty screams, waving her floury hands above her head.

'Hello, Martin,' Mum says, handing the brush to Kitty, who frowns hard at Luke.

Martin tucks a strand of hair behind one ear, a pink tinge rising in his high cheeks. 'Hello, Mrs Wolff.' Kitty bashes the brush on the table, still trying to get his attention. 'Hey, Kitty,' he replies, raising a hand.

Mum looks up. 'You get taller every time we see you, doesn't he, Kitty?'

‘*Mum?*’ Luke rolls his eyes and opens the fridge, tutting as the door of the tiny freezer compartment falls open with a crack, scattering ice dust.

Kitty presses her thumb down on a dough baby’s head, squashing its face into the table. ‘I’m *four*,’ she says, assertively waving four fingers in the air.

‘Nearly old enough for school,’ says Martin, accepting an ice pop from Luke.

Kitty smiles proudly and returns her attention to the dough babies.

‘Phewee! What about this weather, then, boys?’ Mum pinches her loose smocked shirt and wafts it at the neckline. ‘Just look at Luke – he’s already so brown you’d think he’d been to the South of France! Who’d imagine May could possibly be as hot as this?’

Martin holds his arm up against Luke’s, comparing his pale skin to his friend’s chestnut tan, as Mum stretches over the sink, filling the kettle and setting it down on the side. She looks at Luke and sighs.

‘You ought to do something about your hair, Luke. It’s getting a bit long. Although I’d kill for dark shiny hair like yours. Look at it – straight as a poker.’ She rakes fingers through her own wavy hair, drawing it over one shoulder. ‘Your dad’s was just the same as yours when I first met him.’

Luke ignores her.

‘Your hair’s lovely, Mrs Wolff,’ says Martin, staring at his ice pop. ‘Sort of honey-coloured.’

‘Pack it in, Mart.’ Luke grimaces and loads up two plates with roughly made sandwiches and crisps. Martin looks away, rubbing a thumb down his long crooked nose.

‘Aw, Martin! *You* can come again,’ Mum says, twirling her hair into a bunch. ‘Although this weather is playing havoc with it. There’s *so* much static.’ She reaches into the cupboard for a mug.

‘How many cups of tea do you drink a day, Mum?’ Luke asks irritably.

She flicks the switch at the wall. ‘I don’t know. Six? Maybe eight?’

‘Urgh.’

‘What d’you mean, “urgh”? What’s wrong with tea all of a sudden?’

Luke hands a plate to Martin, and looks back at Mum, pushing his fringe from his face. ‘I think you’ve got too much time on your hands.’

Martin, clearly uncomfortable, takes a special interest in Kitty’s dough babies, scanning the table with a fixed expression of concentration.

‘Goodness me, Luke, it’s not like I’m drinking gin all day long, or smoking pot. You are a strange boy sometimes.’ She turns away to get on with her tea-making. ‘So, how’s your dad, Martin? Is business good? I haven’t seen him in the town for months.’

Martin clears his throat.

‘He just got another big order in, so we’re really busy. I’m going to be working for him full-time when exams are over. Some of the new frames he’s making are really big – the biggest is six or seven foot tall, so you need two men on that kind of job.’

Mum reaches into the low fridge to fetch a beer for Dad, handing it to Luke, along with the bottle opener. ‘I hope you’ll have a bit of a break, Martin, before you get stuck into all that work. You’ve been studying hard too – harder than old slack-chops here.’

Martin grins as Luke pushes him. ‘Yeah, well, I need to – he’ll get good marks whatever he does. I’ve got a weekend off soon, so we’re gonna go round the island on our scooters, aren’t we, Luke?’

Luke rolls Dad’s beer bottle from one hand to the other. ‘Uh-huh. We’ll take the tent, make a weekend of it. Martin wants to do a bit of bird-spotting.’ He smirks. ‘He’ll be busy looking up in the sky with his binoculars, while I’ll be trying to spot birds of the mammalian kind.’

Mum purses her lips. ‘*Luke*. I hate it when you say that.’
‘What – *mammalian*?’ He laughs, putting a saucy accent on the word.

‘Yes.’

‘But women *are* mammals, aren’t they? So, strictly speaking, they’re mammalian.’

She scowls harder. ‘And “birds”. It’s sexist.’

When Luke notices Martin’s awkwardness, he laughs even louder. Mum flicks him with the teatowel and turns away to clear the washing-up. Martin’s eyes linger a moment on her small waist. Luke frowns at him to let him know he’s noticed and gives him a little shove towards the door, making a point of pulling a face at Kitty as he goes. She squawks, throwing her paintbrush to the floor.

