

# Chapter 1

It was bitterly cold, the day of the fish-stunning. So bitter that I nearly didn't go to watch. Lying in bed that morning, gazing at the wall since the early hours, I'd never felt more ancient, nor more apathetic. So why, in the end, did I roll over and ease those shrivelled feet of mine into my new sheepskin slippers? A vague curiosity, maybe – one had to clutch on to that last vestige of an enquiring mind, stop it slipping away.

Still in my dressing gown, I shuffled about the kitchen making tea and looking at my emails to see if there were any from Alistair. Well, my son was busy, no doubt, with his fieldwork. Those slippers he bought me for Christmas were cosy in the morning chill. There was a message from my daughter Melanie but it was only to tell me about a documentary she thought I might like. She often mistook her father's tastes for mine. I ate dry toast and brooded over my last conversation with her and for a second bristles of shame itched at the back of my neck. It

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felt easier to ignore it, so instead I read the newspapers online and saw that David Bowie had died.

At my age, reading obituaries is a generational hazard, contemporaries dropping off, one by one; each announcement an empty chamber in my own little revolver. For a while I tried to turn a blind eye, as if ignoring death could somehow fob it off. But people kept dying and other people kept writing about it, and some perverse imp obliged me to keep up to date. Bowie's death upset me more than most, although I never really listened to his music. I did remember him introducing the little animation of *The Snowman*, but when we watched it with my grandson at Christmas they'd replaced the introduction with something else. So my one recollection of Bowie was him holding a scarf and looking sombre, and for some reason the image was a disturbing one. The unmade bed beckoned, but then Leo's voice in my head as it so often was, 'Buck up, Mrs Carmichael! Onwards and upwards!'

So I went up to my room to put on my thickest pair of tights and a woollen skirt, grimacing at the putrid blue veins, and creaking along with the stairs on the way back down to fetch my coat. Struggling with the buttons, I sat down for a moment to catch my breath, thinking about the sign in the park the previous week.

My post-Christmas slump was particularly bad this year, the warm glow of festivities punctured by Alistair's departure, and with him Arthur, my golden grandson, his voice already taking on the Australian upward lilt. And it was still hard, being in the park, without remembering Leo. He was a great believer

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in a constitutional; enjoyed belittling self-important joggers and jovially berating cyclists. Every landmark had a dismal echo, but I was drawn back again all the same – the resident grey lady, idly roaming. There was a certain oak tree we used to visit – Leo liked its gnarled old trunk and said it was a *Quercus* version of him, increasingly craggy in old age. I would no doubt have spent hours standing there wool-gathering that day, but was distracted by a child who sounded like my Arthur. A boy of his age was tugging his mother fretfully as she read a notice pinned to the railings that circle each lake. Moving closer, I pretended to read it.

‘Mummmmmmmmmmm!’ He had strawberry blonde locks and biscuit crumbs at the corner of his mouth that begged to be wiped away. Children are so beautiful, flawless and shiny, like a conker newly out of its shell. Such a shame they all grow up to be abominable adults. If only we could preserve that giddy-with-possibility wiring, everything greeted with an open embrace.

‘Jeez, Otis, give me a break,’ said the mother, in a broad Irish accent, batting him off. She had dyed red hair and I loathed her instantly. She glanced sideways at me, the old crone leering at her son, and I resumed my faux-study of the notice.

‘What do you think, Oat?’

*Oat?* Good Lord, people today.

‘They’re gonna electrocute the fish! Wanna watch?’

The park caretakers needed to move the fish from one lake to the other, which required them to be stunned. Electrofishing. I’d never seen or heard of such a thing, nor did it seem

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particularly interesting, but maybe if I could see ‘Oat’ again then the tightness I’d felt in my gullet since Ali and Arthur got on the plane might ease a little. It would be something to do, after all . . .

