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Losing You  
by  
Nicci French

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Sometimes I still felt that I had fetched up on the edge of the world. The wintry light slanting on to the flat, colourless landscape; the moan of the wind, the shriek of sea-birds and the melancholy boom of the foghorn far out at sea all sent a shiver through me. But I stamped my feet on the ground to warm them and told myself that in a few hours I would be far away.

Rick dropped the spanner and straightened up from the open bonnet of the car. My car. He rubbed his grazed knuckle. His unshaven face was raw from the cold north-easterly that whipped over us, carrying the first drops of rain, and his pale blue eyes were watering. His curls were damp and lay flat on his head so that I could see the shape of his skull. He blew on his whitened fingers and tried to flash me his boyish smile, but I could see it was an effort.

‘Rick,’ I said, ‘it’s kind of you, but you don’t need to do this. It was just a rattle in the engine and I thought something had come loose. I would never have called you otherwise. I can take it to the garage after we get back from holiday.’

His wife, Karen, came out of the front door with three mugs of coffee on a tray, three Digestive biscuits laid out neatly beside them. She was a tall woman, almost as tall as Rick, big-boned but thin. Sometimes she looked striking, nearly beautiful, and then I could understand why the pair

of them had got together, but too often she seemed gaunt and unfinished, as if she hadn't paid proper attention to herself. Her hair was brown, already peppered with grey, and pulled back in a hasty bun. Her skin was bracketed with worry lines, her nails were bitten down to the ends of her fingers. She rarely wore makeup or jewellery, except for the wedding band on her finger. Her clothes didn't quite fit together. Today it was a strawberry-pink quilted jacket and a thin black skirt that was trailing on the ground. I worried she would trip over it. She had the bossy abruptness of someone who was fundamentally shy, and once, late at night, when she was a bit tipsy, she'd confided to me that life rushed at her out of a fog, constantly taking her by surprise. Maybe that was why she often seemed to talk in non-sequiturs, and her manner often swung between sprightly sarcasm and barely suppressed anger.

'White no sugar, right? How's it going, then? All sorted?'

Rick grimaced at her in exasperation, then down at the ground on which lay the battery from my car and a couple of other parts that I couldn't identify.

A little gleam appeared in her eyes. 'You said when you came back that it would only take a couple of minutes.'

'I know,' said Rick, wryly.

'That was before ten.' She glanced ostentatiously at the watch on her wrist. 'You've been out here for nearly three-quarters of an hour.'

'I know that too.'

'Nina's got a plane to catch.' She cast me an amused smile that said, *Men*. I looked away guiltily.

'*I know.*'

'It's all right,' I said. 'I've done most of the packing for me

and Jackson, and Charlie promised she'd be ready by the time I was back.'

Rick's head disappeared beneath the bonnet again. There was the sound of several sharp taps and a mumbled curse. It might have seemed funny but he was so obviously not finding it funny that I bit my lip to forestall even the tiniest hint of a smile. I pulled off my gloves to pick up my coffee mug and wrapped my fingers round it, grateful for the warmth, the curl of steam that licked at my cold face.

'Christmas in the sunshine instead of this endless cold, grey drizzle,' said Karen, and pulled her jacket more closely round her, shivering exaggeratedly. 'What time does your plane go?'

'Not until just before six. I'm picking Christian up on the way to Heathrow.'

I said it casually, but felt a small prickle of nervous happiness in my chest: Christian and I had been friends for nearly eighteen years, lovers for just a few months, and now, for two weeks, the four of us would all be together in the Florida Keys. We would be the family unit I'd thought had been smashed to pieces: going on trips, making plans, collecting shared stories that we could tell and retell later, even eating breakfast together. Except Charlie never ate breakfast: she acted as though toast was immoral. I hoped she would behave herself.

'I think Christmas should be cancelled,' Karen was saying. 'Eamonn has a kind of ideological objection to it anyway, and is always trying to make us celebrate the winter solstice instead, stand around a bonfire at midnight like witches. Rick tries to make us play board games and Charades and Wink Murder, even though you can't play Wink Murder with just

three people, and I . . .’ She raised her eyebrows at me. ‘I’m the one who drinks too much and burns the turkey.’

