

BEE BONES

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For Marianne

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Chapter 1

Memories are open wounds. They don't heal, even when I'm asleep. And then he wakes me.

Tillmann. His mother had been obsessed by that name. I don't know why. Anyway, it doesn't matter. She's dead now. So there's just me and him. Tillmann. My son. I don't think he's ever forgiven us for that name. The kids at his school call him Attila. He's almost as tall as me now. Although he's only twelve, almost thirteen. So he can stand up to the name calling. I reckon he probably likes it deep down. Him and his messed-up black hair and his messed-up friends. I'm not important. I'm just his servant and his driver, however much I rebel. Oh - and his banker.

'Dad,' he whispers, shaking me. 'Dad.'

Strange how they never lose that whining tone they acquired when they were infants, before they could even spit out half-formed words, just those imploring complaining sounds that drive fathers mad and mothers to lactation.

'Dad!'

I'm awake now. Grudgingly awake in the bed that I should have thrown out after she died, but never got round to.

'Do you know what time it is?' I groan.

He's been doing this since he was an infant,

too, waking me at inconvenient times, or at least appearing in my bedroom at inconvenient times. 'It's still dark, for Heaven's sake.'

'So?' he says. 'Doesn't stop you waking me when you want me to go to school.'

'It's Saturday, Till. And I was asleep. For a change. Go away.' I try to pull the duvet back over my head. And my head's hurting, too. Not as much as on some Saturday mornings, but enough.

'This is important, Dad.'

This time I manage a glance at my clock. Six o'clock. 'Tillmann. It's even earlier than I thought it was. What the hell are you on? You need to sleep, too.'

He shrugs and grunts. 'I dreamt about her again,' he simply says.

'Oh, Jesus, mate.' I sigh and sit up. He's been dreaming about her ever since she went, ever since we'd been left, heartbroken and alone, we two men - almost men, anyway, - in this sad little flat overlooking this sad little road. Eight years of dreams. Never nightmares. Never bad dreams. Despite the way she died. Although he saw her die. Here, in fact. Here, in this bed, in this room, in this dark room, morning still waiting under the horizon, behind the houses, out past the railway line from London to Bristol. I miss her, too, his mother, his wonderful gentle beautiful mother.

Some things I remember, some I don't. The pub down the road is one of the things I do remember.

Her face I remember from the photographs we still have hanging around desolately; dusty trophies from a better time. But I've forgotten her caresses, the pitch of her voice; they're things I can only imagine, living touches from a dead woman's hand.

He's started sobbing by now, unusually, deep, racking sobs that shake me down into the part of me that I try to hide from everyone including him, because it hurts too much to let it out. His crying crashes into my eight years of pain, of trying to forget, of grief. My arms around him, he just lets himself go, like I've tried to teach him, hypocrite that I am, because I've never learned to let go, never accepted that she's dead and gone and buried, and that we'll never ever ever see her again. Because I'm beginning to think grief is pointless. Because the one person you want to share your grief with is the one you're grieving for. Because it hurts to be alone.

'What can I do?' I say, still cradling him in my arms. 'Is there anything I can do to make it better?'

'This is one pain you can't kiss better, Dad,' he smiles through his tears.

At least I can still comfort him.

Kate's death has made him grow up too quickly, where it made me age too soon. He speaks with the voice of an older boy, with the thoughts of a young man already making sense of a world that's trying to confuse him. 'We've got to go and look for

Mum.'

I don't quite get what he's saying. 'What do you mean, look for Mum?' I say. 'She's dead, mate, you know she's dead. What're you talking about?'

I can't think of anything else to say. Because he's totally taken me by surprise. I've often hoped that some day she'd just come knocking on the door again, although I know that's impossible. That I might just get a postcard from her asking me to go and pick her up from somewhere at a certain time. Or a phone call. I've never told Tillmann about those thoughts, because they're stupid. And they make me cry.

'She can't be dead, Dad. Not with all these dreams I'm having. They mean she's alive somewhere, waiting for us. She needs us.' He tries to look me in the eye, but I'm hiding my face until my tears dry. He shoves me, half playfully, half young pretender challenging. 'Come on,' he says.

