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**“Drawing a Daisy on a Post-it”: Expressions of the  
Phenomenology of Illness in Literary Fiction set in 1956 and the  
Present Day**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of

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## Abstract

This thesis explores representations of the experience of illness in literary fiction. It argues that the portrayal in literature of an imagined character's subjective experience of illness constitutes a phenomenological perspective on the illness experience, and that literary fiction's performance of a phenomenological approach offers important insights to a holistic understanding of illness. Section One is a critical essay which examines two contemporary literary texts by the light of recent scholarship in the areas of medical philosophy and medical sociology. A concern frequently expressed by writers in these areas is that the modern biomedical paradigm, while increasingly sophisticated in its science, risks neglecting its art, and that this, in turn, dehumanises medicine in a manner that is fundamentally harmful to the lived experience of illness. Modes of talking about illness which encompass subjective, phenomenological, experience offer a way to rectify this. I argue that creative fiction is therefore a powerful form in which to explore the lived experience of illness. I apply this notion to a close reading of two literary texts, one set in 1956 and one in the present day. By its very nature, however, literary fiction's power lies in its effects on the imagination, and is only clumsily explained by analytic argument. Thus Section Two of this thesis is a creative partner to the critical essay and aims to demonstrate, or perform, the thesis. This creative section is an extract from a novel called *Strip*, set in present day New Zealand and told from the perspectives of a mother and a father whose teenage daughter has a terminal illness.

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## **“Drawing a Daisy on a Post-it”: Expressions of the Phenomenology of Illness in Literary Fiction set in 1956 and the Present Day**

### **Introduction**

This two-part critical and creative thesis explores representations of the experience of illness in literary fiction. It argues that the portrayal in literature of an imagined character’s subjective experience of illness constitutes a phenomenological perspective on the illness experience, and that literary fiction’s performance of a phenomenological approach offers an important forum for reflection on the management of illness and mortality.

The critical part of this thesis examines attitudes to illness and medicine in two contemporary American works of literary fiction. The primary texts are the 2008 novel *Home* by Marilynne Robinson and the 2013 story “Tenth of December” by George Saunders. I am interested in how these texts express the phenomenology of illness through the portrayal of their fictional characters’ experiences, with particular regard to the fact that *Home* is set in 1956, whereas “Tenth of December” is set contemporaneously, close to its year of publication. These points in time, almost sixty years apart, represent distinct phases on an accelerating trajectory of American cultural and scientific development. *Home* is set at a relatively naïve and conservative point on this arc, whereas the action in “Tenth of December” takes place in a socially permissive, technically sophisticated and information-saturated world. I explore how the experience of being ill manifests in each text, especially in regard to what is expressed about the distinct subjective qualities of that experience.

Both texts are deeply concerned with the impact of progress on tradition. Both, therefore, examine legacy and its shadow twin, obsolescence. In *Home*, one way this

concern finds expression is in Glory Boughton's decision-making as she contemplates her imminent inheritance of the family home. She ponders which items in the over-cluttered house should be kept, and which discarded (Robinson 311-312). These actual relics are symbolic of abstractions which must also be sifted and sorted. A strong theme of the novel is the legacy of ideas, especially the concept of moral heritage. "Things necessary to know," thinks Glory, are "passed along" from family member to family member in an important "chain of transmission" (17). Accordingly, Glory, who was raised in a Presbyterian family, sifts her life experience through a Biblical filter, asking, as did Cain, 'am I my brother's keeper?' and probing the concepts of forgiveness and of grace. Her elderly father's illness tightens the focus around these notions, forcing an examination of behaviour and belief in the context of suffering, especially her father's belief that "it is the Providence of God that we look after those nearest to us" (273).

The world portrayed in "Tenth of December" represents the current state of the legacy inherited from the world of *Home*. That inheritance was heavily influenced by Western society's post-World War Two commitment to the personal and public politics of autonomy, self-expression and self-determination, and to science and technology. As the reliability of technologies has improved it has been increasingly possible to place faith in a measurement model of thinking, and in scientific problem-solving. This more scientific worldview privileges 'evidence-based' statements, seeks as much certainty as possible, and therefore favours language in its deductive, reductive and denotive modes, using the vocabulary of definition and classification. The shift is exemplified in these texts. Writing in *The New Yorker*, the critic James Wood describes *Home* as a work which "slowly grows in luxury" (N. pag.). This richness is endowed by a steady accumulation of carefully-observed detail and Robinson's ear for lyrical composition. Each phrase is composed as a harmonious beat to its neighbour and to the work as a

whole. The syntax is full and grammatical. The vocabulary is wide, and deeply nuanced with a complex array of latent or archaic meanings, paradox, associations and allusions. The plot is “spare” with an “achingly slow pace”, and takes place in a “narrowly confined setting” (Tanner 35). Linger in one place, however, we see things we miss if we rush through. Reading *Home* is like that: the senses gradually open, sensitising the reader to the subtleties of Robinson’s language, and hence also to the subtleties of qualitative thought. Robinson’s consciously literary style eschews measurements, numbers, dates, diagnoses and classifications in favour of qualitative vocabulary and a discursive narrative, each detail of which must be understood in relation to its wider place in that narrative, and, especially, to its themes. For example, while references to the forthcoming United States presidential election appear to fix the historical setting of *Home* as 1956 (43), other references in the text allude to civil rights events which in fact occurred later, such as a reference to 1963’s ‘Stand in the Schoolhouse Door’ crisis: “Tuscaloosa. A colored woman wants to go to the University of Alabama” (162). This ‘don’t let the facts get in the way of a good story’ approach directs the reader away from strict historical accuracy to the narrative’s thematic concern of integration. In doing so Robinson asserts the primacy of the narrative mode of understanding where complex and ethical issues are at stake.

Robinson’s self-conscious literary style contrasts with Saunders’ use of the vernacular in “Tenth of December”. His story is characterised by interruptions and quick shifts of focus, a stylistic device which intensifies whenever a character’s ruminations on an issue has no obvious and immediate answer. The story is peppered with quantifying vocabulary and references to science and measurement: “methodology”; “NASA”, “*co-ordinates*”; “Prominent Windspeed Velocity”; “The duck thermometer said ten”; “He was now approximately three-quarters, or that would

be sixty percent, across” (Saunders 215, 217, 217, 218, 221, 229). Yet these apparent certainties prove not very useful when it comes to working out what’s really going on. Under closer scrutiny, some simply dissolve. For example, although the date which forms the title looks precise, it does not pin the story to a particular day. It is a date without obvious associations to the wider culture or the story itself. Saunders has said that “Basically I picked it just because I love the sound of that phrase” (interview). Without context, the date floats above the story, tantalising but meaningless—except to illustrate what transpires to be the major themes of the story: separation, and the paradox that exactitude is often only an alluring mirage.

This paradox has become an important theme for our times. Susan Krumdiek, Professor of Engineering at the University of Canterbury, for example, claims we have invented “a social mythology of our own cleverness”, and warns of the “magical thinking” inherent in this belief system, such as undue faith in so-called “miracle technologies” which will “save” the planet from global warming (interview).

In medicine, philosopher Havi Carel notes that the science and technology boom has led to an emphasis on a “naturalistic” approach to illness. This approach views illness as “biological dysfunction”, and classifies unwellness into categories of “disease” to which a cure can be applied. An alternative approach is the “normativist” view, which sees the interpretation of illness as primarily cultural and stresses that “the concept of disease is value-laden” (Carel 11). As one medical sociologist puts it: “What a particular group perceives to be problematic or unacceptable, needing remedy, is socially contingent” (Jutel 3).

Both approaches, however, are reductive in the sense that they are both preoccupied with categories and diagnoses. Carel talks to the problem of “what is left out of these two accounts”. “Again,” she writes, “the first-person perspective is missing.

Again the voice of the ill person is not heard” (12). In remedy, Carel advocates an illness model which encompasses both naturalistic and normativist views, yet also takes into account the ill person’s lived experience of being unwell. She terms this approach “a phenomenology of illness” (12).

Phenomenology stresses that to live is to perceive. It accepts as a basic premise that “the world is always ‘already there’” (Merleau-Ponty, Preface xx). In this view, human perception is always embodied (experienced by the body) whilst simultaneously embedded in the world beyond the body. Measureable scientific data supports this notion: our bodies move through the external world, and the external world—in its micro-physicality of photons, radioactivity, sound waves and molecules—moves through our bodies. Yet the scientific perspective, alone, is insufficient. It cannot encompass the subjective-objective flux of phenomenological experience, the embodied and embedded process through which meaning is created and sustained in our lives. It is not only, for example, that the aroma of chicken soup consists of molecules which stimulate the olfactory system, but that the aroma of chicken soup invokes a cascade of personal meaning: your or my chicken soup story. A phenomenological approach acknowledges this.

In his foreword to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, Taylor Carman writes that:

Phenomenology is an attempt to describe the basic structures of human experience and understanding from a first person point of view.... [It] is thus a descriptive, not an explanatory or deductive enterprise, for it aims to reveal experience as such, rather than frame hypotheses or speculate beyond its bounds. (viii)

Conceived as forms of artistic expression, the creative fictions of *Home* and “Tenth of December” exemplify these ideals. Both aim to “reveal experience as such” through close attention to, and description of, subjective impressions and perceptions. Both display what philosopher Martha Nussbaum claims is a particular strength of some literary fiction: “a commitment to qualitative distinctions”, or “a richly qualitative kind of seeing” (36). Although both texts use third person points of view, the narrative style is closely filtered through the protagonists’ minds, so that to read the stories is to sit within a character and vicariously experience his or her world. The approach is, primarily, phenomenological. In *Home*, set in 1956, the elderly Reverend Boughton is frail and understood to be dying, while in “Tenth of December”, set circa 2012, 53 year old Don Eber has a terminal brain tumour. An examination of these texts might therefore cast light on the “first person perspective” of illness identified by Carel as being so poorly attended to in the contemporary medical paradigm.

Nussbaum makes a further claim, directly connecting literature’s strength in expressing phenomenological experience to the development of “ethical ability”. She cites the Aristotelean concept of perception as “the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient features of one’s particular situation” (37). Nussbaum asserts that literature which demonstrates, as *Home* and “Tenth of December” do, “the detailed study of complex particular cases”, is, by nature, a mode of ethical enquiry. Indeed, she writes, humanity has long turned to imaginative narratives in the search for answers to “larger questions” (23): “the best ethical criticism, ancient and modern, has insisted on the complexity and variety revealed to us in literature, appealing to that complexity to cast doubt on reductive theories” (22). Nussbaum reminds us of the “practical” value of literary fiction: we “‘read for life’, bringing to the literary texts we love (as to texts admittedly philosophical) our pressing questions and perplexities” (29). The essential

“pressing questions” have not altered over millennia. We still ask, as Plato and Aristotle asked, how should I live? We still ask, as Kant asked, what is my moral duty? (22).

Secondarily, then, this essay explores the ways in which moral consciousness is revealed in the texts, especially in relation to suffering and compassion. My touchstone for this exploration is a passage from *Home* in which the elderly Revered Boughton, a Presbyterian minister, articulates his understanding of obligations in regard to compassion: “Part of it is giving care and another part is accepting it. That second part is difficult and very important” (Robinson 272). Boughton derives his understanding from his religious beliefs:

“That’s what the family is for,” he said. “Calvin says it is the Providence of God that we look after those nearest to us. So it is the will of God that we help our brothers, and it is equally the will of God that we accept their help and receive the blessing of it. As if it came from the Lord Himself. Which it does. (273)

This idea has not survived intact into succeeding generations: Boughton’s religious certainty is not shared by his children. *Home* and “Tenth of December” tell of individuals in a secular and increasingly scientifically-orientated world working towards a satisfying understanding of how to “look after those nearest to us”.

The creative portion of this thesis is an extract from a novel called *Strip*, which also explores the theme of how to “look after those nearest us”. *Strip* is set in contemporary New Zealand. Harvey Wright is a family doctor who, in midlife, unexpectedly finds fame as a medical cartoonist. Also rather unexpectedly, he and his wife Isobel (a museum administrator) adopt a baby girl, Fleur. At sixteen, Fleur is diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. The novel explores the experience of Fleur’s illness from her parents’ perspectives, as each works to “discern, acutely and

responsively, the salient features of [this] particular situation” in order to provide the best possible care for their daughter. In exploring this family’s lived experience of illness, *Strip* exposes particular kinds of suffering for which the contemporary biomedical paradigm has no remedy. The bonds which tie the family together are tested by the demands of practical compassion. The very nature of those bonds comes into question, as does the nature and extent of obligations and responsibilities imposed by those bonds. For all three family members, Fleur’s illness triggers reconsideration of formerly understood roles and identities.

Fleur’s illness also tests the family’s ideas about the essential nature of humanity. Is there a point at which Fleur’s dignity as a human being is so compromised that her life is no longer worth living? How then does one define human dignity? For the Boughton family in *Home*, this question is never seriously in contention: the Reverend Boughton’s end-of-life suffering is regarded as a normal part of being human. The Boughton worldview encompasses a cultural template for the transition of life to death, allowing for the independent ‘doing’ human to ease into the role of dependent human ‘being’. Sixty fictional years on, in “Tenth of December”, Eber runs a cost-benefit analysis on his situation and decides that the burden imposed by his illness on his family is unjustified, especially when weighed against what he sees as cancer’s devaluation of his worth as a human. In *Strip*, although Isobel and Harvey respond differently to Fleur’s illness, a major driver in both their behaviours is their sensitivity to its effect on her human dignity. The extract presented in this thesis ends with Harvey’s unilateral (and secret) decision to—as he sees it—alleviate Fleur’s suffering by administering a fatal dose of morphine. The third part of the novel (not presented here) goes on to pick up the story five years later, exploring the consequences of this decision.

## Section One: Critical Research Essay

### “Drawing a Daisy on a Post-it” and “the Posture of Grace”

Between 1956 and now, two developments have contributed to significant reframing of ideas about illness. The first was the mid-twentieth century shift towards political and personal self-determination. The second has been the continually increasing sophistication of biomedical knowledge and technology. The first resulted in a move towards empowering the patient within the patient-doctor relationship. Sociologist Arthur Frank noted in 1995 that illness had “come to feel different” over the preceding two decades. In Frank’s view, the shift in what it felt like to be ill came down to the issue of voice. “*Postmodern times*,” he wrote, “*are when the capacity for telling one’s own story is reclaimed.*” Frank contrasted this with the “*narrative surrender*” previously expected of the patient, whereby an all-knowing doctor dispensed advice to a passive, obedient patient (5-7, original italics). This shift implies the evolution of a relational and inclusive style of medical practice.

Working against this, however, has been the increasing complexity of the biomedical knowledge base, which has resulted in the compartmentalising of general medicine into multiple specialities. This plays to the particular strength of biomedicine which is, as medical doctors Hamish Wilson and Wayne Cunningham point out in their 2014 book *Being a Doctor: Understanding Medical Practice*, the diagnosis and treatment of organic pathologies. This model is especially effective in the management of “acute disease” (53). In non-acute situations, however, the focus on pathology and diagnosis leaves the unsatisfactory gap identified by philosopher Havi Carel: the problem of “what is left out” (12). Not all pain can be accounted for by pathology. Not all unwellness is disease. Not all disease has a cure. Life expectancy is up, but so also are levels of chronic illness and disability. The contemporary medical experience—for

patient and doctor—is characterised by sophisticated interventions, but too frequently also by a sense of interpersonal disconnection and isolation. Carel, who herself suffers a chronic illness, expresses how this can manifest:

I quickly learned that when doctors ask “How are you?” they mean “How is your body?”; that when an X-ray of my lungs is up on the screen and several doctors stand around it discussing my “case”, they will not include me in their discussion. That they will not want to know how my life has changed because of my illness, how they could make it easier for me. This is one of the reasons I believe phenomenology’s emphasis on the first-person experience of illness would be beneficial to the patient-physician relationship. (39)

In similar vein, essayist Heidi Julavits writes of a widespread contemporary “nostalgia” for pre-modern medical practice. She quotes surgeon Mehmet Oz: “I would take us all back a thousand years, when our ancestors lived in small villages and there was always a healer in that village” (26). Julavits herself yearns for a time when the “family practitioner often knew his patients from their infancy, since he ... had delivered them. He made house calls; he understood the physical and familial context of every illness” (26-27).

This nostalgic view, however, glosses over the fact that the village healer worked without antibiotics, anaesthetics or effective analgesia. In *Sons and Lovers*, first published in 1913, D. H. Lawrence describes Gertrude Morel’s death from cancer at home, where she is nursed by her daughter and visited daily by the village doctor. Gertrude’s death is agonising, both for her and for her family:

Her body was wasted to a fragment of ash. Her eyes were dark and full of torture.

‘Can’t you give her something to put an end to it?’ he asked the doctor at last.

But the doctor shook his head. (477)

Faced with this kind of suffering, nobody today would seriously advocate a return to a pre-scientific medical age. Nevertheless, as Julavits’ nostalgia makes clear, many people perceive that something important—some practice therapeutic in its own right—has been lost in the transition to the modern biomedical paradigm. Carel and Julavits point to the way a failure to take sufficient account of the subjective, or first person perspective, can damage the therapeutic experience. Surgeon Atul Gawande concurs. Indeed, in his 2014 book, *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End*, Gawande makes the brutal observation that when medicine’s science becomes alienated from its art, the results can stray dangerously far from the ancient guiding principle of ‘first, do no harm’, with actively negative results :

You don’t have to spend much time with the elderly or those with terminal illness to see how often medicine fails the people it is supposed to help. The waning days of our lives are given over to treatments that addle our brains and sap our bodies for a sliver’s chance of benefit. They are spent in institutions—nursing homes and intensive care units—where regimented, anonymous routines cut us off from all the things that matter to us in life. Our reluctance to honestly examine the experience of aging and dying has increased the harm we inflict on people and denied them the basic comforts they most need. Lacking a coherent view of how people might live successfully all the way to their very end, we have allowed our fates to be controlled by the imperatives of medicine, technology and strangers. (9)

It seems that care can be technically sophisticated, professional and safe, and yet fall short of *feeling* like care. What is it that makes care feel compassionate? All three commentators above speak of a deep need for personal recognition: Carel desires to be asked “how are *you*?” (emphasis added); Julavits yearns for a doctor who has known her since childhood; Gawande warns that medicine can harm if it does not address “all the things that matter to us”, which implies the need to become familiar with what matters to the ill person. In George Saunders’ story “Tenth of December”, the doctor fails to convey any sense of seeing his patient, Don Eber, as a whole and unique person, and the result is a bleak experience for Eber. Eber’s brain’s “brown spot” (231, 248) has received highly technical medical attention, but his human self—his *person*—has been neglected. Yet Eber’s suffering is not in the brown spot, *per se*, but in Eber himself. Who is Eber? He is child, boy and adult; abandoned son; Allen’s loved stepson; Molly’s husband; Jodi and Tommy’s devoted father. These relationships are, for Eber, “all the things that matter”; they constitute a major part of his identity. He fears his illness will render him useless in these relationships, and this is a source of great pain. The story opens when this unattended aspect of his suffering becomes too great to ignore: “He hadn’t cried after the surgeries or during the chemo, but he felt like crying now” (231).

In contrast to Eber’s experience, the Reverend Boughton’s illness is a low-tech, relatively non-medicalised event. Boughton’s frail and suffering body receives little pharmaceutical relief, because there is, in 1956, little pharmaceutical relief to be had. Instead, he is nursed: fed, carried, washed and dressed. Notably, he is also listened to. Boughton’s experience is probably poorer than Eber’s if measured on a scale of physical pain. Yet *Home*, although often sad and frequently serious, is never bleak. Boughton’s experience is rich with detailed attention to “all the things that matter”. Boughton’s illness is never partitioned from his *person*, nor is his *person* ever

partitioned from the wider cultural framework in which he lives. Indeed, the richness apparent in aspects of his care—apparently so lacking in Eber’s experience sixty years later—seems to derive from the particular emphases of that wider culture. A comparative understanding of the differences in approach to Boughton’s and Eber’s illnesses therefore needs to take into account how changes in the wider cultural framework since 1956 have affected people’s beliefs and expectations. The two texts certainly reveal quite different foundational expectations about illness. In “Tenth of December”, for example, Eber has never truly anticipated having a terminal illness. Another person’s death gives him “a sense of superiority”. “Poor guy,” he muses, “It was pretty unlucky, what had happened to him” (Saunders 231). In *Home*, however, Glory Boughton’s father’s dying is no surprise: “And this was coming. We all knew it would happen” (Robinson 316). Pain and difficulty are seen as inevitable, necessary and important parts of life, sometimes to the point of being sacred: “Some things,” thinks Glory, through whose mind the narrative is closely filtered, “are sacred, even, especially, this wounding thing” (326). In this view, organic illness is part of, and integrated within, a much larger context encompassing physical, emotional and metaphysical suffering. Although any one area might be more sharply in focus at a given time, they are not distinct territories but aspects of one holistic notion. In *Home*, the focus is not on avoiding suffering, but on negotiating it with the best possible grace.

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Robinson weaves this central concern—grace—into the content and structure of *Home*. It is a gracefully composed work which probes the meaning of graceful composure. Especially, it examines grace under pressure, when equilibrium has been disturbed. Glory, already mourning a broken engagement, has returned home to care for

her ailing father. Resentment about the way this duty has fallen to her, as the unmarried youngest daughter of the family, compounds her suffering:

But oh, the evenings were long. I am thirty-eight years old, she would say to herself, as she tidied up after supper. I have a master's degree. I taught high school English for thirteen years. I was a good teacher. What have I done with my life? What has become of it? It is as if I had a dream of adult life and woke up from it, still here in my parents' house. (20)

As far as her father, a retired Presbyterian minister, is concerned, her obligation is ordained by scripture: "it is the Providence of God that we look after those nearest to us" (273). The Reverend emphasises that this duty of care has two aspects: "giving care" and "accepting it". He stresses the difficulty and the importance of that "second part" (272). In his increasing frailty, however, Boughton struggles with just how difficult accepting care can be: "Jesus never had to be old," he complains (327). His cantankerousness (and her own unhappy situation) causes Glory to reflect on the knotty link between grace and forgiveness:

There is a saying that to understand is to forgive, but that is an error, so Papa used to say. You must forgive in order to understand. Until you forgive, you defend yourself against the possibility of understanding.... If you forgive, he would say, you may indeed still not understand, but you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace. (46-47)

In this notion of "the posture of grace", the idea of 'give' seems central, its elastic essence contained in the word 'forgive' and in the notion of 'give and take'.

In *Home*, the idea of giving and receiving support is often enacted quite literally in acts of carrying and holding. The novel opens with Glory arriving home, and the old

man carrying her bag upstairs. Glory is shocked: “How could her father be so frail? And how could he be so recklessly intent on satisfying his notions of gentlemanliness, hanging his cane on the railing of the stairs, so he could, dear God, carry her bag up to her room?” (3). Yet Glory allows him his “notions of gentlemanliness”, knowing they go to the heart of her father’s sense of self and therefore to the preservation of his dignity. This is despite her concurrent awareness that the time for clinging to such notions is almost past, and that a transfer of power is imminent. The scene indicates that the maintenance of Boughton’s dignity is to be a vital principle in managing this transfer, and Boughton’s care generally. It also illustrates the intimate relationship between dignity and autonomy. In Atul Gawande’s words, the ability to retain authorship of one’s own life story constitutes “the very marrow of being human” (140).

As Boughton’s illness progresses he struggles to act with dignity in the face of his increasing dependence. The town’s Presbyterian minister for most of the first half of the twentieth century, his is the shoulder upon which, Glory notes, “much of Presbyterian Gilead above the age of twenty had at some time wept”. Now, however, he is “poor old Papa, sad old Papa” (Robinson 7). By the time the novel closes, Boughton is fully dependent on Glory’s care. She is helped by her brother, Jack, who has also returned to the family home. The stairs their father managed to climb in the opening scene are now an impossible challenge. Instead Jack must carry his father up and down, cradled in his arms (322). The Reverend Boughton’s bodily infirmity and pending death plays out alongside the dying of the institutional church and a general demise of the concept of ‘the sacred’ in favour of a secular attitude. Thus Boughton is both a dying father and a dying Father. In the first capacity he is becoming incompetent, in the second, irrelevant. The new church elders listen to her father’s opinions without interest, as if, Boughton complains, “I were a child!” (51).

“But superstition like belief must die,” wrote Philip Larkin in his poem “Church Going”, composed in 1954 (59). This imperative sums up the mood of the age, a time when the Western world’s “solidaristic moral economy”, as David Marquand has termed it (Harding 13), was unravelling, the guiding light of the Holy Trinity giving way to “an unholy trinity of individualism, freedom and choice” (Hinseliff N. pag.). In Larkin’s “Church Going”, the speaker enters an empty church, removes his cycle clips in “awkward reverence”, “peruse[s] a few / Hectoring large-scale verses”, and falls to wondering what churches will become “[w]hen” (not *if*) they “fall completely out of use” (58). The tussle between Faith and Science since Enlightenment times is often exemplified in literature as a competition between priest and doctor. Another of Larkin’s poems, “Days”, composed in 1953, asks “Where can we live but days?”. Larkin has “the priest and doctor / In their long coats / Running over the fields” to solve “that question” (98). The image is that of a race between belief systems which can only have one winner. This pervasive idea is expressed again in Robertson Davies’ 1994 novel *The Cunning Man* which opens with a man dying in a church. The narrator, a doctor, rushes to help, but is waved back by a “hissing” priest, who says, “This is holy ground. Leave it to me.” The doctor/narrator comments:

We were members of two rival priesthoods, he the Man of God and I the Man of Science, and in the circumstances I thought my priest equal if not superior to his. But I did not want to show pique or press a petty advantage. We were in a church, Holy Communion had begun, and the dying man was behind the altar rails, so I suppose I thought Charlie was on his own turf and must be respected accordingly. Was this chivalry toward the weaker, or snotty contempt for a lesser creature? I suppose it was a little of both. (9-10)

The eventual outcome of Larkin's race and Davies' altar-side altercation can be seen in a passage from James Lee Burke's 2007 novel, *The Tin Roof Blowdown*. In it, a character receives a wrong diagnosis from his doctor. Reeling, he wants to tell friends but cannot, because "he does not wish to rob others of their faith in the exactitude of medical science. To do so is, in a way, the same as robbing them of the only belief system they have" (5).

The "exactitude of medical science" sums up the implied promise of the biomedical model of medicine. Arthur Frank contends that confidence in the idea that medicine cures has changed the dominant narrative template for illness from 'quest' to 'restitution'. A quest narrative imagines suffering as a journey through difficulty. Such a story yields meaning "recursively": "the journey is taken in order to find out what sort of journey one has been taking" (117). The protagonist must engage with the difficulty, pain being necessary for the conclusion of transformational enlightenment (119). The Biblical story of Job is one example of a classic quest story. In a restitution narrative, however, suffering is not prolonged, and things always 'come right' in the end. In Frank's view, contemporary ideas about illness are dominated by this restitution approach, reflecting the "modernist expectation that for every suffering there is a remedy". The meaning of the story of Job has shifted, from acceptance of the necessity of struggle (or dis-ease) to an expectation of ease: "the nature of suffering changes from mystery to puzzle." The story, therefore, now calls for a different response: "A mystery can only be faced up to; a puzzle admits solution". The restitution approach can be seen, for example, in a television advertisement for a cold remedy: "the good person is suddenly struck down but suffering is bourgeois (for example, a missed party or sports event), the remedy can be purchased, and the only learning involved is where to find relief next time" (80). A restitution story contains an important "vision of hope", but an

inflexible adherence to this narrative arc is problematic in situations where a condition has no available cure or ready comfort (92).

In *Home*, the biomedical model is still relatively unsophisticated. But despite Larkin's image of "hectoring" sermons, part of what is dying, in Boughton the man, and in the church he embodies, is a space for inexactitude: for mystery, doubt and the contemplation of the immaterial and immeasurable. Already, Boughton's actual church—"the white clapboard church with the steeply pitched roof and the abbreviated spire"—exists only in memory. It has been "replaced by a much costlier building, monumental in style though modest in scale, with a crenellated Norman bell tower at one corner and a rose window above the massy entrance" (Robinson 51). Glory's reaction to this modernisation bristles with felt offence. For her, as for her father, the new church is evidence of muddled thinking. It is the result of an inability to discern 'simple' from 'simplistic', and the conflation of faith with superstition, mystery with ignorance. It is evidence of something missing in the newly dominant secular belief system. The simple white clapboard church and its humble "abbreviated" spire is actually, for her, a sophisticated architectural response to the task of encompassing complex and centuries-long historical influences. It is also, in its very simplicity, a representation of grace through integrity, the church's outside form resonating with its inner essence:

For her, church was an airy white room with tall windows looking out on God's good world, with God's good sunlight pouring in through those windows and falling across the pulpit where her father stood, straight and strong, parsing the broken heart of humankind and praising the loving heart of Christ. That was church. (52)

In contrast, the new church—and by extension, the new thinking—for all its outward complexity, represents a simplistic version of historical truth, and this troubles both Glory and her father. The Reverend sees the new church primarily as a theological offence: “‘Anglicanism!’ he cries. ‘Utter capitulation!’”(51). Glory’s response is not so open-and-shut. Well-educated in the humanities and the classics, she is most upset by the incoherent representation of historical truth, troubled to think that a person “whose historical notions were sufficiently addled might imagine that centuries of plunder and dilapidation had left this last sturdy remnant of grandeur, that the bell tower might have sunk a dozen feet into the ground as ages passed” (51). Glory’s distress is rooted in her sense that a narrowing or partial historical vision is somehow dangerous. Pondering the worth of her thirteen-year career as a High School English teacher, she decides that she was “helping them assume their humanity” (21). There is no scientifically measurable proof of the value of her approach, only the phenomenological, embodied evidence of her own experience, that “sometimes she felt a silence in the room deeper than ordinary silence” (22).