Rick came round to the driver’s door, leaned in and turned the key in the ignition. ‘Right,’ he said determinedly. There was a hasty splutter, then silence.

‘You *hope* you’re picking up Christian,’ said Karen, who seemed almost pleased.

Rick pulled a face that was a caricature of confusion, anxiety and distress. This was what he did in life. He helped people, he fixed things; he was unflappably, charmingly capable. People turned to him, just as I had this morning.

‘At least you’ve solved the rattle,’ said Karen, gaily, and gave a small, explosive snort.

‘What?’ said Rick, with a glance at her that she pretended not to see.

‘The car won’t rattle if you can’t switch it on.’

His face went a scary shade of crimson. He looked at his watch and I cast a surreptitious glance to it as well.

‘Shall we just call the garage?’ I suggested. ‘Or the AA? I’m a member.’

‘Well,’ began Rick. ‘It might just be –’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ said Karen. ‘You’ve got nothing on today, have you? Just working on your boat. Though God knows why you want to work on your boat on a day like this, and it’s the first day of your holiday. You can’t just take Nina’s car apart and leave it like that. She’s got to get to the –’

‘I *know*. How old is this car, anyway?’ Rick stared at the rusty little Rover as if it was one of his more hopeless pupils.

‘About ten years,’ I said. ‘It was already quite old when I got it.’

Rick gave a grunt as if the car's age was to blame for the situation.

'Can't you work backwards?' said Karen. 'At least you could get it back to the way it was when Nina drove it here.'

'What do you think I'm doing?' Rick asked, with effortful calm.

'Don't worry, Nina,' Karen said reassuringly.

'I'm not worried,' I said, and it was true. I knew that in a few hours, even if I had to get a taxi all the way to Heathrow, we'd be in the air, far from the pinched, icy days of English winter. I imagined sitting beside Christian and gazing out of the window as London became an intricate grid of orange and white lights. I raised my head and looked past Rick and Karen's house to what lay beyond.

For thirty-eight years, I had lived in a city where I could go a whole day without seeing the horizon. Here, on Sandling Island, it was all horizon: the level land, the mudflats, the miles of marshes, the saltings, the grey, wrinkled sea. Now it was mid-morning and from where I stood – facing west towards the mainland – I could see only the glistening mudflats with their narrow, oozing ditches of water where waders were walking with high-stepping delicate legs and giving mournful cries, as if they'd lost something. It was low tide. Little boats tethered to their unnecessary buoys tipped at a steep angle to show their blistered, slimy hulls; their halliards chinked and chimed in the wind. From my own house, a bit further round to the south-east, I could make out the sea. Sometimes, when I woke in the morning and opened my eyes on its grey, shifting expanse, I still wondered for a moment where I was, how on earth I'd landed up there.

It was Rory who had wanted to come, who for years of

our marriage had dreamed of leaving London, of giving up his job as a solicitor and running a restaurant instead. At first, it had just been a daydream, an if-only that I didn't really share, but bit by bit it had taken on the harder edge of an obsession, until at last he'd found premises on Sandling Island and dragged his reluctant family with him to begin a new life. It was only sixty miles from London but, rimmed as it was by the tidal estuary and facing out to open sea, it had the feel of a different world, gripped by weather and seasons; full of wild spaces, loneliness, the strange call of sea-birds and sighing winds. It was even cut off from the mainland every so often, when the highest of high tides covered the causeway. From my bedroom, I could hear the waters lapping at the shingle shore, the foghorns booming out at sea. Sometimes at night, when the island was wrapped in the darkness of the sky and of the rising, falling waters, I could scarcely bear the sense of solitude that engulfed me.

