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Hurry  
up  
and  
Wait

  
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## January 2010

Sarah waits at the kerbside, her winter coat buttoned up tight against the cold night air. The tang of sea spray whips through the lamp-lit High Street, as the distant rumble of clawing waves travels in from the dark shoreline, up and over the hedges and gardens of East Selton. It's an ancient echo, both soothing and unsettling in its familiarity. She checks her watch. She's early.

At the far end of the Parade, an old Citroën turns the corner and rattles along the street, drawing to a stop alongside her. She stoops to peer through the window, and sees John Gilroy smiling broadly, stretching across to open the passenger door, which has lost its outside handle. She slides into the seat, pulling the door shut with a hollow clatter.

'It's good to see you, John,' she says, returning his smile, not knowing whether to kiss him or not. She runs her fingers through her hair. 'This is a bit weird, isn't it?'

John pinches his bottom lip between his fingers and frowns. 'Yeah, *really* weird.'

There's a moment's pause as they look at each other.

'I suppose we'd better get it over with, then?' he says, releasing the handbrake and pulling away.

They cruise slowly along the deserted Parade as the wind buffets the faded canvas roof of the car, whistling out across the night. Sarah draws the seatbelt across her body, clunking it into place between the seats. A disquieting recollection rattles her,

a sense of having been here before, with John at her side. She studies his face as he struggles with the gear-change from second to third, a slice of mild irritation still lodged between his black eyebrows. ‘Sticky gearbox,’ he mutters as it grinds into gear.

Sarah gazes out at the shop windows as they pass through the High Street. She remembers old Mr Phipps from the tobacconist’s. Every Saturday morning Dad would take her there on the way back from the paper shop, and she’d choose something from the jars at the back of the counter. It was a tiny vanilla-smelling store, its walls adorned with framed black and white photographs of the screen greats: Clark Gable; Bette Davis; Victor Mature. She notices the estate agent’s, on the corner opposite the war memorial, although the name over the top has changed.

‘I couldn’t believe it when I got your email,’ she says. ‘It’s been years.’

‘Twenty-four years,’ John replies.

She nods.

‘I worked it out. It was just before your sixteenth birthday, wasn’t it?’

‘You’ve got a good memory.’

He keeps his eyes fixed on the road ahead. ‘Well, one minute you were there, and the next you’d gone. It sort of sticks in your mind.’

Sarah shivers against the cold. ‘The town gives me the creeps, to be honest. When I checked into the B&B this afternoon, the woman who owns it seemed familiar, but I don’t know why. I guess she’s just got that Selton look.’

‘What’s a “Selton look”?’

‘Don’t know. But it puts me on edge, whatever it is.’

John scowls, feigning offence.

‘Not you, though!’ she says quickly. ‘You don’t count.’

She notices he’s wearing a knitted waistcoat under his jacket. It’s a bit hippyish but she’s pleased to see he’s no longer in the black prog-rock T-shirts that seemed to be welded to his torso throughout the eighties.

They turn into School Lane.

‘So, who are you dreading most tonight?’ John asks.

‘Oh, God, what a question! It would be easier to say who I’m not dreading.’

‘OK, then. Who?’

A light mist of freezing fog has started to descend, and the windscreen wipers squeak into action.

‘Actually it’s the same people. I’m looking forward to seeing certain people but dreading them at the same time. Tina and Kate are the obvious ones.’

‘Dante?’ John asks, briefly turning his eyes on her with a small smile.

She blinks. ‘He probably ended up in some rock band in L.A. That was the trouble with Dante. Too cool for school.’

John laughs, rubbing his chin.

They pull up in the new car park at the rear of the girls’ building, a few rows back from the large open double doors of the gym. Sarah scans the area, trying to make sense of the layout. ‘This bit used to be the netball court,’ she says. ‘Can you believe they’ve built a car park on it?’

John shrugs. ‘Well, I suppose the schools are even bigger now than in our day. I’m surprised they haven’t merged the boys’ and girls’ schools into one. It would make sense, wouldn’t it?’

Sarah’s fingers fiddle nervously with the charm bracelet beneath the sleeve of her coat. She rolls a small silver conch between her thumb and forefinger. ‘Do you mind if we just sit here a moment?’ she asks.

