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Opening Extract from...

FALLING SHORT

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I

She has taken a wrong turning again. A wrong turn on a bloody Friday night, too, when she's already well behind the bank holiday traffic with a long journey ahead. Well done, Pilgrim, she thinks. *A*, excellent*. On the passenger seat, Dog lifts his head to look at her, and sighs.

It's amazing, Jackson always says, how completely useless she is at even finding her own way home, a journey she must have surely done at least five thousand times? The funny thing – is it funny? maybe not – is that Frances knows she can always find her way home, in London at least, when she's drunk. Then, wherever she is, she just seems to put her nose down and trot doggedly on. As she pulls over and gets out her phone, frowning for a moment into the rear-view mirror, she wonders if this is simply because she has spent more of her adult life drunk than sober. Has most of her spatial knowledge been acquired under the influence of over-priced glasses of Merlot (oh, large, please) in the Rat and Gate? *Is the Pope Catholic?* mutters Jackson's voice, in her mind, and, *Do bears shit in the woods?*

She finds it more palatable to think that by now she knows her own turf like the back of her hand, even when pissed. Six years, she thinks, putting her hazard lights on, longer than she's lived anywhere since university, longer than she's lived anywhere apart from the Kentish Weald, full stop. Although she had only come here for love – well, lust as it turned out, which had run out faster than her monthly overdraft extension – it was now her place. It was the rickety studio on Swain's Square that was never warm enough in winter so Dog had to do double duty as hot-water bottle. It was the Heath, and Hilltop, and late night sojourns to those iffy internet dates down the Northern line: Archway, Tufnell Park, Kentish Town, King's Cross. *I don't know why you bother*, her mother tells her shrilly. *They all leave you in the end!*

Frances swipes her phone and taps on Google Maps. There she is now, on the screen, a blue dot quietly swelling and sinking, swelling and sinking, like the light on a police car. She can immediately see what she's done, it's a wrong turn she's taken several times before: left, for some reason, at the Alexandra Park Road lights, so she's going back towards Muswell Hill, rather than right and down the hill towards Colney Hatch and the North Circular, the road that Jackson swears Chris Rea must have been talking about when he wrote 'The Road To Hell'. She usually takes this wrong turn on the Fridays that she's driving back to Kent to see her mother because she's too busy telling Dog about the day she's had, or worrying about something she's just remembered she has left undone: a door unlocked, a

gas-ring perhaps still on, a credit card left slightly too close to a ground-floor window. Tonight, sitting in the curdling August heat, she's remembered that she has to give a presentation for House Assembly on Tuesday morning and she's left her MacBook behind.

'Fuck,' she says to Dog, who, with dignity, looks away from her out of the window, pretending not to hear.

'You're a loon,' Jackson used to tell her, listening to her chattering away to Dog in the pub, or in the Green Café at weekends. 'You know that? A certifiable nutter. I've even seen you talking to yourself. One day they'll arrive and take you away. *Boom*.' He would swoop his arms together in front of him, imitating the strait-jacket they'd slap her into before they carted her off, probably to St Anne's on the Seven Sisters Road, and then Frances would always retort that there must be a more salubrious nut-house than that in the North London area. Not for your sort, Jackson would say. *Jackson*, she thinks wistfully. Colleague, confidant, bloody-minded hedonist. And until very recently, pretty much her best friend.

Nonetheless, best friend or not, he's got a point. She knows she ought to stop it, this muttering. She is only running through conversations in her head that she feels she needs to map out more carefully, exchanges where she's asking boyfriends Difficult Questions or squashing that ghastly Mercedes Solomon in Year 13; but still, she's always surprised to find she's actually spoken them out loud. And last term she supposed she had been doing it more frequently than usual, going over in her mind what she'd like to have

said to her ex-boyfriend Lucas when she'd still had the chance. Things like, *When can I meet your friends?* Or, *Where do you actually live?* She recognises now that she never asked him because, subconsciously, she must have known she didn't want to hear the answers; but also because she wanted to bask a while longer in that affection of his, that beguiling sense he had given her that he simply couldn't live without her.

Ha.

But although she was too wet to ask the questions then, she wants the answers now; but no one's interested in listening any more. Everyone says she should get over it; after all, plenty more fish in the sea. Silv says she's a dick who's in denial about more things than a dating disaster. Even Hilary in the flat upstairs has taken to changing the subject on dog-walks when it comes to Lucas.

