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She is huddled into the corner of a shelter on Aberavon Promenade, wrapped in layers to protect herself from the cold. The wind is icy, though nothing can cool her excitement. She pulls back the cuff of her navy leather glove to reveal her wristwatch. It is still early, too soon yet to worry that he won't come. Though that is, of course, a possibility. She has no way of knowing his intentions. She only knows he'd clutched her note firmly in the palm of his hand. And she is here, as she'd said she would be.

'I brought an umbrella, though the rain's held off.'

She recognizes his voice in an instant.

And she turns.

And there he stands.

'Come and sit down,' she says nervously. 'I've brought a flask.'

She pours them two coffees from the Thermos.

'We should have done this eighteen years ago.'

'Better late than never!' she jokes, trying to cover up the painful memory of that horrific night.

The grey Welsh waves are crashing on the shore

beyond and the promenade is deserted bar two passing dog-walkers, heads down against the cold and unaware that this most precious of overdue reunions is taking place just yards away from them.

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1

grace

‘You all right there, love?’

The man wasn’t someone Grace recognized. Must be a tourist. The dog looked unfamiliar too – was it a schnauzer?

‘Yes, thanks!’ she called back cheerily as she strode into the water, hoping this was enough reassurance to send him on his way, but he hesitated.

‘Are you sure you’re safe doing that?’ he shouted.

Uh-oh, Grace thought, *a responsible citizen*. She fought the urge to tell him where to go and began cutting through the water with a steady, well-paced breaststroke. The sea was calm today. How she loved the swimming out – her own infinity pool, the Irish Sea stretching for miles before her, brimming with possibility. The number of times she’d thought, *What would happen if I just kept going?*

She could hear shouts now from the shore, a woman’s voice this time. ‘Excuse me! Helloo? I really think you ought to come back, y’know, dear.’

Oh, bugger off! she thought, and carried on sturdily scooping back the water with her arms

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Most weeks she swam at least three times, usually in her outdoor pool but sometimes in the sea, for a treat. She'd done it ever since moving to Dylan's Quay fifty-four years ago. When she told people she swam regularly in the sea they didn't believe her; when she told people she had her own pool they assumed she must be very rich; they assumed Spanish villas and mosaic tiles and sun-loungers. But Grace's pool was a free-standing canvas and metal-framed affair – a deeper, wider version of a kiddies' paddling pool, like the rugby players once used after a game. It was an ugly utilitarian construction that took up the bottom half of her garden, but she loved it and it kept her fit. Which at the age of eighty-nine was no small feat.

Reaching her usual end point – a big bell-shaped buoy, striped red and white – she stopped and trod water for a few seconds. She took in the beauty of the vast ocean and caught her breath before flipping on to her back to float. In just over two months she'd be turning ninety. Ninety years of age! 'Ye gods,' she whispered, staring up at the cloudless summer sky. 'When did that happen?'

Nobody answered except a disgruntled skua passing overhead who looked down and screeched at her with contempt. Grace lay there for a minute, supported by the ocean, allowing the water to lap gently against her skin. This was the best place in the world for solving problems and working things out. And for several days now, she'd been mulling something over: an issue which just wouldn't go away. If she went ahead with

her idea, it was going to cause such trouble. And yet if she didn't . . . she would never forgive herself for not trying. It was tempting to opt for an easy life and just forget the whole thing. After all, it wasn't too late – she hadn't discussed it with anyone else: John knew nothing of it, nor did her granddaughter, Elin.

Grace winced at the thought of telling *her*.

She turned on to her front and began swimming back, dismayed to see that a welcome party had gathered on the shore. The man with the schnauzer had been joined by a likely wife and two sons. The wife walked towards the water's edge, followed by the man, their arms outstretched in fear. *Iesu Mawr, they're going to try and help me.*

And sure enough, as Grace took her last couple of strokes, the two-person rescue team waded into the water up to their knees and reached out to grab her, one on either side. 'Don't panic,' said the wife as they yanked Grace on to the sand. 'We'll soon have you safe and dry.'

Grace didn't as a rule fit the Grumpy Old Lady stereotype: she was generally polite and tried to respect others, no matter how different their world view may be from hers. But the one thing she could not tolerate was being patronized. And although she knew *intellectually* that these kind holidaymakers believed they were doing a good turn, she couldn't hide her annoyance. 'GET OFF ME!' she snapped, and pushed the wife a little too hard, sending her flying on to the sand.

'It's all right, let's just stay calm, shall we?' said the man.

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‘I think she must be . . . y’know.’ The wife got up and dusted herself down, making meaningful eyes at her husband.

‘You think I must be what?’ asked Grace, in a louder voice than she’d intended, but there was water in her ear. She turned her head on one side and gave it a few swift taps, trying to dislodge the fluid. Grace knew this would simply add to the wife’s assumption that she was in the company of a batty nonagenarian.

‘WHERE DO YOU LIVE, DEAR?’ shouted the wife, slowly and emphatically.

Grace responded at the same volume and speed. ‘ABOUT FIVE MINUTES’ WALK FROM HERE, DEAR.’

‘Aw, she’s just taking the mick now, Lyn,’ the man whined.

‘Dad, can we get ice-creams?’

‘Yeah, go on, Lyn,’ said Grace. ‘Bugger off and buy your sons an ice-cream.’ She pulled her portable changing room – essentially a long, home-made towelling poncho – over her head, and began to disrobe. Lyn appeared to be torn between staying put or joining her family, who were now bored with the whole pensioner-rescue thing and heading off up the beach. It was Grace who helped her decide, smiling inanely she whispered, ‘I’m completely starkers under here now, Lyn. D’you fancy a gander?’ The woman needed no more encouragement, turning on her heel and stomping off, the sand impeding her steps. ‘Honestly, you try to help some people!’ she mumbled indignantly.