'What do you mean, come on?' He's never been like this before. 'This is stupid.'

'Ever realised I'm getting older?' he says. 'I'm maybe not quite as stupid as I was when I was five. I'm maybe a bit more together than you think.'

I didn't talk like that when I was twelve, I'm sure I didn't. In fact, I probably didn't talk at all because my parents were tyrants. 'And what does that mean?' I say. 'You got a plan?' How much more hurt does he want to inflict on himself? On me?

‘Not really,’ he says. ‘I just thought we’d get in the car and drive, and somehow we’d end up where we needed to be.’

‘That simple,’ I say. ‘Now that’s cool. I wonder why I haven’t tried that before. But then I’ve never had the urge to go out and find her.’ Because I know she’s dead, because I’d rather not be here without her. Because the pain’s too much. Because I’m dead inside.

‘You know, Dad,’ he smirks, ‘you’re crap at pretending things don’t get to you. You’re crap at hiding that you miss her more each day. Time the great healer, my arse.’

‘Tillmann, stop swearing.’ Inside I’m sort of laughing with him, though, because my language is a lot worse than his, and he knows it. But he’s so young. He’s probably not even kissed anyone yet. But I won’t ask him. I’m sure he’ll tell me when he’s ready. Just like I’ll tell him about his mother when he’s ready. I stop smiling and shake my head. ‘We can’t do this.’ We’ve got to stay in this ivory tower of memories.

*

Now that’s one of the things I do remember. The first time I kissed his mother, the first time we met. Fifteen years ago, fifteen long years ago. Children we were, really; naïve children in a heartless and devious world. On Newbury railway station, ten minutes walk from

here. Catching the slow train into London because we were both equally impatient with standing on the draughty platform waiting for the next fast train to come. They still had carriages you could have a smoke in, then. Not any more, though, not in this sterile, emotionless world. God, she was beautiful.

We'd both rushed onto the platform just as the fast train was pulling out. Cursed aloud. She was tall and thin, an undone black coat billowing out behind her, a shroud of black hair whirling around her white face, big blue eyes staring angrily down the track. She'd stamped her foot and cursed a second time before she noticed me.

'What're you staring at?' she hissed. 'I hate missing trains. I hate it! I hate it!' She didn't give me time to answer. 'Don't you hate missing trains?'

'Well, yes, I do,' I said, hands in pocket. 'Specially as I always do. Without fail. In fact it's probably my fault that you missed yours. What with me staring and all that. And being jinxed.'

It was her turn to stare. 'What *are* you going on about?' she huffed. 'What are you babbling about? Do you smoke? Have you got a spare cigarette?'

I pulled the crumpled packet out of my pocket and offered her a smoke. 'Here you go.'

'Got a light as well, by any chance?' she said. 'I'm desperate. Tried giving up half a dozen times, but failed miserably.'

I lit her cigarette, sheltering the flame from the wind with my empty hand. Accidentally – honestly accidentally – brushed against her naked hand in the process. Started. Apologised. Almost ran. I'm afraid of women, you see. Of women and love. Always have been. Always will be.

She smiled. Her anger seemed to have disappeared as quickly as it had surfaced. 'Thanks,' she said, breathing out her first lungful of smoke. 'I needed that.'

'No worries.'

I wondered what to do next. Turned to face the track, holding my cigarette tightly against the wind. I'd always laughed at people who claimed that touching someone you were attracted to was like getting an electric shock. But I was still tingling, and I didn't want it to stop. And I didn't want her to see the surprise and fear in my eyes. I'd never believed in love at first sight. Just imagining things, I said to myself, just being a stupid lonely old man.

'D'you always do that?' She'd followed me to the edge of the platform.

'Do what?'

'Turn away from people you've just given a cigarette and a light to. It seems kind of weird to me.' She was hugging her unbuttoned coat closed, breathing smoke across to me, but the wind stopped it from reaching.

‘Sorry,’ I mumbled. ‘I’m not really very good at small talk, so I think it’s less embarrassing for me and other people if I just keep my mouth shut. Much less stress.’

