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The Other Us

Written by Fiona Harper

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The Other Us

FIONA HARPER



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



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For Andy

CHAPTER ONE

My first thought is that I am dead.

How strange, I think, as I lie very still, desperately trying not to open my eyes. Yesterday was such an ordinary day. I wasn't ill, as far as I was aware. I went to the supermarket, watched something really dull with Dan on the telly and then we argued and I went to bed alone.

Maybe that's it. Maybe I popped a blood vessel in my head while I was sleeping, from all the stress. Only that doesn't make sense. It was more of a grumpy tiff than a full-on, plate-throwing kind of row. After twenty-four years of marriage, Dan and I never do anything that involves that much energy – or passion – any more.

It vaguely occurs to me that if I'd known the previous evening was to be my last on earth that I really should have spent it doing something more interesting, something less middle-aged, like tango dancing with a brooding Latin stranger or watching the Northern Lights shimmer across the polar sky. Instead, I'd spent it in the sleepy commuter town of Swanham in Kent, watching an hour-long documentary on the life cycle of a cactus – Dan's choice.

Slightly disgusted with myself, and feeling more than a

little resentful towards my husband, I turn my thoughts back to the present.

I don't know how I know I'm dead. It's just that I had a sense as my conscious brain swam up from the murky depths of sleep of being somewhere entirely 'other'.

I heave in some much-needed oxygen, pulling it in through my nostrils. Odd. I've always thought heaven would smell nicer than this. You know, of beautiful flowers and pure, clean air, like you get on the top of a mountain.

Without meaning to, I move. There is a rustle and I freeze. Not because someone else is here and I'm suddenly aware of their presence, malevolent or otherwise, but because it sounded – and felt – suspiciously like bed sheets. For some reason this throws me.

As I remain still, listening to my pulse thudding in my ears, I start to contemplate the idea that maybe this place isn't as 'other' as I thought.

There's the sheets for one thing. And the fact that I seem to be lying on something that feels suspiciously like a mattress. As much as I get the sense that I'm not where I should be, not in my usual spot in the universe – lying next to Dan and pretending I can't hear his soft snores – there's also something familiar about this place. The smell of the air teases me, rich with memories that are just out of reach.

I really don't want to open my eyes, because that will make this real. I want this to be a dream, one of those really lucid ones. I'll tell Dan about it over breakfast and we'll laugh, last night's spat forgotten. But there's a part of me that knows

this is different, that it's too real. More real than my normal life, even. I'm scared of that feeling.

It doesn't take long before I cave, though. It's just all too still, all too quiet.

I blink and try to focus on my surroundings. The first thing I experience is a wave of shock as I realise I'm right: I'm not at home in my own bed, Dan snuffling beside me. Then the second wave hits, and it's something much more scary – recognition.

I *know* this place!

I push the covers back and stand up, forgetting I don't really want to interact with this new reality, to give it any more credence than necessary.

The memories that were fuzzy and out of reach now become razor-sharp, rushing towards me, stabbing at me like a thousand tiny needles. I want to sit down, but there's nothing to catch me but a thinning and rather grubby carpet.

This is the flat I shared with Becca during my last year at university.

I stumble through the bedroom door and into the lounge. Yes. There's the faded green velour sofa and the seventies oval coffee table, which we'd thought was disgusting at the time but nowadays would fetch a pretty price at a vintage market.

Why am I here?

How am I here?

I turn into the little galley kitchen and spot the furred-up plastic kettle that produced the caffeine that fuelled Becca and me through our late-night essay-writing sessions, a kettle I had completely forgotten about but now seems as comforting and

familiar as my childhood teddy bear. It's something to hang on to while I feel the rest of myself slipping away.

I press down the button at the base of the handle and when it actually clicks on I start to hiccup bursts of hysterical laughter. I have no idea why this is funny. To be honest, I'm starting to scare myself.

Breathe, Maggie, breathe.

I close my eyes and it helps. For a moment the room stops spinning. I try to pretend I'm not here, that I'm back at home. For a second I ache for my dull little life, then I force myself to think this through.

This can't be heaven, can it? My student digs? I flick that idea away and replace it with another one. My eyes open again. Maybe this isn't heaven. Maybe that's too much for a tiny human brain to handle right off the bat.

So maybe this is something else? A waiting room of sorts. Something familiar. Something pulled from my memory banks to help me feel at home.

I frown as I look at the broken chipboard cabinets. Fabulous work, Maggie. Great choice. Of all the places you've been in your life, this was the one that rose to the surface? I haven't travelled much, but what about Paris or that lovely beach in Minorca where we spent our tenth anniversary? Those had been pretty nice places. It must say something about me that I've subconsciously plumped for the grottiest place I'd ever lived. Or maybe it doesn't. Maybe I didn't choose it. Maybe the place you go to reflects what your life was like before you came here.

