

Atlantic Shift

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chapter one

November 14th

I am halfway through a solo cello performance on stage at the London Palladium when I decide to leave my husband. I have been considering the idea for the past two years, half hoping that he would take action before I did. Now I realise that if I want to be free from Jack I must fashion my own freedom; and there will never be a perfect time to tell him. Tonight is an imperfect time for many reasons: it will do.

I have played this suite a hundred thousand times, so I let my mind wander, confident that the notes will keep coming. I want to turn my head, to evaluate the way Jack is watching me from the wings, but this would be unprofessional. Two thousand pairs of eyes are focused on me alone. It would have been less scary if I'd asked to play something that needs at least a piano accompaniment, but no one wants to hear me playing Brahms. They demand the prelude to the Bach Solo Suite, No. 1 in G major. The reason they want to hear that, and that alone, is because I played it on a mobile phone advertisement.

I have desecrated Bach's memory by playing his music on an advertisement, which in turn led to a surprising number of people downloading the opening bars as a ring tone. I might not do the music justice, but mobile phones slaughter it.

I tilt my chin, instead, towards the Royal Box, wondering whether His Highness is enjoying my performance, or whether he's picking his nose. Although famously cultured, I can't imagine that this could really be his favourite way of spending his birthday. Then I force myself to refocus my attention on the music. I am coasting. I am always coasting, and so far I have got away with it. In a concert like this, in a hall which has been sold out for months, I know that I can give an acceptable performance on adrenalin alone. The hot lights keep me going, along with the prospect of dismal failure. I force myself not to go completely on to automatic pilot: that would be too dangerous. One day I will make a complacent misjudgement and the result will be a disaster. I must play with some degree of musicality. The trouble is, I can clone my performance of this Bach suite from the advert, and I can do it without really thinking. I, like everyone else in this hall, have heard it countless times, and I can play with exactly the same nuances as I did then. That's what these people want. That's why the organisers were so keen to make me play the Solo Suite No 1, rather than anything else I might have wanted to offer them. I didn't even try to change the programme. I like an easy life.

These suites are deceptively simple. It's very hard to play them properly, I tell myself, as I dip from A string to D string. It is all in the phrasing, and I copy my phrasing from a recording by Rostropovich. It seemed the safest way to do it. I do not try to convince myself that I play this anything other than adequately. But I give my adequate performance with an enormous confidence, and since I play it like I do on the telly, everyone is happy.

I am confident because I know I look like a professional cellist. I am a professional cellist. I make my living this way. Every day, I expect to be found out. Real musicians don't take me seriously; neither do music critics. Everyone else thinks I'm fabulous. Jack knows I'm not. He has always let me know that, although he is far from a musician himself, he sees through me. He knows I'm not brilliant, and he uses this fact to keep me in my place. He

would call it encouragement – ‘If you do this well, Evie, when you’re not really trying, think how fantastic you would be if you put your heart into it’ – but I know that he’s playing with my mind. He would love me to fail, in the way he failed as an artist. He wears me down, and I don’t need him any more.

This stage is vast, and I am lit, mercilessly, by the spotlight, so I can’t make out anything in the audience beyond the glint of glasses, and the exit signs, far back in the darkness. The sound of my bow across the strings fills every corner of the concert hall. I rarely play for live audiences – my preferred venue is a small recording studio, with a few men in black moving dials and knobs behind a sheet of thick glass. I was almost sick with nerves before I came on to play my mercifully short part in this enormous classical-lite charity concert. I prefer to play wearing jeans and a T-shirt, with my hair scraped back and no make-up on. This evening I am dolled up so my own mother must barely recognise me from her seat in the stalls. I’m wearing a dusty-pink long dress by Maria Grachvogel, designed for me personally, because the cello does not lend itself to the wearing of clingy scraps of skirt, and because I am, in my own way, famous enough to have my own dress. My hair is long, loose, and absurdly over-styled. My make-up is frighteningly garish, but the make-up woman assured me that it wouldn’t look that way to the audience.

Jack laughed when he saw me. He said I looked like Barbie’s mother. This was not what I needed to hear.

