THREE THINGS ABOUT ELSIE

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'How did you fall, Flo?' they'll ask when they find me. 'Did you feel dizzy? Were you wearing your glasses? Did you trip?'

They'll work as they talk. Putting a cuff around my arm and fastening a plastic clip on my finger, and unwrapping all the leads from one of their machines. Someone will shine a light in my eyes, and someone else will rummage through all my tablets and put them in one of their carrier bags.

'Did you feel faint? Can you smile for me? Can you squeeze my hand?'

They'll carry me out of my front room, and they will struggle, because it's barely big enough for me, let alone these two men and their uniforms. They will put me in the back of their ambulance, in the bright-white, blanketed

world they inhabit, and I will blink and crease my eyes and try to make sense of their faces.

'It's all right, Flo,' they will say. 'Everything is going to be fine, Flo.'

Even though they don't know me. Even though I have never said they can call me Flo. Even though the only person who has ever called me that is Elsie.

One of them will sit with me, as we move along the streets, under the spin of a blue light. The light will turn across his face as we travel, and he will smile at me from time to time, and his hand will somehow find mine in the darkness.

When we get to the hospital, I will be rattled across A&E and taken through red double doors, to people with the same questions and the same bright lights, and they will wheel me down blank corridors and put me through their machinery. A girl at a desk will look up as I pass by, and then she will turn away, because I am just another old person on a trolley, wrapped up in blankets and trying to hold on to the world.

They will find me a ward, and a nurse with quiet hands. She will move very slowly, but everything will be done in a moment, and the nurse with quiet hands will be the first person to listen with her eyes. The bed will be warm and smooth, and I won't worry even when the lights are switched off.

Everything I've just told you is yet to happen. None of it is real. Because right at this very moment, I'm lying on the sitting-room floor, waiting to be found. Waiting for someone to notice I'm not here any more.

I have all this time before they arrive, to work out what I'm going to say. All this time to remember everything that happened, right from the beginning, and turn it into something they'll understand. Something they'll accept. You'd think the silence would help, but it doesn't. The only thing I can hear is my own breath, arguing its way backwards and forwards, and just when I'm sure I have an idea all ironed out, it slides away from me and I have to start from the beginning again.

'Do try to focus, Florence,' Elsie always says. 'Concentrate on one word at a time.'

But Elsie isn't here to help me, and so I'll have to search through the words all by myself, because buried amongst them, I need to find a place for the silence. Everyone's life has a secret, something they never talk about. Everyone has words they keep to themselves. It's what you do with your secret that really matters. Do you drag it behind you forever, like a difficult suitcase, or do you find someone to tell? I said to myself I would never tell anyone. It would be a secret I'd keep forever. Except now that I'm lying here, waiting to be found, I can't help worrying that this is my lot. Perhaps the closing words of my chapter will be spoken in a room filled with beige and forgetfulness, and no one was ever meant to hear them. You never really know it's the final page, do you, until you get there?

I wonder if I've already reached the end of the story.

I wonder if my forever is now.

FLORENCE

It was a month ago when it all started. A Friday morning. I was glancing around the room, wondering what I'd done with my television magazine, when I noticed.

It was facing the wrong way. The elephant on the mantelpiece. It always points towards the window, because I read somewhere it brings you luck. Of course, I know it doesn't. It's like putting new shoes on a table, though, or crossing on the stairs. There's a corner of your head that feels uncomfortable if you don't follow the rules. Normally, I would have blamed one of the uniforms, but I always go over everything with a duster after they've gone. There's usually a need for it and it helps to pass the time. So I would have spotted it straight away. I notice everything.

'Do you notice anything?'

Miss Ambrose had arrived for our weekly chat. Fidgety. Smells of hairspray. A cousin in Truro. I decided to test her. She scanned the room, but any fool could tell she wasn't concentrating.

'Look properly,' I said. 'Give it your full attention.'

