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Daily Telegraph

**THE
GREAT
GODDEN**

**MEG
ROSSOFF**

**T H E
G R E A T
G O D D E N**

**M E G
R O S O F F**

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1

Everyone talks about falling in love like it's the most miraculous, life-changing thing in the world. Something happens, they say, and you know. You look into the eyes of your beloved and see not only the person you've always dreamed you'd meet, but the *you* you've always secretly believed in, the you that inspires longing and delight, the you no one else really noticed before.

That's what happened when I met Kit Godden.

I looked into his eyes and I knew.

Only, everyone else knew too. Everyone else felt exactly the same way.

2

Every year when school ends we jam the car full of indispensable junk and head to the beach. By the time six people have crammed their bare essentials into the car, Dad says he can't see out the windows and there's no room for any of us, so half of everything is removed but it doesn't seem to help; I always end up sitting on a tennis racket or a bag of shoes. By the time we set off, everyone's in a foul mood.

The drive is a nightmare of shoving and arguing and Mum shouting that if we don't all pipe down she's going to have a breakdown and once a year Dad actually pulls over to the side of the road and says he'll just sit there till everyone shuts the fuck up.

We've been coming to the beach since we were born, and on the theory that life existed even before that, Dad's been coming since he was a child, and Mum since she met Dad and gave birth to us four.

The drive takes hours but eventually we come off the motorway and that's when the mood changes. The familiarity of the route does something to our brains and we start to whine silently, like dogs approaching a park. It's half an hour precisely from the roundabout to the house and we know every inch of landscape on the way. Bonus points are earned for deer or horses glimpsed from car windows or an owl sitting on a fence post or Harry the Hare hopping down the road. Harry frequently appears in the middle of the road on the day we arrive and then again on the day we leave; incontrovertible proof that our world is a sophisticated computer simulation.

There's no such thing as a casual arrival. We pull into the grass drive, scramble out of the car, and then shout and shove our way into the house, which smells

of ancient upholstery, salt, and musty stale air till we open all the windows and let the sea breeze pour through in waves.

The first conversation always goes the same way:

MUM (*dreamy*): I miss this place so much.

KIDS: So do we!

DAD: If only it were a little closer.

KIDS: And had heat.

MUM (*stern voice*): Well, it's not. And it doesn't.

So stop dreaming.

No one bothers to mention that she's the one who brings the subject up every time.

Mum's already got out the dustpan and is sweeping dead flies off the window sills while Dad puts food away and makes tea. I run upstairs, open the drawer under my bed and pull on last summer's faded sweatshirt. It smells of old house and beach and now so do I.

Alex is checking bat-box cameras on his laptop and Tamsin's unpacking at superhuman speed because Mum says she can't go down to see her horse until everything's put away. The horse doesn't belong to her but she leases him for the summer and would save him in a fire hours before she'd save any of us.

Mattie, who's recently gone from too-big features and no tits to looking like a sixteen-year-old sex goddess, has changed into sundress and wellies and is drifting around on the beach because she sees her life as one long Instagram post. At the moment she imagines she looks romantic and gorgeous, which unfortunately she does.

There's a sudden excited clamour as Malcolm and Hope arrive downstairs to welcome us to the beach. Gomez, Mal's very large, very mournful basset hound, bays at the top of his lungs. Tamsin and Alex will be kissing him all over so really you can't blame him.

Mal clutches two bottles of cold white wine and while everyone is hugging and kissing, Dad mutters,

‘It’s about time,’ abandons the tea and goes to find a corkscrew. Tam hurls herself at Mal, who sweeps her up in his arms and swings her around like she’s still a little girl.

Hope makes us stand in order of age: me, Mattie, Tamsin and Alex. She steps back to admire us all, saying how much we’ve grown and how gorgeous we all are, though it’s obvious she’s mainly talking about Mattie. I’m used to being included in the gorgeous-Mattie narrative, which people do out of politeness. Tam snorts and breaks rank, followed by Alex. It’s not like we don’t see them in London, but between school and work, and what with living in completely different parts of town, it happens less than you might think.

‘There’s supper when you’re ready,’ Hope calls after them.

Dad wipes the wine glasses with a tea towel, fills them, and distributes the first glass of the summer to the over-eighteens, with reduced rations for Mattie,

Tamsin and me. Alex reappears and strikes like a rat snake when Hope leaves her glass to help Mum with a suitcase. He downs it in two gulps and slithers away into the underbrush. Hope peers at the empty glass with a frown but Dad just fills it again.