‘Oh, that reminds me,’ Mum calls after them before they disappear into the hallway. ‘Any chance you could babysit on Saturday night, Luke? You’re more than welcome to come over too, Martin.’

Luke shrugs. ‘Alright, but only if we can have a couple of drinks.’

‘Deal.’ Mum flashes a bright smile at the boys. ‘There you go, Kitty. You’ve got your favourite friend Marty coming to babysit.’

Kitty reaches above her head and claps her floury hands, sending white dust clouds billowing, and Martin laughs, giving her the thumbs-up as they leave the room.

In the living room, Dad’s sitting in his armchair with his feet on the footstool. He’s got the newspaper on his lap and he’s carefully folding it back along the crease to make it easier to handle. Luke’s seen him do it a thousand times before. ‘Ah!’ he says, slapping the paper down on the side table so he can stand, taking the beer from Luke with his left hand, simultaneously offering Martin a handshake with his right. ‘Just the ticket.’ He raises his bottle. ‘Cheers! It’s a hot one today, eh? *May*? Feels more like August. Look, I’ve already got the old legs out.’

Luke cringes at his father's faded denim shorts and Jesus sandals. He's not even wearing a shirt.

'Not bad for forty-something. Look at that!' He pats himself on the stomach, indicating for Martin to do the same. 'Go on, feel it. My abdominals are as tight today as they were twenty years ago.'

Martin stretches out his arm and gently prods Mr Wolff's stomach. 'Wow,' he says, sincerely. He looks at Luke. 'That really is firm.'

'So, I suppose you two have come out of your pit to watch *Top of the Pops*?' Dad says, dropping back into his seat and reaching for his newspaper and ballpoint pen. He points his biro towards the television. 'Flick it on, son. We don't want to miss the dancing girls, do we?'

Martin sits on the sofa as Luke switches programmes, giving the old television set a smack on the side to make the picture settle. 'He means Pan's People,' he says, waggling his eyebrows. 'You know they're not on any more, Dad.'

'Of course they are. It's *Top of the Pops*.'

'Really, Pan's People aren't on any more. I saw their last show a few weeks back.'

'Typical!' Dad says, throwing down his pen. It's just about the only thing worth paying the licence fee for these days! This'll be down to that harridan Mary Whitehouse and her bloody decency laws.'

Luke and Martin eat their sandwiches, chatting over various songs until Noel Edmonds introduces a new act, a mixed dance troupe, who come on to 'Can't Help Falling in Love' by the Stylistics.

'Who's this?' Martin asks.

'I can tell you one thing – it's not bloody well Pan's People!' Dad shakes his head, shifting to the edge of his seat where he stares intently at the screen. 'Good God! They've even got men at it!'

Luke laughs, almost spitting out his sandwich. 'Urgh, it's putting me off my food.'

‘Well I hope Mary Whitehouse is watching *this*. Talk about indecent. Look at those outfits. You can clearly see their meat and two veg.’ Dad gets up to lean on the mantelpiece for a better view, moving in so close that he’s obscuring it entirely. ‘You know what? That one used to be a model – the brunette. You know how I know?’

‘Go on then,’ Luke replies with a sigh. ‘I can see you’re dying to tell us.’

Martin has zoned out altogether as he chews his way through his chicken paste sandwich.

‘Because I went out with her. Back in my London days.’

‘Really?’ asks Martin, refocusing as he gulps down his last mouthful.

‘*Really*.’ Dad raises one eyebrow and drops his voice. ‘A lovely girl, if you know what I mean.’

‘*Dirty* old man,’ Luke says.

‘But, you know how it is. I had to break it off with her. She was getting too clingy, wanted more from the relationship than I did, blah blah blah...’ Dad flops back into his seat, waving his hand in the air, gazing into the middle distance as if imagining the long-ago affair.

‘So, what was her name, then?’ Luke raises his eyebrows suspiciously.

‘Name? God knows!’ Dad laughs uproariously, taking a swig of his beer. ‘Bunty? Sindy? Heaven only knows!’

‘How can you not remember something like that?’ Luke stands and takes Martin’s empty plate, stacking it on top of his own.

‘Ah, so many women. So long ago...’

Luke rests his arm on the mantelpiece, flipping a box of matches with the tip of his free hand. ‘You see, Martin, the thing you need to remember about my dad is that he’s full of –’

‘Luke!’ Mum shouts from the hallway. ‘Is this your motorbike mess on the drive? Someone’ll end up breaking their neck if you leave it there! *Clear it up!*’

Dad pulls a smug face at Luke and turns back towards the television. 'Nice to see you, boys.'