Of course, they're all right. Lucas has gone, and thinking about him now makes her feel sick to her stomach. Frances can cope with most aspects of boyfriend-shittiness. In her iffy internet-dating career she's tolerated perverts and drunks and a baker's dozen of other, more garden-variety weirdos. But Lucas's pathetic little vanishing act has thrown her more completely than anything any other boyfriend has done, reaching as it does back into her past and raking up too many ghosts. *It's not you*, he'd said once, when she'd asked him why he was so cagey about where he lived, *it's me*.

Nope, says Jackson, in her mind. *Believe me, Pilgrim. It's you.*

Her mother thinks she should come home, find a nice farmer and get herself married, an opinion that in itself has caused Frances many a long and muttering walk on the Heath.

'You could always marry me,' Jackson used to suggest when she told him about her mother's complaints. 'I could do with someone to look after me in my dotage.'

Thinking of Jackson and his jokey proposals, Frances finds herself biting her lip so hard it hurts, and putting the car abruptly back into gear. She must stop taking these wrong turns. She must learn to concentrate, she's thirty-bloody-nine next month. And something a long way down tells her, quietly but insistently, for reasons she can't entirely fathom, that she must get home to see her mother.

Frances had not liked Jackson to begin with.

He'd arrived at Hilltop at the start of the Lent term the previous year, supposedly as a short-term cover teacher. He was older and a bit battered, but nonetheless exuded a strange sort of glamour in his bright green trousers, tawny hair barely contained by a pair of outlandish tortoiseshell spectacles that he always wore pushed up on to his head.

'How on earth did you find *that*?' Frances had demanded after she'd been cursorily introduced, and Rhidian had shrugged.

'Oh,' he'd said, 'his wife's a friend. You know.'

'No, I don't, actually. How does that qualify him to *teach*?'

Rhidian, looking surprised, said that Jackson had a doctorate in English Literature and had taught at a very

successful girls' school already. Did that meet with Frances's approval, or should Rhidian sack him immediately?

Frances was suspicious. 'Which girls' school?'

Out of the office window, in Science Quad, she could see that Jackson wasn't even pretending to do break duty, stretched on a bench in the sunshine and idly turning the pages of a book. As Frances watched, two sixth-form girls sidled up to him, flipping back their hair.

'Oh, I can't remember which one, exactly,' said Rhidian irritably, turning back to a pile of mail marked *Head of English*. 'Why don't you ask him yourself?'

But it was Friday night before Frances had any opportunity to interrogate him. It was a department tradition to take a new member to the pub on their first Friday, Rhidian being of the firm opinion that you only saw someone's true colours when they were drunk. But Jackson, it turned out, was more than happy to be plied with alcohol and insisted that night that he only drank very expensive Sancerre. Over his fourth glass, watching Frances hang up the phone on her mother in a huff, he turned away from Rhidian and said, 'Are you an only child?'

Frances had been too startled to demur. 'How on earth did you guess?'

'Easy.' He regarded her over the rim of his glass. 'You've just been rude to your mother, who by the way sounds like a complete pain in the arse, and now you're obviously crippled with guilt. I suspect if you had siblings you wouldn't feel so responsible. Am I right or am I right?'

Frances conceded that he might be a little bit right, and went off to the bar to get another drink, quickly, before he could finish his last six pounds' worth of Sancerre. When she came back, he said, 'Do you get on any better with your father?'

'No.'

Jackson grinned at her. He was, she conceded to herself, attractive. If you were into that ageing bohemian sort of thing.

'Is he a pain in the arse, too?' he asked.

'No,' said Frances. 'He's dead.'

She's nearing home when she remembers that conversation, having managed for once to take the right slip road at the right junction off the motorway, and to come off at the right place on the A2. Now they are on the higgledy-piggledy, tilty-turny road towards Dryland and her mother's house. She puts a hand on one of Dog's warm ears, just across the handbrake, and feels him stir groggily in his sleep.

