

'I cried, I laughed, I couldn't put it down'

PENNY VINCENZI

Things
I want my
Daughters
to
Know



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Things I Want My Daughters To Know
by
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Dear All of You,

Despite my controlling streak, there aren't too many rules, so far as the funeral goes. Do it as soon as you can, won't you? Good to get it over with. Lisa knows about the music, if you can bear to go with what I've chosen. We've talked about the committal - you know I only want you lot there, and you know which coffin, and which fabulous outfit. I'd like this poem - which, by the way, I love. Thank God for insomnia and the internet - I'd never have found it otherwise, and you'd be stuck reading something yucky. It should be read by whoever thinks they can do it without crying, because that is my biggest rule. No crying, please. If you can manage it. Oh, and no black. Wear the brightest thing you can find in your wardrobe. Both are clichés, I know, but better the colourful one than the sombre. And try and make the sun shine (although I recognize that this last one might be outside of your control). I'm not saying anything mushy in this letter - strictly business - but I daresay there will be other letters. I have other things to say, she says ominously - if I last long enough to write them ... (don't you just love terminal illness humour?).

I'm sorry you all have to do this; I really am.

So, never ever-ending love, as always ...

Mum

Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there, I do not sleep
I am a thousand winds that blow
I am the diamond light on snow
I am the sunlight on the ripened grain
I am the gently falling autumn rain

When you wake in the morning hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circling flight
I am the soft starlight at night
Do not stand at my grave and cry
I am not there, I did not die.

(Isn't that perfect for a funeral in a field?!)

Lisa

Lisa lay back gingerly in her deep aromatherapy bubble bath and looked at the 8" x 10" picture she had taken from the top of the piano downstairs and brought up there with her. She'd propped it behind the taps so that she could see it clearly from where she lay in the steamy water, and now she was trying not to splash it. It was a black-and-white shot of her mother, Barbara and it was taken on her sister Jennifer's wedding day, eight years earlier. Mum looked desperately glamorous, with her salon-fresh hair and artfully artless outfit. No mother-of-the-bride peach suit with matching hat for her. Lisa remembered the hat – three feet wide, floppy brimmed espresso coloured straw. No one sitting in the four pews behind her saw a thing of the ceremony. You couldn't see why, and she no longer remembered, but Mum was laughing her big, loud laugh. Her head was thrown back, the ungainly hat long abandoned, the auburn waves of her hair blown messily across her face by the summer breeze. Her large, expressive mouth was open and wide, so that you could see a filling on the top row of her teeth, and her hazel eyes had almost disappeared into the crinkles of her face. It was an especially great picture of her mother, although Barbara had always been photogenic. Lisa could almost hear it when she looked at the picture, deep and throaty, and so, so alive. It was Mum's raucous laugh she would miss the most – that, and the smell of Fracas.

She thought about the last big belly laugh they had

shared. It was the day Lisa had helped her mother plan her own funeral. She couldn't bear to do it with Mark, she had said. He would keep crying, and she so badly didn't want to cry. She was almost obsessed by not crying, towards the end. Hannah was too young, obviously. Amanda wasn't around. Off doing whatever Amanda was doing right now. And Jennifer . . . well, Jenny Wren wasn't exactly the person that sprang to mind for the task, she said, making a stupid grimacing face and rolling her eyes. No, she wasn't – Lisa could see that. Part of her was horrified, and part flattered, of course.

She hadn't expected it to be hilarious, but now that she thought about it, she didn't know why not. The two of them had done a great deal of laughing together, through all of Lisa's life. Mum had been quite well that week. She was thin, and a bit of a funny colour – a sort of translucent pale lavender – but she was still mobile, and almost energetic. She'd had all these brochures and computer printouts spread across the dining-room table. Coffins, hearses, wreaths . . . She always said life was a retail opportunity, but now, obviously, so was death. The last great party you got to go to, they said, if you planned it right. It was macabre and weird for about the first twenty minutes, and then they both just got silly, because that made it easier. Mum had even got prices for those horse-drawn affairs – but they decided that people weren't really ready for a purple crushed velvet, Kray-style East End send-off. She'd planned the clothes, though. She wanted to wear her Millennium Eve party dress, although it was a bit big for her right now. Which was a minor cause for celebration, and almost the justification for an open-coffin ceremony, since she'd eaten cabbage soup for a week and had one of those ridiculous

lymphatic wrap things in order to squeeze into it on December 31st, 1999, and it hadn't been near her since January 1st, 2000, when the wrap wore off and all the cellulite flooded back. Lisa remembered the dress – it was emerald green, lithe and silky, and her mum had looked amazing in it. The kind of good that almost makes adult daughters a little bit resentful. There'd been an underwear issue – she'd talked Mum into the first and last thong of her life, convincing her it was the only acceptable option under the dress bar going commando. Mum had rung, on New Year's Day, to say it was so uncomfortable she'd taken it off after about an hour and seen the New Year in knickerless – with a Magistrate and a headmaster at the table, if you please. More laughing.

'Isn't that a bit of a waste of a perfectly lovely Ben de Lisi? I was hoping I might have that,' she had joked. Actually joked. Jennifer would have been fulminating. 'Too bad,' said her mum, winking. 'There'll be a bit of money. Use it to buy one of your own.'

