

# Jacqueline Wilson



So you think you know  
what's coming?

# THINK AGAIN

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*The Girls series by Jacqueline Wilson*

Girls in Love  
Girls Under Pressure  
Girls Out Late  
Girls in Tears

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**Jacqueline  
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TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS  
Penguin Random House, One Embassy Gardens,  
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW  
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies  
whose addresses can be found at [global.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com)



Penguin  
Random House  
UK

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Bantam  
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

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A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

ISBNs  
9780857506108 (hb)  
9780857506115 (tpb)

Typeset in 11.25/15.75 pt Sabon by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,  
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

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*For Trish*

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# 1

I wake to find Stella rubbing her head against mine and licking my neck suggestively. That sounds misleading. Sadly I'm not enjoying an exciting sex life. I am currently not having *any* kind of sex life, exciting or not. I might have squeezed a double bed into my tiny flat, but apparently I was being overly optimistic.

'Hello, Stella!' I mumble. 'Have you come to wish me happy birthday?'

She purrs agreeably and I stroke her from the top of her head, down her long silky fur to the tip of her tail. She's absolutely the Queen of Cats, though she came from humble beginnings, like many a fairy princess. I rescued her from Battersea Dogs and Cats Home last year. Lottie says she's my replacement daughter – but my role is more servant than mother to Stella. She gives me orders and likes me to keep to a strict routine. Ideally, she would like to be free at night to roam the streets, but that's not wise on a council estate in London. She feels five a.m. is a suitable time for her first breakfast and seems puzzled when I don't greet her with top-of-the-morning joyfulness. I peer at my watch, prepared to push her away and burrow beneath the covers for another couple of hours. But it's gone seven! Stella's given me a birthday lie-in. Perhaps she senses it's a special birthday. One with an O.

Forty!

Dear God, how did I get so *old*? I slide out of bed, pad over to the mirror on my dressing table and peer at my forehead. Yep, wrinkles – three of them, and two little lines like apostrophes over my nose. I try smoothing them out, but they snap back into place the moment I let them go. I suppose peering over my desk a lot and not always bothering with my glasses is taking its toll. Time for Botox? Magda takes little trips to the Beauty Clinic now and looks great. But then she's always looked great. Nadine's a Botox veteran too. She started in her twenties, which was ridiculous, but I suppose that was because she was modelling then.

I pull a pouty face to try to make my cheeks model-thin. I look stupid. I turn sideways and suck in my stomach. It's the bit of me I still can't bear. I had a mummy tummy long before I had Lottie. I look at the snapshots stuck all round my mirror. There's a Polaroid of Nadine and me in a paddling pool when we were four. Nadine is already willowy and striking a pose, while I'm pulling a face, an infant roly-poly with a belly like a little beach ball.

I peer at Magda's early childhood photo beside it. We didn't meet until secondary school, but I didn't want to leave her out. She's in the bath, shaking her curls and dimpling at the camera, posing even then. She looks like a Raphael cherub.

Nadine and Magda, my two best friends. The two most important women in my life, after my daughter. Lottie's photos have taken over the rest of my frame, starting when she was a baby. I peel off my favourite photo: she is only a few months old, and I'm lifting her up and blowing raspberries on her lovely round tummy, making her giggle. Nearly two decades later, I smile along with her. I thought she might take after me, because her baby hair was fluffy and inclined to curl, and she was delightfully chubby then – but now look

at her! I put the old photo back and pick up the one big silver frame that sits on my dressing table and stroke her face fondly. Long straight hair, strong, slim body, huge grin, mad clothes.

‘My girl,’ I murmur.

The photo was taken just before she went to university. Oh God, I still miss her so much.

Stella miaows imperiously.

‘OK, you’re my girl too,’ I say.

She allows me a quick dash to the bathroom, then we head into the kitchen and I give her a bowl of chopped chicken with a little broth as a special treat. We can pretend it’s her birthday as well. I give her fresh water, too, in her special ceramic bowl. She licks and laps daintily, careful not to get her long silvery whiskers wet.

I make myself a coffee and shake a small portion of healthy muesli into my bowl. A few spoonfuls of sawdust isn’t exactly birthday breakfast material so I make myself two slices of buttery toast spread with strawberry jam, picking out most of the whole strawberries from the jar. It’s my birthday, for God’s sake. The diet I’d planned can wait until tomorrow.

Hey, how about Myrtle going on a diet? I wander into the living room, still munching, sit at my desk and put on my glasses. I pick up my ideas book and start sketching her in her own kitchen having breakfast. Big ears, pointy nose, long whiskers – but she’s got human arms and legs and is wearing a stripy teeshirt and boyfriend jeans, which have a discreet hole at the back for her long tail to poke through.

She hasn’t changed all that much since I started drawing her for a competition when I was a schoolgirl. I’ve kept the letter Nicola Sharp sent me then. She was my favourite illustrator – still is, in fact. I’ve tried to keep the letter pristine, but I’ve read it so many times it’s as fragile as tissue paper now.

*I can honestly say your Myrtle is outstandingly original. I'd be proud to have invented her myself. You are going to have to be an illustrator when you grow up!*

Wonderfully, I *am* an illustrator now. And an art teacher.

I'd never admit it, but I love it when I go to parties and people ask me what I do for a living. I don't usually mention the prosaic teacher bit.

'Oh, I do a little weekly newspaper cartoon strip,' I mumble modestly.

'What, in the local rag?' they might ask.

'It's in the *Guardian*, actually,' I say, though I always blush because it sounds like showing off. Well, it *is* showing off, I suppose, but never mind.

