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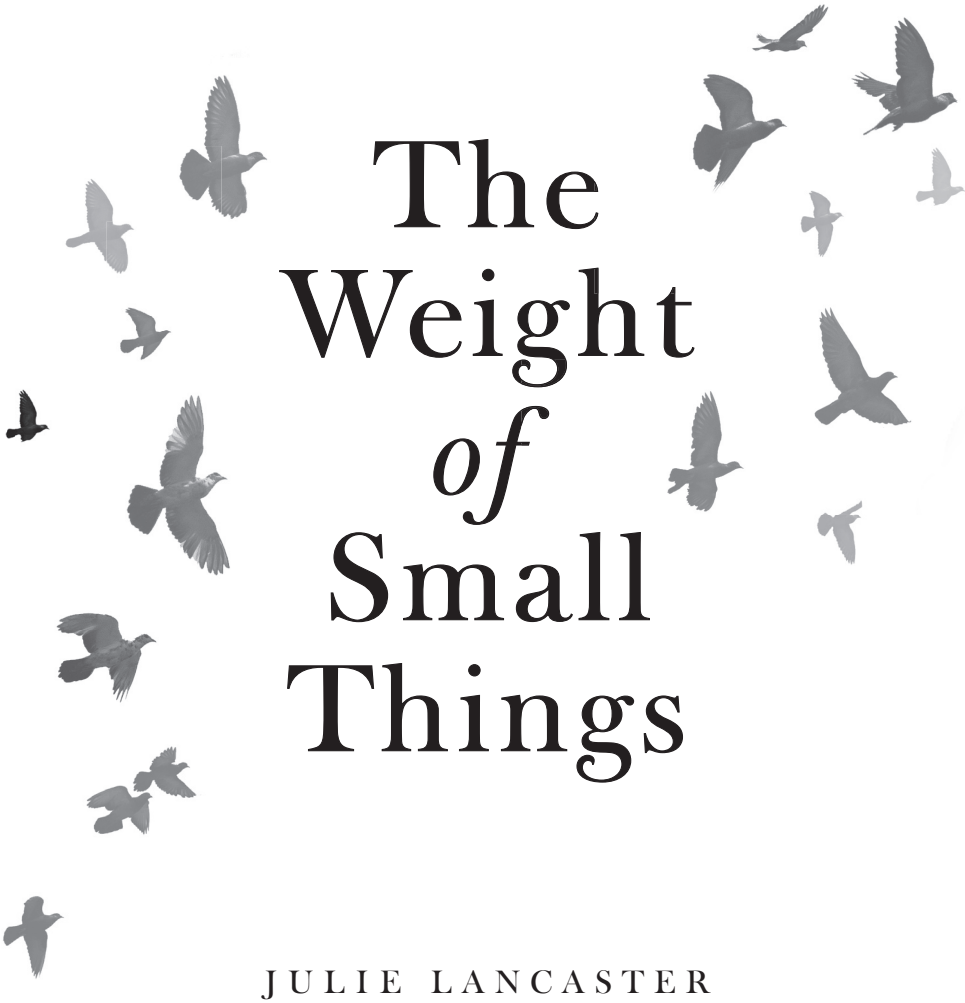
THE WEIGHT OF SMALL THINGS

Written by **Julie Lancaster**

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The Weight *of* Small Things

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For Margaret

Part One

Broken



Chapter One

Arctic Red

1988

Frankie Appleton was counting gates.

Heavy rain was flicking forward-slashes onto the car windscreen and the botanical temperature inside the car was steaming up the glass like a curtain but she was soon able to find a rhythm.

Wipe the glass, count the gate.

Wipe the glass, count the gate.

As the glimpsed gates sped by, wrought-iron, double-hinged, Buxton, lattice, Frankie's fingers grazed the slip of paper in her coat pocket, a sentence from the magazine *Garden Gates – A Definitive Guide*:

'*A gate is the first thing that a visitor sees and its appearance gives an indication of what lies beyond it, providing either a positive or negative first impression.*'

She didn't just like counting gates. She liked designing them too.

She'd written the quote in red felt-tip pen on her bedroom wall, behind a Madonna poster – the 'Angel' one, where she's wrapped in a blue towel, or maybe it's a blue dressing gown. She could never

quite decide which. As with most things, one day it was one thing, the next day another.

It was also glued onto the eight shoebox lids beneath her bed, the boxes housing hundreds of pencil sketches of gates, all named after rivers, because, like rivers, gates led elsewhere too. Some were named after famous rivers like the Nile and the Danube, others after lesser-known rivers such as the Yellowknife and the Arctic Red.

Fellow gate-enthusiast David Miller, author of her most treasured book *The Grandeur of Gates* and a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence agreed:

'*A gate is the ultimate link between you and what lies ahead and both functionality and aesthetic appeal are of equal importance.*'

His gate designs were some of the most innovative and inspirational that Frankie had ever seen; so much so that she'd spent three days last summer composing a fourteen-page letter to him.

She was yet to receive a reply. But she hadn't given up hope. Designing gates took patience, letter-writing, similarly so. And he was no doubt extremely busy. There were so many neglected gates to renovate, so many empty spaces to fill. Their paths would cross one day, she was sure of it, but there was no time to think about exactly when that might be because her current favourite gate was a mere five gates away. Distance for Frankie was always measured in gates.

She quietly counted down, building up the tension like they did when announcing Miss World: 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . *And the winner is* . . .

7, Darwin Crescent was a long-limbed four-storey redbrick townhouse that bowed and swayed like a drunken sailor. Without the

support of the two properties either side of it, each gripping an elbow, it would have been swallowed up like saltwater long ago. Frankie liked the thought of buildings supporting each other, cheering each other on, always being there when you were a little the worse for wear.