The hotchpotch architecture of Gilead’s new Presbyterian church is a good metaphor for the equally hotchpotch state of medicine at this time. In the mid-1950s, aspects of a folk medicine approach still linger, despite the growing efficacy of modern biomedicine in some conditions. A new, scientific, medical model is being constructed, one which with hindsight could be described, like the new church in *Home*, as “costlier”, “monumental in style” and even “modest in scale”, since, according to a recent assessment of the UK public health policy, “trade-offs” are required, given that “[w]ere each patient to be treated according to his or her wishes, we would all be bankrupt” (Skidelsky 37).

But the new medical model also re-presents certain historical symbols, the equivalent of the religious church's "crenellated Norman bell tower" and "rose window". In *Home*, Glory's brother Teddy, a doctor, begins to visit more frequently as their father's health deteriorates. His "pebbly black" medical bag is perhaps the parallel image to the re-created church's "massy entrance". When opened, it smells "of leather and rubbing alcohol". Inside are "cotton balls and tongue depressors in glass bottles, and thermometers, and assorted pills and salves and syrups and the stethoscope and several bottles of aspirin" (Robinson 274). These tools, each a metonymy for doctor, are also the 'baggage' of medicine. Not all of them, it transpires, will be handed to the next generation.

For the Boughtons, the memory of Jack's daughter's death about twenty years' previously remains raw. "My baby's got something the matter with her," said the baby's mother. Recalling this in 1956, Glory muses that the "matter" was "an infection a little penicillin could have cured, but there was no penicillin then, or for years afterward.... Every family had a story that would have ended differently if only there had been penicillin" (245). In the 1950s, every family has a story that would have ended differently had there been a polio vaccine, too, but 1956 is still a threshold time, not yet entirely one age or the other. Glory's discussion with Teddy, about the brand new polio vaccine is revealing of an attitude of cautious optimism, in the mid-fifties, towards biomedicine. When Glory tells him that the neighbour, Lila, is frightened of the new polio vaccine, Teddy admits that he is too: "It's probably safe for her to wait a year, till they've improved it. I haven't vaccinated my own kids yet. I send them to the country in the summer...." (277).

Teddy straddles the divide between pre-modern and modern medical practice, between religious faith, folk custom, superstition and magic on the one hand, and

scientific rationalism on the other. Able to believe that a safe polio vaccine is only a year away, his medical bag still contains only simple old-fashioned concoctions, and he tells Glory that he prays for his polio patients “about as often as I breathe” (274, 277). On one of his final visits, when his father is nearing death, Teddy chooses to leave his medical bag in the car. “A good place for it,” Boughton says. “My heart will do whatever it wants to, and it has my permission. Same for my lungs” (274).

In putting down the tools of medicine at this point, Teddy is consciously embodying the ancient archetype of healer, from which modern doctoring gradually emerged. The activation of this archetype involves a commitment to a relational approach, as Wilson and Cunningham explain:

The patient seeks a healer who can advise and help, while at the same time, the patient’s internal capacity of recovery from illness and wound healing will be activated.... Furthermore, the ‘patient’ aspect of the archetype will also be contained within the doctor. The ‘wounded healer’ is a widespread mythological image referring to the ‘patient in the doctor’, just as there is always an inner healer within each patient. (21)

Teddy relinquishes his medical bag because he sees little use for its tools and pharmaceuticals in Boughton’s illness. But he is not dismayed by this. He puts aside the idea of treatment for the idea of care, turning from the biomedical imperative for cure to the archetypal imperative to heal. For Teddy, the distance between these two concepts is not insurmountable, as it will prove to be for his twenty-first century doctor successor in the story “Tenth of December”. For one thing, Teddy is his father’s son as well as his father’s doctor. For another, as the contents of his bag indicate, in 1956 medical practice was still largely a hands-on, low-tech profession. His family training and his medical training sit comfortably with each other in Teddy, who makes plenty of room in his

medicine for attention to the suffering of the *person* within and beyond the body's pathophysiology. This doesn't mean neglect of physical signs and symptoms, however, despite the fact that he merely glances, most of the time, at his father's "crooked body" under the sheet (Robinson 274). Part of his repertoire of medical response includes clinical skills more likely, nowadays, to be consigned to the nursing profession:

Teddy went to him and smoothed his hair away from his face, and very gently and casually he laid his fingertips on his brow and his temple and the artery in his neck. He took a handkerchief from the drawer where his father kept them and touched the tears off the old man's face, lifting his head to dry the wetter, downward side. Then, still holding his head, he turned the pillow to make it dry and cool. He lifted the blanket and sheet to straighten them, and glanced at his father's slight and crooked body. (274)

Nor does Teddy ignore modern pharmaceutical interventions, such as are available. In fact Teddy, with his aspirin, offers more in the way of modern medicine than the "local fellow", who "had suggested that brandy might ease his discomfort a little, and then had given him a tonic which the old man swore was concocted of whiskey and prune juice" (274, 271). Essentially, though, Teddy's activation of the healing archetype, or care approach, is the result of his professional judgement that alleviation of his father's suffering won't come via stethoscope and aspirin bottle, but through attentive reading of the *person* and care-full attention to the various ways that pain might manifest: physical, emotional and spiritual.

Although Boughton is suffering a 'normal' illness for which no cure is sought or expected, there is no doubt that his physical suffering is marked: he is in "graver pain than he was accustomed to" (52). Teddy's response to this has a place in both sacred

and secular worldviews. It is both a laying on of the hands, and a physical act of support. It is, above all, deliberately connective in intent:

Teddy said, “Here I am, Dad. I’m coming.” He went into the old man’s room, sat down on the edge of the bed, and took him up in his arms. The old man put his arms around him, rested his head on his shoulder, and wept. “I’m so glad you’re here, Teddy!” he said. He tried to speak in his reasonable, fatherly voice, but it was broken by sobs. “It’s been hard, Teddy. I knew it would be. But it’s been very hard!” And he wept. “I’m so old!” he said.

Teddy stroked his back and his hair. “It’s all right. It’ll be all right. (270-1)

Teddy is intent on forming as full a picture as possible of his father’s dis-ease in order to provide the most appropriate care. He knows, for example, that suffering often makes people grumpy. Observing this in his father, he prescribes chicken and dumplings:

“Well,” he said, “at least I know how tough the old fellow has been all these years. It’s no wonder he gets cross. How’s he eating?”

Glory said, “Not very well lately.”

Teddy nodded. “What are you making, Glory? Chicken and dumplings? He’ll enjoy that, if there’s anything in the world he can still enjoy.” (275)

Teddy’s medicine, then, embodies and practices the healing notions of support and nourishment, is relational in nature, and attends to the *person*. His attitude takes seriously, and gives medical authority to, the care that Glory and Jack are providing. Their care is characterised by acts of holding, carrying, and feeding, performed always in a manner that preserves their father’s dignity by respecting his unique, autonomous

self. Glory watches Jack help their father walk from the kitchen to his comfortable chair, where he tucks a quilt over the old man and settles him for a sleep. “The manner of his doing all these things,” she thinks, “suggested courtesy rather than kindness, as if it were a tribute to his father’s age rather than a concession to it. And she could see how her father was soothed by these attentions, as if pain were an appetite for comforting of just this kind” (66). Care of Boughton becomes steadily more intimate. Early in the novel, when Boughton is still ambulant, Glory helps him to “put his socks on and shave and get his shirt buttoned.... She helped him on with his tie and his jacket and parted his hair and combed it straight to one side, which is how he had always combed it himself” (34). Weeks later, Jack responds to his now bedridden father: “I took care of him. I made oatmeal and fed it to him. I cleaned him up and changed his sheets and turned him over, and I think he went back to sleep” (316). Later again:

Jack carried him to his chair on the porch and settled the quilt around him and read to him from the newspaper while Glory made potato soup almost the way he had always liked it, without onions but with butter melted into it and crackers crumbled on top. Jack fed him, held his cup for him.... Then Jack changed into his work clothes and went out to the garden, where his father could watch him, as it seemed he did until he began to doze off. After a little while Jack came back and found him asleep and carried him to bed again, slipping the crooked body out of the robe with great care. (322)

Meanwhile, Glory’s menu is consciously designed to treat the ailments of grief and pain that grip the house. Apart from her mother’s signature dish of chicken and dumplings, Glory also dispenses biscuits, brownies, coffee, pancakes, potato soup, poached eggs, roast beef, dinner rolls, and bread: “Glory made up a batch of bread

dough. Brown bread was her father's preference. Something to lift the spirits of the household, she thought" (109). Later she locates the source of the food's therapeutic power in its aroma:

How to announce the return of comfort and well-being except by cooking something fragrant? That is what her mother always did. After every calamity of any significance she would fill the atmosphere of the house with the smell of cinnamon rolls or brownies, or with chicken and dumplings, and it would mean, This house has a soul that loves us all, no matter what. (263)

The same sensory link is also made by Thomas Mann in his novel *The Magic Mountain*. The novel's protagonist arrives at an unfamiliar place, and inhales deeply, "testing the alien air". The deep breath affects his biological body, but does not speak to his *person* in any meaningful way: "It was fresh—that was all. It lacked odor, content, moisture, it went easily into the lungs and said nothing to the soul" (8-9). Later in the novel, Mann explains that this odourless, dry and empty air "evoked no memories" (115). In both *The Magic Mountain* and *Home*, the protagonists take for granted the fact that one's soul and one's spirit need tending, as much as do the mind and body. This attitude stands in contrast to the situation described in "Tenth of December", which presents a post-soul, de-spirited approach to illness, where the major medical focus is on tending the body.

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Set almost sixty years later than *Home*, George Saunders' story "Tenth of December" represents the small town America inherited by Boughton's descendants. On the face of it, the "Tenth of December" world is populated by people who are more easily and instantly connected than at any previous point in human history. Yet the

protagonists are profoundly isolated individuals. Saunders paints this theme, isolation, into the story's structure and setting. Where *Home* unfolded over an entire summer; Saunders' story is set on a single winter's day. In this landscape, instead of *Home*'s flowing river, there is a frozen-over pond, and "Tenth of December", as one of ten free-standing short stories in Saunders' eponymous collection, is pond-like in its outer form. Within the story, the free indirect narrative style alternates between the protagonists' points of view, so that the story is pieced together from eight separate chunks. In contrast to *Home*, where Glory's inner world is expressed with literary grace and grammatical fullness, in "Tenth of December" syntax tends to brevity and is often fragmentary.

Although both texts begin with a threshold moment, the natures of the crossings are quite different. In *Home*, Boughton's illness having prompted reconnection and home-coming, Glory is welcomed indoors by her father. In "Tenth of December", illness prompts distancing. The story opens with two people leaving their family homes. Robin, an adolescent boy, is not ill in a physical, pathological sense. He carries emotional wounds, however, having "lowly school status" and being teased to a "subtenable" extent (Saunders 241). He enacts his sense of being on the outer by getting "suited up" in his father's white jacket and boots and leaving his house for the frozen landscape (215-217). His near neighbour, 53 year old Don Eber, who has a terminal brain tumour, is already out there in the snow. In contrast to the close-knit Gilead community of *Home*, however, Robin and Eber have never met. Their connection and communication begin, eventually, when Robin falls through the ice on the pond, and Eber hauls him out, getting drenched in the process. Before this moment, however, each trudges separately through the cold, entirely self-absorbed, talking to himself and to imaginary companions.

Eber's actual fall through the cracks in the pond echoes the metaphorical fall he has already taken, through the cracks that have opened up in his dealings with medicine. He is being steadily stripped, by brain cancer, of his abilities to function in the roles which furnish his identity. Fundamental to this process, Eber is losing language:

More and more his words. Askew. More and more his were not what he would hoped.

Hope. (223)

The grammatical structure which supports complex thought is beginning to fail. He can still, however, compose a particularly crucial whole sentence: "*He was a father*". It is in the capacity of this core identity that he chooses to make an outcast of himself, walking into the snow to die: "*That's what a father does. Eases the burdens of those he loves*" (224, original italics). He foresees himself becoming an object of disgust and horror to his wife and children: "MollyTommyJodi huddling in the kitchen filled with pity/loathing, MollyTommyJodi recoiling at something cruel he'd said, Tommy hefting his thin torso up in his arms so that MollyJodi could get under there with a wash—". His decision, therefore, has "preempted all future debasement" (232). It is an "incredible opportunity to end things with dignity" (233).

Eber's thinking reveals the extent to which, in the "Tenth of December" world, the restitution narrative described by Frank has become the pervasive narrative mode for illness. It starkly exposes, too, the problem of illness which, by not getting better, refuses to conform to this model. The preference for a restitution ending in illness reflects the dominance of the restitution narrative in the culture at large, where, in a consumer-orientated world, broken objects are not mended, but discarded, to be replaced by a newer model. Value is linked to utility: an object's "use-value" dictates its "use-time"; utility failure results in the "temporal horizon" of obsolescence (Viney 7).

Saunders embeds this ‘throw-away society’ into the textual landscape of “Tenth of December”, which is littered with broken fragments and discarded mistakes. In Eber’s voice these manifest in grammatical incompleteness and truncated sentences: “That had somehow never—”; “Never a harsh, etc.,etc.” (223). The most obvious problem, however, is with inaccurate word selection: “What a victory he was wresting. From the jaws of the feet” (230); “For now there was still snow, but snow couldn’t last long in this bomb. Balm” (243). This creeping disintegration of language is horrifying to Eber, who remembers his stepfather, Allen, dying of a similar disease. In a tragi-comic scene, Allen’s language problems culminate in a loss of both civility and civilisation: “Went from a shy man, always placing a reassuring hand on your back, to a diminished pale figure in a bed, shouting CUNT! Except with some weird New England accent so it came out KANT!” (224). Without language, mind (Kant, reason and male) and body (cunt, instinct and female) collapse indistinguishably. Allen is dehumanised: at best an animal, at worst an object. “Soon,” remembers Eber, “Allen had become THAT. And no one was going to fault anybody for avoiding THAT” (225).

Eber is particularly haunted by the prospect of losing his personal dignity: “Next thing you knew, you were THAT, shouting KANT!, shitting your bed, swatting at the people who were scrambling to clean you” (225). Here again is the issue of personal autonomy, the idea that retaining control of one’s life constitutes “the very marrow of being human”. This view echoes Heidegger’s notion that the “essence of human existence” is “the ability to *be* this or another thing, to assume a role—as a teacher, a musician and so on” (Carel 15). Eber identifies strongly as a caring father and a husband. He is proud that, in contrast to how his father behaved towards him, his own children “had never come close to being abandoned” (Saunders 244). His terminal illness, however, now threatens to falsify this vital marker of his identity.

Boughton, in *Home*, also experiences the impact of illness as a diminishment of role, status, identity and autonomy, and he also struggles to accept the loss of dignity which accompanies this. But his different belief system allows for a transition to an identity validated, not by utility and autonomy, but by being. His concept of God provides a template for situations which are impossible to control through human will. At such times, a “loftier” authority applies. “We worship,” he explains, “to enlarge our sense of the holy, so that we can feel and know the presence of the Lord, who is with us always.... Love is what it amounts to, a loftier love, and pleasure in a loving presence” (Robinson 115). Thus, when Boughton is dying, he is comforted by the thought that the Lord sees him even in his extreme dependence, and waits to welcome him in death. Death is leaving one’s home on Earth for the Lord’s house: a going home of the spirit. Boughton has an expectation of rest and release, as expressed in one of his favourite hymns: “When all my trials and troubles are o’er, and I awake on that beautiful shore” (321).

Eber’s expectations of death are also faith-based, but his faith is in scientific rationalism. His is a bio-deterministic worldview. He rails that having cancer isn’t “fair”, but he recognises the irrationality in such an attitude:

He’d kept waiting for some special dispensation. But no.

Something/someone bigger than him kept refusing. You were told the big something/someone loved you especially but in the end you saw it was otherwise. The big something/someone was neutral. Unconcerned.

When it innocently moved, it crushed people. (Saunders 231)

Shaped by his secular and scientific education, Eber holds a materialistic and mechanistic view of his existence. He understands his consciousness as a biological feature within a biological body. For him, death is an organic process acting on an

organic structure. Death eliminates the self because it eliminates the neuro-biological source of consciousness: the brain. It is an easy step, then, to also equate the perceived uselessness of his unfixable body with out-of-date machinery: to die, in Eber's view, is to be "defunct" (231).

Eber has no medical training, but as a child of the scientific age he knows more about human anatomy than any pre-Enlightenment physician. He and his wife Molly have even seen inside the human brain:

Years ago at the *Illuminated Body* he and Molly had seen this brain slice. Marring the brain slice had been a nickel-sized brown spot. That brown spot was all it had taken to kill the guy. Guy must have had his hopes and dreams, closet full of pants, and so on, some treasured childhood memories: a mob of koi in the willow shade at Gage Park, say, Gram searching in her Wrigley's-smelling purse for a tissue—like that. If not for that brown spot, the guy might have been one of the people walking by on the way to lunch in the atrium. But no. He was defunct now, off rotting somewhere, no brain in his head. (231)

It is clear that Eber recognises the *person* attached to the brain slice: a personhood evoked by "hopes and dreams", by "pants" hanging in a wardrobe, by a memory of "Gram" floating from the memory of the smell of Wrigley's. Yet, for Eber the pathophysiological status of the brain slice is the defining and determining feature of the illness. Such a reductive view, a *Tin Roof Blowdown*-style "faith in the exactitude of medical science", can only result in an attitude of fatalistic pessimism. It ignores the range of lived experiences which form the reality of illness, and the widely variable quality of each ill person's journey. Carel refers to the concept of "health within illness" and points to studies carried out from a phenomenological perspective which show

“large variation in the meaning and impact of illness and in the coping mechanisms developed in response to it” (77). Eber’s biodeterminist outlook, however, is shared by his doctor. Unable to offer a restitution ending for Eber’s story, Dr Spivey doodles on a Post-it and struggles for words:

As for Dr. Spivey, he couldn’t say. Wouldn’t say. Was busy drawing a daisy on a Post-it. Then he finally said, Well, honestly? As these things grow, they can tend to do weird things. But it doesn’t necessarily have to be terrible. Had one guy? Just always craved him a Sprite.

And Eber had thought, Did you, dear doctor/saviour/lifeline, just say *craved him a Sprite?* (Saunders 225, original italics)

This is the moment that Eber falls through the cracks in the biomedical paradigm. He hears the doctor say that there is no cure. He hears the doctor speak “honestly” about what “can tend” to happen: “weird things”. There is none of biomedicine’s implied promise of “exactitude”; there is only vagueness and uncertainty. Eber reels. For him, the conversation is deeply personal. It knocks him ‘out of true’ into a new reality. This is not a personal conversation for Spivey, however, despite the casual, chummy-sounding register in which he speaks (“Had one guy?”). Crucially, Spivey does not attempt to cross the divide which has just opened between him and his patient. It is unclear whether he is even aware of this gap. He wants to inform, but is unable to provide facts. In the absence of solid information, he withdraws. Not only do his words fail to reassure, but Spivey’s gaze seems to be, not on Eber, but on his doodling. In this crucial consulting moment, Dr Spivey acknowledges Eber’s “brown spot” but completely effaces Eber’s *person*. Eber, in response, although shocked, is not

truly surprised. The sarcasm of his “dear doctor/saviour/lifeline” is revealing of a private—but close-to-the-surface—‘dis-belief’ system, an ironic stance born of Eber’s lived experiences with the practice and narratives of biomedicine. Faith in Medicine turns out to be the same as faith in God: “The big something/someone was neutral. Unconcerned. When it innocently moved, it crushed people” (231).

In *Home*, by contrast, an attentive medical scrutiny is one of Teddy’s defining characteristics. Glory observes him greeting their alcoholic brother Jack, who is recovering from a failed suicide attempt: “Teddy didn’t study him, exactly, though there was always something of the doctor in his kindest attention.... Now he could not help but notice Jack’s color, notice how thin his hand was, that it trembled” (Robinson 269). Teddy is not only reading the body for physiological signs. He is reading the embodied *person*. Thus, when he greets Glory he takes in her emotional state by “making a brief study of her face, noting ... the weariness of it” (265). He gazes more attentively yet: “Once again he studied her face. She had been frightened so recently, and she was sad, and so tired, and it was all surely visible to him” (266). Teddy’s concept of diagnosis is not limited to pathological classifications. This allows him a wider concept of medicine, including, where necessary, the gentle turning of a pillow so as to cool the cheek, and the prescribing of chicken and dumplings. Approaching his patients with this wider conceptualisation of pain in mind, Teddy seeks to read the shape and colour of the mood and the spirit even as he observes skin pallor or a distended abdomen. Julavits’ nostalgia for the village doctor expresses a craving for this kind of medical attention. In “Tenth of December”, Dr Spivey’s “guy” may inadvertently be expressing a similar nostalgia, given that he “always craved him a Sprite” (Saunders 225).

Sprite, the brand name of a popular fizzy drink, is a ubiquitous commodity, cheap, easily purchased. Once consumed it is readily replaced. A sprite, on the other

hand, is a supernatural being: a “nimble elflike creature, especially one associated with water” (*Collins* def. 1). The word is derived from the Old French *esprit*, from Latin *spiritus*, and is thus related to *spirare*, to breathe, and to ‘spirit’. The primary denotation of spirit given by *Collins English Dictionary* is “the force or principle of life that animates the body of living things”. The multiple other definitions cover (among other concepts) temperament, character, states of mind, mood, energy or emotion, the “soul of a dead person”, and the idea of disappearing without trace (being “spirited away”) (defs 1-14). Capitalised, Spirit is a religious term: “another name for the Holy Ghost”, or “God”, and also denotes “the influence of God or divine things upon the soul” (defs 1-3).

Perhaps Dr Spivey’s “guy” craved a sprite, not a Sprite. Perhaps he yearned to have his spirit recognised, or to recognise his Spirit. Dr Spivey, at any rate, remains oblivious to any deeper associations. Meanwhile, Eber’s consultation with Dr Spivey is traumatising to Eber because it injures his spirit in multiple ways: bruising his character, his mood, his animating principle. To Dr Spivey, Eber’s spirit is invisible, non-existent. Eber is thus reduced in his doctor’s estimation, and therefore in his own, to “purely the dying guy” (Saunders 234). Later, profoundly isolated by his diagnosis, dispirited, despairing, he walks into the snow. The loss of agency he feels over his life disturbs the profulence of its narrative, a fact which is revealed in broken language as well as in broken physical activity. Intending to die posed “cross-legged against the boulder at the top of hill”, he lacks the strength to climb the hill. He falls. “Maybe,” he thinks, “this was it. Maybe this was as far as he got” (232). He prepares to die, telling himself to focus on the “beauty” of the surrounding landscape, to which he, as a biological being, will be “returning”: “Concentrate on the beauty of the pond, the beauty of the woods, the beauty you are returning to....” (233). This “beauty”, however, remains a mental

idea, disconnected from sensual or spiritual perception. It is, in consequence, not fully dimensional, and its flatness makes it unconvincing.

The teenaged Robin, out for a winter's walk in "Tenth of December", is also dispirited. He, too, despairs. His is a world dominated by measurement thinking, in which the phenomenological world of embodied experience is pushed to one side. Looking for meaning, he often doubts the evidence of his own senses, seeking a scientific-sounding explanation instead: "Crunch went the snow as he crossed the soccer field. Why did cold such as this give a running guy a headache? Likely it was due to Prominent Wind Speed Velocity" (218). Robin's narrative is sprinkled with scientific and mathematical terms, quantifying language, measurements and statistics. His imaginary enemies, the Nethers, for example, are "small but, upon emerging, assumed certain proportions... That was just their methodology" (215). He imagines wearing a spacesuit and conversing with NASA, who tell him "*We have your coordinates*" (217, original italics). "Duck thermometer read ten," he notes as he steps outside. "And that was without wind-chill" (217).

Yet even as Robin tries to make sense of the world by classification of its various parts, he yearns for emotional connection and for experience which goes beneath the surface. In Robin's world, this connective, emotional approach is regarded as, for males, belonging to childhood. It is a 'feminine' attribute: "The thing about girls?" his imagined girlfriend Suzanne tells him in his head, "Is we are more content-driven" (219). A boy on the brink of manhood, Robin yearns to be allowed to retain his emotional content, and his contentment. He also longs for physical and emotional connection, imagining wistfully that Suzanne desires "a man who likes to play and hug" (220).

Caught up in a self-narrated heroic fantasy epic starring himself, Robin falls actually and metaphorically between the cracks when he attempts to carry out a “real rescue”. He finds Eber’s discarded coat, and sees a “sad confused grandpa” figure “halfway up Lexow Hill” wearing “what looked like pajamas” (221). In superhero mode, he plans to “fly up the hillside like a delivering wraith or mercy angel” to rescue this lost “Nether” (227). Fleetinglly, he recognises that the “definition of a hero” in this actual situation is far less grandiose: he must “hump his coat up that big-ass hill, which, due to its steepness, is not exactly my cup of tea” (228). A separate line of thought starts up, and runs parallel to his fantasy narrative, as Robin attempts to get a fix on his situation by calculating and measuring: “Estimated time of overtaking the Nether, handing him his coat? Approximately nine minutes. Six minutes to follow the path around the pond, an additional three minutes to fly up the hillside...” (227). Suzanne’s imagined voice chips in: “Well, just working through the math in terms of simple geometry”, and Robin pursues this logic, deciding to “cut across the pond, thereby decreasing the ambient angle, ergo trimming valuable seconds off his catch-up time” (228). Not much later, moments before crashing through the ice, he judges himself to be “approximately three-quarters, or that would be sixty percent, across” (229). The problem with Robin’s two trains of thought is that they do not connect: they are not integrated.

As an archetype, the role of superhero is super-certain, super-confident and super-successful. As a model for living, it represents the kind of category rigidity that is actively resisted throughout Robinson’s novel, where the focus is on finding meaning in the spaces between polarised positions. The ‘real’, *Home* suggests, is found in the in-between zones, and in the manner of negotiating this interspace. The vehicle for this negotiation is language, especially an integrative, deep engagement with the mutable

features of language. This process *is* the content (and the contentment), and the process consists of persistent—if tentative—articulation in the constant presence of doubt and uncertainty. In contrast, the text of “Tenth of December” reveals a measurement-driven culture intent on declaring certainties and finding meaning through classification.

Robin’s attempt to walk across the iced-over pond tests the usefulness of complete reliance on this approach. When he reaches the “iffy”, or “grayish” zone on the pond, he falls through (Saunders 229).

From halfway up the hill, where he has collapsed, Eber reacts instinctively: “He was on his way down before he knew he’d started. *Kid in the pond, kid in the pond*, ran repetitively through his head as he minced” (234, original italics). Jolted out of his monadic orientation into a relational, connective mode, his *person* is re-animated:

Suddenly he was not purely the dying guy ... but again, partly, the guy who used to put bananas in the freezer, then crack them on the counter and pour chocolate over the broken chunks, the guy who’d once stood outside a classroom window in a rainstorm to see how Jodi was faring with that little red-headed shit who wouldn’t give her a chance at the book table, the guy who used to hand-paint birdfeeders in college and sell them on weekends in Boulder, wearing a jester hat and doing a little juggling routine he’d— (234)

The phenomenological world opens up: Eber’s life *as experienced* floods through him, not only as colour, taste and tactility, but also as bodily movement, and as the tangible feeling of a caring love. He finds he is still a father, after all: “Eber went down on one knee and told the kid in a grave fatherly way that he had to get up, had to get moving or he could lose his legs, he could die” (237). Saving Robin brings him back to his *person*, a much more fulsome and give-able self than the cruel ‘THAT’ promised by a patho-

physiological focus on his diagnosis. He gives the boy nearly all his clothing and, when Robin flees, is left “standing bereft and blue-skinned in his tighy-whites....” (242). But now Eber, his identity in its compassionate and relational roles re-established, his *person* resurrected, wants to live: “Suddenly he saw clearly how cruel it was. And selfish” (246).