'Come on then, Myrtle,' I murmur. 'Here you are, looking at yourself in the mirror, noticing your jeans are getting much too tight. Then second picture, you're perched on a stool at your kitchen island, frowning at a little packet of low-cal cheese and a carton of fat-free milk. Then picture number three . . .'

But doubt creeps in. My Myrtle comic strip is supposed to be a cute, mousey take on modern life. Do modern women obsess about their figures so much? *I* certainly do. But what about Lottie and her friends? Surely they're all into health and strength and pride in your body, whatever your size or shape? I tap my pencil against my lip, frowning.

I'll ask Lottie when I see her today. I'm meeting her at Victoria. She'll text me when she's on the train. I hope it will be early enough for us to have lunch. We could go to Maison Bertaux and have a private birthday celebration just the two of us. Then we can hang out together, go to a gallery, go shopping, maybe just chill out here at the flat, before we travel down together to Kingtown for the family dinner.

My phone trills. It's Lottie herself! I answer immediately.

‘Hi, Lots!’

*‘Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy BIRTHDAY . . .’*

I wince and hold the phone away from my ear. I love Lottie with all my heart and I’m one of those pathetic mums who can’t bear any criticism of her child, but even I know that she sings much too loudly for someone who can’t hold a tune.

I rub my ear better and then replace the phone just as she sings the last happy birthday.

‘That’s so lovely, darling!’ I say. ‘There, you’ve started my birthday off splendidly. But how come you’re awake so early?’

‘I – I’ve been checking my phone. About my train,’ she says.

‘I can’t wait to see you!’ I say eagerly.

I have to make the most of her. We only meet up every couple of months now she’s studying at Sussex. I was secretly so upset when she told me she wouldn’t be coming home for the summer. I knew she’d want to see friends, maybe go travelling, and I truly wanted that to happen, but I did hope I’d see her *some* of the time. Then she told me that she’d got a job as a summer camp counsellor for international kids for eight weeks. She’s fantastic with children, she’s full of fun yet responsible too; it’s no wonder they picked her. It’s just that I miss her so.

Still, it means so much that she’s coming home for my birthday weekend. And yet she’s paused for several seconds.

‘Lottie?’ I say tentatively.

‘Oh Mum, I’m so sorry, there’s some kind of problem on the railway line. I don’t know, engineering works, whatever,’ she says quickly. ‘The trains up to London have all been cancelled.’

‘Oh no! What a bore. But surely it’ll be fixed?’

‘It says all travel on the line is cancelled for the day, Mum. I’m so sorry!’

She sounds really sorry too, but there’s something odd about her voice. I nibble at my lip. She’s not lying to me, is she?

I take a deep breath.

‘All right,’ I say, trying to keep my voice steady. ‘So, what about the birthday dinner?’

‘I’d give anything to be there, but it’s just not possible,’ she says.

‘Oh Lottie,’ I wail pathetically, unable to help it.

‘You’ll still have Grandad, Anna, Ben and Simon at the dinner,’ she says.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘I truly am sorry, Mum. Don’t let it spoil your special day.’ She sounds really uncomfortable now.

I think she’s definitely making excuses. Or perhaps I’m just being paranoid? Maybe this train problem is the gospel truth and Lottie is really sad not to be seeing me on my birthday. And if she’s got better things to do than hanging out with her mum, that’s totally understandable. She’s nineteen, for God’s sake. And I’m fucking forty, so I’d better start acting like it.

I fix a smile on my face so that it comes through in my voice. ‘Don’t worry, love. I’ve got a lovely day planned. I’ll be fine.’ Despite my efforts, my voice comes out a bit shaky. I pause and hunt around for a change of subject. ‘Lottie, do you and your friends fuss about your figures?’

‘What?’

‘Sorry. Is it a bit old-fashioned to keep starting diets?’

‘Mum, what is this? Do you think *I* should go on a diet?’ She sounds baffled, but amused.

‘No, it’s for Myrtle,’ I explain.

‘Don’t mice want to eat all the time? I don’t think they’re picky with their food.’

‘Yes, but Myrtle’s really a girl – well, a woman – in mouse guise,’ I explain. ‘Oh, never mind. I’m not sure the idea would work. I’ll dream up something else,’ I say quickly.

‘OK. But don’t work too much, not on your birthday. Go

out and have fun. And don't worry, I just know you're going to have a fabulous time tonight, whether I'm there or not. Lots of love. See you!

'See you,' I echo, and switch off her call.

I lean on my desk, head in hands. I can feel another worry line forming right this minute. I peer through my fingers at the sketch of Myrtle in the kitchen. I'm really not sure about the theme now. And didn't I have Myrtle on a diet ages ago, anyway? I can't start repeating myself.

I try to think up another idea but I keep hearing Lottie's voice in my head, telling me all that guff about the train. Surely there must be replacement buses? I reach for my phone, then pull back. No, I am *not* going to google her train line to check. What sort of person would that make me? What sort of mother? And even if I see all the trains are running perfectly, it's not a criminal offence to make a travel excuse. It's better than telling me that she simply can't be bothered to come.

I'm going to stop obsessing. Forty-year-old women are strong and secure. They take things in their stride. I'll check my emails, see if the payment for my last batch of Myrtles has gone through to Jude. She often works late on a Friday, clearing her desk for the weekend.

Yes, there's a message from Judith Barnes Agency – apparently, it popped in last night. I open it, and the sight of the payment statement sends a wave of relief through me. That's next month's rent sorted!

Then, below the statement, I see a message. I give it a fleeting glance, then lean in and give it my full attention. My heart starts thudding. I blink hard and read it again, slowly.

