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THE MEMORY BOOK

Rowan Coleman

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For my mum, Dawn

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love

—'An Arundel Tomb', Philip Larkin

Prologue

Greg is looking at me; he thinks I don't know it. I've been chopping onions at the kitchen counter for almost five minutes, and I can see his reflection – inside out, convex and stretched – in the chrome kettle we got as a wedding present. He's sitting at the kitchen table, checking me out.

The first time I noticed him looking at me like this I thought I must have had something stuck in my teeth, or a cobweb in my hair, or something, because I couldn't think of any reason my sexy young builder would be looking at me. Especially not on that day when I was dressed in old jeans and a T-shirt, with my hair scraped back into a bun, ready to paint my brand-new attic room – the room that marked the beginning of everything.

It was the end of his last day; he'd been working at the house for just over a month. It was still really hot, especially up there, even with my new Velux windows open. Covered

in sweat, he climbed down the newly installed pull-down ladder. I gave him a pint glass of lemonade rattling with ice cubes, which he drank in one go, the muscles in his throat moving as he swallowed. I think I must have sighed out loud at his sheer gloriousness because he looked curiously at me. I laughed and shrugged, and he smiled and then looked at his boots. I poured him another glass of lemonade and went back to my last box – Caitlin's things – yet another box of stuff I couldn't bring myself to throw out and that I knew I'd be clogging up the garage with instead. It was then that I sensed him looking at me. I touched my hair, expecting to find something there, and ran my tongue over my teeth.

'Everything OK?' I asked him, wondering if he was trying to work out how to tell me that my bill had doubled.

'Fine,' he said, nodding. He was – is – a man of few words.

'Good, and are you finished?' I asked, still prepared for bad news.

'Yep, all done,' he said. 'So . . .'

'Oh, God, you want paying. I'm so sorry.' I felt myself blush as I rooted around in the kitchen drawer for my cheque book, which wasn't there – it was never where it was supposed to be. Flustered, I looked around, feeling his gaze on me as I tried to remember where I'd last had it. 'It's around here somewhere . . .'

'There's no hurry,' he said.

'I had it when I was paying some bills, so . . .' I just kept wittering on, desperate, if I'm honest, for him to be gone and

for me to be able to breathe out and drink the half bottle of Grigio that was waiting for me in the fridge.

'You can pay me another time,' he said. 'Like maybe when you come out with me for a drink.'

'Pardon?' I said, stopping halfway through searching a drawer that seemed to be full only of rubber bands. I must have misheard.

'Come out with me for a drink?' he asked tentatively. 'I don't normally ask my clients out, but . . . you're not normal.'

I laughed and it was his turn to blush.

'That didn't quite come out the way I thought it,' he said, folding his arms across his chest.

'You're asking me on a date?' I said, just to confirm it, because the whole thing seemed so absurd that I had to say it out loud to test I'd got it right. 'Me?'

'Yes, you coming?'

'OK,' I said. It had all seemed so perfectly plausible to him: him and me, ten years between us, going out on a date. 'Why not?'

That was the first time I noticed him looking at me, looking at me with this sort of mingled heat and joy that I instantly felt mirrored inside me, like my body was answering his call in a way that my conscious mind had no control over. Yes, ever since then I've felt his looks long before I've seen them. I feel the hairs standing up on the back of my neck, and a sense of anticipation washing over me in one long delicious shudder,

because I know that soon after he looks at me, he will be touching me, kissing me.

Now I feel his hand on my shoulder and I lean my cheek against his fingers.

'You're crying,' he says.

'I'm chopping onions,' I say, putting down the knife and turning round to face him. 'You know that all Esther will eat is Mummy's homemade lasagne? Here, you should watch me make it, so you know the recipe. First, chop the onions . . .'

'Claire . . .' Greg stops me from picking up the knife again, and turns me towards him. 'Claire, we have to talk about it, don't we?'

He looks so uncertain, so lost and so reluctant, that I want to say no – no, we don't have to talk about it, we can just pretend that today is like yesterday, and all the days before that when we didn't know any better. We can pretend not to know, and who knows how long we might be able to go on like this, so happy, so perfect?