Grace laughed to herself as she pulled on her knickers and bra with well-practised ease, her head poking out the top of the poncho as she dressed quickly underneath. She'd always said that when she reached ninety, if she made it that far, she hoped she'd be able to walk without a stick and fasten her bra. She'd surpassed that ambition, for sure: as well as her swimming, she still did twice-weekly yoga, could easily climb the steep hills of Dylan's Quay, and drove to Aberystwyth once a month. The staff at Cadwallader House – a local residential home very close to her heart – never tired of saying, 'Grace Meredith, you're a phenomenon, and an inspiration to us all.'

She rubbed her head with a towel, combed her hair and gathered her things. Licking her lips, she savoured their saltiness before slathering them with lip-salve. She loved the feel of her skin after sea-swimming – it invigorated her, made her feel alive, which these days she didn't take for granted. Reaching the top of the beach steps, she sat on the brightly painted bench, caught her breath and surveyed the view – Dylan's Quay, her beloved home town for more than five decades. There was no other place like it on Earth.

Unzipping the side pocket of her little rucksack, Grace retrieved the greetings card she'd been carrying around with her for the past two days and stared at it for the umpteenth time. The picture on the front was taken from a painting of the Brecon Beacons – a winter view with snowy peaks and crisp, stark lines. But it wasn't the picture that held Grace in its thrall: it

was what was printed on the back of the card. That name.

Shutting her eyes for a moment, she drew breath. It was no good. The thought just wouldn't leave her alone. It had plagued her, given her sleepless nights, and she needed to share it with someone else, get a fresh perspective. Much as she dreaded doing so, she would have to talk to John. And thrusting the card back into her rucksack, Grace began striding up the hill.

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2

elin

A two-hour drive east of Dylan's Quay, Grace's fifty-one-year-old granddaughter stood in her Cardiff kitchen, staring at a Post-it-covered breakfast bar. Each pink square bore the name from a guest list that Elin Matthews held in her hand. She was currently debating where to position an elderly cousin and a much-loved family friend. 'Just put them next to each other, for God's sake!' said her husband, Greg, exasperated that yet another Sunday morning was being taken up by this damn party planning. 'I don't see what the problem is!'

'The problem, Greg,' said Elin, equally exasperated, 'is that politically the two of them are poles apart. And the last thing I want at my grandmother's ninetieth is out-and-out geriatric fisticuffs!'

Of course, the *real* problem had nothing to do with the seating plan. The *real* problem was that the party was to be a surprise. And the reason it was to be a surprise was because Grama Grace had said categorically that she didn't *want* a damn party. 'A load of fuss and nonsense over a silly old woman like me!' she'd grumbled.

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Elin had told her she was being mean and even ungrateful. ‘But people want to celebrate you, Grama Grace. Don’t deny them the chance to do that!’

‘Well, they can do it in the comfort of their own homes,’ Grace had retorted. And the subject was well and truly closed. Or so Grace thought.

But Elin – as usual – felt she knew better, and that her grandmother was just being frustratingly humble. ‘She’ll love it on the day!’ she had said, annoyed when Greg raised a doubting eyebrow in response. And ignoring the tiniest of niggles that perhaps the party *might* be a mistake, she had thrown herself into planner mode. Which, of course, she was delighted to do, seeing as organization – aka *being in control* – was Elin’s happy place. Admittedly it had been easier said than done. Deciding on an afternoon tea party was no problem. Even finding the venue was straightforward – the Brookfield Hotel in Dylan’s Quay on 2 September – Grace’s actual birthday.

It was just the guest list that was proving to be difficult. Since the original plan had been drawn up, three of the guests had died – understandable, seeing as they were in their nineties. And whenever Elin thought she’d finalized the list, she’d remember someone else from her grandmother’s past who she’d like to invite. Then there were the locals in Dylan’s Quay, like the window cleaner or the street sweeper: Grace would talk to absolutely anybody, and felt that absolutely anybody was her friend. How was Elin meant to prioritize those friendships? **Copyrighted Material**

It would have helped, of course, if she'd enlisted the help of John, who to all intents and purposes was Elin's step-grandfather. But John would undoubtedly have spilled the beans and told Grace of the plan: there were no secrets between those two, after all.

'What are fisticuffs?' sixteen-year-old Beca asked her parents. She'd been loitering in the kitchen after breakfast, grateful for any distraction from her Geography revision. Even the boring details of who sat where at her great-grandmother's birthday tea were more interesting than glacial landscapes.

'"Fisticuffs" is an old-fashioned term for fighting,' said Greg with a smile. 'And your old-fashioned mother, as usual, is being overly cautious.'

'No I'm not! I just want everyone to have a nice time, that's all!'

Greg kissed his wife's head as he passed her en route to the dishwasher, carrying Beca's empty cereal bowl. 'I know you do, sweetheart. But this party is starting to take over your life. *And* mine, come to think of it.'

'*And mine,*' mumbled Beca.

'Erm . . . excuse me, young lady!' said Elin in a tone Beca knew well. 'The only thing that should be taking over *your* life right now is tomorrow's GCSE.'

Beca rolled her eyes.

Returning her attention to the table plan, Elin sighed with frustration. She was allergic to asymmetry. She liked things to be balanced, neat and ordered, and these two stray invitees were bugging her.

'Look, just shove 'em anywhere,' said Greg.

‘Preferably on a table full of skinny guests so there’s more elbow room. I’m going for a run.’

‘Please be back by two, Greg. I need you to test Beca on Water Supply and Consumption. She’ll only shout if I do it.’

‘I don’t *need* testing!’ moaned Beca, who hated the way her mother interfered with her revision. Mainly because she wasn’t really doing any and didn’t want to be caught out.

‘Let’s not waste time arguing, Bec,’ said Elin, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice. At all costs they must avoid arguing today. Beca only had one exam left and then they could all relax.