Hi Ellie, I'm so sorry to have to pass on some rather sad news. I've had a long phone call with Cassie. It's been decided that your amazing Myrtle Mouse strip is not really chiming with their

readership any more. I'm afraid the *Guardian* doesn't want to renew your contract. Still, maybe you'll be able to come up with a new idea for them? Here's hoping!

I slump, blinking back tears. It's real. It's there, in front of me. A chunk of my income, gone. An even bigger part of my identity. And as for a new idea . . . Hope away, Jude. My chime is fading fast. I've lost my touch. I'm not current any more. I'm middle-aged. Past it. Finished.

Myrtle means so much to me. Mum drew pictures of her when I was little, and then I went on to make her Myrtle mine. I was nearly fourteen when I entered the cartoon of her for the Nicola Sharp drawing competition. I went on drawing Myrtle even at art school, having her waving in a corner of most of my works, though you'd have to peer for ages before you found her, like a little rodent *Where's Wally?*

I drew her for Lottie all the time I was finishing my degree as a mature student, getting my PGCE, starting teaching, and doing some magazine illustration for extra cash. Then in a fit of madness I sent a Myrtle cartoon to the *Guardian* and they accepted it. I couldn't believe it. But now they've rejected it. Rejected me.

I give a slight moan and Stella pauses grooming herself and mews. She blinks at me slowly with her great green eyes and then decides to take pity on me. She strolls over, gathers muster, and leaps onto my lap.

'Oh, Stella! This is turning into such a crap birthday,' I say, rubbing my cheek against her soft head.

I want to cry but I can't drip all over Stella. I shut my eyes tight, then blink away the tears, a sudden resolve building within me. You want a new idea, Cassie and Jude? Fine. I'll *get* a new idea. I start doodling in my ideas book. Half-formed creatures bob up here and there in an increasingly frenzied maze of sketches.

Stella gets impatient and climbs off my lap, her sympathy evaporating. Getting nowhere with my doodles, I draw her instead. She looks good as a cartoon. But there are already so many famous fictional cats: Garfield, Tom, Felix, Mog, The Cat in the Hat . . . And why would Stella be any more current than poor, axed Myrtle? I sketch her now, an axe sunk deep into her little mousey head, and print RIP underneath her.

Perhaps I could try turning Stella into a children's picture book? The Story of Stella the Cat. But picture books have changed so much since I was little, since *Lottie* was little.

An adult novel? But I don't seem to be leading a proper adult life now, for all that I'm forty. I draw, I go to school, I read, I message Nadine and Magda . . . much the same life I was leading when I was fourteen, but with WhatsApp instead of whispered conversations on the landline. A wave of nostalgia engulfs me. How I'd love to go back to those simpler times, even just for a day.

I look down at the axe embedded in Myrtle's head. How about a crime novel? Maybe one of the cosy crimes that are so popular now? But crime round here isn't cosy in the slightest, which is why I have a bolt on my front door. And those complicated plots would be a total nightmare too. I'm used to Myrtle's neat layout, a set of little pictures, story told, job done.

What am I going to do without her?

I give myself a shake. Come on, think! What do you *want* to do? Draw. Add words. Then it hits me: a graphic novel! Not superheroes with their underpants over their tights. Not fantasy with pointy-breasted women in skimpy animal skins. Real men, real women. Maybe childhood friends who have grown up together, like me and Magda and Nadine? Or would that be too tame?

*Come on, Ellie*, I think crossly. I need to try *something*, if

nothing else for my finances. I've come to rely on the extra Myrtle money. Now I'll just have my salary.

I still find it hard to believe I've ended up a teacher. I had such big ideas when I started at art school. They were all kicked into touch when I had Lottie so young.

How about a graphic novel about a girl getting pregnant at art school and dithering about whether to choose to have an abortion? Everyone advises it. Even her two best friends, and her parents. Even the tutor she confides in. And especially the baby's father she hardly knows. She's almost persuaded. But she can't do it. Of course she can't, because she knows deep down she wants this baby in spite of everything.

How right I was – and how wrong it would be to write this story, because while I would never judge anyone's choices, I couldn't ever bear for Lottie to know what I was once contemplating.

So what else? I can't just sit here at my desk, agonizing. I've got to seize the day. Yep, *carpe diem*. Celebrate my birthday. I could still go to Maison Bertaux, a gallery, shopping . . . but it might be a bit lonely by myself, today of all days.

Shall I contact Nadine? Or Magda? Both? I don't see enough of them now we live so far apart. Though I can't help being hurt that *they* haven't been in touch with me. How can they have forgotten my birthday? I suppose we've grown apart over the last few years. Nadine is still busy partying, seeing new guys most weeks. Magda's seemingly settled at last with Chris, her Third Time Lucky partner – plus his two kids.

They probably haven't got time for me now. Oh, stop the self-pity! It's not as if I'm going to be on my own this evening. I'm seeing Dad, Anna, Ben and Simon for a special birthday meal at some posh new restaurant back at home. Old home, I mean. Where I grew up. The Vine? I google it. It looks ridiculously pretentious, not my sort of place at all. Ben and Simon

obviously chose it, thinking it will be a huge treat for me. I know how much they love me and it means a lot, but they treat me like a poor old maiden aunt sometimes. I don't *mind* not having much money and living in my little tower block flat right up in the sky. A lot less money now that poor Myrtle's been axed, I remember with a lurch of my stomach, but I'll manage. It's a disadvantage being single because I'll never have the cash to buy a stylish mansion flat like theirs, but I don't really care that much. I'm fine by myself. Really. Whereas they're such an old married couple now they've practically become one person.

I never thought pesky little Eggs would grow up to be such a great guy. No more nicknames. He's not a mouthy brat any more. He's Benedict Allard, the interior designer employed by celebrities to add dazzle to their décor. He looks a bit like a boy band pin-up himself, though he's over thirty now.

