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Written by Alexandra Shulman

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The Parrots

ALEXANDRA SHULMAN



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For David

Foreword

July

It must be a westerly. Katherine Tennison enjoyed the thought, with its pleasing combination of factual knowledge and natural order. Tide timetables, wind directions, lunar movements – she liked their names and numbers. As she ran the wind was mirrored on the surface of the ornamental lake, rippling from left to right, the confined water depositing ice-cream wrappers, sodden bags and a thick scum of toxic-looking algae along the eastern edge.

The lake part of her route had the great advantage of flatness, but the competition for space was fierce: small children escaping the distracted eyes of au pairs; an army of dog-walkers; elderly couples propped up against each other; and other jogging women, many of them remarkably similar to Katherine, with blonde hair tied up in a ponytail, well-preserved muscle tone in their limbs and on their faces no hint of the exertion needed to keep at bay the unwelcome and extraordinarily determined process of ageing.

It was at the small gate on to the boundary road, the 6km point where on certain days she would allow herself to stop, that she first heard the rumble. At first she thought it was the pounding Beyoncé through her headphones but then, almost immediately, she saw, moving towards her in the pale sky above, the bright-red machine. Helicopters were always scudding over the park and were often to be seen landing near the ambassadorial mansions that bordered one side of it, but an air ambulance was different.

To her left, the playground began to empty of adults and children, the red shape pulling them like a magnet as it neared the ground. It was just like that moment in *ET*, Katherine thought, watching as parents bundled up the smallest of their brood in one arm, leaving

the elder children to run towards it. In seconds, a circle was formed of buggies, bicycles and crop-headed Saturday-morning fathers with weekend stubble doing their childcare bit, grateful that something unusual had infiltrated the normal routine of swing-pushing and nose-wiping.

Leaving the ambulance and its audience behind, Katherine pushed on. The run helped to empty her mind. To ask for clarity or direction would be too much, but she could keep moving, leave behind the messy chaos that was overtaking every part of her life. Her phone was in a sticky clamp on her upper arm. She could feel it vibrate, but if she stopped right now she wasn't sure she'd recognize who she was. Instead, she thought about the ambulance behind her and how, once, when Josh was small and they were in that same playground, a child roughly his age had fallen from the tall wooden climbing structure and, unlike the others, who constantly tumbled off and jumped up, had lain, a twisted, unmoving shape. She had seen his mother rush to her child and was part of the initial communal concern that shifted collectively into terror as everyone waited for what seemed like hours for the ambulance to land, just as it had that morning.

The phone buzzed again as she spotted the tree that marked the end of her run, and she pushed herself to a last burst of speed, which was meant to keep the calories burning off for hours. She passed a man in brief silky shorts, his legs mottled hams, before finally allowing herself to stop, then waited a moment before bending slowly from her waist to massage her calves in turn. For a minute or so she was able to feel content in the zone – flooded with achievement, a swamp of endorphins and music.

She didn't want to look at her phone, knowing that even a glance would puncture the moment. Missed calls and texts would intrude into this space into which, briefly, she had escaped. Smudging her T-shirt against her sweaty ribs, she pulled her ponytail tighter in its band. At the same time, there was the *ping* of another text coming through, and this time she looked. Three missed calls from Josh lined up on the screen: 9.10, 9.11, 9.15.

The change from warm post-exercise flush to creep of chilly fear was instant. She remembered the air ambulance, its red shape now terrifyingly personal, and Josh with that goofy, accepting grin he still had, and that small child years back twisted on the ground. As she jabbed at the phone she told herself it was ridiculous. Why should there be any connection? But she could feel her heart rate speeding up even further with terror.

'You have one message,' she heard, tormented by the gap between the automated voice and the real one. There was a moment when she thought of replacing the phone in the clamp on her arm and ending the call, as if not listening to it would stop it happening. Whatever *it* was. 'Mum, we're in the park.' Josh was clearly terrified. 'It's gone properly wrong.'

Chapter One

The Previous September

It was the year there was no summer. The optimism of spring with the promise of sunshine, rose- and lavender-scented gardens, bare limbs and smoking barbecues was confounded by relentless grey and torrential downpours, the gardens devastated by the rain, the roses battered, their leaves riddled with mould.