With relief, I note that I am on the homeward stretch. It doesn’t take long to get to the homeward stretch of a piece that is less than three minutes long. I know I’m nearly there when the high notes start coming in. I am tempted to rush the last few bars, to get this over with, to move on to the thing I have to do, to make myself free. I know the audience is loving my performance, and that they’re loving it for the wrong reasons. I am now reprising the very passage from the advert, and the two thousand two hundred and eighty-six people who have paid £150 a ticket to see

me, among many others, are humming along collectively. I can hear a breathy rush coming towards me from them, a random mass hum-along. It has the same out-of-time, tuneless quality as hymn-singing in church.

I hold myself back, and pace my performance, not wanting to make it obvious how desperate I am to be off the stage and attending to my personal life. I will tell him. Things have been going wrong for far too long. I am certain that I'm strong enough to get by without him, at last.

When I come to the end of the piece, relief swamps me, and I allow myself to smile a wholehearted smile. I love this moment. It makes everything worthwhile. Every person in the auditorium is applauding me. Even, I note after a quick glance, my husband. All eyes are on me. I have played my part, played my cello, and these people have paid very good money to hear me, and now they are clapping. I love them, because they love me.

I stand up and bow, and the applause grows slightly stronger. My smile goes up a notch, and I look out into the audience, genuinely grateful to every single one of them. A light shines on Prince Charles, and I see him clapping for me.

At moments like this, I always have the same thought: I hope Louise is watching me now. The thought lasts a fraction of a second. I bow twice more to the audience and once to the Royal Box, not caring, for once, about the obsequiousness. Although the television cameras are here, I ignore them like a professional. I stiffen my resolve not to play an encore, and accept a bouquet of pastel roses from a little girl who stumbles on to the stage wearing a shiny pink dress. I kiss her, and hear an 'Ahhhh!' from my fans. She curtsies to me, as if I were the Queen, and walks backwards off the stage, to her waiting, beaming mother. I smile again, at everyone, and depart from the stage as my applause starts to die away. It is my applause. I wish I could keep it, and bring it out when I need to hear it.

'Well done, Evie,' says Penny, the stage manager, giving me a

pat on the shoulder. 'Good stuff.' Then she is off, attending to the next performer, an eleven-year-old male pianist who has been fingered by the press as a rising star. What they mean is that he, like me, is photogenic. Little Billy, as he is known in print, has blond hair that flops across his eyes, an angelic face, and, unless he's exceptionally lucky, an incipient drug or alcohol problem. He will be delighting the audience with Rachmaninov's Prelude in C sharp minor. God help him when he reaches puberty.

I am the perfect candidate for a concert like this. I am classical-lite through and through. My musicianship would be put to best use in one of the London orchestras, or playing solos on the second rung of the semi-professional ladder. My talent has been promoted far beyond its value because, apparently, everyone loves a blonde girl in lipstick who can do interesting things between her thighs. I always have a CD out at the beginning of December, and it has always sold hundreds of thousands of copies by Christmas Eve. I make most of my income playing for adverts, and I seem to be increasingly filmed, as well as recorded, as my profile has risen. I have played for the President of the United States, and for a reception at Downing Street, and I have been invited to the Kremlin. My agents say I should branch out into pop music – 'That is where the money is' – but I have resisted, so far. When I try to picture myself playing the cello on *Top of the Pops*, all that comes to mind is a vision of Dexy's Midnight Runners. Unless I put my foot down, however, my next CD will contain several tracks played over a techno beat.

The press like me, and I like them, too. I'm often pictured in the tabloids, and I enjoy it. If I suspect someone is waiting for me, outside the house or anywhere else that I'm going, I make a particular effort with my hair and make-up, and they appreciate that. I appreciate it, too. Every time my picture is printed, hundreds more CDs vanish from the shelves. My personal life has never been interesting enough for them, so I've had to wear outrageous dresses and high heels to sustain interest.

Now I'm going to leave Jack. They will adore that, when they hear about it. My profile will soar. Briefly, I wonder whether I should call a friendly hack in the morning. There are several in my address book who would leap upon my news.

