The Picnic

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PART ONE

1995

Smell the salt in the air.

Sadie likes it because she's not used to living by the sea. Every evening after she picks her way over wet cobbles and struggles against the east-coast wind, she smells it on her hair and her coat and it reminds her of some pleasurable thing that might be a memory or a dream of day trips to the seaside when she was little.

So she likes standing here, just like this, across the road from the old entrance walls of the university, which might have been a memory or a dream too, only she knew, on the day she came for her interview, what they would look like. She knew what was going to appear on the approach road, with its fields high on one side and its sand slipping down to the sea on the other, because she had been on that road once before. A day trip many years ago that included a visit to a ruined castle and an anxious choice between two teashops, Pepita's or Juanita's, that her mother, Lily, was too distracted to decide upon. The tearooms are gone so it might have been a dream but the ruined castle is still here and so it is a memory.

And as Sadie stands here, deliberating between memories and dreams partly because it's still early in the morning and she's feeling dozy, the wind picks up and pulls her briefcase,

light with only a few essays and a notebook inside, right up behind her. Her thin grey coat is fine for a west-coast winter but it's no use here. It isn't keeping her warm but she can't afford to replace it. She's at the bottom of the lecturer's pay scale and, even though she's had four month's salary now, she's still finding things tight. So she scowls at the morning in spite of the pleasure of the salty air.

> Oh, I wish I'd just gone to bed when I started to feel tired. That stupid fucking essay drives me mad. Oh and thank you very much – just splash me, why don't you? Why the hell do students need bloody cars when there's only about three streets?

And the cold wind is making her shiver and feel bad-tempered even before the day has properly started.

> That second tutorial – haven't enough . . . have I enough?

And she curses the cobbles that hamper her progress across the street and darken her mood even more.

> Just the same old thing, just exactly what it was before – think they can talk to you any way they bloody well like just because they've been here forever. Bet he doesn't even think he's done anything wrong. 'Yes there will be a permanent post but you won't get it – this is more of a teaching post than a research post which is why you got it.' It was that Oxbridge arse he wanted – couldn't have taught a fucking cat to drink milk but then he *was* researching the English Channel

in Victorian poetry and we all know how important that is, don't we?

The memory of yesterday morning will not go away. Sadie has been here, in her first proper academic post, for exactly a day over six weeks. Yesterday, a senior member of the department, a professor, had asked to meet with her, as the department's latest appointee. He was anxious to tell her, in a polite tone of voice, that he had not selected her for the post. Others had done that. He had preferred someone else. And he wanted to tell her too that, if she worked hard and made friends, she would get a good reference when she left.

I've been through all this before I'm not going through this again.

And now it moves suddenly, the anger from yesterday that she hasn't quite got over yet, and lights instead upon something else, something that is much less important but that matters to her all the same. Sadie bends her head in towards the wind but it is no use. She will have to give up trying to keep her head down in the hope that the wind will not ruin her hair. It is a lately acquired thing, her vanity. She never paid much attention to her appearance, not until the end of her teens anyway, and, although she can't really recall what made it so important, all of a sudden, Sadie knows now, at twenty-six, that she has a fine but fragile sense of how she wants to appear in front of the world. So the wind wins easily and her defeat has a more serious impact than it should have. It angers her even more than the memory of ill-judged remarks by some obsolete professor the day before.

But she has no more time for thoughts like these, not

now – not when she's lifting the latch on the gate and letting herself in by the back door of the departmental building, creaking open that old, white wooden door. Sadie has a full day ahead of her. She needs time to prepare. And then, when she peers in, as gloomy as the basement corridor is, she can just make out the awkward, shifting shape of a student who is standing at the other end of it, right outside her office door. He is waiting for her. He doesn't know how busy her day is going to be – that she will need time by herself. He believes he can see her at any time and so he is waiting, expecting and wanting her attention, before she has even had time to remove her coat or sort out her hair.

As her feet carry her too soon, too soon, to her office door Sadie will have to stifle that impulse to tell him to go away – to tell him to go now, straightaway, that he can come back during office hours when she is ready and calmed and knows what to say, to make him disappear.

'Dr Mathieson.'

'Benedict, isn't it?'

Sadie's key is in her briefcase and she has to set it down on the floor to open it without everything tumbling out and the student doesn't move out of her way but lets her bend down in front of him, which riles her more and compromises her too because, if she were not Dr Sadie Mathieson but the Obsolete Professor of the day before, she knows the student would have stepped back in a deferential manner and given her room.