Yet I was the one who had fallen half in love with Sandling Island while Rory had been driven mad by it. Somewhere in the dream of the austere restaurant decorated with lobster-pots, nets and etchings of fishing-smacks it had gone wrong. There was an argument with a supplier about the ovens, cash stubbornly failed to flow and the restaurant had never even opened. As he found himself trapped by the fantasy he'd held for so long, he no longer knew what he was for or even who he was. Eventually the only way out was to run away.

'Sorry.' I turned my attention back to Karen, who was saying something.

'It's your birthday, isn't it?'

'That's right.'

‘And not just any birthday.’

‘Yes,’ I said reluctantly. ‘Forty. It’s one of the ones you’re not supposed to be happy about. How did you know?’

She gave a shrug.

‘Everyone knows everything about everyone round here. Happy birthday, anyway.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Do you really mind about it?’

‘I’m not sure. A friend of mine once told me –’

‘I minded,’ she said. ‘I looked at myself in the mirror, and I thought, That’s you now. No escape. That’s who you are. Nothing turns out the way you expect, does it?’

‘I think I’m getting there,’ said Rick. ‘Give me my coffee, will you?’

He had a streak of black grease on his jaw that rather suited him, and a rip in his jacket. I watched as he took a large gulp of cooling coffee, then posted half a Digestive after it. I had a list in my mind that I kept adding to: pack swimming stuff, goggles and sun-cream; remember the Christmas presents, including the snorkel and flippers I’d bought for Christian, who was a marine biologist yet lived many miles from the coast; some dollars; books for the plane; packs of cards. Leave out the dog food and instructions for Renata; the Christmas money for the postman, the milkman, the bin men . . . My toes were getting chilly now; my face felt stiff in the cold wind.

‘I’ve been wanting to ask,’ Rick moved closer to me and spoke in a low tone, ‘how’s Charlie doing now, Nina? Are things better?’

‘I think so,’ I said cautiously. ‘You can’t really tell. At least, I can’t with Charlie. She’s quite private, you know.’

‘She’s a teenager,’ said Rick. ‘Teenagers are meant to be private. Especially with their parents. Look at Eamonn, for Christ’s sake.’

‘What’s this?’ asked Karen, moving in closer, a flicker of interest in her eyes.

‘Charlie’s had a rough time at school,’ I said. I didn’t want to talk about this because it was Charlie’s story, not mine. I didn’t want to discuss it lightly, give it a trite meaning. I imagined Charlie’s pale, truculent face, its look of withdrawal behind the turbulent fall of her reddish hair. ‘Rick found out about it. He talked to the girls who were bullying her, and to their parents. And to me. He was very helpful. As much as anyone can be.’

‘Girls can be cruel,’ said Karen, with a sweeping sympathy.

‘She was at a sleepover at one of their houses last night,’ I said. ‘Tam’s. Maybe that’s a breakthrough. I haven’t seen her yet. It would be a good way to end the term.’

‘She’ll be fine, you know,’ said Rick, putting down his mug, reluctantly picking up the spanner once more. ‘Being bullied is horrible. Sometimes I think we forget how horrible it can be, how undermining. Especially if we’re teachers, because we come to take it for granted, don’t you think? But Charlie’s a resilient young woman. Very bright, with a mind of her own and wide horizons. I always enjoy having her in my class. You should be proud of her.’

I smiled gratefully at him.

‘She’s got all those piercings, hasn’t she?’

‘For God’s sake, Karen, what on earth has that got to do with anything?’ Rick tweaked a knob with his spanner.

‘I just thought that maybe she got picked on because she seems different.’

‘Different? Have you seen Amelia Ronson recently? She’s had her right eye half sewn together, and talking of different, look at our own son . . . Oh, speak of the devil.’

