

GEORGIE HALL

Woman
of a
Certain
Rage



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PROLOGUE

The Dog Fight

Our dog Arty died a fortnight ago. She was sixteen, which is over ninety in dog years, the young vet told us kindly when he came to put her down. It was a very dignified departure. She was ready to go but the family was heartbroken. We all had a good cry that night, since when I've mopped my tears out of sight. Goodness, I miss her. She was one of those dogs who comes and leans against you when you're upset, all kindness and patience. Even if I was angry – which I am a lot these days – she'd stick around and let it wash over her, although that could be because she slept a lot towards the end and was stone deaf.

We put her basket, toys and bowls in the garage. Yesterday we went on her favourite walk by the River Leam to scatter her ashes. Edward had made a Nanoblock headstone and Summer read out a poem she'd written. There was a tricky moment when a jogger came past just as the wind was blowing the wrong way, but he took it in good spirit once he realised it wasn't a beloved grandparent. Just a dog.

Just Arty.

It took all my powers of self-control to spare the family the sight of me sobbing uncontrollably on the riverbank like an ageing Ophelia. Instead, I gathered them in a group hug that was more of a head-butting rugby scrum, said a final thank you and goodbye to our darling old dog friend, then let them scatter away from this embarrassingly motherly display of affection as we turned to walk back home.

That's when Paddy suggested we should go straight out and get a puppy. A *true* family dog, he emphasised, as though Arty wasn't enough of one. Summer was taking a sad-face selfie out of earshot and Edward had put his noise-cancelling headphones back on, so I ignored the suggestion, hoping he'd get the message and let it go.

But he brought it up again later when we were on the big television-watching sofa, children upstairs, a void between us where Arty would have been curled up.

'Come on, Elz. Let's go for it. Let's get a puppy.'

I told him I needed a little longer. I felt tearful and panicked, as though this strange new dog was about to attack us. He said that I wasn't being fair on the family, that Edward needs a dog (which is rubbish; he couldn't have cared less about Arty; he wants a snake) and that it would be fun to have a puppy around the place. He got his phone out and started looking up litters on Gumtree, saying how he'd always fancied this breed or that breed. When I accused him of making it sound as though Arty wasn't ever the dog he'd wanted, he pointed out that, as a Heinz 57 rescue dog, *nobody* had wanted her until we came along.

'Anyway, she was always more your dog than mine,' he

said, and I felt indignation spark because that was never the intention.

I still remember how heroic and noble we'd felt trooping to the National Canine Defence League to find our family best friend: Artemis, a strange mottled creature of indeterminate age, breeding and colour, one ear up and one down, one eye blue and one brown, with a long sausage body balanced on delicate Sheraton legs, a white plume of a tail and an overwhelming desire to love. Certainly, I was the one who fed and walked her most often, so perhaps it's true that I got an extra dose of devotion, but she had plenty to share round.

And here was my husband shopping online for another dog, preferably with a bit more love for him and less for me to balance things out.

'You'll feel much better if you cuddle one of these.' He'd held up a screen full of Cockerpoo puppies.

'I will not!' I snarled, and that's when the fight kicked off. Our dog fight.

Once I'd made it clear that I don't want another dog straight away, and he'd made it clear he does, we quickly ramped it up to ranting at each other, all sorts of nonsense, at the end of which Paddy accused me of not loving him any more. I was sobbing too much to deny it. At least, that's my excuse.

I slammed my way up to bed while he stayed downstairs. After a long cry, a self-pitying message left unsent to my best friend Lou and three podcasts I didn't take in, I went back down and found Paddy asleep on the sofa, the TV still streaming back-to-back episodes of *Game of Thrones*, all flying fake fur, plaits and blood. I'm not sure he took on board my apology as he zombie-ed up to bed; I'm not

sure he even really woke up to hear me say that of course I love him.

I always regret shouting the first thing that comes into my hot head when we fight. But I was still furious with him about the dog idea. And now I was angry with myself for jabbering out a tired surrender.

