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## **Letters To Iris**

Written by Elizabeth Noble

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# Letters to Iris

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# Prologue

*Then*

Mornings like this morning were Iris's favourite kind. Tom always preferred springtime, when the sun was high, and everything was burgeoning and bursting. Of the two of them, he was the lay-a-bed, groaning with reluctance at the early starts the farm required, and had done since they were small children. But he hated it just a bit less in the spring and summer, as it was light, and there was no chill in the air when you threw back the blanket. Autumn days were Iris's. It made no difference to her that the tip of her nose was often cold when she woke up, and it was still dark outside. She liked the mists and the nip in the air, the colours of the leaves and the crunch of them under her boots once they'd fallen.

Tom said she was contrary and melancholy in her choice. But he still sat on the fence in the yard with her, in the few minutes before work started, both clasping a cup of hot tea with their whole hands, warming their fingers, not talking much as they came round.

Most of their friends in the village came from much larger families, often with six or seven other siblings. But it had always been just her and Tom. Irish twins, people called them, Tom just ten months older than her. There had been two more, born when Iris was barely old enough to remember her mother's round belly and tired face, but

both those boys had been born already dead. After the births, her mother had been pale and tearful and quiet for what felt like forever, and Iris remembered her and Tom climbing up into the bed she shared with their father and, each on one side of her, trying to cuddle her into a smile or a tender touch, tears streaming down her face. Iris didn't know why there had been no more babies after that last loss. It was just the four of them, and it was just her and Tom.

Everything was about to change. She knew it. It was all anyone talked about these days. Everyone huddled around the radio and pored over the newspapers and talked about war. Her parents and the other older people – they all remembered the last time, and seemed full of dread, gaunt-looking and anxious. They saw it differently from some of her and Tom's friends, gung-ho to stop Mr Hitler. Ignorant bravado, their father called it, willing Mr Chamberlain on last autumn when he'd promised peace for our time. No one seemed to doubt, though, that there would soon be war. Mothers were red-eyed in the grocer's, especially now they were talking about conscription in the spring. And everything would change once it started. She didn't want it to, but, at the same time, there was an inexplicable excitement, a horribly guilty feeling you daren't say out loud because you couldn't even explain it to yourself. Sometimes, before the war had started to loom large, Iris thought she loved that nothing ever changed – that the landscape of her childhood was the vista of her almost-adulthood – and, sometimes, that thought had been unbearable. As she looked out this September morning, on the land she knew so well, her brother hunching his shoulders against the early chill, she only wondered how their lives would be . . .

## *Now*

She's called Iris.

She's Gran to me. Mum to my mother. Mrs Garroway to the doctors and the administrators, and to these burly, kind men in green uniforms lifting her out of the back of the ambulance now, in a way that was far gentler than their size suggested. A patient. A bed blocker.

But she's Iris. Iris Mary Rose Garroway. She was born in the spring of 1921, on 3 April. She doesn't know for sure, because she never asked, but she was almost certainly born at home, because people were, then. At home on a farm.

She's ninety-five years old.

She weighs just a pound or two over eight stone. Far, far less than she should. She was bigger once – curvy even, with broader hips than she ever liked, although she was always just a bit proud of her waist, trim even after my mother was born, she said, and photographs showed it. She doesn't eat enough now. She has no appetite to speak of, and in hospital the nurses haven't had the time, or the inclination perhaps, to sit with her and feed her. Even when I've gone in, with morsels of things I know she loves, she hasn't been very interested, nibbling to be polite, because she still remembers politeness, even if she doesn't know to whom she is showing it. She was taller too. Five foot six. It's amazing how old people shrink. She's barely five foot now, but seems much, much shorter, because osteoporosis has bent her spine into a cruel curl that directs her face towards the floor and hunches her shoulders. Her cardigan hangs off her, and her feet look too narrow for the sheepskin slippers they wear. Her eyes were very blue,

before the yellowy film of age covered them over. She must have been born with them that blue: her mother chose the name because of them. She was supposed to be called Rose, but her mother changed her mind. It wasn't just the colour of them that was pretty. They'd shone and twinkled when she laughed, crinkling at the edges, always upwards, so she looked perpetually optimistic and cheerful. She's been old all of my life: she was sixty when I was born, and even in my earliest memories the hair that had once been thick and chestnut-brown – you could see it in photographs – was salt-and-pepper-grey. But I do remember the sparkling eyes.

She wasn't always this desiccated old lady, hunched, fragile, frightened, you know. Of course not. None of them ever were. None of the people in this new place where she's come to live – the last place, most likely, where she will ever live. She was all of the things we are, and have been. She was a girl, a young woman, a bride, a mother, a friend. She ran, and swam, and rode a bicycle. She laughed, and she loved. She lived.

But she can't remember that now, not most of the time, anyway. There are moments of lucidity, but they are fleeting, and they happen less and less often. They torture us less and less often. When she's lucid, you wonder if she knows where she is, and what she's become, and it's an unbearable thought. It's easier when she's absent. She remembers her mother, a crochet shawl around her shoulders, rocking a stillborn baby she can't yet accept has no need of rocking. She remembers tastes and smells from her childhood on the farm – she'd still know how to milk a cow, although she hasn't done it for decades, or make a daisy chain on a lazy summer afternoon. She knows all



the words to her favourite hymn – ‘I Vow to Thee, My Country’ – but she doesn’t know who the Prime Minister is, or how she got to this place, or at whose behest she is here.

