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Little Face

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Extract

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A Hodder & Stoughton Book

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I am outside. Not far from the front door, not yet, but I am out and I am alone. When I woke up this morning, I didn't think today would be the day. It didn't feel right, or rather, I didn't. Vivienne's phone call persuaded me. 'Believe me, you'll never be ready,' she said. 'You have to take the plunge.' And she's right, I do. I have to do this.

I walk across the cobbled yard and down the mud and gravel path, carrying only my handbag. I feel light and strange. The trees look as if they are knitted from bright wools: reds and browns and the occasional green. The sky is the colour of wet slate. This is not the same ordinary world that I used to walk around in. Everything is more vivid, as if the physical backdrop I once took for granted is clamouring for my attention.

My car is parked at the far end of the path, in front of the gate that separates The Elms from the main road. I am not supposed to drive. 'Nonsense.' Vivienne dismissed this piece of medical advice with a loud tut. 'It's not far. If you followed all the silly rules these days, you'd be terrified to do anything!'

I do feel ready to drive, though only just. I have recovered reasonably well from the operation. This could be thanks to the hypericum that I prescribed for myself, or maybe it's mind over matter: I need to be strong, therefore I am.

I turn the key in the ignition and press my right foot down hard on the gas pedal. The car splutters awake. I turn on to the road and watch my speed rise steadily. 'Nought to sixty in half an hour,' my dad used to joke, when the Volvo was still his and Mum's. I will drive this car until it falls to pieces. It reminds me of my parents in a way that nothing else ever could. I feel as if it is an old, loyal member of my family, who remembers Mum and Dad as lovingly as I do.

I wind down the window, inhale some of the fresh air that hits me in the face, and think that it will take many more horror stories of gridlock before people stop associating cars with freedom. As I hurtle along the almost empty road past fields and farms, I feel more powerful than I am. It is a welcome illusion.

I do not allow myself to think of Florence, of the growing distance between us.

After four miles or so of open countryside, the road on which I am driving becomes the main street of Spilling, the nearest small town. There is a market in the middle and long rows of squat Elizabethan buildings with pastel-coloured fronts on either side. Some of these are shops. Others, I imagine, are the homes of old, rich snobs, bi-focalled bores who witter on endlessly about Spilling's historical heritage. This is probably unfair of me. Vivienne very definitely does not live in Spilling, even though it is her nearest town. When asked where she lives, she says simply 'The Elms', as if her house is a well-known municipality.

Waiting at lights, I rummage in my bag for the directions she gave me. Left at the mini-roundabout, then first right, and look out for the sign. I see it eventually: 'Waterfront' – thick, white, italic letters on a navy blue background. I turn into the drive, follow it round the square domed building and park in the large car park at the back.

The lobby smells of lilies. I notice that there is a tall, rectangular vase of them on almost every flat surface. The carpet – navy blue with pink roses – is expensive, the

sort that will not look dirty even when it is. People with sports bags walk back and forth, some sweaty, some freshly showered.

At reception, I meet a young girl with blonde, spiky hair who is keen to help me. She wears a badge that says 'Kerilee'. I am glad that I chose the name Florence for my daughter, a real name with a history, rather than something that sounds as if it has been made up by a fifteen-year-old pop star's marketing team. I was worried that David or Vivienne would veto it, but luckily they both liked it too.

'My name is Alice Fancourt,' I say. 'I'm a new member.' I hand over the envelope that contains my details. It strikes me as funny that Kerilee has no idea of the significance of this day for me. The meaning of our encounter is completely different in our two minds.

'Oh! You're Vivienne's daughter-in-law. You've just had a baby! Couple of weeks ago, wasn't it?'

'That's right.' Membership of Waterfront is my present from Vivienne, or rather my reward for producing a grandchild. I think it costs about a thousand pounds a year. Vivienne is one of the few people who is as generous as she is rich.

'How is Florence?' asks Kerilee. 'Vivienne's absolutely besotted with her! It'll be lovely for Felix to have a little sister, won't it?'

It is odd to hear Florence referred to in this way. In my mind she is always first – my first, the first. But she is David's second child.

Felix is well known at Waterfront. He spends almost as much time here as at school, taking part in junior golf tournaments, swimming lessons and Cheeky Chimps play days while Vivienne divides her time between the gym, the pool, the beauty salon and the bar. The arrangement seems to suit them both.

'So, are you recovered?' Kerilee asks. 'Vivienne told us all about the birth. Sounds like you had quite a time of it!'

I am slightly taken aback. 'Yes, it was pretty horrendous. But Florence was fine, which is all that matters, really.' Suddenly I miss my daughter terribly. What am I doing at the reception desk of a health club when I could be getting to know my tiny, beautiful girl? 'This is the first time we've been apart,' I blurt out. 'It's the first time I've been out of the house since getting back from hospital. It feels really strange.' I wouldn't normally confide my feelings in a total stranger, but since Kerilee already knows the details of Florence's birth, I decide that it can do no harm.