I lay awake until dawn, feeling like the world was about to end, although that's nothing new either. (Hello insomnia! What doom shall we showcase at 5 a.m. today? Ah yes, Paddy leaving because you said such unforgiveable things. Then there's your failure to make your children's futures safe. And if we need more, there's the old undiagnosed tumour worry again...) The only thing new was that Arty no longer crept up into the bed to try to lick my tears away. Kind, gentle Arty, who wasn't afraid of death, while I am terrified. If I die, I wondered, will Paddy be straight on his phone, swiping left and right to try to find my replacement too?

Arty's dead, the disloyal bitch, and I miss her revoltingly.

I don't want another dog.

Another life, that's a different matter.

1

Drive Time

Sorry! I mouth at Paddy who is reversing out of the drive to take Edward to school after a quick car shuffle.

Our younger son's taken against the transport that the council provides to convey children to his special school an hour's gridlocked rush-hour drive away. This morning's meltdown on the driveway was his fiercest yet, our new neighbours peering from an upstairs window. It's the third day in a row Paddy's been forced to take Edward in by car. Sitting beside his father, earphones on and waving goodbye, Edward looks as though the last half hour of screaming, biting and kicking hasn't happened.

Paddy raises his hand farewell, stone-faced, as wrung out by it as I am. We're still licking wounds after the dog fight and now this. He thinks I'm too soft on Edward; I think he shouts at him too much.

I wish I could have been the one to take him in, but I need to be at work in twenty minutes and it takes half an hour to get there.

I manoeuvre my car back up the drive, and leave the engine running while I dash in for my work bag and to brief Summer whose bus isn't for another hour. 'Can you remember to hand that form in to the office or we'll be fined, and *please* look for your lost jacket and art portfolio today? Cat *out* of your room before you leave the house.' I've been saying much the same since she was in Year Seven like Edward and she's now taking A levels with no noticeable improvement. I hug her. 'Goodbye. Love you.'

She shrugs me off. 'You need to do something about that parting, Mum. It's M40.' We grade my grey regrowth according to roads, from Unmarked Lane through B and A to the dreaded M.

'I'm going back to my roots, like Bob Marley.'

'That is oh so wrong!'

'God, was that racist?'

'Odyssey sang "Going Back to My Roots".' She and Paddy are big music trivia buffs. 'And yes, it's poor taste.'

'Don't hate me.'

'I'm a teenager; I'm morally obliged to hate you.' She smiles to show it's a sort-of joke, but we both know she says it like she means it painfully often.

'I hate you!' were, coincidentally, the first words I ever said to Paddy, although I was definitely joking. And laughing. And *staring* at the Adonis in a beanie who had just correctly identified that it was Supergrass who sang 'Alright', not Blur or Suede or one of the other Britpop bands breaking at the time. I'd had a tenner riding on Pulp, which was all the money I had left to buy food for the week.

It was 1995, one of those grey February days when it never seems to get light. I'd been shut in an unheated scenery workshop with fellow members of the Cat's Pyjamas Theatre Company since breakfast, devoting our precious Saturday to painting the set for a low-budget bit of fringe agitprop. (For set, read a pile of splintered packing cases, several of which disintegrated under the weight of a thin layer of emulsion.) Our director had disappeared hours earlier to source more and we'd turned on the radio to dance round, too busy squabbling over the identity of the band on John Peel's live session to notice him return. He'd brought his new flatmate with him, a man so tall, blonde and handsomely chiselled, he should have come with *Heartbreaking Bastard* stamped across his forehead.

'Paddy here's agreed to build us a stage set.'

'I love you!' were the second words I ever said to my husband. I still remember the way he looked at me, and my goosebumps doing Mexican waves. He was *that* hot.