And now she can’t even remember me. It’s been weeks since she used my name, except to repeat it when I’ve said it, quizzically, rolling the syllables as if she’s hearing them for the first time. Sometimes I think she’s forgotten me entirely, although I still hope – hope for the little, occasional miracles of her knowing me without being distressed about who and where and how she is now.

And I don’t think she will ever know this baby – her great-grandchild – I have growing inside me. I want to whisper it to her. I haven’t told anyone, and I haven’t wanted to, not yet, but, standing here now, I want to lean in and whisper it to her. But I don’t. Because I don’t think I can bear it if she doesn’t react. I have so needed her, all my life, and now, when I think I may need her more than ever before, I don’t want to face the truth that I can’t have her.

# Tess

*November*

London was suddenly Christmassy. The season of mists and mellow fruitfulness gave way almost overnight to the season of spending on credit and hot chocolate with whipped cream. Bonfire Night was over, and the city apparently couldn't wait to wrap itself in fairy lights, knowing how much prettier it looked when it twinkled. It lent the damp, chilly weather – nights drawing in fast – and the grey buildings the magical veneer of cheer and the promise of festivities to come. The windows of the West End were dressed for the season in jewel-bright colours and sparkle. Tourists were meandering through Carnaby Street, taking it all in through a selfie lens. Nobody seemed to be in a hurry.

Except for Tess, who *was* in a crashing hurry. She'd been in back-to-back meetings staring at a flipchart since lunchtime – which had been, for her, a rather hurried warm lettuce and dried-out falafel affair at her desk – and now, released at last, she was weaving her way impatiently through the lackadaisical crowds. It had felt like a day without end – more problems than solutions, and hardly a moment to sit at her desk and actually think. It wasn't that she hated her job – part of a Human Resources team in a City firm – she was good at it, and most of the time she enjoyed what she did. Right now, though, the company

was restructuring after a large merger, and it seemed like major, and often painful, decisions were being taken on a daily basis. It was hard to keep up with the schedule being imposed from above. And at the moment it was simply interfering just a bit too much with her actual life. Taking up space in her brain she very badly needed for thinking about other things. Those being, in no particular order: the precise whereabouts of her difficult mother, her very poorly grandmother, her boyfriend and, oh yes, who'd leave it until last on the list? Her new, very, very new pregnancy. Confirmed as of just a few hours ago, between the falafel at lunch and a Kit Kat at tea break. The pregnancy test she'd bought had been burning a hole in her desk drawer, until she'd peed on it in the bathroom, telling herself it would almost certainly be a negative and she could get back to worrying about all the other stuff she was worrying about. A plan that had not gone terribly well when it came out positive, and she'd had to punch both her knees in the stall to stop her legs from shaking. And go back to the meeting. And talk about cost per square foot, and bodies per floor. At that point taking the test at home had seemed like a much better idea, hindsight as beneficial as ever. Bloody hell. She realized as she walked that she was muttering her list. And swearing gently.

It almost made her laugh out loud, that listing of preoccupations. She'd read somewhere that creative people did it more than other types, because processing out loud made things clearer or something. Not true. Not true at all. None of it was clear. She was too old to let a difficult relationship with her mother distract her from her everyday adult life: that was the stuff of teenage years, when shared domesticity made it impossible to ignore. She hadn't lived

with Donna for – God – fifteen years or something. She was too old to be so invested in, and vulnerable about, the health of her beloved, but undeniably elderly, grandmother. It wasn't like it hadn't been coming. She was ninety-five, for Christ's sake. Tess was afraid she was too sad. Was it right that it hurt her this much? Right that she should be so very terrified of the only ending that was possible now? Even in this new age of living longer, that was a hell of an innings, as the crass saying went. The boyfriend thing was odd too. She should feel wonderful about him, not anxious. He was a great guy (didn't everyone say so? Okay, nearly everyone . . .), they were happy enough, it was all how it was meant to be . . . The pregnancy – okay – so that was a curveball of elephantine proportions. But she was thirty-five. She was sexually active. Not exactly an immaculate conception. But still, bloody hell.

Tess realized that she was breathless, and sweating, despite the damp chill in the air. Neither was a good look. Or a classy way to arrive. And she wasn't quite as late as she thought she might be. Bugger it. There was an empty park bench with her name on it (actually, it had someone else's name on it, but they weren't using it, so for now it was hers), and she sat down gratefully. Just for a minute. She closed her eyes, and willed the swirling thoughts in her brain to settle and still. She concentrated on breathing in and out. She'd read about it in some article on Mindfulness in the hairdresser's a couple of months ago. Be present, Tess. And other aphorisms for 'calm the hell down'. It worked, though. She felt her heart rate slow, and the breathing steadied. She felt marginally, and no doubt temporarily, less crushed by the weight of everything.

One thing at a time. Get tonight over with. The rest

would have to wait a while longer. Tonight was enough to be going on with. She could juggle only so many balls at one time. She could be only one persona at a time. She had to push everything else to one side for now, or she'd cry, and crying wasn't an option. Her mascara was definitely not waterproof. Tonight, she was playing corporate wife. Not an actual wife, in fact. But 'partner' was too professional and girlfriend was too Upper Sixth. Corporate wife was the persona required this evening. It was one of Sean's fairly interminable work dos. Drinks (but never more than two since that embarrassing incident a while back) and dinner (always chicken, for some reason. Always.), speeches (invariably self-congratulatory) and an Uber home at eleven, if you were lucky.

