

PHYLLIDA SHRIMPTON

EVERY
SHADE *of*
HAPPY



An Aria Book

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For my sister Pam
For being the wind beneath my wings

In memory of Peter and Shirley Shrimpton

Thank you to fabulous H,
(the late Helene Dendy Frostick), for lending
me your name. I hope it made you smile.

You were a wonderful lady who touched everyone's
heart and brought happiness to so many people.

PROLOGUE

1929

ALGERNON

Algernon's feet, constricted by brand-new leather shoes, dangled a good two inches above a bare wooden floor where he sat. The narrow bed, metal-framed and identical in every way to all the others in the dormitory, sagged wearily beneath him, and a coarse woollen over-blanket made the back of his legs itch. A single pillow, where he was to lay his head that night, whispered to him of other schoolboys' nightmares still caught inside its cotton slip.

Algernon's bony knees, poking out from black flannel shorts, sported ruddy brown grazes which peppered their way over the bulge of his kneecaps before disappearing into the carefully folded cuffs of his new grey socks. Dragging a nail along the skin of his right leg he gathered a line of pinprick scabby crusts, which, when bringing his finger up close to his face, he was able to examine closely. Each one, he thought, was a beautiful relic of the life he'd left behind. He flicked the debris from his nail onto the floor and watched how a single tear of blood trickled down his shin before rather satisfyingly staining the cuff of his new grey socks. His knees told of a very recent and

daringly triumphant act of bravery and for a brief, liberating moment Algernon indulged himself in the memory of it.

His fingers curled tightly around the railings of his village school and his face pressed against the cold, black iron. He was on the outside looking in. A ball, accidentally kicked onto the roof of the school, had wedged itself in the dip between the gables and the chimney and his friends were all looking up at it, defeated by the problem. Being the most adventurous of boys Algernon had, quick as a flash, climbed over the railings and scaled the side wall knowing every inch of it as he did. Having officially left the little school only the day before, he was trespassing now of course but finding himself back on the right side of the railings once again a delicious sense of familiar belonging lifted his heavy heart. In his mind he was shinning up the drainpipe, the rough brick catching his hands until he reached the chimney stack and clung to it.

Two boys staged a fight to distract the schoolmaster while a gathering of upturned faces waited for the ball. He tossed it down to them. Still clinging to the chimney stack he tilted his face until he could feel the fresh wind against his cheeks. From his vantage point he could see past the village and out across an expanse of glorious fields, each patchworking their way towards the shores of the River Fal and an overwhelming need to fly gripped his soul.

Algernon stared at his knees, at the evidence of his ungraceful dismount from the roof into a surprisingly deep puddle where he was treated like a hero by his friends. The story they told belonged to yesterday. Yesterday he had said goodbye. Yesterday he was free to run wild in the green fields of Cornwall. Yesterday he was a child. Today, according to his parents and the sign above the entrance to his new private

boarding school, Algernon Edward Maybury, aged seven years, was now a young Catholic gentleman.

God, Algernon had noticed, was in the very architecture of his new school, resplendent in arches and glorious through stained glass windows and His only son hung flogged and bleeding from a cross on seemingly every wall. God, however, felt entirely different in this place where his heart now quivered inside his skinny chest. Algernon's God was in his church back in Cornwall where every Sunday a congregation of familiar faces coughed and rustled through hymns and the Divine Liturgy. Algernon's God asked that everyone wore their best clothes to church and greeted each other with a smile on the way in. At Algernon's church the priest always had a precarious dewdrop on the end of his nose and Mrs Dyer, the organist, had an enormous bottom that always made him and his friends laugh behind their hymn books when they weren't having their wrists slapped for being more interested in the contents of their nose than the word of Our Lord. Crying babies were jiggled in their mothers' arms and the air smelt of incense and the promise of Sunday luncheon.

This new God was different. The air in this building, this school where Algernon now sat on the narrow bed, was heavy with a thousand secrets all spiralling silently among the dust motes and hiding behind the eyes of the Brothers who held the futures of all one hundred and sixteen schoolboys in their care. Algernon knew that despite God or because of God, he wasn't sure which, this place was not a happy place.

He also understood that from now on he could no longer expect to be called Algernon. He would, as his father informed him in the brief minutes between decanting his son from his Austin motorcar and hauling his huge school trunk from the

boot of the car onto the drive, now be addressed by his surname 'Maybury'. His father also informed him that he would excel in class, be victorious in the sports field, and take it on the chin when a likely drubbing were to come his way. Algernon had nodded sombrely and wordlessly while his mother had simply smiled encouragingly, her earlobes stretched and wobbling from the huge pearls that hung heavily from them. His parents then climbed back inside their car offering final stiff-upper-lipped farewells and casting promises through the open window to see him in a few weeks' time.

Algernon clenched his fingers tightly until his knuckles turned white and he craned his head towards the open leaded windows of the dormitory. If he willed them hard enough his parents might change their minds and return for him. The long drive outside, which led all the way to the huge iron gates, remained heart-breakingly empty. The overwhelming desire to fly away filled him to the brim and he wished with all his heart that he could climb onto the windowsill, grow wings and soar high into the clouds.