‘See ya!’ shouted Greg, and the front door slammed.

But Elin didn’t reply. She was too caught up in a world of party planning and Post-it notes.

3

grace

As residential homes went, the exterior grandeur of Cadwallader House belied its more functional, clinical interior. Nestled safely on the highest reaches above Dylan's Quay, with grounds surrounded by firs, it boasted thirty-two bedrooms which gazed out either at the coast or back into the hills. Formerly the country residence of a local benefactor and shipping magnate, the house had been bequeathed to the community in his will and for the past twenty years it had been a well-run, friendly, council-owned residence, specializing in care for the elderly. Everyone who visited would comment on the vast floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the town and the West Wales coastline beyond. Through these vast glass panes, soul-uplifting light flooded the rooms, compensating for the not-so-uplifting utilitarian furniture, the handrails and stair lifts and safety grilles – ugly but necessary.

Grace had been visiting Cadwallader House for over three years. She knew virtually every resident personally, but two of them were particularly special: her

darling John, of course, and his younger sister, Cynthia, aka Cissie. They'd known each other a lifetime, and for so many years she'd felt they were indestructible. But, of course, they weren't. Time was bound to take its toll eventually on one or all of them. It was Cissie who'd moved to Cadwallader House first, her mind having taken her to such extremes that the only way forward was full-time care. What a heart-breaking decision that had been. Grace and John had continued living together for another eighteen months until John's deteriorating balance began to lead to more and more falls. Reluctantly at that point they'd decided he should go and join Cissie. It was reassuring for Grace to know that they were both being cared for, of course. But their departure had left a gaping hole in her home. She missed them more than she would ever admit. And it was why she'd become such a regular fixture at Cadwallader House – visiting at least once a day. Even during Covid, Grace would take her daily exercise in the form of a walk – striding up to Cadwallader House, where she would stand in the grounds and wave at them through their individual bedroom windows. When life returned to some semblance of normality and she was allowed back inside the building, the staff would frequently ask her when she was going to move in. But Grace would always smile and politely decline the offer. She knew that John was torn: on the one hand, he'd love them to live under the same roof again; on the other, he adored the fact that at eighty-nine his ~~anna~~ Grace still thrived on

her independence. Cissie, bless her, had no opinion on the matter. Not any more.

This afternoon Cissie was in her chair by the window, looking out, chatting to herself in the made-up language only she understood. It was a happy room, this. John and Grace had done their best to brighten it up with boldly coloured cushions and throws, fresh flowers and scent diffusers. Framed photographs filled the walls and shelves with bygone smiles: stolen moments from Cissie's past and happier days from her long life. One such photo was a black-and-white shot, taken at her wedding to Syd when Cissie was barely twenty. But she no more knew Syd's face now than that of Grace or John.

Today the carers had dressed her in purple, a bonny dress that had once fitted her properly but now swamped her ever-diminishing build in swathes of fabric. And on her tiny feet were the home-made socks that Grace had knitted her for Christmas, tucked inside fur-lined slippers. Despite the summer warmth outside, Cissie's shrinking body still fell prey to the cold, even on the hottest of days.

'She's had her nails done today,' said John, pulling up a couple of chairs. 'Haven't you, beaut?' And his sister smiled back at him, her face still pretty and her eyes still shining, despite the disease that permanently resided inside her head, distancing her more, day by day, from the world she'd once inhabited.

'Let's have a look, then,' said Grace, admiring

Cissie's manicure. 'Oh, there's posh! You put me to shame!'

'And she bought you something from the WI stall, didn't you, Ciss?' said John, reaching under Cissie's chair and pulling out a gift, wrapped in pink tissue. He placed it in Cissie's lap, hoping she'd make sense of his actions and give the gift to Grace. But her brain could not process the task he'd set and she pawed at it gently.

'Oh, thank you, cariad!' said Grace, playing along and carefully taking the gift. Cissie watched as Grace unwrapped it, revealing inside the layers of delicate tissue a headscarf patterned with copper-and-yellow-coloured squares. 'Wow!' Grace exclaimed, taking the scarf and wrapping it around her head. 'Very Audrey Hepburn, don't you think?'

And Cissie gasped with delight, before uttering one of her very rare coherent responses: 'Pretty, pretty.'

John squeezed Grace's hand.

They stayed for over two hours. The care assistant brought them tea and slices of home-made cake also purchased from the WI, and then Grace put on the CD of fifties classics that always made Cissie smile. It was their routine now, and one which gave both her and John a short-lived but precious relief from the pain of losing Cissie to that inaccessible world. The transformation when she sang along was indeed a joy to behold. Almost instantly, Cissie would join in with Elvis Presley or Frank Sinatra or whoever was up first on the track shuffle, articulating the lyrics with such clarity

that sometimes Grace wanted to say, *Is it an act, all this? Are you just pretending?*

John walked her to the door and partway down the drive, though he was much slower on his feet than Grace, tentatively relying on his Zimmer frame.

‘Come on, Captain Tom.’ Grace firmly believed the less mollycoddling of seniors, the more apt they were to stay mobile – after all, she herself was a case in point.

‘Beca’s last exam tomorrow, John.’

‘*Duw*, she’s growing up fast, isn’t she, bach?’

‘Yes indeed.’ Grace’s voice faded. Should she tell him?

As usual, he could read her mind. ‘Right, come on, Grace Meredith. Out with it.’

‘What?’ asked Grace, though she knew feigning ignorance was pointless. He looked at her, waiting. She took a deep breath, shut her eyes and told him.

‘I think I’ve found Alys.’

Her voice was shaking and John remained silent as he took in the news.

‘She’s living in *Brecon*, John. Eighty-odd miles away. Can you believe it? I presumed she’d be abroad, or worse than that, I thought she might—’

‘Whoa, slow down, beaut. You’re going too fast for me now.’