I thought I had his measure. I specialised in broody bastards at the time, mascara-wrecking heartbreak being a badge of honour for most twenty-something single girls of my acquaintance, along with Red or Dead boots, hanky-hem tops, CK One and a copy of *Prozac Nation*. We knew the score: meet him and register mutual attraction, flirty date one, fall for him, mark the phone for a week and tell friends he could be The One. Flirtier date two, mark the phone for two weeks and pretend not to care he hasn't called whilst secretly feeling suicidal. *Very* flirty date three, borrow his toothbrush, straight into date four, falling fast now, *intense* flirtation, lots more sex, the meet-the-friends

date, all good, a weekend away, falling at warp speed, so much sex I get cystitis. Ouch. Most bastards baled here, but a few toughed it out longer: upscaled sex, more friend events, another weekend away. Staring into each other's eyes, not quite ready to say it yet, me free-falling dizzily. Crash landing is inevitable. Perhaps the pregnancy scare will do it, or the meet-the-parents. Then there's all those wedding invitations with a handy plus one. Oh, here we go. Calls are coming less frequently. He has a lot of work on, he says. Then calls stop. Mark the phone and just *know*. Shout at the phone. Leave light and breezy answerphone messages full of unspoken pain. At last it comes: *it's not you, it's me; you're too good for me; I'm not ready for this; I've met someone else*. Cry a lot. Broken.

Don't get me wrong, I broke a few hearts back. But I always fell hardest for the bad boys.

Nowadays being ghosted is all played out digitally, as instant as tapping an X on a screen. Back then, in real time, exorcism was a slow and painful process. They were devils, those beautiful nineties bastards.

Except Paddy Hollander, it turned out, wasn't one. He might have looked like a stud for whom bastardy behaviour should be second nature, but he was steadfastly kind. As a favour for his new housemate, this sex-on-legs cabinet maker whose handmade sideboards were all the rage in Shad Thames, built us a set even the National Theatre would have been proud of. When he realised I had nothing to eat, this demigod in 501s went to Safeway and bought me three bags of groceries *and* decent wine. He was laid-back; he was generous; he was funny. His Shropshire accent was

the loveliest imaginable, his brevity of words thrilling. The intensity of his eyes spoke volumes. I'd never met anyone like him before, not just because his upbringing was so different to mine, but also his values. He didn't play games at all. And he was heaven in bed.

Paddy always called when he said he would. He bought me cranberry juice when I got cystitis. He *liked* going to weddings. Even my parents didn't put him off. This time, when I fell, I landed in his arms, safe and loved. His leap of faith was no less trusting, this pragmatic Shropshire artisan who fell in love with a highly strung actress. Call it a trapeze act.

It's more than two decades since I first span round with paint on my face and saw the man I'd share all the years to come with. I have never once said 'I hate you' to Paddy again, no matter how many times he beats me at music trivia or turns his back to my tears or shuts me out from his demons.

But I don't say I love you as often as I once did.

And I don't feel as loved.

Hell. It's eight forty-five. I am going to be so late for work. Outside our new neighbour – twenty-something trophy wife and hair extension enthusiast – is loitering on the shared driveway demarcation zone, baby on hip. 'Helloooo! Laith can't reverse the Jag if you leave your car there.'

Tall Victorian townhouses like ours weren't designed for modern car owners. They have three (company, SUV and convertible, all alpine white) to our two (utilitarian rust pile and family banger), but they park theirs with precision

neatness whereas I keep ruining the mutual turning geometry with my *The Sweeney* style arrivals.

‘It was just for a minute while we got the other car out and I—’

‘*This is becoming an issue*, Eliza.’ Neighbour death stares me. Hip baby death-stares me too.

‘Yes, absolutely. But I’ve got to go now, so—’

‘We were told you were considerate neighbours.’

‘We are! And my apologies that some of us have to get to work but—’

‘I have a career too! I’m on a baby break.’

‘And he is *beautiful*.’

‘*She*.’

Fuck.

‘Non-binary babywear. So on-trend. Clever you!’ That throws her long enough to make my escape.

I need to drive like a maniac to get to work in time, cutting up cars on the A46 all the way there. ‘Sorry, sorry, sorry!’

