

The First Day of Term

8.45 A.M. DROP-OFF

There was Bea, standing over the other side, in the shade of the big beech tree. Rachel, clearly waiting in the wrong place as usual, moved to go and join her and then stopped short. Uh-oh. She could read the signs even from that distance: taut, watchful, smiling . . . Bea was building up to one of her Big Announcements. The playground was so noisy and frenzied – it always was the busiest morning of the school year – that a normal person might have to shout, bellow even, to attract everyone’s attention. But not Bea. She would never raise her voice around school, especially after the bell had rung. Anyway, there was no need. She just picked her moment, cleared her long hair from each side of her face as if parting the curtains on a stage, gave a little cough and began: ‘Welcome back, welcome back. Hope your summer was

amazing.' And at once the chaotic back-to-school clatter dropped to a placid, steady hum.

The groups that were scattered about, catching up after the long break, all stopped and turned around. Those who were standing alone, anxious about the first day in a new class, forgot their nerves and stared. 'Now then, everyone. Listen up. Please.' Bea held up her enormous bunch of keys, gave them a sharp rattle and smiled some more. 'I have been asked ...' she paused, 'by the *new head* ...' the words ruffled through the gathering crowd, 'to pick a team.' She was on tip-toes, but there really was no need. Beatrice Stuart was the tallest of them all by far.

Rachel, sinking back against the sun-trap wall of the pre-fab classroom, looked on and smiled. Here we go again, she thought. New year, new project. What was Bea going to rope her in for now? She watched as the keenos swarmed to the tree and clustered round. Their display of communal enthusiasm left her with little choice but to stay put, right there, keep her distance. She could sit this one out, surely. She was bound to hear all about it from Bea later. She would wait here. They would be walking out together in a minute. They always did.

The tarmac in the playground needed restoration and was already tacky from the unusual morning heat. Rachel had to keep peeling up the sole of her shoe to stop it sticking. While August had been dank and dark, the summer had bounced back buzzing and full of beans for the start of the new school year. It was funny, she thought, how the seasons seemed to take the holidays off, too. The last few Christmases had been warm and wet. Only in the Easter term had winter eventually

shown up, buried them all and shut the school completely. And now here they all were, after a month of fleeces and cagoules and more *Simpsons* than was good for them, back for the autumn and sweltering. Perhaps it wasn't just schools that came alive according to the academic calendar: it was a pattern to suit the whole of the natural world.

Rachel tried to tune in to Bea's little rally without actually moving, but she could only hear snippets. There was something about the *fabulous* new headmaster. And the latest *savage* cuts. And, guess what, some fund-raising. Of course. Yet more fund-raising. She shifted her weight on to the other hip and tuned out again.

She watched idly as a tractor measured out lines on a field beyond the games pitch, gazed up at an aeroplane drawing a perfect curve in a sky the colour of Quink. Christ, it was hot. What was she doing wearing jeans? This weather was doing nothing to help her general feeling of listlessness. Unlike, apparently, the rest of nature, Rachel had no back-to-school bounce. She was buzzless. Bean-free. She'd had to drag herself up the hill to get here this morning – Sisyphus and his wretched rock rolled into one. But still, after a holiday like that one, even Rachel was, if not quite glad, definitely relieved to be back.

She always did like this school, and even from the murky puddle at the bottom of her own little well of misery she could see that today it looked pretty much like paradise. St Ambrose Church Primary teetered on a hill, clinging to the edge of its market town, enjoying the view of the luscious green belt while it could, before the inevitable retail park came along to ruin it. Rachel loved its mock-ecclesiastical architecture,

its arched front door and sloping roof – so resonant of the splendid nineteenth-century social values that had brought it into existence. She could lose herself for hours in the different shapes thrown above the playground by the puzzled branches of the old beech tree, under which the children played in the day and their parents were assembling now.

And of course she liked the people. OK: most of the people. St Ambrose, after all, was famous for its people. It was known throughout the county for its one-big-happy-family schtick. They all looked out for one another at St Ambrose; prided themselves on it. Well, some of them did. And Rachel had always, instinctively, made a point of having as little to do with that lot, thank you very much, as was politely possible. Still keeping her distance, she watched them all over there, one-big-happy-family-ing round Bea, raising their hands to volunteer for something or other, jittery with excitement. Rachel shook her head: frankly, she despaired sometimes, she really did. But, at the same time, she did think Bea was amazing; it was impressive, really, to give people some thankless task of joy-quenching tedium and make them feel truly thankful. To see her surrounded by women – outlining plans, issuing commands, thinking big, rearranging a few mountains – was to see a creature in its element. It was just who she was. Rachel could only look on, with love and enormous admiration. Really, she and Bea might as well belong to different species. But it didn't matter: they had been great friends – best friends, really – since the day they met, when the girls first joined Reception five years ago.

The soundtrack of the first day of term – the chanted

good-mornings, the little chairs being scraped in to low tables, plastic trays thumping back against classroom walls – drifted out of the open windows. And suddenly the corner of Rachel’s eye was caught by someone she had never seen before – tall, dark, a study in elegance from her clean, swinging bob to her pretty ballerina pumps. And, Well, well, well, she thought to herself as she turned to get a better look. Well, well, well. That was a rare and wonderful sight: an actual exciting-looking newbie. In her long and wearying experience of that playground, the September intake was so strikingly similar to the previous term’s leavers as to be virtually indistinguishable – as if she had sat in the dark through to the end of the credits and the same boring old movie just started playing all over again. Could it be that this year might turn out to be different? The same story but remade, with a fresh new cast?

The newbie approached the crowd around Bea and hovered on its edge, circling. She seemed to debate whether to join in, weigh up the pros and cons, before drifting off through the gate and towards the car park. While Rachel wished she would hang around, just for a minute so they could meet, she also had to applaud the wisdom of getting the hell out without being nobbled. But even as she did so, some grudging admission that she really should be doing her bit was born within her and grew until, like a nagging small child, it was pulling and pushing her somewhere she didn’t want to be. There was nothing for it but to give in. Rachel sighed and dragged herself over to the tree to be given a minor, lowly, inconsequential task – some small token of belonging.

'Aw, that's *amazing*. Thanks, lovely,' Bea was saying to the unlovely Clover, who was always hanging around on the edge of things, like a black cloud at a picnic. 'And I've got Colette, Jasmine and Sharon on board. All old hands.'

How did Bea do that – know who everyone was? Rachel had seen them every day since for ever, but she still found it hard to tell that lot apart. Well, that wasn't quite true: since Colette's marriage broke up last year and she released her inner teenager, Rachel did now know Colette. It was hard to shut out the gossip, however much you wanted to, and the gossip seemed to suggest that every single bloke within quite a significant radius also now knew Colette. But Jasmine and Sharon – she defied anyone to know who was who there. They could swap lives and no man or child would necessarily notice. And even if they did, would they bother to mention it? Those two exercised together, shopped together, thought – even spoke – as one. Rachel didn't know if they had holidayed together too, but she did know they'd had too much sun – they looked like a little helping of snack-box raisins.

That was always the striking thing about the first day of term – the children had all gone trotting into class trimmed and polished and shiny, but the mothers looked about as groomed as Robinson Crusoe. Rachel couldn't quite recognise half of them. Give them all a few weeks, and their turn at the hairdresser or the spa, and the situation would be reversed: the kids would be a mess and the adults reborn. Apart from Heather, of course. Heather didn't really do polish, or trimming, or grooming. She had been the same reliable recognisable figure, in the same reliable clothes, for the past

five years. Right then she was on tiptoe – she did need to be – and using her left hand to push her right up yet higher, waving it frenetically. And as she did so her specs were slipping dangerously far down her nose.

‘All right, er . . . Heather, isn’t it? Perhaps you can . . .’ Bea looked stumped, then inspired. ‘I know! You can be secretary to the committee! We’ll give it a go anyway. No promises, mind. But let’s see how you get on.’

Heather flushed with triumph. It was a shame, thought Rachel with genuine sympathy, that Heather did not meet triumph more often. All pink like that, she didn’t look quite so tragic and mousey.

‘Ah.’ A note of something like mischief came into Bea’s voice. ‘Georgina. Joanna.’

Georgie – who, to be fair, was as kempt as the average cast-away whatever the season – was trying to sneak past. Her hair was even wilder than usual after the long weeks of holiday, but Rachel still thought she looked quite lovely. However much she tried, Georgie could never quite hide her natural, classy, skinny good looks. Jo, stocky and strong, stood beside her like a minder.

‘What’ – Georgie sighed as she stopped and turned towards Bea – ‘now?’

‘The new headmaster is determined to somehow overcome the absolutely *appalling* attacks on the St Ambrose budget this year – it’s a *scandal* what’s happening, we are *so* lucky to have someone with his *wealth* of financial expertise – and he has asked, um, *me* to form a fund-raising committee. I just think it would be nice if you two joined in. For once.’

‘Me? No. Sorry. Really. Love to. But couldn’t possibly.’ She

picked up the toddler padding along beside her and held him up as her passport out. 'I've got Hamish ...'

'Georgie, he's hardly a baby any more! And you do have more children in this school than any other family.' Bea smiled at the crowd as she spoke.

'But you don't want me. Really. I'd be useless.' She moved closer to Jo. 'We'd both be useless.'

'Yeah,' nodded Jo. 'Rubbish.'

