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Opening Extract from...

THE CARER

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Phoebe

The first thing she noticed was her skin. So smooth, for somebody of fifty. Eerily smooth, but then Mandy had never had children – never been married, as far as Phoebe knew – none of the normal wear and tear that makes a woman look used.

Mandy was not beautiful – far from it. An overweight woman with Rosemary West specs, wearing a bobble hat and stripy tights, something vaguely blokey about her. Some time later she told Phoebe: 'I tried to be a lesbian once but it just didn't jell. Give me a man any day. I like the smell of their armpits.'

Phoebe liked her, truly she did. She'd come to the rescue after her father had his fall. Two carers had come and gone. Rejoice, from Zimbabwe, who talked all through his beloved Radio 4 and fed him some sort of maize-meal that clogged up his bowels. Then there was Teresa from County Donegal, who was having a love affair with a baggage-handler from Luton Airport and who sat texting him, in a fug of cigarette smoke, and reading out the replies while the kettle boiled dry and Dad dehydrated.

So Mandy came to the rescue: Mandy from Solihull, arriving in her trusty Fiat Panda and bearing home-made shortbread because her speciality, flapjacks, played havoc with an old boy's dentures. Phoebe, normally wary, was

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encouraged by this early sign of empathy. Mandy hummed show tunes as the kettle boiled. *Blood Brothers* was her favourite, about two boys separated at birth. She said she had seen it three times and blubbed like a baby.

Phoebe understood why, later. At the time she was simply grateful that this bulky, chatty woman had entered their lives and restored her sanity. Her father's, too. For within days Mandy had become essential.

It was a wild autumn in the village where her father lived. Branches were torn from trees and his lawn was strewn with twigs. The yapping dog next door was silenced by a seizure and was discovered a week later, stiff under a pile of leaves that had drifted against the wall. He was a Jack Russell and therefore a perpetual irritant, but the loss of his old enemy dimmed the gleam in her father's eye and plunged him further into gloom.

> *That time of year thou mayst in me behold*, he intoned,
> *When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang*
> *Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,*
> *Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.*

God knew why her parents had retired to the Cotswolds. The village was dead, utterly dead. Ghosts only lingered in the names: The Old Smithy, The Bakehouse . . . honey-stone cottages whose inhabitants had long since gone. It woke up at weekends when the Londoners arrived in their Porsche Cayennes, stuffed with mutinous teenagers and Waitrose bags, and sank back into torpor when they left. What did her father *do* all day, in his diminished life? When her mother was alive he could bicker with her, as men do

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who are dependent on their beloveds. Nowadays his main irritation was to shout at the coach drivers parked outside who, long after they had disgorged their Japanese tourists to wander round the village taking selfies, kept their bloody engines running, filling his living room with exhaust fumes.

Breaking his hip had shunted him into helplessness. No longer could he manage the stairs so a single bed was moved to the ground floor. Upstairs had been his marriage. For sixty-four years, at home and abroad, he had slumbered in mammalian warmth, his wife beside him, deep in her unknowable dreams. Now he slept downstairs like a wizened teenager, alone in his chaste bed, returned full circle to his youth. The room faced the street. One morning he opened his curtains to reveal a tourist at his window, gazing at her reflection as she applied her lipstick. 'I'm living in a blithering museum,' he grumbled. 'I'm a blithering waxwork.'

He wasn't by nature a morose man, he just missed his wife and hated getting old – who wouldn't? Most of his friends had died and by now there was nobody around who remembered the war. Even the ancients in the village turned out to be in their sixties, their faces prematurely aged by the blistering winds that blew across the bleak and lovely uplands.

No wonder his carers didn't stay long. Visitors shuffled round the Norman church and ate scones in the teashop, but there was nothing else to do and only one bus a day into the relatively throbbing town of Cirencester.