'Big day, then,' she says. 'Vivienne said you might be a bit wobbly.'

'She did?' Vivienne thinks of everything.

'Yes. She said to take you to the bar before we do anything else, and give you a large cocktail.'

I laugh. 'I have to drive home, unfortunately. Though Vivienne ...'

'...thinks the more tipsy you are, the more carefully you drive,' Kerilee completes my sentence and we both giggle. 'So, let's get you on to our system, shall we?' She turns to the computer screen in front of her, fingers poised above the keyboard. 'Alice Fancourt. Address? The Elms, right?' She looks impressed. Most local people know Vivienne's home by name even if they do not know its owner. The Elms was the last home of the Blantyres, a famous Spilling family with royal connections, until the last Blantyre died and Vivienne's father bought the property in the nineteen forties.

'Yes,' I say. 'At the moment it's The Elms.' I picture my flat in Streatham Hill, where I lived until David and I got married. An objective observer would have called it dark and boxy, but I loved it. It was my cosy den, a hideaway where no-one could get to me, especially not my more threatening and obsessive patients. After my parents died, it was the one place where I felt I could be myself and express all my

loneliness and grief without there being anyone around to judge me. My flat accepted me for the damaged person that I was in a way the outside world seemed unwilling to.

The Elms is too grand to be cosy. The bed David and I share resembles something you might see in a French palace with red rope around it. It is enormous. Four people would fit in it, or possibly five if they were all thin. Vivienne calls it God-size. 'Double beds are for gerbils,' she says. Florence has a spacious nursery with antique furniture, a window seat and a hand-carved rocking horse that was Vivienne's when she was a child. Felix has two rooms: his bedroom, and a long thin playroom in the attic, where his toys, books and cuddly bears live.

The views from the top floor of the house are breathtaking. On a clear day you can see as far as Culver Ridge on one side and the church tower at Silsford on the other. The garden is so big that it has been divided into several different gardens, some wild, some tamed, all ideal for pram walks on a warm day.

David cannot see any reason to move. When I suggest it, he points out how little we could afford to spend on a house. 'Do you really want to give up everything we've got at The Elms for a two-bedroom terrace with no garden?' he says. 'And you work in Spilling now. It's convenient for us to live with Mum. You don't want a longer commute, do you?'

I haven't told anyone, but gloom settles on me like a fog when I contemplate going back to work. I see the world in a different way now, and I can't pretend that I don't.

'I'll just get Ross, our membership advisor, to give you a tour of the facilities.' Kerilee's voice brings me back to the present. 'Then if you want to, you can have a swim, or use the gym ...'

My insides clench. I imagine my stitches tearing, the still-pink wound gaping open. 'It's a bit soon for that,' I say, one hand on my stomach. 'I've only been out of hospital a week. But I'd love to look round and then maybe have that cocktail.'

Ross is a short South African man with dyed blond hair, muscly legs and an orange tan. He shows me a large gym with a polished wooden floor that contains every sort of machine imaginable. People in lycra sportswear are running, walking, cycling and even rowing, by the look of it, on these sleek black and silver contraptions. Many of them are wearing ear-plugs and staring up at the row of televisions suspended from the ceiling, watching daytime chat shows as their limbs pound the metal and rubber. I begin to realise why Vivienne looks so good for her age.

Ross shows me the twenty-five metre swimming pool and draws my attention to the underwater lighting. The water is a bright, sparkling turquoise, like an enormous aquamarine gemstone in liquid form, throwing and catching light as it moves. The pool has a stone surround and roman steps at both ends. Beside it, there is an area ringed by pink marble pillars that contains a round, bubbling jacuzzi. It is full to the brim, foam and froth seeping over the edge. On the other side of the pool there is a sauna with a sweet, piney smell, and a steam room, the glass door of which is cloudy with heat. A sudden drumming sound startles me and I look up to see rain hitting the domed glass ceiling.

I inspect the ladies' changing room while Ross waits outside. Like everything else at Waterfront, it transcends the merely functional. There is a thick plum-coloured carpet on the floor, and black slate tiles in the toilets and showers. On each surface there seems to be a pile of something tempting: fluffy white bath sheets, complementary bathrobes emblazoned with the Waterfront logo, hand creams, shampoos and conditioners, body lotions, even nail files. Three women are drying and dressing themselves. One rubs her stomach with a towel, making me feel faint. Another looks up from buttoning her shirt and smiles at me. She looks strong and

healthy. The skin on her bare legs is pink with heat. Fully clothed, I feel fragile, awkward and self-conscious.