'Yeah, it's about the essay . . .'

'I haven't really got time to talk about it right now.'

The key is in the lock and the door is open and she can escape the dark, stuffy hallway into a big, bright room with

its high-up windows that look out to the sea. Sadie puts her briefcase on her desk with what she hopes is authority and turns away from him as she starts to unbutton her coat.

'I just wanted to ask about an extension – I've had some family stuff going on at home, you know? So I haven't really had the time . . .'

She turns back and he scratches his head as he tells what is probably a lie.

> Scratching your head, not looking you straight in the eye, playing with your hair – all signs of evasion or lying. I've seen it on TV somewhere – one of those daytime programmes. Can it be that fucking obvious?

But Sadie doesn't care. She just wants rid of him. She wants to have the room to herself so whatever it takes to get him to leave is what she will say.

'That's fine – take an extra day. Any more than that and you lose five per cent but I'll let you have one more day.'

'Oh, that's great, Dr Mathieson – thanks, thanks a lot!'

It works and now he's gone – off to tell the others in the class that the way to a penalty-free essay extension from Dr Sadie Mathieson is to turn up first thing in the morning when she's too tired to argue. And her need to be alone will be taken for weakness or inexperience or both and, yes, she may regret it later but, for now, she has the room to herself. And so she picks up the kettle and fills it at the sink in the corner of the room, as she does every morning as soon as she arrives, puts a teabag in a mug and opens up a can of Marvel.

> Oh for a 'do not disturb' sign!

Now that Sadie has been disturbed so early, she is tense, expecting the next knock at the door. And she has too much to do. There is a tutorial, then a booked appointment with a student, then another tutorial and another one. And suddenly she feels tired, the way she does just before she gives a lecture – that stage-struck feeling that should energise her with 'I'm too scared to' but instead deadens her nerves with 'I haven't the energy to'. And Sadie thinks how preferable it would be to go to the library, where no one can find her, and read for a while.

> Why can't they stick to fucking office hours if they have to come in here with their bloody problems? That's what they're for.

But she knows she may be the only one who sees it this way. She can't be too sure of that, though. She hasn't been here long enough yet to find out how her colleagues

> What a word – what a fucking false word 'colleagues'. Who the hell am I kidding?

view it all, put up with it, sort it to suit themselves. There is so much she has yet to find out but she knows that she will have to find a way to keep her distance, preserve her space, if she is going to make a success of this post. She cannot leave it open for just anybody to walk right in, uninvited, unarranged, no, no, that would not do. That would not do.

And it is just then, as the kettle clicks off and Sadie sighs and pours the hot water over the tea bag, idly watching the brown deepen inside one of the cheap mugs she purchased at the last minute in the supermarket the day after she arrived,

that she is intruded upon for a second time. The phone on the desk rings and Sadie turns round to stare at it. She doesn't want to answer it. She is still in a bad mood, she hasn't even taken a sip of her tea yet and she wants to be alone but maybe she should answer it, just in case. And so she crosses the room, puts her mug on the desk and lifts the receiver.

And, as soon as she does, she hears that bright, sharp voice, 'Sadie!'

Only her mother would call her at work at this time in the morning. And when Sadie hears Lily's familiar tone, she knows she must forgive herself. She must forgive herself quickly, right now, because Lily is as welcome to her at this moment as the student was and that is not a good way to think about your own mother.

'Oh, Mum?' No, it is not good and Sadie is not pleased to hear her voice. She can't forgive it or herself. She can't hide her displeasure.

Her mother hears it straightaway and offers an apology that isn't anything of the sort. 'Well, I'm very sorry to get you at work. But Something's Happened.'

Lily has every justification for calling her at work so early in the day – Sadie can see those capital letters as her mother emphasises her last words. This is Important and there is so little of Importance in her mother's life – but that is an assumption and not a fact because Sadie does not really know what does go on in her mother's life. She does not know because she does not care to know – at least not about what goes on in Lily's life now, in the present. She does not know how Lily fills her day or who her friends are or what she eats for dinner at night with Sadie's father. These are not the things that interest her about her mother. What does interest her are the things her mother would not want her to know.

So Sadie never does ask Lily how she fills her day or what she eats for dinner. But now, at this moment, she is making Sadie ask, 'Oh, what? What's the matter?'