What really did them in was the music. Mum said she couldn't bear to have something miserable – no 'Abide With Me' ('no one can ever make the high notes – you can always hear the tear in their voice'); no 'Nearer My God to Thee' ('Too *Titanic*.') 'Lord of the Dance' was nixed because it reminded her of Michael Flatley, and who the hell wanted to think of that daft prancer as they were shuffling off their mortal coil? And 'He's Got the Whole World' was far too tambourine-y. She'd got a fondness for 'Jerusalem', which was more wedding than funeral, but who cared? And definitely, definitely 'Be Thou My Vision', although preferably the Van Morrison version, piped in, even if it sounded tinny in the high-ceilinged church. She had also surfed the net for a website

recommending popular non-religious music choices, however, and it was this list that finally had them shedding tears of mirth. Frank Sinatra's 'My Way': 'As if dying at 60 would ever be *my* way!' Gloria Gaynor's 'Never Can Say Goodbye': 'Well, I suppose it's more appropriate than "I Will Survive,"' she spat out through the chortles, 'but who the hell *are* these people, and why have I never been invited to one of their funerals?' Imagining the coffin being carried out to the saccharine strains of Doris Day's 'Que Sera Sera' made their ribs hurt, and the idea of quietly listening to Vera Lynn's 'We'll Meet Again' sounded like the funniest thing ever to the pair of them. When they'd regained their breath and dried their wet faces, they'd settled on Louis Armstrong's 'Wonderful World'. But the moment her mum nodded decisively and wrote it down on the A4 pad in her round, girlish handwriting, Lisa heard it playing in her head, imagined the scene and had to turn her face away so her mum didn't identify the fresh tears she refused to see.

Now that day – the day they had meticulously planned, but that, somehow, found her so very unprepared, was here. Van Morrison and Louis Armstrong were lined up in the portable CD player and the organist had his sheet music open at 'Jerusalem'. Just that now it wasn't funny any more. Lisa sank down into the hot water so that it splashed around her nostrils and squeezed her eyes shut. If only, if only, if only Andy was here.

Jennifer

Stephen said he was parking the car, but he'd done that. The driveway was full: Mark's car, and Mum's Polo. Lisa's VW beetle – she'd said, when they'd spoken the previous morning, that she was going to stay the night. So he'd driven a little down the street and expertly parallel parked. She could see him, for God's sake. He'd switched off the ignition and wound the window down a little. Now he'd picked up his BlackBerry and was staring at it intently. Today was terribly inconvenient for him. She'd gotten that message. He had these clients, passing through London on some trip from somewhere. They'd only had today to see him; they were important. He'd made sure she understood that. Not more important than her, obviously, since he was here, and not there but it was close. And he hadn't been gracious about it. She hadn't needed to know, after all, anything about any clients, or meetings, or power lunches. She was burying her mother today. It shouldn't have mattered. He was her husband. Everything about his demeanour, all the way here, had been irritated. The reception got fuzzy on the radio. He'd switched it off viciously. The line for a coffee at the service station was too long. He'd sighed dramatically, and bought a Coke. And now it was too hot. He'd hung the jacket of his black suit on the hook of the back passenger door, unbuttoned the neck of his shirt and loosened the black knitted tie. She stood at the end of the driveway for a few minutes, realizing she was too embarrassed to go into the house without him. They should be together. He should *want* to be with her, shouldn't he, today of all days?

Stephen hated funerals. He'd confessed to her, once,

long ago, that coffins terrified him. He couldn't stop thinking about the body inside. Wondering how it looked, how it smelt, how it would feel to the touch. He remembered losing it completely, when he was about 8 years old, at his grandfather's funeral – having to be taken out of the crematorium, screaming.

He was right about the weather, at least. It was too sunny for this. It was what Mum would have wanted, but to Jennifer it seemed wrong. It was like the day those two planes flew into the World Trade Center. As they made their final descent into hell the sky behind them was too impossibly, perfectly blue. It wasn't the right backdrop. She wanted a slate-grey sky and drizzle; she wanted to shiver with the chill. Not this beautiful day, not today.

The door opened and Mark stood on the doorstep. 'Jen?' Jennifer shuffled from one foot to the other, feeling like she'd been caught out. She waved and gestured towards Stephen. 'We'll be there in a minute. Stephen's just . . .' but Mark was coming towards her. He wasn't dressed – not for the funeral. He had on a pair of linen shorts and a scruffy pink T-shirt, and he was barefoot. He didn't speak when he got to her, just opened his arms and drew her into a tight embrace. Jennifer felt herself stiffen momentarily, then relax and lean into the man who had been her stepfather for the last sixteen years. God knows she needed the hug.

When he drew back, he put his hands on either cheek and looked intently into her face. He smelt of soap and coffee. 'How are you doing?'

'I'm okay. You?'

'I'm trying.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'She got the weather she ordered, hey?' Jennifer nodded, and smiled weakly.

Mark looked behind her, at Stephen. ‘He coming in?’

‘He’s just got to check a few things . . . There’s a lot going on, you know, at work, and . . .’

Mark took her hand and the squeeze he gave it said ‘Don’t explain him, don’t defend him.’ Out loud, he just said, ‘Don’t worry, no hurry. Amanda’s not here yet. Show doesn’t start for a couple of hours. Come on in – I’ve got some coffee going, and muffins and croissants . . .’ Jennifer gave the back of Stephen’s head one more sad, reproachful glance, and went into the house with Mark.

Hannah

Hannah stared at her face in the mirror and wondered whether it was okay to wear mascara. She couldn’t wear it to school, but she could at the weekends and on holidays. To Church? There’d never been a rule that she’d known of. Maybe if she wore it she wouldn’t cry, because she’d know that then it would run. Maybe wearing it would help her not do it.

‘No one was with her when she died.’ That was a line from *Charlotte’s Web*. It had been one of her favourite books when she was young. And that was one of her best bits, the line when Charlotte the spider had finished her web-making, egg-laying mission, and gently slipped away into oblivion. ‘No one was with her when she died.’ It was so deliciously sad. You could revel in it, in the small dry ache it caused at the back of your throat and the little sting in your ribs. When she was younger, Hannah liked to feel sad, so long as it was ‘artificial’ sad; that was what she called it when the sadness was about something that wasn’t real. Like when Leonardo