My cynicism is disgusting: I haven't told my husband yet, and I'm already contemplating telling the readers of the *Mail*. I look around among the dusty stage lights and random clutter, and catch sight of him chatting to a stage hand. I pause for a moment and look at him. He looks cheerful. He hasn't dressed up for the evening, because he knew he would stay backstage with me. When I met Jack, he looked like what he was: an art student. I loved that look. Now he looks like what he is: a computer technician. I walk towards him purposefully, holding my cello like a shield. I have no doubt at all that I am doing the right thing.

'Evie,' says Jack, throwing a companionable arm around my shoulders. I look up at his face. He is rosy-cheeked, and he looks pleased. 'Well done, gorgeous. You were great.'

'Yeah,' says the stage hand, with a shy smile. 'You were.'

I smile at him. 'Thanks.'

Jack ignores him. 'Shall we grab some dinner?'

I shake him off, irritated, and shift my cello to the other hand, so it is between us.

The boy produces a biro from behind his ear. 'Could I possibly have an autograph?' he asks nervously. 'I'm your biggest fan, Miss Silverman.'

'No,' I tell him, and stare pointedly until he shuffles away. I know I'm supposed to be charming to the fans, but that was an intrusion.

'Jack,' I say to my husband, 'I have to stay here till the end. You know that. I told you before. They need me back on stage for the finale.'

Little Billy's three chords ring out, confident and arresting. I want to stand exactly where I am and listen to him. He is good. Jack takes no notice.

‘But you don’t have to play again. No one will notice.’

‘I do. They will. We’re all playing Happy Birthday to Prince Charles. Cringeworthy, yes, sure, but I have to do it. They will notice if I’m not there – how could they fail to in a dress like this? And don’t tell me I didn’t tell you about it, because I know I did.’

‘Then let’s just say, if you told me, it slipped my mind. Bugger it, Evie, I don’t want to spend my whole evening hanging out backstage at some pageant of arselicking sycophants. I have a lot else on, you know, and of course I wanted to come and support you here, but unfortunately there are other things I need to get on with.’

‘Then go home.’

‘Sure you won’t come with me?’

‘Why don’t you get us a takeaway and we can have it in my dressing room? You know I can’t leave.’

Jack shrugs. He looks annoyed. ‘Whatever.’

We have reached my door. I go in, and look around the tiny room. It is meticulously tidy. The only time I cannot bear to have an item out of place is when I am about to perform. I feel like a fraud anyway, and I know that if I wasn’t prepared mentally for a performance – if I let the chaos creep in – then I would no longer get away with it. My serious reviews would go from mediocre to scathing. I only get good reviews from *Heat* and *Smash Hits*, and that’s because they hardly ever review anything classical. Never, in fact, but they make an exception for Evie Silverman because they like my hair and they like my clothes. They would love it if I shifted my focus to pop.

Heat did a feature a couple of weeks ago, based on a photo of me, advising people how to ‘steal her style’. I was wearing jeans and a cardigan. Not a difficult look, I wouldn’t have thought. It included phrases such as ‘Evie swears by John Frieda Sheer Blonde Spun Gold Balm’. Which was news to me, but I might try it out, to see why it is that I love it so much.

I put the cello away, and leave the door of its case swinging open. Then I turn back to my husband.

‘I still think you could sneak out now,’ he says, grumpily. ‘You can play the diva, can’t you? It’s your right. You do it with me all the time.’

I hold up a hand. ‘Jack,’ I say, my heart suddenly thumping, ‘sit down a minute.’

He takes an apple from my fruit bowl and paces round the room. ‘Why? I’m starving. Got anything to drink that isn’t water?’

‘No. Actually, there might be some wine in the fridge, I think. But sit down a sec. There’s something I’ve got to talk to you about.’

He sighs. ‘What?’

I don’t reply, and he lowers himself, with a show of reluctance, on to the sofa.

‘Jack,’ I tell him, terrified by what I am about to do, and still elated by the post-performance adrenalin. ‘It’s about us. You and me. Our marriage. I don’t think it’s working any more.’ I hear myself speaking, wondering why it’s not possible to say words like these, words which change the course of two people’s lives, without sounding as if you’re in a bad soap opera.

He freezes, the apple almost at his lips. I watch him intently. Jack has always been good-looking, but age and confidence have not served him well, and now, at thirty, his pores are blocked and his chin and cheekbones have lost their old definition. Nonetheless, I know he is handsome. I just don’t want him anywhere near me.