Meanwhile, when Robin realises that in his panic he has left Eber nearly naked in the snow, he dithers again in an “iffy”, “grayish” zone, this time between child and adult, boy and man, unable to connect what he has internalised as two separate modes of thinking: “His mind was telling him ... to go back now, save the day. His body was saying something else: It’s too far, you’re just a kid, get Mom, Mom will know what to do”. He does indeed “get Mom”, and Mom does “know what to do” (243). She guides Eber to her house. Until this point in the story, Eber’s perceptual awareness has been dominated by mental ruminations. His few sensory impressions have been fleeting, as when a “cardinal zinged across the day” (222), or weak and sour, as when he thinks of his future: “Waft of shit smell” (225). Now the physical and sensory world begins to pour in, as Robin’s mother tends him with “various things from life”. The scene is a bodily one, full of mammalian sensation and images of maternal love:

To keep him alive she started piling various things from life: things smelling of a home—coats, sweaters, a rain of flowers, a hat, socks, sneakers—and with amazing strength had him on his feet and was maneuvering him into a maze of trees, a wonderland of trees, trees hung with ice. He was piled high with clothes. He was like the bed at a party on which they pile the coats. She had all the answers: where to step, when to rest. She was strong as a bull. He was on her hip now like a baby; she had both arms around his waist, lifting him over a root. (247)

In Robin's home, the first thing Eber notices is the smell. Unlike Mann's empty air or Eber's wafts, these smells are both content-rich and contentment-rich. The feelings they evoke in Eber echo Glory's sense, in *Home*, that cooking chicken and dumplings means "this house has a soul": "It smelled of man sweat and spaghetti sauce and old books. Like a library where sweaty men went to cook spaghetti. She sat him in front of a woodstove, brought him a brown blanket that smelled of medicine" (Robinson 263; Saunders 248). The images thrown together in these few sentences are drawn from juxtaposed positions: body (sweat) and mind (library); past (old books) and present; male and female. What links the polarities, infusing the blanket with the smell of medicine, is Robin's mother's connecting acts of compassion and kindness. "What a thing!" Eber expostulates. "To go from dying in your underwear in the snow to this! Warmth, colors, antlers on the wall, an old-time crank phone like you saw in silent movies" (Saunders 248).

Yet, jubilant though this moment is, it represents something of an overcorrection in attitude, risking an unrealistic sentimentalisation or romanticising of the situation. Robin's mother steps in once more. She touches Eber's surgical scar, thus instantly reconnecting Eber to his "brown spot". Eber, panicking, thinks: "Oh, Lord, there was still all that to go through. Did he still want it? Did he still want to live?" (248). The essence of the Reverend Boughton's notion of the posture of grace can be heard in Eber's answer.

Eber has always articulated his life's purpose in terms of caring for those he loves. His epiphany is in comprehending the relational essence of the meaning of care. Love, he sees, is brought into being by the actions of love. To be fully enacted, love must be fully relational, and thus requires humility as well as strength. The extent of the vulnerability this entails causes Eber to involuntarily fall into language expressive of the

soul and the spirit. “Oh Lord,” he sighs, and then: “Yes, yes, oh God, yes, please” (248). But this does not represent a religious conversion. Eber’s viewpoint is framed by his secular culture. God, here, is almost a linguistic relic, evidence of a once widespread but now abandoned idea. Yet the word retains resonance in this context, speaking to the meta-physical, mystical and ineffable aspects of human experience. Eber’s insight, so hard-won, exemplifies the enlightenment conclusion of a classic quest narrative. There is no restitution ending available to Eber; he will die. Yet his recent confrontation with monsters—in the form of his hitherto neglected metaphysical and emotional pain—results in a transformative healing experience:

Because, okay, the thing was—he saw it now, was starting to see it—if some guy, at the end, fell apart, and said or did bad things, or had to be helped, helped to quite a considerable extent? So what? What of it? Why should he not do or say weird things or look strange or disgusting? Why should the shit not run down his legs? Why should those he loved not lift and bend and feed and wipe him, when he would gladly do the same for them? He’d been afraid to be lessened by the lifting and bending and feeding and wiping, and was still afraid of that, and yet, at the same time, now saw that there could still be many—many drops of goodness, is how it came to him—many drops of happy—of good fellowship—ahead, and those drops of fellowship were not—had never been—his to withhold.

Withhold. (248-9)

Eber’s stance in relation to his illness changes profoundly with this realisation. He forgives himself, and thus—as Boughton would have it—stops defending himself “against the possibility of understanding” (Robinson 47). Although he is “still afraid”

(Saunders 249), he lets go, and in that moment, paradoxically, finds the ‘give’ which frees him to take.

This insight triggers a veritable cascade of related insights about suffering, forgiveness, acceptance, compassion and love, all hinging on acts of forgiveness. First Eber forgives Robin for “being such a dope in the woods” and “running off”. “That was something you could do,” he thinks. “The kid maybe felt better now? He’d given the kid that? That was a reason. To stay around. Wasn’t it? Can’t console anyone if not around? Can’t do squat if gone?” (249). Hot on the heels of this, he remembers his stepfather, realising suddenly that despite the effects of his disease, Allen remained Allen, and that the essential and enduring attribute of Allen’s character was his kindness: “Ha, wow, Allen. There was a man,” thinks Eber. “I’ll be like him, he thought. I’ll try to be like him” (250). Then, thinking of his wife Molly, the notion of forgiveness crystallises in an intensely embodied memory about the early days of his marriage:

When they were first married they used to fight. Say the most insane things. Afterward, sometimes there would be tears. Tears in bed? And then they would—Molly pressing her hot wet face against his hot wet face. They were sorry, they were saying with their bodies, they were accepting each other back, and that feeling of being accepted back again and again, of someone’s affection for you expanding to encompass whatever new flawed thing had just manifested in you, that was the deepest, dearest thing he’d ever— (250-251)

When at last Molly arrives, she is “flustered and apologetic”: “She was angry at him for pulling this stunt and ashamed of herself for feeling angry at him in his hour of need.” She wrestles with these emotions, “trying to put the shame and anger behind her now so she could do what might be needed.” Eber sees the outcome bloom on her face

in an expression of love and concern, and the balance tips. Molly steps up, literally and metaphorically. Eber's relief, as Molly moves towards him, is palpable. It isn't as easy for Molly, as the final sentence in the story reveals: "She came to him now, stumbling a bit on a swell in the floor of this stranger's house" (251). The image offers a jolt to any idealistic notions about the journey ahead. It foreshadows a more difficult reality, a journey across strange, unknown territory.

This conclusion might be read as a fatal blow to Eber's recent transformational experience. Yet this would be to insist on reading the last sentence in isolation, separated from its wider context, and to forget already the story's deeper theme about the value of making the tough journey from separation, isolation and cold to integration, relationship and warmth. With this in mind, Saunders' final sentence can only be fully understood in relation to the previous sentence, which is its gentle corrective: "Overriding everything else in that lovely face was concern" (251).

## **Conclusion**

*Home* and "Tenth of December" offer compelling phenomenological accounts of the subjective experience of illness in the 1950s and in the present day. A comparison of the texts points to some shared aspects of this experience, but also to some stark differences. Both Reverend Boughton in *Home* and Don Eber in "Tenth of December" struggle with losing key aspects of self-identity, especially the ability to function in the roles and relationships that have previously defined them. The differences are exposed in the way that these characters, their families and their doctors react to this. In *Home*, where biomedicine is in its infancy, this struggle is recognised as an important part of what ails Boughton. In "Tenth of December", Don Eber's twenty-first century illness

experience is characterised by sophisticated biomedical treatment of the body, such as chemotherapy and surgeries. This specialised attention divides Eber into his constituent biological systems, and at the same time crowds out the space available for attention to other aspects of his experience. The resultant imbalance—which echoes concerns by Carel, Gawande and others about the contemporary biomedical model—is unhealthy, as the bleakness of Eber’s subjective experience demonstrates.

In both *Home* and “Tenth of December”, the corrective to this bleakness lies in nourishing a worldview which emphasises integration, connection and relationship. The texts offer important insights into how the perceived imbalance can be redressed, most powerfully, it is suggested, with care that is addressed to the *person* rather than only to the pathology. The balance sought is a dynamic equilibrium, requiring respectful and sustained attention, sensitivity to others’ positions as well as one’s own, and willingness to change. Both texts gently emphasise that this approach is difficult to practice.

Arguably also, both *Home* and “Tenth of December” examine these themes with particular attention to the art of letting go, and the humility involved in accepting care from others. Relatively unexamined are the situations experienced by those who accept the burden of care: Glory, for example, who must put aside her own independence for the sake of maintaining her father’s, and Molly, who trips on the unfamiliar, uneven floor as she goes to support her husband. This is a level of inquiry which demands more attention. In the creative section which follows, I pursue this aspect of “the posture of grace” in more detail. *Strip* is set in contemporary New Zealand, and is the story of a family dealing with the serious illness of their teenage daughter. It examines how the burden of care is distributed in this cultural context, and looks more closely at the bumpy ground that Saunders intimates the burden-taker must negotiate.

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**Section Two: Creative Thesis**

*Strip*

**An extract from a novel-in-progress**

## Introduction

The creative section of this thesis is an extract from *Strip*, a novel-in-progress. In order to comply with the requirements for maximum word count in a thesis, the extract consists of four chapters from Part One and the whole of Part Two (the middle section) of the novel. Part Three of *Strip* is not presented here, but deals with the consequences of a decision made by a character at the end of this extract.

The novel is written in free indirect narrative style from the alternating points of view of Harvey Wright and his wife Isobel. Both are nearly forty when the novel opens. The first three chapters (not presented here) describe Isobel and Harvey facing up to the reality that they cannot have children. When Isobel, a museum administrator, is offered a more demanding, high-powered position at work, the opportunity seems timely. She accepts, a decision which allows Harvey to give up his full time practice as a general practitioner, and devote most of his time to developing his cartoon strip, ‘Dr Doctor’. To both Isobel’s and Harvey’s surprise, Harvey’s strip becomes wildly popular, and Harvey falls into a new career of his own. He becomes a public figure, the ‘funny doctor’, widely regarded as a specialist in health and humour. Settled in their new vocations, Isobel and Harvey put the idea of having children behind them. Then, out of the blue, they are offered an abandoned baby for adoption. The creative thesis opens at this point in their story, with chapters 4-8 of *Strip*, which follow Harvey and Isobel through the intense and difficult period of readjustment after they take the baby, Fleur, into their home. A brief synopsis of chapters 9-11 is then provided, describing plot details important to the reader’s understanding of Part Two of the novel.

Part Two of *Strip* is presented in full. It describes a two year period, during which teenage Fleur becomes seriously ill. This section explores the ideas expressed in *Home* and “Tenth of December” surrounding the notion of finding grace in suffering:

forgiveness, acceptance, dignity and balance. The focus, however, is on the caregivers' experiences. Recalling Glory's resentment, in *Home*, about the sacrifices made to her own autonomy so that her father might retain his, and Molly, in "Tenth of December" stumbling as she comes forward to support her husband, this section looks at how the burden of care is distributed in this family, and how this affects the story of Fleur's illness for everyone involved.

***STRIP*****Part One**

## CHAPTER FOUR

Isobel didn't recognise the caller display number, and almost didn't answer the phone. It would be for Harvey, who was in his studio. He could pick it up on the extension. He didn't of course. He routinely ignored the phone. As it rang on she reminded herself she wasn't his PA, but her resolve broke just before it clicked over to voicemail. She picked it up. "Isobel speaking." Later that night, lying in bed unable to sleep, she relived the conversation. It had a car-on-skids unreality to it. She had floated above the action, while the foundations of her world slewed and tipped. It wasn't that Isobel had *forgotten* the adoption register, it was more that she'd archived the idea. It had been four years after all, since she last heard that voice, and at that meeting the social worker had more or less said forget it. Unless you want to try international. Now that same stolid don't-get-your-hopes-up voice said, "We think we may have a baby for you." Then the floaty sensation started, and Isobel was up above the swirling details, grasping at facts as they slid past. She heard herself tell the social worker all manner of rational things, such as needing to think, needing to talk to Harvey, and also that meeting tomorrow at nine was perfect. Then she stumbled through to Harvey's study, where he was bent over his desk, drawing. She couldn't find the words to start. She leaned on the door jamb until he looked up.

"My God, Isobel. Are you all right?"

"Yeah. No. Yeah. I don't know. That was ... that was the social worker. There's a baby, Harve. A little girl." She looked at him for a signal. Any signal. Expressionless, he stared back. Finally he swiveled his chair and opened his arms. Isobel walked across the

room. The floating feeling had vanished. Now she struggled for forward momentum, wading mud. When his arms went around her she could not at first lean on him, not fully. Her leaden self might crush him, bruise him. He was insistent, dear Harvey, her prop, her scaffold. He didn't say a thing, but pulled her closer. Eventually, they pulled apart.

Harvey put the cap on his pen. "Cup of tea, then," he said.

"I guess," said Isobel.

He brought the tea into the lounge, and Isobel shifted her legs off the couch to make room for him. It was the same old couch they had sat on to discuss Isobel accepting her new job and Harvey ditching his old one. It was the same old living room: the same small orderly pile of Isobel's books on the coffee table; the same large and disorderly chaos of Harvey's various piles of various objects—his keys, a selection of fine-nibbed pens, a couple of medical journals, a skew-whiff mountain of back copies of *The New Yorker* given to him recently by a friend. What was different, thought Isobel, was the atmosphere: something in the air itself had changed. The barometric pressure had lifted, or perhaps dropped. Which? It was extremely difficult to say. She was like a woman tapping on the case of a broken dial. Tap, tap . . . nothing. Harvey's face was guarded. She couldn't read it. She couldn't read herself, so swiftly did her reactions replace one another and run on. They were both grasping for the response they had thought they'd feel, and—Isobel realised—neither felt it. Shouldn't they be delighted? It dawned on her that what she really felt, now that the first shock was subsiding, was dismay. Which was appalling. She sat up straight. She would admit it if he would admit it. Cautiously, she said, "What are you thinking?"

"Well, it's fraught, isn't it? More fraught than usual, wouldn't you say? They found her on the church step, is that right?"

“In the porch. In a cardboard box. Wrapped up in a towel. With a blanket. Not many hours old. They think.” She fiddled with the tassels on the rug thrown over the back of the sofa. She plaited them together and unwound them, plaited them again. A soft blanket? Was it soft, mohair, like this one? Or was it a worn-out harsh woollen one, rough and scratchy? Or not even wool. Cotton, nylon, polyester? Who could leave their baby in a box? Wouldn't she change her mind, the mother? And then the image of a newborn without the cradle of maternal arms—right down in her guts she felt a kick, or a wrench. Hostile womb, how dare that man use that term! If he could feel what she had endured for years! Never hostile. Painful, yes. Days and nights of ache, of yearning: to be pregnant, to give birth, to breastfeed, to hold her baby, coo to it, rock it to sleep, smile it to wake. All that stuff. She thought it had stopped calling to her, but god, feel that, that stirring. *Save me, save me*, as if from the bottom of a well.

“I think it's got to be your decision Isobel. I will back you up, whatever.”

He was giving her an out. She twisted the rug tassels tightly, released them. “A baby,” she said, cautiously, although her heart was pounding. “But my job. What would I do about my job?”

Harvey shrugged. “We'd work it out.”

“A baby, Harvey. We're having a baby.”

“Could have a baby,” he corrected her.

Yes, yes, I understand, she thought. Have to remember it might not come off. The birth mother might come back. Of course she knew that, but louder than that ugly bureaucratic tick-every-box thinking was that song, overpowering in its sweetness and intensity, deep in her belly.... Not really delight. More wonderment. But she had said out loud what she had never thought would be said. We're having a baby. It sounded, well, it *tolled*. It was a rightness. She rode a swell of joy, abandoned herself to it, and to

what lay beyond. For the first time since Harvey had sat down next to her—no, she realised with a start, make that for the first time in months—she looked him fully in the eye. It made her realise how far apart they had become. It made her realise that something had unraveled between them, something that appeared to have its roots deep in her own self. She knew this only because she could feel it, whatever it was, swiftly knitting itself back together. Warm, warm. She breathed out, still holding Harvey's eye.

“Do you want to take it further?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. And there it was, sheer and utter: the delight.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“Yes,” said Isobel, and Harvey fought slippery panic. He had thought she’d say no. He really thought they’d reached the no point. Her job, his strip. Everything going so well. He thought they were at that point someone—D. H. Lawrence?—said *was* the point: this contented immersion in their work. She was looking at him, her eyes sparkling, barely keeping in check the twitching of an emerging smile. She was waiting for his response, and he realised he’d been fooling himself. She still suffered, oh god, he saw that now. Desire neglected and desire unrequited, desire potent and raw, desire quite indistinguishable from need. “Okay,” he said slowly, meaning merely to play for time.

“Really, Harvey?” The hope that flared on her face! Harvey swallowed. “Okay,” he said again. “All right. Wow. We’re having a baby. Maybe.” His panic flicked again and he pushed it down. Panic wouldn’t help. There was no cause for panic. But everything had changed. Not in the catastrophic manner of a dam-burst, wiping out everything downstream of the dam—not quite catastrophically—but as the opening of a sluice gate into a rough-cut, never-before-tested channel: rambunctiously, irrevocable, loaded with danger. “We’ll take it step by step,” he told Isobel. “We don’t have to commit to anything yet. It might all come to nothing, eh.”

“What’ll we need?” said Isobel. She leapt up to grab a pen and paper. “Booties, stretch’n’grows, singlets. Um, nappies! Bloody hell, Harve. Changing table. Bassinette?”

“Slow down, slow down,” he warned her. “Let’s see what the social worker says tomorrow. We haven’t even seen the ... her ... yet.” His mind was whirring too, also making lists. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Methamphetamines. HIV. Lots of tests, he would insist. He reserved the right to veto this whole thing, on medical grounds. No need to say so to Isobel, it was a bridge they’d cross if necessary. He’d get her over it. Right

now she was more animated than he'd seen her in years. She wanted to phone Sarah, but he said, not yet, maybe after the meeting tomorrow. Christ, he thought, slow down Izzy. Isobel had fetched her laptop to google layettes. She gave a little gasp. Harvey glanced over. "What?"

"Look," Isobel whispered. The social worker had sent a photo. His heart flipped, melted. But no, be careful. But, look, her eyes were wide open. Alert as. A newborn baby searching for an answering gaze. Needing that gaze. There she was. Their baby. Oh, she was gorgeous. No, be careful. But. Perhaps.

## CHAPTER SIX

It was midwinter. The southerlies kept coming, battering the weatherboards, thrashing the stripped trees. On and on went that winter, went the ordeal. Through the pale washed-out day and through the black night the wind shrieked and the baby shrieked. Isobel was chapped, chilblained, exhausted. She was blown towards the baby in the cot, or she stood still and was shredded like the trees. Harvey had picked up extra clinics for the first six months. Each morning when he left the house the wind blew the front door in a brutal final slam, locking her in with the baby. Locking her in to play mother. To play mum. To play numb. Words were splitting apart and reforming like that, their meanings ungraspable, fleeing across the surface of her mind like the clouds streaming over the harbour. From the picture window in the lounge she watched Harvey as he emerged from their gate onto the street and set off for the practice in the suburban shopping centre three blocks away. She saw how jaunty he became, jauntier and jauntier with each step away from the house.

Occasionally a day would dawn doused in weak low-voltage light from a pale blue sky, cloudless and still. These were days Isobel would wrap the baby, grimly ignoring her yells, and plunk her into the buggy. She would wrap herself: hat, coat, boots. A smear of lipstick, a cranked-up cranked-out smile that was more of a grimace. No wonder, she thought, the baby screamed. She was probably scared of this witch-woman. She'd soften for a moment, feeling sorry for her, bending down to kiss the child on the top of her wool-capped head. And if only once the child had glanced up and not screamed in response! But she always did, and Isobel's thaw would snap cold again, and she'd become brisk, clipping the straps and pulling them perhaps a tad too tight across the baby's ribcage. Desiring to pull them tighter yet, but overcome with remorse already and letting them loose. Watching the kid inhale, in readiness for the outcry. Oh god.

Gloves, keys, wallet. Pushing the buggy ahead of her as if she was trying to push it away from her. Gripping the buggy in case the worst happened, and the buggy got away on her, gathering speed as it rolled downhill.

Isobel was amassing secrets. It wasn't just how tight she sometimes wanted to pull the buggy straps. One afternoon, following a chilly outing that had seemed an entirely uphill slog, Isobel heard Harvey's key in the lock and jumped awake. Guilty! Caught napping on the couch. Where was the baby? In her cot, thank goodness. At least she hadn't left her squalling on the rug mid nappy change, or in the car seat in the car... these things she had done, not that Harvey knew. Harvey, who was too *jaunty* to do anything that appalling. She stumbled upright, and sent a pile of baby clothes flying from the arm of the sofa. Harvey tiptoed into the room. This was the way they moved around their house now, if the baby was asleep.

"She's down?" His voice was low, furtive, and he glanced around the room. So, he *did* in fact suspect her of letting the child lie where she landed. How dare he? Isobel plunked the scooped clothing into another precarious pyramid.

"Yes, in the cot."

"Hallelujah," whispered Harvey. They smiled weakly at each other. "Tell you what, don't tidy up." Isobel sunk back to the couch. She would *love* to tidy up. Making piles wasn't tidying up. But if you made piles you could at least see clear patches between them. You could make out the route, to the kitchen, say, or to the washing machine. Harvey said, "Yes, sit. I bought you something. Hang on." He tiptoed away and returned with a supermarket bag, within which something solid swayed. He placed it at her feet, and knelt, sliding the sides of the bag down to reveal its content. The scrunching sound as he did this was terrifyingly loud in the silence of the house. Isobel stiffened. She waved at Harvey to stop. He slowed down, but he was determined to

divest the rose—for that's what it was, a bald-looking midwinter rose in a polythene container—of its shoddy supermarket robes. When the supermarket bag was at last whitely folded around the base of the polythene, he lifted the plant up and placed it on Isobel's lap. She almost screamed. From holes in its polythene base, a trail of damp earth and bark chips followed the trajectory of the gift, falling on the fawn carpet in a dark brown trail, strewing themselves on the couch. Now her jeans were smeared and her thighs were damp. Idiot, Harvey! She didn't want to grasp the polythene, but if she didn't the whole thing would tip right off her lap, pouring dirt everywhere. So she clapped her hands around its grubby waist. He picked up the supermarket bag from the floor and stood up, crunching it into a ball, beaming at her. She couldn't concentrate on what he was saying; the supermarket bag was crackling so loudly in his fist. Then—oh god—from down the corridor she heard the baby starting up, as if matching the bag, grizzle for crackle.

“Don't worry,” said Harvey. “I'll get her. So, you see, it's perfect. We'll get it in soon. It'll be her flower—it'll be our flower. *Notre fleur*.” He was so pleased with himself, Isobel could see that. While he got Fleur out of her cot, she found the rose's label. Birthday Present. Oh, ha ha Harvey. Very sweet. It was Isobel's birthday next week, although she was far from excited about it. Forty-two. Some grandmothers were forty-two. How about that front page story the other day, the one about the five generation family? The eighty year old great-great-grandmother holding the newborn. The twenty year old mother, the forty-two year old grandmother, the sixty-two year old great-grandmother. The rose on her lap was an ugly beast. Just a fat stalk and a couple of blunt outshoots, a few thorns. It was just as well it wore a label. Great things were promised on that small square: abundance, colour, scent, resistance to disease. She turned the label over and read the care instructions. She ran through a couple of

potential planting options in her mind. There was nowhere on this squall-struck section where a plump, fragrant climbing rose would flourish. It would struggle in the wind, in the cold; it would get rust and aphids and black spot despite the hours of work she would put in pruning and spraying and feeding.

Harvey came into the room jogging Fleur on his hip. He had her mesmerised, holding her solemn eyes in his jocular ones. She was quiet and still, examining his face as it moved this way and that. His eyebrows flew up, they sunk down. He threw a wide grin, and plunged from there into a parody of sadness, his bottom lip pushed out so far that Fleur put out her hand, tentatively, as if to touch it. He pretended to nibble her fingers, making fish-like bubbly noises. Clown. Isobel watched them, fascinated. Why didn't she have this kind of—what would you call it?—this kind of *bounce*? It was a missing ingredient in her. Harvey had it, despite the seriousness of his character. He had bounce in—well, you couldn't say in *spades*. Not for bounce. In balls. In his balls? This made her smile. Harvey saw it, and turned a beaming face full of relief upon her. *Thank God*, she read him thinking. *I made you smile*. Isobel laughed.

Harvey, tickling her tummy, said to Fleur, “See bubs, Mummy likes her birthday present. Mummy’s going to have vases and vases of pretty flowers in the summer time. And you’re going to be a pretty flower come summer, aren’t you my little grump?” Fleur examined Harvey as he spoke. She squirmed under his tickling fingers, frowning, frowning. “Oh, our little grumpy pumpy,” teased Harvey. Isobel’s smile vanished. Harvey always took it too far. Stop! She could see Fleur gearing up to cry. *No, no, no!* Isobel was sucked straight back to winter, this bleak and howling reality which wouldn’t imagine spring, let alone languid summer. Fleur’s wobbling lips turned upwards, and she gave Harvey a great big smile. Harvey’s eyebrows shot so high in surprise they

nearly disappeared into his hairline. He grinned, laughed out loud. “That’s my girl! That’s my Fliss-floss. Hey, you *can* do it.” He tickled her again; again she smiled.

Here. Now. She watched Harvey cradling Fleur in the doorway. This rare, sweet moment—Isobel was swimmy with a most delicate sensation. This was great. This was beautiful. Yet ... why him? Why was she smiling at him? She, Isobel, ought to stand up and walk over to join them. No, Harvey ought to seek her out, invite her to play. Because he had clearly forgotten Isobel was even in the room. How could he forget? She stood up then, clumsy with social awkwardness, as if she was amongst strangers. But they were strangers, that man and that baby on the other side of the room, cooing into each other’s eyes. As she stood she knocked the pile of baby clothing and it spewed onto the carpet. The dirty carpet, with its small clods of soil spilled from the noisy plant. “Shit!” she shouted. Harvey and Fleur both startled, and Fleur’s face wobbled as she began to draw in a big breath.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Harvey strapped Fleur into the front pack and grabbed his jacket off the hook. The trick was to keep moving, for as long as it took, which could be long. But you just had to hang in there. He rocked from foot to foot, explaining to Isobel, above Fleur's wailing, that he was taking her for a walk. "Have a rest," he told her. He really wished she would. *Just lie down and sleep*. But he knew that by the time he came back the house would be vacuumed and a new load of washing would be hung out. Also, he knew that the timing of his return—no matter how brief or long the outing—would coincide with Isobel preparing, finally, to sit down to have the rest she complained she could never get. He hated Saturdays. Although he did enjoy these walks, eventually, once Fleur had settled down and was snuggled sleepily into his chest. He would have kissed Isobel goodbye but she was already moving around the lounge, stooped, gathering scattered items into a pile hugged against her chest. "See you in an about an hour," he yelled.

Bruised camellias blotted the path, and he kicked at them half-heartedly as he wended his way down to the street. He should sweep the path properly, or someone would slip. He wondered if he could do that with Fleur on his front. Probably. But not today. This part of the house was in shade by early afternoon, and he wanted some sunlight on his face. At the gate he paused, looking back at the section. Everything looked damp and winter-shabby. The ivy had taken over the hedge again. Fleur pulled up her knees and pushed them into his stomach. She stretched them out, arched her back and committed to some serious crying. Bloody hell, thought Harvey. I can't bear it. But it was his fault; he'd stopped. So he arched his own back, and set forth. It was a thirty minute stroll to the park, but Harvey had it down to twenty minutes at full pace. The first time he had gone out with Fleur in the front pack was like carrying an emergency

siren. Three months on, and it was better. Sure enough, she settled as he strode, and this time within five minutes. He felt a little glow of success, and, without breaking his rhythm, he bent down and kissed her bobble-topped head.