Echoes of the voices of other boys bounced across the dorm, along cold corridors and out from shadows. They told of pecking orders and alarming rites of passage that made Algernon... rather *Maybury* feel so terribly small. He didn't cry, not then at least, but cast his gaze down towards his own, unpacked trunk and breathed in air that smelt of fear. When at last he understood that his parents most definitely would not be returning for him, he squeezed his small hands tightly together and prayed to his God back home that the school holidays would come quickly so that he could leave this place and return to the fields, the rivers and the beautiful craggy coastline of Cornwall where he belonged.

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And Then There Were Three

2019

ALGERNON

Algernon glanced at his carriage clock. The steady tick of its mechanism nudged its delicate gold hands to 5.28pm, telling him that it was nearly time for his ready meal and another cup of tea, virtually the highlight of his whole day. That hideous thing had marked time ever since the day of his retirement when it was handed over with a handshake and a smattering of applause, followed by cheap filter coffee, a plate of fondant fancies and a hasty escape by everyone attending. He'd hated it then and he hated it now but he just couldn't bring himself to throw it away. It would be like throwing away each of the thirty-nine years he'd worked for the Corporation. He had kept it, punishing himself daily with the fact that the sum total of his worth was a gaudy mechanical device, encased in glass, which told him with audible regularity that he had one less second to live.

A shard of evening sunlight sliced across the room, highlighting dust motes that circled aimlessly outside his

field of vision before landing in a golden stripe upon the empty armchair opposite him. He bruised himself further by forcing his gaze to rest in the light where it pooled upon the tartan fabric. Cat sauntered into the room and wound his way round Algernon's legs, pressing a warm cheek against his shin and giving a sharp 'eck' to get his attention. Tearing his gaze away from the empty chair Algernon gave both the animal and his clock a cursory glance, never ceasing to be amazed by the accuracy of the cat's inner clock. It was now exactly 5.30pm.

'Cupboard love,' he grumbled, fumbling for his stick and heaving himself out of his chair, knees creaking and hot pains shooting across his shoulders and down his arms. Cat trotted towards the door turning to give another insistent 'eck' as Algernon straightened into an upright position and headed towards the kitchen to make their mutual evening meals. By 6pm they were both ingesting something vaguely unappealing but nutritionally robust if nothing else.

Then Algernon's phone rang. Algernon's phone never rang.

ANNA

For Anna, losing everything was a sudden thing. It had happened the moment her mother's partner, Harry, made a declaration of genuinely surprising and apparently insuppressible love for the man who fixed the coffee machine at his place of work. Harry, at the age of fifty-three, had finally found someone who could make his life complete but, in doing so, he'd managed to scatter the entire contents of both Anna's and her mother's comfortable lives in one swift, highly emotional confession.

They'd been watching *The Great British Bake Off* when it happened. Apparently, the perfect moment to destroy their lives was the final stage of the biscuit Show Stopper and it couldn't even wait until the end of the show. Anna's mother Helene had been horrified by what she was hearing, swinging between unrestrained anger and total disbelief. 'I thought it was just the male menopause,' she'd sniffed, wiping the flats of her hands across her damp eyes and cheeks once her initial outburst had abated. 'You know... why you're always so... *bland*... in the bedroom department. Lights off, unenthusiastic and quite frankly, unrewarding fumbling...'

Anna, who'd been curled in a large tan leather armchair, her face already flushed with the shock of Harry's announcement and the ensuing row, had made a show of blocking her ears. '*Overshare!*' she'd complained, forcing the grisly details of her mother's sex life out of her mind.

Shooting a red-eyed glance at her, Helene had jerked her head in the direction of Harry. 'I'm sorry, Anna, but we've been together for *six* years and now he's running off into the sunset with a man called *Derek!* I've a right to be pissed off, don't you think?' Harry had passed round a box of tissues and all of them, including Harry, had taken one, each dabbing at their tear-stained faces and blowing their noses, their hearts pounding in their throats over what should happen next. The stark reality of exactly what was about to happen next had hit Anna in the very next moment, when she'd realised with awful certainty that the ground beneath her was about to fall entirely away.

'Technically speaking *I'm* not doing the running.' Harry had sniffed offering a genuinely apologetic glance at Anna, rushing his words under his breath in a failed effort to make

them less wounding. 'Derek will be moving in with me. This...?' He'd cleared his throat and paused with discomfort '... is *my* house.' Regardless of Harry's efforts at empathetic delivery, his words had plopped like cow shit into the centre of the room splashing in the faces of both Anna and her mother.

'So how is your application for the Diplomatic Corps coming along?' Helene had growled at him. 'You could have given us at least five minutes to process the boyfriend thing before landing us with eviction!' She'd reached for the box of tissues again, snatching at several more before throwing the half-empty box at Harry who'd let it bounce off his head with barely a flinch. Knowing her mother all too well and that she would shortly be searching for more missiles to throw, Anna had uncurled herself from the armchair, removed the fruit bowl from the table in front of them, placed it on the sideboard and quietly left the room.

Lying on a spray of stars printed on a black cotton duvet cover she'd pushed her earphones into each ear to drown out the sound of the continuing one-sided argument going on downstairs. She'd heard enough. Her mother declaring that she barely earned enough on her own to rent even the smallest flat in the area and how they'd both starve now and why the *fuck* didn't he know he wanted to bat for the other side six years ago before they first got together?