Jackson had had the good grace to look mildly abashed when she told him about her father, and they had not pursued the conversation until a long time later, over a year in fact, on the night they walked home beneath the apple blossom. It was only then that she had taken a deep breath and told him the full story: that her father had disappeared from his naval ship, a destroyer named HMS *Wanderer*, in 1981. That he was believed to have slipped and fallen while out on the upper deck. He'd always been a keen

astronomer, she said, he'd probably been star-gazing, although no one seemed to know the precise circumstances of what had happened.

It had seemed to five-year-old Frances that one day they'd been seeing him off at Portsmouth, her father pressing a going-away present into her hand and hugging her so tightly to his uniformed front that she had felt the cold imprint of his brass buttons on her forehead, and that almost the next she'd been shepherded gently away by Jean-up-the-lane into a warm house that smelled of cats. Mummy's had a terrible shock, Jean had said to her, but when Frances had asked what the terrible shock was, Jean had only swallowed and avoided her eye. It was about Daddy, she'd said eventually, and Frances had looked away then, out of the window to where Jean's black dog Mack was chasing an indignant-looking squirrel up a tree. What about Daddy? she'd asked. He is all right, isn't he, Jean?

Jean had said in a voice that was not much more than a whisper that Mummy would tell her when she was ready, and in the meantime Frances needed to be a big brave girl. Perhaps, she'd said hopefully, Frances would like to have a cuddle with Mack, or one of the cats?

But thirty-four years later, as they turned into the garden of Jackson's building, where the apple blossom was falling like torn paper on to the warm grass, Frances had admitted to Jackson that she had not been a particularly big brave girl at all. Over the next few days with Jean – her mother was not very well, and it would be better if she was not disturbed, 'yet' – Frances had asked and asked about her

father, and when no one would give her an answer she had taken to climbing up to the spare room on Jean's first floor, where she had been installed for her stay with some of her toys from home, and closing the door.

The spare room smelled like vacuum cleaning and air-freshener, but if she climbed up on to the windowsill, Frances had found she could see the first stars coming out between the spiky branches of the damson trees in the garden. At the time of her father's disappearance she'd been going through a period of fascination with stars and planets, she told Jackson that evening, had even been clamouring for a telescope. But on her last night in Jean's spare room, she had pressed her face against the window so that her breath began to fog the glass, and looked out in particular for Sirius, the dog star. There it had been, burning away blue-white in the darkening sky. It was not the brightest star, her father had told her, though it often seemed so because it was the closest to earth.

'Can you see it when you're at the sea?' Frances wanted to know, and her father had smiled. He could see it when he was *at* sea, he told her, yes. In fact, one of the first watches a sailor kept at sea was named the *dogwatch* after Sirius, the dog star. And if Frances ever felt sad, he said, she could always look up at the dog star and be sure that, wherever he was, when her father looked up at it, he'd be thinking about her, too.

But that night, even as Frances watched, something unexpected and devastating had happened.

The dog star had guttered and gone out.

She had blinked, and then, pulling her sleeve down over her hand, had scrubbed at the fogged-up glass, and looked out again.

Nothing.

Sirius had vanished.

And although later Jean would tell her it was probably only the gathering clouds outside that were blocking out the star, that it'd be back by tomorrow evening, love, by then Frances would be quite inconsolable with grief. By then, in fact, she would already have cried and cried until her nose was blocked and she had to breathe through her mouth, and then she would have cried some more until she had humiliatingly retched phlegm and tears all over Jean's plump and comfortable pink-cardied shoulder.

Jean hadn't been cross about the sick, and after she'd settled Frances on the sofa, under a blanket and with Mack – 'to have a cuddle with, he's good at cuddles, aren't you, Mack?' – she had left the room to get them both a nice hot drink and perhaps a piece of cake. But as Mack leaned his old Labrador shoulder against her and licked her cheerfully, Frances had heard Jean talking in a low and indistinct voice in the hall where the telephone lived. And when she came back in, she had told Frances to dry her tears now, because her mother was coming over to collect her, and she needed to show Mummy what a brave girl she was, didn't she?

Afterwards, Frances reflected that she couldn't have done that good a job because when her mother arrived, she had taken one look at her and burst into tears of her own. This

in itself was something unprecedented and so shocking that Frances had stopped crying immediately and sat, mouth half open in amazement, as her mother sat down next to Mack on the sofa, and sank her head into her hands. Unlike Frances's, whose wails had caused the cats to leave the room and even the budgerigar to go quiet, her mother's tears had been silent, but her shoulders had shaken; as she watched, Frances had seen the tears sliding through the cracks in her fingers and dripping copiously on to her knees.