The two of them had met at exactly such an event. An old university friend of hers had begged her to be his plus one, and since she'd had nothing better to do and a drop-dead gorgeous new dress she'd been waiting for an occasion to debut, she'd said yes. She'd been the age (early thirties) and stage (three or four boyfriends of more than six months duration in the last six or seven years. Approximately three fifths of peers married or engaged. Not quite panicking, and espousing the theory that a man was strictly an add-on optional extra to an independent, fulfilling life, but yet aware that Mr Right was unlikely to appear in her front room uninvited on a Monday night during *Silent Witness*) to say yes to all sorts of things. Casting her net. Putting her secretly girlish dreams out in the universe, Deepak Chopra style. She hadn't known about the chicken, or the speeches, then, or she'd have said no, and then she might never have met him.

He was the tallest man in the room, which was always a

good start. At six foot five he was the tallest man in most rooms, unless his father and brothers were there too. They were a family of lanky giants. Impossible to lose in a crowd. It turned out her mate Stuart had known him, and when he'd come over to say hello, she'd had to crane her neck back to look him in the face, and that's when she'd noticed the eyes, which were lovely. They'd been sat on different tables for the dinner, and they had kept catching each other's eye during the speeches, which was fun, and even exciting. When she'd excused herself to go to the loo, she was pretty sure he'd followed her: he was lurking in the hallway when she came out, feigning surprise that she was there too. Numbers were exchanged. He'd called the next day. Drinks. Dinner. A concert at the O2 . . . It had been textbook, really.

And before she knew it, they'd been a 'couple'. They were almost exactly the same age, but it always felt weirdly to Tess like he was several years older. He seemed so much more sorted than she was. He was ambitious, and successful, and . . . just grown up. She'd been thirty-two then, but in some ways she'd still felt like a twenty-year-old, playing at being an adult and waiting to get caught out. It was quite a trick, she realized, seeming like you understood everything even if you didn't. Sean was self-assured, and confident (mostly, if not always, without that confidence tipping over into arrogance), and it was very attractive.

Their lives had meshed so easily, and so fast. It was a bit like being on an emotional Travolator. Sometimes she forgot they'd been together for only two and a half years. A dot-to-dot relationship, with everything done when and how it should be. Three dates before the first time they had sex (good, if not spectacular, sex, but improving with

time, familiarity and some drunkenly brave instructions). Six months before their first holiday (beach, Turkey), and the meeting of the parents (could have gone better, on both sides, but they were grown-ups, not kids, so it didn't bother either of them unduly). A year before they moved in together (his place – bigger, better and nearer the Tube were his three arguments, only two of which were irrefutable). Symbiosis had happened almost before she'd realized it. Which sounded irresponsible. And possibly was. Sean's healthy salary paid exactly sixty-five per cent of their mortgage, as well as their utilities. Tess's home had been a rental, and she'd given it up without too many pangs. Sean had already bought his place: it made sense. It wasn't necessarily her type of thing – it was a modern two-bed apartment with no character, but the building had a gym and a lap pool. Sean used both most evenings. She'd had a paddle in the first week and gone nowhere near it since. And gyms were her Room 101. She'd 'girlified' the space by stealth, as her best friend Holly called it, and it was certainly comfortable enough, although she sometimes missed her rather scruffier rented ground-floor flat in Battersea, with its high ceilings and Victorian tiled fireplace. His corporate insurance paid for their medicals – his idea, not Tess's. It felt terribly middle aged to have a medical when there was nothing apparently wrong with you. His Avios points sometimes flew them on their holidays. And they drove his car. Tess also had her grandmother Iris's Renault Clio, which was knackered, in truth. Tess had railed against it at first, this imbalance in their wages and thus in their shared life, at least over a bottle of wine with Holly. They were the gender pay gap, in coupled form. They both had good degrees from good universities. She was better at Sudoku

than him. And multitasking. And crosswords. Sean had laughed and told her he didn't care, and eventually she'd accepted it. And if it was a betrayal of her feminist principles to appreciate having a bit more disposable income at the end of each month as a result of this arrangement (new Jigsaw outfit just because . . . oh, go on, then), she kept the betrayal to herself.

And this was the price she had to pay – three or four times a year she played his 'trailing spouse' (this, apparently, being a real expression) at these ghastly events, held regularly, no one quite knew why, in the banqueting rooms and Freemasons' halls of the City. Tess dressed up, lipstick and everything, and tried hard not to mind when whichever man she was seated beside glazed over when she answered the inevitable question about 'what she did'. Thank God, she had always consoled herself, that at least she didn't have to say 'homemaker' or 'stay-at-home mother'. Now her stomach lurched. It couldn't possibly be the tiny foetus lurking in there, protesting, but it felt like it might be.

So, today, she had a statement necklace and four-inch heels in her tote bag, posher hair and actual lipstick. The tools with which to transform herself from real working woman into an adornment who'd had nothing else to do all day but prettify herself. Christ, it was such a ridiculous anachronism. All she wanted to do was to crawl home, change into her pyjamas and eat a pint of ice cream in front of Netflix. Call and check on Iris. Text a bit with Holly. And fall into bed.

She needed to digest this. She had never wanted to talk to Iris as much as she did now. The ache of knowing she couldn't – or, at least, that she could, but that Iris wouldn't respond, not properly – sat painfully in her sternum. She



pulled her phone out of her bag and scrolled through the contacts, her thumb hovering over Holly's number. But that wasn't fair. It was Sean she needed to tell. It was Sean's baby.

She tried to imagine the conversation, realized she couldn't. She didn't know how he'd feel. Hell, she wasn't entirely sure how she felt. It wasn't real yet. Saying it out loud might make it real, but she was lost for words. Something odd was gnawing at the edges of her mind. Something off note. It was frightening. It wasn't as it should be, even if you accepted that life was not like movies and television.