'She likes a lot of tomato purée in the sauce,' I say. 'And also a really big slug of ketchup . . .'

'I don't know what to do or say,' Greg says, his voice breaking on an inward breath. 'I'm not sure how to be.'

'And then, just at the end, add a teaspoon of Marmite.'

'Claire,' he says with a sob, and draws me into his arms. And I stand there in his embrace with my eyes closed, breathing in his scent, my arms at my side, feeling my heart pounding in my chest. 'Claire, how are we going to tell the children?'

Friday, 13 March 1992

Caitlin Is Born

This is the bracelet they gave you in the hospital – pink because you are a girl. It says: 'Baby Armstrong.' They put it on your ankle, and it kept slipping off because you were so tiny, a whole month early, to the day. You were supposed to be an April baby. I had imagined daffodils and blue skies and April showers, but you decided to be born one month early on a cold wet Friday, Friday 13th, no less, not that we were worried about that. If anyone was ever born to overcome bad omens it was you, and you knew it, greeting the world with an almighty shout – not a cry or a wail, but a roar of intent, I thought. A declaration of war.

There wasn't anybody there with us for a long time. Because you were early, and Gran lived far away. So for about the first six hours it was just you and me. You smelled sweet, like a cake, and you felt so warm and . . . exactly right. We were at the end of the ward and we kept the curtain closed around us. I could hear the other mums talking, visitors coming and going, babies crying and

fussing, but I didn't want to be part of it. I didn't want to be part of anything ever again except for you and me. I held you, so tiny and scrunched up like a new bud waiting to flower, and I just looked at you, slumbering against my breast, a deep frown on your tiny face, and I told you it was all going to be fine, because you and I were together: we were the whole universe, and that was all that mattered.

1

Claire

I've just got to get away from my mother: she is driving me mad, which would be funny if I wasn't already that way inclined. No, I'm not mad, that's not right. Although I feel pretty angry.

It was the look on her face when we came out of the hospital appointment; the look she had all the way home. Stoical, stalwart, strong but bleak. She didn't say the words, but I could hear them buzzing around in her head: 'This is so typically Claire. To ruin everything just when it's getting good.'

'I'll move in,' she says, even though she blatantly already has, silently secreting herself in the spare bedroom, like I wouldn't notice her, arranging her personal items on the shelf in the bathroom. I knew she would come when she found out. I knew she would and I wanted her to, I suppose; but I wanted to ask her, or for her to ask me. Instead she simply

arrived, all hushed tones and sorrowful glances. 'I'll move into the spare room.'

'No, you won't.' I turn to look at her as she drives. She is a very careful driver, slow and exacting. I am not allowed to drive any more, not since I killed that post-box, which carried a far more expensive fine than you would perhaps imagine, because it belongs to Her Majesty. It must be the same if you run over a corgi: if you run over a corgi, you probably get sent to the Tower. My mother is such a careful driver, and yet she never looks in the rear-view mirror when she's reversing. It's like she feels that, in that one aspect, it's safer simply to close her eyes and hope for the best. I used to love driving; I loved the freedom and the independence and knowing that, if I felt like it, I could go anywhere I fancied. I don't like that my car keys have disappeared, gone without me being allowed even to kiss them goodbye, hidden away in a place where I will never find them. I know because I've tried. I could still drive, I think. As long as no one put anything in my way.

'It's not come to you moving in yet,' I insist, although we both know she has already moved in. 'There's still lots of time left when I won't need any help at all. I mean, listen to me. I can still talk and think about . . .' I wave my arm, causing her to duck and look under my hand, which I tuck apologetically back in my lap. 'Things.'

'Claire, this isn't something you can stick your head in the sand about. Trust me, I know.'

Of course she knows; she's lived through this before, and

now, thanks to me, or strictly speaking thanks to my father and his rogue DNA, she has to live through it again. And it's not as if I'll do anything sensible like dying nice and neatly with all my faculties intact, holding her hand and thanking her, with a serene look on my face as I impart words of wisdom to live by to my children. No, my annoyingly quite young, reasonably fit body will linger on long after I've checked out of my mushy little brain, right up until the moment when I forget how to breathe in and out and in again. I know that's what she is thinking. I know the last thing in the world she wants is to watch her daughter fade away and shrivel up, just like her husband did. I know it's breaking her heart and that she's doing her best to be brave, and stand by me, and yet . . . It makes me so angry. Her goodness makes me angry. All my life I've been trying to prove that I can grow up enough to not need her to rescue me all the time. All my life I've been wrong.