Wiping at the hot tears that ran down her cheeks, Anna had tried desperately to cope with the idea that her mother and Harry were about to part ways. Harry was pretty decent as people go and his cooking was amazing, but it wasn't like he was her father or anything. She'd never known who her father was because her mother, as it happened, hadn't known either. Her conception sixteen years ago was just her mother's hazy

recollection of a wild night out ending in Jägerbombs and a one-night stand. Anna had always generously insisted that not knowing her father was OK by her, as she'd reasoned how can you miss what you never had? When the security of her life was eroding rapidly away, however, she'd found herself to be unexpectedly angry about it. A father, she was sure, wouldn't so easily have cast her adrift as Harry was about to do.

Her bedroom, her own space, her own place since they'd moved in with Harry six years ago, had suddenly become frighteningly temporary. She'd imagined what her room might look like when it was empty of all her belongings. Empty of everything except for the huge mural she'd painted on the opposite wall. Harry had once given her *carte blanche* to express herself artistically in whatever way she chose and as a result the entire wall had been taken up by a huge silhouette of herself sitting in the crescent of a silver moon, holding the string of a bright red kite. She'd painted the ceiling black and pressed glow-in-the-dark stars and planets into the black-paint sky until her bedroom transformed into a beautiful, private universe. Her universe. That night though, Anna had stared at her painting for a very long time until, sleepy with silent tears, she'd imagined herself letting go of the bright red kite and tumbling from her moon into a dark unknown abyss below.

ALGERNON

Algernon wasn't sure how he felt about the telephone call. He'd spent years inside a tidy box created by his own mind. It was neither awful nor lovely in there. It was just where he happened to be. Each day was like the last, governed by

a need to wash, to dress, to eat and to feed Cat, who he'd never invited to live with him in the first place and yet had sauntered in unannounced three years prior making himself a permanent guest.

Each day Algernon walked to the shop for his newspaper, listened to the news on the radio, then made a valiant attempt at completing *The Times* crossword which, to his intense but private shame, he managed less often these days. He would always have an afternoon nap and later, after a supper prepared at exactly 5.30pm, he would watch the news probably followed by a detective series on television. Each activity was marked or perhaps dictated by the carriage clock on his mantelpiece and that was just the way it was. If he were to hold a conversation with himself, Algernon might admit to having been more than skilled in the art of creating tidy boxes in which to place the various stages of his life. He was unlikely, however, to hold a conversation with himself. He was unlikely to hold a conversation with anyone, being a man of so few words as he was.

Until the phone call, Algernon had been pretty sure that each tomorrow would be like each of his todays and the yesterdays before that until he passed off this mortal coil. Now, however, he found that he was to be expecting guests and his head jangled with anticipation over the very thought of them coming to stay in his house.

His house, as it happened, was rather unusual for the area in which he lived. It had two small bedrooms upstairs, one double, one single and two very large rooms downstairs plus a small kitchen. There were three chairs in the small kitchen, six chairs around the dining room table and two armchairs in the sitting room either side of the chimney breast where

an electric bar fire burned a patch of red lace on his legs on cold winter evenings. Nothing had changed in his house since Evie had died and Helene had left, except for the fact that some time back he'd got rid of a large old sofa, which was surplus to requirements, and that Cat had knocked an ornament off the mantelpiece causing it to break upon the hearth. The ornament, a porcelain basket brimming with tiny porcelain flowers had been carefully repaired by Algernon, the fine lines of glue hardly visible, a wad of Blu-Tack now holding it securely back in place. The rest of the house was orderly to the point of fastidiousness and that was how he wished it to stay.

ANNA

When, during the original row with Harry, Helene had complained that she couldn't afford to rent a flat in the area, Anna hadn't appreciated the true extent as to exactly what that would mean in terms of her own situation. Not only did it mean that she had to leave her private painted universe behind in her bedroom, it meant she would also have to leave her school, her city and all her friends. The stability of her life cruelly unravelled around her, the shreds of it catching on the wind, flying too wildly for her to gather back in.

In the end Harry had given them five weeks to sort out somewhere to live, an offer he'd believed to be entirely generous yet in reality had simply not been long enough for them to find any kind of suitable alternative. As a result, Anna now sat in the passenger seat of her mother's car, full to the brim with their belongings, while she attempted to prepare

herself for a three-hundred-mile journey to another life. Those five weeks had been way too brief and too painfully precious, each event with her friends ultimately becoming her last. The last time they went to the cinema together, the last time they hung out in the park or at each other's houses and then, finally, the last time they hugged each other goodbye. The familiarity of her city, its buildings, houses, parks and shopping centres were sadly soon to be far behind her.

Now, the only tangible friend in Anna's world, if you could call it that, was Gary, her cactus, whose pot she now clutched on her lap for want of any other space in the car to put him. Harry had given him to her as a leaving present, along with a soft blue blanket and an extensive collection of make-up. He'd presented the blanket first, the heavy hint of apology in his eyes. 'Your comfort blanket. Soft as an evening cloud,' he'd said, wrapping it round her shoulders, while her mother had tutted audibly and rolled her eyes.

Next, from behind the sofa, he'd produced a large cactus. 'I got you this because I know they're a *thing* these days. It's a fine example of a *Parodia magnifica*... the hot air balloon of cacti.' He'd proudly held it towards her and she'd reached for it, causing the blanket to slide off her shoulders into a heap on the floor. The cactus, planted in a glazed pot of similar green, was made up of segments, like a chocolate orange, each segment edged with prickles. Anna had decided instantly that it was a botanical representation of the way she felt, and she'd reached to touch it with the pad of her index finger. Harry had picked the blanket up from the floor where it had landed and proceeded to fold it again. 'Careful of the spines though, sweetheart – they cause irritation if they come into contact with you.'