She unwound her scarf. 'I am,' she said. 'I am.'

I waited.

'The elephant. The elephant on the mantelpiece.' I prodded my finger. 'It's facing towards the television. It always faces towards the window. It's moved.'

She said, did I fancy a change? A change! I prodded my finger again and said, 'I didn't do it.'

She didn't take me seriously. She never does. 'It must have been one of the cleaners,' she said.

'It wasn't the cleaners. When I went to bed last night, it was facing the right way. When I got up this morning, it was back to front.'

'You haven't been dusting again, have you, Florence? Dusting is our department.'

I wouldn't let her find my eyes. I chose to look at the radiator instead. 'I wouldn't dream of it,' I said.

She sat on the armchair next to the fireplace and let out a little sigh. 'Perhaps it fell?'

'And climbed back up all by itself?'

'We don't always remember, do we? Some things we do automatically, without thinking. You must have put it back the wrong way round.'

I went over to the mantelpiece and turned the elephant

to face the window again. I stared at her the whole time I was doing it.

'It's only an ornament, Florence. No harm done. Shall I put the kettle on?'

I watched the elephant while she rummaged around in the kitchen, trying to locate a ginger nut.

'They're in the pantry on the top shelf,' I shouted. 'You can't miss them.'

Miss Ambrose reappeared with a tray. 'They were on the first shelf, actually. We don't always know what we're doing, do we?'

I studied her jumper. It had little pom-poms all around the bottom, in every colour you could possibly wish for. 'No,' I said. 'We probably don't.'

Miss Ambrose sat on the very edge of the armchair. She always wore cheerful clothes, it was just a shame her face never went along with it. Elsie and I once had a discussion about how old Miss Ambrose might be. Elsie plumped for late thirties, but I think that particular ship sailed a long time ago. She always looked like someone who hadn't had quite enough sleep, but had put on another coat of lipstick and enthusiasm, in an effort to make sure the rest of the world didn't ever find her out. I watched the radiator again, because Miss Ambrose had a habit of finding things in your eyes you didn't think anyone else would ever notice.

'So, how have you been, Florence?'

There are twenty-five grooves on that radiator.

'I'm fine, thank you.'

'What did you get up to this week?'

They're quite difficult to count, because if you stare at them for any length of time, your eyes start to play tricks on you.

'I've been quite busy.'

'We've not seen you in the day room very much. There are lots of activities going on – did you not fancy card-making yesterday?'

I've got a drawer full of those cards. I could congratulate half a dozen people on the birth of their beautiful daughter with one pull of a handle.

'Perhaps next week,' I said.

I heard Miss Ambrose take a deep breath. I knew this meant trouble, because she only ever does it when she needs the extra oxygen for a debate about something.

'Florence,' she said.

I didn't answer.

'Florence. I just want to be sure that you're happy at Cherry Tree?'

Miss Ambrose was one of those people whose sentences always went up at the end. As though the world appeared so uncertain to her that it needed constant interrogation. I glanced out of the window. Everything was brick and concrete, straight lines and sharp corners, and tiny windows into small lives. There was no horizon. I never thought I would lose the horizon along with everything else, but it's only when you get old that you realise whichever direction

you choose to face, you find yourself confronted with a landscape filled up with loss.

'Perhaps we should have a little rethink about whether Cherry Tree is still the right place for you?' she said. 'Perhaps there's somewhere else you'd enjoy more?'

I turned to her. 'You're not sending me to Greenbank.'

'Greenbank has a far higher staff-to-resident ratio.' Miss Ambrose tilted her head. I could see all the little lines in her neck helping it along. 'You'd have much more one-to-one attention.'

'I don't want one-to-one attention. I don't want any attention. I just want to be left in peace.'

'Florence, as we get older, we lose the ability to judge what's best for us. It happens to everyone. You might enjoy Greenbank. It might be fun.'

'It's not much fun when no one listens to what you say,' I spoke to the radiator.

'Pardon?'