'Actually, Mum, I *am* the one who can stick my head in the sand,' I say, staring out of the window. 'I *am* the one who can completely ignore what is happening to me, because most of the time I won't even notice.'

It's funny: I say the words out loud, and feel the fear, there in the pit of my stomach, but it's like it isn't part of me. It really is like it's happening to someone else, this terror.

'You don't mean that, Claire,' Mum says crossly, as if she really thinks that I mean I don't care, and not that I'm just saying it to annoy her. 'What about your daughters?'

I say nothing because my mouth is suddenly thick with words that won't form properly or mean anything like what I need them to mean. So I stay quiet, looking out of the window, at the houses slipping past, one by one. It's almost dark already; living-room lamps are switched on, TVs flicker behind curtains. Of course I care. Of course I'll miss it, this life. Steam-filled kitchens on winter evenings, cooking for my daughters, watching them grow: these are the things I will never experience. I'll never know whether Esther will always eat her peas one by one, and if she will always be blonde. If Caitlin will travel across Central America, like she plans to, or whether she'll do something completely different that she hasn't even dreamed of yet. I won't ever know what that undreamed wish will be. They'll never lie to me about where they are going, or come to me with their problems. These are the things I'll miss, because I'll be somewhere else and I won't even know what I'm missing. Of course I bloody care.

'I suppose they'll have Greg.' My mum sounds sceptical as she ploughs on, determined to discuss what the world will be like after I'm no longer in it, even though it shows a quite spectacular lack of tact. 'That's if he can hold it together.'

'He will,' I say. 'He will. He's a brilliant father.'

I am not sure if that is true, though. I'm not sure if he can take what is happening, and I don't know how to help him. He is such a good man, and a kind one. But lately, ever since the diagnosis, he is becoming a stranger to me day by day. Every time I look at him, he is standing further away. It's not

his fault. I can tell he wants to be there, to be stalwart and strong for me, but I think perhaps the enormity of it all, of all this happening when really we've only just started out on our life together, is chipping away at him. Soon I won't recognise him at all; I know I already find it hard to recognise the way I feel about him. I know he is the last great love of my life, but I don't feel it any more. Somehow Greg is the first thing I am losing. I remember it, our love affair, but it's as though I've dreamed it, like Alice through the looking glass.

'You, of all people.' Mum cannot help lecturing me, telling me off for being in possession of the family's dark secret, like I brought it on myself by being so damned naughty. 'You, who knew what it was like to grow up without a father. We need to make plans for them, Claire. Your girls are losing their mother and you need to make sure they will be OK when you aren't capable of looking after them any more!'

She brakes suddenly at a zebra crossing, causing a chorus of horns to sound behind her, as a little girl who looks far too young to be out on her own hurries across the road, huddled against the rain. In the glare of Mum's headlights I can see she's carrying a thin blue plastic bag with what looks like four pints of milk inside, bumping against her skinny legs. I hear the break in Mum's voice, hovering just below the frustration and anger. I hear the hurt.

'I do know that,' I say, suddenly exhausted. 'I do know that I have to make plans, but I was waiting, I was hoping. Hoping I might get to enjoy being married to Greg and grow

old with him, hoping that the drugs might slow things down for me. Now I know that . . . well, now that I know there is no hope, I'll get a lot more organised, I promise. Make a wall chart, keep a rota.'

'You can't hide from this, Claire.' She insists on repeating herself.

'Don't you think I know that?' I shout. Why does she always do that? Why does she always push me until I shout at her, as if she isn't satisfied I'm really listening until she has made me lose my temper? It's always been that way between us: love and anger mixed up in almost every moment we have together. 'Do you think I don't know what I have done, giving them this shitty life?'