A baroque figure had appeared on the doorstep, wrapped in a bottle-green trench coat that almost reached the ground, bare grubby feet poking out beneath it. Eamonn had a face so pale it almost looked like a mask, although a mask that was pierced several times with rings: on his eyebrow, through his nose and ears. His eyes were Rick’s eyes, but sad. His mane of tangled matt-black hair had green streaks in it. His fingernails were painted black and he had a swirling tattoo on his right forearm. He always appeared unwashed, hung-over, drugged-up and ferociously glum, though when he smiled, he looked sweet and lost, younger than his seventeen years. I knew from Rick that he was a problem-child, an all-out Goth on a small island that regarded him with suspicion or hilarity; a loner; a bright lad who felt he didn’t belong. I also knew that he and his parents, Karen particularly, could hardly manage to get through a minute together without arguing. But I’d always got on with him. He liked talking to me about funny little number problems he’d come across in books – after all, I am an ex-accountant who is now masquerading as a maths teacher – and about God (or the lack of any God). And he liked being around me in case Charlie walked through the door. Mothers notice these things.

Karen looked at her watch. ‘Do you know what time it is?’ she said.

‘No,’ said Eamonn.

‘It’s gone half past ten,’ she said.

‘Low tide’s in ten minutes,’ Eamonn said, as if it was the

most logical response. He wrinkled his face in distaste. 'We're surrounded by putrid-smelling mud.'

'I thought you might have got up and gone out.'

'How do you know I didn't?'

'That'll be the day,' said Rick, from somewhere inside my engine.

'Hello, Eamonn,' I said brightly, trying to forestall another argument.

'Happy birthday.' He gave an abrupt half-bow; his trench coat opened slightly and I could see he was naked beneath it.

'Everyone really does know.' I laughed. Flip-flops, I thought. Remember flip-flops and the camera-charger.

'Charlie told me,' he said.

'Have you seen her recently?' I began, but then my mobile sang in my pocket, an irritating jangle that Jackson must have programmed without me realizing, and I turned away from the car. He was already in mid-sentence by the time I brought the phone to my ear, and it took me a few seconds to separate out the stream of sounds into recognizable words. It was as if I had tuned in to a radio programme that was already half-way through.

'... and if I'd known, fuck it, that you'd turn out to be the kind of mother who'd take my children away from me at Christmas and not only take them away but fly off with a man who hardly knows them to the other side of...'

'Rory, Rory, hold on...'

I walked a few steps down the driveway.

'Just because I went off the rails a bit, does that mean I've forfeited the right to see them and they're growing up so quickly my little children only of course they're not so little

any more and now there's this Christian and soon they'll stop thinking of me as their father that's what you want isn't it only you always used to say –'

'What's up?' I hated the way my voice took on a calming, gentle tone, as if I was murmuring nonsense to a scared horse, all the while wanting to slide a bridle over its head. I knew what his face was like when he was ranting, screwed up in wretched anger, an unnerving replica of Charlie when she was upset. I knew there were tears in his eyes and that he'd been drinking. 'You've known for weeks we were going away. You said it was fine. We discussed it.'

'At least you could have let me see them before they go,' he said.

'What do you mean?'

'Just for a bit, to say happy Christmas.'

'That's not possible,' I said. I heard a crunching on the gravel behind me and turned to find Karen making exaggerated semaphores with her arms and mouthing incomprehensible words at me. Behind her, my car's engine coughed and hacked and rasped, then stuttered into life. I held up a finger, signifying I'd only be a few seconds. I felt like a terrible hypocrite. I was having a suppressed row with Rory while making a pathetic attempt to suggest to the eagerly eavesdropping Karen that I was in a perfectly civilized discussion. 'We're leaving in an hour or so for the airport.'

'I'm speaking theoretically. I'm speaking about principle. You know that word? Principle? The principle of a father seeing his daughter.'

'You've got a son as well,' I said. I had always hated the way he was besotted with Charlie and often seemed barely to notice Jackson, who adored him.

‘Of a father seeing his children. That’s what I’m speaking about.’ His voice broke up.

‘You’re on your mobile. You’re not driving, are you?’ Drunk-driving was what I meant but didn’t say.

‘I got your solicitor’s letter.’