'I'm not going. You can't make me.'

Miss Ambrose started to say something, but she swallowed it back instead. 'Why don't we try for a compromise? Shall we see how things go over the next . . . month, say? Then we can reassess.'

'A month?'

'A re-evaluation. For all of us. A probationary period.'

'Probation? What crime did I commit?'

'It's a figure of speech, Florence. That's all.' Miss Ambrose's shoes tapped out a little beige tune on the carpet.

She pulled out a silence, like they always do, hoping you'll fill it up with something they can get their teeth into, but I was wise to it now.

'It's *Gone with the Wind* tomorrow afternoon,' she said eventually, when the silence didn't work out for her.

'I've seen it,' I said.

'The whole world's seen it. That's not the point.'

'I was never very big on Clark Gable.'

I was still looking at the radiator, but I could hear Miss Ambrose lean forward. 'You can't just bury yourself in here, Florence. A month's probation, remember? You've got to meet me halfway.'

I wanted to say, 'Why have I got to meet anybody halfway to anywhere?' but I didn't. I concentrated on the radiator instead, and I didn't stop concentrating on it until I heard the front door shut to.

'He had bad breath, you know, Clark Gable,' I shouted. 'I read about it. In a magazine.'

There are three things you should know about Elsie, and the first thing is that she's my best friend.

People chop and change best friends, first one and then another depending what kind of mood they happen to find themselves in and who they're talking to, but mine has always been Elsie and it always will be. That's what a best friend is all about, isn't it? Someone who stands by you, no matter what. I can't say we haven't had our arguments over the years, but that's because we're so opposite. We

even look opposite. Elsie's short and I'm tall. Elsie's tiny and I have big feet. Size eight. I tell everybody. Because Elsie says there comes a point when feet are so large, the only thing really left to do is to boast about them.

We spend most of our time with each other, me and Elsie. We even opted to eat our meals together, because it makes it easier for the uniforms. It's nice to have a bit of company, because nothing in this world sounds more lonely than one knife and fork rattling on a dinner plate.

It was later that day, the day Miss Ambrose gave me my ultimatum, and Elsie and I were sitting by the window in my flat, having our lunch.

'They've still not shown their face,' I said.

I knew she'd heard me, the woman in the pink uniform. She was dishing up my meal on a wheel three feet away, and I'm a clear speaker, even at the worst of times. Elsie says I shout, but I don't shout. I just like to make sure people have understood. I even tapped on the glass to be certain.

'Number twelve.' I tapped. 'I said they've still not shown their face. They've been in there a few days now, because I've seen lights go on and off.'

The woman in the pink uniform spooned out a puddle of baked beans. She didn't even flinch.

Elsie looked up.

'Don't shout, Flo,' she said.

'I'm not shouting,' I said. 'I'm making a point. I'm not allowed to do very much any more, but I'm still allowed

to make a point. And that skip hasn't been collected yet. They need a letter.'

'So why don't you write one?' said Elsie.

I looked at her and looked away again. 'I can't write a letter, because I've been given an ultimatum.'

'What do you mean?'

'Miss Ambrose has put me on probation.' I spoke into the glass.

'What crime did you commit?'

'It's a figure of speech,' I said. 'That's all.'

'They'll clear the skip away soon, Miss Claybourne,' said the woman.

I turned to her. 'They shouldn't be allowed to sweep a person away like that. Someone ought to be told.'

'They can do whatever they want when you're dead,' said Elsie. 'Your world is their oyster, Florence.'

In the courtyard, a tumble of leaves gathered at the edge of the grass, and oranges and reds turned over and over on the concrete. 'I only saw her last week. Walking along that path with a shopping bag.'

The woman in the pink uniform looked up. 'It should make a difference,' I said. 'That I saw her. Now everything she ever was is lying in that skip.'

'They had to clear the flat,' she said, 'for the next person.'

We both watched her. She gave nothing away.

