

One of Us

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Extract

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He had given her instructions, a few minutes earlier, on how to find the café, his voice barely audible through a sudden raging static on the mobile.

'It's on that long, ugly road that goes from King's Cross towards Farringdon. Bronze lettering. Next to a twenty-four-hour garage. I'll wait for you. Outside. I'll be there. You'll see me.'

Yes. She knows it. A workmen's café with a broad, pale-yellow front: Formica table tops, high-backed wooden chairs and ketchup oozing out of giant cherry-red plastic tomatoes.

She can see him now, pacing restlessly up and down the pavement.

His first words. 'I am so sorry.'

He ushers her into the café, empty but for a motorcycle courier, bulky in his black leathers, a thick red stripe down the arm of his jacket, drinking tea from a white cup. They sit at the back and he orders them both coffee, and a round of toast for himself.

Funny, she doesn't remember Ben Calder being this pretty. Shorn dark-brown curls and a full red-blooded mouth. He must be in his late thirties by now, but he doesn't look it. Dressed in faded jeans and trainers, carrying a large square canvas bag, he has the eerily youthful look of his tribe: male urban media professionals.

'What a disaster,' he says.

Anna nods. She is trying to remember if she has met him more than once, that time at Dan's flat a couple of years ago. It feels as if she knows him much better than that, but this may be because his picture is in the paper so often these days, his columns and features accompanied by the grainy byline image; that

self-regarding turn of the head, the deliberately quizzical expression. 'Trust me, reader!'

'So are we to consider this a good old British cover-up?' he says drily.

'They actually used the term "vagrant". Twice on television. Countless times on the radio. Can you believe that?'

'Yes, I know, I checked back. A couple of the papers said, "an unidentified homeless man in his mid-forties". Look, this must be really difficult for you.' Ben pats her hand clumsily. His skin is white, his finger as long and tapering as a girl's. She feels faintly repelled.

'Jack did what he did for a reason. It should be known.'

Their coffee arrives, scalding hot. She takes a quick sip and then another. Despite its tastelessness, the intense heat is reassuring. The woman brings back a plate of buttered toast, which Ben devours greedily, barely stopping to chew.

'It means,' he says, his mouth still full, 'I'm going to have to ask you things. About the two families. How they – you – met. About Andy Givings in particular. How you know him. How the relationships between him and your brother – well, both your brothers – developed over the years. Are you up for that?'

'Yes. Of course.'

'You know what they say about him?' Ben's eyes are alight with excitement. 'That he's considered one of a handful who might get to be . . . get right to the top. Maybe soon. If things collapse after this disastrous war.'

'Yeah. Yeah. I read the papers too, you know.'

'Just needed to check . . .' Ben is unsmiling now. From his canvas bag, he pulls out a large black notebook, a clutch of rollerball pens, a Palm Pilot, a mobile phone. He switches the phone off. Glances at his watch. *'Okay. Let's give this an hour and a half, although I'll need to be able to get hold of you later on if necessary.'*

'You're planning to run it when?'

'Probably Wednesday. Depends on what else is happening. They're saving three pages. Maybe more . . . You do realise, don't you?' He hesitates, just for a second. 'It's a big story.'

'Yes.' Anna shuts her eyes, briefly. Best not to think about the consequences. Not now. Not just yet. 'Look. Just go ahead. Ask whatever.'

'Good,' he says, briskly. 'Let's get back to the beginning, to how it

all started. I want you to tell me the whole story,' he says, putting heavy emphasis on the last two words. 'The story, the whole story and nothing but the story.'

'Yeah, right.' She smiles, takes a deep breath. 'Well, once upon a time . . .'

One

Once upon a time, there was a family of six, a mummy and a daddy and two boys and two girls, who lived in a tall, tidy house, with a dark-green front door and big windows, in a quiet street with tall plane trees and a bright-red postbox right outside the door.

1971

‘Help lay the table, will you, Anna Lu?’

It is strange, how well she remembers the hours before the other family arrived that first summer Sunday, a sense of excitement building while she worked to help her mother get everything ready in the kitchen, her favourite room in the house, a long, cool white-painted space, the result of three scullery-style rooms knocked through years before. From here, just below street level, one got a grand view of the calves of passing pedestrians or dogs sniffing contemplatively up against the house railings.

It was a bright, sunny day. A London Sunday morning; oddly peaceful, the streets clean and clear. When she had gone out earlier to post a letter, there was no-one about apart from the rag-and-bone man slow-clattering his weekend way around the neighbourhood, filling the road with his ringing bell and plaintive calls. In the background, tinny Radio 1, with its cheery-sounding DJs, belting out its soulful hits. Why, she wondered, do the melancholy minor chord changes of ‘What’s Going On?’ make her shiver with happiness? It helped to have a job of work to do – her body kept usefully occupied, her mind gloriously free – as she scrubbed

the long, rectangular pine kitchen table until there was not a speck or spot remaining. Shards of sunlight flooded the fruit bowl, the table's centrepiece, withdrawing without warning, like a rapid tide.

