

# 1

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When my mother, Monica, asked, ‘Will you forgive me?’ I just sat as a child does, not understanding. Seeing the anguish in her eyes. Dismissing it. There was a ruffling as she settled back on the couch, plumping the cushions, straightening the red and purple skirt she’d bought at India in Notting Hill the previous Saturday.

My sister, Antoinette, was playing with some of Monica’s old make-up. She daubed at her face. Her lips were like two strawberries, swollen and festering. Antoinette couldn’t have spoken even if she’d wanted to because her mouth was glued by lipstick that smelled like plastic, even from where I sat.

‘Forgive?’ I thought. ‘What is there to forgive?’

Though no one had answered her question Monica said, ‘I know you will.’

Antoinette’s face was as white and freckled as milk sprinkled with cinnamon. She returned a lipstick to the little pile of gold and silver tubes on the floor. Monica closed her eyes. Perhaps she was tired. Or perhaps it was the significance of the question hanging there in the warm room with her two daughters, one playing with make-up, the other reading a book.

My father, Dave, came home a little later. He’d brought Monica a pot of cyclamen as red as Antoinette’s mouth, masses of red flowers bobbing as he passed the flowerpot over. He said, ‘Pop the kettle on, Ruth, I’m gagging for a tea,’ and we laughed because it sounded funny. We went into the kitchen and sat around the table. The kettle made an impatient stamping sound as the water boiled. Antoinette reached up for the tin of chocolate biscuits on the top shelf of the pantry. Monica stood

with her back to the stove. She'd filled the teapot with hot water and turned it round and round in her hands, touching the spout and looking down at the cyclamen flowers.

After that, forgiveness always seemed red to me: lipstick, cyclamen, Monica's red and purple skirt, the tip of Dave's nose red because it was cold outside. I didn't think of blood. Blood was death and I didn't associate death with forgiveness, not then, anyway.

Antoinette saw nothing of this. She was always the family optimist, bobbing along like a cork on a benign sea. She believed in Santa Claus, that princesses were always pretty, that cowboys' horses were always golden, that the sun would never burn out. Monica and Dave believed in the sanctity of cheap vegetables from the markets, that orange-haired children should never wear red or pink, in the infinite wisdom of doctors. That you should always keep on the bright side of the road.

What did I believe as a child? That my mother was a puzzle that would take a long time to solve. Since her death I've found it impossible not to look back on my childhood in this clouded way, as though the past were an extinct animal, a dodo or a rare white tiger viewed through mist. I've decided that our family memories became foggy because of what happened to Monica. They were ruptured by the endless shock of seeing familiar objects through an unfamiliar haze. Antoinette and my Great Aunt Elsie have another theory, of course. For them, Monica was a shrub that never put down deep roots. As a result, Antoinette often says, the surface ones became overdeveloped and hypersensitive, like tiny broken capillaries just underneath the skin.

When I was a child I believed that the human heart could break with a crack because that happened to the Happy Prince and to my mother. Monica wove her fingers in and out of endless cat's cradles. Her feet were drawn under her skirt, cold white,



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out of sight. I watched her from the door. Should I go over? Make a cup of tea? Turn on some of her favourite music? But I was a child back in 1995, so I went into the kitchen, to the kettle and the blue-and-white striped mugs. Monica didn't look up as I tinkled the tea things into the room. The cat kneaded her lap. He turned into a ball but Monica didn't notice. The movement of her fingers was incessant. As I watched I imagined carving her suffering into a lump of wood. And her untouched tea went cloudy, then cold, on the coffee table.

## 2

Monica's been dead for fourteen years. I reel myself back into the present, the past dissolving as I look out the window of Great Aunt Elsie's cottage, the Yorkshire sky a bright azure, the briefest of clouds. These clear evenings in the Yorkshire Dales are always more vicious, my aunt has warned. It's the absence of cloud cover that lets the cold in. The village chimneys are already smoking. Their coal fires offer a sulphurous smell. I spread a train timetable out on the scrubbed table and check the times. Two and a half hours to London. Elsie is ironing in front of the TV. She lashes her blouses with water-diluted white vinegar, runs the iron hard over them, glances from time to time at the TV where the Prime Minister is arguing about the benefits of austerity.

'You'll smell like a fish and chip shop,' I joke. 'Let me do that for you.' Elsie responds with an impatient thud of iron onto ironing board. The iron hisses, the steam hovers.

I say, 'There's an express at two-fifteen.'

'Then Paris?' Elsie thumps the iron down again onto a freshly vinegared sheet.

And I say slowly, 'I'll go in a few weeks.'

For all Elsie's thumping and folding and ironing, it is Monica's movements I see. The way Monica would freeze, suddenly, in a doorway as though she'd had a sudden flash of understanding. Or she'd turn so quickly her hair slid around her like a magician's cape, then on she'd go. She'd catch my hair in her hands and let it drop as though it had burned her. Plaiting it with her well-practised fingers, her mouth full of bobby pins, she'd frown as she worked the three threads,

over-under-over, as though my hair offered its own curious rubric. Before the mirror, the top of my head just reaching Monica's breasts, I saw myself as I'd look in ten, twenty years' time. Call it prophetic if you like, but I couldn't imagine how Monica would age, standing there, her hair swept up into a knot on top of her head.

