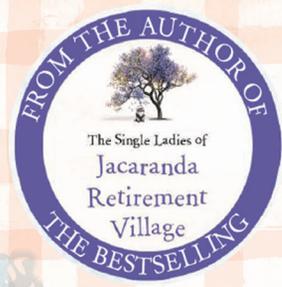


'Tender and funny' *Woman's Weekly*



The  
Tea Ladies  
of St Jude's  
Hospital

JOANNA NELL

## PRAISE FOR JOANNA NELL

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*The Last Voyage of Mrs Henry Parker*

*The Great Escape from Woodlands Nursing Home*

The  
Tea Ladies  
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JOANNA NELL

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*For Will and Lotte. You are my world.*



### 3

## The new Duke of Edinburgh

NORMALLY SO COMFORTABLE, CHLOE'S DOCS MAY AS WELL have been made of lead. Each clomping footfall echoed off the sterile corridor walls, her mother's words pulsing in her ears as she ran.

'Don't be late, Chloe.'

*Don't be late.*

*Shit.* Her mother was going to go ballistic after all the strings she'd pulled to secure this volunteer position at the very last minute.

'I'm onto it, Mum,' she'd insisted, referring to the blank paperwork sitting on her desk. She simply hadn't got to it yet, that's all.

Chloe had been a bit miffed when her mother insisted on taking over and calling Hilary, the manageress, on Chloe's behalf. She might be the youngest child but she was nearly eighteen.

Tonight, Chloe would have to explain why she'd been late on her first morning. She imagined trying to tell her mum she'd been distracted taking a photo of a toddler on the bus. The sun had been shining through the kid's blond curls and they looked like an angel's wings. Chloe missed her stop and had to walk back to the hospital from the next one.

Her mother would sigh, head on one side. *Chlo-ee*. The disappointment was way harder to handle than a full-on dummy spit. She wouldn't understand how taking a photo could make someone miss their bus stop. No point explaining that the best shots were always the candid ones, and that if Chloe didn't capture the beauty of the moment it would be lost forever. If the inside of a bus could be considered beautiful. Later, she would edit the photo on her laptop, cropping out the ugly background and experimenting with different exposures and filters.

The sign on the wooden-framed door hadn't changed since Chloe had spent what felt like half one winter at St Jude's Hospital with recurring tonsillitis, not as a patient, since her parents always wrote the prescriptions for the sickly courses of penicillin, but in the waiting room with colouring-in pencils because she was too sick to go to school. Looking back she was amazed she'd survived childhood with two medical parents, a dubious privilege and renowned predictor of neglected illnesses or injuries. It had been other people's mothers who'd taken pity on her when she'd had a fever, taking her to the cafeteria next door for an orange squash and a Kit Kat. Patients often complained about waiting an hour for their doctor. Chloe had spent half her childhood waiting for her mother.

Even now, St Jude's Hospital still brought bile to her throat. People always said that hospitals smelled of disinfectant. That wasn't it at all. It was noise that made people uncomfortable. Bare walls and hard floors reflected every sound: the whistling of a wardsperson pushing a trolley, the nervous chatter of visitors, phones, pagers, elevators, the crisp snap of starched linen and the hiss of oxygen. Hospitals sounded clinical. Even the tinkle of the bell over the door to the Marjorie Marshall Memorial Cafeteria was enough to freeze Chloe's insides.

A beaming woman in a blue apron greeted her. 'You must be Chloe.'

God, the place looked exactly the same. Nothing had changed at all in the last eleven or twelve years. The spindly greeting card holder in the corner. The knitted teddy bears lined up on the top shelf like sinister woollen voodoo dolls. The glass-covered plate of muffins. Even the old man in the corner with his newspaper seemed familiar. It was like stepping into a museum of memories, one that provoked an unexpectedly visceral reaction. Even her throat ached when she swallowed although her tonsils were long gone.

'Sorry.' First rule of being Chloe Foster-Pearson: always start with an apology. She pulled a piece of hair away from her sweat-damp forehead and poked it behind her ear. 'Are you the manageress?'

'Oh no, dear.' The woman seemed to think this was hilarious. 'I'm Joy. The intern. She's the manageress.' She pointed to a woman in a red apron who was frowning at a tatty five-dollar note.

She pulled a piece of lint from Chloe's sleeve and lowered her voice, 'A word to the wise, try and arrive before we open next time. And you might want to do something about your

hair.' She mimed pulling Chloe's dense curls back into a ponytail.

The woman in the red apron approached and shook Chloe's hand formally. 'I'm Hilary. Welcome to the Marjorie Marshall Memorial Cafeteria.' She spoke with deference, in the slightly stilted way people usually addressed her parents. Pleasantries followed, mostly variations on how lucky they were to have Chloe volunteering there.

