

PROLOGUE

Claire, October 2020

It wasn't until my husband was in hospital, that I finally allowed myself to cast my mind back. I knew he wasn't coming home, my protector, my best friend, my rescuer. The phone would ring every day, a doctor keeping me updated, and I am thankful for that, for the compassion he showed, the unendurable shock of not being able to visit my husband, to sit with him and stroke his hands, hands that used to be so strong, hands that could fix anything, including me.

I woke up at 2:13 a.m., my dream still vibrant and alive in my head. In it my husband was kissing my forehead, as he was always wont to do, looking into my eyes with tremendous love. It wasn't my husband as he is now, at eighty, but my husband as he was when he was young, his hair that bright ginger, his nose covered with freckles, his grin lighting up his face like sunshine. "You will be fine," he said. "I will always look after you." I woke up, and knew he was gone.

Six months later, and I am fine, if still adjusting. I am not sentimental. I sent all his clothes off to the charity shop. What on earth would be the point in keeping those closets filled? I gathered his shirts, his ties, his beautiful suits, and took them myself. I couldn't ask Tally; my daughter would have been horrified.

Since he died, I have started working again. Coiled pots and vases, some sculpture, but small, simple, not like the large ones I did twenty years ago, the ones with which I made my name. I have arthritis now and my hands don't have the dexterity they used to, so I keep the sculptures manageable. I take daily walks through Hampstead village and photograph scenes that might inspire me; the windows of the little shops that line Flask Walk, the people sitting outside the Spaniards Inn, the ducks on Whitestone Pond. I come back and sketch ideas for sculptures and pots at the kitchen table.

I have not been able to go into the attic, to sort through the detritus of a shared life. I have not been willing to revisit the past, but my husband has been dead for six months, and as I sit, this morning, I know that it is time. I need to move forward, I think, looking out the window, admiring the garden.

The shrubs are bursting into color as spring becomes summer, the profusion of cherry blossoms now dropping as the leaves burst into green, and the alliums and tulips start to droop, their time now over.

The kitchen soothes me, with its pale gray cabinets and open shelving, white plates and bowls stacked on the shelves. There is little color anywhere, save for cookbooks, and of course paintings that we collected over the course of our marriage, paintings that tell the story of our lives, that cover all the walls.

The television is on low as I decide to try to map out some new ideas today. I have an idea for an abstract duck sculpture, but first, I will paint it and see if I can make sense of it on the page. I dip my brush into water and swirl it around the cadmium yellow on a white china plate, diluting it until it is sufficiently watery, as I start to paint the outline of my duck. In the background, the murmurs from the television soothe me. I'm not really listening, until the music starts, when I catch my breath and drop the paintbrush.

It is *Madama Butterfly*. *Un bel dì, vedremo*. Maria Callas at her height. That voice. I would know that voice anywhere.

*Un bel dì, vedremo.
levarsi un fil di fumo sull'estremo.
confin del mare.
E poi la nave appare.
Poi la nave bianca.
entra nel porto, romba il suo saluto.*

I have heard this over the years, of course. It is the most popular aria in the opera, filled with longing and a hint of the tragedy that follows. I remember exactly where I was when I first heard it. Morocco. I was perched on the edge of a divan, the colorful kilim cushions piled up behind me, as Paul carefully moved the needle on the record player. He explained the story of *Madama Butterfly* to me, and what this aria was saying. He would pause to sing parts of it, softly, as if in a reverie. Of course he spoke beautiful Italian, understood every word as he translated it to my willing ears. I knew nothing about opera. I knew nothing about anything. I had never heard anything so beautiful in my life.

“She sings bel canto,” Paul said, when I opened my eyes. I had to close them, to shut everything out so I could lose myself in the music, and when I opened them there were tears trickling down my face. Paul was delighted, moving an ottoman close to me and sitting down. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it. Callas. There is no one like her. She had such rigorous training in the kind of singing that hasn’t been fashionable for decades. Can you hear how light her voice is? Most of the bel canto singers in the last century were taught by castrati, even though there were few of them left.”

