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Watching Edie

Written by Camilla Way

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Watching EDIE

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For Alex

‘It’s no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then.’

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll

PART ONE

After

Outside my kitchen window the long afternoon empties of light. I look at London stretched out far below, my dripping hands held poised above the sink. The doorbell rings, one long high peal; the broken intercom vibrates. The view from up here, it's incredible, like you're flying. Deptford and Greenwich, New Cross and Erith, then the river, and beyond that there's the Gherkin, over there's the Shard. From my top-floor flat here on Telegraph Hill you can see forever and as usual it calms me, soothes me: how big it is, how small I am, how far from where I used to be.

The doorbell rings more urgently – whoever it is putting their finger on the buzzer and holding it there. The night hovers.

At first I used to see Heather everywhere. Connor too, of course. From the corner of my eye I'd catch a glimpse of one or the other of them, and there'd be that sharp, cold lurch that would leave me sick and shaken long after I'd realized that it had been an illusion; just a stranger with similar hair or the same way of walking. Whenever it happened I'd go somewhere busy and lose myself amongst the crowds, roaming the south-east London streets until I'd reassured myself that

all that was very far away and long ago. A small West Midlands town a million miles from here. And the doorbell rings and rings as I'd always known it would one day.

I live on the top floor of a large, ugly Victorian building, and there are lots of us squashed in here side by side, in our small, draughty little flats. Housing Association, most of us. And when I wedge my door open with a shoe and go down to answer the bell, past four floors of white doors marked with brass letters, the early evening sounds seep from beneath each one: a baby crying, a telly's laughter, a couple arguing; the lives of strangers.

I'm entirely unprepared for what's waiting for me beyond the heavy wide front door and when I open it the world seems to tilt and I have to grip the door frame to stop myself from falling. Because there she is, standing on my doorstep staring back at me. There, after all this time, is Heather.

And I have imagined this, dreamed of this, dreaded this, so many hundreds of times for so many years that the reality is both entirely surreal and anticlimactic. I see and hear life continuing on this ordinary London street on this ordinary afternoon – cars and people passing, children playing down the street, a dog barking – as if from far away, and as I stare into her face the sour taste of fear creeps around the back of my tongue. I open my mouth but no words come and we stand in silence for a while, two thirty-three-year-old versions of the girls we'd once been.

It's she who speaks first. 'Hello, Edie,' she says.

And then she does the unthinkable. She steps across the threshold (my heart jumping as she looms so close), wraps me in her arms and hugs me. I stand there rigid, enclosed, as memories slam into me: the wiry feel of her hair as it brushes against my cheek, that weird fried onions smell her clothes always had, her tall, heavy presence. My mind is empty, I am only my heart knocking in my throat and now she's following

me into the hallway *no no no this is just one of your dreams* and up the stairs, past all the other doors with their brass letters and their chipped paint and we're at the top and I'm watching my hand as it pushes open my door and we're here inside my kitchen *no no no no no*, and we're sitting down at my table, and I'm staring into the face I'd once hoped never to see again for the rest of my life.

Neither of us speak at first and I'm filled with longing for my quiet, solitary life within these three cramped rooms of moments before. The tap drips, the seconds pass, the browning tendrils of my spider plant shiver on the windowsill. I get up so I don't have to look at her, and I turn away and grip the work surface. With my back to her like this, I manage to speak. 'How'd you find me then?' I ask and when she doesn't answer I turn and see that she's gazing around the room, peering across the hallway to the narrow lounge with its fold-down bed.

'Hmm?' she says vaguely. 'Oh.' She looks at me. 'Your mum. Still lives in your old place, doesn't she.'

And I nod, although I hadn't known, because Mum and I haven't spoken in years and in that instant I'm back there, in the old Fremton house. We're in the kitchen, the strip light flickering, the blackness outside making mirrors of the windows. I'm crying and telling Mum everything, every single thing about what happened that night, as if telling her might stop the screaming in my head, clear the pictures from my mind. I tell her about Heather and Connor and what they did but it's like I'm telling her about some horror film or a nightmare I've had. I listen to myself say the words and I can't believe that what I'm saying is true. I don't stop talking until I've told her every last detail, and when I've finished, I reach for her, but Mum's body is rigid and her face grey with shock. She backs away from me, and never, never again in my life do I want someone to look at me the way she does then.