I turn my attention to the numbered wooden lockers. Some are open a fraction and have keys dangling from them; others, without keys, are shut. I circle the room until I find Vivienne's, number 131, chosen because Felix's birthday is the thirteenth of January and because it occupies an enviable position, close both to the showers and to the door marked 'Swimming Pool'. Vivienne is the only member of Waterfront who has her own dedicated locker that no-one else is allowed to use. They keep the key for her behind reception. 'It saves me carting all my possessions in and out every day like a refugee,' she says.

Ross is waiting for me in the corridor by the towel bin when I emerge from the changing room. 'All satisfactory?' he says.

'Very.' Everything is exactly as Vivienne described it.

'Any questions? Did you figure out how the lockers work? It's a pound coin in the slot to close them, which you get back, of course.'

I nod, waiting for Ross to tell me that I too will have my own locker, but he doesn't. I am slightly disappointed.

He marches me round Chalfont's, the health club's smart restaurant, and a cheerful, noisy, mock-American café bar called Chompers which I know Vivienne loathes. Then we go to the members' bar, where Ross hands me over to Tara. I decide to be bold and have a cocktail, in the hope that it will make me feel less on edge. I pick up the menu, but Tara tells me she has already prepared something for me, a fattening concoction of cream and Kahlua. Vivienne, it turns out, has ordered it in advance.

I am not allowed to pay for my drink, which is no surprise. 'You're a lucky girl,' says Tara. Presumably she means because I am Vivienne's daughter-in-law. I wonder if she knows about Laura, who was not quite so lucky.

I gulp down my cocktail quickly, trying to look calm and carefree. In actual fact, I am probably the least relaxed person in the building, so keen am I to get home, back to The Elms and Florence. I realise that, deep down, I have been itching to return from the second I left. Now that I have seen everything Waterfront has to offer, I am free to go. I have done what I set out to do.

Outside, the rain has stopped. I break the speed limit on the way home, alcohol buzzing through my veins. I feel brave and rebellious, briefly. Then I start to feel dizzy, and worry that I will drive past Cheryl, my midwife, who will gasp with disapproval to see me speeding along in a clapped-out Volvo only a fortnight after my daughter's birth. I could kill someone. I am still taking the pills they gave me when I left hospital. And I've just downed a strong cocktail ... What am I trying to do, poison myself?

I know I should slow down but I don't. I can't. My eagerness to see Florence again is like a physical craving. I accelerate towards traffic lights that are on amber instead of braking as I normally would. I feel as if I have left behind one of my limbs or a vital organ.

I am almost panting with anticipation as I pull into the driveway. I park the car and run up the path to the house, ignoring the strained, bruised feeling in my lower abdomen. The front door is ajar. 'David?' I call out. There is no reply. I wonder if he has taken Florence out in her pram. No, he can't have done. David would always close the door.

I walk through the hall to the living room. 'David?' I shout again, louder this time. I hear a creaking of floorboards above my head and a muffled groan, the sound of David waking from a nap. I hurry upstairs to our bedroom, where I find him upright in

bed, yawning. ‘I’m sleeping when the baby sleeps, like Miriam Stoppard said I should,’ he jokes. He has been so happy since Florence was born, almost a different person. For years I have wished that David would talk to me more about how he’s feeling. Now any such talk seems unnecessary. His joy is obvious from his sudden new energy, the eagerness in his eyes and voice.

David has been doing the night feeds. He has read in a book that one of the advantages of bottle-feeding is that it gives dads the opportunity to bond with their babies. This is a novelty for him. By the time Felix was born, David and Laura had already separated. Florence is David’s second chance. He hasn’t said so, but I know he is determined to make everything perfect this time. He has even taken a whole month off work. He needs to prove to himself that being a bad father is not hereditary. ‘How was Waterfront?’ he asks.

‘Fine. Tell you in a sec.’ I turn my back on him, leave the room and walk on tiptoes along the wide landing towards Florence’s nursery.

‘Alice, careful not to wake her up,’ David whispers after me.

‘I’ll just have a little look. I’ll be quiet, I promise.’

I hear her breathing through the door. It is a sound that I adore: high-pitched, fast, snuffly – a louder noise than you might think a tiny baby could make. I push open the door and see her funny cot that I am still not used to. It has wheels and cloth sides and is apparently French. David and Vivienne spotted it in a shop window in Silsford and bought it as a surprise for me.

The curtains are closed. I look down into the cot and at first all I see is a baby-shaped lump. After a few seconds, I can see a bit more clearly. Oh God. Time slows, unbearably. My heart pounds and I feel sick. I taste the creamy cocktail in my mouth again, mixed with bile. I stare and stare, feeling as if I am falling forward. I am floating, detached from my surroundings, with nothing firm to grip on to. This is no nightmare. Or rather, reality is the nightmare.

I promised David I would be quiet. My mouth is wide open and I am screaming.