I was wary now. I’d asked my solicitor, Sally, who was also a close friend, to write a letter to his solicitor. It had been the first step on an unpleasant road. The letter warned him that if his behaviour with Jackson and Charlie didn’t become more rational I would be forced to seek a restraining order. I’d done it after their last visit, when he’d got drunk and knocked Jackson over. The children hadn’t told me about it until I’d insisted on knowing how the bruise on Jackson’s shoulder had come about.

‘You just want to take them away.’

‘I don’t,’ I said hopelessly.

‘It’s Christmas and I won’t see them.’

‘I’ve got to go. I’ll ring you from home.’

‘Don’t cut me off.’

‘I’m not. I’m saying I’ll call you in a few minutes. Have a strong coffee or something and I’ll call you.’

‘What does that mean, “have a strong coffee”?’

‘Bye, Rory.’

I clicked the phone off. I blinked and hoped it might look as if it was just the wind in my face.

‘Oh dear,’ said Karen. ‘Upset?’

‘He’s fine.’ I felt my pity flare into protectiveness before Karen’s blatant curiosity. ‘I mean, no.’

‘Christmas can be difficult for the absent father, can’t it?’

‘I guess.’

‘And, after all, Rory was always rather . . .’ She was search-

ing for the exact word. 'Volatile,' she said at last, with heavy-handed tact. 'Like Charlie,' she added. 'Not like you and Jackson. You're always so polite and methodical.'

I turned with relief to my now nicely chugging car. 'That's fantastic, Rick. Thanks so much.'

'Don't mention it.'

'Now go and work on your boat,' I said. I stood on tiptoe and gave him a kiss on both cold, stubbly, grease-stained cheeks.

'Not just yet,' said Karen. 'I need him for something else.'

I sensed that I should escape before a really serious row broke out.

'I'm going to collect Jackson and finish the packing. 'Bye, Karen.' I kissed her too, missing her cheek and landing on her nose. 'Thanks for the coffee. Take care, Eamonn.'

I got into the car, pulled the door shut and wound down the window.

'Happy Christmas,' I called, as I reversed down the drive. I waved, then swung into the narrow lane. 'And new year.'

I put it into first gear and drew away, free. The car rattled happily as I went.

As soon as I had turned inland and was out of sight, I pulled over, tugged my mobile out of my back pocket and phoned Christian. The engine was still running, and the heating system blew warm air on to my hands while my feet remained cold. Outside, gusts of wind rattled in the bare branches of the trees and blew twigs and tin cans along the road. He didn't answer his landline, so I tried his mobile but only got his voicemail.

'It's just me,' I said into it. 'And I don't really know why I'm calling.'

I had first met Christian when I was in the third year of my degree in maths. He was a graduate in marine biology. I was going out with Rory by then and I used to spend every weekend in London with him. We were planning our future together, and university already felt like part of my past. I liked Christian and his circle of friends. But because he was of the world I was preparing to leave, I didn't remember him very well. I've tried, but he's a blur, a half-remembered face. We had a drink together a few times. I think I once went to his house and had a meal with lots of other people there. He says we danced together more than once; he swears he once put his arm round me when we were in a pub by the river. A few weeks ago, he showed me a photograph of himself as a student, his thin face, the tumble of dark hair, the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. I studied it and felt desire stir in me for the youth he was then, but at the time I had felt nothing like that. He was a figure I passed on the road and, though we promised to keep in touch, we hadn't really. He sent me a postcard from a conference he was at in Mexico several years ago, and it took me a few seconds to work out who 'Christian', signed with an inky flourish under a couple of lines I could hardly decipher, actually was. Two years ago I heard from a mutual acquaintance that the relationship he'd been in had broken up and I thought then of getting in touch, but I never did. I sent him a change-of-address card when we moved to Sandling Island, but assumed it would never reach him. I wasn't even sure where he lived any more.

Six months ago, he called me up out of the blue to say he was going to be in East Anglia for a conference, and maybe we could meet. I almost made an excuse. Rory had left in a maelstrom of tears, unpaid bills, smashed dreams, and I felt

lonely, bewildered, reclusive and sad. By that time, I had already had a forlorn, short-lived fling, and I knew it wasn't the answer to anything. Certainly not to loneliness, certainly not to sadness. All I really wanted was to spend time with the children, and when I wasn't doing that, to work on the house and the small, nettle-filled garden. I was trying to create a tiny haven for us, filled with the smell of fresh paint and baking, and I didn't really want to make an effort for a man I used to know but who was now a half-remembered stranger.

