

UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT

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QUEUING FOR
THE QUEEN

Hour 1: Southwark Park

Where were you, when you learned the news? Perhaps you were out and about. Perhaps you were late for an appointment, and you were hurrying along the street a little faster than usual. Perhaps you didn't notice when your mobile phone buzzed in your pocket with a notification. When you finished your appointment, you retrieved it from your pocket, intending to check your fastest route home. Then there it was, flashing on the screen, in unambiguous finality.

Or maybe you were working late. Maybe you saw the story unfurl across social media websites in the afternoon. Maybe you got a sense of foreboding when you saw the vague announcements, the tension of the coverage. Maybe you knew that her family flocking to Balmoral could only mean one thing. Yet, in the early evening, as the text sprawling across the TV in the office changed from speculation to certainty, it still caught you by surprise.

Possibly, like me, you were at home. I was curled up on the sofa, chatting nonsense with my fiancé as he prepared dinner in the kitchen. Over the day I'd seen what the headlines were saying, and I flicked to the news every so often, in between watching some familiar sitcom or other. And so

there I was, curled up on the sofa, when the newscaster's grave face filled the screen and he spoke the words. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II has died, aged ninety-six.

And how did you feel, when you learned the news?

I saw a vast range of reactions online, from despair to indifference – and sometimes, harrowingly, celebration. Some people wrote of their intense, leaden, consuming grief over losing a figure they'd come to love and admire. Others wrote scathingly of the monarchy's utter irrelevance in these modern times. Some posted jokes; others prayers. Many simply didn't acknowledge it at all, and just went about posting their regular memes and film reviews and emphatic opinions on football.

Me? I didn't know what to feel. I've never been particularly invested in the monarchy, and I'm not entirely convinced that having a king or queen makes much sense any more. Nevertheless, this wasn't some abstract concept of a ruler. This wasn't some theoretical notion from a textbook. This was *the* Queen. The one and only – the woman on our coins and banknotes, the woman we celebrate in our national anthem, the one families gather around the television to watch each year as she gives her Christmas address to the nation. The woman whose sheer length of reign afforded us jubilee street parties and extra bank holidays.

A woman who was loved, across the country as well as within her own family. A woman who lived and breathed, who fought and laughed and collected outlandishly colourful hats – until she didn't any longer.

I never met her, and I never particularly followed royal news. When her death was confirmed, I didn't know what to feel. My emotions seemed to pause, frozen and unsure. Was I

sad? I didn't believe so. But I felt something within me shift. Something ineffable, a gradual turning of the tide, perhaps, which told me things would never be quite the same again.

'Love?' I called through to Jonny in the kitchen. 'The Queen's died.'

'Ah, that's a shame,' he called back. There was a pause for a few moments, during which I could only hear the sounds of sizzling on a frying pan. 'Are you all right?'

'Yeah, I'm all right. You?'

'Yeah.'

Another pause. Then Jonny called again:

'Dinner's ready in five minutes, love.'

And so we followed our unchanged routine. Perhaps we chatted a little less than usual while we ate, but fundamentally our evening continued as before.

Later, when the Queen was brought to London, I heard about people queuing across the city to view her lying-in-state. I was quite indifferent to the whole affair. Personally, I couldn't imagine ever going to all that effort simply for thirty seconds in the presence of a coffin. But who was I to judge? Each to their own. No one was dragging *me* out to shuffle from Southwark Park to Westminster through an interminable sequence of barriers, navigating awkward conversations with strangers, like an outdoor airport queue run amok. So why should I complain?

Perhaps, years from now, I'll look back on today and realise there was only ever one person who could have convinced me to be here.

'Tania, did you remember to bring a scarf?'

And perhaps, years from now, I'll look back on today and wonder why I ever let that person drag me here.

I sigh. 'No, Mum. It's only September. I don't need a scarf.'

She's now unfurling a woollen jade-green scarf from around her neck: 'Here, take my scarf.'