John shifts in his seat. ‘We can sit here as long as you like.’ He reaches inside his jacket and brings out the postcard-sized invitation. ‘I wonder who designed the cheesy invites? Look at this: “*Wanna know what your old school friends have been Kajagoogooing? Then put on your leg warmers and Walk this Way for a Wham Fantastic night out...*”’

‘Stop!’ Sarah laughs, clapping her hands over her ears. ‘I can’t believe I let you talk me into coming.’

‘It’ll be fine,’ he says, slipping the card back in his jacket.

A taxi pulls up outside the entrance to the gym and a small group of men and women disembark. The men are clutching cans of lager, and they stumble on to the pavement, laughing and shouting to each other. Sarah recognises one of the women as a girl from her class, but she can't quite grasp the name. Melanie? Or perhaps it was Mandy.

'Bloody hell,' says John, grimacing. 'Look at the state of them.'

Sarah blows air through pursed lips, watching her white breath slowly drift and disperse inside the car. Her eyes rest on the funny little gearstick, poking out of the dashboard like a tiny umbrella handle. 'Is this a Citroën Dyane?'

John leans into the windscreen to wipe the moisture away with a sponge. It's a stiff synthetic sponge, and all it does is turn the condensation to water, which runs into a pool on the dashboard. 'Yep. My trusty old Dyane. It's a bit of a renovation project.'

'Thought so,' she says. 'It's freezing. Just like my dad's old car.'

He sticks the sponge under the dashboard. 'I know. I really liked his car. Used to see it chugging through the town sometimes, and I thought, one day, when I've got a bit of money, I'd like one of those.'

Sarah leans across and kisses him on the cheek. It takes them both by surprise, and she draws her hand to her mouth.

'Sorry,' she says from behind her glove. 'I'm a bit nervous.'

John shifts in his seat so he's facing the windscreen. 'Me too.'

Two screaming women run down the side of the car towards the school, click-clacking on high heels. Sarah tries to make them out, but they're strangers to her. She draws a smiley face on her misted side window.

'We'd better go in,' says John, 'before the car steams up completely.'

Sarah stares ahead, her fingers curled around the still-buckled belt strap. 'Just five more minutes.'

# *Summer Holidays*

## 1985

Sarah considers the possibility that her father could be lying dead in his bed upstairs. She looks over her shoulder, to the first floor bedroom window, where the curtains are drawn and unmoving. He's in his sixties now. It's possible.

The soft drift of decaying seaweed floats over the streets and gardens, in from the shoreline, salted and sharp. She crosses the lawn in her bare feet, feeling the slow heat of morning break through as she inspects the neat poles of runner beans that line the edges of the garden. A violet morning glory has attached itself to the beanstalks, and twines elegantly up and round, its vine head bouncing lightly in the still air. She collects a handful of beans and returns to balance them on the windowsill beside the deckchair. Her feet are damp with dew; she stands motionless, alert for human sounds from within the house. Nothing. He only retired in May, but already he's got himself stuck into more research work. She heard him up late last night, working on his new project. Maybe he never even made it to bed. Perhaps he's in his study now, slumped across his papers and history books, his skin pale and lifeless.

Sarah plucks a daisy from the lawn and drops back into the deckchair, causing her heavy fringe to puff up momentarily. She gathers a handful of hair and checks it for split ends, noticing how the sun has bleached the top layers to a soft

tawny brown over the summer. Where would she go? Maybe she'd be sent away to Swiss finishing school, like Jane Tyler's cousin. Or to some distant relative, perhaps one she's never even heard of.

But there are no relatives. She's on her own.

The sun's heat washes over her as the cloud cover thins in the wide blue sky. 'One – two – three –' She pulls off the white petals one by one, discarding each with a casual flourish. They flutter briefly before spiralling to the ground, bruised and broken. ' – thirteen – fourteen – *fifteen*.' Sarah blows the last petal from the palm of her hand, just as Ted pads out through the back door, fanning his tail and grinning.

'*Fifteen*, Ted! That's how old I am today. Yes, it is! And that's how many kisses you have to give me!'

Ted's tail goes into overdrive, and he stamps his little paws rhythmically, like a wind-up toy. Sarah snatches him up on to her lap, where he wriggles and snorts happily as she ruffles the whiskery fur of his chin. She hears water running through the pipes at the side of the house as the toilet flushes inside.

'So where's the Birthday Girl?' her father bellows as he makes his way down the stairs. You'd think he sounded annoyed if you didn't know him. 'Well? These presents won't open themselves, young lady.'