When she speaks she spits out her words like stones. 'Go to bed, Edith,' she says. 'And don't ever talk to me about this again. Do you hear me? I never want to hear about this again.' She turns her back then, staring at the window and I see her pinched, awful face reflected in the glass. The next morning I get up before dawn, take some money from her purse and catch the train to my Uncle Geoff's in Erith, and I never go back there again.

I'm stunned by what Heather has told me: that my mother had my address to give her amazes me. My uncle never knew what caused the rift between us and always hoped that we would one day reconcile, so the fact he passed it on to her is no surprise. But that Mum had actually written it down and kept it safe somewhere is a revelation.

I suddenly feel exhaustion roll over me in waves, but I force myself to ask, 'What do you want, Heather? Why have you come here now?' Because I always knew, really, that this moment would come. Hadn't I dreamt about it night after night, woken in the small hours sick with the fear of it, looked over my shoulder certain it was approaching, out there somewhere, getting steadily closer?

She doesn't answer at first. On the table in front of her she's put her bag: a black woollen knitted thing with a chipped plastic button. Clinging to the wool are bits of fluff, crumbs, and lots of little ginger hairs – cat hairs, maybe. Her small hazel eyes peer at me beneath sparse pale lashes; she wears no make-up except for an incongruous smear of bright-pink lipstick that looks like it should be on someone else's face. In the silence a woman's voice drifts up to us from the street, *Terry . . . Terry . . . Terrrrrrr-eeeeeee . . .* and we listen to it dwindle and die, and at that moment the darkness over London pounces, that sad, final instant where daylight vanishes, the electric lights of the city suddenly strong, and I hear a faint tremor of hurt and reproach in Heather's voice as she says,

'Nothing. I don't want anything. I just wanted to see you.'

I try to make sense of this, my mind confusedly grasping at various possible explanations, but then she starts to speak again, and she says – with loneliness like an open wound, so raw and familiar that I have to turn my eyes from it – 'You were my best friend.'

'Yes,' I whisper. And because I have no idea what else to do I get up and put the kettle on and I make some tea while Heather talks, for all the world as though this is an ordinary visit – two old friends catching up: how she lives in Birmingham now ('We moved not long after you left'), the newsagent's where she works part time.

As she talks I take in little glances. Such an ordinary-looking woman. A bit on the large size, her chubby hands folded in front of her on the table, her soft Welsh accent, her shoulder-length hair, her eager smile. 'Do you still live with your mum and dad?' I ask, for something to say, falling in with the game she's playing, if that's what this is. And she nods. Yes, I think – it would be hard, even now, to imagine her coping without them. She was never stupid, Heather, not backwards or anything like that – in fact she'd always done well at school. But despite her cleverness there'd always been an inexplicable something missing somehow, an innocence that made her vulnerable, too easily led astray. I sit down in the chair next to her. 'Heather,' I say quickly, before I lose my nerve, 'Heather, what do you want?'

Instead of answering, she reaches over and, taking me by surprise, gently pulls a strand of my hair between her fingers. 'Still so pretty, Edie,' she says, dreamily. 'You haven't changed a bit.' And I can't help it: I flinch so obviously that I have to get to my feet, cluttering the tea things together in the sink, her eyes boring into my back.

'Can I see your flat?' she asks, and when I nod she goes and stands at the door to my tiny living room. I follow her,

and together we look in at the cramped, dusty mess, the fold-down bed, the rail of clothes, the crappy, second-hand telly. 'It's lovely,' she says in a hushed voice, 'you're so lucky,' and I have to stifle a sudden desire to laugh. If you had asked me at sixteen what sort of person I would become, what sort of life my future self might lead, I would never have pictured this.

It occurs to me that she must have found her way to London by herself, before making her way through the city to get here, and I'm both impressed and horrified by this. The thought hits me that she might expect to stay the night, and the idea is so awful that I blurt, 'Heather, I'm sorry but I have to go out, I have to go out soon and it's been so nice to see you again but I really do have to—'

Her face falls. 'Oh.' She looks around the room wistfully, disappointment etched into her face. 'Maybe I could stay here until you get back.'

She eyes my sofa hopefully and I try very hard to keep the panic from my voice as I lie, 'I'm going away for a few days actually, with friends,' and I begin to steer her back towards the kitchen. 'I'm sorry.' Reluctantly she nods and follows me to where she's left her coat and bag. I watch her, my heart sinking, knowing I should relent. She's only been here fifteen minutes after all. But I stand there as she puts her coat on, and I say nothing.