‘You didn’t do so badly just then. Must’ve been quite an effort, that. Talking of being jinxed and stuff. Quite a monologue.’ She wasn’t smiling.

I shrugged. ‘I get carried away with myself sometimes.’ I said. Nearly tried to flirt. Managed to stop myself.

She threw her half-finished cigarette end onto the track. Her coat blew open. She was dressed entirely in black. Black coat, black boots, black trousers, black top.

‘You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself,’ she said. ‘Meeting strangers is never easy. ‘Specially not when you’re jinxed.’

I thought I heard a suppressed chuckle.

‘How is it you’re jinxed, anyway?’ she said. ‘You look quite normal to me. Like someone who’s just missed a train should look, anyway.’

I stared at her in that way that Tillmann says can be frightening and endearing at once. Shrugged again. ‘Not much luck with women and things.’ The words just sort of came out of my mouth before I realised what I was saying, before I could stop myself. Should’ve been strangled at birth, I thought, blushing. Should’ve stayed in bed this morning. Should’ve been

anywhere but here. 'Keep myself to myself,' I added, sort of in self-defence. 'Like it best that way.' Shut the hell up, I was saying to myself. She doesn't want to listen to you banging on about all sorts of rubbish.

'Been there,' she said. 'Don't worry about it. There'll be someone somewhere; bound to be.'

But already it was only her I wanted. But I was afraid, so afraid. And now she's dead.

*

Tillmann drags me from my daydreams.

'Come on, Dad,' he shouts. 'We've got to do this. We've got to go.'

He's already dressed. I'm naked and unshaven, still clinging to the duvet, as always. 'No. It's early, too early. I'm tired.'

'Come on,' he shouts again, pulls the duvet off me - what do they feed these kids at school? 'Get dressed. Then we'll go shopping, get some nosh for the journey, and off we go.'

His madness is enthusiastic and worrying. I can't let him do this.

'And how long would this sudden magical mystery tour last?' I say despite myself, as I drag on yesterday's clothes, lifted from the floor.

'Who cares?' he says. 'Who cares? Let's live a little. Let's do something we've not done since before

Mum died. Let's have an adventure even if it leads nowhere.'

'No.'

'Then I'll go on my own.'

'What?'

'I'll go on my own. Simple.'

We're face to face now. I can't give in. He stares at me. I stare back. Don't even have to look down at him.

'No.'

'I will. Nothing wakes you. I can just leave.'

'And then?'

'Hitch.'

'At your age.'

'Been done before.'

'Don't you care about how I feel?'

'Don't *you* care about how *I* feel? What have we done since Mum died? Nothing. Vegetate.' He takes a step back. 'Laugh? Never.'

I shrug. I can't say anything. He's right. All I've done is work, from out of this house. All I've done is send him to school. In the holidays all we've done is watch the telly or read, or go for short walks round the town. But never away, never away from here. Because, even though I hate it, she's still here, and I don't want to leave her.

'So?' he says. 'Still no?'

'I don't know.'

‘Why?’

‘I don’t want you to hurt yourself.’

‘I’ve been hurt already. You don’t know what I know. You think I’ve forgotten her, but I haven’t. She’s in my head. All those dreams, and you think I’ve forgotten. And now I need to do this.’

Maybe he does need this. But it’s all wrong. What if I lose him as well? What then?

‘D’you promise that you’ll knock it on the head if it gets too much, if I say enough’s enough?’

‘I promise.’ He smiles at me.

‘I mean it.’

‘So do I.’

‘On your head be it. Just the weekend. That’s all.’

‘Ok.’

I put enough dried food and water down for the cat to live on for a couple of days, grab my mobile phone, my coat, my wallet, keys for house and car. Tillmann turns off the lights. We’re on our way, and I don’t even understand why I’ve given in to him – again. That’s all we parents do – give in, give, give, give. And that’s all children do – take, take, take. It makes me more tired than I should be. And there are so many things he doesn’t know that he’ll need to find out sometime. Maybe this will be as good a time as any.