The gate, however, required no such support, the wood hardy and dense, the violet varnish shimmering beneath a blistering summer sun, sometimes with a hint of citrus lime, other times an apricot glaze. Even in winter it welcomed the heaviest of snow, retaining its sturdiness and its shape, never buckling under the extra weight. You could still tell that it was a gate. Frankie liked that. Everything should live up to expectation. A gate should always look like a gate.

Today, silver sparks were ricocheting angrily off the tearstained wood. But even during the worst downpour it still fulfilled all the demands that were made of it, the dark timber glistening like tinsel, the rainwater trickling down the bevelled grooves like un-soothed tears running into the gutter.

Frankie stopped counting gates. She was nearly home. Ellie was chatting to her mother about the type of dog that she desperately wanted (really furry). She'd already given this fictitious dog a name, Ringo Starr, after her favourite Beatle, regardless of whether it was male or female. She'd heard them have the same conversation many times. Ellie would promise to feed it twice a day and take it for three-hour walks, 'cross my heart and hope to die'. Her mother would promise to think about it.

That was as far as they ever got, promising and thinking, promising to think. Crossing hearts and dying. Her mother was still grappling with the Beatles obsession. 'It seems such an unusual

fixation for a nine-year-old girl who spends hours in her bedroom making dresses for her dolls out of old pairs of 15-denier tights and who still watches *Rainbow*,' she would explain to Frankie. People often spoke to Frankie as if she was an adult when she still wanted to be a child. But sadly on this occasion she could offer no insight. She was similarly perplexed, although for an entirely different reason. Everybody knew that Paul was the best Beatle.

The car purred gently at the traffic lights and the windscreen wipers squeaked in a hypnotising game of cat-and-mouse. Frankie sat cradling the two slices of birthday cake that Ellie's mother had wrapped in a yellow napkin and pressed into her hands. The package felt hot on her lap, like sunshine melting. The traffic lights finally turned green on the thirty-first squeak.

Ellie craned her neck towards the backseat, her glasses magnifying her eyes so many times that her eyes seemed bigger than her face. She was nothing but eye, a giant questioning eye, an optical illusion.

'Are you still coming to Alton Towers on Saturday?' she asked Frankie. 'Liam Lewis says the Corkscrew's awesome.'

Frankie turned away from the melting sunshine and the gates now sailing by uncounted.

'I'm not sure. Mum's a bit under the weather.'

What did that even mean? Weren't they all under the weather? Still, that's what everybody said and Frankie had always found it a conveniently evasive and vague response.

'I'm sorry to hear that, Frankie,' Ellie's mother said. 'Is there anything you need?'

'No thank you, Mrs Barlow.'

Frankie didn't elaborate; being 'under the weather' allowed you to forgo the small print of an ailment, imagined or otherwise. Besides, her mother would never forgive her for 'airing their dirty laundry in public', even though it was something that her mother did on a daily basis, showing everyone her underwear while she was still wearing it.

They drove through another set of traffic lights ('They're always digging something up,' Mrs Barlow complained, her fingers impatiently tapping the steering wheel), which took eighty-three squeaks (a new record) to change to green, and then Frankie closed her eyes, visualising the rest of the journey behind closed eyelids – the four lefts, the three rights, the two roundabouts, the six potholes and the two zebra crossings – plotting it all on a map inside her head, her fingernail following the spiral contours, the world condensed beneath a fleshy fingertip.

She flatly refused to visualise the two gates on Hillside Drive, though; could barely breathe when she had to go past them. They were hideous. Thank goodness David Miller would never see them.

She timed it perfectly. When she next opened her eyes they were pulling up in front of an equally hideous wooden gate, the paint peeling off it like a damp plaster that can no longer protect the wound beneath it.

Frankie had begged her mother to buy a new gate, but her mother had told her not to be ridiculous, they didn't have money for gate repairs. A new gate was the least of their worries, she'd said – what did it matter if it didn't close properly? It would be easier to walk through. And then her mother had held a palm up

to her forehead as if her thoughts were spilling out onto the floor and she was trying to catch them before they scattered everywhere.

Frankie didn't want to be the cause of her mother's thoughts spilling everywhere, but how else would they keep the bad things out, how else would they stay safe? Her mother just didn't understand the importance of a resilient gate.

Deciding to purchase the necessary materials herself, Frankie began collecting loose coins in a pickled-onion jar that no matter how many times she washed still smelled of pickled onions. Currently, she had eight pounds and twenty-five pence and a cent and a peseta that she'd found on the pavement outside Woolworths, and that had taken seven months to collect.

Perhaps she could do a sponsored swim, although she'd have to learn to swim first. She spent the majority of her school swimming lessons hiding in the changing rooms inking verrucas onto the soles of her feet because she was scared of drowning.

Sharon Jackson had nearly drowned at the start of the autumn term when her armbands had unexpectedly deflated and none of the teachers had even noticed. Robin Bloor, who'd only completed his first full length of the baths the week before, had had to drag her to the steps flailing and gulping like a fish. And even though Martin Sargeant was suspected of deliberately deflating them – he kept a box of drawing pins in his blazer pocket – Frankie still thought it entirely possible that things could deflate all on their own.

Perhaps washing cars would be less hazardous, and there was a sponge and a bucket in the pantry so there'd be no start-up costs. Only elbow grease would be required and she had plenty of

that. Or a delivery service. People always wanted things delivered: newspapers, letters, babies . . .

Ever hopeful of securing the additional funding needed, she would spread her DIY catalogues and pamphlets across the bed and either add something new to her designs or erase what had once been there and start again. It was a continual process, searching for the perfect gate, and the secret was to never accept what was already there but to look beyond the expected, beyond the landscape, beyond the ordinary. Nobody, apart from David Miller, quite realised the effort or the financial commitment involved.