'I don't *need* it, Mum,' I hiss, trying to push her hands away.

It's 11 a.m. on a Friday. Here I am, clad in my burnt-orange autumn coat and some old faded black jeans. My new shoes aren't sexy boots or kitty heels, but trainers, light grey with shocking pink laces. They're cute, if I do say so myself, but they're much more practical than they are stylish. Not my usual choice at all. Today, I had to select footwear which would see me through several hours of walking, standing, and perhaps even occasionally stomping a foot in impatience.

It's 11 a.m. on a Friday, and I've been dragged out to shuffle from Southwark Park to Westminster in slow motion, part of an epically long human chain snaking along London's spine, the River Thames.

It's the last place I would've expected to be. I should be working from home right now. Jonny set up a 'home office' for me (in other words, a big wide shelf screwed into the corner of the living room with a swivel chair next to it), where I'd normally be spending my Friday morning looking at stats and preparing a weekly report. My marketing job pays the bills, but it's not exactly glamorous.

It's a nice change of pace to be spending the day outside instead. Here in Southwark Park, the fresh early-autumn air is crisp and cool on my face. The park itself is full of towering trees, and the dazzling sunlight is giving everything a lively glow.

It's just about warm enough not to need a scarf. Just about.

Mum is now reluctantly wrapping her scarf back around her neck and letting it fall against her thick black coat,

though she seems poised to thrust it back towards me at any moment.

Neither of us is alone in our choices. In the mass of fellow members of the public surrounding us, I see some wearing hats and gloves along with their thick winter scarves. Conversely, several people have donned lighter layers. One, presumably crazy, man up ahead seems to be wearing a vest and shorts.

The last time I read about it, the queue to view the Queen's lying-in-state was taking about six hours. I suppose vest-and-shorts man will be home before it gets dark, at least.

'Well,' I say. 'We've got a long day ahead of us, haven't we?'

'Yes,' responds the diminutive woman by my side. I'm not particularly tall myself, at five foot four, but I'm not sure my mother even graces five feet. Unlike me, she's skinny; she always has been, but now she's in her sixties it seems there's barely a gram of fat left on her. The crevices around her mouth and eyes seem more obvious than before. She carries herself like someone much bigger and tougher and younger, though: her back is always ramrod-straight and her chin held high. Her long, dyed-black hair is pulled into a ponytail, which reveals the beginnings of silver-grey roots at her temples.

'I'm glad to be here,' I continue. 'This is such a historic moment.'

'Yes.'

'Elizabeth was Queen for my entire life. For your entire life, as well. It's weird to think we have a king now, isn't it?'

She doesn't even bother saying anything this time – she just nods.

'Thank God for that,' pipes up an elderly male voice from

in front of us. 'About time we had a man running things around here.'

'Excuse me?!' I exclaim.

As he turns to face us, his weather-beaten face indicating he's in his late seventies at the very least, I see there's a twinkle in his eye. He's wearing a shabby, shapeless, ancient-looking khaki-green raincoat, buttoned up to his chin. Wispy white hair sits atop a face bearing deep creases, suggesting he wears a smile more often than not.

'What's the problem?' he says, grinning widely. 'Can't handle the truth?' He's got the faintest hint of a Yorkshire accent.

His grin is infectious, and despite myself I reflect it back at him. 'Oh, I can handle the truth,' I say. 'And the truth is that women are much better at running things.'

I raise my arms, indicating the flock of activity around us. Southwark Park is probably as full as it ever has been, or ever will be again. Aside from the queuers, zigzagging their way across the span of the park, there are also officials in high-vis jackets dotted around, doling out wristbands and shepherding newcomers to the right places. Some vendors have set up stalls along the sides, flogging hot drinks and pastries. There is constant noise: talking, laughing, shouting. Occasionally, I catch a sob, too. People of all ages, of all races, from all corners of the country, have congregated here in Southwark Park. Inhabitants of our very own pop-up kingdom, in which there's a whole lot of standing around.