'Well, thank you. It's great to have you on board.' Bea wrote down Georgie's name. 'And you, Jo.' Another little tick. 'Excellent.' They retreated, muttering, indignant.

Rachel was hardly going to raise her hand like everyone else. She was not a total loser. But she was preparing to attract Bea's attention and make a small, subtle yet ironic sign that she might help in some way vague and tangential, when someone else she had never seen before stepped to the front and addressed the whole crowd. Hello, what was this? Not another stand-out newbie? They were reaching levels of excitement here that were really quite unprecedented. Rachel chortled away to herself. She did hope St Ambrose was up to it ...

'Oh, OK,' said the exotic stranger, who was as tall as Bea, as blonde as Bea and actually – golly – as good-looking as Bea. 'Surrender! No excuse. Career break. *Extraordinary* feeling! Nothing for it. Do one's bit. Yikes! Here goes. *I* will come and help you all.'

Bea raised an eyebrow. Oh dear, thought Rachel. Bea didn't raise an eyebrow very often – risk of skin damage to the forehead – but when she did ... blimey. It was on a par with an ordinary mortal, say, throwing a chair out of a window or

driving a car into a lamppost. Christ. The eyebrow. Rachel gave a low whistle.

‘Sorry.’ Bea’s voice was as warm as her smile, but that eyebrow was still way up there. ‘I don’t think we’ve met . . .’

‘I’m new. First day. Just *loving* it.’ She swept her enormous sunglasses off her face and up into her long hair. ‘You know that feeling: *done the right thing*. We’re so pleased we chose St Ambrose. *Perfect*. Gad. The private sector! Escapees. *Never* again. I’m Deborah.’ She stopped to dazzle the assembly with her teeth. ‘Deborah Green. But everyone calls me Bubba.’

Woo and hoo, thought Rachel. We’ve got a right one here. That’s it. I’m in after all. This is going to be a laugh. She raised her hand, just as Bea flicked back her hair and declared that her work there was done.

‘Thanks, all.’ Bea laced the strap of her enormous handbag into the crook of her elbow, shook her gigantic bunch of keys. ‘I really do think this is going to be a very interesting year.’ And she swept out of the school gates and off to her car.

Rachel stared after her. She had hardly had a clear thought in weeks, what with the murk, the well, the puddle, the depths etc., but at that moment, as she stared at the blonde-on-dark stripes on the crown of Bea’s retreating hair, she had several. One after the other. Clear as day.

The first was: Huh. Weird. She didn’t speak to me. And I haven’t spoken to her for ages.

The second: Hey. Have I actually clapped eyes on her since Chris walked out?

And the third, very, very sharp this one: Hang on. Bloody hell. She didn’t pick me.

ST AMBROSE CHURCH SCHOOL EXTRAORDINARY FUND- RAISING COMMITTEE

Minutes of the First Meeting

Held at: The Headmaster's house

In attendance: Tom Orchard (Headmaster), Beatrice Stuart, Georgie, Jo, Deborah Green, Sharon, Jasmine, Colette, Clover

Secretary: Heather Carpenter

THE MEETING began at 8 p.m.

MR ORCHARD thanked everybody for giving up their evenings and wished to—

BEA seconded that and also informed the committee that HEATHER was to act as SECRETARY for the very first time and informed HEATHER that all she had to do was take down exactly what everybody said and make it sound a little bit, she knew, more official-sounding if she could. She also would like to add that she really loved those new shoes.

MR ORCHARD continued that he was touched by the dedication of so many parents in the community. He explained that this was his first post as headmaster after several years in the City, that the financial situation was as grim as the rumours suggested, but he was in possession of a number of proposals which in his view would lead the school out and up to a brighter—

BEA thanked THE HEADMASTER on the committee's behalf and stressed the excitement at its hearing of all his plans, which she already knew to be awesome and which she totally promised would happen so soon.

COLETTE informed the meeting that she had made some

nibbles, nothing much, just a few cheesy bits into which the committee should simply dive.

MR ORCHARD requested that the meeting just took the time to hear—

BEA thanked THE HEADMASTER again and proposed the coming of first things first. This committee needed a chair.

MR ORCHARD informed the meeting that he presumed he was the—

CLOVER wished to add that she had bought some Wotsits.

SHARON requested to inform all present that BEA was the obvious choice for Chair—

JASMINE explained that this was because BEA was always Chair.

BEA proposed that she really did not want to be appointed Chair for the reason that she was always Chair. And perhaps it was time for someone else and the doing of their bit.

DEBORAH requested that the committee call her BUBBA as everybody did, announced that she would be delighted to be Chair and would like now to take this moment to outline in depth her professional experience in the world of HR, the career from which she was having a break.

BEA let it be known that goodness gracious of course she could not compete with BUBBA. She also had to say how thrilled everybody felt to have someone of such status among them and that one day she would just love to hear lots and lots more about BUBBA's amazing career, simultaneous to putting the world to rights, over a bottle of something completely delicious. Meanwhile all she could add was that she had five years of tireless work for the community of St

Ambrose, a deep knowledge of every member of the happy school family and her own record of fund-raising success behind her. That was all. She had nothing more.

MR ORCHARD proposed that he would also like to be considered for the—

COLETTE said all in favour of BEA say aye. And all in favour of BUBBA say aye.

JO informed the meeting that there was a surprise.

BEA thanked her many supporters for their kind vote of confidence and her astonishment that she should be chosen in the face of such frankly terrifying competition.

SHARON requested that her absence be recorded for just a minute and enquired of THE HEADMASTER if it, you know, was upstairs?

MR ORCHARD agreed, and added that it was the second on the right.

JASMINE informed SHARON that she would come with.

BEA commenced the outlining of her plans. Her number-one fund-raising priority was the introduction of a LUNCH LADDER, the having of which was already happening over at St Francis. In brief: one person has a lunch, charges £15 a head, and those who attend have a lunch in turn and so on. And even more money could be made for this venture if we took down all the recipes that are used and published them as THE ST AMBROSE COOK BOOK. She happened to know that that was something of which St Francis had not thought and that therefore we were already up on the game. Also she announced the happening of THE QUIZ in the summer term and proposed the holding of a CAR BOOT SALE as soon as possible before it got too wet.

CLOVER apologised but wanted to ask if GEORGIE was quite all right?

JO informed the meeting that she was just having a snooze and enquired if anyone had a problem with that.

COLETTE proposed the introduction of a termly GOURMET GAMBLE in which everyone made a dish for supper, put it in a room and bought a raffle ticket. Then they won a completely new and different thing for their supper. As well as raising money, this encouraged within the community the trying of new things and also guaranteed the making of a change.

JO woke GEORGIE and instructed that the Minutes record their absence from the meeting for the smoking of a fag.

SHARON requested permission to ask THE HEADMASTER a little detail about which there was wondering. And that was, she could not but help the noticing of just the one toothbrush in the bathroom and enquired of THE HEADMASTER whether Mrs Orchard would be relocating soon?

JASMINE seconded that question, and added that the committee was very excited about meeting her.

MR ORCHARD suggested not to get too excited as there was no MRS ORCHARD for the meeting to meet and added that while he had the floor, now might be the time to raise the subject of—

BEA proposed the pressing on of the agenda and requested the declaration of volunteers so that the fund-raising might begin. Of course, BEA herself would be in charge of THE QUIZ as usual. And enquired who would like to start THE LUNCH LADDER?

THE MEETING was silent.

HEATHER proposed that if nobody else wanted to she was happy to do it but she was keen to avoid getting in the way of others or indeed the treading on of their toes.

BEA said that hmm, well, in her view GEORGIE should be the first and that the meeting must inform her of this in due course when she chose to return. She then requested volunteers for the GOURMET GAMBLE.

THE MEETING was silent but the Minutes record that HEATHER raised her hand.

BEA informed CLOVER that here at last was her chance to shine. That just left THE CAR BOOT SALE which in her view was not in any way difficult.

THE MEETING was silent. HEATHER raised her hand again.

BEA informed HEATHER that she could organise THE CAR BOOT SALE but also informed COLETTE that she would oversee that.

COLETTE said that was fine, she did only have her living to earn and it would sometimes be nice if people

BEA enquired of THE MEETING if it had any suggestions on how she might exist without COLETTE and her amazing support? And also if it had noticed her jacket which was so gorgeous? Furthermore, she wished to praise the committee for its making of an excellent start.

MR ORCHARD seconded that, but expressed some regret that no other male members of the community had been able to turn up this evening.

BEA stated that that was because she hadn't invited any of them and asked if there was any other business.

JASMINE said she would like to enquire of THE HEADMASTER

if he had considered the possibility of knocking this room through to the kitchen.

SHARON personally guaranteed both the creation of a more spacious living area and the bringing in of more light.

The Minutes show that here GEORGIE and JO returned to the meeting.

GEORGIE enquired whether they had missed anything important.

HEATHER said yes, that she was starting THE LUNCH LADDER.

GEORGIE stated that the committee did have to be joking.

JO informed GEORGIE that she had predicted something along those lines and that they had done her up like the proverbial kipper.

COLETTE then enquired of THE COMMITTEE, Hello? Like, excuse her? But what was THE COMMITTEE to be called and was it going T-shirts or wristbands?

SHARON sought clarification that THE COMMITTEE was surely an off-shoot of PASTA?