The 24-hour supermarket is deserted when we get there. Just a few sullen shelf-stackers and check-

out girls listening to the piped music, watching the checkout queue television screens, waiting to get out of their boredom, off their shift, and into their beds again. Tillmann chooses what we're taking with us; I'm useless at that sort of stuff. Used not to be. Used to love shopping. Used to cook all the time. She used to call it foreplay, my cooking. Not been much call for it since she died. Nothing of the sort. Because when she died, so did I. It's Tillmann who's kept us going. Because he's like his mother – determined, unbeatable, loyal.

We head back to the car with our bags of shopping. It's only a small two-door hatchback; modern, boring, and there's plenty of room for what we've got. It's still dark when we nose out of the car park and head towards the motorway.

Tillmann's already stuck a CD in the drive. We hate listening to the radio now, now that John Peel's dead, now that all the good people have gone, now that there's just manufactured pap on, repeat, repeat, repeat. Maybe the times will change and there'll be a new New Wave.

We burned some of Peelite's shows onto CD, but we don't listen to them in the car, because there's too much background noise. Because we don't just like the music; we like to hear him talking between tracks. I used to carry tapes of Peel round with me on my travels, to keep me sane, the same 10 shows over and

over, but always something new. But that was even before I met Till's mother, before my real life started.

So we're moving along listening to something Tillmann's put together, robbed mp3s from the internet, legal tracks from the CDs he buys with his pocket money, stuff from here there and everywhere. He calls them things like 'rocktravel' and 'softtravel' because he needs music when he's moving. And he likes to know what mood the CD is. Doesn't bother with track listings. Problem is that he likes the same music as me. I've been told off for taking away a boy's most potent form of rebellion – music his father hates. And, just on cue, here's The Killers and *Somebody Told Me*. I love loud music.

As we're coming up to the roundabout by the motorway, I ask Tillmann which way to go.

'Head for London,' he shouts over the music, his mouth already full of ripped French bread and ham. 'As good a place to start as any.' He laughs.

And it is as good a place as any. Because that's where everything started, really, after the coincidental meeting at the railway station. It's easy to dream when you're steering a car on a long empty motorway. Easy to lose track.

*

So there we were, on the platform, the black-haired

woman and the bleached blond, skirting round each other like nervous animals do. God made this coincidence, I'm sure. Problem is, I've never been able to tell what people are thinking or feeling. My favourite question's always been 'What're you thinking?' but I didn't ask it then.

We had another couple of cigarettes. I was feeling less embarrassed now, more in control of myself, and I knew the slow train was going to arrive soon. Then we'd go our separate ways and that would be that. Another dream, another moment lost.

'So what are you planning up in London?' she said.

'Just looking round record shops, wandering round,' I answered. 'You know the usual sort of thing sad bachelors do on Saturdays to keep themselves occupied.'

'How very sad. I'd have thought you'd at least be going to a football match or something macho like that.'

'Not today. Been there; done that. My heart's not in it anymore.'

I didn't admit to her that I did actually miss doing what I'd used to do when I lived in London; just take a tube to King's Cross and decide on the platform which match in London to go to. But, as I said, my heart wasn't in it anymore.

'And you?' I said.

‘No, I don’t like football,’ she said, deliberately ignoring the real question.

‘I meant what are you...’

‘I know what you meant. I’m being silly. I live in London. I was just down here last night for a party.’

‘And you were in a hurry to leave? Can’t have been much of a party if you’re not hung over and don’t want to stay.’

She shrugged – she had this tendency to shrug. ‘These things happen,’ she said. ‘Can’t have great parties all the time.’

Just then the tracks began to rattle, the station announcer muttered some muffled comments through the tannoy and the train pulled in. Before I could stop her, she’d slipped her arm through mine.

‘You might as well accompany me to London,’ she chuckled (another one of her habits).

In those days the slow trains up to London had separate compartments, all linked on one side of the carriage by a long corridor, but with sliding doors shutting off the compartments. She chose one about halfway down the carriage and sat down opposite me.

While we were waiting for the train to leave, she just stared out of the window onto the platform. Never said a word. Never looked at me. Only when the train started moving again did she turn to me again.

