
Opening Extract from...

Thursday's Children

Written by Nicci French

Published by Michael Joseph

Thursday's Children

NICCI FRENCH

MICHAEL JOSEPH
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

MICHAEL JOSEPH

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue,
Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa
Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL England

www.penguin.com

First published 2014

1

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978–0–718–15699–2
Trade paperback ISBN: 978–0–718–15700–5

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

Penguin Books is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet.
This book is made from Forest Stewardship
Council™ certified paper.

He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.

Sigmund Freud

I

It started with a reunion and it ended with a reunion and Frieda Klein hated reunions. She was sitting in front of her fire, listening to its slow crackle. Beside her was Sasha, who was staring into the glow. Beside Sasha was a buggy. In the buggy was Sasha's ten-month-old son, Ethan, a blur of dark hair and soft snoring. A cat lay at Frieda's feet, faintly purring. They could hear the wind blowing outside. It had been a day of fog and swirling leaves and gusts of wind. Now it was dark and they were inside, hiding from the approaching winter.

'I've got to admit,' said Sasha, 'that I'm intrigued by the idea of meeting an old school friend of yours.'

'She wasn't a friend. She was in my class.'

'What does she want?'

'I don't know. She rang me up and said she needed to see me. She said it was important and that she'd be here at seven.'

'What time is it now?'

Frieda looked at her watch.

'Almost seven.'

'I don't know things like that any more. Since Ethan was born, I've forgotten what a night's sleep is like and my brain has turned into sludge. I don't even know what day it is. Is it Wednesday?'

'Thursday.'

'That's good. Almost the weekend.'

Frieda gazed back into the fire. 'Thursday's perhaps the worst day of the week. It's nothing in itself. It just reminds you that the week's been going on too long.'

Sasha pulled a face. 'That may be reading too much into it.' She leaned over the buggy and stroked her son's hair. 'I love him so much but sometimes when he's asleep I feel relieved and grateful. Is that a terrible thing to say?'

Frieda turned to her friend. 'Is Frank helping out?'

'He does his best. But he's so busy with his work. As he says, helping the guilty walk free.'

'That's his job,' said Frieda. 'He's a defence barrister and –'

She was interrupted by a ring at the door. Frieda gave Sasha a rueful look.

'You are going to answer it, aren't you?' Sasha said.

'I was tempted to hide.'

Opening the door, she heard a voice that seemed to come out of the darkness and was immediately enfolded in a hug.

'Frieda Klein,' said the woman. 'I'd know you anywhere. You look just like your mother.'

'I didn't know you'd ever met my mother.' She gestured towards the fireplace. 'This is my friend Sasha. This is Madeleine Bucknall.'

'Maddie,' said the woman. 'Maddie Capel. I got married.'

Maddie Capel put down her large embossed bag and unwound a chequered scarf from her neck. She took off a heavy brown coat that she handed to Frieda. Underneath she was wearing a maroon crossover dress with wedge-heeled leather boots. There was a thick gold chain round her neck and small gold earrings in her lobes. She smelt of

expensive perfume. She stepped towards the fire and looked into the buggy.

'What a darling little thing,' she said. 'Frieda, is it yours?'

Frieda pointed at Sasha.

'Just the sight of it makes me want to have another,' said Maddie. 'I love them at that age, when they're like a warm bundle. Is it a boy or a girl?'

'A boy.'

'So cute. Is he walking yet?'

'He's only ten months old.'

'You just need to be patient.'

Frieda pulled a chair up, close to the fire, and Maddie sat down. She had long brown hair, artfully styled into shagginess and streaked with blonde. Her face was carefully made up, but this only emphasized the tightness of the skin over the cheekbones, the little lines around the eyes and at the corners of the mouth. Frieda remembered her from school, cheerful, laughing, loud, but there was always an anxiety: being in the group or not in the group, having a boyfriend or not having a boyfriend.

'Should I give you some privacy?' said Sasha.

'No, no, it's lovely to meet a friend of Frieda's. Do you live here as well?'

Sasha gave a faint smile. 'No, I live with my partner. Somewhere else.'

'Yes, of course. Thank you, thank you,' she said, as Frieda handed her a mug of tea. She took a sip and looked around her. 'Such a sweet little place you have here. Cosy.' Another sip. 'I read about you in the newspaper, Frieda. About how you helped on that terrible, terrible case with all those girls. And you rescued one of them.'