Fortunately, Jean had come in then, and they'd all sat together on the sofa. Jean had put her arms around both of them and said that life was a real bugger sometimes, wasn't it, and for years afterwards the camellia smell of Jean's pink cardigan would bring an aching lump to Frances's throat, as if she were fleetingly going down with the flu.

It was only later that night, when she was in bed, that her mother had finally told her the truth. That Daddy had gone to the sea, but that he wouldn't be coming back this time.

Frances, close to an exhausted sleep, had murmured, 'Has he gone with the star?'

Her mother had carried on tucking her in. That was a nice thing to think, she said. That Daddy was a star in the sky.

'But no more tears, now,' she had added. 'They won't bring him back.'

And even close to sleep as she had been, Frances's lip had still quivered to think that her father, in his gold and navy uniform with the big brass buttons, had gone into the sky, which was after all so very far away, and been swallowed up

by the darkness where once the star had been. But she had done her best, and next morning her mother, looking pale and composed, had brought her some hot chocolate with her breakfast and a pile of books about ballet and ponies that she'd once liked as a girl. Frances hadn't been remotely interested in ponies or ballet, but she had taken a deep breath herself then, and given her mother a watery smile. Her mother had smiled back: not a particularly happy smile, of course; but there had been a flicker of something in her face then that had awed Frances, for a moment some transcendent sense of her mother's strength of which she had never, when her father was alive, been aware. And later that day, when Jean came round and asked her how she was feeling, Frances had squared her shoulders and raised her chin, and said in a voice that wobbled only a little that she was all right, thank you very much, Jean. She was sad that Daddy wasn't with them any more, but tears weren't going to bring him back, were they?

There'd been a long silence then. Jean had looked confused.

Trying to be helpful, Frances had said, 'He's in the sky with the dog star, Jean.'

Jean had gone *pale* then. She'd looked across at Frances's mother, and said shakily, 'You're sure about that, are you, Mary?' and Frances's mother had looked back at her, unblinking, making Frances think, for a moment, of Merlin, or Morgan le Fay.

Her mother had squared her shoulders and said oh yes, she was quite sure, Jean.

And Frances knew in that moment that Jean had seen it, too, this odd new power of her mother's, because after that she had seemed struck all of a heap, as Frances's father might have said. She hadn't been able to finish her cup of tea, and had left shortly afterwards, her face strangely blotchy and her mouth pressed into a pursed white line.

So after that, when Frances felt like she might cry, she had brought her father's leaving present out of its hiding place in her socks and pants drawer. It was a tiny figurine, no more than two inches high, of a girl standing on the deck of a boat, her hands shading her eyes as she looked out to sea. On the day they returned from Portsmouth, Frances had put the ornament proudly on the sitting room mantelpiece to show anyone who happened to drop in – Come and see my ornament on the mantelpiece! Although more often than not, in her hurry to get her words out, it would come out as *Come and see my ormanteen on the mankenpeen!*

But shortly afterwards, Frances's mother had started to move through the house, taking down all the photographs and insignia associated with her husband, the first stage in a process by which she would, steadily but irrevocably, wave her wand and excise him from their lives. The ornament was a casualty of the purge, luckily found again in the ticky-tack drawer in the kitchen, where small things destined for the bin were sometimes held, and by the time her next birthday came around Frances had learned that most things to do with her father – his vinyl LP of *Sgt. Pepper*, his books on stained glass – were better off concealed. So she hid the

ornament under the lining of her socks and pants drawer, and took it out only when her mother was not around to see.

She had told Jackson all this on his doorstep, and he had been so horrified he hadn't even got around to opening the door. 'You poor little scrap,' he had said, when she had finished, putting his arm round her, and Frances, shrugging, had muttered yes, well, crying didn't do anyone any good, did it? You just had to get on with it.

Now, she swings the car left at last, off the main road and up the narrow lane towards her mother's house, and when they reach the hairpin bend a hundred yards before the house, as usual Dog stirs and stands up on the seat, pressing his nose to the crack in the window. Then they round the bend and Frances gasps, stamping on the brakes just in time. Dog slithers into the dashboard and bumps his nose.