‘You’ve not told me your name,’ she said.

‘You’ve not asked me. I’m not sure what you’re

doing talking to a total stranger, anyway. I could be dangerous.'

She laughed. 'I think I'd know if you were dangerous. London's taught me a bit.' She took off her coat, leaned back again. 'So, what *is* your name?' she persevered.

'You first,' I said, folding my arms over my chest. 'For all I know, *you* might be dangerous, so I need your name and address. Sorry.' I still don't understand, to this day, what had got into me.

'And you say you're crap at small talk! Maybe you're dangerous, after all. A liar.'

'A jinxed liar, if I am a liar. Don't forget that.' I wagged my finger at her playfully. 'Don't ever forget that.'

'I won't.' She giggled and grabbed hold of my finger, stared right at me, face close enough to scent. 'You *are* dangerous, my friend, very dangerous indeed.' She let go of the blushing me, pursed her lips. 'I'm Kate,' she said, 'short for Katherine with a K. And I live...'

'I was joking.' I stopped her. 'And I'm Nairne. God knows what my parents were thinking.'

This time she extended her hand gracefully and waited for me to shake it. The tingling got worse each time she touched me. That's what I remember most.

By the time we reached London we'd

persuaded ourselves to have lunch with each other. By the time we decided we'd have dinner with each other as well, we were holding hands. By the time I'd missed the last train home I knew where she lived. And by the time the next morning came, we'd kissed and I'd slept on her sofa.

I believe in gentle beginnings.

*

We're getting close to London. It's only just getting light, and there's still hardly any traffic. The Sex Pistols are telling us now that God should save the Queen, although we'd rather He didn't.

'What now?' I call across to my ever-hungry son who never seems to put on any weight.

'Why don't we drive up to where Mum used to live?' he shouts back.

By now I've given up even trying to argue with him. I don't understand what he's trying to achieve, if him claiming that he thinks Kate is still alive is just a ruse to try to get me to finally confront her absence and start again, or if he genuinely believes that she's alive somewhere and living in London.

'Dad?' he says. 'Did you ever notice anything weird about Mum? Like before she died?'

'What d'you mean - weird? She was dying, Till. She was really ill. There wasn't anything to notice other

than that.'

The traffic's worse now. Bloody London. I have to slow down and look at my son when it's the last thing I want to do.

'But did things change between you after she'd got ill, or even before?' He carries on pushing.

I suppose now's the time to tell him those things that he should know. 'I think we really stopped getting on with each other the minute she got ill, to be honest,' I say quietly, after I've turned down the music. 'It was like she became someone else, just like that. One day she was Kate. The next day she wasn't. I can't explain it.'

'And before that?'

'Well, before that,' I scratch my chin. 'Well, things had sort of been a bit ropery, but I didn't really think much of it.'

'Why's that, Dad?'

'What, why didn't I think much of it, or why were things a bit ropery?'

'Both,' he answers.

'The ropery thing was because Kate wanted more kids, and I didn't. As for the not thinking much about it; well, I guess I reckoned she'd just change her mind after a while, and be happy with just you.'

'Didn't you talk about this stuff before you got married?' He's sounding incredulous now, like he expects everyone to be sensible and rational and

organised, when getting married's nothing like that. Just the opposite, in fact. Although it shouldn't be.

'We should've, I guess,' I admit. 'Y'see it's difficult when you're in love and sort of just want to go for it. You don't sit down and discuss things point by point like you should, really.'

'So you didn't,' he states.

'No.' I try to concentrate on driving again. We're heading up to north London. I wonder if I should persuade him that we should just go sight-seeing. It wouldn't work. I'll just drive.

'So how did she react when she noticed that you basically weren't gonna do anything about having any more kids?'

He doesn't give up, does he?

'She stopped sleeping with me,' I say bluntly.

He must be old enough to understand about that stuff by now, mustn't he? Anyway, I've talked to him about it a bit, now and again. Love and respect. Safe sex and all that responsible stuff. It's just difficult to know if they're taking it in. Or even listening. 'I started sleeping on the sofa in the living room.' Back to Square One, I think, but without the anticipation.

