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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Mystery of Mercy Close**

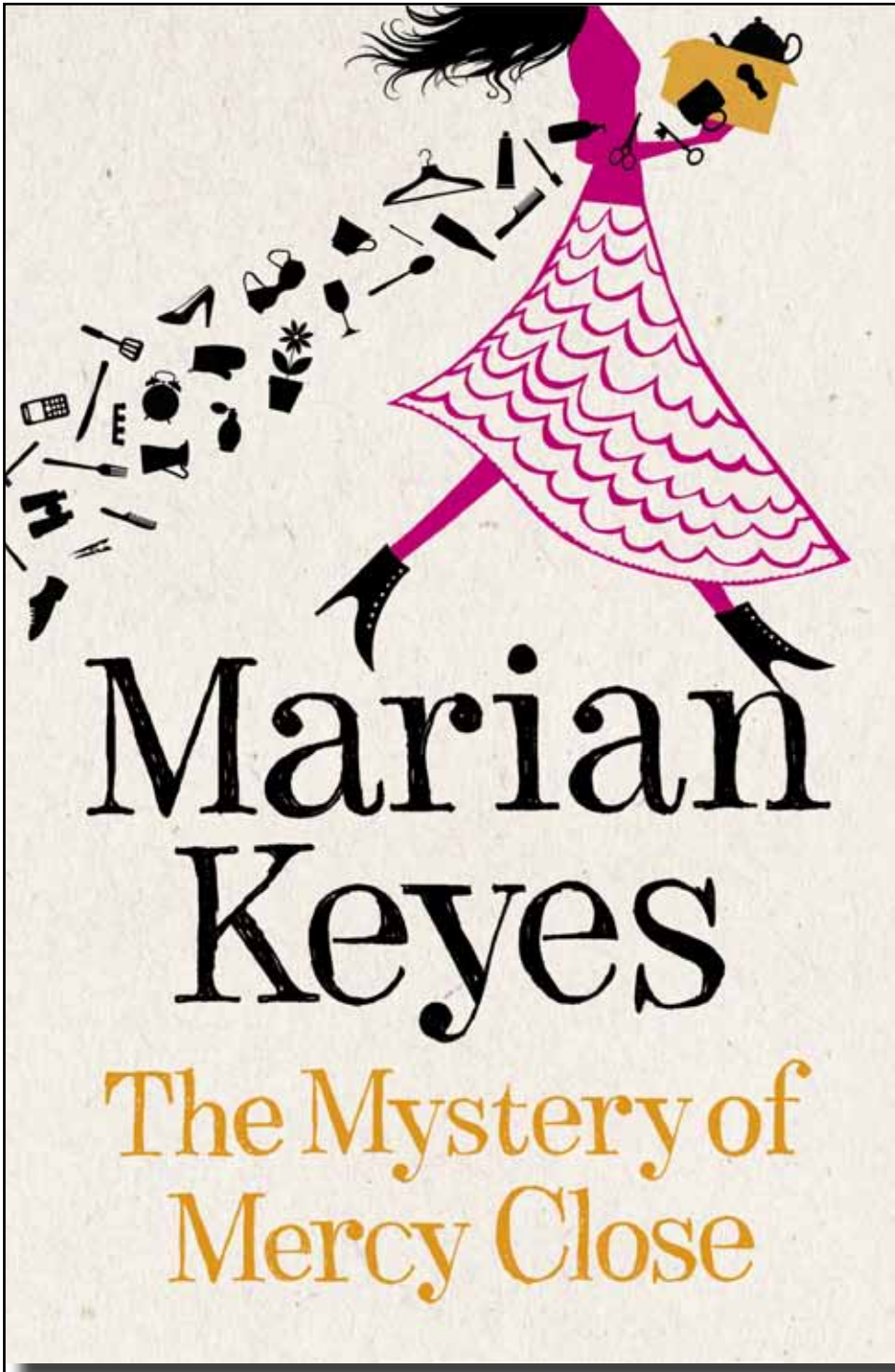
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Published by Michael Joseph Ltd

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by  
Marian Keyes

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I wouldn't mind – I mean, this is the sheer irony of the thing – but I'm the only person I know who *doesn't* think it would be delicious to go into 'someplace' for 'a rest'. You'd want to hear my sister Claire going on about it, as if waking up one morning and finding herself in a mental hospital would be the most delightful experience imaginable.