I had never heard the word “castrati.” He saw my confusion, and explained that castrati were male singers who were castrated before puberty in order to keep their beautiful voices intact. Women were not allowed to sing in churches, so in the eighteenth century, castrati were often all you heard, many of whom had been sold to singing schools by impoverished parents, hoping their child would become rich and famous. He explained that the castration stopped the production of testosterone; the lack of it kept their bones soft, so they were often very tall, with large rib cages. Their breathing capacity was huge. They could hold notes for an inordinately long period of time, with a higher pitch than was thought humanly possible. “They were the voice of angels,” he said, once he had recovered from a fit of laughter at the horrified expression on my face.

This was act 2, Paul explained, putting the aria on again. “It’s the perfect opera for the beginner. You love it, don’t you.” The smile spread across his face as I nodded, and he explained that Cio-Cio San is Butterfly, awaiting the return of her husband, an American naval officer, three years after their marriage. Butterfly imagines a glorious reunion, unaware that her husband has married another woman. The opera culminates with a distraught Butterfly taking her own life.

Paul taught me about opera, starting with the light ones, Donizetti, Rossini, Bellini, moving on to Verdi and Wagner. He would escape the hordes of people sprawled out on the daybeds beneath fur blankets and retire to his room, playing music, drinking whiskey, smoking opium. I would join him there, some of the time, as his willing pupil. It was his sanctuary. And it became my sanctuary, too.

I am so lost in memories, the paintbrush having skittered across the floor once I had dropped it, I don’t hear the doorbell ring, and suddenly Tally is there in the kitchen, her eyes wide with fear.

“Oh, thank God!” She claps her hand onto her chest, presumably to quell the heart attack that may or may not have been coming. “I thought I’d find you on the floor.”

I am lucky, so very lucky, to have a daughter who lives a few streets away, who cares. Since her father died, she has worried about me unnecessarily, insisting I give her a key, insisting I check in with her on a daily basis.

“Darling, I know you’re worried about me, but I’m fine. I was focused on painting.” I follow her eyes to the red sable paintbrush on the floor next to me and lean down to pick it up.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay?” She looks at me suspiciously, her red hair so like her father’s, streaks of gray running through the temples now.

I catch sight of myself in the metal around the wall oven. My hair is now completely white. I had always hoped it would go silver, a steel gray, something imposing and dramatic, but it went white, and I have accepted it, knowing that we always want what we cannot have.

And sometimes, when we get what we want, we discover it is not the thing that we wanted after all.

“Mum?” I look up, about to dive into the rabbit hole of memories again. “Can I go into the attic? I think there’s a chair up there that would be perfect for Lizzy’s room. She’s tossed out everything from her childhood and wants mosquito nets around her bed and twinkly lights.” She rolls her eyes at my granddaughter’s antics. “Remember the gray chair that used to be in Dad’s office in the old house? Is it okay if I take it?”

“Of course.”

Tally’s phone buzzes. She looks down at the screen and sighs.

“Everything okay?” I worry about my daughter. I have always worried about my daughter. She is a good girl, a kind girl, a girl who has spent her life thinking of others. I wasn’t quite so keen on her husband. He was rather...dull. Or so we thought. None of us had any idea he was fooling around with his office assistant.

Tally only found out when she stumbled upon a pile of receipts in his desk drawer at home. Not just any old receipts, but receipts for regular dinners at The Ivy, Hakkasan, Ottolenghi. All restaurants Tally had never visited.

Alan could have got away with it had there just been receipts for smart restaurants, but there was so much more. There were countless expensive hotels. When he was supposed to have been on a work trip in Birmingham, he was, in fact, at Whatley Manor in the Cotswolds.

