Forget Me Not

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Extract

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ONE

'It's hard isn't it?' said Dad. 'Saying goodbye.' I nodded, shivering slightly in the mid-February air. 'It's sad seeing it with everything gone.' We gazed at the back of the house, its windows glinting darkly in the late-afternoon sunlight. 'Maybe you shouldn't have come.'

I shook my head. 'I wanted to see it one last time.' I felt Milly's tiny hand in mine. 'I wanted Milly to see it one last time too.'

I'd been down several times to help Dad pack up, but this was the final goodbye. The following day Surrey Removals would arrive and our long association with the house would cease. As I stood there, memories spooled across my mind like the frames in an old cine film. I saw myself in pink shorts, on the swing; my parents, posing arm in arm under the cherry tree for their silver wedding photo; I saw Mark throwing tennis balls for Bob, our border collie; I saw Cassie doing cartwheels across the lawn.

'I'll just go round it once more,' I said. 'Just to check . . . you know . . . that I haven't left anything.' Dad nodded understandingly. 'Come on, Milly.'

We went inside, picking our way through the expectant crates, our footsteps echoing slightly over the bare floors.

I said a silent goodbye to the old-fashioned kitchen with its red and black quarry tiles, then to the big, bay-windowed sitting room, the walls stamped with the ghostly outlines of pictures that had hung there for thirty-eight years. Then we went upstairs to the bathroom.

'Starbish!' Milly announced, pointing at the curtains.

'Starfish,' I said. 'That's right. And shells, look, and seahorses . . . I used to love these curtains, but they're too frayed to keep.'

'Teese!' Milly exclaimed. She'd grabbed Dad's toothbrush. 'Teese, Mum!' She was on tiptoe, one chubby hand reaching for the tap.

'Not now, poppet,' I said. 'Anyway, that's Grandpa's toothbrush and we don't use other people's toothbrushes, do we?'

'*My* do.'

I opened the medicine cabinet. All that remained were Dad's shaving things, his toothpaste and his sleeping tablets. He said he still needed to take one every night. On the shelf below were a few of Mum's toiletries – her powder compact, her dark-pink nail varnish, streaked with white now through lack of use, and the tub of body crème I'd given her for her last birthday, hardly touched. I stroked a little on to the back of my hand, then closed my eyes.

How lovely, darling. You know I adore Shalimar. And what a huge jar – this will keep me going for ages!

'Mum! Come!' I opened my eyes. '*Come!*' Milly commanded. She'd grabbed my hand and was now leading me up the stairs to the top floor, her pink Startrites clumping against the steps.

'You want to go to the playroom?'

'Yes, Mum,' she panted. 'Paywoom!'

I pushed on the varnished door, inhaling the familiar musty smell of old dust. I'd already cleared most of the toys, keeping a few that weren't too wrecked for Milly. But there was still a stack of old board games on the table, a jumble of dressing-up

clothes in a basket and, scattered across the green lino, a selection of old comics. The debris of a happy childhood I reflected as I picked up an ancient *Dandy*.

Milly reached inside a little pink pram. 'Look!' She was holding up one of my old Sindys with the triumphant surprise of an actress with an Oscar.

'Oh . . . I remember *her* . . .' I took the doll from Milly's outstretched hand and it gave me a vacant stare. 'I had lots of Sindys. Five or six of them. I used to like changing their clothes.' This Sindy was wearing a frayed gingham shirt and a pair of filthy jodhpurs. Her once luxuriant nylon tresses were savagely cropped, thanks, I now remembered, to Cassie. As I ran my thumb over the bristled scalp I felt a stab of retrospective indignation.

I know Cassie annoys you, darling, Mum would say. But try to remember that she's six years younger than you and she doesn't mean to be a nuisance.

'She's *still* being a nuisance,' I breathed. I held the doll out to Milly. 'Would you like her, sweetie?'

'No.' Milly shook her dark curls. 'No, no, no,' she muttered. The severe coiffure was clearly a turn-off. She thrust it back into the pram.