'I've a great idea,' she declared to her friend, Judy. 'Let's have our nervous breakdowns at the same time.'

'Brilliant!' Judy said.

'We'll get a double room. It'll be gorgeous.'

'Paint me a picture.'

'Weeeell. Kind people ... soft, welcoming hands ... whispering voices ... white bed-linen, white sofas, white orchids, everything white ...'

'Like in heaven,' Judy said.

'Just like in heaven!'

Not just like in heaven! I opened my mouth to protest, but there was no stopping them.

'... the sound of tinkling water ...'

'... the smell of jasmine ...'

'... a clock ticking in the near distance ...'

'... the plangent chime of a bell ...'

'... and us lying in bed off our heads on Xanax ...'

'... dreamily gazing at dust motes ...'

'... or reading *Grazia* ...'

'... or buying Magnum Golds from the man who goes from ward to ward selling ice cream ...'

But there would be no man selling Magnum Golds. Or any of the other nice things either.

‘A wise voice will say –’ Judy paused for effect: “‘Lay down your burdens, Judy.’”

‘And some lovely wafty nurse will cancel all our appointments,’ Claire said. ‘She’ll tell everyone to leave us alone. She’ll tell all the ungrateful bastards that we’re having a nervous breakdown and it was their fault and they’ll have to be a lot nicer to us if we ever come out again.’

Both Claire and Judy had savagely busy lives – kids, dogs, husbands, jobs and an onerous, time-consuming dedication to looking ten years younger than their actual age. They were perpetually whizzing around in people carriers, dropping sons to rugby practice, picking daughters up from the dentist, racing across town to get to a meeting. Multitasking was an art form for them – they used the dead seconds stuck at traffic lights to rub their calves with fake-tan wipes, they answered emails from their seat at the cinema and they baked red velvet cupcakes at midnight while simultaneously being mocked by their teenage daughters as ‘a pitiful fat old cow’. Not a moment was wasted.

‘They’ll give us Xanax.’ Claire was back in her reverie.

‘Oh lovvvvely.’

‘As much as we want. The second the bliss starts to wear off, we’ll ring a bell and a nurse will come and give us a top-up.’

‘We’ll never have to get dressed. Every morning they’ll bring us new cotton pyjamas, brand new, out of the packet. And we’ll sleep sixteen hours a day.’

‘Oh sleep . . .’

‘It’ll be like being wrapped up in a big marshmallow cocoon; we’ll feel all floaty and happy and dreamy . . .’

It was time to point out the one big nasty flaw in their delicious vision. ‘But you’d be in a psychiatric hospital.’

Both Claire and Judy looked wildly startled.

Eventually Claire said, ‘I’m not talking about a psychiatric hospital. Just a place you’d go for . . . a rest.’

‘The place people go for “a rest” *is* a psychiatric hospital.’ They fell silent. Judy chewed her bottom lip. They were obviously thinking about this.

‘What did you think it was?’ I asked.

‘Well . . . sort of like a spa,’ Claire said. ‘With, you know . . . prescription drugs.’

‘They have mad people in there,’ I said. ‘Proper mad people. Ill people.’

More silence followed, then Claire looked up at me, her face bright red. ‘*God*, Helen,’ she exclaimed. ‘You’re such a cow. Can’t you ever let anyone have anything nice?’

Thursday

# I

I was thinking about food. Stuck in traffic, it's what I do. What any normal person does, of course, but now that I thought about it, I hadn't had anything to eat since seven o'clock this morning, about ten hours ago. A Laddz song came on the radio for the second time that day – how about that for bad luck? – and as the maudlin syrupy harmonies filled the car I had a brief but powerful urge to drive into a pole.