'Then we understand each other,' Anna had replied.

'These things are just gift-wrapped sticking plasters,' Helene had objected. 'They're hardly going to make up for you wrecking her entire life.'

'I shall call him Gary,' Anna had said.

Harry hadn't reacted to Helene but had calmly placed the blanket on the sofa. 'Gary it is then... and now put him down for the moment, because here...' He'd beamed at Anna while Helene had given another exaggerated eye roll, showing the whites of her eyes for so long that Anna had thought they might have got stuck there '... I have the pièce de résistance of sticking plasters.' He'd winked at Anna and reaching behind the sofa again, had brought out a large package wrapped in beautiful multicoloured paper, tied with a multicoloured ribbon.

Offering no reaction to his conspiratorial wink Anna had ripped open the package without the ceremony he may have hoped for. As the paper dropped to the floor, she'd found herself trying hard not to show her genuine pleasure at what she'd held in her hands. Inside a beautiful silver case were palettes and pots of make-up plus an array of brushes, all from a particular brand that she knew was massively expensive. There was also a box of the special body-art pens she'd coveted for a very long time having had to resort to biro or felt pen to create delicate artwork on her skin. She'd stared silently at her wonderful gift while both love and anger had raged inside her. Placing a hand on each of her shoulders Harry had stooped to look her in the eye, speaking softly as he did so. 'I got you this last gift so that you can truly express how very unique you are.'

'You can't be *very* unique. You're either unique or you aren't,' Helene sniped. She'd then left the room in a display

of annoyance, leaving Harry to hug Anna tightly for the very last time.

'Go be who *you* are,' he'd urged as he rested his chin on the top of her head. During that hug she'd felt the last seconds of life with Harry melt away making her push the flats of her hands against him, as she fought the urge to beat his chest with her fists.

'Stop being so *nice* when I want to hate you!' she'd said, her words gurgling through the tears in her throat. He was not her father, he was just her mother's ex-boyfriend but she'd known, in that moment, she had loved him all the same.

ALGERNON

Algernon knew he hadn't been an ideal father in the eyes of his small family. In fact, he knew with certainty that his view of parenthood had been at total loggerheads with theirs and so, unable to find a mutually agreeable line of action for raising a child in a modern era, he'd admitted defeat. When Helene was just a young child, he'd willingly handed the primary role of raising her over to Evie and breathed an inner sigh of relief. He only had one template for raising a child and that was the one his parents had used on him, a template that consisted of strict boundaries and rigid rules that Algernon had been unable to transgress.

Evie and Helene were able to see life in an entirely different way from anything he was used to. They had always skipped and twirled their way through each day as if nothing he'd been taught in his own upbringing could be of any consequence to them. Life to them was something light and frivolous, which

should not be taken too seriously. As a result of his letting go of the parenting strings, however, he had subsequently spent many of Helene's formative years believing that his stricter ideas of raising a child may have been sadly correct. Life, as it happened, did have consequences. Helene, whose mind was as sharp as anyone's, if not sharper as far as he was concerned, did not excel at school. She gave up learning the piano, much to his disappointment, and Evie had simply let her.

'If she doesn't get on with it, Algernon, she shouldn't be forced into it,' Evie had said. 'Our child isn't a natural musician,' she'd added, when after the piano the idea of learning the violin was enthusiastically embraced by Helene yet abandoned after only a few short weeks. Algernon had not been quite so disappointed about his daughter's disregard for the violin as he had over the piano, having suffered many an evening listening to a sound akin to that of a cat being strangled. 'She hates long-distance running... as did I,' Evie had defended when Helene was reported by the school to be strolling in at the last and having a leisurely chat with the other stragglers as she did so. 'She's at *that* age,' Evie indulged, when Helene was discovered playing truant in town.

So it went on. Helene drifted and weaved her way uncertainly across the years, through university, in and out of multiple jobs, plunging headfirst into various relationships, leaving home and always returning again when everything went awry. Then sixteen years ago Helene had delivered her final crushing blow as she stood in front of himself and Evie and announced the fact that she was pregnant. No husband, no boyfriend, no future. Algernon had thrown up his arms in dismay as years of suppressed frustration bubbled over and released itself, gushing out from inside with such force as a

whale spouts water. Evie had cried, Helene had cried, and Algernon had ranted until the air that circled around inside the little house grew heavy with wasted opportunities.

ANNA

As they now reversed out of the drive for the last time, the air cloudy and blue with the early dawn light, Anna stared up at the house they were leaving behind. *Go be who you are*, Harry had said. She supposed that was what he had done. He'd gone to be who he wanted to be and although she knew she shouldn't blame him for that she couldn't forgive him for it either. He was on solid ground while she and her mother now trod a precariously flimsy path.