DiCaprio slips beneath the icy waves at the end of *Titanic*, with Kate Winslet hoarsely whispering her promise never to forget him. Or when Charlotte died. Well, this was different. This sad was real; the ache wasn't fun. Trying not to cry was a huge effort, one she made all the time, all day, until she got into bed at night, and didn't have to try not to any more. Especially today. They'd all promised that they wouldn't. They'd promised Mum, although Hannah didn't think it was fair of her to ask for that. Still, none of it was fair, was it? She tried not to think about Charlotte anymore. Unhelpful bloody spider! There'd been loads of people around when Mum died, anyway. She'd died in a crowd scene. All of them there, around that horrible high hospital bed they'd brought in, so incongruous in the pretty room. Her sisters, Jen and Lisa . . . Dad. And the vicar, and the doctor – both more by accident than design, she thought. It made her think of a Philip Larkin poem she'd learnt at school – something about the priest and the doctor running across the fields in their long coats trying to figure out all the answers to all the questions. The doctor came every other day, checking up on Mum. The vicar came because Mum had asked for him, which was slightly odd, since Hannah only really ever remembered seeing him before this year on Christmas morning, once every three hundred and sixty-five days, belting out 'O Little Town of Bethlehem', the tip of his nose perpetually bright red and dripping with a winter cold. She told Dad she was hedging her bets. Not in front of the vicar, of course. And even more people downstairs, Mum's friends, in and out on a rota, making tea that no one wanted to drink and sandwiches no one wanted to eat and taking phone calls no one else wanted to answer.

She decided against the mascara, and picked up the

hairbrush, running it through her long auburn hair. Mum's hair. Dad's hair was silvery above the ears, and still pretty dark on the top. That would have been okay too – the dark, not the silver. But she had Mum's hair. When she'd finished, she sat on the end of her bed, with her hands folded in her lap, squeezed tight together. And waited.

Jennifer didn't want coffee, but she took a mug for something to do with her hands, and wandered across the large living room. The house was immaculate. It was a great house for the summer. Mark had built it. Not with his own hands – he was an architect, and he'd designed it for him and Mum the year they married, just before Hannah was born. They'd bought a hideous bungalow with peeling, custard-yellow paint, on a lovely three-acre plot, and immediately knocked it down, even as the neighbours watched, open-mouthed, muttering to each other about how the elderly couple who had sold it to them had bothered to remove every picture hook and filled every crack in the place. It had taken six months to build the new place, and they'd lived in a caravan on the site the summer it went up. Jennifer remembered her mother standing on the steps of the van, pregnant with Hannah, offering cups of tea made on a camping stove. She remembered how obscene it had looked to her then. Jennifer had been 22. She hadn't lived at home since she was 18, and she felt like she barely knew Mark. It was all wrong – her mother, 45 years old, with her vast, fertile baby-belly. Living in this temporary squalor with a man ten years younger than she was. Jennifer had been embarrassed for her then, or for herself.

Now she stood staring at the garden out of the tall glass doors that ran the entire length of the back of the house downstairs and wondered whether she'd just been jealous. She'd never lived here; she'd never really been a part of the family that happened here, the happy, laughing life they'd had before Mum got ill. Each corner showed her a different memory. Baby Hannah, with her smooth, round arms and legs kicking contentedly on a plaid blanket under that apple tree. Her mother, kneeling at her beloved herb garden, tending the fragrant plants. Mark flipping burgers on the barbeque; Mum, radiant with happiness and contentment. She'd always been just a visitor.

Stephen loved the house. He'd spent hours, the first time he'd come, wandering around with Mark, looking at details Jennifer had never really taken in. His questions, and examinations, had gone way beyond flattery, although Mark was always happy to show it off. She knew he wanted something like it for himself, one day. They couldn't afford it now, of course. Their flat was a good start – right area, high ceilings, great light. It was modern and fashionable, all dark wenge wood and stainless steel. But it was nothing like this, and it had nothing to do with money. It just didn't have the heart.

Mark came and stood by her, gazing into the garden. 'Needs a damn good water. Everything's dying.' He didn't seem to realize what he had said.

She smiled at him. 'You've been busy. Cut yourself some slack.'

'She'd be cross.'

'No, she wouldn't.'

Mark smiled his half-smile at her, and she smiled back. 'Okay, maybe a bit cross.'

Then, 'Where's Hannah?'

'Upstairs. Lisa was having a bath – I think Hannah's in her room.'

'No Andy?'

'No. Haven't asked her about it. She came last night. We had a curry and too much red wine. But she hasn't mentioned him.'

Jennifer nodded. She wondered if she ought to offer to go and see Hannah. She didn't want to. 'How is Hannah doing?'

'She's quiet. She's been quiet for days. No crap music blaring out of her room. She hasn't been on the phone much to her mates, and no one's been round. I expect they'd like to come, some of them, but I don't think she's spoken to any of them. I'm not even sure she's told them, although they must know by now. She hasn't even watched *Coronation Street*, which has me *really* worried.' He was trying to sound lighthearted, but he was failing.

'It's early days, Mark. She's lost her mum. She's only 15.'

'I know. It's . . . it's hard. I'm trying, but I don't have a lot of juice left in my tank, you know? I know she needs me. But I need . . . I need Barbara. I need her to help me. And she's not here.'

Upstairs, someone knocked gently on Hannah's door.

'C'mon in.'

It was Lisa, still damp from the bath, wrapped in a bath sheet.

‘You got any make-up, Hannah? I forgot mine. Can you believe it? Can I come in?’

Hannah nodded, and pointed to her dressing table. ‘Not much. Some – mascara and lip gloss and stuff. You can borrow whatever you want.’

‘Cheers.’ Lisa closed the door again behind her, and let the towel fall to the ground. She was wearing a strapless bra, and she had a thong on. They were beige, with lace, and they looked expensive, and nice. Hannah felt shy, and Lisa saw her glance away.

‘Excuse the blatant semi-nudity but I’m so hot. That bath was boiling, and it must be 90 degrees out there already. I should have had a cold shower, really.’ She was pretty red, and her legs were blotchy. ‘I forget you’re not really used to sisters running around naked. Me and Jen did it all the time when we were younger.’ That didn’t sound like Jennifer. ‘It’s fine, really.’ Lisa caught her sister’s glance. ‘Okay . . . not Jennifer. Just me. I ran around naked all the time when we were younger. Jen just tolerated it.’