She needed a plan of action. And the brain space to come up with a plan. Not tonight. So that was the plan so far . . .

Tess shook herself out of the reverie. She was calmer now, but she was getting cold too, and she was officially almost late. Sean didn't like late. Cinderella: you and your as yet secret unborn child shall go to the bloody ball. Like it or not. The rest will have to wait.

She had her game face on by the time she walked into the hall ten minutes later. And her Tom Ford power lipstick. She picked up a glass of champagne from a tray held by a waiter. Put it down again. Picked up a glass of orange juice. And scanned the room for Sean. He was right at the back – she spotted him immediately, towering over his companions, and waved to get his attention.

He was at her elbow a moment later. 'Hello, darling. You made it.' He kissed her cheek. She wondered randomly when he'd started calling her 'darling'. Possibly just this evening. Possibly just on these evenings.

'Am I late?' He didn't appear to notice the orange juice. Although after the embarrassing incident (that was what

they both called it: she'd groped someone's bum, back in the early days when lust was liable just to come on with the speed of an anaphylactic shock, and the bum turned out to belong to a senior partner, not Sean), it was probably what he expected.

'Barely . . . Come and meet Guy . . . I've told you about him.'

Tess fixed her smile and fluffed her hair. She'd never heard of Guy. And they were off . . .

## *December*

*Okay. Deep breaths. You're okay. I mean, I'm okay. You're probably okay too. I've no idea, actually. It's Week 4. I think. I googled, and tried to work it out. Work out exactly how old you were in there. Not pinpoint the actual moment of conception, you understand. My sex life isn't exactly E. L. James-worthy but it isn't so tragic that I could do that . . . It's very early, anyway. If I wasn't so ridiculously set-your-watch regular, I probably wouldn't have a clue yet. If pregnancy tests weren't so incredibly scientifically advanced and accurate, I'd still only be wondering. I took three tests on three different days, two more after that one in the office, and they all said the same thing. It's about four weeks. The website I found (I read these things avidly, and then delete my search history more often than a teenage porn addict) tells me the embryo – who up until now I have thought of as a sort of nebulous and shapeless fizzing and sparkeling collection of cells, performing magic on itself like in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, but it's you – splits in two this week. One half will become your placenta. That's the bit that is going to connect you to me absolutely, albeit all grossly and bloodily: some women eat it afterwards, apparently,*

or wrap it in a muslin cloth with herbs and carry it around until it falls off of its own accord. *Ew. Ew. Ew.* I'm the 'please, never show me that' type of mother, baby mine. Hope that's not a disappointment. This way what I eat can nourish you. (Note to self: must replace Pret à Manger almond-croissant-and-large-latte breakfast with yoghurt with fruit and seeds and healthy tea if can find one that doesn't smell funny.) What I breathe will be what you breathe too. (Next note to self: no more following smokers down the street like a nicotine Bisto-kid, you filthy, regretful ex-smoker who still loves the smell so long as it's fresh and not stuck in curtains.) The other half of the embryo – that's actual, real you. Everything that will ever be you is you already. It's hard to get my head around. We did this at school – never had a notion of what an extraordinary, mind-blowing thing it is that my body can do this. I'm Boudicca, Joan of Arc and Xena, Warrior Princess, all in one. And your body is doing this. **YOU ARE SO CLEVER.** Growing and developing at a faster rate than you ever will again.

You're not a lump of cells. You're the miraculous start of a tiny human. In Week 4 you become an actual baby, though to be honest, in the image on my laptop, you don't look like much of one. And so, I become your mum, ready or not. Willing or not. Able or not. It's rather extraordinary that all this action can be going on deep in my belly with absolutely no outward signs or feelings. Turns out my body makes me more aware of itself and its workings when I've eaten too much white bread than it does when I'm splitting an embryo. And the truth is, baby mine, I'm not sure how I feel about you yet. You weren't planned. Sorry, but you weren't. You weren't even – what do people say – a twinkle in your father's eye. Five days ago, you were a vague, long-time-off, 'we will because that's what people do' kind of a notion. Like everything else about my life, I realize. I'm not sure I'm ready. I'm definitely not sure Sean

*is. Oh God. Sean. But look . . . I'm thinking about what I need to eat, about not inhaling smoke from passers-by. That tells you something, and it tells me too. I just need a minute.*

It certainly wasn't unusual for Sean to be up before her, but this level of – well, chirpiness – was as unusual as it was unacceptable so early in the day. They'd been home late, from an interminable dinner. He'd been in a very good mood, expansive, chatty and affectionate. He'd told her he'd been proud of her, that she'd looked gorgeous. He had wanted to make love, and she'd put him off by feigning exhaustion, realizing only as his hand strayed across her backside in a very familiar opening gambit that she couldn't, yet. That something was very different now. Admittedly, he'd gone straight to sleep, not noticeably frustrated by her refusal, leaving her staring at the ceiling for ages. Par for the course. She'd always thought of the two of them as broadly compatible in most areas, except this one. Sean was the proverbial lark, she the proverbial owl. No, that wasn't true. Owls came to life at night. Tess peaked for a couple of hours around 6 to 8 p.m., and was pretty much comatose (in bed or upright) by 11 p.m., always had been. She wasn't sure what kind of animal that made her. But since it was appreciably more true in the winter, perhaps she was the proverbial tortoise or brown bear. She had new thoughts to keep her awake now. Thoughts Sean had no notion of.