Frankie got out of the car and thanked Mrs Barlow for the lift home. Ellie was still waving as they pulled away, her features now blurred by the running rain, and then they turned right at the bottom of the road and disappeared. Frankie kicked open the garden gate with her foot, she never liked to touch it, and walked towards the front door.

She suddenly hesitated, wondering what would be waiting for her on the other side of the door. Would her mother be out of bed? Would she be happy to see her? If the day was black (there were only black days and blacker days) then her mother would be on her hands and knees trying to scoop her thoughts back up off the living room carpet with a dustpan and brush, the carpet swirls making it that much harder. She didn't want to think about the possibility of it being a blacker day.

She took a deep breath and unzipped her rucksack. Ellie always made fun of her rucksack, said that she must walk around with 'everything but the kitchen sink' inside it because it was always so

heavy, but it only really contained the things that she considered essential, the things that she needed access to at all times: a notepad with at least forty blank pages, two pens in case one ran out, a pencil, a rubber, a ruler, David Miller's book and a copy of the letter that she'd sent him, a chocolate bar – usually a Mars bar, because the fridge was often empty and the cupboards full of other things – a local map that she'd picked up at the bus station, a photograph of her mother with tomato-red lips and far too many teeth and, most importantly, a front-door key.

She didn't mention the pickled-onion jar that she now had to carry around with her as well. Even though she'd written 'GATE FUND MONEY' on it in angry capital letters and hidden it inside a vase on a shelf in her bedroom, there was one pound and eighty three pence missing from it. She'd checked it four times just to be sure, disappointed that her mother hadn't at least left an IOU.

Unlocking the front door, she stepped inside. The hallway was as dark as liquorice, the rooms either side of it silent and chilly. Normally, the central heating would hiss and the water pipes whistle and the house would yawn and stretch; you could hear it breathing, especially at night. But today it sat quietly, watching and waiting. She checked for her mother's camel coat. It was hanging from one of the coat hooks.

Frankie had locked herself in the bathroom and refused to come out when she'd first seen her mother wearing it. Through the bathroom door her mother had assured her that 'the camel would only have been made into a coat when it was very, very old and about to die or even already dead,' *and*, she'd said, as if this was

the most exciting part, 'having spent a long and happy life ferrying people across hot deserts, it's the camel that's now being ferried, only to town and back and the weather isn't as good, but still. Isn't that wonderful?' Hardly wonderful, but it had made Frankie feel a little less queasy.

She closed the front door and went into the kitchen, placing the squashed yellow napkin on the kitchen table. She hadn't realised that she'd been clenching her fist and the crumpled napkin now reminded her of the tiny yellow bird that she'd once caught her mother stamping on in the backyard. She hadn't dared ask her whether it had already been dead (like the camel, *and*, if it had been dead, then why was she stamping on it?) or whether she'd killed it by stamping on it. Her eyes were like pebbles.

When she'd gone back inside Frankie had carefully cupped the lifeless bird that was as flat as a pressed flower inside her pinafore dress and buried it beneath a patch of daisies. She was sorry that the bird had been yellow and not brown. Being yellow made you stand out. It made you noticeable. Later, she noticed blood on the sole of her mother's left shoe and a small yellow feather on the yard brush and she wondered if there'd been other yellow birds, other things that she didn't know.

She quickly blinked the image away, remembered instead the grey half-moons beneath her mother's eyes that morning that had been slowly sliding down her cheeks. She'd been wearing her customary red lipstick, but instead of looking like her younger self she'd looked like a circus clown. All Frankie wanted was for her to look like herself, but she imagined that her mother had forgotten who that was.

Blood-red picket-fencing ran along her lip line, as if her lips had been stitched together and she'd had to cut through the stitches with scissors to speak, and she must have forgotten to blot her lips with a tissue because she left a second pair of rosebud red lips on Frankie's right cheek when she kissed her goodbye. Frankie couldn't bring herself to wipe them away. It would have been like wiping her mother away. And so she'd gone to Ellie's birthday party with one rosebud red cheek and one white unloved cheek and nobody had spat on a handkerchief and tried to remove the traces of her mother.

There were two mugs in the kitchen sink. Frankie wondered if her mother was 'entertaining'. She picked up the one that wasn't smudged with lipstick. It smelled of whiskey and Nescafé. Sylvia didn't drink whiskey. And Stan wasn't expected back for another two weeks, although he often liked to surprise them, her mother's pale and unready face shooing her upstairs. She shuddered. She hated Stan. So many times she'd tried to tell her mother just how much she hated him, which was the most that she'd ever hated anybody, but then she would catch sight of her mother's trembling fingers in the hall mirror as she was clipping back her hair, the fluttering, shallow breaths as she sat nervously biting her fingernails, and she couldn't do it.

She didn't want the half-moons to become full moons. And it probably wouldn't have made any difference anyway. Apparently, her mother didn't need 'the approval of a fucking nine-year-old'.

And so he continued to manoeuvre her mother away from her with his garlic-fried breath and his frostbitten stare. She'd hoped that he'd drift quietly away like the others, but unfortunately he

seemed to be inching his way ever closer, bringing her conciliatory childish bribes that he thought might pacify her and buy him more time with her mother (obviously unaware that her approval wasn't necessary); things that other people had discarded, and for good reason: a *Beano* comic that smelled of Campbell's mushroom soup, a plastic beaded necklace with a broken clasp, sticky, glittery hairslides, a naked Sindy doll with no arms, things that she suspected he'd stolen from another child's hands or dustbin finds that he'd decided to recycle.

'People throw away a lot of perfectly useable things that just need a good wipe,' she'd overheard him telling her mother. She wondered if this included her mother.

Frankie could barely disguise her contempt and often threw his 'gifts' straight into the bin while he was still waiting for a 'thank you' (her mother would fish them back out again and tell her not to be so ungrateful).