‘What are you talking about?’ he demands. ‘That’s bollocks.’

‘It’s not.’ I am still terrified, but now that I have begun this, I am going to finish it. My emotions are heightened anyway, and this is not a moment for backtracking. ‘I know you know I’m right, really. I don’t want us to be together any more. I’m not happy. I don’t think you’re happy either – I think you’re happy in most of your life, but not with me. It would be best if we tried living apart for a while. I’d like you to move out. Go and stay with Ian and Kate, maybe.’

He pretends to splutter. ‘Evie, this is completely out of the blue. Are you having a laugh?’

I shake my head. 'Of course not.'

He looks around the room. 'And you tell me this now? Backstage at the London fucking Palladium?'

'I'd been wanting to talk about it for ages,' I tell him, trying to be soft and sympathetic, 'but it never seemed the right time. Then I realised there was never going to be a right time, and that I just had to do it when I had a moment. When we were alone together. I know you must have noticed it too.'

He stares at me. 'You are a hard bitch, do you know that?'

I'm stung. 'I'm not! I'm right, and you know it. You've had your head in the sand for the past three years or more.'

'Oh, have I? It's all my fault.'

'No! It's not all your fault. It's no one's fault. We've just changed a lot since we were twenty-two, that's all.'

'And in five minutes you're going to go back out on to that stage and play Happy Birthday to Prince bloody Charles?'

'Yes,' I tell him, 'even divorce won't get me out of that.'

I sit, he stands, and we look at each other in silence while the word echoes between us. Jack looks at the apple in his hand, then tosses it into the bin. His arms hang by his sides and he doesn't seem to know what to do with himself. I look at our reflections in the big mirror above my dressing table. We present a strange tableau: a computer technician in his jeans and a shirt, with an overgrown Barbie doll.

'All right,' he says, after a while.

I look at him. 'Thanks, Jack.'

He avoids my eyes as he picks up his coat from the back of a chair. 'I'll go home now. Pack up some stuff and get out. We can sort out the rest of it later. You're going to regret this, Evie, I promise you. Let me know when you come to your senses.'

He leaves the room, the theatre, and my life without looking at me. As I watch him leave, I force myself not to smile. The moment the door shuts behind him, I look at myself in the mirror and grin. I am still high from the performance, and I am certain I have done

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the right thing. Finally, I am capable of being on my own. I don't need my mother to look after me, and I don't need my husband. Fifteen years after the event, I can stand on my own two feet.

I reapply my lipstick and wait to be called back to the stage.

chapter two

A week later

I'm sitting at home in the early evening, watching our wedding video forwards and backwards, and waiting for Kate to arrive. She said she'd be over after work, and it's now half past six. The trouble with living in Greenwich is that it sometimes takes people hours to reach you. I think I should move somewhere more central. I need to get away from the remnants of my married life.

I haven't really worked today. I practised for two hours in the morning, packaged up the proof of my past three months' earnings and a blank VAT return for my accountant, and sat down to watch daytime television. I tell myself that I am doing fine. I didn't miss Jack today: how could I have missed him at a time when he would never have been home, anyway? After *Neighbours* and *Doctors*, I had a little nap, then walked to the corner shop, as an experiment, to see how I felt leaving the house. I thought that, perhaps, the boring, unchanging real world would make me feel superior, as it normally does. I walked along the familiar pavements to the shop where they almost know my name, after five years of daily patronage. The wind was evil, and I wished I'd worn a proper coat, rather than my flimsy denim jacket. Denim jackets are for summer, not for November. I passed a few

people as I went. Two mothers with pushchairs ambled along side by side, blocking the pavement. As I loitered impatiently behind them, with no reason in the world for my impatience, nowhere to go except the shop, I heard one of them say to the other: 'Oh! I know what I was going to tell you!' in a tone of great excitement. I walked on her heels to hear what it was. 'Bernie did a wee in the potty yesterday!' the woman continued, and my heart sank. 'He's such a clever boy, aren't you, darling?'

The other mother was enthralled. 'Really?' she gushed. 'A wee in the potty? That's so clever. Well done, mister.'