Everyone smiles and laughs and radiates optimism. This year is going to be the best ever – the best weather, the best food, the best fun.

The actors assembled, the summer begins.

3

Our house is picturesque and annoying in equal measure. For one thing it's smaller than it looks, which is funny because most houses are the opposite. My great-great-grandfather built it for his wife as a wedding present in 1913, constructed in what Mum calls Post-Victorian-Mad-Wife-in-the-Attic style. It stayed in the family till the 1930s, when my ancestor had to sell it to pay off gambling debts. His son (my great-grandfather) bought it back twenty years later, restored the original periwinkle blue, and thereafter everyone refrained from mentioning the time it left the family. He also built a house down the beach for family overflow, which is now owned by Hope. Since Mal came

on the scene we think of it as their house, even though technically it's not.

Our house was built as a summer place, a kind of folly, not to be lived in year round, so we don't. It's draughty, has no insulation, and the pipes freeze if you don't drain them and fill the toilets with anti-freeze in November, but we love every tower and turret and odd-shaped window and even the short staircase that ends in a cupboard. My great-great-grandfather must have had a great-great sense of humour because everything in the house is pointlessly idiosyncratic. But you can see the sea from nearly every window.

My bedroom is the watchtower. Most people wouldn't want it because it's ridiculously small, no room to swing a rat. Someone tall enough could touch all four walls at once by lying flat with arms and legs outstretched. The tower comes with a built-in captain's bed and a ladder, and the ladder goes up to a tiny widow's walk, so-named because women needed

a place to walk while gazing out to sea through the telescope, waiting for their husbands to come back. Or not. Hence widow.

I am the possessor of the brass telescope that belonged to my great-grandfather. He was in the Navy and in his later years spent a lot of time doing what I do – standing in the square tower with his telescope trained outwards. I have no idea what he saw – probably the same things I do: boats, Jupiter, owls, hares, foxes and the occasional naked swimmer. It's kind of an unwritten rule that the telescope goes with the room. No one takes a vote, it just gets handed to the right person. Theoretically, the telescope and the room might have gone to Mattie, Tamsin or Alex, but it didn't.

There are lots of traditions in my family, like the passing down of this house and the passing down of the telescope. On the other hand, we're distinctly lacking in the kind of traditions grand families have, like naming every oldest son Alfred or being

feeble-minded, and there's no sign of the gambling gene re-emerging so that's kind of a relief. But, wobble aside, when it comes to keeping property in the family from one generation to the next we're practically on a par with the Queen.

On the other side of the house is a turret. Before we four were born, Mum and Dad used the turret as a bedroom, which was romantic but impractical as it threatens to blow away from the house altogether in a high wind. About five years ago they moved down a floor to a room-shaped room over the kitchen. Mum makes costumes for the National Opera so the turret became her summer workroom. Alex's room is across the hall and everyone calls it the cut-throat. I used to think that was because of some murky historical murder, but Dad says it's because it's so small it makes you want to cut your throat. On the plus side, it has a hexagonal window and feels snug as the berth of a boat.

Mattie and Tamsin shared a room for ages, but

once Mattie hit twelve they had to be separated to prevent bloodshed. Even Mum and Dad realised that no one on earth could live with Mattie, so she ended up sole proprietor of the little guest house in the garden, which makes her feel exactly as special as she imagines she is. Tamsin has the room all to herself now, which suits everyone, as it smells powerfully of horse.

Between the bedrooms is a long landing with a built-in window seat where you can stretch out and read or meet to play cards or look out the big window to the sea. The cotton cover on the window seat is so faded it's hard to tell what colour it once was. When we were little we used to call this area the playroom, but it's actually just a corridor.

Outside, the house is decorated with Victorian curlicue gables and brackets, so even the fishermen stop to take pictures on their phones. It doesn't help that it's painted periwinkle blue. When I asked Dad why we couldn't paint it a slightly less conspicuous

colour he shrugged and said, 'It's always been periwinkle blue,' which is the sort of thing you get a lot in my family. Mindless eccentricity.

Hope is Dad's much younger cousin; Dad was twenty-two when Hope was born. Since they got together, Mal and Hope started staying at the little house together every summer. It's only a hundred metres down the beach from ours and it's built of wood and glass, very modern for its time, with big wooden decks where everyone can sit and eat and look out at the sea.

Malcolm met Hope at drama school. No one thought the relationship would last because she seemed far too sensible to settle down with an actor. But they've been together for twelve years and we refer to them as Malanhope like they're a single entity. Where's Malanhope? Are Malanhope coming for dinner?

