

## I

The seasons seemed to come and go that year without me really noticing them. They just rolled on. Sometimes I wondered if that was how my predecessor had seen them, too; if Miss Ford had ever looked up at the pure blue sky one September afternoon, and thought *Jesus, it's autumn*. Or if she'd used to sit on a bus from her home to St Luke's and back in a kind of trance. I hardly even registered the children growing taller, or the sums getting harder, or the seasonal fruits on the lunch menu changing from rock-hard winter oranges to small Scottish strawberries. I used to take sandwiches in for lunch, myself: I packed them in the pale green lunchbox I'd had at high school. Cheese and pickle most days, a wee carton of juice and an apple. I ate sitting on the same chair in the staffroom, looking out of the same window at the same view. I was stuck, I suppose; I was fixed, and I didn't know how to alter things. *This month is: JUNE. Today the weather is: SUNNY*, I remember it saying one day on the weather chart that Mrs Baxter kept propping up on the Nature Table – but it's funny how you can read a statement like that and not take it in. How you can almost want to disagree with it.

I hadn't arrived at the start of the school year; I'd been offered the job late in the autumn, a replacement for Miss Ford, who had not, apparently, quite *cut the mustard*. Susan Ford was a kind of ghost at St Luke's, an absence, a person whose spectral shoes I was filling. There was a gap on the staffroom wall of fame where *Miss Ford's* photo had been. I remember wondering if my recruitment had been a case of desperate measures, because I was clearly never going to be ideal either, as classroom assistants go. My job offer had been typed on pale letterheaded paper bearing St Luke's emblem of a fat owl sitting in a tree, and its motto, *Veritas et Fidelis*.

Truth and Fidelity.

*Dear Miss McKenzie*, Mrs Crieff, the school's headmistress, had written, *Following your interview at St Luke's yesterday afternoon I am delighted to inform you . . .*

– and it had been quite hard to believe that I'd passed something; that I hadn't failed, the way I'd flunked all my Highers the previous year. It had felt strange that I would have a role and an income and a place to go. By the time I started, we were already halfway through November. Harvest Festival had come and gone, and so had Halloween and Eid and Sukkot, and we were on our way to Diwali and St Andrew's Day. We had, as Mrs Crieff said, ticked a lot of the *festivals boxes* that term, both secular and religious.

St Luke's was one of those sandstone Victorian places built to last. There was a door marked *Boys* and another

marked *Girls*, and standing outside the main door was one lone silver birch tree. The playground was pretty much a sea of tarmac apart from that tree. The only other form of decoration was a stone relief, placed high on the front wall, of a small child and a crouching, cloaked person showing the child a book. I used to think that the cloaked person looked quite off-putting, like Death or the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come. But I suppose it was just one of those educational things that you saw sometimes on old buildings. A lot of other things about St Luke's had changed, of course, since it was first built. For instance, the old janitor's house that had once stood alongside had quite recently been knocked down and replaced with four small modern houses, known collectively as Janitor's Close. The houses in Janitor's Close were identical, with sloping, chalet-style roofs and creosoted lean-tos for the rubbish bins, and porches with frosted glass. At playtimes, the children used to peer across at the houses, now sectioned off from the school behind a new wall, and discuss who might live in them, like wondering if there was a troll lurking beneath a bridge.

The playground, in the mornings, always looked very grey and hard. And sometimes the mothers – still standing there after their children had gone in and the doors had closed behind them – made me think of teenagers hanging around a swingpark after dark. Loitering; waiting for something – though it was hard to tell for what. To be reunited, maybe, with something they'd let go of by mistake. It was mainly mothers,

in the playground. Some of the fathers only turned up once a fortnight or so. This had been quite a shock to me at first: I'd always assumed that times had changed, that we'd moved on from the days of dads in offices and mums at home. But this was not the case at all. The St Luke's dads were like needles in haystacks. There was one man in particular, the father of a little girl called Emily Ellis, who stuck out by his absence. He was some sort of specialist in something, some consultant, I'd been told, and when he *did* turn up at school, he always looked as if he had somewhere to be that was more important.

'Chop chop,' I'd heard him say once to Emily when she was taking a long time getting her shoes on in the cloakroom. 'Chop chop', he'd said, standing there with his arms folded and a frown on his face. And I don't know why, but I'd felt like punching him. I'd only been there a couple of weeks, and it just seemed such a mean thing to say to a wee girl struggling with her shoes. 'Chop chop' was what people in authority said. It was what my old Brown Owl had barked at me on Brownie nights when I'd taken too long – I'd always taken too long – getting out the papier mâché toadstool for the fairy ring. 'Chop chop, Luisa McKenzie!' she'd used to say, clapping her hands.