Simon is pretty hot too. Both Magda and Nadine had a mini-crush on him, though they both knew he was gay, of course. Maybe *I'd* have had a crush, too, though it would be beyond weird to fancy my brother's boyfriend. Simon earns a lot as a music producer so their flat is out of this world. But it's not *my* world. I'm fine where I am.

Will it be good to see Dad and Anna? I love Anna now, and we get along really well, but she'll never take the place of Mum. I start sketching Mum now, trying to remember every single detail, her wild curls like mine, her beautiful smile, her head on one side, her lovely arms outstretched, ready to give me a hug – but it's getting harder and harder now to remember exactly what she was like.

'Oh Mum,' I whisper. It still hurts after all these years. I don't mind, though. I want to keep missing her. The worst thing ever would be to forget her altogether. If only I could have a birthday dinner with her. But she never got to be forty. Bloody cancer.

I pick Stella up for comfort but I'm holding her too needily and she wriggles away.

I wonder if Dad still misses Mum the way I do. Oh, he does, I'm sure he does, but I don't really know if he was a great husband to her. I used to think he was a great dad too, long ago – but I can't ever forgive him for the things he said when I told him I was pregnant. He was furious with me, horrified that I'd have to leave Saint Martins when so few people were lucky enough to get there. He wanted to pay for me to go to a private clinic for a termination so I wouldn't ruin my life. Did he act like that with any of his former girlfriends? Did he actually want to terminate *me*?

I know he adores Lottie now, but the damage is done. I was so proud when I applied for a council flat as a single mum and managed to get it all arranged. I tried hard to decorate it and make it into a haven for Lottie and me. I hoped Dad would be impressed but he said I was off my head wanting to live in such a dump, and couldn't understand why I wouldn't let him help me find somewhere decent. He even looked down on my teaching job at the failing secondary near my flat, saying he couldn't see the point of trying to imbue a love of art in a lot of rowdy yobbos. He kids himself he's so arty-liberal and then comes out with offensive rubbish like that. Anna said it was because he just wanted the best for me and felt frustrated that I wouldn't let him help me. I'm not convinced.

He was entirely flummoxed when the *Guardian* started running my Myrtle cartoons. Maybe even a bit jealous? I don't relish telling him that they've axed her now. He'll see she's gone missing anyway, because he's an archetypal *Guardian* reader and gets the actual printed version with the magazine.

I could always pretend that it's my decision, that I've got bored with Myrtle, that I'm starting on a brand new project.

Stella leaps up onto my desk, agitating for attention. I stroke her and return her slow blink.

‘Maybe I *should* start a graphic novel today? I’ll buy a beautiful new sketch book, and begin. No more messing about. Carpe diem, right?’

Stella purrs in agreement.

I’ve actually got several lovely blank sketch books, all of them untouched. Each time I buy one I think that *this* will be the one. But it isn’t. I doodle on the backs of envelopes and receipts, or the standard paper I use for my cartoons, but my Pigma pen wobbles whenever I approach a virgin sketch book.

I pick up one of these pens, fiddling with it idly. I use them because they’re permanent, though why I want to preserve my little cartoons I don’t really know. I’ve got several stacks of *Guardians* in the airing cupboard. Oh God, I won’t be adding to those piles any more. They’re now as big as they’re ever going to be. The thought makes tears prick at my eyes.

I blink hard. I’m going to have an amazing birthday, even though Lottie’s gone AWOL and Myrtle’s been axed. I really will go shopping and buy a fantastic outfit to wear to the posh dinner tonight. I wish I could buy a fantastic body too. I suppose my boobs are still OK, so something low cut yet not too tight around the rest of me. In a colour I never wear. Red? With a red lipstick to match? Maybe not – I’ll look like I’m channelling Magda. Or a black dress, with very dark lipstick and black nail varnish? No, then I’ll look like Nadine’s small, podgy twin.

Or I could wear my usual go-to dressy outfit, the emerald Indian loose top with silver threads that glint when they catch the light. Plus my best black jeans and black boots. I feel like me in it. So maybe I’ll just stick with that for tonight. It’s only a family dinner so why am I fussing so? Dad won’t even notice what I’m wearing. Anna probably will, but we have entirely

different ideas about what looks good. She's a camel kind of woman, camel coat, camel cashmere, camel patent heels. I've never worn camel in my life since I was dressed as a dromedary for a Nativity play in the Infants.

I ferret in my wardrobe for the black jeans. I try them on, just to check. Oh dear, just like Myrtle, I have to wriggle hard to get them over my hips and it's a struggle to zip them up. They still fit, sort of, but I'll have to be careful what I eat tonight. I could buy new jeans but it's such a performance trying them on in changing rooms with other younger, skimpier women all around me. I always imagine they're peering at me, raising their eyebrows, giggling.

'*Shut up!*' I say out loud, startling Stella. She retreats to her cat tower by the window. 'No, come back, Stella! I didn't mean to frighten you. I'm just cross with myself for being so self-conscious.'

I force myself to meet my own eyes in the mirror. I'm a strong, powerful forty-year-old woman. I have a wonderful daughter, a great family, a beautiful cat. I've had a successful artistic career for years. This is my opportunity to branch out in a new direction. A graphic novel. Definitely. And I always have my teaching to tide me over. I'm independent. I certainly don't need a man in my life to make myself whole. When has that ever happened? Not with any of the men in my life so far.

I take my jeans off and breathe out. I look in the mirror and breathe in again. I poke my tummy.