Lisa sat down in front of the dressing table and started applying make-up, although Hannah didn’t think she really needed it. She was dead pretty. Lisa’s hair was much lighter than her own – strawberry blonde, with really light bits in it. And she had all these freckles, tiny ones, across her nose and cheeks. But her lashes and eyebrows were surprisingly dark (maybe she did something to them?), above eyes that were more green than hazel most of the time, and almond shaped. Hannah didn’t think Lisa had had spots when she was young – if she had, there was no photographic evidence in the albums Mum kept. She was slim and tall, with great skin and hair that just looked nice, without you spending ages on it – the kind you could just put up in a ponytail,

and the ponytail didn't make you look like you hadn't had time to wash it – it looked pretty and natural. Hannah felt a stab of envy and misery. She wasn't spotty, or fat, or ugly, or anything. She knew that much, at least. She just didn't feel comfortable in her own skin like Lisa seemed to. She wasn't easy like her sister was. She'd rather die than have anyone see her in her bra and knickers.

'What are you wearing?' she asked Lisa.

'Well . . . Mum really did a number on me with her "brights and primaries only" thing. I'm more of a black and beige girl, myself; neutrals all the way. I found something in the summer sales. Don't you hate how they have those in July – it's like summer's over before it even starts, don't you think? It's bright yellow. A bit Jackie O, I thought. A sundress, thank God! I doubtless look like a giant banana in it. But it fits the bill. You?'

'I've got this pink dress from last summer. I wore it to a wedding – my friend Amy's sister got married and she was allowed to invite one friend, and she took me. Mum got it for me, so I think she liked it. It's a bit sparkly, is all . . .' Hannah's voice tailed off.

Lisa looked at her in the mirror, through narrowed eyes. 'She'd love that even more,' she said, as gently as she could. She swivelled around on the stool.

'Hannah?'

Hannah stood up. 'Don't be nice to me, Lisa. You'll make me cry. Please don't, okay? Let's just get it over with; I just want to get it over with. Doesn't matter what we're wearing, does it? It's a stupid, stupid rule.'

Lisa nodded, and when she spoke again, she made her tone jokey. 'Well, you and Jennifer have that opinion in common, at least. She was bitching about it the other night on the phone. Said that Stephen would refuse to

wear anything but black; said she was thinking about it. I said she could compromise – black dress, red shoes, you know. God knows what she'll be wearing when she turns up.'

'What about Amanda?'

'God knows if *she'll* even turn up . . .'

They smiled hopefully at each other. That was how Amanda was – you wouldn't exactly count on her in a crisis, although neither of them really doubted that she would be here today.

'Is someone coming with you?'

'No.' Lisa looked at her quizzically. Hannah shrugged. 'Didn't ask anyone. I don't really want anyone to come. How about you? Andy isn't coming?'

'No, he's not.'

'How come?'

That was a good question . . .

The sound of a car stopping outside the house saved Lisa from further questions. The engine idled, doors were opened and closed again. Hannah ran to the window.

'It's Amanda.' Until she heard the words, and felt the relief, Lisa hadn't realized how much she needed to hear that her sister had arrived.

Amanda

Amanda paid the taxi driver and thanked him, as he heaved her rucksack out of the boot of his car.

'Blimey, girl, are you telling me that you lug this thing halfway around the world?'

'Someone has to!'

'What the hell have you got in it? Bricks?'

'No bricks, no. My entire life.'

'That explains it!' He doffed an imaginary cap at her, like Dick van Dyke in *Mary Poppins*, and opened the driver's door. 'Good luck to you, then, girl. And welcome home.'

'Thanks.'

Home.

She'd been 8 years old when they'd come to live here, in the house that Mark built. She'd lived here for eleven years. And then she'd left. Not permanently, of course. She'd been back. Sometimes for months at a time, sometimes just for the night. And she'd had other places to live. Flatshares, rented flats, rooms in houses, university halls . . . But this was still the place she thought of as home; still the address she wrote in the boxes on the forms.

This time she hadn't been back for nearly three months. She hadn't seen Mum when it was really bad, and she hadn't been here when she died. That was deliberate, and, at the time, she believed, or so she told herself, that Mum understood, and that it was okay. But now she didn't know whether or not she was glad that she had missed it. She looked back down the road to where the taxi was driving away, and felt a familiar flight impulse, and then she turned back to the house. With some effort she hoisted her backpack onto her shoulder and trudged up the path. Mark saw her and came to the front door. Behind him, she saw her three sisters. When she reached her stepfather, Amanda put the rucksack down beside her and almost fell into his arms, and the two of them stood there for a long time, without speaking, holding each other. After a minute, Hannah pushed

past Jennifer and Lisa on the threshold, and wrapped her arms around her father and her sister. 'You're home!'

Stephen, presumably having finished whatever crucial business he had been conducting in the car, was coming up the path to the front door, adjusting his tie. He sidestepped the emotional scene and went into the welcome cool of the entrance hall. 'I see the Prodigal Daughter has returned,' he remarked wryly as he passed his wife. Jennifer threw him a withering look. 'Sssh!'

Behind him, a few other people were starting to arrive now. Mark's brother Vince and his wife Sophie were parking behind Stephen, and more cars behind them. These were the prime spaces – you could walk to the church from here. Mark remembered strolling back, flanked by friends and family, one beautiful May morning, after Hannah's christening, as she slept in his arms. Some of the same cast would be here today. Looking at them, he groaned quietly. 'Christ, should have got my trousers on earlier!' He released Amanda, and went out into the front to say hello, and be hugged, and answer inane questions about parking.

Hannah and Lisa took the rucksack between them and set it down at the bottom of the stairs.

'You cut that a bit bloody fine, didn't you?' Jennifer didn't mean it to sound as harsh as it did.

'Don't start on her,' Lisa chided. 'Not now.'

'I'm sorry.'

'No, *I'm* sorry. I didn't mean to make you worry.'