'Only one,' said Frieda. 'And it wasn't just me.'

'How can people do things like that?'

There was a pause.

'What was it you wanted to talk to me about?'

A gulp of tea.

'I can't believe we've lost touch,' Maddie said. 'You know that I still live in Braxton. Do you ever come back?'

'No.'

'Some of the old lot are still there.' She gave a mischievous smile. 'I remember you and Jeremy. I used to be rather jealous of you. He was quite a catch. He left, of course. Do you keep in touch with him?'

'No.'

'I married Stephen. Stephen Capel. Did you know him? We had some good years but it went wrong. He's remarried, but he still lives nearby.'

'When you phoned, you said there was something you needed to talk to me about.'

Another gulp of tea. Maddie looked around. 'Is there somewhere I can put this?'

Frieda took the mug from her.

'I've read about you in the paper.'

'You said.'

'More than once,' Maddie said. 'You've attracted quite a lot of attention.'

'Not by choice.'

'Yes, it must be difficult sometimes. But they said that apart from solving crimes . . .'

'That's not really . . .' Frieda began, and Sasha smiled again.

'No, but the articles mentioned that you're a psychologist.'

'I'm a psychotherapist.'

'I'm not very good on all the jargon,' said Maddie. 'I'm sure there's a difference. I don't know all the details, but from what I understand, people talk to you and you help them. Is that right?'

Frieda leaned forward. 'What is it you want?'

'It's not me.' Maddie gave a little laugh. 'If that's what you're thinking. Not that I couldn't do with some help. When Stephen left, I was crying for days and days. Weeks, really. I didn't know who to turn to.'

There was another pause.

'I know things like that are terrible,' said Frieda, 'but, please, why have you come to see me?'

'It'll sound silly. It's probably a waste of your time, my coming up all the way from the country.'

'Should I leave?' asked Sasha, again.

'No,' said Maddie. 'We're just old friends talking.'

'Tell me what you want from me.'

Maddie hesitated. Frieda had experienced this moment dozens of times with her patients. One of the most difficult, precarious moments in therapy was that first naming of the patient's fear. It was like jumping off a cliff edge into darkness.

'It's my daughter, Becky,' said Maddie. 'Rebecca. But everyone calls her Becky. She's fifteen, almost sixteen.'

'Has something happened?'

'No, no, nothing like that. It's hard to put into words. Becky was such a sweet little girl. When I looked at this little boy in the buggy, it reminded me of those days, when it was all so simple. I could just look after her. You know, when Becky was that age I thought I was going to have lots of

children and I was going to be the best mother in the world and protect them from everything. I was so young when I had her, almost a child myself. And then . . .' she breathed deeply, as if she were trying to control herself '. . . I couldn't have another child. And then Stephen left. It was probably my fault. I tried to hide the way I felt from Becky but I didn't do a very good job. She was only six. Little thing. And I was still in my twenties and all over the place.' Her voice wavered and she stopped for a moment. 'It must have hit her hard but I thought we'd come through it. I suppose I'd always dreaded the teenage years.' She glanced at Frieda. 'Maybe I was thinking of our own teenage years. We got up to one or two things that we probably regret now, didn't we?'

A voice inside Frieda was saying, What do you mean, 'we'? We weren't friends. We didn't get up to anything together. But she stayed silent and waited.

'In the last year or so she's changed. I know what you're going to say. She's just an adolescent. What am I worrying about? Well, I am worrying. To begin with, she was just withdrawn and moody and she wouldn't talk about anything. I wondered whether there were drugs or boys involved. Or drugs *and* boys. I tried to ask her about it. I tried to be sympathetic. Nothing worked.

'About a month ago, it got worse. She seemed different. She looked different. She stopped eating. She was on this stupid diet before, and was already rail-thin. Now I don't know how she's managing to stay alive. I've cooked everything I can think of, but she just moves it about on her plate. Even when she does eat, I think she makes herself sick. She misses school. She doesn't do homework.'

'Does she see her father?'

'Stephen's hopeless. He says it's just a phase. She'll get over it.'

'What do you want from me?' said Frieda.

'Can't you just talk to her? Isn't that what you do? Just have a word with her?'

'I'm not sure if you're clear about what I do. I see patients over extended periods of time in order to explore problems they have in their life. I wonder if your daughter ought to see a school counsellor or a teacher.'