There’s always one who takes it personally. Today it’s a lorry that I nip in front of at traffic lights. Its driver leans hard on his horn and then tailgates me for two miles.

I dodge lanes, trying to lose him, but he’s not dropping it. This could be movie car chase stuff if it weren’t for the fact it’s a Portaloo truck, its cargo of peppermint green sentry boxes wobbling each time we all brake.

Portaloo lorry driver is upsides now, yelling something at me. His cab’s so high all I can see is a tattooed arm – barcode, Roman dates, Aston Villa lion – and chunky gold ring.

I buzz my passenger window down jerkily, shouting,

‘Sorry!’ over a traffic reporter chirpily telling me I’m in a three-mile tailback.

‘I said you deserve to crash and die, mad old bitch!’

‘Sorry!’ I say it again automatically before realising what I’ve heard.

I flick a V, but I’m just insulting a row of green loos.

He leaves at the next exit and I try to put the encounter behind me. A death threat’s hard to brush off before your first cup of coffee. ‘Old’ will take longer to process.

I’ve got more assertive as I’ve got older – positively crabby, lately – although I still try as hard as ever to balance bad karma. When I mess up, I’m quick to apologise. (Except perhaps in my marriage.)

It shocks me how unforgiving society has become, particularly men. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I’ve now realised how much I once got away with. It’s not just the digital age of trolls and memes; it’s always been like this. Being young and female is simply more forgivable than being old and female. Over fifty, apologies carry less weight. Which could be why I repeat mine so much.

‘Sorry. Sorry! Sorry, sorrrrry. SORRY! Sorry. So sorry!’

An American friend once told me that Brits apologise in the same way Yanks say ‘you’re welcome’. It’s an oral apostrophe not a statement.

Today I *am* genuinely sorry. Sorry that I didn’t make up with Paddy and was snappy with the children, that I had

road rage driving here, and now that I'm doing my job so badly. I've narrated tens of audiobooks with calm assurance, but today I'm fluffing and lip-popping like a beatboxer.

'Sorry!' Fuck, fuck, fuck (that far more universal oral apostrophe, silent in my case). I keep botching the same small section of text. We're overrunning today's deadline. With time so tight, I've skipped lunch to work through. I'm light-headed and dry-mouthed, as well as hot and bothered from crossing my legs and holding on tight to avoid another dash up two floors because I've drunk so much coffee.

Now my phone is lighting up. It's on silent, but Edward's school's name is striping the screen.

'One minute. I have to get this.'

I step outside. It's pastoral care. He's refused to get in the taxi home again.

Is it pick-up time already? Thankfully, Paddy's on standby.

Poor Edward gets so illogically scared of things. We can't possibly understand the sheer terror of that taxi. Right now it's his Armageddon.

'Can somebody come and fetch him?' asks the care leader wearily. 'I appreciate Mr Hollander's number is the one down to call, but he's not answering his phone.'

'Yes, of course. We'll pick him up in the next hour. Sorry!'

'Thank you, Mrs Hollander.'

I try Paddy's number, but he's not answering *my* calls either. There's nobody else I can ask. My elderly parents aren't up to driving all the way there or handling Edward when he's like this, and my brother, who lives with them, doesn't find his nephew easy to deal with. Not many people do.

Our oldest son Joe is the one who understands Ed best, and I worry it's no coincidence that his anxieties have escalated since his big brother went away to university last autumn.

'I have to go,' I tell my boss, a hipster twenty years my junior who usually empathises with family pressures with man-bunned earnestness. I love him, and I can see how much it pains him when he must act tough, like now.

'Eliza.' He explains with quiet, puppy-eyed apology that if we don't get this job finished today, I won't get hired again. It's not the first family crisis that's called me away, is it?

Family always comes first for me. Edward comes first. But I need to feed and clothe them.

'One more minute and I'll sort this,' I promise.

I call Paddy two, three, four times. I text furiously. He should be in his workshop. His phone *is* his business. Where *is* he? If he's on that narrowboat again, I'll kill him.