Still gesturing at our surroundings, I ask: 'Could a man have inspired all this?'

The old man chuckles warmly. 'When you put it that way, you certainly have a point.'

I nod. 'My name's Tania. It's nice to meet you.'

'Hello, Tania,' he says. He pronounces it 'Tanya' – most people do. 'My name is—'

'*Tania*,' Mum interrupts suddenly.

He turns to look at her, still grinning. 'Oh, and here I thought my name was Harold.'

'My daughter's name is pronounced *Tania*,' Mum says, pronouncing it the correct way: a long 'taa' with a very light flick of the tongue for the T, followed by a short 'nee-yuh'.

'Tania,' he says slowly, but he still says it more like 'Tanya'.

'Yes, that's fine,' I say hastily, just as Mum repeats: '*Tania*.'

'It's really fine,' I insist. 'Please don't worry about it – call me whatever you want.'

'No, no, I want to get this right,' Harold says, leaning towards my mother and watching her lips move. '*Tania*. Is that right?'

I give a half-hearted shrug, as Mum beams and nods. 'Very good,' she tells him.

'Excellent,' he says with obvious delight. 'It's nice to meet you, Tania. And what's your name?'

'Rani,' Mum answers him. 'Rani Kapadia-Nichols.'

'Rani,' he says, getting the pronunciation correct instantly this time. 'That's a beautiful name.'

My mum gives a short nod and blushes, before fixing her gaze on the path below.

'It's very nice to meet you both,' Harold says. 'Here, at the end of the Elizabethan Age.'

'Welcome to the Carolean Age!' bellows a passer-by in response.

'The what?' I ask, but the person's already drifted into the throngs.

'The Carolean Age,' Harold affirms. 'That's what it's called, when someone named Charles is monarch.' He gives a mischievous smile. 'Carol-ean. Sounds like women are still calling the shots after all, doesn't it?'

'Thank God for that. So, are you here all by yourself?'

He gives a curt nod.

'Not any more,' I say. 'You're with us now.'

'Well, that's good to know. After all, I'm just a useless man.' There's no malice in his voice, and he gives me an exaggerated, theatrical wink, his eyes slightly crossed. I burst out laughing at the goofy expression on his face.

'Excuse me!' A middle-aged woman with short blonde hair standing in front of Harold has turned around sharply. She's wearing a dramatic black velvet dress, which has already gathered bits of soil and crumpled leaves around its hem. 'You *do* know we are here to mourn? You shouldn't be laughing.'

The whole park is fizzing with laughter. It's like getting shushed during the trailers for talking, even though everyone else in the cinema is talking too. 'Yes, of course,' I mumble nevertheless. 'Sorry.'

'Yes, sorry,' Harold adds in a good-natured tone. 'After all, the Queen absolutely hated laughter and joy, didn't she? Such a tyrant.'

The woman shakes her head in mute disapproval, before turning her back on us again.

Harold and I catch each other's eye, and we both laugh this time, while Mum gives a shy smile.

Hour 2: Bermondsey

Once upon a time, the idea of slowly queuing across London with my mother might not have seemed like much of a novelty at all. When I was small, I was always at her side. I would've followed her anywhere, she was so pretty and caring and wise. My tiny hand would slip eagerly into her big warm one, hers just a bit darker than my own.

Then my other hand would be taken by my father, his pale knuckles covered in brown-red fuzz. There I was, in the middle, my brown-pink complexion the perfectly balanced blend.

I would never question where they led me. Because where they led me was always full of joy, and excitement, and love. We moved forward in synchronicity, the three of us a single unit, never to be torn apart.

That was once upon a time. But things are very different now.