A diary that he left outside her bedroom door belonged to 'Diana Copeland, aged 12', according to the inside cover, and entries for the whole of September had been completed (none of them particularly riveting) – *lunch today was cod in parsley sauce, the slimiest fish ever; Nigel Fenton is a massive cry baby, I barely touched him; a woman who wasn't Mum was in Dad's car today* – and she hated him for stealing something so personal. She wanted to return it, she'd already read too much, but there was no one by that name at any of the local schools. She'd called them all pretending to be Diana's mother (and then Nigel Fenton's mother). The diary was the only thing that she ever kept in the hope that she could one day return it.

She wondered what Christmas would be like this year. Normally, her mother would be barefoot in the kitchen with a dusting of flour in her hair humming 'Silent Night', the silver baubles dangling from the artificial tree branches like Pat Butcher's earrings. There'd be a bottle of Le Jardin perfume or a C&A cardigan and a pair of slippers to unwrap, followed by the Queen's speech and *It's a Wonderful Life* and then, later, repeats of *The Morecambe and Wise Christmas Special* and a Quality Street orange creme or caramel swirl. It was the same each year, like the programme listings in the Christmas *TV Times*, but that was what her mother liked most – the familiarity, the uneaten toffee fingers rolling around the tin at the end of the night.

By Boxing Day morning, however, it was as if the previous day had been a different Christmas or another family's celebrations. The tree would be Norwegian green again and back in its box, the turkey carcass unceremoniously tossed into the pedal bin, and her mother would be lying in bed, curiously intrigued by the spider cracks in the ceiling that were apparently 'the size of Yellowstone canyons'. Frankie hoped that Stan was planning to spend Christmas elsewhere. She didn't want him ruining the only nice memories that she had of her mother.

She carefully unfolded the napkin and slid what wasn't still stuck to it onto a plate. It was carnage, a bloodbath of buttercream and strawberry jam. She tried not to think about the tiny canary-yellow bird buried in the back garden, the slightly raised earth not noticeable at all now, but like the bird, her mother still hadn't stirred.

Canaries were once used by coalminers as early-warning systems, she'd recently learned. She'd immediately raised her hand and told Mr Thomas, her teacher, that it was a cruel practice and

could she please be excused from the lesson. But he'd said that human life must always come before that of an inferior species and no, she couldn't be excused. Furious, she'd broken her pencil rubber in half, pushed the two halves into her ears, and reproduced the Celtic knot gate accent that she'd seen that morning on her way to school in the back of her science book instead. Not all humans deserved prior warning of imminent death. Mr Thomas obviously hadn't met Stan. And the canary-yellow bird in their backyard couldn't alert any of them to potential dangers any more.

She couldn't remember seeing Stan's car in the street, a rusty metallic grey Volvo with leopard-print seat covers and a reclining backseat, a car that you didn't forget in a hurry, a car that you were lucky to escape from alive. But perhaps he'd walked or hitched a ride. He often parked streets away, as if he didn't want anybody to know where he was, didn't want to be held accountable for what might happen when he got there. She decided to wait a little longer just in case.

If she ever interrupted him, often accidentally, he would go white with rage, never red like normal people, and wait until her mother was out of earshot before roughly pinching her arm and cursing under his breath and telling her to '*never, ever, do that again, you sanctimonious little shit*'. She always tried to hold his gaze, pretended to know what words like 'sanctimonious' meant (it didn't sound particularly complimentary), but would have to rush to the toilet the minute he let go of her, her bladder never quite as fearless.

She wondered what colour he would go if he was being stabbed. Orange, she imagined, like tangerine peel. She silently listed all the

different ways that he might die and the different colours that he might turn as he lay dying.

She sighed and went into the sitting room. The curtains were still drawn. She pulled them open to let in the day, but the day was so dark that all it did was let in more darkness. The room had been tidied, she noticed, the ashtrays emptied and the wine glasses cleared away. The coffee table smelled of lemon furniture polish. Frankie generally did all the housework, but sometimes it would have to wait if she had homework to finish or gates to design. And this morning she'd been busy wrapping Ellie's birthday presents.

Fortunately, with the dusting done, she would be able to catch up on her reading. She was halfway through *136 Ornate Garden Gates* by Penny and Gilbert Jones and was planning to read *The Perfect Gate for the Perfect Space* by Carl Franks next.

She was looking forward to building a gate that Stan could never get through – the Stan-Repellent, she would call it. She was running out of rivers.

The house was eerily quiet apart from a clock ticking (she couldn't tell which one). Her mother had a huge collection of clocks, although many of them no longer worked, and those that did work were either too fast or too slow. One of them, a glass-domed anniversary clock, didn't tick at all, the minute hand rotating in a sullen silence.

Growing increasingly impatient, she collected what she'd salvaged of the birthday cake and went upstairs to wake her mother. When she got to the top of the stairs she noticed that her mother's bedroom door was open. She could see a sliver of room, a corner of

bed. Her mother always kept the door closed because she hated the thought of somebody spying on her. She didn't consider staring into the neighbour's houses from the bedroom window for hours at a time spying. That was apparently 'showing a neighbourly interest'.

She also didn't like anyone going into her bedroom when she wasn't there, although there was nothing much to see. Frankie had looked. Anything of interest was hidden in a less conspicuous corner of the house. But she did like trying on her mother's shoes and putting on her lipstick.

Frankie wished that they didn't have doors at all so that everything could be easily seen. She always dreaded what might be behind them. She took another deep breath and pushed open the bedroom door, preparing herself for a 'get the fuck out' and a spinning gin bottle. There was neither.