Monica was always more rugged with Antoinette. Despite her Pre-Raphaelite hair, Antoinette had the disposition of a survivor, just like Dad. Monica often sat watching TV, curling and uncurling the red mass of Antoinette's hair. 'You could be a couple of orangutans at the zoo,' Dad once said, tossing a cushion at them. 'Come and look, Ruth,' he'd call to me. 'Don't these two look like monkeys?' And Antoinette turned her grinning face to Monica, who didn't think the joke at all funny.

When I could plait my own hair Monica still liked to stand behind me at the mirror. By the time I turned fourteen I was taller than her. Over-under, Monica's fingers working my hair so the plait fell straight between my shoulder blades like an arrow. In the mirror I saw only Monica's elbows weaving the hair, felt her warm breath on the back of my head as she worked silently, then the pull backwards, painful, my scalp protesting as she secured the plait-end with an elastic band.

### 3

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This past month with Elsie has posed more questions than it's answered, of course. Had I expected anything less? Fourteen years is a long time for someone to be dead. You grow away from them, or you think you might. But Elsie is like string or a rope attached to a lifebuoy. She keeps us all tied together, afloat. She knew Monica long before we did, as an aunt with an aunt's privileges. She's a lot like Harry Luby in that regard, though she'd hate to hear it.

'Anything can be tolerated if you can make art of it,' Harry used to say. '*Cherchez la femme.*'

I'd answer, 'I *am* searching,' aware as I returned Harry's steady gaze that my face displayed all too clearly my fear of being swept back to my mother again. Harry certainly knew about the way dead people cling to you. They enter every thought, he said. They lick along your skin. He had scores of people he liked to call forth in this way. 'See,' he'd say, conjuring up someone still young and unchanged from when he'd last seen them. His cousin Renée, for example, seventeen years old: she would die the following year, just before her eighteenth birthday.

Even my first meeting with Harry seemed a conjuring. I first met him in Mario's coffee bar, a tiny place just off Charing Cross Road. It was eighteen months to the day since Monica's death and the potent taste of adolescence and grief were bitter in my mouth. He was sitting at a table near the door, his back to the window. Most people liked to watch the street outside, but it wasn't just his seating habits that made Harry seem strange. The first weeks of that summer had been uncharacteristically

hot, and to keep cool Harry had cropped his hair. He was going through an American phase in clothing. He wore a long-sleeved shirt with a faded Hawaiian pattern on it, and soft blue palm trees rippled and swayed over his stomach. On his feet were Chinese slippers and a pair of striped socks. He stared at me for a while before he spoke, then he smiled and said in a very deep voice, 'Do you come here often?'

'Yes,' I said carefully. 'And you?'

'Oh, my word, yes,' he replied, 'I practically live in the place.'

I looked out of the window. My school uniform felt hot and prickly against my bare legs.

'Are you all right?' he asked. 'You seem sad.'

'I'm fine.'

'Really?'

And before I could help myself I said, 'I was thinking about my mother and her doctor.'

'A bad one, I gather? The doctor, I mean.'

I nodded.

Harry was certainly right about hauntings. Monica has been dead for years and I have given up resisting her. Resistance never worked anyway. And like a siren's call, the thud, thud of Aunt Elsie's iron, the crisp acidity of the kitchen, draws me back to a day not long after Monica's question of forgiveness, when Antoinette and I sat at the kitchen table busy with homework while Monica pressed our school uniforms and Dave's shirts. I had recently learned the old nursery rhyme, *Monday's child is fair of face, Tuesday's child is full of grace*, and recited it loudly.

'Lovely, Ruth,' Monica said, easing the point of the iron around a button.

From the poem I'd decided the day a person was born predetermined the colour of their skin and hair, their disposition

and future mapped out like a bird's-eye view. Over hopscotch, the taw skipping along chalky lines, I imagined what it would feel like to be Tuesday's child, full of grace like a chicken stuffed and ready to roast, or a Saturday-drudge Cinderella, always scrubbing floors and washing clothes.

Homework done, Antoinette retreated to her usual spot, the big red armchair, our reluctant cat on her lap. Hair orange and fluffy around her pale face, born on a Friday, did Antoinette look loving and giving? No. Her expression was far from benign. She could have been a portrait from the naïve school, a sullen, primary-coloured *Girl torturing long-suffering animal*. The impatient thud of her shoes had already worn out the upholstery, and the timber frame of the chair was showing through. The cat narrowed his eyes. He was going to scratch her if she didn't let him go. I read in the other chair. My hair was blacker than the cat's fur. The cat spat and sprang off Antoinette's lap then slunk away.

