

THE
BOOK
OF
BEGINNINGS
SALLY PAGE



HarperCollins*Publishers*

Prologue

Sometimes a heartbeat is all the time it takes to reach a decision.

It may not even feel like a considered choice. Just the veering away from the prospect of more misery – a final spur to movement. The room remains unmoved. A silent witness. But loyal in its way to the woman who has just left it. The chair pushed out from the table tells no tales. The plate of half-eaten roll and cheddar (extra mature) with leftover Christmas pickle (eight months old, but still going strong) lies in mute defiance.

The man calls her name, and without pausing to be invited in, pushes open the door that leads from the hall into the kitchen. And why would he pause? He has already let himself in the front door without asking.

He huffs and puffs his way around the kitchen, opening the fridge, flicking through the diary left open on the table.

The diary doesn't give her away either. Its record of parish meetings, choir practice and a planned visit to a local garden

with her curate; a testament to a seemingly blameless life. Maybe there is something in the handwriting? A neatly formed hand, precise and clear, apart from a kink in the S's that look as if they would like to escape from the regularity of the line.

Opposite him, the back door to the garden (which always requires a doorstep) for once stands half open, half closed. Stilled, as if in anticipation, like the rest of the room.

Then, very slowly, it swings on its hinges and quietly clicks shut.

Ninety miles away, off an alleyway in North London, another door is pushed open. A different woman, a different life. The mail piled up in the entrance slithers aside and the broken bell clinks its tinny welcome. First across the threshold is a solitary leaf. A twist of orange, sent spiralling by a late August wind that holds within its warmth the piquant tang of autumn. The woman watches the leaf's spinning progress into the quiet darkness of the shop within. For her, autumn has always been a season of beginnings; punctuated, in her childhood, by the anticipatory thrill of new shoes, crayons and pencil cases.

Now she only thinks of endings.

Out of place

Jo stoops to retrieve the post and, as she does so, she picks up the stray leaf. It lies in her open palm like a coloured-paper 'mood fish' that as children they would hold in their hands to tell their fortune. The leaf trembles and then is still. She wants to ask it, does this mean that one day she will be happy? She wants the orange leaf 'fish' to tell her, if when she is thinking about James, is he ever thinking of her? During all those minutes that stretch into hours, she wants to believe that if at some point he is missing her, this would constitute a connection between them. A thread of hope that she could twist around her little finger and gently pull on. Jo closes her hand around the fragile substance of the leaf, cocooning it in the hollow of her hand, and tucking the post under her arm, she pushes the door wider.

Stepping inside, her suitcase wheels rumble in rhythm over the tiles that mark the entrance to her Uncle Wilbur's shop. Taylor's Supplies is a premises not much bigger than an

elongated cupboard, selling a mixture of hardware and stationery. This has been her uncle's business and home for the past fifty-two years.

Looking around, it is much as Jo remembers it. From the front of the narrow premises, one aisle leads away from the door, turning left at the back of the shop (where there is an archway to a small kitchen, a toilet, and stairs to the upstairs flat). A second narrow aisle returns back to where Jo is now standing. This is all there is to her uncle's shop, apart from the small area at the front where a glass-topped cabinet sits, set at a right angle to the window. This old-fashioned oak cabinet (which, in a former life, Jo imagines, had displayed handkerchiefs or gloves) comprises of a top shelf given over to fountain pens and, underneath, a series of broad drawers containing the larger sheets of paper that Uncle Wilbur sells.

A place for everything and everything in its place.

Jo can hear Uncle Wilbur's voice echoing in her head; and studying the shop, she can see that he has held true to his favourite maxim. The shelves may be more sparsely stocked than in previous years, but everything is neat, everything is in its place.

Apart from her uncle, she thinks, who is miles away from here.

And apart from her.

Jo glances at the gap between the counter and the wall. Here, suspended by string on a wooden pole, hang the brown paper bags. Bags that, miraculously, seemed to accommodate everything Uncle Wilbur sold, from a few screws and nails

(bag twisted at the top to secure them) to a long metal saw with gleaming teeth.