'But that's where I always remember you sleeping, anyway,' he says. 'I thought it was because she was ill.'

'Till, mate, can you imagine what I'd have given to be still in that room with her, even when she

was ill?' I say, and all the guilt comes out. 'I should've been there for her, should've been able to care for her more than at arm's length, shouldn't have used her insurance money to pay for a nurse to come in and deal with the worst of it.' I'm almost crying now, idiot that I am. 'And, at the end, all I could do was hold her hand, nothing more. I should've felt close to her but I didn't. It'd all gone, somehow, changed, all changed the minute she got back from the doctor's. Changed even from the friendship we'd still had kipping in separate rooms and having you to look after.'

'D'you love me, Dad?' he says. He's not shaking as much as I am. In fact, he's not shaking at all. He seems quite untouched by all these revelations.

"Course I do! Why d'you ask?"

"Cos it all seems a bit weird to me, that's why," he says. 'Had the two of you planned to talk about it at any point, and move back into one bed, or were you just two stubborn idiots?' He talks more grown-up than me sometimes, does Tillmann.

'I don't honestly know.' I don't. 'Kate got ill quite soon after we agreed to disagree, so we never really got round to talking about it again.'

'Mmm.'

He turns the music up again. We're just on the road again. A twelve-year-old dude and his inadequate father. It'll probably take another hour to get where he wants to go. And then? All I can do is follow.

Chapter 2

It lasted for several months, the sofa stage after Kate and I first met. It was the right thing to do. If this was the real thing, it'd wait. If it wasn't, there'd be no harm done. I spent a small fortune tripping up to London and back most weekends. Weekends full of kisses and holding hands. During the week we'd call each other and talk and talk and talk. The cats sort of knew that they'd get short shrift once I picked up the phone, and disappeared out into the garden, hunting in the railway embankments for rats and whatever else they could find.

Then, one cold winter evening the following February, Kate cooked us dinner, sat me down at the table and told me she was moving out west. Oh God, I thought, here we go. Another one down. What did I do wrong this time?

I'd had girlfriends before, but they'd all been exercises in brief serial monogamy, or the odd one-night stand, nothing anywhere in the same league as what I felt for Kate – and we hadn't even slept together. Maybe I should've gone for it in a bigger way. Maybe I should've tried to seduce her that first Saturday. All this was going through my head as she was talking at me about moving away from London. Hell, west could even mean the States.

‘Are you listening to me?’ she said, grabbing hold of my hand.

The tingling was still there. And the kissing over the past few months had been really good. Was this really the end?

‘Course I’m listening,’ I said. ‘I’m just wondering what I’ve done wrong.’

‘What d’you mean, done wrong?’ she said, shaking her head. ‘I’ve just said I want to move in with you, you big fool!’

‘What?’ No, I was imagining things. ‘Can you say that all again, please?’

‘Dear Lord, what am I letting myself in for?’ she said instead. ‘What is it that you’ve got that I just don’t want to be without?’

‘Stupidity?’ I said, smiling, disbelieving. ‘A jinx? I’m a good listener?’

She laughed out loud, a shimmering belly laugh straight from the centre of her. A laugh that shook the table. A laugh that made me feel at home. And now she was coming home to me. The logistics of it didn’t matter.

That night we drank two bottles of Spanish Cava without getting drunk. And she asked me into her bed. I can still feel her hair stroking my face as she looked down at me. Or I imagine I can feel it, because there’s so much I’ve forgotten. So much I’ve had to forget to protect myself.

A few weeks later I was pottering about in the flat one weekday evening, trying to get things in shape for when she was due to move in. I'd already tidied up most of the place. Was just passing time until she called me, really. She wouldn't be bringing much with her anyway, because she'd rented her place furnished – cheaper that way. Just a car (which she hardly ever drove), a heap of books, and the usual things that women decide to strangle bathrooms with. I'd already given her a key – she used to come to me sometimes, and I'd sleep on my sofa instead of on hers.