As though she knew what fractured times lay ahead, Antoinette started to stutter that year. 'If I...If...if if...If...' She stopped as she often did because the words were hers and she gathered them back like milk teeth in a matchbox. 'What are you on about, Antoinette?' I asked impatiently, but Antoinette's words had already disappeared.



## 4

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London train booked, I head off for a walk. Elsie follows me to the door and leans for a moment against the doorframe, thinking, no doubt, of all the times she watched Monica walk away. I make my way on one of Arkengarthdale's walking tracks. I pass black-faced sheep, some rambblers. Whatever the season, the Dales wear darkness easily, the height of the hills playing with the light. In winter the days are truncated and time moves to an odd rhythm as it might on another planet, but in summer twilight butters the days along the hills like appeasement. Dusk hovers as the iron's steam hovered, immersing the hills and offering long evening walks from which I return bamboozled by the time. When I get back Elsie will most likely be ready for bed, the hills outside only just beginning to darken. Achingly pale pink now, the twilight sky stretches above me, a smooth and convex skin. I suspect that if I reached up and tapped it, it might purr like a kettledrum.

Last night Aunt Elsie reached over and took up one of Harry's notebooks then began to thumb through it. 'Why, this is the story you mentioned about the lass with the hair ribbon and the birthday present. There's even a little picture of her here.'

'All Harry's stories are in the notebooks and journals. And they all have sketches or watercolours to accompany them.'

'And you're doing the same for your mother's life?'

'Sort of, but without the pictures. She'll have to be satisfied with words.'

Elsie passed the journal back. 'And you'll do that after you've taken Harry back to Paris?'

'Yes,' I said.

A man pushing a bicycle suddenly appears. He is as surprised to see me, as I am to see him.

‘Hello,’ I call.

‘Good evening.’

The bicycle wheels creak as they fight the stones on the path. He descends into the valley as I continue my way upward, the bike squeaking, the cyclist’s footfalls in conversation with the hills.

Memory continues on the path with me. It’s a transforming medium; it allows you to keep things close. It builds an extra layer on you, lets you become what you always felt you should have been. That’s how memories of Monica became fixed like a prehistoric and beautiful insect in amber. Nothing can release her now. It is satisfying to think this. Memories may shift as the stones shift on the path, but they can’t go anywhere while ever there is someone prepared to remember.

Pebbles crunch underfoot; above my head, a lone bird, a kestrel, I decide. Before they moved south to London, Monica and her sister, Laura, came to Langthwaite every couple of months on a bus that started at Richmond and ended in Reeth. They climbed over peat-coloured brooks and little bridges, past ranter’s chapels and dry-stone walls. It was a place where Monica could spread her wings too. She rolled with Laura down the hills, and there was comfort in the undulations. There was always a long view, and Langthwaite, seen from the heights, was a cluster of stone houses with smoking chimneys and roast-warm ovens. The water of Arkle Beck washed thinly over its stones, and sometimes a fairground popped up in the fields like a child’s picture book, with a brass band and brightly coloured stalls and wellington-booted farmers selling penned sheep and hand-reared rabbits. Monica told me about the fair once when I was curled up beside her, two sleepers, side by side on our railway-track bed, waiting for something to roll over us.



SLEEP

From the tops Elsie's house is as tiny as a postage stamp, its distinctive chimney pot, the trail of purple clematis along the stone wall, barely discernible in the diminishing light. The kestrel performs balletically, its body erect. Its hovering wings shudder, then it swoops. Onto what, I wonder, a field mouse? *'Great men are like eagles, and build their nest on some lofty solitude,'* I whisper softly. Like Monica, Harry follows me everywhere too. In the fading light I sit for a while and watch the smoke rise from the valley. The ground is damp. The seat of my jeans will soon be marked with a peat-coloured stain. I descend into the twilight. A long freight train of cloud is forming towards the east. I can smell frying food, bacon and onions. Ironing done, Elsie is preparing a late supper.

## 5

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Antoinette has been making plans for a trip to Australia, as though going so far might allow her to outrun her memories. She has a vast collection of travel brochures showing wide southern skies, red landscapes, the ground pitted, above it swirling red dust.

‘I’ll go to Sydney first,’ she’s said, ‘then Melbourne. Though I’ll be going to the outback as soon as I can.’

‘Perhaps I could join you in Australia?’ I said once, thinking, This family has done nothing but get away.

‘You’ll come to Sydney for New Year?’ Antoinette suggested.

‘Perhaps,’ I said, ‘but before I do that, Harry and I are going to Paris.’

‘And what do you think you’ll discover in Oz, Antoinette my pet?’ Dave asked. ‘What does Australia have that you can’t get here, at home?’

Antoinette diverted him with platitudes. Ancient landscapes, new perspectives, a travel-broadened mind. Dave rarely asks me about my plans. He’s never quite trusted Harry.

When Antoinette arrives at the weekend, I’ll ask her about the long flight to Australia. I’ll ask Monica about those odd memories she pre-set ages ago, like a TV program recorded while we were out. Monica of the odd sounds, her face a violin, her hair the strings, she sang ‘Oh, God, oh God, oh God’ mournfully, the notes – and words – birds.