Mum pulls into the drive in front of a house – my house, I realise a second too late – and I feel the tears coming against my will. Slamming out of the car, I don't go into the house, but instead walk into the rain, dragging the edges of my cardigan around me, heading defiantly up the street.

'Claire!' Mum shouts after me. 'You can't do this any more!'

'Watch me,' I say, but not to her, just into the rain, feeling the tiny droplets on my lips and tongue.

'Claire, please!' I just about hear her, but I keep walking. I'll show her; I'll show them all, especially the people that won't let me drive. I can still walk; I can still bloody walk! I haven't forgotten how to do that yet. I'll just go to the end of the road, where the other one crosses over it, and then turn back. I'll be like Hansel following a trail of breadcrumbs.

I won't go far. I just need to do this one thing. Go to the end of the road, turn around and come back. Although it is getting darker now, and the houses round here all look the same: neat, squat 1930s semis. And the end of the road isn't as near as I thought it was.

I stop for a moment, feeling the rain driving into my head, tiny cold needles of icy water. I turn around. My mum isn't behind me: she hasn't followed me. I thought she might, but she hasn't. The street is empty. Did I reach the end of the road and turn around already? I am not sure. Which direction was I walking in? Am I going to or from, and to where? The houses on either side of the road look exactly the same.I stand very still. I left my home less than two minutes ago, and now I am not sure where it is. A car drives past me, spraying freezing water on to my legs. I didn't bring my phone, and anyway I can't always remember how to use it any more. I've lost numbers. Although I look at them and know they are numbers, I've forgotten which ones are which, and which order they come in. But I can still walk, so I begin to walk in the direction that the car that soaked me was going. Perhaps it's a sign. I will know my house when I see it because the curtains are bright-red silk and the light shining through them makes them glow. Remember that: I have red glowing curtains at the front of my house that one of my neighbours said made me look 'loose'. I will remember the red glowing curtains. I'll be home really soon. Everything will be fine.

The appointment at the hospital hadn't exactly gone well. Greg had wanted to come but I told him to go and finish the conservatory he was building. I told him that nothing the doctor said would make our mortgage need to be paid any the less, or mean that we don't have to keep feeding the children. It hurt him that I hadn't wanted him there, but he didn't realise that I couldn't cope with trying to guess what the look on his face meant at the same time as guessing what I felt myself. I knew if I took Mum she would just say everything in her head, which is better. It's better than hearing really terrible news and wondering if your husband is sorry that he ever set eyes on you, that of all the people in the world he could have chosen, he chose you. So I wasn't in the best frame of mind – pun intended – when the doctor sat me down to go through the next round of test results. The tests they had given me because everything was happening much faster than they'd thought it would.

I can't remember the doctor's name because it's very long with a great many syllables, which I think is funny. I mentioned this as Mum and I sat there waiting for him to finish looking at the notes on his screen and deliver the bad news, but no one else was amused. There's a time and a place for gallows humour, it seems.

The rain is driving down faster now, and heavier; I wished I'd flounced off with my coat. After a while all the roads round here start to look the same: 1930s semis, in row after row,

either side of the street. I'm looking for curtains, aren't I? What colour?

I turn a corner and see a little row of shops, and I stop. I've come out for a coffee, then? This is where I come on a Saturday morning with Greg and Esther for a pain au chocolat and a coffee. It's dark, though, and cold and wet. And I don't seem to have a coat on, and I check my hand, which is empty of Esther's, and for a moment I hold on tight to my chest, worrying that I've forgotten her. But I didn't have her when I started. If I'd had her when I started, I'd be carrying her monkey, which she always insists on taking out but never wants to carry herself. So I've come here for coffee. I'm having some me time. That's nice.

I head across the road, grateful for the rush of warm air that greets me as I enter the café. People look up at me as I walk in through the door. I suppose I must look quite a sight with my hair plastered to my face.

I wait at the counter, belatedly realising that I am shivering. I must have forgotten my coat. I wish I could remember why I came out for coffee. Am I meeting someone? Is it Greg? I come here sometimes with Greg and Esther for a pain au chocolat.