Sarah turns to look up at her father standing in the doorway in his chequered gown and slippers, his bright white hair pushed up wildly on one side. With his gently rounded belly and sleep-creased face, she sees the boy in him.

'I suppose you want a coffee?' she asks, pushing herself out of the deckchair.

'Naturally,' he says, placing two gifts on the concrete path beside her seat. He takes her face in his hands and kisses the top of her head.

They decide to have breakfast outside, and, while Sarah makes coffee and toast, Dad drags the garden table and chairs out into the middle of the lawn. He arranges the two parcels and a single card in the centre of the table.

‘Right. There’s jam and marmalade. And butter.’ Sarah carefully lowers the laden tray on to the table.

‘Marmite?’ Her father pulls a disappointed face.

‘Oops. Sorry. Hang on.’ She runs back inside.

When she returns, she drops the morning post on the table and places the Marmite on his plate.

‘You can’t beat a bit of Marmite on toast,’ he says, thumbing through the envelopes on the table. ‘Bill. Bill. *Reader’s Digest*. One for you. Bill. That’s it.’

He spreads a thick layer of butter across his toast. Sarah pulls a disgusted face and opens the envelope, easing a clean knife under the corner and slitting it gently along the fold. The card is a Monet print, of the bridge at Giverny.

‘No signature,’ she says, as she looks inside. ‘Just a kiss. Look.’

She holds it open to show him the little handwritten ‘x’. Her father raises his eyebrows and takes a drink of coffee.

‘*Dad*. It’ll be Kate or Tina. Kate probably. She’s always taking the mickey out of me for not having a boyfriend. She’s winding me up. I’ll phone her later, so she knows I know. Cow.’

Sarah’s sure it’s a joke, but the card unsettles her and she slaps it on to the table face-down. Dad picks it up and turns it over in his hands critically.

‘So. Are we going to open these presents, then?’ He passes Sarah the first one, clearly a book.

She carefully opens the wrapping, smoothing out the paper as the book cover is revealed.

‘*I Capture the Castle*. Dodie Smith.’ She smiles gratefully. ‘Looks good.’

‘It’s a classic,’ he replies. ‘You’ll enjoy it, I’m sure.’

The other present is perfume, Anaïs Anaïs, neatly hand-wrapped in the store.

‘How did you know I like this one? I love it!’ She immediately sprays it on her wrists, holding it out for him to smell. The sweet floral fragrance hangs in the air between

them, confusing the scent of honeysuckle which wafts over the garden fence.

‘Very nice. Very you. Deborah helped me to choose it.’

Sarah pulls a face. She’s certain he’s blushing behind his white beard.

He takes a bite of his toast. ‘She’s an old colleague, from Stokely University days. An old friend. She’s got a daughter, you see, so she knows about buying presents for young women.’

‘So you didn’t choose it yourself, then.’ She busies herself, folding the wrapping paper into neat squares.

Gulls fly over the garden squawking and screeching; Dad looks up as the birds pass by and soar over the rooftops out of sight.

Sarah carefully balances the Marmite jar on top of the pile of paper, to stop it unfolding. ‘Have I met her?’

‘No. No, I don’t think so. No.’ He starts to clear the plates.

‘What about this one?’ Sarah asks, holding up his card.

‘Oh, yes, of course,’ he says, perching on the edge of his seat, still clutching the plates.

She wipes her knife clean, and slides it beneath the seal. ‘Ten pounds! Brilliant. That’s great. Thanks, Dad. That’s really great.’ She smooths the note flat. ‘And say thanks to Deborah, for, you know, helping with the perfume.’

She kisses him quickly on the cheek, and gathers her gifts and cards into a little collection on the table in front of her.

Dad rises and strides towards the house with the plates. ‘Will do!’

‘So, what shall we do today?’ she calls after him.

He pauses in the doorway, and turns back, gazing past her into the garden.

‘Dad?’

‘Oh. Well, I’ve got to get some work done this morning. How about a walk later on, then back here for birthday cake?’ He’s frowning.

Sarah follows him into the house. ‘I’ll get baking, then. Victoria sponge?’

‘Naturally,’ he replies, and he leaves her to clear up.

As Sarah weighs the caster sugar and pours it into the mixing bowl, she hears the click of his study door and she knows she won’t see him again until teatime.