'I wonder who that is,' I said.

Still nothing.

'I wonder as well,' said Elsie.

The woman in the pink uniform frowned at herself. 'I've been off. And anyway, Miss Bissell deals with all of that.'

I raised my eyebrow at Elsie, but Elsie went back to her fish finger. Elsie gave up far too easily, in my opinion. There was a badge on the front of the woman's uniform that said 'Here to Help'.

'It would be quite helpful,' I said to the badge, 'to share any rumours you might have heard.'

The words hovered for a while in mid-air.

'All I know is, it's a man,' she said.

'A man?' I said.

Elsie looked up. 'A man?'

'Are you certain?' I said.

Yes, she said; yes, she was quite certain.

Elsie and I exchanged a glance over the tablecloth. There were very few men at Cherry Tree. You spotted them from time to time, planted in the corner of the communal lounge or wandering the grounds, along paths that led nowhere except back to where they'd started. But most of the residents were women. Women who had long since lost their men. Although I always thought the word 'lost' sounded quite peculiar, as though they had left their husbands on a railway platform by mistake.

'I wonder how many people went to her funeral,' I said. 'The woman from number twelve. Perhaps we should have made the effort.'

'There's never a particularly good turnout these days.'

Elsie pulled her cardigan a little tighter. It was the colour of mahogany. It did her no favours. 'That's the trouble with a funeral when you're old. Most of the guest list have already pipped you to the post.'

'She wasn't here very long,' I said.

Elsie pushed mashed potato on to her fork. 'What was her name again?'

'Brenda, I think. Or it might have been Barbara. Or perhaps Betty.'

The skip was filled with her life – Brenda's, or Barbara's, or perhaps Betty's. There were ornaments she had loved and paintings she had chosen. Books she'd read, or would never finish; photographs that had smashed from their frames as they'd hit against the metal. Photographs she had dusted and cared for, of people who were clearly no longer here to claim themselves from the debris. It was so quickly disposed of, so easily dismantled. A small existence, disappeared. There was nothing left to say she'd even been there. Everything remained exactly as it was before. As if someone had put a bookmark in her life and slammed it shut.

'I wonder who'll dust my photograph after I'm gone,' I said.

I heard Elsie rest her cutlery on the edge of the plate. 'How do you mean?'

I studied the pavement. 'I wonder if I made any difference to the world at all.'

'Does it matter, Flo?' she said.

My thoughts escaped in a whisper. 'Oh yes, it matters. It matters very much.'

When I turned around, Elsie was smiling at me.

'Which one was that, then?' I said.

The pink uniform had left us with a Tunnock's Tea Cake and the Light Programme. Elsie insisted it was called Radio 2 now, but perhaps she'd given up correcting me.

'The one with a boyfriend called Daryl and acid reflux,' said Elsie. We watched the uniform make its way up the stairwell of the flats opposite, flashes of pink against a beige landscape. 'Enjoys making mountains out of molehills.'

'Is she the one with a wise head on her shoulders?' I said.

'No.' Elsie stirred her tea. 'That's Saturday. Blue uniform. Small ears. You must try to remember. It's important.'

'Why is it important?'

'It just is, Florence. It just is. I might not always be here to remind you, and you'll need to remember for yourself.'

'I always get them mixed up,' I said. 'There are so many of them.'

There *were* so many of them. Miss Bissell's 'army of helpers'. They marched through Cherry Tree, feeding and bathing and shuffling old people around like playing cards. Some residents needed more help than others, but Elsie and I were lucky. We were level ones. We were fed and watered, but apart from that, they usually left us to our own devices. Miss Bissell said she kept her north eye on

the level ones, which made it sound like she had a wide range of other eyes she could choose from, to keep everybody else in line. After level three, you were moved on, an unwanted audience to other people's lives. Most residents were sent to Greenbank when they had outstayed their welcome, which was neither green, nor on a bank, but a place where people waited for God in numbered rooms, shouting out for the past, as if the past might somehow reappear and rescue them.