'Becky won't accept it. I've tried everything. I'm completely desperate. I don't know who to turn to. Please. As a favour to an old school friend.'

Frieda looked at Maddie's pleading expression. She didn't like this woman from her past claiming to have been her friend and wanting something she couldn't really give. She felt bad about Sasha being there to witness it. 'I'm not sure I'm the right person for this,' she said, 'but if you bring your daughter here, I'll talk to her. I'll see if I can give you, or her, some advice. But I can't promise anything.'

'That's wonderful. I can be there too, if you want.'

'I'll need to talk to her alone. At least at first. She needs to know it's private and that she can say anything. That is, if she wants to say anything. She may not be ready to talk. Or, at least, ready to talk to me.'

'Oh, I'm sure she'll talk to you.'

Maddie stood up and fetched her coat as if she needed to get away before there was any possibility of Frieda withdrawing her offer. She pulled it on and wound the scarf back round her. Frieda felt she was watching someone put a

shell on. In the doorway, after saying goodbye, Maddie suddenly turned round.

'You know, there's something in my daughter that frightens me,' she said. 'Isn't that terrible?'

2

'I'm only here to get my mother off my back.'

'Why don't you at least come in out of the wet?'

It was raining steadily, the sky a heavy unbroken grey and the leaves on the cobblestones sodden in the downpour.

Becky stepped inside, pulling the door shut. Her long dark hair was wet and sticking to her skull; her eyes, almost black, were large in her pinched face.

'She wouldn't even let me come here alone. I'm nearly sixteen, but she insisted on getting the train with me and coming all the way to Goodge Street. She'll be there now. Buying more *shoes* or something. She's got a thing about shoes.'

'Sit by the fire. Can I take your jacket?'

'I'm all right like this.' The girl pulled her thick woollen jacket more closely around her. Even though she was huddled inside it, Frieda could see how thin she was. Her wrists were tiny, her legs were as narrow at the thigh as at the knees, her cheekbones sharp. She looked malnourished, her skin stretched tight over her features.

'Can I get you some some tea?'

'No. Or do you have any herbal tea?'

'Mint?'

'Mint's OK.'

'Take a seat. Warm yourself. Biscuit?'

'Just tea.'

Frieda left her leaning towards the flames, her delicate fingers held out to their warmth, and went into the kitchen. She made two mugs of tea – mint for Becky, Assam for her. Becky wrapped her hands around the mug for warmth and let the steam curl into her bitter little face.

'It's always hard to begin,' said Frieda.

Becky drew her brows together in a frown and muttered something under her breath.

'There's no value in coming if you don't choose to be here. I'm not going to force things out of you that you don't want to tell, make you say things you'd prefer to keep secret. You're here because your mother is worried about you and she asked me to talk to you. But I don't want to talk to you or tell you what to do. I want to listen to you, if there are things you need to say to someone.'

Becky gave a violent shrug. 'I'm OK.'

'But you're here.'

'Only because she made me come.'

'How did she make you?'

'She said I only thought about myself. I was selfish. But that she was suffering too, and if I cared at all about anyone else, I could do this one small thing for her.'

'You know I'm a therapist.'

'So now she thinks I'm mad, as well as selfish.'

'She thinks you may be in some kind of trouble.'

'I know. Drugs. Or boys. That's all she can think of. Is that what she told you?'

'Are you in some kind of trouble?'

'I'm fifteen, aren't I? Isn't that what being fifteen means? Everything feeling rubbish and shitty?'

'Shitty. Is that how everything feels to you?'

'Is that what you do?' Becky lifted her fierce eyes and glared at Frieda. 'You take a stupid random word and twist it around and say, "Oh, how interesting, she thinks everything's shitty." Shitty, crap, disgusting. I can do that too.' She looked around her, her gaze resting on the chess table that Frieda had inherited from her father. 'You play chess. You move pieces around on a board. Is that how you think of life? Like a great game you can win at?'

'No. That's not how I think of life.'

'You're famous, aren't you? I Googled you, you know.'

'And?'

'It gave me the creeps. I'm not like those missing girls.'

'But you're not in a safe place right now, are you?'

'What do you mean?'

'You're angry and anxious and unsettled. I know you've been missing school and falling behind with work.'

'Oh, that's what it's about. I won't get my precious A stars.'

'And I can see you're not eating,' Frieda continued.

Becky glowered at her. 'Everyone I know is too fat or too thin,' she said.

