

CRUSHED

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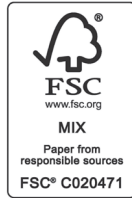
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And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.

Macbeth, ACT I, SCENE 3

Parents, you have been my undoing and your own.

A Season in Hell, ARTHUR RIMBAUD

The idea of having a knife close by without him even knowing plunges through me in a shock and wakes me up from this lank and dreadful state. The pointed carving knife is too sharp to hide in my pocket – it would slice right through. I take it out of the drawer. The curve of it has a deathly menace. In this house it's used for carving, boning, forcing deep into the flesh and twisting there. It's been here for as long as I remember, and each and every time I've glimpsed that menace it's caused me to shudder, even at the age of five, so now it seems the most fitting and best thing to take, like it's been waiting for its purpose all along. He will not see it. He will not know it's there. Only I will know that, how close it's got to him, and when he leaves, when I see his figure moving off away across the fields, only I will know that there was another scenario already played out in my mind, one where I've torn out my anger and fear on him, one where he is left ripped and bloody, his insides hanging out in ribbons. And knowing that will cause electricity to stir about me. It will make my hair stand straight up with static and the power of it will gather inside my belly. It will keep me going for days. It will show me how I'm in control, of my thoughts and everything, and if I order it all correctly they can work for me rather than against. I take one of my mother's snowy tea towels – bleached, then boiled for an hour on the stove's top until a season of mist and rain fogs the windows – and I wrap it round and round the shining blade and with precise care insert the package in the pocket of my mac.

I

Phoebe

It was a book full of hate. The words must have been scratched underground at the dawn of time. They should've stayed there and never come to the surface.

It set it all off again.

I've had to come to the only place that can calm me down. The corner of Pulteney Bridge. The only thing is, I've lost a shoe so people keep looking. My tights have an open gash from toe to thigh, flashing bright white flesh. I try to cover my face with my hair so I won't be recognised. Things get reported back. I don't know where my bag has gone – perhaps I dropped it on the way and didn't notice.

I'd been calm as the sea before that book. It may as well have come crawling towards me on its elbows, dragging its black and bursting body behind. I should have heeded the inkling I had straight away that it was a bomb about to explode.

I lean against the cool stone of the bridge and look over the water to the weir. Usually it soothes me, but not today. In this water are hidden many ancient things. Sometimes one pops out – a coin, a tin mask, a figure of a bull, a crown, a pin. People are always surprised. Why should they be? The river is at the end of a vast drain sluicing straight down from the Roman bathhouse.

The sun glints off the water. The ancient buildings look more friendly in this light. It turns their darkness the colour

of honey. The trees are full of early summer and shake their leaves in the breeze. Yet despite the bright surroundings I cannot be contained this time and I have to lean further over the wall, sickness cramping my stomach.

I'd tried to explain to Grace.

'It's just a book,' she said. 'It's just a dusty old copy with half the pages falling out because they won't pay for new ones. What are you on about?'

Her soft blue eyes travelled from side to side as she looked behind me. Her hair is cropped close to her head. The sight of it always makes me feel tender because I know she cuts it herself. It's so short you can see the shape of her pretty little skull. I wanted to get her attention back. I cupped my hand over my mouth and whispered to her, quoting from the text.

'I've been eating on the "insane root" again. Not now. Not today. A couple of weeks ago.'

Her eyes snapped back on my face and she nodded and gave a little laugh. 'I'm partial to a few substances myself.' Then she frowned. 'You want to be careful, though, you know. Stuff like that can be dangerous.'

I turned away from her. I was bored of tellings-off. I felt light and free. Nothing bad was going to happen. It was just the warm day that had made me feel there could be a bomb, and Mr Jonasson being so close. All the pieces of me that had flown out came back and began fitting themselves together safely with hardly any gaps left in between.

That's where it should've stopped.

But, no. I had to take it further, didn't I? I had to go on testing myself, trying things out.

I've been told once, *thoughts are just that* by a woman with a face that looked like a little pussy-cat. The more I

stared at her the more she seemed to resemble one.