And here is where Jo played ‘post offices’ as a child, tucked away in her secret spot. (*A place for everything and everything in its place.*) Standing behind the counter, shielding her from sight, her uncle appreciated that a busy postmistress needed a ready supply of stationery. As a little girl, one of her greatest joys had been when her uncle had beckoned her over and presented her with a brown paper bag bulging with some intriguing shape. Inside might be a notebook with its cover missing or a receipt book with a scrape in the carbon paper. Uncle Wilbur had told her (and more importantly, Mrs Watson-Toft, his bookkeeper with the basilisk’s stare) that he only ever gave away ‘damaged goods’. But when she was older, Jo began to suspect that when Uncle Wilbur had seen her younger self gazing covetously at a new batch of receipt books, he had run his broad, flat fingernail over the carbon paper on purpose.

Looking up, Jo notices a small, square calendar pinned to the large noticeboard on the wall behind the counter. This is all that is displayed there. The month is now August, but it still shows July’s date. Fleetinglly she wonders what her Uncle Wilbur used to use this noticeboard for – she can’t recall it being here on her visits to the shop as a child.

Leaving the post and the leaf on the counter, Jo takes her suitcase to the back of the shop and mounts the stairs. From the first-floor landing, a half-glazed door opens into a small entrance hall. A low bench sits under a row of coat hooks, on which her uncle’s dark grey winter coat still hangs.

Off the hall is a bathroom. This has an ancient suite in brilliant white, and is heated by a small, ineffective blow-heater. Jo is not looking forward to using this room. She knows from experience that even when the bath is full of hot water, the outer edge is still ice-cold to the touch.

The hallway opens up into a living room, beyond which is the kitchen. Both have long sash windows overlooking the alleyway. Opposite the first window are two doors to bedrooms. Jo wavers for a moment, undecided whether to use her uncle's room or the box room she slept in as a child when she visited for a few weeks each summer. She opens the door to the smaller of the rooms and is soon unzipping her case. Most of the clothes she flings onto a chair. What she is looking for is at the bottom of her bag.

She pulls out the dark-blue denim dungarees, their fabric stiff in her hands, like card. Jo stares down at them, unsure why it was so important for her to bring them with her. Her best friend, Lucy, left them in her cottage after staying over one evening – oh, it would have been months ago now – vintage Fifties, high-waisted, wide-legged dungarees. Lucy is a lover of all things vintage. As a teenager, and still now, as a 38-year-old woman, she wears the dresses that she begged off their grandmothers. Jo sees her own passion for stationery as an echo of her friend's quirky connection with the past, and clings to her love of newly sharpened pencils, knowing it makes her feel closer to Lucy. Even at primary school, the two of them were attuned and in step – without fail and without effort, winning the annual three-legged race at the school's sports day.

Jo sits on the bed, holding the dungarees to her. And now? Now she thinks that even if someone tied her and Lucy's legs together, they would not be able to keep in rhythm. She has never felt more out of step with her best friend, and she cannot clarify in her mind exactly why. She knows there are probably many reasons, but whichever way she stacks and rearranges these reasons – her point of view; her perception of Lucy's point of view – it never gives her a sense of truly understanding what has gone wrong between them. They rarely text each other now; and when they do something jars, and Jo can't put her finger on what or why. She just knows that if she and Lucy were to try a three-legged race now, rather than emerging as the natural victors, they would both fall flat on their faces.

Jo's far-off gaze gradually refocuses on the precise tidiness of the small room. She should really put her things away in the chest of drawers. (*A place for everything and everything in its place.*) It doesn't take long. Less than ten minutes later her possessions are stowed away and her empty suitcase is stored under the single bed.

There is just one thing she doesn't have to unpack, or to put away. There is no need. It is not something that she can hide away at the back of a drawer. However much she would like to.

Jo knows she has no option but to carry her broken heart around with her, wherever she goes. James saw to that when he left her four months ago.

2

I do

Jo sits behind the old oak counter looking up at the sliver of sky that she can just spy – if she leans out far enough on her tall stool. This is where she has perched for the past six weeks, minding the shop, watching the pedestrians who move in an intermittent stream through the alleyway, and scanning her sliver of sky for signs of change. Today, the sky is a troubled grey and the rust-coloured brickwork of the alleyway wall opposite gleams wet from squally, October rain.