'I wonder what level he's on.' I peered out at number twelve. 'The new chap.'

'Oh, at least a two,' Elsie said. 'Probably a three. You know how men are. They're not especially resilient.'

'I hope he's not a three, we'll never see him.'

'Why in heaven's name would you want to see him, Florence?' Elsie sat back, and her cardigan blended in with the sideboard.

'It helps to pass the time,' I said. 'Like the Light Programme.'

We sat by the window in my flat, because Elsie says it has a much better view, and the afternoon wandered past in front of us. More often than not, there's something happening in that courtyard. Whenever I'm at a loose end, I always look out of the window. It's the best thing since sliced bread. Much more entertaining than the television. Gardeners and cleaners, and postmen. No one ever taking any notice whatsoever of anyone else. All those separate

little lives, and everyone hurrying through them to get to the other side, although I'm not entirely sure they'll like what they find when they get here. I doubt it was anything to do with the woman who dished up our baked beans, but a short while later, they arrived to collect the skip. I watched them. They loaded someone's whole life into a lorry and drove it away. There wasn't even a mark on the pavement to say where it had been.

I watched someone walk through the space where it had stood. Everything carried on as it always did. People rushed from place to place to keep out of the rain, uniforms travelled along stairwells, pigeons measured out their time along the lengths of guttering and waited for the right moment to fly away to somewhere else. It felt as though the impression this woman had made on the world was so unimportant, so insignificant, it dissolved away the very minute she left.

'You're very maudlin this afternoon, Florence.'

'I'm just commenting,' I said. 'I'm not allowed to do very much any more, but I'm still allowed to comment.'

I was fairly sure she was smiling, but I couldn't tell you for definite, because I wouldn't give in to looking.

I kept my eye on number twelve, but nothing happened of any interest. About three o'clock, Miss Bissell marched up the communal stairwell with a clipboard and an air of urgency.

'Miss Bissell,' I said, pointing.

'Indeed,' Elsie said.

'She has a clipboard, Elsie. She must be doing his levels.'

'So it would seem,' she said.

We measured out our afternoon with pots of tea, but the rinse of a September light seemed to push at the hours, spreading the day to its very edges. I always thought September was an odd month. All you were really doing was waiting for the cold weather to arrive, the back end, and we seemed to waste most of our time just staring at the sky, waiting to be reassured it was happening. The stretch of summer had long since disappeared, but we hadn't quite reached the frost yet, the skate of icy pavements and the prickly breath of a winter's morning. Instead, we were paused in a pavement-grey life with porridge skies. Each afternoon was the same. Around four o'clock, one of us would say the nights were drawing in, and we would nod and agree with each other. Between us, we would work out how many days it was until Christmas, and we would say how quickly the time passes, and saying how quickly the time passes would help to pass the time a little more.

The winters at Cherry Tree always took longer, and this would be my fifth. It was called sheltered accommodation, but I'd never quite been able to work out what it was we were being sheltered from. The world was still out there. It crept in through the newspapers and the television. It slid between the cracks of other people's conversation and sang out from their mobile telephones. We were the ones hidden away, collected up and ushered out of sight, and I

often wondered if it was actually the world that was being sheltered from us.

'The nights are drawing in, aren't they?' said Elsie.

We watched the lights begin to switch on in the flats opposite. Rows of windows. A jigsaw of people, whose evenings leaked out into a September dusk. It was the time of day when you could see into different lives, a slice of someone else, before their world became curtained and secretive.

'Someone's in,' I said.

Most of the uniforms had gone home, and Miss Bissell and her Mini Metro had long since sped through the lights at the bottom of the road and vanished up the bypass, but a bulb had been switched on in the lounge of number twelve. It faltered, like the reel of a cine film, and I watched, frame by frame, as a man walked across the room. Middle-aged, I thought, but the faulty light made it difficult to be sure.