Tess had never been 'a baby person', as she thought of them. Not, at least, a person who felt sure and certain babies must be in her future in order for her future to look rosy. And complete. She wasn't even sure she liked babies. They seemed to be a lot of work and worry, and to offer

relatively little reward for both. Women at work had babies. Tess handled their maternity leave. Mopped their hormonal tears, allaying their professional fears as best she could. Bought cakes and balloons for their leaving parties and took their phone calls when they were anxious about coming back to work. When the tiny people who had caused so much disruption appeared in the office in their car-seat thrones several weeks later, and everyone crowded around to coo and marvel, Tess felt fairly ambiguous. They weren't all beautiful. Some she struggled to find a compliment for, sure at least that one ought to be forthcoming. 'Adorable outfit' was a safe standby if all else failed. And some of them were far too noisy. Which invariably led their nervous, fluttery mothers to proclaim that they were hardly ever this unsettled, which Tess invariably did not entirely believe. Their arrival did not make her uterus contract with envy or anticipation, and their departure was usually a relief.

She had felt differently about Dulcie, her god-daughter, the first baby she'd been very involved with. Dulcie had been beautiful, and placid, and Tess had loved her from the first moment she saw her, as she loved Dulcie's mother, Holly. Her little cries had seemed like communication and not like complaint. Her every sneeze and shrug and wriggle had been miraculous, and not boring at all. Tess had fallen in love, but didn't remember even a tinge of envy. She'd been the first non-'bloody relative' to visit the hospital. Holly had sent her husband, Ben, away, and the two of them had sat on the bed with Dulcie sleeping between them, and gazed at her while Holly graphically recounted the horrors and indignities of labour. The gentle sing-songy tone of her voice, and the way she couldn't take her

eyes off the baby, convinced Tess that she didn't mean a word of it. Tess had picked up Dulcie and deeply inhaled the scent of her, and listened to the tiny snuffling sounds of her, and wondered at her delicate fingers and the dark sweep of her long eyelashes, and she'd loved her straight-away. There'd been no deep ache in her womb for one of her own, or even a frisson of excitement at the notion that one day it would be her turn. Holly doing this was like all the other things they had done differently from each other. Right for her friend, she was sure, but not for Tess. And now that the peaches and cream baby was fourteen years old, she loved her still. Tess was definitely heading Holly's way at last. She put her hand on her flat belly, dipping as it still did between her hipbones as she lay on her back, and wondered . . .

Sean's iPhone sprang to life with the egregious sound of a clanging church-bell tower at 6 a.m. Monday through Friday, a full hour before Tess needed to be roused. Her phone was altogether gentler with her – it made the sort of sounds they play in posh spas – but Tess always felt slightly like she should stand to attention and be wearing some sort of uniform that included spurs when Sean's went off. On the average day, by the time hers – located on the chest of drawers across the room so that it forced her out of bed – did its thing, Sean would have cycled at least five miles on the racing bike he kept anchored in some sort of contraption in the sitting room, facing the television. He'd have wiped down the bike (which always made Tess laugh – gym etiquette at home, where she never went anywhere near the bike unless they had people over for dinner and she wanted to hang their coats on the handlebars). He'd

have eaten his healthy breakfast, showered, dressed . . . and left. It was how it had always been. Even when they'd first been together, and everything had been a novelty, she'd seldom been able to tempt him to stay in bed, instead of jumping up to check the markets in Tokyo, even with her best tricks.

This morning, though, the spa chimes had rung, Radio 4 had delivered the seven o'clock news, and Tess was considering what she might wear, focusing on the minutiae of her day to avoid the enormous subject of the busily splitting embryo within, as she had been doing for almost a week now. She knew – it had registered from day one – that it wasn't quite right, wanting to keep it all to herself. She ought to be bubbling with the news, fizzing with it. Maybe that would take a while. Maybe it was shock . . . She'd wake up one morning brimming like she was supposed to, and she badly wanted to wait for that morning, project everything as it was meant to be. So she planned her outfit, her hands resting on her still very flat tummy under the duvet, and listened to the news.

And yet Sean was still here.

And he was humming loudly. That almost never happened. Frank Sinatra. *That* never happened. He was more of a Drake kind of a guy.

Tess rolled out of bed and, wrapping herself in her dressing gown, padded into the kitchen where the humming was coming from. Sean was apparently scrambling eggs. He smiled cheerfully at her over his shoulder.

'Morning. Want some?'

Tess shook her head and groaned. 'Too early . . .'

'I've made you tea.' He gestured towards a mug on the table. 'I was going to bring it in.'

‘Have I slept right through the rest of the week, and it’s actually Saturday?’

Sean laughed. ‘No. It’s definitely Thursday.’

‘You never cook breakfast in the week.’

‘God. I’m that much of a creature of habit?’

‘You’re really asking me that?’ He was the actual living definition of a creature of habit. He knew it and she knew it and everyone who knew him knew it.

‘Fair enough.’

She liked this Sean, though. He was . . . light somehow. Almost frivolous. This Sean would probably take baby news very well. She wondered how long he was hanging around for.

‘So what’s it all about, then?’ She looked at her watch. ‘It’s . . . 7.15, and you’re still here. You’re eating’ – she went over to the stove – ‘eggs *and* bacon. It’s a Thursday.’

He couldn’t have guessed, could he? As the thought suddenly flooded her brain, she wondered whether it would be a relief, and decided that if it made him smile and scramble eggs on a Thursday and be like this, perhaps it might be. Perhaps. Perhaps. Perhaps. Now she wanted to hum.