I'd once heard Mr Ellis tell Emily to pick her feet up, too, when she'd tripped in the playground.

*If you picked your feet up, Emily, that kind of thing wouldn't happen.*

He certainly never helped her with her shoe buckles,

or commiserated for long over her bleeding knees. That was my job, or Mrs Baxter's, or some other woman who happened to be around.

'He's quite pleasant underneath it all,' Mrs Baxter had told me once, damning him with faint praise. She often did that, when speaking about the parents. 'A few weeks ago,' she'd added, 'Mr Ellis donated a fair stash of his own money to the school library.'

Yes, he had *personally* provided the cash for several new *Biff and Chip* books, as well as a series of hardbacks about the universe.

'I think he spent over £100 in total,' she'd said.

'Bit of a dark horse, then,' I'd replied.

I still couldn't think of Mr Ellis as a generous person, though, or even as someone who particularly liked books. But then, there were a lot of people at St Luke's who were surprising. And in any case, I no longer trusted my ability to judge character.

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Just inside the school gates was a large wooden board upon which were listed the school's Golden Rules. All the primary schools had them. I used to read them as I hurried in every morning. I hurried because I was nearly always late. But I still read them – the rules – instinctively, compulsively, the way I read the backs of cereal packets at breakfast, as if they might mysteriously have changed overnight. They never had, of course.

*We are honest!*

*We are kind!*

*We are patient!*

*We are fair!*

It seemed to me that you could put a ‘not’ in every one of these statements and they would still work. The children mostly ignored them, anyway. Especially the bigger boys trading football cards in the playground. Really, those rules were about as meaningful as my old high school motto – *Per Ardua ad Astra* – had been. Which had been no help at all. I was already nineteen by now, and I had not risen through adversity to the stars. *You know*, I sometimes felt like saying to Mrs Crieff, *after I flunked all my exams last year it was either a job here, or working as a sous-chef, or being a florist: those were really the only options available to me!* And Catering had almost won, in fact: I liked cooking. But on the day I’d signed up at my local training college I just hadn’t been able to picture myself standing behind a huge aluminium tin of mashed potato, a hairnet on my head; or stirring a great vat of gravy in some two-star hotel. So a classroom assistant was what I had become. It was as if somebody had lifted me, like a little Playmobil figure, out of the life I’d once envisaged and plonked me down again in the wrong setting. *There you are, Miss McKenzie.* And they’d put me in the kindergarten! They’d put me in the school! – when I’d actually wanted to be in the artist’s studio with the easel, or in the cafe with the

ice-cream sundaes, or at least sitting in the little cinema with a friend and a bag of popcorn. I wasn't even wearing the right kinds of *clothes* any more – I was wearing strappy sandals and a cheesecloth shirt and stripy linen trousers! I was wearing kindly, slightly dowdy clothes appropriate for someone twice my age! – when once, a few months earlier, I'd have dressed head to toe in black. And just a few years before *that*, I'd have been wearing a blue and white striped dress and been at primary school myself.

I used to try to have mature, teacherly conversations with Mrs Baxter, or to crack knowing jokes with the lollipop man, but quite often I just used to find myself saying all the wrong things and hurrying on. Likewise, I used to try to be in by 8.30, but sometimes I was not in till nearly nine, and then I used to have to run, breaking one of our own Golden Rules in the process. Classroom assistants were supposed to be calm, dignified people who always walked and knew just the right, encouraging things to say to the children. But I was not; I did not: I was not a good example at all.

'Good morning, everyone,' I would say brightly when I arrived, slightly out of breath, at the classroom door. And the children would all look up from their little tables.

'Good Moorr-ning, Miss McKennn-zie,' they would reply in the droning note that schoolchildren have used down the ages. And because the use of first names was frowned upon, for some reason I could never work out.

'Ah: Miss McKenzie,' Mrs Baxter would add, a little

curtly, like a big, irked robin, from her side of the room. Mrs Baxter and I worked together, Monday to Friday, seven hours a day, and it could be a bit of a trial, for both of us. We inhabited a Portakabin at the far side of the playground, with our class of twenty-nine. To get there you had to walk the length of the school, past the secretary's office and the medical room, past Mrs Crieff's office, through the dinner hall, past the gym, up and down three short flights of steps and then back out again into the playground. Then you had to walk past the bike shed, past a bin shaped like a frog and the lone silver birch tree, and up a ramp.