'Can I have your number?' she asks. 'I could phone you and then next time we could spend the day or even the weekend together.' There's such longing in her eyes that I feel myself nodding hopelessly, and she rummages eagerly in her bag. I watch her, my arms folded tightly, as she slowly punches my name into her mobile.

She looks up expectantly, but my posture or the angle in which I'm standing reveals something to her and as realization dawns, her mouth gapes. 'You're pregnant!' she says.

For the briefest moment I see something in her eyes that makes me shudder, though I don't know why – just for a second something else peeps out at me from behind her hazel stare. My hands fly defensively to my belly and an image, gone almost before it's there, of Heri's face flickers across my mind. I don't reply.

'Well,' she says after a silence, 'congratulations. How lovely.' As she continues to gaze at me her pupils twitch intently, and sensing that she's about to ask more questions, I rattle off my number and watch as she punches it in, agonizingly slowly, until finally I open the door, say goodbye as warmly as I know how, and at last she turns to leave. But before she does she stops and pauses and says very softly, 'Do you remember the quarry, Edie? How we used to go up there together, all of us?'

I feel momentarily light-headed, a wave of nausea washes over me, and when I speak my voice is barely a whisper. 'Yes.'

She nods. 'Me too. I think about it all the time.' And then she leaves, her sensible lace-ups clattering upon the staircase as she retreats lower and lower. I lean against the wall, weak with relief, until from far below I hear the front door's heavy slam as she closes it behind her, like a jailor.

Before

Year 11 leavers' day, and everywhere you look girls are writing on each other's shirts in felt-tip pen, drinking from Coke cans I think they've filled with something else, throwing flour bombs out of top-floor windows. I sit on the bench below the library window and watch. They're all going up to the rec later to get drunk – I'd heard them talking about it in the loos. They hadn't asked me, but I don't really mind because Mum always worries if I'm back late. I see Nicola Gates over by the water fountain, but she turns away when I wave.

And that's when I first see Edie. Walking across the forecourt in the direction of the main doors. As I watch, her face appearing then disappearing behind others in the crowd, she stops, her eyes squinting up at the building before darting around herself again and then finally landing upon me. I hold my breath. I don't think I've ever seen anyone so pretty before, not in real life.

Then there she is, standing right in front of me, and at first I'm too distracted by all the different parts of her to take in what she's saying: the smell of the leather jacket she's carrying over her arm, mixed with something else, something soft and appley, her eyes, big and golden brown with lots of black

eyeliner, pale mauve varnish on her nails. In the hollow of her clavicle is a little gold locket with a tiny green stone in the middle. If you were to put your finger beneath it you'd feel the jump jump jump of her pulse.

'Sorry,' I say. 'What?'

She smiles. 'The office. Where is it?' Her voice is clear and sure with a northern accent – Manchester maybe.

Of all the people she could have stopped to ask, she'd picked me. I get to my feet. 'I'm going that way myself,' I tell her, though I wasn't. 'I'll walk with you if you like.'

She nods, shrugs. 'Yeah, OK. Ta.'

As we walk, I see Sheridan Alsop and Amy Carter standing by the water fountain. They stop talking and watch us as we pass. I have a mad impulse to link my arm through hers, this stranger who walks beside me, and I imagine us strolling along like that, arm in arm like best friends. How amazed Amy and Sheridan would be to see that! I don't though, of course. People don't like it when you do that sort of thing, I've realized.

'My name's Heather,' I tell her instead.

'I'm Edie. Well, Edith really. But how lame's that?' She looks around herself then shakes her head, 'Bloody hell, this place.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'I know! Totally lame, isn't it? Are you going to come to school here then?'

She nods. 'Starting my A-levels in September.'

'I'm doing my A-levels here too! What're you studying? I'm taking Biology and Maths and Chemistry. I was going to do a language as well but Mum and Dad said it was pointless because it's not what I need to read Medicine at uni. Best to concentrate on just the three. What with all my volunteering work and everything too. I'm going to be a doctor one day and—' I stop myself, my mouth snapping shut. I always talk too much Mum says. I bite my lip, waiting for Edie to look at me the way the other girls do.

