

Grip

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Extract

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one

february 2000

The light was already failing in the early afternoon but there was just a suggestion of spring in the unseasonably warm, damp weather. A few crocuses were dotted around the muddy lawns and the mourners, mindful of their newly polished shoes, were careful to stay on the path as they made their way to the chapel.

Inside, the body lay in its mahogany, brass-handled casket, lined with maroon velvet. No-one had been able to agree on the music so there was none, and the short obsequies were spoken into a stiff, cold silence. From somewhere, a scent of geranium and lime-flowers drifted on the dank air.

Never again. A river running bright with possibilities now suddenly dry.

Then, as the bones and flesh burned behind the curtains, mourners filed out into the pale afternoon. The ceremony over, the formal procession eased into sociable circulation as they came through the doorway. A young man laughed as he gestured to three other men standing around him and the girl on his arm. Two older men, grey-haired, hands thrust in their overcoats, conferred earnestly while their wives stood slightly apart and chatted amiably together. Shortly afterwards, a woman emerged from the chapel on her own and paused by the doorway to brush away a tear, and the trace of wetness was a transfer of grief on her cheek.

The little congregation began to break up and move off towards their cars. As they did so, a man appeared in the doorway to usher a new group of mourners into the chapel. The furnace was once again ready behind the curtains. It had finished with the mahogany casket and its contents and the ashes were now waiting to be collected round the back.

eight months earlier . . .

two

tuesday 6.30 a.m.

At half past six on the morning of his birthday, James was woken by voices in the kitchen. Sushila and Mark were arguing about something in the newspaper as they got ready for work. The Vengaboys were on the radio. 'Boom, boom, boom, boom,' they went as Mark did up his tie and Sushila polished her shoes. James still found it unsettling to see them in suits. A year ago, he thought drowsily, none of them had got up until the afternoon and now Sushila was putting on the jacket of her little black suit as the sun rose. It was disconcerting. A year ago, she had not worn knickers. 'Boom, boom, boom, boom,' sang the Vengaboys on the radio. He was twenty-three today.

Twenty-three. How had their ocean of possibilities crystallised down to these jobs and this shrinking ambition and this daily struggle? Now Sushila and Mark had a common language with a vocabulary of offices and prospects and rivalries and salaries. Miranda, with whom he shared a room at Prendergast's, would have been at home round this breakfast table. But James was not. Whenever he heard them talking like this, he was chilled by foreboding. He went back to bed.

When he woke again, it was seven thirty. Sushila and Mark had left for work and the flat was quiet but someone was shouting in the street outside. They sounded cross. A car horn blared. There was more shouting.

James opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. The curtains stirred in the early morning breeze.

Chris would be here soon.

three

tuesday 8.00 a.m.

Virginia carefully positioned the twenty-third candle in the cake. There. Twenty-three years of her baby's life in strawberry pink. She hoped James would not think the cake was meant seriously.

'Julie,' she called. 'Could you put those flowers in the sink in a vase and bring them here.'

There were going to be twenty-three items at his birthday dinner, one for each year of his life, and the project had stretched her ingenuity for weeks as she combed through old photograph albums for inspiration. But finally Virginia reached twenty-three and now the table was crowded with allusion and resonance – satsumas from every Christmas stocking, Smarties he had picked off his fifth birthday cake, quiche he had refused to eat when he was nine, and Rice Krispies from the breakfast in bed she had served for him and that blonde girl, the first time he had had someone stay the night. And then there was the Liebfraumilch that had made him sick when he was thirteen.

'Here you go,' Julie said. 'Where do you want them?'

As she came into the living room, there was a sudden resemblance between the two women. The warmth of the early morning sun caught the high cheekbones and dancing eyes they shared and they could almost have been sisters.

'If you are going to steal chocolate,' Virginia said, 'you shouldn't leave the evidence all round your mouth.'

Julie laughed and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Tiny and with her blonde hair in an elfin bob, she looked as if she had just left school. Only the fine lines round her eyes suggested otherwise. 'Now, where do you want them?' she said.

'Over there,' Virginia said. 'What do you think?' As she spoke she looked quickly at her watch. There was just time to salt the almonds and submerge the chicken in its apricot marinade before she had to leave for school.

'Lovely,' Julie said. 'I can't believe he's twenty-three. They grow up so quick.'

'But you never stop worrying about them,' Virginia said.

Julie looked at her sympathetically. 'It's hard, isn't it,' she said, 'when it's your only one. And they are so unpredictable. Two is different. You know where you are with two. The older one is always trying to please you and the younger one will never do anything you say.'

'Rubbish,' Virginia said. 'Everyone's different.'

'No, it's true,' Julie said. 'Look at Courtney and Nicole.'

'Come on, Julie.'

'What do you mean "come on"? They are just like that.'

'I mean firstly they are three years old.'

'Nearly four.'

'And secondly, Courtney is twenty minutes older than Nicole. What does that prove?'

'You can see it. Nicole is going to be a rebel.' Julie opened her arms for emphasis. 'You can just see it.' As she punctuated the point with her hands, she caught a photograph on the table. 'Whoops,' she said. 'Sorry.'

