Is There Anything You Want?

Margaret Forster

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The Clinic

MRS HIBBERT was a Friend. In her own mind, it gave her a status she otherwise lacked: she was a Friend of St Mary's Hospital, someone known to give her time to help others. She was the most senior of all those who belonged to this association of Friends and was regarded with respect and, in some cases, awe. She rarely spoke to the other Friends, except to say a polite good afternoon, and her arrival in the little room off the hospital's main entrance hall, where Friends met and deposited their coats, stopped any conversation instantly. This did not worry Mrs Hibbert in the slightest. She was perfectly comfortable with the sudden silence, taking it as a tribute to her seniority. There was work to be done, serious work, and it ought to be approached solemnly. She took off her jacket and busied herself fixing her armband to her sleeve. The armband was red with 'Friend of St Mary's' stamped in black letters upon it. It fastened with a Velcro strip, making it easy to fit on to any arm except for the very fattest. Mrs Hibbert's arm was stout and strong but the armband encompassed it easily. Ready to take up her position, she nodded at the other Friends and walked out into the entrance hall to begin her particular duties. As ever, she felt alert and eager, ready to support all those who were coming in fear and trembling for their appointments and unsure how to make their way. She would sort them out. She would give them confidence. She would soothe their troubled spirits.

Taking up her position in the centre of the busy entrance hall, to the left of the reception desk and immediately in front of the doors, Mrs Hibbert hummed. She hummed to the tune of her favourite hymn 'Who would true valour see', knowing that such was the constant commotion no one could possibly hear her. While she hummed, she scanned the faces of everyone entering, trying to assess to whom she would need to offer help. Some were easy to spot. Those who went on hovering near the desk, even though they had been given directions, were approached by her before they had any more time to worry. 'Can I help you?' she would say, and their gratitude was touching. Sometimes, she took very nervous patients all the way to wherever they were supposed to go, chatting to encourage them to relax. Their appreciation was gratifying. She would hear moving stories of suffering and try to reassure the narrators. 'Never give up hope,' she would say. But sometimes, nerves made patients utterly silent. Who knew what was going on in their heads? Who knew how great was their need?

Mrs Hibbert was in her element.

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Edwina talked to herself in her head. Avoid that woman, that Friend, she said, that creature out to catch people. Edwina sidestepped her, as she always did. She would follow the yellow line, oh yes, follow the thin yellow line, that was all she needed to do, that was what she'd been told to do at reception, the first time, just follow the yellow line. It wasn't yellow, not what she would call yellow, it was cream, a sickly cream. The red beside it wasn't red either, it was maroon. Were they colour-blind? Only the green was green, fresh and bright beside the others. She wished she had to follow the green, but where did it lead to? No, hers was the yellow line: follow it, pretend to be Dorothy, pretend the Tin Man and the Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion are beside you. Dance along, think of the magic. Oh, it's what is wanted. Magic!

End of the yellow line. Full stop. No, not a full stop, a right turning, an arrow. Bye-bye red and green lines, wherever you are going. The clinic. Mr Wallis's clinic. Quite small, the area. A square. Metal chairs, arranged in rows. Grey metal chairs, three rows of ten. All joined together, riveted to the floor. Who would want to steal them? Who would want to throw them? Such hard seats, uncomfortable, no cushions. Where should she sit? Oh, at the end of a row, certainly. Nearest to the door, yes. At the end of a row, then she won't be stuck between two others. Good thinking. Near the door, then she could escape easily. If she had to, if she dared, if she was silly. Silly to think of escape. This is not a prison. Isn't it? No. Nobody is here yet. Well of course they're not. She is early, very early; not even the clinic's own receptionist is here yet. Much too early. No one else is foolish enough to come forty minutes before the clinic begins. But it isn't foolish. It is smart. It shows she is experienced, an old hand. They can't fool her. Come for 2 p.m., the time on her card, the time of her appointment? Three other women will have been given the same time. She knows they will. She can't be fooled. First card handed in, first patient seen. Simple. She will be first.