Back then, the three of us would take holidays to various UK seaside towns. Once, we went to Llandudno, in north Wales. With its pebbly beaches, its flashing and hooting arcade games along the pier, and brightly coloured cable cars gliding through the mountains, it became a firm family favourite. And so after that, we returned every year.

Dad would drive the four or five hours from Watford; although Mum has a driving licence, she always felt nervous behind the wheel. I was safely belted into the back seat, and then we'd set off.

For long stretches, Dad would play I-spy with me, or join me in pointing out passing fields of cows. Or we'd both tunelessly sing along to the tape player: he got to enjoy a hit from the seventies for every Spice Girls song I insisted we put on. If he bellowed his song at the top of his lungs, I'd make sure my next performance was even louder.

As we were screeching and shrieking away, Mum's quiet voice would suddenly cut through: 'Jim, should we stop for lunch?'

We'd park at the motorway services, and I'd scoff down chips practically swimming in salt and vinegar. Mum would hand me some crayons so I could fill in the little puzzles at the back of the menu. Then we'd be back on the road, for more games and singalongs. The holiday hadn't even officially begun yet, but already my cheeks and ribs ached from laughing.

Whether it was me or Dad being the boisterous entertainer, our audience was a constant. Mum would listen intently, and smile and laugh along in all the right places, always swept up in our stories and our roleplays, but never participating herself. She sat back and marvelled in silence; she never attempted to contribute her own piece.

Until: 'Jim, do we need more petrol?'

Dad would dutifully take the next exit to fill up the tank. Then, in the car on the way to our holiday rental once more, he'd start regaling me with some silly story about the dragon on the Welsh flag and all his adventures. Mum wouldn't say

another word, until we'd reached our hotel and she had to remind him which bag he'd packed his wallet in.

So it should be no surprise to me that, after an hour of waiting, slowly filing out of Southwark Park and reaching Bermondsey, Mum has barely said a word to me besides, 'Is your mobile phone fully charged?' and, 'Are you sure you don't want my scarf?'

In some ways, things are very different now, compared to 'once upon a time'. In other ways, nothing has changed at all.

It's past midday, and the sun has risen high above us, beaming down from an almost cloudless sky. I've taken off my coat and slung it over my arm, carrying it along with my handbag. Yes, I tell my mother yet again. I'm sure I don't want a scarf.

Now that we're out of the park, the queue's path takes us along the Thames, from east to west then bending south. We'll be following the river all the way until we reach Lambeth Bridge, a few miles along the way.

From this vantage point, we can't see too much of the city across the river. The bobbing heads of other queue-dwellers often obscures our view, because Mum and I are too short to see over most of them. It's incredible: when I try to look out at the river on my right I can see a seemingly never-ending mass of people, far beyond my vision towards Westminster. When I look to the left, I see almost an identical scene: people, people, people, an eternal stream from Southwark Park. I can scarcely comprehend that we're only at the back of the queue; it feels more as if we've been plonked in the square centre of a single-axis, but infinite, crowd.

All the much taller people inhibiting her view don't seem

to stop Mum gazing towards the river, though. Meanwhile Harold, the top of his spine slightly hunched over as it is, also struggles to observe much beyond other people's backs.

When I catch a glimpse, though, I remember why this area of London is so loved and sought after. Our road is taking us past quaint, squat little houses, built in a mellow sandstone. Bright purple fuchsias spill out from the hanging baskets decorating the local pub on the corner. There's a patch of grass on the other side of the road, and though it's clearly battled the summer's unprecedented heatwave, flashes of its greenness still stubbornly linger. This part of London, with the lazy Thames drifting nearby, feels plucked straight out of some tiny rural village.

'It's nice here, isn't it, Mum?'

'Yes.'

What else did I expect? I should start talking to one of the hanging baskets instead – it'll probably have more to say than Mum.

'I love this architecture,' says a dark-skinned man in front of me.

His companion begins replying, but I get in there first: 'Me too,' I say pointedly, stepping somewhat rudely in between them, inserting myself into their unit. If I'm going to take this slow, winding road along the Thames today, then I demand games and singalongs.