The sun gilds the brass doorknob on Elsie’s front door. ‘You were right about the cold,’ I call. ‘It’s quite chilly now.’ I hang up my jacket as I tell her about following Arkle Beck home, the

water thin in parts, stretched and frayed over rocks. It muttered at me, hurrying me on to supper as the light faded and the temperature dropped.

Elsie has a cook's delight in watching me eat. She's grilled some lamb chops and boiled some new potatoes, which she's dusted with parsley, fried lardons and onions. She pushes my plate closer, excited, because while I was out walking Antoinette rang to confirm she'll be coming up as planned.

'She sounded happy enough,' Elsie says.

Enough. Happiness.

'She would,' I say. 'Antoinette always sounds happy.'

'Aye,' Elsie says slowly. 'And you're as deep as your mother.' She indicates the pile of ironed sheets I'm to take upstairs to the linen press after we've eaten.

## 6

Harry wasn't as tall as my father, Dave, but then, few men are. His face was round and he had a wide, mischievous mouth. His hands were large, his fingers very long, the fingernails stained with oil paint. His was the kind of accent that made me think of actors putting it on in French, some show that required Maurice Chevalier's boater and cane or Alain Delon's romance. He spoke so softly that often I had to lean towards him to hear what he was saying.

In comparison with Aunt Elsie, who seems to have been old all her life, Harry was quite young really. He was in his seventies when we first met in 2002. I was seventeen.

'He was just a bit younger than me, then,' Elsie said when I told her.

Elsie has lavished my childhood with tales of the Second World War, about the smoke rising from Yorkshire's bombed cities and factories and depots, their destruction accompanied by an acrid smell not unlike the under-the-bonnet metal of an overheated car. Of course she was hungry for what Harry had seen and heard.

'He was just a boy in Paris while you were watching the searchlights probing the sky above Sheffield for German bombers.'

Elsie looked sceptical. 'In Paris. In France?'

I nodded. French-Hungarian, he said he was, though the Lubys had lived in France for more than two hundred years. The early French Lubys were musicians and philosophers. There was even a pastry cook. One arm of the family changed their name to Lubier. 'I always thought it sounded odd,' Harry said. 'And, as it turned out, it didn't do them any good.'

At our first meeting in Mario's I drank my coffee warily, keeping an eye on the café's other customers. It was as though I'd ingested some of Monica's distrust, her watchfulness around older men. Harry was the kind of man who terrified you at first then put you at your ease. I still can't explain how he did it. Perhaps it was his way of staring into your eyes or dissolving into a silence so intense you felt you just had to fill it. Whatever alchemy Harry used, before long I found myself describing our lounge room and those little red outbursts in it – lipstick, skirt, flowers and Monica's question of forgiveness.

'The room must have smelled of more than your sister's lipstick,' Harry said. 'Were there freesias in a vase on the mantelpiece? The fire might have given off a woody scent, oaky and etherising? The kitchen, the previous night's cooking? And your father's jumper? Surely it bore the traces of someone who'd been smoking in the pub he'd stopped at for a pint on his way home from work? Tea, yes, the tea, was it Russian caravan?' Harry was very good at foraging for such details. But forgiveness? Like me, he couldn't see the need to forgive Monica at all.

I talked about my family, about my relationship with Antoinette and how we were always posing and regrouping, mindful of the contrast we made. Under the Christmas tree our faces were orb-shaped reflections in silver balls. At Sunday lunches we rested our elbows on food-laden tables. At Holy Communion we dressed in child-sized bridal veils. *I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth.* Antoinette takes after her father, Ruth after her mother, people said. How old is your Ruth now? Twelve. And your Antoinette? Just turned ten. Antoinette's eyelashes were so pale they almost disappeared. A studio photo was taken and the photographer drew spidery black lashes around Antoinette's eyes that shocked us and made us laugh. My eyes were so dark

the pupils disappeared. When I closed them I felt my eyelashes flutter against my cheeks, a Red Admiral butterfly or one of the vivid tropical blue ones I'd seen on TV.

When we'd finished our coffee he told me he was an artist, a *painter of the passing moment*. He suggested I go back to his flat to take a look at his art.

'Another time,' I said, shocked.

'Why not today?'

I just gave him a look and he didn't ask again.

I ran into Harry at Mario's half a dozen times after that. Always eccentrically dressed, always with his back to the window. He respected my right to make up my own mind. He loved to listen as well as talk. And he knew straight away that something terrible had happened to me.



In Langthwaite the locals stare whenever I go for a walk. ‘That’s Elsie’s niece’s lass,’ they say, then lower their voices. I’ve grown used to it. I just take my backpack and Elsie’s sandwiches and walk in whatever direction I please. This is where Monica played when she was a little girl. It is where she was happy, and the sheep, the needled grass and the echoing birdcalls are the things she loved most. How hard could it be to expect a bright future in a place like this?

