Opening Extract from...

Elizabeth is Missing

Written by Emma Healey

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To my grandmothers, Vera Healey
and Nancy Rowand, for inspiring this book

Prologue

'Maud? Was I boring you so much that you'd rather stand outside in the dark?'

A woman calls to me from the warm light of a cluttered dining room. My breath curls towards her, wet and ghostly, but no words follow. The snow, sparse but bright on the ground, reflects the light on to her face, which is drawn tight in an attempt to see. I know, though, that she can't see very well, even in the daylight.

'Come inside,' she says. 'It's freezing. I promise I won't say another word about frogs and snails and majolica ware.'

'I wasn't bored,' I say, realizing too late that she's joking. 'I'll be there in a minute. I'm just looking for something.' In my hand is the thing I've already found, still clotted with mud. A small thing, easily missed. The broken lid of an old compact, its silver tarnished, its navy-blue enamel no longer glassy but scratched and dull. The mildewed mirror is like a window on a faded world, like a porthole looking out under the ocean. It makes me squirm with memories.

'What have you lost?' The woman steps, precarious and

trembling, out on to the patio. 'Can I help? I might not be able to see it, but I can probably manage to trip over it if it's not too well hidden.'

I smile, but I don't move from the grass. Snow has collected on the ridges of a shoeprint and it looks like a tiny dinosaur fossil freshly uncovered. I clutch at the compact lid in my hand, soil tightening my skin as it dries. I've missed this tiny thing for nearly seventy years. And now the earth, made sludgy and chewable with the melting snow, has spat out a relic. Spat it into my hand. But where from? That's what I can't discover. Where did it lie before it became the gristle in the earth's meal?

An ancient noise, like a fox bark, makes an attempt at the edges of my brain. 'Elizabeth?' I ask. 'Did you ever grow marrows?'

I

'You know there was an old woman mugged around here?' Carla says, letting her long black ponytail snake over one shoulder. 'Well, actually, it was Weymouth, but it could have been here. So you see, you can't be too careful. They found her with half her face smashed in.'

This last bit is said in a hushed voice, but hearing isn't one of my problems. I wish Carla wouldn't tell me these things; they leave me with an uneasy feeling long after I've forgotten the stories themselves. I shudder and look out of the window. I can't think which direction Weymouth is in. A bird flies by.

'Have I got enough eggs?'

'Plenty, so you don't have to go out today.'

She picks up the carers' folder, nodding at me, keeping eye contact until I nod back. I feel like I'm at school. There was something in my head a moment ago, a story, but I've lost the thread of it now. Once upon a time, is that how it started? Once upon a time in a deep, dark forest, there lived an old, old woman named Maud. I can't think what the next bit should be. Something

about waiting for her daughter to come and visit, perhaps. It's a shame I don't live in a nice little cottage in a dark forest, I could just fancy that. And my granddaughter might bring me food in a basket.

A bang, somewhere in the house, makes my eyes skitter across the sitting room, there's an animal, an animal for wearing outside, lying over the arm of the settee. It's Carla's. She never hangs it up, worried she'll forget it, I expect. I can't help staring at it, sure it will move, scurry away to a corner, or eat me up and take my place. And Katy will have to remark on its big eyes, its big teeth.

'All these tins of peaches!' Carla shouts from the kitchen. Carla the carer. 'Carers' is what they call them. 'You must stop buying food,' she calls again. I can hear the scrape of tins against my Formica worktop. 'You have enough for an army.'

Enough food. You can never have enough. Most of it seems to go missing anyway, and can't be found even after I've bought it. I don't know who's eating it all. My daughter's the same. 'No more cans, Mum,' she says, going through my cupboards at every opportunity. I think she must be feeding someone. Half the stuff disappears home with her, and then she wonders why I need to go shopping again. Anyway, it's not like I have many treats left in life.

'It's not like I have many treats left,' I say, pushing myself higher in my seat to make my voice carry to the kitchen. Twists of shiny chocolate wrappers are wedged down the sides of the chair; they squirm against the cushions and I flick them away. My husband, Patrick, used to tell me off for eating sweets. I ate them a lot at home. It was nice to be able to have a sherbet lemon or a caramel cup when I wanted, as we weren't allowed them at the exchange – no one wants to speak to a telephonist who's got her mouth full. But he said they'd ruin my teeth. I always suspected he was more worried about my figure. Polo mints were our compromise, and I still like them, but now there's no one to stop me eating a whole box of toffees if I want them. I can even start first

thing in the morning. It's morning now. I know because the sun is on the bird table. It shines on the bird table in the morning and the pine tree in the evening. I have a whole day to get through before the light hits that tree.