Since that afternoon a week ago, I’d changed my mind half a dozen times, dwelling on the decision as only the terminally bored and insecure can. In the end, I decided to go so that there would be something to tell Alistair about. My life had become so circumscribed I’d grown worried he might think me trivial, and I only read the papers (including the obituaries) so that I knew what he was talking about when he mentioned a politician’s gaffe, or asked which new plays were on in the West End. I could tell Ali was impressed when I went to the Turner exhibition, so the three buses in the rain were worth it.

Seeing some carp get electrocuted wasn’t quite the dazzling metropolitan excursion, but it was better than nothing. So there I was, off to see the fish-stunning in my best winter coat, already drafting the email I would write on my return. Perhaps I might bump into little Otis and feed the ducks with him and queue up with his mother for a coffee, and . . . I ran adrift at this point, and nearly turned back, but by then my legs were stiffening up in the cold, and the bench by the lakes was nearest.

A small group had gathered to watch. Someone was handing out croissants, and when one was offered I took it, not because I was hungry but just grateful to be noticed. I put it to my lips and remembered a time in Paris with Leo when we’d had pain

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au chocolat on the banks of the Seine and then went to a bookshop where he'd disappeared up a rickety staircase while I petted a cat curled on a battered sofa, picked shards of pastry out of my teeth and worried which hand I was using to do which. They smelt of chocolate and cat for the rest of the day because we couldn't find anywhere to wash. My eyes filled with tears: Leo and I would never go to Paris again, even though it wasn't a particularly pleasant memory as I found the city dirty and unfriendly, there were no green spaces, and despite Leo speaking fluent French, they used to curl their lips at him because he never sounded anything but English and as puffed up as their croissants.

I swayed and sank onto the bench, blinking and fighting the breathlessness, until a warm patrician voice said, 'Oh my love, don't look so horrified – they're not Greggs or anything. I made them myself.' A middle-aged woman with eyes like berries was smiling down at me, waving a napkin, so I made a show of nibbling the croissant and mumbling my thanks, cursing myself for being such a distracted old bat. She carried on moving through the crowd, handing out her pastries and pleasantries, then everyone surged forwards, so I struggled to my feet again, to watch two men in waders and lurid jackets sailing across the pond in a curious-looking boat.

About four feet off the bow hung a circular contraption with small bars dangling from it into the water, like a giant set of wind chimes. Next to me, a chap was explaining the process to the woman on his other side. The device worked in combination with a conductor on the hull to create an electrical field

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in the water wherever the boat travelled, with an on-board lever controlling the current. The men made large circles around the lake, one steering and operating the electrical lever while the other knelt poised with a net. For a while nothing happened, but then a glistening grey buoy popped gaily to the surface – the first stunned fish. ‘Ooooh,’ said the onlookers, clapping politely. After that they started bobbing up everywhere, gleaming and flaccid, waiting to be fished out. Every time the second man scooped one up, the watching crowd cheered and clinked their paper cups of mulled wine.

But the longer it went on, the more unsettling it became. The rhythmic ‘plash’ as they juddered out of the water, the slow whoosh of the net, the resulting thud as they hit the container. Plash, whoosh, thud. Plash, whoosh, thud. Then . . . flap. The stunning only lasted long enough to get the fish into the boat. Those vast, prehistoric-looking carp, covered in pond-mud, were hauled on board and immediately started writhing and flopping. Plash, whoosh, thud, plash whoosh, thud. Flap, flap, flap.

One minute you’re gliding along, not a care in the world, and the next a huge prod appears and knocks you for six, and then everything is different and you’re gasping with the shock of it. And there’s no triumph in survival, because you’re just swimming round and round endlessly in a new lake, mouthing pointlessly. I’d rather someone put me out of my misery. Ashes to ashes. The breathlessness, back. Plash, whoosh, thud. I could look the other way, then it would go away. Don’t think, don’t think. Thud, thud, thud. I clutched the railings, trying to ignore

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the looming branches above, but my skin prickled around the edges, flared, and I felt myself fall amidst reaching hands and faraway shouts as the blackness took over . . .