I rolled my eyes, sighed as audibly as I could, and stepped into the road to pass them, nearly finding myself mown down by a speeding motorbike as I did so. Slim chance, then, of distractions from mothers. I turned to look at the children. Clever Bernie had a snotty nose and looked old enough to use a loo like any civilised human being, and the other child was red-faced and asleep. I have to be scathing about children I see out with their mothers. It's the only thing that works.

The mothers were plump. Their hair was messy and they were both in need of some foundation. Women have babies, and let themselves go. I would never be like that.

I passed a couple of kids who should have been at school, and a few old people. They all looked normal. None of them looked as if their world had fallen apart lately.

Mine hasn't either. I am absolutely fine. In fact, I am rather enjoying the excuse to lounge around. If you can't watch bad television and eat junk food when your husband has just moved out, when can you? It is the novelty of it all that is confusing me. Jack and I were so settled for so long that I'm simply not used to rattling around on my own. I felt like Superwoman when I dumped him, but now that the high has worn off, I'm not finding it easy to be alone.

I've cancelled several work engagements, which I've only ever

done before when I've been too ill to get out of bed. Even then, I've sometimes forced myself. I've been citing personal circumstances, and told my agent to let people know, subtly, that my marriage has broken down. I may as well use it. It's now only a matter of time before it appears in the tabloids.

I am, perversely, looking forward to that day. Once the press start taking an interest, the decision will be made for me. Events will be taken out of my hands. I'll have to get on with my life. I will have to get my hair done, think about what I'm wearing, choose a bright lipstick and go to a party or premiere one evening, to prove that I'm emerging stronger and wiser from my ordeal. If they catch me moping about in tracksuit bottoms and a big T-shirt I will be in trouble. Image is everything. In a few months I could judiciously allow myself to be caught with an aspiring pop star or someone similar. I can see myself on the front pages entwined with someone young and fresh-faced. Some boy from a band.

My trip to the shop was a resounding failure, and it took all my strength not to cry until I got home. South-east London can be unremittingly grim. I came back with a thin plastic bag, the handles already stretched almost to breaking point, which contained a pint of milk (no need for large quantities any more, now that Jack no longer gulps it straight from the carton every day), two bottles of red wine, and an enormous bar of Dairy Milk. Having never been in this situation before, I am turning for comfort to the sort of props recommended by women's magazines. I can't think of anything else to do. I put it down in the hall, next to three cardboard boxes of Jack's things, leaned back on the front door, and took deep, gulping breaths. I feel that he's died. But that is good.

Our house has always been my sanctuary. Jack, if it had been up to him, would have lived in a bachelor pad with no ornamentation or decoration whatsoever. All he needs is a Gameboy and a duvet. Left to his own devices, he would be a prime candidate

for buying a ‘men’s’ duvet cover, a black one with thin grey and orange stripes on it. Perhaps he will get one, now, to see him through until the next woman comes along. There will be a next woman. I know there will. Jack will replace me, just as I will replace him. I hope I replace him, with a fanfare of publicity, first.

I moulded this place, over the years, into the home I wanted. On the outside it’s a grey-brick terrace with a red front door and a tiny front garden. The most striking thing about it is its location, with the Thames at the bottom of the street. Indoors, it is open plan, light and airy. The walls are all white, the floors all stripped and varnished, with rugs here and there. The sofa is large and welcoming and cream, with heaps of cushions hiding various red wine and curry stains. There are paintings on the walls, a few of them done by people we know from Jack’s art school days. A few years ago I had the fake fireplace removed and a woodburner installed, which we light on cold evenings. There’s a pile of kindling next to it. I have been lighting it, all alone, lately. I’m good at doing that. I always lit it for Jack and me too. I love the ritual of the kindling and the scrunched-up newspaper.

The coffee table is cluttered with books and papers and pens and letters, and the shelves are overflowing with books. This is not an immaculate house, by any means: it is a friendly house. People who come here comment on the welcoming atmosphere, and sometimes I find it unlikely that I have created such a home, while I have relatively few close friends.

I keep finding Jack’s bits and pieces in among the clutter. Every time I come across a book or a CD or a magazine that belongs to him I force myself to throw it into one of the boxes in the hall. I love our house, and I would never have imagined that I was capable of feeling lonely here. Yet here I am, alone and, perhaps, not as happy as I would like to be.