Whatever the weather, Jo finds her small slice of sky strangely soothing. She knows that beyond the alleyway (its entrance between a hairdresser's and a café), the same sky is a canopy to a larger world: Highgate High Street, with its broad avenue of shops and restaurants. A mixture of the enticing and the functional – at times managing to combine both in one establishment. Like the shop papered with old newspapers that sells cherrywood-handled knives with sculpted steel blades, or the

haberdasher's that displays on its door a wreath made from ribbons, the colour of autumn fruit.

Beyond the High Street, if she were to walk up the hill to the left, she would reach the expanse that is Hampstead Heath. There, the same sky she can glimpse from her stool sweeps across a landscape that is part parkland, part pleasure garden, part wilderness. It is good to know this larger world is out there, but also that her slice of sky is contained, bordered by a wall and a rooftop – giving definition to her place in a city that, to Jo, is an alien world.

She has tried to imagine this same sky stretched out, flapped like a huge bedsheet or tablecloth to cover her old home: the terraced cottage on the outskirts of a Northumberland village. But they had different skies up there. Broader, bigger, and more magnificent in their changing moods. She cannot imagine ever being able to capture a slice of those skies.

But then, she never needed to. It was enough to walk out onto the fells and gaze up at them.

Today, as usual, Jo is wearing Lucy's dungarees. Vintage is not really Jo's style (she's not quite sure what is), but it seems fitting to wear borrowed clothes, sitting here, in her borrowed life. Jo reaches for the dungarees each morning, her jumpers underneath changing from green to orange to yellow to red, depending on the weather, her mood and the washing pile. Sometimes she feels like a traffic light, solid and static, glimpses of colour recycling, as life moves slowly past her. The high, fitted waist holds her tight just under a heart that aches for her friend's company.

Since living in London she has tried to text Lucy more regularly, but it has been hard to find the right words. The words that do keep returning to her are from their final conversation before she left. She'd always known Lucy didn't like James, but never until that conversation, just how much. Jo knew her best friend's outburst was fuelled by Lucy seeing how hurt Jo was, but she wonders why Lucy thought she would want to hear it, or in what way she imagined it could ever make her feel better. Not while she held onto that slender thread of hope. She hadn't told Lucy about this. But now she wonders if she needed to. Wasn't that part of what made Lucy so furious?

And James? Jo spends most of her time trying *not* to text him. It has been hard. Texts written and then deleted. Only one thing stops her pressing send. The thought that James's phone might be picked up and the texts read by his new girlfriend, Nickeey. Jo can never think of her old work colleague, Nicky, without extending her name with a whine. They had only worked together briefly, but Jo won't forget her endless complaints and whinging in a hurry

Jo glances up at the small, square calendar that is still the only thing pinned to the large noticeboard behind her. At the close of each day, she crosses a date off. Sometimes she does this well before the end of the day, as if urging time to hurry up.

Six weeks on, Uncle Wilbur is still in the home that he moved into (temporarily) for some respite care. It is near to her parents, and Jo's mother visits her brother most days. What started as confusion (that her mother put down to a

‘very nasty tumble’) has revealed itself as something else. The doctors talk about the things they can do to manage the progression of dementia. Jo’s mum talks to her about how Wilbur is feeling much better and it won’t be long now before he can come back to the flat and the shop.

Her dad rarely talks to Jo on the phone, leaving all that to his much more talkative spouse.

But when he is the one who answers her call, he says quietly to Jo, ‘Just give her time.’

So this is what she is trying to do.

Jo turns her attention to the sole customer in the shop. It is late morning, and the woman has been lingering by the reels of parcel tape and rolls of brown paper. Jo is about to ask if she can help when another customer walks in.

The first customer is extremely tall, the second one short and rounded. As they browse, the smaller woman obscures the taller woman, giving the illusion of double-decker heads. Jo’s mouth edges towards a smile.

The taller woman moves away and the tableau is broken. She approaches the counter.

A pause.

Jo looks expectant and, she hopes, keen to please.

The woman glances down and frowns.

‘Of course, no one writes with a fountain pen these days.’

She says this with composed certainty. She is not trying to be rude or to imply that Jo is a simpleton for selling them. In fact, she does not seem to have made the connection: she, customer, one side of the small wood and glass-topped counter;

Jo, shop assistant, the other side, with a range of fountain pens on sale underneath this same glass-topped counter.

‘The thing is, we don’t write, do we?’ The woman looks up, but doesn’t wait for an answer. ‘It’s a lost art.’