Carla comes, half crouching, into the sitting room, picking up wrappers from around my feet. 'I didn't know you were here, dear,' I say.

'I've done your lunch.' She snaps off plastic gloves. 'It's in the fridge, and I've put a note on it. It's nine forty now, try not to eat it till twelve, right?'

She talks as if I always gobble everything up as soon as she leaves. 'Have I got enough eggs?' I ask, feeling suddenly hungry.

'Plenty,' Carla says, dropping the carers' folder on to the table. 'I'm going now. Helen'll be here later, all right? Bye.'

The front door clicks shut and I hear Carla locking it after her. Locking me in. I watch her through the window as she crunches across my path. She wears a coat with a fur-edged hood over her uniform. A carer in wolf's clothing.

When I was a girl I'd have been glad to have the house to myself, to eat things out of the larder and wear my best clothes, to play the gramophone and lie on the floor. Now I'd rather have the company. The light's been left on and the kitchen seems like an empty stage set when I go in to rearrange my cupboards and check what Carla has left me for lunch. I half expect someone to come in, my mother with her shopping or Dad with arms full of fish and chips, and say something dramatic, like in one of those plays at the Pier Theatre. Dad would say: 'Your sister is gone,' and there'd be a drum or a trumpet or something, and Ma would say: 'Never to return,' and we'd all stare at each other for the benefit of the audience. I pull a plate from the fridge, wondering what my line would be. The plate has a note attached: *Lunch for Maud to eat after 12 p.m.* I take the cling film off. It's a cheese and tomato sandwich.

When I've finished eating I wander back to the sitting room. It's so quiet in here; even my clock doesn't tick out loud. It

shows the time, though, and I watch the hands slowly moving round on top of the gas fire. I have hours of the day to fill and at some point I have to switch on the TV. There's one of those sofa programmes on. Two people on one sofa lean towards another person on the opposite sofa. They smile and shake their heads and, eventually, the one on her own starts to cry. I can't work out what it's all about. Afterwards there's a programme where people run through various houses looking for things to sell. The sort of ugly things that are surprisingly valuable.

A few years ago I would have been appalled at myself – watching TV in the day! But what else is there to do? I occasionally read, but the plots of novels don't make sense any more and I can never remember where I've left off. So I can boil an egg. I can eat an egg. And I can watch TV. After that, I'm just waiting: for Carla, for Helen, for Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is the only friend I have left; the others are in homes or graves. She's a fan of these running-about-selling-things programmes, and has a hope of one day finding a disregarded treasure. She buys all sorts of hideous plates and vases from charity shops, her fingers crossed for a fortune. Sometimes I buy her things too, bits of garish china mostly, it's a sort of game – who can find the ugliest piece of pottery at Oxfam. Rather childish, but I've begun to find that being with Elizabeth, laughing with her, is the only time I feel like myself.

I have an idea there was something I had to remember about Elizabeth. Perhaps she wanted me to get her something. A boiled egg, or some chocolate. That son of hers keeps her on starvation rations. He won't even spend money on new razors for himself. Elizabeth says his skin is raw from shaving and she's worried he'll cut his own throat. Sometimes I wish he would. The miser. If I didn't pop round with the odd extra, she'd waste away. I've got a note here telling me not to go out, but I don't see why. It can't hurt to nip down to the shop.

I write a list before I put on my coat, find my hat and keys, check I have the keys in the right pocket and then check again at

the front door. There are white stains along the pavement where snails have been flattened in the night. This street always collects hundreds of casualties after a rainy evening. But what makes those marks, I wonder, what part of the snail makes the stain turn white like that?

'Turn not pale, beloved snail,' I say, bending over as far as I dare to get a better look. I can't think where the phrase is from, but it's possible it is about this very thing. I must try and remember to look it up when I get home.

The shop isn't far, but I'm tired by the time I get there, and for some reason I keep taking the wrong turning, which means I've got to walk back around the block again. I feel like I did at the end of the war. I often got lost on my way into town, what with houses bombed to rubble, and sudden open spaces, and roads blocked by bricks and masonry and broken furniture.

It's a small place, Carrow's, crammed with things I don't want. I wish they'd move the rows and rows of beer cans to make space for something useful. It's always been here, though, ever since I was a child. They only changed the sign a few years ago. It's got Coca-Cola written on it now and Carrow's is squashed in underneath like an afterthought. I read it out to myself as I go in and then I read my shopping list aloud, standing by a shelf of boxes. Ricicles and Shreddies, whatever they are.