Yes, there were the occasional hours of almost painfully sharp sun when the sodden lawns and borders and dripping trees would suddenly sparkle like fairy lights. And sometimes the arrival of the two, three, sometimes four parrots on the branches of the morello cherry tree would coincide with this brilliance in a flash of emerald, turquoise and gold, startling anyone spotting them for the first time. But more often in the dank grey it was their colour alone that would transform the neat lawn, box hedging and tragic beds of 30 Norland Terrace into something other than a nicely sized patch in one of the more expensive London streets. Despite their incongruous presence, the parrots were entirely confident in their ownership of wherever they happened to land and some days would remain perched for hours, unchallenged by the drab pigeons and starlings more often found there.

Katherine Tennison glanced at a pair of the parrots as she prepared her breakfast. Now, in late September, the morning was warm, a frustrating reminder of what had been missing the whole summer. She was still not immune to the transforming effect of the birds on the garden, although they had been appearing since early spring, when the bare branches made their visits all the more obvious. There were no rules as to when they would arrive. Sometimes, like today, they would be perched there casually in the morning, sometimes it would be early evening; guests for cocktails.

The silence in the house seemed louder than its usual soundtrack of washing machines and vacuum cleaners, the housekeeper Mariella's commentary on its deficiencies, ringing mobiles and chatter from a distant television which Josh, if it were up to him, would leave on for days when he was still at home. She watched the sticky trail of honey from the wooden drizzler make a pattern on her yoghurt. The ceramic honey hive reminded her of the weekend they'd found it on a cluttered table on a Cotswold high street. It had been the spring before Josh was conceived. Rick's arm was across her shoulders, clamping her to him, demonstrating his ownership of her. And how flattered she'd been to be claimed in that way. To be his. Momentarily, she was nostalgic for that couple, for the narrow vision of their youth, the absence of knowledge of what was to come, the years dominated by her desire to have a second child.

Her vision (and she acknowledged that it was hers, not Rick's) of a family had never been just them and Josh. Both she and Rick were one of three: she had two brothers and he two sisters. But despite her determination and diligence, despite the money, despite the injections, supplements, timetabled sex, shrinks, examinations and endless waiting rooms with dusty pot plants and property magazines, they had been unable to conceive another child.

'Morning, darling!' Rick bellowed from the hallway, dropping the squash racquets from his regular morning session on to the floor. He pressed his lips to her forehead, simultaneously flinging the mail down on the kitchen island. 'I hope I didn't wake you earlier. Rubbish game. Ed destroyed me. *De*stroyed me.' He swiped an imaginary ball towards the glass doors leading on to the garden. 'It was obvious right from the first serve. Must have been that second bottle last night that did for me.' He squinted through the glare on the glass. 'Parrots in residence, I see.'

As he walked towards the doors Katherine could smell the game on him, rich and tangy. Often, she had less of a physical sense of him when he was right next to her than when he moved away and she looked at him: solid; ginger hair faded to a pale sand but still

gratifyingly *there* in thick waves, when most of his contemporaries were either bald or grey.

'I'll make some coffee. Toast? Eggs?'

'Just the caffeine hit, I think.' Rick stretched, arching his back and bending his knees, his loose cotton jogging pants hiding sturdy thighs. He pulled down the locks at the top of the high doors to the garden. As he walked out, the parrots, first one and, seconds after, the other, flew from the branch in a crackling rush into the clear blue of the sky.

The large kitchen was at the back of the house, transplanted from the front when the Tennisons arrived five years before. The tall stucco-fronted building in a terrace of similarly gleaming properties had been in perfectly reasonable condition, but they wouldn't have bought it if Katherine hadn't been able to see that work could be done to improve it. It might be Rick's family money, but it was her skill at renovation and her vision when it came to interior decoration that had made their property buys so successful.

'I might get on with some deadheading later!' shouted Rick as he squatted by a border, resisting the impulse to tear a dead flower from its stem by hand. 'I must buy some new clippers this weekend.' Despite his poor performance that morning, playing squash had filled him with a sense of well-being. 'Did you see? There's a letter for you. It's on the top of the usual pile of crap. All that do-good stuff dropped through the door. I reckon we could save a rainforest simply by losing all their flyers.'