So. Here she is. Early. Sitting alone in this dreary place. Heuga felt squares on the floor, moved around many times, stains on them all. Doesn't seem hygienic. Why not lino? Why not wood? Such a dusty rubber plant in the corner. Needs cleaning, needs some cotton wool, soaked in milk, wiped over each leaf. Tin wastepaper basket, lined with a black bin-liner. A black plastic table, coffee-table size, piles of magazines. Old, torn magazines, much thumbed. At least look through them. Mostly women's magazines, the covers promising makeovers of rooms and faces, offering free packets of shampoo attached inside, but taken out long ago, naturally. One copy of a wildlife magazine at the bottom, mysteriously pristine. She takes it to her seat. Lovely photographs. Lovely birds. Lovely colours. She can't read the words, though. They blur. She blinks repeatedly, to clear the blur. She blinks in time to a beating in her head. She tells herself to stop it. Be calm. Calm.

Footsteps. Brisk, confident footsteps. It's the receptionist. Good afternoon, she says, snapping on the lights in her corner. It isn't a corner really, more of an alcove. Has she said good afternoon in reply? No, just grunted, but the receptionist doesn't notice. She is busy. She bustles. The small space is filled with her bustling. Switching switches on, connecting unseen things, emptying her bag, listening to messages on the answerphone, making notes. Arranging herself, getting ready. She's organised now. Get up and present the card. Accepted. Return to seat, no words spoken except thank you, by both of them. More footsteps. Other early arrivals, though not really so early, it's two minutes to two. Do not look up. Fatal. No eye contact, ever. Still, two

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people are within her line of vision even as she studiously avoids looking up at them. Two sets of legs, both wearing trousers, but one set obviously female, one male. The man here as a support. Crowded clinics because of women's support systems. Hardly anyone comes on her own. Husbands, partners, brought to endure with them, willing or not. Sometimes mothers, sisters, friends, all taking up places on the thirty chairs. Feeble. She should not be scornful, why shouldn't women have support, if it helps, but momentarily she is proud of herself. She is terrified, sick with apprehension, but she manages alone. Why put Harry through this misery, why drag Emma or Laura through it? No. She will manage. And not just to spare them. Harry would make her even more nervous. He can't sit still. Up, down, up, down, fussing, complaining. It would drive her mad. Harry doesn't do waiting, for anything. Emma might cry, she's sensitive, and Laura might get angry. Easier to be on her own. Easier not even to have told them she's here. Harry forgets the date. She doesn't conceal appointments from him but she doesn't draw attention to them either. He ought to remember, but he doesn't. She won't even tell him she's been today, unless she has to. Unless she is obliged to because . . . No. Please, no.

These other early arrivals have chosen to sit in the middle of the left-hand row of seats. The legs are seated. The man is wearing trainers, the woman moccasin-type shoes. Rather jolly ones, red, with little tassels. She can just glimpse their hands hanging down in the narrow space between the seats. They are holding hands, slightly furtively. They are talking. The man is saying something very quietly. Something personal, she's sure. Comforting, maybe. She can't quite hear. There is a sound of sniffing. Is the woman crying? Possibly. The hands separate and a tissue is pushed into the woman's hand. Well, there's often crying going on, if it is crying, in this place. Never laughter. She's never heard laughter among those waiting, though sometimes there are inexplicable bursts of it from staff rushing through. It's always a shocking sound, such hilarity. But now there's another familiar noise. Rumblings, squeakings. She knows what it means. A bed. In a minute, through the open door, a bed passes, wheeled along by a porter with a nurse in attendance, holding a drip steady. There's a woman lying in the bed, eyes open and staring upwards. She's quite young. Hair scraped back, bones of the face startlingly prominent, a yellow tinge to the skin. Her hands, above the bedcovers, are plucking at the white, open-weave blanket. She is travelling from one ward to another, or perhaps from or to an operating theatre. Travelling like a Pharaoh to another world, but where are her worldly goods? The bed has sides to it, which are pulled up, and as it passes the clinic door the woman suddenly switches her stare, gazes through the bars into the clinic. Help me, her eyes plead. But that's fanciful. Probably she is doped up. Mercifully, she probably has no idea where she is or what is happening.