There was a petrol station coming up on the left, the red sign of refreshment hanging invitingly in the sky. I could extricate myself from this gridlock and go in and buy a doughnut. But the doughnuts they sold in those places were as tasteless as the sponges you find at the bottom of the ocean; I'd be better off just washing myself with one. Besides, a swarm of huge black vultures was circling over the petrol pumps and they were kind of putting me off. No, I decided, I'd hang on and –

Wait a minute! *Vultures?*

In a city?

At a petrol station?

I took a second look and they weren't vultures. Just seagulls. Ordinary Irish seagulls.

Then I thought: Ah no, not again.

Fifteen minutes later I pulled up outside my parents' house, took a moment to gather myself, then started rummaging for a key to let myself in. They'd tried to make me give it back when I moved out three years ago but – thinking strategically – I'd hung on to it. Mum had made noises about changing



the locks but seeing as she and Dad took eight years to decide to buy a yellow bucket, what were the chances that they'd manage something as complicated as getting a new lock?

I found them in the kitchen, sitting at the table drinking tea and eating cake. Old people. What a great life they had. Even those who don't do t'ai chi. (Which I'll get to.)

They looked up and stared at me with barely concealed resentment.

'I've news,' I said.

Mum found her voice. 'What are you doing here?'

'I live here.'

'You don't. We got rid of you. We painted your room. We've never been happier.'

'I said I've news. That's my news. I live here.'

The fear was starting to creep into her face now. 'You have your own place.' She was blustering but she was losing conviction. After all, she must have been expecting this.

'I don't,' I said. 'Not as of this morning. I've nowhere to live.'

'The mortgage people?' She was ashen. (Beneath her regulation-issue Irish-Mammy orange foundation.)

'What's going on?' Dad was deaf. Also frequently confused. It was hard to know which disability was in the driving seat at any particular time.

'She didn't pay her MORTGAGE,' Mum said, into his good ear. 'Her flat's been RECLAIMED.'

'I couldn't *afford* to pay the mortgage. You're making it sound like it's my fault. Anyway, it's more complicated than that.'

'You have a boyfriend,' Mum said hopefully. 'Can't you live with him?'

'You've changed your tune, you rampant Catholic.'

'We have to keep up with the times.'

I shook my head. 'I can't move in with Artie. His kids won't let me.' Not exactly. Only Bruno. He absolutely hated

me but Iona was pleasant enough and Bella positively adored me. 'You're my parents. Unconditional love, might I remind you. My stuff is in the car.'

'What! All of it?'

'No.' I'd spent the day with two cash-in-hand blokes. The last few sticks of furniture I owned were now stashed in a massive self-storage place out past the airport, waiting for the good times to come again. 'Just my clothes and work stuff.' Quite a lot of work stuff, actually, seeing as I'd had to let my office go over a year ago. And quite a lot of clothes too, even though I'd thrown out tons and tons while I'd been packing.

'But when will it end?' Mum said querulously. 'When do we get our golden years?'

'Never.' Dad spoke with sudden confidence. 'She's part of a syndrome. Generation Boomerang. Adult children coming back to live in the family home. I read about it in *Grazia*.'

There was no disagreeing with *Grazia*.

'You can stay for a few days,' Mum conceded. 'But be warned. We might want to sell this house and go on a Caribbean cruise.'

Property prices being as low as they were, the sale of this house probably wouldn't fetch enough money to send them on a cruise of the Aran Islands. But, as I made my way out to the car to start lugging in my boxes of stuff, I decided not to rub it in. After all, they were giving me a roof over my head.

'What time is dinner?' I wasn't hungry but I wanted to know the drill.

'Dinner?'

There was no dinner.

'We don't really bother any more,' Mum confessed. 'Not now it's just the two of us.'

This was distressing news. I was feeling bad enough, without

my parents suddenly behaving like they were in death's waiting room. 'But what do you eat?'

They looked at each other in surprise, then at the cake on the table. 'Well . . . cake, I suppose.'

Back in the day this arrangement couldn't have suited me better – all through my childhood my four sisters and I considered it a high-risk activity to eat anything that Mum had cooked – but I wasn't myself.

'So what time is cake?'

'Whatever time you like.'

