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Opening extract from **Missing Ellen**

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Dear Ellen,

I missed you in school today. It's so strange to be starting a new school year without you. Fuddy Duddy was being a complete cow as usual – the summer holidays don't seem to have done her much good. She gave out to me for having too many earrings in. Like she would know anything about fashion. You should have seen the hideous brown blouse she had on today. It was the kind of thing my granny would have given to Oxfam twenty years ago. The colour of Bovril or something horrible like that, with a big frilly collar.

It feels weird to be writing you a letter, but I don't think you will be checking your emails, and I know Mum will be checking mine. So I've found this spiral notebook in the bottom drawer of my desk. The first few pages are filled with sketches of different costumes and outfits, so if Mum picks it up she will take no notice, I hope, and won't flick on through to here. I'll be able to write exactly what I want.

It was David's idea, really. He suggested I should write about what happened, put it all down on paper, a kind of exorcism or something. You're wondering who David is, I know. I'll get back to that. But first I need to go back to the beginning.

Love,

Maggie.



Actually though, I am not really sure when the beginning is, how far back I need to go to make some sort of sense of it all. If that's even possible. Did it all start with what happened to Ellen's family last spring, or did it go even further back?

I can still remember the day I first met Ellen, a bouncy five-year-old, red plaits flying as she dashed from one side of the junior infants classroom to the other, wanting to try everything at once – the books, the sand table, the dolls' corner. I remember being fascinated by her and how utterly fearless she seemed. I was clinging on to my mum's hand, not wanting her to go, not wanting to be left alone in this strange place. And here was this girl, no bigger than me, who seemed completely happy to be there and eager to explore our new world. I thought she was amazing. And strangely enough, she seemed to like me too. She took me under her wing, bossed the other children around and shouted at a little boy who tried to take my snack. And from that moment on we were friends.

I think even then I knew that wherever Ellen is is always the best, the most exciting place to be. She lights up the room with her energy and passion for life. When she leaves, I feel deflated, like everything that was going to happen has happened and there's no point in being there any longer.

But that's too far back, I think. I suppose the best place to start is a dreary Tuesday last spring, Ellen and I in geography with Fuddy Duddy (Mrs Duddy to her face. The nickname

crack of dawn, heading to the gym before coming home to make pancakes from scratch for Ellen and Robert's breakfast. Other days she wouldn't even get up to wave them off to school. It never seemed to bother Ellen. I guess she was used to it.

I think Mum must have sensed that something was wrong though, because she didn't just wait in the car to make sure Ellen had got in OK like she usually does. She got out of the car and went to the door with Ellen, round to the back of the house. I followed them, not sure what else to do.

Robert's bike was lying on its side outside the back door. My dad would have gone crazy, he is forever nagging Jamie and me to put our bikes away so they won't get rusty from the rain. Mum just walked past it and asked Ellen if she had her key. Ellen produced it from where it hung from a chain around her neck – she likes to call herself a latch-key kid – and opened the door. I got this increasing sense of doom, I suppose you could call it. I don't mean to sound melodramatic but I think Mum's nervousness was infecting me or something. Ellen didn't seem to notice anything wrong. She was just humming to herself and twisting her ponytail around her fingers.

Mrs B was sitting at the kitchen table, still in her nightie, her elbows resting among the breakfast dishes. Her hair was all over the place and she was just staring into space. She didn't even seem to hear us come in.

was kind of inevitable if she insisted on having that surname combined with a complete lack of any sense of fashion). Ellen trying to pass the time by scribbling notes to me on her homework notebook. And Ellen's father, at home, packing his bags and getting ready to move out for good.

Her mother didn't show up to collect her after school. This wasn't exactly unusual. Mrs Barrett has never been the most reliable of mothers.

'Do you want to give her a ring?' Mum asked Ellen, sounding a little anxious. Mum always leaves in plenty of time to collect us. She was late once a few months back because there were road works along the way. I was almost in tears by the time she arrived, and she wasn't much better. I felt silly afterwards, for panicking like that, but it was just so unlike her.

Ellen shrugged. 'There's no point. She couldn't find her mobile charger this morning, and she never answers the land-line in case it's Granny calling for Dad.'

Mum looked kind of shocked at this. I thought she should have been used to Mrs B by now, but I guess she always wants to think the best of people.

'Come on then, I'll give you a lift home,' Mum said.

When we got to the Barretts' house all the curtains at the front windows were closed, but again, it wasn't something all that unusual. Even before Ellen's dad left, her mum was kind of inconsistent. Some days she would be up at the

I looked at Mum, not sure how to react. Ellen was already at the table, pulling out a chair and sitting down. ‘Mum, what’s wrong?’ she demanded, shoving aside a bowl of soggy coco pops to take her mum’s hand.