I quickly gathered a few things into a bin liner. As I did so a stray Monopoly note fluttered to the floor.

'Five hundred pounds . . .' I turned it over in my hands. 'Shame it's not real – we could do with some more cash right now – and this' – I held up a battered Land Rover – 'was Mark's.' Its paint was chipped and it was missing a wheel. 'You know Uncle Mark? The one who sent you Baby Annabelle?' Milly nodded. 'He lives a long way away – in America.'

'Meika,' Milly echoed.

'You've only met him . . . once,' I realised disconsolately. 'At your christening.' I looked around the room. 'Mark and I used to play here a lot.' I remembered changing the signals

on his Hornby train set and arranging the little fir trees by the side of the tracks. 'He and I were great friends, but we hardly see each other now. It's sad.'

Especially for Milly, I thought. She doesn't have many men in her life. Not much of a dad; no brothers, just one grandfather, and Mark, her only uncle, had been living in San Francisco for the past four years.

'OK, darling – let's go. Bye-bye, playroom,' I added as I closed the door behind us.

''Bye, paywoom.'

Then we crossed the landing into my old room. As we sat on the bed I looked up at the frosted-glass bowl light fitting in which I now noticed the hunched corpse of a large spider. It must have been there for months. Then I glanced at the window-panes, the lower left one visibly scored with large, loopy scribbles. 'I did that,' I said. 'When I was six. Granny was a bit cross with me. It was naughty.'

'Naughty,' Milly repeated happily.

'You'd have loved Granny,' I said. I lifted Milly on to my lap and felt her arms go round my neck. 'And she'd have adored you.' I felt the familiar pang at what my mother had been deprived of.

''dored . . .' I heard Milly say.

We stood up. I said a silent goodbye and closed my bedroom door for the very last time. Then I glanced into Mark's room, next to mine. It was almost empty, the dusty white walls pebbled with Blu-Tack. He'd cleared it before he left for the States. He'd stripped it bare, as though he was never coming back. I remember how hurt my parents had been.

Now we went downstairs and I stood in the doorway of their room.

'I was born in here, Milly . . .'

You arrived three weeks early, Anna. But there'd been heavy snow and I couldn't get to the hospital so I had to have you at home. Daddy delivered you – imagine! He kept joking that

he was an engineer, not a midwife, but he told me afterwards that he'd been terrified. It was quite a drama really . . .

Their mahogany wardrobe – along with other unwanted furniture – was being sold with the house. I opened Mum's side – there was a light clattering as the hangers collided with each other. I visualised the dresses that had hung on them until only a few months ago – it had been two years before Dad had gone through her clothes. He said the hardest part was looking at her shoes, imagining her stepping into them.

Now Milly and I went downstairs to say goodbye to the garden – the garden my mother had nurtured and loved. It was only just emerging from winter mode, still leafless and dormant and dank. But as we stepped outside I remembered the flowerbeds filled with phlox and peonies in high summer; the lavender billowing over the path; the lilac with its pale underskirt of lilies of the valley in May; the lovely pink Albertine that smothered the arch. Every tree, shrub and plant was as familiar to me as an old friend. The *Ceanothus*, a foamy mass of blue in late April; the Japanese quince with its scarlet cups. I remembered, every autumn, the speckly green fruit with which my mother made jelly – the muslins heavy with the sweet, stewed pulp.

Chaenomeles. That's the proper name for quince, Anna – Chaenomeles. *Can you say that?*

My mother loved telling me the proper names of plants and started doing so when I was very young. As I trailed after her round the garden she'd explain that they weren't just pink flowers, or yellow shrubs, or red berries. They were *Dianthus*, or *Hypericum*, or *Mahonia* or *Cotoneaster*.