In the end, I arranged to meet him because I couldn't think of a reason not to quickly enough. I told him as much at the end of that first meeting, because even by then – two and a half hours in – I wanted to be honest with him. I felt I could trust him. He didn't seem to be trying to impress me or pretend in any way to be someone he wasn't. Had he always been like that, I wondered – and why hadn't I noticed?

He was still slim, still boyish-looking, but his unruly hair was shorter and streaked with grey, and there were crow's feet round his eyes and brackets round his mouth. I tried to fit this fortyish face with the smooth, eager one from the past, and I could feel him doing the same with me. Our ghosts were with us. We walked along the sea wall, with the tide going out and the lovely light of a May early evening gradually thickening into dusk, and we talked or sometimes were silent. He told me the names of the birds that glided on the currents, although as an islander I was the one who should have known. But that became part of the flirtatious joke. He came back and had a glass of wine at my house; he played a computer game with Jackson (and lost), and when he met Charlie, who burst into the room with mud on her

shoes and a dangerous glint in her eyes, he was gravely friendly without being sycophantic or matey. He rang me almost as soon as he had left the house. He told me he was crossing the causeway and the water was nearly over the road, and would I invite him for dinner the next day? He would bring the pudding and the wine, and what did the children like to eat?

I set off once more, turning inland, to drive through the centre of the town, past the shops and the church, the garage, the old people's home, the garden centre; past the building that had been going to be Rory's seafood restaurant and now had a 'To Let' sign swinging in the wind above its blank windows. I already felt slightly detached from it all, as if I were five miles high and safely away. Mixed with the detachment was a twinge of guilt. I'd dropped Jackson off with his best friend, Ryan, just after breakfast and promised to collect him very soon. 'Soon' is an elastic concept but I'd heard Ryan's mother, Bonnie, talk about Christmas shopping and the day was advancing. I got to Ryan's house in just a few minutes – practically everywhere on Sandling Island was a few minutes' drive from everywhere else – and knocked on the door. I was carried inside on a wave of apologies.

'I'm so sorry,' I said to Bonnie. 'You were going out. I've sabotaged your day.'

'It's no problem,' Bonnie said, with a smile.

That made it even worse. Even though we'd been on the island for less than two years I still felt I was finding my feet, but Bonnie had been one of the people I had decided would be my friend. She was in the same position as me – bringing up a young son alone – and she was doing it with uncomplaining cheerfulness. She had short hair and a pale face with red

cheeks and she was quite large and I felt that it wouldn't take very much makeup to turn her into a circus clown.

'But you said something about Christmas shopping?'

'That's right. I have a rule, or maybe it's more of a challenge: all Christmas shopping has to be done in one day. And this is the day.'

'Or, in fact, half a day, in this case,' I said anxiously.

'Three-quarters of a day. It's not eleven yet. Which is plenty. Ryan and I are heading into town and we'll be back in about six hours, laden like packhorses.'

'So I'd better say happy Christmas,' I said, 'and a happy new year and everything.'

'That's right,' said Bonnie. 'You're flying off. That's the way to turn forty. I'm so sorry I can't get to -' She stopped.

'Get to what?' I said.

'I mean, that we won't get to see you over the holiday. But let's meet up properly in the new year.'

I said I'd like that. Then I went to retrieve Jackson from where I'd left him, in front of a computer game with Ryan, who grunted but barely looked up as we gave Bonnie a Christmas-and-new-year hug and went out. When we were back in the car, Jackson retrieved another miniature computer game from his pocket and started to play. I glanced across at his serious face, the tip of a pink tongue sticking out in ferocious concentration and his lick of black hair tickling his screwed-up brow, and didn't attempt conversation. I was going over my mental list again: passports, tickets and credit cards. If I got to the airport with those, two children and one nearly new boyfriend, nothing else mattered.