What would have happened, he thought, if the social worker had put it to them that the baby might be difficult? Actually, she had said that. She had been quite blunt about it. Horribly frank. This baby will be damaged, she had said. And Isobel had responded quickly, something like, “Yes, we realise that, but our relationship is really solid, we have love to spare, we can afford whatever therapy is needed for the child, we understand it might be difficult at times, but we can offer stability, we can give the baby love.” Ah, love. What if the social worker had said the baby might be ... unlovable? What then? Isobel would have said *Thank you, yes, but our relationship is really solid, we have love to spare, we can afford whatever therapy is needed for the child, we understand it might be difficult at times, but we can offer stability, we can give the baby love.* And no doubt he, Harvey, would have reached for her hand, squeezed it, met the social worker’s impassive eyes, and nodded with affirmation. The first couple of weeks were hard, but they had known it would be hard. Plus, it was exciting too, and the excitement trumped the hard. They’d been able to buoy one another up, reassuring each other that these were the happiest days of their lives, or at least a temporary means to that permanent end. Hey, we’re a family! Hey, we’re complete! Yes, yes! Four months on, Harvey felt he was the only soldier still standing in a long campaign. What was to be done? It wasn’t too late to backtrack. They were not yet committed to adopting. They could just ... well, no, they could not. They could not just take her back, like a defective purchase. Back to where? Back to whom? Any time he contemplated it, usually in the middle of the night as he paced with Fleur struggling in his arms, his mind balked. He could plan it, in theory. Right up to the point where he packed Fleur in the car seat and

took her to the front door. But no further. It was not a plan he could ever carry out. Nor, he thought, could Isobel, despite the despair and the exhaustion and their sense that their lives had been derailed by the arrival of a monster in their midst. Or was it just that both he and Isobel could not face up to failure?

He turned into the park. He liked to take the bark track through the bush. It was a gentling thing to walk in the dappled light, especially on days like today with Fleur like a loaf of warm bread against his ribcage. Birdsong, and the faint crunching sound of his footsteps were all he heard, that and the children's voices from the swings and slides on the other side of the trees. He thought about Fleur's birth mother. He thought often of her, but could not form a solid image. There was nothing to go on. She had left no trace, excepting whatever clues could be found in her baby. So far as known facts went, all that could be said with confidence was that she was Caucasian. Speculating, professionals from various agencies agreed that she was probably very young. One psychologist thought it 'highly probable' that she was from a strict religious family. Another thought it 'more than likely' that she was a street kid with a violent, drug-drenched life. Harvey thought this second scenario was something like the case. No blood tests had proved the theory, but he felt, nevertheless, that there was something physiological in Fleur's irritability, as if she was suffering a lingering hangover. He also felt, without much evidence to back up his intuition, that she was slowly getting better. These extended periods of relaxation, for example, like today. Ah, Fleur. The track came out by the stream. He followed it until he arrived at the children's play park. Come summer he'd be able to sit Fleur in the smallest swing, the one with the buckle. It'd be lovely to come down here to do that. It'd be good, too, to meet some other parents at the same time, maybe even make a few new friends. He was getting an uncomfortable sense that the friendships with the old crowd were not as strong as he'd thought. After the

initial flurry of visits, even Sarah and Ian stopped calling by. The few times he and Isobel and Fleur went out *en famille* were excruciating. The others tried to continue conversations, avoiding looking at the corner of the room taken over by Harvey and Isobel as they wrestled with each other and the baby. But things *were* changing, thought Harvey. Coming here with Fleur even a month ago had been something he had to gird up for. People glared at Fleur as she bawled, and glared also at Harvey, a glare which said either “what have you done to that baby?” or “discipline that baby”—it was hard to tell which. He couldn’t have stood still like he was doing now, watching another father—another father!—push his son higher and higher on the swing, the boy shrieking with the thrill.

An older woman paused next to him, puffing. A small child wriggled in her arms. “Lovely,” she said, nodding at Fleur, “the easy stage! Wait ’til they start running!” She put the child down. Immediately, like a wind-up toy, he toddled away. “They’re a handful, aren’t they,” said the woman, “but at least we can give them back at the end of the day. Here comes Nana!” She set off after him.

Fleur stirred in the front pack and Harvey realised he better get home. He walked so fast on the return route that he was almost jogging. He had definitely lost fitness, he realised, since Fleur’s arrival. Sure enough, Isobel had tidied everything up. “Oh, you’re back,” she said. “I was just about to have a cup of tea.” She looked gutted to see them. He divested himself of jacket, shoes and baby, passing Fleur, who was grizzling, to Isobel. “I’ll feed her,” he said, but Isobel had already vanished into the kitchen, from where he could now hear Fleur crying with intent. Usually, he’d go in there and help, taking Fleur while Isobel heated the milk. All of a sudden, he couldn’t be bothered. If she wouldn’t take his advice to have a rest when the opportunity arose, then he would. He walked into their bedroom, catching a glimpse of himself in the dresser

mirror. He went up close to the glass. Up to this point in his life the running joke had always been that he looked about ten years younger than his actual age. Now ... these were definitely jowls (he juggled them), and (he tipped his head) that was definitely an actual bald spot on his crown. This was going to get worse, not better. How embarrassed was Fleur going to be, picked up after school by a dad old enough to be her granddad? It embarrassed him that he was embarrassed about this. Further, he was embarrassed that Fleur was so often unappealing, and the fact that he was embarrassed by this was also a source of shame. What if he couldn't, in fact, hack it? Harvey held close in and tight two pieces of knowledge about himself which he couldn't tell a soul. One: he avoided taking Fleur out in her buggy because every time he did so he fought an urge, as he passed the local Presbyterian Church, to roll her into the vestibule and leave her there. Two: jealousy. Fleur's biological father? Maybe he didn't even know he had a daughter. What bliss.

But then, he thought, absentmindedly examining the red threads in his eye-white, also what bliss, the moments—and they were increasing in frequency—when Fleur was all cried-out and allowed herself to lean into his embrace. Then he felt the stirrings of trust between them, as if she was beginning to sort out the conditions of their relationship, considering accepting the deal. And the deal was so simple at heart: she needed carrying, thus he would carry her. She would hiccup out a few last sobs, and then he would feel her last resistance dissolve. Every time that happened, it smoothed the road for a recurrence. On this flimsy evidence, he would continue. He would coach himself in patience. He would give himself to faith. Harvey ran his fingers through his hair to thicken it out a bit. He turned around and followed the wailing sound to its source.

The very next morning he woke naturally, having slept fully through the night. The first thing he registered was that there was no wind buffeting the house. He heard starlings or blackbirds trilling. He rolled over and found Isobel still asleep by his side. When he tiptoed to the cot he found Fleur also fast asleep, her tummy rising and falling regularly, her fists loosely curled either side of her face. He gazed at her. She had changed, grown, plumped out. She was turning pretty. He reached down to stroke, very lightly, one of her hands. She stirred, her eyelashes flickering, and grasped his finger. He felt something like the sensation of a bolt sliding home. Locked in, he hung over the cot. He couldn't stop staring at his daughter. She woke, calmly, and smiled.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Three years later, Isobel sat on the park bench. Through trees, she could see children in the play area, a couple of adults pushing tiny tots on swings. How she hated pushing Fleur in a swing. Immediately, she admonished herself: what a terrible thing to think. But it was true. Pushing a swing for half an hour was just about the deadliest occupation Isobel could think of. She always took the convoluted route home from the shopping centre so as to avoid Fleur glimpsing the park and beginning to kick the car seat, point and demand. The thing, the big bind, was that Fleur in a swing was Fleur smiling. Not that Fleur wasn't a smiler. These days, if Isobel phoned from work to find out how the day was going at home Harvey would be all "Little Miss Happy this" and "Little Miss Happy that". And then he'd say, "I'll put her on", and Isobel would hear whispered urging—go on sweetie, talk to mummy—and could see, plain as if the child was standing next to her, Fleur's set, grim mouth. No, she would not talk to mummy. And she would not smile at mummy. That was the point, and it was a sharp one. Thus, the swings. Surely if she *loved* Fleur, she would spend hours down at the park pushing Fleur on a swing. *Hours*. If she was a good mother she wouldn't be sitting here watching those other parents and being grateful she wasn't doing what they were doing. And feeling guilty about not being a swing-pusher. Not a pushy mama. But—to swing the other way—didn't this actually prove she *was* a good mother? Pushy mothers, the worst sort (she thought of tiny violins and huge stages, and shuddered). But surely she ought to be slightly pushy with Fleur. There was the *damage* to consider. Always the damage, whatever it was ... or would turn out to be. Always this issue of compensating for—Isobel thought fiercely—*someone else's* crime. You couldn't expect the child to show gratitude. You *wouldn't* expect that. Isobel's heart melted in a rush, thinking of Fleur, newborn, un-named, abandoned. It was a mental image that undid her every time.

A cardboard banana box, lined with the day before's newspaper. Fleur, naked, swaddled in three tea towels with a bath towel finishing the bundle. Fleur, a bundle in a box, so that the minister had at first thought she was old tea cups for the fair's white elephant stall. All this detail was in Fleur's file. It terrified Isobel to think that Fleur would probably want, one day, to read it. Blood, for instance, there was blood in the box, and on the tea towels. Isobel supposed that some of it had been stored as DNA evidence in case the girl involved (Isobel could never think "mother") came forward one day. Otherwise the items, with their stains, had been destroyed. Thank goodness. Isobel fished in her bag and took out her wallet. *There* was evidence: Isobel's first hold. Fleur's first being-held. Being beheld. Behold ... this is us.

Harvey had taken that snap. Ha! Isobel looked at herself first. How naïve she was, still pre-baby immaculate, unruffled, *unaffected*. She gazed at Fleur, the funny thatch of stick-up hair that could never be licked flat, her eyes wide open in the expression Isobel, back then, had chosen to interpret as wonder and, let's face it, thankfulness. Shock, it was, in truth. A profound shock that had rattled down beyond her bones, nearly rattled her soul loose. But not quite. Isobel examined the photo and thought, We were there just in time. Behold: us. Fleur was wrapped in that soft woollen shawl she and Harvey had rushed off to buy, in that panicked state, realizing that they owned nothing for a baby. What a list: bassinet, clothing, baby monitor, bottles, steriliser, infant formula, nappies, car seat ... and the rest.

She remembered the startled sales assistant in Baby Beautiful as they began to pile equipment by the counter. A curve of studs outlined each of her ears, a ring pierced one eyebrow, a small star winked in her nose. She'd been leaning bored against the till staring at a patch of sky through the glass doors. When they told her what was happening—we're getting a baby today!—she perked up. "Wow. Awesome," she'd said,

and pulled out a list from a cubby hole on the wall behind her. There was no need for Isobel's list, after all. It made Isobel feel extremely odd. How often, then, did this happen? This was, apparently, a routine experience. But it was so strange! But there was no time to ponder, especially now that Tinkerbelle or Pixiebelle or Trixiebellé—she had some cutie-pie name like that on her name badge—was on their case, bouncing from display to display, list in hand.

Harvey had brought the car round to the delivery door so that they could load everything in. Trixiebellé laughed and said, "Leave room for the baby." She showed them how to fix the car seat in place. "These things are a pain. Glad my two are out of them now." She had kids, this child? Isobel calculated quickly. Tinkerbelle here was bound to be a grandmother by the time she was Isobel's age. She remembered a surge of panic. We're too old. We can't do this. But when she saw the car full of baby equipment, and caught Harvey's expression of excitement, she had pushed the panic down.

"Let's go!" Harvey had said. "Jump in my love. Time to have a baby!"

"Awesome," said Pixiebelle. "Well, I hope it goes well, eh. It's amazing what you're doing. Just so cool."

About two hours later Harvey had taken this snap. "Awesome," he'd whispered, which had made Isobel smile through her tears, not that the tears were sad. Joyful, is what she felt when she saw the picture, even now. How joyful that day had been. She folded the wallet and put it away. Over at the swings, nothing had changed. The same parents were pushing the same kids, and the same kids were yelling "More! More!" Isobel felt herself stiffen in resistance. But I will not be blackmailed, she thought, I won't be a push-over, and then, ah, this kind of thinking is killing me. Why sit here, then, in full view of the swings when the swings only make me tense and resentful? Be honest, she told herself, to delay going home. But Harvey would have the place tidy

enough, in his shambolic fashion. He'd have something organised for dinner, probably a barbeque since it was such a lovely evening, and sure, she'd have to make the salad but that was hardly an imposition. It wasn't Harvey. It was ... Fleur ... but Fleur would *not* be crying. Those days were over. Yet Isobel thought of the evening ahead—bathing Fleur, reading her a story, tucking her into bed—and it was shrouded in fog. It was a chore, basically. Fleur resisted, Isobel insisted. It wasn't overt, but it was there, a constant push-pull. If Isobel chose one bedtime story, Fleur chose another. If Isobel said *these* pyjamas, Fleur said *those*. Fleur looked her in the eye only to glare defiantly. She ran away when Isobel tried to pick her up. She made Isobel chase her; she never chased Isobel. Harvey disputed all this, said (a) it's normal and (b) you're exaggerating. Easy for Harvey to say. With him, Fleur was a hugger and a jabberer. Talk, talk, talk without taking breath, if Isobel was to believe Harvey's end-of-the-day reports. This was why Harvey peeled off after dinner, leaving Isobel to manage Fleur's bedtime routine, claiming he had to finish work on the strip, work he hadn't been able to complete during the day. Even though he had all day to do it. He could do more, Isobel thought, to discipline Fleur. He needed to stop spoiling the child. Fleur needed to learn to wait, not for long, just for a reasonable period of time, reasonable for a three year old. Isobel had suggested he set Fleur up on a rug near his desk, arrange a small picnic with her teddy bears, so that Fleur could play while he drew. Harvey had laughed, but not *at* her. He laughed to share the joke he genuinely thought she was making. Isobel let it lie. In the final analysis she knew she was lucky to have life arranged this way. Her career, it transpired, had barely been interrupted by Fleur's arrival in their lives. There had been that terrible first year, about which she could hardly bring herself to think, but after that everything had worked out perfectly. And that was largely down to Harvey, who cheerfully took on the role of Fleur's main caregiver, freeing Isobel to step back into her

role at the museum full-time. It suited them both. Harvey's happiness at giving up as a GP was undisguised. Isobel hoped she had made a fair fist of covering the fact that she felt released from a dreadful incarceration, shackled to the baby and trapped day upon day in the house on the hill.

And she did love Fleur. Couldn't understand her, felt exhausted in her company, but ached for her. That was love, yes? She rose from the bench and stretched. Home, time to go home. She walked the few blocks swiftly, aware of being late. She would tell Harvey that the Skype session with the Victoria and Albert people had gone overtime, which it had, slightly, which reminded her that she needed to check on some of those exhibition details this evening so that their people could work on it during their day, and have answers by tomorrow morning her time. At the gate she glanced up at the house. She had tried to school herself not to do this, but it was like a tic. The hours she had spent stuck at that pane, staring out, at the clouds, at the harbour. This time of the day, she'd have been peering down at the street. How long ten minutes could be, if you thought someone was coming home at 5.30 and it was now 5.40. She was way more than ten minutes late this evening, more like half an hour. A pang, now, to see the window empty, although it was always empty. She went through the trellis arch that Harvey had built. Surprisingly, the Birthday Present rose was looking healthy. There were buds. Not a sign of aphids. *Who'd have thought, wonders will never*, she was thinking, climbing the steep path to the front door. "Hi!" she called, as she pushed it open.

Harvey came out of the kitchen looking frazzled, carrying a dishcloth. "Hi. Thank goodness you're home."

"What's happened?"

“Nothing really. It’s just ... oh, bad day. I haven’t been able to do anything right by Fleur. It’s been Mummy this, Mummy that, where’s Mummy, when’s Mummy coming home, complete stuck record.” He looked exasperated. Does he snap? wondered Isobel. Was that the hidden truth of Harvey’s day? She relived, for a second, the drowning sensation she used to battle, as the wind whipped the house all that first, dreadful winter. She placed her bag on the floor, moving carefully, feeling time stretch and slow, getting glimpses, little vignettes: Harvey shouting, Harvey urging, Harvey tugging, Harvey pacing at the window ... Harvey in tears? But he had rescued *her*. He had waded in and pulled her out. Then he had gone back and stood in the wild, un-timetabled zone, where the tides crashed and pulled unpredictably. He had stood there. He withstood. She had been safe on shore for two years now, felt like herself again, was strong. But not *that* strong. She couldn’t possibly rescue him. She wasn’t strong enough. Please, this was a one-off, right? Harvey was okay; Harvey was fine.

Harvey brandished the dishcloth. Several bits of tomato-clogged pasta fell on the carpet. Isobel winced. If Harvey or Fleur stood on them.... “Unbelievable!” said Harvey. “She just tipped the whole bowl on the floor. You better not come in here until I’ve cleaned it up. You’ll have a fit.” He turned back into the kitchen. Isobel made to pounce on the dropped spaghetti, but too late. Fleur came roaring out of the lounge, stomping straight on the biggest blob of pasta with her bare foot. She raced now along the corridor towards Isobel, leaving a trail of stains in her wake. Isobel froze, her hands held palm-outwards for ‘stop!’ Fleur hurtled into them.

“Mummy! Mummy! Mummy!” Fleur was wrapping herself around Isobel’s legs, squeezing tight. “Mummy!” And when Isobel crouched, Fleur flung her arms around her neck and kissed her. “Mummy!” Isobel properly noticed, for the first time, the painting flapping in Fleur’s fist. She saw three figures standing close together on a patch

of grass under the yellow rays of an enormous smiling sun. “Who’s this then?” asked Isobel, not that she truly expected an answer. Fleur would harden up in an instant, retreat, take the picture back to Harvey.

“This is you, and this is Daddy and this is me,” said Fleur. “This is our family. I did it at kindy.” Isobel was completely unmoored, at sea, but this was different weather... kinder weather. Fleur babbled on. “And this is your work bag and this is Daddy’s pen, and I did drawing like Daddy didn’t I? This is for you, Mummy.”

Mummy. The word went directly to Isobel’s womb, and wrenched her there. Afterwards, years afterwards, in another city, when it would sometimes seem that none of this had ever happened, she would remember exactly this moment. *This* was Fleur’s birth; *this* was Fleur’s first cry. And who had she been born of? Of Isobel. The long and almost unendurable labour was finally at an end. An umbilical bond had formed between them. Despite. Isobel pressed her lips into Fleur’s fine hair. “I’m your Mummy,” she said.

## Chapters 9-11: A Synopsis

On Fleur's eighth birthday her birth mother, Danielle, makes contact with Harvey, saying that she is "in recovery now" and is phoning to "make my apologies to all the people I've hurt with my behaviour in the past". Harvey, taken by surprise, initially cuts her off, but later arranges to fly to Auckland to meet her. Angry with Danielle, he sees her contact as destabilising the hard-won but now tight-knit family bond of himself, Isobel and Fleur:

He explained that she couldn't contact him again, not like this. Nor could she contact Isobel or Fleur, not directly, not like this. "Promise?" he said. There was a pause. "I suppose," she said.

"You can't suppose!" He was appalled. "Look, how about this." His proposal was terrible—it made him quake even as he spoke it—but it was the least terrible solution that he could think of in the moment. "I've got to come up to Auckland next week anyway. I'll meet you. We'll talk face to face. That'll be a start, eh. I'll tell Isobel, but we won't tell Fleur just yet. But you and me, we can plan it out, when we meet. How about that?" Say no! he willed her, say it won't work, say you've changed your mind and you'll leave it until Fleur is older, say you realise this is a dreadful thing to do, say you understand you can't leave a baby on a church doorstep and come back eight years later as if you were coming back for your bag or your hat. Say you are a grown up, a responsible adult. Say you won't interfere. (manuscript *Strip* chapter 11)

Crucially, although he knows he should tell Isobel that Danielle has made contact, Harvey keeps this conversation, and his subsequent meeting from Danielle, a

secret, telling himself he just needs to find the right moment for the discussion. The 'right moment' never materialises, and in the absence of further contact from Danielle, Harvey continues to let the issue slide.

## Part Two

### CHAPTER TWELVE

“Fleur!” shouted Harvey. “Get up! You’ll be late for school.” This sleeping in was getting to be a pain. He didn’t mind it in the weekend, but this would be the third time this week he’d had to go in and rouse her. “I’ll put your toast in,” he shouted, and went back to the kitchen. When it popped he called again. “Your toast is up! *You* get up!” It was already eight. This was ridiculous. Annoyed, he traipsed along the corridor to her room. As he raised his hand to knock on the door, she emerged, still in her sleeping tee shirt, looking groggy, screwing her eyes against the light. “I’ve got a headache.”

“Another one?” Harvey’s heart sank. That was how many headaches in the last month? Bloody migraines. So she’d be off school again. He suppressed his irritation. He had a half-drawn Dr Doctor due tomorrow, and an Archie Evil due at the end of the week which he hadn’t even begun to sketch. Lately it seemed that as soon as he got on a roll with a strip Fleur would get one of her migraines. She’d sleep it off in her own room, but nevertheless there was something about her being in the house all day that interfered with his process. Plus which, she was missing too many classes, far too many for these important first weeks of year 12. He sighed. “Okay, I’ll phone the school. You going back to bed? Want some Panadol?” She followed him back to the kitchen and leaned on the bench while he foraged in the medicine kit. At first he thought the packet was empty, but there were two tablets in the last row of the foil. It alarmed him to realise how many Panadol he’d dished out to her recently. “Fleur—”

All of a sudden she was on the floor. He had the impression that she had just dropped there, fallen. He had not been watching, but her transition from up to down, so swift and odd, had snagged in his peripheral vision.

“Fleur! You okay?” Crazy question, with her retching like that. No, not retching. She twitched. She slumped. Her eyes, wide open, seemed to be focusing on something behind or beyond him. Harvey turned around to see what that might be. Nothing of note. Nothing there at all. So what was she staring at, so blankly? A dreadful possibility pierced him through. He saw a pattern to her recent complaints that he hadn’t previously noticed. Now that he saw it, he couldn’t unsee it. It was plain as day, and it had been there to see for weeks, if not months. Somehow he managed to kneel calmly next to her, stroking her hair, talking in the most soothing voice he could muster. “Fleur, you’re all right. I’m here. Dad’s here.” Fleur’s eyes remained fixed on an invisible focus. He passed his hand in front of her face and was relieved when she blinked. But he was running a frantic check-list in his mind, watching the ticks accumulate. Headaches—tick, big tick. Nausea and vomiting, quite often with the headaches, so: tick. Seizure—only possibly. Well, probably. Actually, yes—what had that been if not a seizure? Tick. Blank moments, fade-outs (“What were we talking about Dad?”). Maybe. Tick? Fatigue. Well, obviously, but she’s a busy kid, she’s sixteen, she’s got a lot on. But, all right, *maybe* a tick for fatigue. Half a tick. Tick question mark. Balance problems. Strength problems. Coordination problems. Oh god, yes, the banging into doorways, the dropping of cups. Just the other day she’d fallen down the front steps. “I *wasn’t* running,” she’d said. “I just sort of tripped.” But all of that was clumsy adolescence, foal growth. So, tentative tick, that’s all. All of them tentative ticks, nothing for certain.

He rolled her into the recovery position, fetched the rug from the back of the sofa and draped it over her. Her eyes were closed and she seemed to sleep, breathing regularly. He sat on the floor next to her, one hand resting on her shoulder and another monitoring the radial artery at her wrist. He thought (oh god) of routine questions to put

to her when she came round. He fought to remember what he *had* asked, because he *had* checked her over, of course he had. Loosely, lightly ... but she hadn't really given him cause to do more. Way back, when the headaches started—when was that? Two months? Three?—he asked her to describe them. What had she said? “Oh Dad, I don't know! An ache. Like a bad ache. And my eyes go funny.” And his reply? Not “What do you mean by funny?” In fact he hadn't really looked up from the strip; he was stuck for an idea for Dr Doctor that day. “You probably need new glasses. I'll get you an appointment to get your eyes checked.” He hadn't quite got round to organising that, but it was on his list. Then, *migraines*, he decided, especially after she threw up spectacularly in the shower one morning and then slept for three hours, waking utterly restored.

But there was so much he should have noticed, if he had been paying attention. The driving lessons, for instance. She had begged him to start giving her lessons, and so over the last weeks of the recent summer holidays they'd combined visits to Maureen up the coast with a little bit of driving up and down one of the nearby quiet suburban streets. The first times were without incident. But then, on course to hit a lamppost, she did not turn the wheel, and she ignored his shouts to “Brake!” The nose of the car stopped inches away from impact. His heart was pounding and he'd broken out in a sweat. His own leg was rigid, his brake foot pressed into the floor. “When I say brake I mean brake!” He thought she'd been shocked, which explained her dazed look and lack of response, but now he wasn't so sure. There was another day a few weeks ago when she stared at the gear stick, blankly, thinking, he assumed, of something else completely, some boy or an assignment due. He had shifted impatiently on his seat. “D is for Drive, Fliss-floss.” “D,” she'd said, as if it was the first time she'd ever heard of D. Then she'd grinned at him, and grabbed the stick with purpose. “D is for Drive!” she'd said, and put

the car in gear. So many blank stares, with him assuming she was lost in complicated schedule-planning—how to fit her social life around her sporting and academic pursuits—or just plain tired from juggling it all, and all at such a high level of competence. Or perhaps not so high. What about the Did Not Achieves on those first two early—easy—assignments? Did Not Achieves for maths and English, both Excellence subjects for Fleur. Fleur, sweetie, he thought, stroking her hair. What have we missed? He and Isobel had questioned Fleur about those results, or not so much questioned as—gently—reminded her that the school holidays were over; it was time to knuckle down. He had been startled though, and a little uncomfortable at his own reaction. He was more invested than he wanted to admit in the idea of Fleur’s success. He had always told himself he didn’t care what she did with her life, so long as she was happy. If he was honest, and sitting on the floor next to his slumped daughter was suddenly very honest-making, he had to admit that he did care. It had seemed certain that Fleur was going to “do well”, and this (admit this too, thought Harvey) was a buzz for both Harvey and Isobel. She would do well, *despite*. More than that, it seemed she was going to excel. And what did this signify? Ahem, modest cough: it showed how well he and Isobel had done. Despite. Admit, admit! He wasn’t used to Did Not Achieve. Did Not Achieve irritated. It made him feel ... like a failure.

Fleur opened her eyes. “Hi Dad,” she murmured. “Hi,” he said, but she had already dozed off again. He heard himself, a few weeks ago, telling her “You’ll have to pull your socks up if you seriously want to get into med school.” She had said, in a voice wild with fury, “But I *did* study for those tests. I *am* working hard Dad. I am working *so* hard. I don’t understand. Maybe I’m just stupid. Maybe I’m just not as *smart* as you and Mum. Maybe it’s *genetic*.” She had stormed out, whacking herself on

the door frame on the way through. He heard her say “Fuck!” as she stomped off to her room. And he had shrugged at Isobel. “Hot bath?” he said. “Early night?”

Isobel, near tears, had obliged him with a small smile. “Me, you, or her? Oh, I hate it Harve. It’s like she’s *curdled*.” He knew what she meant. Fleur had changed, sourly. He said, “Teenage tantrum”. He cringed now, remembering the Dr Doctor strip he’d drawn the next day, the grumpy gangly adolescent he’d sent to the toddler-sized naughty chair.

Now, he couldn’t stop himself from trying to analyse the muscle tone in her hands (was it slightly hypertonic on the right? Was that wasting in her lumbricals and hypothenar mass?) He was two men. He was Dad, a man whose heart was going rat-a-tat-tat in his chest, whose mind, each time it forged forward surged back again—discovering, rejecting, knowing, disbelieving all at once. And he was Dr Wright, already mapping out the necessary investigations, the probable diagnosis and the necessary treatment. Also, the prognosis. Which was generally good these days, for kids, but—ah—not always, even now. Ah, ah, instantly he was Dad again and there was his heart banging away like that—surely he was going to split apart.

It was a long ten minutes. If he hadn’t timed it he would have thought it an hour. She sat up, the rug falling off her shoulders. “What happened?”

“You fainted I think,” he said, handing her a glass of water. She sipped listlessly.

“Wow, really?”

“Has this ever happened before?”

“Fainting?”

“Yeah, conking out a bit.”

“Did I? Conk out? Well, maybe. Yeah, couple of times. It’s like, just a blur, like being in a dream or something. Hard to explain Dad. Whatever. I hate migraines. I think I’ll go back to bed for a while.”

“Sure, sure. That’s a good idea. Listen, I think we should perhaps go visit the doctor. Just check things out a bit. Might be time to get some proper migraine drugs, eh.” He helped her up. She shrugged him off. He watched her do that thing again, the clumsy stagger she’d been doing lately, narrowly missing the door frame on the way out of the room. He followed her down the corridor, concentrating on how she was walking. No problem. Ha, I’m imagining things, he thought. It’s all in my head. It’s all, he repeated to himself, in *my* head.

“Do you want me to make your bed?” Her room, as always, was a shambles, the floor strewn with clothes, the duvet a crumpled mound in the middle of the mattress, the pillow fallen behind the bed-head.

Fleur pointed to the door, to which she’d long ago blu-tacked a sign. “NO ENTRY TO PARENTS. STOP RIGHT HERE. TURN AROUND. WALK AWAY. THIS MEANS YOU.” Reluctantly, Harvey backed out. “I’ll phone Mike, then. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” said Fleur. She pulled the duvet up over her head and curled up. Harvey was chilled. She should have said “no, I’m fine, what’s the point of seeing the doctor?” He gave her a few moments, because she would surely poke her head out of that nest and say, “nah, don’t worry about it Dad. I’ll be good after I wake up.” She didn’t re-emerge. Harvey would have liked to go to sleep too. But he was standing under a large blade, and awake or asleep, this blade would fall. So why bring it forward, that axing? Because he was the one who’d noticed. He would have to be the one who flicked the switch to drop the blade.