Grace took another deep breath and steadied herself before calmly recounting how she’d received a little thank-you from Dolly Hughes earlier in the week.

‘Dolly Hughes?’

‘From yoga. Rescues greyhounds.’

‘Oh yes. Go on.’

‘Well, I’d done some dog-sitting for her when she had her cataracts done and she made me a bara brith to say thank-you and sent it with this.’

Grace reached into her rucksack and pulled out the Brecon Beacons card.

John took it from her and stared at it for a few moments. ‘You’ve lost me now, bach,’ he said.

‘Turn it over. Look at the back.’

He did so, revealing a plain printed sticker that read, *Arcadia Gallery, Brecon. Taken from a painting by local artist Alys Meredith.*

‘Doesn’t mean anything,’ he said eventually, handing back the card. ‘Could be anyone.’

‘But Alys always loved painting hills, didn’t she? And it’s unusual to see “Alys” spelled like that, isn’t it, the Welsh way?’

‘Not really, love. We are *in* Wales, after all.’

‘Anyway,’ she paused, unable to look him in the eye. ‘I’m thinking of getting in touch.’

‘No.’ The word was out before he’d had time to think.

Then he reached out and took her hand, his voice steady and direct. ‘What she did to you, Grace. And to Elin – it was awful.’

‘It was also thirty years ago,’ Grace countered, and there was a steeliness to her voice which he’d rarely heard before. ‘I’m nearly ninety, John. And Alys is my daughter!’

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‘Little Beca thinks the woman’s dead! Doesn’t even know she’s got a grandmother.’

Grace shook her head. ‘Well, that’s what Elin wanted – I had to respect that, didn’t I?’

‘Oh, Gracie, Gracie . . .’ This whole subject was obviously upsetting John a lot more than she’d anticipated.

‘Look, you’re right,’ she said, softer now. ‘It’s probably not my Alys, and even if it is, she’s unlikely to reply—’

‘You’ve already written to her?’

‘Not yet,’ she whispered.

‘Don’t, Gracie. *Don’t!* Why set yourself up for all that pain?’ And his usually calm demeanour was disturbed, tears moistening his kind eyes.

She sighed. Maybe he was right.

‘I take it you haven’t discussed all this with Elin?’ he asked gently.

‘Of course I bloody haven’t!’ said Grace, a tad of hysteria creeping in at the prospect. ‘She’d go ballistic.’

‘Well, it’s not often I agree with that granddaughter of yours,’ he smiled, ‘but I think she’d have good reason on this occasion.’ And he hugged her to him, reassuring her with a kiss as she inhaled his decades-old, familiar clean smell of Brylcreem and Palmolive soap.

‘I love you, John.’

And John replied, as he always did, in Welsh: ‘*Caru ti ’fyd, Grace.*’ **Copyrighted Material**

4

beca

‘DON’T MAKE ME HAVE TO COME UP THERE—’

Beca made a bet with herself as to what her mother would shout out next.

‘—WE’RE LEAVING IN FIFTEEN MINUTES!’

Almost right, Beca thought. She’d just got the time wrong, expecting *five* minutes leeway, not fifteen. Still, this was good news. A whole ten minutes more in bed. Beca shut her eyes and pulled the duvet over her face. She should really have been leaping out of bed – desperate for today to be over, eager to be free of school at last. But the thought of sitting at a desk in a hall full of silent, scribbling sixteen-year-olds, staring at a paper full of questions that she would never be able to answer, made Beca Matthews feel nauseous. By lunchtime she would have handed in her nineteenth exam paper and failed her nineteenth exam. She knew this, without a shadow of a doubt.

The kids in the year above her still bemoaned the fact that they couldn’t take *their* GCSEs last summer *because of the Covid*. Or ‘Corvid’ as Mrs James Art pronounced it – her Valleys accent turning the

pandemic into a classification term for ravens and magpies with a single stretched vowel. Beca thought the year above were deluded: why would you *choose* to sit exams, for God's sake? She'd have given anything to do the whole thing on coursework – though as her mother was so fond of pointing out, 'It wouldn't make any difference with you, Beca, you don't put the work in *either* way!' She tried to think of a time when her mother had congratulated her, rather than berating her. It'd happened a few times, of course – the woman wasn't a monster, after all. It's just that praise wasn't her default position.

She had *definitely* been proud when Beca passed her grade one piano. And two, three and four. And when she got a distinction in her grade five, Beca had witnessed her mother actually weep. *Weep*. The joy didn't last long, of course, because when it came to sitting grade five theory, Beca had monumentally failed. And then her mother had let out that awful, disappointed sigh she'd mastered so well. 'But I'm no good with all that stuff,' Beca had whined defensively. 'Music theory's as bad as Maths!' Big mistake, as this had only prompted her mother to play the same-old-same-old song, *You're no good at Maths because you refuse to listen!*

It wasn't that. Lessons simply outwitted her, that was all. She couldn't fit the logic together in her head. Her mother had sent her to all sorts of specialists and psychologists over the years, trying to get to the root of it. Was it ADHD? Depression? Dyslexia? Asperger's? As if a label would somehow solve Eli's frustration.

As if finding an adjective to describe her daughter's failure at pretty much *everything* would provide them with the missing link, the key to unlock the issue.

'Maybe she hasn't got an *issue*,' her dad had ventured during one of her parents' many whispered discussions that they thought Beca couldn't hear. 'Maybe she's just . . .'

'Do *not* even think about saying it, Greg!' her mother had snapped.

'What?'

'Our daughter is not . . . *thick*.' She'd spat the last word as if it had been *psychopathic* or *murderous*.

'I was going to say *artistic*,' he'd mumbled.

'She's had the bloody tests! She's not autistic and you know it!'

'Calm down, Elin, I said *ARTistic*, for Christ's sake.'