'That purple climber there,' she'd say. 'That's a clematis. It's called *Jackmanii*, after the person who first grew it. This pale gold one's a clematis too – it's called *tangutica*. They're like fairies' lanterns, aren't they?' I remembered her pinching open the jaws of snapdragons, and showing me the fuchsias, with their ballerina flowers. 'Look at their gorgeous tutus!'

she'd say as she'd wiggle the stems and make them 'dance'. In the autumn, she'd gently rub open the 'coins' of silvery Honesty with their mother-of-pearl lining to show me the flat seeds within. Gradually, with repetition, the names sank in and I'd acquired a botanical lexicon – the lingua franca of plants. As I got older she'd explain what they meant.

'The Latin names are very descriptive,' she'd say. 'So this little tree here is a magnolia, but it's called a *Magnolia stellata*, because *stellata* means star-like and the flowers do look like white stars – do you see? This plant here is a Hosta tardiflora – a late-flowering *Hosta* – it's "tardy"; and that big buddleia over there's a *Buddleia globosa*, because it's got spherical flowers like little globes. And this thing here is a *Berberis evanescens* which means . . .'

'Disappearing,' I heard myself now say. 'Quickly fading from view.' I thought, bitterly, of Xan.

Then I remembered again the advice my mother had given me, at twenty, when I'd first had my heart broken. 'Jason seemed very . . . pleasant,' she'd said carefully, as I'd sat on my bed, in floods. 'And yes, he was good-looking, and well dressed – and I suppose he had that lovely car.' I thought, with a pang, of his Lotus Elise. 'But he really wasn't right for you, darling.'

'How can you say that?' I'd croaked. 'You only met him once.'

'But that was enough for me to see that he was, well, what I'd call – to use a gardening analogy – a flashy annual. They make a great impression, but then they're gone. What you really want, Anna, is a hardy perennial.' I'd had a sudden image of myself marrying a *Forsythia*. 'A hardy perennial won't let you down. It will show up year after year, reliable, and trustworthy – and safe. Like your father,' she'd added. 'Always there for me. Whatever . . .'

I picked Milly up. 'I didn't do what Granny advised,' I whispered. 'But it doesn't matter, because it means I've got

you. And you're just' – I touched her nose with mine – 'the sweetest thing. The bees' knees.'

'Bizzy nees.' She giggled.

I hugged her, then put her down. 'Now look at these little flowers, Milly. They're called snowdrops. Can you say that? Snowdrops?'

'Snowtops . . .'

'And these purple ones here are called crocuses . . .'

''Kisses.' Her breath came in tiny pillows on the frosty air.

'And this, you may be interested to know, is a miniature wild cyclamen.'

'Sick . . .' Milly giggled again.

'Granny used to say they had windswept little faces, as though they'd stuck their heads out of the car window.' As we stood up, then walked across the lawn, I imagined myself, as I often did, years hence telling Milly what had happened to my mum.

You had a wonderful granny, I could hear myself say. *She was a lovely, vibrant person. She was interested in lots of things and she was especially interested in gardening. She knew a lot about it and was very good at it – she'd taught herself the names of all the plants and flowers. And she would have taught you them, Milly, like she taught me, but sadly she never got the chance, because a year before you were born she died . . .*

I heard a step and looked up. Dad was coming through the french windows, holding a cardboard box. Like the house, he had an air of neglect. He used to look well-preserved for his years, young, even. At nearly seventy, he was still good-looking, but had been aged by grief.

I never thought I'd be without your mother, he'd say for months afterwards. *She was twelve years younger than me. I simply never thought it. I don't know what I'll do.*

Now, after three years, he did. He'd finally felt able to sell up and was moving to London, just a mile away from Milly

and me. 'I've loved this house,' he said as he came and stood next to us. 'We've been here so long. Nearly four decades.'

I imagined what the walls had absorbed in that time. Talking and laughter; weeping and shouting; the cries of childbirth, even. I imagined us all embedded into the very fabric of the house, like fossils.

I heard Dad sigh. 'But now it's time to uproot and move on.'

'It's for the best,' I said. 'London will be distracting. You'll feel happier there – or, at least, better.'