That wouldn't do. 'I need a time.'

'Seven, then.'

'Okay. Listen . . . I saw a swarm of vultures over the petrol station.'

Mum tightened her lips.

'There are no vultures in Ireland,' Dad said. 'Saint Patrick drove them out.'

'He's right,' Mum said forcefully. 'You didn't see any vultures.'

'But –' I stopped. What was the point? I opened my mouth to suck in some air.

'What are you doing?' Mum sounded alarmed.

'I'm . . .' What was I doing? 'I'm trying to breathe. My chest is stuck. There isn't enough room to let the air in.'

'Of course there's room. Breathing is the most natural thing in the world.'

'I think my ribs have shrunk. You know the way your bones shrink when you get old.'

'You're only thirty-three. Wait till you get to my age and then you'll know all about shrunken bones.'

Even though I didn't know what age Mum was – she lied about it constantly and elaborately, sometimes making reference to the vital part she played in the 1916 Rising ('I helped type up the Declaration of Independence for young Padraig to read on the steps of the GPO'), other times waxing lyrical

on the teenage years she spent jiving to ‘The Hucklebuck’ the time Elvis came to Ireland (Elvis never came to Ireland and never sang ‘The Hucklebuck’, but if you try telling her that, she just gets worse, insisting that Elvis made a secret visit on his way to Germany and that he sang ‘The Hucklebuck’ specifically because she asked him to) – she seemed bigger and more robust than ever.

‘Catch your breath there, come on, come on, anyone can do it,’ she urged. ‘A small child can do it. So what are you doing this evening? After your . . . cake? Will we watch telly? We’ve got twenty-nine episodes of *Come Dine With Me* recorded.’

‘Ah . . .’ I didn’t want to watch *Come Dine With Me*. Normally I watched at least two shows a day, but suddenly I was sick of it.

I had an open invitation to Artie’s. His kids would be there tonight and I wasn’t sure I had the strength for talking to them; also their presence interfered with my full and free sexual access to him. But he’d been working in Belfast all week and I’d . . . yes, spit it out, might as well admit it . . . I’d missed him.

‘I’ll probably go to Artie’s,’ I said.

Mum lit up. ‘Can I come?’

‘Of course you can’t! I’ve warned you!’

Mum had a thing for Artie’s house. You’ve probably seen the type, if you read interiors magazines. From the outside it looks like a salt-of-the-earth working-class cottage, crouched right on the pavement, doffing its cap and knowing its place. The slate roof is crooked and the front door is so low that the only person who could sail through with full confidence that they wouldn’t crack their skull would be a certified midget.

But when you actually get into the house you find that someone has knocked off the entire back wall and replaced it with a glassy futuristic wonderland of floating staircases and suspended bird’s-nest bedrooms and faraway skylights.

Mum had been there only once, by accident – I had warned her not to get out of the car but she had blatantly disobeyed me – and it had made such a big impression on her that she had caused me considerable embarrassment. I would not permit it to happen again.

‘All right, I won’t come,’ she said. ‘But I’ve a favour to ask.’  
‘What?’

‘Would you come to the Laddz reunion concert with me?’

‘Are you out of your mind?’

‘Out of *my* mind? You’re a fine one to talk, you and your vultures.’

Midgety working-class cottages are all well and good except that they don't tend to have handy underground parking lots – it took me longer to find a parking place than it had taken to drive the three kilometres to Artie's. Eventually I edged my Fiat 500 (black with black interiors) between two ginormous SUVs then let myself into the heavenly perspex cocoon-world. I had my own key – it was a mere six weeks since Artie and I had done the ceremonious exchange. He'd given me a key to his place; I'd given him a key to my place. Because back then I'd had a place.

Dazzled by the June evening sunlight I blindly followed the sound of voices through the house and down the magic, free-floating steps, to the deck, where a cluster of good-looking, fair-haired people were gathered around, doing – of all wholesome things – a jigsaw puzzle. Artie, my beautiful Viking, Artie. And Iona and Bruno and Bella, his beautiful children. And Vonnie, his beautiful ex-wife. Sitting on the boards next to Artie, she was, her skinny brown shoulder bumping up against his big broad one.

