

HERE IS THE BEEHIVE

ALSO BY SARAH CROSSAN

Toffee
The Weight of Water
Apple and Rain
Moonrise
We Come Apart
Once
Breathe
Breathe 2: Resist
Fizzy and Bandit

HERE IS THE BEEHIVE

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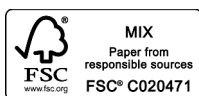
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to the final printed book

For Mum

PART ONE

The only way
 out
 now
is to stay busy,
so I have borrowed
Anna Karenina
from my mother and will not
allow myself to cry
until I have read it.

Twice.

It was ten o'clock in the morning.
My tea had cooled in the mug.
I wanted another biscuit.
I wanted to message you.
I was sorry for the argument.

Very.

Helen buzzed through.

‘I have a Mrs Taylor on the line.
She says we wrote up her husband’s will
and he’s passed. She’s very coherent.’

I scrolled through emails:
clients, questions,
an L. K. Bennett sale.

‘Put her through,’ I said.
I reclined in my chair,
ready to be soft, supportive.

‘Mrs Taylor, Ana Kelly speaking.
Firstly, let me say how terribly sorry I am for your loss.’

‘That’s very kind,’ she said.
On my second screen
I searched Taylor in the database.
Twenty-two clients.

‘May I ask your husband’s first name?’

‘Yes, of course, sorry. Umm ... ’
She was unsure,
like a name might be out of reach,
already stashed away on some high shelf.

And then.

‘Connor Mooney.
I’m his wife, Rebecca Taylor.
We have different names.’

The wife.
His wife.
Your wife.
The wife.

She had discovered us.
This was her way of getting in touch,
of punishing me,

because you were not dead,
we had spoken only days before.

I was planning to message you after lunch.
To apologise. Make things good again.

Rebecca was calling because she knew
and I needed a story to explain it.

Quick. Quick.
Think. Think.

‘He passed away on Tuesday,’ she said.
‘My brother-in-law suggested I phone.’

You’re lying you fucking cunt bitch,
I didn’t say.
You’re fucking lying you bitch cunt,
I didn’t say.

I said, ‘Goodness, I’m so sorry.
That’s awful news.
I have his details here in front of me.
We drew up the will a few years ago.’
My hands hadn’t moved.
I was scanning the list of Taylors.
Keith, Leonard, Meaghan-Leah.
In my throat was an ache, hot and heavy.
My right hand twitched even as I clutched
the desk to steady it.

I didn’t believe her.

‘The funeral is a fortnight this Friday.’

‘Thank you for calling.
You must have a great deal on your plate.
And please don’t worry about the legal end of things
unless there’s a problem paying for the funeral.’

‘That won’t be an issue,’ she said defensively.

‘Well then, I’ll call you afterwards.

You could

come into the office, perhaps.’

‘I’ll wait to hear from you.’

She spoke like we were arranging a dental appointment,
with a calm I could not understand,
yet similar to every bereaved spouse I’d known,
setting aside grief for the brief moments of legal dealings.

I took shallow breaths.

‘Do you know how to register the death?’

‘My brother-in-law is dealing with that.’

She coughed hard into the phone.

I wondered whether she was wearing black.

‘As executors to his will

we can assist with administration, so do ask.’

Rebecca coughed again.

I considered asking if she was sure.

Wholly.

No doubt.

Maybe it was someone else.

‘Is there any more I can do for you, Ms Taylor?’

She paused.

Was she going to confess to the joke?

None of it was true. Was it?

You were going to call minutes later, frantic and found-out.

‘No. Thank you though,’ she said.

‘One last question. How did he die?’ I asked.

Rebecca told me, briefly, all about it.

And I told her, quietly, how upsetting it sounded
and how impossible it was to be without him.

‘Yes,’ she said.

I ended the call and bought a pair of shoes in the online sale.

Purple suede. Pointy toes.

Impractical.

Unaffordable.

Then I did something

very bad

and got back to work.

Tell me.

What would you have done?

It is contrarily cold.
I am wearing a cashmere cardigan
 over a long grey dress,
 a vest beneath.

It is a Marks and Spencer look:
high-street ordinary,
plain to the point of being a blur.

I caught myself in the mirror
on the way out today,
hated the woman
you would see if
you sat up and took a look around.
 Wouldn't that be just like you?

To spy
and later
perform a post-mortem of the service –
fidgeting children,
the state of your mother's face,
thoughts on how I behaved,
 the analysis exhaustive:

I liked your hair up.
You should always wear lipstick.
Could you see from the back?