That Mike was Fleur's GP was a situation that they had fallen into rather than actively chosen, a circumstantial thing that Harvey had always intended to change. Right now, though, he was intensely relieved to be phoning Mike, and not some stranger. Mike knew Fleur, and he knew Harvey. Plus, he had kids of his own, slightly older, so he knew teenagers. He'd say, chuckling, "You idiot, mate. She's a teenager. It's all normal teenage stuff." He phoned the clinic, imagining his call ringing into the bustling reception space. He was well aware that the receptionist's side of the conversation would be plainly audible to the line of patients in the waiting room. Someone unfamiliar answered, not his sparring buddy Debs. Harvey asked to speak to Mike.

"He's with someone right now. I'll get him to call you back. What's your name?"

Gritting his teeth, he gave it, and heard her repeat it. Then he heard Debs' voice nearby. "Oh, that's Harve, he used to work here. Hang on..."

Click, click, and Mike came on the line. "Harvey! Long time no see. What can I do you for?" Harvey launched into it, playing it down—"I'm probably over-reacting!"—even as he said *headaches, possible seizure, possible motor problems*.

"Doesn't sound like over-reacting to me, Harvey. I think an urgent neurology referral is probably a good idea. Bring her in to see me today, at, let's see, two. But I'll set the wheels in motion."

For god's sake, Mike. Now *you're* over-reacting. So calm, so objective ... it was terrifying to hear the doctor in Mike take the reins so competently. He'd phoned to hear *Mike*, not Dr Mike. Don't take me so seriously! This is all just a bad joke. He tried to make it so. "Okay, Dr Doctor!" he said, in a parody of heel-clicking respect. There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“Yeah, well, let’s hope, eh?” said Mike. “See you at two.”

Harvey checked on Fleur. She slept. He looked around at the tangle of clothes on the floor, the makeup, hair clips, rings, earrings and necklaces strewn over her dressing table. Was this chaos, which he and Isobel had excused as normal teenage chaos, in fact another sign that he had missed? He eased open the top drawer of her bedside table. More teenage mess, definitely, but even a teenager would probably not put her coffee cup, half-full, in a drawer. He took it out. Her journal was there too. He checked again on Fleur. Yes, she was asleep. Her cheeks were flushed; she looked completely relaxed and healthy. His hand hovered over the book while he debated with himself. This was a frontier he’d never wanted to cross. It wasn’t to read the content, not that. He didn’t want to know who she hated and who she loved, not that. He didn’t really care to learn the details of her social life, not even if in doing so he could discover just what she actually imbibed at parties (“Ginger beer, Dad, honestly”). Not that. He didn’t need to read *what* she wrote in order to know if Fleur was sick or well. He might only need to glance at *how* she wrote it. The shape and size of her letters on the page might be enough.

Did he dare?

His hand plunged. Just as he lifted the book, Fleur stirred. He dropped her journal back to the drawer and wheeled around, ready to explain—“I was just putting some of your stuff away for you”—but she was only shifting in her sleep. Nevertheless, he closed the drawer and crept out of her room.

He phoned Isobel but she was in a meeting. He sent her a text, just to say he was taking Fleur to see Mike, a check-over. Routine, routine. He made a list, some crib notes for the meeting this afternoon with Mike. When he read it back he saw immediately how it would seem to Mike: both extremely vague and over-detailed. It read like the

lists he himself had seen and discredited, the ones brought in by over-protective parents angsty over school-yard bruises or a three-day snuffle. Temporary, ordinary stuff. Inconvenient, and sometimes ugly, that was all. Things to wait out. First world problems, each and every one, problems on a par with having flat soda water in the fridge. That's all, a case of what he used to call "Bed Hair-itis". And Mike was going to examine Fleur and pronounce her perfectly well, just a hormonal teenager with migraines. At worst, a hormonal teenager who was once an abandoned baby and would need all the extra love, attention and understanding this entails. Hormonal teenagers are Difficult, but Absolutely Normal. He'd told those helicopter parents this very thing.

Yet he *knew*, with a deeper instinct than it would be possible to explain rationally, that Fleur's problem was more serious than this. As much as he wanted Mike to put down his ophthalmoscope, laugh, dismiss his concerns as over-fuss, he wanted Mike to recognise there was something serious going on. He really, really wanted Mike to willingly take over. He didn't want to have to become a Difficult Parent. He perused his list, folded it and put it in the back pocket of his jeans.

Don't take me seriously. Take me seriously.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Isobel found herself in the kitchen warming her hands on a full teapot which she, apparently, had brewed herself. She had no memory of doing so, although clearly she had walked in the front door, taken off her jacket, come straight in here and put the jug on. A pot of tea! A vision of her mother sprung to mind. Maureen, for whom a cup of tea was solace and solution. Something wrong? A cup of tea. Leaves, not bag. Then, wait. Turn the pot three times clockwise, three times widdershins. Then, wait. The infusion should be strong. No weasel piss. Not that Mum would have said weasel piss. She took three mugs from the cupboard, poured a careful inch of milk into each, turned the teapot and poured. Perfect. She filled the cups with the copper-coloured liquid. Something, though, was missing. Biscuits. Of course. Mum would have baked. There would have been something “in the tins” for an eventuality such as this. Such as ... this. Isobel was limp, at “this”. But, an eventuality such as, well, a crisis. So here we are, thought Isobel. We’re having a crisis. But she didn’t feel “here”; she was far from “here”. She really would prefer not to have this crisis, thank you very much Whoever. To whom, she thought, should I complain?

But of course there was no one to whom she could complain. She fished in the back of the pantry for a packet of biscuits and found nothing. Grrr, Harvey, she thought. His constant pantry-browsing during the day while he worked was a pain. So often she would reach for a little treat before bed, that bar of chocolate, the pistachio biscotti she’d secreted behind the rice, only to find it gone. Harvey apologetic of course, but why the hell didn’t he ever replace any of it? Why was it always down to her? She put the mugs on a tray, thinking again of her mother. Maureen’s tray had lived on the bench next to the kettle. It was always laid with teacups and saucers, the milk jug and sugar bowl. Her father used to keep the car topped up with petrol, because, he said “you never

know”. Maureen kept the teapot primed for the same reason. Isobel lifted the tray. Something of Maureen—something like advice, or knowledge—was moving through Isobel’s body. She felt it, as if instructions were being passed over, and was grateful. It was slight, it had no real substance, but it seemed like a kind of knitting-up, or a steeling—some trick of the bones at any rate, something to lean on. The tough get going, she thought, and that, definitely, was an echo from Maureen.

Fleur was nestled into Harvey on the couch. “Shove over, make room,” said Isobel, putting the tray down on the coffee table.

“Thanks,” said Harvey.

“Maureen’s Remedy,” said Isobel. Harvey made a “uh-huh” sound as he reached for his tea, but she could tell he wasn’t with her. Isobel sat, and lifted Fleur’s feet into her lap, where she massaged them gently. The three of them were quiet for a while. Isobel wondered what was going through their minds. Hers was a turmoil. There was so much she wanted to know. More information was the thing; it was impossible to know how to react without more facts. All they could do right now was wait, and hope the scan results were back soon. Today, with luck. Then they could get the proper treatment started and get everything fixed. That was the one good thing, the lucky thing: this was happening now, not fifty years ago. Things weren’t the death sentences they used to be. There were cures, now. Maybe it was going to be a difficult few months. But maybe not. At any rate, they were fighters. And positive thinkers, which was the key thing. They were positive-thinking fighters. Ka-pow! She glanced at Harvey, whose lower shirt buttons were straining to stay closed over the press of his belly. But anyway, everything was on their side: this was a good hospital, with an excellent neurosurgeon. That was the very word that Harvey had used, and Mike too: “Tom Harrison, he’s *excellent*”. No concerns there. And if things did turn out to be difficult, well ... the tough get going.

“Maureen?” said Harvey. “Oh! Tea!” He sipped from his cup. “You sure she didn’t stick a slug of whisky in it from time to time?”

“Unlikely,” said Isobel. The very idea would have shocked Maureen, who regarded accepting a proffered second glass of sherry as a sign of weak character. Poor Maureen, roaming the locked ward like a ghost. She had always been so neatly turned-out. Even within the privacy of her own home Maureen had always worn well-ironed shirts and tailored skirts or trousers, inoffensively-toned outfits that said, before she even spoke to confirm it, *I am crisp*. She even ironed her pyjamas. Isobel had a vague memory of herself as a small child climbing into bed with her mother and tracing the straight crease that ran down her mother’s pyjama sleeve. Maureen, even in bed, was not a woman who relaxed to wrinkles. But in the past five or so years her encroaching mind-muddle had breached its containing walls, had leaked into her posture, her dress, her speech. No matter how carefully Isobel chose her mother’s wardrobe, and no matter how attentive the hairdresser and the dentist, Maureen now looked perpetually disheveled, tights that slipped into sags around her ankles, food stains on her cardigan, hair that broke perm to straggle lankly, revealing the shiny oval of her skull.

Fleur said, “So will I have to have surgery? I don’t want to.”

Isobel looked to Harvey, who set down his mug and shifted himself to a more upright position. “The thing is, surgery, yes. We’ll have to see what the scans say, before we make any decisions. But, Mr Harrison thinks it is quite likely you will need surgery.” Fleur drew breath sharply, as if to interject, but Harvey moved along. “If you do need surgery—if—then it will be because it will fix the problem. If you do have a growth in there” (he nodded towards Fleur’s head) “then Mr Harrison can operate and take it out. Which” (he rushed on now) “is exactly what we want, isn’t it, to fix this thing and make you better. And Mr Harrison, well, he’s excellent.”

“But...” Fleur also sat upright, swinging her feet off Isobel’s lap and planting them on the floor. “But ... why? I just don’t understand. I don’t want to have this thing, Dad. I don’t want it. I mean, what about school? How much time am I going to miss off school? What about my exams and stuff?”

“Hey, hey, don’t get ahead of yourself Fliss-floss. We don’t know yet. We’re just saying ‘if’. There might be nothing. Not a growth, anyway.”

“What then?” demanded Fleur. “What else?”

“Epilepsy, perhaps,” said Harvey.

“But that’s fits and stuff. I don’t want that!”

“Fliss, you are already having fits. So we need to find out what is causing them. And then we can treat the cause and stop the fits.”

Isobel cast a warning look towards Harvey. Pointless going down this track at the moment. What they needed was the facts. She reached to the table, picked up Fleur’s tea and held it out. “Here,” she said. “Drink this.”

“God Mum,” said Fleur. “As if.”

“As if what?”

“A cup of tea! How the fuck is that going to help?” Fleur stood abruptly, knocking Isobel’s outstretched hand. Tea slopped on the carpet. “I’m going to my room,” said Fleur. She marched towards the door, as if purposeful, as if defiant. But Isobel had caught the expression on her face. It was wretched. Isobel wanted to chase her, haul her back to the sofa, to wrap her arms tightly around her as if by laying her own body on top of Fleur’s she could block every perilous thought, stop every wrong turn from getting traction from here on in. Too late. Fleur was gone, stomping along the corridor.

The blotch on the carpet had settled into the shape of Australia, a phenomenon that Isobel had noticed several times in her life. Tasmania was there, only slightly east of its true position. Harvey's hand on her thigh checked her as she went to stand. "Leave it for a moment," he said.

"Okay," said Isobel. She couldn't have, anyway, got up. The strength that had briefly flicked through her skeleton had dissipated. She sank back to the couch like a discarded glove puppet. "What do we do Harvey?"

"We wait for results. And then we plan the treatment."

"You think it's a tumour, don't you Harve?"

"Yes, I do. But it's the twenty-first century, Isobel. We're not in the dark ages. Treatment works."

"But surgery. On her brain! What if the surgery does damage?" Fleur learning to *walk* again? Fleur learning to *talk* again? Her mind jumped from the idea. Facts, this was what was important just now. Get the information. Do the planning. What if, what if .... "What if it's genetic?" whispered Isobel.

Harvey looked startled, and then profoundly puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what if it turns out she has something that's been passed down?"

"Yes, but what do you mean? How does that change anything?" He looked angry now.

"It doesn't change a thing," she said quickly. "It's just that ... I wondered, that's all. You're right—it makes no difference at all."

"We'll get the diagnosis," said Harvey.

"Yes," said Isobel. She looked at Australia, desert-brown on the floor. "I'll mop this up." As she dampened the cloth under the tap in the kitchen, she thought how she had just lied, out and out, to Harvey. The truth was that the notion of Fleur having a

genetic disorder made her furious. This unreasonable reaction, which surged in spite within her, could obviously not be uttered. Nevertheless, she thought, as she squeezed out the excess moisture, just from the point of view of facts, it was important to try and find out more about Fleur's birth parents. This was something she could do, and it could be helpful down the track. It was always going to be useful to Fleur, for when she had children of her own, for instance. And meanwhile, until then, right now (oh god), who knew what transplants or transfusions would be necessary, and how could she otherwise provide the necessary information to the doctors, and how could they otherwise find, how did the phrase go, a 'suitable match'? Cold to the core, she went back into the lounge, knelt, and began to scrub Australia off the carpet.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tom Harrison was very happy with the way things had gone. Harvey wished he had no access to the underside of that bland statement. It seemed to him to hide more than it revealed. Fleur lay in the hospital bed. Her eyes were closed, the blanket pulled up to her chin, her head swathed in bandages. She looked like a caricature of a head injury patient, exactly how he'd draw one in a cartoon. This made his skin creep. His was a voyeuristic trade. Cynical, too.

The bandages overwhelmed her. It was all you saw, when you first looked. They covered not only the shaven area around the surgical wound, but also enveloped her remaining hair, her lovely long hair, with which Fleur was always messing (*Do you like it better like this?—fringe to the left—Or is it better like this?—fringe to the right*). He found he was biting back the urge to tell each and every nurse or technician or house surgeon or registrar that, ordinarily, Fleur had beautiful hair. He flinched when one of the registrars strode in and without preamble snatched up Fleur's arm to probe her inner elbow for a vein. She's not in *there*, he wanted to yell. Look at her face! Talk to her! He tried to ignore the medical paraphernalia around the bed, but couldn't. His eyes were drawn to the monitors, to the tubes, to the drip bag hanging off its chrome tree, and the catheter bag hooked below the mattress. Those bags and tubes, dripping fluid into her and collecting what was seeping out, they mesmerised him. If one was emptied, common sense implied that the other ought to be full, but he couldn't work out the pattern to the cycle. There were times when both bags were almost empty or both bags filled to the brim, and he'd be fighting the urge to leap up and correct this obvious imbalance, as if it was sandpit play, pouring out this one, refilling that one—but it wasn't sandpit play, and nor was it his place to figure out the ratios, as the nurses frequently reminded him (*Sit down, Dr Wright, we'll do that, just ask though, if you*

*have a question*). Never before had he been so aware of the finely tuned balance between sickness and health. Nor, in all his years as a doctor, had he ever noticed how sharp the equipment was, even the edges of the soft-looking plastic containers, in turn sunken or balloon-fat. But yes, he reminded himself, Fleur had come through the surgery very well. “Straightforward,” Tom had said. “It looks like what we thought, a pineal tumour”—and there he had turned to Isobel and said firmly—“which is treatable. When the biopsy report comes back, we’ll go from there. Perhaps some radiation, but, you know, I’m very happy with the way the surgery went, and she’s done so well the last couple of days. Homeward bound, I’d say.” And here he patted Fleur on her sleeping shoulder. “Yep, homeward bound.” When Tom and his entourage had left, Isobel let out a huge sigh. “Thank God,” she said. “Not that I believe in God. Thank science! Thank the twenty-first century! Do you want to nip out for a break? We could probably take half an hour, go downstairs for a coffee, what do you think?”

“You go,” he’d said. “I’ll sit with Fleur.” How could Isobel be so ... so *irrational*? But he was jealous of it. He would love, right now, to be able to trust in a higher power. He would love to believe that science—or God, for that matter—dealt in certainties. To lay down his scepticism, oh, the relief there would be in that. Such sweet and bodily relief. He wondered, do priests feel like this, ever? Do they stand there at the pulpit dispensing Doubt, amazed to see, on the faces of the congregation, the message received, instead, as Certainty? His heart plunged as he watched his daughter in her drug-hazed sleep. He had the power to see through those bandages, that was the trouble. He saw the incision, and he delved between the stitched lips of the cut, deep, deep into the brain, and he embarked on the route laid out for him there, a narrow mountain path which zig-zagged steeply down, tracing folds and sulci, maneuvering to traverse the canyon gulfs between lobes, skirting the corpus callosum, descending an ever-

narrowing valley, entering, at last, a crevice whose depths were shrouded in red mist. He could enter the red mist too, move himself through its droplet drifts—corpuscles, plasma cells, phagocytes: the busy troops of clean-up and repair. What else, what else could he see there? What tentacle tip, fine as cockroach hair, temporarily wedged between globular rocks—what fragment of an evil creature gathering its wits and biding its time?

He pulled himself up and out of there, strode to the window and leaned on the sill, breathing heavily, looking out at the scudding sky. Isobel had no idea, none at all. All she was hearing was “very happy with the way things have gone”. Ah, but maybe he should try and hear that too. Her stance was more sensible than he’d given her credit for. Perhaps it was rational, after all. He would try to hear only what she could hear: Tom’s “very happy”. He must relax and allow “very happy” to do its work. He himself had applied these words, or similar, to anxious relatives, just as a temporary splint, something to hold them together until he had some real information to pass on. But the “very happy” kept sliding away from him. The words had not stuck. Here was the thing, Harvey realised: Tom hadn’t been able to hold Harvey’s eye. He had looked only at Isobel when he spoke those words.

Fleur murmured and Harvey snapped to attention. He reached for her close hand and held it between both of his, kneading her knuckles and fingers. He felt her weak, but definite, responding twitch. “Hi. It’s okay. You’re in the hospital, in the ward now. Out of ICU. Everything’s fine. Mr Harrison said it went very well. *Very* well.” Her eyes opened, and fastened on Harvey’s. For an instant he wasn’t sure if she knew who he was, but—thank Christ—a switch flicked on, and there she was, fully there, all herself.

“Hi Dad,” she whispered, hoarse-voiced. “Hi Mum.”

“Mum’s not here, chicken,” said Harvey. “She just ducked out for a coffee. She’ll be here in a tick.” She looked so young; she looked small enough to piggy-back. He would do anything to scoop her up out of that bed and piggy-back her down the hall and into a lift, press “Ground”, exit in the lobby and leave this ghastly beeping bright-light cage. A nurse knocked lightly on the door. It was Anne, his favourite, the one who dispensed kindness even through the most routine or unpleasant tasks. She smiled at him. “How’re you doing? Why don’t you take a wee break? Looks as if Fleur’s pretty settled right now.” Sure enough, Fleur had drifted back to sleep. With Anne here, he could perhaps duck out and find Isobel. Maybe they could get some fresh air. A quick stroll around the block to wake them up a bit. But “outside” seemed alien. He’d been beamed down on a new planet, this one-roomed planet, a cube with humming air vents and sealed-tight windows. Out there was the other planet, the one he used to walk about in. He wasn’t sure that he was up to making the transition. The air out there, he wasn’t acclimitised. He could feel how it would pierce him. He would need a helmet and a full-body suit. He would have to wade wide-legged along the street, locked behind his visor, the world coming at him as a muffled distant roar. What if it was necessary to converse with a stranger? Please, thank you, excuse me ... all that stuff. No, he really couldn’t remember the language.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I don’t want to leave her. She woke up just before.”

“Really? That’s great. Did she speak? How did she seem?”

“She said hi,” said Harvey. “She was good,” but all of a sudden he was snagged on the visual memory of what had happened when he’d said that Isobel wasn’t there; how the keen, questing expression in Fleur’s eyes had dulled.

“All right then, that’s all excellent.” Anne had run through her observations. “She might be irritable when she comes round, but we can manage that. Sing out when she wakes up again, okay?”

“Sure,” promised Harvey.

“She’s doing well, Dr Wright. How about you? How are you doing?” The question took Harvey by surprise, as did the realisation that he was being perused.

“Oh, you know. Tired.”

“And worried?”

“Mmm.” He didn’t want to encourage a barrage of optimism. He understood it wasn’t kosher to worry.

Anne made no move to leave the room. He wished she would, and then was immensely glad of her continued, silent, presence. He shrugged. She shrugged too, ever so slightly, and nodded. Without a word being said, a long conversation had unrolled between them. Anne raised a finger in farewell, and slipped behind the curtain, leaving the room. It was very calm. The weight sitting on Harvey’s lungs had let up. His chest expanded and relaxed. The full breath was intensely pleasurable.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hidden behind the sheet she had just pegged on the line, Isobel was crying. The sheet billowed against her face and she grabbed it, pressing the cool cotton against her eyes. The piece of string had set her off, a once-white length, now grey and frayed, still hanging from the line where she had knotted it for Fleur's eighth birthday party. On that day she had fixed twelve strings to the wash line: twelve jelly snakes dangling, one for each child at Fleur's party. As she remembered, Hannah was the only child who obtained her prize according to the rules—no hands. She was still nibbling diligently ten minutes after the others had ripped theirs off and swallowed them whole. That was Hannah all over. The other kids had partaken in a frenzy, and then had to stand around watching Hannah taking her own, very sweet, time. Every so often she paused and said, "Yummy", and licked her lips. Yep, it drove the others crazy. Isobel sniffed, smiling. Hannah was coming over after school today to visit Fleur, and to bring a bit of homework too. No need to weep, you idiot, thought Isobel.

But it was the relief. Only two weeks post-op and Fleur was home, bothered only by the fatigue that swept over her in the early afternoon and again in the early evening. Actually, thought Isobel, fending off the sheet as it billowed against her, Fleur was more bothered by the mess the surgery had made of her hair. She hung the last pair of socks, and spent a few fruitless moments attempting to unknot the string but succeeding only in breaking a nail. "Damn!" She sucked the quick of her finger, wiped her eyes again, and went inside. Harvey was putting away the breakfast things, his and hers, since Fleur was still asleep. "You okay?" he asked. "Fine," said Isobel. "It's just, you know, the stress. It hit me out there—I hadn't realised how tired I was. How do people do it? I can't imagine how I'd cope if the outcome had been, you know ... bad."

He filled the jug. "We'd cope. People do."

“Yes, but you’re used to it. The hospital, the medical side of it, all of that. You’re lucky.” From the look he threw her, she surmised this was not how he viewed it. “Okay, not lucky—bad word, not what I mean.” What, thought Isobel, *do* I mean? She tried again. “At least you understand what’s going on.”

“Tea?” When Isobel nodded, Harvey put a second mug on the counter next to his. He emptied the tea leaves from the pot into the old ice cream container they used to collect the kitchen compostables. “Even with my patients, I didn’t know what was going on half the time. And she’s not my patient. She’s our daughter. It’s different. Completely, utterly different.” The jug came to the boil and switched itself off. Harvey poured water into the teapot. Isobel tried to catch his eye but he focused on replacing the teapot lid, turning the pot and rearranging the mugs so that all three handles pointed in the same direction, roughly speaking. Isobel itched to make the few slight adjustments which would line them up properly. Harvey opened the cupboard and snapped off a large chunk of chocolate from a half-unwrapped, half-eaten Easter egg. He shut the cupboard quickly. Isobel wasn’t supposed to know it was there. Well, she wasn’t supposed to comment. She didn’t.

“I suppose it is,” she said instead. She sat at the kitchen table. She couldn’t and wouldn’t tell Harvey how frightening she found his words. Although, she thought, rolling and unrolling the edge of the cane placemat, she didn’t believe him. Of course he knew what was going on! Typical of Harvey to claim otherwise; he was often self-deprecating like this. He thought everyone else had a better grasp of the business of daily living. When he was first tossing anti-hero strip ideas around, he had cast himself, albeit in exaggerated form: tubby, scruffy and bespectacled. He called the character Bamboozle Boy. When Isobel next saw the drawing book, Bamboozle Boy had been scored out with heavy lines. A prototype Archie Evil was stepping out in his Lycra

tights, cat-like, along the top of a high, narrow fence. Archie E was agile and cheeky, quick-witted and out-witting. A trickster kid. Harvey had a lot of fun developing him. His address, for instance, was “Outside the Square”, and a sombrero hung from a nail on the porch, next to the crooked door. “Rationalists would wear sombreros,” he said, by way of explanation.

“Archie is a rationalist?” she asked, puzzled.

“Rhomboidal, anyway,” said Harvey.

It hadn't made sense, still didn't, but as Isobel watched Harvey pour the tea she thought how much she liked his rhomboidal-ness, whatever it was. She wished she could find some way to prove to him that “everyone else” was actually blundering stupidly along, seduced by whatever winked and blinked just ahead of them on the surface of the current, putting their all into trying to keep up. Whereas Harvey, he refused to play that game. He had a quality of is-ness, a capacity to sit with himself, a willingness to work himself out, a sort of *grit* in that regard, an *unflinchingness*. He was, he was ... she searched for the right word ... solid. She wanted to put her hand on him, to remind him—and to remind herself. He grounded her, always had and always would. Harvey brought the cups to the table and took a chair. He rested his chin on his fists. She reached out her hand and rested it on his forearm. “Fleur’s doing so well. Tom’s confident. We are so lucky. She is doing well, isn’t she? It’s all okay. Tom said he got it all. She doesn’t even need radiotherapy.”

“Yes, yes, it’s a great outcome.” Alerted by footsteps, he swung around to face the door. Fleur came through, yawning.

“Morning, old folks.”

“Hi there Fliss-floss. Good sleep?”

“Hi darling. Want some toast?”

“I’m good. I’ll do it. Guess what?” She fingered her scalp near the scar. “I’m going to cut it all short.”

“Really?” Isobel was startled. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it’ll be cool,” said Fleur. The smell of toast filled the kitchen. She opened the cutlery drawer and took out a knife, which she waved at Harvey and Isobel.

“Anyway, when I go back to school I better look the part.”

“What part?” asked Isobel.

“Cancer Kid,” said Fleur, dipping the knife in the peanut butter jar.

Isobel drew a sharp breath. “You’re *not*.”

“Mum,” said Fleur, “I am. Or I was. Whatever. Don’t *cry* Mum. I’m okay. You just said it yourself. He got it all. But I need a haircut. I’m not going back to school with a bald patch. Anyway, I thought I’d do that raise money thing—Hannah and the others say they’ll do it too. We’ll give it directly to the ward.” She brought her toast to the table. “They can buy a couple of comfy chairs. Remember the Iron Uncle?”

Isobel laughed. “Sure do.” There had been one comfortable armchair in Fleur’s hospital room, and she and Harvey had taken turns in it while the other perched on the wide window sill or on the end of Fleur’s bed. On the one occasion she and Harvey had popped out together for a turn around the block, they had returned to find the armchair gone, replaced with a grim, upright steel-framed chair with a ripped vinyl seat. Neither Harvey nor Isobel could sit in it for long; it played havoc with Harvey’s lower back, and it aggravated the band of tightness between Isobel’s shoulder blades. Isobel dubbed the chair the Iron Uncle. The other chair was suddenly Fat Auntie, and they missed her. Hannah did the detective work, prowling up and down the ward peering into rooms. Isobel had heard a trundling noise. She looked up to see a flushed Hannah pushing Fat Auntie through the doorway. “Quick,” Hannah said. Isobel stood up and Hannah

whipped the Iron Uncle away. Harvey had leapt up from the window sill and patted the old chair. “Darling,” he said, “You’re home.” From her bed, Fleur had giggled.

“Fundraising for the ward. That’s a fantastic idea! I love it. What will you call it? We can turn all this into something positive. Give something back!” Isobel grabbed the pen and notepad they kept by the phone.

“It’s already organised,” said Fleur. “Well, not completely *organised*, but we set up a Facebook page last night and we’ve already got 117 likes. The Great Hair Day. What, Dad?”

“Yes, what?” said Isobel. She, too, had noticed Harvey had gone statue-still, as if shocked. She wondered what he’d seen or heard in Fleur’s demeanor that had put him on high alert. Uneasily, she studied their daughter. To her eyes she seemed entirely well. But Harvey’s eyes were trained to pick up details invisible to her. She could glance at a Grecian vase and instantly pronounce its providence from its shape and decoration. The same glance would also reveal potential defects and damage. The cracks, or crackles, if you like, in the façade, some of them so very fine, too fine to be seen by anyone who didn’t know to look for them.

“It’ll grow back. By summer it’ll be down to here already.” Fleur indicated the level of her chin. “I might dye it too, blue, or green.”

“Okay, okay ... it’s just ... I mean, hang on,” said Harvey. “You’re supposed to be resting, not fundraising. And ... what if there’s publicity? Photos and stuff? Do you want the whole world to see you with your head shorn?”

