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We All Live Here

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I

Lila

There is a framed photograph on Lila's bedside table that she hasn't yet had the energy, or perhaps the inclination, to get rid of. Four faces squished together in front of an enormous aquarium in some foreign holiday attraction – she forgets where now – a shoal of enormous iridescent stripy fish gazing blankly from behind them. Violet, pushing up her nose with one finger and pulling down the lower lids of her eyes so that she looks like a grotesque waxwork; Celie, in a Breton shirt, also pulling a face, although given she must have been thirteen by then, a little more self-consciously; Lila smiling vainly, as if hoping that this will be a lovely family shot despite all the evidence; and Dan, his smile not quite reaching his eyes, his expression enigmatic, his hand resting on Violet's T-shirted shoulder.

This last family photograph is the first thing she sees in the morning, and the last she sees at night, and although she knows she should keep it where it won't colour her day, for some reason she hasn't quite fathomed she can't put it in the drawer. Sometimes, in her sleepless hours, she watches the strips of moonlight slide across her bedroom ceiling, glances at that photograph and thinks wistfully about the family she could have had, all the pictures of holidays that will never exist – rainy weekends in Cornwall, exotic beaches with them all dressed in white – a joyful graduation in front of some

red-brick university, perhaps Celie's wedding, proud parents at her side; all ghostly, ephemeral images of a life that have simply evaporated in front of her.

And sometimes she thinks about getting a big glob of Blu Tack and squidging it right over Dan's face.

Lila is attempting to clear a particularly stubborn blockage in the first-floor lavatory when Anoushka calls. When she and Dan had bought this house two and a half years ago – a large, 'quirky' (estate-agent speak for 'nobody else would buy it') doer-upper in a leafy part of north London – she had been enchanted by the decades-old bathroom suites in mint green and raspberry, thinking them and the floral wallpaper charming and quaint. She and Dan had walked around each room, building images between them of what the house would look like when it was done. Although, when she thought back properly, it was she who had walked around building images and Dan had said, 'Mm, mm,' in a noncommittal way and sneaked glances at his phone.

The day after they had picked up the keys the same charming and quaint plumbing had decided to reveal its true self in a malevolent series of blockages and overspills. In the pink bathroom, the one the girls used, a plunger and a twisted coat hanger now sit beside the cistern, ready for Lila (because it is always Lila's job, apparently) to attack whatever had decided to wedge itself stolidly in the depths of the bowl this time.

'Lila! Darling! How are you?'

Anoushka's voice muffles and Lila can just hear, *No, Gracie, I don't want carnations in it. They're such vulgar flowers. No, no absolutely no gerberas. She hates them.*

Lila leans over and uses her nose to touch the hands-free button on her phone. She gags silently as a slosh of water

rides over the top of her rubber glove. 'Great! Marvellous!' she says. 'How are you?'

'Fighting the good fight for my wonderful authors, as ever. There's another royalty cheque on the way. It would have been with you last week but Gracie is pregnant and literally can't stop vomiting. Honestly, I've had to throw away three office wastepaper baskets. They were an actual health hazard.'

Downstairs, Truant, the dog, is barking urgently. He barks at everything – squirrels in the garden, pigeons, bin men, casual visitors, air.

'Oh, how lovely,' says Lila, closing her eyes as she pushes the coat hanger further in. 'The pregnancy, I mean. Not the vomiting.'

'Not really, darling. Terrible pain in the arse. Why these girls keep having babies is beyond me. I have a positive revolving door of assistants. I'm starting to wonder if there's something in the air-conditioning. Now, how are those lovely girls of yours?'

'Great. They're great,' says Lila.

They're not great. Celie had burst into tears at the breakfast table after apparently seeing something on Instagram, and when Lila asked what had happened, Celie had told her she wouldn't bloody understand and stalked off to school. Violet had fixed her with a look of cold fury when Lila had said yes, she did have to go to Daddy's on Thursday – it was his night – then slid silently from the stool and not spoken to her for the entire school run.

'Good. Good,' says Anoushka, in the distracted tone of someone who wouldn't have heard if you'd said they'd both been beheaded that morning. 'Now, about this manuscript.'

Lila pulls the coat hanger from the toilet bowl. The water level is still somewhere just under the seat. She peels the

rubber gloves from her hands and leans back against the cabinet. She hears Truant still barking and wonders if she'll have to take the neighbours another bottle of wine. She has given away seven in the last three months, trying to stop them actively hating her.