'Eggs. Milk – question mark – Chocolate.' I turn my bit of paper about to catch the light. There's a cosy cardboardy smell in the shop and it's like being in the larder at home. 'Eggs, milk, chocolate. Eggs, milk, chocolate.' I say the words, but I can't quite think what the things look like. Could they be in any of the boxes in front of me? I carry on muttering the list under my breath as I shuffle about the shop, but the words begin to lose meaning and are like a chant. I've got 'marrows' written down here too, but I don't think they sell them here.

'Can I help, Mrs Horsham?'

Reg leans over the counter, and his grey cardigan bags out, sweeping across the penny sweets in their plastic tub and leaving

bits of fluff on them. He watches me walk round. Nosy beggar. I don't know what he's guarding. So I walked out with something once. So what? It was only a bag of soft lettuce. Or was it a jar of raspberry jam? I forget. Anyway, he got it back, didn't he? Helen took it back, and that was that. And it's not as if he doesn't make mistakes – I've often been short on change over the years. He's been running this shop for decades, and it's time he retired. But his mother didn't give up working here till she was ninety, so he'll probably hang on a bit longer. I was glad when the old woman finally gave up. She used to tease me whenever I came in because I'd asked her to receive a letter for me when I was a girl. I'd written to a murderer and I hadn't wanted the reply to go to my house, and I'd used a film star's name instead of my own. The reply never arrived, but Reg's mother thought I'd been waiting for a love letter and used to laugh about it long after I was married.

What was it I came for? The loaded shelves frown down at me as I circle them, and the blue and white linoleum stares up, dirty and cracked. My basket is empty, but I think I've been here for a while; Reg is watching me. I reach for something: it's heavier than I was expecting and my arm is pulled down suddenly with the weight. It's a tin of peach slices. That'll do. I put a few more tins in my basket, tucking its handles into the crook of my arm. The thin metal bars grind against my hip on the way to the counter.

'Are you sure this is what you're after?' Reg asks. 'Only you bought a lot of peach slices when you came in yesterday.'

I look down into the basket. Is that true? Did I really buy the same things yesterday? He coughs and I see a glint of amusement in his eyes.

'Quite sure, thank you,' I say, my voice firm. 'If I want to buy peach slices, I can buy them.'

He raises his eyebrows and begins typing prices into his till. I keep my head high, watching the cans being put into the plastic carrying thing, for carrying, but my cheeks are hot. What *was* it I

came for? I feel in my pocket and find a piece of blue paper with my writing on it: *Eggs. Milk? Chocolate*. I pick up a bar of Dairy Milk and slip it into the basket, so at least I will have something from the list. But I can't put the peaches back now, Reg would laugh at me. I pay for my bag of cans and clank back down the road with them. It's slow going, because the bag is heavy, and my shoulder and the back of my knee are hurting. I remember when the houses used to whiz by as I walked – nearly running – to and from home. Ma would ask me afterwards about what I'd seen, whether certain neighbours were out, what I thought about someone's new garden wall. I'd never noticed; it had all gone past in a flash. Now I have plenty of time to look at everything and no one to tell what I've seen.

Sometimes, when I'm having a sort-through or a clear-out, I find photos from my youth, and it's a shock to see everything in black and white. I think my granddaughter believes we were actually grey-skinned, with dull hair, always posing in a shadowed landscape. But I remember the town as being almost too bright to look at when I was a girl. I remember the deep blue of the sky and the dark green of the pines cutting through it, the bright red of the local brick houses and the orange carpet of pine needles under our feet. Nowadays – though I'm sure the sky is still occasionally blue and most of the houses are still there, and the trees still drop their needles – nowadays, the colours seem faded, as if I live in an old photograph.

When I get home there's an alarm clock ringing. I set it sometimes to remind myself of appointments. I drop my bag inside the front door and turn off the alarm. I can't think what it's for this time; I can't see anything to tell me. Perhaps someone is coming.

'Did the estate agent turn up?' Helen calls, her voice broken by the scrape of her key in the front door. 'He was supposed to arrive at twelve. Did he?'

'I don't know,' I say. 'What time is it now?'

She doesn't answer. I can hear her clomping about in the hall.

'Mum!' she says. 'Where have these cans come from? How many bloody peach slices do you need?'

I tell her I don't know how many. I tell her Carla must have brought them. I say I've been at home the whole day and then I look at the clock, wondering how I've managed to get through it all. Helen comes into the sitting room, breathing out sweet, cold air, and I'm a child again, in my warm bed, and my sister's icy face presses against my cheek for a moment, and her chill breath whispers over me as she tells me about the Pavilion and the dancing and the soldiers. Sukey was always cold coming home from a dance, even in the summer. Helen is often cold too, from so much time spent digging about in other people's gardens.