'Maybe,' Dad said. 'I don't know. But it'll certainly be nice being so near to you and Milly.' I noticed the silvery stubble on his jaw. 'I hope you won't mind me dropping in from time to time.'

'I wish you wouldn't say that,' I protested gently. 'You know you can come whenever you like. I've encouraged you to do this, remember?'

'I won't be a nuisance.' I rolled my eyes. 'And I'll babysit for you. You should take me up on that, Anna. Babysitting's expensive.'

'That's kind, but you'll need to get out yourself – see your friends – go to your club, plus I've got Luisa now, haven't I?'

'That's true.'

I reflected gratefully on what wonderful value for money au pairs are. I could never have afforded a part-time nanny – especially with the fees for Milly's new nursery school. But for seventy pounds a week, I get up to five hours' help a day from Luisa, plus two babysits. She's a godsend.

'Not that I go out that much,' I told Dad. 'I usually work when Milly's asleep. I can get a lot done then.'

'You should go out more,' he said. 'It would be good for you. Especially in your situation.' He set off down the garden – Milly and I following – then he stopped to hold back an overhanging spray of winter jasmine. Everything looked so unkempt.

'Thanks for all the sorting out you've done over the past month,' he added as we walked on. 'I know I've said it before, but I've really appreciated it.'

'All I did was a few runs to Oxfam, and I didn't clear everything.'

'Well, it was wonderful just having you here. I'd have got very down doing it on my own.'

I thought, irritably, of my siblings. Mark's in the States, fair enough; but Cassie could have helped. She only came once, to clear her own room. Not that Dad seemed to mind. But then he indulges Cassie, as though she's nine years old, not twenty-nine. Being the 'baby', she's always been spoilt.

Our feet crunched over the gravel as Milly and I followed Dad down the long, narrow path, past the silver birch and the greenhouse. I had a sudden image of my mother in there, in her straw hat, bent over a tray of seedlings. I imagined her glancing up, then waving to us. We walked on, and I assumed that Dad was taking the box to the garage to put in the car. Instead, he stopped by the bonfire patch and began to pile bits of wood on to the blackened earth with a fork.

'I saw Xan yesterday,' I heard him say as he splintered an old crate underfoot.

My heart stopped for a beat, as it always does at Xan's name.

'Where was that, then?' I smiled a bitter little smile. 'On the nine o'clock news? The one o'clock? *Panorama*?'

'*Newsnight*.'

'Oh.' A solitary magpie flew overhead. 'What was he talking about?'

'Illegal logging.'

'I see . . .'

'Poor you,' Dad said. He leaned on the fork. 'You cope very well, Anna, but being a single mum's not what your mother and I would have wished for you.'

What you need is a hardy perennial. Someone who'll always be there for you. Whatever . . .

'Don't misunderstand me,' Dad added quickly. 'I love Milly so much . . .' He reached out to stroke her head and I noticed how frayed the cuffs of his shirt were. I made a mental note to take him shopping for some new ones. 'But I wish you had a better set-up, that's all.'

'Well . . . I wish I did too.'

'It can't be easy.'

'It isn't.' In fact, it's hard, I reflected grimly. However much you love your child, it's hard bringing them up on your own. It's hard not having anyone with whom to share the daily anxieties, or the responsibility, or the joys, let alone the long, lonely nights when they're tiny babies, or the naked terror when they're ill. 'But this is the set-up I've got. And there are plenty of kids who have *no* contact with their fathers.' I thought of Jenny, my friend from NCT. 'And at least Milly does have *some* sort of relationship with her dad' – I bit my lip. I had uttered the dreaded 'D' word.

'Daddy!' Milly yelled, right on cue. '*Daddy!*' She's only met Xan six times in her two and a half years, but she adores him. 'Dad-*dy*!' she repeated indignantly. She stamped her feet, dancing on the spot with frustration, then threw back her head. 'Dad-*deee*!' she yelled, as though she thought she might summon him.