And then a row had ensued, where her dad put forward his case in defence of his daughter – that she painted beautiful pictures, that she could play the piano and she could draw. So what if she couldn't solve a quadratic equation or tell you who Winston Churchill was. She was an artist!

In that moment, Beca had loved her dad for describing her so, even though it wasn't true. She wasn't bad at art, for sure, but she was hardly Van Gogh.

'For God's sake, Beca, you're not even dressed!' her mother screeched as she barged into Beca's doze-dream and swiftly opened the blinds. 'I despair of you, I really, really do. Now COME ON!'

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As Elin pulled off the duvet, Beca screeched back, as she did most mornings, ‘That’s abuse, that is! It’s an infringement of my human rights!’

‘Uniform. Now!’ And Elin picked up the navy skirt and polo shirt abandoned on the floor since yesterday and hurled them at her. ‘I’m not leaving this room until you’ve put it on.’

‘Weirdo.’

‘You can call me what you like, Beca Matthews. You have a responsibility to finish these exams and finish them you will!’

Ten minutes later, they were sitting in Elin’s Skoda estate heading towards St Stephen’s High. They had taken this journey together every school day for the past five years. Beca had never missed a day of school – she had a perfect attendance record. This wasn’t due to any sense of commitment on her part – it was due entirely to her mother’s determination. ‘We have to set an example, Beca,’ she’d said on many occasions, always with an apologetic smile that beckoned Beca to see things from her mother’s perspective and come inside.

Because Beca’s mother was Mrs Elin Matthews.

And Mrs Elin Matthews was Head Teacher of St Stephen’s High.

Being the daughter of a head teacher brought along its own particular brand of downside. No one dared gossip or share secrets with the Head Teacher’s daughter,

for fear of being reported; and no one dared call at the house of the Head Teacher's daughter, because it was also the house of the Head Teacher. So the best and safest option was to avoid the Head Teacher's daughter altogether. Beca was used to it by now. This state of friendlessness had accompanied her throughout her high-school life. It was not that anyone was mean to her – that was the *upside* of being who she was – but they treated her with a kind of distanced respect. She was acknowledged but never included. Smiled at but never laughed with. And that's just the way it was.

The truth of the matter, though, was that Beca actually liked being on her own. It wasn't that she disliked the other girls in school – or the boys, for that matter. She just found them all a bit . . . samey. They dressed the same, liked the same music, had no actual opinions – none that were exciting or controversial, anyway. So she didn't really feel as if she was missing out. Beca knew she was different. But why was different *bad*? She could get so much more done on her own: on her own, Beca could immerse herself in the world of a book. Or play the electric piano in her room. Hour upon hour, headphones on, neither of her parents ever hearing what she was playing but always assuming it was classical. Because the music rack displayed works by composers she knew her mother loved – Mahler, Mozart and Brahms. And if either parent were to pass the bedroom door or peep in, all they'd see and hear was Beca's fingers pounding the keys with velvety thuds, navigating flats, sharps and arpeggios with

dexterity and speed. And they'd congratulate themselves that their daughter was such an accomplished classical pianist. But what Beca was *really* playing was far from classical: what Beca was *really* playing was completely improvised, as she lost herself in the notes and the key changes. Eyes closed, she'd let the music transport her to a world only she knew, losing all sense of time, and only stopping when her mother gently tapped her on the shoulder to ask if she wanted lasagne for tea. This would disturb her from her semi-hypnotic state and bring her back to the boring present-day of her life.

'You're sure you don't want me to drop you by the hall?' Elin asked gently.

'No, you're all right,' Beca said, clambering out of the car. 'Cheers, Mum.'

The one demand Beca had made of her mother in exchange for agreeing to accept a lift to school was that she drop her off two streets away – the thought of anyone witnessing her leave the Head Teacher's car made her blush to her roots. 'What difference does it make?' Elin had asked at first. 'It's not like it's news to anyone that you're my daughter!' But for Beca this was a deal-breaker.

Just as she was closing the door, Elin stopped her. 'Becs?'

'What?' Beca knew what was coming and she watched as her mother struggled with emotion.

'I do, y'know **Copyrighted Material**

Beca looked around to check no one was listening, anxious to put distance between herself and her mother's car. 'Mum, I've got to go,' she mumbled, shutting the door.

'Good luck! Do your best!' Elin called out.

Beca swallowed hard. She preferred it when her mum was cross with her or disappointed. It was far easier to deal with Angry Mum than Sad and Needy Mum. She knew that her mother meant well and that she berated herself for being an inadequate parent far more than she'd ever let on. As Beca headed in the direction of school, she didn't turn round for fear of seeing her mother's face, forlorn and anguished. Elin beeped her horn as she passed and Beca raised her hand in a half-hearted wave.

Reaching the main gate, Beca looked at the tired buildings, the kids, all identically clothed, tootling in different directions like a thousand busy ants, heading this way and that, bustling with noise and hormones and energy. And she felt liberated. Because this was a milestone, albeit a secret one right now: this was the last time she'd ever have to walk through this gate. She had no idea what she was going to do after today, or where she was going to go. The only thing she *did* know was that she wouldn't be coming back here in September. Or ever again, for that matter. She just had to work out how to break the news to her education-obsessed mother. Because whatever Beca's next step turned out to be, it was guaranteed not to win Elin's approval.

5

elin

When she arrived home that evening, Elin presumed the house was empty. Calling out to Greg, then to Beca, she was met only with silence. She'd phoned Beca earlier to see how the Geography exam had gone. All she could glean from her clammed-up daughter, monosyllabic as usual, was that it *went okay*, before she disappeared behind the excuse of a bad signal. It would have been nice to celebrate with Beca tonight – it was the end of a stressful few months for them both, the end of a chapter really. There'd be sixth form starting in September, of course, so Beca's schooldays weren't over yet. But finishing GCSEs was a milestone in her daughter's young life.