Usually my tests are of the mundane kind. If I think *There will be a red car when I turn this corner*, perhaps there will be one. What if I wish for blackberry ice cream on the menu and there it is? If I want that plate to fall, it might and shatter on the stone floor. If, if, if, if. The results so far have been inconclusive.

Not this time.

It must've been the darkness of the story that made me do it. It was to show myself it couldn't happen, that the light and airy feeling was how things were going to be from now on. One last little time, I *thought*. TRY IT OUT.

Was it five or ten minutes later we heard the commotion? Perhaps I was the only one that went towards it. I slipped out and ran down the road until I saw. There was mangled metal. Blood ran down the walls.

I froze a good few moments before I ran again.

I reach for the front door key that I wear on a heavy chain around my neck. It's more precious to me than any piece of jewellery could ever be. Hard won. I clasp it now like a rosary. There's probably keys down there in the water too, along with the other old Roman stuff washed down from the baths. I can almost see it all, bubbling up to the top. Statues and pendants and nails surfacing at once in a thick and filthy mass, and I feel sick again and have to lean right over the wall. A car behind me beeps, once, loudly. They thought I was about to fall, or jump. Maybe I was. I need to move, but maybe I don't have a choice.

Orla

Well, that was sickening.

I feel shaken to the pit of my stomach as I walk away. They haven't got enough tents to cover it all up because the blood goes right along the wall on Walcot Street. They were trying to do it in the chaos and then they made everyone drive or walk away and closed the road as quick as they could. Horrific. Stuff like this just doesn't happen in a place like Bath. I didn't mean to look but it's hard not to. It was mesmerising. It's unbelievable how much blood people have in them. The red was in a stripe coming out from the back of the plastic they've rigged up. I could see how it had got cemented in between the blackened old stones and I wondered how they were ever going to get it out. They'll have to scrape right into the gaps and use hoses so there'll be a wash of pink water swirling across the road.

Behind the yellow tape there's people trundling around in white plastic suits now. They look so out of place against all that dirty ancient stone, it's like flickering beings have been beamed in from the future. My heart feels like it's never going to slow down to its usual pace. I want to cry so badly. I'm only trying to hold on until I get home. I concentrate hard on looking at the normal little things I see every day to keep me going until I can wail in my bedroom. There's a shop of mirrors full of glitter. There's the giant carved head looming over the undertaker's door – Bath is full of

odd things like that, carvings and statues and old buildings. When I was little I always used to whisper 'Hello' to the head as I passed because he looked like he was asking, 'Is it your turn yet? Will you be next?' And I thought starting a conversation might please him so he'd decide not to choose me. He seems to be staring extra hard and pointedly today. It must be because of what just happened. 'Hello,' I whisper in a trembling voice. 'Not me right now. I'm not ready.'

By the time I get to the fruit shop with bright green plastic grass in the window, my breathing has stopped hurting so much.

How many times and in different lights and times of day have I seen all these ordinary things? Hundreds. Thousands. I try to make them take the place of what I've just seen.

That's when I see Phoebe's bag dumped in the shop doorway. The sickness returns. What's happened to her? *What's happened to her?* I pick the bag up and stand, rubbing the striped canvas between my fingers, wondering what to do. It seems strangely violent, this familiar bag being here that I've seen a million times, swinging on Phoebe's shoulder, the hard outline of books showing through the fabric. It's not exactly her dumped body but something makes me think of it. I hug it close, shaking now. God, she frightens me sometimes. It terrifies me the way she carries on. My heart lurches: what if it's her that's been killed on Walcot Street? What if it was her blood I saw? I close my eyes and sway, the idea being so shockingly awful. No, it can't be. I won't allow myself to think that. I'll never make it back.

I hurry on, the taste of home so strong now it's almost on my tongue. I can't wait to collapse inside and feel safe, to phone Phoebe and make sure she's all right. But up ahead

are Belinda and her crew, and they're walking so slowly I'll have no choice but to pass them – it'll look too odd if I slow down to their pace behind.

As I catch up with them their tense bright faces tighten towards me.

'Orla, did you see it?' Samantha's eyes are starry with the sight of the blood. The ribbon of it in the sun is still glittering her eyes.

'Yes. Horrible.'

We all nod even though I can see it's put a spring in all their steps. They'll go home and dissect it together, crouching on one of their beds with their arms around their knees and big, pointy-cornered smiles on their faces they can't wipe off they're so excited.