“D’uh, Dad, of course. That’s the point! And it won’t just be me. We thought sixteen of us. For my age.”

“Who’s we?” asked Isobel.

“Hannah and me. We’ve got it all sorted. We’ve got the sixteen already.”

“And who will cut the hair?” The moment Isobel asked this, she had the answer. “We will! The mothers will. Sixteen girls, and sixteen mothers—perfect! What do you think?”

Fleur pulled the pad towards her and picked up the pen. “That could work, actually Mum.” She smiled slowly. “Yeah, you know, that could be really cool.” She wrote “16” on the page in block digits, and began to fill in the outlines, frowning as she thought things through. Isobel clapped Harvey on the shoulder as she stood. This was a great idea. She had to admit that she had been beginning to get bored. Fleur had bounced back so quickly. There was nothing, bar the still-swollen crescent scar on Fleur’s head, to indicate anything untoward had happened. There had been a detour—a detour around a tragedy—and now they were back on track. In the last couple of days it had crossed her mind that perhaps she could return to work. There was beginning to seem no reason for both Isobel and Harvey to hang around the house until Fleur went back to school in a fortnight. A fundraiser would make the perfect project. She and Fleur would do it together. She saw them revisiting the ward to hand over the cheque. She heard grateful speeches (one from them, one from us) and then, thank *god*, she saw Fleur, herself and Harvey piling into the lift and felt her own forefinger firmly pressing button G, for Ground, and Exit.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dr Doctor's Daughter turns Bad Hair Day to Good

Sixteen year old Fleur Wright, daughter of renowned medical cartoonist Dr Harvey Wright—creator of the popular long-running cartoon strip, Dr Doctor—is recovering from successful surgery to remove a brain tumour. A portion of her scalp was shaved, leaving the plucky teenager with what she describes as “the ultimate bad hair day”. Ms Wright said that rather than hiding the unfashionable effect under a beanie, she had resolved to turn her bad luck into something positive. She and her friend Hannah Vincent, also sixteen, are organising a fund-raising event which they have called The Great Hair Day. Sixteen fellow students have volunteered to have their lovely locks shorn. A special feature of the event is that each girl's mother will cut her daughter's hair. “First of all we thought of having sixteen girls, to represent my age to show that cancer can happen to anyone, but then we thought the sixteen mothers should be involved, because I can tell you that if you get cancer, it really affects your whole family,” said Ms Wright. Money raised from the event will go towards comfortable seating in Ward 6A, because Ms Wright says, “You do a lot of sitting around, and your family and friends do a lot of sitting around too. There was only one comfortable chair in the whole ward, and families were fighting over it.”

Harvey refolded the clipping and put it away in his wallet. His movements were awkward and cramped. The plane was full and Harvey was squeezed by a sturdy woman on his left, whose thigh kept coming to rest against his own. He shrank towards the window. The Great Hair Day was ten days' away, set down for the Friday evening before Fleur was due to return to school. Pledges were rolling in. Fleur, Hannah and Isobel were fizzy with excitement. Just yesterday they had passed their initial fundraising first goal. "A thousand bucks, Dad! One thousand!" Hannah and Fleur had high-fived. Fleur had pulled back from the screen before he told her off. She wasn't supposed to be spending too much time on the computer just yet. "What's wrong?" she asked him.

Harvey had been staring at their to-do list. "TV," he read. "What does that mean?"

Fleur looked at him as if he'd totally lost it. "Um, it means TV. You know, a TV crew is coming. We're going to be on national television." She and Hannah did a little dance. "Crump with us Dad!"

He tried, but his heart wasn't in it. He pleaded a deadline for Archie Evil, which was true—he was way behind with all his strips—and left them to it. In fact he had gone straight away to book this flight. Now, the plane droned, and Harvey tried to figure things out. What *wasn't* wrong? It was *all* screamingly wrong, but he wasn't allowed to scream. He couldn't fault any of it, not without confessing to his prior contact with Danielle. It was not the right time for that confession. Somehow it had never yet been the right time. He was left unable to explain convincingly to Isobel why he was on edge and distracted rather than whole-heartedly enthusiastic about their project. They were, after all, doing exactly what he himself was renowned for recommending: finding perspective through positivity, optimism, generosity and humour. Undeniably, the

project was helping Fleur's recovery. Filling the house with giggles again—who could possibly argue against this? He could only insist, and frequently did, that Fleur rested between bursts of activities. He strictly monitored her computer time. He observed her energy levels, her balance, her coordination and her mental processes like a hawk: there was nothing at all to worry him. On that count he was cautiously, increasingly, optimistic. But they couldn't hear Danielle's voice in his ear. They couldn't know that he was almost paralysed by fear that she would see some of the publicity and make contact again—despite the deal (yes, the *deal*—he clung to that word, to do otherwise would be to admit an ugly possibility) he had struck with her eight years ago.

The wall of the plane was cold against his shoulder, and shuddered constantly, sometimes giving a little kick. They flew above a thick cloud layer. He closed his eyes. With the engine's drone filling his ears, the hub-bub of overlapping conversations in the air around him receded. He was detached from it all. He did not yet know exactly what he ought to do about Danielle. He was only obeying an instruction from within which simply and insistently told him he had to find her and talk to her, warn her off again if necessary. If it wasn't for that envelope, he would be inclined to think he'd dreamed about meeting her. Yet, eight years ago, a similar panic had caused him to fly north, just as he was now doing. But on that occasion she was expecting him. He bit his lip, thinking of how nervously eager she had been, and how thoroughly he had subdued her with his deal. No, he chastened himself, not *subdued*. It was her choice. It was a *deal*. She could have declined. They agreed, together, that the most appropriate course of action was to wait until Fleur was eighteen. Then, if Fleur wanted, Harvey would re-contact Danielle and they could talk about arranging a meeting. Eighteen, he kept saying, allowing it to be understood that 'eighteen' was all that needed to be said. He observed how it unsettled her, how he'd found a useful crack in her already fragile sense

of self-worth. So he said it again. “Eighteen, because, as you’ll be aware.” She wasn’t aware, but she didn’t want to admit she wasn’t aware, so she only dropped her eyes, defeated. Then Harvey had, in his smoothest, most professional voice (“I’m a Doctor”, he’d said, pronouncing it as if began with a capital letter) explained that to do otherwise would, obviously, jeopardise Fleur in “these vulnerable pre-puberty years”. He had taken a punt with that, but, again, saw the knife slide home. He was correct, then, to presume that any reference to childhood vulnerability would trigger a burst of pain in Danielle. Indeed, he’d added (and he actually said “indeed” and he saw her wilt when he used it), he would be remiss (“remiss” was a good choice, too) if he didn’t also point out that premature contact (he gave “Premature Contact” a medical sound, as if it were a serious diagnosis) would likely jeopardise Danielle’s recovery. “How wonderful that you are recovering!” (He had smiled warmly, supportively.) Also, “legally speaking” ... well, all he could say was that she should make sure she was really clean because, “you know, the courts, the agencies ... they favour stability. I just mention that,” he’d said, “for your own sake.” He had watched Danielle wobble with insecurity, and, smiling, smiling, he gave her one more wee push. “Not really a good idea to make contact the way you did. It might look impulsive, you understand?” In the end, her chin down so far on her chest that he couldn’t see her face, she had nodded imperceptibly. She pushed an envelope across the café table. “For her.”

The envelope was not stuck down. Three photographs slid out, or rather, he extracted them when their corners emerged. Danielle as a baby, as a toddler, and as a teenager. Harvey took a sharp intake of breath. The thick dark hair, her cheeky smile, her way of standing with her knees locked back—“God!” You look just like her!” Her chair scraped, but he was slow to look away from the photographs. When he did, he caught a glimpse of her running through the door, her pony tail flying.

The engine thrummed at a deeper frequency as the plane began its descent. Andy would be waiting in the terminal, and there was their lunch meeting—excuse for the trip—to be got through. Andy wanted Harvey to do a book. “A graphic novel. They’re hot just now. Do the impact of Fleur’s illness. Sad-funny, and ultimately positive, hopeful, you know. People love that kind of thing. They relate, you know?” Harvey’s hackles had risen: how could strangers *relate* to what they’d been through! Andy’s words had shamed him too. He had all too easily exploited other people’s lives, mined their difficulties for a few cheap laughs. Face it: he had mocked. He was done with Dr Doctor now, and knew it. Andy was going to be annoyed, but Harvey was about to moot an Archie Evil narrative for the graphic novel. The plane touched down, and as the brakes took hold and the fuselage shook and decelerated, his neighbour braced, pressing her thigh firmly against his.

Andy was indeed annoyed. He had visions of best-seller listings in his head. Harvey would not be convinced. Finally Andy sighed and said, “Up to you, mate. I’m only telling you that the market is hot for sickness stories. I’ve done the research. I know it’d sell. It’s not just the money angle either Harve. Or the career—but it would be great for your career. No, in the end you’d be doing something *therapeutic* for people. Isn’t that what it’s all about?”

Therapeutic, my arse, thought Harvey. “It’s Archie Evil,” said Harvey, “or it’s nothing.”

“Right you are, boss,” said Andy. “I think it’s a mistake, but maybe you just need more time. Do the Archie Evil, and keep Fleur’s story for later. Fair enough. I can see how it would be difficult to do it now. So, where did you want me to drop you? I’ll get this.” He was up and heading for the counter to pay while Harvey fumbled for his jacket.

“I’ll walk,” he told Andy, who didn’t demur, but clapped him on the shoulder in a quick farewell.

“Nearly forgot!” Andy unzipped his bag and pulled out a large boxed Easter egg. “For Fleur. And don’t you eat it, mate.” He poked Harvey playfully just above the belt. Why did people always assume they could do that? thought Harvey. He wouldn’t poke a person who was a bit too skinny. “Thanks,” he said.

“Be in touch,” called Andy, and disappeared into the pedestrian flow. Harvey set off in the opposite direction. The door he sought was only a block away. It was in plain sight, but strangely hard to see, like, thought Harvey, the portal to Platform Nine and Three Quarters. Usually you’d flit past, your attention on the window displays in the fashionable shops either side of that discreet forest green entrance. He, alone amongst the lunchtime crowd, stopped in front of the brass panel, brightly polished, which read “Totara Clinic”. He was full of dread, and it was a physical effort to cross the threshold. The door grazed across woollen pile as he pushed it shut. He was standing in a pleasantly furnished waiting area. There were no Iron Uncles here, nor anything as crassly worn and saggy as good old Fat Auntie. The cushioning was firm within braided tapestries. Floral drapes, pinched at their waists with gold tassels, almost entirely occluded the only window, muffling the street noise. Harvey, as if out of ancient instinct, found himself staring at the source of the room’s light: a glass chandelier fitted with small eco bulbs. One of Bach’s Brandenburg concertos was playing, quietly, through the wired-in speakers. The room exuded calm, the soft sort, the expensive sort, the kind for sale at the luxury end of the spectrum. The scene was very ... *managed*. Isobel would have an expression for it, a wry comment. If she had been here she’d have whispered it already, “Pashmina calm” maybe. Harvey’s heart sank again as he remembered this was unlikely to be something he’d be recounting to Isobel when he got

home tomorrow. A florist's bouquet took centre stage on the low, polished coffee table. He recognised the bright orange daisy-like flowers, although he couldn't name them (Isobel would know, he thought). They had no fragrance. Their stems, he suddenly realised, were wound with wire. He had just put his hand amongst the stalks, delving there to see if this observation held true to all the flowers in the arrangement, or only to the bright-faced orange ones, the apparent stars of the show, when a man's voice said, "May I help you?" Harvey started, withdrawing his hand in a rush. His fingertips were a little wet. He wiped them, quickly, on his thighs, but they would not immediately shed their guilt and so he hid them in his pockets, only to have to take them out again right away in order to shake the hand of the man who had just greeted him.

"Dr Bruce Miller. Clinic director. How may I help you?"

Harvey had to think fast. He'd planned what to say, but now he was discombobulated. "Hi," he replied, playing for time by shaking Dr Miller's hand vigorously. "I'm Ted White. I'm trying to make contact with one of your clients, Danielle Forrester."

The smile on Dr Miller's face disappeared. The handshake was abandoned. "And you are?" His tone was almost hostile.

"Ted White."

"But you are ... to Danielle? Are you her father?"

"No!" Harvey was taken aback. "No, no. Danielle was, she, ah ... my wife taught her for a while at High School. Danielle phoned a few years ago to make contact again. To say sorry for some things she'd done, to my wife. We've lost her contact details. She hasn't responded to my messages, anyway. We'd like to see her again. And I'm in town on business today, so I thought I'd try here. When she phoned us, she was having treatment here." He trailed off in the face of Dr Miller's stony demeanor. "It was

a long time ago. About eight years. You probably can't help. I'm sorry to have bothered you." There were so many holes and pitfalls and self-laid traps in what he'd just said that he hardly dare breathe.

"I remember Danielle very well. Look—Ted, is it? You'll understand that confidentiality means I can't tell you much. However...." The pause was far too long for Harvey's comfort. He shifted like a naughty boy, from foot to foot, almost ready to make a bolt for it. "I guess I can tell you this." said Dr Miller. "It's sad news, I'm sorry. You won't find Danielle. We couldn't help her. Not enough anyway. We lost her." He braced his shoulders slightly. "It would have been not long after she phoned your wife by the sound of it. Let me see, yes, seven, eight years? Something like that. We thought she was doing well. We encouraged her to make contact with folks like yourself, and with her family. It's all part of our programme here. Something went wrong. We don't really know what, although, to be frank with you, I think it was the family. It's usually the family, isn't it? Although, just often enough, the family actually saves the day." Wryly, dryly, he added, "Those are the two facts that keep me in the job."

"What do you mean by 'lost her'?"

"Suicide," said Bruce. "Something went wrong for her, poor kid. I mean, something went wrong *again*. She was a lovely girl you know. Intelligent! So bright. She was really turning her life around. Was about to enroll at university. I thought she was going to make it. I really did."

Harvey's throat was constricted. He had to cough before he could speak. "Didn't she ...? Ah, we, ah, heard, she had a baby."

Dr Miller frowned. "Again, confidentiality. I can't...."

"I understand," said Harvey. "It's just that my wife said that Danielle said she was pregnant." So easy, these lies. They surged up. They fountained from him.

Dr Miller held out his hands. “Okay, not much confidentiality to breach then, is there? If she reached out to your wife, then she must have trusted your wife. What an absolute fucking tragedy. Excuse my French. I mean, what a shame you weren’t her parents! But yes, it’s true. She did get pregnant. She said her parents would have killed her. They wouldn’t have, not actually physically. Obviously not. Blood on the carpet, bad look. She ran away, landed up down south. It must have been a terrible time. We know she was living rough. She wouldn’t talk about it, except that she ended up having a miscarriage. All on her own. A terrible experience. Utterly traumatising. You can imagine. On her own. Just a kid. The family employed a private detective—yes, they do that, those people—and he found her living on the street. Family brought her back, eventually sent her to us.” He was lost in reverie. “I liked Danielle. She’d just started to get her spark back. She was a sparky young lady, very quick. She used to make us laugh—which is phenomenal, really, given how ruined most people are around here.” He gave Harvey another wry look. “Me too, obviously. Anyway, I’m only saying, it was terrible to lose her. By the way, sorry to mistake you. Just for a moment there I thought you were him, her father. But of course not. Out of sight, out of mind. He paid the account, at arm’s length of course, through a lawyer, but as for paying *attention*.... Not a chance. That kind of rejection is very hard on them. It’s the worst blow. When a kid puts her hand out and says sorry, but they don’t want her back. Too hard.” He caught himself, paused. “Sorry—Ted, isn’t it?—I probably shouldn’t be telling you all that. And,” he smiled apologetically, “I don’t know what I was thinking, taking you for Danielle’s father. I sort of imagine him in Versace. No offence. You know what? They wouldn’t allow any of us, from here, to attend her funeral. They said she died of asthma. Asthma! See what I mean? No blood on their carpets.”

Harvey must have smiled and nodded and thanked him. He had no recollection. Presumably, Dr Miller showed him out. He had no recollection of that either. He was three blocks from the Totara Clinic before he realised he'd even left it. Then he realised he was walking in the wrong direction for his hotel. When he eventually got back to his room, he was either too hot or too cold; the instant he decided it was one it was the other. He struggled out of his clothes, and crouched, naked and shivering, over the toilet bowl. A toad crawled and hopped and slithered in the pit of his stomach. He retched, but could not purge himself. Icy, he got in the shower and blasted his body with hot water. Boiling, he stepped out and began, once again, to shiver.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Isobel pulled up at the school's front gate. "There you go," she said.

Fleur made a face. "I said *don't* drop me at the gate."

"Whatever," said Isobel, imitating the tone of a petulant teenager.

Fleur smiled. "Just don't kiss me then."

"Whatever, whatever. Cool. Right. Neat."

"Neat!" screeched Fleur. "Mum you're a dinosaur. Let me out of here!"

All of a sudden there was a crowd of girls on the footpath by Fleur's door. "Hey, a welcoming committee," said Isobel, leaning forward to peer through the windscreen. Some of the girls had been in Friday night's Great Hair Day. It had been a lot of fun—on the night. This morning she was shocked to see them. They looked ghoulish, spectre-like, all eyes and skull. The wind was cold today. They should all be wearing scarves and beanies. She turned her urge to shudder into a cheery wave. It was all for a good cause, after all. A close shave for a close shave, as Harvey had said in his excellent, moving speech, just before the mothers got stuck in with the scissors and razors. "Hi guys," she called.

"Mum!" hissed Fleur. "Don't!"

Isobel blew her a kiss. "Whatever!" she called, but Fleur was gone, swept up in the gaggle, or the giggle, or whatever it was, the chattering knot of girls heading off to class, kilts swinging. What would you call that? A swarm. A school? A swirl? A swirl of girls seemed about right—away they swished. Although without their hair they were less swishy, which was bothersome. Slowly Isobel became aware of a car in her rear view mirror, an impatient driver wanting to pull in where Isobel was sitting. She swung her own head, feeling as she did so her own hair brush her neck (better get my roots done again soon, she thought), gave an acknowledging and placatory wave, and selected

Drive. She felt herself, as the lever slotted in place, also clicking into gear. Onward, then. To work.

The security guard hanging round the entrance to the museum barely glanced at her, nor did the woman who worked on the reception desk during the week. Isobel was taken aback. She had been about to greet both of them with pleasure. Hi John! Morning Heather! She was *back*, for heaven's sake. Hello! It's been six weeks. The longest six weeks of my life. And didn't you see my daughter in the paper. Didn't you see us on TV? Yet walking back into the building was like stepping back into a river. The river didn't care. Out of the lift, and walking towards her office, she spied Tony through the open door of the room they used to share. She knocked, and stood in the doorway. Tony glanced up and waved his paintbrush at her. "Welcome to the Hotel California," he sang, in time but not in tune with the Eagles. He was painting words on a sandwich board. She peered. Actually he was painting words on a sausage. *Hot Diggity Dog BEST HOTDOGS IN TOWN*. Wasn't that from the History of Advertising project that was supposed to be up and running from the beginning of last week? Tony looked up. "Hi Isobel. Good to see you. Welcome back. I'm really glad everything turned out fine." He dabbed. "It's a lovely place, such a lovely place."

"Thanks Tony. Yes, everything's fine." She was about to explain more: how tough it had been, really tough, and these things you never expect ... but it's how they say—and it turns out to be true—the tough, you know, get going, and we did get going and we pulled through.... Suddenly it all seemed inappropriately heavy for the moment. Instead, Isobel heard herself say, "I thought the advertising exhibition was already running." Instantly, she regretted it. She sounded like a head prefect, the goody-two-shoes kind—the unpopular kind.

“Yeah, well, sort of. I mean, it is, it’s just we’re just adding a few more details.” He waved the paintbrush in her direction again. “It’s all under control, don’t you worry.”

Isobel pasted on a grin. “I’m not worried, don’t worry about that!” There was a silence, uncomfortable for Isobel but seemingly of no concern for Tony, who continued to paint. “Plenty of room at the Hotel California” he sang.

“See you later,” said Isobel.

“Will do,” said Tony. “And by the way, saw Fleur on the front page of the paper, when was that? Last week? And heard she was on TV and everything. Great thing she was doing. Good on her.”

“Saturday’s paper. It was in on Saturday. Yes, a great thing,” said Isobel. Again, she poised on the verge of telling him all about it. Tony, however, hummed and painted. Clearly, for him, their conversation was over. She felt deflated, even stung, in a mild sort of way. It was an unreasonable way to feel. What, had she expected Tony to rush up and envelope her in a bear hug? Evidently she had. See: unreasonable. Nevertheless the stinging came and went all morning, as she greeted colleagues and refamiliarised herself with the programmes on the schedule. People were kind, but they had no idea, they didn’t seem to grasp that she, Isobel, had spent the last six weeks going to hell and back. Meanwhile, they all seemed to have taken her being away as an opportunity to slack off somewhat. Yes, History of Advertising was up, but it was up as Tony had said: sort of. At this rate no sooner would it be up, properly, than it would be time to bring it down. The Ancient Geeks was next, but as far as she could tell nobody had made contact with anyone on the list of names she’d left with them. By now they ought to know exactly what pieces of antique computer equipment they would be able to dig up from these

fanatics' basements. The few items held by the museum amounted to a meagre hoard. One old IBM does not an exhibition make, she thought, annoyed.

She met Janet in the museum café for lunch. Isobel blinked hard on her prickling tears as Janet wrapped her in a warm embrace. The bear hug, at last. "So good to have you back!" said Janet. "And so good about Fleur. What a scare, eh."

"Yes. Awful. Terrible. We're so, so lucky. Tom Harrison reckoned another month even, and he might not have been able to get it all. Thank goodness for Dr Doctor eh. Well, not Dr Doctor, I mean Harvey. It was Harvey who recognised what was happening. Otherwise we probably would have let things slide for a while. I just thought she was getting migraines."

"Is Harvey doing a strip on it?"

Isobel recoiled inwardly. What a terrible thought. "No, I doubt it." She saw in her mind's eye the only way the characters (Fleur, Harvey, herself) could be drawn: haggard, skeletal, de-fleshed, un-blooded. There was nothing at all which could—or should—be wrung from the experience. "No. He's doing Archie Evil at the moment. A graphic novel."

"Oh yeah, they're really popular now. What was it, actually, in the end?" asked Janet. The waitress arrived at that moment, and Isobel leaned back to allow her space to put their salads and coffees on the table.

"Thanks," she said. To Janet, as the girl walked away, she said, "It was a pineal tumour. Very rare. But they got it early, thank goodness, and Tom Harrison is pretty confident he got it all. And Fleur has absolutely bounced back. Amazing." 'Bounced back' was a strange phrase, thought Isobel. Unless you were concentrating, all you heard was 'bounced', which sounded like fun. But first you had to hit that solid wall. Forcibly. Punch. Punch. And each time you hit you were completely winded; you had

nothing. But you couldn't think like that, it was dangerous. You had to fight, you had to dig in every time and *find* bounce.

“No problems then?”

Isobel recalled Fleur disappearing in the girl swirl, and grinned. “She’s great. No weakness, balance is fine. No more seizures, thank goodness. And no headaches. Gets tired still, of course. That’s likely to take all year, but fundamentally, she’s cured. They’ll keep an eye on her, but it looks as if we’re out of the woods.”

Janet put her hand on Isobel’s forearm. “That is absolutely wonderful to hear, Isobel.”

Again, tears prickled. “Thanks, Janet.” Isobel reached for the paper napkin and wiped her eyes. “Sorry. It’s actually been a bit of a roller coaster.”

“Of course.”

“And it’s made me think about the genetics. It’s not that this was an inherited thing, it wasn’t. But, I was thinking, when something like this happens, you find yourself wondering what genetic cards you were dealt. I’m going to try to trace Fleur’s birth mother.” There, she had committed herself now. “I mean, one day Fleur might want children. But it’s not just that. It’s more, you don’t realise how much you know about yourself because you know what happened with your mother. Like periods, when they started, when they stopped. All that kind of thing, you know? So I’ve contacted the adoption people, and I’ve asked them to try again to find her.”

“What does Harvey think?”

“Well, Harvey thinks it’s a waste of time, basically. He reckons if they didn’t find her then, they’ll never find her now. But you never know, there might be something more they can do with DNA now.”

Janet checked her phone. “We’d better get back, Isobel. Good luck with that. Finding her birth mother I mean. Sounds difficult.”

It nagged at Isobel throughout the afternoon, that difficulty. As did the difficulty of her own mother. She turned her wrist and stared at the blue rivers running under her skin. Blood. Must it always portend?

No, she thought, not always.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

On the plane home, Harvey had vowed to explain everything to Isobel. That very night, he had decided, and no excuses. When he walked into the house, well, it had been impossible. Fleur and Isobel, brittle with tiredness, were arguing over the design of the tee shirts that were to be sold for the fundraiser. He had put the jug on. “Maureen’s remedy,” he told Isobel, and to Fleur, “How about you have a bath and head off to bed?” She came back after her bath and hugged Isobel. “I love you, Mum,” she’d said. “I love you too,” Isobel had replied, and they clung to each other. Fleur pushed away first. “Good to be fighting again though,” she said. “Just proves I’m fighting fit.” Isobel and Harvey had groaned together, and Fleur grinned broadly. “Night, Parents,” she said. After she’d left the room there was no way in the world he could have said to Isobel, as he’d planned, “Listen, I have to tell you something”. Instead, he pulled Isobel towards him and gave her a kiss. “I love you,” he told her. He was almost shaky, thinking what they had survived. What they had survived *together*. She felt it too, he could tell, holding him close, tears in her eyes. “Harvey, Harvey,” she said, crooning near his ear. His name on her lips, her mouth an instrument just to say “Harvey” which was him, him, and only him. “I just feel so, so ... blessed,” she said. It was the perfect word, he thought. Blessed. Yes. They held each other, letting the tea grow cold. It wasn’t a sexual embrace, or not purely a sexual embrace. It was a recharging, he retuning himself towards her heartbeat, and she towards his. Nevertheless, sexuality was part of it; he felt his extremities—all of them!—fill and warm. She smiled, and shifted her hips, making room for him, pressing in. But they did not attempt to diffuse themselves. They stilled in their close, clothed embrace, breathing each other in, replenishing, being blessed.

Harvey briefly recalled that night as, in passing, he picked the mohair rug off the floor and threw it over the back of the sofa. Fleur was at school but due home any

moment. He had come to firmly believe he had been right not to tell Isobel about Danielle. But now that Isobel seemed hell bent on trying to dig up some more information, he had better bite the bullet. It was just a matter of working out how best to tell it. He went into his and Isobel's bedroom, and slid back the wardrobe door. The envelope was right there, in front of his eyes—in front of Isobel's eyes too, if she but knew it. Yet how could he plausibly suddenly have this envelope in his hands? Could he say the Department made contact? No, Isobel would be down there like a shot, picking their brains and their files. He put his hand on the shoebox on the head-high shelf and was about to pull it down. Then he heard the front door open and slam. Fleur was home.

Her hair was not quite “down to here” yet, but it was no longer gamin-short. “Hiya Dad,” she said, dropping her bag, which, overstuffed, toppled and spilt the top of its load: lunch wrappers, an apple, books, a few pens.

“Could you *not* do that?”

“Hey, guess what, I put my name down at the supermarket. I want to get a job this summer.” She ignored the bag and headed into the kitchen to whizz herself a smoothie. “Can't you clean that up?” he said, following her through and filling the jug. She had sat down at the table and was getting out her iPod. He wiped the milky spills on the bench, put away the milk carton and the ice cubes. There was a suspect-looking plastic container lurking in the fridge behind the array of nearly-empty sauce and satay bottles. He pulled it out. When he peeled back the lid, a puff of spores flew up. He exclaimed. “Aagh! Fleur! You left some baked beans to rot in the fridge.” Fleur, ear buds in, was scrolling through screens, and didn't look up. The furred beans reminded him suddenly of the view of the clouds from the plane window, on the day he flew up to try and find Danielle. Harvey tipped the stuff out, holding the container at arm's length,

face averted. He marched over to Fleur and yanked on a wire near her ear. The ear bud tumbled out. “Dad!” she shouted. “What are you doing? I was listening to something.”

“Listen to me for a moment.” He took the chair next to hers. “You left half a can of baked beans to rot in the fridge.”

“Sorry.” She began to refit the earbud.

“Hang on,” said Harvey, putting a hand on her arm. “I want to talk to you.” Her forearm tensed under his palm, but she said nothing, pretending to be absorbed in turning off her equipment and laying the wires on the table in front of them.

“Lay down your weapons,” said Harvey. “Come out with your hands in the air.”

“I want my buds in my ear,” she said, but slipped her arm out from Harvey’s grip and held her hands high. “I surrender. What’s there to talk about anyway? Do you want me to clean up the beans?”