I watch our wedding over and over again. When I watch it

forwards I stare at myself, younger and skinnier, barely a size eight in those days. I walk slowly up the aisle in my dream dress, with its tight bodice and full net skirt, smiling beatifically, pretending to be Grace Kelly, and adoring the attention. My hair is loose down my back, with rosebuds tied into it at the crown. I am holding a small, tasteful bouquet of roses. As I watch myself, again, pledging myself to Jack for as long as we both shall live, I remember exactly how I felt. I was deliriously happy. I was twenty-two; and I was happy because I was the first of my friends to get married. I was happy because I knew I looked adorable, and because there were a hundred and fifty people in the church and every single one of them was staring at me. I thought I loved Jack, but now I suspect that a large component of that love was the fact that he reflected my view of myself. In those days, when he, too, was twenty-two, Jack was struggling as a professional artist. I already had a recording contract and was in the process of being launched into the classical stratosphere as a scantily clad cello babe. I felt we were superior in every way to people with proper jobs, and anyone who had to ask why we were better than they were was a philistine and would never understand. I knew nothing, back then. I was obsessed with the surface. As I told *OK!* magazine the other day, I am much deeper and more spiritual now.

Above all, I was making a stable life for myself. I gambled on my instinct that Jack would never leave me. It never occurred to me, back then, that I might, one day, leave him. I didn't want to be on my own, so I got married. If it hadn't been Jack, it would have been someone else.

I remember, as I walked up the aisle, half wishing that I'd asked Louise to the wedding. I wanted her to see how gorgeous and happy I was, to show her that, despite her best efforts, I had won.

I see Kate, in the second row of pews. She wipes a tear away as I glide past her. Ian is standing with Jack, as his best man. I

wish we'd captured Kate and Ian exchanging glances on tape. I think they dance together later on the video. They met at our wedding and have been together and, as far as I can see, properly happy, in a way that I can barely imagine, ever since. That happiness has been tested, but it hasn't faltered. Three years have passed, now, since Kate breezily announced that they were trying for a baby.

'Fingers crossed,' she said, unable to sit still with excitement, 'it'll be a late summer baby. If I'm pregnant this month, it'll be due on August the twenty-fourth. I wonder if I'll have morning sickness? I won't care if I do, you know. I'm sure it'll be worth it. I won't mind at all if it's a boy or a girl.'

Such concerns long ago began to seem like a luxury. Kate and Ian have 'unexplained infertility', and no amount of tests, diets and, lately, fertility drugs and IVF seem to be able to do the trick. I'm immensely thankful that Jack and I never decided to have a child; not just for the child's sake, but also for Kate's. When we got married, I thought I would like to be a mother before I was twenty-five, but when it came to it I didn't want that at all. We never even discussed it. I might have a child with my next husband. The magazines would love it.

I mouth the words in perfect synchronisation with my twenty-two-year-old self.

'I, Evelyn Rose,' we say, 'take you, Jack Matthew, to be my lawful wedded husband. To have and to hold, from this day forward ...' I wonder whether we should have a divorce ceremony, if we do reach that point. We could dress up again, get all the same people back to the same church and retract our vows. 'I, Evelyn Rose,' I could say, 'demote you, Jack Matthew, to be my lawfully divorced ex-husband. To snipe and to argue, from this day forward, for as long as we both shall bother to see each other.' I think Jack would like the idea.

At the moment when Jack and I kiss, I pause the video. This is the happiest moment of my life: from here, it went downhill. I

press rewind, and watch myself eating my words, and rushing off, backwards, down the aisle.

The doorbell rings, and I freeze the screen. When I try to get up, I discover that I have been sitting on my leg, that it's numb and alien to me. I punch it a few times, and as the feeling comes back it seizes up in an agony of pins and needles.

Kate is on the doorstep.

'Hello!' she says, with forced jollity. She jigs up and down in the cold. Kate is beautiful, with long corkscrew curls and a cream complexion. She's holding a bag which smells of chips.

'Come in!' I tell her, forcing a breezy smile. "Specially if you've brought food.'

She hands me the bag. 'Fish and chips. Thought you probably weren't eating, so you can get a whole day's calories out of this.'

'I've got wine and chocolate.'