It's past ten o'clock when Luke rises on Sunday morning. He clears the draining board and eats boiled eggs with Kitty before leaving the house, pausing to knock once at his parents' door on his way out.

'Mum? I'm off. Kitty's on her own now.'

They were out late last night, at one of their parties, and judging by the silence from the other side of the door they won't be up for a while. Luke's bedside clock told him it was gone two in the morning when he heard them return, and he could tell they'd had a good time; they were giggling and whispering, Mum joking with Dad to keep the noise down as he dropped his key fob on the front doorstep with a clatter. At least they're not arguing, Luke thought vaguely, before rolling over and going back to sleep.

He wheels his scooter down the front drive, turning to wave at Kitty as she bangs on the front window with her Tiny Tears doll, wobbling her head from side to side to make him laugh.

When he arrives at Sandown seafront Martin is already waiting for him by the pier, and they set off up the island together, to travel the eight or nine miles towards Nanna's house in Wootton Creek. By the time they arrive, the heat of the day is already taking hold, and they're glad of the shade of the wooded back roads that fork off beyond Kite Hill.

Nanna's home is a simple, low-ceilinged bungalow set on a large plot of lawn that slopes down to the creek beyond a screen of trees and bracken at the bottom. The front garden is almost always in shadow, facing dense trees and wooded pathways which snake off in several directions towards the various stretches of coastline at the top of the island. Beyond the low wall to her front garden there's a cluster of old pine trees where Nan has set up a wooden bird table, on to which she scrapes bacon rinds and crusts

each morning after breakfast. Several peanut feeders and home-made fat-balls dangle from the branches of the trees, and they now swing wildly as a burst of garden birds takes flight, alarmed by the sound of the bike engines turning on to the gravel path.

‘Squirrel,’ says Martin, smiling lazily and pointing at the small chestnut rodent as it scoots up the trunk and into the foliage above.

They leave their scooters in a sunny patch of light at the side of the outhouse, hooking their helmets over the handlebars. Luke runs his hands up through his sweaty hair and opens the front door without knocking. ‘Hi, Nanna! It’s me – Luke!’

There’s a pause, before Nan’s voice trails back faintly. ‘I’m in the back, love. Just adjusting my ankle strap.’

‘Where?’

‘In the back!’

The lads walk through the narrow hallway, until they reach the living room and the bright, warm conservatory at the back of the house.

‘Bleedin’ hell, it’s hot!’ Nanna’s sitting in one of the sun-bleached wicker chairs, with her foot up on the tiled coffee table. There’s a support bandage hanging limply from the end of her toes. ‘Here, give us a hand with this, love. Bloody thing. Pain in the arse, it is.’

‘*Language*, Nanna.’ Luke laughs, sitting on the seat beside her. ‘Look, I’ve brought Martin with me.’ He gives her a nudge and she looks up at Martin wickedly.

‘Oh, don’t mind me, Marty, love. Put it down to my age if you like.’

Luke eases the tube bandage along her foot, noticing the silvery slip of her skin as it resists the tight elastic. After a bit of tugging and adjusting, he fits it neatly over her heel. ‘So, how’s the ankle doing at the moment, Nanna?’

‘Oh, it’s alright, love,’ she replies, using his shoulder for support as she gets to her feet, wriggling them into her pink

velour slippers. 'Just a bit crumbly. Like me.' She picks up her wooden walking stick and beckons for them to follow her into the kitchen, where a freshly baked lemon cake is sitting on the side. 'Fancy a slice?'

Luke kisses her cheek and fills the kettle at the sink. 'Grab a seat, Mart. And you, Nan. I'll make us a nice cup of tea.'

Nan sighs heavily as she sits at the small square table, rearranging her thin little legs to get comfortable. 'What are you boys up to today? Off down the beach or something nice like that?'

'We're on our way over to Sunshine Bay,' Luke replies, placing a fresh bottle of milk on the table. The silver foil lid has a wide hole torn in it, where the blue tits have pecked their way through to get at the cream. As he reaches back to fetch the teapot he notices the row of rinsed bottles lined up along the windowsill, and makes a mental note to put them down on the doorstep for Nan on his way out. 'I start my new job at the holiday camp soon, so they want me to come and collect my uniform.'

'Entertaining the grockles?' Nanna asks.

'Nothing so glamorous,' he replies with a snort. 'I'll be cleaning out chalets and minding the pool. Just part-time until after my exams, then I'll do more shifts. The money's not too bad – and if you work there you get a free pass for the pool. And cheap food.'

'*And* you'll get lots of nice girls down there if you're lucky.' Nan gives Martin a wink. 'What about you, Martin, love? You looking for a job too?'

He rubs his nose self-consciously, and looks down at his hands. 'Oh, no. I'm working for my dad, you know, making picture frames. It's the family business.'