BEA suggested to the meeting that a little definition was needed between PASTA and this committee. The thing about the Parents' Association, which was so excellent and so motivated, was that it was open to simply everybody and that was so lovely and so friendly that up she sometimes welled. But as this committee was invitation-only, it was useful to erect a few boundaries to prevent the creation of confusion and the giving of offence. Perhaps something along the lines of COMMITTEE OF ST AMBROSE, to be known as COSTA?

COLETTE seconded that, and proposed wristbands, as

those T-shirts did nothing for anybody and those with light should not be hiding it beneath bushels.

GEORGIE announced that that was it, that was enough of that and that furthermore she was off.

THE MEETING closed at 8.32 p.m.

3.15 P.M. PICK-UP

Rachel had cut it a bit fine and arrived at the school gates with just a few minutes to spare. Georgie and Jo were both in their usual place by the green metal fence, under a grey-blue micro-cloud, with a fag on. They were on their own there, of course – they tended to be on their own. Rachel had never worked out if it was fear of the smoke that kept everyone else away, or fear of Jo, whose zero tolerance of any extraneous social nicety was prone to being misunderstood.

‘Hello, my love,’ Georgie greeted her warmly. Jo didn’t bother. ‘Good day?’

‘Uh. Um. You know. All right. S’pose.’

‘O-K. I’ll take that as a no.’

The school bell rang. Georgie and Jo turned to stubbing out cigarettes and containing dog-ends with sober ritualism, like clergy at the end of the Eucharist. Suddenly Jo broke off what she was doing and looked at Rachel for the first time.

‘Yeah. Chris. Heard about that,’ she said gruffly, abruptly.

‘Oh. Mmm.’ Rachel loathed these conversations. Really loathed them. The first time she had to acknowledge the separation with every single person she knew was excruciating. They all wanted to talk it over, was the worst thing.

Pick at it. Examine all sides of the problem. She was losing count of the number of deep-and-meaningfuls she'd been put through lately, and every single one was wretched and humiliating.

'Yeah. Well,' Jo began.

Rachel braced herself for what was coming.

'He always was an arse.'

She waited for more.

But that was it. Jo was already stomping off towards school. Her powers of oratory were seemingly exhausted. The subject was, apparently, dismissed. And as she followed through the gate, Rachel found that she was almost – not quite, mind, but almost – smiling. Jo had hit just the right level of depth and meaning there. She genuinely felt a tiny bit better.

'Bit chillier today. Brrr ...' Heather was waddling beside them.

'Is it?' Rachel hadn't noticed. She had been working all day, completely up against it, and this was the first time she had been outside. 'How was the other night, by the way? The meeting?'

'Bloody awful,' harrumphed Georgie.

'Worst night of my life,' added Jo.

'Actually, I really enjoyed it,' said Heather dreamily. 'Everyone was so nice, and guess what? I got the Car Boot Sale!'

Rachel did not quite know how to respond. 'Er ... congratulations?'

'Thank you.' Judging from Heather's expression, there was even more good news where that came from.

‘And,’ she was pink again, ‘Bea’s asked me to join them all exercising in the mornings.’

It had worked once. Rachel might as well try it again. ‘Congratulations.’ It seemed to do the trick. Then the school door opened and a tide of children washed into the playground and swirled around the legs of those who stood there.

Poppy flung her arms around Rachel’s waist. She too was pink. ‘The headmaster wants to see you, Mummy. But I haven’t done anything, I promise.’

Rachel rounded the corridor towards the head’s office just as another woman emerged. She flew past Rachel, mouthing the word ‘gorgeous’, rolling her eyes, fanning her face vigorously with both hands to convey some sort of transporting sexual joy. Blimey, thought Rachel. One man on the staff and suddenly we’re *Fifty Shades of St Ambrose*. The grumpy school secretary gave a withering look and cocked her head in the general direction of the office.

Rachel knocked, and entered.

‘Ah,’ said the head, looking up from a spreadsheet. ‘Mrs Mason?’

‘Er, I’m not really sure,’ Rachel wanted to say. What with the swift and nasty bugging-off of Mr Mason, I don’t know if I am, any more, Mrs Mason. Especially as there is, apparently, a second Mrs Mason waiting in the wings . . .

But what she said was: ‘Yes,’ and ‘Hello.’

Well. She didn’t know what that other woman was on. He was fine, this Mr Orchard, but he was nobody’s definition of ‘gorgeous’. There at the head’s desk sat a perfectly normal bloke of early middle age. He was wearing a normal bloke’s

suit, and his hair was, well, the colour of any white bloke's hair – that sort of brownish-greenish, sort of bleached colour.

'Thank you for your time.'

It was a puzzle, Rachel always thought: blokes and hair. By the time they hit thirty-five, they either didn't have any or they just had the same as the next bloke. Imagine us lot out there all with the same hair colour: Bea without her butter-blond highlights, all Bea's mates without their pale – actually brassy – imitations, Georgie without the occasional when-she-got-round-to-it chestnut rinse, Rachel with her signature auburn *née* ginger. We wouldn't know anything about each other. So how do these men, in their regulation grey suits and their brown/green hair, how do they do it? What are their markings? How do they even know who they are, themselves?

'Everything's fine with Poppy,' Mr Orchard assured her. 'Nothing to worry about on that score.'

Well, that was how much he knew. 'Oh, that's a relief,' she said. 'I was wondering why ...'

'Yes, of course. Actually I had been hoping to see you at the fund-raising committee meeting earlier in the week—'

'Oops. Sorry. Babysitter.' Rachel was pleased with that. Babysitter: very smooth. Much better than 'I didn't get picked.'

'It's fine. No worries.' He laughed nervously. 'I'm not going to put you in detention.'

She smiled politely and thought, God, he's lame.

'Only I heard you're an artist.'

'Well, yes – children's illustrator these days ...'

'Great. Even better, actually. The committee got off to – er –

a flying start the other night, but I'm not sure I quite managed to get across exactly what the fund-raising is for. These new cuts mean that, unfortunately, we are not going to get the planned extension after all. Which I'm afraid also means—'

'Oh no! No new library?' She hadn't realised.

'Exactly.' He looked genuinely downcast.

'But that's terrible.'

'I know. And I'm so glad to hear we're of the same mind on this one. But I think we can still do something.' He shifted in his chair and looked at her straight on. 'Not as smart, maybe, but not as costly either. And we can do it ourselves.' His eyes, Rachel noticed, started to shine. Just at that moment, for a brief flash, she thought he might not be quite as lame as all that. 'Look. You know all the outbuildings off to the side over there?' He pointed across the playground to a small collection of sheds and storerooms with high windows and a brick-and-flint cladding. 'We could raise the funds to knock those together and turn them into the library.'

'Oh, yes ...' He was right, as well. Rachel could see it at once.

'It's just not good enough to have the books crammed about all over the school. They deserve their own space, where the pupils can retreat for some quiet time. Where readers can be nurtured and books can be respected.'

'Couldn't agree more.' This was encouraging. She had heard this new headmaster was just a money man. It was more than a bonus to hear he was actually a books man, too.

'And I would love it to be more inspirational than the rest

of the school. No bare walls. Above the shelving, it can be a gallery. For the children's work, and perhaps the adults'. And artists within the wider school community. Don't you think?'

'Absolutely.' She might go so far as to describe him as a breath of fresh air ...

'And I would love you, Mrs Mason, to design a timeline depicting the history of the school, to go around the cornicing. Would you like to do that?'

Eh? What? Woah there. Where did that one suddenly come from? Extra work? By her? For nothing? Noooooo, she wanted to scream. She would not. She had neither the time nor the financial security any more to be pissing around doing voluntary work to provide fripperies for the children that would make not a jot of difference to their educational experience. They came here to learn to read and write and do their bloody tables – and just to get out of everybody's hair, frankly – and that was why they paid their taxes. And now she was broke. She was knackered. Drawing bloody pictures in a quite nice way was the only way she had, in the foreseeable future, of making things comfortable for her own kids at home. So why the hell should she waste one precious minute of her precious free time on meaningless nonsense to be ignored or unvalued by other people's children?

But what she said was 'Yes, of course.' And then added, in a casual don't-mind-if-I-do-don't-mind-if-I-don't kind of way: 'Does that, um, mean ...' she paused, hooked her hair behind her ears, looked out of the window at the children throwing a ball into a net, 'you want me on the committee?'

At the word 'committee', his body seemed to sink slightly.

'You are more than welcome, Mrs Mason. More than welcome. But, in a way, what I am asking you to do here is a little different from being just a member of a committee.'

'Oh?'

'I see yours as a more advisory role. Sort of artistic adviser, type of thing. The committee will raise the funds so that you can do the important stuff.'

'Ooh. So, you mean, it's sort of, more important than being on the committee?' she squeaked. Damn – that was not just lame. That was super-lame.

'Well.' He looked down, shuffled a few papers on his desk. 'I can't guarantee that the committee will see it that way, but that would be my view. Yes. Mrs Mason.' He spluttered a bit and seemed to be struggling to control himself in some way. 'You are more important than the committee.'

Was he laughing at her? Who knew, who cared? They thanked each other, and she left the office. This time, the grumpy secretary's look of contempt couldn't touch her.

She swung back down the corridor, her nostrils closed against the stale air of afternoon school, and out into the day. There was Georgie, hands in the sleeves of her oversized sweatshirt, skinny little legs crossed in baggy jeans, watching all her own children and Poppy playing on the bars. Rachel rushed towards them, punching the air in ironic triumph, was actually on the brink of shouting a satirical 'Yesssss!', when she became aware of Georgie's expression and the atmosphere around her.