'Perfect. Pour us the wine and I'll get this on some plates.' She steps into the hall, and looks round the ground floor. 'Evie! I don't believe you. You're watching your wedding video. That is so unhealthy.'

'I know. I've been torturing myself. Wishing I could step back in time and run away at the last minute. You know' – I pick it up and fast forward, then pause it again – 'if you rewind it from exactly this point, we're divorced.'

I press the rewind button, and we both watch Jack and me, in turn, swallowing our words. Then I rush backwards down the aisle, for the ninth time today. The tear flows upwards into Kate's eye and melts away.

'You don't really wish you'd never done it. Not really,' she says, quietly, staring at the screen. 'You and Jack have had great times together. You were good. You were perfect, actually. You two have always looked perfect from the outside. You were an inspiration to us all. I'm sure Ian and I wouldn't have got married as soon as we did if you hadn't already done it.'

I think about it. 'Really? You're my inspiration now. I want what you and Ian have got, not me and Jack. Unfortunately, though, I don't think I'm ever going to find it. I'm too selfish. I'm no good at relationships. I've got too much else going on.' I can't explain exactly what I mean, but I know this is the truth. I am not cut out for long-term relationships, for fidelity.

'You're not. And don't romanticise us. It's impossible to know what goes on in other people's marriages. We were gobsmacked when Jack told us about you two splitting up. You know that. I would never have predicted it in a million years. And you of all people know what Ian and I have been through. It does put a strain on your relationship. A horrible strain. It's not all roses at our house, Evie.' She looks away. 'Far from it, in fact.'

I crumple up yesterday's paper and arrange it in the wood-burner. I'll need another bag of kindling tomorrow.

'But you're so solid together,' I tell her. 'I just don't know about Jack and me. I didn't think I'd miss him. I felt great when he moved out. And now I think I might be missing him a little bit. Part of me can't help thinking that we'll give it another go and maybe get it right this time, and that this is just a blip.' I place the last piece of kindling in the stove and light a match. 'It's the strangest thing, Katie, it really is. I remember times, so many times, when Jack was away, with work or with the boys, and I adored having the house to myself. I used to secretly hope that he'd stay away longer because I enjoyed being my own boss so much. And you're the only one who knows that I wasn't always exactly impeccably behaved when he wasn't around. So I should be getting on with it, getting out and meeting new people. But I just can't quite seem to shake myself into action. I wait for the sound of his key in the door. If he came back now and asked if we could give it another go, I might even say yes.' I can't look at her. No one else knows that I'm feeling like this. Most of the time I don't know it myself. All my family think I'm fine and strong and happy.

I feel Kate looking at me. I can't look back, so she turns away. She takes the food into the kitchen, and I follow and start hunting for the corkscrew.

'It's easy for me to say this,' she says carefully, 'but I don't think that missing him is necessarily the same thing as wanting him back. I think that missing a relationship that's been at the centre of your life for years is completely normal. If you were really completely lost without him you wouldn't have dumped him in the first place. It was your choice, remember?' She looks up and smiles, her face framed by her light brown hair. Kate doesn't realise it, but she is saying exactly what I wanted her to say. 'You're just not used to being on your own. It's a different issue. You're going to be absolutely fine, whether you take him back or not.'

I smile at her. 'Promise?'

She puts a plate of fish and chips in front of me. 'Promise,' she says.

I open the first bottle of wine, and take the huge wine glasses – for special occasions only – from the top shelf of the cupboard. I hand her a glass as she puts the salt, vinegar and ketchup on the table.

'Cheers,' she says. 'To you coming through this and enjoying being single.'

The fire is beginning to warm the kitchen. It is cosier with company. I shudder at the idea of a future where I am on my own, and clink my glass with hers. 'I quite like the idea of being single, most of the time,' I tell her. 'Cheers.' I try to think of something to toast other than my seducing a young boy from a manufactured band. 'To something happening, anyway,' I say lamely. 'To your and Ian's baby.'

'We've got some news on that front, actually,' she says with a grin.

I put down my glass and grip the edge of the table. 'You're not!' I shout.

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She holds up a cautioning hand. 'No, no, no, hold your horses. Just another avenue to explore. Eat up and I'll tell you.'

With the first hot salty chip, I realise exactly how hungry I am.