'You won't confide in your mother.'

'She's the last person I'd talk to. I'd rather go to my friends' mothers than her.'

'Your school must have a counsellor.'

'I'm just working stuff out.'

'What stuff?'

'Just stuff. Don't look at me as if you can see through me. It makes me feel sick.'

'Why?'

'It makes my skin crawl.'

Frieda scrutinized Becky. Then she said, 'I know this will

make you feel even angrier, but I want you to think a bit about your language.'

'What do you mean, my language?

'Rubbish, shitty, crap, sick, skin crawling.'

'So? They're just words. Everyone uses words like that.'

'It's a language of disgust.'

'So? Maybe I am disgusted.'

'Why?'

'Aren't you going to ask me about my dad?'

'Your father? Why?'

'Mum said you'd want to know about him. She says that's what it's all about. She thinks I blame her for their divorce and let him off too lightly. She says that I can be furious with her because I know she won't leave me like he did – because she's *stuck* with me, for better or for worse, and that's what motherhood is all about. Not being able to escape your nasty daughter. I didn't ask to be born. She says I can't face up to the fact that my dad went off with this other woman, but I know it anyway, and that –'

'Hang on, Becky.' Frieda held up her hand. 'I don't want to hear what your mother thinks.'

'Why not? You're only seeing me because you were best friends at school or something.'

Frieda opened her mouth to protest, then stopped herself. 'That's not the point at all,' she said. 'This is about you, Becky Capel, not about your mother and certainly not about the fact that she and I knew each other many years ago. You can tell me things and I won't pass them on to her or anyone. You can feel safe here and you can say things that you feel unable to say to other people, because I'm a stranger.'

Becky turned her face away. There was a long silence.

'I make myself sick,' she muttered.

'Do you mean that you literally make yourself sick?'

'Both.' She gave a choked laugh. 'What do you call it? Metaphorically, that's the word. My teacher would be proud of me. I literally and metaphorically make myself sick.'

'Have you ever told anyone that before?'

'No. It's disgusting.'

'Do you know why you do it?'

'Food's disgusting too. People taking gobbets of dead animal and bits of fish and mouldy cheese and dirty roots from the ground and putting them into their mouths and chewing them. And then swallowing so it all goes deep into their own bodies to rot away inside.'

Becky looked at Frieda as if to see the effect she was having. 'Apples are all right,' she continued. 'And oranges.'

'So you say you're starving yourself because food disgusts you?'

'I don't like plums. I hate bananas. And figs.'

'Becky . . .'

'What? I hate this stupid conversation. Who cares what I eat? They're starving all over the world and here one poor little rich girl is being sick because . . .'

'Because?'

'Because. Because nothing. It's just a phase.'

'And truanting from school.'

'It's boring.'

'School's boring?'

'Yeah.'

'So if school's boring, what do you find interesting?'

'I used to like swimming, especially in the sea when the waves are big. Swimming in the rain.'

Despite herself, Frieda felt the tug of an old memory, the grey North Sea and breakers surging towards her, shingle shifting under her bare feet. 'But not any longer?'

'I haven't been for a bit. And now it's nearly winter. I hate being cold. I get cold to my bones.'

Frieda was beginning to reply, when there was a rap at her front door. Maddie was on the doorstep, standing under an open umbrella, her cheeks pink and damp, a shopping bag in one hand.

'Am I too early?'

'Early for what?'

'I thought the session would be over by now.'

'It's not a session, it's a conversation.'

Maddie closed her umbrella and leaned forward conspiratorially. 'What do you think?' she half whispered.

'I'm sorry?'

'What do you make of Becky?'

'I think she's a very intelligent young woman who's sitting a few feet away from us, probably able to hear everything we say.'

'But has she said anything?'

'I'll call or email you this evening. We can talk about it then.'

'She's going to be all right, isn't she? You are going to help?'

A few hours later, Frieda sat in her study at the top of the house, listening to the rain on the roof and the wind against the windows. She sat for several minutes in deep thought and then she picked up the phone. When Maddie answered, Frieda could hear the eagerness in her voice.

'I was hoping it would be you. Becky wouldn't tell me anything about her visit to you. I hope she wasn't surly.'

'No. She wasn't surly.'

'Did you discover anything?'

'I'm not sure what you mean by that. But I think your daughter needs help.'

'That's why I made her see you.'