It's such a beautiful day. The sky is a perfect blue. I have an intense longing to be off this dusty pavement with these girls clucking and mauling over the horror like they're actually sticking their fingers into it and dabbling there. I think of our garden just down the road. It's my favourite place in the world. Walled in on three sides and with an apple tree in the middle. In the summer, green vines crawl up the brickwork and the scent of the passion flowers passes over me. Mum and Dad aren't really that into it so I can poke about in there to my heart's content. Even when it's cold I'll sit out on the bench wrapped in a blanket. In the winter the plants have their own bare beauty with all their bones and pods showing like they've been turned inside out. I need to be there now.

'Got to go.' A wave of awkwardness washes over me. What's wrong with me? I can't even make a quick getaway without breaking into a terrible sweat.

‘Hey,’ Belinda calls after me. ‘What was it Grace was saying today?’

I shrug like I don’t know but I heard perfectly well. I was sitting right next to her. Someone had just read a piece out from the supplementary notes. It was Simon, I think.

‘The role of the witch is to demonstrate the female, intuitive, otherworldly power of the mind.’

And while we were all pondering it, supposedly thinking about discussion points, Grace came up with one of her own.

She said, ‘Did somebody actually write this shit?’

It wasn’t even under her breath. In a way it was kind of thrilling, like breaking the law must be.

Everyone heard but nothing happened about it. It never does. She gets away with anything because of her *circumstances*. Grace might be only sixteen, while Phoebe and me are seventeen, but Grace always seems by far the oldest – as if she’s twice our age and she’s been married and had three kids already.

Finally I see our house and the face of it seems like the sweetest thing I’ve ever laid eyes on. As I’m trying to get the key into the lock, the door opens and I collapse inside into Mum’s arms.

‘Did you see?’ she asks. ‘Carol from church just called and told me what’s happened. She’s stuck in the traffic.’

I nod and I can feel my mouth turning down so sharp at the corners it actually hurts.

‘Oh Orla.’ She hugs me tight. ‘My darling, darling girl. I was hoping you hadn’t. I was hoping you’d never have to witness something like that.’

Phoebe

The door glides shut behind me and I stand in the hallway, sniffing the air like a hunted animal.

She's here.

She might be smoking upstairs but the smell gets into every last corner of the house. Left to its own devices, this place smells of its own loveliness. Hard to put your finger on it: a smidgen of dust, honey, jute rugs, good clean soap.

The cigarette smoke is an abomination; it takes forever to fade.

There's the faint sound of the television from above. The front door closed with such a small metallic click, I'm hoping against hope I'm as yet undetected. My heart beats so hard I can feel it in my jaw. I need time to deal with the dreadful chaos of my appearance before I'm seen. To deal with the hole in my tights that splits down my leg from thigh to foot, with my bare toes that are grey and dirty at the ends where they've scraped the pavement, and decide what to do about the missing shoe.

I begin softly, softly creeping up the first set of stairs that leads to the sitting room.

The fourth step creaks and I look down and my stomach twists into a terrible and painful panic. It's all I can do to not cry out because for the first time I see *the book*, the one that caused all the trouble, has been in my grasp *the whole time* like we've grown into each other. My hand is clamped

so hard into it in a claw, I have to use my other hand to prise the fingers off one by one. Deep indentations are left on the soft red cover and the gold letters that spell out *Macbeth*.

How could I not have known it was there? I could've thrown it in the river, where it belongs, but now it's got into the house, infecting everything. It's brought the murder inside. It's brought in its hate.

There's a movement overhead and I have no choice but to shove the book up my jumper. I look behind me and with another lurch see that my cut toe has left a badge of blood on the golden boards of the hallway. I slither back down, fall to my knees, lick my cuff and scrabble it off.

A voice calls from upstairs.

'Phoebe?'

Oh God. Oh God. If I rush past as if I haven't heard, even with hobbling on the side of my foot, and get beyond the living room and then up the second flight of stairs, I might just make it to the bathroom. At least there's a lock on the one on the upstairs landing. As I sprint upstairs I hear her clonking across the wooden floor of the living room in her heels. The noise gets louder the closer she gets to the door and I vault up the second flight. I lunge for the bathroom, just managing to pull the skirt flaring out behind me as if I'm tucking in my tail. I push the bolt across as I hear the living room door open.