Harry had most probably heard them leave yet he hadn't come to the door, or even to an upstairs window. His goodbyes belonged to yesterday; *he* belonged to yesterday. Her family had been built on straw, blown too easily away in a single breeze. *And then there were two*, she thought sadly. In her head she imagined getting her mother to stop the car so that she could run back to Harry and demand of him, *How can you be who you are when you don't even know where you're going?*

ALGERNON

Algernon searched his mind for anything in there that might be out of place, anything that might jar or jangle his thought processes more than they already were. The last five weeks had been difficult to say the least and he was exhausted by all

the goings-on and the upheaval of his usual routine. Having discovered, at the age of seven, that it was possible to put lids on things that were difficult to tackle, he now found himself facing another such situation. He'd always been rather proud of himself for discovering and honing his mental survival tactic and was not pleased when Evie had challenged him, in the early days of their relationship, saying that his ability to distance himself from sensitive matters wasn't at all healthy. She'd told him that it was as if he looked at life through his fingers. The organisation of his mind was the only matter in which Evie had trespassed and Algernon made it sternly clear to her that his psychological make-up would never be a subject for discussion.

Five weeks ago, however, the lid on the box he'd long since put his daughter in had come off and without Evie to deal with it, he knew he had to cope alone. Having survived into his nineties in his own way Algernon knew that he wasn't at all skilled at revisiting his past.

ANNA

Anna had been silent for most of the journey, allowing the humming of the car on the seemingly endless motorways to lull her into a temporary sense of calm. She'd rammed her earphones in almost as soon as they set off, her playlist filling her mind, the rhythmical beat and story behind the lyrics nursing the ache of sadness inside her. Her phone had vibrated with messages first thing that morning, her entire friendship group offering wishes and sympathies. As the journey grew longer, she'd imagined them disappearing from

view, like people on films who stand on the shore waving as the ship carrying their loved ones sails over the horizon. Everyone was making promises to keep in touch, to come for the weekend or spend holidays together but she'd feared that such promises were all too desperately fragile, the distance too great to make them a reality.

After a brief breakfast stop and then a horribly uncomfortable sleep where the strap of the seatbelt carved a deep groove into her cheek, she stirred and stretched, pausing her playlist when a sign ahead of them told her they were near their destination. A flock of jitters took flight in her chest, the tiny wings of them brushing against her ribs. 'That sign says we're only ten miles away.' She pulled out her earphones and looked at the scenery that belonged to their new destination. Scenery that seemed far too wide and sparse and nothing like the dense urban skyline of home. She'd felt at home in the city, hugged by its vibrancy and by the closeness of everything. Here the scanty landscape that stretched endlessly before her made her feel vulnerable and exposed.

'Yes,' Helene answered, her tone one of glum resignation as they broke away from the motorway and turned left off a roundabout.

'Tell me he doesn't live right in the middle of all this nothing?' Anna moodily took in the tedious canvas of farm fields, which were now the only things that lay between them and their destination.

'He lives in a very small town... only a few shops, no leisure centre... part-time cinema, that kind of thing. On the plus side, it's surrounded by all this beautiful *nothing* rather than the urban jungle we're used to.'

'Boring then!' Anna said, feeling quietly irked that her own

appreciation of city life should be so readily dismissed. She didn't want a new life, the old one in the urban jungle had been just fine.

'It will be what you make it,' Helene replied. 'Try to approach this with a positive attitude.'

'Like you are?' Anna managed to surprise even herself with the barely veiled aggression that had suddenly issued forth from her mouth. The meltdown Helene had displayed back at home when she'd finally admitted there were no options left to them other than to contact her father, Anna's grandfather, was still a frighteningly vivid memory.

'I've had to go cap-in-bloody-hand back to my dad at my age and it's all *your* shitting fault!' Helene had spat each word accusingly, jabbing the phone angrily in Harry's direction as he put on his coat and picked up his keys to make his hasty escape. Harry hated confrontation. Stunned at what she was hearing Anna had turned from his apologetic expression to her mother's angry red face.

'Your *dad*?' Anna had been extremely surprised to hear that her mother had contacted the grandfather she'd never seen. 'I thought we... I wasn't to have anything to do with him?'

'You weren't. You will now though, thanks to *him*.' Helene had jabbed the phone in Harry's direction again as he quietly shut the door behind himself.

'But... you said you fell out when you got pregnant with me... *because* you got pregnant with me. You said he didn't want to know about me...' Anna's heart had raced at what her mother was suggesting and she'd begun to feel slightly nauseous at the idea of it.

'I did say that, yes.' Helene had placed the phone quietly

down on the table and sighed, looking back at her daughter with a look of sad defeat clear upon her face. 'But we have no option I'm afraid.'

'And he's *suddenly* all right with this, is he?' Anna had asked.

'Well, it's hard to tell from the limited conversation we had but I'd say he sounds exactly the same as he always did about everything.' Helene's answer had been ambiguous and Anna had felt confused.

'Which is?' She'd waited expectantly, watching a downturned smile curl its way towards Helene's chin.

'Cold!' Hardly had the word left her lips though, when Helene had raised her eyebrows, her bitter defeat suddenly switching to decided positivity. 'But, amazingly, he agreed that we could *both* move in with him until we can find a more suitable alternative, so that's good, isn't it?'

'Whoopee,' Anna had said flatly. 'When do we go... I can hardly wait?'

The car slowed at another roundabout where they waited for a gap in the traffic and Anna found that, now they were so close, she was becoming even more agitated by the uncertainty of new beginnings and the stirrings of hidden truths. Suddenly, the few old family photos her mother had dug out showing a severe-looking old man whose moustache dominated his face, a pleasant-looking grandmother and Helene looking much younger, wasn't enough. The town where he lived and the age that he was, wasn't enough. 'I want to know more about him, this man who wasn't interested in his own grandchild.' Anna turned to her mother, noticing a deep crease appearing on her

brow as she scanned the road for an opportunity to pull out. Helene waited for a van to pass then put her foot down on the accelerator and pulled out, indicating to take the first exit.