## Chapter 2

Something rough was rubbing against my cheek, moving up my face like a scourer. Moaning, I turned my head away.

‘She’s coming round, move back!’

The scourer was back, rough and warm, with sour breath behind it. I could feel my nose wrinkle as the stench flooded my nostrils.

‘Give her some air! Nancy, get away with you!’

Reaching out feebly, I encountered a handful of fur. Then felt the scourer on my hand. A tongue. I pushed it away and moaned again.

I must have been a bit under the weather, because when I finally came to I was lying on the bench and the woman with the berry eyes and pastries was holding a wet napkin to my forehead, onlookers peering around her shoulders. Struggling to the surface, clammy and astray, I could still feel the link with whatever underworld I’d been to, and closed my eyes again, hoping they would all go away.



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‘Gosh, you took a bit of a turn, my love,’ the woman said, holding my wrist. ‘I don’t have a clue what I’m doing with this pulse nonsense,’ she continued, jiggling my hand gently. ‘What’s right, after all? Seventy, eighty? I don’t know. No, don’t get up just yet.’

‘Oh no, I’m fine, really.’ I heaved my legs off the bench. ‘Sorry to be such a bother, I don’t know what came over me.’ The darkness was receding, replaced by the equally cold sweat of embarrassment. My cheek and hand were coated in some sort of sticky substance and there was that urge to go and wash it off.

‘Probably the weather, sweetie. It’s a bit parky, isn’t it? Let’s just sit for a moment and look at the trees. Aren’t they beautiful? Would you like another croissant? Go on, build up your strength. I’m Sylvie, by the way. And these two are Nancy and Decca.’

Still dazed, I realized she was indicating two small dove-blue dogs prancing round her feet. As she sat down on the bench next to me they jumped up either side of her, and I had to shift along to make room, wiping the back of my hand on my skirt. We sat eating croissants, looking up at the trees, and they were rather beautiful in a bleak way, stark and spiky against the pearly sky, with weak sunlight clawing through the clouds and dappling on the lake. The crowd had dispersed, although the men continued to circle, scooping the last of the fish.

‘Something toxic in the water, apparently,’ remarked Sylvie, nodding towards the lake. ‘I do hope they survive the experience. Who’s Leo, by the way? Your son? Would you like someone to fetch him?’

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Leo.

I would have liked nothing more. Someone to go and fetch him, bring him back to me. He'd march up, take my hand, say, 'Missy! What have you been up to, silly old girl?' And we'd walk home together and light a fire to ward off the cold. The tears came again and I dabbed them away, the drops warm on my white fingers.

'I'm sorry,' said Sylvie, patting and squeezing my icy hand. 'I shouldn't have asked. You said his name, and I thought, maybe . . . Anyway, let's just sit here awhile, shall we? No hurry.'

So we sat, mostly in silence, but sometimes Sylvie would point out a plant or bird or dog of note, and I was able to reply adequately without worrying I was boring her or saying the wrong thing. Then I finished my croissant and dusted off the flakes, ready to get up and say goodbye to this easy, undemanding woman who had been the first stranger to speak to me in weeks. Best to end the conversation before I wanted to instead of after she did.

'Thank you so much,' I said, awkwardly holding out my still-sticky hand. 'So kind, but I must be going . . .'

'Bollocks, we missed it.'

We both turned to see Otis's red-haired mother dragging her sulking son down the path between the lakes. He was wearing a cape and had hooked a shield over the handlebars of his scooter, his russet hair sticking out in different directions. I wanted to smooth it down, then ruffle it up again.

'See, I told you they'd die without us,' she huffed, shouldering

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an enormous over-stuffed bag and leaning down to fondle the dogs.

‘Angela, love,’ said Sylvie. ‘Late as ever. Fancy a coffee? I was just about to ask . . . um . . .?’ She turned to me expectantly.

‘Millicent,’ I murmured, scarcely able to believe my luck. Would it be all right to say yes? Surely I deserved a treat? But it wouldn’t do to look too eager.