'I hope Malcolm doesn't lose Hope,' Dad says at least once a week, though in fact the joke is

particularly stupid given how devoted Hope is to Malcolm. We are, too – he’s insanely handsome and an indefatigable player of board games.

Mal and Hope are both in their early thirties and far more interesting than our parents. They’re ring-leaders in all things summery – drunkenness, indiscreet conversations, all-night poker. They both started out as actors, but Hope decided one day that she hated auditions and hated being poor, so now she teaches drama at a university in Essex. Occasionally she does voiceovers because she’s a brilliant mimic, unlike Mal. All Mal’s accents sound Irish and his attempts to speak with an American accent are pitiful. None of us has ever said it out loud, but it should probably be Hope earning a living as an actor and Mal teaching drama.

I saw Hope on stage once, playing Nora in *A Doll’s House*. I was only thirteen but you had to be blind not to see how good she was. I’d never seen anyone do so little and express so much, and I never forgot it. When

Malcolm acts, he throws his whole heart and soul around the stage like a rubber chicken.

We adore Mal. He teaches us stuff like sword fighting and how to laugh convincingly on stage. Mattie flirts with him, but she flirts with all forms of human life so it's barely notable. Malcolm flirts back so as not to hurt her feelings. Mattie isn't stupid, but sometimes I think she's the most trivial person I know. She says she wants to be a doctor but her brain seems mostly filled with sex and shoes.

Mattie's just wandered back up from the water. No one there to admire her but the fish. She shouts to no one in particular that she's going down the beach to help Hope with supper.

I can hear Tamsin arguing with Dad about giving her a ride to the barn. There's a sort of policy that Tam is allowed to have Duke for the summer but doesn't get a lift up every time she has a whim to go and see him. She's right that it takes five minutes to drive and twenty to cycle, but if you add up all

the five minutes she'll require in the course of a summer, Dad's right to nip it in the bud.

Mum ends the discussion and for a few blissful moments there's peace.

4

‘I have two surprises,’ Hope said the morning after we arrived, but she wouldn’t tell us either of them right away no matter how much everyone begged. ‘I’ll tell you at supper.’

I don’t like surprises. Just the facts, ma’am; delivered without the champagne and sneaky smiles.

It was nearly six when I broke off from the book I was reading and looked out the window. Tam, in jodhpurs, walked back along the beach towards ours, holding a large plate of what looked like seaweed but probably had something to do with supper.

With my telescope I can see a good deal of the beach and everything between the house and the sea.

I don't look into people's bedrooms, but what happens outdoors is fair game. I can see the horizon well enough to read the names on cargo ships. I can see people in the sea well enough to lip-read conversations, if only I could read lips. At the moment, we're a couple of days off a full moon and I like its watery shades of blue, like the ghost of a real moon.

There's a general buzz around the house concerning Hope's two surprises. I wonder if she's going to announce that she's pregnant, and if so, whether this is entirely good news. Much as I love Mal, he's the sort of person who would think nothing of exchanging a baby for a handful of magic beans. Though if he did, he'd manage to convince everyone he'd done the right thing and only Hope would be cross. Mal's most useful quality is a wretched excess of charm that makes everyone ignore his flaws. But he's good to talk to when you're fed up with life, or can't stand your family, because he listens, which hardly anyone else seems to do.

I can see the parents heading off for a swim, which they often do at this hour. Mum's in a green-and-white-striped cozzie and the Panama hat Dad bought for her birthday last year. Dad's in shorts and flip-flops. They walk close together.

After the swim, Mum will light the barbecue and Dad will marinate and fuss. Malanhope will drift over with more plates of salads and bottles of wine, which will be opened. And drunk. Adults will be drunk. Children might be drunk too if no one's paying attention.

What I can't see from my window I can imagine with perfect clarity. Right now, for instance, on the floor of their living room Mal is playing chess with Alex. Mal is wincing every time Alex makes a decent move. They both cheat like pirates and no one else will play with them. I can't remember if Alex always cheated or if it's something he's picked up from Mal, who claims to be studying the criminal mind in case he ever gets cast as Moriarty.

Eventually I drift downstairs. Hope arrives and everyone wants to know what the secrets are but she insists it isn't yet time. Mal says he'll take bribes but only in cash.

'Oh for Christ's sake,' mutters Alex. 'This had better be good.'