I can't decide which option is more depressing.

However, the decor might be dated, the windows so rotten they rattle in the slightest breeze, but, as I wander round, other memories start crowding in, stragglers that lope in late behind the initial onslaught.

It's weird experiencing a memory not only in the place it occurred but at the same *time* it occurred. The sensation takes my breath for a second, the recollection sharper and more colourful than it would be back in my little suburban semi with more than two decades insulating me from the moment.

I don't know how I can pinpoint it so precisely, but I know exactly where I am. *When* I am. It's the morning after the May Ball. Becca is out, having finally caught the eye of the one guy she's swooned over all through her drama course, and I'm in the flat all on my own. I remember waking up and just knowing that the world was full of possibilities and I was waiting at its threshold, one foot poised in the air, about to step into my future.

That's when I realise I know why I'm here, in this place, in this time.

Instead of freaking out about my surroundings, I start walking around again, looking at things, greeting them like old friends. Hello, drooping yucca that looks as if someone thought of the ugliest shape they could train you into and did just that. There is no beauty in your asymmetry, but I smile at you all the same. Hello, chunky VCR and impossibly cuboid television set that we watch *Dallas* and *Neighbours* on. Hello, mirrored Indian cushion cover that I bought from Kensington Market, which got ruined during a party when someone was

sick on you. I've kind of missed you all these years, but now I realise you are really rather hideous.

I finish taking the tour and sit down on the sofa and start to wait. This is a waiting room, after all. That's when I notice what I'm wearing. A large, faded 'Choose Life' T-shirt, left over from my teenage years, which I'd kept as a nightshirt. I also notice my legs.

I start to laugh. No wonder I've come back here! Everything is tight and toned and less veiny than normal. I twist my legs this way and that to get a better look. I'd heard somewhere that people aren't old in heaven, that everyone's about thirty, but taking a good look at the bits I can see, I'd put myself closer to twenty.

I smile as I sit on the sofa, tapping my feet on the floor. But eventually the smile fades and the feet stop tapping.

OK, I think. *I'm acclimatised now. Come and get me.*

I wait for someone to appear, maybe my grandad or my cousin, who got taken out by breast cancer ten years ago. That's how this works, isn't it? But nobody comes, no one knocks on the door or floats through a wall.

I get fed up sitting on the sofa and head for the bathroom. That's the weirdest thing about being dead. I need to wee. Didn't think they'd bother with that in heaven. It's a bit of a disappointment to discover otherwise.

Anyway, I go into the bathroom and do what needs to be done, and it's only when I'm washing my hands that it occurs to me I could look in the mirror. So I do. Even though I'm half expecting to see my twenty-one-year-old self stare back at me, it's a shock when it happens.

God, that awful full fringe. I thought it made me look like Shannon what's-her-face from *Beverly Hills 90210*, but, in reality, I look more like Joan Crawford from *Mommie Dearest*.

I'm just drying my hands and wondering if I can find some celestial hair grips in this strange place, when I hear the front door bang.

'Heya!' a voice yells out. 'Only me!'

I try to answer but discover my throat has closed up.

Becca?

Oh, no. Oh, God. Becca! She's not dead too, is she? What a horrible, horrible coincidence! Both of us on the same day? We must have been in a car crash together. And both of us chose *this* as our waiting room?

That's when everything starts to slip and slide again. I hear her moving around in the lounge, dumping her stuff down, just as she'd done that morning after the ball.

'*Mags? You there?*' she shouts, and I know she's pulling her hair out of its usual ponytail and flopping down on the sofa. I nod, still unable to speak – still unable to move, actually – and stare back at myself in the mirror. I'm as white as a ghost, which would be funny under other circumstances.

Reality dashes over me like a bucket of ice water, and I know the next thought that enters my head to be the absolute and inalterable truth: *I'm not dead at all. And this definitely isn't heaven.*

CHAPTER TWO

One week earlier

I arrive at Bluewater, the huge triangular shopping centre sitting in the middle of a disused quarry just near the Dartford crossing. Becca and I have been meeting for a monthly shopping trip here for a couple of years now. We could take it in turns to go to each other's houses, I suppose, but she says, as much as she loves me, the coffee here is way better. And then there's the shopping. Becca loves shopping.

I head for our usual cafe and order a coffee. I could wait for Becca before I order, but I don't. Ever since I've known her, if we've arranged to get together, I'm always ten minutes early and she's always twenty minutes late. I know I should just adjust my arrival time and turn up late as well, but somehow I can't make myself do it.