Her voice calls up the stairs. 'Phoebe? Is that you?'

I keep silent, breathing onto the mirror above the sink so my image is obliterated by condensation. It shrinks to a tiny circle, a nucleus of itself, and I huff out so the mist balloons again. My fingers pass all over my head and face, smoothing, flattening, wiping, making good any damage.

Close to my ear – ‘Phoebe, what’s the matter?’

My whole body jerks. How come I didn’t hear her coming up the stairs? She must’ve taken her shoes off. She’s so close the door vibrates.

‘Nothing.’ I stand on the tiles, balling my fists.

‘I need to talk to you, Phoebe.’

‘What about?’ I ease off my shoe and as silently as possible lift the lid of the bin and place it inside. I put my hands under my skirt, hook my thumbs into the waistband of my tights and peel them down.

‘There’s been a murder down on Walcot Street. It’s just been on the news. Some poor man squashed by a car against the wall. Did you see anything?’

See anything? *I caused it*. I want to scream – I thought murder, and murder happened. I thought darkness, and darkness was right there. It was supposed to mark the end of it and it’s begun all over again. However many times that counsellor pussy-cat face told me my thoughts were as insubstantial as a breath of air, that they certainly didn’t have the power to make things happen outside of my own self, in my heart of hearts I never did believe her.

I got there before the emergency services even. The traffic had stopped, zig-zagging this way and that, and people were climbing out of their cars to look or covering their eyes. Car alarms were going off all over the place. You could see exactly where the body had been scraped from the band of blood along the wall. The car that had done it was mounted up on the pavement, the engine still full of roaring threat. It was metallic grey with bull bars on the front. The driver was completely still. He was staring at the body on his front bumper as if he couldn’t believe it was there. The body was

so mashed and bloodied I hadn't even known it was a man.

I think I'm going to be sick. I clap my hand over my mouth to catch it. I sense her straining to hear on the other side of the door.

'Phoebe? Are you all right?'

I take my hand away. 'Mum. I'll be down in a minute.'

'Tell me what's the matter. You sound strange.'

'Won't be a moment.'

I flush the toilet and with some wet scrunched-up toilet paper I dab at the cut under my big toe, but it's dried to almost nothing now. I'm a quick healer. Always have been.

When I open the bathroom door I get the shock of my life. She's still there, waiting.

'Oh.' I can't help it sounding like a cry. At the bottom of the stairs her high-heeled courts lie on their side like some killing has been committed on their wearer.

'Your shoes.' I realise I'm not making much sense. 'What are they doing down there?'

As if puzzled, she follows my line of sight. 'I don't want to make marks on the new carpet. Listen, I need to talk to you. Come to the sitting room when you're done.' She pauses, frowns. 'What happened to your tights?'

I look down and realise I have them still balled up in my hand.

Inspiration strikes and I don't skip a beat this time. 'Bled through. My period started.'

This is a risky strategy. She's always asking about my periods, wanting to know the details. Sometimes I feel she'd like to weigh me before and after, and weigh all the blood too, and keep the information in some little secret notebook she'd read in bed at night with her glasses stuck on the end

of her nose. If there were any discrepancies I'd have to have an explanation for them. On the other hand, this may just be the right trick to distract her, and my period is just about due so it all fits in. All these things are like coins falling into correct slots one after the other, giving me an enormous sense of relief.

She nods. It's worked. 'I'll see you in a minute.'

I go to my bedroom to put on new tights. I take out the copy of *Macbeth* from under my jumper and put it on my bed. I've held it so hard its shape is malformed. I close my eyes and try to think. I'd liked the beginning, loved it even, the witches with their beards and rags. They'd excited me. They were glamorous in a way. Then came the murders and I'd felt only uncomfortable stirrings, nothing dramatic. Then I'd gone and done the experiment. The one I'd vowed never to do again, the one that pussy-cat face tried to tell me wasn't real. I said to myself, *In the next ten minutes, make something bad happen*. Make something as bad as all the killings in *Macbeth*. If I think hard enough about it, it's possible it will come to pass. It will be a final conclusive test to see if my thoughts can make things happen. Of course, I'd done it many times before with no real consequences. I was on the point of not needing to any more. Now this. Now I know I'll have to spend hours and hours trying to control my thoughts and turn them away from bad directions. It will take all my energy.