‘Millicent . . . to join us.’

Angela sighed and hefted her bag again. ‘Go on, then. But I wanted to see some fish being killed. So did Otis, but he couldn’t find his Spider-Man outfit, daft beggar.’

‘Millicent, would you like to come and have a coffee with us? Or tea – don’t want to get dictatorial about beverages!’ Sylvie’s eyes crinkled engagingly as she linked arms with Angela and held out her hand to Otis.

They seemed such a merry little band. Of course they didn’t want a fuddy-duddy like me tagging along and slowing them down, so I said I had an appointment to get to, which was true in a way, and watched them walk down the avenue towards the café. The sky cleared a bit more as I headed off, feeling cheered by my outing. At least they asked. I told Leo about it, exaggerating some of the details to make it sound more dramatic. But of course it didn’t matter which way I told it, there was no one there to listen, so after leaving some flowers and tidying up, I left for my empty home.

Back in my kitchen, there was the tick-tick-tick of the clock, with no other sound to drown it out, and in the living room Leo’s chair was empty, and I didn’t have any new friends – I

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would never see Sylvie or Angela or Otis again, and would have to avoid the park now in case they thought I was trying to run into them.

I cleaned the house and remembered when we had young children and it was impossible to keep anything tidy. Now everything was spotless, and stayed that way. Eating an over-boiled egg for my lunch, I read more about David Bowie, and thought of the scarf and *The Snowman*. I had made Arthur a scarf for Christmas, forgetting that it was summer in Sydney, and now the knitting needles just rolled around my cutlery drawer, reminding me of my mistake. Later, I couldn't be bothered with making dinner so just had cereal and thought about watching television, maybe that documentary, but really, what was the point? Alistair watched Australian television now, bought me Australian slippers. I turned in early, checking the cupboards and shivering as I got into bed, waiting for the blankets to warm up. *'Sibyl told me . . . before she died. I don't think she knew what she was saying.'* I blinked to banish the image of my daughter Melanie, wide-eyed in my kitchen, backing away. The guilt gnawed away at me, as it had since that terrible day. Whenever I tried to weed it out, it just took a deeper root.

So the day ended as miserably as it began. But I still felt it somewhere – that spark. The beginning of something. Or the end. Who knows?

## Chapter 3

‘Come closer, Missy.’

Kensington, 1942, and impervious to the booms above, Fa-Fa bent to light the spill on one of the candles, cupping huge hands around his pipe and puffing away to get it going. With each inward breath my grandfather’s lined face glowed in the charring light. A crash overhead made me flinch, but I was too caught up in his stories to pay attention to the bombs, snuggled in our bunk, nestling closer under scratchy wool, with half-eaten carrot sandwiches squashed in our hands. Fa-Fa blew out a stream of smoke and settled back.

‘Mesopotamia, 1916. Flies like soot around my face.’ He waved at the grey fog in front of him, and I could almost see them.

‘That blasted fever, too weak to brush them away . . . When I’d recovered, I was allowed home on leave. Marvellous to be back in London after that terrible heat. Your grandmother and I went out to a restaurant in – where was it, Jette? Swallow Street? – to toast my return.’

Our grandmother, sniffing over there in a dark corner. I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to have dinner with her – she barely ever opened her mouth, either to eat or speak. She gave us a watery smile and ducked her head at another skirl above. Then the gap, like thunder after a lightning strike. When it came, it was quite faint.

'We had a grand blowout, then walked back to Piccadilly to find a hackney – you couldn't whistle for one, and of course it was dark along the back roads, and we were a trifle fuddled, must admit.' He chuckled and drew on his pipe, Henry and I giggling at the thought of Fa-Fa, and particularly our grandmother, in such a state. No beating about the bush; that was why we loved him.

'Then, in the darkness, Jette tripped and fell, and as I helped her up, a thief darted forwards and filched her purse, the rascal! I immediately gave chase.'