I hadn't been expecting to see her, but she lived nearby and often dropped in, usually with her partner, Steffan, in tow.

She was the first one to notice me. 'Helen!' she exclaimed with great warmth.

A chorus of greetings and flashbulb smiles reached out for me and I was drawn down into a sea of welcoming arms, to be kissed by everyone. A cordial family, the Devlins. Only Bruno withheld and he needn't think I hadn't noticed; I kept a mental tally of the many, many times he'd slighted me. Nothing escaped me. We all have our gifts.

Bella, head-to-toe pink and reeking of cherry bubblegum, was thrilled by my arrival. ‘Helen, Helen.’ She flung herself at me. ‘Dad didn’t say you were coming. Can I do your hair?’

‘Bella, give Helen a moment,’ Artie said.

Aged nine and of a loving disposition, Bella was the youngest and weakest member of the group. Nevertheless it would be foolhardy to alienate her. But first I had business to attend to. I gazed at the region where Vonnie’s upper arm met Artie’s. ‘Move away,’ I said. ‘You’re too close to him.’

‘She’s his wife.’ Bruno’s ladyboy cheekbones blazed indignant colour . . . was he wearing *blusher*?

‘*Ex-wife*,’ I said. ‘And I’m his girlfriend. He’s mine now.’ Quickly and insincerely I added, ‘Hahaha.’ (So that if anyone ever criticized me for selfishness and immaturity and said, ‘What about poor Bruno?’ I could always reply, ‘God’s sake, it was a *joke*. He has to learn to take a *joke*.’)

‘In fact Artie was leaning against *me*,’ Vonnie said.

‘He wasn’t.’ Tonight I was quite wearied by this game that I always had to play with Vonnie. I could hardly summon the words to press on with the charade. ‘You’re always at him. But give it up, Vonnie. He’s mad about me.’

‘Ah, fair enough.’ Good-naturedly Vonnie shifted along the deck, putting lots of space between herself and Artie.

It wasn’t my way but I couldn’t help but like her.

And what about Artie in all of this? Taking a highly focused interest in the lower-side, left-hand corner of the jigsaw, that’s what. At the best of times he had a touch of the Strong Silents about him, but whenever Vonnie and I started our alpha-female jostling, he had learned – on my instructions – to absent himself entirely.

In the beginning he’d tried to protect me from her but I was mortally offended. ‘It’s as if,’ I’d said, ‘you’re saying that she’s scarier than me.’

Actually, it was thirteen-year-old Bruno who was the real

problem. He was bitchier than the most spiteful girl, and yes, I knew he had good reason – his parents had split up when he was at the tender age of nine and now he was an adolescent in the grip of anger hormones, which he expressed by dressing in fascist chic, in form-fitting black shirts, narrow-cut black pants tucked into shiny black knee boots, and with very, very blond hair, tightly cut, except for a big sweeping eighties fringe. Also he wore mascara and it looked like he'd started on the blusher.

'Well!' I smiled, somewhat tensely, at the assembled faces.

Artie looked up from the jigsaw and gave me an intense, blue-eyed stare. God. I swallowed hard. Instantly I wanted Vonnie to go home and the kids to go to bed so I could have some alone time with Artie. Would it be impolite to ask them to hop it?

'Something to drink?' he asked, holding my gaze. I nodded mutely.

I was expecting he'd get to his feet and I could follow him down to the kitchen and cop a quick sneaky smell of him.

'I'll get it,' Iona said dreamily.

Biting back a howl of frustration, I watched her waft down the floating stairs to the kitchen, to where the drink lived. She was fifteen. I found it amazing that she could be trusted to carry a glass of wine from one room to the next without guzzling the lot. When I was fifteen I drank anything that wasn't nailed down. It was just what you did, what everyone did. Maybe it was shortage of pocket money, I didn't really know; I just knew that I didn't understand Iona and her trustworthy, abstemious ilk.

'Some food, Helen?' Vonnie asked. 'There's a fennel and Vacherin salad in the fridge.'