'When are you going to have something to send me? You seemed very certain last month.'

Lila blows out her cheeks. 'I – I'm working on it.'

There is a short silence.

'Now, darling, I don't want to sound stern,' Anoushka says, sounding stern, 'you did astonishingly well with *The Rebuild*. And you had that lovely little uplift in sales on the back of Dan's terrible deeds. I suppose we should be grateful to him for that at least. But we do not want to lose visibility, do we? We do not want to be so late delivering that I might as well be launching a debut.'

'I – It'll be with you very soon.'

'How soon?'

Lila gazes around the bathroom. 'Six weeks?'

'Let's say three. Doesn't have to be perfect, darling. I just need an idea as to what you're doing. Is it still a guide to a Happy Single Life?'

'Uh . . . yes.'

'Lots of tips on how to live well independently? Funny stories about dates? Some nice hot single-sex anecdotes?'

'Oh, yes. All of that.'

'Can't wait. I'm already agog. I'll live vicariously through your adventures! *Oh, for goodness' sake, Gracie, not the new waste-paper basket.* I've got to go. I await your email! Much love to all!'

Lila ends the call and stares at the toilet bowl, willing the water to go down. As she sits, she hears Bill climbing the stairs. He pauses at the landing, and she can hear him steady

himself as he makes to mount the next step. He and Mum lived in a 1950s bungalow ten minutes' walk away – sparsely furnished, full of light and clean lines – and he finds the many floors and clutter of this rickety house a daily challenge.

'Darling girl?'

'Yes?' Lila rearranges her face into something bright and cheery.

'I hate to be the bearer of bad news but the neighbours have been round complaining about the dog again. And something disgusting appears to be seeping through the kitchen ceiling.'

The emergency plumber had sucked his teeth, pulled up four floorboards, and apparently discovered the leak in the soil pipe. He had drained the cistern, informed her that she would need a whole new system – 'Mind you, I can't imagine you want to hang on to that bathroom suite too much longer. I've got grandparents younger than that is' – drunk two cups of sweet tea and charged her three hundred and eighty pounds. She had started calling it the Mercedes tax. Any tradesman would see the overpriced vintage sports car lurking on the drive and immediately add twenty-five per cent to whatever invoice they had prepared.

'So that's what was causing the blockage?' Lila had said, tapping out the pin number of her credit card and trying not to calculate the damage that would do to this month's budget.

'Nah. Must be something else,' he had said. 'You can't use it, though, obviously. And all the bathroom plumbing will have to be reinstalled. You might want to replace some of those floorboards while you're at it. I can push my thumb through them.'

Bill had put a calloused hand on her shoulder as she closed the door behind the man. 'It'll all work out,' he said, and

squeezed lightly. This was what, for Bill, passed as deep emotional support. 'I can help, you know.'

'You don't have to,' she said, turning to him brightly. 'I'm fine. All good.' He had sighed gently, then turned and headed stiffly to his room.

Bill had lived with them for nine months now, having moved in shortly after her mother's death. Being Bill, it wasn't that he had been found sobbing hysterically or starving or letting the house go to ruin. He had just retreated quietly into himself, becoming a smaller and smaller version of the upright former furniture-maker she had known for three decades until he seemed like a shadow presence. 'I just miss her,' he would say, when she turned up for tea, bustling round, trying to inject some energy into the too-still rooms.

'I know, Bill,' she would say. 'I miss her too.'

The fact was, Lila hadn't been coping well either. She had been in shock when Dan had announced he was leaving. When she finally found out about Marja, she realized Dan simply leaving had been a whisper of a blow, a thing that had barely touched her, compared to this. She had barely slept for the first six months, her mind a toxic whirlwind of finally drawing threads together, of recriminations, dread and cold fury, a million unspoken arguments in her head – arguments that Dan always managed somehow to evade: 'Not in front of the children, Lila, eh?'

And then, just months later, even this had been dwarfed by the sudden death of Francesca. So when she suggested Bill move in for a bit they were both at pains to assure each other that this was really to help Lila with the girls, to provide a bit of practical help while she adjusted to single parenting. Bill kept the bungalow, heading off most days to work in his neat shed at the end of the garden, where he mended

neighbours' chairs and sanded replacement stair spindles to stop Lila's children falling through the gaps in the banisters at Lila's house. Neither of them discussed when he was going to move home. It wasn't as though having him there got in the way of Lila's life (what life?), and Bill's gentle presence gave what remained of their little family a much-needed sense of stability and continuity. An anchor for their vainly bobbing little rowing-boat, which felt, most days, slightly leaky and unstable and as if they had abruptly and without warning found themselves adrift on the high seas.