Her mother had gone upstairs to change, and fix her hair. At twelve-thirty, she came back down wearing the stiff, pouty expression that indicated she was ready to receive company. Clambering now onto a kitchen chair, opening one cupboard door after another, looking for some unspecified object, talking in that dreamy way she had when trying to do three things at once.

'He's their newest recruit. Andy . . . his name is Andy Givings. Don't know why it's not Andrew. Maybe it *is* Andrew. Came straight from doing pupillage at Geoffrey Carter's set at Gray's Inn, about six months ago. Your father says he's made quite an impact already. Hard worker. A charmer . . . Ahh! Here they are.'

She had found what she was looking for: two pale-green plastic juice beakers.

'His children are little. Two boys. So could you make a bit of an effort?'

As if Anna never does.

Her mother jumped down, the beaker handles hooked around her right thumb. Pacing the perimeter of the long kitchen table, head to one side, she scanned her daughter's handiwork, pouncing occasionally to switch a knife and fork or tidy up some spoons. Anna felt a stab of pride at the older woman's good looks: her heart-shaped face, the dark-brown eyes with high, perfectly arched brows, the slim body, in brown cords and a fitted, fawny-coloured top.

Cutlery finally arranged to her satisfaction, her mother straightened up, fingertips grazing her forehead, eyelashes flickering, a coded signal of harassment. Anna could see the delicate blue veins, thin as pencil strokes, criss-crossing the flesh of her milky-white eyelids.

Her mother was nearly forty-three; unimaginably old.

July 1971. The year of decimal money and divorce reform. Hundreds of thousands marched through the streets of New York and San Francisco in protest against the war in Vietnam, a conflict Anna's father frequently railed against, fuming at the Americans' 'criminal

intervention, their colonial arrogance'. A group calling themselves the Weather Underground claimed responsibility for a bomb that had exploded in a bathroom at the White House. 'Complete idiots'; her father's equally choleric judgement on this random, threatening act. 'A ragbag mix of students and middle-class dropouts playing politics with people's lives.' So did Anna begin to recognise the contours of adult opinion, its endless shifts and subtleties, so impossible to predict.

Meanwhile, the new coins felt as smooth and meaningless in her palm as play-currency and she wanted the old blackened pennies back, gouged with the image of Boadicea in her carriage, and the thick, sharp edges of the threepenny bit. Divorce was the talk of her father's colleagues that year. In January, Victor Porter, head of chambers, left his wife of thirty-five years – handsome, worn, stay-at-home Maude – and moved in with a pointy-nosed expert in shipping law who wasn't yet thirty. Her father reported with some amusement that Victor now strutted the narrow passages and cramped, interconnecting warren of chamber's offices with a straightened back and a spring in his step, while poor abandoned Maude rang Anna's mother at least twice a week, her wail of unmitigated distress audible from the top of the hall stairs.

There, in the hallway, with the pretty turquoise, rust and gold-tiled floor (the same mosaic pattern to be found in the entrance hall of every house on their side of the street), Anna could make out the silhouette of a storybook family through the frosted glass: two tall figures framing a pair of low, bobbing heads.

'Hello. I'm Andy.'

Wavy, brown hair and an open, pleasant face.

'Anna, I presume.'

She nodded, wordlessly. The stranger took her hand. 'I'm so glad to meet you. Your father is always talking about you.' His cheeks had the rosy, mottled hue of excitement. Or nerves. He grinned, revealing a row of small, sharp, unevenly spaced teeth. 'This is Clare, my wife.' A pretty, stout, smiling woman with a short, artless haircut and smooth unblemished skin. 'And these are my boys.' Now, he couldn't keep raw pride from his voice. Pointing fondly at the head of the older one – a skinny, dark child

with a long jaw, who kept his eyes stubbornly fixed on the floor – and then at the littler one: white blond curls like a cherub, and a thumb jammed in his mouth.