As usual, I had my music on loud. The girl in the flat upstairs – the detached house had been split into flats years ago – spent most of her time with her boyfriend, and wasn't around to complain about the noise. I was listening to some punk compilation – feeling old already. The Only Ones were banging out *Another Girl, Another Planet* when someone grabbed me from behind as I was dancing round the room with one of my old cricket bats.

'Bloody hell!' I shouted.

'Surprise!' she shouted back, chuckling, shrugging, crying, laughing all at once. 'I'm heeeeeeere!'

I turned down the music. I always need a soundtrack for my life; I just don't have a track listing for every memory. I grabbed her, grabbed her into my arms, against me, smelt the rain on her hair, kissed

her.

‘So I see,’ I finally said. ‘So I see. I wasn’t expecting you before the weekend.’

‘You won’t be seeing me in London this weekend,’ she said, ‘because, as from now, we’re living together.’

I remember bringing in her stuff, scattering her pillows round my spartan living room, piling her books high next to mine. I remember all that, and The Only Ones on repeat because I needed wild music to go with this wild woman who’d found me and saved me. Because I needed something to make a memory.

That’s all I remember, for now. It’s her funeral I can’t remember, refuse to remember. And now she’s gone.

*

Tillmann changes CDs as we start driving into Harringay, the Saturday morning traffic slowing us to an almost weekday crawl. The Only Ones, of course. How does he know these things, this kid who spends most of his time playing PlayStation, or out with his mates when he should be at home? I’ve given up trying to tell him what to do. I’m just thankful that he doesn’t get bad marks at school and that he’s not on drugs – as far as I know.

‘So why d’you want to come up here, then?’ I

say, although I'd already decided it would be futile to ask.

'Just wanted to see the place again,' he says. 'Pick up some vibes or whatever it is you hippies...' I start growling. '...hippies call it.'

He smiles his cherub smile. Yeah, it was a futile question to a precious twelve-year-old. Stupid, really. I shake my head.

'Don't shake your head, Dad,' he criticises. 'I'm sort of serious. Maybe there's something here.'

I pull the car over. The driver behind me hoots his horn.

'Listen Tillmann,' I say, maybe too harshly. 'I really don't think this is gonna achieve anything other than make us even sadder and more depressed than we are. She's gone, mate, and nothing we do can ever change that.'

'Whatever,' he sighs. 'You're wrong. And, Dad, I'm not talking about ghosts and shit like that. I'm talking about the real world, about then and now. And the real world's telling me she's alive, whatever we might've seen then, whatever that thing was that died in your bed.'

I breathe deeply. I'm getting a bit annoyed now. Mustn't get cross because then I'll lose my temper, and I'm not nice when I lose my temper. No-one is.

'Don't talk like that about her!' I hiss, hitting

the button on the CD player to turn it off. 'I don't care what you think about that thing, as you call it, but she was your mother, she loved you right to the end, through all her pain, through all the shit that I put her through, everything. Don't ever ever call her a thing again. You weren't even five, for Christ's sake. You can't even remember her properly.'

He's unmoved by this. Although it's actually bordering on the threatening. He touches my hand - he's electric like his mother, just not in that way. But he has something; power, presence. Maybe I don't think highly enough of myself.

'Sorry it upsets you,' he says, cool, calm, collected. 'But I do remember her. I know you think I'm mad. I know I'm only a kid. I know nothing might come of it. I know it's a crazy idea to have. But what can we lose? Nothing. We'll just be back where we were before I woke you up this morning. And even if we only find out something about her that we never knew, it'll make us wiser, richer, won't it? And maybe you'll be able to start again, meet someone new, stop your pointless grieving.' He doesn't take his hand away when he's finished.

I shake my head. It's impossible to say anything, because I know he's right. With most of it, anyway. I turn the music back on, start the car again. The Smiths hopefully singing *There's A Light That Never Goes Out*. They have that in common with my

son. And, deep down, with me, too.

We're in that maze of streets near White Hart Lane now. Kate had lived round here without ever going to see a game. How strange. I thought it then, and I still think it now. But she was never interested in sport. Hated it with a vengeance, for some odd reason. Had a one-track mind for books and a little music, although her tastes had stopped with The Jam.