My stomach clenched tight: no way was it letting anything in. 'I've eaten.' I hadn't. I hadn't even been able to force down a slice of Mum and Dad's dinner-time cake.

'You sure?' Vonnie gave me a shrewd once-over. 'You're



looking a little skinny. Don't want you getting skinnier than me!

'No fear of that.' But maybe there was. I hadn't eaten a proper meal since . . . well, a while – I couldn't actually remember; it was a week or so ago, perhaps a bit longer. My body seemed to have stopped notifying my mind that it wanted food. Or maybe my mind was so full of worry that it couldn't handle the information. The odd time that the message had actually got through I was unable to do anything remotely complicated, like pouring milk on to Cheerios, to quell the hunger. Even eating popcorn, which I'd tried last night, had struck me as the strangest thing – why would anyone eat those rough little balls of styrofoam, which cut the inside of your mouth and then rubbed salt into the wounds?

'Helen!' Bella said. 'It's time to play!' She produced a pink plastic comb and a pink Tupperware box filled with pink hairclips and pink furry elastic bands. 'Take a seat.'

Oh God. Hairdressers. At least it wasn't Motor Vehicle Registration Lady, I supposed. That was the very worst of our games – I had to queue for hours and she sat at an imaginary glass hatch. I kept telling her we could do it online, but she protested that then it wouldn't be a game.

'Here's your drink,' she said, then hissed at Iona, 'Quick, give it to her – can't you see she's stressed?'

Iona presented me with a goblet of red wine and a tall, chilled glass clinking with ice cubes. 'Shiraz or home-made valerian iced tea. I wasn't sure which you'd prefer so I brought both.'

There was a second when I considered the wine, then decided against it. I was afraid that if I started drinking I'd never be able to stop and I couldn't take the horror of a hangover.

'No wine, thanks.'

I braced myself for the pandemonium that usually followed that sort of statement: 'What? No wine! Did she say,

“No wine”? She’s gone quite mad!’ I expected the Devlins to rise up as one and wrestle me into an immobile headlock so that the glass of Shiraz could be poured into me via a plastic funnel, like a sheep being hoosed, but it passed without comment. I’d forgotten for a moment that I wasn’t with my family of origin.

‘Diet Coke instead?’ Iona asked.

God, the Devlins were the perfect hosts, even a flaky, floaty type like Iona. They always had Diet Coke in their fridge for me, although none of them drank it.

‘No, no thanks, all fine.’

I took a sip of the valerian tea – not unpleasant, although not pleasant either – then lowered myself on to a massive floor cushion. Bella knelt by my side and began to stroke my scalp. ‘You have beautiful hair,’ she murmured.

‘Thanks very much.’

Mind you, she thought I had beautiful everything; she wasn’t exactly a reliable witness.

Her small fingers combed and separated strands and my shoulders started to drop and for the first time in about ten days I had the relief of a proper breath, where my lungs filled fully with air and then eased it out again. ‘God, that’s so relaxing . . .’

‘Bad day?’ she asked sympathetically.

‘You have no idea, my little pink *amiga*.’

‘Try me,’ she said.

I was all set to launch into the whole miserable business, then I remembered she was only nine.

‘Well . . .’ I said, working hard to put a cheery spin on things. ‘Because I haven’t been able to pay the bills, I had to move out of my flat –’

‘What?’ Artie was startled. ‘When?’

‘Today. But it’s fine.’ I was speaking more to Bella than to him.

‘But why didn’t you tell me?’

Why *hadn't* I told him? When I'd given him the key six weeks ago I'd warned him that it was a possibility, but I'd made it sound like I was joking; after all, the entire country was in mortgage arrears and up to their eyeballs in debt. But he'd had the kids last weekend and he'd been away all week and I found it hard to have heavy conversations on the phone. And, in fairness, I hadn't told anyone what was going on.

Yesterday morning, when I realized I'd reached the end of the road – that in fact the end of the road had been reached a while back, but I'd been in denial, hoping the road people might come along with their tarmac and white lines and build a few more miles for me – I just quietly organized the two removal men for today. Shame was probably what had kept me silent. Or sadness? Or shock? Hard to know for sure.