I took the scenic route home. Instead of snaking through the back-streets, I drove down the main street, imaginatively

named The Street, wound to the left to reach the beach and turned right past the deserted caravan site, the closed-up beach huts, and the boat-maker's yard, which was now full of boats pulled up for the winter.

Our house was in a motley line of dwellings just across the road from the boathouses and -yards and mooring jetties. They were all old enough to date from a time when people evidently didn't see much point in a sea view as against the disadvantages of an icy wind and occasional floods. The grand Georgian houses, the manor houses and rectories were safely tucked away inland. The cottages that lined The Saltings were odd, ill-sorted and squeezed in at strange angles as if each had had to be fitted into a space slightly too small for it. Ours was probably the oddest of all. It was made of clapboard and looked more than anything like a square wooden boat that had been dragged on to land, turned upside-down and been unconvincingly disguised with a grey-slate roof. It had been hard to sell because it had a tiny garden at the back and almost none at the front, it was damp and the rooms were poky, but Rory and I had fallen in love with it immediately. From our bedroom window we could see mud and sea and beyond that nothing except sky.

As Jackson and I approached the door, we heard a desperate scratching, whimpering and groaning from inside.

'Stop that, Sludge,' I shouted, as I fiddled with the key in the lock. The door opened and a black apparition flew at us.

The time between our arrival on the island and Rory leaving was mainly a disaster of bills and half-finished building work, then more bills. Almost Rory's sole contribution to the household in that terrible period was to give in to the drip-drip-drip entreaties of Charlie and Jackson over many

years for a dog. In a blur of events that happened almost simultaneously, he obtained a Labrador that looked like an oversized mole, christened her Sludge, left her with me and left me. When Rory walked out, I couldn't believe it. I literally couldn't compute in my brain that he could be somewhere else from me; well, after the last few weeks together, I could imagine that. But even so, I didn't see how he could be away from the children.

However, it quickly became all too clear that Sludge would never leave us. In fact, she seemed to suffer acute separation trauma if we left the house to go to the shops. As we came in and she went through her emotional welcome home, Jackson asked for the hundredth time why we couldn't take her with us on holiday and I said because she's a dog, and he said that we should get her a pet passport and I said that pet passports took a lot of time and money, and I didn't even know if they had them for the States, to which he said, unanswerably: so?

Charlie and I had had an animated discussion on the phone the previous evening. I had said that I wasn't sure it was such a good idea for her to be out the night before we went away. She had hardened her voice in a way I knew well, and asked why. I said there was a lot to do and she said she could do it when she got back. It never became an argument because really I felt relieved, and she knew it, that her enemies were, perhaps, becoming her friends. So when she said that she would come back early and feed Sludge, put the washing out, tidy her room and do her packing, I didn't say anything sarcastic, I didn't pull a face down the phone at her, I didn't laugh. I did mention that she had a paper round to do as well, but she had said she would do that on her way home

and then she would get everything else done. There was plenty of time. And she was right. There *was* plenty of time.

I hadn't fed Sludge this morning because Jackson or Charlie liked to do that: she's so pathetically grateful. And Sludge had done what Sludge always did when she hadn't been fed: she found something else to eat or, failing that, something to chew. In this case it was a box of porridge oats. Oats and fragments of box were scattered through the living room. I took a deep breath. This was the first day of the holidays: nothing could make me angry on the first day of the holidays. At least she hadn't eaten the mail, which had been pushed through the door in my absence – a larger pile than usual, and mostly birthday cards as far as I could see.

I put them to one side to open later. I picked up the fragments of box, then took out the vacuum cleaner and in a few minutes the room was as it had been. Jackson fed Sludge, not that she needed much feeding, full as she was of oats and cardboard.