'You all right, love?' the girl, who's about Caitlin's age, asks me. She is smiling, so perhaps I know her. Or perhaps she is just being friendly. A woman sitting with her toddler buggy, just to my left, pushes it a little further away from me. I must look strange, like a lady recently emerged from a lake. Haven't they ever seen a wet person before?

'Coffee, please,' I say. I feel the weight of change in my jeans pocket, and produce it in my fist. I can't remember how much the coffee is here, and when I look at the board over the counter where I know the information is displayed, I am lost. I hold out the coins in the palm of my hand and offer them up.

The girl wrinkles her nose, as if money I've touched might somehow be tainted, and I feel very cold now and very lonely. I want to tell her why I am hesitating, but the words won't come – not the right ones, anyway. It's harder to say things out loud than think them in my head. It makes me scared to say anything to anyone I don't know, in case I say something so ludicrous they just cart me away and lock me up, and by that time I've forgotten my name and . . .

I glance towards the door. Where is this café? I went to the hospital with Mum, we saw the consultant, Mr Thingy, I couldn't remember his name, I thought that was quite funny, and now I am here. But I can't think why I am here, or even where here is. I shudder, taking the coffee and the brown coins that the girl has left on the counter; and then I go and sit down, very still. I feel like if I move suddenly, I might trip some hidden trap, and that something will harm me or I might fall off something. I feel like I might fall very far. I sit still and concentrate hard on how come I am here and how on earth I will leave. And where I will go. Little pieces come back to me – fragments rushing forward with pieces of information that I must somehow decode. The world is shattered all around me.

I'm not responding to the treatment, that much I know. It was always likely. The odds of the drugs doing anything for me were just the same as flipping a coin and calling heads: fifty-fifty. But everyone hoped that, for me, the treatment would make all the difference. Because I am so young, because I have two daughters, and one of them is only three and one will be left to pick up the pieces. They all hoped it would work for me, and work better than anyone – even the doctor with the long and difficult name – ever thought possible. And I too hoped for the groundbreaking miracle that would change everything. It seemed right that fate or God should allow me, of all people, some special dispensation because of my extenuating circumstances. But fate or God has not done that: whichever one it is that is having a good laugh at my expense has done the opposite. Or perhaps it's nothing so personal. Perhaps it's just genealogical accidents stretching back millennia that have brought me to this moment in time when I am the one chosen to bear the consequences. I am deteriorating much faster than anyone thought I would. It's to do with these little emboli. I can remember that word perfectly well, but I have no idea what the metal stirring thing that came with my coffee is called. But the word emboli is quite beautiful, musical almost, poetic. Tiny little blood clots exploding in my brain. It's a new feature, not something the experts expected. It makes me almost unique in the world, and everyone at the hospital is very excited about it, even though they try to pretend they

are not. All I know is that every time one pops up, some more of me is gone for good – another memory, a face or a word, just lost, like me. I look around me, feeling colder now than before, and realise I feel afraid. I have no idea how to get home. I'm here, and I feel sane, but leaving this place seems impossible.

There are Christmas decorations hanging from the ceiling, which is odd. I don't remember it being Christmas; I am sure it is not Christmas. But what if I've been here for weeks? What if I left home and just walked and walked and didn't stop, and now I'm miles from anywhere and months have gone by and they all think I am dead? I should call Mum. She'll be angry with me for running off. She tells me that if I want her to treat me like an adult, I need to behave like an adult. She says it's all about trust. And I say, well, don't go through my things, then, bitch. I don't say the bitch bit out loud.

I'd text her, but she doesn't have a phone. I keep telling her, this is the twentieth century, Mum, get with the programme. But she doesn't like them. She doesn't like the fiddly buttons, she reckons. But I wish Mum were here; I wish she were here to take me home, because I am not sure where I am. I look intently around the café. What if she's here and I have forgotten what she looks like?

Wait, I am ill. I am not a girl any more. I am ill and I have come out for a coffee and I can't remember why. My curtains are a colour and they glow. Orange, maybe. Orange rings a bell.

'Hello.' I look up. There's a man. I am not supposed to talk to strangers so I look back down at the table. Perhaps he will go away. He does not. 'Are you OK?'

'I'm fine,' I say. 'Well, I'm cold.'