'What will you do?' Bella sounded distraught.

'I've moved back in with my mum and dad for a while. They're going through an old patch at the moment, so there isn't much food, but that might pass . . .'

'Why don't you live here?' Bella asked.

Instantly Bruno's peachy little face lit up with fury. He was generally so angry that you'd think he'd be carpeted with spots, an external manifestation, if you will, of all his inner bile, but actually he had very soft, smooth, delicate skin.

'Because your dad and I have been going out with each other only a short time –'

'Five months, three weeks and six days,' Bella said. 'That's nearly six months. That's half a year.'

Anxiously, I looked at her fervent little face.

'And you're good together,' she said with enthusiasm. 'Mum says. Don't you, Mum?'

'I certainly do,' Vonnie said, smiling wryly.

'I couldn't move in.' I tried hard to sound jolly. 'Because Bruno would stab me in the middle of the night.' Then steal my make-up.

Bella was appalled. ‘He wouldn’t.’

‘I would,’ Bruno said.

‘Bruno!’ Artie yelled at him.

‘Sorry, Helen.’ Bruno knew the drill. He turned away, but not before I’d seen him mouth the words, ‘Fuck you, cunt-face.’

It took all of my self-control not to mouth back, ‘No, fuck *you*, fascist-boy.’ I was almost thirty-four, I reminded myself. And Artie might see.

I was diverted by a light flashing on my phone. A new email fresh in. Intriguingly entitled ‘Large slice of humble pie’. Then I saw who it was from: Jay Parker. I nearly dropped the machine.

Dearest Helen, my delicious little curmudgeon. Although it kills me to say it, I need your help. How about we let bygones be bygones and you get in touch?

A one-word reply. It took me less than a second to type.

No.

I let Bella fiddle about with my hair and I sipped my valerian tea and I watched the Devlins do their jigsaw and I wished the lot of them – except Artie, of course – would piss off. Couldn’t we at least go inside and turn on the telly? In the house I’d grown up in we’d treated ‘outside’ with suspicion. Even at the height of summer we never really got the point of gardens, especially because the lead on the telly didn’t stretch that far. And the telly had been important to the Walshes; nothing, but *nothing*, had ever happened – births, deaths, marriages – without the telly on in the background, preferably some sort of shouty soap opera. How could the Devlins stand all this *conversation*?

Perhaps the problem wasn’t them, I realized. Perhaps the problem was me. The ability to talk to other people seemed to be leaking out of me like air out of an old balloon. I was worse now than I was an hour ago.

Bella's soft fingers plucked at my scalp and she clucked and fussed and eventually reached some sort of resolution that she was happy with.

'Perfect! You look like a Mayan princess. Look.' She thrust a hand-mirror at my face. I caught a quick glimpse of my hair in two long plaits and some sort of handwoven thing tied across my fringe. 'Look at Helen,' she canvassed the crowd. 'Isn't she beautiful?'

'Beautiful,' Vonnie said, sounding utterly sincere.

'Like a Mayan princess,' Bella stressed.

'Is it true that the Mayans invented Magnums?' I asked. There was a brief startled silence, then the conversation resumed as though I hadn't said anything. I was *way* off my wavelength here.

'She's exactly like a Mayan princess,' Vonnie said. 'Except that Helen's eyes are green and a Mayan princess's would probably be brown. But the hair is perfect. Well done, Bella. More tea, Helen?'

To my surprise, I'd – at least for the moment – had it with the Devlins, with their good looks and grace and manners, with their board games and amicable break-ups and half-glasses-of-wine-at-dinner-for-the-children. I really wanted to get Artie on his own but it wasn't going to happen and I couldn't even muster the energy to be pissed off – it wasn't his fault he had three kids and a demanding job. He didn't know the day I'd had today. Or yesterday. Or indeed the week I'd had.

'No tea, thanks, Vonnie. I'd better head off.' I got to my feet.

'You're going?' Artie looked concerned.