Lily pauses before speaking. Sadie can tell how much she is enjoying this moment, when she has her full attention, because she so rarely has something to say her daughter wants to hear. And, as she sits at her desk in her new office, Sadie pictures her mother for a moment. She sees Lily's once-dark hair hennaed and gleaming in the light of the elaborately wallpapered hallway of a low-ceilinged bungalow which is full-to-bursting with decorations and ornaments. They're all compensations for childhood deprivation and things that Sadie loathes for Sadie is the child of a minimalist age. She thinks this as she pictures her mother standing by the fake wrought-iron telephone table in the bright gold hallway, holding the phone in the silence of an empty house full of objects.

'I didn't want to leave a message with the secretary – I wanted to tell you myself.'

'Uh-uh, tell me what?' Sadie's interest is fading – Lily is never quick. She is impatient again and wishes her mother would hurry up.

'Well, how do I put it? It's Amy.'

And Sadie is almost pleasantly surprised. 'Amy? Really? Aunt Amy? What about her?' She hears Lily catching her breath.

'Well, we had a call about an hour ago from her husband –from Pete. She's had an accident – a very bad one. Someone ran into her car. They don't know if she'll make it.'

There is a pause and Sadie waits, says nothing.

Her mother takes a deep breath and continues in a rush, 'Your father and I are flying out to Toronto. We're off to the

airport in an hour or two – it's been a nightmare getting flights . . .'

Sadie does not know what has surprised her more. Her mother voicing those words 'flying out to Toronto', words she has never used before, or her own behaviour – keeping quiet while Lily is saying this and not taunting her mother the way she always have done for not demanding that she tell her about her family when it has always been clear Lily does not want to. What began for Sadie as a small child's curiosity about grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins became a teenager's cruelty when she wanted to bait the woman who insisted and demanded and disapproved of anything she did.

Now it is no longer cruelty that makes her ask but a professional interest that she hasn't yet divulged to Lily. Even when her mother still manages to annoy her with her misconceptions of the world, Sadie does not ask about her family just to upset her, as she once did. Sadie asks her because she wants to know, needs to know, because she decided, as soon as she came here to this ancient university town, what her new research project would be. Sadie has decided she will use the story of her mother's family and, more precisely, the story of her mother's mother. Sadie wants to write about her, theorise about her, raise this woman, who is never, ever discussed for a reason she has never managed to discover, to a position of importance. She wants to write about the personal but Lily will not let her. And it comes to Sadie, as she holds the cream-coloured office phone with someone else's personal numbers still pasted to the handle, that she wants this trip, this excursion to meet her mother's family, for herself. She needs to go too, she needs to be by the bedside of an aunt she has no memory of meeting, she wants to see family she has

never seen because she wants to write about them. So finally she says, 'You're really going out there?'

Lily clicks her tongue. 'Well, I haven't got much choice – she could die.'

And so she does it. Sadie takes a breath and asks the question, 'D'you think . . . d'you think . . . *Rubina* . . . could be there?' And now she has mentioned the unmentionable, on this dark and dreary morning of unwelcome interruptions, she has spoken her grandmother's name and she hears Lily's disapproval and shame speed to her through the telephone line.

'How many times? Can't you leave it alone, even at a time like this?'

Sadie is sorry and resentful all at once. She is a teenager again. 'Mum, it's not like that . . .'

But Lily will not let her speak. Her voice sharpens even more. 'For heaven's sake, Sadie, how often do we have to go through this? I can't believe that's all you can say . . .'

'I'm sorry – I just . . .'

'Can't you have a bit of consideration, just for once?'

'I was only asking – I need to know . . .' Sadie interrupts her but the line is dead. Lily has slammed down the phone. Sadie pictures her jamming it down on to its box. She is the bad daughter. She has upset her mother and she can only sigh, here, miles away in her office, and replace her own cream-coloured phone. She sighs because she knows what will happen later. It has happened so many times before, whenever she has mentioned her grandmother's name. Sadie will wait, she will feel guilty, she will call Lily back, she will apologise and her mother will accept her apology and then the two of them will pretend that the offence was never given, that the unmentionable was ever mentioned. And they will go on as

before, not asking each other questions until something like this accident happens or until she is impatient or angry and then she will ask again – just like now, she will ask and the game will begin all over again.

And how absurd it feels to Sadie now, alone in her office in her first professional post, that her own mother should upset her as much as the Obsolete Professor of the day before. And how much more absurd it will feel to be chasing Lily later to apologise, chasing her still for information that she will never give her, when the reason that Sadie left home in the first place – she will never admit it to herself but it is there, the reason that she came here to this tiny ancient university, whose little town reminds her of a day trip with her mother many years ago – was to get away from her.