In extremis, I get back in the small room with the screen and complete the task in half an hour. I'm boiling hot and too faint with relief and hunger to feel any sense of achievement, especially when Hipster Boss high-fives my sweaty palm and says, 'All you needed was a bit of pressure! I'll remember that next time.'

At least it looks like there will be a next time. I need this work.

Now I'm road-raging my way to deepest industrial Coventry.

I use the journey to talk to my oldest bestie, Lou, on Bluetooth. She's been going through a tough time and we speak most days.

‘Please cheer me up,’ she pleads. ‘It’s his weekend to have the kids and *she’ll* be there.’

I start describing my Portaloo road-rage incident, but she’s just furious on my behalf so I tell her instead about our big family theatre outing followed by supper tonight. Still a trendy Brighton clubber who can dance until dawn, Lou loves teasing me that I’m becoming a ‘greyhead’, the heartless term we coined for elderly audience members when we were studying drama at university together. She should see my roots.

Realising that I’m in the wrong lane and about to leave the motorway an exit early, I nip back across the chevrons and force myself in a tiny gap. There’s an angry beep.

‘Oh God, I’ve picked up another one.’ I tell Lou as a snarly sports car with blackened windows closes in tight behind me, headlights flashing. I hold up an apologetic hand.

‘Don’t let yourself be intimidated!’

‘It *was* my fault.’

I try to get out of his way, but he’s right up behind me, switching lanes when I do. When I attempt to shake him off by squeezing between two big articulated trucks, he squeezes in too.

‘Escape along the hard shoulder!’ urges Lou who watches too many *Fast and Furious* movies.

‘I am in an elderly French people carrier – he’s in a penis extension with more horsepower than Royal Ascot.’ But I eye up the hard shoulder just in case. A movement catches my eye. ‘OHMYGOD it’s a dog!’

‘A dog is in the other car?’ Lou is agog.

I veer across and stop a hundred yards ahead of the

poor creature I've spotted on the tarmac. The sportscar pulls in up ahead with a sinister rev, but I don't care. I'm already wriggling across the handbrake to climb out of the passenger's side to run back, my throat full of dinner-gong heartbeats.

It turns out to be a lamb, not a dog, almost fully grown, bleating in terror as great high-sided monsters thunder by. But that's nothing to the terrifying sight of a well-meaning middle-aged woman bearing down on it, at which it hot-hoofs it up a grassy cutting and starts running up and down a sturdy-looking fence, on the other side of which fifty doppelgangers are grazing with heartless disinterest. It must have broken out somehow, but there's no obvious sign when I scale the bank after it.

I'm not a big sheep fan but I feel duty bound to try to catch it and heave it back in. The fence is five feet of post and rail with mesh stock wire stapled to it. Planted in front is a row of some scraggy, prickly bush, no doubt there to discourage escapees, or indeed entry. The lamb darts about behind them while I get snagged, poked, walloped and partially undressed by the bloody things.

I step back to reassess.

The sports-car driver is out of his car. He's the sort of man the media excitedly call a 'silver fox', olive-skinned and grey-bearded, leaning back against its boot watching me, arms crossed in an expensive suit. I beckon him to come and help. He waves back. Or is that an offensive arm gesture? I can see the flash of white teeth. He's laughing at me. Bastard.

The lamb shoots past again. With reflexes I had no idea I possessed, I grab it and somehow get it off the ground.

It is unbelievably heavy. And wriggly. I reel around with it clutched to my chest. One of its legs kicks its way down my top and lands a blow right on my breastbone. I am going to lose my footing and tumble us both onto the carriageway at any moment. I've wasted sleepless mornings worrying I might have an undiagnosed cancer/degenerative disease/dementia and instead this will kill me. My children will be motherless and humiliated. It will feature endlessly on those real-life traffic cop shows *The World's Most Ridiculous Road Deaths*. Portaloo lorry man's prophesy will be done.

The lamb kicks free with an astonishing bound that propels it over the rail and back to its friends. I fall against a prickly bush, winded.