Elin shuffled off her high heels, rubbed her aching feet and berated herself for not wearing sensible brogues. It was just that a court shoe was so much more in keeping with how a head teacher should look. She picked up the mail en route to the kitchen – a lot of junk which she slung into the recycling. She sighed – such a needless waste of paper. But in amongst all that was a slim cardboard box bearing the logo *Party Time*

Printers. She let out a little yelp of joy – the invitations for Grama Grace’s ninetieth had arrived! Ooh, good, she was looking forward to opening those. There was also a parcel for Greg. She gave it a little rattle and smiled affectionately. More of his beloved supplements. Poor guy was obsessed with the need to battle time, trying desperately to stop it in its tracks.

Catching sight of her reflection in the wall mirror, Elin did a quick spot check: she was still looking good for her age, fair play. The highlights in her shoulder-length auburn hair added to its vibrancy, and her complexion was fresh and creamy. Even after a hard day’s work. Elin was blessed with full lips and bright eyes and although age had not forgotten her when it came to handing out crow’s feet, she didn’t mind. It was natural. And she prided herself on never having had Botox or fillers – God forbid she would ever go down that road.

Opening the French doors that led on to the decking, she let in the warm June air, shut her eyes and inhaled. This evening she could allow herself to relax a little and indulge in a guilt-free gin and tonic. Gin was strictly an occasional treat because Elin believed that treats, like anything in life, needed to be earned. She measured out a single shot and poured it over the ice and lemon in a pristine crystal glass before topping it up with tonic. Greg never understood why she had to measure the gin. ‘Just guess! Pour the bloody stuff in!’ he’d say, confounded once again by her cautiousness. But Elin knew to her cost that alcohol needed to be respected.

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Outside on the decking, Elin flopped into the capacious garden chair, put her feet up and turned her face towards the evening sun, still quite high in the sky – it was midsummer, after all. ‘*Iechyd da,*’ she whispered in a solitary toast to herself, savouring a sip of the fresh, zesty drink that sent a welcome tingling through to her fingertips. Then with a small kitchen knife she slit open the cardboard box that sat in her lap and carefully retrieved its contents: a neatly wrapped bundle of sixty invitations. Printed on rose-coloured card and framed with ivy:

You are invited to
GRACE MEREDITH'S
*****SURPRISE*****

90TH BIRTHDAY PARTY
on September 2nd 2022, at 2pm
at The Brookfield Hotel, Dylan's Quay

But PLEASE REMEMBER IT'S A **SURPRISE**
GRACE MUST NOT FIND OUT ABOUT IT!
RSVP itsasurprise@widenet.com

Or
23 Elm Tree Avenue, Lakeside, Cardiff CF23 3SX

AND REMEMBER, **MUM'S THE WORD!**

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Had she gone over the top by repeating the word ‘surprise’? Now that she looked at it objectively, the invitation did sound a bit . . . well, *bossy*. Greg would no doubt have something to say about it. But she’d rather be thought of as a domineering granddaughter than have the whole project jeopardized. She put the invitations carefully back in their box. She’d send them all out tomorrow. Sitting back and feeling proud of herself, Elin took a deep breath and relaxed.

But her peace was soon disturbed by the sound of two male voices coming from next door’s garden. The house had been empty for almost a year, since the death of her elderly neighbour Mrs Latham, and had been on the market for several months, so Elin had grown accustomed to nobody living there. Someone new must have bought the house. She got up and made her way to the party wall. ‘Hello?’ she called out tentatively. The voices stopped.

‘Yes?’ came the impatient reply.

Elin couldn’t see much through the abundance of foliage but could just make out two figures on the other side of the wall – an Asian man with greying temples and a small, neat moustache, about the same age as her, was standing with a younger white guy, in his thirties maybe, with long sandy locks. The younger man wore a sleeveless T-shirt that shamelessly showed off his biceps. Which he undoubtedly used a lot, judging by the weighty hedge-trimmer he was holding.

‘Hello, I’m Elin,’ she said. ‘Welcome to the neighbourhood! Sorry, I can’t really see—’

‘My name is Sunil Chakrabarti,’ said the older man, polite but very formal. ‘I’m just making preparations. We shan’t take up residence for some time.’

‘Oh,’ said Elin, thrown by the fact that she couldn’t really see who she was talking to. ‘So what’s your moving-in date?’

‘I’m not at liberty to say, I’m afraid. Sorry, but I really have to get on. Time is against us.’ And with that he resumed talking to Mr Biceps, who she thought possibly gave her a friendly nod of apology, though it was difficult to tell through the foliage.

She headed back to the house. How intriguing! Greg would find out more. He was a much better detective than she was and also far more sociable. Before she knew it, Mr Chakrabarti would no doubt become a family friend.

Her mobile buzzed.

Managed to grab court @ David Lloyd. C U @8 ish?

Elin wished Greg wouldn’t abbreviate like that. It was so . . . teenage. The man was fifty-two, for God’s sake. She was about to reply when another message came in on her book club’s WhatsApp group.

Don’t forget ladies – get together’s been changed to tonight not next week. See you later bookworms, Joan x

Oh God, she *had* forgotten. Bloody hell.

Her first thought was not to go. She’d only just sat

down and now she'd made a start on her gin she couldn't drive, she'd have to walk. She texted Greg back:

**Forgot Book Club! Sorry! Pick me up from
Joan's at 10 if you can. Thanks.**

Right. Better change. And grab the notes she'd made on tonight's book. It was called *He Kills in Blue* – a Jack Danfield thriller about a murderous American cop. Not the best book Elin had read, to be honest. Highly predictable and very derivative – and strangely Joan's choice *again* this month, but Elin couldn't complain: the women in book club were nice enough and she'd felt honoured they'd asked her to join. She did find it frustrating though that they were mainly interested in devouring brownies, guzzling prosecco and discussing fantasy casting. Morgan Freeman and Colin Firth seemed to be shortlisted for every book, though Benedict Cumberbatch had been featuring a lot lately. *Why can't we just discuss the damn book?* Elin would think, though she was fighting a losing battle on that one.