It was adolescent neediness – rage, I now know – that led me to recklessly deliver my past to a complete stranger in a café, to Harry. ‘Strangers are dangerous,’ Dave was always saying when Antoinette and I were growing up, though Monica usually replied, ‘and so are the people with whom you should feel safe.’

I suppose my volubility was a response to Harry’s keenness to talk too. My stories about Monica prompted him to tell his own stories.

‘There are canals in Paris,’ he said eagerly after I told him about Monica and her holidays in the Dales. ‘They reflect the buildings on each bank. And there are barges.’

When he said *barges*, his voice softened and his eyes took on a faraway look. ‘Black barges with brass trims... little *tricolores*...dogs...cats...geraniums...flapping washing... bicycles.’ He gazed off into the distance, the silence so profound I heard a woman outside the café grinding her cigarette butt into the footpath with her heel. When a cup clattered onto a saucer he looked like he’d seen a ghost, recalled what he’d been saying and started to talk again, his arms drawing curves in the coffee-scented air.

‘You would like the Canal Saint-Martin very much,’ he said. ‘The sound of the water, the lock keepers’ stations. Best of all are the walks at dusk. The water is still and the sunset flushes pink and orange into it. It reflects the sky in a kind of optimistic promise.’

‘And little children?’

‘Oh yes,’ he smiled. ‘Happy, walking beside their parents, loving all of it.’

‘We have canals here too,’ I said. ‘Near Regent’s Park. Little Venice.’

‘I know. But not like the ones in Paris. Different. Nice though.’

‘You should go back. It’s hardly a long way to France.’

He gave a little shudder. ‘I don’t believe I could do it. Paris might be my home but I can’t overcome what it was, when its soul was taken from it.’

‘My Aunt Laura lives in Sydney, she’s my mother’s sister. And my Great Aunt Elsie’s sister, my grandmother, well, she did too until she died six months ago.’

‘Australia seems a sleepy kind of place,’ Harry said. The café’s steam had formed little rivulets down the window. The coffee machine hissed. ‘One must never go to a place that makes you feel *sleepy*.’

‘Like Bournemouth,’ I laughed. ‘It’s a family joke. My father and mother used to play a game about the sleepest places in England. Clacton-on-Sea, Dorchester. The best was a village in Norfolk called Great Snoring. Dave always fell about laughing at that.’

Harry nodded and thought for a moment. ‘Well, one could never accuse Paris of being drowsy.’ With a little wave to the café owner he indicated our empty cups. ‘Energy is required to live in Paris, because, as I’m sure you know, it’s best to go everywhere on foot.’

‘But I’ve never been there,’ I said.  
‘No matter, one day you will.’

In the years since meeting Harry I’ve pored over maps of Paris’s streets and canals as avidly as I’ve been poring over Ordnance Survey maps of the Yorkshire Dales. His stories were cartographic representations of an era, tensile geography, a map of a place caught before the dark took it, just as clouds ravage and reshape the contours of the hills.

Behind Harry’s head the café owner twiddled and banged at his gleaming coffee machine. A rush of steam, a woman’s shrill laugh as Harry drew his air maps, straight lines and curlicues. ‘Close your eyes,’ he ordered. ‘Now, to enter my old playgrounds in the tenth arrondissement you must position yourself in the Place de la République. Take the Rue du Faubourg du Temple, walk past the Rue Yves Toudic on your left, past the bakery and the bistros, the shops that sell women’s underwear, books and perfume, until you reach the Canal Saint-Martin. Cross the canal and turn left along the Quai de Jemmapes. See the people walking their dogs, smoking cigarettes and gossiping while the barges pass. Boys and girls are sailing ships made of half walnut shells and just across the street on the right Bernard Nodier is washing the footpath outside his café. Two blocks along the canal you reach the Avenue Richerand. That is my building on the corner.’

In his childhood world I stopped as he ordered, looked up. A hand was waving a white handkerchief from a fourth-floor window. It belonged to Harry’s mother, and deep inside his study, invisible to anyone in the street, was his father, Professor Paul Luby. The flapping handkerchief was Mrs Luby’s way of hurrying Harry along. She watched as he stopped to admire a bargeman’s skill, kicking at the cobbles that were being prised up by a chestnut tree’s roots, chatting to the boys with boats. He asked Bernard how his son was doing in Algeria.

‘Harr...eeey,’ his mother called impatiently. ‘There’s a glass of milk here and some toast spread with chocolate.’ But the afternoon was too full of delights, and not even chocolate toast could tempt Harry home.

On Harry rhapsodised about the green light cast by the tree’s branches, the blue fog of smoke from the barges as they idled, lowering in the locks, the children’s excited faces as they watched their makeshift boats skim along the water. The look of concentration on an old dog’s face as it pissed against a tree.