Maybe it's time I got fit. Exercise more. Start classes? No, I absolutely hated PE at school. Jog? I get out of breath in two minutes. I look at the photo of little-girl me at the paddling pool. I've always liked swimming – so why not go again? I search in my drawers for my costume.

## 2

I wonder what the morning swim session is like? I'm always in a rush on school days and I have a lie-in at the weekend, so I've never tried it before. I imagine a muscly squad splashing up and down the pool, keen to do their fifty lengths before work. It's a bit off-putting. I usually swim during the adults-only early evening spots. They put the lights down low and it's gloriously peaceful, just a few sporty types flashing by in the fast lane and assorted mums having a break from baby care swimming in a little flotilla in the un-laned portion.

When I get into the echoing turquoise world of the pool I can see even without my glasses that the morning swimmers are a different breed altogether. They're mostly much older than me, for a start: ancient men with wizened legs and baggy swimming trunks, and sturdy old ladies with faded costumes and swimming hats pulled down to their eyebrows.

I ease myself into the pool slowly, trying not to scream as the freezing water inches up my body. I bob up and down a bit, too cowardly to get my shoulders wet. I start shivering, take a deep breath, and plunge in properly. It's so *cold*. They've obviously turned the temperature down to save on heating costs. I swim as fast as I can, but I keep getting overtaken. How can all these pensioners be so speedy? They're practically Olympic level compared to me. I'm among truly dedicated swimmers.

I imagine them leaping out of bed, rain, wind or snow, to get their hour's session in. Am I ever going to become one of them? I'm already gasping for breath. But apparently no one here stops after ten or twenty lengths to have a rest or a gossip.

I plough on, counting in my head, and it gradually gets easier. I find the right rhythm, and glide along. All my worries get washed away and I find I'm actually enjoying myself. Mum used to take me swimming when I was small and I learnt quickly. 'You're my little mermaid,' she'd say, and I'd happily imagine my hair growing down to my waist, and my legs turning into a glistening green tail.

I taught Lottie, and she liked being a mermaid too. It's terrifying to think I was just a bit older than she is now when I had her. I gave her very serious talks about birth control before she went to university, while she yawned and fidgeted and looked bored.

'Lottie! It's important. Listen, for God's sake!' I snapped.

'Look, I'm sure they ply you with detailed leaflets the moment you get there. And if you don't mind my saying, you're the last person who should be lecturing me on contraception,' she said.

'Exactly! That's the point! I don't want you to make the same mistakes I made,' I said. 'Though of course you didn't turn out to be a mistake in the slightest,' I added quickly.

'You don't have to keep reassuring me. You've always said I'm the best thing that ever happened to you,' Lottie said complacently.

'Well, you are,' I said.

'Oh Mum!' said Lottie, but she gave me a quick kiss. 'Cheer up!'

I do feel surprisingly cheerful when the whistle goes for the end of the session, just as I'm completing my fiftieth length. I actually bound up the steps out of the pool, grinning all over my face. I've done something significant today. Taken

a positive step. The changing rooms are a bit of a nightmare now, with my fellow swimmers chatting behind the curtains and mums trying to stuff kids into their costumes for the family session about to begin. I peer around, hoping to nab the last empty cubicle, but they all seem to be full. Resigned, I grab my stuff from the locker and head into the communal room.

It's still females only, thank God. I join some completely unself-conscious naked older women who are towelling themselves dry as if it's the most natural thing in the world. I suppose it is. Maybe I'll be as matter of fact about my body when I'm their age. There are several younger ones, too: a couple comfortably size sixteenish, but there's one girl who's got a fantastic figure, supple and sleekly brown. Her damp black curls are like a little cap on her head. She is gorgeous. I sigh inwardly, and although I don't make a sound she looks up; she catches sight of my reflection in the mirror and realizes I'm staring at her.

I feel my cheeks flush crimson. Oh God, she'll think I fancy her! I start towelling my hair frantically so she can't see I'm blushing. I feel such a fool. And now I've got my towel soaking and I haven't even started drying the rest of me. Despite all my attempts to accept my body, the thought of peeling off my tight costume and getting naked in front of everyone else makes me panic.

In one fumbled movement I turn my back, grab my towel and wrap it round me. Then I start trying to get dry bit by bit and clothe each part of me. Another swift glance in the mirror shows that she is wearing tiny knickers now, practically a thong. I'm struggling into an old pair of Bridget Jones big pants. Still at least they cover me up. I wrestle with my jeans, the legs sticking because they're still wet, and then drop my towel and shove on my bra as quickly as I can.

Feeling a bit better now, I shrug on my baggy teeshirt casually, as if communal dressing doesn't faze me at all. Then I sit on a bench spending a long time rethreading my flowery Docs, head down. I hear the door open and close several times and hope she's gone out so I can recover my composure. But when I look up there's only her and me in the room.

She's staring at my teeshirt. I stare at hers. We're *both* wearing Alice in Wonderland teeshirts – the exact same design! She bursts out laughing.

'Hey, are you another Alice?' she asks.

'No, I've just loved the two Alice books since I was little,' I say.

'Did you get your teeshirt from that Alice exhibition at the V&A?' she asks.

'I did!' I say, delighted. 'I went twice!'

'Same. And I loved the exhibition about Beatrix Potter, too,' she says. She pulls up her jean leg to put on her socks. She's got a tattoo on her ankle, like a blue bracelet with a red heart hanging off it. The colours look wonderful against her dark skin. There's a name on the heart. I can just about make it out. Wendy.

'Are you into *Peter Pan* too?' I ask.

'What? Oh, I see. No, Wendy's my girlfriend,' she says.

'Oh! Well, I love the design,' I say. 'It's much more delicate than most tattoos.'