There were receipts from Gucci, and Chloe, and Chanel. Which was perhaps the worst thing of all. My beloved Tally is not interested in clothes. If she splurges, she'll buy one of those utterly shapeless but wonderfully comfortable dresses from Toast, and pair them with her gardening clogs. She doesn't care. She is a wonderfully talented artist (I like to think she got a little of that talent from her mother), who never fulfilled her potential because she found that her most favorite thing in the whole world, far better even than painting her days away, was being a wife and mother.

She did everything for Alan. Created a beautiful home filled with books and paintings, and cozy sofas piled with squashy cushions that beckoned you to kick off your shoes and curl up the minute you walked into the house. She cooked delicious dinners every night, and toward the end, when he was always working late, she would leave them in the fridge, tired of waiting up for him, watching the clock tick past midnight.

The receipts told a story of a man who was obsessed with a woman half his age. How tiresome, my husband and I thought, to become such a cliché. Of course we were horrified; everyone was horrified, but I was also, if I am completely honest, the tiniest bit impressed. Who would have thought Alan had it in him? Alan, who was so quiet, so disengaged from Tally, her art, her passions; Alan, who only seemed to be interested in working at the bank and very occasionally going to the opera, mostly when work had provided a box and his boss was going to be there.

My lovely Tally deserved better. Six months after he left to live with Mandy, Mandy found someone younger and more exciting. Alan attempted to come back with his tail between his legs, but—thank God—Tally said no. It was the only time I was happy to hear her saying no. Usually, she says no because she has lost her *joie de vivre*, is content, she says, being home, pottering in the conservatory that is now an art studio, listening to Radio 4.

Tally taps on her phone. “Sorry, Mum. A girl from my art class is trying to get me to join them in Ibiza. I keep saying I can’t go, but she won’t take no for an answer.”

“Darling, why on earth wouldn’t you go? Ibiza? Sunshine? Friends? You must.”

“Mum. You know I can’t stand travel. Look at my skin. If I so much as look at Mediterranean sun I turn into one giant freckle. Plus, Ibiza? Do I look like a twentysomething? I’m not the slightest bit interested in dancing all night and taking drugs.”

Oh my, I think. If only she knew how much fun that can be.

“It’s a big no thank you from me,” she says finally, and I stop pushing. She is old enough to make up her own mind. So much of her life was devoted to others—to her husband, her children—I simply want her to seize life and squeeze out every last drop. She has no idea what she has no idea about. Ibiza is exactly where she should be. And if it includes dancing all night and taking drugs, so much the better. But I have pushed her far enough and know to keep quiet.

“Right. Shall we go into the attic?”

We head into the hallway and Tally pulls down the cord and ladder. She insists I go up first so she can catch me if I fall. I find my footing on each rung before I put any weight on it. I am quite proud of myself, of my newfound agility, as I stand up in the attic and flick on the light.

“My God,” says Tally, coming up behind me, surveying the floor-to-ceiling piles, the furniture, the things I had forgotten

about. “There’s a whole other house stashed up here. How in the hell did you get everything up here?”

“The movers did it.” I push a chair out of the way, hiding my own surprise, for I too hadn’t realized quite how much there is up here.

The space is stuffed to the rafters with furniture and knickknacks we had collected over the years, much of which has no place in this pretty but small Georgian cottage, the house we bought in the midnineties, once Tally was firmly settled and moved out, with a place of her own. I have loved it here, this flat-roofed gracious white stucco dwelling in the heart of Hampstead village. I love the floor-to-ceiling windows and the way the light pours into the living room. I love the pale tiled floors in the kitchen, and the grays and browns that are soothing to my soul.

Most of all I love the simplicity. And yet, when my husband was in hospital, for the first time in years I found my mind drifting elsewhere. To brass lanterns and markets filled with colorful spices. To soft-soled babouche shoes that slipped on like silk, shoes that kept my feet warm on mosaic stone floors that held on to the cold, no matter the temperature outside.