'He's old and he's called Algernon,' she replied unhelpfully, checking her rear-view mirror.

'I know that already. If anyone asked me what my mum was like I'd have plenty more to tell them than you're old and you're called Helene.' Anna's frustration was palpable, caught as she was in the tangled yarn of her own family history.

'*H.*' Her mother glanced at her briefly before looking again at the road ahead. 'The only person who ever called me Helene was my dad. So, if you're going to tell anyone about me you can tell them I'm called *H.*'

'OK, I'll tell them you're old and you're called "H". And what do I call Algernon? Shall I call him A or Alg?' Anna watched how the expression on her mother's face transformed to one of horror and it made her grin.

'Good God no you can't do that! He'd go mad. You'll have to call him Grandfather or Grandad I suppose... to be honest I don't know what you should call him when he was so unreasonably opinionated about how you came into the world... but definitely don't call him "A". He's got a limited sense of humour and it will really rattle his cage.'

'I was joking.' Anna sighed, the grin sliding from her lips.

'We're doing all right for time. I told him we'd be there for half past eleven and I think we will and it's just as well because he always was, and probably still is, a stickler for time. We'll only start off by annoying him if we're late.' Helene was becoming noticeably taut, biting down on her lip and nervously checking the clock on the dashboard. Anna turned her attention back to the world outside the car where

a field of bright yellow had appeared in amongst the nothing. Surprised by the unexpected intensity of colour in the middle of all the browns and greens she fantasised about falling into it, absorbing its brightness into the dark and scary crevices of her mind. As they left the field behind, a large cottage appeared to the left, set back off the road, little dark windows peeking out from under the overhang of heavy grey thatch and a gathering of chickens appeared pecking at the ground from behind a muddy tractor and an old caravan blooming with moss. 'Go on then, what else would you tell people about me?' Helene asked.

'I'd tell them *H* wanted to know good things about herself yet couldn't be bothered to tell me much about my own grandfather before forcing me to live with him.' She lifted her phone to her face and took a fed-up-face selfie, posting it forward to her friendship group. The outside world came and went for another two miles before Helene eventually spoke again.

'You're right, I'm not being fair, except... to tell you the truth, I don't know much about him myself. He is not a talker, as you will probably find out, and he rarely shared anything about himself so I can only guess that there isn't much to tell. I only know snippets, really.'

'And the snippets are...?' Anna focused on the world outside the car window while she waited patiently to hear anything that might help her build up a picture of him.

'So... your grandfather was a manager in a big company where he'd worked for absolutely ever. He liked to play chess, do crosswords and other similarly mind-numbingly boring pastimes. He and my mum worked a lot in the garden, rarely went out or on holiday and what they saw in each other I'll

never know. They were different in every way.’ Anna spotted another farmhouse where a collection of old black barns rose like rotten and broken teeth in the land beside it. A child’s swing and slide set was in the garden and a dog roamed aimlessly between the barns. *Apocalyptic*, she thought silently.

‘My mum was a great cook; she was funny and warm and gentle and...’ Anna groaned loudly, stopping her in mid-flow. She was quite sure that her grandma had been wonderful and wished more than anything that it was her and not her grandfather who was going to greet her shortly, but sadly that wasn’t the case.

‘Mum! Can you stick to telling me about the grandparent who’s still alive please... the one I’m going to meet any minute *now*?’

Helene flicked the indicator and waited for traffic to pass so she could turn right. ‘OK, I’m trying! It’s not easy though. It was so hard growing up with my dad and his strict ideals. He was, still is I assume, old-fashioned with his principles. He’s the no-sex-before-marriage type... which is why we ended up arguing about you in the first place. He likes to dress formally; he demands good manners, disapproves of swearing... unless he’s the one doing it, doesn’t drink much other than a good whisky, and on top of all that he probably votes Conservative. Otherwise, he’s basically a monosyllabic old man whose only claim to fame is that he’s managed to make it into his tenth decade without dying.’

‘He sounds awesome and more than old-fashioned... positively prehistoric and... *burger and fries!*’ A giant sign came into view at the side of the road and Anna pointed hopefully at it, feeling a sense of dismay as Helene shook her head and glanced pointedly at the clock on the dashboard again.

'You ate enough crap when we stopped at the services earlier and talking of your grandfather being a "stickler for time" we'll end up being late if we stop again.'

'What does it matter if we're late?' Anna said, wistfully pressing her finger against the glass. 'We're already fifteen years too late.' They looked at each other then, a world of silent reasoning taking place behind their eyes.

'Oh, sod it!' Helene yanked the steering wheel sharply round to the left, pulled into the drive-thru and came to a halt at a speaker system next to a menu board. Then she grinned at Anna as if such a simple action might now be full of mischievous daring. The bag of food, when it came, smelt of grease and salt and borrowed time. 'My parents had me obscenely late in life,' Helene continued, mid-mouthful of a jammy apple pie. 'I apparently surprised them way after they'd given up trying.' She paused momentarily before she took another bite, seemingly juggling private thoughts inside her mind. 'I was their one and only child. The sole focus of their divided attention. My mum indulged me, and my dad... well, he didn't. I grew up in an era he didn't understand. Even though I had my own flat by the time I got pregnant with you, he said I was "a floozy and an embarrassment to the family".' Anna gave a sudden burst of laughter at the thought of her mother being a *floozy*, and Helene joined in. 'I was in my thirties for God's sake. I'd been a floozy and an embarrassment for years before you came along.'