But Mandy didn't mind. Mandy didn't mind anything. There was something bracingly impervious about her – a necessity, Phoebe guessed, in her profession. She talked

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fondly about her previous patients and told Phoebe in detail about their debilitating ailments, the morphine drips and nappies and dementia.

'Dear Mrs Klein, she thought she was in a hotel but you have to just go with the flow, you know? She'd say, *I don't like this hotel*, so I'd pack her suitcase and walk her round the block. We'd arrive back at her house and I'd say, *This looks like a nicer hotel, doesn't it, dear? Oh yes*, she'd say, *I like this one better.* So we went in and unpacked her bag and she was as happy as Larry until she started fretting, so we'd do the whole thing all over again.' Mandy took a gulp from her thermal mug. 'I was holding her hand when she passed away, four in the morning. It's always four when they're called. The cat knew and so did I.' There was a strange exuberance in her voice when she told Phoebe this. 'She knew I'd be there for her.'

She arrived with testimonials from grateful families. They were lavish in their praise. Mandy's attitude to them, however, was dismissive.

'Catch *them* wiping their bums. No way, Jose! *They'd* had their bums wiped when they were babies, hadn't they? Didn't that come into their calculations? What goes round comes round. You reap what you sow. I think I was a Hindu in another life.'

These conversations made Phoebe uncomfortable, but who was she to complain? Mandy had come to her rescue.

And how swiftly she made herself at home! Within a week it felt she had been there for ever. When the door was ajar Phoebe glanced into Mandy's bedroom and was startled by the transformation. A crochet coverlet, sewn with blowsy flowers, lay tangled on the bed. On it slumped a

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fluffy dachshund, a nightie poking from its zippered belly. She had removed a painting on the wall and replaced it with a pegboard, filled with snapshots of herself and various girlfriends in holiday locations. Not a man in sight. On the chest of drawers were crammed an assortment of knick-knacks – china animals, that sort of thing – and a framed photograph of her parents on their wedding day. Clothes were strewn everywhere; it was her inner sanctum and Phoebe blushed at the intrusion.

She didn't feel uneasy, not then. She was just pleased at this sign of permanent occupation. For, by God, she needed Mandy. So did her brother, Robert.

Robert lived in Wimbledon and she lived in Wales. Their father's village lay between the two of them. In recent years, as various crises had arisen, there had been some tense exchanges between them about who should make the journey. Robert was nearer, but traffic was diabolical, getting out of London. He also subtly reminded Phoebe that he was a family man, with commitments. In fact his children had long since left home and all he did was sit in his garden shed trying to write but she didn't like to point this out, because mentioning his novel wasn't advisable, dear me no.

Phoebe, however, was a single woman, of a certain age, and childless. This suggested an Austen-like obligation to devote herself to others, but she was buggered if she'd let Robert off the hook. Theirs was a turbulent relationship. In adult life it had been flimsily cling-filmed with good manners but skirmishes could still erupt, especially when alcohol was involved.

Mandy, however, eased all this. 'Don't you worry about a

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thing.' She stood in the doorway, her glasses flashing in the sunlight. 'I'm here now, and everything'll be tickety-boo.' Phoebe gazed at that smooth face, unweathered by the past. The woman was fifty! Did living for others keep one young?

She knew little about Mandy, in those early days. All she knew was that she'd arrived with her orange teapot and Marigold gloves, their saviour from Solihull, to take over their father's life and release them back to theirs.

Phoebe was busy setting up her exhibition of watercolours. It was in the waiting room of her local doctors' surgery but she hoped that this might be to its advantage. After all, people facing a smear test might be comforted by one of her sheep. They might even, God forbid, buy one. She'd also put up a display of her latest works on glass – drinking tumblers painted with wild flowers. She'd actually sold a couple of these at the recent Craft Fayre at the British Legion. Both were of cow parsley, so she'd been concentrating on the *umbelliferae* family for this display – sweet cicely, chervil, that sort of thing.