Bea was back under the tree again, and today the crowd around her was bigger: mothers, fathers, a lot of the older children too. And they were all silent.

'It's Laura. You know, mum of the twins in Year Three, breast cancer,' Georgie whispered into Rachel's ear. 'Died last night. Bea just heard. And Dave took all his leave when she was sick, poor love, so he's going to be all over the shop. Bea is just setting up a rota for the next few months – school runs, hot meals, lifts to Brownies. All that stuff.'

Rachel's arm was still out, mid-punch. She wrenched it back and looked around quickly to see if anyone had noticed. No. She hugged herself. Nobody was looking at her. They were all locked into their mutual misery, looking up at Bea. Georgie put an arm around Rachel and said softly, 'Come on.' Leaning in on each other, head propped against head, they walked together over to the tree and took up their places on the edge of the sombre crowd.

The Day of Georgie's Lunch

8.50 A.M. DROP-OFF

It was a brittle, bright October morning. Their tins for harvest festival were clinking in the carrier bag and the cold air snapped in their faces as they walked up the hill. Rachel's head was thick with tiredness, but she had to muster from somewhere the energy to say something. The silence was driving her nuts.

'What's the story, morning glory? You're very quiet.' She knocked on the top of her daughter's head. 'Anyone in?'

'I was just thinking about Scarlett,' said Poppy.

Bet you weren't, thought Rachel. 'Scarlett? What's she up to? Still your best friend this term?'

'She's being a bit funny. There are these two new boys and she thinks she's just like the boss of them. And one of them she likes a lot and says we can't play with him. And the other

one she doesn't like at all and she says we can't play with him either. She says he's a weirdo.'

'Excuse me. Do we use that charming word about our classmates? I think we do not.'

'I didn't!' Poppy's ponytail swung round with the force of her denial. 'I said Scarlett did!'

'Well. Who is this boy? What's he like?'

'He's called Milo. And, OK, right ...' Poppy stuck her ponytail in her mouth and chomped on it. 'He's not a weirdo, but ... He is a bit weird, Mummy.'

Rachel sighed. Was the real problem here Scarlett and the weirdo? Was that really what was bothering Poppy? Or was it actually Chris, and what happened last night, and all sorts of other stuff that was a lot harder to talk about ...

Three o'clock the previous afternoon: Chris, out of the blue, announced that he'd blagged two tickets to the football for that very night, and whisked Josh off, just like that, with half an hour's notice. The whole evening had been chaotic, unsatisfactory and badly handled. Josh was clearly unsettled by suddenly finding himself going out with his dad again, Poppy was clearly struggling with the way she was just left out of it. And the stifling, ghastly silence had been there from the beginning of breakfast. That ghastly silence was becoming increasingly familiar to Rachel. She seemed to hear it on average twice a day, lately, and it was getting quite deafening. She knew what it was: the involuntary silence of the frustrated inarticulate; the silence of the disgruntled young who cannot begin to discuss the source of their own disgruntlement. So cheers, Christopher, she thought bitterly. Here's to yet another parenting triumph.

'Morning all!

Phew. Heather appeared, with a basket of harvest goodies wrapped in cellophane and tied with a bow. It was always at this point, when they came to the corner of Beechfield Close, that Heather and Maisie joined them. Did Heather sit behind her curtains every morning, twitching, watching, stalking the Masons on their walk up the hill? Or was it mere coincidence? Rachel preferred not to think about that. And anyway, she didn't really mind. She rather liked the way they came together, changed partners and proceeded in pairs. It felt like a line dance. Or a porridge advert. And Poppy needed a change of subject.

'Hey, look at you, Sporty Spice. What's with the trackies?'

Heather blushed. 'Oh, I'm working out with Bea and the gang again. It's a run this morning. Wednesday. We always run on a Wednesday.'

Poppy had been walking ahead with Maisie, but at that moment came back. 'So should we say something?'

'Say what?' Heather froze, alert, strangled on the edge of panic. 'What's happened?'

Oh Lord, thought Rachel. We don't want Heather getting wind of this silly nonsense – she'll turn it into something requiring a resolution from the UN. 'Nothing. At all. Is that right? Do we indeed always run on a Wednesday?'

'Yes, generally. But just to confirm, Bea sends out a group text every evening telling us what we'll be doing next morning. Where to meet, what to wear and so on ...'

'Gosh. There's a thing.' Rachel turned to Poppy. 'Go on. Quick. Catch up with Maisie.'

'And then,' Heather was so pleased with herself today, 'time for a quick change and round to Bea's to wash some stuff for the Car Boot Sale, and then it's the lunch! Not even a minute for the internet!'

A Range Rover thundered past. Through the tinted windows, they could just make out the murky shape of its driver waving maniacally.

'Who's that?'

'Not a clue.'

They reached the car park. Rachel got a glimpse of the promising newbie in the ballerinas heading off to her car. Drat. Missed her again. Around Bea's people carrier, four or five women in running gear were already warming up. One had her right foot in her left hand, another was tipping her left elbow over her right shoulder. The rest were gently jogging on the spot.

'There in a sec,' Heather called to them. No one looked up. 'Don't go without me!' No one replied.

'Hey. Baby.' The walk was over; the girls were waiting by the gate. Rachel stopped, squatted and got her head down to Poppy's level. 'Don't worry about it. Least said . . . It's bound to blow over. OK? Now.' She got up again. 'In you go. And please. For once in your life. Can you Just. Try. And. Somehow. Be. Good?'

Rachel stood and watched her trotting off. She was officially the Goodest Girl in the world, her daughter. The champion of the Good Girls' League Table, gold medallist at the Good Girl Olympics, and she knew it. But she hadn't laughed at that, or even smiled.

The school door swallowed Poppy in, and spat out

Georgie, who emerged towing a toddler and wearing a hunted look. 'OK. This is weird. Total strangers keep coming up to me and saying, "See you later." It's giving me the creeps.'

A woman in something resembling her pyjamas bumped into them and swung round. 'Oh! Hi! See you later.'

'What the—?'

'It's your lunch, Georgie!' giggled Heather. 'Today! You can't have forgotten a thing like that?'

'I bloody have. And I don't blame me, either. God.' She pulled down her mouth, put on the voice of a sitcom grumpy teen: 'What time is it, then, my lunch?'

'Twelve-thirty drinks, sit down at one. Everyone's looking forward to it . . .'

'Are they just? And where do you think you're going?' Rachel was tiptoeing away as subtly as she could. Georgie grabbed her by the collar and pulled her back. 'Don't even think it. You're coming. If I've got to put up with it, you bloody well can.'

'Oh Georgie, I can't face it. I'm not ready to—'

'Do you good,' butted in Georgie crisply. 'Here . . .'

Amazing: she had clearly forgotten the lunch again already. It was one of the things Rachel loved about Georgie. You could actually see what she was thinking. You could look into those clear blue eyes and watch the lunch just fly out of her mind, like a trapped bluebottle out of a newly opened jam jar. And there was obviously something else – bigger, more important – worrying away in there now.

'Heth', Georgie began. 'No offence, but . . . You do know you're dressed like a complete and utter total arse?'

11 A.M. MORNING BREAK

It was, Georgie reflected, like grief. She was reminded of those first few strange and cloudy months after her mum had died. She'd go pottering along, as if everything was normal, then, just as she was doing something routinely simple – plonking the baby in its cot, or forking the spuds out of the soggy ground – the truth would come and thump her right there, in the gut.

She'd been just like that this morning. Come home from dropping the children off, dumped the current baby in the playpen, put the kettle on, scraped the scraps into bowls – one for the pigs, one for the chicks – and then it hit: a different truth, but still hard, still right there, nearly winding her: she had all these bloody women coming round. And she was supposed to be bloody feeding them.

She stood, bottom against kitchen sink, and surveyed this morning's damage. She was perfectly well aware that her standards of domestic hygiene did not meet those that were generally upheld as the norm and, broadly speaking, she gave not a tinker's toss. She knew how much she did. She knew that she never stopped working from the minute she opened her eyes in the morning. She felt perfectly confident that the important things, the things that counted, always got done. The children were fed, the children were clothed, the animals lived their expected span. OK, so you could tell the difference between Martin's Farm and the Martha Stewart residence. But then Martha Stewart didn't have too many kids and a big, messy husband in the agricultural sector, did she? It's a darn sight easier being a perfect home-maker, Martha, if there's nobody actually at home.

Still, even she had to admit that today wasn't quite up to snuff. There was – she had noticed this for some time now – always something. Her household was like one of those biblical lands that never knew peace and order; that was always battling against some pestilence or elemental catastrophe sent by the Almighty to try it.

Today, He had sent shoes. There were so many shoes – and boots, and pumps, and trainers and wellies encrusted with hard, dried mud – scattered around that you could not actually see the dirt on the flagstone floor. 'Proof,' she said to Hamish, 'that there's always an up side.' Hamish reclined against the bars of his pen and sucked on his rusk.

'Of course, what we need, Hammy my boy, is a system.'

Hamish gurgled.