*Welcome to Our Classroom*, said a sign when you eventually got there. It was stuck to the Portakabin's front door. *Today we are talking about*, it added, in smaller letters; and beneath this sentence Mrs Baxter would sometimes stick a label with a word on it, often quite an abstract one like 'sunshine' or 'happiness' or 'holidays'. Less often, we would talk about things like 'frogs' or 'trees' or 'shoes'. I remember that we were looking at colours that term, that particular summer term, and that last fortnight, for some reason, was yellow. This was an opinion I disagreed with, being one of those people who attributed different colours to different things. That fortnight to me, for instance, had so far been a kind of greyish-mauve.

Inside the classroom there was a smell of plasticine and sun-warmed milk and plastic plates. There was a rectangular fish tank on a shelf, the water a little murky and containing three small, orange fish. Ranged around

the windowsills were twenty-nine yogurt pots each containing a yellowing, overheated plant. Blu-tacked to the walls were pieces of work that Mrs Baxter and I had deemed to be of interest in some way over the course of that term, and worthy of display.

*Letter to an Alien*, one group of pictures was entitled. We had done outer space in May.

*Dear Alien*

*I am John. I lik the culr yellow. I am six. Wat is lif lik on yur planet?*

There were several other sheets of paper too, as you headed further into the room. Some of them were funny, and some could make your stomach suddenly flip over with a strange kind of sadness.

*Ones I had a coin and I spent it –*

it said beneath a display entitled *Discoveries We Have Made*.

*Ones I wen to Afrika and I saw a jiraffe*

*Ones I saw a man who was bald.*

(*Is this kind, Spike?* Mrs Baxter had written under the bald-man sentence. I'd stuck it up anyway, because it had made me laugh.)

The children's coat pegs were in three rows, just to the left of a small collection of wooden furniture we called

the Home Corner. Each child had a peg there, with their name above it and a picture of an animal beneath. I don't know who'd decided on the animals – who'd thought that Sam Bridges should be given a hippo, or Emily Ellis a bear. That was just the way it was. On my first day in post the previous autumn, I'd had to help the children locate their names. There were a lot of names, and I couldn't imagine how I would ever learn them all. Had Miss Ford learned them all? Or was that one of the ways in which she had failed? Mrs Baxter had made it easy for me, though. She'd written them all down in marker pen on a sheet of sticky labels, and all I'd had to do was pair them up with the children and stick them onto their jumpers.

'Here's you! Here's your *name!*' I'd exclaimed brightly, as if I was having a lot of fun; and I'd peeled the labels off the backing sheet and stuck them on.

'You've put mine on upside down,' a little boy had observed.

'So I have!' I'd continued, seamless and upbeat. And I'd peeled the sticker straight off again and put it back on the right way up. Some of the children could read already and some of them couldn't: that was one of the first things I hadn't anticipated, as a classroom assistant.

'That's better,' the little boy had said, whose name, I'd discovered, was John Singer: a plain name to suit his plainness of speech. 'But why am I a tortoise?'

'Sorry?'

He pointed to the picture he'd been allocated beneath

his coat peg: a cartoonish pale-green creature beneath a shell, with two timidly bulging eyes.

‘Most other people have got bears and lions and elephants,’ he said. He was taller than the other children, a bit older perhaps, and lankier-limbed. His hair was very straight across his forehead. He was wearing glasses, and to help keep them on he had a Band-Aid over the bridge of his nose.

‘Why am I a tortoise?’ he said.

‘Well . . .’ I replied. My mind was a blank. I was not used to speaking to six-year-olds; to crouching at a helpful eye level and being the one with all the answers.

‘Maybe,’ John said, ‘it’s because my mum has a tortoise. She’s got a Russian tortoise called Tolstoy.’

‘Ha!’ I said. *A six-year-old who knew about Tolstoy!*

‘Maybe Mrs Baxter knows about my mum’s tortoise.’

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘Maybe that’s why.’

*Although having a tortoise as a pet is frowned on nowadays, isn’t it? I felt like adding. I wouldn’t tell Mrs Crieff about Tolstoy if I were you: she might confiscate him.*

I remember that John Singer had sighed then, and looked again at the tortoise picture. Perhaps he was thinking about his mother, happy at home, gazing into some fern-filled tortoise tank.

‘I don’t really mind being a tortoise,’ he said.

‘Good,’ I replied.

But I couldn’t help wondering if such things, such arbitrary decisions – a picture above a name – might sometimes have a kind of resonance in a person’s life.

Maybe John Singer would grow up guarded and introspective, just because someone had once stuck a picture of a tortoise above his coat peg.

‘How are we getting on, Miss McKenzie?’ a voice asked suddenly, making me jump, and I looked up. It was Mrs Crieff, precipitating herself through the doorway of the Portakabin. She never knocked on doors.