She saw her mother's slippers first, fluffy pink bedroom mules that had all sorts of matter stuck to them, swinging gently to and fro, on the wrong feet. And then when Frankie looked up she saw the rest of her hanging from the ceiling. Her eyes weren't any colour at all, they were colourless, like pearl barley, but she still seemed to be searching for all those lost thoughts still stuck to the carpet swirls or maybe she was wondering why her slippers were on the wrong feet and there were three baked beans stuck to the matted fur. That seemed more likely.

Frankie had wanted to tell her about the one-eyed magician and the rabbit that wouldn't come out of the hat and the trampoline that no one could bounce on because Ellie's father had had to leave before he could finish assembling it and Rachel Collins pinning the

donkey's tail onto Lydia Thompson's 'Bros' bomber jacket instead of on the donkey. Lydia's mother had had to come and collect her because she wouldn't stop crying about the tiny, barely noticeable, pinprick in her jacket.

But instead the plate slid from her hand and she wondered who would eat the second slice of cake now.

Chapter Two

So Many Reasons Why

(she couldn't be an astronaut)

1979

'Hurry up, Peg, it's like being in the Mediterranean, I've just seen a—'

The rest of the sentence was swallowed up by a swooping seagull, so Peggy had no idea what Ed had just seen – a stingray, a message in a bottle, a corpse that had been weighted down with bricks? She hoped that it wasn't something as mundane as a plastic fork or a string of seaweed.

What she *was* certain of however was that Southport could in no way be deemed comparable to the south of France. As far as she was aware Ed hadn't even been to the Mediterranean, so comparing it to the Côte d'Azur or the Amalfi coastline when it was probably more reminiscent of a bank holiday Skegness was certainly wishful to say the least, although in fairness things were often improved by your imagination (when you weren't imagining the worst).

Her bare feet left a trail of size-five footprints across the oven-hot sand as she made her way towards the water's edge, but by the time

she'd reached the shoreline he'd already disappeared. Which was a blessing really. The water looked far too cold; she certainly had no intention of swimming in it. Whatever Ed might think, it was hardly St-Tropez. It was definitely Southport. And nobody's imagination could convince her otherwise, no matter how vivid it might be.

A small boy in red swimming trunks stood shivering beside her.

'Do you think it's cold?' he asked her, his teeth chattering along with his trembling body.

'It's probably warmer than it looks,' she lied.

'It doesn't look very warm.'

'No, it doesn't,' she conceded.

The boy hesitated and then, scooping up his clothes, rejoined his parents.

Unfolding a beach towel Peggy watched the tide playfully swallow Ed up and in the next breath spit him back out again and then she slotted Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* into the cassette player (the first track appropriately titled 'Tangled up in Blue'), but the lyrics were drowned out by the thrashing waves. And then the tape itself became tangled so she had to pull a pen out of her handbag, insert it into one of the spools and manually rewind it. The tape gathered in a nest of knots on her lap, the silver inscription on the pen shimmering maliciously.

It was the personalised Paper Mate ballpoint pen that Ed, a stranger who she'd turned to in the queue, had handed to her at the second of Bob Dylan's six London Earls Court concerts so that Bob Dylan could sign her bra. She'd brazenly lifted up the 'Lay Lady Lay' T-shirt that she was wearing so that the bra could be

signed more easily, and then kept the pen. It had been an eighteenth birthday gift and wished him a *Happy Anniversary, love Leslie & Sheila* ('whoever the hell they are', Ed had said) instead of a *Happy 18th Birthday, love Mum and Dad*, so it was hardly of sentimental value.

Ed later told her that the manager of Timpson's had insisted that that was the inscription requested and refused their request for a refund even though birth certificates and marriage certificates were produced and a formal complaint forwarded to their head office in Wythenshawe. It was even featured on *That's Life* in a segment warning of the dangers of letting retailers engrave precious heirlooms, with various examples of spelling mistakes produced as evidence: '*Nappy First Birthday*', '*Congratulations on Your Law Decree*', '*My Harp Belongs to You*'.

Peggy, however, liked to think the mistake serendipitous because if there had been a refund then there would have been no pen for her to borrow and they wouldn't now be renting a one-bedroom flat above a florist. And it was an anniversary of sorts, the anniversary of their first meeting, although admittedly at the time she'd been planning her Malibu beach wedding to Bob Dylan and editing an eight-page wedding special for the September issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, until she later noticed a willowy brunette being ushered into his dressing room and realised why he'd been in such a hurry to sign her left breast.

She buried the pen (a permanent reminder that, at five foot three, she was anything but 'willowy') in the sand and, the cassette tape now ruined, angrily began flicking through the *Creative Living* magazine that Ed had been reading on the train. Ed was a temporary administrative assistant for an architectural design company,

although according to Ian Stubbs, the managing director of the company, photocopying and filing duties were far too menial a task for someone like Ed who was *most definitely* Going Places, even though he could never quite pinpoint exactly where those places might be.

'"Homes by Appleton Architects: Investing in Your Future" – just imagine it, Peg,' Ed would say, with the enthusiasm of some born-again Christian being interviewed on *Panorama*. (Peggy was deeply suspicious of anyone who claimed to be able to change their entire belief system overnight. She was sure that spiritual and emotional enlightenment didn't come that easily. Mostly, in her experience, it didn't come at all; the coveting of things that you don't have tending to make any kind of spiritual metamorphosis unlikely.)

Undeterred by her scepticism, however, he would regularly bring home armfuls of cardboard boxes filled with those born-again, spirit-levelled dreams, spreading them across the dining table like tarot cards, project-managing them into existence until there was no room for her or any dreams that she might have had. Instead, the table was littered with more practical concerns: aluminium window frames and loft insulation, roof tiles and plasterboard, how to plumb a sink, how to light a hallway.

He would ask her why she couldn't (or wouldn't) grasp these dreams of his and hold them in her hands, try them on for size. Doing something for the first time shouldn't be a reason not to. There's a first time for everything. But she'd been fooled like that before – having aspirations that were unexpectedly washed away before you could dip a toe in the water.