'You never do.' Jennifer said this quietly, and under her breath. Lisa was the only one who heard.

'Go and make her a cup of tea, or coffee, or something, will you?' Looking Amanda up and down, she asked, 'I assume you've come straight from somewhere, right?'

‘From Stansted. Yes, please. I’m parched.’ Jennifer sniffed into flared nostrils and went to the kitchen.

‘Come upstairs. We’ve got to get out of these dressing gowns. Why the hell are people arriving early? It’s not like you need a great seat – she’s in a bloody basket! Is that what you’re wearing? *Please* say it isn’t. Hannah, can you manage the rucksack . . . ?’

‘Where the *hell* have you been?’

They were in Hannah’s room now, with the door closed behind the three of them. Lisa was climbing into her startlingly yellow dress, not looking straight at her.

‘You sound like Jennifer. And I thought you’d rescued me from her wrath downstairs.’

‘I did, but only so I could subject you to mine up here. And my wrath might be less frequent, but it’s not less scary. Where the hell have you been, Mand? Mark’s got to have been going nuts.’

‘*Has* Mark been going nuts, Hannah?’

Amanda looked to her little sister for support. Hannah shrugged. ‘He just said you’d be here if you could.’

Amanda looked at Lisa, who gesticulated in exasperation.

‘That’s not the point, Mand. *I’ve* been going nuts, okay. *I’ve* been going nuts.’

‘I wrote, in that email, that I’d be here.’

‘Almost a week ago.’

‘And I’m here.’

‘Just.’

‘But I’m here.’ Lisa threw her hands out in exasperation, then turned to the mirror, saw her big yellow self and snorted.

Amanda was rummaging in her rucksack. She had, of

course, been wearing what she thought might do for the church. She just didn't want to admit it.

'Bright, right?' she now asked Hannah.

'Bright.' Hannah shrugged. 'Mum's wishes.'

'Right . . . Bright.' She opened another flap, and started pulling creased clothes out of the pack's dark recesses. 'She'd be lucky to get clean, let alone bright. Even the stuff that started out life bright isn't so bright now . . .' Her voice cracked. Lisa softened. She put a hand on Amanda's back, as she bent over a pile of her stuff. 'Are you okay?'

Amanda's eyes had filled with tears. 'I'm fine.'

She wasn't fine. Of course she wasn't fine. Had it been a week? It could have been a month, or just two minutes. Time had stopped, there in the internet café. The world had gone weird. She'd sat, for ten minutes, looking at the screen. Mark's address . . . the red exclamation mark flashing urgency at her. The email was dated with yesterday's date; no heading – it didn't need one. She knew, before she pushed the button that opened the text and made it real: Mum was dead.

She hadn't gone far, this time. She'd been in Spain. Working at a beach bar on the Costa Calida, near Murcia. Staying with some friends of friends whose parents had a little villa out there near the sea. It wasn't somewhere she would normally have stayed for long. But she couldn't have gone further. She'd been waiting, waiting for this email.

When it finally came, she sent a one-line reply, saying she'd be home. And now she was. In the five days between, she had drunk too much tequila, taken long walks along the beach and resisted the urge to change her tickets home to somewhere else, *anywhere* else.

But it wasn't because of the trouble she would inevitably be in with her sisters. She found the idea of other people's grief far more frightening, far harder to cope with than her own. She had come home to immerse herself in it, and she was afraid it would feel like drowning. It wasn't going to be like some film – *Steel Magnolias* or *Terms of Endearment*, where the funeral marked the end of the really bad time, and the start of everyone getting better. It wasn't going to be like that at all: it was going to be the beginning.

Hannah took her hand. 'I'm glad you're here now. I don't really care where you've been.'

'Thanks, Hannah.' Amanda let herself be held. It wasn't something that happened often. Mum had always said she was a wriggly cuddler – unwilling to sit still and be embraced. Mum once said she'd almost enjoyed it when Amanda was poorly as a young child – it was the only time she allowed her to put her arms around her and stroke her hair.

Jennifer came in without knocking. Amanda readied herself for round two.

'Listen, Jen. I know you're mad at me, and you probably have every right. I'm sorry I took off and left it to all of you. I know it was selfish and cowardly, and all that. And I'm sorry if you thought I would be back sooner. I just needed a bit of time, that's all, to let it sort of sink in. I know – selfish again. That's me, hey? But I really am sorry. And I really am here now. Can we leave the flagellation out, just for today. Hey?'

'What's flagellation, anyway?' Hannah asked.

'Beating. Brought on by guilt.'

'No one wants to beat you up, Amanda.' Jennifer tried

to sound less like a teacher. 'I just thought we should be together for this. For *all* of this.'

She was biting back. Amanda was right. She *was* mad. It wasn't fair – she'd bugged off, and left it all to the rest of them. And now she was crying, damn her, and that just wasn't supposed to happen.

Hannah stepped between the two of them, facing her oldest sister. 'Please, Jennifer. Don't be angry at her, not today.' She held her gaze, and Jennifer was shocked, as she often had been in the last couple of years, at how grown up she looked and seemed. 'Today is about Mum: our mum.' And she was right.

Amanda and Jennifer joined hands on either side of Hannah's hips, and pulled her into a hug, which Lisa joined, her arms encompassing all three of them, and squeezing tight.

Like sisters throughout time, whatever battles raged between them, it was always, always, all four of them against the rest of the world. They emerged from Hannah's room a few minutes later, holding hands, Amanda dressed in something Hannah had found in her wardrobe, her hair pulled back from her face, her tears dried.

The church wasn't too bad. Amanda said they looked like extras from some cheesy musical, or a girl band scoring nil points at the Eurovision Song Contest, all dressed in their bright colours – Lisa in yellow, Hannah in pink, Amanda wrapped in orange and red – and even Jennifer, in a sky-blue shift dress. They stood ramrod straight in the front pew, flanked by Mark – now changed into a purple linen shirt – and Stephen, who remained resolutely and ostentatiously dressed in black, but at

least he had left his BlackBerry in the car. They got there early, so they wouldn't have to watch everybody else file in, and they didn't turn around. They knew it would be full. Mum had a lot of friends; friends they would eventually have to talk to, they knew, at the wake. But not now.

