

The Gap Year for Grown-Ups

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Extract

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Ever wanted
to take a
holiday from
your life?

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Chapter 1

‘Come on, Mum,’ Claire urged, leaning forward over the kitchen table. ‘Put us out of our misery.’

Working on the principle that it’s always best to confront an uncomfortable situation – like root canal work or a smear test – with a brave face, Sarah tentatively pulled at the wrapping paper. Resplendent with Thomas the Tank Engine, she recognised it as the leftovers from the roll she’d bought for a godchild’s birthday. David had obviously forgotten to buy any and had plundered her resources.

‘Nice paper,’ Sarah said pointedly and he looked sheepish.

‘Sorry, love, but it’s what’s inside that counts, isn’t it?’ He looked concerned, and she laughed.

‘Is that your excuse for wrapping last year’s offering in the *Sunday Times* Property Section?’

‘Okay, okay not that again.’

Sarah tore off the paper, keen to get the agony over with. The parcel felt soft and squashy so she already had a strong suspicion what it might be and, sure enough, when she pulled the paper away, a fleecy sweatshirt lay on the kitchen table, like evidence in a court case, the beady black eyes of an embroidered squirrel staring balefully up at them.

Claire leaned back in her chair and sighed. ‘Oh, Dad.’

‘What’s wrong with it?’ David jumped in. ‘It’ll be so practical for gardening, and I got it big and roomy cos I know you hate tight things.’

‘Couldn’t you at least have got her something a bit more

feminine? Even the ubiquitous lacy knickers would have been an attempt at least—'

'Claire—' Sarah began.

'Happy birthday, Mum,' Tom interrupted, walking into the kitchen and yawning, pyjama bottoms hanging off narrow hips. He planted a kiss on his mother's head. 'Sorry I wasn't up to serenade you earlier. I didn't get in till late. What the hell's that?'

'It's from Dad. A fleece for gardening.' Sarah smiled up at her lanky son, his fair hair swept off his face and, as ever, in need of a wash.

'Well, it's certainly the colour of shit,' he laughed. He flicked on the kettle, then dropped a small package onto the table, a box from her favourite shop tied with a pink ribbon. He hadn't gone into town to meet friends until five yesterday afternoon so it must have been purchased pretty smartish. David had gone quiet and was busying himself with some papers on the side. Sarah felt a wave of guilt.

'It's lovely, darling. Thank you. It will be very useful.' She got up from her seat, quashing a vague feeling of disappointment and avoiding her daughter's disapproving eyes. At eighteen, and scrupulously polite with everyone else, Claire still hadn't quite learned the necessity of discretion over honesty when it came to family.

'I'll just take it upstairs and change.' Sarah put her coffee cup into the dishwasher, automatically adding David's that had been left on the side. 'What time's the table?'

'One o'clock. We'll pick your dad up on the way.' Characteristically he rubbed his hands together nervously. 'I booked The Old Bell. We all like it there.'

'Oh God, Dad. We did when we were ten. Isn't there anywhere else?'

'Claire, that's enough!' Sarah said sharply, shooting her daughter an admonishing look. She picked up her parcels off

the table. 'I'll take your presents with me to open there or we're going to be late. And, Tom, remember to make the acquaintance of the shampoo when you get in the shower.'

Sarah made her way upstairs to the landing, shutting the airing-cupboard door with her foot as best she could as she passed. The catch, broken for years, kept jumping open on its own. She must ask David to fix it again. In her bedroom, she avoided looking at herself in the mirror and, picking up David's jeans from the floor and laying them on the chair, she opened the wardrobe and tucked the green fleece with the squirrel motif inside next to a chunky oatmeal cardigan ... a chunky oatmeal cardigan that had been wrapped last year in newspaper and was as yet unworn. It looked down at her censoriously and she shoved it further back onto the shelf, hiding it behind another jumper.

'Bye, love. Have a good day.' David deposited a quick kiss somewhere in the vicinity of Sarah's head as he bent to pick up his briefcase. He was already humming as he let himself out of the door – some song the twins had been listening to on the car radio on the way back to university the night before, after the birthday celebration. Sarah had been asleep by the time he'd got back and he hadn't wanted to wake her, so they hadn't had the usual birthday bonk. Shame, because, with the twins now safely out of the way, it wouldn't have had to be one of those muffled, whispered affairs. You'd have thought ... well, David had thought they could have started being a bit more spontaneous now they were alone in the house but it hadn't happened that way. Still, early days.

David leaned over to put his briefcase in the passenger footwell and winced as he felt the waistband of his trousers dig in. Surely he wasn't putting on weight? He'd always been the fittest of their friends, able to tease Phil about his beer belly without any jibes coming his way. God! He'd already cut out Sunday-morning

fry-ups – admittedly, at Sarah’s urging – what next? He slid into the driver’s seat and prodded his stomach. Maybe not a six-pack, but not yet a party seven. Sarah must have washed his trousers too hot again.