Mattie is starry-eyed, and assumes, the way she assumes everything, that the secrets will involve her. In this, she is not entirely wrong.

It is half past eight by the time we all sit down to eat. The table is lit by proper hurricane lamps, with candle stubs in jars for backup. Alex has positioned himself at the bottom of the table, so when Mal holds out the bottle to top everyone up, Mum and Dad won't notice that one of the glasses is his.

At last Hope stands up and taps the side of her glass with a spoon, like everyone isn't totally on the edge of their seats waiting for this moment anyway. A great cheer erupts from the Alex end of the table

and there's a thump as Tamsin elbows him off the end of the bench on to the ground. He stays there, giggling.

'I promised two surprises,' Hope says. Rather pompously, I think. She's nervous.

'Twins?' pipes up Dad, and Mal chokes.

'Not twins,' Hope says. 'But Mal and I are getting married. So you never know.'

Mal mutters, 'God forbid,' but everyone else is cheering and leaning over the table to congratulate them. Hope pushes them off.

'Oh, please,' she says. 'We've been living together long enough.'

Dad reaches across to shake Mal's hand. 'Well done, Mal.'

Hope rolls her eyes. 'For finding a woman and chasing her to ground?'

Dad laughs.

'The wedding is the last weekend of the summer,

nothing fancy, just a short service. No relatives other than immediate, a few close friends, nice meal, no marquee. Simple simple simple.'

'Like Mal.'

Mum shushes Alex.

'No white dress?' Mattie looks distraught.

'Mal can wear whatever he likes,' answers Hope. And at last they kiss, a sweet comedy kiss.

We cheer.

Hope holds up one hand. 'One last thing. Given that pretty much all the family I have left in the world is sitting here tonight, I'd like to take this moment to thank you for being nicer and less maddening than you might be. That is all.'

In an example of his lifelong ability to steal a scene, Alex throws up in the long grass. Mum grabs him by the collar and drags him indoors. We hear muffled shouting, and when he finally emerges we can see that he's greenish. Mum follows with a bucket of water looking cross.

‘Can I be maid of honour?’ Mattie has already chosen her dress and the flowers she’ll carry.

‘What about me?’ says Tamsin.

‘Two flower girls ...’ Hope says. ‘Unless you ... or Alex?’ Hope peers at me, anxious all of a sudden.

‘No, thank you,’ I say. ‘Unless you particularly want us.’

Hope smiles and shakes her head. ‘Two is plenty.’

Alex perks up. ‘What about me?’ His eyes point in completely different directions.

‘What about you, my darling? I’d love to have you as a flower girl.’

Alex is overjoyed. He lurches sideways.

‘Enough about the wedding,’ says Dad. ‘What’s the second surprise?’

The rest of us have forgotten the second surprise.

‘Ah,’ says Mal. ‘Well. Not all of you will be aware that Hope’s godmother is Florence Godden.’

‘Not *the* Florence Godden?’ Dad and Mal are like a worn-out old vaudeville act. Being Florence

Godden's god-daughter is one of the most significant facts about Hope.

Alex lists sideways again.

'Florence is shooting a film in Hungary and the date has been moved up on short notice. So her boys are coming from LA to stay with us for the summer.'

'Oh my God.' Mattie looks as if she's going to faint. 'I can't believe you didn't tell us.'

'She's telling us now, Mattie.' Even Tamsin talks down to Mattie.

'I haven't seen them for years,' Hope says. 'I suspect they've changed. Kit must be nineteen or thereabouts and Hugo a year or two younger. You kids aren't to swamp them all at once. Remember the poor cormorant.'

We're all silent for a second remembering the poor cormorant. We'd been nursing him back to health under Mal's guidance when he succumbed to a heart attack, from 'too much bloody attention', Mal said. That was the suspected cause of death anyway; we

never knew for sure as Dad refused to authorise a post-mortem. I drew the bird after he died, laid out with his ragged wings stretched to their full breadth, as wide as Alex was tall. His snaky neck and cold eye made a haunting corpse.

Something about the timing of Hope's reminder welded Kit Godden to the cormorant in my brain forever, the golden boy and the ragged black bird. My grandfather's 1954 edition of *British Birds* called the cormorant 'a sinister, reptilian bird, often confused with a shag'.

Hmm.

Hope sat down. 'Well,' she said. 'So that's it. Shall we drink a toast to summer?'

Everyone picked up a glass except Alex, whom Mum fixed with such an icy glare that he slipped into the grass under the table and stayed there.

Eight voices chorus as one. 'To summer.'