When I've caught my breath enough to head back to the car, picking the thorns out of my arms, I realise with relief that sports-car man has gone. There's a note flapping beneath my wiper.

You drive like shit, Crazy Lady, but that was beautiful. Bravo!

I scrunch it up. Road-raging sexist pig. He could have bloody helped. Yet a part of me can't help feeling Crazy Lady is an upgrade from Mad Old Bitch.

And I'm proud of my rescue. It's made me feel good.

Back in the car on hands-free again, Lou is also completely cheered up by the happy ending, although she thinks it's a shame sports-car man didn't leave his number.

'Why would I want that?' I harrumph.

'To pass on to *me*. I need a rich lover with an Italian two-seater.'

'Not one with a temper like that.'

She says she's sorry it wasn't really a dog. 'You could have kept it.'

'I'm not ready for another dog,' I mutter.

'I'm not ready for a new husband either,' Lou says sadly. I stop myself joking that I am.

Lou is one of the very few friends with whom I can confide dark truths with blackest humour. In the bad old days of airing our mutual marriage complaints I'd have told her about my dog fight with Paddy, even the shameful bits. But last year Lou's twelve-year marriage ended when she discovered her husband inside their babysitter and that's trumped everything. Even hating Trump.

We finish our call and I drive to the leafy haven that houses Edward's school. He's been in the library making PowerPoints about Marvel characters and is on very good form, polite and bright, talking non-stop as we set off: what a great day he's had and how many heavy metals there are on the Periodic Table. It's only when I try to address the taxi problem that he starts banging his head against the side window. I stop myself, ask him a few *Dr Who* trivia questions. He's soon happy again, and so am I because for all his anxieties and differences, a happy Edward is the very best company. He even keeps his headphones off and lets me turn on the radio – a rarity – and we sing along to 'Walking on Sunshine' and then 'Old Town Road'.

Back on the motorway, Summer calls, her soft, up-toned voice on hands-free making Edward cheer. She's lost her bus pass at school, she explains. The jobsworth driver knows her but refused to let her get on.

'Come and get me from Waitrose?' It's just across the

road from the grammar school. ‘I’ve had a Gucci recipe idea for tonight.’ (Gucci is ‘classy’ in Summer-speak.)

‘You’re babysitting,’ I remind her, glancing despairingly at the car clock. Traffic ahead is at a standstill, the extra round trip will eat time and we must check Paddy’s OK, plus I desperately need a bath before we go out. There’s a distinctly sheepy waff in this car...

‘I can cook at Granna and Grandpa’s,’ Summer says. She’s looking after her cousins and brother there while we’re all out.

Even though I know this is just a classic ruse to get me to spend, I don’t want to argue, because Summer – who is a wonderful cook – is sounding unusually positive, and one day her teenage animosity towards me will end. Why not now?

‘Give me twenty minutes.’ The radio kicks in again as we ring off. James Blunt’s singing ‘You’re Beautiful’, a ballad the nation loved until somebody pointed out how posh he is, and therefore single-handedly responsible for social injustice, fox hunting and Joules.

It remains a wonderful song. I long to believe what he’s saying. I remember the bearded businessman lounging against his sportscar. *That was beautiful. Bravo!*

‘*You* are beautiful, Mum.’ Edward turns to me, only slightly spoiling it by adding, ‘Even though you’re now too old to mate.’

Just for a moment fifty-year-old Eliza Finch, mother of three with grey roots and a grumpy marriage, feels beautiful. This sunny afternoon feels beautiful. The world feels beautiful. You’ve only got one beautiful life.

Car horns beep behind and I realise the traffic has started

moving again and there's a big gap in front of me. I let off the brake. I want to share the love, the beauty of the day. I turn to smile as a car surges past me on the inside.

A crisp-suited blonde businesswoman in a BMW gives me the finger and mouths *you cunt*.

'Cockney rhyming slang,' I tell Edward quickly, turning off James Blunt.