‘All right, Inspector Clouseau, there is something.’ Her heart pounded. Sean’s back was to her, as he spooned egg on to toast beside the stove. She wondered if her chest was flushing pink, like it always did when she was nervous, and pulled the dressing gown tighter around herself. ‘Sit down. Drink your tea.’

‘I need to be sitting down and drinking something hot and sugary?’ She tried to laugh at her own vague attempt at humour, but even to her the sound was just a little brittle. She sat down, and cupped the mug in her hands to stop from fidgeting.



He joined her there, with his plate and cutlery, and didn't speak while he ground salt and pepper on to his food. Tess realized she was holding her breath, while he carefully and precisely, as was his way, cut off a square of the toast with his knife and fork.

'How do you feel about New York?'

Tess blinked and swallowed as the conversation veered off the track she had imagined for it.

'New York *City*?'

'Yep.' His voice was patient and slow, like a teacher talking to a kindergartener. 'New York City. How d'you feel about it?'

She shrugged. 'I . . . I like it.'

'You loved it, didn't you?' Objection. Leading the witness.

'Loved it? I mean . . . I had a good time.'

'We had a *great* time. Didn't we?'

They'd been Christmas shopping there. Two years ago. Their first Christmas. A long weekend in a nice hotel in Midtown, facilitated by air miles and financed by the anticipation of a nice work bonus. Sean's work bonus. She hadn't thought about it in ages. But they *had* had a great time. She remembered that now she'd had a few seconds to readjust to the fact that he did not want to talk about her pregnancy, the pregnancy she'd been keeping from him for, oh, five days now. A great, clichéd, skating-in-Central-Park, ram-raiding-Macy's, too-much-bacon, cinnamon-on-your-hot-chocolate, sex-in-the-morning-as-well-as-at-night-because-we're-on-holiday time.

He was watching her face, smiling broadly. She mirrored the smile, conscious that it didn't quite reach her eyes.

'Why are we talking about New York?'

Sean took a deep breath, his eyes never leaving her face.

‘Because they’ve offered me the New York job.’

He said ‘the New York job’. Not ‘a New York job’. *The* job. It felt like the completion of a conversation she hadn’t been present at the beginning of.

‘What New York job?’

‘*The* New York job.’ There was an almost imperceptible note of irritation in Sean’s voice. They both heard it, and Sean corrected it when he spoke again. He put his hand across hers, back to being the kindergarten teacher.

‘They want me to *run* the New York office.’

It certainly and instantaneously explained the Frank Sinatra. *New York*.

Tess bought herself some time by taking a big gulp of tea. ‘Wow. Congratulations. That’s . . . that’s amazing . . .’

‘It’s bloody fantastic. I mean, I wanted it, I’ve wanted it for ages. I thought maybe another year or two . . . but it’s come up now.’

‘Did somebody die?’

‘No! Andy’s leaving.’ Again, the feeling of having missed something. Who the hell was Andy with no surname? Then the vague recollection of drinks and dinner a few months ago with a broad and tall American with that uniquely thick hair only American men seem to have, and those very straight, very white teeth, and his monogram embroidered above his heart on a cotton shirt.

‘You know Andy.’

Not exactly. A Martini, two courses and an espresso with a bloke who liked to talk about himself a lot. She sure as hell knew Andy better than Andy knew her.

But Sean was allowing only very brief pauses in which she could catch up. ‘So it’s Andy’s job. And they want me

to start relatively soon. I mean no pressure, obviously. We're talking months, not weeks.'

That's a relief, then, Tess thought ruefully. Although of course these days she was all about the weeks *and* the months. Thirty-six weeks to go. Eight months. If they were going through with it. If it was real, and really happening. When the company said no pressure, she didn't imagine they meant that they'd wait thirty-six weeks.

'I mean, of course they understand we've got things to sort out (there it was, the first *we*) – renting this place out, finding somewhere there, that kind of stuff. Visas, obviously – a mile of red tape, for sure, but they have people to help with that – a whole department of people. But start as soon as that's sorted . . .'

Tess watched him while he spoke, replies or interjections clearly not required at this point – his familiar face in what she recognized were unfamiliar raptures. She stopped listening, but he didn't stop talking, and so she was tuned out of the exuberant diatribe. And she felt like she was at the top of a black run on her skis and they'd made the decision to set off down the mountain without her permission – as so often happened when she was at the top of a mountain on skis, and she'd got her angle all wrong, and pointed downwards before she was ready. Exhilaration, excitement, panic and sheer terror, swirling in a nauseating maelstrom in her stomach.

'Please say something.' As if there'd been a space. Or even a pause. 'What do you think?'

'I . . . I . . .'

'I've sprung it on you. I'm an idiot. I'm sorry. I know it has implications for you, and it's not straightforward. I know that. You need some time. I'm just so *bloody* excited. I should

have chosen a better moment. But this all happened yesterday, and we were late last night, and so sleepy when we came in, and I have barely slept, and I just couldn't hold it in.'

The comparison was so obvious a child could have drawn it. New York was Sean's baby. And *he* hadn't been able to hold it in. *He'd* been fizzing and brimming and desperate to share it with her. *He* hadn't been hugging this new information to himself for five days.

She knew this was the optimum moment, now, to tell him. It should have just burst from her. Not a yes, or a no. Not a weird revelation one-upmanship, even though she'd so win that contest.

'It's just a bit of a shock.'

'But we've talked about it before.' His tone had become imploring.