All artists struggle, of course. She wasn't ready to cut off her ear but she was becoming increasingly dispirited. Trouble was, in her small Welsh town the market was saturated. Every second person was an artist, most of them women. Hares and sheep, sheep and hares, that's what they painted and they were all at it. The results of their labours were displayed along the High Street – in the newsagent's window, hanging on the walls of The Coffee Cup, even propped on easels amongst the bedroom slippers, saucepans and dusty, nightie-clad mannequin that leaned drunkenly

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in the window of Audrey's Emporium, a shop hilariously unchanged for as long as anyone could remember.

Much remained unchanged in Knockton. Unlike her father's village, however, it wasn't dead; it was a thriving little town with plenty of independent shops. Phoebe lived up the alley behind the butcher's, in what had been the abattoir. Her studio overlooked the back yard and she worked to the percussive thump of the meat cleaver as it dismembered the very animals she was attempting to depict.

She couldn't have a private view, not in a doctors' surgery. However, she was curious to see how people reacted to her artworks so she dropped in, on the pretext of getting a repeat prescription for the oestrogen pessaries that should be making sex with Torren less excruciating. Three people sat in the waiting room, all of them busy on their phones. The display cabinet, in which she'd put her tumblers, was now covered with a blue sateen sheet upon which was arranged a Nutribite promotion, complete with smoothie goblet and a bowl of plastic fruit.

At that moment her own phone rang. It was Mandy. 'How are you today?' she asked. 'Just checking in. We've had a lovely morning, haven't we, Jimmy?'

Jimmy? Nobody called her father Jimmy. His name was James.

'I gave him a foot massage, he was purring like a pussycat, weren't you, love? He says he's never had one before but it certainly put a smile on his face and his blood pressure's way down. It'll also help with his constipation. Then we wrapped up warmly and went down the lane to say hello to the donkeys. Next time we'll bring them some

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sugar-lumps, won't we, pet? I have to say it's a real pleasure, looking after your dad. He's such gentleman, and so interesting. He's been telling me all about his work at the university. Would you like to say hello to your daughter?'

Her father came on the line. He sounded in fine spirits, but he was always so polite it was hard to tell what he was really thinking.

'Mandy's been entertaining me with stories about her previous old crocks. Most amusing,' he said. 'One of them was a devout Catholic and she took him to Lourdes in the hope of a miracle. While he was away being blessed or whatever, Mandy sat down in a wheelchair and had a snooze.' He started chuckling. 'And when she woke up – when she woke up . . .' He stopped, wheezing with laughter. 'You tell her, Mandy.'

'So I woke up and walked off—'

'– she *rose* from her wheelchair,' Dad said, his voice shaking. 'And when she did that, everyone stared at her and dropped to their knees—'

'And started praying!' Mandy grabbed back the phone. 'See, they thought it was a miracle. Get it?'

'Yes, I got it,' Phoebe said.

Her father, still snuffling with laughter, took back the phone. 'From now on I'm calling her Saint Mandy, Patron Saint of Lost Specs.'

Phoebe laughed too, of course. Her father sounded more cheerful than he had been for ages.

'She's a tonic, this girl,' he said.

'*Girl?*' She could hear Mandy snorting with laughter.

'At my age, you're all girls,' he said. 'Youth is wasted on the young.'

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Mandy gave a squeal. 'That's a funny thing to say.'

'It's Mr Shaw who said it.'

'Who's he?' she asked. 'Another of your intellectual friends?' She grabbed the phone. 'Your father has been trying to explain to me what he actually does – *did* – but I'm a simple sausage.'

'Particle physics,' Phoebe said. 'Me neither.'

Standing there in the doctors' surgery she felt that familiar sinking sensation. All her life she'd felt inadequate. It was one of the few things she had in common with her brother.

For their father was a serious intellectual – professorships, books, groundbreaking research. Robert had spent his life trying to compete, but she had taken another path. Both of them had been waving for his attention. It was the one thing, however, that he seemed incapable of giving them.

Even in the cottage. Even in Wales.

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