Fa-Fa shifted his bulk on the low stool as Henry and I gasped and clutched each other. Jette, hunched in the shadows, the mouse to his man. I couldn't see her expression in the gloom, only her hand gripping the handkerchief.

'Caught up with him fairly easily, turned him round and saw he was a young lad, too young to fight in a war but old enough to steal in one. Nothing much in the purse of value, a few coins maybe, but I wasn't going back to Jette without it. Gave him a bit of a tap, just to let him know I wasn't going anywhere. Thought that would be the end of it, but he clung on for dear life and try as I might, I couldn't get it out of his grasp. Locked fast in his fingers, he just wouldn't let go.' Fa-Fa held up a

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ham-fist, tendons bulging, sending a few flecks of tobacco to the floor. He stooped forward to sweep them up before he continued.

‘In the end, had to give him a rare old pummelling, a good going over, but no matter what I did, his grip still wouldn’t budge from the bag.’

Another draw on the pipe – puff, puff, puff – along with the slow glow of the burn. Jette’s thin fingers plucked at her dress.

‘Punch, jab, punch! But he wouldn’t let go. Like a dog with a bone.’

Boom went the bombs. My grandmother blew her nose. We were all wreathed in the fug of Fa-Fa’s smoke. It made my eyes water, but I couldn’t take them off him.

‘Started kicking him in the shins, stamping on his feet. He was screaming but he wouldn’t let go. By the time I’d finished with him, he was curled in a ball at my feet, but his hands *still* gripped the purse. It was dirty and covered in blood as well. Realized even if I got it back, Jette wouldn’t want it. So I left him there, lying in the street, mewling like a baby, with the bag still clenched in those bloody hands.’

There was a brief silence, even from above, as Fa-Fa put down the pipe and polished his spectacles, rheumy eyes focused on the job. His hands were shaking a little as he put them back on.

‘Damned scamp got the bag. Admired him for it. Whatever was in it that he wanted, he got. Good on him.’ Leaning forward, he licked his fingers and pinched out the candle nearest our bunk. ‘And that’s the moral of the story tonight. If you really

want something, you hang on. Don't give up. Hang on, as if your life depended on it.'

'Even if someone beats you black and blue?' piped up Henry.

'Even if they do that!' retorted Fa-Fa, ruffling his hair. 'Even if they *cuff* you,' he tweaked Henry's ear. 'Even if they *thump* you,' he aimed a mock punch at Henry's stomach, then again a little harder. 'Even if they bash the hell out of you, you hang on!' He and Henry began play-fighting, but as the bombs started up again, the frolic became something else. Fa-Fa had Henry in a headlock, my brother's face a livid red, eyes sparkling with excitement or tears, I couldn't tell which. Jette stood, holding out her white handkerchief.

'Father! What are you doing?'

My mother had slipped in through the cellar door, unnoticed. She was unwinding a scarlet scarf from her neck, pale from the cold and angry as usual. Jette rushed forward to embrace her, but Mama ignored her, still glaring at my grandfather. Fa-Fa looked up and released his hold on Henry, who fell back on the bunk, his hands at his throat.

'When will you learn to be gentle around the children? They're not your recruits. I suppose you've been telling them awful stories again. Now, Milly, Henry, let's get you in bed, it's far too late for you to be up.' She began the motherly round of tucking us in, picking up our half-eaten pieces of bread and leaving them on the side for morning.

Fa-Fa retreated to a chair in the corner to pack another pipe, sulking, as Mama lay down on her pallet. The last thing I remembered was her blowing out the final candle, and the



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comforting smoulder as Fa-Fa smoked the night away. Then the ink-blot shadows on the walls sent me into a deep sleep that even the booms outside couldn't penetrate.