'Would you mind if I sit here? There's nowhere else.' I look around and the café is busy, although I can see other empty chairs. He looks OK, even nice. I like his eyes. I nod. I wonder if I'll have enough words to be able to talk to him.

'So you came out without a coat?' he asks, gesturing at me.

'Looks like it!' I say carefully. I smile, so as not to scare him. He smiles in return. I could tell him I am ill. He might help me. But I don't want to. He has nice eyes. He is talking to me like I'm not about to drop down dead at any second. He doesn't know anything about me. Neither do I, but that's beside the point.

'So what happened?' He chuckles, looking bemused, amused. I find I want to lean towards him, which I suppose makes him magnetic.

'I only popped out for a pint of milk,' I tell him, smiling. 'And locked myself out. I share a flat with three girls and my . . .' I stop short of saying my baby. For two reasons. First, because I know that this is now, and that it was years ago when I shared a flat with three girls, and back then I didn't even have a baby. Secondly, because I don't want him to know that I've got a baby, a baby who is not a baby any more. Caitlin, I have Caitlin, who is not a baby. She will be twenty-one next year and my curtains are ruby red and grow. I remind myself

that I am not in a position to flirt: I'm a married mother of two.

'Can I buy you another coffee?' He signals to the woman behind the counter, who smiles at him as if she knows him. I find it reassuring that the café woman likes him too. I'm losing the ability to judge people by their expressions, and by those little subtle nuances that let you know what a person is thinking and feeling. He might be looking at me like I am a nutter. All I have to go on is his nice eyes.

'Thank you.' He is kind and he is talking to me just like I'm a person. No, not that; I *am* a person. I am still a person. I mean he's talking to me like I'm me, and I like it. It's warming me through, and I feel oddly happy. I miss feeling happy – just happy, without feeling that every moment of joy I experience now must also be tinged with sadness.

'So, you're locked out. Is someone going to ring you when they get back, or bring you a key?'

I hesitate. 'There will be someone in, in a bit.' I have no idea if that's a lie. 'I'll wait a while and then go back.' That *is* a lie. I don't know where I am or how to get to back, wherever that is.

He chuckles, and I look at him sharply. 'Sorry.' He smiles. 'It's just that you do actually look like a drowned rat, and a very pretty one, if you don't mind my saying so.'

'I don't mind you saying so,' I say. 'Say more like that!'

He laughs again.

'I'm a fool,' I say, warming to my new not-ill status. It feels

good to be just me, and not me with the disease, the thing that now defines me. I've found a moment of peace and normality in this maelstrom of uncertainty, and it is such a relief. I could kiss him with gratitude. Instead I talk too much. I'm famous for talking too much; it used to be a thing about me that people enjoyed. 'I always have been. If something can go wrong, it happens to me. I don't know why, but it's like I'm a magnet for mishap. Ha, mishap. There's a word you don't hear often enough.' I rattle on and I don't really care what I am saying out loud, conscious only that here I am, a girl talking to a boy.

'I'm a bit like that too,' he says. 'Sometimes I wonder if I will ever grow up.'

'I know that I won't,' I say. 'I know it for sure.'

'Here.' He hands me his paper napkin. 'You look a little bit like you've escaped the apocalypse. Just.'

'A paper napkin?' I take it and laugh, dabbing it on my hair, face, wiping it under my eyes. When I take it away, there is black stuff on it, which means I put some black stuff on my eyes at some point today, a fact I find comforting: black stuff on my lashes means my eyes will look better, I will look better, even if I look like a better panda. 'Better than nothing, I suppose.'

'There's a hand dryer in the toilet,' he says, pointing at a door behind him. 'You could give yourself a quick blast under that. Take the edge off.'

'I'm fine,' I say, patting my damp knees as if to make a

point. I do not want to leave this table, this seat, this coffee, and go anywhere else. Here it feels like I am almost safe, like I'm clinging on to a ledge, and as long as I don't move I will be fine and I won't fall. The longer I can sit here, without having to think about where I am and how to get home, the better. I push away the surge of fear and panic, and concentrate on now. On feeling happy.