It was the committal that made them break 'the big rule'. Barbara had chosen a humanist site, about three miles from the church where they held the service. She said she couldn't bear to be cremated, with that supermarket conveyor belt effect, and the vaguely comical curtain that opened and closed, and that she didn't want to be put in the ground in a churchyard. So she was going to decompose gently, in a biodegradable coffin, and go back to the earth. And eventually have a tree growing on top of her that they could come to, if they wanted to, and visit her. In an expanse of green with grass and butterflies, she said, instead of some depressing grey field of marble and granite. She said it would save them a fortune in flowers. Jennifer remembered the night she had told them that, remembered being jealous that she'd sorted everything out with Lisa. Why not her? Mark had squeezed Barbara's hand, all serious and po-faced. Then he'd whispered to her, 'Christ, you want flowers as well! Is there no end to the demands?'

Which was how the four of them, along with Mark and Stephen, came to be standing alone except for the officiant, on a hot August afternoon, with the heat haze shimmering all around them, in a field, in front of a strange and beautiful woven willow casket containing their mother, reputedly resplendent in emerald green Ben de Lisi, listening to Van Morrison sing 'In the Garden' on a tinny tape recorder. Where every one of

them cried exactly as much and for as long as their broken hearts dictated.

‘God, Mark, you’re going to be eating Coronation Chicken for the rest of the month!’ A bunch of Barbara’s local friends had catered the wake, and cleaned up, storing leftovers in clear Tupperware containers. They’d done a beautiful job. It had looked for all the world like a party – a wedding, maybe, or some family reunion. There were trestle tables set out on the lawn, draped in yellow crêpe paper, and jugs and vases with roses cut from the garden dotted between the large bowls of rice and potato salads, French bread and heirloom tomatoes. There were trays of oatmeal biscuits, and small bowls of strawberries, with dishes of clotted cream, sweaty in the heat. People had drunk Pimms and real lemonade. It had all been beautiful. Instead of the low, respectful hum usually heard at funerals, there had been laughter, and stories, and a soundtrack from inside the house of Simon and Garfunkel and the Mamas and the Papas. The men were not shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, hands in pockets; the women did not have red-rimmed eyes. It was exactly how she would have wanted it to be – good friends, good food, good weather. Just no good reason.

Barbara’s friends had cleared up too, graciously and more cheerfully than they felt, and now they had gone and the family was alone, sat in the living room, staring at the vast Tupperware offerings on the kitchen counter.

‘Looks that way.’

The music was switched off now. Lisa had kicked off her shoes, and was curled into the corner of the sofa, her legs beneath her. Hannah was almost dozing, her

head on her sister's lap. Amanda was cross-legged on the floor, her back against a stool.

At the front door, Jennifer was being hugged goodbye by Stephen. Barely. His lips were dry against her cheek, and his arms had no squeeze in them as he held her. He'd tried to take her hand, walking back from the burial to their car, and she'd let him take it for a minute or two. She was irrationally angry with him about the black suit and tie, and the BlackBerry. And, of course, mostly about the one thing totally beyond his control. She knew that too; she knew work was busy at the moment. She knew he'd missed too much, really, in the weeks before Barbara's death. But she was still mad at him. When he put his arms around her, she held herself a little stiff, and wouldn't relax into the embrace.

'Are you sure that you want to stay?'

'Yeah. I haven't seen Amanda in a long time, Hannah is a mess and I don't want Mark to be by himself . . .'

'Aren't Amanda, Hannah and Lisa here to look after him?' His tone was almost sarcastic, almost amused. 'You look exhausted.'

'I just buried my mum, Stephen . . . How do you expect me to look?' She didn't want to go home with him, that was the truth of it. She wanted to stay here.

'I didn't mean that.' He knew it, whether she told him or not. He knew she'd rather be with all of them tonight. He tried not to let it hurt him.

'I know. Sorry.'

'I'm sorry.' God, this politeness.

'I'll be back tomorrow, by the time you get home from work. Lisa'll drop me off, I'm sure. Or maybe I'll take a train . . .'

Stephen raised his hands in a gesture of unnecessary surrender. 'Fine, fine . . . Seems to me, to be honest, like you haven't really needed me all day.'

'Is that what you want to feel – like I need you?'

He rubbed his eyes impatiently with one hand. 'You know what, Jen? It's fine that you stay; it's fine.' He kissed her again, the same dry lips skimming her skin. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

She leant against the doorframe and watched him walk to the car, get in, drive away. He looked back at her, and called out that he loved her, not waiting for an answer. But once again, it felt as if they were on opposite sides of a big hole, a chasm they both made attempts to cross, just never at the same time.

When she got back to the others, Mark was making tea: the national pastime. She got the milk from the fridge and poured some into each mug. He put them on a tray and carried them back to the sofa.

'How mangled are you all feeling?'

Lisa laughed weakly. 'Scale of one to ten? A good nine.'

Hannah raised a limp hand from her reclining position. 'Eleven over here.'

'Why?' Jennifer asked.

'Because there's more,' replied Mark. 'Not the official stuff – we'll sort that out at the lawyers. This is your Mum. She did manage to write a few more letters, like she said. I have them. I was supposed to give them to you all after this was finished. I'd have waited until tomorrow, but Jen's not going to be here . . .'

'I am, actually. Stephen just left . . .'

Lisa raised an eyebrow quizzically at her sister.

‘He’s got an early start tomorrow. I just thought . . .’

Mark put a hand on her shoulder. ‘I’m glad you’re here. Your Mum would be pleased – to know that all her girls were here together.’

They didn’t open them right away. It wasn’t Christmas morning, after all. Each of them held their letter in their lap. Amanda tried to remember what her mum’s hands looked like, imagining them holding the envelope. They chatted until they were too tired. Hannah fell asleep, and had to be gently shaken. They peeled off one by one, a subdued chorus of Walton-esque goodnights issuing forth on the upstairs landing, and went to bed, glad, at least, to have put the day behind them.