'I saw her today in my house for a chat – because you asked me to see her. I think she needs professional help.'

'You make it sound so serious!' Maddie gave an anxious, grating laugh. 'I just need a bit of advice, someone to point me in the right direction. You can do that, can't you? Get to the bottom of her moods and put her back on track.'

'It's important to keep clear boundaries. She needs to see a therapist, not someone who – in her eyes – is connected to her mother.'

'You're a therapist, aren't you? As for being connected . . .' Her tone changed, grew chillier. 'We never really hung about with the same crowd, did we? So we needn't worry about that.'

'I'll see Becky for a proper consultation,' said Frieda. 'I'll make an assessment, and I'll tell you what I think she needs, and I can recommend someone for her to see, although she would need to be involved in that decision.'

Maddie's tone became warm again. 'That's lovely. But what do you mean by a proper consultation? It sounds a bit intimidating.'

'It will be in my room in Bloomsbury. I'll give you the address. It will last exactly fifty minutes. I'll charge you seventy-five pounds.'

'You'll charge me?'

'Yes.'

'That seems a bit cold-blooded, I must say.'

'I saw Becky today because I know you,' said Frieda. 'Next time I'll see her as a patient. That means you must pay me, as if I were an electrician or a plumber.'

'You're being very stern. Is that how much you charge everyone?'

'It's an average fee. If you're not in the position to pay that much, I'll make a concession.'

'I've got plenty of money, thank you, Frieda. That's one thing Stephen did leave me with. It just seems rather odd, paying for a little favour.'

'It's not a favour any more. This is what Becky needs and this is what I do.'

3

Frieda took the tube up to Finsbury Park. She needed to clear her head. She walked along the edge of the park, then turned off on the old cutting that was like a secret green tunnel through Hornsey to the foot of Highgate Hill. Once it had been a railway line but now it had been abandoned to the trees and the dog walkers and the foxes. The yellow autumn leaves were everywhere, soggy under her shoes, blown around her face. There was a dank smell of decay, of mushrooms somewhere, though Frieda couldn't see any. It felt like a time for change, for endings and beginnings. She was composing a sort of speech in her head when she was interrupted by the ringing of her phone. She looked at the screen. It was her old pupil, Jack Dargan. She answered.

'Oh, sorry,' said Jack. 'I'm always a bit shocked when you answer your phone.'

'I've discovered that not answering the phone is even more complicated than answering it.'

'I'll need to get my head around that one.'

'Is this about something?'

'Can we meet?'

'Has something happened?'

'There's something I need to tell you.'

Frieda felt a twinge of alarm. Jack usually rang her when he was in distress and he had periodic episodes of doubt about the whole idea of being an analyst.

'Is something wrong?' she asked.

'No, no. And don't start trying to guess.'

Frieda suggested he come round to her house later in the day but he insisted that he wanted to meet on neutral ground and named a pub, the Lord Nelson, that was just around the corner from her house. They would meet there in two hours.

Half an hour later she was sitting in a now-familiar upper back room of a Highgate terraced house, looking into the wrinkled, kind, shrewd face of her own therapist, Thelma Scott. Frieda took a deep breath and began the speech she had rehearsed on the walk over.

'I've always found two difficulties with therapy, and they're entirely different. One of them is starting, because you don't want it or don't think you need it, and the second is ending, because you're addicted to it or you just don't know how to bring it to a finish. It's difficult to say, "Enough, that's it."'

'And that's what you want to say today, is it?' asked Thelma, smiling but still grave. 'Enough?'

'Yes.'

'What makes you feel that?'

'We've been on a journey,' said Frieda. 'And I think we've come to the end. Or *an* end. I'm grateful. I really am.'

'As you well know, Frieda, usually when patients end therapy, they do it gradually. It can take weeks or months.'

'I don't like goodbyes. Usually, I like to leave without saying goodbye at all.'

Thelma's face wrinkled again. 'If I was your therapist, I'd want to discuss that. Oh, hang on . . .'

Frieda couldn't stop herself smiling. 'You think I'm wrong?' she asked.

Thelma shook her head slowly.

'When you first came to see me – when was it? Eighteen months ago? – I wasn't sure what therapy could do for you. I'd never seen anything quite like it. When you called me up wanting to see me, I knew you'd been attacked and almost killed. You'd obviously been through a severe trauma and needed some kind of help. But then, just before we began, you were also involved in a terrible incident where a man was killed, a close friend badly hurt. You told me how you had walked all the way home, twenty miles, covered with blood.'