'I don't suppose not having a clue who my dad was helped your cause though?' Anna lifted the top half of her burger bun and placed fries on top of a lifeless slice of waxy cheese.

'Well, yes. It wasn't my finest hour to be honest. My biggest

regret in life though, isn't that I got pregnant with you... never that... but that my mum died before she could meet you. It's all so unfair. Then because my dad was such an arse over it all, he never got to meet you either. He never got to see how lovely you are... *most* of the time.' She pulled a wry smile, trying to inject a little humour into the conversation but, reminded of her grandfather's old-fashioned principles, Anna's sense of humour had slipped back down her throat where it landed in her half-digested food.

'What if he hates me?' she said. 'Nothing has changed since you told him about being pregnant with me. As far as he's concerned I'm still... you know...'

'A bastard?' Helene raised an amused eyebrow.

'Funny. I was going to say illegitimate.' On any other day Anna would have laughed but today was not the day for such jokes. Her mother, serious now, reached out and took her chin gently in her hand, turning her face until they were looking at each other.

'He won't hate you, Anna. You are funny and kind and beautiful. No one could hate you.'

ALGERNON

Algernon fidgeted with his tie, the fancy green one with the red spots, received countless years ago as a Christmas tree present from his daughter. Having anticipated, for most of the morning, the sound of the heavy brass knocker against the peeling varnish of his oak front door, he was unsettled to the point of rattling his dentures. Threaded through the teeth of his comb were several white hairs from his preparatory

grooming and the carriage clock was telling him with steady inevitability that it was nearly time.

At 11.29am he swept a rheumy gaze around his house, at its absolute orderliness, its comfortable familiarity, then he sighed heavily as the ghosts of his past stepped aside to make way for his imminent future. It had been a while since Helene had last phoned to check up on him, the atmosphere between them having been seemingly irreparably fractured. Once, a long time ago, she had brought the child with her and left her still strapped in a child's car seat in the back of her car. He'd caught a glimpse of a woollen hat and a chubby hand but that was all. His own stupidity had lassoed him, holding him back from any kind of moral surrender, tethering him to his own awkwardness. Helene had never repeated this peace offering, and Algernon had never relented.

The anticipated knock, however, did not happen at 11.30am. Nor did it happen at 11.31am or 11.32am and by 11.52am, a full twenty-two minutes after their proposed agreement, Algernon had become quite discombobulated.

ANNA

'I suppose the days of listening to loud music in my bedroom are gone then?' Anna made a cloud of her own breath on the window and drew a sad face in the steam. Helene looked at the time on the car dash, jumped a little and screwed up the apple-pie wrapper before pressing it into the pocket of the car door.

'*Shit*, there's late and then there's really late!' She turned the ignition on and released the handbrake. 'And you don't have a bedroom don't forget. We're sharing my old bedroom

and to be honest I have no idea what we will or won't be able to do.' She shot out of the parking space then immediately stepped on the brake pedal so hard that last-minute loose bits rammed precariously in the car shunted forwards. Gary toppled over, his spines prickling Anna's fingers as she caught him in her lap. 'Imbecile!' Helene gave two angry fingers to the heedless driver who drove past in his van, a double cheeseburger pressed halfway into his open mouth. Anna brushed her lap with the flat of her hand, sending a spray of soil and a stray chip onto the floor of the car.

'Calm down, Mum,' she begged, instinctively feeling how the atmosphere in the car had abruptly changed, swelling until it felt as if it were squeezing her from the outside in. 'Why are you so worried about a few minutes?'

'I'm worried because he's a stickler for time and we've just stolen some of it from him.' Helene roared out of the services car park and down the road while the nerves jiggled in Anna's stomach and churned amongst her food. When a miserable-looking high street came into view, they silently appraised each building that came and went as they drove slowly by: a convenience store, a betting shop, a hairdresser, three charity shops, a greasy spoon café, an Indian restaurant and two pubs.

'It hasn't changed much, the old hometown,' Helene commented, while Anna wished with renewed intensity that Harry had never met Derek and that her world had never changed. *There's nothing here*, she thought, panic and disappointment squeezing her eyes shut, forcing unbidden tears to bead upon her lashes.

'We'll have a new start when I get a job. Just you and me, hey?' Helene, sensitive to her daughter's disappointment, reached out again and squeezed her arm while Anna drew the

pad of her thumb across her eyes, attempting to collect her tears before they fell.

Promise? she wanted to say, but the request was stuck in her throat. Perhaps, she thought hopefully, they *would* get a flat of their own soon and they would leave this awful place, maybe move back closer to home so she could still see her friends. Maybe something of her life could be salvaged from the wreckage of it. She stared out of the window, her heart breaking just a little more until the entire miserable little town had swallowed her all up.