Aged four or five, I overheard a friend of my father's calling Edward Heath the c word. I could tell from my parents' frozen faces that this was a bad, bad word. I stored it carefully and only brought it out on very special occasions, mostly when my sister's hand-me-down dolls were misbehaving. Pippa called Sindy a cunt in the privacy of my room when they fell out over tiny shoes.

Some years later my little brother abducted my entire doll collection in an Action Man parachute raid, including a brand-new Bionic Woman with Mission Handbag. I was devastated. Jaime Sommers was my confidante, heroine and future self. I loved her.

We negotiated long and hard and one by one the hostages were returned, but not Jaime. He said that she'd escaped using her superpowers and he didn't know where she was.

I took it to the highest authority.

'Miles has stolen Jaime Sommers,' I explained to my parents. 'He's a cunt!'

It would be years before the discovery of her irreparably broken bionic body in the drawer beneath his bed. He'd accidentally snapped off both her legs and hidden the evidence.

It still hurts. But what hurts most is that I got into far more trouble for saying one little word than he did for taking my doll. Forty-two years later and I still haven't entirely lived it down. *Nobody* says the c word in our family.

Paddy Hollander Bespoke Cabinet Maker operates out of a converted oak-framed barn belonging to his cricket team captain. Paddy pays a peppercorn rent, which might explain why he sometimes treats his working day with a pinch of salt, unlike his bowling.

We find him chiselling a dovetail joint, listening to loud rock circa 1985 on the geriatric CD player, Simple Minds singing 'Don't You Forget About Me'.

He looks surprised to see us. It turns out he's left his phone in the car after he went out to buy some lunch.

'The school couldn't get hold of you, then I couldn't. We were worried,' I say, trying not to sound too irritated as I notice today's paper well-thumbed on the workbench. Then I feel ashamed of myself for seeking proof that he's not been working as hard as me. It's not a competition.

'We bought your favourite toffees!' Summer weaves towards him brandishing a canvas Waitrose bag. 'Mum said no, but I talked her round.'

Our daughter isn't quite ready to shed her antipathy towards me. Summer loves spoiling Paddy, and I feel guilty enough about the dog fight to succumb to bribery.

Paddy looks from the bag for life to me, the disagreeable bag he married for life. He's trying to read my face and I'm trying to hide a groundswell of emotion because Jim Kerr's singing that rain keeps falling down and I'm suddenly upset

about the dog fight again, angry at Arty for dying and at Paddy for not understanding and at myself for saying such awful things when all I wanted was to be told we can wait, this will pass. And to hug him, because I might be spiky and oversensitive, but I give bloody good hugs.

I look away, frightened I'll well up.

'What time are we due at your parents' place tonight?' Paddy is asking.

'Oh, you've got *ages*,' says Summer, who is photographing herself draped on a handmade carver chair with an ornate curved back. She makes Edward take off his headphones and sit on the matching one beside it to pose like a King and Queen. I want to chivvy them all home, clinging on to my hope of a relaxing bath, but I must make peace with Paddy first.

Pinned up on his big noticeboard are tens of my old acting headshots, some curling with age, the many faces of Eliza Finch. Alongside these are a couple of equally outdated school photos of the three children and a legion of pictures of his dad's narrowboat. Paddy worships that boat. In a mosaic of ageing, she remains the same glossy red, her pretty face never changing. Perhaps that's why he loves her so much.

'Do you like the chairs?' he asks me.

'They're lovely. Is it a commission?'

He shakes his head. 'Not too Oberon and Titania?'

'A bit, maybe.'

'I'll put them up on Etsy if you don't want them,' he says vaguely and I realise too late that he's made them for our anniversary next week. Paddy always makes furniture. After twenty-two years we could seat an orchestra.

‘No, they’re beautiful. Truly.’

Some of his pieces are works of art, but it’s weeks since he’s sold anything. He’s reliant upon word of mouth and online trading places and for someone as softly spoken and tech phobic as Paddy, that’s a slow sell.