Nor was I angry when I went into the kitchen and found the clothes still in the washing-machine. If Charlie hadn't fed Sludge, it was hardly likely that she would have hung out the washing. Of course, it meant that the clothes we needed for our holiday would now have to be put into the dryer but that wasn't a significant problem. I bundled them in and turned the dial to forty minutes. That should do it.

And, of course, it was almost a logical necessity, just about as certain as that two and two make four, that if Charlie hadn't fed Sludge and hadn't hung out the washing, she wouldn't have tidied her bedroom or packed. I went upstairs and gave her room the most cursory glance. I knew that the bed hadn't been slept in but it looked as if it had been, then

jumped on. Clothes lay on the carpet where they had been dropped. There were a belt, an empty violin case, a fake tigerskin rug, pencils, a broken ruler, scissors, a pair of flip-flops, CDs with no cases, CD cases with no CDs, a string bag, a couple of teen magazines, a book splayed open, the top half of a pair of pyjamas, a large stuffed green lizard, a couple of small piles of dirty clothes, a broken hairdryer, scattered items of makeup, disparate shoes and three bath towels. Charlie seemed to prefer using a clean towel after each bath or shower, though not to the extent of putting the dirty ones in the washing-basket.

Her laptop computer sat on her desk with a tartan pencil case, several notebooks, a pink-capped deodorant, a bottle of Clearasil, a shoebox, a furry cow, various assorted piles of schoolwork and much, much more.

I felt a sense of violation even peering into her room through the gap of the open door. Since she had had this new bedroom she had been firmly private about it. I didn't clean it. Well, neither did she, but we had an agreement about that. I would leave her to do as she pleased in her room, order it as she wished, so long as she tidied up in the rest of the house. She hadn't exactly kept her end of the bargain, but I had kept mine. I felt a pang about it, of course. In the past, she had always been open, almost terrifyingly so, with me about all her fears, troubles and problems, until sometimes I felt heavy with the weight of her confessions. That had changed, as it had to, as she changed and grew. It wasn't that I believed she had important secrets to keep from me. I knew that she needed a door she could lock and a space she could call her own. Sometimes I felt excluded but I couldn't separate that feeling from all of my emotions at

watching my only daughter become a woman; someone separate from me with her own life.

So I didn't do any clearing up. I didn't do any of her packing. I looked at my watch. It wasn't on my wrist. Where was it? On the side of the bath? On the floor next to my bed? In a pocket somewhere? By the sink? But at that moment a sheep emerged from Charlie's ridiculous sheep clock and bleated the hour. Eleven o'clock. No rush. So I left the room – except that I took her flip-flops off the floor to pack because she would probably forget them and I'd end up having to buy new ones.

I carried them to my bedroom and tossed them into my suitcase, which was now almost full. Walking down the stairs I almost collided with what looked like a peculiar half-boy, half-robot coming up. It was Jackson, looking through the camcorder Rory had bought for us a year ago and which I'd never even got out of the box. I'd planned to take it to Florida and had already packed it, but Jackson can sniff out electronic equipment just as Charlie can sniff out chocolate.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

'Filming,' he said. 'It's brilliant.'

'That was meant for the holiday,' I said. 'There's no point in filming our house. We know what it looks like.'

'It doesn't matter,' Jackson said.

'Yes, it does. I charged it up specially.'

'I'll charge it up again,' he said, proceeding on his way, leaving me on the stairs with my mouth open. Holiday films are boring enough without being preceded by a ten-minute wobbly journey round your own house. But I knew that once Jackson had attached himself to something technological, it required major surgery to detach him from it. Besides, I had

other things on my mind. Eleven. Charlie deserved a lie-in at the end of what had been a difficult, tiring term at school but she had a paper round to do, she had packing, she had a holiday to prepare for. I picked up the phone from the low table at the bottom of the stairs and dialled her mobile. I was immediately connected to her voicemail but that didn't tell me much. As I'd found to my cost over the previous year, there were several dead zones on Sandling Island where mobile phones lost their signal. Charlie might have switched off her phone or left it in a drawer in her room or she might have been on her paper round already. I made a mental note to call her a few minutes later.