'It's all right, darling,' I soothed. 'You'll see Daddy soon.' This wasn't so much a white lie, as a neon-flashing Technicolor one, as I hadn't the slightest idea when we'd next see Xan. Milly has to make do with seeing him on TV. She's elated for the few moments he's on-screen, then she bursts into tears. I know just how she feels.

'Dad-*eee* . . .' Her face had crumpled and her big grey-blue eyes had filled. My father distracted her by getting her to help him pick up leaves. I stooped to pick some up too and,

as I did so, my eye fell on the cardboard box, which seemed to be full of old papers. On one yellowing envelope I saw my mother's neat italics.

'Good girl,' I heard Dad say as Milly scooped up twigs in her mittened hands. 'Let's pick up these leaves over here, shall we – they're nice and dry. That's it, poppet. Now, go and stand next to Mummy while I light the fire.'

'I always thought I'd be just like Mum,' I said, almost to myself now, as Milly wrapped her arms round my knees. 'I thought I'd have a completely conventional family life – just like she did.' Dad didn't reply. He was trying to strike a match, but they kept breaking. 'I thought I'd have a husband and kids. I never imagined myself bringing up a child alone, but then . . .' I shook my head.

'. . . then life happened,' Dad said quietly. The match flared and he cupped it, then put it to the pile.

'Yes. That's what happened. Life.' We heard the crackle of burning leaves and a thread of pewtery smoke began to curl upwards, scenting the air.

Dad straightened up. 'Have you taken absolutely everything you want from the house? Because what doesn't go in the removals van will be disposed of by the cleaners. I left out a pile of your mum's gardening books I thought you might want. Did you see them?'

'Yes, thanks. I just took three, and her trowel and fork – I wanted to have those.'

'That would make her happy,' he said. 'She'd be so pleased at what you're doing. Not just because she loved gardening so much, but because she thought the City was too hard for you – those long hours you had to do.'

'I do long hours now.'

'That's true.' Dad began to fan the fire with the rusty lid from an old biscuit tin. 'But at least you're not a wage slave any longer – it's all for you and Milly. Plus you enjoy what you're doing more.'

'Much more,' I agreed happily. From the holly we heard the chittering of a wren. 'I love being a garden designer.'

'A fashionable one according to *The Times*, eh?' That unexpected bit of coverage had really lifted my confidence; Sue, my former PA, had spotted it and phoned me. 'And those appearances on GMTV must have helped.'

'I think they did.' I'd recently done five short pieces about preparing the garden for spring.

'And what happened with that big contract in Chelsea you were hoping to get?'

'The one in The Boltons?' Dad nodded. 'I've done the survey and I'm taking the designs over on Saturday. If it goes ahead it'll be my biggest commission by a very long way.'

'Well – fingers crossed. But if you're ever stuck for money you know I'll lend you some. I could be a sleeping partner in the business,' he added with a smile.

'That's kind, but I budgeted for the first two years being a bit tough and you know I'd never ask you for help.' Unlike Cassie, I thought meanly. She's always touching Dad for cash. Like that time last year when she simply *had* to go and find herself on that Ashtanga Yoga retreat in Bhutan – Dad had 'lent' her most of the three and a half grand. 'Anyway,' I went on, 'things should be a little easier this year.' There was a soft pop as sparks burst from the fire, like lava from a tiny volcano.

'Well . . .' There was a sudden, awkward silence. Dad cleared his throat, then I saw him glance at the box. 'I . . . imagine you'll want to be getting back now, won't you?'

'I . . . guess so.' I looked at my watch. It was only 3.30. I still wasn't quite ready to say my final farewell, plus I was enjoying the warmth of the fire.

'I know you don't like driving in the dark.'

'That's true.'

'And then it'll be Milly's bedtime.'

'Mm.'

'And I've got things to do, actually.'

'Oh.' Dad wasn't usually in a hurry for us to leave – quite the opposite. 'OK, then . . . we'll be on our way.' I looked at the cardboard box. 'Are you sure you don't need help with anything else before I go?'