Edwina feels nauseous. She swallows repeatedly, but can't prevent the rush of saliva into her mouth, filling it. Hastily, she takes a handkerchief from her bag and surreptitiously spits into it. Then she delves into her bag again and finds some tissues and blows her nose. This helps. A glass of water would help more, but she does not want to draw attention to herself by going in search of one. Her discomfort is her own fault. She broke her own rules. She looked up, she saw that woman in the bed. Never look at anyone, it is the only way. She has learned again a lesson she thought she had learned before. She goes back to looking at people only from the waist down, and now there are plenty of them coming into the clinic. A sequence of

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trousers and skirts, of boots and shoes. The seats are filling up. Each time someone sits down, all the seats shake. They might be firmly attached to the floor and welded together, but the combined weight of ten people in each row seems to affect their stability. It is going to happen any minute. Yes. A woman sits down next to her. A large woman, a fat woman. Her thighs spill over the sides of her seat, her bottom is cruelly caught. Move away from being touched by her. Move! But it's impossible, there is no room to move. The contact can't be avoided, the pressure of this fat woman's thigh, so warm, pressing so tightly. Perhaps crossing legs will help. It does, fractionally. The fat woman is sighing. She is murmuring, Oh dear, Oh dear. There is no doubt about it, she is going to want to talk. Here it comes, the starter question, what time is your appointment? She answers. She has to. But she will not let this go any further. Politeness is one thing, friendliness another. She does not have to be chummy, absolutely not. So, after she has replied that her appointment was for two o'clock, she ostentatiously closes her eyes and leans back in her seat to signify that she does not want to talk. But the fat woman does not read these signs correctly. 'Are you all right, dear?' she asks. This has to be dealt with. She says she is. But there is no stopping her neighbour who resorts now to a monologue. She is enraged because it is already twenty minutes past two and nobody has been seen, and the clinic is nearly full. She thinks this is a scandal. She says nobody could run a business like this. She wants agreement that the NHS is collapsing.

She isn't going to get it. Stay silent. Good, the fat woman has turned to the patient on her other side who, by the sound of it, is happy to chatter. Edwina keeps her eyes closed still, but ponders whether she does indeed think it a scandal, all this waiting. Not really. She assumes there are reasons for it. Doctors wouldn't deliberately keep patients waiting. It would be bad for their health. Anyway, she hasn't the energy to get worked up about it. It is better to be cow-like and simply accept how things are, though Laura wouldn't agree. She herself can only cope by staying remote from everything, it's as basic as that. She opens her eyes cautiously. She thinks about changing seats. Her face feels so hot, her forehead greasy with sweat. She wants to get away from the fat woman's presence. But there is only one seat left and it has women on either side who are clearly in a bad way. One is wearing a bandage round her neck and is having trouble holding her head up. It lolls pathetically. The other radiates tension. She sits ramrod-straight, handbag on knees pushed tightly together, cream-coloured raincoat buttoned up to the neck. She is wearing dark glasses. What a good idea, one to be copied, Edwina thinks. There is a lot of activity now, constant comings and goings, people carrying boxes, people with clipboards. Hardly any of them wear uniforms. It is impossible to tell who on earth they are. Not even all the doctors wear white coats. In fact, she can't recall seeing a white coat for years. White coats have come to be thought of as intimidating, or so she'd read. She didn't find them intimidating. She found them reassuring, she liked doctors to wear them. The receptionist's telephone rings all the time. The receptionist takes her time answering. Resentment is beginning to build up. It is not only the fat woman who is agitated. A man has gone up to the desk. He is saying his wife's appointment - he gestures, it is the woman with the neck bandage - was for two-fifteen and now it is twothirty- three and no sign of anything happening. He is saying, in a bad-tempered, hectoring manner, that he is not prepared to put up with this sort of treatment, his wife deserves better, yes, she does.

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And at that moment a nurse comes in. A nurse in a dark blue uniform. A Sister. At least nurses still wear uniforms, their rank clearly denoted. All eyes follow her. There is a general shuffling of feet, an outbreak of coughing, a general minor agitation. The nurse says she's sorry about the late start but it has been unavoidable. She doesn't say why. Nobody asks her why. Then she reads out the first five names. Hers is the very first, as it should be since her card was the first handed in.

'Mrs Edwina Green?' she calls.