Dear pussy-cat face, see, thoughts are *not* just that. I told you so.

I put the torn tights under my mattress. Something else to sort out later along with retrieving the shoe and perhaps burying it all in the garden.

When I walk down to the living room, Mum is smoking again. She lets out short sharp jets as she watches the TV screen. This living room must be one of the most beautiful in Bath. It's on the first floor and we're high up so you can see the city and the hills that circle around. It's breathtaking. It has yellow velvet sofas and a lofty Georgian ceiling patterned with paint-encrusted acorns and oak leaves from which a sturdy five-armed brass fitting hangs. Polluting this room with dirty smoke is a criminal act.

It's as beautiful as Rapunzel's tower.

When I was little I loved fairy tales and the one I read over and over was *Rapunzel*. I always felt I'd be fine if I could just live like her for a week or two. I'd have a chance to heal over and face things. What I really envied about Rapunzel is that she had to let her hair down before anyone could get in. She could decide, and her hair was her weapon that kept her safe. As far as I was concerned, Rapunzel in that high tower was living like a pig in shit.

'I had a call from the school saying you ran off.'

I freeze.

'What's going on? Do you know anything about what happened? The traffic was terrible.'

'Uh-huh.' I'm thinking, hard. 'No, I don't know anything.'

'Where did you go, then?'

I stay mute, just shrug my shoulders, and she steps closer, coming towards me.

Every time I look at her I realise I'd prefer to see her through something: a honeycomb blanket; a thick sheet of greenish glass; a grille like the one the priest hides behind in a church. When there is nothing between us I have a strong urge to bite her nose.

I let my fringe fall into my face to veil her from me.

‘For God’s sake, push the hair out of your eyes,’ she snaps.

I do, thinking, *Well, it’s your nose.*

I take a step back to create distance. ‘I thought I heard a crash, so I ran out. I didn’t see anything, though.’ As soon as it’s out of my mouth I feel my story is entirely successful. Her face straightens out and the curiosity is replaced by a look of boredom.

‘Well, you shouldn’t have done. You know how I hate getting calls like that. You can’t just take off whenever you feel like it.’ She eyes me suspiciously. ‘So, you didn’t see *anything*?’

‘No, no, no.’ I back away with my hands in the air. I sense another visit to pussy-cat face coming on and I’d rather walk over hot coals than that. Breathe. Breathe.

She shakes her head. ‘They’re saying it couldn’t possibly be an accident, that it was murder. Poor man got spread halfway down Walcot Street by the car. Dreadful.’

I think I really am going to be sick now. I put my hands up to my mouth. I’m lying, of course. I saw it all, but I ran away from it as fast as I could.

I wasn’t going to get close to that, was I?

Back in my room I review what I’ve got to do. Before I came up I managed to turn the knives and scissors in the house so they point towards the living room and where *she* is. Pussy-cat face is the only one who knows about this habit and we worked hard to eliminate it, although sometimes needs must. I still have to dispose of the shoe and tights. Calm down enough to face dinner. The copy of *Macbeth* is still on my bed, glinting wickedly. Now I know for sure that that book is a curse. If I try to throw it away something else terrible will happen, so I’m going to have

to live with it in the same room for now and that's another burden I'll have to bear. I try to keep things under control as much as possible, keep this room drained of myself too so there is nothing for *her* to go on – no clues that she can get hold of to examine or interrogate me. But it's exhausting just thinking about what I have to do to keep everything on an even keel. There's food for a starter. I take sandwiches to school, but they can be put in the bin or flushed down the loo so that's OK. Whenever the food goes into the bin, I'm so happy because I look at it and think, that could be part of me by now, adding to my hips and thighs and molecules. Sometimes I'll warm something in a pan, then grind it down the sink in the waste disposal so there'll be the smell of cooking in the kitchen when she comes back. You have to be forensic about these things. It's the only way to make them work. If she moans about the breadboard covered in crumbs I actually want to lean over to her and say, 'Look, don't you understand? It's evidence. I'm leaving you *evidence*.'