'But why do your dreams have to be so big, so ambitious? Aren't we happy as we are?' she once asked him, increasingly afraid that this particular dream would sweep him away completely and she wouldn't know where to start looking for him.

'There's nothing wrong with having dreams – and the bigger the better. Ask Martin Luther King,' was his pious reply.

She couldn't ask Martin Luther King because he wasn't there to ask, and he'd been a civil rights activist, he was allowed to dream big. He'd had supporters who expected nothing less. Ed was on a twelve-month temporary contract and idolised Richard Branson. His dream was the Abba version, mediocre floor plans unfurling like forest fire across a cluttered and chaotic dining table. And even though Peggy never normally swore, everything soon became 'fuck this' and 'fuck that' and finally, 'fuck you', her tongue swollen with an unleashed, simmering venom that only a swear word could quench, until they were barely speaking at all and the tension between them seem to hiss and burn like the scorched tarmac outside.

A few weeks after their trip to Southport Ed came home waving a sheet of paper in the air as if he'd won first prize in a competition, having apparently forgotten that they weren't speaking, that it was too hot to be waving anything in the air unless it was to cool it. At least it wasn't another cardboard box full of pipe dreams, she remembered thinking. There were so many boxes in the flat that it seemed as if they'd only just moved in.

His cheeks were flushed and he smelled of Stella (the beer *and*

the barmaid, Stella Evans, who regularly doused herself in Yardley's 'Intrigue', although there was no one less intriguing).

'How's Stella?' Peggy asked.

He didn't reply.

'I've found the perfect piece of land to build on, Peg. Why don't you come and see for yourself?' he pleaded.

'You're drunk,' she chided. 'We'll discuss it in the morning.'

They didn't have conversations any more. They just pecked at each other hurtfully, like woodpeckers on bark, clipped, terse sentences that never led anywhere.

The following morning she adamantly refused to discuss anything remotely dream-related. Whatever she might have said, she stubbornly did the opposite. The two slices of bread that she'd placed in the toaster snapped into the air, much like her mood, as she watched him pause in the doorway, no doubt wondering what had happened to the woman who'd once pulled up her T-shirt in front of a queue of strangers so that Bob Dylan could sign her bra and then refused to return his pen because Bob Dylan had touched it.

Peggy threw the toast away without buttering it. She wondered if the willowy brunette who'd followed Bob Dylan into his dressing room was always stubbing her toe on cardboard boxes. She suspected not. Frustrated, she began to clear the dining table. She needed to see it again. She couldn't let its teak finish elude her any longer. She was tired of using cardboard boxes as coffee tables.

As she was arranging various specification documents and upcoming auction dates into neat piles she noticed the sheet of paper that he'd been waving at her the night before – '*twelve acres of*

land for sale behind a disused quarry'. How on earth could they afford twelve acres of land? And how many houses was he planning to build? Was he stealing from his employer? Had he robbed a bank?

So many unanswered questions and the more time that passed, the less she seemed to understand. But a person's dreams were important, she knew that, and it didn't always matter that they weren't your dreams or that they were too big.

As she was moving some of the boxes into the bedroom, the doorbell rang. Two uniformed police officers were standing in the hallway, Jessica from the florist's shop downstairs hovering awkwardly behind them.

Peggy remembered first meeting Jessica. She was wrapping ribbon around a birthday bouquet of carnations, chrysanthemums and roses – the only three flowers that she sold. She flatly refused to stock anything more seasonal such as tulips or lilies or sprigs of mistletoe. Sometimes you can have too much choice she would say, the more choice you have, the more difficult your decision. And I haven't got all day, she complained, as if three types of flower was still two types too many.

And they all die in the end anyway, Jessica had added, resignedly. Peggy had wondered why she sold flowers at all. Their transient nature seemed to be a disappointment to her.

'Mrs Appleton?' the younger police officer asked.

'Yes?'

Peggy didn't correct him. She wasn't married. But she didn't mind that people often assumed that she was. In fact, she encouraged

their assumptions. Perhaps she should wear her mother's wedding ring, make the unofficial official.

Peggy's mother had given up all hope of ever having children and when she discovered that she was pregnant and not, as she'd initially believed, menopausal, she'd found it extremely difficult to re-embrace the idea again. Ultimately, she was prescribed a course of antidepressants to provide some semblance of normality. She contracted a rare blood disorder shortly after the birth and died when Peggy was five. Her father died three months later. He didn't even glance over his shoulder to say goodbye he was so intent on following his wife. Peggy often wondered if she'd killed them both, if she should never have been born at all.

Especially when she became a foster child, one vowel away from being a festering child, something unwanted languishing in a corner somewhere, her life a convoluted genealogical nightmare as she was deposited on the doorsteps of the McCalls (don't call us, we'll call you), the Whites, the Shaws (very sure, thank you), the Millers, the Healeys, the Wrights (who were the most wrong), and finally the Hills – a whole estate of surnames (two were actually on the same estate).

An audience of faces would ask her the same uninterested questions in a variety of regional and overseas accents. She rarely remembered their Christian names, only their surnames – one size fits all – and sometimes only their accents or the shape that their lips made as they were waving goodbye. No doubt they similarly erased her from their lives as soon as they'd closed the front door. What was her name, the miserable one, the one who never spoke? Penelope, Pamela, Paula?

She'd actually overheard Mrs Miller pleading with a social worker over the telephone, 'I really can't keep her any longer. We had an agreement. And she's such a depressing child, isn't she? Is she mute? She just keeps staring into space.' They didn't even try to hide their displeasure and instead of a fostering success, she remained a festering disappointment, a lingering smell behind the sofa cushions, but thankfully not forever, as they tried to forget that she was there.