'No. I've just got to deal with this before the light goes.'

'What is it?'

'Just . . . old correspondence.' I suddenly saw that a red stain had crept up Dad's neck. 'Valentine cards I'd sent your mum – that sort of thing.'

I didn't remind him that today was Valentine's Day. Not that I'd received so much as a petal, I thought ruefully. I was a romance-free zone.

'She never threw them away,' I heard Dad say. 'When I finally went through her desk I found them.' He shook his head. 'Every Valentine card I'd ever sent her – thirty-six of them,' he went on wonderingly. 'She was very sentimental, your mum. Then I sorted through some old letters that she'd sent me.'

I did up Milly's top button. 'But why would Mum write to you when you were married?'

Dad fanned some smoke away. 'It was when I was in Brazil.' He looked at me. 'I don't suppose you remember that, do you?'

'Vaguely . . . I remember waving you off at the airport with Mum and Mark.'

'It was in 1977, so you were five. I was out there for eight months.'

'Remind me what you were doing.'

'Overseeing a big structural repair on a bridge near Rio. The phone lines were terrible, so we could only keep in touch by letter.'

Now I remembered going to the post office every Friday with our flimsy blue aerogrammes. I used to draw flowers on mine, as I couldn't write.

'It must have been hard for you, being away for so long.'

'It was,' Dad said quietly.

'So that was before Cassie was born?'

He snapped in half a small, rotten branch. 'That's right. Cassie was born the following year.'

I looked at the box again – a repository of so much emotion. 'Are you sure you don't want to keep them? It seems a pity.'

'I will keep them.' Dad tapped his chest. 'Here. But I don't want to sit in my new flat surrounded by things that make me feel . . .' His voice had caught. 'So . . . I'm going to look at them one last time, then burn them.'

'I understand,' I said. 'We'll be on our way, then. But ring me when you've got to London and we'll pop over.' Dad nodded. 'Say bye-bye to Grandpa then, darling.'

Milly tipped up her face to be kissed.

'Bye-bye, my little sweetheart.'

I hugged him. ''Bye, Dad.' *Damn*. I'd done it again.

'*Dad*-ee!' Milly cried.

By the time I'd strapped her into her car seat, and we were turning out of the drive, Milly was chanting 'Dad-dy! Dad-dy!' with the passion and vigour of a Chelsea supporter.

'It's OK, darling,' I sang. 'We *will* be seeing Daddy, but not for a little while, because he's busy at the moment.'

'Daddy. Bizzy,' she echoed. 'Bizzy. Daddy!'

'Oh! Look at that horsy,' I said.

''Orsy! Dad-*dy*!'

'And those lovely moo cows. Look.'

'Moo cows. Dadd*eeeee* . . .'

As we idled at a red light, I glanced in the mirror and Xan's eyes stared back at me – the colour of sea holly. I often wished that Milly didn't resemble him so much. And now, as her lids closed with the hum of the engine and the warmth of the car, I recalled meeting Xan for the first time. Not for

a moment could I have imagined the shattering effect that he would have on my life.

As I released the clutch and the car eased forward, I remembered how cautious I'd always been until then. I was like Mark in that way – sensible and forward-looking. Unlike Cassie.

'You need to have a life plan,' Mark would say. He was two years older and we were close in those days, so I listened to him. 'I'm going to be a doctor.'

By fourteen, I had my own plan mapped out: I'd work hard, go to a decent university, get a good job and buy a flat. In my late twenties I'd find myself that nice hardy perennial, get married and have three children, going back to work when the youngest was at school. My salary would not be essential, but would pay for a seaside cottage somewhere, or a house in France, which said hardy perennial and I would ultimately retire to, enjoying frequent visits from our devoted children and grandchildren, before dying peacefully, in our sleep, at ninety-nine.