'I know I'm going on about it but I wish you could have met your grandma,' Helene suddenly said. 'She was always the glue in our family, the mediator, able to understand modern progress and embrace change in a way that my dad never could. She could always take a bad situation and make everything right again. I... I miss her... and how *bloody* brilliant she was at holding us all together. Without her my dad and I just broke in two and fell apart...' As she spoke, a crack appeared in her voice and Anna realised then, that she had never fully accounted for her mother's own feelings, so carried away was she with her own. 'I have to confess, I'm also pretty scared about this.' Anna reached her own hand out and placed it briefly on the steering wheel over the top of her mother's hand. 'All these years later, we've got to somehow find a way to live together again... without her.' Helene's voice was barely a whisper.

'It will be OK, Mum,' Anna said, with a false kind of cheer.

'We will *make* it OK,' Helene replied, with an identical false cheer as she turned the car down a no-through road lined on each edge with modern houses and neat front gardens. 'Oh *blimey*, this is all new!' She gasped and turned her head

from left to right as she drove slowly down the road, her mouth gaping open in the process. 'They've gone and built an entire new development around our house. This all used to be grassland... I can hardly believe it. He would have absolutely hated this happening all around him, poor old sod!' Anna's attention, however, was diverted by the fact that they were aiming for the driveway of a very strange old house, totally out of keeping with every other house in the road.

'Tell me it's not that one?' she said, pointing at it, a further wave of dismay threatening to overwhelm her.

'It certainly is. Brace yourself – we're here. My old home.' Helene drove up the drop kerb and halted the car in front of a narrow old garage with wooden doors badly in need of a lick of paint. She sucked at the air, making rapid breaths as if she was about to give birth and appraised the upstairs section of the house where two small windows with scalloped gables poked their way out of the roof. 'I told you didn't I... that it's crazy small upstairs and we'll have to sleep in my old bedroom together because there's only the two bedrooms?'

'Yes, you said...'
Anna wrinkled her brow at how tiny the upstairs windows were compared to the big windows downstairs. The house had wide concrete steps leading up to a large and solid wooden door, which was also in need of a lick of paint, and a huge chimney graced the roof at the side. Right at the top, balanced upon the ridge, perched a little bell tower sporting a rusty weathervane that was pointing east. 'What *is* this place?' she asked, nervously grasping Gary's pot and crinkling her nose as they climbed the steps. She took a photo and sent it to her friends with the caption: *Ultra cute or ultra creepy?* The replies came back from all her friends confirming that *ultra creepy* had won the vote.

'I was born up there.' Helene stood with her face tilted upwards, her words floating nostalgically upon her breath before her gaze ran slowly over the house she once knew so well. 'Oh look, here are the pots my mum planted bulbs in every year... They're empty.' She sighed sadly as they both turned their attention to a series of big old pots lining the brickwork next to the steps. 'They were always full of something welcoming and pretty... winter pansies, daffodils, sometimes bright red begonias... but now...'

She looked so crestfallen that Anna felt unable to think of a single thing to say. The lifeless terracotta husks stood devoid of anything other than dust and memories.

'My mum and dad bought this as their first house when they got married and they loved it so much they never moved out.' She reached towards a heavy brass knocker, now tarnished and dull, which hung in the centre of the large front door, then she banged it hard three times and grimaced as if she were summoning the grim reaper. 'Here we go...'

They both stood in silence, shuffling from foot to foot until after a full two minutes Helene reached for the knocker and banged it three times again. 'Fuck's sake. What's taking him so long?' She stooped in order to peer through the letterbox but the sound of a bolt being opened, just as her hand touched the letterbox flap, caused both of them to stand immediately to attention like two frightened hare.

ALGERNON

Algernon opened the front door, appraising his guests swiftly and wordlessly. It had taken him a goodly while to navigate

the distance between his chair and the front door and the effort of it caused him to puff. The preparations required for this moment had taxed him and his fingers trembled as they clung to his walking stick. He'd never felt more tired.

Creased at the corners by an enormous and perfectly forced smile, once familiar turquoise eyes looked back at him. He pushed down on his walking stick in an effort to stand as tall as when his daughter had last seen him but the spongy bit between his vertebrae had let him down several years back. Even standing as upright as his arthritic body would allow, he was reduced forever by a good few inches in stature. Three generations of Maybury, all hurtling through life's inevitable stages, now stood at exactly the same height.

'Dad,' the forced smile said.

'Helene,' Algernon replied, giving a single cursory nod of his head.

'This is Anna. My daughter... your granddaughter.' Algernon detected the slight defiant tilt of his daughter's chin that he knew so well, before they both turned their heads in the direction of the child who stood beside her on his doorstep. The last time they were all in such close proximity the child was nothing more than a defiant announcement, a jellybean of a thing tucked in his daughter's swollen belly. Now, sixteen years after the very argument that set them apart, all fatherless and basically destitute, the end product of his daughter's swollen belly was now standing on his doorstep carrying a cactus.

He peered at the child with unashamed scrutiny. Young brown eyes confronted him, nervously assessing him back with equally cautious suspicion and, Algernon thought, the same defiant tilt to her chin. The child was dressed as if she'd

chosen her clothes at a blindfold charity sale and her feet, in a pair of chunky lace-up ankle boots, seemed enormous at the end of her legs. Despite that, he silently caught his own breath as the image of Evie appeared to linger upon her face. Same high curve to the cheek, same upturned tip to her slender nose.

Algernon turned and shuffled back inside, leaving the front door open behind him. He used to have an opinion but now no longer knew what it was his business to say, so took it upon himself to say absolutely nothing. The values implicit in his very being had long ago pooled into an oily puddle at his feet.