She holds up a plastic bag. 'Why would Carla leave tins of peach slices in the hall?' She doesn't lower her voice, even though we're in the same room, and she holds the bag high off the ground. 'You have to stop going shopping. I've told you I can get anything you need. I come every day.'

I'm sure I don't see her that often, but I'm not going to argue. Her arm drops and I watch the bag swing to a stop against her leg.

'So will you promise? Not to shop for food again?'

'I don't see why I should. I told you, Carla must have brought them. And, anyway, if I want to buy peach slices, I can buy them.' The sentence has a familiar ring, but I can't think why. 'If I were to grow marrows,' I say, turning a shopping list to the light, 'where would I best plant them?'

Helen sighs her way out of the room and I find I've got up to follow her. In the hall I stop: there's a roaring noise coming from somewhere. I can't think what it is, I can't work out where it's coming from. But I can hardly hear it once I'm in the kitchen. Everything is very clean in here: my dishes are on the rack, though I don't think I put them there, and the knife and fork I like to use have been washed up. As I open a cupboard door two scraps of paper flutter to the ground. One is a recipe for white

sauce and the other has Helen's name on it, a number underneath. I get a roll of sticking ribbon, long glue ribbon, out of a drawer to stick them back up again. Perhaps I will make a white sauce today. After I've had a cup of tea.

I switch the kettle on. I know which plug it is, as someone has labelled it KETTLE. I get out cups and milk, and a teabag from a jar marked TEA. There's a note by the sink: *Coffee helps memory*. That one's in my handwriting. I take my cup through to the sitting room, pausing in the doorway. I've got this rumbling in my head. Or perhaps it's coming from upstairs. I start up towards the landing, but I can't do it without holding on to both banisters so I step back and leave my tea on the shelf in the hall. I'll only be a minute.

My room is quite sunny, and it's peaceful here, except for a sort of growl somewhere in the house. I push the door shut and sit at my dressing table by the window. Bits of costume jewellery are strewn across the doilies and china dishes; I don't wear proper jewellery now, except my wedding ring of course. I've never had to have it altered, not in over fifty years. Patrick's matching one seemed to burrow itself into his flesh so that the knuckle bulged above it; he refused to have it cut off and it wouldn't budge, however much butter I greased it with. He used to say the ring being bound to him like that was proof of a strong marriage. I used to say it was proof he didn't take care of himself properly. Patrick told me to be more worried about my own ring, too loose on my slender finger, but really it fitted perfectly and I never lost it.

Helen says I lose my jewellery now, though, and she and Katy have taken most of the good pieces for themselves to 'keep them safe'. I don't mind. At least they're still in the family, and none of it was very valuable. The most expensive thing I had was a bizarre gold pendant in the shape of Queen Nefertiti's head, which Patrick brought back from Egypt.

I push my hand through a dingy sort of plastic bangle and look in the mirror. My reflection always gives me a shock. I never really believed I would age, and certainly not like this. The skin

around my eyes and the bridge of my nose has wrinkled in a very unexpected way. It makes me look quite lizard-like. I can hardly remember my old face, except in flashes. A round-cheeked girl in front of the mirror taking out her curlers for the first time, a pale young woman in the Pleasure Gardens looking down into the green river, a tired mother with untidy hair, half turned from the dark window of a train as she tries to pull apart her fighting children. I'm always frowning in my memory, so no wonder my brow has set that way. My mother had smooth, peaches-and-cream skin right to her death, though she had good reason to be more wrinkled than most. Perhaps it was something to do with not wearing make-up; they say that about nuns, don't they?

I don't wear make-up either these days, and I've never worn lipstick, never liked it. The girls at the exchange teased me about it, and every now and then when I was young I'd try some out, borrow a friend's or use one I'd been given for Christmas, but I could never stand to have it on for more than a few minutes. I've got a tube in the drawer from Helen or Katy and I take it out now, twisting the base and applying it very carefully, leaning close to the mirror, making sure not to get it on my teeth. You see these old women with flecked dentures and sooty eyelids and rouge smeared over their faces, their eyebrows drawn on too high. I'd rather die than be one of them. I blot my lips together. Nice and bright now, but slightly cracked, and I am quite thirsty. About time I made myself a cup of tea.

I drop the lipstick back in the drawer and slip a long pearl necklace over my head before getting up. Not real pearls of course. When I open my door I can hear a roaring noise. I can't think what it is. It gets louder the further down the stairs I go. I stop on the bottom step, but I can't see anything. I look in the sitting room. The roaring is even louder. I wonder if it is in my head, if something is coming loose. The noise swells and vibrates. And then it stops.