I felt a catch of breath in my throat.

'How many days is it until Christmas?' said Elsie. 'Do you want to count them with me?'

'No,' I said. 'I don't, especially.'

'It's ninety-eight,' she said. 'Ninety-eight!'

'Is it?'

I watched the man. He wore a hat and an overcoat, and he had his back to us, but every so often he showed the edge of his face, and my mind tried to make sense out of my eyes.

'How very strange,' I whispered.

'I know.' Elsie smoothed tea cake crumbs from the tablecloth. 'Last Christmas only seems like yesterday.'

The man paced the room. There was something about the way he lifted his collar, the shrug of his shoulders, and it made the world turn in my stomach. 'It does. But it can't be.'

'It is. Ninety-eight. I've counted them whilst you've been wasting your time staring out of that window.'

I frowned at Elsie. 'Ninety-eight what?'

'Days until Christmas.'

'I didn't mean—' I looked back, but the lightbulb had given up, and the man with the collar and the shrug of the shoulders had vanished. 'I thought I recognised someone.'

Elsie peered into the darkness. 'Perhaps it was one of the gardeners?'

'No, at number twelve.' I looked at her. I changed my mind and turned back. 'I must be wrong.'

'It's dark, Florence. It's easy to make a mistake.'

'Yes, that's what happened,' I said. 'I made a mistake.'

Elsie went back to sweeping crumbs, and I pulled the sleeves down on my cardigan.

'Shall we have another bar on the fire?' I said. 'It's gone a bit cold, hasn't it?'

'Florence, it's like an oven in here.'

I stared into the shadows and the window of number twelve stared back at me. 'I feel as though someone just walked over my grave.'

'Your grave?'

I definitely must have made a mistake.

Because anything else was impossible.

'It's just a figure of speech,' I said. 'That's all.'

We were halfway through Tuesday before I saw him again.

Elsie was having her toenails seen to, and it always takes a while, because she's difficult to clip. One of the uniforms was dusting the flat, and I was keeping my eye on her, because I've found people do a much more thorough job if they're supervised. They seem to appreciate it when I point out something they've missed.

'How would we manage without you, Miss Claybourne?' they say.

This particular one was especially slapdash. Flat feet. Small wrists. Earrings in her nose, her lips, her eyebrows – everywhere except her ears.

There was a mist. The kind of mist that hammers the sky to the horizon to stop any of the daylight getting in, but I saw him straight away, as soon as I turned to the window. He sat on one of the benches in the middle of the courtyard, staring up at number twelve. He was wearing the same hat and the same grey overcoat, but that wasn't why I recognised him. It was because of the way he pulled at his collar. The way he wore his trilby. The very look of him. You can spot someone you know, even in a strange place or a crowd of people. There's something about a person that fits into your eyes.

I wanted to point him out to the girl with the earrings.

I wanted to make sure she could see him as well. You hear about it, don't you? Old people's minds conjuring things up from nowhere and inventing all sorts of nonsense to fill the empty space, but the girl was in the middle of having a conversation with herself, and pushing a duster around the mantelpiece. And I was on probation. Miss Ambrose hadn't gone into detail, but I was fairly certain hallucinations wouldn't go down particularly well.

When I looked again, the man was still sitting there, but his elbows were resting on the back of the seat, just like they always used to. As I watched, I felt the colour leave my face. I wanted to knock on the glass, make him turn around, but I couldn't.

'Miss Claybourne?'

Because if I did, I might never be able to look away.

'Miss Claybourne? Is everything all right?'

I didn't move from the window. 'No it isn't,' I said. 'It's about as far from all right as it can get.'

'But I've been over the mantelpiece twice. If I dust it again, it'll make me late for the next one.'

The girl stood in front of the television with a can of Pledge. The earrings covered her face like punctuation marks.

'Not the mantelpiece,' I said. 'Out there. Ronnie Butler. On a bench. Do you see him?'