That afternoon passed in a blur of images. It was five o’clock, I saw with a start. Apologising, I picked up my bag and books and left Harry to think through a portrait; the café was always conducive to new ideas, he said. A light rain had fallen while we’d been talking. As I opened the café door my eyes were dazzled by the brilliance of the wet macadamised road. The sun, out again, had turned the road’s surface so bright I could have been walking on sparkling, broken glass.

The mail has brought a new postcard from Laura. *The Blue Mountains. The Three Sisters*. Elsie puts on her glasses so she can gaze again at the rocks. She passes the card to me with, 'I can't see sisters in them at all. Can you?'

Laura of the postcards, her Australia reduced to little bright rectangles. Her postcard seas were turquoise and frilled with pale yellow sand, and I'd always imagined the place just as Laura crafted it.

'Perhaps she'll take Antoinette there,' Elsie says.

Neither of us is sure why Antoinette became so passionate about Australia. She certainly didn't inherit her enthusiasm from Monica, who took little interest in her sister's new life. Laura had migrated. That was it. But Dave was always prepared to imagine or dream. 'We might go down under,' he joked once. 'At least we'd know someone.' 'To live?' Antoinette was quite excited at the idea. I glanced across to Monica. A shadow was already gathering over her face.

'Did Monica ever bring friends up here with her?' I ask Elsie with a quick glance around the cottage, setting the postcard aside, already knowing that in the 1960s there was no room for extra children, and even after the end of rationing, certainly not enough food. There was talk of friends though, in flimsy letters to Elsie in Monica's child-hand. Someone called Doris had a haircut that had exposed her neck to the ridicule of the class. A boy called Tom had been buying Monica sweets. A teacher was very pleased with Monica's progress in composition. Laura, it seems, just didn't cut the mustard. Laura's letters are cursory,

as are Elsie's memories of her. It is Monica, the favourite child, who is preserved in paper.

As Elsie talks I play with an overripe banana in the fruit bowl. The lines of a poem I studied in my last year at school have been haunting me all day. I can't remember the name of the poet, just the rhythm of a train speeding up as it leaves a station. A man stands on the platform. The woman he loves is leaving on a train.

*I loved you and waited  
The train waited too  
Then it slid away  
And I called  
Are you leaving?  
Am I leaving?  
Or are we standing still?*

## 9

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On a warm evening in May, Dad loved to tell us, he and Monica fell in love at a friend's party in a house near Camden Lock. He'd come late after a night class at the Shepherd's Bush Polytechnic, where he was doing an advertising course. He was different from all his other friends, partly because he'd won some money in the Pools a year before. The windfall had aged him into the habits of his parents: a bank account with a good interest rate, a house he'd nicknamed Edwina of the Crossroads, and a Morris Cooper into which he and his friends packed.

Cool in black jeans and a black tee-shirt that showed off his muscled arms, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing in his throat like a party game, and his lovely orange hair that Monica said was exactly the colour of a Buddhist priest's robes, Dave walked down the hall into hilarity, a wall of rock music and chamber pots doubling as punchbowls. 'There were plenty of gorgeous birds,' he liked to joke, 'but once I saw Monica they disappeared from the frame.'

He reached across for a glass and filled it from someone's half-finished bottle of ale before its owner had a chance to reclaim it.

And then he saw her.

By then Monica had been healthy for a while and her doctor was becoming a distant memory. She worked at Biba in Kensington High Street but she was getting tired of the job. Her best friend, the insouciant Nora, had ideas about setting up a shop full of clothes from Nepal and she wanted Monica to work for her, selling the clothes and modelling them too.

She'd offered Monica a wardrobe-full for the party and from them Monica had chosen a long, dark-blue dress embroidered from top to bottom with orange and pink flowers and mirrors, hundreds of them. They made her sparkle whenever she raised her glass to her lips or rested her body against the doorjamb. The partygoers must have been reflected all over her. Whenever I heard that story I liked to think of their tiny faces on her back, and breasts and arms. When she moved Monica must have jingled as delicately as a wind chime. Her hair was hanging loose and she'd topped it with a scarf. She'd painted a butterfly on her right cheekbone, but other than that her skin was very white and her eyes, ringed in kohl, were two burnt black sockets in her face. She looked so *utterly smashing* that no man was game to approach her. They acted up around her, telling jokes loudly so she'd hear, moving their hips to the music, smoking and flicking their spent matches into the fireplace. She must have sensed Dave watching her though, because when someone put on the Bee Gee's 'Run to Me', she turned her eyes to Dave slowly, then smiled her half-smile, the edges of her mouth just rising up a little way, quizzically.

He could never remember what they talked about. At half past three Nora came shouting across the room to take her home. By then Monica had told Dave where she worked and the next day he arrived in the shop to ask her out.



‘You’re certainly like your mother, there’s no doubt about it.’

Elsie has made a pot of tea and as she pours me a cup she asks what I’m planning to do after my visit. It’s a litmus question tinted with unspoken meaning: what else, apart from Monica’s hair and eyes and skin, might have been passed on?