Virginia bent to pick it up and placed it carefully back on the table. James was turning into a handsome young man. He was beginning to look like Francis.

'Your girls are lovely,' Virginia said. 'And so is my James.'

They are all our babies. Always.’ She hoped James was going to enjoy this evening. He was so polite when they were all together it was often hard to work out what was really going on in his head.

‘I’m off now,’ Julie said. ‘I’ve got to take the girls to school.’

‘Where’s Lisa?’

‘In bed. The lazy cow.’

‘You spoil that daughter of yours.’

‘That’s what mothers are for. Anyway, I love taking them. I pretend they’re mine.’

‘They are.’

‘Not the same. But it’s lovely being a grandma. No worries.’

Virginia put the champagne in the fridge. She hoped Francis might unbend enough to drink. At least she had made sure Alex was not going to be there. He would only have complicated the evening. ‘Can you come back later and give it all a good Hoover?’ Virginia said. She scooped up some of the marinade with her little finger and licked it. They ought to enjoy themselves. It was delicious.

‘Virginia,’ Julie said. ‘I hope you don’t mind me asking, but can you pay me the four weeks you owe?’

‘OK. I’ll leave it in an envelope for you on Thursday.’

Julie looked at the floor. ‘Would it be all right if you paid me now?’

‘Are you in trouble?’

‘Me?’ Julie laughed. ‘I am always in trouble. No, it’s the twins’ birthday on Saturday and I promised Lisa I’d get them a Barbie dress each. They’re on offer at Woolworths and I’m worried if I don’t get them today they will all go.’

‘Why are you wasting your money on that rubbish?’ Virginia said.

‘It’s what they want,’ Julie said. ‘And I need the money.’

It's forty-five pounds for the two and I don't get my benefit until next week. Please, Virginia.'

'OK,' Virginia relented. 'I'll go to the cash-machine on the way home. Come by tonight to pick it up. Before eight. Now, how do I look?'

'Lovely. Francis will see what he's missing. And Rachel will be jealous. Perfect.'

'Thank you. You will give it a good going-over, won't you?'

'Don't worry,' Julie said as she went, closing the door behind her.

Virginia inspected the table. It glowed with love. Surely James would feel that. Everything on it was a memory. And every one was precious. Virginia could still feel James in her arms, five minutes old, warm and soft in the delivery room.

four

tuesday 8.15 a.m.

The baby nestled in her arms, the tiny perfect hand clasping itself instinctively round Francis's little finger. She lay in a pethidine daze feeling the warmth of her child. The tearing pain had faded, the infant's first seconds of screaming had given way to peaceful sleep and there was an exhausted joyous calm in the delivery room. Through her drowsiness, Rachel could feel Francis gently stroking her hair. The miracle of birth had awed the room into hushed reverence.

New life.

If only.

A hundred and forty-seven loving, diligent, careful acts of sexual congress and not one out of eighty billion sperm conscientiously ejaculated by Francis had managed to wriggle its way up to fertilise one of Rachel's eggs. Not one.

Which was why she now waited fretfully in the polished calm of Harley Street, in the immaculate waiting room, with its expensive wallpaper and huge centrepiece of lilies on the table, and a longcase clock ticking gravely in the corner.

Sometimes longing came rolling over her like the Atlantic. A baby. Oh how she wanted Francis's baby. And sometimes she could see, in the brilliant colours of a dream, another life. With Francis. And their baby. And no-one else. Rachel paced up and down beside the window and thought about escape.

Once Virginia had taken them and James out for supper.

And when James had gone to the bathroom, Virginia had asked Francis for more money so James could go on holiday to Los Angeles. And Francis had felt for Rachel's hand under the table and stroked it gently with his thumb as he spoke to Virginia, showing her he understood how Virginia and her demands made Rachel feel. And Rachel knew, she just knew, there was a life where they could escape from all of that and be happy.

But the months passed and she had still not found how to get them away.

And now here she was in this Harley Street waiting room. And this was still her life. Worry and struggle. With Virginia and her grip on Francis. And James and his constant demands. And no baby.

Dark, small, smoothed into her neat black suit, Rachel checked her watch again. The man was now twenty minutes late. Why did doctors always think they were the only ones whose time was precious? It was bad enough that a stranger was going to trawl through the precious intimacy of her life with Francis, but his lateness was now giving her time to remind herself just how difficult she was going to find it.

And where was Francis? His breakfast meeting should have finished half an hour ago. She needed him here.

Rachel opened the door of the waiting room and walked over to the receptionist, sitting behind another smaller bowl of white lilies, in a lilac suit, writing carefully in a ledger.

'Excuse me,' Rachel said. 'My appointment was for eight o'clock.'

The receptionist looked up.

'Weren't we expecting Mr Carroll as well?' she asked.

'He was meant to be here at eight o'clock,' Rachel replied. 'Like the doctor.'