Jo has been here before. She would like to say, *I do. I write with a fountain pen.* But she knows she would be wasting her breath.

The tall woman in front of her frowns uncertainly, as if Jo is somehow in the wrong place (which Jo thinks is not far from the truth), then she moves on to handwriting: ‘They don’t even teach them to write in schools.’

Jo wonders what this woman does for a living. She is thin and neat and precise. Pharmacist? Dentist, maybe?

‘I mean, what’s the point of all of this, really, when you think about emails and social media?’

Jo contemplates what this woman would think if she sat in her dentist’s chair and said, *Well, of course, there must be something wrong with you, if you want to spend all your time rooting around in other people’s mouths.* But it’s not the sort of thing she would ever say. Well, certainly not to a woman with a drill in her hand.

Jo glances over the ‘dentist’s’ shoulder to the small woman in an overlong raincoat who is now waiting patiently in line, and she gives her a tiny nod of acknowledgement. The woman lifts both eyebrows and rolls her eyes, and Jo is surprised into stifling a laugh.

The ‘dentist’ gestures a vague dismissal towards the back of the shop and repeats, ‘I mean, what’s the point?’

‘Well, I think some—’ Jo tries.

But this woman hasn’t come to the shop to hear what Jo thinks.

‘It’s terrible how these things are changing,’ the woman reflects, as if she really has no choice in the matter.

Jo’s eyes stray to the customer waiting in line. The woman’s expression is completely deadpan; a mild, open face; middle-aged; with mouse-coloured hair squashed under a rain hat. Then she winks at Jo.

The gesture is so fleeting, but it breathes warmth into her.

And something else creeps into her mind: does she know this woman from somewhere?

‘Do children even know how to hold a pen or pencil any more,’ the ‘dentist’ continues. Again, not a question – a querulous reproach, as if somehow Jo is at fault.

Jo rallies – well, at least in her mind. She would like to ask this woman some questions. *Do you have children? Do they see you writing a letter? Writing a list, even?* But she knows there is simply no point in saying these things. Her eldest brother’s family live in a house with barely a single book in it (unless you count agricultural catalogues and tractor manuals), and her sister-in-law’s frequent complaint is that the twins never pick up a book. ‘Can’t get them to read at all. Well, they’re just not interested in books, are they?’

Then, like now, Jo keeps quiet.

‘Is there something I can get you?’ Jo eventually enquires, politely. She glances again at the woman in the raincoat, trying to catch her eye, trying to tease out the memory of

why she seems familiar. But now the woman is gazing out of the shop window to the alleyway beyond. She appears miles away from this tiny shop in North London. Distanced, in some way, from the wet October day.

Jo rather envies her.

‘Just some Sellotape if you have it.’

Jo gets the woman what she needs, takes the payment and then wishes her a pleasant good morning. Even to herself, her voice sounds over-friendly.

The woman looks sharply at Jo, as if unsure if she is being sarcastic. In that look, Jo thinks the woman actually sees her for the first time. An unremarkable-looking woman, apart – she allows herself this – from her eyes. A woman on the brink of forty, wearing denim dungarees over a yellow jumper.

The ‘dentist’ turns quickly away. She runs her hand over a set of envelopes and writing pads on one of the shelves as she heads to the door. As she opens it, she says, carelessly, ‘And of course, no one writes letters any more.’

Jo mouths silently after her, ‘I do.’

It doesn’t seem worth adding sound, either for the ‘dentist’s’ benefit, or for her own. Of course, she is right. Writing could soon be a lost art. That is the reality. Jo may make lists, send cards, write letters to her mum and to her Uncle Wilbur; she may rejoice in that particular squeaky sound of a fountain-pen nib moving over paper; but she is not going to be able to stem the tide of change. She may take comfort from connecting with other stationery lovers via social media, but she is not a campaigner or a denier; she is not prepared to stand Canute-like,

holding her hand up to the inevitable. And what would she be defending anyway? This is not even her shop.

Not even her life. The niggling thought wriggles in behind.

The rain-coated woman steps forward and hands over the exact money for the pack of envelopes she is holding.

‘No one believes in God any more.’

Jo looks at her in confusion.

There is a pause, and the woman half-smiles at Jo, her eyes glinting.

‘But I do,’ she adds.

The three small words fill the space between them. And then, with another smile, as if they are sharing a joke, she turns and is out the door.