“Done it,” he said, “as well you know. It’s just ... I wanted to catch up with you. You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Keeping up with the schoolwork?”

“Yeah.”

“Still getting tired?”

“Not really.”

“No wobbles, no phasing out?”

“Dad! I did not *forget* the baked beans! I mean, yes, I forgot the baked beans. But it was normal forgetting. It is *normal* to forget about baked beans.”

She picked up the iPod again. Harvey knew she was about to get up and leave. “Agreed,” he said hastily. “Normal. I myself have forgotten every baked bean I’ve ever been introduced to.”

“Please, will you and Mum stop worrying? I’m fine. Assignments under control. On track for Excellence, even.” She glared that at him. “Not tired, no more than anyone else I know. Ask Hannah, Hannah’s tired—everyone’s tired. And no I am not conking out or falling over or dropping things. I don’t have a headache. I haven’t spewed since, let me think, March. Plus, I’m getting a job for summer at the supermarket.”

“Right,” said Harvey. “Well, I guess that covers it.”

“Sure does,” said Fleur, refitting her ear buds. “Haven’t you got some work you could be doing? Shouldn’t Archie Evil be saving the world?”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Fleur jumped in the car and started singing “I’m dreaming of a White Christmas” in a high, sweet voice. “Do you mind?” said Isobel, after the third repetition.

“Just getting in the zone,” said Fleur. “How about Jingle Bells?”

“No thanks.” Isobel pulled into the supermarket car park. Fleur sat up straight in the passenger seat and waved at the skinny boy pushing a trolley.

“Who’s that?” asked Isobel, steering the car into a space.

“No one. Just Robbie.”

“Ah, right.” Isobel tried to sound disinterested. She ran her eye over him: a High School student with a holiday job, an open, friendly-looking face, an asymmetrical hairstyle which spoke to painstaking, though covert, coiffing. “Okay, out you get. Do you want me to pick you up on my way back from work?”

“No, I’ll walk,” said Fleur. “I finish at three. See ya, Mum.”

“Yep, see you later. Have a good day.”

Fleur mimed gum-chewing, and said, slack-jawed, “I’ll speak the Checkout Chick round here, lady. Are ya having a good day?”

“Define good,” said Isobel.

“Like, you know, did ya win Lotto?”

“Oh, get a move on. I have to get to work myself. Here comes Trolley Boy.”

That got her going. Fleur jumped out and banged goodbye on the roof of Isobel’s car with the palm of her hand. Isobel drove off. Waiting to turn into the street, she watched in her rear vision mirror Fleur retrieving a stranded trolley and pushing it towards Robbie, an opening gambit the boy was speeding, all his trolleys rattling, to accept. They stood talking, Fleur sweeping her just-long-enough hair back into a small, high ponytail. Isobel experienced a little leap of delight. Windows down, the sun pouring in

on her bare arms, she pulled into the traffic. Back home, Harvey was working on Archie Evil, some jazz playing, the windows wide open to the warmth. He would greet her that evening with a smile. Fleur might or might not be there. She was out more than she was in these days, the summer break coinciding, for once, with summer weather. She was working all the hours she could get at the supermarket, bored by the job itself but excited by the independence of earning her own money. All three of them, Fleur, Harvey and Isobel, were planning to work through the Christmas/New Year break, and take their break in mid-January. Isobel had bought calendars for each of them as Christmas presents, really nice ones. Choosing for Harvey was easy: *New Yorker* cartoons. And for herself, Japanese ceramics. Choosing for Fleur had taken an hour, and she wasn't completely certain she'd got it right. She perhaps should have gone jokey, but she'd finally selected Renaissance Women, mainly for their magnificent hair. It was going to be a wonderful to turn the first page. January of a brand new year: fresh, positive and—gloriously—healthy. She intended to rejoice, to revel. She reminded herself to check the booking for the beach cottage on the East Coast, and to confirm that Hannah could still join them.

One more year of school for Fleur. Amazing. People always told her it would go fast, the years of Fleur's childhood. Zoom. One second you were rocking an inconsolable baby in your arms, and you yourself were inconsolable, your whole world caught up and churning in a winter-long, ceaseless southerly, and the next ... here you were with the passenger seat empty, having dropped your daughter, that beautiful young woman, to her job, and left her flirting with young Mr Eager Beaver Trolley Boy. Nearly seventeen years, passed in what now seemed like a blink. Except that *while* it was passing, an awful lot of it had seemed to happen in slow-mo. Ha, yes, the *awful lot*, that was what played out in treacle time. Like the first half of this year, thought Isobel,

and grimaced. What a terrible thing to have to go through. Thank goodness it was all behind them. Which reminded her of something else: Fleur's check-up next week with Tom. There was always a slight prickle of dread associated with that, but it was worth it to hear that All Clear again.

She indicated to turn off into the museum car park, but, seeing several children being led towards the main entrance, suddenly thought better of it. Poor mites, she thought. Let them play! She would have hated to have had to attend a school holiday programme when she was a kid. And on a day like today too. This was a day for finding trees to lie under, grass to lie on, a day for absentminded lazing around. Or, if you were a grown-up.... She flicked off the indicator and accelerated past the car park. She pulled up outside the house and phoned work quickly from the car, even coughing a little for effect. How many years since she had pulled a sickie? Too many! The rose had completely taken over the trellis at the gate, the deep red flowers opened to the sun's warmth. Their fragrance meant 'home'. And home, she realised with a surge of feeling, meant love. She hurried up the path towards the door.

Harvey was exactly where she thought she'd find him, working in his shirtsleeves in his studio. He had his music up loud—not jazz today but Maria Callas in full flight—and didn't at first notice Isobel in the doorway. She took a moment to look at him, or rather, to admire him. He was sketching in pencil, the quick outlines that he made before pen-and-inking them in place. She had always liked his forearms in a rolled-up shirtsleeve, particularly, as today, if the forearm was summer-brown. She'd have quite liked to see it against a crisp white sleeve, folded neatly, but you couldn't have everything. Harvey had scrunched his sleeves elbow-wards; his shirt was the shapeless one he wore when he pruned or cut the hedge. He'd had it for years; it was far from crisp and far from white. As far as she could see from this distance he was drawing

an Archie Evil strip, which meant he was working on the book. Graphic novel, she meant. Isobel stepped across to the stereo and turned the sound down. Harvey swung around, startled.

“Hi,” he said. “What’s the matter?”

“Not a thing. Nothing at all. I almost went to work and then I didn’t. I mean, look.” Isobel held her palms out wide, a gesture to encompass the day, the light, the sunshine, the warmth—and him. “I wanted to see you. I haven’t seen you properly for ages.” She began to step towards Harvey, but he stilled her with his own outstretched palm.

“Stop. Stop there.”

Isobel recognised the look in his eye. She stopped.

“Take off your clothes.” His voice was low.

“Here?”

“There.”

Damn, she thought, thinking of the tired underwear she’d put on this morning. But it didn’t matter, she knew better than to think that. She stripped, slowly, letting her skirt fall around her feet, slipping her blouse off her shoulders and feeling it skim past her calves. His eyes roved over her body. He picked up his pad and pencil. “And the rest,” he said. She reached behind to unhitch her bra. She ran her hands across her nipples, watched him watch her doing it. She lowered her knickers, and just as she’d thought, he didn’t even register that they were the saggy ones, with the hole on the side seam. His eyes were on her, on *her*. He kept them on her, even as he drew what he saw. He didn’t once look at the page, his eyes leading and lingering on her form, his hand following blind. “Don’t move,” he whispered. She didn’t, not until he placed his

drawing pad down on the desk, and stood up, walking towards her, unbuttoning that terrible shabby old shirt.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Tom Harrison's consulting room was not plush, and not particularly hushed either. The carpet was, you had to say, threadbare. Harvey could hear the phone ringing in the adjacent waiting room; he could hear the murmur of a conversation taking place in the corridor. Because it was a hot day, Tom's windows were ajar as far as the catches would allow, and through that sliver came incessant traffic noise from the arterial route into the city that ran past the hospital. All the chairs were Iron Uncles, except for Tom's, which he had rolled out from behind his desk and positioned on an angle to the family. He held Fleur's file on his lap, closed. He leaned forward with his arms resting along his thighs, guards for the file in case it slipped. Tom had large hands, Harvey noticed. Too large. Large was clumsy. Tom said he was sorry, and Harvey apologised back. Then Isobel said sorry. But what were he and Isobel apologising for? And then Fleur said it, in the smallest, awfulest voice: "I'm sorry, guys."

"No, no," said Isobel, anguished. "Never say that!"

Tom gripped the edges of Fleur's file and outlined the radiotherapy protocol. Then, they all thanked him. Tom stood. Harvey, Isobel and Fleur copied him.

"Right then," said Tom.

"Right," said Fleur. "This feels weird. Do you feel weird?" She looked from Harvey to Isobel. "I feel really weird. Oh well, at least I'll get some time off school."

"Right," said Harvey.

"Absolutely," said Isobel.

Smiling, smiling, they walked towards the door. Tom was there before them. He opened it for them. "See you soon," he said, as, one by one, they filed out.

"Right. Will do," said Harvey.

“Okay,” said Fleur, as they went down in the lift, “at least I don’t have to have more surgery. That’s good, eh. ”

“Absolutely,” said Isobel.

The elevator stopped on the next floor down. The orderly who had called it waved them on. “We won’t fit,” he said, indicating the hospital bed, and the elderly woman who lay under its sheets. She had a greenish face. She smiled at them from the pillow. It reminded Harvey that there were rules to this game. You had to be a good sport. He pressed Ground again, and the doors slid shut.

“I might though,” said Fleur, as if thoughtfully.

“You might what?”

“Fit,” said Fleur. “Geddit? Oh come on! You’ve got to see the funny side! Don’t you always say that, Dad?”

“Well,” said Harvey, “sort of. That’s what people say I say.” Maybe he was like one of those people, obviously odd, but oddly oblivious to it, the sort who end up studying psychology but never twig why certain dysfunctions exert such a pull. Perhaps he had a need to find out what funny actually was.

The Ground button lit up and the lift bounced to a stop. “I’ve got a very good sense of tumour,” said Fleur, as the doors slid wide. Harvey looked at Isobel, who was shaking her head, but also wrestling with a laugh. “Fleur! Honestly!” she said, and the laugh burst out of her, despite. Harvey snort-chuckled; he couldn’t help it. He reached for Isobel’s hand, and they pursued Fleur through the hospital lobby, having to walk fast to keep up. Fleur swung ahead of them, walking and texting simultaneously. It was extremely hard to give any weight to what Tom had just told them. I mean, thought Harvey, look at her. “She’s going to be fine,” he assured Isobel. His gut constricted, the toad again. For almost a year he’d been hosting that thing. At best, it hibernated for a

few weeks on end. Suddenly, like now, he would feel it squirming, and know he had woken it with a lie.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Isobel stood at the window and watched clouds stream over the harbour. Déjà vu. Had there ever been seasons other than endless windblown rain-lashed winter? Had she ever left? Had there been intervening years? Yes, yes, of course. But this was not a liberating thought; it was a castigating one. She should have stuck it out; she should have learned how to do it. She ought to stay now, yet she was about to leave. But what would she do here, anyway? Harvey and Fleur had their solid routine; she'd only be in the way. She buttoned her winter coat and drew the belt around her waist. She had kissed Fleur. She had given Harvey a quick kiss too, and he had smiled at her. "See you later, darling," he'd said. He was calling her "darling" quite a lot these days. Why was that? To make her feel better about working full time through Fleur's radiotherapy? Yes, probably. To convey that he understood, and didn't condemn her for it. Despite. Despite the fact that Fleur was "not responding". Bridget, the nurse who popped in weekly to check how things were going, had said so, on a phone call to her office, a call that Bridget didn't realise Isobel could overhear. Why had no one said "not responding" to Isobel, directly? Did they think she didn't already detect that? Did they think she would freak out, break down?

A jet on descent to the airport was ploughing into the southerly; down in the city she had a meeting to attend. She turned from the window and headed for the front door. "Bye!" she called. "See you later."

Harvey's voice came along the corridor. "Have a good day darling. I'll phone you later."

She put her hand on the door handle. She could stay. She could help. She put her bag down and walked up the hall, meeting Harvey as he came out of Fleur's bedroom. "I could stay," she said. "I can help."

“Well, yes,” said Harvey, but he looked doubtful. “You could. Of course you could. Really, there’s not much to be done. She’s fine—she’ll get up soon, have a shower, get dressed. Radio’s at eleven. Kind of boring really. But, if you want....”

He was right. There wouldn’t be much she could do. She wasn’t really needed here, whereas, at work, they’d already be wondering where she was. Okay, to work then. “Hi ho, hi ho,” she joked. “You’ll phone me if there’s anything, you know, anything.” If there’s Not Responding, she wanted to say.

“Of course I will. I’ll phone when we get back from radiotherapy anyway. Hadn’t you better go? You’ll be late.”

Isobel didn’t know why that mattered. But clearly, it did. So she adjusted the zippers on her boots, although they had not slipped, and walked back to the door. This time she opened it and stepped out. A raw blast hit her face, and flattened her coat against her torso. Her reflex intake of breath was a spritz to her ribcage. It was not only refreshing, although it was that. It was defining. She did, after all, have edges. She was, after all, still Isobel, a distinct individual in this ever more blurring world.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was a Bridget afternoon. She had been “popping in” weekly for the past six weeks, since radiotherapy had ended. Harvey and she were on polite terms, but the relationship was a little awkward. She wasn’t unlikeable; she was entirely pleasant. She was a little younger than him, in her early fifties. But she was a mountain biker who rode trails around the city during her off hours, and she exuded fitness and fresh air. She strode up the path to the house and was never puffing when he let her in. She wore her name and nurse’s badge pinned to whatever top she was wearing, and always briefly touched the badge after hanging her coat on the hook in the hallway, just before she walked further into their house. Harvey found her visits unnerving. He felt he was being checked up on, that was the thing. Annoyingly, this was partly his own fault. Twice, before Bridget afternoons had become etched into his routine, Harvey forgot she was coming. The first time he had strolled off to the shops. He hadn’t left Fleur alone; he would never do that. Bridget found Fleur on the couch, where she spent much of the day. She was watching music videos with Robbie, who had ducked off school and was stretched on the same couch, under the same blanket. The second time, Bridget arrived to find Harvey on the couch, having a snooze. Fleur wasn’t home, Harvey having dropped her at a café in town to meet Hannah.

He always offered her tea or coffee but she had never yet said yes. “I’ll just pop in,” she always said, “and say hello.” Then she would sit on the edge of the armchair and affect a casual manner while she asked Fleur a string of questions about headaches and backache and balance and strength. Harvey always made a show of leaving them to it, but he eavesdropped from the kitchen. If Bridget would only ask him these same questions he’d be able to give her all the answers. He pushed a cloth around the bench and gritted his teeth to hear Bridget’s simplified phrasing, and her sweetened tone.

*You're talking to Fleur, not to a half-wit! How's your calculus? Hers is brilliant.* It was no wonder Fleur often didn't know what Bridget was driving at. Bridget noted down Fleur's responses nevertheless, in all their confusion. But the confusion, Harvey wanted desperately to point out, was almost entirely Bridget's. She just didn't "get" Fleur.

But no one could know Fleur as Harvey did. Oh, except Isobel, of course. Naturally, Isobel. But even Isobel didn't have the continuous thread of Fleur, as it were, not the way he did, not now that what Fleur said was not necessarily what she had in mind. It was he, after all, who had caught Fleur's first toddler words, unintelligible to others; it was Harvey who had known what she meant to convey. Banana, not pear. Want a swing, not a wee-wee. Her actual words were as immaterial now as they were then; he found he instinctively remembered all the ways to read beyond them. It was some kind of clear-sight, and it came with a heavy responsibility: to be present, to translate, to advocate.

Harvey put a pot of water on the gas and took two eggs out of the fridge, one each for their lunch. While the water heated, he leaned on the bench and stared out at the back garden. He had hung the washing out first thing, when it was fine, not a cloud in the sky. Now it was raining. Fleur's pyjamas and her bed sheets looked miserable out there, flapping in a desultory way. The dismal sight matched his mood. Today, for the first time, he had to acknowledge that Bridget's visits were becoming necessary. Things had changed. That load of laundry was part of the proof. He had stripped her bed immediately, and helped her to the shower, all the while reassuring her that there was no need for embarrassment, that it was an accident, it could happen to anyone. No, it couldn't. Fleur knew it, and Harvey knew it. The deterioration they had been warned of, and had tried to pretend would never happen, was underway. She was that little bit weaker, and her balance was that little bit worse. She steadied herself on the walls and

the furniture as she walked into the lounge this morning. He handed her a glass of water and watched her reach for it. "So how many am I holding?" he asked. "Just one," she said, squinting hard, but her fingers closed on thin air before she found the glass. She had the same problem trying to pick up her toast. Harvey watched her, heart plummeting. All morning he was unwilling to move out of her hearing in case she needed help to get to the toilet. He hated that thought, but he didn't intend to shy from it. This was what he had undertaken to do, after all. Not only for Fleur. For Isobel, so that she need not. He slipped the eggs into the rolling boil and took down two egg cups. He put the jug on too. Although increasingly he felt tea wasn't quite cutting it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Isobel heard Harvey calling her name over and over, but, it being a dream, she ignored him, distracted by a slow motion eruption which was sending enormous plumes of smoke billowing and blotting the sky, while another, much calmer, voice at her shoulder (Maureen's voice?) was saying "take the bus, take the bus", so she put out her hand to signal the driver, and somehow she was on the bus but the driver was not, and the bus was lurching out of control around zig zag bends on the same volcano that she knew was erupting so she had to get out—but Harvey was still yelling and the bus vanished, and she found herself awake, alone in the bed, her heart pounding. She got up and blundered down the corridor to Fleur's room.

"Turn the light on," said Harvey.

There was blood. "My god! What happened? Shall I call an ambulance?"

"No, no, it's okay. Just go grab me a towel and a flannel. She fell out of bed, hit her head on the way down. But she's okay. There's not much blood, it looks worse than it is." There was blood on Fleur's sheet, blood on the bedside table, blood on the carpet, blood on Fleur's face from a cut on her forehead. Fleur smiled. "S'okay, Mum. Little trip."

Isobel smiled back, shakily. She went to get the cloths, and Harvey pressed the flannel against the wound. "It's just a nick."

"I'll get a plaster." Back in the bathroom she chose one from a packet left over from the days when plasters were applied to knees grazed from playground tumbles. It had bright orange flowers on it. She handed it to Harvey. He pressed it over the cut.

"There you go," he said, "good as new. Flowers for Fleur."

"What kind?" asked Fleur, touching the plaster gently. "Ouch."

"Gerberas," said Isobel.

“Good, I like gerberas,” said Fleur.

“What are gerberas?” said Harvey, wiping the table clean. “Now we have to get you back into bed.

“Actually, probably marigolds,” Isobel said.

“Can you sit up Fleur?” Harvey scooped an arm under her shoulders to ease her up.

“Ooof,” said Fleur. “My legs aren’t being legs. Sorry.”

“Isobel, can you get on that side?” It was the first time either of them had lifted her since she was a small child, and not something they had ever done together. Thin as she was, it wasn’t easy. Fleur’s elbow banged the bed frame. ‘Careful!’ hissed Isobel. Moments later, she realised she wasn’t hoisting Fleur’s hips quite high to clear the mattress, and over-corrected. Fleur bumped down gracelessly. “Ooof,” she said again, but smiled. “S’okay.” They tucked her in, Isobel on one side of the bed, Harvey on the other. Then they stood there, not willing to leave the room, not sure what to do next. “Go,” instructed Fleur. She nodded towards the note on the door. THIS MEANS YOU.

They went, flicking off the light behind them. Back in their own bed Isobel reached for Harvey. He wrapped her in his arms. By the shudder of his shoulders, he was crying. She extracted herself from his embrace so that she could cradle him. She pulled his head onto her shoulder and stroked his hair over and over. Her world, in the dark, was entirely the whooshes and catches of his breath and hers, and a slight wind in the tree outside the bedroom window, a small plane that at some point crossed the sky, and, nightlong—as for every night from now on—an alert but silent space in her mind, reserved for the slightest sound from her daughter.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

More and more Fleur floated within herself, thinking who knew what. Was she remembering, or did she anticipate? Or was she simply in the here and now? She smiled whenever Harvey or Isobel spoke to her; she frowned and fretted and called if she was becoming uncomfortable. As far as Harvey was concerned, despite the confusion of her actual words, Fleur was always speaking to him, and he made good replies to everything she asked for. In her bottom drawer he kept an array of differently-weighted cardigans and throws, so as to keep her always comfortably warm. The days were beginning to lengthen, and bulbs starting to poke through the garden soil. The weather was unstable, some days ragged-sky stormy, others blue and placid. He slightly strained a muscle in his hip climbing the kowhai tree outside her bedroom window to hang a bird feeder, and used this as his excuse for spending much of the following three days in an armchair next to her bed. They listened to the music on Fleur's iPod, and watched the waxeyes flock to the feeder. Those three days were pleasantly dreamy. He got up only to bruise ginger, crush garlic and chop parsley for the soups he was now making her for lunch and dinner. Broths, really. The most substantial thing about them was their aromas, with which he filled the house. He served them in the delicate cups from Isobel's Japanese tea set. When those three days were over, he got out of the armchair and carried on.

Fleur required constant monitoring, and yes, he was tired, but who else could do it? Bridget was a great help, and clearly very experienced. But she remained, in his eyes, a sort of plate glass professional. Tin-eared somehow, although Fleur seemed to like her well enough. It was just that he, Harvey, knew not only *what* he was dealing with, but *who*. To know Fleur was to know what music to avoid and what foods would tempt her and what conversations she would enjoy listening to. Certainly not a rambling

monologue about some house renovation reality show, which had turned out to be Bridget's favourite shtick. And then there was Isobel, and her pain, to which he must also tend. He sensed it, tamped down like overheating lava. It could not be adjusted to a more bearable temperature by changing a cardigan. In the essential matter of pain control, the sole thing Harvey could do for Isobel was try to ease the pressure. There were sights he could, and did, spare her. When Isobel returned from work he made sure Fleur was rested and comfortable. Those early evening hours Fleur and Isobel spent together, curled up on the couch, were beyond precious. He could give her that.

Bridget was now coming three afternoons a week. She encouraged Harvey to use her visits as a chance to get out of the house. "You need to look after yourself as well," she told him sternly. It was true, Harvey knew it, but difficult to do. Today he hovered in the doorway while Bridget unrolled a blood pressure cuff. "Off you go!" she repeated, and Fleur lifted her hand from the armrest of her very own newly-installed Fat Auntie to point at the sign on her door.

"See you soon, then," he said. It was a Velcro rip, these days, to leave her room. He had a feeling, nothing tangible, just a feeling ... not a good one. The toad rolled over in his gut; he willed it back to sleep. He shrugged on his jacket and headed out, down the path, down through the scattering of rotten camellias to the gate, through the trellis and the Birthday Present rose, which was just emerging from winter dormancy, onto the street. He'd take a turn around the block, get a drenching of sky and air and sunlight, take in eyefuls of the harbour, that (in today's cold bright wind) tempestuous blue bowl. He needed an infusion—he thought of it as such, direct to his blood—of salt and oxygen and colour. His back ached, which reminded him of Fleur's backache, which was no longer a mere ache, which was turning to intractable pain. He increased his pace until he was on the verge of breaking into a run. The idea of sprinting hard, really hard,

appealed. Get his legs pumping, get his heart pumping, beat down the insistent pistons of his brain which would not stop, would not stop, would not stop. But he was not Bridget (perfect Bridget); he had let himself go. Puffing, sweating, he eased up. At the end of the street he considered carrying on to the park, where he used to take Fleur, pushing her on the swings and yacking away to the other parents. The toad kicked—what was he thinking? He must get back to her, and now. He took another eyeful of the harbour and turned back for the house, struggling up the path and stopping on the porch to gather his breath.

Bridget hadn't heard him walking up the hall. She was murmuring; he heard it before he got to the bedroom door. Bridget wasn't, he'd thought, one to murmur. Fleur, he saw, was back in bed. He couldn't see her face. It was turned away. She was either asleep or staring out the window at the scrabble of waxeyes on the feeder. Bridget, oddly, was kneeling, her back to Harvey. Kneeling? Harvey gripped the door frame: he was not ready. Not yet. Not now.

But Fleur shifted in the bed and cleared her throat. Then he became aware of Bridget's prayer. Not so much a prayer, he thought—surely prayers were addressed to God. Bridget's incantation was addressed to Fleur: take Jesus into your heart. He will forgive you. He will wash away your sins. His Heaven welcomes you. You shall be received.

Harvey shouted—a mistake of course. He realised later, much too late, how badly he had handled it. “Stop that nonsense! Leave her alone. What are you thinking? *Are* you thinking? Is this your job? You leave your religious nuttery out of it. How dare you!” Bridget stood, and faced him frankly. She withstood his entire tirade without comment, not blank-faced exactly—trying to be blank-faced. It was smug, that was what it was. When he finally fell quiet she nodded, as if he'd merely asked if he should

give the next dose of Fleur's meds at the usual time. Her lack of apology or explanation, her silence, hung in the room as loud as spoken words. Harvey took a deep, deep breath. She was entitled to her beliefs, after all. She continued to stand facing him, as if waiting. Incredibly, Harvey found himself apologising to her.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm stressed, obviously. And to be honest, I got a fright just then. And you know, we're not religious."

"I know," said Bridget. "But I am. I find it helps."

"Maybe it helps you, Bridget. I'm not so sure for us. For Fleur. Could you not ... do you mind ... I mean, you're perfectly entitled to your beliefs...."

"Of course Harvey," said Bridget. "I understand." She smiled, patronisingly, Harvey thought, in a way that seemed to say, We are done here. She turned to the drug kit and began to count vials and note doses. "Shall we turn her before I go?"

The cross around Bridget's neck—he had never noticed it before that afternoon. As together they turned Fleur on Bridget's count, he saw it drop forward in the vee of her shirt. It was a small silver cross on a fine chain. Such a small and flimsy token, but like a lightning rod it called the full force of his fury. All of a sudden he wanted to wrench it off her and snap it in two. His hands were on Fleur's shoulder, and she gasped. He eased off, horrified at himself. Moments like that he realised how much anger he harboured. Not, obviously, towards the cross hanging round Bridget's neck. Nor with Bridget, nor with Bridget's prayer. With God? Maybe, well, probably. He was angry with an entity he couldn't believe in, for being unbelievable. That would be it. The irony tickled him; he almost smiled as he held Fleur gently in position as Bridget, all business, tucked the pillows. Fleur's was a sharp body now. It cut into the mattress, cut into the pillows, cut into the Harvey's hands—cut, most horribly, into Fleur's own skin. Harvey's rage flared again. God! What kind of God required a seventeen year old

girl to confess her sins before she would be granted entry to paradise? How dare Bridget! (Yes, he thought, I *am* angry with Bridget.)

Bridget squirted anti-bacterial wash on her hands, preparing to leave. Oh so calm, oh so professional. Harvey hated her. Oh, that was rational, Harvey. Who did he really hate? Himself. Obviously.

“I’ll be back about three tomorrow,” she said. “Page me if you need me though. You might need some extra help soon. Day or night, page me. And what did you and Isobel think about linking in with the support programme?”

“Support programme? Oh, the pamphlet.” Harvey had thrown it out. He knew ‘The Health System’ inside and out. ‘Managing the Medication’ was second nature. He’d been helping Fleur get from bed to chair perfectly safely for weeks. Small nutritious meals? Don’t patronise me, he’d thought. And as for ‘Spirituality’, well, the good folk in the ‘supportive group environment’ would be buoyed up, he was sure, by his position on that. “Yes, great. We’ll look at it again.”

“Good. I can put you in touch with anyone you’d like to talk to.”

“God?” said Harvey under his breath, and kicked himself. That was too mean. Bridget was looking quizzical. “Good,” he repeated, firmly and loudly. “Thank you Bridget. Really.”

When she’d gone, he sat on the chair next to the bed, stroking Fleur’s temple. How many times, doing this, had he wanted to claw in and scrape out the tumour with his own fingernails? Crazy thinking. He leaned down to whisper in Fleur’s ear. “Bridget the Brisk, hey?” Their private joke. He watched for her smile. She hadn’t heard him; she stared beyond and behind his face. He nudged her. “Fleur. Old Bridget the Brisk! Brisk Bridget Bossy Boots.” That was a smile, wasn’t it?

He stroked her hair, and as always got a little shock the moment his fingers found the crescent surgical scar beneath. Again that urge to peel back skin and bone, to pick out the invader beneath by its very roots. Instead he rearranged her hair to cover the scar, and took her hand. The bird feeder hanging in the silver birch outside the window was chittery with birds.

Easeful death, he thought: I'm becoming most in love with easeful death.