'Yeah, I love it too. I had it done at the Needles Studio. There's a great girl there who specializes in designs for women. Go and have a look,' she says.

'I might just do that,' I say, as if I've been seriously thinking of getting a tattoo for ages. But why shouldn't I? It would certainly be an indelible way of marking my birthday.

She's smiling at me. 'So what name would you have on your heart?' she asks.

I start brushing my hair, thinking about it. *Lottie?* People put their kids' names on their arms – but that's generally when the children are little. I try hard to imagine it, looking at my own arm, and my ankle. It might look a bit weird choosing Lottie's name now she's grown up. *Nadine? Magda?* I'd have to have both or the other one would be hurt. One on each leg would look a bit much.

The only other female in my life is Stella and I'd seem such a sad old maid if I went about with my cat's name round my ankle. I could put Mum I suppose – but that's the sort of tattoo you'd find on the bicep of an old sailor. Mum was called Ros but then people might think I'd bottled out of the whole tattooing process before the girl could add the final *e*.

Then it comes to me, and I snap my damp fingers.

'Myrtle,' I say, talking to myself – but Alice hears.

'Myrtle!' she echoes, sitting on a bench and pulling on her turquoise DMs. 'You have a girlfriend called Myrtle? That's such a cool name.'

'No, she's not a girlfriend, she's a cartoon mouse. You won't have heard of her,' I say, feeling my cheeks going hot. Why didn't I keep my mouth shut? Poor Myrtle's no more, as from now.

But she peers up at me. 'Yes, I have! I love Myrtle!' she cries. 'She's so sweet and funny. I love the way she agonizes over everything. Did you see the one where she was trying to give a dinner party, but her cheese soufflé went all floppy and Myrtle did too?'

I wonder if I'm hallucinating. She's like my perfect imaginary fangirl!

'That was based on real life,' I say ruefully.

'What do you mean? You don't actually know Ellie Allard, do you?' She sounds genuinely impressed. She isn't actually taking the piss.

‘I do know her. Well, of course I do. She’s me. I mean, I’m her,’ I say, blushing again, and I curse the fact that I’ve already rolled my towel up so I can’t hide under it.

‘*Really?*’

I hold out my swimming card with Ellie Allard printed on the front underneath a very bad photo of me.

‘How amazing!’ she says. ‘Do you know, I’ve got some of your cartoons stuck in my diary. You’re part of my life!’

‘Goodness. I haven’t even got them stuck in *my* diary,’ I say. I take a deep breath. ‘But sadly there aren’t going to be any more. They’ve just axed her. They think my comic strips are dated. They don’t chime with the readership nowadays, apparently.’ Why am I telling her this? She’s a complete stranger. Maybe *because* she’s a complete stranger.

‘That’s ridiculous,’ she says, with touching indignation. ‘How could they be so stupid? Myrtle Mouse is the highlight of my week. Shall I start a *Save Myrtle Mouse* campaign?’

‘That’s very kind of you but it won’t be any use,’ I say. ‘She’s gone.’

‘Then you must definitely have a Myrtle tattoo in her memory,’ she says, practically bouncing with enthusiasm. ‘Don’t have her name in an anklet heart. You must have a special cartoon of her. You draw it yourself and Catarina at Needles will ink an exact copy, I promise. You could have a huge Myrtle all over your back! It would look fantastic when you go swimming.’

‘No, Myrtle is tiny. She’s a *mouse*. Maybe I could have her inside my wrist?’ I suggest, as if I’m really making plans to have it done. Maybe I am . . .

‘Yep, that would look really cool. And discreet. Go for it,’ she says.

‘I will.’ I put my boots on and lace them determinedly. But she doesn’t look convinced.

‘No, you won’t,’ she says. ‘But you really should, Ellie. Tell you what, I’ll go with you to give you moral support. The studio won’t be open yet so we could have breakfast first. Have you ever been to that little caff near here? They have the most fabulous almond croissants.’

This is so weird. She even likes the same pastry as me. Maybe we’re twins separated from birth. Twins with a ten-year age gap – she can’t be more than thirty. And she’s taller and much slimmer and a different ethnicity. I look up at her properly, her neat short curls, her big brown eyes with long lashes, her high cheekbones, her long neck . . .

‘Is that OK?’ she asks, suddenly looking anxious. ‘I mean, you don’t have to. I don’t want to bully you into it. And maybe you’ve got plans for this morning?’

‘Not really,’ I say. ‘Anyway, let’s have breakfast, then I’ll see if I’m feeling brave enough. Or mad enough. Whatever.’

‘Great,’ she says, beaming.

Is this really happening? I’m still chilled from the swim but my face is burning. We’re walking out of the changing room together as if it’s the most ordinary thing in the world. I wonder if she makes a habit of asking complete strangers to have breakfast with her. But she doesn’t really feel like a stranger, though I find it hard to look her right in the eyes. I feel so shy with her for some reason.

I’ve passed this café Alice likes heaps of times but it always looked a bit hot and steamy, with the sort of staff that chat to you. I prefer the anonymity of a Pret.

The woman behind the counter welcomes Alice joyously and wants to know my name and who I am too. I’m right about the staff, then. She’s called Rosa. Middle-aged. Well, four or five years older than me. She suits being plump, and her dark eyes are so bright and her cheeks so naturally pink she doesn’t need make-up. She’s wearing a faded teeshirt and

baggy trousers under her white overall and when she brings our coffees and croissants to the table I see she's wearing socks and old-fashioned plimsolls, the sort we used to wear for PE at primary school.