I haven't eaten in fifteen days.
I haven't seen you in twenty.

I don't know when I'll next have an appetite.
I won't ever see you again.

I am as thin as I was at the beginning,
when every duplicity

pitched my guts.

You would say I look fine.

But I do not.

It has been noticed.

The partners seem worried,
like I might not outlive my clients' muddles.

Nora bought me a bottle of Floradix.

Tanya asked if I was pregnant.

The sun is straining through the clouds
and it should defeat them
because it is July after all.

I am holding on tight to a bunch of white carnations.

You never mentioned a fondness for flowers
but soon you shall be carpeted in
brightly petalled

dying colour

as a mark of love.

How do *you* smell now?

Are your nails long?

St Mary's car park is crowded.
I cannot see your coffin.

But I see Rebecca,
your boys,
all staring into nowhere.

We plan for death,
make sensible decisions while gorging on life.
But no one intends to die.

When you wandered into my office
three years ago,
you never thought
I would have to confront your family's grief,
or my own.

You thought you had forever to make mistakes
and make amends.

Your sons are dressed in suits,
standing in a row like a little black staircase.

I turn my back on them.
I am not responsible for their sadness
though that's what I've wanted.

Wouldn't it have been better than this?
Wouldn't it have been better my way?

‘Will Mrs Mooney be writing up a will with us?’ I asked.
You were in trainers for that first meeting,
an overcoat better donated to charity than worn.
‘My wife didn’t take my name and
I’m pretty sure she’s made meticulous plans for her own death.
My death too, probably.’

Your laughter filled up all the space,
right into the dusty nooks.

We went through it:

personal data,
property,
pension.

I knew your entire life fifty minutes after we’d met,
while you knew nothing of me
apart from where I’d been to university:

I spotted you studying my walls –
certificates of accomplishment,
praise for a girl I scarcely remembered.
She was ambitious,
liked Manic Street Preachers,
sucked off her jurisprudence professor for a first.
Silly girl.

At the end, you loitered,
traced circles
on the desk
with your thumb
and, grinning somewhat, said,
'I guess I'll be back for the divorce.'

I lidded my pen,
left a space for you to speak.
It was January after all,
a busy month for break-ups and
scrounging around for grounds
after the hellish togetherness of Christmas.

'We're here for anything you need,' I said.
I wasn't being suggestive.
I was a professional
with certificates on the wall to prove it.
A Bristol graduate.
'My colleague Tanya Kushner
is an experienced family lawyer.
I can ask the receptionist to make an appointment.'

'Oh, Rebecca would never let me go.
Who'd put petrol in her car?'
You rose.

‘Once the will is ready you can
pop back in and sign it,’ I said.
‘We’ll provide witnesses.’

‘How lavish! I look forward to it.’
You put on the tatty coat.
A bottle of Ribena poked out of a pocket.
‘Are you Irish? With a name like Ana Kelly you must be.
Unless you married particularly well.’

‘I was going to ask you the same.’

‘Both parents from Meath. Yours?’

‘Mum is from Cork.
Dad is from Cavan.
No one can pinpoint which town.
We all agree he was running from something.’

‘Aren’t we all?’ You winked then shuffled,
embarrassed to have done it,
reaching for the door handle.
‘Have a good afternoon.’

I ate lunch alone at the Subway a few doors down.
A slice of cucumber fell on to my lap and
I noticed a ladder in my tights,
was glad I’d been sitting for most of our meeting,
was worried you’d spot me in Subway.

So you see,
even that first day you were
slinking around
 inside,
stirring things up.

But.
Actually.
I didn't think much more about you until we met by chance
ten days later.

You were with Rebecca.
And, oh,
 she was everything.

How can we know which days
will be the turning points?

So long as we live,
we gamble.

Red.
Black.

Put it all on Number 11.

A man is by my side. 'Ana?'

He is handsome. Bearded. 'Mark?'

'Jesus. Is it a good idea for you to be here?'

Mourners in cars search for spaces,
ways to reach the crematorium
without having to cross the road and
traipse the length of cemetery.

A woman strides towards us and relinquishes a child
like it's nothing more than a bag of groceries.
'He needs changing.
I'm getting a lift with Sheena,' she tells Mark.

I hold out my hand to her but she is gone already.
We watch her go.
'I'm sorry,' he says. 'It must be ...
I don't have a clue how it must be.
Shit, I suppose.
I've thought about you a lot.
 How you're doing.
But you shouldn't have come.
It would seem odd. Did Rebecca spot you?'

‘Does it matter?’ I ask.