As she walked across the landing, Elin heard a familiar sound – the soft, velvety thud of fingers on a muted keyboard. Ah, so Beca *was* home. She knocked on the door out of courtesy, though she doubted Beca would hear her, shoulders hunched over the piano, headphones on and lost in her own world. Elin was loath to make Beca jump, to spoil the peace her daughter was

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clearly enjoying, but as she turned to go the velvety thudding abruptly stopped.

‘Alrigh?’ said Beca, having sensed her mother’s presence and pulling off her headphones.

‘Well, I bet *someone*’s a happy bunny!’ said Elin with a smile, trying to sound jolly.

‘Yeah,’ mumbled Beca, looking nothing like a joyful rabbit.

‘Nice break for you now before we have to start thinking about A levels. I was wondering whether—’

‘Mum, don’t! Seriously, just . . .’ Beca looked forlorn. ‘You’re always moving on to the next thing. You never stand still.’

Elin nodded. ‘Sorry. You’re right. Let’s enjoy today’s achievement first.’ There was an awkward silence. ‘I’ve got book club tonight, otherwise we could have celebrated. D’you have any plans?’ She regretted the question as soon as it was out of her mouth. Of course Beca wouldn’t have any plans. She didn’t have any friends.

‘Nah. Gonna FaceTime Grama Grace and then I might get a pizza.’

Elin rustled in her bag for some cash. ‘Here we are – my treat,’ she said, handing Beca a twenty-pound note.

‘Thanks.’

‘And don’t forget when you’re talking to Grama Grace, don’t mention—’

‘Don’t mention the bloody party! Yes, I know, Mum, you don’t have to keep saying it.’

Elin smiled sheepishly, aware of her control-freakery.

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An awkwardness descended between them once again before Beca put her headphones back on and returned to the keyboard. The invisible wall of things unsaid had once again defeated Elin, leaving her separated from her little girl, as it so often did. Swallowing down a sob, she retreated to the sanctuary of her en-suite bathroom and turned on the shower.

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6

beca

Beca's usual pizza outlet was closed due to family bereavement. So she'd have to try somewhere different. After her mother left for book club, she hauled herself off her bed and set off on the ten-minute walk to Bel-lamy's Italian Palace. The name was far too grand for what it was: a cheap and cheerful pizza takeout that made a fortune selling overpriced slices of pepperoni deluxe to hungry teenagers. Two boys she recognized from school were waiting in front of her in the queue. They ignored her, of course, too caught up in their own world to notice anyone else and in very high spirits, probably induced by vodka or some other substance. It was just banter between them but they were loud and showing off and the girl behind the counter scowled at them. 'Keep it down,' she shouted, 'or I'll 'ave you barred!'

Beca bit her lip to stop herself smiling. The counter girl's Cardiff accent was really strong, and her 'barred' sounded like 'baa-ahed'. As she boxed up the boys' order, she turned to Beca with as much warmth as a bowl of cold porridge and asked what she wanted. 'An'

don't ask for a slice, 'cos we're sold out. It's whole pizzas only or you can sling yer hook.'

'A Slim Jim with extra chillies,' said Beca quickly, adding a fearful, 'please.'

Counter Girl nodded, and silence ensued.

Beca tried reading the name on Counter Girl's badge: *Soozi*. She thought what a cool spelling it was of an otherwise plain name. But then, to be fair, 'Soozi' did exude cool. Clear black skin, bleached braids twisted up high on her head, the sides of her hair still dark and cut close to her scalp; she wore no make-up, but a row of studs adorned her right ear and she had a silver sleeper through her left nostril. *I bet she's got her tongue pierced*, Beca thought. Soozi was wearing latex hygiene gloves, but through their opaque whiteness Beca could see her nails were painted vibrant orange.

'Take a photo, it'll last longer!' Soozi barked when she noticed Beca staring. And turned back to her dough.

Beca blushed at being caught out, but she was fixated on the way Soozi tossed the soft white floury ball back and forth, changing its shape in the process, transforming it within seconds into a flat round base. With well-practised ease, she flung it down on the counter, splattered a dollop of thick tomato sauce in the centre and spread it out uniformly to the edges. Then she grabbed a handful of grated mozzarella and dropped it from a great height on to the base, before sprinkling chopped ham, herbs and chillies on top of the cheese. The whole process was like a carefully

choreographed dance. And with one swift action she scooped up the raw pizza with her paddle, slammed it into the oven and hooked the door shut. ‘That’s five seventy-five,’ Soozie sighed, pulling off her latex gloves and holding out her hand for the cash. Beca handed her the twenty and Soozie gave her fourteen pounds in change, depositing the odd twenty-five pence in a jar on the counter. ‘Cheers for the tip,’ she said. Beca frowned but was too shy to complain about the enforced gratuity. ‘I’m savin’ up, aren’ I?’ Soozie said, by way of explanation. ‘For my tour.’

‘Backpacking?’

‘Gigs,’ she said. ‘I’m a singer.’

‘Oh. Right.’

And that was the end of the chat. They waited in silence as the pizza baked, Soozie wiping down the surfaces before deftly constructing a takeaway box in a matter of seconds. She must have been working there a while, Beca thought.

When the oven eventually pinged, Soozie pulled out the sizzling pizza, neatly flipping it on to the counter. Then, pizza wheel in hand, she cut it into six before sliding it into the box. ‘Enjoy,’ she said as she handed it over. ‘Oh, and do us a favour, turn the *Closed* sign round on your way out, I’m off for a fag.’

From somewhere unexpected, Beca suddenly asked, ‘Why d’you smoke if you sing?’