Tally is oohing and aahing over everything in the attic—Victorian stationery boxes she remembers from her childhood, sofas that would be perfect in her office. She finds an empty box and starts packing it with knickknacks, calling over to ask if it's okay, but I hardly hear her.

I had no idea quite how many things we had accumulated up here. Tray tables, chairs, paintings from the very first flat we bought when we returned from honeymoon, rails filled with clothing not worn in years.

I spot a box filled with old paperbacks. My God. Why are these even up here? A sense of dread washes over me as I think of all the useless things that are contained in the boxes up here, things that should have been given away or thrown out years ago.

I flick through some of the books, seeing how I had made occasional notes in the margins. The pages are now brittle and yellow, the covers in both English and French. I had forgotten that I used to read in French, that once upon a time French came almost as naturally to me as English.

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. *The Valley of the Dolls* by Jacqueline Susann, and **The Adventurers** by Harold Robbins. I remember buying *Valley of the Dolls* at Better Books. I'd taken the bus to Charing Cross Road, desperate to visit this bookstore, knowing that Allen

Ginsberg had given readings there, wanting to be part of something exciting, something bigger than my sleepy Dorset past. I bought Reality Sandwiches by Ginsberg, but never got through it, although I pretended. I would go to parties and tell everyone how fantastic it was, although I only read “Love Poem on Theme by Whitman,” which was the most erotic thing I had ever read. I could see how I grew in people’s eyes as I casually explained the poem to them, as if I were the kind of bohemian hip chick I was so desperate to be.

Being able to quote lines from Ginsberg made me feel intelligent and worldly. I did not confess that I’d also grabbed Valley of the Dolls on the way home, which was much more my speed. I tucked myself in bed in our little room at the youth hostel and gasped at Neely O’Hara’s behavior, mesmerized by the glamour of the world within those pages, hoping that my boring old life—being a shopgirl, sharing a tiny room with a bunch of other girls—would somehow transform into a life filled with glamour, excitement and handsome men. I wanted my world to be bigger than my job in a department store in the West End, bigger than my room in the hostel for unmarried women in Gower Street.

I wanted more.

“What’s in there?” Tally comes over and looks at the book. “Ugh.” The shudders. “I’m not sure a charity shop would even take those. They’re all yellow.” She flinches as I drop the book back on the pile.

I feel the boxes before I see them, pulling me as if by some invisible thread. They are at the very back of the attic, and although I have spent my entire life trying not to think about them, surely it is no coincidence that I heard Madama Butterfly this morning. This is a sign from the universe, I think, although I have not thought about signs from the universe in decades. Not since, I realize, leaving Morocco.

I see it, a box is double wrapped in tape. I ask Tally for a key and saw it back and forth. Together we tug the box open. My treasures from Morocco.

I shake my head as I pull out a clay ashtray and turn it over, the words “Hotel Mamounia, Marrakech” painted around its edges.

Ashtrays, I think. They used to be everywhere. We had crystal ones and china ones, ashtrays on every table. How funny, that everyone smoked back then. On planes, trains and automobiles. On television shows. In offices. In the bath. In bed. From the minute we awoke to the minute we went to sleep or, as happened far more often, passed out in a haze, the cigarette slowly burning in our fingers. Many was the time we would wake up with a shout, our fingers burned.

I remember the night I got this ashtray. Our whole gang was at La Mamounia for drinks. Bill Willis, was there, rangy and so handsome with dark hair and sparkling green eyes, a true dandy in his flocked velvet jacket, a silk scarf around his neck, his large Square Saint Laurent sunglasses—a gift from Yves, of course—never leaving his face, even though it was so dark inside the bar you could hardly see anyone.

He liked me, Bill, thank God. He could be vicious to those he didn't. I was beautiful then, and Bill liked beautiful things. Our whole little gang was at the bar at La Mamounia for drinks. He was already three sheets to the wind, high on life, or more likely the cocaine he had just snorted in the bathroom. He noticed me admiring the ashtray.