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Edwina knows the procedure. She knows the routine. She moves towards the weighing scales without being told, and slips her shoes off. Nine stone 3 pounds. The nurse says her weight out loud before writing it down. She gives it in kilos, but Edwina has already looked at the dial and translated it into the measurement she understands. Nine stone 3 pounds is good. It is excellent. She feels a flutter of relief, a lifting of the weight in her head. She knew she was 9 stone 3 pounds, she'd weighed herself that morning, but it is good to have it confirmed and written down. No weight loss in a year. In fact, 1 pound weight gain. Very, very good. Cubicle three, the nurse says, pop your clothes off except for your pants and put a gown on. Cubicle three is good news too. For some reason, it is more spacious than the others, she always feels less claustrophobic in there, not so much like a horse trapped in a horse-box. She goes into cubicle three and snibs the door. There are two parts to the cubicle. This first section reminds her of the changing cubicles at the swimming baths when she was a child, with its shelf-like seat at the back and the wooden pegs above to hang clothes on. She takes her clothes off and hangs them up. She's dressed today with this stripping in mind. Nothing that takes time to undo. A sweater which pulls over her head, a pair of trousers with an easy zip and no buttons, slip-on shoes. The floor feels cold to her bare feet, but she welcomes the chill. The floor doesn't look too clean, though. She will probably pick up a verruca. She puts on the blue cotton gown provided. At least that is clean. As usual, the Velcro fastenings have come adrift. Two ripped off, one not sticking, only one working. She clutches the gown round her and opens the other door which leads into the examination cubicle.

There is a bed against the wall, with a sheet of thick, coarse paper spread along the length of it. She climbs on to the bed, and stares at the curtain drawn across the end. The curtain used to be blue with tiny white dots on it. She used to try to count the dots. Impossible task, though once she got to 350. She thinks it was 350. Perhaps she cheated. Perhaps she wasn't seeing the dots distinctly at all, such was her fear. But now the curtain is pink. They changed it two years ago. A very pale pink with grey squiggles running vertically down its length. It is rather soothing to follow each squiggle up and down. Better than dots. It's thinner material. Not quite transparent, but she can see shadows through it. Nurses, doctors. Consulting notes, fetching things. The ceiling was painted when the curtain was changed. Not white. It's a cream colour. Magnolia, maybe. Adeeper shade than the walls. She knows the walls are not proper walls. Just hardboard. There is talking going on next door but she can't quite distinguish the words. Some woman rabbiting on to a nurse. She herself doesn't talk to the nurses, beyond saying thank you and that yes, she is quite comfortable. And she is. Very comfortable. She could fall asleep if it were not for her

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pounding heart. Her face feels flushed. She wonders if it is. How strange she must look, with a bright red face above a pearly white body. Harry once said that, he said her skin was beautiful, pearly white. Pearls aren't actually white. She'd said that to him.

The curtain is pulled back so suddenly that she jumps. 'Hello, Mrs Green, how are you? I'm Dr Fraser.' He isn't the consultant, nor the registrar. She knows that is a good thing. They only look at the serious cases. Once, she was serious. She always saw the consultant. Then they down-graded her and for several years she saw the registrar. And now she doesn't quite know who looks her over. The lowest of the low, probably, except they are all qualified, there are no students in this clinic. This doctor is the hearty sort. Looks like a rugby player. Ruddy face, thick buttery yellow hair. She takes an instant dislike to him. She loathes heartiness. She doesn't want her doctors to be jolly. She prefers them quiet and serious, like Mr Wallis himself. This one is smiling in an inane sort of way. He will want to be chummy. He does. Stuff about the weather, stuff about the lunch he'd just had. She doesn't respond, just smiles, vaguely. He asks a couple of standard questions, about how she is feeling, and then he says let's have a look at you, then. She lets the robe fall open. Here come his hands, big hands, here come his fingers, thick fingers. She braces herself. They all examine differently. Mr Wallis has such a light, delicate touch. He never prods, just seems to let his fingers glide over her body, smoothing it down, soothing it. His touch is so gentle it almost tickles. She guesses this one will prod and push. He does. Quite hard, especially round her neck, digging his fingers in. He keeps saying good, good, fine, fine, but she is ignoring him, distancing herself. He asks her to sit up. She sits. His face is very near. He'd used aftershave liberally, a gingery scent coming off him. She closes her eyes, not wanting to meet his.