They're both well-groomed and annoyingly handsome. The white one looks quite perturbed at my sudden presence, but the other smiles.

'I'm Denzel,' says the darker-skinned one, 'and this is my husband, Colin.' Denzel sports some artfully-shaped stubble, while Colin has the clean-shaven, fresh-faced look

of a teenage boy. They both appear to be in their early forties or so, and each is impeccably dressed in a tailored designer coat. Both also have backpacks at their feet, with Colin's twice the size of his husband's.

'Planning to set up camp?' asks Harold cheerily.

'How can you like this architecture?' Colin chides his husband, blithely ignoring Harold and the rest of us.

'It's pretty,' I say, before Denzel can answer. 'It's so quiet and peaceful here.'

Colin rolls his eyes so hard I worry they may pop straight out of his skull. 'Please. You're young, you should be craving lights and noise.'

'I like lights and noise, too,' I instantly qualify, but Colin doesn't seem to have heard me. He's shaking his head in dismay.

'This place is very old-fashioned. This isn't what London's all about. I much prefer the hustle and bustle of the real city.'

'Like it's possible to have more hustle and bustle than what we have right now?' Denzel retorts, looking around at the rest of the queue, our concentrated line of people heading towards Westminster. The buzzing atmosphere of Southwark Park hasn't remotely abated; the noise of our hubbub must carry across the Thames. Anyone hoping for a quiet pint in the pub today will be disappointed. I hope the kill-joy in the black velvet dress brought earplugs.

'You know what I mean,' Colin sniffs. 'The big glass buildings. The cocktail bars and restaurants and clubs. That's what this city is about: modernity.'

'Yes,' Harold laughs lightly. 'I thought the very same thing, when I moved here to be with my wife. Nothing

historical about this place. St Paul's, the Tower of London, the Houses of Parliament – not important at all really, are they?’

‘Exactly.’ Colin seems to miss the very obvious sarcasm, and is instead surveying our picturesque surroundings and looking as though he’s bitten into a lemon. ‘If I lived here,’ he announces loudly, ‘I’d be miserable.’

An old lady with a walking stick is shuffling along the opposite end of the street. She’s heading towards Southwark Park and is clearly not a part of the queue. At Colin’s declaration, she starts, before raising a fragile, papery fist in the air and shaking it in his direction. ‘Don’t live here, then!’ she screeches.

‘I won’t!’ Colin hollers back fiercely, ignoring his husband’s fervent attempts to shush him.

‘*Fine!*’ shrieks the old woman, still shaking her fist.

‘*FINE!*’ roars Colin, his voice so loud that my ears begin ringing.

‘Bloody hooligan,’ she spits as she hobbles away.

‘For God’s sake,’ mutters Denzel, slapping a hand to his forehead. ‘I can’t take you anywhere.’

‘Just take me to the Golden Jubilee Bridges, honey,’ Colin says, his voice shifting to a rather theatrical and commanding tone. ‘Then you don’t have to take me anywhere ever again.’

‘Why?’ I ask. ‘What’s at the Golden Jubilee Bridges?’

‘You’ll see,’ he says, with a strange nod and a wink. Colour me intrigued, Colin.

‘Which ones are the Golden Jubilee Bridges?’ asks Harold, frowning. ‘I don’t think I’ve heard of them.’

‘The Golden Jubilee Bridges were built in 2002.’

We all turn around. A few places behind us stand a

harried-looking woman and, presumably, her son. He looks about nine years old and he's wearing a cardboard crown, crudely cut out from a cereal box. He's standing straight, arms stiffly at his sides.

'The bridges were named in honour of Her Majesty's fiftieth jubilee,' the boy continues, his voice squeaky and earnest.

'Sorry about him,' calls the woman, her Welsh accent even stronger than her son's. 'He's a bit obsessed with the monarchy.'