He was right. They had. Of course they had. But it had formed part of those daft couple conversations over their time together. Mostly at the very beginning, when you still had sex in places other than the bedroom, and could get sort of drunk without drinking, just from being together. The kind that happened on long walks and in dark corners of restaurants and on lazy Sunday mornings. Full of what ifs and dreams and future plans. The trouble was, she couldn't remember the last time they'd had one of those. And she knew that for her two things had changed dramatically since the last time. Iris. How could he not understand, after all the time they'd been together, how central Iris was to all her thinking? And this baby. Was it Sean's fault those things hadn't the chance to be uppermost in his mind, or was it hers?

So this was the moment. To make it their news, not hers. To start. So why couldn't she form the words?

‘I thought you’d be excited too.’ The first tiny note of something in his voice that she didn’t have a name for. A casual bystander would miss it; you had to be one of the two people in the relationship to hear it, the infinitesimal inference that she was spoiling it for him. A mere hint of resentment which, once she heard it, was her cue to make it all okay. To smooth it over, compensate for her disappointing reaction. This time, though, there was something else, as she opened her mouth to speak. Rising in her throat.

She lurched forward, her hands cupped at her mouth.

‘I think I’m going to be sick . . .’

He’d been kind. Because he was kind. He’d tucked her back into bed, blaming last night’s dinner, or a bug circulating at the office. He’d even called her assistant and said she wouldn’t be coming in. If his care had been slightly mechanical, his interest distracted, his kiss on the top of her head perfunctory, she could only be glad. It clearly hadn’t entered his busy, preoccupied head that it could be anything other than a transient illness. And then he couldn’t get out of the flat fast enough, already racing towards his shiny future . . .

Tess missed Holly. If she’d been here, that’s who she’d have called. That’s who she would have told. That’s who she would have listened to, whose advice she’d have taken. But Holly was away – on the holiday of a lifetime. Three and a half weeks in Australia with her family. The Barrier Reef, Uluru, Sydney, Perth . . . She’d been planning it for more than a year, and dreaming of it for far longer than that. She’d left the minute the autumn term at the private school where she worked had ended, sending a breezy and

excited voicemail from the airport departure lounge. She'd be seeing the New Year in from Sydney Harbour, and she wouldn't be back until a few days after that. She'd uploaded a few pictures so far on Instagram – the three of them shiny, happy people, with a variety of exotic-looking backgrounds – and Tess, of course, had done no more than 'heart' them. It wasn't fair to land this on Holly when she was so far away. She didn't want to say it over the phone, and she didn't want to write it down, blunt and factual, in an email or a text. But she was counting down the days. Of course Sean should hear it first, but she knew it would be much easier to say it to Holly. A dress rehearsal: get all the nerves out before the real thing . . .

Tess gladly put her head under the duvet and closed her eyes, gratefully asleep again, her body and its overwhelming need for rest winning over her brain and its endless machinations. It was two hours before she woke again, and that was only because her mobile phone, on the bedside table and horribly close to her left ear, jolted her from sleep.

'Is that Tess?' She knew the voice, but in her fog, she couldn't immediately place it.

'Yes. This is Tess.'

'This is Carol Thomas. Your grandmother's neighbour . . . ?'

Tess sat up, wide awake at once. Another tremor of nausea at the sudden movement, overlaid with a shiver of dread. She hadn't called last night. She called most nights. Every night, probably. But she hadn't last night. It had been late, by the time they'd got home. She hadn't called.

'Hello, Mrs Thomas. Is everything all right?' She knew it. This was it. And she hadn't called.

'Carol. Call me Carol. Please. I hope it's okay to call.'

‘Of course . . .’

‘It’s your grandmother.’

Obviously. Tess wished she’d get to the point, kind and careful though she was. She was frightened.

‘She’s very poorly.’

Relief flooded warmly over Tess. Poorly wasn’t dead.

‘She’s had this cold. I know you know. She’s been in bed for a few days. The carers have been coming in, of course, as usual. But this morning, I popped in, and she . . . well, she wasn’t right, Tess. She was . . . it seemed like . . . she was having trouble breathing. I didn’t want to wait for the carer. So I called an ambulance.’

‘Oh, Mrs Thomas. Carol. Thank you.’

‘That was about half an hour, perhaps an hour ago.’

‘And they took her –’

‘Yes. She’s at the hospital. I told them I’d call you. It is right, yes, to call you, and not your mother?’

‘Yes. I’ll call my mum. Let her know. You did exactly the right thing, Carol.’

‘Okay. Good. I can go in, if you need me to . . . The boys won’t be back from school for a few hours.’

‘No. No. That’s very, very kind of you. I’ll come. I’m coming now.’

There was no need to call the office, who weren’t expecting her. Thank God the nausea seemed to have passed. In truth, it had probably just been superseded. Twenty minutes after she’d hung up on Carol, Tess was in the car, damp-haired from a hasty shower, and afraid. She could feel her blood pounding in her temples and wrists and in her chest. She pulled out too quickly at a junction, causing a driver to brake sharply, and a surge of adrenalin to course unpleasantly through her. The man in the other car honked

angrily at her, flipped the bird as he drove past her, his mouth forming a silent, angry slur. Tess gripped the wheel hard, and forced herself to slow both the car and her breathing down.