I've just reached the silky froth at the bottom of my cup when Becca arrives – an uncharacteristic ten minutes before her usual time – and collapses into the chair opposite me. She has a collection of shopping bags with her: things she needs to return to Coast and Karen Millen that she picked up on our last shopping outing and has decided don't suit her. I also

have something to return, but it's a shower curtain that needs to go back to John Lewis.

'Shall we get a table outside?' she asks, after scanning the restaurant. 'The weather's glorious.'

I sigh inwardly, reach for my bags and stand up. Becca always does this. It doesn't matter where I choose to sit, she always wants to move to a better spot. I wouldn't mind so much but I specifically chose this table because it's the one she wanted to move to last time.

Becca is practically glowing. I haven't been able to take my eyes off her since she walked through the door, and since a few male heads turn as we move tables, I guess I'm not the only one.

She's the same sort of size as me: slightly overweight, with the usual forty-something bulges and curves, but somehow she wears it better. I bought some long boots like hers in the sales last year, but every time I try them on I just end up peeling them off again. I wanted to see a stylish, mature woman staring back at me in the mirror, but all I could see was pantomime pirate. They've sat in their box at the back of my wardrobe since January.

'You look nice today,' I tell her once we've relocated. I usually greet people with a compliment, but today it isn't an automatic response pulled from my mental library at random.

Becca grins back at me. 'Thanks! I'm feeling great, too.'

I can't help smiling with her. If happiness is a disease, it's about time Becca caught it. For a long time I thought her lousy ex had inoculated her against it. 'I take it things are going well with the new man?'

'Pretty good,' she says, and orders a coffee from a passing waiter. It's very odd. Becca used to gush endlessly about her latest squeeze when we were younger, but she's being a bit cagey about this one. The only thing I can think of is that it's because this is the first proper romance since her divorce. 'We might get away for a weekend soon. If he can work out getting time away from … I mean, getting time off.' She looks down at the table again, but I see her secret smile.

'It sounds as if it's getting serious.'

Becca flushes. 'I know. Ridiculous, really. I mean, it's early days and we've only been seeing each other a couple of months and I really should be dating and having fun, but he's just so amazing.'

I want to jump in and tell her that, while I understand how wonderful this is for her, how I'm truly pleased she's happy again, maybe she shouldn't leap into this relationship quite as hard and quite as fast as she has done all her others – but the words keep tumbling out of her in a breathless stream, as if, instead of filing up neatly behind one another to make sensible sentences, they're all racing each other to see who can get out first, and I can't get a word in edgewise.

The gushing carries on as we leave the cafe. She instinctively heads in the direction of her favourite shops and I trail along with her while my shower curtain gets heavier and heavier. I mention this after we've dropped off both her returns.

'Of course,' she responds, but then, when we've turned tail and are heading back towards John Lewis, we pass Hobbs. She gives me a sugary smile. 'You don't mind if we pop in here, do you? It'll only take a minute, and they had this gorgeous

blouse that'd be perfect for work now the weather's finally turned warmer …'

I shake my head, but after Hobbs it's Laura Ashley and then it's Massimo Dutti.

I honestly don't know if she does this on purpose, or whether her memory is really goldfish-short. There are times at the end of our shopping trips where Becca has had to dash off again and I've had to stay behind to do the essential errand she promised we'd get round to an hour earlier.

This makes her sound like a horrible friend, but really she isn't. She's had a tough time in the last couple of years. Her ex, Grant, turned out to be a manipulative, controlling creep. I always worried he hit her, but she always denied it. Even so, it took her far too long to muster up the courage to leave him, which she did eighteen months ago.

He hardly let her out his sight, our shopping trips being one of the few exceptions, and the least I could do then was to let her have some power and control over what she did for a few hours. I suppose we've just fallen into a pattern now, one that's hard for me to change without bringing it up and sounding whiney.

Becca is a theatre manager now and as we shop she gives me an in-depth report on the antics of a well-known soap star who was appearing in the play that was on last week. My shoulder develops a nagging little niggle from the weight of my John Lewis carrier bag.

At first I'm nodding and smiling at her blow-by-blow account of his excessive vodka-drinking to get over his opening-night nerves but, funny as it is, after a while, I start

to tune out. I mean, we've been talking about her stuff since we sat down for cappuccinos and it hasn't even occurred to her to ask if anything much is going on in my life, even if I do usually just wave the question away and say, 'Oh, just the same old same old …'

But today I do have something to say. Something big. Or at least I think I might. I really can't work out if I'm just being silly, and I could do with a friend to help me sift through the facts and sort out the truth from the muddy paranoia.

But Becca is too full of 'glow' to notice the worry in my eyes. She just barrels on. It's only after I've hauled my shower curtain onto the sales desk in John Lewis's homeware department (and almost kissed the sales lady for taking it off my hands), and completed the transaction, that she finds a new topic.