'We need a place for the footwear. That's what that Bea would do, you know: bet she's got a special Designated Footwear Place. And we could have that. What's to stop us? And, see, this would have an added advantage' – Hamish was riveted. His rusk had stopped, mid-air on the way to his mouth – 'because then, when we go out again, we would know where to find our footwear. And then nobody would ever have to ask me the whereabouts of their footwear, as we would all know that their footwear would be in the footwear place.'

Georgie and Hamish both had a faraway look – their eyes focused on a distant parallel universe with a parallel home that ran smoothly on routine and order. Then Georgie took a sip of her coffee, shook herself and came round.

'Of course, it'll never happen.'

And Hamish went back to his rusk.

She did, though, need to come up with something now, if only to get her through lunch. And though she might be a stranger to the long-term strategy, Georgie was the unassailable mistress of the short-term domestic fix. Where could she stuff it all? A solution was lurking in the fluff beneath the skirting-board of her mind, she just needed a brush-around to get it out . . . And there it was. Ha! The dishwasher! The dishwasher that had been broken for weeks, but about which she had done nothing. The baskets had disappeared off to Henry's bedroom days ago, commandeered by Action Man for the war effort. That left a nice spacious cupboard. Of sorts. It would do. For the mean time . . .

'Come on, babe. Work to do.'

Hamish got the hang of it immediately, bombing round the kitchen on all fours, hurling things into the dishwasher till it was packed full. Georgie had to force it, hard, shut. And then she noticed that the floor was filthy even by her spectacularly low standards.

Bubba headed back towards the house, two clinking mugs in one hand and a bunch of drying lavender in the other, smiling happily to herself. There's nothing wrong with it, she thought. She wasn't going to apologise. She just did love domesticity. It was as simple as that. She'd had Mark in absolute stitches over dinner last night, when she said the highlight of her day was the morning coffee break, but it was all true. The routine – the ritual – of it was just so reassuring . . . Every day, eleven sharp – you have, she told Mark, to run a tight ship, or the whole thing goes *completely* pear-shaped – she made three coffees. She left two on the Aga to keep warm, and took one

into the laundry to Kazia. Hand on heart, she said to Mark, some of the cosiest chats she'd had since they'd moved here had been in that laundry, with Kazia, while Kazia did the ironing. 'You would not believe,' she'd said, 'how many hours I spend in there, talking about the children's clothes and what we need next time they go to Waitrose.' Mark said he wouldn't believe it. And, she had added, she simply never got bored . . .

Anyway, then it was back to the Aga, collect the other two mugs and out into the garden. Tomasz was doing amazingly out there. The beds were going to be glorious and he'd got her plans for a veg patch well under way. He leaned on his fork while they chatted away – pruning, ground elder, ya-da-ya-da-da-da, it was actually *hysterical* to listen to – and then she took a little turn around, drinking in the air, and the beauty, of her little corner of England. It was, she'd told Mark more than once, very heaven.

This morning's chat was all about the lake – or, to be more precise, what Tomasz called 'the lake' but which she preferred to call 'the pond'. True, the estate agent called it the lake, when he'd first showed them round at the beginning of the summer. And the previous owners – they were lake this, lake that, lake the other. But Bubba knew a lake when she saw one – like when she honeymooned on Como, or stayed with her granny in Windermere. She was no geographer – hands up, first to admit it – but, as she understood it, a lake was a big thing. And this, this body of water in her own back garden, was not a big thing. Not at all. This was something over which she and all geographers could unite and call, as one, a pond.

'Mrs Green,' Tomasz had said. 'About the lake.'

'The pond, Tomasz. We don't want to sound pretentious, do we?'

'Mrs Green. About the pond ...' Such a quick learner, Tomasz, thought Bubba. Which was no great surprise. He'd got about ten PhDs or something. She wasn't quite listening to the rest of it. Something about banks or borders or some such. *What-ever!*

'Good point, Tomasz.' She'd taken the mug from his gloved hands. 'Thank you for your input.' Always a useful phrase in meetings when her mind had wandered. 'I'll talk to Mark this evening.' And she'd headed back to the house. As a general rule of thumb, Bubba was beginning to realise, while there was no such thing as too much Kazia – God, that girl was a gem – there was such a thing as quite enough Tomasz; and she'd had it, yet again.

'Right.' Georgie was talking things through with Hamish. 'We can now, at least, traverse the floor. We are, my little love, up on the game.' She put her bottom back against the sink, picked up her coffee again, started to think that actually it was about time she started to think about what anyone was going to actually eat at this wretched lunch ... and then noticed the kitchen table. It was almost, in its way, in her view, an art form. Still-life: 'Family Breakfast'. Only a true artist could stick the *Beano* to *Girl Talk* to *The Enchanted Wood* to Biff and Chip – bugger it. That should have gone into school – with egg yolk and Frosties and apple juice; all these inanimate objects combined together to create an animated discourse on Nourishment of the Young. It was a masterpiece, really ...

But she could also see that it was, in another way, to other eyes, a screaming mess. And the problem, Georgie knew, went deeper than the naked eye was able. A true art historian could take this morning's still-life, scrape away at it and find another, older one: 'Last Night's Supper'. And beneath that, there were scores of other masterpieces, 'The Sunday Lunch' and 'The Party Tea', going all the way back – Georgie happened to know – to a surface of ingrained glitter entitled 'Christmas Six Years Back'.

The thing was that, when the floor was in such a state, nobody would even notice the kitchen table. Now the floor was, well, clear at least, the kitchen table was sort of leaping out at her. Mocking. It had its thumbs in its ears. It was wagging its fingers. It was standing there looking at her, poking out its metaphorical tongue. 'Oh dear,' she said to Hamish, who was back in the playpen, filling his nappy with quiet intent, 'what on earth have we started?'

Of course, she could just throw the whole lot in the bin, but there was stuff there that was needed. She could only sort it by sitting there like a pathologist and pronouncing life or death on every colouring book and felt pen and all the rest of it, and there just wasn't the time for all that. She still hadn't worked out what she was giving anyone for lunch. She glanced up at the clock. Fine. Not quite twelve o'clock. No panic. Got a while yet. Just time for another creative solution . . .

Bubba brushed her feet on the mat, coiled her lower leg round the back door, flicked it back into its frame. And suddenly, just like that, she had what she liked to call one of her

lightbulb moments. Ding! she thought. Then doubted herself. Did light bulbs actually go ding? What did she mean? Flash! Or just tah-dah! Anyway, the point was, she had a stonkingly bright idea. Her garden was, indeed, very heaven. She didn't want to sound too boastful or anything but she thought it was probably a lot more very heaven than the gardens of any of the other families at St Ambrose – what Mr Orchard, bless him, kept calling 'our community'. Yikes! Anyway . . . Why not share it with them in some small but special way? They could throw something magnificent here, which would knock everybody's socks off and raise an enormous amount of money for those poor kids. She had felt so sorry for Bea the other night, at that meeting. All those pathetic little ideas of how to make a few bob here and a few bob there. They'll still be at it with one foot in the grave at this rate – selling raffle tickets at their own funerals, holding a cake stall at the back of the crematorium . . .

The Greens should make a substantial contribution, and this could be it. A summer ball. For St Ambrose. The St Ambrose Summer Ball. She could see it now: a marquee down by the pond . . . No, by the lake. For one night only, she would allow the pond to be the lake. A Lakeside Summer Ball. *A-mazing!*

'Kazia!' Kazia jumped, dropping the iron with a clatter. All Bubba's fault – she didn't normally appear in the laundry *twice* in one morning.

'Sorry – did you burn yourself? – but listen: I've had an incredible idea.' Kazia listened intently as Bubba outlined her grand scheme. It was growing as she spoke: it was already a sit-down dinner for up to two hundred people, with fireworks and dancing and a jazz band by the lake. She was so excited

that it was quite a shock when Kazia chucked a bucket of Eastern European cold water all over her.

‘Mrs Green, I’m not so sure . . .’

God, what was it with these people? Kazia was as bad as Tomasz. Honestly. Meet our live-in couple, Mr and Mrs Strindberg – Gloom and Grump. If Strindberg *was* actually Eastern European. Which she might have to check . . .

‘Won’t it mean a lot of work?’ Kazia studied a rising blister on her finger.

‘Oh, Kazia,’ Bubba said, putting her hand on the ironing board in a gesture of affection. ‘You know I’m not afraid of hard work.’

Friendship restored. She trotted into the kitchen and dumped the dirty mugs on the draining board, happy once more. *Now* she had something to get her teeth into. Heavens, was that the time? Twelve o’clock. Where did the mornings go? She was due at this grim-o lunch over at Cold Comfort Whatever any second. She could announce the ball idea right there – that would cheer them all up, bless ‘em. *Christ!* She only had twenty-five minutes to tart herself up. Better crack on.

12.30 P.M. LUNCH BREAK

Georgie was bent over the table, gathering up piles of stuff with her arms and shovelling them all into a bin marked COMPOST – it was empty for once, and amazingly non-smelly; well, just the odd whiff of cauliflower leaf and potato peel – when Will burst in from the yard.

'HELLLLOOOOOO!' He did make her laugh, her husband. Spent all day every day right here on the farm, but whenever he came back into the kitchen – which was only about ten times a day – he was as a Spartan back from Thermopylae, a hero home from the war.

'Two of the most gorgeous beings on the planet, both in my kitchen at once. How lucky am I?' He pulled off his boots, spun them across the floor and picked up Hamish out of the playpen – 'Phwoar. Pongeroo, my darling' – and dropped him again.