But she doesn't, she only smiles again. Her long brown hair swings in front of her face and she pushes it away, tucking it behind her ear. 'I'm doing Art,' she tells me. 'And photography. I'm going to go to art college in London. Saint Martins probably,' she adds with breezy certainty. And she explains that she's recently moved down here to Fremton from Manchester with her mum. She has this way of talking, like she's a bit bored by everything, looking around herself like she finds it all a bit of a joke, but all the while glancing back at me, including me as if I'm in on the joke too. It's nice. I could stare at her for hours.

We've already reached the office, even though I'd taken her the long way round. 'It's in here,' I say, and I'm about to tell her that I'll wait for her, that I'll show her around after if she wants, but she's already moving away. 'OK. Thanks, yeah?' she says. 'See you later.'

The door swings shut behind her. Edie. *Eedee*. I turn the word over and over in my mind on the walk home, trying it out for size, tucking it away for safekeeping like it's a precious locket on a fine gold chain.

'Heather . . . *Heather* . . . HEATHER!' My head snaps upwards and I look around my bedroom in a daze. How long had it been this time? 'Heather!' My mother's voice, its note of irritation rising as she calls me from the kitchen, propels me to my feet. I look around myself for clues. I'm dressed in my school uniform, my bag of books by my desk. It's light outside, but definitely an evening sort of light I think. Slowly it comes back to me. It had been the last day of term before exams started. I had returned home from school and come up here to begin my revision and then . . . it must have just happened, the way it sometimes does, and I never know why. Almost as though I fall asleep while I'm wide awake. It usually happens when I'm upset or angry, like the time with Daniel

Jones, the boy who'd bullied me all through primary. I hadn't even known I'd hit him till I saw the blood. A jumble of my classmates' voices, past and present, crowds in on me, mingling to make one long mocking hiss. *What's wrong with you? Why do you stare like that? Weirdo. Fucking freak.* I shake my head to clear it.

My dad collects clocks and there are hundreds of them in our house all ticking at once, like the air is shivering, chattering its teeth. I listen, and sure enough after a few moments, there it is: the clanging jangle of dings and dongs as they all strike the hour at once. I count to seven. Teatime, then. My mother's never late. The thought of her downstairs sat at the kitchen table waiting to begin grace jolts me into action. 'Coming!' I shout. 'I'm coming!'

Downstairs, Dad sits at the kitchen table reading aloud from a newspaper article about geological engineering. Mum moves around the kitchen not listening to him, transferring plates of food from the worktop to the table in front of us. I watch her, trying to gauge her mood, but she puts the last plate down and without looking at me, sits and begins to pray.

Sometimes Mum reminds me of the lake where we used to go camping back home in Wales. I'd wade through its water on hot summer days, occasionally chancing upon inexplicable pockets of ice-cold, before blundering further into a shallower, warmer patch. I'd stay there for as long as possible, wallowing in the sunny warmth until the touch of slimy seaweed or the thought of eels or dead fish slipping past my ankles would make me panic and press on. Being with Mum is like that sometimes: you never know where the cold pockets are, or what's there waiting for you in the warmer spells.

'Heather!' My mother stops mid-prayer and I realize too late that I'd been absentmindedly picking at the tomato salad.

'Sorry,' I say, and feel myself redden.

Sometimes I do this thing to help me sleep: pretend that

everything's as it was before, that I am six again and Lydia three, and we're all still OK. I imagine Lydia's hand in mine as we run together in the garden of our old house and hear her laughter as I fall asleep.

As if to rescue me from my thoughts the face of the girl I'd met that afternoon pops into my head, and I feel a sort of light, lifting in my heart. *Edie.*

Fremton's a horrible town. I shouldn't say that, but it's true. We moved here from Wales when I was ten – a fresh start, Mum said. After what happened, people in our village who I'd known all my life suddenly looked differently at me when I passed them in the street, or else swooped down on my parents like big black greedy crows, cawing sympathy, pecking for answers.

Eventually Mum and Dad stopped doing the things they used to do. Slowly, bit by bit, Mum pulled out of choir practice, her book group, organizing school fetes. Except for church on Sundays, she barely left the house at all. Dad carried on teaching at the boys' school across the valley but at home he found refuge in his study, mending his clocks and reading his books. I guess from the outside it might have looked like we were shutting out the world to find comfort in each other, but it wasn't like that at all. My mum and dad cleaved like a stricken tree, me like a lost squirrel hopping between the two halves. Dad had never looked at me in the same way after it happened and Mum didn't either, but it was different with her. With Mum I knew in my heart that she wished it was Lydia who had come home safe and sound that day, not me.