A woman in a nightdress is standing barefoot in the lane.

She doesn't move as the car grinds to a stop, but stands looking at them, twisting the hem of her nightdress between her hands. A badly tied headscarf is slipping on to her shoulders.

As Frances unclips her seat belt and opens the door, her mother reaches out a hand, pale as paper. Her face is slack-jawed and blank of recognition, but the word she comes out with shatters the space between them into a thousand pieces.

'Martin,' she says, 'Martin.'

And her eyes fill with tears.

*

'Really,' says her mother brightly, half an hour later. She's got herself dressed now – 'I've been poorly, a tummy bug going round' – and in jeans and wellies looks almost normal again. 'You mustn't be such a drama queen, Far. I've told you and told you, it's *terribly* tiresome.' And she jolts boiling water into two mugs, as if it is the teabags that are to blame.

She'd woken up, she says, and realised that the dogs were gone. When she went downstairs, the back door was open and so was the back gate, and she was worried they'd stray down to the main road. She'd merely been in the road calling them when Frances's car came bowling around the bend. '*Much* too fast, as usual,' she adds, squashing her teabag against the side of the mug. 'Twenty's plenty, you know, on these roads. You're not in London now.'

That's been her war cry for six years, Frances thinks. It has driven her mother demented that Frances has remained in London, despite her being nearly forty and *still* having to share a draughty building with that coven of peculiar women, what were their names again? But that in itself reminds Frances of another thing. Her mother's grasp on names, cloudy at best since Frances can remember, has become much worse of late. Sometimes she has to run through two or three dog names before she can grasp the right one, so her fox terrier sometimes sits with her head patiently on one side, being called Daisy or Drummer for several minutes before Frances's mother can remember that she is, in fact, called *Dilys*. They have laughed about it in the past, joking about that disease,

you know, the one where you can't remember anything, what's it called again?

But recently, Frances knows that there have been other things going on with her mother, things she's tried very hard not to notice. Over the summer, too many cups of undrunk tea in the fridge. Her wallet in the alcove where the fire-lighters live. And other things, sometimes: tiny slippages in her grasp on time, so that, 'Where on earth have you *been*?' she demanded once, when Frances had been out of the room for five minutes. 'I was so *worried*, you've been simply *hours*.' Once, and more peculiarly, when Frances had come in to ask her mother if she knew where her birth certificate was, her mother had said, distractedly, 'Scarborough, I expect.' Glitches, fissures, each in themselves not amounting to much. Her mother is well over seventy, after all, and has lived on her own for years, she's bound to be a bit eccentric. So what if she keeps cups of tea in the fridge? Maybe she likes cold tea.

Now her mother is passing her a mug and saying peevishly, 'I don't know why you never return my phone calls, Far,' and Frances is finding herself unable to tell her mother that she does return the calls, she almost always does. Her mother just doesn't seem able to remember.

And for the rest of the evening every time there's a pause in supper-time conversation, or in the half-second of silence before an advert break on television, she sees again the face staring in at her through her windscreen, that slack jaw and open mouth. But much worse, she recalls the complete absence of recognition in her mother's eyes, as if she had

momentarily wandered off the track, and, turning around to retrace her steps, found that the old familiar path had vanished. And although for over thirty years Frances and her mother have never mentioned him by name, they both know that the person she's looking for has gone.

It's only when she's climbing into bed later, pushing Dog off the pillow, that Frances thinks, with a miserable clutch of nausea in her stomach, that *demented* may be a word she will have to stop using so carelessly in the future. As she turns the light off and lies down, she wishes, not for the first time, that she had a father or even a sibling to discuss this with, someone to reassure her; someone perhaps, in the long run, to go through it with her, whatever 'it' turns out to be. She thinks again of Jackson, who's been through all manner of difficult family situations in his life. But they haven't spoken since the end of term, since the night they walked home beneath the apple blossom; and now they're about to be inspected at school everyone's bound to be preoccupied. A reconciliation is unlikely to happen any time soon.

Her phone screen lights up for a moment in the darkness, and she turns to it immediately. But it's just a reminder about a system update, and, a moment later, it is dark once more. Outside, the wind shivering through the sycamore trees reminds her again of the sea.