'Sorry, babe. Just having a bit of a tidy up ...'

Will took in the scene of devastation around him and guffawed. 'Going well then, I see.' For Georgie, it was one of the beautiful miracles of their marriage that her husband took such delight in domestic chaos. It just cracked him up every time.

He walked up behind her, slapped her quickly on the bottom and pulled her up and into his arms. 'Why bother? I came in search of lunch, but now it occurs to me, perhaps we could use our time more wisely ...' He nuzzled into her neck, and she leaned back into him.

'Mmmmmmm ...' And then that kick of grief again. 'I can't!' she wailed. 'It's "The Wreck of the Deutschland" in here, Hamish's nappy is a health hazard, and I've got all these sodding women turning up in half an hour for a lunch that I haven't even begun to think about and for which I appear to be charging fifteen quid apiece ...'

'Doh. Is that all? Then surely a quick shag shouldn't be out of the quest—'

What was that? They swung round together in alarm. It

sounded – could it be? – something like a sharp little kitten heel on the flagstones in the yard . . .

‘Golly. Gosh. Um. Hi. Are you OK?’

Bubba’s first thought on entering the Martins’ home was that she was actually walking into an as-it-happened crime scene. All the signs were there. She recognised them immediately. She did watch a *lot* of detective programmes on the telly – anything from *Midsomer Murders* to *CSI*. Loved them; couldn’t get enough. As she said to Mark the other night, she was, to all intents and purposes, practically a *policeman*, she knew all the procedures so well.

So there she was, on the threshold of a kitchen that had clearly been ransacked in the most unbelievably *brutal* manner – God, she would hate to have her home violated like that; they’d never been burgled, *so* lucky, touch wood. And there was poor Georgie, gripped in a stranglehold by some *huge brute*, literally *the Gruffalo*, all unshaven and wild and woolly, bushy eyebrows, *exploding* nasal hair, with – she was trying to take in as much as possible for the police report later – filthy, almost *crusty* hands. And there was the baby, being forced to watch – oh God! – from a *cage* . . .

She was about to go in there, all guns blazing, but something stopped her. Something in the atmosphere . . . It was sort of . . . what was it? She wasn’t quite sure. Happy. Cheerful. Or something. So she coughed politely – she could still, she reckoned, attack if attack were needed – and made her presence felt.

‘Ah,’ said Georgie. ‘Good. You’re early’ – though without sounding all that pleased. ‘This is . . .’ she began, to her husband, but her voice trailed away.

‘Call me Bubba.’ Bubba held her hand out in peace to the huge woolly mammoth person, which guffawed an enormous guffaw.

‘Nothing could delight me more.’ He roared again. ‘I’m Will. I gather you’re actually paying to come here for lunch. That’s a family first. I hope you’re not the litigious sort.’

You know what? thought Bubba. He’s oddly attractive, this Will – in a noble-savage kind of way. But, golly. Poor, poor guy. Do they really have to live like this? Should we be fundraising for *them*?

Georgie had moved away to the table, where she seemed to be putting the strangest things in the compost bin. Felt-tip pens? Bubba was only just getting to grips with the whole compost *scene* – she and Tomasz had had more conversations about it than she would like to remember – but she was pretty sure you *couldn’t* compost a felt-tip pen. Still, they were all farmers round here. They must be greener-than-one, she *supposed*. But you’d think: Felt pen? *Toxins*?

‘Oh, sorry,’ she said to Georgie’s back. ‘Am I the first? What can I do? Chop something! Let me chop!’ She looked around. It was funny, but it seemed, oddly, *foodless* ... ‘Isn’t this lovely?’ She and Kazia always had everything *out* by this stage in the proceedings.

‘Chop?’ Georgie turned round. She was pink from the exertion of composting all those toys and so on, her hair was on end – she looked, in Bubba’s opinion, seeing her in her home environment for the very first time, really quite bonkers. ‘We’re not quite at the chopping stage, thanks anyway. More at the – um – picking stage. Will, can you entertain ...’ her

mouth opened, flapped like a codfish, but nothing came out, 'for me, while I just nip out to the greenhouse?'

There were two things in this life that gave Georgina Martin a profound sense of existential contentment. One was walking around with a child – one of her own, obviously – tucked into her hip. The other was the growing and picking of her own fruit and veg, on her own patch of land, for immediate cooking by her and consumption by her loved ones, in her very own farmhouse kitchen. She wasn't quite sure why. She didn't really these days have the time required to think this kind of stuff through. She guessed it was to do with anchoring herself – vertically to the landscape beneath her feet, laterally to the generations that flanked her; establishing her position in the cosmos, her connections to the past and the future.

Humming quietly, she walked back through the yard with a basket full of future lunch. She was completely engrossed in totting up the elements she had – pitch-perfect cherry tomatoes, purple basil, figs, plus tiny beetroot, thyme, shallots and garlic – and how they might be combined together to form a coherent whole. Those that can, cook; those that are completely hopeless need a recipe book – that was her philosophy. She remembered the blackberries that the kids had picked and the mascarpone in the fridge. Simple, stylish, delicious. Hamish could have the leftovers. Perfect.

So she was actually, consciously, smiling when she looked up to see the cloven hooves of a flock of mutton dressed as lamb clip-clopping across towards her. Sharon, Jasmine, Heather – well, Heather was, to be fair, more mutton dressed

as mutton ... But who the hell was that with her? Colette? Colette, in her yard, done up like she was off to some sodding cocktail party ...

OK. That was it. She was the victim of some hilarious bloody practical joke by Bea, and she wasn't putting up with it for another second. If they thought she was giving house-room to every loser and loony with a kid at St Ambrose they had another think coming. 'Oi!' she was about to say. 'Hop it! Bugger off out of here!' But Will, unfortunately, got there first.

'Hey, Heather.' Kiss, kiss. 'Great skirt.' He was having a high old time. And: 'I don't believe we've met. I'm Will Martin,' he swung round with a gesture of openness towards the back door, 'and you are very, very welcome.'

Georgie thought she might actually hit him.

Drinks

Jo's bottom – not an insignificant thing, everyone agreed, but as that didn't seem to bother Jo it didn't seem right for anyone else to add it to their burden of worry – was protruding from the cupboard under the sink. Hamish's little neat one was beside it. They were both in search of something. 'Come on, Hamish.' Jo's voice was muffled by the U-bend, but her irritation with the baby could clearly be heard. 'There must be an ashtray somewhere. Else where does your mother stub her fags out?'

Bubba leaned against the fridge, wondering if she was ever going to be offered a drink. Heather was laying the table – someone had to – while chatting happily to Georgie over one shoulder.

'How many are we?' She opened the drawer of the enormous kitchen table in search of paper napkins, shut it swiftly and gulped.

'How would I know?' Georgie was chopping shallots in a frenzy. She flung open the fridge – Bubba dived out of the way just in the nick – grabbed the butter, slopped olive oil into a wide-bottomed pan and lit the gas beneath. She picked up a mortar and pulverised three garlic cloves – smash, smash, bash – and tossed them in. 'Why would anyone bother to tell me?'

Bubba took up a fresh position against the dishwasher and, to no one in particular, smiled a hopeful, friendly smile.

'Is that Melissa coming?' Heather turned her attention to glasses, drummed her fingers against her lips. Where to start? 'Bea thought she might turn up.' She headed towards the dishwasher – Bubba moved off towards the dresser – and opened it. 'She looks lovely.' She shut the door sharply, pulled a face. 'Know the one I mean? Tall, dark, bob ... Wears ballet pumps.'

Jo reversed out of the cupboard, headed for the dresser and grabbed a bone-china dish. She bashed the side of Bubba's head as she did so. 'Sorry,' said Bubba, as it seemed that someone ought to.

Colette and Clover were already seated tightly together around one end of the grubby table; they seemed to be at a separate social occasion all of their own. 'The tricky one,' Colette was saying, 'is Saturday ...'

'Oh God,' Clover moaned. 'Nightmare.' Her head shook, her eyes closed. 'I don't know how anyone could expect you ...'

'... what with the football in the morning and pick-up from the sleepover and the dance recital in the afternoon ...'

A curious sound started to come out of Clover from deep within. Words now beyond her, she had moved on to some sort of funereal ululation: 'Tut, owwwwww,' it went, 'tut, owwwwww.'

'... then I said to him, "Touch rugby? Sunday morning? You have to be kidding me ..."'

Clover's moans and Colette's detailed itinerary rose up to the blackened gables of the kitchen ceiling. And there they met the manic chatter of Bubba making friends with Heather –

'... all we ever wanted was a quiet life, and average bright, and we end up with this *extraordinary* boy. Little Martha's perfectly straightforward, thank *goodness*, but Milo ... Oh, I don't know. It just feels like such a responsibility to, you know, do the right thing ... So. Anyway. How about you?'

'Oh, um, yes, well. Just the one. Sadly. I would say she is, yes, sort of average bright, perhaps. On,' Heather tried a cheerful laugh, 'ha, a good day ...'

– and the sizzling and chopping of a large lunch being hurriedly cooked. And all these noises came together to make a huge umbrella of sound, beneath which Georgie and Jo were free to talk.