Mrs B finally noticed us. She looked at Ellen and gave this chilling, bitter sort of laugh. ‘Well he’s finally done it, hasn’t he? He’s left us.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Ellen sounded angry, but also a little frightened. ‘He can’t have. He’s just being dramatic. He’ll be back later.’

‘No he won’t. Not this time,’ Mrs B said quietly. ‘He’s taken everything with him. Go and see if you don’t believe me.’

There was a crash as Ellen knocked over her chair in her haste to run out of the room. Mum put her arm around Mrs B and patted her awkwardly, saying ‘There, there’, rather as if she were a small child who had bumped her head and not a middle-aged woman whose husband had just left her after twenty years of marriage and two children.

I stood for a moment not quite knowing what to do with my hands, then I went to put on the kettle. That’s what Mum normally does when there’s some sort of a crisis. Is it just so she will have something to do with her hands? I never thought about that before. I opened the cupboard to take out some mugs, but there weren’t any. As quietly as I could I opened the dishwasher – it was full of dirty dishes. I took out

four mugs and rinsed them under the tap. Just as I was searching for tea bags Ellen came crashing back into the room.

‘He’s really being a drama queen this time. His wardrobe is empty, all his CDs, everything.’ She started to cry, and I think that must have set Mrs B off, because she started to cry too, and suddenly the two of them were clinging to each other and sobbing. Mum took over the tea-making duties, locating tea bags and milk and even a few broken biscuits from the bottom of the biscuit barrel.

I watched her, feeling selfishly glad that I had a mum who was good at things like making tea in crises, and a nice predictable dad whose idea of doing something really wild was the time he tried to hide his grey hairs with Just for Men. I didn’t know what to say to Ellen. I was used to her parents’ rows, but this was something new.

There, that’s a beginning of sorts, isn’t it? David can’t say I didn’t try.

Dear Ellen,

Fuddy Duddy wore the blouse again today. This time with a frilly skirt in lime green. What on earth was she thinking? She could find nothing wrong with my appearance today (I took out the extra earrings and hid them in my pencil case before I went in) so she decided to complain about my homework instead. Apparently my essay on rock formation was ‘long, rambling and lacking in purpose’. You would think she

would be pleased. It sounds exactly like a description of one of her classes.

Siobhan Brady has started a list at the back of her homework notebook of boys she wants to snog this year. What is she like? Should we warn them, do you think? Roll up, roll up, all you young men. Don't just become a notch on someone's bedpost. Become a tick on Siobhan Brady's list instead!

PE today was hideous. Pouring rain all day, and Miss O'Neill decides it's a good idea to play camogie. 'We don't call it an all-weather pitch for nothing, girls,' she trills in this silly fake voice. So we all trudge out onto the pitch in our stupid white shorts and T-shirts and run around for forty minutes, no real idea where the ball is at any time – it's raining so hard we can barely see each other never mind the ball – and jump every time she blows that stupid whistle. Of course the sporty girls thought it was great fun and spent the whole class trying to outdo each other and see who could impress Miss O'Neill the most. While the rest of us mere mortals tried to hover in the background, saving our bouts of energy for quickly dodging in the opposite direction any time it seemed like the ball might be coming our way. I found myself wishing I was sitting at my desk at the back of maths class watching Bouncer draw isosceles triangles on the board. Yes, it was that bad.

Last week, of course, there was blazing sunshine, and instead of taking us outside to work on our tans while pretending to play camogie, Miss O'Neill thought it would be a

good idea to run laps around the stuffy gym. She must have been some sort of dictator in a former life. Or maybe a nun.

Siobhan put Liam's name on her list. Silly cow. Like he has eyes for anyone but you.

Love,

Maggie.

Ellen's parents have been arguing for as long as I can remember. When we were seven, things were particularly bad. Her house was always filled with tension. You could almost feel it when you walked in the front door. You know how some houses have a warm comforting smell, like vegetable stew simmering on the hob, and some are filled with noise, with lots of children running about, a radio blasting in the background, a mum shouting to the kids to keep it down. In Ellen's house nothing struck me as much as that atmosphere of people disliking each other.

Ellen would keep coming over to my house to escape. She never seemed upset by the way her parents behaved, she just acted crazier than ever. One day she persuaded me that we should turn all my dolls into clowns by painting their faces and have our own three-ring circus (my room, the landing and Jamie's room being the three rings). We got out my paints and set to work decorating our little clowns – orange for the background, purples and reds and blues around the eyes and mouths. We took off all their pretty dresses, put