'I'll see you at the weekend.' Or whenever Vonnie next had the kids. I'd lost track of their schedule, which was a very complicated one. Its basic premise was that the three kids spent scrupulously equal amounts of time at the homes of both their parents, but the actual days varied from week to

week to factor in things like Artie or Vonnie (mostly Vonnie, if you ask me) going on mini-breaks, weddings down the country, etc.

‘Are you okay?’ Artie was starting to look worried.

‘Fine.’ I couldn’t get into it now.

He caught my wrist. ‘Won’t you hang on a while?’ In a quieter voice he said, ‘I’ll ask Vonnie to leave. And the kids will have to go to bed at some stage.’

But it might be hours and hours. Artie and I never went to bed before them. Of course I was often there in the morning so it was obvious I’d stayed the night but we’d – all of us – fallen into a pretence that I’d slept in some imaginary spare bed and that Artie had spent the night alone. Even though I was Artie’s lovir we tended to behave as though I was just a family friend.

‘I’ve got to go.’ I couldn’t do any more deck-sitting, waiting to get Artie on his own, for the chance to take the clothes off his fine body. I’d burst.

But first, the farewells. They took about twenty minutes. I had no truck with lengthy valedictions; if it was up to me, I’d rather mutter something about going to the loo, then just slip away and be halfway home before anyone even noticed I was missing.

I find saying goodbye almost *unendurably* boring; in my head I’m already gone, so it seems like a total waste of time, all that ‘Be well’ and ‘Take care’ and smiling and stuff.

Sometimes I want to tear people’s hands from my shoulders and push them away and just bolt for freedom. But making a big production of it was the Devlin way – hugs and double kisses – even from Bruno, who clearly couldn’t entirely break free from his middle-class conditioning – and quadruple kisses (both cheeks, the forehead and the chin) from Bella, who suggested that we do a sleepover soon in her room.

‘I’ll loan you my strawberry shortcake pyjamas,’ she promised.

‘You’re nine,’ Bruno said, super-sneery. ‘She’s like, old. How’re your pyjamas going to fit her?’

‘We’re the same size,’ Bella said.

And the funny thing was, we practically were. I was short for my age and Bella was tall for hers. They were all tall, the Devlins; they got it from Artie.

‘Are you sure you should be on your own?’ Artie asked, as he walked me to the front door. ‘You’ve had a really bad day.’

‘Ah, yeah, I’m grand.’

He took my hand and rubbed the palm of it against his T-shirt, over his pecs, then down towards the muscles of his stomach.

‘Stop.’ I pulled away from him. ‘No point starting something we can’t finish.’

‘Oookay. But let’s just take this off before you go.’

‘Artie, I said –’

Tenderly he untied the Mayan headband that Bella had put on me, demonstrated it with a flourish, then let it drop to the floor.

‘Oh,’ I said. Then ‘Oh,’ again, as he slid his hands under my hairline and over my poor tormented scalp, and began to free up the two plaits. I closed my eyes for a moment, letting his hands work their way through my hair. He circled his thumbs around my ears, on my forehead, on the frown lines between my eyebrows, at the tight spot where my neck met my scalp. My face began to soften and the hinge of my jaw started to unclamp, and when eventually he stopped I was so blissed out that a lesser woman would have toppled over.

I managed to stand up straight. ‘Did I dribble on you?’ I asked.

‘Not this time.’

‘Okay, I’m off.’

He bent his head and kissed me, a kiss that was more restrained than I would have preferred, but best not to start any fires.

I slid my hand up, to the back of his head. I liked tangling my fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck and pulling it, not hard enough to hurt. Not exactly.

When we drew apart I said, ‘I like your hair.’

‘Vonnie says I need a haircut.’

‘I say you don’t. And I am the decider.’

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Get some sleep. I’ll call you later.’

We’d got into a – well, I suppose it was a routine – over the past few weeks where we had a quick little chat just before we went to sleep.

‘And about your question,’ he said. ‘The answer is yes.’

‘What question?’

‘Did the Mayans invent Magnums?’

‘Oh . . .’

‘Yes, of course the Mayans invented Magnums.’