'That's nice,' she says, pinching at her blouse collar and blowing up over her face to cool off. 'Though I don't s'pose you meet many girls in that line of work, do you?'

Martin shakes his head and gives an embarrassed little smile.

‘Of course, she’s right, mate,’ Luke says, sitting at the table and pouring the tea. ‘Once I start work down at Sunshine Bay, I’m gonna be fighting ’em off. I won’t know which way to turn for girls throwing themselves at my feet.’ He raises his eyebrows at Nan, who chuckles.

Martin covers his cake-filled mouth.

‘Just think of all those girls in bikinis, Mart,’ Luke grins. ‘Like Honey Ryder in *Doctor No*.’

‘Or Raquel Welch in *One Million Years BC*,’ Martin replies, chewing slowly on his cake.

Nan points at the sugar bowl on the side, and Luke passes it over. ‘If it’s naked girls you’re after, you’d have liked it round here back in the day.’

‘How’s that?’ asks Luke.

‘Well, we had our own nudist colony up at Woodside, when it was still just the big house. Run by Reverend something-or-other. Bare bottoms everywhere. And not all of ’em that nice to look at, I’ll bet.’

‘A vicar? Are you pulling our legs, Nan?’

She looks affronted. ‘No, I’m bloody not! It only closed down ten or so years ago, before they turned all that land into the holiday camp, as if we needed another one. You ask anyone. They were supposed to stay in the paddock if they were in the altogether, but no end of ’em used to get down on the beach, frolicking about under the tamarisks!’ She giggles to herself. ‘I remember it clearly, because it all started up the year your dad was born, not long after we’d moved on to the island. Lots of the locals were up in arms about it – couldn’t believe a vicar would encourage such shenanigans! Some of the youngsters used to cycle up to the bay and stand on their saddles trying to peek over the hedges. I even heard that the lads from Ryde rowing club used to take a regular trip across the creek just to get a sneaky look on their way down to the Sloop. Well, we didn’t have all the dirty magazines in them days. Probably the first time some of ’em had seen a naked body!’

She gives Martin a little shove across the table and the boys fall about laughing. ‘Bloody hell, Nan,’ says Luke. ‘I’ve never heard of that before. What about you and Grandad? Didn’t you ever fancy getting yourself a nice all-over tan?’

‘You cheeky bugger!’ she hoots, slicing them all a second piece of cake. ‘No, we did not! Mind you, I once had to give him a right bollocking, when I heard him and his daft mate Eric Stubbs had cycled down there for a look one Saturday night. Eric’s wife, well, she heard him bragging at the front gate and dragged him round here to get it out of them.’

‘No! What did Grandad say to you?’

‘Not much. He said he was so drunk at the time that all he remembered was falling into the hedge and tearing his shirt collar. He said Eric was a bleedin’ idiot for thinking they’d all still be out in the gardens at that time of night. It must’ve been midnight by the time they got up there – all the nudies were tucked up nice and cosy in their beds by then!’

‘I bet you were mad at him, weren’t you?’ Luke licks his finger and cleans up the crumbs from his plate.

‘Me? Nah. He’s just a man, after all. Anyway, talking of daft men, how’s that dad of yours? Hasn’t been over to see me in weeks – since he bought me that bloody thing over there.’ She flicks her hand towards the small fridge in the corner of the kitchen. ‘Waste of space. What do I need a fridge for?’

Luke stacks the plates and puts them on the side. ‘You’ll be glad of it if this weather keeps up, Nan. But yeah, Dad’s fine. Looking forward to the end of term, I think. He’s always threatening to jack his job in, but you know he never will. He never stops moaning about teaching, but I think he’s glad of it when the long school holidays come round.’

‘He always was a lazy git.’

‘*Nan.*’

‘Well, he was.’

Martin hides his face behind his teacup, draining every drop with his last mouthful. The sun shines through the window into his eyes and he blinks like a mole.

‘Actually it was him who came up with the idea of me getting a job at the holiday camp. He said he was a Bluecoat at Pontins for a while when he was my age.’

Nan splutters. ‘A Bluecoat?’ She wipes her lashes with a crumpled lavender hanky. ‘The closest he ever got to it was a singing competition he went in for when he was nine!’

Luke’s jaw drops. ‘He wasn’t a Bluecoat?’

She raises her eyes theatrically. ‘*And* he came last, poor little bugger. Tone deaf.’ She eases herself out of her seat and hobbles over to the sink, where she pauses to watch the rise and fall of the birds beyond the windowpane. ‘Poor old Richard,’ she says with a gentle sigh. ‘He always was full of shit.’