

Monica

She had tried to return the book. As soon as she realized it had been left behind, she'd picked it up and rushed after its extraordinary owner. But he'd gone. He moved surprisingly swiftly for someone so old. Maybe he really didn't want to be found.

It was a plain, pale-green exercise book, like the one Monica had carried around with her at school, filled with details of homework assignments. Her friends had covered their books with graffiti of hearts, flowers and the names of their latest crushes, but Monica was not a doodler. She had too much respect for good stationery.

On the front cover were three words, beautifully etched in copperplate script:

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In smaller writing, in the bottom corner, was the date: *October 2018*. Perhaps, thought Monica, there would be an

address, or at least a name, on the inside so she could return it. Although it was physically unassuming, it had an air of significance about it.

She turned over the front cover. There were only a few paragraphs on the first page.

*How well do you know the people who live near you?
How well do they know you? Do you even know the
names of your neighbours? Would you realize if they
were in trouble, or hadn't left their house for days?*

*Everyone lies about their lives. What would happen
if you shared the truth instead? The one thing that
defines you, that makes everything else about you fall
into place? Not on the internet, but with those real people
around you?*

*Perhaps nothing. Or maybe telling that story would
change your life, or the life of someone you've not yet met.*

That's what I want to find out.

There was more on the next page, and Monica was dying to read on, but it was one of the busiest times of the day in the café, and she knew it was crucial not to fall behind schedule. That way madness lay. She tucked the book into the space alongside the till with the spare menus and flyers from various suppliers. She'd read it later, when she could concentrate properly.

Monica stretched out on the sofa in her flat above the café, a large glass of sauvignon blanc in one hand and the abandoned exercise book in the other. The questions she'd read

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that morning had been niggling away at her, demanding answers. She'd spent all day talking to people, serving them coffees and cakes, chatting about the weather and the latest celebrity gossip. But when had she last told anyone anything about herself that *really mattered*? And what did she actually know about them, with the exception of whether they liked milk in their coffee, or sugar with their tea? She opened the book to the second page.

My name is Julian Jessop. I am seventy-nine years old, and I am an artist. For the past fifty-seven years I've lived in Chelsea Studios, on the Fulham Road.

Those are the basic facts, but here is the truth: I AM LONELY.

I often go for days without talking to anyone. Sometimes, when I do have to speak (because someone's called me up about payment protection insurance, for example), I find that my voice comes out in a croak because it's curled up and died in my throat from neglect.

Age has made me invisible. I find this especially hard, because I was always looked at. Everyone knew who I was. I didn't have to introduce myself, I would just stand in a doorway while my name worked its way around the room in a chain of whispers, pursued by a number of surreptitious glances.

I used to love lingering at mirrors, and would walk slowly past shop windows, checking the cut of my jacket or the wave in my hair. Now, if my reflection sneaks up on me, I barely recognize myself. It's ironic that Mary, who would have happily accepted the

inevitability of ageing, died at the relatively young age of sixty, and yet I'm still here, forced to watch myself gradually crumble away.

As an artist, I watched people. I analysed their relationships, and I noticed there is always a balance of power. One partner is more loved, and the other more loving. I had to be the most loved. I realize now that I took Mary for granted, with her ordinary, wholesome, pink-cheeked prettiness and her constant thoughtfulness and dependability. I only learned to appreciate her after she was gone.

Monica paused to turn the page and take a mouthful of wine. She wasn't sure that she liked Julian very much, although she felt rather sorry for him. She suspected he'd choose dislike over pity. She read on.

When Mary lived here, our little cottage was always filled with people. The local children ran in and out, as Mary plied them with stories, advice, fizzy pop and Monster Munch. My less successful artist friends constantly turned up unannounced for dinner, along with the latest of my artist's models. Mary put on a good show of welcoming the other women, so perhaps only I noticed they were never offered chocolates with their coffee.

We were always busy. Our social life revolved around the Chelsea Arts Club, and the bistros and boutiques of the King's Road and Sloane Square. Mary worked long hours as a midwife, and I crossed the

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country, painting the portraits of people who thought themselves worth recording for posterity.

Every Friday evening since the late sixties, at 5 p.m. we'd walk into the nearby Brompton Cemetery which, since its four corners connected Fulham, Chelsea, South Kensington and Earl's Court, was a convenient meeting point for all our friends. We'd plan our weekend on the grave of Admiral Angus Whitewater. We didn't know the Admiral, he just happened to have an impressive horizontal slab of black marble over his last resting place which made a great table for drinks.

In many ways, I died alongside Mary. I ignored all the telephone calls and the letters. I let the paint dry solid on the palette and, one unbearably long night, destroyed all my unfinished canvases; ripped them into multi-coloured streamers, then diced them into confetti with Mary's dressmaking scissors. When I did finally emerge from my cocoon, about five years later, neighbours had moved, friends had given up, my agent had written me off, and that's when I realized I had become unnoticeable. I had reverse metamorphosed from a butterfly into a caterpillar.

I still raise a glass of Mary's favourite Bailey's Irish Cream at the Admiral's grave every Friday evening, but now it's just me and the ghosts of times past.