'It wasn't my own blood.'

'I remember you making that point to me, and I honestly wondered whether what you really needed was time in hospital.'

'I was on fire,' said Frieda, 'and I didn't know how to put myself out.'

There was a long pause.

'I think the image you used is about right. Not the one about being on fire, though that may have been true last year. I mean the one about being on a journey. You've got to a station and it might be a good time to get off.' She paused. 'For a while, at least.'

'Because it's only a station on the way?'

'We've talked a lot in this room and I think we've developed.' She stopped for a moment. 'I don't think you've shed all the pain of the episode that made you seek me out. I think you've absorbed it, made it a part of you, learned from it. But maybe what you can't put your finger on is that it

involves all the things you never talked about with me: your past, your parents, where you came from.'

'When I see patients, they generally talk about their childhood and their parents, and also about their lovers. I know I haven't done that.'

'No.' Thelma regarded her. 'But you've talked a great deal about Dean Reeve.'

'It's true. For everyone else, Dean is dead. The police think he's dead. His ex-partner thinks he's dead. His body – what people took to be his body, rather than that of his poor brother Alan – has been cremated and the ashes scattered. He used to be the media's favourite villain but even that has faded. He's gradually becoming forgotten, but not by me. For me he's alive. He's like a ghost, but he isn't dead. He watches me, watches over me in a way. I feel like he's out there and he's waiting for something.' Frieda saw Thelma's expression and shook her head. 'He's not a figment of my imagination, not some kind of Freudian other. Dean Reeve is a murderer and he's out there in the world.'

'I don't know about him being in the world, but he's inside your head. He haunts you.'

'He does haunt me. But he's alive.'

'Alive for you.'

'No. He's alive. Therapy can help me with my feelings, my fears about Dean, but it can't help with that.'

'So, you're saying that you haven't talked about your parents and your lovers because Dean Reeve gets in the way?'

'I've actually been thinking about the past. The distant past, I mean. A couple of days ago a woman came to see

me, someone who'd been in my class at school. She wasn't a friend, I hadn't seen her since we were sixteen years old, but she wanted me to talk to her daughter. I saw her yesterday, and I have this feeling about it. Something I can't put my finger on.'

'Try to put your finger on it.'

'It felt like my past has come for me.'

'Perhaps that's a good thing.'

But Thelma thought she saw a sadness on Frieda's face she hadn't seen before.

'I don't see how it can be.'

When Frieda arrived at the Lord Nelson, Jack was already there. He didn't notice her at first and she was able to take a proper look at him. He's grown up, she thought. She'd first met him as a young medical student, nervous, argumentative, self-conscious and insecure. Now he looked his own man, even if his own man was dressed like a gypsy, with a patterned jacket over a purple shirt, black and white striped trousers and a multicoloured striped scarf. His tawny hair – usually an unruly mess – seemed to be arranged in a kind of quiff. She blinked and advanced, and as she did so, he turned and noticed her, flushed and suddenly looked much more like the old Jack. He offered to buy her a drink but Frieda only wanted tap water. Jack grumbled and put a slice of lemon into it. 'That makes it a bit less boring,' he said.

He bought himself a half of bitter and led the way to a table in the corner.

'How's work going?' asked Frieda.

Jack shook his head energetically, like someone in a play

shaking their head so that the people in the back row could see. 'I can't talk about anything like that,' he said. 'I had to see you face to face because there's something I've got to tell you.'

'So tell me.'

Jack looked Frieda straight in the eyes. 'I'm seeing someone.'

'Okay,' said Frieda, slowly. 'Clearly I should say I'm happy for you but why all the fuss?'

'Because the fact is, I thought I should tell you because it happens to be someone you know.'

'Someone I know?'

'Yes.'

Frieda felt slightly dazed, as if her brain wasn't working properly. She ran through a sort of mental address book. Who could it possibly be? And in any case, whoever it was, why the big drama about summoning her and telling her like this? 'All right, then,' she said eventually. 'Are you going to tell me or am I supposed to guess?'

'I think you need some sort of explanation, Frieda, just because –'

'For God's sake, Jack, who is it?'

'Frieda.'

She turned and saw her niece, Chloë, bright and cheerful. 'Chloë, what are you . . .?' But then she realized the truth and stopped.