So when they told me one evening after supper that Dad had been offered a new job in an English town 160 miles away, that it meant a promotion and a bigger house, I knew the real reason for the move: we would be going somewhere

nobody knew about us, about what had happened, and what it meant. And a month later here we were. But nothing changed, not really. My mum found a new church to go to, but apart from that she still hardly ever leaves the house. These days her focus is on me. My schoolwork, my weight, my piano practice, my future. She's trying to make me better, I think.

Now that the exams are over I have seven empty weeks to fill, so when I'm not helping Mum around the house or doing my volunteering work there's nothing much else to do but walk. Fremton's right next to the motorway, so wherever you are you can hear it, the never-ending rush of traffic on its way to somewhere else. The whole town feels like it's been forgotten somehow, like everyone upped sticks and left years ago. There's a canal that runs through the middle but no one goes down there very much and the shops in the square are mostly empty since the superstore opened on the Wrexham road. There's a big statue of a miner in the centre of the square, carrying a sack of coals on his back, but someone's spray-painted a big orange willy on his head. Then there's just streets and streets of council houses till you get to the Pembroke Estate, three high towers pushed right up against the motorway, like they're standing guard, warning outsiders away.

Wherever I go I look out for Edie, my eyes scanning the faces I pass, hoping that one day one of them will be hers. I think about her smile and her brown eyes and how nice she'd been to me and I wonder what she's doing and where she lives, whether she's bored or by herself like me. Then, out of the blue, I see her again. I'm walking home through the square when I spy her sitting on a bench by the statue, smoking a cigarette. I stop in a shop doorway to watch her. She's wearing a short denim skirt and her legs are long and tanned, stretched out in front of her, a silver chain around one ankle. Her hair hangs loose around her shoulders and she smokes her cigarette like she's deep in thought. She looks beautiful. It's as if she

shines against the greyness of this town, I think, like she's full of light. I hesitate before half raising my hand to wave and I'm about to call her name when someone cuts across in front of me and reaches her first. My hand falls to my side, her name catching in my throat.

I can't see him properly, whoever he is, this person who's come between the two of us. I only know that his effect on her is instant, her face and neck flushing pink, her eyes wide and bright. She listens to what he says, laughs and glances away, but only for a second, as though her eyes can't quite help being drawn back to him. And then he sits down next to her, so close that their arms touch. He says something and she shakes her head, a smile hovering upon her lips, and I don't know what it is, this strange heat that's there in the crackling, held-breath space between them, I only know that it has no place for me.

As quickly as it began, it's over. He leans in close and murmurs one last thing in her ear that makes two red spots appear high on her cheeks before he gets up and walks away. I get a clearer look at him now. He's dressed in tracksuit bottoms, a zipped-up jacket with a hood. He's about twenty or so and very handsome, I suppose, though I don't like his face at all, its roughness and its smile that shows he knows she's watching him still. I wait for a few moments more, in the shadow of the shop's doorway, before I take a breath and go to her.

When I'm there, standing in front of her, saying her name, she looks at me so strangely, as though she hardly knows where she is, tearing her eyes from his retreating back and blinking up at me. 'Edie?' I say again, and the moment lengthens until, at last, her expression clears and she smiles and says, 'Oh, hiya! Heather, right?' and my heart somersaults with relief.

After

A new family's moving into one of the ground-floor flats today. I stand by the window and watch them; a couple of teenage lads lugging furniture from a van, while a small, ginger, tattooed woman shouts directions from the kerb. As I watch, she raises her arm to point at something and her top rides up to reveal a long, red scar running the entire width of her back and I find myself wondering how she got it, what could possibly have happened to leave such an awful wound behind. Best part of an hour it takes them, the two, grim-faced boys towering over their mother as they traipse back and forth beneath boxes, a sofa, a fridge, watched all the while from the van's front seat by a shining black lump of muscle and teeth that barks and barks and barks.

My hands fall to the warm curve of my belly. The decision to keep it, the baby, was never consciously made, I just never went through with getting rid of it. I got as far as making the appointment, booking myself in at a clinic, but when the time came for me to put on my coat and take myself to the bus stop, I simply didn't. My coat stayed where it was, I stayed where I was, and the seconds and minutes ticked by until the time had passed, my appointment had been and gone, and

the phone with which I could call and reschedule remained untouched. I had never actively wanted a child – motherhood was something that happened to other women, not to me – yet some stubborn, unexamined part of me clung to the life growing in my belly, and it clung stubbornly to me.