‘Yes,’ I said, still kneeling, paralysed for a second at the shock of her appearance, ‘we’re getting on fine, thanks, Mrs Crieff.’

And I remember feeling, even on that very first morning, that I’d said the wrong thing. That I *was*, in some way, wrong.

Mrs Crieff gazed at me. She had silvery hair, cut in an origami-sharp bob. Her blouse was olive green. Her eyes were the palest grey.

‘Great,’ she said.

‘John and I were –’

‘I see,’ Mrs Crieff ploughed on. ‘So. Getting to know everyone’s name OK.’

‘Yes,’ I croaked. I wondered what else to say.

‘I was just thinking,’ I said finally, ‘that there’s a lot of gemstone names in this class, aren’t there?’

Because, actually, there were. There were several gems amongst the girls that year, including a Ruby, a Jade, two Ambers and a Topaz.

‘Gemstone names?’ said Mrs Crieff. Mrs Crieff was known, amongst the parents, to be *one of the best Heads in town*. It was just a fact. It used to make me think of the French Revolution, and all those heads

tumbling into baskets. ‘Gemstones?’ she mused.

‘Yes,’ I said, my voice strangely high and upbeat suddenly; it did not seem to belong to me.

Mrs Crieff considered for a moment, her expression a little pained. She sometimes looked as if she couldn’t imagine ever having a real reason to speak to you. Maybe only if you were someone offering her something, like a shop assistant or an air hostess: maybe she’d ask you for a box of matches in a corner shop, or a packet of peanuts on a flight to Bruges.

‘Yes, I suppose we *have* got quite a few gems this year,’ she conceded after a short pause. ‘Quite a little jewellery box . . .’

Beside me, John Singer sighed wearily. Mrs Crieff ignored this.

‘Morning, Morag,’ she observed instead to Mrs Baxter, who was standing a few feet away, a box of Octons in her hands. And without waiting for her to reply, she swept back out of the Portakabin.

There were no Beryls in the class, of course, I thought, as I watched the door close behind her. No berylliums. Or even Agates. It was funny, how some gemstones could fall right out of favour.

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I’d been sacked from the only other job I’d ever had, the previous spring: I’d been booted out of a gift shop called Moonchild. And along with various other things that had happened to me that past year or so, I’d found

this a difficult thing to take on board. Moonchild had only been a *gift shop*, after all! It had only been a hippy gift shop located in a basement off the High Street and it was supposed to have been a doddle, working there – the kind of job girls like me were supposed to do with their eyes shut. I'd worked there Tuesday to Saturday, from two in the afternoon to six in the evening, and sometimes we only got seven or eight customers the whole afternoon; tourists, mainly, who would stroll in with their cameras and hats and rustling rain macs, look slightly baffled and stroll out again. I'd imagined, briefly, that I might have been happy there; that I might have found the place that was right for me. All day I would be submerged beneath a gently forgiving fog of patchouli and rose oil and joss sticks, and it would follow me, that scent, even after I'd locked up for the night; it would trail after me, like Pig-Pen's little dust cloud. The shop had been filled with soothing, forgiving sounds, too: with the jangle of silvery wind-chimes and the clatter of bamboo ones; with the splashing of the little stone fountain my boss Sondrine switched on every morning; with 70s folk music on tape. I spent my time standing behind the counter listening to Joni Mitchell and Steeleye Span ('All around my hat,' Steeleye Span sang in their robust way, 'I will wear the green wi-hi-llow . . .'), and occasionally selling a tie-dyed blouse or a mood ring or a sea urchin. The sea urchins stood in a display cabinet, behind a small hand-written sign:

*Pretty to look at,  
Lovely to hold,  
But if you break it,  
Consider it SOLD!*

There was something ironic about that sign, but I didn't like to think about it too much.

'Hi there,' I'd say to the people wandering in, and I'd let them browse. I was discreet, as shop assistants go. Un-pushy. The main problem was, I'd kept over-ringing the till: there was always a discrepancy at the end of the day between what was in the till and what it said on the receipt.

'I can't understand how you can be doing this, Luisa,' Sondrine had mourned at the end of one afternoon, her wide, smooth brow furrowed with concern. 'I don't get how you can be so . . .' – and she paused – '. . . unfocused about everything.'

'I've not always been unfocused,' I replied. Because I hadn't. I'd once had a mind that operated with clarity and purpose. It was just that something, during my last few months at high school, had begun to unravel. 'Well, I'm sorry, Luisa, I really am,' Sondrine had continued, her frown deepening. 'There were also', she added regretfully, 'those two . . . breakages the other week. Those sea urchins you broke . . .' Which was quite true. In the three months I had worked at Moonchild, I was the only one who'd actually broken any of the sea urchins. None of the customers had broken anything. 'I mean,' Sondrine

continued sorrowfully, 'I just can't really overlook things like that any more.'