‘People, gather round.’ Edward is addressing his impromptu court, face and voice deadpan. ‘My taxi driver thinks we don’t know what he’s saying on his phone in Urdu, but Louis has a translation app. He calls us the rich white retards. Can I have a toffee?’

So that’s why he won’t get in the cab. I’d trade every mad bitch and crazy lady to take that away.

‘We’ll get another driver,’ I reassure him. ‘I’ll call the council to complain.’

‘I’ve been called worse, Mum.’ Edward unwraps his sweet, characteristically unemotional, but that doesn’t mean the insult’s not burning in his head. ‘You should hear what he calls other road users.’

I can imagine only too well. It’s still burning in mine.

Crone, frump, battleaxe, hag, harridan, bat, bag, witch, cougar, bint, biddy, trout. Who can think of a single positive word used to describe a woman over fifty? We’re ‘feisty’, ‘bossy’, ‘irrational’, ‘overemotional’, ‘hormonal’, ‘abrasive’, ‘difficult’ and we’re fucking pissed off about it, but that’s nothing to the white molten anger if anyone insults those we love.

Nobody calls my son a retard and gets away with it. Edward’s got more sense than any of us. He’s certainly got a better memory. And he isn’t remotely ableist.



As soon as we're home, I leave a message on the council's SEND answerphone, demanding an appointment.

As I do, my eyes search the hallway. Returning home without Arty hurrying to greet me still leaves me hollow. She's gone. The sentient being that loved me most is dead. And a part of me vanished with her. Somehow I feel less visible in my own home as well as outside it.

Arty was far more sensitive to my moods than the rest of the family for a start. She came to find me while they just stand and shout for me. She *noticed* me.

For a moment after I've rung off I stand alone in the kitchen and just miss her.

It's already half past five and I'm desperate for my bath, but there's disaster awaiting us in Summer's room, where her beloved feral-turned-house cat has been trapped all day. It's peed on the bed, thrown a hairball up on the family iPad, pooped mid-carpet and run along the shelves smashing all the blown glass figurines Summer's collected since the age of eight.

'I hated them,' Summer reassures me as I sweep them up with a dustpan and brush, mourning my lost child of swan princesses and unicorns.

Downstairs, the doorbell is ringing, an unfamiliar solo with no dog bark accompaniment. It still gives me a sharp pinch.

Paddy and Edward have, predictably, vanished like smoke. I hurry down, dustpan in hand.

It's the new neighbour, minus baby on hip. 'I'm here to talk about the *car situation*. We've taken legal advice.'

‘I’m *really* sorry, but we’re going out and I must change. Maybe we can get together to talk about it over the weekend?’

‘We’re at our cottage.’ She flashes a bleached smile. ‘I’m just giving you the heads up that you’ll be getting a letter from our solicitor. Personal friend and *shit* hot on this sort of thing. So I suggest you get advice.’

‘Thanks. I’m dining with two barristers and a judge tonight, so I’ll ask them.’

She laughs. ‘Like, yeah!’

‘Google Peter Finch.’

I hate, hate, hate myself for this. I’m in my sixth decade, still scared of mean girls and still bandying Dad’s name about like he’s a superhero or something.

‘Is that what I think it is?’ She’s looking in my dustpan at a lump of cat poo.

Much as I’d like to ask her what she thinks it is and thrust it under her nose to examine more closely, I say a wimpy ‘must go’ and close the door on her. Slightly slammily.

When I turn back I find Paddy has witnessed my shameful dustpan-waving namedrop. His face says it all, eyes flinty and reproving. ‘What was all that about?’

‘I might have parked on their bit a couple of times,’ I admit.

‘How often?’

‘Maybe five?’ Double that.

‘And you think your Dad is going to help how exactly?’

‘Let’s talk about this later, shall we?’ I say it like he’s one of the kids because I’m embarrassed. ‘We need to get ready and I *must* have a bath.’

‘I want a shower.’

'I'm first.'

'Well, be quick.'

'Fine.' I hand him the dustpan to deal with and flounce back upstairs.

Nobody can call it an armistice.