The boys carry the last of the boxes from the van and are followed into the building by the woman and the dog. Within minutes I hear the sound of banging coming from the ground floor, the repeated *thwack* of a hammer echoing up the stairwell, and I stay where I am for a while longer, staring out at the street, watching the afternoon traffic pass until the hammering stops and the sound of a drill takes its place.

Heri, my baby's father, was a chef at the restaurant where I waitress. Like me he worked more and longer shifts than everyone else and we were often left to lock up together, sometimes sharing a beer after a long night. He would tell me about his home in Tunisia, about lagoons and deserts and the sirocco winds. I liked him; I liked that he didn't push his nose into my life, never asked questions I didn't want to answer, liked that he was always somehow self-contained and by himself, like me.

The night we spent together was not unexpected, but never repeated. An attraction that had always been there flickering into life one evening and, for no particular reason, acted upon. From the window of his bedsit you could see the floodlit grounds of Charlton Athletic Football Club. 'You see!' he said proudly as we stood looking out. 'The very best seats for free!' He'd shaken his head sadly as he added, 'You English really can't play football.' We drank beer and talked about our corner of south-east London. The only possessions he seemed to own were lined up on the windowsill: a book, a metal tin, some writing paper and pens, a photograph of a woman with a small boy. His clothes were folded neatly on a chair, his bed a single mattress pushed up against the wall.

'You are a strange one,' he said, turning to me, his large, almost black eyes watching me in the half-light. 'So beautiful, work so hard, so quiet.'

I continued to stare out at the illuminated pitch.

'You never talk about yourself,' he went on. 'Why are you not married, not . . .' He shrugged, and when still I didn't reply, he reached over and brushed a strand of hair from my face.

We undressed in the yellow glow of the floodlights, his skin dark and warm against my paleness; a night's comfort. And afterwards our friendship had continued exactly as it had before. When the day came for his wife and little boy to join him over here, I was happy for him and wished him well. He left the restaurant soon after for an office-cleaning job the three could do together and even after I learnt I was pregnant the thought of contacting him never occurred to me.

And the child inside me grows. I don't think about what will happen after it's born; a strange calmness possesses me: what will be will be.

In the weeks following Heather's visit she phones me repeatedly, sometimes several times a day. I never answer. Instead I watch as my mobile vibrates and buzzes, the unfamiliar number flashing on the screen, my stomach twisting queasily. Sometimes she leaves a message, but I delete them all unlistened to. It's six weeks before the calls stop abruptly one day. Life begins to return to normal, the water closing over the disturbance that she'd made, my pregnancy taking over my thoughts once more, leaving no room for anything else, not even her.

But out of the blue like a carefully aimed dart, she pierces my life again. A few days after the woman and her two lads move in downstairs, I spot the postman approaching from my window and go down to collect my mail, expecting

an appointment letter from the hospital. As I pass the new tenants' ground-floor flat I hear the sound of bolts being drawn and keys turning in their locks before the door opens a crack, stopped by a heavy thick chain. Someone peers out at me through the slim black gap as I pass. For a few seconds I feel myself being watched until finally the door closes again. I hear the locks turn and the bolts shoot home once more.

Amongst the scattered envelopes lies one that's pink and square. I don't remember ever seeing Heather's handwriting before, but I know instinctively that it's from her. The physical presence of it makes my scalp crawl but I return with it upstairs, carrying it like some dead and rotten thing between my fingertips. There on my kitchen table it sits. I leave it unopened, curling up in a ball on my sofa, my legs tucked beneath me, my arms tight around my bump. The minutes tick by until with quick decisiveness I run into the kitchen, snatch up the envelope and tear it open. Along with a piece of pink notepaper a photograph falls out, landing face down on the floor.

My hands trembling, I pick up the letter and quickly scan the words. *Dear Edie,* it says.

I've tried to phone you loads but I think I've got the wrong number. Can I come back and see you? Here's my number at the top. Please phone me.