For years I'd followed my plan to the letter. I read History at York, then got a job at a City hedge fund, where I joined the Equity Research department, gathering intelligence on investment ideas – analysing 'fundamentals across multiple sectors' as they called it. The work wasn't always thrilling, but it was very well paid. I bought a small house in Brook Green, paid the mortgage and pension; then, with the rest, I enjoyed myself. I went skiing, diving and trekking; I joined a gym. I went to the opera, where I sat in the stalls. I spent time in my garden, and with family and friends. I was on track to reach my personal goals.

When I turned thirty, I started on the treadmill of engagement parties, hen nights and weddings. Feeling I ought to make more of an effort to meet someone, I joined a tennis club, gave parties and went on dates. With these I kept in mind my mother's old-fashioned precepts: 'Wait before

returning their calls,' she'd often say. 'Make them think you're too busy to see them. Never, *ever* throw yourself at them, Anna. Try and retain a little "feminine mystique".' I'd groan at all this, but she'd retort that there was a little dance of courtship that needed to be danced and that it was her duty to give me 'womanly' advice.

'All mothers should,' she once said with a vehemence that took me aback. 'My mother never told me anything,' she'd added bitterly. 'She was too embarrassed. But I wish she had done, because it meant I was hopelessly unworldly.'

Which probably explains why she married Dad when she was twenty.

'It was a whirlwind romance,' she'd say coyly whenever the subject came up.

I'd discreetly roll my eyes, because I've always known the truth.

'A tornado,' Dad would add with a wry smile. They'd gone up the aisle two months after meeting at the Lyons Corner House on The Strand.

'It was raining,' Mum would say, 'so the café was full. Suddenly this divine-looking man came up to me and asked if he could share my table – and that was that!'

But it used to amuse me that my mother, whose own romantic life had been so happily uneventful, should seem so anxious to educate me about affairs of the heart.

The men I dated were all attractive, clever and charming, and would have been 'husband material', were it not that they all seemed to have major drawbacks of one sort or another. Duncan, for example, was a successful stockbroker – intelligent and likeable – but his enthusiasm for lap-dancing clubs was a problem for me; then there was Gavin who was still getting over his divorce. After that I dated Henry, an advertising copywriter, who avoided traffic jams by driving on the pavement. The second time he was cautioned I called it a day. Then I met Tony, a publisher, at a wedding in

Wiltshire. Tony was clever and fun. But when after six months he said that he didn't want anything long-term I ended it. I couldn't afford to waste my time.

'You've still got ages, darling,' my mother had said consolingly afterwards. We were sitting on the garden bench in Oxted, under the pear tree. It was her birthday, the tenth of May. She put her arm round me, wrapping me in the scent of the Shalimar I'd given her that morning. 'You're only thirty-two, Anna,' I heard her say. My eyes strayed to the little blue clouds of forget-me-nots floating in the flowerbeds. 'Thirty-two's still young. And women have their children much later now – thank goodness.'

I suddenly asked her something I'd always wanted to know: 'If you could have your time again, Mum, would you have waited longer before starting a family?' She'd had Mark when she was just twenty-one.

'Well . . .' she'd said, blushing slightly, 'I . . . don't think having a child is ever a mistake.' Which wasn't what I'd meant. 'But yes, I did start very early,' she'd gone on, 'so I never really worked – unlike you. But you're lucky, Anna, because you're of the generation that can have a fulfilling career, fun and independence, and *then* the happiness of family life. And you're not to worry about finding that,' she repeated, stroking my hair. 'Because you've still got lots of time.'

Which was something that she herself didn't have, it seemed, because less than a month later she'd died.

Now, as I turned on to the motorway I remembered – as I often do when I'm driving and my mind can range – that awful, awful time. I was so shocked I could barely breathe. It was as though the Pause button had been pressed on my life. What would I do without my mother? I felt as though I'd been pushed off a cliff.

And what if *I* only had twenty-three years left, I had then begun to wonder, as I lay staring into the darkness, night after night. What if I only had ten years left, or five, or *one*?