Katherine didn't immediately recognize the handwriting on the heavy cream envelope, though the stamp was foreign.

'Dear Katherine,' she read. Of course. It was Ann.

It has been such a long time since we've seen each other, but I write to ask you a favour. My children Matteo and Antonella are coming to London for a stay and I would love them to visit my dear friend Katherine. I've been away for so long that I feel quite out of touch with the place and it would be helpful to think that you might introduce them to some friends. Of course, they are now adult and independent. But it would

be great if they could see you. And that might mean that you will finally visit Milano?

For ever

Ann

Annie Berthoud. It must be more than ten years since they had last met, for dinner in that mirrored Italian restaurant on the Pimlico Road. Katherine had felt ridiculous suggesting Italian to an Italian couple, but the place was always filled with noisy Romans in blue blazers and loafers and it seemed to tick the box. Annie and Massimo. He had the longest, thinnest fingers she had ever seen on a man. They moved almost independently of his hand, like the tentacles of an octopus. When they found him after the car crash, there were reports that he had been decapitated. She imagined those fingers, still moving on reflex after the head had gone.

'It's from Annie Berthoud. I still think of her as that, but of course she's Fullardi now. She's sending her two kids to London and wants us to have them over.' Rick turned the pink pages of the *FT* 's Saturday package.

'Aha.' After twenty-two years together, much of the time, only a vague audible acknowledgement was needed to qualify as interest from Rick.

Annie Berthoud had arrived in London for A levels. Teenage myopia had allowed only a few details of her family circumstances to register with Katherine: they were Belgian; her father's job had brought them to a large mansion-block flat which always smelt of stew; and Annie had been given a car by her parents the day she turned seventeen. Annie's sporty appearance – arms with freckles clustered thickly around her elbows, small breasts, thick, short auburn hair and long legs – was an effective disguise for the fact that she had sex with a different boy every Saturday night. Until Annie, the designated pool of boys had been pretty sure that it was *they* who chopped and changed and that girls were after a *relationship*. Annie didn't need any such thing, and this, and her attitude towards sex – that it required pretty much the same level of commitment as

a game of tennis – caused immense confusion and much gossip. But she'd been a close friend and, when the family had returned to Brussels, Katherine missed her chatty confidence. She learnt of Annie's engagement to Massimo Fullardi, the eldest son of an established Italian fashion dynasty, when she read about it in the paper.

'She doesn't say when they're arriving,' Katherine continued, realizing that she was talking to herself now that Rick had moved on to the *Daily Mail* and was also checking his BlackBerry. 'I wonder if they're about the same age as Josh. No. They must be older. She married Massimo at least four years before we were married.' She looked again at the writing on the envelope, this time with a professional eye. Ever since she had taken up calligraphy she found it impossible not to judge handwriting in any form. But that reminded her that upstairs, in her study, there was a garden plan to be finished off for the Jellicoes.

'You remember I'm in Paris a couple of days next week?' Rick said, stroking the striped ginger cat that was sprawled on the floor. 'Got to seal the deal, haven't we, Carrot?'

The Tennison Gallery, which Rick had taken over from his father, specialized in the abstract shapes and evocative landscapes of mid-twentieth-century British art. Michael Tennison had been a well-liked figure in the art world but, had it not been for his wife, he would have become a competent gentleman banker, like so many of his contemporaries. Instead, Lady Christabel Clarendon's money and social skills, combined with his knowledge, intuition and gambler's enthusiasm had created a gallery that merged the mutually attractive worlds of old money and sixties cool. As a child, Rick and his two sisters would be presented at exhibition openings, drab in school uniform against the peacocking velvets and colourful silks of the time. His father held court, a glass in one hand, a paisley scarf draped around his neck.

'How long are you gone? I know it's in the diary . . .' There were so many diaries now: in his office, on her computer, in a brass-clipped leather book, on his BlackBerry. Katherine folded the letter back into the envelope.

'I'm not sure. I want to get a meeting with this LVMH guy, and it's not confirmed. He's meant to be in Singapore but he may get back while I'm there and it would be worth hanging on for. We've never interested him before.'