'Who was Marjorie Marshall?' Chloe asked Joy as she donned an identical blue apron.

'No one can remember.' Joy sniggered.

'Pay attention, ladies,' said Hilary sharply. 'We'll start you on coffees, Chloe, since you're practically a doctor.'

Chloe's eyes widened when she saw the enormous printed labels stuck on the coffee machine.

'Val who used to do Tuesdays was very good with computers,' Joy helpfully explained as she demonstrated the different functions. 'Basically, it's On, Off, Black, White. Anything fancy, like a latte or a flat white, just press White. If someone orders a cappuccino, add a few chocolate sprinkles on the top.' Next, Joy showed her the fridge. 'This is where we keep the milk.' When Chloe frowned, she patted her arm. 'Don't worry, love, you'll soon get the hang of it. We mostly serve teas.'

Chloe peered inside. 'Is there a choice of milk?'

'On Mondays we get Farmer's Best delivered, but when that runs out, I'm afraid it's supermarket home brand.'

'I mean, like almond or soy?'

Joy laughed. 'No pet, there's not the call for it in here.'

'What do we do about the customers who are lactose intolerant?'

‘I usually leave the intolerant customers to the intolerant manageress.’

‘But –’

‘Do your best. All that matters is that it’s hot and served with a smile. That’s what our customers value most.’ Joy thought of something. ‘Or you could offer them a juice instead.’ She indicated the line of coloured boxes on the shelf, the kind that Chloe used to buy from the school canteen before her mother turned into the sugar police.

The first customer orders were already in, impaled on a savage-looking metal spike on the counter. While she waited for the kettle to boil, Joy demonstrated the more technical features of the coffee machine. She explained how to refill the coffee beans and where to empty the grounds.

‘It’s a lot for you to take in on your first day, I know, but one day soon it’ll be your first day on the ward as a newly qualified doctor. Imagine that!’

Suddenly, Chloe couldn’t feel her legs. She removed a blue plastic water bottle from her bag and took a large swig. Her legs returned.

Joy nodded approvingly. ‘It’s important to stay well hydrated when you’re working in a high-pressure environment like this. Hospitals can be very dehydrating. I keep my glass over there by the sink, have a little sip every time I pass it.’

Chloe watched Hilary walk over to the sink, empty the glass and put it into the dishwasher. When her back was turned, Joy helped herself to a clean glass from the cupboard, filled it and, with a wink, placed it next to the sink.

Speaking behind her hand, Joy offered Chloe some final advice. ‘Don’t let her intimidate you, her bark is worse than her bite. Show some initiative, but not too much. Also, wash

your hands like you're a brain surgeon or she'll make you do them again, and never, ever touch the pencil of power.' By this, Chloe assumed she was referring to the pencil Hilary was using to write the customers' order on a thick pad of paper.

*One tea, no sugar. One coffee, two sugars.*

It hardly seemed worth sacrificing a tree for a tea and a coffee. Surely Hilary could credit her staff with remembering two items, but as Joy fussed and fuffed about with cups and saucers, took the milk out of the fridge to add to the tea, put it back in the fridge then removed it a second time for the coffee, Chloe understood. Who'd have guessed there were so many permutations of hot water, milk and sugar, so many opportunities for error. Far from complaining about the long wait or the unsightly dribbles down the sides of the cup, the grey-haired couple who'd ordered the drinks smiled and thanked her profusely when Chloe delivered the tray to the table.

The other customers waiting patiently for their orders included a hipster couple holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes, a nervous-looking older woman clutching a breast cancer leaflet and an overly made-up woman wearing a tight black business suit and scarlet nails who parked her briefcase on the spare chair at her table. A drug rep. The bane of her mother's life. Her father, on the other hand, was more accommodating, especially of the younger, more attractive women.

With Hilary engaged in a lengthy exchange with a woman at the counter who didn't seem interested in anything except chatting, Chloe tried to keep herself busy. But there were only so many times she could fold and refold the tea towel and wipe down the countertop. It was going to be a long day.

*'Psst.'* Chloe heard a noise from the storeroom. Joy beckoned her over and provided another titbit of advice. 'That's Wendy from reception. Come and hide in here 'til she's gone. That woman's like a human black hole. If she finds out who you are, we'll never get rid of her.'

It was slightly awkward playing hide and seek like this. Her best friend Sam volunteered in a charity shop and told her about all the cool vintage clothes he'd found as he emptied the donations. He had a proper paying job too, helping his dad with his removal business at the weekend. Whenever Chloe mentioned looking for a part-time job her parents responded by upping her allowance.