Lila walks to the school. It is the first week back after the long holidays and Bill had offered to go, but she needs to up her step count (she is haunted daily by Marja's endless legs, her still-defined waist). Besides, she has to leave the house to pick up Violet, which means she can stave off the guilt that comes with not having done any writing again.

They both know the reason Bill offers: Lila hates the afternoon school run. Mornings are fine: everyone is in a hurry, she can drop and run. But this is too painful: her acute toe-curling visibility as she gathers with the other mothers at the school gates. There had been a whole month of head tilt after it first happened – *You're kidding me. God, how awful, I'm so sorry* – or perhaps, behind her back, *You couldn't really blame him, though, could you?* And, of course, there had been the awful cosmic joke of the timing of it all: just two weeks after *The Rebuild* had been published, alongside a slew of her promotional interviews talking about how best to repair a marriage that had grown stale amid the demands of work and children.

Two days after he had left, she had walked grimly up to the playground and three of the other mothers, heads bowed together, had been reading a copy of the *Elle* article, helpfully

titled *How I Made My Marriage Watertight*. Philippa Graham – that over-Botoxed witch – had hurriedly shoved it behind her when she saw Lila and blinked hard with pantomime innocence, and her two acolytes, whose names Lila could never remember, had actually corpsed with suppressed giggles. *I hope your husbands are right this minute contracting an antibiotic-resistant venereal disease from underage rent boys*, she had thought, and pasted on a smile ready for Violet to traipse out, schoolbag dragging behind her.

For weeks she had felt the murmur of appalled fascination follow her around the playground, the faint turning of heads and gossip exchanged from the corners of mouths. She had held up her head, skin prickling, jaw aching with the rigid faint smile she had plastered, like a kind of permafrost, across her face. Her mother had taken over play-date duty, explaining to the girls and their friends' mothers when she drove her little Citroën to pick them up that Lila was busy working and she would see them next time. But her mother wasn't here any more.

Feeling the familiar clench of her stomach, Lila pulls her collar around her ears and positions herself at the far edge of the scattered groups of mothers, nannies and the odd lone father, studying her phone intently, and pretends to be engrossed in a Really Important Email. It is her standard procedure, these days. That or bringing Truant, who barks hysterically if anyone comes within twenty yards.

Tomorrow, she thinks. Tomorrow there will be no interruptions. I will sit down at my desk at 9.15 a.m. when I get back from dropping Violet, and I will not move until I have written two thousand words. She decides not to think about the fact that she has made this exact promise to herself at least three times a week for the past six months.

There is a shriek of delight from a group of the mothers near the rainbow-painted bench by the swings. She sees Marja among them, leaning forward, Philippa squeezing her arm and beaming. Marja is wearing a long camel cashmere-type coat and trainers, her blonde hair pulled loosely and artfully into a huge tortoiseshell clip. 'Well, you weren't drinking at Nina's, were you? I have a Spidey-sense for these things!' Philippa laughs. She is just placing her hand on Marja's stomach when she glances over, sees Lila and turns away theatrically. She mouths, 'Oh, God. *Sorry.*'

Marja turns, following Philippa's gaze. She flushes.

Lila understands in her bones what has happened before her brain has a chance to register. She stares, unseeing, at the screen of her phone, her heart racing. *No. No. It can't be. Not after everything Dan had said. He couldn't do this to us.* But any doubt has been removed by the colour flooding Marja's cheeks.

Lila feels sick. She feels dizzy. She cannot think what to do. She has an overwhelming urge to slump against the tree a few feet away but she doesn't want the other mothers to see her do that. She can feel the hot pressure of their gaze so presses her phone to her ear and hurriedly pretends to have a conversation. 'Yes! Yes, it is! How lovely to hear from you! That's great. How are you?' She talks on, not knowing what is coming out of her mouth, turning so that she can no longer see anyone, her brain humming.

She jumps as Violet tugs at her hand.

'Darling!' She drops the phone from her ear, registers Mrs Tugendhat standing beside her daughter. 'Everything okay?' she says brightly, her voice too high, too loud.

'Why are you talking when there's nobody on your phone?' says Violet, frowning at the screen.