The next night, an SC250 landed in the road outside our house, reducing the garden wall to rubble. No one was injured although Fa-Fa's spectacles fell and shattered in the blast. After that, my mother decided we would be better off in the country and packed us off to my Aunt Sibyl in Yorkshire. But it seemed the decision wasn't so much based on the bomb as the story of the bag, which Henry recounted to Mama the next morning, provoking another tirade. Fa-Fa was reprehensible, telling disgraceful stories which probably weren't even true (Jette wouldn't confirm or deny when asked), it was high time we got some country air, etcetera. So off to Kirkheaton we went, to a draughty old rectory where we slept in the garret, searched priest holes for ghouls, made dens in the woods and mostly forgot about the war and Fa-Fa's strange habits.

We didn't forget that story though, and used to tell it back to each other, lying in those hard narrow beds under the eaves. Each time, we'd add an embellishment – a dramatic flourish, some sordid detail, until eventually we weren't sure where Fa-Fa's tale ended and ours began. Did he make it up, or did we? Did any of it happen, or none of it? As the years passed, I was inclined to believe the latter.

Still, it's true though, isn't it? If you really want something, you hang on.

## Chapter 4

A week went by without anything happening that I could put in an email to Alistair. I hardly left the house, except to get a few bits – a scrag end at the butchers, a prescription from the chemist. I thought Sylvie was in front of me in the queue and bent my head so she wouldn't notice me, but it wasn't her at all, just some other middle-aged woman buying indigestion tablets.

I splashed out on a bottle of wine on the way home, though drinking on my own seemed like a slippery slope. But the evenings stretched, and a glass of something gave the synapses a sly tweak, lending a little '*entheos*' – the Greek buzz of enthusiasm. Just the one glass, maybe two small ones, distracting myself from the rest of the bottle by poking around various rooms in the house, most of which were hardly ever used any more. What did I need a dining room for? All those dinner parties?

The dust in Leo's study gave me a coughing fit. I should really

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pack up the books and get rid of them, but he would have been horrified; most of them were first or rare editions and I didn't know enough about them to be sure of getting a decent price. So instead I wiped them, and read the inscriptions: 'Darling Leo, Christmas '86, with love'; 'Leo, read this and please be kind – Asa'; 'Dad – another old tome for you – Mel'. '*Tómos*,' meaning 'slice'. Each book a slice of the man. None of them were mine. I stopped reading when the children were born.

One night and another visit to the vintners later, I found myself in Alistair's room, still as it was when he was a boy. His Arsenal posters, his Lego models, his fossils. My son, the archaeologist! The room was like one of his sites; the artefacts and remains of some revered Pharaoh. And now the next in line slept here – I smoothed the pillow where Arthur's golden head had lain. How I missed him. A gap in the shelf where the first edition should be.

The day Ali left home, we drove him to his halls, Leo chuntering about red-bricks, while I was speechless with the effort of not crying, smiling as we unloaded his bags and settled him in that dingy little room, as if it were just wonderful to think that he was going off into the world to make his own way. What an adventure! Just at the end though, when we said goodbye and he hugged me, I found I couldn't let go. Eventually, Leo gently prised my fingers from Alistair's sweater and gave them a reassuring squeeze. 'He'll be back at Christmas,' he said heartily. Christmas, always Christmas – casting its fairy lights on the banality of every other day.

I went to the fridge again, then to Mel's room to pack up a

few of her books. She had her own flat in Cambridge, and it wasn't like she ever visited any more – not since that terrible afternoon. After checking the cupboard doors on my way to bed, I remembered the lights were still on in the living room, so had to drag myself downstairs again. As the room flicked into darkness, the street outside was illuminated, revealing a young couple wrapped around each other, making their way home after a night out. Her teeth glinted in the lamplight as she smiled up at him, tucking his hand more firmly under her arm as he kissed the top of her head. Lithe and blithe with most of their mistakes unmade. It might have been Leo and me, half a century ago. I closed the curtains, did another round of checking and reeled off to bed.

The next day, nursing a headache, I went to the chemist again, and again saw a woman who looked like Sylvie, only this time it *was* Sylvie. I ducked, but it was too late.