Katherine walked over and massaged his shoulders, experiencing a feeling of warmth towards him at that moment, derived from the relief of never having to worry whether he was fucking someone else while he was away. Long ago, she had decided that there were two kinds of men, those who could keep it in their trousers and those who couldn't. If you had any sense, you married the former. Many of her friends had been seduced by the allure of the latter, convinced that, despite all evidence to the contrary, they would be capable of taming their boyfriend's roaming eyes and of converting Jamie, or Alfie, or Will to the alternative pleasures of familial monogamy.

With Rick, it was a different story. From those first days in his small flat with the brown sheets and view over the treetops of a London square, she was sure that a carousel of girls was not what interested him. He had seen Katherine standing at the bar of a party, helping herself to a glass of wine. Her composure had been evident from yards away: her long, pale face registered little as she poured the drink, turned to look at the crowded room and raised a hand to tuck a strand of blonde hair back into the pile on her head. Rick had since told her that she had seemed to exist in her own ecosystem, and he'd approached her with a, for him, unusual determination to invade that calm space, at the same time imagining what it would be like to have her legs wrapped around his waist as he moved her against him.

Within weeks she had moved into his flat, changed the brown sheets for white, hung curtains in the bare windows and offered him an alternative existence from the cocaine-crammed nights he'd spent with a posse of male friends. In less than a year they were engaged. Katherine, still only twenty-four and drifting in and out of short-term office jobs, was more than content to make the idea of them as a couple the centre of her existence. Rick brought a world

with him, one which, with its proximity to art and wealth and sense of sweeping family, she was eager to embrace. He loved her easy enthusiasm for it all and, not only that, he recognized in her a clearness of purpose that offered salvation from his own lack of it. And nobody could say that Katherine bore any resemblance to CeeCee, the mother who was such a powerful presence in his life.

'We could bring Ann's kids out here sometime,' said Katherine as the London suburbs were replaced by open green countryside. Since the letter's arrival the previous day, she'd been surprised how much time she'd spent thinking about her old friend's request.

'I'm sure my mother would be thrilled,' answered Rick, who was driving. His inability to give up his position in the outside lane was a dominant feature of the way he drove and was now creating tension, since the blue Audi behind him appeared equally determined to force Rick to move over. 'You know how she likes to be involved in everything she can get her mitts on. Personally, I'd keep them a good distance from her. She has long arms and, before they know it, she'll snap them up and she'll never be off the phone.' Katherine could see the muscle at the side of his mouth flex with the competition from the Audi. 'This guy's a total loser. He can just suck it up. We're coming off at the next exit anyway,' Rick muttered, in pointless explanation.

Sunday lunch with CeeCee was a frequent engagement that induced very little pleasure in either Rick or Katherine, but on a day like this, when the September sun was dappling the chalk hills to the north, it was possible to imagine that it might be enjoyable, even if years of experience had proved this unlikely. Rick drove at speed across the three lanes to the junction exit, while Katherine wondered whether lunch with CeeCee was a good enough reason to be killed in a car crash.

Charlwood was the Lutyens-style house CeeCee had made her home when she was widowed. 'It will suit me to have a project,' she had briskly replied to the many concerned friends who had pointed out that size alone made it an unsuitable purchase for a single

woman, let alone one of sixty-five. Not to mention the condition of the place.

Now, fifteen years later, the large house combined authentic architectural details with an extravagant degree of comfort, and the gardens had been restored to their Jekyll-inspired haze of colour: smudges of blues and greying greens, aubergines and muted silvers even in winter, when, in the mornings, the lawn was a frosted sheet.

They found her standing on the wide terrace at the back of the house and Katherine leant in to offer a kiss to the small portion of her face not covered by her large blush-tinted glasses. They covered not only her eyes but the fine skin below. She had always been known for the beauty of her full-lipped mouth, which was still painted a girlish pale pink and made all the more prominent by the glasses.

Roland, one of CeeCee's two black Labradors, leapt up, snagging his claws in Katherine's cardigan. CeeCee both noticed and ignored the victim's grimace, glancing instead at her watch while Katherine readjusted her expression to a bright smile, determined not to let in the feeling of distrust that informed most of her meetings with her mother-in-law.

'It's so glorious today, isn't it? Probably the best weekend we've had all year.' Immediately disappointed in herself for embarking on such a predictable topic, Katherine was also exasperated with her husband for wandering on to the lawn and throwing balls for Roland, thereby avoiding having to talk with his mother.