He is finished with her neck and armpits. He tells her to lie down again while he feels her tummy. She hasn't much of a tummy. She is slim and, lying down, her stomach is almost concave between her hip-bones. She thinks of the big fat woman who'd sat beside her. Her tummy would be vast, how could anything be felt in such a mass of flesh? A doctor would need big hands, thick fingers to examine it, he would need to prod and push. Right, he says, everything seems fine. Seems? Why does he have to be so equivocal, sowing doubt in her mind? Well, she knows why. They can never be certain. They have to cover themselves. He is picking up her notes again. He says he wants her to have a blood test. He says she should have had it before he saw her, but that everything is topsy-turvy today, nobody has been sent for their blood tests, but it doesn't matter, he is sure it will be fine, he'll only contact her if there is any cause for alarm, all right? No. It is not all right, but she is afraid to say so. Letters could go astray, phone calls fail to be made. She needs to know the result of all tests, whatever they are for. But he is still talking, talking and looking at his watch. He is saying something else important. He is saying that next time, next year, she is due for an X-ray, and then if everything is fine, as he expects it will be, she will be discharged. Discharged? She is shocked. The shock sounds in her voice. He looks puzzled, says yes, discharged. She would be reckoned to be clear of cancer after ten years without any further trouble. Doesn't that please her, doesn't it please her to think she wouldn't need to come to this clinic again, or does she love it so much that she can't keep away? He says the last bit teasingly, but she won't be teased, she ignores his flippant remark. She sits on the edge of the bed clutching her robe and

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asks, her voice tremulous, how, if, in a year's time, she is discharged, she isn't seen at this clinic after that, how will she know? He frowns, looks again at his watch, and says know what? That nothing is wrong, she says, that it hasn't started again, because I'm not cured, am I? I'm in remission. He looks embarrassed. He doesn't know what to say. Finally, not meeting her stare, he explains that ten years is a long time. Her tumour had been tiny and of a low malignancy with no spread. She was one of their success stories. 'But that doesn't mean I'm cured,' she repeats, timidly, 'does it?' He hesitates. She'd got him there. What will he say? What has he been taught to say? He hadn't been prepared for her question. 'You're as good as cured,' he says, sounding irritated. Where this disease is concerned long-term remission counts as a cure. 'It doesn't,' she says, quietly, shaking her head. He's had enough. 'Look,' he says, 'maybe you should talk to your GP.' 'Why would I do that,' she says, almost in tears, 'he knows nothing, he didn't even find the lump, he wasn't even going to refer me, I had to insist. I need to be checked out here, at this clinic.' He says he is sorry but that they can't go on checking patients who are perfectly healthy and symptom-free after ten years, there isn't time, there aren't the resources, and there is no need. He says he has to go, he has other patients.

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She didn't thank him. He left. She sat quite still. She heard him pull the curtain aside in the next cubicle. She heard talking, low and indistinct. A nurse came in, surprised to find her still there, and asked if she was all right. She didn't reply but slowly she got up from the bed. The nurse screwed up the paper on the bed, the noise violent, and spread a clean sheet. Another nurse came in, carrying a slip of paper, telling her to trot along with it to haematology. She asked if Edwina knew where that was but didn't wait for an answer, said follow the yellow line back to the entrance hall, then follow the red line. Edwina took the paper, retreated to the changing part of the cubicle, dressed herself. She didn't feel hot any more, didn't put her jacket on top of her sweater. She unsnibbed the door. The clinic was so full that some people, men, were standing. There must have been some kind of commotion. Nurses were clustered round a woman sitting huddled on the floor. Edwina walked past them, found the yellow line, followed it, though she had no need to, she knew the way. That Friend was still standing, lording it in the entrance hall. She went behind her, picked up the red line starting at the reception desk. She'd no need of that line's guidance either, but she followed it, looking down dully at it as it turned corners and shot down corridors. She arrived at haematology. She knew the system. Little numbered tickets came out of a machine, like they do at the deli counter in a supermarket. Take one, sit, keep an eye on the screen flashing up the numbers. She was thirty-seven. They were at twenty, but she knew things moved with speed here. They did. In no time, she was on her feet, moving to the door where a nurse took the slip of paper. It was a long, narrow room. It always reminded her for some reason of a shoe shop. The only shoes in sight were on people's feet, but the atmosphere was like a busy shoe shop, slightly frantic, chaotic. Something to do with how the seats were arranged, all along one wall, with arm-rests to the right of each one. They were all men, the technicians who took the blood. She thought they were some sort of technicians, not nurses, though they wore white coats. Did she mean laboratory assistants, she wasn't sure. No one ever told you anything. They were too busy to talk. It was all sit down, bare your arm, small prick. So busy. Blood pouring out of