Sometimes, words just fall out of your mouth. Even as they leave, you know they really shouldn't, but by then it's too late and all you can do is listen to yourself. The girl

said, 'Who's Ronnie Butler?' and curiosity made all the earrings rearrange themselves on her face.

'Someone from the past. Someone I used to know.'

I pulled at the edge of the curtain, even though it was perfectly straight.

The girl began collecting up her cans and cloths, and dusters, and arranging them in a little pink basket. 'That's good, then, isn't it? You'll be able to have a lovely catch-up.'

I looked back at the courtyard. He was standing now, and as I watched, he made his way along the path that led back to the main gates. 'No,' I said. 'It isn't good. It isn't good at all.'

'Why ever not?'

I waited before I answered. I waited until the basket had been filled, until I'd heard the click of the front door, and the drag of the girl's feet along the corridor outside. I waited for all of that before I answered her question. And when I did, the words still came out in a whisper.

'Because Ronnie Butler drowned in 1953.'

'Do you ever imagine you see things?'

Elsie had returned from the chiropodist, and she was admiring his craftsmanship through her tights. 'Oh, all the time,' she said.

'You do?'

'Oh yes.' Elsie wriggled her toes and they crackled in their 30-denier prison. 'I imagine it's raining, but when I get outside, I find that it isn't. And I often imagine I've got more milk in the fridge than I actually have.'

'No, I mean people. Do you ever imagine people?'

Elsie stopped wriggling and looked up. 'What a strange question. I don't think so,' she said. 'But then again, I wouldn't know, would I?'

I hadn't moved from the window since I saw him. Or thought I saw him. I had watched staff disappear into buildings, and visitors forced to shuffle around the grounds with faded relatives, but I hadn't seen the man again. Number twelve was quiet and dark, and the bench was deserted. Perhaps I'd invented him. Perhaps this was the start of my mind crossing over the bridge between the present and the past, and not bothering to come back.

Elsie was watching me now. 'Who do you think you saw?' she said.

'No one.' I started straightening the ornaments on the sideboard. 'I need to visit Boots Opticians. I need to get my glasses changed.'

'You've only just changed them,' she said. 'And why do you keep picking things up and putting them back again exactly where they were?'

I let go of Brighton seafront and looked at her. You could fit Elsie's worries into a matchbox. 'Did you see anyone?' I said. 'On the way over?'

She frowned. 'No one in particular,' she said. 'Why, who have you seen?'

'Miss Bissell,' I said. 'A man delivering letters.'

'The postman?'

I nodded. 'And that strange little woman from number four. Round face. Never speaks. Not very good with stairs.'

'Mrs Honeyman?'

'I think so,' I said. 'And I saw Dora Dunlop as well. She wasn't in her nightdress either. Fully dressed, she was.'

Elsie raised her eyebrows. 'They're sending her to Greenbank, you know. I overheard.'

I felt all the space behind my eyes fill up. 'She'll never cope,' I whispered.

Elsie didn't reply, but I thought I saw her shoulders give a little shrug.

'You haven't seen anyone interesting, then?' I said.

'No, no one.'

I drank some tea.

'I wish you'd just spit it out, Florence.'

'I just thought I saw someone we used to know,' I said, into the china. 'Can't remember his name.'

'Oh, I wonder who it might be. Someone from school? From the factory?'

I swallowed another mouthful of tea. 'Not sure. Can't place him.'

'I'm sure I'll be able to.' Elsie inspected the empty courtyard through the glass. 'I've always been better at faces than you.'

She was the only one left. The only one who would know if my mind had finally wandered away and left me all to my own devices. But sixty years ago, we'd packed up the past, and parcelled it away, and promised ourselves we'd

never speak of it again. Now we were old. Now we were different people, and it felt as though everything we went through had happened to someone else, and we had just stood and watched it all from the future.

She tried to see a little further into the darkness. 'I do hope I spot him as well.'

'Me too,' I said, into the cup.