That's my story. Please feel free to chuck it in the recycling. Or you might decide to tell your own truth in these pages, and pass my little book on. Maybe you'll find it cathartic, as I did.

What happens next is up to you.

Monica

She Googled him, obviously. Julian Jessop was described by Wikipedia as a portrait painter who had enjoyed a flurry of notoriety in the sixties and seventies. He'd been a student of Lucian Freud at the Slade. The two of them had, so the rumours went, traded insults (and, the implication was, women) over the years. Lucian had the advantage of much greater fame, but Julian was younger by seventeen years. Monica thought of Mary, exhausted after a long shift delivering other women's babies, wondering where her husband had gone. She sounded like a bit of a doormat, to be honest. Why hadn't she just left him? There were, she reminded herself, as she tried to do often, worse things than being single.

One of Julian's self-portraits had hung for a brief period in the National Portrait Gallery, in an exhibition titled *The London School of Lucian Freud*. Monica clicked on the image to enlarge it, and there he was, the man she'd seen in her café yesterday morning, but all smoothed out, like a

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raisin turned back into a grape. Julian Jessop, about thirty years old, slicked-back blond hair, razor-sharp cheekbones, slightly sneering mouth and those penetrating blue eyes. When he'd looked at her yesterday it had felt like he was rummaging around in her soul. A little disconcerting when you're trying to discuss the various merits of a blueberry muffin versus millionaire's shortbread.

Monica checked her watch. 4.50 p.m.

'Benji, can you hold the shop for half an hour or so?' she asked her barista. Barely pausing to wait for his nod in response, she pulled on her coat. Monica scanned the tables as she walked through the café, pausing to pick up a large crumb of red velvet cake from table twelve. How had that been overlooked? As she walked out on to the Fulham Road, she flicked it towards a pigeon.

Monica rarely sat on the top deck of the bus. She prided herself on her adherence to Health and Safety regulations, and climbing the stairs of a moving vehicle seemed an unnecessary risk to take. But in this instance, she needed the vantage point.

Monica watched the blue dot on Google Maps move slowly along the Fulham Road towards Chelsea Studios. The bus stopped at Fulham Broadway, then carried on towards Stamford Bridge. The huge, modern mecca of the Chelsea Football Club loomed ahead and there, in its shadow and sandwiched improbably between the two separate entrances for the home and away fans, was a tiny, perfectly formed village of studio houses and cottages, behind an innocuous wall that Monica must have walked past hundreds of times.

Grateful for once for the slow-moving traffic, Monica

tried to work out which of the houses was Julian's. One stood slightly alone and looked a little worse for wear, rather like Julian himself. She'd bet the day's takings, not something to do lightly given her economic circumstances, on that being the one.

Monica jumped off at the next stop and turned almost immediately left, into Brompton Cemetery. The light was low, casting long shadows, and there was an autumnal chill to the air. The cemetery was one of Monica's favourite places – a timeless oasis of calm in the city. She loved the ornate gravestones – a last show of one-upmanship. *I'll see your marble slab with its fancy biblical quotation and raise you a life-sized Jesus on the cross.* She loved the stone angels, many now missing vital body parts, and the old-fashioned names on the Victorian gravestones – Ethel, Mildred, Alan. When did people stop being called Alan? Come to think of it, did anyone call their baby Monica any more? Even back in 1981 her parents had been outliers in eschewing names like Emily, Sophie and Olivia. Monica: a dying moniker. She could picture the credits on the cinema screen: *The Last of the Monicas.*

As she walked briskly past the graves of the fallen soldiers and the White Russian émigrés, she could sense the sheltering wildlife – the grey squirrels, urban foxes and the jet-black ravens – guarding the graves like the souls of the dead.

Where was the Admiral? Monica headed towards the left, looking out for an old man clutching a bottle of Bailey's Irish Cream. She wasn't, she realized, sure why. She didn't want to speak to Julian, at least not yet. She suspected that approaching him directly would run the risk of

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embarrassing him. She didn't want to start off on the wrong foot.

Monica headed towards the north end of the cemetery, pausing only briefly, as she always did, at the grave of Emmeline Pankhurst, to give a silent nod of thanks. She looped round at the top and was halfway back down the other side, walking along a less-used path, when she noticed a movement to her right. There, sitting (somewhat sacrilegiously) on an engraved marble tombstone, was Julian, glass in hand.

Monica walked on past, keeping her head down so as not to catch his eye. Then, as soon as he was gone, about ten minutes later, she doubled back so that she could read the words on the gravestone.

ADMIRAL ANGUS WHITEWATER
OF PONT STREET

DIED 5 JUNE 1963, AGED 74

RESPECTED LEADER, BELOVED HUSBAND
AND FATHER, AND LOYAL FRIEND

ALSO, BEATRICE WHITEWATER

DIED 7 AUGUST 1964, AGED 69

She bristled at the fact that the Admiral got several glowing adjectives after his name, whereas his wife just got a date and a space for eternity under her husband's tombstone.

Monica stood for a while, enveloped in the silence of the cemetery, imagining a group of beautiful young people, with Beatles haircuts, mini-skirts and bell-bottom trousers, arguing and joking with each other, and suddenly felt rather alone.