'How long have you been married?' He nods at the ring on my finger, which I notice with mild surprise. It feels right there, as if it has bedded into its place on my person, yet somehow it doesn't seem to have anything to do with me.

'It's my father's,' I say, the words coming from a long ago moment in the past, another time when I said them to another boy. 'When he died my mum gave me his ring to wear. I wear it always. One day I'll give it to the man I love.'

There is a moment of silence, awkwardness, I suppose. Once again, present and past converge, and I'm lost. I am so very lost that really all there is in this world is this moment, this table, this person speaking kindly to me, those very nice eyes.

'Perhaps I could take you for another coffee, then?' he says, sounding hesitant, cautious. 'When you are dry and not stuck in the middle of a disaster. I could meet you here or anywhere you like.' He reaches over to the counter and picks up a stumpy writing thing that is not a pen and scrawls on my folded napkin. 'The rain has stopped, shall I walk you home?'

'No,' I say. 'You might be a maniac.'

He smiles. 'So ring me, then? For a coffee?'

'I won't ring you,' I say, apologetically. 'I'm very busy. Chances are I won't remember to.'

He looks at me and laughs. 'Well, if somehow you find the time or the impulse, then ring me. And don't worry; you'll get back into your flat. One of your flatmates will turn up any second, I'm certain.'

'My name is Claire,' I tell him in a rush as he gets up. 'You don't know my name.'

'Claire.' He smiles at me. 'You look like a Claire.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' I laugh. 'And you, what's your name?'

'Ryan,' he says. 'I should have written it on the napkin.'

'Goodbye, Ryan,' I say, knowing that very soon he won't even be a memory. 'Thank you.'

'For what?' He looks perplexed.

'That napkin!' I say, holding up the scrunched-up sodden piece of tissue.

I watch him leave the café, chuckling to himself, and disappear into the dark night. I say his name over and over again. Perhaps if I say his name enough times, it will stick. I will be able to pin it down. A woman on the next table is watching him leave. She is frowning, and her frown is disconcerting. It makes me wonder if everything I thought just happened really did – if it was a nice happy moment or if something bad happened that I hadn't seen, because I've stopped being able to tell the difference. I'm not ready for

that to happen yet. I don't want that to be true yet. It's dark outside now, except for a slash of pink sky cutting through the cloud as the sun sets. The woman is still frowning, and I am stuck on this chair.

'Claire?' A woman leans over me. 'Are you OK? What's wrong?'

I look at her, her smooth oval face, long straight brown hair. The frown is concern, I think, and I think she knows me.

'I am not exactly sure how to get home,' I confide in her, for want of any better solution.

She looks towards the door and then obviously thinks better of what she was about to say. Instead she turns back to me, with the frown again. 'You don't remember me, do you? It's fine, I know about your . . . problem. My name is Leslie, and our daughters are friends. My daughter is Cassie, with the pink hair and the nose piercing? And the awful taste in men? There was a time about four years ago when our girls were inseparable.'

'I've got Alzheimer's,' I say. It comes back to me, like the last rays of sun piercing the clouds, and I'm relieved. 'I forget things. They come and go. And sometimes just go.'

'I know, Cassie told me. She and Caitlin met up a few days ago, caught up. I have your Caity's number here, from that time they were supposedly sleeping over at each other's houses, and attempted to go clubbing in London. Remember? You and I waited all night for every single London train that

came in, until they finally got home at about two. They hadn't even managed to get into the club. A drunk man had propositioned them on the tube, and they were crying so much we let them off the hook in the end.'

'They sound like a right pair,' I say. The woman frowns again and this time I decide it's concern rather than anger.

'Will you remember Caitlin,' the woman asks me, 'if she comes?'

'Oh, yes,' I say. 'Caitlin, yes, I remember what she looks like. Dark hair and eyes like rock pools under moonlight, black and deep.'

She smiles. 'I forgot you were a writer.'

'I'm not a writer,' I say. 'I do have a writing room, though. I tried it, writing, but it didn't work, and so now I have an empty writing room right at the top of the house. There's nothing in it but a desk and a chair, and a lamp. I was so sure I was going to fill it to the brim with ideas, but instead it just got emptier.' The woman frowns again, and her shoulders stiffen. I'm talking too much and it's making her uncomfortable. 'The thing I'm scared about the most is losing words.'