'How's it going? Things any better with Steve?' It wasn't yet common knowledge that Jo was having trouble at home. Only Georgie was aware of it. And knowing Jo, she would like it to stay that way: if anyone else dared ask, they would probably get their heads stoved in. Georgie stole a sideways look as she reached for the wooden spoon. Jo never went in for make-up and all that at the best of times – it was one of the many admirable things about her – but today she was looking

particularly ragged: pale face, shadowed eye, a furrow cut through her brow that wasn't there last year. Something deep in Georgie gave a sudden lurch of sympathy.

She was so fond of Jo. Anyone who knew her well had to be fond of Jo; to the mere acquaintance, though, she could be proper scary. She was just like a girl Georgie had really liked at school: only ever referred to by her parents as her 'bad friend' and in that tone of voice reserved for a dose of measles.

'Bloody awful.' Jo took over stirring the shallots in the butter, so giving her back to the rest of the room. 'He didn't get the job he went for the other week, and there's nothing else in the offing. You know' – she was talking directly to the wall tiles now. Georgie had to come next to her to hear – 'I got back from night shift at half-six this morning and the tea things were still sat on the kitchen table from half-six the night before. Spaghetti hoops sort of fossilised on to the plates. And he's stretched out on the sofa asleep in front of the telly. Hadn't even got himself up to bloody bed.'

Georgie slid the chopped herbs into the foaming butter. Of course, this was what people round here didn't quite get: not only was Jo perfectly harmless, she was also as vulnerable, deep down, as all the rest of them. She just didn't bang on about it to anyone and everyone, and very refreshing it was too. 'He needs a doctor, Jo. He needs proper help.'

'Yeah. Well. He doesn't want it. I couldn't help myself this morning. I was so knackered. I just flew at him.'

'And?'

'Huge scene. Nice for the boys to wake up to...'

'Oh, love. But they're all right.'

'Oh, they're all right. I'm all right, really.' Jo shook herself. 'But I'm starting to think we'd all be a bit more all right without him around ...'

She gave a dry laugh and turned back to the kitchen. 'What's all this about then?' Jo cocked her head in the direction of the table while popping a cherry tomato in her mouth. 'Colette and Clover? That's new, isn't it? An unholy alliance if ever I saw one ...'

'Poor Colette.' Georgie glanced over there. She was now painting olive oil on to bread slices. 'All she needs. The minute she got the decree nisi, she somehow got Clover as her new BFF.' She tossed over some rock salt. 'It's like those bugs the kids pick up at school. If you're on good form, they can't touch you.' Then crunched over some black pepper. 'But if you're already a bit on the low side, that's it. They're in. Worming their way round, sickening your system ...'

'She gives me the right creeps.' Jo gave an involuntary shudder. 'And I bet she's pleased with herself. She's never managed to get in with the Sporties before, has she? What with that wart on her face and legs like a Shetland Pony ...'

'Shhhh.' Georgie nudged her friend in the ribs. They were both sniggering when they looked up, saw two women standing there proffering their fifteen quid, and stopped immediately.

'Hi,' said the braver of the new arrivals. 'Bea suggested that we ...'

Georgie wiped her fringe away with the back of her arm. 'Oh, of course. I'm quite sure she did.' Jo looked them up and down, and took up position on Georgie's side of the chopping board. 'Come in, come in. Oh yes. Just make yourself at home. Everybody else has.' She gestured at a roomful of

women, none of whom had been offered so much as a glass of water.

The women looked baffled. One was halfway to putting her money back in her purse when Rachel put her head round the door.

‘Well done.’ Georgie stepped forward and kissed her warmly. ‘I was beginning to wonder if you were going to flake on me.’

Rachel stepped gingerly over the threshold. ‘Sorry. Tons of work to do and had to wait for the new washing machine. Whose is the Range Rover? Parked like a total nutter. Give us a nice big glass of something, will you? I could do with a little fortification.’

Starter

Bruschetta of cherry tomato on the vine, wild garlic and purple basil. Served with roasted figs and British goat’s cheese

Preparation time: 15 minutes

Cooking time: 10 minutes

‘Mmmm, shish ish shcrummy,’ said Rachel through a full mouth. ‘Schtarving . . .’

‘So are we!’ said Heather, glancing at Colette. ‘We did an hour’s run this morning.’ Clover scowled at her, but Heather was just too cheerful to notice. ‘And then a good old session on the Car Boot Sale.’

Clover put a hand on Colette. ‘You must be shattered . . .’
Jo shot them a bitter look. ‘Chrissake . . .’

‘Oh,’ said one of the late arrivals, saving Heather from the

scrutiny of her friends. 'The Car Boot Sale.' She was desperate to join in somehow. 'Sunday after next, is that right?'

Rachel put down her ciabatta. Her appetite was suddenly gone again. 'Chris has finally announced that that will be his first weekend with the kids.'

'Then that's great for you!' said Heather, delighted. 'Just what you need, a car boot sale. That'll take your mind off it all!'

'I doubt that's possible. It is, after all, my first Sunday on my own in – what? – fourteen years . . .'

'But it's so important, a bit of *me*-time,' chipped in Clover.

'Heather, dear,' called Georgie from the stove in her Mary Poppins voice. 'You are developing, if I may say so, a rather car-boot-centric view of the universe . . .'

'Well, I just hope you're all coming,' said Heather with a frown. 'This is a major fund-raiser for the school.'

Jo snorted.

'And they're always such fun.'

Jo snorted again, and louder.

'And' – time for the big rallying cry, a quote from Bea, as it so happened – 'it's a great chance to just get rid of all your old bits.'

The table fell momentarily silent.

'Oh,' said Bubba. 'I'm not sure I've actually *got* any "old bits".'

'I have,' said Jo in a mournful tone. She wasn't snorting now. 'I've only got old bits.' She was looking quite wretched.

'Ooh, actually,' brought in Bubba. 'Lightbulb! Now I think of it, there's a *cupboard* full of old Alexander McQueens and stuff . . .'

'Oh, Bubba, really? That would be amazing.' Heather

spoke to the table, aglow. 'You know, it really could be quite something, this car boot sale. With a bit of positive energy and good will, we could really do something remarkable here.'

'On the subject of fund-raising,' cut in Bubba, picking her moment. 'I've had an idea. What say you all to ... a summer ball!'

'A what?' said Jo.

'A summer ball! By our lake!'

'Hangon hangon hangon. Woah there. Your *lake?*'

'Friend of mine once, she had a lake,' Clover chipped in. 'It was absolute hell ...'

'Well. Pond. Ish.' She flicked her hand airily. 'We're very lucky. Anyway. Dinner. Dancing. About a hundred quid a head.'

'*One hundred quid???*'

'All right then,' obliged Bubba happily. 'A hundred and fifty!'

'But that's more than a night shift!' spluttered Jo. 'Do you have any idea how many incontinence pads I have to change for a hundred and fifty quid?'

Bubba did not have any idea and nor did she look like she would care to.

'Oh dear,' said Clover. 'It does sound a huge amount of bother. Is it going to be one of those things that is so much more work than it's worth?'

'Bubba.' Heather was practically swooning. 'I think it's the most brilliant idea I've ever heard.'

'Does Bea know about this? Have you told her you're thinking of this?' demanded Colette. Her voice was edgy. 'I mean, I really think Bea should be told ...'

‘Well, this does sound interesting.’ They turned, as one, to the open door. They sat up, reflexively, straight. All faces, save those of Georgie and Jo, were instantly lit from within. Suddenly, lunch was looking up.

‘Do tell. What exactly should I be told?’

Main Course

Risotto of fresh herbs with truffle shavings, served with roasted baby beetroot

Preparation time: 10 minutes

Cooking time: 25 minutes

Rachel shuffled up to make room next to herself on the long pine bench, but Bea went and half perched – like she didn’t really want to catch something – beside Colette instead.

‘A ball. Wow. Awesome. And heroic of you, Bubba, I must say. Heroic.’

Bubba was modest. ‘Oh, you know: From each according to their abilities . . .’

Bea cocked her head. ‘Really? No. I don’t think I do know. Anyway. One thing to get straight: it can’t be a *summer* ball, I’m afraid.’

‘Oh?’

‘No. I always do The Quiz in the summer.’ She checked her phone quickly. ‘The Quiz is the summer . . .’

‘But . . .’

‘. . . The summer is The Quiz.’ She picked a cherry tomato from Colette’s bruschetta.

'Let me get you a plate,' said Heather.

'No thank you.' Bea took some goat's cheese from Clover's. 'I'm not staying.'

Bubba was defiant. 'But what about the weather? It doesn't matter what the weather is like for a quiz, but for a ball it's crucial. The whole point is to be in the garden, drinks around the lake . . .'

Rachel and Jo cleared away the plates from the starter. Bea lifted an entire bruschetta from one as it passed, and continued as if Bubba had not spoken.

'I think the best thing would be a Christmas Ball. Sounds marvellous. The English summer so loves to disappoint, anyway. Let's not even give it the option. A Christmas Ball. It's decided. Bubba, you're completely brilliant.' And she checked her phone again.

Georgie thumped her over-sized, heavy-bottomed pan in the middle of the table with a brisk 'Help yourselves.'

'My favourite,' said Colette.

'Poor you,' chipped in Clover. 'Risotto's a nightmare.'

'Yeah.' Georgie stuck a ladle in the rice. She passed the Parmesan and grater. 'Poor, poor me.'

'Isn't this fabulous?' Bubba swept her arms to take it all in: the humble meal served straight from the pan at the rough-hewn country table. 'Straight out of – I don't know – *Wuthering Heights* or *Jude the Obscure* or something.'