Maybe I'll be like her soon, dressing entirely for comfort. I frown at the thought. I think I *will* get a tattoo, just to have a bit of edge. Nadine's got several after all, had them for years – hummingbirds and daisies and day-of-the-dead images. I teach all the Frida Kahlo stuff to Year Eights, maybe my favourite lessons. I made them fall about laughing this year because I dressed up as Kahlo. I put my hair up, wore a lot of beads and ethnic embroidery, and blacked a monobrow and a moustache on my face. My Kahlo day was a legend in the school. Perhaps I'll try it again the last day of term – though that might be pushing the joke too far.

Sometimes I think my whole life is on repeat. I seem to be doing the same things again and again, seeing the same few people. Yet here I am, with an interesting new friend, sitting in a different cosy café. Even these almond croissants are an entirely new experience, golden brown swirls sprinkled with icing sugar, crisp to bite into but the almond paste is thick and soft as it coats my tongue with sweetness. My little birthday cake. I don't have any candles to hand, naturally enough, but on a whim I take a wrapped strip of brown sugar from the bowl on our table and stick it in the squidgy almond paste of my croissant. I twist the end so it stands up like a little flame.

Alice looks at me quizzically.

'It's my birthday,' I explain.

'Really? Oh, happy birthday, Ellie!' She puts her head on one side. 'So how old are you?'

I can't quite say the figure.

'Don't say you've forgotten!' Alice says.

'I'd like to forget, actually,' I say, snatching my makeshift

candle out of the croissant and laying it at the side of my plate. I take another big bite. ‘You are so right, these are great.’

‘You’re surely not bashful about your age!’ she says, raising her eyebrows.

‘You wait till you get to my significant age, then,’ I retort.

‘Which is what? Three score years and ten?’ she says, teasing again. She takes a deep breath, tucks a paper napkin at her neck so it looks like a vicar’s collar and intones: ‘The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off and we fly away.’

She rattles it off with old-fashioned, holy intonation. I gawp at her.

‘You’re not a vicar, are you?’ I ask.

She takes a sip of her cappuccino as I speak and laughs so much she snorts some up her nose. She has to mop herself with the napkin collar.

‘Of course not, you nutcase. Do I look like one?’

I shrug. ‘Well, I’m not well up on lady vicars, so how should I know? You’re not quite as cheery as the one with the novelty teapots who used to be on *Gogglebox*, but I’ve heard the Church is trying hard to attract cool female celebrants,’ I say.

‘Oh, I love her – Kate Bottley. She’s often on the radio now,’ she says. ‘I have a thing about the Reverend Richard Coles too; he’s a sweetheart. But *I’m* not a vicar. Although my dad is. Hence the biblical knowledge. I was bored out of my mind most Sundays in church so I used to learn bits of the Bible by heart. Some women my age know the words to every Taylor Swift song. I’m word perfect on most of the Psalms. You’ve winkled out my hidden talent already. So it’s only fair you tell me how old you are, ancient lady.’

‘Oh, don’t call me that!’ I protest, stirring my coffee. ‘That’s what my daughter says when she wants to tease me.’

‘You’ve got a daughter!’ she says. ‘How old is *she*, then?’

‘Nineteen,’ I reply, trying to sound nonchalant.

‘*Really?* Were you a teenage bride?’

‘Well, I was never a bride, but I had her pretty young. OK, I’m forty.’ I actually stammer over the *f*. It sounds so odd saying it. She looks strangely impressed.

‘Forty, eh? That’s nothing. Though I thought you were younger. More my age,’ she says.

‘Which is?’

‘Thirty-two.’

‘Well, actually, I thought *you* were younger,’ I say truthfully.

We smile at each other. This is weird. We’re saying all this daft stuff as if we’re flirting, looking into each other’s eyes, heads on one side – yet she’s got her Wendy and I’m straight. I did once get a bit carried away with Nadine when we were teenagers and very drunk, but it didn’t really do anything for me. We never mentioned it afterwards, both of us a bit embarrassed.

‘I feel bad now, practically kidnapping you, when it’s your fortieth birthday and you must have a hundred and one things you want to do,’ she says.

‘No, I woke up with this burning ambition to get a tattoo to celebrate,’ I say, deadpan.

‘OK, no going back now!’ She picks up her coffee cup and clinks it against mine.

We pay and leave the warm café. I hunch into the neck of my teeshirt and rub my arms, giving a slight shiver.

‘You don’t have to go through with it, Ellie!’ she says, misunderstanding.

‘I’m not trembling; I’m shivering, that’s all,’ I say, but I’m wondering now if I’ve really got cold feet. Do I actually want a tattoo? They suit someone like Nadine, they certainly suit Alice, but won’t it just look a bit sad on a woman like me? Especially a little mouse with a kink in her tail. And if anyone

recognizes Myrtle it will look as if I'm showing off. Plus, it will be painful!

Nadine said it wasn't painful at all, she rather enjoyed the whole sensation – but then Nadine's always been a bit like that. The little she's told me about her sex life sounds very dramatic. Perhaps she's a total masochist and even gets turned on at the dentist.

I can be stoical about ordinary oven burns or accidental Stella scratches, but I'm hopeless with real pain. I screamed so loudly when I was having Lottie that a bossy Sister came and ticked me off, saying I was frightening all the other mothers.

I'd planned one of those water births, where I'd lie back serenely and gently pant my way through the whole process, like a Naiad in a waterlily pool. The only thing floating in my pool certainly wasn't a fragrant flower. I had to be hoicked out of there anyway because they thought Lottie was getting stressed inside me.

She didn't have a beautiful peaceful birth at all; she was yanked out violently, with me still screaming my head off – but as soon as she was in my arms it was so wonderful I'd have laboured willingly for weeks just for that moment.