‘I’m fine,’ I reassure her. ‘It’s been wonderful having the time up here to take stock. I’ll finish my writing when I get back from Paris. I might even go out to Australia and have a holiday with Antoinette.’

‘And young men?’

‘Perhaps,’ I say carefully. ‘I’ve been out with quite a few. I met a nice man at the library before I came up here.’ How can I explain to Elsie that despite all this time the touch of a lover is like sandpaper against my skin?

Elsie nods. She’s infinitely proud of us, especially Antoinette now she’s completed her medical studies. Once, Elsie’s awe of the sciences would have rankled, but I realise that doctors were gods in her younger days. Despite everything that’s happened, they probably still are. Antoinette changed once she started studying medicine, though Elsie would never admit it. Antoinette thinks as a doctor does now, and like most doctors she has an ice splinter in her heart.

‘And you can visit our Laura,’ Elsie says with a glance towards the Three Sisters postcard, its landscape so different from the Northern town in which Laura and Monica spent their early childhood. Barnsley, all terrace houses and grim dark streets from which coalminers poured every morning, a long black seam of men clog-clattering towards the dawn shift.

‘No wonder you loved to escape to the Dales, Mum,’ I said to Monica once.

‘Oh, no, our place in Hope Street had a grim charm,’ she replied emphatically. ‘Laura and I loved going to Barnsley Market with your Gran. She could haggle like no one I’ve seen since. And afterwards there were pork pies or some jellied eels from one of the stalls. Don’t wrinkle your nose, Ruth, it was a real treat.’

‘Hope Street. Barnsley. You can take the lass out of Barnsley, but not *Ba...a...a...arnsley* out of the lass,’ Dave joked whenever a miner appeared on the TV, the man’s eyes stark white and exhausted in his black and white minstrel face.

Monica never laughed back. Why would she? A fierce kind of Yorkshire loyalty ran deep through her. Hearing a brass band always made her teary. She hated the Tories. Monica might have lived in London for years but these were *her* people and she’d watched a documentary about the miners’ strike in a state of outrage, the police with shields, the scabs, the striking men desperately picking over what slag they could find to warm an icy winter. Her tamed Yorkshire accent always returned forcefully when she was angry, asserting itself just as the base stock of a plant does if the bush is left unpruned. ‘All for nowt,’ she said, as the mining union was forced to capitulate. ‘Nowt’, as though it wasn’t just her doctor but those mine closures in the 1980s that had excised something deep inside her. And sometimes she got so distressed by it all she just drifted off to sleep.

# 11

Sleep. I talked about it endlessly. Harry always listened patiently. Said, ‘Oversleeping is often a manifestation of depression. Your mother clearly suffered from terrible depression, but I still don’t understand why you believe her doctor was responsible for her death.’

With a sigh I settled back to explain. ‘He *stole* Monica from us.’

‘But this was before you were born?’

‘Yes. It’s hard to believe but this was going on right into the 1970s. That bastard infected her. He sucked her soul out of her. He put her to sleep and from then on she craved it. She was addicted to drugs that helped her sleep. He’d made her want to sleep all the time. Once people had his treatment they were never the same again.’

Elsie interrupts my thoughts. ‘Hope Street,’ she says thoughtfully. ‘Do you think Barnsley’s city fathers were being ironic?’

I shrug. ‘The name certainly didn’t offer much hope to our family, did it?’

Monica spared us no detail about how my grandfather had come back to Hope Street from the war angry about all he’d been through. He carried his rage around with him well into the 1950s. Then Monica and Laura were born. He tried to settle down, but he gave up on Yorkshire and took a job in London. He didn’t sit and reminisce about the war over a pint of ale with all his friends. He had seen more horrors than a man should see in a slag heap full of lifetimes. He needed to move. He was off.

‘Why didn’t he give it more time?’ Monica said. ‘We loved Yorkshire. Why couldn’t he wait a few more years till things picked up? He was like a bloody sheepdog gone mad. We had to leave all our friends behind and our pet rabbits in their hutches. He bullied us onto that train to London. I’ve always wondered what my life would have been like if I’d stayed with Aunt Elsie in Langthwaite.’

‘Cheer up,’ Dave once replied. ‘He could have gone further, to South Africa or Australia like Laura, and then I’d never have met you.’

Monica wept for her abandoned rabbits. My grandmother wept for Elsie’s gossip around the kitchen table, for the teapot on the hob in its singed woollen cosy and Eccles cakes dripping with butter. My grandfather didn’t mourn at all. His nightmares kept him as driven as a dog. ‘Never look back...Never give in... Always look on the bright side.’ Not that he ever did.

‘But Yorkshire isn’t very far, Mum,’ I said. ‘You could have gone back there to live when you were older.’

Monica said with a bitter laugh, ‘Oh, Ruth, pet. Haven’t you ever heard the saying, *You can never go home?* No? Well, it’s true.’

Of her early years in London Monica said very little. She spent a lot of time building a network of friends as the city rebuilt itself around her. The family moved to a flat in Maida Vale, then on to Camden Town. When her father’s job took him to the south side of the river, they rented a flat in Southwark. This was their home for the next five years before their final move to West Kensington.