She'd known Iris wasn't well, dammit. She'd last seen her a week, maybe ten days ago. It felt like longer with everything that had happened since. Her grandmother had had a hacking cough that shook her narrow shoulders, and a wheeze on every breath, in and out. She'd lost some weight too, and she had no weight to lose. She'd been particularly absent, as if she'd needed all her energy to breathe, and had none left for memory. She'd looked at Tess but not really seen her, and given short, vague answers to her questions. Their relationship veered this way and that now. Sometimes Iris was still parental, and sometimes it was completely reversed and Tess felt like the adult. Mostly it was both at the same time, within the same visit. But, poorly, Iris had never seemed quite so small, and helpless. There was never so little evidence of the woman she had always been for Tess. She had left profoundly sad. Tears had swum in her eyes and she'd stopped to fill the tank with petrol, even though it was half full already and she normally drove it on fumes, because she had needed a moment. One of the carers who came in twice a day had been with Iris. She'd been particularly kind and calm and reassuring and, besides, Tess had had no choice, with work in the morning and the rest of her life ninety miles up the A303.

Her grandmother's dementia had crept in so slowly and so gradually that it had been okay to ignore it for a long time. Iris was an old lady – it was easier, at first, to put things down to that. That wasn't terrifying. In the



beginning, Tess was too busy processing the fact that the upright, vital woman she had known was shrinking in every way. Well into her eighties, Iris had been very much like the Iris she'd always known. She'd seemed like a considerably younger woman. Tess knew Iris had known for some time before she did that what was happening to her wasn't just 'wear and tear'. Known before the doctor had confirmed it. It hurt to remember some of the ways Iris herself had tried to cover it up. She'd put notes in her purse, and by the telephone. She'd learnt to cover up what she'd forgotten. Always happy to share her opinion in the past, she'd held back, listening for facts, and framing her responses with the information you'd just given her. It all made sense, in the end, when you looked back.

One of the carers had told her once that making a cup of tea took twenty-seven different, separate thoughts and actions. That was why it was so hard for a person with a loss of short-term memory. Your brain had to do twenty-seven different stages, just to make a cup of tea. How colossally terrifying it must have been for Iris . . . as one by one the twenty-seven dwindled away. To multiply that fear – the fear that you don't know how to make a cup of tea any more – by a hundred, by a thousand everyday functions. Tess came to see the escalation as something close to a blessing. Not for her, but for Iris. When the function of remembering that you weren't remembering started to fade, the fear must too. She hoped that was so. She needed to believe that was so. It was unbearable to think of Iris being frightened.

The disease crept along slowly. She'd googled, read up. It wasn't always slow. It could progress at breakneck speed. Or it could creep. With Iris, it crept. For the first year, it

hardly progressed at all. But then, oh so gradually, Iris had declined. Like a full-colour photograph left to fade in the bright sunshine. Less and less of her seemed to remain. Like dementia was nibbling at the edges of her . . .

Iris had been adamant about staying at home for as long as she could, and Tess knew how hard she had worked at convincing the roster of carers whom the council sent in that she was coping. Tess had helped when she could, complicit in the subterfuge. She did her grandmother's food shopping on the internet, so all Iris had to do was to let the man in with his bags. Whenever she visited, Tess spent time reorganizing the cupboards. Iris put beans with washing powder, and toilet rolls behind the biscuits, but she'd sit with a cup of tea and chat while Tess made sense of the chaos. She paid all Iris's bills. Iris kept notes by the oven, reminding her to switch it off, though, increasingly, Tess bought microwaveable things. She ate less and less heartily anyway, often preferring a bowl of soup to a full meal. Sometimes Tess found a microwave meal cold and congealed still in the machine. She'd remembered to put it in and switch it on, but not to take it out, the ping ignored and the meal uneaten.

Iris had always been immaculate: that changed. Tess would find her in dirty, unironed clothes – tea stains on a blouse, food marks on a skirt. Sometimes, she smelt less than fresh, and her hair had that sebum odour which meant it hadn't been washed. She remembered bottles of perfume on a dressing table, a scent she could almost conjure up. Iris ironing in front of *Coronation Street*, saying she felt less guilty about watching a soap opera if she was doing a task at the same time. Teaching Tess to thread a needle

and sew on a button. A wicker basket with pins and spools of cotton thread.

But Iris's life had become a delicate balance between holding on and letting go, and Tess knew that she fought to find this balance on her own. Sometimes, often, Tess felt like she'd let her grandmother down. Sean said it wasn't true but the feeling persisted.

Over time, 'Don't let me go into a home. Never. Promise' had become 'Don't let me ruin your life, love. Promise.' There was no answer. And now there were no pleas. Iris was past the point of advocating for herself or for anyone else. The passivity of it was deeply sad for Tess. It was the opposite of the Iris she'd known.

Now physical ill health may be forcing their hands, or removing the decision from them entirely. Sitting in traffic, feeling the panic rise as she went in and out of first gear, Tess didn't know which would be worse.

She called her mother's mobile phone from the car, on her hands-free.

Donna didn't pick up: the call went to voicemail. They mostly did.

'Mum. It's me. They've taken Gran to hospital . . . that cold she had seems to have got worse – Mrs Thomas – Carol – the lady next door – she called an ambulance . . .'

Tess paused. If her mother was screening calls, she'd see her name, maybe pick up. She waited for a long moment. Nothing.

'So I was off today anyway. I'm on my way there now. I don't know what you're up to. I don't even know where you are, actually, I realize. But I'll call again once I've seen what's going on. Okay? I'm in the car for another hour or

so. Call me if you get this message . . . I've got the hands-free on, so I can talk. If you call . . .' She pushed the button to end the call, cross at the tone of her own voice. Why had she sounded like a little girl? Desperate for her mother's help? She'd taught herself years ago not to need it, and God knows she hadn't had it in a long while. And yet there it was, the wheedling tone. The lonely-little-girl plea for help.