'Let's have a stroll before lunch.' CeeCee's tiny white-trouser-clad legs set a smart pace as they walked towards Rick, in the direction of the red-bricked loggia. 'What news of Josh? When does he go up? Or is that the wrong term? I forget. Does it only apply to Oxbridge?' CeeCee rarely wasted an opportunity to show her disapproval of her grandson's attendance at a provincial university. 'I do wonder how he will take it. You know . . . I still think the States might have been a better route for him.'

Katherine moved the conversation on. 'What did you think about those figures at Sotheby's last week? Not entirely predictable?

The Gorky went for a huge figure, but a couple of the Irish were disappointing.'

'When you get to my age,' replied CeeCee, 'you realize, in most matters, timing is all.' Katherine's mother-in-law, having reached her son at the far end of the lawn, was positioning herself at an angle that would make further conversation with Katherine difficult.

'I was just saying to Katherine that I hope that Josh will be happy where he is. I know you agree that the States would have suited him so well. Couldn't he have come with you today?' She watched Rick throw the ball to another corner of the lawn. He had his father's build, but he was stouter than Michael had been at his age.

'We don't know where he is. He didn't text us last night, otherwise we might have packed him into the car with us,' Rick replied, keeping his eye on Roland, now chasing the ball. 'You know the States wasn't something he was particularly keen on, though of course he wasn't particularly keen to do anything much. Let's see how it goes. I'm starving. When are we eating?'

'You're just like darling Michael about your food. He always had to have it on the dot.' CeeCee looked back towards the house. Katherine had wandered back. 'Lunch will be ready in a few minutes. Do look at the amaranthus en route. They've done particularly well this year.'

Inside, a round table had been laid with a white cloth in a low-ceilinged square room, the silver cutlery and glass half-moons for salad placed at an angle next to crystal glasses. Pale, tobacco-coloured scrims at the windows added a flattering filter to the light.

'How clever,' observed Katherine. 'Roses. Still. These must be the very last.' She stood, even though it was only the three of them, waiting to be directed to a seat by CeeCee.

'Why don't you sit there?' Her mother-in-law waved at one of the high-backed oak chairs. 'And, please, help yourself.' An Arts and Crafts dresser sat in a niche between bookshelves, and on it pale green, soft lettuce interspersed with the veined reds of radicchio lay in a broad, shallow wooden bowl next to a soufflé inflated to a crusty dome from its white china casing.

'Have you met Mr Oblomovik yet?' CeeCee asked Rick. Her habit of adding a formal prefix to the name of certain acquaintances, far from endowing them with status, clearly indicated her disdain for them. 'Mrs Oblomovik has gutted Drayton Hall – almost completely, I gather,' she continued, as Rick helped himself to some food. 'Simply a shell left. It's over there.' She gestured towards the window. 'Literally, the other side of the M40. Very close to the motorway.'

'We've met Olga,' Rick replied, his concentration focused on piling his plate with soufflé. 'She seemed a nice enough woman, though I can't say I spent much time with her. He wasn't there that night. It was at the Jellicoes, wasn't it, darling?'

'Yes, that's right. She and I had a chat after dinner and she said she'd be interested in meeting Flo. I'd be surprised if she'd gutted it. She seemed pretty clued up on conservation and that kind of thing. I guess Drayton would be a minefield. Anyway, she said she'd like to meet her.' Katherine knew that CeeCee had little time for Flo, her closest friend and an expert on domestic and architectural history.

Rick reached out to the decanter on the table.

'Katherine had a letter from her friend Ann, who married Massimo Fullardi. She's sending her two children over to London. I think you knew the father, didn't you?'

'Yes. Gianni Fullardi. He bought really quite regularly from Michael. An excellent eye, I remember. He was one of the few Italians to invest in the British relatively early. Are they still in charge of the company?'

'Nope. I don't think so. They got bought by some conglomerate – I can't remember which right now. You sometimes see the family members dragged out for publicity. I'd feel like a performing monkey, but the money they sold the company for would lighten the burden. Anyway, it'll be interesting to see what the kids are like. Their father was a good guy. That was a terrible story, that crash. Poor kids.'