She disconcerts me with her comings and goings. Dad is a high-flying barrister so he's out nearly all the time, but Mum's job hours as a part-time speech therapist are wholly unpredictable and I never know quite when she's going to appear. It took ages for her to give me a front-door key, but it was getting ridiculous, the amount of times she came home and I was sitting on the doorstep in the rain, waiting for her. I know she was reluctant. Sometimes I wonder about her clients and feel so sorry for them, being forced to speak and having words dragged up out of their throats by *her*. I understand how they must feel. I know for a fact she's read my diary for many years. Every day I pluck a hair from my head and insert it in the page, only to find it on the floor

on my return. How many thousands of hairs have I pulled from my head over the years for this purpose? Enough to make ten headfuls. The diary has become a kind of game between us. I'll have a thought, a real thought, then I'll translate it into my diary as something either puzzling or without meaning. So, for today, my real thought is, *I made murder. It was that play that made me think to do it.* Now I suspect again that my thoughts have consequences and everyone was lying about that. But I'll translate it in my diary as something like, 'Studied *Macbeth* today. The themes of regicide and the gradual descent into madness after committing an evil act are fascinating. As is the role of the witches who predict that Macbeth will be king, which actually prompts him to kill the King in the first place so without them he may never have done it. Looking forward to hearing more.'

I mean, what's she going to do with that?

I'll even spend time injecting that girlishly naïve tone to it for a measure of authenticity.

My mobile rings and makes me jump. It buzzes across the bed towards the copy of the mangled book.

'Phoebes?'

It's Paul. I know the Cockney edge to his voice straight away. It's so different from the country burr around here.

'Yes.'

'I've got some more— Bloody hell, you don't have to shove.' He must be talking to someone over his shoulder.

'Paul?'

His voice sounds far away. He's taken the phone away from his mouth.

'Leave me out of it,' I can hear him saying. 'You can't swing a frigging cat in here, let alone *that*.'

I curl my hand over the mouthpiece. ‘Paul, Paul,’ I whisper urgently.

He comes back, like he’s been off swimming and has just popped to the surface. ‘Listen, Phoebus, I gotta go.’

The line goes dead. I go to calls logged and press delete. Two seconds later it rings again and I jab the answer button without looking at the number.

‘Paul . . .?’

‘No, it’s Orla.’

‘Oh. Hello.’ I can’t keep the disappointment from my voice.

‘Listen,’ her voice is tinny, eager. ‘I’ve got your bag. It was dumped in a shop doorway. What were you thinking of? Phoebe, are you there?’

‘Thank you, thank you.’ It’s warm and very, very heartfelt the way I say it. I can picture the sticky warmth of it spreading down the phone and flushing her round cheeks a deep pink and making her speckled hazel eyes shine. I lean my face against the cold wall beside the bed. ‘I’d completely forgotten about it.’

After I’ve got rid of her I lie back. I’m exhausted to my bones. I have the sense of disasters averted, one after the other. I’ve had to work so very hard to keep them at bay, and now I’m battle-weary from them and from the day. I let the softness of the pillow absorb the back of my head and just for a few moments allow myself to give in to a swelling tide of absolute relief.

Grace

‘You are such a good, good girl, Grace,’ Mum says.

No I’m not, I think. I’m a horrible bitch who often feels tired and resentful, but one thing I will say to my credit is that I know what needs to be done, and I usually manage to plaster a smile on whatever.

This morning it was getting Mum ready for her big day with her friends who are coming round. It was getting her up early and taking her to the bathroom and pretending not to look at strategic moments while at the same time I washed and dried her, then levered her into her white polyester dress with the matching hat that looks like a garlic bulb. A hat, despite the fact she will be entertaining her friends Rosa and Averill inside. They have hats and she doesn’t want to miss out. Now, the cups and saucers are set out ready, the bread is buttered and the Battenberg cake is sliced.

I look over the table, anxious I’ve missed something because things get on top of me sometimes and it can make me forgetful.

‘Cheer up. It may never happen,’ Mum says, and we both have a hollow laugh at that.