'You need to concentrate on your academic studies this year, Chloe,' her mother said over yet another strained family meal during which her father barked orders down the phone at his long-suffering registrar.

'If you need money for anything,' her mother continued, 'all you have to do is ask. You know that.'

Her father had muttered expletives and hung up on his junior. He turned his attention to dissecting the layers of his vegetable lasagne and excising what looked like a lump of broccoli. Her mother glared at him across the table and, to Chloe's relief, dropped the subject of her study habits. Her results weren't great this semester. She often wondered if she'd peaked too soon academically. The science subjects she was studying this year required real concentration and Chloe simply couldn't muster the same enthusiasm as she had in previous years. It was only a matter of time before her parents discovered her slipping grades.

Joy peered round the corner. 'Wendy's gone.' Then, retreating, she said, 'Quick, look busy, here's the boss.'

'What are you both doing in here?' Backlit in the narrow storeroom entrance, Hilary stood with her feet apart forming the silhouette of an angry capital A.

'Joy couldn't reach the sugar.'

At first this drew a blank until Joy finally caught on. 'Yes, we're out of sugar,' she said as Chloe pretended to reach for the box on the top shelf.

'Well, hurry up. It's five to ten. The ward rounds will be finishing soon.'

'Good job you're so tall,' said Joy when Hilary had gone.

'My dad's six foot four,' said Chloe, handing over the box.

'He's in colonics, isn't he? At The General.'

'Both my parents are colorectal surgeons,' Chloe replied with a wry smile, resisting the urge to add her usual quip about how they counted the knives and forks at the end of each meal, making light of what other people found fascinating, and she found excruciating.

'Well, you must be a clever girl then.' Joy patted her on the arm and showed her where to place the sugar sachets on the saucer. 'Have you decided what you want to specialise in yet? Are you going to follow your parents into surgery?'

Why was this the first thing that people always asked her, as if she were somehow a perfect clone of her parents, or her two older brothers, Ryan and Dan, both pre-eminent in their own scalpel-wielding fields – Ryan removing brain tumours and Dan removing babies? As if to remind her she was the family's genetic hiccup.

‘I haven’t decided yet,’ was her stock reply. Preferably, it would be a specialty that didn’t involve hospitals. Or patients. Or getting out of bed.

‘Never mind. That choice is years away.’

*Years.* Her brothers had made medical school sound like a six-year boot camp. A feat of endurance followed by an even tougher challenge as a junior doctor. It would be like finishing a marathon and, when you were expecting a cold drink and a lie-down, being herded towards another start line.

‘Ladies!’ Hilary called sharply from the counter. ‘Positions please.’

‘Follow my lead,’ said Joy, once again taking Chloe by the arm and positioning her in front of the coffee machine. ‘You can line up the cups and saucers. We mustn’t keep the consultants waiting.’

When the first doctor walked in wearing dark blue scrubs and a paper theatre hat, once again Chloe’s legs turned peculiarly watery.

‘That’s McDreamy,’ said Joy, noticing her staring.

‘What?’

‘Anaesthetist. He could put me to sleep any time.’ Joy tried to wink and Chloe noticed for the first time that she was wearing false eyelashes. Unfortunately one had come adrift and she was desperately trying to make it stick again.

‘Takeaway cappuccino,’ called Hilary over her shoulder. ‘Chop, chop.’

‘Don’t forget I like it extra hot, Joy,’ McDreamy said as he handed over a mug with a plastic patient identity bracelet around the handle.

‘Would you like some sugar on the side?’ replied Joy, having sorted out her eyelash emergency. She dropped her voice for

Chloe's benefit. 'We flirt a bit. I tell myself it's okay to look but not touch. I'm a married woman, you see. Len's his name. Fifty-three years in June and never a cross word.'

Chloe heard a crash. Scattered around her feet she saw broken white crockery. Mercifully, the mug that seconds before had been in her hand had been empty but it wasn't going to earn her the best reference from Hilary. Chloe froze, hands shielding her eyes trying to unsee what she'd done. Joy rescued the individual fragments and made noises about finding the glue while Hilary glared.

'Sorry.' It came out as little more than a whisper.

McDreamy was very good about it and assured Chloe the mug was stolen anyway, the name on the ID band unreadable from repeated washing up.

'Don't you worry, love,' said Joy. 'With my carpal tunnels it was like a Greek wedding here on my first day. Now, fetch me something so I can sweep this up.'

'Do we have a broom?'

Joy whispered, 'Hilary usually parks hers in the corner of the storeroom.'

Out of sight, Chloe opened her backpack and found her water bottle. Lingering, she drank, gulp after gulp until she ran out of breath and the bottle was empty.