Soozie, halfway out to the back, stopped in her tracks and turned. ‘What you say?’

‘Wrecks your vocal cords. And your breathing.’

She was met with a thunderous stare. But Beca held her ground. ‘You’re not gonna disagree, are you?’ she challenged Soozie, whose face suddenly softened and broke into a smile.

‘No, I ain’t,’ she said. ‘Now piss off and shut the door behind you.’

Back at the house, Beca sat on her bed, phone in one hand, pizza box in her lap, and FaceTimed her Grama Grace. She loved the fact that she had such a modern-thinking great-grandmother who embraced technology. They’d been FaceTiming every Friday for the past two years.

‘So how was it?’ asked Grace, sipping a mug of tea.

‘Absolute disaster,’ replied Beca, relieved that she wasn’t met with any patronizing consolations. There were no *It-won’t-be-as-bad-as-you-thinks* or *You’ll-surprise-us-all-you-waits*. Instead Grace said, ‘Well, it’s only what you expected, isn’t it, bach? And at least you’ll never have to open another damn geography book again.’

‘True,’ replied Beca.

Gramma Grace was very much a graduate from the school of no-nonsense. She didn’t fuff around. And for that reason Beca firmly believed that Elin’s surprise party was going to be a big mistake. Grace didn’t suffer fools and if she said she didn’t want something, she bloody well meant it. Beca feared her great-grandmother was going to be extremely pissed off that Elin had gone against her wishes. Should she warn Gramma Grace of

Elin's party plans? Just so that it wasn't too much of a shock, so that she could be prepared? But what if Grama Grace lost it and started railing at Elin? Elin would never forgive Beca for spoiling the whole thing. Of course, there was always the danger that someone else had already let the cat out of the bag. Someone from Dylan's Quay, maybe. Because Grama Grace wasn't herself tonight. She was distracted.

Deciding to risk finding out, Beca ventured near the subject without specifically using the word *party*. 'How you feeling about turning ninety?' she asked nonchalantly, unable to look at the screen in case she gave herself away. Grama Grace was extremely perceptive, even through a cloud of pixelation. A string of melted pizza cheese dropped languidly back into its box as Beca tried to catch it in her mouth.

'Haven't given it much thought, bach. Still over two months to go.'

Beca pushed her luck further. 'Maybe we could take you out for lunch or something? You could come to Cardiff, or—'

Grace interrupted her. 'What do you know about your actual grandmother, cariad? About Alys.'

This was a bolt from the blue.

'Erm . . . not a lot,' said Beca, her mouth on fire from the pizza chillies. She never really gave her mother's mother a second thought. She'd died when Elin was younger, she knew that, and Beca's dad had said she was a bit of a hippy. Though Beca had no idea how he knew, seeing as he'd never met the woman.

Grace smiled sadly. 'But does your mother ever mention her?'

'No . . . but then again, nor do you.'

'Only because it upsets me.'

Beca felt guilty. She'd heard it said time and time again that teenagers didn't really take much notice of stuff going on around them. Maybe this was true. She'd never had a grandmother so she didn't miss having one. And after all, Grama Grace fulfilled that role, didn't she?

'Mum thinks of *you* as her mum, doesn't she? And I've just always gone along with it. Anyway, how comes you're askin' about Alys all of a sudden?'

Grace sighed and started to say something, but then stopped herself. 'Oh, nothing.' She smiled and changed gear. 'Probably been on my mind with this ol' birthday coming up. You're right, bach. Maybe we should go for a little lunch somewhere. Something simple. No fuss!'

Oh God, thought Beca, envisaging Elin's pink Post-it-note table plan. *You are gonna go mental, Grama Grace.*

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7

grace

As a rule, Grace wasn't prone to low mood or anxiety. She put this down largely to the benefits of staying active, the invigoration she enjoyed from her wild swimming and the natural resilience she'd developed as a result of what life had thrown at her over the years. But tonight . . . oh, tonight was different. After FaceTiming Beca, she'd felt more out of sorts than ever and had ordered herself off for an evening walk. She'd called in on Neeta at the café, who was clearing up after a tourist-packed day of trade. As usual, sixty-one-year-old Neeta had tried spoiling Grace with home-cooked fare, presenting her with a large piece of carrot cake and a mug of hot chocolate.

'Have you even heard of diabetes?' Grace asked, staring at the excessive portion.

'Oh, go on with you,' said her friend. 'You'll outlive the lot of us, you will. Anyway, I made that myself – don't be so rude.'

Neeta had been friends with Grace since opening the café in 2010 and they were completely at ease with one another. Neeta loved to talk. Usually this didn't bother

Grace, who enjoyed putting the world to rights as much as the next person, but tonight she didn't seem to hear anything Neeta said.

When she left the café she wandered down to the pier and gazed out at the ocean. The sea was choppy with an offshore wind that sent sets of waves majestically crashing on to the sand. She breathed in the salty air, seeking a nourishing calm from its ions. But even that didn't work. Should she head up to Cadwallader House and see John? Would singing with Cissie settle her soul? It was nearing nine o'clock now, though, and the chances were they'd both be in bed. 'Oh, stop your moaning,' she said to herself, and a passing seagull squawked in agreement as Grace turned for home.

Taking her shoes off was such a relief. She'd been on her feet too long and now they were starting to swell and ache. For a moment she considered dusting off the foot spa she'd been given by Elin and Greg two years previously. But even doing that seemed too arduous a task. She sank into the comfort of her favourite armchair and let out a weary sigh. On days like this she really felt her age, and that wasn't good. Probably best to have a little rest and then do some yoga before bed. That'd help. How she loathed feeling old. John always said that one of the things he most loved about her was her relentless drive. But sometimes she worried she'd set the bar too high: that she could *never* be negative, *never* admit to anxiety or fear of what was to come. In

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