'I'm not *obsessed*,' the boy barks back, his cheeks reddening.

A few queue-dwellers step aside so the mother and son can walk over to chat to us more easily. The mother gives us all a tired half-smile. 'I'm Elsie. And this little eejit is Owen. We came down from Anglesey this morning.'

Owen looks up at us, wide-eyed. As he takes in the mass of new people in front of him, all looking at him, he visibly loses his nerve. 'Nice to meet you, goodbye,' he yelps, and moves to hide behind his mother.

'It's nice to meet you too, Elsie and Owen,' Harold says. 'Owen, I'm ashamed to admit it, but for the life of me I can't remember the Queen's birthday.'

Owen's wide, bright blue eyes peer round from behind his mother.

'Do you think you could remind me?'

Owen gazes up at his mother. Elsie is a pretty woman, but the faint bags under her eyes and her slightly limp, dull brown hair betray her exhaustion. When she smiles, though, her entire face seems to light up like a firework. She nods at her son.

‘W-well,’ Owen stutters, taking a half-step out from behind his mother. ‘Do you want to know her real birthday, or her official birthday?’

‘Her real one,’ Harold says, as Mum simultaneously speaks: ‘Her official one.’

Owen looks utterly alarmed.

Mum and Harold exchange glances, then speak in unison: ‘Both.’

Owen gives a timid smile. ‘OK. Her real birthday is April the twenty-first.’

‘You mean it *was* April the twenty-first,’ Colin says gloomily. ‘*What?*’ he adds sharply, after Denzel’s elbowed him in the ribs.

The fragile beginnings of a smile have evaporated from Owen’s face, replaced with a look of confusion and deep sadness. ‘Oh, right. Um, her real birthday *was* April the twenty-first.’ He clears his throat and blinks hard. ‘I guess Her Majesty doesn’t get to have birthdays any more.’

‘It’ll always be her birthday,’ Elsie reassures her son gently. ‘Even though she’s gone, the day she was born won’t ever change.’

I turn to catch Mum’s eye. She raises her eyebrows enquiringly.

‘Remember that time Dad forgot Grandma’s birthday?’ I ask her in an undertone.

It was a late afternoon, back when I was a teenager. Dad was lounging about merrily on the couch, singing along to his favourite hits on Magic Radio. He was in the middle of bellowing to Fernando that there was something in the air that night and the stars were bright, when Mum offhandedly asked him what he’d bought his mother for her birthday.

I've never in my life seen a man move as fast as my father did in that moment. He bolted from the sofa as if it had electrocuted him, his budding romance with Fernando abandoned forever. Once he'd thrown a coat over his shoulders, he dragged us all out to the local petrol station, to pick up a bottle of Champagne and a cheap keyring, which read 'MUM' in glittery pink lettering. Mum suggested the keyring might be a slightly insulting present for an elderly matriarch, but was proved wrong as we witnessed Grandma enthusing over it an hour later. Grandma never did have particularly good taste.

By contrast, Mum has always had beautiful taste. She sticks to classic looks and effective splashes of colour. Today, for example, the jade scarf she keeps insisting I need adds a pop to her black coat, black jeans and grey jumper. She's also wearing neat black flats, which I don't think I've seen before.

That's unusual. Mum knows I have a vested interest in shoes, and she always, without fail, asks for my opinion before purchasing any of her own.

'Did someone give you those shoes?' I ask.

'I bought them a couple of months ago.'

Of course. With all this reminiscing and revelling, for a fleeting moment I'd forgotten just how long it's been since Mum and I last saw each other, let alone had a normal conversation. There was a time when she'd have sent me pictures, with accompanying shoe emojis and question marks. But that was then – once upon a time – and this is now.

Perhaps I'll never get a message like that from her again. It feels a bit as if a hard stone has lodged in my heart.

'The Queen had a pair of custom shoes made for her coronation by Roger Vivier,' Owen informs us all.