Mum’s decline was a slow and rambling one. I must’ve noticed it first when I was about nine. It didn’t seem anything then. The eye that slipped sideways, momentarily, then righted itself. The stumble on a stone in the road that, when I looked clear-eyed to the ground, wasn’t actually

there. It took a long time to get over the magic of the idea that really there had been an obstacle, something to stumble over, until my nine-, ten-, twelve-year-old eyes had to finally admit that there really was no stone in the road and never had been. Yet all these things were just part of the texture of our lives, like the loosened threads in the weave of my favourite green and black Welsh blanket. We slipped slowly into it. No shocks. No alarms. So by the time her diagnosis of MS came through, it was like it had happened long ago, and they were giving us old news that had already been dealt with.

My father leaving went along the same lines. He was there, or should I say more accurately his *presence* was there – because he came and went more or less as he pleased – through my early childhood. Then the presence got gradually less, like mist thinning. I think it's because of this, that there was nothing more definite in terms of a traumatic event – a huge row, a slammed door, a suitcase by the door – that I think of him as slightly ghostlike, as if something of him still lurks behind the framed photographs and the dusty display of artificial daisies and poppies on the sideboard.

The buzzer to our flat goes and I pick up the phone on the intercom.

'Come up,' I say to Rosa and Averill.

I buzz them through the main doors downstairs, help Mum into her wheelchair and wheel her through to the living room where the table is set out. Mum starts panicking a bit as I try to help her onto the dining chair, so we tuck the wheelchair under the table instead. She fusses around with the cups and saucers.

'Don't worry. It takes an age for Averill to persuade Rosa

to get into the lift anyway. You've got loads of time.' They both dislike the lift, especially Rosa; she always says she thinks she's going to have a fit in it. Plus they both say it smells bad, which it does, but as we live on the top floor of Bath's only tower block it's a bit awkward otherwise. Mum and I both sit looking at each other over the tea things.

'What's taking them so long?' she asks eventually. I haven't said but I was beginning to wonder myself. Then the buzzer sounds in the hallway again.

'Hang on a tick,' I say and go to answer it.

'We've had to come back outside, Grace,' says Averill. 'The lift's broken.'

'OK, well, you'll have to take the stairs. I'll put the kettle on.'

'Are you kidding?' I can hear Rosa's voice behind Averill's. 'You know how I am with heights. It's bad enough going in the lift.'

I sigh. 'Wait there. I'll be down now. Mum,' I call out. 'The lift's broken. I'm going to rescue them from outside.'

I run all the way to the ground floor and they're both standing in the weak sunshine, peering through the glass for me from under the brims of their hats.

'Come on,' I say. 'She's expecting you. You know this will be the highlight of her week. You can't let her down – you'll be fine.'

'Yes. You're right, dear,' says Rosa, tucking her handbag under her arm and hitching up her dress like she's about to scale the Andes. 'I will do my very, very best.'

The first two flights go quite well, then on the third I look behind me and she has frozen, her hand gripping onto the rail and the tuft of her white hanky poking out from underneath.

‘Listen, dear.’ Her mouth has gone strangely rictus-like. ‘I’m not sure if I’m going to be able to do this. I don’t want to let you down but . . .’ She looks up, her eyes wide. ‘I’ve had a bad week. That murder really upset me. It was a jealous rage, you know. Did you hear about it? A lad had been seeing this man’s missus and the man found out – I’m not sure how, they didn’t tell you that bit – and he went out looking all over Bath for him in this huge car of his, and when he eventually found him he went absolutely crazy and drove into him and ended up dragging him all down the wall in Walcot Street. Killed him. It was all over the news. Oh Lord, you did hear about it, didn’t you?’

‘Yeah, Daniel told me.’

‘Are you still on with your lad?’

I suck in my cheeks. ‘It’s better not to watch the news, Rosa. You know it doesn’t agree with you.’

‘Yes, but . . .’ Her hand grips tighter. ‘It’s hard not to when it’s on your own doorstep.’

I don’t point out it’s not only when it’s on her doorstep. The Twin Towers was almost two years ago and it still terrifies her. She really does need to stay away from the news.

A voice floats down from above. ‘Girls, what’s going on?’