And of course nobody wanted to keep her. Something more permanent? No, I'm afraid not. Do you have any newborns? They didn't want fully fledged five-year-olds with their own thoughts and tantrums. They wanted adorable blue-eyed, two-week-old infants with fat pink cheeks and Shirley Temple curls who they could shape into children of their own like clay pots, children who would answer when spoken to and slip undetected into family portraits.

Politely perched on puckered candy-striped cotton bed sheets and frayed candlewick bedspreads, Peggy would wait for a freckled, wrinkled or frowning face to open the bedroom door and announce the arrival of the social worker, and the island raft that she'd been desperately clinging onto began to splinter into so many different pieces that she didn't know which of them belonged to her any more and she was never in one place long enough to find out.

It was while she was in emergency accommodation 'between families' sitting in the administrative office of the local government Child Services Department that she decided she didn't want to be Peggy any more. Mr Wright had started sitting on the bed with her when Mrs Wright was out shopping. He'd given her a doll, a doll that he said was just like her. She buried it in the back garden a few

days later with a note that said 'please leave me as you find me, he must never know that I'm here' because he'd said that it was just like her and she didn't want him anywhere near it.

Most days she wished that she was the one buried in their back garden, not the doll, which *had* looked uncannily like her, the same pink T-shirt and denim skirt that she always wore, the same untameable hair. There was even a mole on its left cheek in exactly the same place. When she rubbed at it, it blackened her fingers.

It was as if Mr Wright had made her smaller, squashed her between his hefty palms until she was small enough to fit inside his pocket and not be seen. Perhaps she and the doll could swap places for a few days so that she could sleep with her eyes closed while the doll pretended to be her, although she wasn't sure what other things might surface if she did that. And it wasn't fair to let someone else suffer just because they could close their eyes and you couldn't.

And then she would wonder if she wasn't already buried in their back garden and the doll was the one with bruises all over its arms and too many secrets to keep. But if the doll was her, then who was she?

Aaron, the social worker assigned to her case, was tapping a black biro against his teeth. He seemed alarmed. Peggy was The Child Who Never Spoke, a case that nobody else wanted. He thought that he must have imagined the sound of her – he'd worked nearly sixty-three hours this week, it was exhausting living other people's lives – and returned to his case notes. He hoped that he wasn't hearing voices again. A gerbil had lost three of its legs last time.

Peggy tried again, but her voice sounded strangely distant, as if it was trapped inside a glass jar. She hadn't heard it in such a long time

and it was like learning to talk all over again, even though she couldn't remember the first time that she'd ever tried to say something.

'I don't want to be Peggy any more,' she repeated, a little louder this time.

She really was talking. Her lips were moving. Aaron was relieved. He really didn't want Barry coming back. Monica, he could tolerate, she was actually quite agreeable – she'd been deeply upset about the gerbil – but not Barry.

Aaron wasn't fond of small talk or childish riddles, although both were inevitable when dealing with children.

'But you are Peggy,' he informed her matter-of-factly, removing the biro from between his teeth and beginning to write with it – not 'she *can* speak' or 'Peggy doesn't want to be Peggy'; he was actually writing, 'I'm not listening, Barry. I'm busy.'

'Well I want to be Devon now.'

She'd been thinking about this name change for some time and had settled on Devon because it was the colour of new sandals and summer holidays, neither of which she'd ever had. And she liked the sound of it, how it felt on her tongue, Devon Moon. She could be anything with a name like that: an actress, an ice skater, an astronaut (the clue was in the name); anything at all.

'Your name's Peggy. It's who you are. It's in all the paperwork. And you'll still be Peggy, even with a different name. And isn't Devon a county rather than a girl's name? I'd have to speak to the head of the division and Mr Davies really hasn't got time for non-urgent requests such as name changes. He wouldn't appreciate all the work involved in renaming you. You do understand that, don't you?'

So many reasons why she couldn't be an astronaut when her name suggested otherwise.

She studied the smear of black ink in the corner of his mouth. It sat there like a moth, eavesdropping.

'You don't have to change the paperwork. I just want to be called Devon.'

Aaron sighed. Changing Peggy's name was hardly a priority, whereas placing her with a family was. And no family wanted a sullen, uncommunicative child like Peggy. Or Meredith, the flea-bitten, one-eyed panda that she carried with her everywhere, part of a past that she couldn't let go of. They wanted the improved and updated version, the panda still in its packaging, still having both of its eyes. He wondered what had happened to the missing eye. *Gouged out with a penknife by a sadomasochist, I expect*, he heard Barry say.

He stared at Peggy slash Devon, her legs swinging back and forth beneath the chair like scissors, her eyes stretched wide.

What harm can it do? Monica whispered in his left ear.

'I'm not promising anything, but I'll see what I can do.'

There, that wasn't so hard, was it?

Aaron's office was always like winter, Devon thought; it gave her goose pimples, even in summer. The chaffinches would be chirping and Billie Holiday would be singing 'East of the Sun (and West of the Moon)' and she'd sit there shivering while Aaron hid record sleeves beneath his files and assumed that nobody was listening, but she was always listening, always ready to cross any road. But maybe that was because she'd had to cross so many of them.

Once, when Mr Davies's secretary, Thelma, had popped her head round the door looking for Eleanor Matthews, Aaron had lifted the stylus off the record so quickly that he scratched the vinyl. She'd never seen him so angry. He seemed to behave differently in front of Devon. 'It's fucking ruined,' he snarled when the crown of Thelma's head had gone, holding the record up to the light so that he could better see the scratch, forgetting that she was still listening. And then he sat down and wrote the word 'shit' over and over again in his notepad with a biro, his breathing ragged and sharp.