And then she'd sacked me. She was less of a hippy than her appearance suggested. And for a while after that, my downward spiral had gathered pace. I'd returned home that evening in my invisible cloak of patchouli and incense, gone up to my bedroom and just sat looking out through the Velux window at the sky. I don't know how long I sat there. Hours, maybe. Days. *All around my hat*, I thought, *I will wear the green willow*. It was only when my mother, a few weeks later, suggested I do some sort of course – something *vocational* in nursery nursing, teacher training – 'Something, sweetheart,' she'd said heavily, 'that might get you back on *track*' – that things had begun to alter. Not necessarily, though, in the way she'd imagined.

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I'd had to report to Mrs Crieff's office mid-morning, I remember, on my first day in post. It was the same morning we'd had our discussion about gemstones; a Monday, November, and raining a cold grey rain.

'Ah: Luisa,' she'd said when I turned up at her door. And she seemed oddly pleased to see me, as if our earlier conversation had never happened; she'd already moved on from *that* conversation. 'So: welcome!' she proclaimed, somewhat hammily, and she stepped back and ushered me into her office.

'Thanks,' I said, feeling quite cowed, all over again, by the slightly military green of the blouse she was wearing,

and also by that silvery-grey hair, cut with such precision and as coarse as a badger's pelt.

We both headed across the room and sat down at either side of her desk. Mrs Crieff adjusted the angle of her chair and smiled across at me.

'OK,' she said.

And then she proceeded to go over what was expected of me in the job. The dos and the don'ts. It was like a sort of presentation, the kind you might use an overhead projector for. She used a lot of words like *positive*, *up-beat*, *role model*, *happy*, *nurturing*.

'Yes,' I interjected occasionally, 'I see . . .'

Although I didn't, really. I didn't think any of those words applied to me. And Mrs Crieff did not refer to my predecessor at all, not once, the whole time I was sitting there: Susan Ford appeared to be *persona non grata*. I supposed that I represented a clean slate.

'Super,' Mrs Crieff encouraged from time to time, after I had begun to speak about the many ways in which I was hoping to excel in the role of classroom assistant. 'Smashing.' But I couldn't help thinking of all the ways in which I might not be super or smashing (or perhaps only in a sea-urchin sense); of all the ways I might, in the coming months, fail to impress. And I regretted the fact that I was not a girl who threw herself into things: I'd never been that sort of girl. I wasn't going to be like the resilient Mrs Baxter with her songs and games; or the metropolitan Mr Temple in P6, whose merry innuendos I'd already encountered at my interview; or the lollipop man with his jokes and his mad yellow jacket.

There were plenty of people like that at St Luke's, I could see; people who knew the words to things; who cracked jokes and who knew who they were. But I was not going to be one of them.

'Now. This', Mrs Crieff said somewhere towards the end of our conversation, and handing me a green piece of paper, 'is an information sheet Mrs Baxter and I have drawn up.'

'Right'

'It should hopefully give you some idea of what's . . .' – she paused, and looked briefly and regretfully at the blank rectangle where I suspected Miss Ford's picture had been – '. . . expected of you, in the role.'

'Thanks,' I said, taking the paper from her and looking down at it. The information it contained appeared in the form of a grid – a kind of spreadsheet involving a lot of elongated rectangles, with headings shaded in pale grey. Some of the words on the far right of the sheet had disappeared, or been chopped in half.

*Classroom Assistant Post  
St Luke's Primary School*

*The role of Classroom Assistant is many and vario  
One day you may be planting seedlings in our wildlif  
garden*

[this was, I already knew, a set of wooden barrels in the playground]

*the next you might be preparing costu  
for the school nativity play. Life here a  
St Luke's is a –*

– and here the text ended abruptly, and was replaced by  
three columns of words

*Classroom Assistant: Daily Tasks.  
Supervising individual/group activity  
Observing individual/group activity  
Talking with individual/group  
Referring to teacher's plans  
Recording observations  
Housekeeping tasks  
Preparation of resources, materials  
Preparing snacks  
Displaying children's work*

'How does that look to you?' Mrs Crieff asked, her head  
cocked to one side. And, briefly, she closed her eyes. She  
was one of those people who closed their eyes at crucial  
points in conversations.

'Yes,' I said, 'it seems . . . ?'

It seemed to me like a cross between being a secret  
agent and an overbearing mother. I moved on to the next  
list.

*Ideal Classroom Assistant Responses and Strengths*