To Fleur he said, "Did you ever get a chance to read Keats?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

It was dawn. Isobel had been awake all night. She rolled towards Harvey. “It must be your doctor training or something. Or else you’re just a better person than me. But I can’t sit home ... and just ... wait. Watch her and wait.” Sleepily, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her on the head. He drifted back to sleep. When the alarm went off at seven, Isobel got up and took a shower and got ready for work. It was love for Fleur that drove her through the motions of getting dressed, putting on makeup, having a decent breakfast. She ate her muesli in Fleur’s bedroom, reading interesting bits of the paper out to her. She brushed Fleur’s hair, and plaited it. She kissed her, and once more for good luck, and a quick final press of her hand, a touch to her temple, then out the door with a cheerful “See you later guys!”. It was love for Fleur that drove her down the steps and onto the path: love, love, love. Isobel’s love drove her this way; his love drove him that way.

No it wasn’t. It was fear. So much to be frightened of. She feared her uselessness within the walls of Fleur’s bedroom. She feared the room itself.

She walked down the zig-zag path to the gate, and paused there, glancing up at the empty window. If only Harvey would say, *Please stay*. It would be all it would take.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

“Lunch time,” said Harvey. It was such a pristinely still day that they could hear the kids in the playground of the primary school four blocks away. Fleur used to be one of those kids. He saw the playground with its plastic tunnels, the swing bridge and the flying fox, and Fleur swinging upside down with her tip of her ponytail frisking the ground. She was always in the thick of the action, surrounded by a crowd of kids who were all doers. They were the action kids, bursting with movement and laughter and shouts. When he arrived at school to pick her up he’d watch for a while. He envied her that easy physicality. It was not part of his own make-up, nor Isobel’s—they had both been quieter, bookish kids, not shy exactly, but not outwardly exuberant (oh, but *inwardly!*). “Remember how you used to love those monkey bars?” As he said this, he thought, uncomfortably, of Danielle. Had she loved the monkey bars?

Fleur smiled. “Hannah,” she said.

“Yep, Hannah loved them too. Hannah’s coming to see you tomorrow, actually.”

“Mum.”

“Mum’s at work, but she’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“Mum. Mother.”

“She’ll be back in a few hours. Or I can phone her—she’ll come home straight away. Would you like that?”

What was she saying? She was shaking her head. “My mother.”

*What?* No! Why *now*? It would destroy ... god, it would destroy Isobel, this.

“Mother,” said Fleur again. Her eyes were wide open and fixed on Harvey’s. She would not let him turn aside, ignore her, or willfully distort her statement. Nevertheless, he made one last-ditch attempt, just in case.

“Mum’s at work sweetheart. She’ll be back soon.”

Fleur made the tiniest move of her head, shaking it. No.

Harvey bowed his head. He continued to stroke the back of Fleur's hand.

Arguments for and against flowed. Tell her. Don't tell her. She deserves to know. She needs to know. It's not important any more. It's too late. It will devastate Isobel. Isobel is her mother. Fleur has no other mother. She has another mother. She needs to know.

"You want to know about your birth mother?"

The question hung between them, and for a second he allowed himself the relief of thinking this wasn't what she wanted. And then—it was as if a switch had been flicked, pushing current into a dormant circuit. Fleur blazed—there could be no other word: light in her face, light in her eyes, and vigour in her sudden scramble to sit upright. Taken by surprise, Harvey also scrambled, jumping up from the chair and hastily raising the back of the bed and helping her get comfortable. She hadn't willingly sat upright for a while. He hadn't told either Bridget or Isobel this, letting them think that she still spent, under his supervision, a couple of hours each day in the chair. He'd not wanted to think, or let anyone else think—not yet—that she might never get out of this bed again. And see, he was right not to think that way. Look at her now: determined, focused. He'd read it all wrong. This last week, she hadn't begun to (say it, Harvey!) die, she was, in fact, overwhelmed by depression. And why? Largely, he thought, because she needed this crucial piece of information. Of course she did. Nevertheless....

Harvey checked the clock. There were two hours before Isobel would get in. Fleur's eyes were fixed on his, searching, searching. As far as he could compute it, he had three choices. One, lie to Fleur. Let there be no birth mother. Let Fleur believe her abandonment was complete, brutal, and never regretted. Two, call Isobel and get her to rush home; he had something to tell them both. Three (he was thinking at speed,

scrutinising Fleur's face, knowing how short these windows of focus were for her, concluding there really was no luxury of time), don't call Isobel; tell Fleur alone ... which led to a faint further question, three and a half: tell Isobel later? He pushed this aside ... for later.

"I can tell you a little bit about her. I have to go and get something Fleur. Photos and a letter. They came for you when you were little. I was always going to give them to you when you turned eighteen." This wasn't true, but suddenly seemed true. He wanted to own the sentiment and the promise. It sounded good: responsible, paternal. Then the implications of his words hit and seared him. Fleur would never turn eighteen. The time was now, there would be no other moment. He put the bed sides up and kissed her. "I'll be two minutes, five. I have to find the envelope." She nodded slightly, and pursued him with her eyes as he left the room.

Not 'find' the envelope: 'fetch' it. He knew full well where the thing was. On the evening of his arrival home from Auckland, shortly after Fleur's eighth birthday, he'd stood in his and Isobel's bedroom with the envelope in his hands. Time to tell. And yet, instead, hearing Isobel in the hallway, he had grabbed the shoebox off the wardrobe shelf and stuffed the envelope inside. The next day, he'd packed it away more carefully, under the hand-made Italian brogues he'd bought at great expense in Florence when he was twenty-five, and had never had subsequent occasion to wear. Furtive, disliking himself, he had unwrapped them hastily (they had never since purchase been divested of their tissue paper wrap and suddenly he wanted to apologise to them—for never wearing them, for not really wanting them, for using them like this) and folded the paper into a thick wad. He had placed the envelope in the bottom of the box and covered it completely with the blanket of tissue. Then he put the bare shoes back (they seemed

so cold and empty—sorry, sorry!), jammed on the lid and bunged the box back on the shelf. Where it had stayed, right in front of their noses, all this time.

How stupid! Isobel or Fleur might have found it any time. He must have secretly desired for that to happen, or else, surely, he would have moved the box long ago. He must have been waiting all this time for his hand to be forced. No pluck, that was him. He reached now for the shoebox and tipped it over on the bed. The shoes fell out readily, but he had to dig under an edge to get the tissue to peel back. For a ghastly moment he thought the envelope was gone. A succession of scenarios played swiftly through his mind—but no, there it was. He lifted it out.

When he returned to Fleur’s room, she had not moved. She was waiting on him, fully attentive, her glance flicking immediately to what he held in his hands. He wanted to burst into tears—he had not seen her so alive for weeks—but tears were not what she was waiting for. He put the envelope into her hands. While he lowered the bars again, she picked at the flap. He sat, reaching over to help her a little, but mainly it was Fleur who opened the package and drew out the photographs of Danielle, and the letter.

It was very hard to watch Fleur staring into the photographs of young Danielle. “You look like her, eh,” murmured Harvey (*you used to*, he thought). “Her hair.” But it was more than just Danielle’s dark fringe and high ponytail. Danielle’s figure was (*used to be*) Fleur’s figure: fit, trim, her legs long with the same locked-back knees, the same elongated calves—a standing posture identical to Fleur’s (*when Fleur used to stand*). Danielle was grinning at whoever was taking the photo, and the grin, too, was completely Fleur. Harvey felt his stomach turn over. How could he ever show Isobel this image?

Fleur heaved a sigh, a sound of satisfaction, a sound of ease. She took her eyes off Danielle long enough to turn them on Harvey. “My mother.”

“Yes.” Again, Harvey’s stomach churned. There was such betrayal in that one word. “She was sixteen in that photo. She was pregnant with you, but she didn’t know it then.” This was all in the letter, which he now picked up and unfolded. “Shall I read it to you?”

Fleur nodded. He put the photograph of Danielle as a baby in her other hand. She wasn’t a pretty baby. She had a visible rash under her chin, and squinty eyes. Fleur actually laughed. “Not like me,” she said.

Harvey grinned too. “No, not like you.” There were, in fact, several photos of Fleur in the family album which were very like this one of Danielle, photos which neither he nor Isobel—nor Fleur herself, perhaps—had ever lingered over, so mixed were the memories they evoked. He fished in his pocket for his reading glasses.

*To my darling daughter*, he read. Without warning his eyes pricked and flooded. With his left hand he whipped off his glasses, and with his right pushed his knuckles against each eye socket in turn. First aid: apply pressure.

“To my darling daughter.” He read the letter. He didn’t know how much Fleur could take in, but read the whole thing right through anyway. When he finished, he said, “Shall I read it again?”

Fleur shook her head. “Later,” she said. She gave a great, heaving sigh, which seemed to expel more than air. “Thank you, Dad.”

“I’m so sorry Fleur. I should have given you this years ago.”

“You lied to me Dad.” Her pronunciation was clear as a bell, and her tone severe. He flinched. “You thought it was a good lie, though.”

Harvey could only nod his head, a feeble, shamed assent.

“She wanted to meet me.”

Harvey wondered if this was what it was usually like for Fleur, this weight that loaded down his tongue. He fought to mumble: “Yes.”

“But you didn’t want me to meet her.”

“No.”

She held the photographs and stared. Harvey watched her fingertips touch Danielle’s fringe, her shoulders, her lips. He didn’t know if he could endure watching this. It was too intimate. He had never seen Fleur so craven. If he had only given her these photographs earlier. He should have done it straight away. She might—no, she *would*—be fully-fleshed and healthy. Instead, this emaciated girl-child, stripped of all dignity, running her fingers over these old photos.

“No, I thought it was too soon. You knew you were adopted, we always told you that. It was just ... so hard, never the right time ... to explain....”

“What’s it called, that, when you get left?”

He stared. He couldn’t say it.

“Don’t lie to me Dad. Not even a good lie. Okay? Never. There isn’t any time now.”

My god, the words she was coming out with—a plug removed, a backlog flowing. She fixed her eyes on his. “Promise: no lies, no more.” Harvey was shaken to his core. He wanted Isobel here, by his side, to help. He couldn’t carry this burden alone. But he couldn’t share it either. He could hardly call Isobel *now* and dump this on her. She’d break. Every which way he turned it (and his thoughts tumbled, careered), he’d betrayed her. But—he wanted to plead—only out of loyalty! Only not to hurt you, Isobel! Fleur put a hand out to his. With her thumb and forefinger she held Danielle; her wagging little finger sought Harvey’s.

“Pinky promise.”

Slowly, he moved his outstretched little finger towards hers. Slowly, but steadily. Their fingers curled around one another. “Pinky promise.”

Fleur gave a swift smile. “Good. What do you call it? What was I?”

“A foundling.” Once he’d said it, it didn’t seem so bad. He repeated it, hearing the emphasis on the first syllable. Found. Found.

“I was found,” she said.

“Yes.”

“She didn’t want me.”

“She was very young. Very confused. I think she was probably terrified.”

“So she got rid of me.”

“She must have been in a terrible state, Fleur. Imagine. You can hear it in the letter, can’t you, how frightened she was. I think that at the time she must have felt she had no choice, none at all.”

“She could have run away with me.”

“Maybe. I bet she thought about it. It must have been so overwhelming. Remember how young she was, and powerless, and alone. And I don’t think she ever forgave herself. Ever.” Danielle’s small voice on the phone that day. *Sorry, I’m sorry.* Harvey’s stomach turned over.

Fleur gestured for water, and Harvey saw that the surge of energy had passed. She was exhausted. He adjusted the straw to her lips and she drank.

“Sweetie, this is tough. This is very big news, a lot to take in. Do you want to sleep a while, then we’ll talk some more about it?”

Fleur nodded. “One more thing, Dad. I’m really sick now, aren’t I?”

He said nothing.

“Aren’t I?”

He wouldn't accord such a terrible question the courtesy of reply.

"Promise," she said, with the barest waggle of her pinky finger.

No lies. "Yes."

"Will it hurt?"

Isobel! He wanted Isobel. "No, sweetheart. It won't hurt. It will be like...."

"... like a big sleep?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Don't want it to hurt."

"It won't hurt."

"Promise?" She waggled her little finger again.

"Promise." He curled his own around hers, and squeezed. What the hell was he promising? And now she looked at him with what he could only think was rapture, joy. She was happy? He was jolted by the realisation: she was happy. She was ready. *She* was ready; he and Isobel were not. He covered her too-delicate hand with both of his large clumsy ones, and leaned his forehead on that pyre. He was entirely hollow. From deep down in that void he sensed something stirring. It stirred like the tremulous first leaf shudder after the wind has turned and begun to blow from its new direction, like an intimation of howling, though it was not yet actually a sound.

Fleur spoke again. "She's dead, isn't she?" Harvey straightened up. Fleur slightly shook the photo of Danielle at sixteen.

"Yes. Drug overdose. It happened about eight years ago." That clammy clench in his belly, his mouth suddenly dry, his heart going rat-a-tat-tat. *Suicide*, said Bruce Miller in his head. *Something went wrong*. Me, thought Harvey, I went wrong.

"Then ... I might meet her."

Harvey stared at her. She wasn't looking at him. She wasn't *asking* him, or even talking to him. She was holding the photo of her mother, communing with Danielle.

No lies, Harvey reminded himself. Well then, the truth was as Fleur had just said: she *might* meet Danielle. He, Harvey, didn't believe this would happen, but he would be lying if he categorically stated it could not. He said nothing, which wasn't a lie. It was the only honest response he could muster in the circumstances, as he reeled, appalled by the inevitabilities that were crashing about him.

Their conversation, he saw, had sapped Fleur. She couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. While she slept, before Isobel came in from work, Harvey slipped the envelope and its contents from beneath Fleur's hands. He wavered, not sure where to put it, not sure how to handle things with Isobel. Had he done the right thing showing Fleur? Wouldn't it have been better to leave her in ignorance? But look: the contentment on her face right now. It had sapped her, but in something like the manner of breasting the tape at the end of an endurance event, something difficult but long-anticipated, trained-for but nonetheless deeply feared. Something conquered. She'd been sated, delighted—even, perhaps you could say, proud.

He heard Isobel's key in the front door, and still he held the envelope, undecided. It was only as she entered the house, calling "Hi!" that he quickly slid it under Fleur's pillows.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Isobel leaned over Fleur and brushed her forehead with a kiss. She examined her face, and ran her eyes rapidly over the objects in the room. It was a compulsive habit, stupid too, but it was impossible not to hope that something wonderful had happened in her absence. Just as impossible as not fearing that something terrible had occurred. Fleur's slippers were still under the bed, as they'd been at breakfast. "Didn't she get up today?"

"No," said Harvey. "She's been in bed all day."

"But she has to get up. You know she can't be in bed all day Harvey." Fleur was stirring. Isobel leaned over her, blocking Harvey out. "Hello darling. I'm home. How are you feeling? Do you want a drink? How would you like a massage? Are you thirsty?"

Fleur's gaze was towards Isobel, but not on her. Isobel drew back, horrified. "Harvey, I don't think ... I think she can't see."

Harvey passed his hand in front of her face. She blinked. "Thank goodness," said Isobel. "I thought for a moment...."

"Fuzzy," said Fleur.

"You're tired. It'll be better after a sleep," said Harvey.

"Or maybe you need to get up," said Isobel. "Since you haven't been up all day. Your eyes have probably got Horizontalitis."

Fleur squinted. "Fuzzy. Improves you both." She tried to laugh.

Isobel rounded on Harvey. "You should have got her up! You can't leave her lying in bed all day. You just can't."

"Izzy, Izzy—"

"I'm phoning Bridget."

“Why on earth would you do that?”

“Because you’re losing the plot Harvey. You’re not seeing the woods for the trees. *You’re* tired—you need to have the sleep, Harvey, not Fleur. Fleur needs, she needs, Fleur has to—”. Isobel sucked in air through her open mouth. Fleur has to *live*, that was what she had been about to say.

“What do you think Bridget can do about it, that I can’t? We can’t, I mean.”

“I don’t *know*, Harvey! But I’m going to ask. She’s the expert.”

Fleur swiped her arm across the bedside table, sending her glass of water flying. It smashed on the skirting board. In the silence that followed, Fleur said, softly, “Stop.”

Harvey bent to the floor and began to pick up the broken glass. “Sorry Fleur. Sorry Isobel.”

“Yes. Sorry. Silly.” Isobel grabbed Fleur’s hand and squeezed it. “I’ll get some newspaper and the brush and pan.”

“Put the jug on while you’re out there, will you?” said Harvey. “I’ll make us a cup of tea.”

“Way to go, Parents,” said Fleur. She closed her eyes.

They sat at opposite ends of the couch. Harvey flicked on the TV and a woman living in squalor with twenty seven cats told them why she couldn’t give any of them away. Isobel drained her tea first, and stood up. “I’m going to bed.”

“Okay, I’ll be there in a tick,” said Harvey.

“I’m going to sleep in the spare room.”

The cat lady said, “They need me.”

Isobel said, “And first thing tomorrow, I’m phoning Bridget.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

After the cat lady, Harvey watched a policewoman track down a psychopathic killer, getting locked in a basement before being saved in a dramatic shootout in which the psychopath was shot through the throat and died bloodily. As the credits rolled he reached for the remote and made himself turn the television off. It was midnight, well past bedtime. Isobel was right that he was tired. But wrong, so wrong to say he'd lost the plot. He, who knew Fleur better than anyone. Than *anyone*. No, Bridget was *not* the expert. He was the expert. And it was his expertise that kept Fleur safely at home. Saint Bridget of the Expert Protocol could not do that, not without him. And Isobel could not do that, not without him. If it wasn't for him, Fleur would be being cared for by strangers by now.

He went to Fleur now. She was asleep, the blanket rising and falling rhythmically. He was filled with fierceness. Let her down? Betray her? Let strangers wash her with a rough flannel, play the wrong music, feed her junket and custard instead of tofu whisk, decide how much pain relief, and when to give it? It won't happen, Fliss-floss. I won't let it. Pinky promise. And then, *shit!* he thought, suddenly recalling Danielle's envelope under Fleur's pillows. Stealthily, he slid his hand in the gap until he'd found the edge of the envelope. He was holding his breath now, terrified of waking her. But he got it free. He had burning coals in his hand. He backed out of Fleur's room.

In his and Isobel's bedroom, his Florentine shoes were still on the bed, the box upside down on the floor. Isobel's cardigan was on the bed too, where she'd flung it when she got home from work. She must have noticed the shoes. Well, he'd been showing Fleur, or something. He'd think of something. He picked up the box and fitted the envelope into its base. Tissue paper on top. Shoes—one, two—packed back in. Lid

on. Opened the wardrobe door, stuck the box back on the shelf. Where it belonged, from where it should never have been and should never again be disturbed.

Gone were the days, before Fleur's illness, where things like envelopes waited, stacked according to size, in a drawer dedicated to envelopes. These days, every drawer was a mess. The few clean envelopes he found either had windows, or were the large ones he used for posting hard copies of his work. He rifled through piles of paper on his desk. Thank Christ. An A3 envelope, addressed to him but what did that matter, now? He removed its contents, a statement of recent earnings for Dr Doctor which he hadn't even read, and took a blank piece of paper from the printer. Bright white, not ivory, and not the right texture either—this was much smoother than the sheet Danielle had used—but he was going to have to take this punt. He folded it, and put it in the envelope. Three photographs then, one from the first of Fleur's baby albums. He had taken it himself. He slipped it into the envelope, and found a later album from which he selected two more. Isobel and Fleur at the beach with their boogie boards, and an image of Fleur, taken on the day Fleur won the inter-school speech competition. She was fifteen, wearing her school uniform and holding the cup high like an athlete. Hannah had taken that photo. He remembered her lining them up in the viewfinder. "Awesome," she'd said, as she clicked.

He tiptoed back into Fleur's room. Her breathing was so relaxed tonight. She would wake tomorrow un-fuzzy, he was sure. He slipped his envelope under her pillow, and kissed her gently on the temple.

Back in his own bed, the mattress seemed vast. He had maze dreams. He couldn't find anyone. Mangy cats snoozed on top of the hedges, or suddenly appeared by his feet, spitting and snarling.

## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

Bridget, Isobel and Harvey sat round the kitchen table. “This eyesight problem, if it gets worse it’ll bring a whole new set of challenges,” said Bridget. “I think we have to look at care alternatives now.”

Isobel had called this meeting so that Bridget would say exactly this. But, Care Alternatives. It sounded like the banner over the awkward products in the supermarket aisle. She said, “What do you mean? Do you mean going to the hospice?”

“Well, that’s a good option. We do need to reassess her meds and her management, from here on. The thing is, at the hospice she would be very comfortable—”

Harvey exploded. “She’s comfortable here! And she wants to be here, at home, with us. Doesn’t she, Isobel?”

“Yes, she definitely does,” said Isobel. “But...” She thought of Fleur’s slippers, unmoved, under Fleur’s bed all day. “Her slippers,” she said weakly. She stared at Bridget, knowing that what she had just said must sound idiotic.

But Bridget nodded. “Yes,” she said, “her slippers.” She touched her nursing badge. “So, what I’m hearing is the other thing we need to factor in. And this is important. Respite, a break. I mean you two need a break. If you’re exhausted, your perspective can get muddled. It can get hard to see what Fleur needs.”

Harvey’s chair scraped on the floorboards. “What would you know about what Fleur needs? She doesn’t need strangers. She needs us!”

“Harvey!” But Harvey was charging from the room. Isobel flushed. “I’m sorry, Bridget. You’re right about him—I mean us—being tired. I guess that proves it.”

“It’s fine, Isobel. It’s normal, kind of usual. This is why we offer respite. I’ll get it set up, okay? A reassessment, probably a change of meds, and a rest for everyone. It’ll make a difference.”

The relief! Yes, Bridget the Brisk had answers. Bridget the Brisk would take her and Harvey by the hand and lead them where they’d have to go. But also ... no. It was enough, thought Isobel suddenly, just to know there was a Plan B. Plan B-for-Bridget, that’s how she would put it to Harvey. But she, Isobel, had had no time yet, no time at all. Harvey, she realised, with a sudden and surprising rush of bitterness, had taken it all. “Bridget, that’s really good to know. Maybe sometime soon. I’ll discuss it with Harvey.”

Bridget had already started to dial. She looked up, uncertain, her cell phone balanced loosely in the palm of her right hand. She took her silver cross between her left thumb and forefinger, and began running it back and forth along its chain. Zip, zip. Zip, zip. “I think you need this now, Isobel. I think it will help enormously.”

“Not yet,” said Isobel, firmly. “I’m not going in to work again. I’m going to be here. This is something we need to do together—me, Harvey and Fleur. Together. Us.” *Us*. That was the word she’d been looking for. She’d been so lost, had been wandering for so long completely alone, in fog, in wilderness. But miraculously, here she was, back on the path, purposeful again. *Us. Together*. Isobel watched Bridget steadily, until Bridget finally folded her hand around the phone and slipped it back in her pocket. Isobel nodded. “Thanks,” she said. She stood and refilled the jug. A while later she realised she was alone in the kitchen, and the water had long boiled. She was standing with her arms folded across her chest, rocking slightly, back and forth. This was the way she rocked when Fleur wouldn’t sleep. This, in her arms, was the baby. And this, this terrible journey they were locked into now, was another labour. A working back to a

state of emptiness. Ah, ah, she squeezed her folded arms. She would not let go. She would not.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Friends still phoned, and some—the last ones standing, as Harvey thought of them—still visited. He didn't blame the ones who'd dropped away. Fleur, who had always been a lively companion—funny, cheeky, adventurous—Fleur had nothing now to add in conversation. Whether she followed what was being said or not (and Harvey believed she did) she gave no sign beyond a slight turn of her head on the pillow, a turn towards the voice. For visitors it was always disconcerting to sit there in the chair by the bed and be the only one holding forth. Robbie was one who still visited. Good on him. But Hannah was the one who could bear it. Harvey admired her enormously. Once, as she was leaving after a grueling visit where Fleur had twice vomited, he said, "Hannah, if this is too hard, you don't need to come again." Hannah looked down at her school shoes. She was wearing her uniform, the blazer with the badges and buttons of leadership and achievement. They twinkled, paining Harvey, who not so long ago had ribbed Fleur, her own blazer so loaded with bright metal, about getting too close to magnets. "It's fine." Hannah spoke softly. "She would visit me, no matter what. She knows I'm here. And even if she doesn't know with her actual body, I sort of think God knows, and so Fleur *does*, like, know."

Harvey was stunned by her theology; here was a God he would believe in, if he could. A fully compassionate, fully respectful God, who would relay love between friends if necessary, but who would otherwise let them be. Harvey had nothing to say in response; just touched her navy blue upper arm and nodded at her.

She hefted the regulation school backpack. They were too heavy, those backpacks. Harvey had once tackled a Board of Trustees member about it, outside the school gates one day when he'd gone to pick up Fleur. The guy agreed politely that the bags were heavy, but what could you do? They'd always been heavy. Harvey saw the

implacable face, the “I was beaten as a kid and it did me no harm” attitude, and decided not to pursue it. At the time, Fleur would have died with embarrassment (Harvey winced—how easily that terrible word, the one they talked circuitous routes to avoid, had snuck into his thoughts). She was thirteen then, preferred him to stay in the car and not make a fool of himself revealing his idiosyncrasies to the more normal parents, which was to say, all the other parents.

Hannah said, “I’ll come again on Wednesday, is that okay? I’ve got Senior Production tomorrow, so it’ll have to be Wednesday.” She swung the backpack into position, and opened the door.

“That’ll be great. See you then. Bye, Hannah.” One day soon, kind Hannah would leave their property for the last time and walk into her future. Pubs, gigs, parties, flatmates, boyfriends, break-ups, reunions, more break-ups, study, training, jobs, travel, marriage, mortgage, children, career—all this lay ahead of her, sketched out lightly in pencil on a steadily unfurling scroll. He watched her walk down the zig zag path to the bloom-laden trellis at the gate, thinking how each step inked in the actual journey, leaving marks to tell the story to date, and how each forward move prompted a fresh unfurling of the road in front of her. Whereas Fleur, Fleur’s scroll would not unravel at all beyond this point.

He leaned against the front door. This was the kind of thing that happened in other people’s lives, right? Not in his and Isobel’s. It happened to people like the ones who used to troop through his clinic, innocuous ordinary people with annoying vague and tiring symptoms: backache, a cough, constipation. A teenager’s headache you might easily think was migraine.

So, he thought, innocuous, ordinary us.

Below the house, Hannah's mother's car pulled up, and Hannah opened the passenger door and got in. He watched the car's shiny red roof disappear under the neighbour's carport, in readiness to reverse. There was something he deeply regretted about his time as a doctor. He saw now how pompous he had been, how arrogant. Everything he had ever advised his patients or published so authoritatively in journals was ... a joke. He, the Funny Doctor, was just another bottle of pills. Pill bottles rattle when you shake them; the emptier they are, the louder they rattle.

He had pontificated, and relished his superiority, his elevated position over *them*, his subjects, the stricken, the 'ordinary and innocuous' stricken—of whom he was now, so painfully, one. It had taken this to make him know how anyone's life could come to this shuddering halt, the outside world whizzing past, like Hannah's mother's car, which now accelerated smoothly away from the stopped house in whose doorway he so heavily leaned.

Yet there was no time to lean. He had to go back to Fleur. Weary, as he'd never before been weary, even when he was a house surgeon working crazy shifts that blurred night, days and weeks together in a hazy mush—wearier even than that—he shut the door and walked to Fleur's room. She heard him come in and smiled. In an upbeat voice, he said, "Hi Fliss-floss. Hannah's gone. Mum went to the supermarket. She'll be home soon. I'm going to put those flowers in a vase for you. Do you smell them? Daphne. Gorgeous, huh. That was nice of Hannah."

It was probably Hannah's mother who had cut the daphne and bound the stalks with pink ribbon. He could imagine the thought processes behind it. What to take to the invalid, when the invalid was nearly blind, almost mute, might no longer be *compis mentis*? A bouquet of daphne was a brilliant choice, but it had been a jolt to him when Hannah brought them in. That they were down to this, bringing scent from the outside

world, down to wafts, drifts and suggestions. He held the flowers closer to Fleur's face and watched for a reaction. Yes, she smelled them, and smiled again.

“You hold them, darling, while I get something to put them in. We'll put them on your bedside table so you can smell them all the time.” He placed them in Fleur's hand, and she gripped them.

He backed out of the room, staring at her while she lifted the flowers to her face. Clumsily, but she could still do it. She still wanted to do it. Soon, she might want to do it, but would no longer be able to do it. Or, she might no longer want to do it.

By the time he had placed the flowers in a cup of water and positioned the cup where she'd be able to smell them, he had decided. Not quite yet, not while there were still pleasures, but soon. No one need know; certainly not Bridget, probably not Isobel, probably not even Fleur. It would be a promise kept. His pinky promise. It would be gentle; it would be kind. It would be medicine.