'Hello, lovely,' Chloë said to Jack, and he got up and they kissed and Chloë gave a murmuring sound. 'So how is it going?'

'I was about to tell her.'

'Could you get me a drink?' Chloë said. 'A white wine.' She turned to Frieda. 'It's all right. I've got my ID.'

The two of them watched Jack start to push his way ineffectually through the crowd to get to the bar. Then they looked at each other.

'Chloë,' said Frieda.

'I know you're going to find this weird.'

Frieda started to speak but Chloë interrupted her.

'First, you're my aunt and you've known me since I was born, and then you were virtually my surrogate mother, since my own mum is a complete waste of space –'

'Chloë –'

'And you spent all that time helping me. You basically got me through my science GCSEs single-handed. I just wish you'd done the same for my A levels, but that's another story. And I've lived in your house and we've gone through all sorts of emotions together. And I know that Jack is like a son to you –'

'A student, in fact.'

'But people aren't like that with you, Frieda. Everyone becomes a part of your family.'

'I don't think that's right at all.'

'What I'm saying is that this probably feels almost like incest to you and it must be even stranger because, really, you were the person who brought us together . . .'

'Brought you together?'

'By which I mean it was through you that the two of us got to know each other, and I'll never stop being grateful to you for that because he's so lovely. As you know.'

Frieda couldn't immediately think of anything to say and when she was finally about to speak Jack arrived with Chloë's white wine and sat down.

'Is everything all right?' he said nervously.

'It's fine. We've sorted it out.' Chloë raised her glass. 'To all of us.' She took a gulp of her wine. Jack sipped his beer while giving Frieda a wary glance. Frieda left her glass sitting on the table. Chloë frowned. 'Is something wrong?'

'No,' said Frieda. 'I'm just surprised, that's all. I'm trying to take it in.'

'I know it's difficult for you,' said Chloë. 'You probably think of me as if I'm, like, twelve years old or something. But I'm eighteen. This is legal. We're not breaking the law.'

'There is a bit of an age difference.'

'All right, so we're six years apart. Is that such a big deal?'

'Well, nine years, if we're being pedantic.'

'Which we clearly are,' said Chloë. 'I'm sorry. I thought you'd be happy for us.'

Frieda forced herself. 'I am glad for you. It's just that you're two people I care a lot about and I don't want you to rush into something where someone will get hurt. I know even as I'm saying this that I'm sounding middle-aged and disapproving.' Frieda took a deep breath. 'I don't mean to. And it was good of you to tell me about it and not feel you have to keep it secret.'

'Good.' Chloë looked across at Jack with a triumphant expression. 'I told you it would be no problem.' She looked back at Frieda. 'Don't you want to hear about how it all started?'

'In the course of time,' said Frieda, who didn't.

'My own suspicion,' Chloë went on cheerily, 'is that Jack fancied me from when he first met me. It was one of those schoolgirl fantasies.'

'Which is completely not true,' said Jack.

'You came to a party at my house when I was sixteen.'

Frieda remembered that party – it was when she had first met young Ted Lennox, whose mother had just been killed and with whom Chloë had been besotted.

'That was different,' said Jack. 'We were just friends.'

'That's your version.'

'In actual fact, this has only just happened,' Jack hissed urgently to Frieda. 'I wanted to tell you right away. I was worried what you might think.'

'Don't be silly, Jack,' said Chloë. 'What are you talking about?'

Frieda suddenly had the horrified sense that she was going to be present for their first argument. 'Does Olivia know?' she asked.

'Mum wouldn't understand.'

'You ought to tell her.'

'I know how she'd behave: she'd get drunk and tell me I ought to be concentrating on my retakes.'

'Which, incidentally . . .'

'And then she'd say I don't know what I'm doing. And then she'd want to know all the details and then she'd tell me about her early sex life. Yuck.'

'You ought to tell her anyway,' Frieda said. 'I don't like knowing things about you that your mother doesn't know.'

'Some time,' said Chloë.

Frieda got up. 'I've really got to go.'

Chloë stood as well. 'You're not angry, are you? Just say you're not angry.'

'I'm not angry and I have to go.'

'I'm going to come and see you,' said Chloë. 'I want to talk to you about my exams. Don't tell Mum, but I'm not

sure that side of my life is going very well. And I've got so much else I want to talk to you about.'

'Yes, yes,' said Frieda, backing away, and she left the pub feeling she was escaping.