'Christ,' muttered Jo, striking her familiar pose of bored crossness – she was in a one-woman war against the pretentious.

Heather was racking her brains. 'Have I read those, Georgie? What happens?'

‘Oh. You know. Usual. Everyone’s miserable-slash-bonkers and then they snuff it,’ said Georgie briskly. Jo snorted. ‘Cheers, *Blubber*. Hey, it’s not my idea of a good time either, but one is trying one’s best . . .’

‘Sorry. And it’s actually, um, *Bubba*?’ She laughed nervously. ‘That came out wrong. I meant, you know, the sort of rustic *charm* of it all.’

Bea was using Colette’s dessert spoon to scoop risotto off Clover’s plate and periodically checking her phone, which remained disobligingly mute.

Clover spoke through a mouthful of rice. ‘Why on earth would you ask Georgie what books you’ve read, Heather? We all know you’re scatty,’ she raised her eyebrows to the rest of the table ‘but . . .’

‘Well actually . . .’ Heather drew herself up and smiled a small, smug smile, ‘we were at school together.’

‘Yup.’ Georgie settled Hamish in his high-chair beside her. ‘And she was a pain in the arse then like she’s a pain in the arse now.’

Will wandered through in his socks. ‘Look at this. The Long and Leisurely Ladies’ Lunch.’ He tousled his son’s hair. ‘It’s another world for you lot, in here. Another world . . .’

‘That’s right. It is. So you can sod off out of it,’ said Georgie cheerfully.

‘I will when I’ve found my mucking-out boots.’ He leaned over and swiped a baby beetroot. ‘Have you seen them?’

‘Umph.’ She had a fork to her lips and a spoon to Hamish’s. She cocked her head. ‘Dishwasher . . .’

Munching loudly, Will padded over there, opened the door and rooted about for a bit. ‘It’s quite full in here, babe . . . Ah,

here we go. My wife – right as ever.’ He pulled his head out again and beamed proudly over to the table. ‘You can’t fault her.’

Bubba looked at Will, at Georgie, at the dishwasher and back again. Bea smiled a particular smile – the same smile that a pope would smile on first looking upon a miracle, say, or Stephen Hawking an alien. A smile that said: There. See? I *knew* it!

Then Will tapped the boots sharply against the dishwasher, stood patiently while the mud fell off all around him and with a cheery ‘Smell ya later, ladies!’ headed out the door.

Dessert

Blackberries served with lavender sugar and mascarpone cream

Preparation time: 5 minutes

Cooking time: none

‘Get stuck in, everybody. In a charming, rustic sort of way.’

Bea leaned over the huge bowl of blackberries and took a handful. ‘I won’t, thanks anyway, Georgina. I’d better be getting on. Gosh. We can’t all sit around all day. See you at school later.’ She gathered up her silent phone and left.

‘You sit down, Georgie,’ said Rachel. ‘I’ll put the kettle on. Who’s for tea? Coffee? Lesbian?’

‘Thanks, Rach.’ Georgie scooped Hamish out of his high-chair. ‘I’d better just take this one off for his nap.’ She knew even before she said it that Heather would leap from her seat and all but rip the child from her arms. Sure enough:

‘Ooh, let me.’ Heather leapt from her seat and ripped the child from her arms. ‘He’ll come with me, won’t you, my gorgeous?’ They headed for the thick oak door that separated the warm sunny kitchen from the dark fridge-freezer that was the main house. ‘We’re the best of friends.’

Hamish was the best of friends with all mankind, was the truth. If Myra Hindley walked in now he’d nuzzle her neck and share his rusk. But let Heather think she was special; she needed the boost.

And Georgie needed the rest. She sat down, closed her eyes and started to drift away. She could hear the others exclaiming over the blackberries – they were damned good, their blackberries – and wondering what she had put in the mascarpone. But it was like the sound of seagulls when you’re lying against a harbour wall, or a tractor in the fields at harvest: it was distant, coming from somewhere else, beyond.

This was what happened to her, these days, whenever she stopped and the kids weren’t around and Will wasn’t there to make her laugh. It happened the other night in that ghastly meeting. It wasn’t that she nodded off exactly; it was that she went into some sort of suspension, like a computer going on standby, Georgie imagined: she’d gone to screensaver. Her body just wouldn’t waste its energy on this lot; it was storing it up for the only stuff that mattered.

‘Wanna ciggie, love?’ Jo was nudging her, but she was too far away. She couldn’t come back yet.

‘Owp! We seem to have lost our hostess.’

‘Look at her, she’s knackered. Leave her to it.’

‘God, it’s *awful*. Look at the *state* of it all.’ Georgie knew that voice: that was the ridiculous Blubber person, sounding

like she was on some fact-finding mission in a Third World country. 'Can they just not *afford* any help?'

'Oh, they're loaded.' Heather was back downstairs then. So Hamish must have gone off all right. That was good. Georgie could sink a bit further down now. Down, down . . . 'She just won't do it. And we just can't understand why.'

Can't we just? thought Georgie. And that'll be because I'm not mug enough to tell you. She might not know everything about the female condition, she would admit that. But this much she did know: she knew what not to talk about with her fellow woman. And number one on that list was any suggestion, not even the merest hint, of marital or domestic contentment. She knew not to say that her husband still liked to have regular sex with her. She knew never to suggest that she might also rather like having regular sex with him. She wouldn't let on to a living soul that Kate was on grade-five piano. Or that Sophie had started Dickens. Or that Lucy was great at gym. And she would never, ever in a gazillion years admit to anyone that she had her whole little set-up exactly as she liked it.

'Hey. Why don't we have a good clear-up while she's asleep? There's only half an hour till pick-up. If it doesn't get done now it'll still be here at Christmas . . .'

She did have an au pair once, and she was brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. The whole house was a new pin and there was no need for them to do anything. So they didn't. The children were either out in the garden or in their rooms and she, Georgie, well . . . she had all day to do whatever she wanted. And it was as if her whole family had been blown apart – this great, pulsing, vital organism just split into lots of simple,

pointless little cells, capable of only the lowest form of existence, never connecting with each other at all.

'Blimey. The dishwasher's a no-go, that's for sure ...'

'OK. Sleeves-up time. Come on, girls. Clover? Cloth. Catch!'

So she sacked Whatsername. And, yes, she had been up to her ears ever since. And some people found her housekeeping wanting. She would admit that there are one or two things that she never quite got round to, though ought. But the kids got their chores back. And every evening, they were not just together during supper but before – when one was peeling the potatoes and another laying the table. And after, when Will docked an iPod and they danced around the washing-up. That nightly ninety minutes was the coping-stone of their family life. But she wouldn't let on about that to this lot.

She heard Clover lumbering to her feet, saying, 'It's my day to pick up the twins and keep them at home until Dave gets back. I'd better slip away.'

Then the sound of the back door closing, and retreating, stomping steps across the yard. It was Jo who broke the silence: 'God, life, eh? First they lose their lovely mum to cancer, then they've got to have tea with that miserable old cow.'

'Jo. That's a *terrible* thing to say.'

'Mebbe. But it's what you're all thinking ...'

Georgie found the energy to prise open one eyelid. There was Bubba at her sink, having a Petit Trianon moment, holding up that green scourer as Marie Antoinette might a fan. 'I haven't done this for ages! Do you know, it's rather good *fun*?'

Then someone hit the iPod, and the song they'd had last night – 'Dancing in the Moonlight' – started up where it had left off. Immediately, Rachel was flicking her hips and jiving with the risotto pan. She was a cool little groover, that Rachel. Jo started head-banging away. Heather was – what was Heather doing? It looked like, sort of, early ballet . . . Bubba's neat little buttocks were twitching along while she washed. Colette – well, there was a surprise – slipped quietly out the door.

And Georgie reckoned she'd got just about ten minutes. Ten minutes left to give in to a nice, quiet snooze . . .

3.15 P.M. PICK-UP

Bea was standing in the playground with Colette, being fully debriefed on the day's events. They each had an eye on a cluster of Year 5 girls nearby. At the centre of it was Bea's eldest, Scarlett. She was going to lend her Sylvanian squirrels out just for that evening, and she was trying to decide to whom. The potential candidates gathered around, each desperate to be the chosen one.

'Georgina! What a success. You really got things off to a flying start.'

'As usual, all the hard work comes down to the likes of *moi*. Here you go.' She handed Bea a fistful of notes. 'I'm pretty sure there were twelve of them, but there was only a hundred and fifty quid in the pot at the end of it. Someone's on the fiddle. Perhaps we should call the fraud squad in.'

Colette had the grace to look shifty. Bea was merely

puzzled, and said to no one in particular, 'Well I was only popping in. I didn't eat anything, obviously ...' Then her phone rang. She gave a little jump, snapped it open and vanished.

Poppy Mason pulled away from the cluster and approached Georgie.

'Hi, Pops. How're you doing? Where's my rabble?'

'Josh went out with Daddy last night. Just the two of them. To the football.'

'Oh. O-K ...'

Then children flooded out of school, parents in from the car park. And they were swamped.

'Georgie! Back with us! Wasn't that fun?'

'No. It was a bloody nightmare.'

'And – ahem – did you notice anything – ahem – different about your kitchen when you woke up?'

'Yeah. It looked a lot better. Cos you lot had all bugged off out of it. Thank the Lord.'