Lisa

The letter was stuck to the outside of a rectangular box, about one foot square. It was tied with a wide green ribbon. Just the packaging was a reminder – Barbara always wrapped things beautifully. An organza ribbon, or a wax seal, or plain brown paper with sprigs of lavender tied in utilitarian string. It was her signature. Lisa left the package there while she undressed and slipped naked underneath the duvet. She looked at it for a moment, almost afraid of it, and then slipped the letter out of its envelope, her hand faltering as she opened the page: Mum’s writing, as familiar as her own, neat and rounded on the page.

My lovely Lisa,

We’re the closest, you and me, in many ways. I think we’re a lot alike. You’re my firstborn child, and the

person who first showed me the miracle of this love a mother has for her child. You made every morning Christmas morning. Thank you for that. There's lots of things I don't even think I need to say to you because I think you know them already. I love you. So much. You're the strongest, I think. Too strong for your own good, maybe. Ask Andy about that sometime. By the way, I love him - did I ever tell you that? So to you, my darling girl, a request, instead of a bequest. Look after your sisters for me. Look after Mark. And let someone look after you.

Mum

PS Re the contents of the box: you're right - it would have been a waste. Wear it when you dance like no one's watching.

Inside the box, neatly folded and lain on white tissue paper, was the emerald green Ben de Lisi dress.

Andy answered the phone on the second ring. Lisa's voice sounded muffled and hoarse.

'That was quick,' she said.

'I thought it might be you.'

'It's me.'

'Hello, me.'

'What you doing?'

'Watching footie. You?'

'Calling you.'

'How was it?'

'I'm sorry I asked you not to come.'

'That's okay.'

‘It’s not okay, Andy. It was stupid. I don’t know what I was thinking.’

‘I don’t think you really were thinking. I don’t mean that to sound unkind – I just mean that it wasn’t really about thinking, it was more about feeling. You wanted to do it without me, on your own.’

‘Don’t be so bloody reasonable with me!’

‘Sorry.’

‘And don’t be bloody sorry!’

Silence.

‘It’s me who should be sorry.’ She paused. ‘I wish you had been here.’

‘Me too.’

For just a while Lisa sat with the phone and listened to Andy breathing, which was almost as comforting as an embrace. Then she sighed.

‘So I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘I’ll be here.’ He was being so careful of her.

‘Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight, Lisa.’

He’d heard a break in her voice when she said that last word, and that was all he needed. He hadn’t been watching the football. He’d been sitting on the sofa in front of the football, but that wasn’t the same thing. Now he stood up, grabbed his car keys from the stand by the front door and went where his mind and his heart had been all day.

As he drove, a little too fast via the M25, he listened to the radio, a little too loud, and wondered, not for the first time in the last two years, what the hell was going on in Lisa’s head. She wasn’t like any woman he’d ever known before. The highs were higher and the lows were

lower. They'd been friends first, before they were lovers. They'd met at work; they'd both been with other people. Nothing serious, but it meant romance was off the agenda, and that they got to know each other pretty well before anything happened. He knew that she was clever and fierce, and stubborn and sharp, and that she didn't suffer fools gladly and that she sometimes took three sugars in her coffee when she was hungover, which was not infrequently. She was funny and sarcastic, but never cruel. She was good company – no, she was *great* company.

One day a friend of theirs was made redundant, out of the blue. A bunch of them went to the local wine bar to drown their collective sorrows and bitch about senior management. One by one the others had melted away or staggered off and it was the two of them, setting off to catch the night bus together. She was different drunk. In the office she was immaculate and stylish – to the point of almost seeming unapproachable. Now she looked ten years younger, and those barriers had obviously come way down. She'd taken off her vertiginous heels and climbed into a fountain, then stumbled and sat down squarely in the water, like a toddler, laughing and crying, and gasping. He'd gone in to fish her out, and she'd pulled him down beside her, and then they'd both been too wet and too giggly for the night bus, and they'd gone to the cashpoint for money and taken a black cab home. She gave the driver only one address.

At her flat, she pulled him into the hot shower the same way she'd reached for him in the cold fountain, and they'd undressed each other there, kissing with drunken abandon and then with something else . . .

He wouldn't have taken it any further. He knew she was completely inebriated, and he'd been to that awk-

ward, short movie with other girls before and was determined not to again, but she looked at him through half-closed, only partly-glazed eyes, and told him exactly what she wanted. And then she'd shown him, pushing him back on the soft unmade bed and straddling him, lowering herself onto him gently, but determinedly. When he was buried deep inside her, revelling in how hot and moist and fantastic she felt, Lisa leant forward and whispered his name once, into his open mouth, as if to release him from responsibility, before she leant back, her soft round breasts arching upwards beautifully, to ease herself into a fast, powerful orgasm. And Andy couldn't believe his luck.

He couldn't believe it the next day, either, when she brought him coffee in bed. Three sugars in hers, obviously.

'How come you're so perky?' he groaned at her, rousing himself from a place far, far away, where he could have happily stayed all day.

'Great sex does that for me.'

'It was great sex?'

She slapped his thigh playfully.

'Don't fish for compliments! It *was* great sex, least it was for me. Think you got left a little behind.'

He shrugged sheepishly. To be honest, his memory of the night before wasn't all that detailed.

'But I'll make that up to you, if you like. Tonight?' She looked at her watch. 'Not quite enough time this morning, I don't think . . .'

He put his own mug down on the bedside table and took hers from her. Then he pulled her down next to him, and pushed the dressing gown she was wearing away from her shoulders.

'I suggest we *make* time . . .'

They'd both been very late for the sales meeting that morning.

And that was how it had been – the first six months had flown by in a blur of wine and sex and laughter. In the next six months they'd calmed down a bit. She said she knew when things got serious because they took to lingering in restaurants – eating dessert and drinking coffee, instead of rushing home after one course, desperate to tear each other's clothes off. She said she lost 10lb in the first half of their first year, with all the 'exercise', and put it all on again in the second half, eating pudding.