Anna could hear her mother's footsteps coming up from the kitchen, see her now, shaking imaginary drops of water from her beautifully manicured hands. Walking quickly towards their guests in her close-fitting brown clothes, a frosted lipstick freshly applied, pout still in place, she conveyed the perfect image of the gracious hostess: laughing just a little, at the absurdity of entertaining, extending the generosity of her amusement to those around her. The adults greeted each other with that honeyed emphasis that is not quite insincerity, her father appearing like an apparition on the front stairs, shepherding everyone through to the front living room, the room kept for best with its long, low couches, pristine pale armchairs and solid, close packed rows of glossy hardbacks. There was fizzy white wine for the adults, juice for the children. (Anna's mother kept a close eye on the little boys; she was paranoid about spillages.) Awkwardness dissolved within minutes and it was then, memory told her, that the lunch party began in earnest.

Andy Givings was twenty-nine years old; her father forty-four, a significant gap in age and professional experience. The younger man was a relatively junior barrister: he had had a false start, in career terms, with a spell in industrial management. Clearly talented, he was, as yet, untested in the law. By comparison, Anna's father was well established: he had a reputation. He had a *name*. (Anna found this common term of praise amusing: for who does not have a *name*?) It was assumed at that first lunch – as it was understood all during the early years of the friendship – that her father was easily the superior of the two, in all worldly ways, at least. He may have – secretly – loved literature more than his work, but he was a first-class barrister, a QC since 1969, and rich too, (now), having made a considerable amount of money from his profession, especially gratifying for a poor boy from Essex raised by his mother, a school teacher, alone. He had married well, to the once-beautiful, still lovely Fiona (née Scott), a young woman from a respectable land-owning Surrey family with whom he now, proudly, had four children; two boys and two girls, born within

just six years, all healthy, handsome and at good schools. The family lived in a tall, comfortable, early Victorian villa in a prosperous but not, yet, fancy area. There was nothing fancy about David Adams. (God forbid, Anna's father loathed flashiness. All was solid, all was substance.)

But beneath the apparent surface of things, there were other realities. Within half an hour of Andy and Clare Givings's arrival on that July Sunday over thirty years ago, it was obvious that the young couple had a possibly much more valuable gift in their possession than wealth or conspicuous success or devotion to the outward proprieties. Human interest. Both of them possessed a contagious enthusiasm for life: the divine gift of apparent self-forgetting, as if their deepest purpose in life was pleasingly to extend themselves for the sake of others. Kind and attentive, this young man and his astute, clear-skinned wife displayed an intense and genuine curiosity in others: what they thought and felt. And why. Looking back, it was strange to Anna, both poignant and prescient, how much the older, richer, apparently more enviable family craved this simple thing: human interest. How much they all seemed to need it, each and every one of them, young and old.

Pacing the living room, a small white wine, as yet untouched, in her hand – neither of the Givings were big drinkers – Clare was bent over a display of family photos set out in stiff, brown leather frames on the marble-topped table by the French windows. 'So this must be Matt?' 'And this here is Laura? What a *pretty* girl.' (Anna, used to the familiar sting of sibling envy, could almost hear her mother purring.) Now, Clare picked up a black-and-white photograph, taken several years previously, a picture of Anna and her three siblings posed formally on the living-room couch: Matt and Jack, dressed in identical pale shirts and dark bow ties and patent brogue shoes, with broad, cheeky smiles. (With a big gap on either side of his front teeth, Jack looked like a rabbit.) Laura and Anna were wearing matching white dresses in a filmy material – organza, possibly? – their hair tied back with butterfly clips. The contrast between the girls' colouring was dramatic (it still was). Laura had fine, white blonde hair, Anna a mass of

brunette curls and heavy, dark brows. ('Little Miss Serious Brow. Her father's daughter in every way', her mother would frequently sigh, it being understood within the family that Anna and her father were particularly close, and not just in the matter of their colouring: linked, too, through a shared interest in books and thinking, traits that were somehow tied up, in their mother's prosaic view, with the head and brow area.)

Anna loved this photograph, her little-girl legs ramrod-straight, blunt patent toes pointing skywards, because the photographer forgot to remind her to bend them.

'Four children. And so close together in age!' Clare Givings looked at the older woman with frank admiration. 'Two's my limit, I'm afraid. But then we did start ridiculously young. I was six months pregnant by the time I finished my finals.'

'Sometimes I hardly know how I fitted them all in.' Anna's mother was gathering up glasses in readiness to usher everyone down to the kitchen. 'Do you know? I once asked a lady who was walking behind me in Kensington Gardens if she would just take my place, for a second. I wanted to see what I looked like, a woman out, all alone, with these four children in tow.'

'And?' Clare smiled, picking up a half-empty bowl of crisps, eager to help. 'What *did* a mother and four children out all alone in a park look like from behind?'

'Exhausted, I dare say!' The older woman was leading them out of the living room now, through the hall, down the stairs into the kitchen, chucking homespun wisdoms over her shoulder, like salt, for luck. 'One makes so many awful mistakes in family life, you know. It's impossible not to.'