'There. That's your hoovering done, anyway.' Helen stands by the dining-room door, winding up the wire on the vacuum

cleaner. Her mouth wavers into a smile. 'Are you going out somewhere?' she asks.

'No,' I say. 'I don't think so.'

'What are the pearls for then? You're all dolled up.'

'Am I?' I lay a hand against my collarbone. I've got a string of pearls on and a thing on my wrist, and I can taste lipstick. Lipstick, with its foetid waxen smell and its suffocating thickness. I wipe the back of my hand over my mouth, but that only smears it and makes it worse, so I begin to scrub at my face, pulling the sleeve of my cardigan down to act as a flannel, spitting on it and rubbing as if I were both mother and mucky child. It's some minutes before I feel clean again, and I find Helen has been watching me.

'Give me your cardigan,' she says. 'I'd better put it in the wash.' She asks if I want something to drink.

'Oh, yes,' I say, shrugging the wool from my skin and dropping on to my chair. 'I'm terribly thirsty.'

'No wonder,' Helen says, turning to leave the room. 'There was a line of cold cups of tea on the shelf in the hall.'

I say I can't think how they got there, but I don't think she hears me, because she's already disappeared into the kitchen and, anyway, my head is lowered as I'm going through my handbag. I had some malted biscuits in here at some point. Was it yesterday? Did I eat them? I take out a comb and my purse and some scrunched-up tissues. I don't find any biscuits, but there is a note in one of the bag's pockets: *No more peach slices.* I don't tell Helen. Instead I put it under the note with today's date. My carer leaves me one like it every day. That's how I know it's Thursday. I usually visit my friend Elizabeth on a Thursday, but we don't seem to have made any arrangement this week. She hasn't called. I'd have written it down if she had. I'd have made a note of what she'd said, or some of it. I'd have written down what time to go and see her. I write everything down.

There are bits of paper all over the house, lying in piles or stuck up on different surfaces. Scribbled shopping lists and recipes, telephone numbers and appointments, notes about things

that have already happened. My paper memory. It's supposed to stop me forgetting things. But my daughter tells me I lose the notes. I have that written down too. Still, if Elizabeth *had* called, I'd have a note. I can't have lost every one. I write things down over and over. They can't all have dropped off the table and the worktop and the mirror. And then I have this piece of paper tucked into my sleeve: *No word from Elizabeth*. It has an old date on one side. I have a horrible feeling something has happened to her. Anything could have. There was something on the news yesterday, I think. About an old woman. Something unpleasant. And now Elizabeth's disappeared. What if she's been mugged and left for dead? Or had a fall and can't get to a phone? I think of her, lying on the floor of her sitting room, unable to get up, still hoping for some treasure to leap from the carpet.

'Perhaps you've spoken to her and don't remember, Mum. Do you think that might be possible?' Helen hands me a cup of tea. I had forgotten she was here.

She bends to kiss me on the top of my head. I feel her lips through the thin hair that puffs from my scalp. She smells of some sort of herb. Rosemary, perhaps. I suppose she was planting some. For remembrance.

'Because, well, you did forget that we'd been out on Saturday, didn't you?'

I balance the cup on the arm of the chair, keeping a hand on it. I don't look up when my daughter moves back. I suppose she must be right. I have no recollection of Saturday, but I have no recollection of not recalling it either. The thought makes me breathe in sharply. These blanks are worrying. More than worrying. How can I not remember last Saturday? I feel the familiar skipping of my heartbeat, the flush of embarrassment, fear. Last Saturday. Can I even remember yesterday?

'So perhaps you have spoken to Elizabeth.'

I nod and take a sip of tea, already losing the train of the conversation. 'You're probably right.' I'm not quite sure what I'm agreeing to, but I like the feeling of falling into blankness, the end

of anxiously trying to remember. Helen smiles. Is there a hint of triumph in it?

'All right then. I'd better get going.'

Helen is always going. I watch her through the front window as she gets into her car and drives off. I can never remember her arriving. Perhaps I should write it down. But these bits of paper on the table beside my chair, this system for remembering, it's not perfect. So many of the notes are old, no longer relevant, and I get them muddled. And even the new ones don't seem to contain the right information. There's one here with writing still shiny: *Haven't heard from Elizabeth*. I run my fingers over the words, smudging them slightly. Is that true? I must only just have written it. I certainly can't remember having heard from her recently. I reach for the phone. Button number four is Elizabeth. It rings and rings. I make a note.