He was always writing things down (normally not swear words). Even when she wasn't saying anything, he was writing it down, spreading lies about her (or were the lies hers?). She wondered who saw all of these lies, or 'case notes' as he liked to call them; sentences that described her without even knowing her, written in somebody else's handwriting; Aaron's view of her. One day she hoped to put her own scratched record straight and tell her side of the story.

When he'd filled three pages of his notepad with the word 'shit' he looked across at her and said, 'So, Peggy – sorry, Devon – let's find you a new family,' as if Billie Holiday was still spinning and unspoiled and finding a family was the easiest thing in the world.

It wasn't. Family implied two parents, two children, ideally a boy and a girl, aunts, uncles, cousins, generations, ancestors . . . but sometimes family was just you; there were no branches leading to other branches because those other branches kept snapping off.

She'd once asked Aaron if she could stay at a hotel instead, but he told her that the council budget didn't stretch that far and a hotel couldn't possibly provide the stability that a foster home could. She

disagreed. A hotel could provide everything that a foster home could. They were practically identical. In fact she thought that hotels might be a little more accommodating, a little more forgiving. They certainly wouldn't sit next to you on the bed or wash your panda without asking, as Mrs Healey had done while she'd been sitting on the pavement squashing ants with a twig.

Aaron removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. He seemed tired. Of her? Probably. Most people tired of her eventually. And if she wasn't framed inside his glasses any more, was she even there? She couldn't be sure. It seemed like she was sitting opposite a different person when he didn't have his glasses on.

'Do you have parents?' Devon asked him.

The moth was back, this time on a front tooth. He looked like he'd been fighting.

'Doesn't everybody?'

'No, not everybody.'

'You had parents once,' he reminded her.

She didn't answer.

The last family that Aaron ever parcelled her up for were the Hills. She stood on their doorstep wrapped in ribbons and bows and a new winter coat and was mortified when he introduced her, almost apologetically, as 'Peggy, but she likes to be called Devon,' as if she couldn't decide who she wanted to be, as if she was being particularly obstinate about it. She wasn't Peggy. She was Devon. She had no past any more. Isn't that what they all wanted? Even Meredith was gone. She'd dropped her in a litter bin on her way to school because since she'd been washed, she didn't smell like her mother any more.

But now, thanks to Aaron, she sounded as crazy as Crazy Olive who walked around town in laddered stockings telling everybody that Tony Bennett was planning to eat them and Mario Lanza owned a casino on Neptune where you could play blackjack with Doris Day on Thursdays.

Aaron nudged her inside, even though she wanted to stay on the doorstep in her new winter coat where it was easier to breathe, and it wasn't as if she'd been dropped into a dark and inescapable hollow with no rope ladder. Mrs Hill was dressed in Easter yellow, smiling. Mr Hill wore wool and shook her hand. An aviary of birds sat on shelves and walls watching events unfold, porcelain wrens, acrylic starlings, matchstick doves, all kinds of birds made out of all kinds of things, a place for everything. She wondered where her place would be. She could see a green velvet armchair with tassels by the fireplace and thought that she might like to sit in that.

Just as she was imagining herself sinking into the mint velvet cushions the sharp slap of an icy breeze drifted in through an open window and the valleys of soft green disappeared. She pulled her coat tighter. She was rushing ahead of herself. Things could still fall apart. She should know that by now.

When Aaron next visited she noticed that her file seemed slimmer. He was now able to balance it easily on one leg, the Peggy crossed out and the name DEVON added in capital letters as if she was a travel brochure.

'Devon seems to suit you,' he told her. 'A new name, a new beginning. If only everything was that simple.'

His gaze fell on the ship's bell clock on the mantelpiece and stayed there for an unusually long time.

She wondered if she might receive a rosette or a trophy this time; or a pat on the back like her father used to give her (she kept forgetting that he was Peggy's father, not hers). Maybe even a hug. She thought that she might like a hug the most. It had been a long time since anybody had hugged her (besides Mr Wright, but that didn't count).

Although, disappointingly, the green velvet armchair wasn't as comfortable as it looked.

While Cynthia Hill collected birds, Bernard, her husband, collected clocks. He would go from room to room late at night winding them up. There were fifty-two clocks in the house – she'd counted them the day she arrived, severely sleep-deprived due to the disruptive ticking inside every room; a ticking that ultimately made its way inside her own head, the fifty-third clock.

There was never a moment when something wasn't ticking, and each clock had its own specific trademark tick: the grandfather clock in the front room that nobody ever sat in (*adagio*), the cuckoo clock above the kitchen table that never failed to startle you (*allegro*), the pendulum clock at the bottom of the stairs that often skipped three 'tocks' in a row.

She was like a doctor with a stethoscope, a paramedic checking for a pulse, a majorette in a marching band, time never standing still, always moving forward. And it was as if there was never enough time, even though there was far too much of it, Bernard routinely winding up clocks each night making everything beat so much faster, particularly the ticking inside her head.

And then Bernard's Morris Minor hit a sycamore tree on the corner of Pool Dam and the ticking stopped. Cynthia had been in the passenger seat and she died at the scene. Bernard broke his jaw. The wrong way round somehow, the wrong person. Bernard had no interest in winding up clocks after that. But thankfully by then she was sixteen and was Peggy again.

'I'm afraid there's been an accident,' the older, balding police officer continued.

If only she hadn't tidied the dining table that morning; if only she hadn't swept all of Ed's dreams away, boxed them up and moved them into the bedroom, she remembered thinking. If only.

This wasn't how it was meant to be at all.

The fluttering inside her stomach felt like a thousand trapped butterflies, like she'd swallowed a glassful of caterpillars at breakfast along with some of the glass. When she looked down she noticed that she was bleeding, a trail of blood slithering down her right thigh towards her calf.

Daphne, she thought suddenly, the name popping into her head from nowhere. The doll Mr Wright had given her – she'd called her Daphne.