He pats the child, who gurgles something
combining complaint with contentment.
‘I better deal with this one.’

Beneath my feet,
wet leaves cling to the tarmac.
The air smells of evaporating rain.
 In the block of council flats
 next to the presbytery
a girl is waving from a top floor window
as though we have all come to see her.
 In her arms, a naked baby.

‘Meet me,’ I say.

The church bell tolls twelve.
Cars edge away.

 You will be smoked,
 nothing but ash in an hour.
I will still be in this cashmere. In these tights.
 Later I will load a washing machine,
 measure detergent into a plastic lid.

‘I can’t,’ Mark says. ‘Meet you, I mean. I can’t.’

I didn't recognise you in the suit,
shaven and smelling of influence,
and was bored of swatting men away.
I retrieved my hand from the bar,
wanted to get back to plotting with Tanya,
making plans to start up on our own:
 Kelly and Kushner Solicitors.

'I'm Connor. I was in your office a few weeks ago.'
I liked your eyebrows,
your teeth, the canines jutting forward just slightly.

'A trust dispute!' I announced.

'Last will and testament,' you corrected.
From the fug of noise
 Rebecca emerged,
pale-lipped in a Patrick Swayze T-shirt.
She had the arms of a tennis player,
the mouth of a politician.
'Rebecca, this is Ana Kelly. My solicitor.'

I was tipsy.

Yes.

I was tipsy and nothing was rooted to the spot.
I wanted you to hold me up,
help me back to the table,

sit with me
and divulge everything you had ever been.
I stopped myself leaning in and resting my head against your chest.

I wanted Rebecca to be more obvious.

‘My boozy friend’s waiting for wine,’ I said instead,
pointing.

‘We’ll get our drinks and join you,’ Rebecca said flatly.
‘No other bloody seats.’

Tanya rolled her eyes, opened the Uber app.
‘They look like the fucking Muswell Hill set.
I can’t sit and listen to the merits
of Ed Sheeran and oat milk all night.’

‘Ten minutes,’ I promised.
I hoped it would be longer.

You wandered over,
waving the peanuts
I’d left on the bar.
Rebecca sat on my left,
you on my right,
and she told us about the house you’d redesigned.
You were the architect,
she worked on interiors.

It had all been ‘taxing beyond’
but ‘God, so worth it.’

Rebecca had a way of simpering
when she spoke that gulped all the
elegance from her face;
I gazed into my glass, embarrassed by it.

You didn’t look at her much,
didn’t touch those lean arms,
instead described a deprived Catholic childhood
and subsequent rise to success
in a forged Irish accent
that made me order more wine.
You’d grown up on the Haringey Ladder,
went to St Aloysius,
which, even back then, was a road to better things.
I’d dated a boy from the same school,
one I’d met in confirmation classes
who couldn’t understand his own hard-ons,
apologised for them and repeated over and over
It’ll deflate in a tick
It’ll deflate in a tick.
And you knew St Michael’s Grammar,
where I trekked each day from Wood Green
to get my holier-than-thou education.
‘So you were a smarty pants then?’ you said.

I nodded.

Tanya yawned.

Rebecca adjusted her wristwatch.

‘What were your sixth-form haunts?’ you asked.

‘Donnelly’s in Turnpike Lane mainly.
They sold only booze and crackers.’

‘They did!’

‘And there was the one and only
O’Rafferty’s with Shebeen out back.
I loved that place.’

‘I worked there!’ You half stood to announce this.

‘What a dive!’ I screeched,
knowing your pride wasn’t about where you were from
but who you were now,

how different it all looked.

And I was your witness. Rebecca your prize.

‘It’s all boarded up now, you know.

To let. When I drive past

I get sentimental for some reason.’

‘Do you live close to it?’ you asked.

‘Not far. Ally Pally. Still trying to escape North London.

Well, I did leave for uni but came back.

Remind me where you guys live.’

Rebecca was tapping her teeth

against the rim of her empty wine glass.

‘Hampstead Suburb Gardens,’ she said sharply.

When Tanya got bored of being ignored
and eyeballed me,
we made our excuses.

‘Christ, she’s dull,’ Tanya said, walking me to the bus stop.

‘He’s alright though.’

‘A bit of alright, you mean.

And he likes you.

Hampstead Suburb Gardens though?

Basically they’re from East Finchley. Tossers.’

Undeterred by the time or my heels,

I walked part of the way home,

the whole length of Fortis Green

until the balls of my feet throbbed,

and, taking my shoes off in the hallway, I thought,

Connor Mooney, I like you too.