Here we are now. A street like hundreds of other streets in hundreds of other cities. Shop fronts strung along a straight mile, some of them boarded up, some of them with tables out front laden with fresh fruit and vegetables contaminated by the passing traffic. And above the shop fronts row upon row of windows looking in on student flats, bedsits, empty rooms, full rooms, shabby and elegant at once. The doors, and the staircases behind them, hidden in the blackened facades.

'It's round here somewhere, isn't it, Dad?'
Tillmann says, doubting his own memory.

'Yes, it's round here somewhere,' I say, staring at the doorway she used to walk in and out of. 'But she isn't.'

*

We'd met by chance. And now we were living together. I couldn't believe how lucky I was. I'd never thought of

myself as handsome or particularly bright. And yet, here I was, sharing a bed, a kitchen, a house, with one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen, never mind known.

Is there such a thing as coincidence? Is there such a thing as chance, or are all our fates and actions governed by an external force? They say the universe has a finite edge, beyond which there is nothing, and that one day it will all collapse in on us again, after having expanded for billions of years. How can we know? Do we need proof for such things, or is it a question of science ruled by faith, or faith explained by science? I still watch the dark nights for a sign, look for the star that might be the soul of my beautiful wife, ripped away from me by a dreadful illness before we'd had enough time with each other. Wish that that external force which might determine our lives had taken me instead of her, because without her nothing makes sense, and nothing is real.

Is there such a thing as redemption? I don't think so, because I carry the guilt over her death around with me every single day.

Living with Kate was wondrous. She was like a child much of the time, despite the sophisticated veneer she covered herself with. Underneath that outside, she was a playful girl and a grown woman at once. She was my cornerstone, my confessor, my plaything, my lover, my healer. That's why I had to

marry her, because I wanted us to be together forever. But there is no forever.

Two months after she moved in with me, I borrowed her passport under false pretences. I'm sure – actually I know now, because she told me later – that she thought I was going to book a holiday for us. What I actually did was to go the local registry office and buy a marriage licence. And set a time for the wedding. A Friday afternoon in May.

We were lucky, really. We had no baggage. She didn't get on with her parents, so I never met them. My parents were old and lived in the North. We were both hermits and loners, deep down. Lucky we found each other.

I surprised her with my proposal. She'd not been expecting it, even after the extended months of sofa sleeping, even after the moving in together. Had she been hoping for it? I don't know. I never asked her. But she said yes, and we dragged two total strangers in from outside the registry office, just like they do in the best sentimental films, to be our witnesses. And that was that.

One thing I remember about that day more than anything else. I managed to find Kate a single black rose which she held throughout the ceremony. And afterwards I took a picture of her in her straight tight dress holding the rose out in front of her. It's that picture that still hangs by the bed – a pale girl all in

cream, proffering a black rose out of the photo, and atop it all a mass of black curls, waves in the sand of time.

Our honeymoon was a brief week of paradise in Venice, a city we both loved. We never went back. We talked about it, but did nothing about it.

Life was fairly kind to us after that, for a while. We had decided, at the first, not to have children straightaway because we wanted some time to ourselves. What we didn't realise was how little time we would have, all told.

We can't see into each other's bodies, just as little as we can see out to the edges of the universe. Maybe the disease was already alive in her when I met her, maybe it started the day we got married. Who knows? Despite all the advances of science, despite mankind's intelligence and progress, we really know nothing of the heart of life. No matter how many books we read, no matter what we try to teach ourselves, we achieve nothing.

What is left to me of her? A barren grave in some barren deserted graveyard. A shallow hole with an urn full of ashes in it. I didn't have the heart to follow her wishes and scatter her ashes over some forlorn rocks in Scotland. I wanted Tillmann to have a place he could go when he wanted someone to talk to other than me. All I really have are the bitter memories of her last few months when we had become strangers

again. Restless bitter strangers with only one thing in common. A child we thought was too young to understand.

I'm not sure she has forgiven me. I'm not sure she ever will.