'*Really?* I love Roger Vivier,' Colin says in delight, just as his husband shakes his head and mutters under his breath, 'Who the hell is Roger Vivier?'

My phone buzzes in my pocket. 'One second,' I say, retrieving it and excusing myself as I see I've got a text from Jonny:

Can't talk, busy lunch shift, but how's it going? x

Jonny's a chef, working at a local gastropub. Having a fiancé who's a professional chef is an incredible thing. I should probably be stricter about portions, as I've gone up two dress sizes in the four years we've been together, but it's worth it to eat his incredible food. He made me a croque monsieur before I left the house and I can still taste all its delicious cheesy hammy goodness lingering on my tongue.

I quickly type back:

It's going good. We're moving a bit slow but there's some funny people here x

My phone buzzes again:

Funny as in fun, or funny as in they're complete weirdos?
 Funny as in fun. For now at least...
 That's great to hear. Bet no one's as fun as you though x
 Obviously I am the one and only queen of fun, long may I reign x

I pocket my phone again.

I wish I hadn't thought about that croque monsieur. I want another one now.

'Guys,' I say, approaching the makeshift circle that consists of Mum, Harold, Denzel, Colin, Owen and Elsie. 'What shall I get my fiancé to make me for dinner?'

'Your fiancé makes you dinner on demand? Lucky,' Colin says, with a pointed, stern glance at Denzel.

'He's a chef, so he loves it. The world's my oyster. Except,' I add, after a thought, 'I don't like oysters. So I guess my world is anything *but* oysters.'

'Hmm,' says Harold meticulously. 'How about steak and kidney pie?'

'You are hilarious,' Colin deadpans. 'Forget that nonsense, Tania. You should ask for something refreshing, like a big salad.'

Denzel lets out a bark of mirthless laughter. 'A salad? Honey, you're insane. Tania, ask your fiancé to make you something rich and indulgent. Like a big, creamy pasta dish.'

'I hate pasta,' Owen pipes up, making a face. 'It's all slimy.'

'My pasta is not slimy,' Elsie says with a wry raise of an eyebrow. 'But personally, if I could pick any dish, I'd ask for a perfect roast lamb. As long as the chef's good enough to pull it off.'

'What do you think, Rani?' Harold asks. 'Is Tania's fiancé a good enough cook?'

Mum has been gazing towards the river again, seemingly lost in thought. Since the river's been in sight she seems to be constantly distracted by it, even more reserved than normal.

At Harold's question, she turns around, opens her mouth to answer, then glances at me and closes it again.

'He's a brilliant cook,' I insist, mortified by Mum's silence.

'Yes,' Mum adds quickly. 'He is very good.'

'What should he make for Tania, then?' Denzel asks.

Mum shrugs awkwardly. 'I don't know much about food.'

That's not true at all. Mum is a good cook, and she knows it, too. It's not food she's avoiding talking about – it's Jonny.

'Pick one of your favourite traditional dishes,' I suggest.

'Daal? Dhokla? I'll get Jonny to make it, and then you can try it out.'

'That's not necessary.'

'He's a brilliant cook,' I repeat, frustration creeping into my voice. 'You're not giving him a chance. You've never given him a chance.'

For a fraction of a second, I think I see something resembling shock flash across my mother's face. Her eyes widen and her jaw drops, as though she's offended, or surprised, or perhaps even hurt. But I think I imagined it, because now all I see is an unyielding expression as she gazes blankly at me.

There's yet another awkward silence. So much sitting between us, unspoken – and as ever, my mother simply looks at me and refuses to engage.

Harold clears his throat. 'Owen, you never did say what food you like.'

Owen bites his lip. 'Um, we live by the sea, so we eat lots of fish and chips. I think that's my favourite.'

Mum's eyes linger on Owen momentarily, and her face softens. Then she turns her back on all of us and looks out towards the river again.