She had told her managing partner she had a doctor's appointment this morning but she knew too many hours out

of the office would count against her, no matter how good the reason. They were going to make three new partners at Rother & Fenwick in September and she deserved to be one of them – her work was first class, Brendan had said so at her last work review. But she also knew that the partners needed to feel they could rely on her.

‘The doctor is here, Mrs Carroll,’ said the receptionist, ‘but he is busy. He will be with you as soon as possible.’

‘And when might that be?’ asked Rachel.

The woman in the lilac suit stared at her. ‘As soon as possible, Mrs Carroll. He is just tied up at the moment.’

‘Please could you un-tie him. I am afraid I cannot wait all day. The appointment was for eight o’clock.’

‘If you would just take a seat in the waiting room, Mrs Carroll. The doctor will be with you as soon as possible. Would you like to wait for Mr Carroll?’

Rachel looked at her. Good point. Where on earth was Mr Carroll? Did she want to wait for him?

‘No, I would not,’ she said to the receptionist. ‘It’s up to Mr Carroll whether he wants to turn up or not. But I would like to see the doctor. As soon as possible. Please.’

Rachel walked over to the window to see if Francis was coming up the street. No sign of him. Outside, the traffic crawled by but double glazing kept the waiting room in sepulchral silence, punctuated only by the ticking of the clock in the corner. She really had to get back to the office.

And she really needed Francis here, now, holding her hand, stroking it gently while she waited. She needed him to soothe away these tense, tangled feelings of anxiety and embarrassment.

Where was he? She rang his number on her mobile phone. And went straight through to his voicemail. ‘Where are you, Francis?’ she said. ‘It’s nearly half past eight.’

Where was he?

five

tuesday 8.15 a.m.

Francis was having difficulty with his breakfast. The bean curd, smothered in a film of dark brown sauce, would not stay within the chopsticks. If he held it delicately to preserve the tremulous shape, it slithered between them. But if he gripped it more tightly, the chopsticks sliced through it and were left holding nothing.

Philippe was not paying any attention to Francis's problems. He carted rice into his mouth with lascivious gusto while he talked about his flight from New York. 'She was gorgeous,' he said. 'And I got her number. And I am going to call her this afternoon.' He looked up from his bowl and grinned goatishly at Francis. His English was fluent and barely accented. He spooned some more sea-spice prawns onto his bowl of rice. 'This is good,' Philippe said. 'Just what I wanted.'

As the great city around it began to stir, the Chinese restaurant, tucked away at the end of the alleyway, was alive with conversation and the clatter of plates. Open twenty-four hours a day, it was currently offering last suppers and breakfast to the unearthly inhabitants of the early morning. Outside, the mechanised sweepers brushed Soho clean of the night's detritus and the first light of the sun softened the empty streets with a pale golden glow.

'I tell you, Francis, she was really gorgeous,' Philippe said

again. He sat hunched over his bowl, with his jacket draped over the back of his chair, the top button of his shirt undone and his tie loosened so it dangled down over his prosperous belly. He felt good. He had just showered at the hotel after a swift run in from the airport. And he was refreshed and hungry and the food was good. And it was a glorious new day in London, a city he always liked. Philippe was suffused with well-being. He wanted to share it with Francis. 'You know what they are like when they are nineteen. They bloom,' Philippe said and then he shovelled more rice into his mouth.

From the back of the room came staccato clicks and clacks as Chinatown waiters played dominoes, drinking tea, getting ready for the day shift. At the big round table in the centre, Francis thought he recognised a man in a cream linen suit from a film he had seen with Rachel. He was holding pharmaceutically wired court with two other young men, and five slender women with huge eyes and shimmering dresses, still high from the departing night. A dumpy middle-aged Chinese woman in spectacles and a grubby brocaded tunic stomped between the tables, pouring tea and depositing steaming plates of food.

Francis looked surreptitiously at his watch. This breakfast was growing into a problem. He was now going to be seriously late for Rachel. He hated upsetting her and she would be fretful about where he was. Her hands would be clasped together in that way she had. He could see it. The hands tightly clasped together while the thumbs circled each other, round and round. To a casual observer she would appear poised and calm. But he knew where to look. At those sweet chubby thumbs. How would he be able to make it up to her?

'You know, Francis, sometimes it's just the time and place. It's just a shared moment which you know will never work again in the same way. It's just special for that time, that

place.' Philippe looked at him, inviting him, as another experienced player in the game of love, to participate in this colloquium. In the smoky early morning light his features had the demure bloom of soft fruit and the sexual allure of bean curd. As he remembered the girl on the plane, he leant forward towards Francis and his hands emphasised his words as if weighing up two luscious cantaloupes. 'It was a spark, Francis,' he said. 'It was a real spark.'

As Francis listened to him, he realised with an awful sense of inevitability that the number this girl had given Philippe, if indeed there was such a girl and such a number, was probably invented and passed across to halt Philippe's persistent and unwelcome wooing. Why else would a young and beautiful girl give her number to him?

'She sounds great,' he said sympathetically. 'I hope it works out.' He really had to leave and meet Rachel. He had better do it now.