“Chérie?” His Memphis accent was unchanged, even when he spoke French. “If you want the ashtray, you shall have the ashtray.” And he immediately pocketed it. The bartender was watching, but who would stand up to Bill Willis, one of the greatest decorators of all time?

“What even is that?” Tally's voice brings me back to the present as she takes the brown clay object from me and turns it over in her hands. “Is that an ashtray? You smoked?” She is horrified, as I laugh. Oh, if only she knew.

Tally helps me pull out the contents of the box, all those items I shipped back to London when I first arrived, drunk on the beauty and glamor, wanting, intending, to recreate the magic when and if I ever got back home, thinking I could transform wherever I ended up into a slice of Morocco.

I never unpacked those boxes.

All those items I spent fortunes on to send home—punched brass lanterns that lit up the stalls in Djemaa El Fna at night, the candles inside casting dotted patterns over the canvas fabric draped across the stall.

The memories come flooding back as we keep pulling things out of boxes, Tally exclaiming over the beauty of it all. I say nothing, too busy remembering where I was when I bought each item, remembering what it all meant.

The rug Tally is now unfolding? I remember being swept into a tiny stall in the souk, a small glass of mint tea in my hand as I tried to explain I didn't want to buy a rug. By the time I had finished my tea, two young boys emerged from the back room. They grinned at me, carrying the rug I had admired when I first came in, not because I wanted to buy it, but because I was polite, did not know what else to say when the owner pointed it out and asked what I thought. Unbeknownst to me, as I was sipping tea and marveling at the warmth and welcome this lovely shopkeeper was giving to a young English girl, that rug was then wrapped in brown paper and tied with string, as the owner cheerfully informed me they would carry it back to my riad for me to make my life easier. Being the well brought up girl I was, I had no choice but to buy it. I didn't know then that I overpaid enormously. I had no idea that haggling was what everyone did. The idea of offering less than asking price filled me with a shudder of mortification.

Tally keeps pulling things out.

“These are stunning, mum! So much color! It's so unlike you!” There are pillows covered in rich embroidered antique fabrics, floor-length velvet kaftans with embroidered bibs and deep sleeves, slippers in the softest of leather, together with some of the clothes I had brought over from London. Tally gasps as she goes through the clothes.

“Mum! I had no idea you had all this hiding up here. Oh, my God! Look at this! This is Biba! And Ossie Clark! This is probably worth a fortune. I would wear these kaftans now.” She shakes one out and we both stare at the tiny item wordlessly, both of us knowing it would never fit my beautiful Tally. I was sixties skinny thanks to a yogurt diet when I moved to London and realized I would have to get rid of my country podge if I had any shot at all of being discovered, which is why any of us moved to London back then, hoping to be rich and

famous, hoping a modeling agent would screech his Rolls-Royce to a halt on the King's Road and jump out, telling us we were the next Twiggy, another Jean Shrimpton, the new Celia Hammond.

"Mum?" Tally is standing there with a satinwood box in one hand, a sheath of letters in the other, a frown on her face. "Mum? Who on earth is T?"

She hands me the letter as my cheeks flame up and my heart pounds. This is what I didn't want to revisit. This is why those boxes have stayed in the attic, untouched. My heart does a flutter as I remember her sparkling eyes, her tiny hands and feet. I remember the way she made me feel, and I am aware that every fiber of my body is trembling.

I miss you every second of every minute of every day. I long to be back in London so I can see you again. I love you. T.

"Oh, my darling," I look down to my shaking right hand, to the gold serpent snake with the ruby eyes that I have not removed in over fifty years, the ring my daughters loved rubbing when they were small, the ring that hides a story I have never told. My eyes take on a faraway look as I wonder if now is the time to revisit the past, if now is the time to forgive myself, to get over the guilt and pain that I have carried with me all these years.

"Oh, Tally. There is so much you do not know."