‘They were always moving,’ Elsie says.

‘By today’s standards they hardly moved at all,’ I say, but the last shift seems the most significant. My grandfather’s war demons, I often think, must have revisited him mercilessly. The towering walls closing in around them, the jackhammers’

pounding, the trains' rattling, the rotting-corpse smell of the Thames at low tide and the slap, slap of the water against its banks, taking him back to the war's most awful places. So they set off again, to a quieter basement flat in West Kensington. And as he succumbed to his anxiety, Monica did too.

By late autumn Harry and I were meeting once a week, on Friday afternoons mostly, when I told my gullible sportsmistress I had a regular doctor's appointment. The teacher would give me one of those empathic, knowing looks I had quickly learned to exploit. 'Of course, off you run.' I'd feel her sympathy caressing my spine as I walked away, already loosening my school tie and crushing my beret and gloves into my satchel.

As the weather cooled, steam and mist licked at Mario's windows and the world outside seemed to ice over and recede. One afternoon Harry drew a little face in the frosted glass, a profile of a man with a mass of hair. 'In my youth,' he said, 'an arrondissement became the map of one's life.' He paused to take a bite from his biscuit. 'It defined your family and friends, the way you lived in a city of other arrondissements, all of them with a unique history and culture.'

Until he left Paris he'd lived just a few blocks from where he was born in the Hôpital Saint-Louis, his mother's one child, her sun from which rays of love radiated. Like a bag of new potatoes he'd weighed exactly three kilograms. He had his twenty digits and all his organs worked. His earliest memory? The Canal Saint-Martin, of course. From eyes still milky blue, he caught his first glimpse of green water, of leaves yellowed and falling like Milton's angels onto the water's unforgiving surface. There was a rush as the lock gates opened. A few weeks later, he met his carousing cousins, the twins, Renée and Constance. Pregnant with mischief, they leaned over the bassinette, their eyes dark brown, lips slightly open, their

fingers probing his sleeping suit to find his penis and give it a little tweak.

His mother and father indulged in an English pram, a huge navy-blue affair with suspension like a Brougham. The pram was too cumbersome to be carried upstairs to their flat, so it lived in the concierge's office for the price of a bottle of cognac once every few months. Harry was sure he could remember sitting up very high, his eyes on his mother's breasts as they leaked milk. His teeth, still soft and tingling in his gums, his newly found voice roaring in his throat, accompanied the sound of the wheels as they chug, chugged along the cobbles.

And so it passed: his teetering steps along the parquetry. His soup served with a strange, curved spoon; a first-birthday cake in the shape of a carousel; the little tapestry stool on which he stood to watch the barges pass. At four years and six months he was sent to a kindergarten on the Rue Saint-Maur. It placed particular emphasis on its charges' numeracy. 'How many children are in this class, boys and girls?' To which they all replied '*Quinze, Madame.*'

If he sniffed back far enough he still could gather the scents of that classroom: vanilla, lavender, a particularly pungent garlic that entered the room two minutes before its source: Robert Couronnes. Elyse Beaune, who became his sweetheart in his sixth year, always smelled of rosewater. In a crocodile-line the children marched to the playground in the Square de Rébeval, and there they'd play from eleven until one, when they were marched back to lunch. The greatest pleasure of each day was going to sleep at two, all the children lying on kapok mattresses until their mothers came. Above them, the muffled voices of the students in the senior grades could be heard through the ceiling, conjugating verbs and adding up their sums. A chair would scrape across the floor, a pencil case drop while March flies circled between them.

In the late afternoon, the mothers waited by the school's low fence. The older children left first to run or cycle home. Once they'd gone, the babies were woken. Bleary-eyed, the cheek on which they'd been lying flushed with red, their tear ducts crusty as though they'd been crying sand. All the women, the mothers and grandmothers, the family *bonnes*, would call out as their charges emerged into the dazzling sun. *Pierre. Elyse. Robert. Harry.* Still not quite awake, the children stumbled towards them, like blind mice from a barn.

Renée and Constance visited in identical summer dresses sprigged with flowers, their black hair plaited into ropes, a dab of Céline's perfume behind each ear. While their mothers caught up with the gossip, the girls rolled Harry on the floor and stole the jacks he kept in his pockets. They were so alike in looks he had trouble telling them apart, but the problem was remedied when Renée began to cook. From that point on she smelled of caramel, and no matter what tricks the twins played it was Renée's sugary sweetness that gave the game away.

When he turned eleven, Harry said wistfully, he was transferred to the École Durant, a school for gifted boys. Each morning he crossed the canal, passed by the Marianne monument in the Place de la République, the market stalls in the Rue de Turenne selling strawberries from Carpentras and melons from the Charente and fruit liqueurs from Alsace. The school, its cluster of pale-pink buildings entered through a courtyard and a porticoed vestibule, is a museum now, dedicated to the history of the mosaic.