It’s Mum. She’s managed to get herself out of our front door somehow.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ I mutter under my breath. ‘You two stay there,’ I say and vault up the flights of stairs.

‘Mum, honestly. How did you get out here? I hope you haven’t locked us out.’

‘I put the door on the latch. I wanted to see why they are taking so long.’

‘Rosa’s having a bit of an issue with the stairs. She’ll be fine.’

‘Rosa,’ Mum shouts down the stairs. ‘You can do it.’

A weak, wavering voice comes back. ‘I’m not sure that I can, Jenny. I will try, though.’

I dart back down, panting now. They haven’t moved an inch upwards.

‘Let me take your arm,’ I say to Rosa. I feel myself losing patience and I take a deep breath. ‘You can hang onto me on one side and Averill will take the other.’

We manage another flight before Rosa sits down abruptly on the floor.

‘No. I just can’t, Grace. I’m sorry to let you down but I can’t. I’m so dizzy I think I’m going to faint. I can’t look.’ She puts her head in her hands so she doesn’t have to.

There’s a burst of male voices from above us. It rings the building, bouncing floor by floor.

I look up. ‘Mum. What’s going on up there?’

Laughter peals down. ‘Mum? Look, let me see what’s happening.’

I run up the stairs again, breathless now and cursing all the sneaky fags I’ve had out on the balcony. Nearly at the top, I stop for a breather and hear heavy footsteps. Then – I can hardly believe it – around the corner comes Mum, her wheelchair being carried between Marshall and Harry from the flat next door like they were handling nothing heavier than a shopping bag. Mum is grinning and laughing as she gets swung about. ‘Careful, boys,’ she says, although you can tell she doesn’t really mean it.

I put my forehead onto the backs of my hands for a second and just lean there, forehead to the banister.

When I look up she’s seen me. ‘Look, Grace. I’ll go down to them. Stuff the Battenberg. We can all go to Jolly’s.’

‘No worries, Mrs H. We’ll have you down there before you know it.’

I follow them, my heart lurching at the way they are practically running round the corners, making her laugh as she tips from side to side.

I have to heave up the stairs one last time to lock up, then I join them all outside.

‘Thanks, boys,’ says Mum.

‘No problem, Mrs H. Anytime. Cheers, Grace.’ Marshall and Harry make off into the day, bunching their puffa jackets up against the cold as a chill has interrupted the warm weather.

‘Honestly,’ I mutter, grabbing onto the handles of Mum’s wheelchair. ‘Come on then.’ I try not to contemplate the fact that we might have got her down, but fuck knows where Marshall and Harry are going and if they will be here to carry her back up.

‘Don’t be a spoilsport, Grace, you’ll put a downer on the day and it’s not often enough I get out,’ Mum says. I open my mouth to snap back but before I can she points. ‘Look, there’s Daniel.’

The other two women’s heads whip round to look at Daniel crossing the grass with a bag of shopping under his arm. I feel the tips of my ears pinking.

‘Hi Grace,’ he says, smiling at me. He kissed me in the lift once and I nearly exploded. We’ve been sort of on and sort of off since then, but it’s difficult, like it feels too much. I pull up my hood and tug it across my cheeks.

‘Hey there.’ Today he doesn’t ask me anything; he only nods at us all and goes quickly inside. Maybe he’s going off me or got tired of waiting. Who could blame him?

I turn and see Mum studying my face with that shrewd look of hers like she knows it all. ‘What?’ I say. ‘Stop it.’

She twitches her shoulders in a shrug. ‘I know I’m not allowed opinions,’ she says.

‘Maybe you’ve got an opinion about how we’re going to get back upstairs,’ I flash back at her, but she ignores me and it occurs to me then to see if Daniel will be around later to help me with Mum, but he’s already disappeared up the stairwell. I might be just about able to manage the other side. I’m stronger than I look. I’ll buzz him and see when we get back. I sigh heavily and tell myself to stop mooning over him like a silly bitch. We wheel off, the three of them chirping to each other like birds about the murder. I glance back, right to the top where our flat is, with its balcony looking down over the other buildings, and contemplate the absolute fucking irony of living in the one and only tower block in the whole of this city.