After a year, he wanted more. That summer, they went on holiday to the Greek Islands. He lay on his beach towel and watched her lovely lithe figure saunter down to the sea to paddle, and realized that he felt as happy as he had ever been. Emboldened by retsina, later that night, he took her hand, told her that he loved her – a sentence he had seldom volunteered – and asked her to move in with him. He wanted to see her every day, and every night. Maybe forever. It had taken her another few months, and several more requests, to agree. After Christmas she'd given up her flat and come to live with him.

On paper, he had what he wanted. He saw her every day and every night. But he didn't have her. He knew it and so did she. She was holding herself back from him. It frightened him. He believed himself in deeper than she was and that made him vulnerable. He wanted things to keep moving, but she was always putting the brakes on. He couldn't keep bringing it up with her. On the couple of occasions when he had tried to talk about what might come next, she withdrew a little, so that his two steps forward ending up feeling like three steps back.

So long as he didn't push, things were good. Things were really great. He worried that he was fooling himself, setting himself up for a fall. What he couldn't figure out – the 64 million dollar question that kept him awake at night – was whether she was holding back because of him, or because of her. And even if he knew the answer, he would keep on doing this because the thing was, he loved her. He couldn't walk away if he wanted to.

So when she said she wanted to do this whole funeral thing alone, he went along with it, and let her do it alone. And when her voice broke on the mobile, he dropped everything, and went to her. And when he parked and climbed out – the car door sounding incredibly loud in the dark, still silence – and caught the twitch of the curtains in the bedroom with the light still on, and waited for her to open the door, and picked her up, clutching her tightly and silently to him, he knew that it had all been the right thing to do. For both of them.

Hannah

Hannah was too sleepy – the night of the funeral – to read her letter. She was still enough of a child that even something like burying her parent couldn't interrupt the rhythm of her needs. She still felt hungry and she still felt tired, even when everyone around her had lost their appetite, and wandered around with the wide staring eyes of the exhausted sleepless. The next morning, when she woke up, a warm, unfamiliar presence was beside her in bed, and she sat up, confused. For just a second, she thought it was her mum. When she was younger, and poorly, Barbara had sometimes slept with her. She remembered nights of coughing and snuffling against

her mum's chest, the aroma of Olbas oil wafting from both of them, feeling arms around her and hearing gentle words. 'There, there. Mummy's got you; Mummy's got you.' It wasn't her mum, of course. She hadn't done that for years, and she would never do it again. It was Amanda, curled with her smooth brown back to her, hair spread wildly across the pillow. She didn't mind; she quite liked it. It made her feel like she'd had something important to do, even if she hadn't known she was doing it. Amanda must have been lonely, or sad. Hannah lay back down, and tried to fall asleep again, but she couldn't. The letter was the first thing she saw when she opened her eyes again, lying propped against her alarm clock.

My Hannah,

This is probably hardest for you. I've gone far too soon for you, haven't I? There is still - however much you deny it! - growing up to do, and I'm going to miss it. You know, in all of this, that is the only thing that makes me mad. It makes me so fucking angry that I . . . well, that I want to write 'fucking' in a letter to my daughter, who isn't allowed to say the word. Don't be cross with me, sweetheart. It isn't my choice.

You were my magical gift. That I should have been able to conceive you, carry you and give birth to you at 45, when I thought that part of my life was over, was a miracle to me. The funny thing was that I never realized you were missing from my family until they put you on my stomach and I looked into your face for the first time. You were red, and angry, and you had that amazing spiky hair sticking out all over your precious head, and I knew straight away that you'd always been meant to come. You were a present from your wonderful

father, and proof of our love for each other. (Doubtless a gross thought right now, but if you keep the letter and read it again in a few years, you won't think so . . .)

You are turning into a confident, beautiful, accomplished, wonderful young woman, Hannah. I have to believe that you and I squeezed more than 15 years into our time together, and I want you to know that I have faith in your ability to carry on and to thrive and to be joyous, all without me. Not that you'll ever, ever be without me completely, sweetheart. I'll always be with you. Look after your Dad for me, honey. He's brave and strong on the outside, but you and I know what's going on inside, don't we? And keep talking to him. He'll listen to whatever you have to say, I know.

I love you, baby girl,

Mum

When she'd finished reading, Hannah put the letter under her pillow. Something was making her feel panic; suddenly she couldn't take the really deep breath she wanted and her lungs felt tight. Tears ran down her face, dripping onto her arms, crossed firmly over her chest.

Amanda awoke to the sound of her sister's crying. She felt empty. Last night, she'd lain in bed and cried until her head throbbed. The red numbers on the alarm clock projected the time onto the ceiling: 2.30am, 2.45am, 3.00am. She'd staggered to the bathroom, found paracetamol, and swallowed a couple with water from the tap. She sat on the stairs, her sore head against the wall, until her nose unblocked and her breathing had steadied. She didn't want to be by herself. Which was strange and new and a bit scary. She was very good at being by herself. She hesitated outside Hannah's door,

and then opened it, very quietly. When Hannah didn't stir, she'd found herself climbing into bed beside her, holding herself tense and rigid under the duvet for a minute or two, until she was sure she hadn't woken her. There were no numbers on the ceiling in here, and after a while – she wasn't sure how long – the pills took hold, and Hannah's steady, gentle breathing calmed her, and she fell asleep.

Now Hannah was crying. There was no need to ask her why, and there was nothing she could say that would help. She pulled her sister down into her arms, and stroked her hair, feeling her vest get wet with tears and snot, and just held her.

All this pain, all this crying . . . It wasn't that she hadn't expected it; she had just underestimated it. It felt like a heavy, dark blanket that had been pulled across all of them. She hadn't known that it would make it difficult to breathe. She hadn't guessed that it would seem so enveloping, and so total, and so permanent.