Lots of love from Heather Wilcox. XOXO

PS. I found this photo of us! LOL! You can keep it if you want!! X

Eventually, reluctantly, I pick up the picture and look at it. It's of Heather and me. I'm sitting just in front of her by the quarry and I'm smiling up at the camera, holding my hand out as if to defend myself from its lens, my fingers a big pink blur in the foreground. Heather is looking away, staring off

down the hill. I'm shocked at how childish we look, our faces plump and stupid with youth. But the picture's not of us, not really. Even though he's the one taking the picture, it's of Connor. He is in the expression in my eyes and in the shadow that streaks across the grass between Heather and me. Connor. In my flat the walls feel a little closer, the air a little harder to breathe. A wave of nausea hits me and I have to run to the sink to vomit up the bile that floods my mouth.

Opening the kitchen window I crawl out on to the flat roof of the neighbour's bedsit below, gulping at the fresh air until the sickness begins to pass. Usually I love to sit out here, high above the city spread out before me in all its noisy, dirty glory, comforted by its vastness and indifference. It's not true what they say about London, that it looks down on the rest of the country – in fact London's barely aware of the England that lies beyond its borders. In its self-absorbed bubble, towns like Fremton and all they represent barely figure, and that has always suited me just fine.

But now, even as the sickness recedes, I see only Connor's face, the moment he'd first approached me in the square, and I feel a reflexive cold punch to my guts. I remember how the sight of him had made the rest of the world vanish, how immediate and physical it had all been. I had never seen anyone so beautiful. He'd asked me for a light, in that quiet voice of his that was like cigarettes, like syrup. Then he'd sat down next to me as if he didn't doubt for a second I'd want him to. I think he asked me what my name was, where I was from. It didn't matter: all I knew was that I'd never ever seen eyes like his before; never in my life had I seen such beautiful green eyes.

I shudder. Far below me is the building's communal garden, full of abandoned furniture and bags of rubbish. As I watch, one of the new lads from the ground-floor flat appears with his dog and it squats down next to a fridge freezer while he

waits. The boy, about seventeen or so, tall and well built, smokes a cigarette and fiddles idly with his mobile, oblivious to me up here looking down at him. I will be due at the restaurant soon and I need to catch the bus to another seven-hour shift, earning all the money I can before the baby comes. I make myself get up and, resolving to throw the letter and photo in the bin, crawl back through my kitchen window. But at the sight of them lying there on my table I freeze then barely notice as I sink into a chair.

Beyond my window the light begins to change as the afternoon wears on, an ice-cream van's chimes jangle in the warm, close air, the school-run traffic picks up, slowly, rain begins to fall. But I'm only dimly aware of these things. Despite my best intentions I am entirely back there at the Wrexham quarry, the night before I left for good, memories slamming into me one after another: the confusion and panic, the awful, terrifying screams as everything spiralled out of control. Here in my flat the last seventeen years vanish, meaningless and unreal compared to the tangible, unforgettable horror of that night.

What does Heather want from me now? What could she possibly want from me now?

Heather seems to haunt me in the days and weeks that follow. I imagine I smell her sour, oniony scent wherever I go, I keep glimpsing her from the corner of my eye, or hear her voice amongst others in the street, causing me to turn sharply, seeking her out with a pounding heart, only to find that she isn't there at all.

When my Uncle Geoff phones one day out of the blue, I'm relieved almost to the point of tears when he tells me he's coming round, so grateful am I for the distraction. He sits here now, filling my tiny kitchen with his comforting smell of cologne and cigar smoke, his broad Manchester accent familiar and soothing. I feel his eyes on me, watching me fondly as I

make him tea, and for the first time since Heather turned up again, I begin to relax.

'You all right then, Edie love?' he says.

'Yeah, you know. Not bad.'

'Not long till the little one arrives.'

'No, not long now.'

He takes the tea I offer him and says, 'Be the making of you, I reckon. You'll be a great mum, you'll see.'

I smile back at him, touched. 'Thanks, Uncle Geoff.'

'Everything going well with that fella of yours, is it?'

I nod, and we drop each other's gaze. He knows as well as I do there's no fella on the scene, but he's too tactful to say. I've always loved that about him, his unquestioning, steady support. I think about how he'd taken me in when I first arrived on his doorstep at seventeen, how kind he'd been to me, and the memory calms me and gives me strength.

When he leaves again a few hours later, I watch him from my window setting off down the street, and my heart tightens with love for him. He's nearly sixty now and I'd only ever known him as a bachelor, though Mum had told me he'd been married once, years before, to a woman who'd run off and broken his heart. He never speaks about her, but you can somehow see the memory of her there still, in his eyes and his smile, the way they do remain a part of us, those people who have hurt us very deeply, or who we have hurt, never letting us go, not entirely.