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everyone into phials. Don't be silly, not pouring, tiny amounts, dribbling. The man in the middle of the row was free. He beckoned to her. Come into my parlour, said the spider to the fly. She went to him. Sat. He tightened the rubber thing round her upper arm. Asked her to clench her fist. The vein came up nicely. He was skilled. The needle went in easily. She watched the blood, her blood, squirt into the test tube. It looked rich. It looked good blood. And then the man said something. He patted her arm, the arm he'd taken blood from, and said, very quietly, almost whispering, now you take care, dear.

Did she smile? Did she acknowledge his little bit of kindness? Did she say that yes, she would take care? She had no idea. She could hardly see for tears, hardly gather up her strength to leave the room. Her progress from the room was unsteady. She couldn't see the red line to follow. Twice she lost the way to the entrance hall, twice turned corners into corridors unfamiliar to her. Miles of floor stretching in front of her, sign after sign directing her everywhere but to the exit. She had to stop and collect herself, breathe deeply. Then she felt a hand on her arm. 'Are you all right, dear, can I help you, where are you going?' She tried to say she was fine, but the words wouldn't come. She coughed to cover her confusion. The coughing helped, it cleared her head. She saw it was that woman, that Friend, the one who waited for prey in the entrance hall. She pulled herself away from the helpful arm and said she was perfectly well, thank you, just a coughing fit, and strode off briskly. She could see the exit sign now. She passed swiftly through the big entrance hall and as soon as she was outside, found a bench and sat down.

She felt better. Tired, but no longer in a panic. Taxis drew up, people got out. An ambulance shrieked past. People milled about, the comings and goings were tremendous. They came from so far away to this hospital, the biggest in the area. She had 30 miles to travel home and couldn't yet face making her way to the bus station. But the terror had finally faded. She'd been in its grip all day. She ought to feel elated, joyous even, the clinic visit over for another year and all well. More than all well. She had the prospect before her of having done with clinic visits for ever. In a year's time, she might never have to follow the yellow line again. It should thrill her, but it didn't. Elation, joy, was not what she felt. It was the fault of that kind man who took her blood. Telling her to take care. Exactly. That was what depressed her, all the care she needed to take, all the time. Taking care meant battling with her fear, grappling with pessimism, blanking out images of cells in her body grouping and splitting and gathering into tumours. They might be anywhere. They might be in her bones already, cosily sleeping, waiting. Waiting for a year, till she was discharged from the clinic and then waking up and getting to work. Nobody would know. It didn't matter how much care she took, she wouldn't know until the pain began. It wouldn't be like last time, the tiny crumb of a hard lump giving the game away. Her own care then had saved her. Mr Wallis had congratulated her on her vigilance. But next time it wouldn't be like that. The secondaries would steal through her bones or creep into her liver or drain into her brain, and no amount of vigilance would prevent them. That was how she reckoned it would be.

The burden of her dread was so heavy. She couldn't sit here all day. She wished she had her car, but she hadn't trusted herself to drive. She got up and trudged along to get the bus home, feeling dragged down by melancholy. It weighed as heavily as a

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bag of stones. She told herself that tomorrow she would feel relieved. She would, it was true. The glorious relief of the clinic being over would start as pin-pricks of happiness, a physical thing. She'd feel them in her skin, the skin of her face first. It would relax, the tautness would slacken. Then they would trickle through her whole body, these minuscule jolts of energy, and she'd feel suddenly vibrant. Harry would say she was looking particularly well. He liked saying that. She would hold herself back from any bitter remark about wondering why that was, had he not remembered she'd just been through the ordeal of the clinic. No, she wouldn't say that, or anything like that. He'd only want to know how she'd got on, and when she told him he'd beam and say what brilliant news. Brilliant!

She couldn't cope with his euphoria. Best to keep quiet. Always best.

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