'Did you see that thing on Facebook?

I'm tucking my returns receipt back into my purse. When I finish I look at her, frowning slightly. 'What thing?'

'The reunion. Oaklands College. Some of the guys are planning a get-together, seeing as it's twenty-five years since we graduated.'

Even though, logically, I know this is how long it's been since I left university, the fact slaps me in the face, waking me up. Twenty-five years … a rapid slideshow of my life starts to play inside my head. I'm horrified to see how many slots are filled with black and white images of my routine suburban life or – even worse – empty.

'Where is it? Who's going?' I ask, feeling slightly dazed.

'On campus, I think someone said, and only a few people have responded so far. The post only went up yesterday.'

I nod. There's not much else I've got to say on the subject.

Becca leads the way back out of the shop and turns in the direction of the food court. I'm pretty sure that's where she's heading, even though she hasn't said anything. Shopping always makes her hungry.

As we walk she turns to look at me carefully. 'Do you think you'll go?'

I shrug. 'Probably not.'

'Really? I thought it'd be fun to see the old crowd.'

Of course you would, I say in my head. You're happy. You look great. You're *glowing*. Even if I'm curious about what everyone looks like and what they are doing now, I'm not sure I want that same inquisitiveness directed back at me.

What will they see? I haven't become anything interesting or 'grown into' myself with age. If anything, I feel all that potential and passion I'd had in my twenties has been slowly diluted until I'm now a watery version of who I once was. I don't want to turn up, have to chat to people with a plastic goblet full of warm sauvignon, and see the look of vague recognition in my university mates' eyes before they smile nicely and move on to someone more interesting.

I shake my head. 'Oh, I don't know. It seems like such a lot of effort for something that was such a long time ago.'

'You're not even curious about Jude Hansen?'

At the mention of that name my pulse jumps. I make very sure it doesn't show on my face. I pretend I'm too busy navigating round a young mum dawdling with a pushchair to answer.

Becca, however, doesn't seem to want to let it go, which

is odd, as she never really liked Jude. 'Word is he's done very well for himself.'

I straighten my spine and keep looking straight ahead. 'I really wouldn't know.'

There's a part of me that wants to turn and scream at her to shut up, but there's also another contrary part that is willing her to keep talking. It's like a scab that's not quite ripe for picking. I know I should leave it alone, that it'll only sting and bleed, but part of me wants both the pain and the satisfaction of pulling it off and knowing what's really underneath.

I deliberately haven't thought of Jude Hansen for more than twenty-four years. I looked at myself in the mirror the morning of my wedding day and told myself that door was closed.

'So what do you think? Shall we go?' She nudges me as we start to peruse the chiller cabinets of the sushi place. I make a show of looking, even though I know I'm going to pick the salmon bento box. I always do.

She joins the queue, leaving me to file in behind her. 'It'll be a right laugh. You'll see …'

I'm really irritated that she's acting as if I've already agreed, as if my role in life is just to trail around behind her and do whatever she wants. I realise that as much as I moan about having a husband who's so laid-back he just 'goes with the flow' about everything, I've chosen a best friend who is the complete opposite and I don't always like this end of the spectrum much either.

'Come on, aren't you even curious?' she asks once we've found some seats. 'You and Jude were quite a hot item at one time, if I remember rightly …'

The penny drops then. For some reason she really wants to go to this stupid reunion and she's using Jude as leverage because she wants me to go with her.

Maybe it's because my shoulder is still twanging from carrying that shower curtain round for an hour longer than I'd wanted but I find I don't want to be nice, accommodating, doormat Maggie any more. 'Not really …' I say, feigning indifference just as well as Becca has been doing. 'It's ancient history and I honestly don't care in the slightest what Jude Hansen is doing now.'

Becca eats her chicken katsu curry sulkily after that. Normally, I'd stay silent for a couple of minutes then start to chat to her, win her round, but today I stay quiet. Let her offer the olive branch for once.

I know this spells the end of our shopping trip. When we finish we throw our rubbish away and head outside, and when we pause to say our goodbyes before heading off to our respective cars, Becca looks sheepishly at me. 'Sorry if I was being pushy … I just got a bit excited about the idea, that's all.' She looks hopefully at me. 'Are you *sure* you don't want to go?'

I shake my head.

'You won't even think about it?'

I laugh. Even when Becca is trying not to be so … Becca … she can't help herself. 'OK, OK, I'll think about it.' Usually, I employ this tactic to shut her up. I just say yes to whatever she's pushing for to keep the peace then wriggle out of it later, but I discover as I drive home back to Swanham that I was telling the truth. I can't think about anything else – any*one* else – all afternoon.