David put his brain in neutral on the drive to work and yawned as he pulled into the car park. How many times had he driven that same route? Once the question occurred to him he couldn’t resist a quick mental calculation. Well, guesstimate really. At least five thousand. He shook his head and smiled. It was amazing, really, how the years went by. Could it really be twenty years since he’d started work here? He turned off the engine, dropped his mobile into his briefcase and clicked it shut. He took his jacket off the back seat, shrugged it on, shut the door and headed towards the office, locking the car with the keyfob.

Now that was something that had changed over the years. Being able to lock your car remotely. Definite progress! He hadn’t been able to do that in those days. They’d had a Fiesta then. Light blue. And Sarah had ridden her bike to school. He smiled to himself, remembering how she’d looked with her violin on her back, her cheeks all pink and her hair sticking out in all directions. Her hair never stuck out any more – the bike was long gone, and they had a car each: hers a little black Renault; his a company saloon. Just before he entered the building, he glanced at it over his shoulder in quiet satisfaction.

Sarah picked up the cards from the window sill in the kitchen. She only ever left birthday cards there for a few days – they tended to fall over and were a pain to clean around. One had arrived only this morning from one of her oldest friends, Nathalie in France – late as always and saying something stupid but in French. Sarah dropped it into the bin next to one with an unseasonal picture of daffodils from David, and a lovely montage of fairy cakes from Claire, who always managed to pick beautiful cards, and had given her a silk covered notebook of no particular use

but pretty all the same. There hadn't been a card from Tom, but the necklace, however hastily it might have been bought, had been a sweet plastic heart and she'd put it on at lunch on Sunday at The Old Bell as soon as she'd opened it.

Sarah sighed and looked out at the garden, bleak and denuded now from the November winds. Though it had been lovely having the children home for her birthday, she had hated them going back to university; really hadn't got used to them being there in the first place. Having had them noisily home from school every night of their lives, their absence was an echoing void.

Sarah propped up the card from her father on the recipe-book stand, not able to bring herself to throw it away, turned off the kitchen light and let herself out into the dank chill of the morning.

'C, F, A,' she sighed two and half hours and five lessons later. Was it actually illegal to do this much damage to a Mozart piece? 'Gregory, just how much practice have you done this week?' The dark-haired boy hung his head in shame.

'Bit,' he mumbled, scuffing the floor with his shoe.

'Too busy playing on the computer? You'll need to do a bit more, you know, if you want to get grade one.' He nodded again. Pulling out his practice book from his music case, Sarah felt a surprisingly strong wave of What Do I Care? wash over her. She'd lost count of the times she'd heard these exam pieces annihilated by children. *I'm concerned Gregory isn't progressing when he has such promise*, read the handwritten note at the bottom of last week's page. *Surely he is ready to move on to grade 3 by now?* It was signed with a flourish of initials, clearly in haste. Sarah had met Gregory's mother at a parents' evening. A brisk, immaculately turned-out woman who Gregory had once said 'sold ladies things'. Sarah assumed he meant clothes, not sanitary products or, God forbid, sex-aids, though with her dominatrix heels and short black skirt, she could well do. You never could tell with private-school parents. Sarah smiled, and replied in her

careful hand with her score-marking pencil: *One step at a time. A little more practice would be a start.*

She watched as Gregory stuffed his books into the bag, not to see the light of day again until next week, then shuffled out of the room with a mumbled goodbye. Sarah glanced at the clock. There wouldn't even be time for a cup of coffee before the Christmas concert rehearsal started. She picked up the scores and headed for the school hall, and another year of smug Mary, mischievous innkeeper and a bunch of disgruntled sheep who hadn't got the main parts. She smiled to herself. She must be getting old.

The sound his key made sliding into the lock always filled David with a kind of low-key happiness. It was like the full stop at the end of the working day and the start of his real life. Coming in and finding Sarah pottering around was comforting after a day of dealing with Barry's bullshit. No smell of cooking yet. Maybe he'd suggest a take-away. That'd be nice for her after a busy day. A jalfrezi and keema naan would hit the spot nicely.

He put down his briefcase, just loud enough so she'd hear it and appear from wherever she was – upstairs, maybe, making the bed. He shrugged off his jacket and slung it on the back of a chair. It could probably do with dry-cleaning. He'd mention it to Sarah later. He prised off his work shoes, pushing the heel of each one down with the opposite foot, then flicked them in turn towards the chair. Not bad! One on the seat, one underneath. 'Yesssss!' He punched the air. 'He shoots! He scores!'

An exasperated sigh from behind him took him by surprise. 'Oh hello, love. Good day?'

Sarah looked at him for a long moment, then rather pointedly at his shoes. 'Yes, fine.'

Uh-oh. 'You all right?' he asked a little defensively. Well, just enough to suggest she was being a bit of a killjoy but not enough to start a row. He pushed the errant shoe onto the floor next to

its mate and turned to face her. 'Fancy a cuppa?' He waited for her to offer.

She softened a little. 'Yes, that'd be great. Thanks.' He could have sworn her smile was triumphant.