I've upset her. I should stop saying things. I'm never that sure what I am saying any more. I have to really think. And wait. Talking too much is not a fun or sweet thing about me any more. I close my lips firmly.

'I'll sit with you, shall I? Until she gets here.'

'Oh . . .' I begin to protest, but it peters out. 'Thank you.'

I listen to her make a call to Caitlin. After exchanging a

few words, she gets up and goes outside the café. As I watch her through the window, in the glow of the street lights, and I can see her still talking on the phone. She nods, her free hand gesturing. And then the call ends and she takes a deep breath of cold damp air before she comes back in and sits at my table.

'She'll be here in a few minutes,' she tells me. She seems so nice, I don't have the heart to ask her who she is talking about.

2

Caitlin

I open the front door for Mum, and then step back, secreting my key in my pocket. Mum doesn't have a key any more, which is one of the things she really doesn't like about this new world order. Her hair hangs down her back – its bright, fiery auburn now a dark ruby-red. She is soaked through and shuddering. When Gran told me Mum had just marched off into the night, I wanted to ask her why she'd let her go, why she didn't try to stop her, but there wasn't time. I was out looking for her when I got the call from Cassie's mum.

Now we are back and, for Mum's sake, I am struggling to not be furious. What would have happened if I hadn't been here to go after her? Would Gran have stubbornly refused to stop Mum, determined to stand her ground and make a point, still somehow believing that Mum was showing off and should be ignored? I'm supposed to not be here soon. In the next few days, actually, I was supposed to be returning

to London for my final year of university. What then? What would have happened then? Mum would have been lost out there in the rain, and who knows when or even if she would have got home.

Perhaps it is a good thing after all that I am not going back – not that any of them know that yet. Perhaps I can just tell them that this is why I have decided not to go back – because Mum needs me.

Gran is in the hallway waiting, one hand clasped in the other, her lips pressed into a thin line. She's anxious and angry and upset. Mum is instantly on edge the moment she sees her. I watch the pair of them look at each other, angry, uncertain, resentful, and I don't know what to do. I don't know how to make this better, especially not when I know that when the truth comes out, I will have made everything much worse.

I feel that now familiar sickening feeling, the surge of nausea that hits me when I think about what I've done, and I push it away. I have to: I don't have a choice. My mum is sick, really sick, and our family is falling apart around her. I don't have time for my own problems, not yet. I'm waiting, waiting for it to be the right time. But the right time might never come, and then . . . It might be better for everyone if I just left.

'Mummy!' Esther, my little sister, charges at Mum, bowling into her. Mum picks her up and attempts to hug her hard, but she is cold and wet, and Esther quickly squirms out of her arms. 'You're icky! I hungry, I tired, I poorly.'

It's Esther's new mantra whenever things aren't going exactly the way she wants them to. Her sad little face, her querulous bottom lip – it's a winning act every time, and Esther knows it. She does it because she knows it works so well on all of us.

'Want some biscuits before bed?' I ask her, offering the naughtiest thing I can think of, just to see her smile. She nods and jumps up and down, happily.

'Go on, then.' I nod in the direction of the living room. 'I'll put some on a plate for you.' Mum lets go of her hand, releasing her back into the living room, her fingers hovering in the air for just a moment, perhaps regretting letting Esther go.

'What were you thinking?' Gran asks Mum furiously.

'Look,' I say, handing Mum a towel that I grab from the downstairs loo. She stares at it, and after a moment I take it and rub her hair for her. 'There's no point going over this now, is there? There's no point having a go at her. I mean, if we are going to get into the whole blame thing, we might be wondering what she was doing heading off like that in the first place, mightn't we?' I look pointedly at Gran, but it rolls off her.

'I was worried sick,' Gran says accusingly. 'You have to understand, Claire, you have to realise that you can't just . . .'

'Gran,' I say, taking a step between her and Mum. 'Gran, Mum knows that.'

I don't understand why Gran is so angry. I can see why she would be sad, and at a loss, unable to deal with this all