'There you are!' she exclaimed, as if I'd only been gone five minutes. 'You rushed off the other day. How are you feeling?'

'Fine, thank you.' I shuffled forward in the queue, hoping she wouldn't notice the paracetamol, which I always used to hide from Leo. A hangover was an admission of guilt. If I didn't have one, then I hadn't drunk too much the night before.

'Snap.' Sylvie nudged her box against mine. 'I've got the most god-awful monster behind the eyes. All self-inflicted, of course. Angela can really put it away. She's a hard-drinking journalist. What about you?'

She had the air of everything in life being a tremendous joke, a flippancy that made me want to kick off my shoes and talk

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of cabbages and kings – to be in a world where things didn't matter so much. But all I could manage was a weak shrug.

'Fancy a coffee?' She nodded at the café opposite. It looked as warm and inviting as Sylvie herself, all low lamps, metro tiles and bare wood. There was the row of workers at their laptops, bashing away; two mothers with prams, heads together as they coo-chy-cooed at their offspring; a couple deep in conversation, their hands entwined. I didn't belong there, amidst all that companionship and industry, and had no idea why Sylvie would offer such a thing.

'Oh thank you, but I really must be going.' I handed over my coins and reached for my paper bag of painkillers.

'All right, well, see you soon, hopefully, Millicent.' She remembered.

'It's actually Missy,' I blurted, as she pulled open the door. It tinkled merrily and she turned back with a raised eyebrow.

'I'm sorry?'

'Well, my name is Millicent, but everyone calls me Missy,' I floundered, dropping my change, feeling the heat building in my face.

'Oh, right, well, Missy it is! I'm sure I'll bump into you again, I'm always around,' Sylvie waved and exited, wielding her wicker basket like a 1950s housewife.

I left the chemist, flustered and overset. No one called me that. Not since Leo, and before him, Fa-Fa. She must have thought me completely doolally. Cheeks still burning, I found myself walking across the road towards the café. If she was there I'd jolly well have a coffee with her, stop being so silly.

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The workers were still tapping away, the mothers clucking over their babies and gossiping, but the couple had gone. There was no sign of Sylvie, but I ordered a coffee anyway and sat at a table, feeling stiff and embarrassed, sure everyone was watching me, wondering why an old lady would come in here on her own. But no one seemed to notice, and gradually the warmth and noise of the place started to sink in. Someone had left a newspaper on the next table. I took it and read about Jeremy Corbyn, who lived nearby, and the astronaut Tim Peake, living much further away, and Alan Rickman, not living anywhere any more. He was in one of Leo and my favourite films, about a ghost who tries to cheer up his bereaved wife. I was a bit like Nina, the wife, wandering around my empty house in the hope of a miraculous resurrection. I always thought she was wrong not to stay with her husband Jamie, even though he was dead.

I stayed there for a while, sipping my coffee and reading the paper, and when I'd finished, the smiling waitress collected my cup, the mothers shifted their prams for me, and a man left his laptop to hold open the door. I walked home slowly, noting the pine needles that still littered the pavement but occasionally holding my face up to the weak winter sun.

When I got back, rather than embark on my usual round of cleaning, I went upstairs to the spare room and brought down an old paisley throw, draping it experimentally over the sofa. Then I went back up and fetched a lamp, placing it on a low stool to one side. I stood contemplating it for a while, then, feeling faintly foolish, went into the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea.

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Later on though, when the light faded, the lamp and blanket looked rather snug. I skipped cereal for once and cooked myself some pasta, eating it off a tray on the sofa while I watched some new period drama. Leo would have scoffed at the anachronisms, but it was a relief to be pulled in by gentle domestic tribulations. I considered rounding my evening off with a glass of wine but remembered I'd finished the bottle the night before. Ah well, I could always buy another tomorrow. Who knew who I'd bump into?

I still didn't have much to write to Alistair about, but at least I'd been invited for a coffee and went, in a way. Baby steps. Old lady steps. Even if I wasn't quite sure where I was going.