My arms always feel empty since I left her in that bleak student room, with its single bed and single bookshelf and single reading lamp.

'Ellie?' Alice says, not reassured by my expression. I jump and force a smile back on my face.

'Sorry! I was just pondering.'

I still have a few qualms, especially when we get to the Needles Studio. The window graphics are very Heavy Metal and brutal.

'It's OK, ignore all that tat. That's just to draw in the weedy guys who fancy themselves as hard men. Catarina's work is on a different level altogether,' says Alice. 'Come and see.' She

takes my hand and pulls me into the studio. There's loud music playing and in the background there's a man lying face down on a long couch, another crouched over him with a machine. It's like a vision from hell. My feet clench in my boots, ready to make a run for it.

Alice waves to a hairy man hung with several kilos of silver jewellery, and points to the ceiling. He nods and signals for us to go upstairs. I follow Alice, even though I really am trembling now. We can still hear the music but it's muted, and the atmosphere is much lighter. The artwork on the white walls is beautiful, delicate and ornate, and Catarina is too. She's petite and elfin, with big Bambi eyes, wearing a pinafore dress over a vintage lace blouse, and cream boots patterned with pink and lilac flowers.

She smiles when she sees Alice. 'Hey there,' she says. She's even got a little-girl voice.

'Hi, Catarina. This is my friend Ellie,' says Alice.

She's called me her friend! It's like being back in Reception, when you make friends instantaneously in the sandpit, like Nadine and I did.

'Do you think you could squeeze her in just now, before you get busy?' Alice wheedles.

Catarina wrinkles her nose. 'I'd love to, but I'm really pushed for time today. I've got a client booked in at half past and—'

'Well, there's still plenty of time then, isn't there? Ellie knows exactly what she wants. And it's just a little wrist job, you could do it in minutes. Go on, Cat, be an angel, before she changes her mind,' Alice begs.

'Look, it's OK, it's not as if it's urgent,' I say, embarrassed.

'See, she's changing her mind already!' cries Alice. 'She's a really important client, you know. She's Ellie Allard, who does the Myrtle Mouse cartoons. You know!'

I'm not sure that Catarina has a clue who I am but she smiles and folds her arms, peering at me with renewed interest.

‘What design do you want?’ she asks.

‘Well, I’d really like Myrtle Mouse,’ I say. At her blank expression, I say, ‘I’ll draw her for you.’

‘Perfect!’ says Alice. ‘Bung her some paper then, Cat.’

My hand steadies as I draw. I breathe slowly, feel my whole body relax. I never have any difficulty with Myrtle. I just go into my own Myrtleworld. I don’t have to direct the pen. I just imagine her and she appears on the paper, with her daisy stud in her ear, one arm raised and her tiny fingers clenched in a power wave. I make her skinny legs knock-kneed to show she’s anxious. Her tail has its usual kink, but it’s at a perky angle.

‘Wow!’ says Alice. ‘Here she is, as if by magic!’

‘Will you be able to copy her?’ I ask Catarina.

‘Don’t worry,’ she says. ‘I just put your design into the machine and it’ll transfer it onto thermal paper. So, if I’m going to do it, I need you to show your ID so I can check your age.’

‘Are you joking?’ I say incredulously.

‘Well, you might be a very mature sixteen-year-old,’ Catarina pipes in her infant voice. But then she laughs. ‘But I do need you to pay first. You seem ever so nice, and you’re Alice’s friend, but even so – people have been known to try to scarper before coughing up.’

I flash my credit card against the machine, forking out £100. I suddenly feel daft spending so much money on something I’m not even sure I want. But a sexy frock might have cost more, I suppose. And it would go out of fashion and eventually fall to bits. A tattoo should last for ever. I have a sudden image of me double my age, my skin all wrinkled so my tattoo looks ridiculous. My mouth is suddenly desert-dry, and I feel my pulse beating in my head. My hand circles my wrist protectively. What am I doing?

Oh sod it, it’s time to live dangerously. Why shouldn’t an old lady have a fun tattoo? And I’ll be able to hide it with one

of those alarm wristbands for senior citizens, when the time comes.

‘OK, sit in the chair, Ellie,’ says Catarina. She turns her head. ‘Are you hanging around, Alice?’

‘Of course I am!’ says Alice, coming to stand right beside me. ‘Don’t you worry, Ellie, I’ll hold your hand if it gets really painful.’

‘Thanks,’ I say uncertainly. I rub my palms on my jeans, hoping they’re not too sweaty.

‘So where do you want your little mouse?’ Catarina asks.

‘Here,’ I say, pointing to the inside of my left wrist, where the little blue veins are standing out prominently. The skin is so delicate there. Will the needles go right into them? I’m shivering just at the thought, though I’ve obviously got to keep as still as I can. What if I get some kind of infection?

‘Don’t worry, you’ll see we always use new needles,’ Catarina says, as if she’s reading my mind. ‘Everything’s new. Even the razors.’ She takes a disposable one from its packet.

‘I want it on my wrist, not under my arm!’ I say, panicking.

‘I’m just making sure there’s no fine hairs that’ll get in the way, that’s all,’ says Catarina, rubbing at my wrist with alcohol.

Then she makes the stencil from my sketch and shows me the image on the thermal paper. She uses a bit of soap to moisten my wrist and places the transfer on carefully. When she peels it off, I peer at the little likeness.

‘OK?’ she asks.

‘Could she be coloured in a bit?’ I ask on impulse.

‘Sure. Purple dress. White daisy. Tiny trace of red on her lips and pink nose?’ Catarina suggests.

‘Perfect,’ I say.

She rubs ointment on the design to make the needle slide easily. And now is the big moment. I take a deep breath and hold it.